

Travel

Japan's courtesy, ofuro-style bathing, and snow monkeys

Smoothly, silently—and on time, as usual—the Shinkansen glides out of Tokyo station. During my 10-day sojourn through the Tohoku region in northeast Japan, and later to Nagano, my 5-day JR Rail Pass offers easy passage through busy well-signposted stations to clearly marked carriages.

Better known internationally as Bullet Trains, nine rail lines ensure local, mid-range and long-haul services throughout most of the country. On long-haul routes the sleek dolphin-nosed trains reach up to 200 miles per hour.

A blue-uniformed staff member walks through our cabin. Reaching the door to the adjoining carriage she turns to face the cabin, bows respectfully to the seated passengers, turns, and continues on her way.

The solemn ritual would be repeated throughout the train, as it was on all the trains during my visit. It was a small easy-to-miss gesture, but it registered with me.

Before leaving home, I've been increasingly aware of the lack of courtesy, respect, and civility—in person and on-line—in our Western society. Since I don't speak Japanese, I can't tell if the inability to complete a basic sentence without using an epithet controls daily conversations in Japan. I'm willing to bet it doesn't.

Obedient rules, such as observing train platform security (stay behind the broad yellow line to avoid a sharp rebuke), don't eat or drink in the street, never jaywalk, and wear a mask if you have a cough or

Adventures



Ursula Maxwell-Lewis

cold in deference to other citizens, all appear to be commonly accepted courtesies.

Bowing (hands at sides) is the mutual way of civilly acknowledging another person, or expressing appreciation.

Throughout the country, tipping is not unacceptable for any service.

Later, outside a market building, I stop to snap a few photos. A woman is brushing the building walkway. Hiroko, our guide, is returning to the building from our bus. Without breaking stride, I notice Hiroko bow to the cleaner as she passes. It was a small, polite gesture in a world which increasingly depresses me with its apparent increase in ruthlessness and unkindness.

Next stop was the Joshinetsu Kogen National Park in Yamanouchi, Nagano Prefecture. I admire the red-faced Snow Monkeys (Japanese Macaques) while hiking 1.6 kilometres uphill in the Jigokudani Monkey Park, which is part of the national park.

When not foraging for food, even these local primates appear focussed on hygiene. Slipping in and out of their tastefully rock encased natural mountain onsens (hot springs), the primates constantly groom each



A deep sense of privacy exists within Japanese culture and that notion generally forbids photographing people in public. This wedding couple, however, agreed to make an exception at the temple in Nagano. (Photo: Ursula Maxwell-Lewis)

other.

The onsens are common due to plentiful volcanic activity throughout Japan.

We had the pleasure of overnighting in *ryokans* (Japanese inns) in both the snowy northern beech forested Hakko-da Mountains and in the Oirase Gorge area of the Aomori Prefecture. The charming inns are found mainly in rural areas and were established around the eighth century AD.

As is customary in this more traditional Japanese-style of accommodation, sliding doors open onto my bedroom. Removing my shoes before stepping onto the tatami bedroom flooring, I wander over to a porch area to relax and enjoy

tea as I overlook this old Nagano town. We have been advised to keep our balcony doors locked because monkeys in the area are inclined to make themselves at home and wreak havoc like naughty children.

Like most ryokans, this one features common bathing areas, or public baths, known as *ofuro*. Fed by a nearby onsen, the baths—one for men, one for women—require that I don a comfortable *yukata* (a kimono pyjama-like outfit). Armed with a small towel, I head for the public bath where I wash and, minus a bathing suit, join other women to lounge in the warm thermal waters as we chat and relax. Believe it or not, it is very re-

laxing—particularly soaking in the private outdoor onsen.

Tattoos are not acceptable and must be covered in most public baths.

Back in North America, I know I will miss the Japanese courtesy, perhaps even the public baths, and may have to remind myself not to bow to everyone I pass.

Ursula Maxwell-Lewis was in Japan to attend the Society of American Travel Writers' Freelance Council meeting. She travelled with All Nippon Airways. Japan National Tourism Organization planned the itinerary. She can be contacted at utrael@shaw.ca.

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AL-ANON SUPPORT GROUP

Does someone you care about drink too much?

You can see what it is doing to them, can you see what it is doing to you? Al-Anon can offer help and hope. We can understand as perhaps few others can. The group meets Thursdays from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Cloverdale United Church, 17575 58A Ave., Cloverdale. Ages 19 and up. By donation. For information call 604-688-1716 or visit bcyukon-al-anon.org.

HOMINUM FRASER VALLEY

Are you a man who's gay, bisexual or just not sure? HOMINUM Fraser Valley is an informal discussion and support group to help gay, bisexual and questioning men with the challenges of being married, separated or single. We meet on the last Monday of every month. For information and meeting location, call Art 604-462-9813 or email aapearson@shaw.ca.

FOOD PROBLEM?

Is food a problem for you? Do you eat when you're not hungry? Do you go on eating binges? Is your weight affecting your life? Overeaters Anonymous offers help. No fees, no dues, no weigh-ins, no diets. We are a fellowship. We meet every Thursday from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at Cloverdale United Church, 17575 58A Ave., Cloverdale. Everyone welcome.

SURREY PROSTATE CANCER SUPPORT GROUP

Last Saturday of every month (except July and December), 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., Valley View Memorial Gardens, 14644 72 Ave. Surrey PCSC provides awareness, public education, advocacy, support and research into the prevention, detection, treatment and cure of prostate cancer to men in Delta, Surrey, White Rock and Langley area. Men diagnosed and treated for prostate cancer, spouses, guests are welcomed. For information call 604-355-4188.

SURREY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The society meets on the second Saturday of every month (except December, January, July and August) at 9:30 a.m. at the Surrey Archives, 17671 56 Ave. Each one-hour meeting is followed by a history presentation. Newcomers are welcome. For information, call 778-593-9989.

FAMILY HISTORY FRIDAYS

The Cloverdale Library invites you to share and explore different topics in family history on the first Friday of every month, 2:30 to 4 p.m. Drop-in, no registration required. The library is located at 5642 176A Street. For more information, call 604-598-7328.

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