



Japan

Ancient temples, snow-capped Mount Fuji and bullet trains, on a long chain of islands known as the Land of the Rising Sun.

Japan is an island nation in the Pacific Ocean, off the east coast of Asia. Four large islands make up most of the country: Hokkaido in the north, Honshu in the middle, and Shikoku and Kyushu in the south, together with thousands of smaller islands. Mountains cover most of the land, so people live crowded along the coasts and plains.

AT A GLANCE

Facts to know

CAPITAL

Tokyo

POPULATION

About 123 million

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

None by law; Japanese in practice

CURRENCY

Japanese yen (¥)

AREA

About 378,000 km²

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional monarchy with a parliament (Emperor Naruhito since 2019)

HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

Mount Fuji, 3,776 m

LONGEST RIVER

The Shinano, about 367 km

NEIGHBOURS

None by land. Across the sea: Russia, North Korea, South Korea, China and Taiwan

DRIVES ON THE

Left

CALLING CODE

+81

A 45-minute trip to Japan

Everything you need is in this pack. No preparation beyond printing. Adapt the timing to your group.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 0 to 5 min | Welcome. Show the map page and find Japan together. Ask: who has been there, or knows someone from there? |
| 5 to 15 min | Read the facts at a glance, then three moments from the story: AD 710: Nara becomes the capital; 1853: Commodore Perry's black ships arrive; 2019: The Reiwa era begins. |
| 15 to 25 min | At the table: talk about Sushi and Ramen. Idea: bring a small taste (bread, cheese, fruit, tea) if your kitchen can help. |
| 25 to 30 min | Say it like a local: practise "Ohayo gozaimasu" (Good morning), "Konnichiwa" (Hello, good afternoon), "Konbanwa" (Good evening). Everyone says them together. |
| 30 to 40 min | Quiz: read the questions aloud, or play the big-screen version at https://worldstroll.com/countries/japan/group . No scores needed. |
| 40 to 45 min | Talk about it (questions page), then stamp or sign everyone's passport page. |

You will need

- This printed pack (one per table, or one each)
- Pens for the quiz
- Optional: a world map or globe, a small tasting, music from the country

Japan and its cities



- Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolis, Kanto): The Imperial Palace, Senso-ji temple in Asakusa, Tokyo Skytree, The Shibuya crossing
- Yokohama (Kanagawa, Kanto): Japan's largest Chinatown, The Minato Mirai waterfront, The first railway, to Tokyo, in 1872
- Nagoya (Aichi, Chubu): Nagoya Castle and its golden roof fish, The car industry, Miso katsu, pork cutlet with miso sauce
- Kanazawa (Ishikawa, Chubu): Kenroku-en garden, Gold leaf, The Higashi Chaya geisha district
- Kyoto (Kyoto, Kansai): The Golden Pavilion, Fushimi Inari's red gates, Geisha in the Gion district, Matcha tea from nearby Uji
- Osaka (Osaka, Kansai): Takoyaki and okonomiyaki, Osaka Castle, The neon lights of

Dotonbori

- Nara (Nara, Kansai): The Great Buddha of Todai-ji, The deer of Nara Park, Kasuga Taisha shrine
- Himeji (Hyogo, Kansai): Himeji Castle, Koko-en gardens
- Hiroshima (Hiroshima, Chugoku): The Peace Memorial Park, Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki, The nearby island of Miyajima
- Fukuoka (Fukuoka, Kyushu): Hakata tonkotsu (pork bone) ramen, Yatai food stalls by the river
- Nagasaki (Nagasaki, Kyushu): Dejima, the old Dutch trading post, The Peace Park, Castella sponge cake
- Sapporo (Hokkaido): The Sapporo Snow Festival in February, Miso ramen, Sapporo beer
- Fujiyoshida (Yamanashi, Chubu): Views of Mount Fuji, The Yoshida climbing trail, Chureito Pagoda

A short history of Japan

Japan's written history begins later than China's, but its imperial family is one of the oldest in the world. For most of the last thousand years real power lay with warrior families, until the emperor was restored to the centre of the state in 1868.

AD 710 **Nara becomes the capital**

Japan built its first long-lasting capital, Heijo-kyo, at Nara, laid out on a grid like the Chinese capital. Buddhism flourished and the great temple of Todai-ji was built here.

AD 794 **Heian-kyo becomes the capital**

Emperor Kanmu moved the court to Heian-kyo, the city we now call Kyoto. It remained the home of the emperors for more than 1,000 years, and court life produced classics such as The Tale of Genji.

1192 **Minamoto no Yoritomo becomes shogun**

After winning a long war between two great clans, Yoritomo was named shogun, the top military ruler, and governed from Kamakura. Shoguns would hold real power, in the emperor's name, for almost 700 years.

1281 **Typhoons wreck the Mongol fleet**

The Mongol empire of Kublai Khan attacked Japan in 1274 and again in 1281. Both attempts failed, the second when a typhoon destroyed much of the fleet. The Japanese called these storms kamikaze, divine winds.

1543 **Portuguese traders reach Japan**

A ship carrying Portuguese traders landed on the island of Tanegashima, the first Europeans known to reach Japan. They brought guns, which soon changed the way Japanese lords fought.

1600 **Battle of Sekigahara**

Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his rivals in one of the biggest battles in Japanese history, ending more than a century of civil war.

1603 **Tokugawa Ieyasu becomes shogun**

Ieyasu was named shogun and ruled from Edo, today's Tokyo. His family kept Japan at peace for about 250 years, a time called the Edo period.

- 1639** **Japan closes its doors**
After a series of edicts, the last of them in 1639, Portuguese ships were banned and Japanese people could not travel abroad. Only Chinese and Dutch ships could still trade, at Nagasaki, where the Dutch were confined to Dejima, a small artificial island in the harbour.
- 1853** **Commodore Perry's black ships arrive**
The American naval officer Matthew Perry sailed into Edo Bay with steam warships and demanded that Japan open its ports. A treaty the next year ended more than two centuries of isolation.
- 1868** **The Meiji Restoration**
The last shogun gave up power and the young Emperor Meiji was restored as head of the state. Edo was renamed Tokyo, meaning eastern capital, and Japan began to modernise at great speed.
- 1872** **Japan's first railway opens**
The first railway line in Japan opened between Tokyo and Yokohama, built with British help. Railways became the backbone of the country.
- 1945** **Atomic bombs and surrender**
In August 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrendered, ending the Second World War.
- 1947** **Japan's current constitution takes effect**
A new constitution took effect on 3 May 1947. The emperor became a symbol of the nation, power passed to an elected parliament, and Japan gave up war as a way of settling disputes.
- 1964** **Tokyo hosts the Summer Olympics**
The Tokyo Olympics were the first Olympic Games held in Asia. The first bullet train line opened just days before, and the Games showed the world a rebuilt, modern Japan.
- 2011** **The Great East Japan Earthquake**
On 11 March 2011 a magnitude 9 earthquake off the northeast coast caused a huge tsunami that left about 18,000 people dead or missing and damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant.
- 2019** **The Reiwa era begins**
Emperor Akihito stepped down, the first emperor to do so in about 200 years, and his son Naruhito took the throne on 1 May 2019. Japan

names its years by era, and the new one is called Reiwa.

What people eat in Japan

Japanese food is built on rice, fish, soy and fresh seasonal vegetables, and UNESCO lists traditional Japanese food culture, washoku, as intangible heritage. A classic home meal is 'one soup, three dishes': a bowl of rice, miso soup, a main dish of fish or meat and two small side dishes, often with pickles and green tea.

Sushi

Nigiri from Edo (today's Tokyo); older fermented sushi came from mainland Asia

Rice seasoned with vinegar, topped or rolled with fish, seafood, egg or vegetables. The best-known kind, nigiri, is a small hand-pressed block of rice with a slice of fish on top.

Ramen

Chinese-style noodles made Japanese; regional styles all over the country

Wheat noodles in a rich broth flavoured with soy sauce, salt, miso or pork bones, topped with sliced pork, a soft-boiled egg, spring onions and seaweed.

Tempura

Introduced by the Portuguese in the 1500s, perfected in Edo

Prawns, fish and vegetables dipped in a very light, cold batter and fried until crisp, served with a dipping sauce and grated radish.

Miso soup

All of Japan

A simple soup of dashi stock and miso, a paste of fermented soybeans, usually with tofu, seaweed and spring onions. It is served with almost every traditional meal, even breakfast.

Onigiri (rice balls)

All of Japan

Triangles or balls of rice with a filling such as salted salmon, pickled plum or tuna, wrapped in a strip of nori seaweed. They are the classic picnic and lunchbox food, sold in every convenience store.

Okonomiyaki

Osaka and Hiroshima

A thick savoury pancake of batter and shredded cabbage with pork or seafood, cooked on a hot plate and topped with a sweet brown sauce, mayonnaise, seaweed flakes and dried bonito. The name means 'grilled as you like it'.

Takoyaki

Osaka

Round balls of batter with a piece of octopus inside, cooked in a special pan with half-round moulds and topped with sauce, mayonnaise, seaweed and bonito flakes.

Chicken teriyaki

All of Japan

Chicken pan-fried and glazed with soy sauce, mirin and sugar. 'Teri' means shine and 'yaki' means grilled, for the glossy sauce.

Oyakodon

Tokyo

A bowl of rice topped with chicken and onion simmered in a sweet soy broth and bound with softly set egg. The name means 'parent and child bowl', because it contains both chicken and egg.

Sukiyaki

All of Japan, especially Tokyo and Kansai

A hot pot cooked at the table: thin slices of beef, tofu, leeks, mushrooms and noodles simmered in a sweet soy sauce broth. It is a favourite dish for winter and celebrations.

Sanuki udon

Kagawa Prefecture, Shikoku

Thick, square-edged wheat noodles with a firm, chewy bite, served in a light broth or with a dipping sauce.

Soba

All of Japan, especially the mountain regions

Thin buckwheat noodles, eaten hot in broth in winter or cold with a dipping sauce in summer.

Gyoza

From Chinese dumplings; popular all over Japan

Thin dumplings filled with minced pork, cabbage, garlic and ginger, fried on one side until crisp and then steamed. They are dipped in soy sauce with vinegar and chilli oil.

Mochi

All of Japan

A soft, stretchy cake made by pounding steamed glutinous (sticky) rice. It is eaten grilled, in soup, or as sweets filled with red bean paste, and it is a must at New Year.

Matcha

Uji, near Kyoto, is the most famous growing area

Powdered green tea, whisked with hot water into a bright green, frothy drink. It is the tea of the traditional tea ceremony and a popular flavour for sweets and ice cream.

GOOD MANNERS

At the table

- Say 'itadakimasu' before you eat and 'gochisosama deshita' when you finish, to thank everyone who made the meal.
- Never stand your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice, and never pass food from your chopsticks to someone else's. Both are linked with funerals.
- Slurping noodles such as ramen and soba is normal, and shows you are enjoying them.
- It is fine to lift a small bowl of rice or soup close to your mouth.
- With nigiri sushi, dip the fish side lightly in soy sauce, not the rice.
- Tipping is not customary in restaurants. Good service is simply part of the price.

Miso soup

A simple soup of dashi stock and miso, a paste of fermented soybeans, usually with tofu, seaweed and spring onions. It is served with almost every traditional meal, even breakfast.

Ingredients

- 800 ml dashi stock (made with instant dashi granules, or with kombu seaweed and bonito flakes)
- 3 to 4 tablespoons miso paste
- 150 g silken or firm tofu, cut into small cubes
- 1 tablespoon dried wakame seaweed
- 2 spring onions, thinly sliced

Method

1. Soak the wakame in a bowl of water for 5 minutes, then drain.
2. Heat the dashi in a pan until it is just below boiling.
3. Put the miso in a ladle, dip it into the stock and stir with chopsticks until it dissolves into the soup.
4. Add the tofu and wakame and heat gently for 1 to 2 minutes. Do not let the soup boil after adding the miso, or it loses its flavour.
5. Serve in small bowls, sprinkled with spring onions.

Onigiri (rice balls)

Triangles or balls of rice with a filling such as salted salmon, pickled plum or tuna, wrapped in a strip of nori seaweed. They are the classic picnic and lunchbox food, sold in every convenience store.

Ingredients

- 300 g Japanese short-grain rice (about 650 g once cooked)
- 1 salted or lightly salted salmon fillet (about 120 g)
- Fine salt
- 2 sheets of nori seaweed, each cut into 4 strips
- A bowl of cold water for your hands

Method

1. Rinse the rice until the water runs almost clear, then cook it in a rice cooker or a covered pan with 360 ml water. Let it rest for 10 minutes.
2. Grill or pan-fry the salmon until cooked through, then remove the skin and bones and flake the fish.
3. Wet your hands, rub a pinch of salt on your palms and take a handful of warm rice.
4. Press a hollow in the rice, add a spoonful of salmon, cover with a little more rice and press gently into a triangle, turning it a few times.
5. Wrap a strip of nori around the base just before eating so it stays crisp.

Okonomiyaki

A thick savoury pancake of batter and shredded cabbage with pork or seafood, cooked on a hot plate and topped with a sweet brown sauce, mayonnaise, seaweed flakes and dried bonito. The name means 'grilled as you like it'.

Ingredients

- 100 g plain flour
- 120 ml dashi stock or water
- 2 eggs
- 300 g white cabbage, finely shredded
- 2 spring onions, sliced
- 6 thin slices of pork belly (about 120 g)
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- To serve: okonomiyaki sauce (or brown sauce), mayonnaise, aonori seaweed flakes and bonito flakes

Method

1. Whisk the flour and dashi into a smooth batter, then beat in the eggs.
2. Fold in the cabbage and spring onions so that everything is lightly coated.
3. Heat the oil in a frying pan over medium heat and spoon in half of the mixture, pressing it into a round about 2 cm thick.
4. Lay 3 slices of pork on top, cover and cook for about 5 minutes until the bottom is golden.
5. Flip it with two spatulas, cover and cook for another 5 to 6 minutes, until the pork is crisp and cooked through. Repeat with the rest.
6. Brush with sauce, zigzag with mayonnaise and sprinkle with aonori and bonito flakes.

Chicken teriyaki

Chicken pan-fried and glazed with soy sauce, mirin and sugar. 'Teri' means shine and 'yaki' means grilled, for the glossy sauce.

Ingredients

- 2 boneless chicken thighs with skin (about 500 g)
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons mirin
- 1 tablespoon sake (or water)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- Steamed rice and a green salad or vegetables to serve

Method

1. Mix the soy sauce, mirin, sake and sugar in a small bowl.
2. Heat the oil in a frying pan and put the chicken in skin side down. Cook over medium heat for 7 to 8 minutes, pressing it flat, until the skin is crisp and golden.
3. Turn the chicken and cook for another 5 minutes, until it is cooked through with no pink in the middle.
4. Wipe out most of the fat with kitchen paper, pour in the sauce and let it bubble, turning the chicken, until the sauce is thick and glossy.
5. Slice and serve with rice, spooning the rest of the sauce over the top.

Oyakodon

A bowl of rice topped with chicken and onion simmered in a sweet soy broth and bound with softly set egg. The name means 'parent and child bowl', because it contains both chicken and egg.

Ingredients

- 250 g boneless chicken thigh, cut into bite-size pieces
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 200 ml dashi stock
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons mirin
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 3 eggs (the egg is traditionally left soft; cook it until fully set if serving pregnant women, young children, older people or anyone with a weak immune system)
- 2 bowls of hot cooked Japanese rice
- 1 spring onion, sliced

Method

1. Put the dashi, soy sauce, mirin and sugar in a small frying pan and bring to a simmer.
2. Add the onion and cook for 3 minutes, then add the chicken and simmer for 6 to 8 minutes, until it is cooked through.
3. Lightly beat the eggs and pour them over the chicken in a circle.
4. Cover and cook over low heat for 1 to 2 minutes, or longer until the egg is fully set if you prefer.
5. Slide half of the mixture over each bowl of rice and sprinkle with spring onion.

Useful phrases

Ohayo gozaimasu

oh-HIGH-yoh goh-ZAI-mahs · Good morning

Konnichiwa

kohn-NEE-chee-wah · Hello, good afternoon

Konbanwa

kohn-BAHN-wah · Good evening

Hajimemashite

hah-jee-meh-MAHSH-teh · Nice to meet you

Arigato gozaimasu

ah-ree-GAH-toh goh-ZAI-mahs · Thank you very much

Sumimasen

soo-mee-MAH-sen · Excuse me

Onegaishimasu

oh-neh-GUY-shee-mahs · Please

Kore o kudasai

KOH-reh oh koo-DAH-sai · This one, please

Ikura desu ka?

ee-KOO-rah DEHS-kah · How much is it?

Toire wa doko desu ka?

TOY-reh wah DOH-koh DEHS-kah · Where is the toilet?

Eigo o hanasemasu ka?

AY-goh oh hah-nah-seh-MAHS-kah · Do you speak English?

Wakarimasen

wah-kah-ree-MAH-sen · I don't understand

Itadakimasu

ee-tah-dah-kee-MAHS · I humbly receive

Gochisosama deshita

goh-chee-SOH-sah-mah DESH-tah · Thank you for the meal

Kanpai!

kahn-PIE · Cheers!

Okaikei onegaishimasu

oh-KAI-kay oh-neh-GUY-shee-mahs · The bill, please

Daijobu desu

dai-JOH-boo dehs · I'm fine, no thank you

Sayonara

sah-YOH-nah-rah · Goodbye

FUN FACTS

Things you might not know

1. Nihon, the Japanese name for Japan, is written with the characters for 'sun' and 'origin'. It means 'origin of the sun', which is why Japan is called the Land of the Rising Sun.
2. Japan is not just four islands: a government survey in 2023 counted 14,125 islands.
3. The first bullet train line, between Tokyo and Osaka, opened on 1 October 1964, just nine days before the Tokyo Olympics.
4. In the 2018 financial year, the average delay on the Tokaido bullet train line was 0.7 minutes.
5. As of 2026, Tokyo Skytree, at 634 m, is the tallest tower in the world.
6. Momofuku Ando invented instant noodles in Japan in 1958, and Cup Noodles followed in 1971.
7. Nintendo was founded in Kyoto in 1889. It started out making hanafuda, traditional Japanese playing cards.
8. As of 2026, Emperor Naruhito is the only monarch in the world with the title of emperor.
9. Written Japanese mixes three scripts: kanji, characters that came from China, and two syllable alphabets, hiragana and katakana. Katakana is used mainly for foreign words.
10. Kanazawa produces about 99 percent of Japan's high-quality gold leaf, and you can buy ice cream covered in it.
11. The 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo were the first Winter Games held in Asia.
12. Mount Fuji is a volcano that last erupted in 1707, covering Edo, about 100 km away, in ash.

TALK ABOUT IT

Questions for the group

- Have you ever been to Japan, or has someone in your family? What do you remember?

- Have you ever tasted Sushi or Ramen? What is a dish you remember from a trip?
- Japan's current constitution takes effect (1947). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Tokyo hosts the Summer Olympics (1964). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Have you seen Mount Fuji, in person or in pictures? Which famous place would you most like to see?
- If you could spend one day in any city of Japan, which would it be and why?

QUIZ

How well do you know Japan?

Circle the right answer. The answers are on the last page.

1. The Golden Pavilion you can see in Kyoto today is the original building from the 1300s.

- A) True
- B) False

2. What did Momofuku Ando invent in Japan in 1958?

- A) The Walkman
- B) The bullet train
- C) The karaoke machine
- D) Instant noodles

3. What is inside a takoyaki ball?

- A) Red bean paste
- B) Chicken
- C) Octopus
- D) Cheese

4. In Japan, slurping ramen or soba noodles is considered rude.

- A) True
- B) False

5. As of 2026, Tokyo Skytree is the tallest tower in the world.

- A) True
- B) False

6. The Mongols tried to invade Japan twice in the 1200s, and both attempts failed.

- A) True
- B) False

7. The first bullet train line opened in 1964, just before the Tokyo Olympics.

- A) True

B) False

8. Oyakodon means 'parent and child bowl'. Which two ingredients give it this name?

- A) Pork and cabbage
- B) Chicken and egg
- C) Tuna and tofu
- D) Beef and onion

9. Which American naval officer sailed into Edo Bay with 'black ships' in 1853 and pushed Japan to open its ports?

- A) Douglas MacArthur
- B) John Paul Jones
- C) George Dewey
- D) Matthew Perry

10. During Japan's centuries of isolation, the Portuguese kept trading from the island of Dejima in Nagasaki.

- A) True
- B) False

11. Which Japanese word means 'delicious'?

- A) Kippu
- B) Oishii
- C) Arigato
- D) Sumimasen

12. Some small shops and restaurants in Japan, especially in the countryside, do not accept cards and must be paid in cash.

- A) True
- B) False

Quiz answers

1. False

False. A young monk burned the original down in 1950, and the pavilion was rebuilt in 1955.

2. D) Instant noodles

Momofuku Ando invented instant noodles in 1958 and Cup Noodles in 1971.

3. C) Octopus

Tako means octopus. Takoyaki are balls of batter with a piece of octopus inside.

4. False

False. Slurping noodles is normal and shows you are enjoying them.

5. True

True. At 634 m, Tokyo Skytree is the world's tallest tower, although some skyscrapers are taller.

6. True

True. The attacks of 1274 and 1281 both failed, the second when a typhoon wrecked much of the Mongol fleet.

7. True

True. The line between Tokyo and Osaka opened on 1 October 1964, nine days before the Games began.

8. B) Chicken and egg

Chicken and egg are the parent and child, simmered together and served over rice.

9. D) Matthew Perry

Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in 1853, and a treaty the following year ended Japan's long isolation.

10. False

False. Dejima was first built for the Portuguese, but they were expelled in 1639. For the rest of the isolation it was the Dutch who kept a trading post there.

11. B) Oishii

Oishii means delicious. Arigato is thank you, sumimasen is excuse me and kippu is ticket.

12. True

True. Cards are spreading, but carry some yen in cash, especially outside the big cities.

Japan visa page

Name: _____ Date: _____



Next stops

Country: _____	Country: _____	Country: _____
Country: _____	Country: _____	Country: _____

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