

What is Golden Week and why does it matter?

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Golden Week is big business. A cluster of holidays that results in an extended break for most of Japan, it is also a time when huge swaths of the population embark on domestic and international vacations. But this year, due to COVID-19, Golden Week is going to be different.

Although it looks likely to be extended for another month or so, Japan's current state of emergency is due to end on May 6, the day after Children's Day — the last in a run of national holidays that make Golden Week such a formidable force.

The government's advice this year is to hunker down instead of heading out during Golden Week. In Tokyo, at least, it is being promoted as "Sutei Homu Shukan" — "Stay Home Week."

The message is clear: Do not travel. For those in Japan heeding this advice, this lack of holiday time for family and friends will surely be felt. But what makes Golden Week so important anyway?

Golden days

Golden Week is the term for the week that encompasses four of Japan's 15 national holidays. It begins with Showa Day, then continues with Constitution Day, Greenery Day and Children's Day. These holidays celebrate former Emperor Hirohito's birthday (April 29), his love of plants (May 4) and the induction of the Japanese Constitution (May 3, 1947). Children's Day (May 5), however, is far more ancient.

Also known as Tango no Sekku, Children's Day (which is alternatively called Boy's Day) has been a fixture since at least the Nara Period (710-94). It is most recognizably celebrated by hanging out windsock-esque *koinobori* (carp streamers) — based on a Chinese legend that if a carp is strong enough to swim up raging rapids, it can become a dragon (if you know your Pokemon, this may ring a bell).

Children's Day is one of Japan's *gosekku* (five sacred festivals), the others of which are observed at new year, and on March 3 (Hina Matsuri), July 7 (Tanabata) and Sept. 9 (Kiku no Sekku). These days have roots, and find analogues, in China's Double Third, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth festivals respectively.

But if you are wondering why this week has been dubbed "Golden," the answer lies not in the eighth century but in the 20th. Following Japan's 1947 Constitution, the new clustering of late-April, early-May holidays led to people spending their free time — among other things — frequenting movie theaters.

When postwar filmmaker and novelist Bunroku Shishi's movie "Jiyu Gakko" saw record ticket sales during 1951's collection of national holidays, film studio Daiei took note. Borrowing from the *waseigo* (Japanese English) for radio prime time ("Golden Time"), Daiei Managing Director Hideo Matsuyama dubbed this lucrative time of year "Golden Week." He is also responsible for the autumnal equivalent, "Silver Week," although it hasn't caught on in quite the same way.

Today, not only the film industry, but other leisure activities see a Golden Week boom, particularly travel: A sizable 35 percent of the population traveled during 2019's extra-long edition, according to Travel Voice Japan.

Travel bug

The history of travel in Japan spans centuries. The country is home to the two oldest continuously running hotels in the world: Nishiyama Onsen Keiunkan in Yamanashi Prefecture, which was founded in 705, and Hoshi Ryokan, Ishikawa Prefecture, which was founded in 718. It is no coincidence that both these accommodations boast *onsen* (hot springs), often a *raison d'être* for travel in Japan.

Popularized by medical advice and Buddhist teachings, *tōji* (hot-spring cures) refers to a stay at an onsen over multiple nights — a practice still popular today. The famous Dogo Onsen in Matsuyama was even mentioned in the eighth-century "Manyōshū," the oldest known anthology of poetry in Japanese. Formerly the pastime of VIPs of the day, it was the Edo Period (1603-1878), with its relative stability and rising merchant and middle class, that saw onsen — and travel — become more commonplace.

"The Japanese are great travelers," wrote Ernest Satow in his memoir, "A Diplomat in Japan" (1921). He cites bookshops with dedicated travel sections, comprehensive maps, well-maintained highways, postal towns with inns and entertainment, and relays encounters with other travelers along his journeys throughout the country.

"Ever since the third Tokugawa shogun (Tokugawa Iemitsu) established the rule that each daimyo must pass a portion of the year in Edo, the great highroads had become important means of internal communication," Satow continues.

The most famous of those "great highroads," the Tokaido, was well traveled and much celebrated, immortalized in art. Utagawa Hiroshige's ukiyo-e woodblock prints of the road's 53 post stations (1833-34) are pre-eminent; lesser known is the comic tale "Tokaidochu Hizakurige," which, serialized between 1802 and 1822, told the story of two bumbling travelers on their way to Ise Grand Shrine. Other great roads of the time have their maps and myths to match.

This long history, the predilection for travel peculiar to Japan, all the *meibutsu* (local specialties), *omiyage* (souvenirs) and *michi no eki* (rest stops) that come with it, makes travel something of a cultural rite — and makes Golden Week's urgent transition into Stay Home Week that much more poignant.

