

FREE

SPRING

NARA IN THE SPOTLIGHT



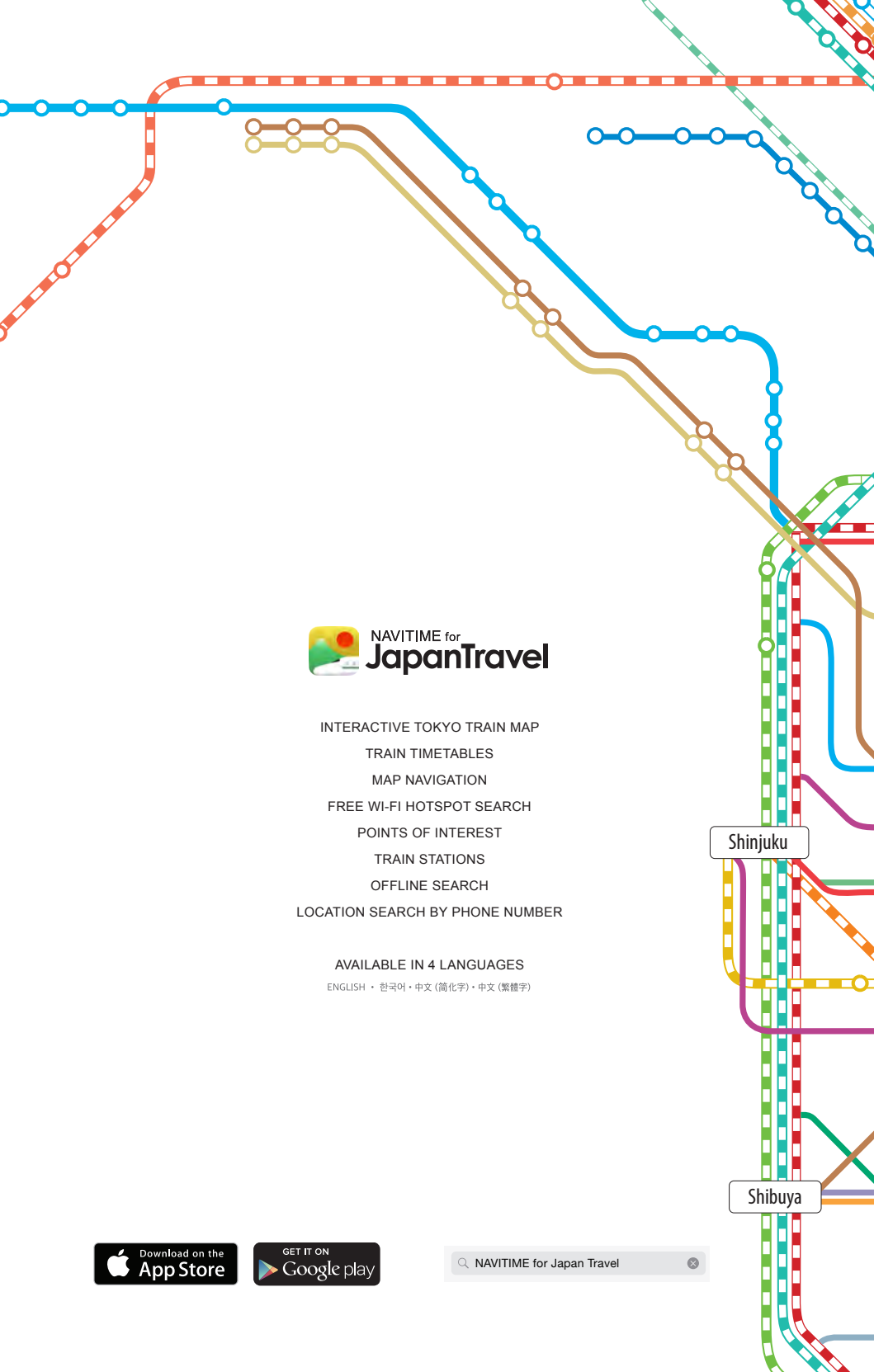
MAGAZINE



WEB



APPS



- INTERACTIVE TOKYO TRAIN MAP
- TRAIN TIMETABLES
- MAP NAVIGATION
- FREE WI-FI HOTSPOT SEARCH
- POINTS OF INTEREST
- TRAIN STATIONS
- OFFLINE SEARCH
- LOCATION SEARCH BY PHONE NUMBER

AVAILABLE IN 4 LANGUAGES
ENGLISH · 한국어 · 中文(简化字) · 中文(繁体字)

Shinjuku

Shibuya



NAVITIME for Japan Travel

春

Spring



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HANAMI IN BLOOM

In Japan, a special tradition that can truly be called time-honored is hanami 花見, or flower viewing.

While *mi* 見 means to look, and *hana* 花 indicates flower, hanami is widely understood to refer specifically to *sakura*, the blossom of the cherry tree, of which there are several hundred varieties all around Japan.

Some rare varieties of the cherry tree bloom in colors ranging from green and yellow to white, but the majority in Japan are bright pink and seemingly spring from nowhere to blanket the country starting at the end of March.

The much-anticipated blooming of sakura happens each spring for roughly two weeks in any given place, with regional climates affecting the timing. In fact, it's so ingrained in the national consciousness that news outlets forecast and track the blooming beginning in Okinawa in late January and sweeping the archipelago northward to Hokkaido by late April or early May.

References to hanami date back to the Nara period (710–794), and span a wealth of important poetry, literature, such as the “Tale of Genji”, and art including paintings and woodblock prints. In those times, hanami was a stately affair in which participants enjoyed seasonal food and drink at picnics under sakura trees. They also composed delicate poetry and spent time in contemplation of the ephemeral beauty that, like so many things in

life, is fleeting.

These days, in busy metropolitan areas, the early scouting and marking-off of picnic space with tarpaulin is a crucial first step, especially during the first weekend of full bloom. Parties form around all manner of social ties, with families, work colleagues, couples, and haphazard collections of friends.



TOP HANAMI SPOTS

UENO PARK

2–43 UENO KOEN, TAITO, TOKYO
T/ 03-3828-5644

01

CHIDORIGAFUCHI PARK

1–1 KITANOMARU KOEN, CHIYODA, TOKYO
T/ 03-3264-2111

02

SHINJUKU GYOJEN PARK

11 NAITO-MACHI, SHINJUKU, TOKYO
T/ 03-3350-0151

03



As always, food and drink are of supreme importance and seem to eclipse the flowers themselves, which form more of a backdrop for the revelry. Saké is a perennial favorite, but any alcohol will do (in significant quantities no less), and most gatherings have a potluck type of etiquette, with both food and drink being shared.

Recently a faux-news comedy website featured a map of the nation marked with dates for major cities, called “Japan Releases Dates for Getting Wasted in a Park”. Satirizing the actual forecasts issued by the state weather agency, it nonetheless points to the truth of modern hanami; that the Japanese flood their parks and get drunk until the last fragile petal falls.

“...THE EPHEMERAL
BEAUTY, THAT LIKE SO
MANY THINGS IN LIFE, IS
FLEETING...”

Hanami can be truly sublime. Visitors are often amazed at how peaceful such large drunken gatherings can be, and how diligently people clean up the area by themselves.

But don't forget, amid the revelry, to take a moment and consider the delicate lesson of the blossom, this too shall pass.

TOP HANAMI SPOTS

OSAKA CASTLE PARK

1-1 OSAKA-JO, CHUO, OSAKA

T/ 06-6941-3044

HIMEJI CASTLE

68 HONMACHI, HIMEJI, HYOGO

T/ 079-285-1146

DAIGO-JI TEMPLE

22 DAIGHOGASHOJI-CHO, FUSHIM, KYOTO

T/ 075-671-0002

TODAI-JI TEMPLE

406-1 ZOSHI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-5511

MEGURO RIVER

MEGURO, TOKYO

04

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DISCOVERING NARA'S SECRETS

JORDY MEOW

Upon coming to Japan, I first knew Nara for its cute and hungry deer, and majestic landmarks such as Kasuga Taisha and Todaiji Temple. Now, living as one of Nara's 370,000 local inhabitants, I have discovered a different city.

My first surprising discovery about Nara was the sheer number and physical size of the *kofun* in the area. I hadn't really heard about them until they caught my eye while looking at Nara on Google Maps where, from above, they look like enormous green keyholes covered with trees and surrounded by water, making them difficult to even notice from ground level. In fact, the kofun are burial mounds constructed between the 3rd to 7th centuries, an era

appropriately named the Kofun Period.

My favorite is the kofun of Emperor Seimu, though not for the tomb in itself (except using a drone and filming from above), but rather for its surroundings. It is located in an ancient residential area called Misasagicho which is full of things to see, such as old houses, farm fields, and hidden shrines.

In the center of Nara, right next to the park, there is also another secretly kept structure named Zuto, which is also referred to as the Pyramid of Nara. Said to be inspired by a similar pyramid in Indonesia, it was recently restored to its original condition from over 1,200 years ago and now allows visitors daily.

Since I live in Nara and do a fair bit of walking and jogging, my favorite area to go through is Naramachi, a historic district that is now becoming more of a tourist hub. Right now it seems that most tourists only visit the area closest to the main street

by Nara Park, but there's much more to discover. The *shotengai* (shopping street) of Mochiido is beautiful towards the end, with a lot of shops dedicated to cats, and you can find even more in the little streets and winding alleyways behind.

At the end of this shotengai you can cross the street and walk towards a very interesting part of Naramachi, away from the tourists and much closer to the original heart of Nara, where the atmosphere is much quieter despite the activity. I usually go up to the Shōnen-ji Temple, try to find my way to Jurin-ji Temple, go back to the Sarusawa Pond, and then stop in front of the classic Nara Hotel. There are a few traditional coffee shops around just waiting to be found.

Nara also has amazing temples, which are almost only visited by Japanese tourists. In my opinion, the most beautiful one is Hannya-ji, especially during the autumn season when its 100,000 cosmos flowers are in bloom, but the simplicity

and austerity of Shin-Yakushi-ji's exteriors have something magical that draws you inside to face a two-meter high Buddha hidden surrounded by twelve guardian deities.

Of course, these are just a small sample of the Nara I'm coming to know, with many more new discoveries to be found and photographed.

NARA KOFUN

MISASAGI-CHO, NARA

01

HANNYA-JI TEMPLE

221 HANNYAJI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-6287

02

SHIN-YAKUSHI-JI TEMPLE

1352 TAKABATAKE-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-3736

03

RURAL NARA: UDA CITY

TOMOMI YOKOTANI

Nara Prefecture is much more than just Nara City, with perfectly kept rural towns and villages dotting the countryside, and welcoming visitors for a quieter, less hurried experience in Japanese life.

Traditional cities like Kyoto and Nara have long attracted tourists from around the world, but now that visitors are starting to go a bit off the beaten path they're discovering that just nearby are towns steeped in history and overflowing with the beauties of the countryside. Such is the case with Uda, my hometown, situated on the Yamato Plateau in northeastern Nara Prefecture.

Uda is actually made up of four historical towns: Haibara, Ouda, Utano, and Muro, each with its own history and character. Like much of Nara Prefecture the temperate climate and atmosphere invoke the classic, rural Japan that somehow even city-dwellers can "remember" and feel a nostalgia for despite never living there.

The original castle town Ouda is home to the ruins of the Uda Matsuyama castle, but especially attracts visitors to the fortified residence of Goto-Matabei, a samurai from the Warring-States Period. Jutting out from the tall rock walls is the ancient Matabei Zakura, an iconic weeping cherry tree of 300 years named after the famed warlord himself.

Walking around through the different parts of Uda shows every element of traditional countryside life, from rice fields and brilliant red azaleas in spring to an abundance of maple trees that peak to a bright red in the fall. The people of Uda have appreciated and worshipped this local nature and continue these traditional rituals, such as the Onda Festival on May 5th in Ouda.

May is rice-planting season, so with this festival we pray for a successful harvest and celebrate it in advance! Local participants mimic rice planting while wearing traditional costumes, as on this day we are not supposed to actually plant our own rice fields, but rather plant for the gods.

As part of the tradition, men dressed as young female farmers dance to the traditional farming songs, while children play tricks on them, such as flipping up their skirts. It is believed that the naughtier the trick, the richer the harvest.

Such rituals are rare in Japan, and harken back to the agricultural lifestyle of the olden times.



HAKUSAN JINJA SHRINE

1047 OUDANORYORI, UDA CITY, NARA
T/ 0745-82-2457

01

HAIBARAHAGIHARA RICEFIELDS

HAIBARAHAGIHARA, UDA CITY, NARA

02

MATABEI ZAKURA

OUA HONGOU, UDA CITY, NARA

03





A STROLL DOWN NARAMACHI

Within the old quarter of Nara City lies a former merchant district where beautifully preserved machiya still exude the elegance of Japan's former capital.

ADRIAN HOGAN

Nara has the authenticity, craftsmanship, honest food and pure experiences that make it significantly different to the well-worn paths of Kyoto and Osaka.

As an illustrator, nothing is more rewarding than being able to travel across Japan with a sketchbook and pen to document my experiences.

When arriving in a new place, first impressions are often projections, because it can be difficult to make sense of what one sees without knowing the history of the area.

At first glance, Nara appears to share a lot of architectural similarities with Kyoto. The narrow roads run in a grid across the city, and a lot of the old merchant quarters and shrines have been beautifully preserved.

When I arrived in Nara, the first area I explored was the long shopping arcade that stretches from Nara Station down to Naramachi, the old quarter.

As I walked down the narrow arcade, vendors cheerfully waved and welcomed customers, and I noticed immediately that the Japanese spoken here is quite similar to the dialect in Osaka, yet more reserved and polite.

Sketching is a way to teach ourselves to really look and investigate our surroundings, but it is also invaluable as an icebreaker when visiting new places. I came across two men setting up a wooden mortar outside their rice-cake store, where they started to use a large wooden mallet to pound the rice at a ferocious rate. As I sat and sketched them, an elderly lady who had stopped to watch the

demonstration, noticed my work and explained that this high-speed way of making rice cakes is unique to Nara.

I continued walking until I arrived at Naramachi, the old merchant quarter, where I was able to go inside many of the homes, and stay at the Naramachi Guesthouse and Restaurant. Interestingly, the recently completed lodge was built inside what used to be an old soy sauce factory.

As I walked through the streets I came upon a sign that pointed to a "Water of Tea" down a nearby narrow lane. I went inside and was welcomed by the owner, who filled a wooden bucket with hot water, tea leaves, and pebbles for me to put my feet into while I enjoyed a hot cup of coffee—perfect after all the walking I had been doing!

Naramachi, a unique town of its own inside the ancient capital of Nara City, is fascinating and multi-layered despite its smaller size, and strolling around on foot is the ideal way to truly appreciate its unique atmosphere.

[CHECK THE MAP](#)

YU NAKAGAWA BOUTIQUE

31-1 GANRIIN-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-1322

CHIKUTAKKU BAKERY

23-1 MINAMIICHI-CHO, NARA

T/ 080-6156-4344

NARA HOTEL

1096 TAKABATAKE-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-3300

NARAIZUMI SAKÉ BAR

22 NISHITERABAYASHI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-6078

UN JOUR CHILDREN'S BOOK STORE

5 TSURUFUKUIN-CHO, NARA

AWA NARAMACHI RESTAURANT

1 SHONAMI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-24-5699

OKUTA ODANGO SHOP

32 CHŪIN-CHŌ, NARA

GANGO-JI SHRINE

11 CHUIN-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-23-1377

01

02

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NARA PARK

SARUSAWA POND

01



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05

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KITAMURO-CHO

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16

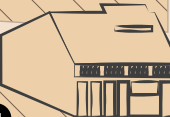
18

17



20

21



NARAMACHI KOUBOU WORKSHOP

11 KUNODO-CHO, NARA

09

KANAKANA

13 KUNODO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-3214

10

NAOT NARA SHOE SHOP

8-1 SHIBATSUKINUKE-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-93-7786

11

SHINJUAN CAFÉ

22 NISHINOSHINYA-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-27-3083

12

YOSHIDAKAYA SOUVENIRS

1 SHIBANOSHINYA-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-23-3381

13

YUYUKOUBOU JAPANESE BRUSH SHOP

29 BISHAMON-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-4387

14

IMANISHI SEIBE SHOTEN SAKÉ SHOP

24-1 FUKUCHIN-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-23-2256

15

KAURI POTTERY

1 NARUKAWA-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-93-9208

16

GORYO JINJA SHRINE

24 YAKUSHIDO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-23-5609

17

KONDOU TOFU

44 NISHINOSHINYA-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-4694

18

ARUKAIKKU SWEETS SHOP

44-1 FUKUCHIN-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-24-7007

19

CHANOYU CAFÉ

20-3 GANGOJI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-7100

20

NARAMACHI KOSHINO IE TRADITIONAL HOUSE

44 GANGOJI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-23-4820

21



ARTISANS OF NARA

Chiyomi Tanaka, Nara-fude craftswoman, talks about how fate brought her from housewife to artisan, and the importance of preserving Nara's unique serenity.

Once an essential part of any stationary set, *fude* calligraphy brushes are now less a part of everyday life and more recognized for the artistic pursuit of traditional writing.

Now with only twenty to thirty craftsmen left producing *fude* from animal hair, there's a renewed sense of purpose to preserve this craftwork.

Brush making originally appeared during the Heian Period under the school of Sakanai Kiyokawa from Nara where the production of *sumi* black ink flourished. The craft was further developed by the monk Kukai, and in 1977, *Nara-fude*, the tradition of brush making in Nara was designated as a Traditional Art Craft.

Born and raised in Nara, Chiyomi Tanaka was a housewife when she applied for a government programme that funded and trained new craftsmen in brush making. Never having been involved in craft making throughout her entire life, suddenly Chiyomi felt she had found her calling, and was eventually certified as the first female Nara-fude Japanese Traditional Craftsman.

"NARA PEOPLE TRULY VALUE SERENITY"



Chiyomi strives to encourage more awareness and active use of the Nara-fude by organizing workshops, especially for people who are interested in experiencing *shodo* (calligraphy). One of Chiyomi's happiest moments is when someone purchases a brush that she originally thought would not be popular, further motivating her to create original brushes using various materials.

As for Nara itself, she is positive about the increase in foreign tourism, but doesn't want the area to change. The city doesn't have high buildings, and has a quiet, peaceful, and traditional atmosphere. Many of the tourists who visit her shop are actually painters, as her brushes can create lines that normal paintbrushes cannot. In fact, even Chiyomi herself doesn't do calligraphy, as her mentor advised her that if she does she will only make brushes for her own tastes at the expense of her customers.

Within the city her favorite spot is the fifty-two steps leading to Kofuku-ji where she can relax during work breaks, and she feels a sense of accomplishment after walking up the steps. Her second favorite is along the Akishino river to Heijokyo. "Compared to Kyoto or Osaka", she tells us, "the city is rather slow-paced and calm. You can tell that Nara people truly value serenity. I'd like Nara to remain this way".

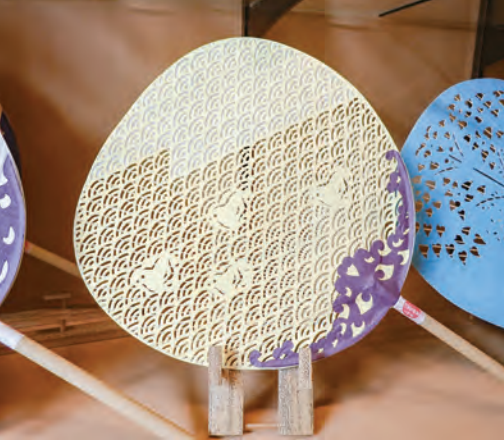
CRAFT STUDIOS

NARA-FUDE TANAKA
6 KUNODO-CHO, NARA

01

IKEDA GANKOUDO
16 TSUNOFURI-CHO, NARA
T/ 0742-22-3690

02



Tadashi Ikeda, one of the last Nara Uchiwa craftsmen, shares his thoughts about the local craft revival and what makes Nara a special place to visit.

Paintings and woodblock prints depicting beautiful geisha holding uchiwa (Japanese fans) go back centuries, and the uchiwa created by Nara craftsmen are known specifically for embodying both beauty and practicality. Typically with fans you get only one of these two elements, but Nara uchiwa evolved from pure functionality to incorporate elaborate design and details, and became its own form of the craft.

We met with sixth generation Nara uchiwa craftsman Tadashi Ikeda who, at only twenty-five years old, is part of a local revival of craftsmanship seeking to preserve these methods. In fact, there are only two Nara uchiwa craftsmen left in Japan, and the other happens to be Tadashi's mother. Their shop, Ikeda Gankoudo, opened over 150 years ago and uses dyed washi paper, which is then hand-cut with intricate designs.

Many craftsmen in Japan can be quite stubborn, and have the attitude that creating something beautiful in itself will attract customers, so there's no need to promote their work. Being young, Tadashi is taking the opposite approach. He's doing events and workshops, and spreading his family's methods to others to show what real, not mass-produced uchiwa are supposed to be.



Like much of his generation, Tadashi is much more open to tourists from abroad, and eager to share his craft with them. Still, he recognises that it's a challenge to gain recognition with overseas people about the Nara area. In his opinion, if they focus too much on tourism, such as changing street signs to English, they will become the 'second Kyoto' and lose the ambiance that makes Nara special.

Still, with Nara being less touched by tourism so far, there are beautiful and unique locations all over the Prefecture. During the spring, Tadashi recommends the sakura along the Sahogawa River, and driving up Mount Wakakusa for beautiful nighttime views of the city.



NARAMACHI NAKANICHI YOSABURO

01

A POPULAR CONFECTIONARY MAKER SINCE 1913, AND KNOWN FOR THEIR INNOVATIVE SWEETS MAKING USE OF TRADITIONAL NARA MOTIFS AND TECHNIQUES.

23 WAKIDO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-24-3048



TAMURA SEIHOEN CHAHO

03

THE ELEVATION AND CLIMATE OF THE YAMATO HIGHLIGHT MAKES THE AREA IDEAL FOR GROWING HIGH-QUALITY TEA, WHICH THEY HAVE DONE SINCE 1200.

18 SHONAMI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-2833



MIYAKE CAFÉ-FORMER KOUNOIKE TEI OMOTEYA

05

HOUSED IN THE FORMER RESIDENCE OF A WEALTHY MERCHANT IN THE EDO PERIOD, THIS ANCIENT BUILDING INCLUDES A SWEET SHOP, CAFÉ, GALLERY AND GARDENS.

1 CHOME-5-1 TORIMI-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-51-3008



MORINO SAMPLE

02

JAPANESE RESTAURANTS DISPLAY REALISTIC SAMPLE MEALS TO ENTICE CUSTOMERS. THIS SHOP SELLS THESE HANDMADE WORKS THAT YOU CAN MAKE AS WELL.

E YUME CUBE 12 MOCHIIDONO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-1145



NARAMACHI MECHANICAL TOY MUSEUM

04

SET IN A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE SETTING, THE MUSEUM GIVES VISITORS A CHANCE TO TOUCH, HANDLE, AND PLAY WITH MECHANICAL TOYS OF YEARS GONE BY.

7 INYO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-26-5656



AKEMITORI

06

WITH PATTERNS CREATED FROM WASHI PAPER AND USING TWO-SIDED DEEP-DYING PROCESSES, THIS SHOP SELLS JAPANESE COTTON TEXTILES WITH NARA MOTIFS.

1F NAGAYA 1 NARAMACHI HASHIMOTO-CHO, NARA

T/ 0742-22-1991

These locations and more, are available in the official NARA Experience Guide iPad application.

Instagram

@NAVITIMEJAPAN



TAG YOUR PHOTOS TO APPEAR ON OUR CHANNEL

#IKITAIJAPAN



@JORDYMEOW



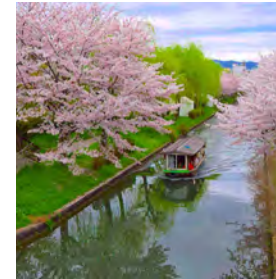
@SUPARUJ



@RRRREI



@FUKU294 _



@RRRREI



@MR _ EBISU



@MR _ EBISU



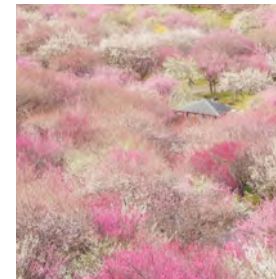
@MR _ EBISU



@NAOMASA _ FUJII



@ATSUTSUI



@RRRREI



@FUKU294 _

NEW BEGINNINGS

HENGTEE LIM

As the weather warms with the coming of spring, Japan suddenly becomes a canvas of clear blue skies painted with cherry blossoms.

The cherry blossom is at the heart of spring in Japan. It's beautiful to witness firsthand; the streets and parks explode into pink clouds, and a gentle rain of petals creates new pathways over the old. It's about new perspectives and a collective, shared sense of awe.

Spring is a time for endings and beginnings. It's when the school year ends and starts; when high schoolers gleefully enter the universities, and young graduates first join the workforce. Locals make it a chance to celebrate life and the beauty of its transience—where the weeklong, graceful bloom of the cherry blossom becomes a noted symbol for transitory existence.

In Tokyo people gather under the trees at Yoyogi Park near the busy heart of Harajuku, or the quieter Inokashira Park in Kichijoji, but all over the country, from mountain hamlets to urban centers, there is renewed activity.

We celebrate the arrival of warmer weather with revelry and drinks. Perhaps a few too many, but who's counting?

Families get together to celebrate in Ueno Park, couples make trips to Hakone's mountains and hot spring baths, and solo photographers wander the lengths of the Meguro River.

It's hard not to feel alive amongst the anticipated vibrancy, color and energy. With winter coats back in the wardrobe, brighter fashion fills the streets. There's a lightness to it all; an excitement and enthusiasm, and a spring in people's steps.



The contagious energy tends to give me a travel bug, and I start making plans and planning trips around the country, coming out of winter hibernation with a sudden surge of energy, powered by sunny days and cloudless skies.

PLACES TO GO

YOYOGI PARK

2-1 YOYOGIKAMIZONO-CHO, SHIBUYA, TOKYO

T/ 03-3469-6081

HAKONE SENGOKUHARA

SENGOKUHARA, ASHIGARASHIMO, KANAGAWA

INOKASHIRA PARK

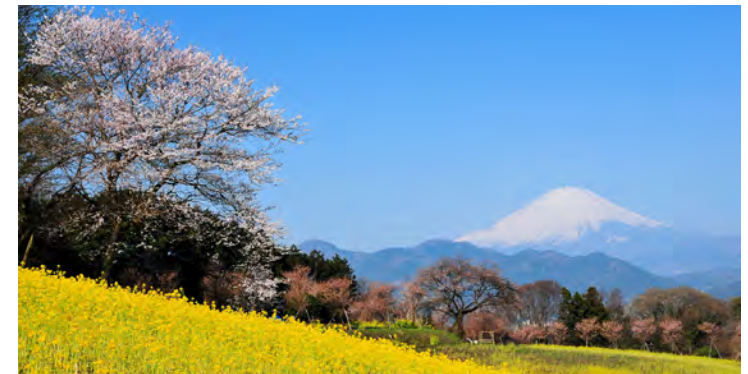
1-18-31 GOTENYAMA, MUSASHINO, TOKYO

T/ 0422-47-6900

01

02

03



I love the hope that lies quietly at the heart of spring, hiding huge promises of fresh starts and brand new experiences.

It's also the time when I make plans to visit the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, the Nezu Museum, and other places I tend to put off during the colder months. The season also brings out my more adventurous spirit, pushing me to Kawaguchiko to see Mount Fuji, or hiking to the top of Mount Takao.

I like to think about these possibilities as the cherry blossoms begin to fade. I walk streets filled with colorful *koinobori* carp streamers that celebrate Children's Day in early May. Sometimes, it's slightly outside of the city in remote places like Kawagoe, where the streamers swing on strings between buildings, or centrally at Tokyo Tower where they create a beautiful rainbow of colorful kites at the base of the iconic structure.



I walk and daydream about new places to go, new things to see, and new people to meet.

Spring is an evolving canvas, first painted in whites and pinks that soon turns multicolored with *koinobori* streamers, before the deep greens of summer soon arrive.

MOUNT FUJI

KITAYAMA, FUJINOMIYA, SHIZUOKA

04

KAWAGOE

KAWAGOE, SAITAMA

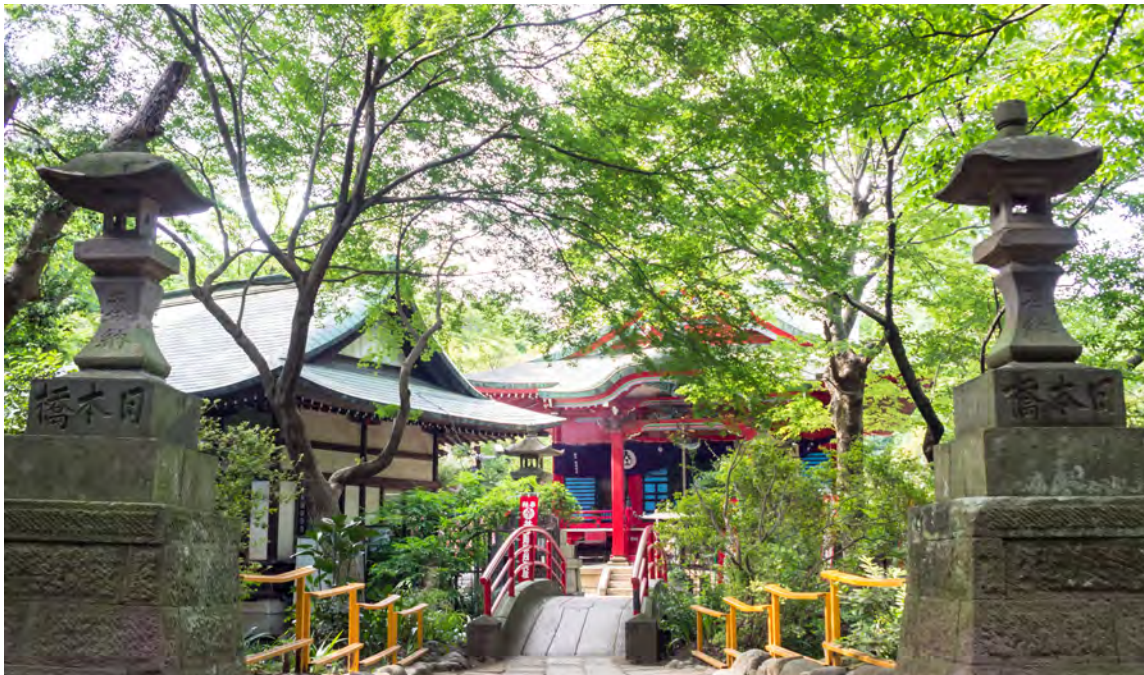
05

TOKYO TOWER

4-2-8 SHIBA KOEN, MINATO, TOKYO

T/ 03-3433-5111

06





OFF TO WORK

SAID KARLSSON

Spring doesn't just mark the time for saké sessions under the cherry blossoms. For hundreds of thousands of young adults entering the workforce, spring also marks the first steps in their professional careers.

With graduations in early March, and April 1st marking the beginning of the fiscal year, new recruits all over the country are starting their new jobs at the exact same time. Young workers wearing new suits and sparkling shoes can be seen on their way to company training and initiations, and during the evenings can be found in shopping areas

looking for the best bargains at a *shin seikatsu ouen sale*, literally meaning a sale to "assist the start of your new life".

It's also the busiest time of year for real estate agents, as individuals and families alike move both in and out of apartments and homes, while taking advantage of shopping bargains for everything from televisions to rice cookers.

After the relative ease of Japanese university life, many new workers will soon enter regimented company cultures, work styles, and hierarchies that are a natural continuation of similar structures in the educational system, but even this traditional organisational culture is slowly changing over time.



OFF TO SCHOOL

As recent graduates move on to their work life, young kids are also filled with the anticipation of change, trying out their new backpacks and uniforms, and getting ready to head to school for the first time.

At the end of the academic year, early March means ubiquitous graduation ceremonies for all levels, with a transition to a new grade or school within a few weeks. The spring timing is no coincidence of course, and nearly every family photo album includes images of smiling kids in fresh school uniforms posing under cherry blossom trees on the first day of the school year.

Unlike much of the Western world, Japanese school children still independently walk and take trains to school, even from a very young age. With droves of excited children heading home from school together, don't be surprised if you see kids as young as six or seven dressed in school uniforms and riding the subway alone.

As Japan is relatively a very safe country, most parents don't hesitate to let their children travel the world's most complex public transportation system all by themselves.

RANDOSERU, A RITE OF PASSAGE



Just before and after school hours you're sure to notice schoolchildren carrying classically-styled randoseru backpacks, an accessory that has become a tradition.

Randoseru? It's a bit of a strange name, but there's a strong history that comes with it. Beaming in assorted hues of bright red, blue, pink, green, black and more, these leatherette backpacks are significantly lighter than they appear, and are the most identifiable mark on any child rushing to and from elementary school.

The word randoseru was derived from the Dutch ransel backpacks used by children in European schools, and the Imperial Army of Japan adopted this style of backpack as part of the military uniform after the end of the Meiji Period. Today's school uniforms are strongly influenced by this trend as well, such as the black collared uniforms worn by most junior high school boys, which are adaptations of the Prussian Army's military uniforms.

So, what could children stock inside this leather school bag? For most it means schoolbooks, notebooks, a pencil case, watercolor set, perhaps even the *uwabaki* shoes for wearing inside the school. Kids can also accessorise by hanging items on the sides: *kinchaku* (small pouches for their lunch mats), *taiiku-gi* uniforms for exercise classes (usually a set of shorts, shirt, cap, sports shoes and the bag to carry them), and a *te-sage* handkerchief pouch featuring Pokemon, Hello Kitty, Doraemon or one of an infinite number of characters Japanese children love. Still, the standard randoseru's design remains simple and free of trivialities.

Regarded as the symbol of traditional school life in Japan, the black randoseru is traditionally carried by boys, and the red color by girls. However, recently this iconic school bag has created its own fashion with shops offering new colors and designs, and even adult versions for travel or day-to-day use. Due to its distinctive design, tourists are also doing

some shopping of their own, but the bags don't come cheap! Handmade randoseru can easily cost between \$500 to \$700, which is not a small amount to spend on a six year old. Even so, as randoseru are sturdy and durable, they are expected to last for many years.

Tsuchiya-Kaban Seizousho, based in Adachi Ward in Tokyo, is still making handmade randoseru after fifty years, and have even opened up their factory space for visitors to see the process. With school bags made of over 100 parts and more than 300 different steps, the staff see this craftsmanship and attention to detail as a team effort. An effort that, once produced, is carried by a young child through the beginning years of their education.



VISIT THE SHOP

TSUCHIYA-KABAN SEIZOUSHO & WORKSHOP 01

7-15-5 NISHIARAI, ADACHI, TOKYO

T/ 03-5647-5124

TSUCHIYA-KABAN SEIZOUSHO NAKAMEGURO SHOP 02

3-19-8 AOBADAI, MEGURO, TOKYO

T/ 03-3463-8871



SMALL TOKYO: GAKUGEI DAIGAKU

ULISSE PITTON

As I walk through Tokyo's concrete jungle, tall skyscrapers cast a shadow over my path, until I finally reach the residential town of Gakugei Daigaku for some food exploration.

The sun shines over this placid local neighborhood, just four stops from Shibuya station along the Toyoko line, which is filled with many small but exotic eateries and quaint shops selling anything from used records to tea.

My first stop in this journey of food enlightenment is Susuru, named after the sound you should make when slurping ramen, and the home of a rich and perfectly balanced specialty of spicy tantanmen *tsukemen*. To the untrained eye, *tsukemen* is merely ramen noodles sans soup, but breaking this bond means dipping the noodles into the thick, undiluted broth, and charging it with new flavors and an explosion of fragrances of chili, sesame, pepper, pork and spices.

Head southwest to Sushiya no Yoshikan, a traditional sushi restaurant that also includes grilled fish selections, with two counters and a kitchen filled with chefs ready to satisfy your curiosity.

Rather than order off the menu, my password to a great meal is the word "*o-makase*", giving the chef freedom to serve what is freshest from the market. While you never know what will be included (you can set a budget if you like), the adventure is worth it. Among my grilled highlights are the pacific cod, gratin oyster, and skewers of tuna belly. The sushi is equally on par in terms of quality with sea urchin, sardine, and eel to continue my feast.

If chicken is on your mind, Aburiyahaku is the perfect tiny spot, just fitting fourteen people who, like it or not, will get cozy and tight with each other. This is as local as it gets, and surrendering any pretentiousness at the door and embracing the adventurous spirit is a must. The chef has the aura of a modern ronin—beard and long hair hidden under a Jack Sparrow-esque bandana, wielding skewers as his swords.

As the 80's Japanese pop music dips me more into this local treasure box, I order more unusual select dishes, many of which I don't even recognize: grilled chicken liver, gizzards, grilled beef and chicken meatballs. Think chicken is a boring meat? Not here, with healthy portions, just the right amount of spices, and I am converted. Then, I have the *yaki takenoko* (grilled bamboo sprouts), a pleasant surprise because hidden in its taste are hints of another vegetable born thousands of miles away, which the chef asks all newcomers to guess.

Though not for the faint-hearted, *reba sashi* raw chicken liver, served fresh from the farm is a delicacy that lingers in the mouth and challenges my preconceived notions of liver as unappealing.

My journey ends for now, yet I only scratched the surface of this lovely town that surely hides more mysteries and surprises in its multiple alleys.

SUSURU

2-15-14 TAKABAN, MEGURO, TOKYO
T/ 03-3791-2336

SUSHIYA NO YOSHIKAN

3-16-19 TAKABAN, MEGURO, TOKYO
T/ 050-5889-4685

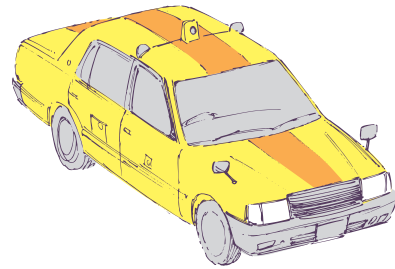
ABURIYAHAKU

2-20-19 TAKABAN, MEGURO, TOKYO
T/ 03-3794-4573

01

02

03



PUBLIC TRANSPORT

With the most efficient, yet easily most complex public transport in the world, it takes a lifetime to master Japan's train system. Still, there are a few things to make your time here much easier on the rails.

- 01 Japan's railways are a mix of private and public companies all working together, but that also means all-day passes for one rail system won't work on another one, so be sure of your plans in advance.
- 02 Rather than buy passes or individual tickets per trip, we recommend to get a PasmO, Suica, or other similar e-money card. Your unused cash is refundable, and makes moving around frictionless.
- 03 Getting on and off trains can be quite simple, as most people politely line up and wait their turn. Be aware of areas for elderly and pregnant passengers, and if you aren't sure just follow the crowd.
- 04 Knowing which trains to take and when is the hardest part of traveling here. Of course we suggest our smartphone app, which has the most up-to-date schedules and easy navigation in Japan.

TAKING TAXIS

Depending on how far you're going, taking a taxi may be one of the more expensive things you do during your trip, but there are a few ways to make the most of them.

- 01 Have the address for your destination ready, and in Japanese if possible. Cities here are dense and drivers most likely won't know your location unless it's a common point of interest.
- 02 Not every taxi takes credit cards, though it's more common these days. Look for a sticker on the window with the card you want to use, and if you aren't sure just ask the driver in advance.
- 03 No need to ever touch the door! Your driver will always open and close it himself, mostly to prevent you from opening it onto an unfortunate cyclist or nearby car.
- 04 Taxis can be quite expensive if you're taking a long trip. Our app provides a simple taxi fare search to give you the best estimate for your journey.

Read more on www.navitimejapan.com/traveling

MONEY TIPS

It's hard to get by on just one form of money during your time in Japan. In fact, you will most likely be dealing with three of them rather often.

- 01 While credit cards are more accepted, Japan is still very much a cash-based country, so you'll need to have a decent amount on you for walking around. The easiest place to find these are at 7-Eleven convenience stores, which provide international ATM service for zero fees. We also have an ATM search feature in our smartphone app.
- 02 Even when you use a credit card, there's no guarantee that smaller shops will accept your particular brand. Best to make sure when you first arrive if it's absolutely necessary, or you'll soon be making a quick run to the ATM.
- 03 Our favorite form of money is e-money cards like Suica and PasmO, which also double as payment systems for riding public transportation. Not only that, but you can make purchases directly from vending machines and convenience stores without getting a lot of loose change in return.

GETTING CONNECTED

Even though Japan is a highly connected country, getting online as a visitor can be frustrating. Even just for basic mapping and information searches, having a reliable connection can be a challenge.

- 01 While it's nice to think about being offline during a holiday, it's hard to go without features like mapping and transit search. We recommend renting a pocket wi-fi during your trip, especially if you want to share the connection with someone else. They're fast, lightweight, and allow you to use any kind of device that supports wi-fi.
- 02 If you're set on using a SIM card for your phone or tablet, you can now find data SIMs in electronics stores, convenience stores, and even vending machines. While they don't provide you a phone number, you'll be online in a snap.
- 03 It can be good to find wi-fi spots when you want to save on mobile data costs. Some companies like Docomo provide countrywide wi-fi on public networks, but more locations are offering it as well. It's best not to bank on having wi-fi or you'll get frustrated when you can't find it when you need it.

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About

NAVITIME for Japan Travel is the most downloaded smartphone app for travellers visiting Japan, available in English, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Korean languages.

Featuring Japan's most popular train route search functionality, the app also includes multimodal route search, navigation, real-time train timetables, and offline search for free Wi-Fi spots.

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ARE YOU A CREATOR?
We're always excited to collaborate with both visitors and locals for written, photographic, and video content. If you are interested in documenting your trip or sharing your experiences of Japan you can find more information at the link below:
navitimejapan.com/creators

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