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Health risks of getting healthy in 2026

I'm overdue for a mammogram, I haven't had my cholesterol checked and I've been ignoring aches and pains for months. It's time to finally make my health a priority.

I add this resolution to my list, which includes quitting Spider Solitaire cold turkey and going to bed earlier. Making my health a priority won't happen easily. Online portals must be accessed. Records must be checked. Appointments will be scheduled. Authorizations will be requested. Medical professionals must be consulted.

I call my podiatrist, Dr. McCormick, who hasn't administered a cortisone shot for my arthritic left foot since March. I've become accustomed to limping around like Quasimodo. Rather than deal with pains individually like I used to, I've accepted my status as a menopausal woman who experiences multiple pains on a daily basis. Back when my hormones functioned properly, natural collagen cushioned my joints. If I felt pain, I'd say to myself, "Ouch! That shouldn't hurt! I'd better investigate."

Nowadays, when each pain du jour presents itself, which often happens with an audible "snap-crackle-pop!" while getting out of bed, I simply groan and add it to the long list of menopausal inconveniences with which I am now plagued.

However, making my health a priority will require acknowledging and mitigating my various pains. The first step is getting that cortisone shot.

"Your authorization expired over the summer," Dr. McCormick's receptionist says. My blood pressure jumps, anticipating the colossal hassle ahead. Who is my Primary Care Manager anyway? I call the Naval Health Clinic to request a new referral.

"What's your DoD ID number?" the clinic scheduler asks. Since they started asking for DoD ID numbers a few years ago, I'm never prepared. For 25 years while I was an active duty Navy spouse, I'd rattled off my husband's social security number, scribbling it on checks at the commissary in the early days. His SSN is burned into my brain more deeply than my own. But my DoD number is a confusing series of tiny numbers stamped among others on my military ID.

"Oh, geez, let me grab that," I fumble, feeling my blood pressure elevate again. I read off the numbers, pausing at the blurry "65" in the middle to be sure it isn't 56. Thankfully, the authorization is requested

The Meat and Potatoes of Life

Lisa Smith Molinari



without the need for an appointment with my unknown PCM, and my stress dissipates.

"Just check Tricare online to make sure the authorization comes through," the clinic scheduler adds, and my blood surges with traumatic memories of accessing the DoD's Self-Service Logon System (DS Logon) to get access to Tricare. A few days later, I hesitantly type my password into the system.

"Your current password has expired and should be updated," appears on my screen, explaining that passwords expire every 60 days. The vein in the middle of my forehead bulges. I tap a new combination of words, numbers and characters into the little box, but each one is rejected. I focus on the long list of password requirements listed on the page:

- Passwords must be at least 15 characters but no more than 128;
- At least one lowercase letter;
- At least 1 uppercase letter;
- At least 1 number;
- At least 1 special character, no spaces allowed: @_#/,;~%&=:*\$+().{}!/?><^[-`~;
- You cannot use your birthdate, SSN, name, phone number or ZIP code;
- When changing a password, your new password must have at least 8 characters be different;
- When changing a password, your new password must be different than the current and 5 previous passwords;
- You cannot change your password more than once every 24 hours.

On the fourth try my heart palpitates, as I think of the worst cuss words for another password, but it, too, is rejected. I type new strings of fresh swears and dirty words. By the time one of my foul epithets is finally accepted as my new password, I'm willing to undergo a gynecological exam on a crowded subway platform rather than make one more password attempt.

"Security be damned!" I seethe, my veins about to burst.

"You are confirmed for your appointment on Tuesday," the podiatrist's receptionist says. "Great, but will Dr. McCormick also check my blood pressure?"

Read more of Lisa Smith Molinari's columns at: themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, *The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com*
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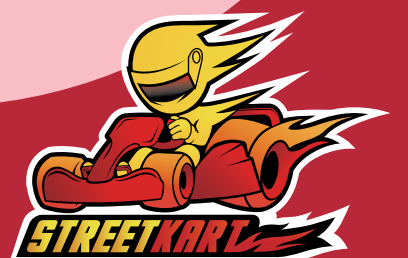
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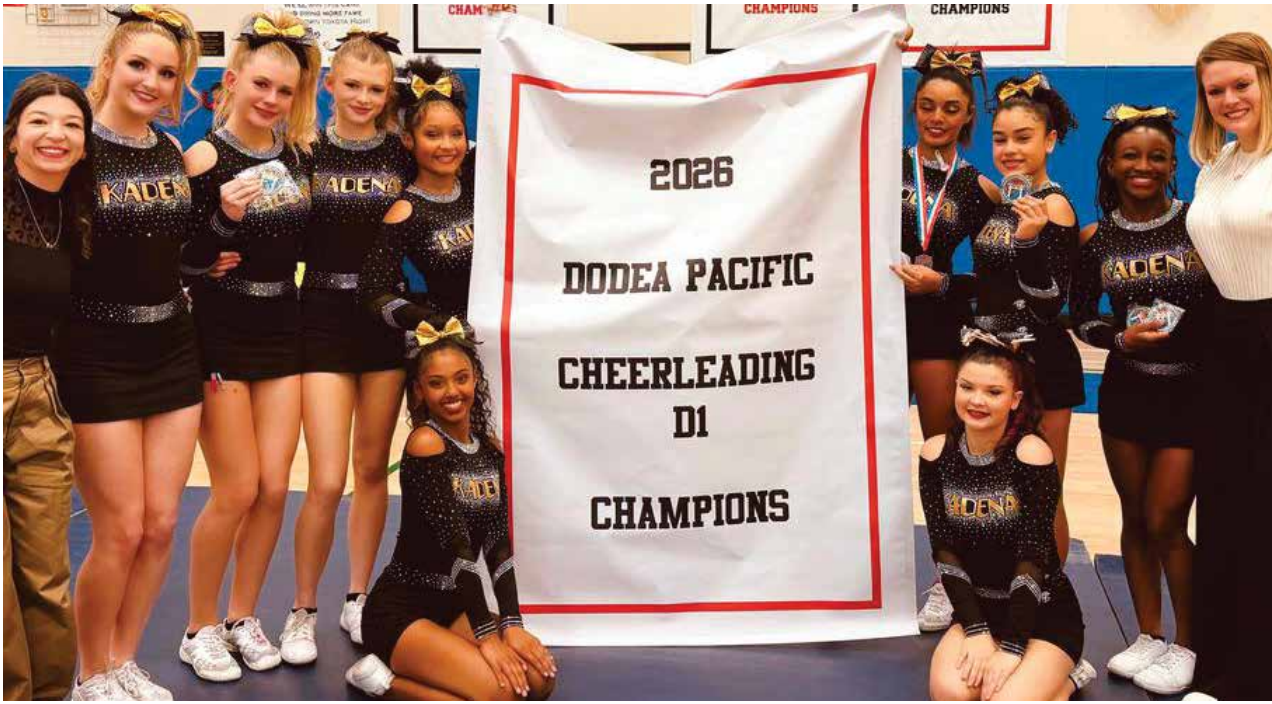
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Kadena's cheerleaders gather round the Division I championship banner. It's the Panthers' 10th overall and third in six years. Photo courtesy of DODEA-Pacific Far East cheer

Kadena and Zama have the most to cheer about

STARS AND STRIPES
Published: February 6, 2026

Zama's cheerleading team has become synonymous with winning Far East championships. Led by All-Far East juniors Lea Rolland, Evelyn Schmidt, Lani Pueblos and Kyona Lisboa, the Trojans made it three straight Far East Division II titles in this week's competition at Yokota Air Base, Japan. It's their fourth D-II title dating to 2016 and fifth overall since 1989.

Meanwhile, two-time All-Far East cheerleaders Jayla Shipp, Navoni' Perry and Sarah Beth Walker and freshman Charlotte Fussinger boosted Kadena to its 10th Division I title and third in six years.

"From the moment this team was formed, it was clear

they had the makings of champions," Kadena coach Jennifer Tibbs said. "They had an unmatched work ethic, a relentless commitment to technical excellence and a deep understanding that execution and dedication win titles."

EXCLUSIVE NEWS FROM:
STARS AND STRIPES
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The Trojans faced what coach Lyndsay Morrison called unexpected challenges throughout the season, but they "demonstrated resilience, unity and a deep commitment to one another," she said.

"Their positivity, encouragement and teamwork defined this championship run," Morrison said. "We are all overjoyed."

The combined clinic-competition featured seven DODEA-Pacific D-II schools from Japan and Korea plus Okinawa Christian; and six D-I schools, from Japan, Korea, Okinawa and Guam plus American School In Japan. The event

Division I

1. Kadena, 2. ASIJ, 3. Humphreys

ALL-FAR EAST TEAM: KADENA: Jayla Shipp (Most Valuable Player), Navoni' Perry (repeat), Sarah Beth Walker (repeat), Charlotte Fussinger; American School In Japan: Anna Fink (repeat), Reina Maei, Lia Junsay; Humphreys: Jolia Ortiz; Guam: Hayden Buck, Alyssa Lorenzo, Lily Young; Kubasaki: Esra Solano.

Division II

1. Zama, 2. Yokota, 3. Robert D. Edgren

ALL-FAR EAST TEAM: ZAMA: Evelyn Schmidt (repeat), Lani Pueblos (repeat), Kyona Lisboa (repeat), Lea Rolland; Yokota: Karli Smathers, Johannah Villagomez, Grace Bennett; E.J. King; Gabriella Barrera (repeat), Lily Jarvis; Osan: Kemora Nash; Daegu: Angeli Huerta; OCSI: Ahiru Tsuchida.

TOP JUMPER: Shipp (repeat)

TOP TUMBLER: Solano

ALL-GIRL STUNT: Kadena, Walker, Shipp, Kenadee Darter and Daisy Gray-Reese.

PARTNER STUNT: Zama

was taped on the first and second days.

Three-peating as D-II champions also served as a send-off for senior Paula Adams, "who concludes her cheer career having contributed to all three of our championship banners," Morrison said.

She also cited the team's newest members, juniors Markell Cerrada and Ella Nguyen and freshmen Naomi Coleman and Kaelyn Perez, who "also played critical roles in securing the title."

"Every member of our team had a role and they stepped in and made it happen," Morrison said. "I believe this victory reflects not only athletic success but the heart and togetherness of our team."

For Kadena, Shipp has been a cornerstone in the only team to have all of its athletes nominated for All-Far East. Shipp was named the event's Most Valuable Player and top jumper for the second straight year, while the Panthers won the all-girl stunt group event.

The Panthers, too, faced what Tibbs called "significant adversity" during the season.

They met it with "resilience rather than fear, choosing to push forward even when things were difficult, showing a willingness to put in the work, stay committed and believe in something bigger than themselves," Tibbs said.

It's all Panthers as wrestling season concludes

STORY AND PHOTO BY DAVE ORNAUER,
STARS AND STRIPES
Published: February 4, 2026

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea – Panthers ruled the mats Feb. 4, as Kadena and Yokota turned the Far East High School Wrestling dual-meet finals into a sweep dream.

Liam Kirby pinned Ayden Hartman in 33 seconds at 160 pounds, giving Yokota enough of a cushion to outlast Zama 33-29 in the Division II final.

Kadena left little to chance, as Christian Luckey used three four-point throws to rally from an early deficit against St. Mary's Max Long for a 20-10 technical fall. Kadena downed the Titans 33-18 for the Division I crown.

Yokota and Kadena doubled their team-title pleasure a day after they won the individual-freestyle team championships. Kadena captured its ninth D-I title and third under coach Joey Wood, while Yokota won its eighth D-II crown and 10th Far East title overall.

Division II

"Some of the kids came up to me on the plane and asked how are we going to take the banner home," Yokota coach Theo Kuntz said. "As soon I knew the kids believed in themselves, I knew we had it. They wanted it. I knew they wanted it."

What was at stake was clear to Kirby when he took the mat against Hartman. Yokota hadn't won a Far East title since the year the coronavirus pandemic began and he said he wanted to put an end to that.

"I was looking at the scoreboard and I realized we needed to win by pin," Kirby said. "I wanted to do that for the seniors. We hadn't won it in six years."

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Jay Gutierrez (107 pounds), Kenza Houston (121) and Evan Horne (139) each scored pins for Yokota and Aiden Greer (145) took a tight decision 5-4 over Zama's Gabriel Simpkins.

The Trojans got points from Cooper Owens (127) and Kingston Ries (133), while Sean Simpkins (152) beat Braydon Laubaugh 10-0 in 1:40 to keep Zama within striking distance. It was Kirby's pin that put it out of reach.

For Horne, the win was especially sweet as he suffered an injury in the first round of last year's Far East at Zama.

"That I got to wrestle after last year, that was great," Horne said. "It feels much better."

"I wasn't really expecting this," Panthers senior Laine Lilly said. "To get first place for both (individual and dual), to win both as a senior, I'm really proud."

Division I

The individual and dual sweep had Wood quite emotional – it came just days after the Panthers swept both titles in the historic first Far East tournament for girls.

"Especially with the girls, building a girls program. They said if we build it, they will come and they did," Wood said. "It's been our goal since Day 1 (to win) four banners. I couldn't ask for a better group of wrestlers, coaches, parents – I'm overwhelmed."

Six of Kadena's victories against the Titans came by technical fall: Jhayden Basto (114 pounds), Kai Wilson (127), Christian Luckey (139), Ryan Luckey (145), Derryck Miller (152) and heavy-weight Troy Hill. Zacharias Perez (107) and Michael Smith (133) each scored decisions.

Christian Luckey's win by tech came after his opponent, Max Long, put him in danger of being pinned for about 30 seconds in the first period. But Luckey rallied in the second period, using two of his three big throws to put away Long, whose physique



Kadena's Zacharias Perez ties up St. Mary's Ponnappa Karthachira at 107 pounds.

matched his family name.

"Just his length," Luckey said of Long. "Whenever I wrestle a lengthy kid, it's really annoying."

Getting such big throws on opponents is a matter of leverage, Luckey said. "I get an underhook, circle to one side, grab the single (leg), reach around and grap the hip."

The Titans stayed in the hunt thanks to technical-fall victories by Ryan Murase (121) and Zen Twohig (160) plus pins by Kentaro Yamauchi (172) and Jimin Kim (215), but it wasn't enough to overcome Kadena.

Outstanding wrestler

The tournament's top prize for an individual wrestler also became a sweep of sorts.

Malcolm Lee, an American School In Japan 139-pound senior, joined his older brother Cadell as a winner of the Outstanding Wrestler award. Cadell captured the honor in last year's tournament.

Mustangs senior Serena Koslow of ASIJ was similarly honored in last week's girls Far East tournament.

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Mastering Japanese gym etiquette

Your ultimate guide to fitting in

BY MIKA INOUE,
METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

Japan's gym culture may seem complex to newcomers, but with a few essential tips, you'll fit in and enjoy a smooth fitness experience. From appropriate attire to essential gym bag items, here's your guide to mastering Japanese gym etiquette.



Etiquette: How to use Japanese gyms

First things first, punctuality is huge in Japan. If you have a booked class or a one-on-one session with a personal trainer, make sure to arrive on time. Showing up late can disrupt the session for others and is generally considered disrespectful. Additionally, some gyms may enforce time limits on machines to ensure everyone gets a fair chance. Be mindful of these limits and be prepared to move on when your allotted time is up.

Cleanliness is next on the list. Japanese gyms typically have disinfectant wipes next to the equipment, so ensure you wipe them down after use. This keeps the gym pleasant for everyone and is a simple way to show consideration for your fellow gym-goers. Also, try not to spend too long on any one machine. This ensures everyone gets a turn and helps keep things running smoothly.

What to bring to a gym in Japan

To make sure you're always prepared, there are a few essential items you should have in your gym bag:

- Indoor shoes**
Required in many gyms to keep the place clean.
- Small towel**
Great for wiping sweat off your body and cleaning the equipment after use.
- Reusable water bottle**
Though most gyms have vending machines, having a personal bottle is useful.
- Swim cap**
If your gym has a pool, it might be required.
- A change of clothes to wear after your workout.**
- Personal care items such as deodorant and a hairbrush for post-workout freshness.**

What to wear to a gym in Japan?

When it comes to dress codes, Japanese gyms can be a bit more conservative than you might be used to. It's very rare to see yoga pants and tank tops; most women tend to opt for comfortable yet modest workout clothes, like longer leggings or track pants and loose-fitting tops. Men usually avoid overly revealing attire, sticking to knee-length shorts and t-shirts. If you have large, visible tattoos, be aware that you might be asked to cover them up. Some gyms have strict rules about tattoos, so it's best to check their policies beforehand.

Indoor shoes are a must in many gyms to keep the floors clean. Make sure to pack a pair of clean, indoor-only gym shoes and take your shoes off in the locker room before changing into your workout gear. Strong perfumes or colognes can also be overwhelming in a gym setting, so go for subtle or unscented deodorants. Good personal hygiene is crucial – make sure you're fresh and clean before hitting the gym to keep the environment pleasant for everyone.

English-friendly gyms and fitness groups

It is important to find a gym where you can communicate easily and feel comfortable in, especially for English speakers. Here are some options to consider:

- Club 360**
Located in Tokyo, Club 360 offers a supportive environment with services such as personal training, physiotherapy and massage therapy. They provide kids' classes, group lessons, and a welcoming atmosphere for English speakers, helping to bridge any language barriers.
- Gold's Gym**
With locations throughout Japan, many Gold's Gym branches have English-speaking staff and offer a wide range of fitness classes, including yoga, pilates and strength training.
- Anytime Fitness**
Anytime Fitness offers 24/7 access and often has English-speaking staff or signage. It's a convenient option for those who prefer a flexible workout schedule.

Can I film or take photos in a Japanese gym?

Many gyms have strict no-photography rules, so refrain from taking selfies or filming your workouts. It's all about respecting everyone's privacy. And remember, food (including energy bars) is generally not allowed on the gym floor. Save your snacks for the designated eating areas.

Last but not least, keep in mind that Japanese gyms tend to be on the quieter side. While a bit of chatting is fine, try not to hog the equipment or engage in long conversations during peak times. This ensures everyone gets a chance to use the facilities.

Local English-friendly exercise groups

If you prefer staying fit outside the gym, many cities, including Tokyo, have English-speaking fitness groups. Running clubs are a fantastic way to meet fellow fitness enthusiasts and enjoy the outdoors. For example, **Namban Rengo** is an international running club in Tokyo that welcomes runners of all levels. They organize weekly group runs and participate in various races throughout the year.

For those interested in team sports, clubs like the **British Football Academy** offer training and matches for both adults and children. They have English-speaking coaches and provide a friendly, inclusive environment.

By following these guidelines and understanding the nuances of Japanese gym culture, you'll ensure a respectful and enjoyable workout experience. Whether you're new to Japanese gyms or just looking to refine your approach, these etiquette tips will help you make the most of your fitness journey in Japan.



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Near Camp Courtney

SADDLE UP!

Hop on for equestrian experience at Mihara Horse Riding Club

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA, STRIPES OKINAWA

Horseback riding can either be an exhilarating or intimidating experience for beginners like me. After watching local kids skillfully maneuvering horses in Nmaharashi, a type of Okinawan horse racing, I was motivated to give it another shot.

On a chilly day in January, I headed to Mihara Horse Riding Club, about a five-minute drive from Camp Courtney, for a 30-minute horse riding experience.

The equestrian club in Uruma City has a 30-year history and is home to 11 ponies and five thoroughbreds.

I'm a complete beginner who has spent time with a horse only a few times. The last time I tried was almost 10 years ago. I was looking forward to the opportunity, but I felt stiff with anxiousness under the cloudy winter sky.

As I approached the club's stable, the resident watchdogs started barking. I was scared when one of them walked up to me. But instead of turning me away, the dog licked my hand, which made me relax a little.

Instructor Erisa Nakahara soon joined, handing me a helmet and body protector. She guided me to the stable where I met Mocha, a pony with a beautiful brown coat and sturdy legs who would be

my company for the day.

To break the ice, I casually addressed the pony "Mocha-chan," which is something similar to Little Mocha. The pony is 33 years old, Nakahara corrected me. Horses age three times faster than humans, so Mocha would be closer to 100 in human years. Not so young after all.

It was mind-boggling to see a pony of this age still at work. Maybe I should have called the pony Sir Mocha instead.

I followed Nakahara and the veteran pony to an outdoor arena about the size of a soccer field.

WALK IT OUT

Holding the reins at a point close to Mocha's muzzle, the lesson commenced with a side-by-side pony walk to warm up. It was supposed to be a pretty simple task to start, but I was surprised to see that Mocha's walking pace was faster than mine. It was even a little bit of a struggle to keep up without stepping on his hooves.

Though I was tempted to look down to avoid stepping on the old pony, Nakahara said I should continue to look ahead. I felt awkward at first, but after several meters we reached a smooth pace. The veteran pony surely knew how to work with a beginner like me.

HOWDY, COWBOY!

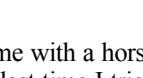
After we accomplished a successful walk, it was time to mount the pony. Mocha is rather on the big side for a pony, so this part required a stepstool.

Height-wise, being on Mocha's back was not much different from being on a standard horse.

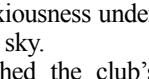
Holding the reins in my hand, I tried to give the pony a cue by gently kicking his stomach with my heels, but the pony did not respond at all.



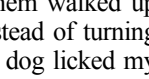
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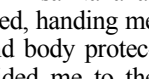
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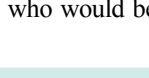
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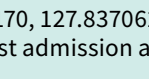
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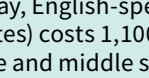
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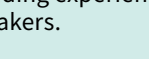
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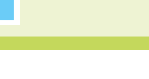
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*Reservation through LINE app required a week in advance for horseback riding experience and pony ride.

*Depending on the day, English-speaking instructor is available.

FEES: Pony ride (10 minutes) costs 1,100 yen (approx. \$7) for those between 4 years of age and middle school age, 1,650 yen for high school age and above. Horseback/pony riding experience (30 minutes) costs 5,500 yen plus rental fees for helmet, body protector and chaps. For Horseback/pony riding experience/lesson, English-speaking instructors will coach English speakers.



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Photo by Mihara Horse Riding Club

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“You can do it more strongly,” Nakahara chimed in.

I hated causing any pain to the old pony, but there was no choice. Fortunately, Mocha began walking after my second kick, making me feel a bit like a cowboy in a western.

Once I started feeling a little more comfortable on the pony’s back, I released the reins while Mocha walked in circles. Following Nakahara’s lead, I threw my hands up, spread my arms, or stretched them forward. At one point, my back almost cramped as I struggled to keep my balance on the saddle. Fortunately, the exercise ended before that happened.

The highlight of the lesson came when I tried “posting trot,” a rhythmic riding technique where I was supposed to repeatedly sit up and down on the pony’s back while it was trotting.

At first, I did not understand why a rider would do such a move and had a hard time figuring out the timing for sitting and rising. I was often out of synch with Mocha, almost throwing myself off his back.

Once I was in tune with the pony’s rhythm, however, it all made sense. It even felt like I was meant to do so to be one with the gentle giant.

At the end of the lesson, once again, Mocha

and I took a slow turn about the field. Just 30 minutes prior, my body had been stiff and I felt chilly, but now I was an easy rider.

‘HORSE FIRST’

On our last loop, Mocha stopped suddenly, refusing to restart. I was worried I might have done something wrong, but Nakahara said the pony probably wanted to enjoy the sunshine that was peeking through the previously cloud-covered sky.

Nakahara said the club’s policy is “horse first” and the club’s instructors require their students to understand that unexpected things, like sudden stops for loud noise or movements that can cause riders to fall, may occur.

“[Mocha] understands words. He understands instructions such as ‘walk’ and ‘trot.’ He has emotions and sometimes gets mad at me when his ears are turned back,”

Nakahara said. She continued, explaining that she didn’t want to put too much burden on the old pony and wanted him to live a long life.

Back at the stable, Nakahara handed me three pieces of kokuto brown sugar treats for Mocha. These are a reward for a good run with a beginner cowboy like me.

As I watched the pony chomp on the Okinawan sweets, my heart melted.

kudaka.shoji@stripes.com



Asia Spicy Curry House

Prior to my horseback riding lesson, I stopped for lunch at Asia Spicy Curry House, a 10-minute drive from Mihara Horse Riding Club. It turned out to be a great decision, especially as I wanted to have energy for the strenuous activity I had next.

The lunch menu has a variety of curries, including standards like chicken and pork and elaborate ones like Baingan, mutton, spinach shrimp. The lunch sets are reasonably priced between 1,000 and 1,250 yen.

I selected the set with the curry of the day, soup, salad, naan or rice and a drink for 1,000 yen (about \$6.37). That day’s special was egg curry. It had a nice spice, and I didn’t miss the chicken or shrimp I usually have with my curry. The set came with lentil soup and it was well-seasoned with a touch of sweetness I enjoyed a lot.

The restaurant’s freshly baked soft and chewy naan went very well with the spicy curry sauce.

I should point out that seconds of rice or Naan were available for free. Although I did not take advantage of it this time, next time, another piece of naan will be a no-brainer.

– Shoji Kudaka, Stripes Okinawa



INSTAGRAM



GPS COORDINATES: 26.377878, 127.851292
HOURS: 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. (lunch) 5 - 10 p.m. (dinner)

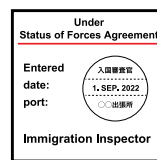
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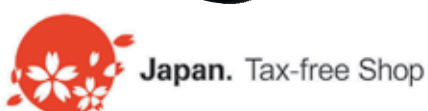
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Celebrate Hinamatsuri Japan's doll festival

Traditions and fun events on March 3

BY EFEEL,
LIVE JAPAN

Hinamatsuri, also known as Doll's Day or Girls' Day, is a traditional Japanese festival celebrated on March 3 each year. The festival is dedicated to young girls, and the centerpiece of the celebration is the display of hina dolls, which represent the Emperor, Empress, attendants, and musicians of the Heian period (794-1185).

This unique Japanese festival is celebrated differently depending on the region you're in, but most customs will include some similar features, like a set of cute hina dolls, peach flower decorations, as well as festive food such as hina-arare (multi-colored rice crackers) and chirashizushi (sliced raw fish with rice).

What's the story behind how March 3 came to be celebrated as Girls' Day in Japan? Here we shed some light on this interesting Japanese festival and share how you can enjoy it during your trip as well!



Hina Matsuri History

Why is the Japanese Doll Festival Celebrated?

There are a few theories about how Hinamatsuri got started, but the likeliest one is that it originated from China's Shangsi Festival that was introduced into Japan as a sekku (traditional festival) when Japan adopted the Chinese calendar system and the customs it came with.

Other traditional festivals on the calendar are the well-known Dragon Boat Festival (5th day of the 5th month) and Qixi Festival (7th day of the 7th month).

As you may have noticed, festival days usually fell on odd-numbered months on the same day as the month, as these dates were considered auspicious.



Shangsi Festival was originally held as a festival to ward off badness by setting dolls on a river, so that they could drift away with the participant's misfortunes, in a ritual called nagashibina (drifting doll). As time went by, these dolls took on more prominence and instead of setting them on rivers, they

were placed inside homes as decorations.

Eventually, these dolls came to be known as hina dolls and were used among the aristocrats as toys in pretend play activities known as hihina-asobi (also called hina-asobi or hina-asobi). And that was how the Hinamatsuri we are familiar with today was born.

The modern festival date falls on March 3, following the Gregorian calendar instead of the lunar calendar. The date, along with its objective of celebrating the growth and happiness of young girls, is said to have been introduced during the Edo Period (1603 to 1868).



What do the hina peach flower decorations

Originally meant to be set on river surfaces and used as pretend play toys, hina dolls are now settled in their roles as decorations. The very first dolls designated for setting on rivers were initially made of paper and straw.

Over time, they became fancy enough to be used as ornaments at home. During the Edo Period, when Hinamatsuri became more established, some forms of the dolls were even dressed in resplendent robes modeled after those worn by royalty, adding to their flamboyance.



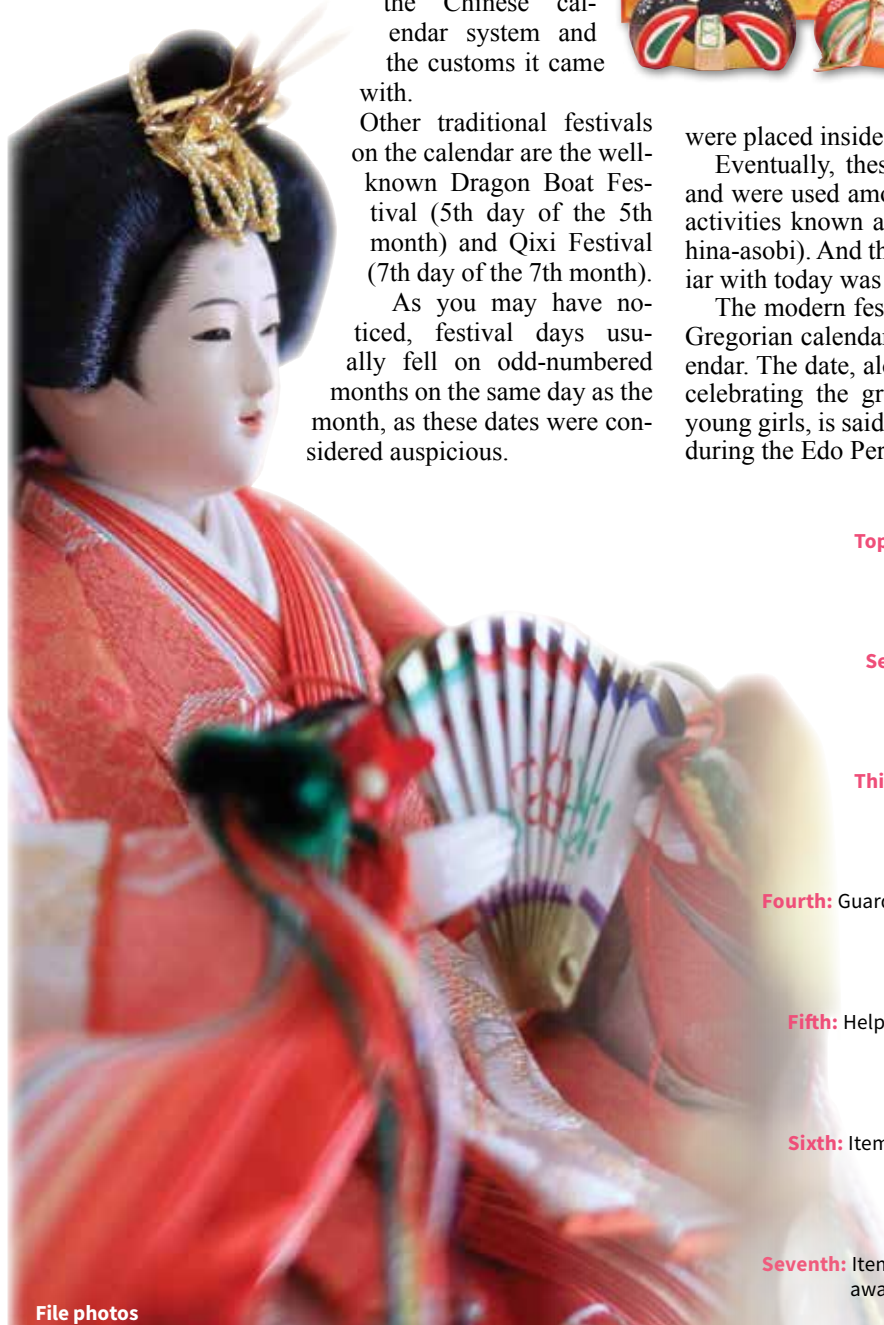
Types of hina doll

Traditionally, the hina doll is believed to protect the young girls in the family by carrying their illnesses and misfortunes for them.

Most houses will thus at least have a pair of male and female dolls in storage. The make of the doll determines whether they are classified as ishōgi (costumed) dolls or kimekomi (grooved) dolls.

As the name suggests, ishōgi dolls have their costumes put on them as we would with normal clothing. As for kimekomi dolls, the process of adorning them is a bit more complex.

First of all, the doll's body is made with solidified paulownia powder mixed with glue. Grooves are then cut out on the body and kinran (gold or silver brocade woven into intricate designs) or yūzen (a dye technique that applies rice paste



Top platform: Imperial dolls

Second: Court ladies

Third: Male musicians

Fourth: Guardians / Ministers

Fifth: Helpers / Protectors

Sixth: Items used in palace

Seventh: Items used when away from palace



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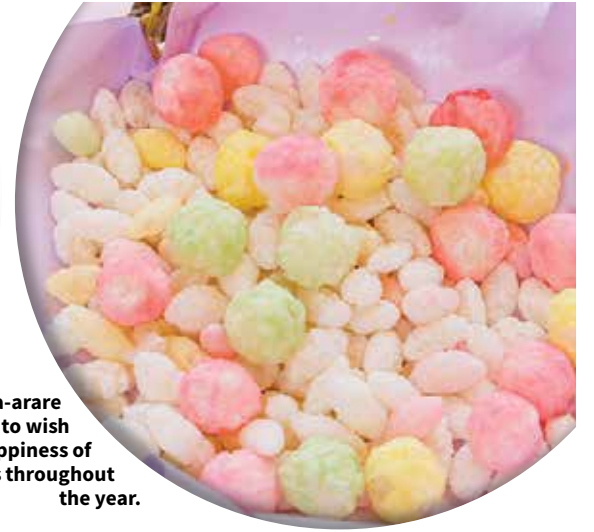


Peach blossom - a Hinamatsuri symbol of equal importance as hina dolls.

The colors used in hishimochi are rich with symbolisms. Green represents health and new encounters, white represents purity and white snow, whereas peach, pink, or red represents peach flowers.



Hina-arare is eaten to wish for the happiness of young girls throughout the year.



hina dolls and decorations symbolize?

Hinamatsuri is also known as Momo no Sekku (peach traditional festival), because peach blossoms were used to celebrate the original Shangsi Festival. These beautiful blossoms were viewed as auspicious plants with the ability to dispel misfortune, ward off evil, and grant longevity. The modern festival has kept this traditional aspect alive in the form of peach blossom decorations. That the bright pink petals are closely associated with the newness of spring and young girls - both elements related to Hinamatsuri - is a bonus!

and how to decorate them

to the cloth to prevent color transfer) fabric are glued on the body, with the edges tucked into the grooves. The most extravagant way of decorating hina dolls is to place them on a seven-tier dankazari doll stand. There's also a shorter version with just two or three tiers, sometimes called the dekazari. Minimalists may prefer the shinnōkazari, which is one tier only and contains just the main pair of dairibina (imperial dolls). Of course, these are just the most common types that can be found. There are plenty of other differently designed doll stands available as well. All platform-based doll stands are collectively called the hinadan, and this is the most prominent and iconic decoration piece of Hinamatsuri that people think about when the festival is mentioned. Although the order of the dolls on the red carpet can change depending on region and family tradition, the dolls represent a Heian period wedding, around which the couple are surrounded by their court. Since dolls can be fairly expensive - costing around \$700 for a two-tier set and \$2,600+ for a 5-tier set - these collections tend to become family heirlooms.

Form: This is occupied by only two dolls, the dai-ri-bina. They are the imperial dolls though they do not represent the Imperial family.

Platform: This holds the san-nin kanjo, three court ladies who link to the male and female dolls.

Platform: This holds the go-nin bayashi, five male musicians of the court, each of who hold an instrument except for the one who holds a fan.

Platform: Here are two ministers, zuijin, who are alternatively known as the couple's bodyguards. Displayed here as well as with gifts for the couple.

Platform: Three helpers (/protectors) - the shichō - of the couple are displayed here: one is a crying drinker; one an angry drinker; and one a laughing drinker. Also displayed here are a mandarin orange tree and a sakura tree.

Sixth and Seventh (Bottom) Platforms: Displayed here are a variety of items used within the couple's household, including furniture, storage chests, mirrors, sewing kits, utensils and more. Ox-drawn carts may also be displayed on the seventh platform.

The doll stands are to be set up and decorated between the first day of spring (around February 3) to around mid-March. At the very least, it has to be up one week before Hinamatsuri is celebrated on March 3! Rushing to put everything up on March 2 is known as ichiyakazari (overnight decoration), and this is something to be avoided as it is considered inauspicious in the eyes of most.

4

How Japanese Celebrate Girls' Day Today: Famous Hinamatsuri events

Like every other festival in Japan, Hinamatsuri comes with its own set of traditional festive food, using seasonal ingredients from early spring. Clam soup is the representative dish here, as it symbolizes a married couple who complement each other perfectly, like how the two shells of a clam are not complete without each other. Another treat often associated with Hinamatsuri is the

hishimochi, a rhombus-shaped rice cake that is colored green, white, and pink. Hina-arare, mentioned in the outset, is another famous snack of the festival, and these rice crackers are usually colored pink, green, yellow, and white, each color representing a season. Finally, there's the ever-popular chirashizushi, a rice bowl topped with ingredients like lotus roots, shrimps, and other food believed to bring good luck and longevity.



Clam soup that calls to mind early spring.



Chirashizushi is a Hinamatsuri staple. The vibrant colors calls to mind the freshness of spring.



Hinamatsuri is a festival that embodies the well-wishes parents have for their daughters, such as wanting them to be happy and healthy always. If you would like to participate in this special occasion, it's really very simple! Set up and decorate your doll stand, grab some auspicious takeout food, and celebrate Hinamatsuri 2026 with the rest of Japan from the comfort of your own home!

Speakin' Japanese

Pronunciation key: "A" is short (like "ah"); "E" is short (like "get"); "I" is short (like "it"); "O" is long (like "old"); "U" is long (like "tube"); and "AI" is a long "I" (like "hike"). Most words are pronounced with equal emphasis on each syllable, but "OU" is a long "O" with emphasis on that syllable.

Doll dialogue

"Kyowa Hinamatsuri desu!"

今日は雛祭りです!
= Today is Girls' Day/Doll Festival!

"Kono hinakazari wo mite kudasai."

この雛飾りを見てください。
= Look at this hina doll display.

"Hakubutsukan no hinakazari wo mitemitai desu."

博物館の雛飾りを見たいです。
= I want to see the hina display at the museum.

"Chirashizushi to hamaguri-no-osuimono wo itadakimasho."

ちらし寿司と蛤のお吸い物をいただきます。
= Let's have chirashizushi and clam soup.

"Hishimochi to hina-arare mo kawanakucha."

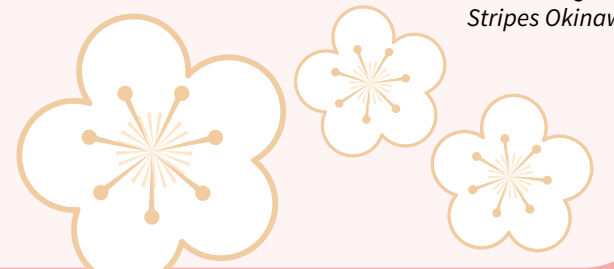
菱餅と雛あられも買わなくちゃ。
= We should buy some hishimochi and hina-arare, too!

"Kono tokubetunahi wo doo oiwai shimasuka?"

この特別な日をどうお祝いしますか?
= How will you celebrate the special day?

("Hinaningyo" 雛人形 = Hinamatsuri dolls
"Hishimochi" 菱餅 = three-colored diamond-shaped rice cake
"Hina-arare" 雛あられ = rice crackers, usually green, pink, white and yellow
"Chirashizushi" ちらし寿司 = vinegared rice topped with colorful ingredients, such as sashimi, egg and vegetables)

- Takahiro Takiguchi,
Stripes Okinawa



My faves

Childhood Toys

MENKO



KOMA



KITE



File photo

YO-YO



File photo

BIIDAMA



File photo

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

Growing up in the 70s and 80s, I had a lot of fun playing with traditional Japanese/Okinawan toys, including kites and spinning tops. Stashing some toys in my schoolbag, I could not wait for a fun time with friends in the schoolyard.

However, once Nintendo's takeover took place in the mid-80s, the age of analog faded away.

By the time the 90s were approaching, we would rather meet at a friend's house to spend hours on the video game console than play outside.

Now, those old toys are almost always talked about in the past tense. But they are not completely gone. Some of them are still available at toy shops and 100-yen stores, while others continue to be sold online.

Why not give them a try and get the taste of Japan's or Okinawa's nostalgia?

■ Menko/Patch

These are cards with illustrations (often characters of kids' TV shows) drawn on their front and back. There are round ones and square ones. There are several variations as to how you play with them, but the one I was familiar with goes like this. First, you lay several of them on the ground. Your opponent will do the same with his or her cards. Then you pick one of your cards from the ground and slam it against the ground, aiming at a spot close to some of your opponent's cards. If opponent's card flips due to the impact of the card you throw, you get to keep it.

■ Koma (spinning top)

Although spinning tops are associated with New Year celebrations, we used to play with them all year.

The most common ways of playing with tops are so-called "battles" and trick shots. In the "battles," we would spin our tops in a close area and let them collide with each other to see which one would be the last one standing. As for tricks, me and my friends used to let a spinning top land on our hands once unleashing it from a cord.

■ Kite

Flying kites are associated with the New Year celebrations. Once January came around, I would purchase one at a bunbouguya (local stationary store) and fly it in a park. In Okinawa, there is also a hand-made kite called "Kaabuyaa", which means "bat" in Okinawan dialect. My fun almost always ended with my kite hanging from electric wire or stuck in a tree. (Now flying kites is prohibited at some locations including those around flight routes for safety reasons.)

■ Biidama (glass beads)

According to Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun, the history of the glass bead game in Japan can be traced back to as far as the Heian era (794-1185), when a type gambling called "zeniuchi" was played with coins. In the late Edo era, an illustration of foreign kids playing with glass beads was drawn in Yokohama.

Back then, according to Asahi, glass beads were expensive imports. So, they were substituted by tree fruits and balls of clay for local Japanese. But glass beads became commonly available when bottled ramune (soda) came to be domestically produced in Meiji era (1868 – 1912). A glass bead was contained in each bottle of the beverage, which was reused as a toy for kids.

There are several ways to play with the beads, but the one I often played was to aim at a bead on the ground with another one. If you can hit your target bead, it becomes yours.

■ (Coca Cola) Yo-yo

Of course, the yo-yo is not a Japanese toy. But my list would not be complete without mentioning it, for several reasons, starting with "Coca-Cola yo-yo." Introduced as a promotional item of the beverage company, this yo-yo was one of the most sought-after items when I was a kid. Once I obtained one, I spent hours just trying to complete tricks like "Walk the Dog" and "Around the World." Of course, I ended up breaking it. Replica Coca-Cola yo-yos are now available online and at select stores.

According to the Japan Yo-Yo Federation, the yo-yo boom has taken place several times in Japan, the first of which came with the Coca-Cola yo-yo. The second wave was introduced by "Sukeban Deka," a TV show based on a manga of the same title where a high school girl fought villains by utilizing a red-colored yo-yo. "Sukeban" means "delinquent girl" in slang. This word is outdated and hardly used now, but every time it is mentioned, I remember the time I recklessly swung my yo-yo like Saki Asamiya, the heroine of the show.

The third boom came around 1997 with "hyper yo-yo", a new brand of yo-yo launched by the Japanese toy company Bandai. About 27 million hyper yo-yos were sold worldwide.

The federation notes that the yo-yo continues to be popular in Japan. There have even been more than 30 world champions of competitive yo-yo from this country. Thanks to improvements in materials and designs, high-performance products are being introduced into the yo-yo world, helping the toy stay up-to-date, according to the federation.

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File photo



How to Win at Arcade Machines

Tips, tricks and strategies



File Photos

1 Understand the machines

Not all are rigged (but some are close)

Not every claw machine in Japan is designed to make you fail, but they are carefully calibrated to challenge you. Knowing the basics can save you from blowing your budget.

■ **Claw machines (UFO catchers)**

These typically don't grip prizes tightly. Instead, the strategy often involves nudging, dragging, or pushing the item into the drop zone.

■ **"Impossible" setups**

If a prize looks wedged into a corner or balanced precariously, it's usually a trap. Move on to another machine.

BY JESSIE CARBUTT,
METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

If you've ever wandered into a Japanese arcade, or game center as they're called, you've seen them: rows of claw machines (UFO catchers) tempting you with plushies, anime figures, and even quirky snacks. Winning, though? That's a whole different beast. The claws seem weaker than your morning coffee, and prizes are always juuuust out of reach. But here's the thing—they're not unwinnable.

With some strategy, a few insider tricks, and maybe a little patience, you can leave the arcade with more than just empty pockets. We show you how to win at arcade machines in Japan. Let's dive into what works—and what doesn't.

4 Watch and learn before you play

Patience is your best friend in a Japanese arcade. Before you throw your ¥100 coins into a machine, spend a minute observing others.

■ **Watch successful players**

How do they position the claw? What angle do they go for?

■ **Look for partially won prizes**

If someone gave up on a machine with a prize already teetering near the edge, that's your golden opportunity.

2 Master specific techniques

■ **The Nudge**

For prizes near the edge or on rollers, aim to push or flick the prize rather than lift it.

■ **Leverage Physics**

Use the claw to topple prizes over, particularly plush toys. Aim for the prize's center of gravity to make it move.

■ **Precision Drops**

Align the claw with specific parts of the prize—like corners or tags—that are easier to grab or manipulate.

■ **One-Sided Grab**

For oddly shaped or heavy prizes, position the claw to grab only one side, creating rotational momentum that can help move the prize

3 The secret to plushies

Aim for the neck or a tag, not the center

This is where most players go wrong—they assume the claw is supposed to grab the prize directly.

■ **Aim for the neck or edge of the prize**

If you're going for a plush toy, aim the claw around the base of the neck or shoulders or a tag or any kind of fabric that could snag. This gives the claw better leverage to nudge or tilt the toy toward the chute.

■ **Use the "drag" method**

For rectangular boxes (like anime figures), try using the claw to drag one corner of the box closer to the edge. Don't aim for the center—it's too stable.

■ **Test the claw strength**

Try a single play to see how much the claw actually grips. If it barely lifts the item, you'll need to rely on nudging or wait until the prize is closer to the edge.

I learned this the hard way with a Pikachu plush. After wasting ¥1,500 trying to grab it dead-center, a staff member casually mentioned, "Try aiming for the neck." Two plays later, Pikachu was mine. For some reason, they also threw in a free strawberry ice cream.

5 Ask staff for help

This might sound like cheating and taking all the fun out of it, but in Japan, it's perfectly normal to ask the arcade staff for a hand. They're surprisingly willing to assist, especially if you've already spent a decent amount trying to win. So make those puppy eyes and they will come and help.

■ **Ask for adjustments**

If a prize is stuck, they might nudge it to a more winnable position.

■ **Request tips**

Staff often know the best way to win and may give you hints.

6 Budget smarter, not harder

Winning at claw machines can be addictive, but it's easy to lose track of how much you've spent. Part of how to win at arcade machines in Japan is knowing when to stop.

■ **Set a cap**

Decide how much you're willing to spend on a single machine—¥1,000 is a good limit per prize.

■ **Take advantage of discounts**

Many arcades offer bundle deals (e.g., ¥1,000 for 12 plays). Use these if you plan to stay a while.

7 Timing is everything

Believe it or not, timing can make a big difference in your success rate for how to win at arcade machines in Japan.

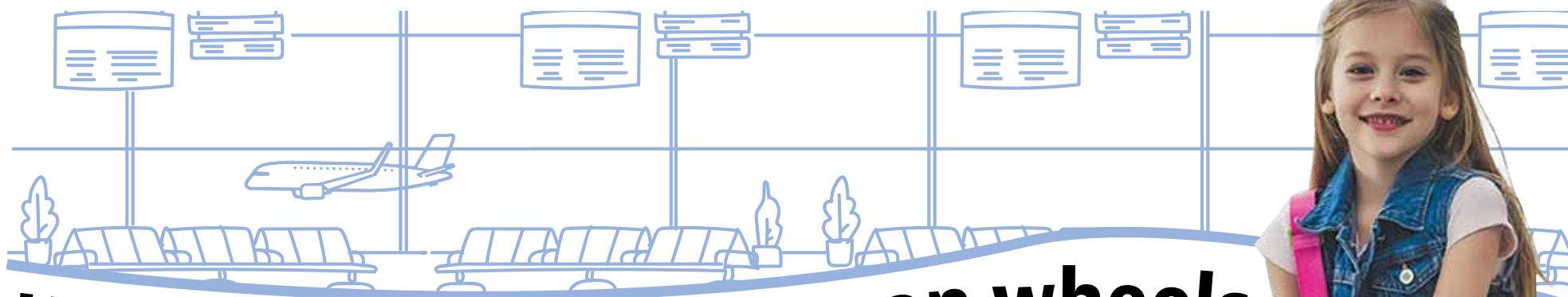
■ **Visit during quiet hours**

Weekday afternoons or late evenings are ideal. Staff have more time to help, and you won't feel rushed by onlookers.

■ **Take breaks**

If you're frustrated or on a losing streak, step away and come back later. Machines sometimes "reset" to easier settings after prolonged use.





Kids are riding suitcases on wheels, and not everyone is amused

BY ANDREA SACHS,
THE WASHINGTON POST

Never mind the little kids who cry on long-haul flights, dine at white-tablecloth restaurants or monkey around in hotel gyms.

If you want to stir up curiosity - or controversy - let your children zip around an airport on a scooter or ride-on suitcase.

Last year, a nomadic family of five whose Instagram handle is “the Hendrix Tribe” drew attention after posting videos of their three young children flitting through airports, boarding ramps and airplanes on candy-colored scooters.

“Yes, they’re the kids racing scooters through the terminal,” reads one caption from a May post on Instagram. “And yes - we’re the parents filming instead of stopping them!”

Thousands of people left comments. Some praised the family for their ingenuity in dealing with airport doldrums and slowpoke children. The majority, however, criticized them for perceived entitlement and thoughtlessness.

“Airports are not a playground,” one commenter wrote.

Wheeled accessories for the junior jet set have introduced a new flash point in family travel. Ride-on luggage such as Trunki,



Younglingz and Jetkids by Stokke, or bags that attach to scooters (see: Kiddietotes and Advwin) allow kids to be more self-sufficient and mobile, according to parents and product manufacturers. They can also be a source of entertainment and an outlet for pent-up energy.

“This product allows them to keep up in the airport. It keeps them more engaged and happier, and they can carry their stuff, which makes it easier for everybody and helps them have a sense of ownership,” said Kiddietotes co-founder Brenton Clive, a father of five.

However, for travelers in their direct path, these innovations can become a pedestrian traffic hazard, obstructing progress to a gate and potentially causing harm.

On the Hendrix family’s Instagram account, a commenter said her mother-in-law landed in the emergency room instead of Vancouver after a child on a scooter crashed into her, fracturing her hip. (The Hendrix family did not respond to requests for an interview.)

Make way for ride-on luggage

Kid-driven luggage comes in two main styles: suitcases that operate like a pedal-less bike and kick scooters with a bag affixed to the front. For older kids and adults, manufacturers such as Modobag and Aotos have created motorized smart luggage that can reach speeds of up to 8 mph. The scooters used by the Hendrix clan do not have a luggage component but are collapsible.

Though this category of luggage is still niche, sightings are becoming more common, especially in hub airports frequented by families.

“I’ve been seeing the rideable luggage everywhere,” said Alison M. Cheperdak, a D.C.-based etiquette coach and founder of Elevate Etiquette.

A few days after Christmas at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, I saw a young boy riding a Jetkids alongside his mother, who was pushing a stroller and toting a swaddled baby. A panda Kiddietotes was parked at my gate.

Aurora Karbe, 8, divides her time between Virginia and Estonia. She has been using her Kiddietotes for more than half

her life. The scooter was a birthday present from her parents. Her dad, Sharif El-Mahdi, said his daughter has flown with it dozens of times to around 10 countries.

She sometimes rides it during hours when most kids are fast asleep in their beds, such as before a red-eye transatlantic flight from the East Coast or after a wee-hours arrival in Europe.

“It helps perk her up,” said El-Mahdi. “If it weren’t for the scooter, I would be carrying an exhausted child who did not want to walk from this terminal to that terminal.”

El-Mahdi said Aurora, who has been riding scooters since age 2, always stays within sight of her parents.

“I usually stop when I can’t see you guys anymore,” Aurora said during a phone interview from Tallinn, Estonia.

The reaction from other travelers, El-Mahdi said, has been a mix of intrigue, envy and amusement.

“At least 50 percent of the people we walk by have some sort of reaction,” he said. “They elbow their friend and say they wish they made it for adults, or people with kids will say it’s amazing. I’ve never seen any negativity.”

Before Anna Karsten became a parent, she found ride-on luggage charming. Now a mom of two, she’s had to adjust her rose-tinted glasses, especially after she tested it with real-life pilots.

On her blog Anna Everywhere, Karsten reviewed luggage that her

sons, now 4 and 6, could push, scoot or sit in. They liked Trunki, but their little legs got tired easily from the pushing. She often ended up pulling them by the strap, creating potential pitfalls in busy airports. They would tumble off, she said, or travelers would stumble on the long leash.

“It was causing more of a headache than it was actually helping,” said Karsten, who is based in France. “When you’re dragging your kids, you constantly have to look behind you to make sure they’re all right and you’re not tripping anyone.”

The family also tried a Jetkids product that converts into a bed.

Karsten said the 360-degree wheels spun smoothly, but the interior space was small, and some airlines did not permit the leg extension, part of the sleeper setup. She had high praise for Younglingz, which includes footrests, a padded seat and a seat belt.

Luggage scooters are a smart idea and a crowd pleaser, she said - except in their intended environment.

“They’re super useful for walking around a new city,” Karsten said. “But at the airport, I feel like everyone will hate you for them.”

Aviation rules on rideable suitcases

Travelers should be aware of aviation industry restrictions on luggage that doubles as conveyance.

Before the 2020 launch of Kiddietotes, Clive said the company contacted 50 of the largest airports in the United States as well as the major airlines. The feedback was encouraging: Luggage scooters are allowed as long as they are not battery-powered and are compliant with Transportation Security Administration and airline rules. The company has not repeated its survey since then, even as it develops new products with a detachable carry-on and scooters tailored for teens.

More recently, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey said it prohibits recreational scooters inside its three airports: JFK, LaGuardia and Newark. At Reagan National and Dulles International, scooters fall into the same category as balance boards, bicycles, hoverboards, Rollerblades, skateboards and Segways: The items must be pushed or carried, not driven. Ride-on luggage is okay.

Two years ago, Haneda and Narita airports in Japan asked travelers to refrain from using electric suitcases for safety purposes.

TSA said it permits rideable



File photos

luggage at airport security checkpoints. The Federal Aviation Administration has guidelines on devices that use lithium batteries, such as smart suitcases. TSA recommends that travelers check with their airline about its carry-on policies.

El-Mahdi said he has had no issues stowing Aurora’s llama Kiddietotes in the airplane’s overhead bin. However, the rules are not always consistent. Some carriers require travelers to gate-check their scooters along with strollers and wheelchairs.

“After 50+ flights, our kids were refused entry onto the plane,” read a caption accompanying a video of the Hendrix children attempting to board with their scooters.

Best practices for scooting

Before setting your kids free on their chariots, Cheperdak, the etiquette coach, said parents and guardians should appraise their surroundings.

She said ride-on luggage is “generally fine” in quieter, uncrowded terminals and gates, but that riders should dismount in congested or sensitive spaces such as security lines, boarding areas, jet bridges and narrow walkways.

“It works best when paired with clear boundaries,” Cheperdak said. “Airports are shared, high-traffic spaces, and anything that turns into a toy rather than a transport solution can quickly affect safety and courtesy for others.”

As with other public spaces, parents should not let their children wander off. They should also enforce slow speeds and quickly intervene if their child starts to weave through people or block the flow of traffic, she said.

“Teaching kids to stop, yield and dismount when asked helps them practice good public manners in a way that translates far beyond travel,” Cheperdak said.

If you want to stir up curiosity - or controversy - let your children zip around an airport on a scooter or ride-on suitcase.

Picking perfect souvenir for everyone in your life

BY HANNAH SAMPSON,
THE WASHINGTON POST

Buying souvenirs can be so fraught that bad ones have become a punch line: My uncle went to Las Vegas and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.

There's no law, of course, that says you have to cram your precious suitcase space with trinkets for your in-laws, co-workers and the neighbor who checks your mail. But bringing back a piece of your trip can be meaningful for the traveler and the people back home, said Elaine Swann, author of "Elaine Swann's Book of Modern Etiquette."

"It's thoughtful, and it brings the recipient surprise and delight," she said. "It's an incredibly kind gesture."

Summer Hull, editorial director at the Points Guy, keeps a couple shopping rules in mind when she travels: Opt for a gift the recipient is likely to use, and make sure it's something the destination does especially well.

"It's not going to burden them; they're probably going to enjoy it," she said.

A disclaimer: Some souvenirs might be unethical or potentially illegal, so travelers should ask where an item came from and check the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website for banned items. Experts urge travelers to buy products made by locals rather than items manufactured far from a destination to ensure the purchase helps the destination.

"Ideally, visit places where you can see the craftsmen and women at work to cut down on the chances of exploitation," United



Kingdom-based travel writer Abi King said in an email.

Here are more suggestions and best practices for gifts that should spark joy.

Stickers and candy for kids

Most families with young kids are waging a war against clutter. Thoughtful travelers will try to avoid souvenirs that are bulky or age-inappropriate.

As a travel reporter and a mom, I've been guilty of last-minute shopping sprees at Times Square tchotchke shops or airport bookstores. Did my toddler need a plush alligator wearing an I Heart NY shirt? Not at all.

A better choice for little kids can be stickers, especially ones that you can't find at home: They take up very little space, give busy hands a task and inspire larger art projects.

Elizabeth de Quillacq, owner and founder of the travel agency Souvenir & Far, said in an email that she likes to buy kids' souvenirs at a grocery store.

"Candy, snacks, and treats kids can't get at home are always a hit," she said.

She also likes to find "small, tactile items tied to everyday life," like a backpack or hair accessories that kids will actually use.

Home goods and personalized mementos for family

Ideally, you know your family well enough to have a sense of what they'd love. But think about whether your knowledge is up-to-date: Your cousin may have adored dolphins once, but what are the odds she's still collecting them 15 years later?

Several experts pick out Christmas ornaments for themselves or family members. Amir Eylon, president of the market research consulting firm Longwoods International, has two trees, with one devoted to trip-related baubles.

He looks for local artisan



File photos

Snacks and postcards for colleagues

If you want to bring something back to the office, you can't go wrong with food. Who doesn't love a spread of New York City bagels, saltwater taffy from the Shore or Kit Kats from Japan? After a recent trip to Louisville, Eylon said he brought back bourbon balls for his office.

Another easy-to-pack, inexpensive and thoughtful item: a simple postcard.

If you don't know your co-workers well, Swann suggested gifts that are "somewhat generic" such as items for their desk.

Don't forget the house sitter

Your travel party might be small, but it can take a village to go on vacation. There's the pal who waters your plants, the sitter who watches your pet, the friend who shared her destination tips or the travel adviser who rearranged your flight when plans changed.

They may not expect anything from your trip - but chances are they'd be moved by one.

"It's never expected, of course, but it's always incredibly thoughtful and appreciated," Savannah Westwood, owner and founder of the Savvy Sitter, said in an email. Clients will usually offer a cash tip to their pet sitters, but Westwood says sometimes they will also bring back something like sweets, magnets or key chains.

Laurel Brunvoll, owner of Unforgettable Trips, said she has received gifts from clients including silver necklaces from Ireland and Finland, vanilla from Tahiti, chocolate from Belgium and "cards from Kenya handmade from elephant poop."

She has also gifted bookmarks, tea towels, reusable bags that look neat and lotions or oils.



Ideally, you know your family well enough to have a sense of what they'd love. But think about whether your knowledge is up-to-date: Your cousin may have adored dolphins once, but what are the odds she's still collecting them 15 years later?

goods as gifts, ideally items with a story that he can share with his family members. Last year at a holiday market in Chicago, he found a Ukrainian Christmas tree. It was, he said, the "first thing my wife put up this year."

Practical items tied to the destination can also be a good fit. Hull brought back chopsticks for her entire family when she visited Japan, including training versions for her kids.

"They were under \$10 each for really good chopsticks," she said. "And we still use them."

Katy Nastro, travel expert at the cheap-flight alert service Going, often defaults to food but tries to appeal to a wide audience with her picks. She said salt and condiments tend to be winners.

On a seven-day river cruise on the Danube, Confetti Travel Service founder Marie Russell bought

her family chocolate from each city so they could taste a variety, she said in an email.

Swann has also given food as a gift to family; she picked up sauces on a trip to Jamaica that she gave to her sister, a sous chef.

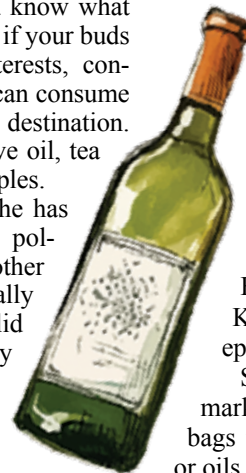
She recalled another gift from her daughter, who went to Las Vegas with friends to celebrate her 21st birthday: mugs for Swann and her husband with their names on them.

"We cherish those mugs," Swann said.

Wine, olive oil and skin care for friends

If your bestie is wild about coffee or notebooks, you know what to do on vacation. But if your buds have less-obvious interests, consider something they can consume that's done well in the destination. Hull named wine, olive oil, tea or shortbread as examples.

Nastro, who said she has a "size of my hand" policy for souvenirs other than liquids, likes locally made perfumes or solid lotions because they travel well and help transport the recipient to the place the item came from.





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Daily rates at Defense Department hotels in Japan, including Yokosuka Naval Base's Navy Lodge, seen here on Jan. 28, 2026, have dropped following a price hike in late 2025. Photo by Jonathan Baez, Stars and Stripes

On-base lodging prices fall in Japan after steep per diem hike

BY ALEX WILSON,
STARS AND STRIPES
Published: January 28, 2026

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE — Defense Department travelers headed to Japan can breathe easier now that on-base lodging in the region is returning to relatively normal prices following a rate hike last year.

The cost of an overnight stay at an on-base hotel skyrocketed in October — in some instances rising nearly 75% — after the Defense Travel Management Office on Sept. 25 raised the maximum per diem rates for lodging at more than a dozen locations in Japan to \$218.

Per diem rates for Japan as a whole range from \$113 to \$448 as of Jan. 1, according to the office's website. Rates are updated monthly or as necessary.

While the maximum per diem rate remains the same for most locations, pricing at various base hotels has since dropped to

pre-October prices.

At Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, a standard room at the Kanto Lodge has fallen to \$98 from \$171 in October. The Misawa Inn at Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan saw a similar decrease, dropping from \$171 to \$104.

DOD lodging facilities at Yokosuka, Sasebo and Okinawa were all \$125 per night, a slight increase over rates around \$91 in October, according to the DOD Lodging website.

Room rates are established at the "minimum amount necessary" to cover the cost of maintaining lodging facilities, with consideration given to local market conditions and operation costs, according to the DOD's lodging policy.

Lodging rates for those traveling on official duty cannot exceed local per diem rates, but those traveling for leisure may face higher prices, according to the policy.

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COMIC CORNER



- Daryl Talbot

Stripes Sports Trivia

Known more these days for being a manager, who was in the on-deck circle when Hank Aaron hit his record-breaking 715th homerun?

Answer

Dusty Baker

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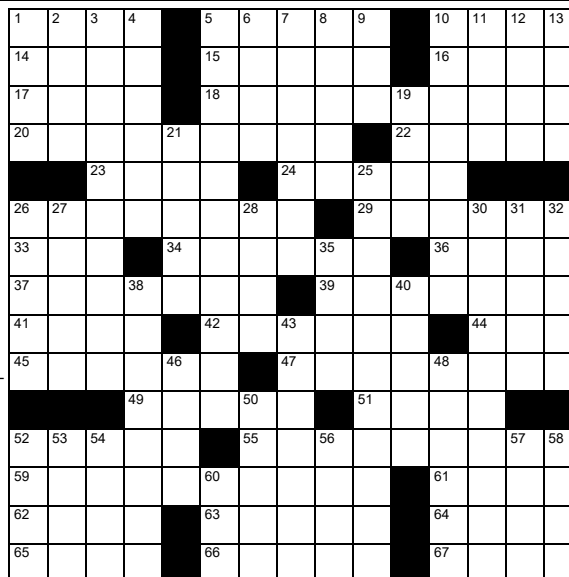
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Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

- 1 Singer Tori
- 5 Horse-racing prize
- 10 Sales prospect
- 14 Easy gait
- 15 Shills for, e.g.
- 16 Surrounding glow
- 17 Antlered beast
- 18 Seized again
- 20 Actress in the "Scary Movie" series
- 22 Faulkner's "___ for Emily"
- 23 Rotisserie rod
- 24 Pointer's word
- 26 Small, as towns go
- 29 Milk option
- 33 That ___ then...
- 34 Laughed with gusto



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- 36 Sprouse who played Jughead on "Riverdale"
- 37 Tax crime
- 39 Calgary's province
- 41 It may be first, middle or last
- 42 Pale shade
- 44 La Brea goo
- 45 Heavy hammer
- 47 They make you feel confident
- 49 TV station, e.g.
- 51 Point on a bus map
- 52 Lets the lure fly
- 55 Greenspan, e.g.
- 59 Say "slippery slope", e.g.
- 61 Stanford town: ___ Alto
- 62 Texter's "ha ha ha!"
- 63 Leans to one side
- 64 1961 space chimp
- 65 Wimbledon surface

- 66 Office papers
- 67 Column crossers

- #### DOWN
- 1 He played Hawkeye
 - 2 Big name in faucets
 - 3 Magical phrase
 - 4 Celestial being
 - 5 Airborne unit member
 - 6 Lyft rival
 - 7 Poet at a reading, e.g.
 - 8 Secret supply
 - 9 Sixth sense, briefly
 - 10 Fishburne of "The Matrix"
 - 11 Latvian capital
 - 12 Son of Zeus
 - 13 Miami's county
 - 19 Edible tuber
 - 21 Flowers in Italy
 - 25 Infinite quality
 - 26 Track legend Jesse

- 27 Part of USNA
- 28 Syrian news agcy.
- 30 Early keyboard
- 31 Sacrificial spot
- 32 Eye drops
- 35 Food, slangily
- 38 Propofol purpose
- 40 Popeye's nemesis
- 43 Caustic wit
- 46 Main point
- 48 Toddler's jumpsuit
- 50 Spooky
- 52 Word in a "Breaking Bad" spinoff's title
- 53 ___ mater
- 54 Cabbage salad
- 56 Comics canine
- 57 Traffic sign word
- 58 Throw out
- 60 Krueger's street

Answers to Previous Crossword:

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

DID YOU KNOW?

Each cow carcass in Japan is given a score based on its yield (from A to C) and level of marbling, firmness, color and overall quality (from 1 to 5). The overall grade of the beef is determined by combining these two criteria, with A5 being the highest possible mark. Matsuzaka-ushi, Yonezawa-gyu, Miyazaki-gyu, Maezawa-gyu and Kobe Beef are ranked the top five of 170 registered wagyu brands.



Kanji of the week

明

aka(-ru) / mei [light]

Language Lesson

I'm full.

Onaka ippai desu.

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SUDOKU

Edited by Margie E. Burke

Difficulty: Medium

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

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:

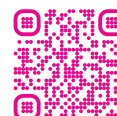
9	3	8	5	6	1	7	4	2
2	5	6	4	9	7	3	8	1
1	7	4	8	2	3	9	5	6
8	2	3	1	7	6	5	9	4
5	4	1	9	8	2	6	7	3
7	6	9	3	4	5	1	2	8
6	1	2	7	5	4	8	3	9
4	9	7	6	3	8	2	1	5
3	8	5	2	1	9	4	6	7

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Japanese Netflix shows you can watch with English subtitles

BY TAKAHIRO KANAZAWA AND JESSIE CARBUTT, METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

Netflix has a bunch of binge-worthy Japanese-language shows with English subtitles. Read on for our latest favorites. And please note that several of these titles rotate in and out by region. Some are available only in Japan, and

some are available internationally in certain times of the year.

If you need slightly more justification that you're absolutely not vegging out in front of the TV, you are absorbing a new language, add the LLN Google Chrome extension. It allows you to see the Japanese and English side by side. You can hover over a word to pause it, see how to pronounce it, and add it to your vocab dictionary.



Omameda Towako and Her Three Ex-husbands

Life seems good for Omameda Towako. The 40-year-old single mom has started her new role as president of the construction company Shirokuma Housing and her relationship at home with her teenage daughter is going well. There's just one problem. Well, three. Each of her troublemaking ex-husbands is still entangled in her life. Inevitably, a series of awkward moments and classic rom-com situations ensue. This reverse-harem series is written with wit and is a relaxing, lighthearted show to switch on when you don't need something heavy.

If you're into Japanese music, watch out for the ending songs. Each episode's credits are accompanied by beats by STUTS, joined by different rappers such as KID FRESINO, NENE, BIM and so on.

Images from Youtube



Crayon Shin-chan: The Storm Called: The Adult Empire Strikes Back

Hands-down the best Shin-Chan film out there (in our opinion). A production about a crudely animated five-year-old with zero verbal filter, which somehow masterfully brings you to tears over the complex, bittersweet nostalgia for your own youth. Aptly released in 2001, the Kasukabe family parents, Hiroshi and Misae, are trapped inside an artificial 20th century. Stuck in the bodies and minds of their child selves, they have fully regressed back to the nostalgia of their childhood lives. It's up to Shin-Chan and his friends to save them and, quite literally, their futures.

Tokyo Godfathers

Without a fantastical anime elf, epic robot battle or school uniform-clad romance in sight, "Tokyo Godfathers" is grounded in a gritty realism as it dives into the underbelly of Tokyo society. Gin, a middle-aged gambling addict and alcoholic, transgender woman Hana and teenage runaway Miyuki have banded together as a makeshift family since finding themselves homeless in the capital. When the oddball trio finds an abandoned baby on a snowy Christmas Eve, an adventure unfolds as they try to trace the parents. A truly poignant story about the journey to recovery, the immorality of prejudice and the pain of regret, this movie points to cracks in Japan's increasingly fragmented and isolating modern society.



Yakuza and the Family

The media has built an image of yakuza culture as a brotherhood of loyalty and luxury — living an adrenaline-rushed highlife steeped in a strict code of tradition, but the reality is that the modern-day yakuza's power is weakening, their numbers are diminishing and society is turning its fear into ostracism. "Yakuza and the Family" follows the life of yakuza defector Kenji Yamamoto, who, forever stigmatized by society for his past association with a criminal gang, struggles to live amongst his local community and erase the reputation of his former self. A sad exposure into Japanese gang culture, "Yakuza and the Family" blends action with reality and delivers a hard look at the truth behind "manners maketh man."



Badly in Love

Badly in Love is one of Netflix Japan's most confronting reality shows, precisely because it refuses to sanitize its cast. The series follows men with openly troubled pasts, including former gang members and long-time delinquents, as they attempt to form romantic relationships while reckoning with the emotional damage they carry with them.



Sanctuary

If you want something louder, messier, and aggressively modern, Sanctuary is it. Set in the world of professional sumo, this series follows an unlikable, desperate antihero clawing his way through a rigid hierarchy that has no patience for outsiders. The dialogue is rough, fast, and often crude, making it less "study-friendly" but perfect for exposure to real, contemporary Japanese. Plus, it's a good watch—one of Netflix Japan's most internationally successful originals to date, to be precise.

The Journalist

Broadsheet reporter Anna Matsuda settles for nothing but the truth. Based on the true Moritomo Gakuen scandal, in which the Abe government suspiciously carried out a massively discounted sale of state-owned land to a private educational institution, Matsuda seeks to bring nationwide attention to the corruption of Japanese politics. The focus, however, is not on the political big fish, but on the ordinary guys in the office blocks, and how far they are required to sacrifice their morals, health and lives in order to serve the powers above them. A quick-moving political thriller, you're left questioning the limits of power — be it the media, the little guy or bureaucratic rule.



The Mikanai: Cooking for the Maiko House

Following two girls living in a Kyoto maiko house, The Mikanai is slow, tender, and deeply domestic. The language is clear and repetitive, the pacing is unhurried, and the cultural context is rich without being overwhelming. It's one of the best Japanese-language Netflix titles for learners who want to get cozy and absorb rhythm, politeness levels, and everyday expressions without stress.



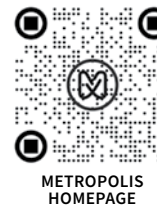
Words Bubble Up Like Soda Pop

Vibrantly animated in candy colors, this teen romance packs a lot into its 1.5 hours. An introverted boy who can only express himself through haiku poetry and a bubbly but self-conscious influencer share a whirlwind summer on a heartwarming adventure to locate a record. It's a fun visual ride that's an homage to the joy of the 1980s aesthetic. You can't go wrong with director Kyohei Ishiguro's work.



Asakusa Kid

Dive into the youth of Takeshi Kitano in "Asakusa Kid," and follow the beginnings of his career towards becoming the legendary director, actor and comedian that he is today. The story largely takes place in France-za, a failing theater-slash-burlesque house where Kitano works at the bottom of the food chain as an elevator boy. 1970s dandy vibes, new-wave manzai, straight-talking strippers and Kitano's mentor Senzaburo Fukami mingle in a cocktail of burnt-out and freshly kindled dreams. It's a biographical drama brought beyond life with playful bursts of magical realism and the thrill of good ol' fashioned showbiz.



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