

A person is seen from behind, sitting on a couch and watching a television. The TV screen displays a vibrant sunset over a mountain range. The person is holding a remote control in their right hand and a bowl of popcorn in their left. The room is dimly lit, with a blue light source visible on the left side of the frame.

UJA
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JAPAN

QUICK GUIDE

WHAT TO WATCH BEFORE YOU GO

KDS MISSION | MARCH 25-APRIL 2, 2025

WHAT TO WATCH BEFORE VISITING JAPAN

Watching a few films, documentaries, and television shows set in Japan is a fantastic way to get a sense of the country's rich culture, history, and lifestyle. Below, find a list of recommended films and series to watch to help inspire and familiarize you with Japan before visiting. From big Hollywood productions in both English and Japanese to local cinema, as well as documentaries and docuseries highlighting some of the country's best, this list has something for everyone, capturing Japan's unique heritage, bustling cityscapes, traditions, and natural beauty.

MOVIES

TOP PICKS - BY ORDER OF RELEASE

SHOPLIFTERS (2018)

Winner of the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes, *Shoplifters* follows a non-traditional and non-biological family struggling with poverty in Tokyo, as they teach their newly adopted daughter Yuri about stealing. A modern film, it offers an inside look at ordinary Japanese life and Tokyo's society. The film was primarily shot in the Adachi ward of Tokyo—a working-class neighbourhood in the north end of the city. *Shoplifters* was nominated at the Oscars and Golden Globes for Best Foreign Language Film.



SILENCE (2016)

Set in 17th-century Japan, *Silence* follows two Portuguese Jesuit missionaries—Rodrigues and Garupe, played by Andrew Garfield and Adam Driver—who face persecution while searching for their mentor, Ferreira, and spreading Christianity. After hearing rumors that Ferreira committed apostasy, Rodrigues and Garupe travel to Japan for answers. However, they begin to question their faith after witnessing and experiencing the torture inflicted on Christians by the shogunate.

Directed by Martin Scorsese as a passion project, *Silence* is based on the 1966 novel of the same name and inspired by real-life events—Cristóvão Ferreira was a Portuguese Jesuit priest who renounced his religion after being captured and tortured during the anti-Christian purges in 17th-century Japan. The film features Liam Neeson as Ferreira, as well as Ciarán Hinds and Japanese actor Tadanobu Asano.



MOVIES

TOP PICKS - BY ORDER OF RELEASE

JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI (2011)

A documentary about 85-year-old sushi master Jiro Ono and his tireless quest for perfection in sushi-making. His world-renowned restaurant—Sukiyabashi Jiro—is located in the basement of a Tokyo office building. As he unrelentingly attempts to create the perfect piece of sushi, his son Yoshikazu faces the pressure of stepping into his father's shoes. The documentary provides an insightful look into Japanese cuisine, as well as the artistry and craftsmanship intrinsic to Japanese culture.



LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA (2006)

Directed and co-produced by Clint Eastwood, *Letters from Iwo Jima* portrays the Battle of Iwo Jima from the perspective of the Japanese soldiers. Predominantly in Japanese, the film starts in 2005, where missives found on the island reveal the stories of the Japanese soldiers who fought and died during World War II—particularly the Battle of Iwo Jima. The film won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language film, and was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director.



MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA (2005)

Based on the eponymous bestselling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* tells the story of a young Japanese girl—Sayuri—who becomes a renowned *geisha* in Kyoto before World War II. Delving into geisha culture in imperial Japan, this English-language film is a great way to learn more about Japanese culture, customs, and history. The plot explores themes of love, sacrifice, and resilience, as Sayuri is torn between her duties as a *geisha* to her patrons and her innermost secret desires. Directed by Rob Marshall, the film features a mix of Japanese and Chinese actors in leading roles, including Michelle Yeoh and Ken Watanabe.



LOST IN TRANSLATION (2003)

Written and directed by Sofia Coppola, *Lost in Translation* follows two Americans in Japan who form an unlikely friendship while dealing with culture shock and loneliness. Set against the vibrant neon-lit backdrop of Tokyo, the film is a blend of humour, emotion, and stunning visuals, with heartfelt performances by Bill Murray as Bob—an aging actor—and Scarlett Johansson as Charlotte—a young woman uncertain of her future. Depicting Tokyo and Japanese culture through a Western lens, the film won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, as well as three Golden Globes.



MOVIES

TOP PICKS - BY ORDER OF RELEASE

THE LAST SAMURAI (2003)

Set in the late 1800s in the early years of the Meiji Restoration period, this film stars Tom Cruise as an American soldier who comes to Japan to help modernize Japan's Imperial Army. He ultimately ends up joining the samurai—in a fight against modernization and the destruction of the samurai's place in Japanese society. Ken Watanabe plays Katsumoto—the “last samurai”—a character based on the real-life samurai Saigo Takamori, who led the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. In addition to Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe, the film also stars Timothy Spall, Tony Goldwyn, and Billy Connolly.

SPIRITED AWAY (2001)

Considered one of Studio Ghibli's most famous films, *Spirited Away* was the first non-English language film to win an Oscar for Best Animated Feature. Despite being animated, it was Japan's highest-grossing film for 19 years. The story follows Chihiro, a young girl navigating a magical world to save her parents from the spirit realm and an evil witch. At the bathhouse where she works, she befriends Haku, a spirit who can transform into a dragon. As Chihiro grows braver, she learns the value of courage, kindness, and staying true to herself. Beyond its stunning animation, *Spirited Away* offers a rich introduction to Japan's connection to nature and Shinto-inspired beliefs.

Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985, is an internationally renowned Japanese animation studio known for visually stunning, hand-drawn films with rich storytelling and emotional depth. Its celebrated works include *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *Ponyo* (2008), and most recently, *The Boy and the Heron* (2023).



MOVIES

TOP PICKS - BY ORDER OF RELEASE

GODZILLA (1954)

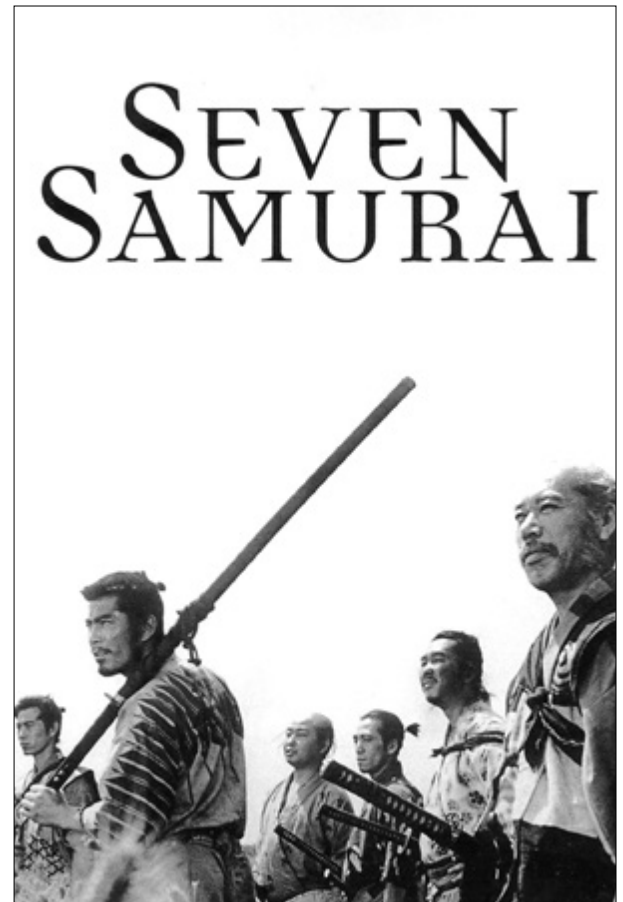
Godzilla, an international pop culture icon and the titular character of one of the world's most recognized franchises, debuted in the 1954 film *Godzilla*. Since then, there have been countless sequels, including five American adaptations. Traditionally depicted in a reptilian or dinosauric form, *Godzilla* has ranged from destructive monster to anti-hero. With a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, *Godzilla* has appeared in 38 films and crossed over into other franchises, such as DC and Marvel Comics.

Start with the original 1954 film, followed by over 30 Japanese sequels, or explore the American adaptations, beginning with the 1998 film starring Matthew Broderick, Jean Reno, and Hank Azaria. The 2014 remake boasts an all-star cast, including Ken Watanabe, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Elizabeth Olsen, Juliette Binoche, Sally Hawkins, and Bryan Cranston. In 2021, *Godzilla vs. Kong* brought together these two iconic monsters, starring Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, Rebecca Hall, and Kyle Chandler.

SEVEN SAMURAI (1954)

Film-school favourite, *Seven Samurai*, is a Japanese epic action film directed by Akira Kurosawa. Set in the 16th century, it captures the essence of feudal Japan and the role of the samurai. Considered a masterpiece, it tells the story of desperate farmers who hire samurai to defend their village from bandits. Often ranked as one of the most influential films of all time, famed directors Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino, and Ingmar Bergman are among those inspired by Kurosawa and *Seven Samurai*.

The film is credited with creating the “men-on-a-mission” subgenre, where diverse individuals unite for a common cause. Its influence is most famously tied to *The Magnificent Seven*, an Americanised adaptation, and spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s. Director Sergio Leone, known for *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, was sued for borrowing from *Seven Samurai* for *A Fistful of Dollars*, which launched Clint Eastwood’s leading-man career. Film classes often highlight parallels between *Seven Samurai* and *Star Wars*, while also analysing Kurosawa’s direct impact on Tarantino’s techniques.



SHOWS & SERIES

BY RELEASE DATE

SHŌGUN (2024–)

Winning the Emmy for Outstanding Drama series—just one of its 18 awards at the 2024 Emmys—*Shōgun* is a Japanese English language series, set at the beginning of 17th-century feudal Japan. The show follows John Blackthorne, an English sailor who becomes shipwrecked in Japan and is forced to embrace the vastly different culture, often at odds with his own beliefs. As he gets close to Lord Yoshii Toranaga—a powerful *daimyo* (feudal lord) and one of five regents ruling Japan—John quickly becomes entangled in religious power struggles and political machinations. *Shōgun* offers a vivid portrayal of Japan during a pivotal historical period, particularly at the birth of the Tokugawa shogunate (also known as the Edo shogunate/period). *Shōgun* has been lauded for its historically accurate attention to detail and consideration of Japanese customs.



TOKYO VICE (2022–2024)

Based on the memoir by journalist Jake Adelstein, this HBO Max crime drama delves into Tokyo's underworld through the eyes of a foreign reporter working with the Japanese police. Ansel Elgort (*Baby Driver*, *West Side Story*, *The Fault in Our Stars*) stars as Adelstein, an American journalist who relocates to Tokyo, securing a job at a popular Japanese newspaper. Becoming the paper's first foreign journalist, Adelstein finds a mentor in a veteran detective from the organized crime squad—played by Ken Watanabe—who helps him navigate through the city's dark and dangerous underbelly as he investigates the *yakuza*. The two-season show has been praised for its setting and aesthetic, with the city of Tokyo serving as its own character in the show.



DROPS OF GOD (2023–)

A French Japanese television series, loosely based on the manga series of the same name, *Drops of God* explores the world of oenology, with themes of family drama, trauma, and competition driving the narrative. When Camille's father Alexandre dies, he leaves behind a world-renowned private wine collection estimated to be worth nearly \$150 million, along with a sprawling Tokyo estate. However, before Camille—who had been estranged from her father—can claim her inheritance, she must battle Alexandre's Japanese protégé in a series of wine-related tests. Despite being raised under her father's tutelage, Camille is unable to drink wine without severe side effects related to childhood trauma.

A blend of French and Japanese aesthetic and styles, with multiple languages used throughout the show, this high stake multi-national drama is a unique look into the world of wine.



SHOWS & SERIES

BY RELEASE DATE

GIRI/HAJI (2019)

A British Japanese crime thriller, *Giri/Haji* weaves together family drama, gripping suspense, and stylish action. The series follows Kenzo Mori, a Tokyo detective who travels to London to track down his estranged brother Yuto, believed to be dead but now implicated in a *yakuza* murder that threatens to ignite a gang war. As Kenzo navigates the unfamiliar streets of London, he becomes entangled with a cast of complex characters, including a troubled detective, a young runaway, and dangerous criminals, all while grappling with questions of loyalty, duty (*giri*), and shame (*haji*). With its stunning visuals, heartfelt performances, and a bold blend of genres, *Giri/Haji* offers a unique, binge-worthy exploration of crime, culture, and redemption.

MIDNIGHT DINER: TOKYO STORIES (2016–2019)

This Japanese-language anthology series from Netflix is set in a small Tokyo diner, open from midnight to dawn. Each episode revolves around a different customer and their story, with the restaurant's chef as the only constant. While many characters only appear in one episode, and some only for small cameos, other recurring customers add a layer of authenticity and depth to the show's world. Depicting the intimate side of city life in Japan with a focus on food and connection, *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* is more than worth a watch for its authentic portrayal of modern urban life in Japan.

ANTHONY BOURDAIN: PARTS UNKNOWN (2013–2018)

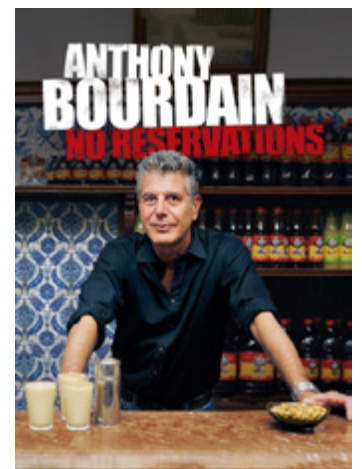
Episodes: Tokyo (season 2, episode 7), Okinawa, Japan (season 6, episode 3), Japan with Masa (season 8, episode 6)

Get a look at Tokyo and other parts of Japan through the eyes of Anthony Bourdain. A thoughtful exploration of Japanese food, culture, and subcultures, this is a great and digestible way to learn more about Japan.

ANTHONY BOURDAIN: NO RESERVATIONS (2005–2012)

Episodes: Asia Special: China & Japan (season 2, episode 1), Tokyo (season 4, episode 16), Japan: Hokkaido (season 7, episode 8), Japan: Cook It Raw (season 8, episode 5)

Explore Japan's culture, history, and cuisine with Anthony Bourdain's first culinary travel show.



MORE RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking for more recommendations? Try some of the following titles, organized by theme:

WORLD WAR II

WIFE OF A SPY (2020)

Directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, this gripping World War II-era thriller follows a Japanese merchant's wife who uncovers her husband's dangerous secret, forcing her to make a fateful choice between loyalty and justice.

MIDWAY (2019)

Directed by Roland Emmerich, this explosive war epic recounts the pivotal Battle of Midway, where outnumbered U.S. forces overcame the Japanese Navy, with a star-studded cast including Ed Skrein, Patrick Wilson, and Woody Harrelson.

UNBROKEN (2014)

Directed by Angelina Jolie, this inspiring biographical drama tells the story of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic athlete turned World War II hero, who survives a plane crash, 47 days at sea, and brutal captivity in a Japanese POW camp.

THE EMPEROR (2012)

A historical drama starring Matthew Fox and Tommy Lee Jones, exploring the post-World War II investigation of Emperor Hirohito's war crimes, with a poignant look at justice and diplomacy in the wake of war.

THE PACIFIC (2010)

From the creators of *Band of Brothers*, this gripping HBO miniseries follows the harrowing experiences of U.S. Marines fighting in the Pacific theatre of World War II, blending intense action with deeply human stories.

FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS (2006)

Directed by Clint Eastwood, this gripping war drama chronicles the story behind the iconic Iwo Jima photograph, revealing the personal sacrifices and hidden struggles of the men who raised the flag.

EMPIRE OF THE SUN (1987)

Directed by Steven Spielberg, this coming-of-age drama follows a young Christian Bale as Jim—a British boy surviving in a Japanese internment camp during World War II, showcasing resilience amidst chaos.

TORA! TORA! TORA! (1970)

A meticulously crafted war film that offers both Japanese and American perspectives on the attack on Pearl Harbor, blending historical accuracy with thrilling action sequences.

AMERICAN MOVIES SET IN JAPAN

BULLET TRAIN (2022)

An action-comedy, *Bullet Train* stars Brad Pitt as a reluctant assassin aboard a Japanese bullet train (*shinkansen*), where chaos and dark humour unfold as his mission collides with other deadly passengers. This film features an all-star cast including Sandra Bullock, Michael Shannon, Joey King, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Logan Lerman, and Hiroyuki Sanada.

ISLE OF DOGS (2019)

Wes Anderson's quirky stop-motion masterpiece tells the tale of a boy searching for his lost dog on a trash-filled island, blending Japanese culture, heartfelt storytelling, and stunning visuals. Keep an ear out for familiar voices like Bryan Cranston, Bill Murray, Edward Norton, Frances McDormand, and Jeff Goldblum.

MORE RECOMMENDATIONS

AMERICAN MOVIES SET IN JAPAN

THE RAMEN GIRL (2008)

A romantic comedy set in Japan, Brittany Murphy plays Abby, an American woman stranded in Tokyo after her boyfriend dumps her. Seeking purpose, she apprentices under a gruff ramen chef, learning not just the art of ramen but also the deeper meaning of perseverance, culture, and self-discovery.

KILL BILL: VOL. 1 (2003)

Directed by Quentin Tarantino, this stylish, action-packed revenge saga stars Uma Thurman as “The Bride,” a vengeful assassin on a bloody mission against her former allies, featuring iconic fight scenes and a dazzling blend of samurai and grindhouse influences.

MR. BASEBALL (1992)

This sports comedy stars Tom Selleck as Jack Elliot, a washed-up baseball player traded to a Japanese team. Struggling with culture shock and his own ego, he is forced to find his footing while faced with overwhelming expectations and vast cultural differences. While humorous, the film was praised for its authentic portrayal of Japanese baseball and is still used today as a training resource for international players.

THE KARATE KID PART II (1986)

A sequel to the hit film *The Karate Kid*, Daniel and Mr. Miyagi travel to Okinawa, Japan. Here, Daniel learns deeper lessons about martial arts, love, and honour in this heartfelt sequel packed with emotional stakes and memorable action.

BLACK RAIN (1989)

Directed by Ridley Scott, this gritty neo-noir thriller stars Michael Douglas as a New York cop chasing a *yakuza* fugitive in Japan, immersing viewers in the underworld of crime and betrayal.

SAMURAI FILMS

47 RONIN (2013)

A visually stunning reimagining of the Japanese legend, *47 Ronin* stars Keanu Reeves as a mixed-race samurai who joins a group of masterless warriors (ronin) on a quest for vengeance against a treacherous warlord.

THE TWILIGHT SAMURAI (2002)

A quiet yet powerful story of a low-ranking samurai (Hiroyuki Sanada) struggling to balance duty, family, and personal honour in the fading days of Japan’s Edo period.

RAN (1985)

Inspired by Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and set in feudal Japan, Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* delivers breathtaking visuals and a harrowing tale of betrayal and ambition, set amongst the chaos of war.

THRONE OF BLOOD (1957)

Akira Kurosawa’s haunting adaptation of *Macbeth* moves the Scottish tragedy to feudal Japan, with Toshiro Mifune delivering a commanding performance in this cinematic masterpiece.

MORE RECOMMENDATIONS

OLD HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE (1967)

Sean Connery's James Bond ventures to Japan in this thrilling spy adventure, featuring ninjas, a secret volcano lair, and an iconic showdown with the sinister Blofeld.

THE BARBARIAN AND THE GEISHA (1958)

Directed by John Huston, this historical drama stars John Wayne as Townsend Harris, the first U.S. consul to Japan, as he navigates cultural barriers and a forbidden romance in 19th-century Japan.

THE TEAHOUSE OF AUGUST MOON (1956)

This charming comedy stars Marlon Brando and Glenn Ford in a tale of culture clash and community, as an American captain in post-World War II Okinawa is won over by the locals' desire to build a teahouse instead of a school.

TOKYO STORY (1953)

This black-and-white Japanese classic offers a glimpse of post-war Tokyo. It follows an elderly couple visiting their children, only to feel ignored and treated as a burden.

ADDITIONAL JAPANESE HISTORY FILMS

MINAMATA (2020)

Johnny Depp stars as W. Eugene Smith, a famed photojournalist documenting the devastating effects of mercury poisoning on a Japanese coastal town, in this poignant true story of corporate greed and human resilience.

THE LAST PRINCESS (2016)

This emotional historical drama follows Princess Deok-hye, the last royal of Korea's Joseon Dynasty, as she struggles against Japanese occupation, exile, and her fight to preserve her identity and homeland.

ASSASSINATION (2015)

A thrilling Korean action-drama about a resistance group's plot to assassinate a Japanese military commander during the 1930s occupation, blending suspense, intrigue, and stunning action sequences.

THE BIRTH OF SAKE (2015)

This beautifully crafted documentary offers an intimate look at the artisanal process and dedication of the workers at a 144-year-old Japanese sake brewery, blending tradition with a glimpse into modern challenges.

THE FLOWERS OF WAR (2011)

Christian Bale stars in this harrowing yet beautiful story of sacrifice and humanity during the Nanjing Massacre, as a group of women seeks refuge in a church amidst the chaos of war.

JOHN RABE (2009)

This powerful biographical drama tells the story of John Rabe, a German businessman who saved thousands of Chinese lives during the Nanjing Massacre, offering a poignant portrait of courage amidst atrocity.

FILM & TELEVISION IMAGE ATTRIBUTION

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Shoplifters, Film Poster.

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Tokyo Vice, Series Poster.

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