

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



How To Survive in Japan. Sangyo Henshu Center Company.

Reviewed by Erik R. Lofgren

Published on H-Japan (August, 1997)

The CD-ROM software "How To Survive in Japan," published by Sangyo Henshu Center Co., Ltd., <http://www.shc.co.jp>, bills itself as "valuable information to make your life in Japan enjoyable and comfortable!" Taken at face value, this is a reasonably accurate statement. Indeed, the core information presented could ease some of the uncertainties of a first-time visit to Japan. However, it remains unclear just how new or useful, in a daily sense, this product really is. Moreover, it is a product marked by a distinctly unpolished air. <p> The CD-ROM is a hybrid, supporting both Macintosh/Windows (3.1 or 95). Only the Macintosh version was tested for this review. Sangyo Henshu Center Co., Ltd. (SHC) deserves credit for putting together a package that includes all the software necessary to run their application. A QuickTime 2.5 installer is included on the CD-ROM in the event that it is not already present in your system, a nice touch that will eliminate some frustrations often associated with installing new software. As a result, installation was simple and clearly explained in the slim manual that doubles as a hard copy of useful telephone numbers. The manual also includes a brief explanation of how to use the software, indicating some of the standard icons, including: a button marked 'Tips' for additional verbal or pictorial information, a picture of a camcorder for QuickTime movies, a picture of a speaker for verbal explications, and fingers pointing left and right for flipping through the pages of each sub-topic. Here, one gets an unfortunate preview of what is to come in the text: "If the color of the icon is off, there is no more pages to turn over." Were this an isolated editorial slip, it would be excusable, especially as it occurs in a context that is, in all likelihood, referenced only once by any given user. Sadly, both the manual and the CD-ROM are riddled with spelling, grammatical, and typographic errors. <p> The information is organized

into twelve topics, and each of these is further broken down. The Introduction provides a scrolling list with commentary for all of these categories, sub-categories, and topics within the sub-groupings. Unfortunately, this overview is available only at startup and the list does not support hyperlinks (strange, given how prevalent they have become with the rise in popularity of the World Wide Web). Perhaps this puzzling lack of functionality is intentional since the categories in the Introduction list do not always correspond to those actually available. The major topics and their associated sub-listings are as follows: ARRIVING, ACCOMMODATION, HOUSING, PUBLIC OFFICE, TRANSPORTATION, DAILY LIFE, INFORMATION, HEALTH & EMERGENCY, RECREATION & ENTERTAINMENT, TRAVELING, CULTURE & CUSTOMS, FOODS. <p> Much of the basic information is accurate. It is, however, not always logically arranged. Consider that information on voltage and electrical appliances is listed with "How to use the Japanese-style toilets" at the end of the sub-listings under "ACCOMMODATION: Conventional practice at Ryokan." Sometimes, the information is useful, as far as it goes, but could benefit from greater specificity. For example, we are told that bulletin boards in universities are a good place to find housing, especially at the end of the academic year, but no mention is made of the fact that the Japanese school year ends in February/March. In "RECREATION & ENTERTAINMENT: English-language newspapers," we are told to contact the local distributors for those papers without a free dial number, but we are not told that a 0120 area code designates a free dial number. On occasion, items deemed non-essential seem to have been omitted: no mention is made of the fingerprint requirement for alien registration. While there is no imperative reason to mention it, its absence in an extensive list of the data appearing on the Alien Registration Card is no-

ticeable. <p> There is no denying the pleasing visual impact of this software. Each section is associated with a different <cite>ukiyo</cite> print, and the promotional literature informs us that there are 400 full-color photos of people, places, and things. In keeping with the multimedia nature of this product, digital video clips have been integrated into the presentation. The package claims twenty-three, the web site twenty-five, and I counted twenty-four. Despite the technological cachet of these video clips, they often seem included simply because they could be rather than because of their informational content or quality. Under "Tokyo Area Guide," for example, a city map is speckled with large yellow spheres, each marked by the name of the area: Ginza, Akihabara, Sugamo, Shibuya, and others. No indication is given that clicking on any of the yellow spheres will start a QuickTime movie set in that location. The narration is often inane, and the value of seeing hoards of people walking through grainy, washed-out clips is questionable. Another instance of graphics inserted for no reason appears in the "HEALTH & EMERGENCY: Dial 119" section where clicking on the Tips button causes a cute ambulance graphic to drive across the page, siren blaring. It is unclear how that constitutes a tip. <p> Since there is only one person listed as a narrator in the credits, one must assume that Raul Camacho is responsible for all the verbal aspects of the CD-ROM. If this is an accurate assumption, this is one of the more serious editorial missteps. The English narrative sounds non-native and synthesized. There are, after all, more non-native than native speakers of English on the planet, and a synthesized voice in a computer endeavor of this kind might reasonably be seen as a plus. Still, if one is going to go to the trouble of producing something for consumption in a given language, then it makes sense to use the best resources available to ensure that the product is accurate and clear in that language. Beyond this simple issue, however, lies a more serious problem. In the two sections that provide Japanese phrases, the same voice is used. Not only is the speaker non-native, his pronunciation is often incorrect. This is of particular concern as the Romanized versions of these Japanese phrases are presented without any pronunciation guide whatsoever leaving the user critically dependent on the spoken example. Such reliance in this case would be a mistake. Given that the CD-ROM was produced in Japan by a Japanese company, it is unclear why the decision was made not to use a native voice. The problem is not made any better by the background music. <p> There are numerous problems with the interface. The most irksome is the lack of consistency in what one can or should click to

bring up additional information. This means either a lot of time is spent clicking in random areas that look as if they might yield something, or certain tidbits are missed. Further problems include the need to always return to the index to move to any new topic. The incorporation of both a search function (an unforgivable omission) or a "goto" interface would greatly improve the usefulness of this software, especially after the initial use. Indeed, the lack of a search function is one of the greatest disappointments of this product. This is particularly true as related concepts are not always grouped together. For example, the "DAILY LIFE: Telephone" section provides information on buying a phone line, but the "ARRIVING: Basic knowledge on Japan" section gives details about the operation of pay phones. Returning to a specific piece of information is extremely difficult unless you remember exactly where it was. This limitation severely reduces the usefulness of this CD-ROM as anything other than a one-time overview of things a first-time traveler to Japan might want to know. Other notable interface problems are: the inability to manipulate the field by dragging in the zoomed mode for the Tokyo subway map under City Transportation, the cutting of text in the scroll boxes when the scroll bar is clicked. Finally, the incessant background music soon becomes repetitive and intrusive. To turn the sound down or off, one must exit the program. There is no way to return quickly to a pre-determined location. <p> The more time one spends going through this CD-ROM, the worse the errors seem to become. Oddities telling us that "To get to know Tokyo, a bus tour is a good idea. It is a fast way to catch the outline of Tokyo and economical" leave one wondering where the proof-reader was. Other errors are, by this point, unsurprising: an incorrect birth year given for Sen no Rikyu and misleading or wrong translations for Japanese phrases. There are factual inaccuracies as well: a local call costing 10 yen lasts three minutes, not one; and while some travelers to Japan need a visa, not all do, as is claimed. Even cultural biases make an appearance, albeit a minor one, with comments such as "Kabuki ... may be compared to Europeam [sic] grand operas." There too many other grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors to detail, but I suspect that my point has been made. <p> The sight-seeing related tips which are provided betray the heavily Tokyo-centric bias of this software. When compared to other tourist guides of a similar nature, however, this focus might be regarded as normal, if somewhat annoying. Considering the amount of data that can be stored on a CD-ROM, however, this is one area where the CD-ROM format could have out-performed the more traditional tourist introductions. While several sites-Nikko,

Kanazawa, Beppu, and others scattered around Japan-get an occasional mention, only Kyoto is given special attention. Unfortunately, the implementation of icon-based clicking shows the same lack of attention-some work, some do not-visible throughout the rest of the CD. Moreover, no reason is given for this special treatment of Kyoto. This lack of historical or cultural background calls into question the accuracy of SHC's claim that this material is useful for everyone coming to Japan for the first time. <p> The software package, as noted above, also comes with a small booklet of phone numbers. Ironically, while most of the phone numbers that are presented on the CD-ROM are also listed in <cite>The Reference Book</cite> (housing, accommodations, etc.), many of the numbers in the booklet do not appear in the CD-ROM, which only serves to emphasize the limited practical value of the software. This point aside, the collection of numbers in the booklet is probably the most useful aspect of this package. In addition to extra numbers for NTT phone service (weather, time, directory assistance, and others), numerous hot lines (Tokyo Labor Standards Office, HIV and Human Rights Information Center, and Foreign Residents' Tuberculosis Telephone, to name but a few), numbers for book shops, museums, Internet cafes, supermarkets specializing in imported food goods, and fitness clubs are some of the other areas that are included. It is both surprising and revealing, however, that not one Japanese language school is listed. <p> In the final analysis, if you can tolerate the myriad problems that plague this product, it does, in fact, provide a decent overview of

the information a first-time visitor to Japan might wish to know, and the concept is an interesting one that offers great potential. Despite the manufacturer's claim, however, that "before we edited this CD-ROM, we asked as many foreigners as we could to know what they really need, and spent months doing this until we were able to provide you the following information," a great deal of the information seems reminiscent of standard tourist information pamphlets. Much of the narration is facile or, worse, inane, and the copy frequently betrays similar leanings. The question remains, then, why that visitor would wish to pay 55,900 yen/\$59 for information he or she could request and receive for free from the Japanese National Tourist Organization (JNTO). Moreover, the money saved could be better spent on several guide books that offer a portability and depth not available in this CD-ROM. Without a computer, it is virtually useless, and few people are going to pull out their laptop, insert a CD-ROM, and poke around looking for something they seem to remember seeing, but cannot readily find without an adequate search function, while they are walking about Tokyo. <p> This CD-ROM looks like nothing so much as a rushed attempt, poorly implemented and badly edited, to leap on the multimedia bandwagon. If this CD-ROM is available in a local library, it may be worth a look, if for no other reason than to enjoy the pictures and get an idea of the areas about which you will want to know more. If you have lived in Japan for an extended period, you can safely give it a miss. <p>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Erik R. Lofgren. Review of , *How To Survive in Japan*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14832>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.