

Day 1 Tokyo (D)

On arrival in Tokyo you will be met by your driver at the airport and taken to the hotel in traditional Asakusa, by shared shuttle. Your tour leader will be waiting to welcome you in the lobby to assist with check in and orientation. Asakusa's great temple and its maze-like side streets of fascinating shops are just a few minutes' walk from your accommodation. This evening you will convene with your group for a trip briefing and a fabulous included meal at one of the area's great restaurants.

Day 2 Tokyo (B)

Well rested, you'll no doubt be ready for a tour of Tokyo's many exciting attractions today. You will probably begin the tour by meandering through Asakusa's low-rise market stalls and its temple, Senso-ji, before going on to discover some of Tokyo's other distinct districts – perhaps the electronics shops of Akihabara, or the famous scramble crossing at Shibuya. A visit to Tokyo's beautiful Hamarikyū Gardens, an oasis of calm in the metropolis, will also be included today.

Day 3 Tsurui (B, D)

Today you will hop aboard a private bus and head out of the city to Haneda Airport for your flight to Hokkaido. Hokkaido is the second-largest of Japan's four main islands, and yet parts of it remain unvisited by most international visitors. Known for its rare wildlife, rugged sweeping plains, volcanic landscape, and amazing snow festivals, Hokkaido is a superb winter destination.

You will land in Kushiro and transfer by private bus to Tsurui, where you'll be spending your first night in Hokkaido. You'll have the chance to take a pleasant hot spring bath and settle down in your wonderful accommodation, with its lovely, relaxing lounge area.

A delicious home-cooked dinner will be included at the hotel this evening.

Day 4 Lake Kussharo (B, L, D)

Tsurui is famous as a breeding ground for the rare red-crowned crane, and this morning you will have the services of an expert local guide in addition to your tour leader, as you take a bird-watching tour of the area. Hopefully you'll be lucky enough to see the cranes perform their incredible mating dance – don't forget to bring your camera.

Day 5 Abashiri (B, D)

This morning it's time to board an icebreaker for a cruise on the Okhotsk Sea. From your boat you'll be able to appreciate the wild scenery of coastal Hokkaido and perhaps even get up close to a flock of Steller's Sea Eagles as they congregate on the ice floes. Later, you will once again climb aboard our private coach for the journey to Abashiri, where this afternoon you'll visit the Abashiri Prison Museum, an interesting set of buildings that were constructed during the Meiji era (1868-1912).

Tonight, we'll enjoy a delicious *kaiseki* meal at our traditional accommodation.

Day 6 Sapporo (B)

This morning you will take a train from Abashiri, through the Hokkaido winter heartland to Sapporo, the island's capital. The ride is a spectacular experience in itself, offering fantastic views of Hokkaido's vast, windswept snowscape as you journey cross-country.

In Sapporo you'll have a chance to slow your pace and relax, with two nights in a hotel located conveniently next to Sapporo station.

Day 7 Sapporo (B, D)

Sapporo is the capital of Hokkaido and most notably hosted the Winter Olympics in 1972. You'll have a chance to explore the city, spend time at the world-famous annual snow festival, and sample some of the unique cuisine such as the local buttery ramen noodles. The city also features some Meiji period architecture, most notably at the city's iconic Clock Tower. This evening, we will visit the Sapporo beer museum, which will be followed by a feast of a dinner at the Sapporo Beer Garden.

Day 8 Hakodate (B)

This morning you will travel by train to Hakodate, Hokkaido's third-largest city. With a history closely tied to Japan's re-opening to the world in the nineteenth century after over 250 years of national isolation, Hakodate became one of the most important Japanese hubs for foreign trade. This afternoon you'll be able to learn about the city's early modern history at the unique star-shaped Goryokaku fort, and as the sun sets, you'll head to Mt Hakodate for a thrilling cable car ride to admire one of Japan's best panoramic nighttime views from the summit.

Day 9 Kyoto (B, D)

Today it's time to leave Hokkaido behind and return to Honshu, Japan's main island, by plane. Flying from Hakodate to Itami Airport, you'll then take the train to Kyoto, Japan's cultural heart and capital for over a millennium, from 794 until 1868.

On arrival in the city, you will drop your luggage at the hotel and have time to freshen up, before heading out to one of the many great restaurants in the area, for an included meal.

Day 10 Kyoto (B)

Kyoto's illustrious history as the seat of Imperial rule has left it with a bounty of ancient temples, shrines, palaces and gardens. In fact, Kyoto's heritage was considered so significant that it was spared bombing raids during World War II. Many of these historical treasures therefore remain intact to this day.

Your tour leader will take you on an extensive tour of the city, introducing you to some of its famous sites as well as some of its lesser-known treasures. This afternoon you will have the privilege of an exclusive audience with a *maiko* - or trainee geisha. This is a rare opportunity to ask questions and discover what life is like in this notoriously secretive world.

Day 11 Kyoto (B)

You will be free to continue exploring the countless sights of the city, or to make a day trip to one of the fascinating destinations within easy reach by rail. Your tour leader may be leading a tour of the former capital, Nara, just an hour's train ride away. You can choose to accompany the group or make alternative plans if there is something else you'd like to see today.

Day 12 Kanazawa (B)

Today you will travel by train to Kanazawa on the Japan Sea coast, an area often referred to as yukiguni – snow country.

The region is renowned for its great seafood and traditional crafts such as gold leaf and lacquerware.

This afternoon you will visit Kenrokuen, ranked as one of Japan's top three gardens and particularly famous for the 'snow ropes' that adorn the pine trees in winter, preventing the branches from breaking under the heavy weight of the snow. Additionally, if you have the energy after a busy tour, you might wish to visit the local market, samurai district, or the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art.

Day 13 Kanazawa (B, L)

Kanazawa is a perfect base for a day excursion by private coach to Shirakawago, and you'll be stopping off on the way for a hands-on lesson in the art of traditional Japanese washi paper making.

Continuing to Shirakawago, and after enjoying a traditional hearty lunch on arrival, you will have the afternoon to enjoy exploring this UNESCO World Heritage designated village of traditional thatched-roof houses, referred to as 'praying hands' houses due to their impressive steep roofs. Late afternoon sees you heading back to Kanazawa for a free evening to explore the city's vibrant restaurant scene.

Day 14 Tokyo (B, D)

Finally, it's time for you to return to Tokyo for one last afternoon and evening in the city. Hopefully you should arrive in time for a little last-minute souvenir shopping. Head out tonight for a farewell dinner with your tour leader and fellow group members. The perfect time to share your favourite moments of the trip.

Day 15 Tour Ends (B)

A shared shuttle bus has been arranged to pick you up from the hotel to take you to the airport for your flight home. Have a safe trip!

Our tours aim to be as flexible as possible, so there is no set-in-stone itinerary for each day. You will be provided on the ground with Day-by-Day sheets and the tour leader will outline what they are going to do each day in detail. If you would like to break away from the group and do something different, they will be available to offer advice, and help you plan your day.

Important Tour Information

Please bear in mind that Hokkaido temperatures in the heart of winter can be as low as -20°C (-4°F). You will be out in the countryside very early some mornings and will also be on the frozen sea near Abashiri, so please ensure you have very warm winter clothing, winter boots and non-bright jackets for the nature spotting sections of the trip. Ice grippers or simple rubber crampons are needed to walk safely on the icy streets.

Fitness

Even when not using public transport, sightseeing in Japan often involves walking between sights, climbing up steps in temples and being 'on the go' for much of the day. To enjoy any of our Small Group Tours you should be of moderate fitness, able to walk and climb stairs without difficulty and able to maintain a pace that is comfortable for the majority of the group.

Dietary Requirements

There are a number of meals included on all our tours. Please let us know in advance if you have any special dietary requirements and we will try to ensure that included meals meet these needs.

In addition, please note that dietary requirements (such as vegetarianism, gluten-free diets and even some allergies) are very uncommon in Japan so meals for those with specific requirements may be simpler and less varied.

On this tour you'll stay at a number of Japanese style accommodation, you will be served a traditional dinner, as well as a Japanese breakfast in the morning.

En suite / shared facilities

Culturally, communal bathing is common practice in Japan. Please note that in some traditional accommodations fully private en suite facilities may not be available. We will do our best to secure rooms on tour with private toilet and sink however some accommodations are not able to offer private facilities. Shared facilities (when included) will always be separated by gender.

Policy on single rooms

Single rooms are guaranteed at all night stops on this tour through payment of a mandatory single supplement.

Double rooms

Please note that in Japan, twin rooms are very much the norm, and there are far fewer double rooms available. Please understand that on this tour we are not able to offer double rooms at any of the locations.

Your tour leader

Our tours are led on the ground by a fluent English speaker, now a resident of Japan and able to speak Japanese. They are there to ensure that you get the most out of your trip and that the whole adventure goes smoothly. The tour leader travels with the group and stays at the same hotels and *ryokan*, so please feel free to ask for help or advice at any time.

Your tour leader is not a guide so may not know every historical detail of every shrine, temple or palace, yet they are available pretty much all day every day and will even be happy to accompany tour members out at night on occasion!

Please note that the tour leader reserves the right to deny participation in an activity if s/he feels that it is in the safety or best interest of you and/or any other members of the group. Similarly, dangerous weather conditions may lead to cancellation of such an activity.

Luggage

We highly recommend that to make your stay more enjoyable you pack reasonably light. Large suitcases will be an inconvenience to you as you will have to carry your bags for short distances at times and some stations do not have escalators or elevators/lifts.

For ease of transit, we will be forwarding your luggage on three occasions, and you will be without your main bag for 2 consecutive nights in Hokkaido (1 night in Lake Kussharo and 1 night in Abashiri), 2 consecutive nights between Hokkaido and Kyoto (1 night in Hakodate and the first night in Kyoto), and for 2 consecutive nights in Kanazawa.

You will need a small overnight bag (e.g. backpack) for use when we forward our main bags to the next location.

Transport on tour

Please note that most transfers are by public transport making use of Japan's first-rate transport network. This tour uses a mixture of domestic flights, trains, taxis, and boats, as well as private coaches for some transfers and sightseeing.

International Flights

This tour starts and finishes in Tokyo for arrivals and departures at Tokyo Narita Airport or Tokyo Haneda Airport. Please note that the included meet-and-greet and airport transfer to the first hotel is ONLY available from these two airports.

Check-in

Upon arrival you will probably be tired after a long international flight. Please note that rooms at the Tokyo hotel are only available **from 3pm**.

Hotels in Japan operate strict check-in policies. If you have an early arrival you can either book an extra night for any-time check-in, or the hotel will be happy to securely store your luggage for you whilst you go for a drink or explore the local area.

The tour leader will be staying at the first hotel for two nights before the tour starts so they will be available for advice if you choose to book pre tour nights. We recommend booking at least one extra night to check in and relax before the tour begins.

