

December 6, 2024 · The Journal / Travel Inspiration

Insider's Guide to Japan

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Image courtesy of Aman Tokyo

There's simply no place like Japan. This country's unique blend of ancient traditions and modernity make it an unforgettable destination for travelers who appreciate distinct cultural

experiences, incredible food and a wide selection of activities. From the neon-lit streets of Tokyo to the tranquil historic district of Kyoto and the serene hot springs of Hakone, there's something for everyone — nature lovers, culture enthusiasts, true foodies and anime fans. No wonder travelers return again and again, whether to revisit their favorite city or find something new among the sweeping coastlines or mountain ski towns.

My guide to Japan unpacks the best places to stay and what to do in the country's top travel destinations. Whichever cities and regions you explore, expect a safe, clean and fascinating escape. Reach out to start planning.

Need to know

- **Currency:** The official currency is the Japanese yen (JPY). It's a good idea to carry some cash — Japan doesn't have a tipping culture, but many shops and restaurants outside major cities are cash-only.
- **Languages:** Japanese. English is not widely spoken outside hotels and tourist areas, but Japanese people will do their best to communicate through translation apps. Google Translate is your friend.
- **Airports:** Tokyo has two major international airports, Narita (NRT) and Haneda (HND). Kyoto is conveniently accessed via Kansai International Airport (KIX), while Kanazawa is accessible domestically and through limited international flights at Komatsu Airport (KMQ).
- **Transportation:** Japan has vast, well-connected train and public transportation systems, with high-speed trains (Shinkansen) connecting major cities. Download the Japan Transit App for the Shinkansen. Arrive early to pick up an Eki-ben meal box for the trip. Other options include private guided tours with transportation provided or renting a car for countryside exploration.
- **Best time to visit:** Japan offers unique experiences throughout the year. Fall foliage in October and November and cherry blossoms in April usher in the most crowds. Shoulder months — May and October — are less crowded but still beautiful. Summer can be hot and humid. Winter is mild and perfect for ski resorts or quieter city excursions.
- **Ideal length of stay:** You need at least seven nights to experience Japan's key highlights.
- **Signature dishes:** Foodie favorites include sushi (you'll love the four-seat Bell Sushi for an especially intimate experience), tempura and ramen (Afuri Ramen is a must). Try kaiseki ryori (seasonal multi-course dining) or yudofu (simmered tofu) in Kyoto. Hakone is the place to try kuro-tamago (sulfur-boiled black eggs), while Kanazawa offers mouthwatering seafood and rice dishes.
- **Key phrases:** Konnichiwa (hello/good afternoon), sayonara (goodbye), sumimasen (excuse me or I'm sorry), arigatou gozaimasu (thank you, polite), onegaishimasu (please) and hai/iie (yes/no).
- **What to wear:** Stylish yet practical attire with comfortable shoes is best for exploring the cities. Japanese women tend to cover their shoulders and chests, while bare legs are common even in winter. Pack smart-casual wear for upscale hotels and restaurants.

- **Special considerations:** Always carry a small plastic bag with you, as trash cans are few and far between. Also: Avoid talking on your phone while on trains or public transportation.

Where to stay



Image courtesy of Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Otemachi

First-time visitors to Japan usually focus on two to four of the country's highlights:

- **Tokyo**, the capital city, dazzles with its vibrant mix of ultramodern skyscrapers, bustling streets and serene historic temples.
- **Kyoto** offers timeless beauty featuring traditional wooden teahouses, peaceful Zen gardens and geisha culture.
- **Kanazawa**, known for its beautifully preserved samurai district and the stunning Kenrokuen Garden, offers a blend of art and history.
- **Hakone**, famous for its hot springs, serene lakes and views of Mount Fuji, is the ultimate tranquil escape.

Below, find some of my favorite places to stay. Reach out for recommendations customized to your budget and preferences.

Tokyo

Aman Tokyo: Stylishly minimalist and zen, with perhaps the most dramatic lobby you've ever seen. In many ways, Aman was made for Japan. The aesthetics beautifully complement each other.

- **Fora's Virtuoso** perks include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Janu Tokyo: Aman's playful little sister, a modern escape in the Azabudai Hills development.

- **Fora's Virtuoso** perks include a \$100 food / beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Palace Hotel Tokyo: An elegant, tranquil retreat in Tokyo's iconic city center. This property's prime location, elegant spa and spacious rooms with balconies overlooking the Imperial Palace are the height of luxury.

- **Fora's Virtuoso** perks include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Otemachi: A luxe, cosmopolitan high-rise overseeing the Imperial Palace gardens and featuring an avant-garde spa and sleek room design.

- **Fora's Four Seasons Preferred** perks include a \$100 hotel credit per room / \$200 credit per suite, daily breakfast and an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Kimpton Shinjuku Tokyo: A design-forward stay in the heart of Tokyo's creative district. This stylish stay is pet-friendly and fun, with a rooftop bar and buzzy dining options.

- **Fora's IHG Destined** perks include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, a welcome amenity, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Kyoto



Image courtesy of HOTEL THE MITSUI KYOTO

HOTEL THE MITSUI KYOTO: With views of Nijo Castle, this luxury retreat balances traditional Japanese aesthetics and onsen offerings with modern elegance and international cuisine.

- **Fora Reserve Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, a welcome amenity and an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Shinmonzen: An art-adorned riverside retreat complete for travelers who crave a sophisticated, immersive stay suffused with traditional Japanese hospitality.

- **Fora Perks** include an 8,000 JPY spa credit, a complimentary bottle of wine, a welcome fruit plate, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

The Ritz-Carlton, Kyoto: At this luxury urban retreat with views of the Kamogawa River and Higashiyama mountains, expect Michelin-Starred dining, exceptional spa treatments and activities like tea ceremonies and calligraphy lessons.

- **Fora's Virtuoso** perks include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Kanazawa

Hyatt Centric Kanazawa: A stylish, central boutique hotel with contemporary design and modern amenities near Kanazawa Station and Kenrokuen Garden.

- **Fora's Hyatt Privé** perks include a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, property credit, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Beniya Mukayu: Minimalist design and a focus on wellness permeate this boutique ryokan property in the hot-spring town of Yamashiro. Enjoy private onsen and guided tea ceremonies surrounded by nature.

OMO5 Kanazawa Katamachi by Hoshino Resorts: A design-forward retreat in the culinary heart of Kanazawa. Hoshinoya properties are ideal for those seeking tranquility and cultural immersion.

Hakone

Hotel Indigo Hakone Gora: A fresh, boutique take on Japanese hospitality, with private onsen tubs in each room and curated art throughout the property. Ideal for couples, small groups and solo travelers seeking relaxation.

- **Fora's IHG Lifestyle** perks include \$50 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Gōra Kadan: A renowned luxury ryokan with private onsen, kaiseki cuisine and beautifully manicured gardens. Popular with couples seeking a private, sophisticated retreat.

Hakone Retreat: A design hotel that blends Scandinavian architecture with Japanese hospitality, farm-to-table dining and onsen culture.

History and culture



Image courtesy of The Shinmonzen

Over the centuries, Japan has witnessed sweeping change while holding tight to its traditions. By turns, it has been ruled by emperors and shoguns. Kyoto's 1,000-year reign as the capital is preserved with landmarks like the Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji) and cultural practices such as tea ceremonies and geisha performances. In 1868, the capital was moved to Tokyo.

Today, Japan blends ancient beliefs and modern life, with Shinto and Buddhist rituals still enshrined in the culture. Festivals like Kyoto's Gion Matsuri and visits to historic sites such as Tokyo's Imperial Palace and Meiji Shrine let travelers experience the deep sense of tradition.

Japan's influence on global culture continues to grow, particularly through anime and film. Studio Ghibli, known for its iconic animated films like *Spirited Away*, has become a worldwide

cultural phenomenon. Art, along with Japanese fashion and food, are integral to the country's contemporary identity.

Activities



Japan has vibrant cities, deep history and culture, incredible food and outdoor adventures like forest hikes and white-powder skiing. Here are just a few top activities to get you dreaming. But the country is also primed for spontaneity. Leave time for wandering.

Tokyo

- **Shopping:** Browse luxury boutiques in Ginza, hunt for vintage treasures in Aoyama or check out Harajuku's bold fashion trends.
- **Tasting:** Sample fresh seafood at Tsukiji Market or savor premium sake or whiskey in a guided tasting.
- **Workshops and classes:** Try hands-on workshops like traditional Japanese calligraphy, kintsugi (golden joinery) or ikebana (flower arranging).
- **Museum-hopping:** Take your pick of Tokyo's world-renowned museums, from mainstays like Tokyo National Museum or Mori Art Museum to immersive exhibits at TeamLab Borderless or Ghibli Museum.

- **Sports:** Watch a sumo wrestling match or take a day trip to nearby Yokohama to see the BayStars, baseball champions of the 2024 Japan Series.

Kyoto

- **Arts and crafts:** Discover Kyoto's vibrant art scene by visiting charming galleries and artisan workshops in the districts of Gion and Higashiyama.
- **Exploring:** Join an e-bike tour to the stunning Arashiyama Bamboo Grove and nearby temples. Alternatively, enjoy a relaxing rickshaw ride through the historic streets.
- **Gardens:** Relax in the lovely Shosei-en Garden, known for its lush landscapes and peaceful vibe.
- **Boat tour:** For an exclusive, intimate experience, have me arrange a private boat tour on the Hozu River.
- **Culture and History:** Explore Nijo Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that offers fascinating insights into Kyoto's feudal past. With enough notice, you may also be able to book a geisha performance in Gion.

Kanazawa

- **Nature:** Spend an afternoon at Kenrokuen Garden, one of Japan's top three landscape gardens and a must-see in spring and autumn.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Visit the Higashi Chaya District to visit traditional teahouses and learn about geisha culture. Don't miss Kanazawa Castle, featuring beautifully restored grounds.
- **Food:** Omicho Market is a lively hub for fresh seafood and local produce.
- **Art:** As Japan's gold leaf capital, Kanazawa offers workshops where you can learn to create unique souvenirs.

Hakone

- **Hot springs:** No visit to Hakone would be complete without relaxing in a private onsen or public baths surrounded by nature.
- **Boat tour:** Cruise on Lake Ashi for incredible views of Mount Fuji on clear days.
- **Hakone Ropeway:** After the boat tour, ride the ropeway for panoramic vistas of the volcanic Owakudani Valley and surrounding mountains.
- **Hakone Shrine:** Visit this serene lakeside sanctuary for photos of iconic red torii gates that look like they're floating on water.
- **Museums:** The Hakone Open-Air Museum includes outdoor sculptures and indoor exhibits (including a Picasso collection), and the Pola Museum features works of French Impressionism.

- **Hike:** Explore the forest paths around your hotel or walk the Hakone Old Tokaido Road, a historic trail shaded by ancient cedar trees.

Add-on destinations



Image courtesy of Six Senses Bhutan

If you're heading to Japan for the second, third or fourth time — or have several weeks to spend in the 'Land of the Rising Sun' — consider exploring a few lesser-visited areas.

In Japan

- **Okinawa (3-hour flight from Tokyo):** Extend your vacation with a visit to tropical Japan. Okinawa's pristine beaches and crystal-clear waters are the perfect place to unwind after Tokyo's frenetic pace.
- **Naoshima (4-hour train and ferry from Tokyo):** The iconic art island of Japan is home to contemporary museums and outdoor art installations. A stay at art-immersive Benesse House is the cherry on top.

- **Hokkaido/Niseko (1.5-hour flight from Tokyo):** A winter escape to Japan should begin or end in Hokkaido, where you can ski or snowboard on world-class powder slopes before a relaxing wintry onsen. (And Hokkaido has the best sushi.)

Outside Japan

If you have more than two weeks for vacation, consider adding another Asian country to your trip.

- **Bhutan:** The 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' will immerse you in Buddhist heritage, mountain-backed forests and beautifully preserved culture with a focus on sustainable tourism.
- **South Korea:** Seoul is a short flight from Tokyo, but Korea offers its own vibrant cities, historical temples, distinct cuisine and seasonal cherry blossoms.
- **Taiwan:** Taipei awaits with incredible modern energy and mouthwatering cuisines. After the city break, explore natural wonders like hot springs and scenic mountain trails.

Get in touch with Gregory

Reach out for travel inspiration, hotel bookings or customized itineraries.

*Email Address

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Please provide some details about your trip.

You can expect a response from Gregory within 1-2 business days. You'll also be subscribed to our traveler newsletter (you can unsubscribe at any time).

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