QUICK FACTS
Population: 126.1 million
Area: A series of Islands in the Pacific Ocean east of Russia and the Korean Peninsula.
Capital: Tokyo
Language: Japanese

EDUCATION
Education is highly regarded in Japan and it boasts the highest literacy rate in the world; 99+% of its population can read. Education begins prior to elementary school with kindergarten and day care centers. By the time children leave elementary school, they are expected to read and write 1,000 characters (called kanji). To enter high school and college, students must pass difficult entrance exams and most students attend tutor schools called “cram schools” in the evening after normal school hours in preparation for entrance exams. Many students are involved in school clubs, which range in interests from tea ceremony to baseball. Although classes are held Monday-Friday, clubs typically have mandatory activities on Saturdays. Japanese Universities are well respected throughout Asia for their research.

FAMILY AND HOME LIFE
Japanese society is very homogenous although this is slowly changing. Family life is strong, with many households including three generations under one roof. When visiting someone’s house for the first time in Japan it is customary to bring a gift to thank the host, and not unusual to receive a gift as well. It is polite to remove your shoes before entering a home, whether in a traditional house with tatami (straw mat) flooring where people sit on cushions, or in a modern home. Major holidays include: New Year’s Day; Coming of Age Day (second Monday of January); Foundation Day (Feb. 11); Vernal Equinox (around March 20); Showa Day (April 29); Constitution Memorial Day (May 3); Children’s Day (May 5); Autumnal Equinox Day (around Sept. 23); Culture Day (Nov. 3), Labour Thanksgiving Day (Nov. 23) and The Emperor’s Birthday (Dec. 23).

GOVERNMENT
Japan’s government is parliamentary, a system of democratic governance of a state in which the executive branch derives its democratic legitimacy from, and is held accountable to, the legislature (parliament). Like Sweden and the United Kingdom, the head of state is different from the head of government. The Emperor is Japan’s head of state and the Prime Minister is the head of government. Japan became a constitutional monarchy after World War II, when the U.S. helped establish Japan’s post war constitution.

RELIGION
The two main religions in Japan are Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto is native to Japan and involves the worship of deities known as kami. It was long believed that the emperor of Japan was a descendant of Amaterasu the Sun Goddess. Visitors to Japan will find Shinto shrines small and large located throughout the country. Buddhism came to Japan in the 6th century via China and is widely practiced today. Buddhist ceremonies are commonly practiced for funerals, while Shinto ceremonies are often used for celebrations of life such as weddings.
Japanese names consist of a surname (family name) followed by a given name. Names are typically written in kanji. Middle names are uncommon. It’s common to use “ro” to end male names and “ko” to end female names. Women retain their family names when marrying and children inherit their father’s names. Unlike other parts of Asia, Japan has a wide variety of surnames with over 100,000 in use today. Many family names were only chosen in the 19th century. Nicknames are also very common in Japanese culture.

**FAMOUS JAPANESE**

**USEFUL PHRASES**
- Good afternoon...........Konnichiwa
- Good evening............ Konbanwa
- Good morning .......... Ohayo gozaimasu
- Excuse me................ Sumimasen
- How are you?.......... O-Genki desu ka?
- Thank you ............ Arigato gozaimasu
- Goodbye.................. Sayonara
- See you later............ Mata ne!
- My name is (...)........ Watsahi wa (...) desu
- You’re welcome......... Doltashimashite

**JAPANESE IN THE USA**
The first Japanese began to arrive to the U.S. in large numbers after 1868 when Japan was ‘opened’ to the West. Most of these immigrants came to settle on the west coast or in Hawaii. There are roughly 1.3 million Americans of Japanese ancestry in the U.S. today (Census 2010). During WWII, Japanese-Americans were wrongly forced out of their homes and interned in detention camps throughout western states because they were seen as potential ‘enemies’ due to their heritage.

Known as the Hinomaru, the Japanese flag was originally adopted in 1870, but it was not until 1999 that the Japanese government officially passed a law that established it as the national flag.

**USEFUL LINKS**
- http://www.japan.go.jp/
- http://www.japantoday.com/
- http://www.jnto.go.jp/ (Tourism Board)