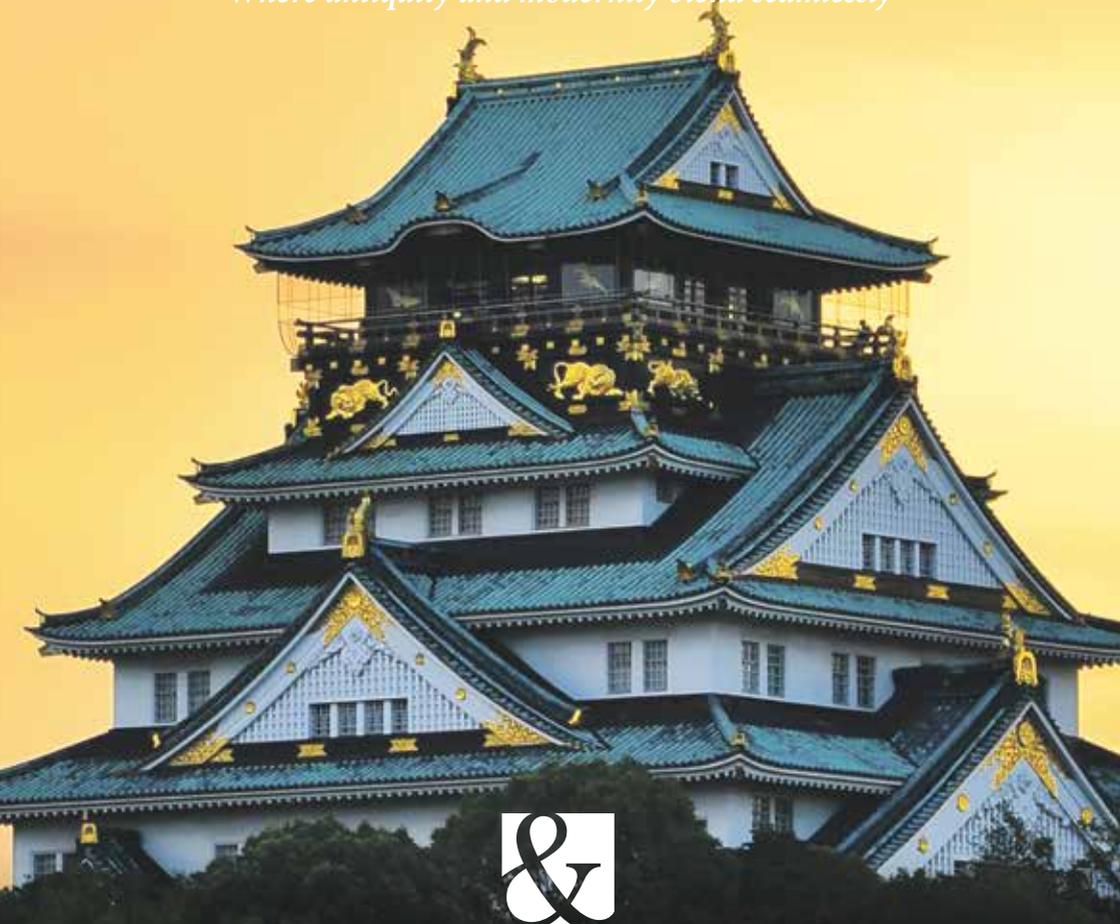


A&K GUIDE

HOW TO SELL JAPAN

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Sacred temples, futuristic cities and island hideaways fascinate in this Pacific archipelago



MOUNT FUJI AT SUNSET

SANDY SHORES

Okinawa These islands are a world away from Japan's urban centres. Here, crystal-clear waters lap white-sand beaches. The main island, Okinawa-Honto, is a tourism hot spot, while the western islands are less frequented. Recommend Okinawa for a tropical getaway, free from the stresses of big city life.

Stay: The Ritz-Carlton Okinawa – a five-star property boasting views of the South China Sea, providing guests with a warm Okinawan welcome.

Shima Peninsula The Shima Peninsula is renowned for its natural beauty. It forms the far-eastern coast of the bucolic Mie Prefecture, where the modest cities of Toba, Isa and Shima draw leisure seekers from far and wide. Clients can explore Shinto shrines, cruise azure inlets, ease into an *onsen* and indulge in seafood caught fresh that same morning.

Stay: Amanemu – a luxury resort, decorated in an authentic local style, with *onsen* culture at its heart.

DAZZLING CITIES

Tokyo Though Japan is the Land of the Rising Sun, in Tokyo the sun never truly sets. Amid the dazzle of its neon lights, clients can witness a sumo tournament, enjoy a traditional *kabuki* show or sup sake at a 24-hour bar. Tokyo is a foodie's heaven – boasting more Michelin-starred restaurants than any other city.

Stay: Mandarin Oriental Tokyo – a world-class hotel with a contemporary style, overlooking the city.

Osaka Japan's third most populous city is famed for its ebullient nightlife, bustling markets and friendly inhabitants. Known as 'the nation's kitchen', Osaka is also a gastronomic paradise, full of ethnic eateries. It hosts Tenjin Matsuri, one of the nation's major festivals, which sees traditional boat processions and street parades vivify the city each July.

Stay: The Ritz-Carlton, Osaka – an extravagant property that combines contemporary luxuries with tributes to Japan's cultural heritage.

COUNTRYSIDE AND CULTURE

Hakone & Mount Fuji The icon of Japan's skyline lies in a region replete with hot springs and hiking routes. There are trails here that take ambitious walkers all the way to Fuji's rugged peak. While visiting the nearby town of Hakone, clients can enjoy a night in a *ryokan* for an authentic flavour of Japanese hospitality.

Stay: Ginyu Ryokan Hakone – provides unbeatable views from its warm, comfortable interior.

Kyoto Kyoto offers a glimpse into feudal-era Japan. Once the nation's capital, the city is home to an array of temples and shrines, as well as 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In the Gion district, visitors can spot geisha. Kyoto is picture-postcard Japan, where traditions remain sacrosanct.

Stay: Four Seasons Kyoto – brand-new but built to encompass an 800-year-old garden, this spacious property blends modern and traditional decor.

Takayama A remote city surrounded by snow-capped mountains, Takayama possesses a charming old-world atmosphere and Edo-period architecture. It's complemented by a twice-yearly festival during which gorgeous floats are joined by the sound of *taiko* drumming and singing. Recommend Takayama to those wanting a break from the big cities, especially active clients keen on walking, biking and hiking.

Hokkaido Hokkaido is Japan's last wilderness. The island's many national parks are blessed with lush forests, sparkling lakes and bubbling hot springs. During winter, Hokkaido transforms into a wonderland of powdery snow, celebrated annually during the Sapporo Snow Festival. It's an ideal destination for keen hikers, nature lovers and winter-sports enthusiasts.



RED-FACED MACAQUE GETTING WARM



GEISHA IN KYOTO

SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT

Mount Koya Mount Koya (Koyasan) is the spiritual centre of Shingon Buddhism. Clients can stay overnight in an atmospheric temple lodging, experiencing how the monks eat, sleep and pray. Recommend to travellers in search of zen.

Stay: Ekoin Temple, Koyasan – located within a 1,000-year-old temple, a traditional lodging with a clean, rustic interior, and a warm Buddhist welcome.

Kanazawa Kanazawa's historical neighbourhoods remained unscathed during World War II. The city's famous samurai and geisha districts are a must-see, as is Kenrokuen – a justly celebrated landscape garden, full of blossoming flowers, placid ponds and lofty maple trees.

Stay: Beniya Mukayu Ryokan, Kanazawa – a cosy inn with an open-plan design, where tranquility and a connection with nature are celebrated.

Snow Monkeys In the mountainous Jigokudani Yaen Koen Park, red-faced macaque warm themselves in the natural hot springs – it's a unique spectacle. The monkeys are unfazed by visitors, meaning clients can get close enough to take a stunning picture.

Stay: Biyu no Yado Ryokan – a traditional Japanese inn boasting bubbling *onsens* and exceptional hospitality.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

<i>When</i>	<i>Why</i>
January	During Japan's coldest month, visit Jigokudani Monkey Park to see snow-sprinkled macaque bathe in hot springs. In Kyoto, thousands of archers compete during the Festival of the Great Target. Wrestling fans should head to Tokyo for the Sumo New Year Basho.
February	Venture to the northern city of Sapporo for the week-long Snow Festival (Yuki Matsuri). The event occupies Odori Park and surrounding streets with exhibitions of huge ice sculptures, concerts and traditional performances.
March	As spring approaches, see the Omizutori Festival in Nara, which includes music, parades and fire shows. Or, near Nagoya, watch hundreds of loincloth-clad men drive out misfortune during the Naked Man Festival. Most memorable of all is the Honen Matsuri, a fertility festival which must be seen to be believed.
April	April ushers in Japan's famous cherry blossom season, and is the busiest time to visit, so book well ahead. Kyoto and Tokyo are popular spots to take in this sea of pink, while the mountain town of Takayama is lesser-known but more romantic for it. April also sees Takayama's Sanno Festival, where large ornate floats are paraded through the streets.
May	Golden Week, a series of national holidays at the beginning of May, can be a chaotic time to visit. However, the weather in Japan is at its best, and Kyoto's Aoi Festival – a Shinto procession of over 600 costumed people – is worth fighting through the crowds for.
June	The beginning of June is warm and sunny throughout the country. On the 15th, hundreds of priests in Koyasan celebrate the birth of Kukai, the grand master of Japanese Buddhism. However, during the latter half of the month, the rain arrives and the humidity increases.
July	As the heat rises, Japan's rainy season begins. Head into the mountainous prefecture of Gifu to hike the Nakasendo way, the former route of the samurai which passes lush vegetation, abundant wildlife and fine waterfalls. The Gion festival in Kyoto takes place every year, and involves a huge procession of unique floats.
August	August is hot and humid, but there's a lot to see. The nation observes the three-day Buddhist custom of 'Obon', during which the traditional dance of 'Obon Odori' is performed throughout Japan. The 6th marks the anniversary of the atomic blast in Hiroshima – here, thousands of paper lanterns are set adrift on the River Ota in a moving ceremony.
September	September remains humid, and though there can be storms, they tend to be utterly spectacular. Professional sumo tournaments are held in Japan six times a year, once in every odd-numbered month, and September sees one of the largest tournaments in Tokyo. This is also the season for whale watching in many of the southern cities.
October	The autumnal colours in the Japanese Alps make for a scenic dip in an <i>onsen</i> . The weather is usually sunny but cool enough for hikes and cycling. Kyoto's Jidai Festival on the 22nd sees over 2,000 people in ornate costumes depart from Kyoto Imperial Palace towards Heian Jingu shrine.
November	Things begin to cool down, though the weather remains dry and sunny. The first few days of November are the only days of the year you can enter the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, and there are a number of smaller festivals in the city. On the 15th, parents of three, five and seven-year-old children dress their kids in kimonos and take them for prayer at a nearby temple during Shichi-Go-San.
December	The weather in December is crisp and cold, but the snow-filled trees and frozen lakes are a sight worth seeing. The Daikon festival in Kyoto on the 9th and 10th celebrates winter food and is well worth a visit. The Japanese don't celebrate Christmas, but traditionally on New Year's Eve, the Japanese eat <i>toshikoshi</i> soba (buckwheat noodles) and temples all over ring their bells 108 times to welcome in the new year.

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