

Japan's culture, geography and history



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Japan is an island-nation found off the coast of Northeast Asia, between the North Pacific and the Sea of Japan. After WWII, the country lay in ruin. Two million Japanese died in the war, a third of which were civilians, and more than 13 million Japanese were homeless ("Japan"). Today, Japan is a new and prosperous nation, and leading in trading. High-speed trains speed between Japan's cities, connected by bridge and tunnel systems. Their transition back to being an economic superpower is remarkable, but not uncharacteristic, given their strong belief in hard work, the value of working together, and vigorous education standards ("Japan"). Since WWII, Japan has turned into one of the most highly urbanized and industrialized countries in the world. The country's price for success, unfortunately, has been overcrowding issues. Close to two-thirds of the 126 million Japanese live in urban cities, making it understandable why Japan is one of the most densely populated nations. ("Japan").

From north to south, Japan consists of four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. There are also thousands of smaller islands stretched around them. The islands are generally covered in mountains, ranging anywhere from 8,000 to 12,000 feet above sea level ("Japan"). Japan also sits along the volcanic and earthquake-prone belt known as the "The Ring of Fire". Minor tremors are common in the region, with most of the 'quakes causing little to no damage at all. The Japanese islands were formed from earthquakes like these, only much stronger, creating mountain chains that eventually grew out of the water and formed into the islands ("Japan"). About four-fifths of Japan's surface is covered in either hilly or mountainous terrain, leaving very little room for the population and agriculture. Most of

the Japanese have no choice but to live in lowland plains around the coast where the land is relatively flat. The largest of these plains is in the region near Japan's capital city, Tokyo, where 12 million people live in one of the most heavily concentrated areas in the world.

Over the course of centuries, the Japanese have developed into a very distinctive people. The Ainu are different from the Japanese because they're the descendants of the islands earliest ancestors. Most of the Ainu now live on Hokkaido, separate from the majority of the population. The Japanese are primarily descendants from various parts of Asia, who migrated there from much earlier times ("Japan"). There's only one official language spoken in Japan, Japanese, though English is taught as the foreign language everyone must learn in school. For this reason, many of the Japanese can understand English to some extent ("Japan"). Much unlike the rest of the world, the Japanese do not make class distinctions based on their income. Above all else, the Japanese are most concerned about status and rank among their peers. Factors such as age, length of service in the government or a company, and leadership in a group are the most highly regarded. The Japanese show their respect in the form of a bow; the higher a person's status, the deeper and longer the bow they receive. In the family, older members get the deepest bows, first dip in the tub, and best seat at the kitchen table ("Japan").

Japan has two principle religions; Shinto and Buddhism. Most of the Japanese adhere to both faiths. Shinto, which means "the way of the gods", is a native religion to Japanese culture. Followers of Shinto worship the forces of nature, much like the gods of ancient Greece, who often personify the forces

of nature themselves ("Japan"). Shinto originally came from the influences of Buddhism, which was introduced from China. Japanese culture is also largely focused on group cooperation. Other than family, the most important group to the Japanese is their company. In Japanese culture, the virtue most valued is harmony, as harmony is the key to success in any group ("Japan"). When groups make decisions, it's important that all the members can agree to the same terms. A simple majority is not enough, as that leaves too many people feeling like they "lost" - The Japanese system of making decisions relies on long collaboration in which every view is expressed. The Japanese like to avoid confrontation by using language that's indirect and carefully worded ("Japan"). Eventually, when there's a meeting of minds, decisions are nearly always completely unanimous.

Japanese culture has long emphasized a heavy focus on education. The Japanese people attribute their development and economic success to a level of educational excellence. Japan often compares its achievements to the rest of the world, and only feels satisfied when it ranks right near the top. Japanese schools are under constant pressure to raise their educational standards, striving for excellence in all areas ("Japan"). All children must attend a six-year elementary and three-year junior high education from age 6 to 15. About 94 percent go on to attend high school, and 40 percent of high school graduates continue their education ("Japan"). In Japan, the school day is longer, the school week is five and a half days, and summer vacation is a little more than a month long. Discipline in schools is strict, with homework assigned starting from first grade on. Every student is also expected to study a foreign language, typically English, in junior high. About

half of all students seek some kind of outside tutoring or after-school instruction. One result of this vigorous pursuit is almost 100 percent literacy, a rare achievement (“Japan”).

In no other society is a successful future more dependent on an individual's academic achievement. Japanese schools are among the most competitive in the world, with the best companies only recruiting graduates of top-ranking universities. Those who attend lower-ranking programs will often settle for lesser jobs and benefits, but still enjoy a high level of job security as everyone else (“Japan”). As a result, nearly every student who has high ambitions for success will seek to enter a university. Admittance to national universities is merit based, rather than by social status or an individual's ability to pay tuition. This mindset allows universities to focus on bringing in the best minds, no matter what walk of life they come from (“Japan”). Students who wish to continue their education after junior high must pass vigorous entrance exams for both senior high school and universities. “Examination season” is during February and March each year. The pressure to pass these exams is phenomenal, often referred to as “examination hell” (“Japan”). Students who fail examinations will often enroll in a special “cram” school and try again the following year.

Under the constitution drafted in 1947, Japan is a constitutional monarchy. The emperor is head of the state, symbolic of the unity of the Japanese people. The legislative body is the Diet, which is made of a House of Representatives (the lower house) and the House of Councilors (the upper house). Councilors are elected to six-year terms, with half the seats up for election every three years. Representatives are elected to four-year terms (“

Japan"). The Diet selects among itself the prime minister, head of the government, and a cabinet. The House can remove the prime minister at any time with a vote of "no confidence". The judicial system is led by the Supreme Court, whose members are appointed by the cabinet. The Supreme Court rules on the constitutionality of laws and government actions ("Japan").

Japan has the world's third-largest economy, having achieved remarkable growth since the destruction following WWII. The Japanese economy grew

Japan has comparatively little farmland compared to the United States. Only 12 percent of the land is cultivated for farming, yet Japan produces about three-fourths the annual food requirement for its people ("Japan", HSW). Japan's fishing industry is also expansive, taking home among the largest catches annually.

The war against the United States and its allies in WWII remains one of the greatest disasters in Japan's history. It cost 2 million Japanese lives, including the hundreds of thousands who were killed in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ("Japan"). As a result of the war, Japan was stripped of its military peacekeeping ability and its forces were disbanded.