

Japan Travel Guide

The Best Things to See & Do



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1. Foreword

Japan has long been on our Must-See list of countries and the first time we wanted to go there was in 2011. Sadly, less than two months before we were supposed to go there Japan was hit by an earthquake and tsunami which caused the Fukushima catastrophe. Luckily, we were able to cancel our travel plans without financial penalties. After waiting for several years, we fulfilled our dream and went.

Getting around in Japan, for somebody who cannot speak or read Japanese, has some challenges, but is doable. Japanese people are very friendly and polite, but many either don't speak English or are too shy to speak English. Street addresses in Japan are not necessarily logical or in chronological order in Japan. Nevertheless, we found that google maps is reliable. So, for me, the time I took to prepare for this trip was significantly longer than normal. And it paid off. But more about that later.



Cruising the Caribbean

2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide I am doing my best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

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3.1 Why you should visit Japan

While you can read about the many highlights of this trip in this article, I like to give you a short summary here:

For somebody who has traveled the world, Japan was a superb experience as this country is so different from everything else we have experienced. Japan is a very modern and technology driven country and yet you will see that Japanese pay immense tribute to their history and preserve hundreds of years old customs and behaviors. Japan is extremely clean, everything is styled to an extreme to look just about perfect and the Japanese people are reserved but very friendly and well mannered.

I think Japan should be on everyone's bucket list.



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3.6 Restaurants in Japan

We were so amazed that Japanese restaurants:
had colorful menus with beautiful photos of their dishes
had all this super real looking plastic food that showed their dishes
the real-life food actually looked exactly as in the photos or the plastic models
that we just had to add these photos to give you an expression of what to expect. Enjoy!



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When we checked in, we were told that the room is not cleaned daily but, if we gave permission, they would enter the room and make the bed and change the towels daily.

Included in the room rate was a daily alcoholic drink. One could choose from 4 or 5 options, including Sake, wine and beer. The receptionist and the chef/bar tender spoke a little English.

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After about 2h of walking and taking in all of the beautiful and bombastic neon and LED lights, I suddenly felt immensely tired and exhausted and that's when I decided to go to the hotel. I got there shortly before 11pm and slipped into my bed and fell asleep immediately.



The next day started with the yummy but small breakfast in the hotel that I described earlier. Good thing I had the snacks I bought from the supermarket the prior night. We then started our first full day in Tokyo.

4.6 Walking Tour 1

4.6.1 Tsukiji Fish Market ([map](#) at new location, [reviews](#), [website](#))

We went to the Tsukiji Fish Market's original location before it was closed on October 6, 2018 and located to its current location, the Toyosu Market, just a few hundred feet away from our hotel.

At its original location, which was opened on February 11, 1935, it was one of the world's largest wholesale food markets.

It is and was the place where fresh seafood is sold and distributed to super markets and restaurants where you will eat it later that day. The fish market is a busy place with forklifts and small transporters rushing all over the place in a chaotic but somewhat orderly manner. To avoid accidents and slow-downs from visitors, some areas are off-limits to tourists before 9am.



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4.6.5 Edo Tokyo Museum ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

The Edo Tokyo Museum is near Ryogoku Station, which is on the Toei Metro Line which means that we now had to use the other subway line in Tokyo and, of course, the respective entrance to the Toei Metro station in Asakusa which is different than the entrance to the Tokyo Metro Line. Walking around and asking people, we were finally able to locate it. And guess what, we had walked by it several times without noticing it.

Opened in 1993, the Edo Tokyo Museum's focus on 30,000 square meters is on giving people a feel for what life was like in Edo (Tokyo) from 1590 to 1964. There are several replicas of old buildings and displays that can be touched. The museum has some artifacts (paintings, ceramics, sculptures, clothes, armors, swords etc.) on display, but they do not come close to what e.g. the Tokyo National Museum offers.

Long story short: This museum gives a good feel for what life was in historic Tokyo. It is a family oriented museum and many displays can be touched. It complements well with the Tokyo National Museum. I would spend 1-2 hours here.



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Long story short: This is a very expensive department store which sells top brands. Window shopping may be the only activity there for most. We did our shopping in other department stores and regular stores and enjoyed our time here.

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4.7.2 Shibuya Summer Festival ([website](#))

After we went back through the forest from the Meiji Jingu Shrine, we saw the wonderful Shibuya Summer Festival in full swing with dancing and music performances on various stages in different locations in the forest and in the city. We did not know anything about this festival and, luckily, we even encountered a fantastic parade in downtown Shibuya. Watching several of the shows and the parade obviously messed up our time plan, but it did not bother us as we truly enjoyed this wonderful experience of seeing normally conservatively dressed and fairly unemotional Japanese people becoming polar opposites when partying.



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4.7.4 Shopping: Omotesando Hills ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#)) to Meiji-Jingumae Station ([map](#))

The Omotesando Hills shopping complex was built in 2005 and it contains a little over 130 upscale stores and restaurants on a stretch of about 250m along Omotesando Street between the Meiji-Jingumae Metro Station and the Omote-Sando Metro Station.



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5.2 Train Ride to Nikko

Our Shinkansen train left from Tokyo Station ([map](#)) and arrived about 50min later at Utsunomiya Station ([map](#)) where we had a 45min layover.

As trains in Japan always seem to be punctual, we decided to explore **Tonarie Utsunomiya (formerly: Lala Square Shopping Mall)** ([map](#), [website - JP only](#)), which is right across the street.

Unfortunately, we were there before the mall opened at 10am and, even though most stores were open, they were typically unattended.



We arrived at the **Nikko JR Station** ([map](#)) after another 50min train ride.

It was a rainy day and we were starved. Luckily, there are plenty of restaurants on Nikko-Kaido, the main street just outside of the train station.

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6.2 Historic Hakone Tozan Railway ([reviews](#), [website](#))

Getting to Hakone from Tokyo by train is straightforward. You take a 35min Shinkansen train ride from Tokyo Station ([map](#)) to the Odawara Station ([map](#)). From there you change to the historic Hakone Tozan Railway which brings you up the mountain to Hakone in only 15min.



Hakone has multiple stops; we exited at Miyanoshita Station ([map](#)) as this is where our hotel was.

There are several restaurants and souvenir stores near Miyanoshita Station.



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6.4 Hakone Open Air Museum ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Do you love to see sculptures from artists around the globe? Have you always wanted to see some paintings, sculptures etc. from Picasso? If so, then the Hakone Open Air Museum may be for you.

Laid out over several acres of grass and wooded land with the mountains as a backdrop are 120 sculptures from artists around the globe and another 900 indoors. Some are bronze, some are shiny mirror like and some are beautifully painted. Others are very modern and others are more traditional Japanese.

Competing with the natural beauty of the scenery is the Picasso pavilion which has paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, dishes and other objects that Picasso made.

Hakone Open Air Museum is for all ages, including small kids who can play in a large transparent plastic structure.

We liked the park, but I am not sure why it is considered the number one attraction in Hakone. If you are in Hakone and like art, then this park will likely be for you. However, don't go out of your way to see it.

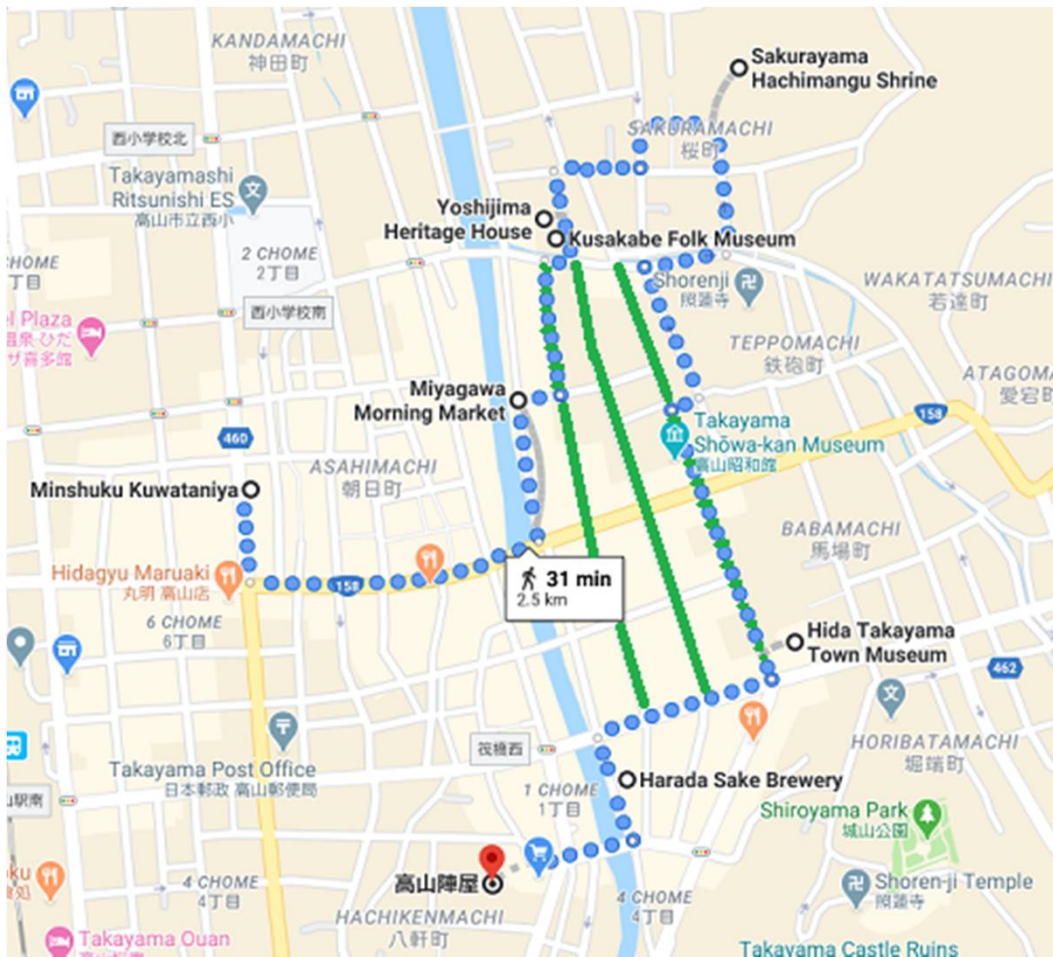
In case you wondered: The Hakone Open-Air Museum opened in 1969 and is Japan's first open-air museum.

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7.3 Takayama Self-Guided Walking Tour ([map](#))



The best way to start a walking tour of Takayama's historic district (also Old Township or Furui-machi-nami) is to visit one of the two morning markets. We went to the Miyagawa Market 宮川朝市 ([reviews](#), [website](#)) along the Miyagawa River between Akiba Shrine ([map](#)) and Yoshijima Heritage House 吉島家住宅 ([map](#)). The other morning market, the Jinya-mae Market 陣屋前朝市 ([reviews](#)), can be found in front of the Takayama Jinya 高山陣屋 ([map](#)). Both open at 7am (8am in winter) and close at noon.

You will see many small stands where vendors and farmers sell vegetables, fruits, flowers, local crafts, souvenirs and snacks.

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7.3.3 Sakurayama Hachiman-gū Shrine 八幡神社 ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

This is the oldest Shinto shrine in Takayama and the starting point for the Takayama Autumn Festival float parade.

It is believed that the shrine was built in the early found hundreds. The shrine burned down several times and the structure you see today dates back to the 19th century.



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7.4 Hida Minzoka Mura Folk Village, Hida no Sato 飛騨民俗村, 飛騨の里 ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

A short 10min bus ride from the main train station where we arrived the previous day lies Hida no Sato (Hida Folk Village), which is the main attraction in Takayama together with Takayama's historic district.

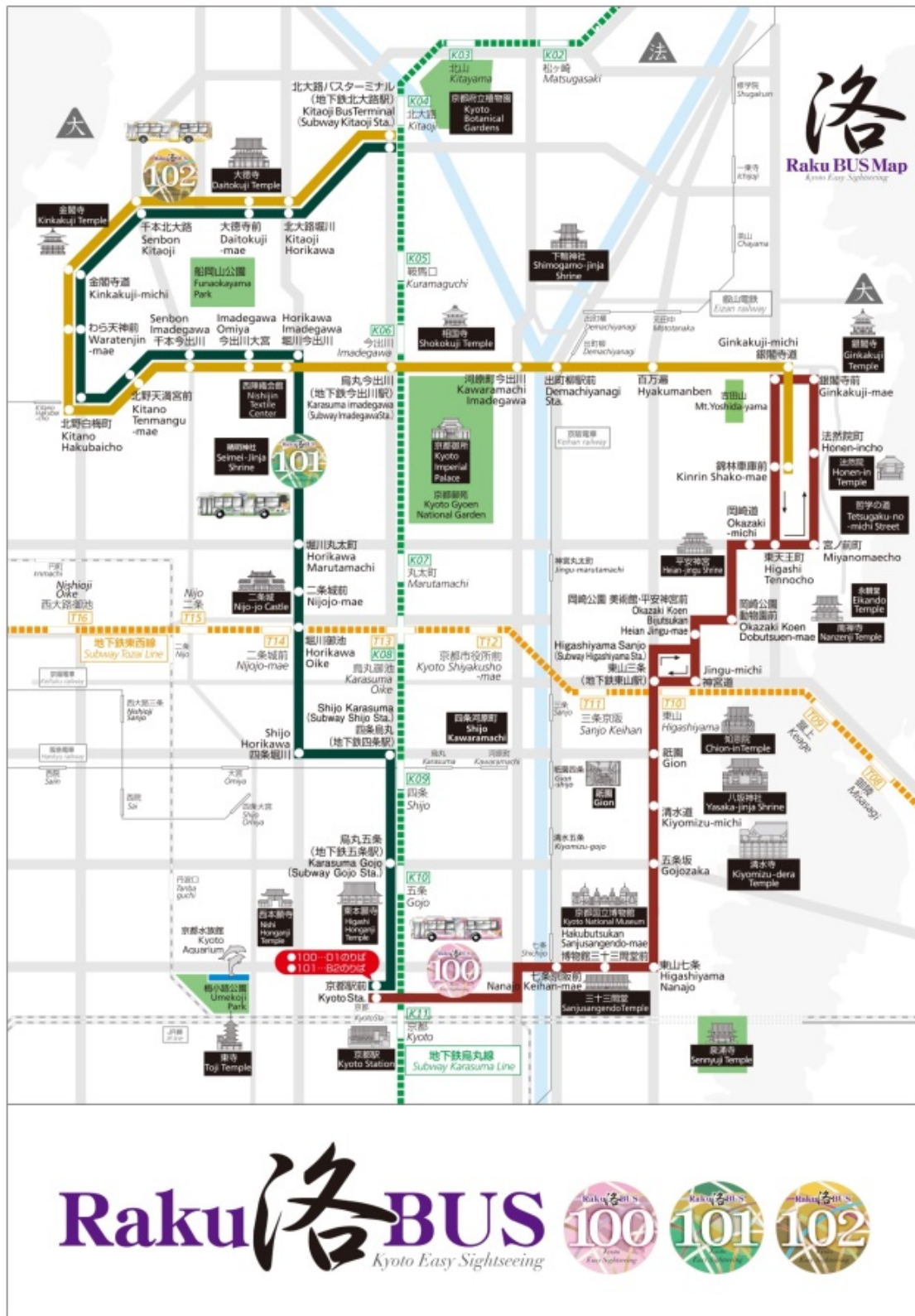
Discounted combination tickets (admission and roundtrip bus fare) can be purchased in the bus terminal right next to the train station.

We recommend spending at least 90 min to tour the houses that were brought here from various locations in the Gifu province; shorter walking tours that can be done are outlined on the ticket, but we recommend to rather spend more time here.

You will need to take your shoes off to enter most houses. Some of the buildings are almost empty, while some have historic artifacts displayed. Explanations on the many signs are given in Japanese and English. The setting of the Hida Folk Village is in a beautiful mountainous wooded area with a lake as the center point.



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So, why is the temple covered in gold in the first place? There are three main reasons:

- gold was intended to mitigate and purify any pollution or negative thoughts and feelings towards death
- gold is a status symbol
- during the period that the temple was built (Muromachi period), visual excesses were fashionable. The golden color makes the temple stand out, especially when the sunlight is reflecting off the gold mirroring in the pond

Long story short: The golden temple is amazingly beautiful and I would absolutely recommend it for a 1h visit.



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Karamon Gate (“Chinese Gate”, see photos below), originally set up at Fushimi Castle, is the main entrance of the Ninomaru Palace and its design is a symbol of power and authority.

Honmaru Palace: Honmaru Palace was added in 1847 Honmaru Palace and it was originally similar to Ninomaru Palace. The structure that you see today was built in 1894 and it consists of four parts: reception and entertainment rooms, living quarters, entrance halls and kitchen area which are connected by corridors and courtyards. The surface area is about 17,000 square feet (1,600 square meters) and today the palace displays paintings by several famous Japanese masters.

Gardens: The castle has several gardens including Japanese cherry and plum tree groves. The Ninomaru garden is located between the two main rings of fortifications, adjoining Ninomaru palace. The garden has a large pond with three islands, topiary pine trees and designed stone formations.



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8.4.5 Shopping near JR Kyoto Station

We took the metro back from Marutamachi Station (K07) to Kyoto Station (K11).

The Cube ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

The Cube is a 3 story underground shopping mall in the JR Kyoto station. The first floor and first underground floor (B1) have mostly confectionery and souvenir stores, while the second basement floor (B2) has ladies' fashion boutiques and cosmetics stores. The opening times vary by store type and day of the week. Please see the bottom of the Cube's website for more details.



8.5.1 Sanjusangendo Temple ([map](#), [reviews](#))

On Day 2, we took Raku Bus 100 to Sanjusangendo Temple.

Wow, what a sight. Sanjūsangen-dō is a Buddhist temple of the Tendai sect that was founded in 1164 and its main attraction of are the 1,001 life-size wooden statues of the 1,000-handed Kannon (each of them has only 25 arms), 28 standing attendants, statues of Fūjin (Japanese god of the wind; one of the oldest Shinto gods) and Raijin (god of lightning, thunder and storms) and a big seated statue of Thousand-armed Kannon. The building and most of the statues that you see today date from 1266, when the temple was rebuilt; only 124 statues were rescued when the original temple burned down in 1249.

The main deity of the 120m long temple is the Thousand Armed Kannon (Sahasrabhuja-arya-avalokiteśvara). To the left and right of it stand 1,000 life-size statues of the Thousand Armed Kannon in 10 rows and 50 columns. The statues are made from Japanese cypress wood and clad with gold leaf.

Around the 1000 Kannon statues stand 28 statues of guardian deities. There are also two famous statues of Fūjin and Raijin.

Unfortunately, no photography or videography is allowed inside the building, but you can buy books with photos for either 500 or 1,000 Yen in the souvenir store. Outside the main building there is a small garden that you can walk through in 5-10min.

Long story short: This is an amazing site and I definitely recommend it.

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Off Shijo-dori are some notable side streets running north. They are:

- On the west bank of the Kamo River is a pedestrian-only levee ([map](#)) where you can rest with hundreds of other people and get away from the busy traffic on Shijo-dori



- Pontocho Alley 先斗町 ([map](#)): Considered to be one of the most beautiful streets in Kyoto, this car-free street is lined with traditional stores and restaurants in traditional buildings. This area comes to life in the evening with its traditional lighting. Only some restaurants have English menus and English speaking staff.



- Teramachi-dori 寺町通 ([map](#), [reviews](#)) and Shin Kyogoku 新京極 ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#)) Shopping Arcades: Those are two covered pedestrian arcades lined with stores selling souvenirs, shoes, clothes, confectionary, souvenirs, and more.

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After our visit, we walked back to the train station, took a train to Kyoto where we retrieved our luggage from the hotel and then we took a Shinkansen to Narita, close to the airport from which we would fly back home the next day.



11 Closing Remarks

ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.



MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!



PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see my [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.