

Plan a Sabbatical in Japan

Country of Japan

Japan consists of a chain of islands. The main ones are Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu (where Tokyo and Osaka are situated), and Hokkaido. The land is mountainous and volcanic, and only 17 percent of the total area is cultivable. The highest mountain is Mount Fuji (a dormant volcano) at 3,776 metres

Japan has a strong economy and plays a major role in the international community as a major aid donor and source of global capital and credit.

More than three-quarters of the population live in sprawling cities on the coastal fringes of Japan's four mountainous, wooded islands. Japan remains a traditional society with strong social and employment hierarchies—Japanese men have tended to work for the same employer throughout their working lives. But this and other traditions are under pressure as a young generation more in tune with Western culture and ideas grows up.

Shintoism and Buddhism are the major religions; 80 percent of Japanese adhere to more than one religion: Shinto (106.8 million), Buddhism (89.2 million), Christianity (a minority with 3.0 million), others (9.8 million).

A strict code of behaviour and courtesy is recognized and followed by almost everyone. Although Japanese people do not expect visitors to be familiar with all their customs, guests are expected to behave formally and politely. When entering a Japanese home or restaurant, shoes must be removed. Bowing is the customary greeting, but handshaking is becoming more common for business meetings with Westerners. The honorific suffix san should be used when addressing all men and women; for instance Mr. Yamada would be addressed as Yamada-san. Table manners are very important, although the Japanese host will be very tolerant toward a visitor. However, it is best if visitors familiarize themselves with basic table etiquette and use chopsticks.

General Comments about Travelling in Japan

Japan has an excellent rail network throughout the country and several international airports. There is a relatively low crime rate in Japan and travel is generally safe although, as always, travellers should take common sense precautions.

Visas

A valid Canadian passport is required. The passport must be valid for at least six months beyond the date of your expected departure from the country. Canadian citizens planning to visit Japan as a tourist may do so for three months (90 days) without having to apply for a visa.

Currency

The currency in Japan is the yen. Japan has a strong cash culture and it is not unusual to see people carrying large amounts of cash. Major credit cards are used, although there may be problems with access to foreign credit cards outside the city. Interac use is also possible although there is limited access for foreign Interac cards. (You should also be aware your Canadian bank may charge a substantial fee for Interac withdrawals outside Canada.) Travellers' cheques (in yen or U.S. dollars) may be cashed at banks.

Health and Safety

Check current inoculation requirements and recommendations by visiting International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT) (www.iamat.org/country_profile.cfm?id=109).

Organizations Welcoming Groups

The Asian Rural Institute in Japan offers volunteer opportunities suitable for sabbatical.

The Asian Rural Institute

The Asian Rural Institute (ARI), Japan, is a training centre for rural leaders. Founded in 1973 by the Rev. Dr. Toshihiro Takami, the aim of the program is to invite and train local grassroots leaders to serve more effectively in their communities as they work for the poor, the hungry, and the marginalized.

Each year from April to December, they bring together about 30 leaders from countries primarily in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific to take part in the Rural Leaders Training Program. The training focuses on sustainable agriculture through integrated organic farming techniques, community building, and leadership. It is community based, and hands-on learning is emphasized in all areas. Working together, participants grow and share their own food. At the heart of the program is the concept of “Foodlife”—a term designed to recognize and value the interdependency between life and the food that sustains all life.

If you feel that you want to work and live together with people from many different countries, why don't you come to work at ARI as a volunteer? ARI needs your talents, skills, songs, thoughts, laughter, and hard work. Consider joining their pursuit of an environmentally healthy, just, and peaceful world.

Who are ARI volunteers?

Volunteers are an integral part of the ARI community, growing and working alongside the institute's participants and staff. Usually 10–12 volunteers from Japan and around the globe live and work at ARI. Volunteers are welcome for a few days, for 60 days, or for up to one year. Christian in inspiration but ecumenical in practice, ARI welcomes people of all faiths, races, classes, and professions to learn and work together.

What do volunteers do?

Dedicated volunteers support the training of the ARI participants. Living simply and working humbly with ARI staff, volunteers have a chance to grow as individuals, as leaders, and as valuable community members. They are expected to be ready for challenges and physically demanding work from 6:30 a.m., six days a week.

Volunteers will be assigned to a job that fulfills the current needs of ARI and best supports the training program. Work assignments are often determined by previous experience or skills of the volunteer, but people from all walks of life are welcomed. Some specific working sections available to volunteers include livestock, crops and vegetables, office work, IT, meal service preparation, and food processing.

Expenses

ARI will pay the cost of boarding in a double occupancy dormitory room for all volunteers staying over 60 days. Housing for married couples or those with children may be available on request. ARI asks that volunteers spend their early months living on campus, but if you would prefer an off-campus housing arrangement, ARI will assist you in finding something suitable that fits your budget.

Volunteers are asked to contribute 30,000 yen per month to cover their food costs. This fee can be waived if necessary. Volunteers are also expected to provide their own lunch on Sundays.

Transportation costs are paid for by the volunteer. Please budget around 5500 yen for a one-way trip to Narita Airport. At ARI you can rent a bicycle for local transportation, and local trains are easily available. The closest train station is approximately 15 minutes by bicycle. Shopping centres to purchase daily necessities are available.

How to apply

Please contact ARI for a volunteer application at ecu@ari-edu.org. You will need to provide a completed application form, a letter of recommendation, a health certificate and one passport photograph.

ARI does not provide visa support for volunteers and you will be required to obtain a proper visa on your own. ARI recommends that volunteers looking to serve for an extended period travel to ARI with the support of another organization, such as with your church or through a college program.

For more information, contact the People in Mission program (pip@united-church.ca).