Tour Code
KR2

ADVENTURESABROAD

SOUTH KOREA & JAPAN-BY-RAIL

20 days

Created on: 21 Nov, 2026

Day 1 Arrive in Seoul

Today we arrive in Seoul, located on the Han River, ringed by granite peaks that have shaped the city's growth for centuries and give even the modern skyline a backdrop of forested mountains.

The city has been rebuilt twice within living memory: first from the Korean War's near-total destruction in the 1950s, then again into one of the world's most connected capitals. Almost no trace of either transformation shows on arrival. Korea spent decades under Japanese colonial rule, here from 1910 to 1945. That period ended with the peninsula's division into North and South, the line we see for ourselves later this week.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Seoul City Touring

We begin at Gyeongbokgung, the largest of Seoul's Five Grand Palaces and the first the Joseon dynasty built when it founded the city as its capital in 1395. Japanese forces burned it during the 1592 invasion, and it stood in ruins for over 250 years until a full reconstruction in the 1860s. We time our visit, where possible, for the changing of the royal guard at the main gate. Inside the grounds, the National Folk Museum sets the daily life of that era against the throne halls outside: farming tools, wedding customs, the rhythms of a Confucian court.

After a break for lunch we visit Jongmyo, the shrine built to hold the memorial tablets of Joseon's kings and queens. Its long, plain halls, deliberately unornamented to focus the mind on ritual, have stood since the 16th century. A royal rite is still performed here each May, the oldest continuously observed Confucian ceremony anywhere.

We finish at Namsan Seoul Tower, raised in 1969 as the country's first integrated broadcast tower. The observation deck gives the clearest view in the city: the mountains that ring Seoul and the Han River curling through it. We stay for dinner at the top as the skyline lights up. The palace we walked through this morning sits far below.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Seoul & The DMZ

We travel north along the Han River to the Demilitarized Zone, the 4-kilometre/2.5-mile buffer that has divided the peninsula since the 1953 armistice ended fighting without formally ending the war. Barbed wire and guard posts line much of the route.

At Imjingak we walk to the Freedom Bridge, where 12,773 released prisoners of war crossed south in 1953 after the fighting stopped. A rusted steam engine, riddled with bullet holes from the war, stands nearby. The Mangbaedan altar lets displaced families perform memorial rites for relatives they cannot visit in the North.

We then descend into the 3rd Infiltration Tunnel, one of four found running under the DMZ since 1974 and dug, North Korea maintains, for coal mining. It reaches within 170 m/560 ft of the Military Demarcation Line, and the walk down is steep and low-ceilinged.

At the Dora Observatory we look across the DMZ itself: Kijong-dong, the North's unoccupied propaganda village, and its flagpole, one of the tallest in the world at 160 m/525 ft. From the platform, guides point out the DMZ's forest, undisturbed by development for seven decades and now one of the most intact temperate habitats on the peninsula.

In the afternoon we return to Seoul and visit the War Memorial of Korea. Its galleries and outdoor displays of tanks and aircraft set the day's sites into the fuller history of the 1950-53 war.

NOTE: today's route and stops may be altered or curtailed without notice, owing to the security situation.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Seoul - Fly to Jeju Island

We fly this morning from Seoul to Jeju, Korea's largest island and the country's only volcanic one, built up in eruptions that continued into the last few thousand years. Hallasan, the shield volcano at its centre and South Korea's tallest peak at 1947 m/6,388 ft, is visible on a clear day from nearly anywhere on the island.

Jeju's culture grew from that geology and from its distance from the mainland. Farming was hard on volcanic soil, so for generations the sea supported families instead, largely through the haenyeo. These free-diving women harvest shellfish and seaweed without oxygen tanks, some diving into their seventies and eighties. Their diving income long gave Jeju women more economic independence than was typical elsewhere in Korea, shaping a more matriarchal society. UNESCO recognised the tradition in 2016 as it has grown rare.

The Jeju Folklore and Natural History Museum introduces both threads, the island's volcanic formation and the customs, from stone walls to shamanist ritual, that developed on top of it. At Jeju Stone Park we see basalt shaped by wind and water into the grandmother and grandfather figures, dol hareubang, that stand guard at village entrances across the island. The grounds also recreate a traditional Jeju village.

Overnight on Jeju.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Jeju Island Touring

At Seongsan Ilchulbong, Sunrise Peak, we climb the rim of a tuff cone that rose from the sea floor about 5000 years ago. It is one of the youngest features in this volcanic landscape, and part of the same UNESCO listing that covers the island's lava tubes. The crater, 600 m/1,970 ft across, has given the peak its name since dynasties looked to it for the first light of the day. The climb up wooden stairs takes about 20 minutes and rewards with views along the coast in both directions.

We continue to the Jeju Haenyeo Museum, dedicated to the free-diving women we learned about yesterday. Photographs, diving gear and the museum's recreated village houses show a working life passed from mother to daughter for centuries. It is now kept alive mostly by women in their sixties and older. Fewer than 3,000 haenyeo still dive today, down from over 20,000 in the 1960s, and most are now in their seventies.

In the afternoon we walk part of Manjanggul, one of the longest lava tubes in the world at over 7 km/4.3 mi. It formed as Hallasan's lava flowed to the sea some 200,000 years ago. Its open section reveals lava columns, ropy flowstone and a 7.6 m/25 ft lava column, the tallest of its kind known anywhere. Manjanggul was discovered in 1958 and only a fraction of its length is open to visitors, kept dim and cool year-round regardless of the season outside.

Overnight on Jeju.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Jeju Island - Fly to Busan: City Touring

We fly this morning from Jeju to Busan, Korea's second-largest city and its busiest port, spread around a natural harbour at the peninsula's southern tip. It has been Korea's gateway to the sea since the country opened to foreign trade in the 1870s.

Gamcheon Cultural Village began as an informal settlement, built up the hillside by refugees who fled here during the Korean War. Busan was

the only part of the country never occupied by North Korean forces, and its population tripled almost overnight. The houses, painted in blues, yellows and pinks since a 2009 arts programme, still house residents, and narrow stepped lanes wind between them to viewpoints over the harbour.

We break for lunch at Jagalchi Fish Market, Korea's largest, where the morning catch is sold straight off the boats and can be cooked to order at stalls upstairs. Stalls run three levels deep along the waterfront, and the market has operated here since the 1930s.

In the afternoon we visit the United Nations Memorial Cemetery, the only UN cemetery in the world. It holds more than 2,300 soldiers from the 1950-53 war, representing 11 countries that fought under the UN flag. Each grave faces east toward its home country, and the grounds include a memorial wall listing more than 40,000 further dead whose remains were repatriated.

Overnight in Busan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Busan:Gyeongju Excursion

We drive south from Busan to Gyeongju, capital of the Silla kingdom for nearly a thousand years and now one of Korea's richest concentrations of ancient sites.

Bulguksa Temple was built in the 8th century and reconstructed after fire during the Japanese invasions of the 1590s. Its two stone pagodas anchor a design meant to represent a Buddhist paradise on earth. Inside, a wooden hall houses a bronze Buddha that has survived from the temple's founding.

Tumuli Park holds 23 of the more than 200 royal burial mounds scattered through the city, grass-covered domes under which Silla's kings, queens and nobles were buried. Gold crowns and other treasures from the tombs are now displayed in the Gyeongju National Museum. We walk among the mounds before visiting the museum itself, whose collection centres on the Silla gold and a 3 m/10 ft bronze bell cast in 771.

Cheomseongdae, a stone tower built around 647, is among the oldest surviving astronomical observatories in East Asia. Its 362 stones, laid in 27 courses, are said to mirror the days and months of the lunar year the tower was built to track.

We finish at Donggung Palace and Wolji Pond, a former royal retreat built beside an artificial lake in the 670s. Its reflecting pool and reconstructed pavilions, based on excavated foundations, are lit after dark.

NOTE: given the length of today's excursion, your Tour Leader may include lunch and leave dinner free.

Overnight in Busan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Busan, South Korea - Fly to Tokyo, Japan

We fly today from Busan to Tokyo, leaving Korea's peninsula for Japan's main island, Honshu, and its largest city. Japan is an archipelago of nearly 7000 islands, though more than nine in ten people live on the four largest. Almost a tenth of the entire population lives in Tokyo alone.

Tokyo is officially a collection of 23 special wards, together home to more than 9 million people and, with its surrounding prefectures, the largest metropolitan area in the world. Trains carry some 40 million passenger journeys a day through it, more than any other city on earth, and its network has expanded steadily since the 1950s.

We settle into our hotel this evening. There is no time change to adjust to, as Korea and Japan share the same time zone.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 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 10 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 11 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 12 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 13 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 14 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 15 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 16 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 17 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 18 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 19 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 20 Departure from Hiroshima

Departure for home.

Departure from Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast