

DESTINATION REPORT

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Japan

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INTRODUCTION

It is fascinating to watch as Japan struggles to merge its thousands of years of tradition with its present and future. So far, it has been able to do so with some mystery intact. The language barrier has helped, although that's slowly dissolving with bilingual signs and Japanese students learning English. For a while at least, the language, like Japan itself, will remain an intriguing challenge for visitors.

At Tokyo station, waiting for the bullet train (*shinkansen*), we watched as everyone bought boxed lunches (*obento*). So we bought one, too. It was inviting: The map on the cover suggested each of the foods inside had been harvested in a different part of Japan—white radishes from the far west, salmon roe from the far northeast, eel from the south coast. We saw it as the "Japan Sampler."

Later, we began to think of the box as a metaphor for Japan itself: It had the same sense of order—each food in its own little compartment, carefully thought out and arranged.

It was also standardized, like the "salarymen" in their dark suits—yet, like their splashy ties, it had a container of sauce to spice things up. It was wrapped—everything in Japan gets wrapped. It even had a moist towelette—almost every restaurant gives you one. It was fairly expensive, too, which Japan can be if you don't plan well.

The boxed lunch did not, of course, come with a portable phone and a miniature camera. It did not open to a karaoke tune. It offered no hint of the passion for ice cream or mayonnaise, for the trendiest fashions, for *manga*, *pachinko* and cigarettes. And although its packaging reflected modern design, it said nothing about the bold, exciting architecture that is slowly changing the face of Japan.

GEOGRAPHY

Japan consists of four main islands (from north to south: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu), plus the Ryukyu Islands and thousands of smaller ones with a combined total of 17,000 mi/27,000 km of coastline.

Mountains cover two-thirds of the country, including more than 70 volcanoes, many of them quite active. Japan's volcanoes are part of the Pacific's Ring of Fire, an enormous circle of volcanic activity along the edge of the Pacific tectonic plate that runs through the Philippines, New Zealand, California and Alaska.

HISTORY

According to oral tradition, the country was founded in 660 BC by Jimmu, a descendant of the Shinto sun goddess. Also according to lore, Jimmu was an ancestor of the emperor. Historians, however, place the date of Japan's founding closer to AD 500, when Yamato priest-chiefs established control over the main island of Honshu. During the following 300 years, the country was greatly influenced by China and neighboring Korea, adopting Chinese forms of Buddhism, government and written language, but then changing them to forms that were uniquely Japanese.

After the capital was moved from Nara to Kyoto in 794, the imperial court gradually became weaker. Following a long power struggle, the strongest warlord seized power from the Kyoto court and assumed the title of shogun. From this point on, the emperors were marginalized and the country was ruled by a succession of shoguns. Civil war left the country exhausted, and Kublai Khan's Mongols twice tried to take advantage of this weakness. Two invasions were cut short when the fleets were destroyed by typhoons (miraculous occurrences attributed to the *kamikaze*, or divine protective winds).

The first Tokugawa shogun completed the unification of the country and established his administrative base in Edo (present-day Tokyo), while the emperor's court remained in Kyoto. The shogun's descendants controlled Japan from 1600 to 1868 (usually known as the Edo Period).

Europeans first arrived in the 16th century, introducing guns and Christianity to the island. By the 17th century,

Japan had had enough of both and closed itself off from the outside world, a period that led to the development of many of its distinctive customs and traditional arts. The country remained isolated until 1853, when U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry arrived with a squadron of warships and forced the reopening of trade.

After a brief civil war, the forces of the last shogun were defeated by rebellious warlords, who called for the restoration of imperial rule. The shogun resigned a few years later, and Emperor Meiji assumed control of the country. During Meiji's reign, Japan became the leading military power in Asia. After victory over China (which ceded Taiwan) in 1894, Japan defeated Russia in 1905. Japan's imperial ambitions led to the annexation of Korea in 1910, along with the invasions of Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937.

Finally, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941 brought the U.S. into World War II. Japanese and Allied forces battled fiercely for control of island after island across the Pacific. Then on 6 August 1945, the world's first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later, a second atomic bomb devastated Nagasaki, and six days later, the Japanese surrendered.

The country was occupied by the Allies for the next five years, although Okinawa did not revert to Japan until 1972. During the 1950s, Japan accomplished what can only be described as an economic miracle: The country was transformed from an exhausted, occupied nation into an economic powerhouse in just a few decades. A hyper-inflated "bubble" economy built up during the overheated real-estate boom of the 1980s.

But in 1990, the bubble burst and Japan's economy collapsed, with stock and real-estate prices plunging. Throughout the '90s, Japan suffered from economic stagnation, leading to many bankruptcies and unprecedented unemployment rates. Saddled with massive bad loans and administrative inertia, the economy was slow to recover, with little growth until 2003. Although the government says the recession has bottomed out and consumer spending is rebounding (especially in central Tokyo), Japan remains dependent on its export industries, and future economic prospects are still uncertain.

SNAPSHOT

Among Japan's chief attractions are Mount Fuji, gardens, shopping, cherry blossoms, cultural attractions (from palaces and historic sites to sumo wrestling and Kabuki theater), bullet trains, beaches, war (and peace) memorials, traditional crafts, and religious shrines and temples.

Japan is a wonderful, fascinating and, unless you're very careful, expensive destination. Don't go if you are on a tight budget or are uncomfortable among dense crowds or in confining spaces. Be aware that you'll have to do a lot of walking to explore most attractions. Avoid traveling to Japan the first week of January, last week of April and first week of May, in late July or early August. These are major holiday periods when there are many closings and public transportation is fully booked.

POTPOURRI

Shinto has 88,000 gods, more than any other religion in the world. During the month of November, the gods take a break from their busy schedule and get together for a conference at the Izumo Taisha Shrine in Shimane Prefecture.

How to distinguish a Shinto shrine from a Buddhist temple? Shrines almost always have gates known as *torii* (or "bird perch")—two pillars topped by two horizontal beams. In contrast, Buddhist temples often have gateways with tiled roofs that look like miniature versions of the temple itself.

You'll see "samurai castles" perched on hilltops around the country, but only 12 are original. Others, including the famous Osaka Castle, are modern concrete replicas. Himeji Castle, west of Kobe, is by far the most imposing and is well worth a day trip—as is the black Crow's Castle in Matsumoto, to the north of Nagoya in central Japan.

During a 2006 visit to Japan to promote a movie, Tom Cruise chartered an entire bullet train to whisk him and his adoring fans from Tokyo to Osaka. During the journey, Tom walked the length and breadth of the train meeting and greeting his admirers. In 2009 Tom repeated a similar act for movie publicity—this time using a chartered aircraft to transport fans between the two cities.

The Hello Kitty phenomenon celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2009. The omnipresent cat, which was dreamed up (and is still owned) by Sanrio Corp., even appears on telephones, a brand of water and underwear.

Big-screen tough man Tommy Lee Jones is better known in Japan as a sympathetic soul working in a karaoke parlor. Such is the character he plays in a popular commercial for canned coffee. He won the hearts of young and old alike as his character cried while listening to an *enka* (Japanese folk song).

Most new buildings in Japan do not touch other buildings. Why? Think earthquake.

Buildings are numbered according to when they were built, not their location on a street. To find a business or home, you may need to do as the locals do: Take the address to the neighborhood police box (or *koban*)—they're everywhere. You may find maps posted around, but they're of little help unless you read Japanese.

Pachinko parlors are everywhere (the game resembles vertical pinball and can pay off like a slot machine). The parlors are incredibly noisy, brightly lit, smoky and invariably full of people, night and day. Although skilled players can make money, for most it's just an enjoyable pastime.

Japanese comic books, known as *manga*, are read voraciously by all ages and are available at every newsstand. Some are as thick as telephone books. For adults, there are men's versions and women's versions. Both get pretty racy. *Manga* and anime, animated movies in the same style, are gaining popularity in the West. Examples include *Ghost in the Shell* and *Akira*.

The so-called "eternal flame" that burns in Hiroshima is not actually intended to be eternal. It will be extinguished when the last nuclear weapon is destroyed.

Some Japanese half-jokingly refer to the U.S. state of Hawaii as "Hawaii-ken" (Hawaii Prefecture) because of its popularity with Japanese tourists.

Should you have problems making your English understood by people who claim to speak the language (or difficulty understanding someone speaking it), try writing out your messages. Many Japanese understand written English better than the spoken version.

The Byodin Temple in Uji, near Kyoto, features on the back of Japan's 10 yen coin.

SIGHTSEEING

When many people think of Japan they picture the metropolises of Tokyo and Osaka—bulging at the seams with citizens. But once they pass the urban sprawl, visitors find the island nation offers picturesque sites, stunning beaches and a rich heritage.

Mount Koyasan, in southwestern Honshu, is home to more than 120 temples scattered throughout a deeply religious site. Okinawa feels like a different country with its sandy beaches and scuba diving spots. Throughout the country there are 14 natural and cultural UNESCO World Heritage sites that are worth a visit, and more that are up for consideration.

Along with the old Japan features a lot of "new." Akihabara in Tokyo has all the latest gadgets that any tech-savvy person could possibly want. Amusement parks are common and not only does Tokyo have Disneyland, it also has DisneySea. In Osaka, visitors can experience Universal Studios.

For a look at World War II from the Japanese point of view, visit the War Museum (Yasukuni Shrine), which has among its displays a manned torpedo and kamikaze glider (the description of the heroism of the young pilots may surprise you.)

RECREATION

A plethora of golf courses can be found at some of the finest locations the country has to offer. The best examples are on Kyushu in the southwest and Hokkaido in the north. Summer activities such as surfing, diving and swimming are best enjoyed on any one of the pristine beaches on Kyushu, Shikoku and Okinawa. Head to Kamikochi near Matsumoto on the main island of Honshu and hike your way through some of Japan's finest views.

Head to Nisseko in Hokkaido—along with thousands of Australians—during the winter months and enjoy some of the best powdered snow anywhere in the world. You could also hit the health clubs and bowling alleys found in almost every Japanese town and city. Grab a fishing rod and follow the locals, resplendent in the latest in fishing attire, down to the local fishing hole.

In spring and fall, the Japanese go en masse to marvel at the color and fanfare of the changing of the seasons. Popular destinations include Kyoto, Nagano and Hokkaido. Hire a bicycle and peddle your way through centuries of tradition and culture. In Kanazawa, put on your walking shoes and stroll through one of Japan's finest gardens, Kenrokuen. Don't forget that any time of year is great time to indulge in one of Japan's greatest pastimes, bathing in an outdoor hot spring.

SPECTATOR SPORTS

Sumo wrestling is Japan's national sport. The national passion, however, is baseball, especially since local players began making it in the U.S. major leagues.

SHOPPING

Shop for pearls (including black pearls from Okinawa), lacquerware, silks, woodblock prints, pottery, furniture, jewelry, cloisonne, paper lanterns, *yukatas* (the cotton robes worn to the bath), dolls, Imari porcelain, shells, red coral, cameras, china, crystal, art, local handicrafts, calligraphy supplies, karate gear, kitchen knives, packaged seaweed, green tea, kites (especially traditional kites), beautifully printed books, toys, comic books, weavings and silk screens. You can purchase good-luck charms (usually covered in silk brocade) from the gift shops of the many shrines. Don't assume you're going to get bargains on electronic goods, pearls or silks—familiarize yourself with sale prices of these items prior to leaving home.

Don't be afraid to forgo the usual tourist buys and try shopping for the latest in denim apparel with kimono-patterned-pockets, or aloha shirts that look decidedly more Japanese than Hawaiian. Stroll down the tree-lined avenues in the very upmarket Aoyama district of Tokyo, and admire the cutting-edge Japanese architecture while shopping for best in both Japanese and imported fashion and goods.

Come back down to earth in the Higashiyama area of Kyoto, and bargain shop for vintage kimonos and earthenware in the narrow backstreets that wind their way around Kiyomizu Temple. While you are there, pick up a pair of trendy Japanese-style sneakers made from used kimono textiles.

Overdose on electrical goods and game software in Japan's electronic mecca, Akibahara in Tokyo. Enjoy the carryings-on of local *manga* fans as they patrol the streets dressed as their favorite comic book character.

About lacquerware (*shikki* or *urushi*): There are many styles from various parts of the country, and modern designs (in/out trays, for example) are at least as plentiful as the more traditional bowls, boxes and trays. Look carefully before you buy—these days, much so-called lacquerware is synthetic varnish on plastic, rather than real lacquer applied over wood.

Take time to visit one of the department stores. They sell everything from rice paper to pressed flowers to a dozen kinds of stuffing for pillows. The Japanese are ardent consumers, so it's fun to shop with them. The Takashimaya stores in particular have a great selection of all the typical Japanese mementos.

DINING OVERVIEW

As would be expected, Japan's sushi and sashimi are excellent. Other specialties include Kobe beef served as steak (very expensive) or in *sukiyaki*; cooked salt- and freshwater fish (often served whole); miso soup; and a wide variety of vegetable dishes. Tempura and teriyaki are two popular ways of preparing seafood and vegetables.

Chilled *mori soba* (cold buckwheat noodles) are refreshing in the summer, and hearty *nabe* hot pots are warming in the winter. If you're feeling a little adventurous, try broiled eel—it's delicious. Tofu is commonly eaten, either chilled with a simple dip, cooked in soups and stews, or basted and grilled (tofu *dengaku*).

For those on a budget, noodle shops offer meals that are simple, quick and satisfying. Ranging from basic stand-up counters on station platforms to more sophisticated places serving a range of side dishes, these are Japan's original fast food outlets (feel free to slurp—in Japan it means you are enjoying the dish). *Yakitori*, a very popular dish, is made from chunks of chicken or squid on skewers, grilled over charcoal and served with a sauce made from soy and sake.

Japan is not an easy country for strict vegetarians to visit, as most of the soup stocks and dipping sauces are made with fish extracts. You can find excellent Chinese food, including popular *gyoza* potstickers and the ubiquitous ramen noodles. In Hiroshima, try *okonomiyaki*, a pancake filled with cabbage, meat, seafood and sometimes noodles. Be sure to specify how you want your meat cooked—it's generally presented raw to medium.

Following your meal, try some refreshing green-tea ice cream. There are several varieties, and it's available in Japan's numerous convenience stores.

Less-expensive restaurants and those in department stores often have window displays of the foods they serve—the plastic food in the displays is amazingly realistic. Sometimes this display takes the place of a menu: One waiter took us outside to the window so we could point out our choices.

If you cannot understand a printed menu, you can (discreetly) look at the dishes on the other tables and (discreetly) point out to the waiter what looks good to you. Generally, Japanese food is made from fresh ingredients and is not highly seasoned (though soy sauce is used throughout).

The appearance of a meal is an important aspect of the art of Japanese food preparation, so take a moment to appreciate the visual presentation before you dig in. Try a Japanese breakfast at least once. Even if you don't prefer cooked rice, fish and miso soup for breakfast, it's an adventure and the presentation will brighten your day. Expect to eat a lot of eggs if you order the "American" or "Western" breakfast.

Western food is widely available in larger cities—especially Italian (spaghetti and pizza are almost as widespread as they are in the West). Outside Tokyo, French food tends to be formal and pricey. Lower down the food chain, there are fast-food and burger chains—both homegrown and imported—on virtually every corner.

Green tea is the preferred beverage with many meals, but you can find alternatives such as soft drinks. Don't expect to find decaffeinated coffee, however. The Japanese drink the real stuff—and really strong. You should sample some sake while in Japan—the famous rice wine is more akin to a liquor than a wine and can be an acquired taste, but it's an essential part of the Japanese experience.

While not strictly a dining experience, if you have the time to spare, try one of the maid cafes, the latest craze to hit Japan. Waitresses in saucy French maid uniforms will call you master or mistress and use the ketchup bottle to paint lovable characters on your meal. On the other hand, they may abuse you from the time you enter the cafe—or they may do both. Shows are usually a part of the experience, and it's quite amusing to watch geeks along with salary-men as they sing along with gusto as their favorite waitress belts out the latest J-pop tune. The cafes can be found around Akibahara in Tokyo and Nihonbashi in Osaka.

ETIQUETTE

Status and rank have played a very important role in Japanese society from the days of the shoguns, and they still do today. Even the Japanese language is stratified, and different forms are used with people of different rank. Thus, much of the country's business and social etiquette revolves around determining the rank of an individual and behaving accordingly. Negotiating Japanese traditions and customs is both fascinating and challenging.

Appointments—An intermediary can be a great asset when doing business in Japan, but it is important to use people of high rank. Establish meetings well in advance of your visit. Note that although the Japanese work long hours (48 hours a week is standard), the standard office hours are Monday-Friday 9 am-5 pm. Punctuality is of extreme importance.

Personal Introductions—The traditional introduction is a bow. However, you may also be greeted with a handshake or a bow and a handshake. Follow the lead of your Japanese counterpart. If your acquaintance bows, bow to the same depth to indicate your equal rank. As you bow, keep your hands flat against your sides (if you're a man) or on the tops of your thighs (if you're a woman) and lower your eyes.

Use your host's last name and append the word *san*, meaning "Mr." or "Ms." Example: If you are meeting Mr. Fukawa, you should address him as "Fukawa-san." It is appropriate to ask about a person's family. Remain formal in your demeanor after the initial introductions. It may take a very long time before any personal relationship develops. Even if you develop a first-name relationship, you should continue to address your associate by his last name in the presence of others.

Business cards are very important, and there is an entire set of etiquette rules built around their use. Have your card printed in English on one side, Japanese on the other. Present the card Japanese side up. The formal way to accept a card is with both hands. Spend time reading the card. Do not immediately put it away into your shirt or jacket, and never place it in a wallet that you then place in your pants pocket. It is suggested that you purchase a special card holder for the business cards of your Japanese associates. Never write on any of the cards you receive.

Negotiating—Do not be surprised if early in your negotiation you are asked many personal questions. This is the way that the Japanese "size" you up and determine your own rank. Do not display any negative emotions or do anything to inadvertently embarrass your host. The concept of the group is important to Japanese business. Individual achievement and glory must be secondary to the success of the group. Thus, many people may be involved in your negotiations, and the higher-ranking members will look for a consensus, which may slow down the decision-making process considerably. Be patient.

The Japanese do not like to respond negatively to a guest. As a result, noncommittal answers—such as "perhaps"—often mean no. Avoid negatively phrased questions, which can lead to confusion. If you use attorneys, you should use Japanese counsel to supplement your own.

Business Entertaining—The Japanese entertain in the evening and often until late at night. Typically, the host will treat. An invitation to lunch or dinner is important in Japan and is an indication of trust. It is customary for the host to order for the guest. When dining, do not fill or refill your own glass, only others' glasses. They will refill yours.

Body Language—Personal space is surprisingly wide. Gesturing is kept to an absolute minimum. There is very little, if any, conversational touching. Eye contact is often very weak. Smiling is a norm but is also used to cover displeasure. Familiarize yourself with differences between Japanese gestures and your own. For example, the typical American gesture for "come here" with the palm up and curled fingers is considered offensive in Japan. Their gesture for "come here" is made with the palm down.

Gift Giving—Gift giving tends to be formalized and even ceremonial. Consumables such as good-quality spirits make excellent gifts. Have the gift wrapped, but avoid white paper as white is associated with funerals. Gifts will not always be immediately opened, and you should follow your host's lead. Present your gift with both hands. If

the gift is for an individual, give the gift in private. If it's for a group, make sure the entire group is assembled. Indicate that your gift is a small one, regardless of what it is. This indicates that your relationship is more important than the gift. Some Japanese believe the numbers 4 and 9 mean bad luck, so avoid gifts that convey those numbers.

Conversation—All aspects of Japanese culture are good topics for conversation, if they are spoken of in a favorable context. Avoid talking about World War II and the current U.S. presence in Okinawa. Jokes do not translate well and may not be understood or, worse, misunderstood.

Other Information—Keep in mind that where you stay will be interpreted as a reflection of your company's stature and success. Staying in a cheap hotel can have serious business consequences when dealing with the status-conscious Japanese, especially if your competitors are in upscale accommodations.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Travel within Japan is generally safe, both in terms of crime and accidents. Japanese people rarely get aggressive, and personal violence is very rare. Pickpockets (many from other Asian countries) are sometimes found in crowded situations.

Most places are safe, even at night, although common sense should be used when visiting the entertainment districts of major cities—avoid hostess bars with no prices posted, as they are often unscrupulous, gang-related clip joints. All firearms are banned in Japan (except for very few licensed hunters). Situations involving prostitution and illegal drugs (penalties for possession are severe) are invariably connected with organized crime groups and best left well alone.

When hiking in the mountains, be on the alert for bears. In Kyushu and the Okinawa islands, venomous snakes are common (and some bites can be fatal).

Women in particular should be wary of gropers on trains, although Japanese women are the main target and groping attempts involving foreigners are quite rare. Japan is very much a male-dominated society, and such incidents are still common, with very little support offered for victims of this crime. Avoid using trains in major cities during rush hour to minimize the risk. Many train companies now provide female-only carriages. Look for the signs on the platform. They are usually marked in Japanese and English.

For the latest information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

HEALTH

Medical practices differ somewhat from what you may be used to at home, but sanitary conditions are good. Proof of sufficient funds may be required before you are treated in Japanese hospitals or clinics. Water is safe to drink. Travelers with coronary problems should be aware that Japan is a mountainous country, and in order to see many of Japan's most impressive sights, you must climb stairs or hillsides and do a fair amount of walking, despite excellent public transportation. Be sure to take along a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

Note: A surprising number of over-the-counter cold medicines (such as Vicks Inhalers and Sudafed) contain small amounts of amphetamines or amphetamine-like drugs, which makes them illegal in Japan. Expect them to be confiscated by customs if your bag is searched on arrival. Alternative medications are available at Japanese pharmacies.

For more information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

DOS & DON'TS

Do remember that you will have to remove your shoes often—when visiting some restaurants, a home, a traditional inn (*ryokan*) and many of Japan's attractions. And don't, under *any* circumstances, walk into a temple

wearing shoes.

Do use *hashi* (chopsticks) for Japanese food. Use Western utensils—and *only* Western utensils—for Western food. Stabbing your french fries with chopsticks may be fun, but it'll just make you look silly.

Don't forget that the moist towelette you get in restaurants should be used to wipe off your hands *before* you eat.

Do buy a colorful handkerchief (they're sold everywhere). You use it to wipe your hands after washing in the restroom—towels are often not provided. (An increasing number of establishments have installed electric hand dryers.)

Do try to learn some basic phrases, including "thank you" (*arigato*), "good morning" (*ohayo gozaimasu*), "good day" (*konnichi wa*), "good evening" (*konban wa*) and "goodbye" (*sayonara*).

Don't expect to find escalators in every subway or train station, although they are becoming more common. Be sure to stand on the left side of the escalator and walk on the right when in Tokyo. Down south in major cities such as Osaka and Kyoto, this is reversed. People stand on the right and walk on the left.

Do take along an inflatable pillow to support your back on the bullet train, especially if you're tall. The seats were designed for shorter people. Tall people also need to watch out for the height of doors: Some are very low, especially in older establishments. Train doors are especially unforgiving—if you're not careful, you may end up wishing you'd brought a helmet.

Do expect to be crowded or jostled unapologetically in public, especially on trains. The Japanese sense of personal space is different than that of Westerners, and crowding and jostling are considered perfectly acceptable behaviors.

Don't be surprised—or alarmed—if someone stops and asks if you need help. This is a frequent occurrence with visitors.

Don't expect shrines to be solemn and orderly. Prayer, chatting and photography occur simultaneously. And every shrine seems to have a busy gift shop.

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: Citizens of Canada and the U.S. need passports and proof of onward passage for stays of less than 90 days. Reconfirm travel document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

Population: 126,804,433.

Languages: Japanese. Numerous regional dialects can almost be considered foreign languages; however, the way people speak in Tokyo is understood throughout the country and anywhere Japanese is spoken around the world.

Predominant Religions: Shinto, Buddhist.

Time Zone: 9 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (+9 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Voltage Requirements: 100 volts AC, 50 cycles. Outlets require the type of plug used in the U.S. Appliances designed for use in North America usually can be used with no adapter; however, the difference in cycles means that they'll run about 15% slower. Many of the larger hotels have a choice of electrical outlets or can supply adapters.

Telephone Codes: 81, country code; 03, Tokyo city code; 075, Kyoto city code;

Currency Exchange

The currency in Japan is the yen. It comes in denominations of ¥10,000, ¥5,000 and ¥1,000 notes, as well as ¥500, ¥100, ¥50, ¥10, ¥5 and ¥1 coins. In the year 2000, the government tried to stimulate the economy by introducing the ¥2,000 note; however, the notes are not common. They might be hard to come by but they are still in circulation and are legal tender, so don't be alarmed if you end up with one.

Most international airport terminals have a currency exchange, as do the larger banks that are prevalent in major towns and cities. ATMs in Japan are becoming more useful, and many can be used to withdraw funds from overseas accounts (Post office ATMs and ATMs in 7-11 stores accept withdrawals from foreign cards.)

Major credit cards are accepted at the majority of big stores and restaurants in large urban areas, but if you plan on spending any time in rural areas, be sure to carry sufficient cash. Traveler's checks are rarely accepted. Keep in mind that Japan is still very much a cash society and some stores, hotels and restaurants—regardless of location—do not take credit cards.

Taxes

There is a standard 5% goods and service tax applied to all transactions. Some high-end restaurants may also add on a service charge of 10%-15%.

Tipping

There is no need to tip in Japan. In some cases a service charge may have already been added, making a tip further redundant. If someone has been especially helpful, a small gift, rather than money, would be appreciated. Don't be discouraged if they refuse it, even twice; they're just being courteous. Offer it a third time.

Weather

The temperature varies widely over the country on any given day—annual average temperatures range from 43 F/6 C to 72 F/22 C, depending on where you are. In general, the best times to visit are in October and April, when the foliage is changing and the temperatures are mild during the day and cool at night. May, June and July are the

rainiest months, and June, July and August are hotter and more humid. Okinawa's beaches are nicest in July and August. Sweaters should be taken along for the occasional cool night (or if you're going into mountain regions). Winter months can become quite cold—parts of Japan are on the same latitude as Siberia—and the areas that aren't terribly cold most likely will be drizzly and dreary. The island of Hokkaido in far-northern Japan is bitterly cold in the winter.

What to Wear

Japan can be scorching hot and uncomfortably humid during the summer, which lasts from mid-June to late August. Loose-fitting clothing made of cotton or linen is recommended for those traveling from Tokyo to Kyushu. Those traveling in Hokkaido or the northern parts of Honshu should be sure to carry a decent fleece or wool sweater since the temperature can drop rather quickly. If frequenting shopping centers, restaurants or bars, be sure to take a light sweater or jacket, as the air-conditioning is usually very cool. Shorts are not common on men in Japan, but that shouldn't stop you from wearing them.

Those there on business should wear appropriate business attire, such as suits and ties for men and a conservative suit, dress or skirt for women.

Winter in most parts of Japan is reasonably mild, and a decent coat and a warm scarf and gloves will suffice. Winter in the mountainous regions, along with northern Honshu and Hokkaido, can be cold, and it is best to wear a good-quality down jacket or coat. Spring and fall are both reasonably comfortable, and items such as jeans and a warm jacket will suffice for all but the remotest areas.

Telephone

Public phones are available all over Japan, mainly in and around train and subway stations. As most people have cellular phones (*keitai*) the number of public phones has been reduced, but they are still fairly easy to find near stations. Green-colored phones are usually for domestic calls (although some are capable of making international calls). Gray ones can be used for both domestic and international calls. It should say on the front (in English) if it is domestic only or capable of overseas and local calls. You can have English instructions displayed on the phone by choosing the English icon. Calls can be made with coins or phone cards. Purchase cards from NTT offices, convenience stores and newsstands.

When calling internationally, there are several dialing codes to choose from, all of which offer the same exorbitant rates. They include Softbank (dial 0061-010), NTT (dial 0033-010) and KDDI (dial 001-010).

Numbers prefixed by 0120 are toll-free calls. For directory assistance, dial 104. For additional questions, English-speaking NTT operators are available Monday-Friday 9 am-5 pm, except holidays, at 0120-364-463.

Softbank, AU and NTT-DOCOMO all offer exceptional coverage for their respective cell phones. Hi-speed or 3G cell phones are commonplace and offer good coverage in all but the remotest areas.

Internet Access

Internet access is prevalent in major towns and cities, with most hotels and guesthouses offering the service. It is common in airports, and Internet cafes are springing up all over the country. Costs vary, with some coffee shops offering free Wi-Fi services and others charging by the hour for cable-enabled PCs. Upon leaving major urban areas, Internet service may be a bit more difficult to find.

Mail & Package Services

The post office handles mail, package and money-transfer services. Little English is spoken in smaller post offices, but in the larger ones you should be able to find someone who can help.

EMS is used for international mail and is typically reliable and efficient (http://www.post.japanpost.jp/int/ems/index_en.html).

Newspapers & Magazines

There are three daily English-language newspapers: *The Japan Times*, *The Daily Yomiuri* and the *International Herald Tribune* published in conjunction with (and including several pages from) the English-language *Asahi Shimbun* paper. Papers can be found in bookshops and hotels, as well as at train and subway stations. These papers also feature daily inserts from leading newspapers from around the world, such as *The Washington Post* and *The Times* (London).

Japanzine, a magazine available free in many hotels, airport lounges and bookstores, offers some useful entertainment information for the major cities. *Outdoor Japan*, available from many airport lounges, outdoor stores and some bookstores, offers traveling information focused on Japan's countryside.

Nagoya city has the *NagMag*, printed by *Japanzine*. Tokyo visitors can keep up-to-date with weekly events through *Metropolis* magazine. Tourists in Osaka can read about what's on in *Kansai Scene*, a monthly publication. Most locations have some information available at the local station or information center, and often in English.

Transportation

In a small island nation with a large population, getting people to their destinations is a considerable challenge but one the Japanese have met in typical fashion. Most major cities have very efficient public transportation systems, and Tokyo's complex of trains, subways and bus routes is nothing short of phenomenal.

In 2011 Japan's already speedy bullet train collection welcomed a new addition—the E5 Series. The latest *shinkansen* will be the top speedster running at a maximum of 186 mph/300 kph initially and reaching speeds of 199 mph/320 kph by 2013.

Taxis (very expensive), trains, trolleys (in Hiroshima) and subways can be used to get around within cities (trolleys and subways are color-coded). Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka sell cost-saving bus and subway passes. To save time and shoe leather, try rental bicycles, which are available at some JR train stations.

Air

International and domestic airlines serve Narita International Airport (NRT), which is 41 mi/66 km northeast of Tokyo (phone 476-34-800; <http://www.narita-airport.jp>), and Kansai International Airport (KIX), which is on an island 31 mi/50 km southwest of Osaka (phone 072-455-2500; <http://www.kansai-airport.or.jp>). Tokyo's Haneda Airport (HND), 11 mi/18 km south of the city center, is much more convenient than Narita, and recently opened an international terminal (phone 03-5757-8111; <http://www.tokyo-airport-bldg.co.jp>).

Osaka's Itami Airport (ITM), 10 mi/16 km northwest of the city, also offers flights within Japan (phone 6856-6781; <http://www.osaka-airport.co.jp>). In 2009, the Mount Fuji Shizuoka Airport opened in Shizuoka. The airport runs domestic flights and international flights to nearby countries (<http://www.mtfuji-shizuokaairport.jp>). Nippon Airlines and Japan Airlines offer frequent connections between major Japanese cities.

Narita Airport can be baffling (especially if you've just arrived after a long flight), and it's also at least an hour from Tokyo. The easiest way to get to and from the city is to take an airport limousine bus (about ¥2,400-¥3,000) or the Narita Express train. The bus will drop you at any of a number of places in the city, and the train will take you to Tokyo Station, Shinjuku Station, Shibuya Station, Ikebukuro Station or farther out to Yokohama. Check the schedule before boarding as not all trains stop at all stops.

The private Keisei Line links Narita with Nippori and Ueno stations. It takes just under 40 minutes on this line to get from Nippori to Terminal 2 and costs ¥2,400. If you're going to use a Japan Rail Pass while you're in the country, you can start using it for the Narita Express at no extra charge. Activate the pass at the Japan Railways office at the airport and make sure you have a reservation for the train. Don't take a cab into Tokyo unless you want to spend ¥20,000-¥30,000.

If you arrive at Kansai Airport, the quickest and least expensive way into Osaka is by the private Nankai Railway, which deposits you at the Namba subway station in 30 minutes (about ¥1,390 for a reserved seat). To get to Kyoto, it's best to take the JR Haruka Express. It takes about 75 minutes and costs ¥2,980-¥4,220. Both trains leave from the station directly opposite the airport terminal.

Bus

City buses usually charge a low flat fare but may be challenging to use if you don't speak the language.

Long haul overnight "highway" buses are a comfortable alternative for long-distance travel between major cities, and as the companies running these buses cater to tourists you'll be able to find information in English. Make reservations for these buses at a travel agency or direct through the company. Reputable companies include Willer Express (<http://willerexpress.com>) and JR Bus (<http://www.jrbuskanto.co.jp>).

Car

You can get around via rented car (with or without driver), but it's not advisable to drive yourself on your first visit: You may not be used to driving on the left, and you'll find that traffic laws differ from those elsewhere. Road tolls are also very high, and in the central city it is unlikely that your hotel will offer parking. You will need an International Driving Permit in order to drive in Japan.

Ship

There are very good coastal steamships sailing between Japan's main islands.

Train

Excellent rail service is available to points throughout the country. The tiers of classes and services offered for trains can be baffling, so we recommend buying a Japan Rail Pass *before you leave home* to prevent confusion and to save time and money. Don't assume the high-speed bullet train (*shinkansen*) will get you where you want to go fastest; the bullet to Yokohama drops you off on the outskirts of town, so if you're heading for the city center, other trains will be faster. (On the other hand, the Tokyo-Osaka run takes less than three hours, while regular trains take up to 12).

Note that the Japan Rail Pass is only valid on JR lines and will not be accepted on the many smaller, privately run lines in suburban areas

For More Information

Tourist Offices

Japan National Tourist Organization has tourist information centers (TIC) in the larger cities. It also provides information on accommodations as well as a complimentary hotel-reservation service (Welcome Inn Reservation Center). <http://www.jnto.go.jp>.

Tokyo head office: Tokyo Kotsu Kaikan Building. 10th Floor, 2-10-1 Yurakucho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo. Phone

03-3201-3331. Fax 03-3201-3347. Open daily 9 am-5 pm. Closed national holidays and 29 December-3 January.

Narita Airport Terminal 1: Arrival Floor 1, Passenger Terminal 1 Building, New Tokyo International Airport, Chiba. Phone 0476-30-3383. Open daily 8 am-8 pm, year-round.

Narita Airport Terminal 2: Arrival Floor 1, Passenger Terminal 2 Building, New Tokyo International Airport, Chiba. Phone 0476-34-6251. Open daily 8 am-8 pm, year-round.

Kansai Tourist Information Center: 1F Passenger Terminal Building, Kansai International Airport, Phone 0724-56-6025. Open daily 8:30 am-8:30 pm, year-round.

Kyoto City Tourist Information: JR Kyoto Station, Ninth Floor, Shimogyo-ku, Kyoto-shi, Phone 075-344-3300. Open 10 am-6 pm daily, closed second and fourth Tuesday of the month and on New Year holidays.

Canada: Japan National Tourist Organization, 481 University Ave., Suite 306, Toronto, ON M5G 2E9. Phone 416-366-7140. Fax 416-366-4530. <http://www.ilovejapan.ca>.

U.S.: Japan National Tourist Organization, 111 W. 42nd St., 19th Floor, New York, NY 10036. Phone 212-757-5640. Fax 212-307-6754. <http://www.japantravelinfo.com>. There is also an office in Los Angeles.

Japanese Embassies

Canada: Embassy of Japan, 255 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, ON K1N 9E6. Phone 613-241-8541. Fax 613-241-2232. <http://www.ca.emb-japan.go.jp>. There are also consulates in Calgary, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

U.S.: Embassy of Japan, 2520 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20008. Phone 202-238-6700. Fax 202-328-2187. <http://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp>. There are also consulates in Hagatna (Guam), Anchorage, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Honolulu, Houston, Los Angeles, Nashville, New York, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle.

Foreign Embassies in Japan

Canadian Embassy, 7-3-38 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-8503. Phone 5412-6200. Fax 5412-6289. <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca>.

U.S. Embassy, 1-10-5 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-8420. Phone 3224-5000. Fax 3505-1862. <http://japan.usembassy.gov>. There are also consulates in Fukuoka, Nagoya, Naha, Osaka and Sapporo.

Recommended Guidebooks

To Japan with Love: A Travel Guide for the Connoisseur by Celeste Heiter (Things Asian Press).

Tokyo City Atlas: A Bilingual Guide (Kodansha International).

Additional Reading

Green Tea to Go: Stories from Tokyo by Leza Lowitz (Printed Matter Press).

The Japan Journals: 1947-2004 by Donald Richie (Stone Bridge Press).

Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei by David Mura (Grove Press). This memoir of a Japanese-American who went to live in Japan is a personal exploration of the differences between the two cultures.

What's What in Japanese Restaurants: A Guide to Ordering, Eating and Enjoying by Robb Satterwhite (Kodansha International).

Japanese Etiquette and Ethics in Business by Boye De Mente (McGraw Hill).

