

# Welcome to Japan

*Japan is a world apart – a cultural Galápagos where a unique civilisation blossomed, and today thrives in delicious contrasts of traditional and modern. Its spirit is strong, warm and welcoming.*

## Culture

Standing at the far-eastern end of the Silk Road and drawing influences from the entire continent, Japan has spent millennia taking in and refining the cultural bounties of Asia to produce something distinctly Japanese. 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. Traditional culture is only half the story: an evolving contemporary-art scene, dynamic design and a voracious appetite for pop-culture trends all help shape the fascinating old-meets-new cultural landscape.

## Accessible Exoticism

Travellers to Japan have always found themselves entranced by a culture that is by turns beautiful, unfathomable and downright odd. Staying in a ryokan (traditional Japanese inn) is utterly different from staying in a hotel. Sitting in a robe on tatami (woven floor matting) eating raw fish and mountain vegetables is probably not how you dine back home. Getting naked with strangers to soak in an onsen (hot spring) might seem strange at first, but try it and you'll find it's relaxing. And with helpful locals, spotless facilities and excellent public transport, you can experience this exoticism with ease.

## Food

Savouring the delights of Japanese cuisine on its home turf is half the reason to come to Japan, and you can easily build an itinerary around trying regional specialities and dining in sublime restaurants. Eat just one meal in a top-flight Tokyo sushi restaurant – or gulp down fresh noodles at a station counter – and you'll see why. The Japanese attention to detail, genius for presentation and insistence on the finest ingredients results in food that can change your idea of what is possible in the culinary arena.

## Outdoors

The wonders of Japan's natural world are a well-kept secret. The hiking in the Japan Alps and Hokkaidō is world class, and with an extensive hut system you can do multiday hikes with nothing more than a knapsack on your back. Down south, the coral reefs of Okinawa will have you wondering if you've somehow been transported to Thailand. And you never have to travel far in Japan to get out into nature: in major hubs like Kyoto, just a short trip from the city will get you into forested mountains.



## Why I Love Japan

By Chris Rowthorn, Author

I've spent most of my adult life in Japan and now it feels like home to me. I love the food: it's incredibly varied and nourishing and there seems to be no end to the culinary discoveries you can make. I love the combination of a hike in the mountains followed by a long soak in an onsen. But, most of all, I love the meticulous and careful nature of the Japanese people, reflected in every aspect of Japanese life, from trains that run right on time to sublime works of art. Put it all together and you come away with a country that still intrigues me even after two decades of living there.

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