

OKINAWAN CULTURE

The society and customs of Okinawa, like those of its Asian neighbors, have survived thousands of years...lately including significant industrialization and modernization. Although the island has changed over the years from an agrarian and trading culture to a modern business and tourism frontier, Okinawans still maintain many ancestral traditions.

One most prominent custom on Okinawa is bowing. Bowing is an Okinawan greeting...having the same meaning as shaking hands in America. It also shows respect. The deeper you bow, the greater the respect you are showing. Normally, one would not bow deeply to a shopkeeper when making a purchase...nor would it be acceptable to merely nod to a person of honor. You will find that Okinawans do not often shake hands. If in doubt, by all means bow.

Another sign of respect on Okinawa concerns how you address people. When addressing an Okinawan, custom dictates using his or her name and adding the suffix "san." A man named Masahiro Higa is called Higa-san. The same principle applies when you address a woman. First names with the suffix "san" are reserved for very close acquaintances. As a Westerner addresses an Okinawan, it is proper to use the last name plus "san" or simply use Miss, Mr. or Mrs.

Local cuisine rates as a most palatable for foreigners. Enjoying some Okinawan cuisine requires the use of chopsticks. After a few attempts, you will find chopsticks are quite easy to use. Several local restaurants will supply you with conventional forks and spoons.

One of the most delightful Okinawan customs is gift-giving. Okinawans exchange presents between friends and neighbors on seasonal occasions, journeys, moves, and at the beginning of the new year.

When receiving a gift, it is customary to give one in return. Remember, if you give a gift to an Okinawan, he or she will most likely feel obligated to give one in return. Ensure exchanges are appropriate.

Other Okinawan customs deal with matters of courtesy. First, show respect for the elderly, as they have an honorable place in Okinawan society. Second, you should not walk into Japanese homes, schools, shrines or temples wearing shoes. If you see a tatami (grass) mat, it is usually a clue to take your shoes off. When in doubt, observe our hosts and do as they do. Generally, you do not have to leave a tip at off-base restaurants, hotels, bars or in taxicabs. On base, however, American customs prevail.

Traditional Japanese rooms have a special alcove called "tokonoma" for the display of flower arrangements, sculptures, hanging scrolls and art objects. Many homes have a Buddhist altar containing religious objects and memorial tablets for deceased family members. Be respectful in this area and act like you would if you were in a church or shrine.

It is also good manners to take your coat off before entering the hall of one's home. Both Japanese and western toilets are used in Japan. Most public lavatories offer a choice. When using a Japanese-style toilet, it is usual to squat facing the hooded end. There is no shortage of Japanese public toilets, but some offer no towels or toilet paper. Hot running water is highly unusual. Carry a handkerchief or tissues for drying hands.

Avoid blowing your nose in front of people. If you must, leave your seat, turn away and excuse yourself by saying "shitsurei shimasu." Okinawans seldom display emotion in public. Elders frown on public expression of affection.

If you find customs here different or strange, exhibit understanding and appreciation. Both Eastern and Western cultures developed separately over many centuries. Many differences remain. Learn to enjoy local customs - they are very enjoyable!

Okinawan family life revolves around the household of the eldest son. Each generation is obligated to all others. Rights of the individual are subordinate to welfare of the group.

While the family is basically a male-dominated unit, women hold respected status. The age of the woman will determine level of respect. For example, an aged grandmother is greatly respected for her age and wisdom, while a young mother has more to learn.

The island's indigenous religion is animism. Characteristics include a female priestess (Noro) and the worship of the spirit of things such as fire, rice, water, boats and ancestors. Spirits are called "kami", or God, and worship takes the form of rituals to ask for protection and good fortune. You will find many "utaki", or sacred places, during your island travels. Often, in the center of a grove of trees for instance, you may observe a small grouping of stones near a larger natural stone known as an "ibe", or sacred stone.

Always situated at higher elevations, utaki are believed to be places where gods descend temporarily to commune with man, usually through the Noro priestess.

Okinawans offer prayers at these stones, which should be treated with great respect. Most Okinawan holidays are related to a Kami ritual or celebration. As a result of contact with China, Japan, Korea and the West, Buddhism, Shintoism and Christianity have been introduced, but native animism remains the primary religion.

Okinawans have intertwined the cultures of the Chinese and Japanese into their own, producing a multitude of colorful holidays and festivals. During your stay on Okinawa, you will be able to experience very bright and lively pageants, parades and festivals. A popular festival is the "Tsunahiki" or Tug-of-War. This celebration takes place in October and features a giant tug-of-war between the eastern and western sides of Naha, Okinawa's capital city.

Costumed people, representing legendary Ryukyuan characters, ride two huge ropes through the village. When the two sides meet, the ropes are joined. Thousands of festival participants pull on each end of the rope ... a great tug of war. Ryukyuan have a traditional dance heritage, through which their culture and emotions are dramatically and effectively displayed. Styles of dress and hairdos provide an insightful record of the distant past. Costumes worn in Okinawan dancing are very similar to those worn centuries ago.

Special Ryukyuan dances began when the Ryukyus were a kingdom. Special dance features are the movement of the eyes and hips, through which stories are told and a feeling expressed. This style of dancing necessitates that the body be held very still. The upper part of the body must not be moved. The hands and eyes are a graceful expression.

Performance of these classical and semi-classical island dances frequently highlight local festivals. Americans are encouraged to join in during informal festivals. Okinawans enjoy teaching Americans their customs and culture.