Our ‘In the Shadow of Mountains’ tour visits western Honshu and the Seto Inland Sea, rich in history and culture. The tour’s name comes from the San’in Coastline facing the Japan Sea, a region with a mysterious past and lowering skies - quite different in character from the San’yo coast on the south. The tour begins in Japan’s old capital of Kyoto; let this ancient city fascinate you with its traditional narrow streets. Admire Kurashiki’s historical area and experience a tatami-mat workshop and traditional "shamisen" local folk music. We travel by train to Yunotsu on the Japan Sea Coast, one of the oldest hot spring towns in Japan and a UNESCO World Heritage site along with Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine. Enjoy soaking in the mineral water before leaving for Tsuwano, a charming town known as the ‘little Kyoto of San’in’ with its picturesque streets lined with Edo-era buildings and Koi carp ponds. The journey continues through the former castle town of Hagi, famous for its pottery, then to Hiroshima and the famous Miyajima Island as well as Sensui-jima Island, a secret paradise on the Seto Inland Sea. We will arrive in energetic Osaka, where neon and crowds welcome you back to the modern side of Japan.

DETAILS

DATES & PRICES
Please see website

TOUR LENGTH
12 days

TYPE AND LEVEL OF TRIP
In the Shadow of Mountains is a cultural tour with some arts and crafts activities. We classify its level as “Moderate”. There are no dedicated days of hiking, but each day’s sightseeing includes walking so that we can explore Japan at street level, not from the windows of a tour bus.

WHAT’S INCLUDED
Transport, accommodation, English-speaking tour guide, entrance fees, luggage forwarding, daily breakfast & 10 evening meals included.
Not included are international flights, drinks with meals, lunches and airport transfers.
Exploring Miyajima Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site, with its giant red torii gate - bathe in traditional hot springs - experience a Tatami-mat workshop - visit enchanting towns on the peaceful Japan Sea coast - gaze across the Seto Inland Sea

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Kura storehouses in Kurashiki
2. Ikebana Flower arrangement
3. Deer on Miyajima
4. Strolling in a hot-spring village town
5. Vermilion Torii gates at Tsuwano
DAY 1 ➤ Meet in Kyoto
Meet your guide and other members of the group at the tour hotel in central Kyoto. There will be a Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 2 ➤ Sightseeing in Kurashiki
After breakfast we travel by train to Kurashiki, famous for the picturesque scenery of its preserved canal area, framed with weeping willow trees and white-plastered storehouses ('Kura') from the Edo period. Many of Kurashiki’s former storehouses have been converted into museums, shops and cafes. After lunch, we explore this lovely part of the town and then have some free time later in the afternoon. Overnight in Kojima on the coast near Kurashiki.
Accommodation: Japanese-style Hotel

DAY 3 ➤ Sightseeing in Kojima
A full day to explore the Kojima area of Kurashiki with your guide. Kojima faces the Seto Inland Sea and was once prosperous through sea-salt production and domestic trade through the port. We first visit a tatami-mat trimmer and create our own miniature tatami mats with the trim of our choice. We then transfer to Washuzan Hill with its short walking trail leading up to stunning views over the Seto Inland Sea. After lunch we continue onwards to Shimotsui Port and listen to a local shamisen artist play and sing a beautiful folk song.
Accommodation: Japanese-style Hotel

DAY 4 ➤ Yunotsu Onsen
We cross to the San-in coast, travelling by train to Yunotsu, a hot-spring town on the Japan Sea coast, whose waters were discovered more than 1300 years ago. In addition to being an onsen, Yunotsu flourished as a port during the Edo period, when silver from Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine was delivered and shipped. We arrive in Yunotsu around noon and explore the town. Yunotsu has the wonderful, pure hot spring “Yakushi-yu”, whose water properties received the highest rating from the Japan Spa Association. Our accommodation tonight has its own onsen baths, but you should try “Yakushi-yu” too if you love onsen.
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn)

DAY 5 ➤ Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine
Today we visit Omori-cho, settled by Iwami Ginzan silver miners. Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007. It was the biggest silver mine in Japanese history, flourishing from the 16th to the 20th century. The distinctive landscapes connected to silver mining are still well preserved today - old mining sites, miners’ settlements, fortresses, transportation routes, and shipping ports. The area is now beautifully wooded, with wonderfully invigorating fresh air. Omori-cho is dotted with picturesque Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, shops and cafes. We will visit one of the major remaining silver mineshafts and explore the town. You will have some free time during the afternoon.
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn)

DAY 6 ➤ Tsuwano castle town
After breakfast we travel to Tsuwano. Popularly called the ‘Little Kyoto of San-In’, Tsuwano is known for its picturesque main street, lined with Edo-era buildings and Koi carp ponds. It was a castle town, ruled by the Kamei clan from the 17th to the mid-19th century. It also has the famous mountainside Taikodani Inari Shrine with its “one thousand vermilion torii gates.” We visit the shrine and the ruins of Tsuwano Castle, wandering the pretty streets.
Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)
DAY 7 ➤ Hagi
Today we travel by local bus from Tsuwano to the charming town of Hagi. Hagi was for 260 years the castle town of the Mori lords of Choshu. The town is protected on two sides by the forks of the Aibagawa river and on the remaining north side by the sea. The castle, now in ruins, is further fortified by moats and a defensive chequerboard of samurai dwellings. The remains of the dwellings, with their earthen walls, old gates and orchards of colourful citrus trees are Hagi's most famous sight. We explore the area and also visit the Kikuya House historic building.
Accommodation: Japanese-style Hotel

DAY 8 ➤ Sightseeing in Hagi
After breakfast we will stroll around another area of the town to enjoy more of the historic houses. Hagi is famous for its pottery - Hagi-yaki is a pinkish-beige stoneware which ranks among the most highly esteemed tea ceremony wares. Hagi-yaki ripens to its full beauty with use, its pale tones deepening and softening as tea seeps into the porous crazing. After lunch we will try our hand at pottery making and we will have the opportunity to buy pieces made by local artists.
Accommodation: Japanese-style Hotel

DAY 9 ➤ Miyajima Island
After breakfast we leave the San'in coast and travel to Miyajima, an island nestling in the Seto Inland Sea near the city of Hiroshima. This island is famous for its UNESCO World Heritage Itsukushima Shrine with the giant red torii gate, which seems to float on the sea at high tide. The sight is ranked as one of most scenic vistas of Japan. Wild deer live on the island, but they have now become accustomed to people. We will arrive on Miyajima around noon and after lunch we will visit Itsukushima Shrine and Daisho-in Temple. Our hotel tonight is in Hiroshima itself.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 10 ➤ Sensui-jima Island
This morning we travel to Tomonoura then to Sensuikima Island, a secret paradise on the Seto Inland Sea. Before leaving Hiroshima, there will be a little free time and you may visit the Peace Memorial Park and A-Bomb Museum if you wish. After lunch in the lovely small fishing village of Tomonoura, we take the short ferry ride to the island. We stay at an island ryokan with wonderful hot-spring baths. Bathing is not gender-segregated and bathing clothes will be provided by the ryokan. Set just above the beach and overlooking the sea, the view from this onsen is wonderful and relaxing.
Accommodation: Ryokan (Travellers inn)

DAY 11 ➤ Tomonoura and Osaka
We spend the morning exploring the quiet fishing town of Tomonoura. The town preserves its old-fashioned fishing townscape well. In recent years, Tomonoura has been chosen as a location for several international and local films, such as “Wolverine” with Hugh Jackman and “Ponyo on the Cliff” by the popular Studio Ghibli. After lunch we travel to Osaka. There will be some free time in the afternoon before the group meets again for the Farewell Dinner at a local restaurant.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 12 ➤ Tour ends
Our tour ends after breakfast at our hotel. Your guide will be on hand to offer advice on travel to the airport if you are flying home, or on onward travel if you are extending your stay in Japan.