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*The LUXURY of*  
EXPERIENCE  
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A travel guide to Japan

JNTO



Japan.
Endless
Discovery.

Time-honoured grace

The ancient traditions woven through almost every aspect of Japanese life are joyfully observed and generously shared.

AGE-OLD traditions passed down through centuries still play out in almost every aspect of modern day-to-day life in Japan. Woven through the very fabric of Japanese society, the passionate observation of ancient practices, rituals and customs is what makes even the most cursory of visits so constantly compelling.

Japanese traditions are exquisite in their execution, layered with a luxurious blend of harmony, artistry, precision and significance that is influenced by the concept of Japanese aesthetics – ancient ideals of beauty, elegance and refinement that include *wabi-sabi* (beauty in the imperfect and ephemeral), *yugen* (mysterious profundity and grace), *iki* (refined style), *miyabi* (elegance and refinement) and *shibui* (subdued and austere beauty).

Many of the traditions that are so instantly identified with Japan – performing arts such as *kabuki* and *bunraku* (Japanese puppetry), pottery and ceramics, calligraphy (*shodo*), and the aesthetic arts of tea ceremony (*chado*), flower arranging (*kado*) and incense appreciation (*kodo*), idealised as the three classical arts of Japanese refinement – are known as *geido* or ‘the way of art’ and are the embodiment of discipline and grace.

Religion, both Buddhism and Shinto, also offers a rich tapestry of traditions and practices, with the simple act of visiting a temple or shrine invested with cultural significance and steeped in history, from the lighting of incense (*osenko*) to the offering of wishes on *ema*, small wooden plaques hung in a shrine or temple’s grounds.

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A privileged performance

The delicate refinement of *geisha* culture is still practiced in three traditional teahouse districts of **KANAZAWA** in Ishikawa Prefecture. Here performers granted the title of geisha entertain select guests in song and dance that is heavy with symbolism and emotion. The privilege of seeing geisha perform is jealously guarded, with an invitation required to enter these teahouses; reserving a place at an exclusive **KANAZAWA GEISHA PERFORMANCE** is a rare opportunity to witness the graceful artistry of these performers in storied surroundings.

THE POWER OF SCENT

As precise and intricate as the tea ceremony, incense appreciation is a fascinating art to witness. An incense workshop at **YAMADA-MATSU**’s Kyoto store teaches the intricacies of the culture, including fragrance listening and incense making.

LITTLE LUXURIES

OMIYA BONSAI VILLAGE in Saitama Prefecture is a peaceful neighbourhood that boasts a collection of *bonsai* nurseries, beautiful bonsai gardens and the world’s first museum dedicated to the art of training and manicuring trees to stunning effect. Join a class at **SAITAMA INTERNATIONAL BONSAI ACADEMY** or at a local nursery such as **SEIKOEN** to learn how to create your own bonsai.

PAINTED BEAUTIES

Kokeshi, charming wooden dolls made up of a head and torso and covered in delicate decoration, originated in the Tohoku region. Five generations have crafted *kokeshi* at **SAKURAI KOKESHI**, in Miyagi Prefecture, where visitors can learn the history of *kokeshi* and join a workshop to paint their own doll. ●



BOOK OF MEMORIES

Once received as the proof of pilgrimage and worship, *goshuin* (red seal stamps) are the unique stamps of Japanese temples and shrines. The experience of collecting these allows for the creation of an exquisite memento of a journey: *goshuincho* (available for purchase at temples and shrines, as well as stationery shops) are stamped with a striking vermilion seal with an inscription of the date and name of the shrine or temple written in calligraphy.



TO A TEA

The intricate precision of the tea ceremony is an experience in ritual and elegance.

ONE of the most iconic and luxurious of Japanese experiences is the tea ceremony, a time-honoured ritual of beauty and grace.

While tea was introduced into Japan from China, the Japanese have elevated the process of making and serving tea to an art form. Known as *chado* or *sado*, meaning ‘the way of tea’ (*cha* and *sa* are different ways to pronounce the word for tea), or *chanoyu*, meaning ‘the serving of tea’. The ceremony, considered one of the three classical arts of refinement along with incense appreciation (*kodo*) and flower arranging (*kado*), involves a theatrical process of preparing, mixing and serving that is approached with Zen-like reverence and precision.

There are two types of tea ceremony: the highly stylised formal ceremony known as *chaji*, which traditionally takes hours and involves a full *kaiseki* meal prior to both thick tea (*koicha*; created using the highest grade tea and with less water to produce a syrup-like consistency) and thin tea (*usucha*; made by using more water and less powder, and with a characteristic

frothy head) being served, and a less formal gathering known as *chakai*, with thin tea and small confections (*wagashi*). The preparation and serving of *matcha* at these ceremonies is known as *otemae*, while a *senchado* ceremony uses tea leaves instead of powder.

The tea ceremony most take part in will be abbreviated and usually include thin tea, but it will still involve traditional tools and precise movements. The host, using a ladle (*chashaku*), will scoop the *matcha* from its container (*natsume*), whisking it with a *chasen* once hot water is added. The tea bowl (*chawan*) will be placed on the *tatami* in front of the guest, at which point it should be picked up with the right hand and placed in the palm of the left hand before rotating it so as not to drink from the front of the bowl. The guest should then sip it slowly (ideally finishing it all in about three sips), place it back on the *tatami* and bow and express gratitude. The ceremony is completed once the guest places the *chawan* on the *tatami* with the front facing the host, and the utensils used have been cleaned and placed in their original position.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

STEEPED IN HISTORY

The city of **UJI** in Kyoto Prefecture is renowned for the quality of the green tea grown there, and boasts beautiful temples and shrines and a number of traditional tea rooms. **TAIHOAN**, close to the famous **BYODOIN TEMPLE**, offers a traditional tea ceremony experience, while **TSUEN TEA** is believed to be the oldest teahouse in the country, having opened in 1160 (the current premises date back to 1673) and been run by the same family for 24 generations.

A FINE HERITAGE

SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE is the largest green tea producing region in Japan, and in addition to sampling it there you can also book a night at **TABINOYA** to stay in a traditional farmhouse, learn about traditional growing methods (recognised as a Globally Significant Agricultural Heritage System by the United Nations) and assist with harvesting from spring to autumn.

HOME FROM HOME

NAKAO VILLAGE in Higashi Sonogi, Nagasaki Prefecture, is a picturesque rural tea farming community overlooking Omura Bay where the generous locals welcome visitors into their homes. During an overnight stay you can join in the daily activities of the farm and learn how to create signature dishes using the locally produced Sonogi tea leaves. ●

Stay in style

From a floating inn to living like a monk to the ultimate in designer luxury, unique places to lay your head abound in Japan.

RYOKANS

These traditional inns allow for a sensory immersion in Japanese traditions, from *onsen* (hot springs) bathing to multi-course *kaiseki* dining. Scattered throughout the country, some properties have been run by the same family for generations. For a truly historic stay try **KOTOHIRA KADAN** in Kagawa Prefecture, **RYOKAN KURASHIKI** in Okayama Prefecture or **RYOKAN TANABE** in the mountain city of Takayama, Gifu Prefecture. **ZABORIN** in Hanazono, Hokkaido, and **HOSHINOYA TOKYO**, meanwhile, offer a stylish modern take on the ryokan tradition. And for something totally unique, **guntū** (right), departing from Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, is a luxurious floating ryokan that cruises the Seto Inland Sea.



Designer luxury

Indulge in the work of celebrated architects Kengo Kuma and Tadao Ando at a trio of impeccable design-led hotels: **ACE HOTEL KYOTO** and **ONE@TOKYO** are both studies in Kuma's tactile, arresting aesthetic, while Tadao's signature Zen minimalist approach is given free rein at **SETOUCHI RETREAT AONAGI** (left) in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture, on the island of Shikoku.

GLAMPING

Nowhere is the portmanteau of glamour and camping realised with more sophistication than at **HOSHINOYA FUJI** (below) in Yamanashi Prefecture, a glampsite of architecturally designed cabins stacked amongst the lush landscape and looking out over Lake Kawaguchi to uninterrupted views of Mt Fuji and beyond.



ARTFUL ACCOMMODATION

The starkly modern **BENESSE HOUSE** (right) on the island of Naoshima blurs the line between being a museum and a hotel. Part of the compelling **BENESSE ART SITE NAOSHIMA**, including Yayoi Kusama's *Pumpkin* installation, the stylishly minimalist rooms, which look out to stunning views of the Seto Inland Sea, allow guests to interact with the artworks that are hung throughout.



HISTORIC FARMHOUSE

Gifu Prefecture is home to the charming alpine village of **SHIRAKAWA-GO** (above), a UNESCO World Heritage site, where its historic *gassho*-style houses provide a chance to live a rural idyll from days gone by. Some of the thatched houses, which are delightfully picturesque in the summer sunshine or covered in a pillow-soft layer of snow in winter, offer home stay and guesthouse accommodation.



TEMPLE LODGINGS

Accommodation experiences don't come more singular than staying in a Buddhist temple. Temple lodgings (*shukubo*) offer an evocative experience, with evenings spent dining on delicious vegetarian meals (*shojin ryori*) before rising at dawn to observe the mesmerising morning-prayer rituals of the resident monks. The temple settlement of **KOYASAN** in Wakayama Prefecture has a choice of atmospheric temple lodgings, while the **EIHEIJI TEMPLE** complex in Fuku Prefecture also offers overnight stays. ●

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ONE of a KIND

Indulge in exclusivity with these 'only in Japan' experiences.

1

ENJOY A KABUKI PERFORMANCE

This form of theatre is as much about the spectacle and colour of the lavish costumes and make-up as the drama of the story being told. You can attend performances at **KABUKIZA THEATRE** in Tokyo, as well as in Osaka, Kyoto and Fukuoka, or experience the impressive 185-year-old **KONPIRA GRAND THEATRE** (*Kanamaruza*) in Kotohira, Kagawa Prefecture.

2

ATTEND A SUMO TOURNAMENT

There are six sumo tournaments held each year: in Tokyo in January, May and September, Osaka in March, Nagoya in July and Fukuoka in November. You can also choose to watch an early morning practice session (*asageiko*), which plays out like a brutal ballet, inside a sumo stable (*beya*), which are mainly located in eastern Tokyo.

3

Explore gold standard arts

Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken ceramics and pottery using lacquer and gold in the belief that the visible seams imbue the object with a unique beauty. Classes are available at **SAIDEIGAMA** in Tokyo's Omotesando area. Or in Kanazawa, which produces most of Japan's light-as-air gold leaf, you can join a gold leaf embellishment class at **GOLD LEAF SAKUDA'S** flagship store near the historic Higashi Chaya District.

4

FORGE A SAMURAI KNIFE

From his workshop in Hashima, Gifu Prefecture, master swordsmith **FUSATARO** crafts knives and swords the way they have been for centuries. Attend a class to forge your own samurai knife under his expert tutelage.

5

SEE THE TUNA AUCTIONS

While Tokyo's fish wholesale markets have decamped from the famed Tsukiji site to the new **TOYOSU MARKET**, you can still apply to attend the legendary early morning auctions. Auctions are also held at **KATSUURA FISH MARKET** in Wakayama Prefecture and **SHIOGAMA FISH MARKET** in Miyagi Prefecture. ●

EXPLORE



(from top...

Experiencing Japan

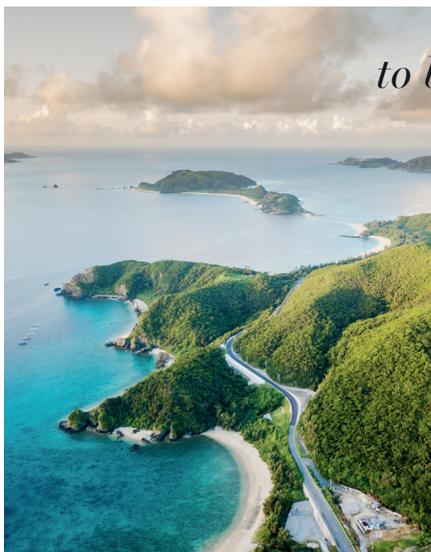
Japan has one of the most beautiful and diverse cultures in the world, with a wealth of mesmerising experiences to explore and indulge in.

ONE of the great joys of travelling in Japan is experiencing the unique and exquisite way in which the Japanese approach almost every element of daily life: from their appreciation of craftsmanship, to their interaction with nature, to their time-honoured observation of the processes and rituals of traditions.

Even the simplest of tasks becomes an experience in its own right. Such indulgence of time, effort, thought and passion is the very definition of luxury, and it is something that visitors to the country can easily experience for themselves – whether spending time in its buzzing cities, charming towns, idyllic islands or pristine landscapes. There are 10 distinct regions stretching from Hokkaido in the north to the islands of Okinawa in the south, with each presenting its own unique take on everything from cuisine to festivals to culture.



to bottom)



Clockwise from top: The beauty of winter at Mt Yotei, Hokkaido; Dining out in Tokyo; Crystal blue waters off Okinawa; Mt Fuji sitting majestically on the landscape.

HOKKAIDO

JAPAN'S northernmost island of Hokkaido is an unspoilt landscape of beauty and drama where the seasons play out almost theatrically. During the icy winter months the countryside is blanketed in pearly-white snow, luring skiers to NISEKO, where days are spent traversing mountain runs before resting in luxurious resorts such as ASPECT and CHATRIUM NISEKO. Spring arrives in a riot of colour, with flowers planted to stunning effect to create fields of rainbows at SHIKISAI NO OKA in the town of BIEI or swathes of colour at HIGASHIMOKOTO SHIBAZAKURA PARK, where the ground is drenched in the delicate pink blooms of moss phlox. Autumn, meanwhile, is the perfect time to explore the awe-inspiring volcanic surrounds of NOBORIBETSU JIGOKUDANI; stroll along walking trails that pass by ethereal sulphurous ponds and wonder at the rich autumnal colours before soaking away the day in NOBORIBETSU ONSEN's hot spring waters at TAKINOYA RYOKAN.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Hike through the otherworldly landscapes of the island's national parks, taking in LAKE AKAN, MT ASAHIDAKE, where plumes of steam waft from the ground, and LAKE SHIKOTSU. Indulge in a stay at SHIKOTSUKO DAIICHI HOTEL SUIZANTEI to soak in the hot springs.
- JR East's TRAIN SUITE SHIKI-SHIMA is a truly luxurious proposition; fashioned as a 'cruise train', it boasts gracious staff, elegant interiors, fine dining and ample opportunity to view the passing landscape.



Tohoku

OCCUPYING the northern tip of Honshu, the Tohoku region's six prefectures – Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata – encompass soaring mountains, tranquil lakes and breathtaking coastlines. The region is steeped in history, with the charming towns of KAKUNODATE in Akita Prefecture and AIZU-WAKAMATSU in Fukushima Prefecture evocative of a time when they were samurai strongholds, and OUCHI-JUKU, the former post town along the SHIMOTSUKE KAIDO route, hinting at life in the storied Edo Period. The temple of YAMADERA in Yamagata Prefecture is another touchstone of the area's past glories: founded in 860, its picturesque grounds stretch up a steep mountainside, painted in rich shades of red and orange in autumn, to the GODAIDO HALL at the top of the mountain, which affords breathtaking views of the surrounding countryside.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Two of the country's most spectacular summer festivals can be witnessed in Tohoku: the NEBUTA FESTIVAL in Aomori City boasts enormous intricately constructed lantern floats, while the AKITA KANTO FESTIVAL's nightly parade of paper lanterns balanced high on bamboo poles and illuminated with real flames is mesmerising.
- Standing among the primeval virgin beech forests of SHIRAKAMI SANCHI in Aomori and Akita Prefectures is to know what it's truly like to be enveloped by nature; the origins of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed forest, which is resplendent with lakes, waterfalls and even roaming black bears, date back 8000 years.
- A farm stay in the rural town of ODATE in Akita Prefecture is a charmingly authentic experience, helping to pick apples and tend to rice fields during the day (depending on the season) and feasting on home-cooked regional cuisine that you've helped to create at night with your generous hosts. ▶

Above: Higashimokoto Shibazakura Park, Hokkaido.
Below: Cherry blossom season at Tsuruga Castle in Fukushima Prefecture.





KANTO

WHILE Kanto is home to the national capital of TOKYO, its other six prefectures of Chiba, Gunma, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, Saitama and Tochigi dazzle with their abundance of experiences. The town of NIKKO encapsulates the diversity of the region, sitting as it does at the entrance of NIKKO NATIONAL PARK, with its still lakes, wild monkeys and hot springs, and with its tradition of mountain worship; Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate which ruled Japan from 1603 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868, is enshrined in the exquisitely decorated TOSHOGU SHRINE here. It also possesses a collection of blissfully untouched islands that are officially part of Tokyo: the volcanic IZU and OGASAWARA islands (a direct ferry journey from Tokyo) are a unique short break from the heart of the city to hike to the caldera of IZU OSHIMA, the largest island in the chain, and snorkel off its unspoiled beaches.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Saitama Prefecture's CHICHIBU NIGHT FESTIVAL (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage), held in early December, is one of the country's most effusive celebrations, with stunning lantern floats, bustling food stalls and spellbinding fireworks displays.
- Both Tochigi and Gunma Prefectures offer an abundance of *onsen* (hot springs) experiences, with a collection of picturesque onsen towns dotted throughout the mountainous landscape.

Clockwise from top left: Toshogu Shrine; History on display in Gifu Prefecture; Winter in the Noto Peninsula.

Hokuriku Shinetsu



Tokai

MADE up of Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Shizuoka and Yamanashi Prefectures, Tokai holds the distinction of being home to Japan's most iconic landmark, MT FUJI. The passage of time is writ large across this region, presenting a wonderful contrast of experiences. In NAGOYA in Aichi Prefecture you can visit its ravishing historic castle in the morning and take in the futuristic NAGOYA CITY SCIENCE MUSEUM in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the rural idylls of TAKAYAMA and SHIRAKAWA-GO in Gifu Prefecture remain charmingly true to their ancient roots.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Aichi Prefecture is famous for its red *hatcho miso*, which has been produced in the city of OKAZAKI for centuries. Tour the MARUYA HATCHO MISO FACTORY to see the thick *umami*-packed paste being made.
- Stay at a temple inn near MINOBUSAN KUONJI TEMPLE on Mt Minobu, Yamanashi Prefecture, to observe the practices of the monks in the *Nichiren* sect of Buddhism.

FUKUI, Ishikawa, Nagano, Niigata and Toyama Prefectures can all be found within the Hokuriku Shinetsu region. Winter sits spectacularly upon the alpine landscape here, with Nagano and Niigata Prefectures offering renowned ski fields such as HAKUBA and ECHIGO-YUZAWA. It is also home to Japan's celebrated snow monkeys which are visible through the wispy clouds of the hot springs at JIGOKUDANI MONKEY PARK. The region's alpine peaks melt into rugged coastal scenery. The terraced rice paddies and quaint fishing villages of the NOTO PENINSULA in Ishikawa Prefecture have a glorious bygone atmosphere, while Toyama and Fukui Prefectures are considered by many to be two of Japan's true hidden gems.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Ishikawa Prefecture is steeped in artisan history, with the city of WAJIMA on the Noto Peninsula specialising in the exacting art of lacquerware. WAJIMAYA ZENNI offers the chance to view its beautiful collection and meet the artisans.
- Stay at FUJIOTO RYOKAN in TSUMAGO, Nagano Prefecture, a picturesque historic post town on the NAKASENDO HIGHWAY.



Kansai

KANSAI'S prefectures – Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, Shiga and Wakayama – are resplendent with the fascinating history of this celebrated region, with NARA (710–784) and KYOTO (794 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868) each serving as the country's capital. While Kyoto holds sway over visitors with its elegance and history, further exploration here offers rich rewards. There is a roster of exquisite historic castle towns to be discovered throughout the region including HIKONE, NAGAHAMA and the delightful HIMEJI, with its UNESCO World Heritage-listed castle. Visitors can sample gourmet delights in the likes of HYOGO, the home of the mouth-watering delicacy that is Kobe beef, and OSAKA, renowned for its delicious street food. And the peaceful repose of nature can easily be found in SHIGA and WAKAYAMA.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Kyoto's GION MATSURI, honouring the lively YASAKA SHRINE, is one of the most famous of Japan's festivals, taking place throughout July.
- Enjoy OSAKA's fine dining scene at the likes of AJIKITCHO, with its attentive service and masterful regional cuisine (*Kamigata ryori*), and FUJIYA 1935, for its artistic use of Japanese ingredients and European techniques.
- NARA's intricate history and majestic UNESCO World Heritage-listed sites such as TODAIJI TEMPLE and KOFUKUJI TEMPLE are best explored on a private tour of the city.

EXPLORE

CHUGOKU

THE prefectures of Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori and Yamaguchi within the region of Chugoku are truly distinct in their character and allures. While HIROSHIMA's affecting ATOMIC BOMB DOME and the giant red torii gate anchored in water at ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE on MIYAJIMA are the region's most recognisable landmarks, there are equally arresting sights to wonder at. The most curious of these is undoubtedly the TOTTORI SAND DUNES (*Tottori Sakyu*), the largest in Japan, which offer a uniquely unexpected experience. Meanwhile, MOTONOSUMI SHRINE in Yamaguchi Prefecture, with its 123 bright red torii gates that wind their way through the rugged coastal scenery, provides stunning views out to the Sea of Japan.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- The precision and beauty of Japanese gardens are breathtaking, and OKAYAMA CITY boasts one of the top three in the country, KORAKUEN GARDEN, commissioned in 1687 by the local feudal lord for his recreation and enjoyment.
- The ADACHI MUSEUM OF ART in Shimane Prefecture includes six gardens that can only be viewed from inside through framed windows, emulating the artworks on display.
- The castle town of HAGI in Yamaguchi Prefecture is famous for its *Hagi yaki* pottery, which you can try your hand at creating.



Clockwise from top left: Kiyomizudera Temple, Kyoto; The Adachi Museum of Art; Shodoshima has the feel of the Mediterranean.

Shikoku

THE smallest of Japan's four main islands, Shikoku nevertheless has some impressive experiences among its four prefectures of Ehime, Kagawa, Kochi and Tokushima. One of the most compelling of these comes from the Japanese modern artist Yayoi Kusama, whose giant yellow and red pumpkins decorated with her signature polka dots sit at the water's edge on NAOSHIMA ISLAND, Kagawa Prefecture. These sit in brilliant contrast to Shikoku's historic treasures including a number of imposing castles like the stunningly situated hilltop castle of OZU in Ehime Prefecture, which offers accommodation within its historic timber keep.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- SHODOSHIMA, an island in the scenic Seto Inland Sea and part of Kagawa Prefecture, has the feel of a Mediterranean escape, with a temperate climate, idyllic beaches, a mountainous interior and the curiosity of charming olive plantations dotting the landscape.
- IYA VALLEY, Tokushima Prefecture, possesses a remote beauty of undulating mountains and deep gorges best indulged in with an overnight stay. Consider HOTEL IYAONSEN, a modern ryokan with opulent rooms, open-air baths and breathtaking views. ▶





Kyushu

THE island of Kyushu is blessed with natural wonders scattered across its seven prefectures of Fukuoka, Kagoshima, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, Nagasaki, Oita and Saga. The island has been stunningly carved by volcanic activity over millennia, creating fascinating sights such as Oita Prefecture's **SEVEN HELLS OF BEPPU** (*Jigoku*), a collection of bubbling, seething hot springs, and the wild beauty of Kagoshima Prefecture's **SAKURAJIMA**. At **ASO** in Kumamoto Prefecture, bucolic villages and farms sit inside a huge caldera. The island is also rimmed with a ruggedly scenic coastline and uncrowded beaches, which are on display at **HYUGA** in Miyazaki Prefecture.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- The **SEVEN STARS IN KYUSHU** sleeper train criss-crosses the island, offering luxury and scenery in equal measure, with fine dining and artisan craftsmanship in abundance.
- **SENGAN-EN** in Kagoshima Prefecture is the expansive estate of the Shimazu clan of samurai who ruled here during the Edo Period. Touring the traditional house and manicured gardens hint at the opulence of life for Japan's ruling class in times gone by.
- Kyushu boasts a number of smaller islands that have a captivating allure, including **AMAKUSA**, **AMAMI**, **TOKUNOSHIMA** and the UNESCO World Heritage-listed **YAKUSHIMA ISLAND**, which is blanketed in ancient verdant Japanese cedar forests including 1000-year-old *yakusugi* trees and plays host to the luxurious **SANKARA HOTEL & SPA**.

Clockwise from top left: Oita Prefecture's Seven Hells of Beppu (*Jigoku*); A Ryukyu dancer in Okinawa; The tropical beauty of Taketomi Island.



OKINAWA

JAPAN'S southernmost islands have a unique culture that is a privilege to behold. Made up of a collection of islands scattered like confetti across startling blue waters that once formed part of the ancient Ryukyu Kingdom, the idyllic sub-tropical and tropical islands are closer in proximity to China than Tokyo, and possess a personality that is informed by their singular history, culture and climate. Visit the architecturally impressive **OKINAWA PREFECTURAL MUSEUM** to gain an insight into the islands' complex past, before striking out to explore them in detail (there are plentiful flights and ferries).

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

- Okinawa's cuisine is thought to have health-giving properties, with Okinawans famously living long lives. *Champuru* is a signature dish of the region, a mix of stir-fried vegetables (often including *goya* bitter melon), tofu and meat, or seafood – try it at **EMI NO MISE** along with its 'longevity meal' (*Chojuzen*), consisting of 15 seasonal dishes showcasing the variety of local produce.
- Okinawa's distinctive pottery (*yachimun*), made from indigenous clay, is still crafted using traditional techniques developed in the **TSUBOYA** area of **NAHA** on the main island. Visit the charming **TSUBOYA YACHIMUN STREET** to create your own *yachimun* or browse the boutiques for exquisite pieces made by local artisans.
- The warm, clear tropical waters surrounding **ISHIGAKI** and the nearby **YAEYAMA ISLANDS** are an underwater wonderland of coral and marine life. A diving expedition here allows for close encounters with everything from whimsical blue-green damselfishes to sea turtles to majestic manta rays.
- Stay on the charming island of **TAKETOMI**, with its signature Ryukyu architecture, wide beaches and blissful pace of life, in the sophisticated resort style of **HOSHINO TAKETOMI ISLAND**.

The LUXURY of INDULGENCE

In Japan, one of the most sophisticated countries in the world when it comes to shopping, extravagance isn't always about price.

SHOPPING is one of the most tangible forms of indulgence when travelling, as accessible as walking into the flagship store of an international design house or browsing one-of-a-kind boutiques for unique finds. But in Japan, shopping is about more than designer labels and price tags.

The extravagance of shopping here is informed as much by the process as the purchase. From small Japanese sweets shops owned and operated by the same family for generations (the likes of **KORENYA SHINGETSUAN** in Matsushima, Miyagi Prefecture, which opened for business in 1327) to the country's famed luxury department stores – **ISETAN MITSUKOSHI**, **TAKASHIMAYA**, **DAIMARU** et al – with their immaculately uniformed lift operators to stores specialising in the mastery and execution of a single item, from fans to incense, the simple act of buying something in Japan is layered with experience, skill, attention to detail and tradition.

While Tokyo is recognised as one of the premier shopping cities in the world, the choice is equally compelling in towns and cities across the country. The same unique regional diversity that informs everything from the cuisine to traditions also extends to what you purchase. The luxury of going to the source and seeing how something is actually crafted is increasingly rare these days, but such exploration is still richly rewarded in Japan.

ILLUSTRATION: MIKE ROSSI



ILLUSTRATION: MIKE ROSSI

Kimono and silk

More than a mere item of clothing, the *kimono* is gloriously emblematic of the beauty of Japanese traditions, and still holds great cultural significance, being worn during traditional wedding ceremonies and on special occasions and festival days. Different styles even indicate marital status and seasonal change. Visit Kanazawa's **KAGA YUZEN KIMONO CENTER** to appreciate its traditional technique of dyeing, known as *yuzen*, and take part in a hand-dyeing class.

STATIONERY

While *washi* paper is available to buy throughout Japan, the town of **OGAWA** and the neighbouring village of **HIGASHI CHICHIBU** in Saitama Prefecture are renowned for the art. The technique of creating *Hosokarwa-shi*, considered the exemplar of *Ogawa washi* (*washi* produced here), is a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.



The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE



POTTERY

Pottery making dates back thousands of years in Japan, with myriad different styles and finishes available in distinctive colours, from rustic browns and greens to the visually refreshing combination of blue and white. Kyushu's **SAGA PREFECTURE** is recognised for its pottery-making tradition, producing earthen *Karatsu* ware and *Arita* and *Imari* porcelain, as is **OKAYAMA PREFECTURE**, where the creation of *Bizen* ware can be traced back to the sixth century. Consider visiting one of the colourful pottery fairs held around the country each year – **GOJOZAKA POTTERY FAIR**, held in August in Yamashina, a district in Kyoto City, and **ARITA CERAMIC FAIR**, from 29 April to 5 May in Saga Prefecture, are both excellent.



KNIVES

Japanese knives are considered some of the best in the world, and you can still have them handmade to order, and engraved with your name, by skilled craftsmen. **SAKAI** in Osaka Prefecture is renowned for the quality of the knives produced there, while **SEKI CITY** in Gifu Prefecture stages an annual **CUTLERY FESTIVAL** in October, offering the chance to meet the knife makers themselves.



TRADITIONAL TREATS

Wagashi are exquisitely crafted sweets included in traditional tea ceremonies and given as gifts on special occasions; shop for them at **ICHIMONJIYA WASUKE** in Kyoto, which is believed to have been founded in the year 1000. Sweets are appreciated not only for their taste but also for their aesthetic appeal.

GIFT WRAPPING

The practice of *tsutsumi* involves wrapping even the smallest of purchases in delicately patterned paper which is intricately folded this way and that to artful effect, while silk or cotton *furoshiki* wrapping cloths tied in bows have been used for centuries to envelop special gifts.





The pursuit of excellence

Japanese cuisine is a delicious blend of tradition, skill, seasonality and taste.

THERE is possibly nowhere else on Earth where tradition and ritual play such an important role in the preparation, presentation and consumption of food as Japan. It is there in the time lavished on achieving an impeccable cut on a plate of *sashimi* or in the way a multi-course *kaiseki* meal is presented at the table to be appreciated for its beauty as well as its taste.

Equally it is hard to think of anywhere else that boasts so much regional diversity in its cuisine. Specialities of regions, cities and sometimes even towns reflect the culture of the areas they are born in, which makes eating as much an exploration of the country as setting out to see the sights. Hokkaido in the north of the country is celebrated for the abundance and quality of its seafood while the fresh, vegetable-rich cuisine of the southernmost islands of Okinawa boasts legendary health-giving benefits. There are also variations in taste and execution, from *ramen*, which is made with a *tonkotsu* (pork bone) broth in Hakata and a thick *miso* broth in Sapporo, to delicately sweet *sakura mochi*, a delightful dessert of mochi (pounded rice) filled with *anko* (sweet red bean paste) and wrapped in pickled sakura leaves (smooth and flat like a pancake in Kanto, textured and round in Kansai).

According to award-winning chef Tetsuya Wakuda, seasonality is another factor that characterises Japanese cuisine. “In Japan you can feel the season on your skin, but you can also taste it in your mouth,” he says. “Knowing the [perfect] time to pick something is in the culture, and the quality and care taken on each product comes out in the taste.”

All of these elements, along with a focus on the dining experience, from impeccable customer service to elegant and refined presentation (including time spent choosing tableware that combines different colours and textures to complement the food and even reflect the seasons), have resulted in Japan consistently being one of the most awarded countries when it comes to Michelin stars.

The final ingredient that elevates Japanese cuisine to its characteristic levels of excellence, says Wakuda, is a time-honoured dedication to the task of producing something to the highest quality possible. “In Japanese cuisine, chefs concentrate on one thing their whole working life. A tempura chef is a tempura chef all their life; sushi chefs are sushi chefs all their lives.” Knowledge and traditions in a singular style of cooking are also often handed down through generations. “They become masters at what they do.” A masterful cuisine is the result.

SHADES OF BRILLIANCE

Located within the lush surrounds of **MINO PARK** in northern Osaka, around 30 minutes by car from the northern hub of Umeda, **ICHIJUNISAI UENO MINO** (right) presents diners with traditional multi-course *kaiseki* meals possessed of an elegance that has earned it two Michelin stars. Consider dining in autumn when the surrounding leaves are painted in a glorious palette of reds, oranges and yellows. During this time you can also try *momiji tempura*, sweet battered and fried maple leaves.



The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

The art of exclusivity

Influenced by the works of René Magritte, chef Keiichi Hashimoto creates an exquisitely artful menu at **LE SORCIER**, located in Yamaguchi Prefecture, combining distinctly Japanese produce with French culinary techniques. With just one group seated per meal and an enviable reputation, the restaurant is often booked out months in advance.



FOR WINE LOVERS

The picturesque **KOSHU VALLEY** in Yamanashi Prefecture boasts some 70 wineries dotted across the landscape. The signature white wine made here is produced from the native *Koshu* grape; there is ample opportunity to sample it at the cellar doors located throughout the region. Take a private taxi tour to be ferried between different wineries, speak with winemakers to gain insight into the process of winemaking in the region and visit the wine museum, before enjoying a seasonal farm-to-plate lunch at a winery restaurant.

A DELICATE BALANCE

While *fugu* (blowfish) contains lethal levels of poison, it is considered a delicacy.

Specialist chefs study for years to gain the skill needed to create *fugu* dishes, including the classic whisper-thin sashimi slices dipped in a citrus-laced soy sauce. **SHUNPANRO** in **SHIMONOSEKI**, Yamaguchi Prefecture, has been serving *fugu* since 1888.



DINE UNDER THE STARS

Located in Nagano Prefecture, **NORIKURA STAR AND MOON RESTAURANT** offers the chance to dine on a menu created by Chisako Hori, one of Tokyo's premier chefs, in the stunning surroundings of the Japanese Alps and under the canopy of the night sky. The best regional and seasonal ingredients are prepared table-side at a glamping-style site and complemented by Japanese wines and local Shiga-Kogen craft beers. ●

A year of wonders

Japan's rituals and customs play out across the country in a roster of spectacular seasonal festivals and events that are exquisite in their visual design and execution.



Winter

15 JANUARY

NOZAWA ONSEN FIRE FESTIVAL
Nozawa Onsen, Nagano Prefecture
One of Japan's most famous fire festivals, this one involves the burning of a giant wooden structure (*shaden*) invested with a deity.

EARLY FEBRUARY

SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL
Sapporo, Hokkaido Prefecture
Sapporo's celebrated snow festival sees ephemeral snow sculptures lit to stunning effect at night, as well as a great variety of winter outdoor activities.

FEBRUARY

NAMAHAGE SEDO FESTIVAL
Oga Peninsula, Akita Prefecture
This eccentric festival involves masked ogres (*namabage*) calling into homes to scare children into behaving in the year ahead.

15-16 FEBRUARY

YOKOTE SNOW FESTIVAL
Yokote, Akita Prefecture
To honour the Japanese water deities, traditional igloos (*kamakura*) are constructed and charmingly lit with candles at night.



Spring

HANAMI

Held nationally
When cherry trees (*sakura*) bloom, the Japanese enjoy *hanami*, cherry blossom viewing parties. Blooms appear on Okinawa in January, in the main cities in Honshu in late March-early April, and in Tohoku and Hokkaido in late April-early May.

3 MARCH

HINA MATSURI
Held nationally
Girls' Day celebrates the health and happiness of girls, with displays of elaborately dressed ceramic dolls and the giving of pretty sweets.

14-15 APRIL & 9-10 OCTOBER

TAKAYAMA FESTIVAL
Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture
Intricately decorated floats (*yatai*) are paraded through the streets of the city's old town to celebrate spring or a good harvest in autumn.

5 MAY

TANGO NO SEKKU
Held nationally

This celebration for boys is marked by families decorating their houses with samurai figurines as symbols of protection and the wish they grow up to be brave and strong. It is also celebrated as *Kodomo No Hi* (Children's Day), dedicated to the health and happiness of children, with the raising of carp flags.



Summer

FIRST SUNDAY IN JUNE

MIBU NO HANA TAUE
Kitabiroshima Town,
Hiroshima Prefecture

During this unique celebration cattle are decorated with necklaces and elaborately adorned saddles, and colourfully dressed girls plant rice seedlings to music and songs to ensure a bountiful harvest.

JUNE TO AUGUST

EISA CELEBRATIONS
Naha, Okinawa Prefecture

Okinawa's unique identity can be seen in the celebration of its traditional performing arts, with weekly events taking place during the *Eisa* Nights season, which culminates in a parade of 10,000 dancers.

12-15 AUGUST

AWA ODORI FESTIVAL
Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture
One of the largest dance festivals in Japan is resplendent with joy and colour. For those unable to attend during the festival days, the **AWA ODORI FESTIVAL HALL** explores the 400-year history of the dance and guests can experience live *Awa Odori* dances performed daily.

2-7 AUGUST

AOMORI NEBUTA FESTIVAL
Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture
A highlight of this festival is the parades of breathtaking towering lanterns made of *washi* paper. The **NEBUTA MUSEUM WA-RASSE** encapsulates the atmosphere of the festival and houses lanterns used in past parades.



Autumn

OCTOBER

KANUMA AUTUMN FESTIVAL
Kanuma City, Tochigi Prefecture
This lively parade features groups of musicians being carried around on carved wooden floats (*yatai*) and engaging in musical duels.

SECOND SATURDAY OF NOVEMBER

TAIMATSU AKASHI FESTIVAL
Sukagarawa, Fukushima Prefecture
This fire festival sees 30 hulking torches paraded through town to the summit of Mt Goro and lit at sunset.

2-4 NOVEMBER

KARATSU KUNCHI FESTIVAL
Karatsu, Saga Prefecture
In celebration of a bountiful harvest, 14 gigantic floats (*bikiyama*) are paraded through the town. For those visiting outside of the festival, the floats are on display at the **HIKIYAMA EXHIBITION HALL**, near Karatsu Shrine, throughout the year. ●

BREATHE

NATURAL HIGHS

While its hyper-lit cityscapes often spring to mind, Japan is a vast landscape of pristine natural beauty.

THE Japanese have a reverential relationship with nature, believing it to be the source of life-giving sustenance and energy, the representation of exquisite beauty, and possessed with mystical spirituality. From soaring mountains to rugged coastlines, from dense forests to verdant valleys, the country is a wonderland of diverse natural experiences.

The most celebrated manifestation of nature's allure is the cherry blossom (*sakura*), which bursts into bloom across the country during spring. Pilgrimages to see the delicate pastel flowers inevitably include **MT YOSHINO** in Nara Prefecture, the historic samurai village of **KAKUNODATE** in Akita Prefecture, **KAWAZU** in Shizuoka Prefecture (the trees here commence their floral blush

in February), and **LAKE KAWAGUCHI** in Yamanashi Prefecture, where the snow-capped **MT FUJI** is perfectly framed in the distance by clusters of pink petals. Wisteria also proliferates in spring, with tunnels of fragrant hanging blooms at **ASHIKAGA FLOWER PARK** in Tochigi Prefecture and **KAWACHI WISTERIA GARDEN** in Kitakyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture.

Japan's other seasons play out across the 30 national parks that form a patchwork from top to bottom. From the drama of the ethereal fumaroles of **SHIKOTSU-TOYA NATIONAL PARK** in Hokkaido, to weaving through the more than 400 idyllic islands in Kyushu's **SAIKAI NATIONAL PARK**, to the blissful isolation of Okinawa's lush **YAMBURU NATIONAL PARK**, Japan's national parks provide opportunity for rejuvenation, contemplation and relaxation.

The LUXURY of EXPERIENCE

ILLUSTRATIONS: MIKE ROSSI

Crane watching

The elegant red-crowned crane (*tancho*), designated as a natural monument, can be seen in Hokkaido's **KUSHIRO MARSH**. Here, some 650 breeding pairs live according to the seasons, with their mesmerising mating dance taking place against a snow-covered backdrop from December to late February.

UME: THE OTHER SAKURA

Some of the first spring blossoms to appear are on plum trees (*ume*), which bloom during February and March (you can distinguish between cherry and plum blossoms by looking at their petals: cherry blossoms have a slight split at the end, while plum blossom petals are rounded). During this time many Japanese enjoy the plum blossoms at places such as **SUZUKA FOREST GARDEN** in Mie Prefecture, **MINABE-BAIRIN** in Wakayama Prefecture and **DAZAIFU TENMANGU SHRINE** in Fukuoka Prefecture.

THE THREE MOUNTAINS OF DEWA

The Three Mountains of Dewa – **MT HAGURO**, **MT GASSAN** and **MT YUDONO** – in Yamagata Prefecture have been an epicentre of mountain worship (*yamabushido*) for some 1500 years. Here, visitors can immerse themselves in the simplicity of nature and quiet contemplation to still their soul.



KUMANO KODO
Once the preserve of emperors and samurai, the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kumano Kodo is an ancient pilgrimage trail through the unspoiled **KII PENINSULA** in the prefectures of Wakayama, Mie, Nara and Osaka. The joy of the experience is in its removal from the whirl of modern life, walking its trails through lush forests, past ancient temples and staying in traditional inns. ●

The LUXURY of
EXPERIENCE

A travel guide to Japan



Maiko / Geiko

Hokkaido

Sapporo



Sapporo ramen
(miso broth, butter, corn)

Aomori



Sakura
(cherry blossom)

Sendai

Honshu

Gassho-zukuri
village



Shirakawa-go



Mt Fuji

Tokyo

Hakone

Nagoya

Kyoto

Osaka

Koyasan

Yasugi

Himeji

Hiroshima

Naoshima

Fukuoka

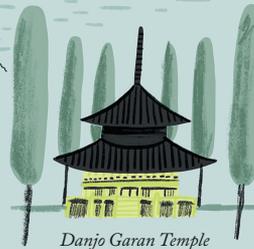
Oita

Shikoku

Kyushu



Shodoshima olive park



Danjo Garan Temple



Himeji Castle



Adachi Museum of Art



Ryukyu Buiyo
(traditional
Okinawan dance)

Okinawa

Naha



Seven Stars in Kyushu
cruise train



Onsen
(hot springs)

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