

January 29, 2026

Exploring the Secrets behind “Clean” Japan



Japan's reputation for cleanliness is world-renowned. It is often touted as one of the cleanest countries in the world, with tourists bringing home stories about Japan's clean streets and toilets. What are the secrets behind Japan's impression as a clean country?

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on “clean Japan”—exploring elements that constitute the Japanese penchant for keeping public spaces clean and sustain their sense of public hygiene. The following are some of the travel destinations across Japan that may offer clues to its cultural and historical background.



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1. Experiencing the Shinto-based “misogi” practice

“Misogi” is an ancient ritual of purifying one’s body and mind, rooted in the teachings of Koshinto, the traditional Japanese Shintoism — the nation’s indigenous religion that predates the influence of foreign beliefs. As discussed in many academic studies, the practice is believed to be one of the spiritual and cultural backgrounds to the long-cherished Japanese virtue of keeping both oneself and public spaces clean.



Cleaning is an important part of the practice of misogi. ©Misogi Shrine

In traditional Shinto, whose teachings believe that deities reside in nature, as well as in people’s daily lives, misogi has been practiced in a variety of ways. One of the common examples can be found in the act of washing your hands and mouth with fountain water at a shrine entrance, thus purifying yourself, before paying respects to the enshrined deity.

Misogi training at the Yamanashi shrine dedicated to the practice

There are some shrines and various other sites that offer visitors an opportunity to engage in the misogi practice. Misogi is often associated with purifying oneself with water — as seen in takigyo (waterfall purification) or bathing in cold water. But that is not necessarily an essential form of misogi.



At Misogi Shrine, learning the proper manners of eating is part of the misogi experience. ©Misogi Shrine

Misogi Shrine in Hokuto, Yamanashi Prefecture, is “dedicated to the practice of misogi.” A two-day misogi program offered at the shrine once every two months (from March to November in 2026, reservation required) will guide participants through misogi training based on traditional Koshinto teachings. It does not involve pouring water over oneself or immersing in cold water. Instead, it is based on four pillars: practicing the proper breathing method, lectures on Japan’s spiritual tradition and culture, practicing the proper manners of eating, and cleaning. (No language assistance is provided to participants who do not understand Japanese.)

[Misogi Shrine](#)

[Misogi Shugyo at Misogi Shrine \(in Japanese\)](#)

The essence of misogi is to recognize one’s impurity



The highest goal of misogi, according to Misogi Shrine, is to “clean one’s mind, destiny, and soul. Once you’re ‘clean,’ it is possible to spend each day with joy and vitality.” Chief Priest Ezawa Taiichi says the Japanese have traditionally valued the concepts of “clean” and its opposite, “dirty”—or “pure” and “impure”—more than the concepts of “good and bad.” Being dirty, impure, or polluted ultimately means a state of weakened vitality, the chief priest adds.

What’s essentially needed in the practice of misogi — no matter what form it takes — is to be aware that your body and mind inevitably become unclean as you spend everyday life. “You may be able to wash off the soil on your body by taking a bath, but what would you do if the unseen part of yourself is impure? If you interact with others or engage in work while you’re unclean, you will be polluting your own life and the rest of the world. Unless you start by purifying yourself, nothing will work.”

The shrine’s misogi program teaches participants the traditional art of breathing that seeks to enhance the energy of their lives. “Life is sustained by breathing, and life equals the force of

breath. An unclean breath causes trouble for your life and its functions. That's why we engage in the practice of purifying our breath," Ezawa says.

Similarly, food is a key source that nourishes your life, and the shrine deems that what you eat makes your body, and that the way you eat determines your fate. Participants have the meals during the program based on a deeper understanding of the significance and proper manners of eating, the chief priest says. The minimal diet is also intended for the participants to savor the taste of each ingredient that usually may be hardly cherished, while also allowing their overused stomach to rest and helping their body recover its inherent functions, according to the shrine.

Likewise, the act of purification is important in Shintoism, and cleaning is what embodies the spirit of purification in everyday life, says Ezawa, adding, "Our daily life starts with cleaning and ends with cleaning — either at home or at workplaces."



Takigyo waterfall purification at Shirataki Daimyojin @shiratakisan

Waterfall purification at a sacred Shugendo site in Mie

There are places where you can experience takigyo, one of the popular forms of misogi practice. Shirataki Daimyojin in Toba, Mie Prefecture, is a revered sacred site where Shugendo (mountain asceticism) practitioners once trained. A part of the mountain range stretching from Ise Jingu, it is a site of nature worship, with the entirety of Mt. Gyoja as its sacred body. Today, the Shirataki Daimyojin Support Association offers visitors a chance to "reconnect with nature" through takigyo rituals and mountain walks.

It is said to be the only site in the Ise-Shima area where visitors can experience takigyo. "Misogi is the act of purifying oneself — cleansing worldly impurities and spiritual defilements — by using sacred water such as that from waterfalls or rivers. It is also a traditional ritual to purify both body and mind before participating in a sacred ceremony," Shirataki Daimyojin says.

[Shirataki Daimyojin](#)

2. Soaking in the cleanliness culture through onsen



Misasa Onsen open-air communal bath along the Mitoku River

Japan's bathing culture has been shaped by the influence of both Shintoism and Buddhism for centuries. And nothing is more Japanese than the iconic "onsen," or hot springs. These steaming natural springs rich in minerals are found all over Japan, a nation formed by volcanoes. Often found in mountainous areas — a gateway to the sacred mountains where deities are believed to reside — onsen became places not just for bathing, but also for renewal and purification.

Misasa Onsen: Purification culture and practices



(Left) Sanbutsuji Temple at Mt. Mitoku; Misasa Onsen open-air bath

In Tottori Prefecture, one hot spring embodies this relationship between onsen and purification: Misasa Onsen. Designated as one of the first Japan Heritage sites in 2015, this place preserves the tradition of purification by bathing in the hot springs before entering Mt. Mitoku, a sacred mountain for Shugendo mountain ascetics, also known as "shugenja."

Shugendo blends Shinto and Buddhist traditions, and the shugenja perform physical and spiritual exercises in Mt. Mitoku. This purification-and-preparation sequence reflects the ancient

belief that an individual must be cleansed physically and mentally before entering the divine realm.

Today, visitors can also experience this tradition. The hot spring town continues to promote its role as a gateway to Mt. Mitoku. It is advised that you bathe in Misasa Onsen in the evening before you enter the mountain the next morning. While the context has evolved, the link between onsen bathing and cleansing practices remains a core feature of the area's heritage. Cleaning one's body and dipping in the onsen isn't just a quick wash — it's a display of millennia-old traditions that define the Japanese "clean identity."

[Japan Heritage Mt. Mitoku Misasa Onsen](#)

3. Discovering Japan's toilet culture and practices



Nishisando Public Toilet (left) and Yoyogi Fukumachi Park Toilet
Photo: Satoshi Nagare, Courtesy: Shibuya City

In Japan, the humble toilet is the epitome of cleanliness. The Japanese treat the toilet not just as a necessity, but as a place of comfort and hospitality. This reverence has its roots in the nation's tradition and culture. In homes and at schools, people are taught at an early age to keep toilets and public spaces clean as a sign of respect for the next user.

The "keeping it clean" mantra is evident in features like special ceramic coatings, self-cleaning, and flush settings. Toilets in Japan have also undergone a series of evolutions in their unique features that enhance the users' comfort, such as the finely adjustable Washlet or the "flushing sound" function to muffle bodily noises. People using the latest Japanese toilets for the first time may even find themselves at a loss over so many buttons activating various functions, but that can also be considered a part of Japan's toilet culture.



Jingu-dori Park Toilet (left) and Nabeshima Shoten Park Toilet

Photo: Satoshi Nagare, Courtesy: Shibuya City

Uniquely designed toilets like public installation art in central Tokyo

This evolution extended to the realm of public art. Strolling around Shibuya in Tokyo, one might come across THE TOKYO TOILET, a series of 17 public restrooms reimagined by 16 top-notch architects and designers. Each has a unique design embodying the project's aim: transforming the perception of toilets as dirty and uninviting into a place that is clean, inclusive, and aesthetically pleasing.

Placed strategically in high-traffic areas in metropolitan Tokyo to attract the public, the unique toilets look like public installation art. They were also featured in the acclaimed film "PERFECT DAYS." Among the notable designs are the forest-inspired "Walk in the Woods" toilet by renowned architect Kuma Kengo and the "transparent" toilet by architect Ban Shigeru. To see these 17 toilets, visitors can take THE TOKYO TOILET SHUTTLE TOUR, which takes them to the East and West courses within Shibuya City. Each course takes two to three hours and is held on Thursdays and Saturdays.

THE TOKYO TOILET SHUTTLE TOUR



Toilet Museum by INAX MUSEUMS
Photo:INAX MUSEUMS Courtesy:Toshihide Kajihara

Museums to appreciate the history of Japan's modern toilets

Outside Tokyo in Aichi Prefecture, the toilet is again the centerpiece, this time in the Toilet Museum by INAX MUSEUMS. Opened in April 2025 in Tokoname in celebration of the 100th anniversary of LIXIL's tile and water products, the museum takes visitors on a journey through the history of Japanese toilets.

The permanent exhibit displays around 50 artifacts and documents representing each era, from wooden squat toilets to porcelain bowls, from pit systems to water flush, and from Japanese style to Western versions. Visitors can trace the evolution from the adaptation of Western fixtures to the development of technologies found in modern Japanese toilets.



Exhibits at TOTO Museum

To the west in Fukuoka Prefecture, Japanese toilet brand TOTO has its own museum that displays Japan's hygiene history. With three exhibition areas, visitors can trace almost a century of innovation in sanitation from its founding in 1917. The museum showcases the evolution of toilets in Japan.

There's a variety of exhibits for curious visitors: vintage toilet seats from 1927, vintage plumbing setups, early flush toilets, and the original version of the famed "Washlet" — the legendary electric bidet toilet seat first launched in 1980. There's even a large unit of the same scale as the one that was actually used by sumo wrestlers at the Ryogoku Kokugikan sumo arena, proof of how TOTO designed its products to meet diverse customer needs. The TOTO Museum shows how a simple necessity like the toilet bowl can provide a world of convenience by combining intuitive design, technology, engineering, and Japanese cultural affinity for cleanliness.

[Toilet Museum/INAX MUSEUMS](#)

[TOTO Museum](#)

4. The deep connection between water and cleanliness

Japan's reputation for being clean is not just cultural; it is a direct result of how the nation treats, uses, and reveres its water. This vital resource underpins the nation's ethos of cleanliness, providing the medium for both cultural purification and modern hygiene. Japan's commitment to water purity is best reflected in the fact that tap water is safe to drink throughout the country. Ultimately, such purity relies on protecting the water at its source.



Protecting mountain water at its source ensures the safety and quality of tap water nationwide.

© Kawakami Genryu Tourism (Left)

Deep in the mountains of Nara, the village of Kawakami is home to a key source of water supply. Here, forests cover 95 percent of the land area, creating a vast, natural reservoir that has been protected for centuries. The village upholds a centuries-old responsibility to protect its rich natural environment and precious ecosystems while serving as one of the sources that deliver clean water downstream to the millions of people living in the Kansai region. They actively manage the land to guarantee that the water is clean from the start, ensuring it is safe by the time it reaches a tap.

To share the value of this environment as a water source, the village has launched the Kawakami Genryu (Headwaters) Tourism initiative, in which various nature-experience programs, events, and tours are organized. The initiative provides opportunities to learn and experience the area's natural resources. Through programs involving residents and businesses both inside and outside of the village, the rich nature, culture, and history are preserved and passed on to future generations. In 2019, this initiative was certified under the Ecotourism Promotion Act.



Yoshino forest (left) and Yoshino River headwater area

© Kawakami Genryu Tourism

Outdoor activities offered by various guide groups and facilities under the initiative range from fishing to kayaking, trekking, canyoning, and waterfall observation tours. The Forest and Water Forest Museum (Mori to Mizu no Genryukan) holds exhibits on the village's natural resources and organizes nature-experience and education tours.

A nonprofit foundation commissioned by the village is collecting donations to support the preservation of this precious environment. A part of the participation fee for some of these tours and activities is donated to the forest management fund.

By sharing the value of its pristine nature with tourists and seeking to increase its supporters, the Genryu Tourism initiative aims to maintain the ecosystem that keeps the water clean at its source. A visit to Kawakami serves as the ultimate proof of this ethos, demonstrating that the water flowing through Japan is sustained by the dedicated, centuries-old guardianship of its origins.

[Kawakami Headwaters Tourism](#)
[Mori to Mizu no Genryukan \(in Japanese\)](#)

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