

A TOURIST IN TOKYO Q&A:

Toilets, menus and naked bathing

By LINDA LOMBARDI
Associated Press

TOKYO — Tourism to Japan is booming, with 1 million Americans among the country’s more than 20 million annual visitors. But language barriers and cultural differences may seem intimidating to some travelers. Here are answers to questions you might have if you’re contemplating a trip to the capital city, Tokyo.

Q. Is it true that addresses don’t really exist? How will I find anything?

There are addresses, but the Japanese system is different. Most streets have no names and buildings are not numbered in order. Use a map or an app. That’s what the natives do.

Bilingual neighborhood maps are usually posted outside train stations in tourist areas. Carry a bilingual map so you can point to where you’re heading if you need to ask a local for directions. Two tricks will help you pronounce Japanese destination names: Put equal emphasis on every syllable, and always pronounce the E at the end of words as a separate syllable (so “Kobe” is “ko-bay”).

Q. I can’t read Japanese. How will I figure out the trains?

Trains and stations have signs in English. Most trains also have bilingual recordings and electronic signage announcing the stations. Stops are also numbered, which helps both with figuring out distance and with names that seem like a jumble of random syllables.

The bigger problem is that the system is so elaborate, a mere human can’t always figure out the best route. No map can include all lines. Again, use an app. English options include the Tokyo Metro app and a version of the Japanese app Navitime.

Avoid trains at rush hour if possible.

Q. Bathrooms are really different, right? Spraying water, heated seats! What do I need to know?

Most high-tech Japanese toilets are easy to use. Flush is sometimes labeled in English. Just don’t touch the other buttons. And don’t be freaked out when a fancy one opens the lid automatically for you.

But be prepared for traditional squat toilets. Some public toilets have both squat and Western-style toilets, often with doors labeled for each type. If there’s a line, it’s



In this Jan. 16 photo, Hotel Edoya Executive Director Yuta Tomura cleans a bathroom at the hotel in Tokyo.



In this Jan. 16 photo, Hotel Edoya Executive Director Yuta Tomura arranges a futon at the hotel in Tokyo.

fine to wait for the Western style to be available.

Another small wrinkle: Toilets nearly always give an option for a big or little flush. If you want to be environmentally correct, learn the characters for those terms because they’re rarely labeled in English. Not a bad idea to learn the character for “flush” also, just in case.

Q. I’m scared of eating strange things. How will I order food?

Some restaurants have photo menus posted outside, and there may also be plastic food samples, so you can usually point to what you want. English menus are not unheard of, but don’t expect them. And if a server doesn’t come to take your order, you’re not being ignored. It’s typical to call one over

(usually by saying “sumi-masen” — basically “excuse me”). There’s no tipping and usually you pay at the register on the way out.

Other options include convenience stores, where food is much better than in similar U.S. stores, from wrapped sandwiches and bento to snacks and dessert. Most Japanese department stores also have food on lower levels that you can point at and take away.

For unadventurous eaters, there’s always tempura and ramen. But Tokyo is also a world-class food city. In some neighborhoods it’s harder to find traditional Japanese food than Italian or French. There are exquisite Western baked goods in many neighborhoods along with a version of white bread

that is like your childhood supermarket loaf died and went to heaven. You’ll also find Western fast food chains, although don’t be surprised to find local specialties on the menu.

Q. Do I have to drink tea? I really need my coffee.

The Japanese are serious about coffee. You will find Starbucks, local chains and many independent shops.

Q. What do I need to know about money?

Japan is still very much a cash society, partly because it’s so safe that no one worries about carrying a lot of cash. Department stores, large chains like Uniqlo and hotels take credit cards, but you’ll pay cash at most other places.

Q. I’m intrigued by onsens. But do I have to be



In this photo taken Jan. 14, people walk around at Tokyo Station in Tokyo.



This Dec. 11, 2016 photo shows a menu with photographs of dishes served outside a restaurant in Tokyo.



In this photo taken Jan. 14, special instructions on how to operate the toilet are shown on the wall at a public toilet in Tokyo Station in Tokyo.

naked with strangers?

Yes, in both onsen (natural hot-spring baths, usually at resort hotels) and sento (public baths in cities). But bathing is gender-segregated. When everyone else is doing it, it quickly seems natural. To avoid calling attention to yourself, follow the customs. Most critically, wash yourself thoroughly BEFORE getting into the bath, which is only for soaking. Also know that baths traditionally prohibit people with tattoos, which are associated with organized crime, though this is starting to change.

Q. Will I have to sleep on the floor? Or in a drawer?

Not unless you want to. There are innumerable Western-style hotels in Japan. But there’s nothing quite like waking up on a futon to the smell of tatami mats, so why not try it? As for the famous beds in drawers, capsule hotels are mostly for short-term business travelers, not vacationers.

Q. Do I have to take my shoes off?

Historic houses, fancy traditional restaurants, temples and traditional inns may require visitors to remove shoes. If you’re wearing sandals, bare feet may not be allowed, so pack socks.

Try meatballs bursting with the flavors of Southeast Asia

By THE CULINARY INSTITUTE
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Associated Press

Though students at The Culinary Institute of America face a seemingly endless to-do list, central to their course work is recipe and menu development. At the CIA, food is life, and even the best-managed restaurant is nothing without flavorful, exciting, and innovative recipes.

A recent standout is this recipe for Hanoi Pork Meatballs with Hoisin-Peanut Dipping Sauce, which is ideal if you’re hosting friends and family for the big game.

Bursting with the flavors of Southeast Asia, like garlic, ginger and bright herbs, these meatballs are an easy make-ahead option that will stand out against the usual party favorites. The sweet hoisin-peanut dipping sauce will remind you of those other meatballs you may have simmered in your slow cooker, but with a little something special and unexpected.

If you love the flavors in these meatballs, why not put your own spin on the recipe? You can replace the pork with turkey for a leaner appetizer to balance out those beers. Or, if you want to serve a more substantial dinner, form the mixture into burger-sized patties and serve them on buns. You can top them with the dipping sauce, some more fresh herbs, and pickled onions for



This Jan. 10 photo provided by The Culinary Institute of America shows Hanoi pork meatballs in Hyde Park, N.Y. This dish is from a recipe by the CIA

some zing.

This year’s big game is being held in Houston. And even though you might think of Houston as BBQ central, it’s actually known to have some of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the country — so this recipe

will help your guests feel like they are right in the middle of the action.

This article was provided to The Associated Press by The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

HANOI PORK MEATBALLS WITH HOISIN-PEANUT DIPPING SAUCE

Start to finish: 55 minutes
(Active time: 40 minutes)
Servings: 5 (Makes 15 meatballs, 3 per serving)

- Non-stick cooking spray, as needed
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 5 cloves minced garlic
- 2 ½ tablespoons minced fresh ginger
- 3 minced scallions
- 2 teaspoons chopped parsley
- 1 ½ tablespoons chopped Thai basil
- 1 ½ tablespoons chopped cilantro
- 1 ½ tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 teaspoon sriracha
- 1/8 cup whole milk cottage cheese
- ½ cup panko bread crumbs
- 2 teaspoons ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon lime zest
- 1 pound ground pork
- Hoisin-Peanut Dipping Sauce (*recipe follows*)

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F.
Oil a rack for a sheet tray with non-stick cooking spray. Place rack in sheet tray and set aside.
In a medium-size saute pan, heat both oils over medium heat. Once oil is hot, add the garlic, ginger, and scallions.
Sweat until aromatic and soft (about 5 minutes). Remove from pan, and allow to cool.
In a mixing bowl, add and combine all remaining ingredients except for the ground pork and dipping sauce.

Mix all of these ingredients together thoroughly until completely combined.
Add the ground pork and mix lightly until all the ingredients are lightly incorporated. Be careful not to over mix the meat, as it will result in tough meatballs.
Scoop or form mixture in 15 1 ½-ounce balls and place them onto the oiled rack.
Cook the meatballs in the preheated oven for about 15 to 20 minutes, or until the internal temperature has reached 155 degrees F and the exterior is golden brown.
Serve meatballs hot, with toothpicks and a bowl of the Hoisin-Peanut Dipping Sauce to dip!

Hoisin-Peanut Dipping Sauce

- 3/4 cup hoisin sauce
- 3 tablespoons creamy peanut butter
- 2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lime juice
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce

Mix all ingredients together in a bowl.
Nutrition information per serving of the meatballs: 309 calories; 199 calories from fat; 22 g fat (8 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 66 mg cholesterol; 527 mg sodium; 9 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 1 g sugar; 17 g protein.
Nutrition information per serving of the sauce: 144 calories; 56 calories from fat; 5 g fat (1 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 1 mg cholesterol; 776 mg sodium; 19 g carbohydrate; 2 g fiber; 12 g sugar; 4 g protein.