

LEISURE

The way Japanese people enjoy their free time

History of Leisure Activities in Japan

Interest in leisure activities rose in Japan in the late 1950s. As the nation's economy recovered in the postwar years, "leisure" became a buzzword. Recreational facilities, such as hot-spring resorts, were developed in areas throughout Japan.

In the 1960s, as Japan entered an extended period of high economic growth, more and more people began using automobiles, while at the same time there was an expansion of the transportation infrastructure, including expressways and Shinkansen train lines. The outcome was an increase in group tours and family trips by people using their own cars. Moreover, the number of Japanese visiting foreign destinations rose as various overseas travel restrictions were lifted. During this time the number of amusement parks as well as sporting facilities like bowling alleys and golf courses rapidly rose, increasing the scale of leisure activities and making them available to more people.

In the 1970s, leisure activities that were inexpensive, conveniently located, and not time-consuming were popular, such as playing sports, visiting game arcades, or going to cultural centers. The year 1983, which saw the marketplace debut of the Family Computer video game console, marked the beginning of the development of a wide range of video game consoles. That same year Tokyo Disneyland opened its doors, setting off a wave of similar theme parks opening throughout the country. With Japan's bubble economy of the late 1980s, the number of Japanese traveling to overseas resorts shot up quickly.



A family preparing a camp fire on a day off

After the collapse of the bubble economy at the start of the 1990s, more people spent their free time on hobbies, including various types of lessons.

Starting around 2000, there has been a diversification of the ways Japanese people are spending their free time, with many choosing to enjoy activities that suit their own special sensibilities and tastes.

Post-retirement Leisure Activities

Japanese are also vigorously enjoying leisure activities in their retirement years. Retirees who are particularly health-conscious are using their free time to play tennis or golf, go jogging, or have fun hiking and mountaineering. There is also a strong interest in studying and taking lessons among retirees, who are engaging in lifelong learning on topics that interest them by actively participating in classes and seminars held at local cultural centers or universities.

Many retirees are also traveling to a wide array of destinations for a variety of reasons, whether visiting scenic and historical spots of interest to them or hot-spring resorts to improve their health. There are also many who are traveling overseas, which has increased the proportion of elderly among overseas travelers.

The elderly have also become more eager to play an active social role through local volunteer activities and the like.

Family-oriented Leisure Activities

During the period of high economic growth, Japanese workers led career-centered lives, but in recent years there is a tendency for people to spend free time with their family members, and increasingly working adults are dedicating their days off to family activities. In Japan there are consecutive vacation days during the New Year holiday, Golden Week (from late April to early May), and Obon (mid-August), and many people use those times to take trips with their families. There are also many facilities located throughout Japan that families can enjoy, such as zoos, aquariums, and museums, and these locations are crowded with family groups on weekends and holidays. And more and more families are going camping or climbing mountains together, reflecting an increased interest in outdoor activities. With the increased environmental awareness in Japan, those



A hot-spring resort

living in urban areas are participating with their children in “eco tourism” to experience the culture and natural settings of local areas and “green tourism” to experience agriculture in rural areas. In the home, some parents teach their children traditional Japanese games such as *shogi* (a chess-like game) and *go*. Families enjoy passing the time playing these games.

Large-scale suburban shopping centers with movie theaters and other attractions have increased in number, so more families do their weekend shopping there.

Meanwhile, lots of Japanese people have become interested in gardening or home carpentry as a way of better enjoying their daily lives. And more and more people are interested in cooking and baking cakes or interior design.

Leisure Activities for Children

Children in Japan spend their free time after school, on weekends, or during summer vacation in a variety of ways. After school, in addition to playing at home or at a friend’s house, children play in parks or playgrounds, or visit local libraries and children’s centers. Children when alone at home often enjoy a variety of hobbies, such as playing video games and watching TV, reading books and *manga*, engaging in painting or crafts, and enjoying piano or guitar. Quite a few children are also spending their free time at “cram schools” or taking swimming and piano lessons. And once students enter junior high school, they begin to spend more time involved in extracurricular school activities such as playing sports.

Shogi

Often known in the West as “Japanese chess.” (Photo courtesy of Getty Images)



There are also community activities for children, such as sports clubs that meet on weekends to play baseball, soccer, or volleyball, as well as neighborhood children’s associations (*kodomoka*). Schools also open their athletic fields to the public on weekends so that parents and their children can play there.

During summer vacation, there are popular travel opportunities for children such as camps where children spend time away from their parents.

Japan also has an after-school daycare system for elementary school children of parents who both work. At these centers students can have snacks, play with their friends, and do homework during the time between the end of school and heading back home.

Leisure Activities for Youth

In this day and age when lifestyles are becoming ever more diverse, young people have a wide variety of pastimes, and there is no single trend for spending leisure time. However, many young people are very interested in fashion and so like to spend their days-off shopping. Karaoke is also a popular free-time activity. People enjoy karaoke not only with friends but also with colleagues from work or family members. There are also many who are investing in their own future by learning a foreign language or studying to obtain a qualification.

There has been an increase in “theme park” style hot-spring resorts located in suburban areas, and some young people visit such attractions on their days off.

Fewer young people are taking trips with their coworkers, increasingly preferring instead to travel with friends not related to work or family members—or even travel by themselves.