

Moving to Japan: An Expat's Guide

I love Japan, its people, its cities, its culture. I spent five wonderful years of my life there. However, I struggled at the beginning. So here are some tips for you, which I hope, will make your integration into the country's life easier.

Inside Japan

Something I experienced, while living in Japan, is that no matter how long you stay there or how hard you try, Japanese people will never see you as one of them. The most common word in the Japanese language for foreigner is [gaijin](#), which means outsider. And, that is the way they actually see you.

However, in a society where order is valued so highly and rules are so important, being a gaijin has its advantages. For example, if you break a rule, but show respect and a desire to learn, you will be forgiven. Use this tolerance to your advantage, and build relationships with those around you. Learn their ways, how they think and connect. It will help you enjoy your stay in the country.

Research in advance

When I first moved to Japan, I didn't know what to expect. Do your research before coming, ask around, check forums and blogs and don't believe everything you hear. Contrary to a [recent study](#) about US perception of Japan, Godzilla doesn't actually walk the streets of Tokyo. Once there, contact the expat's networks. They can be of great help in case of problems.

Public transport

As someone who doesn't enjoy driving, I loved Tokyo's public transport system. The train network can take you virtually anywhere. It is efficient and clean, trains arrive and leave on time, and doors open exactly in front of the queues. If you miss one train, just wait for the next one.

However, get yourself a [network map](#), as the network can become a jungle without a proper guide. Plan your trips in advance, and get a pen and mark your departures and destinations on your map.

Safety

Something great about Tokyo is its safety. You can walk without the fear of being mugged at any time of the day. Honesty is part of their culture. I remember a friend who forgot his briefcase in a taxi and recovered it intact, credit cards and documents untouched.

Natural disasters

One of the great dangers of being in Japan is its natural disasters. Be it earthquakes or a nuclear reactor disaster, Japan has a history of having to cope with big catastrophes. Thus, learn where the emergency kits are, participate in the emergency drills, and have a clear knowledge of the gathering points. Also, keep your embassy contact numbers, and links to expats communities on hand. They have a proven history of being of help in case of emergency situations.

Outing

Tokyo is a big metropolis. Thus, it offers many possibilities when it comes to entertainment and socializing. The city host fine restaurants, Karaoke bars, cinemas, bowling playing places and many more amenities. Reservations are a must, particularly in top places, so plan beforehand.

A great way to mix with the locals and learn their ways is to visit many kinds of eateries and enjoy the local food at an izakaya, a train station stand and a classy restaurant. If you like shopping, the many [shopping centres in Tokyo](#), also offer a great opportunity to mix with locals.

When going out, be presentable and dress accordingly. Also don't forget that cleanliness is a must when it comes to the Japanese.

Be prepared to queue. Queues are everywhere, and are respected religiously in Japan. So, have a book or your cell phone at hand whenever you go out. Similarly, public places are respected in Japan. From childhood, Japanese people are taught to consider others and the environment. Take your trash with you and dispose of it at a proper place.

Language

Although the amount of Japanese people that speaks English nowadays is growing, it is a good idea to learn basic Japanese. Having to deal with banks, hospitals, doctors, and many others can become very difficult without some knowledge of the local language

Besides, you will find that it is fun learning Japanese, and that it greatly helps to create life-lasting friendships.