

Sustainable Travel Guide in Japan



*Taking your time, listening, respecting
—that is what sustainable travel is all about.*

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Welcome to Japan!

A fascinating country where ancient traditions meet modernity. For travelers, Japan offers a unique blend of culture, natural beauty, and exciting experience. However, as in any country, it is important to travel responsibly to preserve its heritage.

Whatever your interests, exploring ancient temples, relaxing in an onsen, tasting local cuisine, or venturing into national parks, it is essential to adopt respectful practices.

At Japan Travel, we are committed to sustainable tourism through continuous efforts and a genuine desire for change. We have achieved a Travelife Partner status, ensuring that every journey contributes to a more sustainable future.

Travelife is a three-stage certification program for tour operators and travel agents: Travelife Engaged, Travelife Partner and Travelife Certified. We are at stage Travelife Partner.

The Travelife Partner award is a recognition of our commitment towards social and environmental sustainability. We comply with more than 100 criteria related to sustainability management, office operations, working with suppliers and customer communication. We are working towards further improvements aiming to eventually reach the Travelife Certified stage.

This guide provides practical tips to help you fully enjoy your trip while reducing your environmental impact and respecting local traditions. Taking your time, listening, respecting—that is what sustainable travel is all about.

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Japan is a country rich in traditions and customs that have been passed down for centuries. Whether artistic, spiritual, or cultural, these traditions form an integral part of the nation's identity and heritage. Understanding and respecting these practices will allow you to fully immerse yourself in the local culture.

Culture

- 🍃 Cultural Heritage
- 🍃 Sacred places
- 🍃 Onsen

Cultural Heritage



Japan's spiritual heritage is deeply rooted in spiritual and philosophical traditions such as Shintoism and Buddhism. You can appreciate this through architecture (temples, shrines, Zen gardens), rituals and festivals (matsuri, tea ceremonies), and the relationship with nature and ancestors.

Japan has also developed a rich artistic heritage that continues to influence the world. Traditional arts such as calligraphy (shodō), woodblock printing (ukiyo-e), and ceramics offer a fascinating journey into the past. Performing arts like Noh and Kabuki provide a unique immersion into Japanese culture, while wearing a kimono or practicing ikebana allows you to experience Japanese aesthetics firsthand.

Cultural traditions passed down through generations combine respect for nature, a refined lifestyle, and ancient customs. A great example is the Onsen (hot springs), which offer a unique relaxation experience that embodies the harmony of body and mind.

If you're curious to learn more about Japanese culture, check out our [**Japan Travel**](#) and the official website of the [**Japan National Tourism Organization \(JNTO\)**](#).

In this chapter, we will cover essential basics, focusing on sacred sites and onsen.

Temples and shrines



How to Visit

- At the entrance of a Shinto shrine, bow before passing through the torii gate.
- Wash your hands at the purification fountain, following the provided instructions.
- If you wish to pray, throw a 5-yen coin as an offering, as it is believed to bring good luck.
- To pray at a Shinto shrine, bow twice, then clap your hands twice. Make your prayer with your hands together, then finish with one final bow.
- In Buddhist temples, a simple prayer with your hands joined together is sufficient.

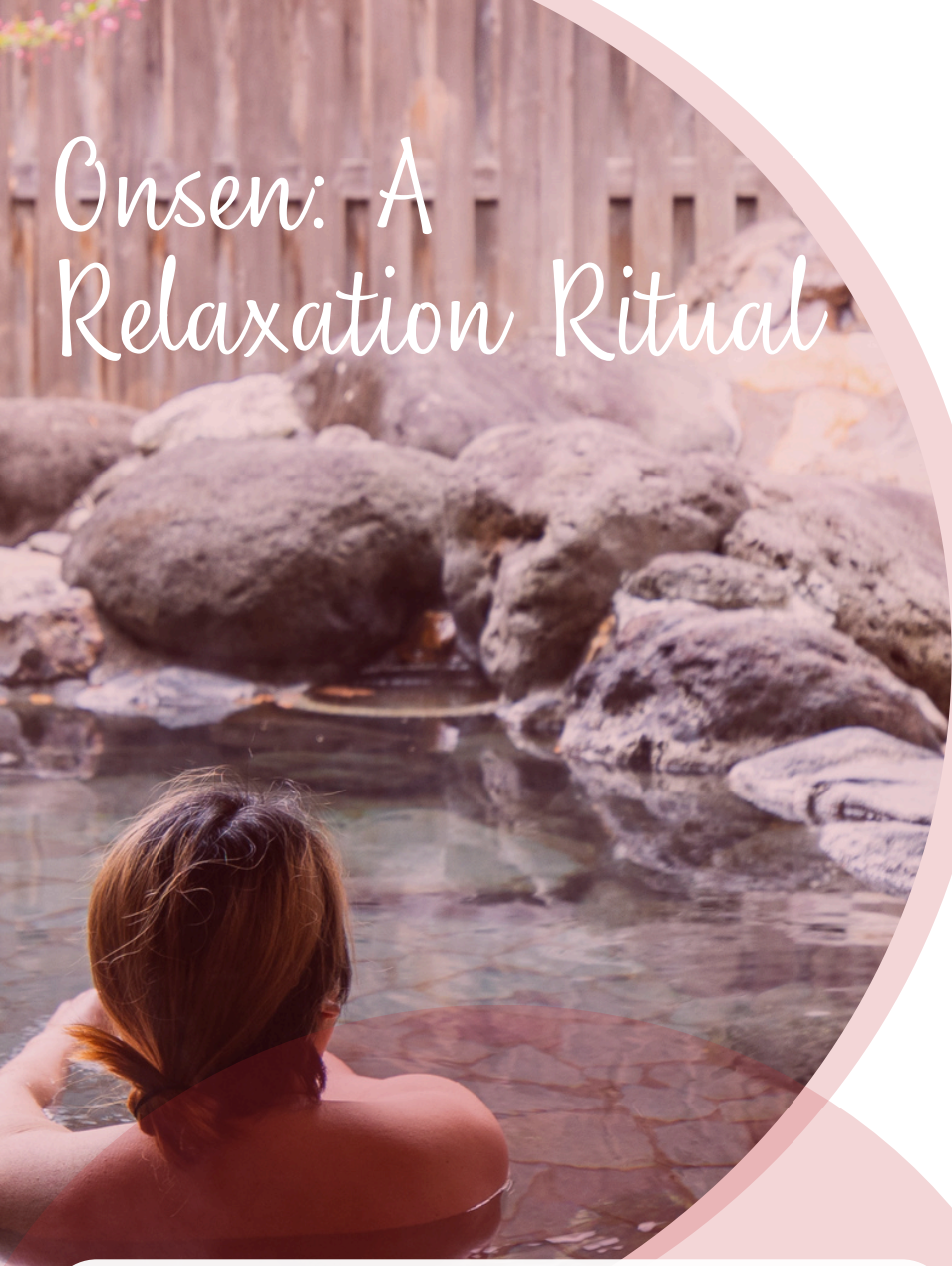
In Japan, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are primarily spaces dedicated to spirituality and culture. Shinto shrines can be recognized by their majestic red gates known as torii.

Today, with the increasing number of tourists, these places have gained popularity and sometimes lose the peaceful atmosphere that once defined them. During your trip, you may want to visit these famous sites, but for a truly unique experience, why not explore lesser-known spiritual locations? This will give you the opportunity to immerse yourself more intimately and authentically in Japanese culture, away from the crowds, and rediscover the traditional atmosphere you envision.

Here are some important rules to follow during your visit:

- If you visit popular temples, we recommend going early in the morning when they are less crowded to help reduce the negative effects of overtourism.
- If you choose to visit lesser-known temples, you will quickly notice the calm atmosphere, which is typical of Japanese culture. To maintain this serenity, it is recommended to stay quiet and avoid disturbing the tranquility of the sacred ground.
- When entering a temple, you may be asked to remove your hat or shoes. This is an important gesture of respect, so please make sure to follow this rule.

Onsen: A Relaxation Ritual



You've probably seen images of people unwinding in Japan's famous hot springs and might be tempted to relax in one after a long day of sightseeing.

A true institution in Japan, onsen, natural hot springs with numerous health benefits—have been part of a relaxation ritual since ancient times. However, their use follows certain rules that are essential to respect for a truly enjoyable experience:

- Before entering an onsen, you must thoroughly wash your body and hair in the designated washing areas. (soap, shampoo, towels, and hairdryers are usually provided)
- In the bath, it is customary to relax quietly, avoiding loud conversations or sudden movements.
- The small towel provided should be placed on the edge of the bath and must not be submerged in the water. If you feel too hot, you can sit on the edge of the bath to cool down.
- For hygiene reasons, people with long hair are expected to tie it up so it doesn't touch the water.
- After bathing, it is recommended to dry yourself lightly before entering the changing room.
- Many establishments prohibit access to people with tattoos due to their association with the yakuza. It is therefore recommended to cover tattoos in advance with bandages. Here is a [link](#) to a selection of onsen that allow tattoos.



To make the most of your onsen experience, consider staying in a ryokan with a private bath in the room or an outdoor bath you can reserve. Both options offer peace and privacy, and can be a good choice for those with tattoos.



During your stay in Japan, adopting local customs is a great way to fully experience the culture and atmosphere of the country.

People

- 🍃 Omotenashi
- 🍃 Politeness & Respect



Omotenashi: Japanese Hospitality

Omotenashi, Japanese hospitality, is more than just a tradition. It's a core principle of Japanese culture, centered on offering exceptional service and respect for others, without expecting anything in return.

Omotenashi is not only about politeness; every gesture and detail is thoughtfully considered to offer a pleasant and soulful experience.

During your trip, you will surely experience this philosophy in your daily interactions, through simple gestures such as a greeting accompanied by a slight bow.

Omotenashi is also reflected in how shared spaces are respected, to help maintain a pleasant atmosphere for everyone. For example, in public transport and sacred places, it's important to remain discreet and speak softly.



Politeness and Respect


As mentioned earlier, respect for others is a core value in Japan. Here are some tips to help you travel in harmony with local culture:

- Be sure to follow the signs and restrictions at the places you visit.
- Make sure to queue calmly when entering restaurants or other establishments.
- Smoking outside of designated smoking areas is prohibited. Smoking rooms, marked with a cigarette symbol, are typically available near train stations, shopping malls, parks, & even some restaurants!
- Japan is also known for its geishas, and you might be lucky enough to spot one during your trip. If you do, don't take photos and allow them to pass by peacefully. For a more authentic experience, it's possible to book a private event with geishas, such as an evening performance.
- Before taking a photo with locals such as artisans, residents, or artists please ask their permission by saying: **Sumimasen, shashin o totte mo ii desu ka?** (Excuse me, may I take a picture?)

Useful phrases



- **Arigato gozaimasu:** Thank you (a polite and appreciated form)
- **Sumimasen:** Excuse me or I'm sorry (a common expression to get someone's attention or apologize)
- **Konnichiwa:** Hello / **Konbanwa:** Good evening
- **Itadakimasu:** Said before a meal, as a sign of respect for the food and those who prepared it
- **Gochisosama deshita:** Thank you for the meal (said when leaving the restaurant)



Traditional Japanese accommodations offer an authentic experience that blends hospitality, history, and local craftsmanship.

Accommodations



Traditional Accommodations

Although Japan offers many modern hotels, staying in traditional accommodations such as a ryokan, minshuku, machiya, or shukubo allows travelers to experience a more intimate and authentic side of the country.

The level of comfort can vary depending on the type and age of the establishment, so it's a good idea to check the amenities carefully before booking.

Ryokan are refined traditional inns where guests sleep on futons laid out on tatami mats. Meals are carefully prepared using local ingredients. Higher-end ryokan offer great comfort, and many feature onsen (Japanese hot spring baths) , sometimes even private baths.

Minshuku are family-run guesthouses that offer simple, friendly accommodation, often with shared bathrooms facilities and more modest traditional bedding. It's a chance to enjoy a warm, authentic experience with local hosts.

Machiya are renovated wooden townhouses that combine historical charm with modern comforts. They often include fully equipped kitchens, Western-style beds, and practical amenities, making them ideal for families or small independent groups.

Shukubo, or temple lodgings, provide a unique spiritual experience with minimal comfort: futons, vegetarian meals (shojin ryori), and the opportunity to participate in the temple's morning rituals.

In all of these accommodations, sleeping on a futon laid out on tatami may come as a surprise. It may not be suitable for older guests or those with joint pain. Futons can also collect dust, which may be uncomfortable for people with allergies.



Useful Information

Here are some useful information to help you make the most of your stay in traditional Japanese accommodations:

- Upon arrival at one of these establishments, make sure to remove your shoes at the entrance and put on the slippers provided.
- In ryokan, minshuku, and shukubo, meals are served at fixed times, often early. Be sure to check the schedule to fully enjoy the experience and avoid disrupting the organization.
- In minshuku and shukubo, meals are often taken in a shared dining room.
- In minshuku and shukubo, heating may be limited in winter, so make sure to bring warm clothing—you may need it even indoors.
- The walls are often thin, so sound can easily travel from one room to another. A peaceful atmosphere is essential, especially in the evening, so it's important to speak quietly and respectfully to help maintain the traditional ambiance.



In Japan, ancient traditions coexist with modern culture. Dive into this heritage through unique experiences that will introduce you to art, craftsmanship, and skills passed down through generations.

Activities & Tradition



Traditional Activities

Japan blends modernity with tradition, offering a unique experience that combines futurism with cultural heritage.

During your stay, you'll experience the pop culture and futuristic side of the country with popular attractions such as high-tech theme parks, UFO catchers, giant robots, and maid cafes. However, Japan also preserves its ancient traditions, allowing you to enjoy unique cultural activities.

Here are some of our recommendations:

- Attend a tea ceremony or a kabuki performance to discover authentic aspects of Japanese culture.
- Participate in activities such as calligraphy, kintsugi (repairing objects with gold leaf), or ikebana (flower arranging) for an immersive experience in traditional Japanese arts.
- Visit local workshops for pottery, washi paper-making, or indigo dyeing to see artisans at work and perhaps try their techniques yourself.
- For food lovers, join traditional cooking classes, such as making sushi or bento.
- Lastly, for the younger ones, become a Ninja for an afternoon! These workshops offer a fun way to get acquainted with Japanese culture.



Traveling responsibly in Japan means discovering a punctual, efficient transportation network designed for the comfort of all.

Transportation

- 🍁 Responsible Travel
- 🍁 Practical Tips



Responsible Travel

Combining efficiency and accessibility, Japan's railway network allows you to travel across the country easily while adopting an eco-friendly mode of travel. Solutions such as the JR Pass make your trips even smoother by providing unlimited access to most JR trains, including the Shinkansen.

In large cities, you can also buy IC cards like the Welcome Suica, which can be used on trains, buses, subways, and in certain stores (such as Konbini, convenience stores).

If you're seeking an economical alternative for long-distance travel, night buses are a great option, connecting major cities like Kyoto and Tokyo.

To experience the country in a different way, why not book a bike tour?

It's a great way to explore iconic landscapes, such as those around Kyoto, or even cycle along the Shimanami Kaidō, a stunning route connecting several islands by bridges, between the sea and mountains.

Practical Tips



Traveling responsibly in Japan means discovering a punctual, efficient transportation network designed for the comfort of all.

- Public transportation is usually calm, but during rush hours (7:30-9:00 AM and 5:00-7:00 PM), trains can get crowded, and the last train in particular can be lively, especially in large cities.
- On escalators in Tokyo, it's common to stand on the left, while in Osaka and Kyoto, it's on the right.
- Before boarding a train, Japanese people wait neatly in line on the side, letting passengers exit before boarding. Once on the train, speak softly and avoid using your phone, particularly when it's crowded.
- During rush hours, consider wearing your backpack in front of you to avoid disturbing other passengers.
- Some seats in the trains are reserved for elderly people, those with disabilities, or pregnant women, for example. We strongly advise against sitting in those sections, even if they are available.
- Similarly, during peak hours, certain train cars are exclusively reserved for women, which are marked in pink on the respective cars.
- Eating on the subway or bus is not typical, but on the Shinkansen, we recommend enjoying an ekiben (a boxed meal), which is part of the experience in Japan.
- Lastly, if you're ever feeling even slightly unwell, wearing a mask on public transport is a sign of respect to those around you and their well-being.



Don't worry if you're unsure about something. Just observe those around you and follow their lead. You'll soon feel comfortable!



In addition to staying in traditional accommodations and participating in cultural activities, you can support the local economy through your daily activities.

Local Economy




Local Economy

Here are a few suggestions to immerse yourself in Japanese culture while supporting local artisans :

- Choose restaurants that highlight local flavors such as yudofu in Kyoto or okonomiyaki in Osaka.
- If you're vegetarian or vegan, options can be limited, especially outside of major cities. We recommend using **HappyCow** or the **Vegan Maps** app, which are very useful for finding alternatives.
- Try Japanese street food, such as senbei from the Heian period or dango from the Edo period. When buying from a street stall, avoid eating while walking, as in Japan, food is meant to be enjoyed without distraction.
- Tipping is not common in Japan and may be seen as rude. Simply say **arigato gozaimasu** or **gochisousama deshita** when leaving the restaurant.
- To appreciate local craftsmanship, you can purchase handmade items made from natural materials. Must-have items include silk garments (such as kimonos), wooden objects (chopsticks, bowls), ceramics, and Japanese washi paper.
- Another unique and personal souvenir can be a goshuincho, a booklet where hand-calligraphed seals are collected during visits to temples and shrines.

Japan is a true natural gem. During your stay, it's important to adopt responsible habits when it comes to the environment and waste management to help preserve its beauty.

Environment

-  Preserved Areas
-  Waste Management



Preserved Areas

Japan's national parks offer a unique opportunity to discover spectacular landscapes and pristine nature.

Imagine exploring active volcanoes, following trails that lead to majestic waterfalls, or observing rare wildlife in its natural habitat.

Visiting these national parks also gives you the chance to explore protected sites like for example Kumano Kodō, with its traditional villages and temples.

To ensure this heritage continues to awe future generations, we invite you to adopt a few simple practices:

- When visiting national parks, make sure to follow the marked trails.
- Each national park has its own set of rules. We recommend taking a moment to read the information boards on-site.
- Don't forget to bring a plastic bag to carry your trash with you.
- To avoid disturbing the local environment, do not pick flowers. For example, during cherry blossom season, refrain from pulling branches for better photos.



To learn more about Japan's official national parks, you can check this [link](#). It provides detailed information about their location, biodiversity, and available activities.



In Japan, you will quickly notice the streets are remarkably clean. While there is a garbage sorting system, in some areas, you might find it difficult to find trash bins.

Here are some practical tips to help you:

- Carry a plastic bag for your trash, and dispose of it later in a bin at your accommodation, near vending machines, or in convenience stores like 7-Eleven, FamilyMart, or Lawson
- When trash bins are available, they are often color-coded and have pictograms to help with sorting.
- In stores, you'll often be asked if you need a plastic bag (**fukuro**). To decline, just say **daijoubu desu** (no thanks) with a hand gesture to say no.



Eco friendly habits

- When leaving your room, remember to turn off the lights, air conditioning, or heating. You can use the remote control; if you're unsure, the hotel staff will be happy to assist you!
- In large cities, opt for reusable water bottles. You will find many free refill stations available through the **Mymizu app**.
- **Doko app** can also help you find essential facilities in Japan such as garbage bins, restrooms or smoking areas.
- Purchase a reusable bag at stores like Muji or Loft, and keep it as a souvenir!



Animal Welfare

As in any part of the world, in Japan, it's important to respect animals and their environment for harmonious coexistence and choose activities that support their well-being.

- 🍁 Respect wildlife and environment
- 🍁 Ethics and Animal Welfare



Respect for
wildlife

If you have the opportunity to interact with or be near wild animals, be sure to follow these guidelines:

- Do not touch them, as this can disrupt their natural behavior and stress them out. It's also a risk to your safety.
- Avoid loud noises and flashes, as this could scare them.
- Maintain a safe distance, ensuring both their comfort and your safety.
- For example: In Nagano, feeding wild monkeys is prohibited to preserve their natural instincts. In contrast, Nara is one of the only places where you can feed free-roaming animals, such as the famous bowing deer!



Respectful alternatives

- You can observe the Japanese macaques, also known as "snow monkeys," in the hot springs of the Jigokudani National Park in Nagano.
- To see the Japanese cranes, visit Kushiro in Hokkaido, where these majestic birds migrate every year.
- National parks such as Nikkō, the Ryūkyū Islands in Okinawa, or the UNESCO-listed Hiroshima Memorial are also perfect places to observe local wildlife while preserving their natural habitat.
- For more information on national parks, you can check the [Ministry of Environment's website](#).




Ethics & Animal Welfare

In a world where respect for animals and their environment is crucial, it is important to know and follow the fundamental rules that ensure their well-being.

Here are the key principles to follow, as well as advice on activities to prioritize:

- Follow the Five Freedoms defined by the **Farm Animal Welfare Council**:
 - Freedom from hunger and thirst
 - Freedom from pain, injury, or disease
 - Freedom to follow natural instincts
 - Freedom from fear and distress
 - Freedom from mental suffering
- We strongly advise against participating in activities involving captive animals, such as zoos, aquariums, or "animal cafes." If you still wish to visit such establishments, ensure that they are certified by JAZA (Japanese Association of Zoos and Aquariums).
Feel free to check **the list of certified establishments** for more information.



It is forbidden to buy souvenirs made from species listed in the **CITES** treaty and **IUCN Red List**, as well as cultural artifacts.

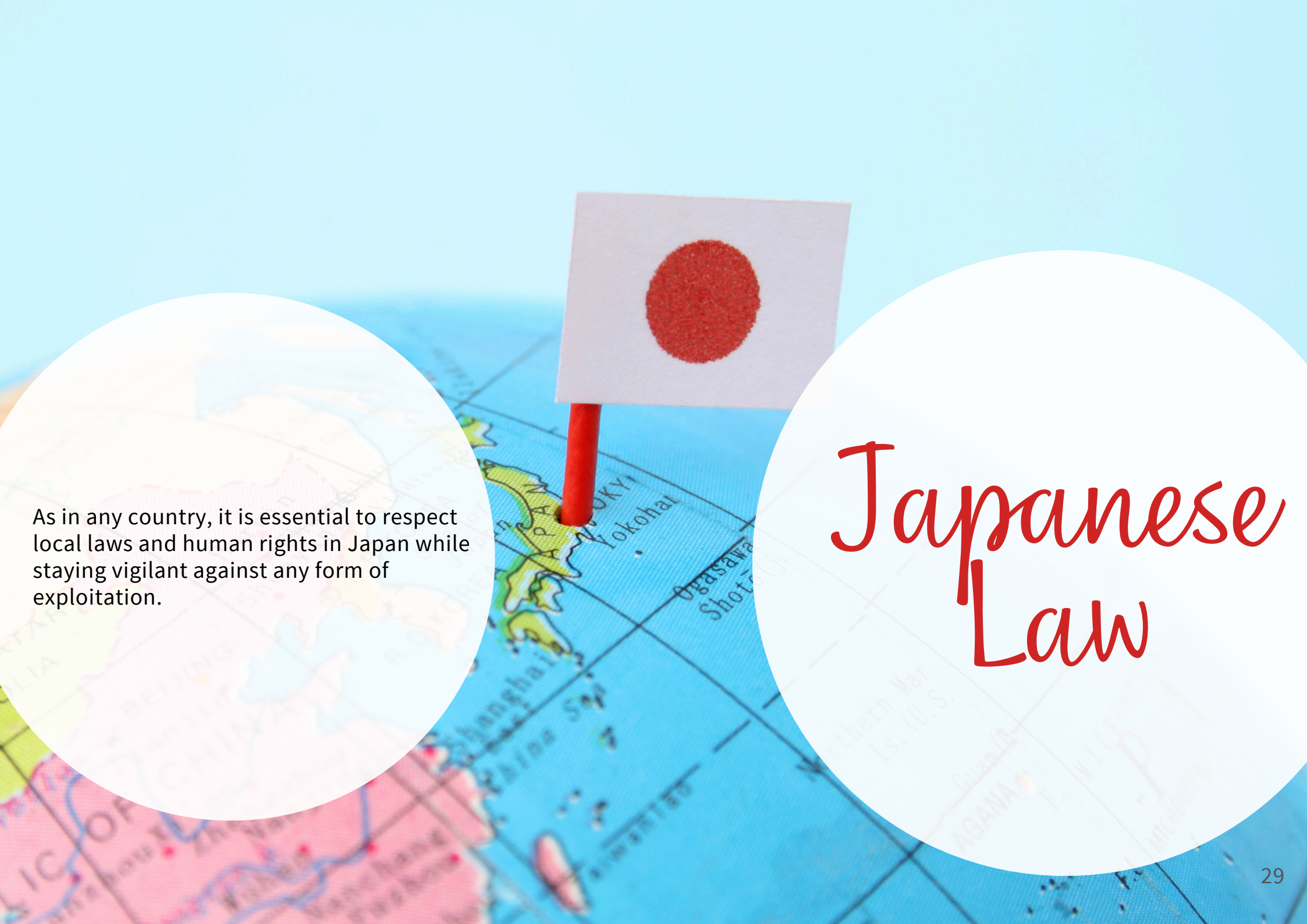
Souvenirs
made from
endangered
species

Prohibited souvenirs



Common illegal souvenirs include the following:

- Ivory products such as jewelry, ornaments, and carvings
- Turtle/tortoise shell items (ex. jewelry and accessories)
- Bird feathers (especially for visitors traveling to Okinawa)
- Coral (especially for visitors traveling to Okinawa)
- Endangered Seashell Species - especially for clients traveling to Okinawa. Some species of seashells, particularly those from endangered marine species, are prohibited.
- Seahorses whether dried or used in decorations (especially for visitors traveling to Okinawa)
- Japanese snake wine (habushu) which contains a venomous snake preserved in alcohol
- Shark fins often used in soups or as decorative items
- Whale products including meat, bone, and other by-products
- Products made from endangered marine life such as dolphin or whale bone carvings
- Antique items or artifacts when the export of such items is prohibited by Japanese law or international agreements
- Items made from protected plant species such as certain types of orchids or other rare flora
- Products from endangered wildlife such as certain types of leather or skins from protected animals



As in any country, it is essential to respect local laws and human rights in Japan while staying vigilant against any form of exploitation.

Japanese Law



Japanese Law

During your stay in Japan, make sure to respect national laws, regulations, and human rights.

- We strongly oppose the sale, promotion, or recommendation of any commercial or sexual services, as well as any form of service involving the exploitation or harassment of children and adolescents.
- Although child labor or abuse is not a significant issue in Japan, it is essential to remain vigilant on this matter. If you notice anything suspicious, please inform the nearest police station or contact Japan Travel directly so we can pass on the information.

If you have any other questions regarding your trip, such as sustainable activities, eco-friendly options, or other topics related to sustainability, feel free to **contact us** before your departure.

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