

The Japanese Alps

Discover the samurai culture of Matsumoto, the rural folk traditions of Takayama, and the Edo-era heritage of Tsumago on this ten-day journey into the Japanese Alps.



Day 1 – Arrival in Tokyo

You will be met by our airport representative on arrival in Tokyo. They will escort you to the train/shuttle bus that will take you to your hotel in the city centre.

The rest of the day is at leisure. If arriving in the morning, we can arrange for a guided afternoon tour taking in some of Tokyo's highlights (at additional cost), though you may prefer to explore the city at leisure or relax in your hotel.

Day 2 – Tokyo (B)

Your guide will meet you at your hotel after breakfast to begin your guided tour of Tokyo. Start the day with a stroll through Hama-Rikyu Teien. Once the private hunting ground of the Shogun, this immaculately-maintained public garden is situated near the mouth of the Sumida River, and features as its centrepiece a beautiful tidal pond complete with moon-viewing pavilions and traditional tea villa, where you can stop to enjoy a taste of Japanese matcha (green tea).

Following the tea ceremony, continue along the promenade to the pier where you'll board the Tokyo water bus for a cruise on the Sumida River. During the half-hour cruise you'll enjoy wonderful views of Tokyo's skyline, including famous landmarks such as the Tokyo Skytree and the iconic Sumida Bridges, before disembarking at Asakusa.

Tokyo's traditional old quarter, Asakusa offers a glimpse of classical Japan. Take the time to explore the district's ancient temples and lantern-lit lanes, with their wooden shopfronts and century-old ateliers, before continuing to Ginza on the Tokyo metro.

Tokyo's most polished neighbourhood, Ginza (literally, "Seat of Silver") was established in 1612 as the city's first silver mint district. In later years, Ginza would become the first part of Tokyo to adopt a European layout, incorporating a French promenade and Georgian brick houses. The area remains famous to this day as an upmarket shopping and dining district, where Tokyo's most expensive real estate is found.

A short distance from Ginza is the Imperial Palace, the permanent residence of Japan's Emperor. The Palace is closed to the public, but you can enjoy a walk in the surrounding grounds and Palace East Gardens.

End the day with a visit to the Meiji Shrine, Tokyo's most iconic monument. Hidden away in the Meiji Jingu Forest, a natural woodland in the heart of the city, the shrine is perhaps most famous for its two dramatic *torii* (entry gates), among the largest of their kind in Japan. Take the time to explore the shrine and its adjoining Iris garden (best in May/June when the flowers are in bloom), before returning to your hotel.

NB: We may change the order of this itinerary depending on the location of your hotel. If there are any areas of Tokyo you particularly want to cover, just let your guide know and he/she can reschedule the tour to suit.



Day 3 – Matsumoto (B)

Say goodbye to Tokyo this morning as you travel by train into the Japanese Alps. Your destination is Matsumoto (2 ½ hours from Tokyo), a lively castle city with a history dating back to the early 8th century.

Nestled in a beautiful valley in the Northern Japanese Alps, Matsumoto enjoys one of the most scenic locations of any city in Japan. Embraced by the Utsukushi-ga-hara and Yariga mountains, Matsumoto’s scenery changes dramatically with the seasons, but the enchanting mountain vistas, and the equally stunning sunsets, are a year-round constant.

Matsumoto reached its peak of influence in the 15th and 16th centuries as the base of the Ogasawara clan, whose family castle still stands to this day in the centre of the city. It remains one of Japan’s most attractive cities. Rich in history, but with a pleasantly laidback atmosphere, it’s a joy to explore.



After checking into your hotel, the rest of the afternoon is free for you to tour the city. Matsumoto is best explored on foot or by bike, though there’s also a bus service taking in most of the main attractions. Start with Matsumoto Castle.



One of the most striking of Japan’s medieval forts, Matsumoto Castle was built at the end of the 16th-century during the country’s tumultuous Sengoku period. Comprised of two keeps, its thick ramparts, wide moat and numerous turrets are revealing of a castle that was built during war time. Yet Matsumoto Castle is also quite beautiful, particularly in mid-April when the cherry blossom groves come into bloom.

A few blocks north of the castle you’ll find the Former Kaichi School (1876), one of Japan’s first public schools. The main school house, with its white-washed walls and French plate glass, is striking, but the main attraction is the displays of Meiji-era memorabilia found inside, which provide a fascinating insight into everyday life in turn-of-the-century Japan.

To conclude your tour, we recommend a stroll through the narrow lanes around Nawate-dori Street, just south of the castle. Running parallel to the

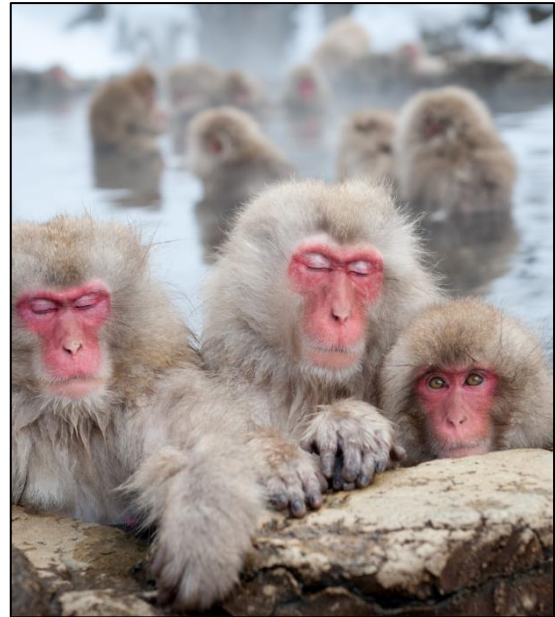
Metobagawa River, Nawate-dori's old row houses have been converted into trinket stalls and snack shops selling, amongst other things, pottery and taiyaki (curious fish-shaped cakes!)

Day 4 – Yudanaka Snow Monkeys (B)

Take a break from the city sights today as you head into the mountains to visit the snow monkeys of Jigokudani. It's a short journey of approx. 2 hours by train and bus to Jigokudani Park, situated just outside the highland resort town of Yudanaka.

'Jigokudani' translates into English as "hell's valley", so called because of the steam and boiling hot springs that escape from the mountainous region's otherwise frozen earth. It is these natural hot spring baths that attract the park's most famous residents, the Japanese Macaques, or snow monkeys.

The snow monkeys live in large troops, and it's tremendous fun to watch their interactions, as they soak in the springs, groom one another, and play. Sightings are best in the winter and spring, but the monkeys can also be seen in the summer, albeit in smaller numbers as the troops tend to disperse.



Allow 1-2 hours to visit the monkeys and, if you're feeling energetic, enjoy a relaxing hike in the hills above the valley. Late afternoon, return to Matsumoto via Nagano.



Day 5 – Kiso Valley (B, D)

Depart Matsumoto this morning and travel by train into the Kiso Valley. This is a wonderfully scenic ride into the mountains, with beautiful views all the way to Magome.

A quaint hill town dating back to the Edo era, Magome is one of the many 'shukaba', or post towns, that served the Nakasendo trunk road between Tokyo and Kyoto during the 17th and 18th centuries. Little changed, the town remains a beautifully-preserved tribute to the Edo era, with its old wooden inns and cottages.

Magome is also the starting point for one of Japan's most popular walks, the Nakasendo walking trail. This is a peaceful hike, which runs for some 8km through dense pine forests and quiet mountain villages, past fields of green tea and stepped rice paddies, before ending in the quiet post town of Tsumago. The route is clearly sign posted, and there are tea houses along the way where you can stop to rest. In the holidays, you're likely to encounter other hikers.

The Magome-Tsumago hike takes around 3 hours, so aim to set off from Magome around noon in order to reach Tsumago in good time. On arrival in Tsumago, check into a traditional family-run guesthouse, or *minshuku*, with tatami mat flooring, futon beds, and onsen baths. For dinner, you'll be served an elaborate kaiseki (multi-course) meal fit for a samurai!



NB. Before leaving Matsumoto for Kiso, we recommend having your luggage couriered to your next destination, Takayama, and carrying only your essentials with you in a day pack. You can ask the desk staff at your hotel in Matsumoto to arrange this for you – the process is very simple.

Day 6 – Takayama (B, D)

After an early start and a fulsome Japanese breakfast, say goodbye to your hosts in Tsumago and catch the bus to Nagiso. From Nagiso, take the train to Takayama, a wonderfully atmospheric Jomon-era town that is most famous for its biannual festival.

Expect to arrive in Takayama this afternoon. After checking into your ryokan in Takayama's old town, the rest of the day is free for you to explore the town.

Due to its remote location in the mountainous Hida region, Takayama was for many years cut off from the rest of Japan, allowing it to develop a highly unique culture in almost total isolation from the country at large. This culture is placed on full display during Takayama's annual Spring and Autumn festivals, when the otherwise sleepy town comes alive in celebration, as crowds flock to Takayama's old town to watch an elaborate procession of yatai (festival floats) and karakuri (mechanical dolls).

Even outside of the festive periods, however, Takayama has much to offer visitors interested in learning more about Japan's rural folk traditions. This afternoon, we recommend paying a visit to the Takayama Festival Floats Museum, where the city's famous processional floats are displayed when not in use.





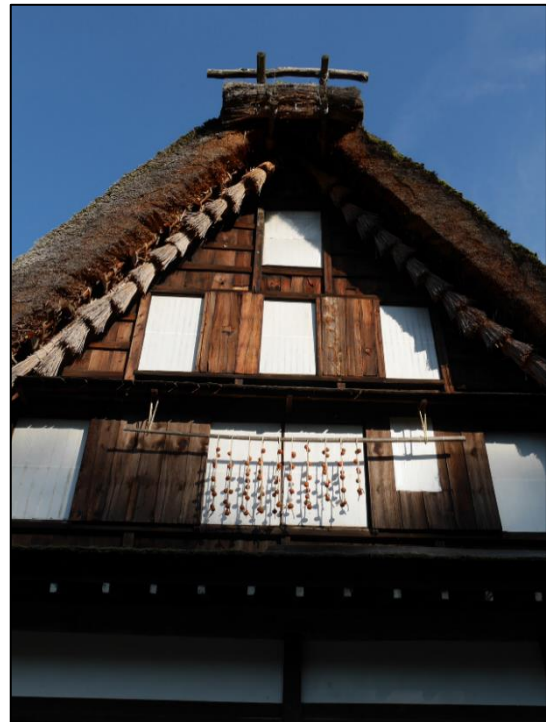
Alternatively, take an afternoon tour of one of Takayama's famous sake breweries, finishing up with a session of sake tasting!

End the day with a kaiseki dinner at your traditional ryokan and a soak in Takayama's famous hot springs—the perfect way to recover from a long day of travel and sightseeing!

Day 7 – Shirakawago (B, D)

We recommend waking early today to visit the Miyagawa Morning Market (open from around 7am), where you can browse stores selling traditional Hida crafts and local sweets such as *genkotsu ame* (“fist candy”), before returning to your ryokan for breakfast.

After breakfast at your ryokan, travel to Shirakawago province to visit the UNESCO-listed village of Ogimachi (one hour from Takayama by bus). Famous for its rustic gasshō style farmhouses, some of them over 200 years old, and its splendid vistas, Ogimachi is widely-considered one of the region's most scenic villages. Though tourism provides much of Ogimachi's income, it's a working community and provides a genuine insight into traditional Japanese village life and rural custom. It's worth hiking to the hilltop ruins of Ogimachi castle, just outside the village, where you'll find an observation deck with a magnificent view of the village and the surrounding hills, before returning to Ogimachi for lunch.



After exploring Ogimachi, return to Takayama for dinner at your ryokan.

Day 8 – Kyoto (B)

After breakfast at your ryokan (and a last soak in the hot springs), undertake the 3 hour train journey to Kyoto. This is another scenic rail journey, the first leg of which is on the Ltd Express Hida Wideview, which takes you on a winding course through tall peaks and dramatic mountain gorges to Nagoya. In



Nagoya, change to the Shinkansen bound for Kyoto. On arrival in Kyoto, check into a centrally located hotel.

Kyoto is classical Japan writ large, a city of ancient Buddhist shrines, tranquil gardens and sublime palaces. It is the traditional home of Japanese court culture and artisanry, and the setting and focal point of over 1,000 years of Japanese Imperial history.

This afternoon we've arranged for you to visit the home of a local calligraphy instructor for a private lesson in Japanese writing. You'll learn how kanji (Chinese pictographs) were introduced to Japan, the differences between the three character sets (kanji, hiragana, and katakana), and which one to use on which occasion. You can try your hand at writing classical characters with the guidance of the calligraphy instructor, and, of course, you can take home your finished work as a souvenir!

If calligraphy doesn't interest you, there are other possibilities for this afternoon. We can arrange for a guided market tour followed by a Japanese cooking class, or, to get a feel for Kyoto's traditional customs, a tea serving ceremony followed by a course in Zen meditation at a private temple.

You'll be returned to your hotel at the end of the activity. Evening at leisure.



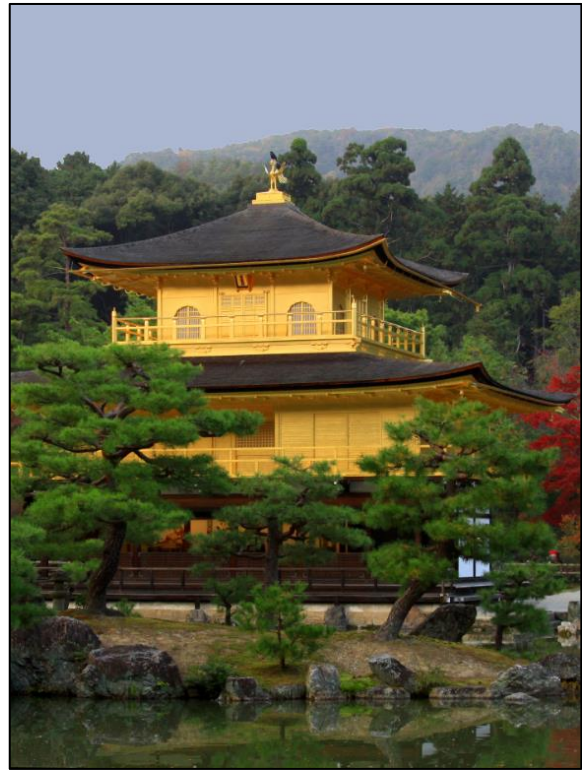
Day 9 – Kyoto cycle tour (B)

Today you'll explore some of the stunning temples and gardens for which Kyoto is famous, getting around as the locals do – by bike. Kyoto is a great city for cycling, with largely flat roads and limited traffic.

Set off in the morning after breakfast. Your guide will be waiting with your hire bike at Kyoto Station, ready to start your tour of the city highlights!

Begin with a visit to the Nishi-Honganji Temple, a short ride from Kyoto Station. Nishi-Honganji is the headquarters of the Jodo-Shin (True Pure Land) Buddhist sect, and one of the largest temple complexes in Kyoto.

From Nishi-Honganji, continue to Nijo Castle. Built in 1603 by the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu, Nijo Castle is considered by many to be the definitive piece of Momoyama (1573-1615) architecture. Whereas many of Japan's surviving feudal-era castles were, like the fort at Matsumoto, built as defensive structures, Nijo Castle was designed with a clear aesthetic purpose, its intricate wood carvings and Kano-style sliding doors serving as a demonstration of the Tokugawa clan's cultural credentials as much as their military prowess.



After lunch, bike to what is arguably Kyoto's most famous landmark, Kinkakuji, the "Golden Pavilion". Built in the late 14th-century as a retirement villa for the then Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Kinkakuji was converted into a Buddhist temple following the shogun's death. Today it stands as one of Kyoto's most iconic sights. Covered in a thick layer of gold-leaf, Kinkakuji glows like a beacon in the sunlight, its golden reflection captured in shimmering waters.

After getting your snapshots of the Golden Pavilion, continue to the famous Zen rock garden of Ryoanji, and then on to Arashiyama district to explore its famous bamboo forest and, time allowing, the UNESCO-listed Tenryuji Temple.

Return to Kyoto station late afternoon. The rest of the evening is at leisure. You might like to take a trip into Kyoto's central Gion district for dinner and a stroll along the Kamo River—a lovely way to spend your last evening in Japan.



Day 10 – Departure from Kyoto (B)

Today is at leisure until your shared shuttle bus transfer to Kansai Airport.



Price Guide:

The cost of this itinerary is from **£2,740 per person**, based on two travellers in twin/double accommodation and mid-range hotels (superior hotels available from **£3,195pp**; deluxe from **£3,890pp**). Travel in peak season (i.e. Sakura or koyo seasons) will require a higher budget.

For more information, or if you would like to enquire about a tailor-made holiday combining part or all of the above itinerary, please [contact us](#).

Includes:

- Accommodation in twin/double rooms with breakfast (for ryokan, minshuku, and other traditional accommodation, rooms are Japanese-style with futon and meals are half board)
- Meals as outlined in itinerary
- Meet and greet at the airport and return transfers to the airport
- 7-day Japan Rail Pass
- Roundtrip bus tickets from Takayama to Shirakawago for Day 7 (reserved seats)
- PASMO Transport Pass (Tokyo)
- Tokyo tour with English-speaking guide
- Private calligraphy lesson and cycling tour in Kyoto

Excludes:

- International flights – please ask us for a quote
- Personal travel insurance
- Personal expenses and tips
- Supplementary travel expenses and entrance fees during self-guided days
- Lunch and dinner to own account unless stated otherwise in itinerary

Suggested accommodations

<i>Mid-range</i>			
Location	Hotel	Hotel Category	Room
Tokyo	Villa Fontaine Shiodome	Mid-range	Standard Room
Matsumoto	Hotel Buena Vista	Mid-range	Standard Room
Tsumago	Onyado Daikichi	Mid-range	Japanese-Style Room (shared bath & toilet)
Takayama	Minshuku Sosuke	Mid-range	Japanese-Style Room (shared bath & toilet)
Kyoto	Vista Premio	Mid-range	Standard Room

<i>Superior</i>			
Location	Hotel	Hotel Category	Room
Tokyo	Park Hotel	Superior	City Room
Matsumoto	Hotel Buena Vista	Mid-range	Standard Room
Tsumago	Takimi-no-ie	Superior	Japanese-Style Room (private onsen)
Takayama	Honjin Hiranoya Bekkan	Superior	River-View Japanese-Style Room (with <i>ensuite</i> bath)
Kyoto	Hotel Granvia	Superior	Standard Room

<i>Deluxe</i>			
Location	Hotel	Hotel Category	Room
Tokyo	Conrad	Deluxe	City View Room
Matsumoto	Hotel Buena Vista	Mid-range	Standard Room
Tsumago	Takimi-no-ie	Superior	Japanese-Style Room (private onsen)
Takayama	Honjin Hiranoya Kachouan	Deluxe	Japanese-Style Room (with <i>ensuite</i> bath)
Kyoto	Hyatt Regency	Deluxe	Deluxe Room

Accommodation Notes:

- The above hotels are given as examples and are subject to availability. If unavailable, we will arrange a hotel of a similar category.