

Destination Japan

Japan is a world apart – a wonderful little planet floating off the coast of mainland China. It is a kind of cultural Galapagos, a place where a unique civilisation was allowed to grow and unfold on its own, unmolested by invading powers. And while there has been a lot of input from both Western and Eastern cultures over the millennia, these have always been turned into something distinctly Japanese once they arrived on the archipelago.

FAST FACTS

Population: 127 million

Female life expectancy:
84.5 years

Literacy rate: 99%

GDP: US\$3.7 trillion
(estimated)

Latitude of Tokyo: 35.4°N,
the same as
Tehran, and about the
same as Los Angeles
(34.05°N) and Crete
(35°N)

Islands in the Japanese
archipelago: approxi-
mately 3900

Number of onsen (hot
springs): more than 3000

World's busiest station:
Tokyo's Shinjuku Station,
servicing 740,000
passengers a day

Money spent on manga
(comics) each year in
Japan: ¥481 billion
(about US\$5 billion)

Cruising speed of the
shinkansen (bullet train):
300km/h

Even today, the world struggles to categorise Japan: is it the world's most advanced technological civilisation, or a bastion of traditional Asian culture? Has the country become just another outpost of the West, or is there something decidedly Eastern lurking under the veneer of its familiar modernity? There are no easy answers, but there is plenty of pleasure to be had in looking for them.

First and foremost, Japan is a place of delicious contrasts: ancient temples and futuristic cities; mist-shrouded hills and lightning-fast bullet trains; kimono-clad geisha and suit-clad businesspeople; quaint thatch-roofed villages and pulsating neon urban jungles. This peculiar synthesis of the modern and the traditional is one of the things that makes travel in Japan such a fascinating experience.

For all its uniqueness, Japan shares a lot with the wider world, and this includes the state of the economy. Japan has been severely affected by the worldwide recession that started with the US sub-prime loan crisis of 2008. Japan's export-driven economy has always been sensitive to economic health of its trading partners, particularly the USA. Indeed, it has often been observed that when America sneezes, Japan catches a cold. And this time, Japan has caught a whopper.

As housing prices fell and the stock market tanked in the USA, America's profligate consumers stopped buying Japanese products. The effect on the Japanese economy was almost immediate. Exports in January 2009 were down an astonishing 46% compared to the previous year. For a nation that exports about 20% of its total manufacturing output, this sort of decline can only be termed apocalyptic, and the bursting of Japan's famous 'Bubble Economy' in the late '80s is starting to look tame by comparison.

To add insult to injury, just as the world's consumers have stopped buying Japanese products, the world's currency traders have been snapping up the Japanese yen, making it one of the world's most valuable currencies. This has made Japan's exports even less attractive to foreign buyers. This one-two economic punch has left the nation reeling, and Japanese newspaper headlines are a daily litany of economic woes, from shrinking tax receipts, to massive layoffs, to huge corporate losses. It's too early to tell how all of this will play out in the coming months and years, but one thing is certain: many businesses will probably close (including some listed in the pages of this guide).

To make matters worse, the present economic crisis is unfolding against a backdrop of two other severe problems: Japan's low birth rate (the second-lowest in the industrialised world after Italy) and ageing population. Japan's population peaked in 2006 at 127.46 million and is estimated to have fallen by almost 400,000 people by mid-2009. Experts predict that it may drop as low as 100 million by the year 2050, which begs the question: who will work in the factories and who will take care of the elderly as time passes?

In order to address the problem, Japan has recently been experimenting with a solution familiar to those in Hong Kong: importing workers from

Southeast Asia. Japan recently changed its visa policies to allow nurses from countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines to work in Japan on a temporary basis. Critics have assailed the plan as inherently racist, as these nurses are not eligible for eventual permanent residence. However, many observers see foreign nurses as the first wave of overseas workers who may eventually change Japan's traditionally conservative (some would say xenophobic) attitudes towards immigration.

Changes are also taking place in many other spheres of Japanese life. The traditional foundations of Japanese life – cradle-to-grave employment, age-based promotion, and a strong social safety net – are gradually being abandoned in favour of an economy based on more flexible labour conditions and a tightening of privatised government services (eg in the case of the post office). Now, rather than priding itself on being a country where everyone is a member of the middle class, there is talk of a nation composed of two distinct classes: the '*kachi-gumi*' (winners) and '*make-gumi*' (losers).

Fortunately, it appears that the politicians and corporations behind these changes may have overplayed their hand, and the slightly more progressive Democratic Party of Japan has been gaining ground in the polls recently, based largely on popular discontent with the negative effects of the new economic model.

Relations (or lack thereof) with nearby North Korea continue to be a perpetual source of concern for the Japanese. In 2006 North Korea successfully tested a nuclear bomb. In April 2009 the country launched a rocket over Japan. While the North Koreans insisted the payload was a nonmilitary satellite, many Japanese feared that it was intended to demonstrate the ability of North Korea to lob a warhead over the Sea of Japan (they also feared that jettisoned parts from the rocket would fall on Japan). While American and Japanese analysts later concluded that the test was a failure, this did little to calm Japanese nerves.

Of course, the news is not all bad in Japan. Three Japanese scientists shared the 2008 Nobel Prize in physics, and the Japanese athletes garnered 26 medals in the Beijing Olympics, more than at any previous Olympics. The film *Okuribito* (Departures), by Japanese director Takita Yojiro, won an Oscar for best foreign film, and interest in Japanese manga (comics) and anime continues to soar. Meanwhile, the country continues to expand its brilliant shinkansen (bullet train) system, already the world's most extensive high-speed train network.

Japan's tourist economy has attracted travellers not only from the West, but also from neighbouring Asian countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. Australian skiers have flocked to ski areas like Niseko, so much so that some Japanese have started referring to the area as 'little Australia'. Though tourist numbers have waned in recent times, it seems a safe bet that as the world recovers from recession, Japan will continue to increase in popularity, as more and more people are drawn to a country that manages to be both utterly foreign and incredibly welcoming.

Getting Started

Japan is Asia's most user-friendly country. It's incredibly efficient, clean and safe. Indeed, many travellers will find it easier to travel around Japan than to travel in their home countries. While English is not widely spoken, communication is not as difficult as you might think – more and more Japanese are able to speak some English, and you'll find English signs in train stations, airports and, increasingly, major cities. Another concern is cost: as this book went to press, the yen was soaring versus many world currencies. However, costs within Japan have remained stable for years, and it can actually be cheaper to travel in Japan than in Western Europe and North America.

WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit Japan are the climatically stable seasons of spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November).

Spring is the time when Japan's famous *sakura* (cherry trees) burst into bloom. Starting from Kyūshū sometime in February or March, the *sakura zensen* (cherry tree blossom line) advances northward, usually passing the main cities of Honshū in early April. Once the *sakura* bloom, their glory is brief, usually lasting only a week.

Autumn is an equally good time to travel, with pleasant temperatures and soothing colours; the autumn foliage pattern reverses that of the *sakura*, starting in the north sometime in October and peaking across most of Honshū in mid- to late November.

Travelling during either winter or summer is a mixed bag – midwinter (December to February) weather can be cold, particularly on the Sea of

See Climate (p810) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

The clothing you bring will depend not only on the season, but also on where you are planning to go. Japan extends a long way from north to south: the north of Hokkaidō can be under deep snow at the same time Okinawa and Nansei-shotō (the Southwest Islands) are basking in tropical sunshine. If you're going anywhere near the mountains, or are intent on climbing Mt Fuji, you'll need good cold-weather gear, even at the height of summer. And unless you're in Japan on business, you won't need formal or even particularly dressy clothes. Men should keep in mind, however, that trousers are preferable to shorts, especially in restaurants.

You'll also need the following:

- Slip-on shoes – you want shoes that are not only comfortable for walking but are also easy to slip on and off for the frequent occasions where they must be removed.
- Unholey socks – your socks will be on display a lot of the time, so decent socks are a good idea.
- Japan Rail Pass – if you intend to do much train travel at all, you'll save money with a Japan Rail Pass, which *must* be purchased outside Japan; see p840 for details.
- Books – English-language and other foreign-language books are expensive in Japan, and they're not available outside the big cities.
- Medicine – bring any prescription medicine you'll need from home.
- Gifts – a few postcards or some distinctive trinkets from your home country will make good gifts for those you meet along the way.
- International licence – if you appreciate the flexibility of having a rental car, note: most nationalities cannot rent a car in Japan without an international licence (see p834).

SAMPLE DAILY BUDGETS

To help you plan your Japan trip, we've put together these sample daily budgets. Keep in mind that these are rough estimates – it's possible to spend slightly less if you really put your mind to it, and you can spend a heckuva lot more if you want to live large.

Budget

- Youth hostel accommodation (per person): ¥2800
- Two simple restaurant meals: ¥2000
- Train/bus transport: ¥1500
- One average temple/museum admission: ¥500
- Snacks, drinks, sundries: ¥1000
- Total: ¥7800 (about US\$80)

Midrange

- Business hotel accommodation (per person): ¥8000
- Two midrange restaurant meals: ¥4000
- Train/bus transport: ¥1500
- Two average temple/museum admissions: ¥1000
- Snacks, drinks, sundries: ¥2000
- Total: ¥16,500 (about US\$170)

Japan coasts of Honshū and in Hokkaidō, while the summer months (June to August) are generally hot and often humid. June is also the month of Japan's brief rainy season, which in some years brings daily downpours and in other years is hardly a rainy season at all.

If you're heading to the southern island groups like Okinawa, the islands of southern Kagoshima-ken, the Izu-shotō or the Ogasawara-shotō, keep in mind that typhoons can wreak havoc with your travel plans. They can strike anytime between June and October, with most making a landfall in August, September and early October.

Also keep in mind that peak holiday seasons, particularly Golden Week (late April to early May), which incorporates four major Japanese holidays, and the mid-August O-Bon (Festival of the Dead), are extremely popular for domestic travel and can be problematic in terms of reservations and crowds. Likewise, everything in Japan basically shuts down during Shōgatsu (New Year period).

All that said, it is worth remembering that you can comfortably travel in Japan at any time of year. Indeed, if you come in winter or summer, you'll escape the crowds and probably get better prices for your plane ticket and accommodation.

For information on Japan's festivals and special events, see p813. For public holidays, see p814.

COSTS & MONEY

Japan is generally considered an expensive country in which to travel. Certainly, this is the case if you opt to stay in top-end hotels, take a lot of taxis and eat all your meals in fancy restaurants. But Japan does not have to be expensive; indeed it can be *cheaper* than travelling in other parts of the world if you are careful with your spending (see p26). And in terms of what

HOW MUCH?

- Business hotel accommodation (per person) ¥8000
- Midrange meal ¥2000
- Local bus ¥220
- Temple admission ¥500
- Newspaper ¥130

IT'S CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK

The fact is, Japan's image as one of the world's most expensive countries is just that: an image. Anyone who has been to Japan recently knows that it can be cheaper to travel in Japan than in parts of Western Europe, the USA, Australia or even the big coastal cities of China. Of course, a lot of this depends on the exchange rate when you travel (as this book went to press, the exchange rate was fluctuating wildly). Prices within the country, however, have barely changed in the last ten years or so (some prices have even gone down due to deflation). Still, there's no denying that Japan is not Thailand. In order to help you stretch those yen, we've put together a list of money-saving tips.

Accommodation

- **Manga Kissa** – These manga (comic book) coffee shops have private cubicles and comfy reclining seats where you can spend the night for only ¥2500. For more details, see *Missing the Midnight Train*, p163.
- **Capsule Hotels** – A night in a capsule hotel will set you back a mere ¥3000.
- **Guest Houses** – You'll find good, cheap guest houses in many of Japan's cities, where a night's accommodation runs about ¥3500.

Eating

- **Shokudō** – You can get a good filling meal in these all-round Japanese eateries for about ¥700, or US\$7, and the tea is free and there's no tipping. For more, see p79.
- **Bentō** – The ubiquitous *bentō* (boxed meal) costs around ¥500 and is both filling and nutritious.
- **Use Your Noodle** – You can get a steaming bowl of tasty *rāmen* (egg noodles) in Japan for as little as ¥500, and ordering is a breeze – you just have to say '*rāmen*' and you're away. *Soba* (buckwheat) and *udon* (thick white) noodles are even cheaper – as low as ¥350 per bowl.

Shopping

- **Hyaku-en Shops** – *Hyaku-en* means ¥100, and like the name implies, everything in these shops costs only ¥100, or about US\$1. You'll be amazed what you can find in these places. Some even sell food.
- **Flea Markets** – A good new kimono costs an average of ¥200,000 (about US\$2100), but you can pick up a fine used kimono at a flea market for ¥1000, or about US\$10. Whether you're shopping for yourself or for presents for the folks back home, you'll find some incredible bargains at Japan's flea markets.

Transport

- **Japan Rail Pass** – Like the famous Eurail Pass, this is one of the world's great travel bargains. It allows unlimited travel on Japan's brilliant nationwide rail system, including the lightning-fast *shinkansen* (bullet trains). See p840.
- **Seishun Jūhachi Kippu** – For ¥11,500, you get five one-day tickets good for travel on any regular Japan Railways train. You can literally travel from one end of the country to the other for around US\$100. See p841.

you get for your money, Japan is good value indeed; see also *Sample Daily Budgets* (p25) for more practical information.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Travel books about Japan often end up turning into extended reflections on the eccentricities or uniqueness of the Japanese. One writer who did not fall prey to this temptation was Alan Booth. *The Roads to Sata* (1985)

TOP PICKS



JAPAN IN THE MOVIES

Here are a few excellent films to whet your appetite for your trip.

- *Marusa no Onna* (A Taxing Woman; 1987) Director: Itami Jūzō
- *Tampopo* (1987) Director: Itami Jūzō
- *Osōshiki* (The Funeral; 1987) Director: Itami Jūzō
- *Minbo-no-Onna* (The Anti-Extortion Woman; 1994) Director: Itami Jūzō
- *Tōkyō Monogatari* (Tokyo Story; 1953) Director: Ōzu Yasujiro
- *Maboroshi no Hikari* (Maborosi; 1995) Director: Koreeda Hirokazu
- *Nijushi-no-Hitomi* (Twenty Four Eyes; 1954) Director: Kinoshita Keisuke
- *Lost in Translation* (2003) Director: Sofia Coppola
- *Rashomon* (1950) Director: Kurosawa Akira
- *Okuribito* (Departures; 2008) Director: Takita Yojiro

MOST BEAUTIFUL SIGHTS IN JAPAN

Japan is all about pockets of beauty. It's unfair to single out just a few, but here's a list of some chart toppers.

- Cherry blossoms in Kyoto (p324) – slow pink explosions? Stationary rose-coloured clouds? The English language reveals its poverty when confronted with Kyoto's cherry blossoms.
- Saihō-ji (p363) – is there a garden more beautiful than the one at Kyoto's Saihō-ji temple (otherwise known as Koke-dera or 'Moss Temple')?
- Bamboo dancing on a hillside – you'll see it from the *shinkansen* (bullet train) or when you're hiking in the hills.
- Yaeyama-shotō (p789) – the reefs around Iriomote-jima are as colourful as a Kyoto geisha's kimono.
- Kerama-shotō (p783) – we like our sand white, our water gin-clear and our coral colourful.
- Japan Alps (p280) – there is a sanctuary in the heart of the Japan Alps that will give any part of New Zealand a run for its money.
- Daitoku-ji (p347) – there are 24 temples and subtemples here and countless gardens; it's pointless to pick a favourite – just go see for yourself.

DON'T LEAVE JAPAN WITHOUT TRYING THESE FOODS

Even experienced travellers will be amazed by the sheer diversity, quality and tasty goodness of Japanese food. A note to our vegetarian readers: most of these foods contain meat or fish, but we've included two items that contain no meat, fish or dairy products. For more on Japanese food, see p76.

- Good sushi – not automatic sushi, the proper sit-down-and-order type.
- *Unagi* – eel cooked the Japanese way and served over rice is one of the finer things in life.
- *Wa-gyū* – Kōbe beef is only *the* most famous of the many types of Japanese beef.
- *Kaiseki* – our apologies to the French, but there is simply no food on earth more refined than *kaiseki* (haute cuisine) – especially when you take into account the utensils, plates and setting.
- *Rāmen* – no, not the plastic packets of the stuff you take hiking – the real item served from steaming vats by a guy wearing a headband.
- *Shōjin-ryōri* – Japan's Buddhist vegetarian cuisine may win over a few carnivores; a good place to try it is at Kōya-san (p433), in Kansai.
- *Okonomiyaki* – the so-called 'Japanese pizza' is both delicious and fun (since you help in making it).

is the best of his writings about Japan, and traces a four-month journey on foot from the northern tip of Hokkaidō to Sata, the southern tip of Kyūshū. Booth's *Looking for the Lost – Journeys Through a Vanishing Japan* (1995) was his final book, and again recounts walks in rural Japan. Booth loved Japan, warts and all, and these books reflect his passion and insight into the country.

A more recent account of a trek across the length of Japan is Craig McLachlan's enjoyable *Four Pairs of Boots* (1998). The same author's *Tales of a Summer Henro* (1997) recounts his journey around the 88 Sacred Temples of Shikoku. Both books are light and easy to read, and give an excellent insight into today's Japan.

Alex Kerr's *Lost Japan* (1996) is not strictly a travel book, though he does recount some journeys in it; rather, it's a collection of essays on his long experiences in Japan. Like Booth, Kerr has some great insights into Japan and the Japanese, and his love for the country is only matched by his frustration at some of the things he sees going wrong here.

Donald Richie's *The Inland Sea* (1971) is a classic in this genre. It recounts the author's island-hopping journey across the Seto Inland Sea in the late 1960s. Richie's elegiac account of a vanished Japan makes the reader nostalgic for times gone by. It was re-released in 2002 and is widely available online and in better bookshops.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There's no better place to start your web explorations than at lonelyplanet.com. Here you'll find succinct summaries on travelling to most places on earth, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back.

Other websites with useful Japan information and links:

Hyperdia Japan (www.hyperdia.com/cgi-english/hyperWeb.cgi) Get Japan transport information (fares, times etc) in English.

Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA; www.mofa.go.jp) Has useful visa information and embassy/consulate locations under the 'Visa' tab.

Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO; www.jnto.go.jp) Great information on all aspects of travel in Japan (see also p822).

Japan Rail (www.japanrail.com) Information on rail travel in Japan, with details on the Japan Rail Pass (see also p840).

Kōchi University Weather Home Page (<http://weather.is.kochi-u.ac.jp/index-e.html>) Weather satellite images of Japan updated several times a day – particularly useful during typhoon season (August, September and October).

Rikai (www.rikai.com/perl/Home.pl) Translate Japanese into English by pasting any bit of Japanese text or webpage into this site.

Tokyo Sights (www.tokyotojp.com) Hours, admission fees, phone numbers and information on most of Tokyo's major sights.

Events Calendar

Japan's calendar is packed with festivities and events from start to finish. It's a safe bet that there is a *matsuri* (festival) happening somewhere in Japan every day of the year. They are often colourful, boisterous and sometimes even wild events. The following is a list of the more interesting *matsuri*, events and seasonal highlights.

JANUARY

SHŌGATSU 31 Dec-3 Jan
New Year's is one of the most important celebrations in Japan and includes plenty of eating and drinking, the sending of auspicious New Year's cards, and the paying of respects to relatives and business associates. The central ritual, *hatsumode*, involves the first visit to the local shrine to pray for health, happiness and prosperity during the coming year.

YAMAYAKI (GRASS BURNING FESTIVAL) early Jan
Held in Nara the day before Seijin-no-hi (below), this festival commemorates a feud between groups of monks of two different temples. An entire mountainside is set alight (it must have been one heckuva feud).

SEIJIN-NO-HI (COMING-OF-AGE DAY) 2nd Mon in Jan
Ceremonies are held for boys and girls who have reached the age of 20. A good place to see the action is at large shrines, where there will be crowds of young folks – girls in beautiful kimono and boys in suits.

FEBRUARY

SETSUBUN MATSURI 3 or 4 Feb
To celebrate the end of winter (one day before the start of spring according to the Japanese lunar calendar) and to drive out evil spirits, the Japanese throw roasted beans while chanting '*oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi*' (out with the demons, in with good luck). Events are often held at local shrines with characters dressed as devils, who act as good targets for beans. See p91 for more details.

MARCH/APRIL

HINA MATSURI 3 Mar
During this festival, old dolls are displayed and young girls are given special *hina* (dolls) that represent ancient figures from the imperial court.

TAGATA HŌNEN SAI FESTIVAL 15 Mar
Held in central Honshū (p265), this festival celebrates the masculine creative force of the universe, which is represented by a giant phallus. The huge member is paraded around the village by joyful villagers. It's both photogenic and fun and guaranteed to make a good 'only in Japan' story.

PLUM BLOSSOM VIEWING late Feb-Mar
Not as famous as the cherries, but quite lovely in their own right, Japan's plum trees bloom from late February into March. Strolling among the plum orchards at places like Kyoto's Kitano-Tenman-gū (p358) is a fine way to spend an early spring day in Japan.

CHERRY BLOSSOM VIEWING late Feb-early Apr
Japan's famous cherry blossoms burst into bloom in the early spring, starting in February in Kyūshū and generally peaking in Honshū in late March or early April. Their moment of glory is brief, generally lasting only a week. Famous spots include Kyoto's Maruyama-kōen (p351) and Tokyo's Ueno-kōen (p151).

MAY

GOLDEN WEEK 29 Apr-5 May
Golden Week takes in Shōwa-no-hi (Shōwa Emperor's Day; 29 April), Kempō Kinem-bi (Constitution Day; 3 May), Midori-no-hi (Green Day; 4 May) and Kodomo-no-hi (Children's Day; 5 May). Transport and lodging in popular holiday areas are often booked solid during this time.

KODOMO-NO-HI 5 May
This is a holiday dedicated to children, especially boys. Families fly paper streamers of *koinobori* (carp), which symbolise male strength.

JULY

**TANABATA MATSURI
(STAR FESTIVAL)**

7 Jul

The two stars meet in the Milky Way on this night, a cosmic meeting that echoes a myth (originally Chinese) of two earthly lovers. From 6 to 8 August, an ornate celebration is held in the city of Sendai (p520).

GION MATSURI

17 Jul

This is the mother of all Japanese festivals. Huge floats are pulled through the streets of Kyoto by teams of chanting citizens. On the three evenings preceding the parade, people stroll through Shijō-dōri dressed in beautiful *yukata* (light cotton kimono). See p367.

FUJI ROCK FESTIVAL

late Jul

Held in Naeba (p575), this is Japan's biggest rock festival and it always draws some top-shelf acts from abroad. It's a world-class event and is worth planning a trip around.

AUGUST

NEBUTA MATSURI

2-7 Aug

Held in Aomori (p542), northern Honshū, this is one of Japan's more colourful festivals. On the final day of this festival enormous parade floats are pulled through the city by teams of chanting dancers.

O-BON (FESTIVAL OF THE DEAD)

mid-Aug

According to Buddhist tradition, this is a time when ancestors return to earth. Lanterns are lit and floated on rivers, lakes or the sea to signify the return of the departed to the underworld. See also Daimon-ji Gozan Okuribi (below).

DAIMON-JI GOZAN OKURIBI

16 Aug

Commonly known as Daimon-ji Yaki, this is part of the summer O-Bon festival (above) and is one of Japan's most impressive spectacles. See p367 for details.

SUMMER FIREWORKS FESTIVALS

Aug

Cities and towns across Japan hold spectacular summer fireworks festivals. You'll be amazed at the quality and duration of some of these incredible displays.

EARTH CELEBRATION

3rd week of Aug

The island of Sado-ga-shima, off the coast of northern Honshū, is the scene of this internationally famous festival of dance, art and music. The festival (p572) is centred on performances by the island's famous *taiko* (Japanese drum) group. This is a must-see if you can make it.

ASAKUSA SAMBA MATSURI

late Aug

Brazil comes to Tokyo during this wild samba festival in the streets of Asakusa (see p162). You may find yourself wondering if you're actually in Japan.

SEPTEMBER

KISHIWADA DANJIRI MATSURI

14 & 15 Sep

This is one of Japan's most dangerous festivals. Huge *danjiri* (festival floats) are pulled through the narrow streets of this town south of Osaka (see p401). Much alcohol is consumed and occasionally the *danjiri* go off course and crash into houses.

OCTOBER

KURAMA-NO-HI MATSURI

22 Oct

Huge flaming torches are carried through the streets of the tiny hamlet of Kurama (p364) in the mountains north of Kyoto. This is one of Japan's more primeval festivals.

NOVEMBER

SHICHI-GO-SAN (7-5-3 FESTIVAL)

15 Nov

This is a festival in honour of girls who are aged three and seven and boys who are aged five. Children are dressed in their finest clothes and taken to shrines or temples, where prayers are offered for good fortune.

DECEMBER

BŌNEN-KAI

mid-late Dec

Literally 'forget the year' celebrations, these are some of the more festive parties in Japan. They're held by companies, families and anyone who can scrape together enough money for a meal and a couple of drinks to celebrate the end of another successful year.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SKYSCRAPERS TO TEMPLES

One to Two Weeks / Tokyo to Kyoto

The Tokyo–Kyoto route is the classic Japan route and the best way to get a quick taste of the country. For first-time visitors with only a week or so to look around, a few days in **Tokyo** (p121) sampling the modern Japanese experience and four or five days in the Kansai region exploring the historical sites of **Kyoto** (p324) is the way to go.

In Tokyo, we recommend that you concentrate on the modern side of things, hitting such attractions as **Shinjuku** (p154), **Akihabara** (p189) and **Shibuya** (p156). Kyoto is the place to see traditional Japan, and we recommend such classic attractions as **Nanzen-ji** (p353) and Arashiyama's famous **Bamboo Grove** (p360). If you've got a little more time, consider a side trip down to **Nara** (p417), which has some of Japan's most impressive sights.

The journey between Tokyo and Kyoto is best done by *shinkansen* (bullet train; p839). For a break from cities, we recommend a side trip to **Takayama** (p267), which can be done on the way to or from Kyoto.



This route involves only one major train journey: the three-hour *shinkansen* trip between Tokyo and Kyoto (the Kyoto–Nara trip takes less than an hour by express train, and the side trip to Takayama adds about five hours of travel time).

NORTH BY NORTHEAST THROUGH HONSHŪ

Two Weeks to One month / Tokyo/Kansai & Northern Japan

This route allows you to experience Kyoto and/or Tokyo and then sample the wild, natural side of Japan. The route starts in either **Kyoto** (p324) or **Tokyo** (p121), from where you head to the Japan Alps towns of **Matsumoto** (p297) and **Nagano** (p286), which are excellent bases for hikes in and around places like **Kamikōchi** (p280). From Nagano, you might travel up to **Niigata** (p566) and from there to the island of **Sado-ga-shima** (p571), famous for its *taiko* drummers and Earth Celebration in August. On the other side of Honshū, the city of **Sendai** (p520) provides easy access to **Matsushima** (p527), one of Japan's most celebrated scenic outlooks.

Highlights north of Sendai include peaceful **Kinkasan** (p529) and **Tazawa-ko** (p550), the deepest lake in Japan, **Morioka** (p538), **Hachimantai** (p550) and **Osore-zan** (p545).

Travelling from Northern Honshū to Hokkaidō by train involves a journey from Aomori through the world's longest underwater tunnel, the **Seikan Tunnel** (p599); rail travellers arriving via the Seikan Tunnel might consider a visit (including seafood meals) to the historic fishing port of **Hakodate** (p593). **Sapporo** (p583) is a good base for your Hokkaidō travels. It's particularly lively during its Yuki Matsuri (Snow Festival; see p589).

The real treasures of Hokkaidō are its national parks, which require either more time or your own transport. If you've only got three or four days in Hokkaidō, you might hit **Shiretoko National Park** (p639) and **Akan National Park** (p632). If you've got at least a week, head to **Daisetsuzan National Park** (p625).

This route, which involves around 28 hours of train travel, is for those who want to combine the urban/cultural attractions of Tokyo or Kansai with a few Northern Honshū and Hokkaidō attractions.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ISLAND HOPPING THROUGH THE SOUTHWEST ISLANDS

Three Weeks to One month / Kyūshū to Iriomote-jima

For those with the time to explore tropical laid-back Japan, this is a great option. The route starts on the southern island of Kyūshū, in the city of **Kagoshima** (p730), where you can catch an overnight ferry to the island of **Amami-Ōshima** (p768), which has some great beaches and semitropical jungles. From Amami-Ōshima, board another ferry and head south to tiny **Yoron-tō** (p772). This little gem of an island is fringed by beaches on all sides. After a few days kicking back on the beaches of Yoron-tō, hop on another ferry for the short ride to **Naha** (p776), on the island of Okinawa-hontō. First, check out the city for a day or two, and then take the short ferry ride out to **Kerama-shotō** (p783). Here, the tiny island of **Aka-jima** (p783) has some of the best beaches in the entire archipelago.

If you're out of time, you can fly back to the mainland from Naha; otherwise, take a flight down to **Ishigaki-jima** (p792). If you've got scuba certification and you're there between June and October, you'll want to dive the mantas. Next, hop a ferry for the quick journey to jungle-covered **Iriomote-jima** (p795), which has some incredible coral reefs around its shores. From Iriomote-jima, return to Ishigaki-jima for the flight back to the mainland.

This route takes around 60 hours of travel time. It highlights a laid-back, tropical side of Japan that is relatively unknown outside the country. If you arrive in the dead of winter and need a break from the cold, head to the islands – you won't regret it!



THE WILDS OF HOKKAIDŌ

Two Weeks to One Month / Hokkaidō

Whether you're on a JR Pass or flying directly, **Sapporo** (p583) makes a good hub for Hokkaidō excursions. A one- or two-night visit to **Hakodate** (p593) should be first on the list. Jump over to the cherry trees of **Matsumae** (p598) if you have time. Be sure to stop between Hakodate and Sapporo at **Tōya-ko** (p607), where you can soak in one of the area's many onsen (hot springs) and see Usu-zan's smouldering peak. On the route is **Shiraori** (p614), Hokkaidō's largest Ainu living-history village. Onsen fans may wish to dip in the famed **Noboribetsu Onsen** (p609).

See romantic **Otaru** (p599), an easy day trip out of Sapporo, then head north to **Wakkanai** (p616). Take the ferry to **Rebun-tō** (p621) and check it out for a day, maybe two if you're planning on serious hiking. On the return, see **Sōya-misaki** (p617), Japan's northernmost point. Sip Otokoyama sake in **Asahikawa** (p612); from there jump to **Asahidake Onsen** (p626), and hike around **Daisetsuzan National Park** (p625) for a day or two, possibly doing a day trip to the lavender fields of **Furano** (p623) or **Biei** (p622).

Head to **Abashiri** (p630). Rent a car there or in **Shari** (p639) if you're planning on going to **Shiretoko National Park** (p639). Do the entire eastern part of the island by car. Not including hiking or other stops this will take one night and two days. Check out **Nemuro** (p638) and return your four-wheeled steed in **Kushiro** (p637).

Watch cranes, deer and other wildlife in **Kushiro Shitsugen National Park** (p637), zip up to **Akan National Park** (p632) to see **Mashū-ko** (p634), the most beautiful lake in Japan, and then toddle back towards Sapporo.

This route, which involves around 40 hours of travel, is popular as it allows you to do what you have time for. Use Sapporo as a hub and do day trips or overnight to nearby attractions, then loop out eastward, renting a car for the most remote regions.



KANSAI IN DEPTH

One to Two Weeks / Kansai

Kansai (p323) contains the thickest concentration of must-see sights in all of Japan. If you want to see a lot of traditional Japanese sights without spending a lot of time in transit, then spending your entire trip in Kansai is a great idea.

Kyoto (p324) is the obvious place to base yourself; it's central and it's got a wide range of excellent accommodation, not to mention the nation's finest temples, gardens and shrines. Spend a day exploring the **Higashiyama Area** (p349), followed by another day strolling through the bamboo groves of **Arashiyama** (p359). Then, hop on a train for a day trip to **Nara** (p417) to see the sights of **Nara-kōen** (p420), including **Tōdai-ji** (p421), with its enormous Buddha figure. Another day trip to see **Ise-jingū** (p443), in the town of Ise, is highly recommended – the ride is quite scenic and the shrine is awe-inspiring.

If you've got the urge to see the modern side of Japan, **Osaka** (p391) is only about 30 minutes by train from Kyoto, and you can combine it with a trip west to see the fantastic castle in **Himeji** (p414). Finally, if you really want to wind down and relax, an overnight trip up to the onsen town of **Kinosaki** (p388) is the perfect way to round off your Kansai experience.

This route, which involves between four and 12 hours of travel time, is the perfect way to pack a lot of traditional sights into a short trip without feeling rushed.



TAILORED TRIPS

FOOD-LOVER'S PARADISE

Japan is a food-lover's paradise and the cuisine runs the gamut from simple *soba* (buckwheat) noodles to multicourse *kaiseki* (haute-cuisine) banquets.

Start in **Tokyo** (p121) and make an early-morning pilgrimage to wander the expanse of **Tsukiji Fish Market** (p150), the world's largest fish market. After taking in the sights and scents of the market, head to one of the nearby sushi restaurants to sample the freshest, and surely tastiest, sushi on earth. **Kyoto** (p324) is the place to sample *kaiseki*. The fresh and seasonal food is superb and the setting is perfect: traditional buildings with lovely gardens to gaze over while you eat. Rough-and-ready locals in **Osaka** (p391) are known for their big appetites and it's hardly surprising that the city's speciality is *okonomiyaki*, savoury pancakes that you cook yourself on a griddle in front of you. The Inland Sea is known for its delectable oysters, and **Hiroshima** (p462) is the place to try them; *kaki-furai* (batter-fried) is just one of the many ways to savour them. Also try *Hiroshima-yaki*, the local version of *okonomiyaki*. **Kyūshū** (p683) is the closest of Japan's major islands to China, which may explain why it's Japan's *rāmen* (egg noodle) mecca. You'll find an incredible variety here, but the locals swear by *tonkotsu rāmen* (noodles in pork-bone broth).



TRADITIONAL CULTURE

A route built around Japan's sublime cultural attractions is a natural choice.

Hidden among the neon and concrete of **Tokyo** (p121) you'll find historical sites, such as **Meiji-jingū** (p155) and **Sensō-ji** (p152). **Kyoto** (p324) is home to the nation's most incredible collection of temples, shrines, gardens and traditional neighbourhoods. For a peek into Japan's ancient religious traditions, a trip to the mountaintop monastery **Kōya-san** (p433) is a must. You can almost feel the power emanating from Japan's most sacred Shintō shrine, **Ise-jingū** (p443), just a day trip by express train from Kyoto. A stop in the town of **Kurashiki** (p456), with its canals and preserved buildings, is a must for those with an interest in old Japan. Head to one of Japan's most iconic sights: the 'floating' torii (Shintō shrine gate) of **Miyajima** (p469). **Izumo Taisha** (p496) in Izumo is the oldest Shintō shrine in Japan.



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