

My Driver's License Journey

Regina, Nagasaki City ALT from August, 2024

So, you want to get a driver's license in Japan, yes? Well, I am here to inform you that it is doable, with a bit of advance planning and patience—neither of which I have much skill in, but even I still managed!

Below is a briefing of the process, followed by my detailed experience and success. I recommend you print out my experience, and highlight/underline all important info you need on your license journey.

1. Prepare paperwork—This starts in your home country.
2. Call the Omura Driver's License Examination Center (ODLEC), and send your paperwork in via mail or fax. Send COPIES of documents and other paperwork, not the originals.
3. Get a call either asking for more paperwork, or to set up an interview.
4. Go in for the interview, bringing all original documents, IDs and whatnot with you.
5. Set up a second appointment and go in for the written test, eye exam, and driving test. (Bring all originals and money.)
6. Repeat step 5 (eye exam and driving test) if you fail the driving test.
7. Pass the test, pay for your license, and walk out of the place with your brand-new license.

Step 1: PAPERWORK

You will need to gather the following at different times. I'll even recommend the order of obtaining the following:

- **Passport** (bring with you to Japan—you need it to get in Japan, anyways!)
- **Foreign Driver's License** (obtain the card from your home country and bring to Japan)
- **International Driver's License** (obtain document in your home country and bring to Japan)
- **Proof of 3 months' residency in your home country before moving to Japan** (Obtain document(s) in your home country and bring to Japan. Can be: college transcripts, tax papers, pay stubs from work, a work contract from your employment in your country, etc. all with clearly written start and finish dates. **The more the better. Bring what you can.**)
- **Translation of your Foreign Driver's License** (obtained at JAF in Nagasaki, Japan. Might need to take time off from work to get this. In Japanese the place is this: 日本自動車連盟 (JAF) 長崎支部)
- **Japanese Residence Card** (received in Japan after filling out paperwork with BOE, either mailed to you or given in person.)
- **Certificate of Residence in Japan** (a document showing you live in Nagasaki, Japan; obtained at a local City Hall or Community Center, or at least a place with this in the name)

長崎市 地域センター. Check with the BOE on where to go to get this. Might need to take time off, might not. Depends.)

- **Photo of self** (taken within last 6 months, obtained at a purikura booth meant for official photos; dimensions of 3cm high, 2.4cm wide)

So, I gathered the paperwork. I did not obtain them in the “right” order, because I am disorganized, but if a disorganized, impatient girl can get a license in Japan, so can you. I digress... I brought my passport, driver’s license from Texas, and International Driver’s License, obtained from a small place in my hometown. I moved to Japan, and in due time got my Residence Card, as well; I think it was delivered to my base school by snail mail. These were uneventful side quests. The real side quests that challenged me concerned getting my photo, the Japanese translation of my license, proof of 3 months’ residency in the USA, and my Japanese Certificate of Residence.

The photo of self, I found at a purikura booth near the China Town Bus Stop—there are many around the city, but you will have to ask around and google it to find one near you. I sat in the booth and was blasted by a very annoying high-pitched female voice in Japanese demanding every few seconds to push this or that button to get this or that photo taken. The machine also did not accept new Japanese money. If you are new to Japan, in the last year or so the currency design has changed—but many coin machines, buses, transit, and so on do not accept the new currency design. So, have “old money” on you.

Luckily, with perseverance against the annoying audio, I got my professional photo taken, with a white background, in the right dimensions (3cm high, 2.4cm wide), and even paid a bit extra for a little prettifying up of the photo, and was given a photo sheet with 6 or so small photos of me. I think I paid around 1100 yen. This photo is used for your application at the ODLEC, not for your actual Japanese Driver’s License. (That photo is taken the day of passing your exam.)

For the Japanese Translation of my license, I actually went on a day that I had sick leave (not wise when you have a severe sickness and should be bedridden, but it was either do it during sick leave or take time off from work, called “nenkyuu” or 年休. I was literally death warmed over.) I brought along with me my passport, residence card, driver’s license and any other documents I had on hand. I think those three documents were the most important ones, though. I then googled where the JAF in Nagasaki was, arrived when it opened (I think 10am) and went to the second floor, where I was met with many smartly dressed men with fantastic haircuts. I lamented my scraggly appearance, but took a deep breath and walked in. One man came up to me and helped me immensely.

Naturally, we spoke in Japanese only, but it went smoothly enough. I was sat down, then I explained in simple Japanese what I was there for (the translation of my American driver’s license) and the process began. The man had me whip out my phone and scan a QR code there, and said I could apply online. Now, having lived overseas in Taiwan previously, I have learned that it is best to have the locals walk you through things step by step rather than doing it on your own. So, I demurely requested that he guide me through the process on my phone. I recall I had to fill in basic info about me (birthday, name, addresses, phone number, etc. etc.) and then snap

photos of both sides of my American driver's license, then upload them to the application on my phone. I also possibly had to repeat this process with the passport and Japanese residence card as well, though I don't remember clearly now. Just bring them all! Bring all IDs, documents, and everything in a folder! Paperwork loving country, Japan is!

Once all filled in on the phone, I had to pay, and I used my American credit card to pay. I do not think they accept cash... be prepared for that. It cost 4,000 yen, I think. I was told that I would receive an email in about a week with a code of some sort, and to go to a 7-11 with said code and print it out at the 7-11 printer/copier machine.

And so it was. I did get that email a week later, with instructions on how to print out the translation at the 7-11. I went to a nearby 7-11, figured out how to input money and my code into the machine, and out popped one, lone, valuable document from the machine. Once the code was used once, I couldn't re-print it—so I thought to copy the thing. I did copy it, but the watermarks disappeared. That is ok, as when you send your documents to the ODLEC down the line, they only want copies mailed to them. You bring originals in person during the interview and test.

Next up was the Japanese Residence Certificate (called 住民票 or じゅみんひょう) This was simple enough. One day after work, I had a sliver of time to get to a nearby place that the BOE told me about before it closed for the evening. Ask the BOE where to get your Residence Certificate to play it safe. The place I went to was near where I lived, and was called this: 長崎市 三和地域センター. I went in, and simply asked people where to get the Residence Certificate. The people directed me to the right counter, I told them what I wanted, and they asked for my reason of it. I filled in an application, and paid some small change, I think 600 yen. While there, I had to make sure my current address and other necessary info was on the document so that it would be suitable for the ODLEC. Double check with the BOE so you know what info is needed on the document, and avoid going a second time.

Finally, proof of residency in the USA. I stupidly did not bring this with me, and had to rely on old emails with my transcripts and scour my emails for my old work contract. I found it, printed it out, and thought I was covered.

Step 2~3: SETTING UP AN APPOINTMENT

Well, now you've got all your paperwork, and you are ready to make an appointment for the initial interview. Here's how it went for me:

I made copies of everything. I repeat, COPIES. Why? You have to mail or fax the COPIES of all your precious paperwork to the ODLEC, also known as the Omura Driver's License Examination Center; if you send originals, you may never see them again, and will be in a tight spot.

To reiterate, I made copies of everything, then asked my co-worker to help me call the ODLEC. (note: You can only call on weekdays between 2pm to 4pm to set up an appointment for getting a Japanese driver's license.) She received an automated voice message, and waited until it read all the options—then pressed one. She repeated this a second time, going through the

second automated list of options, and pressed one again. Finally, a real person. My co-worker spoke with the person and explained of my intentions to set up an appointment for the driver's license, and passed on my name, phone number, that I wanted to drive automatic and such. Then, I was requested to mail all copies of the documents to the ODLEC. Yes, via snail mail. Once they got the papers, they would check over everything, and call me back to either set up an interview or ask for more papers.

Remember how I said I thought I had everything covered? Specifically concerning the 3 months' residency proof from the USA? Well. My contract from my former USA job was rejected.

The start date of the contract conflicted with the "revised date" printed at the bottom. The Japanese apparently didn't understand that the school I worked at had a contract template on file and only updated the contents once every few years, so the date at the bottom was earlier than my sign date. This threw them into a tizzy and they wouldn't accept it at all.

So, I called my parents, frantically asking my mother to scan pay stubs from a second part-time job I had in the USA as backup (didn't use this in the end) and finally called the BOE to ask them for the JET application. The BOE is not overly willing to do this for JETs unless it is their final option, from what I heard, but I was helped regardless. I had indeed tried my other options, and finally called the BOE for help. In about a week, I got the official, Hankou-stamped JET application in hand, stamped by the chief, delivered to my base school via snail mail.

With this now in hand, I attempted to call the Omura Driver's License Examination Center by myself. I did succeed in getting a live person, but had to ask for help again when speaking with them, because they had to pull up my file at the place, check what was needed, and confirm with me that I was about to fax them this final document. It worked. They got the document.

About a couple days later, they called, but I was teaching (remember, they only call between 2pm to 4pm) so I had to ask the principal of one of my elementary schools to help me with the call. FINALLY, an appointment was made.

Step 4: THE INTERVIEW

You need to take nenkyuu for the initial interview and for the day of the test. Also, bring food with you, as the Omura Driver's License Examination Center only has drink machines. And of course, remember all your original IDs, documents and such.

I had an appointment at 10am on a Thursday. I took the Nagasaki Airport Bus, because it had a bus stop right near the center, according to Google Maps. But, this was not smooth sailing. The first time I went for the interview, I accidentally took the bus that didn't make any pitstops—it apparently was a fast shuttle, not the slow one. So, I was dropped off at the Nagasaki Airport! That meant a 40-minute walk away from the center! So, I took a taxi and got dropped off at the place.

Once the place opened, I went in, and went to counter 7. I was met by a man named Mr. Mori, and he was to be a very important aid in this quest for a driver's license. I doled out all the originals, my IDs, my documents, everything, and gave them to him. He took me back at my appointed time, and I sat in a small room with a bright window, rickety card table and other odds and ends. I think there was an actual bed of a truck as decoration in that tiny room, or a part of a car. It was odd. He went off to compare the originals with the copies that I had sent previously, then came back with a box that had all my copies, and returned the originals. I tucked them away for safe-keeping.

We then had the "interview." It isn't so much an interview as it is a questionnaire of your driving history, license history and whatnot. I was asked many questions, such as:

1. How old were you when you first got your license?
2. What was the preparation like for getting your license?
3. Did you sign up for a training course in your home country?
4. What was the test like? On a course or on the local town roads/highway?
5. How long did it take you to get your license after passing the test in your home country?
6. How long have you had a valid license?
7. How often did you drive in your home country? How far on average?
8. What kinds of roads did you drive on? Highways mainly, or side streets?
9. Have you ever violated any traffic laws and/or gotten ticketed?
10. Did you drive automatic or manual?
11. Do you have a scooter/motorcycle license?

...and so on.

Mr. Mori filled in a chart for me whilst I answered his questions the best I could in my limited Japanese, and in the end, he had me sign the paper, and I was cleared to set up an appointment again on a different day for the written test, eye exam, and driving test. At this time, he also gave me two packets. The first was a packet with the three set courses that the ODLEC used. I was told that the course of the day was randomly picked. I had seen these courses online, but the papers were in grayscale. The ones Mr. Mori gave me were color-coded with lines zigzagging throughout the document to show the car's route, and I noticed that each course had 3 or 4 sections. (Red, blue, green, and then yellow.) He pointed out all the stop signs for me, and I colored them in. He also warned me of barrier walls and instructed me how to inch out of side-streets with these walls properly. He stressed repeatedly that I must be checking at all times.

The second packet was an overview of how the grading was to be done, and how to desirably drive. However, this wasn't of terribly great use to me, because I had read this document online as well. The big help would come only after I failed my first attempt, and asked Mr. Mori for more help.

Step 5~6: THE DRIVING TEST

The big day.

To prepare for the written test, I had bought a copy of “The Rules of the Road” (in English) on Amazon Japan. I had skimmed through it many times over the past two months, and closely observed all the road signs in the back. I had also found as many free practice tests online as I could, so as to practice for the true/false written test. It was a good thing I did this. The written test is over basic knowledge, but the questions are tricky. Maybe only one number or one word is changed to confuse you, so read slowly, deliberately, and re-read again!

I got the bus right this time, and arrived early again, so waited until it was time. My written test and eye exam were to be in the morning at 10:30. I noticed a lot of other foreigners milling about. Some Indian, some Hispanic, some of other ethnicities. All here for the same thing. The ticket to freedom in Japan. The DRIVER’S LICENSE.

Mr. Mori was there again, thank goodness. But first, I had to dish out my documents again (the originals, all of them, remember this!) to a scary policeman who might have been a yakuza at one point. He looked rough, but was warm and welcoming once he realized I could speak basic Japanese. He took the documents and had me push buttons on a small screen next to the window counter to verify that I wanted a driver’s license for an automatic vehicle, as well as input phone number, etc. I also had to make a PIN number for some reason I don’t understand, but you had better remember it, because you might need it whenever you need to renew your license in two or three years’ time. He then printed out a sheet with QR codes, later of which I learned would be used to pay for the driving test and the making of the license (if I were to pass.)

After the policeman was done, I gathered my things and Mr. Mori appeared. He took me back to the same room with the rickety card table. I was also accompanied by a silent Chinese guy. We both were greeted again by the police officer, and he instructed us to place our bags in the trunk decoration to the side of the room, and leave our cellphones in our bags. No cheating. Also, we were told that we would both be given the written test, but different questions. I realized then that they had different sets of questions on file for testers. He then informed that once we were finished with our test, we were to ring the bell on the desk, and he’d come in, take the test, and grade it elsewhere. We were given a score sheet with two rows, one for true, and one for false. You had to draw a circle in the slot for true or false for each question. Circles only, I was told, no X’s, for whatever reason.

He then left, and I read over the test. I noticed the Chinese guy received one in Chinese, whilst mine was in English. Made sense. I skimmed over my test first, before answering anything. I recognized some questions from the practice tests I had found online, as well as identified some information from the Rules of the Road book I had read over. I then circled in all 10 answers, re-read all questions and checked all answers again. I rang the bell, the test was taken, and graded. I passed, 100%.

The eye exam was simple enough. I was first asked if I used contacts or glasses, both of which I answered “no” to. Then, I had to go to a big box and put my face up against eye-goggle things. Looking in, I saw a chart covered in the differently-sized letter “C.” Mr. Mori pushed buttons to the side, lighting up different areas of the chart. I had to say up, down, right or left to indicate which way the open part of the currently lit “C” was facing. I also passed smoothly.

I was told I'd have an hour to walk the course before the test began, so I went outside and walked it twice. This time, I didn't know to prepare certain things, which led to me failing the first time. But more on that later. I walked the course, memorized it best I could, and went back to the area where I'd get in the car.

The actual test was odd. I met with a talkative man from India, who cheerfully told me this was his 3rd time. I also saw a sullen Hispanic gentleman who seemed rather worried. The both of them were going to test manual vehicles. I think the Chinese was as well.

Instructors came out, and the foreigners were to take the test before any of the Japanese people. So, I was paired with the sullen Hispanic gentleman. A yakuza-like instructor took us on. He drove up a manual car, and had the Hispanic gentleman go first. I was told to sit in the back. This supposedly was my "test drive" from the back, so I could observe the course and see how the Hispanic gentleman did. He was rather anxious, and I was silently rooting for him. Well, the gentleman got into the driver's seat, clearly distraught, and did all the required checks before starting. The grumpy examiner sat to his left in the front, and I was in back. Then we began the course, the three of us silently sitting in the car. We were to drive course #2.

The poor soul failed before he got half-way through. This was his fourth time.

The manual car was switched out for an automatic, and I got in the driver's seat.

I also failed half-way through.

I was told bluntly I didn't check my mirrors or over my shoulders enough, and that I was too fast. I initially argued, but then finally realized what he meant. You don't check with just your eyes—you **have to move your entire head and make overly exaggerated movements to show you are checking over your shoulder, the side-view mirrors, or the middle rear-view mirrors**. He was looking for that. And also, **I read somewhere that I had to do each check twice before moving on**, and I had only done checks once.

With a heavy heart, I showed Mr. Mori my failed score sheet. He was just as crestfallen, but gently set up another appointment with me. There was only one opening, the very next day, so I booked it and sighed. I admittedly cried a lot, too, because for me this was very stressful.

I arrived the next morning, and found Mr. Mori right away. I discovered that today's randomized course was the same as yesterday, and inwardly rejoiced. I didn't have to practice a new course! With that in mind, I waited until he had a spare moment, then peppered him with questions while we poured over the course packet. I asked where every single wide check was needed, and every single half-check was needed. I marked up the paper royally.

- **Wide check** means look over left shoulder, check left mirror, middle mirror, right mirror, and then look over right shoulder. Generally used when turning, going through an intersection, or when leaving a side street onto a main street.
- **Half-check** means check the middle mirror, the side mirror, and over the shoulder. Generally used when changing lanes to look out for scooters, and when scooting

close to a wall to prepare for a turn. You will know whether to do a left half-check or right half-check based on which way you are veering towards.

I also reconfirmed stop signs, wall barriers, and lane-change techniques. I circled every intersection and marked where to check side streets for oncoming traffic. I reconfirmed to drive extra slowly during all turns. The only time I was to go “normal speed” was during a straight stretch of road, and even then, I had to check side to side in case there were side streets or intersections. **I also confirmed to do each check TWICE, and to be exaggerated with checks.**

Finally, I had that one-hour window to walk the course again. This time, I spoke aloud to myself, reminding myself of checks, turn signal usage, lane-changes, when to slow down and speed up, the whole shebang. I was sunburned, looked ridiculous, and was the only foreigner practicing, but felt confident I had a chance this time.

Same deal, I was paired with another foreigner who sat in the back, a different talkative Indian from Sri Lanka, and this time a lady instructor—and I was told to go first. **DO ALL PRE-DRIVING STEPS DOWN BELOW. The main thing the instructors are looking for is how safely you drive.**

I walked around the car and checked the wheel wells for sleeping cats, and glanced under the car. I stepped up to the driver’s door, dramatically looked all around for oncoming traffic, and finally got in. I adjusted my seat, put on my seatbelt, and adjusted the middle mirror. The wheel/driver’s side was on the right side, so it was momentarily disorienting, but not too bad. The break and emergency break pedals were also on the left side on the floor, so remember to use the left foot. Odd, but ok. The start button was on the dashboard somewhere. This had to be pointed out to me, embarrassingly. The turn signal was also odd, but test it out before driving and you will be ok. I think I also locked the doors, but don’t recall well.

After starting the car, I disengaged the emergency break (a pedal on the bottom left of the floor), did my first (of many) overly dramatic, exaggerated checks, and slowly wheeled out of there. I inched through the crank and curved parts of the course, checked with excessive movements every single time that was required (and did the check twice) and made slooow turns. I was doing pretty well, until... I hit the curb with a rear tire. I was exiting the snaky curve area and turning left, and about had a heart attack.

The lady instructor decidedly ignored it.

The rest of the test went by silently, only interrupted by the lady instructor’s guidance of “change lanes at number ##” or “turn left at ##”, and my “hai” answers as I focused hard on the road. (There were blueish signs with numbers all round the course, but I ignored them. I was too focused.) At the very end, I had to wait for an 18-wheeler pass by on the main stretch while I was on a side street, and the point of view was daunting. Asian 18-wheelers are just a lot more intimidating than American ones. They are bigger and scarier. (So note this: you might not be the only vehicle on the course when you take your test.) But I finished the course, stopped the car, turned it off, activated the emergency break with my left foot, and unbuckled my seatbelt. Before

I got out, I exaggeratedly checked all mirrors and over both shoulders and all windows for any oncoming traffic, did it twice, then finally stepped out of the car.

The instructor lady motioned for me to get back in the car, and kicked out the other guy. After doors were shut, I was told the magic words. I had passed.

I did it!

She gave me some advice, but I was too elated to remember her gentle corrections. It didn't matter, I had passed! From all that I heard I had an 80% and that I turned a little too quickly at the intersection. BUT. I. PASSED.

With passing score sheet in hand, I bounced back into the building, went up to Mr. Mori, and showed the result. He was overjoyed for my success. He has likely seen many foreigners come and struggle for their license. Next, all went smoothly.

Step 7: GET THE LICENSE

I had to wait a long time for the license, several hours after the exam, but at least I would get it the same day. I was guided on how to pay for it with the QR code at a different counter. A lady scanned the code and I paid in cash. Then, I signed papers saying I wouldn't drink and drive, or break any laws. I also signed indicating that now my Japanese license my legal driving document in Japan, this meant the international driver's license was no longer a viable document. I was told when I'd have to renew my license (a month after my current visa expired).

Finally, I was led into a separate area where photos were taken and the license was created. I was handed my shiny new license, asked to verify the details on it were correct, and by about 3 or 4pm, I had my license!

I went home and celebrated. By sleeping. I was so tired.

- Ask questions.
- Practice walking the course.
- Mark up your course map.
- Be well fed and hydrated.
- Be prepared to take the test several times.
- Stay strong, don't give up, you can do this!

JAF Center: (for Japanese translation of your foreign license)
日本自動車連盟 (JAF) 長崎支部

Address: 850-0043 長崎県長崎市八千代町 2 –

Hours of Operation:

Monday: 10am to 5pm

Tuesday: 10am to 5pm

Wednesday: 10am to 5pm

Thursday: 10am to 5pm

Friday: 10am to 5pm

Saturday: CLOSED

Sunday: CLOSED

<https://jaf.or.jp/about-us/headquarters-and-branches/kyushu/nagasaki>

Omura Driver's License Examination Center (ODLEC)
長崎県警察本部交通部 運転免許試験場

Address: 856-0817 長崎県大村市古賀島町 5 3 3 –

Phone: 0957532128

Bus stop to use: 試験場前 (しけんじょうまえ)

Doors open at 10:00 or 10:30, Monday through Friday, probably closes around 5pm.

<https://www.police.pref.nagasaki.jp/police/menkyo/>

Nagasaki City Hall (For your Residence Certificate)
長崎市役所

(Check with BOE first as to where to go to get this document. You might have a place closer to where you live available.)

Address: 850-0874 長崎県長崎市魚の町 4 –

Phone: 0958228888

Hours of Operation:

Monday: 8:45-5:30

Tuesday: 8:45-5:30

Wednesday: 8:45-5:30

Thursday: 8:45-5:30

Friday: 8:45-5:30

Saturday: CLOSED

Sunday: CLOSED

<https://www.city.nagasaki.lg.jp/>