

Mountain Spirits

Tokyo and northern Japan

13 days guided walking tour

Adventures in
JAPAN



13 days guided walking tour visiting Tokyo and northern Japan. Accommodation in family-run minshuku, traditional ryokan, shukubo (pilgrims lodges) and hotels.

Dates & Prices

2008

13 - 25 July 2008 £1850

7 - 19 September 2008 £1850

21 September - 3 October 2008 £1850

Included

all transportation between destinations
accommodation
entrance fees
full-time services of tour leader
all breakfasts
10 evening meals

Itinerary

Day 1 Meet Tokyo **2** Sightseeing in Tokyo
3 Train to Nikko & visit Toshogu shrines
4 Drive to & walking in Oze marshlands
5 Walking in Oze **6** Train to Dewa Sanzan
7 Climb Gas-san **8** By road to Kakunodate & Nyuto hot spring **9** Walking near Nyuto hot spring **10** By road Tono Valley **11** Cycling in Tono valley & train to Tokyo
12 Free day in Tokyo **13** Tour ends

Highlights

Ultra-modern Tokyo – the UNESCO World Heritage site of Toshogu shrine at Nikko – spectacular walking in the Oze marshland – accommodation in traditional ryokan – natural hot spring baths – a temple stay in the sacred mountains of Dewa Sanzan – gentle walks and cycling in the Tono valley – Samurai houses and gardens at Kakunodate – relax in the milky-white waters of the remote Nyuto hot spring – travel on the bullet train

Introduction

Our journey will take us north from Tokyo into a landscape rich in spirituality and tradition. Though off the established tourist circuit, the sights of northern Japan can rival anywhere in the country in their beauty and atmospheric grandeur. By travelling on Japan's modern rail system as well as our own vehicle, we will be able to visit both the better-known, magnificent destinations, such as the UNESCO World Heritage site of Toshogu shrine at Nikko, and Dewa Sanzan, as well as the region's more out of the way natural hot springs and beautiful national parks. We will take exhilarating walks through beautiful scenery in the Oze Marshlands, Mount Gas-san, and the Tono Valley. The Japanese poet Matsuo Basho traveled through this region in the 17th century, a journey subsequently published as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. We will visit several of the places which inspired his famous *haiku* poems. Our small group will stay at traditional *ryokan* and *minshuku* country inns in the countryside – always with a flawless service and beautifully-prepared regional cuisine of fresh local ingredients. *Onsen*, natural hot spring baths, are one of the highlights of our journey. At Tochio near Oze our hot spring *ryokan* has open-air baths next to a rushing river, while at Nyuto near Lake Tazawako, the 300-year old Tsuru-no-yu *ryokan* has eight baths, some with the famous milky-white spring water. The tour starts and ends in Tokyo, with time for sightseeing and shopping.



DAY 1 MEET IN TOKYO

Meet at Narita International Airport and transfer by train to Tokyo. There will be a leisurely walk around central Tokyo, and later a welcome dinner at a restaurant in the center of the city. Overnight at hotel.

DAY 2 SIGHTSEEING IN TOKYO

Our first full day in Japan will be spent on a walking tour of Tokyo, visiting Asakusa, the old residential *shitamachi* neighbourhood around Yanaka, and taking a cruise on boat along the Sumida river to the Hamarikyu gardens. We will also visit the Meiji shrine and its nearby gardens before finishing in Shinjuku – the ultra-modern neon-soaked symbol of modern Japan. Dinner will be at a sushi restaurant.

DAY 3 TRANSFER TO NIKKO

(Walking 3.5 miles: 2 hours)

We will board a train this morning for the journey out of Tokyo to Nikko, two hours to the north. The forests and mountains of Nikko have been sacred to the Japanese for 1,200 years, and it was here that in 1617 the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu had himself enshrined at Toshogu. These extravagantly ornate buildings are now on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites and we will take a guided walking tour of the main shrine buildings. Afterwards, there will be a short walk in the surrounding hills and a chance to stop for green tea and cakes before we head to our lodgings.

DAY 4 DRIVE TO OZE MARSHLAND

(Walking 9 miles: 4 hours)

After breakfast our baggage will be collected and sent on

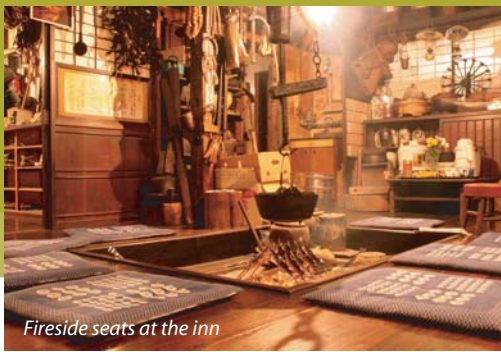
by courier to our lodgings in the Dewa Sanzan area. For the next few days we will carry just a daypack with a change of clothes and other essential items. We will travel by road for two hours on a series of mountain roads to the start of our walk into Oze Marshland.

A two-hour hike will bring us to the marshland high in the mountains of the Nikko National Park; this beautiful area is a haven for wild flowers and plants. We will stay at a friendly mountain lodge next to the Oze-numa lake.

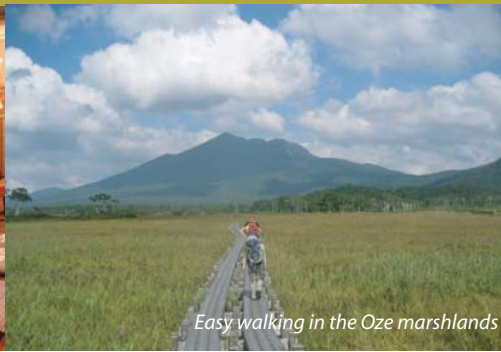
DAY 5 HIKING IN OZE

(10 miles walking: approximately 5 hours)

After an early breakfast, we will hike through the Oze Marshland to the Oze-ga-hara area where boardwalks are laid out amongst the marshes. We will stop for a picnic lunch of *onigiri* (rice balls flavoured with Japanese pickles), and then continue to the northern edge of the marsh, where a bus will take us through a long valley to the Okutadani lake and a boat



Fireside seats at the inn



Easy walking in the Oze marshlands



Toshogu shrine, Nikko

ride to the opposite side. Another short bus ride will bring us to Tochio hot spring, where we will stay for the night in a lovely traditional ryokan, enjoying a dip or two in the open-air hot spring baths.

DAY 6 TRANSFER TO DEWA SANZAN
(2 miles walking: approximately 1.5 hours)

After breakfast and perhaps another quick soak in the hot spring, we will take a bus to the nearby town of Koide, transferring to the shinkansen (Bullet train) for our journey north, following the picturesque Japan Sea coast for part of the way. Our destination is the Dewa Sanzan (literally 'three peaks of Dewa') area, which refers to the three sacred peaks of Haguro-san, Gas-san, and Yudono-san. The lowest of the three, Haguro-san (414 metres) is the spiritual home of the *Shugendō* sect, a mixture of the native *Shinto* belief and Buddhism involving some rather arduous forms of mountain worship. Mountain ascetics known as *yamabushi* can still be seen with their conch shells which are used to call the spirits. The 17th century poet Basho came this way on his famous journey through northern Japan, when he wrote the following *haiku* poem:

*How cool it is
A pale crescent shining
Above the dark hollow
Of Mount Haguro*

The summit of Haguro-san is reached by a staircase of 2,446 stone steps surrounded by a forest of giant cedars. At the top the pilgrims in their white coats head for the Dewa Sanzan shrine with its massive thatched roof. Connected to the shrine by a covered walkway is the lovely *shukubo* (pilgrims lodgings) where we stay tonight. Our baggage sent from Nikko will be waiting for us when we arrive. For dinner we will enjoy a meal of *shojin-ryori*, vegetarian Buddhist cuisine.



Five-story pagoda, Mount Haguro-san

DAY 7 CLIMB GAS-SAN
(6 miles walking: approximately 4.5 hours)

In the morning we will have an early breakfast, and take the bus to the start of our hike on Mount Gas-san. The highest of the three sacred mountains, Gas-san (the name means 'moon mountain') is covered in deep snow for much of the year – up to 5 or 6 metres. The mountain is officially 'opened' each year with a ceremony at the Shinto shrine at the summit, which we will reach following a two

and half hour climb. Along the way there are lovely small ponds formed by the melting snow and an abundance of alpine flowers.

At the summit, we will be purified by the wave of a priest's shide (ceremonial wand) and finish our visit to the shrine with a drop of the sacred drink – saké. After a picnic lunch, we will retrace our steps down the mountain and head by road to Gyokusenji temple. Said to have been founded in 1251 by the Zen monk Ryonen Homyo Zenji, the temple is complemented by a garden completed in the 1650s and now designated as a National Place of Scenic Beauty. We will take a peaceful moment to enjoy the view of the garden while participating in the tea ceremony. From Gyokusenji we will return to our lodgings for dinner. Following dinner there will be an optional visit to a nearby natural hot spring.



Pilgrims, Mount Gas-san

DAY 8 KAKUNODATE & NYUTO HOT SPRING

This morning we will leave the Dewa Sanzan area, heading north. Our first stop will be to Kakunodate, a former feudal town with well-preserved Samurai residences. We will walk through the former Samurai quarter, with an opportunity to visit one of the elegant samurai houses, before arriving at the merchant's area. If there is time, we will head to a nearby sake distillery for tasting. Lastly we will continue to Nyuto Hot Spring, and check in to our beautiful hot spring ryokan for the night. This 350-year old traditional ryokan was once used by the local daimyo (feudal lord) and has eight separate baths with milky white spring water. In the evening we will dine around the *irori* (traditional sunken hearth).

DAY 9 NYUTO HOT SPRING
(6 miles walking: approximately 5 hours)

There will be a full day today in the Nyuto Onsen area. In the morning, after breakfast, we will drive 15 minutes and then head off along a path, climbing to Mount Nyuto, for spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and Lake Tazawako to the south. The length of the walk and route will be decided locally based on the weather conditions. Those wishing for a more relaxed day can stay and soak in the hot springs, or try some short walks along the valley floor.

DAY 10 TONO VALLEY

Today we will travel road to Tono, famous in Japan for its rich folklore. This rural community set in a broad green valley takes great pride in its folk tales, which feature such characters as the *Kappa*, child-sized beings that live in or near rivers. The local people have a strong pride in their culture and myths, and have worked hard to preserve them. Our accommodation for the night will be in a restored traditional farmhouse called a *magariya*. This beautiful L-shaped building was saved by its owner and brought piece by piece to its present location. Run by the owner and his two grown children, the inn has been decorated with local crafts, antiques, and each room is different. In the evening he lights a fire in the *irori* sunken hearth, and on cool evenings we can sit and the fire while the dinner is prepared.

DAY 11 TONO VALLEY AND RETURN TO TOKYO

In the morning, we will rent bicycles, and cycle slowly along the quiet country lanes of the wide Tono Valley. Depending on the time of year, we can see the rice being harvested. Cycling lets you see the beautiful countryside at your own pace; there will be plenty of time to stop and take photographs and you will also visit some of the locations associated with the Tono legends. After lunch we will drive to Kitagami and catch the shinkansen (bullet train) back to Tokyo, arriving early evening. Overnight in city-centre hotel.

DAY 12 TOKYO

There will be a free day today in Tokyo, for shopping, visiting a museum, or simply wandering through the city. In the evening there will be a farewell dinner.

DAY 13 TOUR ENDS

On our final day we say farewell. Your tour leader will help you transfer to Tokyo's Narita airport for your flight home, or you may like to stay a few days longer.



Nyuto Hot Spring

General Information

Meet/Depart

Tokyo (Narita International Airport)

Group Size

5 to 8

Walking level

Moderate - 6 days of walking and hiking from 2 to 5 hours per day

Mode of travel

Trains (shinkansen 'bullet train' and local), bus, and on foot

Tour leader

Full time services of an English/Japanese-speaking tour leader plus local Japanese guides at several destinations.

Extending your trip

We are happy to book pre or post-tour accommodation throughout Japan.

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