

Day	Suggested Schedule
<p>Mon Mar 28th</p> <p>Departure for Japan</p>	<p>We meet at 16:00 at Japan Airlines (JAL) counter, Heathrow Terminal 3 Departures, before assisting you with check-in. Our flight is non-stop departing 19:15 with a flight time of approximately 12 hours.</p> 
<p>Tues Mar 29th</p> <p>Arrival in Japan</p> <p>KYOTO HOTEL</p>	<p>We arrive at Narita Airport, Tokyo at 15:00 local time. After clearing immigration and customs you are joined by the group leader. There will be time to exchange money and relax a little before we board JAL flight JL3019 departing at 17:25 and arriving at Kansai International airport, Osaka at 19:05. We'll board a private coach and reach Kyoto about an hour later. You are welcome to join us for dinner soon after the check-in formalities are completed.</p> 
<p>Kyoto</p>	<p><i>Kyoto, the most traditional of all Japan's major cities, has a phenomenal collection of temples and shrines dating back to its days as Japan's ancient capital and seat of culture. Many of the 2000 temples have national significance and give the city a relaxed and traditional atmosphere. Kyoto is where Japanese people go to see traditional Japan and is world-famous for its tranquil Zen gardens of which the most famous is the one of gravel and rocks at Ryōan-ji. Normally elusive geisha may be glimpsed in the early evenings in the Gion district. Kyoto is also renowned for its elegant kaiseki cuisine and is the original home of the tea ceremony. Like most cities, modernisation has left its share of concrete in Kyoto and often the most beautiful ancient buildings rub shoulders with less elegant post-war constructions or modern skyscrapers.</i></p> 
<p>Wed Mar 30th</p> <p>Kyoto: Gion Kiyomizu Temple</p> <p>KYOTO HOTEL</p>	<p>On our first morning in Kyoto, we visit Gion with its traditional wooden buildings, cobbled streets and geiko (the Kyoto word for geisha). You may be lucky enough to see and photograph them in formal kimono on their way to perform their classical entertainment. From Gion, a short walk takes us to Maruyama Park and its complex of temples in the foothills of the mountains to the east. This is a good opportunity to take part in some temple traditions like throwing a coin and ringing the bell at the temple entrance. The gods will welcome you inside - as long as you remove your shoes!</p> <p>We stroll from temple to shrine, pause for lunch, then head uphill gradually to another Kyoto icon - Kiyomizu. The main temple, from which there are spectacular views over the city, rests against the hill slope supported by 20 metre high wooden stilts. You can try the 'love walk' - finding a path from one ancient boulder to another with eyes closed. Superstition states that if you make it, you will be lucky in love but, if you don't, there are always plenty of good luck charms to buy instead! As the day comes to an end, we walk or take a taxi through this charming area back to the hotel.</p> 
<p>Nara</p>	<p><i>Nara is another ex-capital of Japan from which the Imperial family ruled from 710 and 794 and its legacy is a varied collection of ancient temples spread throughout a vast park. The most famous of these is Tōdai-ji, evidence of the strong Chinese influence during the Nara Period. Thought to be the largest free-standing wooden structure in the world, this is home to a giant Buddha. From here you can meander through parkland dotted with temples, make longer rambles up into the foothills of the mountains, or sit in one of the quaint cafes sipping delicious green tea and drinking in your surroundings.</i></p> 
<p>Thurs Mar 31st</p> <p>Nara</p> <p>KYOTO HOTEL</p>	<p>We take the hour-long train ride to Nara following an ancient route through the countryside between Japan's two former capitals. At Nara we visit the huge Deer Park which, in addition to the more popular temples and giant Buddhas, has many quieter areas of natural beauty. There are also opportunities to try Japanese snacks from traditional food stalls, watch turtles in the ponds and walk in the hills. As the name implies, the city is home to many deer, originally ridden by the gods, but visitors need to be bold to feed them as they are likely to be buffeted from all sides by the greedier ones. Even the traffic stops for them! For your own meal, you can choose from a traditional bento (lunch box) in the park or a restaurant lunch. We finally make our way back to the station via the main arcade. Even if shopping is not your idea of fun, it is well worth wandering through the shopping areas to see how the Japanese live day to day - a different world from the average UK high street. We arrive back at the hotel in Kyoto in time to rest before dinner.</p>  

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<p>Fri Apr 1st</p> <p>Kyoto: Golden Pavillion Miyako Odori</p> <p>KYOTO HOTEL</p>	<p>We start the day in northwest Kyoto at the world famous Golden Pavilion and Ryoanji temples. Some of these temples are the headquarters of differing sects of Buddhism to which many religious Japanese make personal pilgrimages. Glittering Kinkaku-ji is a restored three storey structure overlaid with gold leaf. The world-famous stone garden of Ryoan-ji, consisting of fifteen stones of different sizes set in white gravel, is classic Zen philosophy. The simplicity of such rock gardens is intended to inspire the imagination. From there we will head to Nijō Castle. Completed by Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603 it is now a UNESCO world heritage site. The architecture was ostentatious for its day – designed to demonstrate the shogun's growing power in contrast to the emperor's dwindling influence. A fascinating feature is the nightingale floor which still sounds to detect intruders. The adjoining garden, featuring islands in a lake, is attributed to the famous landscape architect Kobori Enshu, and said to be typical of the ornate designs of the Edo period.</p> <p>In the afternoon we enjoy a performance of 'Miyako Odori'. Since 1872, when the Emperor moved his capital to Tokyo, this special celebration of spring in Kyoto has helped maintain the city's pride in its traditions and unique culture. Performed by twenty maiko and geiko (the correct term for geisha in Kyoto) on a set adorned with cherry blossom, the eight dances are characterised by the elegant movement of the artistes giving the illusion of floating across the stage. After the performance, you will have some free time to rest or explore the town centre.</p>	  
<p>Shinkansen</p>	<p><i>The Shinkansen is truly a fantastic experience - travelling so smoothly at such a speed. Watching the beautiful landscape whiz by, you soon realise how mountainous Japan is and how this inaccessibility has protected the vegetation and wildlife from human impact – nearly two thirds of the land is still forested. Surprisingly, the extreme landscape did not deter construction of the Shinkansen line for the 1964 Olympics. It was skilfully engineered to use the most direct routes, in tunnels under mountains and on tracks over cities. It can be faster than flying!</i></p>	
<p>Sat Apr 2nd</p> <p>Hiroshima</p> <p>Hiroshima Hotel</p>	<p>Today, you'll be travelling by Shinkansen towards Hiroshima. We arrive in the afternoon and will make a visit to the Atomic Dome and Peace Park. The Heiwa Kinen Shiryokan (Peace Memorial Museum) commemorates the events leading up to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6th August 1945 and the tragic destruction of the city and its people.</p>	
<p>Sun Apr 3rd</p> <p>Miyajima Island</p> <p>Hiroshima Hotel</p>	<p>We reach Miyajima island by ferry from Hiroshima. The spectacular shrine on the shoreline with its red torii gate deserves a full day whether at high tide or low. At high tide the inland sea swells around the shrine stilts and the torii appears to float magically on the waves. At low tide you can stroll across the sand to the huge gate. The town has many fascinating shops and is populated by friendly, photogenic deer eagerly awaiting you to feed them. The forested peak of Mount Misen rises 535 metres behind Miyajima's striking torii gate and makes for a short, if strenuous, climb. There is the option of using the cable car if you are not feeling so energetic!</p>	
<p>Ryokan</p>	<p><i>Staying at a ryokan, you will enjoy the very best of Japanese hospitality from a tradition that has hardly changed in centuries. Entering your room, the scene is set by the distinctive scent of tatami floors and wood and paper doors. The yukata (cotton kimono) are neatly folded ready for you to change into and head to the onsen baths as soon as you arrive. In the evening, enjoy sumptuous Japanese cuisine served in a multitude of tiny dishes brought in stages by your hostess. You may struggle to recognise some of them but you should certainly try them all. With meticulous attention to aesthetics this is just as much a feast for the eyes as for the stomach.</i></p>	

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<p>Mon Apr 4th</p> <p>Hakone</p> <p>Hakone Ryokan</p>	<p>Today we travel on to Hakone. The Hakone checkpoint on the historic Tokaido (east sea) road marks the edge of the Kanto region. While Hakone has its fair share of hot springs and health resorts, the main attractions are the views of Mount Fuji and Lake Ashi. Closer inspection reveals that 'Fuji-san' is not quite as perfect as it appears as there are several volcanic craters on its slopes. The area known as Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park is still volcanically active and its Great Boiling Valley is full of sulphurous springs. We spend the evening in our ryokan (Japanese Inn) to enjoy the hot spring baths in the evening before savouring the traditional cuisine.</p>	
<p>Tues Apr 5th</p> <p>Tokyo</p> <p>TOKYO HOTEL</p>	<p>Today we take the traditional route around the Hakone area, which starts in Hakone-Yumoto, from where the narrow-gauge Hakone-Tōzan train zig-zags up forested hills to the resort town of Gōra. Soaring over the treetops the cable car transports us to the Great Boiling Valley from there are unparalleled views of Mount Fuji's peak. The Boiling Valley itself is fascinating and we can explore the geothermal area on foot. The tasty, black-shelled, onsen-cooked eggs reputedly give long life. Then it's onwards by cable car to Lake Ashi, where we board the charming Pirate Ship which takes us across the lake to Hakone-machi. Later, we head for Tokyo, our final destination.</p>	
<p>Tokyo</p>	<p><i>Tokyo, with its incredible variety, superb train system, parks, fantastic department stores and restaurants, is a wonderland. This is where modern Japan thrives and you will be amazed just how advanced it is. Although trains have TV displays that share line information with commercials, most passengers are fully occupied video-mailing on their phones. The famous capsule hotels have been superceded by all-night internet cafes that offer the latest DVDs or games and high-speed internet. Sleeping and eating seem a waste of time to busy workers so a myriad of fast food stalls offer excellent food of all kinds in minutes. In the busiest districts huge screens play pop videos and commercials 24 hours a day and it is immediately clear why so many sci-fi novels and films have looked to Tokyo for inspiration. In spite of this hustle and bustle the city has many historic pockets of tranquility some of which we include in the tour.</i></p>	
<p>Wed Apr 6th</p> <p>Tokyo</p> <p>TOKYO HOTEL</p>	<p>We start by viewing the Ginza area from our coach on the way to the Imperial Palace and a gentle walking in gardens of the Emperor and Empress. More protected and detached from mainstream society than the British monarchy, it is likely to be many years before it is possible to enter the Palace proper. From traditional Tokyo we move to Akihabara, an incredible high-tech shopping area, and from there it is a short journey to the Asakusa Kannon Temple. This is the oldest in Tokyo famous for its colossal lantern at the entrance and the avenue leading up to it lined with traditional stalls and crafts. Boarding the Sumida River water bus we head to the tranquil Sengakuji Temple where poignant graves tell of 47 heroic samurai who, in 1703, exacted a spectacular and terrible revenge for their lost lord.</p>	
<p>Thurs Apr 7th</p> <p>Tokyo</p> <p>TOKYO HOTEL</p>	<p>In the morning we are planning a rare chance to see a samurai swordsmith in his workshop and learn of the art and etiquette of this incredible, uniquely Japanese, weapon. Due to the private nature of this visit the above schedule may need to be modified accordingly. We then take the train to Harajuku to visit Meiji Shrine, hidden away in the forests by Yoyogi Park and dedicated to the spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife. The park was one of the main locations for the 1964 Olympics and is now a peaceful oasis. We walk the Omotesando area, a stunning centre of Japan's youth fashion. In the afternoon you are free to enjoy Tokyo at your leisure. Alternatively we would be delighted to take you to the famous Shibuya crossing and other areas of interest in central Tokyo.</p>	
<p>Fri Apr 8th</p> <p>Return to UK</p>	<p>After breakfast at the hotel, we escort you to Narita Airport and assist with check-in for the flight back to the UK. Japan Airways Flight JL401 departs at 12:00 arriving at Heathrow Airport at 16:35 (flight time approx 12 hours)</p>	