

SMALL GROUP TOURS



ESSENTIAL

Japan Unmasked

13 Nights

Tokyo > Nagano > Matsumoto > Takayama > Kanazawa > Hiroshima > Kurashiki > Kyoto > Tokyo



-  Ride the famous *shinkansen* bullet train
-  Stay in a Buddhist temple lodging at Nagano's Zenko-ji Temple
-  Admire one of Japan's best preserved samurai castles in Matsumoto
-  Explore the traditional craft town of Takayama in the Japanese Alps
-  Visit the traditional samurai and geisha districts of Kanazawa
-  Explore the old canal district of Kurashiki

IJT ESSENTIAL TOURS

Flexible, fast-paced tours. Just the basics included, keeping the cost down so you can choose how much you spend

Style Facts

- Two - three-star accommodation
- En suite rooms in Western-style hotels, shared single-sex bathroom facilities in Japanese-style inns
- Arrival airport transfer by shared shuttle bus and transport pass for departure transfer
- Breakfast every day plus one or two evening meals
- Entrance fees not included
- Carry your own luggage
- Solo travellers: a single room is available for no extra charge at Western-style hotels, but you will need to share with a member of the same sex in the Japanese-style inns

Tour Overview

The tour begins in Tokyo: the beating, neon heart of Japan. The first of many rides on the *shinkansen* bullet train then whisks you into mountainous Nagano, where you'll spend the night at a *shukubo* temple lodging, try vegetarian Buddhist cuisine and search for the key to paradise in the pitch-dark tunnels underneath Zenko-ji - one of Japan's most important temples.

A visit to the snow monkeys soaking in the in the natural hot spring pools of Yudanaka will be included on our 2024 departures, or in 2025, a visit to the small town of Obuse to admire the stunning collection of woodblock prints at the Hokusai museum. This will be followed by a visit to the "Black Crow Castle", Matsumoto's magnificent original samurai fortress. After crossing the Northern Japanese Alps, you'll experience warm Japanese hospitality at a traditional *ryokan* inn in Takayama, where the old-town streets hide sake breweries, craft shops and morning markets loaded with fresh produce.

Kyoto and Kanazawa offer a glimpse of traditional Japan - one a magnificent former capital with an astounding 17 World Heritage Sites, the other a small but beautifully preserved city with lamp-lit streets and one of the best gardens in Japan. Walking around the Gion district in Kyoto you might be lucky enough to spot a geisha in full regalia. Further west you'll visit Hiroshima, where the Peace Memorial Park offers a sobering reminder of Japan's darkest hour. Hiroshima today is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city teeming with life and optimism. Be sure to try the region's favourite savoury pancake: *okonomiyaki*.

Finally, you'll visit Kurashiki - a real gem of a town that often goes unseen by foreign visitors but whose beautiful merchant canal district, wealth of excellent museums and cosmopolitan atmosphere make it well worth the trip.



Day by day

Many of our customers choose to arrive a day or two early to get over jet-lag and get the most out of the tour. Whatever the case, we will be happy to make arrangements to suit your needs.

Day 1 Tokyo

The tour begins in Tokyo. On arrival you will be met at the airport by your driver and travel by shared shuttle bus to the hotel.

Our hotel is in Tokyo's historic Asakusa district. Close by, you will find the Tokyo Skytree and Senso-ji Temple and have easy access to the subway and over-ground links to the whole city. There is certainly plenty to keep you occupied if you arrive early.

We will have a group meeting in the evening, giving you the chance to meet your fellow group members and tour leader. After the meeting, if you feel like it you can head out with your tour leader and group to one of the excellent nearby restaurants for an introduction to Japan's outstanding cuisine and dining etiquette.

Day 2 Tokyo (B)

Today your tour leader will take you on a walking tour which will include Meiji Jingu Shrine, Hamarikyū Gardens and a visit to the traditional Asakusa area. Of course, there are so many fantastic things to do and see in this amazing city: museums, gardens, and shrines. You should feel free, if you want, to head out and do your own thing – your leader will be happy to assist with any plans.

Day 3 Nagano (B)

Today you'll leave the big city behind and make your way to the city of Nagano, located at the foot of the Japanese Alps. Nagano is famous for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics and is also the location of Zenko-ji – one of Japan's most important temples. This afternoon will be yours to explore the temple and the wider city. We also recommend joining your tour leader for a lunch of freshly made soba noodles (a local speciality) before relaxing at the local hot spring baths. Tonight, you will be spending the night at one of Zenko-ji's affiliated *shukubo* lodgings. Accommodation will be in simple, Japanese-style rooms with tatami mats, sliding screen doors and comfortable futon mattresses.

Day 4 Matsumoto (B)

On day four you will be rising early to attend optional morning prayers at Zenko-ji – a unique and spiritual experience. After the ceremony you will return to your lodgings for an elaborate breakfast of *shojin ryōri* (traditional vegetarian Buddhist cuisine) before having the opportunity to make a visit to the hot-spring bathing monkeys of Yudanaka (for tours departing in 2024) or the quaint town of Obuse and the Hokusai Museum with its superb collection of original *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints (for tours departing in 2025). After lunch you will make your way to Matsumoto, another alpine city famous for its impressive original samurai castle – the "Black Crow". This afternoon we recommend paying a visit to the castle and its nearby museum or heading out to the excellent *ukiyo-e* woodblock print museum in the city suburbs.

Day 5 Takayama (B, D)

You will continue your journey through the Japanese Alps on day five as you make your way to Takayama, a town famed for the high quality of its traditional crafts. There are many options to keep you busy in the town today, among which you could opt to join your leader for a wander along the town's riverside then through the renowned historical merchants' quarter, dipping into sake breweries, specialist woodcarvers' shops and soy sauce makers. You can also easily head off on your own to a number of sights, including the festival float museum and the marvellous Showakan museum, for a hands-on, retro experience from the early 20th century. Tonight, you'll be staying at a simple *minshuku* (family-run inn) with Japanese-style rooms, onsen baths and a lovely multi-course *kaiseki* dinner included.

Day 6 Takayama (B)

With another day to explore Takayama we recommend making the local morning market your first port of call. Your leader can also arrange a guided tour around the Jinya – the only Edo Period government house left in Japan. Later, you can join your tour leader on a visit to the Hida no Sato folk village, an open-air museum filled with traditional thatched-roof farmhouses, before heading back to the old town where you could try a spot of sake-tasting at the local breweries to round off the day. Dinner is not included this evening, so we highly recommend going out for a taste of the local delicacy, Hida beef, which is every bit as delicious as its Kobe cousin!

Day 7 Kanazawa (B)

This morning you will have a little time for last-minute craft shopping or a stroll along one of the town's designated walking trails before getting on our private coach. We'll head to the beautifully preserved traditional districts of Kanazawa, home to one of Japan's top three landscape gardens. Located on the Japan Sea Coast, Kanazawa is one of Japan's best-preserved traditional cities. Like Kyoto, its historical monuments were considered sufficiently important by Allied Forces to escape air raids. This has notably preserved the atmosphere of pre-war Japan in certain historic districts of the city. This afternoon we recommend strolling the Nagamachi samurai quarter, the Chaya geisha district, and getting some super-fresh sushi from the Omicho Fish Market. No visit to Kanazawa would be complete without a visit to the city's star attraction: Kenrokuen. Ranked as one of Japan's top three landscape gardens, Kenrokuen is truly stunning and well worth your time today.

Day 8 Hiroshima (B)

With two days in Hiroshima you will have ample time to explore this exciting city and its beautiful neighbour – the island of Miyajima. Your tour leader will take you through the modern heart of the city to the beautiful Peace Park, with its many monuments dedicated to the A-Bomb victims. Hiroshima will forever be remembered for the tragic events of 1945 – and whilst you should certainly reserve some time to visit the museum there are plenty of additional options. With world-class art galleries, an excellent manga library, a beautifully restored castle and the lively Honmachi shopping arcade, you will be spoilt for choice as to how to spend the rest of the afternoon.

Your tour leader will no doubt be keen to take you for an *okonomiyaki* dinner – the local savoury pancake meal that Hiroshima is famous for!

Day 9 Hiroshima (B)

On day two of your stay in Hiroshima you might like to join your tour leader for a ferry ride across the bay to Miyajima, a beautiful island on the Seto Inland Sea. Miyajima is home to a tiny, traditional community, a friendly resident population of deer, and Itsukushima Shrine – whose "floating" *torii* gate is one of the most iconic images of Japan. A cable car can whisk you up over the island's primeval forest to outstanding viewpoints above the surrounding sea. For car lovers, you may prefer to stay in the city, where your tour leader can arrange a morning visit to the Mazda plant, its museum and assembly line. Whatever you decide, Hiroshima is sure to keep you entertained for a second day.

Day 10 Kurashiki (B)

An early morning bullet train ride will take us onto Kurashiki. This wonderful town is a great place to admire a preserved Edo period commercial centre – in the city's canal-lined Bikan district. Just out of town you have the option (weather permitting) to cycle through rice paddies and villages across the Kibi plain.

Kurashiki is rarely included on first-time itineraries to Japan, which we think is a real shame, as it's a truly lovely town with a fascinating history. The preserved canal district forms the centre of the town, with streets lined with traditional shops, cafés and superb museums housed in white-walled, black-tiled storehouses from the Edo era. The Ohara Museum is the most impressive of all the local museums, housing the first permanent collection of Western art ever to be exhibited in Japan. Today you will also have the option to relax in this historical district or join the cycling trip with your tour leader through one of the most beautiful and historical paved cycle paths in Japan, taking you past rice fields, burial mounds, local temples and Buddhist cemeteries.

Day 11 Kyoto (B)

A highlight of any journey to Japan, Kyoto was Japan's capital for over a millennium and is home to an incredible 17 World Heritage Sites, including temples, shrines and some beautiful gardens. Your tour leader will be sure to take you to one of these today – perhaps the incredible structure of Kiyomizu Temple with its commanding city views – before you enjoy a guided tour of the traditional Gion geisha district, where you might be fortunate enough to spot a geisha as dusk falls.

Day 12 Kyoto (B)

On your second day in Kyoto you'll be taken around Kyoto by your tour leader who will put together a specific itinerary to show you some of the city's hidden gems based on the group's interest, the season and the weather. Alternatively, you can opt to head out alone and discover them for yourself. Your tour leader will be happy to help you make plans if there is something specific you'd like to see. Popular options include the exquisite Golden Pavilion of Kinkaku-ji or the spiritual forest trail created by the ten thousand red gates of Fushimi Inari. Nishiki food market is a haven for foodies' or you may wish to further explore Gion's traditional teahouse district – Kyoto has so much to offer that you'll be spoilt for choice.

Day 13 Tokyo (B)

Today you will speed back to Tokyo on the *shinkansen* bullet train, perhaps catching a glimpse of Mount Fuji on your way past – if you're lucky!

This is your chance to do a bit of last-minute souvenir shopping, and to visit any of the sights you may have missed the first time around.

Today would be a great time to see Tokyo from the top of the Skytree, the tallest tower in the world at 634 m (2,080 ft). You could catch some sublime greenery amongst the chaos of Shinjuku at Shinjuku Gyoen Park, arguably Tokyo's finest, or even rent out a karaoke booth and sing your heart out with your new friends. Though dinner is not included tonight, we highly recommend joining your group for a farewell meal at one of your tour leader's favourite restaurants in the city, as a great way to toast the end of a fantastic trip.

Day 14 Tokyo (B)

On the morning of day 14 it's time to say goodbye to Japan and hop on the limousine bus to the airport for your departure flight. We hope you have a good journey home.

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.

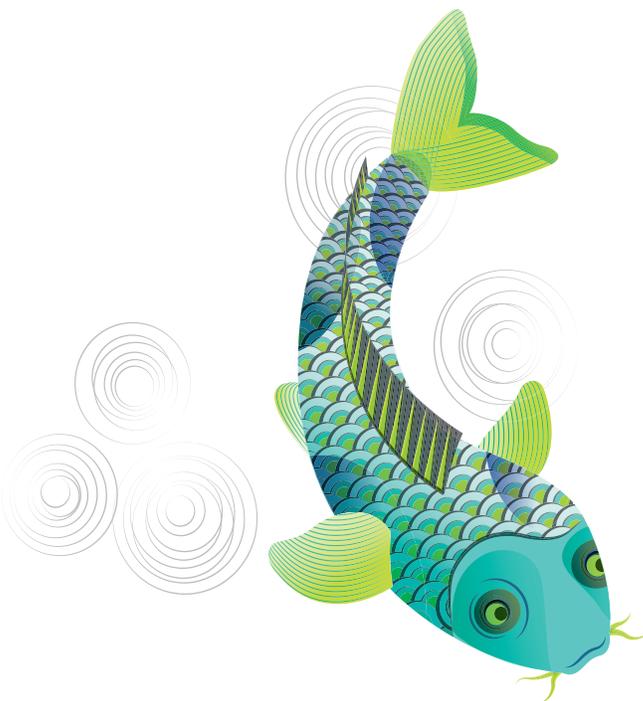
Due to changes in rail network scheduling, departures in 2025 will visit the same destinations for the same number of nights, but in a different order than 2024. The order of destinations in 2025 will be Tokyo – Nagano – Matsumoto – Takayama – Kanazawa – Kyoto – Hiroshima – Kurashiki – Tokyo.

What's included

- ✔ Your comprehensive InsideJapan Info-Pack
- ✔ Full-time services of your InsideJapan tour leader
- ✔ 13 nights' accommodation
- ✔ Arrival transfer by shared shuttle bus
- ✔ Breakfast every day and one evening meal
- ✔ All transport between destinations in Japan
- ✔ IC transport card with 2,500 yen credit for city transport
- ✔ Transfer from Takayama to Kanazawa by private coach
- ✔ Entrance to Zenko-ji Temple in Nagano
- ✔ Entrance to Jigokudani Monkey Park in Yudanaka (2024 departures) or Obuse Hokusai Museum (2025 departures)
- ✔ Geisha district walking tour
- ✔ Luggage Forwarding Tokyo to Matsumoto
- ✔ Shared portable Wi-Fi access throughout the trip

NOT Included

- ✗ International flights
- ✗ Entrance fees (including those for temples, shrines & museums) unless otherwise specified
- ✗ Any local transportation unless covered by the included pass
- ✗ Baggage handling and luggage forwarding except between Tokyo and Matsumoto. Unless otherwise specified - you will be expected to carry your own luggage.



Sample Accommodation

Please note that accommodation is subject to change. Final details of the accommodation will be included in your Info-Pack, which will be sent out approximately four weeks before departure. If you'd like to know more, please speak to your travel consultant.

Hotel Richmond Asakusa, Tokyo

This is the perfect base from which to explore Tokyo - located right within one of the city's most interesting districts. The famous Kaminarimon ("Thunder Gate") and Senso-ji Temple are just a short walk away, and there are numerous restaurants right at the doorstep. You are also ideally placed to visit the Tokyo Skytree (the city's newest and tallest tower), and there are many subway lines just a couple of minutes away on foot, providing easy access to the popular districts of Shibuya, Akihabara, Shinjuku and Ginza - amongst others..

Zenko-ji Yakuo-in, Nagano

The Yakuo-in is a temple lodging connected to Nagano's famous Zenkoji temple. This is a great place to stay with traditional *Shojin Ryori* vegetarian Buddhist meals available. You will also have the chance to join in the morning ceremony at the temple. Rooms are traditional Japanese style with shared toilet facilities and a communal bath house (single sex). The monks are very friendly and delighted to have foreign guests staying at their beautiful temple.

Matsumoto Hotel Kagetsu, Matsumoto

The Hotel Kagetsu has been a part of the fabric of Matsumoto for over a hundred years. It is located just a short walk from Matsumoto castle and has a lovely Meiji-era atmosphere with lots of folk-craft furniture and turn of the century style decor. The restaurant and cafe are very good and the hotel has its own bath house as well as fully en suite rooms.

Iwatakan/Hida Hanasato-no-Yu Ouan

Takayama

The Iwatakan is a friendly, family-run inn. Located a 10-minute walk from the Yatai Kaikan exhibition hall and the morning market along the Miyagawa River, this minshuku makes for a great base in Takayama. Free of charge rental bikes are also available to help you get around. The minshuku also features a natural hot spring bath house and fine home cooked food. Please note selected departures in 2024 will stay at Hida Hanasato-no-Yu Ouan.

Square Kanazawa, Kanazawa

With minimalist decor and a focus on local Kaga crafts, this modern leisure hotel in downtown Kanazawa is an excellent base for your time in the city. Guestrooms are compact yet comfortable, and are boldly painted with one of the five colours of regional, traditional Kaga crafts. The hotel also features communal gender-separated baths, with open air pools and saunas, so you can soak away your travel fatigue.

Washington Hotel, Hiroshima

Located in the downtown Hatchobori area, the Hiroshima Washington Hotel is an excellent base for your stay in the city. The guestrooms are comfortable if a little cozy, and come with standard amenities and free Wi-Fi internet. The hotel's central location means there are plenty of restaurants and bars in the vicinity for dinner, including the famous Okonomiyaki-mura just around the corner where you can try out the local speciality: savoury *okonomiyaki* pancakes.

Dormy Inn, Kurashiki

Located six minutes walk from Kurashiki JR Station and just a stone's throw from the old town area, this hotel makes a great base for a stay in this charming town. Rooms are stylishly designed and WiFi is free throughout the hotel. The ensuite facilities do not include a bath but instead have a shower booth. However, the hotel has some fabulous hot spring baths for guests to enjoy as well as a sauna. The hotel also has coin-operated washing machines so if you have a bag full of dirty clothes, now is a good time to do your washing.

Hotel Gracery Kyoto Sanjo, Kyoto

The Gracery Kyoto Sanjo is a sleek Western-style hotel in a fantastic location in the heart of Kyoto's atmospheric shopping arcades. There are plenty of restaurants on your doorstep, as well as great transport links to all of the city's sightseeing spots. Rooms are fairly compact, but are clean and comfortable with en-suite bathrooms. A buffet breakfast of Japanese and Western dishes is served in the hotel's restaurant Bon Salute.

Sunroute Plaza Shinjuku, Tokyo

The Shinjuku Sunroute Plaza is a modern hotel located slap-bang in the centre of Tokyo, the buzzing Shinjuku district, ideally located to serve as a base for exploring Tokyo on the final days of the tour. Not only are there endless shopping, dining, drinking and entertainment options within a few minutes' walk of your front door, but you are just two minutes' walk from Shinjuku Station - the world's busiest, with links to all Tokyo's districts and beyond. An excellent buffet breakfast is on offer to guests.

Important Tour Information

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 bathing facilities. Shared facilities (when included) will always be separated by gender.

Policy on single rooms

There is no single supplement for this tour. Single travellers will have a single room free of charge at all of the western style hotels (at least ten nights). They will be asked to share with another single traveller of the same sex at the Japanese style stays (maximum three nights).

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 they feel 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 one occasion and you will be without your main baggage for 1 night in Nagano.

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 trains, buses taxis and private coaches for transfers. There is also an optional bike ride.

International Flights

This tour starts and finishes in Tokyo for arrivals and departures at Tokyo Narita or Tokyo Haneda Airport.

Please note that the included meet-and-greet and arrival transfer to the first hotel is **ONLY** available from these two airports.

If you wish to upgrade your departure transfer to a shared shuttle bus service, please speak to your travel consultant.

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.

