

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

Happy Bags

It's always very enjoyable to receive a surprise gift. Even if the contents are rather lacking in taste, there is always the anticipation of perhaps finding something fabulous inside the package.

At the start of the New Year, Japanese retailers put together packs called *fukubukuro*, or happy bags. These sealed, opaque bags are sold at a set amount and contain a selection of items from the store. The contents remain unknown until you complete the purchase, but the value of the contents is guaranteed to be several times the cost of the bag. Shops usually have a selection of differently priced bags on offer so there is something for every budget.

Fukubukuro are sometimes called 'lucky bags' as occasionally there will be super-expensive item hidden in one of them, such as an aeroplane ticket to an exotic destination, couture clothing or a piece of real jewellery. Rumour has it that one year a bag contained keys to a house that the lucky recipient could move into and call their own. A very lucky bag indeed!

For this very reason, and that the sale of these bags is limited to one per person, *fukubukuro* from certain good stores are highly coveted. Long queues of patient shoppers snake around the streets on the first day of the sale in the hope of acquiring the 'jackpot' bag.

Fukubukuro were invented in the early 1900's by Matsuya department store located in an opulent shopping district called Ginza. This area is well-known for its high quality shops and designer brands so the happy bags from there are highly prized, and highly priced. In 2007, the most expensive *fukubukuro* boasted a price tag of ¥250 million and reportedly contained a mix of high-class designer goods, jewellery and diamonds.

The tradition has since spread to most retailers and even other countries, such as Hawaii. It comes from the Japanese belief that the New Year should be started afresh, with no old goods lying around and lots of lovely new items gracing your home.

Like the UK, these 'sales' are now starting earlier so I received a happy bag for

Christmas. It was bought from a stationery store so contained a mix of items such as notebooks and office equipment, most of which were useful and functional, but not particularly attractive. However, in the depths of the bag were a fancy, decorated computer mouse and a calculator. In all, it was a great bargain as the bag itself only cost the equivalent of a few pounds.

My daughter also insisted on buying a *fukubukuro* for our cat – yes, the pet shops produce them too. Unfortunately this one contained little of any use. Among the various food items that the cat refused to eat, toys he wouldn't play with and a pink blanket that he's scared of, we found a tiny gold collar with a bow. Apart from not being to our taste, it was far too small even for a toy cat, let alone our monstrous moggy. However, much to my daughter's delight, a cat lead was also included in the bag. I know some cats are happy to walk on a lead but not our free-ranging animal. The entertainment value of watching my daughter attempting to put the poor cat on a lead was worth far more than the monetary value of the happy bag!

Although the contents of *fukubukuro* are a gamble, there are times when they are a good gamble. For example, a bag of children's toys is always welcome; if my daughter doesn't want the toy, I can save it as a gift ready for her friends' birthday parties.

Besides, it is fun to buy a big bag as a present for yourself. I wonder what I'll get this year.

