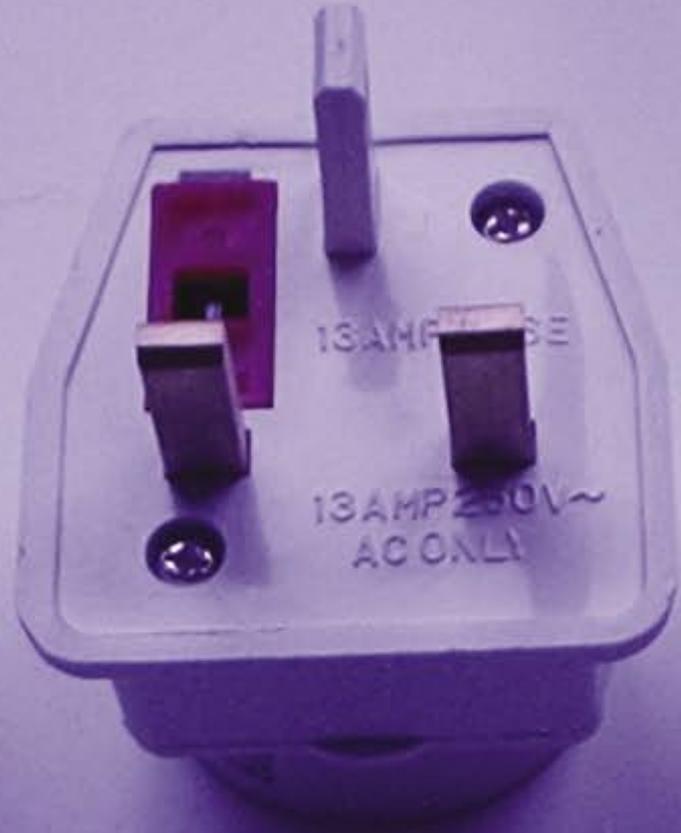


Getting Plugged In

by Mark Navin



Many of the Club's Members have at least one thing in common: they were once new to Japan. When arriving in a country for the first time, there are numerous challenges—the language and culture being the most obvious. Making sure all your technology toys work like they did back home can also have its difficulties.

One difference can be as basic as the voltage and socket. Countries vary from 100 volts to 240 volts, and the plugs differ considerably, much to the annoyance of notebook and laptop owners, who are often forced to hump around meters of cord and plug converters. Check out www.voltagevalet.com/country.html for what is needed, where.

Luckily, computers are volume sellers so almost all notebooks (and increasingly monitors) have voltage sensing. Provided you have the plug for the socket, there shouldn't be a problem. Desktop computers are a little different and very few are voltage sensing. It is possible you can damage your desktop by arriving in Japan and simply plugging it in. Most desktops, however, are equipped to accept a range of voltages, so making the setting 110 volts is going to work fine with 100, the voltage in Japan. There is usually a small switch on the back of the PC's power supply for this purpose. The switch gives two ranges: 100 to 120 volts and

200 to 240 volts. Getting the correct plug usually means a short trip to an electronics store. In general, Japan uses a twin flat pin power connector; there's no earth third pin.

Another consideration is the quality of voltage. While Japan has a nominal voltage of 100 volts, this can vary. Older buildings in Japan are notorious for low voltages (a brownout). Lower voltage simply means that machines tend to run slower before finally shutting down without any lasting damage. Higher voltage, on the other hand, can fry a machine. Surge voltage protectors are a good idea. PowerTraveller is worth a look at www.powertraveller.com for some small and inexpensive models.

If your computer does give up the ghost, make sure that your warranty is valid. There's no guarantee that a worldwide warranty with a PC or notebook bought overseas will be valid in Japan. More than a couple of major vendors refuse to touch non-Japanese computers, even those bearing their logo. Companies such as Dell are a little more enlightened and usually ask that you just update your registration details.

Newcomers to Japan are often surprised by the range of products on offer from Japanese manufacturers. For example, Yamaha—best known for its keyboards and motorcycles—has a wide range of good products, including network routers.



Conversely, an electronics giant abroad won't necessarily have the same presence in Japan. Peripherals, particularly printers and scanners, might cause problems. Lexmark and HP are major players in the printer market in North America, but have a much smaller market share in Japan. You're more likely to see Canon and Epson products on the shelves.

While a product sold across the world might be stamped with the same model name, it doesn't necessarily follow that the internal workings will be identical. I have a scanner from a Japanese manufacturer that works with any PC. If I connect it to a Japanese computer, it "finds" the scanner as a Japanese model and when I connect it to an English operating system, it "finds" an American model. I installed the drivers it requested from the maker's Web site and the scanner is now bilingual. However, it's not always that easy.

Many home-user products are not sold outside Japan so only have Japanese manuals and drivers, and run exclusively on a Japanese operating system. Peripherals have the same potential warranty issues if bought outside Japan. Low-end printers and scanners that are out of warranty can cost more to repair than replace (assuming you can convince the vendor to look at it). A \$300 printer should be considered a consumable. If it breaks out of

the warranty period, throw it away and buy a new one. Remember also that not all models have drivers for both Windows and Mac.

In the world of mobile technology, be aware that neither BlackBerry nor Bluetooth have any installed base in Japan. Wireless connectivity is different. While there is currently very little compatibility between the various international mobile phone systems, this should change over the next 18 months. SMS messaging does not work here. Some mobile phone models have English language menus, but many don't. English-language customer support can be a challenge as well. But fear not, help is at hand for Club Members. CompuCare is an English-language computer support service. Check out www.compucare.jp for details.

Japan is an exciting place—different, interesting, exotic, frustrating and that's just the technology. Wait until you turn off the computer and go outside. □

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