

Japan: Kyoto, Nara & the Kumano Kodo

Tour-Only Itinerary

Tradition permeates Japanese life. You'll find it in the precise choreography of a tea ceremony or the colorful, stylized theatricality of a geisha at your *ryokan* (traditional inn) in Kyoto. Step onto Japan's ancient Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail and you'll sense it all around you. In centuries past, Japanese emperors walked this route from temple to temple, seeking transcendence through physical exertion. Now you'll follow in their footsteps, climbing timeworn stone staircases through forests dense with ferns and moss, watched over by *jizo*, Japan's guardian deity of travelers. Enlightenment still lies around every bend, as simple as sunlight filtering through massive cedars—or the hot-spring-fed *onsen* baths and exquisitely presented organic meals that greet you every evening of this Japan walking tour.



Highlights

Visit a Shugend-o temple and meet with a yamabushi priest to learn how endurance, meditation, and martial arts combine in this often-misunderstood religion.

Attend dinner in Kyoto's Gion district hosted by a geisha and her apprentice, gaining an appreciation for the strict training underlying a geisha's timeless grace.

Explore Kyoto's famous Nishiki Market, a shopping street with over 100 tightly packed stalls, sampling popular and traditional Japanese street food as you go.

On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy to moderate, with a range of 2 to 6 miles per day. The walking is a combination of easy city walking with 2 full days of moderate walking along the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route. There are ascents and descents on all walks and many paths are uneven and rocky and require sure-footedness. Most days include ascents and descents from 150 feet up to 800 feet, and one day has an elevation gain and loss of up to 1,180 feet. Select days on the tour are designed to introduce you to the culture and history of Japan, and these days consist of 3 to 4 miles of cultural exploration and city walking. While visiting historic sites in the city, public transportation such as the subway is used for short transfers. In addition, there are two longer transfer days: Day 4 includes a 3-hour

transfer from Nara to Takahara. While a bit long, the drive is scenic and relaxing! Day 7 includes a 3-hour transfer to Mount Koya on winding roads with stunning scenery. If you are prone to motion sickness, we recommend bringing a remedy to make you more comfortable. In some accommodations, guests may be assigned a Japanese-style room (with comfortable futons on tatami-mat floors), and must feel comfortable with the physical requirement of getting down to and up from the floor.

DAY 1

Join your *Japan: Kyoto, Nara & the Kumano Kodo* tour

Kyoto: Nijo Castle and the Gion District; 5 to 6 miles, easy

Your guide(s) will meet you at The Celestine Hotel Gion at 9:00 a.m. in the lobby. After a brief introduction to the group, your adventure begins. Please be dressed for walking. Your Japan walking tour begins in Kyoto, now Japan's seventh-largest city and the imperial capital for more than 1,000 years. Kyoto is considered the repository of Japan's most important and stunning historical sites—gardens, temples, palaces, traditional neighborhoods—preserved over the centuries, surviving both natural disasters and war. Many of these sites are accessed via foot or subway (often the fastest and most efficient form of transportation within Kyoto)—offering an authentic immersion in Japanese daily life.

You begin your exploration of this fascinating city with a tour of the 17th-century Nijo Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the former residence and seat of power of the Tokugawa shoguns. One of the best examples of Japanese feudal architecture, the castle is protected by several rings of defensive moats and walls. The central Ninomaru Palace boasts five separate buildings and is known especially for its “nightingale floor” alarm system that squeaks like a flock of birds when walked upon. Beautifully painted sliding doors by artists of the Kano school separate the many rooms lining the palace's polished wood corridors.

After lunch in Gion, you continue to Fushimi Inari Shrine. This shrine is known for its rows and rows of vermilion *torii* (gates) that snake up the hillside to the upper levels. This evening, your formal welcome is a private dinner hosted in a local ryokan (traditional inn), where you are attended by a *maiko* (apprentice geisha), *geiko* (full-fledged geisha), and a shamisen (a three-stringed traditional musical instrument) player.

Accommodation: The Celestine Hotel Gion, Kyoto

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 2

Kyoto: Philosopher's Path, Nanzen-ji Temple, Nishiki Market

5 miles, easy

This morning begins with a guided walking tour of the Higashiyama area of Kyoto, whose narrow lanes are lined with wooden houses, traditional shops, and restaurants. You'll stroll the tranquil, cherry tree-lined "Philosopher's Path," a favored place of the famous philosopher Nishida Kitaro. Afterward, make your way to Nanzen-ji Temple, a large complex in Kyoto's forested Higashiyama hills. Originally an emperor's retirement villa, it became a Zen temple in the 13th century and has a number of gardens and sub-temples throughout its extensive grounds. Here, you'll also find a perfect example of a meditative Zen rock garden, with carefully raked stones and a mini landscape, overlooked by a covered viewing walkway for seated contemplation. Next you enter the bustling Nishiki Market in the center of Kyoto, a centuries-old covered shopping street with a wide range of Japanese foods offered from minuscule stalls and full-sized shops. It's the perfect chance to try the variety of Japanese snacks—some sweet, some salty, some both!

Later, a visit to Murin-an, a modern Japanese garden masterpiece constructed between 1894-1896. Designated a National Place of Scenic Beauty in 1951, you'll have the chance to participate in a tea ceremony. You'll learn about this ritual, one that is central to Japanese culture, with its precise steps, particular type of tea, and beautifully minimalist pottery from a local tea master. Return to your hotel in the late afternoon with time to enjoy its facilities before dinner on your own, choosing from one of the many restaurants in town.

Accommodation: The Celestine Hotel Gion, Kyoto

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 3

Nara: Todai-ji Temple, Kasuga Shrine, Nara Park

5 miles, easy

Your day begins with a transfer of about one hour by private coach to the historical city of Nara. Boasting eight sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, after Kyoto, Nara is the Kansai region's second city of immeasurably valuable historic treasures. Although Nara served as Japan's first imperial capital only briefly (from 710 to 784), this short period saw a flourishing of artistic expression and an influx of Buddhism from China—still visible today in its many temples and shrines. Its location and history also saved Nara's structures from the many manmade and natural disasters that destroyed other parts of Japan. Todai-ji Temple, defined by superlatives—the world's largest bronze statue and, until recently, the world's largest wooden structure—is truly awe-inspiring in scale and artistry. Also within the Todai-ji compound is tranquil Nigatsu-do Hall, where an annual Buddhist rite has been performed since the year 752. Afterward, you stroll through Nara's famous park, where mixed forest and open meadow extend broadly over a hill, sharing its trails with a thousand-plus tame deer. These creatures are considered messengers of the deity of the nearby Kasuga Taisha Shrine and are revered as national treasures. Return to your hotel with time to enjoy its elegant atmosphere and relax with tea or a cocktail in the inviting bar before gathering for dinner.

Accommodation: Nara Hotel, Nara

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4

Kii Peninsula and the Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage Route

4 miles, moderate, 820-ft. ascent and 165-ft. descent

You depart this morning for a three-hour transfer via private coach to the Kii Peninsula, the region stretching south of Nara. Your destination is the beginning of the Nakahechi Route—part of the network of ancient pilgrimage trails known as the Kumano Kodo, or Kumano Ancient Trail.

Along with the Camino de Santiago, these are the only two historical routes that are UNESCO World Heritage sites in their entirety. The Kumano Kodo grew from the 11th-century pilgrimages made by emperors from Kyoto. A landscape of verdant slopes, lush deep valleys, and rushing streams, Kumano—part of the mountainous Kii Peninsula—has been a sacred site associated with nature worship since prehistoric times. A tradition of pilgrimages grew out of the Shugendo religion that appeared here in the 7th century. Drawing from aspects of imported Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism along with native Shintoism, Shugendo practitioners believed that physical endurance was the path to enlightenment, and

embarked on long hikes in remote mountains and other physical tests. Along the way, you'll see *jizo* (small statues) that were erected over the many centuries to protect travelers along the earthen, and sometimes stone-cobbled, path. Nowadays, the walking routes are more accessible, and walking distances can be customized with transfers. Today, you follow the pilgrimage route from the small village of Chikatsuyu to Kobiro Touge, through forests of *sugi* (Japanese cedar). Your Japan hiking tour has you ascending on the trail to Nonaka and Tsugizakura-oji, one of the many small shrines along the route, before finishing at Kobiro Touge. In addition to the small shrines and *torii* gates, you'll pass the sites of old *cha-ya* (teahouses), which served as rest stops for pilgrims right up until the early 20th century. After the walk, transfer to your intimate inn in Takahara, renowned for its unsurpassed views.

Experience genuine Japanese hospitality at a multi-course evening meal of locally sourced organic ingredients—dishes of grilled fish and meat, vegetables, pickles, rice, and miso soup served in a myriad of pottery and lacquerware. A soak in the hot-spring baths is the perfect way to relax after the walk and the day's travels.

Accommodation: Organic Hotel Kiri-no-sato-Takahara, Takahara

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 5

Chikatsuyu to Hongu Grand Shrine

4 miles, easy to moderate, 395-ft. ascent and 1,180-ft. descent

Awakening to mountain serenity and a traditional breakfast, you transfer to Hosshinmon-oji. Here, you'll pick up the Kumano Kodo trail to walk the final scenic section to Hongu Grand Shrine, first passing through several ridgetop villages. The symbol of Hongu Grand Shrine is the mythological three-legged raven, which represents the three shrines that pilgrims were required to reach for their pilgrimage to be considered complete: the Hongu, Nachi, and Hayatama. According to the legend, the three-legged bird was sent to guide Emperor Jimmu on his journey from Kumano to the Yamato Plain.

Today, you may have the opportunity to meet a *yamabushi*—a priest of the Shugendo faith who will share some of the tenets of the faith, including their special feats of endurance. Time permitting, we will also walk to the Oyunohara torii gate that marks the ceremonial approach to the shrine. After visiting the shrine, a short drive returns you to your inn in Takahara, where you may wish to enjoy a pre-dinner soak in the hot-

spring baths while taking in the stunning surrounding vistas.

Accommodation: Organic Hotel Kiri-no-sato-Takahara, Takahara

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 6

Boat ride on the Kumano River; Maruyama Senmaida rice fields

3 miles, easy to moderate, 600-ft. descent

Following a satisfying breakfast, you'll travel to the Kumano River, where you board a private boat to embark on a 90-minute gentle float trip in a traditional wooden flat-bottom boat. Running the length of the Kii Peninsula, pilgrims used this route in medieval times to get from the Hongu Grand Shrine to the Hayatama Grand Shrine (one of the three required pilgrim destinations) at Shingu on the coast. The river is considered sacred, and you are sure to gain a unique perspective of the Kumano Kodo's spiritual landscape as you admire the gorgeous surrounding scenery.

After you leave the boat, another short drive brings you to Maruyama Senmaida; this is an impressive system of terraced rice fields developed by farmers over more than 200 years. Descend a narrow road among the small pools, learning about rice cultivation along the way. A fitting picnic beside the rice paddies includes *onigiri* (rice balls with fish, vegetables, or seaweed), local homemade pickles, and green tea. In the later afternoon, return to your ryokan with time to relax before dinner.

Accommodation: Organic Hotel Kiri-no-sato-Takahara, Takahara

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 7

Mount Koya; Afternoon exploration of Osaka

2 to 3 miles, easy

Depart Takahara this morning and travel approximately three hours to Mount Koya. At an elevation of almost 3,000 feet, this group of eight peaks, high in the mountains of Wakayama between the Kumano Kodo and Osaka, is a popular day-trip destination for many Osakans. The sprawling Mount Koya temple

complex, founded in the 9th century by the priest Kobo Daishi, is the center of the Shingon sect of Buddhism. It has grown into a town with over 100 temples, a university, and a large historical cemetery full of fascinating sculptures and memorials. Stroll the grounds and visit Oku-no-in, the shrine to Kobo Daishi, and stroll through the surrounding cemetery that holds the tombs of many historical Japanese figures.

From Mount Koya, you continue the drive to Osaka, Japan's third-largest city. Known today for its distinct local accent and foodie culture, it has long been associated with merchants and trading. Unlike nearby Kyoto, Osaka was targeted in World War II bombing, and its buildings are mainly modern and 20th-century vintage. Upon check-in, you have free time to explore or enjoy your hotel's amenities, before meeting for a farewell dinner.

Accommodation: Osaka Marriott Miyako Hotel, Osaka

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 8

Your Japan: Kyoto, Nara & the Kumano Kodo tour concludes

End your Japan hiking tour with a well-earned, leisurely breakfast at your hotel. Bid farewell to your guide and depart for nearby Kansai airport or Osaka train station for your onward travel.

Included Meals: Breakfast

What's Included

Tour Only

Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓
All on-tour meals except 1 dinner	✓
Local guides with you throughout tour	✓
Local wine and/or beer with dinner	✓
Entrance fees and special events as noted in the itinerary	✓
Travel assistance available 24/7 provided by Allianz	✓