

QUEST JAPAN

The Imperial Pilgrimage Route

Adventure walking tours in the real Japan



22 October - 4 November 2018

Highlights

Exploring the Kii mountains, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and walking parts of the old pilgrimage route to the three Great Kumano Shrines · Staying in a Buddhist temple on Mount Koya · Accommodation in old hot spring villages · Stays in lovely old ryokans in Ryujin, Dorogawa, and in the mountain top village of Yoshino · Hiking the Yoshino mountains · Exploring the old capitals of Asuka and Nara · A country walk along the Yamanobe-no-michi · Kyoto highlights · Meeting friends and locals along the way

Style of tour

Japanese-speaking British leader or local English-speaking Japanese leader, and local guides at places of special interest.

Accommodation in family-run *minshuku*, traditional ryokan, hotels, Buddhist temple.



Duration

15 Days (14 nights)

Walking grade

Moderate/Vigorous

Group size

Minimum: 5 members

Included

All domestic transport, accommodation, meals, guides, entrance and activity fees from start to end of tour.

Does not include:

International flights, airport transfers, drinks with meals.

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About Quest Japan and our guides

Bob Heffill, Managing Director, first visited Japan in 1973. After graduating from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies in 1980, he worked in Japan as an English teacher in state schools for three years. He has subsequently spent twenty five years working as a professional Japanese translator and interpreter. After completing a Mountain Leader training course, Bob established the UK-based company, Hike Japan, in 2003. In 2010, building on seven years of highly successful tour operation, Bob established the Tokyo-based travel company Quest Japan Ltd. Quest Japan specializes in Japan travel, and in particular small group walking adventures and culture-focused tours. His new Japanese business partner has worked at the highest level in the Japanese travel industry. As well as managing the business, Bob continues to guide, and Quest Japan now has a network of expert English-speaking local Japanese guides.



Introduction

Osaka · Mount Koya · Ryujin Onsen hot spring village · Nakaheji trail to the Three Grand Kumano Shrines of Kumano · A day hiking the Yoshino mountains · Yoshino · Asuka · Nara · Kyoto

Although less dramatic than the Japan Alps, the forested mountains of the Kii Peninsula, south of Nara, have for centuries been regarded as sacred.

Your first night after the start of the tour is at an elegant temple situated on Mount Koya, the home of Shingon (Pure Word) Buddhism. The pilgrimage routes to the three great Kumano Shrines – Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Nachi Taisha, and Hayatama Taisha were popularised during and after the Heian Period (794-1185), when the imperial family and nobility began to seek salvation in *sangaku shinko* (a belief in the supernatural power of mountains), rather than through common religious practices. Emperor Gotoba (1180-1239) made no less than thirty pilgrimages to Kumano, recording his thoughts and feelings in the Kumano poems. These precious documents are now in the Yomei Storehouse archives in Kyoto.

Hot springs are abundant, and some of the oldest *onsen* in Japan are located in the Kii Peninsula. You will follow the southernmost part of the old *Nakaheji* pilgrimage route, staying at family run inns along the way. The path, in parts, is paved with flagstone steps and leads through forests of Japanese cedar. Walking in the quiet solitude it is easy to imagine the days, centuries ago, when nobles followed these paths through the mountains.

After a four days of walking along the Nakaheji Pilgrimage route, you will travel north, through the mountains, to Yoshinoyama. There we stay in a traditional ryokan. The ryokan is conveniently located for exploring Yoshino, home to the Kinpusenji Temple and its great Zaodo Hall. Kinpusenji Temple is the head temple of the *shugendo* sect of ascetic mountain priests.

In 2016, for the first time, we explored the mountains south of Yoshinoyama. It turned out to be a good route and interesting village for our overnight stay. We stay in a traditional ryokan in a village with an atmosphere reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho Periods (1896 - 1925).

We then travel out of the mountains, via the ancient capitals of Asuka and Nara, to Kyoto. From Asuka we will walk through countryside along an historic route known as the Yamanobe-no-michi. In Nara and Kyoto you will experience a more cosmopolitan side of Japan. Sightseeing will include Nara Park and other sites in this small city. We'll then explore Kyoto, visiting some special sites including Kyoto's lovely gardens. There will be time for shopping in Kyoto.

On this, as on every Quest Japan tour, excellent food and carefully chosen accommodation come as standard.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 Sunday 21 October MEET OSAKA

Meet at Osaka city centre hotel in the early evening. Your guide will join you and give some insights on the journey ahead. Dinner at a local restaurant.

Overnight hotel.

DAY 2 Monday 22 October TRAIN TO MOUNT KOYA

Transfer to Mount Koya monastery by train. Afternoon walk the Nyonin no Michi around the rim of low hills surrounding the many temples. This is as close as women could approach to the centre of what is conceived to be a lotus flower, whose petals are the surrounding peaks.

Overnight in a peaceful temple on Mount Koya.

DAY 3 Tuesday 23 October GUIDED WALK AND THEN DRIVE TO RYUJIN ONSEN

This morning we'll have an interesting guided tour of Mount Koya, including visits to Okunoin, the mausoleum where Kukai (later named Kobo Daishi) is enshrined. The walk, through tall cypress trees, passes several hundred thousand tombstones, monuments to emperors, shoguns and samurai, landlords and poets.

After lunch we'll drive south from Mount Koya, along the Koya-Ryujin Skyline, to a sumptuous old ryokan (family inn) in Ryujin Onsen. The Kamigoten Ryokan was declared a 'tangible cultural property' (similar to a Grade 1 listed building) in 1999. Dark polished wooden floors, large white cedar baths, and delicious seasonal delicacies will be served for dinner.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 4 Wednesday 24 October HIKE TO CHIKATSUYU (10 miles walking: about 7 hours)

Today you will start your hike along the old Nakaheji pilgrimage path to Kumano. From the start at Takijiri Oji, the path climbs steeply up to the ridge-top village of Takahara. The Nakaheji has been established as one of Japan's National Historic Roads. The paths are clearly defined, and flagstones have been laid in some places to make the climbs easier.

Although rarely seen these days, there are small bears in the Kumano Mountains and, more commonly, deer and wild boar. Wayside shrines encourage regular rest stops. The small shrine at Chikatsuyu marks the end of the first day of the walk.

The night is spent in a family-run ryokan in Yunomine Onsen hot spring village.

DAY 5 Thursday 25 October HIKE TO KUMANO HONGU AND YUNOMINE HOTSPRING (6 miles: about 5 hours)

We will pick up the path again in the hills above the Kumano Hongu Grand Shrine and walk via Hongu to Yunomine, one of the oldest natural hot spring onsen villages in Japan. There is an increasing sense of solitude and purpose as you progress towards the three great shrines of Kumano, passing small *jizo* statues on the way. Nobles would rest at points called *oji*, to refresh themselves and compose poems. You can stamp a booklet as a souvenir of your walk at each *oji*. Their poetry is engraved on stone monuments sited along the path.

At the heart of these sacred mountains, Kumano was said to be the entrance to the land of Yomi, the 'other world' to where spirits travelled in Japanese mythology. The classic style of architecture of the Kumano Hongu Shrine blends perfectly with the surrounding mountains and forests. The shrine uses a mythological three-legged raven symbol, representing the Hongu, Nachi, and Hayatama shrines – the same motif as the one used by the Japan Football Association. The ryokan at Yunomine is comfortable, with an outdoor hot tub fed by local hot springs. Evening soaks under the stars are recommended for tired limbs, as are morning dips before breakfast. Your breakfast eggs might well be boiled in the boiling, sulphurous waters at the spring in the centre of the village.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 6 Friday 26 October WALK IN KUMANO NACHI TAISHA AREA (4 miles: about 4 hours)

Toady you will visit the amazingly sited shrine and temple complex that overlooks the Nachi-no-taki Waterfall, the highest in Japan (133m/436ft). There will be a hike around Nachi-san, the mountain overlooking the Nachi Grand Shrine to the sea beyond, finishing with a short detour - time permitting – to an area of pristine forest above Nachi.

Overnight Japanese-style hotel.

DAY 7 Saturday 27 October DRIVE NORTH TO YOSHINOYAMA

Before we set out on our journey to Yoshino, we'll visit the third of the Kumano Grand Shrines, Hayatama.

We'll then head northward with a drive through the mountains to the pretty hilltop village of Yoshino.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 8 Sunday 28 October LOCAL WALK AND SIGHTSEEING AROUND YOSHINOYAMA

The Zaodo Hall lies at the heart of Yoshino in Kimpusenji, the head temple of the *shugendo* sect of mountain priests. Yoshino has played a very important role in Japanese history – it was the base for the Southern Court when it split from the Imperial Court in Kyoto. There will be time to explore the village and enjoy lunch featuring local *kuzu* (arrowroot) noodles

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 9 Monday 29 October HIKE TO DOROGAWA ONSEN (11 miles: about 5 hours)

This will be the first time we've introduced today's hike to the Imperial Pilgrimage Route itinerary. The hike starts at the hut where the warrior turned priest Saigyō lived in seclusion for a time. The path is one of those taken by the Shugendo mountain priests who undertake rigorous spiritual training in these mountains. The tough regime they followed in the past includes walking these mountain paths at an unearthly pace and for many weeks or months on end. We might come across one or two on our hike. Don't worry, our aim is to enjoy it!

At the end of the hike we'll travel a short distance to stay in a small, traditional village with old inns and hot springs where we can relax in an atmosphere which feels like it might have done a century ago.

Overnight ryokan.

DAY 10 Tuesday 30 October ASUKA

After breakfast it's a short drive to the quiet village of Asuka. Asuka was the first capital of a consolidated Japanese state known as Yamato. It was where culture from Korea and China first took root in Japan. There are large imperial burial chambers as well as the oldest Buddhist statue in Asukadera Temple to see amongst other important site. Asuka is a pleasant area to hire cycles and walk around. We normally hire bicycles as we can get around and see more during the day.

Overnight either at a family-run B&B or other local accommodation (depending on the size of the group).

DAY 11 Wednesday 31 October WALK THE YAMANOBE NO MICHI TRAIL (8 miles: 5 hours)

The Yamanobe no Michi (literally 'path beside the mountains') is a designated historical route. On and off quiet roads, this is a 4 to 5 hour, 13 km hike through countryside with persimmon and mandarin groves, the path winding around imperial tombs. Arrive Nara late afternoon.

Overnight hotel in Nara.

DAY 12 Friday Thursday 1 November 2 November GUIDED WALK OF NARA

Today we'll enjoy a guided walk around Nara Park. Many of Japan's greatest cultural treasures are concentrated in and around Nara. Indeed, the city boasts eight UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Todaiji Temple, Nigastu-do and Sangatsu-do halls, Kasuga Shrine, Shinyakushi-ji Temple, Kofuku-ji Temple, Shosoin Treasure House, Isuien Garden, as well as the Nara National Museum and the Nara City Museum of Photography are all in or near Nara Park. The parkland is also home to a thousand or more free-roaming deer. Todaiji's Daibutsu-den is the largest wooden building in the world, and houses a 16 metre (52ft) tall bronze image of the cosmic Dainichi Buddha, containing 437 tonnes of bronze and 130kg of gold. Prior to being rebuilt three hundred years ago, the awesome structure was even bigger than it is today. There will be some free time to relax and look around Nara on your own.

Overnight hotel in Nara.

DAY 13 Friday 2 November TRAIN TO KYOTO

From Nara we travel north to Kyoto. Imperial power was consolidated here after the court moved from Nara. Kyoto is such a special place that it would take years to see a fraction of its wonders. After we arrive in Kyoto we'll head to the Higashiyama area, visit the Silver Pavilion, and stroll along the Philosopher's Walk to Nanzenji Zen temple. We may take advantage of any special seasonal events or highlights nearer the time when planning our Kyoto itinerary.

Overnight Kyoto city centre hotel.

DAY 14 Saturday 3 November KYOTO

Another day exploring Kyoto.

Celebration farewell dinner at a restaurant specializing in a modern take on Kyoto cuisine.

DAY 15 Sunday 4 November Tour ends

Onward travel after breakfast.

We would be happy to help you extend your stay in Kyoto for a day or two, be it with accommodation or activities.

TRIP NOTES

Equipment & Clothing

On receiving your booking, we send you a dossier which contains a suggested gear and clothing list. Contact us if you have any questions at all. We will be pleased to offer advice.

Accommodation

OSAKA, KYOTO, NARA, and KATSUURA: Comfortable hotels. MOUNT KOYA: Temple. OTHER PLACES: Traditional Japanese inns (ryokan and minshuku), and a family-run B&B.

Please note that single rooms are normally only available in hotels – where a single room supplement may apply.

Meal Plan

All meals are provided.

Important Notes

Every effort will be made to keep to the above itinerary, but we cannot make absolute guarantees! Changes to the itinerary will normally be made to introduce improvements. Weather conditions, road and transport conditions, and the health of walkers can all contribute to changes. The guide will ensure that the trip runs according to plan, but an easy-going nature is an asset!