

Early Cherry Blossom Tour Sunday 18th March to Saturday 31st March 2017

1. Introduction:

Welcome to our Early Cherry Blossom Tour 2018! For 2018 we are running at least four tours across March and April and this is the “early” tour. The 2017 season indicated that the blossom season might have been a few days earlier than average, cold weather in March meant it was around the usual dates.

2. Airport arrivals:

Currently we have guests arriving on 17th March and 18th March for this tour. In all cases we are making arrangements to meet everyone at the airport (either Haneda or Narita) and transfer you to your hotel in central Tokyo.

Upon arrival, after clearing Immigration, luggage collection and Customs, we will meet you at the exit of the Arrivals Hall. You will recognise us as we will have a welcome sign displaying your name and our company logo. For Narita arrivals we then take the Narita Express (N'Ex) train into the city. For Haneda arrivals we take local trains (which require a single station transfer).

3. Tour itinerary:

Sunday 18th March Tokyo: Start the day with a visit to the Meiji Shrine. As the shrine is adjacent to Harajuku, we then head to Takeshita Street which is a trend-setting shopping area for Tokyo youth. Leaving Harajuku, we visit the nearby upmarket shopping district of Omotesando.

After lunch we probably head to Ueno Park: a famous Tokyo cherry blossom viewing spot and while the main season will not have started by this time, Ueno Park boasts a large variety of trees including some early blooming varieties. The park also contains several museums (including Tokyo National Museum) and Tokyo Zoo.

Monday 19th March Tokyo: Visit Asakusa Kaminarimon (“Thunder gate”), Hozomon and pagoda. An array of stalls lines Nakamise Street (the entrance to this shrine) providing a wide range of souvenirs and snacks on the approach to Sensoji Temple.

In the afternoon, visit Shinjuku and enjoy the view from the Tokyo Metropolitan Building (200 metres above ground level). There is also time to see the expansive Shinjuku National Gardens.

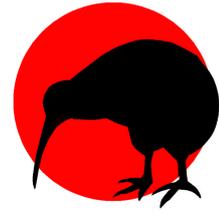
Tokyo options (certainly not an exhaustive list):

- *Visit the Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku (it is best described as a cabaret show and costs approx. Y7, 000)*
- *In Asakusa we can arrange a kimono photo shoot or an introductory samurai lesson for the adventurous (approx. Y7, 000 for the samurai training)*

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- *In Akasaka a ninja-themed restaurant offers a unique dining option*
- *Tokyo also has a great array of art museums and the city often hosts exhibitions from around the world*



Torii gate at Miyajima (left); Kasuga Shrine, Nara (right)

Tuesday 20th March: Tokyo to Togura/Nagano: Head into the mountains for a stay at a traditional Japanese inn including onsen and local foods prepared on-site. There is a small castle (fort) on the hill behind the ryokan that gives great views across the valley and mountains around the area. There is a local cycling tour around Togura available opposite the ryokan.

Wednesday 21st March Togura/Nagano: Several options are available. Explore the local town, the city of Nagano and Zenko-ji temple in Nagano, founded in the 7th century, Togakushi Shrine in the forest to the north-west of Nagano, with its impressive tree-lined approach and Ninja Museum, or Jigokudani Monkey Park.

Thursday 22nd March Togura to Kanazawa: Continuing our journey across Japan's biggest island (Honshu), we take the Shinkansen train to Kanazawa. Visit the beautiful Kenrokuen Gardens and Kanazawa Castle. Enjoy local cuisine including fresh sushi and sashimi (optional) at the Omi-cho food market.

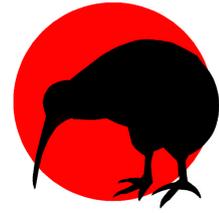
One of the advantages of visiting Kenrokuen is that it has both ume (plum) blossom, which blooms earlier, but also a large range of cherry trees, so worth a visit.

Friday 23rd March to Hiroshima: To maximise the opportunities for cherry blossom viewing, we travel to Hiroshima. This is one of our **longer** travel days, covering 625km in a little over four hours by "Thunderbird" and then the shinkansen transferring at Shin-Osaka. With the transfer there is an opportunity to buy an o-bento (Japanese lunch box) or other food for lunch on the train. With a mid-afternoon arrival time, there is then an opportunity to visit the Peace Park and Museum in Hiroshima city.

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Saturday 24th March Hiroshima: A full day in Hiroshima allows us time to visit and explore Miyajima Island: Itsukushima Shrine is the location of the famous "floating" torii gate. The island is accessed by a short local train and ferry ride.

Depending on fitness and inclination, we can use the ropeway (cable car) and head to the top of Mount Misen for views across the Seto inland sea. If feeling energetic, the walk back down the mountain provides some good viewing and vantage points (otherwise we can get the ropeway back down).

Also in Hiroshima there is the rebuilt Hiroshima Castle (the castle includes a samurai museum), and a further option is to visit the nearby port city of Kure. At Kure there is the Yamato Battleship museum and the also the JMSDF museum with interesting exhibits relating to mine sweeping and also a submarine

Sunday 25th March Hiroshima to Kyoto: The journey north to Kyoto is a modest 400km (2 hours by shinkansen), which delivers us to the historic old capital of Japan around midday. During the afternoon we usually visit the very accessible Fushimi Inari Shinto shrine with its famous 10,000 torii gates. The walk to the top of Inari Yama (to see all 10,000!) takes a couple of hours and is definitely optional.

Given time/inclination we can visit one of the other nearby attractions in the eastern side of the city such as Sanjusangendo that has 1,000 hand carved statues. *(While I had seen Sanjusangendo described as an imitation of the Chinese Terracotta Warriors, each statue is slightly different, and the fact it was more than 100 years in the making helps to make it more impressive.)*

Monday 26th March Kyoto: Visit the "Golden Pavilion" Kinkaku-ji in the north-west of the city and then Nijo Castle *(the palace buildings are one the best surviving examples of castle palace architecture of Japan's feudal era)*, before heading to Heian Shrine and gardens. *(Heian Garden is a good location for blossom viewing in Kyoto as the gardens have many weeping cherry trees, and they bloom slightly earlier than some other varieties. Also, the location is slightly off the tourist trail and is quieter than some of the other more crowded spots.)*

The afternoon/evening can be used to visit the old Gion area, Yasaka shrine and Maruyama Park (a famous site for hanami (picnicking under the cherry blossom trees).

Tuesday 27th March Kyoto To experience one of the most important cultural and historic places in Japan, we visit Nara, Japan's first capital. At Nara is Todaiji Temple which houses the world's largest bronze Buddha in the world's largest wooden building. *We aim to get the 9:32 rapid train from Kyoto station as this is a quick/efficient option at the start of the day.)* Depending on the cherry season there can be some nice blossom displays around Nara.

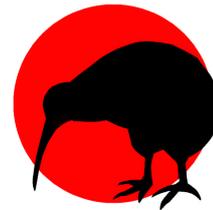
Kyoto options:

- *Yamazakai Distillery Tour (advance reservations are required.)*
- *Exploring the 400 year old covered Nishiki food Market and adjacent Teramachi covered shopping street*

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- *Ginkaku-ji (the “Silver Pavilion”) followed by a walk along the cherry tree-lined Philosopher’s Path*



Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto (left); Kodai-ji Temple gardens, Kyoto (right)

Wednesday 28th March Kyoto to Takayama: Travel by Shinkansen and then local train to the onsen (hot spring) mountain town of Takayama. Use the afternoon for a relaxing onsen bath or explore some of this old-style mountain town.

Thursday 29th March Takayama: During the morning explore the town's historic buildings, morning market and shops on foot and/or visit the festival floats exhibition hall. The afternoon is reserved for a ½ day bus tour that visits the World Heritage Site of Shirakawa-go with its old traditional “A frame” farmhouses. Dinner time is an ideal opportunity to sample the famous Hida Beef.

Friday 30th March Takayama to Tokyo: Taking the WideView Hida train back down the scenic Kiso valley to Nagano and transfer back to Tokyo by shinkansen along the east coast (with a possible view of Mt Fuji on the way).

Saturday 31st March Tokyo: Last formal day of the tour with additional time in Tokyo. A good opportunity to check some of the famous cherry blossom viewing spots around the city or explore some new areas depending on your interests.

4. Transport arrangements:

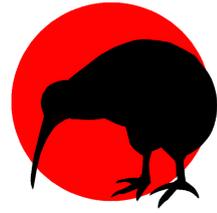
For travel around Tokyo we use a combination of local trains and the subway. For trains and subways in Tokyo and Kyoto we use pre-paid electronic passes. In some places we use taxis to provide cost-effective point-to-point transportation.

The tourist Japan Rail Pass (JRP) covers the extensive Japan Rail network and is the most efficient and cost-effective method to transfer between the different places we are visiting. The pass covers either 7, 14 or 21 days. We will exchange JRP vouchers (previously obtained by us on your behalf)

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for the actual rail passes before we leave Tokyo to travel to Nagano. This exchange process (which we also do on your behalf) requires us to show your passports to prove eligibility (i.e. the temporary visitor visa stamp you receive on entering Japan) for the passes.

5. Hotels

These are an indication only. Actual hotels will be determined when booking availability becomes available (typically three to six months ahead of the tour).

Tokyo: Cerulean Tower Tokyu: This large, modern hotel in Shibuya is very comfortable with a touch of luxury. Previous guests have enjoyed their stays here and the views across the city. The location has good access to the subway, local train lines and the airport. As it is in Shibuya, a busy Tokyo neighbourhood, there are many nearby dining options. Or:

Kyoto: Kyoto Century Hotel: Twin rooms with breakfast included, located next to Kyoto Railway Station, and a good base while staying in Kyoto. The breakfast buffet is excellent and there is an optional Japanese restaurant for a traditional breakfast. Or:

Hiroshima: Crowne Plaza, located near the Peace Park and Museum.

Takayama: Honjin Hiranoya Bekkin Annex: With views of the river and included meals the Honjin is a relaxing retreat in traditional ryokan style with excellent service. Rooms include private showers and there is an onsen on-site.

Kanazawa: Holiday Inn Kanazawa Sky. A short taxi ride from the train station, this comfortable hotel is close to Kanazawa's main attractions. We have booked a mix of rooms breakfast included. For the adventurous, the Omi-cho market across the street provides fresh sushi as a breakfast option.

Togura: Kamesei Ryokan. The Kamesei is an old (100 years) traditional inn with onsen. Staying here is often a highlight of our guests' holiday. The inn is run by an ex-American husband and his Japanese wife. Included meals are a Japanese 'kaiseki' (course meal) dinner and an option for a shabu-shabu (hotpot/stew) meal on the second night. Breakfast is traditional Japanese-style for the first morning and we can arrange a "continental" breakfast for the second morning. For those requiring a "western" bed we will also be booking rooms at a nearby hotel.

Lastly, we look forward to meeting you and providing you with a wonderful experience exploring Japan! If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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