



THE LEADER  
Japan



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On the fly  
From the Mediterranean-esque south to the mountainous north, Japan's rich landscape conceals a nation in cultural flux

## STAND AND DELIVER —Japan

**Preface**  
Japan's faltering position on the world stage has been defined by its post-luxury population's obsession with the good life, Italian style. It's time for this proud nation to step up and get on with it.

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It doesn't take too much imagination (or too many frosted mugs of Orion beer, or chilled glasses of white from a nice vineyard in Yamanashi) to stare out at the bay beyond Kagoshima and, for a brief moment, imagine you're in Naples. With its easy pace of life, exquisite food, strong history of craftsmanship and temperamental volcano huffing and puffing in the near distance, this sizeable city on the southern tip of Kyushu could well position itself as the closest thing Asia has to the Med.

Unlike Naples however, there's little worry of bronzed boys on scooters ripping your tote bag off your shoulder as the only urchins to be found in this region will most likely be in a locally produced bowl of delicate *uni linguine*. Spend a bit more time travelling around

the island of Kyushu sampling the fine cuisine, visiting spa towns and dropping in on craftsmen and it's also not hard to imagine Japan as the Italy of the Pacific: comfortable, chic, bursting with culture, handy with a football and a world leader in a variety of industrial sectors. Get a little closer and the similarities become startling: stifflingly bureaucratic, a carousel of governments, a frustrated electorate, confused policies and a glorious sense of decay.

While there are of course striking differences between the two, and Japan still manages to count itself as the world's third-largest economy and fields scores of muscular global brands, the chronic stagnation mixed with an oddly blissful disposition makes the country feel far more stable than it really is.



Japan has long had a love affair with all things Italian. At Isetan's main Shinjuku department store floors are filled with everything from garments to glassware produced by Italian companies big and small. On the designer floors, office girls from nearby corporate towers can be seen purchasing *meishi* (business card) holders from Bottega Veneta; dapper gentlemen in pinstripe suits and angular haircuts can be found in the shoe salon being fitted for custom-made brogues by an artisan visiting from Florence.

Japanese consumers love their tiny local trattorias where Ryuhei, the owner and chef most likely trained in Bologna for five years, is now on his way to having a Michelin star. They adore finding small Ligurian ateliers that make perfect leather products. They then turn these small businesses into national sensations by producing exhaustive features in the style press that then create snaking queues of consumers eager to purchase an authentic bit of Italy that only 1,000 of their fellow detail-obsessed countrymen will also own.

For a few years now this magazine has been arguing that Japan is the world's first post-luxury economy: the nation that created the modern global luxury-retail boom. Now a country of Yusukes, Akikos and Mitsukos is sitting back digesting decades of purchases and

wondering what comes next. They're not the only ones.

It's for this reason we decided to devote almost an entire issue to not only coming up with solutions to tackle some of the chronic problems plaguing Japan but also highlighting the best the nation has to offer across a spectrum of sectors. From the corridors of Japan's foreign ministry (during the tense days of the recent hostage crisis in the Middle East) to the workshops of the best eyewear makers to the wooden floors of a new, highly choreographed fitness franchise, we have taken a snapshot of Japan as it prepares for what many see as a make-or-break moment for the country: hosting the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

With the economy still stuck in neutral and relations as tense as ever with its neighbours, Japan is using the Tokyo Games as a kick-starter for everything from infrastructure initiatives (the Japanese rarely need much of an excuse to don hard hats and start building something) to encouraging taxi drivers to improve their English.

While all of this is necessary and it's nice to work towards a common goal, the torch relay is still more than five years away. Japan needs to be getting on with things today and not looking to implement projects just before the world shows up on its doorstep. In many ways, 2020

has already become something of a crutch and curse as it allows the Japanese to fall back on the very phrase that drives the international business community crazy and keeps the country from moving forward: "Ahhhhhhhhh, we need a little more time to think about things."

Japan has had decades to think about things; now it needs to stop dithering and get moving. We get the bit about the Japanese being risk averse and needing to meticulously plot every step before venturing forward. But that's no longer an option when emerging economies are coming up fast and new corporate players are rendering once-powerful Japanese industrial players obsolete. While we think Italy is a perfectly lovely place (indeed, we devoted this same issue to all the delights of Italia last year), we also feel it's not quite the time for Japan to kick back in its suede loafers, swimming trunks and comfy linen shirts to watch the world speed by. — (M)

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**Making waves**

Japan needs to up its pace in the lead-up to the 2020 Olympics – and not just its athletes

