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UNUSUAL IS THE NEW NORM

Rabbits, Chopsticks and Bento Boxes

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07 MAR 2016: Experiential, or participatory travel, still ranks as one of the most satisfying pursuits. It's a complete turn-around from the old group travel concept where participants simply looked at the scenery. Now travellers are thrilled to be part of the action and the more unusual the activity, the

brighter the 'value' indicator shines. Here are a few examples from my recent stay in Japan.



Be Vewy Qwiet

Elmer Fudd's classic opening line in "What's Opera Doc" started haunting me as an ear worm (a tune you can't get out of your mind), almost as soon as I was asked if I wanted to visit Rabbit Island.

While Fudd's version began with the caution "Be vewy qwiet...I'm hunting wabbits" and included the refrain "Kill the Wabbit", the purpose of our trip was to locate and photograph the bunnies.

As it turned out, within minutes of landing on the island, I was covered in a fluffy blanket of beige, brown, white, black, and grey rabbits.

In order to reach Rabbit Island you hop on the local train in Hiroshima that takes you to Tadanoumi, and then after walking about 6 minutes to the port, you take a ten-minute ferry ride to Okunoshima, a.k.a. Rabbit Island.

The 300 rabbit inhabitants are evidence of a hare-raising experience that supposedly originated 40 years ago when a small group of domesticated rabbits were abandoned on the island. But now they account for one of the major attractions on this small (4.3 kilometers) island that draws upwards of 100,000 visitors a year to enjoy the beaches, stay at the island resort and of course, fraternize with the rabbits.

And finding rabbits was easier than we thought. Loaded down with six bags of rabbit food (multi-coloured pellets that can only be purchased before you board the ferry), the rabbits actually seek out human visitors and assertively bound up to them with determined looks and fiercely twitching noses. They stand on their hind legs to check out all the possible locations of food and then position themselves like interlocking rabbit tiles, to await their reward.

Posted signs caution visitors about proper bunny etiquette.

1. Do not chase, carry, cuddle or pet the rabbits. They are fragile creatures and can easily sustain injury.
2. Do not put your fingers near the rabbit's mouth. They are hard of seeing and may inadvertently bite you, thinking your fingers are food.
3. Do not feed people food to rabbits. They have delicate digestive systems and can only eat rabbit food, including lettuce and carrots (like Bugs!)

There is one hotel on the island where people can

retreat to their own lair. One woman we met travels regularly from one of the neighbouring prefectures to experience her own version of cunicular (pertaining to rabbits) stress release. With a huge bag of rabbit pellets in tow, she feeds the rabbits, talks to them, and meditates on the hypnotizing sound of the nibbling and crunching of the dried food.

Day visitors to the island can take advantage of the hotel's onsen or hot bath (we did!) and discover that nothing is more relaxing than rejuvenating in the hot mineral waters behind a (tinted) large picture window that overlooks the rabbit-infested Par 3 golf course.

My own goal on the island was to immerse myself in rabbits and I did this by sitting flat on the ground and covering my clothes in food pellets. Immediately 10-12 rabbits leaped over, climbed on my legs and emitted that soft chomping sound as they settled in for the feast. It's an exercise in total tranquility and great for those social media photos that make fellow travellers jealous at your initiative. (And of course you can send the photos by hare mail)

And just a note for your special interest (niche) clients who love animals, Rabbit Island is only one attraction that Japan offers.

In Tokyo for instance, coffee time has turned into the pursuit of comfort, escape and friendship in the growth of animal-themed coffee houses. For prices ranging from \$10.00 to \$25.00 an hour, usually in addition to the cost of a beverage, you can indulge your interest in snakes, cats, dogs, rabbits, tropical birds, owls, tropical fish and even goats. Some cafes allow touching while others

simply provide simulated companionship for those in need. It's just another experience to add to your list.

Carrying on with the theme of getting involved through experience, we had the pleasure of visiting the Takenaka Carpentry Museum in the city of Kobe. It's a beautiful architectural structure complete with a special photo exhibit as well as displays of tools and craftsmanship. Even for those who did not take 'shop' in high school, believe me, this is a pretty amazing place to visit.

In fact Kenzo Akao, the Director and one of the architects, talked about the five senses that the museum promotes: Seeing, Listening, Touching, Smelling and 'Inspiration'; instilling that sense of creative stimulation and energy in all who visit.

One of the highlights was the chopstick-making workshop where, with Yamamoto-san, an expert craftsman guiding us, we selected cypress sticks, planed, sanded and tapered them on all four sides to the correct length and dimensions, and then before applying the lacquer, we were invited to try the 'pick up the glass marble' challenge to ensure that the chopsticks worked! Who knew that there were so many details to making chopsticks? But it was a fun pursuit and is available to individuals on weekends and holidays.

With chopsticks on our mind, we moved on to Tokyo, where we took part in a Bento Box cooking programme. "Bento" means 'convenience' and usually refers to a lunch box, divided into sections, with each containing a different food item.

In our Bento course, the goal was to fill the 6 sections of the Bento Box with tempting treats.

We made a Japanese omelet in a square frying pan, then a vegetable dish of pumpkin and okra boiled in dashi broth, followed by chicken tsekouneh (minced chicken, gently fried and glazed with sugar, soy sauce and cooking sake). Deep-fried marinated chicken strips and delicately-arranged green beans (edamame) and cherry tomatoes completed 5 selections. To add a bit more substance to the meal we made Onigiri—rice balls wrapped in Nori (seaweed); one with flaked salmon and one with kelp. And then the proof of the pudding, so to speak, was eating our bento creations along with the 6th ‘dish’—which in the context of this article, comes full circle -as our final treat was “Rabbit-Ear Apples”. We were taught how to make bunny ears stand up on fresh, juicy apple slices.

It was an ‘oishi’ (delicious) experience.

So now my bragging rights have been elevated to a new high. Seeking out the unusual definitely has its rewards in terms of client satisfaction and value, but also in terms of destination marketing and promotion. Research and experience as well as your expertise in communicating the unusual to your clients will make their next travel experience jump with enthusiasm.

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A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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