

The Tokyo taxi driver: Suit and tie — white gloves optional

By Stephen Wade
AP Sports Writer

TOKYO — Very few countries deliver better service than Japan: in shops, in restaurants, or in taxis. It's called *Omotenashi* and translates roughly as hospitality — or offering customers unreserved attention. Visitors always comment on it. And it's no accident.

Take Tokyo taxi driver Norihito Arima, for instance, as he stands alongside 30 or 40 other drivers at a roll call before his 18-hour shift with the taxi company Nihon Kotsu.

He drives in a suit and tie. White gloves are optional. Drivers are not allowed to have tattoos or wear sunglasses, and men must be clean-shaven. The muster wraps up as drivers — 95% are men — bow toward a small Shinto shrine. And for good measure, they undergo a breathalyzer before hitting the road.

"It's something like the army," Norihito said.

The company also has a booklet for drivers with 77 dos and don'ts: how and when to speak to passengers, taxi sanitation, and opening doors for customers. There's even one instructing drivers to keep both hands on the wheel.

Taxi service has been a concern at some Olympics: poorly trained drivers, dilapidated cars, and sloppy dress. A decade ago in Beijing, the government published edicts for drivers to stop spitting, clean their taxis, and warned about eating on the job.



Customers also got lessons on waiting in line and not jumping ahead.

This shouldn't be at problem at the Tokyo Olympics.

"Japanese people have a pride in this service," Norihito said in an interview with The Associated Press. "In the western notion, an individual is independent. But we Japanese are homogeneous. We think of each other as part of the society, the community. So the honor we get as a group is part of the honor each member gets."

Japan is not perfect, of course. Commuters often push to get on crowded subway trains or bump into anonymous strangers on the sidewalk without apology. Westerns usually receive great service, but some other non-Japanese complain they do not.

Japan has a low crime rate, which is

good news for taxis drivers. But nocturnal Tokyo presents a heavy-drinking culture that can — literally — wind up in the laps of taxi drivers who work overnight, as Norihito does.

"People get drunk and sometimes they throw up in the car, and we have to clean up the car," Norihito explained. He said he routinely offers a specially designed bag to unsteady customers.

If that doesn't work, and it's what he termed, "small damage," he can clean it up and keep driving. If it's too bad, this automatically ends his shift, the rest of which goes to cleaning up the mess.

Norihito said the "damage" occurs a couple of times a year and, under company policy, drivers are told not to collect fares from these customers. Why create more problems?

DECOROUS DRIVERS. *Nihon Kotsu taxi drivers attend a roll call meeting at the company's Akabane office in Tokyo. The company has a booklet for drivers with 77 dos and don'ts, such as how and when to speak to passengers, taxi sanitation, and opening doors for customers. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)*

He said it's not easy to avoid the heavy drinkers. With few exceptions, the law requires drivers to pick up customers requesting a ride. Also, it's impossible to ignore a customer if a reservation has been booked ahead of time.

"We just can't do anything about it," he said. "Go back and clean it up, and that's it."

Norihito has an MBA and speaks English fluently. For drivers who don't, the company has a tablet to assist with language and a hotline for translation emergencies.

Drivers can earn about 50,000 to 60,000 yen — about \$450 to \$550 — in a typical 18-hour shift. Drivers keep half and the company gets the other half.

Norihito acknowledged that when he started driving three years ago — he gave up a "boring office job" as a data analyst — he barely knew his way around Greater Tokyo, an area of about 35 million.

"I couldn't tell Shibuya from Shinjuku," he said, despite passing a test that was much less rigorous than, say, London's famous "The Knowledge" exam for taxi drivers.

"There is no easy job in Japan, but relatively I feel comfortable doing this job," he said. "I like it because I can do it by myself. Sure, there are problems, but I don't need to get involved in office politics."

Indonesia, Thailand mark 15th anniversary of massive tsunami

By Yayan Zamzami and Niniek Karmini
The Associated Press

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia — Thousands of people knelt in prayer in Indonesia's Aceh province at ceremonies marking the 15th anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, one of modern history's worst natural disasters.

The massive December 26, 2004 tsunami was triggered by a magnitude 9.1 earthquake off Sumatra island. The giant wall of water killed about 230,000 people in a dozen countries as far away as East Africa. Indonesia's Aceh province, which was closest to the earthquake, was hit first and hardest.

More than 170,000 people died in Indonesia alone, about three-quarters of the overall death toll.

"No words can describe our feelings when we tearfully saw thousands of corpses lying on this ground 15 years ago," acting Aceh governor Nova Iriansyah said at a ceremony in Sigli, a town in Pidie district, "And now, we can see how people in Aceh were able to overcome suffering and rise again, thanks to assistance from all Indonesians and from people all over the world."

Weeping survivors and others attended religious services and memorial ceremonies. Relatives of the dead and religious and community leaders presented flowers at mass graves of victims in the provincial capital, Banda



Aceh.

Shops and offices were closed, boats were not allowed to sail, and flags were being flown at half staff throughout Aceh for two days.

Disaster-prone Indonesia, a vast archipelago of more than 17,000 islands that is home to 260 million people, lies along the "Ring of Fire," an arc of volcanoes and fault lines in the Pacific Basin.

The commemoration came four days after the anniversary of last year's Sunda Strait tsunami, which followed the eruption and partial collapse of the Anak Krakatau volcano. That tsunami struck coastal regions of Banten on Indonesia's main island of Java and parts of southern Sumatra island, leaving more than 400 people dead and 14,000 injured.

In Thailand, hundreds of people attended a tsunami memorial ceremony at Ban Nam Khem, a small fishing village that lost about half of its population of 5,000 when the waves rolled in.

More than 8,000 people in Thailand died or went missing in the disaster, and the bodies of almost 400 victims remain unidentified and unclaimed.

Western visitors and local residents attended the

COMMEMORATIVE STONE. *A woman pours water at a stone marking the mass grave for the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami following prayers commemorating the 15th anniversary of the disaster, in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, on December 26, 2019. The massive 2004 tsunami, triggered by a magnitude 9.1 earthquake off Sumatra island, killed about 230,000 people in a dozen countries. (AP Photo/Nurhasanah)*

service at the Ban Nam Khem Tsunami Memorial Park in Phang Nga province, where they viewed a photo display of victims. A Thai woman handed over an offering of food for Buddhist monks presiding over the proceedings.

The lucrative tourist industry centered around the island of Phuket was devastated by the disaster — as many as half of the victims were foreigners — but quickly bounced back and has grown much bigger.

Many local residents had their houses rebuilt and jobs restored, but still have to cope with the loss of friends and family.

Niwan Chantharawong left a floral offering at a commemorative wall in Ban Nam Khem. She recalled the horror of losing two children in the tragedy.

"I think they didn't die on the day that the tsunami hit. We couldn't find them until the 28th and their bodies hadn't decomposed at all," she told Thai PBS television, with tears welling up. "I often imagine how much they would have thought about me before taking their last breaths. But we could not find them, and we couldn't help them. This has stuck with me. And every time I think about it, it hurts."

Officially, there are between 8,200 and 8,300 dead in Thailand, but about a third of that total are missing, with no confirmation of their fate. An unknown number of bodies were swept out to sea, and the ad hoc evacuation of foreign tourists meant that at least some survivors were never accounted for. Also unclear was what happened to thousands of undocumented workers from Myanmar who performed low-wage labor in the area, coming from poor, remote areas with little way to plug into the effort to account for casualties.

According to police Col. Kittipong Thongthip, there are 394 unclaimed bodies at the Bang Maruan tsunami victim cemetery in Phang Nga, where white gravestones are marked with numbers, not names.

Kittipong, who as local police chief oversees the cemetery, said 25 bodies had been confirmed to be migrant workers from Myanmar, but could not be further identified. There are no clues as to the identities of the other 369.

"I don't think we will be able to prove who those bodies are," he said by phone. "It's 15 years now and nobody comes to see their missing loved ones here anymore."

Karmini reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. Associated Press writer Susaba Sivasomboon in Bangkok contributed to this report.

Retirement Living



Smith Tower
515 Washington Street
Vancouver, Washington
360.695.3474

- Studio & One-Bedroom Apartments
- Federal Rent Subsidies Available
- No Buy-In or Application Fees
- Affordable Rent includes all Utilities except telephone & cable television
- Ideal urban location near shopping, bus lines, restaurants, and much more!



**American
Red Cross**

Give blood.

To schedule a blood donation
call 1-800-GIVE-LIFE or
visit HelpSaveALife.org.