



# Understand Japan

## **JAPAN TODAY ..... 674**

Despite a sluggish economy, unsettling geopolitical situation, shrinking population and major natural disaster, the Japanese are not down for the count.

## **HISTORY ..... 676**

From the age of shōgun and samurai, through seclusion from the outside world, to the destruction of WWII – find out how Japan has emerged as one of the modern world powers.

## **THE PEOPLE OF JAPAN.....694**

Despite the pervasive Western stereotypes, the Japanese have much in common with the rest of humanity and are as varied as any people on earth.

## **JAPANESE CUISINE.....699**

Japanese cuisine is far more than sushi and sake – see why this incredible culinary scene is half the fun of travelling in Japan.

## **ARTS & ARCHITECTURE..... 713**

Calligraphy, haiku, manga, anime – Japanese art is a blend of traditional and modern. Equally impressive is the architecture, from ancient wooden temples to urban metal-glass frenzies.

## **TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ACCOMMODATION .. 725**

For an authentic Japanese experience start with your lodgings, choosing between ryokan, *minshuku* and *shukubō*.

## **ONSEN..... 728**

Before you indulge in some hot-spring relaxation, read up on best experiences, essential terminology and etiquette tips.

## **LIVING ART OF THE GEISHA ..... 731**

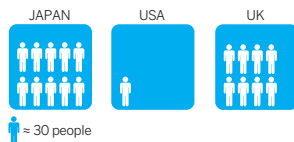
Learn more about the highly skilled entertainers who are an often misunderstood aspect of Japanese culture.

## **ENVIRONMENT..... 733**

While blessed with bubbling hot springs and magical cherry blossoms, the Japanese archipelago is cursed with high seismic activity and active volcanoes.



## population per sq km



# Japan Today

The year 2011 was indeed a terrible year for the Japanese, and it came hard on the heels of two pretty tough years by any standards, with the severe economic downturn brought on by the global financial crisis of 2008.

In March 2011, just as the plum trees had burst into bloom and the nation was gearing up for the annual orgy of *hanami* (cherry-blossom viewing) parties, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck off the northeast coast of Japan. The resulting tsunami (a word that, not coincidentally, happens to be Japanese) was of epic proportions: reaching almost 40m in height, it washed away entire villages along the east coast of Tōhoku (the northern part of the main island of Japan).

To add to the devastation, the tsunami also triggered a major crisis at a nuclear powerplant in Fukushima Prefecture, about 240km northeast of Tokyo. At press time, the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which operates the plants, working with the Japanese government, seemed to have brought that situation under control, but the entire nation was still jittery and wondering how long it would be before the power stations could be declared cooled, cleared and no longer a concern.

Even without a sluggish economy and a severe natural disaster, things were already pretty tough for the Japanese as they set out into the new millennium.

In September 2010 the Japanese Coast Guard took the crew of a Chinese trawler into custody after a collision near the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. About a week later, the Japanese were forced to release the crew in the face of threats by the Chinese. If you listened closely, you could almost hear the nation letting out a resounding '*Ara!*' ('uh-oh!'). The reason is this: since the end of WWII, Japan has done little to cultivate warm relations with China (some would say they've even actively antagonised China) and has, instead, focused on its

- » Population: 126.5 million (2011 estimate)
- » GDP: US\$4.4 trillion (purchasing power parity; 2010 estimate)
- » GDP per capita: US\$34,200 (2010 estimate)
- » Inflation: -0.7% (2010 estimate)

## Dos & Don'ts

» Do take off your shoes when entering a house, the inner hall of a temple, or any place where you step up onto tatami mats. Try to step out of your shoes right onto the tatami mats (ie don't take off your shoes a short distance away and walk over).

» Do learn a few Japanese pleasantries, but don't worry too much about communication difficulties – the Japanese don't expect you to speak their language, and they might know a bit of English.

» Don't get into a sento (public bath) or onsen (hot springs) bath tub before thoroughly rinsing your body.

» Do slurp when you eat noodles.