



Japan has one foot in the future and the other firmly placed in the past. Cities that haven't changed since the 1980's somehow still appear to be from a cinematic version of the future, while ancient traditions continue to be passed down from generation to generation all across the country.

There are few highly developed places left where you can still step into a completely new world, where food, art, fashion and popular culture is unique to the region, city or even the street you are standing on. This is what continues to bring visitors back to Japan, knowing that every single experience will likely be different from the last, and unlike anything found anywhere else on earth.

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TOKYO

i ABOUT

This guide can only begin to scratch the surface of Tokyo. As much as you think you know about the city, nothing can prepare you for the first time you go there. Tokyo seems to exist simultaneously in the past and a distant future; the immensity of the lights, the people, the sights and the sounds are almost too much to comprehend when you first arrive, and the shine doesn't wear quickly. Every time you return (and you will return), there's a brand new experience waiting to blow you away.

Getting around is surprisingly easy, with efficient trains that run like clockwork. Foodies flock to Tokyo for both its unmatched number of Michelin starred restaurants, and its small hole in the wall establishments. Shoppers love everything from high-end brands in Ginza to the eclectic thrift stores in Harajuku and Shibuya. Anybody that visits will appreciate the friendly people, and the energy that pulses through the city.

There's a lot more that can be said about Tokyo, but really, you just need to go there and experience it for yourself.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

Keio Plaza Hotel
Close to: Shinjuku station, nightlife
★★★★★



Intercontinental Ana Tokyo
Close to: Roppongi Hills, Tokyo Tower
★★★★★



Shinjuku Granbell Hotel
Close to: Restaurants, nightlife
★★★★★



📍 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Tsukiji Fish Markets
The tuna auction is the main attraction, but you'll need to get there early.

Harajuku
The heart of teenage culture, and great for people watching.

Golden Gai
Narrow alleys filled with small bars and izakaya, located in Shinjuku.

Day trip to Kamakura
This seaside town is a must visit for its shrines and relaxed vibe.

MarioCAR Akihabara
Go Kart through the streets of Tokyo dressed as a Mario Bros. character.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Ten-ichi
Tokyo's most famous Tempura, with the original store still located in Ginza.

Butagumi
Head to this Roppongi hills establishment for the best Tonkatsu in Tokyo.

Afuri
This ramen restaurant is popular with locals and has a cool atmosphere.

CULTURAL TIP

The train is the best way to get around Tokyo, they are clean and efficient. You'll also notice that they are incredibly quiet. If you are going to chat, keep your voice low, or opt not to speak at all. Talking on the phone is definitely a big no no.



KYOTO

i ABOUT

Far from the bright neon lights of Tokyo and Osaka, you'll find Kyoto, the former capital of Japan from 794 to 1868. The city has come along way from it's feudal roots, with its own modern city centre filled with Michelin-starred restaurants, hip bars and impressive architecture.

On first glance, you may be mistaken for thinking this is just another Japanese city, but if you explore a little further, you'll see the relics of the past hiding amongst the hustle and bustle. In early April the city is blanketed in a pink bloom of cherry blossoms, a popular draw for visitors that is made special by its fleeting nature - the bloom only lasts for two or three weeks each year.

While you'll find all the comforts of a modern city, it's the Zen shrines, torii gates and historic districts that continue to draw visitors to Kyoto. Explore small laneways, traditional merchant houses and see the famous Geisha as they walk down the street. It's here that you can truly appreciate the history of Japan, where tradition and progress stand side by side.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Monterey Kyoto
Close to: Imperial Palace, shrines

★★★★★



ANA Crowne Plaza Hotel Kyoto
Close to: Nijo Castle, Museum of Kyoto

★★★★★



Ryokan Yamazaki
Close to: Takao Golf Club, shrines

★★★★★



📍 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Fushimi Inari Shrine

Famous for thousands of red torii gates that line the trails behind the shrine.

Gion

Visit Gion for traditional wooden merchant houses and the famous Geisha.

Maruyama Park

The best place to see cherry blossoms in full bloom on more than 600 trees.

Kinkaku-ji (The Golden Pavilion)

The upper levels of this Zen temple are completely covered in gold leaf.

Kyoto National Museum

First opened in 1897, museum has a focus on pre-modern Japanese art.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Kappa Sushi

Experience traditional sushi in a charming Geisha neighbourhood.

Sumibi-Torito

This restaurant serves up classic yakitori with a high-end twist.

Kiyamachi Sakuragawa

Serving high-end Japanese haute-cuisine, a truly unique dining experience.

CULTURAL TIP

There is no tipping in Japan, in fact it can even be seen as slightly insulting, as it is believed that the service is covered by the price you pay.





OSAKA

i ABOUT

Osaka was first developed as a merchant city, and is the second largest in Japan. Today, Osakans will proudly tell you that their city is the capital of Japanese gastronomy. From street food to Michelin-starred restaurants, food lovers have plenty of choice here. Local specialties such as takoyaki (fried octopus balls) and okonomiyaki (a kind of savoury pancake) are a must try. This city is also well known for the dangerous Fugu (pufferfish) which should be consumed at your own risk!

The people of Osaka and the Kansai region have a long standing rivalry with those from the Kanto region and Tokyo, because they are passionate about the identity of their city and what makes it unique from the other major metropolis to the east. Spend any amount of time in the city and you'll come to appreciate the friendly, outgoing people who live here, alongside the rich history and culture that they share. No trip to Japan is really complete without a visit to Osaka.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

Sheraton Miyako Hotel Osaka

Close to: Tennoji Zoo, Osaka Museum of Fine Arts

★★★★★



Intercontinental Osaka

Close to: Osaka Station, Umeda Sky Building

★★★★★



Holiday Inn Osaka Namba

Close to: Shinsaibashi shopping, Dotonbori

★★★★★



📍 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Osaka Castle

This beautiful castle is a good example of 16th century Japanese architecture.

Shinsaibashi

Shinsaibashi has been a shopping district in one form or another for 380 years.

Dotonbori

The best place to explore Osaka's restaurants and iconic neon signs.

Nara Deer Park

Deers roam freely around shrines and parks, and can even be fed.

Umeda Sky Building

Get 360-degree views of the city from atop this outdoor observation deck.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Takoyaki

These fried octopus balls are a staple street food in Osaka.

Lilo Coffee Roasters

This small cafe and roastery has some of the best coffee in the city.

Tsurugyu

The place to try the famous Kobe beef, in all its rich, marbled glory.

CULTURAL TIP

In Osaka, people stand on the right side of the escalator (they stand on the left in Tokyo). This is thought to be due to their merchant history, as a way to protect their money and valuables which were typically held in the right hand.



SAPPORO

i ABOUT

Sapporo is the capital of Hokkaido, Japan's most northern prefecture. About an hour's flight from Tokyo, in the winter months Sapporo acts as a hub for the hordes of skiers and snowboarders that are passing through to many of the ski resorts in the area.

Its proximity to ski fields is far from the only reason to visit Sapporo. This is a festival city, with popular beer and food festivals in the summer months, and the famous Sapporo Snow Festival in February each year. The latter is considered a must-see for the enormous ice and snow sculptures that are carved in Odori Park.

There's also great shopping and dining in Sapporo, where you'll find hearty ramen dishes that are salty and buttery, designed to bring some comfort in the harsh winters. Ramen Alley in Susukino is the best place to try the dish, which is also the main nightlife hub in the city.

Skiers already know and love Sapporo, but for those that don't like the snow, there's plenty to see and do there year-round.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

ANA Hotel Sapporo
Close to: Sapporo station, Odori Park
★★★★★

Keio Plaza Hotel Sapporo
Close to: Sapporo station, botanic gardens
★★★★★

Sapporo Park Hotel
Close to: Nakajima Park, Toyohira River
★★★★★

📍 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Sapporo Snow Festival
Annual festival that features snow and ice sculptures up to 15 metres high.

Otaru Day Trip
Quiet seaside town near Sapporo, known for its canal and glass-making.

Sapporo Beer Factory
Take a tour of the factory, or head to the huge beer hall for dinner.

Go Skiing
Experience dry, light powder at the resorts surrounding Sapporo.

Onsen
Natural hot springs contain minerals that are great for relaxation.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Nishitondendori Soup Curry Honpo
A specialty of the region, this is one of the best soup curries in town.

Kani-Honke
The place to go for snow crab, which they have been serving for over 50 years.

Jingisukan
Grilled lamb on a shared hot plate - fun, smokey and delicious.

CULTURAL TIP

Japan has two numbering systems, the ichi system (ichi, ni, san etc.) and the hitotsu system (hitotsu, futatsu, mittsu etc). The hitotsu system is used when asking for a number of an item, like ordering at a restaurant. The ichi system is used for people, time and money.



OKINAWA

i ABOUT

Okinawa is Japan's southernmost prefecture, made up of 160 sub-tropical islands that you might sooner associate with a South Pacific paradise like Fiji. This isn't the Japan you see in movies or read about in travel guides, but it has steadily grown in popularity with travellers from all over the world.

The prefecture is roughly divided into three island groups: Okinawa islands, Miyako islands and Yaeyama islands. The main island of Okinawa is the most heavily populated, with the main centres of Nago, Naha and Okinawa City all located there. Miyako and Yaeyama are further south, with the latter sitting close to the eastern shores of Taiwan.

Culturally and historically, this region is very different from the rest of Japan. The vibe is more relaxed, there's less hustle and bustle, and the food and customs draw from a history that has links to both Taiwan and China.

A visit here will show visitors a completely different side to Japan. It's a tropical paradise that will not stay a secret for long, as paradises rarely do.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

Intercontinental ANA Ishigaki

Close to: Golf, Diving

★★★★★



Okinawa Nahana Hotel & Spa

Close to: Asahibashi Monorail, restaurants

★★★★★



Okinawa Grand Mer Resort

Close to: Okinawa Athletic Park, Little America

★★★★★



📍 ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Kudaka

This small island can be explored by bicycle and has fantastic beaches.

Ishigaki

This island in southern Okinawa has crystal clear water and great diving.

Iriomote

Covered by dense jungle, this is the place for adventurers in Okinawa.

Little America

Located near the US military base, Gate 2 Street is like stepping into the USA.

Awamori

Try this distilled rice liquor, which is unique to Okinawa. It packs a punch!

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Ufuya

This Nago restaurant serves Shabu Shabu, a meat and vegetable hot pot.

Makishi Public Market

Buy fresh fish downstairs and have it cooked at the eateries on level 2.

Usagi-Ya

This izakaya is located in Ishigaki, and serves small tapas style dishes.

CULTURAL TIP

Sake (rice wine) is usually drunk with appetisers, izakaya-style tapas, or sashimi. When sharing sake with friends, the traditional etiquette is that you only ever pour sake for others, never for yourself.



WEIRD & WACKY JAPAN

i ABOUT

To compile a list of weird and wacky things in Japan is to be spoilt for choice. Experiences range from the slightly bizarre to the downright insane, from parasite museums, to ninja restaurants and even a service where you can rent a friend for a day.

Want to visit an island that's filled with cute animals? There's more than one. **Tashirojima** is commonly known as Cat Island, with the feline population outnumbering the people.

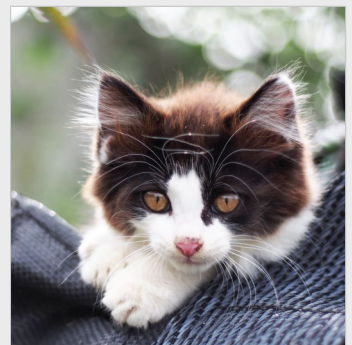
Okunoshima, near Hiroshima, is covered with rabbits who have thrived on the island since the end of the war. If you want to see monkeys, **Sarushima** is known as Monkey Island - but it doesn't have any monkeys. Instead, head to **Jigokudani Monkey Park** near Nagano, where they bathe in the natural hot springs.

Fancy dinner and a show? The **Kabukicho Robot Restaurant** in Shinjuku is a cabaret show from another dimension, with dancers, giant robot dinosaurs, lasers and J-Pop. Animal lovers can have their afternoon cup of coffee while cuddling a cute rabbit, owl or cat at one of the various animal cafes in Japan, or even have their beer delivered by a trained monkey at the **Kayabukiya Tavern**.

There's plenty of unusual attractions to experience too, from jars of parasites at the **Meguro Parasitological Museum**, a re-creation of the town from Anne of Green Gables at **Canadian World**, a chance to take a bath in red wine, green tea, coffee or ramen broth at **Yunessun Spa Resort**, or the chance to make a creepy doll version of yourself at the **Clone Factory** in Akihabara.

FUN FACT

Late night dancing was illegal in Japan for 67 years. The law was abolished in 2015.





EATING IN JAPAN

i ABOUT

In Japan, food often resembles art. Great care and pride is taken in what is presented on a plate, and tradition meets new world gastronomy in Tokyo, a city that holds more Michelin stars than anywhere on earth.

Head to a sushi restaurant and order your sushi Omakase, which translates as "I'll leave it up to you". The chef will present a series of plates, one by one, delicately prepared. Visit **Sushidokoro Yamada** or **Sushi Inomata** in Tokyo for a dining experience you won't soon forget.

Kaiseki is a traditional form of degustation style dining that has taken on a modern twist in recent years. Heavily focused on quality ingredients, guests will be served a range of dishes that balance flavour, colour and texture. This is the zenith of fine dining in Japan, and some of the best restaurants in the world are serving food this way, including **Nihonryori RyuGin** in Tokyo, **Kinobu** in Kyoto and **Masuda** in Osaka.

It's not all fine dining in Japan, and you are sure to find quality food almost anywhere you go. Affordable, and widely available, **Maisen** offers delicious Tonkatsu (breaded pork). Head to the restaurant in a back alley of Omotesando if you are in Tokyo. For another Japanese classic, it's hard to go past a hearty bowl of ramen, with **Afuri** in Tokyo considered the best of the bunch.

It seems wherever you go in Japan, the food is fresh, clean and delicious. Whether it be from a Michelin starred restaurant or a small neighbourhood izakaya, The quality of food comes from an immense pride that chefs take in their work.

FUN FACT

Around 24 billion pairs of disposable chopsticks are used in Japan every year.



SPECIAL EVENTS

i ABOUT

From the traditional to the unusual, there's a myriad of festivals and seasonal activities throughout the year in Japan.

Japan's national sport, **Sumo**, only happens six times a year, so it's important to plan ahead if you want to head to a tournament. These happen in January, May and September in Tokyo, March in Osaka, July in Nagoya and November in Fukuoka.

One of the biggest seasonal events each year is the annual **cherry blossom season**, which draws huge crowds to cities like Kyoto to see the city burst into pink bloom. While it varies slightly each year, the best time is around the first two weeks of April. If you want to avoid the crowds and high prices, try heading south to Okinawa where the first blooms of the season happen in mid-January.

Nihon Sandai Matsuri is the collective term for Japan's three biggest festivals - huge processions of shrines, fireworks displays and traditional arts. These are enormous parades, made up of the **Kanda Matsuri** in Tokyo, **Tenjin Matsuri** in Osaka and **Gion Matsuri** in Kyoto.

Looking for something a bit left of centre? Japan has you covered. Crying babies are used to ward off evil spirits at the **Naki Sumo Matsuri**, belly buttons are celebrated at **Hokkai Heso Matsuri**, people curse at priests dressed as demons at **Akutai Matsuri**, and men ride huge logs down a hill to display bravery at **Onbashira Matsuri**.

FUN FACT

Japanese trains are some of the most punctual in the world. Their average delay is just 18 seconds.

