



SmallGroup Travel tour of Japan 2024 **Another side of Japan** **Escorted by Sue Kuti**

Japan is a country of amazing contrasts – from modern cosmopolitan cities to historic and cultural sights and traditions. Japan is home to some of the most magnificent Heritage sites in the world and it is also the destination to give you an insight into the fascinating world of the geishas and the age old tea ceremonies. Truly a land of raw beauty and rich in culture, with gastronomy to die for, Japan will not disappoint.

Experience Koyo when the Autumn foliage turns to hues of yellow, orange and red creating breathtaking vistas in the forests of Japan.

Day 1: 14th November 2024 Arrival Day: KIX to Osaka

Welcome to Japan! On arrival at Kansai International Airport (KIX), you will make your way by train to Osaka City, Japan's commercial centre located in the Kansai area.

Upon arrival at Tennoji Station, exit from the platform via the gate and you are in Tennoji Station. You will be met and assisted to your hotel.

Three nights Mitsui Garden Hotel Osaka Premier or similar – Moderate Twin Room

Day 2: 15th November 2024 Osaka

As you arrived quite late last night, today will be a day at leisure. Enjoy a sleep in and leisurely morning. Why not explore the surrounds of your hotel? This evening, you will meet your guide for a short briefing meeting heading out for dinner in Osaka. Osaka is famous for Okonomiyaki, Takoyaki and Kushikatsu and we will try to sample all these dishes during our short stay in the "food capital" of Japan. (D)

Day 3: 16th November 2024 Osaka

Enjoy breakfast in your hotel before setting off to visit the Namba and Dotonburi area of Osaka, a centre of youth culture, nightlife and shopping. Osaka's food scene is famous for Takoyaki Kushikatsu. Here, you will visit the Kuromon Market. This is Osaka's food market. Appropriately, nearby is the "Kitchenware Street" where anything and everything related to cooking. Your travel today is via train and the Osaka Metro. Your luggage will be transferred to Nara. (B,L,D)

Day 4: 17th November 2024 Nara

After breakfast at your hotel, catch the JR (Japan Rail) train that takes you to Nara which was the capital of Japan in the 9th century. Nara feels provincial after the hustle and bustle of Osaka and is the perfect bridge to visiting more rural places in the Nara area later on in this trip.

Explore some of the most famous sights in Nara and start today with visiting Todai-ji temple, which houses the Great Buddha. You will notice many deer (shika) in Nara Park which roam around here freely.

Lunch will be at a local restaurant. For example, at Kamameshi Shizuka near Nara Park. Here they specialize in Kamameshi, literally "kettle rice." It is traditional Japanese rice dish cooked in a hot pot (kama).

In the afternoon, stroll through the old quarters in Naramachi centered on Gango-ji temple where many machiya, merchant town houses, still remain. Visit a couple of these houses, such as the Koshino Ie and learn about the characteristics of the exterior and interior of these houses. They now host shops, cafes and restaurants. You will see some of the oldest shops in Nara, such as Yoshida Kaya: Hand towels using Nara-made mosquito net cloth.

In the evening, enjoy a dinner showcasing kaiseki cuisine.

Two nights at Hotel Setre Naramachi Hotel (3-star) chic rooms, rooftop terrace, refined dining).
(B,L,D)

Day 5: 18th November 2024 Nara

In the morning, continue your exploration of famous sights around Nara Park and take a stroll through Kofuku-ji temple and walk through the park to Kasuga Grand Shrine.

For lunch, return to Naramachi and enjoy lunch in a machiya. The lunch is made up of Yamato traditional vegetables. Yamato is the old area name for Nara.

In the afternoon, there will be some free time to stroll around by yourself or enjoy shopping for local souvenirs.

We will meet up again for a sake tasting in Naramachi, where we will visit Harushika Sake Brewery. Harushika began brewing sake in 1884. The brand's name comes from the sacred animal of Kasuga Grand Shrine is the deer, or shika in Japanese. Your luggage will be transferred to Tenri. (B,L)

Day 6: 19th November 2024 Yamanobe no Michi

This morning you will travel to Yamanobe no Michi, one of Japan's oldest trails. There are several shrines and temples here that you will visit such as Isonokami Shrine and Chogaku-ji temple, which leads you through paddy fields and villages. The area is famous for growing persimmon and there are persimmon orchards in the area. Farmers sell their local fare at small stalls here. Your sightseeing will be done by vehicle with the option available for those who wish to walk along the Yamanobe no Michi (approx. 5 hrs).

For lunch today, you will have famous Miwa Somen. Somen are a kind of noodles and they are said to have originated in the Miwa area.

Private transportation will transfer you to your hotel for the night. (B,L,D)

3 nights at The Kashihara (hotspring baths on premise) or similar – Western Style Twin Rooms

Day 7: 20th November 2024 Kashihara/Asuka Village

Today you will walk to the Kashihara Jingu, a grand shrine that is dedicated to the very first emperor of Japan, Emperor Jimmu. One of the shrine priests will do a Shinto ceremony for us (Seshiki Sanpai).

Next, you will move on to historic Imaicho, an area with well-preserved machiya townhouses, which will already be familiar to you from Nara. Stroll through the streets of Imaicho where locals still live today. Visit one of the old houses and also have lunch there. This unique cityscape has been designated as an important traditional building preservation area.

In the Imaicho district, you will have Kaiseki lunch at a local restaurant, for example Yamato Yayu or Kifu. Kaiseki is an upmarket Japanese dining experience.

In the afternoon, transfer to the nearby Asuka Village and start exploring on foot (optional). The area is famous for kofun, the burial tombs already seen at the Yamanobe no Michi. For those feeling active, there is an optional walking tour in the Asuka area. Visit the Ishibutai tomb and then transfer to your accommodation at The Kashihara. (B,L,D)

***Your luggage will be transferred to Kyoto so please pack an overnight bag with essentials for the next three nights in smaller towns.*

Day 8: 21st November 2024 Yoshinoyama

Yoshino is a village on top of an 800m mountain in the middle of Nara Prefecture. It is the centre of Shugendo, ‘the way of acquiring power’, a mountain ascetic tradition that is reaching back over 1,300 years. Yoshino has been a centre of mountain worship and ascetic training since the 7th century.

Travel to Yoshino by local train and ropeway from Asuka. Yoshino is widely acknowledged to be Kansai’s No 1 cherry blossom spot. Tens of thousands of people visit here in April each year to admire what are said to be 30,000 cherry trees blooming all around on the mountain slopes of Yoshino. In autumn, when it is much quieter in Yoshino, the leaves of these cherry trees turn color alongside the more colorful maple trees making for beautiful views.

The Zao-do hall is Kimpusen-ji temple’s impressive main hall. It was built in its current form in 1592 and is said to be the second largest wooden building in Japan after the Big Buddha Hall at Todai-ji temple in Nara. Tour the grounds of this temple and learn about Shugendo in past and present.

Walk to Yoshimizu Shrine nearby which you will tour inside and learn more about important historical figures related to Yoshino. These include the 12th century samurai Minamoto Yoshitsune, the 14th century Emperor Go-Daigo and the 16th century warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

For lunch, enjoy a local fare at Shizukatei local restaurant. The local specialty is kaki no ha zushi, this is a traditional kind of sushi wrapped in persimmon leave. You will also have a chance to try kudzu mocha, another specialty of Yoshin. This is a traditional Japanese sweet made of kudzu powder and topped with syrup.

After lunch, continue walking through the village at a leisurely pace to reach Sakuramotobou Temple. This temple dates back to the 7th century and was set up by Emperor Tenmu. He was succeeded by his wife who became Empress Jito. She came to Yoshinoyama often after the death of Emperor Tenmu. They even had a palace here. Their grandson, Emperor Monmu, reigned when En no gyoja was active in the Yoshino area. First we will tour the five halls of this temple. Each hall is dedicated to another Buddhist deity. Here will also enjoy the experience of Shabutsu, or tracing of a Buddha image. (B,L,D)

Day 9: 22nd November 2024 Dorogawa Onsen

After breakfast, depart to Dorogawa Onsen located deep in the Omine Mountains. This secluded village is also famous for Shugendo but we are unlikely to see any Yamabushi, as the followers of Shugendo are called, in this season. Explore the village and its surroundings and learn more about Shugendo and visit some of the former practice sites. Explore the village on foot at a leisurely pace.

Visit Kimpusenji-temple for their noon prayer. Witness the monks reading their sutras while they perform the Buddhist Goma. This is quite interesting to experience.

Lunch will be simple udon or soba, two types of Japanese noodles, which are a common fare all across Japan and very popular with Japanese people.

The afternoon is free to relax at your ryokan or stroll around some more. The main street of Dorogawa is lined with many ryokan and we will stay at one of them. Lantern-lit in the evening, it is a very atmospheric place and has a hot spring bath on premise.

Dinner will be a lavish affair of many wonderful dishes, presented one after another in Japanese banquet style. (B,L,D)

Overnight Dorogawa Ryokan Onsen or similar (shared facilities)

Day 10: 23rd November 2024 Mitarai Gorge/Kyoto

After another wonderful breakfast at the ryokan, start another walk (approx. 4 hours) which takes you through the Mitarai Gorge near Dorogawa Onsen. This gorge is known for its wonderful autumn scenery and for its dramatic landscape. There are several waterfalls and a suspension bridge for panoramic photo spots. The walk will take about 4 hours and is easy. Enjoy lunch at Kadoya, a local restaurant that serves lunch sets, a popular option in Japan. A lunch set typically contains the main dish but also a side dish, a soup and a desert.

After lunch, catch a local bus that takes you back to Kintetsu Station (1 hour bus ride) from where you catch a train that takes us to Kyoto, the final destination of this tour. Upon arrival in Kyoto, freshen up before going out for early dinner at a local restaurant and then enjoy a two hour night tour of Kyoto, including Kyoto's famous geisha districts and Kyoto's downtown. (B,L,D)

4 nights Mitsui Garden Shinmachu Bettai or similar

Day 11: 24th November 2024 Kyoto

Your first full day in Kyoto will be spent with touring some of Kyoto's most iconic places, all listed as UNESCO Heritage Sites, including Nijo Castle, seat of the Shogun during Japan's feudal period when he visited Kyoto, and Kinkaku-ji temple with its Golden Pavilion, followed by Ryoan-ji, famous for its rock garden.

Enjoy lunch at kaiten Sushi restaurant near these temples. Kaiten Sushi is a fun experience for all ages.

Continuing on, you will visit Ryoan-ji Temple, famous for its rock garden. Take a local train through suburbs to Arashiyama, a forested area in the West of Kyoto. We will walk through the local neighborhood to the famous bamboo forest and spend some time there taking in this tranquil scenery.

Nearby are two places that lovers of traditional Japanese gardens will love.

It is optional to visit one or both places in your own time and at your own expense. Alternatively, your guide will take those who would like to enjoy a mid-afternoon cup of tea or coffee back to the main street.

Your guide will set a meeting time and place for everyone to meet up again for the return journey to down-town Kyoto by train. Return to your hotel to freshen up before meeting up again and head out for dinner (not included). (B,L)

Day 12: 25th November 2024 Kyoto

Today you travel by local bus to visit two more iconic temples in Kyoto: Kiyomizu-dera and Ginkaku-ji (the Silver Pavilion Temple). Kyoto's Philosopher's Path starts near Ginkaku-ji Temple. Walk this path

following a canal in the Higashiyama quiet neighborhood and end at Nanzen-ji, another famous temple in Kyoto.

Enjoy lunch independently in small groups in the Ginkaku-ji neighborhood. Your guide will help you to find a restaurant.

If time permits in the afternoon, your guide will take you to the centre of Kyoto and introduce you to some shopping areas and local cafes. You will have some time to explore by yourself before meeting up again for dinner at a restaurant near the hotel. (B,D)

Day 13: 26th November 2024 Kyoto

Today you will take a short train ride to the other side of the Eastern Hill Mountains that are a natural border between Kyoto and neighboring Shinga Prefecture, where Japan's largest fresh-water lake is located. The train takes you to Ishiyama where you will catch a bus (approx. 50min) to the Miho Museum (closed on Mondays). Spend a couple of hours visiting the museum and surrounds before returning to Kyoto.

The afternoon, enjoy the Sagano Scenic Railway. This is a wonderful way to tour and enjoy the natural beauty of this rural region. The train has come to be known as the Sagano Torokko, or Romantic Train, because its passage takes guests sightseeing through such romantic scenery. Tonight, explore many options for dinner independently. Your luggage will be transferred to Tokyo. (B)

Day 14: 27th November 2024 Kyoto to Tokyo

After breakfast, make your way to Kyoto Station and catch the Shinkansen, the Bullet Train, which will take you to Tokyo, the capital of Japan. On arrival at Tokyo Station, take the subway to your hotel in the Ueno-Asakusa area of Tokyo. Drop off your luggage and head out for lunch in the Asakusa area.

Following lunch, you have time at leisure to take a stroll through Asakusa until it is check-in time at your hotel.

Freshen up and re-group in the late afternoon and take a short train journey to the Shinjuku area of Tokyo for a tour of Tokyo's neon lights. Enjoy an early dinner at a local izakaya, local "pub" in the Shinjuku area.

After dinner, start your exploration of Shinjuku, one of Tokyo's most popular areas for nightlife. Walk through Omoide-Yokocho alley where many small restaurants serve yakitori, or grilled chicken, then head to Kabukicho, a well-known nightlife and entertainment area, and to Golden Gai, a small nostalgic-looking alley where there are many small bars once frequented by Tokyo's literati. This walk will end late in the evening and you will return to your hotel. (B,L,D)

2 nights The Gate Hotel Kaminarimon or similar

Day 15: 28th November 2024 Tokyo

Today you will head to the nearby Asakusa area, where Sensoji Temple is found. It is one of Tokyo's biggest and best-known temples. Explore the area before heading to the other side of the Sumida River. A short train ride will take you to the Tokyo Sky Tree, the largest building in Tokyo. You will have the chance to view Tokyo from the top of this iconic building. Enjoy have lunch in the local area (not included) before heading back by train to Asakusa to catch a water taxi that takes you down the Sumida River to the Hamarikyu Gardens, once a hunting ground of the Shogun's family in the feudal period of Japan, the park has remained its classic flair despite being surrounded by skyscrapers now.

You will have a cup of green tea and a Japanese sweet sitting by the Shio-iri pond in the park before heading back to the Japan Rail train station.

The Yamanote loop line runs all around the inner part of Tokyo. You will take the Yamanote line to Shibuya, an area popular with young people, and have a look at the famous scramble crossing in front of the station. The metro will take you back to Ueno and your hotel where you will freshen up before going out for farewell dinner at a local restaurant (payable locally). (B)

Day 16 – 29th November 2024 Departure

Your tour ends after breakfast this morning. Depending on your flight schedule, you can make your way to Tokyo's Narita or Haneda Airport via train or extend your stay in Tokyo by a few days. (B)

End of services

Inclusions:

- Return airport transfers
- All train tickets as per the itinerary in regular and economy class on a mix of Shinkansen and local/regional trains
- Meals as per the itinerary
- 15 nights accommodation
- **Fully escorted English speaking guide**
- Osaka Food Market - tour and tasting
- Nara Sights - we visit 4 sights in our time in Nara including the Daibutsu and Nara Park area, Nara Sake Brewery
- Kashihara/Asuka sightseeing
- Kashihara Shingu Prayer
- Yoshino sightseeing
- Yoshino morning prayer
- Mitarai walk
- Kyoto Night and Geisha District Walk
- Kyoto sights - over two days we spread out 5 of the best seasonal sights in this city full of history and options
- Miho Museum
- Shinjuku Night Walk
- Tokyo Sky Tree

- Water Taxi Asakusa to Hamariky Garden
- Hamariky Garden Entrance
- Geisha Dinner
- Kaiseki Lunch at Imaicho in Kashihara
- Hamariky Tea and local snack
- Osaka Metro One-Day Pass
- Jumbo Taxi : Kashihara, Asuka, Yoshino and Dorogawa
- Kyoto Bus Pass
- Shinkansen Kyoto to Tokyo
- Sagano Scenic Train
- Tokyo JR One Day Pass
- Luggage forwarding is included between each location but we note that it will not be same day delivery of the luggage and needs overnight delivery by Yamaneko/Post Office.

Exclusions:

- International flights to and from Japan
- Entrance fees to museums, temples, etc not indicated in your itinerary
- Alcoholic drinks with meals, additional snacks and miscellaneous items or items of a personal nature or items not listed as included
- Meals not indicated in your itinerary
- Visas
- Travel insurance

For full terms and conditions, please refer to <http://www.crooked-compass.com/terms-conditions/>

COST OF TOUR

Based on 12 People travelling together

\$11300 per person twin share

\$2380 single supplement

Duration for excursions mentioned in the descriptions are approximate, and can vary for operational

To participate in this tour you must be able to catch public transport where necessary and get on and off trains and buses independently (please note luggage will be transferred separately). Some walking is required and steady footing is required. The walks vary from short to longer but are not difficult.

SmallGroup Travel is not responsible for visa and vaccination regulations.

Travel Insurance is mandatory to travel on a SmallGroup Travel tour. I can help you with this.

Conditions of Payment:

You are required to fill in a signed SmallGroup Travel Booking Form. This booking form acknowledges that you have read and accepted the Terms and conditions. Once completed you will receive an invoice with payment details. Credit card payments will incur a fee .

A non-refundable deposit of \$1000 per person is required to secure your reservation.

Please ensure you have read and understand SmallGroup Travel Privacy Policy and Booking Conditions.

<https://www.travelmanagers.com.au/terms-and-conditions/>

Please contact me if you have any questions.

I look forward to experiencing this intriguing destination with you!

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