

# Culture

One of the great things about travel is learning about another culture. Culture is like a floating iceberg. The part that sticks up above the water are the things that you can see: food, music, dance, art, stories, clothing, traditional crafts, festivals, architecture. The hidden part of culture, like the underwater part of the iceberg, are the ways of looking at the world, values and attitudes.

When you are in Japan, you will be able to observe both parts of the “iceberg”. You will be able to try new foods, see traditional clothing and crafts, visit temples and shrines. You will also be able to watch for and think about topics such as: attitudes and values about education, work, how the individual works within a group, male and female roles in the family and society, environment, humility, cleanliness, and more.

You will also have a chance to think about your own culture. You are part of a teenage culture; you are part of the culture of your family; you are also part of the Alaskan and American culture, your ethnic heritage and your religion. Being in another culture enables you to take a step back and think about your own values.

Keep in mind that while most cultures are based upon a long-held core of beliefs, cultures are always changing. Life in Japan today is not the same as it was 50 or even 15 years ago. You might see something on the news or while shopping or while talking with your new friends that gives you a glimpse of coming changes. The Fukushima disaster started in 2011 and the Tokyo Olympics will be in 2020. You are in a great position to observe how these two events may affect life in Japan.

When you observe culture in Japan, think about the story about the blind men and the elephant. Each one described the elephant a different way, depending on whether he was touching the leg, trunk, tusk or tail. Are you seeing something that is specific to your host family or to the area where they live, or it is more widespread throughout Japan? What aspects of Japanese culture might be a result of sharing a small series of islands? Interesting things to think about!