

Japan Special Edition

Holidays

with kids

29 REASONS TO VISIT
Japan, now!

Theme Parks

THRILLS, CHILLS AND
SAMURAI SKILLS

**JAPAN FOR
ALL SEASONS**
FROM SUNSHINE
TO SNOW

**COOL POWDER
& HOT SPRINGS**
WHERE TO HIT
THE SLOPES



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Japan Flip Cover Image

Miki, Teo and Lia of LikeMiljian exploring the temples of family-friendly Kyoto.

Image © likemiljian.com @likemiljian



Image © Guitjar photographer/Shutterstock.com



From its ancient temples to its modern cities, Japan has been stealing the hearts of travellers for centuries. With exquisite natural scenery, intriguing cultural traditions, hot springs and snowy ski slopes, plus a surplus of crazy *kawaii* (cute) characters, robots and ninjas that will kick young and old imaginations into overdrive, Japan has become one of the world's most sought-after holiday destinations for families.

Stir in an enthralling calendar of festivals, a wide-ranging climate that adds a unique touch of magic to every season, safe streets and cuisine kids can't get enough of. Then add a sprinkle of off-the-chart theme park thrills, cafes serving kitten cuddles with their coffee and more outrageously fun activities than you can poke a samurai sword at, and you've got the recipe for a sure-fire holiday hit.

Chaotic, crazy, cultural and oh-so-cool, it's no wonder Japan has become one of the world's most sought-after destinations for families. With the team at *Holidays with Kids* all fully fledged Japanophiles, we're sharing all the reasons we think your family should add the Land of the Rising Sun to your family holiday hot list.

For more Japan holiday inspiration, head to our website holidayswithkids.com.au and for instant updates, connect with us on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Until next time, safe and happy travels,

Aleney de Winter and the team at HWK

@holidayswithkids @holidayswkids

Japan for all seasons

The ultimate year-round destination, in Japan every season offer something new and special for families, as **KATE POWELL** discovers.

It is one of the world's best year-round destinations for families; from the city streets to the great outdoors, there's always something special beckoning in uniquely beautiful Japan. Whether surrounded by the pink blossoms of spring or the white powder of winter, the Land of the Rising Sun is always splitting at the seams with family fun.

Cherry blossoms and waterfalls of wisteria

Between March and May, Japan overflows with soft blooms of pink and purple as its famous cherry blossoms burst forth all over the country to welcome the spring. The blossoms appear at different times in various regions, and only for a couple of weeks, so this brief period of beauty is celebrated with all the elegant extravagance it deserves in *Sakura Matsuri*, the cherry blossom festival.

The flowers themselves offer meaning in Buddhist tradition as symbols of mindfulness; with such brief visits, they remind us of the importance of living in the moment. At the height of bloom, they take over city streets and fill temple gardens, and families will love participating in the local tradition of *hanami*: intimate picnics under the blossoming trees. Don't miss the tunnels of cascading wisteria blooms either, which are nothing short of magical to wander through at **Ashikaga Flower Park** in Tochigi, north of Tokyo.

Festivals, fireworks and folk dancing

Summer sees some of the country's most invigorating cultural traditions. *Matsuri* (festivals) take over cities and towns across the country during the warmer weather with floats, food stalls and the firework displays for which Japan is renowned.

Throughout July, Kyoto is ruled by the **Gion Matsuri**: the festival of the Yasaka Shrine, dating back to 869AD. Japan's most famous celebration, a host of fun family events includes the jaw-dropping, 25-metre-tall *hoko* floats, drawn on wheels as large as people.

Generally held in August, the festival of **Obon** honours ancestral spirits. Families can witness the *bon-odori* dance, with displays often including beautiful traditional fans.

Summer is also the best time to explore the lush Japanese landscape on splash-tastic visits to Japan's many beaches and islands, or on invigorating hikes. In Hakuba on the main island of Honshu, **Evergreen Outdoor Center** makes it easy with a diverse range of fun, active outdoor programs for kids.

Ablaze with colour

Autumn in Japan is awash with vibrant scenes of deep reds, oranges and yellows as the country prepares for winter. In Niseko, this is perhaps the best time of year to witness the stunning lakes, hot springs and hiking trails of



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01 Rich colours feature in Japan's summer festivals © cowardlion 02 The vibrant tones of *koyo* © Fang ChunKai 03 Senso-ji is Tokyo's oldest temple © IM_photo 04 Playing in the white powder 05 Mum and daughter enjoy the pristine snow. Images 04 & 05 © SkiJapan.com. Images 01-03 © Shutterstock.com

the popular destination, or head to Yatsugatake Heights in Nagano for a breathtaking combination of wild, rocky ranges and abundant forest land.

Shrines are at their most inspiring when surrounded by the falling autumn leaves, or *koyo*. The foliage coordinates perfectly with the colourful historical architecture of Kyoto and Nara, their temples and imperial palaces reflecting the warm autumnal tones.

Legendary 'Japow'

The ultimate winter wonderland, Japan boasts deep powder, thrilling terrain, great family accommodation and snow schools catering to little shredders.

On the island of Hokkaido, **Rusutstu** ski resort is a popular choice for its world-class family ski facilities. You'll also find a great variety of outdoor activities year-round, including an amusement park, pool and the famous Japanese hot springs.

Akaigawa's unspoiled **Kiroro Ski Resort** is another top spot with pristine powder snow, a renowned ski school and a snow playground for kids. When the snow melts, Kiroro becomes a clean, green natural beauty, packed with cultural colour and engaging activities for families.

All-inclusive **Club Med Tomamu** and **Club Med Sahoro Hokkaido** are also family favourites with great skiing and a world of fun.

In **Hakuba**, **Evergreen International Ski School** is a one-stop destination for English-language ski and snowboard lessons for kids (and parents) three years and over. If it's gear you seek to make the best of the snow, **Rhythm Japan**, located in Niseko and Hakuba, is the go-to snowboard and specialty ski store for families.

The seven-day **Sapporo Snow Festival** is another winter highlight, with phenomenal snow structures that have been wowing crowds for six decades. ▲

29

reasons to take your kids to *Japan*

An incredible melting pot of old world and new, Japan is brimming with exciting activities for the family, writes **KATE POWELL.**

1 National Museum of Nature and Science Tokyo

Just a five-minute walk from Ueno Station, this museum is filled with floor upon floor of thrilling exhibits kids will love, including a 360-degree theatre and a section for Japan's scientific progress since the Edo period. There are even regular nights for Astronomical Observation, which are free for kids to attend. www.kahaku.go.jp/english

2 LEGOLAND Discovery Center Tokyo

Discover the city in miniature as LEGOLAND® recreates all of Tokyo's top attractions with LEGO® in its own MINILAND®. This amazing attraction is a world made for kids, literally; everything inside is kid-sized. There's also a 4D cinema, three different rides and 10 build-and-play zones. tokyo.legolanddiscoverycenter.jp/en

3 Ghibli Museum Tokyo

This museum, dedicated to the studio that brought you classics such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, will thrill anime lovers. The museum is a portal to a storybook world in which kids and adults alike are invited to experience the museum as a character themselves, with exhibits like a Catbus adventure and the Saturn Theatre, which screens an original short feature that can't be seen anywhere else. ghibli-museum.jp/en

4 Tokyo Tower Tokyo

See the city from above at Tokyo Tower's Observation Deck. Having recently reopened following a two-year refurbishment, the deck is designed to simulate a sensation of floating and offers sweeping views of the city some 250 metres above sea level. Geometric mirrors, LED lighting and a glass-panelled lift truly bring the futuristic vibe of the city to life for kids. tokyotower.co.jp

5 KidZania Tokyo Tokyo

KidZania is as educational as it is fun, inviting kids to role play adult life in a miniature city where they can learn about society. Most of the jobs and activities encourage kids to create something new, from fashion shows to pizza, and there are activities held in English each day. KidZania offers a designated Toddler Area and kids under two enter for free. kidzania.jp/tokyo/en/

6 Kamakura hiking trail Kanagawa

Kamakura is a great destination for the culture-hunting family, conveniently close to Tokyo. Its greatest draw is its network of hiking trails, hidden in the forested hills above the city, which offer a scenic and invigorating way to walk between some of the city's famous temples and shrines. The easy trails are suitable for all but the smallest of children, and are best experienced in the beautiful climates of spring or autumn. en.kamakura-info.jp





02

01 Plenty of tasty treats in colourful Osaka © @likemiljan 02 The torii gate appears to float at Itsukushima Shrine
03 Shinjuku is one of 23 city wards in Tokyo 04 The bamboo forest of Arashiyama is home of the Togetsukyo Bridge

7 Tōdai-ji Temple Nara
Tōdai-ji Temple is big in every way; its wooden structures were, for a long time, the largest in the world, and it is home to one of Japan's largest bronze statues of Buddha, measuring 15 metres tall. Founded in 728, the temple is one of Japan's most historically significant temples, its grounds also home to a museum. At the adjacent Nara Park, children can feed resident deer. todaiji.or.jp

10 Bunraku Theatre Osaka
Kids will love this traditional Japanese puppetry, called *bunraku*, originally from the Edo period and today recognised as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Each puppet requires three operators and is not controlled by strings, but rather by the intricate cooperation of the puppeteers to manipulate the limbs, eyebrows, mouths and even eyelids. www.ntj.jac.go.jp/english

8 Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum Hiroshima
This museum is one of particular significance, commemorating the bomb that devastated Hiroshima in 1945. It offers learning opportunities just for littlies; at the Kids Peace Station, they learn the vital importance of maintaining peace. hpmuseum.jp

11 Kids Plaza Osaka
Japan's first museum dedicated exclusively to children's education, Kids Plaza believes in learning through play with interactive exhibits and workshops. For babies and toddlers, nursing rooms are available, plus strollers are free to use. You can find Kids Plaza right next to Ogimachi station on the Osaka Metro Sakaisuji line. kidsplaza.or.jp/en

9 Itsukushima Shrine Hiroshima
You might recognise this destination for its famous torii gate and shrine, which appear to be floating above the water at high tide on Miyajima (literally translating to 'shrine island'). The island itself is considered sacred and the various complexes are picturesquely connected over the water by boardwalks, propped above the sea by pillars.

12 Osaka Castle Osaka
Since it was first constructed in 1583, the Osaka Castle has been attacked, burned down and even struck by lightning, only to be returned to its former glory again and again by dedicated worshippers. It makes for a fascinating lesson for little historians. Today, the castle houses an informative museum about its history and Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the *daimyō* who originally commissioned the castle. osakacastle.net/english

13 The Kyoto Manga Museum Kyoto
All three floors (and basement) of this enormous museum are lined with shelf upon shelf of manga. The collection itself will entertain the family for hours, however, the museum will also guide you through the adoption and development of manga internationally and features various themed temporary exhibitions. kyotomm.jp/en

14 Arashiyama Kyoto
Located on the western outskirts of Kyoto, pretty Arashiyama is home of the famous Togetsukyo Bridge, literally translating to 'Moon Crossing Bridge' and dating back to the Heian Period between 794 and 1185. You'll also find the renowned bamboo grove, Iwatayama Monkey Park and the Tenryuji Temple. For real cultural immersion, stay a night in a traditional *ryokan*.

15 Fushimi Inari-taisha Kyoto
This Shinto shrine is famous for its thousands of red torii gates through which visitors may walk to a wooded forest, home to sacred Mount Inari. In addition to the mountain trails, the shrines themselves are quite a sight to behold; kids will love the many fox statues to be found throughout the shrine, said to be the messengers of Inari, the Shinto god of rice.



04

16 Samurai Kembu Theatre Kyoto
Kids will love the opportunity to see traditional swordplay in action and even to have a go themselves. In addition to fantastic displays of the ancient craft performed by masters, the Samurai Kembu teaches authentic courses in which the kids can learn some cool samurai moves and poses with a katana of their own. samurai-kembu.jp

19 Ishigaki Island Okinawa
Ishigaki is Japan's southernmost city, the main island of the Yaeyama Islands and accessible by ferry, a journey well worth it for the opportunity to see the huge, graceful mantas that live in the coral reefs of its tropical coastline. Snorkelling can be enjoyed at nearly any of its beautiful beaches, and a stop at Kabira Bay offers one of the island's most beautiful views. ishigaki-japan.com

17 Samurai & Ninja Museum Kyoto
The samurai were the brave warriors of Japan for hundreds of years, and this museum will teach kids all about their history with its ancient artefacts and authentic swords. Ninja exhibitions tell the tale of farmers who became guerrilla fighters, and kids can try on armour and witness martial art displays during free tours. mai-ko.com/samurai

18 Okinawa World Okinawa
The islands of Okinawa offer a unique culture that differs from that of the mainland. Kids will love a day at this attraction dedicated to the times of the Ryukyu Kingdom, where they can learn about its traditions and explore Gyokusendo, a limestone cave grown on a coral reef. Don't miss the Eisa dance, a traditional folk dance performed to honour the spirits of ancestors. gyokusendo.co.jp



05

20 Professional baseball Country-wide
This is Japan's favourite sport (yes – even more than sumo), with each major city having its own team. Even non-sport lovers are bound to get swept up in the incredible display of enthusiasm from Japanese fans, and it makes for a great day out with the kids discovering some of Japan's more modern cultural traditions. npb.jp/eng

21 CUPNOODLES Museum Yokohama
A true showcase of Japanese zaniness, this museum is dedicated to the history of instant noodles. Kids will love classes where they can design their own flavour, plus there's a large indoor playground to let off some steam. The museum is a short walk from Sakuragicho train station. cupnoodles-museum.jp/en

22 Sapporo Snow Festival Sapporo
Held each February, this festival is worth planning your itinerary around if you're hitting the Hokkaido snow. The festival attracts more than two million visitors from Japan and around the world for its enormous snow statues, ice sculptures and an array of kid-friendly games and activities including a huge snow slide. www.snowfes.com

23 The snow monkeys of Jigokudani Nagano
You've probably heard of Japan's wild snow monkeys, who famously hang out in the *onsen* hot springs. At Jigokudani Yaen-koen (altitude 850 metres), families can observe this up close in winter months; intended to remain undeveloped, there are no fences. en.jigokudani-yaenkoen.co.jp

06





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05 Snow monkeys hang out in onsen hot springs 06 Fushimi Inari-taisha is famous for its thousands of torii gates
07 Flowers at the base of Mount Fuji make for an idyllic backdrop to a family portrait © @likemilijan



24 **Miraikan** Tokyo

The National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation (commonly known as Miraikan) is the futuristic, tech-flooded Japan you came to see. Located in Odaiba, the museum will show kids the not-so-distant world of ultra modern technologies, including meeting ASIMO, the humanoid robot, and participating in a number of other cool activities and workshops. The Curiosity Field activities are free. www.miraikan.jst.go.jp/en



26 **Sunshine Aquarium** Tokyo

This aquarium can be found on the top floor of Sunshine City mall in Ikebukuro and makes for an educational and entertaining activity for kids. There are around 80 tanks, which house 750 species of aquatic life including sea lions, penguins, jellyfish and the legendary, enormous sunfish. Kids will also love the chance to see the otters, iguanas and anteaters. www.sunshinecity.co.jp/aquarium



28 **Meiji Shrine** Tokyo

This shrine is dedicated to the deified spirit of Emperor Meiji, the first emperor of modern Japan, and his consort Empress Shoken. With pleasant walking paths in a large tranquil forest, the shrine makes for a peaceful reprieve from the surrounding chaos of colourful Harajuku. Kids can take part in Shinto activities, such as making an offering and writing wishes on an *ema*, a wooden plate left at the shrine. meijijingu.or.jp



25 **Hiking to the summit of Mount Takao** Tokyo

This is Japan's most popular hiking spot, and for good reason. Trail number one is perfect for beginners and young ones with often-paved paths that pass major sites, plus families are rewarded at the summit with an array of food stalls, souvenir shops and a stunning temple for a touch of culture. It's easily accessed from the city, too, with a train station at the foot of the mountain.



27 **Sensō-ji** Tokyo

This is Tokyo's oldest Buddhist temple, and perhaps its most famous. Dedicated to Kannon, the goddess of mercy, the incredible five-storey pagoda can be reached through an exciting shopping street called Nakamise, whose own history reaches back for hundreds of years. Here, kids will love the vibrant range of Japanese souvenirs including *yukata*, a casual kimono, and beautiful folding fans. senso-ji.jp



29 **Shinkansen** Country-wide

These high-speed bullet trains are an experience in themselves for kids, reaching lightning speeds of up to 320 kilometres per hour. Plus, it can be a very cost-effective way of travelling Japan with a JR Pass. The main Shinkansen lines include Tokaido, Sanyo, Tohoku, Joetsu and Kyushu; Tokaido, between Tokyo and Osaka, is the oldest and most popular, stopping at Nagoya and Kyoto on the way. japanrailpass.net/en ▲

Theme on

In search of thrills, chills and samurai skills, **ALENEY DE WINTER** delves into some of Japan's most epic and outrageous theme parks.

A country of dizzying extremes where the traditional and the outrageous collide with magical force, Japan loves leaving visitors dazed and delighted, and nowhere is that more evident than in the country's collection of wonderful and weird theme parks. On a scale from cute to crazy, here are some of the best.



“We sipped on Butterbeer under the towering spires of Hogwarts and stocked up on wands.”

The happiest place in Tokyo

Mickey, Minnie and their pals may speak Japanese, but happiness won't get lost in translation at **Tokyo Disneyland**. With seven exquisitely themed areas, our kids lost themselves in the fun of Disney® classics Splash Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean and It's A Small World. But Tokyo Disneyland isn't just about rides; it's a completely immersive experience, and they were just as excited by the dazzling shows and rubbing shoulders with beloved Disney characters.

The Happiness Is Here parade's lavish floats ferrying Mickey and beloved princesses Rapunzel, Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty were a huge hit with my little ones. And the show-stopping ending (we won't ruin the surprise) had our jaws on the floor. After dark the Dreamlights Electrical Parade had a similar effect as the kids' favourite Disney superstars came together for an all-singing, all-dancing extravaganza of more than a million sparkling lights and fireworks, a perfect finale to a Disney day.

But wait, there's more! Because right next door is **Tokyo DisneySea**, a theme park inspired by the myths and legends of the sea packed with fun attractions, rides and shows.

Celebrating its 15th year, Tokyo DisneySea is unlike any other Disney experience in the world. The park boasts seven themed ports: Mediterranean Harbor, Mermaid Lagoon, Arabian

Coast, Port Discovery, American Waterfront, Lost River Delta and Mysterious Island, complete with erupting volcano.

While Toy Story Mania and the whimsical Mermaid Lagoon will appeal to little ones, many of Tokyo DisneySea's attractions have been created with older kids in mind. Must-ride attractions for the family daredevils include the classic thrill ride, Tower of Terror, and the park's flagship ride, Journey to the Center of the Earth.

Once you've reached your maximum thrill capacity, there's great food and even better entertainment in store. And, like its sister park, visitors will be dazzled by DisneySea's incredible shows including Fantasmic!, with giant water screens, laser lights and reflections bringing Disney's most beloved stars to life.

01

Lights, camera, action!

Osaka's **Universal Studios Japan** brings popular movies like *Jurassic Park*, *Spider-Man*, *The Mummy* and *Despicable Me* to life with rides ranging from kid-friendly carousels to heart-stopping thrill-rides, plus amazing live shows, colourful parades and cuddly characters from Hello Kitty and Snoopy to the cast of *Sesame Street* that had my kids enthralled. The mischievous Minions, along with super-villain Gru and his girls, have also taken up residence and their yellow-hued world is outrageous fun. But the park's biggest drawcard is *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*, where we sipped on Butterbeer under the towering spires of Hogwarts, rode the kid-friendly Flight of the Hippogriff, scared ourselves silly on the heart-stopping Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey and stocked up on wands at Ollivanders to make a little magic of our own.

Universal Studios doesn't have the monopoly on movie-themed mayhem. Kyoto's **Toei Studio Park** is a working movie set, used to shoot more than 200 films a year, that's also home to a ninja- and samurai-packed theme park. It's a little kitschy, but with live-action stunt performances, dramatic swordfights and samurai skirmishes lurking around every corner, it proved an enormous hit with my wee warriors. Bonus! We even got to see a real action movie being filmed.



01 All smiles at the happiest place in Tokyo 02 One of Fuji-Q Highland's pant-wetting rides © ICQ34791919/Shutterstock.com 03 Raff's samurai skills at Toei Kyoto Studio Park 04 The mischievous Minions © Usa-Pyon/Shutterstock.com. Images 01 & 03 © Aleney de Winter.

Fear factories

Located at the foot of Mount Fuji, **Fuji-Q Highland** is a mecca of mayhem for hardcore adrenaline-junkies, famed for its record-breaking rollercoasters and insane, anime-themed attractions. Blow your hair back on wild rides including the Dodonpa, the world's fastest accelerating rollercoaster, and the stomach-churning Eejanaika, which rocks the most inversions of any coaster anywhere. Just remember to pack a change of undies.

Though it is best known for its pant-wetting thrill rides, Fuji-Q caters to little ones (and their scaredy-cat parents), too, with mini coasters and a variety of gentle rides.

Nagashima Spa Land, in Mie Prefecture, is another hotspot for thrill seekers, with 10 scream-inducing rollercoasters, including the Steel Dragon 2000, a mega-coaster that shoots riders around the entire length of the park. The thrills continue at its neighbouring water park. While adrenaline junkies will enjoy flinging themselves down the insanely steep and tunnelled Boomerang Twist, you'll find me at the lazy river.

Only in Japan

Tokyo's **Sanrio Puroland** is the cat's whiskers of Japanese theme parks, paying perfectly pink homage to the reigning queen of *kawaii*, Hello Kitty. There are rides, musicals and all manners of themed fun, along with meet-and-greets with the whiskered one herself.

There are no rides as such at Nikko's **Edo Wonderland**, a theme park recreation of life in Japan's Edo Period (1603–1868), but my kids were happy to don the finest Edo robes to brave the Haunted Temple, the House of Illusion and escape the Ninja Trick Maze. The live shows at the Grand Ninja Theatre were epic, as are the comic performances, live-action battles and martial arts shows.

Huis Ten Bosch in Nagasaki is quite possibly Japan's most bizarre theme park. Not that there's anything wrong with that! Celebrating all things Dutch, it's a land of replica canals, tulip fields and windmills that is absurdly populated by robots, manga characters and dinosaurs. Not to mention its wild white-knuckle virtual-reality rides, an adventure park complete with zipline and five-storey maze and the host of incredible shows and performances. ▲

Japan Theme Park Report Card



Info jnto.org.au

Do tokyodisneyresort.jp usj.co.jp
toei-eigamura.com fujiq.jp
nagashima-onsen.co.jp puroland.jp
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Explore The Hakuba Valley With Evergreen



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