

Japan Blue Tour



USEFUL INFORMATION BOOKLET

retreat | recreate

GENERAL

- Much of Japan is heavily forested and mountainous so most of the population live in the coastal cities. Japan is one of the most densely populated countries in the world; as a result most people are used to living in very small spaces with a heavy reliance on public transport.
- The weather in Japan in winter can be very cold! The Amami Islands will be much milder than the other locations, but please be prepared for all weathers.
- The currency is the Japanese yen – JPY. Japan is predominantly a cash society and some shops may not accept credit cards. Note that many ATM machines in Japan don't accept foreign cards however ATMs that *DO* accept foreign cards are in all 7-11s and post offices. Download the XE Currency app to your smartphone for instant currency exchange rates
- Visitors to Japan are exempt from paying the 8% consumption-tax when they spend more than 5000JPY in a single purchase at a single shop on the same day, at participating stores. Show your passport to pay the tax free price
- Time zone is UTC + 9hrs
- Electricity voltage is Type A (2-flat-pin)
- Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs webpage: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/index.html>

TOUR HOTELS

Kyoto: Kyoto Resol Kawaramachi Sanjo
59-1 Daikoku-cho, Kawaramachi-dori Sanjo-sagaru,
Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto 604-8031
Tel: 075-255-9269

Tokushima: Anrakuji Temple (Japanese style rooms)
Teranonishikita-8 Hikino, Kamiita, Itano, Tokushima
Tel: 088-694-2046

Tokushima: Sunroute Tokushima
1-5-1 Motomachi, Tokushima-shi, Tokushima 770-0834
Tel: 088-653-8111

Yame: Yame Green Hotel
47-1 Honmachi, Yame-shi, Fukuoka 834-0031
Tel: 0943-22-2156

Hakata: Resol Trinity Hakata
4-4-10 Nakasu, Hakata-ku, Fukuoka 810—8-1
Tel: 092-282-9269

Amami: Bashayama Resort
1246-1 Yoan, Kasari-cho, Amami-shi, Kagoshima 894-0508
Tel: 0997-63-1178

Osaka: Resol Trinity Osaka
2-6-6 Koraibashi, Chuo-ku, Osaka-shi, Osaka 541-0043
Tel: 06-6229-9269

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

- The retreat|recreate host is Susan Rees-Osborne. Susan's WhatsApp number is +61 423 040 887 (*tour 1*)
- The A&F Japan guide is Ms Akiko Suzuki. Akiko's WhatsApp number is +81 80 6543 1887
- A&F's emergency telephone number in Japan is: +81 3 4500 3375
- Ambulance/ Fire - 119
- Police – 110

EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

- Australian embassy: 2-1-14 Mita, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8361 Tel: 03-5232-4111
- US embassy: 1 Chome-10-5 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-8420 Tel: 03-3224-5000
- UK embassy: 102-8381 Tokyo, Chiyoda-ku, Ichibancho Tel: +81-3-5211-1100
- Irish embassy: 102-0083 Tokyo, Chiyoda City, Kijomachi 2 Chome-10-7. Tel: +81 3-3263-0695
- Canadian embassy: 7 Chome-3-38 Akasaka, Tokyo 107-0052. Tel: +81 3-5412-6200
- New Zealand embassy: 150-0047 20-40 Kamiyama-cho, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo. Tel: +81 3 3467 2271
- Dutch embassy: 3-6-3 Shibakoen, Minato-ku, Tokyo. Tel: +81 3-5776-5400
- Visit www.smarttraveller.gov.au or your country's travel site for the latest health and travel updates

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Please also refer to the Trip Notes

- In addition to COVID-19 vaccinations, please consult your doctor re recommended vaccinations (eg flu shots, Japanese encephalitis etc). Further information is available online at Travel Doctor <http://www.traveldoctor.com.au/Page/Knowledge-Hub/Destination-fact-sheets/japan>
- Take sensible precautions with foods you are unused to, to avoid travellers' diarrhoea
- If you suffer from motion sickness, consider bringing ginger tablets/Travelcalm/Kwells
- Tap water in Japan is safe to drink. Please bring a reusable water bottle and refill it as we travel. Stay hydrated!
- With so much to see and do while travelling, it's easy to forget to drink enough water. Carry electrolytes or rehydration powder/tablets with you
- Carry and wear insect repellent
- Carry and wear sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses
- **Carry your own medical kit at all times** (refer to the Packing List)

GENERAL ETIQUETTE

- Shoes - it is customary to remove your shoes before entering homes, ryokans and some restaurants (Easy to remove shoes are useful!) Never wear shoes on tatami mats, only socks or slippers
- Bare feet are not appropriate in homes, studios and restaurants. Please make sure you have clean socks when removing your shoes
- Photography – always ask and receive permission before photographing people, particularly children
- Eating - do not leave chopsticks standing upright in a bowl of rice, or use them to pass food directly to another person's chopsticks. These actions are reminiscent of rituals associated with funerals and the dead. Slurping of noodles and tea is encouraged!
- Tipping – this is not customary in Japanese restaurants, shops, taxis etc
- Bargaining - not customary except occasionally at flea markets
- Temples and shrines – most are open to the public. Ladles are provided to rinse your hands before entering shrines. Speak quietly and respectfully in temples and dress modestly
- Meeting and greeting – it is customary to bow rather than shake hands. The deeper the bow, the more respectful
- On the street and on public transport – eating, drinking, blowing your nose and talking loudly are all considered impolite
- Use both hands when giving or receiving money, food, gifts, business cards etc.

ONSEN ETIQUETTE

- Onsen literally means 'hot spring' and is a natural hot water bath rich in beneficial minerals
- Women's and men's onsens are separate
- Complete nudity is required. No swimsuits or clothes!
- Modesty is appreciated. Use the small towel/cloth provided to cover yourself as you move between changing room to shower area to onsen and back again
- Please wash yourself in the shower area before entering the bathing area
- Never dip your towel/cloth in the water. Keep it on top of your head or on the edge of the bath
- Don't put your face or hair in the water
- If in doubt, ask an onsen attendant or follow the behaviour of other Japanese bathers
- Some onsen do not permit entry to those with tattoos

USEFUL PHRASES

- Hello - Kon nichi wa
- Goodbye - Sayōnara
- How are you? - O-genki desu ka?
- Fine, thank you. - Genki desu. Arigatō.
- What is your name? - O-namae wa nan desu ka?
- My name is ____ . - Watashi no namae wa ____ desu.
- Nice to meet you - Hajime mashite
- Please - Dōzo
- Thank you - Arigatō
- Thank you very much – Arigatō gazaimusou
- Thank you for the food/drink – Gochisoosuma deshita
- I thankfully receive this food – Ita daki masu
- You're welcome - Dō itashi mashite
- Yes - hai (high)
- No - ie (ee-eh)
- Excuse me – Sumi ma sen
- I'm sorry - Gomen nasai
- I don't understand - Wa ka ri ma sen
- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – ichi, ni, san, yon/shi, go

Suggestions for Kyoto pre tour days

Please note that the following list is the result of many hours of research and is made available to retreat|recreate tour participants only, as an additional resource. We would be grateful if you would [please refrain from sharing it](#).

KYOTO - MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

- **Gallery Gallery.** Kotobuku Building, 5F, Kawaramachi, Shijo-sagaru, Shimogyo-ku. Tiny gallery in a building of lots of fascinating shops.
- **Kawai Kanjiro's House and Museum,** Kyoto. Home and studio of the late co-founder of the Mingei Movement (folk style handcraft) artist and potter. 569 Kaneicho, Gojozaka, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto
- **Kodai Yuzen-en Gallery,** 600-8354 Takatsuji dori. Kimono gallery and workshop.
- **Kyoto Handicraft Center,** near the Heian Jingu Shrine. 17 Shogoin Entomicho, Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 606-8323.
- **Kyoto Museum of Traditional Crafts (Fureaikan)** – museum, demonstrations, workshops.
- **Kyoto Shibori Museum,** a small family-run museum, gallery and shop. 127 Shikiami-cho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto 604-8261
- **Marumasu Nishimuraya** – yuzen classes. Housed in a traditional wooden townhouse, also with a café. 457 Tsuboya-cho, Ogawa dori, Oike-sagaru, Nakagyo-ku.
- **Nishijin Textiles Centre,** 414 Korikawa dori, Tatemonzencho, Kamigyo-ku. A textile showroom in a mid-century building. Weaving demonstrations, regular kimono shows, and upstairs you'll find furoshiki, tenugui, kimono, obi, silk ties etc.
- **Orinasukan Museum of Handweaving,** a small family run silk obi and kimono weaving studio in the Nishijin district. 693 Daikokucho, Kamigyo-ku, Kyoto 602-8137
- **Raku Museum,** museum of raku ceramics. Aburanokôji-dôri Ichijô sagaru Kamigyo-ku Kyoto 602-0923. Open 10am-4pm, closed Mondays.
- **Yamahon Gallery,** 2nd Floor, 95-3 Enokicho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto 604-0931. Ceramics and handcrafts gallery. Open 11am – 6.30pm daily except Thursdays.

KYOTO – HANDCRAFTS SHOPPING

- **Bunzaburo,** traditional shibori textiles. 10am-6pm, 221 Hashibenkeicho Takoyakusidori Karasuma Nishiiru Nakagyoku, Kyoto.
- **CASAnE Art Space.** Communal retail space – ceramics, jewellery, textiles, papercraft. Next door to Sarasa Nishijin café which is also recommended.
- **Idola,** vintage buttons and beads. 3rd floor of the western-style building at the corner of Sanjo Dori and Tominokoji Dori
- **Inagaki Kiryou Weaving Supplies,** 602-8317 Kamigyo-ku, open 9-5 except Sundays
- **Itoroku,** beautiful thread shop. 298 Tamatsushimacho, Shimogyo-ku, 600-8427 (near Tanaka Dye Supplies, and Yamaguchi Chubee)
- **Kamiji Kakimoto,** Fuyacho-dori, Nakagyo-ku 604-8085 www.kyoto-kakimoto.jp 9am-6pm – beautiful washi paper and stationery shop.
- **Kamisoe,** 10-1 Kuramaguchi dori, Murasakino, Higashifujinomoricho, Kita-ku (north Kyoto), Tues-Sun 12-6pm. Exquisite handmade papers for shoji screens and stationery. Same district as Nishijin Textile Centre.
- **Kin No Hitsuji** – wool/yarn/spinning shop with supplies, books & tools. 600-8086 Higashinotoin Higashiiru Matsubara St, Shimogyo-ku.
- **Kitamura Tokusai Fukusa Chanoyu textiles shop,** 602-8411, Kyoto-fu, Kyoto-shi, Kamigyo-ku (in the Nishijin textiles district). Look for the small orange fukusa cloth hanging out the front. A fukusa is a small silk cloth used in the tea ceremony. Kitamura Tokusai have been making fukusa for 300 years.
- **Kitone** shop/teahouse/café – 1F, 589 Torochô, Shimogyo-ku, 352 2428. www.kitone.jp. Open Fri-Tues 12pm-dusk
- **Linnet,** specialising in linen. Tominokoji-nishiiu, 562 Aneyakoji dori (by Tominokoji dori), Nakagyo-ku. 11am-6pm
- **Misuya-Bari Needle Shop.** The famous tiny 400 year old shop selling handmade pins and needles. TEMPORARILY CLOSED
- **Nomura Tailor** – multi storey fabric mecca! 362 Shijo, Naramonochô, Shimogyo-ku. Daily 10am-7pm. There's a smaller branch on Taramachi dori in the covered arcade section selling patterns and notions.
- **Saiundo Traditional Art Supplies,** brushes, pigments, art supplies. 552 Anedaitochô, Nakagyo-ku 604-8092. Open 9:30-6pm except Wednesdays.

- **Aizenkobo** indigo textiles and clothing, 215 Yokoomiyacho, Kamigyo-ku 602-8449, Kyoto. Open 11-4 except Sundays.
- **Babaguri** beautiful clothing shop, Osaka Zaimokucho 686-2, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto. Open 11am-7pm

- **Sou Sou** fashion and textiles, 583-3 Nakanochō, Nakagyo-ku. Daily 11am-8pm. 7 branches all located in the same street.
- **Tanaka Nao Senryoten (dye supplies)**, 312 Tamatsushimachō, Shimogyo-ku 600-8427 (Near Itoroku)
- **Tezomeya**, organic clothing and natural dye studio. 456-2F, Sasaya-chō, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto
- **Walnut** - yarn shop, 745 Kikuyachō, Shimogyo-ku. (Street Wakamiya dori, Matubara-agaru). Tues-Sat 11am-6pm
- **Yamaguchi Chubee**, fabric, patterns, sewing supplies. 600-8086 Shimogyo-ku, Hontorocho, 20.

KYOTO – CLASSES & WORKSHOPS

- **Adachi Kumihino Gallery**. Try a kumihimo (braided cord) braiding class from ¥2160 per person. www.adachikumihimokan.com
- Cooking classes www.cooking-sun.com
- **Kyo Gokoro**, Japanese calligraphy class. ¥2000 Open 10am-5pm www.kyo-gokoro.com
- **Matsuda Bookbinding Works**, 57-7 Kitanoshimohakubaichō, Kita-ku, 603-8326. www.matsudaseihon.com
- **WAK Japan (Women's Association of Kyoto)**. Classes in ikebana, kimono wearing, tea ceremony, home cooking. www.wakjapan.jp
- **Yamadamatsu** Koboku-ten. Make your own incense class. www.yamadamatsu.co.jp/en
- **Yamamoto Roketsu Dyeing**. Indigo and wax resist dyeing class – dye a t-shirt, furoshiki, noren curtain etc. www.roketsu.com



KYOTO – FOOD & DRINK

- **% Arabica** Higashiyama – for your coffee fix. 87-5 Hoshinocho, Higashiyama Ward
- **Café Bibliotic Hello**, open 11.30am – midnight. 650 Seimeicho Niji Yanaginobanba Higashi iru Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto 604-0951. Bookshelves and plants line the walls
- **Chao Chao Sanjo Kiyamachi**, 117 Ishiyachō, Nakagyo-ku. Classic, casual izakaya serving gyoza and drinks
- **Inoda Coffee Honten**, 140 Doyucho, Nakagyoku, 604-8118
- **Ippudo Noodle Shop**, popular ramen eatery 653-1 Bantoya-chō, Higashitoi, Nishikoji-higashi-iru, Nakagyo-ku
- **Kamehameha**, 278 Enpukujimaecho, Nakagyo-ku. Fri-Wed 4pm-9pm. Serving okonomiyaki (Japanese omelette)
- **Katsukara**, 16 Ishibashicho, Nakagyo-ku. Serving tonkatsu.
- **Kei's Caffee oggi**, 190-1 Kiyomizu cho-me Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto 605-0862
- **Manzara-tei**, traditional Japanese fare. 321 Kawaramachi-dori, Ebisugawa-agaru Sahimonocho, Nakagyo-ku
- **Mo-An**, 8 Yoshidakaguraokacho, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8311. Tues-Sun 11.30am-6pm
- **Motoi Gyoza**, best gyoza in town. 470-2 Setoyachō, Nakagyo-ku 604-8122. Recommended.
- **Muni Restaurant**, 176-3 Zaimokucho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto 604-8017. A tiny, exquisite, one-man restaurant just around the corner from our hotel. Closed Mondays.
- **Musashi Sushi**, 440 Ebisucho, Nakagyo-ku. Thurs-Tues 11am-9pm. Classic sushi train restaurant.
- **Omen**, udon noodles, just down the road from Ginkaku-ji temple. 74 Ishibashi-cho, Jodo-ji, Sakyo-ku. 11am-9pm
- **Sarasa Nishijin Café**. A café in an old sento (public bath house) 11-1 Murasakino Higashifujinomoricho, Kita Ward, Kyoto, 603-8223. Closed Wednesdays.
- **Vermillion**, coffees and café food. 8 5 Fukakusa Inarionmaecho, Fushimi-ku, Kyoto. Near the Fushimi Inari Shrine
- **Wife & Husband**, little tempura eatery. 188 Sendochō, Nishikiyamachi Shijo-dori Kudaru, Simogyo-ku
- **Yayoi**, 434-3 Ebisucho, Nakagyo-ku. Serving inexpensive, traditional meals
- **Yojiya Café Ginkakujiten**, traditional tea and coffee café. 15 Shishigatanihounenincho Sakyoku 606-8421

JAPANESE TEXTILES & HANDCRAFTS

Boro

Japan's mended and patched textiles are referred to as *boro*, or ragged, both in Japan and abroad. *Boro* textiles are usually sewn from nineteenth and early twentieth century rags



and patches of indigo dyed cotton. The diversity of patches on any given piece of clothing or household cloth is a veritable encyclopedia of hand loomed cotton indigo from old Japan. In most cases, the beautiful arrangement of patches and mending stitches is borne of necessity and happenstance, and was not planned by the maker. *Boro* textiles were stitched in the shadows of farmhouses, often at night by the light of one dim *andon*, on the laps of farm women. This unselfconscious creative process has produced hand-made articles of poignant, utilitarian beauty.

Sashiko

Sashiko, meaning literally 'little stabs', is a quilting technique using a running stitch to reinforce and prolong the life of a fabric or to stitch and recycle old pieces of cloth into a new garment. Sashiko created warmer and more durable fabrics for the Japanese farmer who originally used the stitch for practical reasons. Decorative sashiko stitching developed out of this need for warmth and durability and functions to embellish while strengthen the garment or object.



Shibori

Shibori is a general term which encompasses a wide range of shape-resist dyeing techniques including tie-and-dye, binding, stitching, and clamping, etc. By using these techniques a fabric resists dye and creates surface patterns, some extremely intricate and innovative. We'll encounter exquisite shibori techniques at The Little Indigo Museum during our visit there. (Indigo group*)



Sakiori

Sakiori weaving uses a rag weft against a warp of either bast fiber or cotton. The weft material is often made from shredded kimono or other recycled garments which can be of cotton, silk or other material. Sakiori clothing was first woven by Japanese peasants around 1750 for its warmth and durability as newly minted cotton cloth at that time was too rare and expensive for a farmer or fisherman. The home manufacture and use of sakiori clothing and hearth covers in rural areas of Japan disappeared anywhere from 50-100 years ago, although a few individuals and some historical preservation societies still weave this cloth today.

Kasuri

Kasuri is the Japanese term for what is commonly known as ikat weaving. The *kasuri* process involves yarns being tied before they are dyed. The areas where



yarns are tied are "masked" and will resist dye. The way in which yarns are tied will determine the look of the finished patterns which will be woven into the cloth. Sometimes just the weft yarns are tied. Sometimes both the weft and warp yarns are tied, and this is called double *kasuri* – a technique which can yield quite complex designs.

Katazome

Katazome is a method of dyeing fabrics using a resist paste applied through a stencil, typically a rice flour mixture applied with a brush or tool such as a palette knife. Unlike yuzen, stencils are used repeatedly to make a repeating pattern. Pigment is added by hand-painting, immersion dyeing, or both. The area of the fabric covered and permeated by the paste mixture resists the later application of dye, thus creating undyed areas within the fabric.

Katazome was first invented as an inexpensive and faster alternative to highly patterned woven brocade fabrics. Over time, katazome evolved into a respected fibre art form of its own.

Thin fabrics dyed in the katazome style show the fabric's design on the back of the fabric, whereas thicker or more tightly woven fabrics generally have a solid colour underside, typically indigo blue for cotton fabrics. Futon covers made from multiple panels of katazome fabric, if the stencils are properly placed and panels joined correctly, can display a seamless stencilled pattern. Besides cotton, katazome has been used to decorate linen, silk and fabrics that are entirely or partially synthetic.

Yuzen Dyeing

The *yuzen* dyeing method was introduced to Japan in the 8th century. Tradition has it that hand-painted yuzen was first made by the artist Miyazaki Yuzensai of Kyoto. Many colors are used and yuzen dyeing used to dye kimonos in picturesque designs developed with the cultural life of Kyoto townspeople. In modern times craftsmen developed Utsushi-yuzen (tracing) in which a yuzen design is dyed using paper patterns and stencils. Yuzen dyeing is used for kimonos and coats and these days is produced in the cities of Kyoto and Uji, part of greater Kyoto.

Saori Weaving

Saori is a form of weaving featuring creativity, spontaneity and free expression with no rules. The philosophy behind saori weaving emphasizes that there are no 'mistakes', only the self expression of the weaver. This is quite a departure from the usual precision involved in Japanese crafts. The founder of Saori was Misao Jo, born in 1913 in Osaka, Japan and sadly passed away at 104 years old on 10 January, 2018. Misao began her weaving career at the age of 57 after studying and teaching Ikebana and rearing a family. Her son Kenzo Jo developed the Saori loom and associated equipment and many members of the family continue the Saori tradition.

JAPANESE INDIGO - 'JAPAN BLUE'



Persicaria tinctoria, Japanese indigo

Anyone who has dipped cloth into an indigo vat and watched, mesmerised, as it emerges and changes from green to blue before your eyes, will understand the magical, mythical attraction it holds for people the world over.

Archaeological evidence shows that indigo has been used as a dyestuff for at least 6,000 years old, with traces found on ancient fabric fragments discovered in Egypt and Peru. In antiquity, Pliny the Elder mentions India as the source of the dye after which it was named, while the Chinese character for indigo appears in records from the first century CE. Clearly, many ancient cultures had their own independently derived indigo traditions. In cool climate countries, woad was the main source of blue, until the opening of the trade routes known as the Silk Road, when indigo was transported from India through Central Asia to Constantinople, Persia and Europe.

Indigo dates back to the 10th century in Japan, with the first indigo-dyed textiles arriving from China. A number of these textiles can be found in the 8th century treasure trove in Nara's Shoso-in repository in Todai-ji Temple (not usually on display to the public unfortunately). Japanese aizome dyeing has its roots in the Heian period (794-1185) and by the Kamakura period (1192-1333) the Japanese *sukumo* (fermented/composted) method was well established. In Japanese, indigo dyeing is known as *aizome* (ai = indigo, zome = dye).

Japanese aizome culture exploded in the Edo period (1600-1868) when laws were passed preventing the lower classes from wearing silk, and cotton became the popular alternative. In addition to being readily available (indigo is native to Japan), aizome was also colourfast on cotton and thus faded slowly, adding to its appeal.

There are many different kinds of traditional indigo dye processes however it's said that the unique Japanese *sukumo* method is the one that yields the particular colour known as 'Japan Blue.'

Indigo can be obtained from a variety of plants including *indigofera*, *strobilanthes* and *polygonum*. In Japan, indigo or '*tade*', is from the *polygonum* family – its horticultural name is *Persicaria tinctoria* (previously *Polygonum tintcoria*). The *Persicaria tinctoria* plants grow between 2 to 3 feet high. Their large leaves are green, but turn dark blue when dried.

In the early 1900s Japan grew almost 40,000 acres of indigo plants. Today it has no more than six commercial producers, harvesting about 70 acres. Most of the farmers are in Tokushima on Shikoku, the smallest of the country's four main islands. In indigo's heyday, this fertile region was extremely wealthy. Indigo was so valuable that 18th-century farmers who shared their production secrets with outsiders were supposedly beheaded.

The sukumo process

Indigo fields are seeded in March ...



... harvested in July (first cut) and August (second cut)



... with the drying process commencing in September.



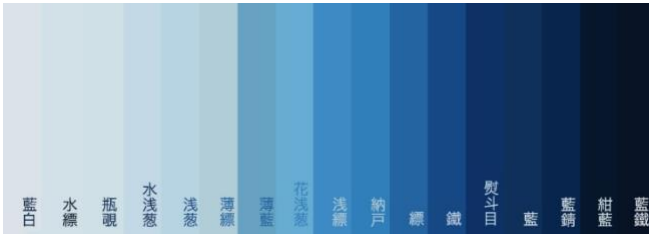
In early October the now dry leaves are ‘put to sleep’ for the winter. This is when composting begins to produce *sukumo* (composted indigo leaves), following a system in practice since the 10th century. Composting takes place in a building called a *nedoko*, a shed with an absorbent clay floor. Dried leaves are spread on the floor, moistened with water and formed into rectangular piles about three feet high. Once a week the piles are turned. They are carefully sliced through, turned upside down and reshaped. Each pile contains four to six tons of dried leaves. The turning process requires six hours and four workers.



To encourage a successful batch of *sukumo*, an indigo master will place an offering of sake and a decorative bough of pine on each pile and pray to *Aizen Shin*, Buddhist guardian deity. The piles are composted for three months before being baled and shipped to dyers.



Varieties of Indigo Blue



Aizome can create various shades of blue depending on the level of fermentation and/or the dyeing time. Each shade has a different name, ranging from *aijiro* (indigo white) to *noukon* (darkest blue, closest to black). Other shades and some of their translations are:

Shira Ai (White indigo)

Kame Nozoki (Looking into the vase)

Asagi

Usu Ai (Light indigo)

Hanada

Ruri Kon (Lapis lazuli blue)

Tetsu Kon (Iron blue)

Kachi

Nasu Kon (Eggplant purple)

Fun fact 1: the logo for the Japan Olympic Games held in 2021 featured 'Japan Blue'

Fun fact 2: the Tokyo Skytree (the tallest building in Japan) is painted in the lightest of the indigo colours, *aijiro*, the bluish white.

Dyeing with Indigo

There are five basic materials used in Japanese indigo dyeing: *sukumo* (the tade leaves of the Japanese indigo plant), *fusuma* (wheat bran), sake, hardwood ash, and lime.



Aizome dyeing is a complicated and long process. The chemical compound indican contained in the raw leaves is converted into indigo by fermenting the leaves (as per

previous page). The traditional process uses only natural materials and no chemicals of any kind.

Sake and *fusuma* facilitate the fermentation process. Wood ash (ash lye or *aku*) and lime are used to control the alkaline levels of the dye stuff. Wood ash for indigo dyeing is a very delicate material and must be stored carefully or it loses its power. Lime is usually added three times directly to the vat.

All these materials are mixed in a large vat (about 540 litres) and moderately heated (between 20-25 degrees Celsius). The entire mixture is fermented for about one week. The vat is buried in the ground to more easily keep the temperature stable.

The fermentation process completely determines the quality of the final dye produced. In the ideal fermentation process a sponge-like foam (called *ai-no-hana* or indigo flower) forms at the top of the vat.



When the fermented indigo solution is ready the cloth or yarn is repeatedly dipped in the vat. If the textile is long, for example an obi sash or roll of kimono cloth, the craftsman slowly and carefully pushes it bit by bit towards the bottom of the vat. The textile is left in the vat for 15-30 minutes, depending on the depth of colour desired and then carefully removed.

After squeezing the excess liquid from the textile it is spread wide and hung up, allowing the textile to oxidize and thus fix the colour. Just after the textile is removed from the vat it looks dark green. As it oxidizes in the open air it turns blue.

The dipping and oxidizing steps are repeated over and over until the final desired colour has been produced. For the darkest blues dips can last 30 minutes and be repeated 30 to 40 times.



[Some of] Japan's Master Indigo Dyers

The [Aizen Kobo](#) workshop lies a few blocks from the world-renowned Nishijin traditional weaving and textile district. This indigo dye workshop and retail shop produces a wonderful range of hand-dyed indigo clothing items using techniques such as shibori (tie dyeing), sashiko embroidery (hand stitching), ikat and double ikat (resist dyeing and weaving). This family business, now in its third generation, started out as an obi sash weaving studio. The second-generation head of the family added indigo dyed textile production and for a while ran both businesses side by side. At a certain point it became clear that the kimono industry was rapidly shrinking and the family decided to concentrate on the indigo business only and sold all their obi weaving looms.

The present head of the business, [Kenichi Utsuki](#) (3rd generation) has been invited to many universities around the world to lecture on natural indigo dyeing. His wife, Hisako, is the designer of many of the clothing items they sell in their shop.

Aizen Kobo produce their indigo dyed textiles in the traditional way. They use the same basic ingredients: indigo plant leaves, wheat husk powder, limestone powder, lye ash, and sake. Their dye vats are in operation year-round and are kept at the right temperature with heaters placed directly in the vats. To ensure quality Mr Utsuki taste tests the sake before adding it to the vat.

Aizen Kobo's indigo process produces an incredibly vibrant, deep blue colour that hardly fades over time. Some of their blues are so intense and deep that they appear to be black. They have pieces in their collection that are 50-60 years old and they look quite new. For comparison the studio has chemically produced indigo textiles from several countries that they show to customers to educate them on the unique colour depth of naturally dyed indigo textiles.



Kenichi Utsuki, displaying an antique katazome piece

The [Little Indigo Museum](#) and workshop of the late [Hiroyuki Shindo](#) is in the tiny rural village of Kita, in Miyama, in the mountains north of Kyoto. The workshop is in a 200 year old thatched roof farmhouse. Shindo san's half dozen indigo vats are sunk into the earthen floor of what was once the farmhouse's kitchen. The studio uses Tokushima sukumo fed with sake – together they provide all the glorious shades of indigo required to produce the bespoke kimono silk and cotton lengths for which the studio is famous. A keen collector and scholar of indigo, Shindo san has travelled the globe collecting priceless indigo textiles of varying ages and provenance, which is displayed in rotating exhibitions in the second floor of his house. Downstairs, in the gallery behind the dye studio, is usually an example of Shindo san's contemporary indigo art – perhaps a collection of papier and indigo dyed thread balls from an exhibition of his work held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, or an exquisite wallhanging from an exhibition in the Netherlands. Shindo san's son and daughter in law now run the museum and studio.



The late Hiroyuki Shindo

The current master dyer at the [Fujiro Factory](#), [Toshiharu Furusho](#) grew up in Tokushima and pursued studies in Tokyo before returning home to continue the family business. Now he sells his wares across Japan, his speciality being huge 2m by 5m wall hangings using katazome (rice paste resist and stencil) and shibori (various bind and fold or tie-dye techniques) indigo techniques, often on an enormous scale.

A sixth generation indigo dyer, Toshiharu san followed his father's and grandfather's traditions and shunned the use of chemicals following only organic processes and utilising natural indigo. In 1998 he was awarded the 'Contemporary Master Craftsman' of the year from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, just as his father had been. In 2018 his *chusen* indigo work was designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Tokushima prefecture. Toshiharu san believes clothes and textiles dyed with chemicals are most beautiful immediately after dyeing; while cloth dyed with indigo grows more beautiful with time.

Among a world of male indigo practitioners, it's refreshing to learn that there are a few women artists working with indigo. [Chiaki Murakami](#) studied for 18 years under two different indigo masters before establishing [Awa Aizome Koubou](#) and her own practice. Working only with natural indigo and no chemicals, her contemporary style pays homage to her traditional training, featuring intricate shibori patterns and a modern, playful aesthetic.



The workshop and studio of [Tetsuhiro Moriyama](#) in Kurume may be focused on kasuri (ikat weaving) but indigo dyeing is a crucial element of Tetsuhiro-san's art. The dye room features thirty two dye vats sunk into an earthen floor. The vats are arranged in groups of four, with a small oven in between each group. During winter months rice straw or corn is burned to ensure the vats stay warm and alive. Skeins of thread are carefully tied and dyed here, dipped into vat after vat until the required shade is achieved, before being woven into cloth for kimono and other items of high end clothing. Tetsuhiro san dyes about twelve metres worth of cloth (the amount needed for one kimono) at one time to ensure a uniform result.

National Living Treasure and owner of [Yamaai Studio](#), [Shoji Yamamura](#), another artist famous for his kasuri skills, states that 'of all the processes involved in the production of a roll of double ikat cloth, the indigo dyeing part of the process is the most tricky and unpredictable'. As part of his Living Treasure status, Yamamura-san receives government subsidies for which in return he must commit to using only sukumo and organic cotton and must hand tie all his ikat thread. The thread is woven on narrow hand looms and is mostly used to create luxury kimono.

Yamamura san was one of the artists selected to create a bespoke kimono for presentation to one of the foreign dignitaries at the Tokyo Olympics. (His kimono was indigo kasuri, of course).

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Photographs

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