

INSIDE JAPAN

SMALL GROUP TOUR

Winter Highlights

14 NIGHTS

CLASSIC



Tour overview

For those who want an active trip that combines nature with fascinating ancient and modern Japanese culture, Winter Highlights is an excellent choice. Rare birdlife, a traditional thatched roof village, World Heritage sites from gardens to temples, and a little Tokyo neon to spice things up, all make this a fantastic and varied winter itinerary.

Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, is known for its dramatic landscapes, from snow covered plains to rugged coastlines and steaming volcanoes. The region is also a haven for wildlife, including rare bird species, making it a paradise for nature lovers.

In Tsurui you'll receive an introduction to Hokkaido's avian residents, accompanied by an expert birding guide, before heading off to Lake Kussharo. Next day, you'll take an icebreaker cruise amongst the creaking floes of the Okhotsk Sea. With a little luck, the floes will have parted sufficiently to allow your cruise to bring you within close range of magnificent Steller's sea eagles and white tailed eagles a fantastic opportunity for keen wildlife photographers.

Next, it's on to coastal Abashiri, home to a former prison, where locals still give thanks to the past inmates – many of whom contributed considerably to Hokkaido's infrastructure development. You'll stop for two nights in Sapporo, Hokkaido's capital and home to the famous snow festival, during which approximately 400 giant snow sculptures occupy the city's spaces. Sapporo is famous for beer as well as snow, so in addition to enjoying the sights you'll have the opportunity to sample some local brews. Before flying back to Honshu, you'll stop for one night in Hakodate, a vibrant port city that flourished during the Meiji period and is now famous for its morning seafood market and panoramic nighttime views.

Honshu, Japan's largest island, offers a very different experience from Hokkaido. In Tokyo you'll warm your hands around a bowl of green tea at Hamarikyu Gardens, whilst in Kyoto you might be lucky enough to enjoy the enchanting sight of the Golden Pavilion wreathed in snow. You will also have a private audience with a maiko (trainee geisha), which is sure to be a highlight of your trip.

Finally, a two-night stay in Kanazawa will see you head to the Japan Sea coast, also known as yukiguni – snow country.

A visit to Kenrokuen, one of Japan's top three gardens is a highlight of any stay here, and a day trip by private bus to Shirakawago, a UNESCO World Heritage designated village will give you a taste of Japan's traditional culture. Of course, throughout the trip, there will be plenty of opportunity for you to soak in the incredibly relaxing hot spring baths that Japan is renowned for.

This trip is ideal for those with a sense of adventure, an affinity with nature, a keen interest in traditional culture and a desire to immerse themselves in all aspects of life in Japan.



Highlights

Sip tea at the traditional tea house in Tokyo's Hamarikyu Gardens

Spot red-crowned cranes with a nature expert and professional photographer

Take an icebreaker cruise on the Okhotsk Sea and look for white-tailed & Steller's sea eagles

Visit Sapporo's world-famous snow festival

Meet an apprentice geisha in Kyoto

Stroll through Shirakawago village and visit the traditional thatched-roof houses

Visit Akan-Mashu National Park and marvel at Lake Mashu's crystal-clear caldera

Classic tours

Mid-range tours that cover Japan's classic sights or interest-specific itineraries (e.g. hiking, cultural activities, specific regions)

- Three / four-star accommodation
- En suite rooms in all locations (except at some unique traditional accommodation)
- Airport meet-and-greet and transfers
- Breakfast every day plus some lunches & dinners
- Selected entrance fees included
- Solo travellers: a single room is available throughout on payment of a mandatory supplement

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

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

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 vibrant streets of Harajuku, known for its fashion and pop culture, 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

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

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.

Afterward, you'll travel by private bus to Kawayu Onsen. After checking in, you'll explore the surrounding area, taking in the stunning natural landscapes before returning to your accommodation to relax and unwind in the soothing onsen baths.

Day 5 – Abashiri

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

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

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, you'll enjoy a lively BBQ dinner at the Asahi Beer Garden (indoor), where you can savour Hokkaido's famous "Genghis Khan" grilled lamb alongside plentiful beer in a fun and relaxed setting.

Day 8 – Hakodate

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

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

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

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

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 may wish to wander through the well-preserved Samurai District and visit the historic Nomura House, admire the beauty of Kenrokuen—one of Japan's top three gardens—or explore Kanazawa Castle. Art enthusiasts might enjoy the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art or the tranquil Daisetsu Suzuki Museum.

Day 13 – Kanazawa

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

Finally, it's time for you to return to Tokyo, for one last 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

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.

Where you'll stay

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.

● TOKYO

The Gracery Asakusa

The Gracery Asakusa is a great location for sightseeing, based just a few minutes' walk from the main attractions in the area; Kaminarimon Gate, Senso-ji temple, Kappabashi Kitchenware Street as well as many restaurants. The Ginza and Asakusa subway lines are also just a short walk away, allowing for easy access to the rest of Tokyo. The hotel has modern ensuite rooms and a convenient coin operated laundry room. The breakfast is buffet style with Western dishes.

● TSURUI

Woody Hotel and Restaurant Yumekobo

This cosy timber accommodation is on the fringes of the Kushiro marshland. Located a 50-minute ride from Kushiro Station, 30 minutes by car from the airport, and conveniently close to the crane sanctuaries of Tsurui, this is an ideal base for your stay in this beautiful area. It backs onto peaceful woodland full of birdsong, so you have immediate access to the snowy countryside.

The hotel features Canadian log buildings and antique furnishings, has its own bathhouse as well as a barbecue area. There are limited en suite facilities on site and some guests will be required to share toilet, shower and hot spring facilities (separated by gender). The fireside lounge area is a great place to take things really easy. The chefs here pride themselves on their fusion cooking – so mealtimes are sure to be a treat. Breakfast is a set Western-style menu.

● LAKE KUSSHARO

Kawayu Kanko Hotel

Located in the heart of the Akan-Mashu National Park, the Kawayu Kanko hotel is a Ryokan-hotel style property offering both Japanese and Western Style rooms. The hotel is a great base to explore the shores of Lake Kussharo and the wildlife-filled National Park. As is common with ryokan-hotels in Eastern Hokkaido, there are indoor and outdoor communal baths and a sauna to help unwinding after a long day of sightseeing. The hotel evokes a sense of vintage showa period Japan with a old-fashioned sweet shop, craft shop and recently renovated darts bar 'Tanto'.

● ABASHIRI

Abashiri Koso

The Abashiri Koso is a Japanese-style hotel on the shores of Lake Abashiri. Your ensuite traditional guestroom will have tatami mat flooring, sliding screen doors, and comfortable futon mattresses spread on the floor, and there are communal gender-separated hot spring baths that are perfect for relaxing in, as well as a separate bath that can be secured for your private use. The highlight of any stay at Japanese-style accommodation is the food, and tonight you can look forward to an extensive kaiseki

What's included

- ⊙ Your comprehensive InsideJapan Info-Pack
- ⊙ Full-time services of your InsideJapan tour leader
- ⊙ 14 nights' accommodation
- ⊙ Breakfast every day and two lunches and seven evening meals
- ⊙ All transport between destinations in Japan, including airport transfers and domestic flights and an IC transport card with 3,000 yen credit
- ⊙ Entrance fee to Hamarikyū Gardens in Tokyo
- ⊙ Bird-watching guide in Tsurui
- ⊙ Icebreaker cruise on the Okhotsk Sea
- ⊙ BBQ dinner at the Asahi Beer Garden in Sapporo
- ⊙ Audience with a trainee geisha in Kyoto
- ⊙ Mt. Hakodate cable car
- ⊙ Hands-on washi paper making experience
- ⊙ Day excursion by private coach to Shirakawago village
- ⊙ Luggage forwarding from Tsurui to Sapporo
- ⊙ Luggage forwarding from Kyoto to Tokyo
- ⊙ Shared portable Wi-Fi access throughout trip

Not included

- ⊗ International flights
- ⊗ Any local transport (subways, taxis, buses) unless covered by the included transport passes
- ⊗ Any entrances fees (including those for museums, temples & shrines) unless otherwise specified
- ⊗ Baggage handling and luggage forwarding unless otherwise specified – you will be expected to carry your own luggage

Where you'll stay

course meal featuring plenty of fresh seafood from the nearby sea. Breakfast will be a buffet with a wide array of Japanese and Western dishes

● SAPPORO

Cross Hotel

In Sapporo you will stay at the Cross Hotel. This is a stylish business hotel in a great location just 5mins walk from the station. The hotel has a boutique feel to it and boasts great facilities such as a bath house and lounge on the 18th Floor with views over the city. There is a good restaurants and the staff are friendly and helpful.

● HAKODATE

Hakodate Kokusai Hotel

Conveniently located close to Hakodate station and the morning market, with well-furnished and comfortable rooms, the Kokusai Hotel is a perfect base for exploring the city. A buffet breakfast is served in the hotel's restaurant, Azalea, with an emphasis on local seafood and famous Hakodate dishes such as salt broth ramen. The top floor of the hotel also boasts onsen hot spring baths.

● KYOTO

Royal Park Hotel Sanjo

The Royal Park Hotel Kyoto is a modern, stylish hotel in a great location in central Kyoto. Rooms are of a good size and the hotel features its own restaurant, bar and bakery cafe as well as a useful concierge service. There is also a handy coin-operated washing machines available. The hotel is just a short walk from the City Hall subway stop. All rooms have free-of-charge wi-fi internet. This is a great base for a very comfortable and convenient stay in Kyoto. A huge breakfast buffet is available in the mornings, while at night the hotel restaurant offers a la carte dining and teppanyaki.

● KANAZAWA

Mitsui Garden Kanazawa

The Mitsui Garden Hotel Kanazawa is a stylish mid-range hotel located right in the centre of Kanazawa, with the main train station, the famous Kenrokuen Garden, and the shopping and dining district of Korinbo all within easy walking distance of the hotel. Rooms combine clean, modern style with traditional Japanese touches, with décor showcasing dyed kimono fabrics in the local Kaga Yuzen style. Head to the top floor for panoramic views of Kanazawa Castle Park from the communal hot spring baths, the ideal way to relax at the start or end of your day of sightseeing.

● TOKYO

Royal Park Iconic Shiodome

Our final tour hotel is The Royal Park Iconic in Shiodome, a great location close to glitzy Ginza and the neon lights and fantastic eateries of Shimbashi and Yurakucho. There are plenty of transport links nearby for your final morning of sightseeing. The hotel occupies the 27th to 38th floors of the landmark Shiodome Tower, providing great views across the city including nearby Hamarikyū gardens and Tokyo Bay. If you fancy a drink to round off your trip, you can head to the 24th floor 'The Bar' and take in those views one last time.





Important tour information

Please bear in mind that Hokkaido temperatures in the heart of winter can lower to -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 two occasions and you will be without your main bag for 2 nights in Hokkaido (1 night in Lake Kussharo and 1 night in Abashiri) and for 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 2pm.

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.