

# JAPAN UNWRAPPED

WHERE TRADITION MEETS TOMORROW



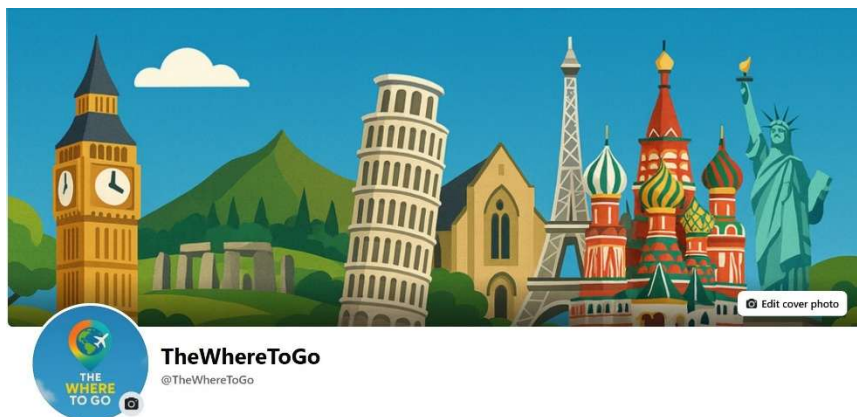
## The inside cover for your information.....



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# Chapter 1: Japan



You can always find out where I am in the world by checking out flagpole 4 in front of the hotel. In case you are not conversant with the flags of the world, then greetings from the land of the rising sun. Unfortunately, my personal time clock is completely out of sync at the moment, so I am not seeing a lot of sun, or anything else for that matter, while I acclimatise myself to the concept of day and night in Japan.

Japan is a captivating island where ancient customs coexist with cutting-edge technology. It consists of four main islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku offering a nation of contrasts from serene Zen gardens and neon-lit metropolises to sacred shrines and robot-staffed hotels as well as snow-capped mountains and sun-kissed beaches.

Its history, shaped by emperors, samurai and rapid modernisation, is etched into every building and landscape creating a tapestry of experiences for everyone who visits the country. Japan's history is marked by significant cultural and political developments with Shintoism and Buddhism defining Japan's spiritual landscape.

Highlights include the rise and fall of emperors, rule by samurai warriors, isolation from the outside world, expansion, surrender and rebirth transforming Japan into an economic powerhouse renowned cutting-edge technology like Japanese cars and bullet trains, weird inventions like karaoke and vending machines, cultural values like politeness and punctuality.



Japan has been on my bucket list for some time now as it represents a living archive of human civilisation with the energetic city of Osaka contrasting well with the serenity of Kyoto, the former imperial capital and certainly one of my favourite places.

The haunting peace of Hiroshima offers a sobering lesson in 20th-century history with the preserved ruins serving as a stark and haunting memorial to the 140,000+ people who perished when that atomic bomb exploded 600 feet above their heads.

Nearby is the spiritual island of Miyajima offering an opportunity to reflect on the human cost of war and the enduring hope for a peaceful future. Travelling to Tokyo takes us past Mount Fuji which stands as the soul of Japan.

Tokyo is city of contrasts offering silent temple grounds and arcade cacophony alongside robot restaurants and centuries-old tea houses. It is a city of astonishing efficiency and depth, where every alleyway can lead to another area to explore.



## The Japanese Flag



Unlike many other countries, Japan did not have a formal national flag until relatively recently. The flag is commonly known as Hinomaru (the circle of the sun) and was officially on 13 August 1999. The red circle is symbolic of the sun and is said to represent a prosperous future for Japan.

The white background symbolizes the purity, honesty, and integrity of the people of Japan. After the war, the Hinomaru's use was limited due to its association with Japan's military past. However, more recently, the flag's meaning was redefined to reflect peace and national unity.



## Chapter 2: Osaka

Osaka is Japan's third-largest city and a mix of historic grandeur and modern innovation. At its core lies Osaka Castle, a 16th-century samurai fortress surrounded by cherry-blossom gardens, symbolizing the city's feudal past. Yet Osaka also gazes boldly forward, showcased by the futuristic Umeda Sky Building and Abeno Harukas which is Japan's tallest skyscraper.

Osaka is not widely regarded as Japan's most beautiful city, but it is very convenient for Kyoto and Nara and a good starting point for a trip around Japan. Osaka is a major financial centre of Japan and is recognized as one of the most multicultural and cosmopolitan cities in Japan. It is also home to several major universities including Osaka University, Osaka Metropolitan University and Kansai University.

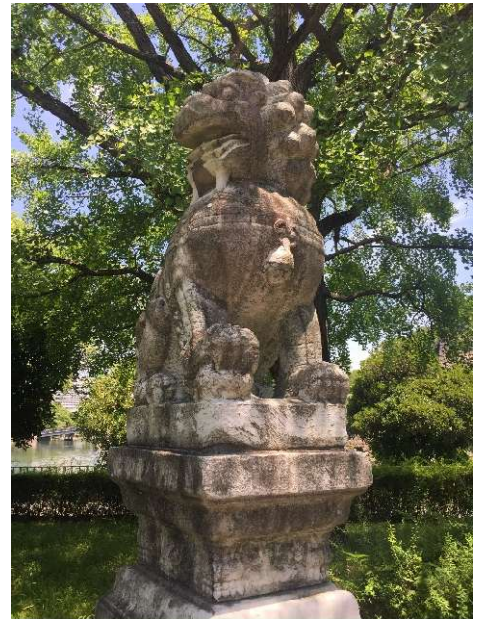
Osaka is famous for being Japan's street food capital and is also acknowledged as the birthplace of pot noodles. The sushi conveyor belt was also introduced here in 1958 when Yoshiaki Shiraishi opened the Mawaru Genroku Sushi. He developed a conveyor belt and thought it might help in dealing with his restaurant's staffing and efficiency.



### Osaka Castle and Gardens:

The Osaka Castle was built in 1583 by warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi and symbolises Osaka's historical significance as a political and economic hub. The castle was destroyed and rebuilt multiple times with the present structure dating back to 1931. The castle's 130 feet (40 metres) walls feature some massive stones (weighing up to 40 tons) and display ingenious defences against sieges. The castle's five-story main tower houses a museum detailing the city's samurai past.





Surrounding the castle, Osaka Castle Park beautifully blends history with nature. The Nishinomaru Garden, once the castle's western citadel, features 600 cherry trees that erupt in pink blooms each spring. Autumn transforms the park with fiery maple foliage. The moat-lined paths and stone bridges offer serene strolls with plenty of seating just sit down and take in the view. At night, the castle grounds are illuminated by sodium lamps.



### **Tsutenkaku Tower**

The Tsutenkaku Tower, also known as the Osaka Tower, was built in 1912 and was inspired by Paris' Eiffel Tower. The word 'Tsutenkaku' means 'Tower Reaching Heaven' and it was one of the tallest structures in Japan when it was built. Regardless, at a height of 201 feet (64 metres) then it is an awful long way away from reaching heaven let alone some of the towering skyscrapers close by.

The original tower was destroyed by a fire during World War II but, by public demand, was rebuilt in 1956 to a height of 338 feet (103 metres) with a more futuristic design. The observation deck is situated on the fifth floor which should give you an idea of just how tall this tower really is. From the observation deck you can look down on the shops and restaurants of Osaka's Shinsekai district.



## Abeno Harukas

Abeno Harukas was completed in March 2014 and is a soaring testament to 21st-century Osaka dominating the skyline of the Abeno district. The building has 60 stories and rises to a height of 980 feet (300 metres) making it Japan's tallest building until 2023 when it was surpassed by the Azabudai Hills Mori JP Tower in Tokyo.

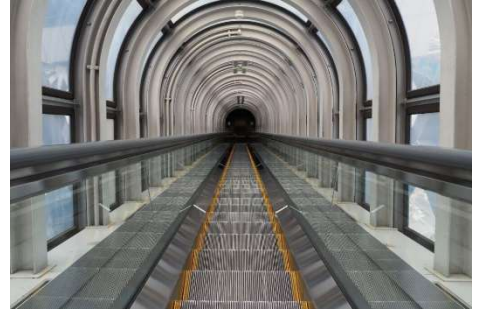
The Abeno Harukas was designed as a 'city in the sky' and seamlessly incorporates a department store, art museum, luxury hotel, offices and 'Harukas 300' which is the observation deck on its top floors. The open-air rooftop Sky Garden offers breathtaking views of the city and the Yamato River. The word 'Harukas' can be interpreted as meaning 'to make clear, bright, and cheerful'.



## Umeda Sky Building

Just in case you have not had enough towers and skyscrapers with city views, then there is always the Umeda Sky Building which is a breathtaking feat of architectural audacity and one of Osaka's most distinctive landmarks. The Umeda Sky Building was designed by architect Hiroshi Hara and was officially opened to the public in March 1993.

The building comprises two 40-story towers connected at the top by a spectacular 'Floating Garden Observatory' which was quite revolutionary at its time. You can ascend to the top via a dramatic glass tunnel escalator bridging the towers before reaching the open-air rooftop deck. From here you can experience a panorama of the city below.

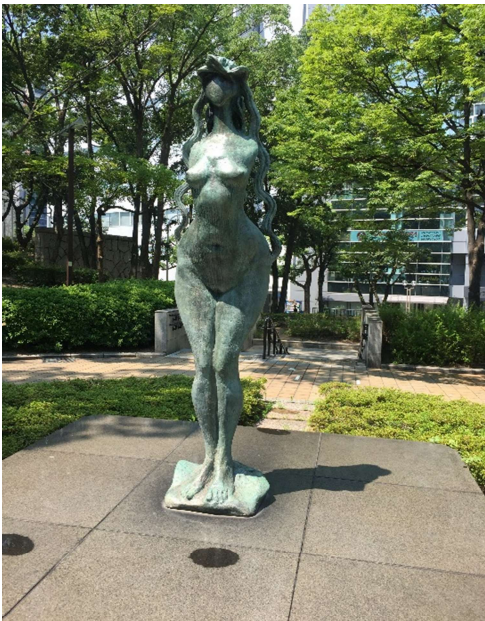


## Chapter 3: Kobe

Kobe is just 30 minutes west of Osaka by train. Kobe is a vibrant port city nestled between the Rokko Mountains and Osaka Bay. The area is renowned for its cosmopolitan flair, rich history and stunning natural scenery. The Port of Kobe was Japan's busiest port and one of Asia's top ports until the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 which killed 6,434 people and injured almost 15000.



A number of memorials and monuments can be found across the city including this gilded Marina statue which holds a clock whose hands are fixed at 5:46 which is the exact time that the earthquake struck the city. The earthquake proved to be a major wake-up call for Japanese disaster prevention authorities.



### Ikuta Shrine in Kobe



The Ikuta Shrine is one of Japan's oldest Shinto shrines dating back to the third century. The shrine predates the city itself and has endured wars, earthquakes and modernisation, embodying Kobe's unyielding spirit. The shrine is dedicated to Wakahirume-no-Mikoto, a Shinto goddess associated with prosperity, protection and the sun. The shrine is surrounded by towering camphor and cedar trees.



The shrine has been rebuilt multiple times due to fires and conflicts, but its sacred essence remains unbroken. It survived the Great Hanshin Earthquake and became a symbol of hope during Kobe's recovery as well as offering a peaceful refuge amidst the urban sprawl. The word 'Ikuta' means 'living rice field' reflecting the agricultural origins of the area.



## Suma Beach

The Suma Beach (Suma Kaigan) is located in western Kobe and is a one-mile stretch of white sand along the Seto Inland Sea. This is the main beach in Kobe and is particularly famous for its firework festivals and breathtaking sunsets. The beach's pine groves and coastal trails contrast with modern high-rises and reflect Kobe's mix of nature and urbanisation.



# Chapter 4: Nara

Nara is a historic city easily accessible from Osaka and Kyoto, making it a must-visit for anyone exploring the Kansai region. Nara is one of Japan's most important historical and cultural centres. It was the capital of Japan from 710 to 784 AD (known as the Nara Period), and it is home to some of the country's oldest and most significant temples, shrines, and artworks.

Today, Nara is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, celebrated for its well-preserved temples, shrines, and artifacts. The city harmonises ancient heritage with natural beauty such as that seen in Nara Park, where sacred sika deer roam freely.....a tradition linked to the Shinto belief that deer are divine messengers. Nara's charm and legacy make this an interesting stopover for tourists.



***In Japanese, the suffix '-ji' means 'Temple' so saying 'Kofuku-ji Temple' translates to 'Kofuku Temple Temple.' This is a common mistake similar to saying 'ATM Machine' (Automated Teller Machine Machine) but this is as it is used in most tourist guides ....and in some they even miss out the hyphen so 'Kofukuji' or, more often, 'Kofukuji Temple***

## Kofuku-ji Temple

Kofuku-ji Temple is a historic Buddhist temple and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its deep cultural, religious and artistic significance. Established in 710 during the founding of Nara as Japan's capital, it was originally built by the Fujiwara clan, one of the most powerful aristocratic families of the period. The temple served as both a spiritual centre and a symbol of the clan's political influence.

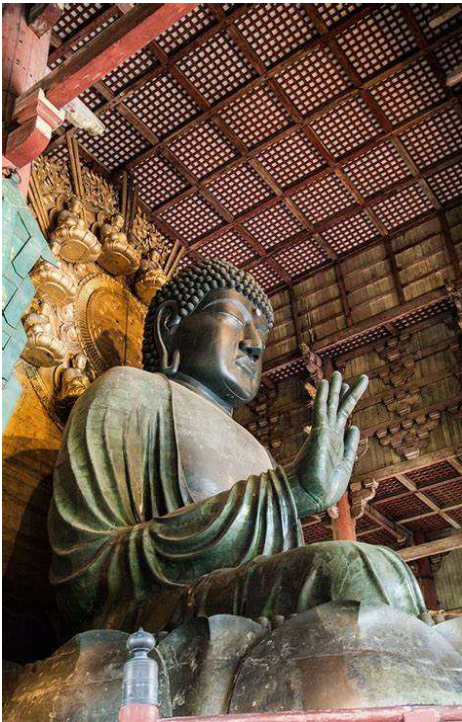
Kofuku-ji is celebrated for its striking pagodas and halls. The temple complex once included over 150 buildings although only a fraction remains today. The iconic five-story pagoda is Japan's second-tallest wooden pagoda and a symbol of Nara. Rebuilt multiple times due to fires and wars, the current structure dates back to 1426.





## Todai-ji Temple and Nara Park

Tōdai-ji Temple was constructed in 752 under Emperor Shōmu and is a monumental symbol of Japan's Buddhist golden age. Its Great Buddha Hall which was rebuilt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after fires, remains one of the world's largest wooden structures, housing a 15-metre-high bronze statue of Vairocana Buddha which was cast using nearly all of Japan's bronze reserves at the time.



The neighbouring Nara Park is a sprawling 1240-acre public space in central Nara combining natural beauty, cultural heritage and spiritual symbolism. Established in 1880, it is renowned for its population of over 1,000 freely roaming Sika deer, considered sacred messengers of Shinto deities in local folklore. These gentle deer, protected as national treasures, interact with visitors and happily bow for treats which are sold in the park.





### The Fine Garden Hotel

My visit to Nara did require a one-night stopover and trawling through Booking.com, I thought I had found the perfect stopover. The Japanese love their children but every now and then you do need a break from their noise and excitement. This is how I ended up in a Japanese love hotel which described itself as adult only..... well, that and the fact that it was the cheapest hotel at only £27.35 per night.

My extremely spacious room has all the normal hotel facilities as well as (in no order at all) a large reclining massage chair, a surround-sound music system, a programmable lighting system, a permanent installed karaoke system, an operational slot machine, a jacuzzi in the bathroom, a projector screen at the foot of the bed and a machine dispensing sexy lingerie .... not much use to me because they look far too small!!!

On reflection, my Japanese is not that good, and I am now worried that the £27.35 per night cost might be £27.35 per hour???





***My next challenge: Are these biscuits or are they soap?***



# Chapter 5: Kyoto



Kyoto (officially Kyoto City) was Japan's imperial capital from 794 to 1868 and, during this time, served as the heart of politics, arts, and religion. The city is a living museum of Japanese culture, history and tradition with over 1,600 Buddhist temples, 400 Shinto shrines and 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Kyoto was fortunate in being spared from World War II bombing because of its cultural significance.

Kyoto is considered the cultural capital of Japan and is a major tourist destination. The city's grid layout mirrors ancient Chinese capitals. The city manages to balance tradition with modernity, hosting cutting-edge universities and tech firms while preserving crafts like Nishijin-ori silk weaving and Kyo-yaki pottery.

Kyoto is well connected to the Tokaido Shinkansen bullet train line and the Keihan Electric Railway, the Hankyu Railway and other rail networks offer frequent services within the city and to other cities and suburbs in the region. Although Kyoto does not have its own commercial airport, it is easy to get there by public transport.

## Arashiyama Station

One of the challenges in Kyoto is that many of the places you want to visit are outside of the city centre necessitating some serious planning to get there. Today, I wanted to visit the Tenryu-ji Zen Temple and the Jojakko-ji Temple, which necessitated a trip on the Keifuku Randen Tram Line (described as the scenic option) to Arashiyama Station.



## Kimono Forest

Right next door to Arashiyama Station is the Kimono Forest which is a collection of 600 cylindrical pillars adorned with traditional kimono fabrics. Each pillar is made of dyed fabric wrapped around acrylic frames which are illuminated from within at night. The intention is to represent Kyoto's heritage of kimono craftsmanship and blends this traditional art with modern design.



## Pond of Dragon

Located at the end of the Kimono Forest is the Pond of Dragon which serves as the station's guardian deity, drawing its spiritual significance from the nearby World Heritage site, Tenryū-ji Temple (whose name means 'Temple of the Heavenly Dragon'). It is said that the dragon once descended on Arashiyama, and now this pond honours that legend, watching over the safety of everyone's journey.



## Pond of Dragon

Wishes are granted if the dragon that  
landed in Arashiyama is prayed to.

If you immerse your hands in the water,  
your heart will be filled with peace and you will be lead to happiness.

## Togetsukyo Bridge

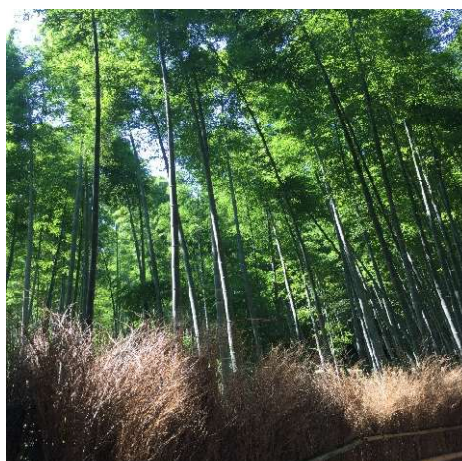
While you are there, don't miss out on the Togetsukyo Bridge which is one of Kyoto's most iconic landmarks, located Arashiyama. Its name translates to 'Moon Crossing Bridge' and it is a wooden pedestrian bridge spanning the Katsura River. The bridge dates back to the ninth century, and the current structure was built in 1934 using reinforced concrete but designed to resemble the original wooden bridge.



## Tenryu-ji Temple and Sogenchi Gardens

The Tenryu-ji Zen Temple is a UNESCO World Heritage Site which was founded in 1339 by shogun Ashikaga Takauji...the name translates to 'Temple of the Heavenly Dragon.' The temple was built to honour Emperor Go-Daigo, a rival of the Ashikaga clan, and to pacify his spirit after a turbulent power struggle. The temple was designated as a World Heritage Site in 1994 as part of 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto.'

The temple's crowning glory is the Sogenchi Garden, which is a serene landscape designed by Muso Soseki, featuring a mirror-like pond framed by Arashiyama's mountains and bamboo groves. The site remains an active Zen training centre and visitors can join meditation sessions or savour matcha in the tea house which overlooks the garden.



## Arashiyama Bamboo Grove

The Arashiyama Bamboo Grove (also known as the Sagano Bamboo Forest) is a natural monument that has captivated visitors for centuries. The grove is located between Tenryu-ji Temple and Jojakko-ji Temple and consists of a cathedral-like canopy of towering bamboo with sunlight filtering through the dense foliage, creating a mesmerising play of light and shadow on the path below accompanied.

The creaking and rustling of the bamboo stalks on a windy day is recognised by the Ministry of the Environment as one of the '100 Soundscapes of Japan'. The grove is open to the public 24 hours a day, although it is quieter early in the morning and later in the evening.

## Jojakko-ji Temple and Mount Oguro

Jojakko-ji Temple is a 15-minute walk from Tenryu-ji Zen Temple and is perched on the slopes of Mount Ogura so make sure you have your best walking shoes. The temple is marked by a steep stone staircase entrance. Unlike the Tenryu-ji Zen Temple, this place offers a much quieter and more meditative experience where you can escape the crowds.

The temple was founded in 1596, and the founder was a monk called Nisshin (1561-1617) who was the head priest of the Honkoku-ji Temple and founded this temple as a retreat for his retirement. The gate is the oldest building in the temple and the pagoda dates to 1620 and is classified as an Important Cultural Property.



## Kyoto Tower

Kyoto Tower looks a bit like a lighthouse and is a modernist landmark offers 360-degree views from its observation deck. The tower was completed in 1964 and stands 430 feet (130 metres) high. The tower's base houses a hotel, souvenir shops and a variety of eating places as well as an onsen (a traditional public bath) if you decide to try one out.

From the tower's observation deck, you will be rewarded with a breathtaking panorama of mountains and forests as well as numerous temples...it is said that on a clear day you can even see Osaka. There are nine elevators to whisk you up the observation deck which can hold up to 500 people ...although it was not that busy on the day I visited.



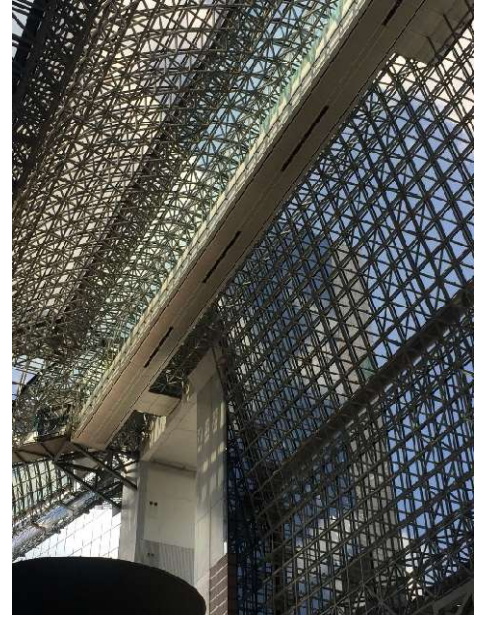
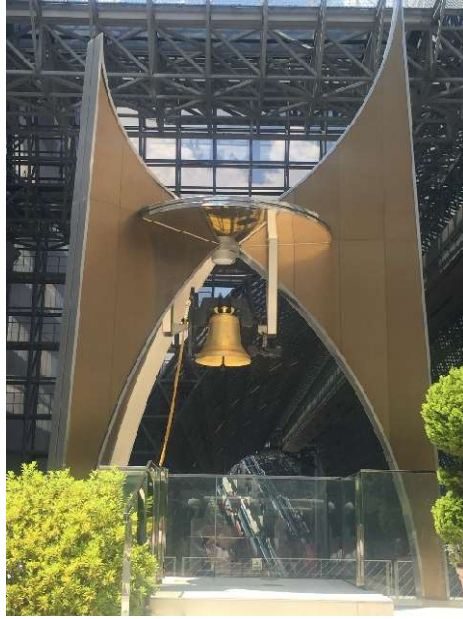
## Kyoto Station

Next door to Kyoto Tower in Kyoto Station which is described as a striking counterpoint to the city's serene temples and bamboo forests and an architectural marvel that defies expectations in a city celebrated for its history. The station was designed by architect Hiroshi Hara and completed in 1997. The station is Japan's second-largest station building after Nagoya Station.



The station incorporates a shopping mall, hotel, movie theatre, a department store, and several local government facilities. Its vast atrium, dubbed the 'Matrix,' soars 15 stories high and is crisscrossed by escalators and bathed in natural light. Do not miss the iconic Grand Staircase, a terraced cascade of steps doubling as a seating area for events. Head up to the rooftop Sky Garden for a free panoramic of Kyoto.

My pictures do not do justice to the sheer size of this place....



## Kyoto Railway Museum

The Kyoto Railway Museum is an absolute paradise for train enthusiasts and can be found next to Umekoji Park. The museum chronicles Japan's rail history and highlights include vintage steam locomotives, shinkansen models and a roundhouse with a fully working turntable which is not so different from those found back in the UK,

The museum offers over 50 trains spanning 150 years of history from steam-powered locomotives to the iconic Shinkansen bullet train that revolutionised travel in 1964. You can climb on board retired carriages to get the feel of a historic dining car or a luxurious royal carriage. The museum's second floor unveils the science behind the rails, with cutaway engines and models explaining aerodynamics and magnetic levitation.





## Kyoto International Manga Museum

The Kyoto International Manga Museum is a haven for fans of Japan's iconic comic art. The museum is housed in a converted elementary school which opened in 2006 through a partnership between Kyoto City and Kyoto Seika University. With over 300,000 items in its collection, the museum spans manga history and delving into manga's artistry and social impact.

As if that is not exciting enough then the pièce de resistance is the 'Wall of Manga' consisting of an extensive labyrinth of shelves stocked with 50,000 volumes which visitors can freely browse ranging from classics to obscure titles. The museum also champions academic research, with archives of rare magazines and a library accessible to scholars. Seasonal events, from cosplay days to lectures by creators, keep the experience fresh.



## Kinkaku-ji Temple

Kinkaku-ji Temple (also known as the Golden Pavillion) was originally built in 1397 as a retirement villa for shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. It was later converted into a temple after his death. The three-story structure blends distinct architectural styles and the top two floors are entirely covered in gold leaf, reflected brilliantly in the Kyōko-chi Pond.

Though the original temple burned down in 1950 it was painstakingly rebuilt in 1955 and is an extremely popular tourist destination so try to get there early. The surrounding gardens are similarly beautiful with meticulously landscaped paths, ancient pine trees and seasonal blooms, specifically cherry blossoms in spring and fiery maples in autumn.



## Ryoan-ji Temple

The Ryoan-ji Temple was established in 1450 by Hosokawa Katsumoto who was a powerful warlord and deputy to the Ashikaga shoguns. The name translates to 'Temple of the Peaceful Dragon' reflecting its role as a place of Zen meditation and introspection. Like the others. The temple is a classified UNESCO World Heritage Site,

Of particular interest here is the Zen Garden measuring 25 meters long and 10 meters wide and covered with 15 stones which is seemingly 'renowned worldwide for its enigmatic karesansui' which is best translated as a dry landscape rock garden. Now, I am not particularly convinced that what I was looking at was particularly enigmatic, but it certainly had the attention of a large number of visitors that day.



## Ninna-ji Temple

The Ninna-ji Temple is a historic Buddhist temple and the head temple of the Omuro school of Shingon Buddhism. The temple was founded in 888 by Emperor Uda and it uniquely served as both a temple and a residence for imperial family members, with its head priests traditionally being sons of emperors. The temple is renowned for its tranquil courtyards, and its sprawling grounds include a landscape garden.



## Kyoto Imperial Palace

The Kyoto Imperial Palace was the residence of the emperor for over 1,000 years until 1868. This historic site offers visitors a glimpse into the refined world of Japanese royalty, surrounded by tranquil gardens and elegant architecture. Key highlights include the Shishinden (Ceremonial Hall), where enthronement ceremonies were held, and the Seiryō-den, a former residential hall adorned with intricate screen paintings.

Outside, you can stroll through the vast Kyoto Imperial Palace Park, which is planted with a wide variety of flowering trees and benefits from walking areas and open fields. Take some time to visit the pond at the southern end of the park which is quite delightful and a peaceful retreat from the city's hustle. The palace is a 10-minute walk from Imadegawa Station on the Karasuma Line.



With around 1600 temples in Kyoto alone, it is evident that you are not going to see all of them in one trip. However, there was one I which I did not want to miss because it seems to adorn most of the tourist publicity. The Fushimi Inari Taisha is the head shrine of the god Inari and sits at the base of the mountain of the same name.

The pathway is laid out so that every time you think you are at the top, there is another set of stairs to ascend. Like the intrepid explorer I am not, I was determined to make it to the top.... proof available here. Unfortunately, by the time I got there it was nearly dark, so I had to make a hasty descent. The moral of this is that going up jiggers your knees and coming down ruins your ankles.... tomorrow I will suffer.

### Fushimi Inari Shrine

Fushimi Inari Taisha (often misspelled as Fushima Inari) is Kyoto's most iconic Shinto shrine which is particularly renowned for its thousands of vermilion torii gates that form a mesmerizing network of trails up the side of Mount Inari. The temple is dedicated to Inari, the Shinto deity of rice, fertility, agriculture and business prosperity.... which seems like a very strange portfolio!!!

The shrine was founded in 711 and subsequently relocated to its current site in 816 by order of Emperor Saga. The shrine's defining feature is its 10,000 or so torii gates, donated by individuals and businesses seeking prosperity. Two dense parallel rows of gates create the famous tunnel-like path leading to the forested mountain. The hike to Mount Inari's summit takes 2 to 3 hours so be warned.

Unlike most shrines, the Fushimi Inari is always open and possibly quietest early morning and late evening. Not surprisingly the base is always remarkably busy but trails thin out the higher you get.







伏見稲荷大社境内案内図

# Chapter 6: Miyajima and Hiroshima

## Bullet train

Today I am taking my first trip on a high-speed bullet train and let me tell you that my morning commute with Southern Railways will never be the same again. The bullet trains, known as *Shinkansen*, meaning 'new main line,' are a symbol of innovation, technology and efficiency. The trains were first introduced in 1964 connecting Tokyo and Osaka at unprecedented speeds.

This inaugural line marked the world's first dedicated high-speed rail network and was designed to address Japan's post-war transportation needs while highlighting the nation's recovery and modernisation. Today, the Shinkansen network spans over 1860 miles (3,000 kilometres) linking major cities across Japan at speeds of up to 200mph (320 km/h).

The Shinkansen's success stems from cutting-edge engineering and meticulous planning. The trains run on dedicated tracks with no level crossings, minimizing delays and ensuring safety. Advanced aerodynamics, lightweight materials, and regenerative braking systems enhance efficiency. The iconic "shinkansen nose" design reduces noise and air resistance, especially when entering tunnels.

Japan has also prioritised punctuality with average delays under one minute..... even during peak period times. This reliability is supported by rigorous maintenance protocols and automated systems that monitor tracks and weather in real time. Over time the fleet has evolved with trains operating at faster and faster speeds.



Passenger comfort is also emphasised with spacious seats, Wi-Fi power outlets and food carts serving a variety of foods. Safety is also another priority and there has been no fatal accident since their introduction thanks to earthquake detection systems that trigger automatic brakes and infrastructure designed to withstand seismic activity.

The Shinkansen remains a source of national pride and a model for rail systems worldwide offering speed, safety and an unparalleled travel experience. The trains are frequent, and I love the way that all the seats face the front.... this is because the seats are all turned around when the train reaches its destination for the return trip.



### **Itsukushima Shrine**

The Itsukushima Shrine is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Japan's most iconic spiritual and cultural landmarks. The shrine is located on Miyajima Island in Hiroshima Bay and is renowned for its 'floating' torii gate. The shrine is a masterpiece of Shinto architecture and a harmonious blend of human artistry and natural beauty.

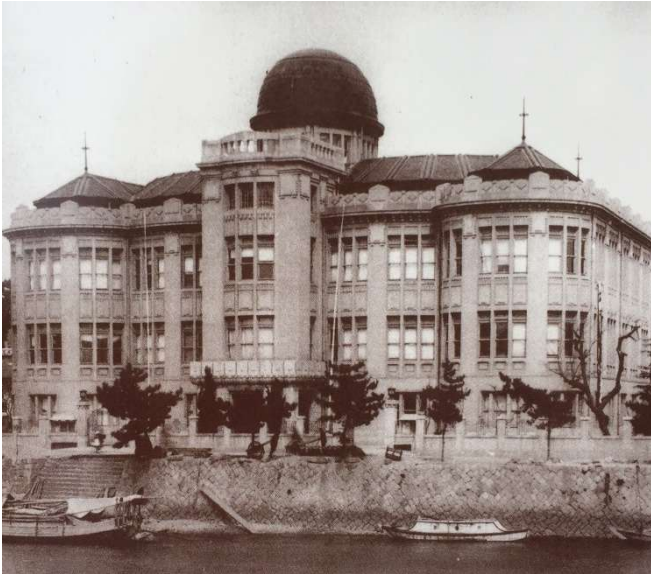


The shrine's most iconic feature is its grand torii gate, standing 54 feet (17 metres) high and constructed of camphor wood. During high tide, the gate seems to hover above the Seto Inland Sea, creating a surreal and magical scene. At low tide, visitors can walk to its base and observe the gate and its intricate carvings at close quarters.

The shrine complex includes a series of halls, connected by covered walkways, and a range of other structures. The shrine was established in the 6th century and gained its current form in the 12th century under Taira no Kiyomori who was a powerful warlord. He dedicated the shrine to the three daughters of Susano-o, the Shinto god of seas and storms.

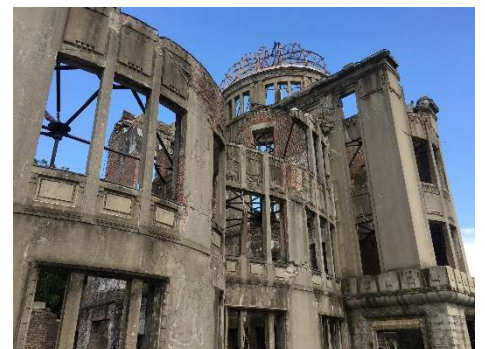


## Hiroshima



Hiroshima is globally renowned for its profound historical significance, resilience and commitment to peace. On August 6, 1945, it became the first city in history to suffer an atomic bombing. The event devastated its landscape and claimed approximately 140,000 lives. Today, Hiroshima stands as a powerful symbol of recovery and hope, blending solemn remembrance with a lively urban culture.

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, includes the skeletal ruins of the Atomic Bomb Dome which was once the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall. The building serves as a haunting reminder of the bombing's destructive force. Nearby monuments, such as the Children's Peace Monument, advocate for nuclear disarmament.



## Peace Memorial Museum

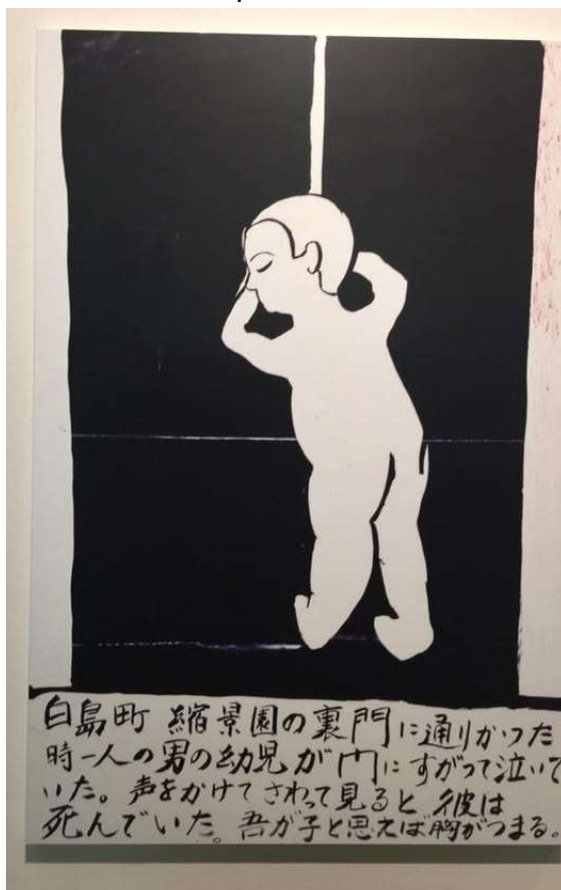
The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, located in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park, is a poignant institution dedicated to documenting the atomic bombing and advocating for global peace. The museum was opened in 1955, and exhibits chronicle the city's devastation through artifacts like charred clothing, melted glass and personal belongings recovered from the blast.

Photographs and testimonials from survivors convey the human toll, while models and diagrams explain the bomb's technical and environmental impact. The museum's mission extends beyond remembrance, emphasizing education and nuclear disarmament. There is a focus on the bombing's aftermath, including radiation effects and global movements for peace.

While I shall spare you the painful details of the 140,000 people who perished when that atomic bomb exploded 600 feet above their heads on that August morning in 1945, I hope you will not mind if I share the story of this tricycle. Shinichi Tetsutani aged 3 years and 11 months loved to ride his red tricycle which was his pride and joy.

When the bomb dropped, he was riding his tricycle in the front garden. His two sisters were killed instantly but badly burned, he survived until later that evening. His father felt that Shinichi was too young to be buried in a lonely grave away from home. So, he was buried with his sisters and his favourite tricycle in the backyard.

Forty years later, his father dug up Shinichi's remains and transferred them to the family grave. The beautiful red tricycle, which was Shinichi's best friend, was donated to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum which is where I took this picture.



Finally, this picture which simply says 'A boy clinging to a gate seemed to be crying. When I called to him and touched him, he was dead.'

# Chapter 7: Hakone and Mount Fuji

## Hakone, Lake Ashi and Mount Komagatake

Hakone is a renowned resort town southwest of Tokyo which is celebrated for its hot springs, lush landscapes and views of Mount Fuji. Hakone blends cultural heritage with natural beauty shaped by its volcanic origins and its mineral-rich waters. There is plenty to see here and this is a really good starting point for a trip to Mount Fuji.



At Hakone's heart lies Lake Ashi which is a serene crater lake formed 3,000 years ago by Mount Hakone's eruptions. Framed by forests and mountains, the lake offers iconic views of Mount Fuji using sightseeing cruises on pirate-themed boats or traditional vessels. The lake's shores host hiking trails with plenty of stopping off places to admire the view and appreciate the tranquillity .... other than all those tourists!!!



Mount Komagatake (4500 feet = 1360 meters) is situated to the southwest of Lake Ashi and is a volcanic peak offering rugged trails and sweeping vistas. Accessible via the Hakone Komagatake Ropeway, the summit offers 360-degree views of Mount Fuji, Lake Ashi and the local peninsula. The peak is part of Hakone's volcanic complex, with ancient lava flows shaping its slopes.

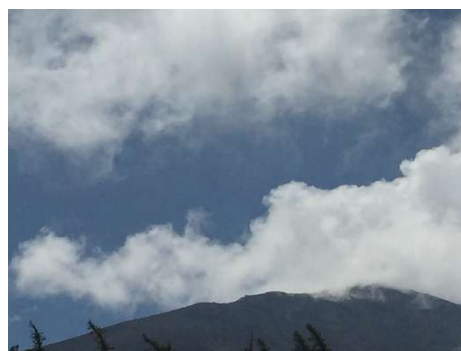




## Mount Fuji

Mount Fuji is Japan's tallest peak at 12,389 feet (3,776 metres) and is an iconic stratovolcano and UNESCO World Heritage Site revered as a sacred symbol of natural beauty and spiritual significance. The mountain's near-perfect conical shape has inspired artists, poets and pilgrims for centuries. Dormant since its last eruption in 1707, Fuji remains an active volcano, its snow-capped summit dominating the landscape.

Fuji's cultural importance is deeply rooted in Shintoism and Buddhism. Nowadays, climbing Fuji remains a pilgrimage for many, with the official hiking season running from early July to mid-September, when trails are free of snow and mountain huts are operating. For me the 5th Station, situated at approximately 7545 feet (2,300 metres) was quite high enough.



The station serves as the primary gateway for climbers on the Yoshida Trail, the most popular ascent route. Two thousand three hundred feet up Mount Fuji and I am already seriously out of breath.... regardless of the fact that I arrived by coach. Greetings from the 5th station of Japan's highest mountain which, for the moment, is as high as I think I am going.

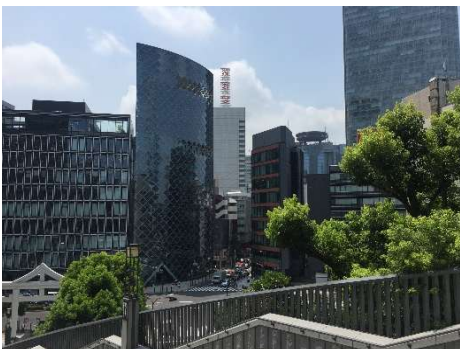
Beyond its trails, Mount Fuji faces challenges from overtourism and environmental strain. UNESCO has raised concerns about litter and erosion, prompting initiatives like mandatory climbing fees and waste management programs. Yet its allure remains undiminished. Mount Fuji embodies Japan's harmony of nature, culture and resilience and I would not have missed being here for the world.



## Chapter 8: Tokyo

The bustling capital of Japan and offers a mesmerising mix of ancient tradition and modern innovation. With a population exceeding 14 million, this sprawling metropolis is not only the political and economic heart of the nation but also a global hub of culture, technology and gastronomy encompassing the scramble of the Shibuya Crossing, the serene beauty of the Senso-ji Temple and the aspirations of the impressive Tokyo Skytree.

Tokyo's neighbourhoods each tell a unique story. This is the centre for innovation with robotics, autonomous taxis, virtual fitting rooms, health monitoring clothing and hologram performances..... and you will also find more Michelin-starred restaurants in Tokyo than any other city. Overall, Tokyo merges tradition with tomorrow, offering a glimpse into a technology-driven yet sustainable future.



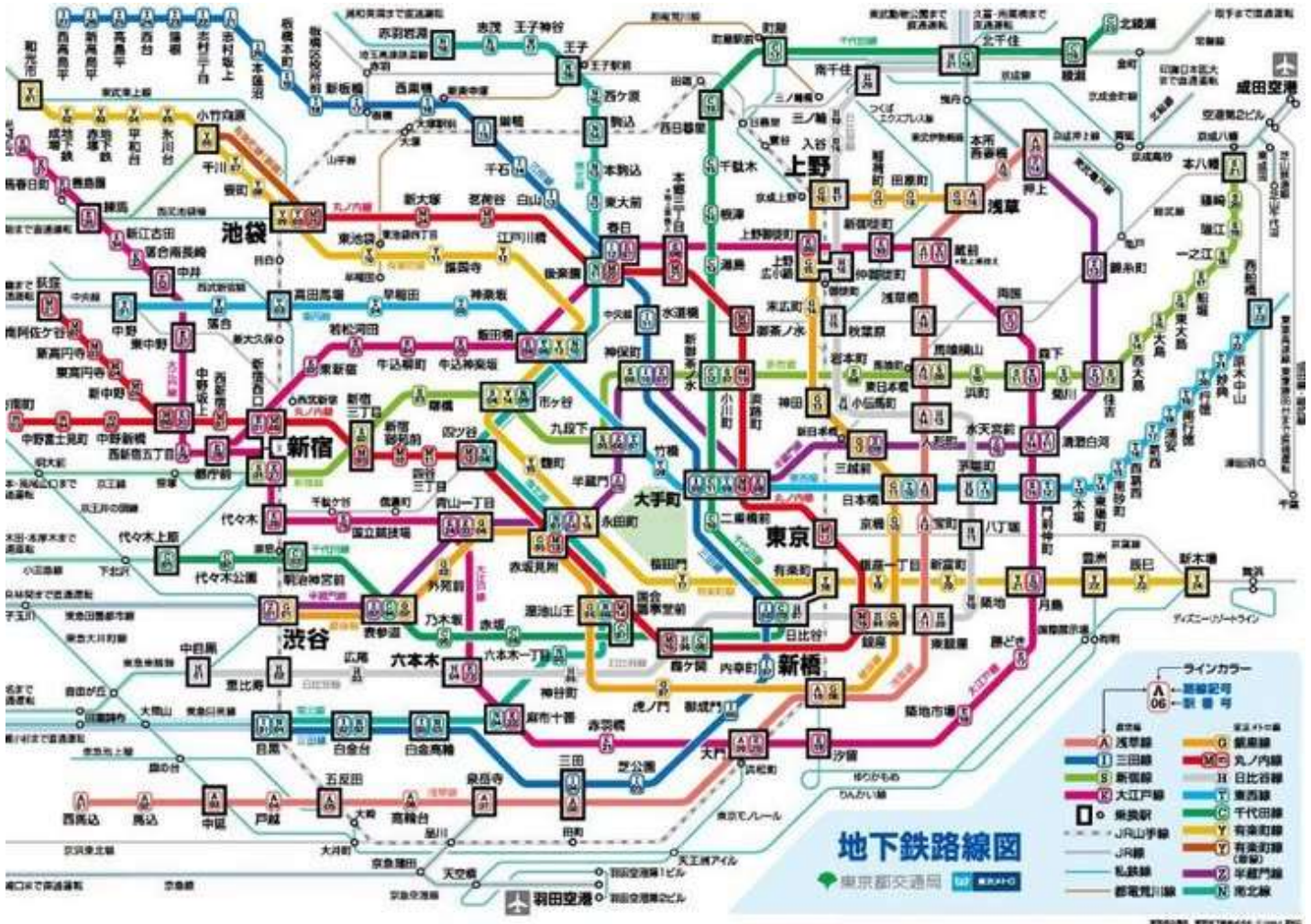
## Tokyo Metro

The Tokyo Metro is the circulatory system of the world's largest metropolis, seamlessly connecting 8 million daily riders across 13 lines and 285 stations. The metro was opened in 1927 and is operated by Tokyo Metro (a private company operating nine subway lines) and Toei Subway (a government owned company that operates four lines).



The system, as you might expect, is a masterclass in efficiency with trains arriving within seconds of their scheduled time. Rush hour transforms carriages into sardine cans, where personal space is a myth and your backpack is Public Enemy Number 1. Where else can you watch a station attendant magically stuff 300 people into a train using nothing but polite hand gestures?

Still, if you think London Underground is challenging, just take a look at the Tokyo Subway map.....



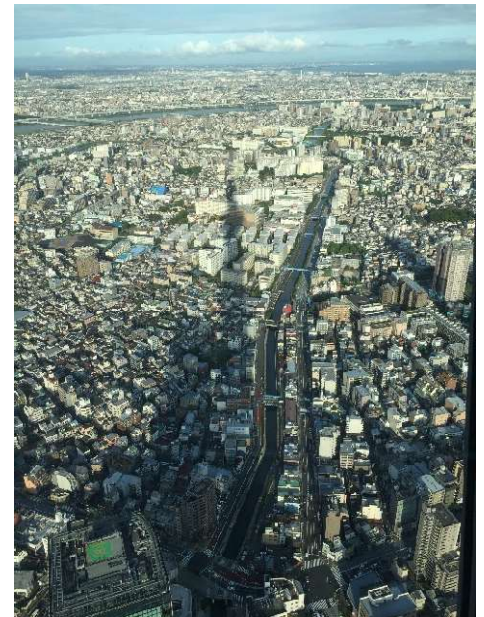
## Tokyo Skytree

Rising over 2080 feet (634 metres) above the bustling streets of Sumida, Tokyo Skytree is not just Japan's tallest structure but a symbol of the nation's ability to harmonize innovative technology with cultural heritage. The tower was completed in 2012 at a cost of £410 million. It was designed to replace the aging Tokyo Tower as the primary broadcasting hub accommodating the new digital terrestrial television.

Its impressive height was a deliberate attempt to ensure signal coverage across the whole of Tokyo. The tower originally earned the title of the world's tallest tower until 2023 when it was surpassed by Dubai's Burj Khalifa although it still remains the tallest freestanding broadcasting tower. The tower was built to withstand tremors of magnitudes up to 9.0.....a safety conscious response in earthquake-prone Japan.



The Skytree's two observation decks offer breathtaking vistas of Mount Fuji, Tokyo Bay and the city's neon-lit sprawl. The base of the tower houses over 300 shops, an aquarium and a planetarium. At night, the tower transforms into a luminous beacon, illuminated by energy-efficient LED lights that cycle through seasonal themes, from cherry blossom pink to icy winter blue.



## Imperial Palace and Gardens

The Imperial Palace and Gardens stand as a serene testament to Japan's imperial legacy and natural beauty. The palace, the primary residence of the Emperor of Japan, occupies the site of the historic Edo Castle which was once the seat of power for the Tokugawa shogunate during the feudal era. The outer areas welcome visitors to explore their tranquil landscapes and buildings.



The Imperial Palace itself, is a low-rise structure with sweeping eaves and minimalist aesthetics, contrasting with the glass skyscrapers which surround it. Public access to the inner grounds is limited as the building serves as the official residence of Japan's reigning emperor and the imperial family. The Imperial Palace remains a living link to Japan's past and a quiet reminder of its enduring imperial legacy.



The East Gardens, open to the public year-round, offer a peaceful escape from Tokyo's hectic energy. Visitors can stroll along winding paths flanked by ancient stone foundations as well as meticulously curated gardens that change with the seasons. The palace complex embodies Japan's ability to honour the past and the future.



## Meganebashi Bridge

The Meganebashi Bridge (Eyeglass Bridge), formally known as Seimon Ishibashi (Main Gate Stone Bridge), forms the elegant entrance to the Tokyo Imperial Palace. The bridge was rebuilt in 1888 and earned the nickname "Meganebashi" because its shape resembles a pair of spectacles when reflected in the moat waters.



## Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building is a striking architectural landmark situated in Shinjuku. The building was completed in 1991 and designed by renowned architect Kenzo Tange. This twin-towered skyscraper complex dominates the skyline and the design blends modernist minimalism with subtle nods to tradition.

Of particular interest are the free observation decks located on the 45th floors of both towers, offering panoramic views of the city out to Mount Fuji. The South Observatory includes a café and souvenir shop, while the North Observatory provides interactive displays explaining Tokyo's urban layout. At night, the towers illuminate in shifting colours themed to seasonal events or civic campaigns.

Beyond tourism, the complex serves as the operational hub for Tokyo's government, housing offices for over 13,000 employees. Its design emphasizes functionality, with earthquake-resistant frameworks and energy-efficient systems, including solar panels and advanced climate control. Though originally criticised for its costs (about £740million), the building is now another highlight for your tour of the city.





## Hachiko

The Hachiko Statue at Shibuya Station immortalises Japan's most beloved Akita dog, whose unwavering loyalty moved the nation. In the 1920s, Hachiko greeted his owner, Professor Ueno who was a Tokyo University professor, daily at the railway station. After the unfortunate and sudden death of his master, Hachiko continued to go each day and faithfully wait at the station for his master to return.

The story says that the dog waited at the same time every day for nearly a decade after the professor passed away. The bronze statue depicts the dog Hachiko. The statue was erected in 1934 but melted down during World War II although subsequently rebuilt after the war in 1948. Today, the statue serves as a popular meeting spot and a symbol of devotion which is popular with both locals and tourists.

## Shibuya Crossing

Shibuya Crossing, often dubbed the world's busiest pedestrian scramble, is a mesmerising symbol of Tokyo's pulsating energy. Located outside Shibuya Station, this iconic intersection sees thousands of people cross simultaneously during peak hours, orchestrated by efficient traffic lights and the desire to make the crossing before the lights change.

Surrounded by neon billboards and towering screens, the crossing epitomises life in modern Tokyo. The nearby Starbucks offers a prime vantage point for soaking in the spectacle. Visitors should experience it during evening rush hour or weekends for maximum impact. ....and no admission costs for this particular tourist attraction.



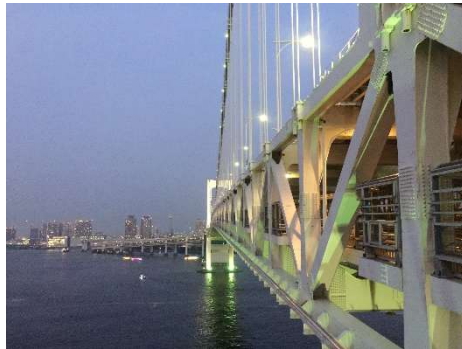


## Rainbow Bridge

Spanning Tokyo Bay, Rainbow Bridge connects central Tokyo to Odaiba, a futuristic entertainment district. The suspension bridge was completed in 1993 and features two decks: an upper highway and a lower roadway with pedestrian walkways offering panoramic views of the surrounding area. At night, the solar-powered LEDs bathe the structure in seasonal colours including rainbow colours over the weekends.

The towers supporting the bridge are white in colour, designed to harmonize with the skyline of central Tokyo seen from Odaiba. There are lamps placed on the wires supporting the bridge, which are illuminated into three distinct colours, red, white and green every night using solar energy obtained during the day. The bridge can be accessed by foot from Tamachi Station (JR East) or Shibaura-futō Station (Yurikamome) on the mainland side.

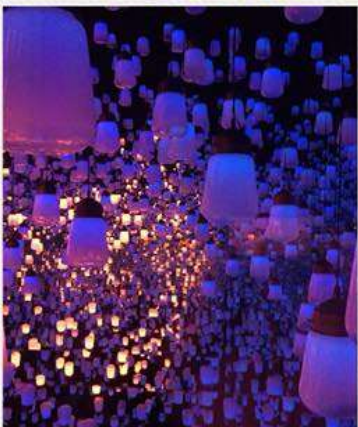
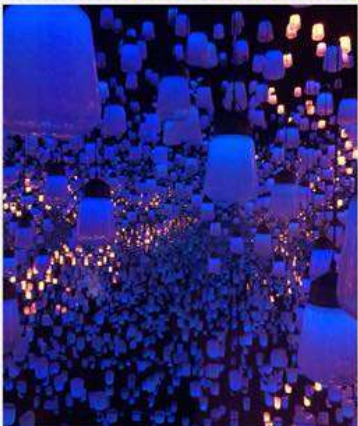
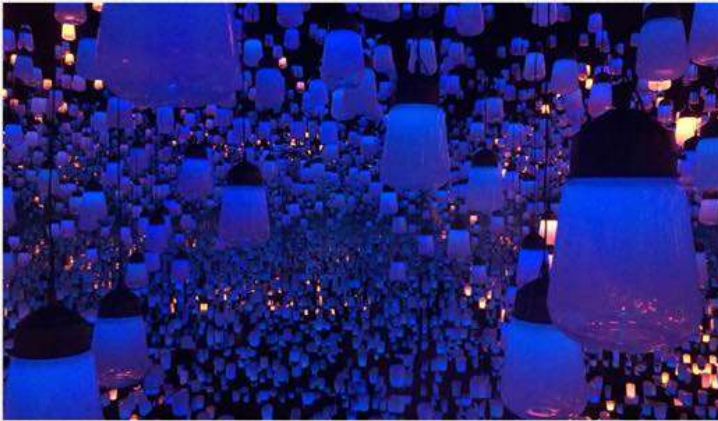
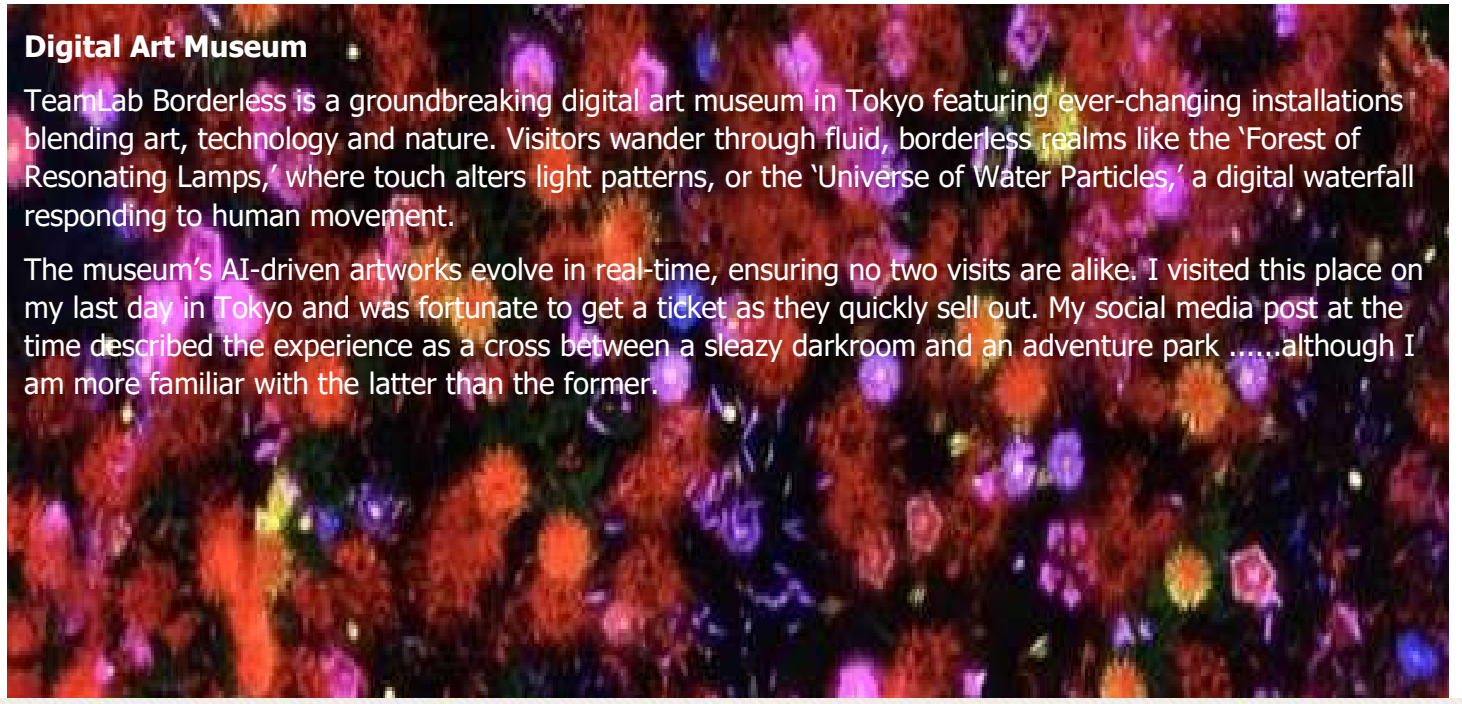
The bridge has two separate walkways on the north and south sides of the lower deck; the north side offers views of the inner Tokyo harbour and Tokyo Tower, while the south side offers views of Tokyo Bay and occasionally Mount Fuji. Bicycles are permitted on the condition that they are pushed (as opposed to riding them) due to its narrow width.



## Digital Art Museum

TeamLab Borderless is a groundbreaking digital art museum in Tokyo featuring ever-changing installations blending art, technology and nature. Visitors wander through fluid, borderless realms like the 'Forest of Resonating Lamps,' where touch alters light patterns, or the 'Universe of Water Particles,' a digital waterfall responding to human movement.

The museum's AI-driven artworks evolve in real-time, ensuring no two visits are alike. I visited this place on my last day in Tokyo and was fortunate to get a ticket as they quickly sell out. My social media post at the time described the experience as a cross between a sleazy darkroom and an adventure park .....although I am more familiar with the latter than the former.





## Roppongi Hills and Mori Tower

Roppongi Hills is a sprawling urban complex comprising a 'city within a city' integrating offices, luxury residences, upscale shops, gourmet restaurants, a cinema and the five-star Grand Hyatt Tokyo. At its core stands the 54-story Mori Tower which is a sleek skyscraper soaring 780 feet (238 metres) above the city which is supposed to embody the principle of 'vertical living'.

The Mori Art Museum, located on the tower's 53rd floor, showcases cutting-edge contemporary art from Asia and beyond, while the open-air Sky Deck on the 52nd floor offers breathtaking 360-degree views of Tokyo's skyline.....I am seriously getting fed up of looking down on Tokyo and hoping to get a glimpse of Mount Fuji through the clouds

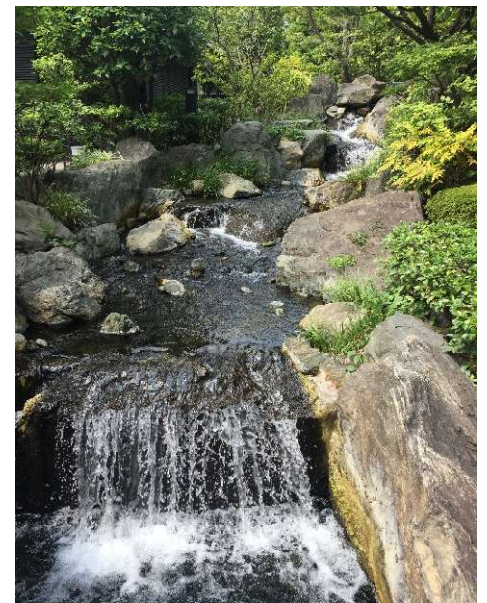
I guess I better go and try it out .....



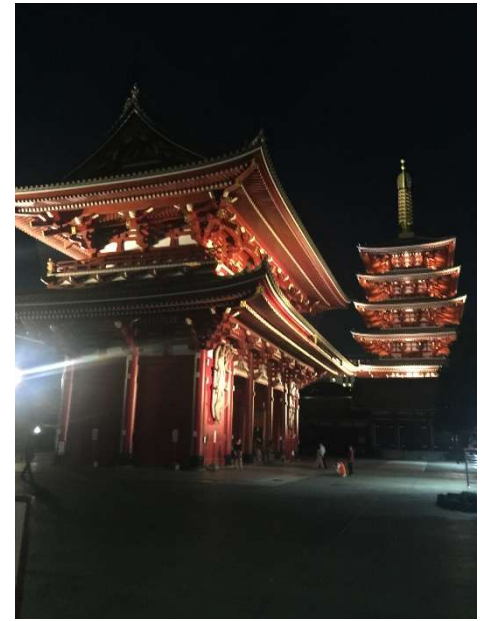
## Senso-ji Temple

Senso-ji Temple was founded in 628 and is Tokyo's oldest and most revered Buddhist temple standing in the historic Asakusa district. Legend recounts that two brothers discovered a statue of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, in the Sumida River. Despite repeated attempts to return it, the statue miraculously reappeared, prompting the village chief to enshrine it, marking the temple's origins.

Dedicated to Kannon, Senso-ji has drawn pilgrims for over 1,400 years, surviving fires, earthquakes and wartime destruction which necessitated a near-complete rebuilding after World War II. Approaching the temple, visitors pass through the iconic Kaminarimon Gate (Thunder Gate) which is adorned with a colossal red lantern and guarded by statues of the wind and thunder gods.



Close by is a striking five-story pagoda dating back to 1973 as well as a number of smaller shrines and gardens. The temple hosts a range of festivals and processions as well as lively street performances. By night, the areas' illuminated structures cast a mystical glow, contrasting with the serene ambiance of the daytime.



## ***Chapter 9: Reflections on Japan***

Well, that's Japan ticked off and I am definitely coming back again. My journey across the country has unfolded as a tapestry of contrasts blending centuries-old traditions with modern innovation. I enjoyed Osaka and Kobe, but I loved Kyoto where Japan's cultural soul really reveals itself. Wandering through the vermilion gates of Fushimi Inari Taisha, meditating in the Zen gardens of Ryoan-ji and enjoying the golden splendour of Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) underscores Kyoto's timeless elegance.

A short ferry ride to Miyajima Island revealed the iconic 'floating' torii gate of Itsukushima Shrine followed by a sobering visit to Hiroshima offering reflection in the Peace Memorial Park, where stories of resilience and hope amid tragedy left an indelible mark. The story of Shinichi's beautiful red tricycle still brings a lump to my throat and each year my social media reminds me of the visit and the 140,000 people who perished when that atomic bomb exploded 600 feet above their heads on that August morning in 1945.

In Nara I learned that adult only hotels were most likely to be love hotels and I shall never forget the look on the receptionist's face when I booked in and informed her that the booking was for one person only. I loved the way my sister told me that the microphone with the karaoke played was not a microphone believing me to be so sweet and innocent that I did not know the difference. The temples and Nara Park were nice, and I loved the sacred deer who bowed their heads for food.

Next stop Lake Ashi and Mount Fuji and another place on my bucket list ticked off. I never got to the top, but the 5<sup>th</sup> Station was high enough and taught me enough that I needed to know about altitude sickness. Then Tokyo .....and how I miss you already. From the scramble of the Shibuya Crossing to the tranquillity of Senso-ji Temple in Asakusa, the city pulsed with history and innovation. Finally, the story of Hachiko and his faithful devotion to his owner.... I only wish my dogs were the same.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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