

Aleah Wilson

Travel story

A Rookies Guide to Japan

Japan is filled with a unique culture unlike any other. There's an endless amount of things to see and experience on your visit. If you're afraid of independent travel and hate guided tours, I'm here to highlight Japan's must-see hot spots.

Ichiran ramen



Photo by Brooke Ortmayer

Ramen is one of the most popular cuisines within Japanese culture. There are a variety of ingredients to include in the dish; it can either be simple or elaborate. Ramen noodles are typically served in a large bowl filled with hot broth, meat or fish and vegetables.

If you're looking for a quick bite to eat that won't break your bank, Ichiran Ramen is a great option. Ichiran is a popular and authentic Japanese chain restaurant. It also expanded to other large cities such as Hong Kong and even New York.

The dining experience is unique in itself. You begin by choosing your meal on a vending machine menu outside the restaurant and pay. You then receive a ticket and proceed inside.

Once inside the restaurant, the staff hands out a sheet to customize your unique bowl of Ramen. You can choose how spicy you want the broth, if you want meat, extra noodles and vegetables.

After a short wait, a window in the booth opens and your meal is placed on your table. The food is plentiful and tasteful. The ramen was filled with flavor and cooked perfectly.

Junior, Brooke Ortmayer, enjoyed her visit to Ichiran. "The vending machine aspect and privacy of the booth made the restaurant comfortable and a fun place to eat," Ortmayer laughed. "The thing I'll never forget about the restaurant was the atmosphere, experience and amazing food."

Because of the very few interactions with employees, this set up brings ease to travelers having a hard time with the language barrier. This dining experience is fast and efficient and should definitely be included on your itinerary.

TeamLab Borderless digital art museum



Photo by Aleah Wilson

While traveling through different countries, viewing art is a great way to immerse yourself in the culture. If you enjoy art, you can't miss Tokyo's digital art museum. The TeamLab art museum is a maze of interactive light exhibits.

Tickets cost \$30 and it's best to purchase them beforehand online. This'll allow you to avoid longer lines. The museum is typically busy so you might want to visit closer to opening hours.

There's no limit on how long you can wander through the exhibits. You can spend the whole day at the museum if you choose. The museum is large and easy to get lost in, so this allows you to take your time.

Turkish student, Esra Gumrukuler, visited the museum while in Tokyo and enjoyed every part of it. "I had an amazing experience at the museum. I really enjoyed the interactive sections," Gumrukuler said. " My favorite part was all of the great photos I was able to take."

Shibuya Crossing



Photo by Aleah Wilson

Titled the busiest crossing in the world, Shibuya is a scene to experience. At any given time, there are 2,500 people crossing the street. The road is filled with businessmen and women, tourists and children all heading in different directions.

If you don't want to be overwhelmed by the crazy crowds, you can watch the famous crossing at the two story Starbucks viewing platform located on the corner of the intersection.

Shibuya is a great place to stay in Tokyo because restaurants, clothing stores, local shops, public transportation and much more, surround the area. The street food was authentic and this is the pace to be if you're interested in fun nightlife.

Traveler Annie DeFreitas stayed there during her time in Tokyo. "Shibuya was one of my favorite places in Japan," DeFritas said. "It was hectic, chaotic and wild at the same time."

It's easy to lose people if you're in a large group so make sure to stick together. "The only time I was overwhelmed was when my friends and I had our suitcases," DeFeitas said. "It was hard to get through all of the people with our luggage."

Fushimi Inari Shrine



Photo by Aleah Wilson

If you're looking to find a more cultural and quiet location, the Fushimi Inari Shrine is a perfect spot. With over 5,000 orange Torii gates, the shrine stretches over 2.5 miles. The shrine is located in Kyoto in the town of Fushimi-Ku. It's dedicated to Inari, the God of rice, sake and prosperity.

While walking through the Torii gates you feel quiet and tranquil. Other visitors tend to stay quiet and respectful. It gets crowded at times, so if you want to avoid that and have better lighting for photos, I suggest going at 9 a.m. when it opens to the public.

Student, Natalie Engel, enjoyed her time at the shrine. "The Fushimi Inari Shrine was my favorite part of Kyoto," Engel said. "I enjoyed learning about the history and hope to hike the whole thing some day."

Nishiki Market



Photo by Aleah Wilson

If you're in the mood to grab lots of small bites, the Nishiki Market located in Kyoto is a great option. There are many similar markets across town but the friendly and upbeat atmosphere make this one stand out.

Besides the multitude of free samples, the small bites are very cheap. There are a variety of different foods to try that range from fish, meat, rice, breads and even dessert.

Not only are the alleyways filled with vendors offering up food, there are many vendors selling crafts and other art. This is a great place to buy trinkets and other gifts for friends and family.

Junior, Aly Lagestee, tried lots of food during her visit to the market. "All of the food looked great so I had to try as much as I could!" Lagestee laughed. "I was certainly full by the end so that was a great way to get a meal in."

Monkey Park Iwatayama



Photo by Aleah Wilson

A fun sight to see in Kyoto is the monkey park. Admission is only \$5 but it's quite a hike to get to the top of the mountain. I suggest wearing comfortable shoes that you don't mind getting dirty because the hike is muddy.

Once arriving to the top, you begin seeing monkeys running around freely. You can purchase a small bag of peanuts to feed to the monkeys inside a caged room.

If you're lucky, you'll get to see the feeding show. A worker begins playing circus music and the monkeys from surrounding hills run to the top to be fed.

Junior Brendan Shields visited the park with some friends and had an unforgettable experience. "We got to see the coolest monkeys in a somewhat natural environment," shields said. "The monkeys were playing, fighting, eating and interacting with tourists."

You must have some precautions when interacting with the monkeys because they carry many diseases. "They smelled awful and I almost got attacked by one, but I'd definitely go back!" Shields laughed.

Overall, there are many sights to see on a trip to Japan. The culture is fascinating and beautiful. The country is unforgettable and a place everyone should have on their bucket lists.