



*The troubles they've seen: Despite their best efforts, the famous three monkeys at Nikko's Toshogu shrine have no doubt seen and heard their share from 'bad tourists' over the years. But perhaps all these visitors needed was some lessons in travel manners. | KAZUYA INOH*

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## Blame for 'bad tourists' to Japan lies with the advice they never receive

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"What do you think of the influx of foreign visitors coming to Japan?" I was asked by a Japanese TV director. Apparently, one person she'd asked distinguished between two types of tourists: good ones and bad ones. "We'd like to encourage only the good ones to come," this person had reportedly said.

I've heard this distinction before from Japanese people. For example, those who visit "cat islands" (there are about 13 of them in Japan) are said to be the worst because they arrive, snap photos of the feral cats and depart, leaving no economic benefit behind. In the meantime, the islanders are stuck with providing facilities for them (toilets, toilet paper, garbage bins, etc.) and cleaning up after them, all while having their own privacy compromised as some ill-mannered cat tourists trample through their yards and go to any length to get the perfect cute kitty shot.

The Benesse art islands in Kagawa Prefecture have been trying to keep out "bad tourists" for years. After having promoted the islands to the point of over-popularity, they are now having to deal with their own success. "The museums were so overpriced," exclaimed a young American artist who recently visited Naoshima for the first time. "And they weren't worth it," she added, clearly not impressed.

Raising prices is one way to discourage so many people from visiting, but that risks alienating genuine culture vultures. Over the years I too have noticed a growing pretentiousness on the part of the art islands and have felt less and less

welcome on Naoshima, an island I have visited frequently over the years since its humble beginnings in 1998 with the Art House Project.

Now with inbound tourists at a record high — 24 million in 2016 — Japanese people are grumbling about the high volume and bad manners of some visitors. The current gripes refer to Asian tourists. Gone are the previous complaints about the “ugly Americans” or the “arrogant French.”

While it’s easy to blame and condemn entire nations for bad behavior, Japan should also take greater responsibility when it comes to teaching Japanese decorum to the travelers they are courting. It is not necessarily common sense to throw toilet paper into the toilet bowl if the country you come from teaches you to put it in the bin next to the toilet instead.

And let’s not forget the ongoing assault of Japanese tour groups on the Australian Gold Coast, or Los Angeles in the U.S. As a family motel operator told me so succinctly when I visited Slovakia, “Tourists leave their brains at home.”

Japan has been educating its own population since at least 1974, when the Tokyo Metro came out with a series of manners posters to remind Tokyoites of “common sense” courtesy while riding the train, like not rushing onto the train while the doors are closing, talking loudly or taking up more seats than needed. Nowadays posters address more contemporary problems such as talking on mobile phones, keeping the volume down on headphones and even putting on make-up while riding the train. Japanese people need to be reminded of propriety too, so why do we expect foreign sightseers shouldn’t?

The government is starting to distribute free booklets to visitors to help them learn Japanese mores. We now see signs all around the country, in many languages, telling people what to do with toilet paper and about proper bathing etiquette in the hot springs. But much more needs to be done.

While guests should also take the time to find out about the cultural norms in the countries they visit, it’s not always so easy. Pity the globetrotter on a year-long excursion visiting a dozen countries. He just might store his suitcase inside the *tokonoma* — the alcove specifically for art or flowers — in his room at the traditional *ryokan* (inn). Or consider the tour-group participant who has been taught to take off their shoes when going into a Japanese ryokan but hasn’t been taught why, and thus unwittingly steps out of their shoes and onto the *genkan* (entrance area) floor before putting on the slippers provided. Can anyone possibly know all the rules?

In addition, many of the government booklets aimed at foreign excursionists are only available after they arrive. And even then the information can be hard to obtain. When I asked the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau to send me the “Kumano Kodo Official Guide Book,” a free publication that includes bathing and general pilgrim etiquette, I was told they couldn’t send it to me, even if I paid postage, although I was already in Japan — I had to go to the tourist bureau to pick it up. It’s a big ask to expect pilgrims to read a 144-page booklet the night before they set off on a long trek. I ended up reading mine after I came back from my hike. Recently I noticed they are now offering the book for online purchase “while supplies last.” Couldn’t they offer a PDF version?

Like manners posters, simple things such as printing train etiquette on the back of shinkansen ticket envelopes, or devising ways to add hints to English restaurant menus would be prudent and be a win-win for all involved. Having manners apps or online quizzes (in natural English, please) would make tourist protocol more accessible and less patronizing.

With foreign tourist numbers climbing every year and the goal of reaching 40 million by the Tokyo Summer Olympics and Paralympics in 2020, we need to help people prepare for their trip to Japan.

The answer to holidaymakers’ poor behaviour isn’t shutting out “bad tourists” but educating *all* tourists. By enlightening them about Japanese etiquette, we can then hope they take these good manners home with them.

