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Japan

Japan is small in size—slightly smaller than California—but big on history, beauty and things to do.

Japan is made up of four major islands and surrounded by roughly 4,000 smaller islands. About 126 million people live in Japan, with more than 12 million living just in the capitol city of Tokyo. Japanese is the primary language, but many residents can speak some English since students learn English in school.

If you are fortunate to be in Japan in the spring, you will see the magnificent blooming of the cherry blossoms. The blooms arrive at different times of the spring each year, so you'll have to monitor the progress and the weather to hit the blooming period just right. In 2007, the blooms arrived from mid- to late March.

Highlights: Take in a tea ceremony—For Japanese people, *cha-no-yu* (the tea ceremony) is a mental discipline for pursuing “wabi” (a state of mind in which a person is calm and content, with a profound simplicity) and is at the same time a performance in which form and grace are paramount. Be sure to set aside enough time so that you are not in a rush. You'll defeat the point of attending a tea ceremony if you aren't relaxed.

Tour an Imperial Palace or Imperial Villa—Tour a magnificent former home of ruling royalty or other members of the noble class. Most have unbelievable gardens and some feature bird sanctuaries. Some tours are conducted in English, but check to make sure you are going when English spoken if that is important to you. At most sites there is no charge. To tour one of the sites you must fill out an application with the Imperial Household Agency a day or two prior to your visit. Applications can be submitted online at www.kunaicho.go.jp

Grand Sumo Tournaments—Six tournaments are held annually, each lasting for 15 days. Tournaments are held in various cities. For more information, visit www.sumo.or.jp/

Other things you might want to do: Take a class in paper making or the art of Japanese flower arranging. Check out the nightlife. Japan is often on the cutting edge of trends when it comes to clubs and restaurants. And if electronics are your things, you'll likely see some of the latest gadgetry.

Okinawa

Okinawa might look like a small dot on a map, but it was at one time an independent kingdom. The island is located between mainland Japan and Taiwan in the Pacific Ocean. The subtropical climate draws tourists from all over the world, and it is the primary destination for Japanese vacationers.

Tourists can enjoy ancient culture at one of nine historic cultural sites. There are also great restaurants, lively clubs and secluded, pristine beaches.

The island is known for its hospitality, but relations with U.S. travelers can be strained due to the island's history with Americans. Okinawa was invaded by American troops in 1944 and 1945—a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The battle on Okinawa was one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. Japan surrendered in 1945. It wasn't until 1972 that the island was reverted back to Japan from the U.S.

In Okinawa, English isn't as readily spoken as in mainland Japan, so you might want to learn a few Japanese phrases.

Okinawa is home to festivals year-round, including festivals to celebrate all four seasons. There are Dragon-Boat races and Moon Viewing parties under the Harvest Moon. For more information and schedules, visit www.ocvb.or.jp/index.php?lang=en

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