

Exploring Japan on your own

Lyn Wendtman

Travel in Japan is often put in the too hard basket. Language difficulties, what to see and eat, sleeping on the floor, communal naked bathing and getting around Tokyo can all be thought problematic.

Col and I have travelled as independent travellers in Japan multiple times and have taken friends and groups from our Probus Club who wanted to see Japan 'our way' i.e. not like most tours. Neither of us speaks more than a few common Japanese words but we find any bumbling attempt on our part, accompanied by a smile, works wonders.

So what is 'our way'?

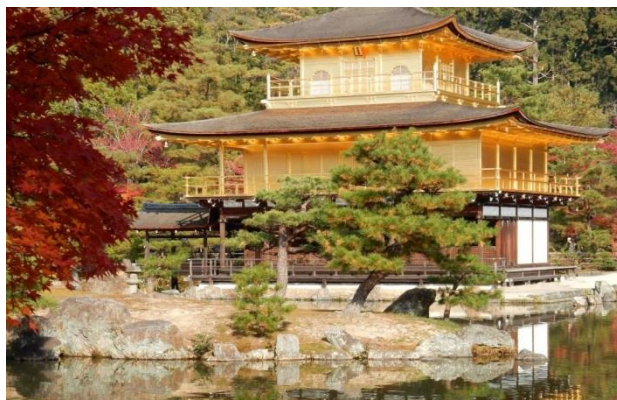
We use public transport (trains, buses, ferries); seek out-of-the-way places and find volunteer guides to walk and talk to us as we explore; stay in western hotels close to stations if no suitable ryokan(inn), minshuku (guest house) or onsen (hotel with natural thermal baths); sleep on futons and eat local food; travel easily with small bags by sending our main luggage by Takuhaibin Delivery Services for next day delivery from any one place to another across Japan (e.g. one suitcase sent from Tokyo to Kyushu or Hokkaido costs 1600 yen – approx. \$18-50).

Our travel tips?

- Plan ahead before you book. There are many informative online sites to help including <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e623.html> and <https://en.japantravel.com/>
- Choose a local Japan specialist travel agent to help you. The following companies have worked with NSW school groups and individuals and will understand your needs:
Pitt Travel www.japanpackage.com.au/ or JTB <https://www.japantravel.com.au/>

- Take advice on when to travel* – spring (March/May) is peak season and more expensive; autumn (October/November) has magnificent colour; summer (June/August) is pleasant in Hokkaido; winter (December/January) is the cheapest time and skiing is an option – if you still can! Avoid Golden Week (April 29 to May 5) when every Japanese person is in transit going somewhere.

** Please see my photos on the next page which highlight the change in seasons.*



Kyoto's Golden Temple in autumn

- Book your accommodation ahead; especially if it is peak season and you have a tight schedule.
- Pre-purchase a Japan Rail Pass (not available in Japan) – \$330 gives unlimited travel for 7 consecutive days across Japan (except for the Nozomi and Mizuho Shinkansen). The pass is valid on the Tokyo Monorail and the JR Miyajima ferry. You could crisscross Honshu without stopping but with planning, a 7 day pass allows time to both see the sights and travel widely. For example, a 7 day pass from Tokyo would take you to Fuji Lakes (1 night), Kyoto (4 nights using the pass for day trips to Nara and Hiroshima) and Kanazawa (1 night) to view Kenrokuen Gardens and the Samurai areas before taking a new fast Shinkansen back to Tokyo. You can also buy different area passes for more flexibility.



Seasonal changes in Japan

- Check train timetables on Hyperdia (<http://www.hyperdia.com/en/>), a simple to use service with route and timetable information from any station to any other. When it lists the departure time, trust it. Trains run on time almost always and the signs at stations and on trains are mainly in Japanese and English. Local buses and taxis are both cheap and convenient ways to travel in cities and towns.

Decide where your interests lie as Japan has something to suit everyone

- **History?** Prehistory to the rule of Emperors and Shoguns with their Samurai warrior class; the time of isolation before the opening of Japan to trade; the Meiji Restoration and modernism before the impact of World War II and the Atom Bomb; to the growth of the dynamic, industrial country of today.

- **Culture?** *Tales of the Genji* – the world’s first novel (11th century and written by a woman); art museums built by individuals or companies to showcase their private collections; ancient kilns and ceramics made in the traditional manner; Kabuki or Noh theatre; or the complex craft and precision of wooden temple and domestic architecture.
- **Religion?** Visit ancient vermilion Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples which still withstand earthquakes and where, if you stay, you will be hosted by monks; traverse the mountains of the Kumano Kudo – one of two Unesco recognised pilgrim routes (the Camino de Santiago is the other); travel to Kyushu and learn about the Christian martyrs of Nagasaki or the mix of Shinto and Buddhist practice.
- **Nature?** With flat land used for farming, cities and settlements much of the remainder is wild and mountainous featuring waterfalls and majestic vistas that are accessible by funiculars and small single carriage trains. The influence of Shinto whose spirits take the form of wind, rain, mountains, trees, rivers and fertility is obvious. Japan has 31 national parks offering a wide selection of activities including fishing, hiking, hot springs, diving and boating.
- **Gardens?** Traditional ‘strolling’ gardens are designed for meditation and tranquillity. ‘Borrowed scenery’ extends garden vistas and some gardens feature night light-ups in Spring and Autumn. Adachi Museum Garden, voted the top modern garden for 14 years, is beautiful but you only see the garden views through windows – even the Emperor can’t walk in this garden!
- **Traditional Japan?** With active volcanoes, there are many natural hot springs/onsen that offer a relaxing and traditional glimpse of the past. Geishas wander the lanes in Kyoto and tourists dress up as Mako’s. Japanese etiquette and hospitality is unrivalled and many will go out of their way to help you if you look even a little lost. The people make it a special country to visit.

Some of our favourite places are:

- Koyasan near Osaka – the centre of esoteric Buddhism and home to many monasteries.
- Island of Shikoku – in particular Iya onsen set on a cliff with hot springs in the river far below.
- Kyoto and Nara – absolute musts for any first or subsequent visits.
- Himeji Castle (White Heron) recently restored and considered Japan’s most spectacular castle.

Feel free to contact either myself or Col if a trip to Japan interests you. If we can help you with information or ideas we will be happy to do so.

Contributor Information

Lyn Wendtman (lyn.wendtman@gmail.com) 3/12/17



Foundation Principal of Cherrybrook Technology High School (1992-2002), Lyn spent many years on the NSWSPC Executive before becoming Assistant Director, Learning Technologies, Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate. In this role and later she helped develop and run online leadership courses for aspiring school leaders and was an evaluator of technology programs in schools.

A Life Member of NSWSPC and a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators (1995), Lyn is married to Col Cooksey (previously Principal Kirrawee High School, also on the Executive of the NSWSPC for many years and subsequently the first NSWSPC Professional Officer) and together they share a love of travel, especially in Japan.