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 country’s 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 is a walking tour of Tokyo. We start at the Hama-Rikyu gardens, located near the mouth of the Sumida-gawa river. There is a striking contrast between the gardens and the gleaming towers of the new Shiodome business area beyond. Next we 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 then head to the elegant Ginza shopping district and 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 travel this morning to Obuse in Nagano Prefecture north-west of Tokyo. The small, attractive town of Obuse was where the artist Hokusai lived towards the end of his life. We visit the Hokusai-kan, a museum where many of his works are on display. We will also visit Masuichi-Ichimura Sake Brewery.

Afterwards we 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: Ryokan (Travellers Inn)

DAY 4 ➤ Matsumoto & Narai Post Town
We 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 (or Edo as the city was known in the feudal period). There are many well-preserved houses and former inns.

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 lacquerware and woodcrafts. Short train and bus journeys bring us to the village of Tsumago. Another of the post-towns on the former Nakasendo trail, Tsumago has been beautifully preserved - a living museum, which is still inhabited by the local residents. Wander the streets, taste gohei-mochi, skewered balls of pounded sticky rice covered in a sweet paste of miso, sesame and walnuts and visit the folk museum.

From here, the trail winds its way over the Magome Pass for just over 8 kilometres / 5 miles to the neighbouring town of Magome. You will have the opportunity to walk this lovely section of the trail through forest and countryside, past farms, rice fields, traditional houses and pretty gardens. Local bus provides an alternative. We will arrive in time to check in to our Minshuku, a lovely family-run inn.

Please note that from summer 2019 onwards our Shoguns and Samurai tour will no longer include this option to walk on the Nakasendo Trail from Tsumago to Magome on Day 5.

Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

DAY 6 ➤ Transfer to Takayama
After breakfast, we stroll through Magome and then travel to Takayama. Takayama has retained much of its traditional architecture and is well-known for its crafts, particularly yew-wood carving, Shunko lacquerware, pottery and furniture. After arriving at our inn, there may be time to explore the surrounding areas and relax in a hot-spring 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
We have a half-day walking tour this morning. We visit the famous Kinkaku-ji, 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. You have 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 travel first to Osaka by local train, then along the scenic Nankai Railway Line to Mount Koya, a bowl-shaped valley filled with cedars high in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula. Since the 9th century Mount Koya has been a place of religious devotion and ceremony. Today there are more than 100 monasteries, many of which have Shukubo (Pilgrims Lodging). We stay in one of the elegant temples and dine on shojin-ryori (Buddhist vegetarian cuisine). We 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 return to Tokyo via Osaka, travelling by shinkansen Bullet Train for the latter part of the journey. In Tokyo there will be a Farewell Dinner in the evening.

*Accommodation:* Hotel

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**DAY 14 > Tour ends**

The tour ends today after breakfast. Your guide will be on hand to offer assistance and advice for travelling to the airport if you have homeward flights, or on onward travel in Japan if you are extending your stay.