

Suriko's Japan Travel Guide

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Resources

Japan-Guide

japan-guide.com

A fantastic resource with great information on things like the Japan Rail network, navigation and attractions in the larger cities, example itineraries, and some great articles on writer's journeys into little corners of Japan. Not a lot of information on villages and towns which are off the usual tourist paths, though.

Japan Trains

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=bside.extremeambient.net&hl=en>

Android app, extremely recommended. I used this constantly during every trip in Japan, and can't recommend it enough. It's a fantastic and lightweight app that shows train schedules, with all information in English. Just plug in where you want to start and where you want to go, and it shows routes, platforms, and fares.

Google Maps

Invaluable given Japan's block-based addressing scheme is unfathomable. Public transport route planning is a bit hit or miss, as it will often default to expensive express shinkansen train lines. Unlike other countries, Japan's laws mean you can't cache Google Maps data to use offline, so this will require a data plan.

Hyperdia

hyperdia.com/en/

A train journey planner, which has English-language station names. Also has menu options for including/excluding subways, ferries, and such.

Airports

Haneda Airport

The closest airport to Tokyo by a good margin, this is connected to the city via a short monorail to Hamamatsuchou Station. From there, just take the subway or elevated rail to whatever station's nearest the hotel. The monorail is very cheap, and can be ridden using a suica card (referred to later on) as normal for any Tokyo metropolitan station.

Would generally recommend using Haneda if possible just for the convenience.

Narita Airport

Narita Airport is connected to Tokyo Station via Narita Express, or N'EX. This runs about 3020 yen one-way (4000 round trip), and takes you through some pleasant Chiba farmland on the way. A relaxing way to get into Tokyo, but longer and more expensive.

Phones

Non-residents can't buy voice SIMs. Airports do, however, have stores that sell data-only SIMs (though pay heed to the network frequencies used in Japan, and whether your phone is locked to your provider). You can also rent phones, to be returned via mailing them back in the supplied packaging. 3G wireless routers are also available.

Transport

JR Pass



For a bit of context: Japan's rail network used to be state-owned, but was privatised and broken up. Japan Rail is by far the largest of Japan's rail companies (and one of their largest companies in general), with their network extending all over Japan.

The Japan Rail Pass gives free travel on the entire JR network (shinkansen, normal trains, even the ferry from Hiroshima to Miyajima Island), with the only limit being that it doesn't extend to their express shinkansen trains (the Nozomi and Mizuho).

The upfront cost looks expensive (~46,000 yen for 14 days), but the pass pays itself off with one round trip between Tokyo and Kyoto, as the shinkansen are unfortunately expensive. There are also JR Passes that are cheaper, while covering only specific areas.

To board a train using the pass, all you need to do is show the pass to the manned turnstile (which is present at all stations). From there, you can just walk on, but you'll need to use seats in the unreserved carriages (which can run out; lining up one hour beforehand is recommended for main routes between large cities). Reserved seating can be booked for free using JR Pass, though I've not bothered doing so before.

A 'green car' variant for the pass is available, which is more expensive and gives access to what's basically the first-class carriage (denoted by a green clover graphic), but this isn't required given that trains are generally quite comfortable in normal carriages anyway.

Only foreign passport-holders can get the JR Pass. To obtain one, you get an exchange order before travelling (from travel agencies or online), then when in Japan, take the exchange order to the JR office in the airport along with your passport. They will exchange it for the real JR Rail Pass, which you'll just need to sign. You will also have to confirm the date from which it will be activated.

The JR Pass is highly recommended if you plan to travel between cities, as being able to grab a train for day trips whenever you feel like it is a great way to travel, and it saves a lot of money in the long run.

Shinkansen



Shinkansen, or bullet trains, link all major cities with trips between them usually every half-hour. They're very comfortable to ride, and all seats have a table and cup-holder, plus a power outlet for laptops or phones. It's very normal for people to sleep, eat, drink, or do work while travelling. Toilets and waste bins are also available, and some have on-train vending machines. All shinkansen are run by Japan-Rail. More detailed information on their networks can be found on Japan-Guide.

Conductors will come through to ask for tickets. Just show them your JR Pass if you're using one. If they ask anything afterwards, it'll just be where you're going (to ensure the pass will get you there).

Make sure that you get onto a non-reserved (自由席) carriage if you do not have a seat allocated. This also extends to the lines, as platforms will have each line for the corresponding carriage marked out.

Tickets, Cards, and Passes



All train and subway stations (excepting small villages) will have at least a couple of standardised ticket kiosks. These are multilingual, and can be used for either refilling your commuter card (such as the Suica, Pasma, Hayaken, or other equivalent), or buying tickets directly.

Buying tickets for a trip is generally done by looking at the map (usually directly above the kiosks) and tracing where you are to the station where you want to go. A number will show the price of the ticket you'll need, and you just tell the kiosk to give you a ticket with that price. Knowing the rough geographic layout of an area can help in locating the right station on the map, and phone apps like Japan Rail can help too). Manually buying shinkansen tickets works the same.

Most major cities have their own commuter card, but the most useful by far is the Suica Card. This can be used for trains, in most convenience stores, and for some vending machines. This can (and should) be bought from the airport, at one of the kiosks before the train exists. They will cost 1000 yen, but this acts as a deposit that can be used for trips. Most commuter cards work everywhere else, just being recolours.

There's no price difference between the normal card and a personalised one, but the latter has your name on it and can be replaced if lost. Such cards work like any usual commuter card - it has an internal cash balance, which is deducted when tapping on the turnstile as you leave a station after a trip, and can be charged via the kiosks at every station. Again, all kiosks have English language as an option.

Many tourist sites have so-called "kippu". These are usually day passes for transport, usable on local trains and buses.

Fare adjustment machines are also present at all stations (outside of small villages) before the turnstiles to leave. These take your ticket, and let you add money if you underpaid for the station you travelled to. Very simple to use, and as usual, are multilingual.

If a conductor comes through and finds your ticket doesn't cover the trip (eg. paying for a commuter train but taking an express one), you'll just have to pay the difference on the spot.

Trains from companies other than Japan Rail may need to be used to get to some towns (like Dazaifu in southern Japan). These generally work exactly the same, though, and just use different livery and rolling stock. If something requires a ticket in Japan, from trains, to food, to zoos, there will usually be a kiosk for it, and often with English available.

Getting Around



Train stations have copious English signage. It's trivially easy to get around without knowing a word of Japanese.

Stations will also have coin lockers for storing luggage, available in multiple sizes from small to very large. The larger lockers tend to fill up very quickly. Other amenities include toilets and sometimes bike rental.

The two main public transport options for getting around Tokyo are elevated rail, and the subway. Both are very efficient and reasonably priced. The Yamanote line in particular is very useful, being a loop around Tokyo with one train going in each direction.

Another interesting line is the Yurikamome. This is an automated monorail with no driver, shuttling between Shimbashi Station through to the artificial island of Daiba (home to Tokyo Big Sight convention center, and the large shopping centers of Venus Fort and Diver City, once home to the the large Gundam statue).

All station turnstiles work with the Suica card. It's highly recommended to grab one, so you can quickly tap and pass through.

Taxis are somewhat expensive, and not required given Tokyo's superb public transport system. In other cities, they should be viewed as a last resort. Note that taxis are well-regulated and will never rip you off.

Buses are common everywhere, and almost a requirement in rural areas. While some bus companies differ, the usual system is that one enters in the middle door, and takes a ticket from a machine as they get in. The ticket will have a number showing which stop you entered at. A sign up the front of the bus will show how much you will need to pay when getting off (with the toll varying depending on distance you travelled). When getting off through the front doors, drop exact change into the slot next to the driver, using the coin machine if you need to.

Money



The most important thing to remember about money in Japan, is that Japan is a cash society; use of credit cards outside of hotels is extremely rare, with payment expected (and often only possible) in cash.

Almost all ATMs will not accept foreign cards. This is critically important to keep in mind - you cannot just walk up to an ATM and expect it to work. The only option is using ATMs located in 7/11 outlets (or with 7/11 branding), which will accept foreign cards and have an option for English text. 7/11 outlets are everywhere in the cities, but you may want to stock up on cash before heading out to more rural areas.

Hotels are fine with foreign credit cards. In the bigger tourist cities (Tokyo, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Sapporo), staff will reliably know English, but in other cities they will often only know just enough to facilitate checking in and checking out.

Convenience Stores



Called 'konbini', these are littered all over Japan from the very top to very bottom. It's absurd how many can be found in larger cities, often with multiple on the same block. The biggest are Lawson, Daily Yamazaki, 7/11, and Family Mart, though there are many others. All offer similar services and goods.

Food from convenience stores is perfectly acceptable quality, with a range of foods from microwavable meals, to Japanese snacks (nori rolls, onigiri), to Western snacks (sandwiches, crisps), to basic baked goods. Daily necessities can also be bought, such as utensils, handkerchiefs (one of the most useful purchases for humid Japanese summers), umbrellas, even business shirts and memory cards.

Various other services are available in addition to buying food, such as photocopying and basic photo prints. These are coin-operated, and some have English-language options. Just pop in a memory card or USB drive, a few yen (typically ~200 yen for a small photo print) follow the on-screen prompts.

Eating Out



The general quality of food in Japan is fairly high - one can drop into a restaurant without checking reviews and expect to eat well. Expect to pay 1500 yen - 2000 yen for the average restaurant meal, consisting of an entree, main course, and a drink.

Very commonly, restaurants will have plastic models of the food they serve outside, showing exactly what you'll be purchasing when going there. From experience, they're quite accurate as well. Portions being small is largely a myth.

Breakfast is uncommon to find as an option to eat out. If you aren't skipping breakfast, it's recommended to either pay for the breakfast option of the hotel, or buy something from a convenience store the day before to have in the morning.

Many eateries, especially those in train stations, will have a vending machine placed either immediately outside or just in the doorway. These are very convenient - just feed in your money, tap the buttons for the food and drink you want, then hand the ticket to the waiter/waitress (or put it on the counter if that's indicated). This system is especially common for noodle restaurants.

Alcohol



The drinking age in Japan is 21.

Other than this, laws regarding alcohol are very relaxed. It can be freely purchased from convenience stores and supermarkets, and any given restaurant will typically serve beer. Prices are very good, and servings can sometimes be surprisingly large. Sold individually, it will almost always be in cans, but restaurants will serve either cans or glasses (or provide both).

Far as brands go, Asahi is omnipresent, available in all of Japan and by far the most popular variety. Not very complex in flavour, it's quite smooth and serves as a good refreshing drink, with a mild enough flavour to not overwhelm a meal. Sapporo and Kirin are the next most popular varieties, both being similar in flavour to Asahi.

There are no laws against drinking in public (eg. on the street, at picnics). Large amounts of beer can as such be found at festivals, often with copious advertising from beer brands on display (via free fans given out to attendees, and signage on stalls).

There are some vending machines that dispense alcohol. Aside from those located inside hotels, these are very rare to find in the wild (given no way to verify ID) and generally only in country areas.

Foods



Noodles - A staple of the Japanese diet, these come in many varieties. Some include soba (long and thin, available hot or cold), udon (thicker than soba, also available hot or cold), and ramen. Fukuoka is crazy for ramen.

Nigiri - The normal form of sushi, comprising a pressed lump of rice with a slice of food on top (from fish to egg to tofu), sometimes held on with a narrow band of seaweed, and sometimes with a small blob of wasabi between the topping and rice.

Onigiri - Rice ball. A triangle or ball of rice with a small amount of seaweed over one edge. Often sweetened with a little salt and some flavouring buried in the middle.

Yakiniku - Fried meat. Anything prefixed with 'yaki' will be fried (eg. yakitori = fried chicken, yakisoba = fried soba noodles). Often served in restaurants as raw meat with a grill on the table for cooking by the customer.

Tempura - Fried vegetables or meat, with a crunchy batter around the outside. Absolutely delicious and highly recommended. Fairly cheap, too.

Edamame - Sweet peas in a pod. Often served as a side with beer. To eat, pull the peas out of the pod with one's teeth.

Gyoza - Dumplings, with either vegetables, pork, or chicken inside. Like edamame, this is often served as a side with beer.

Curry - Japanese curry is very different to Indian curry. Somewhat gravy-like in consistency, it has a mild flavour and is (like normal curry) served with rice. One of the heartier common meals.

Okonomiyaki – Pictured. Somewhat like a thick pancake, comprised of either potato or fried noodles, built up with various toppings and a sweet sauce. Highly recommended to try. A specialty of Hiroshima. 'Haramaki' is a variation often found at festivals, which is just okonomiyaki wrapped around chopsticks.

Festivals



Go to a festival. They're a lot of fun, and the atmosphere is great. Grab a beer and enjoy a great fireworks show, shoot some cork guns, and have some nice festival snack foods, with some having unique cultural dances to the region. Festivals are extremely common in the summer period, to the point of unexpectedly stumbling over them sometimes. I generally plan itineraries around when local festivals are happening.

One thing to remember is that many smaller festivals have a token system to avoid needing seller's permits for everyone. This simply involves going to a stall near the entrance, and exchanging money for tokens, and using the tokens to buy things inside.

Unfortunately, concise lists of festivals are difficult to find. The best bet is going to websites focusing on specific cities or areas, which will often cover little-known cultural events (such as the Morioka Sansa Odori, pictured).

Language

ア	カ	サ	タ	ナ	ハ	マ	ヤ	ラ	ワ		ガ	ザ	ダ	バ	パ
a	ka	sa	ta	na	ha	ma	ya	ra	wa		ga	za	da	ba	pa
イ	キ	シ	チ	ニ	ヒ	ミ		リ			ギ	ジ	チ	ビ	ピ
i	ki	shi	chi	ni	hi	mi		ri			gi	ji	ji	bi	pi
ウ	ク	ス	ツ	ヌ	フ	ム	ユ	ル			グ	ズ	ツ	ブ	プ
u	ku	su	tsu	nu	fu	mu	yu	ru			gu	zu	zu	bu	pu
エ	ケ	セ	テ	ネ	ヘ	メ		レ			ゲ	ゼ	デ	ベ	ペ
e	ke	se	te	ne	he	me		re			ge	ze	de	be	pe
オ	コ	ソ	ト	ノ	ホ	モ	ヨ	ロ	ヲ	ン	ゴ	ゾ	ド	ボ	ポ
o	ko	so	to	no	ho	mo	yo	ro	o	n	go	zo	do	bo	po

Japan has three script systems - hiragana, katakana, and kanji. It's recommended that you learn hiragana and katakana if possible, especially the latter, as katakana is the system used for English loanwords and will instantly open up a huge vocabulary. For example, "toilet" in katakana is "toire". By sounding out words written in katakana, you can usually work out the loaned English word.

One particularly useful phrase is, when pointing, "kore kudasai", which means "this, please". Pointing should not be underestimated as a universal language. "kore onegai" works fine too and is basically the same thing.

Aside from that, the usual travelling words are also useful - the numbers, toilet, emergency, taxi, train station, etc. The Lonely Planet Phrasebook can be a useful resource, as is Google Translate for (very) simple phrases.

Miscellaneous



Stand on the left when using escalators. The left is for people standing still, and the right is reserved for people walking/jogging up in a rush. This applies everywhere in Japan except Osaka, where this is reversed (for historical reasons).

Japan is one of the friendliest countries you can go to. Especially in lesser-travelled areas, people will often strike up conversation, and will be more than willing to help. Just don't expect much English, especially outside Tokyo.

Theft and picketpocketing are incredibly rare. If a wallet is left behind, it will almost certainly find its way to lost-and-found with all cash left inside.

It's quite normal to mark spaces by leaving things around (like a blanket and food/drinks), and people will respect your space and stuff. This is usually done in preparation for fireworks or parades to keep a good viewing spot. This is why patterned sheets and tarps are commonly sold.

Comiket



General Information

Comic Market (aka Comiket) is held twice a year, with one in summer (nicknamed NatsuComi) and one in winter (nicknamed FuyuComi). It is held in the Tokyo Big Sight convention center, located in the artificial island of Daiba in Tokyo Bay. The event lasts three days, with the content of what's sold on each day being different. There are no tickets or other requirements to enter - the event is entirely free.

There are two lines, one for East Hall, and another for West Hall. Work out which one you want to go to in advance, as there's quite some walking distance between them, which is even worse for the crowds. Those working tables for the event can of course enter before attendees.

Preparation



ATMs are available, but have very long lines. It's highly recommended to take a lot of money out beforehand so you're not left waiting for an hour (potentially literally) at the single 7/11 ATM (remember, foreign cards won't work elsewhere) at the event.

Bring a bag to put your loot in. Preferably something with an open top, given fussing around opening and closing a bag is difficult in such a crowded environment.

The convention hall is huge, being the largest convention center in the northern hemisphere and comparable to a small town in size. Given this, and the crowds obscuring your view, it's recommended to take a map of where the circles you want to visit will be sitting.

Print out your map, too. It's difficult to be constantly checking a phone in the rush, and you'll be likely to drop it.

Options are either using the online Comic Market catalogue, which requires a (cheap) subscription that can be cancelled after printing, or getting a Comiket hall map and filling in where artists will be sitting by checking their tables manually (they'll usually note it on their Twitter and/or Pixiv).

Tables around the outside edge of the halls will be reserved for the very most popular circles, with the lines being extremely long and starting outside rather than in. They will generally carry a huge amount of stock, though.

"Copy-shi" are extra little books printed off at the convention or just before, usually being sketchy and printed on cheap paper from normal photocopiers, having extra art that the artist didn't get done in time for normal printing. These sell out extremely quickly, and are highly-sought after by collectors given their exclusivity.

Transport and Times



Transport to Tokyo Big Sight is typically via the Yurikamome monorail, which starts from Shimbashi Station.

The closest monorail stop is Kokusai-Tenjijo-Seimon Station. This is right outside the East Hall entrance, and people will be holding up signs directing you to the end of the line.

Comiket opens at 10:00am. The lines will be about an hour long, so if you want to get popular circles, it's suggested to line up very early (~7:00am).

Comiket closes at 6:00pm, and at 4:00pm on the final day. By 2:00pm, circles will mostly be sold out.

Lining Up

I generally line up around 7:00am at latest. The lines are gone by noon, but circles will start selling out by then.

Take a snack and couple of bottles of water, especially in the summer. There's an attached 7/11 outlet, but it has incredibly long lines to buy anything during Comiket. A hat and/or towel is also a good idea in summer, as the sun and sweat can be pretty brutal.

Leaving the morning line to get in is possible as long as you have something to mark your spot (eg. a chair, bag, whatever). If you manage to line up near the halls, there are stalls selling things like yakisoba for breakfast, and drinks. Toilets are portable, and generally rather horrid given the sheer number of people using them.

Inside the Convention

Attendance will often run about 500,000 people. As one might expect, things are pretty insane inside the hall, given those numbers. The Comic Market staff are incredibly skilled at crowd management though, so even if a given passage might be moving slowly, you'll eventually get where you want to go.

Popular company booths or circles will have lines for their lines (to ensure clear walkways). There will be a line immediately outside their table/booth, with the last person holding a sign indicating that the start of the line is elsewhere (sometimes with an arrow). Some distance away, the line will restart, with the true end of the line being shown by another sign being held up at the end.

There are some restaurants in the lower level of the convention center. The Japanese restaurant in particular has some very nice tempura. These do sell out quickly though, but the prices are surprisingly reasonable and not jacked up because of the event.

Getting Out

Expect a long line to leave; it can take upwards of half an hour from joining the end of the line to getting back on the Yukikamome monorail, and the train will be jam-packed going both in and out.

Day Four

Comiket is only 3 days long, but here's an informal '4th day' where people go to Akihabara and buy whatever doujin they missed out on during Comiket through stores such as Toranoana and Melonbooks. There will be lines to get in at opening time (10:00am), and every floor of the stores will be packed.

Note that many Comiket doujin are actually sold in advance of Comiket; go to Toranoana/Comic ZIN/Melonbooks/etc in the week or so before Comiket, and most big circles will have their doujin sold there.

