



at *home* in

# JAPAN

Visiting Japan's major cities, rural towns and villages is an odyssey through a thousand years, because no other nation on earth has been able to modernize and advance in technology and also reflect its traditions and cultural values at every turn.



**TOWERING SKYSCRAPERS** in Tokyo may have Shinto shrines on their roofs, feudal castles may be neighbors of new office complexes and train stations, and teahouses seem like time machines where hundreds of years melt away by crossing the threshold into a bastion of ceremony. Festivals of holidays and shrines persist in retaining the culture of long-cherished values and beliefs.

But before you set foot on this beautiful and diversified homeland, you'll need to do some shopping first. For the newcomer, bringing a number of inexpensive and small gifts with you is not only generous, but a wise strategy to earn the respect of new Japanese friends. Nothing extravagant — anything American will do. Popular gifts might include a video representing your last duty station, small picture books, calendars, ashtrays, soap, shampoos or cosmetics.

Once you have landed, you'll soon discover that you will be living on unsteady ground. Japan, in fact, is one of the world's most earthquake-prone regions. Although tremors occur on a daily basis in the Tokyo area, you may not experience your first earthquake right away. But when you do, you'll know it. Don't be alarmed, but do be prepared. A quick overview of earthquake safety is a must. Also, knowing who and how to call for fire or emergency assistance in Japanese is essential if you live off base.

And while you are at it, take a complete on-base or online course in basic Japanese, learn to drive on the left side of the road like the British do, and learn the proper etiquette concerning eating and drinking.

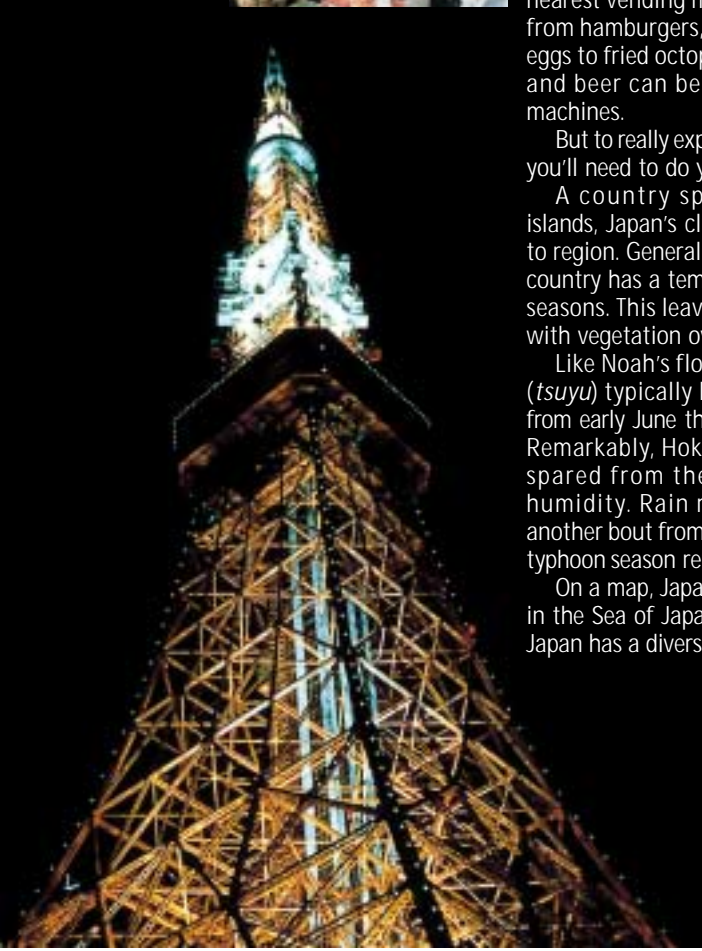
Give the chopsticks a whirl. And we don't mean on your next on-base Burger King® Whopper®. Go for the small stuff. When you can grab that single grain of rice with ease, you'll know you are ready to go public with your new talents.

To try out your new language, manners and chopsticks-wielding mastery, you should venture out to the local *izakaya* (Japanese-style bar), *yakitori* or *okonomiyaki* restaurants for a true cultural experience.

Not quite up to reading the menu yet? Luckily for you, the Japanese have made reading the menu a snap. Interested in a seafood dish? Just point. That is, at the display of fake food in the front window. It's plastic and lifelike. So much so that you'll swear the *ramen* noodles are steaming before your eyes.

Interestingly, many visitors find these faux food displays so entertaining they often bring home a few souvenirs with them.





Don't be surprised by what you see in the restaurants and other social settings in Japan. The Japanese are at home picking up their bowls when they eat. They also enjoy slurping down noodle dishes, such as *udon* and *ramen*. It supposedly tastes better that way.

Like soy sauce on your rice? You might get some curious stares from fellow diners if you do. To the Japanese it's as odd as someone in the States who likes to pour lemon juice on their bran cereal.

And you'll soon discover that *sake* is a staple at most social events. The first sip is taken after the customary toast, or *Kampai!* (literally means Cheers!) During the evening your companions will keep your glass full and in return you should do the same for those around you. It is considered impolite to pour your own glass. If you've had your fill, just sip from your glass or politely refuse a refill.

Still hungry? Just head over to the nearest vending machine. Everything from hamburgers, hot dogs and fresh eggs to fried octopus, fried sea bream and beer can be found in vending machines.

But to really experience this country, you'll need to do your own exploring.

A country spanning across 3,000 islands, Japan's climate varies from region to region. Generally speaking, however, the country has a temperate climate with four seasons. This leaves Japan richly carpeted with vegetation over much of the islands.

Like Noah's flood, Japan's rainy season (*tsuyu*) typically lasts 40 days and nights from early June through the middle of July. Remarkably, Hokkaido is the only island spared from the rainfall and intense humidity. Rain revisits the islands for another bout from August to October when typhoon season returns to the islands.

On a map, Japan is a small set of islands in the Sea of Japan. On the road, however, Japan has a diversified offering of things to

see and do. From Hokkaido's Olympic-quality skiing in the north to Tokyo's bustling entertainment districts and renowned restaurants, Japan offers more than you can see and do during your tour here.

While you are visiting the fabulous temples, statues, museums and galleries which dot the countryside, don't miss the opportunity to take part in some of the local festivals. You might come across the *Hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) or *Hinamatsuri* (also known as the Doll's, Peach or Girl's Festival), which celebrates young girl's growth and happiness.

Or, if you are lucky, you might be a spectator to some of the stranger festivals in Japan.



If you come upon the *Setsubun* festival, you'll experience people walking around the outside of a house throwing handfuls of roasted soybeans, shouting "*Onni wa soto. Fuku wa uchi!*" This roughly translates to "Out with the goblins. In with fortune!" When done throwing the beans, they eat the same number of beans as their age to allow them to be free of sickness in the upcoming year.

During the *Mikoshi* festivals each summer, natives from Hokkaido to Kyushu dressed in their "*happi*" coats parade their diety around the community or parish in a portable shrine. Each shrine can weigh several tons and require up to 100 people to carry it. These shrines are carted around for hours to the anguished delight of participants.

Or, for a different spin on the Mikoshi festival, check out the *Kenka Mikoshi* (fighting Mikoshi). In this event, the gods are not "in" the shrines; therefore, the participants are free to thrust their shrines into each other until one or both are destroyed. You can witness this jousting-like event in Niigata or Hokkaido.

Hopefully, by the time your tour is over you will have experienced all that the "Land of the Rising Sun" has to offer.

