

Explore Japan



Welcome to Explore Japan with eat2explore! In this exploration guide you'll find ways to incorporate history, literature, geography, cultural studies, art, music, and more as we take you on a multi-subject tour of Japan, all while enjoying delicious foods from the country known as Nippon.

How to Use This Exploration Guide

We've suggested a schedule for days and subjects, but this is your exploration guide! Follow the plan we've presented or change it up to make it work for your family.

Read the entire exploration guide before you begin. Some subjects overlap to provide a deeper understanding of the country as a whole. Follow the links for awesome online resources!

(If you find a broken link, please let us know so we can update our exploration guide.)

Read through the Cultural Guide from your eat2explore box. Make your shopping list for the fresh ingredients you'll need for the week.

Are you ready to begin your eat2explore adventure?

Let's get started!

You can bring together reading, writing, listening, and hands-on activities to make this an adventure to remember!

We've included book links so you can explore more! Many of these books will also be available at your local library, and some are on Amazon Kindle for free.

You can find more information on how to get the most out of your eat2explore box by clicking this link to our [educational blog post](#).

Disclaimer: This content is provided for general educational and informational purposes only. It is not intended as, nor should it be considered, a substitute for state-approved or federal-approved educational curriculum. Disclosure: Eat2explore, Inc. is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, and may earn a small commission on products sold through their affiliate links. Each of your purchases via our Amazon affiliate links is at no additional cost to you.



Geography & Science



JAPAN

• Where is Japan located?

Japan is a group of 4 major islands and several smaller islands located in East Asia, it is considered an archipelago.

• What water bodies surround Japan?

The island of Japan is bordered by the North Pacific Ocean, the Sea Japan and the East China Sea.

• What kinds of landforms are found in Japan?

Japan is a volcanic archipelago consisting of volcanic mountains, fertile plains, and coastal regions. The highest mountain in Japan is Mount Fuji, a dormant volcano that last erupted in 1707.

• What are the major bodies of water in Japan?

The Shinano, Tone, and Ishikari are the three longest rivers in Japan. The largest freshwater lake is Lake Biwa, one of the oldest lakes in the world.



The Ring of Fire

Japan is located in an active tectonic region known as the Ring of Fire. This makes Japan prone to earthquakes. The ring of fire surrounds the Pacific ocean along the line where tectonic plates meet.



Japan is located at the junction of several different tectonic plates. As these plates slide past or bump into one another, they build up pressure. When the pressure is released, this triggers an earthquake, tsunami, or the eruption of a volcano. This is where the name Ring of Fire originated.

There are over 100 volcanoes on the islands of Japan that are considered active, several of which have erupted in the last decade. Although quiet since 1707, Mount Fuji is one of the most recognizable features of Japan's geography. Currently, 50 of Japan's volcanoes are being closely monitored for potential activity.



Since Japan experiences so many earthquakes, the engineers and building contractors have worked hard to create buildings that can withstand the shaking and rolling of earth movements.



Because of all this geothermal activity, Japan has numerous hot springs. Visitors can have a soak in the hot water, which has been said to have healing properties although some of the springs smell like rotten eggs from all the sulfur in the water!

In the steamy Jigokudani park, you can find a population of Japanese macaques, or snow monkeys. These monkeys like to come down out of their mountain habitat in the winter to sit in the warm springs.

Japan is also home to the world's deepest underwater mailbox! According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the postbox at Susami is 10 meters deep. People write letters on water-resistant paper with oil-based markers, and every few days, a diver retrieves the mail and sends it to the recipients.

Science experiment:

You can construct your own earthquake-resistant buildings with wooden blocks and Lego bricks and then see how well they perform during an "earthquake" you create.

Simple Science: Earthquake Experiment

Online resources:

- [The Geography of Japan](#)
- [Jigokudani Monkey Park](#)
- [The Science of Earthquakes](#)

Explore more! How did the location of Japan affect trade for the country?

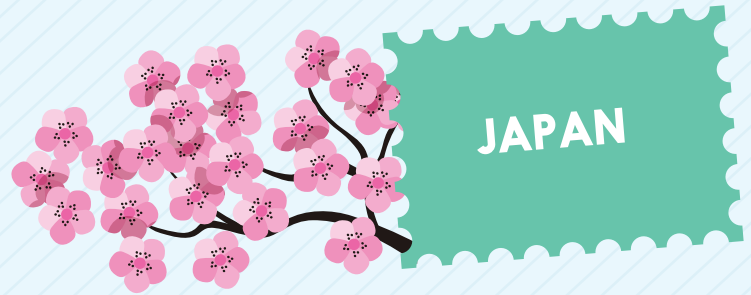
Time to Cook!

Salmon/Chicken Teriyaki

- Learn fun facts about nori and soy sauce



Language Arts & Literature



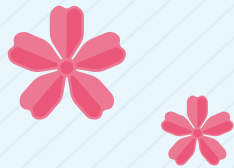
The official language of Japan is Japanese, but there are nearly 50 dialects around the nation.

Japanese use a beautiful script alphabet composed of three different types of characters. The Kanji script was borrowed from Chinese writing, and two others developed in Japan: the Hiragana and Katakana scripts.

Writing in Japan can be done left-to-right horizontally or right-to-left vertically. Both directions are interchangeable. The Japanese turn their script into beautiful art.

Katakana

*	w	r	y	m	h	n	t	s	k	
ン	ワ	ラ	ヤ	マ	ハ	ナ	タ	サ	カ	ア
n	wa	ra	ya	ma	ha	na	ta	sa	ka	a
		リ		ミ	ヒ	ニ	チ	シ	キ	イ
		ri		mi	hi	ni	chi	shi	ki	i
	ル	ユ	ム	フ	ヌ	ツ	ス	ク	ウ	ウ
	ru	yu	mu	fu	nu	tsu	su	ku	u	u
	レ		メ	ヘ	ネ	テ	セ	ケ	エ	エ
	re		me	he	ne	te	se	ke	e	e
	ヲ	ロ	ヨ	モ	ホ	ノ	ト	ソ	コ	オ
	o(wo)	ro	yo	mo	ho	no	to	so	ko	o



Literature of Japan

Japan has a rich history of literature including folktales and fables passed down orally for generations. Written down around 700 AD in the Kojiki, these tales have survived through the centuries to educate and delight.

One of the most beloved tales of Japanese folklore is the story of Momotarō, or "the eldest son of the peach."

The story tells of an old couple without children. The woman finds a peach floating in a river when she goes to fish. When she brought the peach home for the old man to eat, they discovered a small boy inside.

The old couple tended the boy as he grew into a fine young man. One day, Momotarō announced he was going on a journey.

His parents bid him farewell, and the remainder of the tale describes his adventures. On the way to defeat a band of ogres, Momotarō befriends several talking animals, including a monkey, a pheasant, and a dog.

This merry band of adventurers arrives at Ogre Island where they proceed to defeat the ogres. Momotarō takes the ogres' treasure and heads home where he and his parents live well and happily until the end of their days.

Japanese Poetry

Another popular form of writing in Japan is the poetry style known as the haiku. This short, descriptive poem began as a practice introduction to longer works of literature. Eventually, the small poem became an art form in itself.

There's even a day set aside in the US for haikus: [National Haiku Day!](#)

The idea of the haiku is to create a small poem that paints a picture of the senses such as the smell of a flower or the sound of windchimes.

Consisting of three lines of metered words, a common form of the haiku is:

- First line 5 syllables
- Second line 7 syllables
- Third line 3 or 5 syllables

Here is a famous poem by Matsuo Bashō.

- An old silent pond...
- A frog jumps in the pond
- splash! Silence again.

Often, Japanese artists incorporate haikus in their paintings.

Online resources:

- [Japanese Writing System](#)
- [Japanese Fairy Tales, Folk Tales, and Fables](#)
- [10 Classic Japanese Stories](#)
- [Japanese Folk Tales: The Tree of Blossoms video on YouTube](#)
- [Examples of Haiku Poems](#)

Explore more! Learn most about the history of the haiku and write your own descriptive poems!

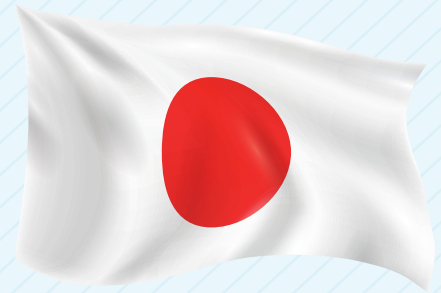
History

JAPAN

The official name is Japan and its capital is Tokyo. It is informally referred to as "Nippon" or "Nihon" by the Japanese people. It means "origin of the sun" or "the land of the rising sun," reflecting Japan's location to the east of the Asian continent. National Foundation Day on February 11, commemorates the day the nation of Japan was founded.

- The National Flag of Japan was adopted on August 5, 1854, but the general form of the flag dates back to around 700 AD.
- The Japanese parliament formally adopted the flag on August 13, 1999.
- It is called Nisshoki, which means sun-mark flag.
- The flag is a white rectangle with a red circle in the center.
- White represents the integrity and honest of the Japanese people. The red circle symbolizes the sun and also Amaterasu, the sun goddess said to have founded Japan.

Online resource: [Flag of Japan](#)



Ancient Japan to Today

Ancient Japan hosted inhabitants as early as 13,000 BC. Once agriculture began, the rice culture arose around 100 BC along with a fishing culture, and the country flourished. Organized political areas arose and grew through the 8th century AD.

During this time, Buddhism was introduced to Japan, as well as Confucianism and Taoism from China. Writing, customs, and philosophy also flowed into Japan from China.

As the various kingdoms ruled and fought for rule, the country eventually came together under emperors and shogunates through the 1600s when Japan closed its doors to the rest of the world except for a small Dutch trading port.

The economy and population of Japan grew until the mid-1800s when an expedition from the United States encouraged Japan to open trade to other countries.

Japan continued to grow and is now a prosperous country offering many scientific and technological inventions to the world.

Technological Inventions of Japan

Here are 6 Japanese inventions that have changed our world.

Instant Ramen - 1958 - Created to give longer shelf-life to cooked noodles, dehydrated ramen became a staple around the world for its convenience and ease of preparation.



Bullet train (Shinkansen) - 1964 - This electric train system allows passengers to travel at over 200 miles per hour to reach their destinations in a fraction of the time as standard railway lines.

Karaoke - 1969 - A fun machine that plays instrumental music and allows a performer to sing along with the tune with the help of scrolling lyrics.

Pocket calculator - 1970 - Using a few microchips and a plastic housing, this device allowed for easy transport of a calculating device, where earlier calculators took up quite a bit of room on a desk.

Walkman - 1979 - Instead of carting around a handheld radio and listening to whatever the stations played, the Walkman allowed music buffs to create playlists and listen to the songs they wanted, wherever they wanted.

Camcorder - 1983 - Before smartphones, videos were made with portable cameras that rested on the shoulder. As technology improved, the size of the cameras shrunk.

Japan is known for other technological inventions and improvements that have changed our world.



Explore more! How did having Dutch traders in Japan influence Japanese growth?

Time to Cook!
Okonomiyaki
(Japanese cabbage pizza)



- Learn fun facts about bonito flakes and Japanese mayonnaise

Social studies / Cultural studies

JAPAN

A lot of the early Japanese culture was influenced by China throughout several centuries BC to about 700 AD. The writing, political systems, religions, social customs, architecture, and philosophy of China was brought back to Japan by visiting Japanese dignitaries.

However, as the states of Japan grew, merged, split, and merged again through warring families, Japan began to

develop a culture of its own. Then in the 1600s, Japan decided to close its borders to all outsiders. No foreigners could enter and no Japanese could leave.

During this time, also called the Edo period which lasted almost 300 years, the Japanese culture solidified and became very distinct from the rest of Asia.

Once Japan opened to trade from other countries in the late 1800s, its culture has been influenced by Western culture since that time.

What are the two main religions in Japan?
Shintoism and Buddhism

What are some of the major celebrations in Japanese culture?

Japan has used the Gregorian calendar since 1873, which means they do not use a lunar calendar like other Asian countries. Many of their observances revolve around seasonal shifts such as the solstices and equinoxes. Two of the major celebrations are:

- **Oshogatsu (New Year)** - This is celebrated on January 1, but the preparation begins in the middle of December. Houses are cleaned and decorated, and businesses send good New Year wishes to their customers.

People get up early on New Year's day to greet the first sunrise of the year, and later families gather for a quiet dinner after visiting the family shrine.

- **Obon** - The annual Festival for the Dead is held in the middle of August. Since some Japanese hold the belief

that spirits of the dearly departed come back for a visit during this time, houses and shrines are cleaned and lanterns are hung to light the way for the spirits.

After community dances, people light small lanterns and set them afloat in a lake, stream, or river.

- **Golden Week (April 29-May 8)** - This week merges four holidays into one week-long celebration. Constitution Day, Greenery Day, Children's Day, and Showa Day, also called Emperor's Day.
- **Labor Day/Thanksgiving** - Held November 23, this day celebrates workers and shows gratitude for the goods and services they produce.
- **Hanami (Flower Viewing)** - In the spring, from the middle of March through May, the Japanese people take time to admire the fleeting cherry blossoms and plum blossoms. They hold picnics outside under the trees and enjoy the blooms.

12 Japanese Holidays and Celebrations

Famous people from Japan with links to biographies and other interesting facts!

- **Kobo Daishi (Kukai)** - religious leader
- **Matsuo Bashō** - poet
- **Meiji** - emperor
- **Inō Tadataka** - surveyor and mapmaker
- **Hayao Miyazaki** - animated movie director
- **Taishi Shōtoku** - prince and author
- **Ichiro Suzuki** - baseball player
- **Osamu Tezuka** - manga artist
- **Yayoi Kusama** - artist
- **Sakamoto Ryōma** - samurai

Learn about the life of one of these famous people from Japan and locate their birthplace on the map.

Online resources

- [Ancient Japan](#)
- [Shinto History and Culture](#)
- [What Japanese Breakfast is Like video on Youtube](#)

Explore more! How did closing Japan in the 1600s affect growth and population?



Arts & Music



JAPAN

Japanese Art

Aside from gorgeous paintings, elaborate sculpture, and intricate pottery, Japanese art styles extend into many other sectors of life in Japan.

Many of Japan's art styles such as calligraphy and jade carvings were influenced by early trips to China and Korea. But Japan developed its own styles right within its borders.

Four Types of Japanese Art



Bonsai

The word "bonsai" was first mentioned in a poem from the mid-14th century. Bonsai simply means "planting in tray" and refers to a special kind of container gardening.

Shrubs and trees are cultivated and carefully pruned or trimmed to keep the plant small. Since the bonsai is in a pot, even a large tree stays tiny, no matter how long it lives.

Sometimes bonsai are handed down from generation to generation with grandchildren receiving a plant their grandparents grew!



Textile arts

Using dye, embroidery, and beautiful inks, the Japanese invented new processes and created stunning textiles over the centuries. Used to create "kimono" which meant clothing, these textiles became a way for people to identify one another using patterns and colors.

While Japan was closed to the outside world during the Edo period and afterward during the Meiji period (1600s through early 1900s), artisans used ideas they learned from other countries to perfect their own styles of creating kimono.

The textile artists took inspiration from the world around them and used images of flowers, bodies of water, and people to create beautiful, one-of-a-kind designs. Today, the kimono is not used for everyday clothing, but is instead reserved for special occasions such as weddings or other celebrations.

Time to Cook!

Pork/Chicken Katsu



Bento boxes

Food preparation has been raised to an art form in Japan with bento boxes. The word bento was coined to describe this convenient way to carry food to work or school, like a lunch box.

Originally used a thousand years ago by hunters or outside workers to contain their midday meal, the boxes have become a fun way to present food. The early boxes were modeled on farmers' seed boxes, with small compartments inside to keep seeds separate.

Bento boxes have small sections inside, and each section features one kind of food from rice balls to pickled fruit to soup. In artistic boxes, the rice is formed into creative shapes with the other foods arranged around the centerpiece to complete the box.



Origami

Paper folding is an ancient art, and paper has been around a long time. In China, paper and the art of folding it began in the 2nd century AD and made its way over to Japan. Since paper was very expensive, only the very wealthy had access to it. Decorative folding was usually limited to special occasions such as weddings.

Once paper became readily available to everyone, the art of making intricate folded shapes began to grow. By the 1700s, origami (to fold paper) was widespread and developing into a delightful pastime for young and old.

While many animal shapes are popular, the crane is the shape that is given as a gift to represent health and long life.

- Online resources
- [Bonsai Facts for Kids](#)
 - [History of Kimonos](#)
 - [Japanese Lunch Boxes](#)
 - [The History of Origami](#)



Music of Japan

Traditional Japanese music was influenced by China, and although instruments were also brought from China, musicians in Japan adapted these to suit their playing styles.

Stringed instruments

- Koto
- Taishōgō
- Shamisen
- Biwa

Percussion instruments

- Wadaiko
- Kotsuzumi
- Kagura-suzu

Wind instruments

- Nohkan
- Shakuhachi

Some music is created without instruments at all. Shomyō, or chanting, is ritual music performed in Buddhist ceremonies.

Other types of musical art are performed with instruments and dancing. Gagaku is a type of dramatic interpretive dance used to celebrate the beauty of music and sing.



Online resource

- [History of Japanese Music](#)

Wear your kimono and play some authentic Japanese music while you cook!

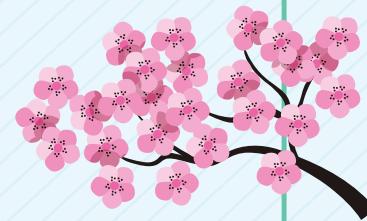
Online resources

- [Japanese Koto Music](#)
- [Beautiful Japanese Music](#)

- [Upbeat Traditional Japanese Music](#)

Other Resources

- [All About Japan: Stories, Crafts and Games for Kids](#)
- [My First Book of Japanese Words](#)
- [Let's Go Sightseeing in Japan!](#)
- [Origami For Kids: 20 Projects to Make Plus 100 Papers to Fold](#)
- [A History of Japanese Art](#)
- [History of Japan for Kids](#)



- Learn fun facts about sesame seeds and pankō