History

ANCIENT JAPAN: FROM HUNTER-GATHERERS TO DIVINE RULE

Once upon a time, two deities, the male Izanagi and the female Izanami, came down from Takamagahara (The Plains of High Heaven) to a watery world in order to create land. Droplets from Izanagi's 'spear' solidified into the land now known as Japan. Izanami and Izanagi then populated the new land with gods. One of these was Japan's supreme deity, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu (Light of Heaven), whose great-great grandson Jimmu was to become the first emperor of Japan, reputedly in 660 BC.

Such is the seminal creation myth of Japan. More certainly, humans were present in Japan at least 200,000 years ago, though the earliest human remains go back only 30,000 years or so. Till around the end of the last Ice Age some 15,000 years ago, Japan was linked to the continent by a number of landbridges – Siberia to the north, Korea to the west and probably China through Taiwan to the south – so access was not difficult.

Jōmon pottery vessels dating back some 15,000 years are the oldest known pottery vessels in the world.

Amid undoubted diversity, the first recognisable culture to emerge was the Neolithic Jōmon (named after a 'rope mark' pottery style), from around 13,000 BC. The Jōmon were mostly hunter-gatherers, with a preference for coastal regions, though agriculture started to develop from around 4000 BC and this brought about greater stability in settlement and the emergence of larger tribal communities. The present-day indigenous Ainu people of northern Japan are of Jōmon descent.

The name of Japan's most famous mountain, Fuji, is an Ainu name for a god of fire.

From around 400 BC Japan was effectively invaded by waves of immigrants later known as Yayoi (from the site where their distinctive reddish wheel-thrown pottery was first found). They first arrived in the southwest, probably through the Korean peninsula. Their exact origins are unknown, and may well be diverse, but they brought with them iron and bronze technology, and highly productive wet rice-farming techniques. In general they were taller and less stocky than the Jōmon – though a Chinese document from the 1st century AD nonetheless refers to Japan (by this stage quite heavily peopled by the Yayoi) as 'The Land of the Dwarfs'!

Opinion is divided as to the nature of Yayoi relations with the Jōmon, but the latter were gradually displaced and forced ever further north. The Yayoi had spread to the middle of Honshū by the 1st century AD, but Northern Honshū could still be considered 'Jōmon' till at least the 8th century. With the exception of the Ainu, present-day Japanese are overwhelmingly of Yayoi descent.

Other consequences of the Yayoi Advent included greater intertribal/regional trade based on greater and more diverse production through new technologies. At the same time there was increased rivalry between tribal/regional groups, often over resources, and greater social stratification.

Agriculture-based fixed settlement led to the consolidation of territory and the establishment of boundaries. According to Chinese sources, by the end of the 1st century AD there were more than a hundred kingdoms in Japan, and by the mid-3rd century these were largely subject to an 'over-queen' named Himiko, whose own territory was known as Yamatai (later Yamato). The location of Yamatai is disputed, with some scholars favouring northwest

TIMELINE

c 13,000 BC
First evidence of the Jōmon people and the world's earliest pottery vessels.

c 400 BC
The Yayoi people appear in southwest Japan, practising wet rice farming and using metal tools.

Kyūshū, but most preferring the Nara region. The Chinese treated Himiko as sovereign of all Japan – the name Yamato eventually being applied to Japan as a whole – and she acknowledged her allegiance to the Chinese emperor through tribute.

On her death in 248 she is said to have been buried – along with a hundred sacrificed slaves – in a massive barrow-like tomb known as a *kofun*, indicative of the growing importance of status. Other dignitaries chose burial in similar tombs, and so from this point until the establishment of Nara as a capital in 710, this time is referred to as the Kofun or Yamato period.

The period saw the confirmation of the Yamato as the dominant – indeed imperial – clan in Japan. Their consolidation of power often appears to have been by negotiation and alliance with (or incorporation of) powerful potential foes. This was a practice Japan was to continue through the ages where possible, though it was less accommodating in the case of perceived weaker foes.

'Through emulating powerful China, Japan hoped it could also become powerful'

The first verifiable emperor was Suijin (died around 318), very likely of the Yamato clan, though some scholars think he may have been leader of a group of 'horse-riders' who appear to have come into Japan around the start of the 4th century from the Korean peninsula. The period also saw the adoption of writing, based on Chinese but first introduced by scholars from the Korean kingdom of Paekche in the mid-5th century. Scholars from Paekche also introduced Buddhism a century later.

Buddhism was promoted by the Yamato rulers as a means of unification and control of the land. Though Buddhism originated in India it was seen by the Japanese as a Chinese religion, and was one of a number of 'things Chinese' that they adopted to achieve recognition – especially by China – as a civilised country. By emulating China, Japan hoped it could become as powerful. The desire to learn from the strongest/best is another enduring Japanese characteristic.

In 604 the regent Prince Shōtoku (573–620) enacted a constitution of 17 articles, with a very Chinese and indeed Confucianist flavour, esteeming harmony and hard work. Major Chinese-style reforms followed some decades later in 645, such as centralisation of government, nationalisation and allocation of land, and law codes. To strengthen its regime, under Emperor Temmu (r 673–686) the imperial family initiated the compilation of historical works such as the *Kojiki* (Record of Old Things, 712) and *Nihon Shoki* (Record of Japan, 720), with the aim of legitimising their power through claimed divine descent. It had the desired effect, and despite a number of perilous moments, Japan continues to have the longest unbroken monarchic line in the world.

Emulation of things Chinese was not indiscriminate. For example, in China Confucianism condoned the removal of an unvirtuous ruler felt to have lost the 'mandate of heaven', but this idea was not promoted in Japan. Nor was the Chinese practice of allowing achievement of high rank through examination, for the Japanese ruling class preferred birth over merit.

Northern Japan aside, in terms of factors such as effective unification, centralised government, social stratification, systematic administration, external recognition, legitimisation of power, a written constitution and a legal code, Japan, with its estimated five million people, could be said to have formed a nation-state by the early 8th century.

c AD 188–248
Queen Himiko reigns over Yamatai (Yamato) and is recognised as 'over-queen' of Japan by Chinese visitors.

c 300
First verifiable emperor, Suijin, possibly arrived as the leader of 'horse-riders' from Korea.

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HISTORICAL PERIODS

Period	Date
Jōmon	c 13,000 BC–c 400 BC
Yayoi	c 400 BC–c AD 250
Kofun/Yamato	c 250–710
Nara	710–94
Heian	794–1185
Kamakura	1185–1333
Muromachi	1333–1568
Azuchi-Momoyama	1568–1600
Edo/Tokugawa	1600–1868
Meiji	1868–1912
Taishō	1912–26
Shōwa	1926–89
Heisei	1989–present

THE AGE OF COURTIERS

In 710 an intended permanent capital was established at Nara (Heijō), built to a Chinese grid pattern. The influence of Buddhism in those days is still seen today in the Tōdai-ji (p403), which houses a huge bronze Buddha and is the world's largest wooden building (and one of the oldest).

In 784 Emperor Kammu (r 781–806) decided to relocate the capital. His reasons are unclear, but may have beenrelated to an inauspicious series of disasters, including a massive smallpox epidemic (735–37) that killed as many as one-third of the population. The capital was transferred to nearby Kyoto (Heian) in 794, newly built on a similar grid pattern. It was to remain Japan's capital for more than a thousand years – though not necessarily as the centre of actual power.

Over the next few centuries, courtly life in Kyoto reached a pinnacle of refined artistic pursuits and etiquette, captured famously in the novel *The Tale of Genji*, written by the court-lady Murasaki Shikibu around 1004. It showed a world where courtiers indulged in amusements, such as guessing flowers by their scent, building extravagant follies and sparing no expense to indulge in the latest luxury. On the positive side, it was a world that encouraged aesthetic sensibilities, such as *mono no aware* (the bitter-sweetness of things) and *okashisa* (pleasantly surprising incongruity), which were to endure right through to the present day. But on the negative side, it was also a world increasingly estranged from the real one. Put bluntly, it lacked muscle. The effeteness of the court was exacerbated by the weakness of the emperors, manipulated over centuries by the intrigues of the notorious and politically dominant Fujiwara family, who effectively ruled the country.

The Tale of Genji, written by the court-lady Murasaki Shikibu in around 1004, is widely believed to be the world's first novel.

By contrast, while the major nobles immersed themselves in courtly pleasures and/or intrigues, out in the real world of the provinces, powerful military forces were developing. They were typically led by minor nobles, often sent out on behalf of court-based major nobles to carry out 'tedious' local gubernatorial and administrative duties. Some were actually distant imperial family members, barred from succession claims – a practice known as 'dynastic shedding' – and often hostile to the court. Their retainers included skilled warriors known as samurai (literally 'retainer').

Mid-5th century
Writing (Chinese characters) introduced into Japan (from Korea).

Mid-6th century
Buddhism introduced into Japan (from Korea).

The two main 'shed' families were the Minamoto (also known as Genji) and the Taira (Heike), who were basically enemies. In 1156 they were employed to assist rival claimants to the headship of the Fujiwara family, though these figures soon faded into the background, as the struggle developed into a feud between the Minamoto and the Taira.

The Taira prevailed, under Kiyomori (1118–81), who based himself in the capital and, over the next 20 years or so, fell prey to many of the vices that lurked there. In 1180, following a typical court practice, he enthroned his own two-year-old grandson, Antoku. However, a rival claimant requested the help of the Minamoto, who had regrouped under Yoritomo (1147–99) in Izu. Yoritomo was more than ready to agree.

Both Kiyomori and the claimant died very shortly afterwards, but Yoritomo and his younger half-brother Yoshitsune (1159–89) continued the campaign against the Taira – a campaign interrupted by a pestilence during the early 1180s. By 1185 Kyoto had fallen and the Taira had been pursued to the western tip of Honshū. A naval battle ensued (at Dannoura) and the Minamoto were victorious. In a well-known tragic tale, Kiyomori's widow clasped her grandson Antoku (now aged seven) and leaped with him into the sea, rather than have him surrender. Minamoto Yoritomo was now the most powerful man in Japan, and was to usher in a martial age.

'Minamoto Yoritomo was now the most powerful man in Japan, and was to usher in a martial age'

THE AGE OF WARRIORS

Yoritomo did not seek to become emperor, but rather to have the new emperor confer legitimacy on him through the title of *shōgun* (generalissimo). This was granted in 1192. Similarly, he left many existing offices and institutions in place – though often modified – and set up his base in his home territory of Kamakura, rather than Kyoto. In theory he represented merely the military arm of the emperor's government, but in practice he was in charge of government in the broad sense. His 'shōgunate' was known in Japanese as the *bakufu*, meaning the tent headquarters of a field general, though it was far from temporary. As an institution, it was to last almost 700 years.

The system of government now became feudal, centred on a lord-vassal system in which loyalty was a key value. It tended to be more personal and more 'familial' than medieval European feudalism, particularly in the extended *oya-ko* relationship ('parent-child', in practice 'father-son'). This 'familial hierarchy' was to become another enduring feature of Japan.

But 'families' – even actual blood families – were not always happy, and the more ruthless power seekers would not hesitate to kill family members they saw as threats. Yoritomo himself, seemingly very suspicious by nature, killed off so many of his own family there were serious problems with the shōgunal succession upon his death in 1199 (following a fall from his horse in suspicious circumstances). One of those he had killed was his half-brother Yoshitsune, who earned an enduring place in Japanese literature and legend as the archetypical tragic hero.

Yoritomo's widow Masako (1157–1225) was a formidable figure, arranging shōgunal regents and controlling the shōgunate for much of her remaining life. Having taken religious vows on her husband's death, she became known as the 'nun shōgun', and one of the most powerful women in Japanese history. She was instrumental in ensuring that her own family, the Hōjō, replaced the Minamoto as shōguns. The Hōjō shōgunate continued to use Kamakura as the shōgunal base, and was to endure till the 1330s.

It was during their shōgunacy that the Mongols twice tried to invade, in 1274 and 1281. The Mongol empire was close to its peak at this time, under Kublai Khan (r 1260–94). After conquering Korea in 1259 he sent requests to Japan to submit to him, but these were ignored.

Japanese pirates were operating in the islands of present-day Indonesia as early as the 13th century.

His expected first attack came in November 1274, allegedly with some 900 vessels carrying around 40,000 men – many of them reluctant Korean conscripts – though these figures may be exaggerated. They landed near Hakata in northwest Kyūshū and, despite spirited Japanese resistance, made progress inland. However, for unclear reasons, they presently retreated to their ships. Shortly afterwards a violent storm blew up and damaged around a third of the fleet, after which the remainder returned to Korea.

A more determined attempt was made seven years later from China. Allegedly, Kublai ordered the construction of a huge fleet of 4400 warships to carry a massive force of 140,000 men – again, questionable figures. They landed once more in northwest Kyūshū in August 1281. Once again they met spirited resistance and had to retire to their vessels, and once again the weather soon intervened. This time a typhoon destroyed half their vessels – many of which were actually designed for river use, without keels, and unable to withstand rough conditions. The survivors returned to China, and there were no further Mongol invasions of Japan.

It was the typhoon of 1281 in particular that led to the idea of divine intervention to save Japan, with the coining of the term *shinpū* or *kamikaze* (both meaning 'divine wind'). Later this came to refer to the Pacific War suicide pilots who, said to be infused with divine spirit, gave their lives in the cause of protecting Japan from invasion. It also led the Japanese to feel that their land was indeed the Land of the Gods.

Despite the successful defence, the Hōjō shōgunate suffered. It was unable to make a number of promised payments to the warrior families involved, which brought considerable dissatisfaction, while the payments it did make severely depleted its finances.

The 'divine wind' of 1281 is said to have drowned 70,000 Mongol troops, which, if true, would make it the world's worst maritime disaster.

It was also during the Hōjō shōgunacy that Zen Buddhism was brought from China. Its austerity and self-discipline appealed greatly to the warrior class, and it was also a factor in the appeal of aesthetic values such as *sabi* (elegant simplicity). More popular forms of Buddhism were the Jōdo (Pure Land) and Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) sects, based on salvation through invocation of Amida Buddha.

Dissatisfaction towards the Hōjō shōgunate came to a head under the unusually assertive emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339), who, after escaping from exile imposed by the Hōjō, started to muster anti-shōgunal support in Western Honshū. In 1333 the shōgunate despatched troops to counter the rebellion under one of its most promising generals, the young Ashikaga Takauji (1305–58). However, Takauji was aware of the dissatisfaction towards the Hōjō and realised that he and Go-Daigo had considerable military strength between them. He abandoned the shōgunate and threw in his lot with the emperor, attacking the shōgunal offices in Kyoto. Others soon rebelled against the shōgunate in Kamakura itself.

This was the end for the Hōjō shōgunate, but not for the shōgunal institution. Takauji wanted the title of shōgun for himself, but his ally Go-Daigo

was reluctant to confer it, fearing it would weaken his own imperial power. A rift developed, and Go-Daigo sent forces to attack Takauji. When Takauji emerged victorious, he turned on Kyoto, forcing Go-Daigo to flee into the hills of Yoshino some 100km south of the city, where he set up a court in exile. In Kyoto, Takauji installed a puppet emperor from a rival line who returned the favour by declaring him shōgun in 1338. Thus there were two courts in coexistence, which continued until 1392 when the 'southern court' (at Yoshino) was betrayed by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), Takauji's grandson and third Ashikaga shogun, who promised reconciliation but very soon 'closed out' the southern court.

Takauji set up his shōgunal base in Kyoto, at Muromachi, which gives its name to the period of the Ashikaga shōgunate. Notable shōguns include Takauji himself and his grandson Yoshimitsu, who among other things had Kyoto's famous Kinkaku-ji (Golden Temple; p343) built, and once declared himself 'King of Japan'. However, the majority of Ashikaga shōguns were relatively weak. In the absence of strong centralised government and control, the country slipped increasingly into civil war. Regional warlords, who came to be known as *daimyō* (big names), vied with each other in seemingly interminable feuds and power struggles. Eventually, starting with the Ōnin War of 1467–77, the country entered a period of virtually constant civil war. This was to last for the next hundred years, a time appropriately known as the Sengoku (Warring States) era.

'In particular, he hated Buddhist priests, whom he saw as troublesome'

Ironically perhaps, it was during the Muromachi period that a new flourishing of the arts took place, such as in the refined *nō* drama, *ikebana* (flower arranging) and *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony). Key aesthetics were *yūgen* (elegant and tranquil otherworldliness, as seen in *nō*), *wabi* (subdued taste), *kare* (severe and unadorned) and the earlier-mentioned *sabi* (elegant simplicity).

The later stages of the period also saw the first arrival of Europeans, specifically three Portuguese traders blown ashore on the island of Tanegashima, south of Kyūshū, in 1543. Presently other Europeans arrived, bringing with them two important items, Christianity and firearms (mostly arquebuses). They found a land torn apart by warfare, ripe for conversion to Christianity – at least in the eyes of missionaries such as (St) Francis Xavier, who arrived in 1549 – while the Japanese warlords were more interested in the worldly matter of firearms.

REUNIFICATION

One of the most successful warlords to make use of firearms was Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), from what is now Aichi Prefecture. Though starting from a relatively minor power base, his skilled and ruthless generalship resulted in a series of victories over rivals. In 1568 he seized Kyoto in support of the shōgunal claim of one of the Ashikaga clan (Yoshiaki), duly installed him, but then in 1573 drove him out and made his own base at Azuchi. Though he did not take the title of shōgun himself, Nobunaga was the supreme power in the land.

Noted for his brutality, he was not a man to cross. In particular he hated Buddhist priests, whom he saw as troublesome, and tolerated Christianity as a counterbalance to them. His ego was massive, leading him to erect a temple where he could be worshipped, and to declare his birthday a national holiday. His stated aim was *Tenka Fubu* (A Unified Realm under Military Rule) and he went some way to achieving this unification by policies such as strategic redistribution of territories among the *daimyō*, land surveys, and standardisation of weights and measures.

In 1582 he was betrayed by one of his generals and forced to commit suicide. However, the work of continuing unification was carried on by another of his generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98), a footsoldier who had risen through the ranks to become Nobunaga's favourite. He, too, was an extraordinary figure. Small and simian in his features, Nobunaga had nicknamed him Saru-chan (Little Monkey), but his huge will for power belied his physical smallness. He disposed of potential rivals among Nobunaga's sons, took the title of regent, continued Nobunaga's policy of territorial redistribution and also insisted that *daimyō* should surrender their families to him as hostages to be kept in Kyoto – his base being at Momoyama. He also banned weapons for all classes except samurai.

Hideyoshi became increasingly paranoid, cruel and megalomaniacal in his later years. Messengers who gave him bad news would be sawn in half, and young members of his own family executed for suspected plotting. He also issued the first expulsion order of Christians (1587), whom he suspected of being an advance guard for an invasion. This order was not necessarily enforced, but in 1597 he crucified 26 Christians – nine of them European. His grand scheme for power included a pan-Asian conquest, and as a first step he attempted an invasion of Korea in 1592, which failed amid much bloodshed. He tried again in 1597, but the campaign was abandoned when he died of illness in 1598.

'Hideyoshi became increasingly paranoid, cruel and megalomaniacal in his later years'

On his deathbed Hideyoshi entrusted the safeguarding of the country, and the succession of his young son Hideyori (1593–1615), whom he had unexpectedly fathered late in life, to one of his ablest generals, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616). However, upon Hideyoshi's death, Ieyasu betrayed that trust. In 1600, in the Battle of Sekigahara, he defeated those who were trying to protect Hideyori, and became effectively the overlord of Japan. In 1603 his power was legitimised when the emperor conferred on him the title of shōgun. His Kantō base, the once tiny fishing village of Edo – later to be renamed Tōkyō – now became the real centre of power and government in Japan.

Through these three men, by fair means or more commonly foul, the country had been reunified within three decades.

STABILITY & SECLUSION

Having secured power for the Tokugawa, Ieyasu and his successors were determined to retain it. Their basic strategy was of a linked two-fold nature: enforce the status quo and minimise potential for challenge. Orthodoxy and strict control (over military families in particular) were key elements.

Policies included requiring authorisation for castle building and marriages, continuing strategic redistribution (or confiscation) of territory, and, importantly, requiring *daimyō* and their retainers to spend every second year at Edo, with their families kept there permanently as hostages. In addition the shōgunate directly controlled ports, mines, major towns and other strategic areas. Movement was severely restricted by deliberate destruction of many bridges, the implementation of checkpoints and requirements for written travel authority, the banning of wheeled transport, the strict monitoring of potentially ocean-going vessels, and the banning of overseas travel for

1156–85
Hostilities between Taira and Minamoto clans; Minamoto finally prevails under Yoritomo.

1192
Japan unified under Minamoto Yorimoto, who takes the title *shōgun* (generalissimo) and establishes *bakufu* (shōgunate) in Kamakura.

1274 & 1281
The Mongols attempt to invade Japan, and fail in large part due to 'divine wind' of typhoon.

1333
Ashikaga Takauji topples Hōjō shōgunate and establishes Ashikaga shōgunate.

Japanese and even the return of those already overseas. Social movement was also banned, with society divided into four main classes: in descending order, *shi* (samurai), *nō* (farmers), *kō* (artisans) and *shō* (merchants). Detailed codes of conduct applied to each of these classes, even down to clothing and food and housing – right down to the siting of the toilet!

Christianity, though not greatly popular, threatened the authority of the shōgunate. Thus Christian missionaries were expelled in 1614. In 1638 the bloody quelling of the Christian-led Shimabara Uprising (near Nagasaki) saw Christianity banned and Japanese Christians – probably several hundred thousand – forced into hiding. All Westerners except the Protestant Dutch were expelled. The shōgunate found Protestantism less threatening than Catholicism – among other things it knew the Vatican could muster one of the biggest military forces in the world – and would have been prepared to let the British stay on if the Dutch, showing astute commercial one-upmanship, had not convinced it that Britain was a Catholic country. Nevertheless, the Dutch were confined geographically to a tiny trading base on the man-made island of Dejima, near Nagasaki, and numerically to just a few dozen men.

'After killing the man responsible, they in turn were all obliged to commit *seppuku'*

Thus Japan entered an era of *sakoku* (secluded country) that was to last for more than two centuries. Within the isolated and severely prescribed world of Tokugawa Japan, the breach of even a trivial law could mean execution. Even mere 'rude behaviour' was a capital offence, and the definition of this was 'acting in an unexpected manner'. Punishments could be cruel, such as crucifixion, and could be meted out collectively or by proxy (for example, a village headman could be punished for the misdeed of a villager). Secret police were used to report on misdeeds.

As a result, people at large learned the importance of obedience to authority, of collective responsibility and of 'doing the right thing'. These are values still prominent in present-day Japan.

For all the constraints there was nevertheless a considerable dynamism to the period, especially among the merchants, who as the lowest class were often ignored by the authorities and thus had relative freedom. They prospered greatly from the services and goods required for the *daimyō* processions to and from Edo, entailing such expense that *daimyō* had to convert much of their domainal produce into cash. This boosted the economy in general.

A largely pleasure-oriented merchant culture thrived, and produced the popular kabuki drama, with its colour and stage effects. Other entertainments included *bunraku* (puppet theatre), haiku (17-syllable verses), popular novels and *ukiyoe* (wood-block prints), often of female *geisha*, who came to the fore in this period. (Earlier *geisha* – meaning 'artistic person' – were male.)

Samurai, for their part, had no major military engagements. Well educated, most ended up fighting mere paper wars as administrators and managers. Ironically, it was during this period of relative inactivity that the renowned samurai code of *bushidō* was formalised, largely to justify the existence of the samurai class – some 6% of the population – by portraying them as moral exemplars. Though much of it was idealism, occasionally the code was put into practice, such as the exemplary loyalty shown by the Forty-Seven *rōnin* (masterless samurai) in 1701–03, who waited two years to avenge the unfair enforced suicide by *seppuku* (disembowelment) of their lord. After killing the man responsible, they in turn were all obliged to commit *seppuku*.

15th–late 16th centuries

Japan in almost constant internal warfare.

1543

The Portuguese arrive in Japan, the first Westerners, presently leading to the introduction of firearms and Christianity.

In more general terms, Confucianism was officially encouraged with the apparent aim of reinforcing the idea of hierarchy and status quo. Though this was clearly not in the best interests of women, it encouraged learning, and along with this, literacy. By the end of the period as many as 30% of the population of 30 million were literate – far ahead of the Western norm at the time. In some opposition to the 'Chinese learning' represented by Confucianism, there was also a strong trend of nationalism, centred on Shintō and the ancient texts. This was unhelpful to the shōgunate as it tended to focus on the primacy of the emperor. Certainly, by the early-mid-19th century, there was considerable dissatisfaction towards the shōgunate, fanned also by corruption and incompetence among shōgunal officials.

It is questionable how much longer the Tokugawa shōgunate and its secluded world could have continued, but as it happened, external forces were to bring about its demise.

The Japanese religion of Shintō is one of the few religions in the world to have a female sun deity, or a female supreme deity.

MODERNISATION THROUGH WESTERNISATION

Since the start of the 19th century a number of Western vessels had appeared in Japanese waters. Any Westerners who dared to land, even through shipwreck, were almost always met with expulsion or even execution.

The Three Imperial Treasures *(sanshu no jingi)* – a mirror, sword and jewel – are considered the most sacred objects in the Shintō religion.

This was not acceptable to the Western powers, especially the USA, which was keen to expand its interests across the Pacific and had numerous whaling vessels in the northwest that needed regular reprovisioning. In 1853, and again the following year, US Commodore Matthew Perry steamed into Edo Bay with a show of gunships and demanded the opening of Japan for trade and reprovisioning. The shōgunate had little option but to accede to his demands, for it was no match for Perry's firepower. Presently a US consul arrived, and other Western powers followed suit. Japan was obliged to give 'most favoured nation' rights to all the powers, and lost control over its own tariffs.

The humiliation of the shōgunate, the nation's supposed military protector, was capitalised upon by anti-shōgunal samurai in the outer domains of Satsuma (southern Kyūshū) and Chōshū (Western Honshū) in particular. A movement arose to 'revere the emperor and expel the barbarians' *(sonnō jōi)*. However, after unsuccessful skirmishing with the Western powers, the reformers realised that expelling the barbarians was not feasible, but restoring the emperor was. Their coup, known as the Meiji (Enlightened Rule) Restoration, was put into effect from late 1867 to early 1868, and the new teenage emperor Mutsuhito (1852–1912), later to be known as Meiji, found himself 'restored', following the convenient death of his stubborn father Kōmei (1831–67). After some initial resistance, the last shōgun, Yoshinobu (1837–1913), retired to Shizuoka to live out his numerous remaining years peacefully. The shōgunal base at Edo became the new imperial base, and was renamed Tōkyō (eastern capital).

The disorienting collapse of the regimented Tokugawa world produced a form of mass hysteria called *Ee Ja Nai Ka* ('Who Cares?'), with traumatised people dancing naked and giving away possessions.

Mutsuhito did as he was told by those who had restored him, though they would claim that everything was done on his behalf and with his sanction. Basically, he was the classic legitimiser. His restorers, driven by both personal ambition and genuine concern for the nation, were largely leading Satsuma/Chōshū samurai in their early 30s. The most prominent of them was Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), who was to become prime minister on no fewer than four occasions. Fortunately for Japan, they proved a very capable oligarchy.

Late 16th–early 17th centuries

Japan reunified by Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. The latter becomes shōgun.

Early 17th–mid-19th centuries

Tokugawa shōgunate based at Edo (Tōkyō). Life tightly controlled. Japan closes itself to the outside world.

Japan was also fortunate in that the Western powers were distracted by richer and easier pickings in China and elsewhere, and did not seriously seek to occupy or colonise Japan, though Perry does seem to have entertained such thoughts at one stage. Nevertheless, the fear of colonisation made the oligarchs act with great urgency. Far from being colonised, they themselves wanted to be colonisers, and make Japan a major power.

The rickshaw was not developed till 1869, following the lifting of the Tokugawa ban on wheeled transport.

Under the banner of *fukoku kyōhei* (rich country, strong army), the young men who now controlled Japan decided on Westernisation as the best strategy – again showing the apparent Japanese preference for learning from a powerful potential foe. In fact, as another slogan *oitsuke, oikose* (catch up, overtake) suggests, they even wanted to outdo their models. Missions were sent overseas to observe a whole range of Western institutions and practices, and Western specialists were brought to Japan to advise in areas from banking to transport to mining.

In the coming decades Japan was to Westernise quite substantially, not just in material terms, such as communications and railways and clothing, but also, based on selected models, in the establishment of a modern banking system and economy, legal code, constitution and Diet, elections and political parties, and a conscript army.

The salaries of the foreign specialists invited to Japan in the Meiji period are believed to have amounted to 5% of all government expenditure during the period.

Existing institutions and practices were disestablished where necessary. *Daimyō* were 'persuaded' to give their domainal land to the government in return for governorships or similar compensation, enabling the implementation of a prefectural system. The four-tier class system was scrapped, and people were now free to choose their occupation and place of residence. This included even the samurai class, phased out by 1876 to pave the way for a more efficient conscript army – though there was some armed resistance to this in 1877 under the Satsuma samurai (and oligarch) Saigō Takamori, who ended up committing *seppuku* when the resistance failed.

To help relations with the Western powers, the ban on Christianity was lifted, though few took advantage of it. Nevertheless numerous Western ideologies entered the country, one of the most popular being 'self-help' philosophy. This provided a guiding principle for a population newly liberated from a world in which everything had been prescribed for them. But at the same time, too much freedom could lead to an unhelpful type of individualism. The government quickly realised that nationalism could safely and usefully harness these new energies. People were encouraged to become successful and strong, and in doing so show the world what a successful and strong nation Japan was. Through educational policies, supported by imperial pronouncements, young people were encouraged to become strong and work for the good of the family-nation.

The government was proactive in many other measures, such as taking responsibility for establishing major industries and then selling them off at bargain rates to chosen 'government-friendly' industrial entrepreneurs – a factor in the formation of huge industrial combines known as *zaibatsu*. The government's actions in this were not really democratic, but this was typical of the day. Another example is the 'transcendental cabinet', which was not responsible to the parliament but only to the emperor, who followed his advisers, who were members of the same cabinet! Meiji Japan was outwardly democratic but internally retained many authoritarian features.

The 'state-guided' economy was helped by a workforce that was well educated, obedient and numerous, and traditions of sophisticated commercial practices such as futures markets. In the early years Japan's main industry was textiles and its main export silk, but later in the Meiji period, with judicious financial support from the government, it moved increasingly into manufacturing and heavy industry, becoming a major world shipbuilder by the end of the period. Improvement in agricultural technology freed up surplus farming labour to move into these manufacturing sectors.

A key element of Japan's aim to become a world power with overseas territory was the military. Following Prussian (army) and British (navy) models, Japan soon built up a formidable military force. Using the same 'gunboat diplomacy' that Perry had used on the Japanese shōgunate, in 1876 Japan was able to force on Korea an unequal treaty of its own, and thereafter interfered increasingly in Korean politics. Using Chinese 'interference' in Korea as a justification, in 1894 Japan manufactured a war with China – a weak nation at this stage despite its massive size – and easily emerged victorious. As a result it gained Taiwan and the Liaotung peninsula. Russia tricked Japan into renouncing the peninsula and then promptly occupied it itself, leading to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, from which Japan again emerged victorious. One important benefit was Western recognition of its interests in Korea, which it proceeded to annex in 1910.

By the time of Mutsuhito's death in 1912, Japan was indeed recognised as a world power. In addition to its military victories and territorial acquisitions, in 1902 it had signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the first ever equal alliance between a Western and non-Western nation. The unequal treaties had also been rectified. Western-style structures were in place. The economy was world ranking. The Meiji period had been a truly extraordinary half-century of modernisation. But where to now?

'The Meiji period had been a truly extraordinary half-century of modernisation'

GROWING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WEST

Mutsuhito was succeeded by his son Yoshihito (Taishō), who suffered mental deterioration that led to his own son Hirohito (1901–89) becoming regent in 1921.

On the one hand, the Taishō period ('Great Righteousness', 1912–26) saw continued democratisation, with a more liberal line, the extension of the right to vote and a stress on diplomacy. Through WWI Japan was able to benefit economically from the reduced presence of the Western powers, and also politically, for it was allied with Britain (though with little actual involvement) and was able to occupy German possessions in East Asia and the Pacific. On the other hand, using that same reduced Western presence, in 1915 Japan aggressively sought to gain effective control of China with its notorious 'Twenty-One Demands', which were eventually modified.

In Japan at this time there was a growing sense of dissatisfaction towards the West and a sense of unfair treatment. The Washington Conference of 1921–22 set naval ratios of three capital ships for Japan to five US and five British, which upset the Japanese despite being well ahead of France's 1.75. Around the same time a racial equality clause that Japan proposed to the newly formed League of Nations was rejected. And in 1924 the US introduced race-based immigration policies that effectively targeted Japanese.

This dissatisfaction was to intensify in the Shōwa period (Illustrious Peace), which started in 1926 with the death of Yoshihito and the formal accession of Hirohito. He was not a strong emperor and was unable to curb the ris-

1853–54
US Commodore Matthew Perry uses 'gunboat diplomacy' to force Japan to open up.

1868
Meiji Restoration of imperial authority, disestablishment of shōgunate. Japan's formal capital moved to Tōkyō (formerly Edo).

Late 19th century
Japan modernises through Westernisation, aiming to become a major power, and succeeds.

1895–1910
Japan defeats China in the Sino-Japanese War (1895), gaining Taiwan.

SAMURAI

The prime duty of a samurai, a member of the warrior class from around the 12th century on, was to give faithful service to his lord. In fact, the term 'samurai' is derived from a word meaning 'to serve'. Ideally, 'service' meant being prepared to give up one's life for one's lord, though there were many ranks of samurai and, at least in the early days, it was typically only the hereditary retainers who felt such commitment. At the other end of the ranks, samurai were in effect professional mercenaries who were by no means reliable and often defected if it was to their advantage.

The renowned samurai code, *bushidō* (way of the fighting man), developed over the centuries but was not formally codified till the 17th century, by which stage there were no real battles to fight. Ironically, the intention of the code appears to have been to show samurai as moral exemplars in order to counter criticism that they were parasitic. It was thus greatly idealised.

Core samurai ideals included *gaman* (endurance), *isshin* (whole-hearted commitment) and *makoto* (sincerity). Samurai were supposed to be men of Zen-like austerity who endured hardship without complaint. Though often highly educated and sometimes paralleled with European knights, chivalry was not so dominant as in Europe, and certainly not towards women. Far from romancing women, most samurai shunned them on the grounds that sexual relations with women (who were *yin/in*) weakened their maleness *(yang/yō)*, and as a result most samurai were homosexual or, in many cases, bisexual. There were actually a small number of female samurai, such as Tomoe Gozen (12th century), but they were not given formal recognition.

Warriors, who for one reason or another became lordless, were known as *rōnin* (wanderers), acted more like brigands and were a serious social problem.

Samurai who fell from grace were generally required to commit ritual disembowelment, meant to show the purity of the soul, which was believed to reside in the stomach. Westerners typically refer to this as *harakiri*, but the Japanese prefer the term *seppuku* – though both mean 'stomach cutting'.

The samurai's best-known weapon was the *katana* sword, though in earlier days the bow was also prominent. Arguably the world's finest swordsmen, samurai were formidable opponents in single combat. However, during modernisation in the late 19th century the government – itself comprising samurai – realised that a conscript army was more efficient as a unified fighting force, and disestablished the samurai class. However, samurai ideals such as endurance and fighting to the death were revived through propaganda prior to the Pacific War, and underlay the determination of many Japanese soldiers.

ing power of the military, who pointed to the growing gap between urban and rural living standards and accused politicians and big businessmen of corruption. The situation was not helped by repercussions from the World Depression in the late 1920s. The ultimate cause of these troubles, in Japanese eyes, was the West, with its excessive individualism and liberalism. According to the militarists, Japan needed to look after its own interests, which in extended form meant a resource-rich, Japan-controlled Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere that even included Australia and New Zealand.

In 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria on a pretext, and presently set up a puppet government. When the League of Nations objected, Japan promptly left the League. It soon turned its attention to China, and in 1937 launched a brutal invasion that saw atrocities such as the notorious Nanjing Massacre of December that year. Casualty figures for Chinese civilians at Nanjing vary between 340,000 (some Chinese sources) and a 'mere' 20,000 (some Japanese sources). Many of the tortures, rapes and murders were filmed

1915–41 (esp 1930s)

Japan becomes increasingly disillusioned with much of the West, and its expansionism in Asia becomes more aggressive, especially in China.

1941–45

Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, entering WWII. It makes initial gains but over-reaches itself and is forced to surrender.

and are undeniable, but persistent (though not universal) Japanese attempts to downplay this and other massacres in Asia remain a stumbling block in Japan's relations with many Asian nations, even today.

Japan did not reject all Western nations, however, for it admired the new regimes in Germany and Italy, and in 1940 entered into a tripartite pact with them. This gave it confidence to expand further in Southeast Asia, principally seeking oil, for which it was heavily dependent on US exports. However, the alliance was not to lead to much cooperation, and since Hitler was openly talking of the Japanese as *untermenschen* (lesser beings) and the 'Yellow Peril', Japan was never sure of Germany's commitment. The US was increasingly concerned about Japan's aggression and applied sanctions. Diplomacy failed, and war seemed inevitable. The US planned to make the first strike, covertly, through the China-based Flying Tigers (Plan JB355), but there was a delay in assembling an appropriate strike force.

So it was that the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor on 7 December that year, damaging much of the US Pacific Fleet and allegedly catching the US by surprise, though some scholars believe Roosevelt and others deliberately allowed the attack to happen in order to overcome isolationist sentiment and bring the US into the war against Japan's ally Germany. Whatever the reality, the US certainly underestimated Japan and its fierce commitment, which led rapidly to widespread occupation of Pacific islands and parts of continental Asia. Most scholars agree that Japan never expected to beat the US, but hoped to bring it to the negotiating table and emerge better off.

'Whatever the reality, the US certainly underestimated Japan and its fierce commitment'

The tide started to turn against Japan from the battle of Midway in June 1942, which saw the destruction of much of Japan's carrier fleet. Basically, Japan had over-extended itself, and over the next three years was subjected to an island-hopping counterattack from forces under General Douglas MacArthur. By mid-1945 the Japanese, ignoring the Potsdam Declaration calling for unconditional surrender, were preparing for a final Allied assault on their homelands. On 6 August the world's first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima (see the boxed text, p457), with 90,000 civilian deaths. On 8 August, Russia, which Japan had hoped might mediate, declared war. On 9 August another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki (see the boxed text, p684), with another 75,000 deaths. The situation prompted the emperor to formally announce surrender on 15 August. Hirohito probably knew what the bombs were, for Japanese scientists were working on their own atomic bomb and seem to have had both sufficient expertise and resources, though their state of progress is unclear.

RECOVERY & BEYOND

Following Japan's defeat a largely US occupation began under MacArthur. It was benign and constructive, with twin aims of demilitarisation and democratisation, and a broader view of making Japan an Americanised bastion against communism in the region. To the puzzlement of many Japanese, Hirohito was not tried as a war criminal but was retained as emperor. This was largely for reasons of expediency, to facilitate and legitimise reconstruction – and with it US policy. It was Americans who drafted Japan's new constitution, with its famous 'no war' clause. US aid was very helpful to the rebuilding of the economy, and so too were procurements from the Korean War of 1950–53. The Occupation ended in 1952, though Okinawa was not

1945–52

After its defeat Japan experiences US-led Occupation, its constructive policies and revived Japanese spirit sparking a rapid recovery.

1970s & 1980s

Japan 'reigns' as an economic superpower.

returned till 1972 and is still home to US military bases. And Japan still supports US policy in many regards, such as in amending the law to allow (noncombatant) troops to be sent to Iraq.

The Japanese responded extremely positively in rebuilding their nation, urged on by a comment from the postwar prime minister Yoshida Shigeru that Japan had lost the war but would win the peace. Certainly, in economic terms, through close cooperation between a stable government and well organised industry, and a sincere nationwide determination to become 'Number One', by the 1970s Japan had effectively achieved this. It had become an economic superpower, its 'economic miracle' the subject of admiration and study around the world. Even the Oil Shocks of 1973 and 1979 did not cause serious setback.

Until it was occupied by the USA and other Allies following WWII, Japan (as a nation) had never been conquered or occupied by a foreign power.

By the late 1980s Japan was by some criteria the richest nation on the planet, of which it occupied a mere 0.3% in terms of area but 16% in terms of economic might and an incredible 60% in terms of real estate value. Some major Japanese companies had more wealth than many nations' entire GNP.

Hirohito died in January 1989, succeeded by his son Akihito and the new Heisei (Full Peace) period. He must have ended his extraordinarily eventful life happy at his nation's economic supremacy.

The so-called 'Bubble Economy' may have seemed unstoppable, but the laws of economics eventually prevailed and in the early 1990s it burst from within, having grown beyond a sustainable base. Though Japan was to remain an economic superpower, the consequences were nevertheless severe. Economically, Japan entered a recession of some 10 years, which saw almost zero growth in real terms, plummeting land prices, increased unemployment and even dismissal of managers who had believed they were guaranteed 'lifetime' employment. Socially, the impact was even greater. The public, whose lives were often based around corporations and assumed economic growth, were disoriented by the effective collapse of corporatism and the economy. Many felt displaced, confused and even betrayed, their values shaken. In 1993 the Liberal Democratic Party, in power since 1955, found itself out of office, though it soon recovered its position as a sort of resigned apathy seemed to set in among the public.

The Yamato dynasty is the longest unbroken monarchy in the world, and Hirohito's reign from 1926 to 1989 the longest of any monarch in Japan.

The situation was not helped by two events in 1995. In January the Kōbe Earthquake struck, killing more than 5000 people and earning the government serious criticism for failure to respond promptly and effectively. A few months later came the notorious sarin gas subway attack by the AUM religious group, which killed 12 and injured thousands. Many people, such as the influential novelist Murakami Haruki, saw the ability of this bizarre cult to attract intelligent members as a manifestation of widespread anxiety in Japan, where people had suddenly experienced the collapse of many of their core values and beliefs were now left on their own – a situation postmodernists term 'the collapse of the Grand Narrative'.

The collapse of corporatism is reflected in increasing numbers of 'freeters' (free arbeiters), who do not commit to any one company but move around in employment, and 'neets' (not in employment or education or training). More people are now seeking their own way in life, which has resulted in greater diversity and more obvious emergence of individuality. On the one hand, this has led to greater extremes of self-expression, such as outlandish clothes and hairstyles (and hair colours) among the young. On the other hand, there's a greater 'Western-style' awareness of the rights of the individual, seen in the recently introduced privacy and official information laws. Direct control by government has also loosened, as seen in the 2004 corporatisation of universities.

The economy started to recover from around 2002, thanks in part to increased demand from China, and is now steady around the 2% to 3% per annum growth mark. The year 2002 was also marked by a successful co-hosting of the football World Cup with rivals Korea. However, relations with Asian nations are still far from fully harmonious. Recent bones of contention include the continued appearance of history textbooks that downplay atrocities such as Nanjing, and controversial visits by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (in office 2001–06) to Yasukuni Shrine to honour Japanese war dead, including war criminals.

'However, relations with Asian nations are still far from fully harmonious'

There are other worries for Japan. One is that it is the world's most rapidly ageing society, with the birth rate declining to a mere 1.25 per woman, and with its elderly (65 years plus) comprising 21% of the population while its children (up to 15 years) comprise just 13%. This has serious ramifications economically as well as socially, with a growing ratio of supported to supporter, and increased pension and health costs. Along with many ageing Western nations, Japan is doing its best (for example, by introducing nursing insurance schemes), but there is no easy solution in sight, and there are serious calls to redefine 'elderly' (and concomitant retirement expectations) as 75 years of age rather than 65.

Other concerns include juvenile crime and a growing problem of Social Anxiety Disorder in young people, which can lead to serious withdrawal *(hikikomori)* from everyday life. Internationally, the threat from nuclear-capable North Korea, with which Japan has had a particularly troubled relationship, presents a major worry.

Some Japanese were also concerned about there being no male heir to the throne, but in September 2006 Princess Kiko gave birth to Prince Hisahito and allayed those fears. Polls show that most Japanese would have been happy with a reigning empress anyway. That same month Koizumi was followed as prime minister by the 52-year-old Abe Shinzō, the first Japanese prime minister to be born postwar. It remains to be seen how the country will fare under his leadership, for which public support seems somewhat limited as 2007 unfolds.

1989
Emperor Hirohito dies after reigning 63 years and his son Akihito succeeds.

Early 1990s
Japan's so-called 'Bubble Economy' bursts, heralding a decade of economic recession and a re-orientation of values.

2002
Japan's economy starts a sustained recovery, and Japan successfully co-hosts the Soccer World Cup with Korea.

2006
Prince Hisahito born, providing eventual male heir to the throne. Issues such as ageing, relations with Asia and juvenile crime remain.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

The uniqueness and peculiarity of 'the Japanese' is a favourite topic of both Western observers and the Japanese themselves. It's worth starting any discussion of 'the Japanese' by noting that there is no such thing as 'the Japanese'. Rather, there are 127 million individuals in Japan with their own unique characters, interests and habits. And despite popular stereotypes to the contrary, the Japanese are as varied as any people on earth. Just as importantly, the Japanese people have more in common with the rest of humanity than they have differences.

Why then the pervasive images of the Japanese as inscrutable or even bizarre? These stereotypes are largely rooted in language: few Japanese are able to speak English as well as, say, your average Singaporean, Hong Kong Chinese or well-educated Indian, not to mention most Europeans. This difficulty with English is largely rooted in the country's appalling English education system, and is compounded by a natural shyness, a perfectionist streak and the nature of the Japanese language itself, which contains fewer sounds than any other major world language (making pronunciation of other languages difficult). Thus, what appears to the casual observer to be a maddening inscrutability is more likely just an inability to communicate effectively. Those outsiders who become fluent in Japanese discover a people whose thoughts and feelings are surprisingly – almost boringly – similar to those of folks in other developed nations.

'Japanese people have more in common with the rest of humanity than they have differences'

Of course, myths of Japanese uniqueness are quite useful to certain elements of Japanese society, to whom Japanese uniqueness is evidence of Japanese racial superiority. Among this small minority are writers of a class of books known as Nihonjiron (studies of the Japanese people), which contain absurd claims about the Japanese (including the claim that Japanese brains work differently from other people, and even that Japanese have longer intestines than other races). Some of these beliefs have made headway in general Japanese society, but most well-educated Japanese pay little mind to these essentially racist and unscientific views.

All this said, just like any other race, the Japanese people do have certain characteristics that reflect their unique history and interaction with their environment. The best way to understand how most modern Japanese people think is to look at these influences. First, Japan is an island nation. Second, until WWII, Japan was never conquered by an outside power, nor was it heavily influenced by Christian missionaries. Third, until the beginning of last century, the majority of Japanese lived in close-knit rural farming communities. Fourth, most of Japan is covered in steep mountains, so the few flat areas of the country are quite crowded – people literally live on top of each other. Finally, for almost all of its history, Japan has been a strictly hierarchical place, with something approximating a caste system during the Edo period.

All of this has produced a people who highly value group identity and smooth social harmony – in a tightly packed city or small farming village, there simply isn't room for colourful individualism. One of the ways harmony is preserved is by forming consensus, and concealing personal opinions and true feelings. Thus, the free flowing exchange of ideas, debates and even heated arguments that one expects in the West are far less common in Japan. This reticence about sharing innermost thoughts perhaps contributes to the Western image of the Japanese as mysterious.

The Japanese tendency to put social harmony above individual expression is only strengthened by the country's Confucian and Buddhist heritage. The former, inherited from China, stresses duty to parents, teachers, society and ancestors before individual happiness. The latter, inherited from India by way of China, stresses the illusory nature of the self and preaches austerity in all things.

Of course, there is a lot more to the typical Japanese character than just a tendency to prize social harmony. Any visitor to the country will soon discover a people who are remarkably conscientious, meticulous, industrious, honest and technically skilled. A touching shyness and sometimes almost painful self-consciousness is also an undoubted feature of many Japanese as well. These characteristics result in a society that is a joy for the traveller to experience.

And let us say that any visit to Japan is a good chance to explode the myths about Japan and the Japanese. While you may imagine a nation of suit-clad conformists, or inscrutable automatons, a few rounds in a local *izakaya* (Japanese pub) will quickly put all of these notions to rest. More than likely, the salaryman (white-collar worker) next to you will offer to buy you a round and then treat you to a remarkably frank discussion of Japanese politics. Or, maybe he'll just bring you up to speed on how the Hanshin Tigers are going this year.

LIFESTYLE

The way most Japanese live today differs greatly from the way they lived before WWII. As the birth rate has dropped and labour demands have drawn more workers to cities, the population has become increasingly urban. At the same time, Japan continues to soak up influences from abroad and the traditional lifestyle of the country is quickly disappearing in the face of a dizzying onslaught of Western pop/material culture. These days, the average young Tokyoite has a lot more in common with her peers in Melbourne or London than she does with her grandmother back in her *furusato* (hometown).

Did you know that there are more than six million vending machines in Tokyo alone?

In the City

The overwhelming majority of Japanese live in the bustling urban environments of major cities. These urbanites live famously hectic lives dominated by often-gruelling work schedules (the Japanese work week, like the school week, usually runs from Monday to Saturday) and punctuated by lengthy commutes from city centres to more affordable outlying neighbourhoods and suburbs.

Until fairly recently, the nexus of all this activity was the Japanese corporation, which provided lifetime employment to the legions of blue-suited white-collar workers, almost all of them men, who lived, worked, drank, ate and slept in the service of the companies for which they toiled. These days, as the Japanese economy makes the transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, the old certainties are vanishing. On the way out are Japan's famous 'cradle-to-grave' employment and age-based promotion system. Now the recent college graduate is just as likely to become a *furitaa* (part-time worker) as he is to become a salaryman. Needless to say, all this has wide-ranging consequences for Japanese society.

The majority of families once comprised of a father who was a salaryman, a mother who was a housewife, kids who studied dutifully in order to earn a place at one of Japan's elite universities and an elderly in-law who had moved in. Though the days of this traditional model may not be completely over, the average family continues to evolve with current social and economic conditions. The father, if he is lucky, still has the job he had 10 years ago, though

if, like many workers, he has found himself out of a job, it is possible that his wife has found part-time work as he continues to search for emplyoment (the unemployment rate has hovered at around 4% for the last several years – a grim figure by Japanese standards).

The kids in the family probably still study like mad; if they are in junior high, they are working towards gaining admission to a select high school by attending a cram school, known as a *juku;* if they are already in high school, they will be working furiously towards passing university admission exams.

As for the mother- or father-in-law, who in the past would have expected to be taken care of by the eldest son in the family, she or he may have found that beliefs about filial loyalty have changed substantially since the 1980s, particularly in urban centres. Now, more and more Japanese families are sending elderly parents and in-laws to live out their 'golden years' in *rōjin hōmu* (literally, 'old folks homes').

In the Country

Only one in four Japanese live in the small farming and fishing villages that dot the mountains and cling to the rugged coasts. Mass postwar emigration from these rural enclaves has doubtless changed the weave of Japanese social fabric and the texture of its landscape, as the young continue their steady flight to the city leaving untended rice fields to slide down the hills from neglect.

Today only 15% of farming households continue to make ends meet solely through agriculture, with most rural workers holding down two or three jobs. Though this lifestyle manages to make the incomes of some country dwellers higher than those of their urban counterparts, it also speaks clearly of the crisis that many rural communities are facing in their struggle to maintain their traditional way of life.

The salvation of traditional village life may well rely on the success of the 'I-turn' (moving from urban areas to rural villages) and 'U-turn' (moving from country to city, and back again) movements. Though not wildly successful, these movements have managed to attract young people who work at home, company workers who are willing to put in a number of hours on the train commuting to the nearest city, and retirees looking to spend their golden years among the thatched roofs and rice fields that symbolise a not-so-distant past.

Facts, facts and more facts are found at this website (www.stat.go.jp/english/index.htm), managed by the Japanese government.

POPULATION

Japan has a population of approximately 127 million people (the ninth largest in the world) and, with 75% of it concentrated in urban centres, population density is extremely high. Areas such as the Tokyo–Kawasaki–Yokohama conurbation are so densely populated that they have almost ceased to be separate cities, running into each other and forming a vast coalescence that, if considered as a whole, would constitute the world's largest city.

One notable feature of Japan's population is its relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity. This is particularly striking for visitors from the USA, Australia and other multicultural nations. The main reason for this ethnic homogeneity is Japan's strict immigration laws, which have ensured that only a small number of foreigners settle in the country.

The largest non-Japanese group in the country is made up of 650,000 *zai-nichi kankoku-jin* (resident Koreans). For most outsiders, Koreans are an invisible minority. Indeed, even the Japanese themselves have no way of knowing that someone is of Korean descent if he or she adopts a Japanese name. Nevertheless, Japanese-born Koreans, who in some cases speak no language other than Japanese, were only very recently released from the obligation to carry thumb-printed ID cards at all times, and still face discrimination in the workplace and other aspects of their daily lives.

Aside from Koreans, most foreigners in Japan are temporary workers from China, Southeast Asia, South America and Western countries. Indigenous groups such as the Ainu have been reduced to very small numbers and are concentrated mostly in Hokkaidō.

The most notable feature of Japan's population is the fact that it is poised to start shrinking, and shrinking fast. Japan's astonishingly low birth rate of 1.4 births per woman is among the lowest in the developed world and Japan is rapidly becoming a nation of oldsters. Experts predict that the present population will start to decline in 2007, reaching 100 million in 2050 and 67 million in 2100. Needless to say, such demographic change will have a major influence on the economy in coming decades (for more information on the Japanese economy, see p54).

Almost all Japanese babies are born with a Mongolian spot or *mōkohan* on their bottoms or lower backs. This harmless bluish-grey birthmark is composed of melanin-containing cells. Mongolian spots are common in several Asian races including, as the name suggests, Mongolians, as well as in Native Americans. These birthmarks, which usually fade by the age of five, raise interesting questions about the origins of the Japanese people.

The Ainu

The Ainu, of whom there are roughly 24,000 living in Japan, were the indigenous people of Hokkaidō, and some would argue, the only people who can claim to be natives of Japan. Due to ongoing intermarriage and assimilation, almost all Ainu consider themselves bi-ethnic. Today, less than 200 people in Japan can claim both parents with exclusively Ainu descent.

Burakumin

The Burakumin are a largely invisible (to outsiders, at least) group of Japanese whose ancestors performed work that brought them into contact with the contamination of death – butchering, leatherworking and the disposing of corpses. The Burakumin were the outcasts in the social hierarchy (some would say caste system) that existed during the Edo period. While the Burakumin are racially the same as other Japanese, they have traditionally been treated like an inferior people by much of Japanese society. Estimates put the number of hereditary Burakumin in present-day Japan at anywhere from 890,000 to three million.

While discrimination against Burakumin is now technically against the law, there continues to be significant discrimination against Burakumin in such important aspects of Japanese social life as work and marriage. It is common knowledge, though rarely alluded to, that information about any given individual's possible Burakumin origin is available to anyone (generally employers and prospective fathers-in-law) who is prepared to make certain discreet investigations. Many Japanese dislike discussing this topic with foreigners, and unless you are on very familiar terms or in enlightened company it is probably bad taste to bring it up.

Nakagami Kenji provides a rare insight into the world of the Burakumin, Japan's former untouchable caste, in his book *The Cape and Other Stories from the Japanese Ghetto*. The stories are set in the slums and alleyways of the Kishū, which is now known as the Wakayama-ken.

IMMIGRATION

Like many industrialised countries, Japan attracts thousands of workers hoping for high salaries and a better life. At present, there are about 1.9 million foreign residents registered with the government (about 1.5% of the total population of Japan). Of these, 32% are Korean (for more on resident Koreans, see opposite), 24% are Chinese or Taiwanese, 14% are Brazilian and 2.5% are from the USA. In addition, it has been estimated that at least another 250,000 unregistered illegal immigrants live and work in Japan.

Due to its ageing population and low birth rate, Japan may soon have to consider means to increase immigration of skilled workers, something that many Japanese oppose on the grounds that it will disrupt Japan's existing social order (for more on the shrinking population, see opposite).

ECONOMY

The Japanese 'economic miracle' is one of the great success stories of the postwar period. In a few short decades, Japan went from a nation in ruins to the world's second-largest economy. The rise of the Japanese economy is even more startling when one considers Japan's almost total lack of major natural resources beyond agricultural and marine products.

There are many reasons for Japan's incredible economic success: a hard-working populace; strong government support for industry; a strategic Pacific-rim location; infusions of cash during the Korean War (during which Japan acted as a staging point for the American military); and, some would say, protectionist trade policies. What is certain is this: when free-market capitalism was planted in the soil of post-war Japan, it was planted in extremely fertile soil.

Of course, it has not always been smooth sailing for the Japanese economy. During the 1980s, the country experienced what is now known as the 'Bubble Economy'. The Japanese economy went into overdrive, with easy money supply and soaring real-estate prices leading to a stock market bubble that abruptly burst in early 1990. In the years that followed, Japan flirted with recession, and the jobless rate climbed to 5%, an astonishing figure in a country that had always enjoyed near full employment.

Fortunately, the new millennium has brought good economic news to Japan. In the last three months of 2006, the Japanese economy grew by an astonishing 4.8%. This expansion led the Bank of Japan to abandon its long-held zero interest policy, finally raising its prime lending rate to a modest 0.25% in July 2006, followed by another incremental increase in February 2007. At the same time, the stock market enjoyed a near-record year and companies reported robust profits. Despite the rosy figures, many ordinary Japanese contend that corporate profits aren't filtering down to the person on the street. And when Japanese travel abroad, they may indeed wonder if they come from the world's second-richest country: at the time of writing, the yen stood at a 20-year low in terms of real purchasing power (which is, conversely, good news for travellers to Japan).

RELIGION

Shintō & Buddhism

There are three sacred regalia in Shintō: the sacred mirror (stored in Mie-ken's Ise-jingū; p435); the sacred sword (stored in Atsuta-jingū near Nagoya; p243); and the sacred beads (stored in the Imperial Palace in Tokyo; p110). Some speculate that the sacred treasures were brought over by the continental forerunners of the Yamato clan.

The vast majority (about 86%) of Japanese are followers of both Buddhism and Shintō, a fact puzzling to many Westerners, most of whom belong to exclusive monotheistic faiths. The Japanese are fond of saying that Shintō is the religion of this world and this life, while Buddhism is for matters of the soul and the next world. Thus, births, marriages, harvest rituals and business success are considered the province of Shintō, while funerals are exclusively Buddhist affairs. When one looks at the beliefs and metaphysics of each religion, this makes perfect sense, for Shintō is a religion that holds that gods reside in nature itself (this world), while Buddhism stresses the impermanence of the natural world.

Shintō, or 'the way of the gods', is the indigenous religion of Japan. More than a monolithic faith, Shintō is a collection of indigenous folk rituals and practices, many concerned with rice production, and wedded to ancient myths associated with the Yamato clan, the forerunners of the present-day imperial family. It is revealing that Shintō didn't even have a name until one was given to distinguish it from Japan's imported religion, Buddhism.

In Shintō there is a pantheon of gods *(kami)* who are believed to dwell in the natural world. Consisting of thousands of deities, this pantheon includes both local spirits and global gods and goddesses. Shintō gods are often enshrined in religious structures known as *jinja, jingū,* or *gū* (usually translated into English as shrine; see above). The greatest of these is Ise-jingū in Kansai's Mie-ken (p435), which enshrines the most celebrated Shintō deity, Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun to whom the imperial family of Japan is said to trace its ancestry. At the opposite end of the spectrum, you may come across waterfalls, trees or rocks decorated with a sacred rope (known as a *shimenawa*), which essentially declare that these things contain *kami* (and make them natural shrines in their own right).

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TEMPLE OR SHRINE?

One of the best ways to distinguish a Buddhist temple from a Shintō shrine is to examine the entrance. The main entrance of a shrine is a *torii* (Shintō shrine gate), usually composed of two upright pillars, joined at the top by two horizontal cross-bars, the upper of which is normally slightly curved. *Torii* are often painted a bright vermilion, though some are left as bare wood. In contrast, the main entrance gate *(mon)* of a temple is often a much more substantial affair, constructed of several pillars or casements, joined at the top by a multitiered roof, around which there may even be walkways. Temple gates often contain guardian figures, usually Niō (deva kings). Keep in mind, though, that shrines and temples sometimes share the same precincts, and it is not always easy to tell where one begins and the other ends.

In contrast to Shintō, which evolved with the Japanese people, Buddhism arrived from India via China and Korea sometime in the 6th century AD. For most of its history, it has coexisted peacefully with Shintō (the notable exception being the WWII period, during which Buddhism was suppressed as a foreign import). Buddhism, which originated in southern Nepal in the 5th century BC, is sometimes said to be more of a way or method than a religion, since, strictly speaking, there is no god in Buddhism. In practice, the various forms of Buddha and *bodhisattvas* (beings who have put off entering nirvana to help all other sentient beings enter nirvana) are worshipped like gods in most branches of Buddhism, at least by laypeople.

Until Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century AD, Japanese emperors were buried in giant earth and stone burial mounds known as *kofun* (see p413). The largest of these is said to contain more mass than the Great Pyramid at Cheops.

The four noble truths of Buddhism are as follows: 1) life is suffering; 2) the cause of suffering is desire; 3) the cure for suffering is the elimination of desire; and 4) the way to eliminate desire is to follow the Eightfold Path of the Buddha. Thus, Buddhism can be thought of as an operating manual for the human mind when faced with the problem of existence in an impermanent world.

All the main sects of Japanese Buddhism belong to the Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) strain of Buddhism, which is distinguished from Theravada (Lesser Vehicle) Buddhism by its faith in *bodhisattvas*. The major sects of Japanese Buddhism include Zen, Tendai, Esoteric, Pure Land and True Pure Land Buddhism. The religious structure in Buddhism is known as a *tera, dera, ji* or *in* (temple; see above).

WOMEN IN JAPAN

Traditional Japanese society restricted the woman's role to the home, where as housekeeper she wielded considerable power, overseeing all financial matters, monitoring the children's education and, in some ways, acting as the head of the household. Even in the early Meiji period, however, the ideal was rarely matched by reality: labour shortfalls often resulted in women taking on factory work, and even before that, women often worked side by side with men in the fields.

As might be expected, the contemporary situation is complex. There are, of course, those who stick to established roles. They tend to opt for shorter college courses, often at women's colleges, and see education as an asset in the marriage market. Once married, they leave the role of breadwinner to their husbands.

VISITING A SHRINE

Entering a Japanese shrine can be a bewildering experience for travellers. In order to make the most of the experience, follow these guidelines and do as the Japanese do.

Just past the *torii* (shrine gate), you'll find a *chōzuya* (trough of water) with long-handled ladles *(hishaku)* perched on a rack above. This is for purifying yourself before entering the sacred precincts of the shrine. Some Japanese forgo this ritual and head directly for the main hall. If you choose to purify yourself, take a ladle, fill it with fresh water from the spigot, pour some over one hand, transfer the spoon and pour water over the other hand, then pour a little water into a cupped hand and rinse your mouth, spitting the water onto the ground beside the trough, *not* into the trough.

Next, head to the *haiden* (hall of worship), which sits in front of the *honden* (main hall) enshrining the *kami* (god of the shrine). Here you'll find a thick rope hanging from a gong, with an offerings box in front. Toss a coin into the box, ring the gong by pulling on the rope (to summon the deity), pray, then clap your hands twice, bow and then back away from the shrine. Some Japanese believe that a ¥5 coin is the best for an offering at a temple or shrine, and that the luck engendered by the offering of a ¥10 coin will come further in the future (since 10 can be pronounced *tō* in Japanese, which can mean 'far').

If photography is forbidden at a shrine, it will be posted as such; otherwise, it is permitted and you should simply use your discretion when taking photos.

Increasingly, however, Japanese women are choosing to forgo or delay marriage in favour of pursuing their own career ambitions. Of course, changing aspirations do not necessarily translate into changing realities, and Japanese women are still significantly under represented in upper management and political positions, but over represented as office fodder, such as 'OLs' (office ladies). Part of the reason for this is the prevalence of gender discrimination in Japanese companies. Societal expectations, however, also play a role: Japanese women are forced to choose between having a career and having a family. Not only do most companies refuse to hire women for career-track positions, the majority of Japanese men are simply not interested in having a career woman as a spouse. This makes it very intimidating for a Japanese woman to step out of her traditional gender role and follow a career path.

'Those women who do choose full-time work suffer from from one of the worst gender wage gaps in the developed world'

Those women who do choose full-time work suffer from one of the worst gender wage gaps in the developed world: Japanese women earn only 66% of what Japanese men earn, compared to 76% in the USA, 83% in the UK and 85% in Australia (according to figures released by the respective governments). In politics, the situation is even worse: Japanese women hold only 9% of seats in the Diet, the nation's governing body.

MEDIA

Like all democratic countries, Japan constitutionally guarantees freedom of the press. In general, journalists do have quite a bit of freedom, though both Japanese and foreign media analysts have noted that exercise of this liberty is not always easy.

For reasons that are not completely clear, many Japanese journalists practise a form of self-censorship, often taking governmental or police reports at face value rather than conducting independent investigations that might reveal what is hidden beneath the official story. Some have speculated that this practice is symptomatic of journalists working closely, perhaps too closely, with political figures and police chiefs, who tacitly encourage them to omit details that might conflict with official accounts.

Added to the problem of self-censorship is that of exclusive press clubs, also known as *kisha clubs*. These clubs provide a privileged few with access to the halls of government. Journalists who are not members of a *kisha club* are unable to obtain key information and thus are shut out of a story. Some reporters have argued that this constitutes a form of information monopoly and have put pressure on the Japanese government to abolish the clubs.

Despite some problems with the free flow of information, the Japanese press is considered trustworthy by most people in Japan. Newspapers enjoy wide circulation, aided perhaps by the nation's incredible 99% literacy rate, and almost all households have TVs. Internet usage is also high: an estimated 86 million Japanese use the internet regularly.

ARTS

Contemporary Visual Art

In the years that followed WWII, Japanese artists struggled with issues of identity. This was the generation that grappled with duelling philosophies: 'Japanese spirit, Japanese knowledge' versus 'Japanese spirit, Western knowledge'. This group was known for exploring whether Western artistic media and methods could convey the space, light, substance and shadows of the Japanese spirit, or if this essence could only truly be expressed through traditional Japanese artistic genres.

Today's emerging artists and the movements they have generated have no such ambivalence. Gone is the anxiety about coopting, or being coopted by, Western philosophies and aesthetics; in its place is the insouciant celebration of the smooth, cool surface of the future articulated by fantastic colours and shapes. This exuberant, devil-may-care aesthetic is most notably represented by Takashi Murakami, whose work derives much of its energy from *otaku,* the geek culture that worships characters that figure prominently in manga, Japan's ubiquitous comic books (see the boxed text, p65). Murakami's exuberant, prankish images and installations have become emblematic of the Japanese aesthetic known as *poku* (a concept that combines pop art with an *otaku* sensibility), and his *Super Flat Manifesto,* which declares that 'the world of the future might be like Japan is today – super flat,' can be seen as a primer for contemporary Japanese pop aesthetics.

Beyond the pop scene, artists continue to create works whose textures, layers and topics relay a world that is broader than the frames of a comic book. Three notable artists to look for are Yoshie Sakai, whose ethereal oil paintings, replete with pastel skies and deep waters, leave the viewer unsure whether they are floating or sinking; Noriko Ambe, whose sculptural works with paper can resemble sand dunes shifting in the Sahara, or your high-school biology textbook; and the indomitable Hisashi Tenmyouya, whose work chronicles the themes of contemporary Japanese life, echoing the flat surfaces and deep impressions of wood-block prints while singing a song of the street.

Traditional Visual Art

PAINTING

From 794 to 1600, Japanese painting borrowed from Chinese and Western techniques and media, ultimately transforming them into its own aesthetic ends. By the beginning of the Edo period (1600–1868), which was marked by the enthusiastic patronage of a wide range of painting styles, Japanese art had come completely into its own. The Kanō school, initiated more than a century before the beginning of the Edo era, continued to be in demand for its depiction of subjects connected with Confucianism, mythical Chinese creatures or scenes from nature. The Tosa school, which followed the *yamato-e* style of painting (often used on scrolls during the Heian period, 794–1185), was also kept busy with commissions from the nobility who were eager to see scenes re-created from classics of Japanese literature.

Scream Against the Sky (edited by Alexandra Monroe) provides a comprehensive look at some of the finest Japanese postwar art, photography and sculpture. Includes wonderful glossy photos throughout.

Finally, the Rimpa school (from 1600) not only absorbed the styles of painting that had preceded it, but progressed beyond well-worn conventions to produce a strikingly decorative and delicately shaded form of painting. The works of art produced by a trio of outstanding artists from this school – Tawaraya Sōtatsu, Hon'ami Kōetsu and Ogata Kōrin – rank among the finest of this period.

CALLIGRAPHY

Shodō (the way of writing) is one of Japan's most valued arts, cultivated by nobles, priests and samurai alike, and still studied by Japanese schoolchildren today as *shūji*. Like the characters of the Japanese language, the art of *shodō* was imported from China. In the Heian period (794–1185), a fluid, cursive, distinctly Japanese style of *shodō* evolved called *wayō,* though the Chinese style remained popular in Japan among Zen priests and the literati for some time later.

In both Chinese and Japanese *shodō* there are three important types. Most common is *kaisho,* or block-style script. Due to its clarity, this style is favoured in the media and in applications where readability is key. *Gyōsho,* or running hand, is semicursive, and often used in informal correspondence. *Sōsho,* or grass hand, is a truly cursive style. *Sōsho* abbreviates and links the characters together to create a flowing, graceful effect.

'Among the Japanese, the prints were hardly given more than passing consideration'

UKIYO-E (WOOD-BLOCK PRINTS)

The term *ukiyo-e* means 'pictures of the floating world' and derives from a Buddhist metaphor for the transient world of fleeting pleasures. The subjects chosen by artists for these wood-block prints were characters and scenes from the tawdry, vivacious 'floating world' of the entertainment quarters in Edo (latter-day Tokyo), Kyoto and Osaka.

The floating world, centred in pleasure districts, such as Edo's Yoshiwara, was a topsy-turvy kingdom, an inversion of the usual social hierarchies that were held in place by the power of the Tokugawa shōgunate. Here, money meant more than rank, actors and artists were the arbiters of style, and prostitutes elevated their art to such a level that their accomplishments matched those of the women of noble families.

The vivid colours, novel composition and flowing lines of *ukiyo-e* caused great excitement in the West, sparking a vogue that one French art critic dubbed 'Japonisme'. *Ukiyo-e* became a key influence on impressionists (for example, Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet and Degas) and post-impressionists. Among the Japanese the prints were hardly given more than passing consideration – millions were produced annually in Edo. They were often thrown away or used as wrapping paper for pottery. For many years, the Japanese continued to be perplexed by the keen interest foreigners took in this art form, which they considered of ephemeral value.

CERAMICS

Ceramics are Japan's oldest art form: Jōmon pottery, with its distinctive chord-like decorative patterns, has been dated back as far as 10,000 BC. When the Jōmon people were conquered by the Yayoi people, starting around 400 BC, a more refined style of pottery appeared on the scene. While Jōmon pottery was an indigenous Japanese form, Yayoi pottery had clear continental influences and techniques. Continental techniques and even artisans continued to dominate Japanese ceramic arts for the next millennia or more: around the 5th century AD, Sue Ware pottery was introduced from Korea, and around the 7th century, Tang Chinese pottery became influential.

FAMOUS CERAMIC CENTRES

The suffix '*~yaki*' denotes a type of pottery. Thus, the term 'Bizen-yaki' refers to a type of pottery made in the Bizen area of Western Honshū. Some of Japan's main ceramic centres include the following:

- **Arita-yaki** known in the West as Imari, this colourful pottery is produced in the town of Arita, in Kyūshū (p679).
- **Satsuma-yaki** the most common style of this porcelain, from Kagoshima (p708) in Kyūshū, has a cloudy white, crackled glaze enamelled with gold, red, green and blue.
- **Karatsu-yaki** Karatsu (p676), near Fukuoka in northern Kyūshū, produces tea-ceremony utensils that are Korean in style and have a characteristic greyish, crackled glaze.
- **Hagi-yaki** the town of Hagi (p478) in Western Honshū is renowned for Hagi-yaki, a type of porcelain made with a pallid yellow or pinkish crackled glaze.
- **Bizen-yaki** the ancient ceramics centre of Bizen (p446) in Okayama-ken, Honshū, is famed for its solid unglazed bowls, which turn red through oxidation. Bizen also produces roofing tiles.
- **Kiyomizu-yaki** the approach road to the temple Kiyomizu-dera (p335), in Kyoto, is lined with shops selling Kiyomizu-yaki, a style of pottery that can be enamelled, blue painted or red painted in appearance.
- **Kutani-yaki** the porcelain from Ishikawa-ken (p295), in Central Honshū, is usually green or painted.

In the medieval period, Japan's great ceramic centre was Seto, in Central Honshū. Here, starting in the 12th century AD, Japanese potters took Chinese forms and adapted them to Japanese tastes and needs to produce a truly distinctive pottery style known as Seto Ware. One Japanese term for pottery and porcelain, *setomono* (literally, 'things from Seto'), clearly derives from this still-thriving ceramics centre.

Today, there are more than 100 pottery centres in Japan, with scores of artisans producing everything from exclusive tea utensils to souvenir folklore creatures. Department stores regularly organise exhibitions of ceramics and offer the chance to see some of this fine work up close (for more information, see above).

SHIKKI (LACQUERWARE)

'Raw lacquer is actually toxic and causes severe skin irritation'

The Japanese have been using lacquer to protect and enhance the beauty of wood since the Jōmon period (10,000–300 BC). In the Meiji era (1868–1912), lacquerware became very popular abroad and it remains one of Japan's best-known products. Known in Japan as *shikki* or *nurimono,* lacquerware is made using the sap from the lacquer tree *(urushi),* a close relative of poison oak. Raw lacquer is actually toxic and causes severe skin irritation in those who have not developed immunity. Once hardened, however, it becomes inert and extraordinarily durable.

The most common colour of lacquer is an amber or brown colour, but additives have been used to produce black, violet, blue, yellow and even white lacquer. In the better pieces, multiple layers of lacquer are painstakingly applied and left to dry, and finally polished to a luxurious shine.

Contemporary Theatre & Dance

Contemporary theatre and dance are alive and well in Japan, though you'll quickly notice that most major troupes are based in Tokyo. If you're interested in taking in contemporary theatre, your best bet is to enlist the help of a translator and to hit the *shogekijō* (little theatres; see p60) scene. If

contemporary dance is what you seek, check the *Japan Times, Metropolis* or the *Tokyo Journal* in Tokyo, or the *Kansai Time Out* in Kansai, to see what's on when you're in town.

UNDERGROUND THEATRE

Theatre the world over spent the 1960s redefining itself, and it was no different in Japan. The *shōgekijō* movement, also called *angura* (underground), has given Japan many of its leading playwrights, directors and actors. It arose as a reaction to the realism and structure of *shingeki* (a 1920s movement that borrowed heavily from Western dramatic forms), and featured surrealistic plays that explored the relationship between human beings and the world. Like their counterparts in the West, these productions took place in any space available – in small theatres, tents, basements, open spaces and on street corners.

'Butoh tends to be more underground than the more established forms of Japanese dance'

The first generation of *shōgekijō* directors and writers often included speedy comedy, wordplay and images from popular culture in their works to highlight the lunacy of modern life. More recent *shōgekijō* productions have dealt with realistic and contemporary themes, such as modern Japanese history, war, environmental degradation and social oppression. Changing cultural perceptions have propelled the movement in new directions, notably towards socially and politically critical dramas.

BUTOH

In many ways, butoh is Japan's most accessible (there are no words except for the occasional grunt) and exciting dance form. It is also its newest dance form, dating only to 1959, when Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–86) gave the first butoh performance. Butoh was born out of a rejection of the excessive formalisation that characterises traditional forms of Japanese dance. It also stems from the desire to return to the ancient roots of the Japanese soul, so is also a rejection of Western influences that flooded Japan in the post-war years.

Displays of butoh are best likened to performance art happenings rather than traditional dance performances. During a butoh performance, one or more dancers use their naked or semi-naked bodies to express the most elemental and intense human emotions. Nothing is sacred in butoh, and performances often deal with taboo topics such as sexuality and death. For this reason, critics often describe butoh as scandalous, and butoh dancers delight in pushing the boundaries of what can be considered tasteful in artistic performance.

Butoh tends to be more underground than the more established forms of Japanese dance and it is, consequently, harder to catch a performance. The best way to see what's on while you're in town is to check the local English-language media (the *Japan Times, Metropolis* or the *Tokyo Journal* in Tokyo, or the *Kansai Time Out* in Kansai), or to ask at a local tourist information office.

Traditional Theatre & Dance

NŌ

Nō is a hypnotic dance-drama that reflects the minimalist aesthetics of Zen. The movement is glorious, the chorus and music sonorous, the expression subtle. A sparsely furnished cedar stage directs full attention to the performers, who include a chorus, drummers and a flautist. There are two principal characters: the *shite,* who is sometimes a living person but more often a demon, or a ghost whose soul cannot rest; and the *waki,* who leads the main character towards the play's climactic moment. Each *nō* school has its own repertoire, and the art form continues to evolve and develop. One of the many new plays performed over the last 30 years is *Takahime,* based on William Butler Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well*.

KABUKI

The first performances of kabuki were staged early in the 17th century by an all-female troupe. The performances were highly erotic and attracted enthusiastic support from the merchant classes. In true bureaucratic fashion, Tokugawa officials feared for the people's morality and banned women from the stage in 1629. Since that time, kabuki has been performed exclusively by men, giving rise to the institution of *onnagata,* or *ōyama,* male actors who specialise in female roles.

Over the course of several centuries, kabuki has developed a repertoire that draws on popular themes, such as famous historical accounts and stories of love-suicide, while also borrowing copiously from *nō, kyōgen* (comic vignettes) and *bunraku* (classical puppet theatre). Most kabuki plays border on melodrama, although they vary in mood.

'Kabuki actors are born to the art form, and training begins in childhood'

Formalised beauty and stylisation are the central aesthetic principles of kabuki; the acting is a combination of dancing and speaking in conventionalised intonation patterns, and each actor prepares for a role by studying and emulating the style perfected by his predecessors. Kabuki actors are born to the art form, and training begins in childhood. Today they enjoy great social prestige and their activities on and off the stage attract as much interest as those of popular film and TV stars.

BUNRAKU

Japan's traditional puppet theatre developed at the same time as kabuki, when the *shamisen* (a three-stringed instrument resembling a lute or a banjo), imported from Okinawa, was combined with traditional puppetry techniques and *joruri* (narrative chanting). *Bunraku,* as it came to be known in the 19th century, addresses many of the same themes as kabuki, and in fact many of the most famous plays in the kabuki repertoire were originally written for puppet theatre. *Bunraku* involves large puppets – nearly two-thirds life-sized – manipulated by up to three black-robed puppeteers. The puppeteers do not speak; a seated narrator tells the story and provides the voices of the characters, expressing their feelings with smiles, weeping, and fits of surprise and fear.

RAKUGO

A traditional Japanese style of comic monologue, *rakugo* (literally, 'dropped word') dates back to the Edo period (1600–1868). The performer, usually in kimono, sits on a square cushion on a stage. Props are limited to a fan and hand towel. The monologue begins with a *makura* (prologue), which is followed by the story itself and, finally, the *ochi* (punch line or 'drop', which is another pronunciation of the Chinese character for *raku* in *rakugo*). Many of the monologues in the traditional *rakugo* repertoire date back to the Edo and Meiji periods, and while well known, reflect a social milieu unknown to modern listeners. Accordingly, many practitioners today also write new monologues addressing issues relevant to contemporary life.

MANZAI

Manzai is a comic dialogue, with its origins in the song-and-dance and comedy routines traditionally performed by itinerant entertainers during Shōgatsu (New Year celebrations; p794). It is a highly fluid art that continues to draw large audiences to hear snappy duos exchange clever witticisms on up-to-the-minute themes from everyday life.

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Architecture

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

Contemporary Japanese architecture is currently among the world's most exciting and influential. The traditional preference for simple, natural and harmonious spaces is still evident in the work of modern architects, but this style is now combined with hi-tech materials and the building techniques of the West.

Japan first opened its doors to Western architecture in 1868 during the Meiji Restoration, and its architects immediately responded to the new influence by combining traditional Japanese methods of wood construction with Western designs. Some 20 years later, a nationalistic push against the influence of the West saw a surge in the popularity of traditional Japanese building styles, and Western technique was temporarily shelved.

This resistance to Western architecture continued until after WWI, when foreign architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright came to build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Wright was careful to pay homage to local sensibilities when designing the Imperial's many elegant bridges and unique guest rooms (though he famously used modern, cubic forms to ornament the interiors of the hotel). The building was demolished in 1967 to make way for the current Imperial Hotel, which shows little of Wright's touch.

'Contemporary Japanese architecture is currently among the world's most exciting and influential'

By WWII many Japanese architects were using Western techniques and materials and blending old styles with the new, and by the mid-1960s had developed a unique style that began to attract attention on the world stage. Japan's most famous postwar architect Tange Kenzō was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier. Tange's buildings, including the Kagawa Prefectural Offices at Takamatsu (1958) and the National Gymnasium (completed 1964), fuse the sculptural influences and materials of Le Corbusier with traditional Japanese characteristics, such as post-and-beam construction and strong geometry. His Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices (1991; p137), in Nishi-Shinjuku (west Shinjuku), is the tallest building in Tokyo. It may look a little sinister and has been criticised as totalitarian, but it is a remarkable achievement and pulls in around 6000 visitors daily. Those with an interest in Tange's work should also look for the UN University, close to Omote-sando subway station in Tokyo.

In the 1960s, architects such as Shinohara Kazuo, Kurokawa Kisho, Maki Fumihiko and Kikutake Kiyonori began a movement known as Metabolism, which promoted flexible spaces and functions at the expense of fixed forms in building. Shinohara finally came to design in a style he called Modern Next, incorporating both modern and postmodern design ideas combined with Japanese influences. This style can be seen in his Centennial Hall at Tokyo Institute of Technology, an elegant and uplifting synthesis of clashing forms in a shiny metal cladding. Kurokawa's architecture blends Buddhist building traditions with modern influences, while Maki, the master of minimalism, pursued design in a modernist style while still emphasising the elements of nature – like the roof of his Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium (near Sendagaya Station), which takes on the form of a sleek metal insect. Another Maki design, the Spiral Building, built in Aoyama in 1985, is a favourite with Tokyo residents and its interior is also a treat.

Isozaki Arata, an architect who originally worked under Tange Kenzō, also promoted the Metabolist style before later becoming interested in geometry and postmodernism. His work includes the Cultural Centre (1990) in Mito, which contains a striking, geometrical snakelike tower clad in different metals.

A contemporary of Isozaki's, Kikutake, went on to design the Edo-Tokyo Museum (1992; see p142) in Sumida-ku, which charts the history of the Edo period, and is arguably his best-known building. It is a truly enormous structure, encompassing almost 50,000 sq metres of built space and reaching 62.2m, which was the height of Edo-jō at its peak. It has been likened in form to a crouching giant and it easily dwarfs its surroundings.

Another influential architect of this generation is Hara Hiroshi. Hara's style defies definition, but the one constant theme is nature. His Umeda Sky Building (1993; see p376), in Kita, Osaka, is a sleek, towering structure designed to resemble a garden in the sky. The Yamamoto International Building (1993) on the outskirts of Tokyo, is the headquarters of a textile factory. Both these buildings, though monumental in scale, dissolve down into many smaller units upon closer inspection – just like nature itself.

In the 1980s, a second generation of Japanese architects began to gain recognition within the international architecture scene, including Andō Tadao, Hasegawa Itsuko and Toyo Ito. This younger group has continued to explore both modernism and postmodernism, while incorporating a renewed interest in Japan's architectural heritage.

Andō's architecture in particular blends classical modern and native Japanese styles. His buildings often combine materials such as concrete, with the strong geometric patterns that have so regularly appeared in Japan's traditional architecture. Some critics contend that Andō's work is inhuman and monolithic, while others are taken by the dramatic spaces his buildings create. Why not judge for yourself? The most accessible of Andō's work is the new Omotesandō Hills shopping complex in Tokyo's Aoyama area (2006; p137).

Fans of modern Tokyo architecture may be surprised to discover that Tokyo's most famous modern building, the new Roppongi Hills complex (2003; p139) wasn't designed by a Japanese architect at all – it was designed by the New York–based firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates.

TRADITIONAL SECULAR ARCHITECTURE

Houses

With the exception of those on the northern island of Hokkaidō, traditional Japanese houses are built with the broiling heat of summer in mind. They are made of flimsy materials designed to take advantage of even the slightest breeze. Another reason behind the gossamer construction of Japanese houses is the relative frequency of earthquakes, which precludes the use of heavier building materials such as stone or brick.

Though this site (www.tokyoq.com) focuses exclusively on Tokyo, its art and architecture reviews are up to the minute and some of the best you'll find.

Principally simple and refined, the typical house is constructed of post-and-beam timber, with sliding panels of wood or rice paper (for warmer weather) making up the exterior walls. Movable screens, or *shōji,* divide the interior of the house. There may be a separate area for the tea ceremony – the harmonious atmosphere of this space is of the utmost importance and is usually achieved through the use of natural materials and the careful arrangement of furniture and utensils.

A particularly traditional type of Japanese house is the *machiya* (townhouse), built by merchants in cities such as Kyoto and Tokyo. Until very recently, the older neighbourhoods of Kyoto and some areas of Tokyo were lined with neat, narrow rows of these houses, but most have fallen victim to the current frenzy of construction. These days, the best place to see *machiya* is in Kyoto (p309).

Farmhouses

The most distinctive type of Japanese farmhouse is the thatched-roof *gasshō-zukuri,* so named for the shape of the rafters, which resemble a pair of praying hands. While these farmhouses look cosy and romantic, bear in mind that they were often home for up to 40 people and occasionally farm animals as well. Furthermore, the black floorboards, soot-covered ceilings and lack of windows guaranteed a cavelike atmosphere. The only weapon against this darkness was a fire built in a central fireplace in the floor, known as an *irori,*

which also provided warmth in the cooler months and hot coals for cooking. Multistorey farmhouses were also built to house silkworms for silk production (particularly prevalent during the Meiji era) in the airy upper gables.

Castles

Japan has an abundance of castles, most of them copies of originals destroyed by fire or war or time.

The first castles were simple mountain forts that relied more on natural terrain than structural innovations for defence, making them as frustratingly inaccessible to their defenders as they were to invading armies. The central feature of these edifices was the donjon, or a keep, which was surrounded by several smaller towers. The buildings, which sat atop stone ramparts, were mostly built of wood that was covered with plaster intended to protect against fire.

The wide-ranging wars of the 16th and 17th centuries left Japan with numerous castles, though many of these were later destroyed by the Edo and then the Meiji governments. Half a century later, the 1960s saw a boom in castle reconstructions, most built of concrete and steel, and like Hollywood movie sets they're authentic-looking when viewed from a distance but distinctly modern in appearance when viewed up close.

Some of the best castles to visit today include the dramatic Himeji-jō (p398), also known as the White Egret Castle, and Edo-jō (p110), around which modern Tokyo has grown. Little of Edo-jō actually remains (the grounds are now the site of the Imperial Palace), though its original gate, Ōte-mon, still marks the main entrance.

Literature

Interestingly, much of Japan's early literature was written by women. One reason for this was that men wrote in kanji (imported Chinese characters), while women wrote in hiragana (Japanese script). Thus, while the men were busy copying Chinese styles and texts, the women of the country were producing the first authentic Japanese literature. Among these early female authors is Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote Japan's first great novel, *Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji)*. This detailed, lengthy tome documents the intrigues and romances of early Japanese court life, and although it is perhaps Japan's most important work of literature, its extreme length probably limits its appeal to all but the most ardent Japanophile or literature buff.

In this exquisite haiku travelogue, *Narrow Road to the Deep North,* Matsuo Bashō captures the wonders and contradictions of Honshū's northern region.

Most of Japan's important modern literature has been penned by authors who live in and write of cities. Though these works are sometimes celebratory, many also lament the loss of a traditional rural lifestyle that has given way to the pressures of a modern, industrialised society. *Kokoro,* the modern classic by Sōseki Natsume, outlines these rural/urban tensions, as does *Snow Country,* by Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari. Each of these works touches upon the tensions between Japan's nostalgia for the past and its rush towards the future, between its rural heartland and its burgeoning cities.

Although Mishima Yukio is probably the most controversial of Japan's modern writers, and is considered unrepresentative of Japanese culture by many Japanese, his work still makes for very interesting reading. *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace* and *After the Banquet* are both compelling books. If you're looking for unsettling beauty, reach for the former; history buffs will want the latter tome, which was at the centre of a court case that became Japan's first privacy lawsuit.

Ōe Kenzaburo, Japan's second Nobel laureate, produced some of Japan's most disturbing, energetic and enigmatic literature. *A Personal Matter* is the work for which he is most widely known. In this troubling novel, which echoes Ōe's frustrations at having a son with autism, a 27-year-old

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MANGA – JAPANESE COMICS

Despite the recent popularity of graphic novels in the West, it's fair to say that comics occupy a fairly humble position in the Western literary world. In Japan, however, manga (Japanese comics) stand shoulder to shoulder with traditional text-based books. Indeed, hop on any morning train in Japan and you could be excused for thinking that the Japanese refuse to read anything that isn't accompanied by eye-popping graphics, long-legged doe-eyed heroines, and the Japanese equivalents of words like 'POW!' and 'BLAM!'

Manga, written with the Japanese characters for 'random' and 'picture', have their roots way back in Japanese history – some would say as early as the 12th century, when ink-brush painters drew humorous pictures of humans and animals (these pictures are known as *chōjū jinbutsu giga*). The direct antecedents of manga, however, are the *ukiyo-e* prints of the 18th century. Following WWII, Japanese artists worked with Western artists to produce the first true manga. These were sometimes called *ponchi-e,* a reference to the British magazine *Punch,* which often ran comics of a political or satirical nature.

The father of modern manga was Tezuka Osamu who, in the late 1940s, began working cinematic effects based on European movies into his cartoons – pioneering multipanel movements, perspectives that brought the reader into the action, close-ups, curious angles and a host of movie-like techniques. His adventurous stories quickly became movie-length comic strips – essentially films drawn on paper. What Tezuka started took off in a big way once weekly magazines realised they could boost sales by including manga in their pages. Tezuka's most famous works include *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy), *Black Jack* and *Rion Kōtei* (*Jungle Emperor Leo,* which Disney adapted to make the film *The Lion King*).

These days manga have proliferated and diversified to an almost unimaginable degree, and there is literally no topic that manga do not explore. There are manga for young boys and girls, manga for salarymen, manga for studying, historical manga and even high literary manga. And let's not forget the inevitable *sukebe* manga (pornographic manga), which contain some truly bizarre and often disturbing sexual images.

Unfortunately, almost all manga available in Japan are written in Japanese. These days, however, some of Japan's better English-language bookshops stock English translations of famous Japanese manga. Try the Kyoto branch of Junkudō bookshop (p312) or the giant Kinokuniya bookshop in Tokyo's Shinjuku area (p106).

If you want to get a quick taste of what's out there in the manga world, drop into any Japanese convenience store and check out the magazine rack. If you want to delve deeper, head for a *manga-kissa* (manga coffee shop), where buying one drink will give you access to a huge library of manga (and internet access to boot). Finally, real manga fans will want to check out Kyoto's International Manga Museum (p315).

cram-school teacher's wife gives birth to a brain-damaged child. His life claustrophobic, his marriage failing, he dreams of escaping to Africa while planning the murder of his son.

Of course not all Japanese fiction can be classified as literature in highbrow terms. Murakami Ryū's *Almost Transparent Blue* is strictly sex and drugs, and his ode to the narcissistic early 1990s, *Coin Locker Babies,* recounts the toxic lives of two boys who have been left to die in coin lockers by their mothers. Like Murakami Ryū, Banana Yoshimoto is known for her ability to convey the prevailing zeitgeist in easily, um, digestible form. In her novel *Kitchen,* she relentlessly chronicles Tokyo's fast-food menus and '80s pop culture, though underlying the superficial digressions are hints of a darker and deeper world of death, loss and loneliness.

Abe Kobo's beautiful novel *Woman in the Dunes* (1962) is a tale of shifting sands and wandering strangers. One of the strangest and most interesting works of Japanese fiction.

Japan's most internationally celebrated living novelist is Murakami Haruki, a former jazz club owner gone literary. His most noted work, *Norwegian Wood,* set in the late '60s against the backdrop of student protests, is both the portrait of the artist as a young man (as recounted by a reminiscent nar-

rator) and an ode to first loves. Another interesting read is his *A Wild Sheep Chase* in which a mutant sheep with a star on its back inspires a search that takes a 20-something ad man to the mountainous north. The hero eventually confronts the mythical beast while wrestling with his own shadows.

'The jazz scene is enormous, as are the followings for rock, house and electronica'

In April 2004, the Akutagawa Prize, one of the nation's most prestigious, was awarded to the Kanehana Hitomi and Wataya Risa. At the time they received the award, they were 19 and 20, respectively, making them the youngest writers ever to receive the award. Interestingly, prior to these two, the record for youngest writer ever to receive the award was jointly held by Ōe Kenzaburō, and Ishihara Shintarō, a sometimes writer who is now the mayor of Tokyo (both men received the award when they were 23 years old). Kanehana's novella *Snakes and Earrings* is now available in English translation. If you're interested in the work of Wataya, however, you've only got two choices: read it in the original Japanese or read it in Italian (her novel *Install* has been translated into Italian).

Music

Japan has a huge, shape-shifting music scene supported by a local market of audiophiles who are willing to try almost anything. International artists make a point of swinging through on global tours, and the local scene surfaces every night in one of thousands of live houses. The jazz scene is enormous, as are the followings for rock, house and electronica. More mainstream gleanings are the *aidoru,* idol singers whose popularity is generated largely through media appearances and is centred on a cute, girl-next-door image. Unless you're aged 15, this last option probably won't interest you.

These days, J-pop (Japan Pop) is dominated by female vocalists who borrow heavily from such American pop stars as Mariah Carey. The most famous of these is Utada Hikaru, whose great vocal range and English ability (she peppers her songs with English lyrics) make her a standout from the otherwise drab *aidoru* field.

Cinema

Japan has a vibrant film industry and proud, critically acclaimed cinematic traditions. Renewed international attention since the mid-1990s has reinforced interest in domestic films, which account for an estimated 40% of box-office receipts, nearly double the level in most European countries. Of course, this includes not only artistically important works, but also films in the science-fiction, horror and 'monster-stomps-Tokyo' genres for which Japan is also known.

TRADITIONAL MUSIC & ITS INSTRUMENTS

- *Gagaku* is a throwback to music of the Japanese imperial court. Today ensembles consist of 16 members and include stringed instruments, such as the *biwa* (lute) and *koto* (zither), and wind instruments such as the *hichiriki* (Japanese oboe).
- *Shamisen* is a three-stringed instrument resembling a lute or banjo with an extended neck. Popular during the Edo period, particularly in the entertainment districts, it's still used as formal accompaniment in kabuki and *bunraku* (classical puppet theatre) and remains one of the essential skills of a geisha.
- *Shakuhachi* is a wind instrument imported from China in the 7th century. The *shakuhachi* was popularised by wandering Komusō monks in the 16th and 17th centuries, who played it as a means to enlightenment as they walked alone through the woods.
- *Taiko* refers to any of a number of large Japanese drums. Drummers who perform this athletic music often play shirtless to show the rippled movements of their backs.

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At first, Japanese films were merely cinematic versions of traditional theatrical performances, but in the 1920s, Japanese directors starting producing films in two distinct genres: *jidaigeki* (period films) and new *gendaigeki* films, which dealt with modern themes. The more realistic storylines of the new films soon reflected back on the traditional films with the introduction of *shin jidaigeki* (new period films). During this era, samurai themes became an enduring staple of Japanese cinema.

The golden age of Japanese cinema arrived with the 1950s and began with the release in 1950 of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashōmon,* winner of the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice International Film Festival and an Oscar for best foreign film. The increasing realism and high artistic standards of the period are evident in such landmark films as *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari,* 1953), by the legendary Ōzu Yasujirō; Mizoguchi Kenji's classics *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Ugetsu*, 1953) and *Saikaku Ichidai Onna* (*The Life of Oharu*, 1952); and Kurosawa's 1954 masterpiece *Shichinin no Samurai (Seven Samurai)*. Annual attendance at the country's cinemas reached 1.1 billion in 1958, and Kyoto, with its large film studios, such as Shōchiku, Daiei and Tōei, and its more than 60 cinemas, enjoyed a heyday as Japan's own Hollywood.

Tokyo Story (*Tōkyō Monogatari,* 1953) is Ōzu Yasujirō's tale of an older couple who come to Tokyo to visit their children, only to find themselves treated with disrespect and indifference.

As it did elsewhere in the world, TV spurred a rapid drop in the number of cinema goers in Japan in the high-growth decades of the 1960s and '70s. But despite falling attendance, Japanese cinema remained a major artistic force. These decades gave the world such landmark works as Ichikawa Kon's *Chushingura* (*47 Samurai*, 1962) and Kurosawa's *Yōjimbo* (1961).

The decline in cinema going continued through the 1980s, reinforced by the popularisation of videos, with annual attendance at cinemas bottoming out at just over 100 million. Yet Japan's cinema was far from dead: Kurosawa garnered acclaim worldwide for *Kagemusha* (1980), which shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and *Ran* (1985). Imamura Shōhei's heartrending *Narayama Bushiko (The Ballad of Narayama)* won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1983. Itami Jūzō became perhaps the most widely known Japanese director outside Japan after Kurosawa, with such biting satires as *Osōshiki* (*The Funeral*, 1985), *Tampopo* (*Dandelion*, 1986) and *Marusa no Onna* (*A Taxing Woman*, 1988). Ōshima Nagisa, best known for controversial films such as *Ai no Corrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976), scored a critical and popular success with *Senjo no Merry Christmas (Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence)* in 1983.

In the 1990s popular interest in Japan seemed to catch up with international attention as attendance rates began to rise once again. In 1997 Japanese directors received top honours at two of the world's most prestigious film festivals: *Unagi (Eel)*, Imamura Shohei's black-humoured look at human nature's dark side, won the Palme d'Or in Cannes – making him the only Japanese director to win this award twice; and 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano took the Golden Lion in Venice for *Hana-bi,* a tale of life and death, and the violence and honour that links them. The undisputed king of popular Japanese cinema, Takeshi is a true Renaissance man of media: he stars in and directs his films, and is a newspaper columnist, author and poet. In 2002 he released *Dolls,* a meditation on the sadness of love told in three parts, and in 2003 he followed this up with the release of *Zatoichi,* a tale of a blind swordsman set in the Edo period.

The film *Distance* (2001) is a subtle meditation on togetherness and loneliness. Koreeda's sequel to *After Life* tracks four people into the woods as they seek the truth about lovers and friends who belonged to a mysterious cult.

Of course, since 2000, the major story in Japanese film has been *anime*, which has captured Western interest in a way unknown since the days when Godzilla was tearing up Tokyo (see the following Anime section).

ANIME

The term *anime*, a contraction of the word 'animation', is used worldwide to refer to Japan's highly sophisticated animated films. Unlike its counterparts in other countries, *anime* occupies a position very near the forefront of the

film industry in Japan. *Anime* films encompass all genres, from science fiction and action adventure to romance and historical drama.

Unlike its counterparts in many other countries, *anime* targets all age and social groups. *Anime* films include deep explorations of philosophical questions and social issues, humorous entertainment and bizarre fantasies. The films offer breathtakingly realistic visuals, exquisite attention to detail, complex and expressive characters, and elaborate plots. Leading directors and voice actors are accorded fame and respect, while characters become popular idols.

Some of the best-known *anime* include *Akira* (1988), Ōtomo Katsuhiro's psychedelic fantasy set in a future Tokyo inhabited by speed-popping biker gangs and psychic children. Ōtomo also worked on the interesting *Memories* (1995), a three-part *anime* that includes the mind-bending 'Magnetic Rose' sequence where deep-space garbage collectors happen upon a spaceship containing the memories of a mysterious woman. Finally, there is *Ghost in a Shell* (1995), an Ōishii Mamoru film with a sci-fi plot worthy of Philip K Dick – it involves cyborgs, hackers and the mother of all computer networks.

MIYAZAKI HAYAO – THE KING OF ANIME

Miyazaki Hayao, Japan's most famous and critically acclaimed *anime* director, has given us some of the most memorable images ever to appear on the silver screen. Consider, for example, the island that floated through the sky in his 1986 classic *Laputa*. Or the magical train that travelled across the surface of an aquamarine sea in *Spirited Away* (2001). Or the psychedelic dreamworlds that waited outside the doors of *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Watching scenes like this, one can only conclude that Miyazaki is gifted with the ability to travel to the realm of pure imagination and smuggle images back to this world intact and undiluted.

Miyazaki Hayao was born in 1941 in wartime Tokyo. His father was director of a firm that manufactured parts for the famous Japanese Zero fighter plane. This early exposure to flying machines made a deep impression on the young Miyazaki, and one of the hallmarks of his films are skies filled with the most whimsical flying machines imaginable: winged dirigibles, fantastic flying boats and the flying wings of *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds* (to see one is to want one).

In high school, Miyazaki saw one of Japan's first *anime*, *Hakujaden,* and resolved to become an animator himself. After graduating from university in 1963, he joined the powerful Tōei Animation company, where he worked on some of the studio's most famous releases. He left in 1971 to join A Pro studio, where he gained his first directorial experience, working on the now famous (in Japan, at least) *Lupin III* series as co director. In 1979, he directed *The Castle of Cagliostro,* another *Lupin* film and his first solo directorial credit.

In 1984, Miyazaki wrote and directed *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds*. This film is considered by many critics to be the first true Miyazaki film, and it provides a brilliant taste of many of the themes that run through his later work. The film enjoyed critical and commercial success and established Miyazaki as a major force in the world of Japanese *anime*. Capitalising on this success, Miyazaki founded his own animation studio, Studio Ghibli, through which he has produced all his later works.

In 1988, Studio Ghibli released what many consider to be Miyazaki's masterwork: *My Neighbor Totoro*. Much simpler and less dense than many Miyazaki films, *Totoro* is the tale of a young girl who moves with her family to the Japanese countryside while her mother recuperates from an illness. While living in the country, she befriends a magical creature who lives in the base of a giant camphor tree and is lucky enough to catch a few rides on a roving cat bus (a vehicle of pure imagination if ever there was one). For anyone wishing to make an acquaintance with the world of Miyazaki, this is the perfect introduction.

Serious Miyazaki fans will want to make a pilgrimage to his Ghibli Museum (p197), located in the town of Mitaka, a short day trip out of Tokyo.

Of course, one name towers above all others in the world of *anime*: Miyazaki Hayao, who almost single-handedly brought *anime* to the attention of the general public in the West (see the boxed text, opposite).

FASHION

It's impossible to visit Japanese cities and not notice their incredible sense of style. From the ultra chic ensembles sported by the beautiful people of Aoyama in Tokyo to the retro chic of the young things in Kyoto, people here think carefully about design and trends and beauty.

In the last 20 years, the fashion scene has been loosely organised around the work of three designers – Issey Miyaki, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto – all of whom show in London, Paris and New York, in addition to maintaining a presence in Tokyo. Together they are revered as some of the most artistic and innovative designers in the business, though it has often been said that their pieces are simply too radical to wear.

SPORT

Sumō

A fascinating, highly ritualised activity steeped in Shintō beliefs, sumō is the only traditional Japanese sport that pulls big crowds and dominates primetime TV. The 2000-year-old sport, which is based on an ancient combat form called *sumai* (to struggle), attracts huge crowds on weekends. Because tournaments take place over the span of 15 days, unless you're aiming for a big match on a weekend, you should be able to secure a ticket. Sumō tournaments *(bashō)* take place in January, May and September at the Ryōgoku Kokugikan Sumō Stadium (p178) in Tokyo; in March at the Furitsu Taiiku-kan Gymnasium in Osaka; in July at the Aichi Prefectural Gymnasium (p244) in Nagoya; and in November at the Fukuoka Kokusai Centre in Fukuoka (p670). Most popular are matches where one of the combatants is a *yokozuna* (grand champion). At the moment, sumō is dominated by foreign-born *rikishi* (sumō wrestlers), including Mongolian Asashōryū and Bulgarian Kotoōshū.

'Japan was already soccer crazy when the World Cup came to Saitama and Yokohama in 2002'

Soccer

Japan was already soccer crazy when the World Cup came to Saitama and Yokohama in 2002. Now, it's a chronic madness, and five minutes of conversation with any 10-year-old about why they like David Beckham should clear up any doubts you might have to the contrary. Japan's national league, also known as J-League (www.j-league.or.jp/eng/), is in season from March to November and can be seen at stadiums around the country.

Baseball

Baseball was introduced to Japan in 1873 and became a fixture in 1934 when the Yomiuri started its own team after Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig had swung through town. During WWII, the game continued unabated, though players were required to wear unnumbered khaki uniforms and to salute each other on the field.

Today, baseball is still widely publicised and very popular, though many fans have begun to worry about the future of the sport in Japan as some of the most talented national players, such as Matsui Hideki, Suzuki Ichirō and Matsuzaka Daisuke, migrate to major league teams in the USA. If you're visiting Japan between April and October and are interested in catching a game, two exciting places to do so are the historic Koshien Stadium (Map p375), which is located just outside Osaka and was built in 1924 as Japan's first stadium, and Tokyo Dome (p177), affectionately known as the 'Big Egg' and home to Japan's most popular team, the Yomiuri Giants.

Environment

Stretching from the tropics to the Sea of Okhotsk, the Japanese archipelago is a fantastically varied place. With everything from coral reef islands to snow-capped mountains, few countries in the world enjoy such a richness of different climes and ecosystems. Unfortunately, this wonderful landscape is also one of the world's most crowded, and almost every inch of the Japanese landscape and coastline bears the imprint of human activity (see the boxed text, opposite).

Although Japan's environment has been manipulated and degraded by human activity over the centuries, there are still pockets of real beauty left, some quite close to heavily populated urban areas. Indeed, there is decent hiking in the mountains within two hours of Tokyo, an hour of Osaka and a few minutes from downtown Kyoto.

Nature lovers are likely to be most troubled by the condition of Japan's rivers and coasts: almost all of Japan's rivers are dammed, forced into concrete channels and otherwise bent to the human will, and an astonishing amount of Japan's coast is lined with 'tetrapods' (giant concrete structures in the shape of jacks used to prevent erosion).

Given the incredibly active nature of the Japanese archipelago – the country has always been plagued by volcanoes, earthquakes, typhoons, landslides and other natural disasters – it's perhaps not surprising that the Japanese are eager to tame the wild nature of their islands. Unfortunately, this means that the visitor to Japan is often forced to try to imagine what the land looked like before the industrial revolution. Fortunately, environmental consciousness is on the rise in Japan, and more effort is being put into recycling, conservation and protection of natural areas. We can only hope that some of Japan's remaining areas of beauty will be preserved for future generations.

Japan incinerates an estimated 75% of its solid waste.

THE LAND

Japan is an island nation but it has not always been so. As recently as the end of the last ice age, around 10,000 years ago, the level of the sea rose enough to flood a land bridge that connected Japan to the Asian continent. Today, Japan consists of a chain of islands that rides the back of a 3000km-long arc of mountains along the eastern rim of the continent. It stretches from around 25°N at the southern islands of Okinawa to 45°N at the northern end of Hokkaidō. Cities at comparable latitudes are Miami and Cairo in the south and Montreal and Milan in the north. Japan's total land area is 377,435 sq km, and more than 80% of it is mountainous.

Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Modern Japan – Alex Kerr's book is essential for anyone who wants to understand why Japan's environment is in such a sorry state. In particular, Kerr explores the power of the construction industry over the government.

Japan consists of some 3900 small islands and four major ones: Honshū (slightly larger than Britain), Hokkaidō, Kyūshū and Shikoku. Okinawa, the largest and most significant of Japan's many smaller islands, is about halfway along an archipelago that stretches from the western tip of Honshū almost all the way to Taiwan. It is far enough from the rest of Japan to have developed a culture that differs from that of the 'mainland' in many respects.

There are several disputed islands in the Japanese archipelago. The most important of these are the Kuril Islands, north of Hokkaidō. Seized by Russia at the close of WWII, they have been a source of tension between Japan and Russia ever since. While the Japanese have made some progress towards their return in recent years, they remain, for the time being, part of Russia.

If Japanese culture has been influenced by isolation, it has equally been shaped by the country's mountainous topography. A number of the mountains are volcanic, and more than 40 of these are active, many of them on the southern island of Kyūshū. On the plus side, all this geothermal activity is responsible for Japan's fabulous abundance of *onsen* (hot springs).

In addition to its volcanoes, Japan has the dubious distinction of being one of the most seismically active regions of the world. It has been estimated that Japan is hit by more than 1000 earthquakes a year, most of which are, fortunately, too small to notice without sophisticated seismic equipment. This seismic activity is particularly concentrated in the Kantō region, in which Tokyo is situated. But earthquakes can strike just about any part of the archipelago, as the citizens of Kōbe discovered in the disastrous earthquake of January 1995, which killed more than 6000 people.

Friends of the Earth Japan (FoEJ; www.foejapan.org/en/), the Japan chapter of Friends of the Earth International, runs weekly hikes in the Tokyo area and has a good list of environmental events on its site.

WILDLIFE

The latitudinal spread of the islands of Japan makes for a wide diversity of flora and fauna. The Nansei and Ogasawara archipelagos in the far south are subtropical, and flora and fauna in this region are related to those found on the Malay peninsula. Mainland Japan (Honshū, Kyūshū and Shikoku), on the

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HILLS?

Visitors to Japan are often shocked at the state of the Japanese landscape. It seems that no matter where you look, the hills, rivers, coastline and fields bear the unmistakable imprint of human activity. Indeed, it is only in the highest, most remote mountains that one finds nature untouched by human hands. Why is this?

Undoubtedly, population density is the crucial factor here. With so many people packed into such a small space, it is only natural that the land should be worked to the hilt. However, it is not just simple population pressure that accounts for Japan's scarred and battered landscape: misguided land management policies and money-influenced politics also play a role.

Almost 70% of Japan's total land area is wooded. Of this area, almost 40% is planted, most of it with uniform rows of conifers, known as *sugi* (cryptomeria). Even national forests are not exempt from tree farming and these forests account for 33% of Japan's total lumber output. The end result of this widespread tree farming is a rather ugly patchwork effect over most of Japan's mountains – monotonous stands of *sugi* interspersed with occasional swathes of bare, clear-cut hillside.

To make matters worse, the planting of monoculture forests and the practice of clear cutting reduces the stability of mountain topsoil, resulting in frequent landslides. To combat this, land engineers erect unsightly concrete retaining walls over huge stretches of hillside, particularly along roadsides or near human habitations. These, combined with high-tension wire towers and the patchwork forests, result in a landscape that is quite unlike anything elsewhere in the world.

As if this weren't enough, it is estimated that only three of Japan's 30,000 rivers and streams are undammed. In addition to dams, concrete channels and embankments are built around even the most inaccessible mountain streams. Although some of this river work serves to prevent flooding downstream, much of it is clearly gratuitous and can only be understood as the unfortunate result of Japanese money-influenced politics.

In Japan, rural areas wield enormous power in national politics, as representation is determined more by area than by population. In order to ensure the support of their constituencies, rural politicians have little choice but to lobby hard for government spending on public works projects, as there is little other work available in these areas. Despite the negative effects this has on the landscape and economy, Japanese politicians seem unable to break this habit.

The upshot of all this is a landscape that looks, in many places, like a giant construction site. Perhaps the writer Alex Kerr put it best in his book *Lost Japan:* 'Japan has become a huge and terrifying machine, a Moloch tearing apart its own land with teeth of steel, and there is absolutely nothing anyone can do to stop it'. For the sake of the beauty that remains in Japan, let's hope he is wrong.

other hand, shows more similarities with Korea and China, while subarctic northern and central Hokkaidō have their own distinct features.

Animals

Japan's land bridge to the Asian continent allowed the migration of animals from Korea and China. The fauna of Japan has much in common with these regions, though there are species that are unique to Japan, such as the Japanese giant salamander and the Japanese macaque. In addition, Nanseishotō, which has been separated from the mainland for longer than the rest of Japan, has a few examples of fauna (for example the Iriomote cat) that are classified by experts as 'living fossils'.

Japan's largest carnivorous mammals are its bears. Two species are found in Japan – the *higuma* (brown bear) of Hokkaidō, and the *tsukinowaguma* (Asiatic brown bear) of Honshū, Shikoku and Kyūshū. The brown bear can grow to a height of 2m and weigh up to 400kg. The Asiatic brown bear is smaller at an average height of 1.4m and a weight of 200kg.

The Lost Wolves of Japan, by Brett Walker, is a sad tale of how the wolf in Japan went from being considered divine to being considered a vermin, and went extinct in the process. You'll learn a lot about Japanese attitudes towards nature as the tale unfolds.

Japanese macaques are medium-sized monkeys that are found in Honshū, Shikoku and Kyūshū. They average around 60cm in length and have short tails. The last survey of their numbers was taken in 1962, at which time there were some 30,000. They are found in groups of 20 to 150 members.

According to a 2006 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), there are 132 endangered species in Japan. Endangered species include the Iriomote cat, the Tsushima cat, Blakiston's fish owl and the Japanese river otter. For more on these, visit the Animal Info page on Japan at www.animalinfo.org/country/japan.htm.

Plants

The flora of Japan today is not what the Japanese saw hundreds of years ago. This is not just because a lot of Japan's natural landscape has succumbed to modern urban culture, but also because much of Japan's flora is imported. It is thought that 200 to 500 plant species have been introduced to Japan since the Meiji period, mainly from Europe but also from North America. Japanese gardens laid out in the Edo period and earlier are good places to see native Japanese flora, even though you won't see it if it had flourished naturally.

A large portion of Japan was once heavily forested. The cool to temperate zones of Central and Northern Honshū and southern Hokkaidō were home to broad-leaf deciduous forests, and still are, to a certain extent. Nevertheless, large-scale deforestation is a feature of contemporary Japan. Pollution and acid rain have also taken their toll. Fortunately, the sheer inaccessibility of much of Japan's mountainous topography has preserved some areas of great natural beauty – in particular the alpine regions of Central Honshū and the lovely national parks of Hokkaidō.

With offices in Tokyo and Kyoto, theJapan Environmental Exchange (JEE; www.jca.apc.org/jee/indexE.html) is one of the best, foreigner-friendly environmental groups in Japan. Visit its site to check on its upcoming environmental projects.

According to the IUCN's 1999 figures, there are more than 1000 endangered species of vascular plants in Japan. For more information, visit the Japan Integrated Biodiversity Information System's site at www.biodic.go.jp/english/J-IBIS.html.

NATIONAL PARKS

Japan has 28 *kokuritsu kōen* (national parks) and 55 *kokutei kōen* (quasi-national parks). Ranging from the far south (Iriomote National Park) to the northern tip of Hokkaidō (Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park), the parks represent an effort to preserve as much as possible of Japan's natural environment. Although national and quasi-national parks account for less than 1% of Japan's total land area, it is estimated that 14% of Japan's land is protected or managed for sustainable use.

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL IN JAPAN

As a casual visitor to Japan, you may feel that you have few chances to make a positive environmental impact. There are, however, several things you can do to minimize your impact on the Japanese and the world's environment.

Cut down on packaging One shopping trip in Japan will impress upon you just how fond the Japanese are of packaging – some would say overpackaging – purchases and gifts. The solution to this is simply to refuse excess packaging. One line that will come in handy is: *'Fukuro wa irimasen'* (I don't need a bag). Another is the simple *'Kekkō desu'* (That's alright), which can be used to turn down offers for additional packaging.

Carry your own chopsticks Another way to save trees and cut down on waste is to carry your own chopsticks around with you, which you can use instead of the ubiquitous *waribashi* (disposable chopsticks) that are provided in restaurants. One simple way to acquire your own personal set of choppers is to take away the first nice pair of *waribashi* that you are given in a restaurant.

Think globally, eat locally Food that comes from afar carries a lot of 'carbon mileage' with it. If you eat what's grown locally in Japan, you'll almost certainly save some money, you'll get a better understanding of the local diet, and you won't be consuming foods that came across the ocean in oil-burning ships.

A little less tuna, please When you go to a sushi place, try to stay away from species of fish that are endangered, like *maguro* (tuna), including *toro* (fatty tuna belly). We know, this one hurts!

Stay in ecofriendly places When you travel in Japan, try to stay in ecofriendly places, particularly in areas where the environment is easily harmed by human activities. Mountain huts in the Japan Alps, for example, range from very ecofriendly to downright careless. Similarly, when you're in the southern islands, stay in low-impact places and never, ever, walk on or touch coral.

Reduce fuel consumption There are plenty of ways to reduce your fossil fuel consumption as you travel around Japan. Rental bicycles are widely available in most tourist spots (see p815). Japan's public transport system is the best in the world, and you can traverse almost all the archipelago by train and bus (see p814). And keep in mind that Japan's *shinkansen* (bullet trains) are often faster than planes for getting from one big city to the next, especially when you factor in the time spent travelling to and from airports.

When discussing Japan's national and quasi-national parks, it must be noted that these parks are quite different from national parks in most other countries. Few of the parks have facilities that you might expect in national parks (ranger stations, camping grounds, educational facilities etc). More importantly, national park status doesn't necessarily mean that the area in question is free from residential, commercial or even urban development. Indeed, in many of these parks, you'd have no idea that you were in a national or quasi-national park unless you looked on a map.

The highest concentration of national parks and quasi-national parks is in Northern Honshū (Tōhoku) and Hokkaidō, where the population density is relatively low. But there are also national parks and quasi-national parks, such as Chichibu-Tama and Nikkō, within easy striking distance of Tokyo. The largest of Japan's national parks is the Seto-Nai-Kai National Park (Inland Sea National Park; Seto-Nai-Kai Kokuritsu-kōen), which extends some 400km east to west, reaches a maximum width of 70km and encompasses almost 1000 islands of various sizes.

For an update on the greening of Japan, check out www.greenpeace.or.jp/index_en_html, Greenpeace Japan's excellent URL.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Japan was the first Asian nation to industrialise. It has also been one of the most successful at cleaning up the resulting mess, though problems remain. In the early postwar years, when Japan was frantically rebuilding its economy, there was widespread public ignorance of the problems of pollution, and the government did little to enlighten the public.

Every year, 24 billion pairs of *waribashi* (disposable chopsticks) are used in Japan.

Industrial pollution was at its worst from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. But public awareness of the issue had already been awakened by an outbreak in 1953 of what came to be called Minamata disease, after the town of the

same name, in which up to 6000 people were affected by mercury poisoning. It was not until 1968 that the government officially acknowledged the cause of the 'disease'.

By the late 1960s public consciousness of environmental problems had reached levels that the government could not ignore. Laws were passed to curb air and water pollution. These have been reasonably successful, though critics are quick to point out that while toxic matter has been mostly removed from Japanese waters, organic pollution remains a problem. Similarly, controls on air pollution have had mixed results: photochemical smog emerged as a problem in Tokyo in the early 1970s; it remains a problem and now affects other urban centres around Japan.

'Laws were passed to curb air and water pollution'

In 1972 the government passed the Nature Conservation Law, which aimed to protect the natural environment and provide recreational space for the public. National parks, quasi-national parks and prefectural parks were established, and it appears that these measures have been successful in increasing wildlife numbers.

More recently, Japan has been facing a new set of problems, including dioxin given off by waste incineration plants and a series of accidents at nuclear reactors and nuclear fuel processing facilities. The only up side is that these accidents have forced the government to revise its safety guidelines for the nuclear power industry.

Of course, the news isn't all bleak. The governor of Kumamoto-ken announced in 2002 that the Arase Dam on Kuma-gawa would be removed, starting in 2010. In a country with a surplus of unnecessary dams, this is a major step in the right direction.

The Onsen

Japan is in hot water. Literally. The stuff percolates up out of the ground from one end of the country to the other. The Japanese word for a hot spring is *onsen,* and there are more than 3000 of them in the country, more than anywhere else on earth – it's like Iceland on steroids. So if your idea of relaxation involves spending a few hours soaking your bones in a tub of bubbling hot water, then you've come to the right place.

With so many *onsen,* it's hardly surprising that they come in every size, shape and colour. There are *onsen* in downtown Tokyo, a few minutes' walk from the nightlife district of Roppongi (you could even have a quick soak between drinks if you were so inclined). There are *onsen* high up in the Japan Alps that you can only get to by walking for a full day over high mountain peaks. There are *onsen* bubbling up among the rocks on the coast that only exist when the tide is just right. The fact is, somewhere on the archipelago, there is the perfect bath of your imagination just waiting for you to take the plunge.

Some Japanese will tell you that the only distinctively Japanese aspect of their culture – that is, something that didn't ultimately originate in mainland Asia – is the bath. There are accounts of *onsen* bathing in Japan's earliest historical records, and it's pretty certain that the Japanese have been bathing in *onsen* as long as there have been Japanese. Over the millennia, they have turned the simple act of bathing in an *onsen* into something like a religion. And, for the average modern Japanese, making a pilgrimage to a famous *onsen* is the closest thing he or she will come to a religious pilgrimage.

'When you think about it, the Japanese were way ahead of the curve here'

Today, the ultimate way to experience an *onsen* is to visit an *onsen* ryokan, that is, a traditional Japanese inn with its own private hot-spring bath on the premises. At an *onsen* ryokan you spend all day enjoying the bath, relaxing in your room and eating sumptuous Japanese food. When you think about it, the Japanese were way ahead of the curve here: for what is an *onsen* ryokan but the ultimate spa retreat? Yes, some *onsen* ryokan even offer massages, saunas and beauty treatments.

Perhaps the best thing about *onsen* is where you find them. Whenever possible, *onsen* are located in areas of stunning natural beauty, with tubs placed so that you can enjoy the views while soaking. More often than not, the tubs will be *rotemburo* (outdoor tubs). Imagine relaxing in a natural tub with a river flowing gently by and mountains all around you. Sound idyllic? Perhaps so, but this describes literally hundreds of *onsen* in Japan.

Like many of the best things in life, some of the finest *onsen* in Japan are free. Just show up with a towel and your birthday suit, splash a little water on yourself and plunge in. No communication hassles, no expenses and no worries. And even if you must pay to enter, it's usually just a minor snip – averaging about ¥700 (US$6) per person.

All too often, after taking a holiday somewhere, you return home feeling like you could use another holiday. If this has happened to you, then we strongly recommend a Japanese *onsen* vacation. As you slip into your futon after a day soaking in a beautiful natural bath, you could be forgiven for thinking, 'Now this is a vacation!'.

TOP ONSEN EXPERIENCES

With so many *onsen* to choose from in Japan, it's a thankless task to pick favourites. And no matter how many *onsen* you try, there's always the suspicion that somewhere out there is the holy grail of *onsen* just waiting

to be discovered. That said, we're going to go way out on a limb here and recommend a few of our favourites, broken up into categories to help you choose. Here goes:

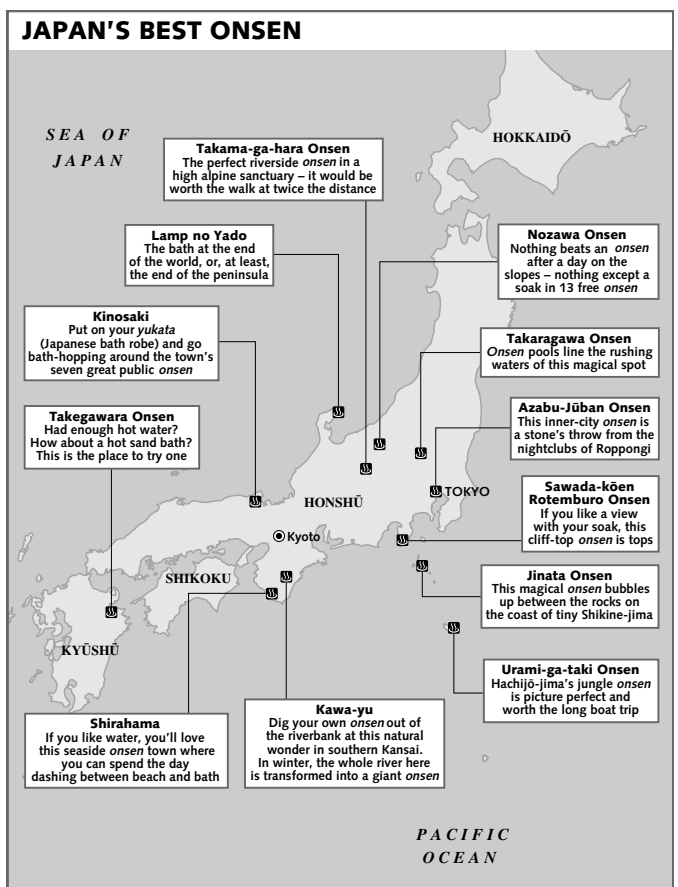
'It's located in a rocky cleft in the seashore of lovely little Shikine-jima'

Best Inner-City Onsen

Azabu-Jūban Onsen (Tokyo p142) Azabu-Jūban is the urban *onsen* par excellence. As you ease into the tubs here, you'll have to pinch yourself to believe that the seething masses of Tokyo are only just outside the door. The bland exterior of the place belies the reward inside: the steamy, mineral-rich water piped up from 500m below ground and the classic bathhouse atmosphere. Surprisingly, there's a small *rotemburo* for each gender, and weekends feature live traditional music in the tatami tearoom.

Best Island Onsen

Jinata Onsen (Shikine-jima, Izu-shotō p233) The setting of this *onsen* couldn't be more dramatic: it's located in a rocky cleft in the seashore of lovely little Shikine-jima, an island only a few hours' ferry ride from downtown Tokyo.



The pools are formed by the seaside rocks and it's one of those *onsen* that only works when the tide is right. You can spend a few lovely hours here watching the Pacific rollers crashing on the rocks. And, there are two other excellent *onsen* on the island when you get tired of this one.

Best Riverside Onsen

Takaragawa Onsen (Gunma, Central Honshū p196) Japanese *onsen* maniacs often pronounce Gunma-ken's *onsen* to be the best in the country. Difficult for us to argue. 'Takaragawa' means 'treasure river', and its several slate-floored pools sit along several hundred metres of riverbank. Most of the pools are mixed bathing, with one ladies-only bath. The alkaline waters are said to cure fatigue, nervous disorders and digestive troubles.

Best Onsen Town

Kinosaki (Kinosaki, Kansai p371) Kinosaki, on the Sea of Japan coast in northern Kansai, is the quintessential *onsen* town. With seven public baths and dozens of *onsen* ryokan, this is the place to sample the *onsen* ryokan experience. You can relax in your accommodation taking the waters as it pleases you, and when you get tired of your ryokan's bath, you can hit the streets in a *yukata* (light cotton robe) and *geta* (wooden sandals) and hit the public baths. It doesn't hurt that the town is extremely atmospheric at night, and the local winter speciality, giant crab, goes down pretty nice after a day of *onsen*-hopping.

'The alkaline waters are said to cure fatigue, nervous disorders and digestive troubles'

Best Rotemburo

Sawada-kōen Rotemburo Onsen (Dōgashima, Izu-hantō, Around Tokyo p217) If you like a view with your bath, you won't do any better than this simple *rotemburo* perched high on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We liked it early in the day, when you can often have it all to yourself. Of course, if you don't mind a crowd, it's a great place to watch the sunset.

Best Hidden Onsen

Lamp no Yado (Noto-hantō, Central Honshū p304) The Noto-hantō peninsula is about as far as one can go in Central Honshū, and the seaside is about as far as one can go on Noto-hantō. A country road takes you to a narrow 1km path, from where you have to climb down a switchback hill on foot. No wonder this property has been a refuge for centuries of Japanese seeking to cure what ails them. Even if one night here now costs what people would have once spent over weeks here, it's a worthy splurge for a dark-wood and tatami room on a cove, with its own *rotemburo* and Sea of Japan views through craggy rocks.

Best Semitropical Onsen

Urami-ga-taki Onsen (Hachijō-jima, Izu-shotō, Around Tokyo p234) Even in a country of lovely *onsen*, this is a real standout: the perfect little *rotemburo* located next to a waterfall in lush semitropical jungle. It's what they're shooting for at all those resorts on Bali, only this is the real thing. Sitting in the bath as the late-afternoon sunlight pierces the ferns here is a magical experience. Did we mention that's it's free?

Best Onsen/Beach Combination

Shirahama (Shirahama, Wakayama-ken, Kansai p429) There's something peculiarly pleasing about dashing back and forth between the ocean and a natural hot-spring bath – the contrast in temperature and texture is something we never tire of. At Shirahama, a beach town in southern Kansai, there is a free

onsen right on the beach. And, Sakino-yu Onsen here is just spectacular – it's one of our favourite *onsen* in all Japan.

Best Onsen/Sand Bath Combination

Takegawara Onsen (Beppu, Kyūshū p729) Sometimes simplest is best. This traditional Meiji Era *onsen* first opened in 1859, and its smooth wooden floors transport you back to a Japan of neighbourhood pleasures – unpretentious, relaxing and accessible to all. There are separate (and very hot) baths for men and women. Takegawara also offers heated sand baths in which, wearing a cotton *yukata,* you are buried up to your neck with hot sand for 10 to 15 minutes, followed by a rinse and a soak in an adjacent *onsen* bath.

'It's located in a high natural sanctuary with mountains on all sides'

Best Mountain Onsen

Takama-ga-hara Onsen (Northern Japan Alps, Central Honshū below) High, high up in the Japan Alps, if you want to soak in this wonderful free riverside *rotemburo*, you're going to have to hike for at least a full day. It's located in a high natural sanctuary with mountains on all sides. To tell the truth, even if it took three days of walking to get here, it would be worth it. Some Japanese say that this is the highest *rotemburo* in Japan, and it's definitely one of the best. You can spend the night nearby in a creaky old mountain hut.

Best Do-It-Yourself Onsen

Kawa-yu (Kawa-yu, Wakayama-ken, Kansai p433) If you like doing things your own way, you'll love this natural oddity of an *onsen* in southern Kansai. Here, the *onsen* waters bubble up through the rocks of a riverbed. You choose a likely spot and dig out a natural hot pot along the riverside and wait for it to fill with hot water and – *voila* – your own private *rotemburo*. In the winter, it gets even better: they use bulldozers to turn the entire river into a giant 1000-person *onsen*. It doesn't hurt that the river water is a lovely translucent emerald colour.

SO CLOSE TO HEAVEN *Chris Rowthorn*

Takamama-ga-hara is a natural sanctuary in the heart of the northern Japan Alps. The name means 'high heaven plain' and it's very apt. Most people take at least two days to walk here from the nearest trailhead. But I had only three days to spend in the mountains, and I wanted to check out the sanctuary and then make it all the way down to Yari-ga-take, a fine peak two days' walk south of there, so I rushed things a bit.

I climbed from the Oritate trailhead, over Taro-san and walked down the lovely Yakushi-zawa valley. I made it to Yakushi-koya, a hut located at the bottom of the valley. It was already about 2pm. I asked the hut owner if he thought I could make it to Takama-ga-hara and he looked at me like I was mad. Nonetheless, I set out.

Turns out, the hut owner was right. The light was fading and I was completely exhausted as I finally arrived at Takama-ga-hara-koya hut. I could barely walk, but I knew the *onsen* was only another 20 minutes' walk into the forest.

I dropped my bag and made my way along the trail in the fading light. Finally, I heard the sound of a stream rushing down a mountainside. I crossed the river and there it was – Takama-ga-hara Onsen – the simplest of tubs sitting right beside the river. It was deserted and that suited me just fine.

I stripped down, splashed quick buckets over myself and plunged in. It was pure bliss. It took a few minutes to gather my wits. But, when I did, I realised that I was sitting in one of the most spectacular natural baths anywhere. I was smack dab in the middle of the Japan Alps, with mountains forming a perfect circle around me and a fine alpine river cascading by me. And, I had it all to myself. There was no place in the world I would rather have been.

DO 'YU' SPEAK ONSEN?

yu	ゆ or 湯	hot water
o-yu	お湯	hot water (polite)
dansei-no-yu	男性の湯	male bath
otoko-yu	男湯	male bath
josei-no-yu	女性の湯	female bath
onna-yu	女湯	female bath
konyoku	混浴	mixed bath
kazoku-no-yu	家族の湯	family bath
rotemburo	露天風呂	outdoor bath
kake-yu	かけ湯	rinsing one's body
yubune	湯船	bath tub
soto-yu	外湯	public bath
uchi-yu	内湯	private bath

Best Onsen Ryokan

Nishimuraya Honkan (Kinosaki, Kansai p372) If you want to sample the ultimate in top-end *onsen* ryokan, this is the place. With several fine indoor and outdoor baths and elegant rooms, your stay here will be a highlight of your trip to Japan, and will shed some light on why the Japanese consider an *onsen* vacation to the be ultimate in relaxation.

Best Onsen Ski Town

Nozawa Onsen (Nozawa Onsen, Nagano, Central Honshū p279) What could be better than a day spent on the slopes, followed by a soak in a Jacuzzi? Well, how about a day on the slopes followed by a soak in a real natural hot spring? This is skiing the Japanese way, and we're sure of one thing: try it and you'll like it. This fine little ski town boasts some first-rate skiing, reliable snow, ripping alpine views and no fewer than 13 free *onsen*. Best of all, the *onsen* here are scalding hot, which is a nice contrast to the snow outside and it feels wonderful on tired skier's legs.

'You'll be relieved to hear that there really is nothing tricky about taking an *onsen* bath'

ONSEN ETIQUETTE

First: relax. That's what *onsen* are all about. You'll be relieved to hear that there really is nothing tricky about taking an *onsen* bath. If you remember just one basic point, you won't go too far wrong. This is the point: the water in the pools and tubs is for soaking in, not washing in, and it should only be entered after you've washed or rinsed your body.

This is the drill: pay your entry fee, if there is one. Rent a hand towel if you don't have one. Take off your shoes and put them in the lockers or shelves provided. Find the correct changing room/bath for your gender (man: 男; woman: 女). Grab a basket, strip down and put your clothes in the basket. Put the basket in a locker and bring the hand towel in with you.

Once in the bathing area, find a place around the wall (if there is one) to put down your toiletries (if you have them) and wash your body, or, at least, rinse your body. You'll note that some scofflaws dispense with this step and just stride over to the tubs and grab a bucket (there are usually some around) and splash a few scoops over their 'wedding tackle'. Some miscreants can't even be bothered with this step and plunge right into the tubs unwashed and unrinsed. Frankly, we like to think that these people will be reincarnated into a world where there are only cold-water showers for their bathing needs.

Skiing in Japan

With more than 600 ski resorts and some of the most reliable snow anywhere, Japan may be the skiing world's best-kept secret – the perfect place to combine some world-class skiing with an exotic vacation. Japan offers stunning mountain vistas, kilometres of perfectly groomed runs at all levels of difficulty, along with ripping mogul runs, snowboard parks, friendly locals and good food. There's also great off-piste skiing, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. And let's not forget Japan's incredible variety of hot spring baths *(onsen)* for that all-important après ski soak.

According to ski-industry figures, the number of active skiers in Japan is less than half what it was during the peak of the Bubble Economy in the 1980s.

With so many ski resorts, you're spoiled for choice in Japan. Powder hounds flock to Hokkaidō's Niseko, which offers the world's most reliable lift-served powder snow. Others head to the sprawling Shiga Kōgen resort in Central Honshū, the largest ski resort in the world. Those who want a little European atmosphere gravitate to nearby Nozawa Onsen, which, like its name suggests, offers great hot springs in addition to excellent skiing. There are also plenty of small local areas that are perfect for families and learners.

Of course, you probably think that skiing Japan will cost about as much as a week of heli-skiing and caviar in the Canadian Rockies. If so, you may be surprised to learn that it's actually cheaper to ski in Japan than in North America or Europe – for prices, see below.

Or perhaps you're under the impression that skiing in Japan will involve horrendous communication difficulties – like a sadistic Japanese game show that combines ordering sushi in Japanese and skiing black-diamond runs blindfolded. If so, relax – ski areas in Japan are remarkably foreigner friendly and many even have Aussie, Kiwi and Canadian employees. For useful skiing words and phrases, see p84.

Easily the best source of online information on skiing in Japan can be found at www.snowjapan.com. This site has extensive resort info, snow reports, transport and accommodation info, and booking services, as well as information on English ski lessons. And it's all in English.

Finally, you may think that getting from the airport to the slopes will be a nightmare. In fact it's easier to get from major airports to ski resorts in Japan than anywhere else in the world – the lift doesn't leave from right outside the arrivals hall, but it sometimes feels that way (for more details, see Getting to the Slopes, below).

COSTS

If you're like most skiers, you probably imagine that skiing in Japan is prohibitively expensive. Well, let's check the numbers.

- **Lift tickets** A full-day lift ticket at most areas in Japan costs around ¥4000 (US$35). This is roughly half the cost of big ski areas in the USA, and about two-thirds the cost of most big areas in Europe.
- **Accommodation** You can find plenty of accommodation in the ¥8000 (US65) per person range at most major areas in Japan, and this will often include one or two meals. This is less than half of what you'd expect to pay for similar accommodation in the USA or Europe.
- **Food** On-slope meals average around ¥1000 (around US$9).
- **Transport** Airport-to-resort transport in Japan costs no more than in other countries, and is usually faster and more efficient (and unlike in North America, you most certainly don't need to rent a car). See Getting to the Slopes (below) for more details.

GETTING TO THE SLOPES

Japan's brilliant public transport system makes getting to the slopes a breeze. Take Japan's premier resort, Niseko in Hokkaidō. Say you're coming from abroad and want to go straight to the resort, you'll find the journey painless and efficient. First, you fly into Tokyo's Narita International Airport, then change to a domestic flight to Sapporo's Shin-Chitose International Airport. Buses to Niseko depart from right outside the arrivals hall of Chitose and take a mere 2½ hours and cost only ¥2300 (about US$20) to reach the resort. If you arrive in Sapporo in the morning, you can be skiing that afternoon.

The journey from Tokyo to Nagano, the heart of Japan's Central Honshū ski country, takes one hour and 45 minutes and costs ¥7970 (about US$65). And the best part is this: you get to ride on one of the country's ultramodern *shinkansen* bullet trains. You could literally start the day with a look at Tokyo's incredible Tsukiji Fish Market and be skiing in Nagano that afternoon.

The first winter Olympics to be held outside Europe or North America were at Sapporo in 1972.

The 1998 winter Olympics were held at Nagano, in Central Honshū. The downhill events were held at Happō-One resort, the slalom and giant slalom events were held at Shiga-kōgen resort, and the biathlon was held at Nozawa Onsen resort.

JAPAN'S BEST SKI RESORTS

Japan's best ski resorts are found in the Japan Alps region of Central Honshū (mostly in Nagano and Niigata prefectures) and on the northern island of Hokkaidō. The former lays claim to the highest mountains, while the latter has the deepest and most regular snow. Both regions offer first-class skiing.

If you're interested in doing some sightseeing in cities like Kyoto, Nara and Tokyo in addition to your skiing, you might consider hitting the resorts in the Japan Alps. If skiing is your main goal, then Hokkaidō might be the way to go (although, to be fair, the difference is really only one quick internal flight).

What follows is our very biased list of the five best ski areas in Japan. This is just to whet your appetite – there are more than 600 that we don't mention here.

The world's longest ski lift, the 'Dragondola', a 5.4km gondola, can be found at the Naeba ski resort in Niigata-ken.

- **Niseko** As far as most Australian skiers are concerned, 'Niseko' is how you say powder in Japanese. This is understandable, since Niseko receives an

average of 13m of snow annually. Located on Japan's northern island of Hokkaidō, Niseko is actually three interconnected ski areas: Niseko Annupuri, Niseko Higashiyama and Niseko Grand Hirafu. One lift ticket gives access to all 60 runs and 30 ski lifts. Snowboarding is allowed on all slopes. Needless to say, with so many Aussie skiers making a yearly pilgrimage to Niseko, you'll find that communication is a breeze, and if you like Vegemite on your morning toast, you'll find that, too. If you're heading to Niseko in early February, don't miss Sapporo's famous Yuki Matsuri (see p577). For more information on Niseko, see p589.

Nearly 90% of foreign skiers at Niseko come from Australia.

- **Happō-One** Nagano-ken's Happō-One (hah poh oh nay) is the quintessential Japan Alps ski resort. With the sprawling Hakuba mountain range as a backdrop, it offers eye-popping views along with excellent and varied skiing. The layout is pretty straightforward here, with plenty of good wide burners heading straight down the fall line from the top of the area. There are both groomed runs and bump runs and you can descend most of the mountain on either. The village at the base of the mountain has several good *onsen* and lots of foreigner-friendly accommodation. For more information on Happō, see p280.
- **Shiga Kōgen** Also in Nagano-ken, Shiga Kōgen is the world's largest ski area, with an incredible 21 different interlinked areas, all interconnected by trails and lifts and accessible with one lift ticket. Needless to say, with so many different areas, there is something for (almost) everyone here, including one skier-only area. This is a very family-friendly area, and there's lots of accommodation at the base of the slopes, so you can ski right from your lodgings. Like most other major resorts in Japan, there are also some good *onsen* around for soaking out the kinks after a day on the slopes. While you're here, you can make an easy sidetrip to see Japan's famous 'snow monkeys' (see p278). For more information on Shiga Kōgen, see p279.
- **Nozawa Onsen** This quaint little ski resort/village tucked high up in the Japan Alps of Nagano-ken is the closest thing you'll find to Switzerland in Japan. The main difference is this village has 13 free *onsen* scattered around for your evening entertainment. Of course, skiing is the main reason to visit, and it's excellent here. The area is more compact and easy to get around than Shiga Kōgen, and it has a good variety of runs, including some challenging bump runs. Snowboarders will enjoy the terrain park and half-pipe, and there's a cross-country skiing course up on the mountain as well. For more information on Nozawa Onsen, see p279.
- **Rusutsu** Hokkaidō's Rusutsu is luring a lot of skiers away from super-popular Niseko. Rusutsu gets regular dumps of deep powder snow like Niseko, and allows skiers and boarders to enjoy it both on piste and off piste (there are some great tree runs and the management doesn't try to prevent you from enjoying it). Rusutsu tends to be less crowded than Niseko and as long as the lifts aren't shut down due to high winds, you won't often wait in line here. All in all, if you're going to ski in Hokkaidō, we recommend that you at least give one day to Rusutsu – you may find that you like it as much or even more than Niseko. For more information on Rusutsu, see p591.

'The main difference is this village has 13 free *onsen* scattered around for your evening entertainment'

SKI-DŌ: THE JAPANESE WAY OF SKIING

Snow is snow, skis are skis, right? How different can skiing in Japan be? At first glance, you might conclude that ski areas in Japan are exactly like those at home. But, as Vincent Vega observed in the movie *Pulp Fiction,* 'it's the little differences'. Throughout the day, these little differences will keep reminding you that you're not in New Zealand, Colorado or the Swiss Alps.

- Pop music – often really annoying pop music – is played along ski lifts and in restaurants. Bring an iPod if you prefer real music to the latest girl/boy band.
- The signposting is inconsistent and irregular, something you may not expect in Japan. It's a good idea to study the map carefully and plan a central meeting point/time at the beginning of the day.
- Not all resorts use the green/blue/black coding system for difficulty. Some have red, purple, orange, dotted lines or black-numbered runs on the map.
- The majority of Japanese skiers start skiing at 9am, have lunch at exactly noon and get off the hill by 3pm. If you work on a slightly different schedule, you will avoid a lot of the crowds.
- You will find young Aussies, Kiwis and Canadians working the lifts and restaurants at many Japanese resorts (a popular way for people from these countries to earn money, do a little skiing and see the country). These folks are always a good source of information.
- Snowboarders are everywhere in Japan, but unlike areas back home, few of them seem to do much snowboarding. In Japan, the usual position for a snowboarder is sitting on his/her bum surrounded by friends doing the same. Consider them natural hazards and give them a wide berth.
- Lift-line management is surprisingly poor in Japan. Skiers are often left to jostle and fend for themselves, and even when it's crowded, singles are allowed to ride triple and quad lifts alone.

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SKIING LESSONS IN ENGLISH

The following outfits offer skiing lessons in English for both children and adults (usually with foreign instructors). Half-day private ski lessons in Japan average ¥14,000; full-day private ski lessons average ¥21,000.

- **Canyons** (http://canyons.jp/index_E.htl) With a base at Hakuba (close to Happō-One), Canyons offers skiing, backcountry skiing and snowboarding lessons, as well as snowshoeing tours.
- **Evergreen** (www.evergreen-hakuba.com) Also in Hakuba, Evergreen offers skiing, snowboarding, powder skiing and telemark lessons.
- **SAS Snow Sports** (www.sas-net.com/school.html) Based in Niseko, SAS offers skiing and snowboarding lessons.

WHAT TO BRING

With the exception of really large ski boots (see the following list), almost everything you need is available in Japan. However, due to prices or difficulty in finding some items, it's best to bring the following things from abroad:

- **A small 'around the arm' type case to hold your ski lift chip** You will be scanning this at every lift – having it on your arm is easily the best place to keep it.
- **Goggles** They're very expensive in Japan, so it's best to bring your own.
- **A small waterproof bag** For maps and information.
- **Large size ski boots** Rental places at most resorts have boots up to 30cm (which is equivalent to a men's size 12 in the USA, UK or Australia). If you have larger feet, you'll have trouble finding your size.
- **Mobile phone(s)** Many of Japan's ski areas are covered by one or more mobile-phone networks, and these are a great way to keep in touch with others in your party. You can easily rent mobile phones in Japan (see p802).

SNOWSHOEING TOURS IN ENGLISH

Snowshoeing is an excellent way to get into the woods and enjoy the winter in Japan. The following operators offer snowshoe tours and instruction.

- **Suisen-Kyō Tours** (www.suisenkyo.com) This friendly outfit offers snowshoe tours of the Kitayama mountains, a short bus trip north of Kyoto. If you can't make it all the way to the Japan Alps, this is a great way to experience the beauty of Japan's mountains.
- **Canyons** (http://canyons.jp/index_E.htl) Located at Hakuba, Canyons offers a variety of backcountry tours, including snowshoe tours and backcountry skiing.

Before you start your skiing day, it's also useful to grab a bunch of ¥1000 notes and ¥500 and ¥100 coins, as many of the rest houses on the mountain have vending machines.

CAN YOU SAY SKI IN JAPANESE?

That's right: it's 'ski' (alright, it's pronounced more like 'sukee'). But the point is, communication won't be much of a problem on your Japan ski trip. First, tackling the language barrier has never been easier: most resorts employ a number of English-speaking foreigners on working holiday visas. They operate the lifts, work in the cafeterias, and are often employed in the hotels or ryokan that are most popular with foreign guests. All major signs and maps are translated into English, and, provided you have some experience at large resorts back home, you'll find the layout and organisation of Japanese resorts to be pretty intuitive. The information counter at the base of the mountain always has someone on staff to answer questions, and, of course, the stereotype regarding politeness holds true.

Snowboarding first debuted as an Olympic sport at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics.

Useful Skiing Terms

Some useful words and phrases you may want to try out on the locals:

boots	*bootsu*	ブーツ
cold	*samui*	寒い
difficult	*muzukashii*	難しい
easy	*kantan/yasashii*	簡単・易しい
gondola	*gondora*	ゴンドラ
lesson	*ressun*	レッスン
lift	*rifuto*	リフト
map	*mappu*	マップ
poles	*sutokku*	ストック
run, course, trail	*kōsu*	コース
size	*saizu*	サイズ
ski (noun)	*sukee*	スキー
ski (verb)	*sukee wo suru*	スキーをする!
ski area/field/resort	*sukee jō*	スキー場
skis	*sukeezu*	スキーズ
slippery	*suberiyasui*	滑りやすい
snow	*yuki*	雪
(lift) ticket	*chiketto*	チケット

I come from…	*…kara kimashita*	…から来ました!
It's cold, isn't it?	*samui desu ne*	寒いですね!
Nice weather, isn't it?	*ii otenki desu ne*	いいお天気ですね!
You're a good!	*(anata wa) jōzu desu ne*	!あなたは!上手ですね!
I'm not so good.	*(watashi wa) heta desu*	!私は!下手です!

Food & Drink

Those familiar with *nihon ryōri* (Japanese cuisine) know that eating is half the fun of travelling in Japan. Even if you've already tried some of Japan's better-known specialities in Japanese restaurants in your own country, you're likely to be surprised by how delicious the original is when served on its home turf. More importantly, the adventurous eater will be delighted to find that Japanese food is far more than just sushi, tempura or sukiyaki. Indeed, it is possible to spend a month in Japan and sample a different speciality restaurant every night.

Of course, you may baulk at charging into a restaurant where both the language and the menu are likely to be incomprehensible. The best way to get over this fear is to familiarise yourself with the main types of Japanese restaurants so that you have some idea of what's on offer and how to order it. Those timid of heart should take solace in the fact that the Japanese will go to extraordinary lengths to understand what you want and will help you to order. To help you out further, eating reviews in this book recommend specific dishes where no English menu is available; restaurants that do offer English menus are identified with an E.

With the exception of *shokudō* (all-round restaurants) and *izakaya* (pub-style restaurants), most Japanese restaurants concentrate on a speciality cuisine. This naturally makes for delicious eating, but does limit your choice. In the Restaurants & Sample Menus section of this chapter we will introduce the main types of Japanese restaurants, along with a menu sample of some of the most common dishes served (see p88).

For information on how to eat in a Japanese restaurant, see the boxed text, p89. For information on eating etiquette in Japan, see the tips in the boxed text, p87.

Lonely Planet's *World Food Japan* (John Ashburne and Yoshi Abe) provides a detailed introduction to Japanese cuisine. It's an excellent supplement to the information in this chapter.

STAPLES

Despite the mind-boggling variety of dishes throughout the island chain, the staples that make up Japanese cuisine remain the same nationwide: *shōyu* (soy sauce), miso, tofu, *mame* (beans) and above all, the divine crop, *kome* (rice).

Rice (O-kome)

The Japanese don't just consume *kome* (rice) all day, every day. In its uncooked form it is called *o-kome,* the *o-* denoting respect, *kome* meaning rice. Cooked Japanese style, it is called *go-han* (the *go-* prefix is the highest indicator of respect), denoting rice or meal. Truck drivers, however, may use the more informal *meshi,* something akin to 'grub'. When it is included in Western-style meals, it is termed *raisu*. On average, Japanese consume an astonishing 70kg of *kome* per person per year. Culturally, most Japanese feel a meal is simply incomplete without the inclusion of *kome*.

Hakumai is the plain white rice that is used in every dish from the humble *eki-ben* (station lunchbox) to the finest *kaiseki* (Japanese formal cuisine). A meal will consist of, for example, a bowl of *hakumai* topped with *tsukudani* (fish and vegetables simmered in *shōyu* – soy sauce – and *mirin* – sweet rice wine), served with a bowl of miso soup, accompanied by a side dish of *tsukemono* (pickles). *Genmai,* unpolished, unrefined brown rice, is rarely spotted outside organic restaurants (with the notable exception of *shōjin-ryōri* – Buddhist vegetarian cuisine) as it lacks that fragrance and glow so desired of simple *hakumai*. Rice is used in *zōsui* (rice soup), *o-chazuke* (where green tea is poured onto white rice), *onigiri* (the ubiquitous rice balls) and vinegared in sushi.

Mame (Beans)

Given the country's Buddhist history, it's no surprise that Japanese cuisine has long been dependent on beans as a source of protein. Top of the Japanese bean pile is the indispensable soy bean, the *daizu* (literally, 'big bean'), which provides the raw material for miso, *shōyu,* tofu, *yuba* (soy milk skin) and the infamous *nattō* (fermented soy beans). It also finds its way into such dishes as *hijiki-mame,* where black spiky seaweed is sauteed in oil, with soy sauce and sugar, and *daizu no nimono,* soy beans cooked with *konbu* (kelp) and dried shiitake mushrooms.

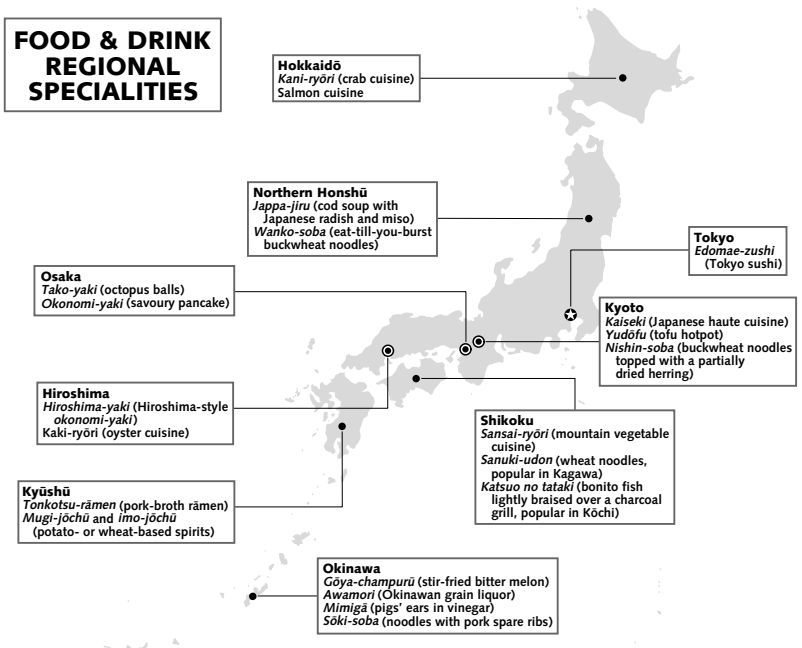
Next is *azuki,* the adzuki bean (written with the characters for 'little bean'), used extensively in preparation of *wagashi* (Japanese sweets), often for the tea ceremony, and in the preparation of *seki-han* (red-bean rice), which is used at times of celebration and to commemorate a teenage girl's first menstruation.

The superb Tokyo Food Page (www.bento.com) offers explanations of Japanese dishes, great places to eat in Tokyo and much, much more.

Miso

A precursor of miso arrived on the Japanese mainland from China sometime around AD 600, not long after Buddhism. Its inhabitants have been gargling it down as *misoshiru* (miso soup) ever since, at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Made by mixing steamed soy beans with *kōji* (a fermenting agent) and salt, miso is integral to any Japanese meal, where it is likely to be present as *misoshiru* or as a flavouring. It is also used in *dengaku* (fish and vegetables roasted on skewers), where it is spread on vegetables such as eggplant and *konnyaku* (devil's tongue).

Misoshiru is a brownish soup made from a mixture of *dashi* (stock), miso and shellfish, such as *shijimi* (freshwater clams) or *asari* (short-necked clams);



EATING ETIQUETTE

When it comes to eating in Japan, there are quite a number of implicit rules, but they're fairly easy to remember. If you're worried about putting your foot in it, relax – the Japanese don't expect you to know what to do, and they are unlikely to be offended as long as you follow the standard rules of politeness from your own country. Here are a few major points to keep in mind:

- **Chopsticks in rice** Do not stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. This is how rice is offered to the dead in Buddhist rituals. Similarly, do not pass food from your chopsticks to someone else's. This is another funereal ritual.
- **Polite expressions** When eating with other people, especially when you're a guest, it is polite to say '*Itadakimasu*' (literally, 'I will receive') before digging in. This is as close as the Japanese come to saying grace. Similarly, at the end of the meal, you should thank your host by saying '*Gochisō-sama deshita*', which means, 'It was a real feast'.
- **Kampai** It is bad form to fill your own drink; fill the glass of the person next to you and wait for them to reciprocate. Raise your glass a little off the table while it is being filled. Once everyone's glass has been filled, the usual starting signal is a chorus of '*kampai*', which means 'cheers!'.
- **Slurp** When you eat noodles in Japan, it's perfectly OK, even expected, to slurp them. In fact, one of the best ways to find a *rāmen* (noodle) restaurant in Japan is to listen for the loud slurping sound that comes out of them!

assorted vegetables, such as *daikon* (giant white radish), carrot or burdock (especially good for the digestion); pork; or simply tofu. You may see this up to three times a day in Japan, as it accompanies almost every typical Japanese meal. The simple rule is this: if there's a bowl of rice, then a bowl of *misoshiru* is never far behind.

Tofu

Usually made from soybeans, tofu is one of Japan's most sublime creations. Tofu is sold as the soft 'silk' *kinugoshi* and the firm *momen* (or *momengoshi*). The former is mainly used in soups, especially *misoshiru*. The latter is eaten by itself, deep-fried in *agedashi-dōfu* or used in the Kyoto classic *yudōfu,* a hotpot dish. Both *momen* and *kinugoshi* take their names from the technique used when the hot soy milk is strained – if the material used is cotton, the resulting firm tofu is *momen;* when silk *(kinu)* is used, it's *kinugoshi*.

A classic way to eat tofu is as *hiyayakko,* cold blocks of tofu covered with soy, grated ginger and finely sliced spring onion. This is a favourite on the menus of *izakaya*.

Abura-age is thinly sliced, especially thick tofu traditionally fried in sesame oil (more recently, however, producers use salad oil or soy bean oil). It is a key ingredient in the celebratory *chirashi-zushi* (sushi rice topped with cooked egg and other tidbits like shrimp and ginger) and in *inari-zushi* (where vinegared rice is stuffed into a fried tofu pouch).

Yuba is a staple of *shōjin-ryōri* and a speciality of Kyoto. It is a marvellous accompaniment to sake when it is served fresh with grated wasabi and *shōyu tsuyu* (dipping sauce). Its creation is a time- and labour-intensive process in which soy milk is allowed to curdle over a low heat and then is plucked from the surface.

'Usually made from soybeans, tofu is one of Japan's most sublime creations'

Shōyu (Soy Sauce)

Surprisingly, *shōyu* is a relatively new addition to Japanese cuisine, although a primitive form of it, *hishio,* was made in the Yayoi period by mixing salt and fish. *Shōyu* in its current form dates back to the more recent Muromachi era.

KŌBE BEEF

All meals involving Kōbe beef should come with the following label: warning, consuming this beef will ruin your enjoyment of any other type of beef. We're not kidding, it's that good.

The first thing you should know about Kōbe beef is how to say it: it's pronounced 'ko bay', which rhymes with 'no way'. In Japanese, Kōbe beef is known as Kōbe-gyū. Second, Kōbe beef is actually just one regional variety of Japanese beef, which is known as *wa-gyū* (literally, Japanese beef). *Wa-gyū* can be any of several breeds of cattle bred for the extreme fatty marbling of their meat (the most common breed is Japanese Black). Kōbe beef is simply *wa-gyū* raised in Hyogō-ken, the prefecture in which the city of Kōbe is located.

There are many urban legends about Kōbe beef, promulgated, we suppose, by the farmers who raise them, or simply imaginative individuals who ascribe to cows the lives they'd like to lead. It is commonly believed that Kōbe beef cattle spend their days drinking beer and receiving regular massages. However, in all our days in Japan, we have never seen a single drunk cow or met a 'cow masseur'. More likely, the marbling pattern of the beef is the result of selective breeding and the cow's diet of alfalfa, corn, barley and wheat straw.

The best way to enjoy Kōbe beef, or any other type of *wa-gyū*, is cooked on a *teppan,* or iron griddle, at a *wa-gyū* specialist, and these restaurants are known as *teppen-yaki-ya*. In the West, a giant steak that hangs off the side of the plate is generally considered a good thing. But due to the intense richness (and price) of a good *wa-gyū* steak, it is usually consumed in relatively small portions, say, smaller than the size of your hand. The meat is usually seared quickly and then cooked to medium rare – cooking a piece of good *wa-gyū* to well done is something akin to making a tuna fish sandwich from the best cut of *toro* sashimi (fatty tuna belly).

Although Kōbe beef and *wa-gyū* are now all the rage in Western cities, like most Japanese food, the real thing consumed on its home turf is a far superior dish. And – surprise, surprise – it can be cheaper to eat it in Japan than overseas. You can get a fine *wa-gyū* steak course at lunch for around ¥5000, and at dinner for around double that. Of course, the best place for Kōbe beef is – you got it – Kōbe. See the Kōbe Eating section (p395) for our favourite Kōbe beef specialist. Just don't blame us if this puts you off the leathery things they call steaks in the West.

Twentieth-century mass production made a household name out of Kikkōman, but *shōyu* is still made using traditional methods at small companies throughout the country. It comes in two forms: the dark brown 'thicker taste' *koikuchi-shōyu*, and the chestnut-coloured 'thinner', much saltier *usukuchi-shōyu* (sweetened and lightened by the addition of *mirin*). *Koikuchi* is used for a variety of applications, especially in the Kantō region around Tokyo, and is perfect for teriyaki, where meat or fish is brushed with *shōyu, mirin* and sugar, and grilled. The aromatic *usukuchi-shōyu,* a favourite of the Kansai region, is best suited to clear soups and white fish. It is especially important in enhancing the colour of a dish's ingredients.

We can't recommend *What's What in Japanese Restaurants: A Guide to Ordering Eating and Enjoying* (Robb Satterwhite) highly enough. With thorough explanations of the various types of Japanese dishes and sample English/Japanese menus, this is a must for those who really want to explore and enjoy Japanese restaurants.

RESTAURANTS & SAMPLE MENUS

Shokudō

A *shokudō* is the most common type of restaurant in Japan, and is found near train stations, tourist spots and just about any other place where people congregate. Easily distinguished by the presence of plastic food displays in the window, these inexpensive places usually serve a variety of *washoku* (Japanese dishes) and *yōshoku* (Western dishes).

At lunch, and sometimes dinner, the easiest meal to order at a *shokudō* is a *teishoku* (set-course meal), which is sometimes also called *ranchi setto* (lunch set) or *kōsu*. This usually includes a main dish of meat or fish, a bowl of rice, miso soup, shredded cabbage and some Japanese pickles *(tsukemono)*. In addition, most *shokudō* serve a fairly standard selection of *donburi-mono* (rice dishes) and *menrui* (noodle dishes). When you order noodles, you can choose between *soba* and *udon*, both of which are served with a variety of toppings. If you're at a loss as to what to order, simply say *kyō-no-ranchi* (today's lunch) and they'll do the rest. Expect to spend from ¥800 to ¥1000 for a meal at a *shokudō*.

RICE DISHES

katsu-don	かつ丼	rice topped with a fried pork cutlet
niku-don	牛丼	rice topped with thin slices of cooked beef
oyako-don	親子丼	rice topped with egg and chicken
ten-don	天丼	rice topped with tempura shrimp and vegetables

NOODLE DISHES

soba	そば	buckwheat noodles
udon	うどん	thick, white wheat noodles
kake soba/udon	かけそば/うどん	*soba*/*udon* noodles in broth
kitsune soba/udon	きつねそば/うどん	*soba*/*udon* noodles with fried tofu
tempura soba/udon	天ぷらそば/うどん	*soba*/*udon* noodles with tempura shrimp
tsukimi soba/udon	月見そば/うどん	*soba*/*udon* noodles with raw egg on top

'An *izakaya* is the Japanese equivalent of a pub'

Izakaya

An *izakaya* is the Japanese equivalent of a pub. It's a good place to visit when you want a casual meal, a wide selection of food, a hearty atmosphere and, of course, plenty of beer and sake. When you enter an *izakaya,* you are given the choice of sitting around the counter, at a table or on a tatami floor. You usually order a bit at a time, choosing from a selection of typical Japanese foods like *yakitori,* sashimi and grilled fish, as well as Japanese interpretations of Western foods like French fries and beef stew.

Izakaya can be identified by their rustic façades and the red lanterns outside their doors bearing the kanji for *izakaya* (see p96). Since *izakaya* food

EATING IN A JAPANESE RESTAURANT

When you enter a restaurant in Japan, you'll be greeted with a hearty '*Irasshaimase!*' (Welcome!). In all but the most casual places the waiter will next ask you '*Nan-mei sama?*' (How many people?). Answer with your fingers, which is what the Japanese do. You will then be led to a table, a place at the counter or a tatami room.

At this point you will be given an *oshibori* (a hot towel), a cup of tea and a menu. The *oshibori* is for wiping your hands and face. When you're done with it, just roll it up and leave it next to your place. Now comes the hard part: ordering. If you don't read Japanese, you can use the romanised translations in this book to help you, or direct the waiter's attention to the Japanese script. If this doesn't work, there are two phrases that may help: '*O-susume wa nan desu ka?*' (What do you recommend?) and '*O-makase shimasu*' (Please decide for me). If you're still having problems, you can try pointing at other diners' food or, if the restaurant has them, dragging the waiter outside to point at the plastic food models in the window.

When you've finished eating, you can signal for the bill by crossing one index finger over the other to form the sign of an 'x'. This is the standard sign for 'bill please'. You can also say '*O-kanjō kudasai*'. Remember there is no tipping in Japan and tea is free of charge. Usually you will be given a bill to take to the cashier at the front of the restaurant. At more upmarket places, the host of the party will discreetly excuse him- or herself to pay before the group leaves. Unlike some places in the West, one doesn't usually leave cash on the table by way of payment. Only the bigger and more international places take credit cards, so cash is always the surer option.

When leaving, it is polite to say to the restaurant staff, '*Gochisō-sama deshita*', which means 'It was a real feast'. The Useful Words & Phrases section (p102) contains more restaurant words and phrases.

is casual fare to go with drinking, it is usually fairly inexpensive. Depending on how much you drink, you can expect to get away with spending ¥2500 to ¥5000 per person. (See the following Yakitori section for more dishes available at *izakaya*.)

agedashi-dōfu	揚げだし豆腐	deep-fried tofu in a dashi broth
chiizu-age	チーズ揚げ	deep-fried cheese
hiya-yakko	冷奴	a cold block of tofu with soya sauce and spring onions
jaga-batā	ジャガバター	baked potatoes with butter
kata yaki-soba	固焼きそば	hard fried noodles with meat and vegetables
niku-jaga	肉ジャガ	beef and potato stew
poteto furai	ポテトフライ	French fries
sashimi mori-awase	刺身盛り合わせ	a selection of sliced sashimi
shio-yaki-zakana	塩焼魚	a whole fish grilled with salt
tsuna sarada	ツナサラダ	tuna salad over cabbage
yaki-onigiri	焼きおにぎり	a triangle of grilled rice with *yakitori* sauce
yaki-soba	焼きそば	fried noodles with meat and vegetables

Yakitori

Yakitori (skewers of grilled chicken and vegetables) is a popular after-work meal. *Yakitori* is not so much a full meal as an accompaniment for beer and sake. At a *yakitori-ya* (*yakitori* restaurant) you sit around a counter with the other patrons and watch the chef grill your selections over charcoal. The best way to eat here is to order several varieties, then order seconds of the ones you really like. Ordering can be a little confusing since one serving often means two or three skewers (be careful – the price listed on the menu is usually that of a single skewer).

In summer, the beverage of choice at a *yakitori* restaurant is beer or cold sake, while in winter it's hot sake. A few drinks and enough skewers to fill you up should cost ¥3000 to ¥4000 per person. *Yakitori* restaurants are usually small places, often near train stations, and are best identified by a red lantern outside and the smell of grilling chicken.

gyū-niku	牛肉	pieces of beef
hasami/negima	はさみ/ねぎま	pieces of white meat alternating with leek
kawa	皮	chicken skin
piiman	ピーマン	small green peppers
rebā	レバー	chicken livers
sasami	ささみ	skinless chicken-breast pieces
shiitake	しいたけ	Japanese mushrooms
tama-negi	玉ねぎ	round white onions
tebasaki	手羽先	chicken wings
tsukune	つくね	chicken meat balls
yaki-onigiri	焼きおにぎり	a triangle of rice grilled with *yakitori* sauce
yakitori	焼き鳥	plain, grilled white meat

Sushi & Sashimi

Randy Johnson's 'Sushi a là Carte' (www.ease.com/~randyj/rjsushi.htm) is a must for sushi lovers – it explains everything you need to know about ordering and enjoying sushi.

Like *yakitori,* sushi is considered an accompaniment for beer and sake. Nonetheless, both Japanese and foreigners often make a meal of it, and it's one of the healthiest meals around. All proper sushi restaurants serve their fish over rice, in which case it's called sushi; without rice, it's called sashimi or *tsukuri* (or, politely, *o-tsukuri*).

There are two main types of sushi: *nigiri-zushi* (served on a small bed of rice – the most common variety) and *maki-zushi* (served in a seaweed roll). Lesser-known varieties include *chirashi-zushi* (a layer of rice covered in egg and fish toppings), *oshi-zushi* (fish pressed in a mould over rice) and *inari-zushi* (rice in a pocket of sweet, fried tofu). Whatever kind of sushi you try, it will be served with lightly vinegared rice. Note that *nigiri-zushi* and *maki-zushi* will contain a bit of wasabi (hot green horseradish).

Sushi is not difficult to order. If you sit at the counter of a sushi restaurant you can simply point at what you want, as most of the selections are visible in a refrigerated glass case between you and the sushi chef. You can also order à la carte from the menu. When ordering, you usually order *ichi-nin mae* (one portion), which usually means two pieces of sushi. Be careful, since the price on the menu will be that of only one piece. If ordering a la carte is too daunting, you can take care of your whole order with just one or two words by ordering *mori-awase,* an assortment plate of *nigiri-zushi.* These usually come in three grades: *futsū nigiri* (regular *nigiri*), *jō nigiri* (special *nigiri*) and *toku-jō nigiri* (extra-special *nigiri*). The difference is in the type of fish used. Most *mori-awase* contain six or seven pieces of sushi.

Be warned that meals in a good sushi restaurant can cost upwards of ¥10,000, while an average establishment can run from ¥3000 to ¥5000 per person. One way to sample the joy of sushi on the cheap is to try an automatic sushi place, usually called *kaiten-zushi,* where the sushi is served on a conveyor belt that runs along a counter. Here you simply reach up and grab whatever looks good to you (which certainly takes the pain out of ordering). You are charged by the number of plates of sushi that you have eaten. Plates are colour-coded by their price and the cost is written either somewhere on the plate itself or on a sign on the wall. You can usually fill yourself up in one of these places for ¥1000 to ¥2000 per person.

'Be warned that meals in a good sushi restaurant can cost upwards of ¥10,000'

Before popping the sushi into your mouth, dip it in *shōyu,* which you pour from a small decanter into a low dish specially provided for the purpose. If you're not good at using chopsticks, don't worry – sushi is one of the few foods in Japan that is perfectly acceptable to eat with your hands. Slices of *gari* (pickled ginger) will also be served to help refresh the palate. The beverage of choice with sushi is beer or sake (hot in winter and cold in summer), with a cup of green tea at the end of the meal.

Note that most of the items on this sample sushi menu can be ordered as sashimi. Just add the words '*no o-tsukuri*' to get the sashimi version ('*o-tsukuri*' is the more common Japanese expression for sashimi). So, for example, if you want some tuna sashimi, you would order '*maguro no o-tsukuri*'. Note that sashimi often appears in other kinds of restaurants, not just sushi specialists. Shokudō often serve a sashimi set meal *(o-tskuri teishoku)*, *izakaya* usually offer a plate of assorted sashimi *(otsukuri moriawase)* and *kaiseki* courses usually feature a few pieces of carefully chosen sashimi. When it's eaten at a sushi restaurant, sashimi is often the first course, a warm up for the sushi itself. Note that you'll often be served a different soy sauce to accompany your sashimi; if you like wasabi with your sashimi, you add some directly to the soy sauce and stir. And make no mistake, a bit of good soy sauce and some fresh-grated wasabi is the only way to improve on one of the finest tastes on earth: a piece of top-quality *ō-toro tsukuri* (fatty tuna belly sashimi).

ama-ebi	甘海老	sweet shrimp
awabi	あわび	abalone
ebi	海老	prawn or shrimp
hamachi	はまち	yellowtail
ika	いか	squid
ikura	イクラ	salmon roe
kai-bashira	貝柱	scallop
kani	かに	crab
katsuo	かつお	bonito
maguro	まぐろ	tuna
tai	鯛	sea bream

tamago	たまご	sweetened egg
toro	とろ	the choicest cut of fatty tuna belly
unagi	うなぎ	eel with a sweet sauce
uni	うに	sea urchin roe

Sukiyaki & Shabu-shabu

Restaurants usually specialise in both these dishes. Popular in the West, sukiyaki is a favourite of most foreign visitors to Japan. Sukiyaki consists of thin slices of beef cooked in a broth of *shōyu,* sugar and sake, and accompanied by a variety of vegetables and tofu. After cooking, all the ingredients are dipped in raw egg before being eaten. When made with high-quality beef, like Kōbe beef, it is a sublime experience.

Shabu-shabu consists of thin slices of beef and vegetables cooked by swirling the ingredients in a light broth, then dipping them in a variety of special sesame-seed and citrus-based sauces. Both of these dishes are prepared in a pot over a fire at your private table; don't fret about preparation – the waiter will usually help you get started, and keep a close watch as you proceed. The key is to take your time, add the ingredients a little at a time and savour the flavours as you go.

Sukiyaki and *shabu-shabu* restaurants usually have traditional Japanese décor and sometimes a picture of a cow to help you identify them. Ordering is not difficult. Simply say sukiyaki or *shabu-shabu* and indicate how many people are dining. Expect to pay from ¥3000 to ¥10,000 per person.

Tempura

Tempura consists of portions of fish, prawns and vegetables cooked in fluffy, non-greasy batter. When you sit down at a tempura restaurant, you will be given a small bowl of *ten-tsuyu* (a light brown sauce) and a plate of grated *daikon* to mix into the sauce. Dip each piece of tempura into this sauce before eating it. Tempura is best when it's hot, so don't wait too long – use the sauce to cool each piece and dig in.

While it's possible to order à la carte, most diners choose to order *teishoku* (full set), which includes rice, *miso-shiru* and Japanese pickles. Some tempura restaurants offer courses that include different numbers of tempura pieces.

Expect to pay between ¥2000 and ¥10,000 for a full tempura meal. Finding these restaurants is tricky as they have no distinctive façade or décor. If you look through the window, you'll see customers around the counter watching the chefs as they work over large woks filled with oil.

kaki age	かき揚げ	tempura with shredded vegetables or fish
shōjin age	精進揚げ	vegetarian tempura
tempura moriawase	天ぷら盛り合わせ	a selection of tempura

Rāmen enthusiasts will get hungry just looking at the World Ramen.net (www.worldramen.net/) site. It includes reviews of Tokyo *rāmen* shops and even information about how to open your own *rāmen* shop!

Rāmen

The Japanese imported this dish from China and put their own spin on it to make what is one of the world's most delicious fast foods. *Rāmen* dishes are big bowls of noodles in a meat broth, served with a variety of toppings, such as sliced pork, bean sprouts and leeks. In some restaurants, particularly in Kansai, you may be asked if you'd prefer *kotteri* (thick) or *assari* (thin) soup. Other than this, ordering is simple: just sidle up to the counter and say *rāmen,* or ask for any of the other choices usually on offer (a list follows). Expect to pay between ¥500 and ¥900 for a bowl. Since *rāmen* is derived from Chinese cuisine, some *rāmen* restaurants also serve *chāhan* or *yaki-meshi* (both dishes are fried rice), *gyōza* (dumplings) and *kara-age* (deep-fried chicken pieces).

Rāmen restaurants are easily distinguished by their long counters lined with customers hunched over steaming bowls. You can sometimes hear a *rāmen* shop as you wander by – it's considered polite to slurp the noodles and aficionados claim that slurping brings out the full flavour of the broth.

rāmen	ラーメン	soup and noodles with a sprinkling of meat and vegetables
chānpon-men	ちゃんぽん麺	Nagasaki-style *rāmen*
chāshū-men	チャーシュー麺	*rāmen* topped with slices of roasted pork
miso-rāmen	みそラーメン	*rāmen* with miso-flavoured broth
wantan-men	ワンタン麺	*rāmen* with meat dumplings

We consider the film *Tampopo* (Itami Juzo, 1985) just about essential preparation for a visit to Japan – especially if you intend to visit a *rāmen* shop while you're here! It's about two fellows who set out to help a *rāmen* shop owner improve her shop, with several food-related subplots woven in for good measure.

Soba & Udon

Soba and *udon* are Japan's answer to Chinese-style *rāmen*. *Soba* are thin, brown buckwheat noodles; *udon* are thick, white wheat noodles. Most Japanese noodle shops serve both *soba* and *udon* in a variety of ways. Noodles are usually served in a bowl containing a light, bonito-flavoured broth, but you can also order them served cold and piled on a bamboo screen with a cold broth for dipping.

By far the most popular type of cold noodles is *zaru soba,* which is served with bits of *nori* (seaweed) on top. If you order these noodles, you'll receive a small plate of wasabi and sliced spring onions – put these into the cup of broth and eat the noodles by dipping them in this mixture. At the end of your meal, the waiter will give you some hot broth to mix with the leftover sauce, which you drink like a kind of tea. As with *rāmen,* you should feel free to slurp as loudly as you please.

Soba and *udon* places are usually quite cheap (about ¥900 a dish), but some fancy places can be significantly more expensive (the décor is a good indication of the price). See Noodle Dishes (p89) for more *soba* and *udon* dishes.

zaru soba	ざるそば	cold noodles with seaweed strips served on a bamboo tray

More than five billion servings of instant *rāmen* are consumed each year in Japan.

Unagi

Unagi (eel) is an expensive and popular delicacy in Japan. Even if you can't stand the creature when served in your home country, you owe it to yourself to try *unagi* at least once while in Japan. It's cooked over hot coals and brushed with a rich sauce of *shōyu* and sake. Full *unagi* dinners can be expensive, but many *unagi* restaurants offer *unagi bentō* (boxed lunches) and lunch sets for around ¥1500. Most *unagi* restaurants display plastic models of their sets in their front windows, and may have barrels of live eels to entice passers-by.

unagi teishoku	うなぎ定食	full-set *unagi* meal with rice, grilled eel, eel-liver soup and pickles
una-don	うな丼	grilled eel over a bowl of rice
unajū	うな重	grilled eel over a flat tray of rice
kabayaki	蒲焼き	skewers of grilled eel without rice

Fugu

The deadly *fugu* (globefish or pufferfish) is eaten more for the thrill than the taste. It's actually rather bland – most people liken the taste to chicken – but is acclaimed for its fine texture. Nonetheless, if you have the money to lay out for a *fugu* dinner (around ¥10,000), it makes a good 'been there, done that' story back home (see the boxed text, p94).

Although the danger of *fugu* poisoning is negligible, some Japanese joke that you should always let your dining companion try the first piece – if they are still talking after five minutes, you can consider it safe and have some yourself. If you need a shot of liquid courage in order to get you started, try

a glass of *hirezake* (toasted *fugu* tail in hot sake) – the traditional accompaniment to a *fugu* dinner.

Fugu is a seasonal delicacy best eaten in winter. *Fugu* restaurants usually serve only *fugu,* and can be identified by a picture of a *fugu* on the sign out the front.

Fugu is the speciality of Western Honshū, and Shimonoseki (p476) is a good place to give it a try. Of course, you can also find *fugu* in other parts of Japan.

fugu chiri	ふぐちり	a stew made from *fugu* and vegetables
fugu sashimi	ふぐ刺身	thinly sliced raw *fugu*
fugu teishoku	ふぐ定食	a set course of *fugu* served several ways, plus rice and soup
yaki fugu	焼きふぐ	*fugu* grilled on a hibachi at your table

Tonkatsu

Tonkatsu is a deep-fried breaded pork cutlet that is served with a special sauce, usually as part of a set meal *(tonkatsu teishoku). Tonkatsu* is served both at speciality restaurants and at *shokudō*. Naturally, the best *tonkatsu* is to be found at the speciality places, where a full set will cost ¥1500 to ¥2500.

ARE YOU A CULINARY DAREDEVIL? *John Ashburne*

There are few cuisines that actively threaten to dispatch you into the next life. Japan's famed, poisonous *fugu,* also known as globefish, blowfish or pufferfish, is one such dish. Its ancient nickname is the *teppō,* 'the pistol', from its tendency to bump off careless eaters. Its active ingredient is tetrodoxin, a clear, tasteless, odourless poison 13 times stronger than arsenic. One species of *fugu* contains enough to kill 33 people. Specially trained chefs remove most of the poison, leaving just enough to numb your lips. Though the danger of *fugu* poisoning is negligible, no one ever pisses off *fugu* chefs.

Yet some consumers actively choose to poison themselves. How's this for bold? A good friend's grandfather, a man of somewhat decadent sensibilities, would eat *fugu* liver (a practice now outlawed) and slip into a state of semiparalysis for three days! Apparently the near-death sensation was rather agreeable, and he was always somewhat disappointed when he regained full control of his limbs. Lonely Planet Publications wishes to remind the reader: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME.

Fugu, life threatening as it may be, at least has the saving grace of having shuffled off its own mortal. No such luck with 'dancing-eating' or *odorigui,* the practice of wilfully consuming live animals. It originated in Fukuoka and the chosen Fukuoka victim is usually *shirouo,* a small transparent fish, which wriggles to its suffocating oesophagal doom half-drunk, washed down with sake.

Really bold diners can try the same thing with an octopus. In a Gunma sushi shop I once fatally left the ordering to 'friends', who grinned malevolently and asked for the 'special'. The chef promptly lifted a poor cephalopod from a large tank on the counter, sliced up one tentacle, put it on a plate with some soy sauce, and passed the still twisting and writhing limb to yours truly. The sensation, as the suckers attach to the roof of your mouth, is impossible to convey. Equally difficult to put into words is how it feels to try to murder an octopus leg by chewing it to death.

Same sushi shop. Same evening. It got worse. Dismayed by my refusal to pass out, the said friends brought out the big guns in the shape of *shirako*. Staring at the frothy, white objects shaped like pasta spirals but exuding an unmistakable deep-sea odour, I feebly requested a translation. Poker-faced Mr Suto offered the deadpan 'cod sperm'. I ate. I turned green. I drank large quantities of cold beer.

That was 15 years ago. Since then I have consumed many odd dishes and survived. But it's only now that I can recognise Mr Suto's translation error. *Shirako* is not 'cod sperm' at all. It is the 'sperm-filled reproductive gland of the male cod'.

Enjoy!

When ordering *tonkatsu,* you are able to choose between *rōsu* (a fatter cut of pork) and *hire* (a leaner cut).

hire katsu	ヒレかつ	*tonkatsu* fillet
kushi katsu	串かつ	deep-fried pork and vegetables on skewers
minchi katsu	ミンチカツ	minced pork cutlet
tonkatsu teishoku	とんかつ定食	a set meal of *tonkatsu,* rice, *miso shiru* and shredded cabbage

Kushiage & Kushikatsu

This is the fried food to beat all fried foods. *Kushiage* and *kushikatsu* are deep-fried skewers of meat, seafood and vegetables eaten as an accompaniment to beer. *Kushi* means 'skewer' and if food can be fit on one, it's probably on the menu. Cabbage is often eaten with the meal.

You order *kushiage* and *kushikatsu* by the skewer (one skewer is *ippon,* but you can always use your fingers to indicate how many you want). Like *yakitori,* this food is popular with after-work salarymen and students and is fairly inexpensive, though there are upmarket places. Expect to pay ¥2000 to ¥5000 for a full meal and a couple of beers. Not particularly distinctive in appearance, the best *kushiage* and *kushikatsu* places are found by asking a Japanese friend.

ebi	海老	shrimp
gyū-niku	牛肉	beef pieces
ginnan	銀杏	ginkgo nuts
ika	いか	squid
imo	いも	potato
renkon	れんこん	lotus root
shiitake	しいたけ	Japanese mushrooms
tama-negi	玉ねぎ	white onion

Okonomiyaki

The name means 'cook what you like', and an *okonomiyaki* restaurant provides you with an inexpensive opportunity to do just that. Sometimes described as Japanese pizza or pancake, the resemblance is in form only. At an *okonomiyaki* restaurant you sit around a *teppan* (iron hotplate), armed with a spatula and chopsticks to cook your choice of meat, seafood and vegetables in a cabbage and vegetable batter.

Some restaurants will do most of the cooking and bring the nearly finished product over to your hotplate for you to season with *katsuo bushi* (bonito flakes), *shōyu, ao-nori* (an ingredient similar to parsley), Japanese Worcestershire-style sauce and mayonnaise. Cheaper places, however, will simply hand you a bowl filled with the ingredients and expect you to cook it for yourself. If this happens, don't panic. First, mix the batter and filling thoroughly, then place it on the hotplate, flattening it into a pancake shape. After five minutes or so, use the spatulas to flip it and cook for another five minutes. Then dig in.

'All of this is washed down with mugs of draught beer'

Most *okonomiyaki* places also serve *yaki-soba* (fried noodles) and *yasai-itame* (stir-fried vegetables). All of this is washed down with mugs of draught beer.

One final word: don't worry too much about preparation of the food – as a foreigner you will be expected to be awkward, and the waiter will keep a sharp eye on you to make sure no real disasters occur.

gyū okonomiyaki	牛お好み焼き	beef *okonomiyaki*
ika okonomiyaki	いかお好み焼き	squid *okonomiyaki*
mikkusu	ミックスお好み焼き	mixed fillings of seafood, *okonomiyaki* meat and vegetables
modan-yaki	モダン焼き	*okonomiyaki* with *yaki soba* and a fried egg
negi okonomiyaki	ネギお好み焼き	thin *okonomiyaki* with spring onions

Kaiseki

Kaiseki is the pinnacle of Japanese cuisine, where ingredients, preparation, setting and presentation come together to create a dining experience quite unlike any other. Born as an adjunct to the tea ceremony, *kaiseki* is a largely vegetarian affair (though fish is often served, meat never appears on the *kaiseki* menu). One usually eats *kaiseki* in the private room of a *ryōtei* (an especially elegant style of traditional restaurant), often overlooking a private, tranquil garden. The meal is served in several small courses, giving the diner an opportunity to admire the plates and bowls, which are carefully chosen to complement the food and season. Rice is eaten last (usually with an assortment of pickles) and the drink of choice is sake or beer.

All this comes at a steep price – a good *kaiseki* dinner costs upwards of ¥10,000 per person. A cheaper way to sample the delights of *kaiseki* is to visit a *kaiseki* restaurant for lunch. Most places offer a boxed lunch containing a sampling of their dinner fare for around ¥2500.

Unfortunately for foreigners, *kaiseki* restaurants can be intimidating places to enter. If possible, bring a Japanese friend or ask a Japanese friend to call ahead and make arrangements.

bentō	弁当	boxed lunch
kaiseki	懐石	traditional, expensive Kyoto-style cuisine
matsu	松	extra-special course
ryōtei	料亭	a restaurant serving a variety of traditional Japanese dishes
take	竹	special course
ume	梅	regular course

Sweets

'Some Westerners find Japanese sweets a little challenging'

Although most restaurants don't serve dessert (plates of sliced fruit are sometimes served at the end of a meal), there is no lack of sweets in Japan. Most sweets (known generically as *wagashi*) are sold in speciality stores for you to eat at home. Many of the more delicate-looking ones are made to balance the strong, bitter taste of the special *matcha* tea served during the tea ceremony.

Some Westerners find Japanese sweets a little challenging, due to the liberal use of a sweet, red *azuki*-bean paste called *anko*. This unusual filling turns up in even the most innocuous-looking pastries. But don't let anyone make up your mind for you: try a Japanese sweet for yourself.

With such a wide variety of sweets, it's impossible to list all the names. However, you'll probably find many variations on the *anko*-covered-by-*mochi* theme.

Sweet shops are easy to spot; they usually have open fronts with their wares laid out in wooden trays to entice passers-by. Buying sweets is simple – just point at what you want and indicate with your fingers how many you'd like.

anko	あんこ	sweet paste or jam made from adzuki beans
mochi	餅	pounded rice cakes made of glutinous rice
wagashi	和菓子	Japanese-style sweets
yōkan	ようかん	sweet red-bean jelly

DRINKS

Drinking plays a big role in Japanese society, and there are few social occasions where beer or sake is not served. Alcohol (in this case sake) also plays a ceremonial role in various Shintō festivals and rites, including the marriage ceremony. As a visitor to Japan, you'll probably find yourself in lots of situations where you are invited to drink, and tipping back a few beers or glasses of sake is a great way to get to know the locals. However, if you don't drink alcohol, it's no big deal. Simply order *oolong cha* (oolong tea) in place of beer or sake. While some folks might put pressure on you to drink alcohol, you can diffuse this pressure by saying '*sake o nomimasen*' (I don't drink alcohol).

What you pay for your drink depends on where you drink and, in the case of hostess bars, with whom you drink. Hostess bars are the most expensive places to drink (up to ¥10,000 per drink), followed by upmarket traditional Japanese bars, hotel bars, beer halls and casual pubs. If you are not sure about a place, ask about prices and cover charges before sitting down. As a rule, if you are served a small snack with your first round, you'll be paying a cover charge (usually a few hundred yen, but sometimes much more).

Izakaya and *yakitori-ya* are cheap places for beer, sake and food in a casual atmosphere resembling that of a pub. All Japanese cities, whether large or small, will have a few informal bars with reasonable prices. Such places are popular with young Japanese and resident *gaijin* (foreigners), who usually refer to such places as *gaijin* bars. In summer, many department stores open up beer gardens on the roof. Many of these places offer all-you-can-eat/drink specials for around ¥3000 per person.

There are more than 1500 sake breweries in Japan.

izakaya	居酒屋	pub-style restaurant
yakitori-ya	焼鳥屋	*yakitori* restaurant

Beer

Introduced at the end of the 1800s, *biiru* (beer) is now the favourite tipple of the Japanese. The quality is generally excellent and the most popular type is light lager, although recently some breweries have been experimenting with darker brews. The major breweries are Kirin, Asahi, Sapporo and Suntory. Beer is dispensed everywhere, from vending machines to beer halls, and even in some temple lodgings. A standard can of beer from a vending machine is about ¥250, although some of the gigantic cans cost more than ¥1000. At bars, a beer starts at ¥500 and the price climbs upwards, depending on the establishment. *Nama biiru* (draught beer) is widely available, as are imported beers.

biiru	ビール	beer
nama biiru	生ビール	draught beer

Sake

Rice wine has been brewed for centuries in Japan. Once restricted to imperial brewers, it was later produced at temples and shrines across the country. In recent years, consumption of beer has overtaken that of sake, but it's still a standard item in homes, restaurants and drinking places. Large casks of sake are often seen piled up as offerings outside temples and shrines, and the drink plays an important part in most celebrations and festivals.

The Sake World Homepage (www.sake-world.com/) offers an excellent introduction to sake, including some tasting picks.

Most Westerners come to Japan with a bad image of sake, the result of having consumed low-grade brands overseas. Although it won't appeal to all palates, some of the higher grades are actually very good, and a trip to a restaurant specialising in sake is a great way to sample some of the better brews.

There are several major types of sake, including *nigori* (cloudy), *nama* (unrefined) and regular, clear sake. Of these, clear sake is by far the most common. Clear sake is usually divided into three grades: *tokkyū* (premium), *ikkyū* (first grade) and *nikyū* (second grade). *Nikyū* is the routine choice. Sake can be further divided into *karakuchi* (dry) and *amakuchi* (sweet). As well as the national brewing giants, there are thousands of provincial brewers producing local brews called *jizake*.

Sake is served *atsukan* (warm) and *reishu* (cold), with warm sake, unsurprisingly, being more popular in winter. When you order sake, it will usually be served in a small flask called *tokkuri*. These come in two sizes, so you should specify whether you want *ichigō* (small) or *nigō* (large). From these

flasks you pour the sake into small ceramic cups called *o-choko* or *sakazuki*. Another way to sample sake is to drink it from a small wooden box called *masu,* with a bit of salt on the rim.

However you drink it, with a 17% alcohol content, sake (particularly the warm stuff) is likely to go right to your head. After a few bouts with sake you'll come to understand why the Japanese drink it in such small cups. Particularly memorable is a real sake hangover born of too much cheap sake. The best advice is not to indulge the day before you have to get on a plane.

amakuchi	甘口	sweet sake
atsukan	あつかん	warm sake
ikkyū	一級	first-grade sake
jizake	地酒	local brew
karakuchi	辛口	dry sake
nama	生	regular clear sake
nigori	にごり	cloudy sake
nikkyū	二級	second-grade sake
o-choko	おちょこ	ceramic sake cup
reishu	冷酒	cold sake
sakazuki	杯	ceramic sake cup
sake	酒	Japanese rice wine
tokkyū	特級	premium-grade sake

Shōchū

For those looking for a quick and cheap escape route from the sorrows of the world, *shōchū* is the answer. It's a distilled spirit made from a variety of raw materials, including potato (in which case it's called *imo-jōchū*) and barley (in which case it's called *mugi-jōchū*). It's quite strong, with an alcohol content of about 30%. In recent years it has been resurrected from its previous lowly status (it was used as a disinfectant in the Edo period) to become a trendy drink. You can drink it *oyu-wari* (with hot water) or *chūhai* (in a highball with soda and lemon). A 720mL bottle sells for about ¥600, which makes it a relatively cheap option compared to other spirits.

The Insider's Guide to Sake (Philip Harper) offers a fine introduction to sake, including information on how to choose a good sake and the history of the drink.

chūhai	チューハイ	*shōchū* with soda and lemon
oyu-wari	お湯割り	*shōchū* with hot water
shōchū	焼酎	distilled grain liquor

Wine, Imported Drinks & Whiskey

Japanese wines are available from areas such as Yamanashi, Nagano, Tōhoku and Hokkaidō. Standard wines are often blended with imports from South America or Eastern Europe. The major producers are Suntory, Mann's and Mercian. Expect to pay at least ¥1000 for a bottle of something drinkable. Imported wines are often stocked by large liquor stores or department stores in the cities. Bargains are sometimes available at ¥600, but most of the quaffable imports cost considerably more.

Prices of imported spirits have been coming down in recent years and bargain liquor stores have been popping up in bigger cities. However, if you really like imported spirits, it is probably a good idea to pick up a duty-free bottle or two on your way through the airport. Whiskey is available at most drinking establishments and is usually drunk *mizu-wari* (with water and ice) or *onzarokku* (on the rocks). Local brands, such as Suntory and Nikka, are sensibly priced, and most measure up to foreign standards. Expensive foreign labels are popular as gifts.

Most other imported spirits are available at drinking establishments in Japan. Bars with a large foreign clientele, including hotel bars, can usually mix anything you request. If not, they will certainly tailor a drink to your specifications.

whiskey	ウィスキー	whiskey
mizu-wari	水割り	whiskey, ice and water
onzarokku	オンザロック	whiskey with ice

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Most of the drinks you're used to at home will be available in Japan, with a few colourfully named additions like Pocari Sweat and Calpis Water. One convenient aspect of Japan is the presence of drink-vending machines on virtually every street corner, and at ¥120, refreshment is rarely more than a few steps away.

COFFEE & TEA

Kōhii (coffee) served in a *kisaten* (coffee shop) tends to be expensive in Japan, costing between ¥350 and ¥500 a cup, with some places charging up to ¥1000. A cheap alternative is one of the newer coffee-restaurant chains like Doutor or Pronto, or doughnut shops like Mr Donut (which offers free refills). An even cheaper alternative is a can of coffee, hot or cold, from a vending machine. Although unpleasantly sweet, at ¥120 the price is hard to beat.

'An even cheaper alternative is a can of coffee, hot or cold, from a vending machine'

When ordering coffee at a coffee shop in Japan, you'll be asked whether you like it *hotto* (hot) or *aisu* (cold). Black tea also comes hot or cold, with *miruku* (milk) or *remon* (lemon). A good way to start a day of sightseeing in Japan is with a *mōningu setto* (morning set) of tea or coffee, toast and eggs, which costs around ¥400.

kafe ōre	カフェオレ	*café au lait,* hot or cold
American kōhii	アメリカンコーヒー	weak coffee
burendo kōhii	ブレンドコーヒー	blended coffee, fairly strong
kōhii	コーヒー	regular coffee
kōcha	紅茶	black, British-style tea
orenji jūsu	オレンジジュース	orange juice

JAPANESE TEA

Unlike black tea, which Westerners are familiar with, most Japanese tea is green and contains a lot of vitamin C and caffeine. The powdered form used in the tea ceremony is called *matcha* and is drunk after being whipped into a frothy consistency. The more common form, a leafy green tea, is simply called *o-cha,* and is drunk after being steeped in a pot. In addition to green tea, you'll probably drink a lot of a brownish tea called *bancha,* which restaurants serve for free. In summer, a cold beverage called *mugicha* (roasted barley tea) is served in private homes.

bancha	番茶	ordinary-grade green tea, has a brownish colour
matcha	抹茶	powdered green tea used in the tea ceremony
mugicha	麦茶	roasted barley tea
o-cha	お茶	green tea
sencha	煎茶	medium-grade green tea

CELEBRATIONS

When the Japanese celebrate it must include food and drink, and lots of it, whether it is in a rural festival to appease the rice gods (themselves not averse to the odd glass of sake) or in the party-hard *izakaya* of the big cities. And it's fun. Everyone seems to know about the famous Japanese reserve – everyone, that is, except the Japanese themselves.

The celebratory year begins in homes and restaurants on 1 January, with the multicourse, lavish, colourful *osechi-ryōri*. Served in *jūbako* (four-layered lacquerware boxes), *osechi* originated primarily as a means of giving the overworked Japanese housewife three days' much-needed rest – its ingredients last well.

JAPANESE TEA CULTURE *Morgan Pitelka, Ph.D*

Tea came to Japan from China as part of a cultural package that included kanji and Buddhism, but the beverage did not become popular until the medieval period. Buddhist monks drank tea for its medicinal and stimulatory properties, a practice that gradually spread to warrior society and then to commoners. By the 16th century, elite urban commoners such as the merchant and tea master Sen no Rikyû (1522–91) had elevated the preparation, serving and consumption of powdered green tea *(matcha)* to an elaborate performance art. In the 17th century, tea masters established their own schools of tea, and these institutions codified, spread and protected the practice over subsequent centuries.

Although *chanoyu* (literally, 'hot water for tea') is often referred to in English as the 'tea ceremony', the practice has always been more focused on collaboration, pleasure and artistic appreciation than on dutiful ritual. Tea gatherings can be short and spontaneous or long and extremely formal. They might be held to mark an anniversary, the changing of the seasons, or just as an opportunity to see old friends. Typically, a group of guests arrives at the location of the gathering, perhaps a home or a temple with its own tea house, and waits in the outer garden, a peaceful and meditative space. After entering the tea house, the guests observe while the host arranges the charcoal and serves a special meal known as *kaiseki* cuisine. After the meal, they eat some simple sweets, take a brief intermission and then return for a serving of viscous 'thick tea' *(koicha)* followed, in many cases, by a round of 'thin tea' *(usucha)*. The movements of the host and guests are carefully choreographed and rehearsed, making the sharing of the beverage a satisfying mutual performance. At certain moments during the gathering, the guests have the chance to admire the hanging scroll, the flower arrangement and the host's careful selection of tea utensils *(chadôgu)*.

Tea culture has stimulated and supported the arts and crafts in Japan for centuries, and utensils – including tea bowls, tea caddies, tea scoops and tea whisks – can be purchased in tea shops, galleries or directly from artists. Urban department stores, such as Takashimaya, Daimaru, Seibu and Mitsukoshi, among many others, frequently have whole floors devoted to ceramics, lacquerware and other crafts. There are also galleries in which the finest artists hold solo exhibitions and sales. A trip to a town famous for its crafts, such as Bizen (p446), Hagi (p478) or Karatsu (p676), gives travellers further opportunities to buy tea utensils.

Some tea schools, such as Urasenke, Omotesenke, Mushanokojisenke and Dai Nippon Chado Gakkai, hold tea gatherings that are open to the public, particularly in large cities. Speciality cafés, such as the confectionary Toraya, also offer a serving of sweets and tea. Museums that specialise in art associated with tea, such as Kyoto's Nomura Art Museum (p339), Raku Museum, the Kitamura Museum and Tokyo's Gotoh Museum, display historical tea utensils and on occasion serve tea as well.

Morgan Pitelka is the author of Handmade Culture: Raku Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan.

The third of February sees beans employed not as a meal ingredient, but as weapons in the fight against evil, at the Setsubun Matsuri. At shrines throughout the country, worshippers and tourists gleefully pepper costumed demons with hard soy beans, to the cry of '*oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi*' (out with the demons, in with good luck).

Common at many celebrations, but especially at the Hina Matsuri (Girls' Day celebration; 3 March) is *seki-han,* red rice, made from glutinous and nonglutinous rice mixed with either *azuki* or black-eyed peas, which give it its sweetness and characteristic pink colour.

Late March or early April sees the much-anticipated coming of the cherry blossoms. The Japanese gather for *hanami* or flower-viewing parties, which during the brief, glorious reign of the pink blossoms transform every inch of open space into a riot of alcohol-drenched, raucous contemplation of the evanescence of life and beauty. As if the cherry blossoms overhead weren't enough, the Japanese eat a variety of pink and white *mochi* on sticks during these parties, which is supposed to resemble the branches from a cherry tree.

The Japanese summer is long, hot and very humid. Its star festival is Kyoto's July Gion Matsuri, nicknamed Hamo Matsuri, the Pike-conger Festival, for the large quantities of the beast consumed during that time. Pike-conger and eel are famed for their invigorating qualities and their ability to restore flagging appetites.

New Year is one of the most food-centred festivals in Japan, the time when distant family members gather for a three-day bout of feasting and drinking, punctuated with the sacred first visit to the local shrine. Inevitably, it's a freezing midwinter night, and the warm *ama-zake* (sweet sake served at winter festivals) served at the shrine helps keep out the winter chill. The first dish of the year will be *toshi-koshi soba,* long buckwheat noodles symbolising long life and wealth, as *soba* dough was once used by gold traders to collect gold dust. To cries of '*yoi o-toshi o*' (Have a Happy New Year) and, postmidnight, '*akemashite omedetō gozaimasu*' (Happy New Year), the cycle of eating and celebration continues anew…

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Travellers who eat fish should have almost no trouble dining in Japan: almost all *shokudō, izakaya* and other common restaurants offer a set meal with fish as the main dish. Vegans and vegetarians who don't eat fish will have to get their protein from tofu and other bean products. Note that most *miso-shiru* is made with *dashi* that contains fish, so if you want to avoid fish, you'll also have to avoid *miso-shiru*.

Most big cities in Japan have vegetarian and/or organic restaurants that naturally will serve a variety of choices that appeal to vegetarians and vegans. (See the Eating sections of the destination chapters for specific recommendations.) In the countryside, you'll simply have to do your best to find suitable items on the menu, or try to convey your dietary preferences to the restaurant staff. Note that many temples in Japan serve *shōjin ryōri,* Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, which is made without meat, fish or dairy products. A good place to try this is Kōya-san in Kansai (p429).

For some ways to express your dietary preferences to restaurant staff, see Useful Words & Phrases (p102).

EATING WITH KIDS

Travelling with children in Japan is easy, as long as you come with the right attitudes, equipment and the usual parental patience. There's such a variety of food on offer that even the most particular eaters can find something to their liking, and if noodles and rice begins to pale there are always Japanese fast-food chains in almost every city. At most budget restaurants during the day, you can find '*okosama-ranchi*' (children's special), which is often Western style and actually rather good, though its mini-hamburgers and wiener sausages won't appeal to nonmeat eaters.

The Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo is the world's largest. It handles 2246 tonnes of marine products a day (more than 450 kinds of fish!)

The Useful Words & Phrases section (p102) contains a few phrases that will come in handy when dining out with children in tow.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Japanese people generally eat breakfast at home, where a few slices of bread and a cup of coffee are quickly taking over from the traditional Japanese breakfast of rice, fish and miso soup as the breakfast of choice. If they don't eat at home, a *mōningu setto* (morning set) of toast and coffee at a coffee shop is the norm.

Lunch is often eaten at a *shokudō* or a noodle restaurant, usually in the company of coworkers, but alone if a partner can't be found.

Evening meals are a mixed bag. Many people, of course, eat at home, but the stereotype of the salaryman heading out for drinks and dinner every evening after work with his workmates has some basis in fact.

Weekends are when almost everyone, if they can afford it, heads out for dinner with friends, and at this time, many eateries are packed with groups of people eating, drinking, conversing and generally having a ball.

Mealtimes are pretty much the same as in many parts of the West: breakfast is eaten between 6am and 8am, lunch is eaten between noon and 2pm, and dinner is eaten between 7pm and 9pm.

COOKING COURSES

If you enjoy the food in Japan, why not deepen your appreciation of Japanese cuisine by taking a cooking class? There are good cooking courses available in both Tokyo and Kyoto, and these companies can also arrange market tours:

A Taste of Culture (☎ 03-5716-5751; www.tasteofculture.com; courses from ¥5500) Offers cooking courses, and can create custom courses. For more, see p143.

WAK Japan (☎ 075-212-9993; www.wakjapan.com; 412-506 Iseya-chō, Kamigyō-ku) Offers cooking courses, and can create courses to suit special interests. For more, see p351.

USEFUL WORDS & PHRASES

Eating Out

Table for (one/two/three/…), please.
(hirori/futari/san-nin/…-nin) onegai shimas[u] (一人/二人/三人/…人),お願いします。

I'd like to reserve a table for eight o'clock (tonight/tomorrow night).
(konban/ashita no ban) (今晩/明日の晩)
hachi-ji ni yoyaku shitai no des[u] ga 八時に予約したいのですが。

We have a reservation.
yoyaku shimash[i]ta 予約しました。

We don't have a reservation.
yoyaku sh[i]teimasen 予約していません。

What's that?
are wa nan des[u] ka? あれは何ですか?

What's the speciality here?
koko no tokubetsu ryōri wa nan des[u] ka? ここの特別料理は何ですか?

What do you recommend?
o-susume wa nan des[u] ka? おすすめは何ですか?

Do you have…?
… ga arimas[u] ka? …がありますか?

Can I see the menu, please?
menyū o misete kudasai? メニューを見せてください?

Do you have a menu in English?
eigo no menyū wa arimas[u] ka? 英語のメニューはありますか?

I'd like…	*… o kudasai*	…をください。
Please bring me…	*… o onegai shimas[u]*	…をお願いします。
some/more bread	*pan*	パン
some pepper	*koshō*	コショウ
a plate	*sara*	皿
some salt	*shio*	塩
soy sauce	*shōyu*	醤油
a spoon	*supūn*	スプーン
a beer	*beeru*	ビール
some water	*mizu*	水
some wine	*wain*	ワイン

Harumi's Japanese Cooking (Kurihara Harumi) is a well-illustrated cookbook and a good introduction to Japanese cuisine. If you want to try making some of the dishes you enjoyed while in Japan, this is an excellent choice.

The bill/check, please. *(o-kanjō/o-aiso) o onegai shimas[u]* (お勘定/おあいそ)をお願いします。

You May Hear

May I help you?
irasshaimase いらっしゃいませ?

Welcome!
irasshai! いらっしゃい!

By yourself?
o-hitori-sama des[u] ka? お一人さまですか?

(Two/Three/Four) persons?
(ni/san/yon) -mei-sama des[u] ka? (二名/三名/四名) さまですか?

This way, please.
kochira e dōzo こちらへどうぞ。

May I take your order?
(go-chūmon wa) o-kimari des[u] ka? (ご注文は)お決まりですか?

Vegetarian & Special Needs

I'm a vegetarian.
watashi wa bejitarian des[u] 私はベジタリアンです。

I'm a vegan, I don't eat meat or dairy products.
watashi wa saishoku-shugisha des[u] kara, niku ya nyūseihin wa tabemasen 私は菜食主義者ですから,肉や乳製品は食べません。

Do you have any vegetarian dishes?
bejitarian-ryōri ga arimas[u] ka? ベジタリアン料理がありますか?

Is it cooked with pork lard or chicken stock?
kore wa rādo ka tori no dashi o tsukatte imas[u] ka? これはラードか鶏のだしを使っていますか?

I'm allergic to (peanuts).
watashi wa (pīnattsu) arerugii des[u] 私は(ピーナッツ)アレルギーです。

I don't eat…	*… wa tabemasen*	…は食べません
meat	*niku*	肉
pork	*buta-niku*	豚肉
seafood	*shiifūdo*	シーフード/海産物

Children

Are children allowed?
kodomo-zure demo ii des[u] ka? 子供連れでもいいですか?

Is there a children's menu?
kodomo-yō no menyū wa arimas[u] ka? 子供用のメニューはありますか?

Do you have a highchair for the baby?
bebii-yō no isu wa arimas[u] ka? ベビー用の椅子はありますか?