

JAPAN TRIP REPORT

I was extremely excited to visit Japan when the opportunity came up. Japan is a top destination – with almost 30 million people visiting each year – and I was dying to find out why for myself. I had very high expectations. Now that I've been there, I can tell you that it met and exceeded all my expectations!

As soon as the plane landed, I knew that this trip would be spectacular. It started with the Japanese people. Each person I met, including my fantastic guides, were amazingly kind and courteous. Strangers on the street would assist with directions and would go as far as walking me to the locations I needed to get to. The hotel bellman would block the top of the car to make sure I never hit my head entering or exiting a taxi. Even the customs agents apologized for keeping me waiting - this just proves how nice and warm the people of Japan are. I felt safe, humbled and grateful for meeting new people.

I was struck by the Japanese attention to detail, in every walk of life. They treat their food like works of art with the exact placements, and up to 16 different courses at the ryokans! The public transportation, whether it be cars, buses, city trains, or the bullet trains, is clean, sleek, and, most importantly, never late. On the rare occasion when it is late, riders are given certificates to bring to their employers.



During my 10-day trip I visited Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, and the Setouchi region. I absolutely LOVED Tokyo. Tokyo is the ultimate big city with tons of quirks. I spent an afternoon in Harajuku mesmerized by the different cafes, large cotton candies and the oh so fabulous Harajuku girls with their pink hair and eccentric clothing. That night I had dinner at the Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku. This was the ultimate night out - think bright lights, robots, and a silly but interesting plot line! I was smiling for 2 hours straight at the outrageousness of the Robot Show.



From Tokyo I moved onto Kyoto where I had perfect weather (in February!!). Kyoto truly combines the old with the new - the Golden Pavilion, or Kinkaku-ji, was a stunning work of art dating back to 1397, and the Fushimi Inari Shrine was overwhelmingly intricate (and gorgeous!) with its 10,000 torii gates!



From Kyoto I took a day trip to Nara. I felt like a true Disney Princess being in Nara. I was surrounded by hundreds of deer (I believe the park has an estimated 1,200) roaming around. Not only does Nara have deer but it is home to the massive UNESCO World Heritage Site, Todaiji Temple. I found a day trip to Nara to be essential when visiting Kyoto and well worth the 35 Minute Shinkansen train ride from Kyoto Station.



Most of my trip was spent in Setouchi, and wow, it was well worth it! I fell in love with this hidden gem in the western-southern part of Japan that is off of the Seto Inland Sea. The Setouchi area consists of 3,000 different islands (Japan has 6,900 total) and it is one of the world's largest archipelagos.

The first stop in Setouchi was Kobe! I took a 27-minute Shinkansen ride from Kyoto Station to arrive in Kobe. I stayed at the Kobe Merikien Park Hotel which had a wonderful view of the port with the best ferris wheel show I have ever seen.



Kobe is known for two famous things – (1) Kobe Beef and (2) Sake! I had the pleasure of going to a group dinner where we all dined on melt-in-your-mouth Kobe beef. The following morning, we visited a Sake Brewery where we learned about the processes of making sake and thankfully got to taste a few different kinds. Just like the rest of Japan, the details and manual labor going into the art of making sake is very intricate. Viewing the processes made me value drinking sake so much more.

Upon leaving Kobe, we headed to the Okayama Prefecture. Our first stop was at the Bizen Osafune Sword Museum. While there, we got to witness a sword master creating a sword by heating metal and hitting it with a hammer. This technique requires three people and over a month of work! I had the pleasure of contributing to this creation.



Next stop, Hotel Ofutei, located in the Hiroshima Prefecture, where I experienced my first ryokan! One of the biggest questions people ask, “Should I stay in a ryokan?” My colleague, Andrew, did an excellent job of answering that, and I agree with his sentiment, Yes, stay in a ryokan! Link to Andrew’s article (<http://www.kainyc.com/to-ryokan-or-not-to-ryokan-that-is-the-question/>)

Hotel Ofutei had breathtaking views, an indoor and an outdoor onsen (hot spring with a bath) that was so remote you got to feel the nature. It was located in Fukuyama, also known as the place where they shot The Wolverine movie. Our wonderful guides were very proud of the fact that Hugh Jackman stayed in this area.

Setouchi literally means Inland Sea. Because Setouchi is made of so many islands, the scenery is breathtaking regardless of where you end up. It is a wonderful place to visit and experience nature in Japan. Being in Setouchi and on the Seto Inland Sea, taking a boat ride (or 3!!!) is a must.



One of the biggest draws in Setouchi is Naoshima Island, an island in the Hiroshima Prefecture that is an art haven. First, you have the ever luxurious Benesse House Hotel with sleek minimalist rooms. Connected to the hotel is the Benesse House Museum with today’s modern art. The most highly regarded museum on Naoshima Island is the Chichu Art Museum which has artwork by many famous artists,

including Claude Monet and James Turrell. For all of your clients who seek out art, Setouchi offers an art show every two years called the Setouchi Triennale. The next one will be in 2019. The Setouchi Triennale was first held in 2010 and it is intended to create Setouchi to be a leading destination for contemporary art. Clients who are passionate about art will be impressed by Setouchi and Naoshima Island.

Here is the famous yellow pumpkin on the pier close to the entrance of the Benesse House created by Yayoi Kusama.



Visiting Setouchi was a breath of fresh air after spending a few days in the big cities. It is a great addition to any trip to Japan. Whether you just wish to add 2 or 3 days onto your itinerary to see a different side of Japan or if you are returning for a second or third time, and would like to spend a week in Setouchi, you will not be disappointed. Setouchi provides an opportunity for people to experience a more unique and authentic part of Japan. It is a perfect destination for travelers who would like to get off the beaten path.

Based on my brief but jam-packed trip, no matter where you end up going in Japan, you will find kind people, beautiful surroundings, delicious food, and have a great time.

My friend jokingly said Japan is a Utopia, and all joke aside, it just might be.