Japan Handbook
General travel information for Self-Guided walking trips
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Preparing for your holiday

Timetable for travellers

Please check the following list of things to do in the weeks before your trip. If you remember to do the tasks at the right time the tour will run more smoothly.

As soon as you make your booking

- Arrange travel insurance
- Check that your passport is valid.

2 months before departure

- Pay your final balance.
- Check the clothing and equipment list. Contact Oku Japan if you need any help or advice.

6 weeks prior to departure

- Arrange a dental/medical check-up, and arrange prescriptions if required.
- Arrange travel to the airport, making sure you have a contingency plan in place in case of delays or cancellations. Arrange airport parking if required.

2 weeks prior to departure

- Buy yen if you plan on taking them (yen or US dollars recommended, as cash machines/ATMs in Japan do not usually work with foreign cards)

Last minute checks

- Passport
- Flight tickets (check flight details)
- Insurance certificate - remember to carry this with you
- Spending money
- Is your baggage within weight limits?
- Baggage labels
- Any sharp objects, such as knives, are packed in main hold baggage
- Tour dossier and any other guidebooks, maps etc.
- Check clothing and equipment

Tickets

Please make sure you have confirmed, return air tickets to Japan. When checking in for your flight, most airlines will require you to have either a return ticket, or at least a ticket to a third destination following your stay in Japan. They may deny you boarding if you only have a one-way ticket.

Visas

Nationals of EU countries, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand plus some other countries do not require visas for Japan. You will be given a landing card on your flight to Japan on which you should fill in the address of your first hotel in Japan. Please see the website of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to see if your country is exempt from applying for a visa in advance. http://www.mofa.go.jp/ It is your responsibility to check that you do not need a visa. Oku Japan cannot accept responsibility if you are denied entry into Japan.

Money
Cash is still the best form of payment to carry in Japan, particularly outside big cities. Smaller shops, restaurants, and bars will usually only accept cash. Japan is a very safe country to travel in, and there is very little street crime. Many Japanese people routinely carry large amounts of cash with them. Further, it can be time-consuming to exchange overseas currency even in Tokyo and Kyoto, especially anything other than US$, Euros, AUD and Pounds Sterling. The best option is to change foreign cash either before you leave home or on arrival at the airport.

Regular Japanese bank ATMs will not accept overseas bank cards or credit cards, although there are some ATMs in large cities that will (note that your credit card issuer will normally charge you interest for taking out cash on your credit card). Some Japanese Post Office ATMs will also give you Yen cash with an overseas card. You should bring enough cash to cover day-to-day expenses not included in your holiday price, such as snacks, drinks, and souvenirs.

How much money to bring

You will need to have cash to pay for lunches, dinners which are not included in your tour, drinks with meals, snacks and any gifts you wish to buy. We recommend 5,000 Yen per day (about $50, AUD55, £35, €40). Please make sure you have this at the start of your tour.

Insurance

It is a requirement of our tours that you are covered by travel insurance for the duration of your trip. You are free to purchase this insurance from any supplier you choose, however for those on walking trips it should cover activities including walking/hiking and helicopter rescue in the event of injury while in mountainous areas. Please bring your certificate of insurance with you.

We recommend you take out the following level of cover:
- Medical Expenses - £2m (personal accident or illness)
- Personal Liability - £1m (should you be sued while abroad)
- Cancellation - £3,000 (will cover costs should you need to cancel the trip e.g. in the event of illness)
- Baggage - £1,500
- Cash - £250
- A 24hr emergency line and cover for legal costs.

Health and Safety

Japan is one of the safest places to travel in the world and medical services are of a high standard, but it is always wise to be prepared. As already noted, it is essential to take out full medical insurance when visiting Japan, as there are no reciprocal health care agreements between Japan and the UK or other countries. Whilst certificates of vaccination are not normally required, travellers who have passed through infected countries may be asked to report to the health office on arrival. The authorities are scrupulous about travellers who have passed through areas with yellow fever.

Some of our tours visit remote areas and in the event of serious illness or injury, evacuation could be difficult, so we discourage anyone with serious medical problems from joining our walking trips. If you are in any doubt about your ability to join a tour, please consult us and your doctor.

We recommend that everyone has a physical and dental check-up. Problems such as fillings coming loose and toothache could be troublesome.

Vaccinations

No vaccinations are required for entry into Japan.

Medicines

It is advisable to bring with you any medications that you may need while in Japan. Western brands of most medicines are often not available in Japan. Although there are generally good Japanese brands, they are often expensive. Make sure to bring any prescriptions you may have and make sure you know the generic name for the medicine.
**Water**

Water from taps in Japan is safe to drink, although bottled water is widely available if you prefer. Avoid drinking from streams and rivers.

**Diseases**

There is no malaria in Japan; however mosquitoes can be a mild nuisance in the summer months. It is best to bring an insect repellent.

**Looking after yourself when travelling**

The best way to stay well is to get into the habit of looking after yourself. Japan is not only a safe destination, it also very clean. Personal and public hygiene is an important feature of Japanese society.

- Make sure you hydrate well before, during, and after your international flights. Dehydration can contribute to constipation during the first few days of your trip. Alcohol tends to speed up dehydration, so compensate by drinking water or juice.
- June through September is hot in Japan, and winter can be very dry, so drink plenty of fluids during these seasons.
- It is safe to drink tap water in Japan.

**What to bring**

**Clothing and Equipment**

Clothing is a matter of personal choice, but Japan has four distinct seasons, and the weather and temperatures change with the seasons.

The weather in Japan is warm in May and September. The rainy season lasts from the middle of June through to mid-July. Towards the end of May it can become quite hot at lower altitudes (up to about 30°C). It gets cooler in October, and at the beginning of November it is cold at 1,800m. You can expect daytime temperatures of about 15-20°C in October, although this does of course vary with elevation. Short tropical cyclones can hit Japan between June and October. Please refer to the section on climate later.

**Baggage**

We suggest a main, lockable suitcase on wheels or larger rucksack, and a day pack for personal items for sightseeing/walking. The day sack should be at least shower-proof, and if in doubt you should keep its contents inside a waterproof stuff bag.

Several companies in Japan offer a fast and efficient system of baggage forwarding in Japan (‘Takkyubin’ is the Japanese brand name of the best-known service). They are reliable, safe and economical. You can send luggage from most hotels and from many ryokan to any address in Japan. The hotel concierge will help you arrange the baggage forwarding and tell you how much to pay. Some smaller local accommodations may not offer the service, but they will direct you to the nearest location where the service is available. When we send you your final itinerary, about three weeks before your departure, we will suggest the occasions where you may choose to forward your baggage; if you are travelling light, then you may not need to use the service.

Most clients send the luggage on to the next large city (you can specify the exact date and time of delivery up to a week or two ahead), and walk with their day pack. Accommodations provide amenities such as soap, shampoo, hairdryers, and cotton robes called yukata, which you can wear around the accommodation, so you only need to bring your hiking clothing. In addition, shoes are not worn inside, so extra footwear is not needed.

Please note the following general rules:
1. Please do not put any breakable items in your luggage such as glass or pottery.
2. Do not send open bags or loose items. Everything should be in a closed suitcase, pack or bag.
3. You pay per bag, so it is more economical to send one larger bag rather than several smaller ones.

**Clothing**

This list is a general guide to what to take on tours. It is not comprehensive.
• Waterproof jacket (ideally breathable)
• 1 pair waterproof trousers (ideally breathable)
• Light hiking trousers or shorts for warmer weather walking (do not bring denim jeans for walking as they will be hard to dry if they get wet)
• Medium-weight hiking trousers
• T-shirts (ideally breathable)
• Fleece top (Polartec 200 or equivalent weight)
• Comfortable walking boots or lightweight trail boots. Footwear with ankle support is recommended for the hikes
• Trainers/sandals or comfortable shoes for the city sightseeing
• Outdoor shoes are not worn indoors in Japan. So bring slip-ons, slippers, or flip flops that you can use at your overnight accommodation. These must be exclusively for use indoors. The plastic slippers provided by most hotels and inns in Japan are small and uncomfortable, not to mention hazardous when negotiating steep stairs
• A pair of light but strong gloves (two pairs in case you lose one) if hiking outside of the warmest summer months
• Underwear (ideally breathable for the walking)
• 3 pairs hiking socks
• Other thin socks
• Hat
• Bandana/handkerchiefs
• Smart/casual clothes for air travel and in cities
• Nightwear/pyjamas
• Towel. Most hotels, ryokan and minshuku supply towels, but these may not be provided at your overnight accommodation (and won't be provided at some of the open-air natural hot springs you may visit), so take a towel.

Japan is liberal when it comes to clothing, and trendy and/or high tech gear is perfectly normal.

**Equipment and documents**

• Passport
• Cash (yen), credit/debit card(s)
• Travel insurance certificate
• Small day pack (about 35 litres)
• Main suitcase, rucksack or bag (preferably on wheels)
• Waterproof stuff bag for using inside your day sack
• Laundry bag for dirty clothes
• Walking pole(s) - for environmental and safety reasons, these telescopic poles should have rubber caps over the metal tips.
• Water bottle (1 litre or more if you drink a lot)
• Personal first aid kit (see suggestion below)

**Accessories**

• Wash bag & toiletries
• Alarm clock
• Personal stereo
• Address book & writing materials
• Reading material
• Travel wash (small quantity, preferably biodegradable)
• Favourite snacks/sweets
• Charger for digital cameras and other devices (and adapter for Japan two flat pin sockets)
• Penknife – if you take one, make sure it is not in your hand luggage for the flight
• Small torch
• Camera, film, spare batteries, spare memory cards
• Wristwatch
**Phones and gadgets**

Only 3G or 4G phones such as iPhones, Android smartphones, and newer models of Nokia and other manufacturers’ phones will work in Japan. Depending on your carrier, you will ‘roam’ with either NTT Docomo or Softbank on their 3G or 4G networks. If you have an older ‘2G’ phone, it will not work in Japan.

Please note that SIM cards are not available in Japan from the major carriers. B-mobile now offers SIM cards that will work with unlocked overseas phones, tablets, or ‘Mifi’ personal wifi devices. You may be able to purchase data-only SIM cards from some of the larger electronics stores which offer a fixed amount of data to be used within a fixed period.

When bringing your own phone you will need to use it with your SIM card from home, i.e. ‘roaming’. This can be very expensive.

Another option is to rent a Japanese mobile from NTT Docomo that will take a GSM SIM card, allowing you to use your regular number. It is possible to rent Japanese mobile phones, and have them ready when you arrive, usually at Narita or Kansai Airports. The rental company will also give you the phone number before you leave home so you can tell friends and family.

Companies that rent mobile phones:

- **Telecom Square** http://www.telecomsquare.co.jp/en/ 03-3239-2333
  This company rents mobile phones at Narita Airport, Kansai International Airport and Chubu Centrair International Airport near Nagoya.
- **go mobile** http://www.gomobile.co.jp/index_in.html
  This company rents and returns mobile phones by postal mail, so it is necessary to make arrangements in advance.
- **DoCoMo Sentsu** 0120-680-100, 03-5911-3968
  DoCoMo Sentsu rents mobile phones by the day or month, and has offices at Narita Airport and in major cities.
- **Passengers of ANA** may be able to take advantage of a discount packages through rental companies Inphonix and WorldCell

Prepaid mobile phones were previously an economical option for visits of over a few weeks or so, but now they are no longer available to tourists and require either photo identification showing a Japanese address.

**Personal first aid kit**

Carrying a small personal first aid kit is recommended. Hopefully you will not need to use it, but you might find someone else who is in need of help.

- Any medicines for personal use
- Antibiotics (must be prescribed – carry prescription with you)
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen
- Foot blister pack, moleskin pads
- Knee or ankle support if required
- Zinc oxide adhesive tape
- Bandage, wound dressing
- Antiseptic wipes
- Assorted plasters
- Sore throat sweets
- Analgesic
- Scissors

**Contents of your day pack**

This will normally contain personal items including:

- Water bottle
- Waterproofs
• Camera, spare film/battery, and accessories
• Personal first aid kit or part of it
• Litter bag
• Gloves and hat (depending on conditions)
• Snacks
• Warmer layer that can be taken off when walking
• Walking pole(s)
• Tissues

**Footwear**

The type of footwear you use for hiking is important. You should use boots that you have broken in and know are comfortable. Leather or fabric (e.g. suede/Gore-Tex) boots are appropriate for this type of walking holiday. Ankle support is important, so trainers or similar footwear are not recommended for the longer hikes. Sandals or trainers are OK for the shorter morning or afternoon guided walks.

**General advice about air travel and baggage allowance**

- Confirm your check-in baggage allowance.
- Airlines generally allow only one item of hand baggage
- You must bear the cost of any excess baggage charges
- Electrical equipment should not be packed in your main baggage
- Dangerous items, such as penknives and other sharp, lethal, or hazardous implements, cannot be packed in your hand baggage
- Fragile or valuable items should be carried in your hand baggage
- Do not leave baggage unattended at airports or elsewhere
- Most baggage scanning x-ray machines are film safe. If in doubt, check with security personnel
- Never carry anything onto an aircraft for someone else
- If you are at risk from deep vein thrombosis (clotting in the leg veins), you might need to wear compression stockings or take medication. Check the appropriate steps to take with your doctor. Stretch your legs and take the occasional walk around during your flight, and drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids
Travelling in Japan

Accommodation

Ryokan

*Ryokan* (旅館) are traditional Japanese inns, and a visit to one is the highlight of many a trip to Japan.

On entry take off your shoes in the *genkan* (玄関) entrance area before stepping up onto the raised floor where shoes are not allowed. Put on the slippers provided which you will wear inside the house. After checking in you will be led to your room, which is invariably simply but elegantly decorated and covered in *tatami* matting. Please leave your slippers at the entrance to the room, as you should only step on tatami in socks or your bare feet.

Most ryokan have large, communal segregated baths, and it is common to bathe either before or after dinner. A *yukata* (cotton gown) will be placed in your room and you will find it more comfortable to change into this and wear it while in the ryokan. It is also acceptable to wear the yukata outside the ryokan (geta – wooden clogs will be available for this purpose). Place the left lapel atop the right when closing your yukata – closing the right is bad luck!

Hint: wear underwear underneath.

Dinner will usually be served in a dining room, but occasionally in your room. In most ryokan dinner is very elaborately prepared and presented from carefully chosen seasonal ingredients; one of the highlights of traveling in Japan, particularly for the Japanese, is to try the local specialties. Ask if you are not sure how to eat a given item.

After dinner you may soak in the bath, or head out into the town. It is perfectly acceptable to do this in hot spring towns in your yukata and geta.

While you have been eating, the ryokan staff will have laid out your futon in your room, ready for sleeping. Futons are slightly harder than western mattresses, however when laid on tatami matting they are really quite comfortable. Japanese futons are simple single mattresses, much lighter than in the west and not supported by a wooden frame.

Breakfast in the morning is normally served communally in a dining hall at a fixed time.

Minshuku

*Minshuku* (民宿) are similar to ryokan, but more often than not family-run and a little simpler: the overall experience is much the same but the food is a little less elaborate, dining is communal, bathrooms are shared and guests are expected to lay out their own futon.

Hotels

Japanese hotels will always have western-style rooms, but also sometimes they will have Japanese-style tatami rooms. They have the same amenities as those in Europe or North America, although room sizes are generally smaller.

Mountain huts

Japan has an extensive network of mountain huts called *yamagoya* (山小屋) covering many of its mountain chains. Sleeping is normally on tatami mats, while eating is in communal canteens. Facilities are often fairly basic, and hot water is not always available. Mountain Huts are good places to meet and talk with Japanese hikers!
Japanese Customs and Etiquette

Respect

While Japanese culture and customs can be confusing at first, as a foreigner you are generally not expected to understand them. In fact, many Japanese take a pride in the belief that their culture is extremely complex and impossible for the foreigner to comprehend. You will likely be forgiven for any minor cultural gaffs you make. However, it is important to show respect for the Japanese and their beliefs, as in any other country you visit.

1. Language – try to learn at least a few phrases. Your guide will be happy to help! Japanese is not really that difficult, and there are very few sounds that are difficult for a native English speaker to pronounce. Your efforts will be rewarded even with just a few words, and the Japanese will never make fun of your mistakes.

2. Shoes – make sure to remove your street shoes before entering ryokan, minshuku, temples, shrines, and restaurants – anywhere that has a raised floor. Remove slippers before walking on tatami. Lastly, there are special slippers provided at the entrance to toilets, use them and don’t forget to remove them afterwards!

3. The Japanese consider over-familiarity inappropriate, so hearty backslaps or hugs are best avoided if you have just met someone.

4. Topics such as the Imperial Family and Japan’s role in World War II are best avoided as they are still sensitive subjects in Japan.

Eating

They key ingredient of every Japanese meal is rice, always white and sticky. Other key ingredients are soybeans, used in miso (味噌) soup, tofu (豆腐) bean curd and soy sauce (醤油 shōyu). Seafood in its many forms features heavily, often being used in sauces or soups. Pickles are another key ingredient of the Japanese meal. Japanese food refrains from heavy sauces and spices in favour of subtle flavours coming from the freshness of the ingredients themselves. Japanese restaurants abroad reflect only a small amount of the variety of dishes available in Japan, so it is likely you will experience a whole new range of tastes if this is your first visit!

Japanese meals generally consist of various small dishes served all at the same time. There is usually no specified order in which to eat. The Japanese use chopsticks (箸 hashi) to eat their food, with the exception of ‘curry rice’ and fried rice. There are two items of etiquette to be aware of with chopsticks. Never use chopsticks to pass food to another person’s chopsticks and never place your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. These resemble Japanese funerary rites.

Many Japanese dishes come with different sauces and garnishes. Japanese never put soy sauce on their rice, though they do dip their sushi in it before eating, and they pour it on grilled fish as well.

Restaurants

The Japanese eat out on average several times a week and the sheer number of restaurants, eateries, canteens and hole-in-the-wall snack bars is incredible. These restaurants can be found in stations, in underground shopping areas, the top floors of department stores, and along shopping arcades. Socialising in Japan nearly always involves eating out, as Japanese people rarely invite each other to their homes.

The best value in eating in Japan are set lunch menus, often offering the same menu as the evening but for half the price. These typically consist of a meat or fish dish, with a bowl of miso soup, pickles, and rice. These can be as inexpensive as ¥600 yet ample enough even for large appetites.
Restaurants will present you with the check after the meal, and you are expected to pay at the counter when leaving — do not leave payment on the table and walk out. The phrase for “check” is kanjō or kaikei. If it’s getting late, a server will usually come to your table to tell you it’s time for the "last order."

Tipping is not customary in Japan.

**Shokudo**

While most restaurants in Japanese specialize in a certain type of dish, each neighborhood is guaranteed to have a few shokudō (食堂), serving up simple, popular dishes and teishoku (set meals) sets at affordable prices (¥500-1000).

A staple of the shokudō is the donburi (丼), literally "rice bowl", meaning a bowl of rice with a topping. Popular ones include:
- oyakodon (親子丼) — "parent-and-child bowl", usually chicken and egg (but sometimes salmon and roe)
- katsudon (カツ丼) — a deep-fried pork cutlet with egg
- gyūdon (牛丼) — beef and onion
- chūkodon (中華丼) — "Chinese bowl", stir-fried vegetables and meat in a thick sauce

Curry rice (カレーライス karē raisu) — a thick, mild, brown paste that would leave most Indians scratching their heads. Often the cheapest dish on the menu, a large portion (大盛り ōmori) is guaranteed to leave you stuffed.

**Noodles**

The alternative to rice are noodles, and the two main types are soba (そば, buckwheat) and udon (うどん, wheat).

- **kake soba** (かけそば) — plain broth and maybe a little spring onion on top
- **tsukimi soba** (月見そば) — soup with a raw egg dropped in named "moon-viewing" because of the resemblance to a moon behind clouds
- **kitsune soba** (きつねそば) — soup with with sweetened thin sheets of deep-fried tofu
- **zaru soba** (ざるそば) — chilled noodles served with a dipping sauce, shallot and wasabi, popular in summer

Soba and Udon are very common, and can be found often at train stations for 300-400 yen.

Chinese egg noodles or rāmen (ラーメン) are also very popular but more expensive (¥500+) due to the greater effort involved and the condiments, which typically include a slice of grilled pork and a variety of vegetables. The three major styles of ramen are:

- **shio rāmen** (塩ラーメン) — salty pork broth
- **shoyu rāmen** (醤油ラーメン) — soy broth
- **miso rāmen** (味噌ラーメン) — miso (soybean paste) broth
- **tonkotsu ramen** (とんこつラーメン), thick pork broth

**Sushi and sashimi**

Probably Japan’s most famous food export, the word sushi (寿司) actually refers to the vinegared rice that accompanies it. Sliced raw fish on its own is called sashimi. Sushi chefs train for years to perfect their skills, and the preparation of sushi is actually quite tricky. Above all it is important that the fish be extremely fresh.

Types of sushi:
- **nigiri** — the canonical sushi form consisting of rice with fish pressed on top
- **maki** — fish and rice rolled up in nori seaweed and cut into bite-size chunks
- **temaki** — fish and rice rolled up in a big cone of nori
- **gunkan** — "battleship" sushi, like nigiri but with nori wrapped around the edge to contain the contents
- **chirashi** — a large bowl of vinegared rice with seafood scattered on top

A few species more or less guaranteed to feature in every restaurant are maguro (tuna), sake (salmon), ika (squid), tako (octopus), and tamago (egg). More exotic options include uni (sea urchin roe), toro (fatty tuna belly, very expensive) and shirako (fish sperm).

Most Japanese people eat sushi only rarely, it is relatively expensive compared to other restaurants. You can eat sushi with chopsticks or alternatively with your fingers.
Grilled and fried dishes
Before the opening up of Japan to outside world in the late 19th century, little meat was eaten in Japan. It had been largely banned after the introduction of Buddhism in the 5th century. However the Japanese now eat beef, pork and chicken with great enthusiasm, and many well-known dishes such as sukiyaki and shabu-shabu are recent innovations.
okonomiyaki (お好み焼き) — Japanese pancake-pizza, based on a wheat-cabbage batter with meat or seafood of your choice, slathered with sauce, mayo, bonito flakes, dried seaweed and pickled ginger
teppanyaki (鉄板焼き) — meat grilled on a hot iron plate
tempura (天ぷら) — battered shrimp, fish and vegetables deep-fried very quickly, served with a dipping broth
tonkatsu (豚カツ) — deep-fried pork cutlets elevated into an art form
yakiniku (焼肉) — Japanese-style barbeque, cooked by yourself at your table
yakitori (焼き鳥) — kebabs from every chicken part imaginable

Stewed dishes
Particularly in the cold winter months various stews (鍋 nabe) are popular ways to warm up. Common types include:
chankonabe (ちゃんこ鍋) — a hotchpotch hotpot much favored by sumo wrestlers
oden (おでん) — fish soup simmered for days on end, often sold on the street (and convenience stores) in the winter
sukiyaki (すき焼き) — a hotpot of beef, tofu, noodles and more, often somewhat sweet
shabu-shabu (しゃぶしゃぶ) — thinly-sliced beef dipped in a savoury broth and dipping sauces

Pseudo-Western dishes
Much admired and much copied, western food, or at least something resembling it, is common even in rural Japan. A few popular only-in-Japan dishes include:
hambaagu (ハンバーグ) — a standalone beef patty often served with Japanese sauces
omuraisu (オムライス) — rice wrapped in an omelette with a dollop of ketchup
wafū suteeki (和風ステーキ) — steak served Japanese-style with soy sauce
korokke(コロッケ); croquettes, usually filled with potato, along with some meat and onion.
kare-(カレー); Japanese-style curry, it is not as spicy as Indian curry

Convenience stores
Japan’s kobini (コンビニ) are everywhere, and serve both hot and cold food, snacks, beer, ice cream, as well as milk, juice and bread.

Eating vegetarian
Despite its image as light and healthy cuisine, everyday Japanese food can be quite heavy in salt and fat, with deep-fried meat or seafood being prominent. Vegetarians (much less vegans) may have difficulty finding a meal that does not include animal products to some degree, particularly as the near-ubiquitous Japanese soup stock dashi is usually prepared with bonito.
An excellent option is the kaiten sushi shop. Westerners tend to associate sushi with fish, but there are several kinds of rolled sushi available in these shops that does not include fish or other marine creatures: kappa maki (cucumber rolls), nattō maki (sushi filled with stringy fermented soy beans, an acquired taste for many), kanpyō maki (pickled-gourd rolls), and, occasionally, yuba sushi (made with the delicate, tasty ‘skin’ of tofu). These types of sushi tend to be less popular than the sushi using marine animal products, so you may not see them revolving in front of your eyes on the conveyor belt. Just shout out the name of the type of sushi you want and the sushi chef will prepare it for you right away. When you are ready to leave, call the waitress over and she’ll count your plates. The vegetarian sushi options are always inexpensive. Whether eating vegetarian (or otherwise), kaiten sushi shops offer good value and are lots of fun.
Drinking

Beer

There are several large brands of Japanese beer (ビール biru), including Kirin, Asahi, Sapporo, and Suntory. Yebisu is also a popular beer brewed by Sapporo. Microbrewed beers are also starting to appear in Japan, with a few restaurants offering their own micros or ji-biru (地ビール) but these are still few in number.

Beer is available from vending machines in various sizes, but in restaurants bottles (瓶 bin) or draft (生 nama meaning "fresh") are the norm. Bottles are large and can be shared. One tradition is to pour your companion’s glass and have them pour yours. Holding the glass while they pour shows respect. A hand placed on top of the glass means you have had enough.

Sake

What is known outside Japan as sake (酒) is more commonly called nihonshu within the country. Sake refers to any alcoholic drink. Sake is around 15% alcohol, and can be served hot (熱燗 atsukan), or cold (冷やし hiyashi).

See: Japan Sake Brewers Association http://www.japansake.or.jp/sake/english/
Wikipedia also has a good write-up: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sake

Shochu

Shochu is more common on the southern island of Kyushu, and is made from potatoes, yam or grain, and is much stronger than sake.

Tea

The most popular beverage is tea (お茶 o-cha), provided free of charge with almost every meal, hot in winter and cold in summer. There is a huge variety of tea in bottles and cans in convenience-store fridges and vending machines. Western-style black tea is called kōcha (紅茶); if you don’t ask for it specifically you’re likely to get Japanese brown or green tea. Chinese oolong tea is also very popular.

The major types of Japanese tea are:

- sencha (煎茶), the common green tea
- matcha (抹茶), soupy powdered ceremonial green tea, bitter and expensive
- hōjicha (ほうじ茶), roasted green tea
- genmaicha (玄米茶), tea with roasted rice, tastes popcorn-y
- mugicha (麦茶), a drink of roasted barley, served iced in summer

Coffee

Coffee (コーヒー kōhi) has become very popular in Japan, at western coffee shops such as Starbucks, and the more traditional kissaten. Japanese chains include Doutor and Excelsior. It is easy to buy coffee from vending machines even in remote areas. Ryokan do not usually serve it for breakfast though.

Soft drinks

Soft drinks are available from vending machines in a bewildering, often changing variety. Along the common Coke and Fanta are various Japanese brands and isotonic sports drinks such as Pocari Sweat and the milk-based Calpis.
Bathing

Bathing is an important part of daily life in Japan, and be it a scenic onsen hot spring, a neighbourhood sentō bath or just an ordinary household tub, bathing Japanese style is a pleasure. Japanese wax lyrical about the joys of hot water (湯 yu) and dub even the ordinary tub with a honorific (お風呂 o-furo), and a visit to a Japanese hot spring should be on the agenda of every visitor.

Onsen

Onsen (温泉), quite literally "hot springs", are one of the quintessential experiences of traveling in Japan. There are more than 3,000 named hot springs throughout Japan, ranging some simple rock pools in the mountains to large swanky hot spring resort hotels. A real onsen will have its source nearby, piping in the hot water and adjusting it to the right temperature for bathing. Onsen will always have a sheet posted describing the chemical composition of the water.

Most common are the indoor baths, usually segregated between men and women. Some up-market resorts offer private baths known as family baths, or reserved baths (貸切風呂 kashikiri-furo). Rotenburo (露天風呪) are open air baths, often located next to a rushing river or with some view of the surrounding scenery.

Most onsen charge anywhere from 300 to 1000 Yen, and offer changing rooms, showers, soap and shampoo, and often lounges to relax afterwards. There are more simple publicly-run baths often deep in the mountains where the facilities are more basic.

A note about Jewellery: The minerals in some hot springs may affect jewellery and can cause discoloration. Please remove rings and other jewelry when bathing in hot springs. If discoloration occurs, then toothpaste has proven effective at removing the stains.

Sentō and spas

Sentō (銭湯) are the old-style neighbourhood bath houses, once common but now slowly dying out as all new housing is built with modern bathrooms. Sento were once a focal point for a neighbourhood, where families would go every evening, wearing their bath robes and carrying a small bucket filled with towels, soaps, and shampoo. You can still see the sentōs; easy to spot with their entrances concealed behind low curtains.

Etiquette

Look for the characters "man" (男) and "woman" (女) (often coloured blue and red respectively) to enter the correct bath! You will usually have to remove your shoes to step into the changing room, and there will be either lockers or simple shelves to store your belongings. Undress and place your clothes in the provided basket if there is one, or the locker, and take the key. Take your small towel (often provided for a fee), and enter the bath area. You will see a row of taps and/or shower attachments along one wall. Take a small plastic stool, and sit in front of the taps. Being careful not to splash your neighbour, rinse and wash yourself, making sure to rinse all the soap suds away. This is important, as the bath water will be used by many people after you, and soap in the water is a big taboo.

You can now enter the bath itself. Test the water temperature as the baths are often hot! If there is an outdoor bath, it will usually be cooler than the indoor one. The idea is to slip gently into the water and let the heat penetrate your bones. Your small towel can be left by the edge of the bath or placed on your head, but not in the water. You can move between baths, taking a cool shower in between, repeating the process as often as you like.

When you are finished, use the towel to dry off, squeezing it to remove excess water. You will find the hot onsen water will evaporate fairly quickly.

After your bath is finished, there will often be a lounge to relax (休憩室 kyūkeishitsu). Beers are often on sale from vending machines. Feel free to relax, take a quick nap, or just sit and observe the Japanese at leisure!
Toilets

Japanese toilets come in both the western-style and Asian-style squat varieties. You will often find special toilet slippers at the entrance. You should not wear regular slippers into the toilet, but change into these. Be careful to change back on leaving!

Japan is undoubtedly the world leader in advanced toilet design. High-tech toilets are common, called washlets, which incorporate seat warmers, hot air dryers and small robotic arms that squirt water. Make sure you are sitting before you press any of the buttons! One thing to note is that usually the flush mechanism is not operated by the control panel, but by a more conventional switch or knob.

Note: There is always a red button labeled 止 on the panel — pressing this will instantly stop everything.

Common buttons are:

- **Oshiri (おしり)**, lit. "honorable buttocks", for spraying your rear — typically shown in blue with a stylized butt icon
- **Bidet (ビデ)**, for spraying your front — typically shown in pink with a female icon
- **Kansō (乾燥)**, for drying off when finished — typically yellow with a wavy air icon

**How to use a Japanese-style (squat) toilet**

Most toilets in Japan are now western-style, but you may find Japanese-style squat toilets in some rural areas.

Communications

**Emergency telephone calls**

Emergency calls can be made from any phone free of charge: call 110 for police or call 119 for fire and ambulance.

**Pay telephones**

Public pay telephones (公衆電話 kōshū denwa) are easily found, particularly near train stations, although with the popularity of mobile phones, public pay phones are not as quite as numerous as they once were. Gray and green pay phones accept ¥10 and ¥100 coins, and pre-paid cards. Some of the gray phones, as indicated on the LCD display, can make international calls. Pre-paid cards may be purchased at convenience stores, train station kiosk stores and sometimes in vending machines next to the phone. International phone charges from pay phones can be unusually high; third-party phone cards are a reasonable alternative.
By post
You can send postcards to anywhere in the world for 70 yen. Public mail deposit boxes are found throughout Japan. They have two slots, one for regular domestic mail, and the other for overseas and express mail.

By internet
Internet cafes (インターネットカフェ) can be found in or around many train stations. Here, you can upload your pictures from a digital camera, and if you forgot your cable, some cafes will lend you a memory card reader for free. Manga coffee shops (漫画喫茶 manga-kissa) usually have internet PCs as well. The cost is typically around ¥400/hour, with free drinks.
Some hotels have rental or free PC's available for hotel guests.
Some larger train stations and airports also have rental PCs to netsurf and send e-mail, usually about ¥100 for 10 minutes.
When using public access PC's, remember to be careful not to the accidentally hit the left side Alt-Shift keys together, or you'll be writing in Japanese—even if you don't know any. On the other hand, if the last person left the computer this way, you can use this key combination to switch back to the Roman alphabet.