



Kansai

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Best Places to Eat

- Wanaka Honten (p376)
- Yoshino Sushi (p375)
- Shoubentango-tei (p376)
- Kōbe Plaisir (p387)
- Yokarō (p429)

Best Places to Sleep

- Hostel 64 Osaka (p373)
- Cross Hotel Osaka (p374)
- Oriental Hotel (p386)
- Nishimuraya Honkan (p432)
- Blue Sky Guesthouse (p418)

Why Go?

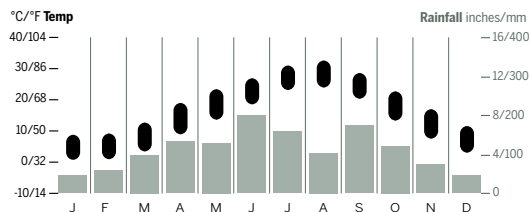
If you had to choose only one region of Japan to explore, Kansai (関西) would be an easy choice. It's the heart of Japan – there is nowhere else in the country you can find so much of historical and cultural interest in such a compact area.

Osaka, the region's hub and Japan's third largest city, shows off Japanese urban life in all its mind-boggling intensity, while Kōbe retains some of the international feeling that dates back to its days as a foreign treaty port. Nara, Japan's first permanent capital, is thick with traditional sights including Japan's largest Buddha at the awe-inspiring Tōdai-ji. Ise Grand Shrine in Mie Prefecture is one of the three most important sites in Shintō. In Wakayama-ken you'll find great onsen and hiking, a rugged coastline and the mountaintop Buddhist temple complex of Kōya-san, one of Japan's most intensely spiritual places.

Kyoto (p297) and Osaka are the main cities of Kansai and both make good bases for exploration.

When to Go

Osaka



Late Mar–mid-Apr The beauty of the cherry blossoms is over the top.

May–Sep July and August are hot and sticky, but summer is a great time for festivals and street life.

Oct–early Dec Kansai's sights are sublime against a backdrop of bright red maple leaves.

i Getting There & Around

By air, Osaka (p380) is the main hub for entry to the Kansai region, served by Kansai International Airport for international and domestic flights and Osaka Itami Airport for only domestic flights. By rail, Osaka (p382) and Kyoto (p356) are the main gateways, linked to major cities in the rest of the country via rail and *shinkansen* (bullet train).

There's an extensive network of Japan Rail and other ('private') train lines throughout Kansai. Within some of Kansai's outer reaches such as Kumano Kodō on the Kii Peninsula, bus may be the most efficient mode of public transportation. Renting a car is becoming increasingly popular, though take care if you'll be doing a lot of expressway driving as tolls can add up quickly.

OSAKA

大阪

📍 06 / POP 2,705,300

If Kyoto was the city of the courtly nobility and Tokyo the city of the samurai, then Osaka was the city of the merchant class. Japan's third-largest city is a place where things have always moved a faster, where people are a bit brasher and interactions are peppered with playful jabs – and locals take pride in this.

Osaka is not a pretty city in the conventional sense – though it does have a lovely river cutting through the centre – but it packs more colour than most. The acres of concrete are cloaked in dazzling neon; shopfronts are vivid, unabashed cries for attention. This is not a city that prefers to dress all in black.

Above all, Osaka is a city that loves to eat: it's unofficial slogan is *kuidaore* ('eat until you drop'). It really shines in the evening, when it seems that everyone is out for a good meal – and a good time.

History

Osaka (originally called 'Naniwa', a name still heard today) has been a key port and mercantile centre from the beginning of Japan's recorded history. From the 6th century onwards, it became Japan's base for trade with Korea and China – a gateway for goods but also ideas such as Buddhism and empire-building, and new technologies.

In the late 16th century, Osaka rose to prominence when the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, having unified all of Japan after centuries of civil war, chose Osaka as the site for his castle. Merchants set up around the castle and the city grew into a busy economic centre. When Tokugawa Ieyasu moved the seat of power to Edo (now Tokyo) in the early 17th

century, he adopted a hands-off approach to the city, allowing merchants to prosper unhindered by government interference. During the Edo period (1603–1868) Osaka served as Japan's largest distribution centre for rice (which was akin to currency at the time), earning it the nickname 'Japan's Kitchen'.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, as economic influence became increasingly consolidated in Tokyo, Osaka reinvented itself as one of the most productive manufacturing centres in East Asia. Unfortunately this made it a bombing target during WWII. During the 1945 air raids, one-third of the city centre was levelled and over 10,000 people were killed.

Today commerce remains vital to Osaka – it is the business hub of western Japan – while the greater Keihanshin Industrial Zone, of which Osaka is part, is one of Japan's great manufacturing centres.

Sights

Central Osaka is commonly divided into north (Kita), around Osaka and Umeda stations, and south (Minami), around Namba Station. Running east-west through the middle are two rivers, Dōjima-gawa and Tosabori-gawa; the island of Naka-no-shima divides the two. Sandwiched between the Tosabori-gawa and Minami is central Semba; landmark and top sight Osaka-jō is east of here.

Below Minami is Tennōji, a neighbourhood that has seen some recent redevelopment but is still rough around the edges. The bayside Tempōzan neighbourhood and Universal Studios are west of the city centre.

Kita (Umeda)

キタ

Kita ('north') is the city's centre of gravity by day in office buildings, department stores and shopping complexes – plus the transit hubs of JR Osaka and Hankyū Umeda Stations (and the multiple train and subway lines converging here). While there are few great attractions here, there is plenty of big-city bustle both on street level and in the extensive network of underground passages below.

Umeda Sky Building

NOTABLE BUILDING

(梅田スカイビル; Map p362; www.kuchu-teien.com; 1-1-88 Ōyodonaka, Kita-ku; admission ¥700; ☺ observation decks 10am-10.30pm, last entry 10pm; ☑ JR Osaka, north central exit) Osaka's landmark Sky Building (1993) resembles a 40-storey, space-age Arc de Triomphe. Twin towers are connected at the top by a 'floating garden' (really a garden-free observation deck), which