

QUEST JAPAN

WALKS IN THE HEART OF JAPAN TOUR

*Sea of maple leaves
At Nanzenji the rain falls
Soaking the gardens
Children's laughter fills the air
Then drifts through the Sanmon gate*

A 12-night guided walking tour visiting some of the most culturally and historically important sites in Japan. The itinerary includes hikes on the Odaigahara Plateau in the Mount Odaigahara & Mount Omine Biosphere Reserve, and along the Yamanobe-no-Michi trail between Asuka and Nara.

Date	
Duration	12 nights
Hiking days	Hiking or walks on at least 6 days Local cycle ride on 1 day
Hiking grade	Moderate
Guide	Japanese-speaking British guide or local English-speaking Japanese guide.
Accommodation	Comfortable city-centre hotels, Buddhist temple, ryokan, a Japanese-style hotel, and a family-run B&B.
Minimum group size	5 members (but fewer possible, although this will be reflected in a higher tour price per person).
Price	500,000 yen per person (30,000 yen single supplement).

About Quest Japan and our guides

Bob Heffill, Managing Director, first visited Japan in 1973. After graduating from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies in 1980, Bob worked in Japan as an English teacher in state schools for three years. He has subsequently spent more than twenty five years working as a professional Japanese translator and interpreter. After completing a Mountain Leader training course, Bob established the UK-based company, Hike Japan, in 2003. In 2010, building on seven years of highly successful tour operation, Bob established the Tokyo-based travel company Quest Japan. Quest Japan specializes in Japan travel, and in particular small group walking and mountain hiking adventures, most of which include a cultural focus in addition to the off-the-beaten-track walking. His Japanese business partner has worked at the highest level in the Japanese travel industry. As well as managing the business, Bob continues to guide, and is actively developing a network of expert English-speaking Japanese guides.



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Japan. Endless Discovery.

Introduction

Osaka > Mount Koya > Yoshino > Odaigahara Plateau > Asuka > Nara > Kyoto

Several of the Hike Japan tours begin and end in the Kansai, focusing on the Nara/Kyoto areas. There are good reasons for this; there is a greater concentration of culturally important sites here than anywhere else in the country, there is easy access to rural areas that retain some of their integrity and which have not been spoiled by modern development, the locals are friendly, the food is good, there is plenty of scope for easy walking, and the climate is milder than in the mountains and further north.

This tour features less demanding walks than most of the tours. From Osaka, we travel to Mount Koya, head monastery of the Shingon Pure Word Buddhist sect in Japan, a short train journey to the south. Mount Koya has an extraordinary cemetery (in the company of our guide, this walk will offer interesting glimpses into Japanese history) and is the centre of the esoteric Shingon (Pure Word) sect of Buddhism. After a peaceful night we will rise early and attend a short sutra reading. Whilst the temple we stay at has a small *karesansui* (rock garden), the main temple, Kongobuji, has the largest dry rock garden in Japan. The fresh green foliage of the maple and other trees can be enjoyed in May.

From one famous site we travel either by train or road to a village with an equally well-known name, Yoshino. The Kinpusenji temple in Yoshino is the head temple of the Shugendo Buddhist sect. With links to Tibetan Buddhism, the mountain monks belonging to this sect, known as *gyoja*, maintain high levels of personal discipline and are renowned for their hardiness. The village is perched on a ridge. A walk south takes us to some interesting sites on the approach to the Omine pilgrimage route, including the site of the warrior poet Saigyō's hut. Overnight is in a welcoming ryokan run by a young family. Yoshino is well-known for its delicious *kuzu* noodles, and we'll enjoy a lunch which features them.

Parts of this tour are common to the Imperial Pilgrimage Route. After Yoshino we'll visit the Odaigahara Plateau. With a highest point at about 1,700m, this limestone upland is an area of special scientific interest. The area has some of the highest levels of rainfall in Japan (over 5,000mm), and is blessed with mixed forest and an abundance of wildlife. A few years ago, a typhoon destroyed a bridge which gave access from the east, so we will approach by road up from the west side and enjoy a day walking around Odai without the extremely hard climb! Weather permitting we'll enjoy a picnic. There are natural hot springs in the area. We'll enjoy a bath in the hotel after the hike.

We then turn north to Asuka, historically important as the site of the first capital of a unified Japanese state. The area is beautifully conserved and remains from the Asuka Period (538-710) include huge imperial tombs. The opening of the tombs, and the conservation work required, remain hotly debated issues in Japan. Newspaper articles on the subject regularly appear in the press. Frescos which had almost been destroyed by exposure to the atmosphere were recently exhibited at the local museum and a Hike Japan group was fortunate enough to see these before they were taken to the labs for a long time whilst they undergo restoration work. We enjoy a buckwheat *soba* lunch en route to Asuka, and maybe able to try *indigo* fabric dyeing.

Heading next to Nara, the Yamanobe-no-michi is a pleasant walking 5-hour walking route that starts at the Miwa Shrine north of Asuka and ends at Isonokami Jingu Shrine in the foothills near Tenri.

After a couple of nights in Nara, where you'll have a guided walk and the chance to visit, among other places, the great Todaiji Temple, we head for Kyoto using a local train. We plan three nights in Kyoto in order to enjoy some of the many sites and cultural gems. You'll enjoy some wonderful Kyoto food, including a *ramen* lunch. Depending on the group's interests, we may visit to the Nijo Castle, the Nanzenji Temple in the eastern hills, or even travel further afield to the Miho Museum.

There is a farewell dinner downtown on our last night, before breakfast at our top Kyoto hotel and your onward journey.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERAY

DAY 1 – MEET OSAKA

The group will meet guide at the hotel in central Osaka.

Dinner at local restaurant.

Overnight city centre hotel

DAY 2 – OSAKA to MOUNT KOYA

Meet Osaka. Transfer by train to Mount Koya. Lunch. Afternoon guided walk of temples and cemetery to Okunoin, where the founder of Shingon Buddhism, Kobo Daishi, is believed to be in eternal meditation. Dinner and early night.

Overnight temple.

DAY 3 –MOUNT KOYA and YOSHINO

Early morning rise for to join in short sutra reading ceremony before breakfast. All food is temple vegetarian *shojin ryori*. After breakfast descend cable car for train to Yoshino. Arrive Yoshino. After lunch free time to wander around village and see garden of the ryokan. Dinner at ryokan.

Overnight ryokan

DAY 4 – EXPLORE YOSHINOYAMA

Walk from site of poet priest Saigyō's hut, passing Mikumari Jinja Shrine, to the Kinpusenji Temple. Yoshino *kuzu* noodle lunch. Later afternoon travel south to Odai area.

Overnight Japanese-style hotel

DAY 5 – ODAIGAHARA PLATEAU WALK

Drive up to Odaigahara. Stop by visitor centre. Hike West Odai and trail to highest point. Picnic on the way if weather permits.

Overnight Japanese-style lodge

DAY 6 – TO ASUKA via HASEDERA

In the morning travel by road via Hasedera Temple, with a stop for a buckwheat noodle lunch. In the afternoon drive to Asuka.

Local walk in the afternoon.

Overnight B&B

DAY 7 – EXPLORE ASUKA

Leisurely sightseeing, by rented bicycles, of sites in and around village of Asuka, including the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, Ishibutai tomb, and Asukadera. Dinner at local restaurant

Overnight B&B

DAY 8 - YAMANOBE NO MICHI TRAIL HIKE

After breakfast, transfer to start of the Yamanobe no Michi (lit. road beside the mountains) trail at Miwa Jinja Shrine. 5-hour hike to Isonokami Jingu Shrine near Tenri. The pleasant hike is through fairly flat countryside featuring village surrounded by persimmon groves and market gardening. Transfer to Nara. Dinner at local Japanese restaurant.

Overnight city centre hotel Nara

DAY 9 – NARA SIGHTSEEING

Morning and early afternoon sightseeing in and around Nara Park, including Todai Temple, with a very knowledgeable local guide. Later afternoon free time. Dinner at Japanese restaurant.

Overnight city centre hotel Nara

DAY 10 – KYOTO SIGHTSEEING

Transfer by local train from Nara to Kyoto. Visit Nishiki Koji food market, followed by a *ramen* noodle lunch. Visit to Ginkakuji, with its rock garden and famous Silver Pavilion, and Nanzenji Temple, following the 'Path of Philosophy.' Dinner at restaurant featuring modern Kyoto cuisine, *kyoryori*.

Overnight city centre hotel Kyoto

DAY 11 – KYOTO

What we do today depends on interests of group. There is so much to see and do it would take decades to start to see all aspects of this wonderful city. Those interested could visit the Miho Museum in Shiga, about 90 minutes from Kyoto. Itineraries today and tomorrow to be discussed with group.

Dinner at local restaurant

Overnight city centre hotel Kyoto

DAY 12 – KYOTO

Day free or activities based on interests of group members.

Farewell celebration dinner at local restaurant

Overnight city centre hotel Kyoto

DAY 13 – TOUR ENDS. ONWARD TRAVEL

Tour ends after breakfast. Onward travel - hotel is conveniently located for access to Kyoto station and by train to Kansai International Airport.

TRIP NOTES

Equipment & Clothing

On receiving your booking, we send you a dossier which contains a suggested gear and clothing list. Contact us if you have any questions at all. We will be pleased to offer advice.

Accommodation

MOUNT KOYA: Buddhist temple YOSHINO: Ryokan ASUKA: B&B ODAIGAHARA AREA: Japanese-style hotel,

OSAKA, NARA & KYOTO: HOTELS

You will be sleeping on tatami mats in ryokan and temple, with shared facilities.

Please note that single rooms are normally only available in hotels – where a single room supplement may apply.

Meal Plan

All meals are provided.

Important Notes

Every effort will be made to keep to the above itinerary, but we cannot make absolute guarantees! Changes to the itinerary will normally be made to introduce improvements. Weather conditions, road and transport conditions, and the health of walkers can all contribute to changes. The guide will ensure that the trip runs according to plan, but an easy-going nature is an asset!

