

Shoguns and Samurai

Tokyo to Kyoto

14 days guided tour

Adventures in
JAPAN



Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site

14 days guided tour from Tokyo to Kyoto visiting the mountains and villages of central Japan. Accommodation in family-run minshuku, traditional ryokan, and hotels.

Dates & Prices

2009 £2375

25 March - April 7,
8 - 21 April,
13 - 26 May,
15 - 28 July,
19 August - 1 September,
13 - 26 October,
27 October - 9 November

Included

all transportation between destinations
accommodation & entrance fees
full-time services of tour leader
all breakfasts & 9 evening meals

Itinerary

Day 1 Meet Tokyo **2** Tokyo **3** Obuse woodblock museum, Yudanaka Hot Spring & snow monkeys **4** Narai & Nakasendo trail **5** Tsumago **6 - 7** Takayama **8** Shirakawa-go **9 - 10** Kyoto temples, gardens & markets **11** Nara and Todaiji temple **12** Mount Koya temple stay **13** Tokyo **14** Tour ends

Highlights

Imperial Kyoto and Nara – Obuse woodblock print museum – Nakasendo Way 'post towns' – Snow monkeys of Yudanaka hot spring – merchants houses of Takayama – Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site - Natural hot spring baths – Accommodation in traditional ryokan – Ultra-modern Tokyo

Introduction

Central Japan is a region of tall mountain ranges and fast-flowing rivers. It wasn't until recently that roads reached the remoter villages, and today many remain remarkably well-preserved, and evocative of centuries past. Our journey takes us through Japanese history from modern Tokyo, known as Edo during Japan's period of rule by the Shoguns, to end near Kyoto, Japan's capital for 400 years and the repository of much of the country's cultural heritage. At Obuse we see a museum dedicated to the woodblock artist Hokusai and visit a local Saké brewery. Nearby is Yudanaka Onsen hot spring where the famous 'snow monkeys' come to enjoy the natural hot spring baths just like humans. In feudal times people travelling from Kyoto to Tokyo would use the Nakasendo – the road through the central mountains – one of a network of ancient highways. We will visit one of the best preserved sections, where the lovely villages of Tsumago and Magome have been immaculately restored. In the Hida region, we will visit the castle town of Takayama, isolated by a barrage of mountains. The superb local crafts and architecture are much in evidence in the old town, with the preserved merchants' houses, teahouses, local sake, and crafts shops specialising in lacquer ware, pottery, and furniture. Further north is Shirakawa-go, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995, where we will stay for the night in one of the traditionally thatched gassho-zukuri houses. These large wooden houses have steep thatched roofs, designed to withstand heavy snow, and the term gassho-zukuri refers to the shape of praying hands formed by the roofs. From the mountains we will move to the city of Kyoto, Japan's capital for more than a thousand years. The city is home to more than 1600 Buddhist temples, hundreds of Shinto shrines, imperial palaces and formal gardens. There will be time to explore this historical city, and also enjoy some of the wonderful Kyoto cuisine, with its refined preparation and artistic presentation. Our next stop is Nara, Japan's capital during the 8th century, when Buddhist glory reached its height in Japan. Todai-ji temple is the largest wooden structure in the world and home to the Great Buddha, 15 metres high and made of bronze. Our last night will be spent in a shukubo temple lodging situated on Mount Koya, the home of Shingon (Pure Word) Buddhism. There will be time to wander amongst the thousands of ancient tombs and memorials in the Okunoin cemetery, near the mausoleum of Kobo Daishi, the Buddhist monk who founded the first temple here in the 9th century.

DAY 1 MEET IN TOKYO

Meet at Narita International Airport and transfer by train to Tokyo. In the evening there will be a welcome dinner at a city restaurant. Overnight at city centre hotel.

DAY 2 TOKYO

Our first full day in Japan will be spent on a walking tour of Tokyo, visiting the Akihabara electronics district, the elegant Ginza shopping district and the fashionable Harajuku and Omote-sando areas, famous for their avant-garde fashion

and architecture. We will continue to the Grand Meiji Shrine, and in the evening your tour leader will be on hand to help you with ordering dinner.

DAY 3 OBUSE

We will travel this morning to Obuse in Nagano Prefecture north-west of Tokyo. The small, attractive town of Obuse was where the artist Hokusai, famous for his *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints lived towards the end of his life. We will visit the Hokusai-kan, a museum where many of his works are on display.



We will also visit Masuichi-Ichimura Saké Brewery, where we will have a lunch of *kaiseki ryori*-style cuisine prepared from fresh local ingredients. Afterwards, we will make the short journey to Yudanaka Onsen, a hot spring village famous for its 'snow monkeys'. The Japanese long tail monkeys originally started coming here to warm themselves in the outdoor hot spring bath during the cold winters, and now come year round. Overnight in Japanese style minshuku (travellers inn)

Buddhist monks at Okuno-in temple, Mount Koya



Snow Monkeys at Yudanaka Onsen



Kiyomizu-dera temple, Kyoto



DAY 4 NARAI

We will travel by train this morning to the Kiso valley and the small town of Narai, an atmospheric example of a post-town on the ancient Nakasendo trail between Kyoto and Tokyo. There are many well-preserved houses and former inns from the 19th century. The village is also a good place to buy lacquer ware and woodcrafts, made from Japanese cypress and zelkova. Our accommodation will be an edo-period house converted into a *minshuku* (family-run travellers' inn).



DAY 5 MAGOME

A short train journey followed by a 10-minute bus ride will take us to the small town of Tsumago. Another of the post-towns on the former Nakasendo trail, Tsumago has been preserved by strict self-imposed rules that prohibit the sale, rental or destruction of the handsome houses. It's a living museum but one which is still inhabited by the local residents. We will wander the streets, tasting *gohei-mochi*, skewered balls of pounded sticky rice covered in a sweet paste of *miso*, sesame and walnuts. There will be time to visit the folk museum, with exhibits on the old Nakasendo trail and the village. From here, the trail winds its way over the Magome Pass to the neighbouring town of Magome. There will be the opportunity of some lovely walking along the ancient trail. We will arrive in time to check in to our *minshuku*, a lovely family-run inn with an antique *irori* (sunken Japanese hearth) and a bath made of *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) wood.

DAY 6 TAKAYAMA

After an early breakfast, we will transfer to Takayama in Gifu Prefecture. Takayama was formally an enclave for skilled carpenters working for the imperial courts in Kyoto and Nara. It has retained much of its traditional architecture, and we will explore the San-machi area with its rows of old merchant's houses, some open as museums. The town is also well-known for its crafts; particularly lacquer ware, pottery, and furniture. In the evening we will try the local Hida beef, and perhaps some locally-brewed sake.

DAY 7 TAKAYAMA

Today we will have a full day in Takayama. In the morning there will be an opportunity to visit the morning market along the banks of the river. In the afternoon there will be free time to wander the old town and hunt for souvenirs or perhaps see some of the museums, such as the Hirata Kinenkan, a restored house and garden where ten generations of the Hirata merchant family lived.

DAY 8 SHIRAKAWA-GO

North-west of Takayama is the village of Ogimachi, within the Shirakawa-go area of the Sho-kawa valley. The village is home to a large number of gassho-zukuri houses, and has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995. These large wooden houses have steep thatched roofs, designed to withstand heavy snow, and the term gassho-zukuri refers to the shape of praying hands formed by the roofs. Inside, the houses could accommodate large extended families of up to sixty people.

Our accommodation here will be in one of these traditional houses, and dinner will be served around the *irori* (sunken hearth).



DAY 9 KYOTO

We will leave the mountains today, travelling bus to Takayama, and then by train to Kyoto.

We will check into our accommodation, a comfortable modern hotel in central Kyoto. In the evening we will take a walk through the Gion district famous for its many *ryotei* (exclusive private restaurants) and the *geisha* or *maiko* (apprentice geisha).



DAY 10 KYOTO

There will be a half-day walking tour this morning. First of all we will visit the Sanjo-ohashi Bridge, the western end of the Nakasendo Trail. From there, we will visit Ryoan-ji, with its famous rock garden of raked gravel and 15 moss-covered boulders. It is not possible to see all 15 boulders at once from any place in the garden. It is said that if you can see all 15 you have achieved enlightenment. Afterwards, we will visit the famous Kinkaku-ji, also known as the Golden Pavilion, originally built by the Ashikaga Shogun in the 15th century as a place of contemplation and rest. There will be free time in the afternoon so you can explore the area further or shop for crafts.

DAY 11 NARA

The ancient city of Nara, which preceded Kyoto as Japan's capital from 710 to 784, is one hour south of Kyoto by train. We will visit the old merchant district of Nara-machi with its narrow streets, shops, cafes and restaurants. Next we will visit Todai-ji temple, with its bronze statue of Buddha, said to be the largest wooden structure in the world. Return to Kyoto and overnight in city-centre hotel.



DAY 12 MOUNT KOYA

From the Nara plain we will travel by train along the scenic Nankai railway line to Mount Koya, a bowl-shaped valley filled with stands of cedar trees 800 metres up in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula. Since the 9th century, when the monk Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi) founded the first temple and the *shingon* sect of Buddhism, Mount Koya has been a place of religious devotion and ceremony. Today there are more than 100 monasteries, many of which have *shukubo* (temple lodgings). We will stay in one of the elegant temples, run by the monks, and dine on *shojin-ryori* (Buddhist vegetarian cuisine). There will be a guided walk through the vast Okunoin cemetery, with thousands of graves and memorials to feudal lords and other past luminaries.

DAY 13 RETURN TO TOKYO

This morning you will have the opportunity to get up early to join in the Buddhist service at the temple. After breakfast we will check-out and return to Tokyo via Osaka.

DAY 14 TOUR ENDS

The tour will end today and your tour leader will help you transfer to Tokyo's Narita Airport for your flight home.

General Information

Meet/Depart

Tokyo (Narita International Airport)

Group Size

5 to 12

Mode of travel

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

Tour leader

Full time services of an English/Japanese-speaking tour leader.

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