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VACATIONS

INSPIRING JAPAN

WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO DO & MORE



WELCOME TO JAPAN

At Inspiring Vacations, we're on a mission to inspire you to see the world.

If you're dreaming of travelling to the most iconic destinations across the globe, you're in the right place. We couldn't be more excited to get you there.

Inside these pages, we showcase one of our most popular destinations, Japan. It offers so much to the first time visitor and repeat explorer alike — one visit is just not enough. By the end of this eBook, we're sure you'll be as eager to visit Japan as we are to get you there!

Happy travel planning and, as always — safe travels.

Paul Ryan
CEO
Inspiring Vacations

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Japan tours,
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INSIDE...



Why travel with Inspiring Vacations? 4

Why visit Japan now? 6

When is the best time to visit? 8

Introducing Japan 10

Snapshot on:

↳ Tokyo 12

↳ Kyoto 16

↳ Osaka 20

↳ Fushimi Inari 24

Guide to:

↳ Where to find the best views of Mount Fuji 28

↳ Cherry Blossom season 32

↳ Japanese Etiquette 36

Our Customers 42

How to book with Inspiring Vacations 44

WHY TRAVEL WITH INSPIRING VACATIONS?



GLOBAL EXPERTS

When you travel with Inspiring Vacations, you can expect thoughtfully curated tours to iconic destinations across the globe. Our authentic and culturally-rich tours are packed with must-see sights, lesser-known locations and enriching local experience, all at an unbeatable price.



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INSPIRING COMMUNITY

Our travel articles, digital magazine, destination videos and member-only Facebook community groups will inspire your wanderlust or if you prefer, have a phone chat with one of our travel specialists for their recommendations.



↙
Miyajima Island, Hiroshima



WHY VISIT JAPAN NOW?



Brendan Cooper
HEAD OF TRAVEL
Inspiring Vacations



Crosswalk at Shibuya district in Tokyo



10HR FLIGHT

Japan has always been a popular destination — a 10-hour flight for Australians, and 12 hours for UK and US travellers — and you'll find yourself in one of the most vibrant countries in Asia.

Our itineraries are designed to show you the best that there is to see in Japan — start ticking off your bucket list.



81,000 SHINTO SHRINES

First time visitors to Japan are in for a sensory overload. Regardless of your interests, Japan is a melting pot of cultural extremes. From one of the most refined cuisines in the world to the 81,000 Shinto shrines dotted throughout the country, Japan is old and ultra-modern wrapped into one. My personal favourite first-time must is walking the district of Gion in Kyoto around 4pm — this is your best chance of seeing a real-life Geisha. You can then wander one of the many alleyways and experience a savoury *okonomiyaki* pancake.

(Image: Shutterstock)



UNFORGETTABLE TOURS

Book our 17 Day Unforgettable Japan tour and witness stunning Kyoto for yourself.

If you're a returning visitor, I'd recommend our 20 Day Treasures of Japan. Recap your favourite places like Tokyo and Kyoto while experiencing the traditional north of Sapporo and Hakodate before venturing south and stay overnight on top of sacred Mt Koya in a monk temple.

No matter which tour you decide on, all our tours offer unparalleled comfort, quality and price — we strive to deliver unbeatable value to Japan whether it's your first or second visit.

And take it from me, one visit isn't enough.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO VISIT?

Japan is an island country full of contrasts. From ultra-sleek modern cities to soaring alps, traditional villages and ancient shrines. And with very distinct seasons and incredible attractions in each, Japan has something for everybody.

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Watch our Japan weather video.
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SPRING

One of the highlights in Japan every year has to be the spring cherry blossom season, so you'll want to land between late March and mid-April for the best of the Hanami Festival. Tokyo and Kyoto, prime cherry blossom territory, enjoy cool to mild temperatures that can reach up to 18 degrees.

In May, things start to warm up, beginning with Golden Week - one of Japan's busiest holiday seasons. Late spring can be one of the best times to travel before things start to seriously heat up.



SUMMER

Summer, from June to August, doesn't just deliver steamy daytime temperatures and Japan's rainy season, but also some of the most spectacular festivals. Many say the season is worth it for the *matsuri* or festival culture that happens during this time.

Temperatures in summer average around 26 degrees in the north and 31 degrees in the south and the humidity is high. Hokkaido can be one of the more comfortable parts of the country at this time and is popular with outdoor enthusiasts.



AUTUMN

If the colours of Autumn coupled with warm and mild temperatures that, after the initial typhoon season, are much drier, September to November can be one of the best times to visit Japan. Temperatures start the season with a comfortable 22 degrees in the north and 30 degrees in the south. For hundreds of years visitors have sought out the spectacular autumnal colours on display all over the country and the vibrant foliage can be the perfect backdrop to your Japanese adventure.



WINTER

Two-thirds of Japan is mountainous, so for those that love the snow and winter sports, December through to February are your months.

With the north of Japan averaging temperatures of -1 degree in January, winter is perfect for skiing, discovering the hot springs and enjoying events like the Sapporo Snow Festival. Meanwhile, in the south, temperatures can still reach a mild 19 degrees during the day.

↘
Above: A row of yellow ginkgo trees in Autumn

(All images: Shutterstock)

Mount Fuji in Spring

Watch our
Japan videos
[here](#)



INTRODUCING →

JAPAN

As the most technologically advanced city in the world, Japan's sprawling capital showcases its culture and history on every corner.

SNAPSHOT ON ↑
TOKYO

FROM TOWERING SKYSCRAPERS to eclectic streets and an award-winning food scene, Tokyo is Japan's most populous city and is regularly ranked among the most liveable in the world. The city of over nine million people is broken into 23 different neighbourhoods (known as wards), each with its own special appeal. Ginza is known for its high-fashion boutiques, Asakusa boasts the city's largest Buddhist temple, Senso-ji and Shibuya is home to the world's busiest pedestrian crossing. Tokyo is easily explored on foot but its sophisticated public transport system weaves across the city and connects each area seamlessly.

The history of Tokyo dates back around 400 years when it was a modest fishing village known as Edo. During this time, Kyoto was the imperial capital of Japan. ▶

(Image: Shutterstock)



Two geishas wearing traditional kimono at Sensoji Temple in Asakusa



Clockwise from right: Crowds walk through Takeshita Street in the Harajuku district; tourists enjoying Nakamise shopping street in Asakusa; Tokyo street food

► It wasn't until the Tokugawa Shogunate was established in the early 17th century with Edo as its capital, that the population boomed.

This Shogunate was the most powerful government in Japanese history with ruling power over the Emperor and all religious establishments. The government went on to function for several centuries until the last Shogun Yoshinobu surrendered to imperial forces in 1868. Shortly after, the Emperor officially relocated the capital from Kyoto to Edo and renamed it Tokyo or, 'eastern capital.' It has remained the administrative hub ever since.

The following decades resulted in drastic expansion throughout Tokyo and the construction of infrastructure like locomotive railways. However, the city, as it stands today, is relatively new. Devastating air raids in World War II caused mass destruction, so when the war ended, reconstruction projects sprang up across the city. By the late 1950s, the skyline was brimming with modernised structures like the Tokyo Tower which became a symbol of hope for the Japanese people.

Being the capital, Tokyo is a fantastic place to learn about Japanese culture, sights and dishes. Impressive art and history museums are found in most neighbourhoods and showcase artefacts dating back to antiquity — everything from traditional calligraphy to samurai attire. Four of Japan's most prestigious museums and galleries are located in Taito's Ueno Park, making it the perfect place for art lovers to spend the day.

Surprisingly, Tokyo is home to thousands of parks and gardens which provide respite for travellers and residents alike. Areas such as the East Gardens at the Imperial Palace are stunning in every season — autumn paints the leaves crimson while in spring, you can see the famous cherry blossom. Take a stroll through the grounds (where the current Emperor Akihito still resides), and marvel at its immaculate design that dates back to the 19th century. A lake filled with koi fish winds through



the east gardens and mirrors the surrounding trees, creating a scene so picturesque it resembles a painting.

For many travellers, one of the biggest drawcards in Japan is the cuisine, and Tokyo — which has been awarded more Michelin Stars than any other city in the world — is a food lover's paradise. The streets of each neighbourhood are dotted with all kinds of restaurants: modest vending machine ramen shops sit beside lavish fine dining restaurants and shops dedicated to *dezato* (dessert). In Shinjuku, Omoide Yokocho is a maze of alleyways packed with bars and restaurants which typically specialise in one particular dish. Visit during the early evening and prepare to jostle crowds for a spot as each restaurant only seats five to 10 people.

Nearby sits the historic Golden Gai, known for its labyrinthine laneways and hundreds of compact *nomiya* (bars). A former red-light area, Golden Gai was reclaimed in the 1960s and protected from development meaning that most bars only hold a handful of people. Upon nightfall, the area's eccentric mix of *nomiya* — from karaoke joints to cocktail bars — come to life and attract businessmen, locals and visitors alike. What better way to break down the language barrier than by sharing a Japanese beer with a local? *Kanpai!* (Cheers!). ●

Enchanting visitors from across the globe, this iconic city is Japan's beating heart.

SNAPSHOT ON →

KYOTO

FOR TRAVELLERS LOOKING TO DELVE

into the history and traditions of Japan, Kyoto is the ultimate destination. Located in the Kansai region of Honshū, the ancient capital is bursting with lavish temples and shrines, tranquil gardens and bustling Geisha districts. Unlike its counterparts around the country, Kyoto suffered only minor damage during the air raids of World War II. Many of its most beautiful temples were spared and thanks to extensive restoration, are open to the public. As Kyoto's most important sights are located outside the city centre, an extensive public transport network of buses, trains and subway lines weaves across the city and its surrounds.

A city of many names — Heian-kyō, Miyako and Saikyō — Kyoto was the capital of Japan throughout the most important parts of its history. ▶

(Image: Shutterstock)



▶ Punting along Arashiyama River in autumn



Clockwise from right: A visit to Fujimi Inari; enjoying ice cream on the streets of Kyoto; a tofu dish; Buddhist monks at Kinkakuji Temple

► For over 1000 years, the city functioned as an administrative and imperial hub, hosting the Japanese royal family until the Meiji restoration of 1868 which moved the capital to Edo (modern-day Tokyo).

Its status as Japan's most important city led to the construction of buildings and temples in traditional architectural styles, most notably, wooden sanmon gates and *noyane* (hidden roofs). Today, more than 2,000 Buddhist and Shinto shrines are dotted across Kyoto, all with varying levels of grandiosity. Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) – once a residence of shogun Yoshimitsu and now a Buddhist zen

in the west and well worth a visit) to see paths showered in *sakura* (cherry blossom) petals, or crimson leaves. The central Gion district is particularly striking at these times of year, thanks to the deciduous trees dotted throughout. Walk the wooden streets and you'll be forgiven for thinking you've travelled back in time – if you're lucky, you may glimpse geisha and *maiko* (apprentice geisha) shuffling from building to building dressed in their traditional kimono and *okobo* (tall, wooden sandals).

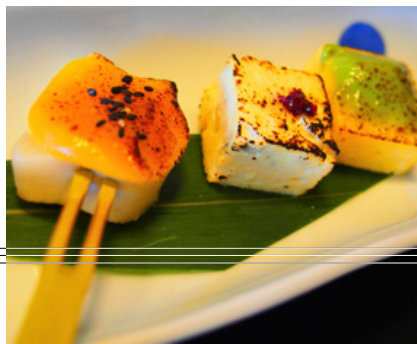
Kyoto is also known for its delicious cuisine. Many dishes are centred around tofu which are then paired with flavours like sesame or miso. The best way to sample

KYOTO'S MOST RECOGNISABLE SITE IS FUSHIMI INARI-TAISHA, A SHINTO SHRINE WITH OVER 10,000 RED GATES

temple – is covered in glistening gold leaf, while Kyoto's most recognisable site is Fushimi Inari-taisha, a shinto shrine with over 10,000 red gates (and counting). Each gate is a donation to the Shinto god, Inari, and the black inscriptions on the back of them detail the year and name of the business or individual sponsor.

Kyoto's stunning landscape transforms most dramatically in spring and autumn. Wander through Arashiyama (a district

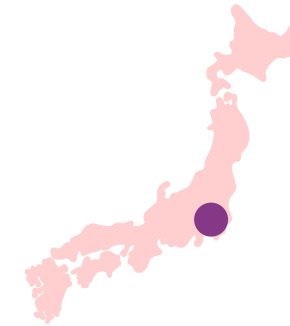
the flavours of Kyoto is with a kaiseki dinner, a lavish spread of many small dishes like soups and sashimi. Alternatively, head to the Nishiki Ichiba (Nishiki market) to sample Japanese street food at its best. Be sure to sample yatsushashi, a chewy rice flour triangle filled with sweet paste. Chawan-zaka Street is lined with shops offering free samples of these delicious morsels in every imaginable flavour, from traditional red bean, to cinnamon and chocolate. ●



Japan's third largest city packs a cultural punch, with vibrant streets and world-class cuisine.

SNAPSHOT ON →
OSAKA

(Image: Shutterstock)



OSAKA IS WHERE EVERY QUIRKY and colourful vision of Japan comes to life. This wonderful mecca for all things eccentric has long been the economic powerhouse of the Kansai region, boasting major companies, and attractions galore. Osaka is Tokyo's edgier cousin and has plenty to offer the inspired traveller.

Take a walk (or metro ride) through the busy streets and you'll quickly learn that this vibrant city is different from its Japanese counterparts. Among the typical shrines and ancient sites for which Japan is known, you'll find wards beaming with neon signage, contemporary art galleries and friendly locals unafraid to toast with a *gaijin* (foreigner) at their local izakaya (pub).

Osaka has long been an important trade city, thanks to its position by the Seto Inland Sea.

Before roads or rail were viable options, ports connected Japan with the rest of Asia and eventually transformed the spot into a flourishing economic hub. Later, it added political centre to its list of titles and several times between the 5th and 8th centuries AD, it was considered Japan's official capital. This status, however short lived, led to the construction of cultural sites like schools for traditional arts (Bunraku and Kabuki) and the beautiful Osaka Castle.

While most don't associate Osaka with traditional sites, there are still plenty to explore. Shitenno-ji Temple in the city's south is one of the oldest in Japan, dating back more than 1,400 years. This sublime white and red Buddhist complex was founded by Prince Shotoku, an influential religious figure throughout Japanese history. ▶

↘
Clockwise from below: Takoyaki ball dumplings (octopus balls); Osaka Castle;
The bustling area of Dotonbori; okonomiyaki cooked on a teppan grill



► Though the site looks well-preserved, many of its buildings are reconstructions, as the originals were destroyed by war and fire.

Osaka Castle is another of the city's great attractions, and a fine example of Japanese imperial architecture. While the castle

at passersby. Despite looking like a forgotten section of an amusement park, Shinsekai hosts some of Osaka's most well-loved restaurants, such as Daruma, slinging top-notch *kushikatsu* (food skewered and deep-fried) and Zuboraya, famous for its *fugu* (pufferfish). After all,

DESPITE LOOKING LIKE A FORGOTTEN SECTION OF AN AMUSEMENT PARK, SHINSEKAI HOSTS SOME OF OSAKA'S MOST WELL-LOVED RESTAURANTS

standing today is yet another reconstruction, its stunning white exterior with turquoise and gold finishes is well-worth admiring.

Much like Tokyo, the city of Osaka is made up of different wards and neighbourhoods. Start with a walk through futuristic Shinsekai, an entertainment district designed in the 20th-century to model New York in the southern half and Paris in the north. This garish part of town is a visual assault, with colourful billboards, giant lanterns and animatronic animals waving

Osaka is the *tenka no daidokoro* (the nation's kitchen), so dig in!

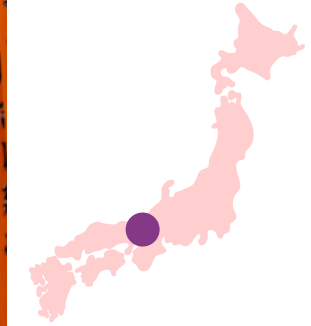
Next, continue on to Dotonbori, the buzzing heart of Osaka. Running alongside the Dotomorigawa River, this district sparkles like a miniature Times Square; you'll find streets plastered in billboards, shops and yet more delicious restaurants. You can't visit Osaka without trying *takoyaki* (octopus dumplings), so head to Creo-ru for a delicious rendition topped with mayo, bonito flakes and takoyaki sauce. ●



(All images: Shutterstock)

SNAPSHOT ON →
**FUSHIMI
INARI**

One of
Kyoto's most
photographed
sights is also its
most sacred.



THE FUSHIMI INARI SHRINE

(or *Fushimi Inari-Taisha*) is one of the largest in Japan, and among Kyoto's most visited attractions, but it wasn't always such a hotspot. In fact, the site was relatively tourist-free until the 2005 release of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, where it features in one of the film's pinnacle scenes. In the years since the shrine has exploded in popularity and when you lay eyes on it yourself, you'll quickly understand why.

Fushimi Inari-Taisha features more than 10,000 *torii* gates that wrap around the base of Mount Inari and continue deep into the mountain. The gates symbolise a division between the regular world and the sacred and are a striking shade of red to ward off evil spirits. The colour is also affiliated with the harvests that Inari gives to the Japanese people. ▶

(Image: Shutterstock)



(All images: Shutterstock)

INARI, THE DEITY FOR WHICH THE SHRINE WAS DEDICATED, IS THE GOD OF RICE, SAKE AND PROSPERITY

Clockwise from top right: Tourists admiring a torii gate at Fushimi Inari Shrine; small red wooden torii as a souvenir; Fox-shaped praying cards; Patrons washing their hands for good luck; Ema prayer tables with fox-shaped boards at Taisha Temple

► Inari, the deity for which the shrine was dedicated, is the god of rice, sake and prosperity. Although he is one of eight million *kami* (deities), Inari is one of the most admired and Fushimi Inari-Taisha functions as the head shrine to more than 30,000 others devoted to him across Japan. Officially, Fushimi Inari dates back to the 8th century, but unlike many of Japan's most sacred sites, new torii are added regularly. Gates are donations to Inari and the inscriptions detail the year and name of their sponsor. Even tourists can gift a torii, if they have a spare one million yen (AU\$12,736).

The Fushimi Inari shrine is easily accessible from anywhere in Kyoto. The site is unmissable, with a towering red torii and the Romon Gate, which signifies the entrance to the shrine. Continue past temples and sculptures to the *chozuya* (water ablution pavilion) where it's respectful to wash your hands with a *hishaku* (ladle) before proceeding to the most spectacular part of the shrine, the *senbon* torii (thousands of torii). Walking through the vermillion tunnel of gates, shrouded by trees and away from the hum of the city, feels entirely otherworldly. The colour of the gates changes depending on light and time of day, so when the crowds subside, stick around to see them glow golden in the setting sun.



Throughout the site, you'll see many foxes. From sculptures to wooden *ema* (wishing) plaques with fox faces, the animals are scattered everywhere. Foxes are said to be spirit messengers of Inari. While souvenirs typically attract tourists, it's usually Japanese visitors that buy fox-related memorabilia which is thought to be lucky.

Although you'll have to share the shrine with other tourists, Fushimi is an unmissable stop on any visit to Kyoto. For the best chance of capturing a perfect photo of the *senbon* torii without people, head to the shrine early in the morning or after sunset. Unlike most sites in Kyoto, Fushimi Inari is open 24 hours and come nightfall, most people will have left, reverting the site back into the peaceful sanctuary it was intended to be. ●



GUIDE TO → FINDING THE BEST VIEWS OF MT FUJI

While many visitors flock to Fuji 5th Station, the best views of Japan's iconic mountain are from a distance.

MOUNT FUJI (*Fuji-san*) is Japan's most recognisable sight. It appears proudly on the 1,000 yen note and is said to be the most climbed mountain in the world, with over 200,000 people reaching its summit every year.

Visibility of Mount Fuji is notoriously erratic: summer casts a haze over the mountain and rain shrouds it in cloud, so although the chances of spotting it are better in colder months, clear sightings are never guaranteed.

For those wanting to get a closer view of the mountain, Fuji 5th Station is your best bet, as is the surrounding Fuji Five Lakes region.

Looking for that postcard-perfect shot of Fuji-san? Here, our recommendations. ▶

↳
Lake Kawaguchiko

(Image: Shutterstock)

↙
Clockwise from below: Arakura Sengen Park;
Enoshima island; Lake Ashinoko; and Lake Kawaguchi

1 ARAKURA Sengen PARK

Although you may not have heard of Arakura Sengen, this scenic spot located in the Yamanashi prefecture is known locally as one of the best places to view Mount Fuji. Tackle the 398 steps to the top and you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of Fujiyoshida city and the mountain. The five-storey Chureito Pagoda is the most recognisable monument on the hillside and features in many of the country's most iconic photographs beside Mount Fuji.

Arakura Sengen Park is an exceptionally seasonal spot, so visiting is a pleasure year round. Visit in winter to see barren trees and snowy surroundings, in summer for lush greenery, in autumn for bright, crimson leaves and in spring when hundreds of breathtaking cherry trees dust the landscape in pink *sakura* (cherry blossom) petals.



2 LAKE KAWAGUCHI

If you've been dazzled by photos of Mount Fuji reflecting off a glassy lake, or seen Japan's most famous artwork collection 36 Views of Mount Fuji by Katsushika Hokusai, there's a good chance you're familiar with Lake Kawaguchi. The second largest, yet most developed of the Fuji Five Lakes, Kawaguchi offers breathtaking views of the mountain due to its proximity, as well as traditional *onsen* (hot springs) and plenty of restaurants serving the local specialty *hoto* (thick noodles in miso-based soup). Pay a visit to Oishi Park to enjoy the manicured gardens and Mount Fuji views.



3 ENOSHIMA ISLAND

Just off the Kanagawa coast sits a tiny island with spectacular views of Mount Fuji. Enoshima may be small, but it's popular thanks to its proximity to Tokyo (around one hour from Shinjuku station). It's also home to a handful of sacred shrines and beautiful beaches, so well worth a visit. For the best views of Fuji-san, head to Katase Nishihama beach where the mountain looms on the horizon, flanked by sand and sea.

4 LAKE ASHINOKO

Stunning Lake Ashinoko (or Lake Ashi) sits at the heart of the Hakone region, just 100-km from Tokyo. Hop aboard an old-style pirate ship and take a scenic cruise down the lake, passing by submerged torii gates and numerous traditional buildings nestled into the surrounding shore. The lake was formed thousands of years ago when Mount Hakone erupted and on a clear day, provides stellar views of Fuji-san as it pokes out between two peaks. For the best chance of an unobstructed view, take an early-morning departure and visit later in the year when temperatures are cool.

The boats run from one end of Lake Ashi, to the other, before passengers usually swap boats for the return journey. The ship back to the main port will slow next to the iconic red torii gate and if you're blessed with good weather, you can get the perfect shot of Mount Fuji beside it. ●



GUIDE TO → CHERRY BLOSSOM SEASON

From March to April every year, millions head to Japan to see their famed cherry trees shower the landscape in pink and white petals.

THE ANNUAL BLOOMING OF SAKURA (cherry blossom) trees in Japan is a sacred occurrence that has been celebrated for over 1,000 years. While its origins are somewhat disputed, with some sources pointing to the 3rd century and others to the 9th, it's generally agreed that the earliest *hanami* (flower viewing) parties were reserved for imperial aristocrats and later, the samurai class. By the turn of the 17th-century, cherry blossom season was widely celebrated by ordinary folk and today, millions of locals and international visitors flock to Japan in March and April to see the blooms and join in the sakura festivities. ▶

Chidorigafuchi Park in Tokyo during sakura season

(Images: Shutterstock)



↘ Clockwise from far left: Himeji Castle; getting up close and personal to the blossoms; enjoying the Cherry Blossom Festival at Ueno Park; Japanese lanterns; hanami dango

Why is cherry blossom season such a big deal in Japan?

These days, tourists visit Japan during sakura season to see the country's most famous sights showered in delicate petals. But for the Japanese, the season has a much deeper significance. In addition to being appreciated for its splendid appearance, it has also come to symbolise the ephemeral nature of life and its fleeting beauty.

In Japan, Shinto and Buddhism are the dominant religions, with many people identifying as both. While the beliefs differ in some areas, many of the main ideas are shared between Shintoists and Buddhists, including the worship of nature and life's impermanence. The short-lived bloom of sakura embodies this principle; it is a stunning yet temporary sight that, at the height of its beauty, quickly vanishes.

When do the cherry trees bloom?

Cherry blossom season is an annual event that occurs every spring, however the exact dates of the bloom vary from year to year, based on weather conditions. A warm spring often leads to early *kaika* (flowering), while cold temperatures might lead to late blooms. The one thing that's guaranteed is the pattern of blooming, with the *sakura zensen* (cherry blossom front) starting in the southern islands near the beginning of the year and heading north, as late as May. For visitors wanting to see the deciduous trees flower in Japan's most popular cities, Kyoto and Tokyo typically bloom in the last week of March and first two of April.

As the cherry blossom season is big business in Japan, its prediction has become a suitably grand affair, involving scientists, mathematic equations and many of the country's

leading meteorologists. For those wanting up-to-date information, the Sakura Navi app — developed by the Japan Meteorological Corporation — allows people to track the cherry blossom zensen in real time, alerts them when they're near a viewing spot and contains blooming forecasts for the entire country.

Best place to view the cherry blossoms?

Traverse Japan in early April and you're in with a great chance of seeing cherry trees in bloom, however the best spot to bask in their beauty requires a detour. Yoshino, a relatively quiet town east of Osaka, explodes in population when the sakura zensen arrives. The town has long been one of the most popular to visit during spring as it's home to 30,000 cherry blossom trees, which blanket the mountainous region in pink and white.

In Tokyo, there are many places to spot sakura. Head to Chiyoda in central Tokyo, where hundreds of sakura trees line the edge of the Chidorigafuchi Moat, beside the imperial palace. Those looking for a

perspective away from the crowds should rent a boat and paddle down the waterway.

Just as Kyoto is known for its beautiful temples and shrines, it's also renowned for its blossom displays. Ditch the crowds at Kiyomizudera and set up your own hanami on the sakura-lined banks of the Kamo-gawa River or visit the often-overlooked Konkai Komyo-ji Temple.

Which events take place during cherry blossom season?

Japanese people love a celebration, with hundreds of thousands of *matsuri* (festivals) taking place around the country every year. From giving thanks, to praying for a good harvest, there's a festival ... to commemorate any occasion and when March arrives, the matsuris turn their focus to all things pink and floral.

Travel anywhere with flowering sakura trees and you're bound to find people partaking in hanami celebrations, so grab a bento box and set up camp under a blossoming tree to bask in the beauty of the season. ●

QUICK TIPS →

CHERRY BLOSSOM SEASON

Occurs every spring:
→ from January through to March & early April

BEST VIEWING PLACES

→ Yoshino (east of Osaka)
→ Chiyoda (central Tokyo)
→ Kyoto

MATCH WITH

→ Soft-service ice cream
→ yatsubashi (chewy rice flour triangle)
→ Sakura flavoured *wagashi* (Japanese sweets)

Japan is a country with buckets of charm and ancient history, but its customs can be tricky to navigate.

GUIDE TO → ETIQUETTE FOR VISITORS TO JAPAN



THERE'S A LOT TO LOVE about Japan. Its quirky streets, delicious cuisine and centuries-old castles attract millions of visitors each year, but while its culture intrigues, it also confuses. Manners and strict etiquette practices are deeply entrenched in the lives of Japanese people and can be intimidating to first-time travellers.

Yoshimi Nagashima, etiquette expert and founder of Impredge, an image and etiquette consultancy based in Tokyo, says that Japanese people put importance on maintaining a good relationship others.

"Etiquette in Japan has been considered wisdom for living comfortably with each other for a long time," says Yoshimi. "If you learn our customs and etiquette in advance, you will be able to [connect] with local people, making your trip more enjoyable," she says. ▶

1 REMOVE YOUR SHOES

In Japan, it's customary to remove your shoes when indoors. Some westernised spots allow visitors to keep their shoes on, but when entering most homes, restaurants or *ryokans* (traditional inn), shoes should be left at the entrance. This practice keeps tatami floors looking pristine and prevents contamination coming inside.

Keep an eye out for signage (or staff) that will indicate whether removing footwear is expected. These places will provide slippers in the bathrooms — just remember to remove them when you exit, as they're considered much dirtier than regular shoes.



2 QUEUE WITH THE FLOW

You could walk the city streets and you'd be lucky to see a single person pushing and shoving to be served. In Japan, queueing is key. This applies to all the typical scenarios, such as waiting at a cafe or shop counter, to a boarding a bus, and beyond.

"Japanese people form an orderly queue when waiting for trains at busy times, such as the morning or evening rush hours," Yoshimi says. Underground train platforms have lines denoting where to line up for each carriage, and *shinkansen* (bullet train) stations clearly label where each carriage will stop.

You can forget slotting in beside a friend, too; Yoshimi says cutting the line (even if you're helping a friend) is never acceptable.

3 WATCH YOUR CHOPSTICK TECHNIQUE

Like much of Asia, chopsticks are used, but in addition to the challenge of mastering the technique, travellers must also pay attention to the way they're used. There are enough chopstick taboos to make your head spin, but Yoshimi says the biggest faux-pas relate to Japanese funerary practices; these are known as *tate bashi* and *utsushi bashi*.

Tate bashi is the act of sticking your chopsticks into the middle of a bowl of rice, while *utsushi bashi* is the passing of food from one set of chopsticks to another. Both techniques are demonstrated in Japanese funerals and are therefore disrespectful in any other setting.



(All images: Shutterstock)

4 DON'T BE LATE

Japanese are very punctual people and when visiting the country, it's expected that you'll follow suit.

"When you travel by bus or train, you need to be at the station or bus stop on time, otherwise you will miss it," says Yoshimi. Yes, public transport is that punctual.

It's common for public transport to arrive ahead of schedule and depart right on the dot. "When you meet someone for the first time, it would be polite to arrive five minutes prior to your appointment time," she says.

5 CHECK YOUR GREETINGS

Japanese greetings can be tricky for foreigners. Across the west, hugging is common practice, and across Europe, it's customary to kiss on the cheek. In Japan, Yoshimi says it's best to stick with the most common greeting: a bow, especially when meeting elderly people. While there is specific etiquette in regard to angles and amount of times to bow, simply returning the gesture or nodding will be appreciated. Yoshimi adds that in a business setting, a handshake is also acceptable. ▶



8 KEEP THE CHANGE

Leaving a tip is a common way to express gratitude in dozens of countries around the world, but such a practice isn't popular in Japan. In fact, if you leave money on a Japanese restaurant table, there's every chance a staff member will run after you to return it, thinking it was left by mistake. The Japanese work ethic emphasises high standards and rather than incentivising it, excellent service is seen as standard practice.

The best thing you can do to thank the staff for a great meal is to give them a smile and your best attempt at the phrase "*gochisousama deshita*" which means, "thank you for the meal, it was a feast." ●

6 SLURP AWAY

In many corners of the world, noodle soup causes anxiety. People shy away from ordering the dish to avoid the inevitable struggle of eating it in a socially-acceptable manner. But in Japan, there's no such problem. Slurping is considered a sign of enjoyment and is even said to enhance the flavour of your meal! You have our permission to order a steaming bowl of ramen and slurp with abandon.

7 RESPECT RELIGIOUS SITES

Some of Japan's biggest attractions are its ancient Buddhist and Shinto shrines, and as with most sacred sites around the world, they come with their own set of customs. When exploring famous spots such as Fushimi Inari-taisha, be sure to observe the etiquette exhibited by Japanese people and displayed on signage. Common etiquette is to keep your voice down and purify yourself at the *chozuya* (shinto water ablution pavilion) before entering the main shrine.

9 DITCH YOUR PERFUME

Sushi is one of Japan's greatest and most renowned delicacies. People train for years, even decades, to become an *itamae* (sushi chef) and the world's freshest seafood is auctioned at Tokyo's Toyosu Market every morning. For these reasons and many more, it's fair to say that sushi is big business.

That's why, Yoshimi says, perfume is not allowed at many fine sushi restaurants.

"Sushi chefs believe that the fragrance of perfume ruins their meals, especially when [customers] are eating sushi at the counter facing the chefs."



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Although Japanese etiquette can seem overwhelming, it is a well-known fact that Japan is the country of warm hospitality.

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