

# Revel in Japan

As well as a culture and history that is fascinating to the international visitor, Japan offers students a thoroughly modern experience, says AMY BAKER.

Japan consists of four main islands: Hokkaido in the north, Kyushu in the south, Honshu, the main, largest island, and Shikoku. All of these islands offer local specialities, customs and tourist sites all bound by the distinct culture of Japan itself. For many students, their experience of Japan is one of wonder, with traditions very different from those in Western countries in particular. That said, Japan is an ultra-modern country, which has experienced major technological and industrial progress since the 1950s.

Tokyo, the capital city, is the first port of call for many students. One of the most heavily populated cities in the world, Tokyo is home to at least 11 million people. Not surprisingly, there are many language-learning opportunities in the capital, which boasts impressive skyscrapers, modern architecture and inspiring gardens. According to E

Shiraishi of the Tokyo School of the Japanese Language-Naganuma, popular areas to visit include Roppongi and Akihabara.

Akihabara boasts a large collection of electronics shops, specialising in everything from domestic appliances to the latest gadgets for the Internet generation, while Roppongi has an international flavour and is home to some of Tokyo's largest nightclubs.

In the daytime, the area of Harajuku is teeming with young Japanese, making it a good place to visit for an insight into youth culture. Fashion stores, cafés and shops owned by celebrities make it a popular haunt for teenagers. Takeshita-dori Street, in particular, is very crowded at the weekends.

Also in this area is the NHK Broadcasting Center,

which students at the Naganuma School visit as part of their organised excursions, and the popular Meiji Shrine, dedicated to Emperor Meiji – who died in 1912 – and his wife. The shrine is set in a field, famous for its carpet of irises that bloom during the rainy season. Naganuma students also enjoy visiting the gardens and parks around the ancient site of Edo Castle, and the Tokyo National Museum, the largest art museum in the country.

While the many beautiful sites of Japan are easily accessible, learning the language can be difficult, so schools ensure that students can meet local Japanese with whom they can practise their language skills. Shiraishi explains, “[Class] projects, such as information gathering and



**Meiji Shrine**  
A serene oasis away from the busy Tokyo streets, the Meiji Shrine is surrounded by trees and has a beautiful inner garden. The Treasure Museum houses artifacts from Emperor Meiji

## Agent viewpoint



“At LAL, we offer [Eurocentres] Kanazawa as our sole destination in Japan. Students like the mix of learning about the culture, staying in a private household, and learning the language. Tourist sites which are most popular [include] the seaside, the traditional Japanese gardens and the Gokayama mountain villages.”

**Juergen Gemmeke, LAL Sprachreisen, Germany**



“There is no doubt that my students return to Denmark with a lot of experience from their stay at the Yamasa Institute in Okazaki, Japan. My students remember the high quality teaching at the institute, their fellow students and staff. Outside the institute, the students will remember a lot of free-time activities in the middle of the lively Japanese society. Okazaki is rich in history, [and] students [like] to visit the old castle, which was the

birthplace and stronghold of the most powerful shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, unifier of Japan.”

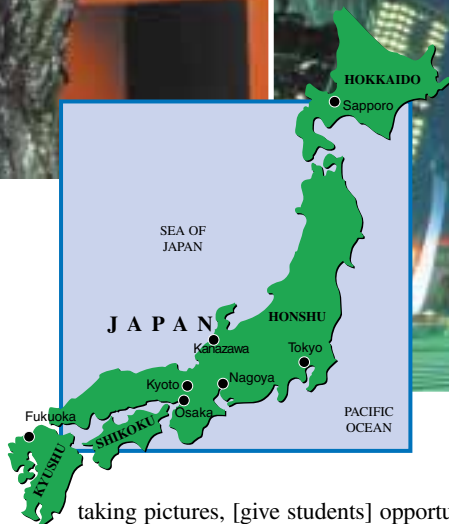
**Thomas Schramm, MTS Languages International, Denmark**



“The culture, religion, art, natural beauty, fascinating language and people are the major attractions for our students going to Japan. The unique history of this beautiful island has produced a land



Japan is a fusion of deep cultural history, as is evident in its many shrines (left), and the ultra modern, epitomised in much of Tokyo's architecture (below)



taking pictures, [give students] opportunities to meet local people.”

At Eurocentres Kanazawa, which is located on the opposite side of the island of Honshu, Yasuko Aizawa says that their overseas students have Japanese conversation partners. “Students can experience the local community and meet people through [their] host family,” she adds. There are also some interesting festivals in which students can take part. “There is a traditional Japanese dance parade during the city’s biggest festival. Anybody can participate in the parade in a rented traditional costume.”

of fascinating people and rich culture, artistic traditions combined with some surprisingly western habits in the large cities that somehow seem out of place. Our students seem to enjoy this quirky combination of cultures. During the week, our students love to eat meals together, visit local places of cultural interest and go out in the evenings and mix with the young people of Japan in clubs and restaurants. Both of our schools [in Kanazawa and Tokyo] organise cultural activities

Aizawa also mentions a sumo tournament for international students!

Kanazawa itself is a port city, which, according to Aizawa, is “historically and culturally unique, surrounded by sea, rivers and mountains”. The school takes students to shinto shrines, *onsen* (hot spring baths) and Buddhist temples. Students are also encouraged to try Japanese cooking, kimono dressing and tea ceremonies. “Kanazawa is just the right size [as] students can concentrate on study without too much distraction [and] still find interesting things to see and do,” says Aizawa.

For those keen to travel further afield, there are many interesting cities in the north

of Honshu. Niigata has an international film festival and a winter food festival, while its Kobari beach is the venue for the famous Sunset Concert held every summer. Further north in the Tokohu region, there is much impressive natural beauty. The area of Fukushima, for example, has more than 150 hot springs, national parks, and many natural lakes and ponds, including Lake Inawashiro-ko, where board sailing and water skiing are available. Nearby, Yamagata boasts the Zao mountain range, more national parks and historical cities with ancient temples and shrines. In this region, the local cuisine is said to benefit from the fresh air and water – locally brewed sake, fresh seafood, and fruits such as cherries, apples and peaches are delicious.

Sean Wurz, Head Instructor at the International Academy in Sapporo, on the north island of Hokkaido, says that Japan’s cuisine is one of the aspects of the country that students enjoy most. “People tend to really love the food,” he says. “Sapporo *ramen* (noodles) are world famous and the seafood is a well-kept secret.” He adds, “The extraordinary friendliness of the

Sapporo people is also not to be forgotten.”

Sapporo, literally translated, means “City of fun for everyone”, and with its hot springs, ski areas and famous Sapporo Snow Festival, the city is a friendly and exciting language travel destination. At 150 years old, Sapporo is a relatively new city, and, according to Wurz, this “has created an environment where outsiders are accepted very easily”. Students at the International Academy mix with students learning a variety of languages, and excursions are organised for all students to local sites of interest, such as Hokkaido Historical Village and the Hokkaido Shrine. Wurz relates, “People love to spend their free time playing

for our students, which many take part in. Our students love to travel by train or bus to nearby places of interest at the weekends.”

**Nida Kaciulis, Languages Plus International Education, Canada**



“Unfortunately, [many] students in Japan have to travel great distances from their accommodation to their place of study. Not so at Yamasa,

where accommodation is on-site, only minutes from their classroom. Okazaki [is] close to all the major attractions such as Kyoto, Nara, Mount Fuji, Suzuka, Takayama, Nagano, the pearl islands at Toba etc., all of which are accessible in a day trip. Moreover, the institute is exactly halfway between Tokyo and Osaka, where many of our students head for the weekends.”

**Barry Haywood, Eurolingua Institute, international**



**Mount Fuji**  
Situating in the Shizuoka prefecture, Mount Fuji - or Fujisan as it is known in Japan - stands 3,776 metres above sea level and has become an enduring symbol of the country itself

### Did you know?

- The islands of Japan are actually the exposed tops of undersea ridges, which rise up out of the Pacific Ocean. Because of this, more than 80 per cent of the country is made up of rugged mountains and hills. Japan extends 3,000 kilometres from north to south, equivalent to the area from southern British Columbia in Canada to the Mexican Baja Peninsula.
- The high-speed Japanese Shinkansen "bullet train" was revolutionary in its design when it was introduced in 1964. Trains can travel at 210 kilometres per hour.
- Tea ceremonies are an important part of Japanese culture. There are several integral parts of a ceremony: invitation, exchange of greetings, purification of hands and mouths with water, tea ceremony cuisine and then tea drinking itself, all of which are observed with minute attention to detail and etiquette.
- Renowned fashion designers, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, Founder of Comme des Garçons, all hail from Japan.
- The Japanese commonly refer to their country as Nihon Koku, Nippon Koku, or simply Nihon or Nippon. These names translate to mean "The Sources of the Sun" or "Land of the Rising Sun".
- The Fifa World Cup, the premier football championship in the world, is being held in 10 venues across Japan this year.
- Japan has about 200 volcanoes and many earthquakes. In fact, it has about three minor earthquakes every day of the year. It has severe earthquakes too, such as the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, which demolished Tokyo and Yokohama and killed more than 120,000 people.
- A Japanese man is considered to be entering into the phase of old age by the time he reaches 60 years of age. This is commemorated with a special ceremony. The man wears a special red kimono, which symbolises that he no longer has the responsibilities of being a mature adult.
- It is considered rude to blow your nose in public in Japan. Nevertheless, a recent trend in Tokyo has been to hand out packets of tissues with advertisements on, as these are considered more effective than leaflets and flyers.

sports, whether it be an organised game of soccer beside the river, a walk at the beach or a lazy walk up one of the mountains within the city limits." And in the suburbs, there are accessible ski areas for ski and snowboarding enthusiasts.

Sports are popular throughout Japan, as Akira Nara at Nagoya Gakuin

University testifies. He relates that students enjoy playing sports in their free time as well as working part-time. "Students like our culture and tradition, and our comfortable living standards," he adds. Many students choose to work part-time so that they can make their money go further – Japan remains expensive for students of most nationalities. Nagoya is within easy reach of many other centrally located cities, such as Tokyo, Osaka

and the ancient capital, Kyoto, via the Shinkansen express trains. It is a good central destination for students who want to travel around the country, while Nagoya Castle, built

by the shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, in 1612, is just one of many reasons to spend time in the city itself.

Also in the Aichi prefecture, near Nagoya, is Okazaki, where Yamasa Institute is situated. Declan Murphy, Director of the international office at the institute, points out that "Okazaki offers advantages in terms of being a much lower cost than Tokyo, providing more job opportunities and having a central location for travel". Other advantages he highlights are the possibility for total immersion, as few locals speak English; the wealth of history in the local area (Okazaki was also once ruled by Tokugawa, on whom the novel, *Shogun*, is based); and the thriving local arts scene. The school organises extracurricular activities to ensure that students are kept busy, such as digital photography clubs, a web page design group and parties

where local DJs play. There are also many opportunities to interact with the locals. "There are quite a few community groups that coordinate activities with the institute, and because foreigners are still fairly rare, it's quite easy to make friends," says Murphy. "The radio station also attracts visitors, especially when bands are playing in the studio."

In Osaka, which is situated on the Honshu coastline facing Shikoku island, Ceran Lingua International also makes efforts to enable students to speak to locals. "On Thursday nights, local guests are invited for the students to meet [and] usually this is the first time they have an opportunity to really practise the language," relates Frédéric Vandenhove at Ceran. Special cultural activities are also organised, such as tea ceremonies and dining out in typical Japanese restaurants.

Osaka – which is nicknamed the Venice

of Japan because of its numerous canals and rivers – has the largest population outside of Tokyo. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, there is much to see there, such as Osaka Castle, situated on a

lawn that stretches for 60,000 square metres; its famous cherry blossom in the spring; and the Tanpo-yama Harbor Village on the waterfront, with its 112.5-metre high Ferris wheel and large shopping mall.

Oita prefecture on the southern island of Kyushu was once known as the Land of Abundance because of its fertile fields, which supplied many agricultural products, and the fresh seafood from the nearby waters. Fukuoka is the largest city on this island and, according to the Fila Japanese Language School, it is home to about 1,600

foreign students. Fukuoka itself, also known as Hakata, prides itself on its reputation as a lively international city and conference venue, particularly within Asia. The Hakata Dontaku festival in spring, in which children and adults in fancy-dress costume parade through the streets, draws more than two million spectators. □

**"A young German student arrived last year and went down to the local shopping mall. He was looking at the shop [plan] written in Japanese, trying to work out where the CD store was. A young Japanese girl walked over and asked him if he needed assistance. They are getting married in June."**

**Declan Murphy, Yamasa Institute, Okazaki**



**Sumo**  
Sumo is one of the oldest art forms of fighting, with the first Sumo match being chronicled in AD720. The heavier the fighter, the lower his centre of gravity, making it harder to force him out of the ring