Todaiji Temple in Nara

**Highlights**

The mandala of Shingon Buddhist temples on Mount Koya – Mountain top village of Yoshino – Hiking Odaihahara Plateau – Historical Asuka – Hiking the Yamanobe no michi – The refined culture and arts of Nara and Kyoto – Hiking around the village of Ohara, north of Kyoto – Excellent food and accommodation – Indigo dyeing

**Style of tour**

Japanese-speaking British leader or local English-speaking Japanese leader

Accommodation in B&B, traditional ryokan, hotels, Buddhist temple.

**Duration**

10 days

**Hiking days**

6 days

**Grade**

Moderate

**Group size**

Maximum: 9 Clients Minimum: 5 Clients

**Prices**

Please contact us for latest prices and other details for this tour, or for similar, custom-made itinerary quotes.

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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 is actively developing a network of expert English-speaking Japanese guides.
Introduction


Several of the Hike Japan tours begin and end in the Kansai, focusing on the Nara/Kyoto areas. There are good reasons for this; there is a greater concentration of culturally important sites here than anywhere else in the country, there is easy access to rural areas that retain some of their integrity and which have not been spoiled by modern development, the locals are friendly, the food is good, there is plenty of scope for easy walking, and the climate is milder than in the mountains and further north.

This tour features easier walks than most of the tours. From Osaka, we travel to Mount Koya, head monastery of the Shingon Pure Word Buddhist sect in Japan, a short train journey to the south. Mount Koya has an extraordinary cemetery (in the company of our guide, this walk will offer interesting glimpses into Japanese history) and is the centre of the esoteric Shingon (Pure Word) sect of Buddhism. After a peaceful night we will rise early and attend a short sutra reading. The temple we stay at has a small karesansui (rock garden). The main temple here, Kongobuji, has the largest dry rock garden in Japan. The fresh green foliage of the maple and other trees can be enjoyed in May.

From one famous site we travel by train to a village with an equally well-known name – Yoshino. The Kinpusenji temple in Yoshino is the head temple of the Shugendo Buddhist sect. With links to Tibetan Buddhism, the mountain monks belonging to this sect, known as gyoja, maintain high levels of personal discipline and are renowned for their hardiness. The village is perched on a ridge. A walk south takes you to some interesting sites on the approach to the Omine pilgrimage route, including the site of the warrior poet Saigyo’s hut. Overnight is in a wonderful ryokan. Yoshino is well-known for its delicious kuzu noodles, and you will enjoy a lunch which features them.

Parts of this tour are common to the Imperial Pilgrimage Route, but after Yoshino we will visit the Odaigahara Plateau. At about 2,000m, this limestone upland is an area of special scientific interest. The area has some of the highest levels of rainfall in Japan (over 5 metres!), and is blessed with mixed forest and an abundance of wildlife. A few years ago, a typhoon destroyed a bridge which gave access from the east, so we will approach by road up from the west side and enjoy a walk around Odai without the stiff climb on foot! Weather permitting we will have a picnic. There are one or two natural hot springs in the area which means we can enjoy a bath after the hike.

Asuka is historically important as the site of the first capital of a unified Japanese state. The area is beautifully conserved and remains from the Asuka Period (538–710) include huge imperial tombs. The opening of the tombs, and the conservation work required, remain hotly debated issues in Japan. Newspaper articles on the subject regularly appear in the press. Frescos which had almost been destroyed by exposure to the atmosphere were recently exhibited at the local museum and a Hike Japan group was fortunate enough to see these before they were taken to the labs for a long time whilst they undergo restoration work. We enjoy a buckwheat soba lunch here, and do some indigo fabric dyeing.

The Yamanobe no michi is pleasant walking 4-hour walking route that starts at the Miwa Shrine north of Asuka and ends at Isonokami Jingu Shrine in the foothills near Tenri.

After a couple of nights in Nara, where we will visit, among other places, the great Todaiji Temple, we head for Kyoto. Our ryokan there is one we have used for years. The grace and charm of Kyoto are in evidence in every detail and the food is wonderful. After a Kyoto ramen lunch, we will visit to the Nijo Castle and Nanzenji Temple in the eastern hills during the afternoon.

The village of Ohara north of Kyoto is a gem nesting quietly in a valley that feels far from the city. We enjoy hiking here stopping at the important temples along the way.

There is a farewell dinner downtown on our last night. You will enjoy the night in the comfort of a top Kyoto hotel before breakfast and your onward journey.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 – OSAKA to MOUNT KOYA
Meet Osaka. Transfer by train to Mount Koya. Lunch. Afternoon guided walk of temples and cemetery to Okunoin, where the founder of Shingon Buddhism, Kobo Daishi, is believed to be in eternal meditation. Dinner and early night. Overnight temple.
DAY 2 – MOUNT KOYA and YOSHINO
Early morning rise for to join in short sutra reading ceremony before breakfast. All food is temple vegetarian *shojin ryori*. After breakfast descend cable car for train to Yoshino. Arrive Yoshino. After lunch free time to wander around village and see garden of the ryokan. Dinner at ryokan.
Overnight ryokan

DAY 3 – YOSHINO WALK
Walk to up to site of Saigyo’s hut, passing Mikumari Jinja Shrine. Yoshino *kuzu* noodle lunch. Transfer to Kamikitayama.
Overnight hotel

DAY 4 – ODAIGAHARA PLATEAU WALK
Drive up to Odaigahara Plateau. 4-hour walk of West Odai and see visitor centre. Picnic if weather permits. Transfer to Asuka in the afternoon. Western-style dinner at local restaurant.
Overnight B&B

DAY 5 – ASUKA WALK
Leisurely tour, on foot or by rented bicycles, of sites in and around village of Asuka, including the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, Ishibutai tomb, and Asukadera. Lunch of *soba* buckwheat noodles at craft centre where there will be a hands-on indigo fabric dyeing session.
Dinner at local restaurant
Overnight B&B

DAY 6 – YAMANOBE NO MICHI WALK and NARA
After breakfast, transfer to start of the Yamanobe no Michi trail at Miwa Jinja Shrine. 4-hour hike to Isonokami Jingu Shrine near Tenri. Train into Nara.
Overnight city centre hotel

DAY 7 – NARA SIGHTSEEING
Morning and early afternoon sightseeing in and around Nara Park, including Todai Temple. Later afternoon free time.
Dinner at Japanese restaurant.
Overnight city centre hotel

DAY 8 – KYOTO SIGHTSEEING
Transfer by train from Nara to Kyoto. *ramen* noodle lunch followed by visits to Nijo Castle and Nanzenji Zen Temple.
Dinner at ryokan.
Overnight ryokan

DAY 9 – KYOTO and OHARA VILLAGE WALK
Bus to Ohara and local hiking. O-bento picnic lunch box or noodles depending on weather.
Return to Kyoto in afternoon and check-in to hotel. Evening farewell dinner downtown and enjoy Gion area.

DAY 10 – KYOTO
Tour ends after breakfast. Onward travel - hotel is conveniently located for access to Kyoto station.

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**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**
MOUNT KOYA: Buddhist temple YOSHINO and KYOTO: Ryokan ASUKA: B&B KAMIKITAYAMA, NARA & KYOTO: HOTELS
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!