

ArtsJP

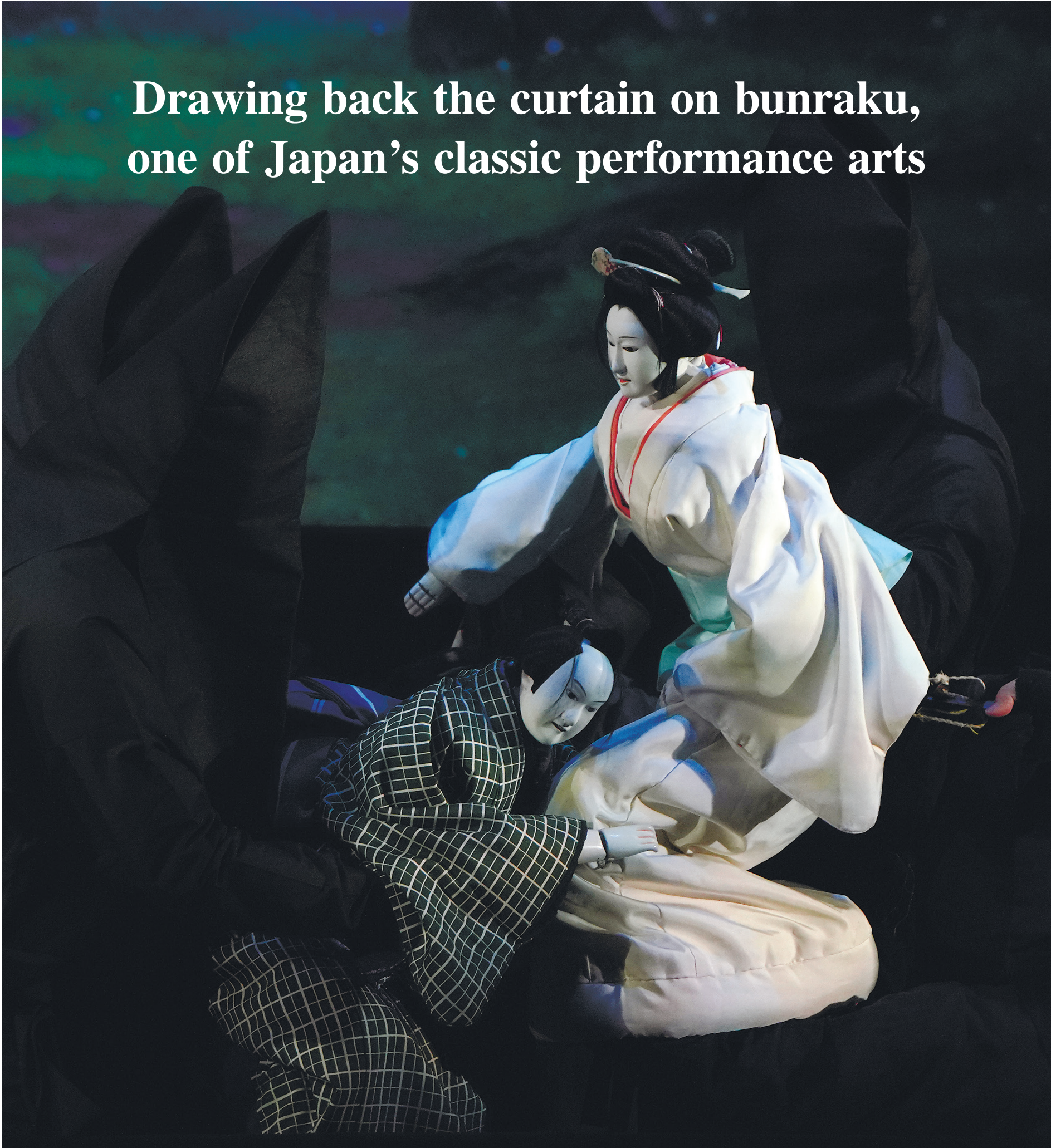
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The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 serves as an information hub for foreign visitors who are interested in experiencing “The Beauty and the Spirit of Japan.”

Drawing back the curtain on bunraku, one of Japan’s classic performance arts



Bunraku puppets act out the Tenjin Shrine forest scene from “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki.”
TOMOKO OGAWA

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Bunraku broadens appeal with anime stage art

Puppet theater tradition gets digital twist to allow more flexibility in performing at theaters worldwide



Bunraku puppets cross a stage with a newly added anime backdrop at a U.S. performance in October 2024, accompanied by musicians and narrators (right). TOMOKO OGAWA

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Bunraku is a traditional performance art in which the narrator (*tayu*), shamisen player and puppeteers combine their mastery — cultivated over decades of training — to breathe life into otherwise lifeless puppets.

Formally known as Ningyo Johruri Bunraku, it originated in Osaka in the early 17th century and was designated by UNESCO in 2003 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. The essentials have remained unchanged: three equal components — the puppeteers (*ningyotsukai*, usually three per puppet), the *tayu* and the musicians who play the traditional three-stringed shamisen. Performers devote decades to honing their craft — not for personal glory, but to create the stage that brings the puppets and stories to life.

The puppeteers dedicate themselves entirely to the puppets, while the narrators voice characters of all ages and genders. The shamisen provides the depth and range of a full orchestra. Every aspect of their skill contributes to bunraku theater, with every moment calculated to enhance the story and captivate the audience.

Each member of the bunraku team is essential; no component can perform without the others. True mastery may require decades of dedication. Practicing, studying and refining the art continues throughout the performers’ entire careers.

New challenges

Traditional Japanese performing arts are often seen by the public as long, difficult to follow and somewhat intimidating. To make bunraku more approachable and comprehensible to a broader audience, Japan’s National Theatre — a leading institution in the preservation and promotion of classical arts — has been exploring ways to

streamline its productions for touring while maintaining the artistic integrity of the performances, particularly with overseas and regional audiences in mind.

To further advance this initiative, the National Theatre has looked into staging performances with more accessible storylines, shorter running times and venues beyond designated theaters, aiming to bring bunraku closer to everyday life.

Taking the lead in this initiative, the National Theatre’s executive producer Tatsuhiko Kanda produced a traditional bunraku play using innovative direction. By reimagining the classic work through a fresh artistic lens, the production aimed to lower the barriers to entry and rejuvenate this time-honored art form.

Kanda selected the final and most famous scene of the 18th century classic “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki.” Written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon and first performed in 1703, “Sonezaki” remains one of bunraku’s most hauntingly memorable plays. Set in Osaka, it is a tragic love story.

A brief recounting of the final scene of “Sonezaki” goes like this. A gentle young clerk working for a merchant in Osaka is swindled by a friend and wrongly accused of fraud. This brings him great shame and sorrow. In the meantime, he pines for his lover Ohatsu, amid circumstances that make it impossible for them to be together.

Kanda said: “I chose this title because it’s a

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Ohatsu, the heroine of “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki” TOMOKO OGAWA

→ **Continued from page B2**

poignant story of lovers seeking peace in the afterlife — a tale with emotional clarity that may resonate with people who are unfamiliar with Japanese culture. Though the original material is longer and the narrative more involved, the final scene is concise and simple, yet fascinating to behold.”

Furthermore, anime artist and art director Kazuo Oga was chosen for a collaborative project that takes bunraku to new realms of expression: an animated backdrop that both heightens and complements the ambience of the world and its stories.

For all its treasured history, bunraku is also flexible and experimental. The collaboration with Oga is a prime example of how bunraku has evolved over the centuries. Kanda said that simplifying the stories and downsizing the stage props have been vital factors in the continuing journey of this fascinating stage art.

Although the idea of an overseas tour had existed for some time, it began to take concrete shape in 2024 when the Japan Society invited the National Theatre to open its annual puppet season with a bunraku performance. The initiative was in line with the Japan Cultural Expo’s belief that bunraku is a particularly effective medium for communicating Japanese culture to international audiences. The Japan Cultural Expo is a government-led initiative aimed at showcasing the appeal of Japanese arts and culture through exhibitions, performances and festivals. As such, the expo decided to provide support for the project, and a U.S. tour was organized — beginning in Los Angeles and continuing on to five major cities, including New York and Washington, D.C.

They were met with standing ovations and thunderous applause. Audiences were deeply moved, including a woman who was in tears after the performance. Another person in Washington said that the story and the strains of the shamisen transported them on a spiritual journey right alongside the characters.

An energetic match

Kanda said the animation backdrop collaboration with Oga has revitalized bunraku without altering its essence. “Traditionally, the backdrop visuals are all handmade, which is one of the most valuable traits of bunraku theater. Logistically, however, the backdrop was difficult to dismantle and

re-create with every performance in an outside venue. If touring was to become the norm rather than the exception, we had to think of an alternative plan.”

Kanda recalled watching a ballet production with a video backdrop, which inspired him to take a similar approach.

“That being said, we didn’t want a video backdrop that would dominate the production. We wanted something that would enhance and complement the performance. We even considered bringing in a Japanese painting artist. In the end, we turned to Kazuo Oga.”

Oga is famed for creating the backdrop visuals for such Studio Ghibli classics as “My Neighbor Totoro” and “Princess Mononoke.” His work is evocative and emotional yet restrained.

Kanda recalled watching a ballet production with a video backdrop, which inspired him to take a similar approach.

“We selected Mr. Oga for his beautifully intricate artwork and particular aesthetic,” Kanda said. “His backdrops are breathtaking but harmonious with the stage, never overshadowing the characters or story. They fit perfectly with the world of bunraku.”

Oga approached the project meticulously, studying the original material and often calling with detailed questions. “The completed paintings were scanned, then the data was sent to a production team and turned into video. From inception to completion, this was all very much a team effort,” Kanda explained.

“Most of the story takes place at night, and it was a challenge to decide how much of the sky to reveal and what to keep in shadow. For example, in the beginning the stars are hidden by clouds, but when a puppet looks up and says with tremulous ardor, ‘as I look upon the night sky,’ the clouds part and the stars emerge.”

“In the final segment of ‘Sonezaki,’ the puppets die and fade out on stage as dawn approaches. The anime backdrop refined and elevated the expression of this scene. All the movement in bunraku is traditionally horizontal, but in the anime backdrop, the sun ascends



Anime artist Kazuo Oga works on a background scene for the famed bunraku play “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki.” TOMOKO OGAWA

vertically. The effect is breathtaking. The performers themselves are not doing anything they wouldn’t normally do but the vertical movement, the colors and the ambience of the backdrop adds a beautiful new dimension to the performance,” Kanda said.

“‘Sonezaki’ is a play that portrays the tragic deaths of star-crossed lovers, performed with a unique beauty through puppetry. Such tragic love stories are common in bunraku, and one of its distinctive features is that, because the characters are not played by real people, the audience doesn’t experience death or bloodshed in a graphic way. Instead, they are able to focus more deeply on the emotional drama that leads the characters to their fate.”

Now, more than 300 years after its literary debut, “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki” is embarking on a new journey across Japan. On Nov. 29 and 30, it will be shown at the Okayama Performing Arts Theater, Harenowa. Kanda hopes the Harenowa shows will set a precedent for bunraku in other regional theaters. “We’re exploring the potential of locality-based productions where audiences can walk in on a whim and then sit back and enjoy the performances.”

Bunraku extends its reach

Kanda hopes the success of the U.S. tour will mark a new phase of bunraku’s global reach.

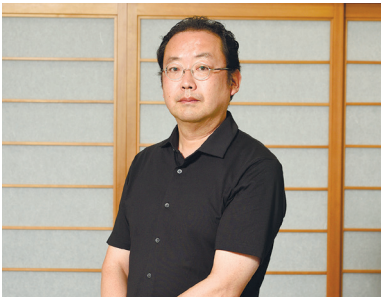
“Going forward, audiences will be treated to new and innovative ideas enacted within the confines of this classical art form. Ideally, we hope to captivate both bunraku’s core fans and those who are completely unfamiliar with this theater

art form. This includes the Japanese who have never seen bunraku but are curious to try,” he said.

“We also want to reach inbound travelers who don’t understand Japanese but would love to have a traditional theater experience.”

Though bunraku is often seen as overly traditional and difficult to understand, Kanda emphasized its accessibility.

“Once you get the hang of it, you may be amazed at how much bunraku has to offer. I hope one day, foreign tourists will choose Japan as a destination just to see bunraku.”



Tatsuhiko Kanda, National Theatre executive producer Born in Tokyo in 1972, Kanda graduated from the Department of Japanese Literature at Chuo University. He joined the Japan Arts Council in 1997 and has since been involved in the production of traditional performing arts, including bunraku, for many years. ARK COMMUNICATIONS



Banners hang from the venue for a bunraku show in October 2024 at the theater in the Japan Society building in New York. TOMOKO OGAWA

BUNRAKU 1ST SESSION ‘The Love Suicides at Sonezaki,’ Tenjin Shrine forest scene

This special performance begins with “Bunraku 101,” a commentary session by Seiko Ito, followed by a re-enactment of the famous Tenjin Shrine forest scene from “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki.” Featuring a fusion of traditional bunraku and anime, the show includes visuals supervised by Living National Treasure Kanjuro Kiritake and created by renowned anime art director Kazuo Oga. A perfect introduction to bunraku for all audiences.

Performance schedule: Nov. 29 (Sat.) and 30 at 2 p.m. (open at 1:30 p.m.)
Venue: Okayama Performing Arts Theatre, Harenowa
Access: 7 min. by tram from Okayama Station, followed by a 5-min. walk
Information: https://okayama-pat.jp/event_info/bunraku-1st-session/



Japan Cultural Passport

A digital way to wander Japan’s wonders

It’s time to wander the wonders of Japan. Visitors can discover the deep aesthetic regard that’s prevalent in every art exhibit. Learn about the stories lurking in their details and the harmonious relationship between natural wonders and scientific innovation.

The Japan Cultural Passport connects people, their smartphones and over 30 of Japan’s most exciting cultural institutions and facilities. The JCP enables a travel experience beyond the ordinary and off the beaten track. Some of the best that Japan has to offer is all but a click or swipe away.

Depending on their itinerary, people can choose from the seven-day plan (¥3,500) 14-day plan (¥6,000) or 21-day plan (¥8,000) any time between Aug. 5 and Feb. 15, 2026.

Outline of seven-day plan

People can take a week to discover and revel in the beauty of Japanese art. From the delicate and intricate artwork of traditional crafts to high-tech experiential art installations, there’s a vast range of options to choose from and encounter. The following suggested route is just one example, taking you to 12 cultural sites across Japan. With the JCP, you can enjoy admission to all of them for just ¥3,500 — compared with the regular total of ¥12,540 (depending on season), saving ¥9,040.

Day 1

Tokyo:
Art lovers can discover the precious treasures of Japan’s art world before following the timeline to premodern Japanese paintings. This is a chance to delve into Japan’s incomparable aesthetic and artistic legacy.
10:00
Tokyo National Museum in Ueno

The National Museum of Nature and Science boasts a large collection of animal specimens.



The Institute for Nature Study is a nature preserve in Tokyo’s Minato Ward.

13:00
Yamatane Museum of Art in Ebisu

Day 2

Travel from Tokyo to Saitama:
Two museums in Saitama Prefecture celebrate the ordinary and mundane through Japan’s particular sense of aesthetics. The Iwatsuki Ningyo Museum sheds light on Japan’s enduring *ningyo* (doll) culture, which has traditionally cherished dolls in many facets of daily life, including the Doll Festival for girls held every year on March 3. Visitors can also discover the exquisite craftsmanship of master artisans whose skills have supported and preserved this intricate art form for generations. The Saitama Prefectural Museum of History and Folklore focuses on Saitama’s regional history through exhibits from local festivals. There are also workshops for visitors interested in indigo dyeing and crafting.
10:00-11:00
Travel from Tokyo to Saitama
11:00
Iwatsuki Ningyo Museum
15:00
Saitama Prefectural Museum of History and Folklore

Day 3

Travel from Saitama to Kanazawa
This is a day for self-reflection. People can get in touch with their inner Zen philosopher while strolling among artworks that represent the newest and best of the modern art world.



The Yamatane Museum of Art is home to a variety of Japanese paintings, including the “Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons” folding screen by Suzuki Kiitsu.

9:00-11:30
Travel to Kanazawa
13:00
D.T. Suzuki Museum
15:00
21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

Day 4

Travel from Kanazawa to Kaga Onsen
Ishikawa is a region that’s crammed with glorious colors and astounding form. Visitors can experience the unparalleled world of Ishikawa’s art and craftwork.
10:00
Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art
11:00-12:30
Travel to Kaga Onsen Hot Springs
14:00
Kutaniyaki Art Museum

Day 5

Travel from Kaga Onsen to Kyoto
Here, people can walk through the streets of centuries-past Kyoto. The Toei Kyoto Studio Park transports visitors to the Edo Period (1603 to 1867). Visitors can stroll through the open-air sets of films and dramas wearing period costumes and take a seat in the samurai and ninja shows. After that time machine experience, treat your senses to the classical and Buddhist art treasures at the Kyoto National Museum. Revel in the ancient capital’s millennium of beauty.
9:00-11:30
Travel to Kyoto
13:00
Toei Kyoto Studio Park
Kyoto National Museum

Day 6

Travel from Kyoto to Nara
Buddhist art is the artistic manifestation of the quest for Nirvana. The faith, beauty and spirituality of Japan presides in every corner of the Nara National Museum, a Buddhist facility in the heart of Nara Park. It’s near Todaiji and Kofukuji temples, making this a unique chance to see both museum treasures and two UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
10:00-11:00
En route to Nara
11:00
Nara National Museum

Day 7

Transit from Nara to Osaka
Classic Japanese art meets mind-boggling holograms at the Koji Kinutani Tenku Art Museum, named after the master fresco artist whose works captivate and fascinate the viewer with their vibrant colors and sensuous energy.
10:00-11:00
En route to Osaka
11:00
Koji Kinutani Tenku Art Museum

Customer reviews

Travelers who used the JCP gave us their feedback. Rick West from the U.S. state of Utah visited the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo.
“One of the highlights of my visit was an exhibition tracing the history of Japanese calculators,” he said. “I found it fascinating to see how the soroban, a tool deeply embedded in Japanese culture, had evolved under the influence of mechanization. It was a great experience to glimpse the roots of computing in Japan.”
West added that he recommends the JCP to travelers with a “broad range of interests and strong intellectual curiosity.”
Marc Philippe who was visiting from Le Havre, France, said he had decided to visit at least one museum per day during his one-week stay in Tokyo.
“For me, museums are more than cultural sites: They offer calm moments in the middle of a very active trip, and a way to connect with the history, art and identity of Japan. Looking for a practical solution, I discovered the Japan Cultural Passport. It allowed me to explore a wide range of museums across different districts, each with its own unique atmosphere.”
“Switching between districts, museums, and atmospheres felt like moving through different worlds within Tokyo,” Philippe said. “Each museum told a distinct part of Japan’s story: art in Ebisu, nature in the heart of Minato-ku, historical treasures in Ueno, futuristic science in Ariake and modern creativity near the Imperial Palace.”
Summing up his experience, Philippe said: “I strongly recommend the pass to anyone visiting Japan. Slowing down inside these cultural spaces allowed me to reconnect with history, art, and even nature, in the middle of one of the busiest cities in the world. The Japan Cultural Passport made this journey not only convenient, but also meaningful.”

Japan Cultural Passport Campaign

Aug. 5 (Tue.) to Feb. 8 (Sun.), 2026

7 days: ¥3,500 | 14 days: ¥6,000 | 21 days: ¥8,000

The Japan Cultural Passport is a digital pass that lets you explore about 30 cultural facilities nationwide with just a QR code on your smartphone. From cultural properties and modern art to science and technology, it eases access to a wide variety of attractions in a convenient and cost-effective way.

Featured regions: Kanto / Chubu / Kansai / Chugoku / Kyushu

Highlights include:

National treasure artworks, modern and contemporary Japanese paintings, innovative design and craftwork, samurai and ninja period drama sets, regional cultural heritage, seasonal gardens and displays of dinosaur skeletons and meteorites.

Model Courses:

Recommended routes are introduced on the official website at <https://www.japanculturalpassport.com/en/>

Pass Overview

- Only 5,000 available
- Valid for 7, 14 or 21 consecutive days
- One-time entry to each facility

