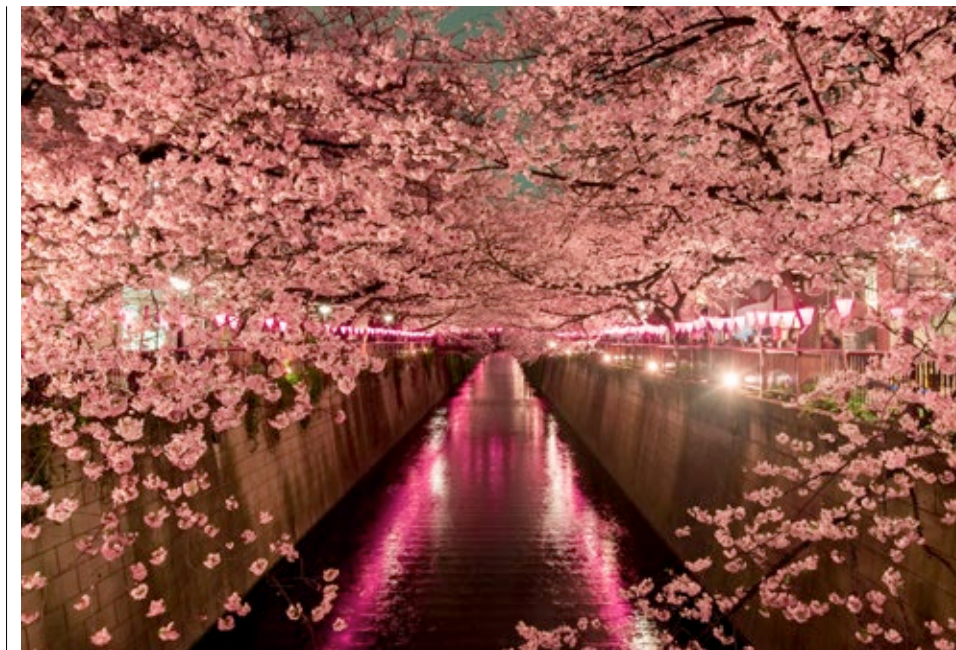


IN 2024, THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN ISN'T JUST A BOOMING TOURISM HOTSPOT - IT'S ALSO A POPULAR DESTINATION FOR CORPORATE AND BUSINESS TRAVELLERS, WITH EVOLVING TRADE AND TRAVEL REGULATIONS CREATING INCREASINGLY STRONG TIES TO THE MIDDLE EAST

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

# JAPAN IN BLOOM



ABOVE: Cherry blossoms at night in Tokyo

BELOW: Chureito Pagoda and Mount Fuji

OPPOSITE PAGE: Chidorigafuchi Park

**O**n any given year, from late March to around mid-May, all over Japan you will find groups of people huddled together in parks and public gardens, with a picnic blanket and food and drinks, enjoying an intimate moment with nature as they pause to enjoy the crisp spring air, and the delicate scent of cherry blossoms on the breeze. This centuries-old practice is called hanami, or “flower viewing”, and it is a treasured part of the annual cherry blossom season that Japan has become famous for during the springtime season.

The cherry blossom, or sakura as it's known in Japanese, is the national flower of Japan, and the flower has now become almost synonymous with Japanese culture. Hanami is the name used for its viewing by day; at night, the practice is called yozakura, and both customs have been celebrated since the Nara period in 710 to 794 CE, when it is said that members of the imperial court and elite classes of Japan would gather to enjoy poetry and fine beverages underneath plum blossom trees at the turning of the season. Over time, the cherry blossom began to attract more attention than the plum blossom, and the practice

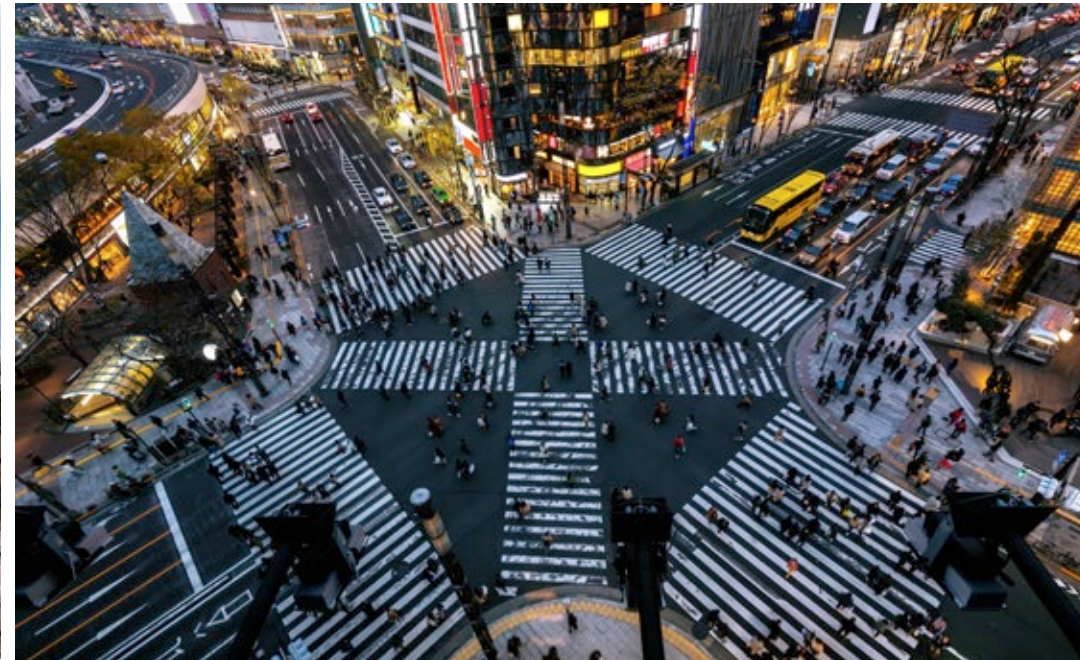
has since evolved into the one that is still followed in modern times. In fact, in the current day, this season is so widely appreciated that each year, an estimated 63 million people travel to view these flowering trees both domestically and internationally – and in doing so, spend around US\$2.7 billion within the country.

With recent statistics showing that Japan's tourism is flourishing – it's now officially back at its pre-pandemic levels, with an estimated 2,688,100 international visitors predicted in 2024 – it seems →



RICHIE CHAN, TAWATCHAI1990/ADOBE STOCK, JAPAN TOURISM





Longing for epic views of sweeping pink trees? Here are some top-rated spots for viewing cherry blossoms across Japan



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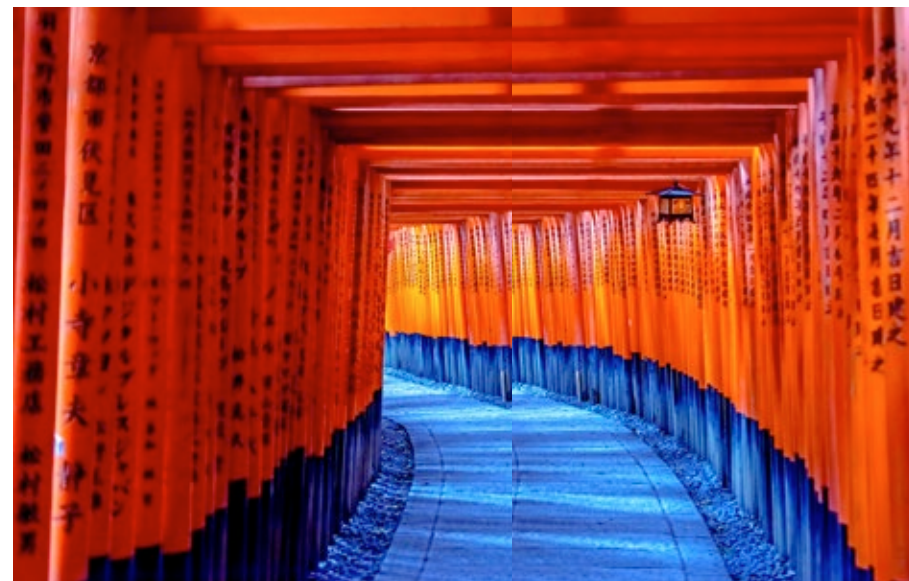
that cherry blossoms are not the only things that are blooming in the country right now. There has been such a large influx of tourists in recent years that in order to counteract potentially negative side-effects on local infrastructure and services, and to preserve quality of life for residents, new measures have been introduced in popular cities including Tokyo and Kyoto. The tourism ministry's overtourism prevention plan includes an increase in bus and taxi fleets – particularly in busy areas during their most popular seasons – while also encouraging travellers to visit some of the country's lesser-known areas, to distribute the spread of people. New initiatives have also been introduced for "Hands-Free Tourism", through luggage storage and delivery services that enable tourists to travel from place to place more easily without the need to schlep heavy luggage with them – and in doing so, reducing the time they take to move around public transport, and lessening its knock-on effect on congestion.

So what can this meteoric comeback be attributed to? To start with, despite the event being pushed

**Cherry blossoms are not the only things that are blooming in the country right now**

back by a year due to the pandemic, city-wide investments for the 2020 Summer Olympics left behind improved infrastructure that had been in the works for years since the hosting designation was announced, including multiple new skyscrapers, green spaces, and sport and education facilities. Work on a new Shinagawa Station, which began in 2017, is still ongoing, and its completion date is currently being planned for 2027 or 2028, to coincide with the opening of the ultrafast Chuo Shinkansen Line that will connect Tokyo to Nagoya, Mie, Nara, and Osaka. When complete, the Shinagawa Station project will transform the surrounding area into a bustling urban neighbourhood with offices, hotels, a large pedestrian deck, and an international exhibition hall.

The pandemic pause rebounded with a later surge, with many



international visitors having shifted their travels from 2020 and 2021 to 2022 and 2023. In a world where travel-related online content is often dominated by quirky, unusual, and "won't-see-it-anywhere-else" experiences, many of Japan's unique offerings, served with its stunning backdrops that seamlessly blend both modern city vibes and plenty of lush nature, have easily gone viral on social media. And while Japan once had a reputation of being prohibitively expensive for many, this too has changed in recent years – in fact, the 2024 annual *Holiday Money*

Report from the UK Post Office, which creates a Worldwide Holiday Costs Barometer by calculating and comparing the average costs of visiting tourist attractions and dining out, among other factors, has named Tokyo the fourth most affordable place to visit in the world this year. And it's not only tourists who are benefiting – these changes have also made Japan's capital city more appealing and accessible for remote workers and business travellers. In 2023, Tokyo was named the fastest-growing destination for digital nomads, following a whopping 369 per

cent increase in remote workers since 2022. Business travel to the country took a hit due to the pandemic, with the number of international travellers coming to Japan for business having dropped to 0.02 million in 2021 – a dramatic decrease from 2019's 1.76 million – but in 2022, this figure crawled back up to 0.42 million, and a number of forward-thinking changes in legislation suggest that this will keep rising in the years to come.

Japan's ties to the Middle East, in particular, are only set to grow due to a series of recently-changed regulations that are strengthening business and

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Osaka Castle with cherry blossoms; Intersection in Ginza, Tokyo; A selection of traditional Nigiri and Maki sushi; Red Torii gates in Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto

- ✿ Mitsuike Park, Yokohama
- ✿ Hirosaki Park, Aomori, Hirosaki
- ✿ Arakurayama Sengen Park, Fujiyoshida City in Yamanashi
- ✿ The Philosopher's Path, Kyoto
- ✿ Mirajima Island, Hiroshima
- ✿ Kintaikyō Bridge, Yamaguchi
- ✿ Mount Yoshino, Nara
- ✿ Kenrokuen Garden, Ishikawa
- ✿ Takada Castle, Niigata

economic ties between the two countries, while also making it easier to visit the country for tourism purposes. As of winter 2022, UAE nationals no longer need an entry permit to Japan, and in spring 2023, Japan commenced visa waiver arrangements for short-term stays for Qatari nationals. Also in 2023, Japan announced that residents of 10 countries could now easily apply for an e-visa, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia joining Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, the UK, and the US on that list. And 2024 welcomes two new direct routes between the GCC →

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## QUICK TIPS ON JAPANESE BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

Punctuality is highly valued in Japanese culture – be on time, or early, for meetings.

Modesty is also valued, both through minimalistic clothing in simple colours, and by avoiding excessive flattery and undue loudness.

Privacy is also held in high esteem – try to avoid asking people overly-personal questions.

Following a first name with the honorific “san”, e.g. “Khaled-san”, is a sign of respect.

When presenting your business card to a recipient (or receiving one), do so with both hands.

Age, status, and hierarchy are traditionally taken into consideration in both social and business interactions alike, with the most senior in position greeted first.

Bowing is a sign of respect – if you are bowed to, you may mimic the motion to be polite.

**TOP RIGHT:** A cup of matcha, a popular Japanese green tea

and Japan, with Qatar Airways having resumed its daily nonstop service to Osaka Kansai International airport in March, and Japan Airlines launching daily flights between Doha’s Hamad International airport and Tokyo Haneda in April, as the first Japanese airline to operate a nonstop service to and from the Middle East.

The Japanese government is reportedly working on increasing the amount of multi-lingual support options available for foreigners visiting the country, by relaxing old rules around which individuals can provide tour guide or interpreter services. Upon arrival in the country, foreign visitors can now ease their journey through immigration by preparing a QR code through the Visit Japan website, to speed up the process. Meanwhile, the Suica, an IC card issued by JR East that allows users to ride public transport such as trains and buses, and at a number of shops and dining venues, with just a single tap, is constantly working to open up to more foreign payment methods, and to make its app version available to foreigners with Apple Pay. In January this year, the IJ – Internet Initiative Japan Inc. – also announced seven new plans for its Japan Travel Sim (eSIM) services, which will provide easy mobile data communication options to visitors for up to 30 days.

It isn’t just Middle Eastern visitors heading to Japan, either – the number of visitors from Japan to the GCC has also been increasing, with 30,000 more heading from Japan to the UAE in 2022 than in 2021. A recent survey conducted by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) found that more than 90 per cent of GCC citizens would like to visit Japan, but haven’t had the chance to do so yet – so in late 2023, the JNTO launched a “Japan Travel House” in Qatar, to help provide more people in the GCC with information about the country, from details of tourism attractions to education on the country’s culture and traditions.

The last few years have seen a series of new developments take place to foster greater understanding and



friendship between Japan and the Middle East, through bilateral ties in both tourism and business. In 2023, Japan deepened its relationship with the region through multiple new partnerships and initiatives that are set to bolster ties through bilateral trade and investment across various sectors. The signing of 23 major new initiatives with the UAE centered around green and clean energy aim to combine the strengths of both countries through advanced technology, geography, investment, and renewable energy resources. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Japan finalised 14 new agreements for cooperation in the healthcare, water, energy, and financial sectors, notably including the opportunities for Japanese banks surrounding the kingdom’s many giga-projects.

Japan is a country that has, historically, expertly managed to sweep into modernity while holding onto its many traditions, striking a delicate and successful balance between the two. A walk through the bustling capital can take you from the

dizzily busy subterranean world that encompasses its metro system and the shops and restaurants that have sprung up around it, and its various modern districts featuring cutting-edge technology and all of the latest fashions, to those that still hold true to the retro charms of historical traditions, complete with old temples, zen gardens, and quiet winding lanes. It’s a destination that seems to have it all, and for the many visitors that insist no amount of time in the country ever seems to be enough, a return trip is often dreamed of before they’ve even left. This dynamic land has already been popular for commercial travel from surrounding countries for decades, and with plenty more to look forward to in the coming years – including major landmarks such as immersive theme parks and art museums, distinctive and multi-faceted commercial districts, major hotel openings, and some jaw-dropping architecture – it’s a prime time for it to be discovered by new tourists and business travellers from across the world. **BT**