

Did You Know?

- Japan gets hit by more than one thousand earthquakes every year, or an average of three per day. Most of them are minor, but some cause serious damage.
- Japan's official name is *Nihon*, or *Nippon*, meaning "Land of the Rising Sun."
- Every year, Japanese schools hold sports festivals (*undokai*), in which students compete in various sports, races, and other activities. During these competitions, all of the students wear matching baseball caps as part of their uniforms.
- Sumo wrestling is the national sport of Japan. Sumo wrestlers eat special meals to help them gain weight so they can topple their opponent in the ring. The elaborate ceremonies before the match are usually longer than the actual competition.
- The *kimono* is the traditional clothing of Japan, worn by both men and women. *Kimonos* are full-length robes tied at the back with an *obi* (sash).
- Following World War II, Japan adopted a constitution that doesn't allow the country to have an army.
- Karaoke singing is a favorite way to spend free time and allows the singer to sing along with guided lyrics with music in the background. *Karaoke* means "empty orchestra" in Japanese.
- Small pets such as fish, dogs (small breeds such as Chihuahuas or toy poodles), and *stag beetles* (large beetles with jaws that look like antlers) are popular.
- There are millions of vending machines in Japan, and they sell everything from candy and sodas to cell phones and iPods.
- Japan has some 400,000 robots—more than any other country in the world. They work in factories and hospitals and help with rescue operations.
- In the past five years, the number of Japanese over one hundred years old has doubled to more than 20,000.
- Shoes are not worn in Japanese homes. The floor is raised about 6 inches at the entrance to a Japanese home to indicate you should remove your shoes and put on slippers before walking on the floor. Some floors are made of *tatami* (woven straw mats).

Flag

The Japanese name of Japan's flag is *Hinomaru*, meaning "circle of the sun." The red circle represents the rising sun. An ancient legend says that after Japan was created by the gods, it was the first land touched by the sun.



National Image

Sakura (cherry blossoms) appear frequently as symbols in Japanese art, song, and literature. In a tradition that started in the imperial court more than a thousand years ago, every spring, families and friends picnic under the beautiful pink and white blossoms.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)
145,914
Area (sq. km.)
377,915

Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku, and Kyushu are Japan's biggest islands, but the country has more than six thousand islands in total. Smaller islands are the tops of underwater mountains. All together, the nation is about the same size as Germany or just smaller than the state of California. The capital city of Tokyo is located on the island of Honshu. Forests and steep mountains cover much of Japan. Mt. Fuji, the tallest mountain in Japan, is an active volcano and a UNESCO World Heritage site. More than a million people climb it every year. There are more than two hundred other volcanoes dotting the country, which lies in the volcanic zone known as the Pacific Ring of Fire. The mountains protect the west coast from the *tsunamis* (tidal waves) that pound the east.

The climate is *temperate* (mild) in most places and tropical in the south. On the northern islands, especially Hokkaido, the winters are bitterly cold. Snowfall is heavy along the Sea of Japan. The summers, especially in the south, are warm and humid. The main rainy season begins in May down in Okinawa and works its way north until late July. The call of the summer cicadas can reach a quiet roar.

Population

Population
126,919,659

Japan has more people per square mile than almost any other country in the world. The majority of the population lives in cities like Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. Most people in Japan are Japanese, but some Chinese and Koreans also live there. Anyone who isn't of Japanese ancestry has to register in the city where they live and carry a foreigner identification card with them at all times. Non-Japanese don't have all the rights that the Japanese enjoy. The *Ainu*, the native inhabitants of Japan, live mostly on the northern island of Hokkaido. The biggest island, Honshu, is where most Japanese live. The Japanese have one of the highest life expectancies in the world, living on average five years longer than people in the United States. In Japan, people are known by their family name first and their given name last. The ending *-san* is often added as a sign of respect.



Language

The first page of a Japanese book is what Americans consider the last page. In other words, Japanese books are read from “back” to “front.” That’s because Japanese is written in a line from right to left and from the top of the page to the bottom. Japanese is the country’s official language. The Japanese use several alphabets. *Kanji* characters come from China. One character represents an entire word or idea. *Hiragana* is an alphabet used to spell out the words that make up *kanji*. It’s the first alphabet Japanese children learn in school. *Katakana* is an alphabet used for foreign words. Japanese written in the Roman (Western) alphabet is called *romaji*.

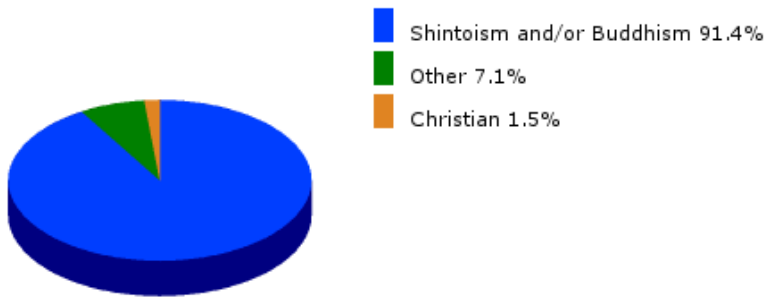


The Japanese use several different “levels” when speaking. These levels express how much the speaker respects the person they are speaking to. So you speak differently to your brother than you do to your teacher. You might greet your school friends with *Ohayou* (Good morning). Also common is *Genki?* (Hi! How’s it going?). However, to greet a teacher, you would bow and say *Ohayou gozaimasu* (Good morning) or *Konnichi wa* (Hello). English is taught in school and is often used in business.

Can You Say It in Japanese?

| | | |
|-----------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Hello | <i>Konnichi wa</i> | (kon-KNEE-chee wah) |
| Good-bye | <i>Sayounara</i> | (sai-OH-nah-rah) |
| Please | <i>Onegaishimasu</i> | (oh-neh-guy-shee-mossu) |
| Thank you | <i>Domo arigato</i> | (doh-MOH ah-REE-GAW-toh) |
| Yes | <i>Hai</i> | (high) |
| No | <i>lie</i> | (EE-eh) |

Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*


Most Japanese practice a combination of Shinto and Buddhism. *Shinto* means “the way of the gods” and stresses a person’s relationship to nature and its many gods. Amaterasu is the sun goddess and the highest Shinto god. There are many *shrines* (holy places) across Japan where the gods are honored. When entering a *shrine*, you wash your hands and mouth and then make an offering before clapping your hands together twice and then praying for loved ones or the things you need.



Buddhism focuses on finding beauty in life through meditation and finding enlightenment. Simple activities such as serving tea or arranging flowers can bring meaning to life. The ancient *samurai* warriors practiced Buddhism as a way of enriching their fighting arts.


Many households observe some ceremonies of both Shinto and Buddhism, such as Shinto marriages and Buddhist funerals, and most have small Shinto altars (*kamidana*) in their homes. But for most people, this is done more out of respect for social tradition than because of religious belief. A small percentage of the population is Christian.

History

Time Line

| | |
|---|--|
| 3000 BC | |
| ca. 3000 BC | Small clans form, settle in villages, and begin to farm rice |
| 660 | Legend says that Emperor Jimmu of the Yamato clan becomes the first ruler |
| AD 1 | |
| AD 500s | The Chinese writing system is adopted |
|  | |
| 538–52 | Buddhism spreads throughout Japan |
| 646 | The Taika Reforms organize Japan under a central government |
| 794 | Emperor Kammu establishes Heian (what is now Kyoto) as the capital city |
| 900s | The Katakana and Hiragana alphabets are developed; the emperor loses power to the <i>shoguns</i> (military rulers) |
| 1000 | |
| 1011 | <i>The Tale of Genji</i> , one of the world's first novels, is written in Japan |
| 1281 | Mongol warlord Kublai Khan attempts to invade Japan but is stopped by a typhoon |
| 1336 | Civil war breaks out as rival <i>shoguns</i> fight for control |
|  | |
| 1500 | |
| 1540s | Portuguese traders and Spanish missionaries bring Christianity to Japan |
| 1603 | Tokugawa Iyasu establishes the Tokugawa military government in Edo (what is now Tokyo) |

| | | |
|---------|---|---|
| 1639 | Japan closes itself to all outside people and influences; later on, Christianity is <i>banned</i> (outlawed) | |
| 1707 | Mount Fuji erupts | |
| 1800 | | |
| 1853 | U.S. commodore Matthew Perry arrives, and Japan opens trade with other countries | |
| 1868 | The <i>shoguns</i> are overthrown, and Emperor Meiji establishes a new government |  |
| 1889 | The Meiji Constitution goes into effect | |
| 1895 | Japan defeats China in war | |
| 1900 | | |
| 1910 | Japan takes over Korea | |
| 1914–18 | Japan fights on the same side as the United States and the other Allies in World War I | |
| 1923 | The Kanto earthquake strikes the Tokyo-Yokohama area, killing 140,000 people | |
| 1937 | The second war between China and Japan begins | |
| 1941–45 | Japan fights in World War II but surrenders to the Allied forces after atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki |  |
| 1964 | The bullet train begins operation | |
| 1989 | Emperor Akihito takes the throne when his father dies | |

| | | |
|---------|--|---|
| 1995 | Kobe is hit by a devastating earthquake, killing more than six thousand people |  |
| 1997 | The Japanese economy enters a severe <i>recession</i> (period of lower economic activity) | |
| 2000 | | |
| 2002 | Saturday school is no longer required by law | |
| 2003 | Japan sends peacekeeping troops to Iraq in the first deployment in a combat zone since World War II | |
| 2006 | The last Japanese troops leave Iraq | |
| 2009 | Japan faces its worst economic crisis since World War II | |
| 2011 | A huge offshore earthquake and <i>tsunami</i> (tidal wave) devastate miles of shoreline, damaging a nuclear plant, killing more than 20,000 people, and causing the nation to prepare for a radiation disaster | |
| PRESENT | | |

Ancient Chinese

Thousands of years ago, the first Japanese came from what are now China and South Korea. They lived in caves or pits, hunted animals, and gathered plants to eat. About five thousand years ago, they began to settle down. They lived in small groups, developed a distinct language, and farmed crops like rice. Legend says that Japan was founded in 660 BC by Jimmu, the first emperor. By AD 300, the small family groups had grown into large clans. The clans began to fight each other for territory. The Yamato clan was the most powerful and created the first empire. This imperial dynasty has ruled Japan ever since.



Shoguns

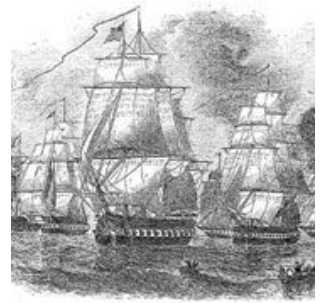
The emperors were like kings, but Japanese warriors known as *samurai* also held a lot of power. The *samurai* were highly trained in martial arts, archery, and sword fighting. They lived by a code of honor called *bushido* (the way of the warrior). Their loyalty, once given, lasted until their dying day. In the 1100s, the emperor's army generals, called *shoguns*, slowly became the real power governing Japan, and the *samurai* worked as law enforcement for the *shoguns*. The *shoguns* were always fighting each other for control. Civil war had been going for about one hundred years before Tokugawa Ieyasu finally took control of all of Japan in 1600. The Tokugawa clan ruled the empire for nearly two hundred years.



Return of the Emperor

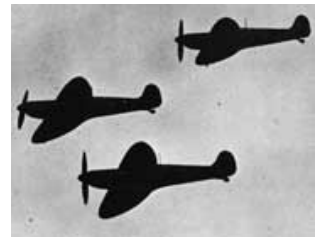
In the 1600s, the *shoguns* (army generals) closed Japan to the world because they feared the spread of Christianity and the influence of European culture on Japanese society. Foreigners were kicked out of the country, travel outside of Japan was forbidden, and trade with other countries was stopped. This lasted for two hundred years. During this time, the city of Edo (what is now Tokyo) became the center of the government. With a population of more than one million people, Edo was the largest city in the world at the time.

But in 1853, U.S. commodore Matthew Perry changed things. He arrived with four large naval ships and demanded that the Japanese open their country to trade. The *shogun* government, weak from fighting and *famine* (food shortage), agreed. This made the local lords (*daimyo*) angry because they were afraid the foreigners would take over the country. They overthrew the *shoguns* and gave the emperor back his power.



World Power

Japan's armies grew in strength. By the 1930s, Japan controlled Korea, Manchuria (part of China), and some Pacific Islands. But it wanted more. While the rest of the world fought in World War II in Europe and Africa, Japan fought the United States for control of the Pacific. On 7 December 1941, Japan attacked U.S. naval forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This led the United States to enter World War II. The fighting was fierce, but Japan surrendered after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. More than 150,000 people died from the bombings, and many more died later or were scarred for life from exposure to radiation from the bombs.



Postwar Japan

The United States helped rebuild Japan after the war. The occupation government helped establish a new constitution. The emperor was allowed to remain but was stripped of all governing powers. The Japanese often worked long hours and went without some things in order to progress. By the 1980s, Japan was one of the world's richest countries and a leader in electronics and vehicles. It had good relations with other countries and promised to encourage peace. Despite facing some economic difficulties in the 1990s, Japan now has one of the biggest economies in the world.



2011 Tsunami

In March of 2011, one of the most powerful recorded earthquakes in the world hit 70 miles (113 km) off the coast of Japan. The earthquake triggered a huge tsunami. The waves reached a height of almost 128 feet (39 m) and washed as far as 6 miles (10 km) inland. More than 20,000 people were killed, half a million lost their homes, and several nuclear power plants were damaged, causing radiation leaks. People all over the world came together in support of Japan. Today, the Japanese government and people are working hard to recover from this disaster and rebuild.



Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Baseball is a Japanese passion. It was brought to Japan in the 1870s by a professor from the United States. Little League teams play year-round, and almost everyone watches as many games as possible. Soccer, golf, volleyball, and tennis are also popular. Martial arts such as judo, kendo, and others began in Japan long ago and are still favorites today. Thousands of Japanese gather in indoor arenas to watch sumo wrestling. Kids enjoy playing video and computer games.



Holidays

Japan has many festivals with parades, colorful kites, special costumes, dancing, and fun. New Year's (*Shougatsu*) is the biggest and brightest event. People clean their homes and stores from top to bottom, send out postcards to friends and family, prepare huge dinners, and visit local *shrines* (holy places). Friends and families get together, and celebrations last almost an entire week. Traditionally, Buddhist temples ring their bells 108 times to drive out evil.



Food

The Japanese believe fresh food is the best. Rice is eaten at nearly every meal. The Japanese also like to eat *onigiri* (rice balls wrapped in seaweed). *Sushi* is rice and fish (cooked or raw) served together wrapped in seaweed and traditionally dipped in soy sauce. For something fast, Japanese will grab a *bento* (box lunch) from a street shop or train station. A *bento* is divided into sections holding rice, *sushi*, and vegetables. A favorite street snack is *takoyaki*, which is a small cooked ball of octopus and onions mixed with batter and rolled with fish flakes and seaweed flakes on the outside and eaten along with a sweet sauce. Noodles (*ramen* and *udon*) are popular, and so is *tofu* (bean curd). When the Japanese eat their noodles, they slurp them loudly to cool them down as they're eating them. It can also be a way of showing that the food is delicious. People eat with *ohashi* (chopsticks) and drink tea with every meal.



Schools

Adult Literacy
99%

Japanese kids are under a lot of pressure to do well in school. Their careers depend on which college they get into, and the competition is fierce. They spend a lot of time studying and even go to school for a half day on many Saturdays. Many attend *juku*, special private classes, every day after public school gets out until late at night. Japanese schools are very formal. The term *-sensei* is added to the last name of the teacher to show respect. So Mr. Ito would be called *Ito-sensei*. Japanese students usually eat lunch in their classrooms. They often help serve lunch to their classmates or clean up afterward. Children may have other chores to do at school as well, such as cleaning the hallways. Students in middle school and high school must wear uniforms.



Japanese kids start *youchi-en* (kindergarten) at age six. At this age, children are given a lot of responsibility, including walking to school on their own. Math and science are

very important subjects and are taught early on. When they turn 12, kids go to junior high, which lasts three years. Sports, clubs, and other *extracurricular* (outside of school) activities are very popular during junior high. Students must pass an exam to get into high school, which is also three years long.

Life as a Kid

Japanese kids usually have one or two siblings. Kids often share a room because apartments and homes are small. They wear special slippers inside the home and roll up their *futons* (mattresses) each morning. Japanese children like video games, computers, music, movies, scooters, and cool clothes. They also love reading *manga* (comic books) and watching *anime* (a style of animated shows or films). But in Japan, kids have to study hard, so they don't have very much free time. Many children also participate in school sports or take lessons to learn how to play a musical instrument, dance, perform martial arts, or speak English.



Society

Government

Capital

Tokyo

Head of State

Emperor Akihito

Head of Government

Prime Minister Shinzō Abe

Japan's emperor has no real power, but the royal family is still important for national unity, and the emperor is deeply respected by the Japanese people. According to tradition, the emperor can trace his family line back to the sun goddess. The current crown prince's firstborn is a girl, and because the emperor's line is traditionally not allowed to pass through women, there have been discussions about changing the law.

A prime minister governs the nation, and a *legislature* (called the *Diet*) makes the laws. Similar to the ancient clans, certain political families have held seats in the *Diet* for several generations, and voters remain loyal to them. The *Diet* has a 475-seat House of Representatives and a 242-seat House of Councillors. Councillors are elected to six-year terms, while representatives are elected to four-year terms. The voting age is 20.

Money and Economy

Currency

Yen



Japan has one of the largest economies in the world, and Japanese products are known for their high quality. Japanese brand names such as Sony, Panasonic, Honda,

Mazda, Canon, and Nintendo are famous worldwide. The Japanese *import* (buy from other countries) about half of what they eat because there isn't much flat land to farm. However, rice is the most important crop and is even farmed in backyards. Japan has a diverse economy. Most people work making or designing cars, electronics, or machines. Some of the world's most famous electronic companies are Japanese. The United States is Japan's biggest and most important trading partner.

Getting Around

Japan is a small country with a lot of people, so traffic jams are pretty common. Most families own a car, but in the cities, many Japanese use public transportation. Buses, trains, and subways help passengers get around in the busy cities. Sometimes the trains are so crowded that railway staff come out and cram passengers inside. You can get from one island to another on a plane or by taking the *Shinkansen* (bullet train), which is one of the fastest trains in the world. In cities, underground trains, regular trains, taxis, and bicycles are all commonly used modes of transportation.



Culture Facts & Contacts

Manga and Anime

Manga (comics) and *anime* (a style of animated shows or films) are wildly popular in Japan. People of all ages read *manga*, and the stories cover everything from superheroes, science fiction, and fantasy to mystery, romance, and comedy. Most *manga* are series with several installments or issues published. All the issues are gathered together later and published in one paperback volume. Popular series include *Sailor Moon*, *Battle Royale*, *Yotsuba&!*, and *InuYasha*. *Manga* cafés are also common, where people can sit and drink coffee and read *manga*.



Anime is known for its colorful graphics and often the exaggerated physical features of its characters, such as large eyes, hair, and arms and legs. *Anime* borrow a lot from *manga*, and many *manga* have been made into *anime*. World-famous *anime* filmmakers include Hayao Miyazaki and Mamoru Oshii. *Manga* and *anime* conventions are held around the world, and fans often go in costume, dressed as their favorite characters.

Learn More

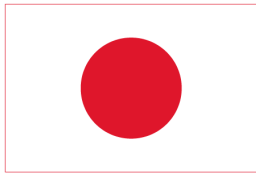
Contact the Japan National Tourism Organization, phone (212) 757-5640; web site www.jnto.go.jp. Or contact the Embassy of Japan, 2520 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 238-6700; web site www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/english/html.

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Japan



Japan is home to more than 80 active volcanoes; Mount Usu last erupted in 2000.

Sapporo
Mt. Usu
HOKKAIDO

Tokyo is one of the world's biggest cities.

SEA OF JAPAN
KOREA STRAIT
Lake Biwa
Tokyo
Yokohama
Sendai
HONSHU
Osaka
Shizuoka
Mt. Fuji
Kobe
Nagoya
Kyoto
Hiroshima
Okayama
SHIKOKU
PACIFIC OCEAN

Japan is just smaller than Montana, but it holds almost half as many people as the United States.

In 1995, an earthquake in Kobe killed around six thousand people.

Mount Fuji, an inactive volcano, is Japan's highest peak, at 12,388 feet (3,776 m).

Kitakyushu
Fukuoka
Nagasaki
Kumamoto
KYUSHU
RYUKYU ISLANDS
OKINAWA