

Mountains of Central Japan



HIGHLIGHTS

Four days hiking in the wonderful Hida range (the 'Japan Alps'), from Kamikochi to Yari Peak and along the Omote Ginza ridge.- classic mountain walking - Kenroku Park , Ninja Temple , the samurai district, and 21 st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in the historical city of Kanazawa - relaxing hot springs - Matsumoto Castle - Haku-san hike - Kyoto by day and night - important cultural and historical sites in the ancient capitals of Nara and Asuka - the mountain top village of Yoshino - guided tour of the huge cemetery and accommodation in a Shingon Buddhist temple on Mount Koya

GUIDE – BOB HEFFILL

Bobs connection with Japan goes back 30 years to 1973, when his parents were diplomats in Tokyo. After nine months living in Japan he studied Japanese language and literature at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. He then worked in Japan as an English teacher in state schools for three years on the JET program. He has spent most of the last fifteen years in the UK working as a Japanese translator and interpreter. He is a Member of the Institute of Translators and Interpreters.



15 days, 14 nights

European leader, small-group walking and hiking. Accommodation in minshuku, traditional ryokan, hotels, mountain huts, temples

Meet/Depart:

Kyoto/Osaka

Places visited:

Kanazawa · Mount Haku-san · Shirakawago village · Japan Alps · Matsumoto · Kyoto · Osaka

Level :

Vigorous - 7 days of hiking from 3 to 8 hours per day on mountain trails with some prolonged climbs, steep in parts

Dates:

27 June - 11 July 2010

12 - 26 September 2010

Group size:

Maximum: 8 Clients Minimum: 5 Clients

Prices for 2010:

£2875


Includes:

All domestic transport, accommodation, meals

Does not include:



International Flights, drinks with meals

Booking

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INTRODUCTION

Kanazawa · Mount Haku-san · Shirakawago village · Japan Alps · Matsumoto · Kyoto · Osaka

Mountains cover about 80% of the islands of Japan . The North Alps of Honshu , the main island are the jewel in the crown, the Koh-i-Noor diamond in the smouldering necklace of peaks that lie along north-western Pacific rim . The alpine valleys of Kamikochi, situated in the Hida Range , were first explored as a climbing and hiking area by a British preacher from Derbyshire, Walter Weston. He climbed in these mountains between 1891 and 1894, and published "Mountaineering and exploration in the Japan Alps" in London in 1896. Weston, together with two Japanese climbers, established the Japan Mountaineering Club in 1906. Hiking in these mountains it is easy to understand why Weston was attracted to them. Kamikochi is so beautiful that the prestigious Imperial Hotel in Tokyo even has a branch there. It is one of the few areas of Japan that the Ministry of the Environment is seriously trying to conserve. Fortunately, most visitors only walk a mile or two beyond the road head, leaving nature beyond for the walkers and climbers.

Many mountains are considered sacred in Japan , and Haku-san is one of them. You will hike on the north side of the ' White Mountain ', which in summer is covered in spectacular Alpine flowers, and lit with autumn colours in late September. Haku-san is relatively difficult to get to by public transport and so is quieter than other hiking areas such as Kamikochi. Haku-san stands proudly to the west of the North Alps , and from it there are stunning views of the Alps on a clear day.

In the city of Kanazawa , an important cultural centre with an interesting history. you will stay in a family run minshuku in a well preserved area near the Asanogawa River . In Kanazawa we visit the Kenrokuen Gardens , the ' Ninja ' temple, and the old samurai district., stopping for lunch at the 21 st Century Museum of Contemporary Art. The local morning fish market, which we visit to buy ingredients for a picnic, supplies restaurants that serve some of the best seafood in Japan .

Equally interesting are the beautifully restored minka houses in the secluded mountain village of Shirakawago , where you will spend the night after walking on Haku-san. The village was appointed a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995. The steeply pitched thatched gasshozukuri (literally 'like hands together in prayer') roofs, angled to withstand massive amounts of snow that fall every winter, are typical of many of the older farmhouses in this area of Japan . Although this is a conservation area, families live in these minka homes today, keeping alive traditions that might otherwise have disappeared.

Following four days of classic valley and ridge walking in Kamikochi you will visit Matsumoto, with its wonderful 16th century castle.. From Matsumoto you will then continue your journey, via the Kiso Valley to Kyoto where we spend a night at a comfortable, traditional ryokan. After a couple of days exploring Kyoto , Nara , and sites around the first imperial capital of Asuka, you will continue into the cultural heart of Japan , staying in the ridge-top village of Yoshino , and in a Buddhist monastery on Mount Koya . Local guides will lead walks in Kanazawa , Nara , and on Mount Koya .

As always, excellent Japanese food and accommodation is featured on this tour. You should expect to 'go-Japanese' for a couple of weeks, and can look forward to meeting the locals and staying in typical mountain huts in great locations on a hike that one client described as 'an awesome bit of walking'!

The last night is spent in dynamic Osaka.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 – SUNDAY MEET KYOTO

Overnight city centre hotel

DAY 2 – MONDAY TRANSFER TO KANAZAWA.

From Osaka we will drive to Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture via Omi Hachiman on Lake Biwa , where we will stop for lunch. Afternoon and evening to rest at minshuku in quiet neighbourhood beside the Asanogawa River . Soak in nearby baths before dinner. Overnight minshuku .

DAY 3 – TUESDAY KANAZAWA SIGHTSEEING.

Kanazawa , 'little Kyoto ' , is a charming city, and one with a brilliant history. Kaga grew to power as territory under feudal lords in the 16 th century and Kanazawa itself, escaping heavy bombing during the Second World War, retains more original buildings than most other Japanese cities. Under Maeda Toshiie, a retainer of the military hero Oda Nobunaga, this region became the wealthiest in Japan in terms of its rice yield. Locals are justifiably proud of their city. Afternoon sightseeing will include Kenrokuen Gardens . Kenrokuen is one of the three most famous gardens in Japan (the name refers to the six attributes (kenroku) of a garden, based on a Chinese concept, of spaciousness, seclusion, ingenuity, antiquity, water, and beautiful views). You will have a guided tour of the amazing 'Ninjadera' temple and the old samurai quarters in the afternoon.

You will stay in a minshuku near the quiet Higashi Chaya district in the heart of old Kanazawa . There is a chance to visit the local sento bathhouse in the early evening. Local families still use the sento.

The local seafood is first class, and will most likely have been landed in the morning and sold at the Omicho fish market down the road. Overnight minshuku.

DAY 4 –WEDNESDAY DRIVE TO SHIRAKAWAGO VILLAGE . SHORT HIKE ON HAKU-SAN EN ROUTE

You will make an early start from Kanazawa this morning. Driving south, we will enjoy a walk on one of the northern ridges of Haku-san. Haku-san, or ' White Mountain ' , is one of Japan 's three holy peaks and, as such, a site for religious training. Priests and pilgrims have been climbing the mountain for over a thousand years. The other two holy mountains are Tateyama and Mount Fuji . Covered in deep snow every winter, alpine flowers bloom here in the summer time.

From Haku-san you will drive to the village of Shirakawago . Your accommodation will be in one of the thatched minka farmhouses. The design of Japanese teahouses can be traced back to some of the architectural features of these rural homesteads. They can be very large, and at one time accommodate extended families of up to forty people. This village has been conserved as a UNESO World Heritage site, but families still farm locally and live in the minka . As in the minshuku and ryokan , you will eat fresh, local food, and sleep on futon on tatami mats. Overnight minshuku .

DAY 5 – THURSDAY DRIVE TO KAMIKOCHI. START HIKE

Today, after a look around the village of Shirakawago , you will drive via Hida Takayama in the mountains of Gifu Prefecture to Kamikochi. Our trek into Kamikochi starts from midday afternoon. We follow the path along the Kamikochi valley floor, gradually ascending through forests of birch and pine, where you are likely to see Japanese macaque monkeys, as well as a wide variety of wild flowers and birds. The main path ends near Yoko Lodge, beyond which you get your first views of the pyramidal peak of Yurigatake . You will climb up through the Yarisawa Valley tomorrow. Overnight mountain lodge.

DAY 6 – FRIDAY HIKING IN KAMIKOCHI

Today you will continue up the Yarisawa Valley and climb up to the mountain hut at 3,060m just below Yurigatake Peak . The hike will not take the whole day, and so you will have time to enjoy the views from the ridges around Yurigatake. If you feel energetic, you can climb (about 30 minutes) up to the top for a view of the sunset, although tomorrow, weather permitting, you will be up early to see the sunrise from the summit. Overnight mountain lodge.

DAY 7 – SATURDAY HIKING IN KAMIKOCHI

An early rise for your climb up to Yurigatake Peak, the fifth highest peak in Japan and, on clear mornings, a point with one of the finest views. Mount Fuji can occasionally be spotted rising beyond the mountain ridges to the east, floating above a sea of mist and cloud. This is a popular spot so you won't be alone, but the short climb up ladders is definitely worth it.

Your hike then turns east along a ridge known as the Omote Ginza and a succession of peaks to another mountain hut at Otensho. There are good views across to Yari and other mountains to the West. En route there one or two ladders and chains to help make walking safer. Overnight mountain hut.

DAY 8 – SUNDAY HIKING IN KAMIKOCHI

Today you will continue the walk along a wonderful ridge path to the Tsubakuro lodge, before descending from the mountain. You will stay overnight at Jonenbo ryokan at Hotaka hot spring. Overnight ryokan.

DAY 9 – MONDAY MATSUMOTO SIGHTSEEING AND DRIVE TO KYOTO

In the morning you will visit Matsumoto Castle , one of the finest feudal castles in Japan . Beautifully proportioned and featuring black and white walls, the three donjons rise six storeys. You can climb the steep steps up to the top floor, stopping at the tsukimi yagura (moon-viewing platform) on the way. A helpful English-speaking guide will explain the castle's history. From Matsumoto the drive down to Kyoto is through the scenic Kiso Valley . Overnight ryokan.

DAY 10 – TUESDAY KYOTO SIGHTSEEING. TRAIN TO NARA

Kyoto is such a special place it would take years to see a fraction of its wonders. You will have a glimpse when you visit Nijo Jinya, an old merchant house. In the afternoon, after a noodle lunch, and a visit to Ginkakuji Temple , nestled in the foothills of eastern Kyoto , you will take a train to the older capital city of Nara .Overnight city centre hotel.

DAY 11 –WEDNESDAY NARA SIGHTSEEING

This morning you will visit Nara Park and the great Todaiji temple. Todaiji's Daibutsu-den is the largest freestanding wooden structure in the world, and houses a 16-metre tall bronze image of the cosmic Dainichi buddha, containing 437 tonnes of bronze and 130kg of gold. Prior to being rebuilt three hundred years ago, the awesome structure was even bigger than it is today. In the afternoon you will visit a small, local sake brewery, and look around Naramachi, the old town. There will then be some free time to wander around and explore, shop, or just relax. Overnight hotel.

DAY 12 – THURSDAY NARA TO YOSHINOYAMA VIA ASUKA

Today you will continue your journey by train to Asuka, where we will hire bicycles for a guided tour. You will have lunch at a small aizome (indigo dyeing) craft-centre, run by an ex-HNK broadcaster. He makes buckwheat noodles and serves a delicious lunch. We then continue to the mountain-top village of Yoshino , where you will stay in a ryokan with wonderful Japanese-style baths and a garden designed by the tea-master Sen no Rikyu. Overnight ryokan.

DAY 13 – FRIDAY YOSHINO WALK. TRAIN TO MOUNT KOYA

This morning we will hike up through Yoshino to the Mikumari Shrine. Above this is the start of a pilgrim trail that continues south through the Omine mountains to Kumano. Returning to the village, we will see the marvellous Zaodo Hall at the Kinpusenji Temple (head temple for the shugendo ascetic mountain priest sect), before enjoying kuzu (arrowroot) noodles, a local speciality, for lunch. In the afternoon you will travel to Mount Koya by train and cable car. Overnight temple.

DAY 14 – SATURDAY WALK MOUNT KOYA. TRAIN TO OSAKA

You will rise quite early and have the opportunity to take part in a short, informal meditation session. After breakfast, you will have a guided tour of the huge cemetery under the cedar trees on Mount Koya . The local guide will explain who is buried where and what they were famous for - a real history lesson. The path leads to the mausoleum of Kukai, or Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon (Pure Word) Buddhism. After lunch we take the train to Osaka where we enjoy our farewell dinner. Overnight hotel.

DAY 15 - SUNDAY FLY HOME OR ONWARD TRAVEL

Breakfast, then transfer to Kansai International Airport for flight home or onward travel to other destinations.

TRIP NOTES

Equipment & Clothing

When we receive your booking we send you a dossier, which contains a suggested gear and clothing list. If you do have queries at this initial stage do ring us and we will be pleased to offer advice.

Hotels

HOTELS NARA, OSAKA : Comfortable, modern, downtown hotels. You will also stay in temples, traditional ryokan , and minshuku . Most have bathrooms with modern toilets and basins and, in most cases, large Japanese style bathrooms with communal single sex baths. Please note that single rooms are normally only available in hotels – where a single room supplement may apply.

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Meal Plan

All meals are provided.

Important Notes

Every effort will be made to keep to the above itinerary, but we cannot make absolute guarantees! Changes to the itinerary will normally be to introduce an improvement. Weather conditions, road and transport conditions, and the health of walkers can all contribute to changes. The guide will ensure that the trip runs according to plan, but an easy-going nature is an asset!