Welcome to Japan
Japan is truly timeless, a place where ancient traditions are fused with modern life as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

There’s an intoxicating buzz to Japan’s urban centres, with their vibrant street life, glowing streetscapes, 24-hour drinking and dining scenes, architectural wonders that redefine what buildings – and cities – should look like. Leave them behind and you’ve got a country that is more than two-thirds mountains, with bubbling hot springs at every turn. In the warmer months there is excellent hiking, through cedar groves and fields of wildflowers, up to soaring peaks and ancient shrines (the latter founded by wandering ascetics). In the winter, all this is covered with snow and the skiing is world class. (And if you’ve never paired hiking or skiing with soaking in an onsen, you don’t know what you’ve been missing.)

Travelling around the country offers numerous opportunities to connect with Japan’s traditional culture. Spend the night in a ryokan (traditional Japanese inn), sleeping on futons and tatami mats, and padding through well-worn wooden halls to the bathhouse (or go one step further and sleep in an old farmhouse). Chant with monks or learn how to whisk bitter matcha (powdered green tea) into a froth. From the splendour of a Kyoto geisha dance to the spare beauty of a Zen rock garden, Japan has the power to enthral even the most jaded traveller.

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Plan Your Trip

Japan’s Top 12

Tokyo

The city that has it all

Tokyo is one of the world’s reigning cities of superlatives – the dining, drinking and shopping are all top class. It’s a city always in flux, which is one of its enduring charms, forever sending up breathtaking new structures and dreaming up new culinary delights. It truly has something for everyone, whether your ideal afternoon is spent in an art museum or racing through the streets of Akihabara in a go-kart.

From left: Kabukichō (p59); 21_21 Design Sight (p64)
Naoshima

*Island of contemporary art*

Naoshima is Japan’s top destination for contemporary art and architecture. An island in the Inland Sea, it functions as one big open-air museum, with buildings and installations from leading international creators – all designed to enhance the glorious natural scenery. Much of what visitors find so compelling, however, is the blend of avant-garde and rural Japan: there are villages here that remain a vital part of the island’s artistic renaissance.
Plan Your Trip

Need to Know

Currency
Yen (¥)

Language
Japanese

Visas
Visas are issued on arrival for most nationalities for stays of up to 90 days.

Money
Post offices and some convenience stores have international ATMs. Most hotels and department stores, but only some restaurants and ryokan, accept credit cards.

Mobile Phones
Purchase prepaid data-only SIM cards (for unlocked smartphones only) online, at airport kiosks or at electronics stores. For voice calls, rent a pay-as-you-go mobile.

Time
Japan Standard Time (GMT/UTC plus nine hours)

When to Go

High Season (Apr & May, Aug)
- Weather in April and May is generally fantastic; August is hot and humid but the season for summer festivals.
- Accommodation is pricey and hard to find during cherry-blossom season (late March to early April), Golden Week (early May) and O-Bon (mid-August).

Shoulder (Jun & Jul, Sep–Dec)
- June and July fall in the rainy season (except Hokkaido); typhoons roll through in September.
- Prices and crowds increase in resort areas during autumn foliage season (November).

Low Season (Jan–Mar)
- Cold days and snowy mountains make this peak ski season, but affordable and uncrowded elsewhere.
- Many businesses close over the New Year period (end December to early January).