

## Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

### New Japanese Culture: The World of Capsule Toys

#### Ubiquitous in Japan

Capsule toys, which generally go by such names as Gashapon, Gachapon, and Gacha Gacha in Japanese, are ubiquitous throughout Japan. There are capsule-toy vending machines in supermarkets, candy stores, shopping malls, drugstores, restaurants, tourist sites, art museums, expressway parking areas---almost everywhere. When I was a child, I used to beg my grandparents to let me have a go. Kids can be seen standing in front of the vending machines sobbing, “Just once more!” When I became a parent myself, I had a hard time steering clear of the machines when we were out. For Japanese, these are familiar experiences.



Capsule toys are stored in small vending machines. Each machine has several different products of the same series, and they come out randomly. The name Gashapon is onomatopoeic. *Gasha* refers to the clanking sound when the handle of the machine is turned; *pon* is the sound of the capsule falling into the collection tray.



Operating the machines is quite simple. You just insert coins and turn the handle. The price is reasonable. Usually it costs 100–500 yen, and mostly 200 yen or 300 yen. But you do not know what will come out, so it is a suspenseful moment. And of course, you want to try “just once more” and collect the whole series, so your purse gets lighter and lighter.

## History of capsule toys in Japan

Capsule toys have evolved in an original way in Japan. The prototype of the current machines is said to have been a vending machine dispensing candies and bubble gum that appeared in the United States around 1880. That evolved into what was known as the gumball machine. This machine was improved, and free gifts came to be supplied together with the candies and bubble gum. At first these free gifts did not come in capsules but were bound in with the candy or whatever. For that reason, apparently there were a lot of breakdowns. So in 1956 a capsule was developed in the United States that was both hygienic and less breakable, and capsule toys were born. Then American makers of that time looked to Japan and Hong Kong in search of highly skilled artisans capable of making toys that could fit into these capsules.

In response to their popularity in the United States, Japan began to import capsule toys from that country in 1965. At that time almost all the toys were cheap, lightweight, and designed for kids. They spread throughout the country in the 1970s, with such items as supercar erasers and Kinnikuman erasers becoming all the rage in the late 1970s and 1980s. Among them, there were some toys that were rather dubious, such as erasers looking like (but not quite the same as) popular characters and oddly transforming robots, but most kids did not seem to bother and became hooked.

In Japan, things like anime and manga, which in other countries were thought to be only for kids, had developed into new and high-quality forms of culture. Likewise, even though they were seen in other countries as nothing but inexpensive toys for children, in the 1990s and thereafter not only capsule toys for children but also more elaborate and high-quality items for adults were planned and manufactured in Japan.

In 2012 a series called Fuchico on the Cup was launched. This series, which became a huge hit, featured a female figure in a variety of unique poses, sitting or hanging, designed to be placed on the edge of a cup. The series was so popular that later Fuchico books were published and exhibitions held. Around this time, lots of items considered to be interesting and topical for young people and adults were developed.

Traditionally Japan excels in miniaturization. Since ages ago there have been seal cases with fine decorations made by lacquer or gold techniques, as well as *netsuke* ornaments, tiny dolls and their accessories, and bonsai. More recently we have seen transistor radios, the Walkman portable audio player, plastic models, and figurines. The capsule toys made by Kaiyodo, which is famous for its figurines, include Buddhist statues, local toys of Japan, dinosaurs, and tanks. They are tremendously popular for their elaborate detail. Capsule toys began as toys for children, but nowadays they seem to be enjoyed even more by teenagers and adults as collectors' items.

As of May 2022, examples of especially popular items include the Ikimono Daizukan (The Diversity of Life on Earth) series, a cat penholder, push-buttons, and items in which the capsule itself is part of the figurine. In addition, as one genre, collaborations with other companies are popular as well. For example, collaborations with restaurants and food product makers have produced miniature food samples, and a tie-up with a camping-gear maker has led to miniature items for camps.

New products are being developed one after the other, and once they are sold out, they are replaced by new ones. So if you see something you like, you have to purchase it on the spot, otherwise you may never see it again. It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance! Unusual capsule toys that have become topical recently include such usually inconceivable items as ID photos of complete strangers and letters from a grandpa and grandma. Such items often become talking points on social media. There are also items limited to certain tourist spots and limited-time offers, which are popular among collectors.



## New hub of capsule toy culture

The Gashapon Department Store Ikebukuro Main Store opened in February 2021. It is the flagship store of Gashapon department stores deployed around the country. The



concept of this flagship store in Tokyo's Ikebukuro, which is a hub of art and culture, is to update Japan's capsule-toy culture, which is representative of the nation's toy culture, with an experience-oriented sales floor proposing new ways of enjoying Gashapon. The store boasts more



than 3,000 machines, the largest number in the world. Indeed, in March 2021 it was listed in the Guinness World Records as having the largest number of Gashapon machines in a single location. Incidentally, Gashapon is a registered trademark of Bandai. (Gachapon is also a Bandai trademark, Gacha Gacha is the trademark of several companies, and Gacha is a trademark of Takara Tomy Arts.) Bandai entered the capsule-toy business in 1977, so this year marks its forty-fifth anniversary in this domain.

Overturning the conventional image of Gashapon, the store, right from its entrance, evokes a theme-park-like feeling of fun. The exhibition changes every so often. As of May 2022, it features the history of Gashapon. Beyond the entrance there is a Gashapon Odyssey machine, one of only two of their kind in the world developed as concept models of future Gashapon vending machines at a total cost of more than 100 million yen. This machine will be on display until the end of February 2023. Visitors can actually insert coins and experience operating it.



A wide range of people visit the store, including groups of junior and senior high school students, couples on dates, and nostalgic adults. The spacious interior of the store is packed with Gashapon machines. It really does seem like a maze. Just looking around is fun in itself. What surprised me as I walked around was the unexpectedly large variety of machine types. As befits a so-called department store, the product lineup is plentiful. There are kids' characters and toys, novelty goods, and elaborate figurines of anime and



manga characters, animals, insects, dinosaurs, and so on, as well as practical items like clear file folders featuring well-known characters, pouches, and eco-friendly bags. Unusual items include miniature push-buttons, traffic signals, and train seats. They are all so charming and desirable. One recent hit is the Onigiring series, which features a ring mounted with sample rice-ball ingredients inside a rice-ball-shaped case. It has become a talking point on social media.

### New experiences to enrich daily Gashapon hunting

The Bandai Gashapon Corner inside the store sells Premium Gashapon items that would be difficult to find elsewhere, including high-quality capsule toys priced in the 800–1,500 yen range. Premium Gashapon items are top-quality capsule toys with amazing product specifications going way beyond conventional wisdom.



In addition, recently Smart Gashapon machines have been introduced, especially at railway stations. These machines, which offer cashless operations with IC cards, can be experienced at the store too. And the store's stock of items in the Bandai Gashapon Corner can be checked on its website, so shoppers can confirm the availability of their desired products before going to the store.

### Clinching a 100-yen coin and having a go myself!

After much hesitation, I decided to have a go for a capsule toy imitating, in commemoration of the forty-fifth anniversary of Bandai's Gashapon, past Gashapon vending machines. There are a total of six types of these Gashapon vending machines of the past in this machine. I inserted the coin and turned the handle. My heart pounded as I opened the capsule. When I returned home and assembled it, I was surprised to find that there was





actually a tiny capsule included. And when I rotated the small handle, the capsule even came out. The elaborateness was simply amazing! When I stuck on the seal, it was just like the real thing. I highly recommend this item for people who like miniature things. I also tried the Ninja Cat. The capsule contains a small ninja cat figurine, which can be disguised using the small mask that is included. This is a highly elaborate piece too.



### Ideal as souvenirs as well

Gashapon are attracting attention in some foreign countries too. At the moment apparently it is mainly anime and manga characters that are popular among foreigners. But Japan has a tradition of excellence in the elaborate manufacture of small products, and various miniature goods would probably make good souvenirs. Traditional Japanese figurines or unique goods, such as traffic signals, might be just the thing. Or such items as food-sample keyholders.

For tourists visiting Japan from overseas, such items are reasonably priced and would be perfect as bulk souvenirs for friends back home. There are many to choose from, including haniwa stuffed dolls that are sure to make you smile, uniquely Japanese merchandise that conjures up images of everyday life in Japan, such as Japanese train seats, signals, and food samples, and nostalgic items, such as vintage cars and a pouch



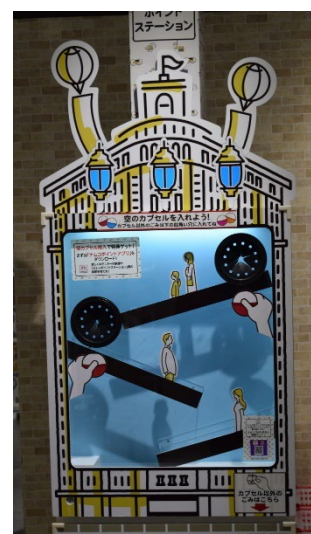
shaped like a cassette tape. When they are carried home, they can be put back into the capsules, so there is no need to worry about them breaking.

In addition, the capsule-toy department store is indoors, so fun can be had whatever the weather. Another attraction is that it is located in a shopping mall alongside other popular anime character stores, boutiques, variety stores, restaurants, and so on. What's more, while many museums, art galleries, landscape gardens, and other such facilities are usually open only until around 16:30, this capsule-toy store remains open until 22:00, and admission itself is free. Even if you just intend to take a little peek, half an hour soon flies past.

Visitors to the Gashapon Department Store Ikebukuro Main Store can also make free use of the Gasha Photo Spot, where you can have fun photographing items that catch your fancy. Scenes of Tokyo can be used as a background, so they would make a good memento. Coins are used when buying Gashapon toys. But don't worry if you only have 1,000 yen, 5,000 yen, or 10,000 yen banknotes, because there are change machines in the store.



While capsules can be taken away, they are reusable, so the store also provides a place where they can be returned. This Gasha Point Station for retrieving empty capsules has a charming toy-like design itself. So while enjoying some playful fun, children can learn about recycling capsules too.



I had a talk with Mr. Tomohiro Tsuruta, manager of the Gashapon Department Store Ikebukuro Main Store.

Q: Do you get many visitors from overseas?

A: We opened in 2021 amid the Covid-19 pandemic, so as yet we have had almost no visitors from overseas. But some foreigners who are living in Japan do come here.



Q: I would like to ask you to convey the attractions of the Gashapon Department Store to foreigners coming to Japan from overseas. What is the main selling point?

A: I think maybe it's the thrill of thinking that some time you will be able to encounter something you like. We have a wide variety of products available, so it's easy for absolutely anyone to find something they like. I think it's a place where the possibility of encountering something you like is expanded. I would like foreign customers to find what they like here and take it home with them as a memento of Japan.

Q: Do you have pamphlets in foreign languages or a foreign-language website?

A: At present we don't have any foreign-language pamphlets. But I don't think words are that necessary, because really all you have to do is look, insert a coin, and turn a handle. Visitors can see in an instant how to play and what products are on offer, so they can just go round and have fun as they please. First of all, foreigners should come to the store and see for themselves. We are the only place in the world with more than 3,000 machines. With such a large variety, they are sure to have a lot of fun looking around and maybe finding something quite unexpected.

Q: What is the age of your customers?

A: We get a really wide range of visitors, from families with small children to elderly folk. Kids naturally have an interest mainly in popular characters, but older people seem to have an interest in nostalgic things from the past. Moreover, many items are very elaborately made, so one way to enjoy a visit is to look at the products and think, "This is how it used to be!" Our store is a place where a wide variety of customers can have fun.

Q: Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, I realize you haven't had many visitors from overseas yet. But when the pandemic subsides, the number of foreign visitors to Japan is going to rise. What is your message to foreigners coming from overseas?

A: I think this huge boom in Gashapon is a unique culture of Japan. You will find many surprising products here, so by all means come and visit us once and look around. And if you tell your friends and acquaintances about us, Gashapon will become even more popular. We're looking forward to seeing you!



Visiting this store, you encounter all kinds of things. You see Japan's passion and devotion to craftsmanship and its affection for small things, as well as glimpses of Japanese life. You also see what interests the Japanese and their sense of humor. Apparently, if you are in Japan, you can now enjoy Gashapon online too. Going forward, capsule toys are going to continue evolving and transcending the times. You simply can't afford to take your eyes off Gashapon!

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Cooperation:

**Gashapon Department Store Ikebukuro Main Store**



Sunshine City World Import Mart Building 3F

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Tel.: 050-5835-2263

Business hours: 10:00–22:00

Holidays: Open all year round

<https://bandainamco-am.co.jp/others/capsule-toy-store/store/ikebukuro/>

\*Notification of sudden changes in business days and hours will be posted on [Twitter](#) (@gasha\_ikbkr).