

Japan



Japan is a country steeped in tradition and yet at the cutting edge in terms of architecture and technology. Most visitors discover numerous ways in which the ancient and modern are casually intertwined in everyday life.

The city of Kyoto, which was the Imperial capital between 794 and 1868, provides the most obvious examples of Japan's rich cultural history and it is here that many of the traditional images of the country can be found. Large numbers of temples and shrines are dotted around the city and 17 historic sites in the city have been designated World Cultural Heritage sites.

One of these is Nijo-jo castle, situated next to the former Imperial Palace.

Ninomaru Palace, which forms part of the castle complex, has interesting features designed to protect the building from intruders. The *Uguisubari-no-roka* (nightingale) corridor makes a noise like a nightingale when anyone walks on it, thereby alerting the inhabitants to their presence, and *Mushakakushi* (warriors hiding place) are sliding doors designed to hide guards.

Kyoto is home to some of Japan's most prominent Geisha districts, the most famous of which is Gion. Geisha – literally translated as “entertainer” – and their apprentices, known as *maiko*, are easy to spot due to their elaborate traditional kimonos and distinctive white make-up. Experts in many traditional arts such as singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, the tea ceremony and conversation, Geisha live

in separate Geisha houses and undergo a rigorous apprenticeship lasting many years. While opportunities for visitors to witness a Geisha's skills are restricted to invitation only, in spring each district holds a traditional dance, called an *odori*, which is open to everyone.

Another of Japan's unique characteristics is its traditional sports, including a large number of martial arts that often have a strong religious significance. Aikido, Judo, Kendo, Kyudo and Sumo are all martial arts that originated from Japan and are still popular throughout the country. Kyudo, meaning “the way of archery”, is

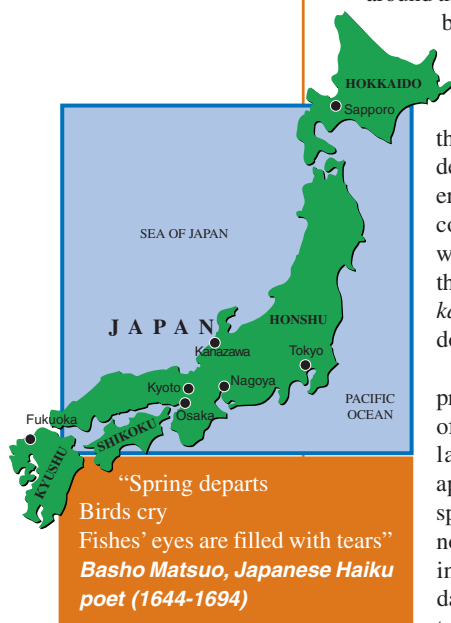
one of the oldest traditional martial arts in the world and is closely associated with Zen Buddhism. A Japanese bow of over two metres is used in the practice, which has a huge following among all age groups in Japan. Yabusame, or “archery on horseback”, is today practised as a Shinto rite to ensure peace and good harvests and to dispel evil spirits. Displays are performed annually at many Shinto shrines.

While traditional activities are still a major part of Japanese life, the country also has a number of distinctly modern attractions. Tokyo, the country's capital, is a huge international city with areas that are famous for different reasons. The Ginza is the city's shopping area where large department stores and branches of international shops can be found, while Shibuya has a young and trendy vibe. Tokyo is famous for selling the very latest electronic goods at reasonable prices and the best place to buy these is in Akihabara.

One of Japan's most ambitious modern developments can be found on the southern island of Kyushu, near Miyazaki city. Seagaia is a vast resort with a variety of hotels, golf courses, recreational facilities, a wildlife park and the Ocean Dome – one of the largest indoor waterparks in the world. In the dome, an artificial beach is enclosed under a retractable roof that only opens in good weather, keeping the temperature within the dome at a permanent 30 degrees year round. Other features include a virtual reality raft ride, waterslides, a volcano that erupts every 15 minutes and a wave machine that provides perfect 3.5-metre waves every hour.

Japanese people are famed for their love of karaoke and no visit to Japan would be complete without experiencing a karaoke bar. The word “karaoke” comes from *kara*, meaning empty, and *oke*, an abbreviation of *okesutura*, the Japanese reading of the word orchestra, and originates from the city of Kobe. The story goes that, 20 years ago, a bar owner encouraged his patrons to sing along to instrumental tape recordings after a guitarist could not perform and the phenomenon was born.

Participants can sing in bars or karaoke boxes, which are soundproofed rooms on the roadside. There are currently more than 100,000 karaoke boxes and buildings in Japan and it is the country's fourth most popular form of entertainment, after the cinema, restaurants and bars.



“Spring departs

Birds cry

Fishes' eyes are filled with tears”

Basho Matsuo, Japanese Haiku poet (1644-1694)