



Spend Less, Travel More in

JAPAN

ULTIMATE 2 WEEK ITINERARY, FOOD, ACCOMMODATION,
ACTIVITIES, FULL BUDGET BREAKDOWN AND MUCH MORE

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THE GUIDE



Who are we?

We are a British (Jordan) and Irish (Chrisy) couple, currently based in the UK. We met while travelling 13 years ago in Bolivia, and have been travelling alongside our day jobs ever since, squeezing our budget and time to get the most out of our annual leave. We're passionate about getting great value trips and self-guiding our own adventures.

Find us:

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How to use this guide



- This guide is based on our own experiences and we aim to keep it as up-to-date as possible.
- Prices are correct as of February 2026 and are subject to change. Any costs are listed in GBP as we are from the UK.
- Anything underlined is a direct link to the relevant source/website
- **“Choose your own adventure”** sections detail alternative things to see or do, if you have the time or want to swap them out for something in our itinerary.
- We would love to hear your feedback via our socials - this guide and our other resources are FREE, but if you found them helpful, you can [buy us a coffee here](#).

Disclaimer - this guide contains affiliate links, which means we receive a commission if you decide to book/purchase via the link, at no extra cost to you. We will only ever recommend services, tours and operators that we have personally used and consider good value.

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WELCOME TO JAPAN

Japan truly is a bucket list destination, but visiting always seemed unachievable for us due to cost, logistics, language barrier etc. All I ever saw were ads for group led trips which cost thousands. But the more I researched, the more I thought “we can do this”. Don’t get me wrong, it was definitely the most complicated and jam-packed itinerary I have ever attempted, and I definitely tried to do too much. But, it absolutely is possible to self guide yourself around Japan.



Do I need to speak some Japanese?

I’m guilty of trying to learn a little on a language app and giving up the moment it started showing me kanji. However, although I am (embarrassingly) not even close to fluent in any language other than English, I do think it’s only polite to try a little. While Google translate can be your best friend here, even a stilted “please” or “thank you” in the local language goes a long way.

I think feeling and enthusiasm really helps - even if you don’t understand each others’ words, your actions and expressions can tell a huge story.

Learn from my mistakes and steal our refined itinerary or take inspiration for your own. The first mistake we made was assuming that we could only afford to visit for 2 weeks. In reality, we would have been absolutely fine to spend longer there as the food etc is much more affordable than expected.



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JAPAN TOP TIPS

NAVIGATION

When navigating on foot, think in 3D. Often restaurants may be on upper floors of high buildings, or even below ground. A combination of Google Maps and Japan Travel by Navitime apps are really useful for navigating on foot and plotting your train journeys - they will even indicate which exit to use from the station (this is more useful than you think!).

I have not detailed exactly which metro lines we used for each journey on the itinerary because there's often many ways of making the same journey - the apps will show you options with the fastest route first depending on your departure time. Don't panic too much if you get lost/confused in the stations (easily done) and miss the train on the line you had planned - the next one will usually only be a few minutes away. I found it best to stick to a route and wait rather than trying to retrace steps across the station and find another line to save a few minutes (and risk missing that one too)

TAXIS



I was very wary of using taxi's, as had heard that they were very expensive in Japan. However, in a few instances (mainly when we found ourselves short on time - self inflicted), we had to resort to using a taxi. We stuck to Uber for two reasons: the language barrier isn't an issue and the price is fixed when booking the ride (much less likely to get ripped off). We actually found taxi's quite affordable everywhere that we used them EXCEPT Tokyo (had an £80 idiot tax - more on that later).



E-SIM

Mobile data is extremely helpful, if not essential. The signal is excellent throughout Japan. We had wifi access in hotels, but very rarely in cafes/restaurants, so relied heavily on data. For this, we used an e-sim from [Airalo](#) - use promo code **JORDAN2245** for a discount!

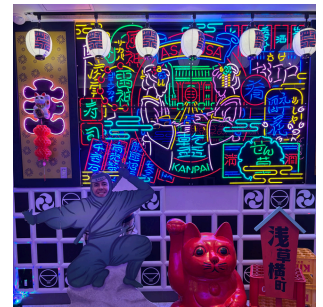
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JAPAN TOP TIPS

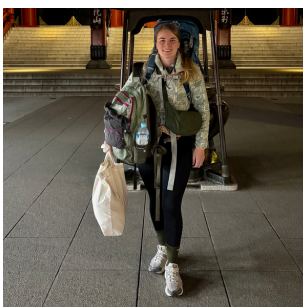
TOKYO

Do not underestimate the size of this beast. I don't think I really comprehended just how huge one of the biggest cities in world could be. You could spend a whole day in each district and still not have enough time. This is most relevant to planning your days/transport - it can take a LOT of time to navigate your way across the city or even within the metro stations themselves (don't get lost in Shinjuku station AKA Shinjuku dungeon!), even with the handy tricks on Google maps.

While I did actually plan our days around this and tried to stick to particular areas, an admin faux pas on my part (read later) meant that we couldn't possibly get across the city and back in time using the metro. We had to get a very expensive taxi ride. Interestingly, it definitely was the quickest way to get about - the roads were empty - I guess everyone's on the trains/metro!



LUGAGGE TRANSFER



We used this twice with varying success: Used it via a Lawson combini in Kyoto to send bags on to Kanazawa, which were waiting for us when we got there 48 hours later, inside our Airbnb! From Kanazawa to Tokyo, it took a lot longer, so they still hadn't arrived when we returned from Hakone, and we ended up buying a couple of emergency t-shirts in Uniqlo to keep us going! Double check how long it will take to get to your destination. We also put [AirTags](#) on our luggage which was fun to track where they were.

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ONSEN ETIQUETTE

A lot of Western tourists are apprehensive about onsens, but we would thoroughly recommend trying it, as it's such a huge part of Japanese culture. The etiquette is not that complicated, but do familiarise yourself beforehand to avoid any awkward interactions.

- Yes, you do need to be fully naked, no exceptions. The Japanese are used to it, so it's only you that's feeling awkward - let go of your inhibitions and go for it!
- Public onsens are gender segregated.
- You will enter a room where you can undress, and use a small towel to cover yourself. Then you should wash before entering the onsen water - there's usually little plastic stools and shower heads for you to do so.
- The water is generally very hot so don't spend too long in there, especially if you start to feel unwell.
- Some ryokans/hotels will have a private onsen in some rooms or available to book. You may use these with your partner/family.
- Tattoos - generally tattoos are not allowed, however, there are some onsens/hotels that will allow them, so it is worth asking - they may provide skin coloured "stickers" to cover them with.



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JAPAN FOOD TIPS

For us, part of the experience of travelling is the food. Local cuisine is part of the cultural experience but it doesn't have to be pricey. Often the best, most authentic food can be found in the cheaper restaurants more geared towards locals. Japan does have a bit of a caveat to this - some restaurants don't welcome tourists or non-Japanese speaking patrons. But you definitely don't need to eat in the fanciest places to experience great food.

TIMINGS

A lot of shops and restaurants didn't seem to open until 10 or 11am so if you need to be up early to pack activities into your day, bear this in mind. Either book accommodation with breakfast, plan a combini breakfast or look for chains which may be open earlier (we are guilty of a couple of McDonalds breakfasts while in Japan purely because nothing else was open).



SUSHI

Believe it or not, neither of us had really eaten sushi before we went to Japan. I'm not really that into fish, let alone raw fish. But we are generally open to trying anything when travelling. I was absolutely blown away by how incredible the sushi and fish was in Japan - I mean "melt-in-your-mouth" good. If you had told me a few months ago that I would have eaten a raw crab from a market or raw fish in a restaurant, I absolutely would not have believed you. Try everything - you may be surprised!



MUST-TRY DISHES

Other must-try dishes include tempura (battered/fried vegetables and fish), okonomayaki (layers of egg, noodles, cabbage, and fillings of your choice cooked in front of you), ramen, Kobe beef, katsu, takoyaki (fried octopus) and many delicious sweet treats - often matcha flavoured.



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JAPAN FOOD CHAINS

The detailed breakdown of the itinerary will include area-specific food recommendations, but there are several local chains that can be found in many locations throughout Japan. Here's some of our favourites.

ICHIRAN

This is a chain of ramen restaurants for solo diners - you don't have to be solo, but you'll be given a booth each. We loved this place, for the novelty of the single booths, faceless food delivery (via a hatch/curtain) and the ramen itself. There's options to personalise and add extras throughout your meal without having to speak to a human. We ate here 3 times in various locations. It's also quick and handy after a long day of sightseeing.



GYUKATSU MOTOMURA

Cook your own steak katsu at your table. There are branches in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. We ate at one of the branches in Osaka and absolutely loved it. We were lucky to get in with minimal waiting but there was a huge queue by the time we had finished. I would definitely say it's worth the wait though!



COMBINIS

Conbini or convenience stores such as 7/11, Family Mart and Lawson have a good selection of food, as well as services such as printing and luggage forwarding. Our highlights were the infamous egg sando (from 7/11), fresh fruit sandwiches, hot fried chicken (Family Mart) and the DIY smoothie machines. An ideal a go-to option for a quick breakfast when nothing else was open if we had an early start.



SUMO WRESTLING

This is the single best thing we did in Japan. Although it was part of an extremely stressful day (entirely self inflicted by my trying to fit too much in - shock), it was an incredible atmosphere. It's such a unique sport, and was a joy to see the Japanese fans so animated and caught up in the action.



There are 6 sumo tournaments a year, so I would absolutely recommend trying to time your visit to Japan during one of these. If you are, however, in Japan between tournaments, you can visit the sumo training "stables" in Tokyo and witness them training.

TICKETS

Tickets are supposed to be quite difficult to get hold of, and this wasn't in my original plan, so I was actually less organised in booking, but we still managed to get tickets around a month in advance. We went to the tournament in Fukuoka, however, I suspect that if it was a tournament in Tokyo, it might be more competitive to get tickets. Other host locations are Osaka and Nagoya, which can be easily reached by bullet train (shinkansen) from Tokyo, Kyoto or Osaka.



The ticket system was a bit convoluted - we had to pay for them online on the sumo website and print the confirmation, then visit a 7/11 combini for them to print them out when we arrived in Japan.



This is the [Japan Sumo Association website](#) to book tickets directly. It details the sumo tournament dates and the dates that tickets go on sale. We booked a 4 person box for 2 of us. It is designed for 4 people sat cross legged 2 in front of 2 on the cushions provided. (You must take your shoes off as well). However, if you are tall like Chrisy, we would have struggled to fit 4 of us, so it was perfect for 2. You pay for the whole box regardless of how many people are in the party. We had a great view and can highly recommend these seats over the individual chair seats (which had sold out by the time we bought tickets anyway).

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The train network in Japan is huge and highly efficient but can be highly confusing. However, once you get your head around it, it's spectacular. Hopefully this guide helps to clear some things up.

Firstly, there are many types of trains and rail companies in Japan - tickets are not interchangeable between all companies. There are also a number of regional passes that cover some rail networks within a certain region (but not all). It can take some time to work out the most efficient tickets/passes to use - we'll list all of the passes we used for our itinerary.

GENERAL TYPES OF TRAIN/TICKET



- **Subway/Metro** - underground trains similar to underground systems in other parts of the world.
- **Local / express / limited express / rapid train services** - overland trains that use the same lines but speed depends on how many stops there are. For example, see the link below for the journey between Osaka Namba and Kintetsu-Nara: the local train stops at every stop, whereas the limited express stops the least and is therefore the quickest. There's a good visual explanation of this on the [Kintetsu Rail website](#).
- **Shinkansen** - the "bullet trains". These are usually in a separate area of the station as they run on specific high speed tracks (not the same as the other trains).



USING THE METRO/SUBWAY

I would recommend using an IC card/Suica (see below) as it makes it so much quicker to just tap your card/phone without having to find a ticket machine every time you want to make a metro journey. Alternatively, you can buy physical tickets or multi day passes. We bought a 3 day pass for Tokyo, but used the Suica IC card on our phone wallets for all other metro/subway journeys.

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IC CARDS

SUICA, PASMO, ICOCA AND MORE

IC cards are rechargeable cards (either physical or digital) that can be used to pay for train services, some vending machines and in some shops (we found that many stalls in train stations would only accept cash or IC cards, not credit/debit cards). There's lots of different cards, depending on which region/city they are issued in. Examples are Suica, Icoxa and Pasma. It doesn't matter which one you have, it can be used all over Japan.

WELCOME SUICA

If you're arriving into Tokyo, there is a visitor version of the physical Suica card, called the "Welcome Suica" which can only be purchased from Tokyo Narita or Haneda airport on arrival. This does not require a deposit, and is valid for 28 days. You can add money to these at designated ticket machines in train stations and at Seven Bank ATMs at 7/11 stores. This can only be done with yen in cash (you can't top up a physical Suica with your credit/debit card). Try to use up the remaining balance as you cannot get it refunded.

Beware: You can't use an IC card to pay for a journey that crosses regions - not relevant to our itinerary but just keep this in mind in case you're going off piste!

DIGITAL OR PHYSICAL CARD?

We each added a Suica to our Apple wallet and found it convenient to top up using a debit card when needed. You can't withdraw unused funds, so in the last few days of the trip, we kept an eye on the balance and just topped up what was needed for the last payment.

Alternatively, you can pick up a physical IC card at a train station, but you will need to put down a deposit - this is refundable, but only if you return the card in the region it was purchased. We arrived in Osaka and departed from Tokyo so would not have been able to get the deposit back. With a physical IC card, your remaining balance will show on the barrier when tapping it to go through. You can top these up at 7/11, Family Mart and other combinis, but with cash only.

ANDROID USERS

It seems that, for Android users, the app/wallet doesn't work for tourists for a number of reasons, so you will need to get a physical IC card instead.



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Since the price of the JR pass increased in recent years, there is a lot of debate over whether it will actually save you money. This is completely dependant on your itinerary. I think the biggest gripe that tourists have with the JR pass is that they expect it to cover every transport medium they will need in Japan and are shocked when they then have to pay extra for services that are not covered. The key thing to understand is that JR or “Japan Rail” is one of the many train companies in Japan, it doesn’t mean the whole Japan rail system, which I think is where the confusion stems from.

To further complicate things, there is the whole Japan JR pass, as well as regional options. The JR pass will cover many (but not all) bullet trains, some other trains, buses and even some ferries.

SO IS THE JR PASS WORTH IT?

The short answer - it depends on your itinerary. For us, it was very slightly cheaper to use the JR pass, but not massively. However, the advantage to us was a degree of flexibility - I overplanned one day and we missed our train. Having the JR pass meant we could just jump on the next train without losing any money, and didn’t have to queue at a ticket machine when in a rush.

There is a great website which you can use to plot your expected journeys and calculate whether it will be cheaper using the JR pass or booking the journeys separately: [The JR calculator by Japan Travel Navitime](#).

JR PASS DURATION

You can choose the duration of the pass: 7 or 14 days.

Even if you plan to visit Japan for 2 weeks, you don’t necessarily need the 14 days pass. You can plan your trip to use the 7 day pass in the middle to maximise your travel. Our itinerary made use of this - just bear in mind that it is valid for 7 consecutive days from activation though.

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HOW TO BUY A JR PASS

- You cannot purchase a JR pass in Japan - it must be done before your trip. Be aware that there are a number of different JR websites that look official but may not be. We ordered ours through the [**Klook app**](#). Use promo code **SPENDLESS** to get a discount on Klook.
- To order the JR pass, you need to leave enough time (it's generally recommended 1-2 months before your trip) because the "Exchange order" will be posted to your address.
- You must bring this with you to Japan and exchange it for the physical JR passes at a JR office. Here, you can choose the date of activation - it does not need to be the same date that you collect your pass. For example, we arrived into Osaka KIX airport and immediately went to the JR office in the airport. Here, I collected the passes and opted for activation 3 days later. I also made the seat reservations for the journey to the sumo tournament at the same time.

DO I NEED TO MAKE SEAT RESERVATIONS?

The only train we booked seats for in advance was the shinkansen to and from the sumo tournament in Fukuoka. This is because we knew in advance which train times we needed and were concerned that the last train from the tournament was likely to be busy (and we were correct!). Otherwise, you will probably be able to find a seat in the non-reserved cars. One caveat to this is if you're travelling at very busy times of the year eg. Golden Week (usually around the start of May) - the [**JR website**](#) lists key dates to consider.

While most trains have non-reserved sections (we always found seats), some shinkansen only have reserved seating cars (eg. the Kagayaki train from Kanazawa to Tokyo). Others may not have unreserved sections during busy periods such as Nozomi and Mizuho trains. The Nozomi and Mizuho trains are not actually included in the JR pass anyway but you can use them for an additional fee (reduced compared to the full fare for either of these trains). Book these at a ticket machine or office in a JR station. We only used one once in order to save time, but you could actually do this itinerary without needing either.

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TRANSPORT SUMMARY

SO WHICH TICKETS/PASSES DO I ACTUALLY NEED?

These passes/ tickets covered all of our transport in Japan (excluding the odd Uber):

- IC card for the metros, the limited express to Nara, and other rides not covered by JR
- JR pass, activated on day 4
- Bus tickets booked via Japan Bus online
- Hakone freepass
- Tokyo 3 day subway pass - also valid on buses



CHILDREN'S TICKETS

We don't have kids so can't speak from experience but I'm aware that some childrens' train tickets need to be bought/collected in person - I advise looking into this if you are planning on travelling with kids to Japan.

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THE ITINERARY



The payoff is worth the hassle

Warning: this is NOT your basic Tokyo-Kyoto-Osaka Golden Route itinerary. By all means, if you are a less experienced traveller, stick to the big three, and take more time doing so. Also note that this itinerary is 14 full days in Japan, so consider a day either side for travel too.

But if you are a seasoned traveller, you can cope with multiple public transport networks, are happy to communicate with limited local language and you're up for a challenge, then this is the perfect itinerary for you.

Yes, it is a bit more hectic, but it gives a much wider overview of Japan and, in my opinion, the extras outside of the big cities are the best bits. I've included a few optional "choose your own adventure" days too. It is also still pared down from what we tried to do so is, in my opinion, very achievable.



Detailed breakdown

The next two pages show an overview of the 2 week itinerary. This is followed by a detailed breakdown of each day's travel, accommodation activities and cost. There's also a cost summary and chart for booking times for popular attractions at the end of the guide.

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2 WEEK ITINERARY

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DAY 1 OSAKA

- Arrive into Osaka Airport, pick up JR passes if using them.
- Train to city, then check into accommodation
- Stroll around Osaka Castle
- Sample street food and soak up the lights in Dotonbori

DAY 2 OSAKA

- Universal Studios Japan
- Don't forget to pick your time slot for Super Mario World

DAY 3 NARA

- Train to Nara
- Feed the bowing deer and sample matcha treats
- Marvel at the huge bronze Buddha
- Head back to Osaka to check out Shinsekai retro area

DAY 4 HIROSHIMA

- Use the shinkansen (bullet train) to get to Hiroshima
- Wander the memorial peace park and museum
- Sample an okonomiyaki pancake
- Ferry to Miyajima island - see the floating Torii and befriend deer

DAY 5 KYOTO

- Start your day at Fushimi Inari Shrine and hike through thousands of red Torii gates.
- Visit the stunning Kiyomizu temple on the hillside
- Try tempura in a traditional restaurant
- Spot Geishas in Gion district

DAY 6 KYOTO

- Head out to Arashiyama and take the wild Hozugawa River Boat ride with spectacular views.
- Hike up to the Arashiyama Monkey Park
- Wander through the bamboo forest

DAY 7 TAKAYAMA

- Get a bento box to take on the train to Takayama
- Explore the picturesque streets and try the mouth-watering Hida-beef
- Immerse yourself in the retro Showa-kan museum

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2 WEEK ITINERARY

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DAY 8 SHIRAKAWA-GO

- Take the bus to Shirakawa-go
- Explore the UNSECO world heritage village
- Go inside some of the thatched houses to learn more
- Continue on the bus to Kanazawa

DAY 9 KANAZAWA

- Take part in a Tea Ceremony in Kenrouken Gardens
- Discover the Samauri District
- Sample local delicacies at Omicho Market
- Have gold-leaf ice cream in the Higashi Chaya district

DAY 10 HAKONE

- Take the shinkansen to Hakone via Tokyo
- Settle into your Ryokan
- Experience a Japanese Onsen
- Enjoy a traditional multi-course Kaiseki dinner

DAY 11 HAKONE

- Ride multiple modes of transport around the Hakone loop
- Sail on a pirate ship with a view of Mt. Fuji
- Eat black eggs, cooked in a volcanic hot spring
- Take a cable car over a volcano

DAY 12 TOKYO

- Explore Senso-Ji Shrine in Asakusa
- Join the madness and walk across Shibuya Scramble crossing
- Take in the views from Tokyo Metropolitan Building or Shibuya Sky
- Have drinks in Golden Gai. Stay in a capsule hotel

DAY 13 TOKYO

- Immerse yourself in the interactive art at Teamlab Borderless
- Race across Rainbow Bridge and around the streets of Tokyo in go-karts
- If you haven't already, try ramen or sushi

DAY 14 TOKYO

- Befriend capybaras at a cafe
- Get photo-booth souvenirs at Takeshita Street, Harajuku
- Do some last-minute shopping before heading home

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DAY 1 @OSAKA

STAY IN OSAKA DAYS 1-4

Osaka is a great place to base yourself for a few days. We actually loved the city in it's own right but it's also within easy reach of a lot of great sites, with accommodation being cheaper than Kyoto or Tokyo.

HOTEL

Henn Na Namba, Osaka - 4 nights - £262 en suite double room

- (5 minute walk from both Namba station and Shinsaibaishi metro station)
- Very affordable option in Osaka
- Checked in by animatronic dinosaurs (no really!) which was fun
- Had a small communal space with microwaves and self operated laundry service

TRANSPORT

- Kansai airport express to Namba (Osaka) - takes around 45 minutes - £7
- There is a "Rapid" version of this train which makes less stops and arrives about 10 minutes quicker, but the ticket costs slightly more.
- Metro to Osaka Castle and back to Dotonbori

ON ARRIVAL

Depending on your arrival time (and level of jet-lag) you may have time to do some local exploring.

We managed to check into our hotel and get to Osaka castle for sunset (ish) via metro. It was a bit of a rush (due to time of year - the sun sets around 4pm in November in Osaka) and the park around the castle is actually huge. You could definitely spend a lot more time exploring the area or go into the castle itself if you had more time.



THINGS TO DO

- Osaka castle
- Dotonbori area in the evening - try takoyaki - fried octopus (many stalls selling them) and Kobe beef (we had the Kobe beef sushi from the stall near the Spiderman clam)
- Namba yasaka shrine (we actually didn't have time to visit in the end)



DAY 2 @OSAKA

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UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

If theme parks aren't for you, or you'd rather go to Disney in Tokyo instead, skip or substitute this day (see "choose your own adventure" for alternative day trips).

HOTEL

[Henn Na Namba, Osaka](#)

TRANSPORT

Metro to Universal City

BEAT THE CROWDS

This is one attraction that I would recommend arriving early to, in order to "beat the crowds". Check the website for up to date opening times - strangely, the park will often let visitors in before this anyway. We arrived an hour before official opening time and walked straight in with very little queue. We had a fantastic day (even though the jet lag was hitting), but I am a complete Harry Potter nerd. Super Nintendo World is a must see too - you usually need timed entry for this part of the park. You can select a time when booking your express pass, or if you aren't using express passes, you can book a time slot on the day on the USJ app (do it as soon as entering the park). The app is also useful for checking real time queue times and how busy certain areas of the park are.

DO I NEED AN EXPRESS PASS?

An express pass is not essential but definitely will reduce your queuing times - we bought ours via **Klook** along with our park tickets (the USJ website only accepts Japanese debit/credit cards). Use promo code **SPENDLESS** to get discount on Klook.

FOOD IN THE PARK

You aren't officially allowed to take any food into the park, and they do bag search (but not particularly thoroughly). I was always brought up thinking that theme park food is absolutely extortionate and to always take a packed lunch, so being forced to buy food in the park grated against all of my money-saving instincts! But I do have to say that the prices weren't too bad (certainly cheaper than food at UK theme parks), and actually there were a few quirky foods/drinks that we wanted to try anyway eg. The Mario pancakes and, of course, Butterbeer.

In the evening, we ate at Hard Rock Cafe, just outside the park - this is an international obsession of mine and can be hit and miss for both prices and quality depending on where you are. But I did very much enjoy my teriyaki chicken burger and was impressed at the good value at the Osaka branch.



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DAY 3 NARA

DAY TRIP TO NARA

Nara is easily accessible as a day trip from either Osaka or Kyoto. We chose to stay longer in Osaka because the accomodation is much better value than Kyoto.

HOTEL

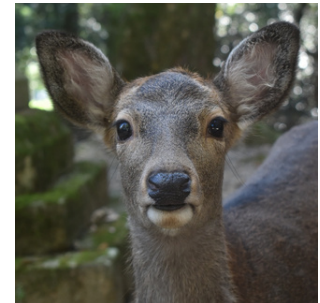
[Henn Na Namba, Osaka](#)

TRANSPORT

- Rapid express train from Osaka Namba to Nara Kintetsu - around 40 minutes ~£6 pp return
- Metro to Shinsekai

We actually started our Nara day with breakfast opposite the hotel in Osaka at 512 cafe for the wobbly pancakes. There are many cafes that serve this style of pancake - they're worth trying, but can be an acquired taste.

After arriving in Nara, walk down to the deer park - there are many stalls selling crackers to feed the famous deer, who will bow for a tasty treat.



TOP TIP TO AVOID THE CROWDS

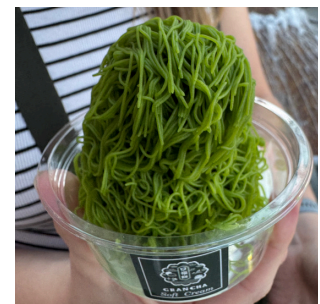
Purchase your crackers in the park but don't open them yet - here the deer absolutely mob people for food. Walk further up through the woodland towards Kasuga Taisha shrine - there's less people and still plenty of deer here, but they weren't quite so demanding!

Get lunch at Mizuya Chayd - a riverside tea room (sadly closed when we visited), then head over to Todai-Ji Temple to see the huge bronze Buddha.



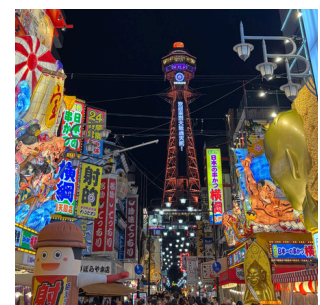
MATCHA TREATS

Don't forget to try mochi and various other matcha flavoured sweets and ice-cream from Grancha on Higashimuki street. You can watch the mochi pounding at Nakatanidou - check opening times on social media before visiting.



BACK IN OSAKA

We arrived back in Osaka and went straight on to Shinsekai - a really cool retro area with bright lights and lots of street games. We had dinner at Gyukatsu Motomura - there are branches in Shinaekai, Namba and Dotonbori.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 4 HIROSHIMA

DAY TRIP TO HIROSHIMA AND MIYAJIMA

It's a busy day to fit both in, but it is doable. If you have an interest in history, the Peace Memorial Museum is not to be missed. Miyajima island is an optional add on.

HOTEL

[Henn Na Namba,](#)
[Osaka](#)

TRANSPORT

- Day 1 of your JR pass if you're using it
- Shinkansen from Shin-Osaka to Hiroshima - takes 1.5 hrs
- The JR pass also covers the Hiroshima sightseeing bus
- Ferry to Miyajima - some routes included in JR pass

On arrival to Hiroshima, use the sightseeing bus to get to the Atomic Dome, then walk through the Memorial Peace Park to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

LOCAL CUISINE

Get lunch at Okonomimura, a 10-15 minute walk from the Memorial Peace Park. This is an upstairs food court with many stalls serving Okonomyaki - a regional delight in the form of a savoury pancake like dish made in front of you on a hotplate. It's intriguing to watch, but don't underestimate the time taken to craft it (prepare to sit down for at least 30 minutes - this is not a grab-and-go snack!).

FERRY TO MIYAJIMA

There are 2 ways to do this:

- Direct ferry from the Memorial Peace Park terminal - this will be a quicker overall journey but this route is not included in the JR pass. The ferry takes about 40 minutes and a one way ticket costs about £10.
- Get public transport or a taxi (Uber) to the JR ferry port (Hiroden-Miyajimaguchi) and get the ferry across. This ferry takes 10 minutes.

I recommend getting the direct ferry from the Peace Park to Miyajima one way, then get the shorter JR ferry when leaving (check the last ferry times). This means you can then use the local JR Sanyo line train to Hiroshima station, and then get the Shinkansen back to Shin-Osaka to conclude your day.



DAY 4 MIYAJIMA

DAY 4 CONTINUED - MIYAJIMA

Unfortunately we did not have time to visit so cannot speak from experience (as we went on to Fukuoka instead), but we have made some suggestions below.

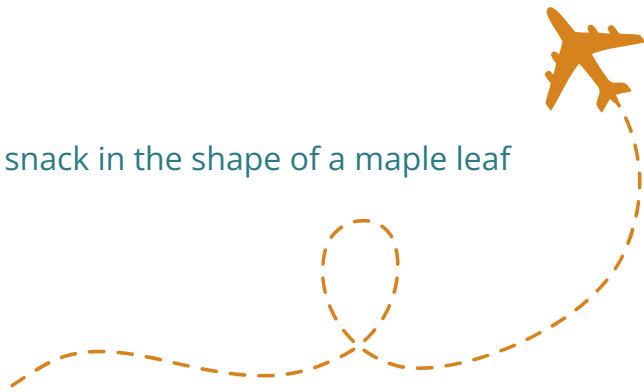
THINGS TO DO

- See the Great Torii - the floating torii gate. Check the tide times - best seen at high tide but you may be able to walk right up to it if the tide is low.
- Meet the friendly deer on the island.
- Get the cable car up to Mount Misen for great views on a clear day.
- Miyajima Omotesandō Shopping Street for souvenirs and local crafts.
- Explore Itsukushima Shrine

LOCAL CUISINE

local cuisine

- Oysters
- Oyster curry bread
- Momiji Manju (red bean paste filled snack in the shape of a maple leaf)



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE WHILE BASED IN OSAKA

- Trade the day at Universal for a day at Disney in Tokyo instead if that's more your vibe. As HP nerds, we absolutely had to do Universal.
- Day trip to Himeji Castle (not something we did)
- **Sumo tournament:** the November tournament is in Fukuoka. This can be done as day trip from Osaka via Shinkansen (bullet train). Side note - we squeezed this into the same day as Hiroshima instead of going to Miyajima, but I would NOT recommend this - it was too much! Dedicate a whole day to each or pick one over the other. Alternatively, if you're in Japan at a different time of year then attend the sumo tournament in the relevant location.
- Spend longer in Hiroshima and dedicate a whole day each to Hiroshima and Miyajima.

DAY 5 KYOTO

SPEND DAYS 5-6 IN KYOTO

Kyoto is not far from Osaka - only about 15 minutes via Shinkansen, or around 30 minutes by local train. Check out of your hotel in Osaka in the morning and prepare for a full day in Kyoto.

HOSTEL

Guesthouse Gajyun, Higashiyama - 2 nights - £96 for 2 beds in shared dorm

- The hostel does have private rooms but these were full by the time we booked, so we had opted for a 4 bed shared dorm.
- The cost included a HUGE breakfast which was absolutely wonderful, with lots of options including Japanese (miso soup) and more western.
- The family that ran the hostel were very friendly and helpful.
- 20 minute walk from tourist spots in Higashiyama area.
- Affordable compared to a lot of accommodation in Kyoto

TRANSPORT

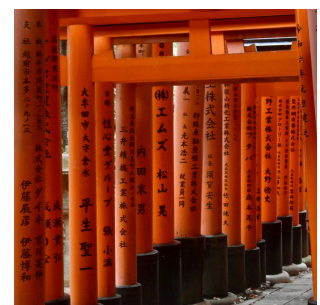
- JR pass day 2: use this for the Shinkansen from Shin-Osaka to Kyoto Station - takes 15 minutes.
- From Kyoto station, take the JR Nara Line (JR pass inclusive) to Inari (5 min)

Coming from Osaka, it makes sense to go virtually straight to Fushimi Inari before heading into the central area to the accommodation. You can store luggage in the large lockers at Kyoto train station before heading on to Inari.

FUSHIMI INARI

Fushimi Inari shrine consists of thousands of vermillion torii gates lining a walkway which loops up and to the summit of mount Inari. The full loop is around 4km. Despite being free to enter, most tourists only see the first few metres, so don't be put off by the crowds at the bottom. We walked the full loop and it was blissfully quiet once you get even a short way up the hill.

Allow 2-3 hours here before heading back to the Kyoto station to collect luggage. From there, use the metro to get to the accommodation and check in/drop your bags off.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 5 KYOTO

DAY 5 CONTINUED

After scouting somewhere for lunch, continue on an afternoon of sightseeing within the local Higashiya district.

KIYOMIZU TEMPLE

Walk towards Ninenzaka, a quaint street with a view of the 5 storey pagoda and explore the many shops nearby. From here, make your way on foot up the hill to Kiyomizu temple, a large beautiful wooden temple on the hillside.

After your visit to the temple, time dependant - you can stroll through Gion, the Geisha district, and see if you can spot a Geisha around sunset. Observe the signs - you aren't allowed to take photographs in some of these areas as a sign of respect.

FOOD RECOMMENDATIONS

Pontocho Alley is famous for it's food but we found it a bit pricey so headed elsewhere for dinner.

There are many small traditional tempura restaurants (prepare to sit cross-legged) right near our accommodation so we just picked one that had space.

We also had our first experience of Ichiran ramen (a chain with individual booths) in Kyoto, which we loved so much, we went back to Ichiran in other locations!



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE - KYOTO

- Sagano Romantic train in Arashiyama (we did the boat ride instead - pick one, not both)
- Tea Ceremony at Camilla Tea experience - this books up weeks in advance. It was fully booked when we looked, so we booked a tea ceremony in Kanazawa instead.
- Golden Pavilion - it's a bit further out of the way from other sites, and we ran out of time.
- Kodak temple - has a small bamboo forest
- Nishiki market

DAY 6 KYOTO

DAY TRIP TO ARASHIYAMA

HOSTEL

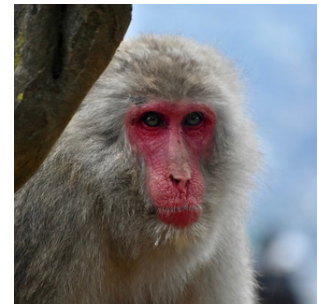
Guesthouse
Gajyun,
Higashiyama

TRANSPORT

- JR Pass day 3 - valid on these JR lines.
- Metro to Kyoto Station then JR San-in line to Kameoka station (nearest the boat start point) ~30 minutes
- Return from Saga-Arashiyama Station to Kyoto on the JR San-in line

HOZUGAWA RIVER BOAT RIDE

The boat start point is a 5 minute walk from Kameoka station. You can buy tickets on the day for the next available boat (we had to wait about 15 minutes). The boat ride takes 1.5-2 hours through some beautiful scenery and some mild “rapids” (the water level was quite low for us but it has the potential to be a wilder ride!). The boatmen were great fun and it was well worth the price (~£30 pp) - definitely the best thing we did in Arashiyama.



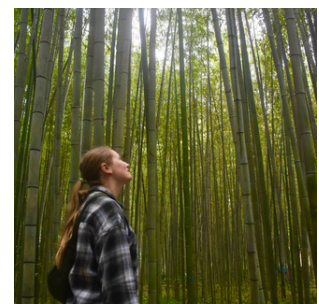
ARASHIYAMA MONKEY PARK

Grab some lunch, then walk across the Togetsu-kyo bridge and up the hill (around 20 minutes) to the Arashiyama Monkey park. The monkeys are free roaming, but you can feed them from inside a hut: you are “behind bars” and the monkeys have freedom to come and go as they please - they were very gentle and polite, unlike mokeys in tourist areas of other countries! Entrance is ~£4 pp



ARASHIYAMA BAMBOO FOREST

The “must-see” Arashiyama bamboo grove is a little underwhelming and often overcrowded, but you can appreciate the height of the trees, and may as well stop by while you’re in Arashiyama. In our opinion, it’s not worth it if it’s the sole reason you’re heading out to Arashiyama.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 7 TAKAYAMA

TAKAYAMA

This is where the itinerary goes off the “Golden Route”, but it’s so worth it!

HOSTEL

Hostel Miyagawa by Murasaki - 1 night - £30 for twin room, shared bathroom

- Well located. We had a private twin (bunkbed!) room.
- Traditional Japanese townhouse with paper screens (not very soundproof - bring earplugs!)

TRANSPORT

- JR Pass day 4 - valid for all trains today except the metro.
- Metro to Kyoto station
- Shinkansen from Kyoto to Nagoya ~50 minutes
- Nagoya to Takayama via the JR Hida Limited Express train. This is a long but scenic ride ~2.5 hours

BENTO BOX

The journey takes around 4 hours altogether including connections, so set off early in order to make the most of your afternoon on arrival in Takayama. Get a bento box in one of the stations for lunch on the train. There are cold or hot options.



SHOWA-KAN MUSEUM

The town is very walkable - walk to your accommodation to drop off your bags and then head to the Showa-kan museum - a cool spot with lots of retro Japanese artefacts. We spent about 1.5 hours here.



Stroll through the picturesque streets, lined with traditional machia townhouses and eat some Hida beef - sold on a stick as a snack. The Sanmachi-Siji area is very pretty. Stop at the Bagpipe Cafe for coffee and cake.

Takayama was much quieter and more chilled than the big cities. One night is enough, as a stopover to get to Shirakawa-go. If you don't have time to visit Shirakawa-go, there is the Hida open air museum, which has houses with similar architecture.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 8 SHIRAKAWA-GO

TAKAYAMA → SHIRAKAWA-GO → KANAZAWA

Both legs of the journey must be booked in advance via [Japan Bus Online](#). There were no tickets available on the day. This means you have to pick how much time you'll have in Shirakawa-go - we had 3.5 hours, which was about right. Be aware that the bus durations can be longer in poor weather. Luggage can be stored at the Shirakawa-go bus station.

ACCOMODATION

Yuimaru East, Kanazawa - 2 nights - £110 en-suite private double

- This was more like a small apartment with a shared kitchen.
- Spacious with tatami mat floors, and traditional Japanese futon beds, which were surprisingly comfortable.
- The shared kitchen area was very well equipped and had self service laundry machines too.

TRANSPORT

- Bus from Takayama to Shirakawa-go ~ 1 hour
- Bus from Shirakawa-go to Kanazawa ~1.5 hours
- Total for both buses ~£26 per person

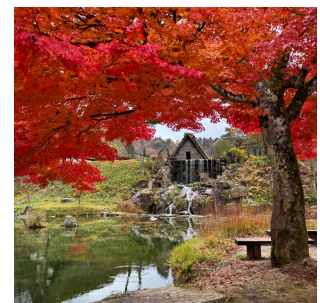
SHIRAKAWA-GO

Shirakawa-go is very beautiful - it's a UNSECO world heritage site and the thatched houses were like nothing else we'd seen in Japan so far. Walk up the hill to the viewpoint to see the village from above, then explore the village itself. You can pay to go into some of the houses - we went into 2. There are a number of restaurants and cafes to stop for lunch. Ensure you walk further out of the village to the south (5 minutes) to see the 3 houses. Back towards the village, cross the river and explore the open-air museum to learn more.



ARRIVE INTO KANAZAWA

After getting the bus onto Kanazawa, we arrived at the station just after the last bus left. We decided to grab dinner at Kirari Sushi (highly recommend!) right next to the train station, before getting an Uber to our accommodation.



DAY 9 KANAZAWA

KANAZAWA

Use the Kanazawa loop bus to get to Kenrouken gardens to start your day. The rest is walkable, gradually making your way back towards the accommodation.

HOTEL

[Yuimaru East,](#)
[Kanazawa](#)

TRANSPORT

- Kanazawa Loop bus ~£1 single ride
- Walking

TEA CEREMONY AT KENROKUEN GARDENS

Learn about the traditions surrounding matcha by attending a tea ceremony (£25 pp) - we booked this via [Get Your Guide](#) - use discount code **SPENDLESSTRAVELMORE5** for 5% off! You do have to pay the entry to Kenrokuen as well (£3), but the beautiful gardens are worth a visit in their own right.



KANAZAWA CASTLE

Opposite Kenrokuen Gardens, you can walk through the castle grounds towards the Samauri district. We didn't go inside, but you can explore some reconstructed areas for a small fee (£1.50).



NAGAMASHI (SAMAURI) DISTRICT

Walk through the samauri district to Nomura-ke samauri residence (£3), before heading to Omicho market for lunch. Sample a variety of delicacies from raw crab and grilled eel to hida beef and croquettes.

HIGASHI CHAYA DISTRICT

Spend the afternoon wondering through the "tea" district, admiring the beautiful buildings. Kanazawa produces 99% of Japan's gold leaf - you can find many gold coated products here, and can even try gold-leaf ice-cream in the Sakuda shop.



DAY 10 HAKONE

KANAZAWA → TOKYO → HAKONE

Today is mostly travelling and spending time in the ryokan (a traditional Japanese inn) and making use of the onsen - embrace the time to relax after a hectic trip so far!

RYOKAN

Masutomi Ryokan - 1 night - £338 private suite, access to private onsen

- 5 minute walk from the train station
- Dinner and breakfast included

TRANSPORT

- Day 7 of JR Pass - valid on both Shinkansen
- Shinkansen from Kanazawa to Tokyo station. (Note that Kagayaki trains are reserved seats only so you must reserve seats at the ticket machine before boarding) ~2.5 hours
- Shinkansen from Tokyo to Odawara via "Tokaido Shinkansen/Kodama" ~30 minutes. On a clear day, you MAY be able to glimpse Mt. Fuji from the right hand side of the train.
- Hakone Tozan Line from Odawara to Hakone Yumoto. (15 minutes) The Hakone Freepass will cover this journey - you can purchase the pass at Odawara station (or online) - it's valid for 2 days, so will also cover your transport (and therefore many of your activities) for the next day. ~£28 pp. More info on the Hakone Freepass below.

THE RYOKAN EXPERIENCE

Although it is pricey, a visit to a Ryokan is an experience - it's not just a hotel and an onsen. Your evening meal and breakfast is typically included. Arrive as early as check-in allows to make the most of your stay. There are many options for ryokans - I picked ours based on proximity to transport options, and because there was a private onsen that we could book.

Check into your ryokan and spend the afternoon unwinding in the onsen (see the notes on onsen etiquette) before enjoying a traditional multi-course ryokan dinner, called "kaiseki". Ours was absolutely wonderful, and although it is more of an indulgence than we're used to, I 100% recommend.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 10 HAKONE

THE HAKONE FREEPASS

There's different versions of the Freepass, depending on where you want to start your journey and upgrades available for the "Romancecar" (a fast-ish train with a view). It's a bit confusing, but here are your options:

- 2 or 1 day pass - you will need the 2 day pass to cover transport to Hakone on the first day and then all of your transport around the "Hakone loop" the following day.
- Hakone Freepass from Odawara - this will include all of your transport in the Hakone area that you need for the loop, as well as return journey to and from Odawara ~£28
- Hakone Freepass from Shinjuku - this will include all of your transport in the Hakone area that you need for the loop, as well as return journey to and from Shinjuku, Tokyo ~£34
- Upgrade Freepass from Shinjuku to Romancecar - this can be done in one direction only, or both. The Romancecar goes directly from Shinjuku to Hakone-Yumoto and vice versa. Additional ~£6 each direction (~£12 return).
- If you want to purchase the Freepass from Odawara but return to Shinjuku via the Romancecar, you have to purchase the Hakone freepass (£28), plus the base fare from Odawara to Shinjuku (~£4), plus the Romancecar upgrade (£6), so the total is ~£38.

Journey Times (included in the Hakone freepass):

- Odawara <-> Hakone-Yumoto via Hakone Tonzan Railway ~14 min.
- Shinjuku <-> Odawara via Odakyu Odawara Line Rapid Express ~1hr 28 min.
- Shinjuku <-> Hakone-Yumoto via Romancecar ~1hr 30 min.

The shinkansen between Tokyo and Odawara is not included in any versions of the Freepass.

In summary, if you're following our itinerary, we advise purchasing the 2 day Hakone Freepass from Odawara (because the JR pass will cover the journey there), and upgrade to the Romancecar to get to back to Shinjuku, Tokyo on the 2nd day.

DAY 11 HAKONE

THE HAKONE LOOP

The different modes of transport today are part of the fun. You're basically on a Fuji spotting mission, with a few other things thrown in. The transport map of the Hakone area looks quite overwhelming, and I tried to make note of exactly which stops to take in advance. But in reality, as long as you get on the correct bus initially, and get off at the pirate ship terminal stop, then you can't really go wrong, as every other transport mode follows on from there.

HOTEL

[Asakusa Kokono Club Hotel, Tokyo](#) - 4 nights - £294 twin, shared bathroom

TRANSPORT

- Hakone Freepass valid for all transport in Hakone area and to Shinjuku
- Tokyo metro to get to the hotel at the end of the day

There's luggage lockers at the train station if you want to stash your bags for the day, as the loop will bring you back here before heading to Tokyo.

BUS FROM HAKONE-YUMOTO TO LAKE ASHI/MOTOHAKONE-KO (30 MIN)

It's about a 10 minute walk to see the floating Tori gate at Hakone Shrine - it's a cool place to get a photo, but you will likely have to queue to do so! There's also a 7-11 shop opposite the boat terminal if you need to pick up and snacks or lunch for the day.



PIRATE SHIP ACROSS LAKE ASHI (25-40 MIN)

This is your first opportunity of the day to see Mt. Fuji - we had a fleeting glimpse through a break in the clouds but were otherwise unlucky for the rest of the day.



ROPEWAY (CABLE CAR) TO OWAKUDANI VOLCANO (15 MINS)

Try the black eggs here - it is said that eating one will add 7 years to your life (we had 2 each!). The shell colour comes from boiling them in the volcanic hot springs. In theory, you may be able to see Fuji from the ropeway or Owakudani area but we unfortunately experienced dense clouds.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 11 HAKONE

ROPEWAY FROM OWAKUDANI TO SOUZAN STATION (15 MINS)

If you have to wait for the next train, make use of the foot onsen with a view, for free! It's in the station itself shortly after you get off the cablecar, but before you make your way to the funicular.



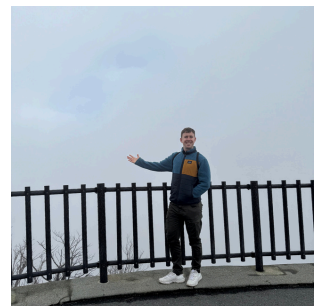
FUNICULAR TO GORA STATION (10 MINS)

Confusingly, on the maps, this is referred to as the "Hakone Tozan cable car", but it is what I would describe as a funicular.

TAKE THE HAKONE-TOZAN RAILWAY TRAIN BACK TO HAKONE-YUMOTO (45 MINS)

Don't underestimate this journey - it looks short but is very slow!

If you have time, you can stop off at the Hakone Open Air museum. We were a bit pushed by this point so just stayed on the train all the way back to Hakone-yumoto.



ROMANCECAR FROM HAKONE-YUMOTO TO SHINJUKU (90 MINS)

Finally, collect your bags if you used the storage lockers in the station, and head to Tokyo. You may get views of Fuji depending on the time of year, but it was actually dark by the time we took this train as we went in November!



ARRIVE IN TOKYO

This is already quite a long day, so you'll probably just want to head back to your accommodation by the time you arrive in Tokyo. We did pop out of Shinjuku station to see the Shinjuku cat billboard and Godzilla head. The word "pop" is used loosely here - Shinjuku station is known by locals as "Shinjuku dungeon" as it is absolutely huge and can be a nightmare to "escape", even with the exit info on Google maps. But you can do this another day when you're in the Shinjuku area again.

DAY 12 TOKYO

SPEND DAY 12-14 IN TOKYO

I cannot emphasise this enough - Tokyo is absolutely huge! Try to divide your time into different areas and stay in that area for the day/half day. I would dedicate at least 3 full days to Tokyo, but it depends on your plans - you could easily spend far longer here! Also be aware that it takes a lot of time to travel between areas and even just navigate the train stations.

HOTELS

1. Asakusa Kokono Club Hotel, Asakusa - 4 nights - £294 twin

- We picked Asakusa to base ourselves in as it's a bit more laid back while still being pretty accessible by metro. I would definitely recommend the area, but it felt a little far away from some things. However, the city is so huge that you cannot possibly be near everything! Overall, a good compromise.
- The hotel itself was very good value for Tokyo. We had a twin room with a shared bathroom. It was more like a fancy hostel than a hotel - the room itself was basic but did have a very large lockable cupboard.
- The bathroom was technically shared, but we were given a code for the shower that corresponded to our room number. Really, it was just the sink and toilets that were shared. The facilities were very clean and modern with free toiletries, toothbrushes, hair combs and super fluffy towels.

2. First Cabin Ichigaya (Capsule hotel) - 1 night - £80 total for 2 separate capsules

- We wanted to experience staying in a capsule hotel for one night, but also utilised this to have a night of accommodation nearer to the centre of the nightlife.
- This was so much more than we expected from a capsule hotel - it had an onsen (gender segregated) and the shared bathroom facilities were fantastic. They provided pyjamas, towels and toiletries as well.
- I had booked a premium capsule and Chrisy had booked the economy one. We were on different floors, which we expected, as capsule hotels are usually gender-segregated or one gender only. Mine was very spacious and had ample lockable storage. Chrisy's was half the height, and although he's over 6ft, it was more than comfortable and still roomy.
- Because we had overlapped the bookings, it meant that we could leave our main luggage in our room in Asakusa, and just take a small bag with one nights worth of stuff.
- Extra points for being right across the road from a metro station.

DAY 12 TOKYO

ASAKUSA - NIHOMBASHI - SHIBUYA - SHINJUKU

HOTELS

- [Asakusa Kokono Club Hotel](#)
- [First Cabin Ichigaya](#)

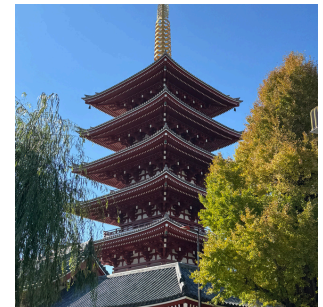
Fuglan Waffle - we had breakfast here because nothing else nearby was open yet. The coffee and waffles were very good, but very expensive compared to pretty much everywhere else we ate in Japan (around £25 for 2 breakfasts and coffees).

TRANSPORT

Tokyo 72 hour subway ticket. We bought this at the ticket machine in the station in Asakusa or you can buy in advance [via klook](#) and collect there (we did this). This costs around £7 and allows you to use all Tokyo metro and Toei subway lines, as well as some buses. Again, Google maps is very useful to help navigate the subway/metro stations and find the most direct route to your destination. You'll need the metro a lot today to hop between places.

SENSO-JI SHRINE, ASAKUSA

This was a 5 minute walk from our hotel, so we started here. To be honest, we had seen a lot of temples at this point so didn't find it overly impressive, but it was worth the short walk. I probably wouldn't go out of your way though unless you're in the area.



POKEMON CAFE, NIHOMBASHI

Despite mixed reviews, we had a great time - it really comes down to whether you are/were a fan of the franchise. The food looks great and tastes just ok, but we had so much fun and could not stop laughing at dancing chef Pikachu. And there's also a large shop selling Pokemon everything. For us, it was well worth it - we spent about 90 minutes here in total. The cafe is on an upper level of a tall building so the location isn't immediately obvious from the outside - look for the Pokemon artwork.



It is also quite elusive to book a table, and I had no luck when trying the [website](#) as soon as spaces were released one month in advance. However, spaces do come up as other people cancel their bookings, so if you're really keen, keep checking the website. A lunchtime spot came up the day before and I managed to book it. Alternatively, you can turn up and queue - we saw other people doing this and they did get seated within the time we were there, but I expect that it has the potential to be far busier.

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 12 TOKYO

TOKYO METROPOLITAN BUILDING

Try to time this for sunset. We arrived about an hour before sunset and were initially disheartened by the long queue at the elevator for the South Observatory but it moved very quickly. It's free to go up and on a clear day, the view is incredible - we could see all the way to Mt. Fuji.

SHIBUYA SCRAMBLE CROSSING

The busiest pedestrian crossing in the world. We walked across it a couple of times but to really appreciate it, you need to see it from above. There is a pretty decent close view from the Starbucks on the junction, but you do have to buy a drink to access the viewing area - it's very busy as clearly everyone else had this plan. Another option is Shibuya Sky.

SHIBUYA SKY

This is a paid viewing area (£13 pp) at the top of a skyscraper. Despite being a top attraction in the area, it was a little hard to find the entrance - you have to go up via an elevator to the 14th floor of the Shibuya Scramble Square building, which is connected to Shibuya station. The ideal time to visit would be sunset or after dark. Tickets are notoriously hard to get for sunset (we tried), and the website only accepts Japanese cards, so I booked tickets [through Klook](#) (use promo code **SPENDLESS** to get a discount) for after dark. (I wasn't too fussed as we had managed the metropolitan building at sunset). I do think the view was slightly better than the metropolitan building, but if you have time, doing both (and at different times of day like we did) will give you the best of both worlds. There's also an open air deck and some bars.

GOLDEN GAI

We then went to check in to the capsule hotel and drop off the small daybag before heading out to Golden Gai, an area of traditional Izikaya or little pubs/bars in narrow streets. When I say little, the two that we went in could only fit around 10 people in at a time. I would say try a couple of different ones, as the first one we went in was very quiet, but the second was much more lively and more our style of music (indie/rock), called "Alley Nuts". Some of these bars have a cover charge (a fee for the table before any drinks or snacks), but many have signs outside advertising no cover charge. Also be aware that some of these do not welcome non-japanese nationals in.



LAST TRAIN HOME

Be warned - the last metro trains generally run around midnight so check the times and don't miss the last one! The only times we really witnessed locals in a hurry and running for a train was around this time.

DAY 13 TOKYO

HOTEL

[Asakusa Kokono Club Hotel](#)

TRANSPORT

Tokyo 72 hour subway ticket - metro between all activities - but ensure you leave enough time to get to Street Kart as it is quite out of the way.

TEAMLAB BORDERLESS

Described as interactive art, we didn't really know what to expect - neither of us are that into art and we didn't know if it would be more aimed at kids. We absolutely loved it though! and highly recommend spending a couple of hours here - make sure to add your sea creature to the interactive ocean. You can book direct on the [Teamlab website](#) or via [Klook here](#).



HARD ROCK CAFE, ROPPONGI

As mentioned before, it's a bit of a theme for us to visit Hard Rock Cafes around the world. We had a pit stop for lunch before I had the stomach-dropping realisation that I had left our driving permits in the hotel.



STREET KART TOKYO BAY

This is an absolute must - it was our favourite activity in Tokyo, once we had gotten over the permit stress. They absolutely will not let you drive without your passport and International Driving Permit, so thankfully I followed my gut and dashed back to the hotel. Cue a small (major) panic and two very expensive taxi rides back to Asakusa and on to the meeting point for Street Kart. We call this an "idiot tax" and seem to clock at least one on each holiday!



Street Kart has a multiple locations throughout the city, but we picked [Tokyo Bay](#) because the route takes you over the infamous Rainbow Bridge and right by Tokyo tower. We booked this in advance [on Klook](#). It does tend to sell out, so you must book if you don't want to miss out. Use promo code **SPENDLESS** to get discount on Klook.

INTERNATIONAL DRIVING PERMITS

These can be obtained by select [Pay Points](#) in the UK - you need to take your UK driving license and a passport style photo along, and for £5.50, you'll be issued there and then with a very flimsy looking paper book with said photo pritt-sticked to an inside page. Although it looks entirely pathetic, it is genuinely essential for this activity. They are valid for 1 year once issued.

You need the 1949 one for Japan, but all of the information can be found on the [Gov website](#).

DAY 14 TOKYO

HOTEL

[Asakusa Kokono Club Hotel](#)

TRANSPORT

Tokyo 72 hour subway ticket - Tokyo 72 hour subway ticket - this covered the bus to the Capybara Cafe and metro to Harajuku.

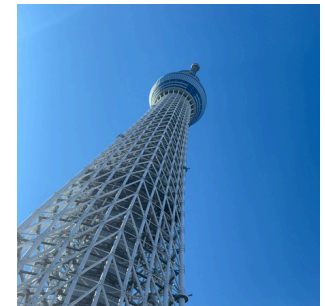
CAPYBA CAFE

The Capyba Cafe was another elusive spot to book, with bookings opening up exactly 2 weeks in advance and selling out almost instantly. We went to the location near Tokyo Skytree, but they have since opened another site in Asakusa.



KAMEYA BAKERY AND TOKYO SKYTREE

Incredible fresh sandwiches and pastries, a 10 minute walk from Tokyo Skytree. There was a Christmas market at the base of Skytree - sorry Japan, it just didn't do it for me - Europe does them better. You can pay to go to the top of Skytree but we'd had a few skyscraper views by this point so we gave it a miss.



HARAJUKU

The designer stores lining the walk from the metro fade into a vibrant area of thrift stores and tattoo places. Venture along Takeshita Street - it's probably packed but take in the colourful food offerings and funky cafes.

ARE ANIMAL CAFES ETHICAL?

Japan has a lot of animal themed cafes and I was a bit dubious about the ethics of a number of these, but was interested to experience at least one. The capybara cafe has 2 capybara, who have access to a small outside area, which, while it's not exactly the expanse of outdoor space they'd have in the Amazon, they seemed genuinely content. Having seen them in the wild too, they are pretty sedentary animals, often described as "terminally chill", using apparent laziness to conserve energy so they can be agile when needed. Without the impending threat of predators, I suspect that actually lounging on a nice comfy sofa and being fed vegetables is quite the life of luxury.

The cafe was well run - the reason it's so hard to get a booking is that they genuinely only let a very small number of people (4 in our group) at a time. The staff ensure that you do not crowd the capybaras, who really do seem unfazed at being the centre of attention. The coffee was actually very good too.

DAY 14 TOKYO

PURIKURA

On Takeshita Street, dive into an underground Purikura shop, containing lines of photo booths and numerous mirrors for touching up your make up. It's a bit confusing and chaotic but the result is some quirky photos with random backgrounds and stickers - a cool souvenir.



REISSUE CAFE

The artists create 3D images out of the foam topping your coffee. Although it's probably the most expensive coffee we bought in Japan (£7.50), it was pretty impressive. You can pick from a catalogue or show a photo you'd like them to recreate eg. Your own pet. You may have to queue or make a reservation to come back later.



ASAKUSA YOKOCHO

Head back to Asakusa for some last minute souvenir shopping along Nomiakamise Dori St (don't miss the chocolate fish pancakes). Have dinner at Asakusa Yokocho, a neon food court above Uniqlo. We had "cook it yourself" okonomiyaki here - seated with a hotplate between us. It was really tasty and had a great atmosphere, with live dancing.



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE - TOKYO

There's so much more to explore in Tokyo. If you want to substitute one of these days for something else, there are unlimited options:

- **Tokyo Disneyland** or **DisneySea**
- Other districts such as **Akihabara** for "geek culture" - anime, manga, gaming
- Watch the **sumo wrestlers** practice at the sumo "stables" - see the [sumo website](#) for details, as the wrestlers aren't there during tournament times.
- Alternatively, if you're here when there's a **sumo tournament** in Tokyo, dedicate a day to this! Info on booking [here](#).
- **Ghibli museum** - I tried desperately to get these tickets, but was not successful. There's lots of Ghibli shops throughout Japan but tickets for the museum are so limited. We did find tours [like this](#) that take you there but didn't want to sacrifice the time or budget - it depends on your priorities.
- Day trip to **Nikko/Kawaguchiko/Kamakura** or other nearby areas.
- **Kayaking** through the city - book [here](#) and use discount code **SPENDLESSTRAVELMORE5**
- **Samurai experience** - dress in armour and learn sword skills
- **Chopstick making class** or **cooking class** - use code **SPENDLESSTRAVELMORE5**

GOODBYE JAPAN

FINALLY, DEPART TOKYO

- There are two airports in Tokyo: Narita and Haneda.
- We did not fly from Narita, but the options to get to/from the airport include bus, train or taxi. The journey takes around 90 minutes by public transport.
- We recommend flying in/out of Haneda because it is more conveniently located for the city. Options to get to/from Haneda airport include metro, train, monorail, bus and taxi. The best way to get there from the Asakusa area is via metro/subway using the Asakusa line - you can use the 72 hour subway ticket for this but you will need to pay the fare adjustment (~£1.50) on arrival in cash or using your IC card.

ITINERARY ADJUSTMENTS IF FLYING IN AND OUT OF TOKYO

This itinerary works better arriving in Osaka and departing from Tokyo as you will get a bit more time in each of these cities, and likely save money on transport, but it can also be done as a circle from Tokyo:

Day 1-3 - Tokyo

Day 4 - Tokyo -> Kanazawa (activate JR)

Day 5 - Kanazawa

Day 6 - Kanazawa -> Shirakawago -> Takayama

Day 7 - Takayama (travel to Kyoto in the afternoon)

Day 8-9 - Kyoto

Day 10-12 - Osaka (1. Hiroshima, 2. Nara, 3. Universal) Visit Hiroshima first as this will be your last day of the JR pass.

Day 13 - Osaka castle -> Hakone

Day 14 - Hakone loop

Day 15 - Depart Tokyo

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

ADVANCE BOOKINGS

A lot of popular attractions do require advance booking, with some selling out quickly, so it's important to be organised with tickets if you don't want to miss out. I put alarms in my phone calendar so I could book as soon as they went on sale, and I still couldn't get some of the tickets I wanted. Also be aware of the times that ticket sales go live as some attractions genuinely do sell out in minutes. Here's the timeline for booking for some of the attractions we visited/tried to visit - all times are JST (Japan Standard Time) so ensure you work out the time difference.

Attraction	How far in advance to book	Where to book	Notes
JR Pass	30-90 days	<u>Klook</u>	There are many websites that look official. We booked through <u>Klook</u> and had no issues (see train travel section for more details).
Universal Studios	8 weeks	<u>Klook</u>	Official website does not accept foreign debit/credit cards. You must book the park entrance tickets, but express passes are optional (although we felt it was 100% worth it - we went for one of the 4 ride passes). There are a number of different passes which allow queue jump on various different ride combinations - there's a useful table on <u>this page</u> (scroll down). Book via <u>klook here</u> .
Sumo	Around 5 weeks, at 10am JST	<u>Ticket Oosumo Website</u>	Check the <u>Japan Sumo Association website</u> for information on the schedule and when ticket sales go live.
Bus tickets from Takayama -> Shirakawa-go -> Kanazawa	1 month	<u>Japan Bus Online</u>	These do sell out so must be booked in advance.
TeamLab Borderless	2 months	<u>TeamLab website</u>	You can make changes to your entry time after booking if needed.

ADVANCE BOOKINGS

Attraction	How far in advance to book	Where to book	Notes
Street Kart Tokyo	2 months	<u>Klook</u>	Don't forget to organise your IDP (International Driving Permit) too.
Pokemon Cafe Tokyo	31 days at 6pm JST	<u>Pokemon Cafe Website</u>	These sell out in minutes. Don't be disheartened if you don't get tickets though, they do come available again (we booked ours the day before) so it's worth it to keep checking <u>the website</u> .
Shibuya Sky	28 days at midnight JST	<u>Klook</u>	Official website does not accept foreign debit/credit cards. Book <u>through Klook</u> .
Capybara Cafe	2 weeks at midnight JST	<u>Capyba Cafe website</u>	
Tea Ceremony in Kenrouken Gardens	At least 3 days in advance	<u>Get Your Guide</u>	We booked this only a few days before - we did initially try to book one in Kyoto but found them all full by the time we looked.
Ghibli Museum Tokyo	Tickets go on sale at 10am JST on the 10th of the month prior to the month you want to visit	<u>Ghibli Museum Website</u>	This does sell out in seconds, and after a lot of research, it seems the odds are extremely small of getting tickets. Some <u>tour companies</u> do include a visit here, but this is a much more expensive way to visit (around £150pp compared to £5pp through the official site). If you're a huge fan and really don't want to miss out, it may be worth booking <u>a tour</u> . Note that "Ghibli Park" is a different attraction in another city entirely - Nagoya.

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

HOW MUCH DOES A TRIP TO JAPAN ACTUALLY COST ?

Below are the exact costs from our trip in November 2024. We prioritise experience over comfort, which is why there's such a variation in accommodation costs - we aimed for the best value in each location, but also didn't want to miss out on a ryokan stay or trying out a capsule hotel. Throughout the guide, the prices have been checked for current entry fees etc and are correct as of February 2026.

We have not included the sumo tournament tickets here, which were £196 for a 4 person box.

Item	Details	Cost	Cost for a couple	Cost per person
Flights	London Heathrow -> Beijing -> Osaka Tokyo -> Beijing -> London Heathrow	£1428	£1428	£714
Accommodation	Osaka - Double room - 4 nights	£262	£1210	£605
	Kyoto - 2 singles in a shared dorm - 2 nights (includes breakfast)	£97		
	Takayama - Twin private room - 1 night	£30		
	Kanazawa - Double studio room - 2 nights	£110		
	Hakone - Double suite - 1 night (Ryokan - breakfast and dinner included)	£338		
	Tokyo - Twin room, shared bathroom - 4 nights	£293		
	Tokyo capsule hotel - separate capsules - 1 night	£80		

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

Item	Details	Cost	Cost for a couple	Cost per person
Transport	7 day JR pass £260 pp	£520	£709	£355
	Hakone freepass	£51		
	Suica spends on metros/subways/buses	£72		
	Bus Takayama -> Kanazawa	£52		
	3 day Tokyo subway pass	£14		
Activities	Universal Studios tickets & express passes	£290	£489	£245
	Teamlab Borderless	£54		
	Shibuya Sky	£25		
	Street Kart	£120		
Food/spends	This includes food and anything else not covered above eg. The tea ceremony in Kanazawa, entrance to the samurai house, the river boat ride in Hoguzawa, Arashiyama monkey park, show-a-kan museum.	£1500	£1500	£750
	Total:		£5336	£2669

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

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This guide and our other resources are FREE, but if you found them helpful, you can [buy us a coffee here](#), so we can work on producing the next one!

Follow, subscribe and share for more travel and budgeting tips! Other destinations include Kyrgyzstan, Vietnam, Svalbard, South America, with many more coming soon.

