Tour Code
JP1

ADVENTURESABROAD

JAPAN-BY-RAIL

Tokyo, Hakone, Takayama, Kyoto & Hiroshima

13 days

Created on: 29 Mar, 2024

Day 1 Arrival in Tokyo

Today we arrive in Tokyo and transfer to our hotel.

Tokyo is Japan's capital and the country's largest city. Prior to 1868, Tokyo was known as Edo. A small castle town in the 16th century, Edo became Japan's political center in 1603 when Tokugawa Ieyasu established his feudal government there. A few decades later, Edo had grown into one of the world's most populous cities.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to Japan Rail procedures related to your passes used for the tour, it is important that you arrive no later than "Day 1", the published start date of your tour.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Tokyo: City Touring

Tokyo is a dazzling modern metropolis rich in history and tradition. While the pace and the glitz of the city can be overwhelming, we will do our best to also showcase the tranquil, traditional side of the world's most populous city.

We have a private bus at our disposal today, though we may, during our time in the city, also make use of its legendarily efficient public transit system, an excellent way to observe the locals going about their daily lives in one of the world's most vibrant cities.

We'll kick off our morning with a visit to one of Tokyo's venerable department stores, the earliest of which were founded during the early 1900s. Their predecessors were kimono stores, which supplied various types of luxurious goods during the Edo and Meiji periods. Japanese department stores are famous for their unparalleled customer service; we'll aim to be there just before it opens when we will see its employees lined up neatly, waiting to welcome customers. The moment the second hand of the clock hits the opening time, the doors punctually open and customers can make a grand entrance being flanked by bowing and greeting staff.

We'll take some time to stroll through the food halls, where you will see the amazing variety of beautifully-presented foods being sold at unbelievably high prices. Seeing where and how the Japanese shop, what they buy, for whom and for what occasion, offers instructive glimpses into a highly sophisticated social strata where conventions of human interaction and presentation are minutely-defined. Whether it be for a wedding, business meeting or returning from a trip, the culture of gift giving in Japan is one of the most prevalent in the world. However, unlike in some other cultures, in Japan the emphasis is more on the ritual of gift giving than the gift itself. This dates back to the Edo period when a lucky few would go on pilgrimages and bring back souvenirs for the villagers who weren't able to go. You'll have time here to pick up supplies for a picnic lunch at our next stop (a "bento box" is an excellent and convenient option).

We then move on to the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace, part of the inner palace area. The Imperial Palace, or Kokyo, built on the site of the Edo-jo Castle, is an impregnable fortress that housed the Tokugawa Shogunate for 265 years until Emperor Meiji moved the court here in 1860's. Surrounded by moats, the original outer walls extended for over 16 km (10 miles) and were thick enough for a squad of samurai to walk six abreast on top. Even in its original state, it deceptively looked more like an administrative villa than a fortress. The buildings survived until they were all but obliterated by the fire bombings of WWII. You'll have time to explore a bit, see the iconic bridge, and to enjoy your picnic lunch in a relatively peaceful setting.

Our next stop is Meiji Shrine. Entry into the shrine grounds (a ten minute walk) is marked by a massive torii gate, after which the sights and sounds of the busy city are replaced by a tranquil forest. The approximately 100,000 trees that make up Meiji Jingu's forest were planted during the shrine's construction and were donated from regions across the entire country. At the middle of the forest, Meiji Jingu's buildings also have an air of tranquility distinct from the surrounding city.

While in the vicinity of the shrine, time- and weather-permitting, we may be able to take a stroll down nearby Takeshita Street, possibly the busiest and definitely the most colourful pedestrianized shopping street in Tokyo.

Our last stop is Ueno Park and the National Museum which, among other things, features the finest collection of Japanese art in the country.

After our guided tour of the museum we will return to our hotel before our evening meal at a local restaurant.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Tokyo: Sushi Making Class

This morning we take a fascinating dive into Japanese seafood cuisine during a 3-hour combination walking tour of a local fishmarket and cooking class, where we can learn to prepare traditional style 'washoku' food items like sushi and a Japanese omelette.

We meet up with our guide in front of Tsukiji Honganji Temple, located just outside the market. Then we step inside this temple to all things seafood for an in-depth shopping session including plenty of time for photography and exploration. As you wander the aisles of this colourful and chaotic market, you'll observe everything from giant tuna to sea urchins to octopus arranged for sale.

We'll then proceed with our guide to the gourmet cooking studio of one of Asia's largest culinary schools, boasting more than 150 studios throughout the region. Following the instruction of an experienced cooking teacher, we'll learn to prepare two 'washoku' recipes, a style of Japanese cuisine emphasizing traditional and homemade techniques. This typically includes a sushi roll along with a Japanese style omelette called Tamagoyaki, plus side dishes. This will be an excellent and fun introduction to Japanese cuisine, definitely a highlight of any trip to Japan.

We finish our session by digging into our tasty creations for lunch. We'll leave with full stomachs and a new-found appreciation for the wondrous world of Japanese cuisine and its top-notch ingredients.

Because of our late/filling lunch and full day tomorrow, and because you may be planning an evening activity before we leave Tokyo, we will leave dinner on your own account tonight. Your Tour Leader can help you plan.

Tomorrow our large luggage is transported to Hakone for us -- please pack an OVERNIGHT BAG for ONE NIGHT. Your larger bags (one per person) will be shipped ahead to Takayama, and you will need to pack an overnight bag to carry with you for the the one overnight in Hakone. Your Tour Leader will advise in advance re recommended items to have with you for the next two days.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 Tokyo - Lake Ashi - Hakone

This morning we take a short metro (train) ride* to Odawara Station where we connect with our private coach towards Lake Ashi near Hakone. Shortly after we leave the station, we'll make a brief stop to see Odawara Castle (exterior visit only).

Wedged between Mt Fuji and the Izu Peninsula, Hakone is a large region encircled by several forested mountains with a beauty accented by deep glens and ravines. In the feudal era, Hakone was a very important checkpoint that safeguarded the security of Edo (now Tokyo) as the seat of the Shogunate. This onsen (hotspring) area has been popular since the 1500s, when Hideyoshi Toyotomi came here to relax in an open-air bath after the hard fought Battle of Odawara.

From the castle town of Odawara we board a bus that takes us into the National Park. We then board a lake cruiser on Lake Ashi for scenic views of the surrounding mountains. Weather permitting, we can enjoy views of Mt Fuji. One of the highlights today will be our visit to the Hakone Outdoor Museum, or Chokoku-no-mori, a beautiful park filled with sculptures by renowned Japanese and international artists such as Rodin, Bourdelle, Moore, Zadkine, and Picasso.

Tonight we will enjoy a Keiseki-type meal at our ryokan-style hotel. Originally this type of dining was to accompany tea ceremony and is a feast for both the eyes and the taste buds. You can feel free to wear your "yukata" (bathrobe - provided by the hotel) to the dining room as many of the Japanese do when they stay in ryokan, a perfectly wonderful place to relax after leaving busy Tokyo behind. Our rooms are traditional style with tatami flooring and futon beds.

* PLEASE NOTE: We use the rail system quite extensively on this tour, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO MANAGE YOUR OWN BAGS ONTO/OFF TRAINS AND IN TRAIN STATIONS. Japanese stations can be large and crowded and may not have escalators or elevators. Packing lightly is

essential. If you are unsure about your suitability for this type of trip, please refer to our website entry for this tour or speak to one of our sales agents for more information.

Overnight in Hakone.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Hakone - Train to Takayama

Today we travel by Shinkansen (Bullet Train) to Takayama.*

The region known as Hida, which surrounds Takayama, was cut off from the rest of Japan by almost impregnable encircling mountains. Hida lacked good farmland, which made taxpaying from an agricultural livelihood an impossible burden upon the people. Necessity caused them to diversify, so the craftsmen of Takayama honed their tools to a sharpness matched by their skills and became known as the finest woodworkers in the land. The mountains yielded the most coveted lumber in the empire, which Takayama's artisans fashioned into magnificent works worthy to adorn Japan's finest temples, shrines and palaces. During the Nara period, the central government, in lieu of taxes, required ten Takayama craftsmen to relocate to the capital, where their considerable talents were employed. During the Tokugawa era, the ancestral daimyo of Takayama was reassigned to the far north. Our train journey today takes us through the scenic Hida River Valley.

We arrive in the late afternoon and will have time to wander through the lovely town of Takayama and the merchant quarter of San-machi with its historic wooden structures.

* PLEASE NOTE: For our 2024 tour on which this day falls on 09 October, we will be in Takayama for the yearly Autumn Festival, which will impact the sightseeing program as published for today and tomorrow. Your Tour Leader will advise on our exact program prior to our arrival.

The Takayama Autumn Festival is ranked as one of Japan's three most beautiful festivals and was registered as an UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in late 2016. The festival has continued to be protected and cherished by the local people, who demonstrate their traditional folk arts during the event. Because it honours Hachiman Shrine in the old town, the festival is also known as Hachiman Festival. The festival is about giving thanks while also marking the beginning of preparations for winter.

Perhaps more than anything else, the focal point and must-see attraction of the Takayama Festival is the beautiful festival floats, which are products of the fabulous craftsmanship of the Hida masters. With elaborate, artistic ornaments, masterfully designed marionettes who exhibit incredibly dexterous movements, and clever contraptions for manoeuvring them around town, the floats are really masterpieces in their own right! At nighttime, the floats are covered with lanterns, and the parade of these floats creates a beautiful fantasy world completely different from the daytime procession and is considered the festival's highlight by many visitors.

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Takayama: City Tour

This morning we will visit the colourful early morning market before heading to the Hida Folk Village, consisting of over 30 unique houses which had been scattered in the Hida region.* The houses are attractively laid out around a small lake and display valuable articles showing the way of life and culture of the past. The style of architecture is called gassho-zukuri, or "praying hand" houses, because of the steep pitch of the roofs reminiscent of two clasped hands in prayer. This was to protect the occupants from the large amounts of snow that fall here over the winter months. Upon our return to the town centre we will visit the Yatai Kaikan, or Float Museum.

Your afternoon is at leisure. Takayama is a small, interesting and manageable place for those who enjoy easy-going, on-foot exploration.

* 10 October 2024: Please note that this day will operate differently for our Fall 2024 tour that coincides with the Takayama Autumn Festival.

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Takayama - Train to Kyoto

Our journey continues back through the Hida Valley to connect with the Shinkansen train in Nagoya.

Kyoto vibrates with creative energy. For 1,000 years, skilled craftsmen, wise masters, and the nation's most promising fine artists have been lured here. The deep impress of culture and the refinement is indelible; it's in the soul of the city. A long line of Japanese emperors was enthroned here, and the city retains this regal bearing through myriad festivals and commemorative customs preserved from feudal times. In diminutive home workshops along cobblestone alleyways no wider than a footpath, lacquerware, cloisonne, damascene, kimono fabrics, pottery, porcelain, fans, dolls, embroideries, and bamboo ware are still expertly turned out by hand. Kyoto attracts a sophisticated crowd to its vibrant Noh and Kabuki theatres, while the last geisha finishing schools are found in the lantern-lit side streets of the Pontocho and Gion sections of the city.

Thankfully, Kyoto's treasures were spared from bombing during WW II, when American scholars persuaded the military to leave this masterpiece of a city alone. Though Kyoto is now a thoroughly modern city, much of its spirit is intact, with over 200 Shinto shrines; 1,600 temples, 30 of which administer to the major sects of Buddhism throughout Japan; three Imperial palaces, nine major museums, and countless classic gardens.

We arrive in this fascinating city mid-afternoon. Tonight we will venture to the Pontocho District, one of the traditional geisha quarters of Kyoto and next door to its rival, Gion. Wandering down the narrow lanes with the Kama River flowing alongside gives a sense to what this city was like long ago.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Kyoto: City Tour

Today we have a highlight-packed full day of sightseeing in this spectacular city. Please note that the actual order of sites visited may vary from what is listed below, depending on how your Tour Leader and local guide for the day determine what is the best way to deliver the program.

We start with a quick stop at Nishi Honganji (West Honganji), a designated UNESCO world heritage site, built in 1591 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Nishi Honganji is the head temple of the Honganji faction of the Jodo-Shin sect with over 10,000 sub-temples across the country and 200 temples overseas. The two largest structures are the Goeido Hall, dedicated to Shinran, the sect's founder, and the Amidado Hall dedicated to the Amida Buddha, the most important Buddha in Jodo-Shin Buddhism.

We then visit Heian Shrine, built in 1895 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the founding of the capital. It is a replica to three-fifths of the size of the first imperial palace in the ancient capital Heiankyo. We also visit the beautiful "go-round" style garden with a total area of 30,000 sq metres, which is well-known for the beauty of its weeping cherry trees, Japanese iris, and waterlilies.

At some point we will make a stop to acquire some picnic lunch items followed by a break, possibly combined with a walk on Philosopher's Path (Tetsugaku no michi), a pleasant route through the northern part of Kyoto's Higashiyama district. The path follows a canal which is lined by hundreds of cherry trees.

We continue to Ginkakuji, the Silver Pavillion, and then proceed to Kinkakuji, the Golden Pavilion, one of Japan's most famous architectural and historical icons. We also visit Ryoan-ji, the famous raked gravel Zen Garden, for which the Zen Buddhists are renowned. The essential dichotomy and harmony of the universe, which lies at the heart of this belief system, is symbolized in these tranquil gardens.

After a busy day, we'll have a break before reconvening for our evening meal at a local restaurant.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kyoto & Nara

Today we travel by local train to Nara.

The crest of every mountain, the slope of every hill, the mute testimony of every rock, the waterfall, rivulet, and the valley of Nara are infused with the intangible spiritual energy that accompanied the birth of the Japanese civilization. Nara, meaning "level land, " occupies the great basin of what was Yamoto, or the Land of Great Peace. Here was the centre of the half-real, half mythical kingdom of Japan before it became a nation. Jimmu Tenno, the first emperor of Japan, was purportedly buried at Nara, the Imperial Japan, the oldest existing dynasty in the world, established its first permanent court within the city in 710. Arts, culture, and literature also bloomed in this fertile valley. The earliest histories of the nation were compiled in Nara by noble court ladies in colloquial Japanese, and from the ancient city Buddhism spread throughout the land.

In its glory days, Nara covered an expansive area linked by palaces, temples, shrines, public buildings, and nobles' villas. The temples were massive and extremely powerful, almost like independent city-states. Numerous fires, the ravages of time, war, and pestilence have reduced many of the ancient structures, but plenty remain in their original states, especially in the eastern sections of the city. Part of this legacy is the Great Buddha of Todai-ji Otera, the largest bronze statue in the world, tipping the scales at over 500 tonnes.

Nara Koen, at over 500 ha (1235 acres), is Japan's largest park and is home to the sacred deer of nearby Kasuga Taisha. This shrine, moss-covered and illuminated by over 3000 stone lanterns, was first erected in 768 and is second in importance only to the Grand shrines of Ise. As we walk through this park dotted with temples and deer wandering about, you will be struck at how the sublime cultural richness of the quiet past lingers on.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kyoto: Nijo Castle & Leisure time

This morning we visit Nijo Castle, built in 1603 as the Kyoto residence of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first shogun of the Edo Period (1603-1867). His grandson Iemitsu completed the castle's palace buildings 23 years later and further expanded the castle by adding a five story castle keep. After the Tokugawa Shogunate fell in 1867, Nijo Castle was used as an imperial palace for a while before being donated to the city and opened up to the public as a historic site. Its palace buildings are arguably the best surviving examples of castle palace architecture of Japan's feudal era, and the castle was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1994.

The balance of the day is yours to explore Kyoto on your own. A good place to start may be the small Japanese garden named Shoseien, located another few street blocks east of Higashi Honganji. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your afternoon.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kyoto - Train to Hiroshima

Today we take the Shinkansen train to Hiroshima. Passing through Osaka and Kobe, just minutes from Kyoto on this fast train, we will arrive at our destination in just a couple of hours.

Modern Hiroshima rose like a phoenix from its own ashes. Less than five decades since its obliteration, it is once again the most vital city of San-Yo with a population of one million and growing. Hiroshima is referred to as the "River City." In its confines, the Ota-gawa River fans out into six delta tributaries that flow into the immense and very busy bay. In the years just following the A-bomb blast, scientists doubted if Hiroshima could ever live again. Today the streets hum with activity, trees and flowers grow, and birds sing. Nature may not forget, but it does forgive!

On the morning of August 6, 1945, the people of war-torn Japan hurried to begin the day. Then suddenly buildings melted, people evaporated, and humankind lost the first battle of the atomic age. Seventy thousand buildings were flattened and 200,000 people perished, the lucky ones quickly; the unlucky lingered. Hiroshima, fringed by mountains forming a natural amphitheatre, seethed and fumed.

Our visit takes us to the Peace Memorial Park (Heiwa Kinen Koen). Here the Cenotaph, shaped like an ancient tomb, holds the names of the dead. The prayer, the hope, the Japanese reads "Repose ye in peace, for the error shall not be repeated." The skeleton of the Atomic Bomb Dome (Genbaku Domu) turns green with age against a blue sky. Until all nuclear arms are banned and destroyed, the Eternal Flame will

flicker. We will visit the Peace Memorial Museum and walk to the A-Bomb Dome, passing the many monuments, memorials, and statues.

Overnight Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Hiroshima & Miyajima

Today we travel by train and ferry to Miyajima where we spend the day.

Since ancient times, Miyajima has been regarded as one of the "Three Most Beautiful Spots" of Japan and, as part of the Seto Inland Sea National Park, it has received several distinctions, such as a place of extraordinary scenic beauty, exceptional history, and a natural monument. The virgin forests neighbouring Mt. Misen are representative of the lush greenery and abundance of nature which still covers the entire island even now. A surprisingly large number of southwestern Japan native botanical specimens can still be found on Miyajima. The island is like a miniature model of Japan, showing the harmonious ecology of all living things from the ocean depth to the top of mountains.

Our walking tour of the island will include a visit to the famous Itsukushima Shrine, which together with its large wooden tori, stands in the ocean during high tide.* You will also have some free time to admire this World Heritage Site before returning to Hiroshima.

* Please be advised that the tori may be undergoing regular maintenance at the time of our visit. This occurs every 30 years and can, depending on its needs, take anywhere from 6 months to two years to complete. Please be prepared for the gate to be either partially or completely covered by scoffolding during this time.

Overnight in Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Hiroshima - Departure

Departure for home.

LAND ONLY CLIENTS: You could book your return flight from Osaka or Fukuoka instead of Hiroshima, though you would have to make it late enough in the day to allow for your arrival by train on the same day. Trains are very regular and your Tour Leader will assist. Your flight from Fukuoka or Osaka should be no earlier than 4pm. YOU MAY also fly directly from Hiroshima to Tokyo and connect to homeward flights if this is easier/more economical for you (though beware of possible change of airport). Land & Air passengers may be offered this option.

Departure from Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast