

# The "Kimono"

*By Chiemi Brezden, former United Nations Tour Guide,  
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**About the author:** Chiemi Brezden is originally from Japan and has worked as a United Nations Tour Guide at Headquarters in New York since 2006. One of the most experienced tour guides, Chiemi gave guided tours in English, Japanese and Spanish. After almost seven years of service with the Guided Tours Unit, Chiemi has recently joined the Records Management Unit, Operations Section at the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund. We wish her well in her new endeavour!

The morning of Thursday, 23 May was a very special day for me. The United Nations tour guides and staff of the Visitors' Services Section were scheduled to assemble at the podium in the majestic General Assembly Hall. We were not there for an official meeting of any sort, but we all came dressed in our colourful, unique and elegant national attire to pose for a memorable photo, taken by Mr. Mark Garten of the United Nations photo unit. We organised this special event prior to the temporary 14-month closure of the General Assembly Hall due to renovations under the final phase of the Capital Master Plan.

I am from Japan and, naturally, I decided to wear my "Kimono" to the photo shoot. It amazes me to learn how much the Kimono brings out the curiosity in people – "what is that she is wearing?"; "how does she manage to put it on?"; "how long does it take to put on?"; "how is she able to walk in it?" - the questions are endless.

The Kimono is a T-shaped and straight lined robe made of silk, which is wrapped around the body. Once wrapped, the Kimono is tied by a sash - an "obi" - at the back. There are no buttons, zippers, hooks or safety pins in a Kimono. As you can imagine, it is very tricky to put on and requires some skill and technique. Because the shape of the "obi" resembles a square box, visitors often ask what is inside it. Actually, there is nothing inside of the "obi". That is just the shape that it is meant to be.



The photo above shows me wrapping the "obi" around my body. The length of an "obi" is about 4m (13ft)!!

Until two years ago I could not put on a Kimono by myself, so I enrolled in a class in New York (yes, one can find anything in New York!) to learn how to wear a Kimono. Once I learned how to put it on, I occasionally wore it on my tours despite the fact that it takes me more than half an hour to put it on properly. When I gave tours to the public wearing my Kimono, the visitors in my group viewed

me as special - as if I were a celebrity!. One day, a teenaged girl said that my hands should be free in the Kimono; I was carrying a water bottle on tour and she kindly offered to carry it for me during the tour.

Nowadays, Japanese women, men and children wear a Kimono only on special and formal occasions such as weddings, a university commencement, and tea ceremonies. Wearing a Kimono does make me feel special and elegant, but to be quite frank, I do not feel very comfortable wearing it for long hours because neither can I walk fast in it nor am I able to sit on a chair with my legs crossed. Still, I enjoy wearing my Kimono as it lifts my spirit. And I am honoured to showcase the Japanese culture to people around the world who come to visit the United Nations and to confirm how the United Nations truly embraces cultural diversity. ◆



*United Nations Tour Guides in the General Assembly Hall, 23 May 2013*