

GETTING AROUND JAPAN

**It doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg
. . . and you don't even need to pack pajamas!**

by David Skillan

We've all heard horror stories about how expensive Japan is. But it doesn't have to cost as much as you might think.

Hotels in Japan run the gamut from basic backpacker hostels, capsule hotels, and small, family-run hotels to intermediate- and medium-priced places to the famous American Holiday Inn and Hilton chains. You'll also find many luxury establishments. Rates vary considerably, from as little as forty dollars to several hundred dollars per room per night.

Almost all Japanese hotel rooms, except those in the capsule hotels—which come deliberately cheap and spartan, containing only a bed, clock, and television, ideal for the businessman who misses his train home after a late night of work or partying—come fully equipped, no matter how large or small . . . and some can be tiny. Expect to find twin beds and a dresser containing two neatly folded *yukata*, or lightweight kimonos. These garments are worn by both women and men. They're comfortable for sleeping and come in useful for strolling around the neighborhood on sweltering summer evenings and going to the local *ofuru*, or public bath. In the closet you'll find clothes hangers, a coat brush, a back-scratcher, a foot-long shoehorn, disposable slippers, and usually a flashlight and a combination safe.

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The modern flat-screen television in every hotel room has multiple Japanese channels plus the BBC, CNN, and often adult movies for an extra fee. You might also find tea- and coffee-making facilities, but they're not always free, so don't be surprised if you're charged for using them. The same applies to bottled water. Tap water throughout Japan is safe to drink, though. A small fridge is also nearly always included.

The bathroom always includes both a shower and a bathtub. Near the wash basin you'll find a small tray containing shampoo and conditioner, a toothbrush, a hairbrush and comb, and a safety razor, all of which you can take away with you. Attached to the wall you'll find an electric hair dryer. And no worries—you can use your electric razor or curling iron, because the voltage is the same as in North America.

Most hotel bathrooms and newer private homes are now fitted with high-tech heated toilet seats. After you've done your business, instead of using toilet paper, you activate the remote or push-button controls and find your derriere subject to squirting warm water and a long blast of hot air. Some do everything but talk and play music! Visitors to Japan find them novel, and the more sophisticated setups sometimes difficult to operate. They're excellent conversation pieces that invariably have everyone doubled up with laughter. These toilets are now available in Canada. The most popular brand in Japan is Toto.



If you prefer a genuine Japanese experience, you might like to stay in one of the traditional inns known as *ryokan*. There you can sit on the floor and enjoy typical Japanese hospitality and entertainment, then luxuriate in a Japanese bath locally known as *ofuru* before retiring to a *futon* on a *tatami* mat floor.

The Japanese people have to be among the cleanest in the world. They make regular visits to hot springs (known as *onsen*) in the countryside, and daily visits to their local public baths, which they enjoy naked. Men and women have separate pools and changing rooms. You pay a nominal entrance fee, and the procedure is the same on each visit. You remove all your clothes in the *ditsuijyo* (changing room) and place them into a basket, together with your bath towel. You then place the basket on a wooden shelf to await your return from bathing. Nude as the day you were born, you may feel a little self-conscious at first, but this is Japan, and while the Japanese are quick to notice a *gaijin* (foreigner) in their midst, there are no prying eyes. Nobody so much as glances in your direction.

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Before entering the bath, you must wash and rinse your face and every pore of your body, so bring your own soap and shampoo. You do this while seated on a tiny stool, with the hot and cold taps in front of you. Only after you've had a thorough wash and rinse do you immerse yourself slowly and carefully into the steaming water, where you can soak for as long as you like. Typical water temperatures are between 40 and 44 degrees Celsius, and while westerners find them too hot to tolerate for long, the Japanese are used to them, and sometimes soak for hours. However long you take, you can be sure this authentic Japanese experience will leave you feeling refreshed and invigorated.

The variety in restaurants is overwhelming. At shopping arcades and main railway stations, there are myriad reasonably priced restaurants, all displaying realistic plastic samples of their dishes in their windows or on outside tables, together with prices, so you can see exactly what you'll get and how much it will cost.

Almost all the places you'll come across offer sushi, tempura, yakisoba, noodles, curry and rice, gyoza, shabu-shabu (which is similar to sukiyaki), and of course salad, spaghetti, hamburgers, and a wide choice of sandwiches, including ham, cheese, and lettuce and tomato, toasted or plain. For those looking for something familiar, Pizza Hut, Starbucks, and McDonald's are just about everywhere. And just like in Europe, there are countless delis and pastry shops offering a variety of breads, cakes, pastries, and desserts to die for.



You name the food, and the Japanese serve it in a polite, courteous, efficient manner in a customer-friendly environment. All meals automatically come with iced water or hot green tea.

There's no service charge in restaurants, no GST or HST, and no tipping. In April of 2010, when we were there, one Canadian dollar equalled roughly 100 yen, so 1,000 yen was worth about ten dollars. In twelve days, my wife and I never paid more than ten dollars each for lunch. Admittedly, that was often for a one-course or set meal, but that was sufficient. Usually we'd order the daily special, which consisted of miso soup, pork or chicken cutlet with salad, and a bowl of rice. And of course green tea.

Yes, it can be expensive, like all those scary stories, if you don't venture outside your hotel to dine. In the hotels you can pay forty to seventy-five dollars for a three-course dinner. And no matter where you eat in

Japan, be prepared to pay four or five dollars for a cup of coffee, and five to eight dollars for a beer or sake. It's a lot more for whisky and brandy, and much, much more in a bar with hostesses whose job it is to entertain you and keep topping up your drinks.



If you're not into Asian food and don't like rice, fear not—except for the *ryokans*, which offer only a Japanese breakfast, most hotels provide a western meal consisting of juice (orange or apple), cereal, yogurt, fresh fruit (melon, pineapple), eggs any style, bacon, sausage, hash browns, bread rolls, Danish pastries, milk, tea, and coffee. Most also offer the choice of an Asian breakfast of rice, miso soup, pickles, tofu, steamed fish and vegetables, and green tea. If it's an all-you-can-eat meal, you can then skip lunch and settle for just an ice cream.

As for whetting your whistle, the selection is mind-boggling. On almost every village, town, and city corner—and inside every hotel lobby and on every station platform—stands the ubiquitous vending machine. Just drop in a 100-yen coin and choose whichever drink takes your fancy—Coke, juice, hot or cold green tea, English tea, coffee, milk, or water. Not to mention cigarettes and all manner of daytime and late-night snacks. The choices are endless.

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Comfortable trains, planes, and buses serve most of the country. No matter how remote, every train arrives and leaves on time, exactly to the minute.

People who appreciate an orderly lifestyle, punctuality, and precision like Japan almost instantly. You can't help but admire the super efficiency of the Japanese. Everything works as it should, especially their enviable transportation system. You can buy a Japan Rail pass when you purchase your airline ticket, giving you unlimited access to almost all rail services throughout the country (though not to the *Shinkansen*, or bullet train). There are two types of passes: ordinary and first class (called a green pass). Ordinary rates are about 300 dollars for a seven-day pass, 480 dollars for fourteen days, and 600 dollars for twenty-one days. First-class rail travel costs about thirty-five percent more.



You can also rent a car. In Japan, like in Britain and many Commonwealth countries, they drive on the left side of the road. Be warned, however, that even though a GPS comes with the car, exploring big cities can be confusing and difficult, and parking fees are high. But a car is ideal if you intend to explore rural and off-the-beaten-track areas where public transportation can be inconvenient or infrequent. International rental-car agencies include Hertz, Avis, and Budget, and Japanese rent-a-car companies include Toyota, Mazda, Nissan, and Nippon. It costs roughly fifty dollars a day to rent the smallest car, and 100 dollars for a midsized one, plus the mandatory insurance.

Like North America and Europe, the best times to visit Japan are spring and fall. Depending on your itinerary, from early March to the end of May you can catch an amazing variety of blossoming trees and

shrubs. From mid-September to the end of November you'll see extraordinary fall foliage. June, July, and August are always hot and muggy, and to be avoided at all costs, while winter—unless you're into winter sports or ice festivals—is a little too cold for sight-seeing.

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There is one drawback to visiting Japan. Even though a friendly stranger will almost certainly come out of nowhere to offer assistance, if you get lost or find yourself in a tight spot, English isn't as widely spoken as you might expect. As always in a foreign country, when you can't read the signs or communicate freely with the locals, it's wise to take a tour. There's no wasted time, and you're guaranteed comfort and convenience. With a knowledgeable, experienced English-speaking guide, you'll get to visit most of the major places of interest, and some that are out of the way and lesser known.

For a two-week, fully escorted, comprehensive tour of Japan from Canada, including airfare, moderate to first-class hotel accommodation, transportation, daily western breakfasts, and a number of other meals, expect to pay anything from 5,000 to 8,000 dollars per person.

Remember to keep all your entry tickets for temples, castles, and gardens. They make ideal bookmarks. →



*David and his Tokyo-born wife Yuriko, lower right, host regular tours to Japan.
Check the Skillan Safaris [tour page](#) for details.*