



JAPAN

A CURATED GUIDE

ABRAHAM THOMAS

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About This Guide

1. About This Guide

This is a **curated** guide to Japan.

Most websites and guidebooks try to be comprehensive – they have information about every city, every neighbourhood, every sight. In a country like Japan, this can quickly get overwhelming.

Not this one. This is a guide that tells you exactly what to do, and when; where to go, and how. But also, what *not* to do; which sights are skippable; how to manage your time effectively. Follow my instructions and I promise you will have a magnificent vacation.

2. Why Trust Me?

First, I lived in Japan for many years, during which time I travelled extensively all over the country. And I've visited Japan a dozen or so times after I moved away. I think I do a good job of combining the insider / resident / Japanese speaker perspective, with the foreigner / visitor / tourist perspective.

Second, I think I have an unusually eclectic set of tastes, that I explored in great depth while living in and visiting Japan. This guide reflects those tastes and interests:

- Japanese aesthetics and design
- Buddhist temples and rock gardens
- Cityscapes, neon lights, nightlife
- Modern urbanism, transit, liveability
- Anime, manga, otaku and weeb culture
- Food, restaurants, markets and cooking
- Coffee, taiko, jazz and photography
- Art, calligraphy, prints and stationery

- Crafts, fabrics, everyday design
- Tools, gadgets, electronics, gear
- Zen philosophy and mindfulness
- Shinto shrines and respect for nature
- Japanese ways of balancing traditional and modern, speed and calm – attention to detail, the aesthetics of everyday things

Third, I'm an over-optimizer, a compulsive researcher and planner, and an enthusiast. You get to benefit from all those attributes!

3. What This Guide Includes

- Detailed itineraries and descriptions for all the places you should visit.
- Hundreds of 'insider' suggestions to make your journey extra enjoyable.
- Dozens of personal recommendations, from restaurants to souvenirs to sights.
- Lots of photographs! (and much more)

4. What This Guide Isn't

This is not an "off-the-beaten-path" guide. I do include a number of my personal favourite places to go, some of which are obscure. But I also include many of the more popular destinations: they're popular for a reason.

This is not a budget cheapo guide, nor is it a luxury YOLO guide. Instead, I try to follow a middle ground. Fortunately, many of the best experiences aren't expensive, and many of the most expensive experiences aren't very good.

5. Author's Note

I put a lot of time, effort, thought and love into this guide. If you liked it or found it useful, please let me know: at@abrahamthomas.info. Thank you for reading!

Planning Your Trip

1. Where To Go

Here is how I would spend two weeks on a first trip to Japan:

Day	Activities	Stay
0	Arrive Tokyo	Tokyo 1
1	Tsukiji, Ginza, Imperial Palace, Tokyo Station	Tokyo 1
2	Ryogoku, Asakusa, Akihabara	Tokyo 1
3	Monzen-nakacho, Nihombashi, Ueno	Tokyo 1
4	Train to Kanazawa + Kenrokuen	Kanazawa
5	Kenrokuen + Train to Kyoto + Nishiki Market, Gion	Kyoto
6	Kinkaku-ji, Ryoan-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Philosopher's Path	Kyoto
7	Kurama-dera + Osaka for dinner	Kyoto
8	Fushimi Inari, Kiyomizu-dera, Higashiyama	Kyoto
9	Arashiyama + Train to Hakone + Onsen stay	Hakone
10	Hakone loop + return to Tokyo	Tokyo 2
11	Shinjuku and Shibuya	Tokyo 2
12	Day trip to Kamakura	Tokyo 2
13	Free day to explore Tokyo neighbourhoods	Tokyo 2
14	Depart Tokyo	

This itinerary is divided into three 4-night stays, in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Tokyo, separated by 1-night stays in Kanazawa and Hakone. This arrangement is highly intentional: it minimizes packing, repacking, and carting luggage round, and is designed to take advantage of Japan's fantastic *takkyubin* service (see the section titled 'luggage optimization' for more).

You might think this is too much Tokyo and Kyoto, and not enough elsewhere. I disagree. For a first trip, Tokyo and Kyoto have everything you need to see and more; they are both inexhaustibly rich cities. You'll have plenty of variety (along

every dimension) just from spending your time in those two places, leavened with trips to Kamakura, Kanazawa, Arashiyama, Kurama, Osaka and Hakone. I'd strongly recommend focusing in this manner, rather than trying to visit more destinations in an effort to "cover the whole country".

If I had more time to spend in Japan, I would add Nikko, Mitake, Naoshima, Matsumoto, and Koyasan to my itinerary, maybe more Kanazawa as well. With even more time, I'd add a trip to Hokkaido, Kyushu or Okinawa. And Tokyo is an endless treasure: you could add another week

there and still just scratch the surface of things to see and do and experience.

Elsewhere in Japan: the Kumano Kodo and Shikoku Henro pilgrimage trails are both wonderful but require dedicated trips of their own. If you visit in August and have time, Kodo's Earth Celebration on Sado Island off the Niigata coast is a personal favourite. And if you come in Jan or Feb, the skiing in Hokkaido and the Japan Alps is world class. Other towns I like a lot are Morioka and Kagoshima.

Spend as much time on your holiday as you can! Japan is totally worth it. I lived there for many years; have visited the country a dozen times since then; and still, at the end of every trip, find myself wishing I had more time to spend there.

2. When To Go

Spring is the best time to visit Japan: 1 Apr to 31 May. Mild weather, lots of sunshine, and it's also cherry blossom season. Unfortunately, it's also the busiest time of year for tourists, for precisely those reasons. Avoid the 'Golden Week' holiday period (29 Apr to 5 May) if you can.

Fall is the next best time to visit: 1 Sep to 31 Oct. Again, mild weather, lots of sunshine, and you get to see spectacular fall colours in Kyoto, Kamakura and especially Nikko.

Summer is hot and humid. June is a bit rainy but not too bad. The first half of July tends to be quite wet. From about 15 Jul to 31 Aug is peak heat and humidity, but there's less rain. There may be some typhoons in Aug and Sep but they come and go quickly. Avoid the O-bon holidays in mid Aug.



Fall colours, Shoyo-en garden in Nikko

Winter depends on where you are. Tokyo and Osaka are generally mild: 5 to 10°C. Kyoto is a touch cooler and the houses tend to be older (hence less well insulated), but still nothing uncomfortable. Snow is rare in these cities and never stays on the ground; while the days are short, you'll get more blue skies and sunshine than at most other times of year. Any place in the mountains gets a lot colder, as do Kanazawa, northern Honshu, and Hokkaido. 30 Dec to 3 Jan is another holiday period to avoid. In general I like winter over summer.

Seriously, though, avoid the three major holiday periods if you can: Golden Week, O-bon, and New Year's. Tourist spots will be crowded, stations and trains packed, hotels full. Nothing insuperable, but you'll need to book train tickets and hotel stays at least a few weeks in advance, if you're travelling during those windows. Apart from that, any time is a good time to visit. My last trip was 26 Dec to 9 Jan and it was gorgeous: clear blue skies, not too cold, fresh and crisp and beautiful.

3. Getting Around Japan

By far the best way to get around Japan is by **shinkansen** ('bullet train'). These are comfortable, convenient, frequent and fast. Intercity train stations are central and well-connected to local subway and bus networks.

The cheapest way to ride the shinkansen is with a **Japan Rail (JR) pass**. The JR pass allows unlimited travel on all JR trains in the country, including the shinkansen, with one relevant exception: JR passes don't cover the Nozomi super-express shinkansen between Tokyo and Osaka. But they do cover the slightly slower Hikari shinkansen and the significantly slower Kodama shinkansen on the same route.

A 1-week JR pass costs about \$250; since a single return trip between Tokyo and Kyoto costs nearly that much, all you need is a couple more journeys to make this worth it. Note that JR passes must be bought before you enter Japan ([online](#) or from a travel agent in your home country) (this rule may have changed recently; please check).

Different shinkansen lines have different names. On my itinerary, you'll be taking the Hokuriku shinkansen from Tokyo to Kanazawa, and the Tokaido shinkansen from Kyoto to Tokyo (not to be confused with the JR Tokaido line between the same cities).

Shinkansen have reserved and unreserved compartments. Reservations are free for JR-pass-holders, and easy to get; just look for the booking office or 'green window' (*midori no madoguchi*) at any station, and say you want to make a reservation (*yoyaku*). Writing down your trip details on a post-it is a useful trick!

If the queue at the green window is very long, you can make reservations at a JR travel service

centre instead, or at an automated kiosk (English menus available). If you buy your JR pass online from the official [JR website](#), you can also reserve seats online, up to a month in advance.

Alternatively, you can just stand in line on the platform and board one of the unreserved compartments and hope to get a seat. You can also take any empty seat in a reserved compartment. Unless you're travelling in high season (see the holidays listed previously), you shouldn't have a problem.

Pro tip: For the best views of Mt. Fuji, sit on the right side of the train going from Tokyo to Kyoto, or the left side going the opposite direction. Fuji-san is about 30 minutes out from Tokyo; keep your eyes peeled, the train moves fast!



Fuji-san from the shinkansen

JR stations around the country sell '*eki-ben*' – eki means station and ben is short for bento, beautifully packaged box lunches – and they take pride in showcasing regional specialties. So if you're going to be on a train at lunchtime, I recommend buying an eki-ben before you board. Tokyo station has a large eki-ben store called Ekiben Matsuri, off the main east-west corridor just inside the Marunouchi Central gate.

4. Luggage Optimization

Public transit options in Japan are plentiful, convenient and cheap, and almost every station has elevators and escalators. Nonetheless, you may not fancy the idea of schlepping heavy luggage up and down city streets and station platforms. Fear not, here are three pro tips to make life easier:

Coin lockers can be found at every station (including many 100s of them at Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto's main stations) and at many bus stops. A small locker (handbag or backpack-sized) costs ¥100-200 per day, while a large one (suitcase-sized) costs ¥500-700 per day. Some of the older units require actual coins (don't worry, change machines are always present), while the newer ones can be paid for with your SUICA card. In addition, the major stations have cloak services (*kurōku*) who will store your baggage for you if you can't find a locker.

If you don't use the takkyubin (see next paragraph) between Tokyo and Kyoto, you can leave your suitcases in a coin locker at Tokyo station while travelling light to Kyoto and back (but the takkyubin is better). Coin lockers are useful not just for your suitcases but also for your shopping – if you buy souvenirs in the morning, you don't have to cart them around all day.

Takkyubin is Japan's domestic package delivery system and it's incredibly efficient and convenient not to mention amazingly cheap. There are two main providers: Yamato (aka *kuroneko* – 'black cat') and Sagawa. Drop your suitcase off at a service counter, and they will deliver to any address in the country by the next evening – no need to carry stuff with you when you travel! It might take a bit of planning around packing, but the convenience is wonderful. Most convenience stores offer takkyubin dropoff, and

there are dedicated service counters in many neighbourhoods as well as at Tokyo station, Narita airport and so on. If you're staying at a hotel, it's even better – most front desks will do everything for you.

Takkyubin does next-day delivery (not same-day), which is why I designed the itinerary the way I did. Stay in Tokyo 4 days. On the morning of your departure, ask your hotel front desk to send your big suitcase(s) by takkyubin to your Kyoto hotel. Then go to Kanazawa carrying just a day bag. Stay one night in Kanazawa, then proceed to Kyoto: your luggage will be there waiting for you! Repeat the process in the opposite direction as well: send your luggage from Kyoto directly to Tokyo, while you take a day bag (backpack, carry-on) to Hakone.



Shinkansen at Kyoto station

Finally, **buy a suitcase!** Japan makes excellent and reasonably priced luggage – Lojel and Frequenter are the best brands – stylish, lightweight hard-shell suitcases. Arrive in Japan travelling light, shop till you drop, and buy a suitcase or carry-on (or both) from Tokyu Hands or Shibuya Loft to carry all that loot back home.

5. Hotels, Inns and Ryokans

Japan has a number of home-grown business hotel chains which are really good: reasonably priced, clean and well-maintained, and generally frictionless to stay at. APA, Dormy Inn, Tokyu Stay and Villa Fontaine are all great. The only catch is that rooms tend to be small – best suited for solo or pair travellers. You can reserve directly or via booking.com, which is a bit painful but less so than other options.

A few family hotel chains have sprung up in recent years – the tourist equivalent of the business hotels mentioned above: Bon, Mimaruru, Yadoya etc. They're also excellent, and some have larger suites with cooking facilities. Many of these can be booked through Airbnb.

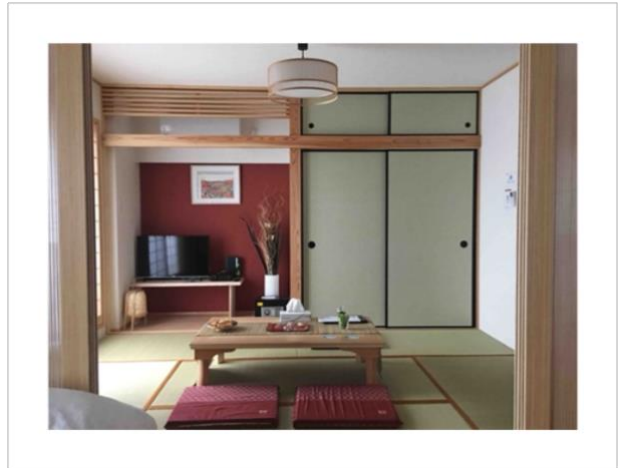
I've stayed at a couple of one-off Airbnbs in Japan and they were delightful, but they took some work (and expertise) to pick out, so I wouldn't recommend it unless (see above) it's actually a room in a hotel that you're booking, not an individual house or apartment. Also, Airbnbs make it harder to use the takkyubin, which is a bit of a disadvantage.

In small towns (and I include Nikko, Hakone, Kamakura, Mitake in this list), I recommend staying at a traditional Japanese inn – a ryokan or minshuku. Beautiful tatami rooms, hot tubs to soak in, and delightful meals included. Minshuku tend to be basic, ryokans slightly fancier. They're inevitably family-run. Note that most such inns only accept cash.

If you can afford it, try to spend at least one night at a truly high-end ryokan, ideally in Kyoto but any town should be fine. It's an aesthetic, culinary, visual and tactile experience like no other. Most of Kyoto's best ryokan are outside

the city proper, in the surrounding hills or river valleys.

Also try to stay at or at least visit an onsen – a hot spring resort. Hakone is the best place for this.



Tatami room in a minshuku

Most mid-range Western hotel chains in Japan are not as good as their Japanese equivalents, not even close. I'd choose Dormy Inn over Holiday Inn every time. But some of the high-end global establishments are excellent – for example the Four Seasons and the Park Hyatt in Kyoto.

TLDR: stay at Mimaruru or APA in Tokyo, Dormy Inn in Kanazawa, a ryokan or minshuku in Kyoto, an onsen hotel in Hakone, and then back to APA or Mimaruru or Dormy in Tokyo.

6. Travelling Within Cities

While a JR pass is all you'll need for long-distance travel, it won't cover your intra-city travel. Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and other cities have a dizzying array of public transport options: subway, light rail, heavy rail, buses and trams, operated by a mix of public corporations, private companies, JR and more.

Fortunately, you don't need to sweat the details; the system is perfectly and seamlessly integrated.

All you need is a **prepaid IC card** (brand names "SUICA" or "PASMO" in Tokyo, or "ICOCA" in Osaka), easily available at any station. Buy a card at an automated ticket kiosk, load up a balance of a few 1000 yen, and you can travel on virtually *any* mode of transport. Just tap your card at the start and end of your journey and the correct fare will be automatically debited, irrespective of transfers or who operates the system you're travelling on. Everything works nation-wide; it's incredibly convenient. You can even use your IC card to pay for purchases at convenience stores, coin lockers and taxis.

Each city also has its own array of unlimited 24-, 48-, and 72-hour transit pass options, which may make sense depending on your itinerary.

In Tokyo and Osaka you're unlikely to need anything beyond the metro system and perhaps a JR or private line here or there. But you'll find yourself using the bus network more often in Kyoto, Kamakura, Kanazawa and Nikko.

Don't even think about renting a car and driving.

7. More Traveller's Tips

Japan used to be a cash-based economy, but that's no longer true – almost every establishment now accepts credit cards, plus various payment providers including Apple and Google Pay, and of course IC cards. I found that it's substantially cheaper (better FX rates) to use a travel-specific credit card than to withdraw yen from an ATM.

That said, it's a good idea to have around 20 to 50,000 yen on hand for contingencies. The best place to get yen is from the **7-bank ATMs** that can be found inside seven-eleven convenience stores. (English menus, no foreign transaction fees). I believe you can convert currency at post offices as well, though I've never done so myself.

The Japanese are very helpful to tourists, so when in doubt – ask. Fluency in spoken English is still rare, but almost everyone can understand written English, so carry a small pad with you, and if you run into any difficulty, write down what you need. (Or type it into your phone – who uses pen and paper anymore).

Google Translate is your friend! Download the app, and also download its Japanese-English lexicon so that you can use it offline. The best feature is camera mode – point your phone at any kanji or kana to get an instant translation. After having been imperfectly literate for all my years in Japan (I can read hiragana and katakana and recognize several hundred kanji – a tiny fraction), this felt revolutionary. Even without camera mode, just type in what you want in English, and show the Japanese translation to people and you'll go far.

Convenience stores (Seven Eleven, Family Mart, Lawson, Yamazaki) are everywhere; they're open 24 hours and have an eclectic mix of daily household goods, from bread and milk to toilet

paper and detergent to magazines and umbrellas to beer and pre-cooked meals. Convenience stores are a great choice for breakfast or lunch on the go – I especially recommend their hot food shelves: agedori (fried chicken), kari-pan (curry buns), nikuman (pork dumplings) and more. Rice triangles wrapped in dried seaweed (onigiri) is another delicious and super-convenient snack/meal.

Vending machines are famously ubiquitous. I'm a fan of their canned hot coffee, it's surprisingly good. Also common are drugstores like Matsumoto Kiyoshi, that sell a lot more than just pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. Finally, every neighbourhood has a couple of '99-yen stores' which sell a variety of products at, well, Y99 each.



Vending machines on a street corner

You can rent a pocket wifi (battery-powered portable router) or buy a **local SIM card** at Narita or Haneda airports, and I recommend doing this, unless you want to substantially enrich your home country wireless provider with roaming fees. I prefer the SIM option myself, but you might choose pocket wifi if you're in large group (that sticks together), or have multiple devices, or have locked phones. On a recent trip I used Sakura Mobile and it was convenient and easy.

Here's a brief price list:

- Subway or local bus: Y150-400 per ride
- Taxi: Y650 minimum, Y1500 average
- Meals: Y800-1500 (cheap and quick)
Y2000-4000 (mid-range)
Y5000-15000 (fine dining)
Over Y25000 (ultra-luxe)
- Conbini snacks and drinks: Y100-200 each

Food should set you back around Y3000 per day, eating reasonably well but not including special treats. (As a foodie, I recommend spending a bit more – Tokyo and Osaka are both among the great food cities of the world).

If you don't take taxis too often, you can manage on about Y600-800 yen a day for local transport (over and above your JR pass). Temple, garden and museum entry fees are between Y300 and Y1000 each time.

Japan is amazingly clean, but public trashcans are rare (perhaps that's why). Carry a **plastic bag** with you to hold food waste, empty bottles, wrappers, all your travel debris, so that you can dump it later.

There is no tipping in Japan. Also, Japan is probably the safest country in the world.

8. Too Many Tourists?

Japan's popularity as a tourist destination has *exploded* in recent years: from 7M visitors in 2009 to 32M in 2019. And after 3 years of pandemic isolation, the tourist floodgates have opened again – mostly Chinese and Korean, but also many North Americans, and S.E. Asians. (Weak yen + rising prosperity elsewhere).



Visitors at Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kyoto

As a result, popular destinations can get insanely busy. It's hard to feel calm and contemplative at Arashiyama, beautiful though the bamboo grove is, when you're surrounded by 500 other visitors. There are queues and crowds everywhere: restaurants, shopping streets, museums, train stations you name it. (Let's not be snooty about this; you can't blame traffic when you *are* traffic.)

Fortunately, there are ways to work around this. Here are two very simple but very important suggestions to beat the crowds.

First, **make an early start** to every day. Jet lag is your friend! THIS ONE TRICK will get you ahead of 95% of the crowds and really unlock a different level of experience. Organize your days like this:

- Rise at 7, out the door by 8, and head straight to destinations that open by 9.
- Try to eat lunch at 11 or 11:30, thus beating the 12-2 rush.
- Take it easy in the afternoon: rest at your inn, chill in a park or garden, saunter through museums and shops.
- Head out again for dinner at 5 or 5:30, thus beating the 6-9 rush.
- Then walk around through sunset (7p in Tokyo in June) and the night hours.

This schedule not only beats the crowds, it also gets you the best light for photography ☺ .

Following this plan is *especially important* for visiting the most popular tourist attractions: Senso-ji in Asakusa, Fushimi Inari Taisha and Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, and Arashiyama.

Useful info: Trains start running around 6am. Toyosu market opens at 6ish, while Tsukiji gets going around 8 or 9. Shinto shrines are open 24/7. Most gardens are also open quite early. Buddhist temples usually open around 9. Finally, shops invariably open at 10am.

My second suggestion is to **venture beyond the greatest hits**. Wander the side streets. Explore lesser-known neighbourhoods. Pop into obscure temples and random zakka shops. Japan is full of wonderful sights, and Tokyo and Kyoto are cities that truly reward this kind of serendipitous exploration: take full advantage.

I cannot emphasize these two suggestions enough. Make an early start to your day, and step off the beaten track. Trust me, your Japan holiday will be *vastly* improved as a result.

Tokyo Overview

1. Where to Stay in Tokyo

Central Tokyo is defined by the **JR Yamanote line**, which runs in a 35-km loop with the Imperial Palace at its (rough) centre. Major interchange stations on the Yamanote line act as city centres in their own right; the biggest ones are Shinjuku, Shibuya, Ueno, Ikebukuro, Nippori and Tokyo Station.

My suggested itinerary has two Tokyo stays of 4 days each. For the first one, I'd recommend staying east of the palace: in Ueno, Asakusa or Akihabara. And then west of the palace for the second stay: in Shinjuku, Shibuya or Ikebukuro.

Asakusa is a bit touristy, but it's a good introduction to traditional / historical Tokyo, with a venerable temple and lots of old shops. Akihabara is the opposite extreme: modern, high-tech, full of neon signs and gadgets. And Ueno is somewhere in between, with a lovely large park, several good museums and a fun market district. You can't go wrong with any of them.

Other options on the east side of the palace are Kanda and Nihonbashi; I also like Ryogoku and Monzen-nakacho on the east bank of the Sumida river. The area around Tokyo station and Ginza tends to be expensive but does have some good hotels and restaurants.

For the second Tokyo leg of your trip, Shinjuku would be my first choice (but make sure you're close to one of its many stations – Shinjuku is vast!), followed by Ikebukuro, and then Shibuya and maybe Omotesando. An area that many expats and business travellers tend to stay is the embassy / government / big business zone south of the imperial palace – Roppongi, Akasaka,

Toronamon etc. – but it's really boring for tourists, I can't recommend it.

It's harder to find good places to stay in Shinjuku-Shibuya than on the eastern side, especially for families who need more room. If so, one option is to stay in Akihabara on the second leg; there's a direct train from Akiba to Shinjuku which makes it trivial to go across town.

2. Getting Around Tokyo

For getting around central Tokyo you can't beat the subway system, which is convenient, cheap, and fast. Individual journeys range from Y160 to Y400, auto-debited from your IC card. Before exiting a subway station, look for an area map to orient yourself and take the right exit.

There are two subway operators in the city: Tokyo Metro and Toei. Changing from one to the other means you'll be charged an extra fare, but it is not worth optimizing your routes to avoid this; don't do it.

JR trains are a good option if you have an already active JR pass, but their coverage is limited to stations on the Yamanote line and a couple of others. There aren't too many JR lines within Tokyo proper, and it's not worth activating your JR pass just for local transit in the city.

JR trains are useful for day trips from Tokyo: Hakone, Nikko, Kamakura and Mitake. Some of these destinations are also served by private line operators, and they're often better: Odakyu for Hakone, Tobu for Nikko.

Buses are great for short hops; stops have handy route maps; tap in and out with your IC card. Finally, taxis are convenient and fast, but not cheap: reckon on Y100 per minute of journey time.

3. Arriving in Tokyo

Your flight will land at either Narita or Haneda. At the airport, buy a local SIM card or rent a pocket wifi for use during your trip – I like to reserve mine in advance from Sakura Mobile.

Narita is about 90 minutes from central Tokyo. If you're staying in Ueno, take the Keisei Skyliner directly there (45 mins, Y2500). For Asakusa, take the Keisei SkyAccess or Access Express (55 mins, Y1300), or take the Skyliner to Ueno and take a taxi/subway from there. For Akihabara, take the JR Narita Express to Tokyo station, then change to the Yamanote line anti-clockwise.

Haneda is about 60 minutes from central Tokyo. For either Ueno or Akihabara, take the Tokyo Monorail to Hamamatsucho, and then switch to the Yamanote line anti-clockwise. For Asakusa, take the Keikyu line directly to Asakusa station.

For all these train options, buy a SUICA or PASMO prepaid IC card and use that to pay for the trip. Some trains require reservations, which can be done quite easily at the ticket kiosks. There are also information and ticket counters with multi-lingual staff for each train line.

Another option is to take the 'Airport Limousine' bus into town. I don't recommend it; the train is generally better (faster, cheaper, equally if not more comfortable). The only exception is if you're staying at one of the major hotels, in which case the bus might take you directly there.

Do not use your JR pass to cover your journey from Narita to Tokyo. First, it's inefficient: your next few days are going to be in Tokyo, where you won't be using the pass much. Second, the JR tourist counter at Narita inevitably has very long queues – you could easily spend 1-2 hours just waiting to activate your pass – not worth it!

(Note that the JR pass isn't even valid on the Keisei or Keikyu or Monorail lines, only on the JR Narita Express).

Once you're in central Tokyo, you'll need to take a taxi, or subway, or walk to your place of stay. The density of subway stations is such that you shouldn't need to walk more than 800m (max!).

If you have a lot of luggage, I'd recommend taking the train into town and then taking a taxi for the last leg from station to hotel. (A useful word in this context is *ōgata*, for "large taxi"). Another option is to head to your hotel with just an overnight bag, and use *takkyubin* to send the rest of your luggage from the airport.

If you're flying to Japan from North America or Europe, you'll most likely arrive in the late afternoon or early evening. Once you get to your hotel, it'll be past sundown, and you'll be tired. This is the perfect opportunity to explore the miracle that is the Japanese convenience store. Find the nearest 7-11 or FamilyMart, and buy whatever you forgot to pack; then make dinner out of assorted bento, agedori, onigiri, niku-man and curry-pan. Enjoy!

4. Tokyo Day Planner

Tokyo is a city that rewards serendipitous exploration. Don't just go to the standard sights – instead, pick different neighbourhoods and wander the streets. You can't go wrong.

And while Tokyo's transportation network is without question the best in the world, it's truly a wonderful place to walk. Most of the city is relatively flat, the streets are pedestrian friendly, density is high, and there are interesting sights around every corner. So walk! Don't rush from point to point; saunter, stroll, meander, explore.

I describe a dozen or so of my favourite Tokyo neighbourhoods in the next few pages. In my itinerary I allocate 5 days to Tokyo proper (not counting day trips and excursions), with each day spent exploring 2-3 parts of the city. Assuming you stay in Ueno / Asakusa for the first leg of your trip and Shinjuku for the second, here's a suggested day planner:

Day 1: Tsukiji, Ginza, Tokyo Station

Day 2: Asakusa, Ryogoku, Akihabara

Day 3: Monzen-nakacho, Nihombashi, Ueno

Day 4: Shinjuku, Omotesando, Shibuya

Day 5: Free day! Visit the places you missed.

I've grouped these by proximity and optimal time of day, but feel free to pick and mix as you like.

The most popular tourist spots in Tokyo are probably Shibuya Scramble, Shinjuku Golden Gai, Asakusa Nakamise, Tokyo Skytree and Harajuku Takeshitadori. My plan does cover all those areas, but they're not the only focus; indeed, I'd advise not spending too much time battling crowds and queues at those spots.

Tokyo Neighbourhoods

1. Tsukiji and Toyosu

Tsukiji was Tokyo's original fish market, where the tuna auctions ran every morning at 5am. A few years ago, the market outgrew its premises and was split into two. The 'inner market' is now at **Toyosu** (a couple of miles away), and that's where the merchants and fishing captains and restaurateurs congregate for the early morning auctions – it's very much a wholesale / professional setting. The 'outer market' remains at Tsukiji, and that's where you'll find a whole bunch of fresh fish as well as prepared foods for sale to the general public, not to mention cutlers and potters and spice stores and the like.

I recommend Tsukiji over Toyosu. It's more lively, with more variety, and the sushi is (almost) as good. Stores open around 8am and really warm up by 9ish. Lots of eateries, of course – sushi, street food and snacks, non-sushi seafood, yakitori, ramen, the list goes on – but also a huge selection of produce and foodie supplies. I suggest watching the 'Salt' episode of 'Salt Fat Acid Heat' on Netflix before visiting Tsukiji ☺.

However, if you're up very early because of jetlag, and/or if you want to watch the tuna auction, go to Toyosu. The auction runs from roughly 5:45 to 6am, and at that hour you'll probably need to take a taxi to get there. You can watch from the upper gallery (somewhat distant, separated by a glass wall) or apply for the lottery (online, a month in advance) to watch from the closer and more immediate lower gallery. Afterwards you can eat incredibly fresh sushi for breakfast at one of Toyosu's dozen or so sushi restaurants – Daiwa and Sushi Dai are the most famous, but also have the longest waits. By 11am most of them are done for the day.

2. Ginza

From Tsukiji, walk or take the subway (Hibiya line, two stops) to **Ginza**, long established as Tokyo's fanciest neighbourhood. Ginza is home to Tokyo's most exclusive department stores: Wako, Matsuya, Ginza Six and more. Stores take pride in crafting elegant and aesthetic window displays. If you're a foodie, I especially recommend visiting the basement food section of any department store; who'd have thought box lunches could be so stylish? Most department stores also have excellent restaurants, typically on upper floors.

When in Ginza, do visit **Itoya**, perhaps the world's best stationery store (Sekaido in Shinjuku is its only competition). Look for the big red paperclip on the south side of the Chuo-dori, Ginza's main street. Itoya is a marvel, full of tastefully-chosen, beautifully-displayed art and stationery supplies of every type. In addition to the main branch (G. Itoya), don't miss the annex (K. Itoya), on the alley behind it, with its wonderful collection of traditional Japanese paper and paper products. Another flagship store to visit is **Muji**, for inexpensive, functional, minimalistic and above all *sensible* home goods.

3. Imperial Palace

The **Imperial Palace** proper is off limits to visitors, but you can still walk around it and see some of the outer gardens. For runners, there's a 10k path all the way around the palace which is very nice (even if you don't run).

From Ginza crossing, walk northwest towards Yurakucho and Hibiya, taking in all the shops, billboards, and people along the way. This area includes many of Tokyo's finest restaurants (including Gomei, Arai and Sukiyabashi Jiro). Cross under the train tracks and you'll reach Hibiya Park. Turn right and cross the outer moat

of the Imperial Palace on to its expansive grounds. There are two lovely views here: the picture-postcard-perfect **Niju-bashi** (bridge), and the small but elegant **Sakurada-mon** (gate).



Walls and moat of the Imperial Palace

You're now in the 'Front Garden' of the Imperial Palace, a large expanse of trees and grass. More intimate is the '**East Garden**', a traditional formal Japanese garden. To get there, walk north from Nijubashi and then enter through the Ote mon gate. But if you're running out of steam, turn along Gyoko-dori to approach **Tokyo Station** from its Marunouchi side: an elegant, European style train plaza, much photographed and deservedly so. Then take the train from Tokyo back to wherever you're staying.

Scheduling Note, Day 1:

You will probably be feeling somewhat jetlagged at this point, so it's a good idea to return to your rooms and rest. (My plan has an intentionally light schedule for day 1). If you still have energy after visiting Tsukiji, Ginza and the Palace grounds, I'd suggest an evening stroll through whichever of Asakusa or Ueno you're staying in, but don't worry, you'll be walking through both those places later. Alternatively, you could take an evening cruise down the Sumida river, or just go for a riverbank walk.

4. Asakusa

Start your second day with a stroll through **Asakusa**, one of Tokyo's oldest neighbourhoods, and in many ways still its spiritual heart. Before becoming the capital of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokyo (then known as Edo) was a small fishing village. Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, was the patron saint of the fishermen, and **Sensō-ji**, the temple dedicated to her, was and remains the city's most venerated Buddhist site.

The neighbourhood around Sensō-ji retains a strong traditional vibe, and it's a great introduction to traditional Japanese culture. The heart of the neighbourhood is the Kannon Asakusa temple, and the **Nakamise-dori** (street) leading up to it. With its large gateway (the Kaminari-mon), red lanterns and myriad shops, it's impossible to miss.



Asakusa Sensō-ji, early in the morning

Asakusa gets crowded, so I recommend visiting early in the morning. At 9am the temple grounds are empty and lovely; by 11am they're packed. The souvenir shops and eateries on the main approach are terribly touristy, but fun enough to stroll by. Try some snacks! I like Nakaya for traditional matsuri (festival) supplies – tabi socks and happi coats and more. I also like the Sakai

gallery for ukiyo-e – woodblock prints – reasonable quality at a reasonable price.

Next, head west and explore the alleys and byways west of the temple complex. You'll find a wide selection of shops here – fabrics, leather, ceramics, art, glassware, wooden crafts – often run by the same family for generations. Wander through Orange-dori and Hoppy-dori and Sushiya-dori, popping in and out of whatever seems interesting – don't be afraid to backtrack. You don't need to buy anything, just explore and enjoy the vibe.

Worth noting here are Don Quijote, a massive discount store that's open 24/7 (it's a chain), Uniqlo for whatever clothes or accessories you forgot to pack, and Marugoto for food souvenirs from around Japan. I like Nakazawa for hand-made greeting cards and washi paper; Yamakichi for tasteful ceramics, and Sanrio for Hello Kitty merch.

This area is also full of great eateries for lunch and dinner – I recommend Hori Okonomiyaki, Sushi Hatsu, Ippudo Ramen, Fuji Ramen, Ichiran Ramen, Kudaka Teppanyaki, there are lots more.

5. Kappabashi

After lunch, head to **Kappabashi**. Kappabashi is a district dedicated to kitchen and cooking supplies. If you're a foodie, or like to cook, or just love gear and gadgets, it's well worth visiting.

To get here, walk west from the Sensō-ji area, through all the side streets of Asakusa and past Don Quijote, until you hit the main road, Kokusai-dori. Cross and continue along Kappabashihon-dori, lined with the first few kitchenware shops. Soon you'll reach the main Kappabashi street; turn left and explore.



Dengama ceramics in Kappabashi

My personal recommendations are Sakai Jikko for beautiful high-end knives, Dengama for classic ceramics, and Kakesu zakka-ten for modern teacups and teapots. Other well-regarded stores are Kamata and Tsubaya for knives, Kama-asa and Maeda for general kitchenware (Kama-asa also has an excellent dedicated knife store), Yabukita for ceramics, Union Commerce for coffee gear, and there are many more.

[See the **Shopping** section for more suggestions about what to buy in Asakusa and Kappabashi, and from where].

6. Ryogoku

Once you're done with Asakusa and Kappabashi, head over to **Ryogoku**. There are multiple routes you can take, depending on which part of Asakusa you're in:

- Tawaramachi to Ueno-Hirokoji on the Ginza line and change to the Oedo line for Ryogoku.
- Tsukuba Asakusa to Shin-Okachimachi on the Tsukuba line and change to the Oedo line.
- Toei Asakusa to Asakusabashi on the Toei Asakusa line and change to the JR Chuo-Sobu.
- Walk to Kuramae station and board the Oedo line directly.

(I include these just to give a flavour of how incredibly dense Tokyo's subway network is.)

Ryogoku is another traditional Tokyo neighbourhood, on the east side of the Sumida river. It makes a nice change of pace after the hustle and bustle of Asakusa – less crowded, more relaxed. There are 2.5 main attractions in Ryogoku: the Edo Tokyo Museum, the Kokugikan Sumo Arena, and the Sumida Hokusai Museum. (The latter is very small, so only counts as 0.5).

The **Edo Tokyo Museum** is a great introduction to the history and society of Tokyo during the Edo period: roughly 1600 to 1850. It'll give context to a lot of the sights you'll see elsewhere. With its emphasis on scale models, it's also very accessible to visitors.

If you visit Japan in Jan, May or Sep, I *strongly* recommend attending a **sumo tournament** at the Ryogoku arena. Even outside of tournaments, there's a good chance you'll see a sumo wrestler or two walking through the streets here. There's also a sumo museum inside the arena. Several restaurants in the neighbourhood specialize in chanko-nabe, an extremely rich and filling stew eaten by sumo wrestlers to put on muscle.

Finally, about 15 minutes' walk east of Ryogoku station is the **Sumida Hokusai Museum**, a compact but delightful summary of the life and work of the great printmaker and artist.

(There's also a Japanese Sword Museum in Ryogoku; it has lots of beautiful antique swords, but the signage is all in Japanese.)

7. Akihabara

From Ryogoku it's just one stop to **Akihabara** station on the JR Chuo-Sobu (local) line.

Akihabara is renowned for its electronics and for its **geek culture** – it's one of the places to go for all things manga, anime, cosplay and otaku. (The other is Ikebukuro). Akihabara is best visited at night, to give its neon maximum impact.



Akihabara at night

Akihabara's flagship stores are its **camera stores** (Bic, Yodobashi), its hobby stores (Surugaya, Akiba Gamers, Kaiyodo) and its big electronics depots (Laox, Yamada, Onoden). In addition, there are dozens of tiny shops selling speciality goods – everything from capacitors to action figurines – as long as there's some sort of geek connection. (See **Shopping** section for details.)

Akiba has a large number of good eateries: some on the upper floors of the big shopping complexes, others in the streets all around the station. I recommend Kiku Sushi, Ginzo Sushi, Fukunoken Ramen, Kyushu Jangara Ramen, and Jiromaru Yakiniku.

Akihabara is also known for its themed cafes – butlers and maids, gamers and arcades, anime and manga etc. They're all rather kitschy.

Scheduling Note, Day 2:

It's possible to do Asakusa, Kappabashi, Ryogoku and Akihabara in a single long day. You'd follow roughly this timetable:

9am – Sensō-ji temple and grounds.

10 to 11:30 – explore Asakusa alleys and shops, starting with the Nakamise and heading west.

11:30 to 12:30 – lunch in Asakusa. (Ippudo Ramen is delicious, quick and convenient.)

12:30 to 2:00 – Kappabashi kitchenware street.

2:30 to 4:30 – Ryogoku, including the Edo Tokyo museum and maybe the Hokusai museum.

5 to 6 – Dinner, either Ryogoku or Akihabara. (In Ryogoku I like Niku no Yamaki for cheap, tasty, plentiful gyudon; in Akihabara I like Kiku Sushi for Edo-mae style vinegared fish.)

6 to 9pm – Akihabara night stroll.

Note that this is a long and tiring day, and I don't particularly enjoy the feeling of rushing from sight to sight. So please feel free to deviate; to take longer at any given spot; or to skip stuff. That's why there's a buffer day at the end of the Tokyo stay!

(If there's a sumo tournament on, you may have to leave Akihabara for later and stay in Ryogoku through the evening.)

(Asakusa is also quite nice at night: the temple grounds are very atmospheric, and there are a lot of lively izakaya – pubs – on and around Hoppy Street.)

8. Monzen-nakacho

You won't find **Monzen-nakacho** in any of the usual tourist guides, but it's a pleasant area to stroll through to get a sense of what 'everyday Tokyo' is like; besides, I used to live there, so I have a soft spot for it.

Start your third day in Tokyo by taking the Tozai or Oedo line (subway) to Monzen-nakacho station. Take exit 3. Upon ascending to street level, turn left, cross the road, and continue southeast along Eitai-dori. You'll pass a number of mom-and-pop stores, all very down-to-earth and unpretentious.



Side street in Monzen-nakacho

After about 200m you'll come to exit 1 of Monzen-nakacho station; immediately before the exit there's a large red gateway on the left, leading on to a brick-paved street lined with traditional stores selling handicrafts, religious artifacts, snacks and souvenirs.

Go through the arch and walk to the **Fukagawa Fudosen** temple (Buddhist), straight ahead. Wash your hands at the fountain, inhale incense smoke from the burner, and toss a coin into the offertory box. Fukagawa Fudosen has daily 'fire ceremonies' and I recommend attending one if you can.

Come out of the temple and turn left (paralleling your original direction on Eitai-dori); a stone's throw away, past the tennis courts, you'll see the wooden gateway of the **Tomioka Hachimangu** shrine (Shinto). Explore the shrine grounds, noting especially the large and ornate 'mikoshi' (palanquin), said to be worth over a billion yen. Tomioka Hachimangu is celebrated as the birthplace of Kanjin-zumo, the predecessor of modern professional sumo.

Monzen-nakacho is home to many festivals and events. There's the daily fire ceremony at the temple. There's a large flea market on the shrine grounds on the last Saturday of every month (recommended! – see if you can time your visit accordingly). New Year's sees lots of temporary stalls and eateries – a fairground atmosphere takes over the whole neighbourhoods. And finally every August there's the **Fukagawa Hachiman Matsuri** (festival) which is one of Tokyo's three great Shinto festivals – a huge celebration and parade and party.

Monzen-nakacho has an *excellent* shabu-shabu and sukiyaki restaurant called Shabu-koh, on the second floor just above Exit 2 of the station.

9. Nihombashi

Nihombashi was traditionally the 'centre' of the country – the marker from which all distance measurements were taken during the Edo period, and the starting point for all journeys. The name means '**bridge of Japan**', and it's the [first](#) of the 53 stations of the Tokaido made famous by Hiroshige – a classic Edo view.

Unfortunately, Nihombashi subsequently became the capital's financial district: home to many Japanese banks, and accordingly drab, with grey

office buildings and an ugly expressway cutting through it all.

But today the area is experiencing a bit of a rebirth as a centre for traditional arts and crafts and culture. It's not really a tourist sight in itself, but it's home to a number of shops, many of them 100s of years old, selling all sorts of wonderful Edo signatures:

- **Haibara**, for traditional handicrafts and stationery – buy a notebook here!
- **Yamamoto Noriten**, for beautiful tins of delicious nori (flavoured dried seaweed)
- **Kayanoya**, for dashi, soy sauce and ponzu
- **Ozu Washi**, for handmade 'washi' paper – with a gallery and classes

All of these stores are recommended; this is my favourite area to buy souvenirs from.



Nori from Yamamoto Noriten

Nihombashi has some good restaurants in the Coredo Muromachi building, a shopping mall designed to look an Edo-area merchant street. Also in Nihombashi is Mitsukoshi department store, Tokyo's oldest and most venerable; lots of dining options inside.

10. Ueno

Ueno has a little bit of everything. It's a major interchange station on the Yamanote line, and the heart of an old and bustling neighbourhood.

The station is at one edge of **Ueno Park**, a large urban park that's especially great for cherry blossoms. Within the park there are several museums:

- the Tokyo National Museum: classic Japanese art and craft: kimonos, swords, ceramics.
- the National Museum of Western Art: mostly European – some old masters, some 19th and 20th century masters as well.
- the National Museum of Nature and Science: geology, palaeontology, biology – English signage, suitable for kids of all ages

These museums are generally not crowded and can be a relaxing way to spend an afternoon. Or just chill in the park, which is lovely. There's a pond, a zoo, an old temple – like I said, a little bit of everything.

Just south of Ueno station is **Ameyoko**, an open-air market full of all sorts of cheap and cheerful stuff. (It was originally a black market during the post-WW2 American occupation – hence the name). Continue walking south from Ameyoko past Okachimachi station and you'll find yourself in Akihabara.

Ueno has lots of hotels and eateries, plus great train and airport connections, which makes it a good place to stay.

11. Ya-ne-sen

(Shorthand for **Yanaka-Nezu-Sendagi**). Ya-ne-sen is one of the few neighbourhoods untouched by WW2. Traditional buildings and lots of greenery. Yanaka Ginza is a friendly little shopping street. Hard to describe but this is a very charming area to stroll through.

I suggest starting from Nippori station on the JR Yamanote line, walking along the Godenzaka slope to Sendagi, then turning south towards Nezu station. Nezu is in fact just west of Ueno Park, which makes it convenient if you're staying in the Ueno area (but note that the park itself is pretty big).

Nippori is an interesting hub to explore, much more working-class than say Ginza or Aoyama or Omotesando. If you're into sewing, knitting or any sort of fabric craft, Nippori is the place to go – there are dozens of great shops in “Fabric Town” just east of the station, of which the fabulously named **Nippori Tomato** is the best.



Yamanote line, east of Nippori

For transit enthusiasts, the Nippori-Toneri Liner, an automated guideway, runs north from Nippori to Kumanomae, where you can change to the Toden-Arakawa line, Tokyo's only remaining streetcar (tram, trolley).

12. Jimbocho-Ochanomizu

Tokyo used to be zoned, with different neighbourhoods specializing in different shop products. For the most part that's a thing of the past – these days you can get anything anywhere – but exceptions exist. Kappabashi kitchen district is one; another is the 'bookstore street' in Jimbocho, which is right next to 'music street' in Ochanomizu.

Take the Hanzomon or Shinjuku line (subway) to Jimbocho station, and take exit A1. Upon ascending to street level, turn right, and head east along the main road, Yasukuni-dori. You'll pass one bookstore after another. Most of the books are in Japanese, but the displays, especially those of antiquarian books and scrolls, are fascinating.

The alley paralleling the main road is also enticing and home to many wonderful small shops. Komiyama and Bumpodo are perhaps my favourite two.

After a few 100 meters, turn left onto Chiyoda-dori/Meidai-dori towards JR Ochanomizu station. The street here is lined with music stores – both recorded music (Disk Union has 5 different branches, each specializing in a different genre) and musical instruments. There are several large universities in the neighbourhood, contributing to the general youthful vibe of the place.

Scheduling Note, Day 3:

If you're still jet-lagged and up early, I suggest starting the day with a stroll through the lovely Kiyosumi Tei-en (garden), a short distance north of Monzen-nakacho. The closest station to the garden is Kiyosumi-Shirakawa on the Hanzomon and Oedo lines.

The earliest fire ceremony at Fukagawa Fudosen temple is at 9am, so that's another early-morning option. Or just head over to Monzen-nakacho when you feel like it, no need to push for an early start today.

Wrap up at Monzen-nakacho by mid-morning, then take the Tozai line to Nihombashi. Go to Haibara, then cross the Nihombashi bridge to Yamamoto Noriten, Kayanoya et al. Eat either an early lunch in Monzen-nakacho, or a late-ish lunch somewhere in Nihombashi. (Since they're both off the tourist track, waits won't be long.)

After that it's up to you which of Ueno, Ya-ne-sen or Jimbocho you want to explore. All three are easy to get to from Nihombashi. You can possibly do 2 out of 3, but doing all 3 in one afternoon will be a challenge.

Today might be a good day for a late evening stroll. Akihabara, Ueno, Asakusa and Ginza are all good areas to visit after dark. (Shinjuku and Shibuya are the best, but we'll save those for after you're back from Kyoto.)

My maximalist suggestion would be to head from Nihombashi to Nippori; check out Fabric Town if that interests you; then walk through Ya-ne-sen all the way to Ueno Park; relax a bit in the park; and finally wander through Ueno and Ameyoko in the evening before ending up at Akihabara. Another long day!

Scheduling Note: Off to Kyoto!

Day 4 of my plan sees you checking out in the morning, sending your luggage to Kyoto using the *takkyubin* service, and then taking the train to Kanazawa. So you might want to skip ahead to the Kanazawa, Kyoto and Hakone sections of this guide, before returning to our survey of Tokyo neighbourhoods in Shinjuku.



Shinjuku, coming soon.

13. Shinjuku

Welcome back to Tokyo! Let's jump straight into the thick of things: **Shinjuku**.

Shinjuku is the world's busiest train station, with dozens of subway, local, commuter and long-distance lines converging. It's also a city within a city: an incredible density of restaurants, bars, department stores, office buildings, specialty shops, you name it. If Asakusa is traditional Tokyo, Shinjuku (and its close peers Shibuya and Ikebukuro) is modernity.



Izakaya on a side street near Golden Gai

If you're travelling with family or kids, I recommend staying near Shinjuku san-chome or Shinjuku gyoen-mae – slightly away from the highest density, but just a short stroll from all the action. If you're travelling solo or as a couple, **Kabukicho** has a bunch of hotels: the area is bright, busy, grungy (or rather, as grungy as Japan ever gets), noisy and lively. The Park Hyatt in western Shinjuku is popular with expats.

My suggested itinerary has an evening in Shinjuku on your way back from Hakone. You'll also have time in Shinjuku after your day trip to Kamakura. Don't waste those evenings! Shinjuku is at its best at night, full of life and light.

Shinjuku station is a city within a city within a city, and if you're into urban transit, worth exploring for itself. It has 4 subway lines, 7 distinct subway stations, 3 private lines and 6 JR lines. Not to mention being a major bus terminal. The station is incomprehensibly vast, a three-dimensional maze of trains and tracks and people and shops and facilities, and yet it all works seamlessly and amazingly.

Here are some things to do and see in Shinjuku:

- **Shinjuku Gyoen**, one of Tokyo's finest gardens, an oasis of peace and quiet
- **Golden Gai** and the alleys around Hanazono shrine, full of eateries and drinkeries – I recommend Jaken for excellent teppanyaki.
- **Kabukicho** entertainment district (warning: some adult content)
- **Isetan** department store, a Tokyo landmark
- **Omoide Yokocho** ('memory lane') for street eats and beer – a bit touristy, but still
- **Specialty stores** for almost everything under the sun, especially Sekaido (see below)
- Lots of great **restaurants** everywhere
- **Okubo**, a hip neighbourhood full of Korean and other immigrants, full of life and cool
- **Camera stores** including Yodobashi's flagship and [many more](#).

But Shinjuku isn't about specific destinations, it's about atmosphere and vibe. Don't aim to "do" something in Shinjuku, just wander and explore and absorb. (Especially in the evening). Pick a different quarter around the station every day, and walk.

Okay, wait, I'll plug one specific destination: **Sekaido** stationery, at Shinjuku-sanchome. Seven floors of pens, books, paints, inks, an artist's delight, but also wonderful if you're into journaling, calligraphy, or just writing in general.

14. Omotesando-Harajuku-Yoyogi

Take exit A1 from Omotesando station and walk along Omotesando avenue, the main approach to Tokyo's holiest Shinto shrine. Near the subway station, the avenue is lined with expensive designer stores and boutiques (Kenzo, Issey Miyake etc), but as you walk west towards the shrine, the stores become funkier and the pedestrians younger and cooler.

This reaches a climax at **Harajuku** station, where the people and costumes can be surreal fun – a long-running open-air cosplay festival. A block north is the much-photographed Takeshita-dori, a crowded alley lined with hip boutiques. Along the way, the **Ota Museum** has a nice collection of woodblock prints.



Wooden torii (gate) of Meiji-jingu

Omotesando avenue comes to an end here; cross the road and go through the wooden gate into **Meiji-jingu (shrine)**, a vast expanse of calm and peace in the middle of Tokyo's noise and crowds. Keep an eye out for traditional weddings inside the main shrine, complete with samurai-sword-wielding groom and kimono-clad bride.

Behind Meiji-jingu is the large and inviting **Yoyogi Park**, a great spot to unwind and relax on

a Sunday afternoon (or any day, really). You'll see lots of locals here, and not many tourists.

Alternatively, you can return to Harajuku and hop on a train down to Shibuya.

15. Shibuya

Shibuya is sensory overload. Like Shinjuku, it has a bit of everything: crowds, neon, shops, restaurants, galleries, music, noise, excitement. But where Shinjuku is mind-warply vast, Shibuya is concentrated and condensed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous **Hachiko square** / Shibuya scramble crossing.



Shibuya crossing at night

Two of my favourite shops are in Shibuya: Tokyu Hands, and Shibuya Loft.

Tokyu Hands is unique: a mix of hobbyist and DIY crafts, and home goods and hardware, and random gadgets, and things to fill in the corners of your needs. I love it.

Loft is another cool and funky home goods store, slightly cheaper but equally neat. It's kind of hard to describe exactly what they sell, so my recommendation is to just go.

Both Loft and Hands are reached along Centre Gai, the pedestrian road that runs northwest from the station. Feel free to branch off along the many criss-crossing alleys. Shibuya's stores tend to serve a younger crowd than Shinjuku's (let alone Ginza's).

Apart from that, Shibuya, like Shinjuku and indeed like much of Tokyo, is more about atmosphere and being there, even if you don't have a particular goal in mind.

Shibuya is best visited at night, to photograph the crowds and lights on Center Gai and Hachiko crossing. By day, in fact, it's a little drab.

Scheduling Note, Tokyo Day 4 (Overall Day 11)

Assuming you're staying in Shinjuku (and still making early starts), Shinjuku-gyoen is a good morning walk. Then head north to Okubo for an area with a very different 'feel' to it; it's also a good place to get some yakiniku or Korean food for lunch.

Then take the train down to Omotesando or Harajuku. Explore that area, then chill out at Meiji-jingu and Yoyogi park in the afternoon. Head to Shibuya around early evening. Don't miss Tokyu Hands!

Finally, if you still have energy and are up for a late night, take the train one stop west from Shibuya to Shimokitazawa for great live music at one of Shimo's many funky coffee shops and jazz bars.

16. And More...

My Japan itinerary allows 1 free day in Tokyo. You can use this day to visit (or revisit) any of the neighbourhoods listed above, or you can slot in another day trip or town to visit elsewhere in Japan. But if you want to get even more of Tokyo, here are some neighbourhoods I recommend:

Kichijoji: funky and fun neighbourhood with a great park and endless back streets to explore

Ikebukuro: the geek culture of Akihabara, the scale of Shinjuku, a vibe that's all its own

Kiyosumi-Shirakawa: excellent art museum, coffee culture, artsy vibe and a lovely garden

Okubo: A young and lively immigrant neighbourhood just north of Shinjuku

Nakameguro: good coffeeshops, Tokyo's coolest bars, little shops, posh but not too pretentious

Shimokitazawa: live music, galleries, theatres, hideaway bars, antique stores

Aoyama: luxury design, fashion, nightclubs and jazz, fancy restaurants, the high life

OGIKUBO: filled with neat little 'zakka-ten' – curiosity shops selling a little bit of everything

Daikanyama: super trendy area with many hip cafes, brunch spots, bars, and fashionistas

Ghibli Museum: a delight, but you have to buy tickets months in advance

Jiyugaoka: stylish and sophisticated 'little Europe' – cafes, boutiques, pedestrianized streets

Korakuen & Rikugien: lovely landscape gardens

Odaiba: slick artificial development in the middle of Tokyo Bay – malls, theme parks, expo centres

Roppongi: expat nightlife zone is a bit soulless but does have a few good art museums

Subway Museum in Kasai: transit buffs unite!

Tsukishima: mainly for 'monjayaki', a kind of savoury pancake unique to Tokyo

Yokohama: port city with a true Chinatown and two separate Ramen Museums.

(You can see why I said Tokyo is inexhaustible!)

Short Trips From Tokyo

Scheduling Note, Short Trips

There are dozens of interesting destinations within a short (1-2 hour) train ride from Tokyo. Of these, my 4 favourites are Kamakura, Hakone, Nikko and Mitake. Each of these can be done as a day trip; they can also be visited over 2 days with an overnight stay.

In my itinerary, I suggest visiting Hakone on the way back from Kyoto, with an overnight stay at an onsen (hot spring) resort. This dovetails well with using the *takkyubin* next-day luggage delivery service between Kyoto and Tokyo. Hakone is the only place for which this plan makes sense; the logistics don't work for the other three destinations.

I subsequently allow one day for a day-trip from Tokyo, with Kamakura as a suggested destination. You can of course visit Nikko or Mitake on that day instead; or you can slot those in to replace some other Tokyo experiences; or you can extend your Japan stay. These are all good choices and there's no wrong answer; my personal preference is a half-day in Kamakura to see the Buddha and Enoshima, and then maximize time in Tokyo.

1. Hakone

Hakone combines beautiful scenery, Edo-period history, hot springs, lake cruises, and classic views of **Mt Fuji** in a full and fulfilling day.



Mt Fuji, seen from Lake Ashi in Hakone

You can visit Hakone as a day trip from Tokyo, but in my itinerary, I suggest visiting on your way back from Kyoto. You'll spend the first evening relaxing at an onsen (hot spring) resort, before doing a scenic loop the next day, and then continuing to Tokyo.

From Kyoto, take an afternoon Hikari shinkansen to Odawara, 3 stops before Tokyo. Aim to get there around 4pm. At Odawara, look for the Odakyu / Hakone-Tozan ticket counter, and buy the 2-day '**Hakone Free Pass**'. This pass covers local travel in the Hakone area; it's worth it, for both savings and convenience.

(There's also a more expensive version of the Hakone Free Pass which includes return travel between Odawara and Shinjuku; you don't need it since you'll be using your JR Pass for that leg. Make sure you buy the right version!)

Then hop on to the Hakone-Tozan line to Hakone-Yumoto station, the starting point for Hakone proper.

The Onsen Experience

Hakone is a hotbed (!) of thermal activity. Some of its many springs cater to day-visitors; others have associated hotels, resorts or ryokans. Pick one to stay at. Some criteria to keep in mind:

- Private bath or communal bath?
- If communal, is it segregated by gender?
- Do they accept tattoos?
- Is there a restaurant on the premises?
- Is it easy to get to from Hakone-Yumoto?

Most resorts are near Hakone-Yumoto station, or near Gora a few miles away. Some offer a station pickup service; otherwise you can walk, or take the bus, or a taxi. It's a good idea to book your stay in advance.

Hakone has a couple of very high-end ryokan, so this might be a good place to splurge for 1 night.

Head over to your resort, and indulge in a pre-dinner bath. The most important piece of onsen etiquette to know is that you should wash and soap yourself thoroughly *before* entering the main tub or pool. Onsen are for soaking, not for cleaning! (And oh, how heavenly the soaking is.)

Sleep well; you'll have a full day tomorrow.

Hakone Scenic Loop

The 'classic' Hakone itinerary is an anti-clockwise loop: train, funicular, cable-car, boat, bus, train, stopping for views along the way. I recommend doing the loop clockwise: less crowded and better synching of location and view and time of day.

The steps, in clockwise order, are:

1. Train, Odawara to Hakone-Yumoto, 30'
2. Bus, Hakone Yumoto to Amazake Chaya, 30'
3. Walk, Amazake Chaya to Moto Hakone, 30'
Interlude: Amazake Chaya, 30'
Interlude: Hakone-Jinja shrine, 30'
4. Walk, Moto-Hakone to Hakone-Machi, 30'
Interlude: checkpoint museum, 30'
5. Lake Cruise, Hakone-Machi to Togendai, 45'
6. Gondola, Togendai to Owakudani, 15'
Interlude: ice cream and eggs. 30'
7. Gondola, Owakudani to Sounzan, 15'
8. Funicular, Sounzan to Gora, 15'
9. Train, Gora to Hakone Yumoto, 45'
Interlude: Open Air Museum, 60'
10. Train, Hakone Yumoto to Odawara, 30'

The Hakone Free Pass covers all of these. And you've already done step 1, hurray!

In the morning, check out from your hotel (after a pre-breakfast soak, if desired) and head to Hakone-Yumoto station. Leave your bags in a coin locker or at the left luggage desk (cloakroom, '*kurōku*') for the day.

Exit Hakone Yumoto station and find the bus for Moto-Hakone. (It used to be at stop #4 – the Odakyu staff at the bus stop will help you find the right one.). The bus takes about 45 minutes, switch-backing up mountain slopes through pine and cedar forests with nice views over the valley and back towards Tokyo – a very scenic ride.

About 30 minutes into the journey, there's a 300-year-old teahouse called **Amazake Chaya**. Hop off here for a tea break, and then walk the rest of the way to Moto-Hakone along a trail that follows the **Old Tokaido Highway**, paved with cobbles and lined with ancient cedars. (If you'd rather not walk the trail, just board the next bus.)

Either way, you'll eventually reach Moto-Hakone on the shores of **Lake Ashi**. On clear days, you should get your first view of Fuji across the lake.



Hakone-jinja

Look to your right along the lakeshore and you'll see the red torii (shrine gate) of **Hakone Jinja**. Walk there and spend some time exploring the atmospheric shrine grounds. Then return to Moto Hakone. This might be a good time to eat an early lunch – there are a few eateries plus a large seven-eleven that sells hot food.

From Moto Hakone, now walk in the opposite direction (i.e. with the lake on your right) along the road towards Hakone Machi. A few yards in, there's an (easy to miss) turnoff on the left that rejoins the old Tokaido trail.

The cedar highway puts you back on the main road after a short distance; cross over for a quick visit to the Hakone Sekisho (checkpoint) and associated museum. Then continue a few more

yards and you'll see the dock for the Hakone Sightseeing Cruise. Take the **ship** back to Moto Hakone (stay on board!) and thence to Togendai. The best views of Fuji are in the early part of the cruise, on the left side of the ship.

Now we're onto the loop proper and you can just follow signs and the flow of traffic. From Togendai, take the **cable car** up to Owakudani (Fuji is now behind you). At Owakudani, walk over to see the fumaroles, and stop for an ice cream or for the local specialty, eggs boiled in hot mud. (It's only the shells that look black.) The continue down the other side of the mountain, on a cable car to Sounzan. From Sounzan, a **funicular** takes you steep downhill to Gora.

From Gora, the **Hakone-Tozan railway** takes you back to Hakone-Yumoto station. This section of the railway is Japan's oldest mountain train, and very pretty.

If you have time and energy, the Hakone Open Air Museum, accessible from the Chokoku-no-mori stop on this line, is worth a visit – a genuinely world class collection of modern sculpture, it's a good way to spend the mid or late afternoon.

Otherwise carry on to Hakone-Yumoto. Pick up your bags. At this point you have two options:

- Take the Hakone-Tozan line to Odawara, then change on to a shinkansen back to Tokyo using your JR pass.
- If you don't want to change trains, or if your JR pass is no longer valid, you can take the Odakyu line directly to Shinjuku from Hakone-Tozan. You'll have to buy a ticket for this. Optionally, pay a surcharge to get a reserved seat on the express 'Odakyu RomanceCar' (faster, more comfy).

2. Kamakura

Kamakura is a pleasant day trip from Tokyo, with its many Zen Buddhist temples nestled in the cedar-clad hills ringing a pretty bay. And the **Great Buddha**, for my money the single most spectacular sight in Japan.

From Shinjuku station, take the JR Shonan-Shinjuku line to Kamakura station. If you're staying in eastern Tokyo, take the JR Yokosuka line from Tokyo station to Kamakura station.

We'll start by visiting **Hokoku-ji**, a small but tasteful temple with a lovely bamboo grove that is far less crowded than the one in Arashiyama. At Kamakura station, board the 23 / 24 / 36 bus and get off at Jomyo-ji stop, Hokoku-ji is a short walk from there. After walking through the bamboo grove, drink matcha tea at the temple's tea house.

Take the bus back to Kamakura station. Now is a good time to explore the shops (mostly touristy but some are quite nice, including the Ghibli merch store) on Komachi-dori around the station. Get an early lunch; I recommend [kaiten-zushi](#) (conveyor belt sushi).

Suitably fortified, take the **Enoden line** – a tram-like train, 2 carriages long, that seems to wind through people's backyards – to Hase station. Hop off and walk to **Kōtoku-in**, home of the **Daibutsu** (Great Buddha) of Kamakura. Some guidebooks suggest taking the bus to the Buddha but the train is better.

At first glance, the Buddha seems merely big, nothing further. But as you walk closer, you begin to notice the subtlety and elegance of its features. I'm always thrilled by the way the expression on the Buddha's face changes as you walk around the statue – despite the fact that the

representation is emphatically not realistic, but rather, highly stylized.



The Buddha at Kamakura

After seeing the Buddha, walk back a few hundred yards along the road and turn right to enter Hase-dera (Hase Kannon temple). Climb to the back of temple for a panoramic view of Kamakura Bay. Then walk back down to Hase station. (If you're visiting Kamakura after Kyoto, Hase-dera is skippable; it's just another temple.)

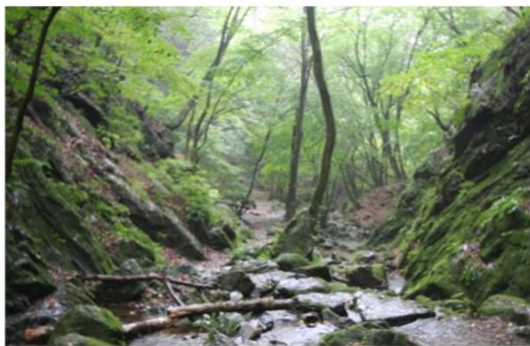
If you're tired, take the Enoden line back to Kamakura station and thence to Tokyo or Shinjuku. But if you have time, I recommend taking the tiny train the other way, to **Enoshima Island**, where you can watch sunset on a quiet beach. Yes, that's the Pacific Ocean.

Return on the Enoden line to Kamakura station. Or for something different, take the Shonan suspended monorail onward to Ofuna, and then switch to one of several JR lines connecting Ofuna to Shinjuku and Tokyo.

Kamakura can be covered in half a day if you make an early start; skip either Hokoku-ji or Enoshima. You can also extend it to a full day with lots more sights; see the "And Finally" section of this guide for details.

3. Mitake

Mitake is a great getting-away-from-it-all retreat. It's not that far from central Tokyo as the crow flies, but it's a bit tricky getting there (multiple train changes, bus and cable car), and as a result it remains crowd-free and unspoiled. Mitake has some gorgeous hiking trails, and is home to one of my favourite inns, the Shukubo Komadori Sanso ('mountain lodge of the robin').



Rainy hike in Mitake

Here's how to get to Mitake. From either Tokyo or Shinjuku station, take the JR Chuo line to Tachikawa. Trains run every 5-7 minutes; taking an express (*kaisoku*) will lop 10 minutes off the regular journey time of 55 minutes. At Tachikawa, change to the JR Ome line towards Okutama. The line goes from Tachikawa to Ome to Mitake to Okutama, but not all trains run all the way, so you may have to change again.

Get off at Mitake station, cross the road to Mitake-eki bus stop and catch the bus for Cable-shita bus stop (10 minutes, Y200ish). Cable-shita is the last stop on the bus route. Walk to Takimoto cable-car station, and ride the cable-car up to Mitake-san cable-car station. You're finally there! The trip in its entirety (from Tokyo to Mitake-san) should take between 2 and 3 hours, depending on the quality of your connections.

At Mitake-san cable-car station, pause briefly to gaze over the valley of the Tama river from the Mitake-daira viewpoint. Then walk along the sidewalk to the visitor centre. Grab a map of the local hiking trails, and proceed, climbing gradually higher all the way, to Mitake-jinja (Mitake shrine); you will pass through a tiny village with a few inns and shops. The shrine is at the very top of Mt. Mitake and offers panoramic views in all directions.

An especially pretty circular walking trail starts just below Mitake-jinja; turn to the right as you descend the steps of the shrine and you'll be on it. A short way into the walk, turn left onto the Nagano-daira viewpoint, a large and level promontory which juts out above the valley floor. Retrace your steps and continue your walk till you reach the **Ayahiro Falls**.

Descend by the side of the falls and walk by the side of the stream through the '**Rock Garden**', an astonishingly beautiful, forested valley with lots of moss-covered stones and flowing water everywhere. The trail then starts to climb away from the stream. Soon after passing a single, large rock, you'll hear the **Nanayo Falls**; you can descend to their base via a series of metal ladders. Climb back and continue along the main trail; it'll take you all the way back to where you started. This round trip takes about 2-3 hours and is a fairly easy stroll. Then back down the cable car, bus, and train back to Tokyo.

With 2 days in the Mitake area, you can explore Lake Okutama and the beautiful Tama River valley. I recommend staying at the Shukubo Komadori Sanso (www.komadori.com), a 250-year-old pilgrims' hostelry just off the left side of the road between Mitake visitor centre and Mitake shrine. Be sure to get there in time for dinner at 6pm; they do a fabulous spread.

4. Nikko

Nikko offers a number of hikes of varying difficulty, all through spectacular mountain scenery. It also houses the mausoleum of the first Tokugawa shogun, a building that's quite unlike anything else you'll see in Japan.

You can visit Nikko in one day, in which case you can cover the mausoleum complex and the Kegon Falls but not much more. Or you can take two days in which case you can go hiking in Nikko National Park, seeing the Ryuzu and Yudaki Falls, Senjogahara Marsh and more. The rest of this section is written assuming a 2-day trip.



Shinkyo bridge in Nikko

If (and only if) you have an active JR pass, take the Tohoku shinkansen from Tokyo or Ueno to Utsunomiya, and transfer to the JR Nikko line for Nikko. This option is rather expensive if you don't have a JR pass, and it's not worth buying or extending your JR pass solely to get to Nikko.

Assuming you don't have a JR pass, take the subway to Asakusa. Tobu Railway has its own station in Asakusa; a large cream building, you can't miss it. Go to the Tobu Tourist Information Centre first. The staff there will help you buy the appropriate combo pass for travel to, from and within Nikko. Then board the Tobu Nikko line

train, taking care to sit in the correct carriage (not all cars of any given train go to the same destination).

On a one-day trip to Nikko, you should leave Tokyo / Asakusa as early as you can. On a two-day trip, it's okay to leave around 11am to get to Nikko around 2pm, but no later than that.

Exit Nikko station and turn right along the main road through town. Walk 2 miles, stopping halfway at the tourist information centre to pick up hiking maps and a bus timetable, to the antique **Shinkyo Bridge**. You can stroll across the bridge for a rather stiff fee, if you must.

Then cross the road and climb up the stone steps to the main mausoleum complex. The complex has a Chinese garden, a Buddhist temple, a Shinto shrine, and the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu (the first shogun of the Edo era), all surrounded by towering cedars.

The first attraction in this complex is **Shoyo-en**, a formal garden laid out in the Chinese style; it's a triumph of proportion and texture. The temple and shrine are fine, but unremarkable; I wouldn't recommend spending too much time on them. Instead, walk along the cedar-lined avenue, past moss-covered lanterns, climbing up several broad flights of stone steps to the extremely ornate **Toshogu Mausoleum**. Don't miss the famous 'three monkeys' sculpture.

When in Nikko, I usually stay at the Annex Turtle Hotori-An, a small inn right by the water's edge. Just keep descending from the temple complex and you'll find it. You should check out and pay your bill after dinner, since you'll be making an early start the next morning.

In the morning, walk back up from the inn to the Nishisando bus stop and dump your bags in the

coin-locker by the side of the road. Then catch a bus bound for Chuzenji Onsen or Yumoto Onsen. Buses start running around 6am, and I suggest catching the earliest one possible. Your Nikko pass will cover the fare.

The bus ascends a beautiful winding mountain road – the **Irohazaka** ('alphabet') slope, so called because it has 48 curves, labeled with the 48 letters of the Japanese alphabet – before emerging near Lake Chuzenji. Get off the bus at the town of Chuzenji Onsen, and descend to the **Kegon** waterfall, the first of Nikko's three spectacular cascades.

Return to the bus stop and catch a bus bound for Yumoto Onsen. Stay on the bus as it skirts the lake, and get off at the **Ryuzunotaki** stop; this is the second (and in my opinion, most beautiful) of the cascades. Cross the road and walk back 30m to the waterfall (which is cunningly hidden from view from the roadside, though you can't miss the noise). Grab a cup of coffee at the open-air café with its amazing location at the base of the falls.

Then climb up the broad trail along the east side of the falls. After crossing the main road at a bridge, walk through a larch forest along the east bank of the Yugawa river to the southern end of the marshy **Senjogahara plain**.

Cross the plain on wooden planks, taking in the views of the encircling mountains, then walk through another forest to the base of the massive **Yudaki** falls. Climb up the east side of the falls to Lake Yunoko. Circle round the western shore of the lake to Yumoto Onsen, a pleasant little town with several inviting hot springs to soak in.

Finally, catch a bus from Yumoto Onsen all the way back to Nikko station, hopping off at Nishisando to pick up your bags.



Senjogahara plain in Nikko National Park

The hike described above, from Ryuzunotaki to Yumoto Onsen, takes about 4 hours at a leisurely pace; the course is easy, and the views are marvelous. The bus rides at either end should in theory take only 1 hour each, but the traffic in Nikko can get quite unbelievably bad (especially on the narrow roads approaching Chuzenji Onsen, especially on weekends, especially during fall colours), and you might easily end up spending 2-3 hours crawling down jammed mountain slopes. That's why I emphasize making an early start.

If you're delayed setting out, then I recommend taking your first bus directly to Ryuzunotaki, doing the hike, and stopping at the Kegon falls on your way back (if time permits). Another variation is to cover the stretch between Chuzenji Onsen and Ryuzunotaki on foot, or even by boat, though this will of course add time to your journey, not subtract it. Note that the last direct train back to Tokyo from Nikko leaves around 6ish, though indirect trains run up to 8:30.

Interlude: Kanazawa

1. Kanazawa

Kanazawa is a pretty town on the western (Sea of Japan) coast of Honshu. Because of its location (away from the warm Kuroshio current, on the windward side of the Japan Alps) it gets a lot of cold rain and snow in winter. Nonetheless it's a beautiful town and is home to the magnificent **Kenrokuen** – one of the three “great gardens” of Japan. Is it worth going all the way to Kanazawa just to see this garden? Yes, yes it is.



Kenrokuen in Kanazawa (Wikimedia image)

The Hokuriku shinkansen (newly opened in 2015!) connects Tokyo to Kanazawa – it takes 2.5 hours. Activate and use your JR pass for this. You should also reserve a seat; reservations are free, but compulsory. You can do this on the day of your journey, at the ‘green window’ reservation counter at Tokyo station. Ask to travel on either the Kagayaki express or the Hakutaka semi-express, whichever gets you there quicker.

The Hokuriku cuts through the Japanese Alps and is quite scenic. Catch an early train to Kanazawa so that you get there by lunchtime. Either eat an eki-ben on the train, or pick up lunch at Kanazawa station, which has several good eateries; Kanazawa is famed for its seafood.

Stash your luggage in a coin locker, and then take the [Kanazawa Loop Bus](#) from outside the station directly to Kenrokuen Garden. Spend the afternoon wandering its grounds, marvelling at the balance and perspective.

There are 4 museums in a “cultural complex” adjoining Kenrokuen, and they’re all excellent: the Museum of Contemporary Art (open late), the DT Suzuki Museum, the National Crafts Museum, and the Prefectural Museum. But the garden outshines them all.

Once you’re done at Kenrokuen, return to Kanazawa station, grab your suitcases, and head over to your hotel (I recommend the Dormy Inn, right next door to the station). If you have the energy, head over to Higashichaya or Nagamachi – well-preserved districts featuring traditional architecture and design – or ride on the [Light-Up Bus](#) for an illuminated tour of the city at night.

You could perhaps continue to Kyoto the same day, but it would be a very long and train-filled day, plus you’d miss the coastal scenery between Kanazawa and Kyoto, so I wouldn’t recommend it unless you’re very tight on time.

Assuming you’re staying overnight, my next suggestion is to go for an early morning stroll through Kenrokuen – it opens at 7 in the summer, 8 in the winter. There’s also an early admission option for complete solitude. The morning light and feel of the garden is very different, and repays the effort.

Return to your hotel, check out, grab your bags, and head to the station. Go to the reservation counter and book seats on the JR Thunderbird Express to Kyoto – your JR pass will cover this. Ask for a window seat on the right for the best views of the Sea of Japan.

2. Matsumoto

If gardens aren't your jam, an alternative to Kanazawa is **Matsumoto**, a small town in Nagano prefecture on the edge of the Japanese Alps.

To get there, take the Hokuriku shinkansen to Nagano, and then change to the Shinano line; the journey from Tokyo takes 2-3 hours. The next day, take the Shinano line from Matsumoto to Nagoya, home of Toyota, and then take the Tokaido shinkansen to Kyoto. (Unfortunately, this means you won't get to see the Sea of Japan).



Matsumoto Castle

Matsumoto is known for three things: a beautiful castle; numerous onsen resorts; and Japan's best collection of woodblock prints, at the Ukiyo-e Museum. All three are worth seeing, but personally, I'd still choose Kanazawa over it.

If you have unlimited time and money, do both: Tokyo to Matsumoto, stay the night, Matsumoto to Kanazawa, stay another night, then on to Kyoto. Alternatively, skip both towns and just go straight to Kyoto from Tokyo.

Note that getting around Matsumoto is a little tricky – it's a small town without much public transport, so be prepared for long walks or taxis.

3. Sado Island

Sado is a small island off the west coast of Japan. Isolated, craggy, with harsh winters, it was often the place of exile for criminals, nobles who fell out of favour, and other undesirables.

Perhaps for similar reasons, in recent decades it has become a bit of a haven for artists, musicians and writers: still somewhat isolated, distraction-free, a place to devote yourself to your work, while living in communes with like-minded people. The most famous such commune is **Kodo**, one of Japan's top taiko ensembles.



Kodo performing on Sado Island

Every summer, Kodo hosts a 3-day music festival on Sadogashima called the **Earth Celebration**. Musicians (especially percussionists) from around the world come to listen, learn, and perform. It's an experience like no other. The island itself is beautiful and wild; recommended if you can manage it.

Scheduling Note: Interlude

I include the destinations on this page in case you have lots of extra time in Japan. But my main recommendation remains 1 day in Kanazawa, on the way from Tokyo to Kyoto. Save these other places for your next visit!

Kyoto Overview

1. Introduction

Kyoto is one of the great cities of the world. Capital of Japan for a thousand years, it is the fount of Japanese tradition and culture pre-Edo era: politics and religion, art and architecture, food and drink, music and dance. And it's a living heritage: to this day you can find master craftsmen whose families have been creating works of art in Kyoto for dozens of generations and hundreds of years. There's a depth of culture and aesthetics behind every encounter in this wonderful city.



Kimonos at Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto

All this history can be fatiguing. While Kyoto's shrines and temples and gardens and craft houses are wonderful individually and collectively, it's not a good idea to simply rush from sight to sight. Instead, relax and soak in the atmosphere of this historic town. Don't try to see everything (with several thousand temples in the city, that would be impossible!). But what you see, see deeply.

2. Arriving and Getting Around

Kanazawa connects to Kyoto via the scenic Thunderbird Express – it's not a shinkansen but it's still pretty fast, and it travels through some wonderful coastal and mountain scenery, before skirting Lake Biwa on its approach to Kyoto.

Kyoto has a handful of train lines but the network isn't as dense as Tokyo's. Buses are plentiful and efficient ([route map](#)). Taxis will save you a lot of time. Bicycles are readily available to rent and convenient for getting around in the city centre (less so for the hilly outskirts, and besides they're not terribly contemplative). I usually pick an area (Higashiyama, Arashiyama, Gion), take a train or taxi there, then walk around a lot.

3. Where To Stay in Kyoto

The very things that make historic Kyoto a charming place to visit – narrow streets, temples and shrines and culture everywhere, traditional wooden architecture – make it occasionally frustrating to find good, comfortable places to stay in the city core. But I have some suggestions!

If you're okay with slightly longer travel times, I suggest staying outside the city centre. There are several good ryokans in northern Kyoto, both expensive and inexpensive. Arashiyama, out west, is another good area to stay in.

In the city centre, I recommend the area between Kyoto Station and Nishiki Market: there are several good hotels here. Gion and the banks of the Kamo River are popular with tourists, but I've found that inns and guesthouses in that area can be hit or miss.

If you have deep pockets, Kyoto is a good city to splurge: Hoshinoya, the Four Seasons, the Park Hyatt and Aman Kyoto are all excellent.

4. Kyoto Day Planner

I budget 4 nights in Kyoto, arriving from Kanazawa around mid-day on day 1 and heading back to Tokyo around mid-day on day 5.

Here's how I would spend my time in Kyoto:

Day 1: Central Kyoto: Nishiki Market to Maruyama Park, via Hanamikoji and Gion.

Day 2: Northern temples: Kinkaku-ji & Ryoan-ji, then Ginkaku-ji and the Path of Philosophy.

Day 3: Mountain excursion to Kurama-dera; visit Osaka in the evening.

Day 4: Fushimi Inari Taisha, Kiyomizu-dera, and a walk through southern Higashiyama

Day 5: Arashiyama bamboo grove; depart Kyoto around mid-day

Kyoto's "greatest hits" attractions are Kinkaku-ji, Kiyomizu-dera, Fushimi Inari Taisha, Arashiyama and Nishiki Market. They're all great but they do get crowded, especially on weekends and holidays. My schedule tries to get to one of these sights first thing every morning; try to make an early start!

5. Interlude: Japanese History

It's worth knowing a little bit about the history of Japan, to give context to the places you see.

500-700: **Asuka Period.** Japan first unified. Buddhism arrives from Korea. Agrarian society.

700-800: **Nara Period.** Nara becomes capital. Strong Chinese cultural influence.

800-1200: **Heian Period.** Kyoto becomes capital. Peak of the Imperial court. Development of *hiragana* and *katakana*. Flourishing art and literature. 'Classical' period of Japanese culture.

1200-1350: **Kamakura Period.** Emperors in Kyoto reduced to figureheads. Japan ruled by *shōgun* (military dictators) based in Kamakura. New schools of Buddhism spread. Feudal society.

1350-1500: **Muromachi Period.** Kamakura shogunate loses power, replaced by Ashikaga shogunate based in Kyoto. Development of Higashiyama culture based on Zen Buddhism: *wabi-sabi*, *chadō*, *ikebana*, *sumi-e* and *Noh*.

1500-1600: **Sengoku Period.** Civil war and social upheaval; the period of warring states. *Daimyo* (nobles) and *samurai* (warriors).

1600-1870: **Edo Period.** Japan unified under the Tokugawa shogunate, based in Edo. Authoritarian society, closed to foreigners. Prosperous merchant class and cultural flourishing: *ukiyo-e*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*, *haiku* and *sumo*.

1870-1945: **Imperial Restoration.** Shogunate falls, emperor restored. Court moves to Edo, now renamed Tokyo. Japan modernizes rapidly. Militarism ends with World War II.

1945-present: **Modern Japan.** Look around you!

6. Interlude: Temples and Shrines

My Kyoto plan sees you visit 6 different temples and shrines in 3 days, and swing by at least a dozen more. Is this excessive? Won't you get "templed out"?

More generally: Kyoto's Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are the heart of its history and culture. Everything from *sumi-e* (calligraphy) to *ikebana* (flower arrangement) to *chadō* (the tea ceremony) has its origins in these institutions. But there are so many of them! Where do you begin, and how do you avoid temple fatigue?

Here's the key. Don't think of Kyoto's historic monuments as sights to see, or a checklist to be ticked off. You're not here to rush from Kinkaku-ji to Fushimi Inari Taisha to Kiyomizu-dera, just so that you can say you've been there. You're here to enjoy and absorb the aesthetics and atmosphere of these places, and reflect on the deeper meanings they represent.



Garden door, Ryōan-ji

I like to think that Buddhist temples are foci of **interiority**. Where does fulfilment come from? What does it mean to lead an enlightened life? How do you cultivate mindfulness, and presence?

Meanwhile, Shinto shrines are all about the **human connection** to the quotidian world. How do you live in harmony – with nature, and with your fellow human beings?

Enough philosophy; time for some practical tips.

- In Japan, Buddhism and Shinto are not exclusionary; it's considered perfectly normal to observe practices from both religions.
- Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are both generally welcoming to visitors, though most inner sanctums are off limits.
- Shrines typically have vermilion gateways, and often have sculptures of animals, or are built around rocks or waterfalls, near lakes and rivers and mountains.
- Temples tend to be more austere on the outside, but sometimes have ornate gold interiors. Different temples are associated with different schools of Buddhism.
- Shrines can be identified by the suffixes *jinja*, *taisha*, and *jingu*. Temples can be identified by the suffixes *dera*, *in*, *ji* and sometimes *do*.
- There are rules of temple and shrine [etiquette](#) worth following, both for the sake of courtesy, but also for the experience.

A lovely and strongly recommended souvenir to take back home from Kyoto is the **goshuincho** – literally, 'honourable seal or stamp book' – a pilgrimage journal of sorts. Buy a blank one at the first temple or shrine you visit. Then hand it to the staff at every subsequent location; they will write in it, with the most exquisite calligraphy.

(Don't forget to do this in Kamakura and Asakusa as well!)

Kyoto Neighbourhoods

1. Nishiki, Hanamikoji, Gion, Yasaka

Your train from Kanazawa should arrive around lunchtime. Leave your overnight bag in a coin-locker at Kyoto station, and take the subway a couple of stops north to Shijō station. Walk east along the main road, then turn left (north) on the narrow street immediately after Daimaru department store. Walk one block, and you'll see the entrance to **Nishiki Market** on your right.

This part of the market is all about food: snacks and confectionery, greengrocers and fruit sellers, butchers and fishmongers. Forage here for lunch: dip in and out of various shops, buying and sampling the wares. (Be [adventurous](#)!)

The food arcade eventually comes to an end, and now you're in the "general purpose" part of the market: everything from clothes to kitchenware, umbrellas to handbags. The oldest stores here have often been in the same family for 100s of years. Aritsugu is well-known for kitchen knives (though personally I prefer the knife shops in Sakai city in Osaka and Kappabashi district in Tokyo). Nomura Tailor is another great shop to visit.

Eventually, after exploring the arcades and alleys of Nishiki Market, return to the main road and walk east. Cross the Kamo River to **Hanamikoji**. This is a very scenic, atmospheric part of Kyoto, cross-crossed with narrow alleys and wooden storefronts. You'll see plenty of kimono-clad visitors, and perhaps a few maiko as well.

Gion (the area around Hanamikoji) is at its best around sunset, and there are lots of restaurant choices here for dinner. Another popular option is to eat at an open-air restaurant on the banks of the Kamo River.

After eating, head further east to see **Yasaka Jinja**, built in 656 CE; it's beautifully illuminated at night with hundreds of lanterns. (If you're early, explore **Maruyama Park** even further east – very pretty when the cherry trees are in bloom).

Yasaka ends your day; head back to the station, get your bags, and check in to your hotel. Your large suitcases should be waiting for you there!

Scheduling Note: Kyoto Day 1

Here's the maximalist plan for today. It's quite full and doesn't leave much in the way of down time, so don't feel bad if you can't do all of it:

6-7: rise and shine!
7-9: bus to Kenrokuen; early morning stroll
9-10: return to hotel, breakfast, check out
10-1: depart Kanazawa, arrive Kyoto, coin locker
1-3: Nishiki Market, lunch
3-5: Hanamikoji and Gion
5-6: dinner in Gion
6-7: sunset in Gion or Maruyama Park
7-8: Yasaka Jinja, illuminated
8-9: collect luggage, head to hotel, check in

It's understandable if you skip your early morning visit to Kenrokuen. Also, you can save some time by eating breakfast on the train, especially if your hotel doesn't include it with your stay (most hotels do). Finally, you don't have to stay at Yasaka till late at night; the lanterns are lit around dusk.

Note that Nishiki Market is closed on Sundays.

2. Ryōan-ji and Kinkaku-ji

Start your day at **Ryōan-ji** – ‘The Temple of the Dragon at Peace’ – my favourite of all of Kyoto’s many temples and shrines, and soon to be yours as well. Ryōan-ji is at the northern edge of the city, and can be reached by bus #59 from Shijō-Kawaramachi; but I usually take a taxi.

Ryōan-ji is famous for its **rock garden**, a classic of the *kare-sansui* (dry landscape) style. Get there early in the morning while it’s empty and quiet, and contemplate the patterns of stone and gravel. There’s an amazing depth and balance to its abstraction.



The Zen garden at Ryōan-ji

Equally moving is the *tsukubai* (fountain-basin) at the back of the temple, with its Zen aphorism: “I know only to be content”. This is Ryōan-ji’s motto, and a fine one to keep in mind.

Ryōan-ji’s gardens are modest but tasteful, and there’s a lovely tea pavilion overlooking the ornamental pond, if you need to refresh body as well as mind.

From Ryōan-ji it’s a 15-minute walk or a quick bus/taxi ride to Kinkaku-ji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion.

Kinkaku-ji is a work of art: a building whose every proportion is just perfect. But it’s also terribly crowded. There are lines to get in, lines to take photos, lines along the pathways, lines at the souvenir stalls. You would think that all these people detract from the beauty of the building, but amazingly, they don’t.



The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

(One idea is to go to Kinkaku-ji first, to beat the crowds, and then go to Ryōan-ji. I don’t recommend it, though: of the two, Ryōan-ji is the one that really rewards solitude and quietness.)

Note that the current Golden Pavilion dates from 1955; it’s a replica of a structure originally built around 1400, which was notoriously burnt down in 1950. This is not unusual in Japan, a country with wooden architecture, frequent earthquakes, and tsunami: old temples often burn down and are rebuilt exactly as they were, down to the specific construction techniques used.

(A notable exception is Kōtoku-in in Kamakura: the original wooden structure was washed away by a tsunami in 1498, and since then, the Great Buddha has been sitting in the open, exposed to rain and wind and sun and snow.)

3. Ginkaku-ji and the Path of Philosophy

Next, take a taxi or bus (#32) to **Ginkaku-ji**, the Temple of the Silver Pavilion. (Official name Jishō-ji, the Temple of Shining Mercy.)

Structurally, Ginkaku-ji appears quite similar to Kinkaku-ji. Aesthetically, it couldn't be more different. Where Kinkaku-ji is all ornate gold leaf and decoration, Ginkaku-ji is all austere wood, understated tones, and the texture of moss and leaf and tree.



Ginkakuji in Higashiyama

This is intentional. Ginkaku-ji is the origin and one of the canonical examples of **Higashiyama culture** – the elegant, refined, minimalistic aesthetic, dating from the late 15th century, that we associate with Japanese design to this day. (Higashiyama means 'eastern mountains' – the district where Ginkaku-ji is situated.)

Despite its name, there's no silver in Ginkaku-ji. That's because the temple was intentionally left unfinished – no silver leaf, only wood – as part of the Zen philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, the mindful acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Take a few minutes to explore Ginkaku-ji's grounds. There's a nice view from the paths at the back of the grounds; also, don't miss the carefully tended gravel Mount Fuji.

The road leading to Ginkaku-ji is lined with shops and stalls; it's a good place to get lunch. Walk back down this road, cross a tiny wooden bridge, and turn left. You are now on the Philosopher's Walk, a pleasant stroll along the side of a quiet canal. (It's especially popular during *hanami*, the cherry blossom season.)

The path is 1.5km long and winds past several Higashiyama temples, all on your left. My favourite is **Hōnen-in**, a small, usually empty temple with a gorgeous seasonal garden.



The garden of Hōnen-in

At the end of the walk are **Eikan-dō**, famous for its fall colours and illuminations, and **Nanzen-ji** with its massive grounds and many sub-temples.

Don't feel the urge to visit every single temple in Higashiyama; while they're lovely, there are a lot of them. If you manage to see all of Ryōan-ji, Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji and Hōnen-in, that's already a very full and satisfactory day.

4. Kurama and Kibune

For day 3 in Kyoto we'll visit Kurama in the morning, and Osaka in the evening.

Kurama is a little village in the mountains north of Kyoto. It's home to **Kurama-dera**, a lovely mountaintop temple nestled among cedars and pines; there's a great hike up to and across the temple grounds, and an onsen (hot spring resort) to wash away your sins (and fatigue). Possibly my favourite excursion from Kyoto

You get there by taking the **Eizan railway**, a cute two-car train that runs from Demachiyanagi station near the Kyoto Imperial Palace; connect via the Keihan line. Be sure to take the train bound for Kurama, not the one that branches to Yase-Hiezanguchi. The route is quite scenic in parts, and if you're lucky you'll get to ride on the 'Kirara' trainset with panoramic windows.

From Kurama station, you can either walk up the hill to the temple, or take the Kurama incline railway (supposedly the shortest railway line in all of Japan).



Worship hall at Kurama-dera

Kurama-dera temple used to be a sub-temple of the (also gorgeous) Shoren-in temple in Kyoto, but they branched off some years ago and now follow their own esoteric practice. The temple is beautiful, and the forested setting is spectacular.

Historically, Kurama-dera is associated with Yoshitsune, the young noble considered to be the ideal chivalric hero of medieval Japan, and his faithful retainer, the giant warrior-monk Benkei. Kurama-dera is also (supposedly) the place where *reiki* originated.

After seeing Kurama-dera, you can retrace your steps to Kurama village, or you can continue along the trail, descending the other side of the mountain to Kibune village. The full hike is not very long – a couple of hours maybe? – but it gets moderately steep at parts. From Kibune you can take a bus back to Kibuneguchi, which is another stop on the Eizan railway line.

There's an excellent onsen (hot spring) in Kurama village, with both open-air and indoor baths, a great way to unwind after all that mountain air. (Towels and yukata provided). If you want to see the temple, do the full hike and also soak in the spring afterwards, it makes sense to start your traverse at Kibune and end at Kurama station.

If you decide to go the other way, Kibune village doesn't have hot springs but it does have some river-side (actually, river-top) dining in the summer which is quite the experience.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 3

What better end to a day in the mountains, than the hustle and bustle of Osaka for dinner? See the Osaka section under 'Short Trips from Kyoto' for details and suggestions.

5. Fushimi Inari Taisha

Your first stop on day 4 is **Fushimi Inari Taisha**, dedicated to Inari, the Shinto deity of the rice harvest, and – by extension – of commerce and business. It's famous for its hundreds of bright red shrine gates or torii; they make for dazzling photographs.



Vermilion gates at Fushimi Inari Taisha

The shrine gets very busy as the day goes by, so it's best to get there early. Take the Keihan line to Fushimi Inari station, or the JR Nara line to Inari station, and then walk east and uphill. You can visit the lower (outer) shrine, or you can climb up the hill to the upper (inner) shrine; the full hike takes about 3 hours and offers some nice views. The higher you go, the sparser the crowds; very few make it all the way to the top.

Unlike Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines are open 24/7. This suggests two enticing options to beat the crowds. You can get there early in the morning, ideally before 9am. Or you can get there after sundown and climb the mountain at night.

Night at the shrine is very scenic; there are a few lights to keep the trail safe, but not so many as to spoil the atmosphere. If you decide to go at night, carry a torch; don't go off-trail (there are wild boar in the area!); and travel with a friend.

6. Kiyomizu-dera to Kodai-ji

Next, take the Keihan line north to Kiyomizu-Gojō station. Exit the station and head east towards **Kiyomizu-dera**, one of Kyoto's great temples. It's a 30-minute walk, steadily uphill, along an uninspiring main road with lots of traffic – I recommend taking a taxi instead.

Kiyomizu-dera, the 'Monastery of Pure Water', is an imposing and lively temple 'on stilts' at the top of a mountain, with great views over the city. There's always a crowd here, but it's a festive, happy crowd. Explore the temple grounds – wash your hands at the dragon fountain and ring the prayer bell – before descending westward down a road lined with wooden shops.



Kiyomizu-dera on its platform

Halfway down the slope, make a right turn and head north along the **Sanneizaka** and **Nineizaka** slopes, passing yet more traditional shops, selling everything from umbrellas to furikake.

At the end of Nineizaka, turn left and then right along Nene-no-michi to walk alongside Kodai-ji park. **Kodai-ji Temple** on your right is another elegant, peaceful temple to visit, with a little bit of everything: a rock garden, willows and moss, a tea house near a bamboo grove, fall colours, cherry blossoms, and illuminations at night.

7. Maruyama Park, Chion-In, Shoren-In

Past Kodai-ji, you'll reach **Maruyama Park**, which you may have walked through on day 1 in Kyoto. This is a good place to relax and unwind for a while. It's probably mid-afternoon by now, and you have a choice: continue north to see two bonus temples, Chion-in and Shoren-in, or head back west to Gion and the city centre.

Chion-in is large and rich, but somewhat boring. Three notable sights here: the imposing *Sanmon* (ornamental gateway), the massive temple bell (thousands gather here on New Year's Eve to hear it rung), and the lily pond at the back with its Monet-inspiring stone bridge.



The stone bridge at Chion-in

Far nicer, to me at least, is **Shoren-in**, an exquisite little temple with an impeccably tasteful garden and peaceful meditation rooms to sit in.

You'll eventually want to head back to the city centre. From Maruyama Park, you can walk past Yasaka Jinja to the heart of Gion and Hanamikoji. Alternatively, if you decide to visit my two bonus temples, continue north to Higashiyama subway station which will take you back to central Kyoto. You could even walk all the way to the southern end of the Path of Philosophy, for maximum completion points.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 4

In my plan, I assume you start the day at Fushimi Inari Taisha, head to Kiyomizu-dera by late morning or mid-day, and reach Maruyama Park by mid- or late afternoon.

But you can also do things in the opposite order. Start your day by heading up to Kiyomizu-dera; if you're early, it'll be quite empty. The temple opens at 6am, but any time before 9 should do.

Walk down past Sanneizaka and Nineizaka in the late morning. (If you're too early, the shops will be closed.) Eat a picnic lunch at Maruyama Park. Rest and relax there in the afternoon; or even head back to your hotel for a nap. Eat an early dinner, then head over to Fushimi Inari Taisha around sunset; climb the mountain after dark.

This schedule beats the crowds, but it's a long day. So it's entirely a function of how much stamina you have, and how adventurous you want to be 😊.

8. Arashiyama

Arashiyama is a calm, quiet, pretty area just a little west of Kyoto. It has several attractions: the Togetsu-kyo bridge, the Tenryuji temple, but most of all, the **Arashiyama Bamboo Forest**. The latter gets quite crowded (are you sensing a Kyoto theme?) so it's best to get there early.

From Kyoto station, the JR Sagano line will take you to JR Saga Arashiyama station. An alternative is to take the (very cute) Keifuku Arashiyama line (aka the Randen tram line) to Keifuku Arashiyama station, although that doesn't connect to Kyoto station directly.



Arashiyama bamboo grove

The bamboo grove is Arashiyama's main attraction. Togetsu-kyo is also nice. Tenryuji is okay, you can go there for completion but it's also skippable. If you have time and you like picturesque train rides, I recommend the Sagano Scenic Railway which heads west alongside the river up into the hills from Torokko Saga station – it takes about 30 minutes each way. You can also go for a boat ride if the weather is pleasant (and it usually is).

Arashiyama has some good restaurants; Yudofu Sagano and Shoraian for the local specialty, tofu in broth, and Otsuka for exceptional wagyu steak.

Scheduling Note, Kyoto Day 5

It's just about possible to visit the bamboo grove, ride the scenic train, eat lunch in Arashiyama, and still be back in Kyoto by early afternoon for your shinkansen to Odawara. But it requires an early start and some planning.

- Wake up early and check out by 8am. Send your large suitcase(s) to Tokyo using your hotel's *takkyubin* service. Carry an overnight bag with you.
- Head over to Arashiyama and stash your overnight bag in a coin locker. (Or leave it at Kyoto station if that's more convenient).
- Try to get to the bamboo grove by 9am, before the crowds arrive.
- Either wander through Arashiyama's side streets, shops and the Togetsu-kyo bridge, or ride the Sagano Scenic Railway. (You may not have time to do both).
- Eat an early lunch in Arashiyama at 11 or 11:30. Then head back to Kyoto to catch the shinkansen around 1:30 or 2, which should get you to Odawara around 4ish.

This schedule is easier if you're staying in Arashiyama. Also, you can save time by eating a late eki-ben lunch on the shinkansen. And finally, it's okay to reach Odawara around 5ish if that allows more leeway to see the sights you want to see in Arashiyama.

(Arashiyama is quiet and peaceful – all the more reason to have a relaxed day there, and not rush about with your eye on the clock.)

9. And More ...

I find it hard to skip any of the main temples and shrines – Ryōan-ji, Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Fushimi Inari Taisha and Kiyomizu-dera. They're all very different, and they're what makes Kyoto special.

But you should follow your own preferences. If you're enjoying the temples and shrines and gardens and groves, great; stick with my plan. If you want a change of scenery, fear not; Kyoto has a lot more to offer. Here are some favourites:

Kyoto International Manga Museum: history, posters, large manga collection, reading areas, some English books.

Japan Rail Museum: amazing huge building with many full-size trains inside, including old shinkansen models.

Suntory Yamazaki Distillery: public tours and a whisky store, halfway between Kyoto and Osaka.

Murin-an: traditional villa with gardens and a tea-house, with daily gardening demos for a true get-your-hands-dirty experience.

Kyoto Museum of Crafts and Design: small, elegant museum with materials, tools, video exhibits and artist demos.

Japan Kanji Museum: collection of calligraphy, scrolls and wall-hangings.

Conversely, if you've fallen in love with temple architecture, here are a few more to visit:

Ninna-ji: large, elegant, usually quite empty of visitors. A short walk from Ryōan-ji.

Daitoku-ji: a complex of 14 Zen temples of which 4 are open to visitors, with compact, beautiful, contemplative rock gardens.

Shoren-in and Honen-in: my favourite small temples in Kyoto. Many others are more imposing, and some are more inspiring, but these two are special.

Enrakyu-ji temple: sprawling temple complex at the top of Mt Hiei, the seat of power for "warrior monks" in the 10th to 12th centuries.

Sanjūsangen-dō: simple exterior belies an impressive interior, with 1000 life-size wooden statues of Kannon, the goddess of mercy.

Katsura villa: not a temple, but similar elegant design, dedicated especially to the tea ceremony.

Finally, some popular tourist attractions in Kyoto that I generally think are *not* worth visiting, given limited time, are the Kyoto Imperial Palace, Nijō Castle and Heian Shrine.

Short Trips From Kyoto

Scheduling Note, Short Trips

Arashiyama and **Kurama** are the closest short trips from Kyoto proper. They take 30 to 45 minutes to get to, and they can be covered in half a day to a full day each. I've described both in the Kyoto Neighbourhoods section above.

Osaka is worth visiting for one evening, but probably not much more than that. It takes 45-60 minutes to get there (but just 15 minutes on the shinkansen – use your JR pass!).

Nara and **Okayama** are both easily doable as day trips from Kyoto, but in my opinion they're not quite worth the effort, especially on a first visit to Japan – good, but not great.

Conversely, **Koya-san** and **Naoshima-Teshima** are both wonderful and well worth going to, but it's hard to fit them into a day trip; you really need to stay overnight for the full experience.

Putting it all together, my suggestion would be:

- visit Kurama and Arashiyama on days 3 and 5 of your stay, per my Kyoto day planner.
- get dinner in Osaka at least once.
- skip the others unless you have more than 2 weeks to spend in Japan.

1. Osaka

The Japanese stereotype of Osakans is that they are funny and friendly; boisterous and noisy; blunt to the point of rudeness; commercial-minded and practical. I don't know how much truth there is to all of that, but it's certainly true that Osaka has a different vibe than formal, mannered Kyoto, or sophisticated, stylish Tokyo.

But it's hard to absorb that vibe on a short visit, and in any case Osaka doesn't have a whole lot of 'obvious' tourist destinations. (Osaka Castle is fine, I guess. Osaka Aquarium is impressive, but also a little sad.)

So I'd just keep it simple: walk through **Dotombori** and maybe Shinsaibashi-suji, paying attention to the subtle ways they're different from Tokyo and Kyoto.

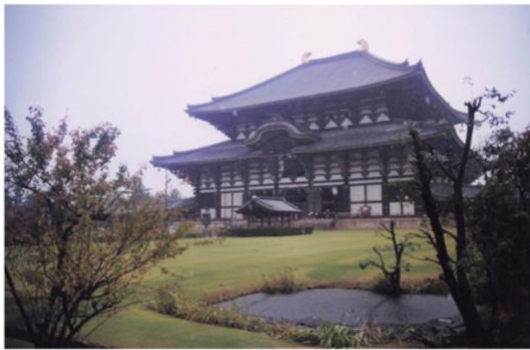
One thing to know is that Osaka is the culinary capital of Japan and the food I've eaten there has been uniformly amazing. **Okonomiyaki** is perhaps the signature Osaka dish – I strongly recommend **Kuishinbo** near Amerika-Mura – but honestly, everything you eat here is delicious. Explore and be adventurous!

Osaka also has excellent **nightlife** – lots of pubs, karaoke, late night bars, music, clubs and so on. Meanwhile Kyoto tends to get very quiet after sunset. So – especially if you have a JR pass, the commute is kind of long without it – you could easily make it a habit to spend the day imbibing high culture in Kyoto, and then head to Osaka every evening for amazing food and lively company. Long days, but YOLO!

2. Nara

Nara was the capital of Japan even before Kyoto; you can trace a clear cultural lineage through Nara, Kyoto, Kamakura and Edo. Today it's a well-preserved village of temples, mausoleums and cultural treasures.

Notable about Nara is that most of its sights are situated in a vast open expanse – **Nara Park**. It's not like Kyoto where you turn the corner of a residential street and stumble upon a massive temple complex (or a tiny shrine); in Nara Park there are no structures other than the historical ones. It gives Nara a very different feel.



Todai-ji in Nara Park

The highlight of Nara is **Todai-ji temple** – the largest wooden structure in the world from the time of its initial construction in 752, all the way until 1998. (Japanese joinery for the win!). It's truly imposing. Within Todai-ji is Nara's own **Great Buddha** – it's bigger than the one in Kamakura, and 500 years older. Casting it used up almost all of Japan's bronze – 500 tons worth! To me it's not quite as refined as the Kamakura Daibutsu, but it's still spectacular.

Horyu-ji in Nara is another temple worth visiting – the world's oldest wooden building.

3. Okayama

The reason to go to Okayama is **Korakuen**, one of the “three great gardens” of Japan. Kenrokuen in Kanazawa and Kairakuen in Mito are the others; if you've already seen Kenrokuen, skip Okayama.

Okayama is a 1.5-hour shinkansen ride from Kyoto, doable as a day trip if you have a JR Pass. (If you don't, it's not worth it: the shinkansen costs \$80 each way, while cheaper local trains take 4-5 hours each way). From Okayama station, there's a direct bus to Korakuen.

Spend a couple of hours walking through the garden, with all your senses (sight, sound, smell) active. Every turn of the pathway reveals something new, always balanced and always calm. Note especially the use of ‘borrowed perspective’ – the way the garden incorporates elements of the surrounding countryside (most notably **Okayama Castle**) into its own views.

After you're done with the garden, you can visit the castle, known for its unusual black exterior (it's nicknamed “Crow Castle” for this reason). While the original was built around 1600, the current structure is a copy constructed in 1966.

Okayama to me is where “western Japan” really begins. The landscapes, weather, food and vibe are all subtly different from the cities of Kanto, Chibi or Kinki. It's also a great stepping-off point for the beautiful Seto Inland Sea and trips to Shikoku and Naoshima.

(Having said all that, I don't think Korakuen is as good as Kenrokuen.)

4. Koya-san

Koya-san (Mount Koya) is magical. It's one of Japan's holiest Buddhist sites – a complex of a few dozen temples and monasteries, on a high plateau ringed by eight mountains. There are no inns or commercial establishments in Koya-san, so visitors stay as **temple guests**, dining on vegetarian food and participating in early-morning prayer services. [Accommodations](#) are basic, but the experience is sublime.



Okuno-in cemetery among the cedars

Getting there is half the fun! (Not really.) Here are the steps:

- Kyoto to Osaka on the JR Kyoto line or (if you have a JR pass) the Tokaido shinkansen
- Osaka to Shin-Imamiya on the Osaka loop line
- Shin-Imamiya to Gokurakubashi on the Nankai-Koya line (change at Hashimoto)
- Gokurakubashi to Koyasan sta. via cable-car
- Koyasan sta. to the temple area via bus

The full trip, from Kyoto to Koya-san, takes about 3 hours – it's just about doable as a day trip, but unlikely to be very enjoyable that way, plus you miss the temple stay. I'd suggest overnighting here instead – perhaps combined with some time in Osaka on the way in or out.

Within the Koyasan complex, I *highly* recommend walking through the cemetery of Okunoin Temple, with its stone lanterns, moss-covered pathways and towering cedar trees. It's especially atmospheric at twilight and later.

The entire Koya-san experience is utterly magical, there's simply no other word for it.

5. Naoshima and Teshima

Naoshima isn't really a day trip from Kyoto – you'll need two days to get there and back – but you can potentially combine it with a visit to Okayama, or stage it on your way to Hiroshima. You'll have to take a train from Okayama to either Uno or Takamatsu, and then a ferry to the island. The former route is shorter but a bit fiddly; the latter is longer but more scenic. Details [here](#).

Naoshima's claim to fame, aided by some slick marketing, is that it's an "art island". There are multiple museums, many of them designed by Tadao Ando (Japan's foremost contemporary architect), in his subtle minimal / modernist style. Also a bunch of open air exhibits, all set in beautiful natural surroundings.

About those natural surroundings – Naoshima is lovely, and really has the feel of the **Inland Sea**. It's very different from what you've seen so far (big cities like Tokyo and Osaka, mountains and temples like Kyoto and Kamakura). The art is good, the vibe is great, and the experience is greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally: the best part of Naoshima is not Naoshima, it's the adjoining island of **Teshima**. Teshima is home to a single museum with a single exhibit – the museum is the exhibit and the exhibit is the museum. It's wondrous; I don't want to say more. You should go there if you can.

Dining in Japan

1. Introduction

A big part of any visit to Japan is sampling all the delicious food on offer. There's a lot more to Japanese cuisine than just sushi and ramen (great though those are); the food is varied, tasty, and for the most part quite healthy. And Japanese restaurants generally offer good quality, reasonable prices and excellent service.

So don't miss out on the experience! Be open-minded and curious. Try different foods! Get accustomed to the different flavour profiles – the sweetness of mirin, the saltiness of soy, the sourness of plum. Embrace the umami!

Japanese restaurants tend to focus on a single style of cuisine. So there are tempura joints, and sushi joints, and ramen joints, but you won't get sushi at a ramen restaurant, or vice versa.

2. Foods to Try

Here are some foods you should try on your visit:

Yakitori: grilled chicken on skewers

Tempura: batter-fried shrimp and vegetables, usually on a bowl of rice or noodles

Shabu-shabu: thinly sliced beef, cooked with veggies in a hotpot at your table

Sukiyaki: similar concept but the meat (or fish) is sauteed in a light stew, again at your table

Yakiniku: Korean-style beef seared on a grill

Teppanyaki: high-end Japanese steakhouse

Ramen: noodles in broth; many different [styles](#) (Hakata style is my favourite)

Okonomiyaki: savoury pancakes stuffed with all sorts of meat and seafood

Monjayaki: the Tokyo version of Okonomiyaki, thinner and somewhat lighter

Soba and udon: thin and thick wheat noodles

Gyu-don, katsu-don, unagi-don: rice topped with beef, pork cutlets, and eel (respectively)

Takoyaki: octopus grilled in pancake batter

Yakisoba: griddle-fried noodles

Sushi: raw fish with vinegared rice

Tonkatsu: deep fried breaded pork

Takoyaki: grilled battered octopus

You can find restaurants that specialize in each of these. In addition, here are a few other restaurant types:

Kaiseki: fine dining with small elegant courses

Izakaya: Japanese pub, wide variety of foods

Yoshoku: Japanese versions of western dishes

Kushiage: deep fried or grilled skewered meats

Yatai: roadside food stalls

Teishoku: 'set' meals: main dish, vegetables, rice and miso soup.

3. Tips and Tricks

So, lots of restaurants to visit and foods to try. How do you navigate it all?

- Restaurants get crowded, especially in popular tourist areas. Queueing 30 to 60 minutes or even longer for a table is not uncommon. The answer is to **eat early**. Lunch at 11:30, dinner at 5:30.
- Google, Yelp and TripAdvisor tend to over-index on cheap, lowest-common-denominator, tourist-friendly eats. Use **Tabelog** instead, with browser translation enabled.
- Japanese **chain restaurants** generally score well on quality, taste, value, convenience; none of the negative associations of their international counterparts. I especially recommend **Ichiran** and **Ippudo**, two excellent chains for ramen. There are chains for every sort of donburi (rice bowl): tempura, gyu-don, katsu-don and more.
- **Convenience stores** (conbini) are incredibly, well, convenient. There's always a large selection of pre-packaged meals, and they're cheap, tasty, and not too unhealthy (a trifecta hard to find). The staff will heat your food if you ask, and also give you chopsticks (*o-hashii*). Good choices to eat on the go are onigiri (rice triangles), agedori (fried chicken) and curry buns. But there's also sandwiches, yakisoba, bento boxes ...
- If your hotel doesn't serve breakfast, go to a *kissaten* (café) for their '**morning service**' – coffee, toast, eggs. **Kôhikan** is a great chain version of this; there are others.
- Many restaurants have plastic models of the food in the window, and pictures on the menu. Ask for English menus (*eigo-no-menu*) or use Google Translate on your phone.

4. Japan for Vegetarians

Being vegetarian in Japan is easier than it was 20 years ago, but it's still not easy. The fundamental problem is that *dashi* – fish-based stock – is an essential constituent of many Japanese dishes, even those that are nominally vegetarian.

Tofu, for example, is invariably served with a dipping sauce of dashi, soy and sake, and often topped with dried bonito flakes. So even if you order dishes with no 'obvious' meat or fish in them, you might still be getting those ingredients.

One idea that I've seen work is to carry a card that says "I am a vegetarian and I do not eat *any* meat or fish, including stocks and sauces" (translated into Japanese of course).

Another useful tip is to ask for Buddhist food – many restaurant staff will understand this and accommodate. (Kyoto, incidentally, has high-end restaurants that specialize in sophisticated Buddhist vegan fare – "*shojin ryori*".)

Every restaurant serves rice, so worst case, you'll be eating a lot of rice, soy sauce and pickled vegetables.

You can of course restrict your dining to non-Japanese restaurants: Italian and Indian and generic American eateries will usually have lots of options. But that's an option of last resort.

Convenience stores can come to the rescue here. Baked goods, rice bowls, inari sushi (rice wrapped in tofu), veggie sandwiches: it's pretty easy to put together a filling meal.

Experiences in Japan

When in Japan, you should take some time to participate in and enjoy a few quintessentially Japanese experiences.

(You may think that my daily plans are too action-packed for this, but they're not. I allocate generous amounts of time in every area precisely to allow for exploration, serendipity, and local experiences – I prefer that to short, rushed visits.)

Here are some activities to consider, with possible locations [in brackets].

1. Art and Craft Classes

Washi-making class: make traditional Japanese paper. [Ozu-Washi in Nihombashi]

Book-binding class: design your own *goshuincho*. [Kyoto is best for this]

Knife-sharpening class: for your new *gyuto*! [Kamata in Kappabashi]

Mokuhanga class: how to make traditional woodblock prints. [Tokyo is best for this]

Shodo class: brush-ink calligraphy. [anywhere, but Kyoto is probably best]

2. Music and Theater

Jazz: Shimokitazawa, Aoyama, Akasaka-Roppongi and Shinjuku all have great live jazz venues.

Taiko: various ensembles of which Kodo is my favourite; also see Sado Island section.

Kabuki, Noh, Bunraku: three forms of traditional Japanese theatre. Kabuki is the most accessible for visitors. [Kabuki-za in Ginza]

3. Sports and Adventure

Skiing: Hokkaido and the Japanese Alps both offer absolutely world class skiing, amazing snow.

Baseball: passionate fans, synchronized cheers, unique rituals.

Sumo: if you're in Tokyo during tournament time, a must-see. [Ryogoku]

Biking: Tokyo is too big, but Kyoto is just right for riding a rental bike. [at hotel, or Kyoto sta.]

4. Group Activities

Karaoke: terrific fun, a great way to end the evening. [Shinjuku, Akihabara, Osaka]

Cooking tours: walk through Tsukiji or Nishiki market with a guide and then cook with the ingredients you bought.

Festivals: if you're lucky, you'll be in Tokyo for one of Sanja, Kanda or Sanno Matsuri; or in Kyoto for Gion Matsuri – wonderful community events.

Hanami: cherry blossoms in Japan, every bit as wonderful as advertised. [Ueno, Maruyama]

Tea ceremony: formal, elegant, refined and mindful. (and the tea is good too!) [Kyoto]

5. And More...

Sumida River Cruise: a pleasant way to spend an hour or two; some boats go out into Tokyo Bay.

DisneyLand and DisneySea: perhaps not very Japanese, but if you're a fan, go for it.

Climbing Mount Fuji: strenuous and crowded, but the views are spectacular. (July to September)

Shopping

As a general principle, I believe in spending on “experiences, not objects”. But I make an exception for shopping in Japan ☺. Japan is a great place to buy souvenirs that are:

- Evocative of the places you’ve visited
- Useful and usable back home
- Distinctive, tasteful and not tacky
- Beautifully designed and packaged
- Reasonably priced

My favourite souvenirs from Japan are stationery, paper arts and crafts, woodblock prints, kitchen knives, teapots and cups, fabrics, food and pantry supplies, and *zakka* (eclectic household sundries).

1. Recommended Shops, By Area

Here are some stores I recommend: both for the quality and variety of their offerings, and also for the experience of visiting them.

- *Asakusa*

Nakaya: Japanese festival clothes & supplies
Sakai gallery: classic woodblock prints
Mokuhankan: contemporary woodblock prints
Sanrio: Hello Kitty merchandise
Marugoto: delicacies from around Japan
Maekawa Inden: deerskin leather goods
Yamakichi: ceramics
Miyamoto-Unosuke: taiko drums

- *Kappabashi*

Dengama: classic ceramics
Kakesu zakka-ten: modern teapots and cups
Touan Yabukita: more ceramics
Kama-asa: general kitchenware
Jikko: my favourite knife shop
Kamata, Seisuka, Tsubaya: more knives

- *Nihombashi*

Haibara: paper, notebooks, prints
Yamamoto Noriten: nori (dried seaweed)
Kayanoya: dashi, soy sauce, ponzu
Ozuwashi: handmade washi paper
Mitsukoshi: beautiful department store

- *Shinjuku*

Sekaido: amazing stationery store
Kyowa: traditional calligraphy inks, brushes
Yodobashi: flagship camera store
Kitamura: camera store that feels like a museum
Lemon, Map: used camera gear including Leica
Yuzawaya: knitting, crafts, hobbies
Okadaya: fabrics, buttons, haberdashery
Yamamoto Coffee: all sorts of coffee gear

- *Jimbocho & Ochanomizu*

Hara Shobo: gallery for woodblock prints
Bumpodo: traditional art and stationery supplies
Tools: modern art supplies, especially Copic
Komiyama: books on photography, fashion, art
Disk Union: CDs, vinyl – stores by genre
Lots of musical instrument stores!

- *Ginza*

Itoya: another amazing stationery store
Muji: flagship store of global home goods chain
Mikimoto: cultured pearls
Tsutaya Books: bookstore inside Ginza Six
Ippodo: high-end Japanese tea, inside Mitsukoshi
Kyukyodo: traditional arts and crafts
Gekkō-sō: more traditional arts and crafts
Wako: possibly the most elegant of Ginza’s many department stores.

- *Shibuya*

Tokyu Hands: household, DIY and hobbyist
Shibuya Loft: similar, eclectic, slightly cheaper
Uematsu: art supplies
Shibuya 109: young and cool fashion
Mandarake: collectibles – toys, anime, j-pop

- *Akihabara*

BIC & Yodobashi: flagship camera stores

Nisshin & Lemon: used cameras and lenses

Laox, Yamada Genki: huge electronics depots

Onoden: electronics shop with a friendly neighbourhood vibe (yes, that's a thing!)

Kaiyodo: figurines and toy models

Akiba Gamers: all things anime-related

Sofmap: all you need for PC gaming

Surugaya: multiple branches, each with a different focus: games, figurines, cards etc.



Rows of colour at Pigment Tokyo

- *Elsewhere in Tokyo*

Kakimori: custom inks and fountain pens

Nippori Tomato: fabrics and sewing supplies

Pigment Tokyo: the ultimate store for colours, pigments, inks, dyes

Wood Like Matsumura: supplies for making woodblock prints

Ma-suya: a store that sells to salt. Yes, just salt.

Sippo: eclectic store, goods from all over Japan

(All these specialty stores are highly recommended, btw.)

Finally, be sure to visit **Uniqlo** and **Muji** – chains that sell well-designed, high-quality, very well-priced clothes and housewares, respectively.

2. Buying a Japanese Knife

A Japanese **chef's knife** is life-changing. If you enjoy cooking, this is one purchase I would encourage you to splurge on.

There are many different types of knife available, distinguished by size, shape, and material. For most home chefs, a Japanese-handle-design knife made of high-quality **stainless steel** is your best bet, combining sharpness, ease of use, and ease of maintenance. Carbon steel retains its edge longer but requires more care.

If you're buying one knife, I'd suggest a **santoku** (general purpose knife). If you're buying two, buy a **gyuto** (chef's knife) and a **petty** (small knife). And if you're buying three, buy a **gyuto**, a **petty**, and either a **nakiri** (vegetable knife), or a **santoku** for your third. Also buy a **hinoki** wooden cutting board, and a wooden sheath or **saya** for every knife you buy.

I suggest buying your knife or knives in **Kappabashi** district near Asakusa. **Kamata** is the best-known vendor and tourist friendly, but it gets crowded. **Kama-asa** is a general kitchenware store with a knives-only branch, well laid out and easy to shop at. But my favourite is **Jikko**, a newcomer to Kappabashi but long-established in Osaka. Jikko for me has the optimal mix of authenticity, high quality and surprisingly reasonable prices. Finally, if you just want the best possible knife for your money, cross the Sumida river and go to **Masamoto Sohonten** on the east side.

And Finally

1. Compressed Itinerary

If you only have 1 week to spend in Japan, here's a compressed itinerary you can follow:

Day 1: Arrive Tokyo. Stay in Tokyo 3 nights, preferably in Asakusa.

Day 2: Tsukiji market at 8am. Ginza, Hibiya, Imperial Palace, Tokyo Station, Akihabara.

Day 3: Asakusa, Kappabashi, Ryogoku, Ueno.

Day 4: Very early train to Kyoto. Nishiki market, Kiyomizu-dera to Kodai-ji, then Hanamikoji and Gion. Stay in Kyoto 2 nights.

Day 5: Ryoanji and Kinkakuji in the morning. Path of Philosophy in the afternoon. Fushimi Inari Taisha at sunset.

Day 6: Very early train to Odawara. Hakone scenic loop. Continue to Tokyo in the evening. Stay in Tokyo 2 nights, preferably in Shinjuku.

Day 7: Shinjuku-gyoen in the morning. Nihombashi, Omotesando, Shibuya and back to Shinjuku at night.

Day 8. Depart Tokyo.

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With even less time, skip Kyoto and do a day trip to Kamakura instead. Take the JR Yokosuka line to Kita-Kamakura and explore various Zen Buddhist temples: Engaku-ji, Jochi-ji, Tokei-ji and Kencho-ji. Then visit Hachimangu Shrine on the main approach to Kamakura station. Take the Enoden line to the Great Buddha, visit Hase-dera, and wrap up at Enoshima Island.

2. Books, Movies and More

Essays:

- [The Sea of Crises](#) – Brian Phillips
- Popup walks and newsletters – [Craig Mod](#)

Books:

- Emergent Tokyo – Jorge Almazán
- The Lady and the Monk – Pico Iyer
- The Roads to Sata – Alan Booth
- The Inland Sea – Donald Ritchie
- Hokkaido Highway Blues – Will Ferguson
- Ametora – David Marx
- The Tokyo Zodiac Murders – Soji Shimada
- The Tale of Genji – Murasaki Shikibu

And you can't go wrong reading anything by Haruki Murakami and by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Movies

- Spirited Away
- My Friend Totoro
- Kubo and the Two Strings
- Akira
- Ran / Yojimbo / Throne of Blood

Anime and manga:

- Attack on Titan
- Full Metal Alchemist
- One Piece
- Naruto

3. And Finally

Thank you for reading this guide. I welcome your suggestions, corrections, ideas, and feedback. And if you enjoyed the guide and found it helpful, I would truly appreciate your letting me know; please email me – at@abrahamthomas.info ☺

Happy Travels!
