

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs



Shopping

For a shopaholic like me Tokyo is a retail paradise. Shopping appears to be a national pastime for most Japanese and everyone has the buying experience down to a fine art.

Thankfully, each area has different shops; there are no 'cloned' High Streets here as there are in the UK, which makes retail therapy exciting rather than mundane. There are few chain stores and all the streets comprise mostly independent shops, while countless tiny boutiques can be found tucked up alleyways and hidden around corners.

The service from the sales assistants is second to none; one doesn't get hassled as in some countries and I have never seen assistants gossiping at the expense of ignoring your custom, they keep themselves busy by cleaning or tidying. If you require help they will bend over backwards to assist you and if you don't, they will keep at a discreet distance until you ask for them.

Entering a store when they first open in the morning is an incredible experience as all the smartly uniformed shopkeepers line up to greet you with a deep bow and a call you will hear everywhere; "*irasshaimase!*" which means "welcome!" And it is called out any time you pass a counter in the store. Depending on the type of shop many shop assistants wear little white gloves when handling the goods.

The supermarket I tend to go to regularly also has a wonderful line in service; all I need to do is push my overloaded trolley to the cashier whereupon a least two other assistants unload the goods, sort them into piles for ease of packing, repack after the cashier has scanned them and, if I don't want them delivered, the bags are then packed into the boot of my car for me or stop

A great favourite with Tokyoites and foreigners alike are "100 Yen Shops"; general stores where every single item is priced at ¥100 (about 50p) so

when you check out, the cashier just counts the number of items in your basket, adds 5% tax to the total and off you go.

For craft and hobby shopping there is one incredible store that sells everything. It is called Tokyu Hands and sells absolutely everything you ever need. From plants, pet supplies and pearls to chopsticks and chemistry equipment, origami paper to furniture and pretty much anything you can think of. One can spend hours in this multi-floored shop alone.

Another favourite haunt of mine is an area called Kappabashi, also known as Kitchen Town. This is the

restaurant wholesale district where you can buy anything from bumper packs of toothpicks to the most incredible pottery and lacquerware. Some of the more unusual shops along here sell the plastic food that's displayed outside all restaurants and a supplier for coffee shops is absolutely fascinating, as the photo shows.

Most of the shops do not open until eleven o'clock in the morning but they do stay open until at least eight o'clock at night sometimes even until ten. All shops are open on Sundays and National Holidays.

Once you've made your purchases you are invited to sit down to pay. The cashier is often located in a back room somewhere and most transactions are completed in cash. Credit cards are only just being accepted and sometimes my British card doesn't work in their system. In high-end shops you may even be offered a cup of green tea while your purchases are being wrapped. You aren't just handed your purchase in a plastic carrier bag. Your precious acquisition will be beautifully wrapped in tissue and the shops own wrapping paper. And even the method of wrapping is entirely different to our own and it's a joy to watch the assistant fold even the most awkward of packages into a neat and tidy gift.

Once the transaction is complete your package is placed in a well-made paper carrier bag and the assistant walks around the counter to hand it to you with a deep bow, a smile and a thank you. For large items home delivery is completely normal and often delivered the same day.

Or you could transport your purchases the Japanese way; I see many out shopping with a small wheeled suitcase. What a sensible and practical way to transport your purchases home! Why not try this with your Christmas shopping this year?