

NOW AND THEN

HISTORY'S BEST BITS

8 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT JAPAN

1. The geisha, or art-people, were originally all male; not until the eighteenth century did the women really take over. There are still male geisha, normally referred to as taikomochi.
2. To achieve the porcelain-white face, female geishas used layers of nightingale dung, called Uguisu no Fun; how aptly named! This is now a trendy facial treatment in the West with those women daft enough to get plastered in bird poo paying about \$150 for the privilege.
3. The original Japanese were the Ainu, a tall Eurasian-like people, many of whom had blue eyes. Largely driven out about 10,000 years ago – only 25,000 remain in Japan today – they were replaced by Chinese, Korean and Polynesian invaders with some of the Ainu finding their way across to America to become the native tribes there.

4. Tsutomu Yamaguchi was in Hiroshima the day the bomb dropped. Escaping with minor burns he rushed back to his home town of Nagasaki, just in time to survive the second bomb by flinging himself into a canal and staying under as long as possible. Either the luckiest or unluckiest man in recent Japanese history, Yamaguchi finally died on 4 January 2010 at ninety-three years old.
5. The black-clad ninja is a Western invention. The ninja were spies and informants, usually working as domestic staff; Samurai were hired for assassinations. In Japanese theatre, a stagehand, or kuroko, 'person in black', often moved about the stage amongst the actors with their black clothing, telling the audience that they were not really there. The same device was used if the script called for a killer to sneak about 'unseen', hence the confusion.
6. Japanese educationalist Elizabeth Lee visited England and was so taken with the Royal Navy uniform that she introduced it to Japanese girls' academies in the 1920s. Known in Japan as the fuku, this is still standard schoolgirls' attire.
7. Japan and Russia are still officially at war, with neither nation having signed peace treaties after World War Two due to the still on-going dispute over possession of the Kuril Islands.
8. In Japan sake means liquor and can denote any alcohol, whisky, gin, rum, whatever. That which Westerners call sake is in Japan called seishu, or clear liquor, and it is not a rice wine but a beer. Very strong beer but a brewed product nevertheless.

THE VIKINGS...

Did not wear horned helmets.



Sometimes fought naked.



Drank from skulls – hence the beer brand Skol!



Settled in America in the early tenth century.



Were obsessively clean.



Wore make-up in battle.



Took Kiev in the ninth century.



Were mostly farmers not raiders.



Invented haggis.



Used magnetic compasses.



Made human sacrifices to appease their gods and at funerals.



Occupied Normandy, aka Land of the Norsemen.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: MYTHS, RESTAURANTS AND FROGS

FROGS AND TOADS

Harking back to the glory of the Frankish Kingdom and its heraldic device of three golden toads, it was common for the courtiers at Versailles to refer to themselves as toads and to the Parisians as the frogs, they being the lesser of the two creatures. ‘What do the Frogs say?’ was a popular way of inquiring the mood of Paris in pre-revolutionary Versailles, with foreign visitors acquiring the term and applying it to any Frenchman.



AN UNNATURAL VIOLATION

You could say that the Marquis de Sade helped to start the French Revolution through his raving out of his Bastille prison window about whippings and ‘unnatural violation’. Believing his imaginings an account of what was happening inside, the mob attacked but only found six prisoners, two of them as mad as de Sade, by now moved elsewhere. In fact, the Bastille was already scheduled for demolition and Louis XVI’s diary for 14 July 1789 reads ‘Nothing’.



DR GUILLOTINE

Beheading machines were nothing new in 1789; they had been in use in England as early as 1286 in Halifax and were common across Europe. Dr Guillotine only campaigned for the machine

to be made available to the common herd, who at the time had to endure various painful and inefficient methods of dispatch while beheading was a luxury reserved for the nobility.



AN UNBALANCED DIET

‘Revolution’ describes something going full cycle to return to the point at which it started and so it was for the French ‘hommes-dans-la-rue’ (man in the street) under the new administration. Although modern films of the events tend to depict an endless line of power-wigged fops flouncing off to the guillotine, the machine’s diet was otherwise. Of those it devoured, 6% were clergy, only 8% were aristocrats, with the vast majority of 72% being commoners. *Plus ça change!*



BON APPETITE

Even with only 8% of the aristos gone, Paris was still left teeming with out-of-work flunkies and chefs who got together to do the only thing they knew how – to cook and serve food. *Voila la restaurant!* Prior to the Revolution there were no walk-in dining establishments anywhere in Europe. And the first to sample the delights of such pampering were, of course, the leading lights of the Revolution; ‘revolution’ indeed.



SHORT AND SWEET

Marie Antoinette never uttered the callous ‘Let them eat cake’ during the pre-revolutionary bread riots but she was hated

nevertheless. On her last night she summoned her executioner and paid him a full purse of gold to ensure the blade was good and sharp so she could be certain of a clean death.



PUTTING THE 'TERROR' IN TERRORISM

As a word and as a concept, the terrorism with which we all now live was born in the French Revolution's so-called Reign of Terror (September 1793–July 1794). Known in France as *La Terreur*, or *Le Terrorisme*, this was when Robespierre used state-terrorism to disorientate and suppress any that opposed him. It was this horror that would later inspire Dickens' famous opening lines from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859): 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'.

DID YOU KNOW?

Napoleon's privates are still marching on. After his 1821 autopsy on St Helena, Napoleon's priest-confessor, Ange Paul Vignali, decided that only the imperial penis would do for a keepsake so he cut it off for drying. His descendants sold the trophy in 1916 with it passing through several hands before being bought at auction in Paris in 1977 by the American Dr John K. Lattimer, the chap who reviewed the evidence of the JFK assassination for the bereaved family.



10 FAMOUS DRUG ADDICTS

1. Queen Victoria – marijuana and opium
2. Sigmund Freud – cocaine
3. Winston Churchill – barbiturates
4. Adolf Hitler – amphetamines
5. Horatio Nelson – opium
6. Tsar Nicholas II – hallucinogens and morphine
7. Hermann Goering – cocaine
8. Leonid Brezhnev – tranquilizers
9. Anthony Eden – amphetamine
10. William Wilberforce – opium

FAMOUS CROSS-DRESSERS IN HISTORY

JOAN OF ARC (1412–1431)

The so-called Joan of Arc was not French but born in the independent Duchy of Lorraine in 1412, which did not become part of France until 1766. Her sentence was imposed not for her being deemed a witch, as is popularly told, but for the heresy of habitually wearing men's clothes, which was proscribed by the Bible. After she was beatified in 1909, French women started to copy her page-boy haircut and thus was born the still-popular 'bob-cut'.

DR JAMES BARRY (1795–1865)

This famed medical man also had a distinguished army career rising to the post of Inspector General of British Military Hospitals. He fought duels and was perceived as ‘one for the ladies’, always flirting outrageously at balls but, on his death, Barry turned out to be a woman who had given birth to at least one child. Influential even after death, and following his burial with full military honours in London’s Kensal Green Cemetery, Barry had his home descended upon by unmarked carriages, which removed all his papers, and his war record vanished from the War Office.

**QUEEN CHRISTINA OF SWEDEN (1626–89)**

Portrayed in film as a pouting vamp by Greta Garbo, Queen Christina of Sweden was in reality decidedly butch and a bit of a demon with a sword. In 1654 she abdicated and quit Sweden, dressed as a man. Possibly a hermaphrodite with more of a fondness for women than men, she roamed Europe and, upon her death, became one of the few women to be buried in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. She was exhumed in 1965 in an attempt to determine her true gender but by then there was not much left to check.



Catherine the Great is popularly said to have expired of sexual ecstasy while indulging in a very adult game of ‘My Little Pony’. Not so; she collapsed with a stroke in the loo and was carried to her bed where she died.

J EDGAR HOOVER (1895–1972)

The first Director of the FBI ran the bureau with sinister efficiency while enjoying a long-term relationship with his aide, Clyde Tolson; he was also a regular at the gay orgies held in a secluded suite in New York’s Plaza Hotel. According to Susan, fourth wife of bisexual whisky baron Lewis Rosenstiel, Hoover always attended in drag, full make-up and wig, squealing with glee as he clattered round in high heels, trying to catch any of the male prostitutes hired in for the night.

**CHARLES D’EON (1728–1810)**

The Chevalier Charles d’Eon was one of Louis XV’s best spies. Dressed as the Lady de Beaumont, he took up post as Maid of Honour to the Empress Elizabeth of Russia in order to report back on court affairs and intrigues. ‘Her’ fencing abilities and gung-ho equestrian skills attracted many admirers among the Russian nobility, none of whom managed to make it past first base, for obvious reasons.

**MRS NASH (?–1878)**

General Custer’s maid and laundress at Fort Lincoln, Nebraska, Mrs Nash was a treasure; when not busy with her domestic duties she would spring, gazelle-like, to the battlements and pick off attacking hostiles at several hundred yards. Living with one Sergeant Noonan she died suddenly in 1878 while her partner was out on patrol. She was discovered to have been a man before his return and Noonan shot himself rather than face the ridicule.