

# Discover Japan



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**About this guide:** Little Passports has developed this guide to provide ideas, activities and resources for teachers using the World Edition subscription in the classroom.

**Lesson:** Discover Japan

**Suggested Use:** geography, social studies

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# DISCOVER JAPAN



**Japan Profile:** Japan is an island nation that consists of over 6,500 islands. There are four main ones: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. About three-fourths of Japan's total land mass is covered by mountains. Among these mountains are over 200 volcanoes, 60 of which are active. Japan also has a long cultural history: the first people to settle on its islands arrived over 30,000 years ago, when the islands were connected to Siberia and Korea by land bridges.

## What's included in the Little Passports Japan Package?

- Letter from Sam and Sofia
- 4-page activity sheet
- Souvenirs: a sushi-shaped eraser and origami kit
- Photo postcard from Sam and Sofia
- Stickers to place on the suitcase, passport and map
- Luggage tag, with code to enter the online Boarding Zone

## Teacher's Guide Bonus:

- Activity Sheet:  
"Food from the Islands of Japan"

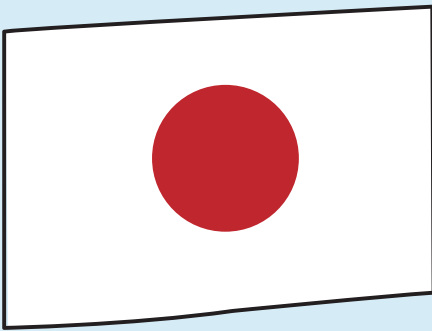


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Pop Quiz Answer Key: 1-b, 2-c, 3-c, 4-a, 5-b

## Facts

- Capital City: Tokyo
- Official Language: Japanese



Japan



## Fun Fact

- Mt. Fuji is the tallest mountain in Japan and is approximately 12,388 feet high.

Despite its vast number of islands, Japan's 4 main islands contain the majority of the country's population. Honshu is Japan's largest island and is home to the capital city, Tokyo. The Japan Alps, a range with mountains reaching over 10,000 feet high, runs down the center of Honshu.

Japan's northernmost main island, Hokkaido, is set apart from the rest of Japan by its climate, wildlife, and history. It has very long, cold winters and a variety of wildlife, like brown bears and deer, that migrated into the region from Siberia during the last ice age. The island wasn't actually claimed by Japan until about the 19th century—before then, it was inhabited by the only people willing to brave its cold climate: the Ainu people.

Kyushu and Shikoku are Japan's smaller main islands to the south, and their subtropical climates are very different from the nearly Siberian climate of Hokkaido. Kyushu is mainly mountainous, and it contains the most active volcano in Japan, Mount Aso. Shikoku is the smallest of Japan's main islands and is also very mountainous.

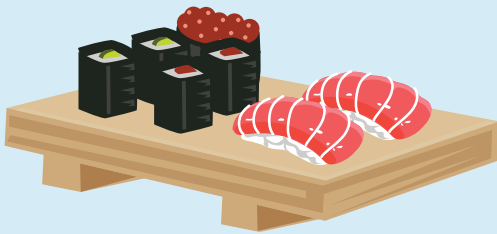
One of Japan's most famous and spectacular geographic features is its tallest peak, Mount Fuji, which is on the island of Honshu. Reaching 12,388 feet high, Mount Fuji is a composite volcano, meaning that it is made up of layers of rock, ash and lava. It is actually a stack of three different volcanoes: on the bottom layer is a volcano called Komitake. Atop that is Ko Fuji ("Old Fuji") and atop that is Shin Fuji ("New Fuji"). Mount Fuji is still active today, but it hasn't erupted since 1707.

Mount Fuji has become an important symbol of Japan, largely thanks to a long history of cultural reverence for the mountain. It is a sacred site for those who practice Japan's traditional Shinto religion, and Japanese artists throughout history have immortalized the mountain. Perhaps the most famous artistic depictions of Mount Fuji were a series of woodblock prints created by Katsushika Hokusai between 1826 and 1833, called *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*.

## Bunraku

*Bunraku* is a traditional Japanese puppet theater. The puppets are large doll-like figures with many different moveable parts to make them appear lifelike. They are held up by three puppeteers, who carry them about the stage and are dressed completely in black with black hoods. One puppeteer, the *ashizukai*, holds the puppet up and operates its legs. The second, the *hidarizukai*, operates the puppet's left arm, left hand, and any props being used. The third puppeteer is the highest ranking of the three: the *omozukai* operates the puppet's right arm, right hand, and facial expressions.

The *omozukai* has to work up to their position by spending ten years each in the other positions. They are typically the only puppeteer that remains hoodless. The narrative, called *Jôruri*, is spoken and chanted by the *tayu*, a narrator off to the side, as a *samisen* (Japanese lute) plays. The art of Bunraku emerged in the 1600s alongside the art of *Kabuki*, which are plays put on by live actors.



## Fun Fact

- Seafood is very popular in Japan. Many dishes, such as sushi, even include raw fish.

## Sumo

Sumo wrestling is an important part of Japanese culture, history and mythology. The creation story of the Japanese nation centers on a sumo match between two gods, Takemikazuchi and Takeminakata, and sumo was practiced in ancient Japan as a Shinto ritual. Around 712 CE, the Japanese imperial court adopted sumo wrestling as an annual ceremonial competition. Beginning in 1192, sumo was used as a training technique for the Japanese military. By about the 1600s, sumo was practiced for sport and entertainment, and it has since been Japan's national sport. A sumo match takes place in a ring called a *dohyo*.

The wrestlers complete several ritual acts before the match begins: the clapping of hands, stomping of feet, and tossing of salt around the ring is a traditional purifying ritual. The match itself is always very short—usually less than a minute long. The only goal of each wrestler is to force the other out of the ring or to make them touch the surface of the ring.

with anything except their feet. There are six national sumo tournaments each year in Japan. The lives of sumo wrestlers, called *Rikishi*, are very strictly centered around their sport: they live in training communities called *heya*.

## Poetry

Japan's poetic tradition is probably best known for its *haiku*. Haiku is a structured form of poetry consisting of three lines: the first line is five syllables long, the second line is seven syllables and the third line is five. Traditionally, the subject of a haiku is also fairly structured: its purpose is to express emotion through writing about nature. Its short length and concentrated subject matter make the choice of words used one of the most important parts about writing a haiku. A 17th-century poet named Matsuo Bashô is perhaps Japan's most famous haiku writer.

## Fun Fact

- A traditional Japanese garment is the kimono, which can be worn by both girls and boys!



## Links:

- Under the Wave off Kanagawa, a.k.a. The Great Wave, one of the images from Katsushika Hokusai's Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji - <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/JP1847/>
- Bunraku - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEUQNvn8EJQ>

# CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. **Teach:** introduce the word “archipelago.” The nation of Japan is an archipelago. Ocean islands are most often formed by volcanic activity on the ocean floor, creating islands and often mountain chains and volcanoes in the middle of the ocean. This is why Japan is so mountainous and has so many volcanoes.
  - a. Have students look at the wall map and point to Japan. Then, have them point out other archipelagos around the world.
2. **Look at the map together:** discuss how humans first arrived in Japan. The last ice age ended around 15,000 years ago. Before then, the Japanese islands were connected by land bridges to Siberia, Korea, and most likely China and Taiwan.
3. **Look at the image from Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (link provided).** This is perhaps the most iconic image from that collection.
  - a. Discuss: what do you notice about Mount Fuji in the image? How does the use of scale in this image affect the way you think about Japan’s tallest mountain? Considering the fact that Mount Fuji is a volcano, how does the chaos of the waves affect how you think about Mount Fuji in this image? What do you notice about colors and color combinations in this image?
4. **Watch the short video about Bunraku.**
  - a. Teach students about the different parts in a bunraku performance (the ashizukai, the hidarizukai, the omozukai, the samisen player and the tayu). Have students point out each position as they watch the video.
  - b. Discuss: how do the lifelike qualities of the puppets affect your experience watching? Do you notice the puppeteers as much, even though they are all present on the stage? How do the chanting and samisen music affect the mood of each scene, even though you cannot understand what they’re saying?
5. **Discuss:** why might the lives of sumo wrestlers be so structured (living in training communities)? What does that say about the status of sumo wrestlers and the importance of the sport in Japan?
6. **Create:** Have students write their own haikus. Encourage them to find an emotion to write about, and to try describing it through nature imagery.
7. **Create:** Use the instruction booklet in the origami paper package you received to teach students how to create their own origami. Go through instructions for one together as a class, and then try writing instructions for another on the board to have the students try independently.

8. **Read Sam and Sofia's letter from Japan to the class.**
  - a. Discuss: have you tried sushi before? Did you like it? Do you think it sounds good?
9. **Activities: Pass around copies of the activities from pages 1 and 4 of the Japan activity book.**
10. **Make a chart on the board or to hang up in class with the topics "Geography" and "Culture." Ask students what they learned about Japan, and which category it would fit in. Write what they learned on the chart. Alternatively, read out facts that were taught and ask students whether they fall under "geography" or "culture."**
11. **Class Passports: Have students design a stamp image for Japan, using things that they learned about, in their passports.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# POP QUIZ

Read each question. Circle the letter next to the correct answer.

1. How many main islands does Japan have?
  - a. 1
  - b. 4
  - c. 7
  - d. 2
  
2. What is the name of the tallest mountain in Japan?
  - a. Mount Everest
  - b. Mount Song
  - c. Mount Fuji
  - d. Mount Kilimanjaro
  
3. How many puppeteers control a Bunraku puppet at once?
  - a. 5
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  
4. What is Japan's national sport?
  - a. Sumo Wrestling
  - b. Haiku
  - c. Bunraku
  - d. Kabuki
  
5. What is the Japanese art of paper folding called?
  - a. Haiku
  - b. Origami
  - c. Hokkaido
  - d. Fuji



# VOCABULARY

**Ainu** – An indigenous Japanese people group.

**Ashizukai** – A bunraku puppeteer who controls the puppet's legs.

**Bunraku** – Traditional Japanese puppet theater.

**Composite volcano** – A type of volcano formed over the course of many eruptions and made up of layers of lava, volcanic ash, rock and other minerals.

**Dohyo** – The ring in which a sumo match is held.

**Haiku** – A traditional form of poetry consisting of three lines: the first line is 5 syllables long, the second is 7 syllables and the third is 5 syllables.

**Heya** – Training and living communities for sumo wrestlers.

**Hidarizukai** – A bunraku puppeteer who controls the puppet's left arm, left hand and props.

**Ice Age** – A period of long-term cold temperatures during which glaciers covered much of the Earth. The last Ice Age ended around 10,000 years ago.

**Island** – A piece of land surrounded by water; smaller than a continent.

**Jôruri** – The narrative, or spoken story, of a bunraku performance.

**Land bridge** – A natural connection between two land masses. During Ice Ages sea levels have been lower, making it possible for humans and animals to cross to other continents on land bridges.

**Omozukai** – A bunraku puppeteer who controls the puppet's right arm, right hand, and facial expressions.

**Rikishi** – The Japanese name for a sumo wrestler.

**Ritual** – A religious or traditional ceremony or series of actions performed in a particular order.

**Samisen** – A guitar-like instrument with three strings used in bunraku performances.

**Shinto** – A traditional Japanese religion in which ancestors and nature spirits are sacred.

**Siberia** – A vast, cold region of Russia covering most of northern Asia.

**Sumo** – A form of traditional Japanese wrestling.

**Tayu** – The narrator of a bunraku performance.

# Food from the Islands of Japan

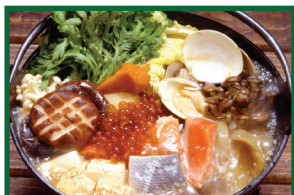


Japan consists of four main islands: Hokkaidō, Honshū, Shikoku and Kyūshū. Each of the popular dishes below originated from one of these islands. Read the descriptions to connect each Japanese dish to its matching island. Write the island names in the blank boxes.



**Wanko-soba** originated on Japan's largest main island. Wanko-soba is served as a small bowl of noodles. Once the noodles are eaten, the server immediately tosses more noodles into the bowl. This continues until you cover your dish to signal that you're finished eating.

This dish originated in:



**Ishikari-nabe** is a traditional stew from Japan's main northernmost island. The stew is made from seaweed stock and includes salmon, vegetables, tofu and *konnyaku* (a type of yam popular in Japan). Potatoes and cabbage can be added for more texture.

This dish originated in:



**Mizutaki** is a boiled chicken and vegetable dish from the southernmost Japanese island. The chicken and vegetables are boiled in broth and the broth is used to make porridge. The chicken and vegetables are eaten by dipping with ponzu sauce and a relish made from vegetables called leeks.

This dish originated in:



**Tai-meshi** is a dish made with a type of fish called *tai* (also called snapper) on Japan's smallest main island. There are two ways to make it. The first method is to cook the whole fish with rice. The second method is to eat the fish as *sashimi* (raw slices) added to rice mixed with egg yolk and sauces.

This dish originated in: