

The Treasures of Chubu

16 days on the road through the historic heartlands of Japan



TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

Beneath wide-open skies, this road trip through central Japan will bring you to some of the country's most spectacular natural wonders, and immerse you in its most intriguing history and customs on a 14-night itinerary that will leave you with an appreciation to last a lifetime.

History

Travelling by car, you'll follow ancient postal routes, stopping off at perfectly preserved towns from the Edo Period along the way. These two weeks are filled with samurai swords, cherry blossoms and glimpses of geisha, as you travel through time to embrace some of Japan's oldest traditions.

Nature

This is a gorgeous region of Japan. From its geologically unique coastline and 20-metre corridors of mountain snow, to the gentle riverways of Lake Biwa and the clear starry skies of Achi, Chubu is stunning throughout.

Culture

Get hands on with a woodcarving workshop where you'll learn the traditional art of Inami and shape a spoon from a block of cherry wood, and step quite literally into the art in Tokyo's biggest immersive art experience.

DURATION

16 days / 14 nights

ARRIVAL

Fly into Tokyo Haneda Airport

DEPARTURE

Depart from Tokyo Haneda Airport

PERFECT FOR

Couples, small groups, and families who prefer to explore at their own pace

WHEN TO VISIT

This tour departs on the 27th of April – the best time of year to experience the spring cherry blossoms



TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 1: Bon voyage!

Your trip begins with an overnight flight from Heathrow. You'll eat dinner on-board then relax into your trip for the evening, with plenty of time to sleep.

Day 2: Welcome to Japan

You'll eat lunch on your flight before you arrive into Tokyo Haneda Airport that evening. Here you'll board a one-hour onward flight to Nagoya, Japan's fourth largest city.

When you arrive at Chubu Centrair International Airport, you'll meet an English-speaking assistant for a briefing ahead of your journey. They'll go over your itinerary in detail, and hand you a TOICA IC card for the metro, and your Nagoya Me-guru Bus 1DAY ticket.

A short train journey later and you'll arrive at your hotel in Nagoya, just a few minutes away from the station. It's been a long day of travel, so you can grab a quick dinner tonight before retiring to your room at the three-star Meitetsu Grand Hotel. Your adventure begins in earnest tomorrow.

Day 3: History and culture



Rise and shine, Japan awaits! After breakfast at the hotel, you'll take the bus to Shikemichi, a historic merchant town that dates back to the Edo Period (1603-1868).

You'll take in the lovely sights of the old town before heading to Tokugawa Art Museum, a unique collection of fascinating and valuable historical artefacts that have been donated by aristocratic families from the region for the past 400 years. Fans of Japanese history will be spoiled for choice here, as the collection holds nine designated National Treasures, as well as armour, weapons and calligraphy all preserved in pristine condition.

You may wish to visit the Tokugawa-en, a beautiful example of a Japanese garden with a central lake surrounded by a promenade, where you will stroll through a serene landscape featuring delicate waterfalls, refined tea houses and vivid bursts of flowers among the foliage.

TRAVEL ITINERARY

A short bus ride takes you to Osu Shopping Arcade, a 400-year-old shopping street brimming with more than 1,200 restaurants, shops and other businesses. You can choose any lunch you like from an array of street food stalls preparing tasty local specialties and national favourites – perhaps try *miso kushi-katsu* (delicious deep-fried pork skewers) or *agemanbo* (dumplings filled with a tangy red bean paste).

Your final stop for the day is Nagoya Castle, a grand structure renowned for its golden *shachihoko* (imaginary sea creatures with tiger-like heads) that grace the top of its tower. The original building burned down in 1945, but it has been painstakingly reconstructed, making it one of the finest examples of traditional Japanese wooden architecture in the country.

You're free to spend the evening however you might like, whether that's grabbing some more street food as you stroll through the city, or sitting down for a multi-course sushi tasting menu at one of the many high-end restaurants here.



TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 4: Magome the living museum



Day four starts with a hearty hotel breakfast before an English-speaking tour assistant meets you in the lobby and escorts you to a nearby car rental service. They will help you complete the paperwork, programme the sat-nav and make sure you're comfortable before you set off.

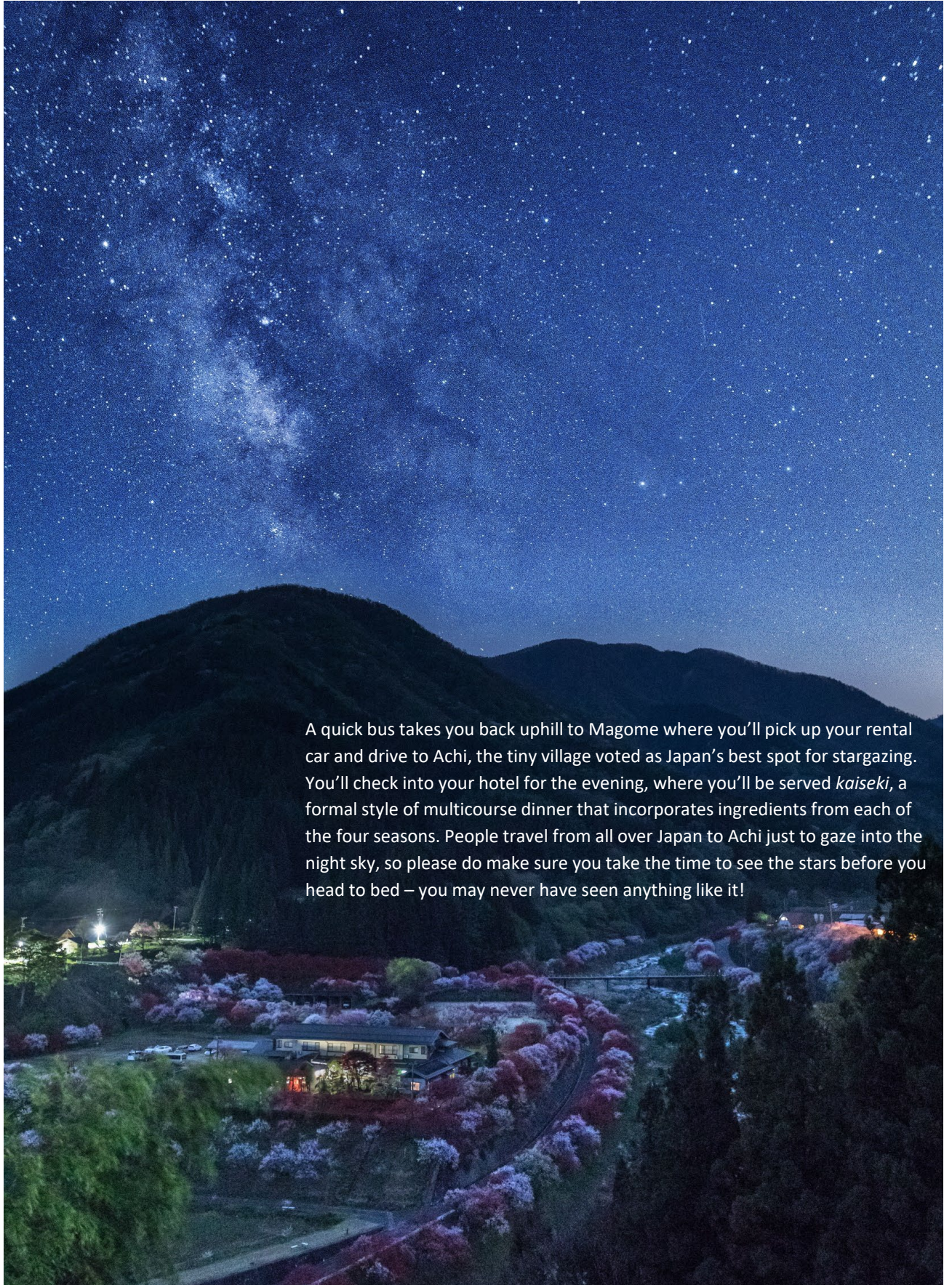
Your first drive is an easy 90 minutes, bringing you to Magome, a perfectly preserved former post town that sits on the Nakasendo Highway, one of the major former trade routes between Tokyo and Kyoto. Now an open-air museum, you can stroll the cobbled streets past waterwheels and carefully tended flowers at your leisure, checking out the local crafts and ceramics.

After lunch, you'll set off on a cycling tour of Magome, Ochiai and Nakatsugawa Shuku along the Nakasendo, accompanied by a guide. Beginning high in Magome-juku with its breathtaking view of the Kiso River, you'll glide through gorgeous landscapes past rice paddy fields and farmhouses, rolling out before mountains that rise into the sky in the distance. At Ochiai, a moss-covered path with original stone paving from the Edo Period winds beneath a lush treetop canopy.

The final stop is Nakatsugawa-juku, a small town famous for its chestnut confectionery, known as *kuri kinton*. Each piece is a tiny work of art, but they're so delicious you won't want to admire them for too long! You'll be able to visit the shops to buy some yourself after the tour ends – they make wonderful gifts.

There are spectacular photo opportunities all along the route, such as the ruins of Naegi Castle perched at the end of the valley, and the lush local bamboo groves.

TRAVEL ITINERARY



A quick bus takes you back uphill to Magome where you'll pick up your rental car and drive to Achi, the tiny village voted as Japan's best spot for stargazing. You'll check into your hotel for the evening, where you'll be served *kaiseki*, a formal style of multicourse dinner that incorporates ingredients from each of the four seasons. People travel from all over Japan to Achi just to gaze into the night sky, so please do make sure you take the time to see the stars before you head to bed – you may never have seen anything like it!

TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 5: The peach blossom village

There's time for breakfast at the hotel before you take a morning walk to Hanamomo no Sato, known in English as "Peach Blossom Village". This is the largest peach village in Japan, and it's famed for its spectacular springtime display, as the rows of peach trees blossom into vivid pastel pinks and whites, creating a stunning gradient through the boughs.



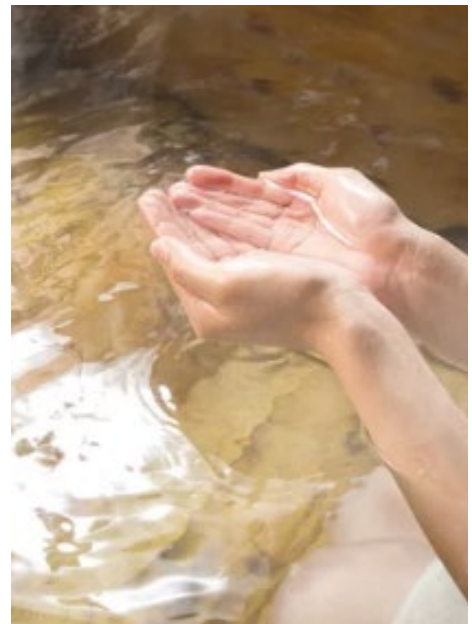
TRAVEL ITINERARY



You'll find your own lunch in town before taking a scenic route along the Nakasendo – lined by more pretty peach blossoms – to Tsumago Yado. You'll have to park your car, as they are forbidden on the streets of this well-preserved Edo town, which even conceals its power lines to ensure that the authentic historic feeling is maintained.

Take an hour or so to explore the charming buildings and shops stocking local crafts, before driving onwards to your next hotel in Nagiso Machi. The three-star Hotel Fuki No Mori is a ryokan traditionally appointed travellers' inn. Floor-to-ceiling shutter-windows look out onto the Kiso forest, which stretches off out into the horizon.

After a long day, it's time to sink into the outdoor traditional wooden *hinoki* bath beneath the stars to feel truly close to nature before sitting down to dinner at the hotel. If you like, there'll be time for an evening stroll in this beautiful valley.



TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 6: Matsumoto Castle

After breakfast is served at the ryokan, your day begins with a two-hour drive to the magnificent five-storey Matsumoto Castle, which is one of Japan's finest castles. Built in the 16th century, it's also one of a tiny handful of original castles to remain standing throughout Japan.

Matsumoto Castle, well known due to its striking black-and-white exterior, is listed as a National Treasure of Japan, and maintains its original wooden interiors and external stonework. To ensure that this special building remains in pristine condition, you are asked to remove your shoes before you enter the keep, so remember to bring a pair of socks with you.

And watch out for the Omotenashi Squad, who roam the surrounding Honmaru Gardens dressed as ninja, armoured warriors and princesses, waiting for people to pose for photos.



TRAVEL ITINERARY



Choose a good spot for a quick lunch – perhaps at one of the food stalls near the castle – before your next stop: Takayama, a small town high up in the Japanese alps. This afternoon, you’re free to discover this town by yourself, navigating lanes lined with beautifully preserved merchant homes. Perhaps you’ll stop into one of the traditional breweries and learn about the Takayama sake-making process, or step into a teahouse for a cup of green matcha.

Your hotel for the evening is the four-star Hotel Associa Takayama Resort, which is a little outside town, with a dedicated shuttle bus to and from the railway station. You will choose dinner on your own – but that means you get to decide which speciality cuisine to sample, whether it’s *chuka soba* – a Chinese-style ramen, or *hida-gyu*, beef from a prized Japanese cattle breed raised right here in Gifu Prefecture. Whatever you end up with, there’s no doubt you’re spoiled for choice in Takayama.



Day 7: Like Hands in Prayer

Today begins with breakfast at your hotel, ahead of a short drive to Shirakawa-go, a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its unique traditional farmhouses, some of which are over 250 years old.

You can explore the town in your own time, and step inside the farmhouses which are known as *gassho-zukuri*, meaning “built like hands in prayer”. This refers to the steep thatched roofs which look like the clasped hands of Buddhist monks, a style developed in response to the environmental and economic requirements of the town; the sharp roofs can withstand heavy snowfall, leaving room to cultivate silkworms in the attic.

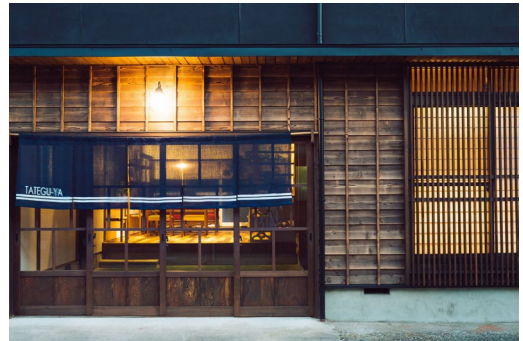


TRAVEL ITINERARY



@Kosuke Mae

After helping yourself to a bite to eat for lunch in town, you'll drive to your next activity in Nanto, where you'll be learning how to carve your own spoon using the Inami technique. You'll attend Bed and Craft TATEGU-YA, a residential workshop - where you'll also stay overnight - run by a local master craftsman, who will guide you along the journey of shaping a single block of cherry wood into a beautiful spoon, and teach you about the history and techniques of this ancient school of woodcarving. The exact course schedule is subject to change, and guests must be aged 12 or over.



Once you've carved your masterpiece, you'll be driven to your accommodation for the evening, an annexe at the workshop, to settle in. Tonight's meal is served at a restaurant attached to the workshop. You'll enjoy appetisers, smoked platters, and meat, fish and vegetarian dishes prepared with locally-sourced seasonal ingredients. Please remember to book in advance.



Day 8: Scaling the Japanese Alps

Today is an adventure through the high points and vistas of the snowy Japanese Alps, a huge mountain range that bisects the mainland.

After breakfast, you'll drive to Tateyama and board the steep Tateyama Ropeway, climbing 500m in just seven minutes. You'll pause to take in the breathtaking view from the station and then continue your journey upwards with a bus to Murodo, which, at 2,450m above sea level, is the highest point on the Tateyama Alpine Route.

The main attraction here is the stunning Snow Corridor, a road flanked with walls of snow that can reach 20m high. This is only open for two months each year before the snow closes back in. You'll walk the length of the trail to its highest point, enclosed on both sides by towering sheets of snow.



TRAVEL ITINERARY

After a bite to eat, your journey continues onto Bijo-daira, an alpine plain that's home to virgin forests and 60 species of wild bird. You'll then board the Tateyama Cable Car and drive on to Kanazawa, where you'll pick up your rental car before checking into your hotel for the evening, the four-star ANA Crowne Plaza Hotel Kanazawa.



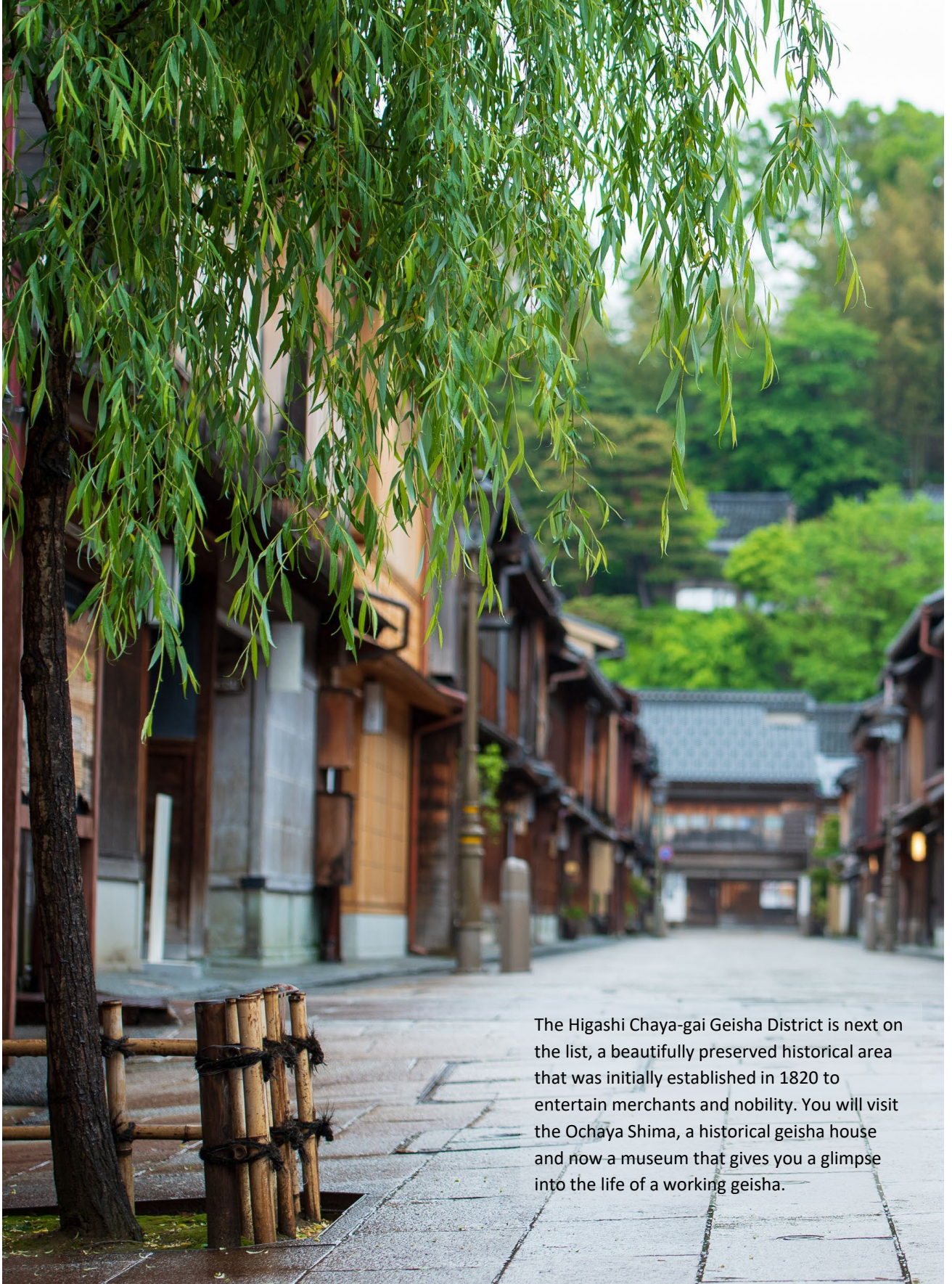
Lunch and dinner are both up to you today, but there are plenty of local delicacies on offer. Why not try *jibun*, a duck hotpot with seasonal vegetables or *gori karaage*, small fish fried in tempura batter?

Day 9: Magnificent Kanazawa

On this tour you will visit gorgeously preserved historic towns on practically every day – but Kanazawa is something else! This city on the north coast is one of the crown jewels of Japan, and once you've had an early hotel breakfast, a driver will whisk you away for half a day exploring its streets.

The day begins at Kenroku-en, officially one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan. Its name means “the Garden of the Six Sublimities”: spaciousness, seclusion, artificiality, antiquity, abundant water and broad views, which according to Chinese landscape theory are the six essential attributes that make up a perfect garden. You'll observe each of these as you walk past countless water features, bridges, teahouses, viewpoints, flowers, and trees in blossom.





The Higashi Chaya-gai Geisha District is next on the list, a beautifully preserved historical area that was initially established in 1820 to entertain merchants and nobility. You will visit the Ochaya Shima, a historical geisha house and now a museum that gives you a glimpse into the life of a working geisha.

TRAVEL ITINERARY



You'll visit Omicho Market, a bustling space with over 200 stalls selling crafts, home goods and fresh seafood, before finishing your morning's sightseeing at the Nagamachi Samurai District. This is a parade of stately samurai homes, which housed important families from the hereditary military nobility of early-modern Japan.

For lunch, we will take you to a famed local sushi restaurant with a delicious 10-piece set. The afternoon is yours to keep exploring; perhaps you'll want to visit the famous gold-leaf workshops, or even try a gold leaf ice cream as a decadent snack!

For dinner, we recommend returning to Omicho Market for the delicious fresh fish, but by this point, you'll be quite the expert in Japanese cuisine, so whatever you pick is up to you!

TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 10: The Mindful Serenity of Nature



Today you'll be immersed into entirely new landscapes away from civilisation, to find wild seas and Zen temples.

Get a good breakfast at the hotel before your drive to Tojinbo on the coast of the Sea of Japan. These are a series of spectacular basalt cliffs, in a rare columnar geological formation that can only be found in two other places in the world. There are trails and stairways carved through the cliffs, where you can explore right up to the unmarked edges. Be careful, for according to legend, the cliffs are named after a monk who lacked caution and fell to his untimely death!

You have the option to view the cliffs by boat, with a short trip around the bay to take in the full scale of the scenery.



TRAVEL ITINERARY



Your next stop is Eihei-ji Temple, “the Temple of Eternal Peace”. It was founded in 1244 as a centre for ordained Zen monks, and it remains an active monastery today, where visitors can observe the monks go about their daily routines. Take your time exploring this calming and historic complex, which comprises more than 70 halls and towers joined together by covered walkways (to shelter the monks during snowy winters) and surrounded by cedar trees that are almost 700 years old. There’s much history here, as you’d expect from one of the most crucial temples in all Japanese Buddhism.



Drive onwards to your stay for the night, Onoue Onsen Ryokan Beniayu. It’s a traditional *ryokan*, and you’ll enjoy a hearty *shabu-shabu* hotpot for dinner, a simmering broth containing thinly sliced beef and vegetables cooked at the table. Retire to your room for a soak in the semi-open-air bath before bed.

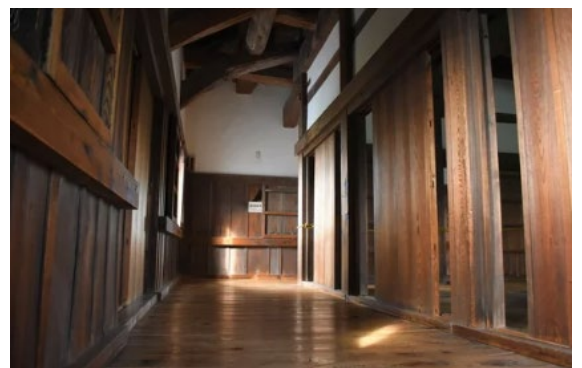


TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 11: Healing Mind and Body

After a traditional breakfast at your ryokan, you'll make your way to Hikone Castle, a hilltop fort that celebrates its 400-year anniversary in 2022. It has survived the intervening years almost intact, and the majority of the buildings are unchanged since the 17th century.

It has one of only five castle keeps designated as a Japanese National Treasure, due to its unique combination of different architectural styles. Look out for the wooden bridge that was designed to be destroyed in the event of an attack, and listen for the large bell that is still rung to tell the time.



TRAVEL ITINERARY

Next you'll board a hand-paddled boat for a tour along the waterways of Lake Biwako, drifting through the reeds and fields in the quiet, but for the sound of the oars hitting water. In spring, the cherry blossom falls lightly from the trees lining the banks into the water, truly a place to unwind and observe some of Japan's most beautiful scenery.

Once you disembark, you'll head to your next hotel, the luxury VISON, which sits within a brand-new spa complex built to the concept of connecting body, mind and soul with the natural environment. There are numerous organic cafes and restaurants to choose from for dinner, and afterwards you can optionally experience one of 72 different herb-scented outdoor and indoor baths at their expansive spa.

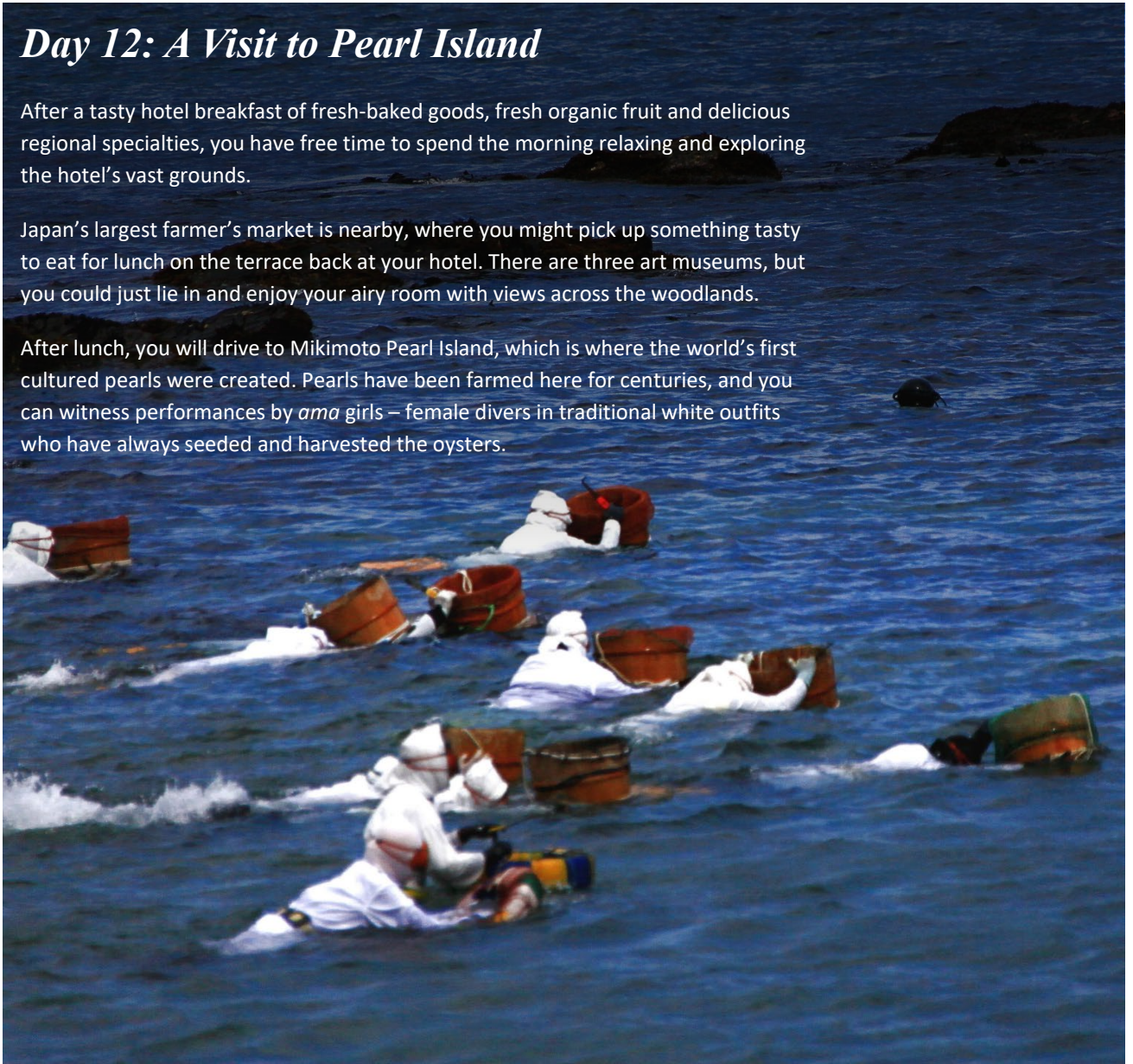


Day 12: A Visit to Pearl Island

After a tasty hotel breakfast of fresh-baked goods, fresh organic fruit and delicious regional specialties, you have free time to spend the morning relaxing and exploring the hotel's vast grounds.

Japan's largest farmer's market is nearby, where you might pick up something tasty to eat for lunch on the terrace back at your hotel. There are three art museums, but you could just lie in and enjoy your airy room with views across the woodlands.

After lunch, you will drive to Mikimoto Pearl Island, which is where the world's first cultured pearls were created. Pearls have been farmed here for centuries, and you can witness performances by *ama* girls – female divers in traditional white outfits who have always seeded and harvested the oysters.



The island's museum houses exquisite antique jewellery and works of art, and there's a shop where you can buy your own pearls as a gift or memento.

You'll end your day at Toba Hotel International, a four-star hotel overlooking the bay. Dinner will be served at the hotel, where you'll enjoy a set menu crafted from local ingredients and flavours, before retiring to your spacious ocean-view room to spend the night.



Day 13: The Home of the Ninja



Today holds adventures galore; after an early breakfast you head straight to Iga Ueno Castle, which sits high up in the secluded mountain town of Iga on stone walls 30 metres high, higher than any other in the country. This mountain fastness has been painstakingly reconstructed using wood instead of stone, returning it to how it looked in the 16th century.

Iga is the ancestral home of the ninja, a real-life clan of acrobatic spies whose exploits have become legendary the world over. You can learn all about them at the Iga Ninja Museum – including the hidden traps and tricks of a Ninja house, with escape routes and secret weapons in case of attack. The museum contains over 400 real tools once used by the ninja, including *shuriken* – throwing stars – and other deadly devices. And don't miss the show, where trained professionals demonstrate how the ninja used their swords, *shuriken* and *kusarigama* (an axe on a chain).



TRAVEL ITINERARY

Pick up lunch en route to your next destination, the Gozaisho Ropeway, a 15-minute cable car that provides views over Gozaisho Mountain Park. From the observatory you'll see unusual rock formations, such as the precariously balanced Jizou-iwa, a rock that sits on a corner between vast natural columns – it never falls despite Japan's history of earthquakes, and its tenacity gives good luck to those who pray for success in exams.

At the summit there's a restaurant, a museum and a souvenir shop, and you should take a turn around the park to admire the scenery.

Once you've returned to the base of the cable car, you'll drive to the rental car shop in Nagoya Nishiki, in order to complete the return of your vehicle. There is an interpretation service available through the reservation centre if required. The three-star Meitetsu Grand Hotel is just a short walk away, and once you've helped yourself to dinner, you can relax into a good night's sleep. You'll need it, because tomorrow you're headed to the centre of it all – Japan's sprawling capital city of Tokyo.



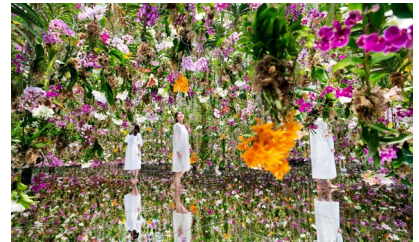
TRAVEL ITINERARY

Day 14: The Dazzling Metropolis

After an early breakfast you'll board the super-fast Bullet Train to Tokyo, where an English-speaking guide will meet you on the platform and escort you to Tsukiji Outer Market by private car. They will help you explore the market as it's one of the best places in all of Japan to enjoy fresh seafood, and a local's eye will help you make the right choices when settling on something truly special for lunch.



You'll then head to teamLab Planets TOKYO, a totally unique, once-in-a-lifetime immersive art experience, where you walk through and become part of the art. No shoes are allowed in the gallery, and you'll at times find yourself wading through water that's knee deep, standing in rooms that feel infinite.



teamLab, Floating Flower Garden; Flowers and I are of the Same Root, the garden and I are One © teamLab

From the fantastical to the traditional, Senso-ji is Tokyo's oldest temple, and it's your next stop. It was built in 645 after a local legend about a statue of the Bodhisattva Kannon that kept returning, and it remains one of Japan's most popular temples. To reach it, you'll have to walk along the Nakamise shopping street, a parade of decorated kiosks where locals sell traditional snacks and souvenirs.



It's then time for a coffee break at Owl Cafe OZ, where you'll enjoy refreshment under the watchful eye of the friendly resident owls before heading onwards to check into your hotel, the four-star Shinagawa Prince Hotel Main Tower, which reaches nearly 40 storeys into the sky.

All of Tokyo is yours for the exploring tonight, and you'll be seeking out your own dinner in this great culinary capital of the world. Perhaps try *tsukemen*, dipping noodles, or *monjayaki*, a pan-fried batter which is Tokyo's answer to *okonomiyaki*. You might want to end your night at some of Tokyo's world-famous bars, but if not, your hotel room awaits.

Day 15: Getting to Know Tokyo



Today you can explore Tokyo to your heart's content, as this is a free day to fill with activities of your own choosing.

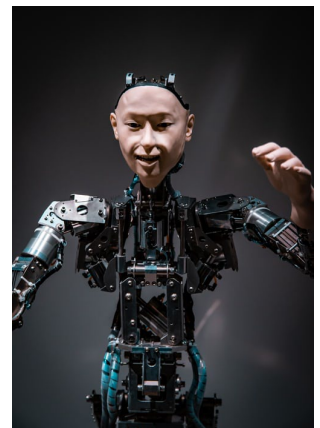
You could try the Sakurai Tea Experience, a tea-tasting session in a stunning minimalist ryokan, or the Yayoi Kusama Museum, where you can see this famous modern conceptual artist's signature spotty artwork in all its glory.

Golden Gai is a tangle of narrow streets filled with dive bars, some with just a handful of seats, promising authentic drinking experiences. Its foodie equivalent is Omoide Yokochō, a lane filled with 60 or so hole-in-the-wall restaurants each serving a small number of customers. Pull up a chair and get comfortable with where you leave your menu in the hands of your chefs, as you are served a continuous stream of mouth-watering skewers of chicken, pork and vegetables.



No visit to Tokyo is complete without a stop at the famous Shibuya Crossing, the world's busiest intersection. Get there at dusk rush hour to see it in all its glory. Shibuya and Ginza are incredible shopping districts for designer labels and electronics, while the cutting edge of Japanese fashion can be found in Harajuku. For a different mood, the Oedo Antique Market is a wonderful place to find older artefacts.

Then there are galleries, museums, temples, shrines and the majesty of the Imperial Palace. There's so much to do here, and once you've tired yourself out from the sightseeing highlights, find a suitably special restaurant for dinner and head to bed for the last time on your trip to Japan.



Day 16: Day Sixteen: Sayonara Japan

Today you bid farewell to Japan after an early breakfast. You'll walk to Shinagawa Station and catch the Airport Express to Haneda Airport, where you'll catch the morning flight back to London Heathrow.

TOUR DETAILS

Tour fees:

- Two passengers: From ¥ 522,200 per person
- Three passengers: From ¥ 472,200 per person
- Single supplement: Please enquire

Based on a 28th of April 2023 departure

Included:

- Board: 14 nights at three or four-star hotels, guest houses or ryokan
- Meals: 14 hotel breakfasts, one lunch, six dinners
- Bullet Train tickets: One journey in reserved second-class seats (Nagoya to Tokyo)
- Train ticket: One journey from Kanazawa to Kyoto, in a standard seat (reserved)
- English-speaking assistant: Per itinerary (including tip and allowance)
- English-speaking guide: Per itinerary (including tip and allowance)
- Chartered taxi: With non-English-speaking driver
- Private car: Per itinerary
- Transport: TOICA card with ¥2,000 pre-loaded, Me-guru Bus ticket ¥500

Excluded:

- International and domestic flights
- Entrance and activity fees: Per itinerary
- Rental car parking fees
- Local transport: Bus, Ropeway, Boat and train, all per itinerary
- Drinks
- Certain meals, per itinerary
- Personal expenses
- Any other items not mentioned in the itinerary
- Entrance tickets
- Car rental
- Bike hire