

DEPARTURES

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LIVING THE RIGHT LIFE

Richard David Story



DEPARTURES Does Japan

Since the day I arrived at DEPARTURES, I've thought about doing an issue devoted to Japan. Back then, I had not yet been and, in fact, it took me 16 years to make it there. Last October, the staff and I began our long and sometimes tough orientation, admittedly with the help of a lot of people. In my case, it started with **Catherine Heald of Remote Lands**, who organized my virgin voyage to Tokyo and Kyoto; **Stuart Foster**, vice president of marketing for Hilton Worldwide, who introduced me to Tokyo's Conrad hotel (and its **VIP manager Ari**, page 96); and **Joshua Cooper Ramo**, who figures throughout the issue. Joshua has been a great friend of mine and an invaluable adviser, consultant, consigliere to this magazine ever since our China Issue in 2005, when he was based in Beijing. Since then, he's lived in Kyoto, gotten married, become co-CEO of Kissinger Associates, and written two best sellers (including his most recent book, *The Seventh Sense*, which we excerpted). I want to thank these four people for so much of what you see in this issue.

But then the Japan Issue belongs to so many people, namely the editors and their associates here at DEPARTURES. They've all done an amazing job of organizing and curating and sorting through not the easiest country in the world for Westerners, many nights staying at their desks and on their phones and computers until 2 A.M. Thanks to them, Japan is definitely much more accessible and understandable to all of us. After everyone returned, we decided to put together a crib sheet of sorts on everything you kind of wanted to know about going...as well as a translation of some essentials of making your way through one of the most remarkable places on earth.

Your Questions About Japan—Answered

Experts explain everything from Toto toilets to going shoeless. All you wanted to know but were afraid to ask.

- 1 What exactly is a tea ceremony?** "The 'Way of Tea' is a long, contemplative ritual that originated in Zen Buddhism," says Kimiko Barber, author of *Cook Japanese at Home* (Kyle Books UK, out May 2017). Tea masters study for a decade to perfect how to boil and pour water, what type and how much matcha tea to use, and details like flower arranging. The ceremony can last two to four hours and is a deeply philosophical experience.
 - 2 What is the Harajuku phenomenon?** "Dressing up in outlandish outfits and hanging out in Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood is the ultimate escapism for young people," says Ashley Isaacs Ganz, founder of Lour operator Artisans of Leisure. A popular stop for travelers is Maison de Julietta (B1.5F Laforcet Harajuku, 1-11-8 Jingumae, Shibuya-ku), where women can dress up in Lolita-style fashion—smock dresses, ruffled blouses, giant pastel hair bows—that's seen as romantic.
 - 3 What are pachinko parlors and gachapon?** Pachinko parlors are huge, smoky gaming centers for a Japanese version of pinball. "Although ostensibly for recreation, under-the-table illegal gambling is often involved," says Scott Gilman, cofounder of tour operator JapanQuest Journeys. Gachapon are more benign: vending machines that dispense everything from toys to underwear. Find them all over Japan, but especially in Tokyo's Akihabara neighborhood.
 - 4 Why shouldn't you step on the borders of a tatami mat?** Historically, tatami mats, which date back to at least 710, were lined with fabric that displayed the owner's family crest, and it was considered rude to step on these images. The practice continues today, even though family crests aren't common. Always remove your shoes before stepping on one.
 - 5 What's the difference between Shinto and Buddhist shrines?** Shrines are Shinto, and temples are Buddhist. Shintoism posits that everything in nature is an integral part of life, so shrines tend to be simple. Buddhism is based on the Buddha's teachings, so temples
- are ornate, with images and statues. The simplest way to distinguish? Shinto shrine entrances are usually marked by red gateways called torii.
- 6 Why is canceling a dinner reservation so frowned upon?** Most restaurants have a very limited number of tables and just one or two seatings per night. Chefs shop for the amount of food needed for the night's house, so canceling at the last minute or up to 48 hours before is considered extremely rude and can lead to fees.
 - 7 Why aren't you given napkins at restaurants?** You are given an *oshibori*, or wet towel, before the meal to clean your hands in lieu of a cloth or paper napkin, the latter of which is considered wasteful. This is also the reason why many people carry handkerchiefs in Japan, as bathrooms rarely have paper towels.
 - 8 Do I take my shoes off or not?** You will. Take your shoes off frequently—at temples, shrines, *ryokan*, teahouses, some restaurants and galleries, and in homes. Pack socks: "It's considered impolite to go barefoot in public places or the homes of all but close friends and family," says Lauren Scharf, executive director of tour company The Art of Travel. Most places will provide slippers and a cubbyhole—the best indicator to remove your shoes.
 - 9 Why are Japanese convenience stores amazing?** *Konbini*, such as 7-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawson, are ubiquitous—there are more than 7,000 in Tokyo alone—and carry everything from (surprisingly good) bento boxes to shirts and ties for office workers, says Gilman. Imagine a UPS, Kinko's, and general store rolled into one that's open 24-7.
 - 10 Why does Tokyo have so many helpads?** Since 1990, most buildings taller than 148 feet have had a helpad for emergencies. (The law doesn't require it but strongly urges one.) Noise restrictions mean they are seldom used.
 - 11 Why are there no trash cans?** Most were removed because of concerns over chemical terrorism,

Guide to the Guides

A Who's Who of the best tour operators specializing in Japan

Japan is a difficult country to penetrate without outside help. Enter the tour operators. DEPARTURES vetted outfitters from around the world and selected six to arrange our travel plans based on a single criterion: whether the company has particular expertise in the country. For the most part, there is a pretty well-traveled circuit in Japan. First-timers usually do a ten-day trip to Tokyo and Kyoto, and then add an additional stop or two along the way. Because of this, tour operators often fish out of the same, er, koi pond—each seems to have its own secret sushi spot, sumo stable, pottery person. But that's okay, because, as we will vouch, it's insanely hard to get from point A to B—let alone get behind closed doors—without them.



THE ART OF TRAVEL

Founded in Kanazawa in 2010 to promote the city's crafts to Western buyers, the company entered the travel-and-leisure business in 2012 and expanded its radius to all of Japan. But the focus on culture remains. Staff is half Japanese, half American. **Person to Know** Executive director Evelyn Teploff-Mugli, a former educator at Parsons's Kanazawa campus. **What to Expect** Encounters with master artisans and (given enough advance notice) top architects. **Contact** theartoftravel.net

ARTISANS OF LEISURE

Though it organizes premium trips with an emphasis on culture and gastronomy in 60 countries, Artisans of Leisure is uniquely well connected in Japan, its first specialty. **Person to Know** New York-based founder Ashley Isaacs Ganz, who briefly lived in Japan in the '90s. **What to Expect** Access to hypercompetent and attentive guides who can adjust itineraries on the fly (not a given in Japan) and bypass every line. **Contact** artisansofleisure.com

GEOEX

The San Francisco-based outfitter's niche is remote global adventure travel, but it has notable mastery of Japan, especially in areas less frequented by Westerners (or other tour operators), including Shikoku, Hokkaido, and Kyushu. **Person to Know** The company's secret Japan weapon is American Don George, a travel writer who has a Japanese wife. He leads GeoEx's trips. **What to Expect** Off-the-beaten-path Japan: hiking in the Iya Valley; taking back roads to Nachi Falls; lodging in temples and farmhouses. **Contact** geoex.com

JAPANQUEST JOURNEYS

The six-year-old company is built on a network of relationships honed over decades of firsthand experience in Japan. **Person to Know** Scott Gilman runs itinerary planning from Washington, D.C.; Philip Rosenfeld is on the ground in Tokyo (don't miss his sushi spot). **What to Expect** Itineraries handily matched to travelers' interests and guides with singular knowledge—and personality. **Contact** japanquestjourneys.com

REMOTE LANDS

The Asia-specific tour operator parlayes its encyclopedic knowledge of Japan into customized trips with ultraposh touches (think private jets, helicopters). No luxe detail goes untouched. **Person to Know** Cofounder Catherine Heald, who lived in Asia for seven years in the '80s and '90s, runs operations out of her office in Midtown Manhattan. **What to Expect** White-gloved service—literally all of our Tokyo drivers had them—that even involves arranging an English-speaking escort to accompany travelers all the way to the Narita Airport security line. **Contact** remotelands.com

WABI-SABI JAPAN

The tiny Canada-based company does nothing but Japan, so its connections run wide and incredibly deep. **Person to Know** Founder and Butterfield & Robinson alum Duff Trimble, who's been traveling to Japan since the mid-'90s. Today, he spends three months a year there, fine-tuning logistics, researching and discovering the undiscovered—his forte. **What to Expect** Exceptionally customized, highly immersive, and intimate encounters that feel like you're meeting a long-lost friend. (See "Coastal Driving," page 192.) **Contact** wabi-sabi-japan.com

