



Japan – the tourists guide to getting around in Tokyo and Kyoto.

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Introduction

Hi there... this is a basic guide to travelling to, in and from Japan.

This is up to date as at April 2016. The intention of this article is to help people when they arrive in Japan, and how to get around with a minimum of fuss. Its not so much a tour guide as it is a tourist's guide.

I recently returned from Japan and, before I arrived I figured it would be a breeze, but not so.

I had the travel guides and I had the apps..... and they are essential, but there are a few things missing and I hope I cover them here for you to make things a bit smoother.



The flight

Now, my trip began from Gold Coast Airport in Australia. This is the home of Jetstar. So if you are traveling on a budget – this is probably where you are going to leave from. But if you arrive from another destination, the process at the Tokyo airports will be pretty similar.

Other airlines also leave from Gold Coast and some leave from Brisbane. Gold Coast airport is what I would describe as a budget airport... no bells and whistles here. You get what you pay for.

I understand that there is an upgrade planned for this airport in preparation for the next Commonwealth Games in 2018.

I went with my wife and 11 year old son. We travel a lot so he flies well and is easily entertained with an ipad and some movies.

Our flight was the JQ11 flight that left GC at around 11am (it was 15 minutes delayed). The plane was a new 787 Dreamliner.

Thankfully, the plane is very voluminous, which help relieve any claustrophobia feelings. The seats we had were just at the front of the wing in Economy. The seating was pretty tight, not a lot of legroom. I would have hated to have been any taller (I am 5'11"). It was surprisingly comfortable though. The flight time was just on 9 hours.

We bought the 'food' package. Man ... what a mistake. I'll give you a tip – unless you like hospital food (public hospitals) then take your own. Gold Coast airport has a Maccas, Subway etc in the departure area after Immigration, so you can stock up with cheeseburgers before you leave ...Lol ! , no , Seriously!

We actually picked economy because we were told that the business class seats where not really different to the economy ... had only a few inches extra leg room and the seats went back a little further. Same food – but free grog.

That was about it for the extra \$6000aud or so it was going to cost us ..

Oh ,.. and service was pretty good – cabin crew where incredibly attentive for the duration of the flight. There are also in-seat TV sets on this plane with movies and music but you need your credit card for the AUD\$10 per seat charge for the length of the flight.

Narita T3

The flight that I was on arrives into Tokyo's new Narita airport Terminal, which from what I can see is the corresponding budget terminal to the Gold Coast one we left from.

The Jetstar terminal is Terminal 3 (T3). There are also domestic flights from this terminal – seemed a bit strange to be checking in at the international counter right next to domestic flight check in.

T3 had only been open around 12 – 18 months at the time I arrived. I didn't see the other terminals T1 and T2, so not really sure how they stack up. I think Qantas and other international lines also operate there plus some domestic services.

Narita airport is very stark and clinical. A basic 'spanline' shed type terminal set up. Plenty of steps and no escalators.



The Immigration process is pretty straight forward. You come from the plane through corridors and walkways into a big empty room with one of those crowd control line set ups.

On the plane we were given an immigration form to fill in. It's a bit hard to understand. There are two parts to it – the first part is the OUT going card that you need to retain.

We filled that in at the same time as the outgoing card, which seemed to be the thing to do. Immigration remove the OUT going part and give it back to you to hold until you leave. Don't loose it.

The conveniently have a sign at intervals indicating the approximate waiting time to the immigration counter.. but it didn't take long.

There was Long line to get through immigration but the process is not too bad. My wife and I needed to scan our finger prints on an electronic finger print scanner and a photo is taken of your face. Passport stamped and you are through to baggage pick up.

Basic carousel pick-up area is in an even bigger shed, then over to customs. Customs guys skimmed over us and let us through without a bag check ... but I suspect they would be pretty officious when they want to be.

Once through into the terminal there is a large eatery area – which is also where people congregate before departures... so you can sit and rest your legs, have a beer etc before getting on a shuttle bus to Tokyo city 2 hours away.

Airport Transfers

The Limousine Bus service ticket counter is right next to the international baggage pick up and customs exit.

Buses run regularly during the day and every 30- 60 minutes or so in the evenings. It is a 2 - 2 ½ hour trip into Tokyo central Shinjuku area. Be aware of this.. it's a long drive, especially after a long haul flight. But you get to see some sights.

The Limousine bus service had buses to all different areas of Tokyo, so it was pretty convenient. Our bus dropped us off at the hotel we were staying at. Which was great given the time was around midnight when we arrived.

The cost of the transfer from Narita to the Hotel (Shinjuku) was around Y7800 for the three of us.

We stayed at the Hyatt Regency Tokyo hotel which is in the Shinjuku area. Not far from the incredibly busy Shinjuku Railway Station. This hotel pretty flashy and they charge accordingly. The staff are lovely and very professional and thorough.

The room we had as pretty small but it was fine for our purposes. The loo had a bidet built in ... interesting! Not sure that we need to go there.

Their restaurants are pretty expensive.. one meal we had there cost nearly AUD\$700 for three of us. Menu charges were a little lost in translation- I mistook Y17,000 for a 2 person meal as one charge not an each charge. Am I bad?

Shinjuku station is a very busy place. In fact, it is the busiest train station in Japan – in the world, for that matter, and caters for around 3.6+ million commuters each day. Weekends are a little quieter up until midday and then it gets busy again.

We found walking around Shinjuku station in the morning on the weekend that the small food shops and restaurants didn't open until around 10.30 – 11.00am. There are a lot of them, mostly ramen noodle shops but also some small bakeries and more full on restaurants.

Oh .. I have to tell you, if you like pastries and breads – the Japanese bakeries are to die for. I have been told that the Japanese bakers are better at French pastries than the French. Even the supermarket breads are fabulous.

There were some great little food shops around the Shinjuku station area and in the restaurant alley on the south side of the station.

Also a food hall on the basement floor of the Daiyo department store was a top spot to stop for food and a beer or sake. Busy atmosphere and they do cater for English speakers. You

need to get used to smokers – you can't really get away from it unless you go to a hotel restaurant.

You can get alcohol at pretty much all restaurants regardless of size, but you have to prove you are over 21 to be served it.

Our hotel had a shuttle bus that left every 30 minutes from the Shinjuku station to the hotel. Its not a long walk from the hotel, but you seem to walk forever here, so the shuttle bus at the end of a shopping morning is a welcome respite.

The department stores around Shinjuku station have some fabulous electronics floors (yep, floors of them). And some great sports gear.

You can buy tickets for the Shikansen (bullet train) at all railway stations. They usually have a ticket office that is displayed.

We were traveling to Kyoto, so I needed to buy tickets for our trip. At Shinjuku station the ticket counter was located inside the terminal behind the main bus stop. Refer map.

Before you go to buy tickets, try to find out, using the tourist guides (I was using lonely planet), what train line you travel on ... this makes it easier to find the correct counter to go to.

Also – I highly recommend not bothering about buying the Rail Pass VOUCHERS or bus tickets from Overseas for any travel – as you still have to go to the same counters to collect the tickets as you do to buy them. I think you can also only buy the 'rail travel pass' vouchers internationally ... they can't sell you single tickets.

The travel passes give you travel to multiple destinations for a period of time, 7 days, 14 days etc. You need to prove you are a travelling and show your passport etc to buy these. They would be good value if you intend to travel a lot on the bullet train. But if you are doing a single stop trip like we did, then the rail pass is not worth it.

Train travel is not overly cheap, either. We did travel in the Green Class (it's like a lounge on rails) which was a bit more expensive than the unreserved seats, but worth it if you like some comfort. For 2 adults and 1 child our return ticket to Kyoto from Tokyo was Y98,000 – which translated to around \$1250 AUD on my credit card statement.

You'll need to buy train tickets in advance (a few days before) if you are going in high season. However, in saying that, our train was not full, and that was during Sakura no hi (Cherry Blossom festival time). But I was told that it can get busy and you can get stuck in a non reserved carriage and end up standing for the trip.

Language

I do speak a little bit of high school Japanese – and that was pretty helpful at times, but generally, you can get by without knowing how to speak Japanese. It can certainly be frustrating at times but using your Apps and travel books will help a bit.

Most of the ticketing people (Limousine buses, Train stations) had just enough English understanding to know where you want to go. They are incredibly patient people and will go to great lengths to understand you.

But learn some basics - greetings etc. You'll find yourself saying Gomennasai a lot ... that means 'Im sorry' and Sumimusen "excuse me", as you attempt to push your way through crowds or walk through the busy arcades.

I have a very useful mobile phone app – free on appstore – Learn Japanese. It has phrases that are spoken for you. So easy to learn and use in an emergency.

Also Google translate is fabulous – you can take a photo of Japanese writing and it will translate it for you. Great for menus in Japanese. You may still not know what you are ordering but it will be in English! Lol.

Taxis

Taxis are a little more challenging, unless you can find the "tourist friendly taxis" – who mostly speak English pretty well. They have a sign on the door of the car and generally have a special pick up point at the railway stations next to the local taxis.

Alternatively, as we did, get someone to write the address and basic instructions for you in Japanese on a piece of paper that you can show the taxi driver.

Taxi prices are not too bad ... a 10 – 15 minute trip will cost you between Y1200 and Y2000 (that's roughly \$10)

Touristy Things - Tokyo

Maps and Directions

Just a quick note re. following maps. If you come from the Southern hemisphere you will need to remember that some maps use South as the reference rather than North. It might just be me but I got pretty disorientated following maps and guessing direction. (I have sailed a yacht across the Coral Sea and up the Malacca Straights and navigated for overnight coastal races)

Ok there are temples everywhere. We did a few off the cuff trips to some parks and temples. This was nice but exhausting.

We were in Tokyo for 3 full days before heading to Kyoto.

Our first day was spent looking around the local area. It was nice just walking around, checking out the department stores and food shops. We had breakfast in a shop where you order your meal from a vending machine then hand the ticket to a bloke who hands you the meal you ordered.... So easy and lovely noodles with tempura tofu and veges.

The second day it rained and it blew a very strong wind. We took a taxi to the Meiji Shrine. One of the main Shinto Shrines in Tokyo, it is a beautiful display of 19th Century Japanese architecture that is still in use today.



Saki barrels at Mei-ji Shrine

There was a wedding happening the day we arrived. Unfortunately for the bride and groom, who were all in traditional dress, the weather was disastrous. Apparently weddings here are quite common on the weekends, so a good time to come. After the temple we headed for the Tokyo Museum (what else do you do on a rainy day) ... which turns out was on the other side of town to where we were, so the taxi fare was pretty costly.



The museum was interesting... Personally, I found it a little tedious, lots of repetitive themes and displays.

Japanese history is fascinating, but there are only so many pots you can look at! (what a heathen!)

The display of Samurai swords and armour was definitely worth it for me, though.

On the third day we decided to take a bus tour around the city. We are not bus tour people by any stretch, but this was the best thing for us to do. The tour guide was a young guy from Nairobi in Africa who was an English teacher part time and a bus tour guide the other part. He spoke fluent Japanese and fluent English.

We visited the Imperial Palace, the very touristy, but incredible. Then the Senso-ji Buddhist Temple, the fish markets, had lunch and a boat ride. We started at 8.30 am and got dropped off at Shinjuku station at 5.00pm.



The reason this was great was because we drove through areas that we realised we needed to go back and visit later.

The fish market was spectacular – street food, sushi, you name it – smells and sights you don't forget.

So we bookmarked this to go back to when we returned to Tokyo after Kyoto.

So I'd recommend taking a bus tour early and you will see some top touristy sites plus locate the places you might like to go back to on your own.

Quick Food Note

If you are not used to Japanese food, you may start to find it a bit overwhelming. Ramen noodles are very delicious but the soup has a strong flavor. Sushi is my absolute favorite foods but after several days of it I was starting to crave for something plain.

You'll find the odd Western steak restaurant around the place and the major hotels cater for western style food tastes.

If you get stuck for food (a lot of restaurants close quite early, especially during the week), then you will find everything you need in a local 7/11. They are all over the place.

You can buy anything from alcohol to sandwiches and pre-prepared meals (fresh ones) and cakes. Plus they have ATM's where you can get cash if you need it off your credit card.

If you get totally desperate – you will find a Mac Donald's or a Burger King somewhere near a train station.

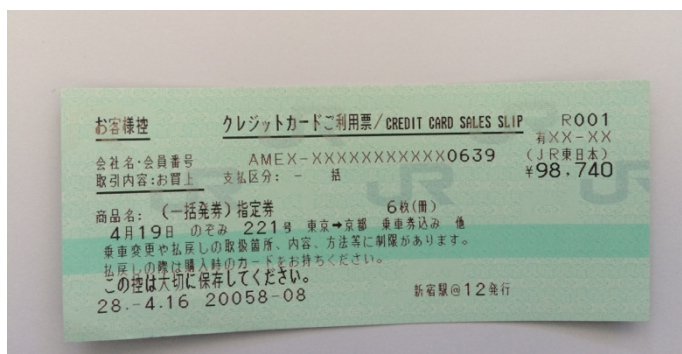
You cant leave Japan without trying a MOS Burger.... Try one then go to Macca's for a real one.

Kyoto via Shinkansen

The next day was Shinkansen time. We had to catch a taxi first to the Tokyo Station (this is the central station where the bullet trains terminate).

Tell your taxi driver you are travelling on the Shinkansen and they will know where to drop you.

Finding the right platform can be difficult – even more so if you didn't pay attention to the ticket seller who pointed to name of the train and the line on your ticket. It is actually very clear on the ticket – so all you need to do is look for the platform sign that corresponds with your train name and number (ours was the Nozomi, 221) ... too easy. Note that the trains run to EXCACT time. Do not be late or you WILL miss it.



This is my receipt. Had to hand in the tickets at the gates.

But this shows the train number 221 and apparently the JR line.

The tickets had the carriage and seat number as well.

Also, if you don't see your train number up on the board – it might be because you are a little early... they display only a few trains at time. But there are only 4 platforms and they are all close together, so you will have time to get to the train on time.

And ... if all else fails you can show your ticket to the guard at the platform entry area and they will point. The JR lines also have helpers who stand at the ticketing areas to help people with their tickets. The ones I spoke to all had a reasonable English understanding and were very helpful.

Once on the train – you get seated into your comfortable chair (like first class on a plane – not that I have ever been in first class on a plane but I have seen pics!) The train is fast. The Bullet train has a top speed of around 420 km per hour. But on the train we were on, I imagine, we were averaging around 250km per hour given that the trip took just over 130 minutes and the distance is 500km (Math Genius!)



Taking pictures from the Shinkansen out the window is difficult at the speed it goes. Plus on our line there were a lot of tunnels and walled bridges, but around these the scenery is very interesting.

Houses and buildings appear to stretch the length of the trip as all the different towns and cities seemed to mould into one great city. There were areas of countryside

and once you get closer to Kyoto, you get all the mountains that surround this great ancient city.

We missed Mount Fuji due to very low clouds. Unfortunately, as I was looking forward to that.

Kyoto Station is also a busy place. You get off the train at the Central Exit (worth remembering where this is as you have to go back there to get back to Tokyo or go on to anywhere else on a bullet train).

Our Accommodation in Kyoto

If you have not heard of [AirBNB](#), then you need to look it up. [AirBNB](#) provide access to accommodation using residential homes and apartments, all over the world.

You can rent a whole house, a room, a granny flat, a unit or apartment. I have even seen a yacht for rent at a marina in Coffs Harbour, NSW.

So, we use them a lot – given we travel a fair bit. We booked a traditional house in Kyoto the ‘Shogun Cottage’, not far from the Niji Castle – the castle used by the ruling Shogun of the era.

The cost was not cheap but much less than the hotel we stayed at in Tokyo.



It had two bedrooms and could sleep up to eight (but I couldn't see that being at all comfortable given the number of areas to sit and one toilet and bath.) It was just fine for the three of us and would suit maybe 4 – 5 max. Cost was around AUD\$780 for 5 nights. About half the hotel cost.

We had traditional futon beds, sliding doors and tatami mats. The wash facility was traditional, where you wash yourself down first then hop into a plunge bath.

Kitchen area was minimal – not functional to western standards, but fine for us as we planned to eat out.

The house was in a narrow street with other residential houses around it and a barber shop across the road. 7/11 up the street and a bottle shop next door to that and little local eateries all around... what more could you need?

Kyoto is definitely my favourite city between it and Tokyo. Much slower, wider streets, more open and less people (still phenomenally busy compared to Australian cities but way less than Tokyo).

Touristy Things - Kyoto

We visited the Nishiki markets first day. This is in ‘town’ near the Kyoto Station area. Its also the place of some very fancy department stores – like Harrods of London and David Jones in Australia.

The food halls were just out of this world ... so much, so much food. And the cakes and lollies ... oh my, I think I just dribbled.



Nishiki markets are opposite the Department stores. They are very tidy, well organised shops and eateries where the owners have everything out at the shop front for you to see.

Shops range from boutique candy shops, puffer fish specialists, sushi specialists, seaweed merchants, seafood cooked on skewers, icecream shops, tea specialist and restaurants.

The two malls that adjoin the markets are equally as flash with many high end boutique stores through to restaurants and kids game shops. This was an all day experience and we were totally knackered by the time we got home.

Day two went to Nara. Nara was the first capital of Japan, some 12 – 1300 hundred years ago and is the home of the Daibutsuden, the great Buddha located in Todai-ji.

Nara is located to the south east of Kyoto and has some of the most wonderful things to see. Travel by train to Nara took about an hour. The Daibutsuden is simply one of the most stunning sights I have experienced and you need to put this on your agenda.

If you are in Kyoto you have to visit NARA.

The native deer wander freely through the city and you can feed them and pat them. Watch they don't eat your tourist guide, though.

Catching the train was not without its drama. From Kyoto you need to find the platforms for the Kintetsu lines. This is a private line not run by JR (Japan Rail). Little did we know that it is easily accessed from the Central Exit area where we got off the Shinkansen.

After a long time walking around in circles looking at station maps and scratching our heads we manage to find the Kintetsu lines and ticket sales machines. Of course, the ticket machines are all in Japanese, so we got a lovely ticket guide to assist us and help by the tickets.

Now there are several types of train you can catch in the Japanese network. And you have to buy different tickets for them.

There is the Express train, the Limited Express, the Special Rapid, Rapid and local trains.

Hmm... Ok so we ended up getting an express ticket. This meant that the train was to go straight to the destination (being Nara train station). But we actually got onto a Limited Express train, that required us to change trains at another station somewhere before Nara.



Technically, we were supposed to have bought more expensive ticket to travel this way .. but we were not confronted about this anywhere.

So here we are on a train, heading in the right direction, but not the one we were meant to be on. Somewhere, we had to change trains.

The funniest thing I have ever seen was my wife chatting to an elderly Japanese lady, showing her the ticket we had and trying to decipher through words, hand gestures and laughter, where to get off. The elderly lady then invites several other old ladies to discuss this with my wife, who is now surrounded by 3 others all in deep conversation about our predicament.



I had, in the mean time accosted a guard on the train who whipped out his trusty translation guide and showed me the words that said in English, "you must get off at XXX station and change there for Nara". Problem solved.

The trip back to Kyoto was much easier .. we were now old hands at this and could probably conquer the world.

The following day we caught a local bus to Arashiyama. This is in the western area of Kyoto and is one of the top places to visit in Kyoto.

This is where you find the Tenryu-ji temple and the famous Bamboo Forest Grove walk. Quite stunning and very tranquil, even with the thousands of other tourists walking the track.

There is also a monkey park where the monkeys rule and they get to interact with you. We ran out of time for this. You can also hire small row boats on the lake which looked like heaps of fun.



Catching the bus was pretty easy as it terminates at Kyoto station.

Kyoto bus # 28 from Kyoto Station and same from Arashiyama back to Kyoto. Cheap as chips – costing us Y650 for the three of us each way.

Thing to note about buses – you pay when you get off the bus and generally need the right change.

The next day, being a weekend, the local Kyoto tourist bus runs. You pick this up, again from the Kyoto train station, and it will take you to most of the key tourist spots in Kyoto. You buy an all day ticket which allows you to get on an off as you please. So you can stop at one location and pick up the tour on the next bus that comes through.

We got off and visited the Niji Castle and toured through this spectacular building. It was built in the early 1600's as the residence for the first Shogun of the Edo period. It took us around 1 hour to walk around this site, so our time remaining at the other sites was going to be limited if we were to get the last bus. So timing your day is something to think about.

We caught the next bus available and got off at the iconic Kinkaku-ji or Golden temple. The walk from the bus to the temple was about 10 -15 minutes and it took us a good 40 minutes to walk around this stunning site.



Stopping to take pics and take in the scenery. You need to factor the time in so you can get the final bus as it comes past.

You are quite far out of town here, so a taxi back to Kyoto station would be costly. You can, of course catch the trains or a local bus, if you feel so inclined.

This temple is very commercialised and it detracted from the atmosphere somewhat. But the temple itself is beautiful in its setting on the lake. Definitely something to see.

Cost of entrance was around Y1500 each, as were most of the temple and castles we visited.

We caught the last bus and got off in the Geisha district for a bit of a look around before heading back home to our 'Shogun cottage'.

One site that we missed that we wanted to go to was the Ryoan-ji Temple. This is a very famous Zen temple in Japan. It is said that it is very small and underwhelming to see but once you are there you will become absorbed in the tranquillity of the temple.

According to one of our taxi drivers, this temple has an abstract garden with 15 rocks.

Apparently you can see 14 easily, but it is not till you achieve full inner peace that you can see the 15th rock. Next time maybe !

Our next day was time to head back to Tokyo on the bullet train again. All too easy now. Navigating the train stations has become second nature. Another fast, comfortable ride back to Tokyo.

Flight Back

Time the next morning to run out and see the fish market again in Tokyo before heading back to the hotel to get on the bus back to Narita airport in time to catch out 8.30pm flight back to the Gold Coast.

Another tip for Narita airport (T3) – is that there is no food in the transit/ departure area, so most people sit outside in the pre – immigration area. There is plenty of food and drink and shops in this area and ample lounges to sit on.

But make sure you time your entrance through customs and immigration as the line can quickly build and their outgoing security checking is very thorough.

We were able to buy sandwiches outside before the flight but you cant take drinks in with you. You'll have to get these on the plane.

Well that concludes my short traveller's guide to Tokyo and Kyoto.

I hope it can be of some assistance to you on your adventure to the land of the rising sun.

I will certainly be returning, in winter next time.



About the Author

James works at his [online marketing](#) business fulltime and travels when he can. His 'Tourists Guide' ebooks are composed during visits overseas to help travellers get some of the raw detail that might get glossed over in the magazines. Some of these guides will be used in the future in a travel blog site but for now are available to you use. If you think some one might benefit from this ebook, then please send them to affiliategoto.com to download this ebook rather than just give it to them. This is how he makes his living. ☺

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