

# JAPAN

Compared to other, more popular Asian destinations, Japan is often overlooked. Many travelers change planes at Tokyo's Narita airport, bound for China or Thailand or other places, and skip Japan altogether. This is a shame, as Japan has much to offer curious and sophisticated travelers seeking new and unique experiences. For starters, Japan is one of the few countries in the far East that was never conquered or occupied by a foreign power - aside from the US occupation from 1945-52 at the end of World War 2. This proud and independent island-nation, closed off to the world for over 200 years (1600s to mid 1800s), developed a civilization unlike any other. Secondly, Japan offers travelers a wealth of cultural treasures and historical sites, stunning natural beauty, active options such as hiking, winter sports, and golf, entertainment of all sorts - from highbrow kabuki and classical music to karaoke, great shopping, a rich culinary tradition, and much more. Compared to Vietnam, Thailand or China, Japan is a more expensive destination, but the good news is that the US Dollar now buys 21% more Yen now than it did 6 months ago. Here is some practical advice for Japan-bound travelers:

When to go? Spring and Fall are the best times to visit - but - this are also peak seasons. Avoid New Year, the so-called 'Golden Week' (29APR-5MAY) and the Bon Festival (around 15AUG). If traveling during this time, book way ahead of time (at least 6 months out), especially in popular destinations such as Kyoto, Hakone, and Miyajima. Summers in Japan tend to be hot and humid, and there is also the threat of cyclones every year. If you don't mind the cold (40s by day/30s by night) winter is a great time to visit as you will find better rates and fewer crowds everywhere.

**Getting around:** Japan has one of the best networks of public transportation in the world. If you plan to visit various places in Japan, your best bet is to buy a rail pass from Japan Railways. Note - the pass must be purchased in the USA as a voucher, which is exchanged in Japan into the actual pass when you start traveling. You can buy a 7, 14, or 21 day pass, in economy or first class. Japan's rail system (JR) is everything Amtrak is not: superbly organized, runs like clockwork, trains and stations are modern and spotless, and the staff is polite and helpful to a fault. Japan launched the world's first 'bullet train' in the 1960s and over the years has perfected the formula. Today, trains have top speeds of nearly 200 mph and the passenger comfort will blow you away. When riding a Shinkansen (bullet train) you feel you are inside an airplane, complete with a hostess cart offering coffee or snacks going down the aisle. In the big cities like Tokyo or Osaka, use the Metro to get around quickly and inexpensively. FYI: Average metro fares in Tokyo are less expensive than New York's subway system. Take taxis in small doses, as they are expensive. Just to sit down and ride 1 mile, you will pay around 700 Yen, or \$8.

**Luggage-related:** If traveling by train and/or moving around from place to place within Japan, use Japan's exceptional luggage-delivery system. For less than \$20 per shipment, Japan's luggage operators ship overnight from anywhere to anywhere in the country. This is a godsend, especially when using the railways, which have limited space for bags on the train.

**Finding your way:** It's recommended always having your hotel give you a card with the name and address of the property in Japanese, just in case you need it.

**Health-related matters:** Water is safe to drink everywhere. Bring any medicines you might need, as finding replacements can be expensive in Japan.

**Minding your manners:** Japanese attach great importance to etiquette, so here are a few pointers: First, always remove your shoes when entering a temple, traditional restaurant or someone's home; be punctual -- the Japanese are the Swiss of Asia, refrain from using your cellphone in restaurants or trains; do not make physical contact when meeting a stranger -- bow instead with your arms down beside the body. In a restaurant, NEVER put your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice.

**Money matters:** the current exchange rate, 1USD=92Yen. It's helpful to always have some cash with you, as many smaller establishments and restaurants do not accept credit cards. The most widely used credit cards are Visa and Mastercard. Have some 500/100 Yen coins handy for subways and vending machines, which are very convenient.

**Tipping:** No tipping is necessary in Japan. It is simply not in the culture. When paying the bill in a restaurant, the service is already included.

Where to start? Planning a trip in Japan can be daunting, and sorting out the details can be tricky. Use a destination specialist!!

Japanese people say Tokyo is the single largest metropolitan area in the world, and I believe them. When you see the view from any high floor in the city, the buildings go on and on until infinity, in every direction. Tokyo is disorienting because, aside from the Imperial Palace and a few isolated pockets, the city was completely rebuilt after the earthquake of 1923 and the extensive firebombing during World War II. Tokyo does not have just one 'downtown', it has many: the Marunouchi - near the main train station; Shinjuku - home of government buildings and a vibrant youth scene; and Roppongi- home of many art galleries and museums, as well as some of Tokyo's most popular nightclubs and restaurants -- to name just three. Here are some highlights you don't want to miss:

**Temples and Shrines:** Tokyo has dozens of both, in every area of the city. My favorite temple (oldest in the city) is the Senso-ji temple in Asakusa. This enormous complex is located on what used to be Tokyo's red light district. Today, the temple is surrounded by stores offering souvenirs and typical Japanese crafts for sale. Between the temple's gate and the front gate of the district there are over 90 stores to choose from. On the other side of Tokyo is my favorite shrine, the Meiji-Jingu shrine, honoring one of Japan's emperors and his wife. The shrine is located inside an enormous 173 acre park and is divided into 2 estates: the outer (Gaien), and inner estate (Naen) which is far more interesting. Tip - if you visit Meiji-Jingu on Saturday or Sunday, ask one of the guards for the times of Shinto weddings, which are beautiful to see. The bride walks in a long white gown with her groom, protected by an enormous red paper umbrella, held by a priest following behind them. The robes of the priests and the ceremony harken back to ancient Japanese history.

**Fish Market:** Fish is to Japan what steak is to Texas, so if you are interested in seafood and fresh produce, visit the Tsujiki Jogai fish market, open every day except Sunday and national holidays. Tsujiki is the single largest fish market in the world, and the statistics are staggering: every day over 50,000 merchants come in to buy fresh seafood, 30,000+ vehicles and trucks go in and out, and over 500 different kinds of seafood are bought and sold - octopuses from Africa, shrimp from Indonesia, coho salmon from Chile, you name it - if it swims, it's here. There is a very famous tuna auction every morning at 5am. To see it, you need to get a ticket, and that means you have to stand in line starting at 4am if you wish to be one of the lucky 140 people that are let in daily. Tuna is king in Japan and the auctions are feverish affairs -- one single frozen tuna can go for over \$250,000 a shot. The market is fascinating for all the different sections, including one that sells fresh produce and fruits from all over the world. Japanese are very particular about their fruit, so don't be surprised if a perfectly shaped melon goes for \$100 each - wholesale! Finish your Tsujiki tour with fresh sushi served at many restaurants outside the market.

**Views:** There are many, but some of the more memorable are from the new 'Skytree' (line up in advance as this is very popular); from the Mori Tower/Museum in Roppongi, or from the observation deck of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Buildings.

**Shopping:** There are zillions of shopping districts in Tokyo. For high fashion and the most beautiful stores anywhere, go to Ginza (do not miss the Dior, Prada, Armani buildings - landmarks in their own right). For electronics and gizmos, go to Akihabara district. For cutting edge fashion, hit Omotesando or Harajuku districts. For youngsters, Shibuya. If you have limited time, visit Japan's exceptional department stores like Takashimaya or Mitsukoshi.

**Museums:** There are dozens of museums in the city. The greatest and oldest is the Tokyo National Museum, an enormous complex where you can literally get lost. Do not miss the central building, also called the Japanese Gallery.

**Imperial Palace:** No visit to Tokyo is complete without visiting the Imperial Palace and its beautiful gardens - especially in the Spring and Fall. Note - you can go beyond the velvet rope and see more of the palace grounds by applying for a permit ahead of time.



Asakusa



Meiji Shrine





Tsujiki Fish Market



Imperial Palace



Mori Tower

**Getting around:** the best option by far is the Metro. If you are visiting multiple areas in 1 day, buy a one day pass to save time and money.

Many travelers make the mistake of visiting Hiroshima and Miyajima in one day, as a side trip from Kyoto. I don't recommend this, as it's exhausting and way too much to cram into one day. Besides, if you do so, you will miss many special places and views that can only be captured by devoting at least 1 night in the area, preferably two.

**Hiroshima:** Regardless of your opinion of the history of World War II, you cannot be indifferent to Hiroshima. This pleasant city, built on the delta of the Ota river, was struck by the world's first atomic bomb on August 6th 1945. Within a few seconds, the city was completely destroyed and over 80,000 people were killed instantly, with another 60,000 dead shortly thereafter due to the effects of radiation. The bombing of Hiroshima hastened the end of World War II in the Pacific, and Japan was determined to rebuild Hiroshima as quickly as possible. Within a month of the bombing, streetcars were running again - a remarkable feat in a devastated city. If you visit, you will likely come in by train from somewhere else in Japan. Take the city's tram to see the exact spot above which the bomb struck, the so-called helio center, then walk over to see the 'atomic bomb dome', one of the few structures that still remain standing and left intact from the war. The dome building was originally an industrial promotion hall, and today is a Unesco World Heritage site. From here, you cross the river to visit the moving Peace Park, a beautiful and solemn memorial to those who died in 1945. The park was created in the 1960s by a Japanese architect, Tanage Kenzo.

Next to the park is the Peace Memorial Museum, which shows the consequences of the bombing, with photographs and objects saved from 1945. Note - Museum is not for the faint of heart, and certainly not for children.

**Miyajima Island:** From Hiroshima, take a local train to Miyajimaguchi, a small ferry terminal. From here, take a frequent and quick (15 minute) ferry boat ride to Miyajima island, on the other side of the bay. Miyajima is one Japan's holiest sites, and it has been a sacred Shinto shrine for centuries. No one can be born on Miyajima (there are no hospitals or maternity wards on the island) and no one can be buried here either (your body is buried on Honshu, the main island, opposite). Only the deer truly live here, and you will see dozens of deer wandering around the island, as they are considered messengers of the gods. Miyajima is famous for its Shinto shrine, Itsukushima, and its even more famous torii (red gate) which is enormous. The red vermillion gate is 53 ft high, made of camphorwood, and has been rebuilt, over and over, for centuries. The current gate is over 130 years old. When high tide comes in, the gate seems to float over the sea, and at low tide, you can walk right up to it. The shrine is impressive, and is partially built over the sea with a series of pontoons and elevated decks. It also 'floats' over the sea when the tide is high. Japanese say that Itsukushima is one of the three most beautiful sights in Japan, and I think there is an element of truth here. Tip: walk to the shore at night, when the gate is illuminated and appears like a vision over the sea.

Miyajima is a quiet, unhurried place, and it has much to offer. There are many hiking trails on the island, the most popular being the hike to the top of Mount Misen (1500 ft over sea level, reached via a series of steep steps and well marked paths in the woods. If you are not feeling so energetic, there is a cable car to the top. There are many temples and shrines in Miyajima, but my favorite thing to do was to get lost in the woods and explore various parts of the island.

**Where to stay:** Miyajima has a very special ryokan called Iwaso. This simple inn has welcomed celebrities and heads of state from the world over. The inn has a warm, welcoming staff, and rooms are simple and spare. Caution: Iwaso is not Ritz Carlton Japanese-style, but the quintessential Japanese inn. Your room will have tatami mats on the floor, a low low low table on the ground, and a chair with no legs that sits on the floor, so you can sit cross legged on a cushion, and that's it. At night, the staff will bring you a 6 course dinner in your room, course by course. Later on, the hotel's staff will prepare a futon bed on the floor, which is not unlike camping in sleeping bag, except linens will be immaculate and you will have a down comforter to keep you warm. My favorite thing about Iwaso is its onsen, the typical hot-spring fed thermal bath. There are separate facilities for men and women (we are not in Finland, kids!). First, you must bathe and clean yourself completely. THEN you step into the communal hot water. The onsen has indoor and outdoor pools. Sitting in the hot water in 30 degree weather, listening to the river flowing through Iwaso's garden, is simply magical.





Hiroshima



Miyajima



Iwaso

If you had to pick 1 place to visit in Japan, make **Kyoto** your choice. The city is the heart and soul of Japanese culture, art, traditions, civilization. Kyoto has well over one quarter of all the national treasures of Japan, over 2,000 temples and shrines, world-class museums, exceptional architecture (ancient and contemporary), and vibrant quarters offering great shopping, dining, and entertainment. Kyoto was the capital of Japan for over 1,000 years, and in many ways the rest of Japan still thinks as Kyoto as the center of the Japanese world -- not Tokyo.

You need at least 3 days in Kyoto, just to cover the high points. The city is very spread out, and you need to carefully plan your itinerary. Use a destination service!! Your guide will know the ins and outs of each place, the secret shortcuts, where to get the best vantage points, and of course, provide the commentary to help me interpret each place and get the most out of each visit.

**Temples:** You can only see so many temples, so here are 3 suggestions: First, Sanjusangen-do. This temple, almost 900 years old, surprises you by its sheer size. The main hall is 400 feet long, and divided into 33 bays (\*san ju san in Japanese, hence the name) to represent the 33 times the Kannon, goddess of mercy, changed to rescue mankind. The second surprise is seeing the 1,001 life-sized statues of Kannon facing you. It is said that 80 artists worked for a century to create all the statues, and when you see this site, you believe it. Go early in the morning as the temple gets crowded. Also, the morning is the best chance to see a Buddhist monk chant prayers in front of the main statue, which is very moving. My second choice is Daitoku-Ji, an immense enclosure housing 22 separate buildings, 4 open to the public. Most tourists skip this site, which makes the place even more interesting. Do not miss the Ryogen-in (abbot's living quarters) and the Daisen-in, strikingly beautiful. My third choice, for the temple, walk, and views, is Kiyomizu-Dera temple, a series of 7 pavilions built on a hill with the best view of Kyoto. The temple is notable also for its Otowa waterfall, which is holy to believers. Do not miss the huge terrace, overlooking the city and the mountains.



**Shrines and special sites:** A favorite shrine is Fushimi Inari, Southeast of the city. The shrine is built on the side of a hill, with a path winding its way through 2 miles of hundreds of bright red torii gates. Japanese have been worshipping here since the 700s, so the site welcomes hundreds of pilgrims daily. Another must-see site, symbol of the city, is the Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion), a Unesco World Heritage site and one of the most photographed places in the country. The Golden Pavilion is set in a stunning garden, and the original was built around 1400. The pavilion you see now is an exact copy of the original, which unfortunately was burned down by a deranged monk in the 1950s.

**Gardens:** Kyoto has many wonderful gardens: Moss gardens, Landscaped gardens, flower gardens, and -unique to Japan- 'dry gardens', or gardens with only rocks and gravel. The most famous 'dry garden', by a mile, is Ryoan-ji, next to the temple of the Peaceful Dragon. The garden was created about 600 years ago and is about 80ft X 33ft. It is the ultimate 'zen' garden, so the purpose of the garden is to make you think and contemplate. The raked gravel suggests the sea, where 15 rocks 'float' in various clusters.

**A very special place:** If you have time, arrange a visit to the Katsura Villa. You need to apply for a permit in advance to gain access. The villa goes back over 300 years, is a series of pavilions scattered around a beautiful garden. The minimalist architecture belonged to the royal household, and have had enormous influence on all modern architects from the 1940s to today. All modern Japanese architecture (and much of the world's) quotes elements from Katsura.

**Day trip:** The other 'must' during your visit to Kyoto is to visit Nara, Japan's first capital, which is about 40minutes away by train. Nara is much smaller than Kyoto, and moves at a slower pace. Do not miss the Todai-ji, the building that houses an enormous Buddha statue, housed within the biggest building made of wood in the world. The proportions are enormous, and the site is magnificent. It's recommended to see the Kasuga Taisha shrine, at the foot of two sacred mountains,

**Unique experience:** Into Japan arranged for me to meet one of the leading experts on Japanese architecture and design. I spent the day with this acclaimed architect ,which was by far the highlight of Kyoto for me.

**Walks:** Take time to visit the Gion district, especially 6-8pm, so you can catch glimpses of geishas going to work, all dressed up. The other great neighborhood is the Pontocho area. If you have time, walk all or part of the 'Philosopher's Path' in the Eastern end of Kyoto.



Sanjusangen-do Hall



Buddha statues

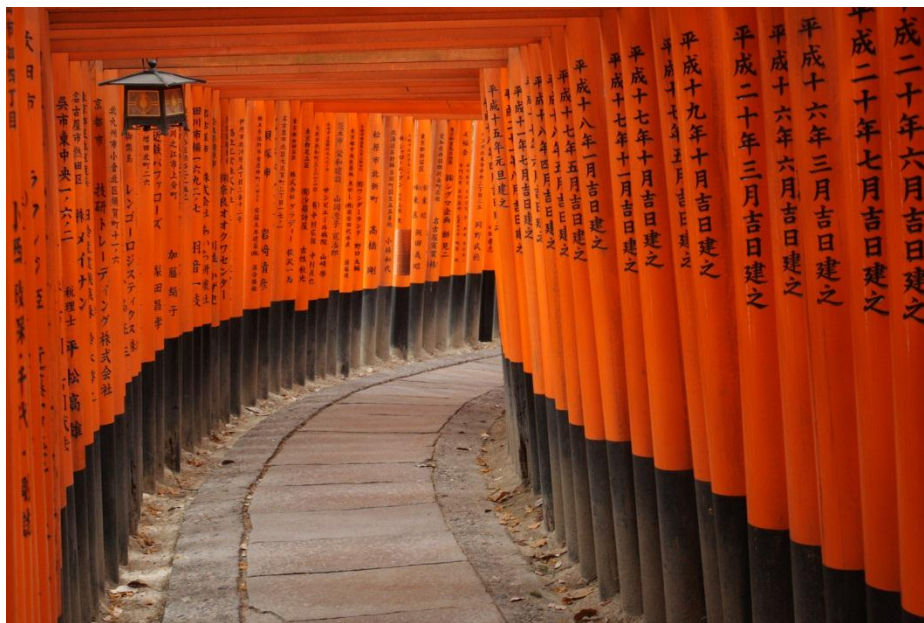


Ryoan-ji





Kinkaku-ji



Fishimi Inari Shrine





Todai-ji Temple



Buddha statues

On the way to or from Kyoto, you can easily add stops in Kamakura and/or Hakone.

The **Hakone** region is part of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. The region has volcanoes, lakes, thermal springs, and great forests, and is easily explored in one or two days. After a strong dose of temples and shrines, being outdoors is a welcome change. The best way to capture the varied landscapes of this region is to do the so-called 'Hakone Loop', which can be done in one day. Buy a one day pass that includes all the various modes of transportation in the area, including cable car (Japanese call it 'ropeway'), train, funicular, and boat. Each ride will end where the other begins, and this being Japan, everything runs like clockwork: the boat meets the train, the funicular meets the cable car, etc. Along the way, you can also see parts of the old Tokaido road, which is how the Japanese traveled in ancient times between Tokyo and Kyoto. Walking along the stone paths of this old road, under giant cedar trees, was one of the highlights of Hakone for me. For some reason, Hakone has an abundance of museums: modern art, impressionist art, and statues. The most famous of all is the Hakone Open-Air Museum, the 1st of its kind in the world, presenting sculptures displayed outdoors among the gardens. If you are lucky, you will have super views of Mount Fuji (over 12,000 ft high and Japan's tallest mountain), permanently covered with snow. Tip: Chances are, you will travel to Hakone via bullet train via Odawara station. To/from your train, have your taxi/car driver stop at the beautiful Odawara castle (5 minutes' drive from the station), surrounded by a moat and a garden of cherry trees. Walk through the various gates and take photos of the castle from the main courtyard, without having to pay the admission fee. The most fantastic castle in Japan is Himeji Castle outside of Osaka - but - unfortunately it is closed for restoration work, so Odawara is a good proxy to give you an idea of what ancient Japanese castles look and feel like.

**Kamakura** is one of the most popular day-trips from Tokyo, easily visited by frequent train service. The town is located on the shores of the Pacific, and has a rich history. The three star attractions here are: First, the Hase-Dera temple, with beautiful golden statues of the Kannon, goddess of mercy, and great gardens surrounding it; the Tokei-ji garden and temples; and -my personal favorite - the great outdoor Buddha statue (Daibutsu), at the Kotoku-in temple. The Buddha statue, one of the most iconic symbols of Japan, is 37 feet tall and made of bronze. The statue goes back almost 800 years, and is probably the #1 reason travelers visit this area. To ensure I made all my various train connections to/from Kamakura and to help me better appreciate all the sites, I hired a guide from Into Japan, who was very helpful and ensured the day ran perfectly-- even walking me the door of my train back to Tokyo.

In Hakone, **The Hyatt Regency Hakone** is, by all accounts, the top choice in this area. The hotel feels more like a small Park Hyatt than anything else. The property features very spacious 80 rooms and suites, starting at 560 sq feet. The hotel has a modern, warm, cozy feel to it. I had dinner with the general manager, who runs the hotel like her own home, complete with a resident black lab called Haru. The hotel has a large 'living area', with a big fireplace in the center. This is the heart and soul of the hotel, and in the evening the property serves complimentary drinks and snacks to its guests. The hotel has two excellent restaurants, one serving Japanese sushi, the other serving brasserie French dining. I loved the hotel's Onsen (hot springs) on the 2nd floor - a must during your stay. Tip: If you have a family traveling, suggest a 'tatami room' with a large bed + Japanese futons for children, accommodating up to 4 people per room. I was impressed with the service on property - warm, welcoming, helpful at all times. Note: the hotel wants guests to feel at home, so feel free to wear your yukata (cotton kimono) in public areas, at all times!

Here are some recommendations on where to stay in Tokyo, Kyoto, and the Japan Alps:

**Tokyo:** In a city of many great hotels, the **Shangri-La Tokyo** stands out. First: location-- the hotel is across the street from Tokyo's main rail station, and a hub for various metro (subway) lines. You cannot get more central than that. Hotel is walking distance to Imperial Palace, and the Ginza is not far away. Second: unique services for guests. For starters, the Shangri-La can meet your clients at Tokyo's Narita airport, and put them on the bullet train to Tokyo (39 minutes), where they are met by another Shangri-La escort who will meet your clients at the door of the train, and bring them to the hotel. The Shangri-La will also escort your clients from the hotel's lobby to any train they are taking from Tokyo, so no chance of ever getting lost in the maze of hallways in the station! Third, an intimate scale. The hotel has only 200

rooms, so the property feels like a private, secluded retreat. Next, service. The staff on property is very customer focused, and notices every detail. In general, service in Asia is great, but Shangri-La takes it to another level. I also liked the big, ample rooms. The smallest room on property is 538 sq feet (Deluxe Bay View, as Signature clients get an upgrade). The hotel has a number of room configurations, but my favorite rooms were the Premier City View rooms, on the corners of the building, at 700 sq feet. The hotel is on the top floors of an office tower, so every room has a view, regardless of category. Hotel offers all guests complimentary high speed internet, a great health club, and a 60 ft long lap pool. IN addition, the property has a Japanese and Italian gourmet restaurants, and a superb breakfast buffet.

**Kyoto:** In Kyoto itself, and superbly located, we highly recommend the **Hyatt Regency Kyoto**. Again, don't let the label mislead you - the level of service, amenities, dining, feel, is that of a Park Hyatt. What's special about this property? First, service - the hotel is run like a Swiss watch by Ken Yokoyama, who is a star and a hotelier par excellence. Ken is everywhere at once - greeting guests at the front door, personally handling VIPs and special requests, directing his team, and ensuring everyone feels welcome and looked after. I had dinner with Ken in Kyoto, and was blown away with his knowledge, commitment to great customer service, and caring spirit. The Hyatt is next door to the Sanjusangen-do temple (a must-see) and across the street from the Kyoto Museum (great art collection), as well as a 5 minute walk from one of the local train stations that provides light rail service within and to the outskirts of Kyoto. The hotel only has 189 rooms and suites, and has a modern, comfortable feel to it. Make time for a spa treatment at Riraku spa -- the shiatsu treatments are exceptional. The hotel also has a gym, and three restaurants: Touzan (Japanese), The Grill (French), and my favorite - by far - Trattoria Sette, the Italian restaurant. After an overdose of sushi and Japanese cuisine, it's nice to have a nice Italian meal, perfectly prepared. Locals in Kyoto have made Sette one of the top tables in the city, so make sure your clients have reservations ahead!

Outside of Kyoto's center, **Hoshinoya Kyoto** redefines Japanese hospitality for the 21st century. The property, a member of Small Luxury Hotels, is located on a rise next to the Oigawa River, in the Arashiyama area. Arashiyama is known for the beauty of its gardens and forest, and has a laid-back feeling compared to Kyoto's city center. There are a number of temples and shrines in the area, but the idea is to think of Hoshinoya Kyoto as a retreat from our busy world. The first surprise is that your taxi/driver will drop you off at a small dock, next to a welcoming lounge. From here, Hoshinoya's staff will take you, by boat, up the Oigawa river, to the hotel's dock, a 15 minute ride. I visited in winter, and it was beautiful. Imagine what it would be like in spring, summer or fall! Hoshinoya is the vision of a talented Japanese third generation hotelier, Mr Yoshinaro Hoshino. The property is built into the side of a mountain, so you have privacy and seclusion during your stay. Rooms are spacious, starting at 350-400 sq feet, and go up from there. MY favorite rooms were the suites facing the river, at about 1,000 sq feet of space, with super views. The hotel only has 25 rooms and suites, and opened in 2009. Choose from Japanese-style, or more contemporary/Western style rooms---my recommendation for US clients. Staff on property is exceptional. Breakfast is room service, and it's an MGM production, with 2 staff members to set everything up. Dinner is very elaborate Japanese-style Kaiseki (multi-course) menu, or you can also have room service menu brought to your room. You can also dine outside the property, as there are many great restaurants in the area. This hotel is perfect for clients seeking a uniquely Japanese experience, in a very special setting. But - the hotel is not for everyone. For starters, the 15min boat ride to/from the dock, plus 30minute (or more) taxi ride into Kyoto's city center can make it difficult to get in/out at times. At night, you must call ahead so someone meets you at the dock to drive you to the hotel (boat does not run at night). In addition, the dining options on property may not work for everyone, and finally, there are no TV in the rooms. Having said this, the Kyoto Hoshinoya gets high marks for its unique design, topnotch service, authenticity, one of a kind location, and over the top experience.

The Japan Alps. North of Tokyo is a very special mountain/ski resort called Karuizawa. This is where Tokyo's elite escapes to in the summer, when Tokyo gets hot and humid. Karuizawa is only 1hr10min by bullet train, so it's an easy trip. The top choice here is the **Hoshinoya Karuizawa**. The property is located in a forest, about 3,000 ft over sea level, and a river runs through it. Sleeping rooms are in 'villa clusters', which typically have a room downstairs and another upstairs. The 77 rooms are spacious(500 sq feet and up) and done in a simple, spare, modern Asian style with high ceilings. The hotel has a beautiful hot



spring communal bath (onsen), which is fantastic. Breakfast is room service only (unless you want Japanese style breakfast with fish, miso soup, etc), and dinner on property is at the hotel's Japanese restaurant. A nice feature is that very nearby (5 minute walk/van transfer) you have several restaurants to choose from ((Italian, Chinese, Japanese, etc). The hotel will also drive you to this over-the-top gourmet French restaurant , Bleston court Yukawatan, about 10 minutes away. This French restaurant won the Paul Bocuse 'Best in Asia' award two weeks ago, and it is heaven for anyone with a passion for food and wine. The property also offers a number of excursions, hikes, and eco-adventures. During my stay, I took advantage of a fantastic hike in the snow-covered forest to a frozen waterfall, which was amazing. I would say Karuizawa is a nice, outdoorsy/relaxing option at the end of a Japanese itinerary. You come here to rest, relax, recover, and forget about the world, as you walk through the woods and listen to the river run outside your terrace. Things to consider for US travelers: decor in the room is very Japanese (low mattress on a wood platform, nothing on the walls, no TV). In addition, having to go out for lunch and dinner (if you are not keen on eating an elaborate multi-course Japanese dinner on property) may not be your clients' cup of tea. Having said this, Hoshinoya Karuizawa, like its Kyoto sister hotel, is a uniquely Japanese hospitality concept. If your clients are looking for a special and authentic experience, exceptional modern design, great service, a stunning setting in the mountains, and something totally different, then Hoshinoya is the answer.

Many travelers bound for Tokyo stay near the main train station. Tokyo station is indeed convenient, but because this is primarily a business district, the area is quiet after business hours and on weekends. If your clients want to explore other parts of Tokyo, a great option is the **Grand Hyatt Tokyo**. This 387-room hotel is located in the heart of the vibrant Roppongi district, and is next to the Roppongi Hills shopping mall, the Mori Tower (major modern art museum and observation deck), as well as many shops, restaurants, art galleries, and nightclubs. The neighborhood is alive day and night, and is located just 15 minutes by metro to Ginza and other major destinations in the city. The Grand Hyatt Tokyo, a Signature property, presents a modern, stylish design. Rooms are spacious and well laid out. The smallest room, Grand King, is 420 square feet, and 15 other categories go up in size from there. Some of the unique room types are the corner rooms (there are only 4 in the hotel) with two exposures and 600 sq ft of space, and the Club rooms, found on the 10th floor with access to the hotel's wonderful Club Lounge, featuring various food presentations, snacks, coffee, drinks during the day until 10pm. The suites are indeed 'Grand' in every sense, and start at 850 square feet. There are various suite categories, but the showstopper is the Presidential Suite, which feels more like a luxury apartment than anything else, with almost 3,000 sq ft of space and a terrace with its own pool. The property is known for its fine dining, and the hotel is very popular with guests and local residents, who love the 7 restaurants and 3 bars in the hotel, offering Japanese, Chinese, French, and Italian cuisine in various venues. The hotel even has its own pastry shop, to complete the menu. Grand Hyatt Tokyo has a terrific lap pool, as well as spa and fitness center. The service everywhere: efficient, helpful, caring, fast.



Mt Fuji



Hyatt Regency Hakone



Hakone Funicular





Kamakura Daibatsu Buddha Statue



Hoshinoya Kyoto