

PLANNING A TRIP TO JAPAN

**A collection of ideas and inspiration
from TheRealJapan.com**



**EXPANDED
SECOND EDITION**

Rob Dyer

Planning A Trip To Japan

by Rob Dyer

TheRealJapan.com

Second Edition

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About The Author



I'm Rob Dyer.

I have been exploring Japan since 2000, and yet I still feel like I have only seen the tip of the iceberg of this amazing country.

I started [TheRealJapan.com](https://www.TheRealJapan.com) in 2015 to share my passion for travelling in Japan. It's where I share inspiration, advice and resources for anyone looking to explore Japan beyond the cliches. Hopefully encouraging you to set off on your Japanese adventures.

My wife is Japanese, and we were married in a Shinto ceremony in Japan. We now split our time between Japan and England - my home country.

I also create guides, resources and books like this one. Pleased to meet you. Or as we say in Japan, *hajimemashite!*

Think of me as your online Japan travel buddy.

If you find this book useful, then I'd really appreciate it if you shared your thoughts with your Twitter followers or Facebook friends using the hashtag #TheRealJapan.

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Introduction

Welcome to this collection of articles from the Planning Hub of TheRealJapan.com.

Whether you're planning your first trip to Japan or your tenth, this guide will get you started on your journey.

Anyone can plan a trip... just choose 2 or 3 destinations and hope for the best. Right?

Well, only if you want to return home regretting all the things you didn't know about, could have done but missed entirely.

In this book you'll learn everything from the basics, to expert advice. From the most common mistakes to avoid when planning a trip to Japan, essential etiquette when travelling, through to sample five-day and two-week itineraries, and heading off the beaten path into The Real Japan.

Thinking of experiencing Japan's incredible sakura display of cherry blossoms in the spring? Or maybe you want to witness the stunning autumn colours? Either way, here are the guides that show you how.

If you enjoy this book, please tell your friends, and me, by emailing me here: hello@therealjapan.com.

Let's get started!

- Rob

3 Most Common Mistakes Planning A Trip To Japan

It's easy to make mistakes when planning a trip to Japan, especially if it is your first trip. Over the years, I've seen many people repeating the same errors.

Here, we explore the three most common mistakes people make when planning a trip to Japan. And importantly, how to avoid and overcome them.

The 3 Most Common Mistakes

In my experience there's three that repeatedly crop up. They are:

1. Only planning to visit Tokyo (or Tokyo and Kyoto).
2. Thinking it will be really expensive.
3. Being worried about not being able to speak Japanese.

Let's take a closer look at each of these in turn...

1. Only Planning to Visit Tokyo

Or only planning to visit Tokyo and Kyoto.

Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with going to Tokyo or Kyoto; you'll have a terrific time in both cities. But, if this is all you do, you'll have a very narrow, even distorted view of what is an incredibly diverse country.

Imagine a foreigner visiting only your capital city and how 'representative' of your country as a whole that would be. Not very, I'd bet.



Shinjuku Tokyo fabrizio-chiagano

Tokyo is an incredible city, but plan to explore beyond the capital.

You'll also have the same set of experiences and photos as millions of other 'tourists'. We don't want to be tourists. That's not good enough for us.

By all means, fly in and out of Tokyo, that makes *plenty* of sense. And using it as a base for a few days at the start of your trip is wise. But plan to [travel beyond Tokyo](#) .

During World War II, the Allied forces specifically spared bombing Kyoto because of its cultural heritage - so by all means go soak up those glorious temples and shrines!

But also keep some time and money for a few other places that are less well-known. You may find that it's those that provide you with the most indelible experiences and memories of Japan.

TAKEAWAY: Japan is made up of more than 6,800 islands. Trust me, you need to go and see more than two cities.

READ: [Japan - Why You Need To Go Beyond Tokyo](#)



[*Takekomi Island*](#) is a world away from Tokyo and absolutely beautiful.

2. Thinking It Will be Really Expensive

Although it isn't as prevalent as it once was, there's still a persistent misconception that a trip to Japan is going to be really expensive. Like SUPER expensive.

Sure, it's definitely a country where you *could* spend a fortune if you wanted to . And, if you're lucky enough to have one, it would be easy to do so. (And probably a lot of fun too!)

It's not uncommon for people thinking about coming to Japan to get slightly obsessed with this idea of expense. So much so, that people go as far as putting off going to 'save up more money'.



Vending machines are everywhere, providing cheap food and drink. Everything in this machine is just ¥100.

A Big Myth About Visiting Japan

Putting off your trip to Japan because you think:

- It will simply be too expensive,
- or at least more than you can currently afford,
- or take you too long to save for the trip,
- or maybe you have other less expensive priorities

One of the biggest myths about Japan is that any trip there will inevitably be seriously expensive. It need not be so.

Eating Cheaply in Japan

Eating out, either in restaurants, takeaway places, at food stalls, etc. can be cheaper than in many Western countries. You can easily get lunch (including a drink) for around ¥980 (about \$8.70 or £7), dinner and a drink for ¥1,400 (\$12.50 or £10) - sometimes even cheaper.

Look for *kaiten-zushi* (conveyor belt sushi) places*. These use a simple system of colour coded plates. With each colour representing a price. So at a glance you can see how much each item costs and, as your empty plates stack up, how much you're spending.

*Not a fan of sushi? No problem - most *kaiten-zushi* restaurants also offer noodles and fried chicken.



Kaiten-zushi, conveyor belt sushi restaurants, can be good sources of quality food at very reasonable prices.

Better still, some *kaiten-zushi* places have their dishes at one fixed price, sometimes as low as ¥100/¥150. These are great places to eat good quality fresh food at bargain prices.

Use Japan's famous convenience stores (aka *konbini*). They are particularly handy for food. Some have hot food counters or even kitchens where you can get snacks and meals for just a few hundred yen. Some stores have a seating area so you can eat it there.

Food available changes with the seasons and includes classics like hot, pork-filled buns in winter for about ¥100, or year-round fried chicken for around ¥300.

Travel Cheaply by Subway and Train

There are many [regional area passes](#) covering trains and subways, offering unlimited travel within fixed periods, offering good value for money.

If it's convenience you're after then ordering a [Suica pass in advance](#) (and pick on arrival at the airport) can be handy.

Suica is a pay-as-you-go card that can be topped up as needed, offering cashless convenience when travelling on trains, subways and buses and when shopping at stores, kiosks, or vending machines. There's [more about Suica and other easy travel tips in this article](#).



Suica cards

Getting a [Suica pass in advance](#) makes travel a lot simpler.

Seishun 18 Ticket

There's also a special rail ticket - the *Seishun 18 Kippu* (ticket). That will get you from Tokyo to the southern island of Kyushu by a series of local trains for an incredible ¥2,410 per day.

That's 883km as the crow flies or approximately 1,200km by rail, meaning with the *Seishun* ticket you'd be paying just ¥10 / 9¢ / 7p per kilometre to travel! The catch? You can only use local and rapid JR trains (no bullet trains here), so while it is really cheap, it isn't suitable if you're in a hurry.

The *Seishun 18 Kippu* is not available year round, but three times annually, coinciding with Japanese school holidays:

Season	Valid	On Sale
Spring	March 1 - April 10	February 20 - March 31
Summer	July 20 - September 10	July 1 - August 31
Winter	December 10 - January 10	December 1 - December 31

Price and Availability

Seishun 18 Kippu tickets cost ¥12,050 each and can be bought at most JR stations throughout Japan.

More details on the Seishun 18 (in English) can be found on the [JREast website here](#).

A helpful way to think about the cost of travelling in Japan is to focus on value for money. In all aspects of travel, this is something Japan excels at delivering. Whatever your price range. And, when it comes to value for money, few services offer more bang for your buck than the Japan Rail Pass.

Low Cost Flying

There are also a good number of low cost airlines operating in Japan.

Internal flights with them can often work out cheaper than travelling by bullet train. For more information on using these [read our guide to low cost airlines in Japan here](#) .

Budget Accommodation

If you believe accommodation in Japan is always expensive - don't worry - it isn't.

Can you spend a lot of money on accommodation in Japan? Sure you can. But you don't need to.

Here's three cheap accommodation options. Heck, the first one is even free!

Couchsurfing

Price Per Person, Per Night: FREE!

[Couchsurfing in Japan](#)

Hostels

Price Per Person, Per Night: ¥ 1,000+

[Youth Hostels in Japan](#)

Capsule Hotels

Price Per Person, Per Night: ¥ 2,500+

[Capsule Hotels in Japan](#)

Minshuku (Japanese B&B)

Price Per Person, Per Night: ¥ 3,000+

[Minshuku in Japan](#)



A traditional style minshuku I stayed in, [Ainokura village](#) , Gokayama

Giving some [thought in advance](#) to what you want to get out of your trip to Japan will help with managing costs.

Think about things such as the kind of experiences you want, how long you can visit, where you will stay, how you'll get around etc.

TAKEAWAY: Japan isn't the cheapest country, but there are bargains and savings to be had - if you plan ahead.

READ: [How To Plan a Trip To Japan In Just 4 Steps](#)

3. Worrying About Not Speaking Japanese

Being worried about not speaking Japanese - and sometimes using that as an excuse for not booking that trip to Japan just yet. I've even heard of people not coming to Japan until they've learned Japanese!

Worried about not being able to speak any Japanese? Or concerned that what little Japanese you do know won't ever be enough to get you by in Japan, especially if you want to go off the beaten track a little and do some exploring?

Are you really putting off planning that dream trip of a lifetime because you don't speak the language?

I bet you've not done that too many other times going to foreign countries, where the primary language isn't English?



A restaurant menu. Don't expect English to be everywhere. But don't panic either.

Too much fuss is made of being unable to speak Japanese when travelling in Japan. But I also appreciate that many people get anxious about this.

Not least, as you don't want to be a 'bad' tourist and turn up expecting everyone to speak your own language. I can still only speak a little Japanese. But I don't let that stop me going off to explore on my own.

It's a myth that if you cannot speak Japanese you won't get far in Japan, or your experiences will have to be curtailed as a result, or you cannot go off the tourist trail.

None of this is true.

How to Travel In Japan When You Don't Speak Japanese

I've covered the issue in depth in an article entitled, not surprisingly, "[How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)" - go read it.

When it comes to the capital Tokyo, the larger cities and other big or popular tourist destinations, the non-Japanese speaker will probably fare just fine. Particularly if you are travelling on public transport.

I've also written a guidebook to travelling in Japan when you don't speak the language. You can [read more about that here](#) .

Using public transport in Japan is probably a lot easier than you think and train station and station navigation signs are frequently written in English.

In the more familiar tourist locations, train station signs and announcements are also in English. Scrolling information screens on all shinkansen (bullet trains) and announcements are in English as well as Japanese.

Even when you're heading off the beaten track a little, provided you arm yourself with a few survival phrases, a translation app, some pre-trip planning to tackle the most common sticking points, you'll get by just fine.



How to Travel in Japan Without
Speaking Japanese

TAKEAWAY: *Don't let being unable to speak Japanese be a barrier to coming to Japan.*

READ: [How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

Resources

Further Reading

[Japan - Why You Need To Go Beyond Tokyo](#)

[How to travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

[A Complete List of Low Cost Airlines in Japan](#)

[How To Plan a Trip To Japan In Just 4 Steps](#)

[Guide Book: *How to travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese*](#)

Cheap Accommodation

[Couchsurfing in Japan](#)

[Youth Hostels in Japan](#)

[Capsule Hotels in Japan](#)

[Minshuku in Japan](#)

The Real Japan's Travel Planning Services

[Travel Planning Call](#)

[Travel Planning Service](#)

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How I Plan Trips To Japan



Traditional 'gassho-zukuri' farmhouses in Shirakawa, Gifu Prefecture

When it comes to planning independent travel to Japan, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

That's why starting with a clear idea of what you want to get out of your travels, and then shaping those ideas into a well-designed travel plan, according to a few simple steps, is crucial if you want to consistently enjoy exceptional travel, trip after trip.

There are a couple of well-known phrases I think apply to travel planning: American writer Benjamin Franklin's "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail", and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's "He who fails to plan is planning to fail".

When it comes to travel planning, they do kind of have a point. When you start out, there can be dozens of questions that need answering when trip planning...

- How long should we travel for?
- Where will we go?
- How much do we need to budget?
- What type of accommodation should we focus on?
- What are the essential things to do?
- Can we do it all by ourselves, or should we book some guided trips?

Figuring Out What You Want

Japan is a wonderful country with countless attractions, but it can be difficult to plan the perfect trip. In order to create your ideal itinerary, you need to filter through all those ideas you've been bookmarking for months, if not years, on end.

Sometimes it can be hard to precisely figure out what you really want to do, and if you're planning the trip solo, it can be even more challenging. And you need a way of doing it that doesn't amount to 6 months staring relentlessly at your laptop and phone screens.

So, since I've been travelling in Japan for decades, I thought it might be helpful if I shared with you how I plan my trips to Japan.

Now, with technology and apps providing instant access to information, it isn't essential to plan travel in such detail as we once did. But some people, my wife and I included, still enjoy doing this.

If you're the methodical type, someone who doesn't mind delving into the detail, then you'll probably already be doing some or all of what I am. On the other hand, maybe you're someone who doesn't enjoy spending months on research, and would appreciate just a handful of key things to think about and steps to take.

Or maybe you're somewhere in between? Wherever you are in that range, I thought it might be helpful if I shared with you my approach so that you might get some new or extra insights into my travel planning. And that maybe you can use and apply some of this in your own trip planning.

The 5 Key Stages of Travel

To consistently experience exceptional and stress-free travel, my approach to travel is to consciously recognise that there are several distinct stages to travel. And that being aware of each step up front helps me position my mindset and complete the tasks required at each stage.

The 5 key stages of travel are...

1. Dreaming
2. Planning
3. Booking
4. Experiencing
5. Reflecting

Stages 1 and 2 are the most time-consuming.

Some people really enjoy stages 1 and 2. Others find them a chore. A potentially never ending series of problems to solve, that just get in the way of the fun bit of actually travelling.

Stage 3 is largely a necessity.

It's the one where you turn your ideas into concrete plans.

Stage 4 is the fun part.

And stage 5 is the most overlooked, but, as we'll see, one of the most important.

Let's take a closer look at what each of these 5 stages are, and see how you can apply them when planning your next trip into The Real Japan.

Stage 1: Dreaming 夢想する (Musou suru)

Sometimes dreams are just that, they're dreams. To turn them into reality, you need to have some kind of plan, with tangible steps. Only then will your travel dreams become real, unforgettable experiences and memories.

Dreaming is the best part of travel planning. You want to get away. You're motivated. You start searching for things like destinations, seasons, duration, and experiences.



Taikodani Inari Shrine, Tsuwano, Shimane Prefecture

If you're anything like me, it's also the most *visual* stage. Meaning you'll be watching videos, reading travel blogs, swiping through hundreds and hundreds of amazing-looking photos of places that you can't wait to visit, and food you just have to eat.

I find watching films set in Japan and documentaries (about any aspect of the country, not just travel), can be an abundant source of inspiration at this starting phase.

At some moment during the Dreaming stage, you'll reach a tipping point and realise that it's time to start making a travel plan. Which takes us onto Stage 2.

I think of this as the 'Vision' stage.

Stage 2: Planning 計画する (Keikaku suru)

After the sheer joy of the Dreaming stage, honestly, the Planning stage can sometimes feel like a bit of a slog.

You want to do it, but you don't want to do all of it at once. You turn to [the most trusted resources you know](#), to hopefully make the process a bit more manageable and, frankly, more enjoyable than it can often be.

The thing about the Planning stage is that it is full of yet-to-be-answered questions: how? when? where? what? how much? Which is part of the reason that Planning is usually the longest stage by some margin.

The Goal of The Planning Stage

The goal at the Planning stage is to research your options, manage the overwhelm of possibilities and begin organising. Narrowing down your options. **This will be an iterative process and it will take time. Do not attempt to rush this stage.** If you do, you'll only be doing yourself and your potential future memories a disservice.



Tsumago, a Nakasendo Way post town in the Kiso Valley, Nagano Prefecture

Here, the general browsing of the Dreaming stage turns into something altogether more targeted. Online, you'll start looking more closely at websites dedicated to the specific kind of travel in Japan you are most interested in. Specifically, [YouTube](#) and [personal travel blogs](#) can be a mine of information about possible destinations and things to do.

Your search terms will include words like flights, hotels, trips, activities, restaurants, experiences, tours, etc. You'll probably be diving deeper into your favourite social media for ideas and inspiration. Offline, maybe you'll [buy a couple of Japan travel guides](#), or borrow them from a library.

Don't expect to complete this stage quickly. At least, not if you're doing your planning correctly. And don't worry if your energy feels sapped along the way. After the highs of the Dreaming stage, that is to be expected.

I think of this as the 'Consideration' stage.

Stages 1 and 2 are the most time consuming. If you want to speed that stuff up, with the aim of getting to the Experiencing stage quicker, why not [take a look at my travel planning services](#). If you want more on what websites and resources I use when I'm planning, check out my [Planning Travel Hub](#).

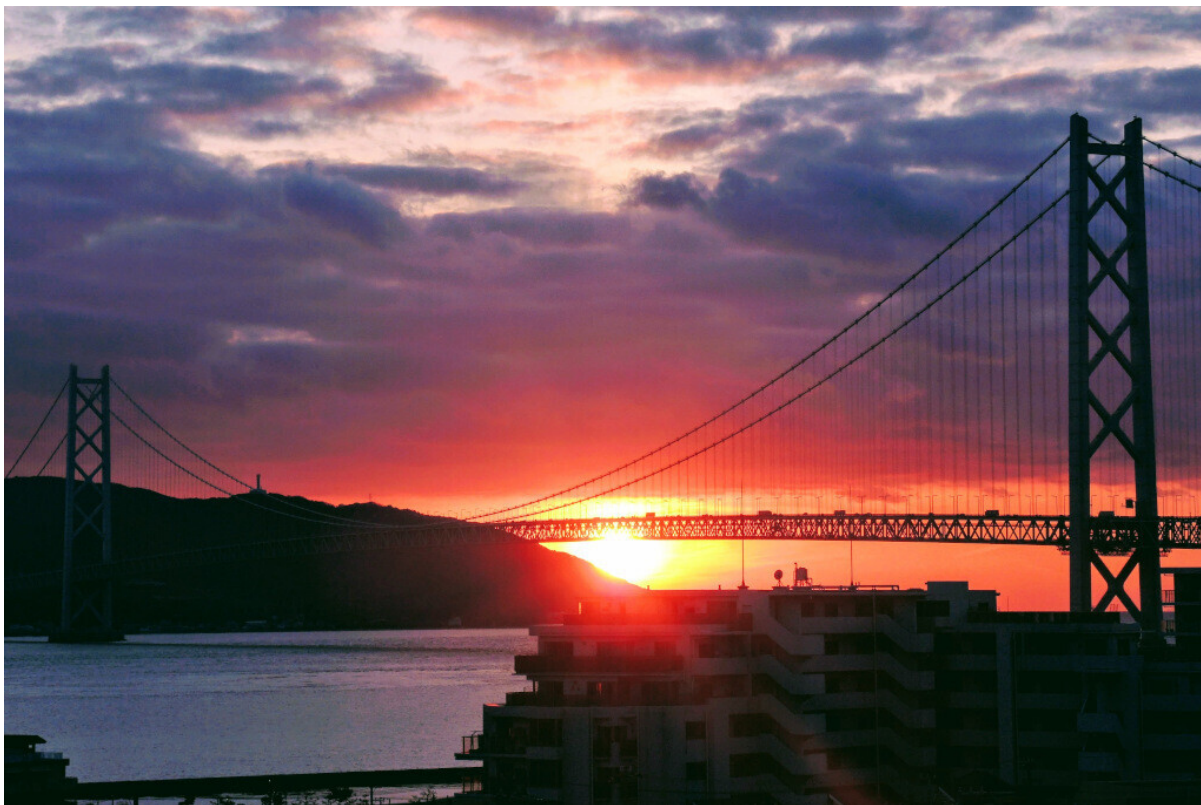
RELATED: [38 Japan Travel Sites and Resources Every Traveller Should Know](#)

Stage 3: Booking 予約する (Yoyaku suru)

This is the phase where those dreams you started with all those months ago begin to become reality. After what can sometimes feel like the protracted hard work of Planning, the Booking stage is the shortest of our 5 stages. It's the point at which research turns to action.

A lot of progress is made at this stage.

Now you're getting closer to your actual journey, and your spirits are given a boost once again.



Akashi Kaikyo Bridge at sunset, Akashi, Hyogo Prefecture

Working from the various shortlists you made during the Planning stage, you'll now be reviewing, choosing and deciding on which options to actually book. From flights, to accommodation, to experiences, right through to the practical stuff, including things like [Japan Rail Passes](#), [WiFi rental](#), SIM cards and so on.

Again, to help speed up the lengthy 'vetting process' at this stage for you, I suggest [bookmarking my Recommended Japan Travel Resource page](#), where I've done the groundwork on all the above options for you.

Your time online is focused on the booking platforms, be they direct with the suppliers (such as airlines, hotels, train companies, resorts, restaurants, etc.) or through aggregators (like [Skyscanner](#), [Booking.com](#), [Klook](#), [Voyagin](#), [byFood](#), etc.).

This is the 'Let's book it!' stage.

Stage 4: Experiencing 体験する (Taiken suru)

This is the big one! The one all our hard-earned efforts to date have been working towards. Your dream trip to The Real Japan really starts here.

This fourth stage is itself a journey. It starts with the days directly prior to travelling when you finally get to pack those cases. Then you're on your way to and arriving at your destination.



Kirishima Shinto shrine, Kagoshima Prefecture

Once you've arrived your adventure begins. You can't wait to explore everything you have planned and, hopefully you've allowed spare time for serendipity to introduce you to places and encounters no amount of pre-planning would have unearthed.

Here's where you get to make the best of the time you have available.

Now you can dip back into [your final shortlist of bookmarks and saved online resources](#) and efficiently look for those spur-of-the-moment things to do that are near you today, tonight and tomorrow.



Eating delicious Japanese food is a big part of visiting Japan for many travellers

You'll probably be making greater use of specific apps, maps and restaurant booking sites. Maybe, if you're like me, you'll have brought a couple of your favourite travel guides with you, along with notes on individual places, [cafes](#), walks, [restaurants](#), neighbourhoods, [museums](#), etc. they mention.

It's now that you benefit from all the hard work that has gone before. Now you're truly living in the moment. Travel is deeper, easier and your experiences richer and more rewarding - because you have a plan of travel.

I call this the 'memory creation' stage.

Want some more inspiration for things to do in Japan? [Check out my Experiences Travel Hub](#).

RELATED: [Top 10 Most Popular Activities In Japan](#)

Stage 5: Reflecting 振り返る (Furikaeru)

This is the stage most people never consider. It's not the 'forgotten' stage, rather that people usually aren't even consciously aware that there is even a stage *after* Experiencing. But there is, and it's an important one. Here's why...

It starts with the journey back home. When the physical act of travelling itself can feel its most perfunctory and mundane. Most of us feel an emotional dip after such euphoric highs of the Experience stage. (*Though it often feels good to be home, back in your own bed once more.*)

However, **no sooner are you home than the final phase of travel kicks in.** Nostalgia, remembering and reminiscing.



Kabira Bay, Ishigaki, Yaeyama Islands, Okinawa Prefecture

This is also a time to share. Share your experiences and memories with friends and family.

Such discussions will spark questions from those you're sharing with and, you know what, you won't have answers to all of them. That's when *you'll* inherit some of *their* questions and make them the basis for future exploration and to seek answers.

You may create an online gallery of your favourite photos and video clips. You may even be inspired to start a blog to share your journeys with people all over the planet. People you've never met, but inspire to make their own plans to broaden their travel horizons. :-)

The Reflecting stage is where we show (and share) our gratitude for what we have been fortunate enough to have experienced.

It's for these reasons **the Reflecting stage is all about gratitude.**

Live, Learn, Apply, Repeat

Of course, like any other irrepressible traveller, once you've completed all 5 stages of travelling, you'll already be brimming with ideas of places to go and things to do next time.



Super Mario characters welcoming you at Kansai International Airport, Osaka

You've lived through some incredible experiences and probably learned a few lessons along the way. Lessons that you can apply to further improve your future travel plans.

The seeds of that next trip are already taking root.

You (and I) know it won't be long before dreaming about that next journey into The Real Japan starts again. I wish you well on your travels my friend!

Resources

My List of Recommended Japan Travel Resources

[Resources](#)

My Travel Planning Services

[The Real Japan Travel Planning Services](#)

My Collection of Planning Guides And Resources

[Planning A Trip To Japan](#)

More Planning Resources

[Planning Travel Hub](#)

More Destination Ideas

[Destinations Travel Hub](#)

More Experience Ideas

[Experiences Travel Hub](#)

Suggested Further Reading

[5 Essential Things You Need BEFORE You Come To Japan](#)

[38 Japan Travel Sites and Resources Every Traveller Should Know](#)

[How To Plan A Trip To Japan In Just 4 Steps](#)

[How And Why To Think Differently About Travel](#)

[Top 7 Etiquette Tips For Travel In Japan](#)

[The Real Japan Travel Store](#)

Top 7 Etiquette Tips For Travel in Japan

Japanese society is known for its politeness, which is why knowing a few key etiquette tips for travel in Japan can be really helpful.

Its many etiquette rules can be daunting to anyone planning to visit Japan.

Don't Be That Loud Foreigner

While there's no need to get overly anxious about making social faux pas, no one should put their foot in it if it can be easily avoided.

There's a phrase in Japan that *gaijin* (foreigners) are often given a 'gaijin pass' to make mistakes. People will be understanding. However, observing a few key customs will help you blend in with the locals.

The subject is so extensive that there are [several books available](#) on the topic. But, for starters, here's our Top 7 Etiquette Rules to follow in Japan...

#1 Be Considerate And Blend In

Attempting to blend in with the locals in will always be welcomed in Japan

Japanese society often means foregoing some personal expression so as not to stand out. The Japanese have a saying: "*The nail that stands out must be hammered down*".



[Etiquette in Japan \(8\)](#)

Many people do not speak while using public transport, even if they are travelling with friends or family members. If you do speak, do so quietly so as not to disturb other passengers.

Many people do not speak while using public transport

Few things make me wince more inside, than seeing a loud foreign tourist, stomping about, gesticulating wildly, practically shouting as they speak.

Don't be that loud foreigner who stands out!

Be considerate of others (surely something we all do everyday anyhow?) and try to blend in as much as possible. Using this as a general guiding principle will serve you well on your travels in Japan.

#2 Removing Shoes Indoors



[Etiquette in Japan \(2\)](#)

Remove shoes when entering homes, hotel rooms, restaurants, changing rooms

Bowing aside, perhaps Japan's best-known custom is removing footwear when entering a home.

The same also applies in traditional-style restaurants, hotel rooms, ryokan ([Japanese inns](#)), minshuku (Japanese B&Bs) and onsen ([hot springs](#)). You should also take off your shoes before entering a changing room in clothing stores.

Japanese culture makes a clear distinction between *soto* (outside) and *uchi* (inside), and this is where this custom originates.

Often you'll exchange your outside footwear to indoor slippers. This is done at the *genkan* - an area directly inside the entrance, designed as the place where external footwear is removed and left.

This is probably the main social faux pas that (even the very polite) Japanese will actually pick you up on. Whether in private or in public. Don't sweat it if someone does point out your error. You won't be the first, or last to do it.

#3 Using Chopsticks



There's a lot of etiquette involved when it comes to using chopsticks.

Here are three essential chopstick manners to get your started:

1. Don't place your chopsticks vertically in your rice/food (this is a funeral ritual).
2. Don't pass food using your chopsticks to someone else's chopsticks.
3. Don't point with your chopsticks, or use them to pull dishes towards you.

Number 2 on the list is frowned upon also because it relates to funeral rites. When a person is cremated in Japan (as virtually all are) mourners pick up bones of the deceased with chopsticks and pass them into an urn. The act of passing food with your chopsticks is seen as resembling this.

If you struggle to use chopsticks simply ask for a knife and fork or a spoon. Many restaurants and izakaya will have them. Some modern Japanese dishes are even sometimes served with a spoon.

No-one will be offended if you need a bit of cutlery assistance when dining.

#4 There Is No Tipping!



Photo: [Jasmin777](#) from [Pixabay](#)

In Japan there is no such thing as tipping.

(No more trying to remember what percentage you are supposed to tip!)

Don't make the mistake of trying to tip, thinking you are being extra considerate. You are more likely to offend the person you're offering the tip to.

A (Little-Known) Tipping Exception

There is a little-known exception to the 'no-tipping' rule.

When you're on a guided tour (such as a one-day coach trip), it is acceptable to tip your guide at the end of the tour if you especially enjoyed it. A modest monetary gesture is fine. If you're unsure how much - then see what the locals are tipping and judge by that.

#5 Using A Phone In Public



tore-f-3K-82WaqJ3I-unsplash

Photo: [Tore F](#) on [Unsplash](#)

It's not the done thing to talk on the phone when using public transport. Don't be surprised if staff ask you to stop. It's fine to use it to play games (provided the sound is off), browse the web, check your messages, etc.

On Japan's shinkansen bullet trains, you'll see signs in the carriages asking you to take and make calls only in the vestibules between cars, or in designated areas.

Don't watch videos or listen to music out loud in public

Using phones in restaurants or cafes is considered impolite and inconsiderate of others. If you must make or take a call, step outside to do it.

Don't watch videos or listen to music out loud in public.

#6 Don't Eat And Walk On The Street



DSC_0287

A friend and I munching on Minion donuts in [Universal Studios Japan](#)

Although you do see people sometimes eating on the street in front of yatai (street food stalls), walking along and eating or drinking is a no-no.

Don't eat or drink on public transport. However, on long distance journeys eating ekiben ('station bento') boxed meals on bullet trains is considered a part of the experience - so enjoy it.

Eating outside within the grounds of theme parks (like I am doing in the photo above, taken at [Universal Studios Japan](#)) is also fine.

#7 Learn Some Japanese



[Etiquette in Japan \(3\)](#)

Even if you can't speak Japanese, it's often easy to get the gist of public information signs

Don't expect that most people in Japan will be able to speak English. They won't. Besides, it's polite (and easy) to learn at least a few useful Japanese words and phrases.

No one will expect you to be fluent, but any Japanese you do use will show you to be a considerate traveller and be welcomed. Just use whatever Japanese you have - no matter how little that may be.

Don't expect most people in Japan to speak English

Also, the Japanese are particularly adept at [being attuned to the needs of others](#), especially when those in need are customers. It's called *omoiyari*. So even if you can't always express yourself in their language, you can work on the basis that in most instances, the locals will do their best to understand and assist you.

Nevertheless, a small amount of well-chosen Japanese can go a long way during your travels in Japan. If you'd find a reference of 32 key travel-related Japanese words and phrases handy, then [check out my first Japan travel guide](#).

Not being able to speak Japanese is the No.1 concern of most visitors to Japan. Our (most popular) post [How To Travel in Japan \(When You Don't Speak Japanese\)](#) will guide you further on the subject.

Resources

Bookshop Booklist: 5 Books About Etiquette, Customs and Manners in Japan*

<https://bookshop.org/lists/etiquette-customs-and-manners-in-japan>

**Shipping to US + UK customers only*

Amazon Booklist: Etiquette, Customs and Manners in Japan

<https://www.amazon.com/shop/therealjapan?listId=BV4ORP28WGKN>

Japanese Manners Do's and Don'ts (JNTO)

<https://www.japan.travel/en/guide/japanese-manners-dos-and-donts/>

Related Articles

[How To Travel in Japan \(When You Don't Speak Japanese\)](#)

[How The Japanese Anticipate Other People's Needs](#)

[Onsen Tips For Those With Tattoos](#)

[Review: Diary of A Tokyo Teen](#)

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Japan Travel Tips: A Journey Into The Real Japan

I first came to Japan in 2000. Here I share my Japan Travel Tips and lessons from my journey into The Real Japan, advice on must-see places for first-timers, my single biggest travel tip and more.

Love Japan Magazine was a beautiful print publication, with accompanying website and blog, so I was rather chuffed to have been interviewed by them, discussing some of my many adventures in The Real Japan.

Sadly, the magazine and website have since discontinued. So, presented here, with never-before published photos, is that original interview, first published in 2016...



Interview by Emily Lovell

Planning A Trip to Japan

Love Japan Magazine: Could you give us a little overview of who you are, what your blog focuses on?

Rob Dyer: I was born in England and have been fascinated by Japan since I was at school. Reading avidly about the country when I was young. Everything from books about its economy, its cinema (I'm a big film fan), its history and its culture.

Like many others, I immersed myself in anime, for about a decade. I was editing and publishing a fantasy film magazine at the time, called *Dark Star*, just as anime started to take off outside of Japan. All of this drove me to start learning Japanese in the early 90s (I didn't get very far!).

Japanese Pen-Pals & A Shinto Wedding

Before the internet was a part of everyone's daily lives, I had several Japanese pen-pals with whom I corresponded in letter form for several years. One of whom eventually became my wife. :-) We were married at a Shinto ceremony at a shrine in [Kobe](#).

My wife and I were both avid travellers before we met, so it was kind of inevitable that we would go on to explore the lesser-known parts of Japan.



[Ikuta Shrine 2018 February](#)

Ikuta Shrine, Kobe - where my wife and I were married

Knowing we were often in Japan, friends (and friends of friends), were frequently asking for advice and ideas for travelling in Japan - but off the beaten track. So I decided to start a website, to share my experiences and to collect all my travel ideas into one place.

The site provides inspiration and resources to anyone interested in exploring Japan beyond the popular clichés we see in the media.

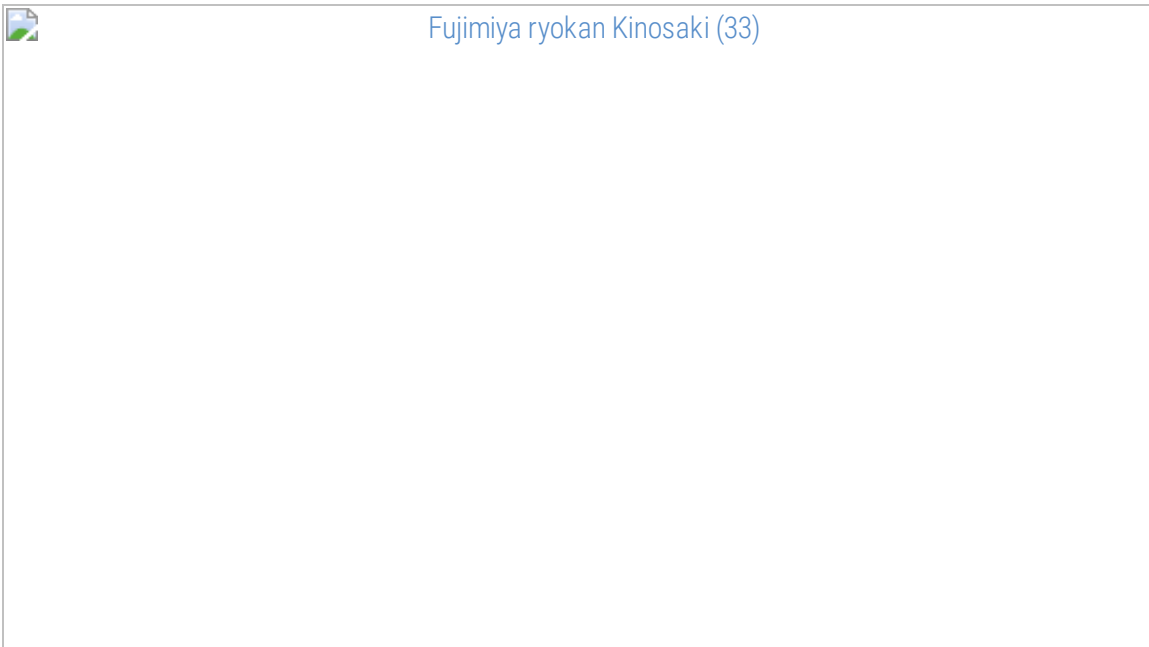
The neon lights of Tokyo and Geisha in [Kyoto](#) are certainly part of The Real Japan, but what interests me is discovering and exploring the hidden, secret Japan. The Japan that sometimes even the locals are unfamiliar with. Style wise I guess it's part travelogue, part guide.

I've also started a Real Japan YouTube channel which people can find [HERE](#).

Compelled To Return

What is it about Japan that has compelled you to return so many times?

Well, my wife is Japanese, so we have family there. Which is obviously part of the reason we spend so much time in the country. As someone born in the UK, I've always seen a lot of similarities between the two countries, but I think the Japanese have managed to achieve the best balance for society as a whole.



Ryokan, traditional Japanese inns, are a must-experience

Both countries are relatively small islands in close proximity to huge continents. Yet they have managed to retain their own, distinctive national identities. Both countries have extensive histories, and are well-known to foreigners for those, and yet both countries embrace modernity. Albeit in different ways.

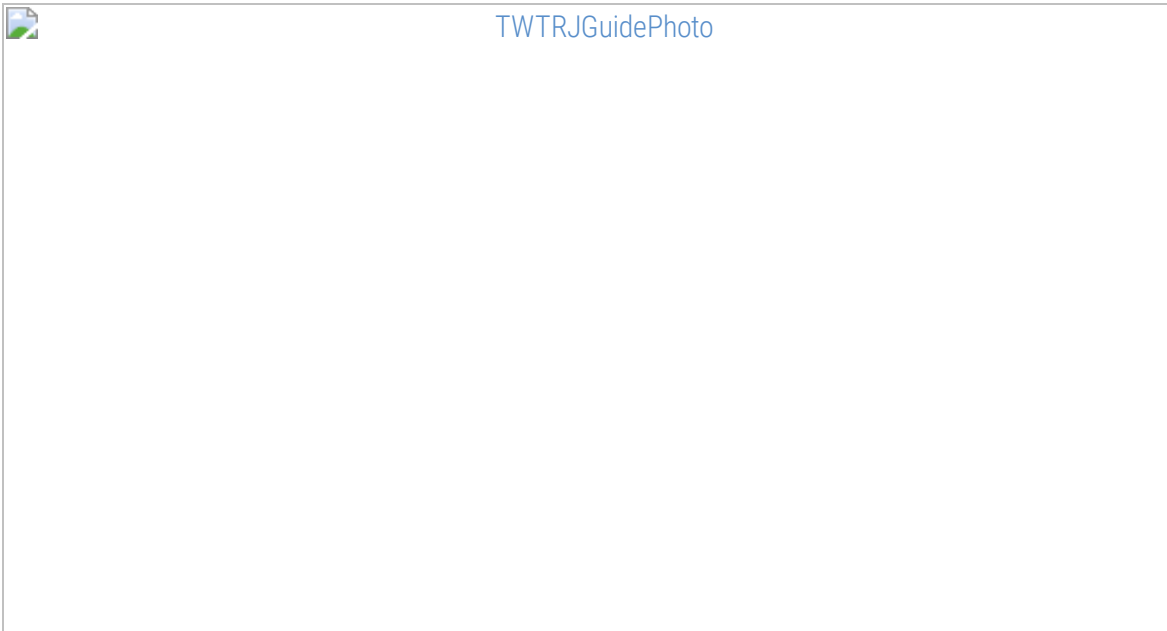
I like travelling in Japan to experience the differences.

[Ryokan, onsen](#), the beautiful [countryside](#) (especially the [mountains and the forests](#)), the cohesiveness of society, the efficiency of [public transport](#), [Japanese customer service](#) and vending machines ;-), are all things that make Japan a wonderful place to be and explore.

Amazing Adventures - Personal Recommendations

You published a free guide called 5 Amazing Adventures in The Real Japan. Can you tell us a bit about that?

I wanted to create a valuable and stylish guide to send to everyone who subscribed to TheRealJapan. So I came up with the idea of [5 Amazing Adventures to experience The Real Japan](#). (Actually there's a bonus sixth adventure included as well.)



Free Guide: 5 Amazing Adventures in The Real Japan

It helps people focus on some of the less obvious but often more rewarding things that can be enjoyed in Japan. The suggestions are spread across several of Japan's main islands. Each includes planning resources, tips on when to go, and links to websites where they can find more information or book the adventures.

Download your [free](#) copy of the 5 Amazing Adventures Guide [HERE](#).

Taiko Drumming on Sado Island

The guide includes all sorts. From joining an ice-breaker ship off the northern coast of Hokkaido (just below Siberia in Russia), having a go at taiko drumming at the [Kodo Drummers](#) cultural centre on Sadoshima, island hopping by bicycle between Awaji and Shikoku, and diving off the coast of Okinawa in the south.



Exploring Sado Island

Crucially, I have been on each of these adventures. They are not based on research, or what other people have done, they are all experiences I have had, and are my personal recommendations.

Favourite Places, Stand-Out Experiences

This may be a tricky question, but do you have any particular favourite places or stand-out experiences from your travel around Japan?

I have a soft spot for Kobe. It is like my home town in Japan and I've gotten to know it intimately over the years.

But in terms of places explored, everywhere I've been in [Kyushu](#) has been very memorable. Particularly the area surrounding the Aso caldera.



[Aso Kuju National Park](#)

Aso Kuju National Park, Kyushu

I tend to gravitate towards the countryside and small towns rather than the cities. Last year we did a [16 day tour of the Chugoku region](#) on the main island of Honshu, taking in the northern and southern coastlines.

Tsuwano: A Picturesque Town Surrounded by Mountains

On the northern side we spent a couple of days in [Tsuwano in Shimane Prefecture](#). A picturesque town in a valley surrounded by forested mountains. It had bags of character. I found it really charming, and I had the best oyakodon I've ever had in a tiny restaurant there.



Taikodani Inari Shrine Tsuwano

Tsuwano, Shimane Prefecture

One of my first visits to Japan was to the northernmost island of [Hokkaido](#). The northerly tip of which lies just below Russia. Much of Hokkaido is designated as national parkland, more than any other prefecture. It's great for adventurous experiences, especially in winter where it regularly gets down to -12 °C.

My first trip there included snowmobile racing on a frozen lake, a helicopter flight and [joining an ice-breaker ship](#) in the ice floes just below Siberia. That was a stand-out few days!

Related: [Reflections on The Mountains of Central Japan](#)

Must See Places For A First Timer

What would be your must-see places for a first timer in Japan on a short vacation?

Make sure wherever you go it includes [staying at least one night in a traditional wooden ryokan](#). Ideally somewhere in the countryside, and make sure it has an onsen. For me, this is perhaps the single most perfect way of experiencing what I think of as The Real Japan.



Fujimiya ryokan Kinosaki (22)
Fujimiya ryokan, Kinosaki Onsen

I'm someone who travels more for experiences, rather than ticking off well-known sights from a list of 'must-see' places. My natural instinct is to say to people that they should think about what sort of memories they would want *after* their vacation, and then plan their trip to accommodate those.

That will better determine where anyone should go rather than me telling them.

Related: [The Best Way to Experience The Real Japan? - Stay In A Ryokan](#)

We are all individuals. But rather than start with a list of places (that most other tourists will also go to), and attempting to tick off as many of those as possible within the time you have, instead ask yourself these three questions:

1.) What experience are you after? The 'what sort of memories would you want' bit I just mentioned. I recommend the [Voyagin](#) website for researching and booking activities and experiences in Japan.

2.) How long can you stay? This will determine how many of the islands you can visit. You should aim to visit at least two.

3.) Where will you stay? Think beyond hotels to include ryokan, minshuku (B&B), temples, even homestay. Airbnb has some very distinctive properties all over Japan and is worth a look. [Booking.com](#) now offers a broad range of accommodation in Japan, not just hotels.

I'd encourage people to use shinkansen (bullet trains) for internal travel where possible. Internal flights (which now can be really cheap) can also be an option. These will enable you to visit as many of Japan's islands as possible, including the 'big five' (from north to south): Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu and [Okinawa](#).



Tanba Sasayama, Hyogo

Do some early pre-trip homework online and/or read your preferred guide book. Based on that research, select a major city and remote town on any of these islands. If you've selected them well, to answer the three questions I mentioned before, you'll come away with some unforgettable memories.

If you need more ideas on how to plan a trip to Japan check out [THIS POST](#).

My Single Biggest Travel Tip

My single biggest tip: [do not only use Tokyo as your base](#) for two weeks or more.

By all means visit Tokyo and stay there for a while. But if you intend using it as your base from which to do day trips for the duration of your trip, you will be severely limiting your experiences and your memories.

Is there anywhere in Japan that you would like to explore, that you haven't visited before?

The list of new places I would like to explore has no end. There are over 6,800 islands that make up Japan - so there are plenty of options!

Exploring Smaller Islands

But, at the moment, the furthest south I've been is to Okinawa. Beyond that are the [Yaeyama and Ryukyu \(Nansei-shoto\) Islands](#). I'd like to explore some of the smaller islands at this end of the southern archipelago.



Sangara Falls Iriomote Yaeyama

Sangara Falls, Iriomote, Yaeyama Islands

Most people are unaware that when you get down to this chain of islands you're actually closer to Taiwan than you are Tokyo. The climate is subtropical in Okinawa, and at the far end of the chain is tropical rain forest.

So this region feels distinctly different from the rest of Japan - I'd like to explore more of that. (Since this interview was published [I have](#).)

About Love Japan

Love Japan was created by fans, for fans of Japanese culture. Put together by a small creative team from London in the UK, all of whom have travelled around Japan, they offer a fusion of East meets West.

Love Japan Magazine issues 1 & 2 were produced as limited edition print magazines, which have since sold out.

Their **Love Japan Blog** was creative, contemporary and colourful, filled with interesting Japan related topics. From travel, food, fashion, and art, to interviews, events, and pop culture.

They had contributors from all over the world.

All of whom had been inspired by Japanese culture in some way, whether it be to take stunning photos, create delicious food, or to travel and experience Japan's unique landscapes. RIP *Love Japan*!

 LoveJapanMag#1

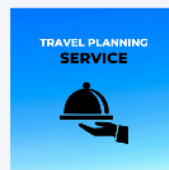
Issue #1 of Love Japan Magazine

You may also like: [AVO Magazine Interview - My First Trip To Japan](#)

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Travel Planning Services

Whether you're planning your first trip or your tenth, my Travel Planning Services make life a lot easier



LEARN MORE

"Insanely effective!"

"This is fantastic"

"It was a priceless experience working with Rob"

"Saved me the cost of his consultation within the first 10 minutes"

Planning A Trip to Japan

Adventures In The Yaeyama Islands



Kabira Bay, Ishigaki

My wife and I are just putting the finishing touches to our first trip to the Yaeyama Islands. They lie at the southwestern most tip of Japan's island chain.

Down here, it is the unspoilt aquamarine seas surrounding islands of jungles and mountains that define the unique character of these sparsely-populated outposts.

The Ryukyu Archipelago

You might not be familiar with the Yaeyama Islands. They're part of the Ryukyu archipelago of islands stretching southwest from Kyushu, all the way down to Taiwan.

The better-known [Okinawa](#) is part of the Ryukyu chain. Well, the Yaeyama Islands lie *beyond* that. Ishigaki, the main administrative island for the group, is a 1 hour flight from Okinawa.

12 main islands make up the group: Aragusuku, Hateruma, Hatoma, Iriomote, Ishigaki, Kayama, Kohama, Kuroshima, Sotobanari, Taketomi, Yonaguni and Yubu.

See: Iriomote, Yubujima and Taketomi Triple Island Tour [HERE](#)

A 3 Hour Flight From Tokyo

To give you some idea of just how remote these subtropical islands are, [Tokyo](#) is a 3 hour flight away at best. While on a clear day Taiwan is visible from Yonaguni Island.

Or, to put it another way, Taiwan is just 67 miles from Yonaguni Island, whilst Tokyo is *more than 1,200 miles* away.



Unspoilt Isolation

If you're looking for unspoilt isolation, beaches, waterfalls, crystal clear seas, mangrove forests, water buffalo pulling wooden carts, tradition, and a culture that's barely changed for hundreds of years, then this is the place for you.

Swimming or diving in the coral reefs found here you'll come across dolphins, sea turtles, manta rays and white sharks.

See: **Mangrove Canoeing and Jungle Trekking on Iriomote** [HERE](#)



Ishigaki Island

See: **Scuba Diving Tour on Ishigaki Island**

Their Own Languages

They even have their own languages - Yonaguni and Yaeyama. Around these parts, Japanese is the *second* language.

They even have their own languages - Yonaguni and Yaeyama

I'll be posting plenty of photos on [social media](#) (and in our [Private Facebook Group](#)) regularly during our trip.

Of course, I'll be writing up our adventures for a full article and shooting plenty of video for our [YouTube channel](#) too.

Browse accommodation in Yaeyama on [Booking.com](#) .

Resources

Yaeyama Islands Tours

Scuba Diving Tour on Ishigaki Island [HERE](#)

Iriomote, Yubujima and Taketomi Triple Island Tour [HERE](#)

Ishigaki Half-Day Snorkeling Tour [HERE](#)

Mangrove Canoeing and Jungle Trekking on Iriomote [HERE](#)

Half-Day Bus Tour of Ishigaki [HERE](#)

Discover more about the Yaeyama Islands [HERE](#)

Browse accommodation in Yaeyama on Booking.com [HERE](#)

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Japanese Inns and Hot Springs: A Guide to Ryokan and Onsen

Kikkaso ryokan in Hakone, Kanagawa Prefecture

Japanese Inns And Hot Springs

Of all the culturally authentic experiences with which one can participate in Japan, there's nothing quite the same as staying in a ryokan - a traditional Japanese inn.

Few others enable you to better understand the soul of The Real Japan.

In their book *Japanese Inns and Hot Springs* (Tuttle), author Rob Goss (an Englishman living in Tokyo) and Japanese photographer Akihiko Seki have brought their respective skills together, curating a fine guide to these wonderful havens.

An Immersive Cultural Experience

Often closely connected to, indeed a part of many ryokan, are onsen - natural hot springs. Which, due to its volcanic nature, Japan has in abundance.

Among the many immersive cultural adventures I've had in my fairly extensive travels in Japan, few can compare with soaking in a steaming hot rotenburo (open-air onsen) at night.

READ: [How To Travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

Preferably high in a mountain forest, as snowflakes gently fall onto one's face, turning to a cold liquid, helping temper the sweat caused by the hot waters.



Award-Winning British Writer Rob Goss

Award-winning British writer Rob Goss has lived in Japan since 1999. His other guidebooks include *Tuttle Travel Pack: Japan*, *Tokyo: Capital of Cool* and *Japan: A Traveler's Companion*.

Having also contributed to books for Fodors, Insight Guides, Dorling Kindersley and Rough Guides, as well as for illustrious magazines like *Time* and *National Geographic Traveler*, few are as well-placed to chronicle this particularly Japanese phenomenon.

Related: [The Best Way to Experience The Real Japan? - Stay In A Ryokan](#)



Japanese_Inns_and_Hot_Springs_CoverMD

Japanese Photographer Akihiko Seki

Teaming Goss up with Japanese photographer Akihiko Seki was an inspired move. Seki focuses his attention on travelling and photography.

He's also a ryokan aficionado, having previously photographed and co-authored *The Japanese Spa: A Guide to Japan's Finest Ryokan and Onsen* in 2005, so again expertly placed to perform the same duties on *Japanese Inns and Hot Springs*.

His previous career working for the Itochu Corporation and Asahi Shimbun International (publisher of Japan's second largest newspaper) has taken him to live in countries all over the globe; giving him a worldly perspective.



[Japanese_Inns_book2](#)

Other previous books published by Tuttle include *Houses and Gardens of Kyoto* and *Asian Resorts*. Seki literally brings an insightful Japanese eye to these often beautiful establishments, providing a native view.

The coming together of these two individuals results in a captivating collection, spanning 216 wonderfully illustrated pages.

40 of the Best Ryokan in Japan

Between them, Goss and Seki have singled out what they consider to be 40 of the best Japanese ryokan and onsen for English-speaking visitors. The list includes 13 in the Tokyo area and 11 in and around the popular tourist destinations of Kyoto and Nara.

Thankfully, there's a good number off the beaten path included for the more adventurous explorers.



A countrywide map and photographic index at the start sets out the locations of all those included.

The three largest islands: Honshu, Hokkaido and Kyushu, are all represented.



[Ginrinsou ryokan](#)

Related: [The Best Way to Experience The Real Japan? - Stay In A Ryokan](#)

It would have been nice to have seen some of the smaller and lesser-known islands included. But at least that leaves scope for a second volume (he says hopefully!).

Ease of Reference

For ease of reference, the ryokan are categorised into five areas: Around [Tokyo](#), [Kyoto](#) & [Nara](#), [Central](#) Japan, [Western](#) & [Southern](#) Japan and [Hokkaido](#) & [Northern](#) Japan. A simple but practical approach, as most readers will want to seek accommodation based on where in the country they want to stay.

All of the entries include a description of the distinguishing features of each ryokan and what is included in your stay. Each one tantalisingly illustrated by Seki's enchanting photographs.



Buy *Japanese Inns and Hot Springs* at [The Real Japan store on Amazon](#)

Whether it be their design and architectural details, the calming zen-like gardens, their unique views across local landscapes, the symmetry of the (usually) traditional rooms, the picture-perfect food served in them or, occasionally, portraits of the owners, the photography perfectly captures the aesthetic appeal of these uniquely Japanese guest houses.

The photography perfectly captures the aesthetic appeal of these uniquely Japanese guest houses.

The Ryokan Experience

Goss opens with a section called 'The Ryokan Experience' - eloquently encompassing everything that is special about these places. If you've yet to stay in a ryokan, you're likely to have committed to doing so after reading this introduction. Staying in a ryokan truly is an *experience*.

One, if you're like me, you'll want to sample as frequently as your travel budget will allow.



Further sections cover the tradition of fine hospitality, historical context, practical advice on how to book a stay and a detailed etiquette guide. For the reader intending to utilise the book as a research tool, it contains all you need to know.

A Quality Guide

This good-looking book is printed on quality paper. With its square format (20.3 x 20.3 cm), this sits nicely between glossy coffee table objet d'art and practical guide that can easily be popped into a bag and taken on the road (and off the beaten path).

Guidebooks to ryokan (and onsen) in English are a rare thing. There are literally hundreds available in Japanese which, if (like me) you can't read Japanese, are a total tease. They *look* wonderful, but you cannot fathom anything of use from the text!

I speak from experience, as we have several Japanese-language guides in our library. So this perfectly helps fill part of that void.

Related: [A Luxury Spa Day At Arima Onsen \(That Won't Break The Bank\)](#)

Tsuru-no-yu, Nyuto Onsen

Having stayed in a good number of ryokan since I first came to Japan in 2000, I was interested to see if I had stayed at any featured in the guide. I have - just the one. But it is perhaps one of the most famous in the whole of Japan.

Deservedly so too, as the 350-year old *Tsuru-no-yu*, part of Nyuto Onsen, in Akita Prefecture in the Tohoku region, is the epitome of the traditional rural ryokan.



Buy Japanese Inns and Hot Springs at [The Real Japan store on Amazon](#)

Set deep in the woodlands at the base of Nyuto mountain (in the northernmost tip of the main island of Honshu), mixed nude bathing is a rarity preserved here. The milky white waters of the open air hot springs maintain guests' modesty.

Although I see ryokan essentially as an opportunity to step back in time and indulge in a tradition of rustic luxury, connecting with nature, a new wave of contemporary, city-centre ryokan is gathering pace. These too are represented in the book.



[Wakasa Bettei](#) (in central Nara).

Also, for those uncertain about splashing out too much cash to try a ryokan for the first time, there's

Connected to a Western style hotel, it's very foreigner friendly and a great place for those who want to sample the ryokan experience without jumping in at the deep end.

Resort Ryokan

Then there are 'resort ryokan' like *Hoshinoya Karuizawa* (in Nagano) - pushing the boundaries of what can still be called a ryokan. It's encouraging to see new premises (and not all in a modern style) making the cut.



There was talk in recent years of the demise of many ryokan when the government shifted the regulations around onsen baths. Hopefully, that won't come to pass.

If providing a new twist on the historical concept generates fresh interest in ryokan and onsen, particularly from the younger generations, that has to be good for the industry as a whole.

You would quite gladly work your way through the entire list of premises in the book!

Related: [Onsen Tips For Those With Tattoos](#)

Given the opportunity, time and money, I'm sure, like me, you'd quite gladly work your way through the entire list of premises in the book.

My Personal Ryokan Shortlist

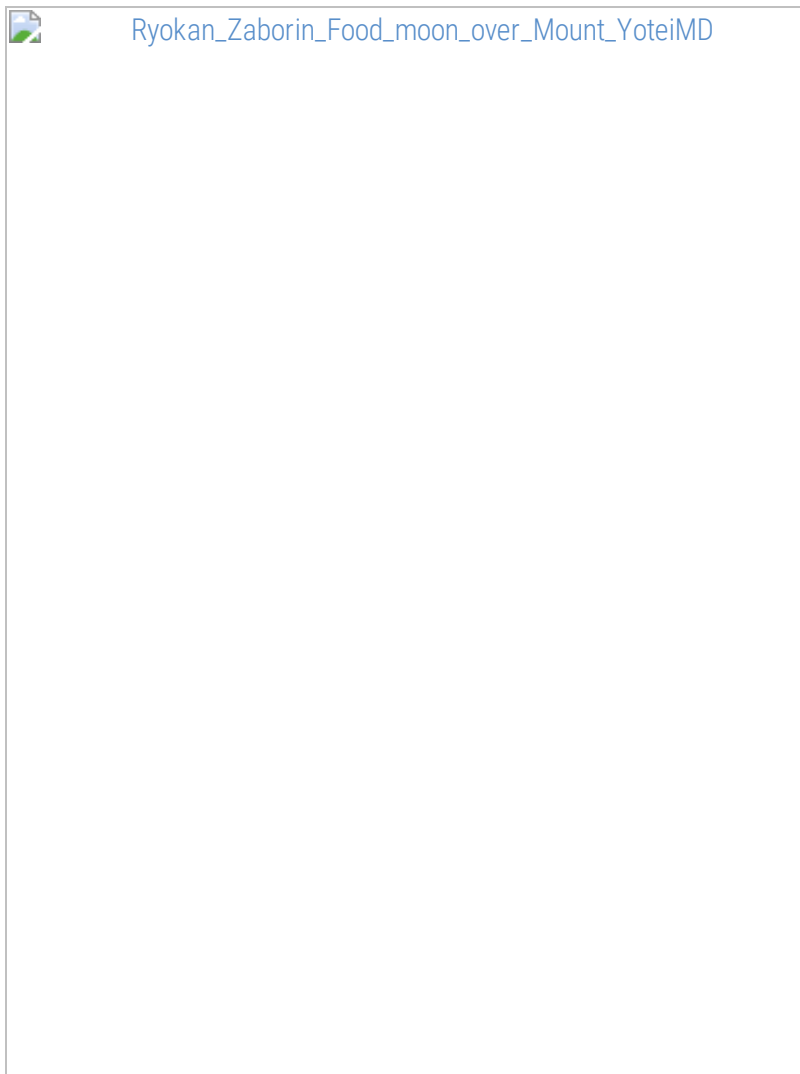
But, for now, I've noted [Gora Kadan](#) (in Hakone) for its amazing looking and very rare full size swimming pool. [Shuhoukaku Kogetsu](#) (near Lake Kawaguchi) for its stunning views of Mt Fuji.

The views of the surrounding nature at the teahouse-inspired style of *Yagyū-no-sho* (in rural Izu), and the gorgeous-looking blend of old and new at *Sansou Murata* (in Yufuin, Kyushu) - all look like potential shortlisters.



The book includes tips on choosing a ryokan that is right for you, the best time to go, meals (a major attraction for many), room rates per person per night for every entry (classified into four bands from US\$100+ to \$1,000+) and reaching each property by train, bus or taxi.

Everything you need, making it an indispensable English-language guide.



Conclusion

Staying in a ryokan is something I consider an essential aspect of experiencing The Real Japan.

Richly illustrated and exhaustively researched, *Japanese Inns & Hot Springs* is an excellent guide to some of the best and most distinctive ryokan and onsen the country has to offer.

Everything you need and an indispensable English-language guide. My copy is already well-thumbed, and I'm sure it will continue to be for years to come. Thoroughly recommended.

Top Ryokan and Onsen as Rated by Guests

Fancy booking a stay in a ryokan for your next trip?

Here are the top ryokan and onsen as rated by guests on Booking.com:

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Tokyo](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Kyoto](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Nara](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Central Japan](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Western Japan](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Southern Japan](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Northern Japan](#)

Top rated ryokan and onsen in [Hokkaido](#)

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[How To Travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

[Onsen Tips For Those With Tattoos](#)

[Period Charms of Aburaya Ryokan, Takahashi](#)

[The Best Way to Experience The Real Japan? - Stay In A Ryokan](#)

[Tsugaru Shamisen Live Performance Asobenomori Iwakiso Ryokan, Aomori](#)

12 Tips & Tricks For Exploring Japan With A Baby

by Teni Wada of [The Wagamama Diaries](#)

Author Teni Wada with her little one

It's time to get real here.

We love our kids, but going out with them can be a nightmare.

Add an international flight, [language barrier](#), and [cultural differences](#) to the mix and you just might wonder what you did in a past lifetime to earn such a punishment!

Ready To See The Real Japan With Your Little Ones?

While I can't guarantee that your Japan trip will be free of tears and meltdowns, I can share my domestic and international travel experience to help make your trip as smooth as possible.

I've put together a list of 12 tips and tricks for exploring Japan with a baby or toddler just for you.

Ready to see *The Real Japan* with your little ones?



Let's start with the basics!

The Basics

Wondering what to pack for your trip to Japan with a baby or toddler?

Take everything that's currently in your diaper/nappy bag, and multiply it by 2!

While it sounds like a lot, remember that you don't want to spend your precious vacation time searching for [diaper/nappies](#) or [baby food](#) (*I speak from experience: that was me in Australia last September!*)

BONUS: Flying With A Baby Checklist

Packing for your Japan trip begins with your international flight. Download our printable Carry-on Checklist to flying to Japan with a baby.

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)

When traveling with littles ones, it's always best to expect the unexpected. Packing for your Japan trip begins with your international flight.

It's a good idea to have an airplane carry-on list of flight essentials.



Once you're in Japan, here are a few basic tips to help you throughout the day:

1. Dress in layers, no matter the season

In the summertime, air conditioned buildings, buses, and trains can feel extremely chilly.

Likewise, heated buildings, buses, and trains can feel stuffy. Dress your child in layers so that you can adjust for temperatures. An alternative is to bring a lightweight blanket.

2. Toilet time

Overall, public restrooms in parks and train stations are very clean.

However, you might quickly notice that there's no soap dispenser or hand dryer. Be sure to bring a handkerchief, plenty of antibacterial wipes, and hand sanitizer!

Related: [How To Travel In Japan When You Don't Speaking Japanese](#)



3. Diaper changing facilities and nursing rooms

Generally speaking, you won't have to worry much about where to go when you need to change your child's diaper. Public toilets will have at least one changing bed.

Bathroom stalls often have special seats for babies and toddlers, and it's not uncommon to find a diaper changing bed in the men's restroom. You can also find multi-purpose toilets or even "family" toilets.

Nursing rooms are commonly found on the baby/kids' floors of shopping malls and department stores. While men can enter the changing rooms, they should not enter the nursing room, even if it is a private booth.



4. Don't rely on convenience stores for baby and toddler items

Despite being nearly everywhere you turn, Japanese convenience stores aren't so convenient when it comes to stocking the basics for babies and toddlers. This is especially true if you need to buy diapers or wipes!

Err on the side of caution and bring plenty with you on the go.

Instead, head to a department store or shopping mall, which will have a floor dedicated to babies and kids. Look for キッズ (kizzu/kids) or 赤ちゃん (akachan/baby) on the floor guide.

100 yen shops stock nearly everything you need for babies and toddlers

If you come across a 100 yen shop (Daiso, Seria, and Can-Do) you're in luck because they stock nearly everything you will need for babies and toddlers.

Related: [Can You Travel In Japan If You Don't Speak Japanese?](#)



Toddler-friendly activities you can book in advance

[Powered by GetYourGuide](#)

Transportation

Japan, especially its sprawling cities, is known for its punctual and efficient transportation network. It's also known for packed trains operating above capacity. And, when it comes to value for money, few services offer more bang for your buck than the Japan Rail Pass.

During morning peak hours, make use of the “women only cars,” (女性専用車/*josei senyou sha*), the first car located at the front of the platform.

RELATED: [How The Japanese Anticipate Other People's Needs](#)

Throughout the day, try to sit in “priority seats,” (優先席/*yuusenseki*) which are often located next to elevators and escalators.

Here are more tips on how to get around Japan with a baby and little ones in tow:

5. Use a baby carrier and a stroller

Yes, it may be cumbersome to take both when traveling, but train stations, especially in the city can be terribly congested and the platforms very narrow.

On top of that, elevators are few and in high demand (though this is changing).

Take along a carrier so that you can easily get through crowds, climb stairs, or use the escalators. Use the stroller to transport all your gear.



[Japan Family Vacation - Explore Family Friendly Japan](#)

6. Go hands-free with a prepaid travel card

You can purchase these cards at train stations throughout Japan, and they can be used to pay your train or bus fare.

Charge before your day adventure and you won't have to worry about how much the fare is to your destination.

These cards are a great way to avoid long lines at train stations and popular tourist spots.

Another reason to get a rechargeable 'IC card' (as they are known) is because they can be used at convenience stores, vending machines, etc. across Japan.

They are a hassle-free way to make purchases without fumbling around for change, perfect for when you're traveling with kids.





7. Get a one day pass

Combine your rechargeable IC card with a one day pass. These are great way to explore the area near your accommodation or your destination.

Alternatively, if your kids are having a meltdown, it may help to get off the bus or train and help them calm down.

Easy travel tools to book in advance:

[Powered by GetYourGuide](#)

8. Make use of buses when possible

Don't let the buses intimidate you. They are often a welcome alternative to crowded train stations and are a great way to see Japan with a baby up close. The only downside is that buses may not be a comfortable option waiting outside when it is too hot or too cold.

The pair seating is also a great choice for tired kids to lay out on your lap without disturbing other passengers.

Eating & Dining Out

Japanese restaurants often have kids' menus or free drinks/meals for children under 3. While it's also good to bring your child's favorite snacks when traveling, there are plenty of tasty and healthy options for babies and toddlers.

Here are some of my recommendations...

Barley tea is non-caffeinated and is more refreshing than still water

9. Stay hydrated with barley tea

Nearly every Japanese person grew up drinking barley tea. It's *the* drink of childhood and humid summers. Barley tea is non-caffeinated and has a roasted taste that feels more refreshing than still water.

It's sold everywhere — in convenience stores, supermarkets, and vending machines, normally around 100 yen a bottle. Look for 麦茶 or むぎ茶.

10. Have a family meal at a sushi spot

One of the most family-friendly dining spots in Japan is a conveyor belt sushi spot. Choose a dish from the lane or order from the multilingual tablet provided at your table. Some spots have games, or other forms of entertainment.

But, nearly all will have kid-approved choices like fruit juice, milk, chicken nuggets, fries, and jelly.



Inari zushi are “pouches” of fried and sweetened tofu filled with seasoned rice

While options for babies are limited, you will appreciate the escape-free baby booster seats that attach directly to the table.

Best sushi picks for kids: inari zushi (“pouches” of fried and sweetened tofu filled with seasoned rice), natto (fermented soybeans) rolls, tuna rolls, or cucumber rolls.

11. Eat like the locals – grab a rice ball (onigiri)

If you need a mess-free kids’ meal on the go, just pop into a supermarket or even better, a convenience store, for the classic rice ball, called *onigiri* in Japanese.

Kids will love *wakame* (わかめ, a type of seaweed), konbu (昆布/kelp), or *natto* (納豆, fermented soybeans) rolls.

The dim lighting in Starbucks can help calm down excited kids.

12. When all else fails, Starbucks

While Starbucks may not scream “Japan” to you, the cosy, smoke-free environment is a wonderful place to rest. They often occupy prime real estate and are a great place for people watching and taking a break. The dim lighting can also help calm down excited kids.

Use the free wi-fi to entertain kids, catch up with relatives back home, or check out the next stop on your Japan itinerary.

[Search Skyscanner Flights to Japan](#)



There you have it, 12 tips and tricks for exploring Japan with a baby or toddler.

While it's not an exhaustive list, I hope these are useful tips that will relieve some of the stress as you plan your Japan trip.

Author Teni Wada is a blogger, content creator, and first-time mom documenting her journey of motherhood in Tokyo and travels with baby at [The Wagamama Diaries](#) .

Resources

Toddler-Friendly Activities Bookable In Advance

[Disneyland or DisneySea: 1-Day Ticket and Private Transfer](#)

[From Tokyo: Mount Fuji Exploration, Lunch & Fruit Picking](#)

[Harajuku Owl Café 1-Hour Owl and Falcon Experience](#)

[Hello Kitty Puroland Ticket with Transfer](#)

[Nagano: Snow Monkeys, Zenkoji Temple & Sake Day Trip](#)

[Tokyo Ghibli Museum Admission Ticket with Transfer](#)

Easy Travel Tools To Book In Advance

[Japan: Unlimited Pocket Wi-Fi Router Rental](#)

[Tokyo Metro Pass: 24, 48 and 72-Hour Options](#)

[Tokyo: Shared Transfer to/from Narita Airport](#)

Further Reading:

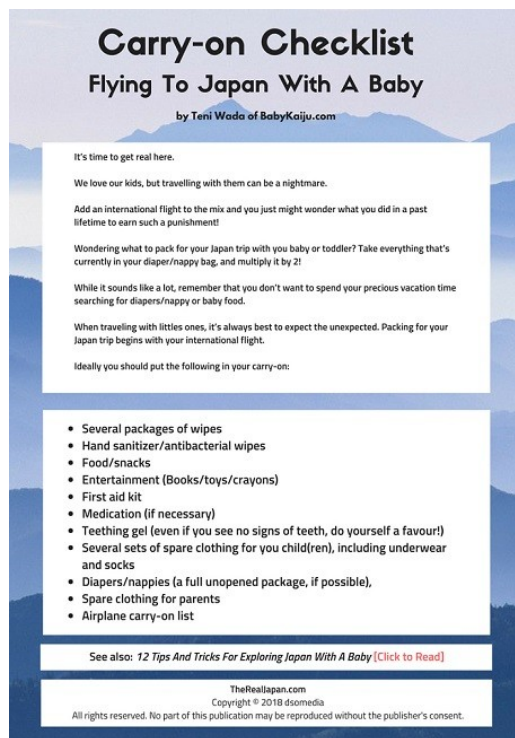
[How To Travel In Japan If You Don't Speak Japanese](#)

[How The Japanese Anticipate Other People's Needs](#)

BONUS! Download our Free Carry-on Checklist: Flying to Japan With a Baby

Packing for your Japan trip begins with your international flight. Download our printable Carry-on Checklist to flying to Japan with a baby.

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)



Click on the Checklist to Download your free copy

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How To Cruise An Icebreaker Ship In Hokkaido

Even by Japan's already impressively high standards, Hokkaido is beautiful.

Taking a cruise on an icebreaker ship in Hokkaido is an unforgettable way to explore this wilderness.

Japan's Second-Largest Island

Hokkaido is the second largest island of Japan, and its largest prefecture. About 43 km north lies the Russian island of Sakhalin. Beyond that lies the coastline of Siberia. This most northerly of Japan's islands is still largely untamed and wild.

It's also the harshest and coldest, with average January temperatures ranging from -12 to -4 °C (10.4 to 24.8 °F). None of which puts off more [brown bears](#) making Hokkaido their home more than anywhere else in Asia, outside Russia.



Untamed and Wild

Whilst it is rarely on the must-see list of people visiting Japan for the first time - that is an oversight. Hokkaido offers the explorer myriad opportunities for adventures that will get you closer to Japan's natural landscape than few other places can.

If you have a taste for more unconventional modes of transportation, and rare opportunities, then joining an icebreaker ship off the coast of Hokkaido delivers on both counts.

This most northerly of Japan's islands is still largely untamed and wild

On my first trip to the island in 2001, my wife and I went on an icebreaker ship in Hokkaido, and to this day it remains an unforgettable experience. One I thoroughly recommend.

Ice Floes In The Sea of Okhotsk

The Sea of Okhotsk lies between Hokkaido and the Russian island of Sakhalin. It is a forbidding landscape in winter, but affords ideal conditions for observing the massive annual ice floes.

During the midwinter ice floe season (typically between the end of January and end of March), it is possible to travel aboard icebreaker ships. It is sometimes possible to see the ice at the start of April but it's best to check first and this can vary from year to year.



Ice Floes In The Sea of Okhotsk

A Bird Lovers Paradise

As well as enabling you to experience first hand the thrill of cutting through the drift ice, it's a chance to spot the local wildlife. The area is considered one of the richest north temperate marine ecosystems in the world.

It is home to an abundance of fish, bird and marine mammal life. Known as a 'bird-lover's paradise', the Okhotsk Sea's shores serve as a haven for large colonies of the common and thick-billed murre, tufted puffins and Steller's sea eagle the world's largest raptor.

As well as the fish and mammals in the sea itself, it is possible to see the eagles, seals, and even Ezo Red foxes actually on the ice flows.



Steller's Sea Eagle / Credit: [Michael Pinczolits](#) , [CC BY 2.0](#)

Icebreaker Ship Cruises

A few companies offer prearranged icebreaker trips. This is one of those times when joining a prearranged tour really is the easiest way to marvel at this spectacle. Tours operate out of two main harbours in the region: Abashiri and Shiretoko.

Located near Hokkaido's eastern tip, in Abashiri the sea remains an important part of the community as well as the economy, as fishing, oysters, and seaweed are still an important means of livelihood for many people living here.

Shiretoko is derived from the [Ainu](#) word *sir etok*, meaning “the end of the Earth”

A further 90 minutes east by train from Abashiri, the Shiretoko peninsula is home to the Shiretoko National Park. The name Shiretoko is derived from the [Ainu](#) word *sir etok*, meaning “the end of the Earth”.

Fishing boats moored at Abashiri Harbour

The White Capped Mountains Of The Shiretoko Peninsula

Whichever harbour you choose to cruise from, whilst the ship you'll likely join is geared towards carrying tourists, nevertheless, they were built for their main purpose - breaking ice. So don't expect too much in the way of luxuries.

The ship we took (the Aurora II in the photo) sailed out of the harbour in Abashiri. The white capped mountain ranges of the Shiretoko Peninsula can be seen on the horizon as you head out into the Sea of Okhotsk, providing an impressive backdrop to the start of the journey.

Temperatures will always be cold when the ice is flowing. Add to that any wind chill factor, and to keep the worst of the freezing atmosphere out, you'll need to wrap up in the warmest clothing you have with you.



Aurora II icebreaker ship in Hokkaido

But that bracing wind is all part of the experience, only serving to make it all the more impressive that Hokkaido's impressive array of wildlife can survive out here on the ice - even in the deepest of winters.

However, if you're lucky, you may have one of those ideal Japanese winter days, when warm sunshine and clear blue skies temper the worst of the ambient temperatures, and afford the perfect conditions for taking in the awesome views.

The Local Landscape

One thing worth considering if you are thinking of taking an icebreaker ship in Hokkaido is if you want to factor in travelling around the neighbouring landscape, taking in the local landscape as well.

There are some, lasting from as little as 4 hours, to as long as 14 days tours that include both cruise and sightseeing. We did this with our tour.



Your's truly with my wife (circled in yellow) at Abashiri Harbour

A coach took us up to Lake Mashu in the Akan Mashu National Park. Lake Mashu is a volcanic crater lake surrounded by steep walls 200 metres (660 ft) high. It lays claim to being the clearest lake in the world with visibility down as far as 41 meters.

The views from up here down into the lake are said to be impressive. Unfortunately, on the day we visited there was a lot of low cloud interrupting our view.

Nevertheless, as Akan is an area of volcanic craters, crystal clear lakes, hot springs and forests, it was still worth it for what we did see enroute.

Booking Icebreaker Cruise Tickets

Prices are very reasonable. Cruises like ours on the Aurora II out of Abashiri cost typically less than 3,500yen per adult, and about half that for children. Tickets are available, priced for adults and elementary school-aged children (infants can ride the ship for free).

A discount on the standard adult fare is available for group bookings. Check with individual tour operators for confirmation of details.

At the busiest times of the season ships can get fully booked more than a month in advance. Therefore, to be guaranteed a cruise on a day that suits you, it is best to book your tickets in advance.

Everything you need to know about the trips available and book tickets your ship can be found here:

<http://ms-aurora.com/abashiri/en/>

Regional Sightseeing Tours

If you want to make the most of your time in the region and factor in some local sightseeing as well as an icebreaker cruise (as we did, and I recommend you do), then there are a few options.

Each includes at least one of the highlights featured in this article.

Go canoeing in Lake Akan – includes Akan National Park

Explore the wild beauty of Lake Akan in Hokkaido by paddling a Canadian canoe for two people. Meet the wildlife of Akan National Park and paddle the canoe between the common reed near the lake's shores.

[View Lake Akan Tour](#)

Visit the most scenic photo spots of Akan National Park – includes Lake Mashu

Akan National Park is a true natural paradise of pristine beauty and unique hot springs! In this tour you will visit the most scenic spots around the park's lakes and volcanic mountains. Immerse yourself in the splendid scenery of rural Hokkaido. (Includes Lake Mashu).

[View Akan National Park Tour](#)

9-Day Hokkaido Snow Festival Tour – includes onsen visits both in Abashiri and Shiretoko

Start in [Sapporo](#) and end in Akan National Park! With this adventure tour you have a 9 day package taking you through Sapporo, and 8 other destinations. This is a [small_group_tour](#) that includes hotel accommodation as well as an expert guide, meals, transport and more.

[View 9-Day Hokkaido Tour](#)

14-Day Highlights of Hokkaido Cycling Tour – includes Abashiri, Shiretoko, Lake Mashu and Akan National Park

Start in [Sapporo](#) and end in Abashiri! With the [bicycle](#) tour Highlights of Hokkaido, you have a 14 day tour package taking you through Sapporo, Japan and 6 other destinations in Japan. Highlights of Hokkaido includes hotel and hostel accommodation as well as an expert guide, meals, transport and more.

[View 14-Day Highlights Tour](#)

Getting here

By Air

There are multiple direct flights from Tokyo (Haneda airport) to Memanbetsu Airport, taking 100 minutes. Options via either flag carrier Japan Airlines (JAL) or low cost airline Air Do. Abashiri is 30 minutes by bus from Memanbetsu Airport.

Check flight options via [Skyscanner](#).

By Train

Since the opening of the Seikan Tunnel connecting Hokkaido to the main island of Honshu it has been possible to catch a train to the island.

JR's Tohoku/Hokkaido shinkansen runs between Tokyo to Hokkaido's capital Sapporo - where you'll need to change for services to Abashiri. The Japan Rail Pass can be used for this trip.

By Car

Sapporo > Abashiri - The quickest drive from Sapporo to Abashiri is 334km, taking around 4hr and 30mins via Routes 12 and 40. Note: Route 40 is a toll road.

See the [Route on Google Maps](#) .

Sapporo > Shiretoko - The quickest drive from Sapporo to Shiretoko is 421km, taking around 6hrs via Routes 12 and 40. Note: Route 40 is a toll road.

See the [Route on Google Maps](#) .

Accommodation

Abashiri - [Booking.com](#) has 18 properties in Abashiri.

[See the list of accommodation in Abashiri](#)

Shiretoko - [Booking.com](#) has 7 properties in Shiretoko.

[See the list of accommodation in Shiretoko.](#)

Sapporo - [Booking.com](#) has 184 properties in Sapporo.

[See also this list of accommodation in Sapporo.](#)

The island of Hokkaido is justifiably known as Japan's largest wilderness and for being the coldest part of the country.

A cruise on an icebreaker ship in Hokkaido into the Sea of Okhotsk is an unforgettable experience. One I can completely recommend.

Just be sure to pack your thermals!

Resources

Book your icebreaker cruise here: <http://ms-aurora.com/abashiri/en/>

[Go canoeing in Lake Akan](#) - includes Akan National Park

[Visit the most scenic photo spots of Akan National Park](#) - includes Lake Mashu

[9-Day Hokkaido Snow Festival Tour](#) - includes onsen visits both in Abashiri and Shiretoko

[14-Day Highlights of Hokkaido Cycling Tour](#) - includes Abashiri, Shiretoko, Lake Mashu and Akan National Park

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5 Days In Kyushu – Itinerary



'Spectacles' Bridge, Nakashima River district, Nagasaki

Thinking of visiting Kyushu?

Here's my 5-day itinerary - a whistlestop tour of a few highlights of Kyushu, including recommendations for sights, restaurants and hotels for each day, with photos.

5 Days In Kyushu

The starting point for our return trip was Kobe - 20 minutes east of Osaka by train. But you could be starting in any number of cities in Japan that have an airport.

Of course, you could start in one city, fly to Kyushu, use this itinerary, and then fly onto a new city as your next destination.

Just choose somewhere where the flight time isn't too long so that you can make the most of your first and last days in Kyushu.

The itinerary

Day 1: Kobe to Fukuoka

Day 2: Fukuoka

Day 3: Fukuoka to Nagasaki

Day 4: Nagasaki to Saikai

Day 5: Saikai to Kobe



Ohori Park, Fukuoka

Day 1: Kobe > Fukuoka

Fly: 08:00 Osaka Itami to Fukuoka (5am start)

Lunch: Cafe Brasileiro - Fukuoka's oldest cafe (food OK, coffee good, atmosphere great)

See: ACROS building (stunning ‘half-pyramid’ architecture cultural centre covered in greenery)

Stay: Hotel Forza (just thirty seconds from Hakata Station)



ACROS Building, Fukuoka

Day 2: Fukuoka

Activity: Stroll around Ohori Park (walk across bridges connecting three islands in a large lake)

Lunch: Restaurant Mizutaki Nagano (top quality, proper nabe, reservations essential)

Coffee: Cafe ‘Knock’ (run by an 89 year old lady for more than 40 years)

Buy: Traditional sweets from Ishimura Manseido Deitos (gorgeous original shop and sweets)

Day 3: Fukuoka > Nagasaki

Train: 09:55 Kamome Limited Express from Hakata (interior looks like business class airline designed by Mercedes Benz)

Stroll: Nakashima River/Tera-machi districts (more than 10 bridges + traditional *machiya* repurposed as shops, cafes, galleries, etc.)

View: The stunning city lights at night by taking the Nagasaki Ropeway to the top of Mt. Inasa

Dinner: Restaurant Yossou (*chawan mushi* - steamed egg custard specialist, incredible pork)

Stay: Hotel Forza (rated #1 hotel in Nagasaki on Trip Advisor)

'Spectacles' Bridge, Nagasaki

Want to see the famous 'Spectacles Bridge' for yourself? Use [this self-guided tour of Nagasaki](#) (ideal for couples).

Day 4: Nagasaki > Saikai

Ride: The Nagasaki Electric Tramway for a cool retro way to get about the city

Experience: Atomic Bomb Museum, Nagasaki (sobering, be sure to visit the blast hypocentre outside)

Train: 15:00 Sea Side Liner from Nagasaki Station to Huis Ten Bosch Station

See: Omura Bay (sit on the left hand side of the train when leaving Nagasaki Station for the best views)

Stay: Minshuku (stay in a regular home with a local family)



Memorial at the Atomic Bomb Museum, Nagasaki

Day 5: Saikai > Kobe

Experience: *Mikan* picking at Saikai Genkimura eco-village (thoroughly recommended - full article to follow!)

Lunch: Restaurant Kasayama (good quality Japanese staples, reasonably priced, large portions served in private dining rooms)

Bus: From Huis Ten Bosch (we didn't go inside the theme park) to Nagasaki Airport

Fly: 17:20 Nagasaki to Kobe Airport



Mikan picking at Saikai Genkimura eco-village

I hope you gained some insight, motivation and, if you're thinking of spending a few days in Kyushu, some specific ideas from this quick snapshot. It's a mere sampling of what Kyushu has to offer.

Resources

[Visit Nagasaki | The Official Guide to Nagasaki Prefecture](#)

[Fukuoka – Japan National Tourism Organization](#)

[Nagasaki Like a Local: Customized Guided Tour](#)

[Experience a Self-Guided Tour of Nagasaki \(ideal for couples\)](#)

[Private Full-Day Fukuoka Custom Tour by Chartered Vehicle](#)

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Fantastic Interactive Map of Japan – Get Exploring!

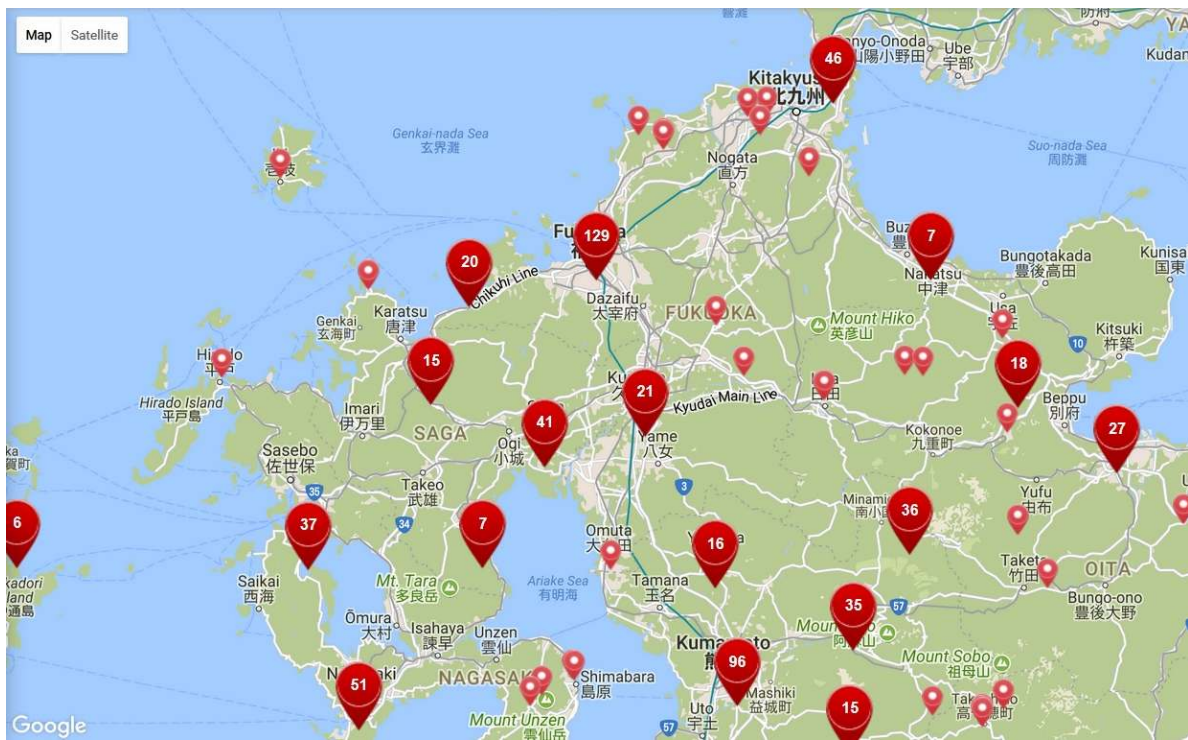
Next up for me is a visit to the southern island of Kyushu, where I'll be taking in Fukuoka (for the first time) and Nagasaki, among other lesser-known towns and hopefully a few villages.

So I've been deep in research...

It's easy to get buried when researching your adventures in Japan. That's why it's important to find and use resources that get you to the detail you're after as easy and quickly as possible.

(Oh, and help you discover hidden-away places you've never heard of too.)

Here's a fantastic resource I've been using recently.



Exploring the region around Fukuoka on Kyushu - CLICK THE MAP to get started!

It's an interactive map of Japan (on the [Japan Airlines](#) website) that lets you filter your searching by island and region.

Zoom in as close as you like to see the matching number of points of interest - shrines, bars, restaurants, hotels, temples, gardens - you name it!

Single out your destination of choice and just click on it to be taken to an article about the place or look at a photo gallery, get the contact details, make your reservation, plan your itinerary.

Zoom in as close as you like to see points of interest

It's unbelievably useful for getting to know your way around a region, village, city or neighbourhood before you even put a foot on Japanese soil.

Use this link to the map to start your exploring and planning:

<https://jal.japantravel.com/map/jal>

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How To Choose The Best Japan Travel Guide Book



As much as the internet is a godsend to researching a trip to Japan, for many people, myself included, there's still nothing quite like having a trusty, print guide book in your hands when travelling.

How Do You Choose The Best Japan Travel Guide?

Selecting the best guide for you is a little like choosing your ideal partner, or your favourite album of all time - it's a very personal thing.

So, in that sense, there can be no definitive 'best' guide book. It all depends on your personal perspective, needs and preferences.

Some of us absorb information when it is presented visually, others prefer to read lengthy text, whilst many prefer a combination of the two. Me? I fall into the latter camp - but with a bias towards more text than pictures.



The Rough Guide to Japan

Using Amazon's 'Look Inside' Feature

They all have their strengths (and weaknesses), take a look at them all if you can. Use internet research for making comparisons online - saving you the trouble of browsing in a bookshop or library.

Using Amazon's 'Look inside' feature can be really handy here (if it is available on the book you are looking at then the words 'Look inside' with an arrow pointing down appear directly above the top of the book cover photo).

BONUS: Guide Book Checklist

How do you choose the best travel guide to Japan? Easy! Download The Real Japan Ultimate Checklist to Choosing A Japan Travel Guide Book.

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)

If you've not used it before, you simply click on the book cover and it opens up and you can literally look inside to see example content, and judge if you like the content, design, and any useful features like maps, etc.

READ: [How To Travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

My First Travel Guidebook To Japan

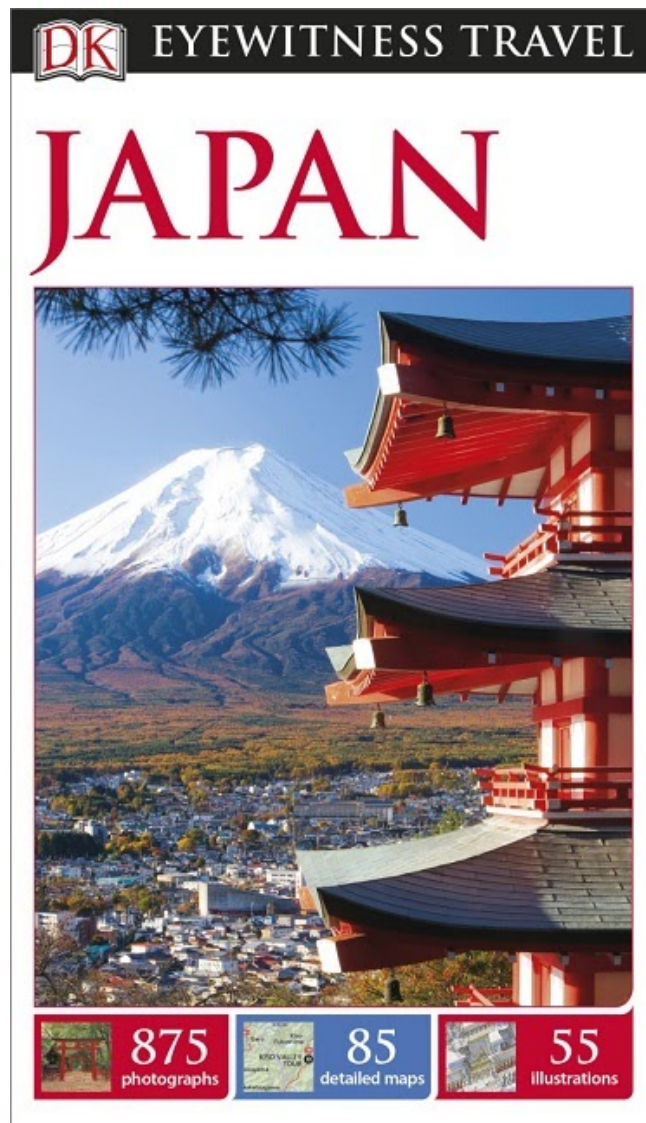
The way I chose my first travel guide book to Japan (in 2008) was to do some initial research on the internet and read customer reviews on Amazon.com for the various guides. That whittled down the candidates for me to just two: [Lonely Planet](#) and [The Rough Guide](#).

To help me make the final choice between them I went into a bookshop and picked up and had a short read through both publishers' editions. I could also have borrowed both from my local library and taken my time making my decision. Maybe that's an option for you?

Lonely Planet (Globe Trekker) TV Show

I fondly remember an episode of the first season of *Lonely Planet* (now *Globe Trekker*) TV show dedicated to Japan.

What I liked most about it was instead of focusing on Tokyo and the other obvious destinations, reporter Ian Wright started in the capital and then made his way to the very end of the southern chain of the archipelago. Ending up in the [Yaeyama islands](#). (This episode dates back to 1994 - which I still have on video tape!)



DK Eyewitness Japan Guide

Rough Guide vs Lonely Planet

The thing that immediately struck me was that the *Lonely Planet* guide was more attractive to look at than *The Rough Guide*. The maps in the [Lonely Planet guide](#) were more detailed than those in their competitor's and looked more practically useful.

I imagined that if I was somewhere in Japan I'd never been to before, and had *The Rough Guide* maps in front of me, they wouldn't have been much help on the ground.

[Lonely Planet](#) had more photos and more colour than *The Rough Guide* too. It also had heavier stock paper. I remember being shocked at just how thin the pages of *The Rough Guide* were - suspecting they might tear all too easily when in active use 'out in the field'.

However, that did mean [The Rough Guide](#) managed to cram in more pages into their edition within a similar thickness (more than 1,000 compared with [Lonely Planet](#)'s 831). Neither were pocketable, they were quite hefty reference books. Both were priced pretty much the same too.

All of that was interesting, useful and good to know. However, the key determining factor for me was in *reading* them.

The Trick I Use To Make The Final Choice

If you are in a position to, read entries about places you already know and see how their description of them tallies with your own real-life experience.

If you've never been to the country before, then simply pick up a guide book either to a country you have been to, or even for the country in which you live.

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"This is fantastic"

"It was a priceless
experience working with
Rob"

"Saved me the cost of his
consultation within the
first 10 minutes"



Frommer's Japan Guide

Then turn to read about a place (town, city, region, resort, whatever) you know and see how that description meets your experience and knowledge of the place. If you've been to the country before and know a town or city well - use that as your reference point.

"Knowing Kobe well, I turned in both editions to read about the city."

Knowing Kobe well, I turned in both editions to read about the city. I recall the [Lonely Planet](#) guide saying that one of the highlights of a visit to Kobe was to explore the Harborland district in the evening, where attractions like the Kobe Tower, Meriken Park are lit up at night in a colourful display.

But, having been there several times before, I knew that in the evening the area can be quite desolate and that the only real reason people do go there at night is to go to a restaurant or the multiplex cinema. Not exactly ground-breaking experiences. Whereas, of the same location, [The Rough Guide](#) described it more accurately, pointing out that in the evening there was less to attract the passing visitor.

A Gaijin's Perspective

Don't make the mistake of thinking that guide books written only by locals are better than those written by, or with input from, foreigners (aka gaijin in Japan).

A foreigner's perspective is often invaluable, particularly if they are well-travelled.

They can often have the advantage of being able to draw on more extensive travel experience in other countries, and regions within the same country, giving them additional perspective and insight. This enables them to draw valuable comparisons or highlight useful contrasts.

How To Compare Your Shortlisted Books

Confirming this wasn't personal bias, friends of ours who were using the [Lonely Planet](#) guide specifically went to Harborland based on that guide's description. Having visited there they came to the conclusion that, nice as it was, it was a waste of one of their few free evenings. Important stuff when every day in Japan is precious.

I did the same comparison for several other places I knew, and yielded similar results.

[Lonely Planet](#) felt more like it was sponsored by the local tourist board, whilst [The Rough Guide](#) made more of an effort to go out on a limb with what were clearly very personal insights and recommendations - either of locally-based writers or well-travelled and informed foreigners.

I felt that, at the research stage, [Lonely Planet](#) possibly looked like it contained more useful practical information. But based on my years of experience of travelling in Japan, I could see that much of it would be redundant pretty quickly and wouldn't reward repeat use as much as [The Rough Guide](#) would.



Lonely Planet 2019

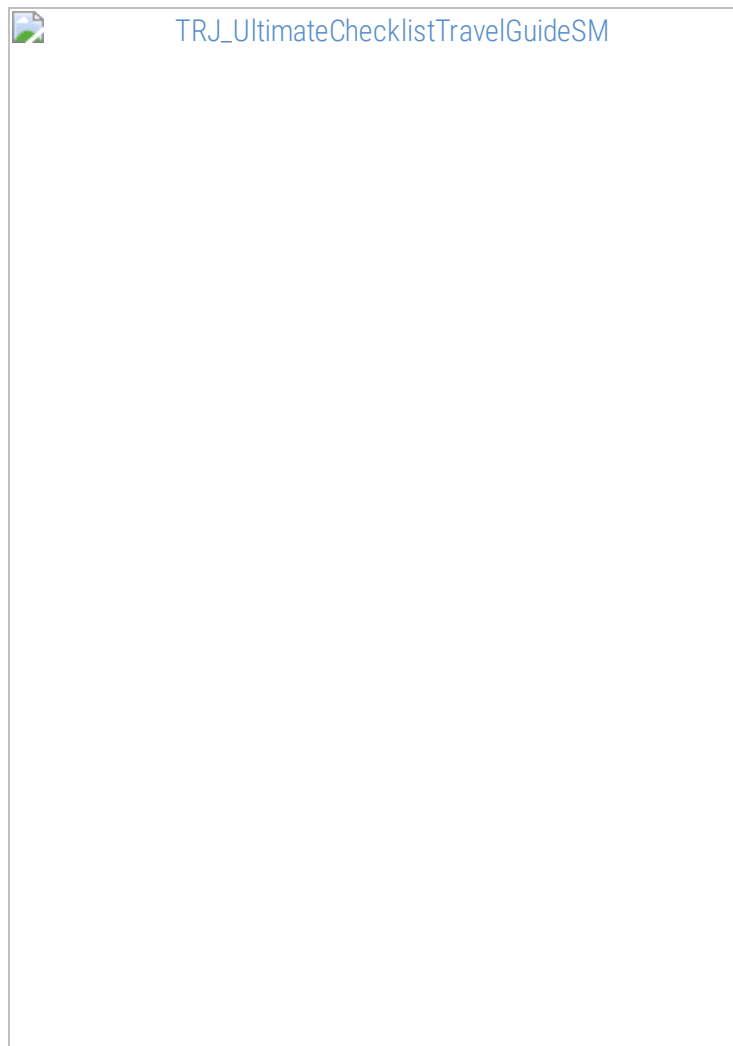
[Get the Lonely Planet Guide](#)

Don't make the mistake of thinking that guide books written only by locals are better than those written with input from foreigners. A foreigner's perspective is often invaluable, particularly if they are well-travelled.

They can often have the advantage of being able to draw on more extensive travel experience in other countries (and regions within the *same* country), giving them additional perspective and insight, enabling them to draw valuable comparisons or highlight useful contrasts.

"To the previously uninformed it would have been difficult to choose between them. But, to me, the differences were striking, and enough to enable me to make a clear and confident choice."

To the previously uninformed it would have been difficult to choose between them. But, to me, the differences were striking, and enough to enable me to make a clear and confident choice.



BONUS: Guide Book Checklist

How do you choose the best travel guide to Japan? Easy! Download The Real Japan Ultimate Checklist to Choosing A Japan Travel Guide Book.

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)

Planning A Trip to Japan

'Nuts and Bolts' vs 'Essence and Feeling' Guides

I felt that the *Lonely Planet* guide was better at describing the 'nuts and bolts' of a place - the facts and figures, if you will. Whereas *The Rough Guide* was less detailed on such things but better at conveying the essence, the style, the 'feeling' of a place. Essentially, what it feels like when you are actually *there*. And, crucially, 'there' more as a local than a 'tourist'.

To me the [Lonely Planet guide](#) seemed possibly better suited to those who had never been to Japan and who like to have a lot of detail and specifics around the logistics of booking accommodation, flights, sites, etc. I also felt their maps would be more helpful in finding your way when compared with the minimalist, almost oblique maps in *The Rough Guide* (remember, I'm referring to the 2008 editions here).

If You Just Want Facts - Use Wikipedia

But, I also felt that the [Lonely Planet guide](#) would be far less useful on *repeat* visits. There was less in it to capture your imagination regarding a place, whereas [The Rough Guide](#) included all kinds of (on first glance) seemingly leftfield or random details - but information that would reward subsequent visits.

"What I was looking for in a guide was more along the lines of 'insider' information, personal recommendations, off-the-beaten-track tips, etc. Fewer facts, more opinions. (If I want facts I'll look on Wikipedia.)"

Since I would always do my pre-travel research on the internet to get the most up-to-date information on the logistical side of travelling (flight, train, bus schedules, best connections, recommended accommodation, opening hours of restaurants, bars, sights, etc).

The Best For 'Insider Information'

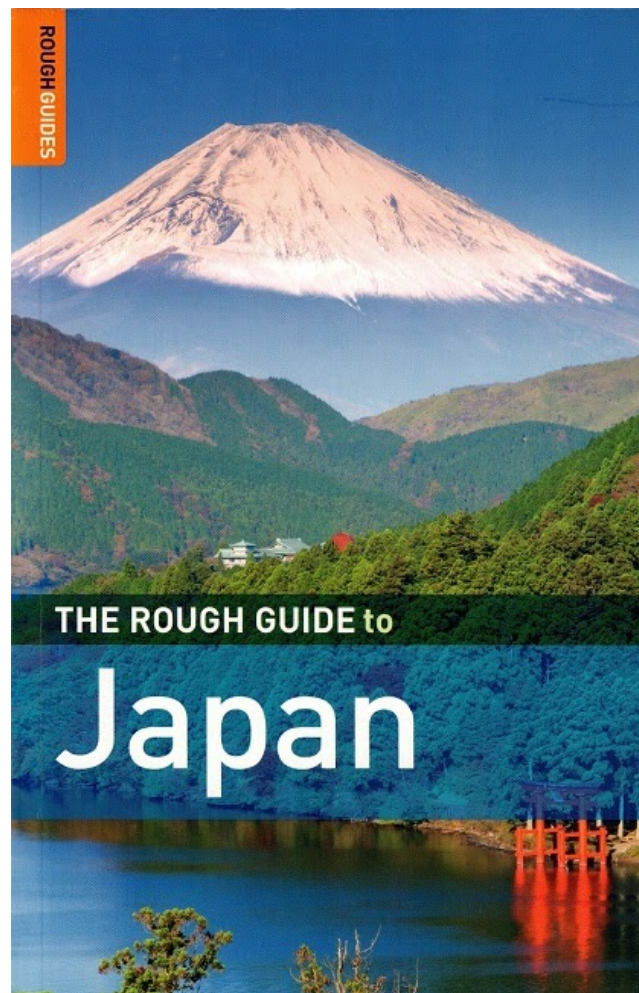
What I was looking for in a guide was more along the lines of 'insider' information, personal recommendations, off-the-beaten-track tips, etc. Fewer *facts*, more *opinions*. (If I want facts I'll look on Wikipedia!)

The book that delivered what I was after was [*The Rough Guide to Japan*](#).

It didn't matter to me that the maps in it were basic and not much help. The first thing I ask for when visiting any tourist information centre (or [ryokan](#) or [hotel](#)) is for any maps they have of the local area. These are way better than anything you'll find in any guide book.

Hidden 'Bonus' Feature

Guide books also have a hidden bonus feature! They are also a handy place to keep flat mementos of travel ephemera such as tickets, flyers, leaflets, etc that you'll pick up on your journeys. Which, if you're anything like me, you'll collect hundreds of ;-).



Rough Guide Japan (2008 Edition)

Keeping Your Guide Up To Date

Personally, I don't think it necessary to update my guide books *every* year, or even every few years.

In fact, it could be argued that if you need to then it isn't the right guide for you. The occasional natural disaster or social upheaval aside, the basics don't change very often. Particularly in a country as well-developed as Japan.

Nevertheless, I recently decided to update my original *Rough Guide*, which was published in 2008 - but has served me well (even those wafer-thin pages were miraculously still intact!).

Confident that it was the right choice the first time around, I didn't bother to do the same extensive comparative research, but did note that several of what I identified as shortcomings in my previous edition had been changed/improved in the latest edition. So I simply ordered the new one online.

Comparing New and Old Editions

When it arrived, I was delighted to discover that many of the better production values of the older [Lonely Planet guides](#) had been incorporated - more colour photos, colour-coordinated sections, better, more detailed maps, thicker paper(!). With my 2008 and latest edition side by side, I re-read several familiar sections to compare between them.

Some have been completely re-written, others changed little or not at all (but justifiably so). Information about some places has been dropped, replaced by new entries.

Incidentally, at the moment, I see the [Lonely Planet](#) title is the most popular guide in Amazon's Japan Guide Book category. Proving that, in spite of my fondness for [The Rough Guide](#), this whole process is about personal viewpoint and preferences.

Spotting Shortcomings

The only shortcomings I've spotted since using it relate to the index. Whilst many towns (in particular) are included in the guide they do not appear in the index.

This makes quickly finding them inside the guide more difficult than it should be. It wouldn't have added too much to the length of the index to include the significant places. To read about them as it is, you have to navigate to the more general region, etc entry and find it from there.

Also, although there are *fewer* pages than the 2008 edition (880 now compared with over 1,000 then) the book is noticeably *thicker* than its earlier edition. I guess that's what you get with thicker paper!

So, that was my original and recent experience of choosing what, for me, is the best guide book to Japan. Tastes, preferences and needs differ. Your needs may indeed be different, meaning a different guide is better suited to you. But, however you choose, choose wisely, and you'll have an invaluable resource that rewards your adventures in Japan for years to come.

Where To Buy: Amazon vs Wordery

Amazon is usually my first port of call for researching and usually purchasing books. The customer reviews alone are a really valuable and time-saving resource.

However, typing in “Rough Guide to Japan” into Google, I managed to find [Wordery.com](#) - where the same edition was £2.95 cheaper than the price on Amazon. And it included free, worldwide delivery.

Useful Links

[Amazon.com Japan Travel Guide Search Results](#)

[The Rough Guide To Japan](#)

[Lonely Planet Japan](#)

[Frommer's Guide To Japan](#)

[Fodor's Guide To Japan](#)

[DK \(Dorling Kindersley\) Eyewitness Travel Japan](#)

My guide book: [How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

Reflections on The Mountains of Central Japan



The Mountains of Central Japan

I'm typing this on a bus bound for an area in the heart of Shiga Prefecture, which is in the middle of the main island of Honshu.

The views from the window are stunning, and impress upon me just how glorious the mountains of Japan are.

Mountains Define Japan

Japan is a long, thin strip of a country, comprising some 6,800 islands. The main one, Honshu, is where you'll find most of the places you've heard of: [Tokyo](#), [Kyoto](#), [Hiroshima](#), [Osaka](#), [Nara](#), etc.

Whilst the northern-most island of Hokkaido is rightly regarded as Japan's wild frontier, and the largest southern island of Okinawa the country's sub-tropical sun-worshippers' destination, the main island of Honshu is where you'll find the mountainous spine of the country that truly defines its character and people.



72% of Japan Is Covered In Mountains

An incredible 72% of the country is mountainous. A statistic that seems hard to reconcile with the popular images you see outside of Japan.

The extensive mountain range (incorporating the Japanese Alps) virtually spans the entire length of Honshu and it is possible to drive (or ride a bus or train) through much of it.



Remarkable Feats of Human Engineering

Today, we're headed for an area east of lake Biwa-ko, north-west of Nagoya.

Our journey began this morning in Kobe where we caught a coach that is currently driving across elevated highways that are remarkable feats of human engineering. As if saying to the gods of the mountains that we humans too can turn our hand to inspiring creations when we want to.

Although utilising tunnels which cut their way through the most obstructive mountains, the bulk of the route is via the elevated expressways that exemplify how Japan's impressive road infrastructure tames and occasionally dominates the landscape.

And, in between the mountains, the valleys.



Rice Fields Clinging To Every Contour

Where rice fields cling to every contour of the undulating land. The rice fields look like vast stepping stones weaving their way gradually up the mountainside as if for some ginormous god of agriculture to take to the top of each mountain in order to survey the remarkable efforts of his worshippers.

Farmers (none of them seemingly under 60 years of age) either utilise high-tech niche farming equipment and tractors. Or through lack of funds keep the hand-held traditions alive, their backs irreparably bent forwards in gruelling and yet still commonplace manual labour.

Afternoon Sun Shimmering Off The Water

The lowering and yet still hot afternoon sun shimmering off the water-filled rice paddies. The surface rippled by a gentle and welcome cool breeze. Kilometres of such views abruptly switch to fields of a modern crop: solar panels.

As is often the feeling, if you didn't know better, you'd be hard-pressed to believe Japan's economy was still in a desperate slump. The amount of on-going construction projects designed to extend the already extensive network of elevated highways Japan's vehicles rely upon would be noteworthy in any country.

A Nation That Defines Resilience

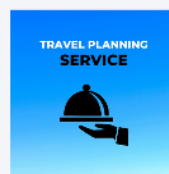
But it seems in Japan this kind of thing is commonplace.

Just part of the nation's admirable stoic ability to absorb whatever the planet throws at it. Be it earthquakes, tsunami's, typhoons, authorities resolutely repair, reconstruct, even develop in response and in doing so reinvigorate a nation that defines resilience.

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*"Saved me the cost of his
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first 10 minutes"*

12 Reasons Japan Is A Tourist Paradise

Sunset over Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture

There are hundreds of reasons why Japan is a tourist paradise.

And they go beyond the robots, geisha and neon lights we are used to seeing in the media. Not that there's anything wrong with robots, geisha or neon lights of course. ;-)

Whether you're staying in a [hotel](#) or a traditional [ryokan](#), catching a bullet train from [Tokyo](#) to [Kyushu](#) or jumping on a long-distance [bus](#), eating out in a high-end restaurant or a [burger bar](#), visiting the frozen northern island of [Hokkaido](#) or the sub-tropical palm trees and beaches of the [southern islands](#), here then are 12 reasons Japan is a tourist paradise.

#1 – Customer Service

Japan has the best [customer service](#) in the world.

#2 – Japanese Food

Japanese food goes way beyond sushi and sashimi. It's diverse and there are hundreds of [regional delicacies](#) to try. Even their fast food is healthier than you'll find in the West (well, some of it is!).



#3 – The Japanese Landscape

The Japanese landscape is far more varied than popular belief. 70% of it is covered in mountains, and most of those are covered in forests. And there are more than 6,800 islands that make up the country.

#4 – Ryokan

You can step back in time by [staying at a ryokan](#) - a traditional inn. Live like a samurai, eat unbelievable-looking meals and be waited on hand and foot.



Ryokan are traditional style Japanese inns

#5 – People Are So Helpful

Although not many Japanese can speak English, they'll go out of their way to do all they can to help you if [you don't speak Japanese](#).

#6 – Taxis

You'll never have to open a taxi door in Japan as they all have automatic doors. They'll be pristinely clean and you can hire a taxi for up to a day for a fixed price and the driver will act as your personal tour guide.

#7 – The Climate

The country straddles several types of climate. From the frozen northern island of Hokkaido, through the temperate main island of Honshu, down to the sub-tropical southern island of Okinawa and beyond. Just pick the one that suits you best.

#8 – The Ancient and The Modern

The Japanese are great at combining the best of traditional with the best of modern - see automated toilets in traditional ryokan inns for example!

#9 – Cheap Flights

In recent years Japan has embraced the budget airline phenomena. There are at least [9 low-cost carrier airlines](#) offering cheap internal and local international flights.

#10 – Safety

Japan is one of the safest countries in the world.

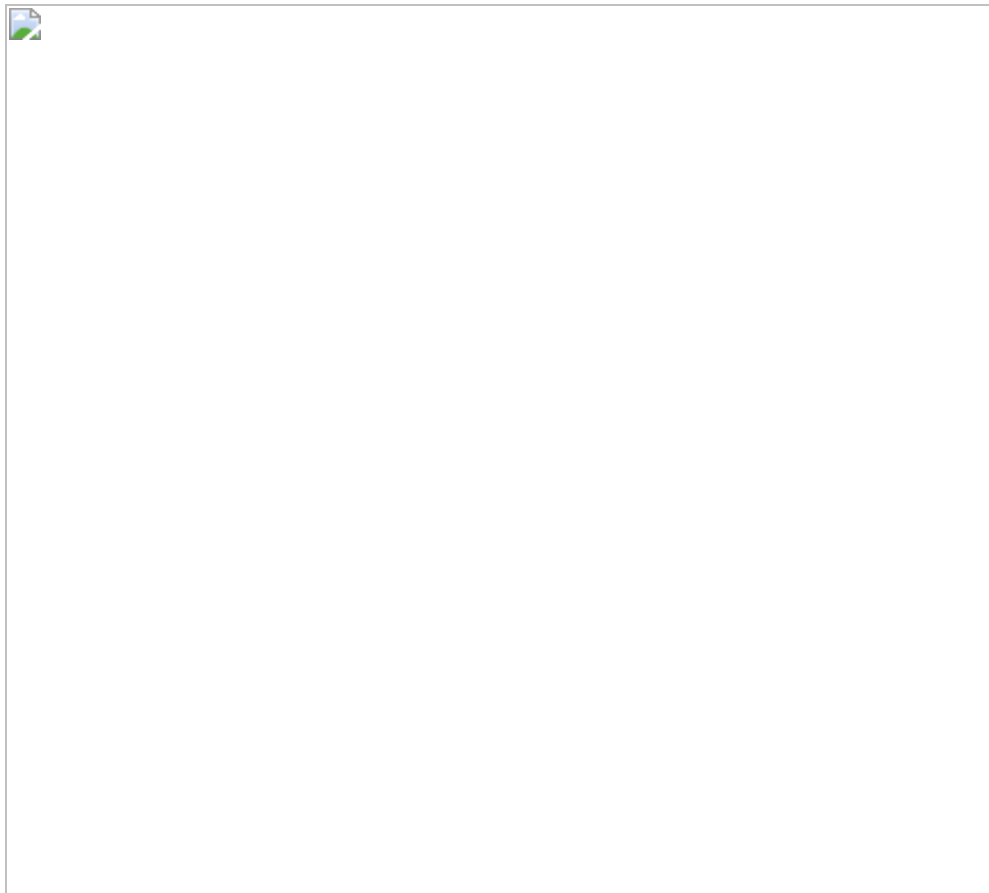


#11 – High Speed Rail - Shinkansen 'Bullet' Trains

Japan was the first country to embrace high-speed train travel with the shinkansen (bullet train) which debuted in time for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, and they continually introduce new versions every few years.

#12 – Vending Machines

Vending machines are everywhere in Japan and they contain all kinds of food and drink wonders. You could easily survive by only eating and drinking out of them if you had to! :-)



Vending machines in Japan often feature unique and intricate designs

There are *dozens* more reasons why Japan is a tourist paradise, so don't be surprised if I revisit this topic with more of them. ;-) In the meantime, **what do *you* think makes Japan such a great place to visit?**

Related: [How To Stay In A Decent Cheap Hotel In Tokyo](#)

Related: [The Best Way to Experience The Real Japan? — Stay In A Ryokan](#)

Related: [How The Japanese Anticipate Other People's Needs](#)

Related: [How To Eat Your Way Around Japan](#)

Related: [How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

Related: [Japan — Why You Need To Go Beyond Tokyo](#)

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experience working with
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consultation within the
first 10 minutes"*

How To Travel In Japan When You Don't Speak Japanese



One of the major considerations with [travelling in Japan](#) is the inscrutable Japanese language.

A seemingly incomprehensible, often kaleidoscopic, barrage of cryptic symbols awaits the foreign traveller who doesn't speak or read the language.

But just how difficult is it to travel around Japan when you don't speak the language?

Using Public Transport in Japan

When it comes to the capital [Tokyo](#), the larger (and more popular with tourists) cities such as [Osaka](#), [Kyoto](#), and other big or popular tourist destinations, the non-Japanese speaker will probably fare just fine. Particularly if you are travelling on public transport

In the more familiar tourist locations, train station signs and announcements are in English as well as Japanese. Scrolling information screens on all [shinkansen \(bullet trains\)](#) and tannoy announcements are in English as well as Japanese.

Travelling by Shinkansen (Bullet Trains)

The Shinkansen bullet train is Japan's pride, being the first high-speed train in the world. It attracts travellers with its high levels of safety, speeds over 200 km per hour, and frequent departures - every 3-5 minutes.



Digital signs in large train stations alternate between Japanese and English

Travelling by train and, specifically, on Japan's incredibly well-developed [high-speed rail network](#) of shinkansen is recommended. Particularly if you don't speak Japanese.

There are announcements and scrolling screens in English in every car telling you which station is up next. Making reservations is easy to do without Japanese (again everything is available in English).

Seat Reservations on Shinkansen

Most [shinkansen](#) have both reserved and non-reserved seats in separate cars. Bilingual signs indicate whether a shinkansen car has reserved or non-reserved seating. Seat reservations can be made from one month before the date of travel until just before departure time.

They can be made at ticket counters at all major JR stations (any shinkansen can be reserved from any JR ticket office).

Some ticket vending machines with bilingual menus (Japanese/English) allow travellers to make seat reservations on shinkansen trains. However, [Japan Rail Pass](#) holders cannot use vending machines to make seat reservations.



JR East has an English language website allowing regular ticket users and JR Pass holders to book tickets and make seat reservations for selected trains in Eastern Japan and Hokkaido.

[Smart-EX](#) is an app in English available to users in the United States, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia for purchasing tickets for the Tokaido-Sanyo [Shinkansen](#).

Japanese websites for online reservations are operated by the JR train companies, but typically require Japanese language skills. Google Translate can sometimes help though.

BUY my eBook: [How To Travel in Japan Without Speaking Japanese](#)

Buying Shinkansen Tickets

You can easily buy Shinkansen train tickets from [Voyagin](#) and travel safely and rapidly to your destination in Japan. Use [this dedicated page](#) to buy tickets, book packages with accommodation, day tours with shinkansen and more.

[Search and buy shinkansen tickets HERE.](#)



Shinkansen landing page

[Click HERE to search & buy tickets](#)

Japan Rail Pass - Unlimited Rail Travel in Japan

The JR Pass is the ultimate way to travel Japan, with unlimited rides on the Shinkansen bullet train, all JR trains, buses, even the Miyajima ferry and the Tokyo Monorail!

A few reasons why you should consider the JR Pass:

- Discovery — you can travel the length and breadth of Japan using a JR Pass
- Incredible savings — unlimited use on trains, buses, ferry and monorail
- Ultimate flexibility — choose a 7-day, 14-day or 21-day pass
- Convenience — worldwide delivery in 7 days or less

The Japan Rail Pass is easily the best value way to get around Japan.

[Order your Japan Rail Pass HERE.](#)

Using Buses

Information in English on buses is more limited, but even if it is, if you're armed with a few key words and names of your destinations, chances are you won't go far wrong.

You board buses in Japan either in the middle or at the back, exiting at the front, next to the driver, paying when you get off.

Ticketing on buses and trams in Japan tends to work differently from the rest of public transport. But, from the non-Japanese speaker's perspective, it's pretty simple once you know the system.



Screens at the front of the bus show the price by stop number

You either take a numbered ticket on entering the bus or tram from an on-board dispenser, or simply board if there is no dispenser. Ticket numbers correspond to stops. The same ticket number also appears on an illuminated board at the front of the bus, above and to the left of where the driver sits.

This displays the current price you have to pay should you wish to get off the bus. The further you go, the more that price above your ticket number increases. If there is no ticket dispenser, it likely means that the fare is a fixed price.

The key thing with buses and trams is to either know the stop you need to get off at or to know what the cost of your journey is and get off the bus/tram when the indicator board at the front gets to your price. Chances are you won't need to say or ask anything!

Note: coaches in Japan are often referred to as limousine buses. These you usually board at the front by the driver - having purchased your ticket in advance.

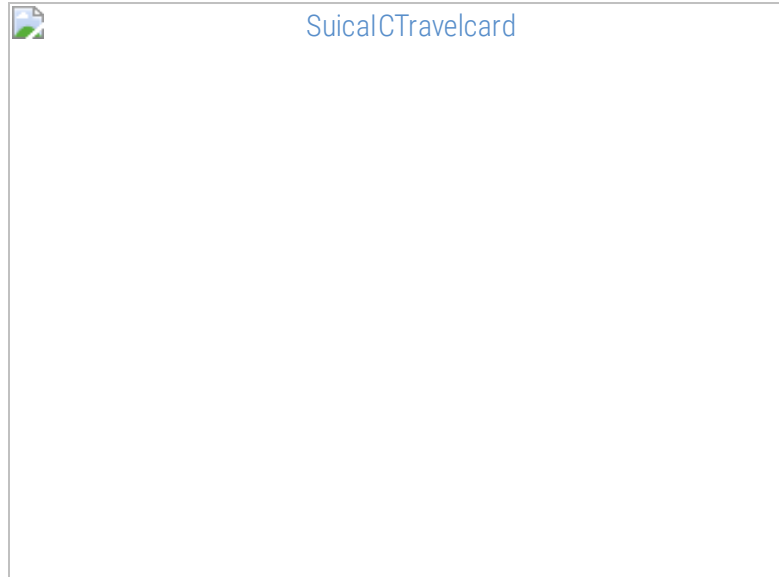
Get a Suica Card

But if this all sounds too much to think about, you could always get a [Suica card](#) and just tap to pay.

Suica is a prepaid e-money - handy for paying for transportation or shopping. You can [order them in advance online](#) for easy pick-up at Tokyo's Narita or Haneda airports or in downtown Tokyo.

- * Board buses without coins
- * Enter stations without tickets
- * Use Suica to pay for goods at stores, kiosks, or vending machines
- * Use to pay for services like lockers, parking, or taxis.

Using a Suica card it's possible to ride city trains, subways, or buses without handling tickets or cash. Less to think about = more chance to enjoy yourself! Using the card it's even possible to get extra discounts on many lines.



4 Great Suica Benefits

- 1.) Easy pick-up at Narita/Haneda airport or in downtown Tokyo
- 2.) Instant confirmation & flexible usage
- 3.) Ride city trains, subways, or buses without handling tickets or cash
- 4.) No need to calculate fares before boarding trains or subways

You can [pre-order Suica Cards HERE](#).



Don't panic! It's just a Muji store sign

Taking Taxis

If you are simply headed to a well-known local landmark, using a taxi should be straightforward enough. There will be a minimum charge already on the meter (clearly displayed just to the left of the driver) that will start to steadily increase once you get beyond the distance covered by the initial price.

However, taxis can also be the most challenging mode of transport to use if you need to get somewhere specific that isn't well-known locally - such as a small hotel, restaurant, private address, etc.

This is because drivers will usually not know exactly where your destination is, in part due to the surprisingly vague postal address system employed in [Japan](#), and in part as they do not have to learn the street network in their area to qualify as a driver.



Taxi drivers in Japan rarely speak English

The easiest way to manage a taxi ride is to have your address written in Japanese and with some sort of map - ideally a print out from an official website of your destination, [Google Maps](#) or an equivalent.

You can pay with cash, credit card and, sometimes, with a Suica Card.

Note: the rear doors of taxis open and close automatically, so you do not need to touch them to enter or exit the car.

Making the Most of Japanese Tourist Information Offices

You should definitely make the most of [tourist information offices](#). For the non-Japanese speaker these are your constant lifeline when [travelling throughout Japan](#) - especially when going off the beaten track.

The larger ones often have at least one member of staff who speaks English, and an extensive (if not entirely comprehensive) selection of translated literature. At the bare minimum they're likely to have maps of the local area, town/city centre and any significant tourist sights in English (and other major languages).

BONUS: Language Hacking Checklist

Download my free printable guide to language hacking in Japan. Includes my 7 step guide to the best apps, tools, websites, phrasebooks, tours + more!

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)

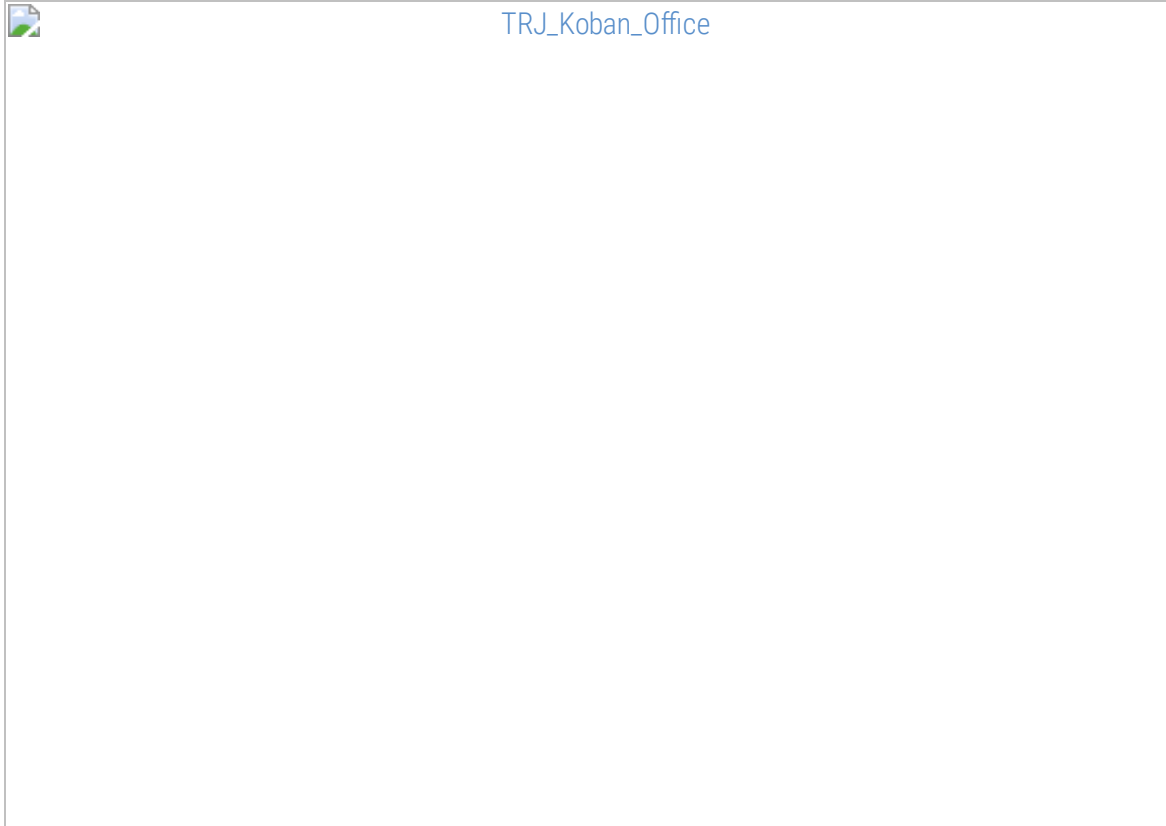
Aside from the information published in English by the [Japan National Tourism Organisation](#) (JNTO), local offices will sometimes have information about local sights that you cannot get anywhere else. They may be black and white photocopies rather than their glossy, full colour and more detailed Japanese counterparts, but they'll do the job - and at least you can read them.

The same goes for sights. More remote tourist sights, such as temples, shrines and castles may simply have the main points of interest covered in a couple of pages of typed up, translated notes. However, it's easy to book a [guided tour with an English speaker](#) for some of these sites.

Ask A Policeman

Aside from their law-enforcement role, police in Japan also serve a community role.

In cities especially, if you need directions then you can pop into a Koban (police box) and ask for directions, which they will gladly offer using probably using a map.



Koban (police boxes) can be useful places to get local directions

Koban are easily identified as "Koban" will be written in Romaji and they always have a red light above the entrance.

Pop your head around the door and try saying: "*Sumimasen, michi o oshiete kudasai?*" ("*Excuse me, please can you tell me the way?*")

The police officer probably won't speak English, but they will be used to Japanese people regularly asking for directions, and they will quickly pull out a local area street map, often pasted onto a large board for ease of reference.

Pre-plan Connections and Book Accommodation

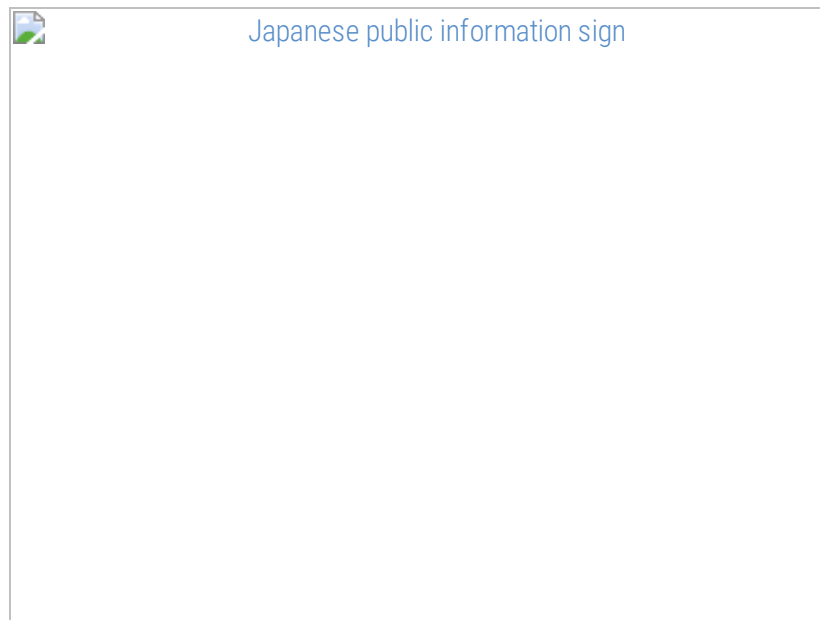
Pre-planning key connections and [booking accommodation](#) in advance will make life a lot easier. It allows you to focus more on the experience, in the moment, instead of worrying about not knowing when your connecting train leaves.

Major train stations in Japan can be [very, very, very large](#). No, you think you know what a big train station looks like, but in Japan they can be massive. They sprawl underground, sometimes on multiple levels - making navigating your way around them even more challenging.

Some have grown and grown over the years, constantly being extended and added to. This can mean that they become labyrinths - even to the locals.

The best tip I can give you is to do what I do when your sense of direction fails you: get above ground as soon as possible so you can get your bearings on local landmarks. You can then either continue to your exit overground or try going back into the underworld and use your general sense of navigation to get you there.

I find the former works more often than the latter. ;-)



Not all signs in Japanese are difficult to understand!

Travelling Off The Beaten Track

Inevitably, the further you travel off the well-trodden tourist routes the less support for other languages there will be.

Small tourist information offices may have a smattering of English literature but no English-speaking staff. Venture further still and many will have neither.

However, if there's one thing decades of [travelling around Japan](#) has taught me, it's not to underestimate what a smile, some strategic hand gestures and speaking English slowly and clearly, but with a Japanese accent, can achieve.

I'm not joking. I can vouch for this tactic from extensive experience.

Whilst you might like the idea of going off the beaten track, you might not be confident enough to do so yourself. That's where [guided tours and activities with English speakers](#) can help.



Narai Station Sign

Station signs on JR Railways have information in English

Asking A Local For Assistance

One general tip that applies particularly in the countryside is never be afraid to ask people you see on the street for help. Younger people are often good to ask as they are more likely to have a smattering of English (you'd be surprised how far you can get with them only knowing “Yes”, “No” and “OK”!).

Shopkeepers are also worth a try. It's perfectly acceptable to pop into a store just to ask for directions. It will help if you have a local street map to hand (which you picked up from the local tourist office - didn't you? ;-)) If staff can help they will, and sometimes will walk you outside the store to give you your bearings before pointing you in the right direction. Fellow Japanese travellers too will frequently come to your aid.

The Japanese may generally be reserved but they can also be extremely helpful if you do ask for help or assistance. Particularly off the beaten track. Just remember to keep your tone and gestures modest. Loud voices and excessive gesticulating can alarm and put off some people.

It is possible to book activities and tours where you are guided by a local. Often by someone who does this sort of thing as a way to share their passion for local food and drink, history, culture, etc. Travel booking sites such as [GetYourGuide](#) and [Viator](#) both have a good selection of such guided tours.

Using a Japanese Phrasebook or App

If you want to make the effort to engage with the locals in their native tongue, take a trusty pocket language guide and/or you could try a phone app.

There are plenty of Japanese phrasebooks out there. The one you choose will largely depend on what you look for in a guide. Me? I still use my old because it is small, well-organised and doesn't require charging or Wi-Fi.

[Lonely Planet's Japanese phrasebook](#) and dictionary is also a best-seller. Lonely Planet is rated as the world's #1 phrasebook publisher.

[Get the Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook](#)

Related: [How to choose the best Japan travel guide book](#)



[Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook](#)

Recently, I've been field testing translation apps, including Google Translate (available both for [Android](#) and [iOS](#)). But have to say, in spite of its slick interface, one of the best in the apps market, I've yet to be impressed.

None of the other apps I've tried have me converted either yet - and I'm a bit of a technology geek - so I'm more than keen on the idea. If you've found one that works well, is easy to use and doesn't rely on internet access I'd be interested to know.

Resources

Japan National Tourism Board - <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/>

(That is the English landing page, if you'd like to choose another language start here: <http://www.jnto.go.jp>)

[Top 10 Most Popular Japan Tours and Trips](#)

[Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook & Dictionary](#)

[Berlitz Japanese Phrasebook & Dictionary](#)

[List of Japan guided tours and activities with English speakers](#)

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How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese

- The Book

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I've been exploring Japan since 2000 and I've picked up plenty of tips along the way.

I've distilled decades of my experience into this ebook for you.

This practical Guide and Workbook covers all the essential basics you need to ensure your first (or next) trip to Japan is as Amazing as you deserve it to be.

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Planning A Trip to Japan

Why Travel Jitters Are A Good Thing



Airplane tails at sunset

Travel Jitters

No matter how much I travel, and no matter how many times I've been to Japan - a country I'm getting to know and understand better with every journey - I still get a slightly uncomfortably 'light' feeling in my stomach as I'm gearing up for a trip.

It's not that I'm a nervous traveller or nervous flyer. But I get travel jitters weeks before the journey begins.

I don't know if many people get it or if it's just me. I can't believe it is.

It feels like a combination of excitement and anxiousness. The excitement is understandable. I've been thinking about what causes the latter.

I've always had a view that I want to be as content as possible. I've never had what I'd call extraordinarily grand desires, but I have had, and still have, ambition. A desire to pursue that contentment as much as possible.

Personal Milestones

It helps immensely if you have control over your circumstances and situation. That's not easy to achieve. Like most things in life, I guess. But this year I'll have reached a few personal milestones. Ones that I set myself when I was in my 20s. It feels special to be close to achieving them. But I can already feel a nervousness about setting new goals.



Playground at Moerenuma Park, Sapporo, Hokkaido

More than another 20 years later and I don't feel anywhere close to my age (well, mentally at least!). Not at all. In my head I am still a teenager (though thankfully without the angst!).

I guess the anxiousness before more travel stems from me being a bit of a control freak. I try not to be. But I can't help myself. The irony is that many of the most memorable, enjoyable and meaningful experiences I've had in Japan are the ones you don't and cannot plan.

You Cannot Buy These Moments At A Travel Agent

Stumbling upon that achingly cute café in Takamori in the middle of the Aso caldera in Kyushu which happens to have a shiatsu treatment room in a shed in the back garden.

Eating in the restaurant in someone's private house surrounded by their inquisitive cats on the north coast of Okinawa. Playing like a child in the sculpture park of Moerenuma Park in Sapporo on the northern island paradise of Hokkaido.

You cannot buy these experiences, these moments, these memories at a travel agent. You have to allow them to happen. That can only happen if you allow yourself to loosen the reins, let chance wrestle control from your hands. Or at least *my* hands.

If I could only learn to relax and embrace the uncertainty I'm sure I'd have less butterflies in the stomach. But having those reminds me I'm alive and that I need to make the most of my time on earth. That I need to keep setting goals. And that I need to keep having adventures in The Real Japan.

Cafe in Takamori, Aso caldera, Kyushu



How To Stay In A Decent Cheap Hotel In Tokyo



Tokyo at night - stunning

Is there such a thing as a cheap hotel in Tokyo?

One of the most common, recurring myths about Japan is that it is prohibitively expensive. So expensive in fact that, as much as you'd love to go there, you're simply not sure you can afford to go for any decent amount of time.

Isn't Japan Prohibitively Expensive?

Whilst it's true that travelling in Japan isn't likely to be the *cheapest* trip you'll ever embark upon, it's also true that it doesn't have to be expensive.

Take accommodation as an example. A key aspect of any travel plans.

What do you think it would cost for two adults to stay in a good hotel in Japan for one night? How hard is it to find a decent cheap hotel in Tokyo?

READ: [How To Travel in Japan When You Don't Speak Japanese](#)

An Ideal Hotel Room Wishlist

Let's make the picture a bit clearer.

Here's a reasonable list of criteria you might want to apply to staying in a hotel in Tokyo - the capital city of Japan (and therefore one of the most expensive places to stay):

- Should be clean, comfortable and modern, if not exactly 5 star
- Needs to have central location that's conveniently close to key areas you want to explore
- Needs a decent size double bed
- Air conditioning/heating
- A vanity table/desk would be good
- Wardrobes to hang clothes and some drawers for smaller items
- A separate seating area - ideally with a table would be really nice
- A fridge
- An en-suite toilet and bathroom is essential! (For me, I really love to have an actual bath rather than a shower - a bit of an ask, particularly in Japan where hotel rooms can be on the 'compact' side, but ideally - that's what I'd like)
- TV

Some 'bonus' features would be:

- A safe
- Free Wi-Fi
- Coffee and/or tea-making facilities
- A microwave
- A hob to cook on (if you wanted to keep costs down by not relying on eating out all the time)
- A separate area to store your luggage (rather than right next to your bed)
- A balcony
- A decent view of the city outside
- Breakfast included - ideally one where you can choose from a range of different options including at least one vegetarian option
- A contemporary rather than dated decor
- A trouser press

Anything else? OK, so this is actually quite a *long* list of requirements/desires!

The Mini-Apartment Hotel Room

But, let's suppose you *could* have the benefit of **all** these features. In Tokyo, the capital of Japan - one of the most expensive cities in the world. What do you think that would cost?

Re-read through the list and write down a sum that you think you'd have to pay for all of this.

Done it? How much was it?

I expect it may have been more than ¥14,000. How much is ¥14,000? Around £78, or \$116, or €106.

That's the *per-room* rate. No the *per-person* rate. And it includes breakfast. So, per person that's around £ 39, \$58, € 53!

All of that in the middle of Tokyo, in Japan - one of the so-called most expensive cities in the world. I don't know about you, but to me that's not only *not* expensive, I'd say that's bordering on downright *cheap*! It's certainly a bargain.

And, just for good measure, *in addition to all of the above*, it had a **full-sized washer/dryer machine** in the mini-kitchen as well! It was as much like a mini-apartment as it was a hotel room and if you were there for any length of time would make a great base for a trip.

[See details of this hotel on Booking.com](#)

An Apartment Room in Tokyo for ¥14,000 Per Night

To take advantage of such reasonable prices it's good to book your reservation as far in advance as you are able. Hotels in Japan often offer an early booking 'plan'.

Some also offer special, internet only rates (when booking via their own websites) that can be discounted from the standard room rates or those available elsewhere.

But what would such a room look like in reality? Well, here's where I can also help. :-) On a [recent stay in Tokyo](#) my wife and I stayed in a room with all of the above features, including breakfast, for that total of just ¥ 14,000.

My Recommended Hotel in Gotanda

The hotel we stayed at was the [Tokyu Stay in Gotanda](#).

Here's some photographs of our apartment...



CheapHotelTokyo7



CheapHotelTokyo6

If you only need a single bed then the hotel offers similarly (though not quite so extensively) equipped single rooms for almost exactly half the price of the double example above - from around ¥7,000 (£39, \$58, €53) per room per night, *including* breakfast.

I'm not sure about other countries, but in the UK a single room rarely costs half the price of a double room.

[See details on the Tokyu Stay Gotanda on Booking.com](#)



CheapHotelTokyo1

The view out to Gotanda from our balcony

Location, Location, Location

The hotel is just 1 minute on foot from Gotanda Station. It's also convenient for Shibuya, Shinjuku, Shinagawa and Odaiba.

We chose it as it is only around 30mins from Haneda International Airport and as a base from which we could easily get to Shinjuku and Shibuya - where we had plans on our [two days in Tokyo](#).

When we stayed there several floors were undergoing renovations (but the price we paid was not discounted on account of the works). There were signs around politely notifying guests of the works and apologising for any noise or mess.

Needless to say, despite the warnings we experienced neither.

The Breakfast Experience

Taking breakfast was a novel experience as the hotel itself doesn't have a kitchen or dining area at all.

Instead, it has a deal with the neighbouring Jonathan's Restaurant, a chain of what's known as 'family restaurants' in Japan - ie family and children friendly. You are given a breakfast token, when checking in, which you redeem at the restaurant.

[Read more about Tokyu Stay Gotanda HERE](#)

This might initially sound a bit inconvenient, but both the hotel and the restaurant are in the same building and are connected to each other via a simple glass door accessed on the second floor! (Both hotel and restaurant have their own, independent separate entrances at street level - you wouldn't know they are connected inside.)



DSC_0773SM

The breakfast options were fairly extensive. The menu having helpful colour photos making choosing easy for non-Japanese speakers. There are unlimited hot and cold drinks like coffee, tea, fruit juices, squashes, milk and water.

Compared to other hotels I've stayed in (it is possible to still pay *less*, and of course you can easily pay an awful lot *more*) but in terms of amenities and value for money this was just about the best deal yet.

*Note: Make sure you choose the *correct* hotel, there are several chains in Japan with similar names (like Tokyu Inn, Tokyo Inn, Tokyu Hotels or Toyoko Inn), but for the purposes of this article it's Tokyu Stay you're after.

Use this link to take you to the correct hotel: [Tokyu Stay Gotanda](#) .

This is an entirely independent review, there has been no considerations of any kind from the hotel in question. It was just a genuinely impressive hotel, in a good location for a great price. So I thought I'd share that with you!

Best Tokyo Hotel Deals

Tokyu Stay Hotel

<http://www.booking.com/hotel/jp/tokyu-stay-gotanda>

If you have other needs, requirements or locations, try Jalan.net (one of the biggest online hotel booking websites in Japan):

http://www.jalan.net/en/japan_hotels_ryokan/?cc=eng_banner

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Changing Plans, New Discoveries

I recently arrived back after our most recent [16 day Japan adventure](#). It was one full of discovery and variety, friends, family, seeing a friend's band perform their first gig in Japan and me [DJing in Tokyo](#)(!).

Travel wise, what worked especially well this time was taking in several short and one-day trips, rather than building an itinerary around one major trip, as we've often done before. However, some things didn't go as planned during our 2 week tour and so I thought I'd share some experiences and lessons from the trip with you.



Bitchu Matsuyama Castle, Takahashi

Changing Plans, New Discoveries

My wife and I had worked out an [itinerary](#) for 16 days which included pre-booked accommodation. Travel we were more fluid on, as the bulk of our transit was by train - facilitated by a (7-day) [Japan Rail Pass](#) - so we'd booked no trains in advance.

As we began our adventure, it became clear that one of the (what I'd hoped to be) major highlights of our 2 week tour around the Chugoku region, a visit to Takeda Castle in Asago (referred to locally as 'the Machu-Picchu of Japan'), may not work out as planned.

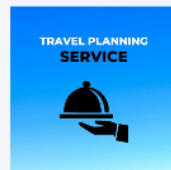
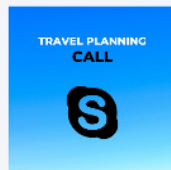
Takeda's location at the top of a mountain and the surrounding landscape mean that at certain times of the year, notably in the autumn (the time of year we were visiting), early in the morning the castle is surrounded by a ring of clouds, making it appear that the castle is floating in the sky, suspended by the clouds.

Once here it became clear that:

- to observe the clouds when they are there, since we were not staying in Asago the night before, would require a very early start to catch a train to get to the location in time for viewing the *possible* clouds, and
- due to the weather conditions it was almost certain that there would be none of the clouds the location is famous for. Hmm...

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"This is fantastic"

*"It was a priceless
experience working with
Rob"*

*"Saved me the cost of his
consultation within the
first 10 minutes"*



Yours truly at Bitchu Matsuyama Castle, Takahashi

Takeda Castle is actually just a ruin. So, if the weather wasn't going to provide that picture perfect moment, the appeal of getting up very early, travelling from Kobe to Asago - just to get to the location (probably somewhat knackered) to find no magic clouds and some ruins, kind of put a different spin on that potential 'highlight'.

Rather than be slaves to a plan, we decided to abandon the idea of visiting Takeda Castle this time, and replace it with something else.

Bitchu Matsuyama Castle

A little bit of additional internet research revealed that Takahashi (in Okayama Prefecture which was already in [our itinerary](#)) had its own 'castle in the clouds' in the form of Bitchū Matsuyama Castle. Moreover, it is higher than Takeda. At 430 metres above sea level, it's actually the highest castle in Japan. And the views from the top confirm that.

Unlike Takeda, Bitchū Matsuyama is still standing, and although the castle itself is relatively modest by Japanese castle standards, it is in fine condition (having been extensively repaired by a citizen's restoration group established in 1929). Moreover, the ascent to it up through the steep, winding mountain forest path, with its wild monkeys and expansive views, is a major part of its appeal, making it a no-brainer to switch out Takeda and replace it with Bitchū Matsuyama instead.

So, although it wasn't in our original plan, the day spent at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle became one of the highlights of the tour. And we still have Takeda to visit on another adventure. ;-)



Bitchu Matsuyama Castle, Takahashi

The weather during some of this trip was a bit worse than we'd hoped.

During November, around the Chugoku region, the weather tends to offer up plenty of clear blue skies, glorious (and warm) sunshine, and little wind. Temperatures can fluctuate between the mid 20°s to low teens. But this time, we had some colder days (not a problem in itself - just chuck on a scarf) and more rain than usual - which does tend to spoil days built around walking around outside.

A Half-Day Trip To Arima Onsen

Due to the fluctuating weather, we realised that to get the most out of this particular adventure we'd need to flip the days of some plans around to make the most of those days when the best weather was forecast. As part of this re-jigging, we added a half-day trip to Arima - a mountain spa resort town famous throughout Japan for its onsen (natural hot springs).

This was rustled up when we saw that a good run of glorious weather would continue the next day when, in our [original itinerary](#), we had nothing planned. An hour on the internet the night before turned up all the basic information required to book an impromptu half-day trip.



Arima Onsen

The visit to Arima was an absolute delight. Even the journey getting there was a treat in itself.

Only 40 minutes north of our base in Kobe, it's easily accessible by the local bus (Hankyu company). This steadily winds its way back and forth up and then over Mount Rokko, offering vast views from the sides and the top of Rokko mountain back down into the natural harbour of Kobe.

Arima itself is hidden, tucked away behind Mount Rokko.

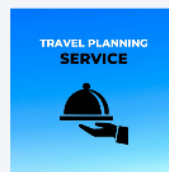
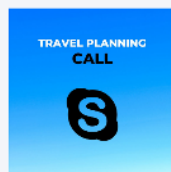
I guess the main lesson from these experiences, was a reminder that as much as we like to plan to ensure we get the most from our travels in Japan, it's good to remain flexible.

Moreover, being flexible can result in making what at first feels like a disappointment (not visiting Takeda Castle) seem like an irrelevance when the replacement (in Bitchū Matsuyama) is better even than I might have hoped.

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first 10 minutes"*

2 Week Tour of Chugoku

A 16 Day Itinerary

Takeda Castle, Asago Credit: Unkai

Our next adventure begins soon.

This time around we have just over two weeks.

In order to make the most of that time, we have planned an itinerary that takes in at least 9 locations but, at the same time, doesn't see us crazily running around non-stop. We've put together a 2 week tour of Chugoku region (Western Honshu).

How We Put The Itinerary Together

What we've come up with gives us time to pause, relax, stroll, socialise, spend time with family and friends, and generally chill, drink coffee and eat cake. :-)

Here's the low-down on how we put the tour together. Feel free to use this as inspiration for building your own version. Links to a whole bunch of resources that we used can be found at the end of the article.

Places Included

- Asago
- Hagi
- Kobe
- Kyoto
- Okayama
- Osaka
- Takahashi
- Tokyo
- Tsuwano

And who knows where else we might squeeze in a day trip to? ;-)

Chugoku Location Map

The North-western Coastline of Honshu

Given that we only have two weeks we decided to keep our travels limited to the main island of Honshu. That way we keep the distance to travel between destinations relatively modest, so we can see more, do more, enjoy more and spend less time actually doing the travelling bit (though I do love that too!).

Of course, we want to explore the lesser-known destinations, more than the more popular tourist places. So, in preparation, I opened my ageing [Rough Guide to Japan](#) to look at the map of Honshu and to see where on the coastline I've not yet been to, and to read about some of the places found there in more depth.

One area stood out: the north-western coastline of Honshu - between Kinosaki and the southern island [Kyushu](#) - two areas I've done some exploring in already. Filling in the gap between them felt like a good plan.

Related: [5 Days in Kyushu - Itinerary](#)



Kobe's Harborland has terrific views both inland and out towards Osaka Bay

With friends in Tokyo, a friend's band ([Mechanical Cabaret](#)) playing their first gig in Japan in the capital, and the invitation to DJ at a club the following day (I also run an electronic/alternative music review website [dsoaudio.com](#)), we decided to begin our trip by flying into Tokyo for a couple of days, before heading over to Kobe, which we will use as the base for the rest of our adventures.

After our travels around Western Honshu, we'll be flying back to England from Kansai International Airport in Osaka.

The Itinerary

Day 1 - Arriving **Tokyo** (Haneda International Airport), stay in hotel (in Gotanda)

Day 2 - **Tokyo** - DJ-ing. Evening Nozomi shinkansen from Tokyo to Kobe

Day 3 - **Kobe** - Chill

Day 4 - **Kobe** - Chill

Day 5 - **Takahashi**, stay in ryokan

Day 6 - Return to **Kobe** from Takahashi (via **Okayama**)

Day 7 - **Asago** (for Takeda Castle) day trip

Day 8 - **Kobe** - Chillout

Day 9 - **Hagi**, stay in guesthouse

Day 10 - **Tsuwano**, stay in ryokan

Day 11 - Return to **Kobe** from Tsuwano

Day 12 - **Kobe** - Chillax

Day 13 - **Kyoto** day trip

Day 14 - Osaka day trip

Day 15 - Kobe - Shopping

Day 16 - Depart to **England** (via Kansai International Airport)

Some Highlights From The Tour

This trip is about mixing new destinations with familiar ones. The new destinations are all much of a kind, in that they are all off the beaten track (of course!) and are examples of the more historical/traditional side of Japan. Here's a few, quick highlights on each of them:

Takahashi (and Tenchi Muyo!)

Takahashi town in Okayama Prefecture is pretty innocuous. Even in Japan.

So much so, that in 2014 the authorities there invested in developing an anime series, *Ai: Tenchi Muyo!*, set in Takahashi to help raise its profile and hopefully drive some of the millions of Tenchi Muyo! fans there in pilgrimage.

Tenchi Muyo! creator Masaki Kajishima is from Okayama prefecture. There's a castle ([Bitchū Matsuyama](#)) and a Buddhist temple (Raikyū-ji) best known for its Japanese garden. My Rough Guide tantalisingly describes it as “*A small, charming time-warped castle town... evoking images of a long-lost Japan*”. That sounds like a piece of The Real Japan to me!

Asago (Takeda Castle – the ‘Japanese Machu Picchu’)

The sole reason for going to Asago is to see Takeda Castle, also referred to as The Castle In The Sky/The Castle In The Clouds. Referred to locally as the ‘Machu Picchu of Japan’, it is the ruins of a castle built in 1441.

At 353 meters above sea level, meaning that in autumn mornings clouds form below the peak it sits on, forming a ring of clouds below the castle - making the castle appear to be floating on the clouds.

I’m not sure if this place gave inspiration to Hayao Miyazaki for the [Studio Ghibli](#) film *Laputa: Castle In The Sky*, but images of it suggest it may have (but either way I love and recommend that film).

Hagi: Samurai Houses and Merchant Quarter

Hagi was chosen to fulfil my insatiable desire to wander around places in Japan that have barely changed in hundreds of years.

The kind of place where samurai houses and merchants' quarters date back to 1604. Where traditional crafts, such as the Hagi-yaki pottery that the town is famous for, and regional specialities like the whitebait caught in the Matsumoto river which divides the town, are maintained to this day. Hagi offers all of this.



The streets of Hagi reward exploring

Tsuwano: Street Canals Teaming With Koi

Like Hagi, nearby Tsuwano was also chosen to revel in the ancient, traditional side of Japan. Tsuwano is older than Hagi and sits below the 908-metre Aono-yama volcano, and is known for its picturesque main street, ‘Tonomachi’ which is lined with Edo-era buildings and canals teaming with koi.

You could visit Hagi and Tsuwano in a single day but wouldn’t have enough time in each, so we opted to travel to Hagi first, stay there overnight, then spend the next full day in Tsuwano, where we will [stay in a ryokan](#).



The town of Tsuwano really is a hidden gem

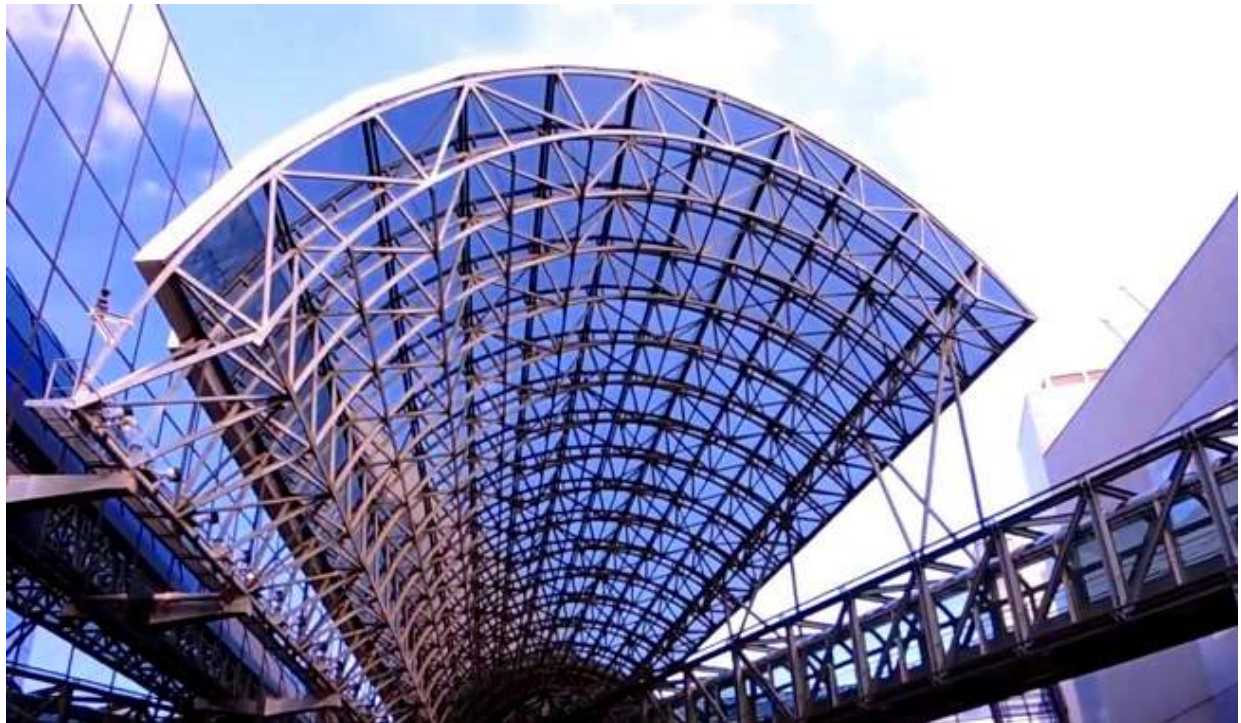
Kyoto and Its Amazing Train Station

Not off the beaten track and a well-known international tourist destination - but with good reason. Kyoto is always worth a visit if you have the time. The main area of interest, including the shrines, temples and old town, is surprisingly compact and a lot can be covered on foot in just one day.

In stark contrast to the traditional temples and shrines Kyoto is famous for, the interior of its train station is a jaw-dropping example of modern Japanese architecture at its finest. You should allow some time to linger inside, taking in the striking design and engineering of the vast atrium spanning its 15-storey high interior.

Related: [Exploring Kyoto's 15 Storey Train Station](#)

There's also a shopping mall, restaurants and even a cinema if you want to spend a few hours here (and you easily could).



Kyoto Station is a destination in itself and well worth exploring

Our Approach To Pre-Planning

- Re-read ageing Rough Guide to Japan for inspiration based on areas of Western Honshu I've never been to before.
- Little bit of additional internet research to fill in the details on and refine our short list of possible destinations.
- Checked late train and flight options from Tokyo to Kobe on Day 2. Opted for Nozomi shinkansen train as they are super fast and frequent. Not much difference in price between plane and train, and not a lot in it duration wise, door to door either. Also, going by train allows us to stay in Tokyo a little longer. (The Nozomi tickets worked out at just under ¥15,000 per person.)
- [7-day Japan Rail Pass](#) purchased in advance in the UK (you cannot buy once you are in Japan). Which we will 'activate' on Day 5 with our train from Kobe to Takahashi.
- All accommodation researched online via Jalan.net (see Resource links below) booked in advance. Even so, a suitable (i.e. affordable) ryokan in Hagi was not available, so we have opted for a more humble (and much cheaper) guest house there.
- International flights booked using Skyscanner.com. Flights from London Heathrow to Tokyo Haneda with ANA. Return flights with Lufthansa (code share flight with ANA) from Kansai International Airport (Osaka) to Frankfurt, Germany, then to London Heathrow worked out to £687 per person.

Related: To read how this trip actually panned out you might want to read this follow up article:

[TRJ Adventures: Changing Plans, New Discoveries](#)

Resources

Skyscanner (for flights)

<http://www.skyscanner.com>

JR Rail Pass (for trains)

<http://www.jrpass.com>

Jalan.net (for accommodation)

http://www.jalan.net/en/japan_hotels_ryokan/?cc=eng_banner

Official Tourist Websites For All The Destinations

Asago Tourist Bureau

<http://www.city.asago.hyogo.jp/kankou/eng/index-en.html>

Hagi City official website (Japanese only)

<http://www.city.hagi.lg.jp/portal/>

Kobe City official website

<http://www.city.kobe.lg.jp/foreign/english/index.html>

Okayama City official website

<http://www.city.okayama.jp/english/index.html>

Osaka City official website

<http://www.city.osaka.lg.jp/contents/wdu020/english/>

Takahashi City official website (Japanese only)

<http://www.city.takahashi.okayama.jp/>

Tokyo City official website

<http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/ENGLISH/>

Tsuwano Official website (Japanese only)

<http://www.town.tsuwano.lg.jp/>

Related: To read how this trip actually panned out you might want to read this follow up article:

[TRJ Adventures: Changing Plans, New Discoveries](#)

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Why You Need To Go Beyond Tokyo

Takachiho Gorge, Miyazaki Prefecture, Kyushu

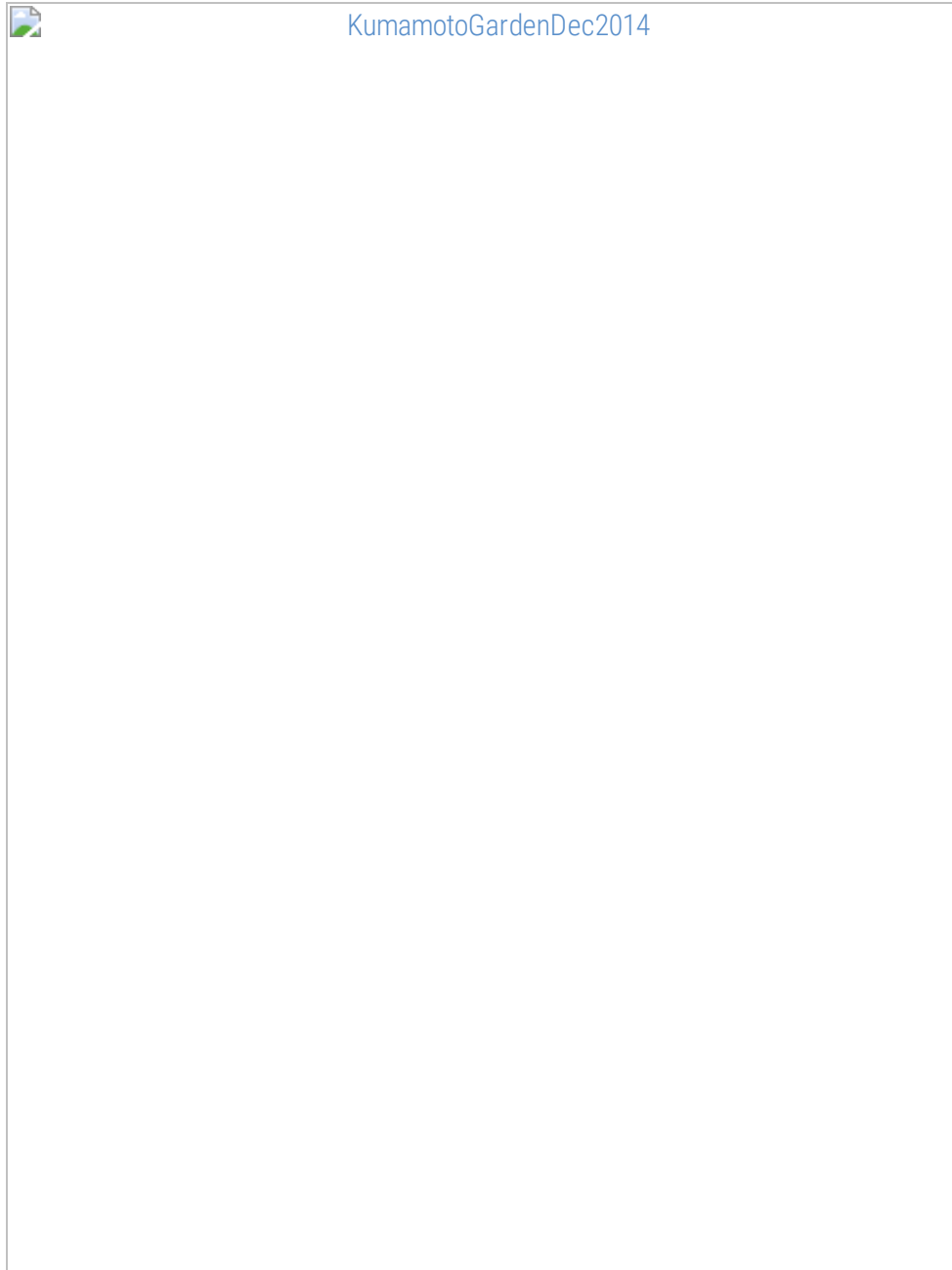
One of the biggest messages I want you to take on board when planning any trip in Japan, especially your first, is not to make the mistake of thinking that provided you spend a week or more in Tokyo then you'll have a great grounding in the country.

You won't.

Here's why you need to go *beyond* Tokyo.

Trying Harder, Digging Deeper

For discovering and experiencing The Real Japan you've got to try harder, dig deeper, look further. The good news is - that's what this website is here for. To do some of the time-consuming and often difficult ground work for you.



Suizenji Garden, Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu

Of course, capital cities are globally recognisable for a reason. If you are travelling a long way to a country it's understandable that you'll want to take in the capital (particularly if it is Tokyo!).

If only to be able to regale friends on the quirks of local culture that (in all honesty) you were already familiar with from a distance via TV, movies and the internet, but had simply never experienced first hand.

And that's all fine.



Japanese farmstead, Hokkaido

Avoid This Fundamental Error

However, the key here is not to save up money and holidays to spend two, maybe three weeks in Japan and then make the fundamental error of spending half (or more) of your time in the one place.

This applies to most capital cities around the world, but never more so in Japan. Our goal here, lest we forget, is to discover and experience The Real Japan - the Japan that most tourists never see.

You Can See A Lot of Japan In 2 Weeks

Of course, there will always be budgetary considerations to factor in that will influence your plans, but going off the beaten track doesn't have to be prohibitively expensive.

As much as having months to do a grand tour of the country would be lovely, for most people it's also highly unrealistic. But that's not a problem.

You do not need months to see a lot of Japan.

You can see a lot of Japan in just 2 weeks; the length of time many visitors to Japan are limited to. Indeed, my next trip will be for 2 weeks, but I'll still be visiting 9 different locations.

Only 2 days of my 2 weeks will be spent in Tokyo. It just takes a little planning and setting your priorities. Of course, if you want to spend more time in Tokyo than 2 days - feel free. It's *your* trip!

Cheap Rail and Air Travel

Rail Passes (purchased in advance from your home country) can save you a fortune on rail travel and for the amount they include are fantastic value for money. In the last few years, Japan has also woken up to and embraced the budget airline phenomenon that those in others countries have taken advantage of for a long time.

New, low-cost carriers like Air Asia, Air Do, Jetstar, Peach, and Vanilla Air mean you can fly internally in Japan, connecting the more remote and exotic islands, far cheaper than in the past. Japan has an extensive internal airline network, there are currently 97 airports in Japan, make the most of them.



Kansai International Airport at dawn

Focus on booking (flights, accommodation, trains, day trips, etc.) directly rather than buying an all-inclusive package tour. Those can be fine but you will be paying a premium for the simplicity of a pre-set itinerary and, chances are, you'll just be traipsing in the same, well-trodden footsteps of millions of other overseas tourists, ticking off the major sights.

That's not what The Real Japan is about.

Japan Is Made Up Of 6,800 Islands

To be fair, it is largely a repetitive diet of countless (clichéd) images and stories those outside of Japan are fed by the mainstream media of the iconic city of Tokyo, which accounts for what feels like 90% of coverage of Japan. (Natural or man-made disaster stories excluded.)

Don't get me wrong, Tokyo *is* part of The Real Japan, as are white-faced geisha strolling around the streets of Kyoto, but they are merely *aspects* of it, and certainly not representative. Japan is made up of more than 6,800 islands - don't you want to see some of them!?



Japan is made up of 6,800 islands

There's So Much Beyond Tokyo

Most people understand it would be wrong to think that spending two weeks in London or New York City gives you an accurate impression of England or America, or of the breadth and variety both of those countries offer. There's so much more beyond those capital cities. The same goes for Japan and Tokyo.

So, by all means, build in a stay in Tokyo into your itinerary - you'll never forget it! - but think about keeping it focused on giving you the kind of experiences and memories that most package tourists won't leave with, and allow plenty of time to explore some of the lesser-known areas.

You'll be surprised at what is out there.

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Travel Planning Services

Whether you're planning your first trip or your tenth,
my Travel Planning Services make life a lot easier



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"Insanely effective!"

"This is fantastic"

*"It was a priceless
experience working with
Rob"*

*"Saved me the cost of his
consultation within the
first 10 minutes"*

A Guide To Low Cost Airlines In Japan



Peace Park Statue, Nagasaki

I'm in the thick of planning my next set of adventures in Japan.

And we're using airmiles for the flight down to Nagasaki - so that one's for free!

I think it's almost equal parts exciting *and* overwhelming - there are just so many options - but I think *exciting* just wins out. ;-)

Flying Can Be Cheaper Than Take The Train

This time, I'll be spending 3 months exploring this endlessly fascinating and beautiful country. I can't wait to share with you my experiences along the way.

One aspect of travelling inside Japan that a lot of foreigners overlook is how the number of low-cost airlines has exploded in Japan in recent years. And, get this...

It's often cheaper to fly inside Japan than take the bullet train.

It wasn't so long ago that there weren't any cheap airlines at all, the country lagging behind other countries with well-developed, and competitive, airline industries.

Well, thankfully, that has changed - big time.

One of our first adventures will be going back to the southern island of Kyushu. There's something about Kyushu that keeps calling me back.

I can't quite put my finger on it, but I think it may have something to do with that no matter where you are on the island you get a sense that nature is always in command. Maybe it's all that bubbling thermal energy that comes from the mountainous interior.

8 Low Cost Carriers

At last count I found no less than 8 low-cost carriers operating in Japan. So have compiled a list of them all to share with you.

Here's why you need to go *beyond* Tokyo.

For discovering and experiencing The Real Japan you've got to try harder, dig deeper, look further. The good news is - that's what this website is here for. To do some of the time-consuming and often difficult ground work for you.

Of course, capital cities are globally recognisable for a reason.

And if you are travelling a long way to a country it's understandable that you'll want to take in the capital (particularly if it is Tokyo!). If only to be able to regale friends on the quirks of local culture that (in all honesty) you were already familiar with from a distance via TV, movies and the internet, but had simply never experienced first hand.

And that's all fine.



Me snorkelling off the coast of Okinawa island

Avoid This Fundamental Error

However, the key here is not to save up money and holidays to spend two, maybe three weeks in Japan and then make the fundamental error of spending half (or more) of your time in the one place.

This applies to most capital cities around the world, but never more so in Japan. Our goal here, lest we forget, is to discover and experience The Real Japan - the Japan that most tourists never see.

You Do Not Need Months To See A Lot of Japan

Of course, there will always be budgetary considerations to factor in that will influence your plans, but going off the beaten track doesn't have to be prohibitively expensive. As much as having months to do a grand tour of the country would be lovely, for most people it's also highly unrealistic. But that's not a problem.

You do not need months to see a lot of Japan.

You can see a lot in just 2 weeks - the length of time many visitors to Japan are limited to. Indeed, my next trip will be for 2 weeks, but I'll still be visiting 9 different locations. Only 2 days of my 2 weeks will be spent in Tokyo. It just takes a little planning and setting your priorities. Of course, if you want to spend more time in Tokyo than 2 days - feel free. It's *your* trip!

RELATED: [How To Spend A Week In Kansai \(And Not Visit Kyoto\)](#)

Cheap Rail and Air Travel

[Japan Rail Passes](#) (purchased in advance from your home country) can save you a fortune on rail travel and for the amount they include are fantastic value for money.

In the last few years, Japan has also woken up to and embraced the budget airline phenomenon that those in other countries have taken advantage of for a long time.

97 Airports In Japan

Newer, low-cost carriers like Air Asia, Air Do, Jetstar, Peach, and Vanilla Air mean you can fly internally in Japan, connecting the more [remote and exotic islands](#), far cheaper than in the past.

Japan has an extensive internal airline network, there are currently 97 airports in Japan, make the most of them.

Personally, I prefer to focus on travelling independently. Booking (flights, accommodation, trains, day trips, etc.) directly rather than buying an [all-inclusive package tour](#).

47 Prefectures, 73% Covered in Forests

To be fair, it is largely a repetitive diet of countless (clichéd) images and stories those outside of Japan are fed by the mainstream media of the iconic city of Tokyo, which accounts for what feels like 90% of coverage of Japan. (Natural or man-made disaster stories excluded.)

Don't get me wrong, Tokyo *is* part of The Real Japan, as are white-faced geisha strolling around the streets of Kyoto, but they are merely *aspects* of it, and certainly not completely representative.

Japan has 47 Prefectures, and 73 percent of the country is covered in forests.

Most people understand it would be wrong to think that spending two weeks in London or New York City gives you an accurate impression of England or America, or of the breadth and variety both of those countries offer. There's so much more beyond those capital cities.

The same goes for Japan and Tokyo.

So, by all means, build in a stay in Tokyo into your itinerary - you'll never forget it! - but think about keeping it focused on giving you the kind of experiences and memories that most package tourists won't leave with.

Allow plenty of time to explore some of the lesser-known areas of Japan. You'll be surprised at what is out there. And it needn't cost you a fortune either.

Resources

[Buy Japan Rail Passes HERE](#)

The Complete List of Low Cost Airlines in Japan

Click on the airline name to go to the English language version of their website.

[Air Asia](#)

[Air-Do](#)

[Peach](#)

[JetStar](#)

[Skymark Airlines](#)

[Solaseed Air](#)

[Spring Airlines Japan](#)

[StarFlyer](#)

If you found this article useful then you might also want to read these posts:

[The JAL Japan Explorer Pass](#)

[The ANA Experience Japan Fare](#)

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How To Eat Your Way Around Japan

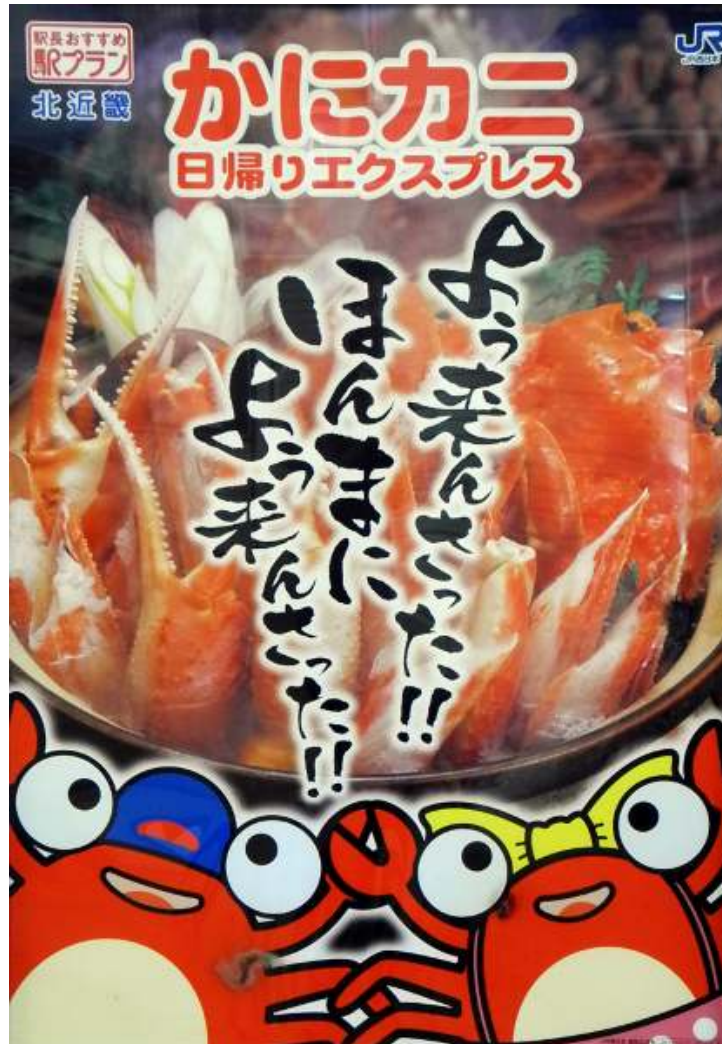


One aspect of Japanese culture that strikes many travellers who explore Japan is just how distinctive the variation is in regional foods.

And how you can get a speciality in one region - but nowhere else in the country.

Japan Food Tours

The Japanese are very proud of this variety, and do a lot to not only preserve this regional character, but go positively overboard in promoting these differences with package tours built entirely around travelling to another part of Japan solely to sample the local delicacy.



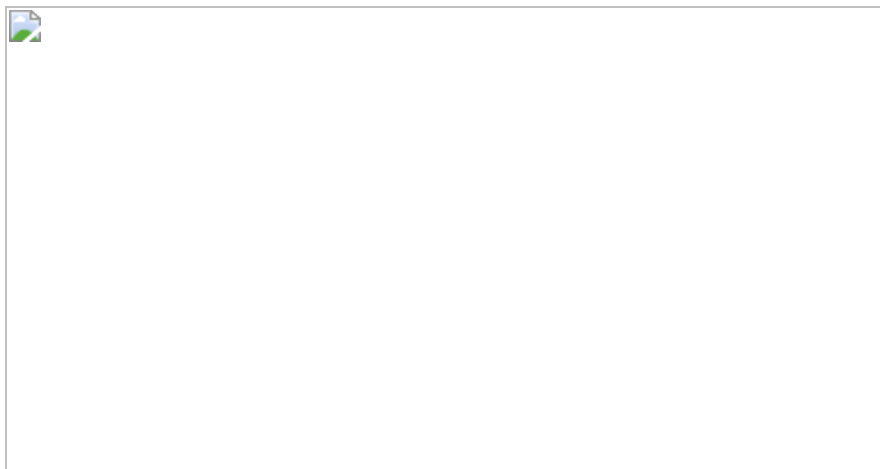
Japan Rail poster for regional crab cuisine

Although aimed primarily at internal travellers, they are, of course, also open to foreigners and can be a unique (to say nothing of delicious!) way to discover The Real Japan.

Japan Real Food Adventure Tour

Start in Tokyo and end in Kyoto! With the food and culinary tour Japan Real Food Adventure, you have a [12 day tour](#) package taking you from Tokyo, via Takayama, Kanazawa, Osaka and Koya-san to Kyoto.

Japan Real Food Adventure is a [small group tour](#) that includes hotel accommodation as well as an English-speaking expert guide, meals and transport. Meals included: 11 breakfasts, 4 lunches, 4 dinners. This tour offers Vegetarian, Vegan, Halal and Kosher food options on request.



Highlights include:

- Learn how to make soba
- Sample Japanese whiskeys
- Eat like a sumo wrestler
- Explore the rural countryside

This tour is run by [Intrepid Travel](#) - the largest 'small group adventure' tour provider in the world.

[Japan Real Food Adventure Tour](#)

Go into any Japanese train station at any part of the year and you will see numerous colourful flyers with promotions for short, food-themed package tours.

These are built around travelling to a region, by train. In the usual way of excellent Japanese customer service and efficiency, will include being picked up at the train station by a private car or bus.

Then you'll be taken to a local hostelry - where your stay will be geared around you sampling as many of the neighbourhood's delights as possible.

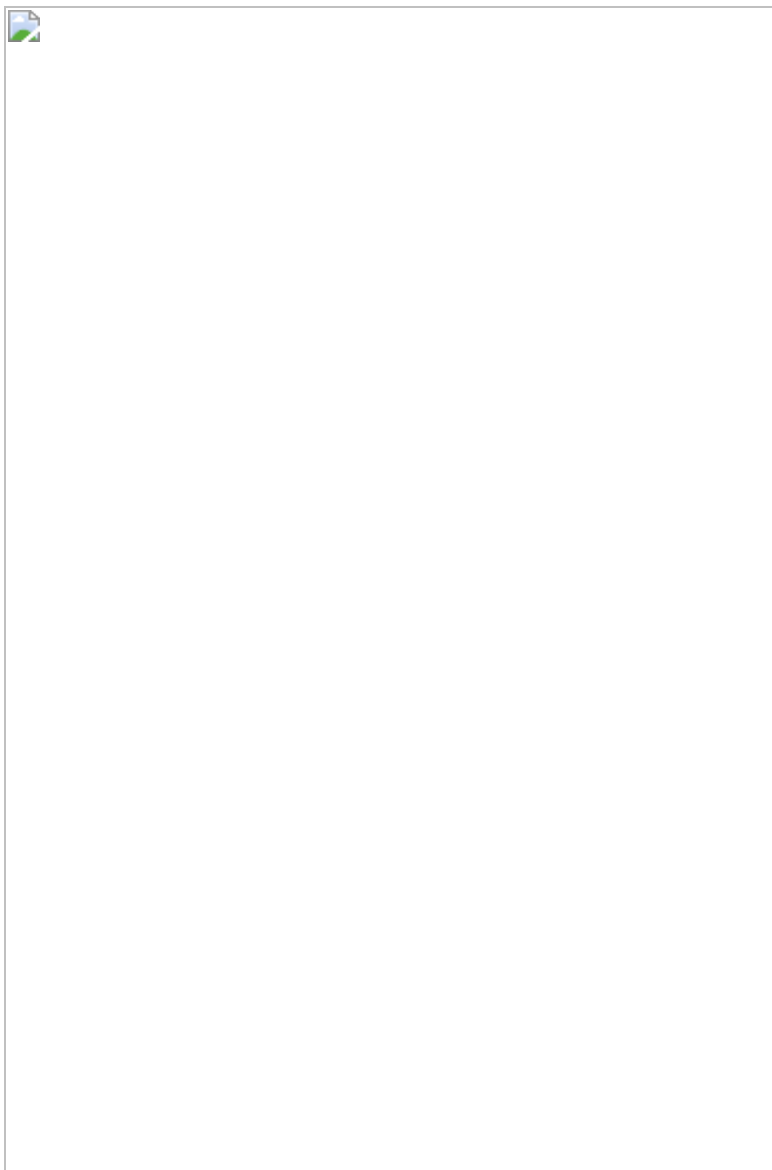
This is not only a wonderful way to sample regional foods that often cannot be had anywhere else in the country, but is a terrific way to travel.

The common interest in food being the ideal talking point for kicking off fascinating conversations and potentially new friendships.

Moreover, as these trips are aimed mainly at the Japanese themselves, you'll find few foreigners actually participating.

This is a good thing, because you get to blend more with, and behave like, a Japanese rather than a regular tourist. Albeit whilst doing a very 'touristy' thing!

So, next time you are planning a trip to Japan, think about eating your way around Japan, using food and train company package tours as a way of getting to see other parts of the country the way the Japanese themselves do.



A regional crab feast

If you are a foodie and would like to read more about food, culture and ‘food culture’ in Japan, I can thoroughly recommend Peter Carey’s entertaining book *Wrong About Japan*. In fact, I’d recommend it even if you are not a foodie.

READ MORE: [Japan Real Food Adventure Tour](#)

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5 Essential Things You Need Before You Come To Japan

When it comes to travel, many of us dream about being spontaneous.

Suddenly deciding to up sticks and fly somewhere new with [no real plan](#). Maybe even without a specific final destination in mind.

The reality for many though is that travel can be a big commitment both in terms of time and money.

Essential Things

If that's the case, and your goal is to set off to explore The Real Japan, then here are 5 essential things you need before you come to Japan...

No.1 - Japan Rail Pass



TokaidoShinkansenNagoya

Take advantage of at least a 7 day nationwide rail pass. They offer fantastic value for travelling on Japan's famous bullet trains (or shinkansen as they are known locally). If you are travelling as a couple, you can cover your pass in just a couple of journeys.

As convenient and rapid as it is, rail travel in Japan can be expensive if you buy tickets as you go. Costs can be kept down *considerably* by buying a [Japan Rail Pass](#).

The options are passes lasting for 7, 14 and 21 consecutive days.

What's more, the savings get proportionally *greater* if you can buy a longer pass. Simply choose the duration that best fits with your plans. Cheaper tickets are available for children (6-11 years old), and there's a first class option for both adults and children if you want to treat yourself to a bit of extra luxury.

If your time in Japan is limited to two weeks or less, even if you are staying in one place for much of the time, then having a [7 day rail pass](#) can really open up The Real Japan to you.

The passes also cover use of all non-bullet national and local Japan Rail trains, so you can use it to explore some of the lesser-known regions. Even the JR ferry that runs between Hiroshima and Miyajima is included in the coverage.

Investment in extending and improving both the rail network and a programme of continually introducing new trains every few years, make Japan's rail network one of the best and most efficient in the world.

Rail tunnels and bridges now connect the main island Honshu with the extreme northern island of Hokkaido, as well as the southern island of Kyushu, and the smaller Inland Sea islands. All of which I'd encourage you to visit, so if you have a [Japan Rail Pass](#) there's really no excuse not to get out there exploring.

No.2 - Cash



Bring cash with you and plan to get more cash out when you are here.

The fact that cash firmly remains the preferred form of transaction in Japan can come as something of a surprise to the first-time visitor.

Street crime is incredibly rare in Japan - so the safety of carrying lots of cash on you simply isn't a concern. Look out for Citicorp, Post Office and [7-Eleven](#) convenience store ATMs, as they accept the widest variety of non-Japanese credit and debit cards.

Many, particularly those off the beaten track, will take cash only as payment. And as ryokan tend not to be cheap, be sure you have enough on you to settle up at the end of your stay.

地下鉄路線図
SUBWAY MAP

都営線

- E 大江戸線
- A 浅草線
- I 三田線
- S 新宿線

The fact that the majority of Japanese do not speak English, means that to get the most out of your trip equipping yourself with a decent, pocket-sized phrase book or downloading an equivalent phone translation app will be handy. (That's assuming, of course, that you don't already speak Japanese.)

Not only does this demonstrate that you're not just a dumb, lazy tourist which, of course, as a follower of The Real Japan you couldn't possibly be, but it also shows a willingness to converse and 'fit it'- which always goes down well when travelling abroad; particularly in Japan.

No matter how limited your vocabulary may be, any attempt at speaking in Japanese in Japan will indeed go down well with the locals who will appreciate any effort to speak in their native tongue.

In turn, if you don't scare the occasional one away (it does happen!), you can expect people to often take the time to go out of their way to be helpful.

I still rely upon my trusty old printed pocket Berlitz Japanese guide from years ago. It's so old it doesn't even include a translation for the word 'internet'. (That's '*intanetto*' by the way).

Read the following article for more on the reality of the perceived language barrier and to get you started with your travel plans: [How to Plan A Trip to Japan in Just 4 Steps](#) .

No.4 - Travel Insurance

Boring it may be, but I *never* travel without insurance. I recommend you don't either.

Annual multi-trip works out cheapest. If you are going to travel to a country where you may not speak the language, and where the culture will be about as close as you can get to visiting an alien world (without actually leaving this planet), for the peace of mind alone, it will be worth it.

Besides, some airlines require you to declare that, if you don't take their travel insurance when booking your tickets, that you already have travel insurance in place. Ticking that box and not having any insurance will invalidate your booking should anything go awry with your flights or trip.



I have claimed on travel insurance more than once whilst travelling in Japan - including a short time in hospital including New Year's Day. I wouldn't skip it if I were you.

No.5 - A Plan



It's fine to chill out, wander aimlessly, take each day as it comes. I know. I often do this. I've also done a bit *too* much of it sometimes, only to regret it afterwards.

Discovering that if I'd done just a *little* more research before going somewhere in Japan I could have made *so* much more of my time there. After all, it's unlikely you can simply 'pop back' in a couple of weeks to fill in the things you missed.

That's why having some sort of plan before you go is worthwhile.

The shorter your visit the more valuable having some sort of plan is. The trick with most travel, but especially when it comes to Japan, is to not get stuck in one place for too long. Ideally, it's even best not to use one place as your base for too long either.

“travel [verb] – to go from one place to another; take a trip; journey.”

Therefore, a plan is a good idea. (Or at least a rough idea if you find plans too constricting!).

I'm not talking about an hour-by-hour, package tour type deal here. Just a breakdown of where you will be staying and where you will be visiting on key dates during your trip. Unless you're back-packing or winging it, you might want to think about pre-booking accommodation, major rail travel, and any air travel.

Of course, in addition to the time you have available, your budget will be a key factor here and will largely determine the extent to which you can travel around or have multiple bases during your adventures.

Whatever the limitations you have to work to, still set a travel plan as a goal. The higher you set the bar for your trip, the farther your adventures will take you, and the more rewarding and memorable your trip will be. You'll be glad you did.

Read [this article](#) to get your started with your Japan trip game plan.

If you want a little more help check out my [Japan Travel Planning Service](#).

That's it. These are just a few of my basic suggestions.

Have you already been to Japan? If so, you may have other ideas for essentials that you felt you couldn't do without before you departed on your adventure. Comments and questions welcome - please leave any on the [post on our website](#).

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Sakura! A Guide To Cherry Blossom Festivals in Japan

Spring, or *haru*, is a perfect time of year to explore Japan.

Across large parts of the archipelago the weather is bright, sunny and generally free of rain.

It is also the only season in which you can catch the famous cherry blossom in its full glory.

Sakura Cherry Blossom Forecast

Weather forecasting company Meteorological Corp (JMC) releases their forecast for each year's sakura (cherry blossom) season, and publishes a map of Japan showing this with expected bloom dates.

Predicted Sakura Arrival Dates



2020 sakura

High temperatures in autumn and winter, along with a projected warm and sunny spring, can be reasons given for the early blooming. A trend that has been observed in Tokyo since 2013.

Expected Full Bloom Dates

The flowers are expected to reach full bloom. Estimated dates for this across Japan are also published.

But don't take these dates as set in stone. Sometimes early blooming is initially predicted but then revised to be a later than usual blossom by a later forecast.

More information can be found at the JMC website [HERE](#).

Sakura-matsuri: Cherry Blossom Festivals

There are hundreds of regional sakura-matsuri (cherry blossom festivals) to celebrate this, which incorporate picnicking and drinking beneath the iconic, pink-flowered trees.

If you are staying in a hotel at a sakura resort at this time, they helpfully provide daily updates to the cherry blossom viewing potential - so you do not miss the best viewing opportunities.



Hotels often provide local blossom information in the lobby

The Viewing Season

The viewing season really begins on the main sub-tropical southern island of Okinawa. Because the climate is so much warmer here than the north of Japan, the blossom begins appearing from as early as mid January.

A little further up is the island of Kyushu - and its capital Nagasaki. Here the blossom begins to emerge in the latter half of March.

Moving onto the main and biggest island Honshu, in Kyoto it typically appears in late March. Similarly in Osaka, sometimes nudging into early April. Late March is the time to see it in the capital Tokyo.

In the northern region of Honshu, Aomori it tends to be around late April. Finally, in the northernmost island of Hokkaido and its capital Sapporo it is early May before the cherry blossom first blooms.

Sakura Cherry Blossoms 5-Night Tour of Japan



Visit Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto

Japan's cherry blossoms, also known as sakura, are known worldwide for their beauty.

So why do the Japanese like cherry blossoms so much?

If you watch cherry blossoms in Japan, you will get the answer.

[Read more about the Cherry Blossom Japan Tour](#)

Tour through the major cities of Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto

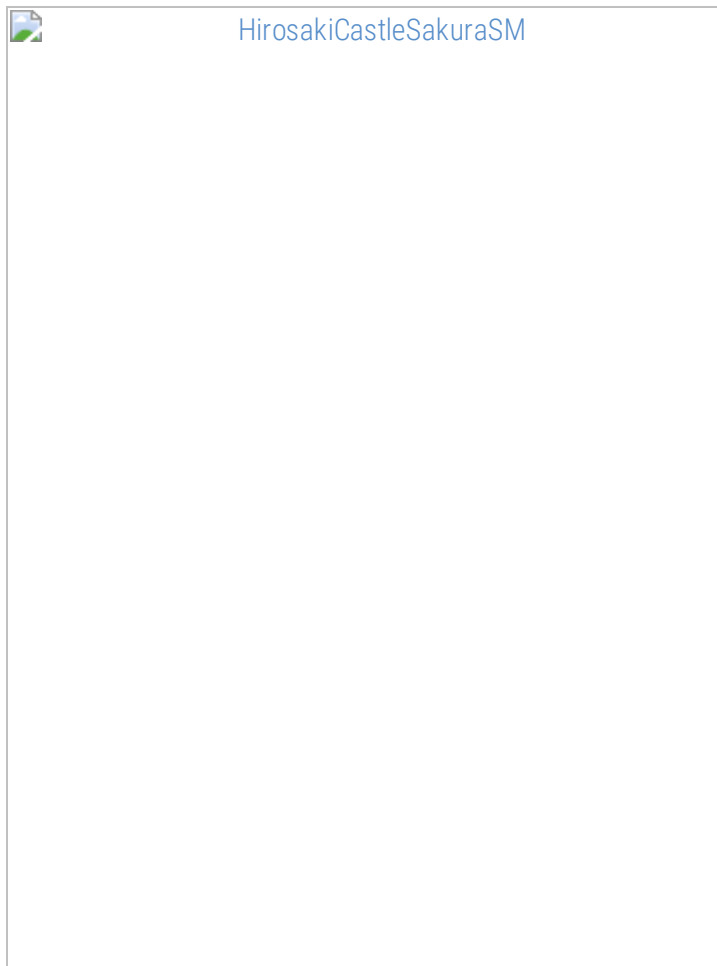
Visit top attractions in Japan including Asakusa, Kiyomizu Temple, Kinkakuji, and more

Cosplayer girl gets on the bus with you and spices up the sightseeing! (Only day 2)

[> Learn More <](#)

The Beautiful Sakura-matsuri in Aomori Prefecture

If this all sounds appealing, you could do a lot worse than experience Hirosaki's beautiful sakura-matsuri festival in Aomori prefecture on the northern most tip of (the main island) Honshu.



Sakura season at Hirosaki Castle

There's an extensive park surrounding Hirosaki castle, and it is here where the extensive and lively celebrations take place.

You can easily spend a half, or even a full day here, wending your way around the thousands of trees laden heavy with blossom. It is worth joining the queue to go inside the castle to get superb panoramic views over both the park and the city.



[SakuraCherryBlossom1](#)

Relaxing with friends and a beer underneath the sakura

Planning Your Cherry Blossom Viewing

Blossom viewing is a major annual activity throughout Japan, and popular viewing locations are flooded by millions of Japanese families all seeking to gain the optimum vantage point and to soak up the carnival atmosphere.

Therefore, if you're planning to visit Japan in the spring, I thoroughly recommend planning to take in some cherry blossom viewing. An essential part of The Real Japan experience.

Cherry Blossom Viewing Top Tips

Book key travel and any accommodation in any destinations in advance if possible to avoid disappointment.

Every year, the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO) website helpfully lists dates when the blossom is expected to be in full bloom as it tracks its way south to north.

JR Rail (and others) offer special priced train packages to the most popular blossom viewing festival locations.

Top 10 Places to Enjoy Sakura Cherry Blossoms in Japan

Japanese company Voyagin has a marketplace where guests can discover and book unique travel experiences hosted by locals.



Chidorigafuchi Park, Tokyo - © by <http://bit.ly/196uJnp>

So, what better way to find the best places to see sakura cherry tree blossoms in Japan than to ask the locals?

Nobody knows the famous sakura viewing spots better than the Japanese, so they asked them for suggestions to compile a definitive list of cherry blossom experiences not to miss while in Japan.

[Read the Top 10 places to enjoy cherry blossoms in Japan](#)

Resources

Japan National Tourism Organisation Cherry Blossom Forecast:

<http://www.jnto.go.jp/sakura/eng/index.php>

Using a Japan Rail Pass to follow the Cherry Blossom:

<http://www.jrpass.com/blogs/follow-the-cherry-blossom-with-your-jr-pass>

Cherry Blossom Tour

[Cherry Blossom 5-Night Tour of Japan](#)

Voyagin's Top 10 Sakura Destinations

[Voyagin Top 10 places to enjoy cherry blossoms in Japan](#)

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How To Plan A Trip To Japan In Just 4 Steps



Planning a trip to Japan should be exciting!

But it can also be daunting and the options for what to do potentially overwhelming.

To help you get started, I've compiled 4 steps, in the form of key questions you should think about and answer.

These will help you determine where to go, how long to go for, what to see and do and how to manage when you are there.

Only A Springboard

This is only the first springboard to get you started, but I've found this approach to be helpful to others, especially when planning their first trip.



HowToPlanMD

BONUS: 4-Step Plan Workbook

Download my 8-page printable trip planning workbook.

Includes my step-by-step guide and 4 self-paced exercises to complete to defining the best trip for you.

[Get This Guide Now \(FREE Download\)](#)

But this isn't only for first-timers. Even now, after decades of travelling around Japan, I still use these steps to generate ideas. If you use them, it will help you discover The Real Japan...

- What Are You After?
- How Long Can You Stay?
- Where Will You Stay?
- Do You Speak Japanese?

1.) What Are You After?

Before you get too involved in the planning process, pause, try to clear your mind of the pre-conceptions you may have about Japan, and then think about when you are back home - what would be the stories or experiences, adventures, places, sights and sounds you experienced during your trip you would want to have and convey to family and friends.

Thinking about and forming some idea of what the takeaway memories you want *after* you've visited Japan will make pre-planning before you go there a whole lot easier. Just one very important tip on places to visit: there is far more to Japan than just Tokyo!

By all means [visit Tokyo](#), but please only have that as one part of your trip. The Real Japan lies far beyond Tokyo alone.

Related: [The Best Way To Experience The Real Japan? - Stay In A Ryokan](#)



Tetra Mound in Moerenuma Park, Sapporo

2.) How Long Can You Stay?

The budget you want to make available will determine your options here but if you are travelling a major distance, e.g. from Europe, North America or Australasia, then the bare minimum duration I'd recommend visiting is 10 days. It is possible to do less. I've done 8 days before from the UK (and my wife once even did a long weekend around a business trip - not recommended!) but it is far from ideal.

You want to be thinking of between 2-3 weeks if you can. Any more than that is a bonus. If you tend to suffer from jet lag make sure you factor that into your plans, i.e. the shorter the trip the greater the proportion of your time there will be hampered by jet lag.

If you are starting from East Asia (e.g. China, India, South Korea) then your flight times can be considerably shorter and therefore a correspondingly shorter break is a practical alternative if holidays are in short supply.

3.) Where Will You Stay?

This is obviously linked to question 1 and 2 but one of the single most essential experiences of visiting Japan that I recommend everyone builds into their budget and itinerary is to stay at least one night in a traditional ryokan.

The more remote the better. High up a mountain, overlooking a river, covered in winter snow and if that ryokan also has an onsen then that would be perfect. If you want to know more about staying in a ryokan then read [this article](#).



StayInARyokan1SM

Typical ryokan room interior

Compared with the west, western-style hotels in Japan (often referred to as 'business hotels') can offer good value accommodation. Deals can sometimes be found online, on the hotel's website or on their Facebook page.

If you're doing things on a budget then there is a decent network of hostels (in one of the safest countries in the world) and camping is another option.

You may want to spend a little more and stay in minshuku (the Japanese equivalent of bed and breakfast) where you'll be staying with someone in a spare room in their own home (where meals are sometimes also included in the price). Airbnb has plenty of accommodation across Japan spanning the price spectrum and is well worth investigating.

Related: [How To Stay In A Decent Cheap Hotel In Tokyo](#)

4.) Do You Speak Japanese?

Chances are you don't.

Don't worry not many people can.

I still can't - and I have a Japanese wife and family and have been exploring Japan since 2000. (I know, shameful.)

Whilst having a Japanese partner is an invaluable asset and advantage, it may not be convenient for you to marry a Japanese person right now. No matter, being unable to speak the language may not be [the barrier you might think](#).

The Japanese tourist authorities are acutely aware of the perception that their language can be a major turn-off in deciding to visit their lovely country. Don't let it be a reason to stop you. Major tourist offices will certainly have English (often multi-lingual) speaking staff and literature.

Big department stores and chain brands will at least have store guides in English. Even some small restaurants in cities and bigger towns will have English menus.

Using public transport to get around Japan is the best practical option for most first-time visitors. All [major train lines](#) and roads and even some buses have signs and announcements in English in addition to the native Japanese.



[Japanese restaurant sign](#)

Japanese restaurant sign

Admittedly, I encourage you to go off the beaten path where English language support will be either more sparse or non-existent.

But do not underestimate either the helpfulness of random Japanese people you will meet on your travels.

They will go out of their way to help you, and then some. Nor just how much you can convey with a [phrasebook](#) (or smartphone app), exaggerated gesticulation and saying English words in a Japanese accent.

I'm serious. I still do this.

Minimise Hassle, Have The Best Possible Time

Asking and answering these 4 simple questions will enable you (and those you are travelling with) to identify the main elements of your trip and to plan accordingly. It will help minimise any hassle once you're there and help ensure you have the best possible time once you are there.

These are just my suggested 4 questions to begin how you plan a trip to Japan.

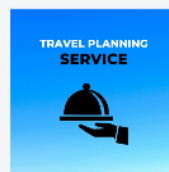
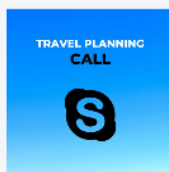
You may want to change these or add one or two additional questions that are especially pertinent to your own personal circumstances. Feel free!

I'd love to hear how you answer these (and any other) questions and to know how you intend to - or did - apply them to your travels in The Real Japan.

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experience working with
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*"Saved me the cost of his
consultation within the
first 10 minutes"*

Japan Airlines JAL Japan Explorer Pass

Japan Airlines offer an excellent flight deal - which is only available to foreign tourists. It's called the JAL Japan Explorer Pass.



A Simple, Low-Cost Solution

Prices start from a little as 5,400yen - that's only \$50 / AU\$66 / £36 - including tax! It's a simple and low cost fare for travelers wishing to explore the unique culture and feel of local Japan.

The fare can be used to access over 30 cities across JAL's domestic network. The pass provides an easy solution to [travelling beyond Tokyo](#) and the well-trodden tourist routes.



Day trip to Shirakawago, Gokayama or Takayama from Kanazawa

Prices and Routes Covered

It's available at a special price for any applicable route within Japan at 3 price points:

5,400 yen (Tax included):

Routes within Hokkaido & Routes departing from/to Tohoku

7,560 yen (Tax included):

Routes between Tokyo and Osaka Routes between Tokyo and Nanki-Shirahama Routes between Okinawa main island and outlying islands

10,800 yen (Tax included):

Routes aside from the above.

*Fare is valid for Economy Class travel only. (Class J, First Class may be purchased at the time of check-in on a standby basis.)

*Depending on the availability, JAL Japan Explorer Pass fare may not display for some routes.



[Dinner with a top level geisha performance in Kagurazaka, Tokyo](#)

Free Wi-Fi Included

JAL offers free internet access on their Wi-Fi-equipped aircraft across Japan, so it's easy to stay connected onboard.

For Nagoya (Chubu) - Okinawa (Naha), Okinawa (Naha) - Miyako / Ishigaki routes, inflight Wi-Fi is available on some flights only. You may check the latest departure and arrival information starting one day prior to departure for the Wi-Fi availability on your flight.

[JAL Japan Explorer Pass website](#)

Eligibility For The Pass

Only individuals residing outside Japan with a return ticket leaving Japan are eligible to purchase JAL Japan Explorer Pass fares.

Reservation and purchase of domestic flight sectors must be completed through JAL's website.

A long list of destinations and routes, along with full details and terms are available on the JAL Japan Explorer Pass website.

Take a look - it might give you some ideas for exploring The Real Japan! :-)



[Try an Introduction Diving Course on Ishigaki Island](#)

ANA's Experience Japan Fare

All Nippon Airways (ANA) also offer a similar discount program called the ANA Experience Japan Fare. You can read more about that below.

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ANA Experience Japan Fare

As part of their domestic flight service, ANA's **Experience Japan Fare** is a great, cost-effective way to explore Japan by air.

All Nippon Airways (usually abbreviated to ANA) is the largest airline in Japan.

Discounted Domestic Flights

The experience JAPAN Fare is a special fare that can be used across ANA's entire Japan domestic flight network. It's a service specifically designed for foreign visitors to Japan, priced to encourage exploration of [Japan's diverse islands](#).

Prices are significantly lower than their standard domestic flights. However, it's also worth checking prices of the [various low cost carrier airlines](#) also operating in Japan.



Boarding an ANA domestic flight

An Alternative to Shinkansen

As the fares are aimed specifically at foreign visitors, ANA are clearly hoping that some travellers will choose their Experience Japan Fare flights instead of taking the [shinkansen](#).

And with good reason. When it comes to longer-haul travel within Japan, its much-praised bullet trains are not always the quickest or cheapest means of transportation.

Train vs Plane - An Example

It takes around 8 hours to travel by shinkansen from Tokyo to Nagasaki on the southern island of Kyushu. Taking a flight takes just 2 hours.

Pricewise, the cheapest return shinkansen option would be to [get a 7 Day JR Pass](#) for 29,650JPY. Whereas a return flight using ANA Experience Japan Fare would be just 22,000JPY.

Also Recommended: [A Guide To Low Cost Airlines In Japan](#)



Geisha on the streets of Kyoto - Credit: ANA

[An exclusive maiko experience in a Kyoto teahouse](#)

Pricing and Routes

There are three ANA Experience Japan Fares. Pricing is determined by the locations they cover.

5,500 yen (Tax included)

Sapporo to Wakkanai, Memanbetsu, Nemuro Nakashibetsu, Kushiro, Hakodate, Aomori, Akita, Sendai, Niigata, Fukushima

Tokyo to Odate Noshiro, Akita, Shonai

Osaka to Aomori, Akita, Sendai, Fukushima, Niigata

7,700 yen (Tax included)

Tokyo to Osaka (Itami, Kobe and Kansai airports)

11,000 yen (Tax included)

Routes within the ANA network aside from the above

This pricing is current as at September 2020.



Sunset over Tokyo - Credit: ANA

Go-karting in Roppongi, Tokyo

Cities and Islands Included

Major cities covered by the network include Sapporo, Tokyo (both Haneda and Narita airports), Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka and Okinawa. Meaning the following islands are all included:

- Hokkaido
- Honshu
- Kyushu
- Okinawa
- Yaeyama Islands



ANA Domestic Flight Network Map - Credit: ANA

Fare Baggage Allowance

The fare includes a free baggage allowance, which is the same piece system as on international flights. ANA advises all fare users to check the baggage rules of all of their flights.

Details on Fare Conditions

It is possible an additional airport fee may apply to the above pricing. Fares are converted from Japanese Yen to the local currency, and is therefore subject to change, depending on the current exchange rate.

Reservations must be made at least three days prior to the departure date. Seats booked using this fare are limited and may not be available on all days or on all flights.

Full details on the fare conditions can be found on ANA's website [HERE](#).



Sample local dishes throughout Japan - Credit: ANA

Enjoy an adventurous evening of food and drink in Osaka

Eligibility For The ANA Experience Japan Fare

To use this fare, the following conditions must be met:

- Passengers must reside outside of Japan.
- Passengers must hold a passport issued by any country other than Japan, or be a Japanese passport holder with permanent residency outside of Japan.

(Passport details are required at time of purchase.)

- Passengers must hold an international ticket/tickets to and from Japan.

(This fare is only applicable for stay in Japan using the international tickets described above.)

(The reservation code or ticket number are required at the time of purchase.)



Explore Japan's remote Yaeyama Islands - Credit: ANA

Enjoy a day of snorkeling and Kayaking at Okinawa Blue Cave

Full details on ANA's Experience Japan Fare can be found on the ANA website [HERE](#) - where flight availability can be check and bookings made.

JAL's Japan Explorer Pass

Rival airline Japan Airlines (JAL) also offers a similar discounted domestic flight program called the JAL Japan Explorer Pass. You can read more about that [HERE](#).

You might also want to read our [Guide To Low Cost Airlines In Japan](#).

TRJ Resources

[ANA Experience Japan Fare](#)

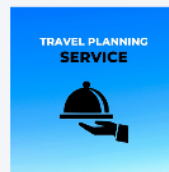
[ANA Experience Japan Fare - Conditions](#)

[The Real Japan Guide To Low Cost Airlines In Japan](#)

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Travel Planning Services

Whether you're planning your first trip or your tenth,
my Travel Planning Services make life a lot easier



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"This is fantastic"

*"It was a priceless
experience working with
Rob"*

*"Saved me the cost of his
consultation within the
first 10 minutes"*

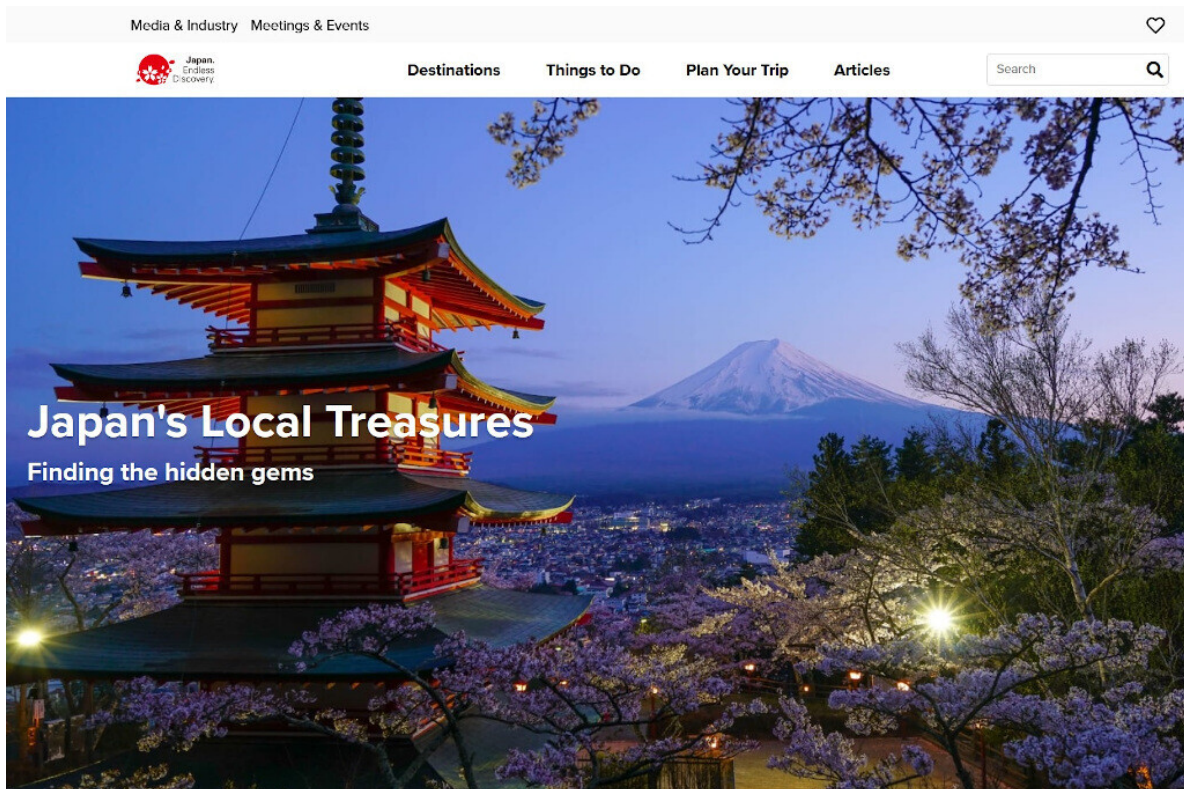
38 Japan Travel Sites and Resources Every Traveller Should Know

An [effective approach to trip planning](#) has become indispensable for many travellers when researching their next trip. To consistently experience exceptional travels in Japan, it helps to have a list of the best Japan travel websites and resources. That's what this post is about.

Here you'll discover some of my favourite trip planning resources, along with some others I suggest you consider. If I've used them, you won't just see what I use, but also how I use them. That's what this post is about.

Although numbered, the list isn't in order of recommendation. Instead, it broadly follows the [5 steps of trip planning](#). From dreaming, through planning, to booking, and so on. All of the sites included in this guide are available in English, or have an English language version. Some are available in multiple languages.

Japan Tourism Websites



JNTO, The Japan National Tourism Organization Website

1.) JNTO, The Japan National Tourism Organization Website

JNTO, The Japan National Tourism Organization website, is the ultimate gateway online to travel information about Japan. It's an absolute must bookmark and a site I use on a regular basis.

The extensive site includes details on destinations (islands, regions, prefectures, cities, towns and villages), things to do (seasonal, activity and interest categories and itineraries), planning (first-timer info, transportation, travel guides, etc.).

They also have a big selection of articles, blog posts, FAQs, and you should also check out their Japan Monthly Web Magazine - an online magazine hosted on the site.

[> Visit JNTO <](#)

2.) JAL Interactive Map of Japan

Tucked away on the Japan Airlines (JAL) website is a really useful interactive map of the country. Search by region, destination A-Z, or just zoom in on the map, and start browsing around.

Click on an area and an overview of it pops up, click again for more detailed info. Or click on one of the highlighted places on the map and be taken to a dedicated page, and get practical information on where to eat, where to stay, and a location map.

Alternatively, use the categories section to focus on things like nightlife, shopping, activities, culture, food, transportation and more. **I've written about the JAL interactive map in this post:** [Fantastic Interactive Map of Japan](#).

[> Visit JAL Map <](#)

Best Airline Websites



Japan Airlines (JAL) logo

These are the best flight booking and flight deal services available right now. I have personally used each of these flight services and I am a member of both JAL and ANA's Frequent Flyer programs. Both are synonymous with the most outstanding customer service at an affordable price.

3.) All Nippon Airways (ANA)

ANA is Japan's other major airline and again, booking your flights through them can be a great idea. Don't forget that you can also earn valuable points with their frequent flyer program, too. I am a member of their frequent flyer program and recommend joining it.

I have flown with ANA several times over the years and have only good things to say about their excellent service. **ANA offers special deals for foreign tourists through their ANA Experience Japan Fare**, where prices are significantly lower than their standard domestic flights. [You can read more about this special fare in this article.](#)

> Visit ANA <

4.) Cheapflights.com

This is a similar flight search functionality to that found on Skyscanner, but with a little more flair. You get more options so that you can be sure you're getting the best deal on your chosen flight. Its interface is also a little prettier and less utilitarian than Skyscanner's, too.

[> Visit Cheapflights <](#)

5.) Japan Airlines (JAL)

JAL offers a range of different flight options, including the popular JAL First Class seats. JAL is a major player in the Japanese air travel market and there are plenty of other benefits of booking your flights through them besides getting top flight service.

I am a member of their frequent flyer program and advise joining it. In my decades of flying to Japan, I have flown more times with JAL than any other airline.

JAL also offers an excellent flight deal, which is only available to foreign tourists, called the **JAL Japan Explorer Pass**. [You can read my guide to those fares in this post.](#)

[> Visit JAL <](#)

6.) Skyscanner

Skyscanner is the first place we look for flight deals. It's fast, easy and free to use. You can search by country, airports, times and airlines.

All the necessary details are laid out clearly in front of you so that you can analyze and compare flight options quickly. A list of suggested destinations also provides ideas for your trip if nothing else is coming up.

[> Visit Skyscanner <](#)

Best Accommodation Booking Sites



Kobe Meriken Park Oriental hotel, Kobe

7.) **Booking.com**

Booking.com is an excellent site to book accommodation whenever you're in Japan (or anywhere else for that matter). There are thousands of options available, so finding the best deal is a breeze (they also price match). They also offer some great deals on hotels when booking during peak periods. They also negotiate favourable cancellation terms with accommodation, meaning last minute cancellations without any charge are commonplace.

With the option to book it as far in advance as a year in advance, this is my go-to site for accommodation. Be sure to create an account with them to get access to discounted pricing not shown to the general public.

Look out too for their Genius Loyalty Program where the more you stay the more you unlock additional benefits such as bigger discounts, free breakfasts and free room upgrades.

[> Visit Booking.com <](#)

8.) Hostelworld

If it's hostels you're interested in then Hostelworld now offers over 500 properties in 86 cities across Japan.

If you're on a budget, or simply want to try staying at a hostel in Japan as part of your trip then there's few English language sites as quick and easy to use as Hostelworld.

If you've never stayed in a hostel, or ruled them out in the past thinking they'll be a bit rough and ready, then trying a hostel in Japan could give you a different perspective on the entire concept.

[> Visit Hostelworld <](#)

9.) Jalan

If you like the idea of a site dedicated only to places to stay in Japan, but want a wider choice than that offered by Japanese Guest Houses (below), then bookmark Jalan.

On Jalan, in addition to ryokan and minshuku, they also include 'regular' and chain hotels, hostels, guesthouses, but also holiday rental homes (which they call villas). They work with over 20,000 establishments across all five main islands (Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku, Kyushu and Okinawa).

I like that their site is 'cleaner' and less cluttered than the bigger global players.

[> Visit Jalan <](#)

10.) Japanese Guest Houses

Although the big sites like Booking.com have added considerably to their niche accommodation offering in Japan in recent years, there's still nothing like a site dedicated to accommodation in Japan. Which is where the superb (English language) Japanese Guest Houses comes in.

As their name suggests, the focus here is on traditional Japanese accommodation, such as ryokan (traditional Japanese inns), minshuku (family-run 'bed and breakfasts') and shukubo (Buddhist temples). They work directly with over 600 ryokan throughout Japan.

They have every style represented, from simple through to luxury.

[> Visit Japanese Guest Houses <](#)

Official Japan Rail Pass Agents



E2 Toki shinkansen (bullet train), Sendai

The Japan Rail Pass is only available for purchase through officially approved agents worldwide. The awarding of the agency status is controlled by the Japan Rail Pass consortium itself.

Some travel agents in your home country may sell the pass but the best choice is online. There are several websites that offer a global or international service. There's not a great deal to choose between them as retail pricing is controlled by the JRPass company.

Some websites are better than others in terms of presentation and many 'throw in' one or two sweeteners, such as country guide ebooks, to get your business and to try and stand out from their competitors.

11 - 12.) Klook + Voyagin

However, if you're already using booking portals like Klook and Voyagin (more on those below) it can make a lot of sense to book your Japan Rail Passes while shopping with them (and you can often get discounts the more you buy through the one site).

So, depending on your preference, both Klook and Voyagin are safe bets for reserving your Japan Rail Passes.

[> Visit Klook <](#)

[> Visit Voyagin <](#)

13.) JRailPass.com

Of the dedicated players, the one I recommend is JRailPass.com. All their passes come with their own free Japan travel guide.

[> Visit JRailPass <](#)

14.) Japan Rail Pass (Official)

It is possible to buy the rail pass inside Japan but it is more expensive. By the way, the official Japan Rail Pass website can be [found here](#).

[> Visit Japan Rail Pass \(Official\) <](#)

Tour & Trip Booking Platforms



Torii gates at Ikuta Shrine, Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture

As a long-standing independent traveller, I used to turn my nose up at guided tours. But having used several down the years, these can be some of the most efficient and easiest ways to explore Japan, often guided by a passionate local.

There are a lot of companies in this space (and the topic is worthy of an in-depth article in its own right), so for our purposes here I'll highlight just a few key players. As with the accommodation platforms, register where you can for access to subscriber-only deals.

None of those listed here are all-include package tours, meaning they'll offer tour services once you are inside Japan. You'll need to add the cost of getting here to their prices.

Full Country Tours

15.) G Adventures

Started in 1990, G Adventures is an independent company dedicated to responsible, small-group travel. Their tours help support local communities and they use local tour guides, only they call them Chief Experience Officers!

Their handful of Japan itineraries include Back Roads of Japan, and often combine culture and history with Japanese foods such as with their Ramen and Railways, Castles and Cuisine, and Speed Trains and Street Food tours.

[> Visit G Adventures <](#)

16.) Intrepid

Intrepid is a small company with a good reputation. They have a small selection of Japan-only tours ranging from family holidays, to cycling, adventure, food themed and more. They also provide Lonely Planet Experience trips, made for travellers who value their independence but also want the benefit of a local leader and a group of like-minded travellers.

Intrepid's more hands-off approach means they can offer low prices. Just be clear on what is and is not included as it varies from trip to trip.

[> Visit Intrepid <](#)

17.) TourRadar

For full country itineraries the TourRadar portal is a reliable starting point. They have several tours (offered by a small selection of specialist providers) that are ideal for first-time visitors who don't want to stick rigidly to the Golden Route.

They also offer some more niche and specialist-interest tours. Prices are very reasonable and they frequently have seasonal sales offering some hefty discounts ([subscribe to my Japan Travel Bulletin](#) to get updates on their sales).

[> Visit TourRadar <](#)

Experiences, Short Guided Tours and Day Trips



Streets of Narai-juku, part of the Nakasendo Way, Nagano Prefecture

On my [Recommended Resources page](#) I've split out short tours and day trips from experience booking services. But there's a lot of overlap between the two and some sites feature more than once. Here, I'll just combine the two categories, but if you'd like to see them separately I suggest taking a look at that page.

18.) GetYourGuide

GetYourGuide has their headquarters in Germany, but they've built up an impressive global network of trips and experiences by partnering with local experts and companies. Their range of Japan activities includes tickets to popular attractions, things to do, and day tours lasting from 1 hour to 1 day.

Popular sightseeing aside, they also provide some very niche private experiences in some of the more remote regions of Japan, meaning it's worth spending some time browsing around their site - which is made easy by a simple filtering tool.

[> Visit GetYourGuide <](#)

19.) Klook

Launched in 2014 and headquartered in Hong Kong, Klook is now an established name in the travel activities and ticket booking platform space.

Their bread and butter has been attraction tickets, often with e-ticket, fast-track and last-minute booking options. They're great for family-oriented activities and for young travellers keen to share their Japan vacation on Instagram (and possibly TikTok for all I know these days!).

Over time, they've steadily broadened their target audiences with more adventurous and off-the-beaten-path experiences now available through the platform. I love the clean design and use of high quality photos and graphics on their website, which makes browsing it more of a pleasure than some of their competitors.

[> Visit Klook <](#)

20.) Magical Trip

Magical Trip is a smaller Japanese company that encourages deeper travel using local guides. But that's deeper within the familiar big cities: Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and Hiroshima, rather than in the less touristy parts of Japan.

Think bar hopping, historical bike tours, area walking, photography, sake/craft beer/vegan tasting, craft and fashion tours. Their range is modest but is supplemented with a number of virtual tours and livestreamed experiences.

[> Visit Magical Trip <](#)

21.) Tiqets

Tiqets was founded by four experienced Dutch entrepreneurs who'd experienced the struggles of traveling first-hand. Although their Japan-based offering is limited when compared with some others in the competitive 'ticket booking' space, Tiqets sets itself apart (and earns its place here) by concentrating on cultural experiences.

There's no go-karting or theme parks here. Instead you'll find a hand-picked selection of cultural and historical based attractions with the emphasis on top museums and hidden gems.

[> Visit Tiqets <](#)

22.) Viator

The TripAdvisor owned Viator has a nicely varied selection of activities, trips and short tours in Japan. Although there is some overlap with the two regional specialists Klook and Voyagin, it has enough unique offers to make it one worth bookmarking. (Check out [this post on 10 Top-Rated Virtual Japan Tours](#) it has available.)

[> Visit Viator <](#)

23.) Voyagin

The granddaddy of Japan-focused experiences, Voyagin is part of the mighty Rakuten group of companies. If you want plenty of choice and keen pricing, this is the perfect place to start.

Their selection is possibly the broadest of anyone out there and as such, they tend to do a lot of volume rather than specialise in any particular line of service. But there are plenty of short guided tours and day trips to browse through.

[> Visit Voyagin <](#)

Food Experience Platforms



Osechi Ryori meal, eaten on New Years' Day

If food is a bit part of your travel, several of those mentioned above have food-based experiences you can research and book. However, there's a couple of platforms solely dedicated to food in Japan you need to know...

24.) Arigato Japan

If you would like to experience a Japanese food tour, Arigato Japan has the popular destinations covered. They have 70 local experts offering 40 foodie tours in 5 culinary destinations (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima and Mt. Fuji).

They also offer a range of online experiences, so you can get a taste of Japan from the comfort of your sofa, if you can't be there in person. The Online Experiences start really cheaply, from just 1,650 Yen. In person city tours start at 16,800 yen.

Aside from the well-known city area tours, they also offer a Hidden Gem Food Tour (Tokyo), a Wine Country Day Trip from Tokyo in Yamanashi where you can visit Japan's oldest family-run winery, as well as sake, whisky, and matcha tours in Kyoto.

[> Visit Arigato Japan <](#)

25.) byFood

byFood's tagline is "A Bite of Japan, A World of Smiles" and they aim to put a grin on your face through two main booking categories: Experiences and Restaurants. Its restaurant reservation service is particularly useful if you don't speak Japanese.

They work with over 1,600 restaurants and your search can be quickly narrowed down by using filters including Areas, Cuisine, Dietary Restrictions, Price Range, Michelin Star holders, and more.

On the Experiences side, activities are classified into Food Tours, Cooking Classes, Dining Experiences and Tastings. A nice social touch is when you make a reservation or booking via their platform byFood donates 10 school meals to children in need for each guest booking.

[> Visit byFood <](#)

26.) Cookly

If you want to actually get hands on then Cookly is the ideal place to start your research. They offer the chance to experience local food culture through cooking classes. And not just in Japan, but across the globe.

Choose a location in Japan or search using tags that match your interests. There's tags for everything from Solo Traveller and Sushi Making, to Vegan/Vegetarian Option and Organic Garden/Farm Tour.

If you've a specific cuisine you'd like to try your hand at (sushi, ramen, soba, takoyaki, tempura, etc.) just select it from the tags. There's sake tasting, wagashi (traditional sweet) making, tea tasting, market and city food tours.

Availability on each class is clearly shown, including if they're available tomorrow, start time, duration and customer star ratings to help you decide and choose which to book.

[> Visit Cookly <](#)

Bus, Ferry, Train Timetable Sites



Anei Kanko ferry services from Ishigaki, Okayama Prefecture

27.) 12Go Asia

This platform is dedicated to providing instant seat confirmation for buses, ferries, flights and railways in Japan and throughout SouthEast Asia.

Aside from some destination travel guides, a few country FAQs and a travel news page, 12Go Asia's simple interface focuses on quickly searching for seat and ticket availability. Perfect for backpackers and independent travellers who want to pre-book tickets in advance (which is sometimes essential on some routes and in some seasons).

[> Visit 12Go Asia <](#)

28.) Hyperdia

Although well-known for their popular phone app, this train and highway bus timetable service also has a website portal. It was created and is maintained by the Japanese company Hitachi. Searches can be made in English, Japanese and Chinese.

Choose your start and end points, date and departure time, then apply any filters, such as the type of service (bullet train, limited express, sleeper service, etc.) and hit search. The results page will return multiple options and list any change of service. The detail and accuracy of the information is impressive, listing arrival and departure track numbers and how long to allow for transfers between services.

[> Visit Hyperdia <](#)

Portable WiFi



Pocket WiFi is the best way to stay connected in Japan

For the highest connectivity and minimal difficulties navigating in Japan, I strongly recommend hiring a mobile WiFi. It's my No.1 'Must Have' piece of tech while exploring the country, and really is the best way to stay connected.

There are a range of services available with little to choose between many of them. Some companies operate under more than one brand name. Japan's excellent mobile phone network ensures you'll get a strong, fast signal even in the farthest reaches of Japan's islands. Provided you go with a reliable provider.

29.) Japan Wireless + 30.) Mobal WiFi

Two other companies that are equally reliable are [Japan Wireless](#) (use my discount code: JWREALJAPAN for 10% off), and [Mobal WiFi](#). I particularly like Mobal as a company because they donate a majority of their profits to charities helping underprivileged children in Africa.

[> Visit Japan Wireless <](#)

[> Visit Mobal WiFi <](#)

31.) Ninja WiFi

Ninja WiFi is my main recommendation. Although you can order online directly from the company themselves, you can **get exactly the same router and connectivity at a lower price by ordering via Voyagin's website**. (Want to know more? Read my [Review: Ninja Pocket WiFi](#))

[> Visit Ninja WiFi \(Voyagin\) <](#)

[> Visit Ninja WiFi <](#)

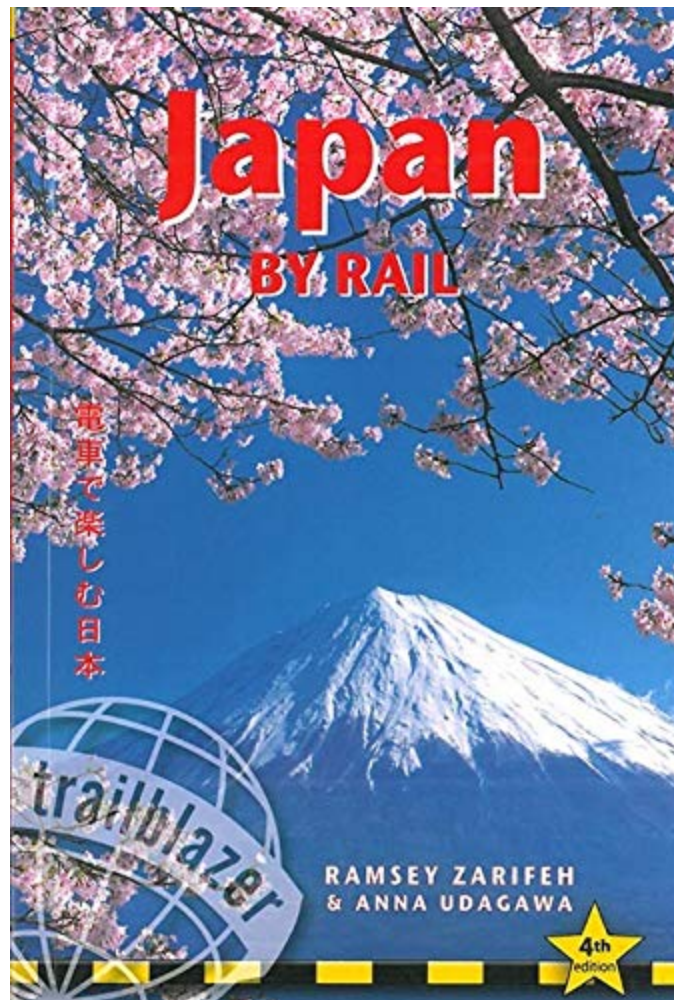
32.) Mobal SIM + 33.) SIMcard Geek

If you don't need WiFi but do need a Japan SIM card then [Mobal](#) provides those too. Another company I recommend is [SIMcard Geek](#) who specialise in cards for short-term tourists.

[> Mobal SIM <](#)

[> Visit SIMcard Geek <](#)

Japan Travel Guide Books



The only guide to Japan by Rail you need

I've written in detail about how to actually go about choosing a guide book to travelling in Japan (you can [read that post in full here](#)). In that article I say determining which is the best guide for you is a little like choosing your ideal partner, or your favourite album of all time - it's a very personal thing.

34.) The Rough Guide To Japan + 35.) Lonely Planet Japan

Still, for my money (and I spend wisely when I do!), the two big names in the field deserve their reputations. So take a look at [The Rough Guide To Japan](#) (my personal favourite) and [Lonely Planet Japan](#). [Read this post for the pros and cons](#) on each.

[> Browse Rough Guide Japan <](#)

[> Browse Lonely Planet Japan <](#)

36.) Japan By Rail

If, like me, you're a keen train traveller, then there's no better guide to using Japan's excellent (and extensive) rail network than [Japan By Rail](#) published by Trailblazer. It includes a rail route guide, multiple network maps and 30 city guides.

[> Browse Japan By Rail <](#)

Meet And Greet Service

For stress-free travel in Japan, you might want to consider a personal concierge service. These are available at major airports and rail stations to assist with things like travel documentation, ticket purchases, Japan Rail Pass voucher redemption, currency exchange, and WiFi/SIM card rental.

37.) Airserve

I have used and can recommend Airserve. It's a Japanese company, part of the Hankyu Hanshin Toho Group. [Book via Voyagin website](#).

You can [read more about Airserve's personal concierge service here](#).

[> Visit Airserve \(Voyagin\) <](#)

38.) Dream Drive

Your average-sized American RV would struggle to navigate its way around many of Japan's narrow and winding roads, which is where Dream Drive comes in. The compact but comfy camper vans at Dream Drive are tailor-made for the landscape. Their custom vans comfortably sleep 1-4 people.

[> Visit Dream Drive <](#)

A Few Words About Phone Apps

I haven't included any phone apps in this list as I will be publishing an article dedicated to the best and most useful apps when travelling in Japan. And this list is pretty long as it is.

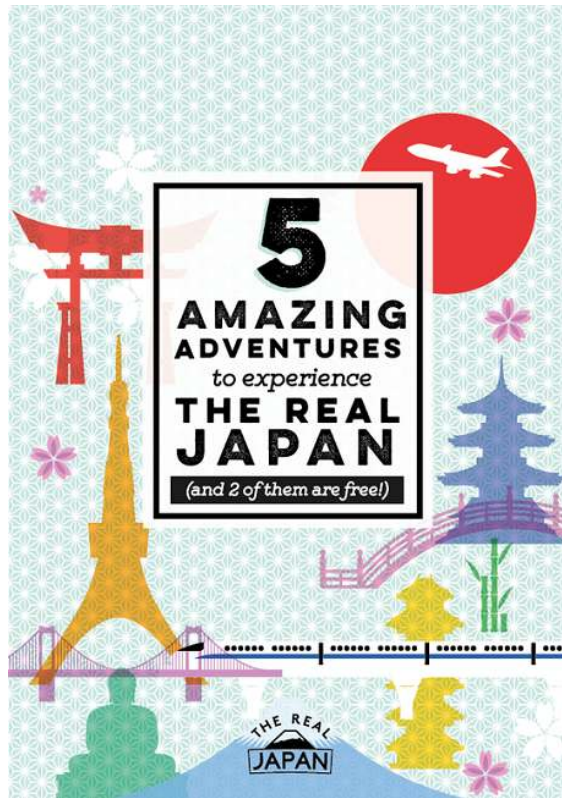
But if you'd like to know more now, in my book *How To Travel In Japan Without Speaking Japanese*, I list 8 Japan travel apps I recommend taking a look at, and 11 Japanese free translation apps for both Android and Apple phones.

Well, that's quite a list!

Be sure to bookmark this article so you have quick access to all of these.

Join The Club!

Download your FREE Amazing Japan Adventures Guide now to get you started!



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Planning A Trip to Japan



The Real Japan Travel Planning Service

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for Richer Experiences**

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Let me guess... you've probably spent way too much time researching travel in Japan?

It's time to stop searching through millions of Google results, and reading out of date Tripadvisor reviews.

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TravelPlanningService.com