



[Japan](#) is an [island nation](#) in [East Asia](#) comprising a [stratovolcanic archipelago](#) extending along the [Pacific](#) coast of [Asia](#). Measured from the [geographic coordinate](#) system, Japan stretches from 24° to 46° north latitude and from 123° to 146° east longitude. The country is southeast of the [Russian Far East](#), separated by the [Sea of Okhotsk](#); slightly east of [Korea](#), separated by the [Sea of Japan](#); and east-northeast of [China](#) and [Taiwan](#), separated by the [East China Sea](#). The closest neighboring country to Japan is the [Russian Federation](#).

The Japanese islands are the summits of mountain ridges uplifted near the outer edge of the [continental shelf](#). About 73 percent of Japan's area is mountainous, and scattered plains and intermontane basins (in which the population is concentrated) cover only about 25 percent. A long chain of mountains runs down the middle of the archipelago, dividing it into two halves, the "face," fronting on the Pacific Ocean, and the "back," toward the Sea of Japan. On the Pacific side are steep mountains 1,500 to 3,000 meters high, with deep valleys and gorges. Central Japan is marked by the convergence of the three mountain chains—the [Hida](#), [Kiso](#), and [Akaishi](#) mountains—that form the [Japanese Alps](#) (Nihon Arupusu), several of whose peaks are higher than 3,000 meters. The highest point in the Japanese Alps is [Mount Kita](#) at 3,193 meters. The highest point in the country is [Mount Fuji](#) (Fujisan, also erroneously called Fujiyama), a volcano dormant since 1707 that rises to 3,776 meters above sea level in [Shizuoka Prefecture](#). On the Sea of Japan side are plateaus and low mountain districts, with altitudes of 500 to 1,500 meters.

Ten percent of the world's active [volcanoes](#)—forty in the early 1990s (another 148 were dormant)—are found in Japan, which lies in a zone of extreme [crustal instability](#). As many as 1,500 [earthquakes](#) are recorded yearly, and magnitudes of four to six on the [Richter scale](#) are common. Minor tremors occur almost daily in one part of the country or another, causing slight shaking of buildings. Major earthquakes occur infrequently; the most famous in the twentieth century was the [great Kantō earthquake](#) of 1923, in which 130,000 people died. [Undersea earthquakes](#) also expose the Japanese coastline to danger from [tsunamis](#) (津波?) and [tidal waves](#). On March 11, 2011 the country was subject to a devastating 9.0 magnitude earthquake and a massive tsunami as a result. The March 11 quake was the largest ever recorded in Japan and is the world's fourth largest earthquake to strike since 1900, according to the U.S. Geological Service. It struck offshore about 231 miles (373 kilometers) northeast of Tokyo and 80 miles (130 km) east of the city of Sendai, and created a massive tsunami that devastated Japan's northeastern coastal areas. At least 100 aftershocks registering a 6.0 magnitude or higher have followed the main temblor. At least 10,000 people died as a result.

The small amount of habitable land has prompted significant human modification of the terrain over many centuries. Land was reclaimed from the sea and from river deltas by building [dikes](#) and drainage, and rice paddies were built on terraces carved into mountainsides. The process continued in the modern period with extension of shorelines and building of artificial islands for industrial and port development, such as Port Island in Kobe and the new [Kansai International Airport](#) in Osaka Bay. Hills and even mountains have been razed to provide flat areas for housing.