
Travel Guide Tokyo

Megacity of superlatives

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 02 Quick view | 05 Top 10 sights | 10 Hotels |
| 02 Japan | 07 Shopping in Tokyo | 11 Crew Tip |
| 03 Travel etiquette | 07 Restaurants | 12 24 hours in ... |
| 04 Health | 08 Nightlife | 14 The great journey |
| 05 Phone calls & Internet | 09 Calendar of events | |





Quick view

Tokyo: Megacity of superlatives

The world's largest metropolitan area is also one of its most unrelenting. Tokyo is a place that never stops, its sheer scale meaning you'll never run out of things to keep you entertained. On the surface, Japan's capital is a thoroughly modern metropolis: impressive skyscrapers, neon-lit boulevards and superb shopping.

But you don't need to walk far off the beaten track to find a taste of old-world Japan. Rambling parks, pretty temples and ancient culture are all up for grabs. However long you spend here, you'll struggle to find the time to get to know every nook and cranny of this wonderful town.



Japan

General knowledge

Country overview

Japan is swathed in natural beauty, from the snow festivals and lavender farms of the northern isle of Hokkaido to the sun-drenched beaches and turquoise waters of the subtropical islands of Okinawa. Whether climbing volcanic Mount Fuji, wandering the pine forests of Mount Koya, taking in

the springtime beauty of the sakura cherry blossoms or the spectacular maple leaves in the autumn, a journey to Japan is a wealth of unforgettable natural landscapes. In recent years, the powdery snow of Japan's ski fields has also been attracting international visitors.

Geography

The archipelago of Japan is separated from the Asian mainland by 160km (100 miles) of sea and split into four main islands: Hokkaidō, Honshū, Shikoku and Kyushū. About 70 percent of the country is covered by hills and mountains, a number of which are active or dormant volcanoes, including Mount Fuji, Japan's highest peak, reaching 3,776m (12,388ft). Japan sits on major seismic fault lines and is susceptible to frequent earthquakes.

A series of mountain ranges runs from northern Hokkaidō, to southern Kyushu. The Japanese Alps (the most prominent range) run in a north-south direction through central Honshu.

Lowlands and plains are small and scattered, mostly lying along the coast, and composed of alluvial lowlands and diluvial uplands. The coastline is very long in relation to the land area, and has very varied features, for example, the deeply indented bays with good natural harbours tend to be adjacent to mountainous terrain. Many of Japan's major cities are located on the coastline, and have extremely high population density.

General knowledge

Key facts

Population: 127,5 Million (estimate 2018)

Capital: Tokyo

Language

Japanese is the official language. Some English is spoken in Tokyo and other large cities but is less usual in rural areas. There are many regional dialects and there are distinct differences in the intonation and pronunciation between regional variations.

Currency

Japanese Yen (JPY; symbol ¥). Notes are in denominations of ¥10,000, 5,000, 2,000 and 1,000. Coins are in denominations of ¥500, 100, 50, 10, 5 and 1.

Electricity

100 volts AC, 60Hz in the west (Osaka); 100 volts AC, 50Hz in eastern Japan and Tokyo. Plugs are flat two-pin plugs.

Public holidays

Listed below are the public holidays for the period January 2020 to December 2021.

Note

Holidays falling on Sunday are observed the following Monday. When there is a single day between two national holidays, it is also taken as a holiday.

2020

New Year's Day: 1 January 2020
Coming of Age Day: 13 January 2020
National Foundation Day: 11 February 2020
Vernal Equinox: 20 March 2020
Showa Day: 29 April 2020
Constitution Memorial Day: 3 May 2020
Greenery Day: 4 May 2020
Children's Day: 5 May 2020
Additional Public Holiday: 6 May 2020
Marine Day: 23 July 2020
Health and Sports Day: 24 July 2020
Mountain Day: 8–10 August 2020
Respect for the Aged Day: 21 September 2020
Autumnal Equinox: 22 September 2020
Culture Day: 3 November 2020
Labor Thanksgiving Day: 23 November 2020
Emperor's Birthday: 23 December 2020

2021

New Year's Day: 1 January 2021
Coming of Age Day: 11 January 2021
National Foundation Day: 11 February 2021
Vernal Equinox: 20 March 2021
Showa Day: 29 April 2021
Constitution Memorial Day: 3 May 2021
Greenery Day: 4 May 2021
Children's Day: 5 May 2021
Additional Public Holiday: 6 May 2021
Marine Day: 19 July 2021
Mountain Day: 10 August 2021
Respect for the Aged Day: 20 September 2021
Autumnal Equinox: 23 September 2021
Health and Sports Day: 11 October 2021
Culture Day: 3 November 2021
Labor Thanksgiving Day: 23 November 2021
Emperor's Birthday: 23 December 2021

All information subject to change.

**Travel etiquette**
How to fit in**Social Conventions**

Japanese manners and customs are vastly different from those of Western people.

A strict code of behaviour and politeness is recognised and followed by almost everyone. However, Japanese people do not expect visitors to be familiar with all their customs but do expect them to behave formally and politely.

A straightforward refusal traditionally does not form part of Japanese etiquette, and a vague 'yes' does not always mean 'yes'. (The visitor may be comforted to know that confusion caused by non-committal replies occurs between the Japanese themselves.)

When entering a Japanese home or restaurant, shoes must be removed.

Bowing is the customary greeting but handshaking is becoming more common for business meetings with Westerners. The honorific suffix *san* should be used when addressing all men and women; for instance Mr Yamada would be addressed as *Yamada-san*.

Table manners are very important, although the Japanese host will be very tolerant towards a visitor. However, it is best if visitors familiarise themselves with basic table etiquette and use chopsticks. Exchange of gifts is also a common business practice and may take the form of souvenir items such as company pens, ties or high-quality spirits.



Health Health

Main emergency number: 119

Food & Drink

Tap water is usually safe to drink.

Only eat raw fish, seafood and meat from recognised establishments, and be aware that there is a risk of parasitic infection and toxins if these foods have not been prepared properly. E-coli food poisoning outbreaks tend to occur in Japan during the warmer months (June-September), and it is advisable to take precautions when consuming perishable foods at outdoor summer festivals, where refrigeration may be an issue.

Other Risks

You should make sure you are up to date with routine vaccinations. Influenza and measles epidemics have occurred in recent years and precautions should be taken. Tuberculosis and hepatitis B occur and vaccination is sometimes advised. Typhus occurs in some river valleys. Japanese encephalitis may occur. Vaccination is recommended for long-term travel (greater than one month) in rural areas. All normal precautions should also be exercised to avoid exposure to sexually-transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

If spending prolonged periods outdoors during the summer months when heat and humidity can be extreme, make sure to have plenty of fluids on hand to avoid dehydration and wear hats and other protective clothing to avoid heatstroke.

Contractual physician of Lufthansa

Dr. Seez, Peter
Tokyo Medical & Surgical Clinic
Mori Bldg. 32 / 3-4-30 Shiba-koen
Minato-ku
Tokyo 105
Japan
Tel. +81-3-34363028

Please note that Lufthansa accepts no responsibility for the treatment nor will it bear the cost of any treatment.



Phone calls & Internet

Phone calls & Internet

Telephone/Mobile Telephone

Dialing Code: +81

Mobile Telephone

The Japanese mobile network uses PDC (Personal Digital Cellular System) technology, which is not compatible with GSM or other mobile services. Modern smartphones will usually work, though. Visitors can hire handsets at the airport from companies such as bemobile (bmobile.ne.jp), Softbank Mobile (softbank-rental.jp/e/) and NTT DOCOMO (nttdocomo.co.jp). Coverage is generally good.

Internet

Internet is widely available; there are many internet cafés in Tokyo and in the main cities in Japan. Most hotels have Wi-Fi internet access. Free Internet access via Wi-Fi is possible in many busy tourist spots, too. When using public Wi-Fi networks, it is a wise precaution to ensure encryption of all passwords, credit card details and banking credentials entered. Use of a VPN app or security software to check the safety of a hotspot is recommended.



Top 10 sights

Top 10 sights in Tokyo

Sensō-ji

A key Buddhist site, Sensō-ji enshrines an image of Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. The temple has been rebuilt over the centuries, but this colourful spot is a beautiful, not to mention peaceful, counterpoint to the buzz of central Tokyo.

2-3-1 Asakusa, Taitō-ku
111-0032 Tokyo
Japan
Tel: 81-3/38 42 01 81

www.senso-ji.jp

SkyTree

The second tallest tower in the world opened its doors in 2012 and has fast become one of Tokyo's hottest attractions. Zip up to the top on a clear day and you'll get sweeping views of the vast metropolitan area and even Mount Fuji.

1-1-2 Oshiage, Sumida-ku
131-0045 Tokyo
Japan

Opening times:
Daily 0800-2200

www.tokyo-skytree.jp

Toyosu Fish Market

Reputedly the largest fish market in the world, Toyosu Fish Market opened for business in October 2018. Its predecessor, the legendary Tsukiji Fish Market, was well known and well loved for its quaint, old fashioned atmosphere. But modern Toyosu is also worth a visit. Its tumultuous auctions begin at five in the morning, and visitors can observe them from a gallery – or sample the market's fresh specialities at one of its over 40 food outlets.

6 Chome-3 Toyosu
135-00461 Tokyo
Japan

Opening times:
Mon-Sat 0500-1700

Tokyo National Museum

The largest museum in Japan, Tokyo's National Museum has the biggest collection of Japanese art in the world. There are six different galleries, which play home to a variety of ancient artefacts and stunning Buddhist-influenced pieces.

13-9 Uenokoen, Taitō-ku
105-7090 Tokyo
Japan
Tel.: +81-3/57 77 86 00

Opening times:
Tue-Sat 0930-1700

www.tnm.jp

Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fans of modern art, both Japanese and western, should definitely make time for this sprawling space. Alongside standard artworks, you'll find 21st-century takes on Japanese flower arranging and ink brush paintings.

8-36 Uenokoen, Taitō-ku
110-0007 Tokyo
Japan
Tel: +81-3/38 23 69 21

Opening times:
Tue-Sun 0930-1730 and every other
and every fourth monday of a month;
times may vary in July and December

www.tobikan.jp

Imperial Palace East Garden

The Imperial Palace itself, built on the site of the old Edo Castle, only opens its doors twice a year as it is still home to Japan's imperial family. Its pretty gardens, however, are open throughout the year and look particularly beautiful during spring cherry blossom season.

1-1 Chiyoda-ku
100-0001 Tokyo
Japan

Opening times:
Tue-Thu, Sat/Sun 0900-1700, during
winter 0900-1600

www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-event/higashigyoen02.html

Akihabara

The neon-lit streets of Akihabara district are a byword for Japan's love of all things technology. Duck into an arcade and play classic titles, trawl the stores looking for second-hand bargains and amazing anime, or just take in the whole chaos of it all.

Akihabara, Taitō-ku
Tokyo
Japan

www.akiba.or.jp

Shibuya crossing

Probably the most famous road crossing in the world (and certainly the busiest), Shibuya buzzes with people 24 hours a day. If you're after a good view of locals bustling across, then head into Shibuya train station to see it all in action from a dedicated platform near the Hachiko exit.

Shibuya-ku
Tokyo
Japan

Ghibli Museum

This magical museum focuses on the work of renowned Japanese animator and filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. Learn how classics such as *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* were made, and marvel at the fantastical models and designs on show.

1-1-83 Shimorenjaku, Mitaka-shi
181-0013 Tokyo
Japan

Opening times:
Wed-Mon 1000-1800

www.ghibli-museum.jp

Advertising Museum Tokyo

A fascinating insight into the changes in Japanese advertising. From the years before the country opened up to foreign trade in the late 19th century to US-influenced occupation-era posters, this small museum has a wonderful collection. Admission is free.

Caretta Shiodome B1F-B2F, 1-8-2
Higashi-Shinbashi, Minato-ku
105-7090 Tokyo
Japan
Tel: +81-3/62 18 25 00

Opening times:
Tue-Sat 1100-1800

www.admt.jp



Shopping in Tokyo

Key Areas

Tokyo is a city that lives to shop. Shibuya and Harajuku are fashion meccas for the young and trendy, while Shinjuku throbs with department stores and some of the city's best electronic shops. Asakusa is great for knick-knacks and souvenirs, while Ginza is the ultimate destination for luxury goods lovers.

Markets

One of Tokyo's oldest flea markets, Setagaya Boroichi is essential for bargain hunters and those after unique trinkets. Yoyogi Market is a more modern take and a great place to mix and shop with locals. For antiques fans, Yasukuni Jinja Flea Market is a stop-off not to be missed.

Shopping Centres

Malls can be found in the ultra-modern Roppongi Hills development and at the vast Tokyo Bay shopping centre. Both have an international flavour, with leading global brands up for grabs. The department stores near Shibuya and Shinjuku stations are also excellent.



Restaurants

Restaurants in Tokyo

Tokyo is officially the world's gourmet capital, with more Michelin stars than any other city on the planet. Fortunately, it's not all pricey dining though, with plenty of excellent places for affordable tempura, ramen and sushi dotted across town.

Sukiyabashi Jiro Honten

Three Michelin stars, 10 seats and arguably the best sushi in the world.

B1F, Tsukamoto Sogyo Building
4-2-15 Ginza, Chuo-ku
104-0061 Tokyo
Japan

Price category: Luxurious

Usukifugu Yamadaya

Renowned for serving the delicacy of blowfish, this is one of Tokyo's most unique eateries.

4-11-14 Nishiazabu, Minato-ku
106-0031 Tokyo
Japan

Price category: Luxurious

Sushi Dai

The Sushi Dai is one of the many well-known sushi restaurants that moved with the old Tsukiji Fish Market to its new site in Toyosu. As the restaurant is very small, it's a good idea to book a place when you first arrive at the market so that you can be sure of eating there when you've finished your tour. What's special about the Sushi Dai is that in addition to the *omakase*, the day's menu, it also offers a small selection of cooked dishes.

6 Chome-3 Toyosu
Block 6, 3. Floor
135-00461 Tokyo
Japan

Price category: Moderate

Tsunahachi Rin

Superb tempura bowls that won't break the bank, this Shinjuku joint is a winner.

3-38-1 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku
160-0022 Tokyo
Japan

Price category: Budget

Ippudo

You can't come to Tokyo and miss out on its famous ramen. Ippudo is one of the best places in the city.

1-3-13 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku
150-0012 Tokyo
Japan

Price category: Budget



Nightlife Nightlife in Tokyo

Tokyo's club and bar scene is hugely varied and caters to all tastes. From western-style clubs to cosy izakaya bars, visitors will find plenty of great spots to kick back, sip on a glass of sake and see a whole different side to Japan's capital.

Warayakiya

This highly rated izakaya is a great spot for grabbing a few local beers.

1F, Roppongi Go Dee Building, 6-8-8
Roppongi, Minato-ku
106-0032 Tokyo
Japan

Gonpachi

One of Tokyo's most famous izakaya has the feel of a German beer hall. Snacks

and booze abound.

1F, 2F, 1-13-11, Nishi-Azabu, Minato-ku
106-0031 Tokyo
Japan

ageHa

Tokyo's biggest club can hold up to 5,000 people. A free shuttle takes revellers there from Shibuya.

2-2-10 Shinkiba, Koto-ku
136-0082 Tokyo
Japan

Womb

A short walk from Shibuya, this mega club is the place to see world-famous DJs do their thing.

2-16 Maruyamacho, Shibuya-ku
150-0044 Tokyo
Japan

Club Quattro

Expect both local and international acts in this mid-sized, rock-music venue right in the heart of trendy Shibuya.

32-13 Udagawacho, Shibuya-ku
150-0042 Tokyo
Japan



Calendar of events Calendar of events

Hanami (Cherry Blossom Viewing)

It's not only a tourist dream, it's the real thing. Families gather under the newly arrived blossoms to drink sake and share a picnic – and there's nothing to stop visitors from joining in. One of the most popular places to see the Cherry Blossom in Tokyo and enjoy a drink with friends under the trees is Ueno Park.

March - April 2020

Venue: Parks across the city, but Ueno Park and Chidorigafuchi Park in particular

Kanda Matsuri (Kanda Festival)

For a lavish display of portable shrines and floats, visit Tokyo during the three-day festival that honours the deities of the Kanda Myojin Shrine. Worshippers parade ornate goldenmikoshi(portable shrines) through the streets in one of the three largest festivals in Japan. Revel in the Edokko spirit, famed for knowing how to have a good time.

May 7 -13, 2020

Venue: Kanda Myojin Shrine

Asakusa Sanja Matsuri (Sanja Festival)

At one of Tokyo's biggest shrines, May sees one of Tokyo's biggest festivals. Thousands fill the streets to watch themikoshi(portable shrines) wobble along the streets on the shoulders of men, women and children. If the wobble looks like an intentional jolt, don't be surprised. Jolting is supposed to increase the power of the deities.

May 15 - 17, 2020

Venue: Asakusa Shrine

Sanno Matsuri (Sanno Festival)

This is another big festival involving parades of portable shrines through the streets of Tokyo. This one takes place in even years only and sets itself apart by having a phoenix on display plus a number of legendary goblins called Tengu. Look out for flower displays and plenty of Japanese tea.

June 6 - 15, 2020

Venue: Hie-jinja Shrine

Sumida Hanabi (Sumida Fireworks Festival)

Tokyo's biggest and most spectacular fireworks display erupts over the Sumida River. Over the course of an hour, countless rockets are launched from the banks of the river into the Tokyo sky in one of the most spectacular displays anywhere in Japan. Stalls and kiosks selling mulled sake and Japanese specialities add to the bustling, party atmosphere.

July 25, 2020

Venue: Two sites along the Sumida River



Hotels Hotels in Tokyo

Affordability is not something you associate with Tokyo, with truly budget rooms in short supply. Business stays and truly top-end hotels, however, are abundant and can be found in key locations across the city.

Park Hyatt Tokyo

So much more than the set of *Lost in Translation*, this is Tokyo's plushiest, most luxurious hotel.

3-7-1-2 Nishi Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku Price category: Luxurious
163-1055 Tokyo
Japan

The Peninsula Tokyo

Spacious, well-appointed rooms just a short hop from the Imperial Palace.

1-8-1 Uramachi, Chiyoda-ku Price category: Luxurious
100-0006 Tokyo
Japan

Hotel SAILS

This apartment hotel offers suites and studios accommodating up to four adults. It is two kilometers away from Ueno Station, but guests here have the chance to

experience daily life in a regular residential area of Tokyo. Suitable for travelers planning to stay a little longer in Tokyo.

1-2-7 Taito-ku Minowa Price category: Moderate
110-0011 Tokyo
Japan

The Millennials Shibuya

The location of this modern capsule hotel is perfect at only around 400 meters from the Hachiko Statue in Shibuya. The sleep pods are comfortable and peaceful, the communal areas, spacious and bright.

1-20-13 Shibuya-ku Jinnan Price category: Budget
150-0041 Tokyo
Japan

Kimi Ryokan

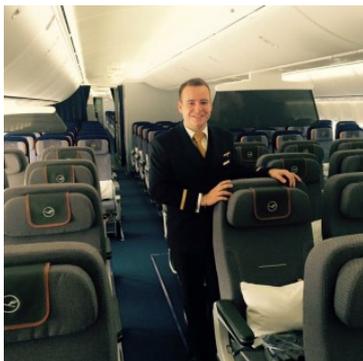
A *ryokan* was originally a country inn with tatami mats on the floor and futons instead of beds, but accommodation of this kind also exists in Tokyo. This ryokan is centrally located in Ikebukuro. The price per night depends on the number of guests per room.

6-8-2 Chome, Ikebukuro Price category: Budget
171-0014 Tokyo
Japan



Crew Tip My Tokyo

My absolute favorite place in Tokyo is Shinjuku, where you can not only get every variation of sushi, but also super-delicious *yakitori* (meat skewers). After grabbing a bite to eat, I head for the karaoke bars and j-pop clubs to enjoy some of the neighborhood's offbeat nightlife.



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24 hours in ... Tokyo



© Fotolia

09:00 a.m. – Wake up at Hotel Niwa Tokyo

Tokyo calls for a plan. And comfy shoes. The city is simply too crowded, too stuffy and too gigantic to make setting out to explore at random an option. We prepare our day's route in the comfortable beds of Hotel Niwa Tokyo. The rooms of this boutique hotel are not very big – of course not, we are in Tokyo, after all, where the use of every last square meter is carefully thought through. The decor takes its cue from traditional Japanese aesthetics: plenty of wood, light colors, everything very streamlined and purist, and windows with the typical Japanese wood-frame paper blinds. The Niwa Tokyo is a gem with a small garden and roof terrace tucked away in a quiet street in the not so touristy and not so expensive north of the city, and just a three-minute walk from the central train line Chūō. We discover that a good connection is worth a great deal in the world's largest metropolitan region.

1-1-16 Misakicho, Chiyoda hotelniwa.jp/
Tokyo
Japan
Tel. +81-3/32 93 22 28

11:00 a.m. – See and be seen in Shibuya

Even if it can be a little difficult for tall Europeans to find their size in some of the clothes stores here, a visit to the world-famous shopping district is an absolute must. It is the beating heart of Japan's trendy society with money to spend. It's a good idea to plan this trip for the first half of the day when you still have enough energy reserves because once you exit Harajuku Station, there will be nothing for it but to let yourself be carried along by the crowds. All of the world's luxury brands, from Comme des Garçons to Isabel Marant, appear to have at least one shop of their own on Omotesandō Street. On a neighboring street, you will find nothing but sneaker stores, and on the next, one manga store after the next, regularly interspersed by imposing modern architecture, like The Gyre, a luxury mall designed by the Dutch company MVRDV, which is really worth seeing. There is one street definitely not to be missed, and that's "Cat Street," the pedestrian zone that doubles as a catwalk. This is where fans of extravagant fashions get together. The more eccentric the outfit, the better. We recommend you enjoy a cup of matcha tea on the terrace of The Roastery, an excellent coffee shop, from where you can survey the fashionable comings and goings.

5-10-1, Jingumae, Shibuya gyre-omotesando.com/
Tokyo
Japan

04:00 p.m. – Contrast program in Yanaka

After all the hustle and bustle, we find some peace and tranquility in the old town

neighborhood Yanaka. The district survived the severe earthquake of 1923 and Tokyo's heart really does seem to beat a little more slowly here. The best plan here is to rent a bicycle, from Tokyobike, for example, to explore the neighborhood, which is famous for its small workshops and studios, its ceramics shops and galleries. One highlight here is the Matsunoya store, which was established in 1945 and could even be the role model for the Muji lifestyle chain. The owner, Hiroshi Matsuno, travels throughout the country in search of everyday products, such as baskets, lamps and brooms made by unknown, often traditional artisan workshops. Like Muji, Matsunoya names no brands. We let ourselves drift and come upon the Yanaka Beer Hall. In a quaint parlor on the ground floor of a traditional Japanese wooden house, of which there are quite a few here, various ales and lagers, all of them produced by local breweries, are served. You can also order hot and cold snacks. On the first floor, boutiques measuring just a few square meters sell local fashion labels, and a little out of sight in the back yard, there's also a bakery and a shop selling Japanese specialties. An idyllic place, ideal for stopping awhile and unwinding a little.

2-15-6 Ueno Sakuragi, Taito 110-0002
Tokyo
Japan

07:00 p.m. – Dine amid the hubbub of Ueno

We continue by bicycle or on foot toward Ueno Station, through vast Ueno Park, past a handful of museums, like the highly recommendable Tokyo National Museum, which houses the world's largest collection of Japanese art. We are headed for the lively area around Ameyoko shopping mile. Dozens of street-food stalls attract a young crowd here, who perch on stools at folding tables, their voices billowing through the streets, where neon signs flash, and the culinary delights on offer range from sushi to yakitori skewers and tempura. All you have to do now is pick a meal – and find a place.

13-9 Uenokoen, Taitō-ku www.tnm.jp/ Tokyo National Museum
105-7090 Tokyo
Japan
Tel.: +81-3/57 77 86 00

10:00 p.m. – Following in Bill and Scarlett's footsteps

We did our homework and watched Sofia Coppola's 2003 masterpiece *Lost in Translation* again before flying out. And that's why this is what we need now: We drop in on one of the many sky bars in the city. But it doesn't have to be the elegant, but often overcrowded New York Bar in the Park Hyatt Hotel, where actors Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson once sat. The Sky Lounge Stellar Garden on the 33rd floor of the Prince Hotel is equally well worth recommending. Over a sake, we try to get the measure of this crazy metropolis – and fail cheerfully.

The Prince Park Tower Tokyo www.princehotels.com/en/
4-8-1 Shibakoen, Minato
Tokyo
Japan



The great journey Caught between worlds



A wedding ceremony at the Shinto Meiji shrine, one of the most important religious sites in Japan

Japan has a polarizing effect. On a five-day trip from Tokyo to Osaka we are treated to a fascinating mix of people and customs: a women's diving cooperative, a peaceful bonsai school in the middle of flashy Tokyo, an enterprising master firework maker and two Dutch girls who love to dress up.



Each branch was lovingly trained by the famous Bonsai master Kunio Kobayashi

Half an hour is all it takes in Tokyo to get from the world's largest intersection to a green oasis of tranquility. At Shibuya Crossing doors open automatically and we climb into a taxi driven by a woman sporting white gloves and a chauffeur's cap. Soon we are standing in an inner courtyard amid hundreds of bonsais, overwhelmed by the serenity of the scene. A stream splashes softly into a pond, where koi circle dreamily. Sensei Kunio Kobayashi pours us green tea. He has been working with bonsai since 1976 and is a grand bonsai master today, teaching the art of shaping bonsai and welcoming visitors from Japan, Italy and Australia almost every day. Some of his students stand absolutely still, firmly gripping their secateurs as they contemplate the fine twigs. Kobayashi has chalked a bonsai consisting of three elements onto a board: a stand, a plant pot and a tree.

Ideally, a bonsai should express – in miniature – the harmony between humans and nature. Kobayashi sighs. "Shaping a good student is more difficult than shaping a good bonsai." The master shows us his most beautiful trees, one of which is 800 years old and worth a fortune. "Love is the key," explains Kobayashi, "One has to devote many hours every day to a bonsai." He tells his students to watch their tree instead of watching television. Kobayashi walks over to a small altar where a dried-up tree is lying on the floor – the bonsai graveyard. "Bonsai can sense when we neglect them," he says, closing his eyes. The distant din of the city of millions drifts in over the walls. Silently, Kobayashi asks the dead bonsai for

The great journey: From Tokyo to Osaka

© Enno Kapitza

Day 1 – Tokyo: Shaping Nature

© Enno Kapitza

forgiveness.



Unmistakable Mount Fuji is Japan's highest peak

Mount Fuji is shrouded in cloud and only its snowy peak is visible. A recorded loudspeaker message brings us a woman's monotonous warning to "Drive carefully, there have been many accidents recently, drive slowly." We are sitting outside at a rest stop, spooning noodle soup with mountain vegetables, having left Tokyo via the ring expressway, which is frequently the scene of illegal nighttime races. The countryside is growing hillier, the air fresher, the leaves gleam red-brown in the sunshine. "Kôyô" is what the Japanese call the season when the foliage turns. They celebrate it with a variety of festivals just like they do the season of spring blossoms. Hiroto Kamijoo makes his living from such festivals. Kneeling in front of a pile of gunpowder balls with his son Rioji, he strikes a match. A loud bang resounds and through a dense swathe of smoke, we see five different colors as five layers of powder burn.

Mr. Kamijoo looks pleased with himself. "I loved watching fireworks in the sky as a boy," he says, "and there comes a time when you want to do it yourself." He has been igniting tiny bombs with gusto for over 30 years and was one of the 12 master firework makers entrusted with firing the rockets at the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Nagano in 1998. At his warehouse, protected by double steel doors, stout walls and a round-the-clock security guard, six employees pour powder into balls; the wider their diameter, the longer they burn. The closest building is half a kilometer away. He and his team make up to 20 000 bombs year. Does he enjoy what he does? "What, you noticed?," Kamijoo replies with a broad grin.



Owners Mikoko Nakajo (right) and her mother Kyoko outside their guesthouse

In the morning, we are met by Mikoko Nakajo, landlady of a ryokan at the foot of the Japanese Alps. Her 120-year-old guesthouse draws water via a wooden pipeline from thermal springs located kilometers away in the mountains. "My only fear is that an earthquake could destroy the line," says Nakajo. Twigs hang from high ceilings, calligraphy adorns the walls and her guests sleep on futons. Automatic, heated lavatory seats and flatscreen televisions are the only nods to the 21st century here. Outside, steam rises from the onsen, hot pools of healing mineral water. Her husband monitors their quality every month. She herself does not particularly like them, says Ms. Nakajo, smiling politely: "Too hot and too many people." Foreign visitors often extend their stay into a relaxing break; Japanese visitors usually only

Day 2 – Tokyo to Matsumoto: Masters of pyrotechnics

© Enno Kapitza

Day 3 – Matsumoto: Raw fish and thermal springs

© Enno Kapitza

come for a night.

"We Japanese find it more difficult to let go; very few of us take a vacation," explains Nakajo. She herself enjoys traveling, especially to Baden-Württemberg in Germany, where her children went to university. She loves German buildings, grandfather clocks and church bells. In fact, the only thing she had a problem with was the food: "The huge portions, awful, dumplings this size!" she exclaims, shaping her hands to encompass an imaginary soccer ball. She and her husband would travel across the border to France to eat. She is interrupted by a gong striking 6pm. Guests in kimonos and slippers come to kneel at the low tables. This ryokan is famous for its food: fish with roe inside, raw octopus in seaweed, yuba rolls made of tofu skin, sea anemones, marinated mushrooms. Ms. Nakajo beams.



The fishing fleet lies moored and secure in Wajima's harbor

After breakfasting on fish, we go down to Wajima harbor. A few fishing boats are still coming in, but most of the fleet has already been tied up along the pier and unloaded. The air is filled with the smells of salt and diesel oil, gulls squabble over shrimp scraps, and it's drizzling. Harue Aochi surveys the sea.

She is an expert at reading the currents; she knows the waves and the wind. Aochi works literally in the sea all year round. She is one of around 200 amas, the women divers of the Noto Peninsula in the Japanese Sea. There are nearly 1000 divers like her in the country. After the Second World War, very few men returned to Noto and many were no longer able to work. Forced to provide for their families, their wives went fishing or diving for mussels and snails.

Aochi sails out every morning with eight other amas and a captain to one of the islands off the coast. The weather determines where they head. Aochi has been gathering abalone and turban snails from the sea bed for 40 years. Delicacies like that fetch up to 10 000 yen (over 100 dollars) a kilo at the fish market. On a good day, the divers haul between 20 and 30 kilos on board.

The women are organized as a cooperative and share their profits equally, regardless of how many mussels and snails each one of them collects. If someone is sick, she still gets her share. "The young women dive further down and bring up more than the older ones," explains Aochi, "but someday they, too, will be old and profit from the young." An ama's skills are handed down from generation to generation. Aochi's mother taught her her craft under water and showed her the good spots; Aochi in her turn trained her cousin, who dives with the cooperative, too.

The women can hold their breath for two minutes and dive down 18 meters without oxygen bottles. They always dive in pairs, taking it in turns to stay at the surface and keep watch while their partner is down below, filling the baskets. They use sign language to communicate with each other, and only women do this kind of work. "Men are too impatient," says Aochi with a smile, "they feel the cold quickly because they have no body fat." Her husband is standing beside her, two heads shorter and quite a bit slimmer.



Visitors discover a fascinating underwater world at the Kaiyukan Aquarium in Osaka

We head southwest along the coast, past pagoda villages, rice terraces and rocky beaches. Now and then, we come upon a racing cyclist, but otherwise the streets tend to be deserted. Many Japanese express a longing to return to nature and the simple life in the country, far from the crowds and the fast pace and noise of the city. Not Leyla Cavusoglu from the Netherlands. Cavusoglu left Europe to live in a

Day 4 – Matsumoto to

Wajima: The old woman and the sea

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Day 5 – Wajima to Osaka:

Two Lolitas far from home

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Japanese city. "The secondhand stores in Osaka are fantastic," she says, peeping out from under her false eyelashes. She is looking for new Lolita fashions, a variation on "cosplay," the costume trend exported from Japan along with the manga boom in the 1990s. "In cosplay, you play a different role, but as Lolita, you keep your own character," explains Leyla, today in a black-and-red costume. Her friend Danchelle Heijnen is all dolled up in baby blue and pink, right down to the bow in her hair, in an outfit worth around 1000 euros.

The pair of Lolitas are inside a Hello Kitty store. Outside, jostling masses fill the shopping malls near the Glico Man, one of several garish neon signs and a landmark of Dotonbori, a district famous for its nightlife. Young people pose for photos, suited business types sit in sushi bars, and girls match high boots with short skirts, wearing their iPhones like jewelry around their necks. A cacophony of sounds pounds from the Gamecenter, where boys dance to light patterns that keep on changing at breakneck speed. Friday night is a dazzling, neon time of the week. The two Lolitas are off to a party. As they disappear into the crowds, Leyla turns back, her purse describing a semicircle, and calls out, "I just love Japan!"