

# Japan

## Living in Japan

Japan is a country of diverse customs and culture, while on the other hand, it is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. This is what makes it so unique.

## School

The basic school system in Japan is composed of elementary school (lasting six years), middle school (three years), high school (three years), and university (four years). Education is compulsory only for the nine years of elementary and middle



school, but 98% of students go on to high school. Students usually have to take exams in order to enter high schools and universities.

The subjects children study include Japanese, English, mathematics, science, social studies, music, crafts, physical education, home economics (to learn simple cooking and sewing skills) and ICT. Students also learn traditional Japanese arts like shodo (calligraphy) and haiku. Shodo involves dipping a brush in ink and using it to write kanji (characters that are used in several East Asian countries and have their own meanings) and kana (phonetic characters derived from kanji) in an artistic style. At public elementary and junior high school, school lunch is provided and it is eaten in the classroom. Nearly all junior high schools require their students to wear a school uniform.

Japan has one of the world's best-educated populations, with 100% enrolment in compulsory grades and zero illiteracy. While not compulsory, high school enrolment is over 96% nationwide and nearly 100% in the cities. About 46% of all high school graduates go on to university or junior college.

The Ministry of Education closely supervises the curriculum, textbooks, classes and maintains a uniform level of education throughout the country. As a result, a high standard of education is possible.

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## Work

Japan is the world's third largest automobile manufacturing country, has the largest electronic goods industry, and is often ranked among the world's most innovative countries. Facing increasing competition from China and South Korea, manufacturing in Japan today now focuses primarily on high-tech and precision goods, such as optical instruments, hybrid vehicles, and robotics.

## Transport

Japan is the world's third largest automobile manufacturing country, has the largest electronic goods industry, and is often ranked among the world's most innovative countries. Facing increasing competition from China and South Korea, manufacturing in Japan today now focuses primarily on high-tech and precision goods, such as optical instruments, hybrid vehicles, and robotics.

Transportation in Japan is also very expensive in comparison to other countries, reflected in high tolls and taxes, particularly on car transport.

In Japan, railways are a major means of passenger transportation, especially for mass and high-speed transport between major cities and for commuter transport in metropolitan areas. Seven Japan Railways Group companies cover most parts of Japan.

The Shinkansen, or "bullet trains", as they are often known, are the high-speed rail trains that run across Japan. The 2,387km of 8 Shinkansen lines run on completely separate lines from the commuting trains. The whole Shinkansen system has carried over 10 billions passengers in its lifetime. 1114 journeys are made daily, with the fastest train being the JR East E5 and E6 series trains, which operate at a maximum speed of 320 km/h (200 mph). Shinkansen trains are known to be very safe, with no accident-related deaths or injuries from passengers in its history to date. Shinkansen trains are also known to be very punctual, like all other Japanese transportation.

There are 176 airports and the largest domestic airport, Haneda Airport, is Asia's busiest airport. The largest international gateways are Narita International Airport (Tokyo area), Kansai International Airport, and Chubu Centrair International Airport.



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## Sport

Sports in Japan are a significant part of Japanese culture. Both traditional sports, such as sumo and martial arts, and sports adopted from the West, like baseball and association football, are popular with both participants and spectators.

Sumo wrestling is considered Japan's national sport. Baseball was introduced to the country by visiting Americans in the 19th century. The Nippon Professional Baseball League is Japan's largest professional sports competition in terms of television ratings and spectators. Lots of people also enjoy practising martial arts such as judo, karate and modern kendo, and these sports are also enjoyed by spectators in the country. Association football has gained wide popularity since the founding of the Japan Professional Football League. Other popular sports include figure skating, rugby union, golf and racing, especially car racing.

Japan has hosted many international competitions including the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, 2002 FIFA World Cup, and the 2006 and 2009 World Baseball Classic. The 2019 Rugby World Cup will be hosted by Japan and Tokyo will host the 2020 Summer Olympics.

There are opportunities to play various sports for all ages, and school plays an important role in community. Kindergarten and lower elementary school students can play in a private sport club that can be joined for a moderate fee. Most martial



arts can be started from as young as 4 or 5 years old. When a student starts 5th grade, schools offer free after-school activities for students to participate in. Middle and high schools also encourage their students to join school sport clubs.

It is hard to find a sport that is not played in Japan. Some new sports were invented by changing elements of imported sports. Japanese board games include a form of chess, known as 'shogi'. A board game called 'go' is also widely popular in the country.

## Traditional Clothing

Almost everyone is familiar with the traditional Japanese clothing item i.e. the kimono. In the past, 'kimono' was a blanket term used to define all types of clothing. However, its contemporary definition is that of a long garment worn by men, women, and children. The types of kimonos worn vary based on occasion, marital status, and even the season.



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## Japanese Festivals

**Girl's Day - Hina Matsuri:** Popularly known as the doll festival, Hina Matsuri falls on March 3rd each year. On this day, parents of girls display dolls of an ancient Imperial couple in their houses. In some cases, dolls of the couple's courtesans and other servants, along with peach blossoms and rice cakes, are displayed at multiple levels to make one huge display. These dolls are displayed to take away bad luck from the girls of the house so that good fortune prevails. At the end of the day, i.e. midnight, the dolls should be put back into their boxes, else it is believed that the daughters of the house may never get married.

Another holiday is the Cherry Blossom Viewing 'Hanami': The viewing of blooming flowers of cherry blossom trees is an ancient practice that continues with the same amount of popularity to this day, from the months of February to April each year. Trees are planted across parks and people are known to enjoy tea ceremonies and picnics under these trees to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of spring.

Another celebration is that of Golden Week. The Golden Week is called this because three public holidays tend to fall in the same week and are sometimes clubbed with a weekend that turns out to be one long holiday for everyone. This week falls between April 29th and May 5th, and the public holidays it encompasses include Green Day, on April 29th, Constitution Day, on May 3th, and Children's Day, which falls on May 5th.

**Star Festival - Tanabata Matsuri:** This festival is celebrated based on a legend about two lovers having been separated by the Milky Way, who are allowed to meet only on one specific day in the 7th month based on the lunar calendar. Since the lunar calendar is different from the calendar largely used in the West, this festival falls on different dates between July and August. July 7th however, is the day when the festivities first begin. People celebrate this day by writing different types of wishes on small paper pieces and hanging them on bamboo. This bamboo is then burned once the festival ends the next day. This festival is celebrated on a large scale across the country.

**Seven-Five-Three - Shichi-Go-San:** This is a festival specifically held for children aged 3, 5 and 7 and marks the coming of age of children into middle childhood. This festival is important for girls who are 3 and 7 years of age, and boys who are 3 and 5 years of age. Observed on the weekend closest to November 15th, this festival sees children dressed in elaborate kimonos who then visit various shrines in their city. Children are given what is known as 'Chitose Ame', a long red and white candy as a symbol of good health and a long life.

Japan hardly has a Christian population, yet Christmas is as popular in the country as is any other festival. However, there is no turkey and no going to church. People give each other presents and celebrate with a special dinner.



## Tourism

Japan is one of the most popular travel destinations in the world. It attracted 13,413,600 international tourists in 2014. It is a unique blend of traditional and modern, with many temples and buildings from the past existing alongside modern architecture and technology.

Japan has 16 World Heritage Sites, including Himeji Castle and Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto. Popular visitor attractions include Tokyo and Nara, Mount Fuji, ski resorts such as Niseko in Hokkaido, Okinawa and riding the shinkansen. In addition, Japan has one of the world's lowest crime rates, which makes it ideal for travellers.

## Religion

Religion is not predominant in Japan, but the two prominent religions are Shinto and Buddhism. In today's day and time, the beliefs, faiths and rituals overlap with each other's. Shinto is a belief in the fact that a superpower resides in all the elements of nature, rather than one single god. There are specific sites that have been developed into shrines, dedicated to sun worship and the like. Each site is associated with a deity known as kami. Buddhism in Japan came from Chinese influence, and is far more popular in the country. There are several Buddhist temples and in some cases these are built alongside Shinto shrines. Other religions that exist in minority in the country include Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

## Japanese Food

When people think about Japanese food they probably think of sushi. However, sushi is not the only food that makes up for the vast cuisine that this country has to offer. While sushi and sashimi and other types of raw seafood dominate Japanese cuisine, there is also a huge variety in vegetarian food that people outside of Japan are usually unaware of. An example of a well-known and largely consumed type of vegetarian food in Japan is 'natto' or fermented soy, the taste and smell of which can be a little too strong if one is not used to eating it regularly. Rice is a common ingredient in most food preparations, as are noodles of various types, such as thick wheat noodles and buckwheat noodles. Meals usually have three courses along with a soup. These meals may be consumed raw, grilled, steamed, boiled or pan-fried.

The Japanese tea ceremony is a unique ritual that contributes to the identity of the country. It is an elaborate event and specific tea rooms are dedicated for this ritual to be carried out. It is an elaborate manner of preparing and presenting 'matcha' or powdered green tea, and this ceremony is known as 'chanoyu'. The tea is prepared in the presence of guests and one bowl of tea is passed around a maximum of five guests. Each guest takes a few sips and wipes clean the rim of the bowl before passing on the tea. There is a specific technique by which the kettle is held and the tea is scooped. Tea ceremonies can be formal or very informal, and can last for several days.



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# Questions

Read the information sheet about Japan carefully. You might want to use a highlighter to highlight important points and facts. Then answer the following questions with as much detail as you can.

1. At what age do children start school in Japan? How long is school compulsory for?  

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2. What does the manufacturing industry in Japan produce now?  

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3. What is the transport system in Japan like?  

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4. What is Japan's national sport?  

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5. Which other sport is very popular with spectators in Japan?  

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6. Which two things beginning with 'S' dominate Japanese cuisine?  

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7. What is the main item of traditional clothing in Japan?  

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8. Describe one of the Japanese festivals. What happens?  

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9. Apart from the many tourist attractions, why might travellers be attracted to visiting Japan?  

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10. What are the two prominent religions in Japan?  

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# Answers

1. At what age do children start school in Japan? How long is school compulsory for?

**Children start school when they are 6 in Japan. School is compulsory for the first nine years (elementary and middle school).**

2. What does the manufacturing industry in Japan produce now?

**Manufacturing in Japan today now focuses primarily on high-tech and precision goods, such as optical instruments, hybrid vehicles, and robotics.**

3. What is the transport system in Japan like?

**Transportation in Japan is modern and highly developed. Japan's transportation sector stands out for its energy efficiency: it uses less energy per person compared to other countries.**

4. What is Japan's national sport?

**Sumo wrestling is Japan's national sport.**

5. Which other sport is very popular with spectators in Japan?

**Baseball is also a very popular sport with spectators.**

6. Which two things beginning with 'S' dominate Japanese cuisine?

**Sushi and sashimi are the most popular foods in Japan.**

7. What is the main item of traditional clothing in Japan?

**The main item of traditional clothing is a kimono.**

8. Describe one of the Japanese festivals. What happens?

**Accept any answer that references key information about a Japanese festival from the text appropriately.**

9. Apart from the many tourist attractions, why might travellers be attracted to visiting Japan?

**Japan has one of the world's lowest crime rates, which makes it ideal for travellers.**

10. What are the two prominent religions in Japan?

**Shinto and Buddhism are the two prominent religions in Japan.**