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The joy of not tipping

by Nigel Bowen

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If there's one thing guaranteed to induce holiday stress, it's trying to work out what gratuities are appropriate.

There's a lot to recommend about holidaying in Japan, but something Aussies will particularly appreciate is that tipping is not part of the culture. In fact, one way you can mark yourself as an ignorant *gaijin* is by tipping.

After a blissful fortnight of not shelling out while travelling through the Land of the Rising Sun, I realised that tipping should be done away with everywhere. Here's why.

A world separated into tippers and non-tippers

We supposedly live in a world that is becoming increasingly globalised and homogenised, but there's no international consensus on tipping. Countries can be divided into ones where tipping is expected and ones where it isn't, but do you really want to spend hours researching that, for example, tipping is expected everywhere in Albania, considered appropriate only in restaurants in Croatia and pretty much unheard of in Ireland before heading off to Europe?

And what if you wake up after a big night out imbibing the local brew and mistakenly believe you're in Slovakia (where tipping is common) rather than Slovenia (where the only form of tipping that's appropriate is rounding the bill up to the nearest euro)?

It's total madness.

How do you work out who to tip and how much?

Even in countries where tipping is a long-established practice, debates rage about what and who to tip. For foreigners, the constant confusion has the potential to turn a much-anticipated getaway into a never-ending series of awkward encounters.

Do you tip your waiter 10, 15 or 20 per cent of the bill? Do you have to provide a separate tip to the guy who brings your drinks? Does the porter who brings your bag to the room expect a gratuity and, if so, how much is the standard rate? What if everyone else on a day tour you've been on is pressing a €5 note into the guide's hand while saying goodbye but you've only got €50 notes? Do you give them nothing or ask for change?

And what's the test to decide who's considered worthy of a tip? Should you tip the street food vendor the way you would a waiter, a bus driver the way you would a taxi driver? After a few days of this you'd be tempted to bunker down in your hotel room if it wasn't for fear of having to work out whether or not to reward the person bringing up your room-service meals.

It's uncomfortable paying other people's wages

As anyone who is an employer (at least in non-tipping countries) knows, being responsible for someone else's livelihood is a big deal. So it kind of puts a dampener on things when, at the end of a meal or a hotel stay, you have to work out how much of your rapidly diminishing holiday funds you have an ethical responsibility to hand over to poorly paid, lower-level employees so they can afford to feed and clothe their families.

Here's a radical idea for tourism operators: pay your staff a living wage and charge your customers enough to accommodate that

rather than expecting them to cover your payroll out of the goodness of their hearts.

The good news is that at least half the world's tourist destinations are in non-tipping countries. If we all start favouring those places, it can't be long before the others institute a long-overdue ban on illogical and exploitation-enabling tips.

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