Tour Code
**JP2**

ADVENTURESABROAD

# JAPAN IN DEPTH

## Imperial Heartland to Volcanic Frontier

**20 days**

Created on: 13 Nov, 2026

### 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 Hiroshima (Honshu Island) - Train to Kagoshima (Kyushu Island) & Sakurajima Island

The bullet train takes us under the strait and the length of Kyushu Island to Kagoshima, about two and a half hours.

Kyushu is where the outside world got in. The first Portuguese ship reached Tanegashima, off this coast, in 1543 and brought the gun. Francis Xavier landed in Kagoshima in 1549, founded Japan's first Christian mission, and was expelled two years later. When the shogunate closed the country a century after that, the Satsuma domain here kept trading anyway, through the Ryukyu islands. In 1865 it smuggled nineteen students to Britain to learn how the West worked. They came home to help run the Meiji government and build the navy. Satsuma's own samurai later rose against that same government in 1877, in a rebellion crushed just outside the city.

Kagoshima faces its volcano across the bay. Sakurajima rises 1117 m/3,665 ft, smokes constantly and erupts in a small way most days; the city issues an ash forecast with the weather. Its largest eruption in a century came in 1914 and poured out enough lava to join the island to the peninsula, burying a shrine gate to its lintel. We cross by ferry, tour the lava fields and the visitor centre, and see the buried gate, its torii now standing barely above the hardened rock.

Overnight in Kagoshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 14 Kagoshima & Ibusuki

A full day on the Satsuma Peninsula south of Kagoshima.

Chiran keeps a samurai district of seven houses and gardens, laid out about 250 years ago along a single 700-metre street of stone walls and clipped hedges. There are no wires or parked cars to spoil it. These were goju, lower-ranking samurai posted to guard the domain's borders rather than live at the lord's court, and their gardens are small, dry and borrowed from the hills behind. Each family still lives in its house.

Chiran was also an air base. Its Peace Museum for Kamikaze Pilots holds the letters, photographs and last belongings of the 1,036 young men who flew from here in the spring of 1945. Most flew during the Battle of Okinawa, and most were in their teens and early twenties. It is a

sober place, and some visitors find its tone a contested one.

We visit a shochu distillery, where the region's spirit is distilled from sweet potato rather than rice, and taste it. At Ibusuki, the hot-spring resort on the peninsula's tip, there is the option to be buried to the neck in volcanic sand heated by the springs beneath the beach. The cure is said to date back some 300 years and to take about ten minutes.

Overnight in Kagoshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 15 Kagoshima: Ko-en Gardens - Train to Kumamoto

We begin at Sengan-en, the Shimadzu lords' garden villa at Iso, laid out in 1658 with the bay as its pond and Sakurajima as its borrowed mountain. The house is open, and up the hill sits a shrine to the family's cats. They were brought on campaign in Korea in the 1590s because their dilating pupils could be read like a clock. The view from the garden is the one the lords built it for. Beside it, the Shoko Shuseikan was Japan's first Western-style factory complex. The Satsuma domain built it in the 1850s to make cannon, glass and steamships, before anyone in Edo had decided whether the West was even allowed. It has been part of a UNESCO World Heritage industrial site since 2015. It is now a museum.

In the afternoon we take the train north to Kumamoto and visit its castle, one of the three great castles of Japan. Built in 1607 by Kato Kiyomasa, its curved stone walls are known as musha-gaeshi for the way they steepen as they rise to defeat any climbing attacker. They were badly damaged in the 2016 earthquake. The main keep has been rebuilt, restoration of the rest continues, and the walkway built to view the work is part of what there is to see.

Overnight in Kumamoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 16 Kumamoto - Unzen - Nagasaki

From Kumamoto port we take the ferry across the Ariake Sea to Shimabara, about an hour, crossing water that once carried salt, silk and, eventually, missionaries between the two coasts.

Mount Unzen erupted here between 1990 and 1995, killing 43 people including two well-known French volcanologists, as a series of pyroclastic flows and mudflows buried parts of the town. Eleven houses were left as they were, roofs at ground level, and we see them at the memorial park. The town's castle keep and its samurai street, where carp swim in the roadside channels, survived.

We then drive up Unzen to the Jigoku, the "hells", where steam and boiling water vent through the hillside, sulphur staining the rock yellow and the ground too hot to touch. The name is older than the tourism. This region rose against the shogunate in the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637, led by Christian peasants crushed after a months-long siege. In the persecutions that followed, some were tortured in these same springs. A memorial marks the place.

Descending to the coast we reach Nagasaki, the one port the shogunate left open after that rebellion. It remains the city where Japan's Western, Chinese and Christian strands are most visible, and tomorrow's touring stays with that story.

Overnight in Nagasaki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 17 Nagasaki: City Tour

Nagasaki was Japan's window on the world for two centuries, and this morning is that story.

We begin at Glover Garden, the hillside where Thomas Glover, a Scottish trader, built his house in 1863. He sold arms to the Choshu and

Satsuma clans that overthrew the shogunate, and smuggled out the students who later helped build the Meiji government. He also founded the brewery that became Kirin. His marriage to a Japanese woman is one source of the city's enduring claim on the Madama Butterfly story. Several Meiji-era Western houses have been gathered on the slope around his own, along with a museum of the dragon floats used in the city's Kunchi festival.

By streetcar we reach Dejima, the fan-shaped artificial island built in 1636 to hold Portuguese and then Dutch traders. Just 1.5 hectares/3.7 acres, it let foreigners trade without touching Japan itself. For more than 200 years, until the country reopened in the 1850s, everything Japan learned about the West came through this one narrow gate: anatomy, astronomy, clockwork. The Japanese called this body of study rangaku, Dutch learning. The restored warehouses and the chief factor's house show how small the gate really was.

The afternoon is free. Chinatown and the Confucius Temple are close by. On 9 August 1945 the second atomic bomb used in war exploded over the Urakami valley on the city's north side. An estimated 74,000 people were dead by the end of that year. The Atomic Bomb Museum stands there now; guests who visited Hiroshima's park six days ago will find this one smaller, quieter and no easier.

Overnight in Nagasaki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 18 Nagasaki - Saga Prefecture - Fukuoka

We drive north through Saga, the home of Japanese porcelain.

The craft arrived as spoils of war. Potters brought back from Korea after Hideyoshi's invasions of the 1590s found kaolin at Arita in 1616 and built Japan's first porcelain kiln. Blue-and-white came first, then the red-enamelled aka-e style of the 1640s, and both were shipped from the port of Imari to a Europe that had never seen anything like them and spent a century trying to copy them. We visit the Arita Ceramic Museum, whose Shibata collection traces four centuries of the ware.

At Okawachiyama, the "village of secret kilns", the Nabeshima lords moved their potters into a guarded valley in 1675 so that no one could copy the work they made for the shogun. The kilns still fire, the chimneys still stand over the lane, and the bridges are tiled.

We continue to Karatsu, pass its castle on the headland, and stop at the Nijino Matsubara pine forest, a million trees planted along the beach as a windbreak in the 1600s, for coffee and a walk on the sand. Our destination is Fukuoka, the largest city on Kyushu. Closer to Seoul than to Tokyo, it was where the Mongols landed in 1274 and 1281, and where the typhoon they called the divine wind, kamikaze, sank them.

Overnight in Fukuoka.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 19 Fukuoka: City Tour

Our last touring day goes back to the beginning of Japan's contact with the mainland.

In AD 57 a Chinese emperor sent a gold seal to the "King of Na", a chiefdom on this bay. It turned up in a farmer's field on Shikanoshima in 1784. It is the earliest written record of Japan, and it was found here, on the coast the country has always faced Asia from.

We drive to Dazaifu, the government's outpost for dealing with Korea and China for 500 years, and visit Tenmangu Shrine, built over the grave of the scholar-official Sugawara no Michizane. Exiled here on false charges in 901, he died two years later. When plague and lightning struck the capital soon after, frightened courtiers declared him a vengeful spirit and deified him as the god of scholarship to appease him. Students still come by the thousand to pray for exam results. Nearby, Komyoji has a Zen garden of moss and stone. The Kyushu National Museum, opened in 2005 as the country's fourth national museum, presents Japanese culture from an Asian point of view.

We return to the city for a free afternoon. Hakata ramen, the pork-bone broth the city invented, is the lunch to have. The Kushida Shrine displays one of the ten-metre floats raced by teams of men through the streets at dawn each July.

Overnight in Fukuoka.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 20 Departure

Departure from Fukuoka.*

* LAND ONLY PASSENGERS: If you are booking your own flights and are tempted to purchase a ticket in/out of Tokyo only, it is, in theory, possible to travel by train from Fukuoka back to Tokyo, but this is a rather long journey (8 hours) and can involve multiple train changes which, in Japan, can be daunting. Accordingly, if you need to return to Tokyo to fly from there, we recommend that you build in a flight from Fukuoka to Tokyo in order to make this connection.

ITTE IRASSHAI!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast