

Getting Started

Apart from language difficulties, Japan is a very easy country in which to travel. It's safe and clean and the public transport system is excellent. Best of all, everything you need (with the possible exception of large-sized clothes) is widely available. The only consideration is the cost: Japan can be expensive, although not nearly as expensive as you might fear. While prices have been soaring in other parts of the world, prices in Japan have barely changed in the last 10 years, and the yen is at its weakest level in 21 years according to some calculations.

WHEN TO GO

Without a doubt, the best times to visit Japan are the climatically stable seasons of spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November).

Spring is the time when Japan's famous cherry trees (*sakura*) burst into bloom. Starting from Kyūshū sometime in March, the *sakura zensen* (cherry tree blossom line) advances northward, usually passing the main cities of Honshū in early April. Once the *sakura* bloom, their glory is brief, usually lasting only a week.

Autumn is an equally good time to travel, with pleasant temperatures and soothing colours; the autumn foliage pattern reverses that of the *sakura*, starting in the north sometime in October and peaking across most of Honshū around November.

Travelling during either winter or summer is a mixed bag – midwinter (December to February) weather can be cold, particularly on the Sea of Japan coasts of Honshū and in Hokkaidō, while the summer months (June to August) are generally hot and often humid. June is also the month of Japan's brief rainy season, which in some years brings daily downpours and in other years is hardly a rainy season at all.

See Climate (p790) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

The clothing you bring will depend not only on the season, but also on where you are planning to go. Japan extends a long way from north to south: the north of Hokkaidō can be under deep snow at the same time Okinawa and Nansei-shotō (the Southwest Islands) are basking in tropical sunshine. If you're going anywhere near the mountains, or are intent on climbing Mt Fuji, you'll need good cold-weather gear, even at the height of summer.

Unless you're in Japan on business, you won't need formal or even particularly dressy clothes. Men should keep in mind, however, that trousers are preferable to shorts, especially in restaurants.

You'll also need the following:

- Slip-on shoes – you want shoes that are not only comfortable for walking but are also easy to slip on and off for the frequent occasions where they must be removed.
- Unholey socks – your socks will be on display a lot of the time.
- Books – English-language and other foreign-language books are expensive in Japan, and they're not available outside the big cities.
- Medicine – bring any prescription medicine you'll need from home.
- Gifts – a few postcards or some distinctive trinkets from your home country will make good gifts for those you meet along the way.
- Japan Rail Pass – if you intend to do much train travel at all, you'll save money with a Japan Rail Pass, which *must* be purchased outside Japan; see p823 for details.

Also keep in mind that peak holiday seasons, particularly Golden Week (late April to early May) and the mid-August O-Bon (Festival of the Dead), are extremely popular for domestic travel and can be problematic in terms of reservations and crowds. Likewise, everything in Japan basically shuts down during Shōgatsu (New Year period).

All that said, it is worth remembering that you can comfortably travel in Japan at any time of year – just because you can't come in spring or autumn is no reason to give the country a miss.

For information on Japan's festivals and special events, see p794. For public holidays, see p795.

HOW MUCH?

Business hotel accommodation (per person) ¥8000
 Midrange meal ¥2500
 Local bus ¥220
 Temple admission ¥500
 Newspaper ¥130

COSTS & MONEY

Japan is generally considered an expensive country in which to travel. Certainly, this is the case if you opt to stay in top-end hotels, take a lot of taxis and eat all your meals in fancy restaurants. But Japan does not have to be expensive, indeed it can be *cheaper* than travelling in other parts of the world if you are careful with your spending. And in terms of what you get for your money, Japan is good value indeed.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Travel books about Japan often end up turning into extended reflections on the eccentricities or uniqueness of the Japanese. One writer who did not fall prey to this temptation was Alan Booth. *The Roads to Sata* (1985) is the best of his writings about Japan, and traces a four-month journey on foot from the northern tip of Hokkaidō to Sata, the southern tip of Kyūshū. Booth's *Looking for the Lost – Journeys Through a Vanishing Japan* (1995) was his final book, and again recounts walks in rural Japan. Booth loved Japan, warts and all, and these books reflect his passion and insight into the country.

SAMPLE DAILY BUDGETS

To help you plan your Japan trip, we've put together these sample daily budgets. Keep in mind that these are rough estimates – it's possible to spend slightly less if you really put your mind to it, and you can spend a heckuva lot more if you want to live large.

Budget

- Youth hostel accommodation (per person): ¥2800
- Two simple restaurant meals: ¥2000
- Train/bus transport: ¥1500
- One average temple/museum admission: ¥500
- Snacks, drinks, sundries: ¥1000
- Total: ¥7800 (about US\$65)

Midrange

- Business hotel accommodation (per person): ¥8000
- Two mid-range restaurant meals: ¥4000
- Train/bus transport: ¥1500
- Two average temple/museum admissions: ¥1000
- Snacks, drinks, sundries: ¥2000
- Total: ¥16,500 (about US\$135)

JAPAN: IT'S CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK

Everyone has heard the tale of the guy who blundered into a bar in Japan, had two drinks and got stuck with a bill for US\$1000 (or US\$2000, depending on who's telling the story). Urban legends like this date back to the heady days of the bubble economy of the 1980s. Sure, you can still drop money like that on a few drinks in exclusive establishments in Tokyo if you are lucky enough to get by the guy at the door, but you're more likely to be spending ¥600 (about US\$5) per beer in Japan.

The fact is, Japan's image as one of the world's most expensive countries is just that: an image. Anyone who has been to Japan recently knows that it can be cheaper to travel in Japan than in parts of Western Europe, the United States, Australia or even the big coastal cities of China. And the yen has weakened considerably against several of the world's major currencies in recent years, making everything seem remarkably cheap, especially if you visited, say, in the 1980s.

Still, there's no denying that Japan is not Thailand. You can burn through a lot of yen fairly quickly if you're not careful. In order to help you stretch those yen, we've put together a list of money-saving tips.

Accommodation

- **Capsule Hotels** – A night in a capsule hotel will set you back a mere ¥3000.
- **Manga Kissa** – These *manga* (comic book) coffee shops have private cubicles and comfy reclining seats where you can spend the night for only ¥2500. For more info, see Missing the Midnight Train on p146.
- **Guesthouses** – You'll find good, cheap guesthouses in many of Japan's cities, where a night's accommodation runs about ¥3500.

Transport

- **Japan Rail Pass** – Like the famous Eurail Pass, this is one of the world's great travel bargains. It allows unlimited travel on Japan's brilliant nationwide rail system, including the lightning-fast *shinkansen* bullet trains. See p823.
- **Seishun Jūhachi Kippu** – For ¥11,500, you get five one-day tickets good for travel on any regular Japan Railways train. You can literally travel from one end of the country to the other for around US\$100. See p823.

Eating

- **Shokudō** – You can get a good filling meal in these all-around Japanese eateries for about ¥700, or US\$6, and the tea is free and there's no tipping. Try that in New York. For more, see p88.
- **Bentō** – The ubiquitous Japanese box lunch, or *bentō*, costs around ¥500 and is both filling and nutritious.
- **Use Your Noodle** – You can get a steaming bowl of tasty *rāmen* in Japan for as little as ¥500, and ordering is a breeze – you just have to say '*rāmen*' and you're away. *Soba* and *udon* noodles are even cheaper – as low as ¥350 per bowl.

Shopping

- **Hyaku-en Shops** – *Hyaku-en* means ¥100, and like the name implies, everything in these shops costs only ¥100, or slightly less than one US dollar. You'll be amazed what you can find in these places. Some even sell food.
- **Flea Markets** – A good new kimono costs an average of ¥200,000 (about US\$1700), but you can pick up a fine used kimono at a flea market for ¥1000, or just under US\$10. Whether you're shopping for yourself or for presents for the folks back home, you'll find some incredible bargains at Japan's flea markets.

Destination Japan

When you hear the word 'Japan', what do you think of? Does your mind fill with images of ancient temples or futuristic cities? Do you see visions of mist-shrouded hills or lightning-fast bullet trains? Do you think of suit-clad businessmen or kimono-clad geisha? Whatever image you have of Japan, it's probably accurate, because it's all there.

But you may also have some misconceptions about Japan. For example, many people believe that Japan is one of the world's most expensive countries. In fact, it's cheaper to travel in Japan than in much of North America, Western Europe and parts of Oceania. Others think that Japan is impenetrable or even downright difficult. The fact is, Japan is one of the easiest countries in which to travel. It is, simply put, a place that will remind you why you started travelling in the first place.

If traditional culture is your thing, you can spend weeks in cities such as Kyoto and Nara, gorging yourself on temples, shrines, kabuki, *nō* (stylised dance-drama), tea ceremonies and museums packed with treasures from Japan's rich artistic heritage. If modern culture and technology is your thing, Japan's cities are an absolute wonderland – an easy peek into the future of the human race, complete with trend-setting cafés and fabulous restaurants.

Outside the cities, you'll find natural wonders the length and breadth of the archipelago. From the coral reefs of Okinawa to the snow-capped peaks of the Japan Alps, Japan has more than enough natural wonders to compete with its cultural treasures.

Then there's the food: whether it's impossibly fresh sushi in Tokyo, perfectly battered tempura in Kyoto, or a hearty bowl of *rāmen* in Osaka, if you like eating you're going to love Japan.

But for many visitors, the real highlight of their visit to Japan is the gracious hospitality of the Japanese themselves. Whatever your image of Japan, it probably exists somewhere on the archipelago – and it's just waiting for you to discover it!

TOP 10

**Japan in the Movies**

Japan usually fares very poorly in Western movies, which do little but trade in the worst sort of stereotypes about the country and its inhabitants. Thus, if you want to get a clear-eyed view of Japan, it makes sense to check out films mostly by Japanese directors.

- *Marusa-no-Onna* (A Taxing Woman; 1987), directed by Itami Juzo
- *Tampopo* (1987), directed by Itami Juzo
- *Ososhiki* (The Funeral; 1987), directed by Itami Juzo
- *Minbo-no-Onna* (The Anti-Extortion Woman; 1994), directed by Itami Juzo
- *Tokyo Monogatari* (Tokyo Story; 1953), directed by Ōzu Yasujiro
- *Maboroshi no Hikari* (Maborosi; 1995), directed by Koreeda Hirokazu
- *Nijushi-no-Hitomi* (Twenty Four Eyes; 1954), directed by Kinoshita Keisuke
- *Lost in Translation* (2003), directed by Sophia Coppola
- *Rashomon* (1950), directed by Kurosawa Akira
- *Hotaru-no-Haka* (Grave of the Fireflies; 1988), directed by Takahata Isao

Japan Between the Covers

The following is a very subjective list of fiction and nonfiction books about Japan, by Western and Japanese authors. For travel narratives about Japan, see p22.

- *The Roads to Sata* (nonfiction; 1985) by Alan Booth
- *Inventing Japan* (nonfiction; 1989) by Ian Buruma
- *Wages of Guilt* (nonfiction; 2002) by Ian Buruma
- *Memoirs of a Geisha* (fiction; 1999) by Arthur Golden
- *Kitchen* (fiction; 1996) by Banana Yoshimoto
- *A Wild Sheep Chase* (fiction; 1989) by Murakami Haruki
- *Snow Country* (fiction; 1973) by Kawabata Yasunari
- *Nip the Buds Shoot the Kids* (fiction; 1995) by Ōe Kenzaburō
- *Lost Japan* (nonfiction; 1996) by Alex Kerr
- *Dogs and Demons* (nonfiction; 2001) by Alex Kerr

Alex Kerr's *Lost Japan* (1996) is not strictly a travel book, though he does recount some journeys in it; rather, it's a collection of essays on his long experiences in Japan. Like Booth, Kerr has some great insights into Japan and the Japanese, and his love for the country is only matched by his frustration at some of the things he sees going wrong here.

Donald Richie's *The Inland Sea* (1971) is a classic in this genre. It recounts the author's island-hopping journey across the Seto Inland Sea in the late 1960s. Richie's elegiac account of a vanished Japan makes the reader nostalgic for times gone by. It was re-released in 2002 and is widely available online and in better bookshops.

Peter Carey's *Wrong About Japan: A Father's Journey with his Son* (2004) is the novelist's attempt to 'enter the mansion of Japanese culture through its garish, brightly lit back door', in this case, manga (Japanese comics).

MATSURI MAGIC

Witnessing a *matsuri* (traditional festival) can be the highlight of your trip to Japan, and offers a glimpse of the Japanese at their most uninhibited. A lively *matsuri* is a world unto itself – a vision of bright colours, hypnotic chanting, beating drums and swaying crowds. For more information on Japan's festivals and special events, see p794.

Our favourite *matsuri*:

- Yamayaki (Grass Burning Festival), 15 January, Nara, Kansai (p405)
- Yuki Matsuri (Sapporo Snow Festival), early February, Sapporo, Hokkaidō (p577)
- Omizutori (Water-Drawing Ceremony), 1–14 March, Tōdai-ji, Nara, Kansai (p405)
- Takayama Festival, 14–15 April and 9–10 October, Takayama, Gifu-ken, Central Honshū (p259)
- Sanja Matsuri, third Friday, Saturday and Sunday of May, Sensō-ji, Tokyo (p144)
- Hakata Yamagasa Matsuri, 1–15 July, Hakata, Kyūshū (p667)
- Nachi-no-Hi Matsuri (Nachi Fire Festival), 14 July, Kumano Nachi Taisha, Wakayama-ken, Kansai (p432)
- Gion Matsuri, 17 July, Kyoto, Kansai (p351)
- Nagoya Matsuri, mid-October, Nagoya, Central Honshū (p244)
- Kurama-no-himatsuri (Kurama Fire Festival), 22 October, Kyoto (Kurama), Kansai (p351)

Carey and his son Charlie (age 12 at the time the book was written) explore Japan in search of all things manga, and in the process they make some interesting discoveries.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There's no better place to start your web explorations than at lonelyplanet.com. Here you'll find succinct summaries on travelling to most places on earth, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back. You can also find travel news and updates to many of our most popular guidebooks.

Other websites with useful Japan information and links:

Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA; www.infojapan.org) Covers Japan's foreign policy and has useful links to embassies and consulates under 'MOFA info'.

Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO; www.jnto.go.jp) Great information on all aspects of travel in Japan.

Japan Rail (www.japanrail.com) Information on rail travel in Japan, with details on the Japan Rail Pass.

Kōchi University Weather Home Page (<http://weather.is.kochi-u.ac.jp/index-e.html>)

Weather satellite images of Japan updated several times a day – particularly useful during typhoon season.

Rikai (www.rikai.com/perl/Home.pl) Translate Japanese into English by pasting any bit of Japanese text or webpage into this site.

Tokyo Sights (www.tokyotojp.com) Hours, admission fees, phone numbers and information on most of Tokyo's major sights.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SKYSCRAPERS TO TEMPLES

One to Two weeks / Tokyo to Kyoto

The Tokyo–Kyoto route is the classic Japan route and the best way to get a quick taste of the country. For first-time visitors with only a week or so to look around, a few days in **Tokyo** (p104) sampling the modern Japanese experience and four or five days in the Kansai region exploring the historical sites of **Kyoto** (p309) and **Nara** (p400) is the way to go.

In Tokyo, we recommend that you concentrate on the modern side of things, hitting such attractions as **Shinjuku** (p136), **Akihabara** (p179) and **Shibuya** (p138). Kyoto is the place to see traditional Japan, and we recommend such classic attractions as **Nanzen-ji** (p338) and the **Bamboo Grove** (p344).

This route allows you to take in some of Japan's most famous attractions while not attempting to cover too much ground. The journey between Tokyo and Kyoto is best done by *shinkansen* (bullet train; see p822 for more information) to save valuable time.

This route involves only one major train journey: the three-hour shinkansen trip between Tokyo and Kyoto (the Kyoto–Nara trip takes less than an hour by express train).



CAPITAL SIGHTS & SOUTHERN HOT SPRINGS

Two weeks to One month / Tokyo to the Southwest

Travellers with more time to spend in Japan often hang out in Tokyo and Kyoto and then head west across the island of Honshu and down to the southern island of Kyushu. The advantage of this route is that it can be done even in mid-winter, whereas Hokkaido and Northern Honshu are in the grip of winter from November to March.

Assuming you fly into **Tokyo** (p104), spend a few days exploring the city before heading off to the **Kansai area** (p308), notably **Kyoto** (p309) and **Nara** (p400). A good side trip en route is **Takayama** (p255), which can be reached from Nagoya.

From Kansai, take the San-yo *shinkansen* straight down to **Fukuoka/Hakata** (p663) in Kyushu. Some of Kyushu's highlights include **Nagasaki** (p681), **Kumamoto** (p695), natural wonders like **Aso-san** (p701) and the hot-spring town of **Beppu** (p727).

The fastest way to return from Kyushu to Kansai or Tokyo is by the San-yo *shinkansen* along the Inland Sea side of Western Honshu. Possible stopovers include **Hiroshima** (p453) and **Himeji** (p397), a famous castle town. From Okayama, the seldom-visited island of **Shikoku** (p624) is easily accessible. The Sea of Japan side of Western Honshu is visited less frequently by tourists, and is more rural – notable attractions are the shrine at **Izumo** (p487) and the small cities of **Matsue** (p488) and **Tottori** (p494).

This route involves around 25 hours of train travel and allows you to sample the metropolis of Tokyo, the cultural attractions of Kansai (Kyoto and Nara), and the varied attractions of Kyushu and Western Honshu.



NORTH BY NORTHEAST THROUGH HONSHŪ

Two weeks to One month /
Tokyo / Kansai & Northern Japan

This route allows you to experience Kyoto and/or Tokyo and then sample the wild, natural side of Japan. The route starts in either Kyoto or Tokyo, from where you head to the Japan Alps towns of **Matsumoto** (p282) and **Nagano** (p272), which are excellent bases for hikes in and around places like **Kamikōchi** (p267). From Nagano, you might travel up to **Niigata** (p556) and from there to the island of **Sado-ga-shima** (p560), famous for its *taiko* drummers and Earth Celebration in August. On the other side of Honshū, the city of **Sendai** (p506) provides easy access to **Matsushima** (p513), one of Japan's most celebrated scenic outlooks.

Highlights north of Sendai include peaceful **Kinkasan** (p516) and **Tazawa-ko** (p538), the deepest lake in Japan, **Morioka** (p524), **Towada-Hachimantai National Park** (p538) and **Osore-zan** (p533).

Travelling from Northern Honshū to Hokkaidō by train involves a journey from Aomori through the world's longest underwater tunnel, the **Seikan Tunnel** (p571); rail travellers arriving via the Seikan Tunnel might consider a visit (including seafood meals) to the historic fishing port of **Hakodate** (p580). If you're short on time, **Sapporo** (p572) is a good base, with relatively easy access to **Otaru** (p586), **Shikotsu-Tōya National Park** (p592) and **Biei** (p607). Sapporo is particularly lively during its Yuki Matsuri (Snow Festival; see p577).

The real treasures of Hokkaidō are its national parks, which require either more time or your own transport. If you've only got three or four days in Hokkaidō, you might hit **Shiretoko National Park** (p618) and **Akan National Park** (p613). If you've got at least a week, head to **Daisetsuzan National Park** (p604). More distant but rewarding destinations include the scenic islands of **Rebun-tō** (p603) and **Rishiri-tō** (p601).

This route, which involves around 28 hours of train travel, is for those who want to combine the urban/cultural attractions of Tokyo or Kansai with a few Northern Honshū and Hokkaidō attractions.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ISLAND-HOPPING TO THROUGH THE SOUTHWEST ISLANDS

Three weeks to One month /
Kyūshū to Iriomote-jima

For those with the time to explore tropical laid-back Japan, this is a great option. The route starts on the major southern island of Kyūshū, from where you head south from **Kagoshima** (p708) and overnight to **Amami-Ōshima** (p745). **Tokunoshima** (p746) has a 600-year history of bullfighting, while **Okinoerabu-jima** (p746) is an uplifted coral reef with more than 300 caves, which is covered with cultivated flowers in spring. **Yoron-tō** (p747) is surrounded by coral and boasts beautiful Yurigahama, a stunning stretch of white sand inside the reef that disappears at high tide. After a week in the islands of Kagoshima-ken, head to Okinawa, where a day or two in bustling **Naha** (p749) is a must. Take time out for a day trip to nearby **Tokashiki-jima** (p761) to relax on superb Aharen beach, or for a bit of snorkelling, catch a ferry to **Zamami-jima** (p760).

Those who are out of time can fly back to the mainland from Naha, but a great option is to keep island-hopping by ferry, visiting sugar-cane covered **Miyako-jima** (p763) on the way to **Ishigaki-jima** (p769). Ishigaki is a great base for a day trip to the 'living museum' of **Taketomi-jima** (p779). Jungle-covered **Iriomote-jima** (p776) has some brilliant hikes, while divers can swim with the rays in **Manta Way** (p778) between Iriomote-jima and Kohama-jima. Japan's westernmost point, and the country's top marlin fishing spot, is at **Yonaguni-jima** (p781). It's even possible to keep going by ferry from Ishigaki to Taiwan (see p756).

This route takes around 60 hours of travel time, and highlights a laid-back, tropical side of Japan that is relatively unknown outside the country. If you arrive in the dead of winter and need a break from the cold, head to the islands – you won't regret it!



THE WILDS OF HOKKAIDŌ

Two weeks to One month / Hokkaidō

Whether you're on a JR Pass or flying directly, **Sapporo** (p572) makes a good hub for Hokkaidō excursions. A one- or two-night visit to **Hakodate** (p580) should be first on the list. Jump over to the cherry trees of **Matsumae** (p585) if you have time. Be sure to stop between Hakodate and Sapporo at **Tōya-ko** (p592), where you can soak in one of the area's many *onsen* (hot springs) and see Usu-zan's smouldering peak. On the route is **Shiraoi** (p570), Hokkaidō's largest Ainu living-history village. *Onsen* fans may wish to dip in the famed **Noboribetsu Onsen** (p594).

See romantic **Otaru** (p586), an easy day trip out of Sapporo, then head north to **Wakkanai** (p599). Take the ferry to **Rebun-tō** (p603) and check it out for a day, maybe two if you're planning on serious hiking. On the return, see **Cape Sōya** (p599), Japan's northernmost point. Sip Otoko-yama sake in **Asahikawa** (p596); from there jump to **Asahidake Onsen** (p608), hike around **Daisetsuzan National Park** (p604) for a day or two, possibly doing a day trip to the lavender fields of **Furano** (p605) or **Biei** (p607).

Head to **Abashiri** (p611). Rent a car there or in **Shari** (p618) if you're planning on going to **Shiretoko National Park** (p618). Do the entire eastern part of the island by car. Not including hiking or other stops this will take one night and two days. Check out **Nemuro** (p620), stop in **Akkeshi** (p621) and return your four-wheeled steed in **Kushiro** (p617).

Watch cranes, deer and other wildlife in **Kushiro Shitsugen National Park** (p617), zip up to **Akan National Park** (p613) to see Mashū-ko, the most beautiful lake in Japan, and then toodle back towards Sapporo.

This route, which involves around 40 hours of travel, is popular as it allows you to do what you have time for. Use Sapporo as a hub and do day trips or overnight to nearby attractions, then loop out eastward, renting a car for the most remote regions.



FOLK TALES & CASTLES

One to Two weeks / Northern Honshū

Take the *shinkansen* to Kōriyama, then the local line to **Aizu-Wakamatsu** (p501), a town devoted to keeping alive the tragic tale of the White Tigers (p504), a group of young samurai who committed ritual suicide during the Bōshin Civil War; the cause of their angst was the destruction of Aizu's magnificent Tsuruga-jō (since reconstructed). From Kōriyama, take the *shinkansen* to Ichinoseki, then the local line to **Hiraizumi** (p518). Once ruled by the Fujiwara clan, Hiraizumi was a political and cultural centre informed by Buddhist thought – it rivalled Kyoto until it was ruined by jealousy, betrayal and, ultimately, fratricide. Today, **Chūson-ji** (p518), a mountainside complex of temples, is among Hiraizumi's few reminders of glory, with its sumptuous, glittering Konjiki-dō, one of the country's finest shrines. From Hiraizumi, take the local train to Morioka, then a *shinkansen*/local combination to the **Tōno Valley** (p521), where you might encounter the impish *kappa* (water spirits). The region is famous for its eccentric folk tales and legends, and a number of its attractions will put you in the mood for a spot of old-time ghostbusting. From Morioka, take the *shinkansen* to **Kakunodate** (p541), a charming town that promotes itself as 'Little Kyoto'. With its impeccably maintained samurai district – a network of streets, parks and houses virtually unchanged since the 1600s – it's one of Northern Honshū's most popular attractions.

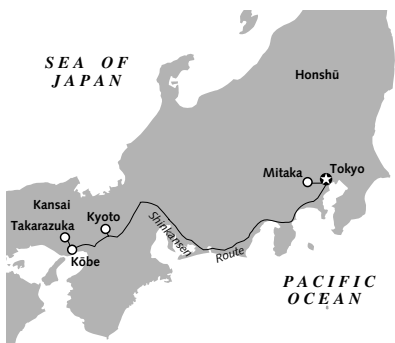


The route, which involves around 19 hours of train travel, takes you through the historically rich regions of northern Honshū. Highlights include the temple complex of Chūson-ji and the restored samurai district in the town of Kakunodate.

TAILORED TRIPS

ON THE TRAIL OF MANGA & ANIME

If names like *Totoro*, *Howl*, *Akira*, *Atom Boy* and *Princess Mononoke* mean something to you, then you'll probably enjoy this trip through the world of Japanese pop culture. It's a journey to the land of *anime* (Japanese animation) and manga (Japanese comics). Start in **Tokyo** (p104), where you can warm up with a stroll through **Shibuya** (p138), home of all Japanese fads. Then make your way to **Akihabara** (p179), the world's biggest electronics bazaar, where you'll find store after store selling nothing but manga and *anime*. From Tokyo, make the pilgrimage out to the **Ghibli Museum** (p142) in nearby **Mitaka**, a suburb of Tokyo. This museum is a shrine to director Miyazaki Hayao, sometimes called the Walt Disney of Japan. Return to Tokyo and then hop on a *shinkansen* and get off at **Kyoto** (p309), where you can check out the new **Kyoto International Manga Museum** (p315). From Kyoto, you can make a short side-trip to Takarazuka, outside of Kōbe, where you can visit the **Tezuka Osamu Memorial Museum** (p394), a shrine to Tezuka Osamu, considered by most Japanese to be the father of *anime* and manga.



THE WONDERS OF NATURE

Japan has some fine natural attractions. Start with the Japan Alps of Central Honshū. **Kamikōchi** (p267) is an excellent base for hikes and is easily reached from Kansai and Tokyo. If you have the time and energy, make the climb to 3180m Yari-ga-take, which starts from Kamikōchi. After checking out the Alps, you must decide: north or south. First, the northern route: from Central Honshū make a beeline for **Hokkaidō** (p566). If you've only three or four days in Hokkaidō, visit **Shiretoko National Park** (p618) and **Akan National Park** (p613). If you've more time, head to **Daisetsuzan National Park** (p604) and the scenic islands of **Rebun-tō** (p603) and **Rishiri-tō** (p601). On your return to Tokyo or Kansai, stop off at some scenic attractions like **Osore-zan** (p533), **Towada-Hachimantai National Park** (p538), **Tazawa-ko** (p538) and **Kinkasan** (p516). The southern route involves a trip south from Central Honshū to Kyūshū by *shinkansen* to check out **Aso-san** (p701) and **Kirishima-Yaku National Park** (p706). Hop on a ferry from **Kagoshima** (p708) to **Yakushima** (p739). From there, you'll have to return to Kagoshima in order to hop onto another ferry or take an aeroplane further south. The one really unmissable spot lies at the very southern end of the island chain: **Iriomote-jima** (p776), which has some pristine jungle, mangrove swamps and fine coral reefs.



Snapshot

There won't be an empress, but there may be an army. There is trouble in the west, and the mighty are humbled in the capital. The middle is growing narrow and the edges are growing wider. This is the way it was in Japan in early 2007. Let us explain.

'It's a boy!' The words rang out across the Japanese archipelago on 6 September 2006. The happy mother was Princess Kiko, wife of the current emperor's younger son, Akishino. The birth of Prince Hisahito, the first male child born to the Japanese imperial household in 41 years, shelved talk, for the time being, of an empress in Japan. This had been a real possibility since the Crown Prince and Crown Princess Masako, who were married in 1993, have so far only produced one female child. So, for now, feminist royalists (surely a relatively small minority in Japan) will have to content themselves with fond memories of Japan's last reigning empress, Go-Sakuramachi, who ruled from 1762 until 1771.

While Japan won't be going back to the good old days of matriarchal rule any time soon, the country is making small steps to return to the sort of nation that existed before WWII. In December 2006, the Diet, under the leadership of newly minted Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, passed a law stipulating that the nation's educational system should produce individuals 'who respect their traditions and culture and love their country'. This seemingly innocuous law is a reform of the Fundamental Education Law, which was enacted in 1947, during the occupation, to limit nationalism in education. Liberals in Japan and abroad immediately attacked the law as a return to the kind of curriculum that led the country into WWII. Perhaps significantly, on the very same day, the Diet passed a law that would make overseas missions the 'primary duty' of the country's Jieitai, or Self Defense Forces. This essentially turns the Jieitai into a proper army. Of course, those who have been watching the news will note that the Jieitai has already been dispatched abroad, having served in Iraq since.

A driving force behind this revival of nationalism and militarism is Japan's neighbour across the Sea of Japan: North Korea. In October 2006, North Korea conducted a successful test of a nuclear device at a secret location in the northeast of the country. Coming hard on the heels of North Korean ballistic missile tests, the announcement of the successful nuclear test sent shock waves through Japan. Japanese right-wing commentators immediately called for the country to develop its own nuclear weapons. Cooler heads argued for renewed efforts at a diplomatic solution to the problem and the Japanese worked with the United States to force passage of a UN-sponsored sanctions program against North Korea in hopes of forcing the country to give up its nuclear program.

On street level, the test had predictable results: bitter feelings towards the country, already strong due to widely publicised kidnappings of Japanese citizens by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, hardened into something approaching outright hatred in some quarters. At the time of writing, six-nation talks were under way in efforts to resolve the problem, but it seems unlikely that North Korea will give up its nuclear ambitions any time soon.

About the only thing that could turn the Japanese public's gaze away from events in North Korea was a juicy home-grown business scandal. It had all the ingredients of a fine kabuki drama: a clash of old and new ways, vain heroes laid low, and plenty of glamour and intrigue thrown in for good measure. Known as the Livedoor Scandal, it was Japan's version of America's Enron

FAST FACTS

Population: 127 million people

Female life expectancy: 84.5 years

Literacy rate: 99%

GDP: US\$4.4 trillion (the world's second-biggest economy)

Latitude of Tokyo: at 35.4°N, the same as Tehran, and about the same as Los Angeles (34.05°N) and Crete (35°N)

Islands in the Japanese archipelago: approximately 3900

Number of *onsen* (natural hot-spring baths): more than 3000

World's busiest station: Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, servicing 740,000 passengers a day

Average annual snowfall at Niseko ski area in Hokkaidō: more than 11m

Number of *rāmen* restaurants: more than 200,000

'In 2006, the number of foreign visitors to Japan topped seven million for the first time'

Scandal. At the centre of the storm was Horie Takafumi, a high-flying young Tokyo-based investor who parlayed an internet service provider into one of Japan's most successful companies. In early 2006, Horie was arrested on charges of securities fraud and share price manipulation, delighting Japan's old brick-and-mortar business elite, who had criticised Horie for making money by smoke and mirrors instead of good old-fashioned manufacturing – an echo of Enron if ever there was one.

In some ways, the Livedoor Scandal was a fitting symbol for the changes sweeping Japan, as the country abandons many of its old ways of doing things – cradle-to-grave employment, age-based promotion, a strong social safety net, a preference for manufacturing over service industry – in favour of an economy based more closely on the American model. Now, rather than priding itself on being a country where everyone is a member of the middle class, there is talk of a nation composed of two distinct classes: the *kachi-gumi* (winners) and *make-gumi* (losers). And while this 'brave new economy' may be leading to a roaring stock market and strong corporate earnings, there is the sense that very little of the wealth is trickling down to street level.

However strong the Japanese economy may be, the trade-weighted value of the yen is hovering at a 21-year low. While this means hard times for Japanese travellers abroad, it's a boon for foreign travellers to Japan. In 2006, the number of foreign visitors to Japan topped seven million for the first time, with the greatest growth seen in visitors from other Asian countries: visitors from South Korea, China and Singapore were all up by over 20% compared with 2005. Increasing numbers of Western travellers are also coming to Japan. More than ever, it seems, foreign travellers are waking up to the fact that Japan is an affordable, safe and fascinating destination.

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The Authors



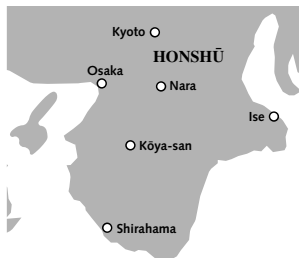
CHRIS ROWTHORN

Coordinating Author, Kansai

Born in England and raised in the USA, Chris has lived in Kyoto since 1992. Soon after his arrival in Kyoto, Chris started studying the Japanese language and culture. In 1995 he became a regional correspondent for the *Japan Times*. He joined Lonely Planet in 1996 and has written or contributed to guidebooks on Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Victoria (Australia). When not on the road, Chris spends his time searching out Kyoto's best temples, gardens and restaurants. He also conducts walking tours of Kyoto, Nara and Tokyo. For more on Chris and his tours, check out his website at www.chrisrowthorn.com.

My Favourite Trip

My favourite trip is a route through my 'backyard' in Kansai. It starts in Kyoto (p309), my adopted hometown. From Kyoto, take the Kintetsu Railway down to Nara (p400) to visit the temples and shrines there. After Nara, jump back on the Kintetsu Railway and work your way down to Ise, to check out Ise-jingū (p435), Japan's most impressive Shintō shrine. From Ise, take the JR line around the horn of the Kii-hantō (Kii Peninsula) and stop in Shirahama (p429) for the night, soaking in its fabulous *onsen* (hot springs). From Shirahama head north and east to Wakayama to the mountain-top temple complex of Kōya-san (p417) to spend a night in a temple there. Finally, head back to Kyoto via Osaka (p373).



RAY BARTLETT

Northern Honshū, Hokkaidō

Ray began travel writing at age 18 by jumping a freight train for 500 miles and selling the story to a local newspaper. Almost two decades later he is still wandering the world with pen and camera in hand. He regularly appears on *Around the World Radio* and has published in *USA Today*, the *Denver Post*, *Miami Herald*, and other newspapers and magazines. His Lonely Planet titles include *Japan*, *Mexico*, *Yucatán* and *Korea*. More about him can be found at his website, www.kaisora.com. When not travelling, he surfs, writes and eagerly awaits the end of George W Bush's embarrassing presidency.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

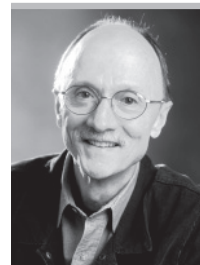
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ANDREW BENDER

Around Tokyo, Central Honshū

France was closed, so after college Andy left his native New England to work in Tokyo, not speaking a word of Japanese. It ended up being a life-changing journey, as visits to Japan so often are. He's since mastered chopsticks, the language and taking his shoes off at the door, and has worked with Japanese companies on both sides of the Pacific. His writing has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, *Forbes*, the *Los Angeles Times* and many airline magazines, as well as other Lonely Planet titles. In an effort towards ever greater trans-oceanic harmony, Andy also sometimes takes tour groups to Japan and does cross-cultural consulting for businesses. Find out more at www.andrewbender.com.



MICHAEL CLARK

Kyūshū

Michael first visited Asia while working aboard a merchant ship in the Pacific bound for Japan. He took his first class in Japanese at the University of Hawaii, and went to Japan to teach at International University of Japan, and then at Keio University. Travelling through Japan sharpened his taste for sumō, sake, bento boxes, trains, kabuki and finally the sound of a baseball striking a metal bat. He has written for the *San Francisco Examiner* and contributed to several Lonely Planet guidebooks. When not on the road, Michael teaches English to Japanese and other international students in Berkeley, California, where he lives with his wife Janet, and kids Melina and Alexander.



MATTHEW D FIRESTONE

Shikoku, Okinawa & the Southwest Islands

Matt is a trained anthropologist and epidemiologist who should probably have a real job by now, though somehow he can't pry himself away from Japan. Smitten with love after a 5th grade 'Japan Day' fair, Matt became a self-described Japanophile after being diagnosed with a premature taste for green tea and sushi. After graduating from college, Matt moved to Tokyo where he worked as a bartender while learning a thing or two about the Japanese underworld. As he is fairly certain that he's seen too much to be allowed back in parts of Tokyo, Matt prefers to spend his time in Okinawa where his only worry is whether or not he applied enough sunscreen.



TIMOTHY N HORNYAK

Western Honshū

A native of Montreal, Tim Hornyak moved to Japan in 1999 and has written on Japanese culture, technology and history for publications including *Wired*, *Scientific American* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He has lectured on Japanese humanoid robots and traveled to the heart of Hokkaidō to find the remains of a forgotten theme park called Canadian World. His interest in haiku poetry has taken him to Akita-ken to retrace the steps of Bashō, as well as to Maui to interview US poet James Hackett. He firmly believes that the greatest Japanese invention of all time is the *onsen*.



WENDY YANAGIHARA

Tokyo

Wendy first toured Tokyo perched on her mother's hip at age two. Between and beyond childhood summers spent in Japan, she has woven travels to other destinations through her stints as psychology and art student, bread peddler, espresso puller, jewellery pusher, graphic designer and more recently as Lonely Planet author for titles including *Mexico, Vietnam, Indonesia* and *Tokyo*. She is based in Oakland, California.

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Dr Trish Batchelor Trish wrote the Health chapter. She is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who worked at the Ciwec Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal. She is a medical advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and east Asia and particularly loves high-altitude trekking in the Himalayas.