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Japan, for All Five Senses

With the beauty of Zen gardens and the taste of unique local dishes such as *Momiji manju*, Japan is a destination for all the senses. Whether it is experiencing the power of art or exploring terraced rice fields, savoring a glass of whisky or hearing the sound of a rare, crested ibis, there is no

doubt that Japan has something for everyone.

All of them add up to giving any visitor the best of times whichever part of Japan they choose to visit.

Here we have rounded up six of the exciting experiences for you to let all of your senses 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.



Photo: Kenta Hasegawa



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Art

Contemporary art experience

Quiet lanes, cycling grannies, craft coffee shops, green parks – and a major contemporary arts hub.

Kiyosumi-Shirakawa, a seductively low-key neighborhood in east Tokyo, is home to the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, sometimes nicknamed MOT. With its sun-flooded triangular walkways of glass, metal and concrete plus airy galleries showcasing cutting-edge exhibitions, the large-scale museum – located just next to Kiba Park – is impossible to miss.

It's one of a group of thriving contemporary museums scattered across Tokyo, a major player in the global arts world. A cluster can be found in Roppongi – from Mori Art Museum, an expansive 53rd floor gallery in the Roppongi Hills development with quality exhibitions, which recently reopened after a renovation; to the National Art Center

Cuisine

Whisky trails

Over the past decade Japanese whiskys have become some of the world's most coveted, bagging award after award, and skyrocketing in value – check the shelves of your local supermarket and you'll be hard pushed to find a bottle of Hibiki 21 Year Old, which stole the title of the world's best whisky five times at the World Whiskies Awards.

There are now more than 20 whisky distilleries in Japan scattered around its various islands, many of them offering tours that give participants a glimpse into the production process. Start at the Yamazaki distillery, resting at the base of Mount Tennozan between Kyoto and Osaka. This distillery owns a museum which exhibits the history of the company. Established almost 100 years ago by Shinjiro Torii, it's where the story of Japanese whisky began. Also owned by Suntory, Hakushu is burrowed in

with its wavy glass façade and impressive schedule of shows.

Other top modern art spots include the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, home to a vast collection of modern Japanese art from the early 20th century to modern times; and Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery with its sleekly produced exhibitions spanning the creative spectrum, from architecture to fashion.

MOT, designed by architect Yanagisawa Takahiko+ TAK Architects Inc., has evolved into a key arts hub for the city since opening its doors in 1995. The museum reopened in 2019 following a major three-year renovation, with interiors given a sleek minimalist upgrade by Nagasaka Jo of Schemata Architects and Irobe Yoshiaki of Nippon Design Center.

Today, the museum houses a collection of around 5,500 predominantly post-war contemporary artworks and stages regular shows across approximately 7,000 square meters of exhibition space.

Among forthcoming highlights is a major exhibition of the work of octogenarian artist Yokoo Tadanori, a household name in Japan, highlighting decades of prolific creativity, from early graphic works to bold paintings (from July 17 to October 17).

The museum is also home to Museum Shop NADiff contemporary – run by one of Tokyo's best art and design bookshops – selling an array of artist-designed goods.

fairytale-like forests of the Southern Japanese Alps.

This is where you'll find the winner of the 2020 World's Best Single Malt, The Hakushu 25 Years Old. While further north on Hokkaido you'll find the pretty harborside town of Otaru and the Nikka Whisky Yoichi Distillery. Founded in 1934 by Taketsuru Masataka on his return from Scotland, the blonde stone and red roofed building is arguably one of Japan's most eye-catching distilleries.

No time to visit these distilleries? Not to worry – you can get a can of highball, a mix of whisky and soda water, at a convenience store.



Courtesy of The Foundation for Ainu Culture

Tradition

All about Ainu at Upopoy

All things Ainu are in the spotlight at Upopoy in Shiraoi town, one-hour drive from Sapporo Station and 40 minute drive from New Chitose Airport. This major new national center is center aimed at celebrating and reviving the culture of the Ainu, the indigenous people of northern Japan and the first to settle in the Hokkaido area. They called their living area “Ainu Mosir,” which means a quiet ground of human beings.

The new center, which opened last summer near the waters of Lake Poroto in Hokkaido, is home to the first National Ainu Museum (and Japan’s northernmost national museum) alongside an open-air National Ainu Park and a peaceful Memorial Site where Ainu ceremonial services are held.

Upopoy – which means “singing in large groups” in Ainu – is a landmark project for the Ainu population, with the goal of promoting and introducing the world to their unique, but endangered heritage, history, language and culture, from their earliest roots to contemporary times.

The museum displays an array of Ainu artifacts, loosely divided into six



Courtesy of Hiroshima Prefecture

Cuisine

Foodie Hiroshima Region

Okonomiyaki, which are cabbage-packed pancakes, fresh oysters, maple leaf-shaped sweets called *Momiji manju*: no doubt about it, foodies are spoiled for choice when it comes to Hiroshima Prefecture.

The southwestern city has long been renowned across Japan as home to a string of specialties as tasty as they are unique. Among the most popular is *okonomiyaki*, a savory, pancake-style dish, which is enjoyed in Hiroshima with its own special twist.

Differing from the *okonomiyaki* found in Osaka, which is made by mixing finely chopped cabbage and other ingredients with a batter, the Hiroshima version is generally layered with a tasty mesh of pork, eggs, and yakisoba noodles (those tempted should head to Okonomi-Mura – a building deriving its name from the words “Okonomi” for *okonomiyaki* and “Mura” meaning village in Japanese, and home to a dozen *okonomiyaki* restaurants serving various styles of *okonomiyaki*).

Another major treat is oysters. Hiroshima produces around 20,000 tonnes every year – an estimated 60

Ainu themes – including language; history; views of the world; livelihoods such as hunting, fishing and farming; lifestyles, from clothing to music; and trade and exchange.

Wrapped in the dense forests that surround the lake, the National Ainu Park is an open-air museum where Ainu culture overlaps with nature, alongside traditional dance performances and an array of hands-on activities and programs.

to 70 per cent of Japan's nationwide production, according to reports.

February is peak winter oyster season, with Hiroshima producing some of the nation's tastiest (and largest) – and a key hub is Hiroshima Bay in the Seto Inland Sea, fueled by its calm waters and nutrient-rich plankton.

Here, countless floating bamboo rafts from which oysters are cultivated can often be spotted on the water surface. It's worth paying a visit to the oyster huts that line Hiroshima Oyster Road, which are packed with fresh oyster treats.

Before leaving Hiroshima, visitors should pick up one more food treat for the road –some *Momiji manju*, a cake in the shape of a maple leaf made of a type of sponge batter filled with sweet red bean paste.

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Art

Sado Island

For nearly 1,000 years, it was a place of banishment for former emperors, aristocrats and intellectuals who had fallen out of favor.

Today, Sado Island – otherwise known today as Japan’s “island of exile” – attracts countless visitors voluntarily, drawn to its rich traditional culture, natural landscape and a world-class taiko drumming festival.

Located around 40km off the coast of Niigata Prefecture, with a two-and-a-half-hour journey by car ferry from Niigata Port in Niigata City to Ryotsu Port in Sado Island, the island, which is home to around 52,000 people, has a deeply scenic landscape of forested mountain ranges, terraced rice fields and traditional wooden architecture.

Surrounded by clear waters, Sado is also a nirvana for nature lovers, its rare flora and fauna confirming its status in recent years as a thriving eco-island (it’s an important habitat for the rare Japanese crested ibis, known in Japanese as the *toki*).

Its colorful history was also deeply defined by Sado Kinzan, its historic – and once impressively productive – network of gold and silver mines, which



© Tofuku-ji Temple Honbo garden

Art

Charm of Zen gardens

A raked swirl of sand. The abstract lines of a boulder. A jewel-green burst of moss. There are few more evocative images of Japan than a Zen garden.

Serene, minimal and deeply soothing to gaze upon, the stylized world of Zen gardens – also known as rock gardens or dry landscape gardens – is as profound as it is peaceful and can be interpreted (and appreciated) on numerous levels.

Tapping into its representation of Zen values, some appreciate how the lines, materials and formation are all carefully positioned to symbolize the order and nature of the world in its miniaturized entirety.

Others might use a serene Zen garden vista as a meditative tool for exploring higher states of consciousness; or simply enjoy its aesthetic.

As an abstract work of art, using nature as its materials, the seed of the nation’s Zen gardens, known as *karesansui* in Japanese, is widely traced to the 15th-century Zen Buddhist temples of Kyoto, of which there are countless iconic examples.

operated for centuries until the final closure in 1989.

August is one of the best – and liveliest – times of year to visit Sado, due to a highlight of its annual calendar: its three-day arts and culture festival Earth Celebration. The event showcases a string of outdoor concerts, workshops and performances led by the island's internationally renowned Kodo *taiko* ensemble.

One of the most famous (and earliest) can be found at Ryoanji Temple. Its stone garden – one of the sites that comprise the Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site – is exquisite in its minimal perfection: from the 15 sculptural stones which often poetically evoke islands in a sea or mountain peaks among the clouds to the aged earthen wall which folds around it.

Tofukuji Temple is another mecca for garden lovers. The 13th-century temple is home to a dreamy collection of gardens designed by visionary landscape architect Shigemori Mirei in 1939, smoothly fusing Zen aesthetics with contemporary motifs (don't miss the graphic checkboard garden of stone and moss).

Other highlights include 6th-century Shitennoji Temple in Osaka – widely regarded as the first officially administered temple in Japan – which is famously home to Honbo Garden, a serene showcase of meditatively raked gravel and rocks alongside green plants and a small stream.

Another place to visit is the Zen garden at Joeiji Temple in Yamaguchi, created by a famous monk and painter called Sesshu, comprising a classic arrangement of rocks, gravel and moss.

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