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*Japan, A Destination of
Discovery*

With 6,852 islands to discover, Japan's natural wonders are the perfect backdrop for the rich cultural mix of heritage and tradition while its dynamic outlook is behind some of the most futuristic designs in the world.

With natural attractions including the magnificent Mount Fuji and beautiful primitive forests, Japan is the ideal destination for exploring on foot or by train; and from sampling the delicious new wave of Japanese wine to enjoying a traditional event such as Sumo. There is a range of possibilities to stimulate the senses.

For this insider guide we invite you to travel beyond the city limits of Tokyo,

with its contemporary design and architecture, to the glorious regions beyond, all of which have their insider secrets from the 88 temples of Shikoku (*famous for the Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage*) to the UNESCO-listed Kumano Kodo trail.

We encourage you to discover Japan as a destination both on and off the beaten track. Here we have rounded up eight of our exciting experiences for you to enjoy.

We promise that our time apart will make travel experiences all the more exciting when cross-border travel is resumed. We are looking forward to seeing you in Japan.



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Nature

Experience primitive nature

When Studio Ghibli dreamed of an enchanted forest for their animated masterpiece Princess Mononoke they drew inspiration from the island of Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture, 2.5 - 3 hours away by high-speed ferry from Kagoshima Port. One fifth of Yakushima island has been registered as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site thanks to its unique ecosystem and beautiful nature.



Cuisine

World-renowned Japanese wine

In addition to award-winning Japanese whisky, the country has also been scooping up medals for its outstanding wine. While few outside of Asia will even have heard of Japanese wines – the type made from grapes as opposed to traditional *sake* rice wine – the industry actually dates back to the late 19th century and has boomed globally over the past ten

Look out the window as your three-hour, one-stop flight from Tokyo comes into land and you'll see an almost-perfect circle of land, haloed by coral reefs and golden beaches where loggerhead turtles lay their eggs.

But the real magic happens inland within the 1,000-acre Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine, home to some of the world's oldest trees. Venturing into the forest feels like entering a magical world: rolling woods, wisps of mist, blankets of lime-colored moss, tangles of silvery lichen, babbling streams and thundering waterfalls. Japanese red cedar trees, known as *sugi* pine, stand shoulder to shoulder like giants.

This isn't Japan's only primitive forest; the leafy heart of Shirakami-Sanchi in Tohoku is home to the country's last virgin beech forest laced with waterfalls, little cobalt blue lakes and rare flora and fauna. While the Shiretoko Peninsula located in the northeast of Hokkaido is covered with huge swathes of primeval greenery filled with foxes and brown bears.

Shirakami-Sanchi and Shiretoko Peninsula are also UNESCO World Natural Heritage sites. These are places beyond time, and it's easy to see why Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine is considered sacred. The deeper you go the thicker and greener the forest becomes, with some Japanese red cedars, known as *Yakusugi*, a mere 1,000 years old. One evergreen, the *Jomon sugi* is thought to have been around for nearer 7,000 years. There are numerous walks, hikes and climbing trails through the forest, including a trek to the top of Mount Miyanoura for a spectacular birds-eye view of Princess Mononoke's home.

years. There are now more than 300 vineyards throughout the country.

While the biggest concentration of wine-producing estates can be found in Yamanashi Prefecture, hugging the verdant skirts of Mount Fuji, vineyards can be found in locations as diverse as Yoichi City in Hokkaido and Nagano. Crisp, delicate and low in alcohol, the pink-skinned Koshu is the country's native grape, and other Japanese vineyards are producing wines made with chardonnay, merlot, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon grapes.

Award-winning wines worth seeking out include the fresh citrusy Châteaux Mars Koshu Orange Gris 2019, Zodiaque's velvety cherry-oak Pinot Noir 2018, and the Mars Koshu Sparkling 2018, which the International Wine and Spirits Competition described as 'delicate yet exquisite.' And it also added it had 'a palate of gorgeous gooseberry and racy rhubarb tart'.



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Tradition

A journey from Sumo

A toss of salt, a stamp of feet, and a blur of a tussle – before, sometimes just seconds later, the winning wrestler is declared. Sumo is perhaps one of the most iconic – and memorable – emblems of Japan.

Lovers of the sport can enjoy a pilgrimage to northwestern Nara Prefecture – home to the nation's ancient Sumo Shrine, widely regarded as one of the birthplaces of all things in sumo.

It was here in Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture, in the early 1st century, that a legendary emperor reportedly arranged for the first-ever bout of sumo to take place – a sacred spot today marked by a modern-day *dohyo* sumo ring.

But all sumo roads lead to Ryogoku Kokugikan, a famed stadium in Tokyo. The spiritual home of sumo, it is here that Grand Tournaments unfold every January, May, and September (there is also one in Osaka in March while Nagoya is in July and Fukuoka in southern Japan is in November).

A sumo journey can also be taken to the remote Oki Islands in the Sea of Japan in Shimane Prefecture. Here,



Outdoor & Tradition

Ninja Trail

The undercover agents of feudal Japan, the ninja specialized in espionage, artifice, and surprise attacks. Some were even said to have the power of invisibility and the dexterity to walk on water – so it's little surprise that they remain embedded in the popular imagination of people around the world.

Follow in the ninja's silent footsteps in Iga, Mie Prefecture, where the assassins came to prominence during the unrest of the 15th-century Sengoku period, with a visit to the Ninja Museum of Igaryu, accessible by a two-hour train ride from Osaka, Nagoya, or Kyoto. Set in a typically modest ninja home, it features fake corridors, trap doors, daggers hidden in the walls, and a collection that includes original ninja weapons and writings. Visitors can enjoy not only the show or atmosphere of the ninja world, but they can also test their potential ninja skills, while wearing ninja outfits.

Another ancient *ninja* stronghold is neighboring Koka in Shiga Prefecture, where you can find Koka-ryu Ninjutsu Yashiki which was built during the Edo period and is thought to be the only authentic ninja house still in

local islanders famously practice something known as *koten-zumo* – a traditional form of sumo.

Deeply tied to the indigenous belief system, this ceremonial form of sumo was practiced for centuries as an offering to the gods and continues to color local life today.

Koten-zumo events are staged to mark auspicious local events, such as the replacement of a new shrine roof or a completed public works project. With more than 300 matches held throughout the night, one distinct highlight is the fact that the ultimate champion must play a second match, letting the opponent win (known as Compassionate Sumo).

Another Tokyo sumo highlight? Enjoy a post-match dinner at one of the countless nearby restaurants that serve *chanko nabe* – otherwise known as sumo stew: a surprisingly healthy (and tasty) protein-packed hot pot soup which sumo wrestlers famously eat because the soup can be made in large portions at once, giving them all the vegetables and well-balanced nutrition they need.

existence. End your tour in Kyoto, where the *shogun* owner of Nijo Castle was so fearful of the ninja that he installed special 'nightingale' floors, which would chirp when walked upon.

You can also spend an afternoon at the Ninja Dojo and Store, where you can learn techniques that have been passed down for 500 years – prowling, sword drawing, throwing *shuriken* (ninja stars) – from a seventh-generation ninja master.

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The Kumano Kodo, a network of ancient pilgrimage trails criss-crossing Japan's southern Kansai region, rambles across 70 kilometers of sun-dappled forest and exhilarating Kii Peninsula coastline

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© Sendai Tanabata Festival Support Association

Cities

Tanabata festival

In Japan, there is perhaps one day of the year when it's worth making a wish – the seventh day of the seventh month.

July 7 annually marks the day of Tanabata, also known as the Star Festival, across Japan – one of five traditional festivals (known as *gosekku*) which were adopted from China by Japan's ancient imperial court.

One of the best places to celebrate is in the northern city Sendai, which is famously transformed by a rainbow-bright sea of paper streamers, known as *tanzaku*, during its Sendai Tanabata Matsuri festival every summer in Miyagi Prefecture.

Sendai Tanabata takes place every year over three days in August (a little later than July 7). A forest of bamboo poles depict bright decorations made of *washi* paper, with motifs ranging from nets (for a good harvest), cranes (for long life) to *kimono* (to ward off bad health) alongside traditional dancing, live music and fireworks along the Hirose River banks.



Outdoor

Railroad trip at the foot of Mt. Fuji & Fuji-Q Highland

Take a deep breath – and enjoy a close-up view of Mount Fuji from the apex of a new open-air sky deck opening this summer in the foothills of Japan's most iconic mountain the tallest peak in the country (it rises to a height of 3,776 meters). The new Fujiyama Tower will soon be unveiled at Fuji-Q Highland, one of the nation's most famous theme parks, located in Yamanashi Prefecture.

The tower is home to a sky deck that stretches up 55 meters, offering views of an impressive sweep of green forests fringing the base of Mount Fuji, with its triangular form and snow-capped peak.

It's also home to Fujiyama Walk: not for the faint-hearted, this element involves visitors strapping on a harness before walking around a curved walkway, with no barriers on the sides. The experience is completed with a giant tube-like slide, to transport visitors from the top of the observation deck to ground level.

The tower is likely to become a popular new feature at Fuji-Q Highland which

The roots of *Tanabata* lie, as is often the case, in a tale of romance and wrath. According to legend, two deities, the weaver *Orihime* and cowherder *Hikoboshi*, were punished by the gods for neglecting their duties after they married. Exiled to separate ends of the Milky Way, they are united for just one day a year on July 7 after completing their duties during the rest of the year.

Different regions celebrate the annual rendez-vous of the couple on varying scales throughout the summer months with another memorable highlight taking place at the Anjo Tanabata Matsuri in Aichi Prefecture.

The spirit of the story lives on every year through wishes written on colourful strips of paper attached to bamboo across the country, every summer during the run up to July 7.

first opened its doors in 1969. It sits alongside Fujiyama – otherwise known as the so-called King of Coasters – long famed in Japan for its stomach-churning loops at a height of 79 meters.

The new Fujiyama Tower attraction is opening to mark the 25th anniversary of the famous rollercoaster and aims to offer all visitors the opportunity to view Mount Fuji from a height, as currently enjoyed by adrenalin-loving rollercoaster riders.

For perhaps more comfortable views of this sacred symbol of Japan, that has been inspiring poets, painters, and pilgrims for centuries, take a trip on the lovely, red Fujisan View Express train. Gliding around the Fuji Five Lakes region, this train has been designed purely for sightseeing, with pretty wood-panelled carriages and huge windows. New on the Fujikyuko Line, there are four services a day rolling between Otsuki and Kawaguchiko stations, at the foot of the great mountain. Visitors can reserve first-class seats with complimentary drinks and snacks in the Special Car, one way, or book a regular (and still very comfortable) seat in Car 2 or Car 3, one way.

Setting off from Otsuki, the entire journey takes about 50 minutes, passing the ruins of the Katsuyama castle and crossing the Katsuragawa River before the snow-dusted summit of Mount Fuji comes into view as you round the bend at Tokaichiba station. From here it's all eye-popping vistas of Japan's highest mountain framed between farms and fields of green tea, *wasabi*, lemons, and mandarin oranges. Not long before you arrive look out for the Tahara-no-Taki waterfall. Its seven cascading falls and

pools inspired the great haiku poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694).

For the even more adventurous, tourists can enjoy the ultimate Mount Fuji experience at close quarters, by climbing the iconic triangular peak during the summer months.

Every year, from early July to early September, thousands of people make a pilgrimage to the top. Hikers can choose from four key trails that lead to the summit, with an ascent typically taking between five and ten hours.

It's also home to Japan's highest shrine: Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha, which dates back to the 9th century when it was reportedly created to placate the volcanic mountain.

Part of the shrine complex is Okumiya, which sits at the top of Mount Fuji, with distinct red *torii* gates and intricate wood craftsmanship, flanked by ancient beech and cedar trees.

It's the perfect sacred resting spot - before starting the descent, a journey which generally takes between three and four hours.



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Outdoor & Tradition

A Modern Pilgrimage in Shikoku



Outdoor & Tradition

Hiking the *Kumano Kodo* Trail

It was in the 9th century that the famed Buddhist priest Kukai created a circular pilgrimage across Shikoku Island, connecting a total of 88 temples.

The sacred route, which spans a 1,200-kilometer loop, cuts a picturesque path through the natural landscape of Shikoku – from the blue waters of the Seto Inland Sea to the open Pacific Ocean waves – and takes in rugged mountains, forests and villages along the way.

Today, 1,200 years on, the pilgrim route, known as Shikoku Henro, remains a deeply popular attraction, whether visitors are dipping into it for just a few days or walking the entire route, which takes about 40 days on foot.

Modern-day pilgrims – whether spiritual, cultural or simply curious – stand out easily, often wearing round, woven *sugegasa* hats and white clothing, as they progress through their journey. There are no set rules, but generally, it all starts (and ends) at Ryozenji - Temple No.1. The early 8th-century temple is not only show-stopping in its architecture (don't miss the ornate wooden gate at the entrance or the two-story pagoda), it's also a good place to stock up on pilgrim essentials, from robes to walking canes.

Other highlights along the way range from Dainichi Temple (4), shrouded in exquisite woodland; Zenjibu-ji (32) with its Pacific views; and Jodo-ji (49) with its 15th-century temple graffiti.

UNESCO includes only two pilgrimage routes in its World Heritage list. One is the famous Camino de Santiago which winds through Spain's north-western provinces. The other is the Kumano Kodo, a network of ancient pilgrimage trails criss-crossing Japan's southern Kansai region (Mie, Wakayama, Nara, Osaka Prefectures).

Rambling across 70 kilometers of sun-dappled forest and exhilarating Kii Peninsula coastline, there are five main hiking trails (although there's no official start or end point, meaning hikers can drop in and out of the walks as they please). Long considered hallowed ground, pilgrims would traditionally visit three major shrines. Known collectively as the Kumano Sanzan in Wakayama Prefecture these ancient temples mark the edges of the Nakahechi route (also known as the Imperial route).

Find the world's largest *torii* gate, standing almost 34 meters high, at Hongu Taisha or stop for a photo opportunity at Nachi Taisha.

Here you will find a three-story vermilion pagoda that sits alongside Japan's tallest single-tier waterfall. Later, you can pitch a tent or check into one of the many charming guest houses that line the route, either way making time for a long soak in one of the area's many hot spring *onsen*.

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