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Columnist

YOKOSO JAPAN! AMBASSADOR

One thing that people visiting Japan really should know about is the playful sense of fun that one often encounters here. People overseas tend to have an image of the Japanese as somewhat expressionless and unemotional, rather like robots. For example, try inviting a Japanese person to a dinner party in the U.S. American guests in a situation like this will get involved in lively discussions, while Japanese people

ELIZABETH KIRITANI came to Japan from the US in 1979. She has written many articles for English-language publications about the charm of Japanese culture, many focusing on things that the Japanese people themselves don't notice. She has written many books, such as *Vanishing Japan*, and a newspaper column in collaboration with her husband, artist Itsuo Kiritani.



tend to just sit quietly and smile, so that no one has the least idea what they are thinking about. One could be forgiven for wondering why the Japanese are so boring when their country has produced such fantastic culture as the films of Yasujiro Ozu or the novels of Yukio Mishima.

If you actually live in Japan, however, you will soon find that this impression of Japanese people changes completely. Japanese society places great importance on formality, so that when first meeting someone people pay a great deal of attention to the correct manners. This is particularly true when Japanese people meet foreign people for the first time. The reason for this is the culture of paying respect to the person who you are meeting, which means that it is considered good etiquette to keep a certain distance. When you become friendly with someone, however, this all changes completely—Japanese people are full of fun, and love to play around and have a good time.

A good example is kabuki theater; different devices can be seen in kabuki that are there to amuse the audience, such as the outlandish clothes or the postures that seem to be frozen in time. This is not just in traditional culture, though, but may be

seen in contemporary culture as well. One example is *cosplay*, in which people dress up as their favorite characters. They get into it in ever greater detail, going deeper and deeper. Using their own interpretation of the character, they put their heart and soul into getting everything just right, from the clothes and the makeup down to the tiniest props. An important thing to note here is that this process is always accompanied by a sense of beauty.

Hot spring culture, cell phone culture, *otaku* culture—Japanese people are capable of making a whole culture out of absolutely anything at all. If you have the chance to visit Japan, be sure to view Japanese culture with this idea of a sense of fun. It will make your stay here even more rewarding.

FACING: Kiritani explains the attractions of kabuki to a group on an InterElder Association tour of Japan who have just watched a kabuki play.

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The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism's "Yokoso Japan!" campaign aims to attract 10 million foreign visitors to Japan annually by 2010. As part of the campaign, people striving to increase visitor numbers are appointed as Yokoso Japan! ambassadors.