

JAPAN SURVIVAL GUIDE

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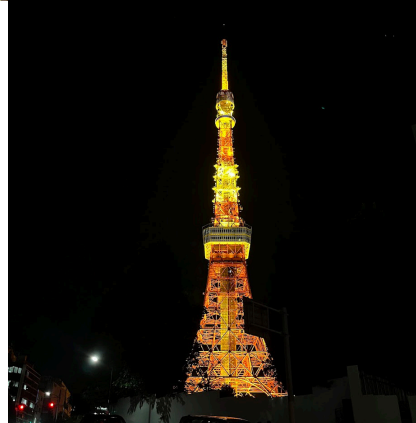
THINGS I WISH SOMEONE TOLD ME

HEY THERE!

I probably sent you this because you asked me for some tips or recommendations for your upcoming trip to Japan. As I write this, I'm currently in Kyoto in my hotel room waiting for my laundry to dry. Whoopee (more on laundry later)! My trip was two weeks long and goes from **Tokyo** to **Kyoto** to **Osaka**. You'll want to do more research for more detailed information but this should be a good starting place. This is from my perspective so you may have a different experience. Hope this helps!



▲ MEIJI JINGU



▲ TOKYO TOWER



▲ NINTENDO STORE OSAKA



▼ ICHIRAN



▲ NARA PARK

WHEN ARE YOU GOING?

Think about what it is that you want to see during your trip and what temperatures you're okay with. Summers can be brutal. We went at the end of September and it was still around 80°F. We found it helpful to research what the previous year's weather looked like to get an idea of what to expect.

Also think about when peak tourist seasons are so that you may be able to avoid crowds (think Fall for foliage and Spring for cherry blossoms). Despite going during the off-season, there were still large crowds. To beat the crowds, you'll have to visit sites incredibly early.



TYPHOON SEASON

According to the [U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan](#), "the typhoon season in Japan runs from May through October, with most activity from July to September." We caught the tail end of it and that meant being rained on for several days during our trip. Not great for tourists who have limited time to explore.



PLANE TICKETS

It's good to get tickets for flights 3–4 months in advance so that you get a good deal on your flight. PSA: don't choose Air Canada. They had the cheapest flights but the food was pretty bad.



HOTELS

If you plan to stay at hotels, a lot of the less expensive non-smoking rooms will go quickly, so I recommend booking at least 2–3 months in advance. Do not put this off!! Considerations for this include distance to subway lines. While 15 minutes might not feel bad in NYC, it certainly does in Japan due to all the walking/standing you'll be doing all day. I would say it's certainly worth it to pay a bit more to be closer to a station.

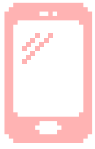


RESERVATIONS

if possible, try to figure out what places you'd like to visit and make reservations. Many attractions fill up, so it's pretty hard to get tickets the day of. You'll be able to book 1–2 months out in most cases. For restaurants, you'll want to make reservations when possible as well. Good restaurants usually have a wait or sometimes will take reservations only.

PRO TIP: I didn't want to wake up at 5:00 AM EST to book a reservation for the Pokémon Cafe and and paid someone on Fiverr to help me for a reasonable price. Just an option if you need help making reservations.

LOOK INTO THE FOLLOWING BEFORE LEAVING



UBIGI

If your current phone plan doesn't have international data, then you'll want to get an eSim prior to leaving the US. **Ubigi** is an app you can download to purchase a data plan. I had the T-Mobile basic international plan and to be honest, it wasn't great. I definitely would have been in trouble had I not been traveling with a friend, so don't depend on the basic T-Mobile plan.



REDDIT

[r/JapanTravelTips](#) is a great resource. If you have questions at any point, chances are you'll find the answers there.



TRAVEL CARDS

I personally used my Discover credit card because it didn't have foreign transaction fees, but it wasn't always reliable. I would treat it as a backup form of payment. My friend used the **Capital One Venture X** card and it worked great. I recommend getting a **Charles Schwab debit card**, as it reimburses ATM fees at the end of each month. FYI that it takes about a week for your funds to appear in the Charles Schwab account so transfer money to the account early.

PRO TIP: Set up travel notifications. Make sure to let your banks know that you'll be traveling so you don't encounter any issues while abroad.



JAPAN WEB

When you land in Japan, you'll need to go through customs. Filling out [Japan Web](#) online prior to arrival will save you some time when you get to customs. You'll be able to access the QR code for customs day of.



JR PASS

if you plan to hop between a lot of cities, then this may be worth it. For me, it wasn't. If you decide to get this, you'll need to order it in advance as the pass needs to get mailed to you.

HELPFUL APPS



GO

Use this app to get a cab. It's like the Uber of Japan (there is Uber, but it's not as popular). It's much more expensive than public transport, but sometimes you have to do what you have to do. You'll want to set this up before arriving in Japan as you'll need to enter a code that you get through your text messages. You can pay on the app or at the end of your ride. Both card and cash are accepted.



GOOGLE MAPS

Google Maps is pretty good for navigating in Japan! Make sure to create a saved list of all the places you plan to visit and download offline maps for times when your internet connection isn't good. When it comes to public transport, it's really good about letting you know exactly where to go in the station to get to where you need to be efficiently. I watched [this video](#) before going and it does a good job of summing up how Tokyo's metro system works (also applicable to Kyoto and Osaka).



KLOOK

We didn't use this but it's an app where you can book activities around Japan for a discounted price.



PAPAGO

This AI translation app has saved us so many times when we needed to communicate in Japanese. It translates less clunkily than Google Translate. Highly recommend downloading the Japanese language pack.



TABELOG

This is a good resource to find where Japanese locals like to eat. I think a 3+ rating is considered good. Of course, you're always able to check Google Maps for food spots as well, though reviews will mostly come from tourists.



TRABEEPOCKET

I used this app to keep track of my expenses throughout my trip. It's great for logging each expense you make and has a handy currency conversion feature so you can easily see how much you spent in USD and JPY. You can also add pictures to each entry.



XE SEND MONEY & CURRENCY

It's helpful to have a currency converter app to have an idea of how much you're paying in USD.

PACKING SUGGESTIONS

SUITCASES

My friend and I each brought one carry-on suitcase and one large suitcase. That was sufficient for us but you can always buy another suitcase in Japan, if needed. Just be mindful of your airline's suitcase policies.

CLOTHES

You don't have to pack too many clothes. I think 5 days' worth is enough. Clothes take up space and most hotels actually have laundry machines you can use for a fair price. The washing machines automatically add detergent. I will note that Japanese dryers aren't very great at drying clothes quickly. You'll have to either wash often so you have less clothes to dry or allot more time for the clothes to cycle in the dryer. Double check how many machines your hotel has because it's pretty miserable if there's only one washer and one dryer. You can also purchase clothes while you're there if needed.

WALKING SHOES

I don't mean your regular degular sneakers!! I'm talking Hoka, On Clouds, Asics, Adidas Ultra Boosts, cushiony shoes!! Please invest in a pair before you go to Japan. You can also pack compression socks, optionally.

PLASTIC BAGS FOR CARRYING GARBAGE

There are no garbage bins on the streets so having bags to hold your trash throughout the day come in handy.

HAND SANITIZER AND HAND TOWEL

Not all Japanese bathrooms have soap, dryers or paper towels.

COIN PURSE

Get one that's large enough to hold a good amount of coins and bills. You'll be carrying a substantial amount of cash. You can get a cheap one at Daiso, whether in the states or in Japan.

SMALL FOLDER

I got a plastic passport holder from Daiso and initially scoffed at all the little pockets it came with. It ended up coming in clutch when I accumulated a ton of receipts, tickets, stickers, and other things that I was able to keep unsquished and flat. Daiso also has tiny accordion folders that will work just as well.

PEN

You'll need to fill out a form for customs (in addition to the Japan Web form) and it'll save you some time when getting through customs to get it done on the plane.

PORTABLE CHARGER

You'll need it after a long day of running around.

TRAVEL DUFFEL BAG

If you plan to use a luggage courier service, you can use a duffel to carry a day's worth of clothes and essentials/valuables when you travel from city to city.

LUGGAGE SCALE

Optional. This will come in handy to see if your suitcases are overweight. If you're staying at hotels, they'll likely have one you can borrow.

CARD HOLDER

Optional. You'll be taking the train a lot so having a card holder to keep your Suica card will come in handy.

WRINKLE RELEASER SPRAY

Optional. While it's not the same as using an iron or steamer, I like that it's small and can take out wrinkles decently.

CASH



VS



CARD



MANY PLACES ARE CASH ONLY

Make sure to always have cash with you (which is easy since there are always ATM machines around at konbinis, train stations, and malls).



BETTER EXCHANGE RATE (SOMETIMES)

Sometimes, your bank will have a better exchange rate, making it ideal to use a credit card when you're making bigger purchases.

PRO TIPS

- The exchange rate is always better when you buy currency in the country of origin. Exchange for yen at an ATM at the airport once you land.
- Carry a coin purse (not a tiny one) as coins accumulate quickly.
- The ¥100 coin will be your best friend, so whenever you see a coin exchange machine, pop in your ¥1,000 bills to exchange for the ¥100 coins.
- By the end of the trip, you'll have accumulated quite some bit of cash. An easy way to get rid of coins is to throw all the little ones (¥1, ¥5, ¥10) into any self checkout machines you come across. If you get change, it'll be far less than what you put in.
- If you still have cash or a balance on your Suica card by the time you get to the airport, don't fret. There are numerous shops at the airport terminals, and the souvenir snacks you can get there are said to be very good. To get rid of your Suica card balance, you can stock up on snacks from the vending machines or konbini.
 - If you happen to be flying from Haneda Airport, Terminal 3, there is a 7-Eleven, Pokemon vending machine, Uniqlo, and a few souvenir shops that you can spend your remaining cash or Suica balance on.
- **For Discover card users:** surprisingly, Discover's regular credit card has no transaction fees in Japan (double check that this remains the case at the time of your trip). I've had two days where the card stopped working despite being accepted at the stores I went to. If you plan to use the Discover card, please make sure you have plenty of cash or other cards with you as well.

ETIQUETTE

Japan has such a homogenous culture so you'll likely stick out regardless. You'll stand out less if you follow the below, but honestly, you're on vacation, don't overthink it if you're a generally respectful person.

ETIQUETTE

NOISE

It's considered impolite to make noise in Japan. Especially in Tokyo, you'll notice on trains that people generally speak softly in order to not disturb anyone, and phones are on silent. I once saw a Japanese woman's phone go off, and she immediately got a bunch of dirty looks. You're okay to speak more freely in restaurants, but a good rule of thumb is to pay attention to what others are doing and follow suit.

BOWING

It's customary to do a small bow when giving thanks and apologizing. Bow from the hip 20–50° depending on the situation, the lower the bow indicating level of respect/apology.

EATING WHILE WALKING

This is considered rude. It has something to do with not being able to properly enjoy your food if you're eating/drinking while on the go. We tried to sneakily eat some snacks while walking and immediately got some looks. Sigh. This also applies to eating on public transportation. So if you like having coffee in the morning, you're going to want to make time for it, as opposed to expecting to be able to drink it during your commute. Please don't forget to hydrate though, very important. Find a spot to stand and take a sip. You'll be able to easily acquire beverages from vending machines.

WEAR BACKPACK IN FRONT WHILE ON TRAINS

It's thought that if you wear your backpack in front of you, it'll save space. You'll see others do it.

CLOTHES

Japanese people, for the most part, dress conservatively. Most people cover up their shoulders, chests and legs. Even when it's really hot out, people are covered up. Wearing colorful clothes will make you stand out like a sore thumb.

ESCALATORS

You'll see that one side is dedicated to people who are standing still while the other is available for anyone who wants to walk up. In Tokyo and Kyoto, you'll stand still on the left, but in Osaka, you'll stand still on the right. Pay attention to what others are doing and you'll be fine.

SHOES

In temples, shrines, dressing rooms, and some establishments, you'll be asked to take your shoes off. If you plan to wear open-toed shoes, bring along a pair of socks when you're out.

DON'T DO IT. IT'S RUDE OR ILLEGAL!

RUDE

Tipping, making excessive noise, staring, blowing your nose in public, eating and walking, littering

ILLEGAL

Not carrying passport, jaywalking

CONVENIENCE STORES

The beauty of Japan is that there is always a convenience store or **konbini** nearby. A few common ones are 7-Eleven, Lawson, and Family Mart. They're open early in the morning and late at night so you can easily pick up breakfast or an evening snack. They also have a bunch of random everyday items you can buy for cheap so don't worry if you forget to pack anything. You can pay in cash or card, but you can also use your transit card (Suica/Pasmo) to pay!



ATM MACHINES

ATM machines can easily be found in convenience stores and subway stations. I personally like to use 7-Eleven ATM machines because you can select to withdraw in Japanese currency (as opposed to USD). If you have the Charles Schwab debit card, you can withdraw from ATM machines and Charles Schwab will reimburse you for any ATM fees at the end of the month.



VENDING MACHINES

These really are everywhere. You'll need coins or a transit card to purchase drinks. Not all vending machines are created equal: keep an eye out for how much they charge for drinks and you'll see some are cheaper than others.

If you enjoy sweet drinks, I really liked Kyoto Lemonade (yellow bottle).



SHRINE AND TEMPLE ETIQUETTE

There's a lot of etiquette around visiting shrines and temples, and you're welcome to look them all up. Don't sweat it entirely though. Here are some of the easy ones.



WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH ANY GATES, WALK ALONG THE SIDES AS THE CENTER IS MEANT FOR THE SPIRITS/GODS.



YOU'LL SEE PEOPLE MAKING DONATIONS AND THIS IS ENTIRELY OPTIONAL. IF YOU'RE AT A SHRINE, DONATE ¥5. IF YOU'RE AT A TEMPLE, DONATE ¥10.



PHOTOGRAPHY IS USUALLY LIMITED IN CERTAIN AREAS OF SHRINES AND TEMPLES SUCH AS WHERE YOU CAN PURCHASE OMAMORI (AMULETS) AND THE MAIN TEMPLE. PAY ATTENTION TO SIGNAGE, THEY'LL TELL YOU WHEN YOU CAN'T TAKE PICTURES. DON'T BE THAT TOURIST!



USUALLY AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE TEMPLES, YOU'LL SEE A LITTLE FOUNTAIN WITH LADLES. USE THEM TO WASH BOTH HANDS, POURING THE WATER AWAY FROM THE BASIN. POUR SOME WATER INTO A HAND AND RINSE YOUR MOUTH WITH THE WATER. WHEN YOU GO UP TO AN ALTAR, BOW TWICE, CLAP TWICE, MAKE YOUR PRAYER, AND THEN BOW ONE MORE TIME.



FOLLOW SIGNAGE TO TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES. I LIKED KEEPING AN EXTRA PAIR OF SOCKS WITH ME SO IN THE EVENT THAT I NEEDED TO TAKE OFF MY SHOES, I WAS READY. IF YOU FORGET YOUR SOCKS, BAREFOOT IS GENERALLY ALLOWED.

EKI STAMPS AND GOSHUIN

Eki stamps are collectable ink stamps you can get at various JR stations and stores. The JR rail ones are usually located outside the JR ticket office. You do not have to speak with anybody to get these so ignore any Reddit comments that tell you that you to go into Ticketing Offices. These are free.

Goshuin are calligraphic “proof” that you can get from temples and shrines as a record that you’ve visited. They’re super pretty and unique, given that they’re painted right in front of you. They usually cost ¥300–500.

To collect eki stamps and goshuin, you’ll need an eki book, which are accordion-style and have thick paper. I’ve read that some places want you to keep your JR stamps and goshuin in separate books but I haven’t had any issues. These books are available for purchase at temples, small shops, and Muji. You will be turned away if you try to get your goshuin painted on anything other than the eki books.



▲ Eki stamps



▲ Goshuin

TAX-FREE SHOPPING

OMG all the shopping!!! Chances are, you'll be able to get stuff cheaper than you can in the US. Always double check, though, since it's not the case all the time. I recommend visiting Don Quijote (a large and at times overwhelming discount store with everything you can imagine for sale).

If possible, you'll want to shop tax-free. In most cases, if you spend something like ¥5,500, you'll be able to buy things without paying tax. The trade off? You won't be able to use these items until you leave Japan. The items are sealed in a bag and your luggage may be inspected when you leave Japan. If it's found that you used any of your tax-free items, you'll have to pay a consumption tax. Apparently, not everyone gets inspected, so you might be able to slip through. I got lucky and got away with opening my sealed bags.

To shop tax-free, you'll be asked to present your passport at check out and that's really it. At department stores or luxury brands, you'll likely pay tax and then be asked to go to another floor where you can get that tax refunded to you.

I found that Kyoto in particular doesn't have as many tax free shopping at well-known brands, such as at the Pokémon Center or at Adidas. Save your heavy shopping for Tokyo and Osaka. Kyoto is better for getting more unique/traditional Japanese snacks.

JAPANESE CHAIN STORES

ABC MART

Shoe store carrying different brands.

@COSME

Makeup department store.

DON QUIJOTE

This chain discount store is insane. There are floors upon floors of everything you could ask for: snacks, souvenirs, clothes, suitcases, skincare, toys, character goods, electronics, etc. Not everything there is cheaper, so don't immediately grab something just because you see it there. You'll spend at least two hours there, but can allot more if you want to get all your shopping done in one go. Check out takes some quite some time.

If you are easily overstimulated, I would recommend bringing earplugs or headphones as they do blast their theme song over and over again.

EDION/YODOBASHI/BIC CAMERA

Electronics/video game store.

HANDS

Department store with various home goods, toys, office supplies, etc.

ITOYA

Multi-level stationary store.

KIDDYLAND

Chain store selling merch for popular characters.

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER: TRANSIT CARDS



SUICA, PASMO & WELCOME SUICA CARDS

- Suica, PasmO, and Welcome Suica Cards (aka IC Cards) are transit cards that you can use throughout Japan on public transportation. If you have an iPhone, you'll be able to add a Suica or PasmO card to your phone. If not, sorry you're out of luck.
- To purchase a card or reload your balance, you'll need to use a machine. These machines can be found at every station by the gates that lead into the train lines and are easy to use. You'll be able to select English and choose how much you want to load in.
- Get one asap. Before you leave the airport, you'll want to get one from a machine.
- These can be used to pay for basic fare tickets **SOMETIMES**. When you take the shinkansen, you'll need a basic fare ticket on top of a shinkansen ticket. In Tokyo, we were able to use our Suica cards to tap, but this wasn't the case in Osaka.
- Can be used as a payment method at konbinis and vending machines. Keep this in mind if you have a balance leftover by the time you get to the airport. You'll be able to spend it there.
- **Note:** As of June 2024, Suica and PasmO card sales are suspended indefinitely due to a microchip shortage. You can still get the Welcome Suica card. The main difference is that you can only use it up to 28 days from your purchase date.

TRANSPORTATION

METRO

Punctual and Frequent

No need to rush because chances are another train will be there soon. The metro in Tokyo is great about displaying stations/stops in multiple languages. The trains in Kyoto and Osaka are older so their displays aren't as advanced. You'll have to pay a bit more attention.

Rush Hour

For whatever reason, we never encountered the situations on videos where station officers shove people onto the trains. Rush hour is from 7:30 AM – 9:30 AM and 5:30 PM – 7:30 PM.

Women Only Cars

These are train cars meant for the use of women during specific hours, though elderly, disabled, and young children are permitted. Pay attention to signage on the platforms for when those times are in effect. I've seen men on the women only train cars so it's not the end of the world if you accidentally wander into one.

Last Train

Typically, the last train will run at midnight. Try to catch the train back to your accommodations before then.

JR RAIL

JR Pass prices went up and we found that it was cheaper to simply purchase individual tickets. I think the pass makes the most sense if you're planning to stay in Japan for awhile and will be hopping between multiple cities often.

If you choose to purchase the pass, you'll need to order it in advance and have it delivered to you prior to your trip.

OTHER TRAIN OPTIONS (KINTETSU / KEIHAN / HANKYU)

There are other train companies besides the metro that you can take. Price point-wise they may be a bit pricier but can be more convenient for your commute. In most cases, you'll be able to just tap your Suica card but do the research. These trains don't run as frequently as the metro so check the train line/schedule and plan accordingly.

BUS

Public Transport

We had to take the bus most often in Kyoto. Pretty much everywhere we went, there was a flat fare of ¥230, though I think some zones in particular charge based on distance. The buses say they don't give out change so either have exact change ready or make sure your Suica card has enough of a balance.

Shuttle Bus from Stations to Airport

In Tokyo, you can reserve tickets ahead of time to ride a shuttle bus that'll take you straight to the airport. Plan this ahead of time. If your last accommodation is in Tokyo, your hotel may also be able to help you in terms of reservations/directions.

MONORAIL

If you plan to take the monorail, you'll need to purchase a ticket before leaving the airport. Find the kiosk where you can purchase them. At Haneda Airport, it was next to the machines where you can purchase Suica cards. When you get off at your stop, make sure to put your ticket into the gate to exit the station.

SHINKANSEN

Do your research!! This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Nozomi is the fastest train on the **Tokaido line** (which is the train line you'll need for Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka). Do not forget this, it's a royal pain to navigate Tokyo Station if you don't know your train line. We had some trouble locating our platform so I highly recommend arriving at the station early for your shinkansen rides.

Train Car Types

- **Reserved car:** Requires purchasing a ticket ahead of time, and will guarantee you a seat. I don't recommend it, but if you're bringing oversized luggage, you'll need to get a ticket to reserve storage for that as well.
- **Non-reserved car:** No guaranteed seating. The upside of non-reserved is not being under pressure to catch a specific train, as you'll be able to ride whichever train that day.
- **Green car:** First class cars with more legroom. Not necessary, in my humble opinion.
- **Non-smoking:** Pay attention also to whether or not you'll be in a smoking/non-smoking car.

Base/Basic Fare Ticket

For Shinkansen and limited express trains, you'll need a basic fare ticket on top of the ticket you purchase for the train ride. The basic fare ticket is how much a normal train would cost to get there. As previously mentioned, we were able to use the Suica card in Tokyo, but not in Osaka.

Making Reservations

I can't speak on the JR unlimited passes (which are only worth it if you're going to many cities during your trip) but if you're looking for a single ride, you can purchase tickets at major JR rail stations. Making reservations ahead of time helps in terms of being able to select your seat/train car.

Missed Train

What happens if you miss your shinkansen? Don't panic. You'll be able to ride the next train to your destination on the same day in the non-reserved car.

Eki Ben

These are lunch boxes you can purchase in the train stations to eat on the train ride. They're kind of hit or miss. There was a ton of people purchasing them, so allot extra time if you plan to look around or buy anything.

Mount Fuji Sightings

It's pretty rare that you'll be able to see Mt. Fuji on your way between Tokyo and Kyoto/Osaka due to weather conditions. If you'd like to try, when you go from Tokyo to Kyoto/Osaka, reserve a seat on the right side of the train. Those seats go fast so reserve earlier.

HAVING TROUBLE EXITING A TRAIN STATION?

If you try to exit the station and the gate gives you an error, ask yourself: "do I have any tickets left with me?" If the answer is yes, put any remaining tickets you have into the gate and it should open. You want to make sure that by the time you're out of the station, you have none left. This includes the ticket for the monorail.

If you accidentally enter gates that you didn't intend to and an error message appears, you'll need to go to an information desk and have a station employee help you out.

LUGGAGE COURIER

I strongly recommend that you use this. We used **Yamato Transport**, which allows you to send luggage between hotels, airports, and Yamato Transport service centers so that you don't have to lug them around on the train (not fun). The prices depend on the amount of luggage, luggage size, and where you're sending them to. It's fairly affordable given the convenience. Be warned though that you'll need to check the cut off time for when to ship your luggage for it to arrive by a certain day. If you're staying at a hotel, the hotel will be able to assist/give information on this. Also keep in mind that delivery time also depends on traffic conditions.

For us, we had to send off our luggage one day prior so that it would arrive in our new city the next day. Same day delivery is only available at a select few Yamato locations (check link for locations with the "Same-day Delivery" icon in red). For airports, you'll need to send your luggage at least 2 days prior to when you want to pick them up. Check with hotel staff a few days before you plan to check out. You might be given two forms at a time, and that's okay. Fill them out as instructed (see link), and let hotel or Yamato Transport staff know how many suitcases you'd like to ship.



- [Yamato Transport FAQ](#)
- [How to fill out Yamato Transport form](#)
- [Same Day Delivery](#)

PRO TIP

Pack a duffel bag for your trip. This will come in handy when you need to send your luggage off a day early, but still need to carry clothes or items. It's much easier to carry around a duffel bag than suitcases, and also find coin lockers given the smaller size. This was a great solution for our day trip to Nara.

COIN LOCKERS

Coin lockers are located in various stations and allow you to put away your luggage while you explore the area, making them ideal for day trips. There are a limited number of large lockers though, so plan accordingly. These are cash only, I believe. You'll need coins, specifically.



TOKYO

Tokyo is incredibly modern and clean, and is a great place to get shopping done.



HARAJUKU

Harajuku is a quirky district with fun shops, animal cafes (read up on these before you decide if you want to go), cafes. This is where we saw the most interesting fashion, and is pretty close to Meiji Jingu.



TEAMLAB BORDERLESS

This was amazing!! It's an immersive and interactive digital art museum where artwork travels from room to room and constantly changes. The art is really beautiful, and they play with your senses through sight, touch, sound, and scents (optionally taste if you visit their cafe). It's located inside a shopping mall, in the lower level. Follow signage that points you to the "digital art museum." Make sure to make reservations ahead of time because you won't be able to get tickets at the door. There's also TeamLab Planets in Tokyo.



TSUKIJI MARKET

This market is definitely a tourist trap. The food was good, but I'm not sure it's worth the trek. It's one of those places you need to go to way early in the morning to avoid crowds.



SHIBUYA CROSSING

This was by far the most crowded area that we encountered in Tokyo. Tons of shopping around here. The Shibuya Crossing itself looks insane from the outside, but actually isn't too crazy once you're inside the crowd.

COLOR ANALYSIS

One of my favorite activities all trip!! We went to Color Tatsumi in Waseda, Tokyo. You'll need to make a reservation a month or so in advance. It cost ¥21,000 per person when I went with my friend. You get an in-depth analysis of what colors look best on you and also a pdf report to keep for later. Tatsumi is super professional, nice, and speaks English.





KYOTO

Kyoto is where to go if you want to visit historic sites and temples.

FUSHIMI INARI TAISHA

Super crowded but worth it. The higher up you go, the less people there are. You'll see a map labeled with numbers, indicating different parts of the hike up Mount Inari. Most people stop at 6 and 7, which are considered to have the best views. After that the views are about the same. However, if you venture past 6 and 7, you'll be able to enjoy the hike with far fewer people.

You'll encounter vending machines and stands selling food and souvenirs along the way up, with plenty of opportunities for you to sit and rest if needed. Keep in mind, though, that for whatever reason the higher up you go, the more expensive things are. In addition, for food, they ask that everyone order something in order to be allowed to sit inside.

We weren't able to find it, but there's a bamboo forest here as well. It's considered a hidden path and not many people know about it so you should be able to enjoy it/ take pictures without the swarms that you'd expect at Arashiyama Bamboo Forest. You may be able to skip Arashiyama.

It is open at night, though there are wild animals such as monkeys and boars that will appear.



KIMONO/YUKATA RENTALS

I thought it was fun for the sake of taking pictures but it's not very comfortable to wear all day, especially if you're wearing the women's kimonos. For women, there are multiple layers and the kimono is wrapped very tightly. It's a bit stiff and not very easy to walk in. But hey, you'll look super pretty when you go to visit temples and walk around town.

KIYOMIZUDERA

This UNESCO World Heritage Site gets super crowded, even early in the morning. It's a grand temple, and the nearby streets leading up to it are worth walking through. There's a street called Chawan-zaka specifically known for ceramics.



ARASHIYAMA BAMBOO FOREST

I don't personally think it's necessarily worth the visit. Contrary to what its name suggests, the bamboo part of the forest is actually very small. If nobody was there, you'd be done walking through it in 5–10 minutes. Because of this, the area gets extremely crowded.

There are other things to check out at Arashiyama, though, such as Okochi Sanso Garden, Tenryu-ji Temple, the Arashiyama Monkey Park and, of course, the town! The Oi River is also lovely to walk across on the bridge.

NARA

Nara is a city in Kyoto and makes for a fun day trip if you like animals. They're renowned for their deer park, where you can purchase cookies and feed them to the deer. There are also nearby temples and a garden you can check out.



OSAKA

Osaka has amazing food and a great entertainment scene.



CUP NOODLE MUSEUM

It's a bit of a trek out of town, but I think you'll enjoy it if you're a cup noodle fan. The museum itself is small, providing a visual history of how cup noodles came to be. If you make reservations, you can make chicken ramen by hand in their factory. It's okay if you don't, you can still go into the My CupNoodles Factory where you can create your own custom Cup Noodle to take home. You get to decorate the cup with markers and then line up to see the process of your noodles being made from start to finish.



DEN DEN TOWN

If you like anime/manga, you may be interested in visiting this area. There a ton of anime merch shops here.



POKÉMON CAFE

There are locations in Osaka and Tokyo. We went to the one in Osaka and it was soooo cute! I got someone on Fiverr to help me book the reservation, but it's possible to get the reservation the day before or the same day as well (you have to show up in person and wait to see if anyone cancels). There's a 90 minute limit to your reservation. The food was fine (good even) but of course it's overpriced compared to food you can get elsewhere. Chef Pikachu shows up to do a little dance during your time there. Depending on the drink you get, you can receive a cafe-exclusive cup to take home. I got the Eevee drink and I cannot recommend it. It was the only bad thing we had there.



DOTONBORI

This is an entertainment area people frequent at night for food and shopping. You'll see tons of restaurants with gigantic moving crabs and cows and whatnot above their shops. There's a giant river that runs through the main street, which has boat tours through reservation. It's quite crowded so it's not the best if your goal is to leisurely walk around. There are two Don Quijote locations, one of which has a ferris wheel (check hours of operation).

HOST CLUBS/HAIR CAFES/LOVE HOTELS

Osaka had the most seedy areas during our trip but by seedy I don't necessarily mean dangerous (though I've heard some of these places have yakuza ties). Just some places that would definitely raise eyebrows in the states.

TOKYO

MARION CREPES



We happened upon the oldest crepe shop in Harajuku (opened in 1976) and it was soooo good! There were a variety of options. Despite how many people were ordering, we got our crepes quickly. I'm not a huge crepe person, but these were the best crepes I've ever had. 10/10

KYOTO

SUSHI-KAPPO
YAMABIKO

This was a small local sushi and tempura spot we came across in Kyoto and decided to stop inside. Such a gem. We got the lunch set meal for ¥2,200 and loved it. We were able to walk in for lunch but needed a reservation when we wanted to come back for dinner on another day. Recommend making a reservation prior to going. 10/10

NISHIMURA GELATO
FACTORY

This is a gelato spot near Fushimi Inari Taisha that we randomly came across and were so glad we did. They make award winning matcha gelato and I can personally attest how great it was! You can try a sample before buying a cup and they also sell the matcha they use for their gelato. There's a seating area upstairs, great for resting. Staff was very nice. 10/10

OSAKA

HIROKAZUYA



This is a great lowkey okonomiyaki spot. The okonomiyaki was large enough to split between two people. It wasn't very busy though, so we did find that the chef was just watching us eat. 8/10

CREMIA



This is located right along the river in Dotonbori, on the side with the ferris wheel Don Quijote. They had the creamiest ice cream ever, in vanilla or chocolate flavors. So good! 9/10

TAKOYAKI TAKOSUKE



If you happen to be going to the Cup Noodle Museum, this is a nearby restaurant that serves yummy takoyaki. The staff were really nice and the food was served pretty quickly. Note: if you get one of their appetizers, they'll come with a bunch of green onions. They're good but they leave you with bad breath, so don't eat a ton of it. 8/10

CHAINS IN MULTIPLE CITIES

GYUKATSU MOTOMURA



This is a chain restaurant where you can grill your gyukatsu to your own liking. The food is delicious and comes with a variety of sauces to try. It's strongly recommended that you get a reservation. Whatever you order in the reservation is what you'll have during your meal. People recommend getting two servings of the gyukatsu. This was one of my favorite meals while in Japan. The first location we went to was reservation only. The second was walk-in only and we had to wait around 15 minutes. They take cash and card. 10/10

SUKIYA, YOSHINOYA,
AND MATSUYA

These are good options if you're looking for cheap but yummy quick meals. You can sit down, order food on an iPad, and a server will bring you your food. The food is served pretty fast. They offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner options.

BUYING NINTENDO SWITCH GAMES

Apparently Nintendo Switches are designed such that if a game is released in English, you can buy alternate language versions of the same game and it'll load in English on your device (assuming your settings are set to English). Look into this, if you plan to buy any games!

FOOT/LEG PAIN

I don't know why nobody bothered to tell me just how bad my legs and feet would hurt after only a few days in Tokyo. It wasn't the walking that did me in. I walk all the time in NYC. It was the constant standing in line for attractions, shopping, and restaurants. We started taking many breaks and reduced our itinerary after we found that our feet simply couldn't take it. I strongly recommend you look into buying a pair of comfortable walking shoes (not necessarily running shoes!) prior to leaving for Japan. One thing that really helped us was the Lion gel pads, available for sale at many pharmacies. Just buy a few boxes at a time when you see them. I used around four gel pads each night on my legs/feet and it did help the next day.



XENOPHOBIA/RACISM

Unfortunately, I think I went into Japan with a romanticized view of the people and its culture. I definitely felt a bit of culture shock when it came to how they treated foreigners. While not everyone was like this, there were definitely times when I got looks, was treated differently, or was quietly but openly mocked for speaking English and not knowing Japanese customs. I think it definitely helps to do some research on customs and learn some Japanese phrases to mitigate this a bit. It sucks but I do think it's worse for POC (including non-Japanese Asians) and women. You'll still have an awesome time while there, but don't be surprised if you experience a rude encounter.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Japanese locals generally aren't very proficient in English. When we asked someone if they spoke English, we were often told "no" or "a little." Have your translation app ready when you need help with something.

FOOD RECS FROM INFLUENCERS

Influencers aren't necessarily the best source for recommendations. They are posting for clicks and, unfortunately, a few of their suggestions weren't great. Rule of thumb is if a restaurant has a long line outside, it's probably good.

