

7 THINGS

FIRST-TIMERS GET WRONG IN JAPAN

(and exactly how to fix them before your trip)

A free checklist from Quest for Durian

I've visited Japan three times — 2001, 2024, and 2025 — and I've made (or watched others make) every single one of these mistakes. Use this checklist to arrive prepared, not panicked.

<p>01</p>	<p>Not getting a Suica card immediately</p> <p>Most first-timers waste 20+ minutes at ticket machines every single day because they didn't grab an IC card at the airport. It works on almost every train, subway, and bus in Japan — and you can even pay for konbini snacks with it.</p> <p>THE FIX:</p> <p>Head straight to the JR East Travel Service Center at Narita or Haneda. Get a Suica, load ¥3,000–5,000, and never queue for a ticket again.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Got Suica / Pasma before leaving the airport <input type="checkbox"/> Loaded at least ¥3,000 on arrival <input type="checkbox"/> Know where to top it up
<p>02</p>	<p>Booking accommodation in the wrong neighborhood</p> <p>Staying in Shinjuku because it's 'central' sounds smart until you're lugging your suitcase up subway stairs three times a day. Tokyo's neighborhoods have completely different vibes — the wrong one can color your whole trip.</p> <p>THE FIX:</p> <p>Match your neighborhood to your travel style. Shinjuku = nightlife & convenience. Asakusa = traditional vibe. Shibuya = shopping. Shimokitazawa = indie, slow, local.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Researched which area suits my travel style <input type="checkbox"/> Checked proximity to my key sights <input type="checkbox"/> Confirmed luggage storage nearby

03

Trying to see too much in too little time

The #1 Japan mistake. Tokyo alone deserves 4–5 days. Adding Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Nara AND Hakone into 10 days leaves you exhausted, rushed, and barely present for any of it.

THE FIX:

Pick a spine. Tokyo + Kyoto + one day trip is a complete, satisfying trip. Add cities only if you have more days, not more ambition.

- ▣ Realistic city count for my trip length
- ▣ Built in at least one unscheduled half-day
- ▣ Not cramming every Kyoto temple into one day

04

Assuming everywhere takes cards

Japan is legendarily cash-heavy. Smaller ramen shops, izakayas, shrines, and local markets often don't take cards at all. Getting caught cashless is both embarrassing and genuinely inconvenient.

THE FIX:

Use 7-Eleven ATMs — they reliably accept international cards 24/7. Keep ¥10,000–15,000 cash on you at all times. Your Suica covers the rest.

- ▣ Know where the nearest 7-Eleven ATM is
- ▣ Always carry minimum ¥10,000 cash
- ▣ Told my bank I'm traveling to Japan

05

Eating only at tourist-facing restaurants

The best food in Japan is almost never the restaurant with the English menu outside. Those places know you're not coming back. The tiny 8-seat ramen shop down a side street? That owner has been perfecting one bowl for 30 years.

THE FIX:

Use Tabelog (Japan's Yelp) for local ratings. Look for queues of locals. Convenience store food is genuinely excellent — don't skip it.

- ▣ Downloaded / bookmarked Tabelog
- ▣ Have at least 3 non-tourist restaurant recs
- ▣ Tried at least one convenience store meal

06

Not booking key things in advance

TeamLab, the Ghibli Museum, popular ramen shops at peak times — Japan rewards planners. Showing up and hoping for the best works in some countries. Not this one.

THE FIX:

Book Ghibli Museum the moment tickets open (10th of each month, 3 months ahead). Reserve teamLab online. Make ramen reservations via Tablecheck.

- ▣ Ghibli Museum tickets booked (if applicable)
- ▣ TeamLab tickets reserved
- ▣ Shinkansen reserved for peak dates

□

07

Underestimating how much you'll walk

Tokyo visitors average 20,000–25,000 steps per day without even trying. Brand new sneakers or stiff boots will end your trip by day three.

□ THE FIX:

Break in your walking shoes before you go. Bring blister plasters. Japanese pharmacies are everywhere — Matsumoto Kiyoshi is your friend.

□ Wearing broken-in, comfortable shoes

□ Packed blister plasters / foot tape

□ Know what a Japanese pharmacy looks like

□ BONUS: QUICK ETIQUETTE & SURVIVAL TIPS

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|---|---|
| □ Bow slightly when thanking someone — it goes a long way. | □ Don't eat or drink while walking. It's considered rude. |
| □ Keep your phone on silent on trains. No calls in the quiet car. | □ There are almost no public trash cans. Carry a small bag for rubbish. |
| □ Onsen etiquette: wash thoroughly before entering the communal bath. | □ Google Translate camera mode is your best friend for menus. |

Ready to go deeper? [The Japan First-Timer Framework](#) gives you 3 complete 10-day routes, restaurant picks, neighborhood breakdowns, and the exact booking order.