

DESTINATION ASIA

DESTINATION MANAGEMENT FOR ASIA'S TRAVEL CONNOISSEURS



JAPAN

COUNTRY FACT SHEET



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ABOUT JAPAN

Japan is a country where the past meets the future; with ancient temples and kimono-clad geisha hurrying between traditional tea houses in Kyoto, to lightning-fast bullet trains connecting the high-tech cities of Osaka and Tokyo. Although it is the tenth most densely populated nation in the world with a population of 127 million – and 30 million in the greater metropolitan Tokyo area alone – Japan possesses vast stunning areas of rural, unpopulated wilderness. One misplaced view is that Japan's position as one of the world's richest nations makes it an expensive holiday destination. In reality, it can be cheaper to travel in Japan than in most Western countries. The "Land of the Rising Sun" is a destination like no other; offering heritage and history one day and hi-tech city living the next.

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AIRPORTS

Tokyo is one of Asia's largest air hubs with connections to the main global destinations. The capital is home to two international airports; Narita and Haneda. Other airports in Japan serviced by international flights include Osaka's Kansai Airport and Nagoya's Chubu Centrair Airport.

ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE INFORMATION

Nationals of many countries, including nearly all Western countries, are eligible to enter Japan for short-term stays (usually 90 days) with a visa on entry for holiday and business trips. Nationals that do not have the "Reciprocal Visa Exemption Arrangements" with Japan must obtain a visa beforehand. To apply for a visa, the applicant must apply in person to a Japanese embassy or a consulate. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website provides information about visas; please access:

http://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/visa/index.html

All foreigners arriving in Japan are fingerprinted and photographed, except children aged 15 and younger, diplomats, and permanent residents of Japan. All visitors must complete an entry/exit form including a customs declaration. It is important that this form is kept safe and presented to immigration officials on departure. All airport taxes are included in the price of flight tickets.

"All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler's responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling."

BUSINESS HOURS

Offices are open Monday to Friday from 9-am to 6-pm; and post offices, Monday to Friday, 9-am to 5-pm. Museums, temples and other tourist attractions are usually open from 10-am to 5-pm. Department stores and major shops are open seven days a week, from 10-am to 7.30 or 8-pm.

BANKS

Most banks are open from 9-am to 3-pm, but they are closed on weekends and national holidays. Money can also be exchanged at the following outlets: Narita and Kansai international airports; banks and post offices that display the "Authorized Foreign Exchange" sign; hotels (for hotel guests only); and major department stores in large cities (at customer service or money exchange windows.) Bear in mind that exchanging money and traveler's checks at banks and post offices can be a very lengthy procedure. Foreign credit, debit and cash cards are convenient for obtaining cash – however, bank ATM machines are restricted to cards issued in Japan. The best option is to use the International ATMs on arrival at the airport, post offices and also those at 7-11 convenience stores. For further information about the location of ATMs at 7-11 stores, please access the following webpage and press the "International ATM icon at the bottom right-hand side of the page: <http://www.sevenbank.co.jp/intlcard/index2.html>

CLOTHING

Lighter clothing in the summer is recommended, but jackets are necessary if you plan to explore the Alpine regions. If you are visiting in the spring then bring some warmer clothes as the temperature drops considerably at night. As a rule, the Japanese people are always meticulously dressed and you will be judged and sometimes treated based on how you dress. While Japan is less strict than other Asian countries about dress codes when visiting temples, it is always polite to cover shoulders and be dressed conservatively. Easy to slip on/slip off shoes are more practical when visiting temples, or staying in ryokans etc.

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CURRENCY

The currency in Japan is the yen, symbolized by the ¥ figure. Coins come in denominations of ¥1, ¥5, ¥10, ¥50, ¥100, and ¥500. Bills come in denominations of ¥1,000, ¥2,000, ¥5,000, and ¥10,000. Japan is very much a cash society and credit cards are not as widely used as in Western countries. However, they are widely accepted in restaurants, shops and hotels. It is advisable to carry cash when paying bills in more inexpensive restaurants, small shops, and some Japanese inns in rural areas.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

Travelers aged 20 or older can bring the following duty-free items into Japan:

- 400 non-Japanese cigarettes;
- Three bottles (760cc each) of alcohol, and;
- Two ounces of perfume.

Tourists can also bring in goods for personal use – purchased abroad – whose total market value is less than ¥200,000.

ETIQUETTE (DOS AND DON'TS)

For the majority of non-Japanese people, there is a greater likelihood of making etiquette mistakes than getting it right, but the Japanese are renowned for being generous and forgiving to foreigners who don't know the rules. The following gives a guideline to accepted and unacceptable behaviour:

DOS IN JAPAN

- Do bow when greeting someone. Bowing is the customary greeting in Japan, but handshaking is becoming more common during business meetings with Westerners. Bowing is a very important custom as it can express many meanings, including respect, gratitude, apology, etc.
- Do learn a few common Japanese phrases before you travel as English is not widely spoken.
- Do enjoy sharing several dishes at a meal instead of just having your own individual dish.
- Do prepare to pay at a restaurant if you initiated the dining invitation and do make an attempt to pay at a restaurant if someone else has invited you.
- Do bring a gift such as a little souvenir from your native city. It is considered rude to visit a Japanese home without bringing a gift.
- Give and receive gifts with both hands, and do not open a wrapped gift until later.
- Japanese people do not show affection in public – kissing and hugging in the street are not usual scenes. Even patting on the back is not considered polite.

DON'TS IN JAPAN

- Do not enter a Japanese home with your shoes on. It is customary to remove shoes at the door. There will most likely be a pair of slippers set aside for guests.
- Never leave your chopsticks sticking up out of a bowl of rice, or other dish. This positioning is associated with Buddhist funerals in Japan. When you are not using the chopsticks, place them neatly on the small chopstick rest provided.
- Similar to the previous advice, never pass food from your chopsticks to someone else's chopsticks. The only acceptable time to pass something between two people using chopsticks is at a funeral. After a cremation, the remaining bones of the deceased are picked up by a relative with special chopsticks and passed to chopsticks held by another relative who then places the bones into the urn.
- Do not start drinking until everyone at the table is served and glasses are raised to make a toast. The Japanese drinking salute is "Kampai!"
- As in most Asian countries, the giving of business cards is a hugely symbolic gesture in Japan. Therefore, always give the card the respect it deserves. It is protocol to receive the card with both hands.
- The use of public baths forms an integral part of daily life in Japan. The communal bath is for soaking and you should be clean before you join fellow bathers in the communal water. A small stool with brushes and cleaning materials is provided.
- Do not use your phone or talk loudly on the train.

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ELECTRICITY

The electric current used throughout Japan is 100 volts, A.C. However, there are two kinds of frequencies (or cycles): 50 Hertz in eastern Japan (including Tokyo and regions northeast of the capital); and 60 Hertz in western Japan (including Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and other points southwest). At major hotels, two outlets for both 110 and 220 volts are installed for electric razors, hair dryers and other small appliances. Japan uses two-flat-pin plugs and cannot accommodate three-pin plugs, so it is best to bring a universal plug adaptor.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

Cocktails in slick bars, jazz with a swing, or thumping techno beats — you will find all of these under urban Japan's neon-soaked night sky. Be careful to enter places that suit your budget as some more upscale establishments may have extra service charges ranging from a few hundred yen to a few thousand. Japan created the karaoke club scene that has been replicated across the world and these bars, along with izakaya — traditional watering holes — are in abundance and are great places to mix with the locals. All-night revelers might want to head for the nightlife districts of Roppongi in Tokyo or Dotombori in Osaka, while those more culturally inclined will find theaters and cinemas in every major city.

FOOD

Japanese cuisine is renowned for three qualities: the seasonality of the food; the quality of the ingredients; and the exquisite presentation. The country's cuisine is based on combining staple foods, typically rice or noodles, with a soup and okazu — dishes made from fish, meat or vegetables to add flavor to the staple food. These are typically flavored with dashi, miso and soy sauce. The most famous Japanese food is sushi, which is cooked vinegared rice (shari) combined with other ingredients (neta). Other prominent cooking styles are: Sashimi, very fresh raw meat, most commonly fish, sliced into thin pieces; Tempura, a Japanese dish of seafood or vegetables that have been covered in batter and deep fried; Sukiyaki, a popular dish of thinly sliced beef, served with vegetables, tofu and vermicelli and usually cooked on a sizzling iron skillet at the table side; Nabemono, a variety of one-pot dishes, usually chicken, fish, tofu, or vegetables, simmered in a light, fish-based broth; Shabu-shabu, similar to sukiyaki that is prepared at the table with a combination of vegetables, but cooked in boiling water; Teppanyaki, a style that utilises an iron griddle to cook dishes such as steak and shrimp; and Yakitori, small pieces of chicken meat, liver and vegetables skewered on a bamboo stick and cooked over hot coals. Eating at hotels and famous restaurants is costly; however, you can eat well for less at standard restaurants. Many less expensive restaurants have plastic replicas of the dishes they serve displayed in their front windows, so you can always point to what you want to eat. Western fast food outlets, as well as Japanese versions of these foreign chains, are widely available.

HEALTH

No vaccinations are required except for yellow fever if you are traveling from an area where the disease is present.

HOTEL INFORMATION

Japan offers a wide range of accommodation in both Japanese and Western styles, including some unconventional options such as capsule hotels that mainly target male clientele in need of nothing but a bed for the night. Other styles of accommodation include: Ryokans, these are traditional Japanese style inns. A stay at a ryokan typically includes dinner and breakfast. A Minshuku is a Japanese-style bed and breakfast lodging. They are usually family run and offer Japanese style rooms, and often include one or two meals. Western style hotels, including various international and Japanese hotel chains, can be found across the country, especially in the major cities. Business hotels offer small, simple Western style rooms with snacks and drinks provided by vending machines.

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INSURANCE

It is essential to take out a good medical insurance policy prior to travelling. The policy should cover adventure excursions and full medical coverage as the country's excellent hospitals come at a premium price if the policy holder needs emergency treatment.

INTERNET

Most mid-range and higher-end hotels have business centers with PCs connected to the Internet. Almost all hotels have free LAN cable and Wi-Fi access in rooms for use with private laptops. Cybercafés are very rare outside the major cities due to the prevalence of internet access on mobile phones and widespread hand-held device and domestic computer ownership.

LANGUAGE

Although a greater number of young people speak English as the language is increasingly taught in schools, it is advisable to carry names and directions of destinations such as hotels, restaurants and attractions written in Japanese so that they can be shown to taxi drivers and people on the street. It is also good practice to carry a phrase book as English signage might not be so prevalent in rural areas.

PEOPLE

Japanese people are well known for their politeness and helpfulness to strangers and few people return from a trip to Japan without stories of extraordinary kindnesses extended by their hosts. With the vast majority of its population consisting of ethnic Japanese, Japan is one of the most homogeneous nations in the world which has led to a feeling among the Japanese that they belong to a single huge tribe different from any other nation on earth. For the best experience, reciprocate their politeness, learn a few basic Japanese phrase, and return the polite bow when greeting people.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays. Please be advised that many long-distance trains, ferries, and airlines will be fully booked, as well as hotels and guest houses, during the following peak periods: New Year holiday season: December 29 to January 3, plus adjacent weekends; "Golden Week" holiday season (April 29 to May 5 and adjacent weekends);

"Bon" Festival Season: One week around August 15.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Japan's travel infrastructure is among the most advanced in the world, symbolized by the futuristic bullet train. The network these trains serve is highly efficient and covers the majority of the country. The flying option is probably best when travelling from the country's main hubs to some of the more far-flung destinations such as Okinawa and Hokkaido. Ferries are a surprisingly uncommon means of transport as all the major islands are linked by bridges and tunnels. One of the most convenient options for travel outside of the big cities is to let the train take the strain and then pick up a rental car at the provincial destination. Car renters need an international driving license. Be sure to purchase a bilingual map, as minor roads sometimes have the names of towns and destinations written in Japanese only. The Japan Rail Pass offers overseas visitors unlimited travel on a vast network of trains. Tokyo has an extensive metro and over ground rail system and it is best to use a prepaid transport card to get around. Taxis can be useful over short distances but they are very expensive during the peak travel hours.

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RELIGION

A popular saying in Japan states that you are Shinto at birth (marked with a Shinto ceremony); Christian when you get married (through a Western-style wedding); and Buddhist when you die (honored with a Buddhist funeral). The Japanese tend to take a practical view of religion and use each religion to suit the occasion. Japan has a melting pot of two dominant religions: Shinto and Buddhism, but most Japanese people do not exclusively identify themselves as followers of a single religion. This was reflected in a poll which stated that most Japanese are "80 per cent Shinto and 80 per cent Buddhist". Of the two faiths, Shinto, literally meaning the "Way of the Gods", is derived from animistic cults that pre-dated the arrival of Buddhism in the country.

SAFETY

Japan is one of the most crime-free countries in the world. Even large cities like Tokyo and Osaka are remarkably safe. Crimes against visitors are virtually unheard of. However, never let your guard down and leave expensive items in hotel safes as pickpockets may take advantage in airports, subways and tourist sites.

SHOPPING

Japan is a shopping paradise with a wealth of stores selling everything from traditional souvenirs and local food to the latest electronic gadgets and the most cutting edge fashion brands. Large cities offer several shopping districts, each with their own unique character, usually grouped around major train stations. A unique retail outlet is the "100 yen shop" which sells a wide range of products for 108 yen per item (100 yen, plus eight per cent consumption tax). Japanese department stores are famous for their unparalleled customer service; the constant greeting by the staff is a distinguishable feature and at the time of opening, employees line up neatly to welcome customers. At major department stores, foreign tourists are often able to get a refund on sales tax for purchases of over 10,000 yen if they show their passport.

TELEPHONE

Pre-paid local sim cards is available (for sole internet use – not possible to call) and mobile Wi-Fi routers can be rented at the airports that will keep you connected while in Japan. Calling from a hotel is almost always the most expensive option as hotels add surcharges to all calls, particularly international ones. Calling cards sold in vending machines and convenience stores usually keep costs to a minimum. Public telephones are a dying breed in cell-phone-happy Japan, but public telephones can be found in stations and hotel lobbies. Domestic long-distance rates are reduced by as much as 50 per cent after 9 pm.

TIME ZONE

Japan is GMT +9 and does not operate a daylight-saving system.

TIPPING

Tipping is generally not practiced in Japan, not even to waitresses, taxi drivers, or hotel porters. A 10 to 15 per cent service charge is added to bills at higher-priced hotels and restaurants. At higher-end Japanese inns with individualized maid service, a 10 to 20 percent service charge is added. No service charge is added to bills at business hotels, youth hostels, and other inexpensive lodgings.

WATER

Tap water throughout Japan is safe to drink.

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WEATHER

Japan has mostly a mild climate, but as it is an archipelago stretching over 3,000 km from north to south, there are major local variations in the weather, as well as variations in fauna and flora and scenery. Pleasant temperatures arrive with spring, which along with autumn is one of the best times to visit. Sakura (cherry blossoms) bloom in Kyushu in March, reaching Tokyo by early April. Early summer is rainy, but July and August are hot and humid except in Hokkaido. The autumn is cool and typhoons may occur. Winter is chilly, but heavy snowfalls are limited to the mountainous regions.

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EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Police dial 110; Emergency Medical Services dial 119; Fire service dial 119. The Tokyo Metropolitan Health and Medical Information Center offers an emergency interpretation service with English-speaking doctors at: (03) 5285-8185.

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