

QUEST JAPAN

Adventure walking tours in the real Japan



Slow Trains to Kyōto 2017

Highlights

Okayama Korakuen Gardens · Kurashiki · Itsukushima Shrine on Miyajima Island · Hiroshima Peace Park · Iwami Ginzan silver mine area · Train travel along the beautiful Japan Sea Coast · The Izumo Grand Shrine · Small castle town of Izushi · Walks on the 'quiet side' of Japan · Hiking on Mount Daisen · World Heritage listed Iwami Ginzan silver mine · Lovely natural hot springs in Arifuku and Kinonaki Onsen · Fine food



Shimenawa rice straw rope, denoting a sacred area, at Izumo Grand Shrine

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, he worked in Japan as an English teacher in state schools for three years. He has subsequently spent 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 Ltd.". Quest Japan specializes in Japan travel, and in particular small group walking adventures and culture-focused tours. His new 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.

Price

540,000 yen per person

Single supplement 42,000 yen.

Hiking days

2 days hiking and local walks on other days

Grade

Gentle/Moderate

Style of tour

Fully guided.

Accommodation in traditional ryokan, hotels.



Reflecting on Itsukushima

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Introduction

Okayama · Hiroshima · Arifuku Onsen · Matsue · Izumo · Mount Daisen · Kinosaki · Kyoto

The Japan Sea Coast of Western Honshu, the main island, is exceptionally beautiful. Rarely visited by westerners, it lies to the north of the mountains that separate this region from the big cities along the *shinkansen* bullet train line which connects Osaka, Kobe, Himeji, Okayama, and Hiroshima. There are a couple of small cities along the north coast, Tottori and Matsue, but the land is mainly devoted to farming. The coastline, with white beaches and rocky headlands, is dotted with small fishing villages. Connecting these villages is a series of railway lines we will use as we make our way slowly to Kyoto.

Our first night is in Kyoto. The first overnight stop after leaving Kyoto along the fabled bullet train, is Okayama, where we'll visit Korakuen Gardens. In the afternoon we'll hop on a train to Kurashiki where we'll visit and have dinner in the pretty *Bikanchiku* conservation area. The next day we travel the short distance to Hiroshima. On arrival we'll visit the Hiroshima Peace Park and Museum. The following day we'll get a local train and ferry to Itsukushima Shrine with its floating *torii* shrine gateway. From the shrine there are pleasant walks up the low hills behind which offer good views of the Inland Sea.

The following day we drive north to the Sea of Japan. This is known as the San-in (literally 'in the shadow of the mountains) Coast. Your accommodation is in the small village Arifuku, famous for its fine natural hot spring onsen baths.

In Arifuku Onsen you will enjoy the hospitality of a very special family for two nights. From Arifuku, the next day, we'll visit the Iwami Ginzan silver mine, a World Heritage listed site, with a local guide. It'll be about a 5-hour walk.

Your journey will then continue along the coast to the pretty city of Matsue located on Lake Shinji. It was here that the writer and Japanophile Lafcadio Hearn lived for a while. In his book *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, Lafcadio Hearn wrote

Looking eastward from the great bridge over those sharply beautiful mountains, green and blue, which touch the horizon, I see a glorious spectre towering to the sky. Its base is effaced by far mists: out of the air the thing would seem to have shaped itself—a phantom cone, diaphanously grey below, vaporously white above, with a dream of perpetual snow—the mighty mountain of Daisen.

From Matsue we'll take a local train to visit the Izumo Grand Shrine, one of the most important Shinto shrines in Japan. The tour features great food - the fresh seafood in Matsue is particularly good.

Again using Matsue as a base, we'll aim to climb sacred Mount Daisen, although how far we get will depend entirely on any remaining spring snow.

We then head slowly east on local railway lines to the *onsen* town of Kinosaki, made famous by the writer Shiga Naoya in his novel Kinosaki Nite. Some 'in-the-know' think that Kinosaki has the best natural hot springs in Japan! We stay two nights in a traditional ryokan. There will be the chance to explore the town as well as on the second day visiting the nearby town of Izushi, famous for its *soba* (buckwheat noodles).

From Kinosaki we head south to Kyoto, where we'll spend the last day exploring and the last two nights in a traditional ryokan.

The tour is designed to get you well off the beaten track and see a beautiful part of Japan. The pace of the tour is unhurried as you stay for more than one night on several occasions. Not only is the accommodation comfortable, the food, as on all our tours, will be excellent. Slow trains and gentle walking are a two great ways to see Japan.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 MEET IN KYOTO

We'll meet in the hotel and have dinner in a local restaurant. Bob will give a short briefing and answer questions.

Overnight hotel in Kyoto

DAY 2 TRAIN TO OKAYAMA AND KURASHIKI

Although the tour is more about 'slow trains', we start our journey on the bullet train from Kyoto to Okayama. After leaving luggage at our hotel we'll visit the Korakuen Gardens, one of the three great public, landscaped strolling gardens in Japan.

In 1687, Ikeda Tsunamasa, the local daimyo (feudal lord), ordered his vassal, Tsuda Nagatada, to begin construction of Okayama Korakuen. It was completed in 1700, and it has retained its original appearance from the Edo Period to the present day, except for a few changes by subsequent daimyo.

The garden was used as a place for entertaining important guests, and as a retreat for daimyo, although ordinary people could also visit on certain days. In 1884, ownership was transferred to Okayama Prefecture, and the garden was opened to the public. The garden suffered severe damage during the floods of 1934 and during World War II bombing in 1945, but has been restored based on Edo Period paintings and diagrams. In 1952, Korakuen Garden was designated a Special Place of Scenic Beauty under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, and is managed as a historical cultural asset to be passed to future generations.

In the afternoon we'll hop on a local train to Kurashiki where we'll have a walk around the pretty Bikanchiku conservation area with its canal before dinner at a local *izakaya* style restaurant.

Overnight hotel in Okayama

DAY 3 TRAIN TO HIROSHIMA. VISIT PEACE PARK

This morning we take a short train ride to Hiroshima. Your hotel conveniently adjoins the station. After checking-in, get a local tram through the city to the Peace Park and museum. The exhibition gives interesting insights which led up to the dropping of the atomic bomb and its aftermath. The impact of the bomb, in every sense, was huge in determining the direction Japanese culture took in the 20th century.

Overnight Hiroshima city centre hotel

DAY 4 LOCAL TRAIN AND FERRY TO VISIT MIYAJIMA AND ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE

The train to Miyajima departs from Hiroshima Station which is conveniently connected directly to your hotel. On arrival at Miyajima, we walk over to the ferry terminus for the short crossing to the island of Miyajima. The walk to Itsukushima Jinja Shrine takes about half an hour and passes through an arcade of interesting shops and small restaurants.

After exploring the shrine, we'll walk up the hill behind to the Daishoin Temple, a location which affords good views on the Setonaikai or Inland Sea.

Overnight Hiroshima city centre hotel

DAY 5 DRIVE TO ARIFUKU ONSEN

After breakfast we'll head north, by road, to Arifuku Onsen on the Sanin Coast – the quieter side of Western Honshu. Free time in the afternoon. Time for relaxing hot spring baths before dinner in a ryokan run by most gracious hosts.

Overnight ryokan

DAY 6 VISIT IWAMI GINZAN MINE IN OMORI-CHO

After a leisurely breakfast you have a guided day tour of the Omori-cho area and the Iwami Ginzan silver mine. This operated for over four hundred years as Japan's most important silver mine. It ranked alongside Potosi in Bolivia as one of the world's great silver mines. Annual production in the early 17th century was 38 tons. Known to Europeans in the mid-sixteenth century, silver from the mine contributed to trade, and to local lords and the shogunate maintaining their military power in the Edo Period.

Overnight ryokan



DAY 7 TRANSFER BY TRAIN TO MATSUE

Our journey continues by train along the coast today to the small city of Matsue. After lunch we'll visit Matsue Castle, Lafcadio Hearn House, and possibly the Shimane Prefectural Art Museum. Located on the shores of Lake Shinji, the museum has collections of Japanese and Western art, sculpture, pottery, and photographs.

Dinner – seafood at a small local restaurant

Overnight Matsue ryokan



DAY 8 VISIT IZUMO GRAND SHRINE

Today you will take a slow, local train to the Grand Shrine at Izumo. Along with the Kumano and Ise Grand Shrines, this ranks as one of the country's most important shrines. Considered one of the oldest in Japan, myth has it that the sun goddess Amanoterasu no Omikami, ancestor of the imperial family, dedicated Izumo Taisha to the god Ōkuninushi-no-mikoto, the Shinto deity of marriage. There are delicious noodles to be enjoyed before returning to Matsue later in the afternoon.

Overnight Matsue ryokan

DAY 9 DAY HIKE ON MOUNT DAISEN

The highest mountain in west Honshu, Mount Daisen is an extinct volcano. Its flanks are cloaked in beech forests. In early April we may not be able to climb more than half way up. Instead we could walk a shorter course to Daisenji Temple. Daisen is an important pilgrimage site. There are shrines and temples on the lower slopes amongst the trees. On the hike you will need approach shoes, or light hiking boots. A day sack for drinks/light lunch, camera, and waterproofs etc. is sufficient for the up and down route. Return to Matsue in the late afternoon.

In case of bad weather, we may, instead, visit the Adachi Museum of Art <https://www.adachi-museum.or.jp/en/>

Overnight Matsue ryokan

DAY 10 TRAIN TO KINOSAKI ONSEN

We'll catch a morning train from Matsue to the small onsen spa town of Kinosaki in Hyogo Prefecture, travelling through the San-in National Park, a pretty stretch of coastline offering good views from the train window. You'll have to be on your toes as there are several connections to be made at small stations en route!

Free afternoon to explore the town.

Later, we'll repair, promenading in cotton gowns (*yukata*) and wooden clogs (*geta*), to the excellent public hot spring baths. When in Rome ...

Overnight Kinosaki ryokan

DAY 11 VISIT TO IZUSHI

After breakfast, we'll take a short train ride to Toyooka, and then drive to the nearby, pretty castle town of Izushi. The small town is famous for its buckwheat noodles, and you'll have an opportunity to try your hand at making fresh noodles which we'll then have for our lunch. Sightseeing stroll, and possibly a visit to a nearby Oriental White Crane (*Kōnotori*) sanctuary in the afternoon, before returning to Kinosaki and a refreshing hot tub.

Overnight Kinosaki ryokan

DAY 12 TRAIN TO KYOTO

Today we'll take the train to Kyoto. After dropping our luggage at our ryokan, we'll head out into the city. What we do in Kyoto this afternoon and tomorrow will depend on the interests of the group, and can be decided nearer the time.

Overnight Kyoto ryokan

DAY 13 EXPLORING KYOTO

Today's plan to be discussed. Popular spots include Ginkakuji, the Silver Pavilion, the Philosophers walk to Nanzenji Temple. The latter is the head temple of the Rinzaï sect of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Nishikikoji market is a great place to get an idea of the incredible diversity of food in Japan, and to see related businesses such as the old Aritsugu knife and utensil shop. Shopping culture in Japan, like everything else, been taken to extraordinary heights. In the early evening, before dinner, we may take a stroll through Miyagawa and Gion, traditional geisha quarters. Overnight Kyoto ryokan

DAY 14 TOUR ENDS

Breakfast at our ryokan. Onward travel.