

“Visitors find cultural parallels, differences”  
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Nagoya, Japan – Sen. Jay Rockefeller and Gov. Joe Manchin have been fond of pointing out during this week’s trade mission that the residents of Japan and West Virginia share many values, such as a strong work ethic and family values. Yet no visitor can miss the fact that this culture is very different.

Rockefeller, who is a lifelong student of Japanese culture, points out that this island nation was isolated for many years. “Isolation is still deeply ingrained in the Japanese,” he said. Manchin marvels that he saw Japanese practicing American football last weekend outside Kyoto. “It was a sight you could have seen in communities across America,” he said. Except it was a Sunday morning in May. Some of the cultural differences are jarring. For example, after touring a Buddhist temple, First Lady Gayle Manchin and other women on the trade mission made a comfort stop on the temple grounds. The facilities were, um, primitive. “That was a lesson!” is all the first lady would say when she rejoined the group. Some things are just hard to fathom.

Charleston lawyer, Ellen Cappellanti, and Martinsburg lawyer, Cem Martin, were surprised that they could not buy a cup of coffee at the hotel across from the U.S. Embassy or at the Starbucks around the corner until after 7 a.m. Japanese people are famous for being indirect. The guidebooks say they will go to great lengths to avoid saying, “No.” They’re also very careful about what information they give to strangers. Take for example a casual conversation Wednesday with Masatami Takimoto, senior managing director and a member of the board of directors of Toyota Motor Corp. I had heard that Toyota’s board would meet this month, so I asked him when the meeting was scheduled. Takimoto listened carefully as an interpreter explained the question and then replied, “I cannot tell you.”