Central Japan is a region of tall mountain ranges and fast-flowing rivers. It wasn’t until recently that roads reached the remoter villages, and today many remain remarkably well-preserved, and evocative of centuries past. Our journey takes us through Japanese history from modern Tokyo, known as Edo during Japan’s period of rule by the Shoguns, to end near Kyoto, Japan’s capital for 400 years and the repository of much of the countries cultural heritage. From Tokyo we head first to Yudanaka Onsen hot spring where the famous “snow monkeys” come to enjoy the natural hot spring baths just like humans. In feudal times people travelling from Kyoto to Tokyo would use the Nakasendo way – the road through the central mountains – one of a network of ancient highways. We will visit one of the best preserved sections in the Kiso Valley, where the lovely villages of Tsumago and Magome have been immaculately restored.

**DATES & PRICES**
Please see website

**TOUR LENGTH**
14 days

**TYPE AND LEVEL OF TRIP**
Moderate - Our Shoguns and Samurai tour includes sightseeing in many of the locations along its route where a certain amount of walking is required. The walking involved on the tour is included as part of the theme of our tour which is to explore and experience Japan at street level, not from the windows of a tour bus. Train stations in the cities are large and often require climbing stairs. There is an optional walk on Day 5 between Tsumago and Magome.

**WHAT’S INCLUDED**
Transport including Bullet Train, accommodation, English-speaking tour guide, luggage forwarding, entrance fees, daily breakfast & 8 evening meals included.
Not included are international flights, airport transfers, drinks with meals, lunches and 5 evening meals.
Imperial Kyoto and Nara - Nakasendo Way post-towns - Snow monkeys of Yudanaka hot spring – traditional merchants houses of Takayama – Shirakawa-go UNESCO World Heritage site - Natural hot spring baths – Accommodation in traditional ryokan – Sacred Mount Koya - Ultra-modern Tokyo

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Traditional roofs in Shirakawa-go
2 An alley in Kyoto
3 Pilgrims
4 A Jizo Bodhisattva
5 Offering incense
6 Nakasendo Post-town
7 A pilgrim-lodge
8 A wooden structure at Mount Koya
DAY 1 > Arrive in Tokyo
Meet your guide and other group members at the tour hotel in central Tokyo in the evening. There will be a Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 2 > Tokyo
Our first full day in Japan will be spent on a walking tour of Tokyo. We will visit the Hama-Rikyu gardens, located near the mouth of the Sumida-gawa, a large river flowing through Tokyo. The garden is divided into two major sections. The southern garden was the site of a villa where the Shogun could relax, enjoy duck hunting and entertain visitors, including feudal lords, during the 17th to 19th centuries. It contains the Shio-iri-no Niwa (garden with a tidal pond) which is on the sea, and thus its scenery varies with the ebb and flow of the tide. There is a striking contrast between the gardens and the gleaming towers of the new Shiodome business area beyond. Next we will visit Nihonbashi (the ‘Japan Bridge’) considered to be the ‘centre of Japan’ and the zero marker point for all Japan’s main roads since the Edo period. We will visit the elegant Ginza shopping district, with time for lunch, and then continue to the Grand Meiji Shrine near Harajuku, an area famous for its avant-garde fashion and architecture.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 3 > Obuse and Yudanaka Hot Spring
We will travel this morning to Obuse in Nagano Prefecture north-west of Tokyo. The small, attractive town of Obuse was where the artist Hokusai, famous for his ukiyo-e woodblock prints, lived towards the end of his life. We will visit the Hokusai-kan, a museum where many of his works are on display. We will also visit Masuichi-Ichimura Sake Brewery, where we will have the opportunity to eat their famous chestnut rice for lunch.
Afterwards, we will make the short journey to Yudanaka Onsen, a hot spring village famous for its ‘snow monkeys’. The Japanese macaques originally came here to warm themselves in the outdoor hot spring bath during the cold winters, and now come all year round.
Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

DAY 4 > Matsumoto & Narai Post Town
We will travel first to the city of Matsumoto to see its beautiful castle, built in the 16th century. After lunch we continue to the Kiso valley and the small town of Narai, an atmospheric example of a post-town on the ancient Nakasendo way between Kyoto and Tokyo. There are many well-preserved houses and former inns. Our accommodation will be an Edo-period house converted into a minshuku (family-run travellers’ inn).
Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

DAY 5 > Tsumago & Magome Post Towns
After breakfast, there will be time to wander the beautiful streets of Narai. The village is a good place to buy lacquer ware and woodcrafts, made from Japanese ‘hinoki’ (which resembles cypress) and zelkova. A train journey followed by a 10-minute bus ride will take us to the small town of Tsumago. Another of the post-towns on the former Nakasendo trail, Tsumago has been preserved by strict self-imposed rules that prohibit the sale, rental or destruction of the handsome houses. It’s a living museum, but one which is still inhabited by the local residents. We will wander the streets, tasting gohei-mochi, skewered balls of pounded sticky rice covered in a sweet paste of miso, sesame and walnuts. There will be time to visit the folk museum, with exhibits on the old Nakasendo trail and the village.
From here, the trail winds its way over the Magome Pass to the neighbouring town of Magome. For those wishing to, there will be the opportunity for some lovely walking along the ancient trail. We will arrive in time to check in to our minshuku, a lovely family-run inn.
Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

DAY 6 > Transfer to Takayama
After breakfast, we will stroll through Magome and then transfer to Takayama. Takayama was formally an enclave for skilled carpenters working for the imperial courts in Kyoto and Nara. It has retained much of its traditional architecture and is well-known for its crafts, particularly yew-wood carving, Shunkei lacquerware, pottery and furniture. After arriving at the ryokan, there may be time to explore the surrounding areas. Relax in a hotspring bath before dinner. In the evening we will try the local Hida beef and perhaps some locally-brewed saké.
Accommodation: Ryokan (Travellers Inn)
**DAY 7 ➤ Takayama**
Today we have a full day in Takayama, starting with a visit to the morning market, with stalls of vegetables, crafts, pickles and souvenirs. We see the Yoshijima Heritage House, a precious wooden structure with a famously refined architectural interior. We wander the San-machi area with its rows of old merchant houses, some open as museums. After lunch there will be free time for you to explore the city further and hunt for special treasures to bring home.

_Accommodation:_ Ryokan (Travellers Inn)

**DAY 8 ➤ Shirakawa-go**

In the morning, you have a few more hours free to stroll and perhaps visit some museums, such as the Takayama Festival Floats Exhibition Hall, which displays some of the huge, elaborate floats used for the Takayama Festival, famous as one of the three most beautiful festivals of Japan. After lunch, we travel to the village of Ogimachi in the Shirakawa-go area north-west of Takayama. The village is home to a large number of gassho-zukuri houses, and has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995. These large wooden houses have steep thatched roofs designed to withstand heavy snow, and the term gassho-zukuri refers to the shape of praying hands formed by the roofs.

_Accommodation:_ Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

**DAY 9 ➤ Transfer to Kyoto**
We leave the mountains today, travelling first by bus to Kanazawa and then by train to Kyoto and our hotel in the centre of the city. In the evening we take a walk through the Gion district famous for its many ryotei (exclusive private restaurants) and the geiko (full-fledged geisha) or maiko (apprentice geisha). We also visit the Sanjo-ohashi Bridge, the western end of the Nakasendo Trail.

_Accommodation:_ Hotel

**DAY 10 ➤ Kyoto**
There will be a half-day walking tour this morning. We will visit the famous Kinkaku-ji, also known as the Golden Pavilion, originally built by the Ashikaga Shogun in the 14th century as a place of contemplation and rest. From there, we will visit Ryoan-ji, with its famous rock garden of raked gravel and fifteen moss-covered boulders. It is not possible to see all fifteen boulders at once from any place in the garden. It is said that if you can see all fifteen, you have achieved enlightenment. There will be free time in the afternoon so you can explore the area further or shop for crafts.

_Accommodation:_ Hotel

**DAY 11 ➤ Nara**
The ancient city of Nara, which preceded Kyoto as Japan’s capital from 710 to 784, is one hour south of Kyoto by train. We will visit Todai-ji temple, with its bronze statue of Buddha. The temple is said to be the largest wooden structure in the world. Next we will visit the old merchant district of Nara-machi with its narrow streets, shops, cafes and restaurants, or we may instead walk along the back road from Todai-ji to Kasuga Taisha Shrine. Return to Kyoto in the evening.

_Accommodation:_ Hotel

**DAY 12 ➤ Mount Koya**
We will transfer to Osaka by a local train then travel along the scenic Nankai Railway Line to Mount Koya, a bowl-shaped valley filled with stands of cedar trees 900 metres up in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula. Since the 9th century, when the priest Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi) founded the first temple and the shingon sect of Buddhism, Mount Koya has been a place of religious devotion and ceremony. Today there are more than 100 monasteries, many of which have shukubo (temple lodgings). We will stay in one of the elegant temples, run by the monks, and dine on shojin-ryori (Buddhist vegetarian cuisine). There will be a guided walk through the vast Okuno-in cemetery, with thousands of graves and memorials to feudal lords and other past luminaries.

_Accommodation:_ Shukubo (Pilgrims Lodging)
DAY 13 ➤ Transfer to Tokyo
This morning you will have the opportunity to get up early (6am!) to join in the Buddhist service at the temple. After breakfast we will check-out and return to Tokyo via Osaka. There will be a Farewell Dinner in the evening.
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 14 ➤ Depart
The tour will end today after breakfast. Your guide will be on hand to offer assistance and advice for travelling to the airport if you have homeward flights.