

JAPAN

STORIA

- The history of Japan begins with an early human displacement to a group of islands in the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula, around 10,000 BC. The first traces of lithic industry and primordial tools date back to 32,000 years ago
- According to traditional legends, the Japanese Empire was founded by Emperor Jimmu Tenno, descended from the goddess Amaterasu, in 660 BC.
- Japan does not have an army because Article 9 of its Constitution renounces war and offensive acts of warfare. However, it does have Armed Forces that serve to defend the country.
- Japan is an imperial parliamentary monarchy located on the Asian continent and it is one of the oldest states in the world, in fact it proclaimed itself in 660 BC.
- Talking about the geography of this country it has no borders with anyone, since it is an island in the Pacific Ocean and currently has a population of 127 million, because few emigrate abroad as the country has an excellent internal economy.
- The country's official language is Japanese, which is a very similar language to Korean in North and South Korea, as they were its colonies until a few decades ago.
- The capital of Japan is Tokyo, one of the most important cities of this country, where the government is located, which controls the whole country. It is also the most important cultural and economic center of the country, in fact this city is very important for the world economy, precisely because the Tokyo Stock Exchange, one of the most important internationally, resides there.

RELIGIONE

- The religion of the Japanese, who call it shintō ("the way of the gods") as opposed to butsudō ("the way of the Buddha") is Shintō /Shintoism and is a polytheistic and animistic religion native to Japan.
- It involves the worship of "kami", that are deities, natural spirits or simply spiritual presences.
- It must also be remembered that Japan declares itself as a secular state, therefore full freedom of religion is permitted. Minorities such as Islam, Hinduism and Christianity are also present in this country.
- To pray in Japan you have to go to a Shinto shrine: prayer follows a precise pattern. At first, put a coin in the trunk (a large red chest at the entrance to the honden, the main building) and ring the bell. Bow twice then clap your hands twice to signal your presence to the local deity.
- But there is another very widespread religion in Japan, namely Buddhism that is a polytheistic religion of Indian origin based on the teachings and philosophies of the Buddha which aims to overcome suffering through a path of liberation and transcendence.
- Buddhism arrived in Japan thanks to Buddhist monks from China and Korea around the 6th century AD.
- Furthermore, being used by some large clans and thanks to the support of the government, this creed began to spread with a certain effectiveness until it spread so well in the territory as to find Shinto and Buddhist cults side by side.

SCHOOL SYSTEM

- Compulsory schooling in Japan lasts up to the age of 15, but from childhood the educational path appears rigid and intense. The Japanese scholastic conception provides that children are educated even after the classic classroom hours. For this reason, there are many families who join courses of in-depth study and repetition during the afternoon so that students, from the age of 6, are as prepared as possible for the lessons of the following days, presenting themselves to the teacher with impeccable preparation. This applies up to undergraduate age and even subsequent masters. Here is how the Japanese school system is structured:
- Kindergarten (not compulsory but strongly recommended): from 3 to 6 years of age
- Elementary school (compulsory): from 6 to 12 years of age
- First level middle school (compulsory): from 12 to 15 years of age
- Second level middle school (not compulsory): from 15 to 18 years of age
- University college or vocational school: 18 to 22 years of age
- Specialization (master's, doctorate, specialized costs, fee): from 22 to 24 years of age
- While on the one hand the entire school system in Japan appears severe and certainly not soft, forcing the very young to give up a lot of time for themselves, it is equally true that the resulting human and cultural

education borders on world excellence, contributing to form a prepared, competitive and highly qualified Japanese working fabric. It is not for nothing that Japan's illiteracy rate is less than 1% and the credit goes precisely to the teachings taught in Japanese schools and their vision of education.

- There are also legendary colleges in Japan and they are very difficult, selective and highly competitive. First of all, in order to enter it, it is necessary to pass particularly complex exams, to the point that, on average, only half of the participants are able to access them successfully. Otherwise, there is no classic degree thesis: there is therefore no test that certifies the official exit from the Japanese college. The course of study ends when all the exams required for the individual subjects have been successfully passed. The selection at the entrance is tough, but once inside, the exit does not require particular tests to be passed at the end of the courses. The university courses foresee an indicative duration of four years with the possibility of taking the exams during the sessions which are practically open for 11 months.
- In general, the concept of oral examination does not prevail in schools in Japan. This occurs very rarely and when you have to deal with it, it is usually in support of a writing. It is precisely this last form that prevails in most cases. If desired, the student could also finish his studies at the end of these first level university years (which corresponds to "our" three-year degree), but could also decide to continue his or her educational path. There are many opportunities that include masters, specialization courses, doctoral experiences: all very expensive but equally educational, exponentially increasing the possibility of entering the world of work.

LANGUAGE

- Until the 5th century, Japan lived in an era in which there was a spoken language, but there were no letters to express it, so it is not known how it was spoken
- In that century, however, the first direct relations between China and Japan begin: thus the Japanese understand the importance of having a written language, therefore they take Chinese and use it as writing.
- But at this point it was uncomfortable having to learn two languages, and so they started writing with Chinese ideograms that were similar to the sound of Japanese words, without seeing the meaning.
- Since all this was still rather difficult to learn, a simplification was sought in the Nara period (8th century), by applying the equivalent Japanese word to the Chinese ideograms
- Already, however, in the 9th century a Japanese "phonetic alphabet" was born, and it was hiragana which allowed words to be transcribed even without using the complicated Chinese ideograms.
- In the Heian era, the famous writer Murasaki Shikibu writes "The Story of Genji" (1021), the most important poem of Ancient Japan
- From 1338 Japan sees, with the transfer of the shogunate capital to Kamakura, the power to pass to the warrior class and the reintroduction of kanji which are also enriched with ideograms very difficult to use (for this reason there was a tendency to see in the hiragana a script for women)
- Then when the foreigners arrived with the Meiji era dating back to about 150 years ago, it had become fashionable to speak Japanese also seasoned with English words.
- Today in Japanese, Nihongo (日本語) is the language spoken in Japan and in many areas of Japanese immigration.

FOOD

In Japan, food consumption is organized around three main meals:

1. breakfast, which can be traditional or western
2. lunch, which is often eaten quickly at work or school, and is usually made up of pre-packaged or previously home-prepared meals in special food boxes (bentō)
3. dinner, the most respectful of tradition. It is customary to consume it in small restaurants or bars such as izakaya or in street stalls (yatai)
4. The traditional afternoon snack is called oyatsu and consists of a drink and snacks called o-kashi (お菓子?) with a drink that can be hot or cold (but not alcoholic) while the o-kashi can be sweet or savoury, such as chocolates for example

BREAKFAST

tradizionale

- The traditional Japanese breakfast (朝ご飯 *asa gohan*) can be compared, due to its nutritional value, to a lunch.

- In addition to rice, it can include miso soup, tofu, pickles such as radishes (takuan) or plums (umeboshi) and fish, both raw and smoked.

occidentale

- Western breakfast consists of eating corn flakes and drinking milk, hot chocolate or fruit juice.
- Adults (especially the younger ones) usually eat slices of toast with butter and jam, eggs or chopped vegetables, accompanied by coffee and orange juice: excellent because it takes little time to prepare

Traditional Japanese hotels (ryokan for example) only serve traditional breakfast; Western-style hotels and restaurants offer customers a choice of both types of breakfast

LUNCH

- Lunch in Japan is lighter than dinner and changes radically from person to person depending on commitments
- For those who stay at home, it is generally made up of a plate of pasta, while those who work usually resort to pre-packaged dishes (such as bento or onigiri) or go to restaurants at the workplace.
- Bento (弁当 bentō?) is a take-away meal popular especially among teenagers, consisting of white rice, fish or meat and pickled or cooked vegetables. It is prepared at home or purchased from street stalls
- The origins of bento date back to the Heian period (794-1182), when the first onigiri and hoshii, cooked and dried rice to be eaten at a later time, were prepared.

DINNER

- This, together with breakfast, is the most important meal of the day for the Japanese, because the whole family finally reunites at the table.
- The Japanese dinner includes the evergreen steamed white rice plus many small "side dish" courses that accompany a hot main dish often served in a large pot where you serve yourself as you like, such as nikujaga, a meat soup and potatoes, or curry rice etc.

HOW TO GET FUN

- Shopping at night: In Japan, there are not only convenience stores open late, but also discount superstores such as Don Quijote, a truly affordable shopping center that offers practically everything from snacks and drinks to tableware and luxury brands.
- For those who love the disco atmosphere, going to the club is certainly the most satisfying way to have fun. There are tons of clubs around, but the best are undoubtedly Shibuya, Roppongi and Ginza. These venues are open until the next morning even on weekdays.
- Furthermore, on Saturday evenings young people tend to go to onsen, which are basically spas where young people take a bath and relax, perhaps putting music in the background.

TRADITIONS

- **Festivals in Japanese Culture**
- There are more festivals in Japan than other countries because Japanese religions are related to celebrating the harvest seasons and seasonal changes.
- **Each of the 47 Japanese prefectures has a different festival** which usually takes place in the summer. Locals usually participate in these festivals by wearing a yukata and sandals.
- The most famous Japanese festivals are:
 1. **Gion Festival** in Kyoto. The largest parade in Japan which started in the 800's when there was a pandemic similar to the Coronavirus.
 2. **Awa Odori Festival** in Tokushima. A Dance festival held during the Obon-Week (the week when the spirits of the deceased are believed to visit the world).
 3. **Nebuta Festival** in Aomori. A festival dedicated to ancient warriors in Northern Japan.
- **Holidays and Celebrations in Japanese Culture**
- If you look at the Japanese calendar, you would notice that there is a cultural celebration almost every month. Japanese people like celebrating seasonal changes to show their **appreciation of new beginnings**.
- The three most important celebrations in Japan are:
 - o 1) **The new year's day**. Japanese people visit a shrine (santuario) after midnight on Dec 31 to make a wish.
 - o 2) **Cherry blossom** celebration in April. It is traditional to have a picnic under the cherry trees during these days.
 - o 3) **The Obon Holiday** in August. Japanese people visit their hometown to commemorate the spirits of those who passed away.

ARCHITECTURE

- **Architecture in Japanese Culture**
- **Japanese architecture** is similar to that of other East Asian countries. Japanese buildings tend to be simple with dull colors as a result of the zen philosophy.
- The temples, shrines and private houses are traditionally made out of **wood**. Most structures have elevated basements and big roofs because of **high humidity** and frequent rains throughout the year.
- The roofs also have curves at the corners that provide more light in the winter.
- Rooms are separated by light wooden screens (**fusuma**) or paper windows (**shoji**) that can be easily moved when seasons change.
- **Gardens in Japanese Culture**
- **Japanese gardens** are considered miniature versions of vast landscapes.
- Rocks symbolize mountains, bushes represent forests and ponds are references to seas and lakes.
- There are three main types of Japanese gardens: pond garden, rock garden and the courtyard garden. **The pond garden** is the most popular type of Japanese garden adopted from Chinese culture. **The rock garden**, also known as the zen garden, consists of white pebbles and stones often found in zen monasteries in Kyoto. The **courtyard garden** is a miniature garden built inside traditional houses, and it makes the Japanese feel like they're living in nature.

TOKYO

- **Tokyo Orientation**
- Since Tokyo has such a long history, it has a lot of things to see. I'll talk about some of them that can be visited in an itinerary of one day.
- 1. **Tsukiji Outer Market**
- The biggest fish market in all Japan, Tsukiji is a must go for sushi lovers, because here they can find some of the best sushi made in Tokyo.
- In fact here, early in the morning, fresh fish is brought to the stands, ready to be cooked and sold.
- 2. **Tokyo Imperial Palace Area**
- From the fish market you can walk through the **Ginza** area towards Tokyo Station. This shopping area is very popular for their department stores.
- From here you can walk to Tokyo Imperial Palace. Built in the 1960s, it is the home of the Japanese royal family.
- The palace and the beautiful gardens are surrounded by a moat (fossato).
- 3. **Tokyo Tower**
- The **Tokyo Tower** is a communications and observation tower in the district of Minato. Built in 1958, it is the second tallest tower in Japan. The structure is inspired by the Eiffel Tower.
- Under the tower, there are museums, restaurants, and shops. In 1961, transmission antennae were added to the tower.
- the tower is 330 meters high and from the top floor you can see all the landscape of Tokyo
- 4. **Gonpachi restaurant**
- It is a traditional restaurant Gonpachi is one of the most popular restaurants in Tokyo, since it became hugely famous worldwide as it was the location for the movie set of the fighting scene from Kill Bill.
- It offers a lot of typical Japanese cuisine such as sushi, soba noodles and grilled chicken.
- The restaurant has a relaxing atmosphere with the old-fashioned wooden interior and the smoky open kitchen.