

TAIWAN, SOUTH KOREA & JAPAN-BY-RAIL**27 days**

Created on: 4 May, 2026

Day 1 Arrive in Taipei

Arrival in Taipei -- welcome to Taiwan!

Lying off the south-eastern coast of mainland Asia, and across the Taiwan Strait from China, Taiwan is an island truly on the edge of the Pacific. One of the most densely-populated places on earth, this is also a natural wonderland with steep mountains, magnificent forests and an array of scenic attractions. Being situated on the western edge of the Pacific "ring of fire", continuous tectonic movements have created majestic peaks, rolling hills and plains, spectacular coastlines, and other natural wonders. 8 national parks and 13 national scenic areas preserve Taiwan's best natural ecological environment and cultural sites.

Overnight in Taipei.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Taipei: City Tour

We will spend today exploring vibrant Taipei, modern and old, where Taoist temples sit alongside shopping malls. Many have rated Taipei as one of the region's most dynamic, comfortable and liveable cities. Situated at the northern tip of the island, the capital is located on the Tamsui River, about 25 km southwest of the Pacific Ocean. This is the political, economic, and cultural center of Taiwan. Originally founded in the early 18th century, Taiwan quickly became an important center for overseas trade in the 19th century. Today this truly is one of Asia's most dynamic and fascinating cities. Taipei is the thriving heart of Taiwan and the bustling centre of commerce, government and culture.

Our sightseeing will first take us to the world-famous National Palace Museum, the world's largest collection of Chinese artifacts. Here we will see porcelain, paintings, jade, bronze, tapestries and other art objects that once belonged to the emperors of China. This truly is a breathtaking selection of Chinese Imperial Art. In 1949, the collection was brought to Taiwan by Chiang Kai Shek's armies. Nearby is the wonderful Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines. This museum houses exhibits relating to the cultures and histories of the Taiwanese aborigines. These Austronesian peoples are related through blood or linguistic ties to people across precolonial Oceania, as far away as Madagascar. The tribes developed pottery, basketry, woodcarvings, musical instruments and colourful costumes. We will view some fine examples of Taiwanese aboriginal handicrafts and learn about the history of these people.

After a break for lunch we will continue with our tour of the city. A must is a visit to the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, located in the heart of the city. This Memorial Hall (C.K.S. Memorial Hall) was constructed in memory of the former president of R.O.C. During our touring of the city we will pass by the Presidential Buildings Presidential Square. Originally built by the Japanese, it originally served as the governor's mansion.

A must during the tour will of course be a visit to Taipei 101, with its outstanding views over the city. Taipei 101 is a 101-floor landmark skyscraper that claimed the title of world's tallest building when it opened in 2004.

Overnight in Taipei.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Taipei - Lukang - Sun Moon Lake

On our journey to Sun Moon Lake we will make a stop in Lukang, the economic and transport hub of central Taiwan in earlier times. The saying "first Tainan, second Lukang and third Mengjia (today Wanhua District in Taipei)," illustrates the high position of the town in its glory days.

Lukang is a historic old town renowned for its well-preserved cultural and historical heritage. Once a bustling port in the 17th and 18th centuries, it served as the center where Taiwan's most affluent families amassed their wealth and power, capitalizing on the thriving commerce of the era. Despite the port losing its functionality due to sedimentation, Lukang has retained its enduring charm, serving as a

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timeless reminder of its glamorous past.

We visit Lukang Old Street, a leisurely stroll through the town adorned with red brick walls and floors, where historic relics await your discovery, each with an intriguing story to tell. During the Dutch and Qing eras of Taiwan, it was the most populous city and most important trading port in central Taiwan. There are more historical buildings here than anywhere in Taiwan except Tainan. Now the area is a lively shopping district, famous for traditional crafts and foods such as oyster omelets, shrimp balls, taro cakes, and meat buns.

After a break for lunch, we continue to the Sun Moon Lake area. In this idyllic environment we will see the deep blue waters of the lake and the mountainous surroundings from different perspectives. We will begin by enjoying a cruise across the lake, where we will benefit from fantastic views of the neighbouring mountains. We will then take in the lake from above as we experience the Sun Moon Lake Ropeway.

Overnight at Sun Moon Lake.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Sun Moon Lake - Taichung

This morning we travel to Taichung, a city that wears its history and creativity in equal measure. Our first stop is Wufeng Lin's Mansion, the beautifully preserved 18th-century residence of Lin Wenchang, a celebrated Qing Dynasty military commander. The mansion's layered courtyards and ornate detailing offer a rare window into the lives of Taiwan's most influential families during the Qing era.

We then visit the 921 Earthquake Museum, one of the most sobering and powerful museums in Taiwan. On September 21, 1999, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake devastated central Taiwan. Rather than clearing the wreckage, the museum preserved it – collapsed school buildings, ruptured fault lines, and buckled riverbanks remain exactly as the earthquake left them, a testament to both the scale of the disaster and the remarkable resilience of the Taiwanese people.

After lunch we explore two of Taichung's more unexpected pleasures. Rainbow Village is the life's work of Huang Yung-fu, a veteran soldier who – facing the demolition of his military dependents' village – began painting every surface in sight with vivid murals of animals, figures and folk imagery. His one-man act of defiance saved the village and turned it into one of Taichung's most beloved landmarks. We also stop at the Miyahara Building, a beautifully restored 1927 Japanese-era ophthalmology clinic that has been reimagined as an atmospheric ice cream and confectionery emporium – the architecture alone is worth the visit.

Overnight in Taichung.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Taichung - Tainan

This morning our journey continues south to Tainan, with a stop en route at the Jingzaijiao Tile-paved Salt Fields in Beimen. These are the oldest surviving tile-paved salt fields in Taiwan, with roots in the Qing Dynasty and their present form dating to 1818. To prevent salt crystals from bonding with the soil, workers laid broken pottery shards across the crystallizing ponds – a technique that produced purer, cleaner salt and, under the right light, turns the fields into a shimmering mosaic that is as visually striking as it is historically significant.

We continue to Tainan, Taiwan's oldest city and its capital for more than two centuries. Most of the Han migrants who sailed for Taiwan in the 17th and early 18th centuries made landfall along this southwestern coastline, and the city they shaped has never entirely let go of that heritage. Often compared to Kyoto for its density of temples, historic streets and living tradition, Tainan is essential Taiwan for anyone drawn to history, religion and the texture of traditional life.

We arrive with time to begin our exploration. The Confucius Temple – built in 1665 and believed to be the oldest in Taiwan – and the well-preserved Great South Gate offer an unhurried introduction to the old city. We also visit the Tainan Art Museum, whose bold contemporary architecture makes as strong an impression as the collection within, before ending the day at Hayashi – a beautifully restored 1932 Japanese-era department store, now home to local artisans and designers, and one of the city's most atmospheric spaces.

Overnight in Tainan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 6 Tainan Sightseeing

Tainan retains a living grip on traditional Taiwanese culture – Buddhist parades and temple ceremonies are not heritage performances here but the fabric of daily life. Today we give ourselves fully to the city's extraordinary historical depth.

We begin in the Chihkan Cultural Zone, the heart of the old city, where Chihkan Tower marks the site of Fort Provintia, built by the Dutch in the 1650s. The Dutch word for "eternity" gives the tower its name, and something of that permanence has proved apt – the site has served as an administrative and cultural landmark through successive periods of Ming, Qing and Japanese rule, each leaving its mark on the structures that remain. The surrounding zone is dense with temples, their incense and ceremony a constant backdrop.

From here we make our way to Anping, considered the cradle of Han Chinese civilization in Taiwan and the island's first European settlement. Fort Zeelandia – Anping Old Fort – took the Dutch nearly a decade to complete. Positioned on what was then a sandy coastal peninsula chosen for its direct supply lines to Batavia, it remains one of the most evocative colonial monuments in Asia. Nearby, Yanping Street – Taiwan's oldest merchant thoroughfare, also known simply as Taiwan's First Street – winds through a neighbourhood of narrow lanes, small shops and food stalls whose character has changed little over the centuries.

Overnight in Tainan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Tainan - High-speed train to Taipei - Taipei Sightseeing

Today we will leave Tainan and travel back to Taipei by high-speed train. This high-speed line opened for service in 2007, using trains with a top speed of 300 km/h (186 mph). The journey time from Tainan to Taipei will take just over 90 minutes!

This afternoon we will complete our sightseeing of Taipei. A visit to the Taoist Lungshan Temple provides some insight into the local culture. Dedicated to Kuanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, this is one of the city's most popular and busiest temples. Like most temples in Taiwan, the Temple worships a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and folk deities such as Matsu.

We will walk through the Dihua Street Area, where one can get a true feel for the city's past. The old-town market has dozens of shops selling a variety of traditional goods such as Chinese medicines and herbs, temple icons and incense, spices and dried food, colourful bolts of cloth, and bamboo and wooden crafts. This is a fascinating patch of the past.

Built on a green hillside in 1969, the impressive Taipei Martyrs Shrine was architecturally inspired by the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing's Forbidden City. The shrine is dedicated to the 390,000 soldiers killed in the service of their country during the War of Resistance against Japan and the civil war between the Chinese Republican and communist forces.

Overnight in Taipei.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Taipei, Taiwan - Seoul, South Korea

Today we fly to Seoul/Incheon, South Korea and transfer to our hotel.

Seoul is a city of contrasts. In this rapidly evolving metropolis, the traditional exists with the modern in a state of harmony. For over 500 years the seat of Joseon Dynasty kings, Seoul is now the beating heart of modern Korea, the centre to which all else in the country is drawn.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Seoul City Touring

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This morning we start with a visit to Gyeongbokgung Palace, where we plan to arrive in time for the very colourful changing-of-the-guard ceremony.

Of all the tourist attractions in Seoul, the Joseon Dynasty Palaces and, particularly Gyeongbokgung Palace, are the most tangible link between modern Korea and its not-too-distant monarchical past. Not merely inert relics, they are symbols of a deep history and rich culture. Although substantially reduced in number, the remaining palace buildings provide a glimpse of traditional architecture and the overall organization of a palace grounds.

As part of our visit, we also include the National Folk Museum, contained within the palace. This excellent museum presents historical artifacts that were used in the daily lives of Korean people in the past. Through the displays, visitors can learn about the domestic and agricultural lifestyles, as well as Korea's cultural beliefs.

After a break for lunch, we proceed to Jongmyo, a royal shrine dedicated to the performance of ancestral rites for the deceased kings and queens of the Joseon Dynasty. Being the place where the royal ancestral tablets are enshrined, Jongmyo's atmosphere is solemn and sacred rather than splendid like the royal palaces. The simple and elegant buildings of this shrine have faithfully kept their original forms since the 16th century.

We finish our day at Namsan Seoul Tower, built in 1969 as Korea's first integrated transmission tower beaming television and radio broadcasts across the capital. Since opening to the public in 1980, it has become a much-loved Seoul landmark. The tower's main attractions include multi-coloured digital art projected onto the tower at night, a digital observatory, a roof terrace, and a number of viewing platforms where visitors can enjoy the cityscape. 32 LCD screens recount the 600-year history of Seoul.

This evening we'll have our dinner at the top of the tower and enjoy a typical Korean meal and nighttime views of the city.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Seoul & The DMZ

This morning we hit the ground running with a full highlight-packed day.

After an early departure we travel along the Jayuro (Freedom Road) to Imjingak, the northernmost point bordering North Korea.* On the way, we will be able to view barbed wire fences and military guards on duty all the way along the river. At Imjingak, we visit the Mangbaedan Memorial ritual altar which was established in 1985 for those who were separated from their families or displaced from home during the Korean War. It is a symbolic spot used to hold traditional memorial services for ancestors or to pray for separated family members living in the North and for reunification of the country. We will see the Freedom Bridge, the very locale where 12,773 Korean War prisoners walked to freedom to South Korea in 1953.

We then board a tour bus that will take us to the 3rd infiltration tunnel dug up by North Koreans. On the 20-minute ride to the tunnel, we pass through the check points, military camps, and mine fields. Before going down to the tunnel, we will view a short video presentation and visit exhibition hall for information on the divided Koreas. A seven-minute tram ride (if available) or a walk down a steep access through a narrow and steep interception tunnel, leads us to the lower platform, a point where we are only 170 meters from the Military Demarcation Line.

Our next stop is the Dora Observatory where we can see the whole expanse of the Demilitarized Zone, North Korean propaganda village, Gijeong-dong, where the world's largest flag hangs on a 160 meter-tall flagpole, South Korea's northernmost village of Daeseong-dong and Panmunjom where the ceasefire that ended hostilities was signed.

We return to Seoul in time for a break for lunch in Insadong, a lively district known for its vast array of restaurants, small museums, and shopping. Insadong was originally two towns whose names ended in the syllables "In" and "Sa". They were divided by a stream which ran along Insadong's current main street. Insadong began 500 years ago as an area of residence for government officials. Today Insadong has some of the tastiest food vendors in all of Seoul. One of the main attractions in the area is the 'Kings Dessert' or the 'Dragons Beard Candy', 16,000 strings of honey wrapped multiple times with a flavouring of either almond, peanut or chocolate on the inside. There are also gooey pancakes and spicy Korean dumplings to sample.

From here we proceed to the War Memorial of Korea, an excellent tie-in with what we experienced at the DMZ. This huge museum documents the history of the Korean War (1950-53) with documentary footage (with English commentary) of the main battles and events. Along with photos, maps and artefacts, the films give a fascinating insight into what the war was like. There's also plenty of military hardware outside - tanks, helicopters, missiles and planes, plus stirring war memorials.

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 * Due to an ever-changing security situation, our activities today may be altered, re-routed, or curtailed without notice.

Overnight in Seoul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Seoul - Fly to Jeju Island

This morning we transfer to the airport for our short flight to Jeju Island.

Jeju Island, also known as the "Island of the Gods," is a popular vacation spot for Koreans and foreigners; indeed it remains the top honeymoon destination for Korean newlyweds. The island is known for beaches, rugged coastal scenery, volcanic geography, and a unique culture which stands in stark contrast to the mainland (and much of Asia) as being matriarchal. Stemming from this basis, and some odd tax reasons, the role of seafood gathering on the island has been dominated by women. As such, a common sight around Jeju's coastline is that of the "haenyo" or "woman diver", a figure that has become somewhat iconic of the island.

After our arrival we'll have a break for lunch, we visit Jeju Folk Village, a living museum showcasing traditional Jeju culture and lifestyle. The village is a collection of restored traditional Jeju houses, including thatched-roof homes and stone houses. Visitors can explore the village and learn about the daily lives of Jeju people in the past.

We also visit Jeju Stone Park, which showcases the cultural significance of stone in Jeju Province. The park features various stone structures, including a stone pagoda and traditional Jeju stone houses. It also includes a large garden themed around Jeju's mythology.

Overnight on Jeju Island.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Jeju Island Touring

Early this morning, we'll head to Sunrise Peak (Seongsan Ilchulbong) for a breathtaking view of this unique volcanic crater and its surroundings. Next we'll visit the Jeju Haenyeo Museum, dedicated to the island's remarkable female free divers. Finally, we'll explore Ilchul Land, a park featuring themed gardens, sculptures, and the intriguing Micheon Cave, a lava tube formed by volcanic activity. Jeju has an extensive system of lava tubes, natural conduits through which magma once flowed, now empty caves that are some of the largest in the world. The insides of the tube is adorned with multi-coloured carbonate decorations and innumerable cave formations commonly found in lava tubes. They include lava stalactites and lava stalagmites, lava columns, lava flowstone, lava helictites and lava blister, cave corals, benches, lava raft, lava bridges, lava shelves and striations.

□
 Overnight on Jeju.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Jeju Island - Fly to Busan: City Touring

This morning we fly to Busan, South Korea's second largest city and largest seaport.

Busan is known for its beaches, hot springs, nature reserves, and events such as the city's renowned international film festival held each fall. Busan is a good destination for those seeking a more laid back atmosphere than Seoul. Located at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, Busan's important port gives the city an international flair, with sailors from around the world trooping through and a growing number of tourists.

On arrival we'll visit the Gamcheon Cultural Village (a UNESCO site), spread out in a panorama of endless rows of low-rise cubicle homes climbing up the steep hillsides, earning it the nickname "Santorini of the East." The cheerful blue, yellow and pink hues a delight to the eye. Narrow stone and concrete alleyways wind their way through the homes, yielding something new at every turn. The village used to house

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the city's poorest people, but during the Korean War, refugees fled their homes for Busan, which was the only area which was free from fighting.

We'll head to the Jagalchi Fish Market for a break for lunch, followed by a visit to the impressive UN Cemetery.

Overnight in Busan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Busan: Gyeongju Excursion

This morning we head out of the city to Gyeongju, located on Korea's southeast coast. This was the capital of the 1,000-year Silla dynasty, and is known for its extensive historical remains. We'll visit the 8th-century Bulguksa Temple featuring twin stone pagodas, a series of wooden staircases, and a large bronze Buddha.

Afer a break for lunch in Hwanglidan-gil we'll continue to Tumuli Park, which contains 23 of the over 200 royal tombs found in Gyeongju. At times, the sense of history, and of secrets buried along with the royals, is almost palpable in the quiet between the large grass-covered mounds.

We'll visit Cheomseongdae, the oldest astronomical observatory in all of Asia The 362 stones that make up the 27-level structure represent each day of the lunar year. Built during the reign of Shilla Queen Seon-deok, it was used for observing the stars in order to forecast the weather.

Our last stops include Gyeongju National Museum, largely devoted to relics of the Silla Kingdom; and Donggung Palace and Wolji Pond, once part of the palace complex of ancient Silla. Return to Busan.

PLEASE NOTE: owing to the length of the day and the probability of a busy trave day tomorrow, your Tour Leader may choose to include lunch today and leave dinner to yourselves this evening.

Overnight in Busan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Busan, South Korea - Fly to Tokyo, Japan

Today we fly from Busan to Tokyo.

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): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Tokyo: City Touring

Morning breaks over a city of 14 million souls, and we begin exploring Tokyo's remarkable layers—from sacred forests to imperial gardens, from traditional department store rituals to the world's finest collection of Japanese art.

Our first sanctuary is Meiji Shrine, where passage through the massive torii gate transports us from urban chaos into tranquil forest. The 100,000 trees surrounding this sacred space were donated from across Japan during the shrine's construction—a living symbol of national unity. Here, the city's roar gives way to whispered prayers and the rustle of ancient leaves.

We continue to the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace, built upon the foundations of Edo-jo Castle. For 265 years, this impregnable fortress housed the Tokugawa Shogunate behind walls thick enough for six samurai to walk abreast. Though Allied bombing destroyed the original structures, the site retains its regal dignity. We'll enjoy our picnic lunch surrounded by meticulously maintained gardens that once witnessed the rise and fall of shoguns.

At one of Tokyo's venerable department stores—evolved from Edo-period kimono shops—we witness Japan's sophisticated gift-giving culture. These rituals trace back to pilgrimages when fortunate travellers brought omiyage (souvenirs) home to their villages. Today's elaborate presentations reflect social hierarchies where the ceremony matters more than the gift itself.

Our day culminates at the National Museum in Ueno Park, housing Japan's finest artistic treasures—scroll paintings, samurai armour, and delicate ceramics that whisper stories of emperors and artisans across millennia.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Tokyo: Sushi Making Class

This morning we take a fascinating dive into Japanese seafood cuisine during a 3-hour 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.

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 Takayama for us -- please pack an OVERNIGHT BAG for ONE NIGHT. Your larger bags (one per person) will be shipped ahead, 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 18 Tokyo - Lake Ashi - Hakone

This morning we take a short metro (train) ride* to Tokyo Station, then transfer to Odawara Station by bullet train 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 (our rooms will be "Western style" with raised beds). Originally Keiseki 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 LUGGAGE will be sent ahead to Takayama for us -- please pack an overnight bag for today/this evening/tomorrow (the cost of this is included in your tour). Our luggage will be waiting for us tomorrow afternoon. Please note that this service is also available elsewhere; your Tour Leader can advise/assist and payment can be made directly.

Overnight in Hakone.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Hakone - Train to Takayama

Today we travel by Shinkansen (Bullet Train) to Takayama (+/- 4 hours).

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.

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Takayama: City Tour

We start our day in Takayama by immersing ourselves in the vibrant atmosphere of the early morning market. Wander through the colourful stalls, sampling local delicacies and admiring traditional crafts.

Afterward, we travel by road to the Hida Folk Village, an open-air museum showcasing over 30 traditional houses. Here we can admire the unique gassho-zukuri architecture, with its steep, thatched roofs designed to withstand heavy snowfall, and explore the interiors to gain insights into the daily lives of past generations.

We then visit the Yatai Kaikan, a fascinating museum dedicated to the magnificent festival floats used in Takayama's annual festivals. These floats feature intricate carvings, vibrant colours, and fascinating historical significance.

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

Overnight in Takayama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Takayama - Nagoya - Train to Kyoto

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Our (road) journey continues back through the Hida Valley to Nagoya from where we take the Shinkansen to Kyoto (+/- one hour).

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 22 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 23 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.

* PLEASE NOTE that some past travellers have indicated that future participants might consider using this as a free day to do their own thing in and around Kyoto, which has much to offer even outside of our busy program. While Nara is always worthwhile and often considered a "must" while in the area, the logistics of getting to/from and the overall busy-ness of the sites visited, means that it takes an entire day to visit this one place. Those who might consider striking out on their own should consult with your Tour Leader for a complete picture of what the above described excursion entails.

Overnight in Kyoto.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 24 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 25 Kyoto - Train to Hiroshima

Today we take the Shinkansen train to Hiroshima (+/- 3 hours). 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. Since its obliteration, it is once again the most vital city of San-Yo with a population of about 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 26 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 torii, 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 torii 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 scaffolding during this time.

Overnight in Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 27 Departure from Hiroshima

Departure for home.

Departure from Hiroshima.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast