

CLASSIC JAPAN



ITINERARY:

Meet at Haneda Airport, Tokyo. **(12 days/11 nights)**

Our new Japan trip explores the central part of Honshu, the largest of Japan's four main islands.

On landing at Tokyo's Haneda Airport we whisk you off to nearby Hakone for 2 nights. Hakone is famed for its hot springs. The lovely situation in the forested hills that form part of the Mount Fuji National Park and our comfortable accommodation with its own hot springs spa make it the perfect spot to recover from jet-lag.

From Hakone we travel by train to Kyoto (3 nights), for over 1,000 years the capital of Japan. The city and its surroundings have 17 UNESCO WHS, the highest concentration in the world! We spend our time exploring Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples and palaces all surrounded by spectacular traditional gardens and strolling along the lanes of various quiet neighbourhoods. Kyoto is busy but most definitely worthwhile.

Naoshima, the main 'Art Island' in Japan's Inland Sea (On the Philippines Sea) is our next destination (2 nights). A tranquil setting for some world class modern art installations and museums among stunning coastal scenery and wooded hills.

We then head for the Japanese Alps (2 nights) and the traditional timber 'post towns' of the Nagasendo Trail, a tightly controlled route that linked Kyoto to Edo (Erstwhile Tokyo). We stroll an 8Km/5 miles section through villages, forest and past lovely waterfalls.

Finally we return to Tokyo, the world's largest megalopolis (2 nights) where we lodge at a leading hotel surrounded by its own famed gardens.

We shall experience the crowds and neon of Shibuya district but also the relative peace of the Meiji Shrine and Ueno and Yanaka districts.



Day 1

Land at Haneda and get transferred by taxi (2h) to Hakone, where we check into our very comfortable Onsen accommodation. Time to relax and wallow in the hotel's hot springs. If up to it, there may be time to go for a stroll.

Day 2

This morning we catch a cable car over the steam and sulphur-spewing caldera of Mt Hakone and down to Lake Ashi. On a clear day the view of Mt Fuji is spectacular. Cruise the lake on a replica pirate ship (Very 'Japanese') and stroll along the shore between ports before retracing our steps. In the afternoon visit the superb Hakone Open Air Museum, a stunning collection of modern sculptures set in beautifully landscaped gardens; one of the lawns has 6 monumental Henry Moores! Anthony Gormley's sculpture of him lying face down and spread-eagled is regularly moved around the lawns of the gardens.

Day 3

We board the Hakone Tozan Railway, the world's second steepest track, that winds its way through lush dense forest to the plains via 3 switchbacks. Here we eventually transfer to the Shinkansen (Bullet train) to Kyoto.

Later in the afternoon, as the light fades, we shall stroll the traditional narrow lanes of the Gion district, famed as the 'Geisha Quarter'. Traditional timber building with paper screens and painted paper lanterns hung on the outside line the streets.

Day 4

Today we start in the northern Higashiyama district, one of Kyoto's prime temple zones, set against the natural backdrop of forested hills. We shall visit some of the many shrines and gardens along the way, and some less known ones too. The Philosopher's Path follows a peaceful canal through Bohemian neighbourhoods linking all these.

After lunch we shall proceed to Chion-in (The Vatican of Pure Land Buddhism) and continue, ending up at Kiyomizu-dera with its stunning sunset views over the city.

Day 5

After breakfast we head for the Arashiyama district. Here too there are temples, shrines and wonderful gardens and the famous bamboo

grove at Adashino Nenbutsu-Ji. Another highlight is the exquisite landscaped gardens of the Tenryu-Ji temple.

Next stop Kyoto Imperial Palace, with its special 'nightingale floor' designed to squeak when anyone approached, and Nijo Castle. While in town we shall also visit the 'Sake district' where various sake producers are based and where we shall have an introduction to sake making and a tasting.

We may have some free time late in the afternoon should any of you wish to make purchases or visit further sites.

Day 6

After checking out we make our way to the southeastern district of Fushimi to visit Fushimi Inari Taisha, one of Japan's most bewitching shrines. Its paths are lined with thousands of orange Tori gates, guarded by a multitude of stone fox guardians (Protectors of the harvest). We shall climb part of the way up the hill, leaving the crowds behind, until a belvedere to then return via a different route.

The afternoon is spent travelling east south east to the island of Naoshima, sheltered, like hundreds of other islands, in the almost enclosed Inland Sea. Our accommodation is secluded among the island's forested hills and renowned for its delicious cuisine.

Day 7

We spend the day exploring the island, its lovely coastline dotted with many art installations and museums. First the superb Chichu Art Museum, then the Valley Gallery, followed by the Benesse House Museum.

In the afternoon we head to Honmura village, on the north coast, where one-off artistic projects are housed within existing village buildings, collectively known as Art House Project.

Day 8

We check out and catch the ferry back to Honshu, then head north east to Nakatsugawa, in the foothills of the Japanese Alps, in the Kiso Mountains. Here too our Onsen accommodation has thermal baths and is renowned for its delicious traditional cuisine that makes the most of seasonal local ingredients.

Rest of the day is at leisure to allow you a bit of R&R after a busy first week.



Day 9

We head for the pretty, timber built, Edo Period (1603 - 1868 AD) post town of Magome on the Nakasendo Trail. During the Shogunate movement between districts was tightly controlled and goods transportation heavily taxed. The role of the post towns along the route was to provide accommodation (Different social ranks had different lodgings) and exact fees. We start our 8Km/5 miles walk in Magome (600m altitude), climb gradually through hamlets lodgings) and exact fees. We start our 8Km/5 miles walk in Magome (600m altitude), climb gradually through hamlets and forest to the pass at 790m and then descend through forest and past waterfalls to the equally picturesque post town of Tsumago. In all the walk takes about 4 to 5 hours. (Should anyone wish to avoid the climb at the beginning of the walk we can drop you off by vehicle at the pass).

Day 10

This morning we travel to Tokyo. The world's largest metropolis, with 37 million people, is somewhat overwhelming. More than a single city it helps to think of it as an amalgam of different neighbourhoods, each with its own character. Tokyo is not ancient and what there was that was old was flattened during WWII bombardments. We check in at our lovely 5 star Luxury hotel surrounded by beautiful private gardens.

Late in the afternoon we head for Meiji Jingu, Tokyo's most impressive shrine, before moving to modern Shibuya. This neighbourhood is most famous for its much photographed Shibuya Crossing, the busiest crossroad in the world, and its brash neon signage. You will be able to experience all this from above, with wonderful views over this enormous city.

Day 11

Today we head for the quieter neighbourhoods of Akihabara and Ueno. This is where many of Tokyo's museums, the zoo and the Tokyo University campus are based. Here we visit Koishikawa Korakuen, one of the city's most beautiful Japanese-style gardens dating back to 1629. In the Edo period it was the property of Yorifusa Tokugawa, head of the influential Mito Tokugawa clan.

We then head for the superb Tokyo National Museum, where we visit the Honkan (Japanese Gallery), a 25 room space hosting Japanese arts and antiquities. The signage is excellent and it gives a comprehensive idea of Japan's influences and historical and artistic development. We then stroll the lanes of nearby Yanaka, one of the few neighbourhoods that still retains a more traditional feel and full of 'mom & pop' run stores.

Day 12

Depending on your flight departure times we transfer you back to Haneda Airport for your flight home.

