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How to Be Your Own Boomer Tour Guide in Japan

by A GUEST WRITER on 2015/09/29 in BOOMER TRAVEL TIPS, JAPAN



How comfortable are you when it comes to exploring a completely foreign city on your own? It seems that travelers are always divided on the issue of **organized tours** versus DIY exploration. However, both travel styles have their advantages and disadvantages and sometimes it just comes down to the individual destination. Today, My Itchy Travel Feet guest writer, Brette Sember, tells us to take the bull by the horns when it comes to becoming your own boomer tour guide in Japan.

I confess my husband and I just don't do well on guided tours. As customized as tours are these days, they either don't do everything I want or include things I'm not interested in. Since my motto is always to maximize my time and money while traveling, I've developed a system for being my own boomer tour guide and I put it into practice on our recent trip to Japan.

Create an Itinerary

Tour guides always provide a travel itinerary so you need to make your own to successfully manage your trip. Before I made any Japanese hotel reservations, I researched the areas of the country, what there was to do in each, and considered how much time I wanted to spend in each. This research is a time commitment but it guarantees you will spend your time well. It took me several weeks to learn about all of the sights, temples, markets, and ease of access for the various areas. I narrowed it down to two primary areas: Japan and Kyoto. Both have plenty to do, but also have lots of day trip options. I then pinpointed how much time we wanted to spend in each city and which day trips we wanted to take as well as what would fit into each day. From there I created an itinerary. Research restaurants near your hotel as well as your destinations so you always have a list of possible places to go no matter where you are.

Choose Your Hotels and Transportation



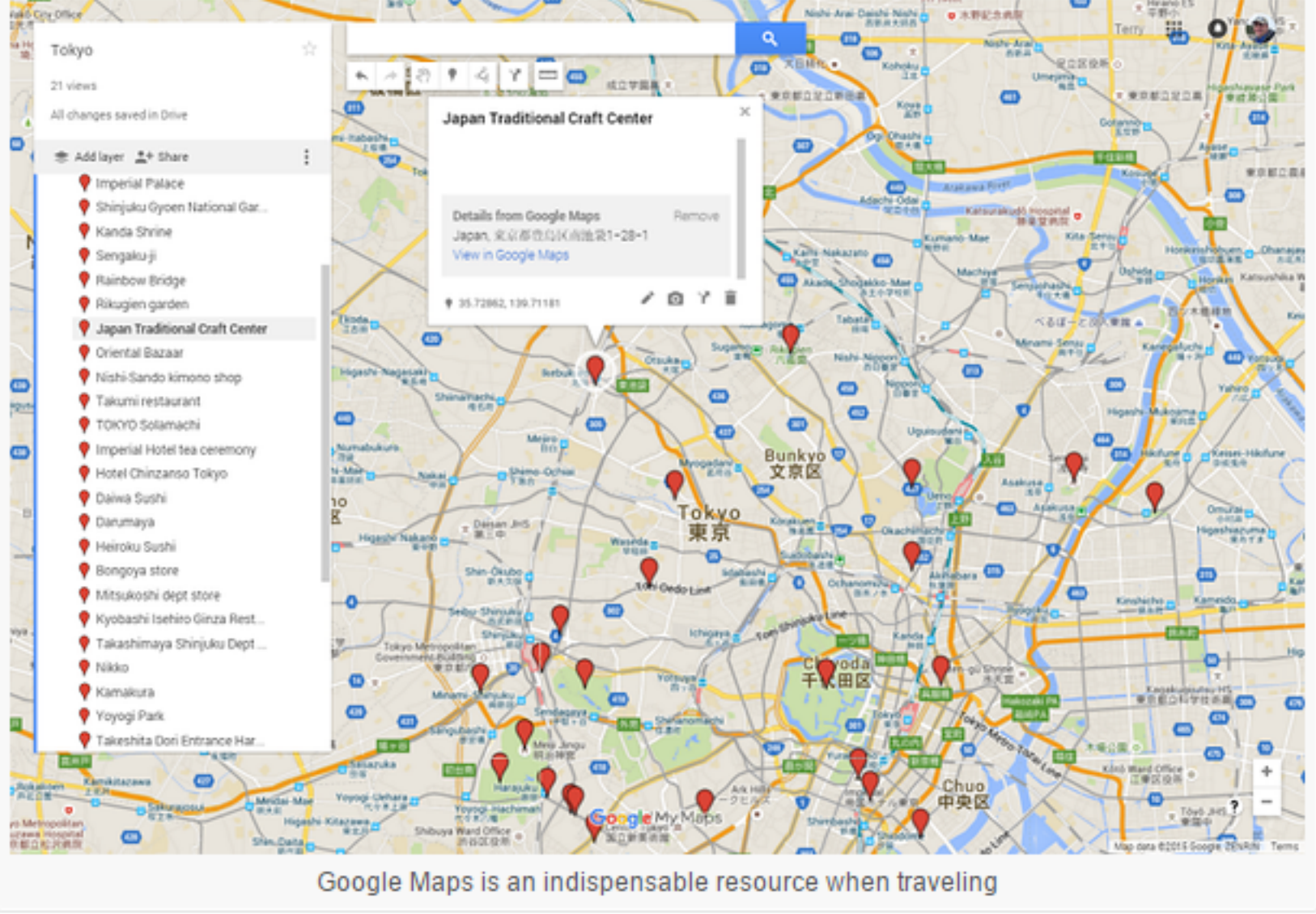
The Japanese train system may be a bit daunting at first, but it is a great way to see the country.

When you go on a tour, your hotels are chosen for you. When you're touring alone, you want to make smart choices about where you stay. Budget and amenities are key, but you also want to select a hotel centrally located to the things you have planned so you don't spend all of your time on transportation.

When you're on your own, you need reliable transportation. We prefer to rent our own car, but it wasn't a wise choice in Japan due to congestion. Fortunately the trains and subways in Japan are world class. Unfortunately, the system is so extensive it can be confusing. First, buy a green pass (which allows you to make train reservations) before you leave (you cannot buy this once you are in Japan) for the JR railway and get it through an **agency that offers support**. Our agency had U.S. email support, in-country 24 hour phone support, and offices at larger train stations. We used this support a lot and employees helped us map out what trains to take when. If we were confused all we had to do was call. Be sure to buy separate **subway passes**. We were able to easily navigate the subways by locating stations on our maps and using the subway maps posted above ticket machines.

Another option we use sparingly is to hire a car and driver for the day. This was an excellent option for us for one day in Kyoto where the subway system is limited and we wanted to see a variety of sites that were widely spaced. It ends up being more affordable than taking separate taxis and your driver can also act as a tour guide, telling you facts and making recommendations about where to go.

Map Everything



Google Maps is an indispensable resource when traveling

I use Google Maps to plot absolutely everything so I can see what is near what and how it relates to our hotel as well as things like subway stops. We have had some trouble with Google Maps working in the field (sometimes you can't get a signal when you need it) so I always carry a large paper map on which I have plotted absolutely everything. It can also be helpful to save specific directions for hard to find destinations (such as the **Arashiyama Monkey Park**).

Arm Yourself with Information



Toshu-go Shrine in Nikko

One of the things I like about tours is that you can learn a lot from your guide you wouldn't pick up just by visiting a site. I like to know history or quirky facts about the places I'm visiting. Before we left I created documents with quirky snippets, history, and fun facts I found about places we were visiting (print or keep on your phone). Because of this, for example, I knew that the **Toshu-go shrine** in Nikko has the original "Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil" monkeys carved on a building in the complex. My notes included some details about dates and how this depiction became incorporated into the Confucian Code of Conduct, just the kind of wonky detail I love hearing from a guide. We also rent recorded tours when they are available, but fast forward at will to customize the experience.

If you're looking for the types of inside tips guides often have about where to eat or shop, start with your hotel concierge. Before the trip, our hotels emailed us lists of restaurants that could accommodate our gluten-free diet. While in Kyoto, our concierge circled crafts shops on a map.

Always stop at tourist information booths. I made a mistake and skipped it in Nikko. My guidebook said the World Heritage Site was a short walk from the train station. It ended up being 30 minutes up a very steep hill in the rain when there was a shuttle bus that left from the info booth I knew nothing about. Info booths also give you detailed maps of the area or site and can suggest local restaurants. In **Nara**, the info booth gave us a map that plotted out exactly the order to see the sites in and how far the walking distance was between each.

Cope with Language Barriers

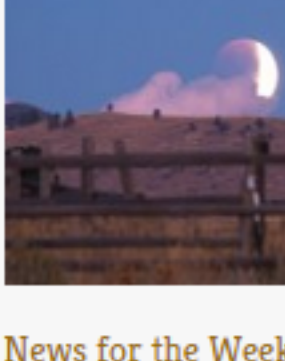
When you're your own tour guide, you have to be prepared to find ways to communicate even if you don't know the language. Learn a few basic phrases (thank you, hello, and where is the restroom?). If you have food allergies or other areas of deep concern, print them on small laminated cards in the language so you can just hand the card to someone. Use the Google Translate app to communicate with someone who speaks no English at all. You will find though that you can almost always find someone who speaks at least some English. Google Translate can also be used to translate menus and signs.

With careful planning, you can customize your trip and guide yourself through any country, even Japan.

*Although we have nothing against group tours, we love the freedom of exploring a new city or country without any limits on our schedule. What about you? Join the conversation at the **My Itchy Travel Feet page on Facebook** or **send us an email** to ask a question or share your experience.*



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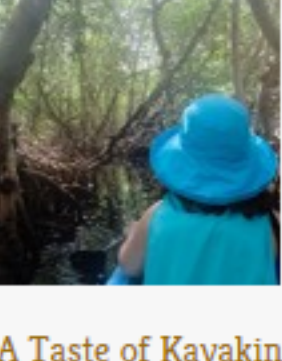
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About Brette Sember

Brette Sember is a dedicated travel shopper who blogs about her finds at **Travel Shopper Expert**. She is the author of **The Gluten-Free Guide to Travel**.