

Some Basic Facts about Japan

1. Geography and Population

Japan is off the east coast of Asia. It consists of four major islands (*Hokkaido*, *Honshu*, *Shikoku*, and *Kyushu*) as well as thousands of small ones. Japan is roughly the size of California, but it has 125 million people, half the population of the U.S. Three-quarters of the land is mountains covered with forests. Most people live in cities, which are very crowded. The climates vary from the north to the south. The northern islands have dry summer and snowy winter. In the southern regions, summer is hot and humid, and it rarely snows in winter. There are considerable rainfalls, and frequent typhoons and earthquakes.

2. Food

Rice is the staple of the Japanese diet. They also eat seafood, beef, pork, chicken, dairy, vegetables and fruits. They have Japanese-style noodles, as well as spaghetti and bread. Soy sauce and soybean paste are the primary flavorings in traditional Japanese cooking. In cities, there are restaurants from different countries, including American fast-food chains.

3. Clothing

Most people ordinarily wear western-style clothes. Some schools have uniforms. The traditional clothing, called *kimono* ('kee-mo-no') is worn only on special occasions, such as New Year's Day, graduations, and tea ceremonies.

4. Housing

Traditional Japanese homes are wooden buildings with tiled roofs. However, most of the contemporary houses and apartments are western style and made of concrete. Inside they have both western-style rooms with tables and chairs, and Japanese-style ones with straw mats and low tables. Traditional bedding is called *futon* ('foo-ton') quilts.

5. Language

In Japanese, vowels are pronounced similar to ones in Spanish. Some greeting words are:

Good morning	"Ohayo" (oh-ha-YO)
Good afternoon	"Konnichiwa" (KON-nee-chee-wah)
Good bye	"Sayonara" (sa-YO-na-ra)
Thank you	"Arigato" (ah-REE-gah-toe)

In order to write, Japanese children learn two sets of phonetic alphabets (50 letters each,) as well as thousands of Chinese characters. *Hiragana*, the basic alphabet, allows them to write simple sentences. *Katakana*, the other alphabet, is to write words of foreign origin. (English words, for example, such as "sak-kah"= "soccer".) Most of the other words are written in *Kanji*, Chinese characters. The finished writing is a mixture of all three kinds of letters. Despite this complicated system, the literacy rate in Japan is quite high. Students spend a major part of their school life learning how to read and write.

6. Schools

The kindergarten includes preschool, and is not a part of the elementary school. The compulsory education includes the elementary school (grades 1-6) and the junior high (grades 7-9). The senior high (grades 10-12) is not mandatory, although the enrollment rate is nearly 100%. A class usually consists of 35-40 students. The curriculums are in general more uniform and rigid. The school is open roughly 220 days a year. The school year begins in April and ends in March, with the month of August as the summer vacation.