

How to... infiltrate a Japanese games show.

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64



diary

HOW TO...

infiltrate a Japanese games show

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by James Ashton



1 Getting there

A number of flight options are available to you. If you're sensible, you'll take the Virgin A340 Airbus Heathrow to Tokyo Narita direct - around £800 and a mere 12½ hours in the air.

If you're not so sensible (or you're buying your own fare), you might consider the Singapore Airlines Boeing 747 via Amsterdam and Singapore - cheaper at £580, but a hefty 18 hours' journey time.

If you're slightly deranged, jump aboard the 'fairly reliable' Aeroflot propeller-driven Cold War crate via Moscow, Murmansk and Vladivostok - £200 (or twenty cows and a pair of

Levis), two days' journey time, with the acquaintance of a vodka-soaked potato salesman from St. Petersburg optional.

Flight tips

● Tripling your fare to well over £2000 will allow you to upgrade to First Class and enjoy up to six inches more leg room. The food will still, of course, present significant problems for your alimentary canal, but the stewardess won't necessarily stare at you as if you've just shot and eaten



◀ That's the view out of an A340 Airbus window. It's Siberia.

their mother when you ask for another packet of peanuts at snack time.

● Be prepared for the noise aeroplane vacuum loos make when they flush. DO NOT press the button and be so terrified at the resultant 'jet plane crashing' roar that you stumble semi-clothed backwards through the door into the arms of an understandably surprised Japanese businessman.

2 Arrival: surviving jet-lag

Japan is such an advanced nation they even get their days nine hours before we do. Hence, when you arrive after your long flight, you'll find the Japanese are already well into a day you were hoping to start with eight or so hours of sleep. After a 12-hour flight starting at noon on Monday, Westerners arriving at 10.00am on Tuesday have a special kind of dazed look in their eyes.

Luckily, it's at this stage that the Japanese sense of humour kicks in, and lots of complex and ruthlessly arbitrary questions at the immigration control desk – mother's favourite

colour, length of hair at age five, father-in-law's star sign – lead to amusing misunderstandings and laughs for all.

Jetlag Tips

● However tired you feel, it's imperative that you establish proper sleep patterns quickly. This means staying awake on your first day until it's Japanese bed time, however many tens of hours it might be after your own. In your quest to stay awake, avoid Japanese TV at all costs – five channels consisting entirely of chat shows, cookery programs and

Useful phrases for the jetlagged

I'm very tired. *つかれた*
 Please don't make this difficult. *むづかしく しないで*
 I haven't slept since 1995. *さいご に わたの わ 1995 です*
 I can't remember my inside leg measurement. *まつしと く なん せんつ か おぼいて いませい*
 Please stop asking me these questions. *も この しつもん を しないで ください*

medieval samurai soap operas, can induce instant slumber in even clinically hyperactive children after a tartrazine overdose.

3 Making yourself understood

You'll soon find that very few Japanese can manage or understand a single word of English. Rather than let this get them down, however, they console themselves by finding anyone who can't speak their language bowel-threateningly funny. As a visitor to Japan you will soon be faced with a stark three-way decision: employ an interpreter, attempt some Japanese, or

quickly perfect your charades skills.

Language tips

● If you do attempt some Japanese, don't be disheartened when you fail completely to make yourself understood. The only thing funnier (in Japan) than someone who can't speak Japanese, is someone who can't speak Japanese very well.



▷ Plastic food is an enormous industry in Japan. It looks almost exactly like the real thing, providing you dust it from time to time.

4 Getting about

Anyone's who's ever watched Blue Peter will already know that Japan's Bullet train travels at the speed of sound (nearly) and doesn't spill Peter Duncan's coffee while it's doing it. However, for getting around Tokyo itself, you'll find the subway a less glamorous but infinitely more useful alternative.

Londoners in particular may be

Walking anywhere in Tokyo is not, generally, a good idea. ▷

And trying to get around on a cycle-driven arcade machine will get you nowhere. ▽



confused by Tokyo's subway network, though. The complete absence of diseased pigeons, diseased people, babbling psychopaths with suspiciously-shaped newspaper parcels and clothing stains, ankle-deep litter, fastidiously unhelpful staff and a sense of impending apocalypse will,

Useful phrases for the subway passenger

Sorry. *すみません*
 That hurt actually. *いたい! ほんて に*
 Stop pushing, Grandad. *おーじ おさないで*
 This is my stop. *こっこ でおりる*
 If you don't get out of my way, you're coming off with me. *お どけな と わたし というしょ に かるびます よ*

understandably, make any regular user of London Transport uneasy. The fact that Tokyo's trains turn up on time and don't mysteriously stop for ten minutes in an unlit, unventilated tunnel threatening the lives of their weaker passengers, can also cause the British to travel the network in a bemused daze. Hold-ups occur at ticket machines which accept, with an electronic smile, the equivalent of £50 notes for a £1.50 fare. The groups of awestruck Londoners gathered at these machines, murmuring "It took a fifty, and gave me change in notes!" in open wonderment are a real queuing hazard.

The only real downside to the whole Japanese subway experience is the rush hour. You might think you've

been on a packed train before, you might think you've seen a bit of pushing, you might even think you've seen gross acts of rudeness. Those, however, were all a walk in the park compared to what 6pm in Tokyo has to offer – we guarantee it.

Useful subway tips

● Most stations have their name written in English script. Except the one you want. Keep your wits about you.

● If you can't work out how much your journey's going to cost, buy the minimum ¥150 ticket and use the 'Excess Fare' machine at your destination to make up the difference. Ingenious!

5 Advice for the hungry

On display in the windows of nearly all Japanese restaurants are highly-realistic plastic mock-ups of all the dishes on the menu. If you speak no Japanese, a quick trip outside with the waiter and some accurate pointing will secure you lunch.

Useful food tips

● Japanese food is fantastic. But then, considering that there's virtually non-stop cooking on TV, there's no excuse for it not to be. Even their beer is superb. You'll probably put on weight within minutes.

Useful phrases for the hungry

That one please. それ お くだし
It is cooked isn't it? すれ ぬあ ひや どうってる いますか?
Oh right. But is it dead? ああ そ めでど のとりぶろ です か? すばらし
No, that's fine. But do it humanely, eh?
いざりす から おん ロクスタ セシよ

6 Getting into your show



Japanese hell would probably be a big public event with no carefully arranged system of queuing. Computer game shows are extraordinarily popular, and if you don't

◀ Once you're in, it's every man for himself. "I think I was first, thank you."

want to spend a life-draining aeon in a queue that would make the service in a Russian bakery look speedy, it's best to try to pre-register a press ticket in advance.

Oh, and if you're afraid of incurring animosity when you march to the front, press pass in hand and go straight into the show, don't worry at all – "another mad foreigner missing out on all this lovely queuing" tends to be the typical Japanese reaction to such a move.

Tips for quick entry

● While the show organisers will be unfailingly polite, if you haven't got good credentials, they might think it better for you to experience that lengthy queue after all. Take plenty of identification with you just to be completely sure.

● Wear your embarrassingly large press armband at all times – unless you need to take covert photographs of secret exhibits.

7 Show etiquette

You'll be unsurprised by now to find that Japanese computer game shows are as well organised as the rest of the country. Instead of the mad set-dressing and gimmickery associated with American and UK shows, in Japan it's the games – and a good queuing system – that get priority.

Each game will have a set number of monitors and, usually, a helper for each available play space. The length of time you get on each game is carefully monitored and it's distinctly 'bad form' not to move off immediately when prompted. This isn't a problem when you're playing a Seta game, for instance, but it's a distinct pain if you should happen to be engrossed in one of Nintendo's finest. If you want to play some more, you've no choice but to join the back of the queue and start again.

Nippon relations. Unless it's Seta. They're probably used to it.

● The majority of game 'helpers' are attractive young Japanese ladies, often dressed in game-themed (and ever-so-slightly risqué) costumes, with a varying knowledge of the games they're actually demo-ing. Getting deliberately stuck in a game and asking these beautiful young things to help you out can liven up the duller of mah jong sims.

That's the back of Max's head. Oh, and Zeida's menu screen.



◀ This young lady was demonstrating Wild Choppers. (Insert your own gag here.)



▽ Yellow plastic shorts and blue back packs are all the rage.

Show tips

● Being as civilised a country as it is, it is considered impolite in Japan to show anything less than polite enthusiasm for a show game. Dropping the joypad after a minute and walking off exclaiming "What a steaming great dumper!" will not do anything for Anglo-



△ "No, you idiot. It's this button for the comedy nose. Cretin."

◀ Very helpful, she was. Showed us all the controls.



Useful phrases at the show

I'm a British rock star, you know. いざりす から おん ロクスタ セシよ
I know Shampoo personally. シアムプ わ ともだち でしょ
What time do you finish here? のんじ に おわります か
I'll see you later, then. じゃ また ね

8 Getting the interview



The press culture in Japan is completely different to the one we enjoy here in the West. Criticism is never expressed openly and it's rare for interviewers to ask probing or difficult questions. For this reason, it's very tricky for Western journalists to arrange

◁ Seta's company president and managing director confer.

interviews – the Japanese are wary of our bullying, impolite ways.

If you're persistence at the press office in question does yield an interview, choose your questions carefully and – even if it's with the office cleaner at Seta – don't be too pushy.

Interview tips

● Try to organise your own interpreter. Interpreters working for the company you're interviewing only add another level of subterfuge and obfuscation (thanks, Jes) to any answers you may get.

● Ask your questions in a positive way. "How are you looking to improve the artificial intelligence?" is

preferable to "Are you actually going to put any artificial intelligence in this time?"

● If the developer you're interviewing has a game on display on the show floor, try to play it before the interview. Don't say "Eh?" when they refer to it and follow up with "Is that your new one, then?"

● Conclude your interview with polite thank yous and the assurance that it's been a really useful experience for you. Don't sigh audibly at the answer to your final question, throw your dictaphone in your bag and walk out calling "Cheers, then" over your shoulder as you go.

9 A visit to Akihabara

Before you leave Tokyo, pay a visit to Electronic Town, or Akihabara as it's known to the locals. The best games shops are here, along with any electronic item you care to mention, smaller and cheaper than anywhere else in the world. The chances are you'll probably also see gadgets for doing things you didn't realise you needed gadgets for doing.

Coming back from Tokyo with anything less than a completely new stereo system and a seriously flexed credit card is an opportunity missed.

Batteries not included

● Despite being smaller than a toothpaste carton (and a thousand times sexier than Aquafresh), that tiny £20 mobile phone won't work at home. So put it down.

● Many shops have a 'Tax Free' department where you can buy goods designed to work to UK standards (240 Volts, PAL TV etc).



◁ Miniature electric Pichachus. We bought a gross.



△ And then, finally, I indulged in a bit of Print Club action. Japan's great. Could I become a permanent foreign correspondent? Please, JD? Please?



◁ A brand new purple (and a bit see-through) Game Boy. £30 to you, squire.

Useful phrases for the technologically backward

No thanks. 見え けっく です

It's more hygienic by hand. いせいでき です

And there's less risk of a fatal electronic shock.

それかだ こんぐでんくし わ しません かな

10 Coming home

Wearily but fulfilled, it's now time to return to sunny Blighty and relay your experiences to your eager readership. Make a promise to yourself that you'll start your report on the plane, but, once settled into your seat, opt for the free bar, non-stop diet of movies and

old BBC sitcoms playing on the in-flight entertainment system, and, when all that's exhausted, the little pack of toothbrushes, headphones and stripy nylon socks.

Arrive back in Heathrow 12 hours later, and yet two hours after you first

set off, and immediately start re-acclimatising. Rejoice at the surliness of passport control, persuade the gentle customs men that, for some reason, you shouldn't have to pay the wallet-crippling duty on your new stereo, pay the duty on your new

stereo, savour the inedibility of your Terminal 3 burger and chuckle at the amateurish late-running of the Rail Link to Reading due, cryptically, to 'Staff Shortages at Crewe.'

Aaahh. It'll be good to be home. Probably.

