1 • INTRODUCTION

Japan is a land of incredible contrasts, from neon skylines and ancient castles to serene shrines and speeding bullet trains. A tour of the land of rising sun never fails to fascinate. With us, you will travel to Japan in style, enjoying insider access opportunities rarely available to the ordinary traveller.

The Japanese islands have been inhabited by humans since Paleolithic times. Archaeologists there have discovered some of the oldest pottery known to existjapan

Migration has not been a significant feature of Japan's history. The Japanese are a mixture of northeast Asians with others from the China coast, Southeast Asia, and Polynesia. By the Heian Period (AD 794–1185), the dominant Japanese population extended control over the northern region of the island of Honshu, displacing (pushing aside) the indigenous (native) Ainu people. In the nineteenth century, the Ainu were displaced from the island of Hokkaido when the majority Japanese settled there.

Throughout Japan's history, the government has been dominated by emperors, whose authority has decreased in modern times. During various historical periods, the Japanese government has been in the hands of the military*(bakufu)*, with power shifted to warriors*(samurais).*

Japan suffered an economic crisis following World War I (1914–18). Tokyo and Yokohama were devastated by an earthquake in 1923. During World War II (1941–45), Japan attacked the United States and Great Britain (in 1941). Defeat in World War II stripped Japan of its overseas empire and military. Its economy and most of its large cities were devastated. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by atomic bombs. Allied military forces (mostly American) occupied Japan (1945–52) and imposed sweeping reforms to promote democracy. After the occupation Japan rebuilt its country.

Japan grew dramatically as an economic force beginning in the 1960s, and has enjoyed a high standard of living since that time.

Politically, Japan is a parliamentary democracy modelled on the British system. Representatives are elected to the *Diet* a parliament (government council) with two legislative chambers. The majority party in the lower house, the House of Representatives, elects its Prime Minister, who forms a cabinet. The conservative Liberal Democratic Party is the largest party, but its long-running control of the lower house was broken in 1993. Parties are now going through a period of reorientation.

2 • LOCATION

Japan's population is about 125 million. Practically all Japanese speakers live in Japan. Small communities have moved to Hawaii and North and South America, but most of their descendants no longer speak Japanese.

Japan is a chain of approximately 3,000 islands off the eastern coast of Asia. Throughout history, the main islands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku have been the homeland of the Japanese. During the seventeenth century political influence was extended southward over the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa. These are occupied by a closely related population that speaks a variant of Japanese. The Ryukyus became part of Japan in the nineteenth century. Hokkaido was fully annexed in the nineteenth century.

Approximately two-thirds of the land area is too mountainous for development. This compresses the population into a few large plains, the Kanto (around Tokyo), the Kansai (around Osaka), and the Nobi (around Nagoya), mountain basins, and coastal strips. The population is overwhelmingly urban, drawn by jobs and city life.

Japan suffers extensive seismic activity. It has many active volcanoes and experiences frequent earthquakes. A huge earthquake on September 1, 1923, destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama and killed approximately 130,000 people. Kobe was devastated by an earthquake on January 17, 1995, which took over five thousand lives. Japan also endures seasonal typhoons. While often destructive, these storms cause little loss of life.

3 • LANGUAGE

The Japanese language is essentially spoken only in Japan. It is an Altaic language and its nearest relative is Korean. It is not related to Chinese, but writing was learned from China. Chinese characters*(kanji),*each with a meaning and multiple pronunciations, are part of the writing system.

Japanese words are composed of many syllables, and endings are attached to change tense, form a negative, or otherwise modify meaning. The standard sentence order is subject, object, verb.

**STANDARD PHRASES AND WORDS**

| ***Japanese*** | ***English*** |
| --- | --- |
| Ohayoo-gozaimasu | good morning |
| Kon-nichi wa | good day |
| Kon-ban wa | good evening |
| O genki desu-ka | How are you? |
| O-kagesama de | I'm well, thank you. |
| Sayoonara goodbye | (formal) |
| Arigatoo-gozaimasu | thank you |
| Doo itashimashite | you are welcome |

Family names come first and given names second. Hence, Tanaka Junko is a female name for Junko of the Tanaka family. Titles of respect follow a name *San* is a universal title of respect equal to Mr., Miss, Mrs.; therefore Tanaka-san could mean Mr. Tanaka, Ms. Tanaka, Miss Tanaka, or Mrs. Tanaka.

4 • FOLKLORE

Japanese folklore combines Shinto religious myths, stories of nature spirits, Buddhist tales, and historical figures to whom mythical deeds are attributed. For example, [Minamoto Yoshitsune](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Minamoto_no_Yoshitsune.html)helped his half brother, Minamoto Yoritomo, win the Gempei War (1180–85). He was a brilliant general who supposedly learned warrior skills as a boy from*tengu*—half-man, half-bird figures who live in mountain forests. Later, Yoshitsune used these skills to defeat a giant Buddhist warrior-monk, Benkei, in a duel on the Go-jo Bridge in Kyoto. Overwhelmed by Yoshitsune's skill, Benkei surrendered and became his loyal follower. Benkei has become a model of loyalty. Yoshitsune and Benkei died in a battle against Yoritomo, who became jealous of his brother and turned against him.

Japanese folklore is rich in strange beings who inhabit nature. In addition to tengu, mentioned above, there are*kappa,*water demons about three feet tall that have bird beaks and turtle shells on their backs. They often lure people into the water to drown. They love cucumbers, and one can protect oneself from kappa by carving one's name on a cucumber and tossing it into the local stream. When out of the water, kappa carry water in a depression on their heads. If encountered, it is advisable to bow to the kappa. It will return the bow, spilling the water and becoming too weak to cause harm.

Japanese myths include Shinto tales collected in the oldest surviving Japanese book, the*Kojiki*. These describe the creation of the world and the Japanese islands by Izanagi and Izanami, a pair of male and female deities (gods). The primary deity is the Sun goddess, Amaterasu. On sending her descendant to rule Japan, she gave him three sacred treasures: a bronze mirror, a sword, and a string of comma-shaped jewels called*magatama*. These items are still associated with the imperial family. Amaterasu is honored at the Ise Grand Shrine, where the original mirror is supposedly housed.

5 • RELIGION

Traditional Japanese religion includes Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Shinto ("The Way of the Gods") is the name given to religious practices that were indigenous to Japan before Buddhism was introduced. It is concerned with humanity's relationship to nature, to agriculture, and to society. Prayers and offerings petition deities *(kami)*for health, a good crop, children, and safety. Harvest festivals are Shinto events. Shinto also concerns itself with community relationships; hence, marriages are usually Shinto ceremonies.

The richness of Buddhism and its ties to Chinese culture helped it gain support at the Japanese court. Buddhism also answered spiritual needs that Shinto neglected, including questions of morals and life after death. By the Nara Period (AD 710–794), Shinto and Buddhism began to exist side by side. Shinto deities (gods) were explained as Japan's local versions of the universal beings represented by the many Buddhas. Shinto dealt with issues of this world (crops, social relations, clan ancestors), while Buddhism concentrated on ethical (moral) and metaphysical (supernatural) issues. This division still works for many Japanese. Weddings may be Shinto ceremonies, but Buddhism deals with morality, funerals, and questions about the future life of the human soul.

Confucianism is imported from China. Confucianism emphasizes the need to find one's place within the greater social order, and to be a responsible member of the social units to which one belongs. Confucianism is hierarchical: in social relations, one party is superior, the other inferior. It is the duty of the superior to teach, protect, and nurture the inferior. The inferior should respect and learn from the superior. Ideally, Confucianism leads to a highly ethical, supportive social order. It also stresses study, a value widely accepted in Japan.

Christianity was introduced to Japan by St. Francis Xavier in 1549. Catholic missionaries had considerable success for nearly one century before the military government expelled them and made the practice of Christianity a crime punishable by death. Christianity was again made legal in the 1870s. At that time Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox missions were established. They are all active throughout the country today, especially in education and charity work. Only 1 percent of Japanese are Christians. However, Christian teachings have significantly influenced Japanese thinking.

6 • RITES OF PASSAGE

One hundred days after birth, an infant is presented at a local Shinto shrine for blessing.

November 15 is "Shichi-Go-San," or "7, 5, 3." On that day, children of those ages are taken to a Shinto shrine to be blessed. Originally, this ceremony was for girls three or seven years old and boys five years old.

Educational milestones are celebrated. At the beginning of formal schooling, a child is presented with a leather backpack for books and may receive a private study desk. School entrance ceremonies and graduations are attended by parents in formal dress. University entrance examinations are a major turning point in a teenager's life. Admission to a good university can be critical to an individual's future. Much is made of the preparation, the exam, and the results.

January 15 is "Coming of Age Day." All who have turned twenty are recognized as legal adults. Fancy dress—usually a kimono for young women—is worn to ceremonies, which are often followed by parties and the presentation of significant gifts.

Formal company ceremonies mark the hiring of new employees as well as an individual's retirement.

Marriage is usually celebrated at a commercial wedding hall. Shinto ceremonies are conducted in private with the couple, priest, witnesses, and parents. In place of vows, cups of*sake*are exchanged and drunk. Christian church weddings strike many Japanese as romantic; many wedding halls have an imitation church in which a church-style ceremony can be held before guests. The ceremony is followed by an elaborate dinner with multiple speeches and the formal cutting of a Western-style wedding cake.

Death is usually associated with Buddhist rituals. Visitors honor the dead at a wake, in which guests burn incense in front of a photo of the deceased. The body is cremated. Ashes are placed in a family grave, which has space for numerous urns under a single tombstone. A plaque bearing the Buddhist name of the deceased is added to the family Buddhist altar. Memorial ceremonies are held over several years to pray for the person.

7 • RELATIONSHIPS

Japan is more formal than America, and phrases and forms of polite exchange are more fixed. Manners require that the speaker use language to honor or elevate the other party, while denigrating (lowering in importance) oneself. Japanese society pays great attention to who is superior to whom in any relationship. This is reflected in language and gestures.

Japanese bow to greet each other. The person of lower status bows lower and should initiate the greeting. Shaking hands is rare among Japanese, who usually do not engage in physical contact. Distinctive gestures include pointing to one's nose to indicate oneself. Women cover their mouths with their hands when laughing. Men, when embarrassed, scratch the backs of their heads. If really uncomfortable, Japanese will often suck wind between their teeth.

Because houses are very small, Japanese usually entertain outside the home. Home visits are usually confined to a brief meeting over tea. The guest brings a gift such as flowers, fruit, or pastries. Such gifts are used to reinforce relationships with relatives, friends, teachers, doctors, business contacts, and so forth. Two gift-giving seasons, New Year's and midsummer, are marked by a large-scale buying and giving of gifts.

Dating is usually confined to high school students and young adults. Schools actively discourage it. Group dating is common and takes the form of outings, picnics, karaoke parties, or visits to amusement parks. Student couples who are dating usually limit themselves to a visit to a coffee shop or fast food restaurant. Japanese students rarely work (many schools forbid it) and often have limited extra incomes. This and busy study schedules restrict dating options. Dating among working adults is common. Most marriages today are based on romantic attachments rather than the arranged marriages that were the norm in the past.

8 • LIVING CONDITIONS

Japanese generally enjoy good health and have the greatest life expectancy (predicted life span) in the world. Medical care is generally good and includes both modern scientific and traditional Chinese-style herbal medicines.

Housing is a major problem in Japan's crowded cities. While Japanese prefer single-family houses, the enormous cost of land prevents them from having a real yard; as many as forty houses may be built on one acre. Small apartments are very common. Traditionally, houses were furnished with wall-to-wall straw mats *(tatami);*recent trends are toward carpet or wooden floors and Western-style furniture.

The Japanese standard of living is very high. Material possessions are comparable to those in the United States, and the general safety of Japanese city streets adds a sense of well-being. The major problems are restricted living space and the limited personal time left by demanding work and study hours.

9 • FAMILY LIFE

Social values place women secondary to men in status. However, even in traditional families Japanese women enjoy considerable autonomy (independence) and power. Japanese schooling treats boys and girls equally, guaranteeing well-educated women. Traditionally, the wife has charge of the house and oversees the children. This is her full-time job and includes two important responsibilities: money and education. The wife keeps the family budget, manages savings and large purchases, and even gives her husband his weekly allowance. She also monitors the children's education. Most Japanese children have few household chores, but devote regular time to study under their mother's watchful eye.

Family size has declined to an average of 1.8 children per couple. The average age for marriage has risen to about twenty-six years for women and twenty-eight for men. Most marriages are based on romantic attachment; however, the separate lives led by men and women in Japanese society often limits the emotional closeness of married couples. Expectations regarding the personal satisfactions to be gained from married life are not as demanding as in the United States. This, plus stress on the importance of the family unit, help to hold the annual divorce rate to 1.3 per 1,000 people (1990). The practice of the eldest son's family living with his parents in a three-generation household is rapidly declining.

Some Japanese have pet dogs and cats, but many are prevented from having them by limited living space. Goldfish and birds are popular. Some keep crickets for their song.

10 • CLOTHING

Traditional clothing is the*kimono,*a robe that is wrapped around the body, left side over right, and tied with a sash*(obi).*Women's kimonos vary from the simple everyday designs preferred by older women to the elaborate painted silk robes worn for ceremonial occasions. Men rarely wear kimonos except for formal occasions and when performing traditional arts. The light summer cotton style *(yukata)*remains very popular for relaxing at home, resorts, and summer festivals.

Traditional footwear is sandals*(zori)*or wooden clogs*(geta)*with a thong that passes between the big toe and the second toe.*Tabi,*a split-toed sock that accommodates the thong, is worn with them.

Most Japanese wear Western-style clothing for daily use. Japanese tend to dress more formally and neatly than Americans. Jeans are popular with the young. Middle-and high-school students wear dark blue or black uniforms with badges that indicate their school and grade.

11 • FOOD

Japanese eat a wide range of foods, including imports from China and the West. The staple of their diet is rice, usually eaten plain from a bowl without seasoning or butter. Rice is complemented with other dishes, including fish, meat, vegetables, various pickles, and soup. Japanese people eat much seafood. Some fresh fish is eaten raw with soy sauce as*sashimi,*or combined raw with rice in*sushi.*However, most fish is cooked, often grilled or deep fried in batter*(tempura).*

Buddhism discouraged the eating of meat, but this taboo (prohibition) has largely disappeared. Japanese eat chicken, pork, and beef, but servings are small. Soup is made from fermented soy bean paste*(miso)*or dried bonito shavings*(katsuobushi).*Noodles in various forms are a common main dish.

Most Western foods can be found in Japan. Hamburgers and pizza are popular, and many U.S. restaurant chains are well represented.

Meals do not include desserts. Sweets are served separately with tea or coffee. Japanese sweets are often based on sweet bean paste. Western baked goods are widely available.

The national beverage is green tea. Black tea, coffee, soda, and beer are all popular. Milk and dairy products, a recent addition to the Japanese diet, have become popular in recent years. A recipe for green tea ice cream, combining traditional and modern ingredients, follows.

*Recipe*

Green Tea Ice Cream

Ingredients

* 1 pint softened vanilla ice cream
* 1 Tablespoon green tea powder

Directions

Blend together ice cream and green tea powder. Return to freezer until ready to serve.

Japanese food is served in numerous small dishes. Pieces are cut to be eaten with chopsticks. Soup is drunk from the bowl. It is inappropriate to stick chopsticks upright in a rice bowl or pass food from one pair of chopsticks to another; these gestures are associated with cremation ceremonies.

12 • EDUCATION

Japanese people place great value on education and see it as the major path toward self-improvement and a successful career. Japan claims a 100 percent literacy rate (percentage of the population able to read and write).

The academic year begins in April and ends in March. Japanese children begin kindergarten at age four and elementary school at age six. Compulsory (required) education covers only elementary school (six grades) and middle school (which consists of three grades), but 94 percent go on to high school (three grades). Most schools are coeducational. Elementary education stresses basic skills, especially reading and math, and seeks to develop the individual into a socially responsible group member. Elementary school teachers establish strong ties with their students, and children often find early education an enjoyable experience.

Middle- and high-school becomes more challenging as emphasis shifts to intensive study with limited electives (optional classes). For a professional career a university degree is essential, but university entry is by competitive examination. Preparation for these exams, called "examination hell," drives much of Japanese middle- and high-school education. Students often supplement regular classes by attending a*juku*(cram school) after hours. Critics rightly charge that Japanese education stresses memorization for university examinations, but Japanese schools also cultivate problem-solving and group work skills more than is usually recognized.

One-third of high school graduates enter college or university and most of those graduate. Two-year colleges are common for women and for vocational education. Four-year universities are similar to those in the U.S., but many students arrive burned out by "examination hell" and exert minimal effort. Graduate study is not as common as in the U.S.

13 • CULTURAL HERITAGE

Japanese classical musical instruments include the*koto*(thirteen-string, horizontal harp), the*shakuhachi*(vertical bamboo flute), and the*shamisen*(a three-stringed banjo-like instrument). The shakuhachi is usually played solo or with the koto. The koto is frequently played solo or in group ensembles. The shamisen is a popular folk instrument that is played solo.

Western instruments such as the piano, violin, and guitar are more popular now than traditional instruments. Modern popular music reflects strong Western influences, and Western classical music is well known in Japan.

In dance, stately classical forms continue to be studied, while a dynamic folk tradition preserves lively dances. The annual Bon Festival includes group dancing open to all.

Japan's literary heritage is very rich. The oldest surviving text,*Kojiki (*published inAD721), blends Shinto myth and history. Poetry anthologies,*Manyoshu,*date back to the Nara Period (AD710–794). The Heian Period (AD794–1185) produced a rich out-pouring of literature, especially by court women. During the Middle Ages (1185–1335) military tales were popular, the greatest being the*Tale of the Heike*. The Muromachi Period (1336–1568) produced poetic Noh play texts that often reflect Buddhist values. Most poetry was written in the*tanka*form, five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. The first three lines of the tanka gave rise to the seventeen-syllable haiku. The most famous haiku author was Basho. The Tokugawa Period gave rise to the*bunraku*puppet drama and kabuki theater, for which Chikamatsu wrote tragedies. In the nineteenth century, Western influences inspired many[autobiographical](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Autobiography.html)novels. Natsume Soseki's*Kokoro*is an early [twentieth-century](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/20th_century.html)favorite. Japanese writers are read overseas in translation, and [Kawabata Yasunari](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Yasunari_Kawabata.html)and Oe Kenzaburo have won Nobel Prizes for literature.

14 • EMPLOYMENT

Most men join a company directly after graduating from high school (for nonprofessional jobs) or college (for professional jobs). The ideal is to remain with the same company until retirement around age sixty. In return for loyalty and long hours of work, the company makes a commitment to preserve the jobs of their employees. This "lifetime employment" ideal extends to only about one-third of Japanese workers. Many younger Japanese question the lack of mobility required by lifetime employment and opt for more risky and potentially rewarding career paths.

Most women work outside of the home in retail, service, or clerical jobs. They are expected to quit work upon marrying or when their first child is due. These women represent an affluent portion of the Japanese public and many enjoy their status prior to marriage. After raising children, many return to work. Until recently, true career options were not open to many women in corporations. Teaching and some government offices provided careers, but corporations only began to recruit women executives seriously in the 1980s. They are still rare in many industries.

The work environment in Japan is group-oriented. Employers expect employees to put company interests before personal concerns. Long hours are typical for office workers.

Wages start very low and rise with longevity (duration with a company). The average per capita income in Japan is higher than in America, but many things, especially housing, are more costly than in the U.S.

15 • SPORTS

The Japanese are great sports enthusiasts. Physical education classes in high school include an elective (optional class) in one of Japan's traditional martial arts such as judo, karate, or archery. Baseball is extremely popular, and the annual national high school baseball tournament in August is followed throughout Japan. The teams of Japan's universities compete in baseball, rugby, martial arts, and other sports.

The most popular professional sport in Japan is baseball. Games in the two leagues, the Pacific and the Central, draw large crowds, including noisy but well-organized fan clubs. There is some interest in American football and basketball. The new "J-League," a professional soccer league, fostered a soccer craze in the early 1990s.

Sumo wrestling is a native sport centered upon six annual fifteen-day tournaments. Two wrestlers seek to force each other out of a circle or to touch the ground with some part of their bodies (other than the soles of their feet). A striking feature is the huge size of the wrestlers; top-ranked wrestlers usually exceed three hundred pounds and can weigh over five hundred pounds.

Popular participatory sports include golf, tennis, skiing, hiking, swimming, and fishing. Gateball, similar to croquet, is popular with elderly people.

16 • RECREATION

The Japanese people are fans of television and have more television sets per person than do Americans. Song and variety shows and celebrity quiz shows are popular, and there are extensive sports and news broadcasts. Family dramas are also popular. Historical dramas often feature stories about samurai (warriors).

Movies are a popular entertainment form but depend heavily upon imports, especially from America. Japan's own movie industry is productive but has faded since it achieved international fame for its art and sophistication in the 1950s and 1960s. The director [Akira Kurosawa](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Akira_Kurosawa.html)made a lasting international impression with films such as*Rashomon*and*Seven Samurai*.

Traditional live theater forms survive, including Noh drama, Bunraku puppet plays, and live kabuki theater. The Japanese also attend concerts, including those of classical Western music and pop groups.

A popular form of participatory entertainment is karaoke. This form of singing along with recorded orchestral accompaniment to popular songs began as entertainment in bars and has since spread overseas.

Appreciation of seasonal changes and holiday festivals are traditional pastimes that remain popular. Major festivals attract huge crowds, and famous sites for admiring plum and cherry blossoms, irises, azaleas, chrysanthemums, and the bright leaves of fall draw many visitors.

17 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES

Japan is a land in which many handicrafts have been raised to the level of art. Japan has many regional variations on pottery. Some fine pottery is delicate and finely detailed; there is also a strong tradition of heavier folk pottery that is more simple and rustic. The aesthetic values of "*wabi cha*" (poverty tea) of the Tea Ceremony encourages this style of pottery.

Handmade paper, produced from mulberry bark, remains a popular art form. Special papers with distinct textures and patterns are prized for letter writing, [calligraphy](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Calligraphy.html)(decorative lettering), and wrapping. A variety of dying, painting, and decorative styles and methods have developed to decorate the panels of silk used for women's kimonos. Tie-dying is also employed.

The Japanese government cherishes these arts, recognizing masters as National Living Treasures to honor and support their work.

18 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Japan's major social problem concerns its population. Japanese enjoy the greatest longevity (longest lives) in the world, but their low birth rate is below the replacement level. As a result, their population is the most rapidly aging in the world and will soon begin to decline in size. This raises serious questions about how, in the twenty-first century, a shrinking work force will support a huge population of retirees.

Civil rights are a problem for some small minority groups. Resident aliens (less than 1 percent of the population), primarily Koreans, may have been born and raised in Japan but are required to register as foreign residents and have been excluded from certain jobs. A campaign to remove these barriers is gradually easing restrictions.

Another minority group (about 2 percent of the population) is the *burakumin* (hamlet people). Physically indistinguishable from the majority Japanese, these are descendants of outcasts who suffered severe discrimination in pre-modern times. Despite attempts to legislate equality, they are subject to widespread discrimination. The tiny population of Ainu on the island of Hokkaido are an indigenous people who were overrun by the majority Japanese population. Most have intermarried with the majority Japanese.

An issue of concern in modern Japan is the status of women. Laws pertaining to women have changed faster than social values. Legally, Japanese women enjoy considerable protection. However, social values tend to emphasize gender-based career paths. While many Japanese women appear content with their status, those who wish to pursue careers previously limited to men find the door only partially open.

Japanese society tolerates and even encourages considerable drinking, and [alcoholism](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Alcoholism.html" \o "View 'alcoholism' definition from Wikipedia)is a problem. Relieving stress and renewing personal bonds over a drink after work is common in Japan, and leads to heavy drinking. Japan's island geography has helped to restrict the inflow of hard drugs and firearms to very low levels, but there are signs that these problems may be on the rise.