

Let's Go To Japan!

Once the Portland HouseParty is no longer in a holding pattern, we can go to the Portland Japanese Garden. The garden is always lovely. Here is a short video on the Garden.

<https://youtu.be/HxHE05lMDw8>. This is a longer video on the Garden by Oregon Public Broadcasting. <https://youtu.be/LOIUNVfKHTE>

In the meantime, let's visit Japan virtually while our Party is in a holding pattern. It always helpful to know the currency exchange is and right now it is USD: \$1 = ¥110.

Some fun facts about Japan

- Japan has an average of 1,500 earthquakes each year!
- 6,852 islands make up the country of Japan.
- There are more than 200 volcanoes in Japan.
- Vending machines are super popular in Japan -- there are more than 5.5 million of them around the country and they dispense everything from snacks to fresh eggs to toilet paper. (And some weirder stuff that a quick Google search that reveal to you.)
- The first geishas were men. (The word "geisha" means *person of the arts*.)

Japanese Phrases and Words to Learn

When traveling, it always helps to know a couple phrases in the language of the country we are visited so I found a few to get everyone started.

Hello: Kon'nichiwa

Thank you: Arigato

Thank you very much: Domo Arigato

Cheers! Kanpai

Bathroom: Basurumu

How much? Ikura

Delicious: Oishi

Beautiful: Kireina

Some manners to keep in mind when traveling to Japan:

- Eating while you walk is considered sloppy. Instead, find a place to sit and enjoy your snack.
- Pointing is considered rude. Instead, use an open hand to make gestures.
- Blowing your nose in public can be considered rude. Japanese people often go into the bathroom to blow a stuffy nose.

- On a crowded subway or train, it is polite to take off your backpack and hold it in your hands.
- Slurping noodles not only cools them down as you eat, but it indicates that the meal is delicious. So slurp away, it's the polite thing to do!
- Taking off your shoes is common courtesy before entering many places. If the floor is raised at the doorway, it is an indicator that you should remove your shoes.

Best Cities to Visit on your First Time in Japan - Japan is a huge country, and it would be an extensive list if we went through all the notable cities to visit. But if you are visiting Japan for the first time, these cities are a good place to start as they will give you a good taste of the country's culture and are relatively easy to get to and from.

Tokyo - This huge metropolis is likely where you're flying in and out of, and it is one of the most interesting cities we've visited anywhere in the world. From quirky experiences, to amazing foods, Tokyo is definitely worth some time on your itinerary. Our friend, Nicole, over at Wee Gypsy Girl has a great list of unique things to do in Tokyo.

Kyoto - Packed with history, important temples, gorgeous architecture and a charming atmosphere, this city is a favorite on many Japan itineraries. If you are traveling with your little ones, there are tons of things to do in Kyoto with kids.

Osaka - Another major hub to fly in and out of Japan, Osaka is worth a visit. It's full of history and food, and is a good city to have a night out with friends.

Hakone - At the footsteps of Mt. Fuji, Hakone is a peaceful retreat from the big cities of Japan and a chance to relax in an onsen and sleep in a ryokan.



If we were visiting Japan this month, we might attend a **Fire Festival**, in Nozawa, Japan. The Nozawa Onsen Fire Festival, Nozawa Onsen Dosojin Matsuri (or 野沢

温泉の道祖神祭り in Japanese), exemplifies this as one of the three great fire festivals in Japan. The old roads that run like rivers between mountain towns in Japan are dotted with gods. Known as *dosojin*, they are deities of roads and borders with their stone statues usually enshrined at village borders. *Dosojin* are good gods for the foreign traveller.

It takes roughly one hundred villagers to build the shrine for the Nozawa Fire Festival. The trees are cut down in October and brought down from the mountain and through the village on January 13th prior to being made into a huge wooden structure or *shaden*. After the *shaden* has been constructed, the priest from Kosuge shrine performs a ceremony endowing it with a *dosojin*. The highlight on January 15th is a “fire-setting battle” which ends up with the setting fire of the *shaden* with blazing torches by the offensive team and the offering of torches to the deity, making the festival truly spectacular and exciting. This famous Japanese festival is nationally designated as an important intangible folk cultural property. It originally began as an invocation for a good harvest, health and good fortune in the coming year, but has been expanded to include a good ski season as well. Taking place on January 15th every year, the festival is staged by men aged 42 and 25 (so-called “unlucky ages”) to celebrate the birth of a family’s first child, to dispel evil spirits and also to pray for happy marriage. If you want to see more detailed background information on the Nozawa Fire Festival [check this excellent local perspective](#).

My Favorite Subject - Japanese castles!

By the Sengoku period, Japanese castle primarily served as the homes for local feudal lords and their family, and aimed to intimidate rivals with their extensive defenses, imposing size, and the opulent design of their elegant façades and interiors. Although more stone was used in their construction than most Japanese buildings to ensure the fortresses would endure, the castles were still primarily constructed of wood, which means that many have been destroyed over the centuries. Like many European fortresses, Japanese castles were encased in huge stone walls and surrounded by protective moats. However, the walls only served to protect the castle compound and never extended to the surrounding castle towns (*Jōkamachi*), reflecting the lack of fear of invasion. Another significant difference between European and Japanese castle models



was the tendency to erect distinct tile-roofed buildings within the compound walls. Buildings inside the compound served as residences for Samurai, with those with a higher rank living closer to the central keep. Some castles contained an inner moat which separated Samurai residences by their rank.

My favorite Japanese Castle is Himeji. The hilltop castle is located in Hyōgo Prefecture. The castle complex comprises 83 buildings and [Himeji Castle](#) is said to be the most pristine example of traditional Japanese castle architecture. Its exterior is a dazzling white, and many say that the structure resembles an egret taking flight. The samurai warrior Akamatsu Norimura built the castle in 1333 as a fortress, and the initial structure has been subject to significant remodeling schemes over the course of the past several centuries. Namely, several buildings were added as the castle changed hands. The castle miraculously survived WWII unscathed even though surrounding areas were bombed mercilessly. Himeji Castle is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. [Himeji Castle, 68 Honmachi, Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture 670-0012, Japan, +81 79 285 1146.](#)



Another lovely castle is Matsumoto, one of Japan's principal historic castles. Because of its black exterior, the castle is commonly known as the 'Crow Castle.' Matsumoto Castle resides in Nagano Prefecture, an easy train ride from [Tokyo](#) proper, and is a *hirajiro*, or flatland castle, which distinguishes it from many others that were strategically constructed on hills or surrounded by rivers. Built in the late 16th century, the fortress consisted of a series of moats, a complex system of walls, and gatehouses. In the late 1800s, it was sold at auction for the purpose of redevelopment. A local high school principal spearheaded the renovation efforts and raised funds to carry them out.

[Matsumoto Castle, 4-1 Marunouchi, Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture 390-0873, Japan, +81 263 32 2902](#)



Nagoya Castle is located in central Japan. During the Edo period, Nagoya stood within the most significant castle town in the area, Nagoyaa-juku. The castle of today was constructed in the early 17th century; however, its origins date back even further than this. The original castle was called *Yanagi-no-maru*, and the military governor Imagawa Ujichika built it as a gift for his son during the 1520s. Shortly after its completion, a warlord seized the castle and changed its name to Nagoya Castle.



Kaiseki cuisine

Kaiseki cuisine is an elegant meal of seven or eight courses of delicately prepared light dishes. Usually served as part of a traditional tea ceremony, each course is meticulously made and beautifully presented. Some dishes are served alongside your own stove, on which you can cook slices of raw fish and meat.

A ryokan is the best place to experience this traditional meal, usually served in your room by a private maid. Dishes vary, based on the freshest seasonal produce available. It's a chance for the chef to display his or her skills, producing precisely cut sushi, carefully balanced soups and grilled meats.