

Life and Culture of Japan

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Abstract

Japan is famous worldwide for its traditional arts, and people talk about their tea ceremonies, calligraphy and flower arrangement. The country is also known for its distinctive gardens, sculpture and poetry. Japan is home to more than a dozen UNESCO World Heritage sites and is the birthplace of sushi.

Keywords

Japan, cherry-blossom, Shinto, Buddhism, Okinawa, Sushi, Ikigai, Kyoto

Introduction

The culture and art of Japan is fascinating to me. Japanese art covers a wide range of art styles and media, which includes ancient pottery, sculpture, ukiyo-e paintings, woodblock prints, ink painting and calligraphy on silk and paper, ceramics, origami. Recently manga which is modern Japanese cartoons and comics along with a myriad of other types has also become popular.

My nephew, who is the captain of a ship narrated this interesting anecdote about Japanese culture. His ship belongs to a Japanese company. Since the year 2000, he has been travelling to Japan every six months, and loves the place and the people out there, just the way he loves India.

The owner of this shipping company is a tycoon. He owns hotels, clubs and spas but his only son works in the ship at grass roots level. The son does not get to enjoy any luxuries. He works along with the other staff roughing it out. However this helps in the child being humble in spite of his parents being wealthy. They are not spoiled, and are made to work hard. Probably that's the reason the citizens of Japan value every little thing from people, to animals, to objects, to their country. And every man in Japan is humble and grateful whether he is a millionaire or the head of the nation.

The office of the shipping company is wide and open to every staff, and the managers or the

owner does not have cubicles. Instead, they have long tables where officers sit on either side and work and the CEO sits at the helm along with the rest of the staff. This makes it a friendly and safe environment for all employees especially women. He says most of the offices in Japan are made in a similar fashion. The culture in a Japanese work environment is very different from an Indian or American work place. While Indians and Americans have to be highly motivated Japanese employees are very good at working in teams and prefer to discuss everything with their team members. This team work also extends outside of the company where they socialize with their colleagues, most often over drinks after work. They also make decisions based on the consensus of everyone in their group.

There are two main religions in Japan- Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto is a Japanese religion, while Buddhism was imported in the 6th century from China. There are more Japanese people who identify as Buddhists, while a smaller percentage are Shinto and Christians.

It's heartening to know that Japanese have a very long life. They follow a healthy diet, with regular physical activity. Apart from this they get to extend their work years which keeps them busy along with government intervention, and that has helped the country to produce the longest life expectancy in Japan. Their life expectancy is the longest in the world. The traditional Japanese cuisine is based on rice with miso soup and other dishes; which they flavor with seasonal ingredients. Side dishes often consist of fish, pickled vegetables, and vegetables cooked in broth. Apart from rice, they also have noodles, such as soba and udon.

The focus is on teaching values to children till the fifth grade and then these values get ingrained in them when they grow up. They value every little thing that however rich they maybe, the houses stay small just enough for their family. They don't believe in luxurious living but believe in values like honesty, integrity and humility.

You can forget your umbrella at the bus stand, and pick it up the next day or drop your wallet at the restaurant and it will be there on that same table waiting for you. Well! you can leave your bag with valuable documents in a taxi, and it will be returned to you. No one steals there. Honest and Integrity are two values which they learn from childhood. It gets ingrained in them.

No one has to supervise the workers, everyone works hard whether it's his own company, or it belongs to someone else. They are passionate about what they do. They work together and their focus is on quality. The people of Japan take good care of the public property and they will not spoil anything. We don't get to see a beggar on the road, every single person works hard whether rich or poor. Music is their soul, fish their health, their land is a heaven's delight with crystal clear water in ponds and rivers, cherry blossom line the streets, and when we look around our eyes sparkle. The place stays green and no one pollutes their land. Their houses are made earthquake safe.



Image 1: Cherry Blossom Line

One thing which you notice in Japan is no one actually retires. They continue to do what they love for as long as their health allows. They remain active throughout their life. I have heard in Japanese language there is no word which means to retire. Having a purpose in life is so important to them that no one even thinks of retiring and sitting at home.

Japanese live longer than most of the world's population and they also remain healthy. They do not suffer from chronic illness like cancer, and heart disease. Many of the old people in Japan, men and women enjoy their life and maintain a good sexual life even when they are old unlike the rest of the people in the world. Dementia is quite rare.

In Okinawa the women live longer. It's also called the village of longevity. There the locals eat a diet rich in vegetables and tofu and served on small plates. How-ever they also have strong ties with their community which could also be the reason for their longevity. They have a broad circle of friends and good family relations which makes them feel secure and happy. Since the resources are scarce there, the communities have to help one another. According to scientists the keys to longevity are diet, finding a purpose in life and forming strong social ties. They manage their time well, they consume less meat and don't take processed food and drink alcohol in moderation.

The Japanese traditional costume kimono is not only the dress to decorate on women's body, but also to express the identity of their life and culture.



Image 2: A Japanese woman dressed as Geisha

They don't do strenuous exercise but take walks in their vegetable garden every day and would rather walk than drive. All of them are passionate about gardening. They eat only till their belly is filled 80% percent. They don't like to over eat. The way food is served is also important. A typical meal in a restaurant is served on five small plates placed on a tray. The main dish will be slightly bigger and the other four plates are very small. So they don't over eat and stay trim.

The Okinawan diet is rich in tofu, sweet potatoes, and fish and vegetables. Japanese believe both mind and body are equally important. They are positive and believe a youthful attitude is the main ingredient to staying young.

What to see and experience in Japan

Sushi shops range from high end to budget, but with a finesse that makes eating in Tokyo an enthralling experience. Ginza area is home to some of Tokyo's best sushi. However, one cannot get away from Japan without the Sushi experience.



Image 3: Sushi

On Japan's island of Okinawa, cherry blossoms bloom in January. Fukuoka, another city in Japan starts flowering on 18th March. In most major cities including, Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka the cherry blossom season begins in early April. It is an ethereal sight and one has to experience its beauty and it lasts only for two weeks.

- Stroll through Arashiyama's Bamboo forest in Kyoto.
- Splurge on a night at a luxurious Tokyo hotel.
- Explore Art & Architecture on the Art Island of Naoshima.
- Eat your way around at Tokyo's Tsukiji market.
- Eat authentic Japanese Ramen.
- Ride the Bullet train around Japan.
- Experience Japanese Night Life.
- Hike through the Japanese country side



Image 4: Cherry Blossom

Ikigai is something every Japanese practices in their daily life. The people of Japan believe that everyone has an Ikigai – a reason to jump out of bed with a smile every morning. Loyalty is very important to the Japanese, and they will blindly trust, and give you many benefits. They live long and healthy, and laughter is their way of life. They do not believe in rushing with life but one needs to nurture friendships, follow our passion, have a mission and give to the world a part of us to lead a long and happy life.

Acknowledgements

- Image 1: Cherry Blossom Line [Photo credit: Ms. Sucharita Kumar]
- Image 2: A Japanese woman dressed as Geisha [Photo credit: Ms. Sucharita Kumar]
- Image 3: Sushi from Pixabay.com
- Image 4: Cherry Blossom from Pixabay.com

References

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