

The Best of Japan

Hardly a day goes by that you don't hear something about Japan, whether the subject is trade, travel, cuisine, the arts, or Japanese imports ranging from Sony and Toyota to karaoke and anime. 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, computers, and a whole array of sleek electronic goods that compete favorably with the best in the West? Or is it still the land of the 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 modern industrialized world?

In fact, Japan is an intricate blend of East and West. Its cities may look Westernized—but 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. Yet 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 some 140 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 views of Mount Fuji, 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 25 (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.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

Long ago, Japanese ranked the three best of almost every natural wonder and attraction in their country: the three best gardens, the three best scenic spots, the three best waterfalls, even the three best bridges. But choosing the “best” of anything is inherently subjective, and decades—even centuries—have passed since some of the original “three best” were so designated. Still, lists can be useful for establishing priorities. To help you get the most out of your stay, I’ve compiled this list of what I consider the best Japan has to offer based on years of traveling through the country. From the weird to the wonderful, the profound to the profane, the obvious to the obscure, these recommendations should fire your imagination and launch you toward discoveries of your own.

- **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. Usually devoted to a particular deity, they’re visited for specific reasons: Shopkeepers call on Fushimi-Inari Shrine outside Kyoto, dedicated to the goddess of rice and therefore prosperity, while couples wishing for a happy marriage head to Kyoto’s Jishu Shrine, a shrine to the deity of love. Shrines and temples are also the sites for most of Japan’s major festivals. See chapter 2, the regional chapters, and “The Best Temples & Shrines” section, below, for more on Japan’s temples and shrines.
- **Taking a Communal Hot-Spring Bath:** No other people on earth bathe as enthusiastically, as frequently, and for such duration as Japanese. Their many hot-spring resorts—thought to cure all sorts of ailments as well as simply make you feel good—range from hangarlike affairs to outdoor baths with views of the countryside. No matter what the setup, you’ll soon warm to the ritual of soaping up, rinsing off, and then soaking in near-scalding waters. Hot-spring spas are located almost everywhere in Japan, from Kyushu to Hokkaido; see 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. These celebrations, which range from huge processions of wheeled floats to those featuring horseback archery and ladder-top acrobatics, can be lots of fun; you may want to plan your trip around one. See the “Japan Calendar of Events” in chapter 2 for a list of some of the most popular festivals.
- **Dining on Japanese Food:** There’s more to Japanese cuisine than sushi, and 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 special vegetables, and its delicacies. If money is no object, order kaiseki, a complete meal of visual and culinary finesse. See the “Tips on Dining, Japanese Style” section of chapter 2, the “Where to Dine” sections in the regional chapters, and “The Best Culinary Experiences,” later in this chapter, for more on Japanese food.
- **Viewing the Cherry Blossoms:** Nothing symbolizes the coming 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, dance, and karaoke. See the “Japan Calendar of Events” in chapter 2 for cherry blossom details.

- **Riding the Shinkansen Bullet Train:**

Asia’s fastest train whips you across the countryside at more than 290km (180 miles) an hour as you relax, see the country’s rural countryside, and dine on boxed meals filled with local specialties of the area through which you’re speeding. See “Getting Around Japan” in chapter 2 for more.

- **Staying in a Ryokan:**

Japan’s legendary service reigns supreme in a top-class ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn. Staying in one is the height of both luxury and simplicity: You’ll bathe in a Japanese tub, feast your eyes on lovely views (usually a Japanese garden) past shoji screens, dine like a king in your own room, and sleep on a futon. See “Tips on Accommodations” in chapter 2 and the “Where to Stay” sections in the regional chapters for more on ryokan.

- **Shopping in a Department Store:**

Japan’s department stores are among the best in the world, offering everything from food to designer clothing to electronics to kimono and traditional crafts. Service also is among the best in the world: If you arrive when the store opens, staff will be lined up at the front door to bow as you enter. See the “Shopping” sections throughout this book.

- **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

“Cultural Snapshots: Japanese Arts in a Nutshell” in appendix A and the Kabuki section of “Tokyo After Dark” in chapter 5.

- **Strolling Through Tokyo’s Nightlife District:**

Every major city in Japan has its own nightlife district, but probably none is more famous, more wicked, or more varied than Tokyo’s Kabuki-cho in Shinjuku, which offers everything from hole-in-the-wall bars to strip joints, discos, and gay clubs. See “Tokyo After Dark” in chapter 5.

- **Seeing Mount Fuji:**

It may not seem like much of an accomplishment to see Japan’s most famous and tallest mountain, visible from 161km (100 miles) away. But the truth is, it’s hardly ever visible except during the winter months and rare occasions when the air is clear. Catching your first glimpse of the giant peak is truly breathtaking and something you’ll never forget, whether you see it from aboard the Shinkansen, from a Tokyo skyscraper, or from a nearby national park. If you want to climb it, be prepared for a group experience—600,000 people climb Mount Fuji every year. See “Climbing Japan’s Most Famous Mountain: Mount Fuji” in chapter 6 for more information.

- **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, Japanese-style inns, traditional restaurants, shops, and gardens. See chapter 8 for extensive information on the city.

2 The Best Temples & Shrines

- **Sensoji Temple (Tokyo):** The capital’s oldest temple is also its liveliest.

Throngs of visitors and stalls selling both traditional and kitschy items

lend it a festival-like atmosphere. This is the most important temple to see in Tokyo. See p. 176.

- **Meiji Jingu Shrine** (Tokyo): Tokyo's most venerable and refined Shinto shrine honors the Emperor Meiji and his empress with simple yet dignified architecture surrounded by a dense forest. This is a great refuge in the heart of the city. See p. 173.
- **Kotokuin Temple** (Kamakura): This temple is home to the Great Buddha, Japan's second-largest bronze image, which was cast in the 13th century and sits outdoors against a magnificent wooded backdrop. The Buddha's face has a wonderful expression of contentment, serenity, and compassion. See p. 224.
- **Hase Kannon Temple** (Kamakura): Although this temple is famous for its 9m-tall (30-ft.) Kannon of Mercy, the largest wooden image in Japan, it's most memorable for its thousands of small statues of Jizo, the guardian deity of children, donated by parents of miscarried, stillborn, or aborted children. It's a rather haunting vision. See p. 224.
- **Toshogu Shrine** (Nikko): Dedicated to Japan's most powerful shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, this shrine is the nation's most elaborate and opulent, made with 2.4 million sheets of gold leaf. It's set in a forest of cedar. See p. 227.
- **Kiyomizu Temple** (Kyoto): One of Japan's best-known temples with a structure imitated by lesser temples around the country, Kiyomizu commands an exalted spot on a steep hill with a sweeping view over Kyoto. The pathway leading to the shrine is lined with pottery and souvenir shops, and the temple grounds have open-air pavilions where you can drink beer or eat noodles. Don't neglect the smaller **Jishu Shrine** on its grounds—it's dedicated to the god of love. See p. 318.
- **Sanjusangendo Hall** (Kyoto): Japan's longest wooden building contains the spectacular sight of more than 1,000 life-size wood-carved statues, row upon row of the thousand-handed Kannon of Mercy. See p. 319.
- **Kinkakuji (Temple of the Golden Pavilion)** (Kyoto): Constructed in the 14th century as a shogun's retirement villa, this three-story pavilion shimmers in gold leaf and is topped with a bronze phoenix; it's a beautiful sight when the sun shines and the sky's blue. See p. 319.
- **Todaiji Temple** (Nara): Japan's largest bronze Buddha sits in the largest wooden structure in the world, making it the top attraction in this former capital. While not as impressive as the Great Buddha's dramatic outdoor stage in Kamakura (see above), the sheer size of Todaiji Temple and its Buddha make this a sight not to be missed if you're in the Kansai area. See p. 340.
- **Horyuji Temple** (Nara): Despite the fact that Todaiji Temple with its Great Buddha (see above) gets all the glory, true seekers of Buddhist art and history head to the sacred grounds of Horyuji Temple with its treasures and ancient buildings. See p. 341.
- **Ise Grand Shrines** (Ise): Although there's not much to see, these shrines are the most venerated Shinto shrines in all of Japan, and pilgrims have been flocking here for centuries. Amazingly, the Inner Shrine, which contains the Sacred Mirror, is razed and reconstructed on a new site every 20 years according to strict rules governing purification in the Shinto religion. Follow the age-old route of former pilgrims after you visit the shrines, and stop for a meal in the nearby Okage Yokocho District. See p. 359.

- **Itsukushima Shrine** (Miyajima): The huge red *torii* (the traditional entry gate of a shrine) standing in the waters of the Seto Inland Sea is one of the most photographed landmarks in Japan and signals the approach to this shrine. Built over the tidal flats on a gem of an island called Miyajima, it's considered one of Japan's most scenic spots. At night, the shrine is illuminated. See p. 460.
- **Kotohiragu Shrine** (Kotohira, on Shikoku): One of Japan's oldest and most popular shrines beckons at the top of 785 granite steps on the

Yashima Plateau with great views of the Seto Inland Sea, but for most Japanese, it's the "I made it!" that counts. See p. 468.

- **Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine** (Fukuoka): Established in 905 to deify the god of scholarship, this immensely popular shrine has a festive atmosphere and is popular with students wishing to pass school exams. The road leading to the shrine is lined with souvenir and craft shops; the new Kyushu National Museum is an escalator ride away. See p. 489.

3 The Best Gardens

- **Hama Rikyu Garden** (Tokyo): Considered by some to be the best garden in Tokyo, this peaceful oasis has origins stretching back 300 years when it served as a retreat for a former feudal lord and as duck-hunting grounds for the Tokugawa shogun. Surrounded by water on three sides, it contains a tidal pool, moon-viewing pavilions, and teahouses. See p. 181.
- **Sankeien Garden** (Yokohama): Historic villas, tea arbors, a farmhouse, a pagoda, and other authentic buildings, all set in a century-old landscaped garden with ponds and streams, make this one of the most interesting and picturesque gardens in Japan. See p. 239.
- **Ryoanji Temple** (Kyoto): Japan's most famous Zen rock garden, laid out at the end of the 15th century, consists of moss-covered boulders and raked pebbles enclosed by an earthen wall. It is said that it's impossible to see all 15 rocks from any vantage point; see if you can. Come early in the morning for some peaceful meditation. See p. 320.
- **Katsura Imperial Villa** (Kyoto): Designed by Japan's most famous

gardener, Kobori Enshu, the garden surrounding this imperial villa 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. It's well worth the extra effort involved to see it. See p. 330.

- **Saihoji** (Kyoto): Popularly known as the Moss Temple, Saihoji is Japan's most famous moss garden, with more than 100 varieties spread throughout the grounds, giving off an iridescent glow. It's especially beautiful after a rainfall. See p. 331.
- **Kenrokuen Garden** (Kanazawa): Considered by some to be Japan's grandest landscape garden (and rated one of the "three best"), Kenrokuen is also one of the largest. The garden took 150 years to complete and consists of ponds, streams, rocks, mounds, trees, grassy expanses, and footpaths. Best of all, no tall buildings detract from the views. After Katsura (see above), this is my top choice. See p. 368.
- **Koko-en** (Himeji): It isn't old (it was laid out in 1992), but this is a wonderful surprise package of nine small

gardens, each one different but typical of gardens during the Edo Period, which lasted from 1603 to 1867. Upon seeing what can be accomplished with skill and money in little more than a decade, some gardeners may turn green with envy. See p. 419.

- **Korakuen Garden** (Okayama): Rated one of Japan's three most beautiful gardens, Korakuen was completed in 1700 and incorporates the surrounding hills and Okayama Castle into its design. It's definitely worth a visit if you're in the vicinity, though personally, I like Kenrokuen (see above) more. See p. 423.
- **Ritsurin Park** (Takamatsu): Dating from the 17th century, this former

private retreat of the ruling Matsu-daira clan is an exquisite strolling garden that incorporates Mount Shiun in its landscaping and boasts 1,600 pine trees and 350 cherry trees. Stop for tea in the Feudal-Era teahouse and contemplate the view at leisure. See p. 467.

- **Sengan'en** (Kagoshima): Laid out more than 300 years ago by the Shimazu clan, this summer retreat with a 25-room villa was known for its poem-composing parties, held beside a rivulet that still exists. After touring the garden and villa, be sure to visit the nearby museum with relics belonging to the Shimadzu family. This garden is one of my favorites. See p. 525.

4 The Best Castles, Palaces & Villas

- **Matsumoto Castle** (Matsumoto): Popularly known as the Crow Castle due to its black color, this small castle boasts the oldest **keep** (*donjon*) in Japan (more than 400 years old). A moon-viewing room was added in 1635, and exhibited inside the castle is a superb collection of Japanese matchlocks and samurai armor dating from the mid-16th century through the Edo Period. Volunteer guides stand ready for personal tours. See p. 258.
- **Kyoto Imperial Palace** (Kyoto): Home to Japan's imperial family from the 14th century to the 19th century, this palace is praised for its Heian design and graceful garden. Good news for travelers: Guided tours of the palace are free. See p. 315.
- **Nijo Castle** (Kyoto): One of the few castles built by the mighty Tokugawa shogunate as a residence rather than for defense, Nijo Castle is where the shogun stayed whenever he was in Kyoto. It's famous for its creaking

floorboards that warned of enemy intruders. The castle is considered the quintessence of Momoyama architecture. See p. 283.

- **Katsura Imperial Villa** (Kyoto): Built in the 1600s by a brother of the emperor, this villa and garden are considered to be among the best—if not the best—in traditional architecture and landscape gardening. More than anywhere else, the villa illustrates the life of refinement enjoyed by 17th-century nobility, when leisurely pursuits included such activities as moon viewing. See p. 330.
- **Osaka Castle** (Osaka): Although just a reproduction of what was once the mightiest castle in the land, Osaka Castle still impresses with its sheer size. Inside you'll find a high-tech museum detailing the life and times of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the warrior general who built the castle. See p. 385.
- **Himeji Castle** (Himeji): Said to resemble a white heron poised in flight over the plains, this is quite

simply Japan's most beautiful castle. With its extensive gates, moats, turrets, and maze of passageways, it has survived virtually intact since feudal times. If you see only one castle in Japan, make it this one. See p. 418.

- **Matsue Castle** (Matsue): This 17th-century castle is one of Japan's few remaining original castles (not a reconstruction). It features a five-story donjon with samurai gear and artifacts belonging to the ruling Matsudaira clan. See p. 438.
- **Matsuyama Castle** (Matsuyama): Occupying a hill above the city, this is also one of the few original castles left in Japan. It boasts good views over Matsuyama from its three-story donjon as well as a collection of armor and swords of the Matsudaira clan. See p. 475.

- **Kumamoto Castle** (Kumamoto): Although a ferroconcrete reconstruction not nearly as huge as the original, this massive castle is still an impressive sight, especially at night when it's illuminated. It's famous for its curved walls, which made invasion virtually impossible. The interior houses a museum with palanquins, armor, swords, and other artifacts of the former ruling clans. See p. 514.
- **Tamozawa Imperial Villa** (Nikko): Comprised of a 1632 villa and an 1899 expansion, this 106-room villa was the home of a prince who later became emperor. You can learn about traditional Japanese architectural details and lifestyles of the aristocracy on self-guided tours, and unlike Japan's other imperial villas, it does not require a reservation. See p. 232.

5 The Best Museums

- **Tokyo National Museum** (Tokyo): Even professed museumphobes should make a point of visiting the National Museum, the largest repository of Japanese arts in the world. Lacquerware, china, kimono, samurai armor, swords, woodblock prints, religious art, and more are on display, making this the best place in Japan to view Japanese antiques and decorative objects. If you visit only one museum in Japan, this should be the one. See p. 177.
- **Edo-Tokyo Museum** (Tokyo): 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. See p. 172.
- **Hakone Open-Air Museum** (Chokoku-no-Mori, Hakone): Beautifully landscaped grounds and

spectacular scenery showcase approximately 700 20th-century sculptures, from Giacomo and Rodin to Henry Moore. Here, too, is the Picasso Pavilion, housing 200 of the artist's works. See p. 246.

- **Japan Ukiyo-e Museum** (Matsumoto): One of the best woodblock-print museums in Japan, this museum displays the largest collection of prints in the world on a rotating basis. A must-see in Matsumoto. See p. 259.
- **Hida Minzoku Mura Folk Village** (Takayama): Picturesquely situated around a pond with flowers, more than 30 shingled and thatched farmhouses—many transported from the surrounding Japan Alps—are filled with farm implements and objects of daily life, providing fascinating insight into the life and times of the extended families that once inhabited them. See p. 268.

- **Inro Museum** (Takayama): Of Takayama's many specialty museums, this one is my favorite: It houses Japan's largest collection of small containers (*inro*) with toggles (*netsuke*) that were once standard accessories of the kimono. You could spend hours looking at these miniature works of art. See p. 270.
- **Museum Meiji Mura** (Nagoya): This open-air architectural museum is an absolute treasure with more than 60 original buildings and structures dating from the Meiji Period situated on 100 beautifully landscaped hectares (250 acres) on the shore of a lake. Western-style homes, churches, a Kabuki theater, a bathhouse, a prison, a brewery, and much more are open for viewing and filled with furniture and household items. Mail a postcard from an authentic post office, buy candy from an old candy store, and drink tea in the lobby of the original Imperial Hotel, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. See p. 352.
- **Ishikawa Prefectural Museum for Traditional Products and Crafts** (Kanazawa): Kanazawa is famous for its handcrafted items, including gold leaf, umbrellas, stringed instruments, Buddhist altars, pottery, and more. English-language explanations, a detailed pamphlet, and an audio guide explain how they're made. See p. 369.
- **Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution** (Kobe): You can't tell by its name, but this excellent museum is devoted to Kobe's 1995 earthquake, with films, dioramas, and exhibits detailing the city's destruction and rebirth. See p. 405.
- **Ohara Museum of Art** (Kurashiki): Founded in 1930, this museum just keeps getting better, with works by both Western and Japanese greats spread throughout several buildings. Its location in the picturesque Kurashiki historic district is a bonus. See p. 431.
- **Adachi Museum** (Matsue): This museum near Matsue combines two of my passions—art and gardens—making it a winner. Japanese modern art is the focus indoors, while the perfectly landscaped garden—one of Japan's best—comes into view through framed windows, making it part of the art in a very surreal way. See p. 442.
- **Louis C. Tiffany Museum and Gardens** (Matsue): This, one of the world's best collections of Tiffany paintings, furniture, ceramics, stained-glass windows, and jewelry, will take your breath away—and make you wonder how much insurance the museum pays in this earthquake-prone land. See p. 440.
- **Peace Memorial Museum** (Hiroshima): Japan's most thought-provoking museum contains exhibits examining Hiroshima's militaristic past, the events leading up to the explosion of the world's first atomic bomb, the city's terrible destruction, and its active antinuclear movement. See p. 450.
- **Fukuoka Asian Art Museum** (Fukuoka): This fascinating museum is devoted to contemporary and modern art from around Asia, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Korea, and India. See p. 488.
- **Benesse Art Site Naoshima** (Takamatsu): This is not a single museum, but rather an island in the Seto Inland Sea that's devoted to cutting-edge art, with two museums (both designed by Tadao Ando) and interactive art installations in traditional Japanese buildings. There's no other place in Japan quite like this. See p. 470.

6 The Best National Parks

- **Nikko National Park:** This 80,000-hectare (200,000-acre) national park centers on the sumptuous Toshogu Shrine with its mausoleum for Tokugawa Ieyasu, majestic cedars, and lakeside resorts. See p. 228.
- **Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park:** Boasting magnificent Mount Fuji at its core, this popular weekend getaway beckons vacationing Tokyoites with its many hot-spring spas, stunning close-up views of Mount Fuji, sparkling lakes, historic attractions relating to the famous Feudal-Era Tokaido Highway, and coastal areas of Izu Peninsula. One of the best ways to see Hakone is via a circular route that involves travel on a two-car mountain streetcar, a cable car, a ropeway, and a boat; the delightful journey offers wonderful scenery and interesting sights along the way. See p. 242.
- **Japan Alps National Park:** Encompassing Honshu's most impressive mountain ranges and the site of the 1998 Winter Olympics, this national park offers skiing as well as unique villages worth a visit in their own right. See p. 256.
- **Ise-Shima National Park:** Boasting a rugged seascape of capes, inlets, and islets, this park is the birthplace of cultivated pearls. It's famous for its bays dotted with pearl-cultivating oyster rafts, its female divers, a pearl museum, plus a top-notch aquarium and the Ise Grand Shrines, Japan's most venerable shrines. Two theme parks are also located here. See p. 358.
- **Seto-Naikai (Inland Sea) National Park:** Covering 650 sq. km (251 sq. miles) of water, islands, islets, and coastline, this sea park stretches from Kobe in the east to Beppu in the west. It's studded with numerous islands of all sizes, the most famous of which is Miyajima, home of the Itsukushima Shrine. Cruises ply the waters of the Seto Inland Sea, as do regular ferries sailing between Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. The adventuresome can even cycle across the Seto Inland Sea via the Shimanami Kaido route linking Honshu with Shikoku (see "The Best Outdoor Adventures," below). See p. 452.
- **Unzen-Amakusa National Park:** At western Kyushu's high-altitude national park, you can climb Mount Fugen (1,229m/4,462 ft. above sea level), relax in a hot-spring bath, and take a walk through the Hells, the park's extrateamy sulfur springs. See p. 508.
- **Towada-Hachimantai National Park:** Tohoku's most popular park beckons with scenic lakes, rustic hot-spring spas, hiking, and skiing. See p. 553.
- **Shikotsu-Toya National Park:** This 987-sq.-km (381-sq.-mile) park in eastern Hokkaido encompasses lakes, volcanoes, and famous hot-spring resorts like Noboribetsu. See p. 591.
- **Daisetsuzan National Park:** The largest of Japan's 28 national parks—and some say Hokkaido's most beautiful—Daisetsuzan boasts three volcanic chains, fir- and birch-covered hillsides, the impressive Souunkyo Gorge, and plenty of skiing and hiking opportunities. See p. 596.
- **Akan National Park:** Popular for hiking, skiing, canoeing, and fishing, Akan National Park in Hokkaido is characterized by dense forests of sub-arctic primeval trees and caldera lakes, the most famous of which are Kussharo, one of Japan's largest mountain lakes, and Mashu, considered one of Japan's least-spoiled lakes and one of the world's clearest. See p. 600.

7 The Best of Old Japan

- **Splurging on a Night in a Ryokan:**

If you can afford to, splurge on at least 1 night in one of the country's best ryokan, where the service is impeccable, the kaiseki meals are out of this world, and glorious views outside your tatami room are of miniature landscaped gardens. You'll be pampered in a manner befitting an emperor—many of the nation's oldest ryokan were indeed born to serve members of the imperial court and feudal lords as they traveled Japan's highways. See "Tips on Accommodations" in chapter 2; the "Where to Stay" sections in the regional chapters; and "The Best Traditional Ryokan," below.

- **Attending a Sumo Match:**

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 them on TV during one of six annual 15-day tournaments. For more information, see "Spectator Sports" in chapter 5 and "Sumo" in appendix A.

- **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. Each step in a strolling garden brings a new view to die for. Refer to "The Best Gardens," earlier in this chapter, and the "Attractions" sections in the regional chapters to see which are heaven on earth.

- **Participating in Zazen Meditation in a Buddhist Temple:**

Zazen, or sitting meditation, is practiced by Zen

Buddhists as a form of spiritual training and by laypeople as a way to relieve stress and clear the mind. Several temples in Japan are willing to take in foreigners for zazen sessions. See the "Five Unforgettable Ways to Immerse Yourself in Japanese Culture" section in chapter 5 and the "Here & Zazen: Buddhism in Japan" box on p. 609.

- **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. Several Tokyo hotels offer English-language instruction in the tea ceremony. See p. 179.

- **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.

- **Relaxing at a Hot-Spring Resort:**

No country in the world boasts more natural hot springs than Japan, which has 19,500 different springs. Hot-spring spas are found in virtually all regions of the country and feature everything from hot-sand baths to open-air baths. See the regional chapters for more information.

- **Spending a Day in Asakusa**

(Tokyo): Asakusa is the best place to experience Tokyo's old downtown, with its popular Sensoji Temple, Nakamise shopping lane with crafts and kitsch, and casual traditional restaurants. As in days of yore, arrive by boat on the Sumida River. See chapter 5.

- **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 "A Stroll through Higashiyama-ku" in chapter 8.
- **Visiting Kyoto's Gion District:** Japan's most famous geisha houses may be off-limits to anyone without a proper introduction, but an early-evening stroll through this enclave of wooden homes and plain facades is like a journey back in time. You might even catch a glimpse of an elaborately made-up apprentice (*maiko*) on her way to an appointment or hear strains of a *shamisen* (a traditional three-stringed Japanese instrument) played behind closed doors. See chapter 8.
- **Watching Cormorant Fishing:** Every night in summer, wooden

boats gaily decorated with paper lanterns will take you out on rivers outside Kyoto and 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. 281 and 352.

- **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 line a 1.6km (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 9.

8 The Best of Modern Japan

- **Attending a Baseball Game (Tokyo):** After sumo, baseball is Japan's most popular spectator sport. Watching a game with a stadium full of avid fans can be quite fun and can shed new light on America's favorite pastime. See the "For It's Ichi, Ni, San Strikes You're Out . . ." box on p. 198 and the "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" box on p. 490.
- **Visiting Tsukiji Fish Market (Tokyo):** One of the largest wholesale fish markets in the world, this indoor market bustles with activity from about 3am on as frozen tuna is unloaded from boats, auctions are held, and vendors sell octopus, fish, squid, and everything else from the sea that's edible to the city's restaurants. Be sure to bring your camera. See p. 178.

- **Seeing Tokyo from the TMG:** On the 45th floor of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office (TMG), designed by well-known architect Kenzo Tange, an 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. 187.
- **Hanging Out in Harajuku (Tokyo):** Nothing beats Sunday in Harajuku, where you can begin the day leisurely with brunch and then stroll the promenade of Omote Sando Dori, shop the area's many boutiques, take in a museum or two and perhaps a flea market, and then relax over drinks at a sidewalk cafe and watch the never-ending parade of humanity. See "A Stroll through Harajuku & Aoyama" in chapter 5.

- **Shopping for Japanese Designer Clothes** (Tokyo): Japanese designer clothing is often outrageous, occasionally practical, but mostly just fun. Department stores and designer boutiques in Aoyama are the places to try on the styles if you have both the money and the figure for them. See “Shopping” in chapter 5.
- **Spending an Evening in an Entertainment 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 “Tokyo After Dark” in chapter 5 and “Osaka After Dark” in chapter 9.

- **Seeing Fish Eye-to-Eye in an Aquarium** (Nagoya, Toba, Osaka, Kagoshima, Beppu): Because Japan is surrounded by sea, it’s no surprise that it has more than its fair share of aquariums. Several have made splashy debuts in the past decade with innovative displays that put you eye-to-eye with the creatures of the deep. My favorite is the one in Osaka. See p. 350, 362, 387, 526, and 549.

9 The Best Outdoor Adventures

- **Climbing Mount Fuji:** Okay, so climbing Japan’s tallest—3,716m high (12,388 ft.)—and most famous mountain is not the solitary, athletic pursuit you may have envisioned—but with 600,000 people climbing it annually, it’s a great, culturally enriching group activity. The most recent trend is to climb through the night with a flashlight and then cheer the sunrise from the top of the mountain. See “Climbing Japan’s Most Famous Mountain: Mount Fuji” in chapter 6.
- **Hiking the Nakasendo Highway** (Japan Alps): 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. 264.
- **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. The Japan Alps in Central Honshu and the mountains of Tohoku and Hokkaido are popular destinations. See chapters 7, 12, and 13.

If you’d rather leave the planning to someone else, join a trip sponsored by the **Shinyi Ski Club**; contact Julia Nolet (☎ 03/3423-8858) from 10am to 10pm Tokyo time; fax 03/3423-8859; jnworwor@gol.com.

- **Cycling** (Matsuyama and Hiroshima): Hard to believe, but you can bike between Shikoku and Hiroshima Prefecture via the 80km (50-mile) Shimanami Kaido route, which actually comprises seven bridges and six islands in the Seto Inland Sea. A well-maintained, dedicated biking path makes cycling one of Japan’s best outdoor activities. See “Cycling the Shimanami Kaido” in chapter 10 and “Exploring Sights of the Seto Inland Sea” in chapter 9.
- **Shooting the Kumagawa Rapids** (Kumamoto): You can glide down one of Japan’s most rapid rivers in a long, traditional wooden boat,

powered by men with poles. See “Shooting the Kumagawa Rapids” under “Kumamoto” in chapter 10.

- **Fishing:** Most foreigners laugh when they see Japanese fishing spots—a stocked pool in the middle of Tokyo or a cement-banked river, lined elbow

to elbow with fishermen. For more sporting conditions, head to Lake Akan in Hokkaido’s **Akan National Park**, where you can fish for rainbow trout or white spotted char. See “Akanko Spa & Akan National Park” in chapter 13.

10 The Best Traditional Ryokan

- **Hiiragiya Ryokan** (Kyoto; ☎ 075/221-1136): 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 woods 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. 293.
- **Tawaraya** (Kyoto; ☎ 075/211-5566): This venerable inn has been owned and operated by the same family since it opened in the first decade of the 1700s; it’s now in its 11th generation of innkeepers. Located in old Kyoto, its guest list reads like a who’s who of visitors to Japan, including Leonard Bernstein, the king of Sweden, Alfred Hitchcock, and Saul Bellow. See p. 294.
- **Ryokan Kurashiki** (Kurashiki; ☎ 086/422-0730): Located right beside the willow-lined canal of Kurashiki’s famous historic district, this ryokan occupies an old mansion and three 250-year-old antiques-filled warehouses. It’s a great place to explore as you wander the corridors and peek into nooks and crannies, admiring all the antiques. See p. 433.
- **Iwaso Ryokan** (Miyajima; ☎ 0829/44-2233): The setting here is as romantic as any you’ll find in Japan. If you can afford it, stay in one of the ryokan’s 80-year-old cottages, where you’ll have a view of maples and a gurgling brook on one of Japan’s most scenic and famous islands. If staying here doesn’t make you feel like a samurai or a geisha, nothing will. See p. 462.
- **Hakusuikan Ryokan** (Ibusuki; ☎ 0993/22-3131): 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. See p. 534.
- **Kannawaen** (Beppu; ☎ 0977/66-2111): This century-old ryokan spreads through lush and carefully tended gardens. Its tatami rooms with shoji screens look out onto hot springs, bamboo, streams, bonsai, stone lanterns, and flowers. It’s the perfect place to escape the crowds and relax in the traditional bathhouse or the open-air hot springs. See p. 550.

11 The Best Western-Style Hotels

- **Park Hyatt Tokyo** (Tokyo; ☎ 800/233-1234 in the U.S. and Canada): Occupying the 39th to 52nd floors of a skyscraper designed by Kenzo Tange, this might well be the most gorgeous and sophisticated hotel in

all of Japan, if not the world. Offering unparalleled views of the city, one of Tokyo's hottest restaurants, rooms you could live in, and legendary service, it's a must for anyone who can afford it (no wonder it was the hotel featured in *Lost in Translation*). See p. 121.

- **Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Chinzan-So** (Tokyo; ☎ 800/332-3442): Surrounded by a lush, 7-hectare (17-acre) garden, this top-rated hotel is a wonderful respite in one of the world's most crowded cities, with its impeccable service and a terrific spa and health club free for hotel guests. See p. 123.
- **Nikko Kanaya Hotel** (Nikko; ☎ 0288/54-0001): Dating from the 19th century, this rambling, old-fashioned hotel combines the rustic charm of a European country lodge with design elements of old Japan—and it's just a 15-minute walk from Toshogu Shrine. See p. 232.
- **The Fujiya Hotel** (Hakone; ☎ 0460/2-2211): Established in 1878 and nestled on a wooded hillside, the Fujiya is one of Japan's oldest, grandest, and most majestic Western-style hotels. Resembling a Japanese ryokan from the outside, it boasts a comfortable interior of detailed woodwork, old-fashioned antiques-filled guest rooms, and a delightful 1930s dining hall. It also offers indoor/outdoor pools, extensive landscaping, and hot-spring baths. A stay here makes you feel like you've traveled not just to Hakone but to another century. See p. 249.
- **Kawana Hotel** (Ito; ☎ 0557/45-1111): Built in 1936 to resemble an English country estate, this relaxed yet refined hotel boasts large, manicured

lawns that slope to the sea, and two famous 18-hole golf courses. It's a great getaway from Tokyo. See p. 254.

- **The Westin Miyako** (Kyoto; ☎ 800/WESTIN-1 in the U.S. and Canada): First built in 1890 but completely remodeled, this smartly appointed hotel sprawls across more than 6.4 hectares (16 acres) of hilltop on the eastern edge of town near many famous temples. Good views, a satellite check-in counter at Kyoto Station, free shuttle service to the hotel, indoor/outdoor swimming pools, a children's play room, a tea-ceremony room, and a Japanese garden make this a winner. There's even an annex with Japanese-style rooms as well. See p. 299.
- **Nara Hotel** (Nara; ☎ 0742/26-3300): From far away, this 1909 building just a short walk from Nara Park resembles a palace. Rooms in the main building have high ceilings, antique light fixtures, and old-fashioned decor. See p. 343.
- **The Ritz-Carlton, Osaka** (Osaka; ☎ 800/241-3333 in the U.S. and Canada): This chain's first venture in Japan has the company's trademark antiques, artwork, and intimate public spaces, as well as such pluses as free access to its fitness center and large, well-appointed rooms. It's not far from Osaka Station. See p. 389.
- **Unzen Kanko Hotel** (Unzen; ☎ 0957/73-3263): This rustic mountain lodge of ivy-covered wood and stone was built in 1935 to cater to foreigners in search of Mount Unzen's cooler climate. It offers a casual and relaxed atmosphere, hot-spring baths, and comfortable, old-fashioned rooms not far from the Hells. See p. 511.

12 The Best Affordable Japanese-Style Places to Stay

- **Homeikan** (Tokyo; ☎ 03/3811-1181): Although it's a bit far from

Tokyo's main attractions, this is my top pick for an affordable, authentic

Japanese inn. 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. 138.

- **Ryokan Fujioto** (Tsumago; ☎ 0264/57-3009): 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. The owner speaks English; his daughter volunteers to guide visitors for free (you can request her services when making reservations). See p. 266.
- **Antique Inn Sumiyoshi** (Takayama; ☎ 0577/32-0228): Located in the heart of Takayama on the banks of the Miyagawa River, this 90-year-old former silkworm factory features an open-hearth fireplace (*irori*) in the high-ceilinged communal room, antiques and painted screens throughout, and simple but delightfully old-fashioned tatami rooms overlooking the river. See p. 272.
- **Minshuku in Shirakawago's Ogi-machi**: 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 p. 277.

- **Matsubaya Ryokan** (Kyoto; ☎ 075/351-3727): Opened in 1885 and owned and managed by friendly Mrs. Hayabashi, the fifth generation of innkeepers, this wooden ryokan has rooms with balconies facing a miniature inner courtyard, and rooms facing a tiny enclosed garden. See p. 292.
- **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 9.
- **Miyajima Morinoyado** (Miyajima; ☎ 0829/44-0430): This public people's lodge on picturesque Miyajima island is modern yet traditional and would easily cost four times as much if it were privately owned. See p. 462.
- **Tsuru-no-yu Onsen** (Nyuto Onsen; ☎ 0187/46-2139): This rustic inn, with a history stretching back to the Edo Period, 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. 567.

13 The Best Culinary Experiences

- **Experiencing a Kaiseki Feast**: The ultimate in Japanese cuisine, *kaiseki* is a feast for the senses and the spirit. Consisting of a variety of exquisitely prepared and arranged dishes, a kaiseki meal is a multicourse event to be savored slowly. Both the ingredients and the dishes they comprise are chosen with great care to complement

the season. There are hundreds of exceptional kaiseki restaurants in Japan, from old-world traditional to sleek modern; A standout is **Kagetsu** in Nagasaki. Traditional ryokan also serve kaiseki. See p. 505 as well as “Tips on Dining, Japanese Style” in chapter 2.

- **Spending an Evening in a Robatayaki:** Harking back to the olden days when 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. 164 as well as "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style" 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, great views, great food, and great jazz. See p. 154.
- **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

sell their wares, samples are set out for you to nibble, and you can choose anything from tempura and sushi to boxed meals. See chapter 5, the regional chapters, and "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style" in chapter 2.

- **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. 227 as well as "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style" in chapter 2 and the "Where to Dine" sections in regional chapters.
- **Rubbing Elbows in a Yakitori-ya:** Yakitori-ya are the pubs of Japan—usually tiny affairs with just a counter, serving up skewered grilled chicken. 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 "Tips on Dining, Japanese Style" in chapter 2.

14 The Best Destinations for Serious Shoppers

- **For Everything:** 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. You'll be spoiled for life. See "Shopping" in chapter 5.
- **For Designer Fashions:** Tokyo's **Shibuya District** has the most designer boutiques in town, while **Aoyama** boasts main shops for all the big-name designers, including Issey Miyake and Comme des Garçons. Department stores also

carry big-name designers; their annual summer sales are mob scenes. See "Shopping" in chapter 5.

- **For Souvenirs:** Japanese are avid souvenir shoppers when they travel, so souvenirs are sold literally everywhere, even near shrines and temples. **Nakamise 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. 202) in Tokyo and the **Kyoto Handicraft Center** (p. 333), both of which offer several floors of everything from fans to woodblock prints.

- **For Traditional Crafts:** Japan treasures its artisans so highly that it designates the best as National Living Treasures. The two best shops for a varied inventory of traditional crafts, from knives and baskets to lacquerware and ceramics, are the **Japan Traditional Craft Center** in Tokyo and the **Kyoto Craft Center**. Department stores also offer an excellent collection of traditional crafts. See “Shopping” in chapter 5 and “Shopping Kyoto” in chapter 8 as well as p. 202 and 333 respectively.
- **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 5 and 8.
- **For Electronics:** 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 5 and 9.
- **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 9, 10, and 11.
- **For 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; **Matsuyama**, famous for its Tobe pottery (white porcelain with cobalt-blue designs); and **Kagoshima**, with its Satsuma pottery, which comes in white (used by the upper class in feudal Japan) and black (used by the common people). See chapters 9, 10, and 11.