

Hikers Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Japan offers a wide range of accommodation, from cheap guesthouses to first-class hotels. In addition to the western-style accommodation, you'll also find distinctive Japanese-style places like *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns), *minshuku* (inexpensive Japanese guesthouses) and *shukubō* (temple lodging).

Anything costing less than ¥6000 should be considered a budget option; mid-range rooms cost between ¥6000 and ¥15,000; and top-end rooms will cost more than ¥15,000 (per double).

Of course, there are some regional and seasonal variations. Accommodation tends to be more expensive in big cities than in rural areas. Likewise, in resort areas accommodation is more expensive during high seasons.

On the hikes, your options are to stay in mountain huts or camp, with camping obviously being the budget option.

Reservations

It can be hard to find accommodation during the following holiday periods: Shōgatsu (New Year) – 31 December to 3 January; Golden Week – 29 April to 5 May; and O-Bon – mid-August. If you plan to be in Japan during these periods, you should make reservations as far in advance as possible.

Tourist information offices at main train stations can usually help with reservations, and are often open until about 6.30pm or later. Even if you are travelling by car, the train station is a good first stop in town for information, reservations and cheap car parking.

Making phone reservations in English is usually possible in most major cities. Providing you speak clearly and simply, there will usually be someone around who can get the gist of what you want. For more information on making accommodation reservations in Japan, see the Japanese Accommodation Made Easy boxed text above.

The **International Tourism Center of Japan** (formerly Welcome Inn Reservation Center; www.itcj.jp) is a free reservation service that represents hundreds of *minshuku*, *ryokan*, inns and pensions in Japan. It operates counters in the main tourist information offices in Tokyo and Kyoto, and at the main tourist information counters in Narita and Kansai airports. You can also make reservations online through its website (which is also an excellent source of information on member hotels and inns).

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider low-down on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.



JAPANESE ACCOMMODATION MADE EASY

More than one foreign traveller has turned up unannounced in a *ryokan* or *minshuku* and been given a distinctly cold reception, then concluded that they have been the victim of discrimination. More than likely, they simply broke one of the main rules of Japanese accommodation: don't surprise them. Unlike some countries, where it's perfectly normal to rock up at a place with no reservation, in Japan, people usually make reservations, often months in advance. With this in mind, here are a few tips to help you find a bed each night in Japan. Note that these also go for hotels, although hotels are generally a little more flexible than traditional accommodation.

Make reservations whenever possible Even if it's a quick call a few hours before arriving, if you give the place a little warning, you'll vastly increase your chances of getting a room.

Fax/email The Japanese are much more comfortable with written than spoken English. If you fax a room request with all your details, you will find a warm welcome. You can always follow it up with a call, once you're all on the same page.

The 'baton' pass Get your present accommodation to call ahead and reserve your next night's accommodation. This will put everyone at ease – if you're acceptable at one place, you'll be just fine at another. Remember: this is a country where introductions are everything.

Tourist Information Offices (TIO) In even the smallest hamlet or island in Japan, you'll find tourist information offices, usually right outside train stations or ferry terminals. These people exist just to help travellers find accommodation (OK, they also give brilliant directions). They will recommend a place and call to see if a room is available, and then they will tell you exactly how to get there. This is another form of introduction.

Lastly, there will be times when you just have to slide that door open and hope for the best. Even the surprise-averse Japanese have to resort to this desperate move from time to time. The secret here is to try to minimise the shock. Smile like you're there to sell them insurance, muster your best *konbanwa* (good evening) and try to convince them that you actually prefer futons to beds, green tea to coffee, chopsticks to forks, and baths to showers.

The **Japanese Inn Group** (www.jpinn.com) is a collection of foreigner-friendly *ryokan* and guesthouses. You can book member inns via its website or phone/fax. Pick up a copy of its excellent mini-guide to member inns at major tourist information centres in Japan.

If you make a reservation and then change your plans, be sure to cancel the reservation. One reason foreigners occasionally have a hard time with accommodation is because others who have gone before them have made reservations and then pulled no-shows. It is common courtesy to cancel a reservation if you change your plans and it makes things easier for those who come after you.

Camping

Camping is possible at official campsites across Japan, some of which are only open during the summer high season of July and August. Popular with students and families, the facilities range from basic to deluxe.

Running water and public toilets are the bare minimum. Similarly, Japanese campers go camping with gear that ranges from the bare minimum to the kitchen sink. *Auto campingu* refers to going camping by vehicle and usually means they have all their creature comforts from home with them.

"Wild" or unofficial camping is also possible in many parts of rural Japan, but we recommend asking a local person about acceptable areas before setting up your tent.

JNTO publishes *Camping in Japan*, with a limited selection of camping grounds that include details of prices and facilities. For more detailed information check out the **Camping Association of Japan (NCA)**; ☎ 03-3469-0217; www.camping.or.jp.

CAMPING ON THE HIKE

For those willing to carry the gear when out hiking, camping is a viable option in the mountains. Mountain huts, especially in the Alps, are expensive and camping will be easier on your wallet. Both fee-taking camping