

FIELD REPORT: EXPERIENCING JAPANESE SUBCULTURES FIRSTHAND

A foreigner's foray into a few of Japan's more offbeat cultural aspects.

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A *Ptilopsis leucotis* (northern white-faced owl) uses the writer as a perch



The *Athene noctua* or little owl is found in Europe, Asia and North Africa

Subcultures like the following have been born out of surprisingly unique ideas, and appear all over Japan.

A ROOM FULL OF OWLS

Japan first gave the world maid cafés, and soon followed with variations that included cat, reptile and even rabbit cafés. These animal-themed shops offer customers an opportunity to interact with their in-house creatures. When I heard about an owl café in Tokyo, my curiosity was piqued. Most people, myself included, have only seen owls in zoos or heard their hooting at night. The chance to see these enigmatic creatures up close—and actually touch them and have them use you as a living perch—is surpassingly rare.

Guests at the Owl no Mori (Forest of Owls) café pay a flat rate, which includes one drink, to spend an hour interacting with numerous owl species; they even have white snowy owls of the sort inhabiting the *Harry Potter* movies. The café keeps around twenty to thirty owls on hand at any given time. Although some are off limits for petting, staff members are happy to allow patrons to hold and pet some of the smaller ones.

The café is dimly lit, in keeping with the owls' natural habitats. Proceeding toward the back, I spotted an owl-shaped decoration but dismissed it as merely a decoration. Much to my surprise, the head pivoted and two very dark and solemn stared back at me—it was definitely not decoration but a live owl!

After receiving a few brief instructions on owl handling, the staff gave me a protective glove and then placed a small owl in my hand. The bird was very light for its size, and I was surprised at how effortlessly it maintained its balance. For the most part it sat in stillness until it finally startled me with cries almost like small barks. Unusual sounds notwithstanding, the experience was quite a hoot.



Retrieving a *gachapon*—you never know what you'll get

CAPTIVATED BY CAPSULES

Another popular pastime for toy lovers and collectors is going after the vending machine-dispensed transparent capsule toys called *gachapon*. The term is a Japanese onomatopoeia: “gacha” is the sound of the machine’s crank turning, and “pon” is the sound of the capsule dropping into the receptacle.

Inside the Akihabara Gachapon Kaikan, which boasts nearly five hundred such vending machines, I received some pointers from customers Eduardo Terzian and Artur Santos, two Brazilians living in Japan that I met in the shop. With *gachapon*, they told me, “You never know what you’re going to get!” This is because although one can see that there are many varieties of toys in the transparent capsules, you may not necessarily get what you wanted since they come out at random.

I had a hard time choosing from among the myriad categories of plastic replicas, which spanned action heroes, Japanese anime characters, warships, airplanes, animals and even plastic food samples—they all looked interesting. I finally settled on a machine that served up pieces of realistic sushi.

Wondering what kind of sushi sample I might get, I inserted a few coins and turned the lever. The capsule dropped down with a small “pon,” I scooped it up, and there in my hands was a lovely plastic replica of rice and . . . *tamagoyaki* (rolled omelette). As my Brazilian friends had said, such is the world of *gachapon*.



Vending machines, called *jidohanbaiki* in Japanese, dispense everything from beer to hamburgers to clothing

MACHINES DISPENSING A VARIETY OF GOODS

The country’s immense number and variety of regular vending machines are also known abroad. Japan has the highest number of vending machines per capita, so whether you’re in the city or the countryside, if there are people then these sophisticated dispensers of goods are never far away.

Japan’s vending machines are fascinating for several reasons. Some can dispense both warm and cold products at the same time, for example—a feature I’ve never seen back home in the United States. Also in contrast to the U.S., while they may be equipped with alarms and surveillance cameras, Japan’s vending machines aren’t outfitted with heavy locks, chains or bars to prevent theft, no matter how remote the location.

I’ve also witnessed a remarkably diverse and incredible range of products for sale in vending machines here, including not only soft drinks and beer but also ice cream, hamburgers, flower arrangements, umbrellas and clothing. I once stopped at a particular machine stocked with cans of *oden*, a Japanese dish typically featuring daikon radish, boiled eggs, konjac and processed fishcakes stewed in a soy-flavored broth.

That machine only dispensed cold products, unfortunately. Consuming my canned *oden* later that night at home, however, I was happy to find the taste was quite satisfactory, and the can even included a long wooden pick for eating on the go.

All of these experiences brought about new discoveries to me, but I’m sure Japanese people wouldn’t be too surprised. After all, when marketing to Japan’s consumers—particularly with a product geared for a subculture audience—you need to think of everything, even what is normally unimaginable. **U**