

Japan COUNTRY & CULTURE

Geography and History

Japan is located in the North Pacific off the coast of Russia and the Korean peninsula. The area of Japan is slightly smaller than California, consisting of four main larger islands—Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu—in addition to more than 4,000 smaller islands. A modern railroad system connects the major islands, with Japan’s high-speed Shinkansen train connecting major urban areas.

Japan is over 70% mountainous terrain with approximately 18% of the land mass suitable for settlement. Japanese cities are typically sprawling and densely populated. Tokyo, the capital city of Japan, is located on Honshu island. Central Tokyo has a population of 12 million people, with the population of the greater Tokyo area estimated at over 35 million people.

The islands of Japan are located in an area known as “The Ring of Fire” in the Pacific. This is an area with many earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Japan is seismically active with over 1,500 earthquakes per year. In 1923 the Great Kanto Earthquake killed more than 143,000 people in the Tokyo area. Tsunamis are often generated from these devastating earthquakes. Most recently, in March of 2011, the Tōhoku earthquake was the most powerful ever recorded in Japan, and triggered tsunami waves that reached heights of up to 133 feet!

Japan’s islands are spread out in a 2000-mile-long arc, but the extremely steep, forested terrain tends to limit settlement to narrow coastal plains and river valleys. Most crowded is the area from Kobe to Tokyo in the southern part of Honshu island. More than 50% of the people live there.

Even with less than one-fifth of the land suitable for cultivation, remarkably, Japanese farmers grow about three-fourths of the country’s food. They use modern farming technologies and have developed improved varieties of rice, the main food crop. Japan’s fishing fleet, one of the largest in the world, provides another staple of the Japanese diet.

The country’s chief resources are its people and a culture that allows for change. Early in its history, Japan borrowed heavily from China, adopting religions such as Buddhism, philosophies such as Confucianism and Taoism, as well as ideas about writing, art, and music. Most Japanese today observe Buddhism along with Shintoism, Japan’s own ancient religion.



At 12,388 feet, Mt. Fuji (also an active volcano) is the highest mountain in Japan. It is located just west of Tokyo. This photograph also shows the Shinkansen commuter train in the foreground.

Two centuries of isolation under the rule of military governors called shoguns ended in the 1860s. Japan sought out Western ideas and technologies in order to modernize the country and establish Japanese industry. The desire for raw materials spurred Japan to conquer countries in the Pacific. Japan emerged from defeat in World War II to become an industrial giant within a few decades.

Climate

The climate of Japan varies considerably depending on the region and season. Summer is usually very hot and humid, known to the Japanese as *mushiatsui*. From mid July there is a rainy season which lasts around one month. Winters are usually mild, with the northern areas of Japan receiving more snow. Spring and autumn are usually sunny with mild temperatures.



Map of Japan

Area: 145,936 square miles
Population: 127,000,000
Capital City: Tokyo
Official Language: Japanese

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Language

The literacy rate in Japan is nearly 100%. In addition to the Japanese language, many also have some limited ability in writing and speaking English, as it is a mandatory part of the curriculum in the Japanese educational system. Japanese uses four different writing systems; Kanji (Chinese characters), Hiragana (phonetic alphabet for native words), Katakana (phonetic alphabet for foreign words), and Romaji (western alphabet used to write Japanese). Japanese vocabulary has been strongly influenced by loanwords from other languages, with most loanwords coming from Chinese and English.

Anime

Anime, also sometimes called Japanimation, refers to hand-drawn or computer animated media from Japan, involving many colorful graphics, vibrant characters, and fantastical themes. In Japan, the word *anime* means ‘animation,’ and thus refers to all forms of the art. In English, anime is more often used to describe the distinct style of animation created in Japan. *Dragon Ball Z*, *Pokémon*, and *Cowboy Bebop* are a few examples of popular anime.

Practice Origami

Origami (*oru* meaning “folding”, and *gami* meaning “paper”) is the traditional Japanese art of paper folding and has been practiced since the Edo era (1603-1867). The goal of this art is to create a representation of an object using geometric folds and crease patterns usually using a single, square piece of paper.

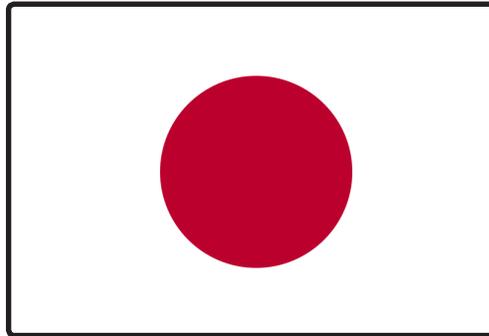
Origami only uses a small number of different folds, but they can be combined in a variety of ways to make intricate designs. The most well known form is probably the Japanese paper crane. Step-by-step instructions for making a paper crane can be found online at <http://www.origami.org.uk/bos>.



Anime poster showcasing a variety of series at once. Photo by Kami Sama. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



Perfectly folded paper cranes in a variety of different papers and sizes.



The Japanese flag is a white background with a red circle in the center that represents the sun. In Japanese, it is called Hinomaru, meaning “circle of the sun.”



The Yin and Yang symbol depicts the intertwined duality of all things in nature, a common theme in Taoism.

Additional Resources

World Factbook: Japan

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html>

About Japan from the Japan National Tourism Center

<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/about/overview/index.html>

Kids Web Japan - Educational and fun facts for students

<http://web-jpn.org/kidsweb/index.html>



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