



Japan Spring Blossom Tour – Friday 23rd March to Tuesday 3rd April 2018

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1. Introduction:

Thank you for the opportunity to put together a customised tour for you.

As we are chasing cherry blossom we are subject to the influence of nature so we cannot guarantee what things will be like in six months from now. Even this year the early indications were for the cherry blossom to be a few days earlier than average, but then cooler weather in March delayed things and meant it was around the usual dates.

This 12 day tour, running across the end of March and into the beginning of April, will be led by Wendy and Koji.

2. Airport arrivals: Friday 23rd March

Wendy and Koji will meet you at the airport.

Upon arrival, after clearing immigration, luggage collection and customs, you will recognise us as we will have a welcome sign displaying your name and our company logo.

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. From Narita we transfer you to your hotel in central Tokyo. The train trip into the city is 75 minutes by express train.

3. Tour itinerary:

Saturday 24th March Tokyo: We start the day with a visit to the Meiji Shrine. As an important period of change we explain some of the historical elements of the Meiji Restoration before visiting the shrine buildings located in a central Tokyo forest. 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 there is a distinct transition as we move to the nearby upmarket shopping district of Omotesando.

We then head to Ueno which provides some good options and variety for lunch adjacent to the expansive Ueno Park. Ueno Park is a famous Tokyo cherry blossom viewing spot where you can see local Tokyoites enjoying the cherry blossom season. *This is approximately one week before the expected peak cherry blossom in Tokyo, but the park boasts many different varieties of cherry trees so may have some good blossom on display.*

Ueno Park contains several museums (including Tokyo National Museum) and Tokyo Zoo (the main attraction of which is a giant panda). The beautiful Tōshō-gū shrine that enshrines the first Shōgun of the Tokugawa Shogunate. *(For those unable to visit the lavishly decorated shrines at the*

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world heritage sites at Nikko, this is a good substitute). Also in Ueno park is the national Museum of Western Art with a variety of sculptures at the entrance (*including some Rodin*), and the building itself is listed as a world heritage site (*designed by the Swiss architect known as Le Corbusier*).

Sunday 25th March Tokyo: Visit Asukusa and the Sensoji Temple (the oldest temple in Tokyo). The temple is famous for its giant lanterns at the 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 the temple.

Also at Asakusa is the Amuse Museum (the Textile Culture and Ukiyo-e Art Museum). The route from the local train station takes is past Sensoji Temple (the oldest temple in Tokyo and Nakamise Street, but these are incidental).

In the afternoon, we can head to Shinjuku to see the expansive Shinjuku National Gardens with its large number of cherry trees. *Similar to Ueno Park, there are early and late blooming varieties of tree. If the season is late we may select a different destination to make the most of your time in the capital.* From the gardens, head to the Golden Gai area of old style bars before seeing Godzilla towering above the night life area of Kabukicho or visiting the small (but interesting) Samurai museum.

Some 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)*
- *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)

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Monday 26th March Tokyo to Hiroshima: To maximise the opportunities for cherry blossom viewing (and your time in Japan), we travel to Hiroshima. This is one of our longer travel days, covering 900km in around 4 ½ hours by shinkansen (high-speed ‘bullet’ train). *There is a brief transfer at Shin-Kobe, but we recommend getting a bento (Japanese lunch box) or other food for lunch on the train.* With an early afternoon arrival time, there is then an opportunity to visit the Peace Park and Museum in Hiroshima city.

Tuesday 27th March Hiroshima: With a full day in Hiroshima we have time to explore a couple of different destinations. The main attraction for the day is Miyajima Island and its Itsukushima Shrine. This is the location of the famous “floating” torii gate. Also on the island we can make use of the 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).

An option for the start of the day is to visit Iwakuni and the famous Kintaikyo Bridge. Beyond the bridge is an interesting array of attractions including stores selling 164 flavours of ice cream (*as featured on TV*), a white snake museum, Kikko shrine and a selections of older style buildings and gardens.

Both Miyajima and Iwakuni have a number of secluded and beautiful parks with groves of cherry trees. As this is further south of Tokyo, the blossom dates are typically earlier.

Some Hiroshima options:

- *The rebuilt Hiroshima Castle (the castle includes a samurai museum)*
- *Hiroshima is the location of one of the Mazda vehicle factories and there is a tour and museum. (Advance reservations are required.)*
- *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*

Wednesday 28th 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.

From Fushimi Inari we have several options including Sanjusangendo temple with its 1,000 hand carved statues or the Kiyomizudera temple and its hillside with many different varieties of cherry trees.

Thursday 29th March Kyoto: Visit Nijo Castle (*the palace buildings are one the best surviving examples of castle palace architecture of Japan's feudal era*). Due to the timing, there should be cherry blossom to enjoy as we stroll around the castle grounds.

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Heading back across town we propose visiting the gardens of Heian Shrine. This extensive garden includes many weeping cherry trees and provides a relaxing location to enjoy to blossom. (*Crowds are normally less because it is paid admission.*)

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).

Friday 30th March Kyoto: Start the day by visiting the "golden pavilion" Kinkaku-ji in the north east of the city before visiting the nearby Ryoan-ji Temple. *Ryoan-ji is the site of Japan's most famous rock garden.*

From Ryoan-ji we then head to the beautiful Arashiyama district, enjoy the view across the Oi River from the Togetsukyō Bridge. A visit to the Tenryū-ji temple gardens is very nice, and a ride on one of the punt boats on the river can insert a relaxing interlude to the day. Among the famous sights in the area is the Sagano bamboo grove (*although the large number of tourists makes it hard to get "travel brochure" photos.*)



Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto (left); Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) (right)

Saturday 31st March Kyoto to Kanazawa: Continuing our journey across Japan's biggest island (Honshu), we take the "Thunderbird" Express train to Kanazawa. Visit the beautiful Kenrokuen Gardens (another site famous for its blossom trees) and the Kanazawa Castle. Enjoy local cuisine including fresh sushi and sashimi (optional) at the Omi-cho food market. The city also boasts the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art which is also an option.

Sunday 1st April Kanazawa to Togura: Departing from Kanazawa we head along the west coast of Japan by Shinkansen to Nagano. As the trip is relatively short we arrive around midday in time for lunch.

After lunch there is an opportunity to visit the Zenko-ji temple, founded in the 7th century. The temple houses the first Buddhist image in Japan (552CE) and the city grew around the temple. Among the interesting features is the passageway beneath the inner chamber and people search for the "key to paradise" and numerous important cultural properties.

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The temple visit takes us to mid-afternoon and the local train bound for Togura (30 minutes) and then check in at Ryokan Kamesei. Before dinner there is time to have a soak in the ryokan's onsen (hot spring baths) or explore the neighbourhood (and castle behind the inn). Dinner is traditional keiseki style (course meal) dinner and we arrange geisha entertainment (music and dance) as part of the evening meal.

Monday 2nd April Togura to Tokyo: By shinkansen, we complete the trip across the island and arrive back into Tokyo. The afternoon is available for sightseeing or checking the progress of the cherry blossom back in the capital. *By this stage we will have a better idea of your interests and can target places that you would like to visit.*

Tuesday 3rd April Tokyo: Last day in Tokyo and free time until transfers back to the airport for your flights home. Depending on the time of your flights there may be time to visit one of the more famous (but not necessarily popular) cherry blossom viewing spots. *The tree lined Meguro canal is a location nearby to Shibuya that might be a good option.*



Kintaikyo Bridge, Iwakuni (left); Cherry blossom at Shinjuku National Gardens (right)

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 Japan Rail Pass (JRP) available to tourists visiting Japan covers the extensive Japan Rail network. The rail network is the most efficient and cost-effective method to transfer between the different places we are visiting. We will exchange JRP vouchers (previously obtained by us on your behalf) for the actual rail passes before we leave Tokyo. 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.

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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.

Kyoto: Kyoto Century Hotel: Located next to the Kyoto Railway Station the “Century” provides an excellent base while staying in Kyoto. The breakfast buffet is excellent and we find the rooms suit the majority of our guests due to the layout and comfort.

Hiroshima: Sheraton Hiroshima. One of our favourite hotels in Japan, we typically book their deluxe king rooms (including breakfast). The hotel is adjacent to the Hiroshima Railway Station, making the city and nearby Miyajima Island easily accessible.

Kanazawa: Holiday Inn Kanazawa Sky. A short walk or taxi ride from the train station, this comfortable hotel is close to Kanazawa’s main attractions. We prefer to book the Japanese style suites (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.