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Karaoke. It's a word you see in headlines everyday, but what is it exactly? Learn about the history and culture of this popular pastime and find out if it's right for you. The word "karaoke" has origins in Japanese that translate to "empty orchestra," and while some might think that means the music is hollow or devoid of feeling, that couldn't be further from the truth. While it's true that a karaoke machine isn't made up of a full orchestra, it does contain thousands of licensed songs (from pop to punk to country) for you to choose from. This is important because the key component of karaoke is singing along with someone else's song, which can be done using recorded instrumental tracks played through the machine or by using its built-in microphone and speaker system. Karaoke is a deeply engrained part of Japanese culture. You can find karaoke machines in virtually every restaurant, bar, and home across the country, and for good reason. In a society where politeness and reserve reign supreme, karaoke provides a social outlet in which inhibitions are thrown to the wind. The perceived notions of failure or awkwardness don't exist when you're in a karaoke box because it's just you and your friends in an enclosed private space—so who cares if you sound horrible? In Japan, karaoke has been used as a way for friends to get together socially since the 1970s. Despite the fact that you can't actually see the other singers in your box, you feel connected to them through the music. The box is small enough so that everyone's voice is evenly heard, and the dark lighting and alcohol add to this sense of togetherness. It's not uncommon to see entire companies singing together or even strangers breaking into song; karaoke is a social lubricant that allows people to interact in a fun and interesting way. Lacking a private function room, karaoke boxes became popular because people could get together and sing without feeling self-conscious. This is why many bars and other establishments have karaoke rooms today. The rooms range in size and cost, and often include other features such as pool tables and small bars. Karaoke boxes can be found even in smaller cities, which attests to the popularity of the pastime. They're also found in large cities that have a strong expat community or those that draw tourists from other cultures such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, Guangzhou, and Taipei. Since people from overseas won't necessarily find it as familiar as those who grew up with it, learning about karaoke etiquette can be useful before you take the plunge.

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