

PAT KAY'S PHOTOGRAPHY GUIDE TO

Japan

Detailed tips and techniques for capturing
Japan's top 50 photography locations

(and the locations of 120 more!)



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People, places, & cultures

For travellers. For photographers. For the curious.
For people like you.



Hanami-koji street, Kyoto

People, places, cultures. These are the most important things to me when I'm travelling.

As a collector of experiences over things, I strive to understand and document the people, places & cultures for every country I visit, and Japan is the one I know best.

By putting in just a little extra effort into understanding a country; getting to know the what, the why, and the how of the people, places, and cultures, we can start to build empathy for it, and thus begin to relate to it better and let it influence our lives.

The goal is to enrich the travel experience. After all, experiences are fleeting; you might have planned exactly how long you're visiting a country, but you might not know when you'll return.

This approach leads to a more active travel experience; an experience whereby one isn't

subjected merely to the experience as a bystander—an outside observer looking in—but an active participant to the environment they're surrounded by.

It's my mission to help people like you—lovers of travel, adventurers, the curious, to make the most of your experiences; to discover and then document the best the world has to offer.

This photography guide is a way for you to do that.

It's a way for you to choose which experiences resonate with you the most so you can experience them to the best of your ability, and then capture them in your own unique way.

This guide is different from any other general travel guide or any "Top X Instagram spots in Japan" blog posts out there. These are the locations that I've personally explored and am delighted to share with you. These are the locations where my work as a full-time travel photographer comes from; work showcased or sponsored by top brands such as Sony, Microsoft, Adobe, DJI, the World Photography Organisation, numerous tourism boards and more. It's a selection personalised by an active practitioner of photography.





There are many types of locations in this guide—the touristy, the uncommon, the “off-the-beaten-path”. Think of it as your own personal, local photography tour guide of Japan.

This guide will not only show you all the gems that would take the average person months or years to discover by themselves, but it will also provide professional photography advice on how best to capture them along the way.

Whether you’re a beginner or experienced photographer, or whether you’re even a photographer at all, if you love to travel and you want to make the most out of your photography and your trip to Japan, this guide is for you.

Happy travels.

❤️, Pat

Welcome to Japan

One of the most photogenic countries in the world.



Chureito Pagoda, Fujiyoshida

It's a diverse place that has almost everything a photographer could want out of a country: a varied and dynamic set of seasonal visual changes like cherry blossom season, Koyo (Autumn leaves), and snow; man-made megacities and some of the most densely populated areas in the world; historical artefacts juxtaposed in a modern world.

It has almost everything a traveller could want out of a country: A deep and rich history, cultural traditions that enjoy a permanence even in modern society, nature to get lost in, urban cities to navigate, fast Wi-Fi, ramen.

It's no secret; this is my favourite country in the world, not only to live in but also to discover and take photos of. Even after having spent years adventuring from top to bottom, east to west, across every season; year after year, I keep coming back for more.

It's my joyful delight to share my 100 favourite locations in all of Japan to experience and take photos of. It's a labour of love, one that I hope shows in the pages to come and one that makes you fall in love with Japan too.



Photography in Japan

Enkoji Temple, Kyoto

Whatever scene you can dream of, you can find it in Japan.

Whether that's an immense cloud inversion overlaying a countryside town set against a backdrop featuring the largest mountain in the country, or it's an urban skyline that stretches far beyond what the human eye can see; filled with more people than the human mind can imagine, or an explosion of pink and white flowers that cover an entire country top to bottom, east to west, or any other number of long-winded dream scenarios that have the potential to take our breath and imagination away.

Shrines, temples, castles, skyscrapers, beaches, sand dunes, mountain ranges, animals, and everything in between - there's something here for you.

The diversity is what makes capturing Japan so interesting and enticing. It stretches your ability to transition from one type of photography to the next: portraits to landscapes, street to architecture, urban to nature—categorically exact opposites from one moment to the next.

I sincerely hope you enjoy photographing Japan as much as I do. To get started, let's begin with some foundational and cultural basics.

Tripod etiquette

Tripods are generally accepted in Japan as non-professional tools; meaning that in most cases, it won't be deemed as "commercial photography" to bring a tripod along with you.

One thing to note is that there are many places in cities where space comes at a premium. There are many people everywhere, and planting your tripod in the middle of crowds is generally not a great idea.

In addition, there are established tourist locations that request you not to use tripods at all. These are usually observation decks or paid spaces such as the Tokyo Skytree overservation deck. Most of the time, these restrictions are due to the size of the crowds; it's a space consideration.



Shirahige Shrine, Lake Biwa

On location, many photography spots become crowded by other photographers (Japan has a very large native photography scene), especially at sunrise or sunset. In some of the more popular locations, it's not unreasonable to expect to fight for a place to set your legs down. It calls for common sense (which sometimes even the locals don't use), but, please be aware not only of your surroundings but also the time that you're spending in a single, planted spot.

This guide will do its best to describe what kind of tripod conditions and/or rules are set in place so that you know whether to bring your tripod or leave it at home.

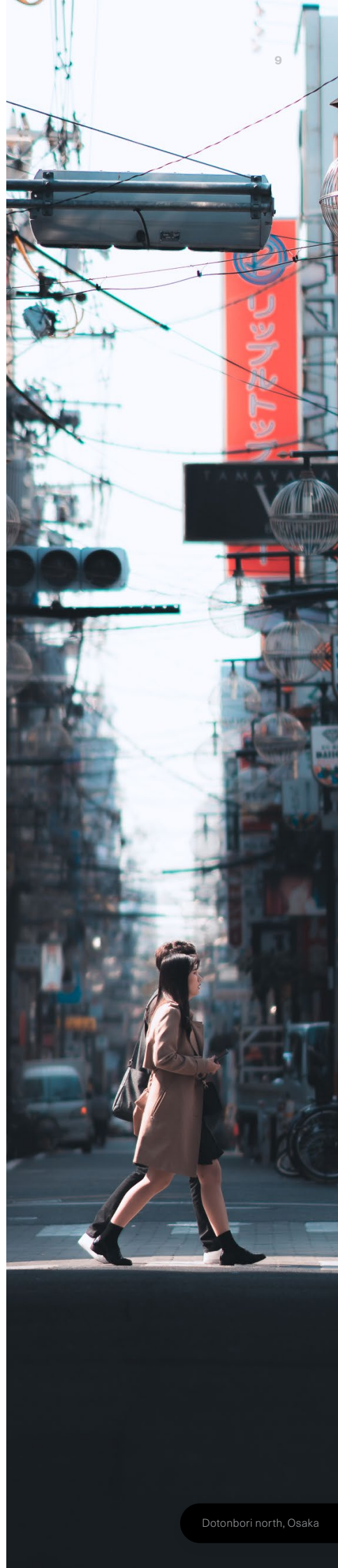
Street Photography etiquette

Generally, regarding the laws around Street Photography, Japan is similar to what you would find in most parts of the world (in contrast to many countries in Europe, for example).

That is, it's not illegal to take photos of anyone in a public place, even if that image is of a crowd or a single person.

That being said, privacy is taken fairly seriously in Japan; as a side note, Japanese smartphones by law have their shutter sounds permanently activated (and loud) at the factory level to discourage photographs of the unsolicited and creepy kind.

On the whole, though, if you're not bothering people, they won't bother you back. There's a big photography culture in Japan, so many people are used to it. People in cities are more used to cameras than people out in the country, so bring the appropriate focal lengths with you depending on the place you're in.



Lake Kawaguchi, Kawaguchiko



NOTE

This guide is not a replacement for you taking responsibility for having a solid grasp on the laws depending on the location you're in. Please fly safely and responsibly so that we can **all** enjoy aerial captures for many years to come.

Drone laws in Japan

Contrary to popular belief, it's actually perfectly legal and straight-forward to fly drones in Japan, but in the cities, it's hard to find the right place to do it legally.

The general rules are that all operators must fly:

- Below 150m Above Ground Level
- At least 30 metres away from people, buildings and cars
- During the day
- With a visual line of sight on the drone itself
- Without any payload

These simple rules mean that *almost the entirety of every major city* counts as a “densely populated area”, and thus you aren't allowed to fly.

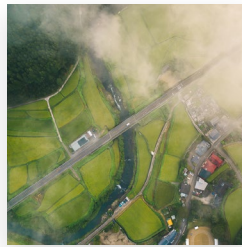
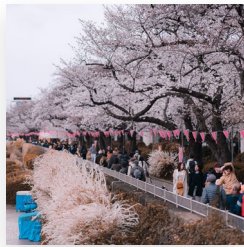
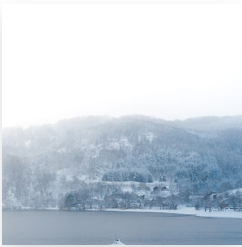
Outside of the big cities, it's totally fine, the normal rules apply.

For more information:

- **[Visit the Civil Aviation Bureau](#)**
- **[Check the FlySafe map from DJI](#)**

Japanese seasons

Blessed with four very distinct seasons and changing conditions around the country, there's something to discover at any time of the year you're in Japan.





Winter

DEC - FEB

Japan is fortunate to receive some of the best snow in the world up north in Hokkaido, especially in the Niseko area. In the other areas of the country, the northern alps of Chubu region and the Tohoku region both receive a fair amount of snow too.

Major cities like Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka rarely get any; perhaps only experiencing a couple of snow days a year if you're lucky. It's pretty magical when that happens though.



Spring

MAR - MAY

Mostly associated with the flora Japan is most famous for; the cherry blossom, or 'Sakura' in Japanese.

Sakura typically blooms throughout mid-March to mid-April, although it's challenging to tell exactly when it will bloom; one year it could be a few weeks late, while the next it could be a week early. They're finicky and difficult to time, but it's the time of year most people will associate with Japan.

Time your visit wisely as the Sakura bloom throughout the country from south-west to north-east throughout the month.



Summer

JUNE - AUG

Humid, hot, wet, and very lush.

In the countryside, the crickets fill your ears with the sound of their chirps, and the scenery turns a vibrant green with the sight of rice fields and mountains in full swing.

In the cities, clear umbrellas decorate most scenes as rainy season visits the country—it's a classic sight for places like Tokyo. Don't be scared of the wet though! It's actually pretty awesome to be out in the rain at night; the reflections, lights, colours, and umbrellas make for amazing scenes.



Autumn

SEPT - NOV

The time of year where the entire country becomes enveloped in the fiery, warm hue of falling leaves.

Personally, this is my favourite time to photograph Japan. It's not as busy as Spring, capturing the lovely warm hue of the trees is much easier than hunting for Sakura, and the temperature is coming down from the Summer, so it's a great time to explore.

It's just a lovely time to be in Japan.

Photography locations

My 50 favourite photography locations across all of Japan, in detail.



Regions of Japan

Japan is split up into 8 different regions.

As such, that's how the locations in this guide are categorised too.

This way, you can plan your trips based on the bigger moves you might have to make between regions, which is usually the type of travel that tends to cost the most time and money.

We'll start at the top of the country, with Hokkaido, and end at the bottom of the country, with Kyushu.



Photography notes icons

In the “**photography notes**” section of each entry, there are 5 icons. These provide an indication of what to expect at each location from a photography perspective. They’re broken down as following:



Tripods

Whether the location is tripod friendly or not.

OK — Go for it.

Not allowed — Specifically informed that tripods were not allowed.

Not recommended — Either for space or social consideration reasons.



Bag friendliness

Bring a big bag and all your gear? Or travel light? Usually based on crowd size.

Friendly — Bring all the things.

Not friendly — Go minimal. There isn't much room to move.



Drones

Whether or not drones are allowed. **Check the laws yourself first before you fly.**

Yes — Check the laws in the area, and if it's good, fly.

Not allowed — As far as I understand the laws, you're not allowed to fly here.

Unknown — No idea. Research the laws yourself before arriving.



Best season

The recommended season to come for **photography specifically**.

May or may not be the best time to come for other reasons, like food, or quiet.



Crowds

The amount of people; tourists, locals, etc. expected at the location.

Low — Typically only a few people if any. Probably pretty peaceful most times.

Moderate — A known tourist area. Expect a decent number of people.

High — A well known area to both tourists and locals. Either a lot of people, or completely packed. Sometimes that's a good thing, sometimes it's not.

Travel notes icons

In the “**travel notes**” section of each entry, there are 3 icons. These provide a quick idea about what it's like to get to the location.

Of course, these are approximations and based on my own understandings and experience of getting to these locations.

They're broken down as following:



Difficulty to get there

Based on the other two factors and other requirements such as additional hiking or walking, or other environmental factors.

Easy — Very accessible and easy to get to.

Moderate — Is a distance to get to, or requires multiple transfers or stops.

Hard — Either very far, or requires a combination of methods to get there.



Distance from closest major city

An approximation based on the preferred method of transport.



Preferred method of transport

Public transport will always be prioritised, as that's what most people will be travelling via. However, if public transport is limited and/or the location is remote, the recommendation will be driving.

Hokkaidō

43.2203° N, 142.8635° E





LANDSCAPE



Biei

Minimal landscapes in Winter, a colourful explosion in Spring.



[Mita, Biei, Kamikawa District, Hokkaido 071-0222, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



You're not actually allowed to step on the snow fields here, however, I caught some tourists in the act. Luckily, they make for good subjects

Biei is a small town a few hours north of the central city of Hokkaido, Sapporo.

Despite its size in area and population, it receives quite a bit of tourism attention due to its rolling hills and vast fields of flowers.

In the spring and partway through the summer, these fields explode with rows of colour from the seemingly never-ending flower farms, and in the winter, covered in snow; lies some of the best minimal landscape photography you can find just about anywhere in the world.

Photography notes



OK



WINTER / SPRING



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK

There's so many different locations and perspectives to capture in Biei. The best thing to do is to hire a car and drive around until you see a composition you like; there are many.

There are also specific trees that are famous landmarks to photograph. Some of them are:

- **Mild Seven Hills**
- **Seven Stars Tree**
- **Tree of Ken and Mary**
- **Parent & Child Tree**
- **マイルドセブンの木**

Note that some areas of the fields are off-limits to people and foot traffic. This is to preserve the flowers and to preserve the landscape. Please ensure you abide by these suggestions so that future people can continue to enjoy this location in the same state you will.





Best time and season

Sunrise, sunset, or overcast conditions are best.

Note that if you're shooting in the snow, you may have a hard time exposing correctly, as your camera may want to turn that pristine, white snow into a dull middle-grey. Overexpose by a little bit, or use a grey card to combat this behaviour.

Come during the Spring to observe the explosions of colour that appear here. Or, come during Winter (around Jan or Feb) for the classic, minimal, snowy landscapes Biei is known for.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2.5 HOURS



BY CAR

Ideally, you'd be hiring a car and driving around from field to field. This way, you can spend time stopping in between locations; you'll almost certainly find something that visually piques your interest on your journey.

The other alternative is to take one of the many tours that go around from spot to spot here. You'll be a number in a busload of people, but at least you won't have to worry about where you're going.



ARCHITECTURE

CULTURE



Hill of the Buddha

A giant stone statue of the Buddha, designed by Tadao Ando



Takino, Minami Ward, Sapporo, Hokkaido 005-0862, Japan



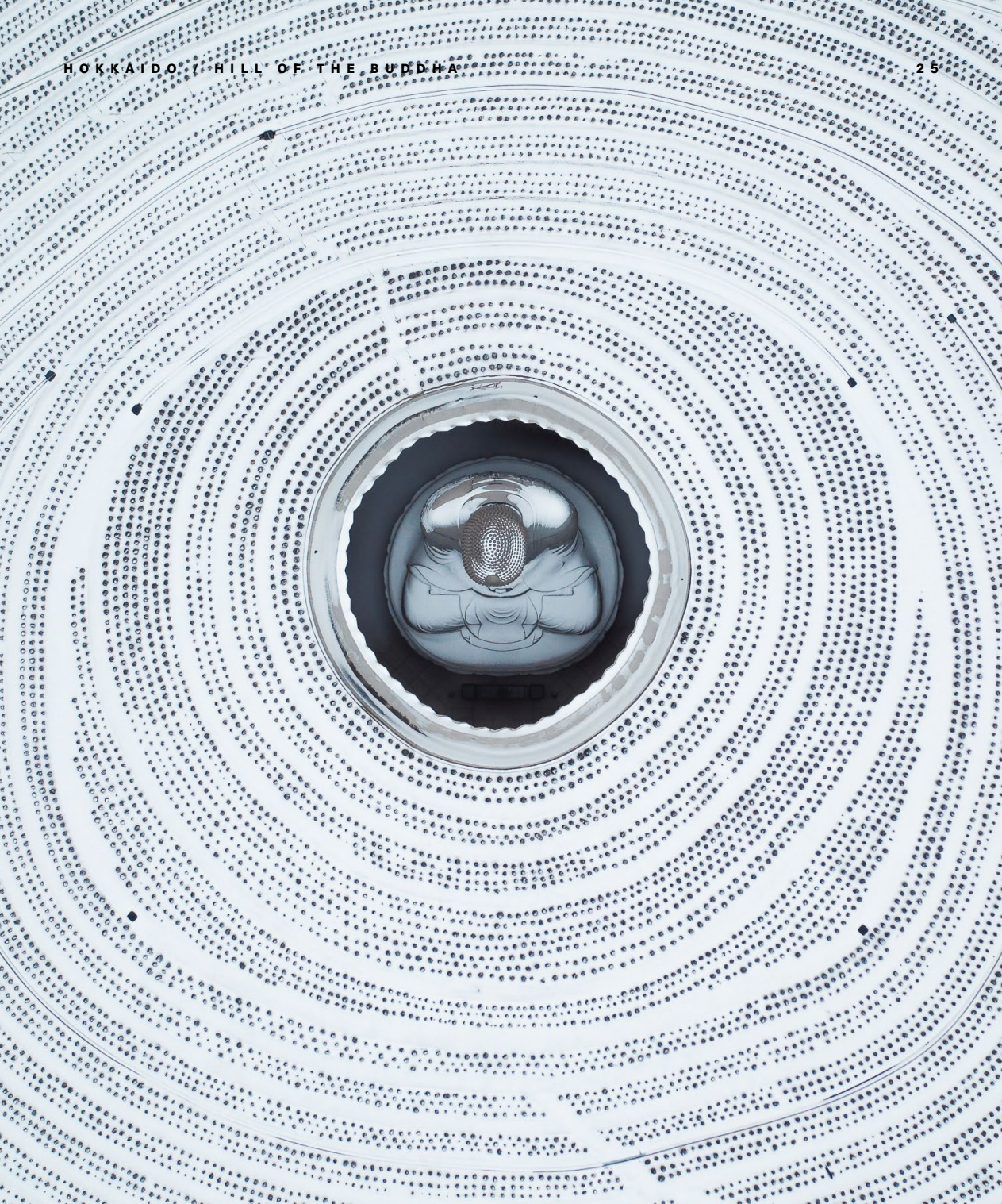
10am - 3pm



Free (donation recommended)



<https://www.takinoreien.com/publics/index/107/>



Hill of the Buddha is a giant stone statue of the Buddha, located in Makomanai Takino Cemetery. Designed by renowned Japanese architect, Tadao Ando, this unique shrine is located an hour bus ride south from Sapporo.

At its core, the shrine features an underground tunnel leading to a giant statue of the Buddha, naturally lit by a wide, concrete encapsulation with a hole in the centre and further surrounded by over 150,000 lavender plants.

From afar, only the head of the Buddha statue is all you can see. It's this intrigue from afar that makes the experience of discovering what's underneath that much more enjoyable.

Photography notes

**OK****WINTER / SPRING****FRIENDLY****MODERATE****UNKNOWN**

Even if you're not Buddhist or not religious, the architecture here is easy enough to appreciate on its own. It's a truly spectacular shrine, certainly unique and unlike anything else in Japan.

There are many perspectives here: capture the shrine from outside, with just the head and the lavender plants. Capture the main prayer hall itself. The concrete encapsulation. The detail of the Buddha statue. The arrangement of the offering pit.

Bring your widest lens to capture the internal space; however, it's quite a large interior; once you're inside, the statue itself is also quite large, so a <24mm lens is recommended to be able to capture the entire space in a single shot.

Shot at 16mm FF equiv.



Best time and season

Unfortunately, this location is not open for sunrise. However, that doesn't matter too much anyway, as the actual prayer hall will most likely be too dim to photograph well. The space looks better with ambient light, especially when it touches the head of the Buddha.

Consider even coming during midday when the sun is the highest so that beams of light come through the opening.

Also, 150,000 lavender plants surround Hill of the Buddha, so during the spring, they come alive in an explosion of colour. It's gorgeous.

During the winter season, this area snows quite a lot, blanketing the entire area with a fresh layer of white, minimal snow.



Travel notes

**EASY****~1 HOUR****BY BUS**

Accommodation in this area of Hokkaido is limited, so I recommended making a day trip from Sapporo.

Catching a bus will take just over an hour depending on where you are in the city, and it's easy enough and regular enough to venture out this way.

Of course, driving there is the easiest, there's a car park inside the complex.



LANDSCAPE

CULTURE

Shosanbetsu Toyosaki Konpira

A big torii gate on the beach just off Cape Konpira.



[Toyosaki, Shosambetsu, Tomamae District, Hokkaido 078-4431, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



If you're exploring Hokkaido with a car, you almost certainly have to consider a drive up the "Ororon Line".

It's a 380km, north to south drive that's super picturesque and known for its sunsets, as it faces west throughout the entirety of its Otaru to Wakkanai route.

Of course, if you're a photographer and you're in Japan, it's almost a rite of passage to document as many shrines and torii gates as you can along your journey. Konpira Shrine is one established in the water—a rarer sight and a welcome change of pace from the hundreds of thousands of other torii scattered throughout Japan.

Konpira Shrine features a giant torii gate planed on the beach. It's a beautiful sight to watch the waves crash up on to it, and an even more beautiful sight to watch the sunset behind it.

Photography notes



OK



FRIENDLY



OK



WINTER / ALL



LOW

This is a reasonably straight-forward location to capture, composition-wise. There are many compositions along the shoreline, and you can even get a little bit of height within your compositions if you walk up the steps to the torii towards the rock face behind.

If you're looking to mix things up, roam around on the concrete tetrapods to get a unique perspective and the possibility of framing up the torii against the edges of the tetrapods, or even pull out a tripod and capture some long exposures of the water surrounding the torii.



Best time and season

This entire stretch of coast is known for its sunsets, due to the horizon coming from the west, so try to come at this time if you can.

Also, because the sand at this beach is black, when it's winter and there's snow around, the white and black create a dynamic contrast very visually interesting.



Travel notes



HARD



~3.5 HOURS



BY CAR

As with many locations in Hokkaido, this spot is tricky if you don't have a car.

It's highly recommended to drive and it takes around 3-4 hours from Sapporo.

If you're going up this way anyway, be sure to stop at each of the towns along the way. It's arguably Hokkaido's most picturesque drive.



STREET

PORTRAITURE

CULTURE



Susukino

Sapporo's bustling entertainment district.



3-chōme Minami 4 Jōnishi, Chūō-ku, Sapporo, Hokkaido 064-0804, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



While it's a much quieter city than Tokyo or Osaka, Sapporo is still the busiest and most populous city in Hokkaido.

It's still a vibrant place, with all the trappings of modern city living. As such, the entertainment district of Susukino is the place to be if you're looking for nightlife, loud music, lots of lights, and a bit of good ol' hustle and bustle.

What makes this part of town unique is how lively it is at night, contrasted with the rest of the city.

The wider streets here compared to the streets of Tokyo gives you more room to manoeuvre and to play with compositions. Also, during winter it snows quite often, and I don't know what it is, but there's something just magical about a city covered in a blanket of snow.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

Generally, street photography is allowed in Japan, so shoot away. However, most people in Japan are quite reserved about having their photo taken, so please remember to be respectful.

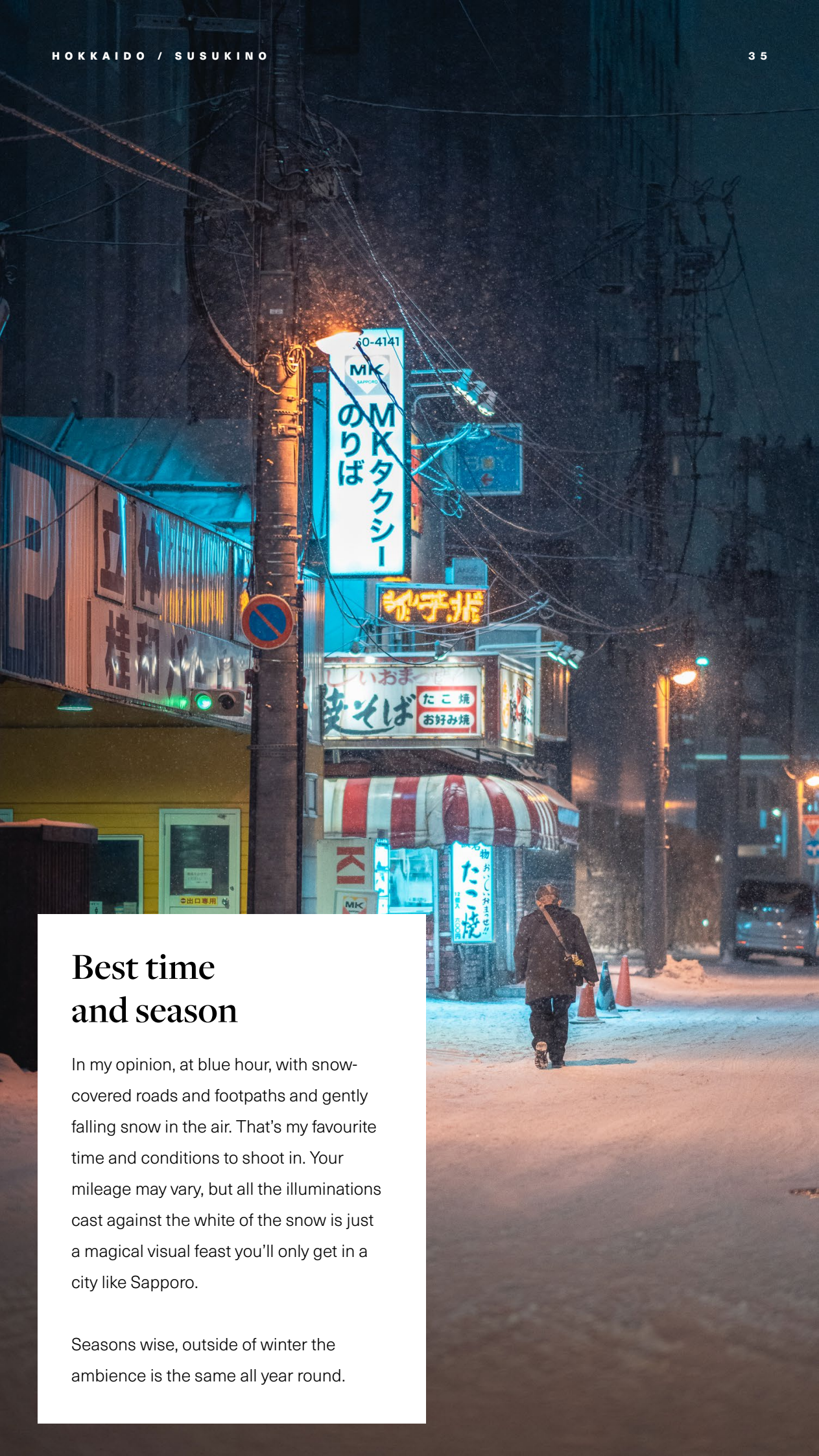
Slap on your favourite walk-around lens and go to town. Literally.

However, be wary of taking photos of men in suits around the more questionable, “adult entertainment” part of Susukino (you'll know it when you see it). There's no need to put yourself in that position.

Also, if you're coming during the winter and it's snowing, be careful about where you step. Many of the footpaths and roads are hard ice, and they're extremely slippery. While there are heated footpaths occasionally that clear up some walkways, it's still very easy to slip in other areas.

Watch out for your gear!





Best time and season

In my opinion, at blue hour, with snow-covered roads and footpaths and gently falling snow in the air. That's my favourite time and conditions to shoot in. Your mileage may vary, but all the illuminations cast against the white of the snow is just a magical visual feast you'll only get in a city like Sapporo.

Seasons wise, outside of winter the ambience is the same all year round.

Travel notes

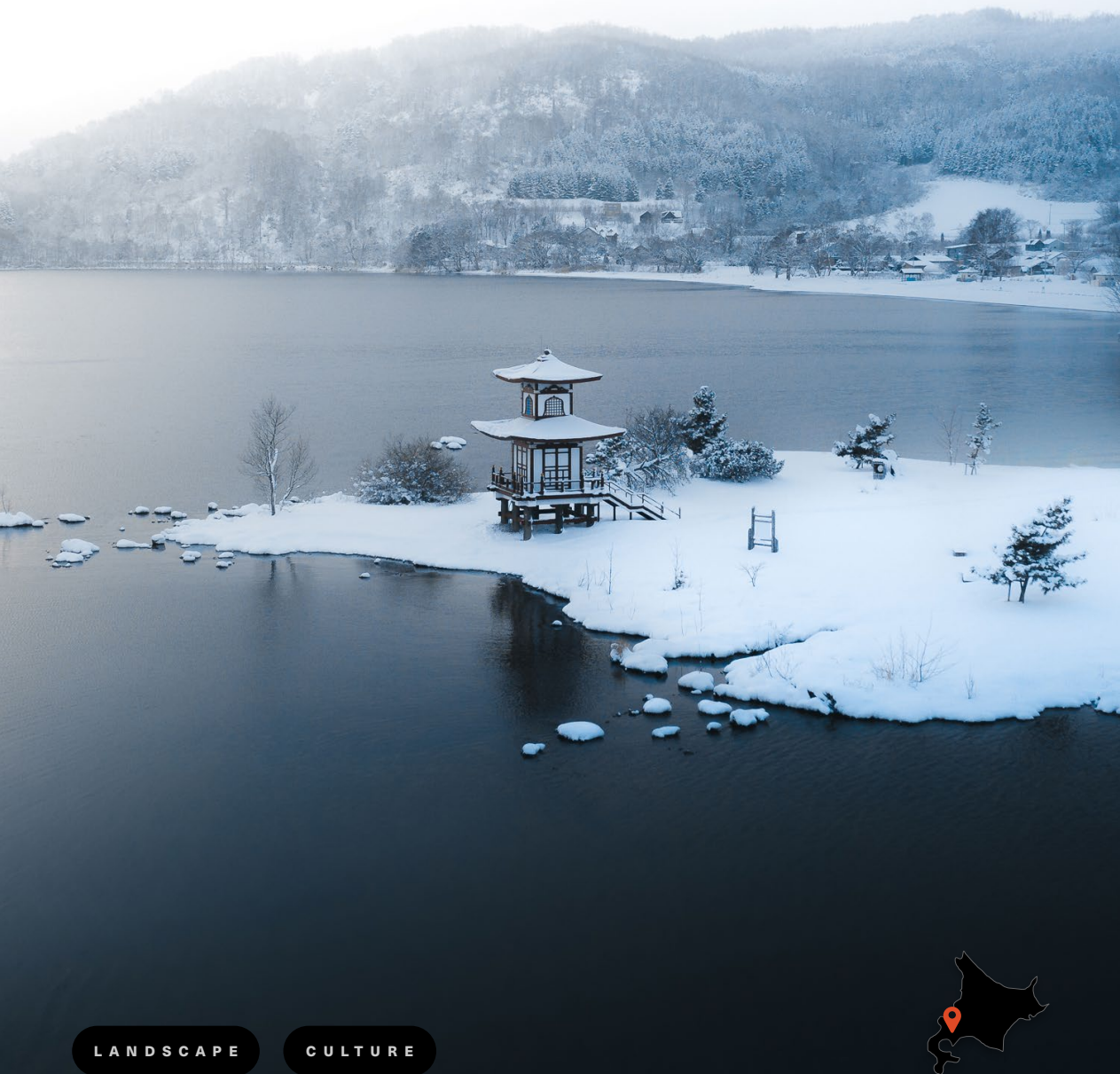
**EASY****5 MINS****BY TRAIN**

Catching the train from anywhere in Sapporo to Susukino station is an easy affair—it's one of the busiest stations in Sapporo and just down from the main Sapporo station anyway.

Accommodation in this area is also very affordable, so consider staying between here and Sapporo station; this part of town is very walkable.

While you're in this part of town, consider visiting the nearby **Sapporo TV Tower** or **Hokkaido shrine**.

Or, if you're hungry, grab a bite to eat at the famous **Ramen Alley** or my favourite **soup curry** spot (Hokkaido is famous for soup curry, by the way).



LANDSCAPE


CULTURE



浮見堂 (Ukimido Park)

A lone shrine rests on its own little island inside Lake Toya

 [Toyamachi, Toyako, Abuta District, Hokkaido 049-5802, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 -

Relative to all the other exciting places Hokkaido has to offer when it comes to sightseeing, Lake Toya is not a regularly visited destination.

That's a shame because it's one of the places that, in my eyes, represents a picture-perfect-type of landscape you'll see in Hokkaido. It's brilliant.



If you're visiting this area of Hokkaido, perhaps from Niseko or Jigokudani, be sure to approach it from Ukimido Park. From there, you'll find the shrine sitting on its own island; one formed when this area's caldera was created over 100,000 years ago.

For photographers, capturing this tranquil location is worth a short visit if you're in the area, and it's also a great spot for a picnic or rest by the lake. While there are many locations to visit around the lake, Ukimido Park is the ideal location for your visit.

It features nice walking paths, a playground, and a stone-built pathway towards 浮見堂, the lone shrine on the lake.

It's a great little spot for a picnic, and there's a Seicomart not too far away for snacks. A nice little location to stop by or to spend the late afternoon at.

Photography notes



OK



FRIENDLY



OK



WINTER



LOW

If you're capturing the shrine, there are many compositions to be had here. From the short walk from the car park, you can easily frame the shrine using the nearby trees and sculptures using longer lenses.

Using wider lenses, you can walk onto the island itself via one of the two stone paths and take some closer shots of the shrine.

However, I highly recommend using a drone here. It's a great way to capture the scale and serenity of the location.



Best time and season

While 浮見堂 is great at any time of year, it's especially beautiful covered in snow in the middle of Winter.

If you're lucky to experience a day with no wind, the water can give you some great reflections if you're standing in the right locations too.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2 HOURS



BY CAR

浮見堂 is not particularly easy to get to.

While you can catch a bus from Sapporo, it will take you between 3-4 hours to arrive, while taking 2-3 hours to drive.

Rather, 浮見堂 and Lake Toya is a location recommended if you're also visiting the ski-town of **Niseko** or the Hell Valley, **Jigokudani**.

In fact, I'd recommend combining all of them together to save on travel times if that suits your plans.

HOKKAIDO

LANDSCAPE



Wakkanai

The northernmost point of Japan.



[Soya Soyamura, Wakkanai, Hokkaido, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



The northernmost point of Japan is a harsh, cold place. After all, it's located 40km south of Russia and receives cold air from Siberia that travels over the Sea of Japan. This gives Hokkaido its world-renowned reputation for some of the best snow in the world.

That's why you won't find busloads of people here; it's not a very touristy place.

Instead, what you'll discover while driving along the coast is a landscape you won't find anywhere else in Japan; snow-capped mountains, snow-dusted beaches, insane winds battering roads, windmills and vast oceans.

It's an exciting place for sure, and a highly recommended location to visit if not for the photos, but for the experience.

The scenery driving along the coastline of Wakkanai changes continuously. One moment you'll be on a beach, the next, maybe a snow-covered town, or you might even be at a still inlet of water providing amazing reflections of high mountains and pretty windmills.

This part of the country looks more like Norway than Japan and it's beautiful.

Photography notes



OK



WINTER



FRIENDLY



VERY LOW



OK

If the winds aren't too bad (which they usually are), using a drone is highly recommended here. However, Be careful and know your limits. The weather frequently changes here, and unless you're experienced with navigating winds mid-flight, try not to push yourself too hard.

One part, in particular, has a long, flat beach that occasionally has a very still inlet of water. This provides impressive reflections that you can't get with anything but a drone. Otherwise, there are plenty of regular compositions on the drive between the northernmost point of Japan (there's a statue) and the town of Wakkanai.



Best time and season

On the drive between the northernmost point and Wakkanai, the light hits the mountains nicely during the afternoon and sunset.

Go in Winter for snow-covered mountains and an eerie, desolate wasteland type of feel. In the spring, the mountains are lush with green, so that's another great time to visit too.



The Northernmost point of Japan has a statue, it looks like this.

Apparently you can see Russia from here.

I couldn't, YMMV.

Still awesome though.



HARD



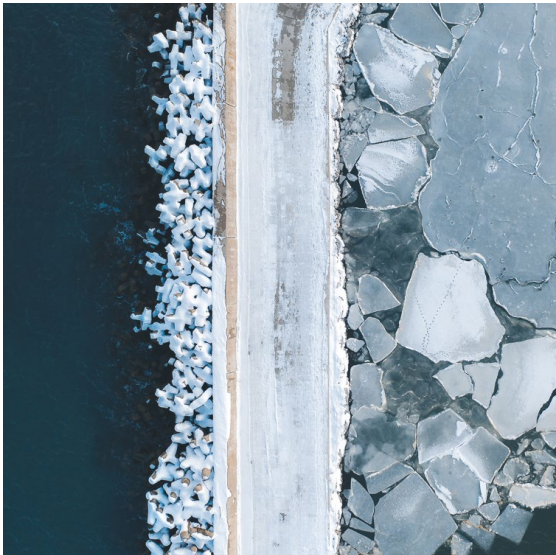
~6 HOURS



BY CAR

Travel notes

This part of Japan isn't very populous. While there are shops set up near the northernmost point, public transport, as expected, is very limited here, so get yourself a car and make plenty of stops. It's better to base yourself in the town of Wakkanai and drive.



These overhead red markers provide guidance as to where the gutter of the road is. This is super important because the road is covered in thick snow most of the Winter.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Hokkaido.



Otaru canal

A romantic canal drenched in historical ambiance.



Unkai terrace

A high vantage point for the "sea of clouds" between May and October.



Daisetsuzan National Park

A national park featuring 16 mountain peaks.



Jigokudani

Natural hot springs that look like Mars.



Mount Yōtei

The "baby Mount Fuji" of Japan.

Tōhoku

39.1362° N, 141.1500° E







ARCHITECTURE


CULTURE


Sazaedo Temple

A hand-made, Japanese-heritage wooden double-helix structure.

 [Takizawa-155 Itsukimachi Oaza Yahata, Aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima 965-0003, Japan](#)

 9am - 4:30pm

 ¥400 per adult

 <http://www.sazaedo.jp/>



Chances are if you're reading this, you're after some of Japan's more unique experiences, rather than merely discovering things on the road well-trodden.

Sazaedo temple is one of those unique experiences; built in 1796, it's a double-helix spire made entirely of wood.

That means structurally on the inside it looks very similar to how DNA is structured; two paths intertwined up and down the temple, where people who walk up it never actually see people who come down it.

Not only is the actual path walking up and down the temple a mind twister, but the inside of the temple is completely covered with stickers from pilgrims of the past who commemorate and prove their arrival.

The name Sazae is Japanese for the sea snail "Turbo Cornutus"; a delicacy commonly eaten in Japan, and the twisted shell of the seas snail resembles the temple, thus the name.

Photography notes



NOT RECOMMENDED



ALL



FRIENDLY



MODERATE



NOT ALLOWED

As with all architecture-related imagery, bring as wide of a lens as you can.

The staircases up and down the spire aren't all that wide, and even a 5-foot tall person would have a hard time standing up straight as they adventure through the temple.

Also, bring a fast lens, especially for the top of the temple where it's particularly dark; something like a 16-35mm f2.8 would be great here.



Best time and season

Sazaedo temple on the inside is the same all year round, however, Aizuwakamatsu, the area the temple is located in, experiences decent snowfall during the winter, so if you're looking for something a little different, consider that too.

Travel notes

**MODERATE****~2.5 HOURS****BY CAR**

Sazaedo temple is in an awkward location; it's almost halfway in between Tokyo and Sendai.

Because of that, chances are, rather than making a day trip from either one of those cities (which is a 2.5-hour drive from Sendai), you'll stay overnight nearby.

In that case, it's just a few minutes drive from the heart of Aizuwakamatsu.

However, if you're looking to catch public transport, it's a ~4-hour journey on five different trains from Shinjuku station in Tokyo. Driving is easier.

LANDSCAPE



Tadami River Bridge Viewpoint

A breathtaking panoramic view of the arched Tadami River bridge



[Kawai, Mishima, Onuma District, Fukushima 969-7515, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



Handheld, from the top viewpoint.

One thing I love about Japan is just how diverse it can be when it comes to nature and the elements.


The Tadami River Bridge Viewpoint is a location that accentuates that love; a place that you can come to any time of the year and get a completely different shot—subject, background and all—depending on the season you're in and the conditions you so chance upon.


The viewpoint shows off a grand panorama of mountains and the Tadami River. However, the main attraction here is the arched bridge that crosses it and the JR Tadami Line trains that pass by just a few times a day.


Photography notes

**OK**

**FRIENDLY**

**OK**

**WINTER**

**VERY LOW**

Be sure to check out the time table first so that you can plan your shots for when the train comes and also so that you know which direction it will be coming from.

If it's coming from the east, you can hear and see it coming. It stops at the Aizu-Nishikata station first before continuing over the Tadami River bridge. From the moment you hear it, you probably have about 3 minutes to get ready.

○第一只見川橋梁通過時刻表＜冬季ダイヤ＞○
※冬季ダイヤ(2020年1月20日～3月31日)

上り(会津若松方面)			下り(只見・会津川口方面)		
会津西方駅	<通過時刻>	会津松原駅	会津西方駅	<通過時刻>	会津松原駅
5:59	6:01	6:03	7:26	7:24	7:22
7:37	7:39	7:41	9:08	9:06	9:04
9:16	9:18	9:20	14:30	14:27	14:25
13:00	13:02	13:05	18:34	18:32	18:30
16:09	16:11	16:13	21:38	21:36	21:34
20:11	20:13	20:16	23:02	23:00	22:58

運行状況により、通過時刻が前後することがありますのでご了承ください。
なお、運行情報についてはJR東日本のHP等をご覧ください。

The middle columns are the times that it passes over the bridge. Note the direction the train will be coming from also.

Otherwise, if it's coming from the west, it will appear suddenly, so be on alert.

Also, the viewpoint has multiple levels up and down the mountain for photo opportunities. Depending on the height you're looking for when composing the shot, it's worth scouting these out before the train comes.

Best time and season

Come at any time of year for different images; in the pristine white of the snow, the warm hues of autumn, or the lush greens of Spring and Summer.

Also, during summer, there's a higher chance of low cloud and fog rolling through the valley, so go then if that's what you're going for.

Travel notes



HARD



~3 HOURS



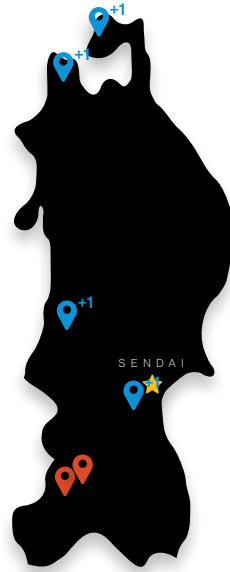
BY CAR

Driving is best. While public transport is possible, to get here from Tokyo will take around 5-6 hours, and even at the end of that, you'll still have to walk 40 minutes from Aizu-Nishikata station to the viewpoint.

Ideally, you'd be hiring a car and driving, perhaps staying overnight in Aizuwakamatsu and visiting some other spots around this area like **Sazaedo Temple** or **Tsuruga-jo**

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Tohoku.



Zaō Fox Village

Walk amongst a village of adorable Japanese foxes.



Three Mountains of Dewa

2446 steps and a short hike in the tranquility of a forest.



Hirosaki Castle

A small castle surrounded by beautiful cherry blossoms.



Hotokegaura Rock Formations

Volcanic rock formations along the Hotokegaura coastline.

Kantō

36.4599° N, 139.6911° E





CULTURE


URBAN

STREET

Akihabara

Tokyo's electronic district; home to gaming, anime, and otaku culture.

 [1 Chome-11-2 Sotokanda, Chiyoda City, Tokyo 101-0021, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 -



In Akihabara, you'll find a plethora of electronics shops, ranging from small, one-person fit-outs to big department stores. There's what the Japanese call "Otaku" culture here, which means "Diehard", like a diehard fan. A place for diehard fans of anime, manga, video game culture, card game culture and many other amazing sub-cultures Japan is famous for.

There are "maid cafes" where waitresses are served by cosplayers (people dressing up), and it's not weird at all (well, maybe for you, but not for them); "Super Potato" sells all the retro game systems and games you could ever want, like a time vortex of pristine condition collectables; there's a shop that sells robots; yes, robots.

I could go all day, but all the weird and wonderful things of Japan are in this hot zone, and I highly recommend having an open mind and exploring them here.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



NOT FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

In typical Japanese fashion, most shops are quite cramped and tight. Be aware of your backpack and your personal space when walking in them, but out on the street, it's no problem.

The streets are quite wide, while inside the stores are super cramped. Keep these two things in mind when considering which lenses to bring.

Also, consider bringing your tripod for some night shots too! Akihabara looks impressive at night.





Best time and season

Like most parts of Tokyo, shops typically open from 11 am in Akihabara and close before midnight. If you're planning on visiting shopping, it gets busy from lunchtime onwards and stays relatively active until the night. If you're planning to capture the surrounds, then I could never go past a blue hour shot of the cityscape.

From an atmosphere perspective, Akihabara stays reasonably similar all year round. The only mild changes are the Gingko trees on the street that bloom into a bright yellow when autumn rolls around. It's a fairly common sight in Tokyo, but it's still pretty nonetheless.



Travel notes

**EASY****19 MIN****BY TRAIN**

To spend time in Akihabara proper, you'll want to get to the Akihabara station, head west, and explore the main street and the streets behind it.

Close to the station, you'll find all the little electronic stores; the stores that sell replacement bits and bobs for your stuff that needs fixing; the actual "electronics" of things.

The further out from the station you go, the more it becomes a mix of video game-related things, anime culture, and other consumer electronics.

The location provided in the link (the first page) will take you to "Super Potato". That area is a great place to start to stroll around. It also happens to be one of the best shops to visit for all things anime and games related too.



CHERRY BLOSSOM

CULTURE

PORTRAITURE



Chidorigafuchi Park

A large city park especially beautiful during cherry blossom season.



2 Chome Kudanminami, Chiyoda City, Tokyo 102-0074, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



During the cherry blossom season, Chidorigafuchi Park is one of the best locations in Tokyo to capture them.

While the park is quite large, there is one specific section on the north-west side of the park that is exceptionally beautiful. It starts from the Boen entrance, all the way to Green Way.

Halfway through this 1km walk from between these two points is the boat rental service, where you can rent a rowboat (or foot-powered boat that looks like a swan) to get onto the water, providing a different experience and perspective—it's an activity I highly recommend during the cherry blossom season. Just be prepared to line up for it.

Otherwise, at most other times of the year, the entire park is lush with green foliage covering the numerous moats and water features.

Photography notes

**OK****SPRING****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

Due to the sheer size of the park, there are too many compositions and views to mention; however, if you're into cherry blossoms or portraits, then you're in the right place.

Just make sure you allocate ample time exploring this entire area—it's quite large.

Best time and season

This location is better experienced during the cherry blossom season.

During this season, get here early to capture the scene with few people and few boats. Then, wait until around 9am when the boat shop opens up and get out onto the water.



You can also **rent a boat** and get out on the water too. It provides a fresh perspective, and you can row towards the overhanging cherry trees and take portraits; there are so many more compositions this way.



Travel notes



EASY



20 MINS



BY TRAIN

Chidorigafuchi Green Way is where you want to get to, and it's about 20 minutes total from Shinjuku station via train.

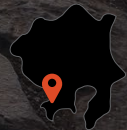
Get off at Kudanshita station, and from there its an 11-minute walk to the main cherry tree area.

The boat rental service usually opens from 11am most times of the year; however, during cherry blossom season, it opens from 8.30am - 9am.

Check ahead of time before you go.





CULTURE



Hakone Shrine

A lakeside shrine at the base of Mount Hakone.

 [80-1 Motohakone, Hakone, Ashigarashimo District, Kanagawa 250-0522, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 <http://hakonejinja.or.jp/>



Just under 2 hours out from the busy streets of Tokyo lies Hakone Shrine, a shrine that sits at the base of Mount Hakone, enveloped by its forest.

Hakone Shrine is a unique Shinto shrine that starts in the beautiful Lake Ashi with a massive, floating torii gate.

From there, the shrine expands up the mountain. A short 5 minute walk up stairs reveal the peaceful main shrine nestled quietly in a clearing, completely surrounded by tall trees that seemingly reach the sky.

It's certainly a peaceful experience, one that would most certainly augment the peace and quiet you come to Hakone for anyway, as Hakone is known as a relaxing Onsen town.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK

The main image everyone captures here is the one of “Hakone Jinjya Heiwa-no-torii” (The first image of this entry). It’s the one that sits floating in Lake Ashi, and it’s most certainly the place to visit here for photographs. If you’re visiting during tourist hours however, expect to line up to take a shot of it.

The forest that the shrine is encased in features very tall trees and longish paths, so bring a wide lens if you can. Otherwise, this location is reasonably straight-forward composition-wise—enjoy the ambience.



Best time and season

Due to how entrenched the torii gates and the rest of the shrine are into the mountain, sunrise isn't going to be the best time here; it takes a while for the sun to rise high enough for it to come through the trees. Consider coming 2 hours before or after noon.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2-3 HOURS



TRAIN/BUS

In terms of difficulty, Hakone Shrine is not that hard. It is, however, a long journey.

From Shinjuku station, you can catch the Romance car to Odawara station and from there catch a bus to the shrine. All up, that journey might take you around 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Of course, driving will be faster; taking just under 2 hours to get there.

However, I recommend you stay overnight rather than making a day trip. Hakone is an onsen town, and there are many many hotels, ryokans, and onsens to stay at in this area. Why not leisurely make your way down, take some photos, stay the night, bathe and relax, then leisurely make your way back the next day?





You could even adventure up to Fujiyoshida from here; you're out of Tokyo anyway.



- NIGHT
- CULTURE
- URBAN
- STREET
- PORTRAITURE

Kabukicho

Bright lights and loud music; Tokyo's famous entertainment district.

-  [1-chōme-16 Kabukichō, Shinjuku City, Tōkyō-to 160-0021, Japan](#)
-  Public, open 24 hours
-  Free
-  -



Kabukicho is one of the busiest areas of Tokyo and is essentially the red light district of it too.

It features one of the highest densities of neon lights in all of Tokyo; the signs of bars, restaurants, karaoke joints, and varying degrees of adult entertainment lighting up the often-crowded streets.

Regardless of all the walks of life you'll find here, it's still relatively safe to adventure in, so don't be discouraged from exploring what's here. After all, this location is one of the many classic images people imagine when they think of Tokyo.

It is, however, a bit of a tourist trap. Expect food to cost just a little bit more here, expect to be street hustled to go into bars and various entertainment joints, and to perhaps pay for things you shouldn't be paying for because you're a foreigner.

Fortunately, while that all sounds a bit rough, it actually isn't bad at all. And, when it comes to Tokyo, this is actually as bad as it gets, which is super tame when compared to other Asian countries (I'm looking at you, Thailand).

A small price to pay for one of the classic locations in Tokyo, I'd say.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



NOT FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

Start your journey at **Kabukicho Ichiban-Gai St.** If you've never been to Tokyo before, you've for sure seen the image of this gate. Walk up and down the streets, exploring and getting deep into Kabukicho. See if you can spot Godzilla.

Experiment with panning shots, long exposures of crowds walking, and even hyper lapses up and down the streets. There's plenty of culture to capture here and plenty of ways to capture it.

Note that it's a public place, so tripods are fine (technically), but there's so many people around, although it's not impossible to find an empty spot.



Best time and season

Visit at night for all the neon light action. In the rain, people with their see-through umbrellas combined with the reflections on the ground from all the lights make for one colourful, visual feast.

Kabukicho is the same all year round. Visit during any season.





Travel notes



DIFFICULTY

EASY



4 MIN



WALK

Kabukicho is just a short 4-minute walk from Shinjuku station, so it's incredibly accessible.

While you're here, consider visiting the nearby **Golden Gai** for some night time ambience and perhaps a drink. Also **Omoide Yokocho**, or as I like to call it, "Instagram alley" is a quick 5-minute walk away under the train line.

PORTRAITURE

LANDSCAPE



Koishikawa Kurakuen

A beautiful Japanese garden escape, away from the chaos of the city.



1 Chome-6-6 Koraku, Bunkyo City, Tokyo 112-0004, Japan



9am - 5pm



¥300 per adult



<https://www.tokyo-park.or.jp/park/format/index030.html>



Okay, confession time; I have a thing with Japanese gardens—I'm kind of obsessed with them.

Whenever I arrive in a new city Japan, there are two things I always do. First, I find the tallest observatory around and take a look. Second, I visit as many Japanese gardens in the area that I can.

I've done this all up and down Japan, in every major city I've travelled to.

Koishikawa Kurakuen is my absolute favourite in Tokyo.

It's not the biggest; it's not the most popular; it's not the most well equipped. But the diversity and beauty of this Chinese-influenced Japanese garden is second to none in Tokyo, in my opinion.

If you don't know, Japanese gardens are prevalent throughout Japan. They're small areas of well-manicured land with sections that each have their own theme; some of them are even models of epic, full-scale landscapes, but in a miniature size!

Photography notes

**OK****ALL / AUTUMN****FRIENDLY****MODERATE****NOT ALLOWED**

This is a fantastic location for portrait shoots; one of my favourite in all of Tokyo.

There are so many different spots; all the diverse landscapes can be different scenes and styles; you could easily spend hours and hours shooting here with dozens of different looks and outfits.

Otherwise, just photographing the landscapes on their own here is great too.

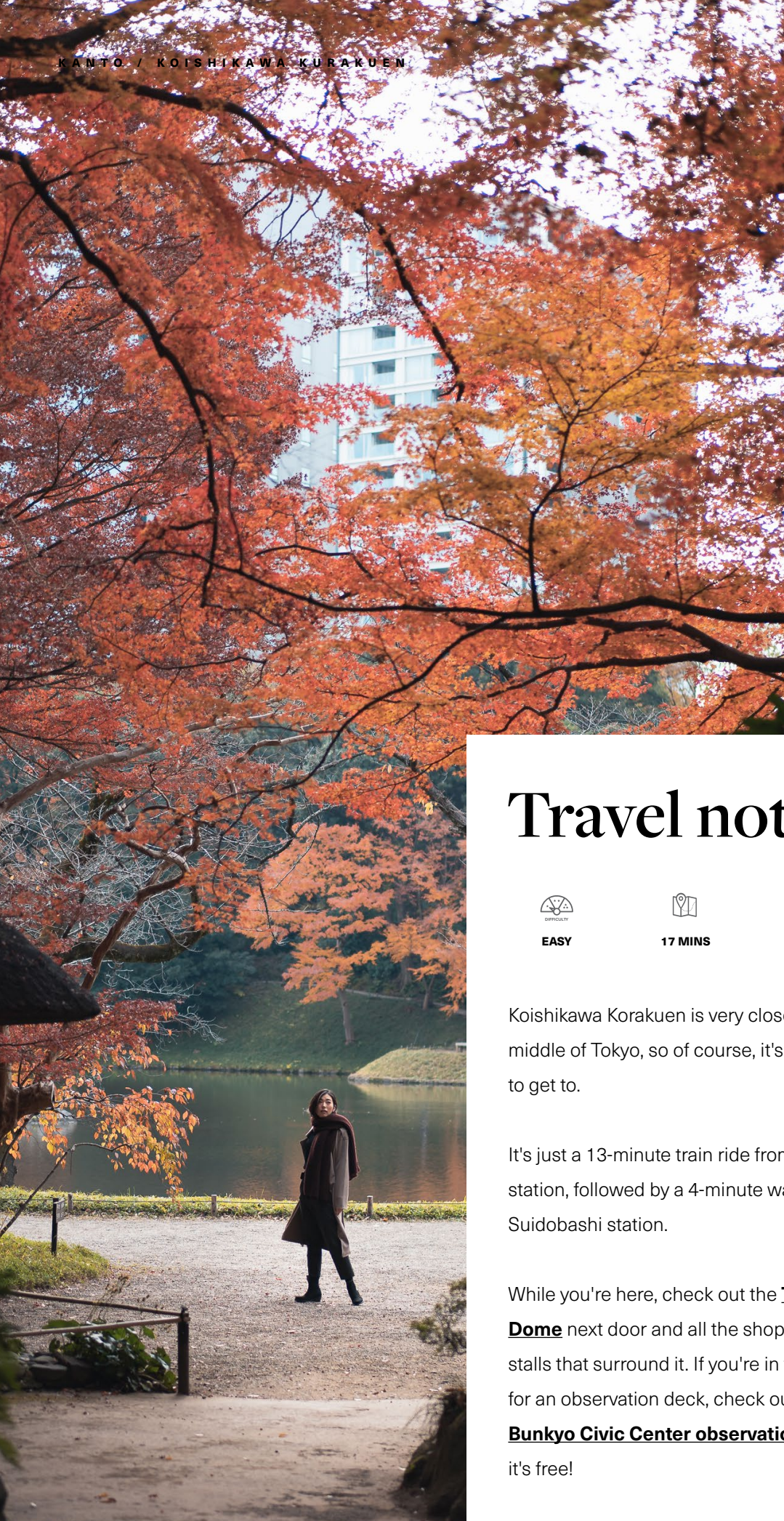


@meyou.mae on Instagram

Best time and season

While Koishikawa Kurakuen is beautiful all year round, it's arguably most beautiful during autumn with all the Momiji (Japanese maple leaves) turning a fiery red.

Of course, it's also exceptionally beautiful during cherry blossom season, but autumn still has to be my favourite.



Travel notes



EASY



17 MINS



BY TRAIN

Koishikawa Korakuen is very close to the middle of Tokyo, so of course, it's effortless to get to.

It's just a 13-minute train ride from Shinjuku station, followed by a 4-minute walk from Suidobashi station.

While you're here, check out the **Tokyo Dome** next door and all the shops and stalls that surround it. If you're in the mood for an observation deck, check out the **Bunkyo Civic Center observation lounge**; it's free!

CHERRY BLOSSOM

PORTRAITURE

URBAN



Meguro River

A river canal lined with rows of beautiful overhanging cherry trees



1 Chome-13-8 Kamimeguro, Meguro City, Tokyo 153-0051, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



Meguro River is one of the most beautiful locations for cherry blossom viewing in all of Tokyo.

It's a river canal, lined top to bottom with overhanging cherry blossoms that bloom and then gently fall into the river.

Starting from Meguro Sky Garden, along its length lies a series of footbridges that each provide slightly different perspectives and cherry blossom arrangements. This makes it worth checking out each footbridge to see which one you like the best.

The tight canals and footbridges eventually break out into a much wider scene after Meguro river park. The channel is much wider here, but cherry blossoms still line both sides of the canal.

If you're around town during cherry blossom season, this is a must-visit.

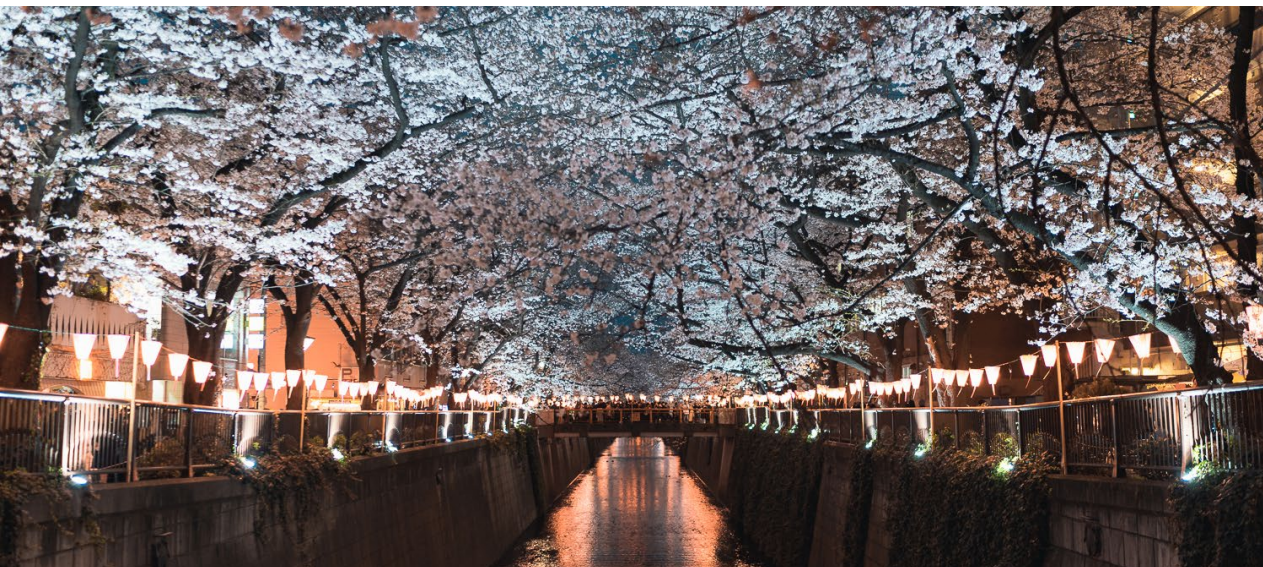
Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****SPRING****NOT FRIENDLY****MOSH PIT****NOT ALLOWED**

No matter what time during Cherry blossom season, Meguro river is busy.

Of course, arriving at sunrise before the crowds come is going to give you the best chance of getting the spot that you want, however, fortunately, most compositions shooting down river won't reveal many people, so, Meguro River can be captured well at almost any time of day.

At night, the entire river is lined with lights that illuminate all the Cherry blossoms, and it is most certainly worth revisiting as it looks completely different to the daytime scene.



Best time and season

This is perhaps exclusively a Cherry blossom-only location, although it could work during autumn as well.

However, during Cherry blossom season, come at any time of day or night, pick your favourite time of light and go. Come at sunrise for fewer crowds, or come at night for the full moshpit-level crowd (which is also quite cool and chaotic to be in).



Travel notes



EASY



15 MINS



BY TRAIN

As is the case with most locations in Tokyo, Meguro River is exceptionally accessible by all methods of public transport.

It's just 12 minutes by train from Shinjuku station to Naka-Meguro station and then a short 3-minute walk to the river.

To explore Meguro River, start at the north end (see the location link for the start) and then work your way down to the **promenade**.

Once you're at the end, if you're in the mood for coffee, **Switch Coffee** is pretty good. Or, if you're in the mood for more exploring, the nearby **Yebisu Garden Place** is also very nice to sightsee too.



URBAN

STREET

CULTURE



Omoide Yokochi

Tokyo's very own "Instagram Alley"; a classic you can't miss.



1 Chome-2 Nishishinjuku, Shinjuku City, Tokyo 160-0023, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<http://shinjuku-omoide.com/>



I call this place “Instagram Alley”, because, well, you’ve undoubtedly seen a photograph from it before on Instagram.

Omoide Yokocho means “Memory Lane” in Japanese. It’s a chaotic and energetic series of alleyways that is delightfully rich in tiny restaurants, lights, sounds and smells.

It’s a Yakitori haven. A place for ramen. A place for curry. Yakiniku. Think Izakaya’s—bars with little dishes to snack on—all crammed into tiny shops that can only fit half a dozen people in a single row.

Like its cousin in Kabukicho, **Golden Gai**, Omoide Yokocho maintains a post-war, Showa-era looking decor and has an incredible amount of ambience.

It’s a highly recommended place to visit for cultural immersion. And the best part? Once you’re done experiencing and capturing the space, you can sit down to enjoy a delicious meal.

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****ALL****NOT FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

Fair warning though, it's a chaotic place.

Prepare for lots of crowds, especially from dinner time all the way to 11 pm. It doesn't help that the entire alley is only about 1-2 people wide at its maximum while jam-packed with hungry people and tourists alike.

It's worth the hustle and bustle; although you'll get a decent shot no matter what time of day or condition you come.

Aside from the regular alley shot, consider venturing around the backside of the alley; there's different compositions there too.





Best time and season

The overhanging leaves at Omoide Yokocho change with the seasons so no matter what time of year you come, you'll be sure to grab a great shot.

My personal favourite is winter; the white leaves against the red lanterns really pop!



Travel notes

**EASY****1 MIN****WALK**

Omoide Yokochō is just a minute away (depending on which exit you come from) from Shinjuku station.

While you're here, be sure to stop by the stalls and actually eat something; there are some genuinely fantastic little restaurants here that are definitely worth eating stopping at. Some of them even have secret upstairs sections! Not going to tell you which though; that's a secret you'll have to find out yourself 🤫.



URBAN

NIGHT

Roppongi Hills Observation Deck

A classic view of Tokyo tower and the sprawling city skyline.



6 Chome-10-1 Roppongi, Minato City, Tokyo 106-6108, Japan



10am - 8pm



¥1800 per adult + ¥500 for Sky Deck



<https://tcv.roppongihills.com/jp/>



For a classic view of the sprawling Tokyo city skyline, the view at Roppongi hills observatory is one of the best—especially for viewing the Tokyo tower.

It's a proper observatory here, with a viewing deck that's quite crowded especially if you're planning your visit at sunset or night time.

However, it also does have a "Sky Deck", which is essentially the rooftop helipad from which you can view the city for an extra ¥500. This view provides an entirely unobstructed, 360-degree view of the city and is worth the extra few dollars to visit.

Photography notes

**OK****ALL****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

To fight the glare shooting through glass, bring a Lens Skirt, black towel, or another reflection-blocking device with you to block any surrounding light. Also, consider using a polariser.

If you decide to go up to the Sky Deck, know that they don't allow tripods up there, so bring a fast lens with you, or even use a Gorillapod which they usually don't strictly count as a 'tripod'.

There are many compositions to choose from here, and although the Tokyo tower view is the most common, don't forget about the surrounding areas such as the Shinjuku Skyscraper district and even parts of Chiyoda.





Best time and season

Due to the opening hours, Roppongi Hills Observatory isn't open for sunrise. Therefore, sunset is your best bet, but of course, it can get quite crowded at this time.

Make sure to stay for blue hour!

Travel notes

**EASY****20 MINS****BY TRAIN**

A short 9-minute train ride on the Oedo line from Shinjuku station and then a 13-minute walk from Roppongi station will get you to the Tokyo City View and Skydeck, also known as Roppongi Hills Observatory in this guide.

If you've never been to Roppongi Hills before, it can be a little bit confusing; it's a skyscraper that houses many things: offices, apartments, restaurants; heck, there's even a museum there.

Because of that, there are many methods of entry and access points, so it can be a little confusing to find.

When you get to the complex, follow the signs to either the Mori Art Museum, or the Tokyo City View, and know that while the actual access is closer to the centre of the building **on level 3**, you need to take the "Museum Cone" entrance in the second floor (which is not close to the centre of the building) to get up there. Kinda confusing. You'll know what I mean when you get there.

Good luck.





CULTURE

URBAN



Sensō-ji Temple

Tokyo's oldest temple and one of the great landmarks of the city.



[2 Chome-3-1 Asakusa, Taito City, Tokyo 111-0032, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<https://www.senso-ji.jp/>



Senso-ji, built in the year 645, is Tokyo's oldest temple. Built for the goddess Kannon, the goddess of mercy, it's one of Tokyo's largest, most popular, and most vibrant temples.

To arrive at the Senso-ji temple, you have to enter through a large gate called the Kaminarimon (Thunder Gate).

From here, the path to the temple is a 200-metre-long street of shops known as "Nakamise". These are tiny shops that sell little trinkets, souvenirs, small snacks and drinks. It's worth stopping at a few, they're adorable, and you might even find one of your favourite snacks here.

Past Nakamise lies the main hall of the temple, alongside a 5-storied pagoda. You'll often find people paying their respects, with a little shop selling incense for you to try for yourself.

Photography notes



NOT RECOMMENDED



ALL



NOT FRIENDLY



MOSH PIT



NOT ALLOWED

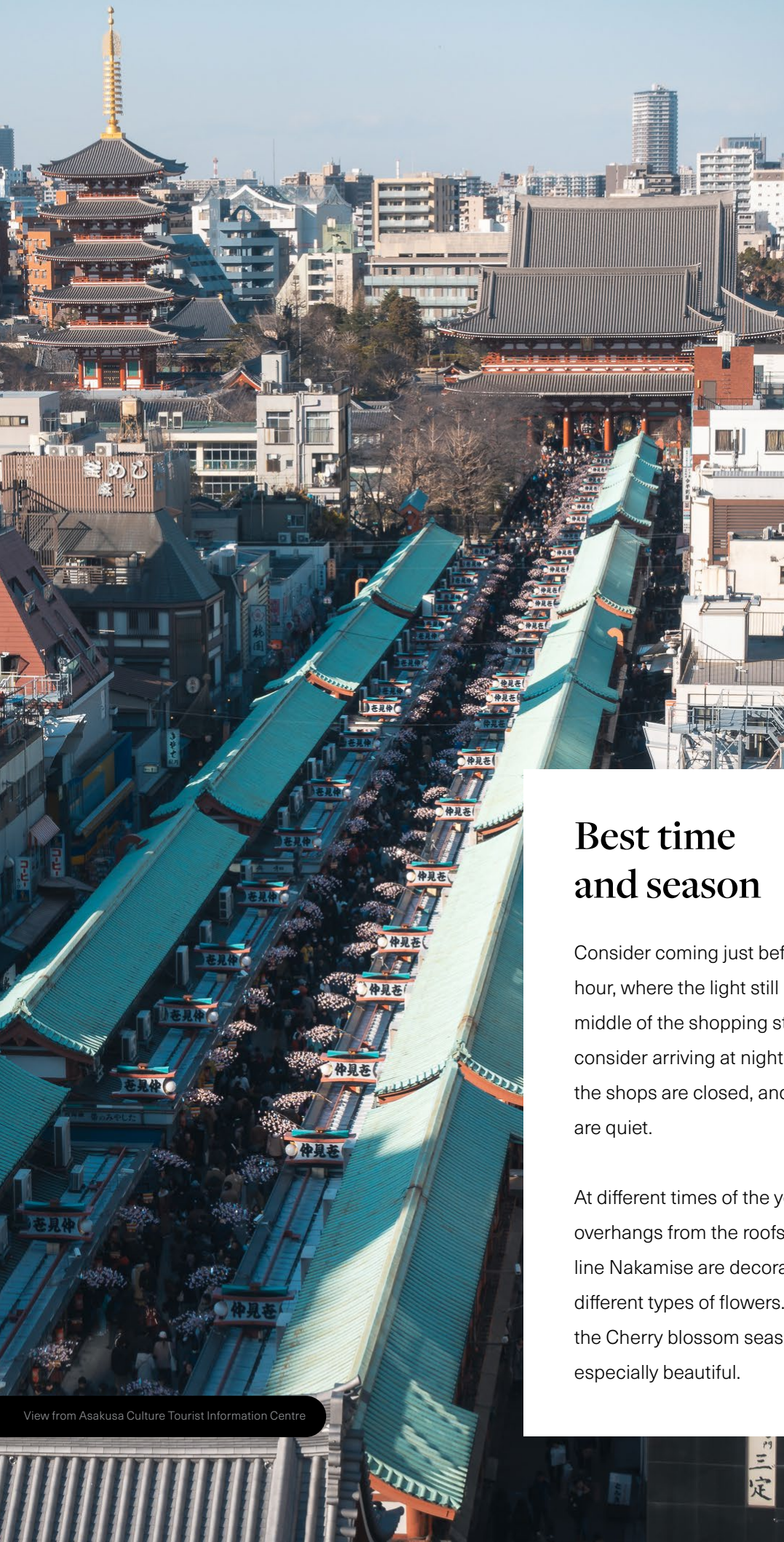
This is a location where I'd encourage coming at a time where there are a lot of people (not that there's a time when there's not a lot of people, anyway). The combination of shops, people, and energy in this place makes the atmosphere come alive.

Capture people praying, or the long line of sight down Nakamise, or the massive temple at the end and the details along the way. There's plenty of compositions to be had at this temple.

For those who want to use tripods, consider coming at night when all the shops shut. The street is still lit up, and it has an eerie yet serene vibe to it.

While you're here, also consider going across the road from Kaminarimon to the **Asakusa Culture Tourist Information Centre**. They have a nice viewpoint where you can see all of Senso-ji, and it's totally free (image on the next page).





Best time and season

Consider coming just before golden hour, where the light still hits the middle of the shopping street. Also, consider arriving at night when all the shops are closed, and things are quiet.

At different times of the year, the overhangs from the roofs that line Nakamise are decorated with different types of flowers. During the Cherry blossom season, they're especially beautiful.



Travel notes



EASY



27 MIN



BY TRAIN

Senso-ji temple is very easy to get to; however, it's on the other side of the city if you're coming from somewhere like Shinjuku station. From there, it's a 27-minute journey, but fortunately, the temple is right next to the station.

While you're here, consider visiting the nearby **Tokyo Skytree** to check out the highest viewpoint in Tokyo, or **Sumida Park** to go for some serene and picture-perfect strolling.

Also, if it's your first time here in Tokyo, this side of the city is cheaper to stay in accommodation-wise. However, it only has a few of the typical touristy attractions that most people visit.

If you're looking to avoid the commute across Tokyo every day, consider staying in the Shinjuku/Shibuya side of town, or even in Chiyoda if you want to be in the middle of Tokyo.



URBAN

STREET

Shibuya Crossing

The world's busiest crosswalk.



[2 Chome-2-1 Dogenzaka, Shibuya City, Tokyo 150-0043, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



View from the "Myth of Tomorrow" overpass

The world's busiest crosswalk, in the world's most populated city.

At peak times, Shibuya Crossing has thousands of people walking across it every two minutes. Walking it yourself for the first time is certainly a surreal experience and one that travellers across the globe forever remember from their trips to Tokyo.

In reality, ultimately, it's just a big, regular, pedestrian crossing. However, the sheer amount of people makes it a spectacle in and of itself, with hundreds of businesses surrounding the intersection offering many different vantage points while providing people a place to stop for a bite to eat or drink.

It's famous for a reason, ya know?

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

There are so many places to capture Shibuya Crossing.

Of course, the most obvious is on the ground level. You see many people lining up at the front of the crowds, waiting for their moment to run onto the temporarily empty road the instant the traffic lights turns green.



View from Mags Park rooftop

However, there are many more vantage points to capture the crossing from surrounding perspectives. Some of my favourites are:

Myth of tomorrow artwork

There's an overpass with a gigantic artwork called "Myth of Tomorrow". It's between the central exit and the Hachiko exit and crosses over the south of the crossing.

Mag's park rooftop view

Mag's park rooftop provides a birds-eye view of the crossing. It's a perfect location for sunset into the night, it's my favourite Shibuya Crossing view, and one of my favourite views in all of Tokyo in general. It always impresses.

Shibuya Hikarie Mall

Just off to the east of the crossing, there's a shopping mall called "Shibuya Hikarie". On the 11th floor, there's a "Sky lobby" level, giving you an interesting but somewhat far view of the crossing. Bring a longer lens if you want this view.



View from Shibuya Hikarie

Best time and season

Visit at peak hours to get the most amount of people. This is around 5 pm - 7 pm. You can also get slices of light spilling onto the street in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon depending on the time of year that you decide to go.





Travel notes



EASY



15 MINS

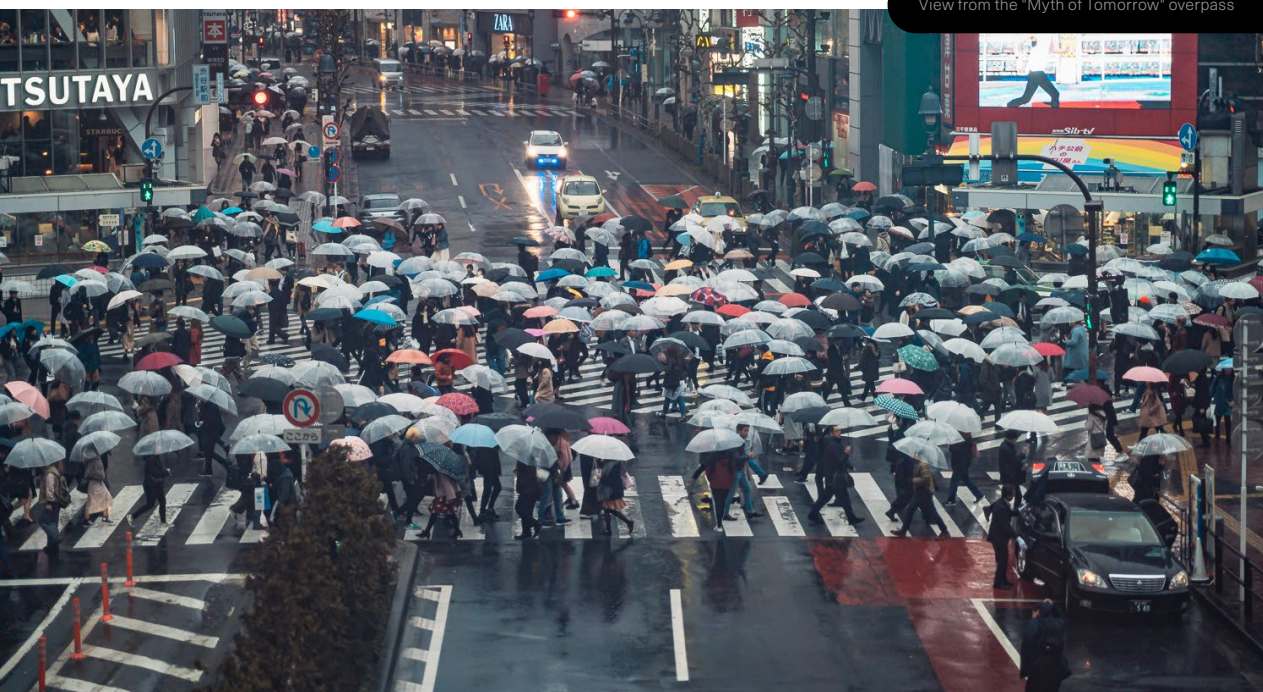


BY TRAIN

Much like the other sightseeing locations around this area, like **Shibuya Sky**, Shibuya Crossing is very easy to get to. It's a 15-minute journey (inc. walking time) from Shinjuku station by train.

The crossing itself is right outside the Yamanote line and next to Tokyo's favourite meeting spot, the **Hachiko statue**.

While you're here, there are so many things to see, do, and eat in Shibuya. Check out the Shibuya Crossing, go shopping at **Center-gai**, eat some Sushi at one of my favourite joints, **Katsumidori Seibu**, get lost in a gigantic **Don Quijote**, or even play some games at the **VR park**! There's so much to do, but there are a few things to get you started.





Shibuya Sky

A 360-degree, open-air observation deck overlooking Tokyo.

📍 〒150-0002 Tokyo, Shibuya City, Shibuya, 2 Chome-24-12 最上階 スカンプルスクエア

🕒 9am - 11pm

🎫 ¥1800 per adult

🌐 <https://www.shibuya-scramble-square.com/sky/>



The newest and tallest observation deck in Shibuya, located atop one of the latest buildings in Shibuya, the Scramble Square.

Shibuya Sky provides a full 360-degree view over **Shibuya Crossing** and all of Tokyo in an open-air setting. From here, you can see many different landmarks such as the **Tokyo Tower**, **Tokyo Skytree**, Tokyo Stadium, and when the weather is clear, even Mount Fuji.

Photography notes

**NOT ALLOWED****ALL****NOT FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

There are not too many places in Tokyo where you can photograph Tokyo Tower, Shibuya crossing, Tokyo Skytree AND Mount Fuji all in the same place.

While the view of Tokyo Tower and Tokyo Skytree is slightly obstructed, the views of Shibuya crossing and Mount Fuji are great (when the weather is good).

Consider bringing a model and taking portraits here! With so many backgrounds to choose from, you can easily spend a few hours shooting up here.

Note that they're quite strict on camera equipment up here; all cameras need to be tethered to you via a strap or otherwise, plus there are no bags allowed up here, so it's a one-body, one-lens-type of affair.

Make sure to bring some smaller lenses in a jacket pocket, then 😊.

Shibuya Sky is a great place to take portraits too!



Best time and season

Shibuya Sky, unfortunately, isn't open for sunrise, so when it comes to good quality light, sunset is your only bet.

Keep in mind that this is the most popular time to come, and crowds are relatively high here, however, the longer you stay into blue hour and night, the fewer people there are.



Travel notes



EASY



15 MINS



BY TRAIN

Shibuya Sky is super easy to get to; the Shibuya station is right underneath it. It's just three stops away from Shinjuku station by train too.

While you're here, there are so many things to see, do, and eat in Shibuya. Check out the **Shibuya Crossing**, go shopping at **Center-gai**, eat some Sushi at one of my favourite joints, **Katsumidori Seibu**, get lost in a gigantic **Don Quijote**, or even play some games at the **VR park**! There's so much to do, but there are a few things to get you started.



PORTRAITURE

URBAN




teamLab Borderless

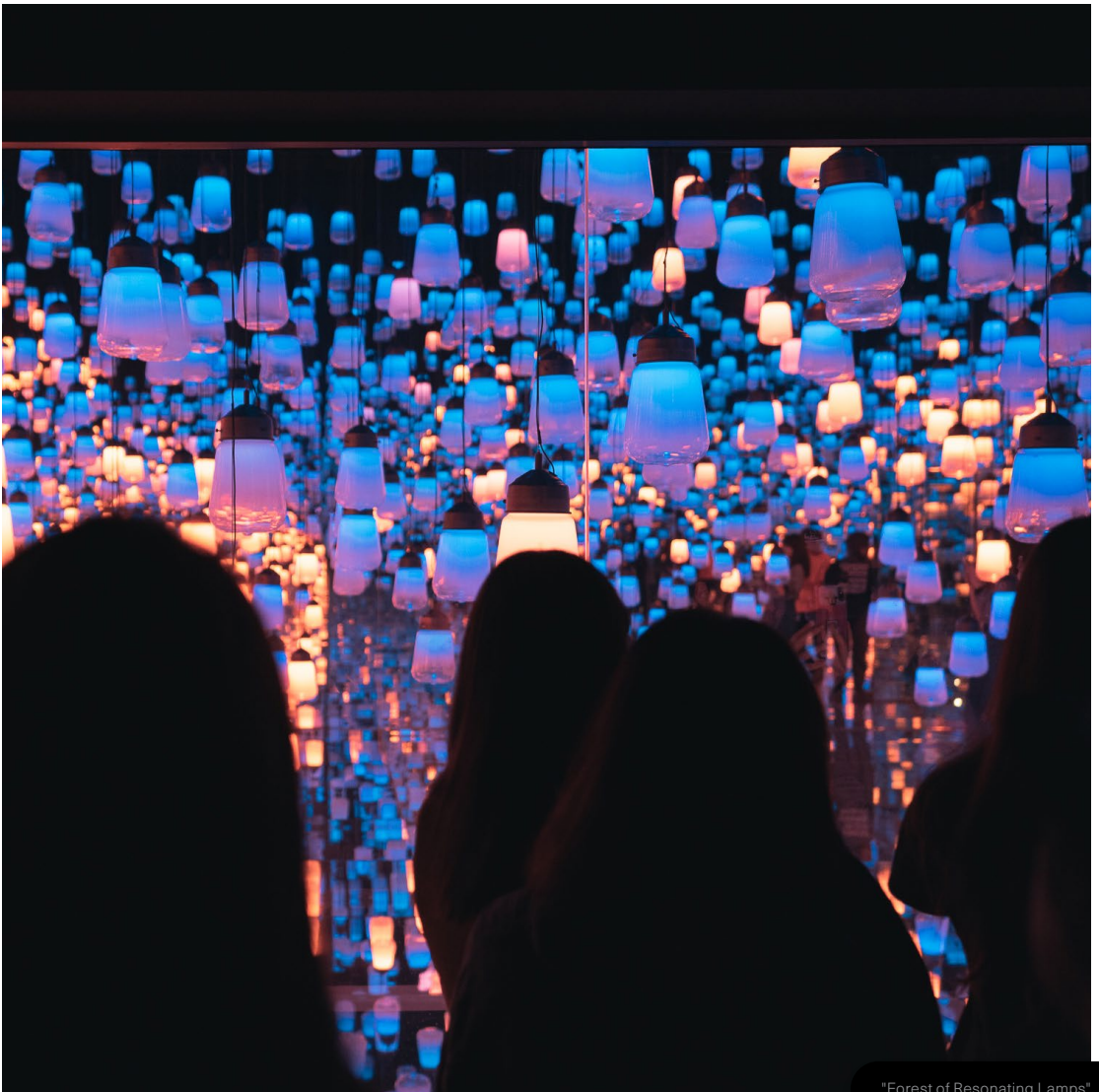
A futuristic, immersive museum of digital artworks and installations.

 Japan, 〒135-0064 Tokyo, Koto City, Aomi, 1 Chome-3-8 お台場パレットタウン

 10am - 7pm (Changes with seasons)

 ¥3200 per adult

 <https://borderless.teamlab.art/>



"Forest of Resonating Lamps"

Perhaps one of Tokyo's most famous portrait locations is teamLab's permanent exhibition/museum.

It contains over 50 immersive artworks spanning digital and physical, audio and visual mediums in a gigantic 10,000 square metre, uniquely designed space.

It's the result of what happens when technology and art combine in innovative ways. For teamLab, it's the culmination of 17 years of experience, with new and old works curated and created by the self-proclaimed ultra-technologist group.

The exhibition is organised into five main areas: Borderless World, Athletics Forest, Future Park, Forest of lamps, and EN tea house.

It's an experience you won't get anywhere else in the world; a spectacle of light and technology. Somewhere definitely worth your time to visit, if not for the photos, then for the experience.

Photography notes



NOT ALLOWED



ALL



NOT FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

Although many artworks feature bright lights, many don't. Bring a fast lens to compensate. Seriously. Some installations are almost pitch-black here, and an f/1.4 lens really helps.

Also, **I strongly suggest bringing a model to shoot** as a subject, even if you don't usually do portraiture. This is a fantastic place for taking portraits and having a subject in many of the artworks adds another dimension to your images.

Note that no bags are allowed in the exhibition. It's a "one-body, one-lens"-type of affair.

...unless of course, you can fit another lens in your pocket 🤪.



Best time and season

Get there early when it opens at 10am for your best chances at the fewest amount of people. Luckily, they have a limit for how many people can be in a session at a single time, but still, it's enough people to get in your shots.

There are no seasonal changes with this permanent exhibition so come any time of year.





"Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders, Transcending Space"

Travel notes



EASY



28 MINS



BY TRAIN

teamLab Borderless is perhaps slightly more inconvenient to get to than some other locations in Tokyo due to it being in Odaiba, but it's by no means problematic or that bad.

It's a 22-minute train ride from Shinjuku station, then a 6-minute walk from Tokyo Teleport Station.

Keep in mind that tickets should be bought online, in advance, and are bought in "sessions". This is to control the influx of people in the museum at any one time (although the crowds are still pretty insane most of the time anyway).

"Reversible Rotation - Continuous, Black in White"





Tokyo Skytree

The tallest tower in the world.



1 Chome-1-2 Oshiage, Sumida City, Tokyo 131-8634, Japan



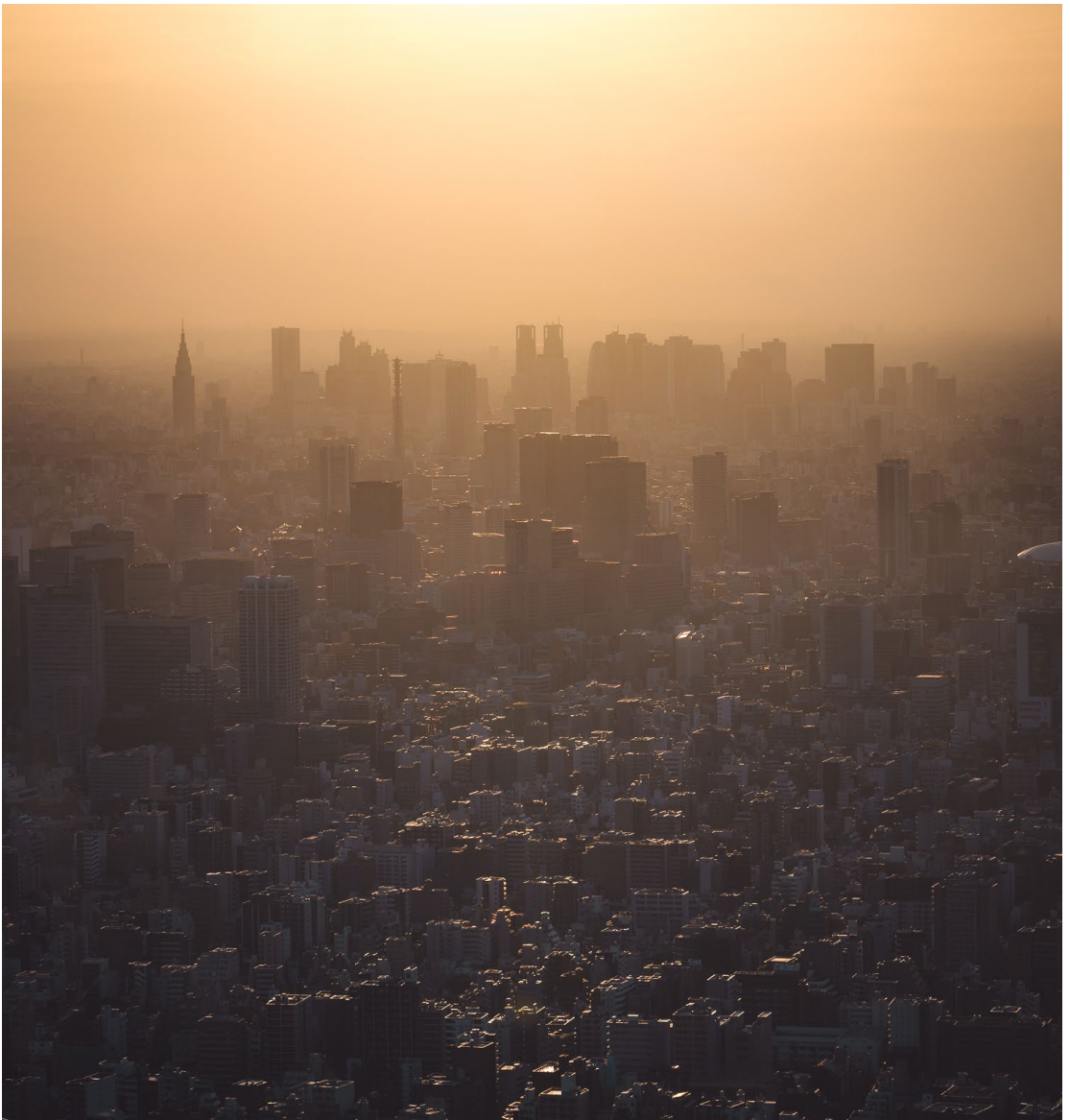
9am - 9pm



¥3100 per adult



<http://www.tokyo-skytree.jp/>



Tokyo Skytree is officially *the tallest **tower** in the world* and the second tallest *structure* in the world after the Burj Khalifa. It stands at a mighty 634 metres (2080ft)—it's insanely tall. It's a lot larger in person than it is in photos.

Of course, with a structure this tall, it has an excellent use for broadcasting and is used as a beacon for all major Tokyo television and radio channels. It also has some great restaurants at the top, and while that's great, the main thing here for us is its observatory.

And what an observatory it is, delivering a 360-degree vantage point of what is arguably the best cityscape view in all of Tokyo.

It's this kind of view, in the tallest tower in the world, that demonstrates just how large of a city Tokyo is. You can barely see the end of the city. It quite literally sprawls as far as the eye can see. Unreal.



Photography notes



NOT ALLOWED



ALL



NOT FRIENDLY



HIGH



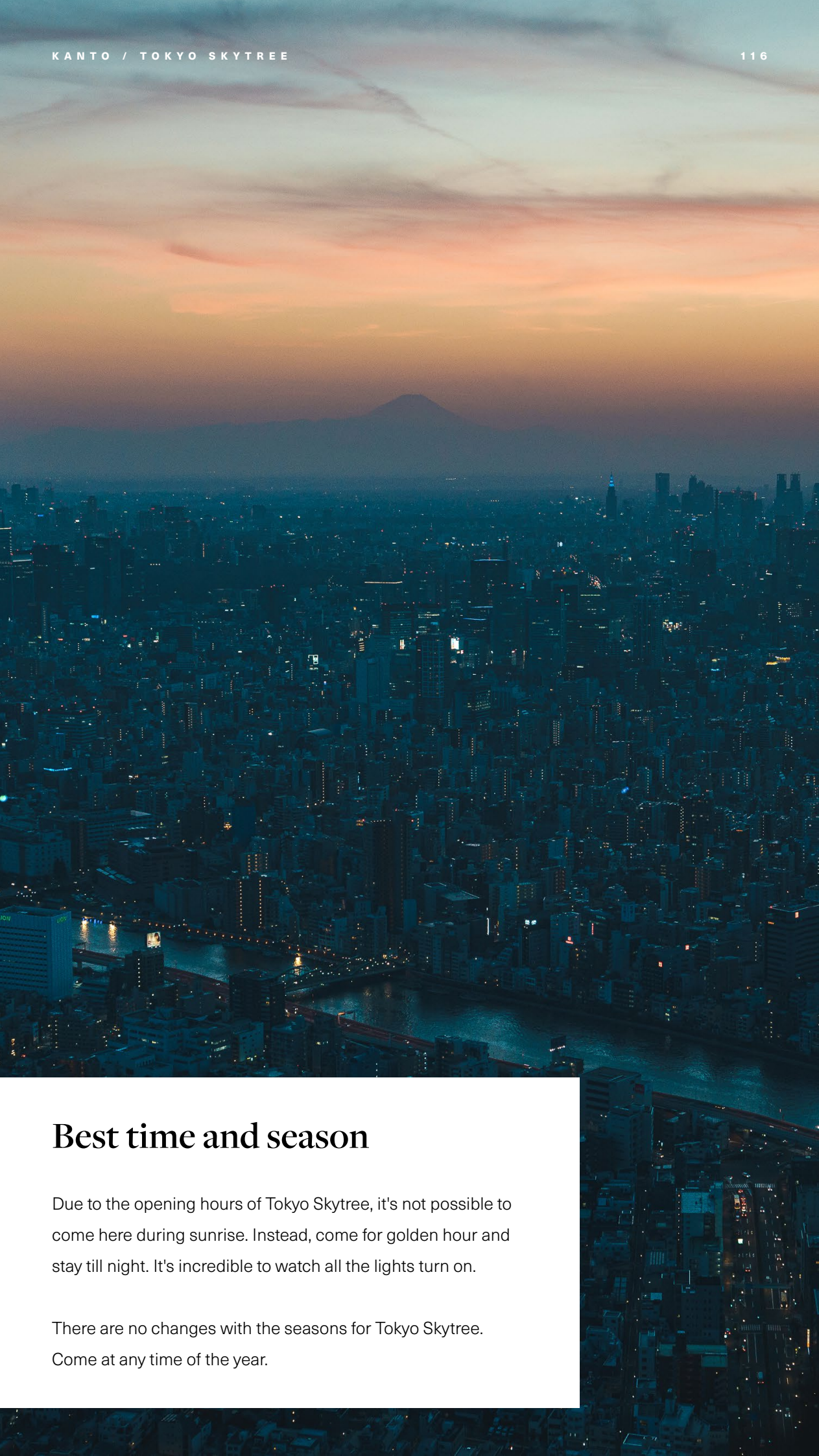
NOT ALLOWED

Tokyo Skytree has a lot of tourists. They really do jam in as many people as possible up there. Be prepared to fight off the hordes of people for a good spot. If you are looking for a sunset-to-blue hour transition, get there early and scout around for some good compositions, set up camp, and stake your spot until the sun sets.

On a clear day, you can even see the top of Mt Fuji in the distance; it's the view that faces south-west.

Although you might be tempted to capture just the wide shot, consider bringing a longer lens too. There are a countless number of compositions to pick off with a telephoto lens. A 100-400mm, 70-200mm, or other telephoto lens comes in handy quite a lot here.

Also keep in mind that you'll be shooting through glass, and most of the time the glass is too far away to put a reflection reducer on. Use a polarizer to help cut through the glare if you need to.



Best time and season

Due to the opening hours of Tokyo Skytree, it's not possible to come here during sunrise. Instead, come for golden hour and stay till night. It's incredible to watch all the lights turn on.

There are no changes with the seasons for Tokyo Skytree. Come at any time of the year.



Travel notes



EASY



20 MINS



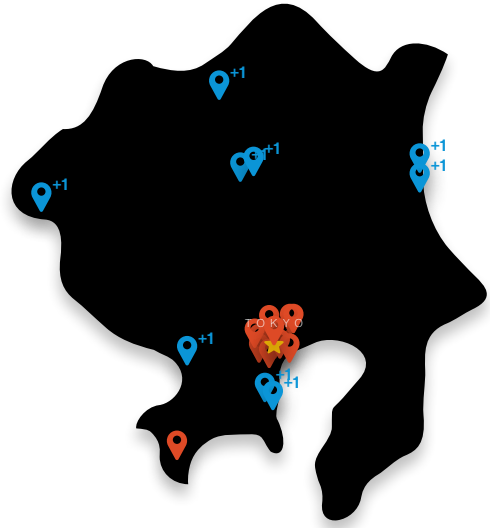
BY TRAIN

Tokyo Skytree is another location that is super accessible from just about anywhere in Tokyo. It takes only 20 minutes by train from Shinjuku station, to which you'll arrive at Oshiage Station which is right underneath the Skytree.

While you're in this part of town, consider visiting **Sumida Park** for a nice, peaceful stroll, **Senso-ji temple** for a cultural experience, or **Jikken bridge** to take this photo to the left.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Kanto.



Photography Guide to Tokyo

For over 40 of the best photography locations *specifically in Tokyo*, check out one of my other books: **Pat Kay's Photography Guide to Tokyo**.

ELSEWHERE IN KANTO



Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum

Great for portraits and you get to eat ramen too!



Sankenien Garden

A large traditional Japanese Garden that has reconstructions of historic buildings.



Mount Takao

The perfect hiking getaway. A 600m peak, hiking trails, and a temple.

ELSEWHERE IN KANTO CONTINUED...



Ashikaga Flower Park

Seasonal flower park known for its spring wisteria festival.



Oarai Isosaki Shrine

A beautiful ocean-side shrine. Locally loved.



Hitachi Seaside park

Rolling fields of seemingly never-ending flowers that change with the seasons.



Kegon Falls

A gigantic 97-metre waterfall; especially beautiful during autumn.



Shinkyo Bridge

A sacred bridge at the entrance of Nikko's temples and shrines.



Onioshidashi Volcanic Park

An abundance of volcanic rock in a park that's full of texture and interest.

Chūbu

35.1833° N, 136.8999° E





CULTURE

LANDSCAPE

Chureito Pagoda

Japan's most famous postcard shot.



[3353-1 Arakura, Fujiyoshida, Yamanashi 403-0011, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



While there's so much to say about Chureito Pagoda, I only really need to mention one thing upfront:

If you're a photographer, this postcard-level Pagoda view is a must-go for any Japan sightseeing itinerary.

This is the classic composition you see on a lot of Japanese tourism marketing. It's an up-close view of a 5-tiered pagoda atop a hill, towering over the sleepy city of Fujiyoshida, with Mount Fuji in the background.

It's the combination of so many stereotypical Japanese elements combined into one composition, as a photographer, it's hard to pass up. That's why it's so popular with locals and tourist photographers alike.

As such, there's rarely a sunrise you'll be alone with the pagoda, as people from all over the world travel to this location to obtain the best lighting conditions for the best shots on a regular basis.



Photography notes

**OK****FRIENDLY****NOT ALLOWED****HIGH**

For the typical compositions, you won't need a lens more zoomed-in than 85mm for most shots, but of course, that depends on what you're going for.

What you do need to look out for, however, is the amount of people that are here at the same time. While there is a multi-tiered "grandstand" for people to stand on, it's all too easy to get in another person's way. Just remember to be polite and conscious of the people behind you.

For sunrise shoots, the light takes a little while to rise over the eastern mountains. Bring a tripod to get some lower-light images and try to position yourself up against the front fence; it'll get crowded quick, however.



Best time and season

Because Chureito Pagoda's view is almost south, both sunrise and sunset work well in terms of light. However, due to the height of the mountains, by the time the sun rises over them, the light is already a little bit harsh.

Conversely, depending on the time of the year, when the sun sets, it may set behind the pagoda, blocking it from view. Keep these two issues in mind when planning your shot.

Come during cherry blossom season for the best composition, as the pagoda is surrounded by cherry trees. Autumn is also a great time to come too.

However, as with all images of Mount Fuji, you may or may not get visibility due to cloud cover. The highest visibility of Mount Fuji is during the winter, and always during the morning.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2 HOURS



BY BUS

If travelling by public transport from Tokyo, the most efficient way is to catch a bus from **Shinjuku bus terminal** to Shimoyoshida station, which will take around 2 hours, then, the walk from there is 20-30 minutes, depending on how long it takes you to walk up those **400 stairs**.

If you're looking for a more scenic route, you can catch a train to Otsuki station, then experience the scenic Fujikyuko line getting off at Shimoyoshida station. The entire trip from Shinjuku station takes around 2-3 hours.

Of course, you can also drive here too, however, there are tolls no matter which way you take to get here, and tolls in Japan are very expensive. Driving from Tokyo will take around 1.5 to 2 hours with stops along the way.





URBAN

Honchō Street

The main street of a sleepy town that sits at the base of Mount Fuji.



[3 Chome-6-12 Shimoyoshida, Fujiyoshida, Yamanashi 403-0004, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



Fujiyoshida and Fujikawaguchiko are two of my absolute, all-time favourite places to visit in all of Japan, and it's so convenient that you can get here in around two hours by car, bus, or train from Tokyo.

This part of the country is an amazingly refreshing break from the hustle and bustle of city life; a down-tempo retreat to recover your senses.

At the base of Mount Fuji lies the town of Fujiyoshida; a sleepy, quiet, rural-ish town that—while being the gateway to more fancy locations like Chureito Pagoda and Lake Kawaguchi—shouldn't be overlooked as "just another quiet little town".

This town has a charm all on its own: streets that run towards Mount Fuji provide the best background a town could ask for, streams and canals run through and add life to this small-town vibe, unassuming doors lead to delicious local eats.

One of the best things to see here, however, is Honcho Street; the main road that runs right through the middle of the town and faces the gigantic Mount Fuji at the end.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



Backstreets of Fujiyoshida

I'd highly encourage you to explore some of the other streets by just walking around. This place has such a small-town vibe, and there are so many little hidden treasures that most people don't bother seeing.

For the main Honcho Street image, due to the size of Mount Fuji relative to the distance of the town, you don't need a very long focal length to achieve these shots. Also, really deep compression is somewhat hard to achieve if you still want to keep Mount Fuji in frame.

At the pinned location, an 85mm is more than enough to ensure some headspace while keeping the top of Mount Fuji in your composition.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2 HOURS

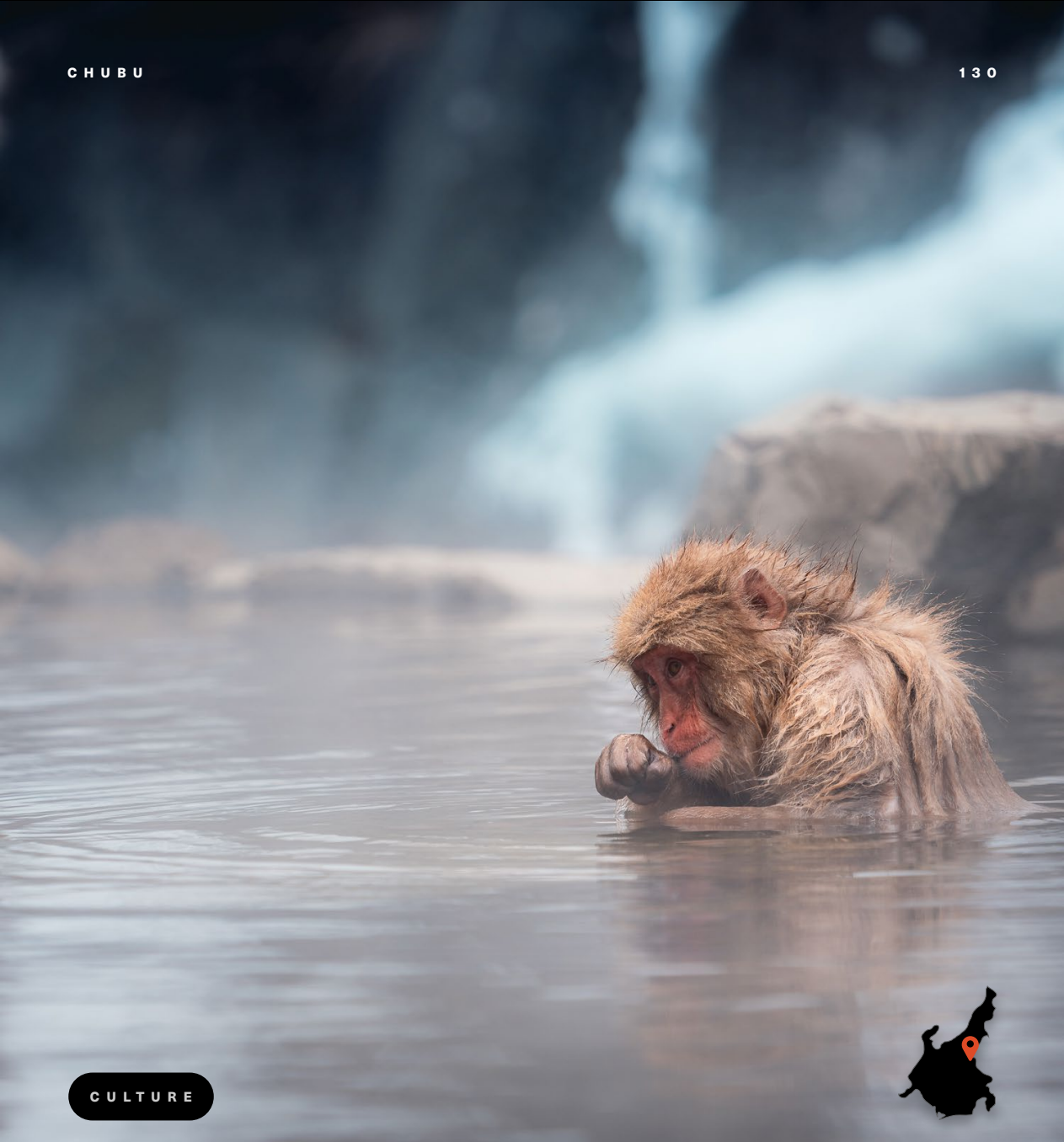


BY BUS

If travelling by public transport from Tokyo, the most efficient way is to catch a bus from **Shinjuku bus terminal** to Mt Fuji Station, which will take around 2 hours. From there it's a 20-minute walk to the base of Honcho street and the pinned location.

If you're looking for a more scenic route, catch a train to Otsuki station, then experience the scenic Fujikyuko line ending at Mt Fuji station. The trip from Shinjuku station takes around 2-3 hours.

Of course, you can also drive to Honcho Street, however, there are tolls no matter which way you take to get there and tolls in Japan are very expensive. Driving from Tokyo will take around 1.5 to 2 hours.



CULTURE



Jigokudani Monkey Park

A monkey park featuring hot spring-bathing monkeys.



6845 Hirao, Yamanochi, Shimotakai District, Nagano 381-0401, Japan



8.30am - 5pm



¥800 per adult



<https://en.jigokudani-yaenkoen.co.jp/>



Monkeys. Bathing in hot springs. You just don't see this kind of stuff every day.

Jigokudani Monkey Park is filled with Japanese Macaques, aka, snow monkeys. They're very accustomed to humans, and the entire park is set up in such a way that although touching and feeding is prohibited, you'll be surrounded by them almost everywhere you go.

You're sure to walk away with many images of cute monkeys, but as a bonus, the walk to the monkey park itself is beautiful, featuring a wide valley, ryokan and geothermic geyser to take photos of too.

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****WINTER****FRIENDLY****MODERATE****UNKNOWN**

As with all wildlife photography, strongly consider bringing a longer lens so that you can capture the monkeys candidly and without too much interaction.

A 100-400mm lens works wonders here (every image in this entry is taken with that focal range), but don't worry if you don't have a long lens; there are so many monkeys around that you're sure to get some great shots with just about anything you bring.

Also, consider bringing a wider lens for the walk-up; the valley and ryokan you pass on the way to the park are quite beautiful too.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~3-4 HOURS



BY CAR

Ideally, you'd visit Jigokudani Monkey Park as part of your adventures through Chubu and/or Nagano.

However, if you're thinking of coming straight here from Tokyo, it's a 3-4 hour drive from Shinjuku station. Once you get to the car park, it's a 20-30 minute walk to the actual inner Monkey Park.

It's also possible to catch a train here, but it's tricky. See the **[official website](#)** where they've detailed all the available options.



LANDSCAPE



Lake Kawaguchi

The most popular of Mount Fuji's five surrounding lakes.



[Fujikawaguchiko, Minamitsuru District, Yamanashi, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-

Personal taste, of course, is subjective. However, even after having travelled up and down all of Japan many times, Lake Kawaguchi and its view of Mount Fuji remains my absolute favourite of them all. I guess that's why I've returned here so, so many times.

Five lakes surround Mount Fuji, each one of them is unique, however, Lake Kawaguchi is by far the most interesting and the most developed of them all.

Lake Kawaguchi is the second largest of the Fuji Five Lakes, spanning 6.13 km². It has a large bridge on its east side, which is also where many hotels and resorts reside.



There's so much to do here: Rent a bicycle and spend your afternoon riding around the entire lake, visit an onsen with a view of Mount Fuji, watch the sun set on the **north eastern shore** of the lake (something I do almost every time I come here), visit one of the **many shrines** that surround the lake, if it's autumn, visit the **Maple Corridor** to view all the Japanese Maple—if you're looking for a fix of nature, this is your spot.

The nearby city, Fujiyoshida, is also a common starting point for hiking up Mount Fuji during the summer months where it's no longer snow-capped and it's finally accessible.

Photography notes

 OK  FRIENDLY  OK  ALL  LOW



To set expectations, **Mount Fuji can be notoriously challenging to capture.**

Sometimes there's too much cloud blocking the view, sometimes it's too overcast, sometimes there's too much fog or haze. The conditions need to be just right. During sunrises and during the winter, however, are your best chances for good conditions.

While we're upping the degree of difficulty to capture Mount Fuji here, Lake Kawaguchi is also one of those locations where there are so many compositions, angles, and perspectives to explore—all of which change depending on the season—that there's no possible way to cover all the common compositions here.



Set your expectations to just cover a few in the likely few days you have here, and **be prepared to come back at different seasons.**

It's worth it, I promise.

From a gear perspective, Mount Fuji is enormous, so very long focal lengths aren't really that required if that's what you're capturing. Depending on the type of shot you're looking for, a 50mm (FF equiv.) lens is more than enough to ensure you can fit everything in.

Bring a longer lens for more detail shots.





Best time and season

Lake Kawaguchi is fortunate enough to be one of the few places in Japan that is absolutely fantastic in **every season**.

In the summer, everything is lush with green, the nearby **Yagizaki park** is covered in purple lavender, and Mount Fuji isn't wearing a snow hat for once.

In the autumn, the entire area is awash in yellows, oranges, and reds. There are so many Japanese maples around, and it's my favourite time of year. Be sure to visit the **Momiji Tunnel** and **Maple Corridor** if you're here during this time.

In the winter, the winds die down and the water becomes still, providing some of the best reflections you'll get. It's also the best time of year for a clear sky and the best visibility. It even occasionally snows here too.

In the spring, Cherry blossoms bloom around the entire lake, and it's such a special time to be riding a bicycle around the entire lake. The smells of fresh air and life are worth it alone.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~2 HOURS



BY BUS

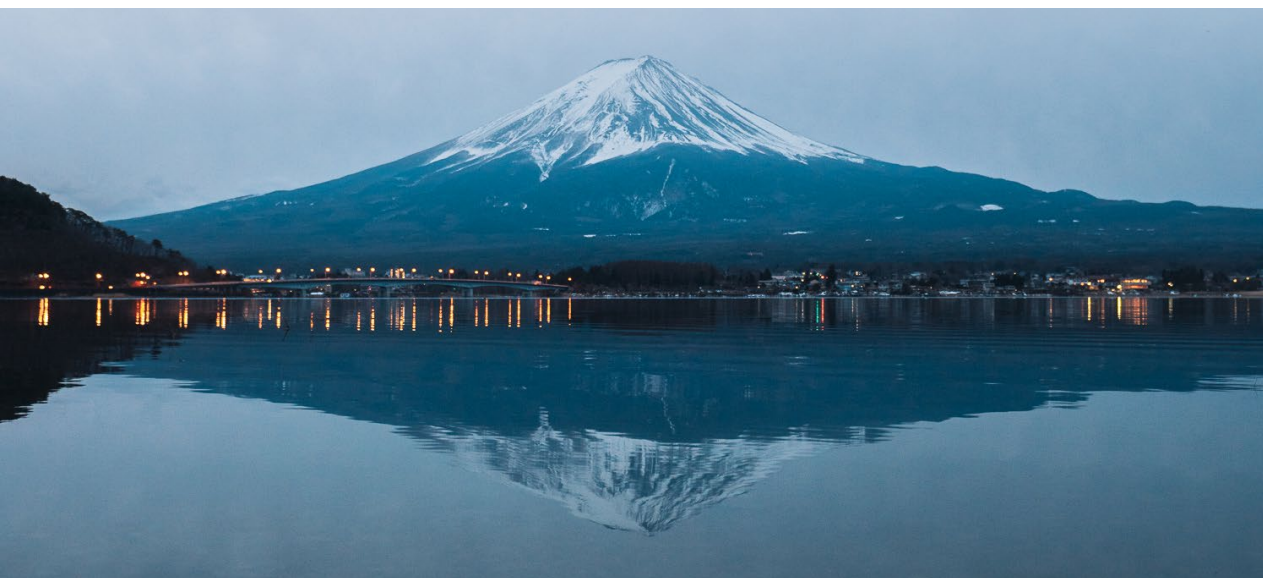
Lake Kawaguchi is relatively straightforward to get to, with many options.

If travelling by public transport from Tokyo, the most efficient way is to catch a bus from **Shinjuku bus terminal** to Kawaguchiko station, which will take around 2 hours, then catch a bus from there to wherever you're staying.

If you're looking for a more scenic route, you can catch a train to Otsuki station, then experience the scenic Fujikyuko line ending at Kawaguchiko station. The entire trip from Shinjuku station takes around 2-3 hours.

Of course, you can also drive to Lake Kawaguchi, however, there are tolls no matter which way you take to get here, and tolls in Japan are very expensive. Driving from Tokyo will take around 1.5 to 2 hours.

Getting around the lake, however, is a little more of a challenge. There are buses, but they're infrequent, so plan ahead. It's more common for people to either drive around or ride bicycles in this area.





CULTURE

ARCHITECTURE

Matsumoto Castle

One of Japan's three premier historic castles.



[4-1 Marunouchi, Matsumoto, Nagano 390-0873, Japan](#)



8.30am - 4.30pm (Castle only. Grounds open 24 hours)



Free



<https://www.matsumoto-castle.jp/>



While there are literally hundreds of castles in Japan, there are only three that are deemed as "premier historic castles". Matsumoto castle, also known as "crow castle" due to the keep's black exterior, is a National Treasure of Japan, and rather than being built on a mountain or a hill, is built on a plain.

Even though it is the oldest five-tiered, six-story castle built all the way back in 1592, Matsumoto castle, unlike many others in Japan, doesn't have a lot of damage and is relatively complete.

In my opinion, it's one of the most beautiful castle keeps in Japan, and I've seen more castles in my life than I can bother to count.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK

Bring a wide lens to capture the grandness and poise of this important castle. Also, consider bringing a tripod to capture reflections of the castle via the moat.

The outside of the castle is open 24 hours, so waking up at sunrise is definitely worth your time. However, if you're looking to capture the actual grounds of the castle and inside the keep, you'll have to wait until it opens at 8.30 am.



Best time and season

Matsumoto castle is surrounded by many cherry blossom trees, so people come from far and wide during the spring. As you could probably imagine, this castle becomes an instant tourist hot spot.

Alternatively, during the winter it occasionally snows here too, so plan ahead if you're looking out for that.

Outside the seasons, come during sunrise for some gorgeous light. Since the castle is tall, the first light hitting the peaks of the main building is just stunning.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~3-4 HOURS



BY CAR

Matsumoto castle is a short 15-minute walk from Kita-Matsumoto station, which you can get to from Tokyo via Shinkansen (bullet train) to Nagano and then a local train in just over 3 hours.




CULTURE

ARCHITECTURE

Narai-juku

A picture-perfect Edo-era post town with a rich history.

 [Narai, Shiojiri, Nagano 399-6303, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 <https://www.naraijuku.com/>



If there was ever a town that looked like a Japanese movie set, it's Narai-juku.

Long ago in the Edo period, there were 5 routes connecting Edo (old Tokyo) and Kyoto. Nakasendō (中山道, lit. Central mountain route) was one of the more popular routes, as the roads were well maintained and did not require traversal over water.

Along the Nakasendō, there were 69 Shukuba (宿場), or "post towns", where travellers could rest as they travelled through the route.

In the middle of them all lay Narai-juku, the 34th station, and the most prosperous of them all.

Since then, many of the other post towns have been rebuilt, redeveloped, or otherwise no longer exist. However, in 1978 Narai-juku was declared a cultural asset and now is preserved in its Edo-era look and feel.

Narai-juku is also sometimes referred to as 奈良井千軒, or Narai-senken; "Narai of a thousand houses". The preserved houses have two stories and look very similar to one another, but the collective cohesiveness of the town is where it gets its name.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



Narai-juku is a great place to document what old Japan used to look and feel like. There's a variety of compositions depending on what you're looking for. The most famous composition, however, is the main image for this entry.

This perspective is on the north side, just a few minutes down from the station. **You can find that location here.**

Note that you need a longer lens to obtain the compression required for the shot. 135mm+ is recommended. The main image for this entry was shot at 400mm, although a 200mm lens works well too.

Don't forget to wander around and check out all the other buildings too! Narai-juku is really a time machine back into the past.

Best time and season

The town doesn't really "wake up" until lunchtime, as you'd expect from such a quiet town in the middle of nowhere. So, depending on what you're going for, plan accordingly.

Also, this area doesn't really benefit from arriving too early; if the sky is not high enough, the street doesn't receive enough light to make the houses stand out.

Narai-juku occasionally has a chance to snow in the Winter also, so if you're looking for a snowy street shot, plan ahead. Otherwise, it looks mostly the same all year round.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~3-4 HOURS



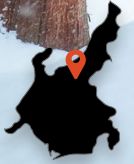
BY CAR

Narai-juku is in the middle of the mountains, so it's a bit of a pain to get to—driving is recommended.

If catching public transport, you can catch the local train from Nagoya or Nagano. However, it has to be a local train, as the limited express and express trains don't stop here.

Ideally, you'd visit Narai-juku as part of your exploration around the Nagano area. There's not too much to do here, so a quick hour or two-long stop will suffice for most people.

LANDSCAPE



Togakushi Shrine Zuishinmon Gate

A corridor of giant cedar trees over 400 years old.



[Togakushi, Nagano, 381-4101, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<https://www.togakushi-jinja.jp/about/index.php#a01>



Upper shrine entrance

North-west of Nagano city lies Togakushi Shrine, a unique shrine split into three parts; a lower, a middle, and an upper shrine.

The lower shrine is located within the nearby town of Togakushi. From there, it's common for visitors to hike 2km up to the middle shrine, Togakushi-jinja, nestled in the mountains.

However from there, it's another 2-3km hike towards the Upper Togakushi Shrine, the location this entry is covering.

It's at this part of the shrine that is the most visually pleasing. As you pass the thatched roof of the Zuishinmon gate, you'll be surrounded by a corridor of gigantic 400-year-old Japanese cedar trees reaching for the sky.

It's surreal—this place is quite remote; there's no sound of cities, no pollution, no distractions; just you and nature. Amazing.

Photography notes



OK



WINTER



FRIENDLY



LOW



UNKNOWN

A combination of very wide and very narrow lenses work really well here.

On the approach, using long lenses enables you to compress the tunnel of trees, providing very different images to if you were just to shoot this wide.

The classic wide shots are very nice here too, though, so bring both.

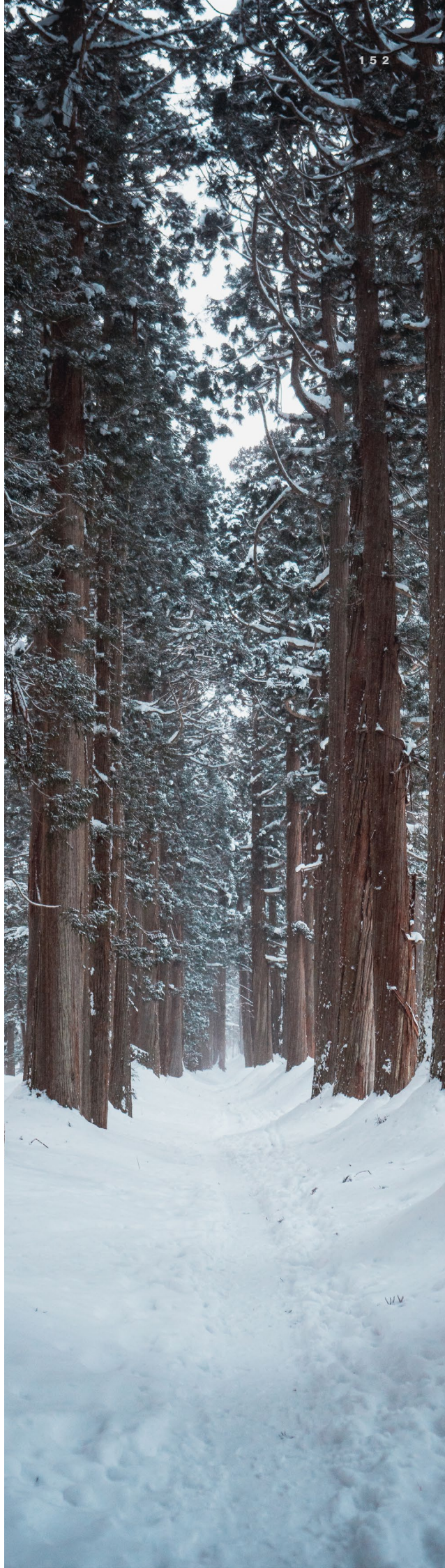
Generally, there aren't too many people in the way of crowds here; even less if you come during the snow and winter, which is the time I recommend to come.



Best time and season

The best time to come here is winter after heavy snowfall.

With a thick blanket of snow on the ground and the trees lightly dusted a snowy white, the corridor of trees is just an absolutely magical place to explore.



Travel notes

**HARD****~4-5 HOURS****BY CAR**

Upper Togakushi Shrine isn't the most accessible place to get to by public transport. Trains aren't available, but there is a scheduled bus that cycles between here and Nagano.

Note that it's very common for timetables to change with the seasons, so please check the **[access page](#)** of the official website for the latest updates.

For those driving, there's a **[car park at the trailhead](#)**. If you're coming in winter, make sure to have those snow tyres!



Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Chubu.



Shirakawa-go

A remote village known for its thatch-roofed houses.



Tsumago-juku

A historic, restored Edo-era post town



Hakuba

One of Japan's most popular snow-sport villages.



Shiroyone Senmaida Rice Terraces

Cascading rice terraces next to the ocean.



Nihondaira

A lookout point with panoramic views over Shizuoka and Mount Fuji.

Kansai

34.6413° N, 135.5629° E





URBAN

LANDSCAPE

NIGHT

Abeno Harukas

The tallest skyscraper in Japan with an amazing observatory.



1 Chome-1-43 Abenosuji, Abeno Ward, Osaka, 545-6016, Japan



10am - 11pm



¥1500 per adult





<https://www.abenoharukas-300.jp/index.html>



Abeno Harukas is a multi-purpose building that houses the biggest department store in Japan; the Abeno Haraukas Kintetsu Department Store. It's also home to an art museum and a hotel. More importantly for us, however, it has a fantastic, 360-degree observation deck occupying the top 3 floors, which provides the tallest view in all of Osaka.

Fun fact: It's also the tallest commercial *building* in Japan, and while that classification doesn't fit in the same rules as the tallest *towers* like the Tokyo Skytree, it's still pretty neat, and pretty damn high.

Photography notes

	OK		ALL
	FRIENDLY		MODERATE
	NOT ALLOWED		

Occasionally, especially during sunset, the observation deck can get quite busy. Make sure to explore some compositions you want to capture beforehand, so you know where to go when the light is right.

Also, as is the case whenever shooting through glass, a Lens Skirt, reflection-cutting device or polariser is highly recommended, as there is **significant** glare at this location.

Tripods are allowed up against the glass here too, so be sure to stay until blue hour to get those longer exposures.



Travel notes



MODERATE



20 MIN



BY TRAIN

Abeno Harukas is very accessible; the Osaka-Abenobashi station is right underneath it.

It's a 20-minute train ride from Osaka station or just a short 9-minute ride from Namba station.

If you're into night time street photography or just a very Japanese night vibe in general, head to **Tsutenkaku** and walk around the **Shinsekai** area nearby after you've finished shooting the Abeno Harukas observatory.

Shinsekai is a wonderful shopping area that lights up at night and it's a great place for an evening stroll in the city.

CULTURE



Arashiyama Bamboo Forest

A mesmerising forest of soaring bamboo stalks.



[Ukyo Ward, Kyoto, 616-0000, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<https://kyoto.travel/en/blog/33.html>



One of the most photographed locations in the city, Arashiyama Bamboo Forest is what it sounds like; a forest filled with dense, green bamboo that soars so high up that you can't see the sky.

You'll follow a well-trodden touristy path that twists and turns until you reach the end. It's not a huge place, but with just the right amount of light and a gentle wind moving the stalks back and forth, it's magical.

It is, however, again, one of the most photographed locations in the city, and with that, comes the tourists.

I highly advise you to come earlier in the morning before the big rush.

Seriously. The paths are narrow, and there's not that much space to move. I've seen pictures and Instagram stories of friends who have come mid-day and the entire place looks like a mosh pit.

However, don't be put off by the crowds; it's still very much worth your visit.

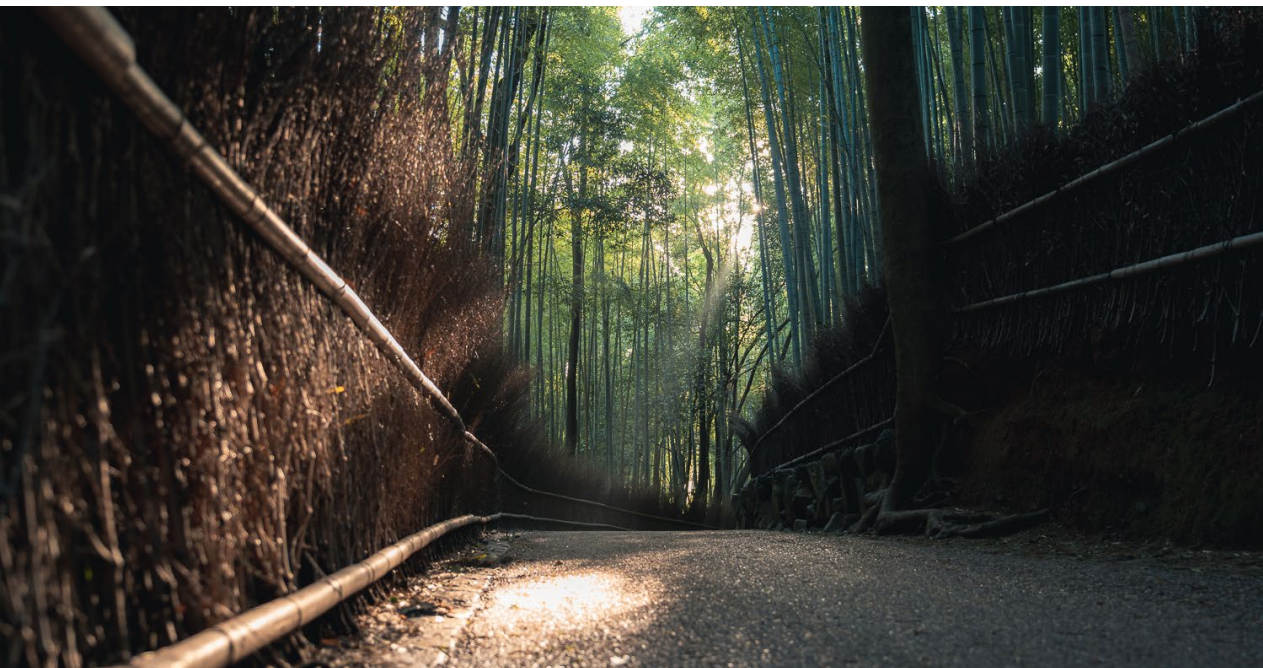
Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****ALL****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

If you're getting here via public transport and the standard method of entry, the most common shot (the hero image of this entry) is at the end of the path. You'll know when you get there because it's a T-intersection and the bamboo ends where you're supposed to turn around and look down the path you just came from.

If you happen to be shooting from that location, anything goes; wide, compressed, whatever you feel like.

Just... don't be that person with the tripod taking up all the space for an hour. It's rude. It's a tight space, and you don't need to take a long exposure here, so be courteous of the people around you, get your shot, and let the next person take theirs.



Best time and season

If you want fewer people, come earlier.

Note that due to the density of the bamboo, first light and the first half-hour of sunrise won't do you much good, as it will take a little while for the light to be high enough to start passing through the trees.

Unfortunately, that's the trade-off you have to make at this location; people, or light.

Travel notes



EASY



29 MINS



BY TRAIN

Arashiyama is on the western outskirts of the city, and it's definitely a change of pace out this way.

To get here, take a train to Saga-Arashiyama station. From there it's about a 12-minute walk to the heart of the forest. This is about a 29-minute journey in total from Kyoto station.

While you're in this part of town, consider exploring the other sights around here too. Taking a boat or walking along the Katsura river is absolutely gorgeous, especially if you're coming during Cherry blossom season or during autumn.

There's also the **Kimono forest** (which is especially beautiful at night) and the **monkey park** to visit too!



STREET



Dotonbori North

Straight vanishing points and overhanging wires on grid-like streets.



1-chōme-7 Higashishinsaibashi, Chūō-ku, Osaka, 542-0083



Public, open 24 hours



Free



-



While **Dotonbori** is most certainly the star of the show in this part of town; if you're looking to capture more everyday urban life, street photography style, this area is your well-off-the-beaten-path location.

I call it Dotonbori North, but really, it's just the entire area north of Dotonbori.

This area is based on a grid, divided into four by the way the Nagahoribashi and the Shinsaibashi train lines intersect.

What you'll find here is real-life Osaka; accompanied by the longest street-level vanishing points in the city, and those trademark overhanging wires that really give Osaka its feel.

This is a fantastic area to spend a few hours roaming around in taking photos and getting lost in the city.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



MODERATE



NOT ALLOWED

This area is fantastic for long compression shots. Bring your big lenses, stand in the middle of the roads (while watching out for traffic, of course), and snag yourselves those compressed vanishing point shots.

There's no 'typical' shot here; this is just pure Japanese street photography.

Enjoy everyday Japan.

Shinsaibashi-Suji Shopping Street



Best time and season

I recommend coming here during a sunny mid-afternoon.

The golden light will be amazing, and it'll stream west to east as you walk up and down the grids.

The light spills between the streets, and you'll be able to catch people as they come in and out of the harsh shadows.

Come any time of the year.





KANSAI / DOTONBORI NORTH

168

Travel notes



EASY



16 MIN



BY TRAIN

Super easy to get to. To be right in the middle of it all, get off at Nagahoribashi station, which takes 16 minutes from Osaka station.

Alternatively, start at Shinsaibashi or Osaka-Namba if you want to capture the craziness that is **Shinsaibashi-Suji Shopping Street** first.

If you're coming during mid-afternoon, shoot a few hours, then potentially spend blue hour in Dotonbori. This is the time when I personally think it looks the best, as the sky still has a little bit of luminance to it from blue hour, all the lights are on, and people are starting to come out.



CULTURE

Enkoji temple

A Buddhist temple with picture-perfect Japanese gardens.



[13 Ichijoji Kotanicho, Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 606-8147, Japan](#)



9am - 5pm



¥500 per adult



<https://www.enkouji.jp/>



Ugh, I'm a sucker for Japanese gardens; the perfectly manicured spaces, the deliberate ornaments and flourishings, the attention to detail, the amount of love and hard work that's been put into them. They're just wonderful to be around and to look at.

My favourite ones are typically the smaller ones; they usually look like they've had more consideration when it comes to placement of the plants and how they co-exist with one another.

Enkoji temple is one such temple that's perhaps my favourite Japanese garden in all of Kansai.

It has everything: a zen garden, Cherry blossoms, a bamboo forest, adorable statues, every kind of classic Japanese flower you can imagine. Best of all, it's incredible in absolutely every season. However, my favourite by far is autumn when the Momiji (Japanese maple) come alive.

Photography notes

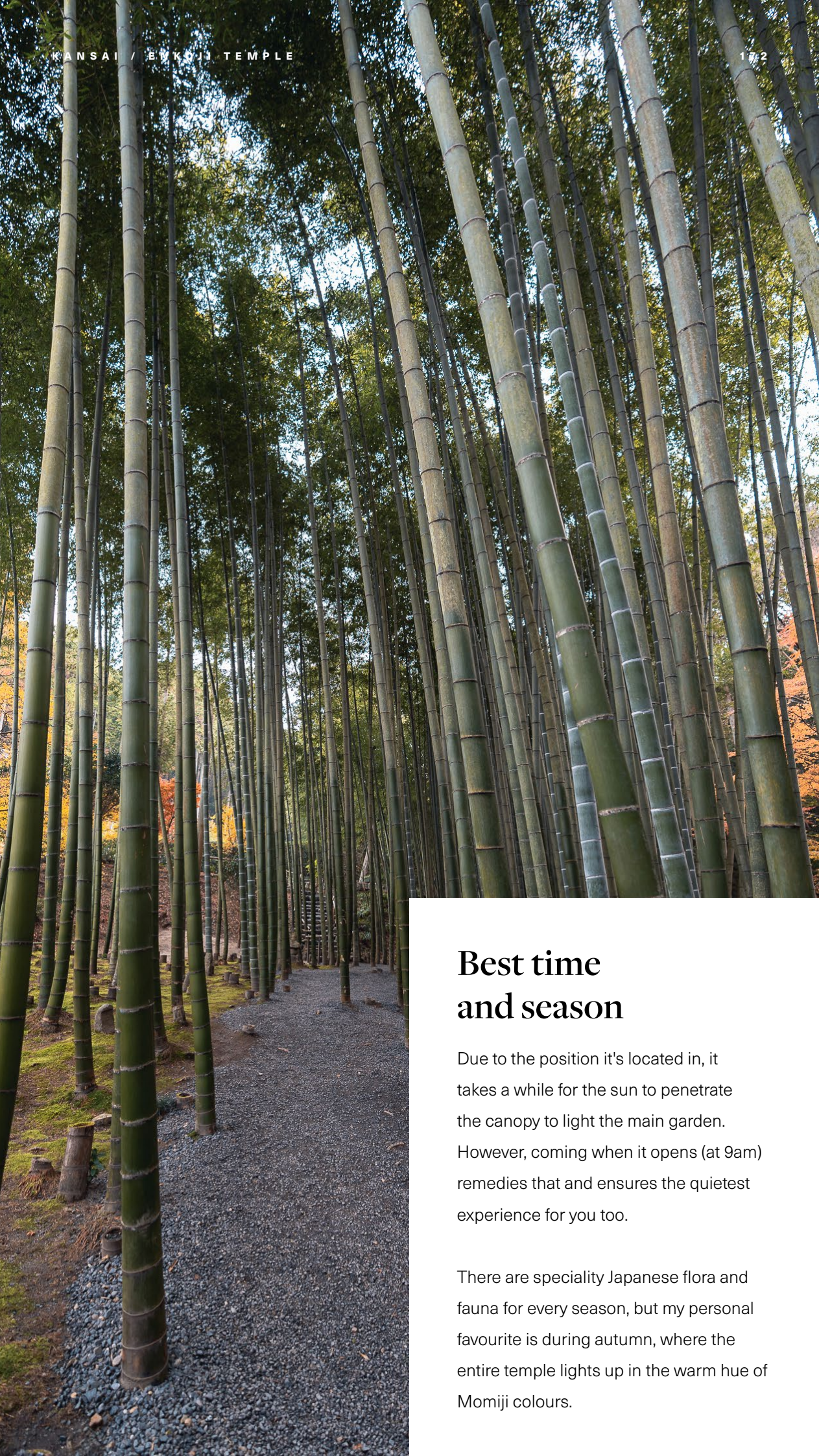
**NOT RECOMMENDED****AUTUMN****FRIENDLY****MODERATE****NOT ALLOWED**

While this temple is a spectacle to look at just about everywhere, make sure to venture inside the buildings and shoot outwards into the foliage too.

There are some paths and angles that are quite tight, so make sure to bring a wider lens. However, there's also a bunch of details to be had here composition-wise, so bring a tele lens too.

Actually, just bring all the lenses. Bring all the things.





Best time and season

Due to the position it's located in, it takes a while for the sun to penetrate the canopy to light the main garden. However, coming when it opens (at 9am) remedies that and ensures the quietest experience for you too.

There are speciality Japanese flora and fauna for every season, but my personal favourite is during autumn, where the entire temple lights up in the warm hue of Momiji colours.

Travel notes



MODERATE



42 MINS



BY TRAIN

Enkoji is somewhat out of the way of the central part of town. Still, it's relatively straight-forward to get to, even if it does take 42 minutes from Kyoto station.

From Kyoto station, you catch the Karasuma line to Matsugasaki station, then catch the bus from there to Ichijoji Shimizucho. From there it's a 10-minute walk to Enkoji.

This area has quite a few other Japanese gardens and temples to check out if Enkoji didn't satisfy your temple cravings.

Explore the nearby **Shisen-do** (which is probably my other favourite one in this area), or if you want to walk a little further (just under 15 minutes), **Manshu-in Monzeki** and **Tanukidani-fudo-in** temples aren't too far either.



CULTURE



Fushimi Inari Shrine

A thousand torii gates dedicated to the Shinto god Inari.



68 Fukakusa Yabunouchicho, Fushimi Ward, Kyoto, 612-0882, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<http://inari.jp/en/>



No Japan guide would be complete without one of the most famous locations in all of Japan; Fushimi Inari Shrine.

Dedicated to the Shinto god of rice and agriculture, Inari, a thousand+ torii gates line a 2-3 hour hike up to the top of Inariyama and back.

Inari shrines are very important and perhaps the most common types of Shinto shrines, with an estimated over 30,000 Inari shrines located all across Japan.

Fushimi Inari in Kyoto is the head Inari shrine of Japan, thus its significance and its extravagance.

Each torii gate is donated by a Japanese business in an offering towards business prosperity. They cost between 400,000 yen (~\$3750USD) and 2 million yen (~18.8kUSD) depending on the size, and the donor's name and date are inscribed on the back of each gate.

Photography notes



NOT RECOMMENDED



FRIENDLY



NOT ALLOWED



ALL



HIGH

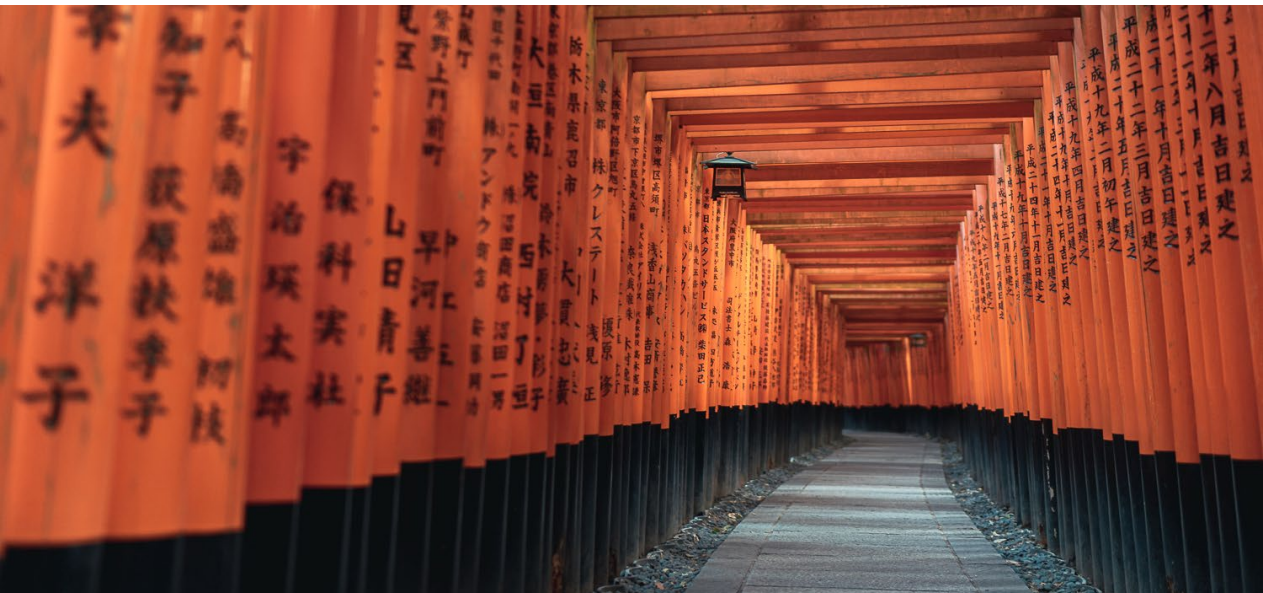


Photography notes

While Fushimi Inari Shrine is absolutely beautiful and a must-go if you're in Japan, it also can be a big tourist trap (however compared to the world, it's not bad at all.).

While there aren't many sleazy vendors or any of the typical nastiness you might get at a place with lots of tourists, what you do get is, well, lots of tourists.

Shooting the Senbon Torii (the thousand torii gates) is hard enough due to the small pathways. However, especially at the start of the trail, it's challenging to achieve images with no one (or just you) in them.



Coming earlier doesn't offer that much reprieve either. During the early hours, there are certainly fewer people. However, there's no light until an hour or two after sunrise because of where the trail is located on the mountain.

In any case, come prepared for anything; there are a plethora of compositions, subjects and perspectives to choose from. Super duper wide (like 12mm) lenses work really well here, but so do 200mm at some locations too—the compression is nice.

When you're done with the Senbon Torii, consider exploring the rest of the shrine; it's massive. Although there's not too much to see past the Yotsutsuji lookout, and the summit is a little bit of a disappointment visually, it's still worth exploring at least once just for the experience to see what's up there.

Also, the rest of the shrines back on the ground level are fantastic to roam around too.

Best time and season

Fushimi Inari Shrine is best when there are fewer people, which is typically on weekday mornings.

It doesn't change with the seasons too much, aside from the surrounding foliage turning orange during the autumn season.

It's explorable at night too; some lights turn on within the Senbon torii. Some people, however, find it a little spooky at night.





Travel notes



EASY



10 MIN



BY TRAIN

Fushimi Inari Shrine is very easy to get to.

It's just a single train from Kyoto station that takes only 7 minutes to Inari station. From there, it's a few minutes walk to the shrine, and a few minutes walk to the back of the main shrine, where the beginning of the trail is.

After you've finished exploring, if you're in the mood for more temples, I'd recommend the nearby **Tofukuji** and **Daigoji** temples too.



CULTURE


STREET



Hanami-koji Street

Kyoto's most famous geisha district.

 [Gionmachi Minamigawa, Kyoto, 600-8340, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 <https://www.gion.or.jp/map/>



Hanamikoji street is in the heart of Gion, and it's arguably Kyoto's most famous geisha district.

It's an upper-class part of town, home to some of the most expensive restaurants in Kyoto where diners are entertained by Geiko (Geisha) and Maiko (Geiko in training). They perform a variety of entertainment, from tea ceremonies, singing and dancing, and general conversation.

Many tourists come to this area in hopes of seeing Geisha because this area has the highest concentration of them due to the types of establishments around, in addition to the Gion Corner performance hall nearby. It's not uncommon to see them moving between the various establishments up and down the street.

The entire area is worth visiting even without Geisha though; all the houses and establishments are very traditional-looking; adorned with lanterns, wooden facades, and paved streets.

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****ALL****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

Make sure you're south of Shijo-dori if your intention is to possibly see Geisha.

As of 2020, exploring the backstreets in this area is no longer allowed. The Kyoto council has placed restrictions and fines of up to ¥10,000 for trespassing within them. Therefore as of now, the only place you are allowed to take photos is on the main streets.

This is due to the steadily growing number of disrespectful tourists treating the Geisha like objects; harassing, grabbing, and annoying them as they're just going about trying to do their jobs. It's horrible.

Please remember that they're humans too and they're just trying to get on with their day. ***Under no circumstances should you ever feel it appropriate to touch or grab them***, especially if you just want a photo. Ask first or shoot from afar.

Sounds like a silly thing to say perhaps. Still, after personally having seen obnoxious tourists lose their minds at the sight of a Maiko in real life, and them literally running at them, grabbing them like rag dolls and harassing them (both males **and** females, mind you), I really cannot help but take this stance here. I understand the excitement, I really do. But please be respectful.



Best time and season

If you're looking to spot a Maiko or Gaiko, the best time is around 5pm.

It's around this time that they will start preparing for their evening shifts and are most likely to be on the move between their locations for the night.

Otherwise, suppose you're looking to capture the fabulous architecture that surrounds this area. In that case, mid-afternoon light provides amazing east-west shadows that cast harsh light slices into the small alleyways. It's wonderful.





Travel notes



EASY



21 MINS



BY TRAIN

Hanami-koji Street is in the heart of most things you'd want to see during your time in Kyoto.

It's a short walking distance to many things worth visiting, like **Yasaka Shrine**, **Maruyama Park**, **Gion Tatsumi bridge**, and **Pontocho Alley**.

That being said, I'd recommend spending at least an hour or two roaming the streets in the provided pin on this entry. Perhaps if you choose to do that mid-late afternoon, you can stop by my favourite Ramen shop in Kyoto, **Musoshin**, and then perhaps spend some time walking up the Kamo river at night.



CULTURE



Ine Fishing Village

A quiet fishing village featuring boat houses called funaya.



Japan, 〒626-0423 Kyoto, Yoza District, Ine, Hirata, 77



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<http://www.town.ine.kyoto.jp/chosei/chiikigaiyo/1447030283073.html>



Far away from the hustle and bustle of the major cities, Ine village is a little fishing town that lines the coast of Ine bay.

Now, when I say "lines", I mean that literally. This town is famous for its "funaya", or, boathouses. These are houses made on top of the water, such that each house can house a little boat underneath it.

Ine fishing village was named one of the most attractive villages in Japan, and this is the reason why.

Over 230 funaya house the 2,200 residents that live here, stretching just 5km from end to end. It's a lovely change of pace, with a unique small-town but also fishing-town vibe.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



Because of the way the town is shaped along the bay, there are many instances where you'll be shooting across a distance of water.

Bring a 50mm equiv. or greater lens to get across this distance. You'll be able to get up close and personal with documenting the houses, but the majority of images will most likely be shot from a distance here.

There are also boat tours that loop around the bay for about half an hour. You'll see these next to the **public parking**. These tours allow you to cover the most distance and get the most amount of compositions possible, but just remember to crank your shutter speed up because of all the rocking about.



Best time and season

Lush mountains surround Ine fishing village, so autumn colours are always a great bet. Otherwise, there aren't any drastic changes with the seasons. It does, however, occasionally snow here in winter if you're looking for that too.



Travel notes



HARD



~2.5 HOURS



BY CAR

Ine fishing village is far.

By public transport, you can catch the Hashidate limited express from Kyoto station to Miyazu station, and from there taking an hour-long bus to the start of Ine fishing village. All up, that journey could take you around three and a half hours at best.

Alternatively, you can drive. A car ride will take around two and a half hours, with tolls.

No matter which way you decide to come, it's a lot of distance to cover for a day trip, so if you don't want to do that and would rather stay the night, there are plenty of guesthouses here too.





CULTURE

ARCHITECTURE



Kinkaku-ji

A Zen temple covered in gold-leaf.



1 Kinkakujicho, Kita Ward, Kyoto, 603-8361, Japan



9am - 5pm



¥400 per adult



<https://www.shokoku-ji.jp/kinkakuji/about/>



While Kinkaku-ji, aka the "Golden Pavilion" is bound to be on most "10 top things to do in Kyoto" lists, it's relatively deserving of such wide praise. After all, how often do you see a temple completely covered in gold?!

Because Kinkaku-ji is squarely on the tourist path so well-trodden, I won't bore you too much with the details of its history and story, which you can find all over the internet.

Instead, let's dig into what most guides won't tell you and why you're here; the photography notes of why this temple is visually amazing and how to capture it.

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****ALL****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

The classic image and perspective from this location is the one where the temple is reflected in the pond.

There are multiple compositions across the pond, however, what you're looking for is a time where there are few tourists, there's no wind, and gentle light.

Kinkaku-ji gets very, very busy; I mean, bus-loads-of-tourists-busy. Sometimes it's quite challenging to jostle your way to get the composition you're looking for.

Also, the reflections on the pond only really become clear if there's no wind, so check the weather before you leave to see if it's a windy day or not.

The temple aside, the surrounding area is very nice to photograph too. It's quite a large area so most focal lengths will work here.



Best time and season

My suggestion is to come as soon as it opens, at 9am, during the Winter.

This is just my own preference—there's less green around the pavilion making it stand out more, and winter mornings generally are more still and calm. This increases your likelihood of a strong reflection from the pond.

If you're fortunate, it might even snow, then you've got something magic.

For all other times, I recommend Spring, where the entire temple is lush with green and feels lively.



Travel notes



EASY



31 MINS



BY TRAIN

Kinkaku-ji, unfortunately, is on the other side of town if you're staying either in the Kawaramachi area (which I recommend you do when visiting Kyoto) or near Kyoto station.

Getting there from Kyoto station isn't too bad. It takes just half an hour via train to Emmachi station, then a bus. However, if you're in the Kawaramachi area, it'll take 41 minutes via bus.



CULTURE

ARCHITECTURE

Kiyomizu-dera

One of Japan's most famous and celebrated temples.



[294 Kiyomizu, Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto, 605-0862, Japan](#)



6am - 6pm



¥300 per adult



<https://www.kiyomizudera.or.jp/en/>



One of the most visited places in Kyoto, and for a good reason.

Kiyomizu-dera (lit. "Pure Water Temple") is one of Japan's most famous and celebrated temples.

The main temple is built entirely without a single nail. Instead, the building is wholly comprised of interlocking joints and 168 pillars, each 12 meters high.

"Butai" is perhaps what the main temple is most famous for; it's a stage that juts out from the main building which gives it a view that overlooks Kyoto.

Surrounding Butai, there are many other picturesque things to see too, such as the **Otowa Waterfall**, **Nishimon**, **清水寺 三重塔**, and many more. It's a gorgeous location that's very worthy of a few hours of your afternoon, especially if you take your time walking up through Higashiyama district.

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****AUTUMN****FRIENDLY****VERY HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

Kiyomizu-dera is a very popular location among tourists and locals alike. As such, it can get very congested in certain areas, especially in the Higashiyama district's path leading up towards the temple, and inside each of the buildings.

On the whole, however, there's more than enough space for larger photography bags and such, but just be patient when photographing here, things, and people here move slowly.



Best time and season

Come during Cherry blossom season or during autumn. These are the best times of year to visit and capture Kiyomizu-dera, although it looks great all year round.

In general, come during the mid-afternoon or sunset. Images from **Okuno-in Hall** line up directly with the stage of the main building and give panoramic views of Kyoto city over a setting sun in the same frame.



Travel notes

**EASY****31 MINS****TRAIN/WALK**

While Kiyomizu-dera isn't that close to the main city area, it's close to quite a few other things that are worth bundling together in a single adventure.

A potential route I could suggest might be to walk from **Kiyomizu-Gojō station**, grab yourself a coffee at **% ARABICA**, spend your time walking from there towards the temple, slowly making your way past **Hokan-ji temple**, **Nineizaka**, **Sanneizaka**, and finally to Kiyomizu-dera.

This walk is a classic Kyoto experience; one I'd highly recommend for every first-timer (Although I still do this walk almost every time I return to Kyoto even though I've been dozens of times).





ARCHITECTURE





Muro Art Forest

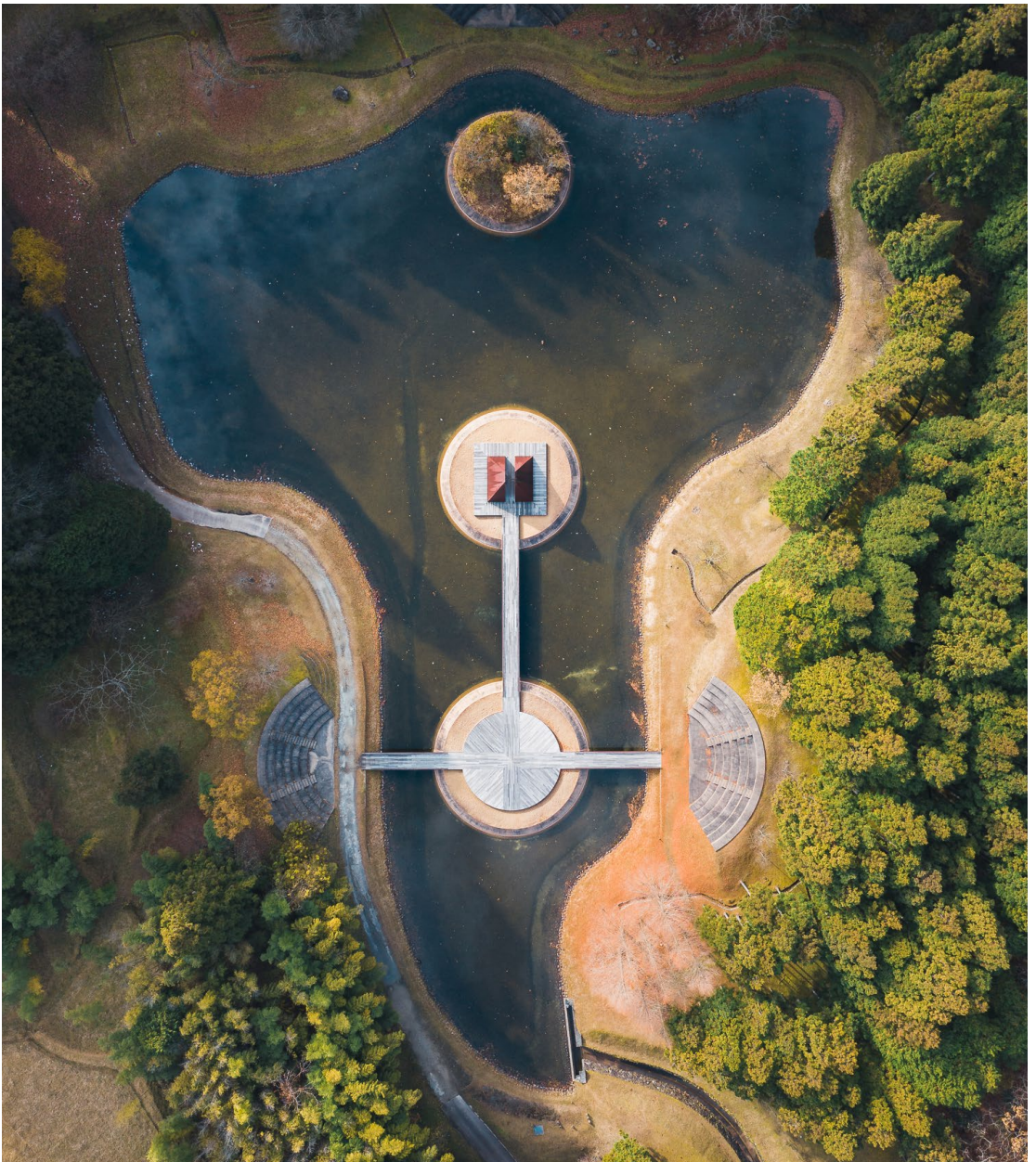
A unique collection of sculptures nestled in a quiet, distant forest.

 [181 Murou, Uda, Nara 633-0421, Japan](#)

 10am - 5pm

 ¥400 per adult

 <http://www.city.uda.nara.jp/sanzyoukouen/concept/>



If you're an art lover and you chase experiences off the beaten path, Muro Art Forest is for you. Most people haven't heard of this place before.

Designed mostly by Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan in 2006, Muro Art Forest an art project on a large expanse of land (rare in Japan in and of itself) dedicated to a celebration of nature and cultural art.

While I won't spoil too much for you because there's just so much art-related cultural significance here (and they document it all really well in the visitor centre), what you need to know is that Muro Art Forest is a collection of sculptures you can walk on, crawl under, and be a part of.

It's literally art in the forest, and it's amazing.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



Unlike most architectural-focused locations, Muro Art Forest is big, with lots of walking space. Because of that, using longer lenses like 50mm+ is actually feasible depending on what you're going for.

Of course, bring your super wides with you as always, as some of the installations have tight quarters you can really get into and discover.

Other than that, because this place isn't really well known, there are usually not that many people here. If you come when it opens, you'll probably have the entire park to yourself for a while.

Best time and season

Muro Art Forest is lovely when the surrounding scene is lush and vibrant. Spring and summer are great times to come, although it's mostly the same all year round.

I do, however, know for a fact that in winter it may snow here, and that's just magical if you have the opportunity to experience that.



Travel notes

**HARD****2 HOURS****BY CAR**

Muro Art Forest is about a 2-hour drive from Kyoto, but it's also seriously in the middle of nowhere.

Public transport is also possible if you're a patient person. From Kyoto, you can catch two trains, a bus, and walk 15 minutes, the entire journey taking about 2.5 hours one way.

While you're in Nara though, consider tying this experience in with visiting the deer at **Nara Park** or the Cherry blossom trees at **Yoshino**.

LANDSCAPE

CULTURE



Nara Park

A giant public park filled with museums, art, and friendly deer.



[Nara, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<http://nara-park.com/>



No recommendations in the Kansai area would be complete without a visit to the famous Nara Park.

Nara Park has it all; the 660-hectare park is home to temples, pagodas, traditional Japanese gardens, and perhaps most famously, bowing deer. Yes, deer that bow their heads in an effort to coerce you to give them food.

The deer are incredibly tame, and the park is home to thousands of them. You'll see them hanging out in many areas of the park, occasionally even crossing roads and getting into trouble. However, most of them will be grazing around, waiting for you to feed them deer crackers that are sold all over the park.

Within the park itself and in-between moments of deer spotting, there are plenty of extremely photogenic locations, especially during autumn and spring. Places such as **Ukimidou Pavilion** and **Kagamiike** are especially picturesque for the more cultural side of things, while **Isui-en** is a gorgeous Japanese-style garden for you nature lovers.

Photography notes

**OK****AUTUMN****FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

Recommendations are hard to give in a location that has so many things to capture, so bring gear that can support all styles of images.

Usually, for animal images, I'd recommend a mid/long lens to capture them. However, one of the charms of Nara Park is that you can get up close and personal, so wide lenses are definitely viable here.

One thing I will mention though is that although the park is gigantic, there will definitely be many people visiting no matter what time of year you decide to come. It's *that* popular.



Best time and season

The best times to come to Nara Park are during autumn for the warm colours, and spring for the cherry blossoms.

The park is gigantic, so you're sure to find compositions no matter what time you come. For locations such as Ukimidou Pavilion, arriving at the very break of dawn won't give you light immediately, however. There are some mountains the sun has to rise above, so expect sunlight about 10-30 minutes after sunrise.

Also, I'd recommend spending the entire morning or afternoon here. There are just so many things to see and do in the park that it's worth **taking a map out** beforehand and planning your route.



Travel notes

**EASY****55 MINS****BY TRAIN**

Nara Park is just a short 10ish-minute walk from Kintetsu-Nara station, which is just a 45-minute train ride from Kyoto station. It's very accessible.

If you're in Kyoto with a car, I'd probably recommend against driving to Nara Park. Although it's more convenient, it actually takes the same amount of time. However, you have to go through expensive tolls and pay for parking, and then you still have to walk on foot around the park.

Train is the most efficient way to get here.



CHERRY BLOSSOM


CULTURE




Osaka Castle

One of Japan's most famous castles.

 [1-1 Osakajo, Chuo Ward, Osaka, 540-0002, Japan](#)

 Grounds: Public, open 24 hours. Castle: 9am - 5pm

 Free, ¥600 for castle access

 <https://www.osakacastle.net/>



Of course, when visiting Osaka, you have to visit Osaka castle. It's just a given.

Osaka castle is a culturally important, 400-year-old castle located in the middle of the city.

The entire complex is quite large; about 1km by 1km and takes a solid 25 minutes to walk from one corner to the other.

This entire complex is adorned with Japanese gardens, moats that surround the keep, and a plethora of cherry blossom trees. It's visually pleasing almost anywhere you decide to walk.

In fact, Osaka Castle is one of the most popular locations in Osaka for "cherry blossom viewing", known as "Hanami" in Japanese. During Hanami, people put tarpaulins or mats on the ground to sit on, and they have picnics with friends; enjoying food and sitting under the trees for a few hours. It's so lovely and a great way to enjoy the fleeting beauty that nature provides during this season.

Photography notes



OK



SPRING



FRIENDLY



HIGH



NOT ALLOWED

Osaka Castle is huge, so there's plenty of space to set up tripods and the like.

There are also multiple compositions if you're looking to get a reflection off the moat too. These are mostly near the **Gokuraku Bridge**.

While you're here, I'd highly recommend exploring the **Japanese garden** in the inner ring; it's a gorgeous little hideaway with a beautiful pond surrounded by a well-manicured garden.



Best time and season

The best time of year to come is during spring and cherry blossom season.

With all the cherry blossoms surrounding the entire complex during spring, there's so many different perspectives and compositions to choose from. It's magical.

Also, come during sunrise time for the least amount of tourists and people in your shots, as it can get a little busy.





Travel notes



EASY



24 MIN



BY TRAIN

Osaka castle is highly accessible from its surrounding train stations; Temmabashi, Osaka business Park, Morinomiya, and Tanimachiyonchome.

From any one of those stations, it'll be just a few minutes walk to the edge of the complex, and then a 15-minute stroll to the main castle from there. That is, if you don't stop to take photos which... let's face it, you probably will.



STREET

Pontochō Alley

A dining and entertainment alley with a classic Kyoto look and vibe.



[Kashiwayacho, Nakagyo Ward, Kyoto, 604-8014, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<https://www.ponto-chou.com/>



Pontocho Alley is the picture-perfect image of what most people imagine Kyoto to look like. It is, after all, known by locals as the most beautiful street in the city.

It's a narrow street running north to south alongside the Kamo River; home to some of the best feeds you can find in Kyoto. The famous **Kichi Kichi Omurice** lives here, as well as top quality Gyukatsu restaurants, Izakayas-a-plenty, and many others. This street is a culinary adventure.

Towards the north end of the street is **Pontochô Kaburenjô**, a performing arts theatre. It mostly features performances from Geiko (Geisha in Kyoto) and Maiko (Gaiko in training). They expertly demonstrate their acting, dance, and musical elegance to their captivated audiences.

This means that during the day if you're lucky, from around 4-6pm, you can see Geiko and Maiko in their elegant dress, rushing from house to house, up and down, towards this north end of the street.

Just keep in mind, they're humans like you and me, and they're just trying to work, so please do not grab them or harass them just to get a photo (yes, that's a real problem here).

Photography notes

**NOT RECOMMENDED****ALL****NOT FRIENDLY****HIGH****NOT ALLOWED**

As with all locations featuring long sight-lines, longer lenses are certainly viable here, especially so with street photography.

There are all sorts of things to capture here: the details of the lanterns outside every restaurant, the authentic wooden styling of each shops' facade, the flash of a Maiko as she scurries between houses on the job.

Just keep in mind that it can occasionally get quite cramped and busy here, as the streets are very narrow and there's a lot of shops.

That in mind, tripods aren't really recommended, particularly at night when it gets the busiest. Also if you're coming during this time, keep in mind that huge bags filled with camera gear really isn't a great idea either as you'll bump into many people. Try to keep it light.

Best time and season

During the day, coming too early or too late means that no light actually illuminates the street. However, for most parts of the year, coming between 10am-3pm is when you'll be able to score some light that's actually visible on the street.

Personally, my favourite time to capture Pontocho alley during the day is from around 10am. The sun is in the east position and lines up with the adjacent alleyways to provide some beautiful horizontal cross-lighting.

At night, however, is when the ambience is truly realised. Lanterns and lights come on; it's such a beautiful vibe.

Pontocho Alley also stays mostly the same no matter what season you arrive, so come any time of the year.



Travel notes



DIFFICULTY

EASY



16 MIN



BY TRAIN

Pontocho Alley is extremely easy to get to and find.

It's just a few minutes walk from Kyoto-Kawaramachi station. Or, if you ask any taxi driver (or any local), they'll be able to tell you straight away.

The only parking available is street parking if you're driving however, so plan ahead for that.

Because Pontocho Alley is in the heart of the city, I recommend staying at accommodation in this area (and the surrounding Kawaramachi area).

This way, you can combine your adventures and just walk to all the nearby locations such as **Gion**, **Nishiki Market**, **Yasaka Shrine**, **Sanneizaka**, **Kiyomizu-dera**, and other locations recommended in this guide.

CHERRY BLOSSOM



Sewaritei

1.4km of gorgeous cherry blossom trees alongside the Uji River.



[Yawata, Kyoto 614-8312, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<http://www.city.yawata.kyoto.jp/0000000479.html>

My favourite types of places when travelling are always the local favourites; locations that are off the well-beaten tourist path; places that you wouldn't find out about unless you ask a local or spend hours upon hours researching.

Sewaritei is one of those places.

Sure, during cherry blossom season, Kyoto is one of the most beautiful places in all of Japan to get your share of visual wonderment, but wander outside the city a little bit, and you'll find some great hidden gems. In this case, the point to which three rivers, the Katsura, Uji, and Kizu rivers eventually join together to become the Yodogawa river (or Yodo river).



What you'll find here during the spring is 1.4 kilometres worth of dense cherry blossom tunnel atop a small hill that flows in the same direction as the rivers.

It's a magical location, rivalled only by **Chidorigafuchi Park** in Tokyo as my favourite places in Japan for cherry blossom viewing.

During the season, the park becomes alive. Street vendors set up local eats, people stay out until the sun goes down, they enjoy "Hanami" (cherry blossom picnics under the trees) and the ambience.

Consider spending your afternoon here to hang out, enjoying the trees, watching the sun go down, and soaking in the atmosphere. It's a great time.

Photography notes

- **OK**
- **SPRING**
- **FRIENDLY**
- **HIGH**
- **NOT ALLOWED**

Focal lengths of all ranges work well here; pick your favourite and go.

One thing I personally love to do when shooting anything to do with tunnels and vanishing points is to bring a longer lens and get a nice compression shot down the middle of the tunnel.

However, here, you can do it all with any camera you have handy; there's just so much to shoot.

Keep an eye out for the people here though, it can get a little busy at times. However, if you stay longer for sunset, the temperature starts to drop and people begin to go home, giving you the perfect opportunity to capture the place with less people and in golden light.





Best time and season

Come during cherry blossom season, from lunchtime onwards.

Up until mid-afternoon, there's plenty of light that comes through the trees on both sides of the tunnel, however, as it gets closer to sunset, the sun begins to fade very quickly behind Shimamoto. Because of that, the light will fade around half an hour to an hour earlier than you expect.

As with all cherry blossom seasons, make sure you're keeping an eye on the blooming schedule for the year as it changes all the time.



Travel notes



MODERATE



~1 HOUR



BY TRAIN

In all likelihood, most people will travel to Sewartitei by train.

From Kyoto station, it takes just about an hour to get there, which involves catching two trains and a 20-minute walk. The walk is easy and quite nice. It's along the Kizugawamiyuki bridge, also giving you the option to stop at the **Sakura Deaikan (淀川三川合流域 さくらであい館)** for a more elevated view of the 1.4km-long cherry blossom tunnel.

For those travelling by car, there's also a car park on the north side of the hill.





CULTURE

LANDSCAPE

Shirahige Shrine

A shrine with a beautiful torii gate floating in Lake Biwa.

 [215番地 Ukawa, Takashima, Shiga 520-1122, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 -



In Japan's largest lake, Lake Biwa, lies the huge torii gate of Shirahige Shrine.

It's a majestic beauty; looking very similar in style to the massive torii gate of the **Itsukushima Shrine** at Miyajima Island.

The deity of this particular shrine is named Sarutahiko-no-mikoto; a god of longevity. People often come to pray for blessings of business, career, marriage, and childbearing.

While this particular floating torii has been gaining a little bit of popularity over the past few years among photographers and tourists alike, it's still a relatively unknown location due to its distance away from the main city of Kyoto.

It's totally worth the trip out if you can make it here, though. It's serene and just outright stunning.

Photography notes

**OK****ALL****FRIENDLY****MODERATE****OK**

When photographing the floating torii gate, you'll be doing so roadside.

After you park at the shrine and cross the road, there's a little area along the water where you can grab your shots.

Consider mixing up your compositions, although there aren't too many locations to walk around here you can still go up and down the lake wall.

Due to the subject being around 50m away from the shore, most lenses work well here, wide or detail shots are easy to accomplish.

Consider doing a long exposure here also. A long exposure image will smooth out the ripples of the water and really accentuate the floating look of the torii.



Best time and season

This is a sunrise location, for sure.

Lake Biwa is huge, so there's a fairly low horizon line where the sun rises behind the gate.

If you're just capturing the floating torii gate, there's no real seasonal changes here, but if you're capturing the rest of the shrine as well, it's encapsulated in fairly dense foliage so the autumn warm colours may be your best bet.

Travel notes

**MODERATE****~1 HOUR****BY CAR**

By car, travelling to Shirahige shrine is a snap. It takes just over an hour to get to from Kyoto station, and there's ample parking at the shrine itself too.

Getting here by public transport is a little bit trickier, however.

The easiest method is catching a train to Omi-Takashina Station, which is about a half-hour from Kyoto station.

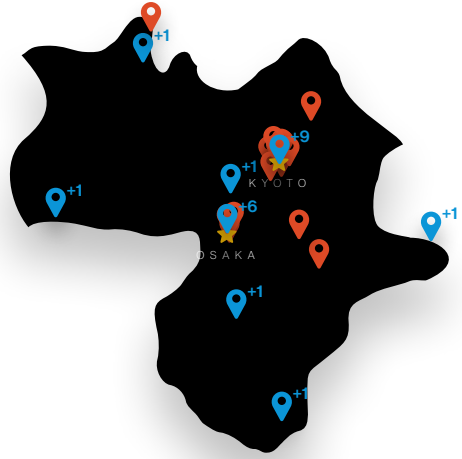
From there, you can either take a 6-minute bus or walk for 35 minutes.

The tricky part is timing this so that you arrive before sunrise.

Sunrise changes throughout the year, so make sure to check what time it occurs. Also, usually, the first train out of the city would be around 5:30am give or take, so make sure to plan ahead if you want to get the best light at this location.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Kansai.



KYOTO CITY



Bishamon-do Temple

A temple known for its amazing autumn colours.



Keage Incline

An old railroad featuring 582 metres of cherry blossoms.



Maruyama Park

A local favourite for hanami (cherry blossom viewing).



Yasaka Shrine

One of the main shrines of Kyoto.



Sannenzaka

A street filled with traditional architecture.



Hokan-ji Temple

A classic Kyoto image of a 5-story Buddhist pagoda.

KYOTO CITY CONTINUED...



Tofuku-ji Temple

A Buddhist temple with many gardens, known for its autumn colours.



Heian-Jingu Shrine Otorii Gate

...probably the biggest torii gate you've ever seen.



Tetsugaku No Michi (Philosopher's Path)

A quiet row of cherry trees lining a narrow, long canal.

OSAKA CITY



Shinsekai

A busy shopping district, especially beautiful at night.



Dotonbori

Lively entertainment district. Also a location in every Japanese guide book ever.



Hozenji Yokocho

Atmospheric street of restaurants. Near Dotonbori.



Kema Sakuranomiya Park

A river-side park known for its cherry blossoms.



Umeda Sky Building

Twin skyscrapers with a popular observatory on the top levels.



Expo '70 Commemorative Park

Beautiful park with many gardens. Popular cherry blossom spot.

ELSEWHERE IN KANSAI



Katsuo-ji Temple

Gorgeous temple famous for Daruma dolls.



Amanohashidate

One of Japan's famous "three famous views".



Himeji Castle

Historical castle known for its cherry blossom trees.



Oku-No-In

A quiet, peaceful Buddhist temple known for its mausoleum.



Nachi Falls

The tallest waterfall in Japan.



Futamiokitama Shrine

A shrine famous for its "wedded rocks".

Chūgoku

35.0499° N, 134.0666° E





CULTURE

LANDSCAPE



Itsukushima Shrine

Ancient shrine featuring a huge floating torii gate at Miyajima Island.



[1-1 Miyajimacho, Hatsukaichi, Hiroshima 739-0588, Japan](#)



Public, open 24 hours (only accessible by ferry)



Free



<http://www.itsukushimajinja.jp/index.html>



Known for its gigantic torii gate that looks like its floating in the water when the tide is high, Itsukushima Shrine is located on the island of Miyajima, an hour away from Hiroshima.

It's a fascinating shrine, as even the temples and its surrounds are built on supports so they, too, can seemingly float as the tide rises. It's beautiful.

The island also has deer that are accustomed to humans, much like at Nara park. This makes Itsukushima Shrine interesting to compare to other locations in the nearby Kansai region—if you want a much quieter giant torii experience, you can visit **Shirahige shrine** at Lake Biwa to get your fix. If you want to see more deer, you can go to **Nara Park**.

If you want both, however, with some beautiful temples floating on the water to boot, Miyajima island and Itsukushima Shrine is your best bet.

Fun fact: Throughout Japan, there are "**three famous views**" of Japan. This location is one of them (and after having been to all of them, it's probably the best one in my opinion).

Photography notes

-  **OK**
-  **FRIENDLY**
-  **NOT ALLOWED**
-  **SPRING**
-  **HIGH**

The biggest recommendation I have is to look up the **tides**.

Visually, the torii is significantly worse-looking at low tide. Although you can approach it (and even touch it), the ground surrounding it becomes patchy and not very visually attractive, so if you want the best shots, don't come at low tide.

Coming at a normal tide time, however, will give you the traditional, water-inclusive view, allowing you more compositions, or even the potential of longer exposure images to smooth out the waves on the water.



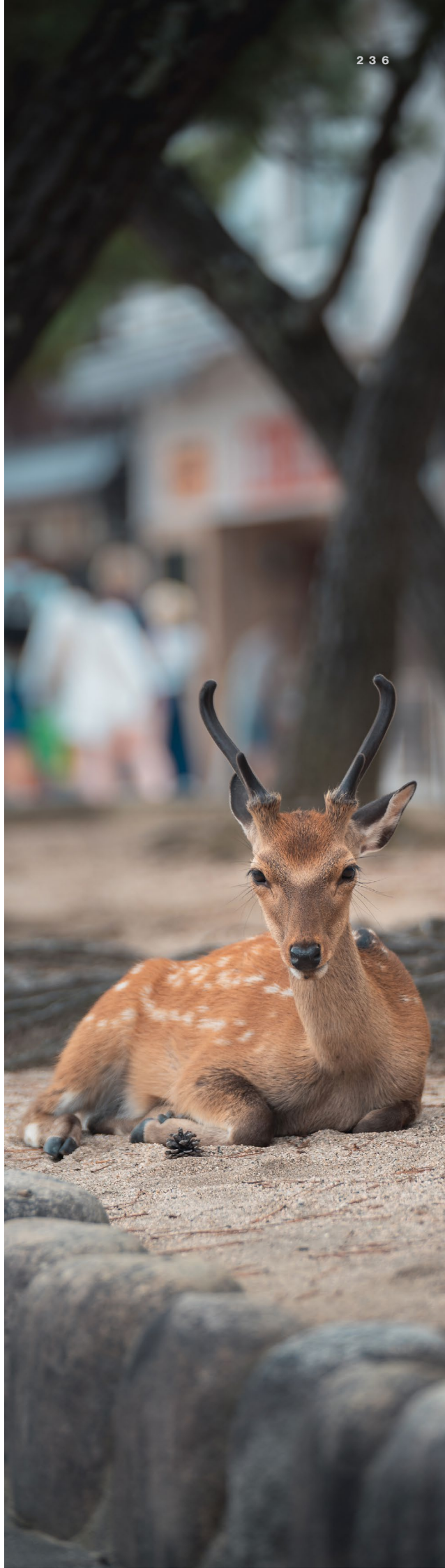
Best time and season

While it's not explicitly known for things like cherry blossoms, there are actually quite a few scattered around the island.

Of course, autumn is a great time to come, as the entire island is covered in a nice dense layer of foliage.

Due to the island only being accessible via ferry, catching a sunrise here is near impossible. That is, of course, unless you decide to stay overnight at one of the ryokans on the island.

Otherwise, for the best light, mid-afternoon to sunset will see the sun set behind the left side of the torii gate.



Travel notes



EASY



~1 HOUR



TRAIN/FERRY

There's not that much else on the island aside from a few other temples, a couple of Ryokan, and some residential areas, however, the only way on and off the island is via ferry, so make the most of your time on the island while you're here.

That said, make sure you time your visit with the ferry times, especially if you're making a day trip from, say, Kyoto.

You can find the **[ferry timetable here](#)**.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Chugoku.



Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter

A peaceful canal in the middle of town, surrounded by traditional architecture.



Tottori Sand Dunes

I bet you didn't know Japan had sand dunes ;)



Adachi Museum of Art

Museum with a Japanese garden that looks straight out of a movie.



Kintai Bridge

A five-arched bridge spanning 200 metres long.



Motonosumi Inari Shrine

Inari shrine featuring 123 torii gates trailing down the side of a hill.

Shikoku

33.7432° N, 133.6375° E







ARCHITECTURE

Chichu Art Museum

An underground museum designed by famed architect, Tadao Ando

 [3449-1, Naoshima, Kagawa District, Kagawa 761-3110, Japan](#)

 10am - 6pm, everyday except Mondays

 ¥2100 per adult

 <https://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/chichu.html>



As a part of the Naoshima art islands, Chichu museum is perhaps my favourite of them all from a photography perspective.

While the permanent displays by Claude Monet, James Turrell, and Walter De Maria are jaw-droppingly fantastic to see (Open Sky by James Turrell is my favourite), *the entire museum*, designed by revered Japanese architect Tadao Ando, is in itself, a gigantic work of art.

As to not disturb the natural scenery of the island, the museum is mostly underground, with many subterranean spaces that are beautiful in and of themselves while also serving the function of letting light into the complex.

For lovers of the more brutalist and concrete-based styles of architecture, the hard lines, extremely angular shapes, and hard, grey concrete textures make for an experience worthy of losing yourself in your camera for a few hours.

Photography notes



NOT ALLOWED



NOT FRIENDLY



NOT ALLOWED



ALL

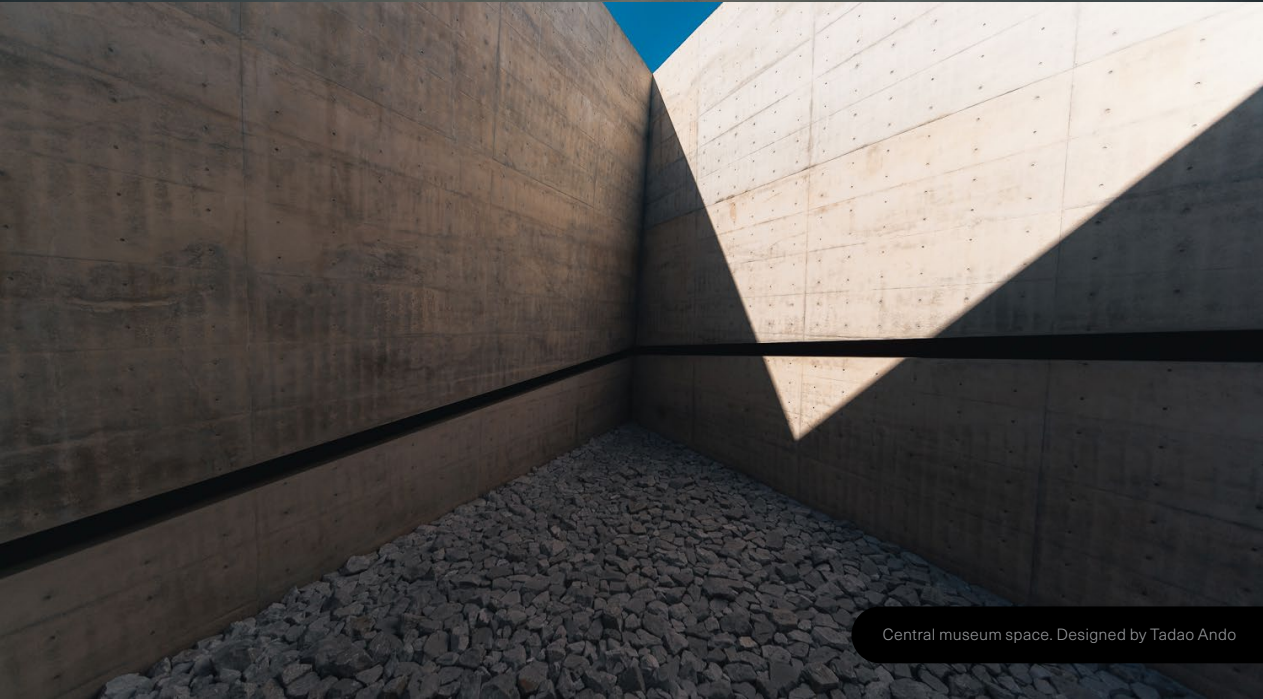
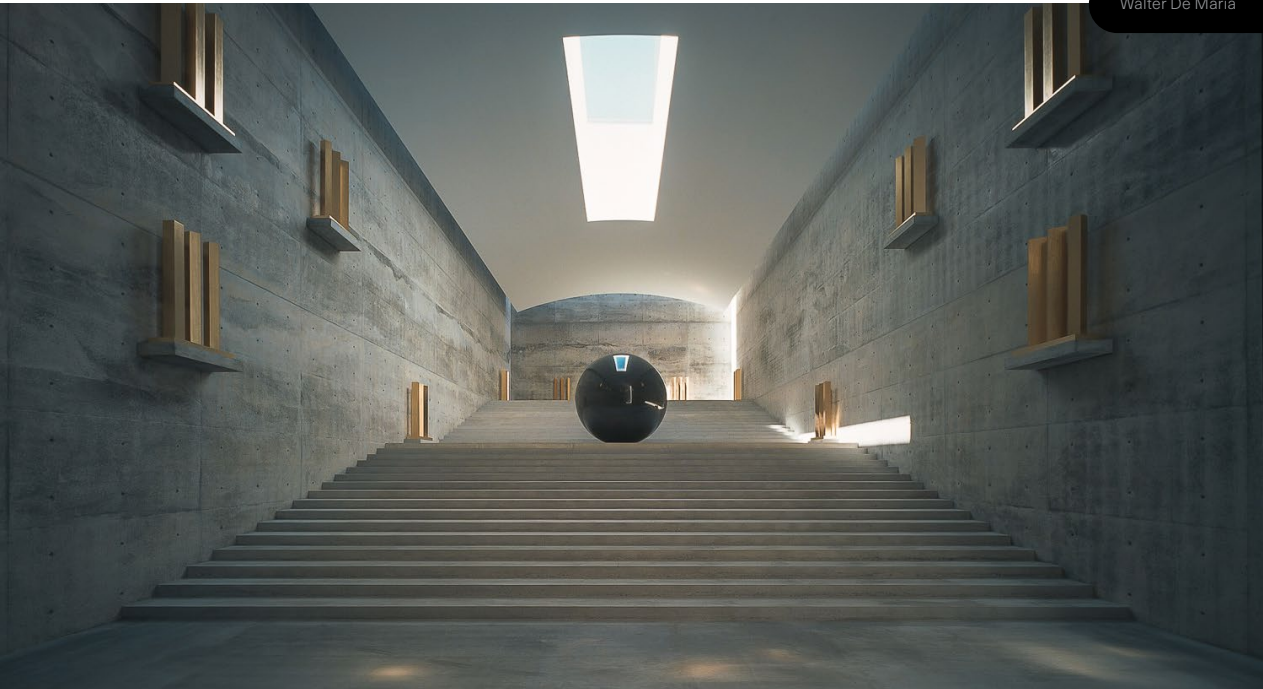


MODERATE

As with all architecture photography, bring the widest, fastest lens you have. There are some corridors that are extremely tight, as well as narrow slits through some of the walls to view into different spaces and artworks.

Also keep in mind that tripods are not allowed here, and neither are big and heavy camera bags. They do have a cloakroom though.

Walter De Maria



Central museum space. Designed by Tadao Ando

Best time and season

Come during high noon or thereabouts so that there's ample light that shines through some of the open areas.

Chichu museum doesn't change with the seasons. Come any time of the year.



Travel notes



HARD



~3 HOURS
FROM OSAKA



TRAIN, BUS
& FERRY

Prepare yourself for a bit of a journey to get to the Art Islands.

From Osaka, you'll need to catch a Shinkansen (bullet train) to Okayama Station, then, get a bus to Uno port, then, get a ferry to Naoshima (Marine Port), and finally from there, it's either a 27-minute walk, or a 16-minute bike ride. This journey will take you just over 3 hours, **one-way**.

Suffice it to say, I'd highly recommend that you stay on the island for 1 or 2 nights while you explore it.

Getting around Naoshima island is best done by *bicycle*. Try to hire an electric-assisted one if you can; there are lots of hills in this little place.

Once you finish exploring Chichu Art Museum, since you're down in this part of the island anyway, I'd also strongly consider visiting the nearby **Benesse house**, watching the sun set at the **Seaside gallery**, or visiting the famous **Yellow Pumpkin** by Yayoi Kusama.




URBAN



Shimonada Station

A quiet, picturesque train station beside the sea.

 [Futamicho Okubo, Iyo, Ehime 799-3311, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 -



Okay this is a weird one to recommend because, well, it's just a train station, and not a particularly big one at that.

However Shimonada station has become famous amongst locals for its position facing the Seto Inland Sea. That, and it also appeared on promotional material for **JR's (Japan Rail) Seishun 18**, which is a ticket that allows unlimited local and express travel for 5 days for around ¥12,000 (which is a great deal that you should totally go for if you're exploring Japan).

Aesthetically, it's the only station on the entire Yosan seaside line that has no fences and a clear view of the horizon (trust me, I've looked), making for some amazing minimalistic scenes, especially during sunset, as the station is north-west facing.

However, it's very out of the way compared to most things to sightsee in Japan, and rationalising the fact that you're travelling all the way out here to see a train station is kind of weird, but hey, if you're exploring Ehime, then you're already way off the beaten track anyway, right?

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK

The distance between the platform and the station building is not that far, so bring a wide lens because there's not that much space here.

Most of the time you'll find no one here and you'll have the whole place to yourself, however, when the train comes it can get a little cramped when everyone gets off it because it's such a small station.

Otherwise, enjoy the peace and quiet.



Best time and season

Shimonada station doesn't change all year round, however, there are occasionally events thrown here so there may be irregular decorations.

It's best shot at sunset, as the station faces somewhat westward. This allows it to be in frame, dependant on the time of year it is and how far along the horizon line it sets.

Travel notes

**EASY****~1 HOUR****BY CAR**

Of course, being a train station, you can get here via train if you like. It's station number S09 on the JR Yosai line. This particular line starts at Takamatsu and goes all the way along the coast until Uwajima; pretty much the entire north-western side of all of Shikoku.

Chances are, however, that if you're exploring Shikoku, you'll be doing so via car (which is what I recommend). Driving here from the closest town, Matsuyama, will take just under an hour.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Shikoku.



Teshima Art Museum

A peaceful, single-install museum shaped like an egg in the middle of nowhere.



Benesse House

Famed contemporary art museum.



Kotohira-gu

A large multi-levelled Shrine half way up Mount Zozu.



Takaya Shrine

A mountain shrine with a torii gate overlooking Kanonji and the Seto Inland Sea.



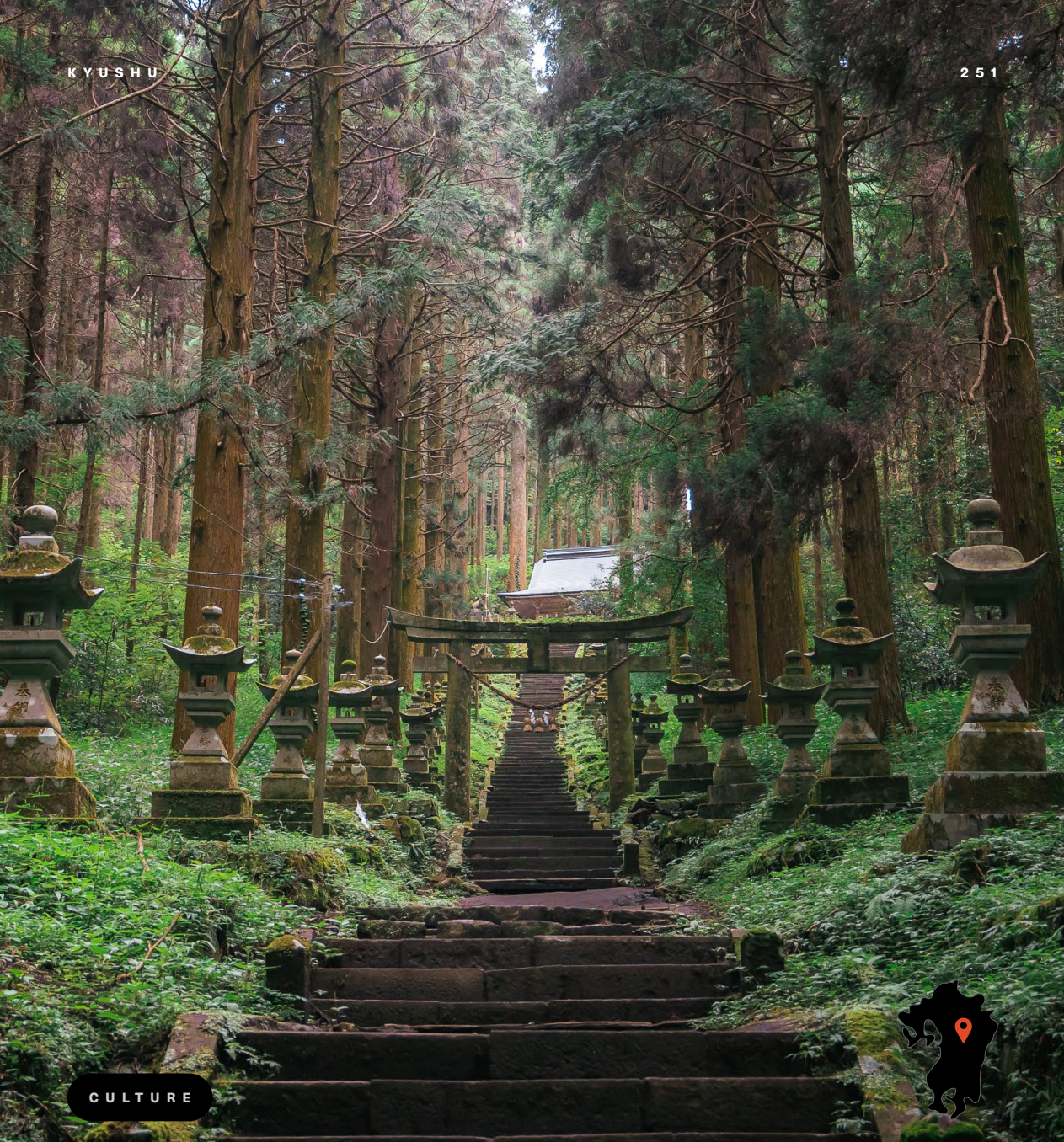
Mount Tsurugi

One of the 100 'Famous Japanese Mountains' and the second tallest in Shikoku.

Kyūshū

32.5900° N, 130.8000° E









CULTURE



Kamishikimi Kumanoza Shrine

A steeply pathed shrine hidden in a lush mountain.

-  [2619 Kamishikimi, Takamori, Aso District, Kumamoto 869-1601, Japan](#)
-  Public, open 24 hours
-  Free
-  town.takamori.kumamoto.jp/kanko/kankomap/kanko/kamisikimikumanoimasujinja.html



Kamishikimi Kumanozu Shrine has some serious anime vibes going on.

When nature and culture mix, especially when it comes together like this, you really can't help but feel transported into another world. Just beautiful.

Kamishikimi Kumanozu Shrine is dedicated to bringing good luck to relationships and prosperity to business. The approach to the main shrine is lined with 100 stone lanterns guiding a 300-stair path up the steep hill.

It's such an atmospheric location; there's overgrowth everywhere, moss on every lantern, decay, it's almost like as if the forest is consuming the shrine.

Magical.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



Kamishikimi Kumanozu Shrine can be quite a dark location at times. Potentially, that could be the vibe you're going for in your images; it's incredibly moody when it has been raining.

Alternatively, wait to come a few hours before or after high noon for your best chances of catching the light piercing the high canopy.

The entire 300-stair path is actually quite far, and it bends. You can't get a straight-on, tunnel-like vanishing point shot here. It's almost like the path is split into two, turning in the middle as it goes up the mountain.

That being said, there's plenty of opportunity for both wide lenses and compression shots here, so make sure to bring both.

Best time and season

Come during the seasons where most of the foliage is green; Summer or Spring.

Otherwise, as mentioned in the Photography Notes section, sunrise and sunset may or may not be good options depending on what you're going for, as the forest is quite dark. It's hard for light to pass through when it's so low on the horizon at this time.

Come a few hours before or after high noon for a chance for the sun to start shining through the canopy.



Travel notes

**HARD****~1.5 HOURS****BY CAR**

As with most places in Kyushu, it's hard to get around without a car. Driving here will take an hour and a half from Kumamoto; not *too* bad.

Attempting to get here via public transport, however, is a mission.

From Kumamoto, you can catch a train to Takamori station, which takes around two hours, and from there catch a limited bus, or you can walk from there if you're up for the hour and a half walk.

Try to drive if you can. There's a car park next to the shrine; it's nice and easy.

Consider visiting this location after potentially exploring **Mt Aso** for sunrise. That will make for good use of your time.




LANDSCAPE



Mt Aso & Kusasenri

Largest active volcano in Japan & one of the world's largest calderas.

 [Kurokawa, Aso, Kumamoto 869-2225, Japan](#)

 Public, open 24 hours

 Free

 <https://www.kyusanko.co.jp/aso/>



Kusasenri

Rather than put several entries for locations in the same general area, this single entry refers to all locations in the Mt Aso & Kusasenri area.

Mt Aso is Japan's largest most active volcano, and it features one of the world's largest calderas.

Having a large caldera means that the surrounding areas of Mt Aso are diverse and beautiful, so consider visiting the many locations that are around here.

Some locations of note are:

Nakadake Crater - Of course, the crater itself. Occasionally closed depending on gas and activity levels.

Kusasenri - A vast grass plain that provides a beautiful foreground for capturing the smouldering crater

Komezuka - An odd-looking volcanic cone that's able to be hiked.

The approach - There are many roadside pullovers where you can see the jagged serrations of the landscape.

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



OK



On the approach to the crater

As we're dealing with landscapes in general here, the typical trinity (16-35mm, 24-70mm, 70-200mm) of lenses will do just fine.

Typically, there are not that many tourists up here until you reach the ASO Super Ring itself; that's the entrance to the crater.

In my opinion, the journey along the caldera to get here is far more interesting than the actual crater itself. The crater is still cool to see, and you might as well since you're this way anyway, but I bet you'll stop for photos in the surrounding areas a little more.



Best time and season

Aside from the mild seasonal changes that occur with the greenery, this area is mostly the same all year round.

If you come during sunrise, you'll have the entire place to yourselves, except for maybe a few other quiet photographers. Get here early to beat the occasional bus-load of tourists that come.

Travel notes

**MODERATE****~2.5 HOURS****BY CAR**

As with most places in Kyushu, it's hard to get around without a car.

Especially true for this area though. I highly recommend that you drive. The drive up the caldera towards the main crater of Mt Aso is absolutely beautiful and filled with rocky terrain, jagged mountain lines, and general ruggedness.

Driving here will take around an hour and a half from Kumamoto, and about two and a half hours from Fukuoka.

Getting here by public transport is possible too, but it takes awhile. From Hakata station in Fukuoka, catching the shinkansen to Kumamoto station, the Hohi line to Higo-Ozu station, then the bus to the Mt Aso Crater will take between 4 to 5 hours. And that's if you only want to see the crater too.



CULTURE

LANDSCAPE

Oouo Shrine

A shrine with three floating torii dedicated to the sea.



1874-9地内 Tara, Fujitsu District, Saga 849-1602, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free



<https://www.town.tara.lg.jp/chosei/1017/3276.html>



Floating torii is a quasi theme in this guide, and with good reason; they make for great photographs.

This shrine, however, is a little unique and a bit different to your regular floating torii gates (like as if floating torii gates are normal).

There are actually four torii gates featured at this shrine, and they all (mostly) line up inside one another.

Their appearance changes with the tide, and in this part of Japan, it's possible to observe a tidal change of up to 6 metres in height.

When it's low tide, you're able to walk a path created through the middle of the three torii gates in the water. Very cool.

This shrine was never really all that popular several years ago. However, due to the rise of social media, it has now recently grabbed more attention. Snap it up quick before it becomes another typical tourist shot!

Photography notes



OK



ALL



FRIENDLY



LOW



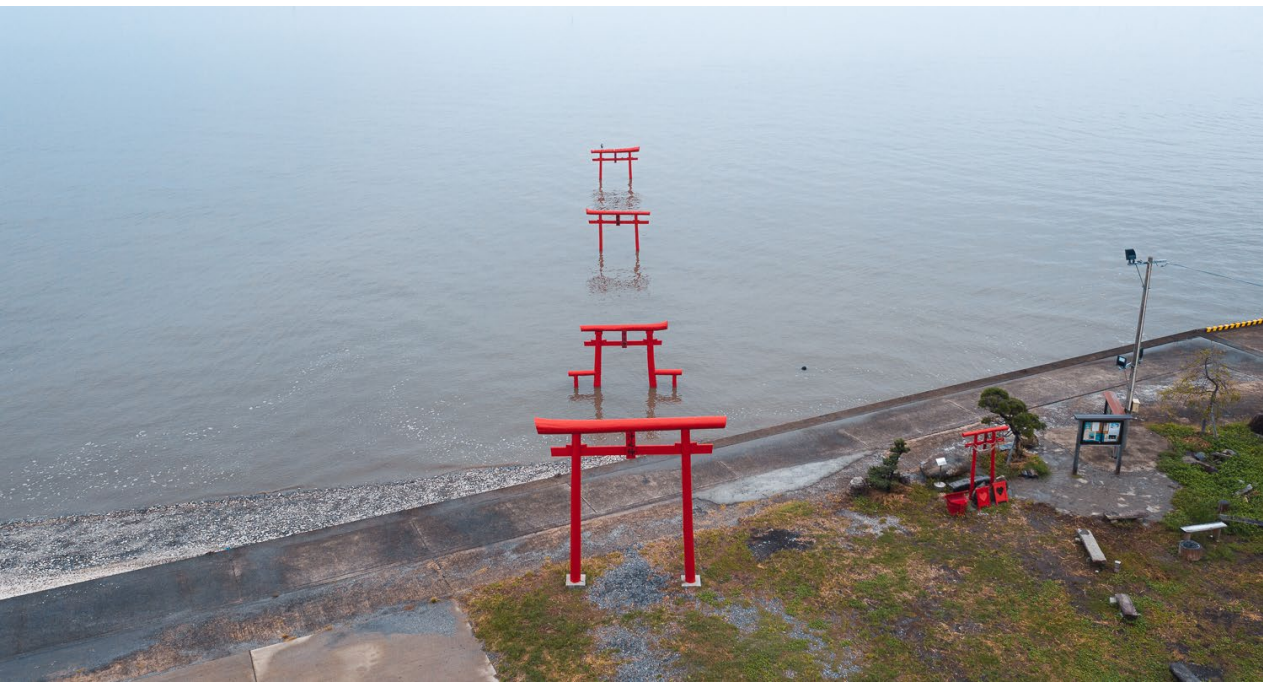
OK

If you can, get down low and grab your perspectives where all the torii seemingly stack within each other like babushka dolls.

If you have a drone, these torii are particularly pretty from the air too!

There is more of a traditional shrine behind all the torii gates too if you're interested. Otherwise, there's not that much else here.

Enjoy the peace and quiet 😊.



Best time and season

Timing-wise, come for sunrise if you want the best light. There's nothing blocking the horizon since the Ariake sea that the torii float in is quite large, so you'll get awesome quality light all throughout the morning.

Also, check the tides for whether you want an image with water, or one with the path that runs through all the torii when the tide is low.



Travel notes



EASY



~2 HOURS



BY CAR

Chances are, if you're in this part of Kyushu, you're probably driving (which is what I recommend).

From Fukuoka, it's just under a 2-hour drive to get here.

However, if you're looking to make a day trip from Fukuoka by public transport, it's actually surprisingly straightforward. The journey takes about two and a half hours.

By train, you catch the Kamome line from Hakata station, then the Nagasaki line from Hizen-Yamaguchi station. From there, it's just a 10-minute walk, and you're there!



LANDSCAPE



Takachiho Gorge

A gorgeous volcanic basalt valley created from Mt Aso activity.



Mukoyama, Takachiho, Nishiusuki District, Miyazaki 882-1103, Japan



Public, open 24 hours



Free (¥2000 for boat hire)



<http://takachiho-kanko.info/sightseeing/takachihokyou.php?cate=all&nav=1>



View from the entry bridge

There are so many waterfalls in Japan, but my favourite is this little one, way off the beaten path; it's Takachiho Gorge.

Shaped and formed hundreds of years ago by the volcanic activity from the nearby volcano, **Mt Aso**, the Gokase River runs through this 17-metre, volcanic basalt-covered gorge.

It features a waterfall partway through and a nice bridge to view it from.

You can also rent a boat to get up close and personal with the waterfall too; just don't get too close if you like to keep dry.

Photography notes



OK



FRIENDLY



OK



ALL



MODERATE



While you can easily capture the waterfall from the bridge, I highly recommend hiring a boat and paddling out into the middle of the gorge. It's a cool but also refreshing experience!

It's also hilarious to watch people flail about, rocking their boats, and trying to take photos at the same time.

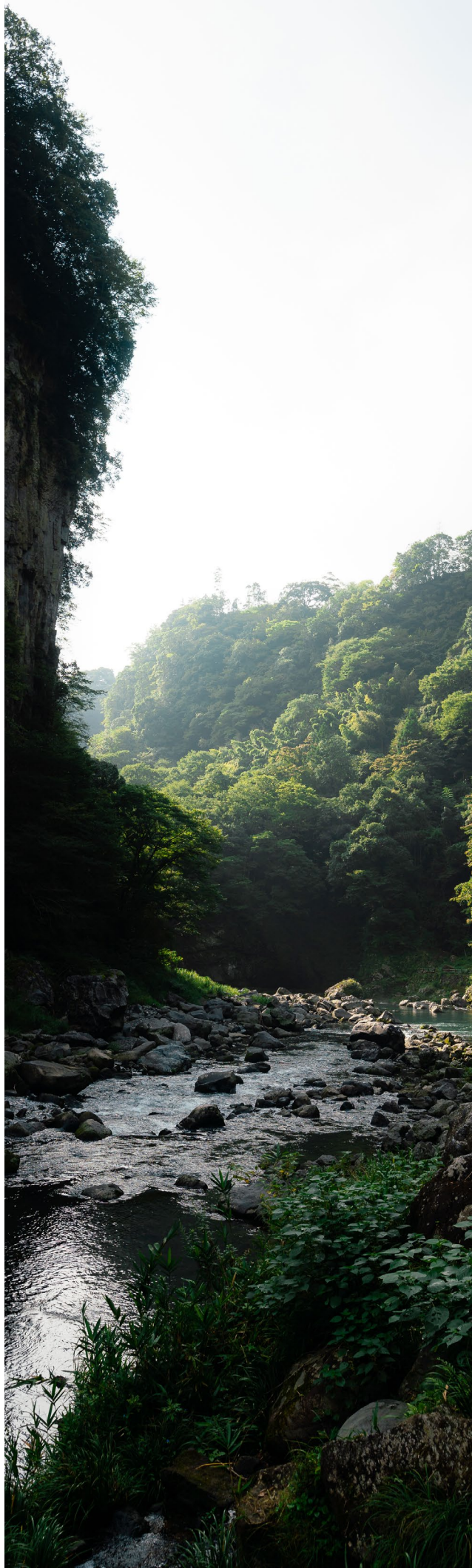
Oh, be careful with your camera as you get close to the waterfall; it kind of sucks your boat in the closer you get to it, and you're bound to get some of your gear very wet if you do so (the splash range is crazy).

Best time and season

Covered in dense greenery, come during summer or spring for a colourful contrast of green and grey, or come during autumn to see the overhanging trees turn a warm tone.

As for timing, the boat rental shop opens from 8:30am, and I'll bet there will already be a line there (there was when I went), so if you want to get the first boat out, try to do so a little earlier than that.

Alternatively, you can wait a few hours for the sun to come up a little bit, carrying itself into the valley and providing a stream of light that cuts through the middle of the gorge. It's glorious.



Travel notes



HARD



~3 HOURS



BY CAR

Takachiho Gorge is smack bang in the middle of Kyushu; also known as, the middle of nowhere.

As with most places in Kyushu, it's hard to get around without a car. Ideally, you'd drive from Kumamoto or somewhere closer. If driving from Kumamoto, it'll take just under two hours to get there. From Fukuoka, around three.

Otherwise, you could try to catch public transport here, but it'll take you six hours from Fukuoka, so I don't recommend it.

Additional locations

Honorable mentions to check out if you have extra time in Kyushu.



FUKUOKA CITY



Ohori park

A beautiful city park in the middle of Fukuoka.



Acros Fukuoka

A concert hall with unique garden architecture.

ELSEWHERE IN KYUSHU



Sakurai Futamigaura

"Wedded rocks" with a white torii.



Miyajidake Shrine

Famous shrine with decorated buildings and long, vanishing-point approach.



Mifuneyama Rakuen

Gorgeous traditional Japanese Garden with teamLab artworks.

ELSEWHERE IN KYUSHU CONTINUED...

**Yutoku Inari Shrine**

One of the top three Inari shrines in Japan.

**Daikanbo Lookout**

Popular lookout with views over Mt Aso and its entire caldera.

**Yukemuri Observatory**

Observation deck with a good view of the steam from Beppu's many onsens.



Major events and festivals

Squeeze a little extra out of your travels with some festivals. Japan loves to celebrate.

Japan absolutely **loves** festivals and events.

As a country with such a long history and rich culture, there are countless occasions to celebrate, worship, and be respectful for.

They're called "Matsuri", and these events come in big and small sizes; from the local gathering at the shrine down the road from your house, to the city-filling, dancing and parading festivals like Gion Matsuri in Kyoto.

Witnessing and partaking in these events helps you connect with the culture of Japan, and you can definitely make the most out of your travels if you time it with one of these events.

With thousands of events and festivals all over the country, of course unfortunately, I can't cover them all. However, here are the ones I know of that are particularly interesting. Note that the dates change all the time, so make sure to confirm before you go.

January

- 15th **Santera Mairi Festival**, Hida
Furukawa, Gifu, Chubu
- 15th **Nozawa Fire Festival**, Nozawa
Onsen Village, Nagano, Chubu

February

- Early **Sapporo Snow Festival**, Sapporo,
Hokkaido
- 15-16 **Yokote Kamakura Festival**, Akita,
Tohoku

March

- 1-14 **Omizutori**, Nara, Kansai

April

- Mid **Takayama Matsuri**, Takayama, Gifu,
Chubu

May

- 15th **Aoi Matsuri**, Kyoto, Kansai
- Mid **Kanda Matsuri**, Tokyo, Kanto
- Mid **Sanja Matsuri**, Tokyo, Kanto

June

- Early **Yosakoi Soran Festival**, Sapporo,
Hokkaido
- 6-17 **Sanno Festival**, Tokyo, Kanto

July

- All **Gion Matsuri**, Kyoto, Kansai
- 1-15 **Hakata Gion Yamakasa**, Fukuoka,
Kyushu
- 25th **Tenjin Matsuri**, Osaka, Kansai

August

- 2-7 **Nebuta & Neputa Matsuri**, Aomori,
Tohoku
- 3-6 **Kanto Matsuri**, Akita, Tohoku
- 11th **Fukagawa Hachiman Matsuri**, Tokyo,
Kanto
- 12-15 **Awa Odori**, Tokushima, Shikoku

September

- Mid **Kishiwada Danjiri Matsuri**, Osaka,
Kansai

October

- 7-9 **Nagasaki Kunchi**, Nagasaki, Kyushu
- 22nd **Jidai Matsuri**, Kyoto, Kansai

November

- 2-4 **Karatsu Kunchi Matsuri**, Karatsu,
Kyushu

December

- 2-3 **Chichibu Yomatsuri**, Chichibu,
Saitama, Kanto
- 31st **Oga No Namahage**, Akita, Tohoku

Food notes

No trip to Japan would be complete without a thorough experience of its unique cuisine.



Shabu-shabu, ramen, yakitori, takoyaki, udon, okonomiyaki, gyudon, yakiniku, tempura, and so, so much more.

With the amount of unique food in Japan and places to eat them, talking about food in Japan could be an entire guide all on its own.

However, while this is a photography guide, I'd be doing you an injustice if I didn't list out at least a few things you should try while you're experiencing Japan.



Average food prices

But first, let's start with some average prices for a variety of everyday foods in Japan.

Relatively speaking, Japan is an expensive place to visit, especially when considering accommodation and travel costs, however, when it comes to food, it's surprisingly affordable, with many options.

¥1200	Restaurant meal, adult
¥300	Beer, can
¥150	Water, 600ml bottle
¥800	Ramen, large meal
¥900	Mcdonald's meal
¥300	Yakitori stick, plate
¥150	Onigiri, combini
¥130	Coffee can, vending machine



Ramen

The “everybody food”. An approachable noodle soup that was appropriated from China and turned into a worldwide sensation. All across Japan, you’ll find many different styles of ramen: thick broths, thin broths, thick noodles, thin noodles, ramen with fried lard, or bamboo shoots, or eggs; unlimited combo potential.

Sushi

When it comes to iconic cuisine, nothing screams Japan more than Sushi. The combination of rice and seafood is ubiquitous throughout the world, and of course, it's the best in Japan.

Nigiri is possibly the most common type you’ll find here—slices of raw fish over rice.



Soba

Japanese buckwheat noodles that are typically thinner than Ramen or Udon. Usually served cold with dipping soup, or hot. Known to be the most "healthy".

Udon

A thick noodle made from wheat flour, however, unlike Soba, it's usually served in a soup in a bowl with toppings like scallions, tempura or egg. Usually served hot.

Yakitori

Grilled skewers of meat, usually chicken, beef, pork, vegetables, or offal. Usually served in izakayas as they're a great food to drink and chat with.

Tonkatsu

Breaded, deep-fried pork. Usually served with shredded cabbage, rice, and topped with Tonkatsu sauce. There's also "gyukatsu" that's quite common which is the beef version of this.

Shabu-shabu & Sukiyaki

A Japanese version of hot pot. With a boiling pot of stock in the middle of the table, you cook your own food; usually Wagyu and other meats, vegetables, and noodles. Eaten with rice.

Also try

- Takoyaki
- Curry rice
- Okonomiyaki
- Gyudon
- Mochi
- Dango
- Tempura
- Karaage
- Yakniku
- Unagi
- Oden
- Miso soup
- Donburi
- Natto
- Kashipan

Accommodation in Japan

From the weird and wacky to the upscale;
Japan has a place to stay for your needs.

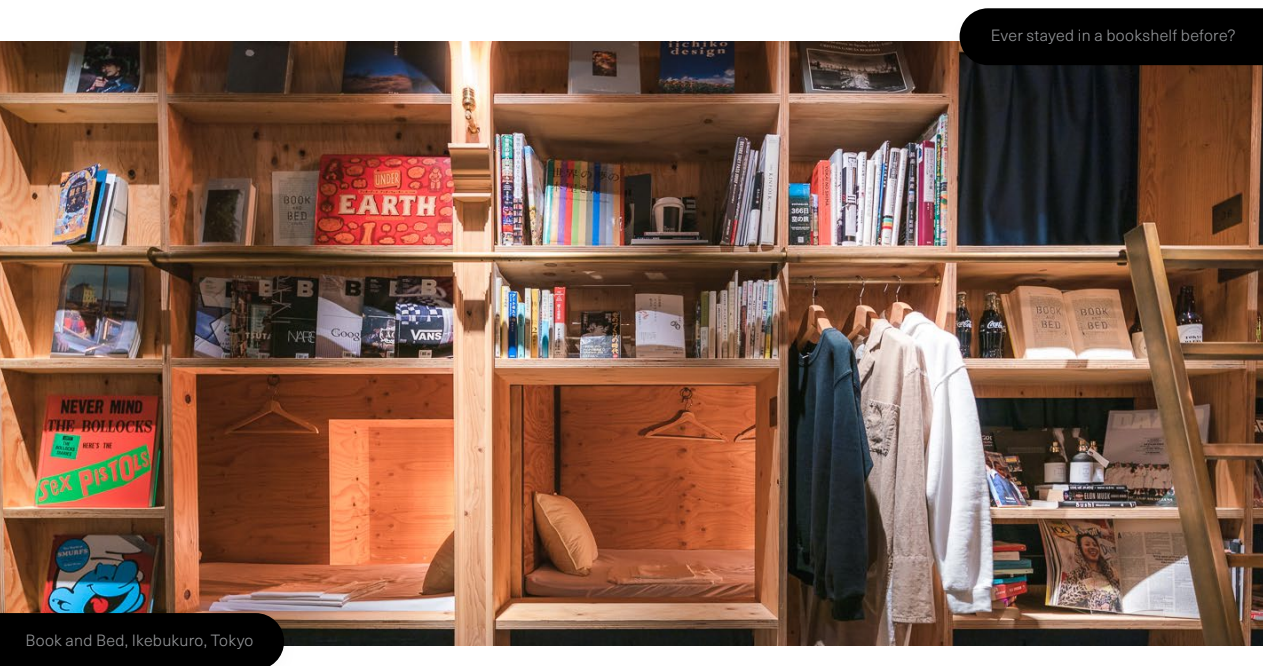


View from Shangri-la, Tokyo.

More so than any other countries, especially western ones, Japan has a vast array of weird and wonderful places to stay on your travels.

Some are normal; hotels, hostels, and the like. Some are refined and traditional, like staying in at an Onsen, or a Ryokan. But then, some are just downright unique; like sleeping in a bookshelf, or a box that looks like an aircraft cabin, or a room completely decked out in Hello Kitty.

With plenty of opportunity for a unique experience, no matter how you like to stay while exploring a country, there's something for you in Japan.



Hostels/Capsule Hotels

If you've stayed at a hostel somewhere around the world, you'll know how it works; a room of bunk beds, a bunch of people, a small space.

Hostels in Japan are kind of like that, but a bit more... separated. Rather than bunks, you have "capsules"; pretty much a 2x1-metre box that you sleep in. Someone is still on top and beside you just like in a regular bunk room, and you can still hear people snoring and talking and making noises at night, but at least you kind of have your own privacy! Kind of.

In Japan, the great thing is many of these capsule hotels are themed, or try to be more like a hotel than a hostel. They're **always immaculately clean**, people are respectful when it comes to noises and volume, there's always all the utilities you need like fast Internet, and they usually have some kind of food situation.

Best of all, they're still cheap, and probably your best budget-travel option.

Hotels

If you're a luxury stays-kinda person, every major international brand you know and love will have a presence somewhere in Japan, mostly in Tokyo and the major cities. But in Japan, there's an additional type of stay to enjoy too; a fusion of traditional ryokans with western influence for a luxury market. These boutique experiences are like no other in the world. Book a "**Kiku**" room at the Hoshinoya Tokyo, and you'll know what I mean.

Ryokan

A ryokan is a traditional Japanese-style inn. You'll swap a bed for a futon. Carpet floors for tatami mats. Heavy doors for shoji (sliding paper doors). Sitting on chairs for sitting on the floor on zabuton (cushions). A shoe closet for a genkan (door entryway)... and you get the idea. They're great experiences to have that are unique to Japan, so if it's your first time in the country, consider booking one! You might just get hooked and book them all the time (like me).




Share economy

Of course, the share-economy like Airbnb and other brands have their exposure in Japan too, albeit not to the same effect as western countries.

The further away from the main cities you go, the harder it is to find this style of accommodation, as you probably could have expected. If you do find it though, generally the quality and cleanliness is still very good, even in the middle of nowhere.

Transportation around Japan

Some methods are better than others depending on where you're going.



Japan has an excellent public transportation network across the entire country. Still, some methods are better than others, depending on where you're going.

Having travelled up and down the entire country many times, here are my experiences with them and also which methods I like the best and why.

IC Cards

Okay, let's start here with how you pay for common transport in Japan.

Of course you can always use cash for anything in Japan, but IC cards are like debit cards you can use on public transport. Every station has a place where you can buy one, or recharge one, and you can tap-on and tap-off at every train station, bus, or ferry.

The cool thing is that you can use IC cards at just about any combini (convenience store). Most of Japan is still cash-based, so it's great to be able to not use cash sometimes.

The two big IC cards in Tokyo are called Suica and Pasma. However, there are equivalents in every city, and they'll work anywhere in Japan. You can even get them on your phone so they recharge automatically, and then you can just tap your phone to get through the gates via NFC.



From the driverless train on the Rainbow Bridge in Tokyo

The thing about trains..

Now, let's get into travelling via train. But first, a quick preamble about trains in Japan.

Trains in Japan are confusing. At first.

To try and put this simply, there are Japan Rail (JR)-owned trains and train lines, and then there are private trains and private train lines.

It helps to think of it like this: the JR lines operate throughout the entire country, but for the places where the JR lines don't cover, local, privately-owned lines operate there.

This is an essential thing to remember, especially if you're considering purchasing the **JR Rail Pass**, which we'll cover a little bit later, or any of the transport deals you might find.

As you get further away from the cities, you'll start to encounter situations where you'll be using limited express or express trains. **Sometimes, you'll need to pay separately for both the line and the train.** Think of it this way: the express train is travelling on the local line, so you need to pay for getting on the express train, plus using the local line that it's on.

This is stupid, I know. I'm sorry, I don't make the rules. This is just how it is. A good example of this is travelling from Narita Airport in Tokyo into the city. **You need to put two tickets into the machine** at once if you decide to take anything other than the local train: for example, the local line ticket, plus the Skyliner (that's what the express is called on this line) ticket.

These situations don't come up that often, but when they do you'll see signs around for them, especially at the airport.



Shinkansen (bullet train)

Perhaps the most famous method of travelling the country is via Shinkansen, or the bullet train. Travelling at 300km/h on a comfortable train with plenty of legroom, enough space to get work done, *and* a snack cart to boot; there's plenty of reasons why it's so popular.

It's fast, comfortable, and convenient, but it's not cheap. And depending on what type of trip you're going for, it may or may not be your most optimal option.

Okay, so this next section may be confusing because **the entire train situation in Japan is confusing.** I'll try to make it as clear as possible, but here's 3 scenarios of why you might want to catch the Shinkansen over anything else:

#1. If you're travelling across the country quickly

If you intend on making **more than 3 city-to-city trips every 7 days** (for a maximum of 21 days), get the **JR Rail Pass** and use the Shinkansen.

This pass is for people who want to see the most of Japan in the least amount of time. It enables you to travel on all regular JR lines and the JR-owned Shinkansen. However, remember that it doesn't cover private lines and other private Shinkansen.

#2. Tokyo to Osaka or Kyoto, fast

If you need to get between Tokyo and Osaka or Kyoto quickly, chances are, it's faster to catch a Shinkansen, but maybe not by much.

Of course, flying is faster in terms of raw travel time. However, if you're in Tokyo and factor in the time it takes to get to the airport (usually ~1.5 hours), then perhaps the time it takes to get from KIK (Kansai International Airport) to Osaka (another ~1 hour), then sure, the flight time is shorter, but the overall time is longer. In this instance, it'll take $1.5 + 1.5 + 1$, so 4 hours to get to Osaka vs just 2.5 to 3 hours on the Shinkansen. However, JFYI, flying is *cheaper* in this instance, though.

#3. If you want the experience

And you do, at least once. Riding the Shinkansen for the first time is awesome! Better than the Eurostar or any other European equivalent in my opinion (although I'm biased).



Train

Shinkansen aside, catching trains is my preferred and recommended way to travel Japan in general. They're always on time, they're fast, it's just so easy.

Especially in the cities, everywhere you want to go is within a 15-minute walk from a station. Stations are mostly well sign-posted in English too, so there is far less guesswork and ambiguity than catching a bus, for example. Google Maps works really well in most major cities, too.

The only thing to look out for is, as mentioned previously, the differences between the private lines vs the JR ones. Oh, that, and Shinjuku station. Shinjuku station is terribly confusing.



You might be able to catch Mt Fuji in a coach!

Bus

Buses are, as always, a reliable method of travel. However, I've found that in most destinations, trains are both easier to navigate and more reliable.

Sometimes, buses can be hard to navigate. There may be several routes coming to the same stop and sometimes those buses don't have numbers or English, so it's hard to determine which one is which.

Also, depending on what part of Japan you're in, sometimes you get on, then pay, then ride. Sometimes you pay, get on, then ride. Sometimes you get on, ride, then pay. Sometimes you enter through the front, sometimes you enter through the middle—it's all so confusing.

For reference, in Tokyo, you mostly enter from the front door, pay, ride, and get off. In Osaka and Kyoto, you enter through the middle, ride, then pay at the front on the way out. Often if you're catching a coach or a longer-travel bus, you pay, get on through the front door, ride, exit.

Confusion aside, sometimes buses are absolutely necessary to get where you need to go. This is especially true in locations that are harder to get to or more remote. Often, there aren't any trains around, and aside from driving, buses are your only option.



If you fly between Tokyo & Osaka or Kyoto, you might be able to see Mt Fuji here too!

Flying

Flying in Japan is a very viable option between major cities.

Of course, all the larger airlines like All Nippon Airways and Japan Airlines fly between cities domestically. However, there's surprisingly quite a large market for budget flights in-between cities too.

Airlines like Peach Aviation, Jetstar, and Vanilla Air (previously AirAsia) offer discount fares when flying between the major cities. It's not uncommon to see these flights for less than ¥9,000 for a one-way ticket.

This can be cheaper than catching the Shinkansen depending on the time of year. However, remember to factor in costs such as the price it costs to get to the airport via local trains in the first place (not to mention the time it takes to get to those stations).

Taxi

Taxis in Japan are neat; they have self-opening and self-closing doors in some cities, and the drivers are always really lovely.

They're reliable as ever in cities. However, they're super expensive too.

Expect to pay 10-30% more to catch a taxi in Japan than you would in another first-world country. It also doesn't help that ride-sharing isn't really a thing in Japan yet, so if you want to travel privately, this is the only other way.



Self-driving

Outside of the cities, driving is always a great idea for getting around.

Within the cities, it's hard to justify hiring a car, worrying about where to park it, paying for said parking, navigating tiny streets etc. versus just catching public transport.

When you're out of the hustle and bustle though, it sure beats catching buses and trains, especially when it comes to remote areas.

Car hire pricing is about on par with any other first-world country. Expect to pay from ¥10,000 per day and up for rental in most cities, which is not so bad when split between a group.

The one downside, however, is that tolls in Japan are almost criminally expensive. The drive from Tokyo to Kyoto on the expressway, for example, is well over ¥10,000 in tolls alone, even though the journey takes 6 hours.

If you're driving a lot, consider purchasing the **Japan Expressway Pass**, which allows for unlimited toll travel for ¥20,400 for 7 days, or ¥34,600 for 14 days (excludes Hokkaido).

Culture notes

Some little facts to make assimilating a little easier and less jarring.



Collectivist culture

Japan has a collectivist culture. This is opposed to most of western society which has an individualistic culture.

The individualistic culture focuses on the self, while Japan's culture is very much focused on the ideals of a group-dominant society.

In this type of society, you'll find behaviours that promote the benefit of the group or society-at-large, rather than individualistic promotion.

This is a fundamental difference to what most people reading this book will be used to.

The collectivist culture manifests itself in day-to-day life in many ways: People seek and require group consensus more often. Families and local communities play a more central role in their daily lives. People avoid confrontation at almost any cost. People won't take action on things if it means inconveniencing someone else. Hierarchy, both socially and in a work environment is very important, and the idea of someone having "a level in society" is something all Japanese people grow up with (and is even baked into the language).

These effects are less pronounced the younger the generation becomes. However, I'm sure you've heard stories, either secondhand or thirdhand: overt kindness by a complete stranger; relentless head bowing in every social interaction; a level of group conscientiousness that you just don't see every day; this collectivist culture is the foundational reasoning as to why that is.

Of course, it doesn't mean all Japanese people are saints—there's a dark side to every culture. It just means that Japanese people think about and are more conscious of one another and their place in society when compared to an individualistic culture. Food for thought.



Ameyoko, Tokyo



Shinjuku Yamanote Line, Tokyo

Working culture

The Japanese are a hard-working bunch.

While most businesses operate during typical 9am to 5pm hours, the working culture in Japan (especially in the cities) could be viewed from a westerners perspective as very harsh.

People work long hours for the sake of working long hours. It's not uncommon to see people working 12 hours days (regardless of whether it's smart-work or not). It's why so many need their daily release by going to bars and clubs after work still in their suits.

A typical Japanese salaryman (or woman) may work up to 60 hour weeks, with many workers during the year not taking their paid vacation time due to them feeling guilty about burdening their colleagues.

You see the effects of this everywhere. People napping all the time on trains and buses. People sleeping on park benches. People partying at karaoke bars till 5am because they missed the last trains after 12. People piss-drunk, throwing up everywhere still in their work clothes.

There's even a full-on internet meme culture behind this behaviour. So if you see any of it, now you know why. It's totally normal, though. Even if it could be seen as unhealthy.

Keeping noise down

You'll find that in most public situations in Japan, it'll be quiet. Whether that's on a bus or a train, on a sidewalk, or in a mall. People generally keep to themselves and keep quiet, because being loud and rowdy disturbs the surrounding peace and draws attention to you—something most Japanese people avoid like the plague.

In trains especially, even talking on your phone is very much frowned upon. I've been in so many absolutely jam-packed trains, so packed that you can't even stretch out your arms to hold on to something (but it doesn't matter because everyone sways around in unison because it is so tight). In these jam-packed trains, all you can hear is the sound of the train. Dead quiet. This happens all the time. It's both eerie and wonderful.

I think the mentality is that "we're all in this bad situation together, so let's not make it any worse for any of us". All this to say, try to read the room when you're in a situation where things are quiet; it happens often. To blend in, follow suit.



Shinjuku Bus Terminal, Tokyo

Masks

If you come from a Western country, one of the first things you'll notice when you arrive in Japan is the vast number of people wearing face masks.

People who are sick wear masks to prevent germs from spreading. That's all. People who aren't sick also wear masks to prevent themselves from getting sick. This is very, very common, especially in the winter months and change of seasons when people are susceptible to the flu.

Although in a post-2020 world after the Covid-19 pandemic, I figure the sight of masks is now a common one, however, it's worth adding here just in case anyway.

Alcohol and drinking

The legal drinking and buying age is 20 in Japan, and most people obey that pretty well.

The drinking and driving laws in Japan, however, are some of the strictest in the world.

In Japan, the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is 0.03%. Which is to say, Japan pretty much has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to drink-driving because even a single beer will put you over that limit.

If you're found over the limit, you could be sentenced with up to five years in prison and fined up to ¥1,000,000 (~\$10,000USD).

If you're not driving, however, life is great. Drinks are available almost everywhere; combinis, supermarkets, even vending machines on the street!

Oh, and the word for "cheers" in Japanese is "Kanpai".



Somewhere in the middle of nowhere, Hokkaido

Money and tipping

Despite what you've heard about how 'technically advanced' Japan is (oh, did I mention they still use fax machines? 🤔), Japan is still very much a cash-based society.

As a general rule, always carry cash with you at all times. It's also useful to fill up an IC card (Suica, Pasma, etc.). Not only can you use it for transport, but many places (like almost all convenience stores) accept them as forms of payment.

Also, tipping is not customary nor required here. In fact, it's generally frowned upon, and you may even get denied when trying to tip people. Accept the fact that service workers will do everything they can to provide the best service to you at the price you're expecting to pay.

A smile and learning how to say thank you (arigatou gozaimasu) authentically is a much nicer alternative in Japan.

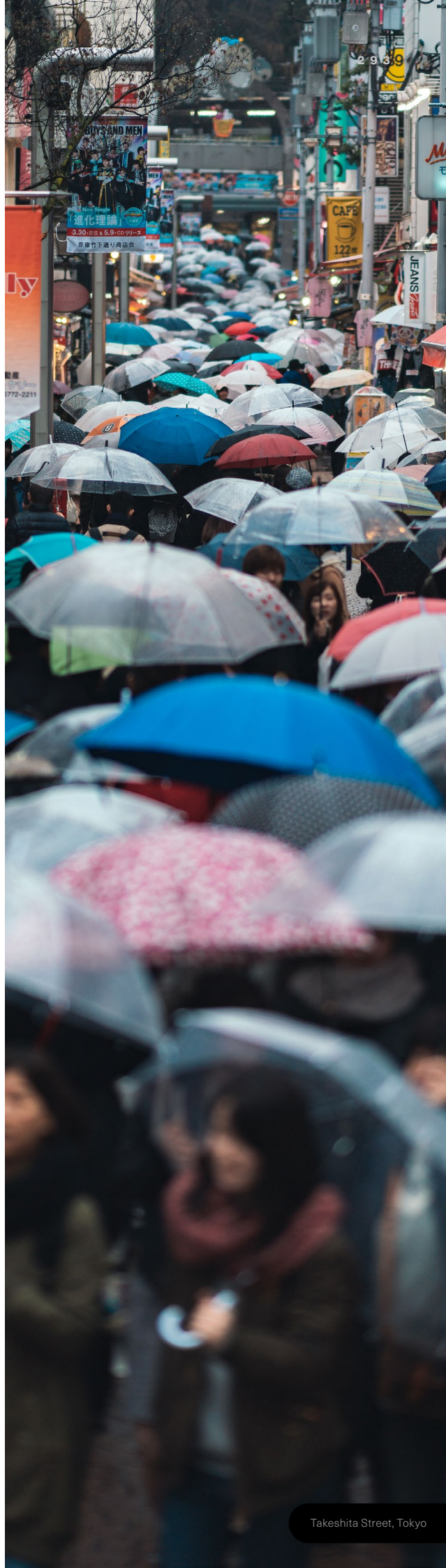
Basic Japanese words and phrases

Just enough to smoothen out your trip.



I'm sure you've heard that Japanese is a challenging language to learn and study, and it is. However, thankfully for us English speakers, Japanese has been romanised into what's called "Romaji". If you're not super serious about learning everything there is to know about the Japanese language, this is more than enough to babble some words to communicate what you need to.

I would never recommend learning Japanese via Romaji as a replacement for learning actual Japanese though. **This is just for basic survival only.**





Romaji breaks down pretty easily into English letters you can start to pronounce. However, there's a bit of a catch with how they pronounce vowels...

Pronunciation

Essentially, the vowels (A,E,I,O,U) are the same, but they're pronounced differently. From there, you take the consonant that surrounds it, and you can essentially pronounce the word effectively enough (although Japanese pronounces 'L' and 'V' and a few others differently).

It works like this:

- | | |
|----------|---|
| A | Pronounced " Ah ". Like in "Far". |
| I | Pronounced " Ee ". Like in "See". |
| U | Pronounced " Oo ". Like in "Moo". |
| E | Pronounced " Eh ". Like in "Edge". |
| O | Pronounced " Oh ". Like in "Old". |

So if you take the word "Sashimi", it breaks down into: **Sahsheemee**. Or if it's the word "Atsui", which means "Hot", you would pronounce it as **Ahtsooe**.

For more examples, with audio, visit [this wonderful resource](#) by Tofugu.

Basic words and phrases

Meaning	Romaji
Yes	Hai
No	lie
Thank you	Arigatou gozaimasu
Excuse me / sorry / pardon me / thanks for your trouble	Sumimasen
Sorry	Gomennasai
That's okay / are you okay/ it's okay	Daijoubu
Good	li (desu yo)
A little bit	Chotto
Amazing	Sugoi (prepare to hear this a lot)
Please	Kudasai (add it on to the end of something. E.g: Biru wo kudasai. Beer please)
Please (politely)	Onegaishimasu



Lake Kawaguchi, Kawaguchiko



Chikurin-ji, Shikoku

Greetings

Meaning	Romaji
Good morning	Ohayo gozaimasu
Good afternoon (or anytime, really)	Konnichiwa
Good evening	Konbanwa
Good night	Oyasumi nasai
How are you?	Ogenki desu ka?
Nice to meet you	Hajimemashite
See ya! (casual)	Jaa ne!
Good bye (won't see them for awhile)	Sayonara

Side note: You'll often hear shop owners say "*irasshaimase*", which roughly translates to "welcome". Don't freak out. It's a very common greeting you'll hear all over Japan.

A response isn't required for this welcome (and it's fairly weird to respond to it; you don't say "thank you" back at that, and it's *not* rude to just ignore it completely). A simple head nod will do if you want to respond back in some way.

Places and conveniences

Meaning	Romaji
Convenience store	Konbini
Supermarket	Suupaa
Restaurant	Resutoran
Toilet	Toire
Hotel	Hoteru (getting the hang of all this now?)
Airport	Kuukou
Station	Eki
Taxi	Takushii
Bus	Basu
Train	Densha
Bicycle	Jitensha
Money	Okane
Card (like credit card)	Kaado



Kimobetsu, Hokkaido



Mt Fuji, shot from a plane between Tokyo and Kyoto

Food

Meaning	Romaji
Delicious	Oishii
Let's eat / Thank you for the food	Itadakimasu
Thank you for the food (after you eat it)	Gochisousama deshita
I'm hungry	Onaka ga sukimashita
To eat	Tabemasu
To not eat	Tabemasen
To drink	Nomimasu
To not drink	Nomimasen
Beer	Biru
Water	Mizu
Coffee	Koohii
Ramen refill	Kaedama (really teaching you the important stuff here)

Help

Meaning	Romaji
English	Eigo (pronounced eh-hh-go)
Do you speak English?	Eigo wa hanasemasu ka?
Don't have	Nai (casual) / Arimasen (polite)
Understand	Wakarimasu
Don't understand	Wakarimasen
Do you have X?	X wa arimasu ka? (E.g: ramen wa arimasu ka?)
Where / where is x?	Doko / X wa doko desu ka?
Why?	Doushite? (pronounced "dou-shi-te")
What / what is it?	Nani / Nan desu ka?



Maruyama Park, Kyoto, during cherry blossom season



Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo

Common adjectives

Meaning	Romaji
Amazing	Sugoi
Happy	Ureshii
Okay	Daijoubu
Good	Ii ("eeee")
Bad	Warui
Fun	Tanoshi
Hot	Atsui
Warm	Atataakai
Cold	Samui
Cool	Suzushii
Near	Chikai
Far	Tooi

Numbers

Meaning	Romaji
One	Ichi
Two	Ni
Three	San
Four	Yon / Shi
Five	Go
Six	Roku
Seven	Nana / Shichi
Eight	Hachi
Nine	Kyuu
Ten	Juu
One hundred	Hyaku
One thousand	Sen
Ten thousand	Man
Yen	En

Thank you!

That's it!

I hope you've enjoyed reading this guide as much as I have enjoyed exploring Japan and writing about it.

I also sincerely hope it thoroughly prepares you for a fantastic trip to anywhere in Japan: great food to look out for, easy ways to assimilate into the culture, and of course, incredible places to sightsee and document.

If you've got any feedback or questions about this guide, please feel free to email me at hey@patkay.com.

Otherwise, enjoy your trip to Japan. I hope you return with many new photos and many new memories.

Happy travels.



About Pat

I'm an award-winning freelance travel photographer and multi-disciplinary content creator based in Sydney, Australia.

With a passion for travel and adventure, I specialise in exploring the contrast between nature and urban via landscape, cityscape, aerial, lifestyle and street photography.

As a photographer, I've been fortunate to have worked with many top brands all over the world such as Sony, Microsoft, Samsung, Nike, Adidas, Adobe, Ford, Lexus, DJI, and many more.

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