

Luxury Japan Spring 2007 Tour

Detailed Itinerary



Monday April 2nd to Sunday April 15th, 2007

This tour includes the best of everything Japan has to offer. It is designed for newcomers to Japan who want first class hotels and follows a leisurely pace starting with 3 full days in Kyoto and Nara. There are no one night stays and your luggage is sent by courier between each location.

This is the most popular time to visit Japan. The delicate pink clouds of cherry blossom transform the temple gardens throughout the country. We also have a special chance to see the 'Miyako Odori' dancing Geisha in Kyoto.

All the details in the schedule and hotel accommodation will be reconfirmed 60 days before departure.



David's Introduction

Travel became a passion at university and I had always wanted to learn a language 'properly'. I read mathematics, which does not usually go hand in hand with languages but I found Japanese to be very logical with 'kanji' characters giving the language another level of complexity and interest not found in most European languages. I also loved Japan's landscape, culture and people and thirteen years on, I still feel thrilled and very privileged that my work takes me back there so often. It is especially rewarding to share the exotic culture, tradition and sheer excitement with visitors and I am always reminded of the amazement and even bewilderment I felt when I first arrived.



Mount Aso is probably my favourite place in Japan. The thrill of seeing an active volcano is easy to understand, coming from a country where it seems so foreign. The awesome panoramic views of the caldera and mountains beyond are breathtaking, making this volcano one of the highlights of the tour. I really look forward to sharing my Japan with you.

Megumi's introduction

I read Law at university but moved towards education, spending several years as an English teacher and instructor in Japan before doing a masters degree in education at London University. I have been a tour manager for four years while also acting as a consultant for Japanese students wishing to enter the UK education system.



For me, the best experience in Japan is the hot spring baths. This is best enjoyed after a day in the mountains and a traditional bento (lunchbox) meal. Another experience not to be missed is eating Gyoza, a small dumpling with juicy meat and vegetables inside and my favourite Japanese dish.



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Day	Schedule	
Monday 2nd April Arrival in Japan Stay at Kyoto Hotel	We meet you on arrival in Japan and advise you according to your schedule until the tour begins. Normally you would arrive at the hotel in Kyoto by the evening so you can relax and get to know other members of the group over dinner. We will brief you about the important points of the tour.	
Kyoto and Nara	<i>Kyoto has a phenomenal collection of temples and shrines, dating back to its days as the capital city and before. There are about 2,000 temples in total, many having national significance. Nara was the capital before Kyoto's longer reign and although smaller today, it has a number of elaborate temples in the main park. Our three days in Kyoto and Nara give you a perfect introduction but people often return to discover more temples they have not yet seen.</i>	
Tuesday 3rd April Kyoto: Gion Kiyomizu Temple Stay at Kyoto Hotel	On our first morning in Kyoto, we visit Gion with its traditional wooden buildings, cobbled streets and renowned Geisha. You may even be lucky enough to see them, shuffling along in their kimono and clogs. From Gion, a short walk takes us to Maruyama Park and its complex of temples, in the foothills of the mountains east of Kyoto. This is a good opportunity to take part in some temple traditions like throwing a coin and ringing the bell at the temple entrance. The gods will welcome you inside - as long as you take your shoes off! We stroll from temple to shrine, pausing for lunch on the way, then head uphill gradually to another Kyoto icon - Kiyomizu. The main temple rests against the hill slope with 20 metre high wooden stilts supporting it. From here, there are fantastic views over the whole city and you can try the 'love walk' - finding a path from one ancient boulder to another with eyes closed. Superstition states that if you make it, you will be lucky in love but if you don't, there are always plenty of good luck charms to buy instead! As the day comes to an end, we walk back to the hotel or take a taxi for comfort.	
Wednesday 4th April Kyoto: Golden Pavilion Miyako Odori Stay at Kyoto Hotel	We start the day in the northwest of Kyoto and the world famous Golden Pavilion and Ryoanji temples. As with Christianity, Buddhism has many denominations and each famous temple is often the seat of one particular sect. More religious Japanese people may consider it a personal pilgrimage to visit such temples. The glittering Kinkaku-ji Temple is a three-storey structure overlaid with gold leaf, which was restored in 1988. The stone garden at Ryoan-ji Temple represents Zen philosophy, consisting of fifteen stones of different sizes placed in white sand representing an image of islands and an expanding sea. The simple beauty of Zen inspired rock gardens is intended to give people a blank space in which to imagine their own landscape. The garden is also referred to as 'The Crossing of Tiger Cubs' as it resembles a mother tiger carrying her cubs across dangerous river torrents. After lunch, we enjoy the seasonal performance of 'Miyako Odori'. This is a special celebration of spring in Kyoto which has been held since 1872, supposedly to maintain the city's pride after the capital moved to Tokyo. It is performed by twenty Maiko and Geiko (the real name of Geisha in Kyoto!) on a set adorned with cherry blossom. The eight dances are characterised by the bent shuffling legs of the artists which gives them the appearance of floating across the stage. After the performance, you will have some free time to rest or explore the town centre.	
Thursday 5th April Nara Stay in Kyoto Hotel	We take the hour-long train journey to Nara following an ancient route through the countryside between Japan's two former capitals. When we arrive at Nara we visit the huge Deer Park which, in addition to the more popular temples and giant buddhas, has many quieter areas of natural beauty. There are also opportunities to try Japanese snacks from traditional food stalls, watch turtles in the ponds and walk in the hills for views over the parkland. As the name suggests, the park is home to many deer - visitors need to be brave to feed them as they are likely to be buffeted from all sides by the greedier ones! For your own meal, you can choose from a traditional bento (lunch box) in the park or a restaurant lunch. We finally make our way back to the station via the main arcade. Even if shopping is not your idea of fun, it is well worth wandering through shopping areas to see how Japanese people live day to day - it is quite different from the average UK high street. We arrive back at the hotel in Kyoto in time to rest before dinner.	
		
		

<p>Shinkansen (bullet train)</p>	<p><i>The Shinkansen is truly a fantastic experience - travelling so smoothly at such a speed. Watching the beautiful landscape whiz by, you soon realise how mountainous Japan is and why the pockets of flat land come at such a premium. The inaccessibility of the mountains has protected the original vegetation and wildlife from human impact. Surprisingly, the extreme landscape did not deter construction of the shinkansen train line for the 1964 Olympics. It was carefully engineered to use the most direct routes, tunnelled through mountains and on tracks over suburban areas.</i></p>	
<p>Friday 6th April Shinkansen to Kyushu Beppu Stay at Beppu Ryokan</p>	<p>We experience the shinkansen on its fastest stretch, travelling west from Kyoto and on to Beppu. We enjoy a bento lunch on the train, reaching Beppu in the early afternoon. The city was founded on 1st April 1924 and is famous for its thousands of sacred onsen (hot springs). Beppu is Japan's onsen capital, containing nine major pools sometimes referred to as the 'Nine Hells of Beppu'. It is a beautiful setting - the sea to one side and mountains on the other with onsen always evident by their columns of rising steam. Most people walking around Beppu wear traditional yukata (kimono-style cotton robes) provided by their Ryokan (Japanese Inn). It is very comfortable and makes a picturesque scene as people potter through the town trying the different baths. We guide you to the various hot baths and the 'devils pools' to see bubbling, boiling mud. We then leave you to relax and sample them if you wish before we try some elaborate traditional cuisine in our ryokan (Japanese inn).</p>	
<p>Ryokan</p>	<p><i>Staying at a Ryokan allows you to enjoy the very best of Japanese hospitality from a tradition that has hardly changed in the last century. As you enter your room, the distinctive scent of tatami floors and paper and wood doors set the scene. The yukata (kimono-style cotton robes) are neatly folded, ready for you to change and head to the onsen as soon as you arrive. In the evening, enjoy sumptuous Japanese cuisine with round twenty tiny dishes brought to you in stages by your hostess. You may struggle to recognise most of them but you should certainly try them all. With meticulous attention to aesthetics and detail, this is just as much a feast for the eyes as the stomach.</i></p>	
<p>Saturday 7th April Mount Aso Stay at Beppu Ryokan</p>	<p>We enjoy a traditional ryokan breakfast before visiting the active volcano, Mount Aso. Soon after leaving Beppu, you get a sense of the volcano's crater as the coach climbs up to the valley that enters from the east side. As the view opens out before you, the scale is immediately clear as the towering volcano stands in the centre of a vast caldera. The coach winds to the top of Mount Aso and we make two stops to take in the views and walk up to the boiling mud cauldron. The volcano was so powerful that the gases here are noxious and constantly monitored to protect visitors. After lunch, we travel back down into the crater and up one side to enjoy more panoramic views. The floor of the crater is almost perfectly flat and very fertile making it ideal for the rice fields and other crops which give it a stunning patchwork appearance.</p>	
<p>Sunday 8th April Hiroshima: Peace Park Atomic Dome Stay at Hiroshima Hotel</p>	<p>We enjoy another traditional breakfast before travelling east by train towards Hiroshima. We arrive late morning and as Hiroshima is famous for its <i>Okonomiyaki</i>, a dish somewhere between a pancake and an omelette, we head straight for lunch.</p> <p>We then spend the afternoon visiting the Atomic Dome and Peace Park. The <i>Heiwa Kinen Shiryokan</i> (Peace Memorial Museum) documents the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6th August 1945 and its aftermath, with exhibits demonstrating the tragic destruction of the city and its people and the events leading up to it.</p>	
<p>Monday 9th April Miyajima Stay at Hiroshima Hotel</p>	<p>We reach Miyajima island by ferry from Hiroshima. The temple on the shoreline and the red <i>torii</i> (temple gate) at high and low tides deserves a full day on any schedule. The inland sea swells around the temple stilts at high tide and the torii appears to float magically on the water. At low tide you can stroll across the sand to the huge gate. The village has lots of interesting shops and the park surrounding the area is populated by placid deer patiently waiting for food. We then take the cable car to the island summit for great views or, for the more energetic, there is time for a gentle hike if you don't mind being joined by a few of the local monkeys!</p>	
<p>Tuesday 10th April Okayama Stay at Hakone Hotel</p>	<p>A short journey by Shinkansen takes us to Okayama where we see one of Japan's three famous walking gardens, Korakuen. Completed in the 17th century, the name means "Garden of Pleasure After", referring to a Confucian quote stating that a wise ruler must attend to his subjects' needs first and only then attend to his own. The first impression may be that of a giant lawn, crisscrossed with wide paths and the occasional teahouse but as you explore you find waterfalls, tiny shrines, miniature maple forests, a lotus pond, and traditional red bridges creating many different but very Japanese landscapes.</p> <p>After lunch, we travel on to Hakone and our first views of Mount Fuji.</p>	

<p>Wednesday 11th April</p> <p>Hakone Mount Fuji Stay in Hakone Hotel</p>	<p>The Hakone checkpoint on the historic Tokaido (east sea) road marks the edge of the Kanto region. While Hakone has its fair share of hot springs and health resorts, the main attractions are the views of Mount Fuji and Lake Ashinoko. Closer inspection reveals that 'Fuji-san' is not quite as perfect as it appears as there are several volcanic craters on its slopes. The area known as Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park is still volcanically active and its Great Boiling Valley is full of sulphurous springs. We spend a day enjoying the Mount Fuji including a cable car ride, a cruise on the lake and a visit to Hakone Shrine.</p>	
<p>Thursday 12th April</p> <p>Kamakura Stay at Tokyo Hotel</p>	<p>Kamakura, surrounded by mountains and the open water of Sagami Bay, is a natural fortress. Consequently, during the Heian period, it was the chief city of the Kanto region and from 12th to 14th centuries, the Minamoto Shoguns ruled Japan from here. Kamakura is now famous for its temples and shrines - Kotokuin, with its monumental bronze Amida Buddha, being the most famous. A tsunami destroyed the temple housing the Great Buddha in the 15th century but the statue survived and has weathered the elements ever since. Kamakura's other sites include the magnificent Zen temples of Kenchoji and Enkakuji, the Tokeiji - a nunnery that was a refuge for women who wanted to divorce their husbands, the Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine and the Hase Kannon Temple.</p>	
<p>Tokyo</p>	<p><i>Tokyo, like London, has distinct districts, an urban train system with a loop line, numerous parks and expensive department stores. This is where modern Japan thrives and you will be amazed just how advanced and hi-tech it is. Some local trains have replaced posters with LCD displays that share line information with quick fashionable commercials. Most passengers, however, are fully occupied video-mailing on their mobile phones. The famous capsule hotels have been superceded by all-night internet cafes that offer the latest DVDs or games plus high-speed internet access. Sleeping and eating seem a waste of time to busy salarymen so a myriad of fast food stalls offer excellent Japanese food in minutes. Huge screens play pop videos and commercials 24 hours a day in the busiest districts. It is immediately clear why so many sci-fi novels and films have looked to Tokyo for inspiration.</i></p> <p><i>Within the busy city, there are pockets of tranquility to be found and we include some of them in the tour.</i></p>	
<p>Friday 13th April</p> <p>Tokyo: Asakusa Imperial Palace Akihabara Stay at Tokyo Hotel</p>	<p>We start the day in Asakusa visiting the Asakusa Kannon Temple. This is the oldest in Tokyo and you may recognise the colossal lantern at the entrance. There is also an avenue leading up to Senso-ji temple, lined with traditional souvenir stalls. We journey on to the Imperial Palace Gardens, home of the Japanese royal family. They are more protected and detached from mainstream society than the British monarchy and it is likely to be many years before it is possible to enter the Palace proper.</p> <p>We end the day by visiting some of the mesmerising shopping districts. This could be considered sightseeing in itself and it is certainly fun to marvel at the flashing lights and electronic gadgets on display in Akihabara known as 'Electric Town'. The more serious shopper will have a chance to continue bargain hunting the following day.</p>	
<p>Sushi and Sashimi</p>	<p>Most famous of all Japanese cuisine, <i>sushi</i> actually refers to the sweet, vinegar rice rather than the raw fish often eaten with it. More correctly, raw fish and other meat - including chicken and horse - is described as <i>sashimi</i> meaning 'uncooked'. In Japan, sushi and sashimi must be fresh and many Japanese people will tell you that some things are most delicious when eaten alive - as fresh as possible!</p>	
<p>Saturday 14th April</p> <p>Tokyo: Tsukiji Fish Market Shibuya Free time Stay at Tokyo Hotel</p>	<p>We make an early start, before breakfast, to visit Tsukiji Fish Market. With an area approximately the size of 30 football pitches and 15,000 people working there, it is not hard to believe that this one of the world's largest markets. After breakfast, we visit Shibuya, a visually amazing district and one of the centres of Japan's youth fashion. We also visit Yoyogi Park, one of the main locations for the 1964 Olympics and now a favourite for buskers. After lunch, we take you to other areas of interest or leave you explore.</p>	
<p>Sunday 15th April</p> <p>Return home</p>	<p>After breakfast at the hotel we escort you to Narita Airport according to your flight schedule or assist you with your ongoing arrangements.</p>	