
Etiquette Can Be Murder

There was one bit of Japanese etiquette that I felt uncomfortable broaching with them. This, of course, was the topic of perilous Japanese toilets. These bad boys, as you probably know, often come equipped with a console arm that is loaded down with buttons—one to summon a bidet feature, one to create flushing sounds (to mask embarrassing sounds), a seat warmer, an air dryer. The Japanese toilet is, in short, one-stop shopping.

Henry Alford, *Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That?*, 2012

Japanese Toilets

Last month I mentioned that I had bought Henry Alford's etiquette book, *Would it Kill You to Stop Doing That? A Modern Guide to Manners*, which discusses—among other things—Japanese restroom etiquette. This apparently made several of you curious as to why an American etiquette book covered the subject.

Mr. Alford went to Japan to compare Japanese etiquette, which he asserts is “burnished to a high art,” with the manners of native New Yorkers. And one of the things he was impressed with was the Japanese system of public toilets.



Now, I had already heard that an architect had installed a new set of transparent public lavatories in Tokyo, made of a clear, colored glass which allows the approaching visitor to see inside.

"There are two things we worry about when entering a public restroom, especially those located at a park," according to architect Shigeru Ban's firm. "The first is cleanliness, and the second is whether anyone

is inside."

Transparent walls can address both of those worries, Ban says, by showing people what awaits them. After users enter the restroom and lock the door, the powder room's walls “turn a powdery pastel shade — and are no longer see-through.” (Bill Chappell, [Transparent Public Toilets Unveiled In Tokyo Parks : NPR](#))

What I hadn't heard was that in Japan you may encounter three different categories of toilet.

The first is the old-timey Asian Squatting Toilet, which, as the name implies, you do not actually sit on. These units are still found in a lot of rural areas and older buildings, since the cost of replacing all of them would be considerable.

Western visitors are apparently not fond of the squatting toilets, and are encouraged to look for more modern buildings that offer the Western Style Toilet, which consists of a bowl, a seat, a flushing mechanism and a water tank. This is the style most Americans are accustomed to.



“They are the most common type of toilet that you may find in Japan because of their practicality and efficiency.” (MT Lee, Japan's Public Restrooms - TankenJapan.com)

Lee states that the third and most up-to-date style of toilets commonly found in Japan (aside from the familiar Western-style urinals found in most male public bathrooms) are ultra-modern commodes such as the “multifunctional high-tech bidet” or “washlet” toilet.



These are the toilets of Henry Alford’s nightmares, with a control arm featuring a panel of unfamiliar buttons.

According to Lee, “There are several features to the washlet that make it stand out against the other toilets in Japan. One of its most prominent features is its ability to spray/wash and dry the users’ bottom (*sic*) afterward.

“The sanitation process of the washlet toilet has many adjustable spray speeds and some washlet toilets even have heated drying features to prevent the need for toilet paper. Without a need for toilet paper, people save money and the environment.”

Alford tells stories of toilet seats that rise automatically when you walk in, and the inability to figure out the various buttons in order to lower the seat and use the appropriate functions. There is also usually a wall panel with additional controls, including one to call for help in an emergency. But I’d be afraid to touch them, too, in case I picked the wrong one and summoned a rescue crew instead of the air dryer.

But, as per the Lee article, no matter which style of toilet you are faced with, there are certain universal practices that are “always applicable in Japan when it comes to using the restroom.”

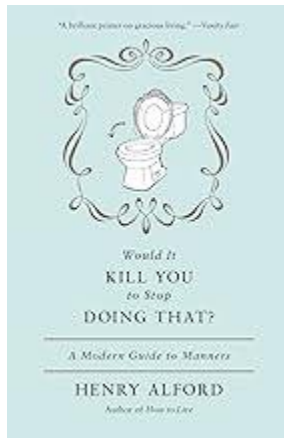
Etiquette practices that you should follow in Japan



include:

- Washing your hands after using the restroom
- Waiting in line for your turn to use the restroom
- Disposing of all items properly
- Flushing the toilet after you use the restroom

Ironically, *Modern Etiquette for Dummies* by Sue Fox offers almost identical instructions for use of the American lavatory, adding that you should “clean up after yourself when using the restroom. Don’t leave used tissues on the floor, always flush the toilet when you’re done, and wipe up any water spilled on the counter.”



The only difference, according to Henry Alford, is in adherence. The Japanese strictly follow these guidelines, making their country “the Fort Knox of the World Manners Reserve,” while most New Yorkers are a bit more remiss.

Which is why Mr. Alford wrote about Japanese toilets in his etiquette book, and why I went off on this complete digression about bathroom accommodations.

Have you ever had an unpleasant experience with a washlet toilet? Or even an outhouse? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

A Reader Asks

Last month I asked if my newsletter readers had any etiquette questions, and François Simon requested information about when it is appropriate for a gentleman to kiss a lady’s hand.

According to my research, hand-kissing began in the Spanish courts of the 17th and 18th centuries, and it was once considered a respectful and courteous way for a gentleman to greet a lady of the same or higher social class.

It was reserved only for married and older women, since it would be a reach of protocol for a gentleman to kiss the hand of a young single woman. In fact, later on unmarried women were warned that “No girl should permit a boy to be so familiar as to toy with her hands.... Such impudent intimacy should never be tolerated for a moment.” (Alex M. Gow, *Good Morals and Gentle Manners*, 1873).



Today hand-kissing is rare, since it has mostly been replaced by a handshake or an air-kiss on the

cheek, even in European countries. In fact, hand-kissing is mostly observed today only in a ceremonial or ritual capacity, such as when high-ranking diplomats or dignitaries greet each other, or in religious usage when lower clerics kiss the ring of a higher official. And for advice on ceremonial hand-kissing, you would need to consult a protocol officer in advance in order to decipher who should be kissing whom.

For non-ritual hand-kissing, or kissing among us commoners, there are also rules to be followed, as explained by the Academie De Bernadac in Paris ([Do you know about the secrets of hand-kiss? : Academie de Bernadac](#)):

- The hand-kiss is only ever practiced indoors, at formal parties in private residences or evening social events such as galas, with two exceptions: private gardens or the forecourt of a church.
- The woman should initiate the hand-kiss, never the man. It is up to her to decide whether or not she wishes her hand to be kissed.
- The lady should only be kissed on her right hand, and it is her prerogative to decide how high to hold it.
- Not only should a gentleman never ask to kiss a lady's hand, he also mustn't raise her hand to a height that suits him better. He should lower his head to her hand, while holding it gently.
- Despite how it seems, it's not a real kiss. The gentleman will only "kiss" the air about 1 cm above the hand, and his lips shall not make contact with the lady's skin.



According to Wikipedia, a woman traditionally initiates the hand-kissing by offering her hand with the palm down and the back of her hand angled toward the person doing the kissing. (Baller and Crain, [How to Kiss Someone on the Hand \(the Proper Way!\)](#) ([wikihow.com](#))).

So, François, to answer your question, it seems it is only appropriate to kiss a lady's hand if she offers it first in the proper position. But I personally consider hand-kissing a charming and gallant gesture, and I'll be very disappointed if it vanishes from social use altogether.

Note to readers: I enjoy reading etiquette books for fun, since they give an entertaining look at the social customs of different time periods. I actually have quite a collection of manuals, which range in coverage from rules for seemingly church behavior in the 1800s to the proper procedures for starting a present-day garage band. So, if you have any questions about current or old-fashioned etiquette, drop me a note at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and I'll do my best to look up an answer. And you might even make it into my next newsletter!

Latest News

Next month I plan to attend the Killer Nashville mystery writers' conference, where I will be meeting with agents and participating in a master class on "Constructing/Deconstructing the Perfect Murder." Hopefully I'll get some new ideas on how to kill people (or at least characters) and get away with it.

In the meantime, I'm taking an online marketing course on how to promote my books on social media, and I'll also be working on future newsletters. As always, if you know anyone who might be interested in signing up for my email list, please pass along my opt-in information at:

[Newsletter - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I would love for my readers to get in touch! You can drop me a note anytime on my contact page at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I hope you all have a great summer. And for your entertainment, here is a picture of Zach in his favorite lamp.

