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To my parents, who, while I was growing up in Kansas, always encouraged me to look farther than my own backyard; to my sons, Matthias and Johannes, for providing a teenager’s perspective on Japan; and to the Japanese people, who have taught me more about myself and life than I’d ever imagined.

—Beth Reiber

Dedication: To the people of Tohoku, whose spirit of ganbare (go for it!) is an inspiration.

—Andrew Bender
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—Beth Reiber

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—Andrew Bender
HOW TO CONTACT US
In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We’re sure you’ll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we’d love to know that, too. Please write to:

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ADVISORY & DISCLAIMER
Travel information can change quickly and unexpectedly, and we strongly advise you to confirm important details locally before traveling, including information on visas, health and safety, traffic and transport, accommodations, shopping, and eating out. We also encourage you to stay alert while traveling and to remain aware of your surroundings. Avoid civil disturbances, and keep a close eye on cameras, purses, wallets, and other valuables.

While we have endeavored to ensure that the information contained within this guide is accurate and up-to-date at the time of publication, we make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties, including without limitation warranties of fitness for a particular purpose. We accept no responsibility or liability for any inaccuracy or errors or omissions, or for any inconvenience, loss, damage, costs, or expenses of any nature whatsoever incurred or suffered by anyone as a result of any advice or information contained in this guide.

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FROMMER’S STAR RATINGS, ICONS & ABBREVIATIONS

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a star-rating system. In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use seven feature icons that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

🎁 special finds—those places only insiders know about
💬 fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
😊 kids—best bets for kids and advice for the whole family
📸 special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
⛔ overrated—places or experiences not worth your time or money
📝 insider tips—great ways to save time and money
🔑 great values—where to get the best deals

The following abbreviations are used for credit cards:

AE American Express DISC Discover V Visa
DC Diners Club MC MasterCard
TRAVEL RESOURCES AT FROMMERS.COM

Frommer’s travel resources don’t end with this guide. Frommer’s website, www.frommers.com, has travel information on more than 4,000 destinations. We update features regularly, giving you access to the most current trip-planning information and the best airfare, lodging, and car-rental bargains. You can also listen to podcasts, connect with other Frommers.com members through our active-reader forums, share your travel photos, read blogs from guide-book editors and fellow travelers, and much more.
The 2011 triple whammy of an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant meltdown will undoubtedly go down in history as one of this century’s worst disasters, yet it also brought global attention to Japan’s most admirable trait: the integrity, honesty and perseverance of the Japanese people themselves. That, coupled with the country’s fascinating history, stunning mountain scenery, festivals, hot-spring spas, historic structures ranging from castles to temples, Japanese gardens, and trend-setting metropolises all combine to make Japan a destination like no other.

**Sightseeing**  With its sensory overload, Tokyo is the nation’s trendsetter, whether it’s avant-garde installations at the Mori Art Museum or knock-out views from Sky Tree. Kyoto is arguably Japan’s most beautiful city, rife with historic structures like Kiyomizu Temple and Katsura Imperial Villa. Other top attractions include Himeji Castle, Nara’s Great Buddha, and Kanazawa’s Kenrokuen Garden, but not to be neglected are small villages, like Mount Koya with its many temples, the mountain resort of Unzen Spa, and Uchiko with its historic district.

**Eating & Drinking**  There’s more to Japanese food than sushi, including tempura, yakitori, and shabu-shabu (see chapter 2 for more information), but part of what makes travel here so fascinating is the variety of national and regional dishes. Every prefecture, it seems, has its own style of noodles, its locally grown vegetables, its delicacies, and unique dishes, whether it’s mountain vegetables in Takayama or hairy crabs in Hokkaido. Japan is also renowned for sake, with about 10,000 varieties available throughout the country.

**Shopping**  Japan is famous for crafts ranging from lacquerware to ceramics (with Kyoto and Kanazawa being top destinations), but other fun shopping experiences include browsing department stores, antique and flea markets, streets known for their electronics and anime stores (like Akihabara in Tokyo and Den Den Town in Osaka), and local shops selling regional products—like sake, toys, handbags and other items made from locally made cloth, sweets, dolls, and much more—virtually everywhere in Japan.

**Arts & Culture**  Japan is known for its highly ritualized tea ceremony, offered in teahouses at many gardens, and ikebana (Japanese flower arranging). The theatrics of Kabuki, should be at the top of anyone’s list, but equally entertaining are Bunraku puppetry and sumo
wrestling matches. The nation’s top museum for Japanese art and antiquities is the Tokyo National Museum, but top-notch contemporary art is visible throughout the country, including virtually the entire island of Naoshima, the I.M. Pei-designed Miho Museum, and Kanazawa’s 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art.

THE most UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Making a Pilgrimage to a Temple or Shrine:** From mountaintop shrines to neighborhood temples, Japan’s religious structures rank among the nation’s most popular attractions. They’re often visited for specific reasons: Students flock to Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine (p. 469) to pray for successful exams, while couples wishing for a happy marriage head to Kyoto’s Jishu Shrine, devoted to the deity of love (p. 260). Shrines and temples are also sites for Japan’s major festivals. See p. 24 for information on Buddhism and Shintoism and the regional chapters.

- **Taking a Communal Hot-Spring Bath:** No other people on earth bathe as enthusiastically, as frequently, and for such duration as the Japanese. Their many hot-spring baths—thought to cure all sorts of ailments as well as simply make you feel good—range from elegant, Zen-like affairs to rustic outdoor baths with views of the countryside. You’ll find them all over Japan; see the “Bathing” section under “Minding Your P’s & Q’s” in chapter 2, and the regional chapters for more information.

- **Participating in a Festival:** With Shintoism and Buddhism as its major religions, and temples and shrines virtually everywhere, Japan has multiple festivals every week. Celebrations range from huge processions of wheeled floats to those featuring horseback archery; you may want to plan your trip around one (and book early for a hotel). See the “Japan Calendar of Events,” in chapter 2, for a list of some of the most popular festivals.

- **Viewing the Cherry Blossoms:** Nothing symbolizes the approach of spring so vividly to Japanese as the appearance of the cherry blossoms—and nothing so amazes visitors as the way Japanese gather under the blossoms to celebrate the season with food, drink, and dance. See the “Japan Calendar of Events,” in chapter 2, for cherry blossom details.

- **Riding the Shinkansen Bullet Train:** One of the world’s fastest trains whips you across the countryside at up to 300km (187 miles) an hour as you relax, see Japan’s rural countryside, and dine on boxed meals filled with local specialties. See “Getting Around” in chapter 14.

- **Staying in a Ryokan:** Japan’s legendary service reigns supreme in a top-class ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn. You’ll bathe in a Japanese tub or hot-spring bath, feast your eyes on lovely views past shoji screens, dine like a king in your tatami room, and sleep on a futon. See “Tips on Accommodations,” in chapter 14, and the “Where to Stay” sections in the regional chapters for more on ryokan.

- **Attending a Kabuki Play:** Based on universal themes and designed to appeal to the masses, kabuki plays are extravaganzas of theatrical displays, costumes, and scenes—but mostly they’re just plain fun. See “Japanese Arts in a Nutshell,” in chapter 2, and the kabuki section of “Entertainment & Nightlife” in chapter 4.

- **Seeing Mount Fuji:** It may not seem like much of an accomplishment to see Japan’s most famous and tallest mountain, visible from about 160km (100 miles) away. But, the truth is, it’s hardly ever visible, except during winter months and rare
occasions when the air is clear. Catching a glimpse of the giant peak is truly breathtaking, whether you see it from aboard the Shinkansen, a Tokyo skyscraper, or a nearby national park. If you want to climb it (possible only in July–Aug), be prepared for a group experience—400,000 people climb Mount Fuji every summer. See “Climbing Mount Fuji,” in chapter 5.

THE best CITY & SMALL-TOWN EXPERIENCES

- Feeling the Adrenalin Rush of Tokyo: Tokyo is Japan’s showcase for all that’s high-tech, sophisticated, zany, and avant-garde, making this a must-see for just about everyone. Seeing main sights like the Tokyo National Museum and Sensoji Temple top the list, but wandering the metropolis’ many neighborhoods adds a totally new dimension to a Tokyo experience. See chapter 4.

- Spending a Few Days in Kyoto: If you see only one city in Japan, Kyoto should be it. Japan’s capital from 794 to 1868, Kyoto is one of Japan’s finest ancient cities, boasting some of the country’s best temples, imperial villas, Japanese-style inns, traditional restaurants, shops, and gardens. See chapter 7.

- Wandering the Historic Streets of Takayama: Nicknamed “Little Kyoto” of the Hida Mountains, this town invites exploration: you’ll find streets lined with traditional wooden buildings and shops, a morning market, Japanese inns, and a wealth of museums. See chapter 6.

- Pretending You’re a Feudal Lord in Tsumago: Back in the feudal days, this tiny village served as a stopover for feudal lords traveling between Kyoto and Edo (present-day Tokyo). To make your experience even richer, hike part of the old footpath between Tsumago and Magome and stay overnight in a ryokan. See chapter 6.

- Exploring the Historic Quarters of Kurashiki: With its willow-fringed canal and black-and-white old granaries, this former merchant town is a photographer’s dream, though there are also museums (like the renowned Ohara Museum with its impressive collection of Western art) and plenty of shops to explore. See chapter 8.

- Reliving History in Nagasaki: This port town surely ranks as one of Japan’s prettiest, with hills rising from the harbor and a plethora of sights tied to its past history of international trade. Best bet: restored Dejima, a small island that served as home to Japan’s only foreigners during the country’s 200-some years of isolation. See chapter 10.

- Soaking in the Baths of Hell in Unzen: This mountain-top hot-spring resort has served as a summer resort for international travelers for more than a century. With its sulfurous hot springs (the Hells) and ryokan spread along its one main street, it’s still a great getaway for travelers needing some R&R. See chapter 10.

THE best FOOD & DRINK EXPERIENCES

- Experiencing a Kaiseki Feast: The ultimate in Japanese cuisine, kaiseki is a feast for the senses and spirit. Consisting of a variety of exquisitely prepared and arranged dishes, a kaiseki is a multicourse meal consisting of seasonal ingredients served on complementing tableware. There are hundreds of exceptional kaiseki
restaurants in Japan, from old-world traditional to sleek modern. Traditional ryokan also serve kaiseki. See regional chapters as well as “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2.

- **Spending an Evening in a Robatayaki:** Harkening back to the olden days when the Japanese cooked over an open fireplace, a robatayaki is a convivial place for a meal and drinks. One of the most famous is Inakaya in Tokyo, where diners sit at a counter; on the other side are two cooks, grills, and mountains of food. You’ll love the drama of this place. See p. 138 as well as “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2.

- **Dining on Western Food in Modern Settings:** Japan has no lack of great Western food, and some of the best places to dine are its first-class hotels. The New York Grill, on the 52nd floor of the Park Hyatt in Tokyo, epitomizes the best of the West with its sophisticated setting, and great views, food, and jazz. See p. 130.

- **Slurping Noodles in a Noodle Shop:** You’re supposed to slurp when eating Japanese noodles, which are prepared in almost as many different ways as there are regions. Noodle shops range from stand-up counters to traditional restaurants; one of my favorites is Raitei in Kamakura. See p. 192 as well as “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2, and the “Where to Eat” sections in regional chapters.

- **Rubbing Elbows in an Izakaya:** Izakaya are pubs in Japan—usually tiny affairs with just a counter, serving up skewered grilled chicken, fish, and other fare. They’re good places to meet the natives and are inexpensive as well. You’ll find them in every nightlife district in the country. See the regional chapters and also “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2.

- **Feeling Adventuresome in the Hinterlands:** Virtually every region in Japan has its own local specialties, from oysters in Hiroshima, raw horse meat in Kumamoto, and goya champuru (a stir-fry of bittermelon, tofu, pork, and other ingredients) in Okinawa. You can even enjoy local specialties by ordering regional box lunches on the Shinkansen bullet train. See the regional chapters and also “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2.

### The Best Ways to See Japan Like a Local

- **Buying Prepared Meals at a Department Store:** The basement floors of department stores are almost always devoted to foodstuffs, including takeout foods. Shopping for your meal is a fun experience: Hawkers yell their wares, wives buy food for the evening’s dinner, samples are set out for you to nibble, and you can choose anything from tempura and sushi to boxed meals. See “Eating & Drinking in Japan,” in chapter 2.

- **Using Local Transportation:** Sure, jumping in a taxi might be the quickest way to travel in a city, but you’ll have more fun taking local subways, buses and trams (and save money, too). In fact, in some towns (like Nagasaki, Kumamoto, and Hakodate), streetcars are considered a star attraction. Some towns also have dedicated tourist buses—filled with Japanese tourists. See the regional chapters.

- **Renting a Bike:** Some towns just lend themselves to biking, like Kyoto, Takayama, Ise, Kanazawa, Himeji, Matsue, Hiroshima, Kakunodate, and Hiraizumi, making this slow form of transportation popular among locals and tourists alike. See the appropriate regional chapters.

- **Overnighting in a Hot-Spring Resort:** It’s not unusual to see multi-generational families at Japan’s many hot-spring resorts, where everyone from the youngest tyke
to granny wander the halls in *yukata* (cotton robes), soak in the baths, and dine en-masse in noisy restaurants. See the regional chapters.

- **Joining the Crowds at a Local Festival:** Local festivals are big events for families, who come to peruse market stalls, dine on festival fare like octopus balls, and enjoy parades, flower shows, folk dancing, and other activities. While not as famous as Japan’s major festivals, these local celebrations can be more accessible and equally fun. See “Japan Calendar of Events” in chapter 2 and the regional chapters for local tourist websites.

- **Spending a Sunday in a Local Park:** Parks are popular Sunday destinations for families with kids and young couples on dates, making for great people-watching and a restorative afternoon. Among my favorites: Ueno Park in Tokyo, Yamashita Park in Yokohama, and the extensive park surrounding Osaka Castle. See p. 95, 203, and 362.

- **Strolling Through Tokyo’s Nightlife District:** A spin through one of Japan’s famous nightlife districts, such as Shinjuku or Roppongi in Tokyo or Dotombori in Osaka, is a colorful way to rub elbows with the natives as you explore narrow streets with their whirls of neon, tiny hole-in-the-wall bars and restaurants, and all-night amusement spots. See “Entertainment & Nightlife,” in chapter 4, and “Osaka After Dark,” in chapter 8.

### THE best FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- **Joining the Throngs at Sensoji Temple:** Tokyo’s oldest temple is also its liveliest, with throngs of visitors and stalls selling both traditional and kitschy items, giving it a festival-like atmosphere every day of the year. There’s enough excitement to keep everyone entertained, but top it off with a stop at nearby Hanayashiki amusement park for its old-fashioned rides. See p. 94 and 94.

- **Learning History at the Edo-Tokyo Museum:** Housed in a high-tech modern building, this ambitious museum chronicles the fascinating and somewhat tumultuous history of Tokyo (known as Edo during the Feudal Era) with models, replicas, artifacts, and dioramas. Not only can children climb into a palanquin and a rickshaw, but volunteers stand ready to give free guided tours in English. See p. 101.

- **Attending a Baseball Game:** After sumo, baseball is Japan’s most popular spectator sport. Watching a game with a stadium full of avid Japanese fans and cheerleaders can shed new light on this favorite pastime. See p. 102 and “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” on p. 469.

- **Seeing Tokyo from the TMG:** On the 45th floor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office (TMG), designed by well-known architect Tange Kenzo, this observatory offers a bird’s-eye view of Shinjuku’s cluster of skyscrapers, the never-ending metropolis, and, on fine winter days, Mount Fuji. Best of all, it’s free. See p. 98.

- **Seeing Fish Eye-to-Eye in an Aquarium:** Because Japan is surrounded by sea, it’s no surprise that it has more than its share of aquariums, many with innovative displays that put you eye-to-eye with the creatures of the deep. My favorites are the ones in Osaka and Okinawa. See p. 364 and 530.

- **Pretending You’re a Ninja:** There are plenty of amusement parks in Japan, but for something uniquely Japanese, head to one that’s themed around feudal Japan, where staff is dressed like ninja and courtesans, the setting harkens back to old Japan, and amusements like throwing ninja weapons at a target or navigating a ninja house keep little ones entertained. You’ll find them in Futami and Noboribetsu. See p. 336 and 587.
**Hanging Out in Harajuku:** If you have teenagers, nothing beats a day in teenybop-per heaven with Tokyo’s many clothing and accessory stores lining narrow streets packed with a never-ending flow of humanity. There are lots of restaurants geared to the younger generation, too, but for a bit of culture (and quietude) head to nearby Meiji Shrine enveloped in woods. See “Walking Tour 2: In the Heart of Trendy Tokyo, a Stroll Through Harajuku & Aoyama,” in chapter 4.

**Exploring a Japanese Castle:** The past comes alive when you tromp the many wooden stairs in a Japanese castle, gaze upon samurai helmets and gear, and pretend you’re the feudal lord viewing his domain from the keep’s top floor. Some are remakes (but still impressive, like towering Osaka Castle) and others are the original. My favorites: Himeji Castle, Matsue Castle, Matsuyama Castle, and Kumamoto Castle. See p. 394, 413, 454, and 494.

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**THE best TRADITIONAL JAPANESE-STYLE ACCOMMODATIONS**

- **Hiiragiya Ryokan** (Kyoto): If ever there was an example of the quintessential ryokan, Hiiragiya is it. Located in the heart of old Kyoto, it’s the ultimate in tatami luxury: a dignified enclave of polished wood and rooms with antique furnishings overlooking private gardens. Six generations of the same family have provided impeccable service and hospitality here since 1861. See p. 292.

- **Hakusuikan Ryokan** (Ibusuki): I’m usually partial to historic Japanese inns, but this sprawling complex right on the coast, with manicured lawns dotted by pine trees, offers an assortment of accommodations (the oldest building is 45 years old), along with one of the best hot-spring spas I’ve ever seen, modeled after a public bath of the Edo Era, as well as a museum filled with antiques. See p. 514.

- **Homeikan** (Tokyo): This is my top pick for an affordable, authentic Japanese inn in the capital. Rooms do not have private bathrooms, but pluses include a Japanese garden, nice public baths, and detailed tatami rooms adorned with traditional architectural features. Meals (optional) are served in your room. Another great plus: The owner speaks English. See p. 181.

- **Arai Ryokan** (Shuzenji): Fifteen historic structures, all registered as national cultural assets and situated around a river-fed pond, comprise this sprawling ryokan, in business since 1872. See p. 220.

- **Ryokan Fujioto** (Tsumago): This 100-year-old inn is nestled back from the main street of Tsumago, a delightful village on the Edo-era Nakasendo Highway. Meals feature local specialties, and the father-daughter team running it go out of their way to make guests feel at home. See p. 232.

- **Minshuku in Shirakawago’s Ogimachi:** Nestled in a narrow valley of the Japan Alps, Ogimachi is a small village of paddies, flowers, irrigation canals, and 200-year-old thatched farmhouses, about two dozen of which offer simple tatami accommodations and meals featuring local cuisine. This is a great, inexpensive escape. See “Rural Shirakawa-go & Ogimachi,” in chapter 6.

- **Temple Accommodations on Mount Koya:** If your vision of Japan includes temples, towering cypress trees, shaven-headed monks, and religious chanting at the crack of dawn, head for the religious sanctuary atop Mount Koya, where some 50 Buddhist temples offer tatami accommodations—some with garden views—and two vegetarian meals a day. See “The Temples of Mount Koya,” in chapter 8.
- **Tsuru-no-yu Onsen** (Nyuto Onsen): This rustic inn, with a history stretching back to the Edo Period, complete with thatched-roof building and outdoor hot-spring baths, is as close as you can get to time travel. To really save money, opt for the self-cooking wing and prepare your own meals. See p. 560.

### THE best HISTORIC EXPERIENCES

- **Paying Respects to the Shogun at Toshogu Shrine** (Nikko): Dedicated to Japan’s most powerful shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, this World Heritage Site is the nation’s most elaborate and opulent shrine, made with 2.4 million sheets of gold leaf. It’s set in a forest of cedar in a national park. See p. 196.

- **Hiking the Old Nakasendo Highway**: Back in the days of the shogun, feudal lords were required to return to Edo (now Tokyo) every other year, traveling designated highways. Nakasendo was one of these highways, and an 8km (5-mile) stretch through a valley still exists between the old post towns of Magome and Tsumago. It’s a beautiful walk, and the towns are historic relics. See p. 231.

- **Strolling Through a Japanese Garden**: Most of Japan’s famous gardens are relics of the Edo Period, when the shogun, daimyo (feudal lords), imperial family, and even samurai and Buddhist priests developed private gardens for their own viewing pleasure. The garden at Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto is, in my view, Japan’s most beautiful. A “strolling garden,” its view changes with every step but is always complete, perfectly balanced, and in harmony. See p. 264 and 23 in chapter 2.

- **Attending a Traditional Tea Ceremony**: Developed in the 16th century as a means to achieve inner harmony with nature, the highly ritualized ceremony is carried out in teahouses throughout the country, including those set in Japan’s many parks and gardens. See “The Tea Ceremony,” in chapter 2, and the regional chapters.

- **Exploring Kyoto’s Higashiyama-ku District**: Kyoto’s eastern sector is a lovely combination of wooded hills, temples, shrines, museums, shops, and traditional restaurants, making it one of the best neighborhoods in Japan for a stroll. See “Walking Tour 1: A Stroll Through Higashiyama-ku,” in chapter 7.

- **Exploring the Buddhist Pure Land in Hiraizumi**: Back in the 12th century, three generations of the Fujiwara clan devoted themselves to creating a Buddhist heaven on earth, filled with magnificent temples (like Chusonji’s Golden Hall), sleeping quarters for monks, and the Pure Land Garden. Located in Tohoku, it was declared a World Heritage Site shortly after the Great East Japan Earthquake. See p. 549.

- **Walking to Kobo Daishi’s Mausoleum on Mount Koya**: Ever since the 9th century, when Buddhist leader Kobo Daishi was laid to rest at Okunoin on Mount Koya, his faithful followers have followed him to their graves—and now tomb after tomb lines a 1.5km (1-mile) pathway to Daishi’s mausoleum. Cypress trees, moss-covered stone lanterns, and thousands upon thousands of tombs make this the most impressive graveyard stroll in Japan, especially at night. See “Exploring Mount Koya,” in chapter 8.

### THE best OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

- **Climbing Mount Fuji**: Okay, so climbing Japan’s tallest—3,766m-high (12,355 ft.)—and most famous mountain is not the solitary, athletic pursuit you may have envisioned—but with 400,000 people climbing it annually, it’s a great, culturally
enriching group activity. Many opt to climb through the night with a flashlight and then cheer the sunrise from the top of the mountain. See “Climbing Mount Fuji,” in chapter 5.

- **Cycling in Japan:** Hard to believe, but you can bike between Shikoku island and Hiroshima Prefecture via the 70km (43-mile) Shimanami Kaido route, which actually comprises six bridges and six islands in the Seto Inland Sea and follows a well-maintained, dedicated biking path. See “Cycling the Shimanami Kaido,” in chapter 8, and “Exploring Sights of the Seto Inland Sea,” in chapter 8. Another favorite: Cycling through the historic, rural Kibiji District in Okayama Prefecture on a path that takes you past paddies, ancient burial grounds, temples, and shrines. See p. 400.

- **Hiking:** With 70% of Japan covered with mountains, it should come as no surprise that there are many hiking trails lacing the country. Top hiking destinations include the Japan Alps, Tohoku, and Hokkaido, but there are also many temple pilgrimages (like on the island of Shikoku). See individual chapters.

- **Skiing in Honshu & Hokkaido:** Host of two winter Olympics (in Sapporo in 1972 and Nagano in 1998) and riddled with mountain chains, Japan is a great destination for skiing, the most popular winter sport in the country, and for snowboarding. The Japan Alps in Central Honshu and the mountains of Tohoku and Hokkaido are popular destinations. See chapters 6, 12, and 13.

- **Scuba Diving and Snorkeling in Okinawa:** Okinawa, an archipelago of 160 subtropical islands, is blessed with coral reefs, schools of manta rays, and operators offering excursions for all levels, not to mention some of the best dive spots in the world. Favorites include the Kerama Islands and Iriomote. See chapter 11.

**THE best SHOPPING EXPERIENCES**

- **Shopping in a Department Store:** Japanese department stores are microcosms of practically everything Japan produces, from the food halls in the basement to the departments selling clothing, accessories, office supplies, souvenirs, pottery, household goods, and cameras, to rooftop garden centers. What’s more, service is great and purchases are beautifully wrapped. If you arrive when the store opens, staff will be lined up at the front door to bow as you enter. You’ll be spoiled for life. See the “Shopping” sections throughout this book.

- **Finding Those Souvenirs:** Japanese are avid souvenir shoppers when they travel, so souvenirs are sold literally everywhere, even near shrines and temples. Naka-mise Dori, a pedestrian lane leading to Tokyo’s Sensoji Temple, is one of Japan’s most colorful places to shop for paper umbrellas, toys, and other souvenirs. The two best places for one-stop memento shopping are the Oriental Bazaar (p. 148) in Tokyo and the Kyoto Handicraft Center (p. 280), both of which offer several floors of everything from fans to woodblock prints.

- **Appreciating Traditional Crafts:** Japan treasures its artisans so highly that it designates the best as National Living Treasures. Tokyo’s Japan Traditional Craft Center (p. 148) offers a varied inventory of everything from knives and baskets to lacquerware, but there are many renowned shops in Kyoto and Kanazawa as well. Department stores also offer an excellent collection of traditional crafts. See “Shopping,” in chapter 4, and the shopping sections for Kyoto in chapter 7 and Kanazawa on p. 350.
Hunting for Antiques & Curios: Flea markets are great for browsing; you’ll see everything from used kimono to Edo-era teapots for sale. Japan’s largest and one of its oldest monthly markets is held the 21st of each month at Toji Temple in Kyoto. (A lesser flea market is held there the first Sun of each month.) Tokyo also has great weekend markets. See chapters 4 and 7.

Sizing Up the Latest Gizmos: Looking for that perfect digital camera, MP3 player, calculator, or rice cooker? Then join everyone else in the country by going to one of the nation’s two largest electronics and electrical-appliance districts. In Tokyo, it’s Akihabara, where open-fronted shops beckon up to 50,000 weekday shoppers with whirring fans, blaring radios, and sales pitches. In Osaka, head to Den Den Town. Be sure to comparison-shop and bargain. See “Shopping,” in chapters 4 and 8.

Searching for Local Specialties: Many prefecture capitals have a government-owned exhibition hall where local products are displayed for sale. Often called a kanko bussankan, the hall may have everything from locally produced pottery to folk toys and foodstuffs. Cities with kanko bussankan include Kanazawa, Okayama, Matsuyama, and Kumamoto. See chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Buying That Special Porcelain & Pottery: Porcelain and pottery are produced seemingly everywhere in Japan. Some of the more famous centers include Nagoya, home to Noritake, Japan’s largest chinaware company; Kanazawa, known for its Kutani pottery with its distinctive colorful glaze; Bizen, with its unglazed pottery; Matsuyama, famous for its Tobe pottery (white porcelain with cobalt-blue designs); and Kagoshima, with Satsuma pottery available in white (used by the upper class in feudal Japan) and black (used by the common people). See chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Visiting a Local Market: Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo is Japan’s largest (and most crowded), but there are local seafood and produce markets virtually everywhere. Those in Kyoto, Kanazawa, Takayama, Kagoshima, Hakodate, and Okinawa are among my favorites. See p. 282, 350, 235, 503, 570, and 532.

Watching the Big Guys Wrestle (Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka): There’s nothing quite like watching two monstrous sumo wrestlers square off, bluff, and grapple as they attempt to throw each other on the ground or out of the ring. Matches are great cultural events, but even if you can’t attend one, you can watch them on TV during one of six annual 15-day tournaments. For more information, see “Spectator Sports,” in chapter 4, and “Sumo,” in chapter 2.

Getting a Shiatsu Massage: Shiatsu, or pressure-point massage, is available in virtually all first-class accommodations in Japan and at most moderately priced ones as well. After a hard day of work or sightseeing, nothing beats a relaxing massage in the privacy of your room.

Watching Cormorant Fishing: Every night in summer, wooden boats gaily decorated with paper lanterns will take you out on rivers outside Nagoya for an up-close look at cormorant fishing. The birds, maneuvered by fishermen in traditional garb, have tight collars around their necks to prevent them from swallowing their catch. Drinking and dining on board contribute to the festive air. See p. 326.

Joining the Otaku (Geeks) in Akihabara (Tokyo): In addition to its electronics stores, Akihabara boasts Japan’s largest concentration of shops devoted to manga...
(Japanese comic books and graphic novels) and *anime* (Japanese animation), as well as “maid cafes,” coffee shops with waitresses dressed as maids. See p. 146.

- **Getting off the Beaten Path, Literally:** There are hiking paths throughout Japan, to mountain peaks, through forests leading to temples and shrines, and in national parks. Because most Japanese hikers tend to stick to famous trails, you can often have trails entirely to yourself. See individual chapters, including Hokkaido’s national parks in chapter 13.
Hardly a day goes by that you don’t hear something about Japan, whether the subject is trade, travel, food, the arts, Japanese products, karaoke, anime, or, more recently, ongoing economic struggles and clean-up efforts as the country continues to deal with the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Yet Japan remains something of an enigma to people in the Western world. What best describes this Asian nation? Is it the giant producer of cars and an entire array of sleek electronic goods that compete favorably with the best in the West? Or is it still the land of geisha and bonsai, the punctilious tea ceremony, and the delicate art of flower arrangement? Has it become, in its outlook and popular culture, a country more Western than Asian? Or has it retained its unique ancient traditions while forging a central place in the contemporary post-industrialized world?

In fact, Japan has long adopted the best of the West (and the East, for that matter) and then adapted it to its own needs. Its cities may look Westernized—often disappointingly so—but beyond first impressions, there’s very little about this Asian nation that could lull you into thinking you’re in the West. Japan also differs greatly from its Asian neighbors. Although it borrowed much from China in its early development, including Buddhism and its writing system, the island nation remained steadfastly isolated from the rest of the world throughout much of its history, usually deliberately so. Until World War II, it had never been successfully invaded; and for more than 200 years, while the West was stirring with the awakenings of democracy and industrialism, Japan completely closed its doors to the outside world and remained a tightly structured feudalistic society with almost no outside influence.

It’s been only 150-some years since Japanese opened their doors, embracing Western products wholeheartedly, yet at the same time altering them and making them unquestionably their own. Thus, that modern high-rise may look Western, but it may contain a rustic-looking restaurant with open charcoal grills, corporate offices, a pachinko parlor, a high-tech bar with surreal city views, a McDonald’s, an acupuncture clinic, a computer showroom, and a rooftop shrine. Your pizza may come with octopus, beer gardens are likely to be fitted with AstroTurf, and “parsley” refers to unmarried women older than 28 (because parsley is what’s left on a plate). City police patrol on bicycles; garbage collectors attack their job with the vigor of a well-trained army; and white-gloved elevator operators, working in some of the world’s swankiest department stores, bow and thank you as you exit.

Because of this unique synthesis of East and West into a culture that is distinctly Japanese, Japan is not easy for Westerners to comprehend. Discovering it is like peeling an onion—you uncover one layer only to
discover more layers underneath. Thus, no matter how long you stay in Japan, you
never stop learning something new about it—and to me that constant discovery is one
of the most fascinating aspects of being here.

In any case, with a population of about 127 million, a history stretching back
thousands of years, the world’s longest-reigning monarchy, and unique forms of cul-
ture, art, food, etiquette, and religion, Japan merits more than this short chapter can
deliver. I urge you to delve deeper with the recommendations in “Japan in Popular
Culture: Books & Film,” later in this chapter.

**JAPAN TODAY**

You can’t talk about Japan today without mentioning its biggest earthquake in
recorded history, known as the Great East Japan Earthquake, which struck off the
Tohoku coast on March 11, 2011. While the consequences of the triple whammy—
earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant—may not
be entirely evident for years to come, it seems safe to say that for Japan, 3/11 will
remain a defining moment in its history and its future.

The tangible losses, of course, are painfully clear: More than 19,000 dead or miss-
ing, entire towns and villages along the Tohoku coast obliterated, more than 1 million
homes and buildings damaged or destroyed, and trillions of yen in damage.

Less clear is Japan’s future relationship with nuclear power. The Fukushima
nuclear reactors, owned by Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), suffered the world’s
worst meltdown and radiation leakage since the 1986 disaster in Chernobyl, forcing
the evacuation of more than 90,000 people from around the plant. It was later
revealed that TEPCO and the Japanese government, fearing panic, had withheld
computer forecasts about the spread of radiation, allowing thousands of people to
stay in areas of high radiation for days. Two weeks after the disaster, the government
also decided not to tell the public that if meltdowns spiraled out of control and radia-
tion levels soared, as many as 35 million people in the Tokyo area would have to be
evacuated. And this in a country that, having suffered the world’s only atomic bomb-
ing, knows better than any other the long-lasting effects of radiation. (Discontent
with how then prime minister Kan Naoto handled the aftermath of the March 2011
disaster led to his ouster in September of that year, with the new prime minister,
Noda Yoshihiko, becoming the sixth person to hold the position in five years.)

Meanwhile, as the list of contaminated foods grew to include beef, produce, and
even infant formula, many residents decided to take matters into their own hands,
buying or renting Geiger counters and dosimeters to gauge radiation exposure. Anger
over the cozy relationship between TEPCO and the government ministry that was
supposed to regulate it has led to unprecedented mass protest in Tokyo, with as many
as 60,000 people marching against nuclear power in September 2011.

Although the Fukushima power plant achieved a cold shutdown at the end of
2011, it still contains dangerously high radiation levels and was still suffering occa-
sional leaks at the time of going to press; experts say it could take 40 years to decom-
mission the plant. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, it was mandated that all
nuclear reactors closing down for routine maintenance undergo tests to confirm they
could withstand earthquakes and tsunamis with the force of Tohoku’s disaster and
then get the go-ahead from local governments before restarting. Although all nuclear
power plants in Japan had been shut down by May 2012, two reactors at Ohi nuclear
power plant, serving the Osaka area, were turned on in July despite nation-wide
protests. Those in favor of nuclear power point out that Japan can not generate enough electricity from renewable resources alone, especially during Japan’s hot, humid summers (before 3/11, nuclear power plants supplied 30% of Japan’s energy). Compounding the problem is that Tokyo and all points to the northwest of Japan run on a different electric grid from the southeast part of the country, making the transfer of power between the two systems impossible without major upgrades. In other words, the direction of Japan’s future energy needs remains in limbo.

The biggest challenges facing Japan, of course, remain in the Tohoku area. Like most TV viewers, I was devastated by broadcasts of the tsunami; I’ve traveled the Tohoku coast so often, it seemed like it was happening in my own backyard. When I traveled in Tohoku eight months after the disaster, debris had been cleared, but it was collected in huge piles; other prefectures have been reluctant to take it, especially from contaminated areas. In any case, the work still ahead is staggering: the removal of tons of debris, the decontamination of affected areas, and finding new housing for tens of thousands of people whose homes were destroyed or remain off-limits. The scale of decontamination alone is mind-boggling. According to a news report I saw on Japanese television, the cost of decontaminating one home costs about ¥170,000, and there are 110,000 contaminated houses in Fukushima Prefecture alone. Topsoil equal to the size of Connecticut has to be removed and replaced. Where villages once stood, there are now only wide, empty spaces. Although some towns hope to rebuild, many evacuees, especially families with children, have said they have no intention of ever returning.

Other challenges facing Japan include a large national debt, a government that seems powerless to instigate change, a high yen and an exchange rate that’s devastating Japan’s manufacturing base and making its products too expensive on the global market; not to mention a declining birthrate coupled with one of the most rapidly aging populations in the world. About 22% of Japan’s population is 65 and older; by 2060, that number is expected to reach almost 40%, while Japan’s children aged 14 and younger is expected to decline to 9.1%. Unless more women enter the workforce or immigration standards are relaxed, this will undoubtedly lead to a shortage of labor, severely straining the country’s resources for tax revenues, pensions, and healthcare.

The one message I heard loud and clear from innkeepers, restaurant owners, and others while updating this book is that Japan needs visitors; after 3/11, the number of foreign visitors dropped about 25% in 2011 compared with a year earlier. With the exception of areas in Fukushima Prefecture, radiation levels in Japan are considered normal. Japan’s standards for measuring food and water safety for radioactive contamination are the same as in the United States and have not turned up any new scares since 2011. Hong Kong, Japan’s largest importer of Japanese food, lifted import restrictions, including those from Fukushima Prefecture, in March 2012.

Indeed, with the exception of Matsushima, which received minor damage from the tsunami (p. 543), all other destinations covered in this guide are conducting business as usual. In fact, some areas, like southern Kyushu and ski areas in Hokkaido, have seen a boom in tourism, and virtually every prefecture is trying to figure out how to lure more international travelers. There are deals across the country that are only for foreigners, including regional rail passes and plane tickets. Now is a good time to visit Japan, not only to show support for the Japanese people, but to take advantage of lower prices.

In any case, the attributes that drew me to Japan in the first place and keep me coming back remain strongly in place: the country’s unexpected physical beauty and its unique cuisine, customs, and culture. One of the things I love most about Japan
is how safe I feel from crime. Indeed, after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, never once did it cross my mind that there might be looting or crime in its aftermath. I also like the ways Japan has changed over the years, how a younger generation of less inhibited Japanese has forever altered the social landscape. Whereas in the 1980s Japan was best known as an economic powerhouse, today it's known also for its cool pop culture, from *anime* and *manga* to fashion and food. It's still the land of the geisha, but it's also the land of Hello Kitty.

**THE MAKING OF JAPAN**

**ANCIENT HISTORY (CA. 30,000 B.C.–A.D. 710)** According to mythology, Japan's history began when the sun goddess, Amaterasu, sent one of her descendants down to the island of Kyushu to unify the people of Japan. Unification, however, was not realized until a few generations later when Jimmu, the great-grandson of the goddess's emissary, succeeded in bringing all of the country under his rule. Because of his divine descent, Jimmu became emperor in 660 B.C. (the date is mythical), thus establishing the line from which all of Japan's emperors are said to derive. However mysterious the origin of this imperial dynasty, it is acknowledged as the longest reigning such family in the world.

Legend begins to give way to fact only in the 4th century A.D., when a family by the name of Yamato succeeded in expanding its kingdom throughout much of the country. At the core of the unification achieved by the Yamato family was the Shinto religion. Indigenous to Japan, *Shintoism* is marked by the worship of natural things—mountains, trees, stars, rivers, seas, fire, animals, even vegetables—as the embodiment of *kami* (gods) and of the spirits of ancestors. It is also marked by belief in the emperor's divinity. Along with Buddhism, Shintoism is still a driving belief in Japanese life.

Although the exact origin of Japanese people is unknown, we know Japan was once connected to the Asian mainland by a land bridge, and the territory of Japan was occupied as early as 30,000 B.C. From about 10,000 B.C. to 400 B.C., hunter-gatherers, called Jomon, thrived in small communities primarily in central Honshu; they're best known for their hand-formed pottery decorated with cord patterns. The Jomon Period was followed by the Yayoi Period, which was marked by metalworking, the pottery wheel, and the mastering of irrigated rice cultivation. The Yayoi Period lasted until about A.D. 300, after which the Yamato family unified the state for the first time and set up their court in what is now Nara Prefecture. Yamato (present-day Japan) began turning cultural feelers toward its great neighbor to the west, China.

In the 6th century, *Buddhism*, which originated in India, was brought to Japan via China and Korea, followed by the importation of Chinese cultural and scholarly knowledge—including art, architecture, and the use of Chinese written characters. In 604, the prince regent Shotoku, greatly influenced by the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism and still a beloved figure today, drafted a document calling for political reforms and a constitutional government. By 607, he was sending Japanese scholars to China to study Buddhism, and he started building Buddhist temples. The most famous is *Horyuji Temple* near Nara, said to be the oldest existing wooden structure in the world. He also built *Shitennoji Temple* in what is now Osaka.

**THE NARA PERIOD (710–84)** Before the 700s, the site of Japan's capital changed every time a new emperor came to the throne. In 710, however, a permanent capital was established at Nara. Although it remained the capital for only 74 years, seven
successive emperors ruled from Nara. The period was graced with the expansion of Buddhism and flourishing temple construction throughout the country. Buddhism also inspired the arts, including Buddhist sculpture, metal casting, painting, and lacquer-ware. It was during this time that Emperor Shomu, the most devout Buddhist among the Nara emperors, ordered the casting of a huge bronze statue of Buddha to be erected in Nara. Known as the Daibutsu, it remains Nara’s biggest attraction.

**THE HEIAN PERIOD (794–1192)** In 794, the capital was moved to Heiankyo (present-day Kyoto), and following the example of cities in China, Kyoto was laid out in a grid pattern with broad roads and canals. Heiankyo means “capital of peace and tranquility,” and the Heian Period was a glorious time for aristocratic families, a time of luxury and prosperity during which court life reached new artistic heights. Moon viewing became popular. Chinese characters were blended with a new Japanese writing system, allowing for the first time the flowering of Japanese literature and poetry. The life of the times was captured in the works of two women: Sei Shonagon, who wrote a collection of impressions of her life at court known as the *Pillow Book*; and Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote the world’s first major novel, *The Tale of Genji*.

Because the nobles were completely engrossed in their luxurious lifestyles, however, they failed to notice the growth of military clans in the provinces. The two most powerful warrior clans were the Taira (also called Heike) and the Minamoto (also called Genji), whose fierce civil wars tore the nation apart until a young warrior, Minamoto Yoritomo, established supremacy. (In Japan, a person’s family name—here, Minamoto—comes first, followed by the given name; I have followed this order throughout this book.)

**THE KAMAKURA PERIOD (1192–1333)** Wishing to set up rule far away from Kyoto, Minamoto Yoritomo established his capital in a remote and easily defended fishing village called Kamakura, not far from today’s Tokyo. In becoming the nation’s first shogun, or military dictator, Minamoto Yoritomo laid the groundwork for 700 years of military governments—in which the power of the country passed from the aristocratic court into the hands of the warrior class—until the imperial court was restored in 1868.

The Kamakura Period is perhaps best known for the unrivaled ascendancy of the warrior caste, or samurai. Ruled by a rigid honor code, samurai were bound in loyalty to their feudal lord, and they became the only caste allowed to carry two swords. They were expected to give up their lives for their lord without hesitation, and if they failed in their duty, they could regain their honor only by committing ritualistic suicide, or seppuku. Spurning the soft life led by court nobles, samurai embraced a spartan lifestyle. When Zen Buddhism, with its tenets of mental and physical discipline, was introduced into Japan from China in the 1190s, it appealed greatly to the samurai. Weapons and armor achieved new heights in artistry, while Bushido, the way of the warrior, contributed to the spirit of national unity.

In 1274, Mongolian forces under Kublai Khan made an unsuccessful attempt to invade Japan. They returned in 1281 with a larger fleet, but a typhoon destroyed it. Regarding the cyclone as a gift from the gods, Japanese called it kamikaze, meaning “divine wind,” which took on a different significance at the end of World War II when Japanese pilots flew suicide missions in an attempt to turn the tide of war.

**THE MUROMACHI & AZUCHI-MOMOYAMA PERIODS (1336–1603)** After the fall of the Kamakura shogunate, a new feudal government was set up at Muromachi in Kyoto. The next 200 years, however, were marred by bloody civil wars as daimyo
(feudal lords) staked out their fiefdoms. Similar to the barons of Europe, the daimyo owned tracts of land, had complete rule over the people who lived on them, and had an army of retainers, the samurai, who fought his enemies. This period of civil wars is called Sengoku-Jidai, or Age of the Warring States.

Yet these centuries of strife also saw a blossoming of art and culture. Kyoto witnessed the construction of the extravagant Golden and Silver pavilions as well as the artistic arrangement of Ryoanji Temple’s famous rock garden. Noh drama, the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and landscape gardening became the passions of the upper class. At the end of the 16th century, a number of castles were built on mountaintops to demonstrate the strength of the daimyo, guard their fiefdoms, and defend themselves against the firearms introduced by the Portuguese.

In the second half of the 16th century, a brilliant military strategist by the name of Oda Nobunaga almost succeeded in ending the civil wars. Upon Oda’s assassination by one of his own retainers, one of his best generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, took up the campaign, built magnificent Osaka Castle, and crushed rebellion to unify Japan. Oda and Toyotomi’s successive rules are known as the Azuchi-Momoyama Period, after the names of their castles.

THE EDO PERIOD (1603–1867) Upon Toyotomi’s death (1598), power was seized by Tokugawa Ieyasu, a statesman so shrewd and skillful in eliminating enemies that his heirs would continue to rule Japan for the next 250 years. After defeating his greatest rival in the famous battle of Sekigahara, Tokugawa set up a shogunate government in 1603 in Edo (present-day Tokyo), leaving the emperor intact but virtually powerless in Kyoto. In 1615, the Tokugawa government assured its supremacy by getting rid of Toyotomi’s descendants in a fierce battle at Osaka Castle that destroyed the castle and annihilated the Toyotomi clan.

Meanwhile, European influence in Japan was spreading. The first contact with the Western world had occurred in 1543, when Portuguese merchants (with firearms) arrived, followed by Christian missionaries. St. Francis Xavier landed in Kyushu in 1549, remaining for 2 years and converting thousands of Japanese; by 1580, there were perhaps as many as 150,000 Japanese Christians. Although Japan’s rulers at first welcomed foreigners and trade (three Kyushu daimyo even went so far as to send emissaries to Rome, where they were received by the pope), they gradually became alarmed by the Christian missionary influence. Hearing of the Catholic Church’s power in Rome and fearing the expansionist policies of European nations, Toyotomi banned Christianity in the late 1500s. In 1597, 26 Japanese and European Christians were crucified in Nagasaki.

The Tokugawa shogunate intensified the campaign against Christians in 1639 when it closed all ports to foreign trade. Adopting a policy of total isolation, the shogunate forbade foreigners from landing in Japan and Japanese from leaving; even Japanese who had been living abroad in overseas trading posts were never allowed to return. The only exception was in Nagasaki, home to a colony of tightly controlled Chinese merchants and a handful of Dutch confined to a tiny island trading post.

Thus began an amazing 215-year period in Japanese history during which Japan was closed to the rest of the world. It was a time of political stability at the expense of personal freedom, as all aspects of life were strictly controlled by the Tokugawa government. Japanese society was divided into four distinct classes: samurai, farmers, craftspeople, and merchants. Class determined everything in daily life, from where a person could live to what he was allowed to wear or eat. Samurai led the most exalted social position, and it was probably during the Tokugawa Period that the