

SOLACE GLOBAL

# JAPAN

TOKYO 2020NE

A GAMES DEFINED BY A PANDEMIC

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# Tokyo Olympics 2020NE

## A Games Defined by a Pandemic

### Executive Summary

The 2020 Olympics are set to be unique. The Games will be played behind closed doors in a country struggling to contain a renewed wave of COVID-19. Organisers have faced criticism for going ahead with the Games despite this resurgence of coronavirus.

While spectators will not be able to watch the Games in stadiums, thousands of athletes, officials and support crews are already in Japan, preparing to host the unique Games. With over 11,000 athletes set to take part in 339 events across 50 disciplines and 33 sports, the event is likely to see unprecedented challenges that organisers will not have faced before.

For those in Japan, whether they are competing in, supporting the running of, or broadcasting the Games, they will find themselves in a safe and unique country. The main risk to individuals at the Games will stem from environmental factors, with the Olympics set to take place in a country known for earthquakes and increasing landslides. However, understanding the country's singularity is also vital to ensure that these unique Olympics go ahead smoothly.

### COVID-19

Tokyo's Olympics have been defined by one thing: the Coronavirus Pandemic. The Games have already been delayed from 2020 and, with cases again rising in Japan, there have been calls to cancel or abandon them all together. The organisers have remained adamant that the Games would go ahead despite the case rise and warning from medical experts.

One of the Games most unique aspects will be the lack of crowds. For many of us in a world still struggling to control the virus, the lack of crowds has become almost normal, with football matches and events taking place behind closed doors, until recently. This will create a very unique atmosphere in the stadiums with no fan-based noise. Especially for Japanese people who were offered, originally, a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the best sports people compete at the highest stage.

In mid-November, before the recent resurgence in cases, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach visited Tokyo to inspect facilities. The president stated that athletes, and those supporting the games, should travel to Tokyo with "full confidence" that the Games will be safe.

Despite this, on 14 July, Tokyo's daily cases hit a six-month high, with fears that even without supporters, the Games could be a "super spreader event", as volunteers and staff travel to and from Tokyo, where cases are now surging to a high level, from less impacted areas.

There has also been concerns among athletes. Chinese athletes raised concerns over insufficient COVID-19 measures at their hotel. According to the country's sailing association head, athletes from the country have been allowed to mix with locals and tourists at their satellite accommodation in Enoshima. He added, that while the rooms that athletes use are arranged separate from other guests, locals are still able to mix with Olympic athletes in the lobby and the restaurant.

Indeed, on 14 July, a cluster of COVID-19 cases were reported at a Japanese hotel where members of the Brazilian Olympic team are staying. Seven staff at the hotel in Hamamatsu city are reported to have tested positive. The athletes and staff at the hotel are not believed to have been exposed, however, they are currently in a bubble isolated from the majority of staff and other guests.

This is not an isolated case; the Russian women's rugby sevens team are also currently self-isolating after a member of their staff tested positive. On 15 July, at the time of writing, there were breaking reports that an athlete has tested positive for COVID-19 on arrival. The infected individual is therefore at risk of missing the Games if any of their events start before the end of their quarantine period on 29 July. Athletes from Uganda, Israel and Serbia have also reportedly tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival.

Despite this, some 80 percent of those taking part, supporting or covering the Games in country are expected to have been vaccinated. As such, the risk of an impact on their health is somewhat mitigated. The wider Japan, though, only has a 15 percent vaccination rate. This means that there could be a strong outbreak throughout the country should the virus begin circulating more.

These fears have largely fuelled the opposition to the Games among the Japanese people. With many experts stating that cancelling or postponing the Games remains the safest option, and the general public have agreed. A poll by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper that questioned 1,500 Japanese citizens in June found that, of those questioned, 62 percent supported another postponement or the cancellation of the Games.

### **Other Risks to Factor in**

Away from the pandemic, there are a number of other threats and risks to factor in for those taking part and supporting the Games. As mentioned, these are largely natural, Tokyo, and the wider Japan, is considered a safe destination for people to visit and work in. However, the country does face the risk of natural disasters, namely typhoons and earthquakes.

### **Typhoons**

The Games are set to be played at the beginning of Japan's typhoon season. On average, Japan sees eleven sizable typhoons per year, with the islands of Okinawa and Kyushu normally being the most affected. The mainland does see an average of three storms a year. Despite this, Tokyo is rarely impacted and the chance of adverse weather impacting the games remains low.

Typhoons are tropical cyclones typical of the Pacific Oceans and they are characterised by strong winds, large waves and heavy rains. The landfall of a typhoon can cause infrastructural damage, disrupt travel – particularly flights and ferries – and sometimes result in evacuation orders by the local emergency preparedness authorities. Keeping an eye on weather forecasts is always advisable during the typhoon season to avoid being caught unprepared.

### **Other Adverse Weather**

It is, instead, more likely that heavy rainfall will impact those taking part, supporting and covering the Games. At the beginning of July 2021, a landslide in Atami city resulted in nine fatalities with 21 people still missing. Such incidents are common during periods of heavy rainfall with the seaside city, which is located around 109km from Tokyo, receiving 310mm of rainfall in a 48-hour period. Many other cities were evacuated as a result of the adverse weather. Further rainfall is expected in long term weather forecasts, though it remains unlikely that any of the event locations will be impacted by flooding or landslides.

Landslides are common in the country given the highly urbanised and mountainous nature of Japan. It is common for advance warning evacuations to take place as a result of such weather. With long term radar forecast predicting further periods of heavy rainfall, there may be further warnings and potentially even landslides. Those taking part and covering the Games should monitor for warnings by the authorities, while also avoiding driving in such weather.

The weather in Japan can be hot, especially in the massive city of Tokyo. Indeed, temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius are common in July and August. Keeping hydrated and protecting yourself from the sun is important whilst travelling.

### **Earthquakes**

Earthquakes are a common occurrence across Japan. Minor quakes strike the country almost daily and result in no damage and are often barely noticeable. Major quakes also occur with a frequency unfamiliar to most of the western world and can result in damage.

However, Japan is at the forefront in the field of disaster preparedness and management, due to the country being so prone to natural disasters. Most buildings and infrastructure are built in accordance with stringent regulations and utilise the latest technologies in order to prevent damage and collapse during earthquakes. Most buildings are also equipped with emergency kits that include dry food, water and medical supplies.

Japan’s advanced knowledge of earthquakes and innovative solutions in the field of emergency response were developed in the aftermath of two great disasters, the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 and the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. Moreover, all Japanese citizens are trained in evacuation procedures and most of them have first aid knowledge, which facilitates the preventative and reactive operations. The Japanese government has a system of early warning alerting, which would push out a notification on all devices and televisions in case of an earthquake, tsunami or ballistic missile test.

The largest recent quake was the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake. This megathrust earthquake’s epicentre was located off the coast of the Oshika Peninsula. The quake was the strongest

to ever strike Japan, with a recorded magnitude of 9.1 and 7 on the Japanese Shindo (seismic intensity) scale. It was followed by a tsunami with waves of 10 meters (33 ft) in height – though waves of 40 meters were recorded in some areas. Up to 18,430 people are reported to have been killed or are still missing.

In 2021, a 7.1 magnitude quake struck near Fukushima in a similar location to the 2011 quake. The earthquake itself is considered an aftershock of the 2011 one despite the near decade time difference between them.

Japanese coastal areas are built to defend against tsunamis, all of which have been bolstered since 2011. As such, the majority of small tsunamis do not pose a threat to the major urban centres. However, as was the case in 2011, waves of 10 meters+ have the potential of overtopping the defences.

The island also has a number of volcanoes; however, these pose only a minor threat with the majority being dormant for the past decades.

**Crime**

Japan is considered a very safe country, with crime rates among the lowest in the world. In addition to this, the Japanese law enforcement agencies have a high success rate in solving crimes that are carried out. Pickpocketing and petty theft remain the highest risk to anyone visiting Japan, particularly in large crowds and in the vicinity of tourist landmarks.

Violent crime is also rare, although there is a significant presence of organised crime, often operating in and around entertainment establishments. However, members of criminal networks are unlikely to target foreign nationals unless provoked. Those lucky enough to be in the country for the Olympics should still expect increased security measures and personnel, despite the lack of supporters, further decreasing the risk of being a victim of violent crimes.

The police in Japan have wide-ranging powers and they are lawfully allowed to hold potential criminals for up to 23 days, even for minor offences. Indeed, should you be charged with a crime, you are likely to be held, without bail, until your court date.

**Drug laws**

The laws surrounding prescription medication in Japan is much stricter and different to those in Europe or Australasia. This includes the use of items such as Vicks Inhalers, allergy medications and medication containing Pseudoephedrine. Indeed, some over-the-counter painkillers like those containing Codeine are illegal and foreign nationals have been detained and deported for offences.

There is also a zero-tolerance policy towards all drugs in Japan. The penalties for possession, the use or the trafficking of illegal narcotics can result in long jail sentences and very heavy fines.



Example of an earthquake alert. Depending on the threat level, all public and hotel TV screens will automatically switch to government channels reporting on the disaster and its development. Emergency personnel at the hotel will be able to advise you of the best course of action.

## Terrorism

The risk of terrorism is low in Japan and, while there have been several highly publicised mass stabbings, these remain very rare. With no spectators and travel restrictions, the risk of individuals looking to carry out a mass casualty attack is further decreased.

## Cultural Differences

While visiting any country, it is important to be aware of cultural and religious norms and habits. The majority of people in Japan are friendly and hospitable, but they will tend to remain reserved. As such, loud and boisterous behaviour, especially in public, is uncommon.

Dressing conservatively is important to avoid offending locals, particularly if visiting areas considered sacred or of high historical importance.

Manners are also very important among the Japanese population, making it important to be aware of the basic rules. Japanese people often greet each other by bowing, which is also a way to show respect. It is also customary to exchange business cards, which should be received with both hands and not immediately stored away, as that is perceived as disrespectful. During formal business dinners, keeping the cards on the table is also common.

Public displays of affection are not common in the country, and it is better that visitors avoid doing so. Keeping phones on silent whilst on public transport is also the norm. Avoid taking calls or having loud conversations on any form of public transport.

Smoking in public and littering are frowned upon. Indeed, littering is seen as a sign of disrespect and could get you in trouble. It can also be frustrating when out and about as dustbins are few and far between; the majority of Japanese people take their garbage home with them rather than dispose of it when out. Smoking is mostly reserved for bars and pubs rather than the streets, where it is only allowed to smoke in designated areas.

## LGBT Rights

LGBT rights in Japan are relatively progressive by Asian standards. This is partly due to Japan's culture and major religions not having a history of hostility towards homosexuality. The majority of Japanese people support the legalisation of same-sex marriage, and the younger generation are widely supportive of LGBT rights. However, Japanese society remains inherently conservative, where public displays of affections or sexual preference are considered mostly inappropriate.

## Travel

Travelling around Japan is simple once you have got used to the country's public transportation network. For foreign nationals visiting the country, you can pre-buy Japan Rail Passes, which gives unlimited travel on all of Japan's long-distance rail services. Be aware that due to the pandemic and the Olympics, many trains are likely to be pre-booked. Buying a rail pass before you arrive is highly recommended if you are planning to use the train a lot.

In major urban areas, navigating can take some getting used to but while signposts are in Japanese, the vast majority are also written in English. As such, those travelling for the Olympics should have no trouble getting from their accommodation to the venues. If uncomfortable using local trains or buses, taxis remain a safe and affordable option – just remember not to touch the car doors, as they are fully automated. Travel between cities, be it via plane, train or automobile is unlikely to present any significant risk. It is just vital you allow yourself plenty of time to navigate stations, double-check platform numbers and, where possible, simply ask for directions.

## Healthcare

Japan's healthcare system is among the best in the world. Even hospitals in rural areas and smaller clinics are well equipped and staffed by highly trained medical professionals. However, travel insurance is a must, the cost of treatment in Japan is high and payment will be expected in full and up front. As such, there can be delays in treatment while insurance is verified. Additionally, many doctors do not speak English, making communicating difficult.



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