

Japan on a plate

Japanese food isn't all raw fish and seaweed. We put together a short-break itinerary to Japan that no galloping gourmand could resist!

The appeal of Japan would be powerful even without food: emperors, festivals, geishas and the Zen Buddhist spirituality have enticed people for centuries. But Japanese food – from the delicate sushi and the elegant sashimi to the humble bowl of rice – is reason enough for food lovers to head to Japan.

No gourmet tour of Japan is complete without a visit to a traditional sushi bar. Here you can watch the 'itamae-san', an expert chef, traditionally with at least 10 years practice in sushi making, demonstrate his skills. Watch him carefully as he shapes the various combinations of seaweed, vegetables and rice into small finger fells and slaps a thick sliver of raw fish on top and you may just be able to recreate this art form for yourself. That said, a professionally made piece of sushi is thought to have all the grains of rice facing the same way, which must take a lot of skill – so we say hit one of the many sushi bars across the country instead and save yourself the effort! Dining rituals include eating sushi with fingers, and generally in one bite – usually with 'wasabi' (horseradish), soy sauce and ginger.

The Japanese are crazy about fish and the average Japanese person will consume over a kilo of the stuff every week, which equates to a staggering 8.5 million tonnes of seafood each year. If you're in Japan, make sure you head to the Tsukiji Fish Market, fifty-six acres of reclaimed land about two miles southeast of downtown Tokyo. This is the largest fresh food market of any kind, anywhere in the world and nearly every fish that's eaten in the city and a third of all fish eaten in Japan, will have passed through here. Try to visit the fish market in the early morning if you can and after your visit, don't forget to have breakfast at one of the numerous sushi restaurants nearby.

If you want to experience a traditional Japanese breakfast – which usually consists of rice, soup and grilled fish – book yourself into a traditional inn or 'ryokan' or better still, opt for a 'minshuku' which is a country-style bed and breakfast. In the evening, head to an 'izakaya' or drinking house. Food here arrives in small portions, which makes it a great place to sample a parade of different dishes: 'yakitori' (barbecued chicken kebabs);

'tendon' (rice topped with deep-fried prawns); 'unagi' (grilled eel), succulent 'hijiki' seaweed; 'shabu shabu' (beef and vegetable slices cooked in a light broth); 'yaki-onigiri' (toasted rice balls). In true Japanese style, slurp down a few sakés – the local tipple brewed from rice – for jollity with your meal and be sure to drink plenty of green tea to clear the palate. You might also want to finish off your meal, as a lot of Japanese people do, with hot rice in green tea, also called 'o-chazuke'.



Main image: skewered sushi dish; above left: chef preparing a fresh plate of various kinds of sushi; above right: Tsukiji Fish Market, Tokyo; left: Japanese restaurant

Dining etiquette

In Japan, you say "itadakimasu" ("I gratefully receive") before starting your meal, and "gochisosama (deshita)" ("thank you for the meal") once you've finished. It's considered good manners to empty your dishes to the last grain of rice and, unlike in some other parts of East Asia, it's considered bad manners to burp. As for chopsticks, the general rule is learn to use them. Knives and forks are not widely available but spoons are sometimes used to eat Japanese dishes that are difficult to eat with chopsticks such as some 'donburi' dishes or Japanese style curry rice. You shouldn't stick chopsticks into your food, especially not into rice, and never pass food with your chopsticks directly to somebody else's – both these gestures are associated with funeral rites. Oh, and slurp your noodles! This is quite acceptable in Japan. When drinking alcohol, it's Japanese custom to serve each other. Don't start drinking until everybody at the table has been served and the glasses are raised for a drinking salute, 'kampai'.