Japan

Location

Japan is an island chain located in Eastern Asia between the North Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan. It is east of the Korean Peninsula at 36°N, 138°E. Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku are the four largest islands. These islands extend over 2,000 km in total length, but are only about 300 km in width.

Geography

Japan is made up of four major and over 4,000 smaller islands. The total area of Japan is roughly the same size as California. More than half of the main island of Honshu is mountainous and two-thirds is forested. This leaves only 13% of the land arable. The islands of Japan are located on three tectonic plates, which meet just southwest of Tokyo. Therefore, earthquakes are a major concern. Thousands of people died in the last major earthquake, the Great Hanshin, in 1995 in Kobe. There are also many volcanoes as a result of Japan’s location on the plates. The most famous is the dormant Mt. Fuji, which is the highest point of Japan.

Climate

The climate can vary greatly from north to south. The north is cool temperate, while the south is more tropical. There are four distinct seasons in Japan. The summer is usually hot and humid. There is a rainy season in June and July, which the Japanese call tsuyu. September is usually when typhoons occur. The northern part of Japan, as well as along the Japan coast and in the central mountain areas, can receive large amounts of snowfall during winter.
History

Japan is a very ancient land with a history reaching back thousands of years. The earliest history books, the Kojiki and Nihon shoki, indicate that the first emperor was crowned in 660 BC. He was a descendant of the Sun goddess, the most important of Shinto goddesses. It is believed that all other emperors have descended from him. Japan’s first Constitution was written in 604 AD. It was during this time that Buddhism was introduced into Japan from the Eurasian continent.

From the end of the twelfth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, the samurai, or warrior class ruled Japan. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Japan entered into a period of isolation for more than 200 years under the rule of Tokugawa Leyasa. All contact with other countries was cut off except with China and the Netherlands until Commodore Matthew Perry visited in 1853. Japan then began to open up to the U.S. and European countries. Eventually a new governmental system, that centered on the Emperor, was established and the focus shifted to becoming socially, economically, and politically more “Western.”

Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941 bringing the US into WWII. The US dropped the first and last atomic weapons ever used in war on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945.

Important Dates

Important dates on the Japanese calendar are: January 1 through 3 - New Year (Shogatsu), the most important holiday of the year; Second Monday in January - Coming of Age (seiji no hi), celebration of all young people who will turn 20 that year (this is considered adulthood - allowed to vote, drink and smoke); February 11 - National Foundation Day; March 3 - Doll’s Festival (or Girls’ Festival; Hina Matsuri), families with daughters wish them long and happy lives; March 21 - Spring Equinox Day, families visit gravesites; Golden Week - several national holidays within seven days: April 29 - Green Day,
May 3 - Constitution Day, May 4 - Between Day, May 5 - Children’s Day (or Boy’s Festival); July 7 - Star Festival (Tanabata), hang papers with wishes written on them on little bamboo trees; September 15 - Respect for the Aged Day; September 23 - Autumn Equinox Day; November 3 - Culture Day; November 15 - Seven-Five-Three (Shichi-Go-San), three and seven-year-old girls and three and five-year-old boys are taken to Shinto shrines for good health; November 23 - Labor Thanksgiving Day.

Population

Japan is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The population was estimated at 126.8 million in July 2001. Almost the entire population is Japanese, and of the non-Japanese population, over half is Korean. Japan is also one of the most urbanized countries in the world. Nearly 80% of the population lives in urban areas. The three largest metropolitan areas are Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. Tokyo is one of the largest cities in the world with a population of 8.1 million (12 million in the metropolitan area) as of October 2001.

Currency

The Japanese yen is the official currency of Japan. One yen is roughly equal to one cent (’02). Yen notes are in denominations of ¥10,000, 5000 and 1000 and coins are in denominations of ¥500, 100, 50, 10, 5 and 1.

Education

Children are required to attend elementary school for six years and junior high school for three years. Over 90% of students graduate from high school and 40% receive university or junior college diplomas. Because of these high percentages, in 1997 the literacy rate was estimated at 99%. Japan’s education system is most well known for the entrance exams and the high competition that accompanies them. Most high schools and universities require students to pass these entrance exams. The most prestigious national universities are University of Tokyo and University of Kyoto.
Language

Japanese is the official language of Japan. The writing system is very complex. It is made up of three different types of characters: Kanji (Chinese characters), Hiragana, and Katakana. These can be written in Western style or the traditional Japanese style, vertically from right to left. Though Japanese and Chinese both use Chinese characters, the meaning of a character can be completely different between the two languages.

Religion

Almost 85% of Japanese observe both Shinto and Buddhist religions. Shinto is the indigenous faith of the Japanese people. The word Shinto means “the way of the gods,” and it is as old as the Japanese. Shinto has no sacred scriptures, nor is any person or persons recognized as founding Shinto. It is simply a part of being Japanese. Shinto is deeply rooted in traditions. Nearly 90 million of Japan’s inhabitants label themselves as Buddhist, though every day life is not affected by the religion. Less than 2% of Japanese are Christians.

Agriculture

Agriculture makes up almost 2% of the GDP. Only 1% of the land is in permanent crops and 1% is meadows and pastures. Rice is the most important crop followed by wheat, barley, potatoes and sweet potatoes. According to Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the major agricultural exports are tobacco, tuna, alcoholic beverages, shellfish, and scallops. Japan’s major agricultural imports are lumber, shrimp, pork, and beef.

Trade

Japan’s economy is one of the strongest in the world; its GNP is second only to the U.S. The U.S. imports over one quarter of all Japanese exports. These mainly consist of cars, electronic devices, and computers. The imports are oil, foodstuffs and wood from the US, China, Indonesia, South Korea, and Australia.
**Food**

Sushi is probably the most well known Japanese food by Americans. It is a common misconception that sushi is just raw fish. Sushi is actually anything that contains rice and sushi vinegar. Sashimi is the word for raw fish. One way of preparing sushi is with sashimi on top. *Wasabi* is a hot, horseradish condiment sometimes eaten on sushi. Because Japan is an island nation, it makes sense that seafood is an important part of the Japanese diet.

Rice is eaten with almost every meal in Japan and has been for over 2,000 years. In addition to rice, noodles like *soba* and *udon* are also common. *Tempura* is also a popular dish, which is seafood or vegetables coated with a flour batter and fried. *Okonomiyaki* is cooked like a pancake but prepared like a pizza. It is made with a cabbage dough crust and topped with meat, mushrooms, seaweed, squid, etc., then fried on a griddle. This is especially famous in Hiroshima, where it is served with fried noodles.

Of course, the soybean is extremely important to Japanese cuisine. Soy sauce, tofu, and *miso* (usually in miso soup) are common in Japanese dishes. *Natto* is fermented soybeans that taste just about as good as they sound!

**Landmarks**

One of the most popular structures in Japan is the gate or *torii* that stands in the water in front of the Itsukushima Shrine, which is on an island about one hour from Hiroshima. This bright orange torii, built in the 12th century, is often used to represent Japan in photos. Another beautiful Shinto shrine is the Kinkakuji, or “Golden Pavilion” built in 1394 in Kyoto. There are many Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples scattered across Japan.

Another important place in Japan is the city of Hiroshima, which was bombed at the end of WWII. The people of Hiroshima hope that the Peace Memorial Park and Museum will spread the
message of peace throughout the world. Mt. Fuji, which is near Tokyo, is probably the most famous natural landmark of Japan. The best way to travel between many of the major cities in Japan is on the Shinkansen, or bullet train. As the name implies, this train can reach speeds of nearly 190 miles per hour.

**Traditions**

There are many traditions in Japan that are distinctively Japanese. The traditional dress of men and women is the *kimono*. It is a very expensive silk robe worn with a belt called an *obi*. Kimonos are now worn for only special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and tea ceremonies. The tea ceremony is a ritual of preparing and drinking tea that has been strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism. Each important movement must be memorized. The green tea is called *matcha*.

A sport that is distinctively Japanese is sumo wrestling. This originated as religious performances for Shinto gods. The basic rules are that the first of the two men to leave the ring or touch a part of his body (other than his foot) to the ground loses. Today the sport is followed on television by many Japanese fans.

Another Japanese tradition is *origami* – the art of folding paper. The crane is one of the most popular; it is said that folding 1000 paper cranes will make a wish come true.

Emily Adams