Perhaps nowhere can the four seasons in all their beauty be appreciated as profoundly as in Japan. Trek through vast primeval forests at Shirakami-Sanchi and Hachimantai National Park, lush and verdant in spring and fiery gold in the fall. Soak in a bath amidst ancient trees and let yourself be spirited away to another time. Stroll through idyllic mountain and seaside villages where the residents still live as their ancestors did, in harmony with the natural world around them. Discover a remarkable variety of wildlife, from hauntingly beautiful Japanese storks—a living national treasure—to delightful bathing snow monkeys in their natural habitat.

14-6 Minato, Tanabe-shi, Wakayama
Kumano Travel

Find your spiritual side on the famous Kumano Kodo Trail
Follow in the footsteps of ancient pilgrims on the sacred trails of the Kii Peninsula

Seeking an adventure of self-discovery? The UNESCO World Heritage Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route in Tanabe is a great place to start. Here, you can hike paths trodden by pilgrims for millennia through mystical woods. Sign up for a tour, and an English-speaking guide will regale you with ancient legends and point out historic locations en route. Choose from numerous trail options, from 1- to 3-hour courses suitable for beginners to full- or multi-day treks for the veteran hiker. First-timers shouldn’t miss the beautiful Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine, and the dramatic Nachi Waterfall for which it is famous. When you’re done, head into town to dine on fresh seafood and other local delicacies. Only a 70-minute flight from Tokyo Haneda Airport or 2 hours by train from Osaka, the Kii Peninsula is easily accessible, and a host of lodging options from Western-style hotels to ryokan and temple stays are available.
Explore Kumamoto’s active volcano Mount Aso up close
Eat, stay and play in one of the world’s largest inhabited volcanic calderas

Formed hundreds of thousands of years ago, Mount Aso in Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Even so, amazingly resilient people have been calling it home for the past ten millennia or so. The volcano itself is part of a huge geo park: meat and drink for adventure-seekers! Whether solo cycling, horse-riding, guided hiking across volcanic peaks, paragliding, camping, or even helicopter rides, the choices are almost endless! Craters and calderas aside, forget the still-bubbling fumes a moment and head into town for some local sake and specialties cultivated in the rich volcanic soil. All rounded off by a stayover and star gaze from inside the caldera — something few ever experience.

Explore a ravine in a land of myth and legend
Stroll through natural scenery forged by an ancient volcanic eruption

Takachiho in southern Kyushu is steeped in Japanese mythology, being the spot where the gods descended from heaven and created the Japanese archipelago. Nestled in the heart of its deep forests is Takachiho Gorge, an awe-inspiring ravine encompassing the cobalt blue Gokase River that was born of a massive lava flow from Mount Aso about 90 to 120 millennia ago. Trek down one of the many forest paths to view the chasm from above, or better still, rent a rowboat and admire it from below. If you’re lucky, the 17 meter high Manai Falls may even spray you, which is considered an auspicious sign. Finally, round off your trip with a look at Takachiho Shrine, stay for a kagura dance, or feast on local delicacies like Takachiho beef and Miyazaki-brewed shochu. Takachiho is accessible by bus (reservation required) from Hakata (3.5 hours) or Kumamoto (2 hours). Those looking to stay the night will find a host of ryokan options, with many offering hot springs and beautiful mountain views in surrounding area.
You'll feel both miles and millennia away from modern Japan on a trek through the primeval beech forests of Shirakami. This sprawling 130,000-hectare region traces its literal roots back 8000 years and its unspoiled environment remains home to such rare species as the Asian black bear and the black woodpecker. Standing in the emerald glades of Shirakami, it’s not hard to see why this magnificent scenery has enchanted and inspired so many of Japan’s artists and creators though the years.

Shirakami Sanchi
白神山地
1-509-1 Matsuoyoriki, Hachimantai-shi, Iwate
http://www.experience-shirakami.com/

Hike the Hachimantai Hills
Whatever the season, take to the trails and enjoy the beauty of Tohoku

The natural beauty of northern Tohoku is truly awe-inspiring in the Hachimantai region, part of the Towada-Hachimantai National Park. In this spectacular natural setting, wander through alpine meadows and leafy trails, either solo or with a hired guide from the Hachimantai Mountain Hotel for a high-altitude adventure. In winter, don’t miss the soaring snow walls, superb skiing or a soak in the region’s famed hot springs.

Hachimantai Mountain Hotel
八幡平マウンテンホテル
1-301-1 Matuzugori, Hachimantai-shi, Iwate
Natural therapy in Nagano’s forests

Take time to unwind by forest bathing in Agematsu

No swimsuit needed for bathing of this kind! The Japanese practice of shinrin-yoku or “forest bathing” invites the weary traveler to purify body and soul by taking in the healing air, sights, and sounds of living, breathing woods. The Akasawa Natural Recreational Forest includes Kiso’s 300-year old Japanese towering hinoki cypress trees and is one of the most beautiful forests in Japan. The area is easily and enjoyably accessible by way of eight scenic trails. The plethora of experiences with English guidance available in this protected corner of Nagano includes a forest railway, open from late April through November. Travelers are encouraged to spend the night at one of Agematsu’s elegant ryokan or rustic guest houses, and partake in local fare like soba noodles, a Nagano favorite. About 4 hours by bullet train from either Tokyo or Osaka, it makes for perfect overnight getaway.

A sheltered and secluded Shikoku Valley

Venture into the hidden wilds of Iya Valley in Tokushima

Few places feel as untouched by the hands of time as Iya Valley in western Shikoku. This sparsely populated region, criss-crossed by rivers and dotted with peaks, preserves Japanese life of yesteryear. Pluck up courage to cross the valley’s double rope bridges, allegedly first constructed by warriors fleeing from a major battle over eight centuries ago. The reward? Stunning views of the beautiful natural setting. You’ll also enjoy a visit to Ochiai Village, featuring a precarious mountainside setting and with thatched roof homes designated as important historical structures.
73 Stroll beneath the majestic Great Wisteria

Just north of Tokyo, Ashikaga Flower Park is a laid-back, fragrant escape.

This 52,000 square meter flower park boasts a spectacular main attraction: over 350 flowering wisteria trees. Beginning in mid-April, they create massive umbrellas of red, purple, yellow, and white blooms. The highlight is the 150-year-old Great Wisteria, looking as though it came straight out of a fairytale with its massive, twisting trunk and branches. This tree is so awe-inspiring that Tochigi Prefecture has designated it as a Natural Monument. The park is illuminated in the evening, so you can stroll under canopies of lush wisteria flowers while breathing in their sweet fragrance. Open year-round, the park showcases eight different floral seasons, so there is always a treat for visiting flower lovers.

Ashikaga Flower Park
株式会社 足利フラワーリゾート
607 Hasama-cho, Ashikaga-shi, Tochigi
https://www.ashikaga.co.jp/fujinohana_special2019/en/

74 A singularly scenic expedition across the Japan Alps

Marvel at massive snow walls at this premiere eco-tourism destination.

Spanning 90km and covering an elevation change of 2,400 meters, the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route astounds nature lovers with some of Japan’s most dynamic mountain vistas. Your journey begins with a steep cable car climb up to a virgin forest of mighty ancient cedars. Then comes a winding bus ride featuring a massive snow corridor with walls as high as 20 meters high. Next you’ll board an electric trolley bus and tunnel through the heart of sacred Mt. Tateyama, emerging to one of the world’s most unique ropeways boasting incredible panoramic views of a steep alpine gorge. Then comes an underground cable car to Japan’s highest arch dam, Kurobe Dam, and the beautiful mountain scenery reflected in the waters of Lake Kurobe. With hot spring resorts, hiking routes, campgrounds, and cultural and historic sites along the way, there’s truly something for everyone—and snack bars at each station will ensure that you don’t go hungry. The entire trip will take 6-7 hours, and is best enjoyed from April to June, when the snow walls are at their highest. Tateyama Station is 3.5 hours from Tokyo by bullet and local train, with abundant accommodation options for those looking to stay overnight.

Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route
立山黒部アルペンルート
Spearheading efforts to preserve one of Japan’s living national treasures is the Hyogo Park of the Oriental White Stork, an ideal venue for any eco-conscious tourist. Stroll through lush green wetlands and enjoy the awe-inspiring beauty of these birds in their natural habitat, where they are bred and raised for reintroduction to the wild. Visit the museum and research center to learn all the work done to bring the stork back from the brink of extinction; cementing your bond with these beautiful creatures and their hard-working human saviors. Admission is free, though donations are welcome. Located just a 15-minute bus ride from Toyooka Station (about 2.5 hours from Osaka/Kobe or 3 hours from Kyoto by train). Spend the night and relax yourself at the nearby Kinosaki Onsen hot spring resort.

Enjoy the majestic sight of soaring white storks
This one-of-a-kind wildlife sanctuary is a must for all nature-lovers

Japanese cranes dancing and soaring in a winter wonderland
Up close guided tour of Kushiro Marsh National Park’s natural beauty

Wild Japanese macaques saunter out of the snowy forest and slip into a steaming hot spring. This truly unique wildlife scene is sure to warm your heart on even the coldest winter’s day. At Jigokudani (meaning “Hell Valley”), where the monkeys roam free in their natural habitat, you’ll see that they appreciate a relaxing soak just as much as you do! It’s a captivating sight that can’t be experienced anywhere else in the world. Later, take a 30-minute drive to the historic town of Obuse and visit the Hokusai Museum, home to a spectacular collection of works by the legendary Japanese woodblock artist Hokusai.

Japanese cranes dancing and soaring in a winter wonderland
From the middle of January until the beginning of March, visitors can take a chartered tour of Kushiro Marsh in Hokkaido — an ancient wetland and food source for almost all Japan’s cranes — and appreciate these magnificent birds in their natural habitat, alongside stunning snowscapes and other natural and wildlife wonders. If you’re staying in the Kushiro area, hotel pick-ups are available for even easier access to this unique experience.

Famous bathing snow monkeys will steal your heart
Visit their pristine winter wonderland in the scenic mountains of Nagano

Majestic Japanese cranes soaring into the clear winter sky, before landing within the snowscape for their graceful mating dance. A scene sure to enthrall any bird watcher or nature lover. From the middle of January until the beginning of March, visitors can take a chartered tour of Kushiro Marsh in Hokkaido — an ancient wetland and food source for almost all Japan’s cranes — and appreciate these magnificent birds in their natural habitat, alongside stunning snowscapes and other natural and wildlife wonders. If you’re staying in the Kushiro area, hotel pick-ups are available for even easier access to this unique experience.
The ancient and the modern, the natural and the man-made. In Japan, these contrasting elements combine to create singularly enchanting experiences. Visit Japanese gardens and appreciate the beauty of the four seasons as medieval poets once did. Admire exquisite lacquerware. Turn your eyes to the present, and you’ll find modern art museums coexisting in perfect harmony with nature, open-air music concerts, immersive exhibits of cutting-edge digital art, and more. Experience the full range of artistic expression from Japan’s past to its present, and you’re sure to come away with lasting memories and an appreciation for the timeless quality of its aesthetic beauty.

Voted as the best Japanese garden in the world
See Japan’s greatest artworks and a top-rated garden in one

Get your cameras ready – for six unique and exceptionally photogenic gardens within this 41-acre creatively landscaped all-season attraction. Weave your way through the museum, where pride of place goes to Yokoyama Taikan’s paintings. Originally named Sakai Hidemaro and born in 1868, he is among the finest exponents of modern Japanese painting and known for having painted over 1,500 pictures of Mount Fuji. Alongside, enjoy a wide range of other highly renowned Japanese artists and take in Adachi Zenko’s dream of harmonious art and a garden expressed as a single oversized painting. A must-stop on your Shimane Prefecture itinerary. Shimane Prefecture has never been easier to reach: a discounted bus for international travelers from Hiroshima prefecture, easy access from Kansai and incoming cruises also available from Tottori Prefecture.

ADACHI MUSEUM OF ART
足立美術館
320 Furukawa-cho, Yasa-ku, Shimane
https://www.adachi-museum.or.jp/en/
Experience the wonder of art on a canvas of islands!
A leisurely journey of artistic discovery on the islands of the Seto Inland Sea.

Explore the enticing Benesse Art Site Naoshima project to enjoy and experience interactive works of art on three different islands. Promoting a beautiful blend of contemporary art and architecture, the initiative also lets you interact with locals and contributes to the surroundings. Centering on a network of galleries, installations and museums on Naoshima, Teshima and Inujima, an inspiring holiday highlight awaits. Examples include Inujima Seirensho Art Museum – a former copper factory reborn as a unique art installation, with plant-powered filtration, solar energy and repurposed factory parts emphasizing its eco-friendly credentials. Or the Chichu Art Museum on Naoshima itself, designed by renowned Japanese architect Tadao Ando and housing numerous masterpieces, including works by Claude Monet and Walter De Maria.

Benesse Art Site Naoshima
ベネッセアートサイト直島
@http://benesse-artsite.jp/en/

A world-class modern art museum in the heart of scenic Aomori
Creative expression and the cityscape connect at the Towada Art Center

A downtown cultural hotbed, the Towada Art Center lets you immerse yourself in a dynamic gallery of larger-than-life, three-dimensional works of art and architecture – both inside and outdoors – in an environment painstakingly curated to complement its urban surroundings. Alongside art by Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Ron Mueck, don’t miss the 5.5 meter high Flower Horse outdoor monument, by artist/designer Choi Jeong Hwa, which boldly symbolizes the aesthetic mission of the museum and the city. Outside of town you’ll find Lake Towada, offering stunning vistas and hiking courses for the outdoor enthusiast. Stay overnight at a local ryokan or hotel, and sample specialties like freshwater fish, Kuraishi beef, and sembei rice cracker soup, an Aomori soul food. Towada is a 2 hour bus ride from Hachinohe Station, which is in turn 4 hours from Tokyo by bullet train.

Towada Art Center
十和田市現代美術館
@10-9 Nishi-Nibancho, Towada-shi, Aomori
@http://towadaartcenter.com/en/
Create your own lacquerware masterpiece to take home

Go hands-on with one of Japan's most beautiful and time-honored crafts

Japan has been famous for its lacquerwork since ancient times, and it still fascinates us today. Your gaze sinks into its endless glossy depths, as your fingertips caress its delightfully smooth finish. Sabae City in Fukui, a short trip from Kyoto, is home to the 1,500-year-old artisan tradition of Echizen lacquer. Here, you can watch master artisans at work, and even take part in the process yourself with three hands-on workshops to choose from: painting a design on a bowl, a photo frame or a hand mirror, carving a design on a lacquer plate, and applying lacquer to a round wooden tray. Once you've completed your personal masterpiece, head over to the gallery and see techniques passed down from generation to generation. Sabae is 90 minutes by train from Kyoto.

The secrets of bonsai unveiled: living works of art

At the Omiya Bonsai Art Museum, revel in bonsai's miniature beauty

A tree small enough to fit on a tabletop, yet decades or often centuries old—carefully coaxed by generations of experts into a sublime, harmonious shape. That's the traditional Japanese art of bonsai. The Omiya Bonsai Art Museum is a world-first publicly run museum devoted to bonsai, which has one of the world's most impressive collections on display. With English audio guides available to give you greater insight into these amazing creations, you'll be a bonsai connoisseur by the time you leave. Located less than an hour from central Tokyo, it makes for a perfect half-day destination—or take some extra time to explore the surrounding neighborhood, home to the lovely Omiya Park as well as a number privately-run bonsai gardens, nurseries, tool shops, and even a bonsai café.

East Asian art galore in a striking, scenic setting

Ancient and modern works exhibited in perfect harmony with nature

The hot spring paradise of Hakone, just a stone's throw from Tokyo, is also home to one of Japan's newest and boldest art museums. Opened in 2013, the Okada Museum of Art boasts some 5,000 square meter of exhibition space in a five-floor building that blends seamlessly into the surrounding forests. The regular exhibition features 450 works from Japan, China, and Korea, including paintings, ceramics, and religious art from ancient to modern times. Once you've seen everything, visit the footbath café to enjoy a drink and relaxing soak while beholding a majestic mural of Japanese wind and thunder gods, then take a stroll through the exquisitely maintained Japanese garden. With a number of world-class museums nestled in its picturesque mountainscape, Hakone is a perfect day trip destination from Tokyo, or spend the night in one of the luxurious Michelin-starred ryokan resorts or hotels. The stylish Romance Car express train will take you from Tokyo's Shinjuku Station to Hakone in only 75 minutes.

Explore Japan's rich history of cultural exchange with the continent

Exhibits that educate and inspire in this modern Kyushu museum

The Kyushu National Museum is one of Japan's four national museums - along with Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara - and the first outside the main island of Honshu. The museum is located in the historic city of Dazaifu in northern Kyushu, which served historically as the main gateway between Japan and its Asian neighbors. The museum houses an impressive 3,900-square-meter permanent exhibition focused on international cultural exchange, and showcasing a wide range of treasures representing the long history of cultural exchange. The museum building itself is also an architectural marvel, boasting a soaring entrance hall and spacious galleries. If you’re traveling with young children, the Ajippa hands-on interactive center provides hours of entertainment, and the museum shop and café make it easy for the family to pick up souvenirs or relax and get a bite to eat. Located just 35 minutes by train from central Fukuoka (Tenjin) and adjacent to the famous Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine - dedicated to the deity of learning and culture Michizane Sugawara and famous for its 6,000 plum trees - it’s a perfect day trip destination for Kyushu travelers with an eye for cultural history.
East meets West at Niigata’s House of Light: a singular work of art and lodging all in one. Artist James Turrell united skylights and fiber-optics with Japanese touches like shoji screens and outside porches to create an immersive experience meant to catalyze discussion and meditation amongst guests. The facility caters to both stayover guests and day-trippers seeking tours of this architectural gem, with reservations easily booked online in English. The surrounding city of Tokamachi is also well worth exploring, with multiple art museums showcasing everything from the most impressive prehistoric pottery collection in Japan to contemporary masterworks. It is home to healing hot spring waters and stunning scenes of nature, including virgin beech forests, stunning gorges, and some of the most beautiful terraced rice fields in all of Japan—and with car rental and sightseeing taxi services readily available, it is easy see it all. For supper, why not try the best rice in Japan and enjoy a sip of Niigata’s sublime sake. Located just over 2 hours from Tokyo by bullet and local trains, it’s an enchanting destination that’s surprisingly accessible.

A unique guesthouse in Japan’s snow country

Art, meditation, light and shadows

Wood, washi paper and world-class works of art

At one with nature: nurturing comics, culture and closer community ties

The Comico Art Museum Yufuin, in Oita prefecture in Kyushu, blends seamlessly into the beautiful local surroundings while showcasing abundant visual feasts of its own. Galleries feature works by masters such as the world-famous Takashi Murakami, prolific proponent of Japanese modern art and Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose monochrome ‘Seascapes’ series intensifies the pre-existing black and white interplay of the building. For cultural arts and comics and novels in a setting that melds into the landscape, Comico delivers. 1 hour guided tours are available. Please note that an online reservation is required to enter the museum. Yufuin is located in Kyushu, Japan’s southern island, about a 2 hour flight and 1 hour train ride from Tokyo, via Oita Airport.

Rock out at Japan’s largest outdoor music festival

Navigate the woods of the Fuji Rock Festival to find your favorites

Every summer sees global music lovers flock to Naeba Ski Resort in Niigata for a huge rock festival that has been going strong since 1997 and is often lauded as Japan’s number one music event. While the sheer number of amazing homegrown and overseas artists is more than enough to blow you away, it’s Fuji Rock’s atmosphere that keeps people coming back. Navigating between performances means negotiating deep forests decorated with otherworldly glowing orbs and trotting along woodland boardwalks. Dozens of food stalls tout high-quality fare and there are countless activities for kids too, including a forest play area. Tickets for individual or multiple days can be reserved online in English. Rent or bring along a tent and sleep over at the site, or stay at a traditional inn nearby and recharge with a hot spring bath. With an amazing line-up guaranteed each year, this is not just a music festival – it’s an adventure! From Tokyo, the site is just a 90-minute bullet train and shuttle bus ride away.