

Snow Country

Japan Alps, Kanazawa & Kyoto

10 days guided tour

Adventures in
JAPAN

winter tour



Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site

10 day guided tour visiting the mountains and villages of central Japan, Kanazawa and Kyoto. Accommodation in family-run minshuku, traditional ryokan, and hotels.

Dates & Prices

2011 £1850
14 - 23 February

Included

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

Itinerary

Day 1 Meet Tokyo & transfer to Yudanaka Onsen **2** Obuse, Hokusai museum 'Snow Monkeys' **3 & 4** Takayama **5** Shirakawa-go **6** Travel to Kanazawa, visit Kenrokuen garden **7** Full-day in Kanazawa **8** By train to Kyoto, visit Gion area **9** Full day in Kyoto **10** Tour ends

Highlights

Yudanaka Onsen hot spring – Snow monkeys – Obuse & Hokusai museum – traditional merchants houses of Takayama – Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site - Kanazawa & Kenrokuen Garden - Kyoto

Introduction

The Snow Country tour is ideal for those who want to combine time spent in Tokyo or Kyoto with a journey into the winter landscape of central Japan. The tour offers bathing in natural hot springs, and visits to the historic towns and villages of this mountainous region.

We will begin by travelling to a wonderful hot spring town in the mountains of Nagano, where you can soak in the indoor and outdoor baths. Yudanaka Onsen has a history going back 1,300 years and you will stay at an elegant traditional ryokan with its own hot spring baths. Sitting in a hot bath surrounded by snow is an experience not to be missed! After a soak, sit down to a dinner of delicious home-cooked food with a chance to try 'atsu-kan' (hot sake). On the second day we visit the small town of Obuse, stopping at the museum dedicated to the artist Hokusai, famous for his *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Obuse is also famous for its saké brewery, and during our visit we will be able to try the different varieties and it may be possible to see the brewing taking place.

Afterwards we will visit the famous 'snow monkeys', who come to bathe in one of the outdoor hot spring pools. Japanese monkeys have been coming to this hot pool for more than 40 years, ever since a sympathetic lodge owner started leaving food out for them in the winter.

Our next stop will be Takayama, a former feudal artist's enclave, with many well-preserved traditional houses. The town is famous for its crafts; particularly lacquer ware, pottery, and furniture. There will be time to wander through the back streets, visit the restored Edo-period government buildings, and shop for souvenirs at the morning market.

We head next to the remote village of Gogmachi, 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 formed by the roofs, said to resemble praying hands. From Shirakawa-go, we travel by road to Kanazawa, an elegant city where we will spend two days, and visit Kenrokuen, a classical Japanese garden, one of Japan's three most famous. Winter is a lovely time to see the garden, when snow will grace the trees and rocks, and you will avoid the tourists. Finally, our journey brings us to Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, and we will have two nights to sample this traditional and sophisticated city. The tour ends here but you may like to stay on in Kyoto, or travel onwards to other destinations in Japan. Along with the beautiful snowy landscapes and wonderful hot springs, we will enjoy freshly-made local cuisine at each stop, such as hida beef, miso bean paste, sweet dumplings and sansai cuisine made from delicately prepared mountain vegetables.

DAY 1 MEET IN TOKYO & TRANSFER TO YUDANAKA ONSEN DAY 2 OBUSE & SNOW MONKEYS

We will meet in Tokyo in the early afternoon, and travel by train to Yudanaka Onsen in the mountains north of Tokyo. We will check-in to our accommodation, a lovely traditional ryokan with both indoor and outdoor hot spring baths. Bathing is an important ritual for the Japanese, and soaking in a hot spring bath is a quintessential Japanese experience. Winter is one of the most pleasant times to visit the springs and the experience of soaking in the hot water while contemplating the snowy landscape is sure to be a highlight of your trip. A beautifully-prepared dinner will be served.

The lovely town of Obuse was once an important stop on the salt trade coming from the coast and grew rich on the proceeds. Today the town is known for its abundant sweet-chestnuts and the local sake brewery, which has been owned by the same family since feudal times. It was also the home of the woodblock-print artist Hokusai during the latter part of his life, and a small museum displays some of his works. There will be a chance to visit the museum and the saké brewery, with the possibility of seeing the brewing process. We will have lunch in the

attached restaurant with its fabulous open kitchen, and in the afternoon we will travel to see the famous 'Snow Monkeys'. These monkeys congregate in an open-air hot spring bath built especially for them, enjoying the warm water much as humans do! We will return to our ryokan for dinner.

DAY 3 TRAVEL TO TAKAYAMA

Takayama is surrounded on all sides by mountains, and this remoteness and lack of arable land meant that locals could rely less on farming and more on crafts such as lacquer ware and woodworking for their livelihoods.



Snow-covered trees



Snow Monkeys at Yudanaka Onsen



Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site



The skills of Takayama's craftsmen were so prized in the Edo period (1600-1867) that many of the great temples and palaces of Kyoto were built by them. After checking-in to our ryokan, there will be time to wander through the local streets before another wonderful dinner, with the chance to try the local *Hida-gyu* beef and perhaps some local sake.

snows. The name 'gassho-zukuri' refers to the shape of the roofs which is said to resemble the shape of praying hands. Falling into disrepair, and threatened by the construction of a dam, locals decided to move them to their current location in Ogimachi. We will stay in one of these thatched houses run as an inn by a local family.

DAY 9 KYOTO

We have a full day to enjoy Kyoto, and we start with a visit to the Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji), originally built by the Ashikaga Shogun in the 15th century as a place of contemplation and rest. We will then continue to the Arashiyama area, where we can visit the Togetsukyo Bridge and nearby bamboo groves. There will be free time in the afternoon, however we will meet in the evening for our farewell dinner.

DAY 10 TOUR ENDS

Our tour comes to end this morning, and your tour leader will be in on hand to help you with onward arrangements. You can stay in Kyoto for a few more days, or perhaps travel on to another destination in Japan.

Night-time in Shirakawa-go



Hot spring bath at Yudanaka Onsen

DAY 4 TAKAYAMA

We will have a full day in Takayama, starting with a visit to the morning market along the banks of the river. We will then visit San-machi, the old merchant's quarter, where the houses have been preserved and are still used as shops and restaurants. There will be time to relax and perhaps visit a small antique shop with old kimonos or fans, or just soak up the atmosphere.

DAY 6 TRAVEL TO KANAZAWA

From the remote Shokawa Valley we head by road to the coast and the city of Kanazawa. In feudal times Kanazawa was the seat of the Maeda clan, one of Japan's most powerful, and it rivaled Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo). The old town has survived well and there is both a geisha and samurai district to visit, however the highlight is the traditional Kenrokuen garden, perhaps the most famous in Japan, formerly the outer garden of Kanazawa Castle. Winter is a special time to come here, without the crowds of summer and perhaps with a dusting of snow on the trees and stones. We'll check in to our hotel and enjoy dinner in a local restaurant.



Merchants' houses in Kanazawa



Ukiyo-e woodblock prints in the Hokusai-kan in Obuse

DAY 5 SHIRAKAWA-GO AND GASSHOZUKURI HOUSES

Our journey continues today deeper into the mountains, and the remote village of Ogimachi, part of Shirakawa-go, now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Until the 1970s many of these villages had no electricity and were cut off in winter. Because of a scarcity of flat land only the eldest son was allowed to marry and move out of their parents' house. Extended families lived together in large wooden houses with thatched roofs designed to withstand the deep winter



Fresh crab for sale in the Omicho market, Kanazawa

DAY 7 KANAZAWA

In the morning we will visit the busy Omicho market, where seafood fresh from the Japan Sea such as crab is on sale, alongside fruit, vegetables, pickles and other food items. In the afternoon there will be free time to catch up on postcards or shopping for souvenirs.

DAY 8 BY TRAIN TO KYOTO

From Kanazawa we board the train which will take us to Kyoto, taking us along the coast before heading through the mountains and along the edge of Lake Biwa. We will arrive in Japan's former capital in the afternoon, check-in to our hotel, and take a walk through the Gion area, famous for geisha and the many expensive ryotei restaurants. As dusk arrives, red lanterns glow and it feels like a different world.

General Information

Meet/Depart

Tokyo / Kyoto (extension to other cities is possible, please ask for more details)

Group Size

5 to 12

Mode of travel

Trains (shinkansen 'bullet train'), bus

Tour leader

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

Accommodation

Traditional ryokan and minshuku, western-style hotels.

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After-dinner entertainment in Shirakawa-go