

Customs and Culture

When travelling to any international destination it is always advisable to research your destination so that you are prepared for the differences in custom & culture. This is especially true for those travelling to Japan for the first time. We've provided some advice and suggestions for your consideration prior to travel.

Language

It would be a shame to travel all that way and not get to know some of your fellow snow country enthusiasts. You may find the younger generations more adept with English as Japanese students have three years of English-language studies in-middle (junior-high) school. But even small talk with the aid of body language, can-make the evening enjoyable. Don't hesitate to jump in.

You should make an attempt to familiarise yourself with some basic Japanese before you arrive in Japan. The English language is spoken reasonably well in major centres but can be almost non-existent in smaller centres. You will find all Japanese very friendly and willing to engage in conversation and help as much as possible. Learning the basic "hello" and "thank you" goes a long way in engaging.

Money

Be sure to acquire enough Japanese YEN currency for the duration of your trip before leaving your home country. Japan is a very safe country and as such remains dependant upon hard currency. Credit cards & travelers cheques are not always accepted. Electronic cash tellers are not readily available except when visiting metropolitan centres such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Sapporo or Asahikawa.

Budgeting

If you plan on eating out for the duration of your holiday you need to budget accordingly. If you eat modestly ¥6000 per person per day is sufficient; more if you plan on partaking in Japan's sumptuous seafood, sushi & sashimi. Beer is available by the can from vending machines in hotels, airports and variety stores for approximately ¥400. Expect to pay around ¥500-600 per pint or schooner once you hit Japan's pubs & bars. Spirits are also available. Expect to pay anywhere from ¥800 and above. Tipping is not necessary. Wine is quite expensive.

Health and Security

The health care system in Japan is very much comparable to that of western standards. You can be confident of receiving a high level of care should you require attention or hospitalization. Health Care and other medical services are extremely expensive without the proper insurance. Outdoor Travel Japan advises that it is essential to purchase the necessary travel insurance prior to leaving your home country to cover yourself in the event of injury or accident whilst holidaying in Japan.

Weather

Much of Hokkaido is quite cold with persistent wind and a few sunny days that rarely get above minus 10 degrees Celsius. This unique weather makes for the best most reliable dry powder snow in the Northern Hemisphere.

Skiers & Snowboarders who want to make the most of this environment will dress in layers with an underwear base followed by fleece warm-retention layers and an outer windproof/waterproof shell. Goggles with a lens designed for low light are a must as is a fleece neck-warmer & hat. It's recommended that you bring a spare hat & two pair of ski gloves if you have them.

In addition to offering extra protection, a quality helmet is a great way to keep your head warm and protected from the elements. It will also be necessary to wear rubber soled winter boots if you are walking outdoors in addition to your normal winter clothing.

Luggage Allowance and Ski Rental

In general each passenger will be allowed to check one item of 20kgs. This allowance is quite small for visitors who carry own ski or snowboard. Outdoor Travel Japan recommends that you bring your ski or snowboard boots with you and hire an appropriate snowboard or pair of skis as part of your package. Here in Niseko, we have very light, dry and deep snow especially when you venture off-piste, and as such requires a wider ski or board. Outdoor Travel Japan offers a fine selection of equipment to match the requirements of all our guests, which is available in advance. Please ask us by e-mail or call to hold good stuff.

Smoking

Smoking is still very much a part of eastern society, but smoking rooms can only be found within selected hotels and B&B. If you prefer to stay at smoking room, Outdoor Travel Japan will be able to arrange a room for you.

Accommodation Styles Western & Japanese Style

There is a variety of accommodation offered by Outdoor Travel Japan ranging from 5 star hotels & luxury self contained condominiums to modest pensions and budget backpackers. Within the range there exists two different styles of bedding, western and Japanese. Some hotels and self contained apartments have western and Japanese combined rooms.

Western Style

A familiar standard to westerners comprised mostly of single beds with a base and mattress on top. There are very few double, queen or king beds available at hotels in the resort, so if you consider this a necessity it would be best to opt for a self contained apartment. Hotel rooms are somewhat less spacious compared to western standards with budget rooms approximately 20 square metres, standard rooms 25 square metres and deluxe rooms 30-50 square metres.

Japanese Style

This is the traditional style of bedding in Japan in which guests sleep on woven-straw mats called Tatami. Japanese style rooms have a foyer at the entrance in which normal walking shoes are exchanged for slippers which are to be worn while walking on Tatami. In the afternoon hours, housekeeping will enter your room and pull futons from your linen closet and make up your bed for the evening. This bedding is then cleaned after you have left your room the next morning. Tatami bedding is approximately 2 metres long by 1.2 metres wide.

Telephones

Many are surprised to learn that their mobile or cellular telephones do not work in Japan – even if equipped with

international roaming. Outdoor Travel Japan is happy to assist you with acquiring a mobile phone on arrival in Japan in the event it is necessary to you in your travels. A less expensive option is to use phone cards and public telephones. These are readily available throughout Japan and phone cards are available from the Outdoor Travel Japan offices in Niseko & Furano. Please advise us in advance if you would like to purchase one.

Food

The local store (Seico Mart) within the resort environment are quite small & more resemble a corner store with a limited number of selections. However there are a small number of western food items available. If you're routine includes western items that you cannot live without such as peanut butter, jam, muesli then you are best to bring a supply with you. Foreign visitors hoping to experience a Japanese Espresso will find a proper coffee will likely cost you as much or more than a bottle of beer in the resort areas for a strikingly small quantity. Coffee in metropolitan centres is better in price & quantity.

The Onsen Experience

One of Japan's most cherished customs is a hot mineral bath called an Onsen. Onsens are a unique experience; most notably that any type of clothing (except for modesty towel) in the Onsen is considered unhygienic and therefore unacceptable. Almost all of Onsens have separate male/female baths (the exception being the Niseko Grand in Niseko Hirafu).

Drinking Etiquette

In cozy and friendly Japanese-style bars, customers often pour drinks for each other from bottles of beer as a gesture of companionship. If you are a fellow beer drinker, reciprocate with your own bottle. A whiskey drinker may invite you to drink from his bottle and fix a drink for you. In this case, you need not reciprocate unless you have your own bottle. If with a group, do not begin to drink until everyone is served. Glasses are raised in the traditional salute as everyone shouts *Kampai!* (pronounced *Kuhm-pie!*) which means Cheers!

Eating Etiquette

Mastering chopsticks may be challenging at first, but once you have learned, eating with this simple instrument is a genuine pleasure. Hold the two halves in one hand with your thumb, forefinger and middle finger, as if holding two pencils. Then let the middle finger slip between the two sticks. One stick will rest between the forefinger and middle finger, the other between the middle and ring fingers.

If you make friends with the locals and they happen to invite you out for dinner there are a few *do's* and *don'ts* when sharing a common plate amongst a group of people. If you are selecting food from a dish that others are also selecting from, use the end of your chopsticks opposite the end that you eat with. Move the food onto your plate first, and then flip your chopsticks around. Secondly, once you have picked up food from your own plate it is important that you do not put it down again. It must remain in your chopsticks until you have consumed it.