



JAPAN

AN OPINIONATED GUIDE

ABRAHAM THOMAS

*Text and photos by Abraham Thomas.
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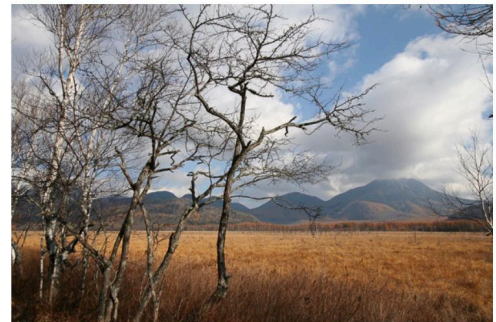
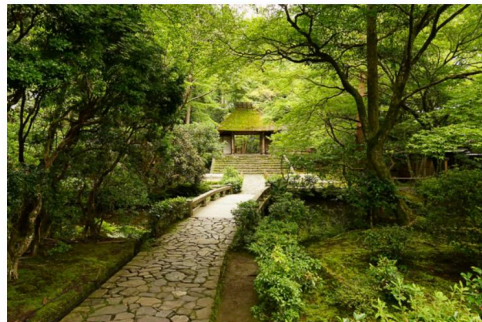
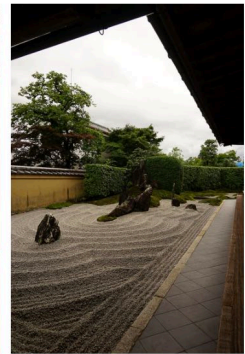
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Bamboo grove in Kamakura; Fortune sign in Asakusa; Rock garden at Daitoku-ji in Kyoto; Red lantern marks an izakaya in Tokyo; Crowds in Shibuya; Traditional fence in Kyoto; Side street in Shinjuku; Garden of Hōnen-in in Kyoto; Senjogahara marsh in Nikko.

Introduction

1. About This Guide

This is my **opinionated** guide to Japan.

Most websites and guidebooks try to be comprehensive – they have information about every city, every neighbourhood, every sight. In a country like Japan, this can quickly get overwhelming. They also try to be neutral – they lay out all the options and then expect the reader to make their own plans.

Not this one. This guide is **opinionated**. I curate what I think is the best of Japan for a first-time visitor. I tell you exactly what to do, and when; where to go, and how; which sights and experiences to prioritize, and which to skip; where to shop, eat, take photos, and much more.

It's also **optimized**. For many people, Japan is a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Why spend that trip navigating crowds, standing in lines, waiting for trains, or otherwise wasting time? I provide detailed and precise daily plans so that you can have a fun and full vacation.

Where other guides are broad and shallow, this one is **narrow and deep**. I include all the detail you need, and nothing else.

This guide is a **labour of love**. I'm not a professional travel writer, tour guide, creator, or influencer. I wrote this guide because I love Japan; I have a lot of experience in the country; and I want to share what I know.

Follow my recommendations, and I promise you will have a magnificent vacation.

2. What's Included

In this guide, you'll find:

- Detailed daily **itineraries** and scheduling notes to ensure you use your time in Japan effectively and well.
- Rich and in-depth **descriptions** for all the places you should visit.
- Dozens of **insider suggestions** to make your journey extra enjoyable.
- Specific personal **recommendations** for attractions, activities, restaurants, shops.
- **Digressions** on Japan's history, culture, society and more; recommendations for what to read and watch, eat and drink, experience and enjoy.
- Over a hundred original **photographs** showing the beauty and vibrancy of Japan.



Bamboo grove at Hase-dera, Kamakura

This guide is designed for **first-time visitors**, so I've included both bucket-list/fan-favourite sights, and obscure "off-the-beaten-path" destinations. I've chosen to focus on **Tokyo** and **Kyoto**, but I've added a few excursions to other places worth visiting.

3. And What's Not

This is not a copy-and-paste guide. Every single recommendation is drawn from my own **personal experience**.

This guide doesn't replace the internet. There are dozens of websites that will give you all the facts you need to have a great Japanese vacation; this guide supplements those facts with **opinions, judgement, and selectivity**.

This is not a budget cheapo guide, nor is it a luxury YOLO guide. Instead, I try to follow a middle ground. Fortunately, many of the best experiences aren't expensive, and many of the most expensive experiences aren't very good.

4. Why Trust Me?

Here are three reasons to trust my recommendations.

First, I lived in Japan for many years, during which time I travelled extensively all over the country. And I've visited Japan dozens of times after I moved away. I think I do a good job of combining the insider / resident / Japanese speaker perspective, with the foreigner / visitor / tourist perspective.



Pedestrians in Omotesando, Tokyo

Second, I think I have an unusually eclectic set of tastes, that I explored in great depth while living in and visiting Japan. This guide reflects those tastes and interests:

- Japanese aesthetics and design
- Cityscapes, neon lights, nightlife
- Modern urbanism, transit, liveability
- Anime, manga, otaku, weeb culture
- Food, restaurants, markets, cooking
- Coffee, whiskey, jazz
- Street and landscape photography
- Art, calligraphy, prints, stationery
- Crafts, fabrics, everyday design
- Tools, gadgets, electronics, gear
- Zen philosophy and mindfulness
- Buddhist temples and rock gardens
- Shinto shrines and respect for nature
- Japanese ways of balancing traditional and modern, speed and calm – attention to detail, the aesthetics of everyday things



Your author, much younger, preparing to perform on the taiko drums

Third, I'm an over-optimizer, a compulsive researcher and planner, and an enthusiast. You get to benefit from all those attributes!

Happy Japan Travels!

Planning Your Trip

1. Where To Go

Here is how I would spend two weeks on a first trip to Japan:

Day	Activities	Stay
0	Arrive Tokyo	Tokyo 1
1	Asakusa, Kappabashi, Ryogoku, Akihabara	Tokyo 1
2	Tsukiji, Kiyosumi, Mon-naka, Tsukishima, Ginza, Yurakucho	Tokyo 1
3	Korakuen, Jimbocho, Ameyoko, Ueno, Nippori, Yanesen	Tokyo 1
4	Train to Kanazawa + Kenrokuen	Kanazawa
5	Kenrokuen + Train to Kyoto + Nishiki Market, Gion	Kyoto
6	Kinkaku-ji + Ryoan-ji + Ginkaku-ji, Philosopher's Path	Kyoto
7	Fushimi Inari + Kiyomizu-dera, Sannenzaka, Kodai-ji	Kyoto
8	Nara + Uji + Osaka for dinner	Kyoto
9	Kurama or Arashiyama + Train to Hakone + Onsen stay	Hakone
10	Hakone Loop + Return to Tokyo, Shinjuku	Tokyo 2
11	Kichijoji, Shimokitazawa, Shinjuku, maybe Ikebukuro	Tokyo 2
12	Day trip to Kamakura, maybe Yokohama	Tokyo 2
13	Nihonbashi, Tokyo Sta, Omotesando, Harajuku, Shibuya	Tokyo 2
14	Depart Tokyo	

This itinerary is divided into three 4-night stays, in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Tokyo, separated by 1-night stays in Kanazawa and Hakone. This arrangement is highly intentional: it minimizes packing, repacking, and carting luggage round, and is designed to take advantage of Japan's fantastic *takkyubin* service (see the section titled 'luggage optimization' for more).

You might think this is too much Tokyo and Kyoto, and not enough elsewhere. I disagree. For a first trip, Tokyo and Kyoto have everything you need to see and more; they are both inexhaustibly rich cities. You'll have plenty of variety (along every dimension) just from spending your time in

those two places, leavened with trips to Kamakura, Kanazawa, Nara, Osaka, and Hakone. I recommend focusing in this manner, rather than trying to squeeze in more destinations in an effort to 'cover the whole country'.

(The one exception is if you visit in winter and you're a skier. The snow and slopes in Japan are magnificent, and highly recommended.)

And Tokyo is an endless treasure: you could easily add another week there and still barely scratch the surface of things to see and do and experience. On my last trip, I spent 11 nights in Tokyo, and it still wasn't enough.

2. When To Go

Spring is the best time to visit Japan: 1 Apr to 31 May. Mild weather, lots of sunshine, and it's also cherry blossom season. Unfortunately, it's also the busiest time of year for tourists, for precisely those reasons. Avoid the 'Golden Week' holiday period (29 Apr to 5 May) if you can.



Fall colours, Shoyo-en garden in Nikko

Fall is also a great time to visit: 15 Sep to 30 Nov. Again, mild weather, lots of sunshine, and you get to see spectacular fall colours in Kyoto, Kamakura and especially Nikko.



Sanja-matsuri, early summer in Tokyo

Summer is hot and humid. June is a bit rainy but not too bad. The first half of July tends to be quite

wet. From about 15 Jul to 31 Aug is peak heat and humidity, and quite draining, but at least there's less rain. There may be some typhoons in Aug and Sep but they come and go quickly. Avoid the O-bon holidays in mid Aug.

Winter depends on where you are. Tokyo and Osaka are generally mild: 5 to 10°C. Kyoto is a touch cooler, and the houses tend to be older (hence less well insulated), but still nothing uncomfortable. Snow is rare in these cities and never stays on the ground. While the days are short, you'll get more blue skies and sunshine than at most other times of year.

Any place in the mountains gets a lot colder, as do Kanazawa, northern Honshu, and Hokkaido. Also, 30 Dec to 3 Jan is when a lot of Japanese travel to their hometowns, so trains and hotels are crowded, and many smaller shops are closed.



Sprinkling of snow in Tsumago, Kiso Valley

Seriously, though, avoid the three major holiday periods if you can: Golden Week, O-bon, and New Year's. Tourist spots will be crowded, trains packed, hotels full. Nothing insuperable, but you'll need to book train tickets and hotel stays at least a few weeks in advance, if you're travelling during those windows.

3. Before You Go

Here are some things you should do before the start of your trip:

- Read this guide from start to finish ☺
- Book tickets for popular attractions like Teamlabs and the Ghibli museum in Mitaka.
- If you're travelling during a Japanese holiday week, book your shinkansen tickets.
- Reserve spots in any classes you plan to take, or activities you plan to do.
- Get an e-sim – I recommend Airalo.
- Get the Suica app and load a cash balance.
- Download the Japanese lexicon for Google Translate so that you can use it offline.
- Download other useful apps like Papago, Line, Go Taxi, Ecbo Cloak, MyMizu, Klook etc.
- Learn some basic Japanese phrases, especially for transportation, shopping, and dining – it makes a *huge* difference, even these days.
- Practise eating with chopsticks if you're not already familiar with them.
- Complete any visa formalities.
- Buy comfortable shoes and get used to walking 10-20,000 steps a day!

Japan uses the same power outlets as the US and Canada, with a slightly lower voltage (100V) and a frequency of 50/60 Hz. Your North American appliances should work fine without any converters or adapters.

4. Dealing With Crowds

Japan's popularity as a tourist destination has *exploded* in recent years: from 6M visitors in 2011 to 32M in 2021. And after a few years of pandemic isolation, the tourist floodgates have opened again, thanks to a weak yen, rising prosperity elsewhere in Asia, and social media and pop culture influence. 2024 is expected to set a new record of 35M visitors.



Visitors at Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kyoto

This has consequences. The most obvious one is that popular destinations can get **insanely busy**. It's hard to feel calm and contemplative at Arashiyama, beautiful though the bamboo grove is, when you're surrounded by 500 other visitors, all busy taking selfies. There are queues and crowds everywhere: restaurants, shopping streets, viral viewpoints, you name it.

And at many of these places, **tourist traps** have begun to proliferate. Food stalls selling mediocre snacks at a 5x markup; 'activities' that are shallow and gimmicky at best, exploitative at worst; long lines for underwhelming experiences. The sheer volume of tourists, combined with economic pressures, means that Japan's legendary customer service has, at some of these places, begun to fray around the edges. (This never used to be the case).

It's reached a stage where dealing with crowds and over-tourism is now a necessary part of any Japan trip. (Let's not be too snooty about this; you can't blame traffic when you *are* traffic.)

Fortunately, there are ways to work around this. Here are two very simple but very important suggestions to beat the crowds.

First, **make an early start** to every day. Jet lag is your friend! This will get you ahead of 95% of the crowds and really unlock a different level of experience. Organize your days like this:

- Rise at 7, out the door by 8, and head straight to destinations that open by 9.
- Try to eat lunch at 11 or 11:30, thus beating the 12-2 rush.
- Take it easy in the afternoon: rest at your inn, chill in a park or garden, saunter through museums and shops.
- Head out again for dinner at 5 or 5:30, thus beating the 6-9 rush.
- Then walk around through sunset (7p in Tokyo in June) and the night hours.

This schedule not only beats the crowds, it also gets you the best light for photography ☺ .

Following this plan is especially important for visiting the most popular tourist attractions: Senso-ji in Asakusa, Fushimi Inari Taisha and Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, and Arashiyama.

Useful info: Trains start running around 6am. Tsukiji market gets going around 7. Shinto shrines are open 24 hours. Buddhist temples usually open around 8-9. Most gardens are also open quite early. Finally, shops open at 10 or 11. Many restaurants close after lunch and reopen for dinner. Smaller shops close at either 6 or 8; larger ones stay open till 9 or 10. Bars stay open very late, but there's usually an "LO" (last order) time

for food. Convenience stores are open 24 hours (hurray).

My second suggestion is to **venture beyond the greatest hits**. Wander the side streets. Explore lesser-known neighbourhoods. Pop into obscure temples and random *zakka* shops. Japan is full of wonderful sights, and Tokyo and Kyoto are cities that truly reward this kind of serendipitous exploration: take full advantage.

Don't merely follow what's viral on Tiktok or Instagram. Don't trust Google reviews, they tend to be lowest-common denominator. Even at major tourist sites, don't go to the crowded establishments on the main approaches; instead, walk a block or two away and look for less glamorous options.

I cannot emphasize these two suggestions enough. Make an early start to your day, and step off the beaten track. Trust me, your Japan holiday will be vastly improved as a result.

And if that fails – relax! Japan has always been a high-density, high-stimulus environment; that's part of its attraction. Go with the flow; enjoy the crowds; embrace spontaneity; it's okay to be cheesy sometimes.

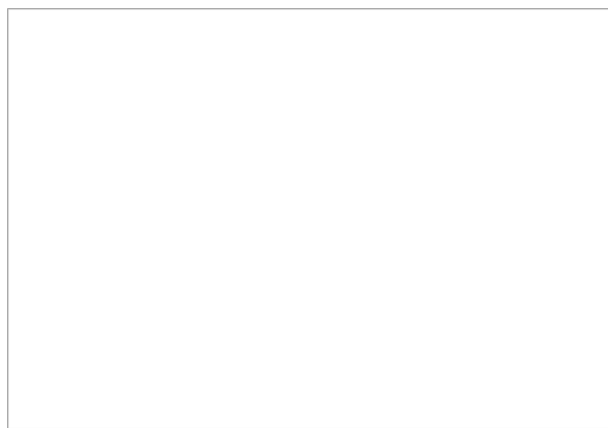


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5. Getting Around Japan

By far the best way to get around Japan is by **shinkansen** ('bullet train'). These are comfortable, convenient, frequent, and fast. Intercity train stations are central and well-connected to local subway and bus networks.

Different shinkansen lines have different names. On my itinerary, you'll be taking the Hokuriku shinkansen from Tokyo to Kanazawa, and the Tokaido shinkansen from Kyoto to Tokyo (not to be confused with the JR Tokaido line). On each line, there are express and local trains; you'll save time by taking the express services. These are called Kagayaki on the Hokuriku shinkansen, and Nozomi on the Tokaido shinkansen.

I used to recommend the Japan Rail (JR) pass, which allows unlimited travel on all JR trains in the country, including the shinkansen. But a recent price hike means this pass is no longer worth it; the break-even point is 4 intercity journeys in 7 days, which you won't do. Instead, buy point-to-point tickets for each trip.

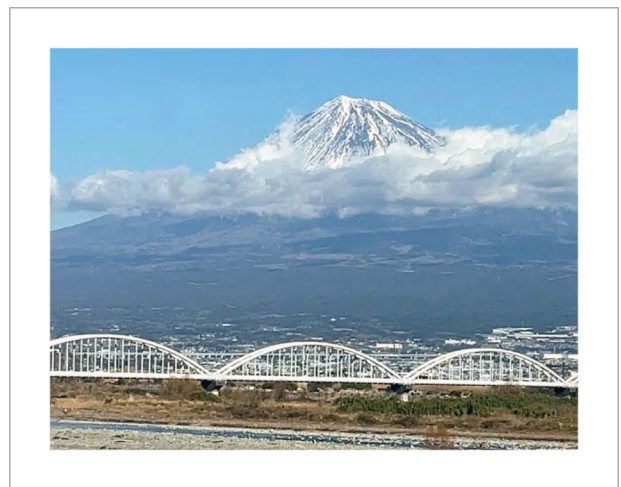
You can buy your shinkansen tickets at vending machines at any JR station (English interfaces available; you'll need cash, or a credit card with a chip/pin). I usually buy my tickets on the day of my journey; trains run very frequently, and seats are almost always available. But if you prefer you can buy your tickets (up to 30 days) in advance.

If the automated kiosks intimidate you, look for a booking office or 'green window' (*midori no madoguchi*) at any station, and say you want to make a reservation (*yoyaku*). Writing down your trip details on a post-it is a useful trick! Note that green window lines can sometimes be quite long.

Shinkansen have both reserved and unreserved compartments. I recommend reserving a seat; the

charge is nominal, and if you miss your train, your ticket converts to an unreserved ticket for any other train the same day. Or you can just stand in line on the platform and board one of the unreserved compartments and hope to get a seat. You can also take any empty seat in a reserved compartment. Unless you're travelling in high season, you shouldn't have a problem.

Travel tips: Rollers and backpacks will fit in the overhead racks, but if you're travelling with larger suitcases, be sure to reserve a designated "travelling with luggage" seat, near the end of each compartment. For the best views of Mt. Fuji, sit on the left side of the train going from Kyoto to Tokyo, or the right side going the opposite way. Fuji-san is about 30 minutes out from Tokyo; keep your eyes peeled, the train moves fast!



Fuji-san from the shinkansen

JR stations around the country sell '*eki-ben*' – *eki* means station and *ben* is short for *bento*, beautifully packaged box lunches – and they take pride in showcasing regional specialties. So if you're going to be on a train at lunchtime, I recommend buying an *eki-ben* before you board. Tokyo station has a large *eki-ben* store called Ekiben Matsuri, off the main east-west corridor just inside the Marunouchi Central gate.

6. Luggage Optimization

Public transit options in Japan are plentiful, convenient, and cheap, and almost every station has elevators and escalators. Nonetheless, you may not fancy the idea of schlepping heavy luggage up and down city streets and station platforms. Fear not, here are three pro tips to make life easier:

Coin lockers can be found at every station (including many 100s of them at Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto's main stations) and at many bus stops. A small locker (handbag or backpack-sized) costs ¥100-300 per day, while a large one (suitcase-sized) costs ¥500-700 per day. Some of the older units require actual coins (don't worry, change machines are always present), while the newer ones can be paid for with your SUICA card. In addition, the major stations have cloak services (*kurōku*) who will store your baggage for you if you can't find a locker.

If you don't use the *takkyubin* (see next paragraph) between Tokyo and Kyoto, you can leave your suitcases in a coin locker at Tokyo station while travelling light to Kyoto and back (but the *takkyubin* is better). Coin lockers are useful not just for your suitcases but also for your shopping – if you buy souvenirs in the morning, you don't have to cart them around all day.

Takkyubin is Japan's domestic package delivery system and it's incredibly efficient and convenient not to mention amazingly cheap. There are two main providers: Yamato (aka *kuroneko* – 'black cat') and Sagawa. Drop your suitcase off at a service counter, and they will deliver to any address in the country by the next evening – no need to carry stuff with you when you travel! It might take a bit of planning around packing, but the convenience is wonderful. Most convenience stores offer *takkyubin* dropoff, and

there are dedicated service counters in many neighbourhoods as well as at Tokyo station, Narita airport and so on. If you're staying at a hotel, it's even better – most front desks will do everything for you.

Takkyubin does next-day delivery (not same-day), which is why I designed the itinerary the way I did. Stay in Tokyo 4 days. On the morning of your departure, ask your hotel front desk to send your big suitcase(s) by *takkyubin* to your Kyoto hotel. Then go to Kanazawa carrying just a day bag. Stay one night in Kanazawa, then proceed to Kyoto: your luggage will be there waiting for you! Repeat the process in the opposite direction as well: send your luggage from Kyoto directly to Tokyo, while you take a day bag to Hakone.



Shinkansen at Kyoto station

Finally, **buy a suitcase!** Japan makes excellent and reasonably priced luggage – stylish, light-weight hard-shell suitcases and more. Arrive in Japan travelling light, shop till you drop, and buy a suitcase, roller or duffel to carry all that loot back home. Hands, Loft, Ginza Karen and Donki are good stores to buy these; Frequenter and Lojel are good local brands to look out for.

(The other standard hack is to travel with a smaller empty suitcase inside your main one, to hold all the stuff you buy.)

7. Hotels, Inns and Ryokans

Japan has a number of home-grown business hotel chains which are really good: reasonably priced, clean and well-maintained, and generally frictionless to stay at. APA, Dormy Inn, Tokyu Stay and Villa Fontaine are all great. The only catch is that rooms tend to be very small – best suited for solo or pair travellers. You can reserve directly or via [booking.com](https://www.booking.com), which is a bit painful but less so than other options.

A few family hotel chains have sprung up in recent years – the tourist equivalent of the business hotels mentioned above. They're also excellent, and some have larger suites with cooking facilities. Some of these can be booked through Airbnb.

I've stayed at quite a few one-off Airbnbs in Japan and they were delightful, but they took some work (and expertise) to pick out, so I wouldn't recommend it unless (see above) it's actually a room in a hotel that you're booking, not an individual house or apartment. Also, Airbnbs make it harder to use the *takkyubin*, which is a bit of a disadvantage.

In small towns (and I include Nikko, Hakone, Kamakura, Mitake in this list), I recommend staying at a traditional Japanese inn – a *ryokan* or *minshuku*. Beautiful tatami rooms, hot tubs to soak in, and delightful meals included. *Minshuku* tend to be basic, *ryokan* slightly fancier. They're inevitably family-run. Note that many such inns only accept cash.

If you can afford it, try to spend at least one night at a truly high-end *ryokan*, ideally in Kyoto or Kanazawa. It's an aesthetic, culinary, visual and tactile experience like no other. Most of Kyoto's best *ryokan* are outside the city proper, in the surrounding hills or river valleys.

Also try to stay at or at least visit an *onsen* – a hot spring resort. Hakone is the best place for this.



Tatami room in a minshuku

Most mid-range Western hotel chains in Japan are not as good as their Japanese equivalents, not even close. I'd choose Dormy Inn over Holiday Inn every time. But some of the high-end global establishments are excellent – for example the Four Seasons and the Park Hyatt in Kyoto.



Time for a coffee brake!

TLDR: stay at Mimaruru or APA in Tokyo, Dormy Inn in Kanazawa, a ryokan or minshuku in Kyoto, an onsen hotel in Hakone, and then back to APA or Mimaruru or Dormy Inn in Tokyo. Mitsui Garden is another good chain to check out.

8. Travelling Within Cities

Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and other cities have a dizzying array of public transport options: subway, light rail, heavy rail, buses and trams, operated by a mix of public corps, private firms, JR and more.

Fortunately, you don't need to sweat the details; the system is perfectly and seamlessly integrated.

All you need is a **prepaid IC card** (SUICA or PASMO in Tokyo, ICOCA in Osaka), available at any station. Buy a card at an automated ticket kiosk, load up a balance of a few 1000 yen, and you can travel on virtually any mode of transport. Even better is to load your PASMO or SUICA on to your Apple Wallet or Google Pay.

Tap your card or phone at the start and end of your journey and the correct fare will be debited automatically, irrespective of transfers or who operates the system you're travelling on. It all works nation-wide and it's incredibly convenient. You can even use your IC card to pay for purchases at *conbinis*, coin lockers and taxis.

Each city also has its own array of unlimited 24-, 48-, and 72-hour transit pass options, which may make sense depending on your itinerary.

In Tokyo and Osaka you're unlikely to need anything beyond the metro system and perhaps a JR or private line here or there. But you'll find yourself using the bus network more often in Kyoto, Kamakura, Kanazawa and Nikko.

I don't advise renting a car in Japan unless you have your heart set on going to a destination unserved by public transport – and such destinations are rare.

9. More Traveller's Tips

Japan used to be a cash-based economy, but that's no longer true – almost every establishment now accepts credit cards, plus various payment providers including Apple and Google Pay, and of course IC cards. I found that it's substantially cheaper (better FX rates) to use a travel-specific credit card than to withdraw yen from an ATM.

That said, it's a good idea to have around 20 to 50,000 yen on hand for contingencies. The best place to get yen is from the **7-bank ATMs** that can be found inside seven-eleven convenience stores. (English menus, no foreign transaction fees). I believe you can convert currency at post offices as well, though I've never done so myself.

The Japanese are very helpful to tourists, so when in doubt – ask. Fluency in spoken English is still rare, but almost everyone can understand written English, so carry a small pad with you, and if you run into any difficulty, write down what you need. (Or type it into your phone – who uses pen and paper anymore).

Google Translate is your friend! Download the app, and also download its Japanese-English lexicon so that you can use it offline. The best feature is camera mode – point your phone at any kanji or kana to get an instant translation. After having been imperfectly literate for all my years in Japan (I can read *hiragana* and *katakana* and recognize several hundred *kanji* – a tiny fraction), this felt revolutionary. Even without camera mode, just type in what you want in English, and show the Japanese translation to people and you'll go far.

Convenience stores or *conbini* (Seven Eleven, Family Mart, Lawson, Yamazaki) are everywhere; they're open 24 hours and have an eclectic mix of daily household goods, from bread and milk to

toilet paper and detergent to magazines and umbrellas to beer and pre-cooked meals.

Convenience stores are a great choice for a quick meal on the go, with sandwiches, bento boxes, baked goods and more. *Conbini* food is generally cheap, tasty, and not terribly unhealthy (a trifecta hard to find). You can ask the staff to heat your food, and for *o-hashhi* (chopsticks). Some convenience store foods to try are *agedori* (fried chicken), *kari-pan* (curry buns), *nikuman* (pork dumplings), *onigiri* (rice triangles wrapped in dried seaweed), *sando* (sandwiches).and frozen fruit smoothies.

Street food stalls are common outside major tourist spots. It's considered rude to eat while walking, so eat what you buy in front of the stall.

Vending machines are famously ubiquitous. I'm a fan of their canned hot coffee, it's surprisingly good. Also common are drugstores like Matsumoto Kiyoshi, that sell a lot more than just pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. Finally, every neighbourhood has a couple of '99-yen stores' which sell a variety of products at, well, Y99 each.



Vending machines on a street corner

Public wifi isn't yet ubiquitous, so you should get a **travel sim card**. I usually get an e-sim from Airalo, but you can also get a physical card when

you arrive at Narita or Haneda airports. Reserve this in advance; I recommend Sakura mobile.

Here's a brief price list:

- Subway or local bus: Y150-400 per ride
- Taxi: Y650 minimum, Y2000 average
- Meals: Y800-1500 (cheap and quick)
Y2000-5000 (mid-range)
Y7000-15000 (fine dining)
Over Y25000 (ultra-luxe)
- Conbini snacks and drinks: Y100-300 each

Food should set you back around Y3000 per day, eating reasonably well but not including special treats. (As a foodie, I recommend spending a bit more – Tokyo and Osaka are both among the great food cities of the world).

If you don't take taxis too often, you can manage on about Y600-800 yen a day for local transport. Temple, garden and museum entry fees are between Y300 and Y1000 each time.

Japan is amazingly clean, but public trashcans are rare (perhaps that's why). Carry a **plastic bag** with you to hold food waste, empty bottles, wrappers, all your travel debris, so that you can dump it later.

Some merchants – department stores, electronics depots, souvenir shops – offer '**tax-free**' shopping for tourists. Show your passport with its tourist visa stamp, and they won't charge the 10% consumption tax on your purchases. (Therefore, don't go through the automated immigration gates when arriving at Narita or Haneda – those gates don't give you the visa stamp!)

There is **no tipping** in Japan. Also, Japan is probably the safest country in the world.

Tokyo Overview

1. Where to Stay in Tokyo

Central Tokyo is defined by the **JR Yamanote line**, which runs in a 35-km loop with the Imperial Palace at its (rough) centre. Major interchange stations on the Yamanote line act as city centres in their own right; the biggest ones are Shinjuku, Shibuya, Ikebukuro, Nippori, Ueno, Shinagawa, and Tokyo Station.

My suggested itinerary has two Tokyo stays of 4 days each. For the first one, I'd recommend staying east of the palace: in one of Ueno, Asakusa, Akihabara or Ginza. And then west of the palace for the second stay: in Shinjuku, Shibuya or Ikebukuro.

Asakusa is a bit touristy, but it's a good introduction to traditional / historical Tokyo, with a venerable temple and lots of old shops. **Akihabara** is the opposite extreme: modern, high-tech, full of neon signs and gadgets. And **Ueno** is somewhere in between, with a lovely large park, museums and a fun market district.

The triangle defined by Tokyo Station, Shimbashi and Tsukiji, with **Ginza** in the middle, has a large selection of very good hotels and restaurants; they tend to be a bit expensive, but the centrality makes them worth it. Akiba, Ueno and Ginza are all excellent transit hubs, Asakusa slightly less so.

For the second Tokyo leg of your trip, **Shinjuku** would be my first choice (but make sure you're close to one of its many stations – Shinjuku is vast!), followed by **Shibuya**, **Ikebukuro** and maybe Omotesando. An area that many expats and business travellers tend to stay is the embassy / government / big business zone south of the imperial palace – Roppongi, Akasaka,

Toranomon etc. – but it's really boring for tourists, I can't recommend it.

It's harder to find good places to stay in Shinjuku-Shibuya than on the eastern side, especially for families who need more room. Those areas also tend to be quite expensive. An alternative option is to stay in Akihabara or Kanda on the second leg; there's a direct train from Akiba to Shinjuku which makes it trivial to go across town.

2. Getting Around Tokyo

For getting around central Tokyo you can't beat the **subway system**, which is convenient, cheap, and fast. Individual journeys range from Y160 to Y400, auto-debited from your IC card. Before exiting a subway station, look for an area map to orient yourself and take the right exit.

There are two subway operators in the city: Tokyo Metro and Toei. Changing from one to the other means you'll be charged an extra fare, but it is not worth optimizing your routes to avoid this; don't do it. The same goes for transfers to/from the **JR Yamanote line**, which you'll use a lot.

JR trains are useful for day trips from Tokyo: Hakone, Nikko, Kamakura and Mitake. Some of these destinations are also served by private line operators, and they're often better: Odakyu for Hakone, Tobu for Nikko.

Buses are great for short hops; stops have handy route maps; tap in and out with your IC card. Taxis are convenient and fast, but not cheap: reckon on Y100 per minute of journey time.

Google Maps works very well in Japan; use it! Navitime is another useful navigation and timetable app. Go Taxi and S.Ride are the most popular ride-hailing apps.

3. Arriving in Tokyo

Your flight will land at either Narita NRT or Haneda HND, both of which are some distance from central Tokyo.

The most comfortable, but also most expensive, way to get to your hotel from the airport is to take a taxi. This will cost about Y10,000 from Haneda, or Y27,000 from Narita; add Y5,000 if you're staying in a west Tokyo neighbourhood.

The cheapest but least luxurious option is to take a train to the city centre, and then switch to the subway for the last leg. The density of subway stations in central Tokyo is such that you shouldn't have to walk more than 700m from your last exit to your hotel, but be wary of staircases and transfers along the way.

A good middle ground is to take the train into Tokyo, and then switch to a taxi for the last leg. Major stations all have taxi stands (*takushi noriba*). Ask for an *ōgata* (large taxi) so that all your luggage will fit, especially if travelling with a family or group.

Another option is to head to town with just an overnight bag, and use *takkyubin* to send the rest of your luggage from the airport to your hotel; it'll be in your room by the next day.

Narita is about 90 minutes from central Tokyo, including transfers. If you're staying in Ueno, take the Keisei Skyliner (45 mins, Y2500). For Asakusa, take the Keisei SkyAccess or Access Express (55 mins, Y1300, less comfy), or take the Skyliner to Ueno and take a taxi/subway from there. For Akihabara, take the JR Narita Express (60 mins, Y3000) to Tokyo station, then change to the Yamanote line anti-clockwise.

Haneda is about 60 minutes from central Tokyo. For either Ueno or Akibahara, take the Tokyo Monorail to Hamamatsucho, and then switch to the Yamanote line anti-clockwise. For Asakusa, take the Keikyu line directly to Asakusa station.

There are information and ticket counters with multi-lingual staff for each train line. Some of these trains require reservations, which can be done quite easily at the ticket kiosks. For others you can just tap in using your IC card. (If you were unable to install SUICA or PASMO on your digital wallet – sometimes it can be finicky – now is the time to buy a physical IC card and load a few thousand yen on it).



Tokyo skyline – Sumida River at night

If you're flying to Japan from North America or Europe, you'll most likely arrive in the late afternoon or early evening. Once you get to your hotel, it'll be past sundown, and you'll be tired. This is the perfect opportunity to explore the miracle that is the Japanese convenience store. Find the nearest 7-11 or FamilyMart, and buy whatever you forgot to pack; then make dinner out of assorted bento, agedori, onigiri, niku-man and curry-pan. Enjoy!

4. Tokyo Day Planner

Tokyo is a city that rewards serendipitous exploration. Don't just go to the standard sights – instead, pick different neighbourhoods and wander the streets. You can't go wrong.



Alley in Shinjuku, lined with izakaya (pubs)

And while Tokyo's transportation network is without question the best in the world, it's truly a wonderful place to walk. Most of the city is relatively flat, the streets are pedestrian friendly, density is high, and there are interesting sights around every corner. So walk! Don't rush from point to point; saunter, stroll, meander, explore.

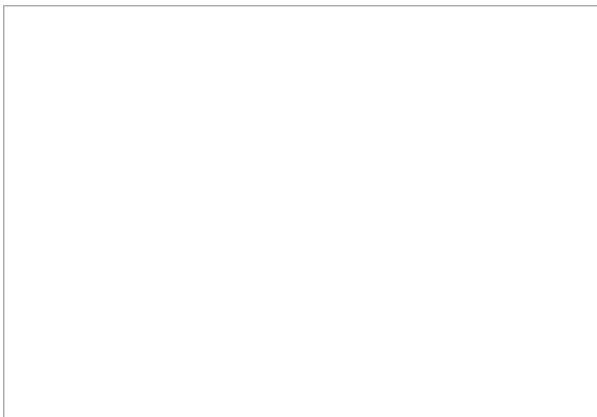


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I describe a dozen or so of my favourite Tokyo neighbourhoods in the next few pages. In my itinerary I allocate 5 days to Tokyo proper (not counting day trips and excursions), with each day spent exploring 3-4 parts of the city.

Assuming you stay in Ueno / Asakusa for the first leg of your trip and Shinjuku for the second, here's a suggested day planner:

Day 1: Asakusa, Ryogoku, Akihabara

Day 2: Tsukiji, Kiyosumi, Ginza

Day 3: Ochanomizu, Ueno, Yanesen

Day 4: Kichijoji, Shimokita, Shinjuku

Day 5: Nihonbashi, Omotesando, Shibuya

I've grouped these by proximity and optimal time of day, but feel free to pick and mix as you like.



Azuma-bashi (bridge) in Asakusa

The most popular tourist spots in Tokyo are probably Shibuya Scramble, Shinjuku Kabukicho, Asakusa Nakamise, Ginza Chuodori, Harajuku Takeshitadori, Tsukiji Outer Market, and Tokyo Skytree. My plan does cover all those areas, but they're not the only focus; indeed, I'd advise not spending too much time battling crowds and queues at those spots.



Main gate of Sensō-ji; worshipper at Kannon temple; incense sticks in a brass brazier; Izakaya lantern; pubs in Golden Gai; department stores along Shinjuku-dori; Shibuya pedestrians; diners waiting outside a restaurant; Asakusa eateries; ramen shop; Sumida river at night; waitresses costumed as maids; Asakusa pedestrians.

Tokyo Neighbourhoods

1. Asakusa

Start your trip with a stroll through **Asakusa**, one of Tokyo's oldest neighbourhoods and in many ways still its spiritual centre.



Asakusa Sensō-ji, early in the morning

The beating heart of Asakusa is **Sensō-ji**, a temple dedicated to Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Before becoming Japan's capital in 1603, Tokyo (then known as Edo) was just a small fishing village. Kannon was the patron saint of the fishermen, and her temple remains the city's most venerated Buddhist site.

Today, Asakusa is a bustling mix of tourists and tradition. Two-hundred-year-old shops selling Edo-era handicrafts and artwork sit next to kitschy souvenir stalls and street food vendors. It's crowded, chaotic, and great fun.

Asakusa gets very busy, so I recommend visiting early in the morning. At 9am the temple grounds are empty and lovely; by 11 they're packed.

After exiting Asakusa station (subway Ginza and Asakusa lines), the first thing you'll see is the famous **Kaminari-mon** gateway with its massive red lantern. Pass through the gate and stroll along **Nakamise-dori**, lined with shops and eateries. Walk through the second gateway, **Hozo-mon**, with its guardian spirits, and to the temple proper. Toss a coin in the offertory box, bow and make a silent prayer, then light some incense and let the smoke waft over you.

Now return to Nakamise-dori. The souvenir shops on the main approach are terribly touristy, but fun enough to stroll by, and there are a couple of gems – Nakaya for traditional matsuri (festival) supplies, and Sakai for good quality *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) at reasonable prices.

Try some snacks! Melon-pan from Kugetsudo, matcha ice cream from Suzukien, and taiyaki from Naruto are popular favourites, but there's no shortage of choices.



Crowds and lanterns on Nakamise-dori

Next, head west and explore the alleys and byways west of the temple complex. You'll find a wide selection of shops here – fabrics, leather, ceramics, art, glassware, wooden crafts – often run by the same family for generations. Wander through Orange-dori and Hoppy-dori and Sushiya-dori, popping in and out of whatever

seems interesting – don't be afraid to backtrack. You don't need to buy anything, just explore and enjoy the vibe.

Some stores I like are Maekawa for wallets and purses made of *inden* (patterned deerskin), Yamakichi for ceramics, and Sanrio for Hello Kitty merch. Also worth noting are Don Quijote ('Donki'), a massive discount store that's open 24/7 (it's a chain) and Uniqlo for whatever clothes or accessories you forgot to pack.

Grab an early lunch from one of Asakusa's many restaurants. I recommend Hinatomaru for excellent, good-value sushi – either the 'conveyor belt' main store, or the 'standing bar' annex. Other safe choices are Yoroiya and Ichiran @ Rox (ramen, can be crowded), Tsune and Midori (more sushi), and Shiraiwa (okonomiyaki).



Open-air izakaya (pub) on Hoppy-Dori

2. Kappabashi

After lunch, head to **Kappabashi**. Kappabashi is a district dedicated to kitchen and cooking supplies. If you're a foodie, or like to cook, or just love gear and gadgets, it's well worth visiting.

To get here, walk west from the Sensō-ji area, through all the side streets of Asakusa and past Don Quijote, until you hit the main road, Kokusai-dori. Cross and continue along Kappabashihondori, lined with the first few kitchenware shops. Soon you'll reach the main Kappabashi street; turn left and explore.

My personal recommendations are Sakai Jikko for beautiful high-end knives, Dengama for classic ceramics, and Kakesu zakka-ten for modern teacups and teapots. Other well-regarded stores are Kamata and Tsubaya for knives, Kama-asa and Maeda for general kitchenware, Yabukita for ceramics, and Union Commerce for coffee gear. Chopsticks from Hashitou make a pleasant and inexpensive souvenir or gift.



Dengama ceramics in Kappabashi

See the **Shopping** section for more suggestions about what to buy in Asakusa and Kappabashi, and from where.

3. Ryogoku

Once you're done with Asakusa and Kappabashi, head over to **Ryogoku**. There are multiple routes you can take, depending on which part of Asakusa you're in:

- Tawaramachi to Ueno-Hirokoji on the Ginza line and change to the Oedo line for Ryogoku.
- Tsukuba Asakusa to Shin-Okachimachi on the Tsukuba line and change to the Oedo line.
- Toei Asakusa to Asakusabashi on the Toei Asakusa line and change to the JR Chuo-Sobu.
- Walk to Kuramae station and board the Oedo line directly.
- Take the waterbus (seasonal)

(I provide all these options just to give you a feel for how *dense* Tokyo's transit options are – you're never too far from public transport).

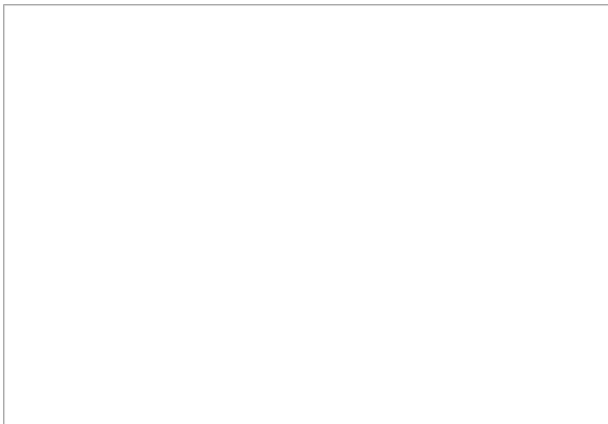


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Ryogoku is a traditional Tokyo neighbourhood, on the east side of the Sumida river. It makes a nice change of pace after the hustle and bustle of Asakusa – less crowded, more relaxed. There are 2.5 main attractions in Ryogoku: the Edo Tokyo Museum, the Kokugikan Sumo Arena, and the Sumida Hokusai Museum. (The latter is very small, so only counts as 0.5).

The **Edo Tokyo Museum** is a great introduction to the history and society of Tokyo during the Edo period: roughly 1600 to 1850. It'll give context to a lot of the sights you'll see elsewhere, especially after a visit to Asakusa. With its emphasis on scale models, it's also very accessible to visitors.



Statue of a sumo wrestler in Ryogoku

Ryogoku is the epicentre of Japanese sumo wrestling, and if you visit Tokyo in Jan, May or Sep, I strongly recommend attending a **sumo tournament** at Ryogoku arena. Even outside of tournaments, there's a good chance you'll see trainee wrestlers – identifiable by their robes, topknots, and size – walking through the streets.

For even more sumo, visiting a *heya* (training stable for wrestlers) is a fun way to spend a morning; book in advance. Also, several restaurants in Ryogoku specialize in chanko-nabe, an extremely rich and filling stew eaten by wrestlers to put on muscle. (Be warned that chanko-nabe emphasizes calories over taste).

Finally, about 15 minutes' walk east of Ryogoku station is the **Sumida Hokusai Museum**, a compact but delightful summary of the life and work of the great printmaker and artist.

4. Akihabara

From Ryogoku it's just one stop to **Akihabara** station on the JR Chuo-Sobu (local) line.

Akihabara (Akiba for short) is renowned for its **electronics** and for its **geek culture** – it's one of the places to go for all things manga, anime, cosplay and otaku. (The other is Ikebukuro).



Akihabara at night

Akihabara's flagship stores are its **camera stores** (BIC, Yodobashi), its **gamer and hobby** stores (Surugaya, Akiba Gamers, Kaiyodo) and its big **electronics depots** (Laox, Yamada, Onoden). In addition, there are dozens of tiny shops selling speciality goods – everything from capacitors to action figurines to vintage cameras.

Most of these hobbyist and DIY hacker stores are to be found on the side streets northwest of the station, on the way to Suehirocho. Even if you're not into these pursuits, I do recommend exploring at least one of the main camera or electronics stores, for the sheer variety of goods on offer. Also, while in Akiba, get some gachapon!

Akihabara is known for its themed cafes – butlers and maids, gamers and arcades, anime and manga etc. They're all rather kitschy and often a bit weird or off-putting; I'd skip them.



Store window decal, Akihabara

Akihabara is best visited at night, to give its neon maximum impact. It's also a good place to get dinner: try the upper floors of the big shopping complexes; the streets around the station; and the bar/diner area to the east. I recommend Fukunoken Ramen, Asahi Sushi and Kiku Sushi, and Aged Meat Bar Avant Garde (!). Kyushu Jangara Ramen and Jiromaru Yakiniku are solid choices but can have long waits.

Scheduling Note, Day 1:

It's possible to do Asakusa, Kappabashi, Ryogoku and Akihabara in a single long day. You'd follow roughly this timetable:

9:00 to 10:00 – Sensō-ji temple and grounds

10:00 to 11:30 – Asakusa alleys and shops

11:30 to 12:30 – lunch in Asakusa

12:30 to 14:00 – Kappabashi kitchenware street

14:30 to 16:30 – Ryogoku

17:00 to 18:00 – Dinner, Ryogoku or Akihabara

18:00 to 20:00 – Akihabara night stroll.

This is a full day, and I don't particularly enjoy rushing from sight to sight. So please feel free to deviate; to take longer at any given spot; or to skip stuff; also to add activities or detours you enjoy. The only 'firm' suggestions I'd make are to get to Asakusa early-ish, and to eat an early-ish lunch, else you'll be stuck in crowds a lot.

If there's a sumo tournament on, you may want to stay in Ryogoku through the evening, and leave Akihabara for later. Asakusa is also quite nice at night: the temple grounds are very atmospheric, and there are lots of lively *izakaya* – Japanese pubs – on and around Hoppy Street.

Note that you may hit the wall sometime in the afternoon, thanks to jetlag and travel fatigue; be prepared and plan accordingly!

More Things to Do:

The stretch of Kokusai-dori between Asakusa and Kappabashi has some neat little establishments. Tabi To is an excellent coffee tasting bar, Nakazawa sells beautiful cards, handmade from Japanese washi paper, and Yamazaki is a delicious Japanese-French fusion bakery.

Slightly further afield, Kakimori in Kuramae is a fantastic shop for ink and fountain-pen enthusiasts.

On the east side of the Sumida river, about 15 minutes' walk from Asakusa, Tokyo Skytree offers panoramic views of the city (and has a fun Studio Ghibli store in the attached mall; but note that both get quite crowded).

Asakusa is the starting point for river cruises along the Sumida, all the way down to Tokyo Bay. It's also a good spot for hands-on experience classes like print-making and book-binding. Oh, and if you don't want to walk, cycle rickshaw tours are a fun way to see the neighbourhood.

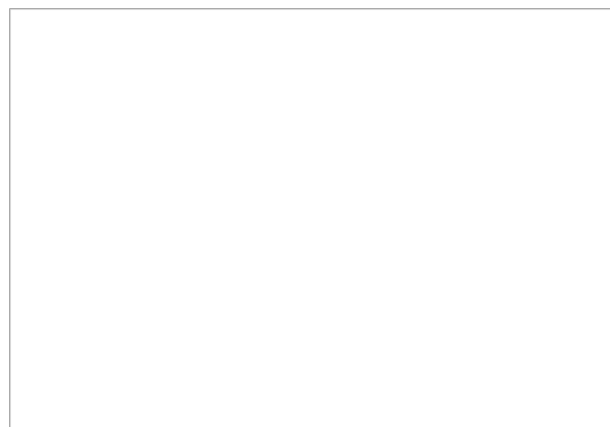


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5. Tsukiji

Start your second day in Tokyo with a visit to Tsukiji (pronounced 'skee-jee', more or less).

Tsukiji was Tokyo's original fish market, where merchants and restaurateurs and fishing captains would gather for the famous early morning tuna auctions (current record price: 114 million yen for a single bluefin, set in 2024). But the market outgrew its premises and was split into two a few years ago. The 'inner market' is now at Toyosu, a couple of miles away, and that's where the wholesalers and professionals go. Meanwhile, the 'outer market' in Tsukiji is where you'll find restaurants, food stalls, produce and spice vendors, kitchen supplies, household shoppers, and, of course, tourists. Lots of tourists.



Shopping for Japanese pickles in Tsukiji

The main attraction here is **sushi**. It may not be the absolute best in the city, but it's still very very good; getting daybreak sushi at Tsukiji market is an essential Tokyo experience.

Jetlag is your friend here. Aim to get to Tsukiji by 6:40am, so that you can be seated as soon as restaurants open (at 7am). I recommend Itadori Bekkan, hidden down an alleyway, for excellent assorted sushi; it's tucked behind Unitora Nakadori which specializes in urchin and roe and

is also excellent. Sushidai around the corner is brilliant but opens later and has long waits. Sushi Sei is another solid choice.

Once you've had your fill of fish, explore the rest of the market. There are dozens of street food stalls, and you may be tempted to come back another day to try all the wares on offer: tamagoyaki, mochi and daifuku, various grilled meats and seafoods on a stick. Be warned that most items are somewhat overpriced, but hey, you're here for the experience ☺.



Street food stall in Tsukiji

More interesting than the food vendors are the stores selling spices, produce, dried snacks, and kitchen supplies. I recommend Okume (for dashi), Hattori and Kitajima (for spices) and Matsumura (for katsuobushi). I also recommend watching the 'Salt' episode of 'Salt Fat Acid Heat' on Netflix before visiting Tsukiji!

6. Kiyosumi-Shirakawa

From Tsukiji market, walk to Tsukiji-shijo station on the Oedo line and take the subway 4 stops to Kiyosumi-Shirakawa. This charming little neighbourhood is ground zero for Tokyo's burgeoning coffee culture; it's also home to a beautiful landscape garden, plus many eclectic shops and eateries.

Take Exit A3 from Kiyosumi-Shirakawa station and cross the road to enter Kiyosumi-teien. This is a Meiji-era 'strolling garden', designed to offer a variety of views as you walk around the central pond. Don't miss the turtles, ducks and geese. Stop for tea at the pavilion; a nice reset, physically and mentally, after the crowds and bustle of Tsukiji (and Asakusa, and Akiba). If you're travelling with small kids, there's a nice park next to the garden, with a children's playground and plenty of space to run around.



Kiyosumi-teien (garden)

From the garden, walk to any of Kiyosumi-Shirakawa's many excellent coffee shops – Arise, Angle, Mameya, or even Blue Bottle (which, like many things, is better in Japan). Explore the shops on the side streets – florists, homemade ginger beer, knitted goods, you name it. Then head on down to Monzen-nakacho.

7. Monzen-nakacho

You won't find **Monzen-nakacho** in any of the usual tourist guides, but it's a pleasant area to stroll through to get a sense of what 'everyday Tokyo' is like; besides, I used to live there, so I have a soft spot for it.

From Kiyosumi-Shirakawa, take the Oedo line or the #33 bus to Monzen-nakacho station (or walk; it's not far). From the main intersection, walk southeast along Eitai-dori. You'll pass a number of mom-and-pop stores, all very down-to-earth and unpretentious.



Side street in Monzen-nakacho

After about 200m you'll come to exit 1 of Monzen-nakacho station; immediately before the exit there's a large red gateway on the left, leading on to a brick-paved street lined with traditional stores selling handicrafts, religious artifacts, snacks, and souvenirs.

Go through the arch and walk to **Fukagawa Fudosen** temple, straight ahead. You know the drill: wash your hands at the fountain, inhale incense smoke from the burner, and toss a coin into the offertory box. Fukagawa Fudosen has several daily 'fire ceremonies' and I recommend attending one if you can; it's a unique experience.

Come out of the temple and turn left (paralleling your original direction on Eitai-dori); a stone's throw away, past the tennis courts, you'll see the wooden gateway of the **Tomioka Hachimangu** shrine (Shinto). Explore the shrine grounds, noting especially the large and ornate '*mikoshi*' (palanquin), said to be worth over a billion yen. Tomioka Hachimangu is celebrated as the birthplace of Kanjin-zumo, the predecessor of modern professional sumo.

Monzen-nakacho is home to many festivals and events. There's the daily fire ceremony at the temple. There's a large flea market on the shrine grounds on the last Saturday of every month (recommended! – see if you can time your visit accordingly). New Year's sees lots of temporary stalls and eateries – a fairground atmosphere takes over the whole neighbourhood. And finally every August there's the **Fukagawa Hachiman Matsuri** (festival) which is one of Tokyo's three great Shinto festivals – a huge celebration and parade and party. The shrine's mikoshi is taken out on a tour of the neighbourhood, carried on the shoulders of dozens of volunteers, while thousands more cheer them on. It's quite a sight!

Monzen-nakacho has an excellent shabu-shabu and sukiyaki restaurant called Shabu-koh, on the second floor just above Exit 2 of the station. Unfortunately, they're only open for dinner, which doesn't quite work for this itinerary. Instead, we'll go to Tsukishima for lunch.

Optional detour: teamLab Planets

teamLab is a group of artists, programmers, architects and animators who have created two *wildly* successful immersive art exhibitions in Tokyo: teamlab Planets in Toyosu just south of Mon-naka, and teamlab Borderless near Kamiyacho. Today is a good day to visit the former, but note that you'll need to book timed tickets (online) a few weeks in advance.

8. Tsukishima

Tsukishima is an island, built on reclaimed land in the middle of Tokyo Bay. Its claim to fame (for visitors at least) is 'Monja Street' – a whole neighbourhood devoted to a single dish, *monjayaki*.

Monjayaki is Tokyo's version of Osaka's famous (and frankly, better) savoury pancakes known as *okonomiyaki*. Thinly sliced cabbage, mixed in a batter with various seasonings, and then topped with pork, shrimp, squid, or other protein of your choice, is grilled at your table on a hot iron plate, before being doused with sweet barbecue sauce, kewpie mayo, bonito flakes and powdered nori. Monjayaki tends to be less robust than okonomiyaki, both literally (the batter is thinner, the pancakes flatter) and figuratively (the flavours are lighter).

Take the Oedo line from Mon-naka to Tsukishima and follow the signs for Monja Street. The street itself has a pleasant, faux-antique vibe. Okoge and Moheji are both solid, but I expect all the restaurants on this strip to be roughly equivalent.

Of course, after all that sushi and street food and coffee, you may not be in the mood for a heavy lunch. In that case, skip Monja Street, and just grab some sandwiches or snacks from any Family Mart. You'll still pass through Tsukishima, but only as a transfer station on your way to Ginza. (And you'll get to try okonomiyaki in Osaka, as you should.)

9. Ginza

Ginza is Tokyo's fanciest commercial area. It's where you'll find all the top Japanese (and global) designer and luxury brands, flagship retail stores, and high-end department stores including Wako, Matsuya, Mitsukoshi and Ginza Six. Even if you're not planning to buy anything, it's fun to wander through Ginza and window-shop.

Ginza is also home to possibly the highest concentration of fine-dining and Michelin-starred restaurants in the world. Most require reservations; your hotel concierge can help.

If you're a foodie, I recommend visiting the basement food section of any department store; who'd have thought bento box lunches could be so stylish? Most department stores also have excellent mid-range restaurants, typically on upper floors.



Tins of Japanese and Chinese tea

Some stores to visit in Ginza:

- **Uniqlo** for stylish, comfy, well-priced apparel
- **Muji** for inexpensive, functional, minimalistic and above all *sensible* home goods
- **Onitsuka Tiger** for cool sneakers
- **JINS** for prescription eyewear, at a fraction of the price of North American opticians

- **Itoya** for beautiful and tastefully chosen art & craft supplies, stationery and ink
- **Kyukyodo** for traditional Japanese paper, prints, cards and stationery
- **Hobbyra-hobbyre** for sashiko and knitting
- **Tsutaya Books** (inside Ginza Six) for books
- **BIC Camera Yurakucho** for electronics

Spend the afternoon exploring Ginza: pop in and out of stores, stop for a drink at a café. Then head over to Yurakucho for an early dinner.

10. Yurakucho

The Yamanote line runs on elevated tracks in a loop around central Tokyo. Under the tracks, at almost every station, you'll find restaurants: mostly casual, mostly aimed at commuters, and mostly excellent (the competition is intense). The stretch near Yurakucho is a great example. You'll find dozens of izakayas (Japanese pubs), but also ramen and gyoza shops, German beer halls, Italian diners, and more. Yurakucho yokocho (alley) is especially great for yakitori (charcoal-grilled chicken skewers).



Diners at an izakaya near Yurakucho

Scheduling Note, Day 2:

I always find that my jetlag is worst on day 2, which is why I've scheduled an early start, plenty of sunshine, and a relatively light afternoon for this day. If you find yourself unable to stay awake in the afternoon, take a break – stop for a coffee, matcha or hot chocolate at one of Ginza's many cafés, or head back to your hotel for a nap.

Here's a rough timetable for the day:

6:45 to 7:45 – sushi breakfast in Tsukiji
7:45 to 9:30 – explore Tsukiji market
9:30 to 11:30 – Kiyosumi gardens and coffee
11:30 to 13:00 – Monzen-nakacho
13:00 to 13:30 – conbini lunch
(budget longer if going to Tsukishima)
14:00 to 17:30 – explore Ginza
18:00 – dinner in Yurakucho

But if you find that you're up very early on day 1, feel free to switch the order of events: do Tsukiji-Kiyosumi-Ginza on day 1, and Asakusa-Ryogoku-Akihabara on day 2. Whatever works for you!

Ginza, as mentioned, has some excellent restaurants. But fine dining can be an elaborate process, so I'm hesitant to recommend it so early on your trip: it's no fun sitting through a multi-course meal if you can't keep your eyes open. Come back here once you're over the jetlag.

If you don't find a suitable place to eat in Yurakucho, keep following the Yamanote tracks southward: the area beyond Shimbashi station is packed with salaryman eateries.

Looking Ahead to Day 3:

Day 3 is a long-ish day with lots of walking. I focus on sights in northern Tokyo:

- Edo-era landscaped gardens in Bunkyo-ku
- Bookshops and art in Jimbocho
- Music and students in Ochanomizu
- Street market in Ameyoko
- Ueno, a city within a city
- Museums, a temple in a pond, in a park
- Fabrics and commuters in Nippori
- Cats and cuteness in Yanaka
- Strolling through Nezu
- End with sushi and jazz in Sendagi

As always, make an early start: try to be at your first destination – either Korakuen or Rikugien – right as it opens, at 9am.

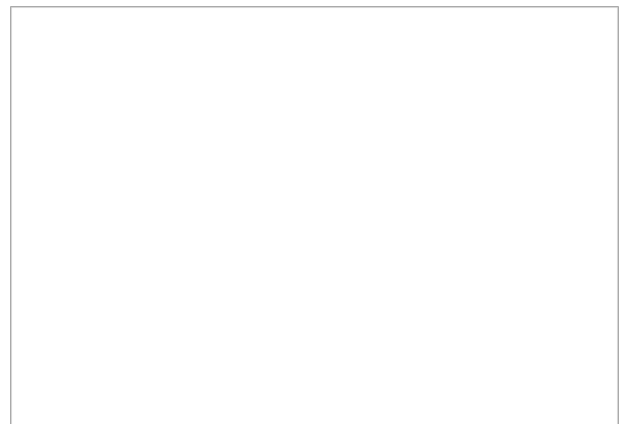


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11. Korakuen and Rikugien

Rikugien and Korakuen are two of the three surviving Edo-era gardens in Tokyo. (The third is Hamarikyū, close to Tsukiji). Rikugien is small and gemlike, and especially beautiful during fall colours, but it's a little harder to get to. Korakuen is larger, and perhaps more peaceful – stately is the word that comes to mind. You can't go wrong with either of them, but it's probably not worth going to see both, especially if you have Kenrokuen in Kanazawa planned for later in your trip.



Ornamental bridge and gate in Korakuen

Whichever garden you choose to see, try to get there right as it opens, at 9am. Spend an hour-ish strolling through them and discovering new perspectives. If their teahouses are open, stop for a contemplative drink. Then head on to your next stop, Jimbocho.

(If you'd rather take it easy this morning, or if your appetite for gardens was satisfied by Kiyosumi-teien yesterday, skip both and go straight to Jimbocho)

12. Jimbocho

Tokyo used to be zoned, with different districts specializing in different shop products. For the most part that's a thing of the past – these days you can get anything anywhere – but exceptions exist. Kappabashi kitchen district is one; another is the 'bookstore street' in Jimbocho, which is right next to 'music street' in Ochanomizu.

If you started the day at Rikugien, take the Mita line from Sengoku to Jimbocho. If you chose Korakuen instead, you can hop on the same line at Suidobashi (subway, not JR), walking past Tokyo Dome along the way. Or you can just walk from Korakuen, it takes about 15-20 minutes.

Start your Jimbocho walk at Gyokusen-dō, a lovely little shop specializing in calligraphy – inks, brushes, paper and artwork. The elderly owner is super friendly and a fountain of anecdotes.



Gyokusen-do and its proprietor

Then walk east along the main road, dipping in and out of stores selling books old and new, scrolls, prints and paintings. Also venture onto Kanda-suzuran-dori, the alley running parallel to and just south of the main road, for even more goodies.

Some stores to visit in Jimbocho are:

- Ohya Shobo for classic ukiyo-e
- Yamada Shoten for contemporary prints
- Okuna Karuta Ten for Japanese board and card games (recommended!)
- Yamagataya for washi and other paper
- Komiyama for photos and vintage posters



University students in Jimbocho

Soon you'll reach a large intersection, with Meidai-dori. If you're in the mood for a coffee, walk a bit further to Dill Coffee Parlor, a perfect little side-street hideaway. Either way, you'll eventually want to walk north along Meidai-dori towards Ochanomizu.



Dill Coffee Parlor

13. Ochanomizu

This part of Tokyo has several universities, and you'll see lots of students. You'll also see a plethora of music stores, each specializing in a different type of instrument (guitars, keys, winds, drums, and so on). Japanese musical instruments are known for their quality and value; the only challenge is transporting them home!

Ochanomizu also has several branches of the excellent Disk Union chain, selling CDs and vinyl for those of us who haven't completely switched to streaming audio. The jazz store is especially good, and has live performances most weekends.

Just around the corner is Tools Ochanomizu, a cute little art supply store that sells brands (like Copic) that are sometimes hard to find elsewhere. By now you'll have reached JR Ochanomizu station, by the side of the Kanda river. Walk east past the station, and you'll come to Hijiri bridge, for a classic Tokyo view:



Three train lines intersect at Hijiribashi

Just south of Hijiribashi, enter Shin-Ochanomizu station on the Chiyoda subway line, and take the train 1 stop north, to Yushima station, on your way to Ueno.

14. Ueno

Ueno has a little bit of everything. It's a major interchange station on the Yamanote line, and the heart of an old and bustling neighbourhood.

The station is at one edge of **Ueno Park**, a large urban park that's especially great for cherry blossoms. Within the park there are several museums:

- the Tokyo National Museum: classic Japanese art and craft: kimonos, swords, ceramics.
- the National Museum of Western Art: mostly European – some old masters, some 19th and 20th century masters as well.
- the National Museum of Nature and Science: geology, palaeontology, biology – English signage, suitable for kids of all ages

These museums are generally not crowded and can be a relaxing way to spend an afternoon. Or just chill in the park, which is lovely. There's a pond, a zoo, an old temple, a massive concert hall – like I said, a little bit of everything.

Just south of Ueno station is **Ameyoko**, an open-air market full of all sorts of cheap and cheerful stuff. (It was originally a black market during the post-WW2 American occupation). Like Tsukiji, Ameyoko has dozens of food stalls and restaurants to explore.

Here's your Ueno plan. At Yushima station, take Exit 2 and turn left to walk east along the main road. You'll pass through a bustling quarter packed with eateries and drinkeries of all sorts (though many of them only open in the evening). It should be lunchtime by now, so feel free to pop into whatever catches your fancy.

Alternatively, keep going until you reach the main entrance to Ameyoko (on your left; neon sign

arches across the road; just before the elevated tracks of the Yamanote line). Ameyoko has lots of street food stalls and a few proper restaurants as well; be adventurous!



The entrance to Ameyoko

Ameyoko's wares are at the opposite end of the spectrum from Ginza: crowded, chaotic, messy, not the best quality, but cheap cheap cheap. Cross back and forth under the tracks to see some of the most interesting stores.

You'll emerge from Ameyoko near the southern tip of Ueno Park. Backtrack just a little bit so that you can approach the park through its main entrance, between two massive cherry trees.

Spend the next couple of hours exploring Ueno Park. Pick one of the museums to visit (you probably won't have time to do more than one – see my day 3 scheduling notes). Walk down the outdoor stone steps to Shinobazu Pond, with the Benten-do temple in the middle. If the weather's nice, rent a duck-boat and paddle in the pond, or go to the zoo if you have kids. Lots of stuff to do!

Once you've had your fill of Ueno's sights, head over to JR Ueno station on the east side of the park, and take the Yamanote line north (anti-clockwise) to Nippori.

15. Nippori

Nippori is an interesting hub to explore, much more working-class than say Ginza or Aoyama or Omotesando. If you're into sewing, knitting or any sort of fabric craft, this is the place to go – there are dozens of great shops in 'Fabric Town' just east of the station, of which the fabulously named **Nippori Tomato** is the best.

For transit enthusiasts, the Nippori-Toneri Liner, an automated guideway, runs north from Nippori to Kumanomae, where you can change to the Toden-Arakawa line, Tokyo's only remaining streetcar (tram, trolley).



Yamanote line, east of Nippori

After exploring Nippori proper – i.e., the area northeast of JR Nippori station, 'outside' the Yamanote loop – cross the tracks through the north end of the station towards Yanaka Ginza. Go up a steep-ish slope, past a temple, and you'll come to a flight of stairs leading to a super-cute shopping street.

16. Yanesen

You're now entering Yanesen, short for **Yanaka-Nezu-Sendagi**. This is one of the few Tokyo neighbourhoods (relatively) untouched by WW2, with traditional buildings and lots of greenery.

Yanaka is Tokyo's cat-town. Its many Buddhist temples were repurposed as granaries after the war; the grain attracted mice and rats; hence the populace kept cats; and today you'll see feline statues – and maybe some real felines – everywhere in this neighbourhood.

Yanaka Ginza is a friendly little shopping street with a classic Showa-era vibe. Most of the shops are family-run, and they're as eclectic as anywhere in Tokyo. Walk to the end of the street, dipping in and out of stores as always. Then turn left, right, and left, to emerge on a (small-ish) main road heading towards **Sendagi**.

You'll walk along this road for about 1km, till you reach **Nezu** station. It's hard to describe but this is a very charming area to stroll through: a classic hidden gem of a neighbourhood.

Along the way, I recommend dinner at Kitsune Sushi, one of my favourite restaurants in all of Tokyo. It's tiny; the diners are friendly and welcoming; and chef Tanaka-san will take exceptional care of you.

(If Kitsune is full, try yakiniku at Ushikuro, or tonkatsu at Mitsuya or sushi at Fukumaru.)

After dinner, if it's Thu, Fri or Sat, drop in at Player's Bar R, a fabulous jazz kissa. Sip a whisky while listening to classic vinyl on a high-end audio system: the perfect end to a long day.

Scheduling Note, Day 3:

Here's a rough timetable for the day:

9:00 to 9:45 –Korakuen or Rikugien
10:00 to 11:45 – Jimbocho and Ochanomizu
12:00 to 13:15 – Ameyoko and lunch
13:30 to 15:30 – Ueno Park
15:45 to 16:30 – Nippori Fabric Town
16:45 to 17:45 – Yanaka Ginza
18:00 – dinner at Kitsune or similar
19:30 – whisky and jazz at Player's Bar R

The key is to work backwards. Many stores in Yanaka Ginza close at 18:00 (some, even earlier), and the same goes for Nippori. So, you need to leave Ueno by mid-afternoon, or skip Nippori, otherwise the Yanesen leg will be less interesting.

The other piece that's flexible is Ueno Park – you can spend as little as one hour or as much as half a day exploring the grounds, visiting museums, having a picnic lunch, and so on.

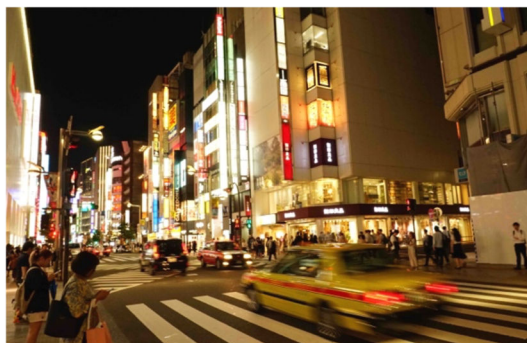
If you want to *really* get some steps in, here are a couple of variations for today:

- From Ochanomizu, instead of taking the subway to Yushima, walk east down the Awaji-zaka slope (a part of the ancient Nakasendo highway). Swing past maach-ecute, an old railway station that's been converted into a café, brewery & museum. Then turn left, cross the Mansei bridge, and walk north through Akihabara and Okachimachi to reach Ueno.
- From Ueno, instead of taking the Yamanote line to Nippori, walk through Yanaka cemetery, which is peaceful and elegant.

Leave some time to pack; we're off to Kanazawa and Kyoto tomorrow!

Scheduling Note: Off to Kyoto!

Day 4 of my plan sees you checking out in the morning, sending your luggage to Kyoto using the *takkyubin* service, and then taking the train to Kanazawa. So you might want to skip ahead to the Kanazawa, Kyoto and Hakone sections of this guide, before returning to our survey of Tokyo neighbourhoods in Shinjuku.



Shinjuku, coming soon.



*Students in Jimbocho; a street corner in Omotesando; crowds on Takeshita-dori;
 Pagoda at Asakusa Sensō-ji; east garden of Imperial Palace; Nijū-bashi (bridge) at the palace;
 Shinjuku at night; tins of black and green leaf tea; dinner cruise on the Sumida river;
 Beer offerings at Meiji-jingu (shrine); corridor in Nishi-Shinjuku; streets of Monzen-nakacho.*

17. Shinjuku

Welcome back to Tokyo! Let's jump straight into the thick of things: **Shinjuku**.

Shinjuku is the world's busiest train station, with dozens of subway, local, commuter and long-distance lines converging. Over 3 million people pass through Shinjuku station every day: that's more than the population of the city of Toronto.

This incredible volume of commuters leads to an equally incredible density of establishments catering to them: retailers, department stores, restaurants, bars, cafés, nightclubs, offices, specialty shops, you name it. If Asakusa is traditional Tokyo, Shinjuku (and its close peers Shibuya and Ikebukuro) is modernity.



Izakaya on Kaname-dori

If you're travelling with family or kids, I recommend staying near Shinjuku san-chome or Shinjuku gyoen-mae – slightly away from the highest density, but just a short stroll from all the action. If you're travelling solo or as a couple, **Kabukicho** has a bunch of hotels: the area is bright, busy, grungy (or rather, as grungy as Japan ever gets), noisy and lively. The Park Hyatt in western Shinjuku is popular with expats.

My itinerary has an evening in Shinjuku on your way back from Hakone. You'll also have time in Shinjuku after your day trip to Kamakura. Don't waste those evenings! Shinjuku is at its best at night, full of life and light. Here are four areas in Shinjuku to visit after dark:

- The streets and alleys around **Kaname-dori** near Shinjuku san-chome station are packed with izakayas and restaurants. I recommend Jaken for teppanyaki at night; Coffee Fragile is a chill hangout during the day
- **Golden Gai** is a set of 5 cramped alleys with over 200 hole-in-the-wall bars, many of them themed. 95% of the customers are tourists, but that doesn't stop it from being fun and atmospheric. My favourite is Bar Uisce, up a narrow flight of stairs, for whisky and jazz.
- **Kabukicho** with its bars, Godzilla head and Donki store is worth visiting (though not that suitable for kids). The neon cityscape on Yasukuni-dori is a classic Tokyo view.
- **Omoide Yokocho** on the west side of the station is, like Golden Gai, cramped, full of tourists, overpriced – and yet kind of cool and atmospheric. Eat yakitori here.

Shinjuku has good **live music**, at Dug Café and Pit Inn and a bunch of other venues. Boudenasu and Samurai are fun jazz bars – Samurai in particular has an utterly unique and unforgettable vibe.

Shinjuku has specialty stores for almost everything under the sun. The **camera stores** are noteworthy: there's Yodobashi's flagship, and a whole bunch of independent vendors. But my favourite specialty store is **Sekaido** – seven floors of pens, books, paints, inks, an artist's delight, but also wonderful if you're into journaling, diaries, calligraphy, or just writing in general.

Shinjuku is also home to a bunch of **department stores**: Isetan, Takashimaya, Lumine and Marui all have their main branches here. (Isetan is a Tokyo landmark).

Just north of Shinjuku is **Okubo**, one of Tokyo's hippest neighbourhoods, full of Korean and other immigrants who bring a youthful pan-Asian vibe to the place.



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Shinjuku station is a city within a city within a city, and if you're into urban transit, worth exploring for itself. It has 4 subway lines, 7 distinct subway stations, 3 private lines and 6 JR lines. Not to mention being a major bus terminal. The station is incomprehensibly vast, a three-dimensional maze of trains and tracks and people and shops and facilities, and yet it all works seamlessly and amazingly.

And finally, if this is all too overwhelming, beat a retreat to Shinjuku-gyoen, a beautiful park that's an oasis of peace and quiet amidst all the bustle and craziness.

18. Shimokitazawa

Shimokitazawa was already one of Tokyo's coolest neighbourhoods, 20+ years ago when I lived in the city. Today there's stiff competition from Kichijoji and Okubo and Daikanyama, but Shimokita is still close to the top of the hipness stakes. Again, it's not a pretentious or pompous kind of cool; it's more laidback, inviting and chill.

Take the Odakyu line from Shinjuku, or the Inokashira line from Shibuya. Exit and explore the twisty little streets to the east of the station – no agenda, just walk!

Shimokita is known for its vintage clothing stores. You'll also find second-hand shops for all sorts of household and personal items, CDs and vinyl, posters and magazines, small appliances, used cameras, and so on. There are several fun indie coffee houses, and at night Shimokita has some of the best live music (garage rock, jazz, punk, crooners, it's all there) in Tokyo. Enjoy!

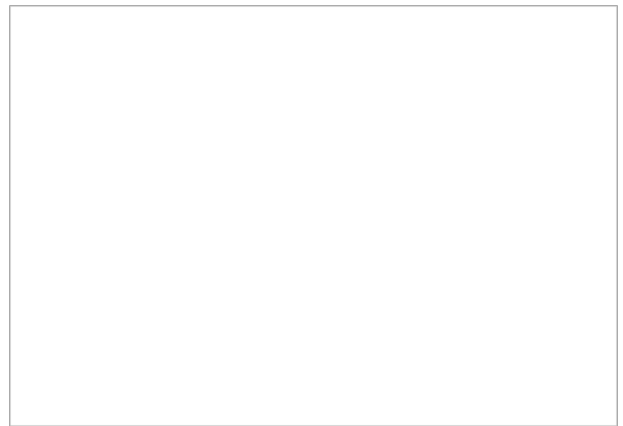


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19. Kichijoji

Kichijoji is a delightful neighbourhood west of Shinjuku; compact, but full of charm and ease. It makes for a pleasant half-day excursion: head out there in the morning, spend a couple of hours exploring, grab lunch, and head back.

To get to Kichijoji, take the Chuo line from Tokyo or Shinjuku, or the Inokashira line from Shibuya, or the (slightly slower) Sobu line from Akihabara.

South of Kichijoji station is the lovely Inokashira Park. Like Ueno Park, this is a great urban retreat, and like Ueno Park, it has a pond, a shrine, and even a zoo.

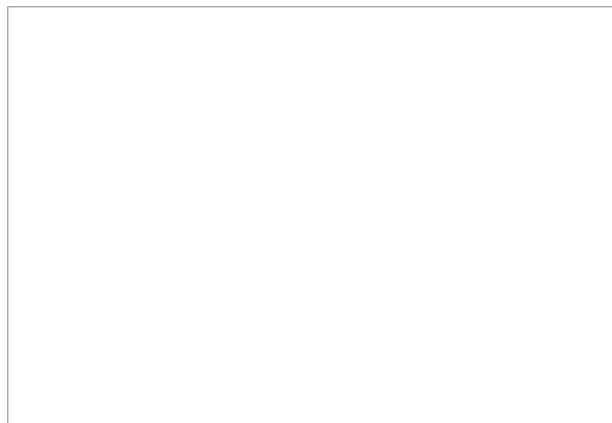


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On the far side of park, about 20 minutes' walk from the station, is the Ghibli Museum. Note that this is a museum, not a theme park: the exhibits are mainly about the making of the Studio Ghibli movies: storyboards and character art, references and drafts, plot outlines and sketchbooks.

The Ghibli Museum is super popular, and you have to book tickets well in advance. Tickets are released in monthly blocks, starting at 10am Japan time on the 10th day of the previous month.

You need to go to the website 45-60 minutes in advance of the release time, keep hitting refresh until you get a spot in the queue, and then hope you get lucky before they all sell out!

North of Kichijoji station there's a large, covered shopping arcade called Kichijoji Sunroad – a type of arcade that's more commonly seen in western Japan (Osaka and Kyoto). In between are alleys with lots of eateries; "harmonica yokocho" is the most interesting one.

As you wander further away from the station, you'll find more of what makes Kichijoji so charming – neat little restaurants, artisanal stores, zakka-ten (curio shops), lots of arts and crafts – a fun, hip, artsy vibe, and not as pretentious as it sounds!

Scheduling Note, Tokyo Day 4: (Overall Day 11):

Start your day by taking the train over to Kichijoji. If you have tickets to the Ghibli Museum, do that first; then get lunch and explore the area north of the station.

Around early or mid-afternoon (or sooner or later, no fixed rule here), take the Inokashira line from Kichijoji down to Shimokita. Spend the afternoon and maybe the early evening exploring Shimokita, then head back to Shinjuku on the Odakyu line.

Exit on the west side of the station and visit Omoide Yokocho first, then pass east under the tracks towards Yasukuni-dori and Kabukicho. Explore Shinjuku till late.

20. Nihonbashi

Begin your final day in Tokyo with a walk through Nihonbashi, through Tokyo Station, and glancing by the Imperial Palace.

Nihonbashi was traditionally the 'centre' of the country – the marker from which all distance measurements were taken during the Edo period, and the ending point for all journeys – including ours. The name means '**Bridge of Japan**', and it's the [first](#) of the 53 stations of the Tokaido made famous by Hiroshige – a classic Edo view.

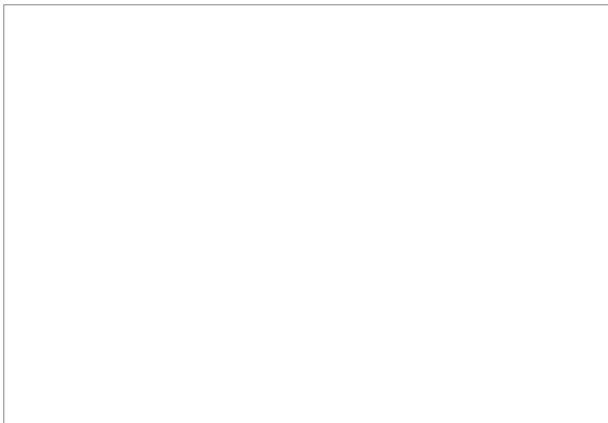


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Unfortunately, Nihonbashi subsequently became the capital's financial district: home to many Japanese banks, and accordingly drab, with grey office buildings and an ugly expressway cutting through it all.

But things are changing. Today the area is experiencing a bit of a rebirth as a centre for traditional arts and crafts and culture. It's not really a tourist sight in itself, but it's home to a number of shops, many of them 100s of years old, selling all sorts of wonderful Edo signatures.

Here are a few you should visit:

- **Hasegawa Saketen**, for a wide range of sake, a helpful English-speaking staff, and a dangerously approachable sake tasting bar
- **Kayanoya**, for dashi, soy sauce and ponzu – takes umami to the next level
- **Yamamoto Noriten**, for beautiful tins of delicious nori (flavoured dried seaweed)
- **Haibara**, for traditional handicrafts and stationery – buy a notebook here!

All of these stores are recommended; this is my favourite area to buy souvenirs from.



Tins of nori from Yamamoto Noriten

Nihonbashi has some good restaurants in the Coredō Muromachi building, a shopping mall designed to look an Edo-area merchant street. Also in Nihonbashi is Mitsukoshi department store, Tokyo's oldest and most venerable.

21. Tokyo Station

From Haibara (the southernmost store in my Nihonbashi list), walk west to Tokyo Station. You've passed through it several times; now is your chance to explore it in more depth.

You're approaching Tokyo Station from the somewhat less-interesting eastern (Yaesu) side. Never mind; enter and wander. Tokyo Sta, like Shinjuku, is a city unto itself, especially the basement level. Interesting stops here include Donguri Republic (Studio Ghibli souvenir store) and other 'character' stores, Traveller's Factory for old-school leather-bound journals, and Ramen Street for a variety of different styles of ramen (from Hokkaido to Hakata; shoyu, shio, miso and tonkotsu), and more. For train buffs, Trainiart and Tokyo Station Gallery are worth a quick visit.

Eventually you'll emerge on the western (Marunouchi) side of the station: an elegant, European style train plaza, much photographed and deservedly so. Maruzen in the OAZO building just north of the plaza is one of the city's best English-language bookstores. Continue west to Nijubashimae station on the Chiyoda line, which you'll take to our next stop, Omotesando.



Walls and moat of the Imperial Palace

22. Imperial Palace

If you're making good time, don't head to Omotesando just yet; instead, take a brief detour to see the grounds of the **Imperial Palace**.

The palace itself is off limits to visitors, but you can still walk around it and see some of the outer gardens. From the plaza to the west of Tokyo Station, walk towards the picture-postcard-perfect Niju-bashi (bridge).



Niju-bashi at the Imperial Palace

You're now in the 'Front Garden' of the Imperial Palace, a large expanse of trees and grass. In fact it's a little *too* large to be truly aesthetic. More intimate is the '**East Garden**', a formal Japanese garden, with ponds, teahouses, and willow trees. To get there, walk north from Niju-bashi and then turn left through the Ote-mon gate. (But you're probably short of time and have seen enough gardens by now, so I recommend heading back to Nijubashimae and thence to Omotesando).

By the way, if you're a runner, there's a 10k path all the way around the palace which is highly recommended (by other runners) (of which I am not one).

23. Omotesando and Harajuku

Take exit A1 from **Omotesando** station and walk along Omotesando avenue, the main approach to Tokyo's holiest Shinto shrine. Near the subway station, the avenue is lined with expensive designer stores and boutiques (Kenzo, Issey Miyake etc.), but as you walk west towards the shrine, the stores become funkier and the pedestrians younger and cooler.

This reaches a climax at **Harajuku** station, where the people and costumes can be surreal fun – a long-running open-air cosplay festival. A block north is the much-photographed Takeshita-dori, a crowded alley lined with hip boutiques. Along the way, the Ota Museum has a nice collection of woodblock prints, while Higuna is a fun stop for coffee and donuts.



Wooden torii (gate) of Meiji-jingu

Omotesando avenue comes to an end here; cross the road and go through the wooden gate into **Meiji-jingu (shrine)**, a vast expanse of calm and peace in the middle of Tokyo's noise and crowds. Keep an eye out for traditional weddings inside the main shrine, complete with samurai-sword-wielding groom and kimono-clad bride.

Behind Meiji-jingu is the large and inviting **Yoyogi Park**, a great spot to unwind and relax on

a Sunday afternoon (or any day, really). You'll see lots of locals here, and not many tourists.

Note that both Meiji-jingu and Yoyogi-koen are deceptively large, and will take longer to walk through than you expect.

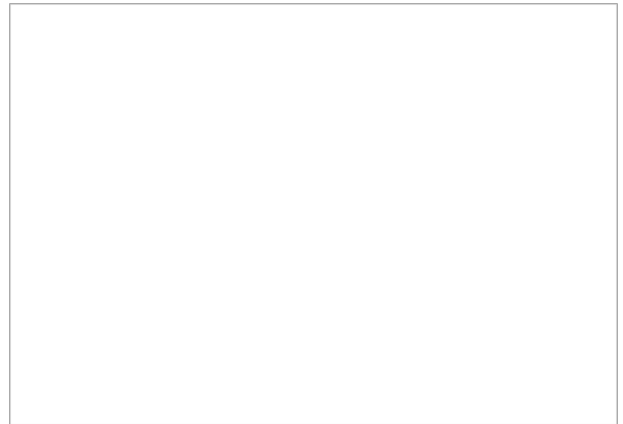


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24. Shibuya

Shibuya is sensory overload. Like Shinjuku, it has a bit of everything: crowds, neon, shops, restaurants, galleries, music, noise, excitement. But where Shinjuku is mind-warply vast, Shibuya is concentrated and condensed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous **Hachiko square** / Shibuya scramble crossing.



Shibuya crossing at night

Two of my favourite shops have their flagship stores in Shibuya: Hands and Loft.

Hands (fka Tokyu Hands) is unique: a mix of hobbyist and DIY crafts, and home goods and hardware, and random gadgets, and things to fill in the corners of your needs. I love it.

Loft is another cool and funky home goods store, slightly cheaper but equally neat. It's kind of hard to describe exactly what they sell, so my recommendation is to just go.

Both Loft and Hands are reached along Centre Gai, the pedestrian road that runs northwest from the station. Feel free to branch off along the many criss-crossing alleys. Shibuya's stores tend to serve a younger crowd than Shinjuku's (let alone Ginza's).

Apart from that, Shibuya, like Shinjuku and indeed like much of Tokyo, is more about atmosphere and being there, even if you don't have a particular goal in mind.

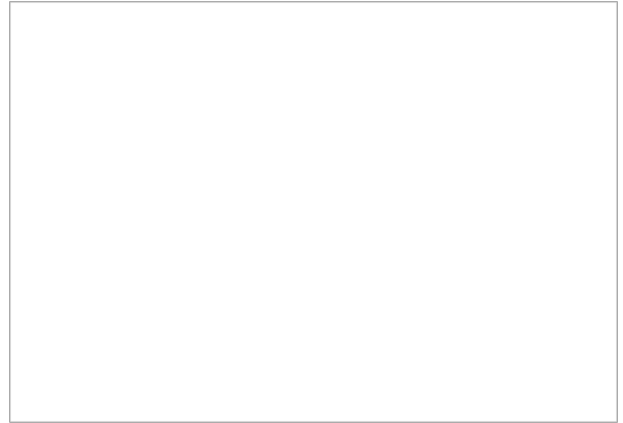


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Shibuya is best visited at night, to photograph the crowds and lights on Center Gai and Hachiko crossing. By day, in fact, it's a little drab.

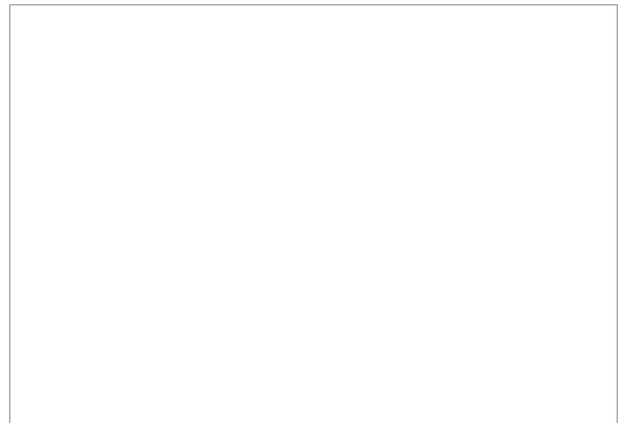


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Scheduling Note, Tokyo Day 5 (Overall Day 12)

Today is shopping day! Apart from Kappabashi, I've left most of the souvenir shopping for your final day in Tokyo, so that you don't have to lug your purchases around the country. Begin at Nihonbashi, then explore Tokyo Sta and (maybe) the Palace grounds, then off to Omotosando and Harajuku in the afternoon, and Shibuya at night.

Try to get to Nihonbashi by 10am when most of its stores open. Head to Tokyo Station in time for an early lunch (or eat in Nihonbashi, which is likely to be less crowded). Explore the underground maze of the station, then pop out onto the western plaza.

(If you've bought a lot of stuff, and depending on where you're staying, it might make sense to store your bags in a coin locker at Tokyo Sta.)

If you're up for it, walk further west to the Imperial Palace grounds as far as Nijubashi. Otherwise, take the Chiyoda line to Omotesando; aim to get there by 2ish, no later than 3.

Spend the next couple of hours strolling through Omotesando and Harajuku; stop for a coffee or matcha, there are lots of good options in this area. Meiji-jingu closes at sunset (~5pm in the winter, ~6pm in the summer) so plan accordingly.

Finally, hop on the Yamanote line and head south to Shibuya. Gawk at the crowds at Shibuya Crossing, wander through Centre Gai, pop into Hands and Loft. Shibuya has lots of nightlife options – restos of every style, bars and izakaya, nightclubs – so if you want to make a late night of it, now is the time!

25. And More...

If you want to get even more of Tokyo, here are some neighbourhoods I recommend:

Ikebukuro: the geek culture of Akihabara, the scale of Shinjuku, a vibe that's all its own

Okubo: A young and lively immigrant neighbourhood just north of Shinjuku

Nakameguro: good coffeeshops, Tokyo's coolest bars, little shops, posh but not too pretentious

Aoyama: luxury design, fashion, nightclubs and jazz, fancy restaurants, the high life

Ogikubo: filled with neat little 'zakka-ten' – curiosity shops selling a little bit of everything

Daikanyama: super trendy area with many hip cafes, brunch spots, bars, and fashionistas

Jiyugaoka: stylish and sophisticated 'little Europe' – cafes, boutiques, pedestrianized streets

Odaiba: slick artificial development in the middle of Tokyo Bay – malls, theme parks, expo centres

Roppongi: expat nightlife zone is a bit soulless but does have a few good art museums

Kasai for its subway museum and **Omiya** for its JR museum: transit buffs unite!

Ningyocho: very old neighbourhood with narrow streets and traditional stores

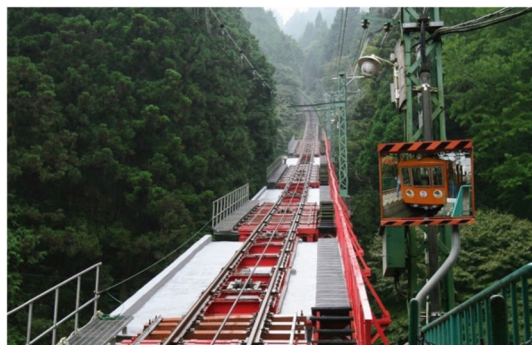
Yokohama: port city with a true Chinatown and two separate Ramen Museums.

(You can see why I said Tokyo is inexhaustible!)

Short Trips From Tokyo

Scheduling Note, Short Trips

There are dozens of interesting destinations within a short (1-2 hour) train ride from Tokyo. Of these, my 4 favourites are Kamakura, Hakone, Nikko and Mitake. Each of these can be done as a day trip; they can also be visited over 2 days with an overnight stay.



Cable car to the top of Mt. Mitake

In my itinerary, I suggest visiting Hakone on the way back from Kyoto, with an overnight stay at an *onsen* (hot spring) resort. This dovetails well with using the *takkyubin* next-day luggage delivery service between Kyoto and Tokyo. Hakone is the only place for which this plan makes sense; the logistics don't work for the other three destinations.

I subsequently allow one day for a trip from Tokyo, with Kamakura as a suggested destination. You can of course visit Nikko or Mitake on that day instead; or you can slot those in to replace some other Tokyo experiences; or you can extend your Japan stay. These are all good choices and there's no wrong answer 😊.

1. Hakone

Hakone combines beautiful scenery, Edo-period history, hot springs, lake cruises, and classic views of **Mt Fuji** in a full and fulfilling day.



Mt Fuji, seen from Lake Ashi in Hakone

You can visit Hakone as a day trip from Tokyo, but in my itinerary, I suggest visiting on your way back from Kyoto. You'll spend the first evening relaxing at an *onsen* (hot spring) resort, before doing a scenic loop the next day, and then continuing to Tokyo.

From Kyoto, take an afternoon Hikari shinkansen to Odawara, 3 stops before Tokyo. Aim to get there around 4-5pm. At Odawara, look for the Odakyu / Hakone-Tozan ticket counter, and buy the 2-day '**Hakone Free Pass**'. This pass covers local travel in the Hakone area; it's worth it, for both savings and convenience.

(There's also a more expensive version of the Hakone Free Pass which includes return travel between Odawara and Shinjuku; slightly inefficient since you'll only be using one leg of that journey, but convenient.)

Then hop on to the Hakone-Tozan line to Hakone-Yumoto station, the starting point for Hakone proper.

The Onsen Experience

Hakone is a hotbed (!) of thermal activity. Some of its many springs cater to day-visitors; others have associated hotels, resorts or ryokans. Pick one to stay at. Some criteria to keep in mind:

- Private bath or communal bath?
- If communal, is it segregated by gender?
- Do they accept tattoos?
- Is there a restaurant on the premises?
- Is it easy to get to from Hakone-Yumoto?

Most resorts are near Hakone-Yumoto station, or near Gora a few miles away. Some offer a station pickup service; otherwise you can walk, or take the bus, or a taxi. It's a good idea to book your stay in advance.

Hakone has a couple of very high-end ryokan, so this might be a good place to splurge for 1 night.

Many middle- and high-end establishments take pride in serving an elaborate, multi-course 'set dinner', included with the stay. These dinners are usually served at 6pm, so time your arrival accordingly (or notify them well in advance that you want a later seating).

Finally, indulge in a late-evening hot-springs bath. (You can indulge in a pre-dinner bath as well, noone's stopping you.) The most important piece of onsen etiquette to know is that you should wash and soap yourself thoroughly *before* entering the main tub or pool. Onsen are for soaking, not for cleaning! (And oh, how heavenly the soaking is.)

Sleep well; you'll have a full day tomorrow.

Hakone Scenic Loop

The 'classic' Hakone itinerary is an anti-clockwise loop: train, funicular, cable-car, boat, bus, train, stopping for views along the way. I recommend doing the loop clockwise: less crowded and better synching of location and view and time of day.

The steps, in clockwise order, are:

1. Train, Odawara to Hakone-Yumoto, 30'
2. Bus, Hakone Yumoto to Amazake Chaya, 30'
Interlude: Amazake Chaya, 30'
3. Walk, Amazake Chaya to Moto Hakone, 30'
Interlude: Hakone-Jinja shrine, 30'
4. Walk, Moto-Hakone to Hakone-Machi, 30'
Interlude: checkpoint museum, 30'
5. Lake Cruise, Hakone-Machi to Togendai, 45'
6. Gondola, Togendai to Owakudani, 15'
Interlude: ice cream and eggs. 30'
7. Gondola, Owakudani to Sounzan, 15'
8. Funicular, Sounzan to Gora, 15'
9. Train, Gora to Hakone Yumoto, 45'
Interlude: Open Air Museum, 60'
10. Train, Hakone Yumoto to Odawara, 30'

The Hakone Free Pass covers all of these. And you've already done step 1, hurray!

In the morning, check out from your hotel (after a pre-breakfast soak, if desired) and head to Hakone-Yumoto station. Leave your bags in a coin locker or at the left luggage desk (cloakroom, '*kurōku*') for the day.

Exit Hakone Yumoto station and find the bus for Moto-Hakone. (It used to be at stop #4 – the Odakyu staff at the bus stop will help you find the right one.). The bus takes about 45 minutes, switch-backing up mountain slopes through pine and cedar forests with nice views over the valley and back towards Tokyo – a very scenic ride.

About 30 minutes into the journey, there's a 300-year-old teahouse called **Amazake Chaya**. Hop off here for a tea break, and then walk the rest of the way to Moto-Hakone along a trail that follows the **Old Tokaido Highway**, paved with cobbles and lined with ancient cedars. (If you'd rather not walk the trail, just board the next bus.)

Either way, you'll eventually reach Moto-Hakone on the shores of **Lake Ashi**. On clear days, you should get your first view of Fuji across the lake.



Hakone-jinja

Look to your right along the lakeshore and you'll see the red torii (shrine gate) of **Hakone Jinja**. Walk there and spend some time exploring the atmospheric shrine grounds. There's usually a queue to take photos at the torii, so use your discretion on that. Then return to Moto Hakone. This might be a good time to eat an early lunch – there are a few eateries plus a large seven-eleven that sells hot food.

From Moto Hakone, now walk in the opposite direction (i.e. with the lake on your right) along the road towards Hakone Machi. A few yards in, there's an (easy to miss) turnoff on the left that rejoins the old Tokaido trail.

The cedar highway puts you back on the main road after a short distance; cross over for a quick

visit to the Hakone Sekisho (checkpoint) and associated museum. Then continue a few more yards and you'll see the dock for the Hakone Sightseeing Cruise. Take the **ship** back to Moto Hakone (stay on board!) and thence to Togendai. The best views of Fuji are in the early part of the cruise, on the left side of the ship.

Now we're onto the loop proper and you can just follow signs and the flow of traffic. From Togendai, take the **cable car** up to Owakudani (Fuji is now behind you). At Owakudani, walk over to see the fumaroles, and stop for an ice cream or for the local specialty, eggs boiled in hot mud. (It's only the shells that look black.) Then continue down the other side of the mountain, on a cable car to Sounzan. From Sounzan, a **funicular** takes you steep downhill to Gora.

From Gora, the **Hakone-Tozan railway** takes you back to Hakone-Yumoto station. This section of the railway is Japan's oldest mountain train, and very pretty.

If you have time and energy, the Hakone Open Air Museum, accessible from the Chokoku-no-mori stop on this line, is worth a visit – a genuinely world class collection of modern sculpture, it's a good way to spend the mid or late afternoon.

Otherwise carry on to Hakone-Yumoto. Pick up your bags. At this point you have two options:

- Take the Hakone-Tozan line to Odawara, then change on to a shinkansen back to Tokyo.
- Take the Odakyu line directly to Shinjuku from Hakone-Tozan. Depending on your flavour of Hakone Free Pass, you may have to buy a ticket for this. Optionally, pay extra for a reserved seat on the express 'Odakyu RomanceCar' (faster, more comfy).

2. Kamakura

Kamakura is a pleasant day trip from Tokyo, with its many Zen Buddhist temples nestled in the cedar-clad hills ringing a pretty bay. And the **Great Buddha**, for my money the single most spectacular sight in Japan.

From Shinjuku station, take the JR Shonan-Shinjuku line to Kamakura station. If you're staying in eastern Tokyo, take the JR Yokosuka line from Tokyo station to Kamakura station.

We'll start by visiting **Hokoku-ji**, a small but tasteful temple with a lovely bamboo grove that is far less crowded than the one in Arashiyama. At Kamakura station, board the 23 / 24 / 36 bus and get off at Jomyo-ji stop, Hokoku-ji is a short walk from there. After walking through the bamboo grove, drink matcha tea at the temple's tea house.

Take the bus back to Kamakura station. Now is a good time to explore the shops (mostly touristy but some are quite nice, including the Ghibli merch store) on Komachi-dori around the station. Get an early lunch; I recommend Misaki for conveyor belt sushi.

Suitably fortified, take the **Enoden line** – a tram-like train, 2 carriages long, that seems to wind through people's backyards – to Hase station. Hop off and walk to **Kōtoku-in**, home of the **Daibutsu** (Great Buddha) of Kamakura. Some guidebooks suggest taking the bus to the Buddha but the train is better.

At first glance, the Buddha seems merely big, nothing further. But as you walk closer, you notice the subtlety and elegance of its features. I'm always thrilled by the way the expression on the Buddha's face changes as you walk around the statue – even though the representation is

emphatically not realistic, but rather, highly stylized.



The Buddha at Kamakura

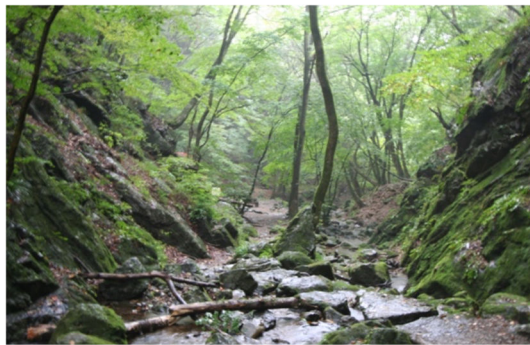
After seeing the Buddha, walk back a few hundred yards along the road and turn right to enter Hase-dera (Hase Kannon temple). Climb to the back of temple for a panoramic view of Kamakura Bay. Then walk back down to Hase station. (If you're visiting Kamakura after Kyoto, Hase-dera is perfectly skippable; it's just another temple, and you've seen plenty of those.)

At this point you can take the Enoden line back to Kamakura station and thence to Tokyo or Shinjuku. But I recommend taking the tiny train the other way, for gorgeous views of the Pacific Ocean. Hop off at Kamakura-kokomae for a quick walk and anime-ready scenery. Then continue to **Enoshima Island**, where you can watch sunset on a quiet beach.

Return on the Enoden line to Kamakura station. Or for something different, take the Shonan suspended monorail onward to Ofuna, and then switch to one of several JR lines connecting Ofuna to Shinjuku and Tokyo.

3. Mitake

Mitake is a great getting-away-from-it-all retreat. It's not that far from central Tokyo as the crow flies, but it's a bit tricky getting there (multiple train changes, bus and cable car), and as a result it remains crowd-free and unspoiled. Mitake has some gorgeous hiking trails, and is home to one of my favourite inns, the Shukubo Komadori Sanso ('mountain lodge of the robin').



Rainy day hike in Mitake

Here's how to get to Mitake. From either Tokyo or Shinjuku station, take the JR Chuo line to Tachikawa. Trains run every 5-7 minutes; taking an express (kaisoku) will lop 10 minutes off the regular journey time of 55 minutes. At Tachikawa, change to the JR Ome line towards Okutama. The line goes from Tachikawa to Ome to Mitake to Okutama, but not all trains run all the way, so you may have to change again.

Get off at Mitake station, cross the road to Mitake-eki bus stop and catch the bus for Cable-shita bus stop (10 minutes, Y200ish). Cable-shita is the last stop on the bus route. Walk to Takimoto cable-car station, and ride the cable-car up to Mitake-san cable-car station. You're finally there! The trip in its entirety (from Tokyo to Mitake-san) should take between 2 and 3 hours, depending on the quality of your connections.

At Mitake-san cable-car station, pause briefly to gaze over the valley of the Tama river from the Mitake-daira viewpoint. Then walk along the sidewalk to the visitor centre. Grab a map of the local hiking trails, and proceed, climbing gradually higher all the way, to Mitake-jinja (Mitake shrine); you will pass through a tiny village with a few inns and shops. The shrine is at the very top of Mt. Mitake and offers panoramic views in all directions.

An especially pretty, circular walking trail starts just below Mitake-jinja; turn to the right as you descend the steps of the shrine and you'll be on it. A short way into the walk, turn left onto the Nagano-daira viewpoint, a large and level promontory which juts out above the valley floor. Retrace your steps and continue your walk till you reach the **Ayahiro Falls**.

Descend by the side of the falls and walk by the side of the stream through the '**Rock Garden**', an astonishingly beautiful, forested valley with lots of moss-covered stones and flowing water everywhere. The trail then starts to climb away from the stream. Soon after passing a single, large rock, you'll hear the **Nanayo Falls**; you can descend to their base via a series of metal ladders. Climb back and continue along the main trail; it'll take you all the way back to where you started. This round trip takes about 2-3 hours and is a fairly easy stroll. Then back down the cable car, bus, and train back to Tokyo.

With 2 days in the Mitake area, you can explore Lake Okutama and the beautiful Tama River valley. I recommend staying at the Shukubo Komadori Sanso (www.komadori.com), a 250-year-old pilgrims' hostelry just off the left side of the road between Mitake visitor centre and Mitake shrine. Be sure to get there in time for dinner at 6pm; they do a fabulous spread.

4. Nikko

Nikko offers several hikes of varying difficulty, all through spectacular mountain scenery. It also houses the mausoleum of the first Tokugawa shogun, a building that's quite unlike anything else you'll see in Japan.

You can visit Nikko in one day, in which case you can cover the mausoleum complex and the Kegon Falls but not much more. Or you can take two days in which case you can go hiking in Nikko National Park, seeing the Ryuzu and Yudaki Falls, Senjogahara Marsh and more. The rest of this section is written assuming a 2-day trip.



Shinkyo bridge in Nikko

Start at the Tobu Railway building in Asakusa. The staff at the Tobu Tourist Information Centre will help you buy the appropriate pass for travel to, from and within Nikko. Then board the Tobu Nikko line train, taking care to sit in the correct carriage (not all cars of every train go to the same destination).

On a one-day trip to Nikko, you should leave Tokyo / Asakusa as early as you can. On a two-day trip, it's okay to leave around 11am to get to Nikko around 2pm, but no later than that.

Exit Nikko station and turn right along the main road through town. Walk 2 miles to the antique **Shinkyo Bridge**; you can stroll across it for a rather stiff fee.

Then cross the road and climb up the stone steps to the main mausoleum complex. The complex has a Chinese garden, a Buddhist temple, a Shinto shrine, and the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu (the first shogun of the Edo era), all surrounded by towering cedars.

The first attraction in this complex is **Shoyo-en**, a formal garden laid out in the Chinese style; it's a triumph of proportion and texture. The temple and shrine are fine, but unremarkable; I wouldn't recommend spending too much time on them. Instead, walk along the cedar-lined avenue, past moss-covered lanterns, climbing up several broad flights of stone steps to the extremely ornate **Toshogu Mausoleum**. Don't miss the famous 'three monkeys' sculpture.



Stone lanterns amid the cedars, Nikko

When in Nikko, I usually stay at the Annex Turtle Hotori-An, a small inn right by the water's edge. You should do paperwork and pay your bill after dinner, since you'll be making an early start the next morning.

In the morning, walk back up from the inn to the Nishisando bus stop and stash your overnight bag in the coin-locker by the side of the road. Then catch a bus bound for Chuzenji Onsen or Yumoto Onsen. Buses start running around 6am, and I suggest catching the earliest one possible. Your Nikko pass will cover the fare.

The bus ascends a beautiful winding mountain road – the **Irohazaka** ('alphabet') slope, so called because it has 48 curves, labeled with the 48 letters of the Japanese alphabet – before emerging near Lake Chuzenji. Get off the bus at the town of Chuzenji Onsen, and descend to the **Kegon** waterfall, the first of Nikko's three spectacular cascades.

Return to the bus stop and catch a bus bound for Yumoto Onsen. Stay on the bus as it skirts the lake, and get off at the **Ryuzunotaki** stop; this is the second and most beautiful of the cascades. Cross the road and walk back 30m to the waterfall (which is cunningly hidden from view from the roadside, though you can't miss the noise). Grab a cup of coffee at the open-air café with its amazing location at the base of the falls.

Then climb up the broad trail along the east side of the falls. After crossing the main road at a bridge, walk through a larch forest along the east bank of the Yugawa river to the southern end of the marshy **Senjogahara plain**.

Cross the plain on wooden planks, taking in the views of the encircling mountains, then walk through another forest to the base of the massive **Yudaki** falls. Climb up the east side of the falls to Lake Yunoko. Circle round the western shore of the lake to Yumoto Onsen, a pleasant little town with several inviting hot springs to soak in.

Finally, catch a bus from Yumoto Onsen all the way back to Nikko station, hopping off at Nishisando to pick up your bags.



Senjogahara plain in Nikko National Park

The hike described above, from Ryuzunotaki to Yumoto Onsen, takes about 4 hours; the course is easy, and the views are marvelous. The bus rides at either end should in theory take only 1 hour each, but the traffic in Nikko can get quite unbelievably bad (especially on the narrow roads approaching Chuzenji Onsen, especially on weekends, especially during fall colours), and you might easily end up spending 2-3 hours crawling down jammed mountain slopes. That's why I emphasize making an early start.

If you're delayed setting out, then I recommend taking your first bus directly to Ryuzunotaki, doing the hike, and stopping at the Kegon falls on your way back (if time permits). Another variation is to cover the stretch between Chuzenji Onsen and Ryuzunotaki on foot, or even by boat, though this will of course add time to your journey, not subtract it. Note that the last direct train back to Tokyo from Nikko leaves around 6ish, though indirect trains run up to 8:30.

Interlude: Kanazawa

1. Kanazawa

Kanazawa is a pretty town on the western (Sea of Japan) coast of Honshu. Because of its location (away from the warm Kuroshio current, on the windward side of the Japan Alps) it gets a lot of cold rain and snow in winter. Nonetheless it's a beautiful town and is home to the magnificent **Kenrokuen** – one of the three 'great gardens' of Japan. Is it worth going all the way to Kanazawa just to see this garden? Yes, yes it is.



Kenrokuen in Kanazawa (Wikimedia image)

The Hokuriku shinkansen (newly opened in 2015!) connects Tokyo to Kanazawa – it takes 2.5 hours. Buy seats on the day of your journey, at a kiosk or at the 'green window' reservation counters at Tokyo station. Ask to travel on either the Kagayaki express or the Hakutaka semi-express, whichever gets you there quicker.

The Hokuriku cuts through the Japanese Alps and is quite scenic. Catch an early train to Kanazawa so that you get there by lunchtime. Either eat an eki-ben on the train, or pick up lunch at Kanazawa station, which has several good eateries; Kanazawa is famed for its seafood. Stash your luggage in a coin locker, and then take the

[Kanazawa Loop Bus](#) from outside the station directly to Kenrokuen Garden. Spend the afternoon wandering its grounds, marvelling at the balance and perspective.

There are 4 museums in a "cultural complex" adjoining Kenrokuen, and they're all excellent: the Museum of Contemporary Art (open late), the DT Suzuki Museum, the National Crafts Museum, and the Prefectural Museum. But the garden outshines them all.

Once you're done at Kenrokuen, return to Kanazawa station, grab your suitcases, and head over to your hotel. I recommend the Dormy Inn, right next door to the station; Kanazawa is also a good place for a ryokan stay. If you have the energy, head over to Higashichaya or Nagamachi – well-preserved districts featuring traditional architecture and design – or ride on the [Light-Up Bus](#) for an illuminated tour of the city at night.

You could perhaps continue to Kyoto the same day, but it would be a very long and train-filled day, plus you'd miss the coastal scenery between Kanazawa and Kyoto, so I wouldn't recommend it unless you're very tight on time.

Assuming you're staying overnight, my next suggestion is to go for an early morning stroll through Kenrokuen – it opens at 7 in the summer, 8 in the winter. There's also an early admission option for complete solitude. The morning light and feel of the garden is very different, and repays the effort.

Return to your hotel, check out and head to the station. Go to the reservation counter and book seats to Kyoto. You'll need to take the shinkansen to Tsuruga, and then change to the Thunderbird Express for the rest of the journey. Ask for a window seat (*madoguchi no seki*) on the right for the best views of the Sea of Japan.

2. Matsumoto

If gardens aren't your thing, an alternative to Kanazawa is **Matsumoto**, a small town in Nagano prefecture on the edge of the Japanese Alps.

To get there, take the Hokuriku shinkansen to Nagano, and then change to the Shinano line; the journey from Tokyo takes 2-3 hours. The next day, take the Shinano line from Matsumoto to Nagoya, home of Toyota, and then take the Tokaido shinkansen to Kyoto. (Unfortunately, this means you won't get to see the Sea of Japan).



Matsumoto Castle

Matsumoto is known for three things: a beautiful castle; numerous *onsen* resorts; and Japan's best collection of woodblock prints, at the Ukiyo-e Museum. All three are worth seeing, but personally, I'd still choose Kanazawa over it.

If you have the time and inclination, do both: Tokyo to Matsumoto, stay the night, Matsumoto to Kanazawa, stay another night, then on to Kyoto. Alternatively, skip both towns and just go straight to Kyoto from Tokyo.

Note that getting around Matsumoto is a little tricky – it's a small town without much public transport, so be prepared for long walks or taxis.

3. Sado Island

Sado is a small island off the west coast of Japan. Isolated, craggy, with harsh winters, it was often the place of exile for criminals, nobles who fell out of favour, and other undesirables.

Perhaps for similar reasons, in recent decades it has become a bit of a haven for artists, musicians and writers: still somewhat isolated, distraction-free, a place to devote yourself to your work, while living in communes with like-minded people. The most famous such commune is **Kodo**, one of Japan's top taiko ensembles.



Kodo performing on Sado Island

Every summer, Kodo hosts a 3-day music festival on Sadogashima called the **Earth Celebration**. Musicians (especially percussionists) from around the world come to listen, learn, and perform. It's an experience like no other. The island itself is beautiful and wild; recommended if you can manage it.

Scheduling Note: Interlude

I include the destinations on this page in case you have extra time in Japan. But my main recommendation remains 1 day in Kanazawa, on the way from Tokyo to Kyoto. Save these other places for your next visit!

Kyoto Overview

1. Introduction

Kyoto is one of the great cities of the world. Capital of Japan for a thousand years, it is the fount of Japanese tradition and culture pre-Edo era: politics and religion, art and architecture, food and drink, music and dance. And it's a living heritage: to this day you can find master craftsmen whose families have been creating works of art in Kyoto for dozens of generations and hundreds of years. There's a depth of culture and aesthetics behind every encounter in this wonderful city.



Kimonos at Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto

All this history can be fatiguing. While Kyoto's shrines and temples and gardens and craft houses are wonderful individually and collectively, it's not a good idea to simply rush from sight to sight. Instead, relax and soak in the atmosphere of this historic town. Don't try to see everything (with several thousand temples in the city, that would be impossible!). But what you see, **see deeply**.

2. Arriving and Getting Around

Kanazawa connects to Kyoto via the scenic Thunderbird Express – it's not a shinkansen but it's still pretty fast, and it travels through some wonderful coastal and mountain scenery, before skirting Lake Biwa on its approach to Kyoto.

Kyoto has a handful of train lines but the network isn't as dense as Tokyo's. Buses are plentiful and efficient ([route map](#)). Taxis will save you a lot of time. Bicycles are readily available to rent and convenient for getting around in the city centre (less so for the hilly outskirts, and besides they're not terribly contemplative). I usually pick an area (Higashiyama, Arashiyama, Gion), take a train or taxi there, then walk around a lot.

3. Where To Stay in Kyoto

The very things that make historic Kyoto a charming place to visit – narrow streets, temples and shrines and culture everywhere, traditional wooden architecture – make it occasionally frustrating to find good, comfortable places to stay in the city core. But I have some suggestions!

If you're okay with slightly longer travel times, I suggest staying outside the city centre. There are several good ryokans in northern Kyoto, both expensive and inexpensive.

In the city centre, I recommend the area between Kyoto Station and Nishiki Market: there are several good hotels here. Gion and the banks of the Kamo River are popular with tourists, but I've found that inns and guesthouses in that area can be hit or miss.

If you have deep pockets, Kyoto is a good city to splurge: Hoshinoya, the Four Seasons, the Park Hyatt and Aman Kyoto are all excellent.

4. Kyoto Day Planner

I budget 4 nights in Kyoto, arriving from Kanazawa around mid-day on day 1 and heading back to Tokyo around mid-day on day 5.

Here's how I would spend my time in Kyoto:

Day 1, Central Kyoto: Nishiki Market to Maruyama Park, via Hanamikoji and Gion.

Day 2, N and NE Kyoto: Kinkaku-ji & Ryoan-ji, then Ginkaku-ji and the Path of Philosophy.

Day 3, SE and E Kyoto: Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kiyomizu-dera, Sanneizaka & Nineizaka, Kodai-ji.

Day 4, Kansai exploration: Nara and/or Osaka and/or Uji.

Day 5, Kyoto outskirts: Arashiyama or Kurama, then train back to Hakone and Tokyo.

Kyoto's "greatest hits" attractions are Kinkaku-ji, Kiyomizu-dera, Fushimi Inari Taisha, and Nishiki Market. They're all great but they do get crowded, especially on weekends and holidays. My schedule tries to get to one of these sights first thing every morning; try to make an early start!



Maiko and visitors in Kyoto

5. Interlude: Japanese History

It's worth knowing a little bit about the history of Japan, to give context to the places you see.

500-700: Asuka Period. Japan first unified. Buddhism arrives from Korea. Agrarian society.

700-800: Nara Period. Nara becomes capital. Strong Chinese cultural influence.

800-1200: Heian Period. Kyoto becomes capital. Peak of the Imperial court. Development of *hiragana* and *katakana*. Flourishing art and literature. 'Classical' period of Japanese culture.

1200-1350: Kamakura Period. Emperors in Kyoto reduced to figureheads. Japan ruled by *shōgun* (military dictators) based in Kamakura. New schools of Buddhism spread. Feudal society.

1350-1500: Muromachi Period. Kamakura shogunate loses power, replaced by Ashikaga shogunate based in Kyoto. Development of Higashiyama culture based on Zen Buddhism: *wabi-sabi*, *chadō*, *ikebana*, *sumi-e* and *Noh*.

1500-1600: Sengoku Period. Civil war and social upheaval; the period of warring states. *Daimyō* (nobles) and *samurai* (warriors).

1600-1870: Edo Period. Japan unified under the Tokugawa shogunate, based in Edo. Authoritarian society, closed to foreigners. Prosperous merchant class and cultural flourishing: *ukiyo-e*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*, *haiku* and *sumo*.

1870-1945: Imperial Restoration. Shogunate falls, emperor restored. Court moves to Edo, now renamed Tokyo. Japan modernizes rapidly. Militarism ends with World War II.

1945-present: Modern Japan. Look around you!

6. Interlude: Temples and Shrines

My Kyoto plan sees you visit 6 different temples and shrines in 3 days, and swing by at least a dozen more, plus a couple in Nara. Is this excessive? Won't you get "templed out"?

More generally: Kyoto's Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are the heart of its history and culture. Everything from *sumi-e* (calligraphy) to *ikebana* (flower arrangement) to *chadō* (the tea ceremony) has its origins in these institutions. But there are so many of them! Where do you begin, and how do you avoid temple fatigue?

Here's the key. Don't think of Kyoto's historic monuments as sights to see, or a checklist to be ticked off. You're not here to rush from Kinkaku-ji to Fushimi Inari Taisha to Kiyomizu-dera, just so that you can say you've been there. You're here to enjoy and absorb the aesthetics and atmosphere of these places, and reflect on the deeper meanings they represent.



Garden door, Ryōan-ji

I like to think that Buddhist temples are foci of **interiority**. Where does fulfilment come from? What does it mean to lead an enlightened life? How do you cultivate mindfulness, and presence?

Meanwhile, Shinto shrines are all about the **human connection** to the quotidian world. How do you live in harmony – with nature, and with your fellow human beings?

Enough philosophy; time for some practical tips.

- In Japan, Buddhism and Shinto are not exclusionary; it's considered perfectly normal to observe practices from both religions.
- Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are both generally welcoming to visitors, though most inner sanctums are off limits.
- Shrines typically have vermilion gateways, and often have sculptures of animals, or are built around rocks or waterfalls, near lakes and rivers and mountains.
- Temples tend to be more austere on the outside, but sometimes have ornate gold interiors. Different temples are associated with different schools of Buddhism.
- Shrines can be identified by the suffixes *jinja*, *taisha*, and *jingu*. Temples can be identified by the suffixes *dera*, *in*, *ji* and *do*.
- There are rules of temple and shrine [etiquette](#) worth following, both for the sake of courtesy, but also for the experience.

A lovely and strongly recommended souvenir to take back home from Kyoto is the **goshuincho** – literally, 'honourable seal or stamp book' – a pilgrimage journal of sorts. Buy a blank one at the first temple or shrine you visit. Then hand it to the staff at every subsequent location; they will write in it, with the most exquisite calligraphy.

(Don't forget to do this in Kamakura and Asakusa as well!)



*Garden door at Ryōan-ji; rock garden at Ryōan-ji; corridor of a temple;
Ginkaku-ji in green; moss garden at Ginkaku-ji; basin at Honen-in; Arashiyama bamboo grove;
Three groups of kimono-clad visitors at Kiyomizu-dera;
Stone carving at Honen-in; sapling in the garden of Ginkaku-ji; gravel garden in Daitoku-ji.*

Kyoto Destinations

1. Nishiki to Yasaka Jinja

Your train from Kanazawa should arrive around lunchtime. Leave your overnight bag in a coin-locker at Kyoto station and take the subway a couple of stops north to Shijō station. Walk east along the main road, then turn left (north) on the narrow street immediately after Daimaru department store. Walk one block, and you'll see the entrance to **Nishiki Market** on your right.

This part of the market is all about food: snacks and confectionery, greengrocers and fruit sellers, butchers and fishmongers. Forage here for lunch: dip in and out of various shops, buying and sampling the wares. (Be [adventurous](#)!)

The food arcade eventually comes to an end, and now you're in the 'general purpose' part of the market: everything from clothes to kitchenware, umbrellas to handbags. I especially recommend Nomura Tailor for traditional fabrics.

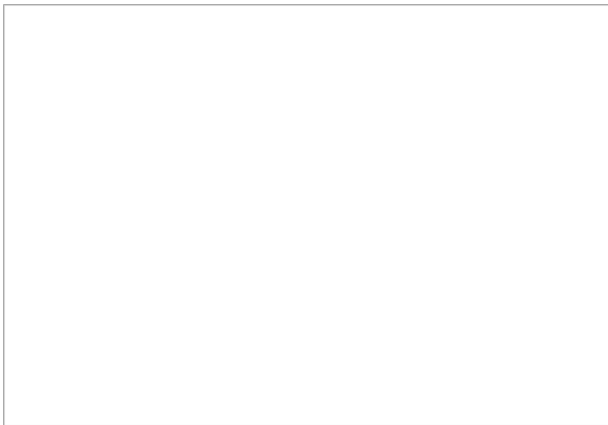


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Eventually, after exploring the arcades and alleys of Nishiki Market, return to the main road and walk east. Just before the Kamo River, turn left (north) along Pontocho Alley: if you're lucky, you may see a few *geiko* on their way to engagements,

Then cross the river to **Hanamikoji**. This is a very scenic, atmospheric part of Kyoto, criss-crossed with narrow alleys and wooden storefronts. You'll see plenty of kimono-clad visitors, and perhaps a few *maiko* (*geiko* in training) as well.

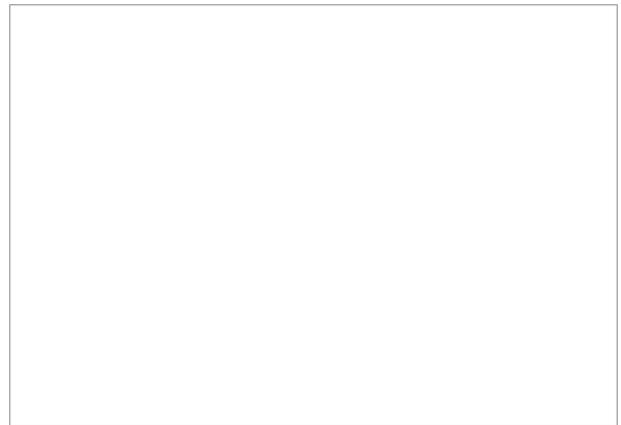


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Gion (the area around Hanamikoji) is at its best around sunset. There are lots of restaurant options here for dinner, including many on the banks of the river.

Unfortunately, there are also lots of tourists and some of them are quite badly behaved. In an effort to control the crowds, the Kyoto city government has designated certain areas "off-limits" to non-residents; read the signage to know what's permitted.

After eating, head further east to see **Yasaka Jinja**, built in 656 CE; it's beautifully illuminated at night with hundreds of lanterns.

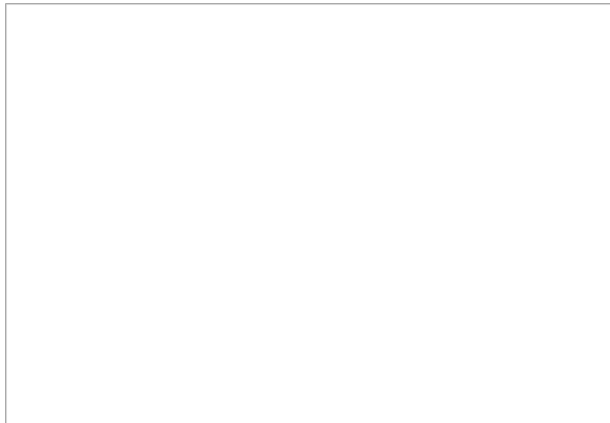


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(If you're early, explore **Maruyama Park** even further east – very pretty when the cherry trees are in bloom).

Yasaka ends your day; head back to the station, get your bags, and check in to your hotel. Your large suitcases should be waiting for you there!

Scheduling Note: Kyoto Day 1

Here's the maximalist plan for today. It's quite full and doesn't leave much in the way of down time, so don't feel bad if you can't do all of it:

6-7: rise and shine!

7-9: (optional) Kenrokuen early morning stroll

9-10: return to hotel, breakfast, check out

10-1: depart Kanazawa, arrive Kyoto, coin locker

1-3: Nishiki Market, lunch

3-5: Hanamikoji and Gion

5-6: (optional) dinner in Gion area

6-7: sunset in Gion or Maruyama Park

7-8: Yasaka Jinja, illuminated

8-9: collect luggage, head to hotel, check in

It's understandable if you skip your early morning visit to Kenrokuen. Also, you can save some time by eating breakfast on the train, especially if your hotel doesn't include it with your stay (most hotels do). This might help you get to Kyoto by late morning, which will free up more time for Nishiki and Gion.

You don't have to stay at Yasaka till late at night; the lanterns are lit around dusk.

2. Ryōan-ji and Kinkaku-ji

Start your day at **Ryōan-ji** – ‘The Temple of the Dragon at Peace’ – my favourite of all of Kyoto’s many temples and shrines, and soon to be yours as well. Ryōan-ji is at the northern edge of the city, and can be reached by bus #59 from Shijō-Kawaramachi; but I usually take a taxi.

Ryōan-ji is famous for its **rock garden**, a classic of the *kare-sansui* (dry landscape) style. Get there early in the morning while it’s empty and quiet, and contemplate the patterns of stone and gravel. There’s an amazing depth and balance to its abstraction.



The Zen garden at Ryōan-ji

Equally moving is the *tsukubai* (fountain-basin) at the back of the temple, with its Zen aphorism: “I know only to be content”. This is Ryōan-ji’s motto, and a fine one to keep in mind.

Ryōan-ji’s gardens are modest but tasteful, and there’s a lovely tea pavilion overlooking the ornamental pond, if you need to refresh body as well as mind.

From Ryōan-ji it’s a 15-minute walk or a quick bus/taxi ride to Kinkaku-ji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion.

Kinkaku-ji is a work of art: a building whose every proportion is just perfect. But it’s also terribly crowded. There are lines to get in, lines to take photos, lines along the pathways, lines at the souvenir stalls. You would think that all these people detract from the beauty of the building, but amazingly, they don’t.



The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

(One idea is to go to Kinkaku-ji first, to beat the crowds, and then go to Ryōan-ji. I don’t recommend it, though: of the two, Ryōan-ji is the one that really rewards solitude and quietness.)

Note that the current Golden Pavilion dates from 1955; it’s a replica of a structure originally built around 1400, which was notoriously burnt down in 1950. This is not unusual in Japan, a country with wooden architecture, frequent earthquakes, and tsunami: old temples often burn down and are rebuilt exactly as they were, down to the specific construction techniques used.

(A notable exception is Kōtoku-in in Kamakura: the original wooden structure was washed away by a tsunami in 1498, and since then, the Great Buddha has been sitting in the open, exposed to rain and wind and sun and snow.)

3. Ginkaku-ji and Higashiyama

Next, take a taxi or bus (#32) to **Ginkaku-ji**, the Temple of the Silver Pavilion. (Official name Jishō-ji, the Temple of Shining Mercy.)

Structurally, Ginkaku-ji appears quite similar to Kinkaku-ji. Aesthetically, it couldn't be more different. Where Kinkaku-ji is all ornate gold leaf and decoration, Ginkaku-ji is all austere wood, understated tones, and the texture of moss and leaf and tree.



Ginkakuji in Higashiyama

This is intentional. Ginkaku-ji is the origin and one of the canonical examples of **Higashiyama culture** – the elegant, refined, minimalistic aesthetic, dating from the late 15th century, that we associate with Japanese design to this day. (Higashiyama means 'eastern mountains' – the district where Ginkaku-ji is situated.)

Despite its name, there's no silver in Ginkaku-ji. That's because the temple was intentionally left unfinished – no silver leaf, only wood – as part of the Zen philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, the mindful acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Take a few minutes to explore Ginkaku-ji's gardens. There's a nice view looking back down

from the paths at the back of the grounds; also, don't miss the carefully tended gravel Mount Fuji.

The road leading to Ginkaku-ji is lined with shops and stalls; it's a good place to get lunch. Walk back down this road, cross a tiny wooden bridge, and turn left. You are now on the Philosopher's Walk, a pleasant stroll along the side of a quiet canal. (It's especially popular during *hanami*, the cherry blossom season.)

The path is 1.5km long and winds past several Higashiyama temples, all on your left. My favourite is **Hōnen-in**, a small, usually empty temple with a gorgeous seasonal garden.



The garden of Hōnen-in

At the end of the walk are **Eikan-dō**, famous for its fall colours and illuminations, and **Nanzen-ji** with its massive grounds and many sub-temples.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 2:

Don't feel the urge to visit every single temple in Higashiyama; while they're lovely, there are a lot of them. If you manage to see all of Ryōan-ji, Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji and Hōnen-in, that's already a very full and satisfactory day.

But do remember to carry your *goshuincho* and get calligraphy done at each temple!

4. Fushimi Inari Taisha

Your first stop on day 3 is **Fushimi Inari Taisha**, dedicated to Inari, the Shinto deity of the rice harvest, and – by extension – of commerce and business. It's famous for its hundreds of bright vermilion shrine gates or *torii*; they make for dazzling photographs.



Vermilion gates at Fushimi Inari Taisha

The shrine gets *very* busy as the day goes by, so it's best to get there early. Take the Keihan line to Fushimi Inari station, or the JR Nara line to Inari station, and then walk east and uphill. You can visit the lower (outer) shrine, or you can climb up the hill to the upper (inner) shrine; the full hike takes about 3 hours and offers some nice views. The higher you go, the sparser the crowds; very few make it all the way to the top.

Unlike Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines are open 24/7. This suggests two enticing options to beat the crowds. You can get there early in the morning, ideally before 8am. Or you can get there after sundown and climb the mountain at night.

Night at the shrine is very scenic; there are a few lights to keep the trail safe, but not so many as to spoil the atmosphere. If you decide to go at night, carry a torch; don't go off-trail (there are wild boar in the area!); and travel with a friend.

5. Kiyomizu-dera to Yasaka Pagoda

Next, take the Keihan line north to Kiyomizu-Gojō station. Exit the station and head east towards **Kiyomizu-dera**, one of Kyoto's great temples. It's a 30-minute walk, steadily uphill, along an uninspiring main road with lots of traffic – I recommend taking a taxi for this stretch instead.

Kiyomizu-dera, the 'Monastery of Pure Water', is an imposing and lively temple 'on stilts' at the top of a mountain, with great views over the city. There's always a crowd here, but it's a festive, happy crowd. Explore the temple grounds – wash your hands at the dragon fountain and ring the prayer bell – before descending westward down a road lined with wooden shops.



Kiyomizu-dera on its platform

Halfway down, make a right turn and head north along the **Sannenzaka** slope, passing many more shops selling everything from umbrellas to furikake. (I recommend Shichimiya Honpo and Ochanokosaisai for spices.)

After a while, Sannenzaka curves left and you'll see the classic Kyoto view of **Yasaka Pagoda** (official name: Hokan-ji; not to be confused with Yasaka Jinja).

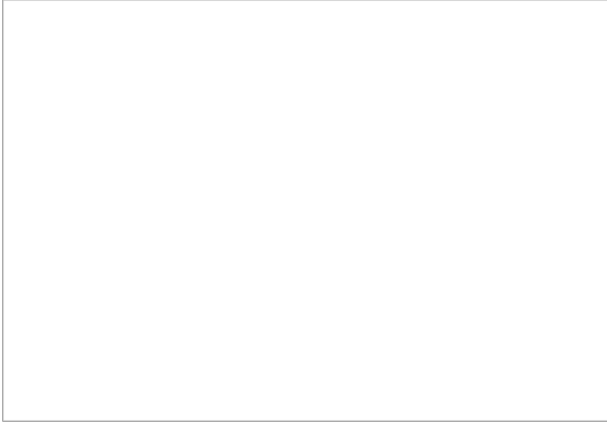


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Take some pics of Yasaka-no-to, then retrace your steps to **Ninenzaka**, on your left – you'll recognize it by the shop with three parasols above its display. Turn north and continue downhill. You'll pass even more shops and a few small restaurants; as always, feel free to dip in and out of whatever catches your fancy.

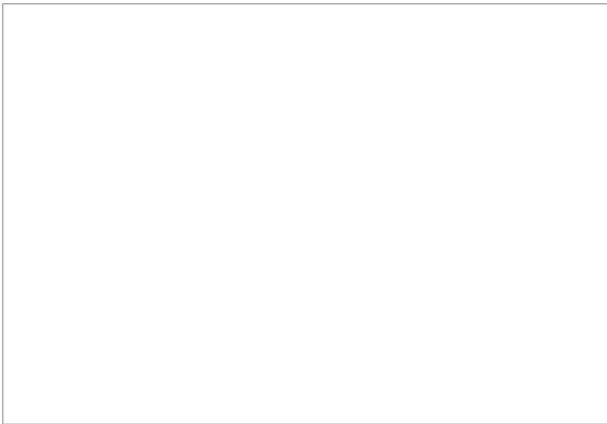


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Eventually the road peters out into what seems to be an uninspiring parking lot. Don't despair! Turn left and immediately right (north) onto the lovely Nene-no-michi walking path, named for the remarkable wife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

6. Kodai-ji and Entoku-in

Toyotomi Hideyoshi was one of the three great warlords who unified Japan in the 16th century, laying the foundation for the Edo era. His wife and confidante Nene (Yoshiko) was a gifted administrator and diplomat in her own right. After her husband's death, she became a Buddhist nun and established the temple of Kodai-ji.

Kodai-ji Temple is elegant and peaceful, with a little bit of everything: a rock garden, willows and moss, a tea house near a bamboo grove, spectacular fall colours, cherry blossoms in the spring, and delicate, graceful illuminations at night. Get some matcha and mochi, and walk up to the top of the hill through the bamboo grove; a lovely experience.

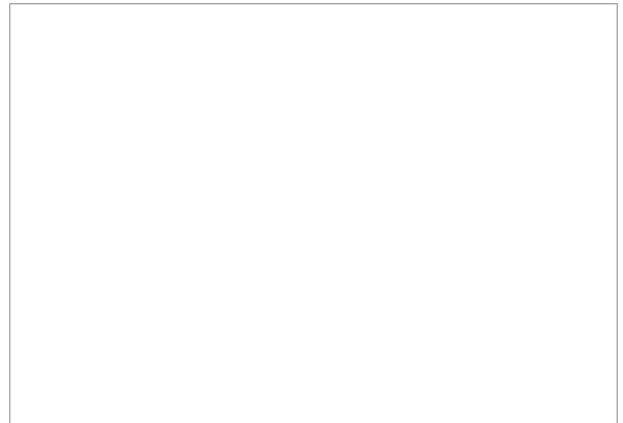


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Return and cross the road to **Entoku-in**, a compact gem of a temple, with two absolutely gorgeous gardens in the front and back. In my opinion Kodai-ji and Entoku-in are two of Kyoto's loveliest and most under-rated temples.

7. Maruyama Park and Beyond

Past Kodai-ji, you'll reach **Maruyama Park**. This is a good place to relax and unwind for a while.

You now have a choice: continue north to see two bonus temples, Chion-in and Shoren-in, or head back west to Gion and the city centre.

Chion-in is large and rich, but somewhat boring. Three notable sights here: the imposing Sanmon (ornamental gateway), the massive temple bell (thousands gather here on New Year's Eve to hear it rung), and the lily pond at the back with its Monet-inspiring stone bridge.



The stone bridge at Chion-in

Far nicer, to me at least, is **Shoren-in**, an exquisite little temple with an impeccably tasteful garden and peaceful meditation rooms to sit in.

You'll eventually want to head back to the city centre. From Maruyama Park, you can walk past Yasaka Jinja to the heart of Gion and Hanamikoji. Alternatively, if you decide to visit my two bonus temples, continue north to Higashiyama subway station which will take you back to central Kyoto.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 3

In my plan, I assume you start the day early at Fushimi Inari Taisha, head to Kiyomizu-dera by mid-morning, and reach Maruyama Park by late afternoon. (Note that Kodai-ji and Entoku-ji are at their best around dusk, so you may want to backtrack to see them – but check their opening hours first!)



Sunset at Kiyomizu-dera

You can also do things in the opposite order. Start your day by heading up to Kiyomizu-dera; if you're early, it'll be quite empty. The temple opens at 6am, but any time before 9 should do.

Walk down past Sanneizaka and Nineizaka in the late morning. (If you're too early, the shops will be closed.) Visit Kodai-ji and Entoku-ji, then eat a picnic lunch at Maruyama Park. Rest and relax there in the afternoon, or even head back to your hotel for a nap. Eat an early dinner, then head over to Fushimi Inari Taisha around sunset; climb the mountain after dark.

This schedule beats the crowds, but it's a long day. So it's entirely a function of how much stamina you have, and how adventurous you want to be ☺.



Hondo (main hall) of Kiyomizu-dera; Kinkaku-ji in gold leaf; Kiyomizu-dera pagoda; Entry to Fushimi Inari Taisha; hundreds of vermilion torii at Fushimi; Arashiyama bamboo grove; Maiko and visitors in Kyoto; steps of Fushimi Inari Taisha; entry to Kurama-dera; Side street on Nineizaka at night; sweetmeat shop on Sannenzaka; late night lanterns in Kyoto.

8. Nara

Nara was the capital of Japan even before Kyoto; you can trace a clear cultural lineage through Nara, Kyoto, Kamakura and Edo. Today it's a well-preserved village of temples, mausoleums and cultural treasures.

Notable about Nara is that most of its sights are situated in a vast open expanse – **Nara Park**. It's not like Kyoto where you turn the corner of a residential street and stumble upon a massive temple complex (or a tiny shrine); in Nara Park there are no structures other than the historical ones. It gives Nara a very different feel.



Todai-ji in Nara Park

The highlight of Nara is **Todai-ji temple** – the largest wooden structure in the world from the time of its initial construction in 752, all the way until 1998. (Japanese joinery for the win!). It's truly imposing. Within Todai-ji is Nara's own **Great Buddha** – it's bigger than the one in Kamakura, and 500 years older. Casting it used up almost all of Japan's bronze – 500 tons worth! To me it's not quite as refined as the Kamakura Daibutsu, but it's still spectacular.

Also in Nara is **Kasuga Taisha**, an ancient Shinto shrine nestled among the trees in its own magical little world.

Take the Kintetsu-Nara line from Kyoto station to Nara station (or, if you're staying near Gion, take the Keihan main line and change to the Kintetsu-Nara line at Tambabashi). Take exit 2 from Nara station, and buy lunch from the Lawson straight ahead (don't eat yet!). Then walk east along the main road.

You'll come to a major intersection. Cross to the northeast corner using the pedestrian underpass. On your left you'll see Saryo Zeze, a classic Kyoto villa that's been converted to a luxe café. Stop for tea, coffee or cake here – it's pricy, but the ambience is superb.

Then walk north along the alley immediately next to the café. Turn right and cut through Yoshiki-en and Isui-en, two beautiful landscape gardens. Depending on which path you take, you'll emerge either in front of the Nara National Museum, or the South Gate of Todai-ji. Either way, here come the deer. Buy some crackers and feed them; don't forget to bow! (And watch where you step).

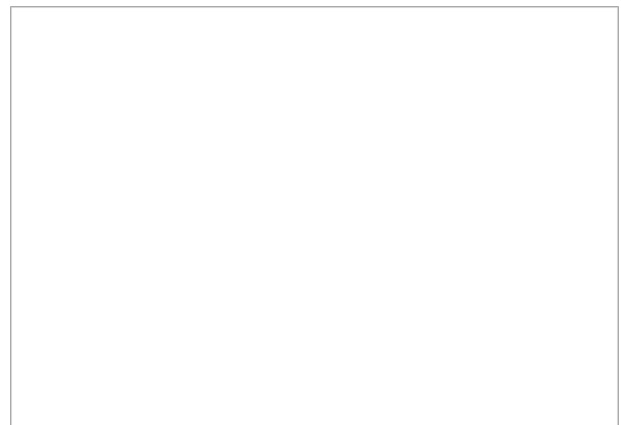


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Walk north along the main promenade leading to Todai-ji, passing through two massive gates. Then enter the temple itself, and walk around the gigantic Buddha. Get your goshuincho!

Exit the temple complex and walk southeast across Nara Park to Kasuga Taisha. This is a good time to eat lunch, but there aren't many dining options here; good thing you bought picnic supplies at Lawson! Find a corner away from the deer, and chow down.

Spend time wandering the paths around Kasuga Taisha. Some folks recommend climbing up to Wakakusayama hill for views of Nara town; it's an easy enough (longish) walk, and the views are, eh, merely okay – I'd skip it.

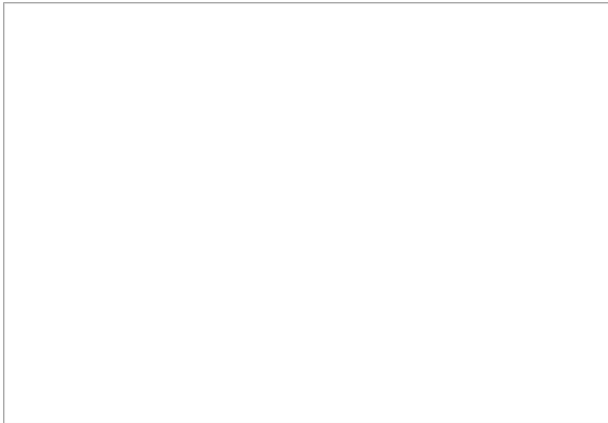


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Return to Naramachi, the part of town west of the park and south of the station. Explore a bit – wander the side streets, stop and watch the mochi-pounding show at Nakatanidou.

Eventually, make your way back to Kintetsu-Nara station, and take the train (Kintetsu, not JR) to Namba station in the heart of Osaka.

9. Osaka

The Japanese stereotype of Osakans is that they are funny and friendly; boisterous and noisy; blunt to the point of rudeness; commercial-minded and practical. I don't know how much truth there is to all of that, but it's certainly true that Osaka has a different vibe than formal, mannered Kyoto, or sophisticated, stylish Tokyo.

But it's hard to absorb that vibe on a short visit, and in any case Osaka doesn't have a whole lot of first-rate tourist destinations. (Osaka Castle is fine, I guess. Osaka Aquarium is impressive, but it's also a little sad seeing the majestic whale sharks confined to a tank, no matter how huge that tank is. Namba Yasaka is meh.)

So I'd just keep it simple: walk through **Dotombori** and maybe Shinsaibashi commercial districts, paying attention to the subtle ways they're different from Tokyo and Kyoto; take a picture in front of the Glico man; eat street food and drink beer.

One thing to know is that Osaka is the culinary capital of Japan and the food I've eaten there has been uniformly amazing. **Okonomiyaki** is perhaps the signature Osaka dish – I recommend **Kuishinbo** near Amerika-Mura – but honestly, everything you eat here is delicious. Explore and be adventurous!

Osaka also has excellent **nightlife** – lots of pubs, karaoke, late night bars, music, clubs and so on. Meanwhile Kyoto tends to get very quiet after sunset. So if you don't mind the hour-long train journey, you could easily make it a habit to spend the day imbibing high culture in Kyoto, and then head to Osaka every evening for amazing food and lively company. Long days, but YOLO!

10. Uji

Uji is a small town about halfway between Kyoto and Nara. (Note that in the Kansai, the boundary between one town and the next is hard to define. The same goes for the Kanto – Yokohama and Tokyo appear as separate cities on the map, but really they're all just part of the same massive urban agglomeration.)

Uji's claim to fame is tea. There are dozens of tea shops, wholesale and retail tea merchants, tea ceremony venues, and tea plantations, all clustered around a picturesque riverside district.

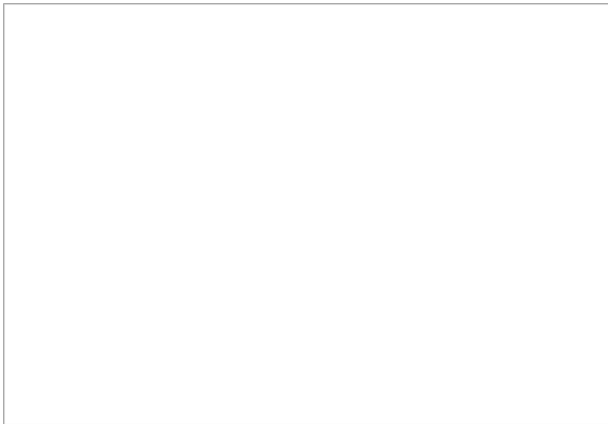


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Most of the shops are on the Omotesando, the road approaching Byodo-in temple (which is Uji's other claim to fame: the temple appears on Japan's 10-yen coin). Tsuen is Japan's oldest tea shop, still going strong after nearly 1000 years. Taiho-an offers visitor friendly tea ceremonies. But really, almost all the vendors here are great.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 4:

This is your day to explore Kansai, the broad coastal plain that encompasses Kyoto, Osaka, Nara, and Kobe, and is home to 20% of Japan's population.

(The other major coastal plain is Kanto, which includes Tokyo and all its satellites – Chiba, Saitama, Gunma, Yokohama etc. – and counts for 34% of the country's population.)

My baseline plan sees you spend most of the day in Nara, heading over to Osaka in the late afternoon. But if you're all templated out and don't want to visit Nara, here are some alternatives:

- Go to Uji in the morning, and thence Osaka
- Go to Uji, swing past Nara but don't spend too much time there, and thence to Osaka
- Skip Uji and Nara, just spend the whole day exploring Osaka.

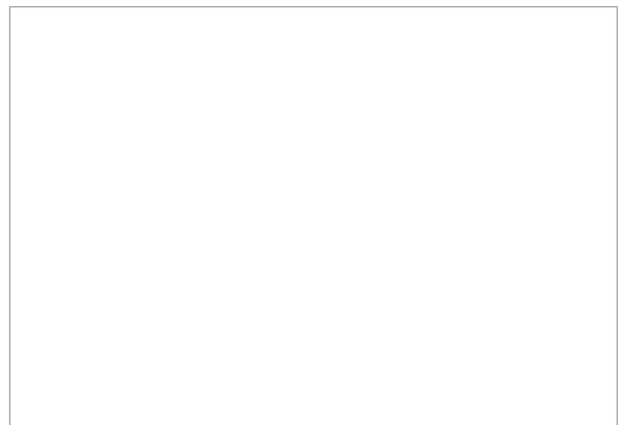


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11. Kurama and Kibune

For your final day in Kyoto, I suggest a morning excursion to Kurama and Kibune, before catching an afternoon train to Tokyo. (But you could do Arashiyama instead; see next section.)

Kurama is a little village in the hills north of Kyoto. It's home to **Kurama-dera**, a lovely mountaintop temple nestled among cedars and pines; there's a great hike up to and across the temple grounds, and an onsen (hot spring resort) to wash away your sins (and fatigue). Possibly my favourite excursion from Kyoto.

You get there by taking the **Eizan railway**, a cute little two-car train that runs from Demachiyana station near the Kyoto Imperial Palace. Be sure to take the train bound for Kurama, not the one that branches to Yase-Hieizanguchi. The route is quite scenic in parts, and if you're lucky you might ride on the 'Kirara' trainset with panoramic windows.

From Kurama station, you can either walk up the hill to the temple, or take the **Kurama incline railway** (the shortest railway line in all of Japan).

Kurama-dera temple used to be a sub-temple of the (also gorgeous) Shoren-in temple in Kyoto, but they branched off some years ago and now follow their own esoteric practice. The temple is beautiful, and the **forested setting** is spectacular.

Historically, Kurama-dera is associated with **Yoshitsune**, the young noble considered to be the ideal chivalric hero of medieval Japan, and his faithful retainer, the giant warrior-monk **Benkei**. (Look for posters depicting their adventures at the train station). Kurama-dera is also the place where **reiki** originated; the six-pointed star on the temple grounds is said to be a focus for energy. Watch for long-nosed tengu spirits.

After visiting Kurama-dera, you can retrace your steps to Kurama village, or you can continue along the trail, descending the other side of the mountain to **Kifune jinja**, an equally picturesque and evocative Shinto shrine. The full traverse takes a couple of hours. From Kibune you can take a bus back to Kibuneguchi, which is another stop on the Eizan railway line.



Worship hall at Kurama-dera

There's an excellent **onsen** in Kurama village, with both open-air and indoor baths, a great way to unwind after all that mountain air. (Towels and yukata provided). If you want to see the temple, do the full hike, and also soak in the spring afterwards, it makes sense to start your traverse at Kibune and end at Kurama station.

If you decide to go the other way, Kibune village doesn't have hot springs but it has something else that's unusual: **kawadoko** or river-dining. Diners enjoy a *kaiseki* (fine dining) meal while sitting on platforms built above the flowing water: it's quite the experience! (Kyoto has similar patios, but Kibune's are better.)

(However, don't do the one where noodles come to your table through bamboo pipes – it's gimmicky and not the most hygienic.)

12. Arashiyama

Arashiyama is a calm, quiet, pretty area just a little west of Kyoto. It has several attractions: the Togetsu-kyo bridge, the Tenryuji temple, but most of all, the **Arashiyama Bamboo Forest**. The latter gets quite crowded (are you sensing a Kyoto theme?) so it's best to get there early.

From Kyoto station, the JR Sagano line will take you to JR Saga Arashiyama station. An alternative is to take the (very cute) Keifuku Arashiyama line (aka the Randen tram line) to Keifuku Arashiyama station, although that doesn't connect to Kyoto station directly.



Arashiyama bamboo grove

The bamboo grove is Arashiyama's main attraction. Togetsu-kyo is also nice. Tenryuji is okay, you can go there for completion but it's also skippable. If you have time and you like picturesque train rides, I recommend the Sagano Scenic Railway which heads west alongside the river up into the hills from Torokko Saga station – it takes about 30 minutes each way. You can also go for a boat ride if the weather is pleasant.

Arashiyama has some good restaurants; Yudofu Sagano and Shoraian for the local specialty, tofu in broth, and Otsuka for exceptional wagyu steak.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 5

Working backwards from the end of the day: reaching Hakone-Yumoto by 5pm means reaching Odawara by 4pm, which means reaching Kyoto station by 1pm to catch the shinkansen.

It's just about possible to squeeze either Kurama or Arashiyama into the morning before that, but it requires an early start and some planning. Also, you won't be able to do all the things I've listed for each place. Here's what you should do:

- **Wake up early** and check out no later than 7:30am. Send your large suitcase(s) to Tokyo using your hotel's *takkyubin* service. Pack an overnight bag and leave it at the hotel front desk, or store it in a coin locker somewhere logistically convenient.
- **For Arashiyama:** aim to get to the bamboo grove before 9am, to avoid the worst crowds. Then either wander through Arashiyama's side streets, shops and the Togetsu-kyo bridge, or ride the Sagano Scenic Railway. (You may not have time to do both).
- **For Kurama:** the Eizan line train takes 1 hour from Kyoto station to Kurama station (changing at Demachiyana), so you'll get there a bit after 9am. Take the incline railway up to Kurama-dera, spend time at the temple, then hike back down to the station. (You probably won't have time to do the traverse to Kibune-jinja unless you're super-efficient.)
- **Start back** to Kyoto station at noon or sooner. Eat an early lunch or get an eki-ben.

Of course, if your onsen ryokan in Hakone allows you to check in later (possibly skipping dinner), then that gives you a lot more leeway to see more of Kyoto before departing.

13. And More ...

I find it hard to skip any of the main temples and shrines – Ryōan-ji, Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Fushimi Inari Taisha and Kiyomizu-dera. They're all very different, and they're what makes Kyoto special.

But you should follow your own preferences. If you're enjoying the temples and shrines and gardens and groves, great; stick with my plan. If you want a change of scenery, fear not; Kyoto has a lot more to offer. Here are some favourites:

Kyoto International Manga Museum: history, posters, large manga collection, reading areas, some English books.

Japan Rail Museum: amazing huge building with many full-size trains inside, including old shinkansen models.

Suntory Yamazaki Distillery: public tours and a whisky store, halfway between Kyoto and Osaka.

Murin-an: traditional villa with gardens and a tea-house, with daily gardening demos for a true get-your-hands-dirty experience.

Kyoto Museum of Crafts and Design: small, elegant museum with materials, tools, video exhibits and artist demos.

Japan Kanji Museum: collection of calligraphy, scrolls and wall-hangings.

Conversely, if you've fallen in love with temple architecture, here are a few more to visit:

Ninna-ji: large, elegant, usually quite empty of visitors. A short walk from Ryōan-ji.

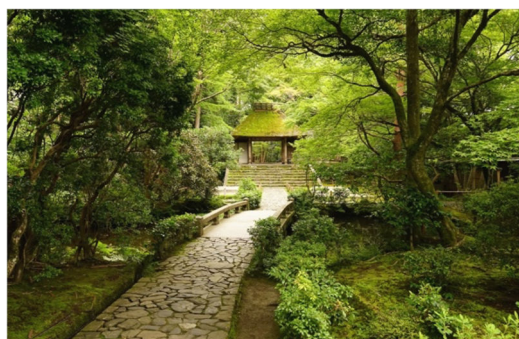
Daitoku-ji: a complex of 14 Zen temples of which 4 are open to visitors, with compact, beautiful, contemplative rock gardens.

Shoren-in and Honen-in: my favourite small temples in Kyoto. Many others are more imposing, and some are more inspiring, but these two are special.

Enrakyu-ji temple: sprawling temple complex at the top of Mt Hiei, the seat of power for 'warrior monks' in the 10th to 12th centuries.

Sanjūsangen-dō: simple exterior belies an impressive interior, with 1000 life-size wooden statues of Kannon, the goddess of mercy.

Katsura villa: not a temple, but similar elegant design, dedicated especially to the tea ceremony.



Garden in Kyoto

Finally, some popular tourist attractions in Kyoto that I generally think are not worth visiting, given limited time, are the Kyoto Imperial Palace, Nijō Castle and Heian Shrine.

Further Afield From Kyoto

1. Okayama

The reason to go to Okayama is **Korakuen**, one of the ‘three great gardens’ of Japan. Kenrokuen in Kanazawa and Kairakuen in Mito are the others; if you’ve already seen Kenrokuen, skip Okayama.

Okayama is a 1.5-hour shinkansen ride from Kyoto, doable as a day trip if you have a JR Pass. (If you don’t, it’s not worth it: the shinkansen costs \$80 each way, while cheaper local trains take 4-5 hours each way). From Okayama station, there’s a direct bus to Korakuen.

Spend a couple of hours walking through the garden, with all your senses (sight, sound, smell) active. Every turn of the pathway reveals something new, always balanced and always calm. Note especially the use of ‘borrowed perspective’ – the way the garden incorporates elements of the surrounding countryside (most notably **Okayama Castle**) into its own views.

After you’re done with the garden, you can visit the castle, known for its unusual black exterior (it’s nicknamed ‘Crow Castle’ for this reason). While the original was built around 1600, the current structure is a copy constructed in 1966.

Okayama to me is where ‘Western Japan’ really begins. The landscapes, weather, food and vibe are all subtly different from the cities of Kanto, Chubu or Kinki (Kansai). It’s also a great stepping-off point for the beautiful Seto Inland Sea and trips to Shikoku and Naoshima.

(Having said all that, I don’t think Korakuen is as good as Kenrokuen.)

2. Koya-san

Koya-san (Mount Koya) is magical. It’s one of Japan’s holiest Buddhist sites – a complex of a few dozen temples and monasteries, on a high plateau ringed by eight mountains. There are no inns or commercial establishments in Koya-san, so visitors stay as **temple guests**, dining on vegetarian food and participating in early-morning prayer services. [Accommodations](#) are basic, but the experience is sublime.



Okuno-in cemetery among the cedars

Getting there is half the fun! (Not really.) Here are the steps:

- Kyoto to Osaka on the JR Kyoto line or (if you have a JR pass) the Tokaido shinkansen
- Osaka to Shin-Imamiya on the Osaka loop line
- Shin-Imamiya to Gokurakubashi on the Nankai-Koya line (change at Hashimoto)
- Gokurakubashi to Koyasan sta. via cable-car
- Koyasan sta. to the temple area via bus

The full trip, from Kyoto to Koya-san, takes about 3 hours – it’s just about doable as a day trip, but unlikely to be very enjoyable that way, plus you miss the temple stay. I’d suggest overnighting here instead – perhaps combined with some time in Osaka on the way in or out.

Within the Koyasan complex, I highly recommend walking through the cemetery of Okunoin Temple, with its stone lanterns, moss-covered pathways and towering cedar trees. It's especially atmospheric at twilight and later.

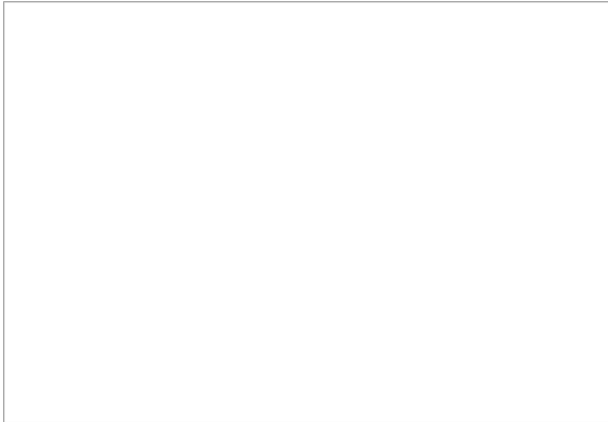


Photo placeholder

The entire Koya-san experience is utterly magical, there's simply no other word for it.

3. Naoshima and Teshima

Naoshima isn't really a day trip from Kyoto – you'll need two days to get there and back – but you can potentially combine it with a visit to Okayama, or stage it on your way to Hiroshima. You'll have to take a train from Okayama to either Uno or Takamatsu, and then a ferry to the island. The former route is shorter but a bit fiddly; the latter is longer but more scenic. Details [here](#).

(One ambitious possibility is to skip Hakone and replace it with an overnight stay here.)

Naoshima's claim to fame, aided by some slick marketing, is that it's an 'art island'. There are multiple museums, many of them designed by Tadao Ando (Japan's foremost contemporary architect), in his subtle minimal / modernist style. Also a bunch of open air exhibits, all set in beautiful natural surroundings.

About those natural surroundings – Naoshima is lovely, and really has the feel of the **Inland Sea**. It's very different from what you've seen so far (big cities like Tokyo and Osaka, mountains and temples like Kyoto and Kamakura). The art is good, the vibe is great, and the experience is greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally: the best part of Naoshima is not Naoshima, it's the adjoining island of **Teshima**. Teshima is home to a single museum with a single exhibit – the museum is the exhibit and the exhibit is the museum. It's wondrous; I don't want to say more. You should go there if you can.

Dining in Japan

1. Introduction

A big part of any visit to Japan is sampling all the delicious food on offer. There's a lot more to Japanese cuisine than just sushi and ramen (great though those are); the food is varied, tasty, and for the most part quite healthy. And Japanese restaurants generally offer good quality, reasonable prices and excellent service.

So don't miss out on the experience! Be open-minded and curious. Try different foods! Get accustomed to the different flavour profiles – the sweetness of mirin, the saltiness of soy, the sourness of plum. Embrace the umami!

2. How to Dine Well in Japan

Here are some tips and tricks to get the best out of your Japan food experience:

- Japanese restaurants tend to focus on a **single style of cuisine**. There are tempura joints, and sushi joints, and ramen joints, but you won't get sushi at a ramen restaurant, or vice versa. (The exception is the izakaya or Japanese pub, which serves a little bit of everything.)
- Restaurants get crowded, especially in popular tourist areas. Waiting 30 to 60 minutes or even longer for a table is not uncommon. The answer is to **eat early**. Lunch at 11:30, dinner at 5:30.
- Be wary of **restaurant reviews**. Google, Yelp and TripAdvisor over-index on cheap, lowest-common-denominator, tourist-friendly eats. Hot destinations on YouTube and Instagram tend to be crowded, expensive, and not necessarily that good (though some are great). And print guidebooks have been recommending the same

tired set of expat-centric venues for decades. Instead of these, use the **Tabelog** website, with browser translation enabled.

- This is going to sound snooty or hipster but: try to eat at restaurants with **no English signage**. Google Translate will help you order, and you'll get better food at lower prices.

- **Train stations** invariably have lots – and I mean lots – of eateries in their vicinity. The best food is typically not at the ones closest to the station, but perhaps 50-200 yards away (tip from @patio11). (Another tip: the presence of Japanese salarymen is an infallible indicator of good eats.)

- Japanese **chain restaurants** generally score well on quality, taste, value, convenience; none of the negative associations of their international counterparts. I like Ichiran and Ippudo for ramen, and Nakau for gyu-don. There are chains for every sort of donburi (rice bowl): tempura, gyu-don, katsu-don and more.

- If your hotel doesn't serve breakfast, go to a kissaten (café) for their '**morning service**' – coffee, toast, eggs. **Kōhikan** is a great chain version of this; there are others.

- Most restaurants offer **lunch-time menus**, especially teishoku or 'set meals', that are just as tasty and much cheaper than their more elaborate dinner offerings.

- If you can, splurge at least once on high-end kaiseki, teppanyaki, and sushi – the three most opulent 'fine dining' experiences.

- Don't forget to explore **Japanese street food**, sold from stalls called yatai, or at markets like Nishiki, Tsukiji and Ameyoko. It's considered polite to eat in front of the stall you bought your food at, and not to walk around while eating.

3. Foods to Try

Here are some foods you should try on your visit:

Yakitori: grilled chicken on skewers

Tempura: batter-fried shrimp and vegetables, usually on a bowl of rice or noodles

Shabu-shabu: thinly sliced beef, cooked with veggies in a hotpot at your table

Sukiyaki: similar concept but the meat (or fish) is sauteed in a light stew, again at your table

Yakiniku: Korean-style beef seared on a grill

Teppanyaki: high-end Japanese steakhouse

Ramen: noodles in broth; try the many different [regional varieties](#) (Hakata style is my favourite)

Okonomiyaki: savoury pancakes stuffed with all sorts of meat and seafood

Monjayaki: the Tokyo version of Okonomiyaki, thinner and somewhat lighter

Soba and udon: thin and thick wheat noodles

Gyu-don, katsu-don, unagi-don: rice topped with beef, pork cutlets, and eel (respectively)

Takoyaki: octopus grilled in pancake batter

Yakisoba: griddle-fried noodles

Sushi: raw fish with vinegared rice

Tonkatsu: deep fried breaded pork

Tamagoyaki: rolled egg omelette

Onigiri: rice triangles, wrapped in dried nori

You can find restaurants that specialize in each of these. In addition, here are a few other restaurant types:

Kaiseki: fine dining with small elegant courses

Izakaya: Japanese pub, wide variety of foods

Yoshoku: Japanese versions of western dishes

Kushiage: deep fried or grilled skewered meats

Yatai: roadside food stalls

Teishoku: 'set' meals: main dish, vegetables, rice and miso soup.

4. Japan for Vegetarians

Being vegetarian in Japan is easier than it was 20 years ago, but it's still not easy. The fundamental problem is that dashi – fish-based stock – is an essential constituent of many Japanese dishes, even those that are nominally vegetarian.

Tofu, for example, is invariably served with a dipping sauce of dashi, soy and sake, and often topped with dried bonito flakes. So even if you order dishes with no 'obvious' meat or fish in them, you might still be getting those ingredients.

One idea that I've seen work is to carry a card that says "I am a vegetarian and I do not eat any meat or fish, including stocks and sauces" (translated into Japanese of course).

Another useful tip is to ask for Buddhist food – many restaurant staff will understand this and accommodate. (Kyoto, incidentally, has high-end restaurants that specialize in sophisticated Buddhist vegan fare – 'shojin ryori'.)

Every restaurant serves rice, so worst case, you'll be eating a lot of rice, soy sauce and pickled vegetables.

You can of course restrict your dining to non-Japanese restaurants: Italian and Indian and generic American eateries will usually have lots of options. But that's an option of last resort.

Convenience stores can come to the rescue here. Baked goods, rice bowls, inari sushi (rice wrapped in tofu), veggie sandwiches: it's pretty easy to put together a filling meal.

Experiences in Japan

When in Japan, you should take some time to participate in and enjoy a few quintessentially Japanese experiences.

My daily itineraries are action-packed, but I don't expect or recommend that you do everything that I've listed. Instead, leave space for exploration, conversations, spontaneity and serendipity. If something seems like a good idea, do it!

Here are some activities to consider, with possible locations [in brackets].

1. Art and Craft Classes

Washi-making class: make traditional Japanese paper. [Ozu-Washi in Nihombashi]

Book-binding class: make your own *goshuincho*. [Kyoto is best for this]

Knife-sharpening class: for your new *gyuto*! [Kamata in Kappabashi]

Mokuhanga class: how to make traditional woodblock prints. [Tokyo is best for this]

Shodo class: brush-ink calligraphy. [anywhere, but Kyoto is probably best]

2. Group Activities

Karaoke: terrific fun, a great way to end the evening. [Shinjuku, Akihabara, Osaka]

Cooking tours: walk through Tsukiji or Nishiki market with a guide and then cook with the ingredients you bought.

Festivals: if you're lucky, you'll be in Tokyo for one of Sanja, Kanda or Sanno Matsuri; or in Kyoto for Gion Matsuri – wonderful community events.

Sento: Neighbourhood public bathhouse: scrub and clean and relax and refresh.

3. Sports and Adventure

Skiing: Hokkaido and the Japanese Alps both offer absolutely world class skiing, amazing snow.

Baseball: passionate fans, synchronized cheers, unique rituals.

Sumo: if you're in Tokyo during tournament time, a must-see. [Ryogoku]

Biking: Tokyo is too big, but Kyoto is just right for riding a rental bike. [at hotel, or Kyoto sta.]

4. Music and Theater

Jazz: Shimokitazawa, Aoyama, Akasaka-Roppongi and Shinjuku all have great live jazz venues.

Taiko: various ensembles of which Kodo is my favourite; also see Sado Island section.

Kabuki, Noh, Bunraku: three forms of traditional Japanese theatre. Kabuki is the most accessible for visitors. [Kabuki-za in Ginza]

5. Culture and Society

Hanami: cherry blossoms in Japan, every bit as wonderful as advertised. [Ueno, Maruyama]

Tea ceremony: formal, elegant, refined and mindful. (and the tea is good too!) [Kyoto, Uji]

Onsen: Wash away your fatigue in the waters of a thermal spring, preferably outdoors. [Hakone]

6. And More...

Sumida River Cruise: a pleasant way to spend an hour or two; some boats go out into Tokyo Bay.

DisneyLand and DisneySea: perhaps not very Japanese, but if you're a fan, go for it.

Climbing Mount Fuji: strenuous and crowded, but the views are spectacular. (July to September)

Shopping

As a general principle, I believe in spending on 'experiences, not objects'. But I make an exception for shopping in Japan ☺. Japan is a great place to buy souvenirs that are:

- Evocative of the places you've visited
- Useful and usable back home
- Distinctive, tasteful, and not tacky
- Beautifully designed and packaged
- Reasonably priced

My favourite souvenirs from Japan are stationery, paper arts and crafts, woodblock prints, kitchen knives, teapots and cups, fabrics, food and pantry supplies, and zakka (eclectic household sundries).

1. Recommended Shops

Here are some stores I recommend: both for the quality and variety of their offerings, and for the experience of visiting them. By area:

- Asakusa

Nakaya: Japanese festival clothes & supplies

Sakai gallery: classic woodblock prints

Mokuhankan: contemporary woodblock prints

Sanrio: Hello Kitty merchandise

Marugoto: delicacies from around Japan

Maekawa Inden: deerskin leather goods

Yamakichi: ceramics

Miyamoto-Unosuke: taiko drums

- Kappabashi

Dengama: classic ceramics

Kakesu zakka-ten: modern teapots and cups

Touan Yabukita: more ceramics

Kama-asa: general kitchenware

Jikko: my favourite knife shop

Kamata, Seisuke, Tsubaya: more knives

- Nihonbashi

Haibara: paper, notebooks, prints

Yamamoto Noriten: nori (dried seaweed)

Kayanoya: dashi, soy sauce, ponzu

Ozuwashi: handmade washi paper

Mitsukoshi: beautiful department store

- Shinjuku

Sekaido: amazing stationery store

Kyowa: traditional calligraphy inks, brushes

Yodobashi: flagship camera store

Kitamura: camera store that feels like a museum

Lemon, Map: used camera gear including Leica

Yuzawaya: knitting, crafts, hobbies

Okadaya: fabrics, buttons, haberdashery

Yamamoto Coffee: all sorts of coffee gear

Disk Union: CDs and vinyl – stores by genre

- Jimbocho & Ochanomizu

Hara Shobo: gallery for woodblock prints

Okuna Karuta Ten: Japanese board games

Tools: modern art supplies, especially Copic

Komiyama: books on photography, fashion, art

Disk Union: CDs and vinyl and live music

Lots of musical instrument stores!

- Ginza

Itoya: another amazing stationery store

Muji: flagship store of global home goods chain

Mikimoto: cultured pearls

Tsutaya Books: bookstore inside Ginza Six

Ippodo: high-end Japanese tea, inside Mitsukoshi

Kyukyodo: traditional arts and crafts

Gekkō-sō: more traditional arts and crafts

Wako: elegant department store.

- Shibuya

Tokyu Hands: household, DIY and hobbyist

Shibuya Loft: similar, eclectic, slightly cheaper

Uematsu: art supplies

Shibuya 109: young and cool fashion

Mandarake: collectibles – toys, anime, j-pop

- Akihabara

BIC & Yodobashi: flagship camera stores

Nisshin & Lemon: used cameras and lenses

Laox, Yamada Genki: huge electronics depots

Onoden: electronics shop with a friendly neighbourhood vibe (yes, that's a thing!)

Kaiyodo: figurines and toy models

Akiba Gamers: all things anime-related

Sofmap: all you need for PC gaming

Surugaya: multiple branches, each with a different focus: games, figurines, cards etc.



Rows of colour at Pigment Tokyo

- Elsewhere in Tokyo

Kakimori: custom inks and fountain pens

Nippori Tomato: fabrics and sewing supplies

Ma-suya: a store that sells salt. Yes, just salt.

Sippo: eclectic store, goods from all over Japan

Pigment Tokyo: the ultimate store for colours, pigments, inks, dyes

Wood Like Matsumura: supplies for making woodblock prints

(All these 'elsewhere' specialty stores are highly recommended, btw.)

Finally, be sure to visit **Uniqlo** and **Muji** – chains that sell well-designed, high-quality, very well-priced clothes and housewares, respectively.

2. Buying a Japanese Knife

A Japanese **chef's knife** is life-changing. If you enjoy cooking, this is one purchase I would encourage you to splurge on.

There are many different types of knife available, distinguished by size, shape, and material. For most home chefs, a high-quality **stainless steel** knife with a **Japanese handle** is your best bet, combining sharpness, ease of use, and ease of maintenance. Carbon steel retains its edge longer but requires more care.

The relevant knife types for home chefs are:

- **gyuto** – chef's knife, 18-24cm
- **petty** – small knife, 12-15cm
- **nakiri** – large vegetable knife, ~18cm
- **santoku** – general purpose knife, 16-18cm

(Yanagiba and deba knives are beautiful to look at, but less practical for home use.)

If you're buying one knife, I'd suggest a santoku. If two, buy a gyuto and a petty. And if you're buying three, buy a gyuto, a petty, and either a nakiri or a santoku for your third. Also get a **wooden sheath** or *saya* for every knife you buy, and a **hinoki cutting board**.

I suggest buying your knife or knives in **Kappabashi** district near Asakusa. **Kamata** is the best-known vendor and tourist friendly, but it gets crowded. **Kama-asa** is a general kitchenware store with a knives-only branch, well laid out and easy to shop at. But my favourite is **Jikko**, a newcomer to Kappabashi but long-established in Osaka. Jikko for me has the best mix of quality, authenticity, and surprisingly reasonable prices. Finally, if you just want the best possible knife for your money, cross the Sumida river and go to **Masamoto Sohonten** on the east side.

A Few More Topics

1. Photography in Japan

Japan is a photographer's dream. I've taken, countless photographs in Japan, and haven't come close to exhausting the country's sights.

Why is Japan so photogenic? I think there are three reasons. There's a rich and distinctive **colour palette** – *sakura* pink, *matcha* green, *noren* blue, *torii* red – and you'll see those colours everywhere. The **quality of light** is excellent, neither the harsh glare of the tropics nor the drab grey of northern skies. And there's an abundance of **visual detail** everywhere you look.



Colourful curtains at Sensō-ji temple in Tokyo

And of course the subject matter is exquisite. Think of all the iconic Japan views: cherry blossoms in Ueno, kimonos in Kyoto, Fuji-san rising majestically from the plains, neon lights in Shinjuku, crowds in Shibuya, posters of anime and manga characters, the shinkansen zooming past, elegant temples with tasteful gardens, a vermilion torii at the water's edge, festival crowds, snow-dusted cedars, the summer sunlight shimmering on the Inland Sea. One never gets tired of photographing Japan.

Some tips:

- Winter has the best light for photography – blue skies, not too harsh, rarely cloudy.
- Cherry blossom season is wonderful but the prime *hanami* ('flower viewing') spots at Ueno and Maruyama get very crowded.
- Nikko has magnificent fall colours; if you're in Japan at that time of year, definitely add Nikko to your plans.
- Fuji is best photographed in the morning, before evaporation lifts clouds around its summit. The best views are in the Five Lakes region. Kawaguchiko and Fujiyoshida are my favourites; Akakurayama Sengen is iconic.
- In Kyoto, plan your day around photography time: Ryōan-ji early morning, Gion around dusk, Fushimi Inari Taisha at night.
- Shinjuku, Akihabara and especially Shibuya are best visited at night. Asakusa and Ueno are better during the day.

Many photographers are also gear-heads; if this is you, you owe it to yourself to spend a few hours at one of Tokyo's **flagship camera stores**: Yodobashi in Shinjuku or Akihabara, or BIC in Ikebukuro or Akihabara. These stores are amazing: vast floors dedicated to cameras, photo accessories, TV, video and audio, household appliances – it's a cornucopia of gadgetry.

Purchasing here is likely to be cheaper than your home country (local brands + weak yen). Also you can sometimes find models in stock that are hard to obtain elsewhere, like the Fuji X100VI.

Remember to carry your passport and get the 'tax-free' discount as a visitor to Japan. And make sure that any devices you buy have an English instruction manual and English menu options. (Some manufacturers – looking at you, Sony – sell Japan-only versions of their cameras and you can't switch the OS over to English.)

2. Compressed Itineraries

Spend as much time on your holiday as you can! Japan is totally worth it. I lived there for many years; have visited the country a dozen times since then; and still, at the end of every trip, find myself wishing I had more time to spend there.

But I recognize that not everyone has that privilege; life gets in the way. If you only have 1 week to spend in Japan, here's a compressed itinerary you can follow:

Day 1: Arrive Tokyo. Stay in Tokyo 3 nights, preferably in Asakusa.

Day 2: Tsukiji market at 8am. Ginza, Hibiya, Imperial Palace, Tokyo Station, Akihabara.

Day 3: Asakusa, Kappabashi, Ryogoku, Ueno.

Day 4: Very early train to Kyoto. Nishiki market, Kiyomizu-dera to Kodai-ji, then Hanamikoji and Gion. Stay in Kyoto 2 nights.

Day 5. Ryoanji and Kinkakuji in the morning. Ginkakuji and Path of Philosophy in the afternoon. Fushimi Inari Taisha at sunset.

Day 6. Very early train to Odawara. Hakone scenic loop. On to Tokyo in the evening. Stay in Tokyo 2 nights, preferably in Shinjuku.

Day 7. Shinjuku-gyoen in the morning. Nihombashi, Omotesando, Shibuya and back to Shinjuku at night.

Day 8. Depart Tokyo.

A variation on this plan is to fly into Tokyo and out from Kansai (Osaka), saving yourself a return shinkansen journey if time is limited.

With even less time, I'd skip Kyoto entirely (much as it hurts me to type those words), and substitute a day trip to Kamakura.

Day 1: Arrive Tokyo. Stay in Tokyo 4 nights; Akihabara is probably best.

Day 2: Tsukiji at 8am, Ginza at 10am. Subway to Asakusa, eat lunch, visit Sensō-ji and Kappabashi in the afternoon. Head to Akihabara for dinner and neon after dark.

Day 3: Day trip to Kamakura. Take the JR Yokosuka line to Kita-Kamakura and explore its Zen temples: Engaku-ji, Jochi-ji, Tokei-ji and Kencho-ji. Then visit Hachimangu Shrine on the main approach to Kamakura station. Take the Enoden line to the Great Buddha, visit Hase-dera, and wrap up at Enoshima.

Day 4: Early morning at Shinjuku-gyoen. Souvenirs in Nihombashi. Tokyo Station Plaza. If early, swing through Ueno Park and Ameyoko. Then head to Omotesando, Harajuku, Shibuya. Back to Shinjuku at night.

Day 5: Depart Tokyo.

(And then, your appetite whetted, start planning your next visit to Japan!)

Speaking of that next trip: the Kumano Kodo and Shikoku Henro pilgrimage trails are both wonderful but require dedicated trips of their own. If you visit in August and have time, Kodo's Earth Celebration on Sado Island off the Niigata coast is a personal favourite. And if you come in Jan or Feb, the skiing in Hokkaido and the Japan Alps is world class.

3. Books, Movies and More

Here are some travel books I enjoyed:

- The Lady and the Monk – Pico Iyer
- The Roads to Sata – Alan Booth
- The Inland Sea – Donald Ritchie
- Hokkaido Highway Blues – Will Ferguson

[Craig Mod](#) is worth following: he writes email newsletters about walking and photographing Japan, and his ‘pop-up walks’ are excellent.

One of my favourite essays of recent years is The Sea of Crises by Brian Phillips; it’s part of his print collection [Impossible Owls](#), but you can read an [earlier version online](#).

[Emergent Tokyo](#) by Jorge Almazán + Studiolab is a superb book about Tokyo’s urban architecture: learn about *yokocho* alleys, *zakkyo* buildings, *ankyō* waterways, dense low-rise, the vibrant life underneath the Yamanote tracks, and much more. In addition to the fascinating content, this is a beautifully produced book; the illustrations alone make it worthwhile.

A few more recommendations:

- Ametora – David Marx
- The Tokyo Zodiac Murders – Soji Shimada
- The Tale of Genji – Murasaki Shikibu
- Anything by Kazuo Ishiguro
- Anything by Haruki Murakami

Moving on to movies and TV: **Kurosawa** doesn’t need my endorsement, but he gets it anyway. Yojimbo, Ran, Rashomon, Seven Samurai, Throne of Blood – they’re all masterpieces. Diametrically opposite in tone is *Makanai*, a cosy-comfort Netflix show about cooking, fulfilment, and Kyoto.

In Japan, animation is not considered necessarily inferior to live-action, or comics inferior to prose; nor is there a connotation of those forms being ‘for children’. If you’re a novice when it comes to **manga** (comics) and **anime** (animated movies), some good introductions to the genre are Naruto, One Piece, Full Metal Alchemist, Cowboy Bebop, Haikyū!, Yotsuba&!, Attack on Titan, Spy Family, Hunter X Hunter, and Akira. Anime made with western audiences in mind include Avatar: The Last Airbender and Kubo and the Two Strings.

Studio Ghibli transcends genres; their movies are works of art. Start with Spirited Away and My Friend Totoro; then watch Princess Mononoke, Princess Kaguya (both *very* unlike Disney princesses), Kiki’s Delivery Service, Howl’s Moving Castle, Castle in the Sky, and Porco Rosso. They’re all on Netflix, yay!

Hokusai and **Hiroshige** are the classic masters of *ukiyo-e* (Edo-era woodblock prints), but don’t miss the early-20th century ‘*shin-hanga*’ works of Hiroshi **Yoshida** and Hasui **Kawase**. You can draw a direct line from their works to modern Japanese illustrators, anime and manga.

4. And Finally

Thank you for reading this guide. I welcome your suggestions, corrections, ideas, and feedback.

I put a lot of time, effort, though and love into this guide. If you enjoyed it and found it helpful, I would truly appreciate your letting me know. Email me! at@abrahamthomas.info ☺

Happy Travels!
