



The Tokyo Taxi Driver: Suit and Tie -- White Gloves Optional

TOKYO (AP) -- 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 a problem at next year's 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. Westerners 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?

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 50,000-60,000 yen -- about \$450-550 -- 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."