



PACK LIGHTLY

THE COUNTRY THAT RUNS ON TIME

Japan

The rail spine, the two great seasons, the regional kitchens, and the access notes most guides leave out.

- p. 26 The route picker: Golden Route or go your own way
- p. 33 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt
- p. 19 The rail pass maths: when it pays and when it does not

49 PAGES

USD PRICES

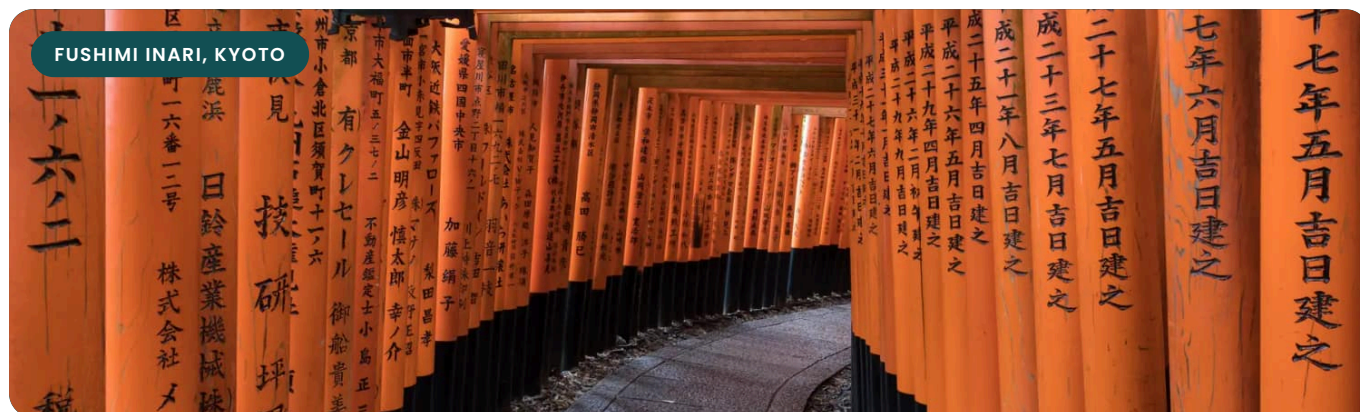
VISA-FREE FOR MOST

EDITION 2026.06

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Japan trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Japan is the easiest hard country to travel: foreign on the surface, frictionless underneath. The first-time trip is the Golden Route, Tokyo to Kyoto to Osaka on the bullet train, with the temples, the food, and Mount Fuji in between. This guide is built around that spine: what each city is for, when the two great seasons land, what the rail really costs, and the access detail most guides skip. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

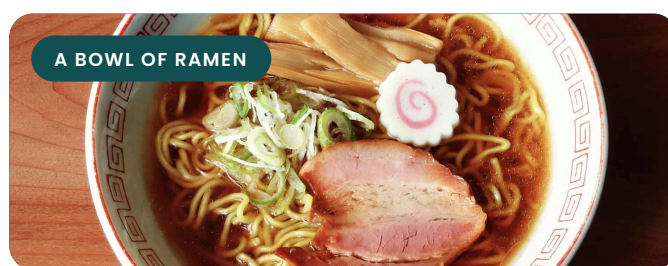
The classic two weeks runs Tokyo, Hakone for Fuji, Kyoto and Nara for the temples, Osaka for the food, with Hiroshima or the north added if you have longer. The shinkansen joins it all in hours.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 70 USD a day, mid-range around 150, captured May 2026. Japan is the priciest country in this series; the full receipt is on page 41.

Sort before you fly

Most passports enter visa-free for 90 days. The big early decision is the rail pass, then an IC card and an eSIM. Page 43 lists the four bookings worth doing early.



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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tap a line to jump straight there

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QUICK JUMPS

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Your trip on one page

14 days • 70 to 350 USD/day • best Apr and Nov

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The Golden Route runs Tokyo, Hakone for Mount Fuji, Kyoto and Nara for the temples, Osaka for the food, all on the bullet train. Budget from the bars below, not from ryokan rack rates. The big early choice is the rail pass; the three bookings at the bottom right are the ones to lock before you fly.

THE ROUTE



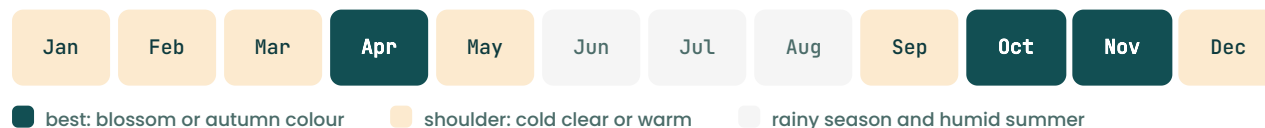
BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		70 USD
Standard		150 USD
Comfort		350 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01** International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02** Big-city hotels early; they sell out in season **Booking.com**
- 03** eSIM, install before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



Japan at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure

95

Safety

95

Food and drinks

95

Culture

95

Cities

95

Budget friendly

45

Budget travel

70 USD/day

Mid-range

150 USD/day

Luxury

350 USD/day

CULTURE

FOOD

CITY

SEASONS

ACCESSIBLE

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country

What Japan is, what it costs, and the four regions strung along the rail spine that you need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One archipelago, four regions, four readers

07

What Japan is

125M people · 4 main islands · the most travel-ready country in Asia

An archipelago of 125 million people on four main islands, from subarctic Hokkaido in the north to subtropical Okinawa in the south. Tokyo is the capital and the largest metropolitan area on earth, 37 million people, yet it runs on time and feels safe at 2am. Japan is the most travel-ready country in Asia: the trains are punctual to the minute, the convenience stores are genuinely excellent, English signage covers the tourist trail, and crime against visitors is close to nonexistent. The catch is cost. This is the priciest country in this series, and the one where booking ahead in peak season actually matters.

CAPITAL

Tokyo

~37M metro

POPULATION

125M

Shinto + Buddhist

CURRENCY

JPY

card + IC card

BEST MONTHS

Apr, Nov

blossom, autumn

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CHARACTERS



TOKYO

Kanto: Tokyo and Mount Fuji

megacity · Fuji · the entry point

Where most trips start. Tokyo's energy and neighbourhoods, with Hakone and Fuji an hour out for the first night in a ryokan.



KYOTO, HIGASHIYAMA

Kansai: Kyoto, Osaka, Nara

temples · food · the cultural heart

The old capital and its neighbours, 15 minutes apart by train. Kyoto for shrines, Osaka for the kitchen, Nara for the deer and the great Buddha.



MIYAJIMA TORII

West: Hiroshima and the south

history · islands · Okinawa

Hiroshima and the floating torii of Miyajima, the Kyushu hot springs, and the subtropical beaches of Okinawa far to the south.



HOKKAIDO SNOW

North: Kanazawa, the Alps, Hokkaido

gardens · snow · the quiet half

The less-touristed north: Kanazawa's gardens, the mountain villages of the Alps, and Hokkaido's powder snow and wide-open space.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time Golden Route

14 days, Tokyo to Osaka, the temples and the bullet train.

Solo traveller

The safest country in this series; the country built for going alone.

Food-led couple

Kyoto kaiseki, Osaka street food, a Tokyo omakase splurge.

Access-led traveller

Step-free stations, the best mobility infrastructure in Asia.

02

Where to go

Nine places on one rail map. The first trip is the four cities of the Golden Route; the rest are the reasons to come back.

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Tokyo

the capital • 4 nights minimum • year-round



SENSO-JI, ASAKUSA

Tokyo is not one city but a chain of them, each built around a station, and the trick is to treat it as neighbourhoods rather than a list of sights. The classic four are Asakusa for the old temple town, Shibuya and Shinjuku for the neon and the crowds, and the quieter pockets of Yanaka and Shimokitazawa where the city slows down. Three nights is the floor; four lets you breathe between districts.

Build a day around one or two areas, not the whole map. The metro is the best in the world and an IC card opens every gate. Start at Senso-ji before the crowds, watch the Shibuya scramble from the Hachiko side, eat your way through a depachika food hall, and finish in a six-seat izakaya under the tracks at Yurakucho. The teamLab digital museums and the views from a free government tower fill the gaps.

Senso-ji, Asakusa

The oldest temple in the city; go at opening, before the Nakamise stalls fill.

Shibuya and Shinjuku

The scramble crossing and the neon canyons; best after dark for the photo.

teamLab

The digital-art museums; book a timed ticket days ahead, they sell out.

Yanaka and Shimokita

Old-town lanes and indie cafes; the Tokyo most first trips never see.



Get a Suica or Pasmo IC card at the airport and load it; it taps you through every train, bus and convenience store in the country.



Rush hour on the Yamanote and Chuo lines, 8 to 9am and 6 to 7pm, is no joke. Plan museum mornings around it.

GO DEEPER

The full [Tokyo city guide](#) ranks the districts, the [Senso-ji page](#) has the timing, and the [Shibuya crossing page](#) covers the best vantage points.

Kyoto

Kansai • 4-5 nights • best Apr and Nov



ARASHIYAMA BAMBOO GROVE

Kyoto was the imperial capital for a thousand years and it still holds the country's densest concentration of beauty: two thousand temples and shrines, the geisha districts of Gion, and the gardens that wrote the rulebook. It is also the most over-touristed city in Japan, so the whole game is timing. The famous places reward the first hour after opening and the last before closing; in between they fill with tour groups.

Do Fushimi Inari's torii tunnels at dawn, Arashiyama's bamboo before eight, and Kiyomizu-dera as it opens. Spend the crowded midday hours in the quieter north, the moss temples and the Philosopher's Path, or in a long lunch. Kyoto in cherry-blossom April and maple November is one of the great sights on earth, and one of the most crowded; book accommodation months ahead for those weeks.



Fushimi Inari is open 24 hours and free. Arrive by 7am and the torii tunnels are yours; by 10am they are a queue.



Gion is a working neighbourhood, not a theme park. Do not chase or photograph geiko and maiko; private alleys are off-limits.

Fushimi Inari

The thousands of vermillion torii up the mountain; dawn or dusk, never midday.

Arashiyama bamboo

The grove plus the monkey park and the river; come before eight or skip it.

Kiyomizu-dera and Higashiyama

The hillside temple and the lantern lanes below; the classic Kyoto walk.

Kinkaku-ji

The golden pavilion over its pond; a quick stop, best in clear morning light.

READ ON

City picks in the [Kyoto write-up](#), the shrine in the [Fushimi Inari page](#), and the grove in the [Arashiyama page](#).

Osaka

Kansai · 2-3 nights · the nation's kitchen



If Kyoto is restraint, Osaka is the opposite: loud, funny, and built around eating. It calls itself the nation's kitchen, and the local motto, *kuidaore*, means to eat yourself bankrupt. The neon canyon of Dotonbori is the postcard, all running-man signs and giant crab, but the real Osaka is in the standing bars of the backstreets and the takoyaki stalls where the grandmother has run the griddle for forty years.

Two nights covers the city; three if you fold in Universal Studios or a day trip. Eat takoyaki and okonomiyaki where the queue is local, drink in the cramped alleys of Shinsekai under the old tower, and ride up to the floating garden observatory at dusk. Osaka sits 15 minutes from Kyoto and 40 from Nara, so many travellers base here and day-trip out to dodge Kyoto's hotel prices.

Dotonbori
The neon-and-canal heart; loud, fun, and best at night with a takoyaki in hand.

Shinsekai and Tsutenkaku
The retro district under the old tower; kushikatsu skewers and standing bars.

Osaka Castle
The reconstructed keep in its park; the grounds beat the museum inside.

Kuromon market
The covered food market; graze it for breakfast before the day-trippers arrive.



Basing in Osaka over Kyoto can halve your room rate in peak season; the 15-minute train makes Kyoto an easy day out.



Follow the queue, not the laminated photo menu. The best takoyaki and kushikatsu stalls have a line of locals and no English sign.

MORE ON THE SITE The city in the [Osaka guide](#), the neon district in the [Dotonbori page](#), and the day-trip in the [Nara breakdown](#).

Nara and Kanazawa

the great Buddha and the garden city • 1 day, 2 nights



NARA DEER

Nara was Japan's first permanent capital, and it packs the country's oldest and largest temples into a deer park you can walk in an afternoon. Todai-ji holds a bronze Buddha fifteen metres tall in the largest wooden building in the world, and the thousand free-roaming deer that bow for a cracker are the reason most people remember it. It is an easy half-day from Kyoto or Osaka, and the early train beats the crowds to the great hall.

Kanazawa is the opposite kind of stop: a former castle town on the north coast, skipped by most first trips and all the better for it. Kenrokuen is one of the three great gardens of Japan, the samurai and geisha districts survive intact, and the modern art museum is a genuine surprise. The shinkansen put it two and a half hours from Tokyo, so it slots neatly into a return route or a longer loop.



The Nara deer are wild animals. Bow and they may bow back, but they nip if you tease the crackers; feed and step away.



Kenrokuen is worth a return visit by season; the snow ropes of winter and the plum blossom of late February are different gardens.

Todai-ji, Nara

The great bronze Buddha in the world's largest wooden hall; go at opening.

Kenrokuen, Kanazawa

One of the three great gardens; a different scene in every season.

Higashi Chaya

Kanazawa's preserved geisha district of teahouses and gold-leaf workshops.

THE FULL PICTURE

The deer park in the [Nara guide](#), the great Buddha in the [Todai-ji page](#), and the garden city in the [Kanazawa write-up](#).

Hakone and Mount Fuji

Kanto · 1-2 nights · the onsen and the mountain



An hour from Tokyo, Hakone is where the first-time trip gets its ryokan night and, on a clear day, its first view of Fuji. The town is a loop of mountain trains, a cable car over a steaming volcanic valley, a pirate ship across Lake Ashi, and a string of hot-spring inns. The point is not to rush the loop but to check into a ryokan, soak in an onsen with the mountain in view, and eat a kaiseki dinner in a yukata.

Fuji itself is fickle: it hides behind cloud more often than not, and clear winter mornings are the safest bet. For the postcard shot, the Chureito pagoda above Fujiyoshida frames the mountain with a five-storey pagoda and, in April, cherry blossom. Climbing Fuji is a separate trip in the short July-to-September season; for most travellers, the view from Hakone or Kawaguchiko is the mountain.



Fuji shows itself most in the cold clear mornings of winter. Summer haze hides it; do not bank a whole trip on the view.



Most onsen require full nudity and no tattoos. Check the tattoo policy when you book, or seek a private family bath.

A Hakone ryokan

The reason to come; tatami room, private or shared onsen, kaiseki dinner.

Owakudani and Lake Ashi

The steaming valley by cable car, the lake by pirate ship, Fuji on a clear day.

Chureito pagoda

The classic Fuji-and-pagoda frame above Fujiyoshida; best with April blossom.

Kawaguchiko

The lake town with the front-row Fuji view; the alternative base to Hakone.

KEEP READING

The onsen loop in the [Hakone guide](#), the mountain in the [Mount Fuji rundown](#), and the pagoda view in the [Chureito page](#).

Hiroshima and Miyajima

the west • 1-2 nights • history in the morning, the island after



Hiroshima carries one of the heaviest histories of the twentieth century, and it carries it with grace. The Peace Memorial Park and museum tell the story of the 1945 atomic bomb without flinching, the skeletal A-Bomb Dome left standing as it fell, and the rebuilt city around it is calm, green, and quietly moving. Give the museum a slow morning; it is one of the most important rooms in the country.

A short ferry away, Miyajima offers the lightest possible counterweight: the great vermilion torii of Itsukushima shrine, appearing to float on the tide, deer wandering the lanes, and the country's most photographed gate. Do the history first and the island after; the torii at high tide near sunset, with the day-trippers gone, is the image you came for. Hiroshima is the natural turnaround point of a longer Golden Route run.



The floating torii only floats at high tide; at low tide you walk out to it on the sand. Check the tide table before you go.



Hiroshima okonomiyaki is layered, not mixed, with noodles inside; it is a different dish from Osaka's and worth the comparison.

Peace Memorial Park

The A-Bomb Dome, the museum, and the cenotaph; a slow, sobering morning.

Itsukushima torii

The floating gate at high tide near sunset; stay past the day-trip crowd.

Mount Misen

The ropeway and summit walk on Miyajima; views across the Inland Sea.

WORTH A READ

The city in the [Hiroshima guide](#), the memorial in the [Peace Memorial page](#), and the floating shrine in the [Itsukushima page](#).

Hokkaido and Okinawa

the cold north and the warm south · trips of their own



The two ends of Japan are destinations in their own right, not Golden Route add-ons. Hokkaido, the northern island, is the wild one: powder snow that draws skiers from across the world to Niseko, the lavender fields and flower farms of Furano in summer, the seafood markets of Sapporo, and a sense of space the rest of Japan does not have. Winter is the headline season; the snow festival in February turns Sapporo into a city of ice sculptures.

Okinawa, far to the south, is a different country in feel: subtropical, slow, with white-sand beaches, coral reefs, and a distinct Ryukyu culture and cuisine that predate the Japanese state. It is the beach Japan, a three-hour flight from Tokyo, best from late spring through autumn outside the typhoon peak. Neither fits a two-week first trip; both reward a return visit built around one of them.

✂

Hokkaido is huge and the rail thins out; renting a car opens the flower farms and coast that trains never reach.

☼

Okinawa's typhoon season peaks August to September. Late spring and October give the warm sea without the storm risk.

Sapporo and Niseko
Snow festival, seafood, and some of the best powder skiing on earth.

Furano and Biei
Hokkaido's summer flower farms and rolling patchwork hills; rent a car.

Okinawa beaches
White sand, coral reefs, and Ryukyu cuisine; Japan's tropical south.

MORE DETAIL The northern island in the [Sapporo guide](#), the southern beaches in the [Okinawa rundown](#), and the island list in the [islands breakdown](#).

Off the beaten path

for second trips • the Japan beyond the Golden Route



Once the four cities are done, Japan opens up. Takayama and the thatched farmhouses of Shirakawa-go sit in the Japan Alps, a preserved mountain Japan of sake breweries and morning markets. Nikko, two hours north of Tokyo, hides the country's most ornate shrine complex in a cedar forest. The Kumano Kodo, on the Kii peninsula, is an ancient pilgrimage trail you can walk hut to hut for days.

For the truly off-route, the islands deliver: Naoshima in the Inland Sea is a whole island turned into a contemporary-art museum, and the Shimanami Kaido is a cycle route across six islands on dedicated bridges. None of these belong on a first trip, and all of them are the reason people come back to Japan again and again rather than tick it off once.

Takayama and Shirakawa-go

Alpine old town and thatched-roof village; sake, markets, mountain quiet.

Nikko

The ornate shrine in the cedars, two hours from Tokyo; a day trip or overnight.

Naoshima

The art island in the Inland Sea; museums, installations, a yellow pumpkin.



Shirakawa-go's thatched houses are a working village; visit by day, but sleep in a Takayama ryokan to keep it that way.



The Shimanami Kaido rents bikes one-way; ride 70km of island bridges and drop the bike at the far end.

DIG IN

The off-route picks in the [off the beaten path rundown](#), the Alps town in the [Takayama page](#), and the cedar shrine in the [Nikko breakdown](#).

Where to base, mapped to what you want

nine bases on one rail map • read down the column you care about

Japan's rail spine means you rarely pick a single base; you chain a few and let the shinkansen do the work. The matrix below sorts the main stops by what each is strongest for, so you can build a route around your priorities rather than a generic loop. Tokyo and Kyoto-Osaka anchor almost every trip; the rest are the choices that shape it.

BASE	REGION	CULTURE	FOOD	NATURE	EASY
Tokyo	Kanto	●●○	●●●	●○○	●●●
Kyoto	Kansai	●●●	●●○	●●○	●●●
Osaka	Kansai	●○○	●●●	●○○	●●●
Hakone	Kanto	●○○	●○○	●●●	●●○
Hiroshima	West	●●○	●●○	●●○	●●○
Kanazawa	North	●●○	●●○	●●○	●●○
Sapporo	Hokkaido	●○○	●●●	●●●	●●○
Naha (Okinawa)	South	●○○	●●○	●●●	●●○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Japan cluster, 2026-06



Two weeks or less: Tokyo, Hakone, Kyoto, Osaka, with Hiroshima if you push. Hokkaido and Okinawa each want their own trip.



Base in Osaka and day-trip Kyoto and Nara to dodge Kyoto's peak-season room rates; the trains make it painless.

ON THE WEBSITE The ranked cities in the [best places rundown](#) and the parks in the [national parks breakdown](#).

03

What to do

The rail system that makes the trip work, the two seasons that define it, the etiquette that keeps you welcome, and the food. Plus where to sleep and which tours are worth paying for.

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The rail system and the pass maths

the thing that makes Japan easy • and the one sum to do before you fly



The trains are the reason Japan is the easiest hard country to travel. The shinkansen runs Tokyo to Kyoto in 2 hours 15, to the minute, every twenty minutes, and the local networks in each city are dense, clean, and signed in English. An IC card, Suica or Pasma, taps you through every gate and most shops; load it at the airport and never think about a paper ticket again.

The one real decision is the Japan Rail Pass. It was the default for decades, but a 2023 price rise changed the maths: it now only pays off if you cover serious distance, roughly a Tokyo to Hiroshima return inside the week. For the standard Tokyo-Kyoto-Osaka loop, individual shinkansen tickets are usually cheaper. Do the sum on your actual route before you buy; the regional passes, JR East or the Kansai area pass, often beat the national one.

Get an IC card first

Suica or Pasma at the airport; taps every train, bus, locker and konbini nationwide.

Do the pass sum

Add up your actual shinkansen legs against the pass price; long distance only.

Consider a regional pass

JR East or the Kansai area pass often beats the national one for a focused trip.

Forward your big bag

Takkyubin luggage forwarding sends your case city to city overnight for a few dollars.



The 7-day national pass pays off around a Tokyo-Hiroshima return or more. For Tokyo-Kyoto-Osaka alone, single tickets win.



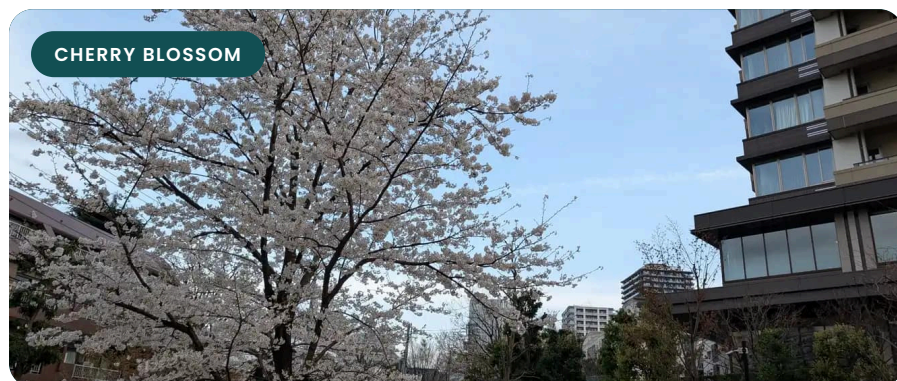
Reserve shinkansen seats free with the pass or app in peak season; the non-reserved cars fill on blossom and holiday weekends.

GO DEEPER

The full transport breakdown in the [getting-around guide](#), and the route planner in the [14-day itinerary](#).

The two seasons: blossom and maple

two windows of a few weeks • the reason to time a trip precisely



More than anywhere else in this series, Japan rewards timing the trip to the calendar. Two short windows define the year. Cherry blossom, sakura, sweeps north from late March, hitting Tokyo and Kyoto in early April for barely a week of pink before it falls. The whole country picnics under the trees, hanami, and the famous spots are joyfully mobbed. Autumn colour, koyo, runs the reverse direction from the north in October to Kyoto in late November, deeper and a little less frenzied.

Both are worth planning around, and both come with a cost: these are the most crowded and most expensive weeks of the year, and accommodation books out months ahead. The blossom front is forecast each spring, but it moves by a week year to year, so allow slack. Outside these windows, fresh green May and clear cold January are quieter and cheaper, and the snow festivals of February are a season of their own.



The blossom front moves a week year to year. Book flexible accommodation and follow the spring forecast before you lock dates.



For colour without the crush, go a few days early or late and skip the top-ten spots; a neighbourhood canal blooms just as well.

LATE MAR TO MID APR

Cherry blossom

A week of pink, north-bound. Picnics under the trees, the spots mobbed, the country at its prettiest.

LATE OCT TO LATE NOV

Autumn maple

Deep reds and golds, south-bound, a touch calmer; Kyoto's temples peak in late November.

FEBRUARY

Snow season

Hokkaido powder and the Sapporo ice festival; a whole different Japan in white.

KEEP READING The month-by-month detail in the [best travel time page](#), and the seasonal picks in the [best places rundown](#).

Temples, shrines and the onsen

three rituals with rules • learn them and the country opens up



At a shrine: bow at the torii, rinse at the basin, then two bows, two claps, one bow. At a temple, skip the claps.



Onsen: wash first at the showers, towel out of the water, fully naked, hair tied up. Tattoos may need a private bath.

Two faiths share the country and the trip. Shinto shrines, marked by a torii gate, honour the spirits of place: bow at the gate, rinse hands and mouth at the water basin, and at the hall toss a coin, bow twice, clap twice, bow once. Buddhist temples, reached through a roofed gate, are for quieter respect: a bow, a coin, no clapping. You will visit dozens; the gestures become second nature by the third day.

The onsen, the hot-spring bath, is the third ritual and the one travellers fret over. The rules are simple once you know them: wash thoroughly at the seated showers first, leave the small towel out of the water, and enter the bath naked, no swimsuits. Many onsen still bar visible tattoos, a holdover from their link to organised crime, so check the policy or book a private family bath if you have ink. Get these right and you have access to the most relaxing institution in Japan.

Shrine ritual

Torii bow, water basin, coin, two bows, two claps, one bow. Simple and quick.

Temple manners

Quiet respect, a coin, incense if offered; no clapping, shoes off where asked.

The onsen

Wash, then soak, naked, towel aside; the country's best free education in slowing down.

WORTH A READ

Etiquette and the cultural calendar in the [culture page](#), the shrine canon in the [religious landmarks rundown](#), and the bath towns in the [Hakone guide](#).

Food: the four calibration dishes

a different kitchen in every city · 5 to 20 USD a plate

Japan has the deepest food culture in this series, and it is intensely regional: ramen changes broth in every prefecture, Osaka is the street-food capital, Kyoto runs to refined kaiseki, and the humblest convenience store sells genuinely good food. Eat at counters where you order by ticket machine, follow the queue of office workers at lunch, and treat the depachika basement food halls of the department stores as a tasting menu. These four dishes are your bar for the rest.



A BOWL OF RAMEN

Ramen ramen

USD 7-12 · everywhere

The national obsession, regional to the bone: rich tonkotsu in the south, soy-based shoyu in Tokyo, miso in the north. Order from the machine, slurp loudly, do not linger; the counter turns over fast.



SUSHI

Sushi sushi

USD 10-40+ · nationwide

From a conveyor-belt plate at a few hundred yen to a hushed omakase counter. The conveyor places are genuinely good and forgiving; save the splurge omakase for one memorable night in Tokyo.



OKONOMIYAKI

Okonomiyaki savoury pancake

USD 8-14 · Osaka, Hiroshima

The savoury cabbage pancake cooked on a hot plate at your table. Osaka mixes the batter; Hiroshima layers it with noodles. Try both and pick a side; locals will argue it with you.



IZAKAYA YAKITORI

Izakaya plates yakitori, small dishes

USD 2-5 a skewer · nightly

The Japanese pub is the heart of an evening: charcoal-grilled yakitori skewers, small sharing plates, and cold beer or sake. Sit at the counter, point at what looks good, and order one round at a time.



Tipping is not a thing and can offend. The price is the price; a sincere "gochisousama" after a meal is the thanks that lands.



Convenience-store food is a real meal here. The egg sandwich, onigiri and fried chicken at any konbini punch far above the price.

ON THE WEBSITE

The full dish-by-dish list with prices in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and the market to start in the [Tsukiji page](#).

Where to stay: Tokyo and Kyoto

prices per night, double room • book early in season, location beats size

Two rules for Japan. First: book the big cities early, especially for blossom and autumn, when good rooms sell out months ahead and prices double. Second: pick the neighbourhood by the train line, not the map distance; a room two minutes from a Yamanote or subway stop beats a cheaper one a long walk out. Rooms are small by Western standards; pay for location, not floor space.

Tokyo (Shinjuku / Shibuya)

hostel 30 USD mid 95 USD comfort 220 USD

Base near a Yamanote-line stop, Shinjuku or Shibuya for the action, Ueno or Asakusa for old-town quiet and lower rates. [Check what a room costs around Shinjuku station](#) before you commit; the hostel and capsule crowd books through [Hostelworld](#).

Kyoto (Gion / Kawaramachi)

hostel 28 USD mid 110 USD comfort 260 USD

Stay central around Kawaramachi or near Kyoto station for the trains; a machiya townhouse stay is the splurge worth making here. Peak weeks vanish fast, so [pull up live Gion-area prices](#) early. Dorms cluster on [Hostelworld](#).

Hotels, ryokan and machiya across both cities, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Tokyo Harajuku and Meiji Shrine walking tour

from 25 USD

5.0 (104 reviews)

2 hours

Kyoto Gion morning walk with a local guide

from 22 USD

5.0 (91 reviews)

2 hours

Tokyo handmade chopsticks workshop in Shibuya

from 11 USD

5.0 (297 reviews)

1 hour

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: Osaka and Hakone

prices per night, double room • the budget base and the splurge night

Osaka is the value play: base in Namba or around the station, save on the room against Kyoto, and day-trip out. Hakone is the opposite, the one place to spend on the room itself, because the ryokan and its onsen are the experience, not the town. Many travellers do one night of ryokan luxury at Hakone and keep the rest of the trip lean to balance it.

Osaka (Namba / Umeda)

hostel **26 USD** mid **85 USD** comfort **180 USD**

Namba puts the food and nightlife on your doorstep; Umeda is the transit hub for day trips. Rates run below Kyoto, so this is the smart base for Kansai. [See what Namba is charging tonight](#), or check the dorm scene on [Hostelworld](#).

Hakone (ryokan country)

guesthouse **70 USD** ryokan **200 USD** luxury **450 USD**

Pay for the ryokan with the private or in-room onsen and the kaiseki dinner; this is the night to splurge. Most include two meals, so the rate is less steep than it looks. [Compare the onsen inns on the live map](#), or browse simpler beds on [Hostelworld](#).

City hotels and onsen ryokan across Kansai and Hakone, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Osaka takoyaki and sake tasting in Namba

from 70 USD
5.0 (161 reviews)
2 hours

Osaka ramen and gyoza cooking class in Dotonbori

from 70 USD
5.0 (80 reviews)
3 hours

Hakone easygoing nature walk with a guide

from 38 USD
5.0 (17 reviews)
4 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

04

Routes

Eight ways through the country, the two-week Golden Route worth flying for, and the line drawn as a rail map. Plus the access, dietary and solo notes most guides skip.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip, 8 paths	26
14 days, day by day	27
The Golden Route as a rail map	29
Access, dietary and solo notes	30

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths • find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend a night decide the route before any list of sights does. Find your row below; the fourteen-day Golden Route on the next spread covers the first three paths in full.

SOLO • 7D • BUDGET

Tokyo and Kyoto, single tickets

USD 1,100 • hostels + IC card

- Tokyo 4n: districts + day trip
- Shinkansen to Kyoto
- Kyoto 3n: temples at dawn

SOLO • 14D • MID

The full Golden Route

USD 2,800 • business hotels

- Tokyo 4 • Hakone 2
- Kyoto 5 • Nara day trip
- Osaka 3, fly out

COUPLE • 14D • COMFORT

Golden Route, ryokan nights

USD 6,000 for 2 • ryokan + omakase

- Tokyo 4: omakase splurge
- Hakone 2: onsen ryokan
- Kyoto 5 • Osaka 3

COUPLE • 21D • MID

Golden Route plus the west

USD 4,800 for 2 • rail pass pays

- Golden Route, 12 nights
- Hiroshima + Miyajima 2
- Kanazawa + the Alps 5

FAMILY • 14D • MID

Cities, deer and theme parks

USD 6,500 • family of 4

- Tokyo 5: teamLab + DisneySea
- Kyoto 4 • Nara deer
- Osaka 4: Universal Studios

ACCESS-LED • 10D • MID

Step-free Golden Route

USD 3,200 • lifts + flat routes

- Tokyo 4: elevator metro map
- Kyoto 4: bus over hill temples
- Osaka 2, all step-free

WINTER • 10D • MID

Cities plus Hokkaido snow

USD 3,600 • ski + festival

- Tokyo 3 • fly to Sapporo
- Niseko 4: powder skiing
- Sapporo 3: snow festival

REPEAT • 14D • ANY

The off-route loop

USD 3,500 • second-trip Japan

- Takayama + Shirakawa-go 3
- Kanazawa 2 • Naoshima 2
- Kumano Kodo walk 4

WORTH A READ

Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), and the [28-day route](#).

14 days, the route worth flying for

days 1-7 · Tokyo, Hakone and into Kyoto

The Golden Route, refined. Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Reserve your shinkansen seats and book hotels well ahead in blossom or autumn; the [full day-by-day](#) lives online.

1 Arrive Tokyo

NRT/HND · day zero

Land, get an IC card and an eSIM, train to the hotel. A first walk through Shinjuku and a ramen counter, then sleep off the jet lag.

2 Old Tokyo

Asakusa + Ueno

Senso-ji at opening, the Nakamise stalls, then the museums of Ueno. Evening in a Yurakucho izakaya under the tracks.

3 West Tokyo

Shibuya + Harajuku

The scramble crossing, Meiji shrine in its forest, the lanes of Harajuku. teamLab in the afternoon if you booked it.

4 Tokyo your way

free day

A day trip to Kamakura or Nikko, or the slow neighbourhoods of Yanaka and Shimokitazawa. Forward the big bag to Kyoto tonight.

5 To Hakone

1h · ryokan night

Romance car to Hakone, the loop of cable car and lake, then check into a ryokan. Onsen before the kaiseki dinner.

6 Fuji and the shinkansen

Hakone to Kyoto

One more soak and a clear-morning Fuji view, then the bullet train west. Arrive Kyoto by mid-afternoon, evening walk in Gion.

7 Kyoto, east side

dawn at Fushimi

Fushimi Inari at first light, Kiyomizu-dera and the Higashiyama lanes, the Philosopher's Path in the quiet afternoon.



Forward your suitcase Tokyo to Kyoto by takkyubin and travel the Hakone leg with a day bag; the mountain trains are not built for cases.



The Kyoto big-hitters reward the first hour after opening. Do one famous site at dawn each day, then go slow and local.

14 days, the Kansai half

days 8-14 • Kyoto, Nara and Osaka

The second week settles into Kansai, where the cities sit minutes apart and you can base once and day-trip out. The pace eases; the temples and the kitchens do the work.

8 Kyoto, west side

Arashiyama early

The bamboo grove before eight, the monkey park and river, Kinkaku-ji's golden pavilion. Afternoon in a Nishiki market food crawl.

9 Nara day trip

45m by train

Early train to beat the crowds to Todai-ji and the great Buddha, the bowing deer in the park, back to Kyoto for dinner.

10 Kyoto slow day

north temples

The quieter moss temples and gardens of the north, a tea house stop, a kaiseki dinner if you booked one.

11 Optional Hiroshima

day trip or stay

If the rail pass pays, run to Hiroshima for the Peace Park and the floating torii of Miyajima, back late or stay the night.

12 To Osaka

15m shinkansen

A short hop to the kitchen of Japan. Dotonbori at night, takoyaki and kushikatsu, a standing bar in the backstreets.

13 Osaka day

castle + market

Kuromon market for breakfast, the castle grounds, Shinsekai under the old tower. A last big food night.

14 Fly home

KIX

Kansai airport sits 50 minutes from Namba on the express. A last konbini breakfast, a last bow, and out.



Fly home from Kansai (KIX), not back to Tokyo. An open-jaw ticket into Tokyo and out of Osaka saves a wasted day backtracking.



Have three weeks? Add Kanazawa and the Alps on the way back to Tokyo, or fly south to Okinawa for a beach finish.

The Golden Route as a rail map

Tokyo to Osaka on the shinkansen · the two-week route in one picture

The first trip is a line down the main island on the bullet train. The map below traces it: Tokyo, out to Hakone for Fuji, west on the shinkansen through Kyoto and Osaka, with the Hiroshima extension running on to the floating torii in the far west.



geography: Natural Earth 50m · route legs on true coordinates

Access, dietary and solo notes

the detail most guides skip • Japan does these better than anywhere in Asia

STEP-FREE TRAVEL

The most accessible country in Asia

Almost every station has lifts and tactile paving; staff will ramp you on and off any train if you ask at the gate. Plan around the hill temples of Kyoto, which stairs cannot avoid, and use the flat shrines and the bus network instead.

SOLO AND SOLO FEMALE

The safest country in this series

Walking alone at night is genuinely safe in the cities, lost wallets get handed in, and women-only carriages run at rush hour on many lines. Capsule hotels and single rooms make solo travel cheap and easy.

DIETARY NEEDS

Vegetarian and gluten-free take planning

Dashi stock and soy sauce put fish and wheat in places you would not expect, so strict vegetarians and coeliacs should carry an allergy card in Japanese. Shojin ryori temple cuisine is fully vegetarian, and dedicated gluten-free restaurants are growing in the big cities.

FAMILIES AND SENIORS

Built for both

Spotless toilets with baby tables everywhere, excellent paediatric and elder care, and a gentle pace easy to keep. The theme parks delight kids; the gardens and onsen suit a slower trip.



Carry a printed allergy and dietary card in Japanese. Kitchen staff want to help and will, but few read English mid-service.



Tell a station attendant your destination and they will radio ahead so a ramp meets your train. It works on the shinkansen too.

KEEP READING Safety and solo notes in the [safety breakdown](#), and the cultural context in the [culture rundown](#).

05

When to go

Four real seasons, two great windows, and a festival calendar worth planning around. Plus what a day really costs, printed as a receipt.

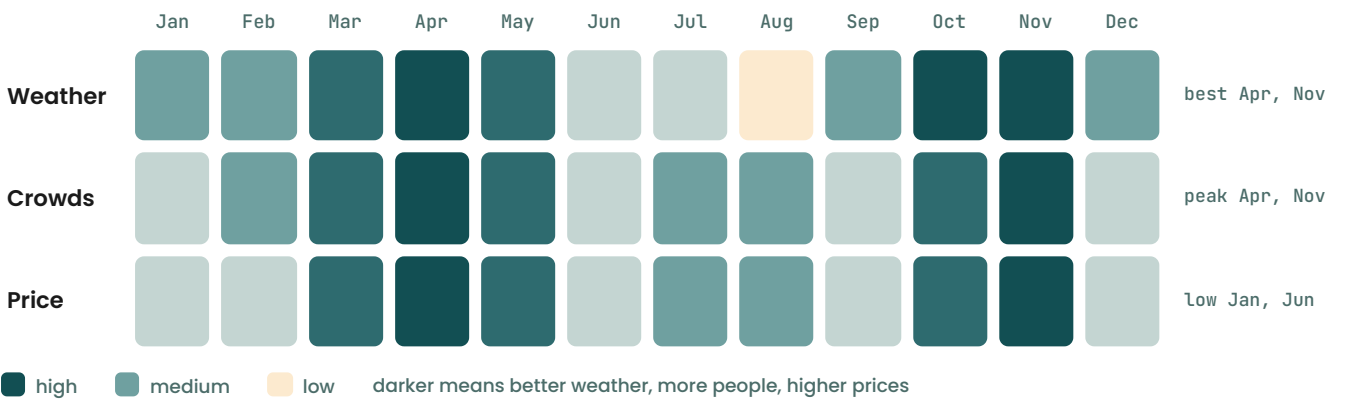
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	32
What a day really costs	33
Festivals worth timing a trip around	34

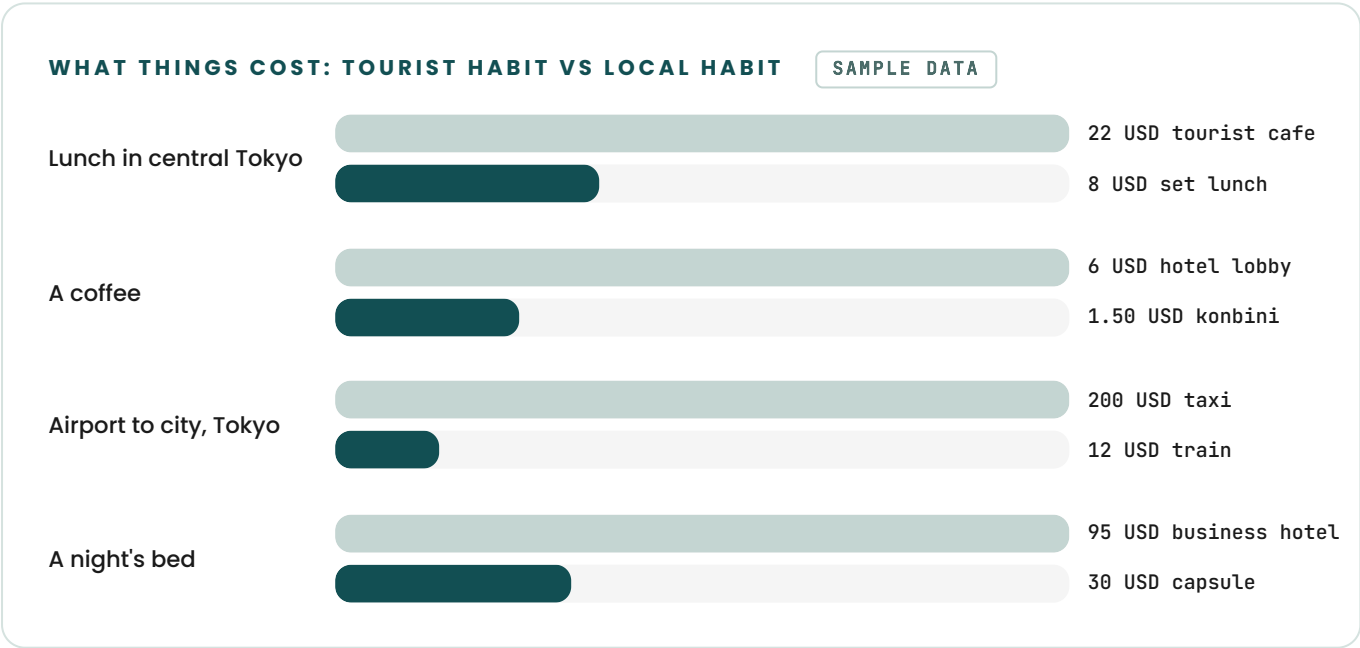
Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · two peaks, one rainy gap

Japan has four distinct seasons and two clear peaks. Spring blossom in late March and April, and autumn colour in late October and November, give the best weather and the biggest crowds at once. The gaps to know: the rainy season, tsuyu, soaks June, and July and August are hot and humid with a typhoon risk. Winter is cold, clear and quiet outside the ski resorts and the February snow festivals, and a genuinely good-value time for the cities.



climate: 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17 · crowd and price: pack-lightly estimate



What a day really costs

bed to nightcap, three ways · itemised, with a capture date

The headline numbers, made concrete. Three days in Japan, priced line by line at the level most travellers actually spend. This is the priciest country in this series, but the gap is narrower than people fear: convenience-store meals, set lunches and capsule beds keep a backpacker day in check, while the splurge is real. Captured May 2026; the budget calculator keeps the live version.

A DAY IN JAPAN * backpacker * hostel or capsule30.00 konbini breakfast4.00 ramen or set lunch8.00 izakaya dinner14.00 local trains, IC card6.00 one temple or museum4.00 two konbini beers4.00 TOTAL / DAY~70 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17	A DAY IN JAPAN * standard * business hotel, half48.00 cafe breakfast8.00 restaurant lunch14.00 dinner with drinks28.00 trains + one shinkansen30.00 leg sights and a coffee12.00 TOTAL / DAY~150 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17	A DAY IN JAPAN * comfort * ryokan or 4-star, half180.00 hotel breakfastincl. kaiseki or sushi lunch40.00 omakase dinner90.00 taxis + reserved seats30.00 guide or privateincl. tourabove bar nightcap10.00 TOTAL / DAY~350 USD budget-calculator estimate · 2026-05-17
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Festivals worth timing a trip around

the matsuri calendar • one festival can define a trip



AUTUMN MAPLE, KYOTO

Japan runs on a calendar of matsuri, local festivals tied to shrines and seasons, and landing on the right one turns an ordinary week into the trip people talk about. The blossom season is its own festival, hanami picnics under the trees in every park. Kyoto's Gion Matsuri in July fills the old streets with towering wooden floats, and the Sapporo Snow Festival in February builds a city of ice.

The dates to avoid, not chase, are the domestic holiday weeks: Golden Week in early May, Obon in mid-August, and New Year, when the whole country travels at once and trains and hotels strain. Time a trip around a festival if you can, but build it around the weather first; the two great seasons are the surest bet.



Avoid Golden Week (early May), Obon (mid-August) and New Year; the whole country travels and prices spike. Festival dates shift, so confirm them.



A neighbourhood summer matsuri, with yukata, lanterns and stalls, is easier to enjoy than the famous big ones and just as memorable.

FEBRUARY

Sapporo Snow Festival

A week of giant ice and snow sculptures in Hokkaido; the headline of the winter calendar.

JULY

Gion Matsuri, Kyoto

The grand float procession through the old capital; the most famous matsuri in the country.

LATE NOV

Autumn illuminations

Kyoto temples light their maples after dark for a few weeks; book the timed-entry nights ahead.

SEE ALSO The month-by-month breakdown in the [best travel time page](#), and the festival context in the [culture rundown](#).

06

Practical

The four things to book before you fly, how money and the trains actually work, and the short list that keeps a Japan trip simple.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	36
Money and transport	37
Bed, bag, signal	38
Health basics	39

Book in this order

four things before you fly • the rest is easy on the ground

Japan rewards a little planning where its neighbours punish it: in peak season, the good hotels genuinely sell out, and a couple of decisions are easier made at home. Four things reward booking ahead, and they have a natural order. Most passports enter visa-free for 90 days, so the visa step is a quick check, not an application.

8 wk
before

International flights

Fares settle six to eight weeks out. Book an open-jaw, into Tokyo and out of Osaka, to save a backtracking day. Blossom and autumn flights go early and dear.

**Compare fares
on Aviasales**

6 wk
before

City hotels + the rail-pass sum

Book Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka early in peak season; the best rooms vanish months ahead. At the same time, add up your shinkansen legs and decide on the rail pass, national or regional, before you buy a thing.

**Find Stays on
Booking.com**

2 wk
before

Visa check + timed tickets

Confirm your entry rule, then book the timed-entry attractions that sell out: teamLab, the Ghibli Museum, popular tea ceremonies and any kaiseki dinner you have your eye on.

**Check entry
rules per
passport**

1 wk
before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on landing. Coverage is excellent nationwide. 5 to 10 GB covers two weeks of maps, translation and uploads; the IC card you pick up at the airport.

**Set up a Saily
eSIM**



Passport rule: valid for the length of your stay; no six-month buffer required for a visa-free visit. Still, check yours has space.



If you buy a national rail pass, you no longer need the paper exchange order; the digital version activates on arrival. Confirm the current rule.

Money and transport

still a cash country in places • the trains do the rest

Japan is more cash-based than its wealth suggests. Cards work in hotels, chains and department stores, but small restaurants, shrines, and rural stops often take cash only, and the reliable foreign-card ATMs are inside 7-Eleven and the post office. Carry a few hundred dollars in yen, and load an IC card for the daily small spend: it taps you through trains, buses, lockers and convenience stores nationwide.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Capsule / business hotel / ryokan	USD 30	USD 90	USD 220
Konbini meal / restaurant	USD 5	USD 16	USD 45
Beer at an izakaya	USD 4	USD 6	USD 10
Shinkansen, Tokyo-Kyoto	USD 90	USD 90	USD 130
Local trains, full day	USD 6	USD 8	USD 12

verified 2026-05-14 • pack-lightly Japan estimate • per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

The shinkansen for the long legs, local trains and the subway for everything in town, and your own two feet for the rest. Reserve bullet-train seats free with a pass or for a small fee without one; in peak weeks the non-reserved cars fill. Run the rail-pass sum on your real route before you buy, since single tickets often win on the standard loop. Domestic flights only make sense for the far ends, Hokkaido and Okinawa, where the train thins out. In the cities, the metro is the best on earth; for the rural north, renting a car opens what the rails cannot reach. Forward your big bag city to city by takkyubin and travel light on the connecting days.



Foreign cards work at 7-Eleven and post-office ATMs but often fail at bank machines. Pull cash at a konbini and carry yen.



Airlines and bus firms are named without links here where no partner relation exists; book those direct.

THE FULL PICTURE

ATM and card notes in the [currency rundown](#), and the route options in the [getting-around breakdown](#).

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For most stays, [Booking.com](#) has the depth and the free-cancellation policy; book the city stays early in season. For hostels, capsules and the social end, [Hostelworld](#) has the deeper review pool. For one night, splurge on a Hakone ryokan with an onsen and a kaiseki dinner; it is the single most memorable bed in the country.

BAG: THE SHOULDER-SEASON CARRY-ON LIST

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Layers; spring and autumn swing warm to cold in a day | ☐ Type A plug adapter; Japan runs 100V |
| ☐ Slip-on shoes you can remove fast at temples and ryokan | ☐ A coin purse for the shrine offerings and cash-only stops |
| ☐ Good socks; you will be in stockinged feet a lot | ☐ A small day bag, since you forward the big case |
| ☐ A compact umbrella for the changeable weather | ☐ Hand towel; many public toilets have no dryer |
| ☐ A printed allergy and dietary card in Japanese | ☐ Cash; not everywhere takes cards |

Signal. Buy the eSIM before you fly and activate on landing. Coverage is excellent everywhere, including the bullet train. A 5 GB plan covers a week (~8 USD); 10 GB covers two. A pocket-wifi rental is the alternative for a family sharing one connection.

[Set up a Saily eSIM](#)

GO DEEPER

The season-by-season list in the [packing list](#), and data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Health basics

a low-drama destination • the list is mostly reassurance

Japan is one of the easiest health destinations in the world: tap water is safe, hygiene standards are exceptional, the food economy is clean at every price, and the hospitals are excellent. No special vaccinations are required for a normal trip. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, which is not much, plus the two natural hazards that are worth a moment of preparation.

THE SHORT LIST

- ☐ **Routine:** confirm your standard vaccines (MMR, DPT, flu) are current; nothing Japan-specific is needed.
- ☐ **Prescriptions:** some common Western medicines are restricted here. Carry a doctor's note and check your meds before you fly.
- ☐ **Insurance:** care is excellent but expensive without cover. A standard travel policy is plenty; no evacuation tier needed.
- ☐ **Earthquakes:** common and usually minor. Learn the drill: drop, cover, hold; hotels post the routine, and phones alert you.
- ☐ **Typhoons:** a risk from August to October. Track the forecast, build slack into island and Okinawa legs, and follow local advice.
- ☐ **Pharmacies:** well-stocked drugstores everywhere; staff are helpful, and a translation app bridges the language gap.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Care is world-class but the system runs in Japanese, so a translation app and your insurer's assistance line are the tools that matter. Larger cities have international clinics used to foreign patients. For minor issues, the drugstores handle stomach upsets, colds and cuts over the counter. Dial 119 for an ambulance or fire, 110 for police; both have limited English, so have your address written in Japanese.



Some cold and allergy medicines normal at home are banned here. Check the rules and pack a doctor's note for anything prescription.



Download the official disaster alert app; it warns of earthquakes and typhoons in English seconds before they reach you.

READ ON Hazard and safety detail in the [safety breakdown](#), and the prescription rules in the [culture rundown](#).

07

Safe and smart

One of the safest countries on earth, where the things that go wrong are nature and etiquette, not crime. Plus the manners that matter and the language minimum that changes how people respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What actually goes wrong in Japan	41
Etiquette: the short list	42
Emergency numbers and eight phrases	43

What actually goes wrong in Japan

not crime • the things that trip travellers up are nature and manners

Japan is among the safest countries on earth: violent crime against travellers is close to nonexistent, lost wallets are routinely handed in, and walking anywhere alone at night is genuinely fine. So the usual safety section does not apply. What actually goes wrong here is different, a handful of natural hazards and a set of etiquette missteps that mark you out as a clumsy guest. Knowing these four is the whole of staying safe and smart.

RISK 01

Earthquakes

Tremors are frequent and usually harmless, but a big one is always possible. Buildings are engineered for it and the warning system is excellent; the danger is panic and falling objects.

What to do: drop, cover under a table, hold on. Phones blast an alert seconds ahead; hotels post the drill. Follow staff, do not run outside mid-shake.

RISK 02

Typhoons and summer heat

August to October brings typhoons, especially to the south and Okinawa, and midsummer heat and humidity are genuinely dangerous in the cities.

What to do: track the forecast, build slack into island legs, and in summer hydrate, use the shade, and treat the midday heat with respect.

RISK 03

The quiet-train misstep

Loud phone calls, eating on a commuter train, or a backpack worn on a crowded carriage are the small breaches that draw real disapproval, even if nobody says a word.

What to do: silence the phone, eat before you board, and swing your pack to your front in a crush. Quiet is the default; match it.

RISK 04

The Kabukicho touts

The one genuine money trap is the bar-tout scene in a few Tokyo and Osaka nightlife districts: friendly men steering you to a bar with a hidden cover charge and an inflated bill.

What to do: never follow a street tout into a bar. Pick your own place, check the cover charge sign at the door, and you will never see the problem.

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety picture in the [safety breakdown](#), and the cultural context in the [culture rundown](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • last four keep you welcome

Eight things that matter. The first four cause quiet offence if you ignore them; the last four are the difference between a polite guest and an awkward one. Japan is forgiving of foreigners, but effort is noticed and rewarded.

DO

Take your shoes off

In homes, ryokan, temples, and anywhere with a raised floor or slippers waiting. Watch for the step.

DO

Keep it quiet on trains

Phones on silent, no calls, low voices. The carriage hush is sacred; do not be the one who breaks it.

DO

Bow, and receive with two hands

A small bow greets and thanks. Take cards, change and gifts with both hands; it reads as respect.

DO

Queue and stand on the correct side

Lines form neatly at every door. Stand left on Tokyo escalators, right in Osaka; watch and follow.

DO NOT

Stick chopsticks upright in rice

It mimics a funeral rite. Rest them on the holder, and never pass food chopstick to chopstick.

DO NOT

Tip

It can confuse or offend. The price is the price; good service is simply the standard, not a transaction.

DO NOT

Eat while walking

Street food is eaten by the stall, not on the move. Bins are rare; carry your rubbish until you find one.

DO NOT

Photograph geiko or wear shoes into a bath

Gion's lanes and the onsen have firm rules; respect the signs and you stay welcome.



When in doubt, watch the person next to you and copy them. The whole etiquette system is legible if you slow down and look.



Carry a small bag for your rubbish. Public bins are scarce, a legacy of the 1995 attacks; locals take their litter home.

KEEP READING

Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and the shrine and temple manners in the [religious landmarks page](#).

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now • the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE

110

limited English

AMBULANCE / FIRE

119

nationwide

JAPAN HELPLINE

0570 000 911

English, 24/7

JNTO TOURIST LINE

050 3816 2787

English, 24/7

US EMBASSY TOKYO

+81 3 3224 5000

citizen services

COAST GUARD (SEA)

118

marine emergency

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND

ENGLISH	JAPANESE (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	konnichiwa	the daytime greeting
Thank you	arigatou gozaimasu	the polite full form
Excuse me / sorry	sumimasen	also gets a waiter's attention
Yes / No	hai / iie	a nod and "hai" go far
How much?	ikura desu ka?	essential at markets and stalls
Delicious	oishii	say it and the cook lights up
Thanks for the meal	gochisousama	said leaving any eatery
Help!	tasukete!	emergencies only



A translation app with camera mode reads menus and signs instantly; pair it with these phrases and you will rarely be stuck.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 47; cut it out and keep it with your IC card.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you	45
Print cards: cut, fold, take	46
Sources and methodology	47
A note on the links	49

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Japan data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Japan: 70 USD/day backpacker, 350 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Country Map

Japan spots mapped, from Hokkaido to Okinawa.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/country-map/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: Apr and Nov. Month-by-month weather for 140+ countries.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Visa Checker

Japan: visa-free 90 days for most. Check your passport's rule.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/visa-checker/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

JAPANESE • ESSENTIALS	
Hello	konnichiwa
Thank you	arigatou gozaimasu
Excuse me	sumimasen
Yes / No	hai / iie
How much?	ikura desu ka?
Delicious	oishii
Thanks (after a meal)	gochisousama
Help!	tasukete!

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY • JAPAN	
Police	110
Ambulance / Fire	119
Japan Helpline (EN)	0570 000 911
JNTO tourist line	050 3816 2787
US Embassy (Tokyo)	+81 3 3224 5000
My hotel:	_____
Address:	_____
Insurance #:	_____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Japan hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/japan/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.



Save your hotel's name and address in Japanese in your phone; show it to a taxi driver or a station attendant when you are lost.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with a performance-marketing background and a data-led approach to travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; where a figure is an estimate it says so on the page, and prices that move more than 15 percent are flagged in the next edition.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hotel and capsule pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, main-city sample.
2. Country scores: pack-lightly country-comparison dataset, re-scored 2026-02.
3. Visa policy: Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs visa-exemption list, retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Rail-pass pricing: Japan Rail Pass official site, retrieved 2026-05-15.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Open-Meteo and JMA 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly Japan cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-15: [visa](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [currency](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Budget figures come from the country-comparison cost model, and the crowd and price calendar is a pack-lightly estimate, marked as such and stamped with its capture date.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first Japan release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: the deep north of Tohoku, the Kii peninsula pilgrim trails, and the southern Kyushu hot-spring circuit, which get their own pages online.

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This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A city to base in or a way to travel is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. The rail-pass advice tells you when not to buy one, and the over-touristed sights are still called crowded. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: Aviasales · Booking.com · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · Viator · via Travelepayouts



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This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.