

Japan: Kyoto, Nara & the Kumano Kodo

Tour-Only Itinerary

Discover a mix of ancient traditions and modern cityscapes on a Japan walking tour that takes you from historic Kyoto to dazzling Osaka. Marvel at tranquil Buddhist temples, scattered amongst towering skyscrapers or perched on dramatic mountaintops. Breathe the cool morning air as you hike through misty cypress forests, past stone jizo statues and ancient cha-ya teahouses. Take part in a traditional tea ceremony – a practice at the heart of Japanese culture – and walk in the historic footsteps of samurai on the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route. Admire immense Todai-ji Temple and delight in Nara Park, where over a thousand sacred deer roam free. Our Japan walking tour showcases the culture and landscapes that make this country a truly fascinating destination.

Highlights

During a serene temple visit, meet a *yamabushi* priest and learn the tenets of his often-misunderstood Shugendo sect, which mixes martial-arts training with rigorous feats of strength.

Gain an appreciation for the strict training undertaken by geishas when you head to Kyoto's Gion district for a formal dinner hosted by one.

Wander the crowded stalls of Nishiki Market in the heart of Kyoto, the perfect opportunity to sample a broad range of Japanese snacks.

Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided - Full 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 Country Walkers *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 Kyoto Tokyu Hotel or 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 from 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, also a

UNESCO site, the former residence and seat of power of the Tokugawa shoguns. The best example of Japanese feudal architecture, the castle is protected by several rings of defensive moats and walls, and the central Ninomaru Palace boasts five separate but connected 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 along polished wood corridors.

After lunch in Gion, you continue to the 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: Kyoto Tokyu Hotel or The Celestine Hotel Gion, Kyoto

DAY 2

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

5 miles, easy

This morning begins with a guided walking tour of the narrow lanes of the Higashiyama area of Kyoto, with its original preserved wooden houses, traditional shops, and restaurants. You take the “Philosopher’s Path,” a tranquil walkway lined with cherry trees that was a favored place of the famous philosopher Nishida Kitaro. Afterward, you 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. Also found here is a perfect example of the 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 miniscule stalls and full-sized shops. It’s a good chance to try the variety of Japanese snacks—some sweet, some salty, some both!

Later, a 30-minute walk brings you to the Biko-en Tea Shop, founded in 1872, which in addition to providing high-quality green tea to the city’s Buddhist temples, also offers visitors a chance to participate in a tea ceremony. You learn about this ritual that is central to Japanese culture with its precise steps, type

of tea, and beautifully minimalist pottery. You return to your hotel in the later afternoon with time to enjoy its facilities before dinner on your own, choosing between one of the recommended restaurants in town.

Accommodation: Kyoto Tokyu Hotel or The Celestine Hotel Gion, Kyoto

DAY 3

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

5 miles, easy

This morning, you transfer about one hour by private coach to the historical city of Nara. Boasting eight sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list, Nara is the Kansai region's second city of immeasurably valuable historic treasures after Kyoto. Although Nara only briefly served as Japan's first imperial capital (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 sites in Japan. You explore the Todai-ji Temple, defined by superlatives—the world's largest bronze statue and, until recently, the world's largest wooden structure—truly awe-inspiring in scale and artistry. Also within the compound is tranquil Nigatsu-do Hall, where an annual Buddhist rite has been performed since the year 752.

Afterwards, you stroll through Nara's famous park, where mixed forest and open meadow extend broadly over the hill—and share the trails with its thousand-plus tame deer, considered messengers of the deity of the nearby Kasuga Taisha Shrine and revered as national treasures. You return to your hotel with time to enjoy its elegant atmosphere. Relax with tea or a cocktail in the inviting bar before gathering for dinner.

Accommodation: Nara Hotel, Nara

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 3-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. This and the Camino de Santiago

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, so they embarked on long hikes in remote mountains and other physical tests. Over the many centuries, small statues (jizo) were erected to protect travelers along the earthen and sometimes stone-cobbled path. Nowadays, the walking routes are more accessible, so walking distances can be customized with transfers. Today, you follow the pilgrimage route from the small village of Chikatsuyu to Kobi-ro Touge, through forests of *sugi* (Japanese cedar). You'll ascend on the trail to Nonaka and Tsugizakura-ji, one of the many small shrines along the route, before finishing at Kobi-ro Touge. In addition to the small shrines and *torii* gates, there are sites of old *cha-ya* (teahouses), which served as rest stops for pilgrims right up until the early 20th century. After the walk, you are transferred to your intimate inn in Takahara, with its unsurpassed views.

Experience true 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 typically served in myriad shapes of pottery and lacquerware. A soak in the hot-spring baths is the perfect way to relax from the walk and the day's travels.

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

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-ji. 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 the 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 shrines. In mythology the three-legged bird was sent to guide Emperor Jimmu on his journey from Kumano to the Yamato Plain. You may have the opportunity to meet a

yamabushi—a priest of the Shugendo faith who shares 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 your visit to 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

DAY 6

Boat ride on the Kumano River; Maruyama Senmaida rice fields

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

This morning, you 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 at Shingu on the coast, one of the three required pilgrim destinations. The river is considered sacred, and you are sure to gain a unique perspective on the Kumano Kodo's spiritual landscape as you admire the stunning surrounding scenery. Leaving the boat, another short drive brings you to Maruyama Senmaida; this is an astounding system of terraced rice fields developed by farmers over more than 200 years. A short walk descends through the small pools on the narrow road as you learn about rice cultivation. 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, you return to your *ryokan* with time to relax before dinner.

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

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 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 and 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 then walk 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 now for its colorful accent and foodie culture, it has long been associated with merchants and trading. Unlike nearby Kyoto, it was targeted in World War II bombing, so 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

DAY 8

Your *Japan: Kyoto, Nara & the Kumano Kodo* tour concludes; depart for home

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.

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

What's Included

Tour Only

Emergency travel assistance hotline available 24/7