

TOKYO IN SEASON

Tea Ceremony Etiquette for First-Time Guests

A practitioner's guide, from inside the tea room

by Suzu

You've booked a tea ceremony. Wonderful. Now one worry is probably forming: what if I do something wrong?

Here is the secret nobody tells you: your host does not expect perfection. What they hope for is a guest who pays attention. Everything in this guide exists to help you be that guest — and to explain the why that booking pages never do.

Before you leave your hotel

Skip the perfume. The tea room is a world of subtle scents — tatami, charcoal, the tea itself. Strong fragrance doesn't just compete; it erases the experience for everyone in the room.

Take off your watch, rings, and bracelets (or leave them behind). This isn't about formality — it's about protection. Tea utensils are often handmade, sometimes antique, occasionally irreplaceable. One ring against a 200-year-old tea bowl is a story you don't want to be part of.

Keep your nails short for the same reason. You will hold the bowl with both hands.

Never bare feet — wear socks. Clean white socks are the classic choice. You'll be stepping onto tatami your host has prepared carefully; bare feet are considered inconsiderate there. Wearing sandals? Tuck a pair of socks into your bag.

Hair: if it's long, tie it up. Toss a hair tie in your bag. You'll be leaning forward over bowls and sweets, and you'll be glad you brought it.

Arriving

Be on time — genuinely on time. A tea gathering is choreographed from the moment it begins. Arriving late doesn't just inconvenience people; it breaks something the host spent days preparing.

Silence your phone completely. Not vibrate. Silent.

In the tea room

Listen to your host — that is the whole art of being a guest. The most common mistake I see isn't a wrong gesture. It's guests chatting among themselves while the host prepares tea. Side conversations that exclude the host break the connection the gathering exists to create. Speak with the room, not within your group.

Questions are welcome — really. About the utensils, the flowers, the scroll, the sweets: ask. Every object in that room was chosen by your host with intent, often matched to the exact season and to you, the guests of that day. Noticing is the highest compliment you can pay. (How much casual chat suits the room varies by teacher — when unsure, let the host set the tone.)

If sitting seiza hurts, say so honestly. No one expects a first-timer to sit on their heels for an hour, and hosts are used to offering an easier position. One practitioner's tip: if you can, return to seiza just for the moments of bowing. It's a small effort that reads as deep respect.

Why you turn the bowl. Each tea bowl has a “front” — its best face — and the host serves it facing you as a gesture of respect. Drinking straight from the front would be like wiping your mouth on the best part of a gift. So you rotate the bowl slightly and drink from the side. That's the entire mystery: mutual courtesy, not ritual for ritual's sake.

Sweets: don't bite off pieces. Use the small pick provided to cut the sweet into bite-sized pieces first. Take your time — the sweet is timed to prepare your palate for the tea that follows.

The spirit of the thing

Don't aim for perfect. Aim for willing. When the host shows you a gesture, simply try to copy it. A guest who imitates sincerely and gets it slightly wrong is a joy. A guest too embarrassed to try is the only real failure.

The tea ceremony has survived for centuries not because everyone performs it flawlessly, but because it keeps creating one specific feeling: a host giving their full attention to a guest, and a guest giving it back. Bring your attention. Everything else is detail.

Enjoyed this guide? At tokyoinseason.com I review Tokyo's tea ceremony experiences the way a practitioner would choose for a friend — honestly, seasonally, and with respect for the people doing it right.