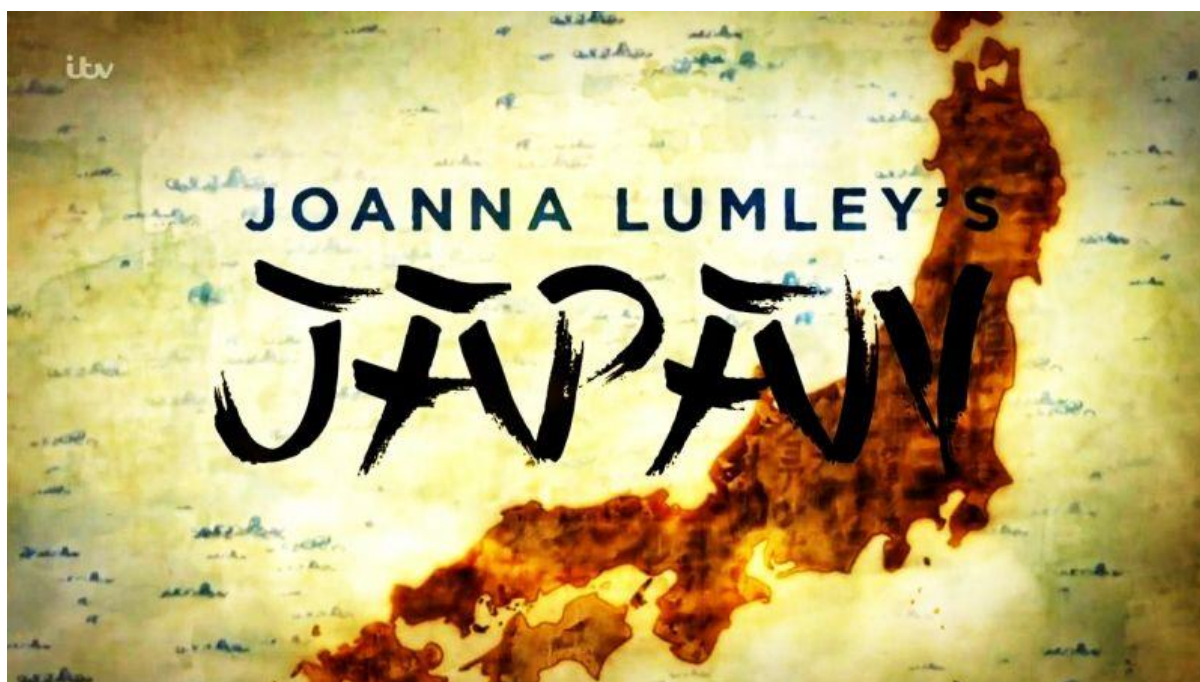


## Joanna Lumley's Japan



Media wiki/ Creative Commons.

*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

*Presenter and Narrator: Joanna Lumley. Directed by Neil Ferguson and Ewan Thompson. Produced by Neil Ferguson, Stephanie Fyfe, Erica Jenkin and Ewan Thompson. Executive Producers: Joanna Lumley and Clive Tullah. Cinematography by Will Churchill. Original Music by Miguel d'Oliveira. Edited by Doug Bryson and Guy Crossman.*

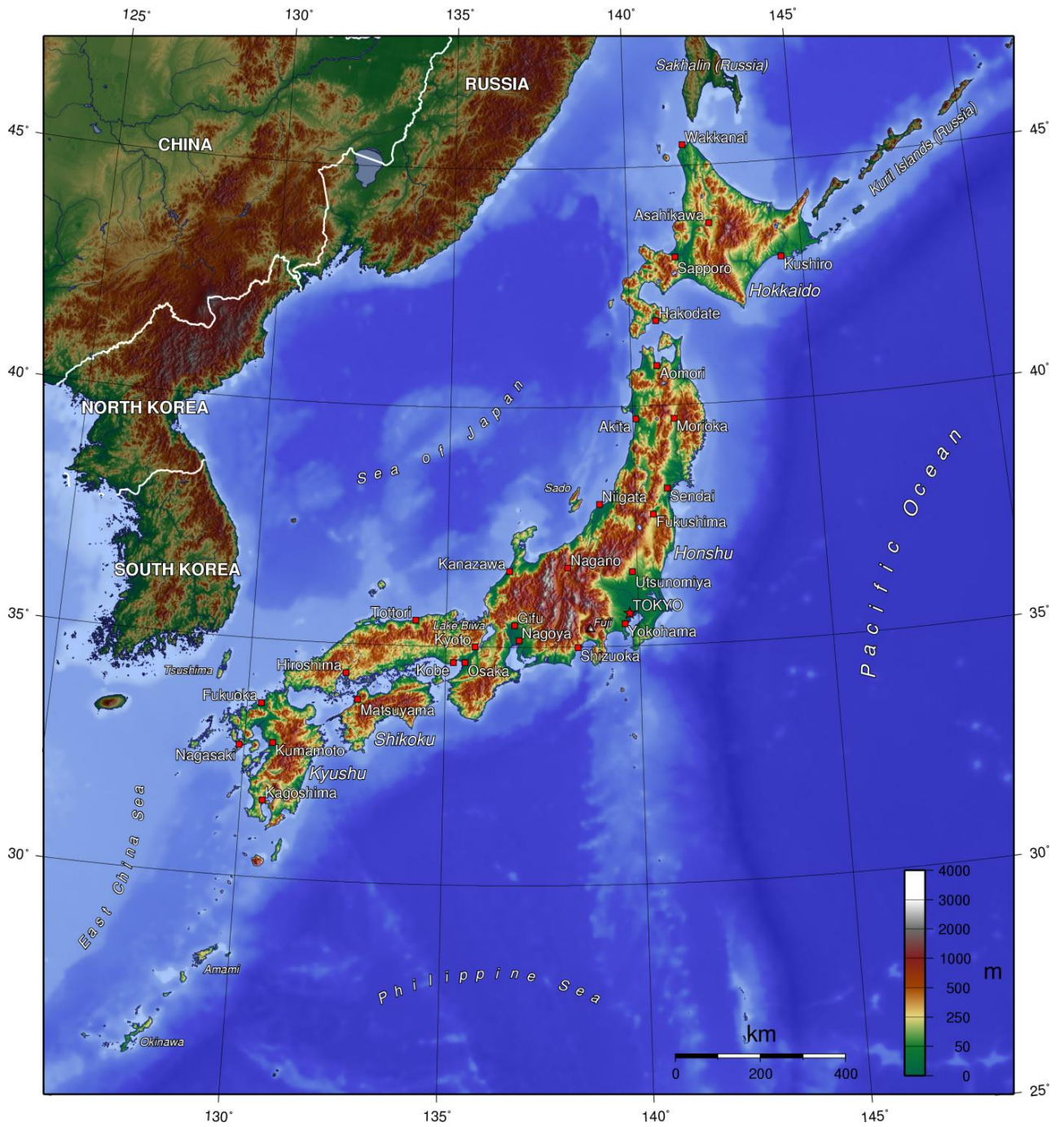
*Length: 46 minutes for each of the three episodes. Distributed by BBC/ITV 1. Release Dates: September 2016 (British television) DVD release: 2016. Check for ratings. Rating: 85%.*

All images are taken from the Public Domain, Wikipedia and Wiki derivatives with permission. Although images for reviews are currently legal, due to copyright some from the series have not been chosen. Others are used because of their similarity to the topic matter the film shows.

Written Without Prejudice.



Joanna Lumley, yes this woman was born in 1946. Documentary proof exists. Wikipedia



Courtesy Wikipedia

Joanna Lumley has made several highly regarded documentaries about different nations and unusual areas. In this three part mini-series she focuses on Japan and once again she goes beyond common conceptions and misconceptions to put together a cinematic mosaic of a society. She does this through segments which sometimes show us the well-known and the stereotypical, such as Kyoto's cherry blossom festival, geishas, artists depicting Mount Fuji, bullet trains and crammed rushed city streets and restaurants. What changes here is how she shows these from a fresh angle.

Such segments are also refreshed by contrasts with what is little known or even unknown. We are shown the hotel staffed by humanoid robots, Buddhist pilgrimages through forests, the school at what was Nagasaki's 1945 ground zero, the elderly women's choir and the red cranes of Hokkaido.

These lists seem almost opposites in their characteristics. Lumley goes on a helicopter ride over hectic, crowded massive ultra-modern Tokio. Soon a superfast bullet trains take her to a locale where pilgrims trudge a trail through a serene, unspoiled forest to an ancient temple.

Such contrasts happen all the way through the series. By doing this the filmmakers were either wise, acting serendipitously or unconsciously reflecting Japanese conditions. They show Japan to be a land of extraordinary contrasts and variety. The contrasts start from the geography and climate. Japan's most extreme longitudes equal those between Montreal and Miami. This means its close neighbours are eastern Siberia and Taiwan. Japan stretches from the end of the Asian tundra's icy frozen north to the beginning of the humid tropics. Lumley presents secluded forests and hectic teeming cities, snowdrifts and sparkling beaches, elderly traditionalists and teenage rappers – and gives the impression that she has only indicated the contradictory nature of Japan.



A Japanese bullet train. Photographer Alok Mishra. Public Domain/Wikipedia



The cranes of Hokkaido Public Domain



One of the nearly extinct cranes [Wikipedia](#)

## Episode 1



[Media wiki/ Creative Commons.](#)

Lumley starts with the border with Russia – as it now is. She shows us the Siberian coast from the bow of a Japanese icebreaker. Days after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed with atomic weapons and Japan was negotiating peace, Stalin invaded the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island; since 1945 they have been Russian. Hokkaido is the next major Japanese island on her trip southwards, but even here what it means to be Japanese becomes less certain than surface impressions and stereotypical images suggest. Lumley tells us something few know; Hokkaido only became Japanese in the last third of the nineteenth century when it's indigenous people, the Ainu and the island itself were forcibly assimilated into Japan. Lumley visits an urbanised Ainu family and they tell their story. Their grandchildren, being educated in the Japanese language, were unable to communicate with their grandparents. They show photographs and relics from their past culture which they no longer fully understand - while living in an invader's culture they cannot empathise with.



[Media wiki/ Creative Commons.](#)

The ice carving festival in Hokkaido's capital of Sapporo also gets a double treatment. The replica in ice of a Chinese cathedral appears as indeed astounding remarkable and beautiful, but Lumley isn't gulled or overwhelmed and asks us not to be as well. She asks the right question, then gives the right answer. Why build this Chinese themed ice palace in Japan? Because tourism is Japan's growing industry and Chinese tourists are a large and growing proportion of that growth. Sapporo's ice festival draws in two paying million tourists so...

This mixture of the serenely magically beautiful and the more mundane frequently appears in Episode 1. When Lumley finds herself in a Hokkaido forest she rightly comments that she feels she is driving through the enchanted world of Nania. Being the only car on the road in a totally still snow covered world of spruce, fir and pine also gives us that impression. Then she finds the pit stop and comments on the vending machine, one of five million in Japan which has the world's highest pro rata proportion. Just as the filming of the beautiful red crowned cranes start we are told that they were nearly exterminated in the 1920s and those being filmed are one of the few groups left. Lumley's crew shows



us the images of immense beauty as the cranes' movements look like a dance – until they soar against a backdrop of a saffron sunrise. Unusual scenarios are frequently used. Maciak monkeys preening themselves in the hot sulphur springs was a personal favourite. Too many serene and beautiful images of nature can give a misconception of Japan as an overly idealised naturalist's paradise. *Lumley's Japan* does not develop that way.

Almost as an antidote to that possibility Episode One concludes with Lumley's arrival by bullet train in hectic, teeming Tokio. In itself this makes for a contrast to the forest, the springs and the cranes. The next contrast is to both that Nania world and hectic Tokio. The documentary makers visit to an eerily still, sinister decaying ghost town near Fukushima, abandoned and quarantined after the 2011 tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster.



A temple in the forest [Media Wiki/ Creative Commons](#).



Lumley in a northern forest. Both Images Media Wiki/ Creative Commons.





Not all of the north is exotic exciting or mysterious. Lumley on the e road south and in a guest bedroom Both Images Media wiki/ Creative Commons.





Tokio                    By Hide1228 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=47149329>



The World's largest Pop Group named AKB18  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ax10akb18.jpg>  
 kndynt2099 [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)]



The Japanese have wisely preserved their forests and places of natural beauty. Both Images Media wiki/ Creative Commons.

## Episode 2

Lumley continues her journey with a helicopter flight over Tokio/Yogohama and their surrounds. The population of thirty-eight million is around a third of Japan's total, and that many people makes Tokio/Yogohama one of the largest cities on earth, population wise. Massive in area as Lumley shows it to be, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Los Angeles and Beijing all cover more land. That may change soon as Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing continue to expand. In Australia's cities quarter acre blocks with a home and garage are rapidly being replaced by high rises to accommodate soaring population growth, similar developments are happening across the world, but for now Tokio is the world's high rise capitol. This becomes amazing when considering the devastating 1923 earthquake and then the 1945 firebombing. Photographs show that virtually nothing of the city was left standing. It was rebuilt in an earthquake zone and has virtually no poverty or crime. Stress it seems, is another matter and has some bizarre outlets. One such

is the “masked girl” band. In frenzied uniformity their fans chant, sing and wave electric lights in adoration.

In depicting the “white face” model who provokes with her photographic portraits in otherworldly settings and costumes, we see another reaction to Japanese conformity, noticeably displayed by the identikit box style apartments in the background, stacked several stories high. Lumley, the model and her photographer discuss the Japanese saying that the nail who (sic) sticks out should be hammered down. Fortunately there is more to Japan than such repressive conformity as we see at the Tokio School. Here individuality, experimentation, pleasure and developing individual desires are cheerfully encouraged.

Lumley follows her Tokio stay with a visit to one of the last traditional woodblock artists. Locating his studio near Mount Fuji, this is his major theme and we see the extraordinarily delicate process of producing a landscape by printing with woodblocks. Each of the eleven woodblocks has a different colour and must touch without overlapping the border of the neighbouring colour. The finished product reveals a work that can be both vivid and subtle, delicate and yet striking.

After Fuji Lumley goes on the pilgrimage to Kyoto, visiting another artist who has created a coiled pictograph of the pilgrim’s road from Tokio to Kyoto. We are shown one of the twenty coils appearing as being about twenty metres long. As in Hokkaido there are temples and villages that look untouched since medieval times, sometimes located in unspoiled forests. Then in the city we meet a teenage geisha and in the ceremonies and the interview it emerges that beneath the serenity, calm and delicacy, a great deal of time devouring practice, effort and self-control goes into creating her image.

This reality does not emerge so unmistakably with white face modelling, masked girl dancing, woodblocks, pictographs and food preparation, but it seems to be there.

At least with Kyoto’s cherry blossom festival we get the joy exuberance and sensuality from nature, free of strained human effort.



Above: The Cherry Blossom Festival Kyoto. Below: A garden in Kyoto



Both images CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=904562>

Two scenes from rural Japan Courtesy Wikipedia







A geisha. Courtesy Wikipedia

### Episode 3

This episode focuses on southern Japan and the mood is generally darker. How could it be anything else when visits to Nagasaki's ground zero and Okinawa's battlefields are included? Conquered in the 1870s, the Okinawans were ethnically different from the Japanese, but to defend what was more a territory than an integral part of the empire when the Americans invaded in July 1945 the Japanese put up such a ferocious and prolonged defence that they inflicted extremely high casualties on their attackers. Lumley interviews a now aged 1945 deserter who as a result of his wartime experiences became dedicated to peace. He played a leading role in establishing Okinawa's peace park, which also serves as a memorial to the dead on all sides, including Okinawa's civilians. Tearfully Lumley also shows us another less pleasing memorial, to the thousands of Japanese soldiers who hid in tunnels and blew themselves up rather than surrender. Such determination and the costly Okinawa battle became a factor in deciding to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Amazingly a school still functions only six hundred metres from where the bomb fell. Being built of concrete the 1945 school survived, although 1400 students did not. The building is now a museum and Lumley interviews the curator, one of the school's hundred survivors. The school, like so much in Japan, is now dedicated to peace.

In southern Japan Lumley visits a radish farm and we are given a glimpse of the world's largest radishes (which make pumpkins look small) and hear from their grower about his life. In the world's first robot staffed hotel we hear only what the robot receptionist has been programmed to say. *Lumley's Japan* can hardly be described as a free advertisement for robot s replacing humans. The sinister robot receptionist recalls zombies in bad horror movies. The automatic porter takes forever to get the luggage to the room and when there Lumley finds that ordering a cup of coffee is beyond the room robot's abilities. When Lumley finally finds a human staff manager the reasons for using

robots becomes apparent: cost. Robots get no wages and Japan does not have to go into employing foreigners as their population is ageing and the work force shrinks. Lumley does not develop this theme, she does not have to.

As she says and shows, the image of Okinawa as an unspoiled tropical paradise is not on – the island has been heavily Americanised and urbanised. We get tropical islands further south, in the Ryukyu chain which stretches almost to within sight of Taiwan. Here Lumley prances in a sing-a-long with the cheerful grannies' choir who had a top 40 hit with a zappy number.

Lumley concludes with thanks to the courteous friendly people of Japan.



One of the series, last scenes. This is a hit group. Note the tall blonde Singer in the back row.

[Media wiki/ Creative Commons.](#)

What is in her documentary makes for a balance between the usual overly idyllic images which are glorified advertisements for tourism and the muck raking exposés which give an overly cynical view. One of the strongest attractions of *Lumley's Japan* is Lumley herself, good

humoured, modest, courteous, high on energy and zest and with a frequently wry approach, she makes the show.

Criticisms? To have seen how an average Japanese family copes with living in a Tokio high rise would have been a balance with the unusual. Japan's extraordinary achievements in ecology and environmental protection, its low crime rate and work ethic are all factors that deserve examination, but what is here gives a fresh view of the new Japan.