

# Mike's Japan



I have lots of Japanese friends and I often visit them in Japan. I have noticed that the conversation flows more freely after a few glasses of sake. I then get to hear about things I might not otherwise know. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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## 1 Country and People



The islands of Japan stretch down the Asian mainland from latitude 45° to 25°, almost exactly the same as the east coast of the USA. The distance from the tip of Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the far south is about the same as from Halifax to Miami. It is equivalent to going from Bordeaux to the Canary Islands.

In winter, icebergs come down from the Bering Straits and the sea freezes in northern Hokkaido. In Okinawa (off the map to the south-west) the weather is still hot and balmy.

The main island of Honshu has the sort of weather normally associated with continental climates. Snow is not unusual in Tokyo in winter and uncomfortably hot conditions are the norm in summer.

The history of Japan has similarities with Europe. Just as Europeans derived much of their culture from Rome so the Japanese took a lot of theirs from the Chinese. This shows in the written language. Japanese is totally different from Chinese. As a consequence, Chinese characters have to be supplemented by a syllabary (sort of alphabet) when used to write Japanese. The result is a complicated mess that has become even messier with the use of the Roman (ABC) alphabet in recent years.

Written Japanese is a language in itself and this is a major obstacle to reform. The Chinese characters often convey subtle meanings which cannot be expressed in words. Reading Japanese is (even for Japanese) a bit like doing a translation job. More than one reading is possible.

Japan sits on the Pacific Rim of Fire and owes its very existence to volcanoes. It is situated slightly to the west of the junction of the Asian tectonic plate and the Pacific plate. The latter dips down as it makes its way northwards and pushes under the Asian plate. A lot of melting takes place when this happens and lava forces its way to the surface.

Japan is mainly mountains. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain: Japan would be a mighty big country if it were ironed flat.

No matter where you go, you will find volcanoes. They stick up along the spine of the country and have created a mountainous landscape with few flat areas suitable for habitation. Japan is an immensely crowded country in some places and sparsely populated in others.

As you travel around, you will see small paddy fields kept alive by government subsidies. Elsewhere, highly efficient market gardens are using the latest technologies to produce fruit and vegetables.

Ancient shrines and temples dot the countryside. The "English garden" with flowers is becoming more common but many people stick to the traditional garden of shrubs and manicured trees.

Forests cover the mountains. Many are plantations. Others are natural. The display of autumn colours is spectacular and city folk flock out to admire it. The mountain roads are often very crowded at that time of year.

A few old castles survive from the past. Where they have been destroyed, concrete replicas are often built and used as museums.

Modern urban life is vibrant in Japan. You will find museums, art galleries and workshops specialising in arts and crafts. Dining out is an everyday experience for many inner city folk and whole areas of the larger towns are given over to restaurants. The youth culture is alive and well. Japanese girls love to dress up and parade with their friends. Fashions change from week to week.

## 2 Getting Around



**There was a time when you had to speak Japanese to travel in Japan and you needed a fat wallet. Those days have gone. The Japanese Yen is no longer highly priced and enough people speak English for you to be able to get around. However, bear in mind that the Japanese are not brilliant linguists. Like many English speakers, they find it difficult to speak any language except their own.**

Getting around is easy. The country has a superb rail and road system. You can take a train, travel by bus or hire a car. If you plan to take domestic flights see if these can be purchased as part of your international air ticket, as this can save money.

Car hire prices are about the same as in most developed countries. My wife speaks fluent Japanese and we usually take a train to where we are going to start our tour. We leave the railway station and shop around in the car hire places that are to be found near most big railway stations.

If you don't speak Japanese, use the car hire counters at the airport because this is where you will find the English speakers. Then take a train to where you want to pick up the car. An international driving licence will be needed together with your national licence.

The Japanese drive on the left and use the same international road signs as in most countries. Drinking and driving is strictly prohibited but there is a relaxed attitude towards speed limits, which are set low and not rigorously enforced. I set my speed to match that of other road users. On the whole, the standard of driving is good.

If you are planning to travel by train, take advantage of the generous rail passes that are available to visitors from overseas. Take a look at [www.jrpass.com](http://www.jrpass.com) and shop around to see what is the best deal for you. At the time of writing (Jan 2016) rail passes (for foreigners) can only be purchased from outside Japan. My Japanese friends wish they could buy them on such favourable terms.

**Money:** Major international bankcards (Visa, MasterCard etc.) are accepted almost everywhere for purchases. The problem comes when you try to withdraw money from a cash machine (ATM). Hardly any of the banks accept non-Japanese bankcards. I always take some Japanese currency with me. When I want to withdraw cash, from an ATM, I go to a **post office** in a major centre. These are run by the Japanese Government and have ATMs that accept international cards.

### 3 Places to Stay



**Secure your accommodation well in advance. The Japanese tourist industry is booming. Last year (2015) the country welcomed more than 20 million guests from overseas. Many come from China. They come on weekend trips. Be aware of that. Finding accommodation at weekends can be next to impossible. On a recent trip to Tokyo, my wife and I were obliged to travel to Chiba (about 80 km away) in order to find a place to spend the night.**

We used to travel around without making reservations. All we needed to do was head for the main railway station and check out the hotels in the immediate vicinity. Those days have gone.

You can no longer amble around. That's a shame for those of us who don't like to plan our holidays in detail. Some of my young Japanese friends overcome the problem by camping. They head for the hills at sunset and kip down amongst the trees.

If you plan to camp, bear in mind that campsites are few and far between and generally intended for school parties and youth groups. Older people, in Japan, have not caught onto the idea of camping. The few who continue to do so, after the age of eighteen, are like my crazy friends or they are on walking treks.

My wife likes to stay in the old-style inns. If you go to one you will have the opportunity to sample traditional Japanese hospitality. Guests sleep on the floor on futons that are stored away in the day and rolled out at night. Cushions or low chairs are available for sitting. Tea and biscuits are free. Meals are usually served in rooms as well as in the restaurant. There is often a choice of both traditional Japanese and Western food.

**Photos:** Top, a traditional inn. Below, futon room and restaurant area.



**Search the internet for places to stay:**

- Inn groups that cater for non-Japanese speakers: [www.Japaneseinngroup.com](http://www.Japaneseinngroup.com).
- Most big hotel chains have pages in English and staff with enough English to book you into your room. I have joined the Toyoko Inn Club ([www.toyoko-inn.com](http://www.toyoko-inn.com)). Take a look at them and some of the other hotels that advertise on the net. Prices will remain low so long as Prime Minister Abe manages to peg the Yen at a low exchange rate.

## 4 Places to Eat



**Food is becoming faster and increasingly Westernised in Japan. As a Japanese friend remarked: it's what happens when everyone wants to go to work and no one wants to stay at home and do the cooking.**

As a visitor, you will have little trouble finding a hamburger joint or a place that sells chicken and chips (French fries). At the same time, there is no shortage of good, old-fashioned, Japanese fast-food. The noodle bars and sushi trains are still doing a brisk trade and they are cheap.

Eating out is cheap in Japan compared with most developed countries. The problem for a non-Japanese speaker is to find what you want. Hamburger and chicken fry are easy because the signs are impossible to miss. Noodle bars and restaurants present a greater challenge.

The more interesting eating establishments aren't obvious. If you want something more exciting than a place where office workers go at midday, look for paper lanterns. They usually indicate that the proprietors have gone out of their way to create a bit of atmosphere.

Let's suppose you have located a suitable place. If it's a hamburger joint it will be like anywhere else. You merely go to the counter and point at a picture on the wall. If it's a noodle bar, there's so little choice it hardly matters. If it's a beer hall, it's easy. They have menus with pictures and prices in the straightforward (1,2,3 ...) numerals that everyone can read.

Beer halls are my favourites. The staff dress like pirates. Many are students. There's a lot of yelling when new customers arrive, gongs sound and raffle tickets are drawn from a jar (in the better establishments). You can order small amounts and take time eating while you down a few beers. The choice is so wide that even fussy palates can be satisfied.

Restaurants present the real challenge. You think that everything is straightforward but you are wrong. You have been fooled by the plastic displays in the window (see photo below). They show replicas of the dishes you can order and many are highly realistic. Then you realise that the names are in Japanese and there are no numbers beside them. I speak a primitive form of Japanese and can understand the odd written word yet I'm sometimes forced to take staff outside and point to a dish in the window.



The problem doesn't end there. For some annoying reason, many restaurants feel obliged to give prices in an old fashioned script that you don't see anywhere else except in Shinto temples and funeral parlours. Mercifully, it's simpler than Roman numerals. Each character corresponds to a numeral normal people use. So if there are three of them you know the price is less than 1000 yen. It helps to remember that one horizontal stroke corresponds to 1, two strokes make 2 and three make 3. After that it gets more difficult. Take a look at the picture, above, to see what I mean.

When I'm in Tokyo, I often eat in the shopping area below Tokyo Station. There's a vast expanse of streets down there and most are packed with restaurants. The main customers are office workers so I try to avoid the midday break. Ten years ago, most served Japanese meals. Now, I'm having difficulty finding a place that does not serve a Japanese version of Western food. If you want to eat Western (or something like it), Tokyo Station could be the place for you.



## 5 Narita Stopover



**A lot of people break their journey at Narita, which is Japan's main airport and about an hour away from the centre of Tokyo by train. There are various possibilities.**

You can check into the airline hotel at the edge of the airport and eat in the hotel restaurant with a whole lot of other international travellers. Alternatively, you can book in and take the next hotel bus to Narita city.

Most buses stop at the main railway station and you can walk through it to the top of the high street, which is packed with tourist shops and eating houses. You can choose to dine there with other tourists or you can hunt out the places where the locals eat.



My preference is for the beer halls near the station. They are in high-rise buildings and you have to look at the advertising signs to find them. The signs are lavishly illustrated and written in both Japanese and English so you will have no difficulty. The beer halls sell drinks and snacks from an illustrated menu. All you have to do is point and hold up one or more fingers to show how many items you want. Needless to say, places in Narita are accustomed to serving people who can't speak Japanese.

If you have time, stroll down the high street to the magnificent temple gardens (Top image). These are shut after sunset so you might consider spending a second night in Narita to see them. You could also take a trip into Tokyo. As always, surf the net to find places to stay.

## 6 Tokyo



**I have friends who left well-paid jobs in Tokyo for a more relaxed lifestyle but they make frequent trips back. It's a great place to visit. Whether you are a teenage tearaway or a serious-minded intellectual, you'll not be disappointed. There's a lot to turn you on so long as you have time to enjoy it.**

When my wife and I go to Tokyo we generally stay in one of the many inns that specialise in taking foreign guests. On our last two visits we stayed in Asakusa. That's a famous temple area and it has a lot of character. I'm reminded of parts of London that have retained something of their Cockney heritage. There are stalls selling things, guys with rickshaws, priests, nuns and girls in kimonos.



During the day, Asakusa is overrun with tourists. When night falls the tourists leave and the atmosphere changes. Side streets light up. Shutters are opened. Tables are brought out onto pavements and suddenly it's like a small town where everyone knows one another and every night is party night.

Getting around in Tokyo is easy. You go to the nearest Metro station and take a train. Timetables and maps are in Western (ABC) script as well as Japanese. You can buy a ticket from a machine or use the ticket office. Many railway staff know enough English to tell you what to do. If you look suitably lost, there's a fair chance some nice person will come to your aid.

If you want to take a look at top department stores and chic restaurants then the Ginza is the place for you. For the latest in electronic wizardry, go to Akihabara. If you want to see where the kids have their rave parties, try Shibuya and Harajuku. The photo on the cover was taken at Shibuya.

The nation's top art galleries and museums are at Ueno. You will also find the ancient shrine of the Tokugawa family (of Shogun film fame) in the park there. The famous Ueno markets are next to Ueno station. Hang on to your wallet and see if you can spot any Yakuza.

Sumo enthusiasts should visit Ryogoko, which is where the wrestlers live. Go just after breakfast when they are walking to their training sessions in full regalia. You'll make the day of some young guy if you photograph him and ask for his autograph.



For books, private art galleries, and shops selling old prints and manuscripts go to leafy Kanda.

## 7 Daytrip to Nikko



**Nikko is up in the mountains to the north of Tokyo and is famous for its temples and gardens. The royal family had a country retreat there and it is open to visitors.**

Use the train to get there. The station is in the high street and an easy stroll takes you to the main attractions, past numerous tourist shops and restaurants. I advise you not to take a car unless you go in midwinter. Finding a place to park can be a nightmare.

The natural scenery is magnificent. A huge, ornamental lake flows into a gorge down a waterfall that freezes in winter. Dress warmly if you go at that time of year. We visited Nikko in winter and spent most of our time huddled beside a fire in a restaurant overlooking the famous frozen waterfall.

The mountains around the lake are covered in majestic trees. These tower above huge boulders and are an important feature of the temple gardens.





Don't forget your camera. You could spend an entire day taking photographs. The temples, royal holiday palace, lake, waterfall, sacred bridge and other attractions deserve your attention.

## 8 Daytrip to Mt Fuji



**Mount Fuji is to the west of Tokyo and visible from the nation's capital on a clear day. It is Japan's highest mountain at 3,776 m (12,385 ft) and is snow-capped throughout the year.**

Fuji is one of those rare volcanoes which looks like a volcano when seen from any angle. It is one of the world's most famous volcanos and one of the most beautiful.

To see it close up, get on a train to Fuji Yoshida. The town is an ancient pilgrimage centre for the mountain. It is a bit rundown following the collapse of the Japanese textile industry when factories relocated to cheap-labour countries. But, the old shrines and viewing spots are still there.

If you want to go up the mountain, get back on the train and continue to the next stop. There's a gigantic amusement park there and you can't miss it. Buses leave from outside the station and drive through the forested area at the base of the mountain to

the start of the cinder cone. There's a visitors centre where you can have coffee and learn how the volcano works. You can also press on further up the mountain.

Guides with ponies will take you part way. You can also join the hardy types who trudge to the very top. You will, of course, have to come fully prepared with the necessary climbing gear if you want to do that.

The three photos were taken from leafy suburbia in Fuji Yoshida, depressed downtown Fuji Yoshida and the amusement park at the bottom of the mountain. The last was shot after it had started to snow. In case you are wondering, that's cherry blossom on the trees. The weather in Japan can be unpredictable.

## 9 Visit a Castle



Japan and Europe have a lot in common. Unlike China, neither had a strong central authority in medieval times. Power lay in the hands of feudal lords who controlled vast stretches of territory. They went to war with one another and paid lip service to kings and emperors.

The Europeans built out of stone. That wasn't an option for the Japanese. Earthquakes are common and stone castles would soon be shaken down. The solution was to build in wood and place the castle on a high stone platform made from irregular blocks that would (hopefully) settle back into their original positions after a big shake.

The castle mounds have survived in most places but the wooden structures rarely withstood the ravages of time. They are vulnerable to fire and costly to maintain.

My first picture is of Himeji Castle in southern Honshu. It is one of the few to have survived in something like its original condition. Those that follow are of Kumamoto Castle in Kyushu.



It is 30-metres high which gives an idea of its massive scale. The building is a 1960s reconstruction on the original stone platform. The exterior was made using authentic materials and methods. The interior was constructed using modern materials and houses a museum.



An adjacent building was completed recently and is a faithful copy of the original. It houses the great hall and associated chambers. The magnificent decorations, shown in the second photograph, are based on careful historical research and are judged correct down to the smallest detail.





The third photograph shows security precautions against ninjas and other assassins. The fourth is of a room in a restored samurai house. The samurai served their lord as soldiers and administrators and were drawn from the knightly classes, just as in Europe.

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