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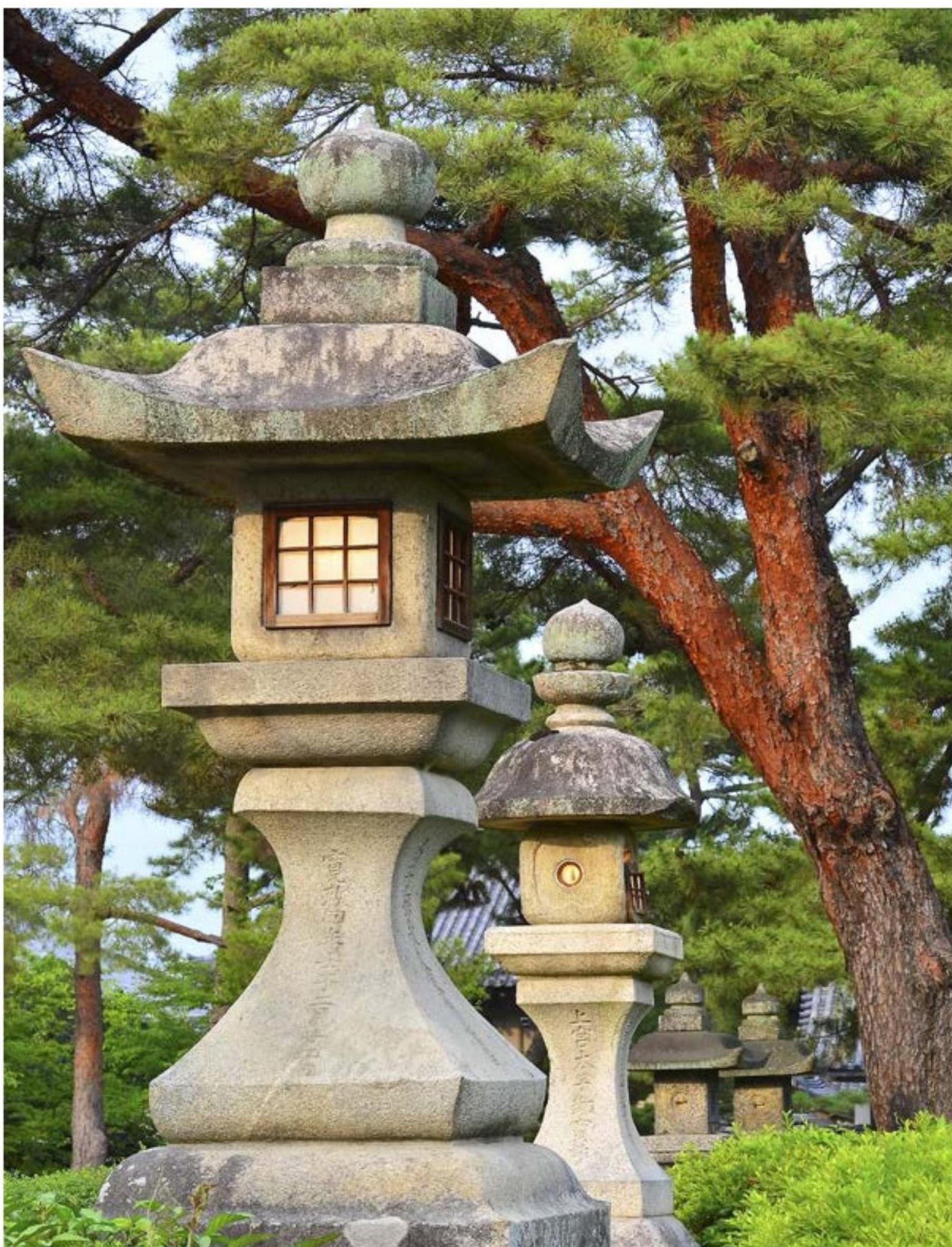
Japan



Written by Nathaniel Wilson

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Table of Contents

Where Is It?	4
People	6
Land	8
History	10
Celebrations	12
Food	13
Conclusion	14
Glossary	16



Where Is It?

Japan is an archipelago, a string of islands that stretches more than 2,400 km (1,500 mi.) just off the east coast of Asia in the Pacific Ocean. Japan is small—smaller than the state of California—and includes four main islands along with thousands of smaller islands.

The country's closest neighbors are China, North and South Korea, and the Siberian region of Russia. The Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, lies between Japan and Asia. The East China Sea lies to the southwest of Japan, and the Pacific Ocean lies to the east.



Bullet trains bring people through Tokyo's busiest train station.

The largest island in the chain is Honshu (HON-shoo), which includes more than 80 percent of Japan's population. The other primary islands are Hokkaido, Shikoku, and Kyushu. The country's largest cities are on Honshu, with nearly all of them located along the east coast.

The capital of Japan is Tokyo (TOH-kee-yoh), also located on Honshu. More than thirty-two million people live and work in this sprawling **metropolis**. The city—a bustling center for international trade and business—is one of the most populated cities in the world.

Millions of people also live in the areas surrounding Tokyo, forming what many call “Greater Tokyo.” People typically travel from these surrounding areas into Tokyo on high-speed trains called *bullet trains*, as well as on slower trains and subways. The city is the main transportation hub for Japan. It is said that more people pass through the Shinjuku (SHEEN-ju-ku) railway station in Tokyo than any other railway station in the world.

People

Although Japan is a small country, it has a population of more than 127 million, with over 90 percent of its people living in urban areas. Many people who live in cities work in banks, restaurants, hospitals, and other service industries. Others work in factories, producing high-tech electronics such as cell phones, computers, and televisions as well as other products, such as motor vehicles and machines. Japan is one of the leading producers of electronics in the world. In cities along the coast, some people work in Japan's massive fishing industry, which includes one of the largest fleets of fishing ships in the world.



In Japan, cell phones are called *keitai* (KAY-i-tie).

Because Japan's cities are so crowded, many people live in tall apartment buildings. In the suburbs surrounding cities, people typically live in houses and smaller apartment buildings. When space allows, meticulously groomed Japanese gardens appear beside some homes.

In some Japanese homes, the floors are covered with thick rice-straw mats, called *tatami* (tah-TAH-mee). It is customary for Japanese people to remove their shoes when entering a home. Some Japanese sleep on thin beds called *futons* (FOO-tahns) that are rolled out on the floor. The rooms in some Japanese homes are divided by thin paper or bamboo screens instead of walls.

Japanese people observe many different rules for manners, such as for greeting people and serving guests. For example, instead of shaking hands when greeting each other, they bow. How many times they bow and how deeply they bow depends on the person's social status. Japan's main language is Japanese, the writing of which is very complex. It uses two scripts, known as *hiragana* and *katakana*, which each contain about fifty symbols that represent different sounds. Japanese also uses *kanji*, which are borrowed Chinese characters, and even the Latin alphabet we use in English!



Japanese
Kanji

fire 火

mountain 山

rain 雨

Japan's Landforms



Land

Japan is a rugged country covered with lofty mountains and surrounded by water. In fact, most of Japan is mountainous, which is why nearly all of its cities are located in the flat coastal areas. The land on some islands is so steep and treacherous that people cannot live there. The highest peak is Mount Fuji, a volcano on the southern coast of Honshu.

Japan is located in one of the most geologically unstable areas in the world, with more than seventy active volcanoes and one thousand earthquakes annually. An earthquake that occurs along the ocean floor can create a giant wave called a **tsunami** (tsoo-NAH-mee), which means “harbor wave” in Japanese.

Fast-flowing rivers cascade down the mountains of Japan and into the flat areas. These rivers help provide water to the many rice farms throughout the coastal lands. Lakes can be found both near the ocean and in volcanic craters called *calderas* that have gradually filled with rainwater.

Monsoons influence Japan’s climate by causing high winds that can be wet and stormy or dry. Temperatures throughout Japan typically vary widely, with a cooler climate in the north and a warmer climate in the south. Japan’s wide temperature range is similar to the temperature range along the east coast of the United States. Japan’s rainy season in the fall also brings the threat of **typhoons**.



Ishinomaki (ih-SHIH-noh-MAH-kee), a city in northeastern Honshu, was devastated by a tsunami in 2011.



History

The Japanese call their country *Nippon*, or “Sun’s origin,” because they once believed that Japan was the first place on which the Sun’s rays shone. The country is also called “Land of the Rising Sun.”

The Japanese civilization is thousands of years old, and was heavily influenced by its Asian neighbors to the west. This influence can be seen in various ways, including in its crops. Some historians think the Japanese gained knowledge of growing rice from the Chinese thousands of years ago.

In addition, the religion of **Buddhism** spread from Korea to Japan in the sixth century. However, Japan has also developed its own unique traditions and customs. **Shinto** is one of Japan’s main religions, and many people observe both Shinto and Buddhist customs. Shinto **shrines** and Buddhist temples can be found throughout the country.

Japan's history is rife with conflict over both land and power. However, the emperor of Japan has come from the same family, the Yamato dynasty, for more than two thousand years. It is the oldest continuous monarchy in the world.

In the twelfth century, a Japanese warrior seized control of the country. He was the first **shogun**, or military king. For centuries, Japan was ruled by the shoguns. The shoguns continued to allow the imperial family to serve as emperors even though they had scant power. This time of the shogunates was also the time of the *samurai* (SA-muh-rye), fierce warriors who followed a strict code of honor. The samurai were also known as skilled fighters.

During this era, Japan operated under a system of feudalism in which lords owned areas of land and wielded power over the people living on the land. These peasants had to work for the lord in order to live there. In the nineteenth century, Japan became a democracy in which people elected leaders to the Japanese parliament, called the *Diet*. Japan still has an emperor today, but since the end of World War II his duties have been ceremonial, not political.

Celebrations

In Japan, people celebrate many holidays and festivals throughout the year. Among these holidays are ones that celebrate the rice planting, harvest, and the good health of children, and others that honor their ancestors.

One of the most important holidays in Japan is the weeklong celebration that leads up to New Year's Day on January 1. During this week, it's a common Japanese practice to clean the house and pay any debts. People also send good luck cards to each other, and children receive special New Year's toys. On New Year's Day, people often dress in traditional **kimonos**, eat specially prepared foods, and visit a nearby shrine to pray for good luck for the coming year.

Another important celebration is the Lantern Festival, called *Obon*. Held in the summer, Obon allows the Japanese to honor their ancestors. During the festival, lanterns or candles are lit and set on rivers and lakes to float slowly away.



During Obon, lanterns and candles are thought to guide the souls of ancestors back to their resting places.

Food

Rice is an important part of the Japanese diet. It is sometimes served in small round cakes, called *mochi* (MOH-chee), as a snack. Japanese people also rely heavily on the surrounding ocean for food and incorporate fish and other seafood into many meals. In cities, *sushi* (SOO-shee) and *sashimi* (sah-SHEE-mee), both made with raw fish, are popular fast food choices.

Many Japanese believe that food should look just as good as it tastes. Meals are typically served as several different small dishes, including soups and sometimes noodles. Like their Chinese neighbors, the Japanese usually eat with chopsticks, which are long, thin utensils made of wood.



Sushi often consists of a sticky rice mixture rolled around raw fish and vegetables to make a roll.

The Japanese follow many rules when preparing and presenting certain types of food. For example, one traditional ceremony is centered around serving tea and includes a highly organized and elegant process. This tea ceremony is usually held in a special room created just for that purpose.



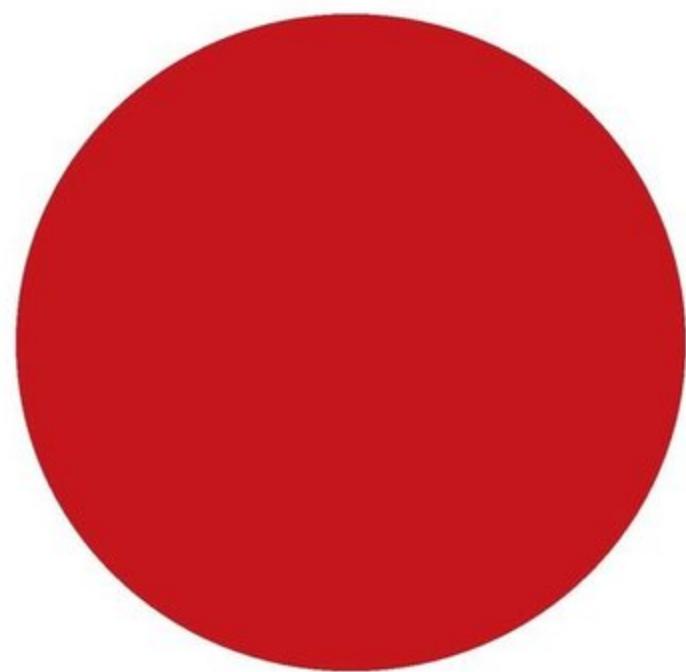
Modern buildings crowd around the edges of the Imperial Palace grounds in Tokyo.

Conclusion

Japan is a small island country covered with mountains, yet it includes crowded, bustling cities filled with high-tech industries. The land shakes with earthquakes, volcanoes erupt, and typhoons rage, but Japan's people continue to thrive.

Over thousands of years, the Japanese have learned to make the most of the land and waters around them. They grow tons of rice in small areas. They harvest large amounts of fish and seafood from the ocean, too.

Timeless traditions and customs mingle with cutting-edge technology, making Japan a place that embraces two worlds—the ancient and the modern.



Population: 127,250,000

Land: 364,485 sq km (226,480 sq. mi.)

Capital City: Tokyo

Primary Language: Japanese

Primary Religions: Shintoism, Buddhism

Currency: Yen



Source: Central Intelligence Agency (July 2014), World Bank

Glossary

Buddhism (<i>n.</i>)	a religion and philosophy based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama in ancient India (p. 10)
kimonos (<i>n.</i>)	Japanese robes or gowns, often used for formal occasions (p. 12)
metropolis (<i>n.</i>)	a very large or important city (p. 5)
monsoons (<i>n.</i>)	seasonal storms that can bring heavy rain to areas (p. 9)
Shinto (<i>n.</i>)	a traditional religion of Japan in which people worship various gods of nature (p. 10)
shogun (<i>n.</i>)	a military ruler in ancient Japan (p. 11)
shrines (<i>n.</i>)	places that are considered special or holy as tributes to a person or a god (p. 10)
tsunami (<i>n.</i>)	a large, destructive ocean wave caused by an underwater earthquake, landslide, or volcanic eruption (p. 9)
typhoons (<i>n.</i>)	strong, spinning storms with heavy rain and high winds that occur near the Indian or western Pacific Oceans (p. 9)

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Front and back cover: Mount Fuji, the highest mountain in Japan, is on the island of Honshu.

Title page: Stone lanterns are common in gardens throughout Japan, and were originally used in Shinto shrines.

Page 3: Women dance in the Ohara Matsuri Dance Festival in Kagoshima, Japan.

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