

QUEST JAPAN

The Imperial Pilgrimage Route Tour 2019



Highlights

Exploring sacred sites and pilgrimage routes in the Kii Mountain Range · Visits to the Three Great Kumano Shrines · Staying in a Buddhist temple on Mount Koya · Accommodation in historic hot spring villages · Stays in lovely ryokans in Ryujin and Yoshinoyama villages · Climbing to the Odaigahara Plateau · Exploring the old capitals of Asuka and Nara · A country walk along the Yamanobe-no-michi trail · Kyoto highlights · Meeting friends and locals along the way



Kyoto Imperial Palace

Style of tour

Small group walking itinerary in the heart of Japan, with a Japanese-speaking British tour leader, and local guides at places of special interest.

Accommodation in family-run traditional ryokan, hotels, Buddhist temple.

Guide price

From 625,000 yen (about £4,475 mid-January 2019 exchange rate)

Duration

15 Days (14 nights)

Walking grade

Moderate/Vigorous

Group size

Minimum: 5 members

Included

All transport on tour, accommodation, all meals, guides, and entrance and activity fees from start to end of tour, all local taxes (other than the new airport departure tax).

Not included:

International flights, airport transfers, drinks with meals.

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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 Quest Japan now has a network of expert English-speaking local Japanese mountain guides.



Taizoin Temple garden

Introduction

Osaka · Mount Koya · Ryujin Onsen hot spring village · Imperial Pilgrimage Trail to the Three Great Kumano Shrines · Odaigahara Plateau · Yoshino · Asuka · Nara · Kyoto

Although less dramatic than the Japan Alps, the forested mountains of the Kii Peninsula, south of Nara, have for centuries been regarded as sacred.

Your first night after the start of the tour is at an elegant temple situated on Mount Koya, the home of Shingon (Pure Word) Buddhism. The pilgrimage routes to the three great Kumano Shrines – Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Nachi Taisha, and Hayatama Taisha were popularised during and after the Heian Period (794-1185), when the imperial family and nobility began to seek salvation in *sangaku shinko* (a belief in the supernatural power of mountains), rather than through common religious practices. Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239) made no less than thirty pilgrimages to Kumano, recording his thoughts and feelings in the Kumano poems. These precious documents are now in the Yomei Storehouse archives in Kyoto.

Hot springs are abundant, and some of the oldest *onsen* in Japan are located in the Kii Peninsula. You will follow the southernmost part of the old *Nakaheji* pilgrimage route, staying at family run inns along the way. The path, in parts, is paved with flagstone steps and leads through forests of Japanese cedar. Walking in the quiet solitude it is easy to imagine the days, centuries ago, when nobles followed these paths through the mountains.

After a four days of walking along the Nakaheji Pilgrimage route, you will travel north, through the mountains, to the Odaigahara Plateau. An isolated plateau surrounded by a sea of mountains, the area has been designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. We hike up the Osugidani Valley from the Mie Prefecture side, spend the night in a mountain hut, then continue along the steeply ascending trail, passing numerous impressive waterfalls en route to the highest point on the plateau.

From Odaigahara we descend to the ridgetop village of Yoshinoyama. There we stay in a traditional ryokan. The ryokan is conveniently located for exploring Yoshino, home to the Kimpusenji Temple and its great Zaodo Hall. Kimpusenji Temple is the head temple of the *shugendo* sect of ascetic mountain priests.

We then travel out of the mountains, via the ancient capitals of Asuka and Nara, to Kyoto. From Asuka we will walk through countryside along an historic route known as the Yamanobe-no-michi. In Nara and Kyoto you will experience a more cosmopolitan side of Japan. Sightseeing will include Nara Park and other sites in this small city. We'll then explore Kyoto, visiting some special sites including Kyoto's lovely gardens. There will be time for shopping in Kyoto.

On this, as on every Quest Japan tour, excellent food and very carefully chosen accommodation, are one of the great highlights.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 Sunday MEET OSAKA

Meet at Osaka city centre hotel in the early evening. Your guide will join you and give some insights on the journey ahead. Dinner at a local restaurant.

Overnight hotel.

DAY 2 Monday TRAIN to MOUNT KOYA & WALK

Transfer to Mount Koya monastery by train. Afternoon walk the Nyonin no Michi around the rim of low hills surrounding the many temples. This is as close as women could approach to the centre of what is conceived to be a lotus flower, whose petals are the surrounding peaks.

Overnight in a peaceful temple on Mount Koya.

DAY 3 Tuesday MOUNT KOYA GUIDED WALK, THEN DRIVE TO RYUJIN ONSEN

This morning we'll have an interesting guided tour of Mount Koya, including visits to Okunoin, the mausoleum where Kukai (later named Kobo Daishi) is enshrined. The walk, through tall cypress trees, passes several hundred thousand tombstones, monuments to emperors, shoguns and samurai, landlords and poets.

After lunch we'll drive south from Mount Koya, along the Koya-Ryujin Skyline, to a sumptuous old ryokan (family inn) in Ryujin Onsen natural hot springs. The Kamigoten Ryokan was declared a 'tangible cultural property' (similar to a Grade 1 listed building) in 1999. Dark polished wooden floors, large white cedar baths, and delicious seasonal delicacies will be served for dinner.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 4 Wednesday HIKE to CHIKATSUYU (10 miles walking: about 7 hours)

Today you will start your hike along the old Nakaheji pilgrimage path to Kumano. From the start at Takijiri Oji, the path climbs steeply up to the ridge-top village of Takahara. The Nakaheji has been established as one of Japan's National Historic Roads. The paths are clearly defined, and flagstones have been laid in some places to make the climbs easier. Although rarely seen these days, there are small bears in the Kumano Mountains and, more commonly, deer and wild boar. Wayside shrines encourage regular rest stops. The small shrine at Chikatsuyu marks the end of the first day of the walk.

The night is spent in a family-run ryokan in Yunomine Onsen hot spring village.

DAY 5 Thursday HIKE to KUMANO HONGU and YUNOMINE HOTSPRING (6 miles: about 5 hours)

We'll pick up the path again in the hills above the Kumano Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine and walk via Hongu to Yunomine, one of the oldest natural hot spring onsen villages in Japan. There is an increasing sense of solitude and purpose as you progress towards the three great shrines of Kumano, passing small *jizo* statues on the way. Nobles would rest at points called *oji*, to refresh themselves and compose poems. You can stamp a booklet as a souvenir of your walk at each *oji*. Their poetry is engraved on stone monuments sited along the path.

At the heart of these sacred mountains, Kumano was said to be the entrance to the land of Yomi, the 'other world' to where spirits travelled in Japanese mythology. The classic style of architecture of the Kumano Hongu Shrine blends perfectly with the surrounding mountains and forests. The shrine uses a mythological three-legged raven symbol, representing the Hongu, Nachi, and Hayatama shrines – the same motif as the one used by the Japan Football Association. The ryokan at Yunomine is comfortable, with an outdoor hot tub fed by local hot springs. Evening soaks under the stars are recommended for tired limbs, as are morning dips before breakfast. Your breakfast eggs might well be boiled in the boiling, sulphurous waters at the spring in the centre of the village.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 6 Friday WALK IN KUMANO NACHI TAISHA AREA (4 miles: about 4 hours)

Toady we'll visit the amazingly sited shrine and temple complex that overlooks the Nachi-no-taki Waterfall, the highest in Japan (133m/436ft). There will be a hike around Nachi-san, the mountain overlooking the Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine to the sea beyond, finishing with a short detour - time permitting – to an area of pristine forest above Nachi, and the Hayatama Shrine on the way to our lodging.

Overnight Japanese-style hotel.

DAY 7 Saturday DRIVE NORTH to ODAIGAHARA. START OSUGINDANI HIKE (4 miles: about 4 hours)

After breakfast we'll drive north to the trail head from which we start our hike up the Osugidani Gorge to the Odaigahara Plateau. The route climbs past a series of spectacular waterfalls before reaching the hut where we spend the night.

Overnight hut.

DAY 8 Sunday HIKE to ODAIGAHARA PLATEAU (5 miles: about 5.5 hours)

The trail continues along the gorge before turning west and climbing steeply through dense woods. From the visitor centre on top, we'll drive to the pretty hilltop village of Yoshinyama and our family-run inn.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 9 Monday WALK & SIGHTSEEING around YOSHINOYAMA

The Zaodo Hall lies at the heart of Yoshino in Kimpusenji, the head temple of the *shugendo* sect of mountain priests. Yoshino has played a very important role in Japanese history – it was the base for the Southern Court when it split from the Imperial Court in Kyoto. We'll explore the village and enjoy lunch featuring local *kuzu* (arrowroot) noodles

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 10 Tuesday ASUKA

This morning we'll travel the short distance to Asuka, where we'll either rent bicycles to explore the village, or small electric vehicles. Asuka is the site of the first palace and centre of the consolidated Japanese state known as Yamato. It was where culture from Korea and China first took root in Japan. There are large imperial burial chambers as well as the oldest Buddhist statue in Asukadera Temple to see amongst other important site. The landscape has been carefully conserved, making it a pleasant area to hire cycles and walk around.

Overnight lodge.

DAY 11 Wednesday HIKE the YAMANOBE NO MICHI ROUTE (8 miles: 5 hours)

The Yamanobe no Michi (literally 'path beside the mountains') is a designated historical route. On and off quiet roads, this is a 4 to 5 hour, 13 km hike through countryside with persimmon and mandarin groves, the path winding around imperial tombs. Arrive Nara late afternoon.

Overnight hotel in Nara.

DAY 12 Thursday NARA SIGHTSEEING

Today we'll enjoy a guided walk around Nara Park. Many of Japan's greatest cultural treasures are concentrated in and around Nara. Indeed, the city boasts eight UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Todaiji Temple, Nigastu-do and Sangatsu-do halls, Kasuga Shrine, Shinyakushi-ji Temple, Kofuku-ji Temple, Shosoin Treasure House, Isuien Garden, as well as the Nara National Museum and the Nara City Museum of Photography are all in or near Nara Park. The parkland is also home to a thousand or more free-roaming deer. Todaiji's Daibutsu-den is the largest wooden building in the world, and houses a 16 metre (52ft) tall bronze image of the cosmic Dainichi Buddha, containing 437 tonnes of bronze and 130kg of gold. Prior to being rebuilt three hundred years ago, the awesome structure was even bigger than it is today. There will be some free time to relax and look around Nara on your own.

Overnight city centre hotel in Nara.

DAY 13 Friday KYOTO

After breakfast, we'll travel by local train to Kyoto. After checking-in, we'll set out explore Kyoto. Imperial power was consolidated here after the court moved from Nara. Kyoto is such a special place that it would take years to see a fraction of its wonders. After we arrive in Kyoto we'll head to the Higashiyama area, visit the Silver Pavilion, and stroll along the Philosopher's Walk to Nanzenji Zen temple. We may take advantage of any special seasonal events or highlights nearer the time when planning our Kyoto itinerary.

Celebration farewell dinner at a restaurant specializing in a modern take on tradition *Kyō-ryōri*, Kyoto cuisine

Overnight Kyoto city centre hotel.

DAY 14 Saturday KYOTO

From Nara we travel north to Kyoto. Imperial power was consolidated here after the court moved from Nara. Kyoto is such a special place that it would take years to see a fraction of its wonders. After we arrive in Kyoto we'll head to the Higashiyama area, visit the Silver Pavilion, and stroll along the Philosopher's Walk to Nanzenji Zen temple. We may take advantage of any special seasonal events or highlights nearer the time when planning our Kyoto itinerary. Dinner at a rather nice Italian restaurant with a Japanese twist.

Overnight Kyoto city centre hotel.

DAY 15 Sunday Tour ends

Onward travel after breakfast.

We would be happy to help you plan if you decided to extend your stay in Kyoto or elsewhere in Japan.

BRIEF NOTES (please also refer to trip dossier)

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

OSAKA, ASUKA, KYOTO, NARA: Comfortable hotels. MOUNT KOYA: Temple. OTHER PLACES: Traditional Japanese inns (ryokan).

Please note that single rooms are normally only available in hotels – where a single room supplement will 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!