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Community Publication

# JAPAN

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## The MADNESS is coming

Pages 8-9

## INSIDE INFO



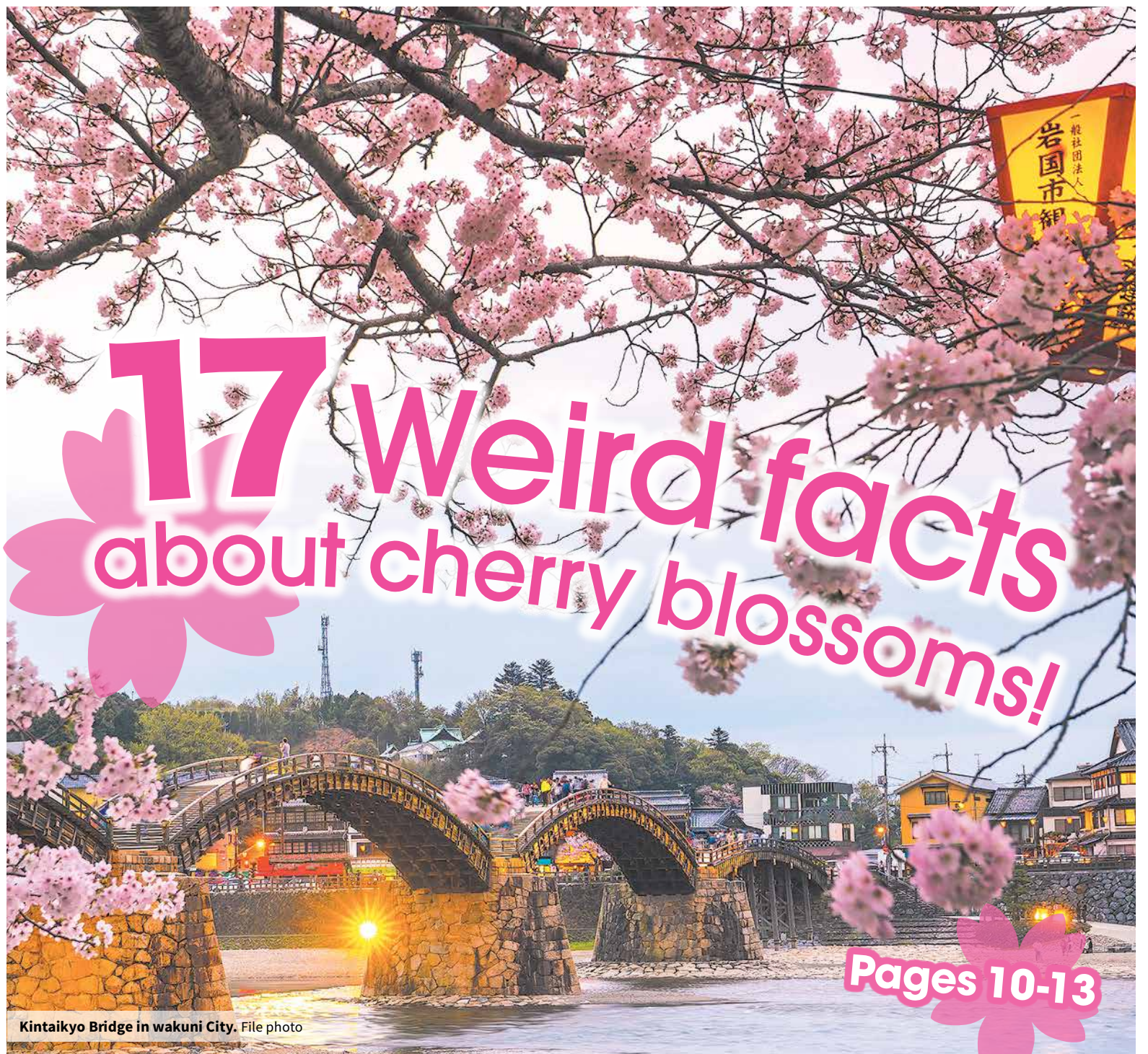
### IT'S THE RIPE TIME FOR STRAWBERRIES!

PAGE 5

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# 17 Weird facts about cherry blossoms!

Pages 10-13

Kintaikyo Bridge in wakuni City. File photo

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# REST AREA REFINEMENT

Take road trip on Japan highway for gyutan grilled beef tongue

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,  
STRIPES JAPAN

Japan's rest areas are more than just gas stations and bathrooms. Many offer an extensive assortment of local foods, souvenirs and more.

If you're traveling north on the Tohoku Expressway, the Chojahara Service Area (outbound from Tokyo), has a restaurant serving up gyutan grilled beef tongue, a Sendai specialty.

Gyutan has a unique tender-yet-crispy texture and has been a fascination for locals and tourists to Sendai alike. The balanced,

**LOCATION:** Chojahara SA (outbound from Tokyo),  
25 Horiba, Miyazawa, Furukawa, Osaki City,  
Miyagi Prefecture

**HOURS:** Mon. - Fri., 11 a.m. - 3 p.m., 5 - 7 p.m.,  
Sat., Sun. and holidays, 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.

**WEBSITE:** <https://tabelog.com/miyagi/A0403/A040301/4016474/>

**TEL:** 0229-28-3737



WEBSITE

for the meat.

I devoured my meal and enjoyed all the textures and flavors. The juicy meat dipped in the savory sauce with a slight kick was mouthwatering. The oxtail soup was hearty and rich — perfect fuel for the road trip ahead.

Meals like these are why Japan's rest areas reign supreme. Whether you're traveling north and get a chance to stop at Chojahara Service Area or traveling elsewhere, you're going to want to stop at the rest areas to check out what delicious surprises are in store!

[takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com](mailto:takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com)

More on  
Japanese  
rest areas  
Page 4



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**Fujigawa PA**  
in the Tomei Expressway

**NEOPASA Shizuoka**  
in the Tomei Expressway

# Don't miss Japan's rest areas while traveling along expressways

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI, STRIPES JAPAN

**D**riving long distances in Japan may seem intimidating, but don't be afraid to hit the road! The country's expressways are part of an efficient system that can get you virtually anywhere in the country without worry. Smooth roads and convenience aside, Japan's parking and service areas are another feature well worth hopping in a car to explore.

Though you may think roadside stations in Japan are like the run-of-the-mill rest areas you'd find in the States, these offer so much more. They are

places to rest, grab regional food and souvenirs, and to use the spotless facilities.

Both parking areas (PA) and service areas (SA) are spread throughout the expressway system and provide various features to make the drive even better. PAs are found every 15 kilometers along the expressway and have public restrooms, vending machines and a restaurant or convenience store. SAs are spread out about 50 kilometers on the road and tend to be larger with convenience stores, souvenir shops, toilets, full-service restaurants and gas stations.

So, be sure to drop by one or more on your next road trip to grab a snack and visit the food

courts inside. Believe me, you won't regret it! And for the ultimate in relaxation, some extra-large SAs have hot springs to soak in or amusement parks with Ferris wheels and other rides for the kids!

Stop by Umihotaru PA, an artificial island on the Tokyowan Aqua-line, and you can enjoy breathtaking panoramic night view of the Tokyo Gulf and surrounding metropolitan skyline. For a taste of old Japan, head to the Hanyu PA on the Tohoku Expressway, which features a traditional façade that will transport you to the feudal times of the samurai.

Japan's parking and service areas are destinations in their own right, and you'll definitely enjoy exploring them while traveling around Japan.

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,  
STRIPES JAPAN

In Japan, strawberry picking is a popular spring activity. When the fruits become ready to pick in early January, many families flock to strawberry farms, some even making a trip to famed picking spots in mountainous regions, to enjoy the sweet, red fruit in season.

Recently, my wife and I visited a farm in Atsugi City in search of the taste of spring.

Located in the middle of a green field along the Sagami River, Sugiyama Strawberry Farm is a scenic farm against the backdrop of Mount Fuji and other mountain ranges.

Known as one of the most popular strawberry picking sites in the region, 3,000 to 5,000 people visit the farm throughout the season, with no less than 100-120 visitors each weekend, according to the owner Hiroshi Sugiyama.

"Many American service members and their family members have visited us," he said.

An admission of 2,800 yen (\$19) got us inside the greenhouse. Sugiyama gave us condensed milk in a plastic cup to dip our strawberries, and showed us how to find and pick the sweet fruit.

Sugiyama gave us the same advice he gives to those who go picking.

"Choose smaller berries that are red, as they are usually sweeter and tastier than big ones," he said. "And white berries don't mean they weren't ripe. They are ripe and tasty, just like red one. So, pick both red and white fruits and compare them with each other."

Although Atsugi has moderate climate and temperature, which is suitable for farming strawberries, Sugiyama grows the strawberries in greenhouse, like most of other farms throughout the country. The reasoning according to Sugiyama is that the greenhouse protects from wind, rain, birds and insects.

Ten types of 9,000 strawberry seedlings are cultivated in the Sugiyama's greenhouse, and eight of them, Akihime, Sachinoka, Yotsuboshi, Koiminori, Kaorino, Oishii-berii, Moikko and Benihoppe, are

available for picking.

"These eight brands of strawberries are suitable for picking, as they rise and bear flowers and fruits very quickly," Sugiyama said.

It was fun to pick different types of strawberries and compare their textures and flavors with each other. Sachinoka was smaller, crispier and sourer than the others, while Akihime was larger and had a soft, springy texture with a sweeter taste. Benihoppe, which is a crossbreed of the two, was large and bright red with a well-balanced taste. Visitors can now try up to 14 different varieties of strawberries grown on the farm, Sugiyama said.

The strawberries are grown higher than ground level, which made it easier to pick.

"The high planters allow anybody, from small children to seniors in a wheelchair, enjoy picking our juicy, tasty strawberries," Sugiyama said.



VIEW VIDEO!

#### Sugiyama Ichigo-en (strawberry farm)

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**TEL:** 046-228-1906 / 090-5213-0922 (Japanese)

**EMAIL:** nrn28098@nifty.com



#### Strawberry Farms in Kanto Plain

##### • Tsukuihama Kanko Farm

Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Pref.

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For reservations or more info, call 046-849-5001 or visit: [ja-yokosukahayama.or.jp](http://ja-yokosukahayama.or.jp) (Japanese)

##### • Strawberry House

Ebina City, Kanagawa Pref.

Open until mid-June, Only Sat., Sun. and holidays: 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m., All-you-can-eat (30 min), Ages 12 and older: 2,500 yen, Ages 3-11: 1,200 yen.

For reservations or more info, call 046-238-2750 or visit: [strawberryhouse-ebina.com](http://strawberryhouse-ebina.com)

##### • Fukai Farm

Saitama City, Saitama Pref.

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For reservation or more information, call 048-794-1243 or visit: [fukainouen.com/strawberry](http://fukainouen.com/strawberry)

##### • Niikura Farm

Tama City, Tokyo

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# AnimeJapan and Tokyo Motorcycle Show

## Opposites attract to Tokyo Big Sight for one weekend in March

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEROME BAQUILAR,  
STRIPES JAPAN

Every year in mid/late March, around the time cherry blossoms start to bloom and attract crowds in the Tokyo and Kanto Plains area, Tokyo Big Sight exhibition center also opens to big crowds for one weekend. And not just for one, but two great events: AnimeJapan and Tokyo Motorcycle Show.

The Tokyo Motorcycle Show runs March 22-24 in the West Halls of the venue and features all things motorcycles, including major manufacturers out in full force to show off their latest and upcoming vehicles, as well as custom/mod shops displaying their unique custom work.

Whether you're a biker, an aspiring biker or curious about motorcycles, there's a lot to see and do at the Tokyo Motorcycle Show. If you like photography, videography, and everything in between, there's a lot to capture here. It's not just the "race queens" that sit and pose for photos on the bikes; you can, too! It's a lot cooler to take a photo of yourself on a motorcycle than

a car because it's easier to capture yourself and the two-wheeler in their entirety. Also, during the event, riding and stunt demonstrations will be held at the outdoor area of the West Halls.

Biking culture has some overlap with various other media, such as television shows, movies, and of course, anime. My favorite anime, Evangelion, always seems to be represented at the Tokyo Motorcycle Show in the form of "Eva"-themed custom bikes, even though there aren't many appearances of two-wheeled vehicles in the anime.

The AnimeJapan expo will take place in the Eastern Halls of Tokyo Big Sight on March 23-24. Previously billed as the Tokyo International Anime Fair, the event has evolved into its current iteration, which is now more foreigner and English friendly.

If you're not yet into anime, or if you're a fan of an older anime looking for something fresh, this is a great place to start. The event draws a plethora of anime purists, young and old, modern anime lovers and anime newbies, so don't worry if

you're not well-versed in the latest or oldest series.

In addition to anime exhibitions, cosplayers and live performances, AnimeJapan will also feature talks with creators, merchandise for sale and screenings.

Like the Tokyo Motorcycle Show, this event will also provide many great photo ops with props, cosplayers, life-sized character displays and more. Don't miss the "anisongs," a portmanteau for anime songs, playing throughout the event area.

The weekend will definitely be a good one to people-watch outside of Tokyo Big Sight and guess which event some members of the crowd are attending. Some are obvious, especially if they are wearing a leather jacket, or a hoodie with fictional drawn characters on it. Most are more subtle in their appearance and some, like me, are attending both events, so the guessing game will be a challenge.

Whichever event appeals to you, Tokyo Big Sight will definitely be the place to be March 22-24. Don't miss out on these great niche gatherings!



### 2024 Tokyo Motorcycle Show

**Date and time:** Fri., Mar. 22, 1 p.m. – 6 p.m.; Sat., Mar. 23, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.; Sun., Mar. 24, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

**Address:** Tokyo Big Sight West Exhibition Hall 1-4, atrium and rooftop exhibition hall 3-10-1 Ariake, Koto-ku, Tokyo

**Tickets:** Same-day ticket: 2,400 yen; Advance ticket (adult): 2,000 yen; Advance ticket (pair ticket): 3,600 yen; Advance ticket (Under 22 yrs old): 1,200 yen; Free entry for high school students and younger.

### AnimeJapan 2024

**Date and time:** Sat., Mar. 23 to Sun., Mar. 24, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. both days. Last entry at 4:30 p.m.

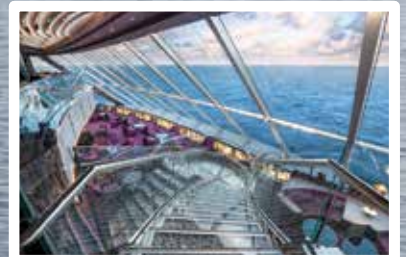
**Address:** Tokyo Big Sight East Exhibition Hall 1-8 3-10-1 Ariake, Koto-ku, Tokyo

**Tickets:** 2,300 yen per day; free entry for children under 12



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Sakura bloom at Aoyama Cemetery in Tokyo, March 24, 2023. Photos by Akifumi Ishikawa, Stars and Stripes

People enjoy the blooming sakura at Chidorigafuchi Park near the Imperial Palace in Tokyo in March 2022.

The official forecast  
Japan Meteorological Corporation

# First cherry blossoms may appear early this year

BY HANA KUSUMOTO,  
STARS AND STRIPES  
Published: March 1, 2024

TOKYO — Cherry blossoms, or sakura, in Japan will begin to flower in mid-March at the earliest, according to recent forecasts by commercial meteorologists. The Somei-Yoshino, a hybrid variant and one of the most widely planted cherry trees across Japan, should start blooming a few days earlier or about the same time as they do every year throughout the country, according to a forecast from the Japan Meteorological Corp. The trees will begin blooming first around March 18 in Kochi city in western Japan, four days earlier than an average year,

according to the forecast. Trees in Nagoya city in central Japan will follow around March 19, five days ahead of average, and in Gifu city six days earlier, according to Japan Meteorological Corp. “Development of flower buds were believed to have been delayed compared to an average year throughout Japan this season,” the company states on its website. “But the growth speed of buds is faster since the temperature is expected to be higher than an average year after the buds awaken (from dormancy), and they are expected to bloom at the same time or earlier than an average year,” it said. Cherry trees are expected to bloom in Tokyo, Kyoto and Hiroshima around March 22, in Fukuoka city around March 21 and

Aomori city around April 17, according to the forecast. Blooms are expected to peak in Tokyo around March 29, in Fukuoka around March 30, in Kyoto around March 31, in Hiroshima around April 1 and in Aomori around April 22, it stated. Sakura last only a few weeks and people in Japan take the opportunity for hanami, or blossom viewing, to celebrate spring and admire the flowers. They will gather in cherry tree groves in public parks and along river walks throughout the country to picnic beneath the blossoms. Other forecast companies also predicted a potentially early sakura. Weathernews Inc.

on Feb. 28 predicted the blooms would occur in Tokyo around March 18, followed by Fukuoka and Yokohama around March 20. It forecasted a peak bloom two to five weeks after the first flowers appear. Japan Weather Association on Feb. 29 predicted the flowers will appear earliest in Tokyo, Nagoya, Gifu and Kochi on March 21. In 2010, the official Japan Meteorological Agency stopped forecasting cherry blossom dates, which it had forecast since 1955, after private companies began putting out forecasts. kusumoto.hana@stripes.com @HanaKusumoto

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# The Madness is coming

More than 50 million brackets will be filled out this year as the annual madness breaks out again in March. So, don't be that person who doesn't fill one out. Here's a blank one for you, courtesy of Pizza Hut!

## 2024 NCAA TOURNAMENT



Final Four

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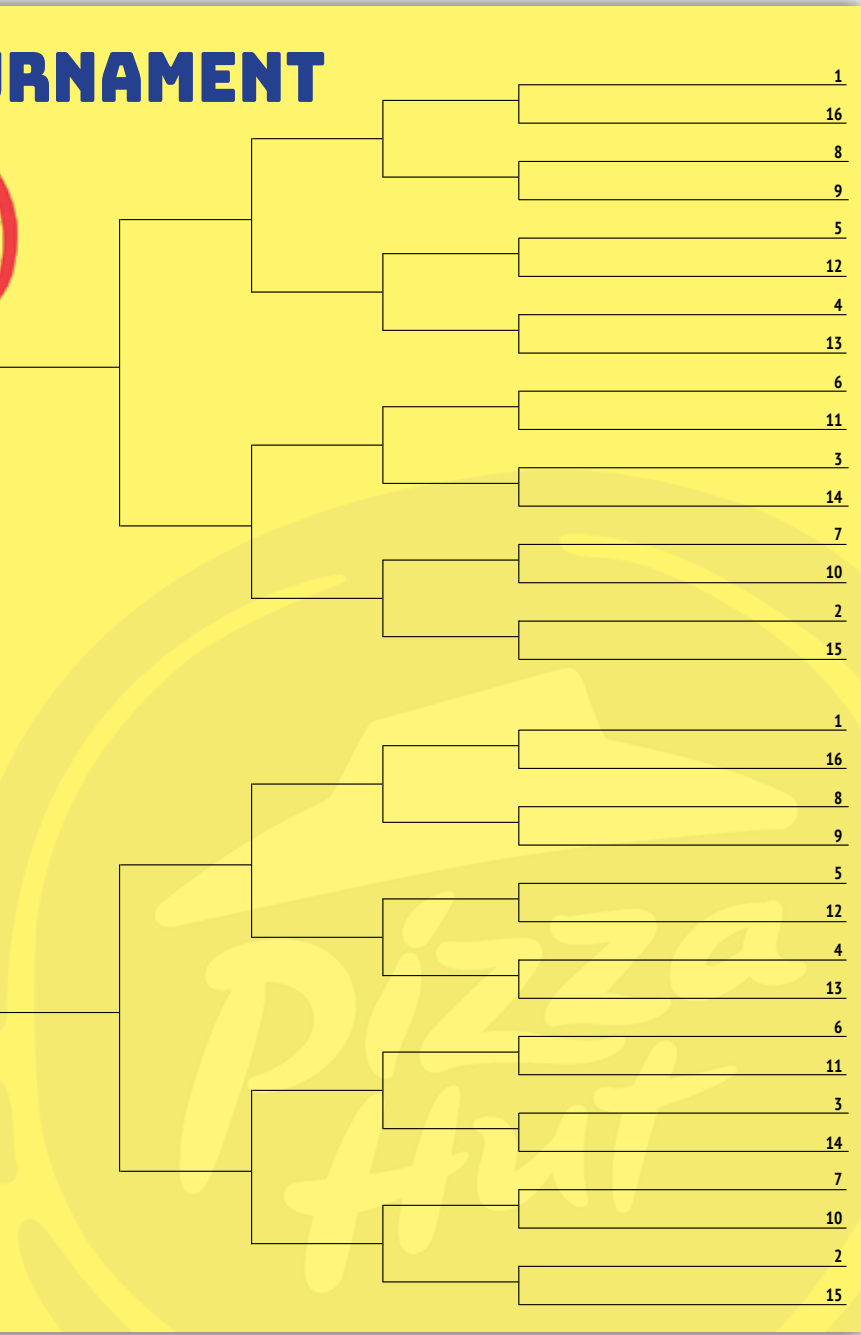
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# 17 weird cherry blossom facts to ring in the season!

LIVE JAPAN

**A** curious cherry blossom fact: While Japan's national flower is the chrysanthemum, many people outside Japan probably associate sakura—or cherry blossom—with the country.

But what's the big deal about cherry blossoms in Japan? Bearing in mind that sakura are in bloom for only about one week, there's a flurry of activity surrounding the season. And once the buds open, there's an explosive chain reaction that results in a beautiful display of pale pink, finally fluttering to the ground in grand finale known as sakura fubuki—sakura snow. Though it's for a short period of time, a trip to see cherry blossoms in Japan is a wonderful way to enjoy nature in all its glory.

We've put together these cherry blossom facts to help you enjoy the viewing of cherry blossoms this year!



## 1 What is the history around sakura in Japan?

Our first of several cherry blossom facts is that according to the traditional Japanese calendar, spring officially starts on February 4, the day known as risshun. Kicking off spring in Japan is the February bloom of Japanese plum blossoms.

This is followed by the early spring celebration of Hina Matsuri on March 3 that wishes health and happiness for girls. After the ornamental dolls of Hina Matsuri are put away, it's only a matter of time until the cherry blossoms are in bloom.

As spring's premier event, it's no surprise that talk

of cherry blossoms dominate conversation in Japan. It's no exaggeration to say that all of Japan is glued to their TV screen anxiously awaiting updates on the weather forecast.

Will there be sunny skies for this year's cherry blossom viewing party? Exactly when will the cherry blossoms begin their bloom? Will spring showers put a premature end to cherry blossom festivities? The following are some of the other major questions asked about cherry blossoms in Japan!



## 2 Why are there so many cherry trees in Japan?

Viewing cherry blossoms has been a national pastime since the 8th century. Another of our cherry blossom facts is that there are many species of cherry, some of which have been cultivated through cross breeding. These efforts took off in the 14th century where they became cultivated as an ornamental flower.

In the mid-19th century, a variety of cherry blossom known Somei-Yoshino (*Prunus x yedoensis*) was first introduced to Japan. From the late 19th century onward, its cultivation spread across Japan, resulting in it becoming the most abundant species of cherry tree.



## 3 What is the significance of cherry blossoms in Japanese culture?

Around February each year, shops all around Japan stock their shelves with sakura-themed items, snacks, and dishes. This is way before the first flowers open, mind you, but the mood is set well in advance.

Every year, this cherry blossom market grows larger and the range of products and food centered on the flowers increase. Especially dessert creations and sweets are plentifully available during March and April when Japan actually experiences the beautiful cherry blossom.

But why is Japan so fascinated with the sakura phenomenon since centuries ago? Cherry blossom trees have many meanings to the Japanese. A lot has to do with the very brief life of the flowers, blooming only for about a week to ten days.

Their fleeting beauty illustrates all too perfectly that nothing in this world is permanent, everything passes away at some point. A sad but beautiful admiration for this impermanence has been an important part of the Japanese mindset since ancient times. In Japanese, it's

called "mono no aware." This mindset can be found in the smallest things of Japanese daily life.

Fans of manga and anime might know the expression "hana yori dango (food over flowers)," which simply means to be present in the moment by pairing nature's beauty with equally appealing and delicious food. There are many ways to enjoy the beauty of cherry blossoms but they nearly always include alcohol and food!

In other countries, the start of the school year or school semester is in September. However, April, when the cherry blossoms are in bloom, is the start of the Japanese academic and fiscal calendar. The bloom of cherry blossoms in Japan matches up nicely with this period, making it an excellent opportunity for new coworkers and classmates to get to know each other.

This is the main event on Japan's social calendar. Plenty of Japanese look forward to gathering with their friends, family, and acquaintances.



## 4 What should I wear to see cherry blossoms

Although the cherry blossoms bloom in spring, you should dress in layers, especially when going out at night. The sun's rays certainly feel nice in the daytime, but once the sun goes down, the chill sets in!



Somei-Yoshino



## 5 When is the best time for cherry blossoms

This is a commonly asked question and another of our very important cherry blossom facts! Starting around March 20, the cherry blossom trees in the southern region of Japan (Kyushu) begin to bloom. Next, is the island region of Shikoku, Chugoku (Hiroshima/Okayama), the Kinki/Kansai Region (Kyoto/Osaka), and Tokai (Nagoya).

Then, the cherry blossom front reaches the Kanto (Tokyo) region by the end of March. It then moves upward to Hokuriku (Kanazawa) and Tohoku (Sendai), reaching Aomori in mid-April and the northern island of Hokkaido at the start of May.

In the Kanto region, buds turn yellow-green and open in mid-March. Gradually they become pink. On average you can expect the cherry blossoms to be in full bloom around five days after the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) announces that the buds have opened. However, if there is a cold snap the flowers will reach peak bloom ten days after the JMA announcement.

You have a two-week window starting from when the buds bloom to when they start to wither. This is all of course dependent upon factors such as wind and rain.

There are several terms in the Japanese language used to describe the trees when they are three-quarters in bloom and nearly in bloom. It is around this time that the petals take on their signature pink color. It is also around this time where you can see both the cherry blossom buds and blossoms at the same time. ↗





## How long do the cherry blossoms last in Japan?

→ Full bloom (mankai) typically occurs within a week after the first opening of cherry blossoms (kaika); you can expect to enjoy the cherry blossoms at peak bloom for about one week.



Please check more details for cherry blossom forecast in Japan 2024



WEBSITE



## Can I still enjoy cherry blossoms in Japan even after peak bloom?



You will see hazakura, cherry blossom trees whose blossoms have been replaced with fresh green leaves, anywhere from April to May.

The contrast between the dainty pale pink petals and the vibrant green leaves is nature's signal for summer to make its entrance. When you see hazakura, you're witnessing the change in seasons, a sayonara to spring.



## Any tips for seeing cherry blossoms at night?

The best way to delight in the full bloom of cherry blossoms is under the moonlight. The moonlight casts a filter over the blossoms, creating a dreamy, romantic mood.

In Tokyo, try to visit a popular spot like Ueno or Rikugien in the daytime then again at night to marvel in the change in scenery. Accent your nighttime viewing with a bottle of your favorite beverage.



## Where are cherry blossom trees found and what can I expect to see during season?

It's said that Japan has 600 species of cherry blossom trees. Around 80% of them are Somei-Yoshino. When cherry blossoms reach peak bloom depends on their region and species. For example, some varieties in Okinawa bloom as early as January, while trees in other areas of Japan don't bloom until mid-May. Furthermore, trees in Hokkaido stay in bloom much longer compared to other regions.

There are also several species of cherry blossom trees that bloom even in the winter. You can see these trees in bloom twice a year, once in April and again from October to January.

While cherry blossoms are closely associated with spring, there are times where unusual weather patterns

will cause them to bloom in autumn or winter. Cherry blossoms prepare for their spring debut in the winter. But if the mechanism that controls their bloom is interrupted they will mistake the warm temperature for spring and open prematurely.

When cherry blossoms bloom depends heavily on location and temperature, so it's a good idea to keep an eye on the forecast.



Somei-Yoshino



## Where to see cherry blossoms?



Photo by Takahiro Takiguchi

### Hashirimizu Reservoir

Known as a spring-fed area near a historical Shinto shrine, Hashirimizu Water Supply Facility and adjacent park is a great cherry blossoms site in Yokosuka City. Enjoy the breathtaking beauty of hundreds of sakura blossoms with a priceless view of Mt. Fuji and Tokyo Bay as a backdrop. The Water Supply Facility was constructed during the 19th century by French engineers and processes about 1,000 cubic meters for spring water every day. Visitors can enjoy the spring water from the facility at fountains in the parking lot. Though the facility is closed to visitors due to the on-going state of emergency, the park is open and has many cherry blossom trees to delight in.

#### Hashirimizu Water Supply Facility Reservoir and Park

- **LOCATION:** 1-2-1 Hashirimizu, Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Pref.
- **OPEN:** 5 a.m. - 9 p.m.



WEBSITE



### Chidorigafuchi

Right next to Ichigaya Station on the JR Sobu Line is Chidorigafuchi and its pink double cherry trees. Rent a rowboat to take a better look at the flowers. The double cherry tree reaches peak boom two weeks after Somei-Yoshimo.

- **LOCATION:** 2 Sanbancho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo
- **HOURS:** (boat) 11 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. (1,600 yen per hour)



WEBSITE



### Koishikawa Korakuen

The variety of cherry blossom tree here is known as shidare zakura, or weeping cherry blossom tree, which reaches peak bloom a week before the Somei-Yoshino. There are also Somei-Yoshino at Koishikawa Korakuen. If you're lucky you might be able to see both in bloom at the same time.

- **LOCATION:** 1-6-6 Koraku, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
- **HOURS:** 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
- **ADMISSION:** 300 yen



WEBSITE

SEE BLOSSOM ON PAGE 12

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# BLOSSOM: Blooming fun everywhere in spring

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11



## Where to see cherry blossoms in Japan?

Since you've made it all the way to Japan, it's only natural that you want to see more of what this country has to offer. Here are a few places to add to your itinerary.



### Take part in the cherry blossom festival right in front of Kumamoto Castle

The cherry trees on the grounds of Kumamoto Castle are listed Japan's Top 100 Cherry Blossom Viewing Sites. Kumamoto Castle itself is one of the three great castles in Japan.

Enjoy taiko drum performances and dishes made with locally grown ingredients. You might even get the chance to meet Kumamoto prefecture popular mascot, Kumamon!

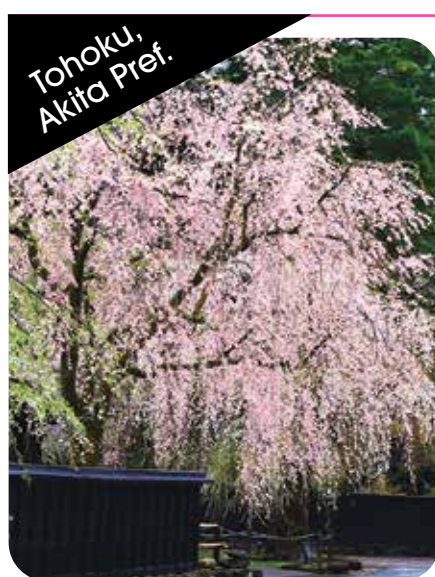
- **EVENT:** Spring at Kumamoto Castle Festival (Haru no Kumamoto to Oshiro Matsuri)
- **DATE:** March 9 to March 24
- **HOURS:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- **ADDRESS:** 1-1 Honmaru, Chuo-ku, Kumamoto, Kumamoto Pref.
- **ENTRY FEE:** 850 yen (group rates and year passes available)



### See riverside cherry blossoms in Omihachiman

Omihachiman is a serene expanse of nature and one of the eight picturesque sights of Lake Biwa. In mid-April, the riverside comes alive with the harmonious union of cherry blossoms and greenery. Be led downstream in a boat, riding along the narrow winding river and taking in your surroundings along the way. It's almost as if you've been transported to a world of fantasy.

- **EVENT:** Omihachiman Riverside Cruise
- **DATES:** April 1 to November 30. Departure times at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. (private tours depart according to schedule)
- **ADDRESS:** 880 Kitanosho-cho, Omihachiman, Shiga Pref.
- **ACCESS:** From JR Omihachiman, take a bus bound for Chomeiji; Get off at Hounenbashi Wasen Noriba Guchi
- **ADMISSION:** Adults 1,500 yen, children 1,000 yen, rental boats from 8,380 yen (price per person, reservation required)



### Relieve history underneath the tunneling weeping cherry tree at the Samurai Residences of Kakunodate

The samurai residence of Kakunodate are where the warriors of feudal Japan called home. There are several buildings on the property that remain intact in an area designated as a Nationally-selected Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings.

The trees 2,000 trees on the grounds of Kakunodate are designated national treasure. When in bloom, they envelop the samurai residences in a tunnel of cherry blossoms, coating the town in a beautiful carpet of pale pink. The Kakunodate Cherry Blossom Festival takes place annually from April 20 to May 5, attracting visitors from all over Japan. Walk in the footsteps of samurai as you explore this castle town and its cherry blossoms.

- **EVENT:** Kakunodate Cherry Blossom Festival
- **DATES:** April 20 to May 5
- **ADDRESS:** Senboku, Kakunodate, Akita Pref.
- **ACCESS:** 20 minute walk from JR Kakunodate Station



## What do Japanese cherry blossoms smell like?

In early spring, you'll see cherry blossom-flavored drinks, sweets, and snacks all over Japan's shops and department stores — but do Japanese cherry blossoms even have a smell?

Generally speaking, the scent of sakura is subtle and delicate, including the flowers of Somei-Yoshino, the variety that makes up 80% of Japan's cherry blossom trees. It's curious among cherry blossom facts, but even if you hold a flower right under your nose, there will only be the tiniest hint of a scent. Most people recognize the scent and taste of cherry blossoms as their salted leaves and petals, or the aromatic traditional sweet called sakuramochi.

For salted cherry blossoms — a recipe that has been around for centuries — people generally use "double cherry blossoms" of the Fugenzo or Kanzan varieties and pickle them with salt or plum vinegar. The leaves of sakura trees are pickled in the same way, coming from the Oshima cherry variety. This pickling brings out the plants' coumarin, a fragrant organic chemical that gives the cherry blossoms a wonderful aroma.

For a genuine whiff of the cherry blossom scent, pour hot water over the flower. The rising steam carries an elegant and sweet aroma, which is the natural scent of sakura.



## What are those birds in Japanese cherry blossom trees?

Birds play a vital role in pollinating flowers and trees. Let's dig deeper into another of our cherry blossom facts and take a look at the species you're likely to find among the cherry blossoms in Japan.

The nectar of cherry blossoms is deep at the base of the petals. Only birds with long thin beaks can reach the nectar. Therefore you're likely to see the Japanese white-eye and brown-eared bulbul nestled among the cherry blossoms. Short beaked birds like the Japanese tit and Eurasian tree sparrow have short stout beaks so they need to tear at the petals to reach the nectar. When you see petals on the ground, it's like the work of those two.

Among the many varieties of cherry blossoms trees, birds are found of Somei-Yoshino and other single petal flower varieties because they have more nectar.

### Japanese white-eye

A bird with a sweet tooth, the Japanese white-eye is attracted to nectar and fruit. You can easily spot them thanks to their yellowish-green feathers and white ring around their eye. The Japanese white eye is frequently mistaken for the Japanese bush warbler but it takes a keen eye and ear to spot the difference.



### Brown-eared bulbul

High in the trees chirping cheerily is the brown-eared bulbul. You can often find them drinking the nectar upside down.



### Japanese tit

You'll instantly recognize the Japanese tit thanks to the bold black line running down its chest. It chirps as if it's urging spring to begin.



### Sparrow

The urban dwelling sparrow is responsible for picking apart the cherry blossom in search for nectar. It's believed that the sparrow drinks the nectar of cherry blossom because their food source is diminishing.



## Can you eat Japanese cherry blossoms?

By pickling both the leaves of Japanese cherry trees and the flowers, they're left intact. Especially the flowers boast a beautiful, vivid pink color and are used as toppings for tea called sakurayu, sakura anpan (bean paste-filled sweet rolls), or sakura onigiri (rice balls).

The most famous dish made with these pickled leaves and flowers is sakuramochi. The rice cake is wrapped in the leaf, while the flower is often — but not always — used as a topping.

Sakurayu is a cherry blossom tea in which hot water is poured over the pickled flower. This tea is somewhat of a lucky charm and often served at weddings or engagements instead of the usual green tea. Regardless of the season, it is commonly enjoyed for celebratory occasions.

Sakura anpan is a spring-tastic twist on the regular sweet roll with bean paste. One of the most famous shops when it comes to sakura anpan is Ginza Kimuraya. After presenting a bread specialty called sakadane anpan sakura to Emperor Meiji, it became a craze all around Japan. The sweet, flavorful bean paste is the heart of this snack, embraced by fluffy bread and topped with a salted cherry blossom that provides a hint of salt.

Sakuramochi can be enjoyed in two different ways. A lot of people eat it as it is, with the pickled leaf wrapped around the rice cake, while others wait until the fragrance of the leaf has soaked the rice cake and then eat them separately from each other.





## What's the difference between sakuramochi from Kansai and Kanto?

→ Sakuramochi is a seasonal word to express spring. It also is a sweet to celebrate the Doll's Festival (Hinamatsuri) on March 3 and one of Japan's most beloved spring desserts.

However, if you did an image search of "sakuramochi," you'll come across at least two kinds that look rather different from each other. This is because the shape of the sakuramochi differs by region.

The sakuramochi of the Kanto region, meaning around Tokyo, is called "chomeiji" and is shaped a bit like a crêpe, with sweet bean paste wrapped in a bread-like baked dough. It is named after the temple where Tokyo's own sakuramochi were first sold. Its creator collected the leaves from the banks of the nearby Sumida River, preserved them, and made the now famous mochi variety.

The people of Edo loved it and even today, you can enjoy the traditional sweet for around 200 yen per mochi (tax included). For 100 yen extra, sit down in the shop and enjoy it with a cup of green tea.

Meanwhile, Kansai's sakuramochi is called "domyoji" and features a round bun shape. It is made from a rice cake powder called domyoji-ko and filled with sweet bean paste. As its name suggests, the mochi was first created at Osaka's Domyoji Temple.

Domyoji-ko is a type of rice that is first cooked and then dried, before being



Above: Sakuramochi, below: Domyoji

pounded into a very coarse powder. It boasts a history of over 1,000 years and was first created as army provision that was easy to carry and easy to store. These kinds of sakuramochi can be found for about 150 yen at basically all convenience stores throughout the country.

During spring, you'll also find all sorts of sakuramochi varieties in the basement floors of Japanese department stores. They tend to be a bit more expensive than the convenience store choices, at about 200 to 300 yen.

A lot of famous confectionery stores offer their creations there and comparing the different creations is a fun and gourmet-centric pastime during spring! The main question is, however: chomeiji or domyoji, which one is your favorite?



## Why are Sakura Cherry Blossom songs such tear-jerkers?

As already mentioned, the fleeting cherry blossom has inspired artists since ancient times. One trend that you will notice when it comes to songs that have "sakura" in their title is that a lot of them are bittersweet or downright sad and dramatic — why is that?

The reason for that actually does not lie with the short life of the flowers. Throughout Japan, the sakura trees blossom between March and April, which is the season for graduations and entrance ceremonies at Japanese schools.

This also means a lot of changes, a lot of goodbyes, and a lot of life-altering decisions. Where to go next, what to do from here? What will the future hold? It's a time during which people leave the environment they've grown up in, parting with long friends and even lovers.

To say it briefly, it's an emotionally turbulent time. Because of this amalgamation of complicated feelings, songs that tug at your heartstrings with dramatic and emotional lyrics and melodies are generally called "sakura songs."

Some name the cherry blossom in their title and some don't, but the trend definitely goes towards calling a springtime melody "sakura something-something."

One of Japan's most famous songs is

called "sakura sakura," initially composed in the late Edo period as a practice song for the koto, a traditional string instrument. Its current lyrics were written in the Meiji period, which is also when the song has become so majorly popular that there's not a single person in Japan who doesn't know it.

Nowadays, various artists release such a sakura song every spring season.

### The top 5 best-selling J-Pop examples of such sakura songs are:

1. "Sakurazaka" by Masaharu Fukuyama
2. "Sakura no ki ni narou" (Let's become a sakura tree) by AKB48
3. "Sakura" by Naotaro Moriyama
4. "Sakura" by Ketsumeishi
5. "Sakura Drops" by Hikaru Utada

All of them are often sung or played at graduation parties or even when parting with a love interest. Even if you don't understand the Japanese lyrics, we encourage you to give those songs a listen — can you feel your heartstrings being pulled at?

Cherry blossoms aren't only a beautiful phenomenon in spring, but the culture and philosophy around them is a major part of Japanese daily life as well. From the image of the filigree flowers to their complex and bittersweet meaning, you'll stumble across "sakura" a lot more than you might expect!



## Why are so many things called "Sakura" in Japanese when they have nothing to do with cherry blossoms?

The Japanese language is filled with words and expressions featuring "sakura," even if they seemingly have nothing to do with actual cherry blossoms. That is because the cherry blossom image is a very familiar one for Japanese people, so even things slightly resembling the flowers in one way or another are often named after the blossoms. For tourists, this may be especially confusing, as a lot of things really look nothing like the flowers at first glance! Let's take a look at some of the most common words.

You'll notice that a lot of the things introduced either boast a resemblance to the famous cherry blossoms in color, shape, or both — sometimes it may take a bit of imagination, but for the Japanese name givers, the resemblance is obvious!

### Shibazakura – Pink moss phlox

Also called "hanatsume kusa." The shape of this flower resembles the cherry blossom and it blooms either in a vivid pink or light purple. It covers the ground densely, forming a floral carpet that is absolutely breathtaking.



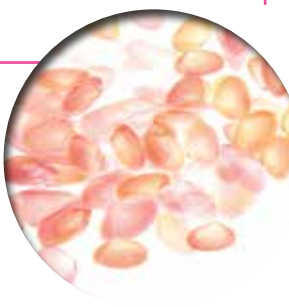
### Akizakura – Cosmos flowers

The Cosmos, a flower that blooms in autumn. The kanji for "akizakura" can also be read as "kosumosu," making the phrase a phonetic equivalent to the flower's actual name. The spelling was made popular by the song "Kosumosu" by Momoe Yamaguchi in 1977.



### Sakuragai – A type of wedge shell

These clams are named because of their pale pink color, making them look like cherry blossom petals.



### Sakura ebi – Sakura shrimp

These little shrimps have a semi-translucent body that shines in a subtle pink, resembling the color of Japan's famous cherry blossoms.



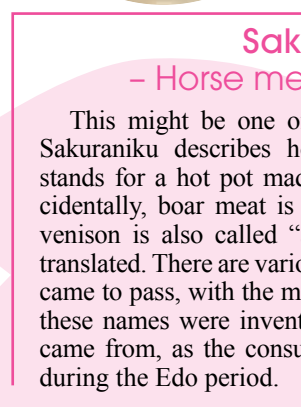
### Sakuragayu – Red bean porridge

Sakuragayu is a porridge made with sweet red beans and rice. Traditionally, it is eaten during New Year's, on January 15th to be precise, to purge and ward off evil and disaster.



### Sakurani – Cooked octopus legs

This is a dish of octopus legs being cooked until soft with sake, soy sauce, mirin, and sugar. The finished dish is of a pink color.



### Sakuraniku & sakura nabe – Horse meat and horse hot pot

This might be one of the weirdest sakura names. Sakuraniku describes horsemeat, while sakuranabe stands for a hot pot made with said horse meat. Incidentally, boar meat is called "peony meat," while venison is also called "autumn leaf meat," literally translated. There are various theories on how this name came to pass, with the most prominent one saying that these names were invented to conceal where the meat came from, as the consumption of game was forbidden during the Edo period.



### Sakura, spelled in katakana – Fake buyer, hired applauder

If "sakura" is spelled not in kanji characters (桜) but instead in katakana (サクラ), the syllabary used to spell words with a foreign origin, it can also refer to a fake buyer. That's a person at, for example, a market stall, getting all excited about the wares to attract other customers. On TV, you'd also call someone hired to applaud or create excitement for a performer or act.



# Warm up with a golden sunset at Zushi Kaigan Beach near Yokosuka NB

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,  
STRIPES JAPAN

Neighboring Kamakura City is a popular summer spot perfect for cooling off in the hot sun. Zushi Kaigan stretches about half a mile and the sandy beach is where you'll find city dwellers sunbathing, wind surfing and more on the weekends. The beach also has beach houses serving drinks, food and tunes to create the perfect ambiance during the season.

Though it is a great place to be

in the summer, the winter here offers pristine views facing west and breathtaking golden sunsets in a less crowded, calm atmosphere.

Zushi Kaigan has been known as popular swimming beach since the end of the 19th century. But Shintaro Ishihara (novelist and ex-Tokyo Governor) made this beach even more popular with his novel "Taiyo-no-kisetsu" (Season of the Sun, 1955) prominently featuring this location. The novel was then cinematized with his younger brother Yujiro the following year, and the work made Yujiro to be

one of Japan's most successful movie stars. To commemorate the works, there is a stone monument at the left end of the beach.

The beach is only a short 20-minute drive from Yokosuka Naval Base. By train, it's a straight shot on the JR from Yokosuka Station to Zushi Station followed by a pleasant 15-minute walk along the Tagoe River through the lively downtown.

Summer is a great time to visit, but don't sleep on Zushi Kaigan's amazing winter sunsets!

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com

VIEW VIDEO



Zushi Tourist Bureau

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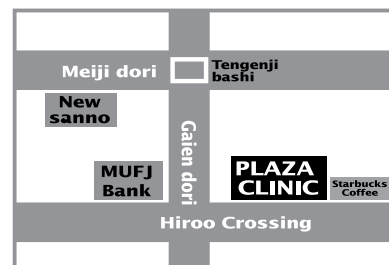
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# Stripes Sports Trivia

**SAY MY NAME!** In a 2004 ALCS filled with many memorable moments, mine almost gets lost among “the bloody sock” and the fact that my Red Sox team became the first to win a series after trailing three games to none. After Kevin Millar drew a walk from Mariano Rivera, I pinch ran for him and soon pulled off what some now refer to as “the steal.” Who am I?

**Answer**  
Dave Roberts

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**Kanji of the week**  
買  
Kau/bai (buy)

**Language Lesson**

Look at that.

**Are wo mite kudasai.**

**The Weekly Crossword**  
by Margie E. Burke

**ACROSS**

- 1 "\_\_\_ we forget"
- 5 Salon service, briefly
- 9 Water park feature
- 14 Initial chip
- 15 Fever with chills
- 16 Former Russian leader
- 17 Tech support caller
- 18 Not too bright
- 20 Palace figures
- 22 Intrepid
- 23 Macho dude
- 24 Luxury watchmaker
- 25 Of the Vatican
- 27 Storage medium
- 30 West African country
- 33 De Niro's "Goodfellas" co-star
- 36 Gardner of film
- 37 Payback seeker
- 39 Piece keeper?
- 41 Faddish disk of the '90s
- 42 Forest worker
- 44 Composes
- 45 Credit card motion
- 47 Washing machine cycle
- 49 Defame
- 52 Macaroni shape
- 56 Religious offering
- 58 Sandwich meat
- 59 Whip
- 61 Kind of tea
- 62 Baby-to-be
- 63 Landfill emanation
- 64 NASA scrub
- 65 Word with tooth or heart
- 66 Part of A.P.R.
- 67 Chew like a squirrel

**DOWN**

- 1 Bust a gut
- 2 Occur as a result
- 3 Pressing need?
- 4 Small turtle
- 5 Mountain route
- 6 Something that's bruisable
- 7 Mark who plays the Hulk
- 8 Taxi feature
- 9 Like some errors
- 10 Good as new
- 11 Review unfairly
- 12 No-win situations?
- 13 Stopping points
- 19 Stetson, e.g.
- 21 Paternity identifier
- 24 Terrier type
- 26 Court statement
- 28 Place to broil
- 29 Big name in candy
- 30 Navigator's aids

**31 State confidently**  
**32 Lay down the law?**  
**34 "A League of \_\_\_ Own"**  
**35 Conflicted**  
**38 Part of G.O.A.T.**  
**40 Grade school subject**  
**43 1980s invasion site**  
**46 Deadly epidemic**  
**48 Deep blue**

**50 Zippo**  
**51 Great sadness**  
**53 Breakfast strip**  
**54 Last Greek letter**  
**55 Lehar operetta "The Merry \_\_\_"**  
**56 Rubs out**  
**57 "Black \_\_\_" (2021 Marvel movie)**  
**58 Very dry**  
**60 Day care candidate**

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**Answers to Previous Crossword:**

S	A	M	B	A	S	T	A	B	G	I	S	H
C	L	E	A	T	H	I	D	E	U	N	T	O
A	G	E	N	T	R	E	D	L	E	T	T	E
B	A	T	T	E	R	E	D	I	N	T	E	R
A	M	O	K	R	E	T	U	R	N	S		
S	K	I	M	P	Y	R	E	F	E	R	S	
T	I	M	T	A	L	O	N	R	A	T	E	S
E	L	M	O	L	A	D	E	N	L	A	V	E
W	O	O	D	S	N	E	W	E	R	T	E	N
R	O	C	O	C	O	W	E	R	E	N	T	
A	V	A	R	I	C	E	W	E	V	E		
B	A	L	L	O	T	M	I	L	I	T	A	N
A	L	I	E	N	A	T	E	D	V	I	R	E
C	U	T	S	V	O	T	E	A	N	T	S	Y
K	E	Y	S	E	W	E	R	L	A	S	T	S

**SUDOKU**  
Difficulty: Medium

**HOW TO SOLVE:**  
Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

5	8	3	1	7	2	6	4	9
4	9	6	5	3	8	2	1	7
7	1	2	9	6	4	3	5	8
9	4	8	3	2	5	7	6	1
6	7	5	8	9	1	4	2	3
2	3	1	7	4	6	9	8	5
3	5	4	6	8	9	1	7	2
1	6	9	2	5	7	8	3	4
8	2	7	4	1	3	5	9	6

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**Saturday**  
**March 23**  
**9 a.m. - 5 p.m.**



Yokosuka MWR

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more information

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