



Japan in Spring





JAPAN — A LAND OF STRIKING BEAUTY

First time visitors are impressed by its green landscape and its mountains, which cover nearly three-quarters of the country. The country, which is roughly the size of Germany consists of several thousands of islands, of which Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku are the four largest.

Japan's rugged peaks, rocky coastlines, gorges, lakes, waterfalls and dense forests are breathtaking, but they put severe limits on liveable land. With seventy-five percent of the land unsuitable for habitation or cultivation the entire Japanese population of about 125,000,000, live in an area roughly the size of Tasmania. This makes Japan one of the most populated countries in the world in terms of people per square kilometre.

From the hi-tech speed and efficiency of the bullet train which will whisk you to Osaka, to the serenity of Kyoto's zen gardens and temples; Japan offers a unique mix of the modern and the traditional. This tour includes the best of everything Japan has to offer. It is designed for newcomers to Japan and follows a leisurely pace starting and ending in Tokyo.

March is a wonderful time to visit Japan. The delicate pink clouds of cherry blossom transform the temple gardens throughout the country. Blue Dot's engaged style of travel means that we will give you every opportunity to meet Japanese people and to do as the Japanese do. We have a special opportunity to the experience the seasonal 'Miyako Odori' dancing Geisha in the most traditional Theatre in Kyoto. We will also enjoy a private dinner with a Geisha performance.

We'll start and finish in Tokyo giving you three full days to enjoy this modern metropolis, a city of pulsating energy. In between you'll have the chance to experience the many different aspects which make Japan such a unique and fascinating country.





Day 1 AUSTRALIA – JAPAN

Fly direct from Sydney to Narita Airport in Japan. (Note, all flights to be confirmed). *Meals in flight*



Day 2 TOKYO

You will be met on arrival by an English speaking guide and taken by coach straight to the hotel in central Tokyo. Once checked in at the Villa Fontaine Shiodome, you

are free to relax and recover from the long flight before our guided tour. Start in Ginza, the traditional heart of Tokyo shopping, with department stores, art galleries, and breathtakingly expensive cups of coffee. Move on to the Imperial Palace Gardens, located in the heart of the city. Enjoy a welcome lunch before moving to the area of Asakusa. Asakusa is as close to the old shitamachi downtown atmosphere as it's possible to get in modern day Tokyo. Centring around Sensō-ji Temple, Asakusa is vibrant, festive, and somewhat nostalgic. There are streets lined with stalls selling freshly grilled rice crackers, Buddhist charms, and paper fans. Sensō-ji Temple is the oldest and most important Buddhist site in Tokyo, home to a small golden statue of the goddess Kannon which is so sacred it cannot be viewed. The main entrance is marked by an impressively large lantern that hangs suspended below the kaminari-mon gate. The temple also boasts a lovely five storied pagoda, and is a popular spot for Tokyoites and visitors alike. Later on, you'll take a boat trip

on the Sumida river from Asakusa to the Hama Rikyu Garden, a peaceful oasis in the Tokyo metropolis and very near our hotel. The whipped green matcha tea at the garden's traditional Nakajima teahouse is 'interesting'. *L*

Day 3 TOKYO KAMAKURA HAKONE

Today you'll depart Tokyo by private coach. After breakfast, set off for Hakone, enroute stop at Kamakura to see the Daibutsu, the Great Buddha. Later, you will enjoy a visit to the excellent Hakone Open Air Museum which boasts an impressive array of international sculptures. The museum displays over 300 works by Picasso alone, as well as sculptures by many other famous artists including Henry Moore, Rodin, and Miro. You can grab lunch (at own cost) and eat in the beautiful grounds of the Open Air Museum (there are also in-door cafés and restaurants). After the museum, drive on to the hot springs area of Hakone to experience a stay in a traditional ryokan, or Japanese inn. Enjoy the peaceful views, the spectacular kaiseki cuisine which is one of the main joys of ryokan accommodation, and enjoy the onsen baths – an amazingly relaxing experience. *B/D*

Day 4 HAKONE

After breakfast, a tour of the Hakone area. You'll take the mountain train, cable car and ropeway through the forested hills of the national park. Along this route, if the weather is kind, you will have spectacular views of Mount Fuji. On the shores of lake Ashi, board the charmingly kitsch "pirate ship" which will take you across the lake to Hakone-machi. A stop for lunch (at own cost) and then head to the impressive Hakone Shrine where the buildings are practically hidden amid the dense forest. Head back to your ryokan in time for dinner. *B/D*



Day 5 HAKONE - KYOTO

Today we have organised an overnight luggage transfer to Kyoto so you'll just need a small bag for one night. This morning after

breakfast, you will be transferred to Odawara station, to board the Bullet train, or shinkansen. You can buy lunch or snacks on board before the end of the journey in Kyoto. In the afternoon a tour of Kyoto focusing on The Golden Pavilion and Ryoan-ji Temple by private coach. The pavilion - also known as Kinkakuji - reflected in the lake, is justifiably one of the best known images of Japan, although the building itself is a recent but faithful reproduction of the 15th century original. Ryōan-ji is home to Japan's first, and arguably best, kare-sansui (dry landscape) garden. The garden is a masterpiece of Zen art, consisting of white raked gravel and fifteen stones, of which only fourteen can be seen at any one time. We'll be taken to our hotel, Daiwa Roynet, after the tour has finished. Dinner this evening will be in a restaurant near our hotel. *B/D*

Day 6 KYOTO

After breakfast at the hotel, enjoy a tour of Kyoto utilising the local transport. You'll start in Gion, the most famous and largest of the Kyoto geisha districts in the hope of seeing some of these talented women on their way to classes. Geisha are disciplined artists under an elaborately-coiffed exterior, and due to a rigorous apprenticeship they are talented and dedicated musicians and dancers. Move on to Maruyama Park, a leafy spot on Kyoto's eastern edge, which houses a number of important shrines and temples. The park is also one of the best places in the city to view the cherry blossoms. After strolling through the park, head to Kiyomizu temple, one of the most famous sites in the city and is renowned for its construction, which uses no nails to support the elaborate wooden structure of the main hall. Then stroll the Philosopher's Path which follows a cherry-lined canal for two miles. There are lovely shops, cafes and small restaurants. Visit one more temple before returning to the hotel - the Silver Pavilion. It was built as a retirement villa and only later converted into a Zen temple. The temple has played an important part in the development of tea ceremony and flower arranging culture and the mostly informal Zen garden is beautiful. Dinner is at your leisure tonight, there are many options near the hotel. *B/L*

Day 7 KYOTO - NARA - KYOTO

Spend today exploring the old capital of Nara by train. Nara's main sights are arranged in the grassy Nara-kōen (Nara Park), through which friendly deer freely wander. We will head first to Tōdai-ji, Nara's most important and impressive temple, and home to Japan's largest Buddha statue. Though the current temple structure is only two thirds the size of the original, Tōdai-ji remains the largest free-standing wooden structure in the world. You will have time to appreciate the calm and the beauty of the park before lunch (at own cost). After lunch, head back to the train station, via the main arcade, which is full of fascinating shops, then take the train back to Kyoto and back to the hotel. *B/D*

Day 8 KYOTO

This morning, a tour of the Sagano and Arashiyama areas at the base of Kyoto's western hills using local transport. The areas are most famous for their bamboo groves, which are

spectacular. The most impressive grove is outside Tenryū-ji's northern gate and we will make sure to stop here. Also a visit to Jōjakkō-ji, which has a famous pagoda and excellent views of Kyoto. You will have lunch in the area (own cost) before strolling beside the Hozu River and crossing over the famous Toget-sukyo Bridge. Late in the afternoon, you'll experience a traditional tea ceremony at Kodaiji Temple before returning to the hotel. *B/D*

Day 9 KYOTO - KUMAMOTO

Today we have arranged a luggage transfer to Hiroshima so you will only need to bring a small bag for the two nights in Kumamoto. After breakfast, head to Kyoto station and will board the shinkansen to Kumamoto city on the island of Kyushu. Enjoy a traditional bento box lunch (beautifully presented and worth a photo) on board. Next visit Kumamoto castle, one of the most impressive castles in Japan with large castle grounds and a variety of buildings, a few of which date back to the time the castle was originally built. In late March and early April, the castle is a fantastic spot to view the cherry blossoms. After the castle, stroll through Suizenji koen walking gardens. The gardens reproduce the 53 post stations of the old Tokaido road – an important road, which connected Edo (currently Tokyo) with Kyoto during the Edo Period – in miniature form. There is even a miniature Mount Fuji. Dinner will be at a restaurant near the hotel. *B/L/D*



Day 10 KUMAMOTO - MOUNT ASO - KUMAMOTO

Today, a day trip to Mount Aso, one of Japan's many volcanoes, by private coach. Peaking at some 1500 metres above sea level, Mount Aso is one of the largest active volcanoes in the world. The present caldera was formed as a result of eruptions occurring over 90,000–300,000 years ago, and is now home to Aso City as well as other towns and villages. The crater contains a steaming lake of bubbling sulphuric acid, which, if the winds are right, you can peer into. The poisonous gasses are closely monitored and the viewing areas are sometimes closed to visitors – and should not be visited at all by those with asthma or any respiratory problems. After lunch, visit the remarkable pottery village of Onta to see how a group of families dating back several centuries continue to produce pottery with traditional methods. Dinner is at your leisure tonight. *B/L*

Day 11 KUMAMOTO - HIROSHIMA

After breakfast, board the shinkansen once again and head to Hiroshima. Lunch which is included today, will be in the city. This afternoon, using the excellent public transport in this modern city, a visit to the Atomic Bomb Dome and the Peace Park, which are poignant reminders of the city's tragic past, as are the swarms of origami cranes made by school children as symbols of peace. You will also visit the Peace Memorial Museum, which documents the bomb and its aftermath, but also explains the events leading up to it. While visiting the museum can be an upsetting and unsettling experience for many, it should not be missed. Check in to the hotel. Dinner at your own leisure tonight. *B/L*

Day 12
HIROSHIMA - MIYAJIMA - HIROSHIMA

Take a day trip today to Miyajima Island, best recognised for its iconic red torii gate – an element of what is said to be one of the three best views in Japan. You will take the train and then the ferry (approximately 10 minutes) from the mainland. Enjoy a cable car to Mount Misen for the stunning views across the



island studded Inland Sea. Later, explore the island at your own pace; Shrine and its famous 'Floating' Torii gate, the 5 Tier Pagoda and Daisho-in Temple. There are many

restaurants and shops for lunch - selling local oysters, also some cafes for tea and cakes. Deer are traditionally believed to be messengers of the gods and wander the island freely. While technically wild, they are fond of any kind of treats - they will happily eat your rail pass, so please keep it tucked away safely while you're on the island! Dinner will be in a restaurant near the hotel. *B/D*

Day 13
HIROSHIMA - TAKAYAMA

This morning, your luggage will be transferred to Kanazawa so you will only need a small bag to take to Takayama. Today is a day of travel, so after breakfast, head to Hiroshima station and take the shinkansen to Nagoya, where you will change trains, also a perfect excuse to get some lunch. Then board an express train which will take you into the mountains to Takayama. The views from this train should be fantastic. When you reach Takayama, check in to the hotel, Associa Takayama Resort, and dinner will be in a nearby restaurant. *B/D*



Day 14
TAKAYAMA

Today after breakfast at your hotel, a tour of Takayama using local transport all day. You will head first to the morning market. There are two, the Jinyamae Market in front of the Jinya and the Miyagawa Market on the east bank of Miya River, between Kaji-bashi Bridge and Yayoi-bashi bridge. The latter is more attractive and larger, but both have farmer's stalls with local vegetables, old women selling pickles, and an interesting assortment of local handicrafts which make great

souvenirs. The markets are generally closed by noon. Have lunch before exploring Takayama Jinya and the sake breweries. Takayama Jinya is an Edo Period government complex. Originally built in 1615, it is the only building left of its kind, and includes government offices and a rice granary. Takayama's clear mountain water and high quality rice are the perfect combination for brewing sake, (nihon-shu in Japanese). The breweries on San-machi Suji can be easily identified by their traditional. sugidama (balls of cedar leaves). Although special tasting events are only available over the winter months, all breweries will willingly loan an o-choko (the traditional small sake cup) to taste their wares for a few hundred yen. Dinner is your leisure tonight. *B/L*

Day 15
TAKAYAMA — SHIRAKAWA-GO — KANAZAWA

Today after breakfast, travel by private coach to Shirakawa-gō village. Although modern roads now make the traditional area of Shirakawa-gō accessible in under an hour from Takayama, for many centuries the surrounding mountains and heavy winter snowfalls made the district nearly unreachable. Cut off from the rest of the country, the villagers of Shirakawa-gō continued their traditional lifestyle until very recently, raising silkworms under the steeply thatched roofs of their gasshō-zukuri (meaning 'hands-in-prayer') houses amidst rice fields and vegetable plots. Have lunch in the village and later in the afternoon travel by coach to Kanazawa. Kanazawa was once one of Japan's richest cities. It was also one of only a handful of cities to escape damage during the Second World War and Kanazawa's older districts are consequently remarkably well preserved. The city is also famed for its traditional arts of ceramics and lacquer ware as well as for its kaga-ryori cuisine. Dinner at your leisure. *B/L*

Day 16
KANAZAWA

Today you will explore Kanazawa using public transport. Start the covered arcade of the Ōmichō Ichiba Markets – the heart of Kanazawa's impressive food culture. Then move to Higashi



Chaya-gai, one of only three chaya-gai (geisha districts) in Japan to be listed as cultural assets. Kanazawa's Higashi Chaya has changed little since its heyday in the early 19th Century. Not only are the buildings a beautifully preserved remnant of the old Japan, geisha still live and work here, and occasionally can be seen out on the streets on their way to an engagement. Have lunch (at own cost) before visiting Kenrokuen Garden. Listed as one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan, Ken-roku-en is often said to be the best of the three. Kenroku-en famously combines all six principles traditionally desirable in a Japanese strolling garden, with spaciousness and seclusion, artifice and antiquity, and water courses and panoramas. Don't miss the Seison-kaku Villa, which has fascinating architectural details. Return to the hotel. Dinner will be in a nearby restaurant. *B/D*

Day 17
KANAZAWA - SADO ISLAND

You will spend most of today travelling to the next destination, Sado Island. Popular for its stunning natural scenery, green hills and cliffs dotted with strange shaped rocks and small islands, Sado Island also has an interesting, though dark history. Because of its relatively secluded location, the island was used as a place of political exile for elements showing a tendency to oppose the system in power. In the early Edo period, however, gold and silver were discovered, and the significance of the island changed dramatically. To get to the island, the shinkansen will take us to Niigata. Have lunch on board the train. From Niigata, a jet foil ferry to Sado Island. On arrival you will board a coach which will take you to your accommodation, the lovely Azuma Ryokan (or similar) on the coast where the sunset views are stunning. Enjoy dinner in the ryokan. *B/L/D*



**Day 18
SADO ISLAND**

Today after breakfast you will have a coach tour of the island. We will be taken to the Sado Taiko Centre for the morning for a taiko drumming experience. The

world famous Kodo taiko group, which debuted at the 1981 Berlin Festival, has its roots on Sado Island, but received international acclaim for its creativity in exploring the limitless possibilities of taiko – traditional Japanese drums. Have lunch at the centre before boarding the coach once again, heading to Shukunegi Fishing village. A handful of traditional houses clustered around an inlet of Sado’s rugged coast, Shukunegi Port is one of the island’s greatest charms. Formerly a centre of ship building, many of the quaint buildings are made of ship’s timbers, and several can be visited. Return to your ryokan this evening in time for dinner. *B/L/D*

**Day 19
SADO ISLAND - TOKYO**

Spend most of today on Sado Island before returning to Tokyo later in the afternoon. Your coach tour of the island today will take you to the Sado Gold Mine first. This gold mine became the most productive mine in Japan and one of the most important sources of wealth for the Tokugawa shogun-ate. The working conditions were miserable, but in time, new methods and techniques were introduced from the West and the area became an exemplary place. The mine was in operation as recently as 1989. Now though, it is open to visitors rather than miners. Later, we will visit Toki Forest Park which was integral in saving the Japanese Crested Ibis. Several varieties of ibises



are kept at the park, with a crested ibis family housed in a large, grassy enclosure being the main attraction. When the ibises are feeling brave, they will walk mere centimetres

away from the windows on their enclosure, much to the delight of the visitors. Have lunch before taking a scenic drive along the coast. The coach will take you to the port to board the jet foil ferry to Niigata on the mainland of Honshu. From Niigata we will take the shinkansen to Tokyo and we’ll be staying at Villa Fontaine Shiodome (or similar). *B/L*

**Day 20
TOKYO**

After a relaxing morning, an opportunity to learn how to make sushi and eat your own creation for lunch. After the sushi lunch visit Meiji Jingu, Tokyo’s largest shrine. The shrine itself is austere and built using cypress and copper and though often busy with tourists and pilgrims is still extremely popular for weddings, which are a treat to see. You will then head on to the nearby Omotesando area. A broad, straight street lined with an avenue of zelkova trees, Omotesando Dōri is where sub culture meets high fashion. The area offers wonderful people-watching, and there are a few architectural gems too. You’ll

have some free time to spend at leisure before a special dinner with Geisha performance, before returning to the hotel. *B/L/D*

**Day 21
TOKYO**

As there is so much to see and do in this great city, today is a completely free day to spend at leisure and will be unguided. If some last-minute shopping is required, the Ginza is recommended for unique souvenirs, Akihabara is great for electrical gadgets, and Kappa-bashi has all the kitchen goods imaginable. Of course there are also many beautiful gardens, museums and other places of interest to explore. *B*



**Day 22
DEPARTURE**

After breakfast today you will head to Narita Airport by coach in time to catch your flight home (all flights to be advised). Your guide will accompany you to the airport. *B*