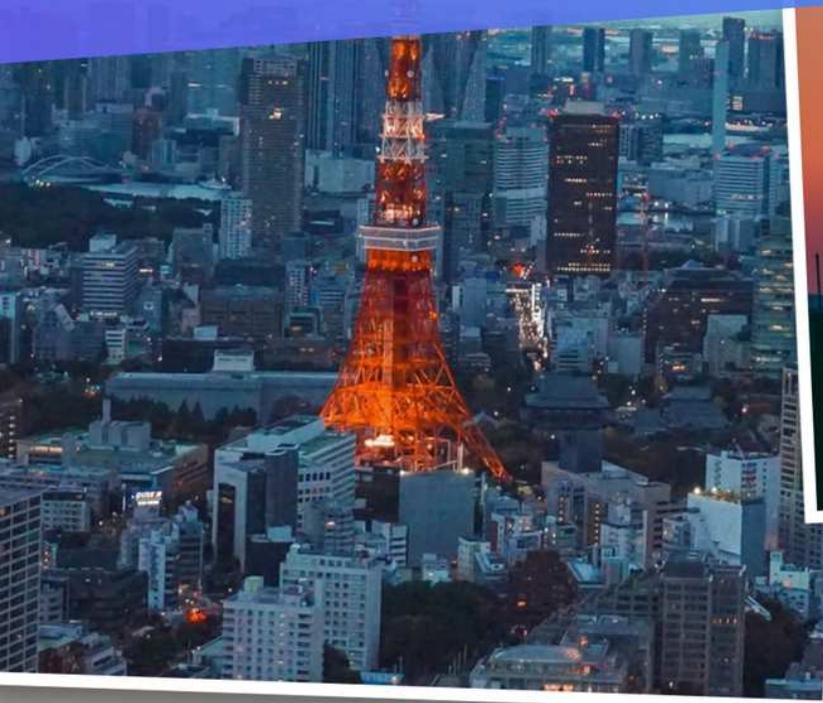




Ichigo Guide

Essential Guide to Japan

2019 Edition



Rachael and Jason Stirk

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Hi there!

Hi, and welcome to Ichigo Guide's **Essential Guide to Japan: 2019 Edition**. This guide focuses on the best places to see over a few weeks in Japan; not just the tourist hotspots, but also lesser-known, more genuine attractions.

In it, we will cover Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Kanazawa, Hiroshima, and Matsuyama; as well as lesser known areas in the Japanese Alps and Shikoku.

In particular, we've focused our recommendations on historic areas, art and craft, plus cultural and daily local life experiences like markets and festivals. Along the way, there will be some scenic spots to visit, some lesser-travelled local areas, and glimpses of the more zany side of Japan.

We've also included some general information on other nearby areas, including some places that might be a little difficult to get to. Even if you don't get a chance to see them on this trip, we hope it might give you some ideas for a future visit to see more of Japan.

This guide takes its name from the Japanese idiom "ichi-go ichi-e", which roughly translates to "one chance one meeting" or "one chance in a lifetime". The sentiment is that every trip, every day, every conversation is a once in a lifetime opportunity that can never be repeated in the same way. We hope that you take this sentiment with you on your travels, and remember to cherish every experience you have in Japan.

We sincerely hope you enjoy the guide and find it useful. If you have any feedback or questions, please feel free to email us at feedback@ichigo.guide - we would love to hear about your journey!

We also prepare personalised guides and itineraries, tailored specifically to you, your interests, and travel dates. To find out more, visit us at <https://ichigo.guide/custom/>.

About Us

We have been fortunate to visit Japan several times since 2000, and in those visits, we have been able to explore a wide range of places and enjoy a variety of amazing experiences. We've lived like a local in Kyoto and Osaka, and meditated at temples in the mountains. We've hiked mountains in Nagano, and woken up in 200-year-old farmhouses in tiny rural towns in Shikoku. Our friends have led us through rabbit-warren alleys full of award-winning restaurants, and we've spent nights chatting away in intimate 4-seat bars. We're incredibly grateful for all the experiences we've had in Japan - this guide is our chance to give some of that joy to other people.

We initially prepared this guide as a series of short tips for friends and family travelling to Japan. Over several years we have built it up as more people have asked us for assistance and advice.

We don't receive kickbacks or commissions for any of the locations or providers we recommend in this guide - we support them because we've found them to be helpful for travellers.

If your friends or family are interested in their own personalised Ichigo Guide, please send them through to <https://ichigo.guide/custom/>

News, Errata and Updates

This guide was prepared in April 2019, and some things might have changed since that time: historic sites undergo maintenance, railway lines are closed due to storm damage, or businesses close down or change prices.

To help keep you updated on these changes, we provide a [News & Updates page](#)¹ for all our guides. Any time we have updates or corrections, we will post it to the News & Updates page.

News & Updates: <https://ichigo.guide/essential-japan/news/>

Ichigo Guide Newsletter

Be the first to know about any news or updates about travelling Japan: subscribe to [the Ichigo Guide newsletter](#)²! In it, we cover any News & Updates, season forecast information, as well as upcoming attractions like local festivals or special events.

Newsletter: <https://ichigo.guide/newsletter/>

What to Expect in Japan

If this is your first trip to Japan, you're in for a treat!

First of all, please remember that although Japan might be quite different to what you're familiar with at home, it's not as "alien" as the mainstream media makes out. At the end of the day, Japanese people are just like anyone anywhere - they work, have families, want to get along and feel safe, and they want their community to be happy and safe too. Even if you can't speak Japanese, try to connect with people on a genuine, human level, and generally, things will work out OK.

The good news is that Japan is very friendly for tourists, and has a wealth of amazing experiences to enjoy. Japan is a mix of familiar and foreign - some parts will feel like any generic, modern city; other times you will see 500-year-old culture still being practised; and other times, you will see zany and fantastic ultra-modern culture. So, expect to be surprised, and be prepared that your first trip is still going to have quite a learning curve - that's part of the fun of travel!

Not only will Japanese culture have different expectations to what you might be used to, but technologically things can be a little different too. Japan is a mixture of extremes - some areas have high tech robots, but it's generally difficult to pay by card, and there are still many "retro" Showa era systems and buildings; some businesses will dote on you with service, others will use impersonal ticket systems; you will find secluded natural spaces and bustling city train stations.

Japanese people are very forgiving and generally happy to help. They might be having a rough day like anyone, but if you need help, someone will usually do their best to help out - and be kind enough to forgive your lack of language skills or experience with how things are done in Japan. Japanese society is built around the group, and this means both helping and accommodating others; but this also means that the expectation is for you to be considerate of others, even if you're not quite sure what you should be doing.

Many Japanese people in the cities will speak a little English. Younger generations and school children will often have excellent English skills. However, it's common for Japanese people - even those with exceptional English - to be nervous about speaking it. They'll appreciate any Japanese you can muster - even a simple, well pronounced "konnichiwa" can often result in delight and exclamations of your language prowess. Once you get to more rural areas, English can be uncommon - especially with older generations. That said, it's quite common for older people to have perfected their English at work, only to retire to their small home village.

In general, Japan is a very safe country, with low levels of crime. By some metrics, even Australia has 4x the crime that Japan does per capita! However, some areas do pose more of a risk than others for tourist-targeting problems like scams and theft. We'll try to let you know about areas you need to be particularly careful, but in general, most places are as safe (if not safer) than most western cities. That said, Japan can be a bit backward and sexist with regards to women's safety and sexual assault. This means that these crimes are often under-reported and under-prosecuted. Women travelling alone should use caution in high-risk situations, even though these types of crimes are rare.

Unforgettable Experiences

If this is your first trip to Japan or your 100th, there are a few things we think every traveller should aim to do at least once. You might not tick them all off this trip, and some might take a bit of courage, but these are the things which are likely to give you the best experience, and the best understanding of the variety that Japan can offer. A mix of Old Japan and New Japan.

- Stay in a Japanese style tatami room (reed flooring and futons) at least once. It's more comfortable than you might think, and waking up to the smell of tatami is a uniquely Japanese experience. Plus, you can find some pretty affordable Japanese style accommodation in some of the tourist hotspots, rather than western style accommodation!
- Bathe at an Onsen or Sento. An onsen, especially one with an outdoor bath, is an incredible way to experience this quintessential Japanese custom. Your first visit will be intimidating, but don't let that put you off!
- Visit a lookout in Tokyo. At ground level, it's easy to forget the scale of Tokyo. It's the largest metropolitan area in the world, and once you're off the ground the sheer size is overwhelming.
- Visit a lookout in Osaka. Osaka is another big city, but it's quite different to Tokyo.
- Visit the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) in Kyoto. It's an incredible sight with a long and fascinating history. A visit to Kyoto isn't really complete without seeing it at least once.
- Visit the Silver Pavilion (Ginkakuji) in Kyoto. Set in a quiet residential part of Kyoto, the Silver Pavilion is a beautiful construction. But even more so, the gardens surrounding the pavilion are exquisite.
- Visit Mt. Koya, even just for a day trip. With Buddhist history dating back to the 800s, wandering the picturesque natural environment of Mt. Koya is an incredible experience.
- Visit a local festival, known as a matsuri. Many local areas have festivals all throughout the year for different reasons. Generally, these are held on or near shrines and include a wide range of food and toy stalls, along with cultural events like dance, traditional musical performances, or religious ceremonies.
- Ride the Shinkansen at least once. The Japanese train system is world renowned - where else would a company publicly apologise for a train leaving the station 25 seconds early! The Shinkansen is a technology and engineering marvel, but it's also thanks to almost fanatical attention to detail and organisation to ensure that all the pieces run like clockwork. There's something about looking at the window at ground level as the world flies past at 300km per hour, within seconds of schedule!
- Ride in a taxi. Japanese taxis are quite unique - automatic doors, lace upholstery, and (often) white glove service. Even if they're a bit expensive for frequent use, getting a taxi at least once is something worth experiencing in Japan.

- If you can, catch a baseball game. Even if you're not the biggest baseball fan, the atmosphere is always electric, and it's a great glimpse into how seriously the country takes the sport. Watch the game, buy a beer or chu-hi from your seat, and enjoy the intense atmosphere - usually featuring supporter-formed brass bands who have a different song for every player! Tickets can be hard to buy without good Japanese language skills, but we've used [Japan Ball](#) ³ in the past - they will buy tickets for you, with a small markup, and post them to you with English instructions.

Finding More Ideas

Japan has so many things to do, and unfortunately, this guide can only cover some of it. Thankfully, there are a lot of other resources available for Japan travel.

Our favourite go-to source for areas we haven't explored is [Japan Guide](#) ⁴. Although it's not an exhaustive list of everywhere you will want to go, it has a vast range of suggestions for your first trip. It tends to cover the big name, most popular places in Japan, but misses out on quite a lot of the smaller, more genuine experiences. (Which is why Ichigo Guide exists!)

Another favourite resource is [Japan Cheapo](#) ⁵ and its sister site [Tokyo Cheapo](#) ⁶. These sites will often list current local events; for example, a local festival or community event. It's a great way to find those once-in-a-lifetime little community events, where you might be the only westerner there. As the name suggests, many of the events are free or cheap.

Visiting the Highlights of Japan

The truth is that Japan is a complex country, and every different locality has its own unique atmosphere and culture. The good news is, with a bit of time, and a selection of cities, you can get a deep appreciation for everything Japan offers - cities and villages, urban and rural, modern and ancient.

We recommend you focus your first trip around Osaka and Kyoto, and plan side trips to Tokyo and Hiroshima from there. Staying in either Osaka or Kyoto, it's easy to travel to the other, and easy to take day trips to nearby attractions like Nara, Mt. Koya, and Himeji. Osaka and Kyoto both include Shinkansen stations, making it very easy to get to Tokyo and Hiroshima.

Depending on how long you spend, and how much you want to see, a good plan for a first trip can be to arrive in Tokyo for a few days, then head to Osaka or Kyoto for the bulk of the trip. For an extended trip, you can take the Shinkansen to Hiroshima or Nagasaki for a few days, and then head back to Osaka or Tokyo to fly home. If you have time, you may like to make a side trip from Osaka, such as an overnight stay at Mt. Koya, or a few days in Matsuyama and Hiroshima.

Obviously, there is a lot of personal taste when it comes to the choice of accommodation when travelling. These options can range from ultra-luxury hotels and onsens, through to cheaper business hotels, to family-run inns, guesthouses, and home-stay arrangements. In general, we recommend first-time visitors to Japan consider onsen, ryokan, or guesthouse accommodation at

least once - many of these are run by families, and will give you a more genuine experience of Japanese daily life.

Another great option is to use a site like [AirBnB](#) ⁷ to find a private home-stay room or a full house in a residential area. Not only will this give you a genuine experience of daily life in Japan, but also provide you with access to someone who can help direct you to local highlights and special events.

Many Japanese guesthouses also list on AirBnB, and these can be a fantastic middle ground - the friendliness of a home-stay, with the services of a low-end hotel. Many of these can provide home-cooked meals, or rent bicycles to you at a fraction of retail rental rates.

There is more information on booking these different kinds of accommodation, and the differences, later in this guide.

In the following sections, we will suggest some basic itineraries you can use when exploring Japan. We recommend you use these as the starting point for your own trip and expand your plans in areas that interest you.

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Get the Essential Guide to Japan

Thanks for reading this sample copy of the **Essential Guide to Japan: 2019 Edition**.

The full version includes:

- Sample itineraries for Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Hiroshima, and more.
- The highlights of each season in Japan, what to expect, and what to pack.
- Guides to major areas in Japan, from major centres like Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, through to lesser known gems like Kanazawa and Matsumoto.
- Detailed instructions how to navigate Japan's train, bus, and streetcar systems.
- How to decide if the JR Pass will save you money or just be an unnecessary cost.
- Tips and advice to make your day-to-day travel smooth and convenient.
- and much much more!

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