



choice
TRAVEL

Destination Guide: Japan

What to know before you go
Essential preparation and planning tips
Accommodation and transport

CONTENTS



2 What you need to know

- 2 Travel-size tips
- 2 Know before you go
- 2 Best time to go
- 3 Culture
- 4 Health and safety
- 5 Laws and watchouts
- 5 Making a complaint
- 6 Emergency contacts

7 What you need to do

- 7 Visas and passports
- 7 Vaccinations
- 7 Phone and internet
- 9 Power plugs

9 Money

11 Travel insurance

12 Handy links and apps

13 Accommodation and transport

- 13 Flights
- 13 At the airport (and getting to your hotel)
- 14 Key destinations and their airports
- 14 Getting around
- 17 Driving in Japan
- 18 Accommodation and tours

Who is CHOICE? Set up by consumers for consumers, CHOICE is the consumer advocate that provides Australians with information and advice, free from commercial bias.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

OVERVIEW

Best time to go, culture, language, health, safety, laws, watchouts, scams, emergency contacts and more.

Travel-size tips

- **Flights** from Australia to Japan take as little as 7.5 hours.
- Most Australian passport holders [don't need a visa](#) to visit for up to 90 days.
- Japan is not as expensive as it used to be, prices are comparable to Australia or Western Europe.
- The [public transport system](#) is world-class, with bullet trains connecting major cities at speeds of up to 320km/h.

Know before you go

- Japan is a relatively safe country, but you should always check the latest alerts from [smartraveller.com.au](#) before your trip.
- Your doctor may recommend [vaccinations](#) if you're travelling to rural areas where Japanese encephalitis could be a risk.
- Some common medications, including codeine and

pseudoephedrine, are [restricted](#).

- [Credit cards](#) are not as widely used as in Australia, and not all [ATMs](#) will accept foreign cards. It's best to always carry some cash.
- Your Australian phone [may not work](#) on Japan's network, but many travellers rent phones while in the country.

Best time to go

- The weather in Japan can vary greatly from one part of the country to the next. Check the [average temperature and rainfall](#) in the area you're planning to visit.
- Spring is one of the best times to travel to Japan, when the magnificent cherry blossoms more than make up for the frequent showers. [Cherry blossom season](#) generally begins in March in the south of the country, and reaches the north by May.
- The rainy season in June marks the beginning of a

hot humid summer for most of the country, except in the cooler north and the mountainous regions.

- September is another wet season, when the country sometimes experiences typhoons.
- Autumn is a great time to visit. The temperatures are mild, the summer crowds have eased and the changing foliage in some areas is spectacular.
- Winter is ski season, beginning in mid-December and lasting until late March or early April, depending on the region.
- Winter weather varies greatly throughout the country, with mild temperatures in the south, harsh winds and heavy snow in the north-west and crisp, blue-sky days in the north-east. Days are short – the sun sets at 4.30pm in Tokyo during mid-winter.
- Peak holiday periods when transport and accommodation come under strain include (Western) New Year, Golden Week in late April/early May, and the Obon festival in mid-August.
- Japan is a major tourist destination for the Chinese, so China's Golden Week (early October) and Chinese New Year (January/February) will affect the availability of accommodation.



➤ School holidays create peak periods. Dates vary throughout the country, but generally there are three school terms with a long summer break in July/August and shorter breaks in December/January and March/April.

Culture

- Japanese society places great emphasis on harmony, co-operation and respect for family and workplace hierarchies.
- The Asian concept of 'face' is very important in Japan. This means avoiding confrontations, criticism or directly turning down requests (Japanese people rarely use the word 'no').
- The Japanese are extremely polite and reserved, so the Australian 'easygoing' nature could sometimes come across as rude or disrespectful.
- Bowing is the traditional way to greet someone, but a slight bow or (gentle) handshake is acceptable if you're a foreigner. Older people should be greeted with great respect.
- Always remove your shoes before entering a person's house. You're expected to remove your shoes in hotel rooms as well – use the slippers provided. In homes, and in accommodation with shared bathrooms, you may be required to use 'toilet slippers'. Some restaurants will also expect you to remove your shoes.
- You should always take a small gift if invited to a person's home. Offer the gift with both hands as a sign of respect. The wrapping is as important as the gift itself, and it isn't customary to unwrap the gift in front of the giver.
- Tipping is not expected. Rather a gift or some money tucked into an envelope is more likely to be

graciously received.

- Blowing your nose in public is considered extremely rude.
- When eating, never point or play with your chopsticks or use them to pierce your food. Return them to the chopstick rest when you pause to drink or speak.
- Leaving a small amount of food and drink is the best way to indicate that you've had enough. An empty plate or cup will invite offers of more.
- It's considered intrusive to talk on your phone while on public transport. You should switch your phone to silent on trains and in quiet places like restaurants and museums.

Official language: Japanese

English isn't widely spoken, although some people may read, write and understand more than they can speak. Even with a language barrier, though, locals will often go out of their way to help a confused tourist. Japanese is written in a range of scripts (kanji, katakana and hiragana). Our Roman alphabet is known as romaji and isn't commonly used. Most street signs include romaji script, but often they only show the Japanese words rather than the English translation.



Health and safety

- Japan has an excellent nationwide health care system. English-speaking doctors can usually be found in cities (see [page 6](#)). Medical fees are high and you may have to pay on the spot, so it's essential that you're covered by [travel insurance](#).
- The tap water is safe to drink and food hygiene is of a very high standard.

- The mosquito-borne disease Japanese encephalitis can be a problem in rural areas. Take steps to avoid bites and speak to a doctor about whether or not you need a vaccination.
- There are restrictions on bringing some medications into Japan, including codeine and pseudoephedrine. If you're planning to travel with medication, check first with the [Japanese Embassy](#).
- Violent and petty crime rates are very low in Japan.
- Japan experiences typhoons, earthquakes and occasional tsunamis. Make sure you're familiar with the safety procedures wherever you're staying.
- Almost all parts of Japan are considered safe, but certain areas close to the damaged Fukushima power plant are still off-limits. Check with [smatraveller.com.au](#) for the latest health and safety alerts about Japan.

[Do I need vaccinations to travel to Japan? > Page 7](#)

Tip: Have you registered your travel plans with [smatraveller.com.au](#) and checked the latest safety advice on the region you're travelling to?

Laws and watchouts

Laws

- Japan has zero tolerance for drugs and imposes severe penalties for the possession of even very small amounts. Japanese police carry out occasional random drug tests on customers in bars.
- The legal drinking age is 20.
- There is zero tolerance for drink-driving. The legal limit is 0%.
- Smoking is prohibited in many public areas. Check for signs, and for other smokers.
- There are no laws against homosexuality in Japan.
- Prostitution is technically illegal but the sex work industry, known as 'fuzoku', generally manages to get around the laws.
- You must carry your passport at all times.
- Japanese police have the power to search without a warrant and to detain suspects for up to 23 days without charge. Jail sentences can be more severe than in Australia and the punishment for serious charges, such as murder, can include the death penalty.

For road rules, see [Driving in Japan > Page 17](#).

Watchouts

- Crime rates are very low and petty theft is rare.
- If you lose something (say, if you leave your wallet on a train) it's likely it will be handed in untouched. A 2004 survey in Japan found that 74% of lost items were retrieved by their owners!
- Women are sometimes groped in public and on trains. If this happens to you, Japanese police advise that you should shout at the perpetrator and tell other people and train staff (this is one situation

when it's okay to make a scene).

- All taxis should be licensed and have a working meter. It's very unlikely that your taxi driver will try to rip you off.
- Fraud can be a problem in Japan, as in many countries. Always cover the keypad when using ATMs, and never let your credit card out of your sight when paying at restaurants.
- Scams are rare in Japan, but it's good to be aware of some of the most common ways tourists are fleeced in other countries. Read our article on [tourist traps around the world](#), or search travel forums such as Tripadvisor for the latest advice from travellers to Japan.

Making a complaint

If you fall victim to theft or any other serious crime, contact the police (numbers [page 6](#)).

If you have a dispute with an accommodation or tour provider and you're unable to come to an agreement, you can contact the Japan National Tourism Organization ([jnto.org.au](#)) for further advice.



For complaints about other goods and services, try the Japanese Consumer Affairs Agency (caa.go.jp). English-language information is limited on their website, so it's best to get a Japanese-speaker to help you.

If you have a problem with a taxi driver, take down their ID and licence plate number and contact the taxi company.

If your gripe is with an Australian or international tour operator, airline, or booking site, see CHOICE for the [usual procedures](#) for making a complaint or seeking compensation.

Emergency contacts

Japan country code: +81

- **Police:** 110 (some operators may speak English)
- **Fire/Ambulance:** 119 (some operators may speak English)
- **The Japan Helpline:** +81 (0)570 000 911 (English-speaking emergency assistance)
- **Emergency interpreting service:** +81 (0)3 5285 8185
- **Tokyo English-speaking police:** +81 (0)3 3501 0110

Your hotel or your travel insurance provider may also be able to help in an emergency.

Hospitals and clinics

The standard of health care in Japan is excellent but the fees are high, so make sure you have the right level of travel insurance. Most major hospitals will have at least some doctors who can speak English.

- See the Japan National Tourism Organization's list of [medical facilities with English-speaking staff](#).
- Alternatively, phone the AMDA (Association of

Medical Doctors Asia) International Medical Information Center: Tokyo +81 (0)3 5285 8088 / Osaka +81 (0)6 4395 0555 – operators speak a range of languages.

Australian Embassy – Tokyo

australia.or.jp

2-1-14 Mita, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8361

+81 (0)3 5232 4111

Enquiries: via [website form](#)

Australian Consulate-General – Osaka

australia.or.jp/en/consular/osaka

16F Twin 21 MID Tower, 2-1-61 Shiromi, Chuo-ku,

Osaka, 540-6116

+81 (0)6 6941 9271

Emergency: +81 (0)6 6941 9448 or +81 (0)3 5232 4111

Australian Consulate-General – Fukuoka

australia.or.jp/en/consular/fukuoka

7th Floor, Tenjin Twin Building, 1-6-8 Tenjin, Chuo-ku, Fukuoka 810-0001

+81 (0)9 2734 5055

Emergency: +81 (0)9 2734 5055 or +81 (0)3 5232 4111

Australian Consulate – Sapporo

australia.or.jp/en/consular/sapporo

17th Floor, Sapporo Centre Building, North 5, West 6-2, Chuo-ku, Sapporo 060-0005

+81 (0)1 1242 4381

Emergency: +81 (0)3 5232 4111

24-hour Australian Consular Emergency Centre:

03 5232 4101 (from Japan) or 1300 555 135 (from Australia) or +61 2 6261 3305 or SMS +61 421 269 080

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Visas, vaccinations, phone roaming, SIM cards, internet, power adapters, money, travel insurance, handy apps and more.



Visas and passports

Australian passport holders can visit Japan for up to 90 days without a visa provided they:

- have a passport which remains valid for the duration of their stay.
- do not receive any income while in Japan.

Visa and entry rules may change. Check with the Japanese Embassy for the latest advice:

au.emb-japan.go.jp.

Important: When you fill out your incoming passenger card at the airport, you'll be asked if you've ever been convicted of a crime. If you answer yes, you'll probably be taken aside and questioned and you may be refused entry to the country. Japan has a tough attitude towards drugs, and foreigners (including [Paul McCartney](#) and [Paris Hilton](#)) have been refused entry because of prior drug convictions.

Vaccinations

It's unlikely you'll need any vaccinations to travel to

Japan, but the Travel Doctor suggests you make sure your routine vaccinations are up to date, and that you consider vaccinations for Japanese encephalitis and tick-borne encephalitis, depending on your travel plans. See their [Japan health planner](#) for more information or speak to your doctor.

Tip: Some vaccinations need to be given four to six weeks before departure, so get in early.

[More about health and safety in Japan > Page 4.](#)

Phone and internet

Will my Australian phone work in Japan?

The simple answer to that question used to be a flat 'no', but some Australian phones may be able to roam. Japan operates largely on the CDMA and W-CDMA networks, which are incompatible with most Australian GSM-network handsets. However, Japan now has a number of 3G networks that you can connect with if you have a 3G phone.

Check with your telco, and with your phone

manufacturer if necessary, to find out if you'll be able to use your phone in Japan.

Be aware that if you use your phone overseas, particularly to access the internet, you could see some enormous bills. Check the global roaming rates with your telco.

Tip: Switch off data roaming on your phone before you leave Australia. Likewise, switch off your voicemail and ask friends and family to text you rather than calling (you'll be charged if you answer incoming calls).

Phone rental

If your phone isn't Japan-friendly, or if you don't want to risk getting stuck with an enormous bill, you could do what many travellers do and rent a phone while you're in the country. You can get set up on arrival at the airport, or at some mobile phone stores. (**Tip:** Some vendors may be reluctant to rent to a foreigner or may have no English-speaking staff, so the airport is your better bet.) You'll need a passport and a credit card to sign up for a contract.

Tip: Some companies offer a discount if you pre-order your rental phone, and some will even mail it to your hotel or address in Japan (you mail it back to them at the end of the lease).

SIMs

Only residents of Japan can buy pre-paid phone SIMs, but travellers can rent them. These are no use if you need data, though; they'll only allow you to make and receive calls.



There are no restrictions on buying pre-paid data SIMs, so they're a good workaround if you mainly just need access to the internet and you don't mind making phone calls through VOIP.

Remember: Your phone will need to be unlocked to accept a SIM from another network.

Tip: If you're ordering a Japan Rail Pass, you can buy a data SIM at the same time which will be mailed to your home address. For \$80, a CHOICE staffer bought a data-only SIM that gave him 100MB per day (shaping to 128kB when used up) and lasted for his entire month of travel.

Wi-Fi

Internet speeds are excellent in Japan (although not as good as some other Asian countries such as South Korea), but access doesn't always come free. Most Wi-Fi signals are locked because of laws that require internet companies to be able to identify who is using their service.

Your hotel should be able to give you Wi-Fi access

(possibly at a price) but most cafes and public spaces don't offer Wi-Fi, or if they do, it's only available to those already registered with a certain provider.

Tip: Many hotels still offer free wired in-room internet, which can be handy if you have a laptop (BYO Ethernet cable).

The good news is that after listening to the complaints of tourists, the Japanese government recently launched a [free Wi-Fi service](#) (the bad news is that it's currently only available in eastern Japan). Free hotspots are accessible for up to 14 days to anyone who signs up using their passport as ID when they arrive in the country. Visitors can even download the app ([Apple](#) or [Android](#)) and register in advance.

Apps: [Japan Connected](#) and [Travel Japan Wi-Fi](#) can also help you track down free Wi-Fi.

If staying connected is very important to you, consider a data SIM, a USB modem or a portable Wi-Fi device. The best place to find one of these gadgets is on arrival at the airport. You can book online in advance and pick it up at the airport, or even have it delivered to your hotel if you're arriving at a time when the airport store is closed.

Power plugs

Standard voltage: 100V

Frequency: 50-60Hz

Japan's voltage is much lower than Australia's 230V, and the variable frequency of 50Hz on the east coast and 60Hz on the west coast (Australia's frequency is 50Hz) means that some of your appliances might not be compatible. Most laptops and phones are designed to work on multiple voltages and frequencies. If your appliance or charger is marked 100-240V, 50/60

Hz then it will work in Japan. Australian appliances without a variable voltage or frequency (usually things like hairdryers, electric toothbrushes and shavers) should never be used on 100V or 60Hz. In the best case they simply won't work, in the worst they'll overheat and catch fire (the same warning applies to electrical goods bought in Japan and brought back to Australia). A transformer can solve your compatibility problems, but it's quite a bulky item to travel with. Instead, consider buying a cheap appliance once you're in Japan if you really need it.



Power sockets:

type A

Japan's power sockets and plugs are different to Australia's type I, so you'll need an adapter. If you're concerned about your appliances being incompatible with Japan's voltage and frequency, you could buy a combined adapter/transformer.

Japanese and USA plugs appear similar but one pin is wider than the other on the USA plug, while on the Japanese plug, both pins are the same. Japanese plugs can be used in the USA but not vice versa.

Money

Currency: Japanese yen (JPY/ ¥)

Check [xe.com](#) for the latest exchange rates.

Important: Tell your bank about your travel plans two weeks before you leave. Card activity in a foreign country could be mistaken for fraud and you could find your account frozen.

Tip: Carry at least two cards and more than one cash currency (Australian and Japanese). Split your money and cards between separate bags. That way if you lose one, you have a back-up.

Credit cards

Credit cards are fairly widely accepted in Japan, but surprisingly cash is still the preferred method of payment (or the only method of payment) in some situations, particularly outside of the big cities. When using your credit card, remember you'll be charged conversion fees by your bank and there may be a percentage surcharge from the retailer.

Tip: Visa is the most widely accepted credit card.

ATMs

Most ATMs have English-language options, but some won't accept foreign cards. Travellers generally have the best luck using ATMs at post offices, 7-Eleven stores, airports, major department stores, Shinsei Bank and Aeon Bank. Maestro cards with IC chips aren't accepted at post office ATMs. If possible, travel with more than one type of card. Remember, you'll be charged transaction and conversion fees for every withdrawal you make from an ATM.

IC cards

[IC cards](#) began as pre-paid passes for use on public



transport but have now become widely accepted as a form of payment in shops, cafes and vending machines. The cards can be bought and recharged at train stations across the country.

Money changers

You'll find the usual currency exchange booths at Japan's airports, but you may have more trouble locating them in towns and tourist areas. The exchange rates are usually not very good, so you may get a better deal withdrawing money from an ATM or ordering money from your bank before you leave Australia.

Tip: Unlike in most countries, you're likely to get a better exchange rate on arrival at a Japanese airport than you would in a Japanese town, according to [tripadvisor.com](#).

Travellers' cheques

Travellers' cheques aren't widely accepted in Japan, except by some major hotels, and at airports, post offices and some banks. Cashing your cheque at a bank is likely to be time consuming, but you may get a slightly better rate than if you were changing cash.



Travel money cards

If you're concerned about money security (there's very little need to be concerned in Japan), consider a [travel money card](#) or 'cash passport'. They can be pre-loaded with a foreign currency and used like a credit or debit card, and cancelled if lost.

Tip: Most travel money cards will accept Japanese yen, with the exception of the American Express Global Travel Card.

For more advice on overseas spending see our [Japan currency and money guide](#).

For more information read our travel insurance [buying guide](#), and to choose the best cover, see CHOICE's [travel insurance reviews and comparisons](#).

Check with your insurer about exclusions that may affect you, including skiing, sports, car hire, and pre-existing medical conditions. You may need to pay an extra premium to be covered.

Be aware that anything that happens to you while under the [influence of drugs or alcohol](#) is unlikely to be covered by insurance.

Tips:

- Keep a print-out of your travel insurance details with you at all times while on your trip.
- Share your insurance details with family or friends before you leave.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is essential, particularly in Japan, where the cost of medical care can be very high. Buy insurance at the same time as you book your trip, that way you'll be covered if you have to cancel for some reason before you go.





Handy links and apps

Consider adding these links and apps to your phone, tablet or laptop before you go.

Tip: Try to find apps that work offline so they won't chew up your data or stop working when you don't have an internet connection.

- Travel apps such as [City Guides](#) (Tokyo and Kyoto) and [Triposo](#) (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Yokohama and more) offer maps, hotel search, restaurant recommendations and other travel tips.
- [NAVITIME](#) is a transport planner app covering 80 train lines and over 700 stations in Japan.
- [Currency conversion apps](#) help you work out costs in Australian dollars.
- [Translation apps](#) help with communication. [Imiwa](#) (for iOS) is a free Japanese/English dictionary and phrase-builder with speech synthesis. Google Translate also works very well – download the Japanese language pack and the app will work offline. You can even photograph Japanese text, such as street signs and menus, and see it translated into English.

Tip: To save a map onto your mobile device for offline use, select the area on Google Maps then select 'Save offline map' from the menu and follow the directions on the screen. Your GPS positioning will still work on the saved map, even when you don't have access to the internet. Alternatively, go to 'Offline maps' in the menu and select a city.

- [jnto.org.au](#) (Japan's official tourism website).
- [japan-guide.com](#) has extensive information about transport, culture, accommodation and more.
- [jorudan.co.jp](#) or [hyperdia.com](#) for train timetables.
- [xe.com](#) for currency exchange rates.
- [wikitravel.org/en/Japan](#) for crowd-sourced information on culture, travel tips and more (may not always be accurate).

ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Flights to Japan, airport guides, key destinations, transport, car hire, accommodation, tours and more.

Flights

Flight time from Australia: 7.5+ hours

- Airlines that fly directly between Australia and Japan include Japan Airlines, Qantas and Jetstar.
- **Direct flights** are available from Sydney, Melbourne, Cairns and the Gold Coast to Tokyo; and from Cairns and the Gold Coast to Osaka.
- Many other airlines fly indirectly to Japan (including Virgin Australia, Singapore Airlines, China Airlines, Cathay Pacific, to name a few) and **domestic flights** connect Tokyo and Osaka with other airports throughout the country.

At the airport

If you're entering Japan as a tourist on your Australian passport, you **probably won't need a visa**. Immigration should be a fairly easy process, although there may be queues.

Most flights from Australia will arrive at Tokyo Narita Airport or Osaka Kansai Airport.

Tokyo - Narita International Airport (NRT)

- 60km east of Tokyo city centre.
- Taxis leave from outside all three terminals.
- **Fixed fares** are charged based on the zone you're travelling to. Passengers pay extra for tolls and a surcharge for late night travel.
- The cheaper, and faster, way to reach the city is by **express train** or **bus**. Use japan-guide.com to plan your trip from the airport to central Tokyo, Shinjuku, Tokyo Disney Resort, Haneda Airport and other destinations.
- **Car hire** is available from Terminals 1 and 2. Companies include Nippon, ORIX, Nissan, Toyota and Times Car Rental.
- A free **shuttle bus** runs between the terminals.
- Airport website: narita-airport.jp

Osaka - Kansai International Airport (KIX)

- 50km south of Osaka city centre. 100km south-west of Kyoto. 70km from Kobe.

- Taxis leave from outside Terminals 1 and 2. There are [set fares](#) for trips to downtown Osaka. Other journeys are charged by the meter.
- [Express trains](#) and [buses](#) connect with central Osaka, as well as Itami Airport, Universal Studios and the nearby cities of Kyoto and Kobe. Use [japan-guide.com](#) to plan your trip.
- A [high-speed ferry](#) connects with nearby Kobe Airport and takes approximately 30 mins.
- [Car hire](#) is available from the Aeroplaza (a three minute walk from Terminal 1 or a shuttle bus ride from Terminal 2). Companies include Nippon (open 24 hours), Nissan, Toyota, ORIX and Times Car Rental.
- Airport website: [kansai-airport.or.jp](#)

Departure tax should be included in the price of your air ticket, so there's no need to worry about setting cash aside.

Key destinations and their airports

Tokyo	Narita International Airport	(NRT)
	Haneda International Airport	(HND)
Osaka (Kyoto, Kobe)	Kansai International Airport	(KIX)
Nagoya	Chubu Centrair International Airport	(NGO)
Fukuoka	Fukuoka Airport	(FUK)
Nagasaki	Nagasaki Airport	(NGS)
Hiroshima	Hiroshima Airport	(HIJ)
Sapporo	New Chitose Airport	(CTS)
Okinawa	Naha Airport	(OKA)

Getting around

Tip: Check if you need to pre-book any tickets.

Trains

Trains are one of the best ways to travel in Japan. The Shinkansen (bullet) trains are world-famous for their efficiency and lightning-fast speeds of up to 320km/h. An extensive rail network covers Japan's four main islands, connecting almost every town and city. About 70% of trains are run by Japan Railways, the other 30% are privately run (see this [list of operators](#)).

There are two classes of travel: ordinary class and 'green car' (first class) which is more





spacious. A few services offer sleeper carriages (for example, Tokyo-Sapporo) but the high-speed trains have mostly eliminated the need for these.

Tickets can be expensive (**tip:** the faster the train, the pricier the ticket), so it's often worth investing in a seven-day, 14-day or 21-day [Japan Rail Pass](#). There are also regional rail passes for travel within certain areas. A rail pass will often work out cheaper than even one long-distance return ticket, so it's worth comparing prices.

Tip: Rail Passes are for tourists only and can't be purchased within Japan. They can be ordered in advance at [internationalrail.com.au](#) or [jrpass.com](#) or from [authorised travel agents](#) in Australia. However, it's the opposite case with ordinary rail tickets, which can't be purchased in advance from Australia and are only available in Japan.

A [Seishun Juhachi Kippu](#) pass can be a big money-

saver if you're travelling between certain dates during Japan's school holidays. Available at train stations, the pass gives you five days of unlimited travel on Japan Rail local and rapid trains (not on express or bullet trains). Using a Seishun pass you can still travel long distances across the country – only at a slower rate and a much cheaper price.

You can search train timetables and compare fares at [jorudan.co.jp](#) or [hyperdia.com](#) but reservations can't be made online from Australia.

Tickets can be purchased from vending machines or ticket booths at stations. If you have trouble making yourself understood, write down where you're travelling from and to, on what date and time, and in which class. Some train stations have English-language forms that you can fill out. See [japan-guide.com](#) for more advice on buying tickets, and [seat61.com](#) for detailed advice on Japanese train routes, train types and photos of carriage interiors.

Buses

Buses are a much cheaper alternative to trains. Many long-distance routes run as overnight services at a fraction of the price (and a fraction of the speed) of express trains. Tickets can be bought at bus and train stations or at tourist information offices. Many bus companies don't have English-language websites but one of the major providers, Willer Express, accepts online bookings at [willerexpress.com](#). The company also offers a three- or five-day [Japan Bus Pass](#) – a much cheaper alternative to the Japan Rail Pass.



Tip: The Japan Rail Pass is accepted on some bus services operated by Japan Railways.

Ferries

Japan is made up of more than 6000 islands, so boats and ferries are a common (and very scenic) means of transport. Daytime and overnight ferries connect the main northern islands of Honshū and Hokkaidō and the southern islands of Kyūshū and Shikoku, with ticket classes ranging from a tatami mat on the floor to a private cabin. Although many people prefer the speed and convenience of flying, ferries tend to be much cheaper, and they're the only way to transport a car or motorcycle between the islands.



See japan-guide.com for national route maps and timetables. Ferries are operated by many different companies, most of which don't have English-language websites. Tickets can be booked at ports or through tourist information offices and travel agents.

Domestic flights

Japan's domestic airlines include All Nippon Airways (ANA), Japan Airlines (JAL), Skymark, Air Do, Skynet Asia Airways, IBEX Airlines and Starflyer. If you're planning on booking more than one domestic flight, particularly to any destinations that would normally incur a high fare, consider a [oneworld](#) 'Welcome to Japan' or 'Yokoso' discount pass from JAL or a [Star Alliance Japan Airpass](#) from ANA. Both passes offer set prices with discounts for up to five domestic flights.

Transport tips:

➤ rome2rio.com is a great resource for working out how to get from A to B, anywhere in the world, by almost any means of transport.

➤ japan-guide.com has detailed information about Japan's many transport systems, including city-specific advice.

The best way to get around towns and cities varies from place to place, but you'll find excellent public

transport networks and taxis almost everywhere you go. If you're planning to use public transport, it's worth picking up an [IC card](#) – a pre-paid pass for use on buses and trains – at the beginning of your trip. IC cards have become widely accepted as a form of payment in shops, cafes and vending machines. The cards can be bought and recharged at train stations across the country.

Taxis

Taxis in Japan are almost always licensed and metered. You can spot a licensed taxi by its green number plate. Fares aren't cheap, compared to using public transport, and in most cities they'll increase by around 20% at night.



Drivers aren't likely to speak English, so it's best to have the address of your destination written down or to point it out on a map. Japan's taxi drivers are generally very trustworthy and there's little need to worry about the kind of scams and rip-offs common in other Asian countries.



Tip: Most taxis now accept credit cards, but be sure to ask before you get in. Drivers will not expect to be tipped.

Car hire

Although Japan has an excellent public transport system, you may want to consider hiring a car if you're travelling to rural areas or want more freedom to explore.



The main rental companies include Nippon, ORIX, Nissan, Toyota and Times Car Rental.

Budget, Avis and Hertz also operate in Japan, but they generally act as agents for the local companies, so their rates will probably be no better. They will, however, be easier to communicate with in English. You can book car rental either through the above company's sites, or through the English-language comparison sites japan-experience.com and tocoo.jp.

Tips:

➤ Check that your [travel insurance](#) covers you for driving, and make sure the car is properly insured either through your own insurance or through the rental company.



➤ There are two types of driving insurance in Japan, jibaisekihoken (compulsory insurance) and nin'i no jidoshahoken (voluntary insurance). It's recommended that you have both.

➤ You may get a cheaper rate from a local car hire company, but international companies are likely to be easier to deal with if you get into a dispute.

➤ Japan has some toll roads, so you may need an electronic tag included in your rental.

➤ Ask for English-language GPS when you book.

More tips in our [car hire guide](#).

Driving in Japan

Japan has an extensive network of good quality roads that are relatively safe and easy to navigate. Congestion and expensive parking, countered by cheap and easy public transport, makes driving unappealing in cities, but it's worth considering if you're venturing out of town.

➤ You'll need an [International Driving Permit](#) as well as your Australian licence.

➤ Vehicles drive on the left side of the road.

➤ Japan has zero tolerance for drink-driving and the blood alcohol limit is 0%. It's even an offence to be a passenger in a car with a drunk driver.

➤ Front and back seat belts must be worn.

➤ Children under six must use child seats. These can be ordered in advance from most car hire agencies.

➤ Most road signs are in Japanese and English.

➤ Speed cameras may catch you if you break the speed limit.

- Drivers must give way to pedestrians.
- At intersections, cars going straight and turning left have right of way.
- Petrol stations accept credit cards. Some are fully serviced by attendants who are unlikely to speak English. Self-service petrol bowsers only have Japanese-language instructions.

Accommodation and tours

Tip: Have you booked your accommodation for at least the first night?

Accommodation options range from traditional ryokans (Japanese inns) to Tokyo's famous space-saving capsule hotels. Prices aren't cheap, especially compared to the rest of Asia, but gone are the days when the Australian dollar could hardly buy you a postage stamp in Japan. In most areas you'll find accommodation prices comparable to Australia or Western Europe.

Bookings can be made on the usual sites, such as [booking.com](#), [hotels.com](#), [expedia.com](#) or

[hostels.com](#). You may find a more competitive rate through the hotel's own website (if it has one) or through local sites such as [japanican.com](#), [ryokan.or.jp](#) or [jalan.net](#). Check customer reviews on Tripadvisor before you book.

Tip: [airbnb.com](#) can be a great place to find a cheap apartment rental or a homestay with locals.

Tours can be organised once you're in Japan, or in advance through an international tour agent such as [intrepidtravel.com](#) or a specialist agent such as [jtctravel.com.au](#) or [japanpackagetours.com.au](#). Search Tripadvisor or Viator for reviews and recommendations from other travellers. For short tours and day trips, consider waiting until you're in the country - you're likely to have greater choice and find better deals, or you may discover it's easy enough to find your own way around.

Package tours are a low-stress option for travellers who don't want to organise their flights, accommodation and on-the-ground transport separately. Ski packages to Japan are particularly popular with Australian travellers. For deals, check with airline and travel booking sites as well as with travel agents. ■

