

MEDICINES & ALLERGIES

Are seasonal allergies bad in Japan? Any trips or tricks to prevent a bad reaction or deal with seasonal allergies?

- Yes, they are. Go to the doctor and get some allergy medication, specifically preventative meds to take before the allergies really hit you. The medication is really cheap, though different meds tend to have different efficacy rates. If you have pollen allergies, masking is good and there's even special glasses to keep pollen out of your eyes. Use an air filter in your home and make sure that you clean the filter in your aircon regularly. If you have really bad seasonal allergies, avoid hanging your laundry outside.
- Depends on what you're allergic to. There's a lot of cedar pollen in the air and during late spring you can even see clouds of the pollen blowing in the wind. I recommend bringing some medication with you (assuming it's legal to bring to Japan) because you might find Japanese allergy meds to be less effective than what you're used to.
- Be very careful about shipping medication. My parents shipped me allergy meds that were ok, but I knew some non-American JETs who got arrested because their parents shipped them meds that were legal in their home country but illegal in Japan. Come supplied if you can; if you know that Zyrtec or something works well for you, go to Costco, get a big package or two and bring it with you. I never had a problem bringing Zyrtec into Japan.
- Sudafed is banned in Japan; it contains pseudoephedrine, so anything with that ingredient is completely illegal. You cannot bring it into Japan and you can't have it shipped to you while in Japan.
- There're websites where you can look these things up. If you have a prescription, bring a copy of it with you to make everything look as official as you can. Even if they can't read the prescription, things that look official can be helpful.
- The word for allergies or hay fever is "kafunsho" (花粉症・かふんしょう) and when you use that, everybody basically nods and gets it.
- The allergies got really bad since WWII because of high level of logging that has been replanted with cedar.
- Just a caution that you look up any medications you use in Japan, especially prescriptions. It's common for doctors to prescribe multiple pills for an illness (I got 4 Rx meds for bronchitis) and if one of them causes problems like extreme sleepiness, allergic reactions, etc., it can be hard to determine which one is problematic. On the label, you should be able to find the technical name for the active ingredient in Roman characters or try Googling the kana if that's all you see. This is both useful to determine the common warnings, "Don't take with grapefruit juice, don't operate machinery, take an hour before eating," but can also help you find the less common issues, if any.
- I also had experiences with getting a lot of prescriptions for an illness, basically a grocery bag of 10-12 meds. It took me a while to realize that I didn't have to take all of those and I actually caused stomach problems for myself by trying to take so many. They're cheap and easy to obtain, but consider picking and choosing which ones you really need.
- That said enjoy living in a country with single-payer healthcare. I got Swine Flu while I was there and the cost of visiting the doctor and getting medications was about \$30. I also have hemophilia which is a rare bleeding disease and while I was in Japan, it was 100% taken care of, despite a lot of paperwork. It's a very expensive disease to treat in the States.

APARTMENTS

How do we go about finding an apartment? Or as we get closer to departure, will we get more information about that?

- Ask your predecessor. You should be put in contact with that person before you go
- The way it normally works (in non-COVID times), you'll get a copy of the contract with contact information for your employer, so you can followup with your supervisor to ask them these specific questions. The tradition of pre-sending contracts and contacts doesn't work 100% of the time, but don't look for housing now. The vast majority of JETs move into the housing that was vacated by their predecessor.
- Even if you don't have a predecessor, you'd have to get a co-signer on your lease and your BOE/supervisor. You won't be able to rent on your own.

Followup question: I've heard that I need to find somewhere to live for the first week or so as temporary housing.

- No, you don't have to worry about that. You're not gonna get there with your supervisor dropping your suitcase on a street corner. Your contracting agency will have housing – temporary or permanent – available for you.
- You can expect your contracting organization to have a lot of responsibility in helping you find housing in one form or another. It might be a temporary hotel room that you will pay for, but they'll have reserved it for you for two weeks or something like that. Or, they'll have the lease on an apartment that they sublet to you as they did to your predecessor. They carry a lot of that responsibility. It's good to remember that they want you to succeed, they've invested a lot of time and money to get you to Japan. They want you there; they simply can't afford for you to turn around and fly home.
- Many contracting organizations won't expect you to pay deposits or key money right from the start. It's good to go to Japan with the money as suggested as a just-in-case scenario.
- Big cities might work out differently than rural country areas. I was in a medium-small city (pop. 140k). My BOE had maintained the same apartments for years. Mine was one of the biggest (2LDK, washer, dryer) but also one of the oldest (no AC, really dinky heater, old kitchen appliances) and my rent was \$450/mo when I left in 2013. You can expect, on the whole, to pay less than in the US/PDX, but at the same time the standards are Japanese and that means smaller apartments. If you get a chance to connect with your predecessor, your two big questions will be about housing and transportation. The best answer is "You don't need to buy anything right away, it's fully furnished. This apartment is close to 3 train lines and 4 bus lines; you can get anywhere from here," and the worst answer might be, "You'll be in a hotel for two weeks while the supervisor takes you out apartment hunting. I got a car because I needed one to get around but I'm selling it to someone before I leave."

When you move into your apartment, you're starting right away, how do you arrange to have things in your apartment? What's the most efficient way to move in? Do you order stuff ahead of time for the stuff that your predecessor hasn't left for you?

- If your BOE has made arrangements for your apartment, it should come with basic furnishings: bed, probably sheets, eating utensils/plates, etc. My predecessor left me an unopened liter of Coke in the fridge. You probably won't need anything the day you walk in; don't expect a bare-bones apartment if it is supplied by your BOE. If your BOE has arranged for you to use a hotel for a short time as you look for an apartment or until a BOE-provided apartment becomes available, there will be some time to shop around. Realistically, you're moving to a foreign country on the other side of the planet, they know you're coming, they're ready for you to arrive with minimal home furnishings, you're not going

into a completely blank slate. In the few cases that you are actually arriving without a place to call home, they know that you're going to need some help settling down and there's some simple, humanitarian emotions towards that situation and are likely to go out of their way to help you.

- The JET Program has certain requirements for its employees. You might meet people who are working for other organizations and have very different stories.
- They're investing in you and want to make sure that you're happy and comfortable. The Japanese people are very gracious.
- You might not have a car right away so if your teacher or supervisor asks if there's anything you need from the home goods store, you say "Yes!" and accept the ride. You'll figure out a single-double mattress size pretty quick.
- It's reasonable to expect that if you are moving into a blank apartment, somebody is going to take you to the home goods store on your first day to shop for a futon and sheets.
- If you move out of BOE housing, like some of my coworkers did because they thought the rent was too high, there are several expenses you will incur beyond deposit and key money. You'll have to buy a refrigerator and other appliances, also you have to buy your own light fixtures because they come as an empty socket. I helped a friend move in to her own apartment and we learned that the fixtures come as a bulb and lamp set and I had to hoist my friend up on my shoulders so that she could reach the socket in the ceiling. You can't take BOE-provided items with you if you move out of BOE-provided housing.

I'm interested in drying machines. Should I dry my clothes outside or inside? Is it feasible to buy a dryer? Or do you dry your clothes inside with a dehumidifier?

- I dried my clothes inside my room or go to a laundromat.
- If you live up north where it's cold in the winter, it's also dry in the winter. Your apartment in the winter is likely to have issues with static and you might want a humidifier in the winter to mitigate that and your wet clothes will help. While I had a proper dryer in my apartment, it sent my electric bill up high if I used it too much. That said, it wasn't vented to the outside, so it blew warm air into the apartment, helping to heat the space in the winter.
- Some apartments don't have good venting in the bathroom/shower areas. You might find mold developing, even in winter. I was in Sapporo and I sometimes opened up my windows in the cold weather to dry out the apartment. I was careful to put away my futon every day.
- So these are some different stories; I was in Aomori (northern Tohoku, just south of Hokkaido) and my apartment was terribly dry all winter. It really depends on just how well insulated the apartment is. My place had such a serious static issue that every time I touched anything metal, I had lightning coming out of my fingertips. I did not, however, have mold issues.

Question about baking... how do you bake if there aren't any ovens?

- You can buy these cube appliances that go up to the size of a large microwave. The smaller ones are a combination toaster oven and standard oven, the fancy ones also have a microwave feature. I bought one off another ALT and I would make quiche and cookies.
- I had the microwave/convection oven version. It wasn't the most useful thing, but it was something. If you can find them, some Zojirushi rice cookers have a 'cake' function, so you put in all your ingredients, stir, close the top and press the button for a birthday surprise!
- As soon as the JETs switch out at the end of the contract period, it's shopping central for those who are staying. The departing JETs will be posting their extra stuff online that they want to get cash for.

CARS**Is getting a car the same situation as the apartment?**

- Yes, probably about the same.
- If you need it for work, they'll often have a predecessor's car or something available for you to use. Some contracting orgs won't want you to have a car and won't allow you to use it for work due to concerns about liability. But it's a great experience to rent a car and drive around a bit to travel in your area. Once you 1-year international license expires, getting a Japanese driver's license is a cool cultural experience; it's a lot of work and will take all day to complete the test. Different licenses for manual vs. automatic transmission. But being able to drive and go to out-of-the-way places is really cool.
- Have friends with cars!

When we get off the plane, are we expected to be looking nice in business clothes or is it ok if we dress casually for the long flight?

- Be comfortable.
- I don't recommend walking around the airport in your fuzzy bunny slippers and PJs, but yes, comfortable clothes.

FINANCES

- Conbini! For utilities, use the convenience store. To pay things like rent, you can pay at the bank (bankers' hours in Japan end around 3pm), or some central post offices have windows often open as late as 6pm.
- For those in BOE-provided housing, that rent money is usually removed direct from your paycheck.
- As your predecessor about how they pay their bills.
- Cash is king in Japan, and there's money transfers at the bank for large sums, but no checks.
- You can pay for almost anything at the conbini. I bought a computer online and went to the conbini to pay for it before they'd ship the product to me.
- A lot of bills are direct deposit/withdrawal. My rent, NTT/landline, electricity, water, and such was pulled directly from my bank account. My office helped set that up.
- I had a kerosene heater where the fuel company would fill up a couple of red Jerrycans on my porch that I used to fill my heater. This is more common in Tohoku, I think. The company required a \$500 account deposit upfront and I spent that amount down over time as they filled the Jerrycans.
- Note for paying at the conbini: there aren't extra fees! Not sure how the conbini companies make their money, but there's aren't additional fees for paying that way. You'll get a receipt for your payment and all. It's well documented.
- Credit cards are getting more popular, but they involve international transaction fees and might not be accepted everywhere. Just let your credit card company know that you're traveling.
- If you get a Japanese phone plan, there's an option for a credit card payment and an option for an automatic bank withdrawal. Bear in mind that it can take up to 2 months to process the cancellation with the bank withdrawal and you need to close your bank account when you leave.
- I also had the issue of charges on my bank account that would occur after I left and I had to hand over my hanko (signature stamp) and bank book (transaction ledger) to someone at the BOE. They closed out my bank account after I left. That said, it's awkward to hand over the hanko because it can be used to sign legal documents.
- In some places, you can use your bank book in place of your debit card to withdraw funds and a few places will accept it as a form on non-photo ID for certain contracts.

- I was able to get a debit card (that only worked at the ATM) and a “credit card” that actually pulled direct from my bank account anyway, but was usable at stores that accepted credit.
- About phones: take a look at contracts. Most companies have 2yr contracts and that can result in some high cancellation fees for those only staying for 1yr. It’s difficult to cancel properly, but there’s some problems if you don’t do it correctly.
- Banks are particularly regional in Japan. My bank was only in Aomori and there was a fee to use any non-Aomori Bank ATM. You’ll get used to carrying cash. I kept my US credit card because my Visa could get cash at a 7-Eleven ATM in any city. That came in handy during the New Year holidays, when the banks shut down for most of a week. Furthermore, while the ATM stays open late at most banks, it doesn’t stay open when the banks won’t be open the next day due to an extended holiday.
- Yes, and most 7-Eleven ATMs also cater to many regional banks. Actually, different combini companies will work with different banks.
- There’s also the post office bank.
- In my case, my office required that I use a particular bank, probably cheaper direct deposit fees for them when my paycheck time rolled around. If you want to get a separate account at the post office or a different bank, you’ll probably need to keep the one your BOE requires, but you can get another on your own.
- Yeah, Day 1 or 2 after you arrive in your town/city, your office will take you to the bank to set up your account.
- In my case, it was Week 3 because we had to get our Foreigner ID card and hankos before we could open a bank account or get a cell phone.

FOREIGNER ID CARD & HANKO

- It’s changing over time; the Foreigner ID cards are now available very soon after your arrival, probably at the airport. You’ll go to your local Ward Office and they’ll officially register you as a resident.
- If you move, you need to get your address changed on the back of the card; it’ll be handwritten and hanko-ed by the Ward Office clerk.
- That ID card is everything short of a driver’s license; carry it with you. If the police approach you and ask for ID, they might detain you if you don’t carry it. It’s precious, let it live in your wallet at all times.
- Also carry your hanko, but be advised that you really don’t want to lose it. My BOE got two for us, one that they keep as a duplicate and one that is legally binding.
- If you lose it you can’t sign documents. If it gets damaged, you have to go in and register the damages like cracks or chips – so that your signature will still be official. You can also get a daily-carry hanko that isn’t the officially registered.
- In my fourth year, I caught my office giving me a hanko that was never registered (and they never encouraged me to register it). It turns out they figured nobody was ever going to check the registration so didn’t bother. If asked point blank, they first told me it was official.
- You can always buy your own unofficial hanko, maybe use a kanji or something punny, and you can stamp your students’ papers with it or have fun with it. You can buy them at any stationary store. You can buy anything you want, but the official nature comes when you register it.
- Your BOE will likely provide your official hanko. Japanese people use their last name, but most BOEs don’t care and might provide your first name on your hanko.