

TOKYO TALES

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Engrish



Wikipedia, the internet encyclopaedia, defines Engrish as “grammatically incorrect variations of English, often found in East Asian countries”. The phrase stems from the fact the Japanese often mix up the letters ‘r’ and ‘l’, but the term covers so much more than that simple confusion.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the Japanese written language differs radically from our own lettering. However, English words are considered fashionable, attractive and rather avant garde, so many companies use English terms for slogans and names of shops, restaurants, and anything else you can think of. These words are often used with little reference to their actual meaning providing unexpected results.

Many entertaining hours can be spent spotting bizarrely named shops, foods, signs and even cars. A name plate on a house nearby tells me that Clark Kent lives in Japan and my neighbour drives a Toyota Belta. Sometime the English is quite poetic; on a sketch pad the words “The pencils begin to waltz on the white stage” conjure up a pleasing image.

Some of my favourite signs include a clothes shop called ‘Hysteric Glamour’ and a vintage clothing store sporting the mind-boggling name, ‘Nude Rump’. Perhaps you would like to dine at a restaurant called ‘Hannibal’s’, stay in the ‘Hotel Carrot’ or have your hair cut at the ‘Skeleton Hair Shop’? Another sign that has me permanently puzzled is the one pictured above; it is at the top of some stairs leading nowhere and nobody seems to know what it means or what it is advertising.

Cars also have some great names: Nissan

Cube, Toyota Noah, and the Cedric Classic. I’ve also seen a top-of-the-range Lexus emblazoned with a large, signwritten advert saying “Lexus, the Fragship of Toyota”. And I recently passed a ‘Car Beauty Shop’, better known to us as a car wash. However, I’m still laughing about a small rickety motorbike I saw called ‘The Nutcracker’.

As a nation that has very advanced recycling rules, Japan requires all rubbish to be separated into the appropriate bins: burnable, non-burnable, plastic bottles and cans. Consequently, all fast-food cafés have many different bins in which to place your litter and in one famous coffee shop the opposite of burnable is, of course, ‘incombustible’.

Eating and drinking provide many interesting opportunities for Engrish spotting. Pocari Sweat is very popular sports drink, and if you prefer coffee you may wish to use Creap, a brand of powdered milk, or dieters may choose skimmed milk called ‘White Water’. At a café recently I bravely consumed ‘flesh juice and fruit jerry’.



But my favourite so far is a hotel I saw today. It was called the Yesterday Hotel and Restaurant and boasted the tag, Welcome to Yesterday. But today it was closed!

