



# Japan

## Introduction

Official Name: Japan

Nationality: Japanese

Area: 377,835 square kilometers (145,883 square miles)

Language: Japanese

Currency: yen (JPY)

Location: Eastern Asia, island chain between the North Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan

## Statistical Information

Population	127.4 million
0-14 years	13.8 percent
15-64 years	65.2 percent
65+ years	21 percent
Birth rate	8 births/1,000
Death rate	9 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	1.2 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	-0.088 percent
Life expectancy	82 years
Literacy	99 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	less than 0.1 percent
Ethnic groups	98.5 percent Japanese 0.5 percent Korean 0.4 percent Chinese 0.7 percent other
Religion	84 percent Shinto/Buddhist 0.7 percent Christian 15.3 percent other

## Economy

Japan's economy has rapidly risen to become the second most technologically powerful economy in the world. One defining feature of Japan's economy has been the closely-knit groups called *keiretsu* in which manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors work together. The crop yields in Japan's small agricultural sector are among the highest in the world. Japan also boasts one of the world's largest fishing fleets, accounting for 15 percent of the world's yearly catch. Long-term problems facing the Japanese economy

include the aging of its population and a large government debt.

## Government

Capital: Tokyo

Japan is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. The monarchy is hereditary. The emperor is largely a ceremonial figure; decisions are made by elected politicians. The prime minister is the head of government. He must also control the parliamentary majority. The leader of the majority party or majority coalition in parliament is usually appointed prime minister. The legislature consists of the bicameral Diet, or Kokkai. There are 242 members in the House of Councillors, or Sangi-in, each elected to serve a six-year term. The House of Representatives, or Shugi-in, has 480 members, each elected to serve a four-year term.

## Climate

Japan's southern islands are tropical, while the northern islands have a cooler, temperate climate.

## History

According to legend, the Japanese Empire was founded in 660 B.C. by the emperor Jimmu, a descendant of the sun goddess and ancestor of the present emperor.

The earliest written records date back to around 400 A.D, when Japan was populated with numerous clans and small tribal kingdoms ruled by priests and chiefs. Ancient Japan had close contacts with Korea. By the fifth century A.D., the Yamato clan, most likely from the island of Kyushu, had settled in the region of modern Kyoto and had established some control over other clans in central and western Japan.

From the sixth to the eighth centuries, Japan's civilization developed with strong cultural influences from Tang China. Buddhism was introduced, and

Japanese aristocrats studied Chinese language, literature, art, philosophy, science, and government. The Yamato clan attempted to set up a centralized government similar to that of imperial China, with the Yamato leader as its emperor. They built a capital city at Nara, modeled after the Chinese capital, and later moved the capital to Kyoto.

By the ninth century, the Fujiwara family had grown more powerful than the Yamato; they established control over the Japanese court. The Buddhist priests became increasingly powerful and began to undermine the authority of the Fujiwara, and aristocrats of provincial clans who opposed the Fujiwara evaded taxes and grew stronger. A feudal system developed around the strong provincial lords, and civil war broke out in the 12th century.

The Minamoto family defeated the Taira family, gaining control of all Japan. The Minamoto leader, Yoritomo, took the title of shogun and established a military dictatorship based in Kamakura. Japan was ruled by military warriors for the next 700 years.

The Mongols, under Kublai Khan, tried unsuccessfully to invade Japan twice. In 1281, the invading Mongol fleet was destroyed by a typhoon, known as *kamikaze*, or divine wind, in Japanese.

In 1331, the emperor Daigo II tried to restore imperial rule. Although his revolt against the military failed, it did bring about the downfall of the Kamakura regime. The Ashikaga family took control of the shogunate in 1338, but was unable to consolidate power. Civil wars raged throughout the next 250 years, and the *daimyo*, or feudal barons, and Buddhist monasteries built up local power and private armies. During this period of civil war, manufacturing and trade developed in some areas, which gave rise to a new middle class. The Japanese traded with the Asian continent and Southeast Asia; Japanese traders and pirates controlled the Asian seas until the arrival of the first Europeans.

The first Europeans to reach Japan were Portuguese sailors in 1542. Christianity was introduced to the islands in 1549 by St. Francis Xavier. Late in the 16th century a group of three warriors—Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu—gained military control over Japan and succeeded one another as shogun. Hideyoshi unsuccessfully invaded Korea twice, in 1592 and 1596, in an attempt to conquer China. After Hideyoshi's death, Ieyasu became shogun. His family ruled Japan for the next 250 years.

Ieyasu's descendents, the Tokugawa, set up a centralized system of feudal government based in Yedo, modern-day Tokyo. The government provided stability, but was very repressive. Christianity was suppressed, and nearly all foreign trade was halted.

Under Tokugawa rule, Japanese society was rigidly stratified. The shogun's family was followed by the *daimyo* (feudal barons), then the samurai (warriors). Peasants, artisans, and merchants were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Loyalty to superiors and military virtues were held in high esteem due to the strong influence of Confucianism.

Despite the rigidity of Tokugawa rule, production and internal trade grew, the use of money and credit became more widespread, cities flourished, and the merchant class gained wealth.

In 1854, an American naval officer named Matthew Perry forced Japan to admit foreign traders and sign trade treaties. When the Japanese attacked the unwelcome foreigners, Kagoshima and Shimonoseki were bombed. Threatened by foreign forces and under pressure from Japanese discontented with Tokugawa rule, the shogunate collapsed, and the shogun resigned in 1867.

Fifteen-year-old Mutsuhito was placed on the throne as Emperor Meiji in 1868, in what was known as the Meiji Restoration. The new Japanese rulers, who were mostly samurai of the western clans, soon realized that expelling the foreigners was very unlikely. Instead, they used Western techniques to strengthen Japan. They sent delegates abroad to study Western ideas. Japan abolished feudalism in 1871, and began to reorganize its government to adopt Western systems.

After the Meiji Restoration, nationalistic sentiment in Japan increased. The new government promoted the old ideas of imperial divinity, glorification of the warrior, and the unique virtues of imperial Japanese culture. Japan soon adopted a foreign policy of imperialism.

During the First Sino-Japanese War, from 1894 to 1895, Japan gained Taiwan and the Pescadores. A 1902 alliance with Britain increased Japan's prestige, which reached its peak after the Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905, when the Japanese quickly defeated Russia and gained territory in Manchuria. In 1910, Japan officially annexed Korea. During World War I, Japan received German-controlled islands in the Pacific. In 1918, Japan led Allied military action in Siberia; Japanese troops remained there until 1922.

After 1922, Japan turned away from expansionism as liberals gained strength. Labor and peasant unions grew in popularity despite police opposition, and liberal and radical ideas became popular among students. Focus shifted from military expansion to economic expansion, and powerful, family-owned business giants known as *zaibatsu* developed.

Militaristic forces in Japan, such as the Kwantung army in Manchuria and the Amur River Society, grew dissatisfied with the government's moderate foreign policies. In 1931, the Kwantung army initiated an incident at Shenyang and proceeded to overrun Manchuria. They separated Manchuria from China and set up the state of Manchukuo. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations after it criticized the invasion of Manchuria.

During the 1930s, the military gained control in the government and built up armaments. In July of 1937, Japanese troops invaded the northern Chinese provinces after an incident in Beijing, beginning the Second Sino-Japanese War. Throughout 1938 and 1939, Japanese troops clashed with Russians along the Manchurian border.

When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, Japan signed a military alliance with Germany and Italy. It then began to invade territory in Indochina with the intention of creating a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" under the leadership of Japan. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Japan lost all the territories it had conquered.

The country was demilitarized, and occupied by the Allies with the intent of establishing a new, non-military government. In 1949, the occupation forces were finally loosened, and control of parts of the government was returned to local officials. In 1951, Japan signed a peace treaty with most of its opponents in World War II. The treaty went into effect on April 28, 1952, and the occupying Allied forces withdrew.

During the 1950s Japan made reparations agreements with Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Vietnam, to be paid in the form of goods and services intended to encourage economic growth.

In 1951, Japan signed a security treaty with the U.S. The treaty was unpopular with many Japanese, who were afraid that military ties with the United States would draw them into another war. Opposition to American-Japanese ties lessened when the U.S. returned the Ryukyu Islands to Japan in 1972.

In 1995, Japan experienced two major disasters. On January 17, the worst earthquake in 70 years devastated the Kobe region. On March 20, members of the Aum Shinrikyo group released lethal nerve gas through plastic bags left on the Tokyo subway system, killing 12 people and sickening 5,000 others.

Japan's relations with North Korea began to grow tense. By 2003, concern over North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and China's increasing power led to the removal of some restrictions on the Japanese government's ability to respond in case of attack. In October 2006, when North Korea announced a nuclear weapons test, Japan imposed tighter sanctions, banning all trade and limiting travel. Japan also pushed for strong United Nations sanctions against North Korea.

Japan's current prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda, took office on September 26, 2007.

### **Ethnic Groups**

Japan is a highly homogeneous nation with an early history of remaining very isolated. The vast majority of Japanese citizens are ethnically Japanese. Ethnic Japanese are sometimes referred to as Yamato, after the ancient Yamato clan. They use Japanese for everyday conversation, although many also speak English. Japanese religion is traditionally a mix of both Buddhism and Shintoism.

The Ryukyuan people, also known as the Okinawans, are the indigenous people of the Ryukyu Islands. They are very closely related genetically to the Japanese. Their languages make up the Ryukyuan language family and are quite different from Japanese. They are a peaceful people and consider the arts and music very honorable pursuits. They value family and friends highly. Most Okinawans live very healthy lifestyles; they have one of the highest life expectancies in the world.

The Ainu are an ethnic group native to Hokkaido, northern Honshu, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands. Traditionally, they spoke the Ainu language, which is nearly extinct today. During the Meiji period, the Ainu were largely assimilated into Japanese culture. Modern Ainu speak Japanese, and many have intermarried with ethnic Japanese. Many Japanese citizens with Ainu ancestry are of mixed heritage, although there are some small villages in the Hidaka region where full-blooded Ainu live today.

Due to Shinto and Buddhist stigmas regarding purity and pollution, there are still populations of outcasts, known as *buraku*, in some areas of Japan.

Traditionally, this included butchers, leatherworkers, funeral workers, and others in occupations associated with death or pollution. The designation is hereditary, and outcasts from Japanese society have the same appearance, ethnic background, and language as mainstream Japanese. Today, discriminating background checks for employment are illegal, and many Japanese who were born into this status are able to leave the designation behind.

There are small populations of Chinese and Koreans living in Japan, as well as small numbers of immigrants from Southeast Asian nations, and a number of Brazilians with Japanese ancestry. Japanese citizenship is conferred through family, not by place of birth, so third- or fourth-generation immigrants cannot obtain citizenship even though they were born in Japan.

### **Religion**

The Japanese religion is a unique synthesis of different elements. One of its most defining features is its strong tendency toward syncretism. Many Japanese follow a mixture of Buddhism and Shinto. Confucianism has highly influenced Japanese philosophy and worldview, including the idea that family stability and social responsibility are obligations of every human being.

Shinto is one of Japan's largest religions. It is native to, and is found nearly exclusively in, Japan. Shinto has no holy book and no founder. It originated in prehistoric times and emphasizes respect for nature and certain sacred sites. Shinto is a polytheistic religion, and deities are known as *kami*. The word "Shinto" means "way of the gods." Shinto worship is done at shrines, and ritual purification is important before visiting a shrine. During World War II, State Shinto was the only legal form of worship in Japan; freedom of religion was restored in 1945.

Buddhism was brought to Japan in the sixth century A.D. from the southern part of the Korean kingdom of Baekje. Mahayana Buddhism is prevalent in Japan, as is Zen Buddhism, a division of Mahayana Buddhism. Shingon, an esoteric form of Buddhism with similarities to Indian Tantric Buddhism, came to Japan from China.

Christianity came to Japan in the 1500s in the form of Roman Catholicism, brought by Spanish and Portuguese missionaries, and Protestantism, introduced by Dutch traders. In the 17th century, Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu banned Christianity. He expelled or killed Christian missionaries and persecuted Japanese Christians. In secluded areas,

hidden Japanese Christians continued to practice their faith. During the Meiji restoration, foreign missionaries were allowed to return. Today, less than one percent of the Japanese population is Christian. Most Japanese Christians are Protestant.

### **Culture**

**Food**—White rice is a staple in nearly every Japanese meal. Soy products and grilled or raw seafood are common ingredients in Japanese dishes. Vegetables and seafood are often served pickled. Japanese meals often include many small dishes which provide contrasts in flavor and texture. Visual appeal is considered very important.

**Social status**—A majority of Japanese consider themselves middle-class. There are many social differences between rural and urban Japanese. Within the urban population, differences in social status exist between white-collar salaried workers, blue-collar industrial workers, and small entrepreneurs such as shopkeepers. Migrant laborers, often immigrants, are considered lower-class, as are those belonging to the "outcast" group.

**Marriage**—Traditionally, marriages were arranged with the help of a matchmaker. Today, most marriages are not arranged, although some Japanese young people do choose to seek the assistance of a matchmaker. Background checks are sometimes performed on a prospective spouse and his or her family, to ensure the suitability of the match. Weddings usually take place in hotels or wedding halls. Wedding ceremonies blend Shinto rituals and elements from Western weddings. They are very elaborate, and the bride and groom often change clothing several times during the course of the ceremony.

**Education**—Compulsory education begins at age six and lasts for nine years, through middle school. Most Japanese children continue on to high school. Entrance examinations are generally required for admission to all levels of private school and public school beyond the elementary level. Entrance examinations can be extremely competitive, and students devote a large amount of time to preparing for an examination. Half of high school graduates go on to college. A college degree is required for most middle-class occupations, and many companies recruit only from certain universities. Students experience a large amount of pressure to gain entrance to a more prestigious university.

**Etiquette**—Japanese etiquette is very intricate. Gift-giving is an important part of Japanese culture. Exchanging presents is a part of personal and business relationships. The recipient of a gift will often present a return gift. The number four is sometimes considered bad luck in Japan because its pronunciation, *shi*, is the same as the Japanese word for death. Because of this, gifts in increments of four or monetary gifts containing four (i.e. 4,000 yen) are considered improper. White is a funereal color, therefore all-white gifts should be avoided. In addition, chrysanthemums are generally considered a funeral flower, and should not be included in a bouquet for any other occasion. When visiting a Japanese family, it is appropriate for a guest to bring some sort of edible gift, such as a cake. On formal occasions, it is customary to give a monetary gift. This gift is placed in an envelope called a *noshibukuro*, which is tied with a special cord that corresponds to the event.

### **Dress**

Today, most Japanese wear Western-style clothing for everyday wear. Traditional Japanese dress can still be seen during festivals and special occasions. The kimono, a long, collared robe that falls to the ankles, is worn by both men and women. It has long, full sleeves and is wrapped around the body with the left side over the right. The kimono is secured with a wide belt called an *obi*. The pattern of the kimono's fabric determines in which season it should be worn; cherry blossoms indicate a spring design, while pine trees may indicate a winter design. There are many different styles of kimonos for different occasions. Men's kimonos are simpler than women's, and usually consist of no more than five pieces. A woman's kimono may consist of 12 or more pieces and is very complex.

Traditional Japanese footwear consists of a variety of styles of sandals. *Zori* are traditional Japanese thong sandals made from plant fibers, leather, rubber, lacquered wood, or cloth. They can be formal or informal, depending upon the material they are made of. *Geta* are another form of traditional Japanese footwear. Geta are thong sandals with elevated wooden bases.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Driving in Japan can be complicated and expensive. Those who cannot read Japanese will have difficulty understanding road signs. Highway tolls can be very steep compared to those in North America. City

traffic is very congested; a 20-mile trip in Tokyo may take two hours. Driving is on the left side of the road, and turns on red lights are not legal unless specifically indicated. Roads and lanes tend to be much narrower than those in America. Japanese insurance is required for all automobile owners and drivers in Japan.

In mountainous areas, roads are often closed during the winter due to dangerous conditions. Cars should be equipped with tire chains to provide increased traction.

Many short-term foreign visitors choose not to drive while in Japan. Those who do wish to drive must have an international driving permit (IDP). Travelers should apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20, and the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

An IDP is not valid for a foreigner with resident status in Japan. Anyone with resident status must apply for a Japanese driver's license. For more information on driver's licenses, visit the U.S. Embassy in Japan's website at [japan.usembassy.gov](http://japan.usembassy.gov).

### **Illness/Injury**

Medical care in Japan is very good, although not all medical facilities have English-speaking staff. Japan has a national health insurance system which is available to foreigners with long-term Japanese visas. Short-term visitors should expect to pay up front for medical services. Most medical facilities will not accept American medical insurance as proof of payment; visitors must pay the hospital then seek reimbursement from their insurance carrier. Smaller clinics and some hospitals do not accept credit or debit cards, and Japanese medical facilities will not accept a personal check drawn on a foreign bank. Prescriptions written by U.S. doctors are not valid in Japan. Travelers should bring a sufficient supply of prescription medication along with them. Some medications commonly prescribed in North America may not be legal in Japan. It is a good idea to consult the Japanese Embassy before bringing prescription or non-prescription medications into Japan.

A list of English-speaking medical facilities in Japan, as well as more information about limitations on the

importation of prescription and non-prescription medications, can be found on the website of the U.S. Embassy in Japan.

### **Crime**

The overall crime rate in Japan is much lower than that of the United States. Violent crime is rare. Travelers should guard against pickpockets in crowded shopping areas or public transportation, as in any crowded urban area.

### **Safety and Security**

There have been no major terrorist incidents in Japan since 1995, and the Japanese government maintains preventative security measures.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

A valid passport is required. Americans may enter Japan for tourism or business for up to 90 days without a visa; visa-free travelers will be asked to show an onward/return ticket. Usually, visa-free status may not be changed to another visa status (i.e. work or study) while in Japan. Most foreign nationals entering Japan are required to submit to a biometric fingerprint scan and a photograph.

For more information on Japanese visas, contact the Embassy of Japan at 2520 Massachusetts Ave.NW, Washington, D.C. 20008.

### **Immunizations**

There are no required vaccinations for entrance into Japan. Routine vaccinations should be up to date. Visitors may wish to consider hepatitis B vaccine, as Japan has an intermediate risk for the disease. Japanese encephalitis is found in all areas of Japan, but is most prevalent in rural areas from June to September. Travelers to urban areas have very little risk. Consult a travel health professional to determine whether a Japanese encephalitis vaccine is recommended. Avian flu virus (H5N1) has been found in some domestic birds in Japan, but there have been no human cases. Travelers should avoid direct contact with birds.

### **Special Circumstances**

Foreigners should carry a passport or Japanese alien registration card with them as proof of identity, since under Japanese law police may ask for identification at any time.

### **Electricity**

Japan uses 100-volt electricity. Eastern Japan (Tokyo, Kawasaki, Sapporo, Yokohama, and Sendai) uses 50-hertz frequency, while western Japan (Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, and Hiroshima) uses 60-hertz frequency. A

power converter may be required to use some American appliances in eastern Japan, since appliances designed to run on 60-hertz current may not work properly on 50-hertz current. No plug adapters will be necessary, since Japan uses types A and B plugs.