
I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Geography

Occupying a land area of 377 682 km², roughly 40 per cent of the size of British Columbia and 30 per cent of the size of Ontario, Japan is composed of four main mountainous islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Some 69 per cent of the land is forested, 16 per cent cultivated, and the balance urban, grassland, or waste.

The climate is temperate with hot, humid summers and generally sunny, cold, dry winters. Average temperatures in Tokyo are 25.2°C (80°F) in the summer and 4.1°C (40°F) in the winter.

The best time to visit Japan is during April and May or mid-September to mid-November.

Population

With 122.3 million people, Japan is the world's seventh most populated country. Of this highly homogeneous society (99.4 per cent ethnic Japanese), 72 per cent live in urban areas. Tokyo, the capital, has a population exceeding 8 million. Other cities with populations of more than 2 million are Yokohama, Osaka and Nagoya. Cities with populations of more than a million include Kyoko, Kobe, Sapporo and Kawasaki.

Although some English is used commercially, the number of Japanese able to speak fluent English is limited.

Government

Since 1947 Japan has been a constitutional monarchy. The head of state is Emperor Hirohito. The head of government is Prime Minister Noburu Takeshita. The Diet, or national Parliament, is divided into the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, elected by universal suffrage. The executive is chosen from the Diet according to the parliamentary cabinet system. The ruling party is the Liberal Democratic Party, with the Japan Socialist Party as the leading opposition party.