



Nagano's Zenkoji Temple. VANESSA PINNIGER



A snow monkey at the Jigokudani Onsen. VANESSA PINNIGER

NOT-TO-MISS GEMS OF JAPAN

See the towering skyscrapers of Tokyo
and the Zen gardens of Kanazawa

VANESSA PINNIGER

Home to the world's most populous city (Greater Tokyo, 37 million), with both the world's busiest rail station (Tokyo) and intersection (Shibuya Crossing), as well as ample green Zen gardens and ingrained cultural traditions, Japan is a fascinating country of contrasts.

Known for its buttoned-up conservatism, the country is also famously safe, making it a great option for solo travellers. Most of the major cities — think Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima — and cultural sites are located on the main island of Honshu, the country's largest, and while there's a lot to pack in, here's a checklist of things to see and do. You can experience it all on Explore Worldwide's popular Simply Japan trip — a greatest hits tour that's perfect for a solo or first-time visitor.

TOWER OVER TOKYO

For the best views of Japan's capital, take a trip up Tokyo Skytree. The 634-metre tower, the tallest in the country, offers spectacular panoramic views over the city. On a clear day you can even see Mt. Fuji. Shibuya Sky rooftop observatory, the newest addition to central Tokyo's rooftops, overlooks the famous Shibuya Crossing. Also known as Shibuya Scramble, five intersections converge at this crosswalk, the busiest intersection in the world. Watch the action from 230 metres above in the tallest skyscraper in Shibuya.

TIPTOE THROUGH JAPANESE GARDENS

Kenrokuen Gardens in Kanazawa is considered one of the most beautiful landscape gardens in Japan. Begun by the Maeda Samurai clan in 1632 and taking nearly 200 years to complete, the name means Garden of the Six Sublimities.

One of the most beautiful Edo-style gardens, Hamarikyu Gardens is a tranquil oasis right in the centre of Tokyo. The former duck hunting grounds of the Tokugawa shoguns (complete with a duck memorial for those hunted) makes a lovely respite from the buzz of the city. In spring, it is resplendent in grandiose cherry blossoms; in fall, it is a kaleidoscope of autumn colours and foliage.

TRIP TO THE MARKET

Tokyo's famous fish market relocated to the modern Toyosu Fish Market, the city's newest and largest, from the inner section of the Tsukiji Market in 2018. The renowned fast-paced morning tuna

auctions where bidders compete for the biggest catches of the day are now held at Toyosu.

Tip: You'll have to get up early to get a spot — the auction can be seen from the gallery floor from 5:45 to 6:25 a.m. Or apply online a month in advance to the Toyosu Tuna Auction Lottery website to win one of 100 places on a special observation deck even closer to the action. The outer section of Tsukiji Market still buzzes with old-school charm, offering free tastings, samples and the freshest seafood in town, now trucked over from nearby Toyosu. Great spot for a sushi lunch.

TAKE ME TO CHURCH

Shinto and Buddhism are Japan's two main religions. Shrines, typically Shinto, have torii gates while temples are Buddhist and boast Buddha statues and incense burners.

Tokyo's oldest temple, Sensō-ji in the Asakusa district, is a must-see. Completed in 645, the complex comprises a five-storey pagoda and imposing Thunder Gate flanked on either side by the gods of wind and rain, and a giant red lantern weighing 700 kg.

For an authentic insight into Japanese Buddhist culture visit the Fudo-do Temple for a spectacular fire ceremony. Leaping flames and chanting of sacred texts are accompanied by the deafening beat of huge taiko drums. Do as the locals do and have your purse or wallet waved over the flames by a monk — it's thought to bring wealth. In Kyoto, the Fushimi Inari Shrine is a spectacular series of 10,000 red torii gates snaking up a mountain.

Tip: Walk the four-kilometre path through the gates at sunrise or at night to avoid the midday crowds. There are 12,000 steps and it takes about two hours.

GET NAKED

A staple in Japanese culture, onsen are naturally occurring hot springs with bathing facilities located throughout the country. There are also onsen at many Japanese hotels which are often artificially heated indoor facilities (sento) using ordinary, not geothermal, water. They are typically clothing-free and separated by gender, unless you are at a private onsen in a ryokan (traditional inn) or temple lodging where couples can reserve a time-slot together.

Rules: Sit on one of the little stools in the shower area and give yourself a thorough scrub and rinse off before you get in (the Japanese are fastidious about this). Do not



Japan's spectacular Mt. Fuji in the distance. EXPLORE WORLDWIDE



The Fushimi Inari Shrine's 10,000 red torii gates wind up a mountain. EXPLORE WORLDWIDE

wear a bathing suit or other clothing (unless noted). Bring a towel into the bathing area but don't let it touch the water. Tie up your hair so it doesn't touch either. **Note:** Many public onsens don't allow guests with tattoos.

LIVE LIKE A MONK

Awake to the smell of fragrant incense burning at dawn from your lodging at a Buddhist temple or shukubo. Created to ac-

commodate pilgrims, the simple accommodations are furnished with traditional tatami mats made from rice straw, futons and paper walls, and offer an authentic Japanese experience. Bathing facilities and toilets are shared, separate for men and women, as is the private onsen (couples can go in together). Join the monks for morning prayers at sunrise at the Zenkoji Temple in Nagano, one of the earliest Buddhist temples in Japan.

Founded in the seventh century, it reportedly houses an image brought from India and hidden somewhere in the temple since 654 that's said to lead those who see it to Nirvana. Receive a sacred blessing from the head monk on his way into the temple, then enter to experience the mesmerizing chant of the ancient sutras echoing all around before heading back to your lodging for a traditional monk's vegetarian breakfast.

MONKEY BUSINESS

Japan's famous snow monkeys of Jigokudani Onsen, with their wintry moniker and cheeky demeanour, are a delight to witness. The indigenous macaques descend from the hills to scamper and bathe in the hot springs, a unique behaviour not found anywhere in the world. You'll get to experience a bit of Japanese forest bathing too as the 30-minute trail to the onsen wends its way through a pretty forest.

Tip: Stop for a big bowl of the best ramen you'll ever taste at the Enza Café on your way back down. One of the chefs is the former ramen chef of a Michelin star restaurant.

PAY YOUR RESPECTS

Largely destroyed when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Aug. 6, 1945, Hiroshima has literally risen from the ashes and is now a thriving city with a palpable energy and spirit of resilience. The city's poignant Peace Memorial Park and Museum, on the site of the A-bomb hypocentre, are a reminder of the horrors of war and nuclear holocaust. The Genbaku Dome, struck from almost directly above, stands preserved as it looked right after the bombing — its centre walls left standing and the building's iron frame still recognizable as a dome. It's heavy stuff but one place everyone should visit on a trip to Japan. Lest we forget.

ISLAND HOP

Take a day trip across to tiny Miyajima Island just off the coast of Hiroshima. Regarded as a god in the Shinto religion, the island itself (literally Shrine Island in Japanese) is home to the world famous 'floating' red O-Torii Gate. Appearing to float on the water at high tide, it is one of the most iconic sights in Japan. Leading out to it is the 16th century Shinto Itsukushima Shrine, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is built over the sea.

For centuries home only to the occasional priest and wild animals, the island's famous deer continue to roam the streets here freely today. They're brazen so be careful what you have in your hands.

For great views across the Inland Sea hike Mt. Misen or take the Ropeway (cable car and gondola) up. At the bottom stop for lemon beer and oyster tempura (oysters and lemons are two of the area's specialties) before hopping the ferry back to the mainland.

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