

# Rip-off bars are taking advantage of Japan's tourism boom

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With the number of foreign tourists to Japan increasing by the year, authorities are warning visitors to steer clear of so-called rip-off bars.

Such establishments have been a problem for a number of years but police are no closer to being able to shut them down, with many operating in a gray zone that protects them from prosecution.

The U.S. Embassy issued warnings about such establishments in 2014 and again as recently as 2017.

"We remind U.S. citizens to exercise caution and maintain security awareness in entertainment districts like Roppongi and Shinjuku's Kabukicho, as drink-spiking incidents over the years have routinely led to robbery and occasionally resulted in physical and sexual assaults," the U.S. Embassy said in a statement in 2014. "In most drink-spiking reports, the victim unknowingly drinks a beverage that has been mixed with a drug, rendering the victim unconscious or dazed for several hours, during which time the victim's credit card is stolen or used for large purchases. Some victims regain consciousness in the bar or club; other victims may awaken on the street or in other unknown locations."

Whether a victim is drugged or not, the chain of events is typically the same. They're lured into an establishment by a street tout (*kyaku-biki*) and charged exorbitant prices by the operators, usually under the threat of physical violence if they refuse to cough up the cash.

Customers are often escorted to a nearby ATM and instructed to withdraw the amount owed.

If a customer is unfortunate enough to have been drugged, they're obviously in no fit state to argue. It can also be easier for the bar operators to get money out of them, forcing them to sign credit card bills that can amount to tens of thousands of yen without even having to make the trip to an ATM.

In some cases, the bar will take photos of customers alongside bottles of Champagne and use them as evidence of the purchases in case authorities come by later with a few questions.

According to sociologist Toru Takeoka, such establishments obviously aren't trying to attract repeat customers. They're simply trying to get as much money out of the victims as possible.

I recently accompanied a friend who was unfortunate enough to get caught up in one of these scams in Kabukicho to the police. He had followed a tout to a bar and woke up the following morning with little memory of events the night before to find his credit card had been charged more than \$1,000.

A detective from Shinjuku Police Station's Organized Crime Control Division was sympathetic but could do little more than provide some advice for visitors to Japan.

"We are receiving more and more complaints about such places as the number of tourists increase," he told me. "Because of language barriers and time constraints, many tourists don't even come to us at all and so we're probably only seeing the tip of the iceberg. And even when we do have an actionable complaint, if the victim is a tourist, they typically won't be around long enough for an investigation to take place and so it's usually a dead end. Unfortunately, foreign tourists are perfect targets for rip-off bars. Criminals know it will take a long time for us to shut them down if they go after non-Japanese."

More specifically, he advised visitors not to follow street touts into a bar.

"In many wards, it's illegal for them to even talk to you," he said. "If you're going to an entertainment district, know where you're going beforehand. If you do this, you won't end up going somewhere you never wanted to be and losing more than you could ever know or possibly remember."