

Your suitcase was heavy enough anyway, but that quirky wooden sculpture you bought from the stall by the beach is looking less and less like a good investment. You also regret buying the ethnic painting that you once felt would be a great talking point above the fireplace, but is now destined for the box at the back of the wardrobe. You take stock of the gifts that you have bought for your family and realise that three tea-towels cannot be divided equally between eleven people. But you've only got enough cash for that final cocktail in the airport departure lounge – what are you going to do?

One solution would be to wring that credit card even drier by having a last minute panic splurge at Duty Free: whiskey for dad, perfume for mum, bookmarks for everyone else. Another way would be to avoid the situation in the first place by visiting a country where even the cheapest gifts give the impression that you really do care.

Cheap Asian handicraft has a certain appeal anyhow; it's that crazy writing they use, giving a one dollar key-ring the look and feel of something steeped in thousands of years of history. But whereas the coconut shell toothbrush holder with the Thai words for *Bangkok Toothbrush Holder* written on it is clearly a piece of nasty souvenir trash dreamed up for tourists, the stuff in Japan is genuine trash that the Japanese actually buy for themselves.

Whenever Japanese workers take a holiday – be it a week in the snow or a day off work to visit the hot springs – there is an unwritten, unbreakable rule of etiquette that their colleagues each be rewarded with a small and quite useless gift. It's a guilty thankyou for all the people who have stayed behind to keep the company prosperous. Sometimes this gift is a solitary (and individually wrapped) biscuit and at other times it is a lucky mascot with a story to tell. In his home country such a talisman will eventually find his own way to the box at the back of the wardrobe, but to ignorant foreigners he will become an object of intrigue, a glimpse into another world.

With trinkets as cute and as dainty as its girls, Japan has something cheap and non-nasty for everyone – and that little something will usually come immaculately gift-wrapped with coloured tissue paper, fancy string and the ubiquitous presentation box. Add to this a bit of creative thinking, and these gifts can be guaranteed to remove that awkward look of disappointment from even the most ungrateful nephew's face.

For gran there is *ma-ne-ki ne-ko* – a white or golden cat with a beckoning paw that will sit in a window and encourage customers to come into a shop. This cute little feline of fortune is supposed to bring good luck to its owner (even though the Asian style of beckoning looks to Westerners like they're being waved away). Tell gran that it will also encourage visitors to come to her house and she will be over the moon with the cat she doesn't have to feed.

For kids there is a whole load of *Doraemon* stuff. Forget about the over-exposed and exported *Hello Kitty* merchandise, *Doraemon* is the character that the locals love. This cat is a robot from the future and there's a story behind him too – his colour changed from yellow to blue because his ears were bitten off by a mouse, and now he is scared of mice. He has a pocket on his chest that holds a door which can take him across time and space, and when you explain this to the nephews you'll suddenly become very cool indeed.

Any mum will be pleased with a pocket pouch of *a-bu-ra to-ri ga-mi* (literally: oil take-off paper) – tiny squares of a special wafer-like paper that remove grease and shine from a lady's face. Some papers have a fine layer of talc that will act as a

foundation, and others have a light perfume to refresh the skin. Fabricate a story about how and when the Geisha of Kyoto use it, and you will get instant kudos for the price of a couple of stamps. The packet in which it is kept will probably be decorated in cherry blossom but there is also *a-bu-ra to-ri ga-mi* for men and this is a little more discreet.

But for the man who prefers something more manly there are gadgets galore at the *hyaku-en* (¥100) shop. You could ask your bank for current exchange rates but whatever the fluctuation these places are exceptionally cheap. Shops like this in other countries usually stock plastic Christmas decorations, candles in cups, and unsticky sticky tape. The ones in Japan sell high quality ties, pens that actually work, garden tools, T-shirts and wallets.

It's always worth buying a few extra gifts just in case you happen to forget someone, and tacky mobile phone attachments will definitely do the job. No phone in Tokyo is complete without something odd dangling from it. Be it a plastic lobster or a miniature bowl of udon, the food-based accessories are the current Japanese trend, and that's enough to keep any fashion conscious friend happy.

But there are some cute gifts that should not be taken away and the uninitiated traveller needs to be made aware of this. In temples across Japan there are mascots called *jizou* that are so sweet you may want to take one home – beware! Some *jizou* can only be taken to an alternative shrine (most Japanese family homes have a room containing a shrine) where they will keep your dead family members safe in heaven. Foreign visitors are welcome to purchase these but they need to be looked after in the traditional Japanese way; a *jizou* needs offerings of food and alcohol to keep him happy. There are other *jizou* that are designed to stay in the same temple where they were created and if you remove them, you will make the gods very angry indeed.

So if you really have spent all of your money on hotels and fancy restaurants and you really do need that final airport lounge cocktail, there's always the photo slideshow for the least deserving gift recipients. Burn all of your favourite holiday snaps onto a non-rewritable CD and bask in their uneasiness when you suggest they set one of your many photographs of temples as their desktop background. It's guaranteed to remove you from *their* holiday gift list ensuring that the box at the back of your wardrobe is filled only with your own junk.