

## **Japanese Hostess Bars: Experiencing Japan's Hidden Side**



**It's 1am and I'm sat back on a purple leather sofa, sandwiched between two attractive Japanese women, sipping whisky and laughing with the girls about how brilliant I am.**

**I lean forward to grab a cigarette and before I can lean back on to the sofa, both girls rush forward with lighters.**

**"Foreigners are so cool aren't they?" remarks one of the women lighting the cigarette. The other nods in agreement, depositing some fresh ice cubes and reasonably priced whisky into my glass. I smile along.**

**Of course I'm cool.**

**"Are you American?" one of them asks.**

**"British," I reply.**

**"Sugoi! Amazing!" They exclaim, before giving me a brief round of applause at this remarkable achievement.**

**Unfortunately, the inevitable comparison arises.**

**"Harry Potter! You look like Harry Potter!"**

**I'm in a good mood so I decide to go along with it. "Oh really! You think I look like Daniel Radcliffe?"**

**There are a few confused looks.**

**"What's Radcliffe?"**

The atmosphere tonight would be relaxing if it wasn't for the unpleasant sound of some sort of farmyard animal being violently electrocuted on the other side of the room.

But as the cloud of smoke within the dimly lit windowless room begins to clear, its revealed that this animal is in fact a middle-aged Japanese salary man.

Probably some sort of influential local politician, the man resembles little more than a reanimated corpse, as he blares out noises amongst an overly enthusiastic crowd of cheer leaders. The attentive female staff cheer him on through his seemingly never-ending musical atrocity.

“You must sing! I bet you're amazing!” cries the woman on my right, mistaking my gaze at the horrific karaoke spectacle for a desire to take part.

“Yes! You're British! You have to sing the Beatles!” jumps the woman on the left, grabbing the touch screen device to punch in “Hey Jude.”

Oh god, not again.

As she punches in the characters for “Hey Jude” into the touch screen, I'm suddenly brought back to reality; I'm not a gangster. I'm not cool.

I'm not even Daniel Radcliffe.

The compliments, the flirting, the intoxicating atmosphere of a room where smoke substitutes breathable air - the cackle of nearby groups of male customers laughing with delight as their egos and masculinity are massaged.

Welcome to a hostess bar (known as “Kyabakura” in Japanese ) a bar usually staffed exclusively by women (unless you go to a host bar where it's the other way round), and where women will sit and drink alongside you all evening, pouring you drinks and harmlessly flirting.

For hours you can enjoy the flirtatious company of hostesses as they pour your drinks, light your cigarettes, laugh at your every utterance and clap along to your every song. It's not difficult to see why the concept of hostess bars, the modern equivalent of geisha service, has great appeal to fatigued salary men.

Credit where it's due to the staff, they work exceptionally hard, showing ruthless discipline and attention to detail. Hostess bars can usually be found in large multi story buildings predominantly comprised of other hostess bars. It can be quite intimidating going into one randomly, so going with a Japanese friend or visiting somewhere you've heard about through a friend is usually the best course of action.



The moment you have open a door to a hostess bar, crammed into a corridor on the 2nd floor of building plastered in brightly lit adverts, you instantly unleash a wave of smoke, karaoke and hospitality.

Before you know it, all the staff have stopped what they're doing, shouted "Welcome!" and the least busiest staff will rush over with a smile and usher you off to a nearby sofa.

Hostess bars aren't usually too big, able to sit around 20 customers on average, and given that there are never any windows, it can feel a little bit claustrophobic at first.

The names of the bars are often written stylishly in English, with similar exciting names like "Dream Bar" or "Magic Dream" - or the even bolder "Bar Dream Magic."

Once you're in the routine is the same. A small damp to wipe your hands and a beer or whisky, with one hostess usually sitting down alongside two customers - although the bigger your group, the more who'll sit with you.

The hostess will often ask if she can drink too, (always say yes) and once your drink and hers have all been poured, shout cheers, clink beers and away you go.

Shortly after you'll be brought a tray of simple, enticing snacks (hence the name "Snack Bar" for smaller hostess bars), with all the potato chips, chocolate and calories you could dream of.

Regular customers buy an entire bottle of whiskey and have their name written on it, so if they don't consume it all in one evening (god forbid), it goes up on the shelf alongside a sea of named and labelled whiskey bottles for next time. It's a fantastic lure for customers returning to the same bar.

For the next 2 or 3 hours you can sit back with women gathered around, complimenting your every word and attending your every whim, while you delude yourself into thinking you're quite good.

Or rather, that's how I choose to interpret it.

I often find people who have never been to a hostess bar are dismayed at the concept, given that such places simply don't exist in Europe and America.

But the concept is a big part of socialising in Japan and in the small town where I use to live, there were well over a hundred snack bars. They're everywhere.

From my own experiences and observations over the past 2 years, the concept is far from the seedy picture that is often portrayed outside Japan - often from those that have never set foot in one. Furthermore the various women I've spoken to outside work, claim to enjoy the environment of socialising, singing and drinking alongside customers.

Yet, despite the warm and friendly atmosphere, I rarely choose to go to hostess bars. I prefer Japanese style pubs (Izakayas), as they're far cheaper and I prefer not to pay for the service of having someone pour my drinks and talk to me all evening.

**Especially given that most of the time, the conversation can be somewhat tedious and superficial.**

**Another reason I came to avoid them in my town was it sometimes led to bizarre and awkward encounters, such as being served by ex-students who'd graduated, or having the parent of one of my students sit alongside me in a revealing outfit pouring my drinks all evening, talking about their child.**

**But when you go out for a work party in a group, it's often a given that the second or third party will be at a hostess bar and it can be an undeniably entertaining spectacle, watching your colleagues interact with the hostess girls. The presence of flirtatious and attentive hostesses can certainly make the evening more fun.**

**At the end of the night I call for the check. After it's placed before me I nearly spill my remaining whisky all over the floor, before handing over the cash and getting up to leave.**

**All the staff stop what they're doing to see my friends and out - they even come outside the hostess bar on to the street to wave us off.**

**"Come back again soon!" they yell.**

**It's a nice moment. Everyone's waving and smiling.**

**I feel special. Very special indeed.**

**And it makes me forget that I've just spent the gross domestic product of a Pacific island nation in the space of two hours.**