

Japan's remote Northern Honshu Tohoku prefecture

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JAPAN'S NORTHERN HONSHU TOHOKU PREFECTURE Samurai, scenery and centuries-old tradition

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Japan is truly a delight for the traveller. A country where meticulous care is taken in every walk of life, from the long preserved cultural traditions to the high tech modern cities and even the food on your plate. After the first visit to Japan, many of us come back feeling that we barely scratched the surface. This itinerary allows you to delve deeper into the lesser travelled, but equally rewarding side of Japan in the Tohoku region, the Northern area on the main island Honshu.

Very few western travellers visit the Tohoku region, so the experience is akin to visiting Japan 30 years ago before tourism exploded in the major cities. We'll visit small traditional villages like the mountainous hot spring village of Nyuto Onsen, with its collection of rustic wooden buildings and Ouchi-juku, a collection of traditional thatched buildings from the Edo Period, both dating back 300 years. This region is rich in Samurai history and we'll visit authentic samurai residences where the direct descendants of the samurai families still live. It is also home to some of Japan's original castles with excellent examples Hirosaki and Tsuruga.

As one of the least densely populated areas of Japan, Tohoku is known for its beautiful mountainous scenery, virgin beech forests, volcanic peaks and lakes. We'll enjoy gentle hiking at Goshikinuma, a cluster of five volcanic lakes, each with its unique colour ranging from reddish-green to cobalt blue; and at Shirakami Sanchi, the largest virgin beech forest in East Asia, and a UNESCO listed area.

In fact, this region is home to three UNESCO listed sites, the most impressive being the vast array of temples in Nikko, where 103 of the buildings and structures as well as their natural setting has been declared a World Heritage site. On our travels, we'll stay in a mix of hotels and traditional Ryokans, some with naturally occurring hot spring baths on site.

Come and join us for a step away from modern life, to wander amongst breathtaking natural beauty and to gain a fantastic insight into Japanese history, culture and traditional customs.



Day 1, Friday 23rd September In Transit

The group will fly from Australia to either Haneda or Narita airport in Tokyo, arriving the following day. All flight schedules are still to be advised. *Meals in flight*



Day 2, Saturday 24th September Tokyo

Welcome to Japan! Our group will be met and transferred from the airport to our hotel, where there will be time to relax and

freshen up after our flight. Tokyo is one of the world's great cities and depending on flight schedules we'll head out for a walk to explore the key attractions around our hotel. Japanese food is certainly a drawcard for many travellers and this evening we'll enjoy our first taste of this wonderfully varied cuisine at our welcome dinner at a local restaurant. *D*

Day 3, Sunday 25th September Tokyo - Aomori

After breakfast, we'll have a short walk to Tokyo station where there'll be time to grab a Bento Box, the quintessential Japanese lunch for our train journey today. We'll be travelling on the Shinkansen, colloquially known in English as the bullet train, to

Aomori. On arrival, we'll visit the Sannai Maruyama Archaeological Site, which dates back to 13,000 - 300 BC. The former village once included over 700 structures and dwellings, some of which are still preserved even now. The buildings have been reconstructed into an open-air museum which is fascinating to explore. The nearby Aomori Museum of Art has been designed to resemble the style of the buildings in the archaeological site and houses an excellent collection of modern art from Japanese artists. We'll return to town with time to freshen up before meeting for dinner at a local Izakaya restaurant. *B/D*



Day 4, Monday 26th September Aomori

Situated on Mutsu Bay and bordered by the Hakkoda mountain range, the picturesque town of Aomori is relatively unexplored by tourists. This morning we'll walk around town, visiting the local markets which are abundant with fresh seafood and perfectly formed piles of the local speciality, deliciously oversized apples. Aomori is best known for its colourful lantern festival and we'll visit the Nebuta Warasse Museum where the gigantic and elaborate lanterns are on display. The nearby Hirosaki Castle, built in 1611, is considered to be one of Japan's most beautiful castles. We'll explore its three-story tower, fortified moats and surrounding parklands before enjoying lunch nearby. We'll then travel to the largest virgin

beech forest in East Asia, the UNESCO listed Shirakami Sanchi Forrest. Covering an extensive mountain range, the forest offers hiking through pristine forests, crystal clear lakes and serene stretches of trees. The 1200 year old Iwakisan Shrine sits at the foot of Mount Iwaki, which we will visit on our way back to town. Dinner is at a local restaurant. *B/L/D*



Day 5, Tuesday 27th September
Aomori - Nyuto Onsen - Kakunodate

This morning we'll travel by train to Nyuto Onsen, a collection of traditional and rustic

ryokan in the mountains of eastern Akita Prefecture. The region is known for the naturally occurring hot spring baths (onsen) found in the area. Visiting an onsen town is a wonderfully relaxing experience; we'll stroll through the village which features a collection of dark wooden buildings up to 300 years old, then soothe our feet in the healing mineral waters. We'll share a traditional style lunch against the backdrop green forest at a local ryokan, then visit the picturesque caldera lake Tazawako, the deepest lake in Japan. We'll travel on to Kakunodate, a former castle town in Akita Prefecture which remains remarkably unchanged since its founding in 1620. We'll be staying in a traditional ryokan tonight and after checking in, we'll share a traditional Kaiseki style dinner: a tasting course comprised of many small, elegantly presented dishes. *B/L/D*

Day 6, Wednesday 28th September
Kakunodate - Hiraizumi

Today we'll walk in the footsteps of the Samurai, as Kakunodate is unique for its well-maintained samurai district. Once home to 80 families, the samurai district still has some of the best examples of samurai architecture in all of Japan, some of which are open to the public. We'll visit the Bukeyashiki Samurai Residence "Ishiguroke" which provides a fascinating insight into the life of a samurai, who were famous as warriors, but skilled in a wide range of disciplines. The direct descendants of the samurai families still live in some residences, so you may even meet a modern-day samurai! After lunch, we'll travel by train to Hiraizumi where we will be staying at another Japanese style ryokan. The hospitality at a ryokan is that guests should feel comfortable, so feel free to wear your yukata (casual kimono) to dinner which will be served at the ryokan tonight. *B/L/D*

Day 7, Thursday 29th September
Hiraizumi - Sendai

After breakfast, we'll visit the UNESCO listed Chusonji Temple, founded in 850 as a Buddhist temple. There is a collection of interesting buildings,

but the most spectacular is the Konjikido. Similar to Kyoto's famous Golden Pavilion, but with far fewer tourists, Konjikido is a hall completely covered in



gold. Inside, it is lavishly decorated with woodwork, mother of pearl inlays and paintings. After exploring the temple we'll have lunch at a local restaurant before heading to the spectacular Geibikei gorge. Surrounded by soaring cliffs and impressive rock formations, we'll enjoy its serene beauty with a cruise on a flat bottomed boat. The boats are navigated by boatmen with giant oars, so it is a truly peaceful journey. After this, we'll travel to Sendai where we will spend the next two nights, and dinner is at a local restaurant. *B/L/D*



Day 8, Friday 30th September
Around Sendai

The modern city of Sendai sits amidst a beautifully scenic area, which we will spend the day exploring. Our first stop will be the Yamadera temple, which means "mountain temple" in Japanese. The temple was founded over a thousand years ago and commands a stunning location, high up a steep mountainside, where there are great views down onto the valley. After exploring the temple we'll share lunch at a local restaurant, before heading to Matsushima Bay. The bay is dotted by over 200 small islands covered by pine trees, and celebrated as one of Japan's most scenic views. The best way to appreciate the bay is by boat, and we'll enjoy a leisurely cruise through the islands. In the afternoon we'll visit the Zuiganji temple; similar in age to Yamadera but a completely different experience. Zuiganji is one of the region's most prominent Zen temples, well known for its beautifully gilded and painted sliding doors (fusuma). We'll return to Sendai for dinner where there is a lively dining precinct of narrow alleyways full of restaurants and bars. *B/L*



Day 9, Saturday
1st October
Sendai - Aizu-Wakamatsu

This morning we'll take a guided tour of the nearby Kirin factory. The Kirin Brewery Company has a long history that is closely tied to the history of beer in Japan and the tour takes in both the history and the brewing facilities, with some tastings of course. We'll continue to Goshikinuma or "five coloured lakes" located in the Bandai-Asahi National Park. Formed when Bandai volcano erupted, the cluster of five volcanic lakes each has its own unique colour ranging from reddish-green to cobalt blue. The 4km walking path along the lakes provides stunning



views of these mystical lakes. As we leave the park we'll travel through lush farmlands, stopping at a local garden to pick the voluptuous strawberries Japan is known for. We'll arrive at Aizu-Wakamatsu in the late afternoon and dinner is at our hotel tonight. **B/D**



Day 10, Sunday 2nd October
Aizu-Wakamatsu - Nikko

Surrounded by scenic mountains, Aizu-Wakamatsu is a former castle town with a rich samurai

history. We'll visit the reconstructed Tsuruga Castle, originally built in 1384, where the garden walls and moat are still original and the reconstruction allows us to climb right to the top floor of the tower. The nearby Nisshinkan School is a fully restored Samurai school depicting the lessons taught to developing samurai. It's a fascinating glimpse into this unique side of Japanese culture. The town is renowned for its award-winning sake distilleries, and we'll visit a local brewery to learn about the distillery process as well as taste the excellent quality sake. One of Japan's favourite dishes is piping hot Ramen and we'll have a ramen lunch at the nearby city of Kitakata, famed for its historic style of ramen, considered one of the best in Japan. Our final stop today is Ouchi-juku, a small village of traditional thatched buildings from the Edo Period. Walking through the village feels like stepping 300 years back in time. After this, we'll travel on a scenic train journey through the mountains to Nikko, arriving in time for dinner at the hotel. **B/L/D**

Day 11, Monday 3rd October
Nikko

Surrounded by the stunning scenery of Nikko National Park, the ancient capital of Nikko is home to an astounding concentration of temples and shrines. So much so that UNESCO listed 103 of the buildings and structures as well as the natural setting around them as a World Heritage Site. Nikko is spread across a beautiful natural landscape and this morning we'll travel out of the city to the spectacular 100m tall Kegon waterfall, then to the nearby Lake Chūzenji. Also called the Sea of Happiness, it is a scenic lake surrounded by mountains that was created by the eruption of Mount Nantai volcano. We'll enjoy lunch in this picturesque setting before heading back to town in the afternoon to explore the surrounds of this wonderful city. An iconic Nikko experience is a walk across the 28-meter-long wooden Shinkyo Bridge that serves as the sacred entrance to the city. The brightly painted red archway makes for the quintessential Japanese photo. Dinner will be at a local restaurant this evening. **B/L**



Day 12, Tuesday 4th October
Nikko - Tokyo

After breakfast we will visit Nikko's most revered attraction, the UNESCO listed Toshogu Shrine. The lavishly decorated shrine complex consists of 42 structures set in a beautiful forest. The temples contain both Shinto and Buddhist elements and are decorated in vivid colours and ornate carvings. Large amounts of gold leaf have been used to decorate the buildings in a way not seen elsewhere in Japan. The most well-known image of Nikko is the shrine's towering and colourful five-story pagoda, where the original carvings inspired the "see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil" maxim. After exploring the temple site in-depth, we'll return to Nikko for lunch. Our afternoon will be spent travelling back to Tokyo, where we will be staying in the energetic Shinjuku neighbourhood. **B/D**



Day 13, Wednesday 5th October
Tokyo

Get your walking shoes on for a day of exploration in fabulous Tokyo. Tokyo is a city with many faces, and we'll show you them today. In the bustling streets of Shinjuku, home to the busiest street crossing in the world, you'll feel you're in one of the world's most modern cities. But travel across town, and you can almost take a step back in time to neighbourhoods where quaint buildings line the streets and ancient temples sit quietly amongst the city surrounds. For lovers of food, Tokyo offers endless delight with everything from street stalls selling freshly grilled snacks to lively yakitori bars, steaming bowls of ramen and the freshest sushi you may ever try. In hip neighbourhoods like Harajuku, it's another side of Japanese culture, where the onslaught of colour, kitschy stores and crepe stands is an entertaining contrast to other parts of the city. And if you are craving a moment of peace in this frenetic city, there are even pockets of lush green forest where beautiful Shinto shrines sit majestically for you to enjoy. We'll celebrate our day and our travels through Japan with a farewell dinner near our hotel tonight. **B/D**



Day 14, Thursday 6th October
Tokyo

Today, our group will be transferred to the airport for the journey home - all flights to be advised. **B/Meals in flight**



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. **An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section.** Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.