

Japan Essentials for Schools

An information pack for students and teachers

Introduction

Japan is known for its distinct, unique, and vibrant culture. Whilst you may already study Japanese or already know a lot about the country, there are still many things you can only learn about through first-hand experience. If you have never visited the country before, you might be surprised by how different societal and cultural expectations are in Japan compared to your home country, and it is completely normal to experience culture shock!

However, a way to minimise culture shock is by researching and learning about the country you are visiting before you arrive, so that you know what to expect. The purpose of this information pack is to inform you of different aspects and etiquettes associated with Japanese society and culture that you are likely to encounter during your visit, in order to best prepare you for an enjoyable experience during your stay in Japan.

We recommend that you bring this pack with you during your trip so that you can refer to it when necessary.

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Introduction to Japan

Key information to know about Japan:

- Flight time: non-stop from London to Tokyo – 13.5 hours on average (flight time may vary depending on your departure airport, destination, and route)
- Time difference: 8/9 hours (depending on daylight savings)
- Capital city: Tokyo
- Currency: Yen ¥

Weather and climate

Depending on where you travel in Japan, the weather and climate can vary greatly. Summers can be hot and humid with temperatures reaching above 30 degrees Celsius. In contrast, winters can be freezing cold; some parts of northern Honshu and Hokkaido are well-accustomed to significant snowfall and minus temperatures during the winter months in particular.

Below is a table of what average temperatures are like across Japan throughout the year.

City	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Tokyo	5°C	6°C	9°C	14°C	18°C	21°C	25°C	27°C	24°C	18°C	13°C	8°C
Kyoto	4°C	5°C	8°C	14°C	18°C	22°C	27°C	29°C	25°C	19°C	12°C	6°C
Osaka	6°C	7°C	10°C	15°C	20°C	23°C	28°C	29°C	26°C	20°C	14°C	8°C
Sapporo	-3°C	-3°C	0°C	6°C	11°C	16°C	20°C	22°C	18°C	11°C	4°C	-1°C
Fukuoka	6°C	7°C	10°C	15°C	19°C	23°C	27°C	29°C	26°C	21°C	15°C	9°C

Wherever you go in Japan, be sure to check ahead of time what the weather will be like, so that you can plan accordingly!

Enjoy Japan's four seasons!

It is certainly true that whatever time of the year you choose to visit Japan, you will be able to experience a wide range of unique seasonal attractions during your stay. Below is a guide to some of the different seasonal attractions and activities you can enjoy during your time in Japan!

Spring

- Hanami (cherry blossom viewing)
- Exploring parks and nature
- Renting and wearing a kimono
- Savouring seasonal food like sanshoku dango or sakura mochi

Summer

- Matsuri (festivals)
- Fireworks
- Visiting the beach
- Savouring shaved ice and festival food
- Renting a yukata

Autumn

- Koyo (autumn leaves)
- Hiking
- Visit parks and getting out into nature
- Savouring seasonal treats like yakiimo (baked sweet potato) and kuri (chestnuts)

Winter

- Winter sports such as skiing and snowboarding
 - Winter illuminations
 - Warming up with seasonal foods like oden and nabe
 - New Year's celebrations
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Daily life

This following section covers various aspects of daily life that you are likely to encounter during your stay in Japan. No matter where you are staying and what you are doing, it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with the subjects within this section before you go in order to have a more enjoyable stay. Try your best to follow these societal rules and expectations during your stay and be a respectful visitor!

Shoes

When entering some buildings (and definitely when entering someone's home!) in Japan, you might be expected to take off your shoes at the genkan (entrance) for hygiene purposes. Slippers might also be provided for you to wear, so be sure to put these on when necessary to do so. If you are staying in a Japanese home or with a host family, it might be a good idea to pack a pair of slippers to bring with you for this reason.

Tatami

Some houses and buildings may have traditional Japanese rooms with tatami flooring. You should only walk on tatami with socks on; you cannot wear slippers and certainly not outdoor shoes. The reason for this is tatami can be easily damaged, so it is better to walk on it without even wearing slippers to help maintain its condition.

Toilets

There are two types of toilets you will encounter in Japan – Western-style toilets and Japanese-style squat toilets. In most public bathrooms, there will most likely be both Western-style and Japanese-style toilets, however, in some extremely rare cases, Japanese-style toilets may only be available. Western-style toilets come equipped with a bidet and sometimes even heated seats.

Bathrooms

In Japanese households, the bathroom will often be separated into two sections. When you enter, there will usually be an area where the washing machine, tumble dryer, and sink may also be. This space is for you to get changed in and out of your clothes. Separate to this is the actual bathroom which is much like a wet room. In here is the bathtub and shower where you will wash. In Japan, the way in which people take a bath and the etiquettes surrounding it is also different from the UK. Public baths and onsen are common and many people like to visit them to be able to relax and unwind. As such, there are rules to be mindful of so you can be considerate of others when bathing. These rules apply whether you are bathing in onsen, a public bath, or even privately at home.

- Before taking a bath, you should first wash your body and hair in the shower area to make sure everything is clean.
- After rinsing off the soap, you can enter the bathtub to soak and relax.
- The bath is for soaking only and not further cleansing, so avoid adding soap or dipping towels into the bath water.
- Once finished in the bath, step out into the shower area to rinse yourself and dry off.

Bedrooms

Most modern Japanese hotels and households will have beds with thick mattresses and bedframes for you to sleep on. However, if you are staying in a traditional Japanese inn (also known as ryokan) or in a Japanese-style room in a house, it is likely you will sleep on a futon mattress on top of the tatami flooring. Futon are thin padded mattresses and are designed to be folded away in the morning when you are done using them. It is important to make sure that you fold up your futon and duvet in the morning to let the tatami flooring air out.

Recycling

You might notice whilst you are out and about that roads and streets in Japan are exceptionally clean. Rubbish bins can be hard to come by whilst out in public, so please make sure you do not litter and hold onto your rubbish until you can find somewhere to dispose of it. Convenience stores often have recycling bins where you can dispose of rubbish but try to avoid disposing of too much all at once.

When you do dispose of rubbish, make sure you place it into the correct bin. Different regions in Japan may have slightly different recycling rules, but generally speaking:

- 紙 **kami** – **paper recycling**, which also includes cardboard, newspapers, magazines, etc.
- ペットボトル **petto botoru** / **PET bottles** – **plastic bottles** with the PET bottle symbol
- ビン・缶 **bin / kan** – **bottles and tin cans**
- 燃えるゴミ **moeru gomi** – **burnable rubbish**, includes things like food waste, fabrics, used paper (i.e. tissues, kitchen roll), small plastic items (i.e. snack or sweet wrappers), etc.
- 燃えないゴミ **moenai gomi** – **non-burnable rubbish**, includes things like broken glass, small electronic appliances, batteries, pots and pans, etc.

Host families

Staying with a host family during your time in Japan is an excellent way of experiencing Japanese culture first-hand and seeing what everyday life is like for people living in the country. It is also a great opportunity for you to practice and improve your language skills by communicating with and learning from native speakers. It is important to remember that, during your time in Japan, you will in some ways be acting as a representative of your own country. Therefore, it is important to know what kinds of rules and customs you should expect before your stay with your host family, to leave a positive impression and to make the most of your experience!

House rules

You should ask your host family what their house rules and expectations are if they do not already tell you. This could include asking when the quiet hours are in the evening, what time would be best to use the bathroom, when everybody else wakes up and eats breakfast, and so on. You should also offer to help your host family with any daily chores such as cleaning, washing dishes, preparing food for dinner, and so on. Doing so will show your appreciation and gratitude for being able to stay with them at their house.

Omiyage お土産

Before your trip to Japan, you should purchase a souvenir (known as omiyage in Japanese) for your host family (or host school, if you are visiting one). It is an expectation that, when going to someone's house for the first time, you should bring omiyage with you. Your omiyage does not need to be anything big or expensive; if you visit a gift shop in Japan, you will notice the omiyage sections are often filled with small boxes of individually wrapped sweets or snacks, so something similar to this would be ideal. It might be nice to bring omiyage that is representative of your hometown, city, or country. Examples of omiyage could include tea, sweets, or biscuits.

Communication

Try your best to communicate with people in Japanese as much as possible, even if you may not know much. Generally, people will appreciate your effort and you will be able to improve your skills even more by practicing speaking with a native speaker! If you are having trouble with communicating, remember to be patient, speak clearly, use simpler words, and don't be afraid to use alternative forms of communication, such as translation apps or visual aids like pictures or your own body language to help.

Bowing

Bowing is an important part of communication and respect for Japanese people. When you say hello or goodbye to someone in Japan, you should bow at the same time. However, a bow can also be used in many other scenarios :

- Apologising to someone
- Thanking someone
- Asking someone for a favour
- Congratulating someone

In most scenarios, you only need to bow at about 15-30 °. A casual bow in informal situations can be as simple as a small nod of the head. In contrast, a deeper bow would be used in more formal scenarios when you want to convey respect to someone.

It is important to keep in mind that, unlike the UK, body contact (i.e., shaking hands or hugging) is not so common in Japan. When you greet someone, it is better to bow instead.

Public transport

You will most likely travel using public transport throughout your stay in Japan. Japanese public transport is well known for its efficiency and punctuality, and it is unlikely that you will experience delays longer than a couple of minutes, however it is not unheard of. This section will aim to provide you with information on basic public transport etiquette and other useful information that you should know.

Note: Public transport services vary depending on location, and some of the information in this section may not apply to every region, so it is best to check to the travel advice and guidance for where you are visiting before you travel.

Etiquette

When using public transport (bus, train, or subway), there are a number of general rules to be mindful of.

- Do not consume food or drink on public transport (note – if you are feeling particularly unwell, you can of course drink water, but be mindful of others and if you are worried, inform somebody that you are not feeling well).
- Be quiet. You may speak to others but do so quietly so that you do not disturb other passengers.
- Set your phone to silent mode. Avoid taking phone calls until you have exited the bus/train.
- Be mindful of where the priority seats are – these will usually be marked with a sign. Try to avoid using priority seats unless you are entitled to one. If you are seated in a priority seat, be prepared to give it up when necessary to do so.
- If the train or bus is busy and you are standing, move your backpack or bag round to your front so you can avoid bumping into other people.
- Board the bus/train in order of the queue and do not push in front of others.

Women-only carriages

On some lines, trains will have reserved women-only carriages. These will usually be clearly indicated with signs. Sometimes, the women-only carriages will only be in effect during certain hours of the day, such as during peak travel times.

Food and Restaurants

Trying authentic Japanese cuisine is something many visitors like to do when travelling to Japan, but there are some key things you should keep in mind first before planning which restaurants to visit and what food you would like to try!

Table manners

During your stay in Japan, you will most likely visit lots of restaurants and try lots of different Japanese food. There are two key phrases you should know to show respect before and after eating a meal someone has made for you:

- Before eating your meal – say, itadakimasu **いただきます**, which literally means “I humbly receive”
- When you are finished with your meal – say, gochisousama deshita **ごちそうさまでした**, which literally means “thank you for the meal”

If you are staying with a host family, make sure to say these phrases to show respect and your appreciation for the food. Also make sure to not start eating until everyone is seated with their meal.

Something else you might notice during your trip is that Japanese people tend to slurp their food quite loudly when eating soba (noodles). Whilst this might be seen as bad table manners in the UK, this is actually a positive thing in Japan! It's a way of showing your appreciation of the meal and that you find it to be delicious - so don't be afraid to slurp soba!

Allergies and dietary requirements

If you have any allergies or other dietary requirements, you may be worried about where you will be able to eat and what kinds of food you will be able to enjoy whilst in Japan. Sometimes restaurants will not always be accommodating of your needs, and finding restaurants that will offer vegetarian, vegan, halal, or kosher meals can also be quite challenging. It's important that before you are seated in the restaurant, you inform a member of staff of your allergies/dietary requirements. It may also be useful for you to learn some key phrases beforehand:

- わたしはアレルギーがあります Watashi wa arerugii ga arimasu. – I have an allergy.
- 「allergen/food」が いっさい たべられません [allergen/food] ga issai taberaremasen. – I absolutely cannot eat [allergen/food] (*issai (いっさい) emphasises that you absolutely cannot consume said food).
- 「allergen/drink」が いっさい のめません [drink] ga issai nomemasen. – I absolutely cannot drink [drink]
- 「allergen」にアレルギーです [allergen] ni arerugii desu. – I am allergic to [allergen].
- 「food」はだいじょうぶです [food] wa daijoubu desu. – [food] is okay for me to eat.
- 「food」が たべられます [food] ga taberaremasu. – I can eat [food].
- 「drink」が のめます [drink] ga nomemasu. – I can drink [drink].

Some restaurants may also have pictograms on the menu to indicate what ingredients are contained in a dish. We recommend that before you travel to Japan, you research and plan to visit restaurants that could be best suited for your needs.

Restaurant etiquette

- When seated at a restaurant, you might notice a box underneath your table. This is for you to place your bag and other belongings in. Japanese people do not like to place personal belongings on the floor otherwise it will dirty them, so make sure to use the boxes and try to avoid placing your belongings on the floor.

- Some restaurants will have a small button for you to press when you are ready to order your food, but at others a member of staff will come over to take your order.
- Most restaurants will also have knives and forks to use if you struggle to use chopsticks - just ask a member of staff if you need them.
- A member of staff will usually leave the receipt for your meal on your table. When you are ready to pay, head to the till counter with your receipt.
- There is no tipping culture, so you do not need to leave a tip when paying at a restaurant (or anywhere!).

Eating outside

Eating food whilst out and about is okay, but you should avoid eating and drinking whilst walking somewhere, as this is something that people do not commonly do in Japan. If you want to eat or drink something whilst you are out and about, it is best to stand somewhere out of the way of other people and eat and drink whilst you are standing.

Shopping

You might want to do some shopping during your visit to Japan and buy some souvenirs for home, so here are some things you should keep in mind before going on your shopping spree!

Cash

Japan is still a cash-based society, and although paying by card is becoming increasingly more common in shops and other establishments across the country, you may generally find it easier to use cash during your stay. International cards are often not always accepted, and some shops do not accept card at all.

The currency of Japan is Yen. There are 1 yen, 5 yen, 10 yen, 50 yen, 100 yen, and 500 yen coins, as well as 1,000 yen, 2,000 yen, 5,000 yen, and 10,000 yen notes. (Note: 2,000 yen notes are quite rare and not often used)

Tax

You might notice when shopping in Japan that price tags or labels for an item may have two prices on. This is because some shops will show the price of an item both with and without tax. If you want to know the actual price of an item, look for the slightly higher price and these Kanji - 税込 ぜいこみ zeikomi – which means “tax included”. VAT in Japan is between 8% - 10% (depending on the item). Make sure you keep an eye out for the tax included price so you aren’t surprised when you go to pay at the till!

Paying

When paying for an item at a till in a shop, you should also place your cash onto one of the cash trays on the counter. Do not directly hand your cash to the cashier and do not place it on the counter. The cashier will also return your change to you on the cash tray and usually lay it out in a way so you can see you have received the exact change.

Key phrases

Whether you already know some Japanese or not much at all, it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with some key phrases that you might use during your visit to Japan. Any phrases that have a star (★) next to them are essential phrases which we recommend you learn before your trip!

General

- おはようございます Ohayou gozaimasu – Good morning ★
- こんにちは Konnichiwa – Hello/Good afternoon ★
- こんばんは Konbanwa – Good evening ★
- おやすみなさい Oyasumi nasai – Good night
- じゃ、また！・またね！ Ja, mata!/Mata ne! – See you later!
- さようなら Sayounara – Good bye
- ありがとうございます Arigatou gozaimasu – Thank you ★
- はい Hai – Yes ★
- いいえ Iie – No ★
- そうですか Sou desu ka – I see.
- すみません Sumimasen – Excuse me ★
- ごめんなさい Gomen nasai – Sorry
- はい、おねがいします Hai, onegaishimasu – Yes, please
- いいえ、けっこうです Iie, kekkou desu – No, thank you
- だいじょうぶです Daijoubu desu – I'm fine/it's okay ★
- ちょっとまってください Chotto matte kudasai – Please wait a moment

Communication

- えいごができますか Eigo ga dekimasu ka – Do you know English? ★
- これはにほんごでなんですか Kore wa nihongo de nan desu ka – How do you say this in Japanese?
- すみません、もういちどいってください Sumimasen, mou ichido itte kudasai – Sorry, can you please say that again?
- すみません、もうすこしゆっくりはなしてください Sumimasen, mou sukoshi yukkuri hanashite kudasai – Sorry, can you please speak a little more slowly?

Introducing yourself

- はじめまして！ Hajime mashite! - How do you do? (Used when meeting someone for the first time)
- 「name」です [name] desu - I'm [name]. ★
- 「country」からきました [country] kara kimashita - I'm from [country].
- よろしくおねがいします Yoroshiku onegaishimasu - Nice to meet you. ★
- これは、おみやげです Kore wa, omiyage desu. - This is a souvenir for you.

Places and directions

- 「place」はどこですか [place] wa doko desu ka. – Where is [place]?
- どこにありますか Doko ni arimasu ka. – Where is it?
- 「place」にいきたいです [place] ni ikitai desu. – I want to go to [place].
- ここから「place」までどうやっていきますか Koko kara [place] made douyatte ikimasu ka. – How do I get from here to [place]?

Shops and Restaurants

- これはいくらですか Kore wa ikura desu ka – How much is this? ★
- 「food/item」をください [food/item] o kudasai – Please may I have [food/item]? ★
- 「food/item」がありますか [food/item] ga arimasu ka – Do you have [food/item]?
- いただきます Itadakimasu – I humbly receive
- ごちそうさまでした Gochisousama deshita – Thank you for the meal
- えいごのメニューはありますか Eigo no menyuu wa arimasu ka – Do you have an English menu?
- わたしは、アレルギーがあります Watashi wa, arerugii ga arimasu – I have an allergy
- 「food」がいつさいたべられません [food] ga issai taberare masen – I absolutely cannot eat [food]
- 「drink」がいつさいのめません [drink] ga issai nomemasen – I absolutely cannot drink [drink]

Emergencies

Save these numbers to your mobile phone before you travel, so that you know which numbers to call in case of emergency.

- Ambulance – Dial 119
- Fire – Dial 119
- Police – Dial 110