

Japan: Hit the Highlights in 7 Days



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Once impenetrable shogun castles now standing sentry to empty chambers... ancient shrines wafting incense across ethereal Buddha images... slick skyscrapers and neon [lights](#) that surpass even New York City's Times Square...

Bullet trains aside, seeing Japan in a week - a country steeped in history and a dichotomy of tourist attractions - would present a challenge to all but the most intrepid travelers. But with a little planning, and some long days of trekking, it can be done.

Day One is naturally getting to Japan, which probably means a long flight, traversing multiple time zones, transportation to your hotel, and... jet lag. Fly into the airport in Narita and check into the [Kirinoya ryokan](#) - a traditional Japanese inn - right on the edge of the small but quirky downtown. Take a short walk into town for an early dinner of tempura or sushi, then back to the ryokan to sleep off the jet lag - you'll need to be fresh for the week ahead.

Day Two. After a traditional Japanese breakfast provided by your gracious host, take a short walk to the [Naritasan Shinshoji Temple](#), built in the year 940. You'll want to devote at least a couple of hours here visiting the many temples and strolling around the surrounding park grounds which are as vast as they are exquisite, including a pond with giant coy, myriad walkways, meditation areas, and buildings of historical significance, as well as the picturesque shop-lined street bordering the temple complex.

By mid-afternoon, set off to take the Shinkansen, the bullet train into Tokyo, about an hour drive, then check into a hotel in one of the downtown sections. One great location would be the Shinjuku District which is central to many things to see and do within walking distance.

Day Three. Get an early start, put on comfortable shoes and explore Tokyo, using the metro when necessary. Scramble across the world famous Shibuya Crossing - one of the busiest pedestrian crossings in the world. Spend some time on Takeshita Street in the Harajuku District for photo ops of youth sporting wacky and elaborate pop culture costumes and shop

for unique gifts. There are lots of shopping opportunities all over the Shinjuku, and even more places to grab a bite.

At dusk, go to the top of the Government Offices Building's 45th floor observation deck. It's free and offers one of the best panoramic views of the city. Then head to Kabukicho, the so-called "red light district" and prepare to be visually stimulated by the sheer magnitude of the lights and the sights. Think [Times Square](#) on steroids. There are an almost infinite number of great places for dinner, as well as after-dinner activities such as Kabuki Theater, clubs, [karaoke](#) bars and strip clubs, or head to Roppongi for even wilder personal encounters.

Day Four. Go to see the things you couldn't fit into the previous day. Some possibilities might be Nakamise Dori, a shopping street selling traditional Japanese goods and souvenirs. Close by is the [Sensoji temple](#). Other options include the Imperial Palace, Yoyogi Park, Tsukiji Fish Market, or [Tokyo Tower](#) and the unique architecture in that area. At night, go back to Kabukicho or try another of Tokyo's districts.

Day Five. Take an early bullet train to Osaka. The three hour drive will deliver you into Osaka by lunchtime, or you can also purchase a bento box lunch on the train to save time for sightseeing. Check into a hotel in the city, leave your luggage, then head right to [Osaka Castle](#), an impressive shogun castle perched at the top of a steep hill with massive stone walls and a moat. It's a bit of a hike across the bridge and up to the castle, albeit a pretty one.

Spend the evening in the Dotonbori section, well-known for its colorful nightlife.

Day Six. Take one of the morning trains to Kyoto, less than an hour away. A good hotel option is [Karasuma Kyoto Hotel](#) which is spotless, reasonably priced, and close to both Kyoto Station and downtown. After checking into your hotel, walk a few blocks to the Nishiki Market for all manner of enticing (and repulsive!) seafood, other foodstuffs and Japanese candy. Grab a quick lunch on the go, then continuing walking to more downtown shopping where you'll find anything your heart, or pocketbook, may fancy, from yukata - the casual kimono, to fans, jewelry, art, tea sets, paper lanterns, masks, and of course Maneki neko - the Japanese lucky charm cat.

In mid-afternoon, grab a taxi and head over to the Gion district where ladies can be transformed into a *maiko*, a geisha-in-training, through a [three-hour makeover](#). The ordeal begins with a green tea ceremony and ends with a slow stroll with parasol to the nearby shrine - not an easy feat wearing geta, the traditional geisha thong sandals with high wooden soles. This head-turning experience is guaranteed to be a highlight of your Japanese trip!

Dinner opportunities abound in Gion or back in the downtown area near the hotel.

Day Seven. Kyoto is awash in not-to-be-missed historical palaces and temples. The best way to catch the highlights is on [Viator's full-day tour](#). [Nijo Castle](#) - a UNESCO World Heritage Site and residence of the first (1603) Togugawa shogun, serene [Sanju-Sangendo](#) Hall's 1001 statues of Buddha, the exquisite [Golden Pavilion](#), Kiyomizu Temple with its jaw-dropping views, are among the important sites on the tour. It would be difficult to get to all of these sites on your own in one day.

Time's up, it's time to return home, and all too soon.

The see-it-all world-wind scenario is not for everyone. Some prefer to choose one location and really get to know it. In that case, the best options would be to decide between the culture and excitement of Tokyo or the charm and history of Kyoto. In either case, Japan will not disappoint.

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