

Spring is Blossoming

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People come to Japan from all over the world to experience the springtime phenomenon of cherry or *Sakura* blossom season. Although cherry blossoms are found in other Asian countries and even in Northern Europe, Japan's blossoms are particularly famed due to their impressive varieties and the many events that occur across the country to celebrate their arrival.

Sakura season isn't just a chance to appreciate nature. In Japan, the short-lived transformation of a cherry tree into a blooming dreamlike wonder has been explored through poetry, literature and artwork over the centuries and elevated to a deeper meditation on renewal and the natural cycle of life and death. In fact, cherry blossom season is so important in Japan that the meteorological office has a service to forecast the first blooms, with daily reports featured on the national news.

When to see Sakura

As *Sakura* blossoms occur in the springtime, the best chance of seeing them is to visit from late March to April. However, as nature operates on its own schedule, no year is the same and as blooms occur across the country, it's possible to see *Sakura* over a four-month period between January and May.



How to Celebrate Sakura Season in Japan

It's the very fact that cherry blossom season is fleeting that makes it so special. So, join in with the fun, keep a watchful eye for those first few blooming buds and you too can experience *Sakura*!

You'll find so many special events and festivals across Japan to celebrate the beauty of this flower, but you'll also see lower-key festivities, such as friends and families enjoying picnics underneath flowering trees and throwing their own *hanami* (flower viewing) parties.

This is your guide to cherry blossom season and the best events to experience *hanami* for yourself on your next trip to Japan:



Do Your Research

If you're visiting Japan, but only staying for a short trip, there is no guarantee that you'll see cherry blossoms. However, pre-planning and a little research about predicted blooming times in the region you're visiting should improve your odds.

For example, in Okinawa, where the weather is subtropical, cherry blossoms pop out in the middle of January, with peak viewing times in early February.

It's possible to chase the blooms if you travel around Japan. After seeing the beginning of the season in Okinawa, you could travel to southern cities like Kumamoto and Fukuoka where blossoms will show up around the last week of March, and peak in early April.

Traveling north to Osaka, Kyoto or Nara, blossoms here also occur from late March to April. Into the first week of April, you can catch them in Tokyo. *Sakura* continues blooming throughout April in northern cities in the Tohoku area, peaking in the last week of the month. Your last chance of the season to catch cherry blossoms is on the North Island of Hokkaido where they bloom in the first week of May.

Keep listening to official forecasts or check previous years' *Sakura* information to try and predict when the flowers will bloom and fall. It's not just about the flowers; you'll find wherever there is *hanami* there will also likely be live music events, barbecues, craft stalls and even tea ceremonies underneath the boughs of the trees.

It's also popular to view the blossoms at night when pretty lights are set up and they take on a beautiful glow. This is known as *yozakura*.

Where to see Sakura

The Motobu Yaedake Cherry Blossom Festival (*Matsuri*)

Okinawa

Welcome the very first blooms of the year at this festival held in Okinawa from mid-January to early February. The short *Sakura* blooming season represents for many Japanese people the concept of “*natsukashi*,” a feeling of nostalgia steeped in fondness and gratitude.

Kumamoto Castle

Kumamoto, Kyushu

The cherry blossoms certainly bring a lot of crowds to Japan’s top viewing spots. If you prefer a quieter experience, choose to experience hanami in Kyushu. At Kumamoto Castle, you’ll find hundreds of blooming trees around mid-March.

Maruyama Park

Kyoto, Kansai

Walk the Philosopher’s Path along the canal in the ancient capital to see hundreds of cherry trees in bloom from late March to early April. Just east of Kyoto, board the Sagano Scenic Railway, which goes through a tunnel of Sakura!

Mount Yoshino

Nara, Kansai

Mount Yoshino has a large cherry tree that’s lit up during the evenings of *Sakura* season and is one of the most popular spots to see the blossoms. Then at Himeji Castle, you can see 1,000 cherry trees bloom into beautiful pinks and whites with the added beauty of a 14th-century UNESCO-listed castle in the background.

Fuji Five Lakes (Lake Kawaguchi)

Yamanashi, Chubu

Try to experience two Japanese cultural highlights in one, by combining Sakura viewing with onsen bathing at the resort town of Lake Kawaguchi. Line your photo up just right and you could capture Mount Fuji framed by beautiful cherry blossoms.



Yoyogi Park, Meguro River

Tokyo, Kanto

If you're in Japan's largest city during *Sakura* season, head to this park where although not that many cherry trees are planted, it is still a popular spot for offices to hold their hanami parties or families to get together armed with picnics and cherry blossom-themed bento boxes.

Consider returning later in the year to enjoy the beautiful orange hue of the ginkgo tree forest. In addition to the park, you can also stroll along the canal in Nakameguro at night when the illuminated reflection of blossoms hits the water and creates a very romantic atmosphere.

Hirosaki Cherry Blossom Festival

Aomori, Tohoku

This festival is incredibly popular and attracts over two million visitors each year! The farmers here claim a technique used to prune apple trees accounts for these cherry trees producing twice the normal amount of blossom.

Don't Forget About Plum Blossoms

Sakura isn't the only blossom to see in Japan. Plum blossoms, which are often overlooked by visitors, hold a very special place in Japanese culture. They also mark the beginning of spring and symbolize hope. In fact, they were the original *hanami* experience, having been grown in Japan since the Nara period (710–794 AD). They look similar to cherry blossoms, but they do not have the iconic split on their petals.

Plum trees bloom from mid-February until the end of March, and during the month of March, you can enjoy multiple plum garden festivals in temples and parks across Japan. They are usually a little less crowded than their more famous *Sakura* cousins, so don't forget to appreciate these blooms too.