Tour Code
JP1

ADVENTURESABROAD

ESSENTIAL JAPAN

Tokyo to Kyoto via the Japanese Alps

13 days

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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.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Tokyo: City Touring

Tokyo rewards a first day that moves in layers: a forest planted from nothing, a shogun's ruined castle, and the country's finest collection of its own art.

We start at Meiji Shrine, reached through a cypress torii gate more than 12 m/39 ft tall. The forest around it, 70 hectares/173 acres deep, did not exist before 1920. It was planted from 100,000 trees donated by every prefecture in Japan to honour Emperor Meiji. His reign ended two and a half centuries of shogun rule and reopened the country to the world. Within a few steps the city noise falls away entirely, and on most mornings a Shinto wedding procession crosses the gravel courtyard in white silk.

From there we walk the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace, the surviving inner grounds of Edo Castle, seat of the Tokugawa shoguns for 265 years. The keep that once crowned it burned in 1657 and was never rebuilt. Its stone foundations, moats and old guardhouses remain, and we picnic among them where samurai once stood watch.

Lunch behind us, we visit the food hall of one of Tokyo's department stores, descended from Edo-period kimono shops. The art of gift-wrapping is taken seriously enough here that a single melon, boxed and ribboned, can cost more than dinner. We close the day at the Tokyo National Museum in Ueno Park, walking past scroll paintings, samurai armour and Buddhist bronzes that trace the country's own history of itself.

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 tour of a local fish market. We meet up with our guide in the hotel lobby and then make our way to the market, a 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 miso soup and four kinds of sushi, 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.

Overnight in Tokyo (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 Tokyo - Lake Ashi - Hakone

We take the bullet train to Odawara, where a private coach meets us, and stop briefly at Odawara Castle before climbing into the Hakone hills.

Hakone was the shogunate's most important checkpoint. Every traveller on the Tokaido road between Kyoto and Edo was inspected here, women and guns most closely. The scrutiny of women guarded against daimyo wives, held hostage in Edo under the shogunate's sankin kotai system, slipping home without permission. The mountains made sure there was no other way through. Hakone has been a hot-spring resort since the 1590s, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi soaked here after taking Odawara, and Tokyo still comes up at weekends to do the same.

Lake Ashi is a crater lake 723 m/2,372 ft above the sea, formed some 3,000 years ago by Mount Hakone's last major eruption. A cruise gives us the mountains and, weather permitting, Mount Fuji over the western rim. We then visit the Hakone Open-Air Museum, opened in 1969 as Japan's first museum of its kind. It is a hillside park of sculpture by Rodin, Moore, Miro and Picasso, with a pavilion of 300 Picasso works and a hot-spring footbath for the walk back.

Tonight we stay in a ryokan-style hotel, with Western beds. Dinner is kaiseki, a course-by-course meal that began as an accompaniment to the tea ceremony and is arranged to be looked at before it is eaten. Guests are welcome to wear the hotel's yukata to dinner, as Japanese guests do.

Overnight in Hakone.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Hakone - Train to Takayama

Today we travel by train to Takayama, about four hours, the last stretch up the Hida river valley where the line runs between the gorge and the mountains.

The peaks that enclose Hida left it with little farmland and a tax bill it could not pay in rice. It paid in carpenters instead. From the 8th century the court took ten Takayama craftsmen a year in lieu of tax, and the Hida no takumi built temples and palaces across the capital. The forests supplied the finest cypress in Japan, and the town learned to work it into everything from festival floats to sake barrels.

We arrive in the late afternoon with time to walk Sanmachi, the old merchant quarter, where the dark wooden shopfronts and the sake breweries, marked by cedar balls hung over the door, have stood since the Edo period.

Our forwarded luggage is waiting at the hotel.

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Takayama: City Tour

Takayama's morning market has run along the Miyagawa river for three centuries. We start there, among farmers selling pickles, apples and the carved wooden charms the town is known for.

We then drive to Hida Folk Village, an open-air museum of more than 30 farmhouses moved here from valleys flooded for dams between the 1960s and 1980s. Their steep thatched gassho-zukuri roofs, named for hands joined in prayer, were built to shed metres of snow. Inside we see how mountain families lived through it: the hearth, the silkworm lofts, the tools of a hundred winters. Craftspeople demonstrate weaving and woodwork in several of the houses.

Back in town, the Yatai Kaikan houses several of the festival floats paraded through Takayama each April and October in what is counted among Japan's three most beautiful festivals. Some stand more than 8 m/26 ft tall, carved, lacquered and gilded, and a few carry mechanical puppets, karakuri, that perform on cue during the real festival. Each float is the work of generations from a single neighbourhood, maintained and rebuilt as needed for centuries.

The afternoon is free. Takayama is small, flat and easily walked, with several sake breweries open for tastings and craft shops along the old streets selling lacquerware and the local sarubobo dolls.

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Takayama - Nagoya - Train to Kyoto

We drive back down the Hida valley to Nagoya and take the bullet train to Kyoto, about an hour.

Kyoto was the emperor's capital for more than a thousand years, from 794 until the court moved to Tokyo in 1868. The shoguns held the power; Kyoto held the culture. Its home workshops still turn out lacquer, textiles, pottery and fans by hand, its geisha districts still train apprentices, and it retains some 1,600 temples and 200 shrines. The city was spared bombing in 1945 after American scholars argued that it was too important to destroy.

We arrive mid-afternoon. This evening we walk Pontocho, the narrow lane of teahouses and restaurants along the Kamo river that, with neighbouring Gion, remains one of the city's geisha quarters, and where a maiko on her way to an engagement is a common sight after dark.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Kyoto: City Tour

A full day among Kyoto's temples, gardens and the two pavilions.

We start at Nishi Honganji, the head temple of the Jodo Shin sect of Buddhism, granted its site by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1591. Its two great halls are among the largest wooden buildings in the country, and the sect's ten thousand affiliated temples make this the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan. Heian Shrine follows, built in 1895 for the city's 1,100th anniversary as a five-eighths scale replica of the original imperial palace, painted vermilion and green, with a stroll garden known for its weeping cherries, irises and stepping stones across the pond.

We pick up picnic lunch and walk part of the Philosopher's Path, the canal-side lane through the eastern hills named for a Kyoto professor who walked it daily.

The afternoon is the pavilions. Ginkakuji, the Silver Pavilion, was never silvered; its shogun builder ran out of money in the 1480s, and the restraint became its point, with a garden of raked sand and moss that set the taste of the country. Kinkakuji, the Golden Pavilion, is the opposite, gold leaf to the waterline and doubled in its pond. Between them in spirit is Ryoanji, where fifteen rocks sit in raked gravel and no vantage point shows all fifteen at once.

We break before dinner at a local restaurant.

NOTE: The order of sites may change on the day at the discretion of your Tour Leader and local guide.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kyoto & Nara

We take the local train to Nara, Japan's first permanent capital, where much of what makes the country recognisably itself first took shape.

The court settled here in 710, and within a few decades Nara had a Chinese-style grid, the nation's first written histories, and Buddhism established as state religion. The temples grew powerful enough to rival the throne, one reason the capital moved on to Kyoto in 784. Because the city was abandoned rather than rebuilt over, much of what was built here still stands, and the eastern half of Nara is now a World Heritage site.

Todai-ji houses the Great Buddha, a bronze figure 15 m/49 ft tall, cast in the 740s. The undertaking used most of the bronze then available in Japan and nearly bankrupted the state. Fire destroyed the original hall twice. The one standing today, rebuilt in 1709 at two-thirds its original width, is still among the largest wooden buildings in the world.

We walk on through Nara Park, where more than a thousand deer wander freely and bow for crackers. Legend holds they carried a guardian deity into the city on their backs in the 8th century, and they have been protected as sacred messengers ever since. The path leads to Kasuga Taisha, founded in 768 for the Fujiwara clan and approached through 3,000 stone and bronze lanterns, lit only twice a year, in February and mid-August.

NOTE: Nara is a full day of trains and walking; guests who prefer a free day in Kyoto should speak with your Tour Leader.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kyoto: Nijo Castle & Leisure time

This morning we visit Nijo Castle, which Tokugawa Ieyasu built in 1603 as his Kyoto residence, the shogun's house in the emperor's city and a reminder to the court of who held the army. Its Ninomaru Palace is the finest surviving example of feudal palace architecture in Japan, with painted screens by the Kano school, gold-leaf tigers and pines, and "nightingale" floors that squeak underfoot to give away intruders. In 1867 the last shogun gathered his lords in this palace and handed power back to the emperor, ending the order that began at Edo Castle, where we stood a week ago.

The rest of the day is yours. The small Shoseien garden east of Higashi Honganji is a good place to start, Nishiki Market is a good place to eat, and your Tour Leader can help you plan.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kyoto - Train to Hiroshima

The bullet train carries us past Osaka and Kobe to Hiroshima in under two hours.

At 8:15 on the morning of 6 August 1945 the first atomic bomb used in war exploded 600 metres above the city centre. Around 70,000 buildings were destroyed in a few seconds. By the end of the year some 140,000 people were dead. The city sits on the delta of the Ota river, ringed by hills, and the blast filled the bowl.

Scientists at the time doubted anything would grow here for decades. Today Hiroshima is a city of 1.2 million, the streetcars that were running again within days of the bombing still run, and we arrive by the fastest train in the country.

Our visit is the Peace Memorial Park, laid out on the ground beneath the explosion. The Cenotaph holds the names of the dead beneath the inscription "Rest in peace, for the error shall not be repeated". The Peace Flame will burn until the last nuclear weapon is gone. The Children's Peace Monument is hung with paper cranes sent from around the world for Sadako Sasaki, who died of leukaemia at twelve. We visit the Peace Memorial Museum, whose collection of belongings is harder than any photograph, and walk to the Atomic Bomb Dome, the one building left standing near the hypocentre and kept as it was.

The rest of the afternoon is unscheduled.

Overnight in Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Hiroshima & Miyajima

By train and ferry we cross to Miyajima for the day.

The island has been counted among Japan's three finest views for four centuries, and it was sacred long before that. For most of its history no one was permitted to be born or die here, and the forest on Mount Misen has never been cut. Deer, considered messengers of the island's gods, meet the ferry and wander the streets freely.

Our walking tour centres on Itsukushima Shrine, a UNESCO World Heritage site built over the water on stilts so that pilgrims could approach without setting foot on holy ground. At high tide the great torii gate, 16 m/53 ft tall and built of camphor trunks too heavy to be anchored, stands on its own weight in the sea. At low tide we can walk out to it across the exposed sand. A renovation completed in 2022, the first in nearly a century, replaced the gate's copper roofing and treated its wood against rot. The shrine took its present form in 1168 under Taira no Kiyomori, the warlord who briefly ran Japan before the first shogunate. His clan's rise, and its catastrophic fall in the Genpei War a generation later, drowned at sea with the child emperor they carried, became the subject of Japan's best-known epic.

There is free time on the island before we return to Hiroshima. Options include the ropeway up Misen for the view over the Inland Sea, the five-storey pagoda beside the shrine, or the street of grilled oysters and maple-leaf cakes below it.

Overnight in Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Departure from Hiroshima

Departure for home.

Departure from Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast