

## Destination Review: Japan

Japan is one of my favorite places in the world to visit. I made my first trip there about 12 years ago and I've returned several times, with each visit a new and wonderful experience. The trip



Janet and I took to Japan this past Christmas was extra special because we spent it visiting our son Rob and his family. For this destination review I want to share some of what I learned from my own visits to Japan as well as visits I've planned for clients. Whether you prefer to travel with a tour group or strike out on your own on a self-guided experience, Japan is a great destination and we can help you plan the ideal trip to fit your travel goals.

It is hard for me as a westerner to say much about Japanese culture without unintentionally offending every person of Japanese heritage on the planet, other than to note that it is a culture worth learning about. The Japanese people are exceedingly polite by our standards, and their courtesy is demonstrated in ways that may seem odd to Americans, but which Janet and I found refreshing. Japan is a safe destination and a great place for families. Predatory behaviors that are routine risks in this country are virtually unheard of in Japan. It is one of the few destinations to rate the lowest State Department travel status, Level 1: Exercise Normal Precautions. You can get into trouble in Japan, but you generally have to go looking for it.

One of the first things to point out about traveling to Japan is that, as different as it can be, it is pretty easy to get adjusted. Signs in the airports and most cities are in both Japanese and English. Their power grid operates on

100 volts with the same outlets we use.

That means most travelers can leave the outlet adapter and power converter/transformer at home...your cell phone and laptop chargers will work just fine. If you pack a hair dryer

or curling iron, then you'll still need the transformer as some higher wattage devices won't work properly on their 50 Hz duty cycle (ours is 60 Hz).



### Getting Around

DO NOT DRIVE! I can't say that enough. Aside from the fact that they drive on the left, and that their roads can be incredibly narrow and their roundabouts crazier than ours, Japan has liability laws that can be quite troublesome for Americans. Even a minor fender bender that isn't your fault can land you in a heap of hot water. Best to leave the driving to someone else, and why wouldn't you? Japan's public transportation system is among the best in the world.

You can get just about anywhere in the country by train. The rail system in Japan is a model of efficiency where departure times are closely followed. Train travel in Japan comes in many



forms from their bullet trains or Shinkansen to local trains and subways. Using Japan's rail system can seem complicated, and it is, but Google Maps is your best friend. Point to point, station to station, train by train directions from anywhere to anywhere are readily available on your cellphone, and if you miss your train, not to worry...there is likely another coming along in just a few minutes.

Busses augment the rail system and will take you to destinations that aren't convenient to the trains and subways, and taxis are available in most large cities. Cabs are clean, fares metered, and the drivers professionals who wouldn't dream of taking you out of your way to run up the tab. One thing you won't find in abundance in Japan is Uber. The app works in some of the big cities, but it is mainly used to hail regular metered taxis as the concept behind Uber is foreign to Japanese culture.

### **Places to Go/Things to Do**

If you are interested in visiting Japan, you should know the country is an island archipelago made up of five main islands ranging from Okinawa in the south to Hokkaido in the north. Honshu is considered the main island and home to cities popular with tourists...Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.

There is no bad time of year to visit Japan. The climate varies greatly, with Okinawa in the south offering tropical beach vacation opportunities while Sapporo in the north is a winter wonderland that skiing fans will love. Spring is well known as the time for cherry blossoms and Honshu is an ideal place to see them. Summer can be swelteringly hot and humid in the south, but comfortable up north. Fall in Japan is as colorful as it is in this country with breathtaking foliage displays. If you plan a winter visit, I highly recommend planning it around the annual Sapporo Snow Festival which is held in early February. You'll see life sized, and bigger, creations sculpted from snow and ice in painstaking detail including familiar characters from comics, movies, and the wonderful world of anime.



### Tokyo

As the capital of Japan, Tokyo is a bustling modern city composed of districts that cater to a wide range of interests. Shibuya Crossing is Japan's version of Time's Square and Piccadilly Circus...all rolled into the one. It is the world's busiest pedestrian intersection. And there's even a statue of a dog just outside the main subway station...Hachiko, the loyal Akita. Be sure to visit Akihabara, the electronics and anime center. Whether you are shopping for the latest gaming system or the individual components to build your own,



you'll find it all at one of the many vendor stalls that line the narrow alleys. You can pick up a print copy of the latest anime issue, or you can see life sized characters as shoppers frequent the region in costume. If shopping is your game, Ginza is one of the world's largest shopping districts, and for nightlife there's Roppongi after dark. And of course, there's my favorite...Kappabashi or Kitchen City, the wholesale restaurant and food service district. During our recent trip our grandkids took us beyond the usual tourist spots to share some of their favorite day trip destinations...a historic castle, a Samurai museum and a Ninja museum, all conveniently accessible from Tokyo by train.

### Kyoto

If you can visit only one city outside of Tokyo, and I recommend you do, Kyoto is the city. This ancient city was the capital of Japan for more than 1,000 years and is still considered the country's spiritual center. Kyoto is also the nation's capital of traditional arts. Whether your interest be in pottery, textiles, dance, the tea ceremony or any of the other innumerable arts, Kyoto has excellent galleries, museums, shops, and tea houses.

### Hiroshima

When the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, the city became an immediate symbol for the horrors of war. In the years since, Hiroshima has been rebuilt into a fairly typical industrial city, but the main reason to visit are the memorials. When you go, be sure to visit the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Museum.

### **The Food!**

Fish and rice are staples of Japanese food, but Japanese cuisine offers so much more, so take full advantage! Yes, you can find western chains like McDonalds and KFC, and they even have 7-11 convenience stores where you can buy a pretty decent meal if you are on the run, but why go all the way to Japan and eat like you do at home? Restaurants throughout the cities are typically small and don't seat many people so you may have to queue up, but your taste buds will thank you for your patience. Food varies widely from ramen to sushi-go-rounds...restaurants where a supply of tempting dishes are delivered to your table continuously via conveyor belt. Be sure to try food from street vendors and small food stalls...they are hygienic, and the food is delicious. You can't go wrong with meat on a stick...yakitori or kushiyaki, or fried batter wrapped fish and meat wraps.



### **And That's a Wrap**

There is so much more I could say about Japan...my first draft for this article was nine page long! But don't take it from me or Janet. Give us a call and we'll plan your own visit to this amazing destination that has so much to offer. Yes, it is a long flight, but that is a minor inconvenience for all the riches this country has to offer, and the lifelong vacation memories you'll bring home.