A travel guide to Japan
The ancient traditions woven through almost every aspect of Japanese life are joyfully observed and generously shared.

AGE-OLD traditions passed down through centuries still play out in almost every aspect of modern-day-to-day life in Japan. Woven through the very fabric of Japanese society, the passionate observation of ancient practices, rituals and customs is what makes even the most cursory of visits so constantly compelling.

Many of the traditions that are so instantly identified with Japan — performing arts such as kabuki and bunraku (Japanese puppetry), pottery and ceramics, calligraphy (shodo), and the aesthetic arts of tea ceremony (chado), flower arranging (kado) and incense appreciation (kodo), idealised as the three classical arts of Japanese refinement — are known as geido or ‘the way of art’ and are the embodiment of discipline and grace.

Religion, both Buddhism and Shinto, also offers a rich tapestry of traditions and practices, with the simple act of visiting a temple or shrine invested with cultural significance and steeped in history. From the lighting of incense (scoobe) to the offering of wishes on ema, small wooden plaques hung in a shrine or temple’s grounds.

**Time-honoured grace**

The ancient traditions woven through almost every aspect of Japanese life are joyfully observed and generously shared.

**A privileged performance**

The delicate refinement of geido culture is still practiced in three traditional teahouse districts of KANAZAWA in Ishikawa Prefecture. Here performers granted the title of geisha entertain select guests in song and dance that is heavy with symbolism and emotion. The privilege of seeing geisha perform is jealously guarded, with an invitation required to enter these teahouses; reserving a place at an exclusive KANAZAWA GEISHA PERFORMANCE is a rare opportunity to witness the graceful artistry of these performers in storied surroundings.

**The Power of Scent**

As precise and intricate as the tea ceremony, incense appreciation is a fascinating art to witness. An incense workshop at YAMADA-MATSU’s Kyo to store teaches the intricacies of the culture, including fragrance listening and incense making.

**BOOK OF MEMORIES**

Once received as the proof of pilgrimage and worship, goshuin (red seal stamps) are treasured graven images of Japanese temples and shrines. The experience of collecting these allows for the creation of an exquisite memento of a journey: goshuincho (available for purchase at temples and shrines, as well as stationery shops) are stamped with a striking vermilion seal with an inscription of the date and name of the shrine or temple written in calligraphy.

**Religion**

There are two types of tea ceremony: the highly stylised formal ceremony known as chadō, which traditionally takes hours and involves a full kaiseki meal prior to both thick tea (koicha, created using the highest grade tea and with less water to produce a syrup-like consistency) and thin tea (usucha, made by using more water and less powder, and with a characteristic frothy head) being served, and a less formal gathering known as shabai, with thin tea and small confections (wagashi). The preparation and serving of matcha at these ceremonies is known as osmaya, while a sencha ceremony uses tea leaves instead of powder.

The tea ceremony most take part in will be abbreviated and usually include thin tea, but it will still involve traditional tools and precise movements. The host, using a ladle (chashaku), will scoop the matcha from its container (natsume), whisking it with a sbwote or hot water is added. The tea bowl (chawan) will then be placed on the tatami in front of the guest, at which point it should be picked up with the right hand and placed in the palm of the left hand before rotating it so as not to drink from the front of the bowl. The guest should then sip it slowly (ideally finishing it all in about three sips), place it back on the tatami and bow and express gratitude.

The ceremony is completed once the guest places the chawan on the tatami with the front facing the host, and the utensils used have been cleaned and placed in their original position.
Stay in style

From a floating inn to living like a monk to the ultimate in designer luxury, unique places to lay your head abound in Japan.

**RYOKANS**

These traditional inns allow for a sensory immersion in Japanese traditions, from onsen (hot springs) bathing to multi-course kaiseki dining. Scattered throughout the country, some properties have been run by the same family for generations. For a truly historic stay try KOTOHIRA KADAN in Kagawa Prefecture, RYOKAN KURASHIKI in Okayama Prefecture or RYOKAN TANABE in the mountain city of Takayama, Gifu Prefecture. The starkly modern minimalist rooms, which look out to stunning views of guntû (right), departing from Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, take on the ryokan tradition. And for something totally unique, ARTFUL ACCOMMODATION (right) on the island of Naoshima blurs the line between being a museum and a hotel. Part of the compelling BENSESSE ART SITE NAOSHIMA, including Yayoi Kusama’s Pumpkin installation, the stylishly minimalist rooms, which look out to stunning views of the Seto Inland Sea, allow guests to interact with the artworks that are hung throughout.

**DESIGNER LUXURY**

Indulge in the work of celebrated architects Kengo Kuma and Tadao Ando at a trio of impeccable design-led hotels: ACE HOTEL KYOTO and ONE@TOKYO are both studies in Kuma’s tactile, arresting aesthetic, while Tadao’s signature Zen minimalist approach is given free rein in KADAN in Kagawa Prefecture, on the island of Shikoku. At SETOUCHI RETREAT AONAGI (left) in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture, there is an emphasis on being a museum as well as a hotel, and the guest can interact with the exhibits throughout. AT AION RETREAT HOUSE, a glamorous floating ryokan that cruises the Seto Island Sea, the stylishly minimalist rooms look out to the Sanuki Ura Inland Sea.

**TEMPLE LODGINGS**

Accommodation experiences don’t come more singular than staying in a Buddhist temple. Temple lodgings (shukubo) offer an evocative experience, with evenings spent dining on delicious vegetarian meals (shojin ryori) before rising at dawn to observe the mesmerising morning-prayer rituals of the resident monks. The temple settlement of KOYASAN in Wakayama Prefecture has a choice of atmospheric temple lodgings, while the EIHEIJI TEMPLE complex in Fukui Prefecture also offers overnight stays. TEMPLE LODGINGS

**HISTORIC FARMHOUSE**

Gifu Prefecture is home to the charming alpine village of SHIRAKAWA-GO (above), a UNESCO World Heritage site, where its historic gauze-style houses provide a chance to live a rural idyll from days gone by. Some of the thatched houses, which are delightfully picturesque in the summer sunshine or covered in a pillow-soft layer of snow in winter, offer home stay and guesthouse accommodation.

**GLAMPING**

No where is the portmanteau of glamour and camping realised with more sophistication than at HOSHINOYA (below) in Yamanashi Prefecture, a glamping of architecturally designed cabins stacked amongst the lush landscape and looking out over Lake Kawaguchi. These temporary cabins allow guests to interact with the artworks that are hung throughout.

**GOURMET EXPERIENCE**

Pumpkin to multi-course kaiseki dining, one encounter with a sumo stable (right) can imbue the object with a unique beauty. Classes are available at EMERGING ARTS (left) in the city of Nara.

**EXPERIENCE**

Indulge in exclusivity with these ‘only in Japan’ experiences.

1. **ENJOY A KABUKI PERFORMANCE**

This form of theatre is as much about the spectacle and colour of the lavish costumes and make-up as the drama of the story being told. You can attend performances at KABUKI THEATRE in Tokyo, as well as in Osaka, Kyoto and Fukuoka, or experience the impressive 155-year-old KONPIRA GRAND THEATRE (right) in Kanamaruza in Kotohira, Kagawa Prefecture.

2. **ATTEND A SUMO TOURNAMENT**

There are six sumo tournaments held each year: in Tokyo in January, May and September, Osaka in March, Nagoya in July and Fukuoka in November. You can also choose to watch an early morning practice session (saigyo), which plays out like a brutal ballet, inside a sumo stable (right), which are mainly located in eastern Tokyo.

3. **EXPLORE GOLD STANDARD ARTS**

Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken ceramics and pottery using lacquer and gold in the belief that the visible seams imbue the object with a unique beauty. Classes are available at SAIDEIGAMA in Tokyo’s Omotesando area. Or in Kanazawa, which produces most of Japan’s light-as-air gold leaf, you can join a gold leaf embellishment class at GOLD LEAF SAKUDA’s flagship store near the historic Higashi Chaya District.

4. **FORGE A SAMURAI KNIFE**

From his workshop in Hishima, Gifu Prefecture, master swordsmith FUSATARO crafts knives and swords the way they have been for centuries. Attend a class to forge your own samurai knife under his expert tutelage.

5. **SEE THE TUNAAUCTIONS**

While Tokyo’s fish wholesale markets have decamped from the famed Tsukiji site to the new TOYOSU MARKET, you can still apply to attend the legendary early morning auctions. Auctions are also held at KATSUURA FISH MARKET in Wakayama Prefecture and SHIOGAMA FISH MARKET in Miyagi Prefecture.

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The Luxurious of Experience

Japan has one of the most beautiful and diverse cultures in the world, with a wealth of mesmerising experiences to explore and indulge in. NE of the great joys of travelling in Japan is experiencing the unique and exquisite way in which the Japanese approach almost every element of daily life: from their appreciation of craftsmanship, to their interaction with nature, to their time-honoured observation of the processes and rituals of traditions. Even the simplest of tasks becomes an experience in its own right. Such indulgence of time, effort, thought and passion is the very definition of luxury, and it is something that visitors to the country can easily experience for themselves – whether spending time in its buzzing cities, charming towns, idyllic islands or pristine landscapes. There are 10 distinct regions stretching from Hokkaido to the north to the islands of Okinawa in the south, with each presenting its own unique take on everything from cuisine to festivals to culture.

HOKKAIDO

Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido is an unspoilt landscape of beauty and drama where the seasons play out almost theatrically. During the icy winter months the countryside is blanketed in nearly-white snow, luring skiers to NISEKO, where days are spent traversing mountain runs before resting in luxurious resorts such as ASPECT and CHATHRIUM NISEKO. Spring arrives in a riot of colour, with flowers planted to stunning effect to create fields of rainbows at SHIKISAI NO OKA in the town of Biei or swathes of colour at HIGASHIMOIKORO SHIRAZAKURA PARK, where the ground is drenched in the delicate pink blooms of moss phlox. Autumn, meanwhile, is the perfect time to explore the awe-inspiring volcanic surrounds of NOROBIBETSU JIGOKUDANI; stroll along walking trails that pass by ethereal sulphurous ponds and wonder at the rich autumnal colours before soaking away the day in NOROBIBETSU ONSEN’S hot spring waters at TAKINOYA RYOKAN.

Luxury of Experience
• Hike through the otherworldly landscapes of the island’s national parks, taking in LAKE AKAN, MT ASAMIDAKE, where planes of steam waft from the ground, and LAKE SHIKOTSU. Indulge in a stay at SHIKOTSUKO DAICHI HOTEL SUZANSET to soak in the hot springs.
• JR East’s TRAIN SUITE SHIKI-SHIMA is a truly luxurious proposition; fashioned as a ‘cruise train’, it boasts graceful staff, elegant interiors, fine dining and ample opportunity to view the passing landscape.

TOHOKU

OCCUPYING the northern tip of Honshu, the Tohoku region’s six prefectures – Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata – encompass soaring mountains, tranquil lakes and breathtaking coastlines. The region is steeped in history, with the charming towns of KAKUNODATE in Akita Prefecture and AIZU-WAKAMATSU in Fukushima Prefecture evocative of a time when they were samurai strongholds, and OUCHI-JUKU, the former post town along the SHIMOTSUKE KAIJO route, hinting at life in the storied Edo Period. The temple of YAMADERA in Yamagata Prefecture is another touchstone of the area’s past glories: founded in 860, its picturesque grounds stretch up a steep mountainside, painted in rich shades of red and orange in autumn, to the GODANO HALL at the top of the mountain, which affords breathtaking views of the surrounding countryside.

Luxury of Experience
• Two of the country’s most spectacular summer festivals can be witnessed in Tohoku: the NEBUTA FESTIVAL in Aomori City boasts enormous intricately constructed lantern floats, while the AKITA KANTO FESTIVAL’s nightly parade of paper lanterns balanced high on bamboo poles and illuminated with real flames is mesmerising.
• Standing among the primval virgin beech forests of SHIRAKAMI SANCHI in Aomori and Akita Prefectures is to know what it’s truly like to be enveloped by nature; the origins of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed forest, which is resplendent with lakes, waterfalls and even roaming black bears, date back 8000 years.
• A farm stay in the rural town of ODATE in Akita Prefecture is a charmingly authentic experience, helping to pick apples and tend to rice fields during the day (depending on the season) and feasting on home-cooked regional cuisine that you’ve helped to create at night with your generous hosts.

Clockwise from top: The beauty of winter at Mt Yotei, Hokkaido; Dining out in Tokyo; Crystal blue waters off Okinawa; Mt Fuji sitting majestically on the landscape.
Tokai

MADE up of Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Shizuoka and Yamanashi Prefectures, Tokai holds the distinction of being home to Japan’s most iconic landmarks, Mount Fuji. The passage of time is well felt across this region, presenting a wonderful contrast of experiences. In NAGOYA, Aichi Prefecture you can visit its ravishing historic castle in the morning and take in the futuristic NAGOYA CITY SCIENCE MUSEUM in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the rural idylls of TAKAYAMA and SHIRAKAWAGO in Gifu Prefecture remain charmingly true to their ancient roots.

The Luxury of Experience

• Aichi Prefecture is famous for its red hatcho miso, which has been produced in the city of OKAZAKI for centuries. Tour the MARUYA HATCHO MIso FACTORY to see the thick umami-packed paste being made. • Stay at a temple inn near MINOBUSAN KUJONJI TEMPLE on Mt Minobu, Yamanashi Prefecture, to observe the practices of the monks in the Nichiren sect of Buddhism.

Kansai

KANSAI’s prefectures – Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, Shiga and Wakayama – are resplendent with the fascinating history of this celebrated region, with NARA (710–784) and KYOTO (794 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868) each serving as the country’s capital. While Kyoto swells away over visits with its elegance and history, further exploration here offers rich rewards. There is a roster of exquisite historic castle towns to be discovered throughout the region, including HIKONE, NAGAHAMA and the delightful HIMEJI, with its UNESCO World Heritage-listed castle. Visitors can sample gourmet delights in the likes of HYOGO, the home of the mouth-watering delicacy that is Kobe beef, and OSAKA, renowned for its delicious street food. And the peaceful repose of nature can easily be found in SHIGA and WAKAYAMA.

The Luxury of Experience

• Kyoto’s GION MATSUMI, honouring the lovely YASAKA SHRINE, is one of the most famous of Japan’s festivals, taking place throughout July. • Enjoy OSAKA’s fine dining scene at the likes of AJIKITCHO, with its attentive service and masterful regional cuisine (Kamigata ryori), and FUJYA 1935, for its artistic use of Japanese ingredients and European techniques. • NARA’s intricate history and majestic UNESCO World Heritage-listed sites such as TODAIJI TEMPLE and KOFUKUJI TEMPLE are best explored on a private tour of the city.

Chugoku

THE prefectures of Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori and Yamaguchi within the region of Chugoku are truly distinct in their character and allure. While HIROSHIMA’s affecting ATOMIC BOMB DOMES and the haunting SUEBI MARU are anchored in water at ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE on MIYAJIMA are the region’s most recognisable landmarks, there are equally arresting sights to wonder at. The most curious of these is undoubtedly the TOTTORI SAND DUNES (Tottori Sakyu), the largest in Japan, which offer a uniquely unexpected experience. Meanwhile, MOTOSONSUMI SHRINE in Yamaguchi Prefecture, with its 123 bright red torii gates that wind their way through rugged coastal scenery, provides stunning views out to the Sea of Japan.

The Luxury of Experience

• The precision and beauty of Japanese gardens are breathtaking, and OKAYAMA CITY boasts one of the top three in the country at KORAKUEN GARDEN, commissioned in 1687 by the local feudal lord for his recreation and enjoyment. • The ADACHI MUSEUM OF ART in Shimane Prefecture includes six gardens that can only be viewed from inside through framed windows, emulating the artworks on display. • The castle town of HAGI in Yamaguchi Prefecture is famous for its Hagi yaki pottery, which you can try your hand at creating.

Shikoku

THE smallest of Japan’s four main islands, Shikoku nevertheless has some impressive experiences among its four prefectures of Ehime, Kagawa, Kochi and Tokushima. One of the most compelling of these comes from the legendary modern master Yayoi Kusama, whose giant yellow and red pumpkins decorated with her signature polka dots sit at the water’s edge on NAOSHIMA ISLAND, Kagawa Prefecture. These sit in brilliant contrast to Shikoku’s historic treasures including a number of imposing castles like the stunningly situated hilltop castle of GOKO in Ehime Prefecture, which offers accommodation within its historic timber keep.

The Luxury of Experience

• SHODOSHIMA, an island in the scenic Seto Inland Sea and part of Kagawa Prefecture, has the feel of a Mediterranean escape, with a temperate climate, idyllic beaches, a mountainous interior and the curiosity of charming olive plantations dotting the landscape. • YAMA VALLEY, Tokushima Prefecture, possesses a remote beauty of undulating mountains and deep gorges best indulged in with an overnight stay. Consider HOTEL YAKYENSEN, a modern ryokan with plush rooms, open-air baths and breathtaking views.

Hokuriku Shinetsu

WHILE Kanto is home to the national capital of TOKYO, its other six prefectures of Chiba, Gunma, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, Saitama and Tochigi dangle with their abundance of experiences. The town of NIKKO encapsulates the diversity of the region, sitting as it does at the entrance of NIKKO NATIONAL PARK, with its still lakes, wild monkeys and hot springs, and with its tradition of mountain worship, Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate which ruled Japan from 1603 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868, is also enshrined in the exquisitely resplendent TOSHOGU SHRINE here. It also possesses a collection of blissfully untouched islands that are officially part of Tokyo: the volcanic Izu and OSAKANAGA islands (a direct ferry journey from Tokyo) are a unique short break from the heart of the city to hike to the caldera of Hakone (hot springs) experiences, with its abundance of experiences. The town of SHIRAKAWAGO in Gifu Prefecture remain charmingly true to their ancient roots.

The Luxury of Experience

• Saitama Prefecture’s CHICHIBU NIGHT FESTIVAL (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage), held in early December, is one of the country’s most effusive celebrations, with soaring lantern floats, bustling food stalls and spellbinding fireworks displays. • Both Saitama and Gunma Prefectures offer an abundance of onsen (hot springs) experiences, with a collection of picturesque onsen towns dotted throughout the mountainous landscape.

The Luxury of Experience

• Ishikawa Prefecture is steeped in history within the Hokuriku Shinetsu region. Winter sets spectacularly atop the alpine landscape here, with Nagano and Niigata Prefectures offering renowned ski fields such as HAKUBA and ECHIGO-YUZAWA. It is also home to Japan’s celebrated snow monkeys which are visible through the wispy clouds of the hot springs at JIGOKUDANI MONKEY PARK. The region’s alpine peaks steep into rugged coastal scenery. The terraced rice paddies and quiet fishing villages of the NOTO PENINSULA in Ishikawa Prefecture have a glorious hygge atmosphere, while Toyama and Fukui Prefectures are considered by many to be two of Japan’s true hidden gems.

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Kyushu

The island of Kyushu is blessed with natural wonders scattered across its seven prefectures of Fukuoka, Kagoshima, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, Nagasaki, Okayama and Kagawa. The island has been stunningly carved by volcanic activity over millennia, creating fascinating sights such as Mt. Yufu, Jigokudani, and the hot springs of Beppu. Kumamoto Prefecture is renowned for its hot springs, and the wild beauty of Kagoshima Prefecture’s Sakurajima. As for Taketomi Island, its 1000-year-old yakusugi trees and plays host to the estate of the Shimazu clan of samurai who ruled here during the Edo Period. Touring the traditional house and manicured gardens hints at the opulence of life for Japan’s ruling class in times gone by.

Clockwise from top left: Officials of Beppu’s Seven Hills of Beppu (left); A Ryukyudancer in Okinawa; The tropical beauty of Taketomi Island.

The Luxury of Experience

The Seven Stars in Kyushu: sleep in a traditional house, take a catamaran to the island of Yaku, hike in Miyazaki Prefecture, consider the visual pleasure of Taketomi Island.

OKINAWA

Okinawa’s southernmost islands have a unique culture that is a privilege to behold. Made up of a collection of islands scattered like confetti across startling blue waters that once formed part of the ancient Ryukyu Kingdom, the idyllic sub-tropical and tropical islands are closer in proximity to China than Tokyo, and possess a personality that is informed by their singular history, culture and climate. Visit the architecturally impressive Okinawa Prefectural Museum to gain an insight into the islands’ complex past, before striking out to explore them in detail (there are plentiful flights and ferries).

The Luxury of Experience

Okinawa’s cuisine is thought to have health-giving properties, with Okinawans famously living long lives. Champuru, a signature dish of the region, a mix of stir-fried vegetables (often including gya bitter melon), tofu and meat, or seafood – try it at EMUNO MISE along with its ‘longevity meal’ (Champuru). Consisting of seasonal dishes showcasing the variety of local produce.

Okinawa’s distinctive pottery (yachimun), made from indigenous clay, is still crafted using traditional techniques developed in the Tsuboya area of Naha on the main island. Visit the charming Tsuboya Yachimun Street to create your own yachimun or browse the boutiques for exquisite pieces made by local artisans.

The warm, clear tropical waters surrounding Miyazaki and the nearby YAKUSHIMA ISLANDS are an underwater wonderland of coral and marine life. A diving expedition here allows for close encounters with everything from whimsical blue-green damselfishes to sea turtles to majestic manta rays. The extravagance of shopping here is informed as much by the process as the purchase. From small Japanese sweets shops owned and operated by the same family for generations (the likes of KIRENIYA SHINGETSUAN in Matsuzaka, Miyagi Prefecture), which opened for business in 1527, to the source of a luxury department store – ISETAN MITSUKOSHI, TAKASHIMAYA, DAIMARU et al – with their immaculately uniformed lift operators to stores specialising in the mastery and execution of a single item, from fans to incense, the simple act of buying something in Japan is layered with experience, skill, attention to detail and tradition.

While Tokyo is recognised as one of the premier shopping cities in the world, you can still have them handmade to order, and engraved with your name, by skilled craftsmen. SAKAI in Osaka Prefecture in renowned for the quality of the knives produced there, while SEKI CITY in Gifu Prefecture stages an annual CUTLERY FAIR in October, offering the chance to meet the knife makers themselves.

Kimono and silk

More than a mere form of clothing, the kimono is gloriously emblematic of the beauty and cultural significance, being worn during traditional wedding ceremonies and on special occasions and festival days. Different styles even indicate marital status and seasonal change. Visit Kanazawa’s KAGUYA YUMON KIMONO CENTER to appreciate its traditional technique of dying, known as yuzen, and take part in a hand-dyeing class.

The Luxury of Indulgence

In Japan, one of the most sophisticated countries in the world when it comes to shopping, extravagance isn’t always about price.

Shopping is one of the most tangible forms of indulgence when travelling, as accessible as walking into the flagship international design house or browsing one-of-a-kind boutiques for unique finds. But in Japan, shopping is about more than designer labels and price tags.

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The luxury of going to the source and seeing how something is actually crafted is increasingly rare these days, but such exploration is still richly rewarded in Japan.

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The pursuit of excellence

Japanese cuisine is a delicious blend of tradition, skill, seasonality and taste.

There is possibly nowhere else on Earth where tradition and ritual play such an important role in the preparation, presentation and consumption of food as Japan. It is there in the time lavished on achieving an impeccable cut on a plate of sashimi or in the way a multi-course kaiseki meal is presented at the table to be appreciated for its beauty as well as its taste. Equally it is hard to think of anywhere else that boasts so much regional diversity in its cuisine. Specialities of regions, cities and sometimes even towns reflect so much regional diversity in its cuisine. Specialities of regions, cities and sometimes even towns reflect

All of these elements, along with a focus on the dining experience, from impeccable customer service to elegant refined presentation (including time spent choosing tableware that combines different colours and textures to complement the food and even reflect the seasons), have resulted in Japan consistently being one of the most awarded countries when it comes to Michelin stars. According to award-winning chef Tetsuya Wakuda, “Knowing the [perfect] time to pick something is in the culture, and the quality and care taken on each product comes out in the taste.”

The final ingredient that elevates Japanese cuisine to another level is the pursuit of excellence. According to award-winning chef Tetsuya Wakuda, “In Japan you can feel the season on your skin, but you can also taste it in your mouth,” he says. “Knowing the [perfect] time to pick something is in the culture, and the quality and care taken on each product comes out in the taste.”

Influenced by the works of René Magritte, chef Keiichi Hashimoto creates an exquisitely artful menu at LE SORCIER, located in Yamaguchi Prefecture, combining distinctly Japanese produce with French culinary techniques. With just one group seated per meal and an enviable reputation, the restaurant is often booked out months in advance.

FOR WINE LOVERS
The picturesque KOSHU VALLEY in Yamanashi Prefecture boasts some 70 wineries dotted across the landscape. The signature white wine made here is produced from the native Koba grape; there is ample opportunity to sample it at the cellar doors located throughout the region. Take a private taxi tour to be ferried between different wineries, speak with winemakers to gain insight into the process of winemaking in the region and visit the wine museum, before enjoying a seasonal farm-to-plate lunch at a winery restaurant.

DINE UNDER THE STARS
Located in Nagano Prefecture, NORKURA STAR AND MOON RESTAURANT offers the chance to dine on a menu created by Chisako Hori, one of Tokyo’s premier chefs, in the stunning surroundings of the Japanese Alps and under the canopy of the night sky. The best regional and seasonal ingredients are prepared table-side at a glamping-style site and complemented by Japanese wines and local Shiga-Kogen craft beers.

SHADES OF BRILLIANCE
Located within the lush surrounds of MINO PARK in northern Osaka, around 30 minutes by car from the northern hub of Umeda, ICHIJUNISAI UENO MINO (right) presents diners with traditional multi-course kaiseki meals possessed of an elegance that has earned it two Michelin stars. Consider dining in autumn when the surrounding leaves are painted in a glorious palette of reds, oranges and yellows. During this time you can also try monjy tempura, sweet battered and fried maple leaves.

DINE

The Luxury of Experience
The Luxury of Experience

A year of wonders

Japan’s rituals and customs play out across the country in a roster of spectacular seasonal festivals and events that are exquisite in their visual design and execution.

Winter

FEBRUARY

NAMAHAGE SEDOG FESTIVAL
Oga Peninsula, Akita Prefecture

This eccentric festival involves masked ogres (namahages) calling into homes to scare children into behaving in the year ahead.

15-16 FEBRUARY

YOKOTE SNOW FESTIVAL
Yokote, Akita Prefecture

To honour the Japanese water deities, traditional igloos (damatane) are constructed and charmingly lit with candles at night.

HANAMI

Held nationally

When cherry trees (sakura) bloom, the Japanese enjoy hanami, cherry blossom viewing parties. Blooms appear on Okinawa in January, in the main cities in Honshu in late March-early April, and in Tohoku and Hokkaido in late April-early May.

Spring

3 MARCH

HINA MATSURI

Held nationally

Girls’ Day celebrates the health and happiness of girls, with displays of elaborately dressed ceramic dolls and the giving of pretty sweets.

14-15 APRIL & 9-10 OCTOBER

TAKAYAMA FESTIVAL

Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture

Irritably decorated floats (hatae) are paraded through the streets of the city’s old town to celebrate spring or a good harvest in autumn.

Summer

FIRST SUNDAY IN JUNE

MIBU NO HANA TAUE

Hiroshima Prefecture

A highlight of this festival is the dances performed daily. For those unable to attend during the festival days, the nights season, which culminates in a parade of 10,000 dancers, can be seen in Hokkaido’s KUSHIRO MARSH. Here, some 650 breeding pairs live according to the season, with their mesmerising mating dance taking place against a snow-covered backdrop from December to late February.

KUMANO KODO

The Three Mountains of Dewa - Mount Hagiwara, Mount Gassan and Mount Yudono – is a UNESCO World Heritage-listed pilgrimage trail through the unspoilt Kii Peninsula in the prefectures of Wakayama, Mie, Nara and Osaka. The joy of the experience is in its removal from the whirl of modern life, walking its trails through lush forests, past ancient temples and staying in traditional inns.

Autumn

DAYS

JUNE TO AUGUST

EISA CELEBRATIONS

Naha, Okinawa Prefecture

Okinawa’s unique identity can be seen in the celebration of its traditional performing arts, with weekly events taking place during the Eisa Nights season, which culminates in a parade of 10,000 dancers.

12-15 AUGUST

AWA ODORI FESTIVAL

Tahokushi City, Tahokushi Prefecture

One of the largest dance festivals in Japan is replete with joy and colour. For those unable to attend during the festival days, the AWA ODORI FESTIVAL HALL explores the 400-year history of the dance and guests can experience live, Awa Odori dances performed daily.

2-7 AUGUST

AOMORI NEBUTA FESTIVAL

Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture

This eccentric festival involves Namahage (tancho) for some 1500 years. Here, visitors can immerse themselves in the spirituality (yamabushido) for some 1500 years. Here, visitors can immerse themselves in the spirituality (yamabushido) and colourfully dressed girls plant rice seedlings to music and songs to ensure a bountiful harvest.

KANSAI AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Kawamura City, Takamaki Prefecture

This lovely parade features groups of musicians being carried around on carved wooden floats (hatae) and engaging in musical duels.

SECOND SATURDAY OF NOVEMBER

TAIMATSU AKASHI FESTIVAL

Naha, Okinawa Prefecture

This fire festival sets 3000 lit torches paraded through town to the summit of Mt Gore and lit at sunset.

2-4 NOVEMBER

KARATSU KUNCHI FESTIVAL

Karatsu, Saga Prefecture

In celebration of a bountiful harvest, 14 gigantic floats (hikigama) are paraded through the town. For those visiting outside of the festival, the floats are on display at the HIKYAMA EXHIBITION HALL, near Karatsu Shrine, throughout the year.

A Laura Lee star

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THE LUXURY OF EXPERIENCE

Crane watching

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The NIBUTA MUSEUM WA-RASSE

Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture

Here, visitors can immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the festival and houses lanterns used in past parades.

The HEBREW BIBLE

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