

Best of Japan in 14 days

Day 1 and 2 – Tokyo:

Spend three nights in Tokyo.

Tokyo (東京, Tōkyō) is Japan's capital and the world's most populous metropolis. It is also one of Japan's 47 prefectures, consisting of 23 central city wards and multiple cities, towns and villages west of the city center. The Izu and Ogasawara Islands are also part of Tokyo.

Prior to 1868, Tokyo was known as Edo. Previously a small castle town, Edo became Japan's political center in 1603 when Tokugawa Ieyasu established his feudal government there. A few decades later, Edo had grown into one of the world's largest cities. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the emperor and capital moved from Kyoto to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo ("Eastern Capital"). Large parts of Tokyo were destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the air raids of 1945.

Today, Tokyo offers a seemingly unlimited choice of shopping, entertainment, culture and dining to its visitors. The city's history can be appreciated in districts such as Asakusa and in many excellent museums, historic temples and gardens. Contrary to common perception, Tokyo also offers a number of attractive green spaces in the city center and within relatively short train rides at its outskirts.

Consider this Tokyo itinerary:

Suggested full-day schedules:

Western Tokyo Full Day

This itinerary takes you on a full day walking tour of Tokyo's popular western districts. Starting at the tranquil grounds of Meiji Shrine, the plan moves on to explore urban Shinjuku, Shibuya and Harajuku, some of the city's most popular shopping and entertainment districts and centers of Japan's youth culture and fashion.

Asakusa and Odaiba Full Day

This itinerary combines a trip to the historic Asakusa district, including Sensoji Temple and its narrow shopping streets with a visit to the modern malls and museums on Odaiba. The plan utilizes the Tokyo Water Bus and Yurikamome elevated train to travel between the two districts and stops off at Hama Rikyu garden along the way.

Hama Rikyu (浜離宮, Hama Rikyū), is a large, attractive landscape garden in central Tokyo. Located alongside Tokyo Bay, Hama Rikyu features seawater ponds which change level with the tides, and a teahouse on an island where visitors can rest and enjoy the scenery. The traditionally styled garden stands in stark contrast to the skyscrapers of the adjacent Shiodome district.

The garden has served many purposes over the centuries. It was originally built as a feudal lord's Tokyo residence and duck hunting grounds during the Edo Period (1603-1867), but later served as a strolling garden and as an imperial detached palace before eventually being opened to the public in its current form. Vestiges of these old roles are still visible throughout the garden including several reconstructed duck hunting blinds and the remains of an old moat and reconstructed rock wall.

Hama Rikyu is attractive in any season. Although not as famous for its fall foliage as some of the other gardens around Tokyo, it offers plenty of maple, ginkgo and other trees that show their beautiful autumn colors between late November and early December.

Late February brings plum blossoms, while the spring cherry blossom season from late March to early April is also nice but somewhat subdued compared to other hanami spots in the city. Several other species of flowers bloom in spring including fields of peony and canola blossoms.

Hama Rikyu is a 10-15 minute walk from JR Shimbashi Station or a 5-10 minute walk from Shiodome Station on the Oedo Subway Line and the Yurikamome elevated train.

Hama Rikyu can also be accessed from Asakusa by a small number of Tokyo Water Buses (35 minutes, 1180 yen one way including admission into the garden), but note that the water buses do not stop at Hama Rikyu in the opposite direction, and that it is currently not possible to board boats at Hama Rikyu. It is only possible to get off.

Suggested half-day schedules:

Shinjuku Half Day

This half day itinerary explores the sites around Shinjuku Station, the busiest train station in the world, which is surrounded by one of Tokyo's most popular shopping and entertainment districts. Included in the plan are Shinjuku Gyoen, the modern skyscraper district of western Shinjuku and the observation decks of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office with plenty of opportunities for shopping and a large variety of restaurants along the way.

Asakusa Half Day

Basically the first half of our Asakusa and Odaiba full day itinerary, this plan explores the narrow shopping lanes and entertainment streets around Sensoji Temple in the historic Asakusa district.

Imperial Palace and Ginza Half Day

This itinerary explores the areas surrounding Tokyo Station. It combines a visit to the spacious grounds of the Tokyo Imperial Palace with a trip to Tokyo's famed Ginza shopping district.

Shinagawa Half Day

This walk leads through the old-fashioned streets of Shinagawa's former post town, along promenades of Tokyo's reclaimed waterfront districts and around arty Tennozu Isle.

Day 3: Side trip to Nikko:

In a side trip from Tokyo, visit Nikko, home to Toshogu, Japan's most lavishly decorated shrine and the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate.

Day 4: Tokyo to Hakone:

Travel to Hakone and spend the night there. The area is known for its hot springs, museums and the view of nearby Mt. Fuji.

Day 5-7: Trip to Kyoto:

At least two full days are needed to get a taste of Kyoto; however, the city is extremely rich in history and culture, and you could easily spend a week exploring Japan's ancient capital and not run out of first-class attractions to visit.

Suggested full-day schedules:

Eastern Kyoto Full Day

A full day exploration of Kyoto's eastern hills, this walking itinerary includes many of the city's most popular temples and shrines including Kiyomizudera, Ginkakuji, Yasaka Shrine, Heian Shrine and Nanzenji. The route also leads through the narrow streets of the Higashiyama District and along the Philosopher's Path.

Arashiyama Full Day

This full day itinerary includes the major sites in Arashiyama, such as Tenryuji Temple, the bamboo groves and the monkey park, in addition to the quiet streets and small temples in the quaint, rural district north of Arashiyama. Best done by rental bicycle.

Suggested half-day schedules:

Higashiyama Half Day

Essentially the southern half of our Eastern Kyoto Full Day itinerary, this half day plan covers the most popular temples of the Higashiyama District plus the popular Gion entertainment district. This is one of our most highly recommended itineraries for first-time visitors to Kyoto.

Philosopher's Path Half Day

This is basically the northern half of our Eastern Kyoto Full Day itinerary. It leads along the Philosopher's Path and makes stops at Ginkakuji, Nanzenji Temple and Heian Shrine along the way to Gion.

Arashiyama Half Day

This walking tour is a shortened version of our full day plan and sticks to the main attractions around central Arashiyama including Tenryuji Temple, the bamboo groves and the monkey park.

Northern Kyoto Half Day

Recommended for first-time visitors, this plan covers some of the city's most iconic attractions including the Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) and Ryoanji with its world famous Zen garden.

Day 8: Side trip to Nara:

On a side trip from Kyoto, visit Nara, home of Japan's first permanent capital. Visit some of the oldest and largest temples in Japan and feed the deer that roam freely in the city.

Japan's first permanent capital was established in the year 710 at Heijō, the city now known as Nara (奈良). Prior to that, the capital was moved to a new location whenever a new emperor ascended to the throne.

However, as the influence and political ambitions of the city's powerful Buddhist monasteries grew to become a serious threat to the government, the capital was moved away from Nara to Nagaoka in 784 and a few years later to Kyoto.

Nara is located less than one hour from Kyoto and Osaka. Due to its historical importance, the city remains full of cultural treasures, including some of Japan's oldest and largest temples.

Day 9 - Kyoto to Miyajima via Himeji

Take the shinkansen from Kyoto to Miyajima and visit Himeji Castle along the way. Overnight at one of the ryokan on Miyajima.

Day 10 - Miyajima to Kanazawa via Hiroshima

Take the ferry back to Hiroshima and see the city's sights. Continue on to Kanazawa and spend two nights there.

Day 11 - Kanazawa

Spend a full day in Kanazawa and visit Kenrokuen, one of Japan's best landscape gardens and the city's other attractions.

Kenrokuen Garden:

Kenrokuen (兼六園) in Kanazawa is justifiably ranked as one of Japan's "three most beautiful gardens" alongside Mito's Kairakuen and Okayama's Korakuen. The spacious grounds used to be the outer garden of Kanazawa Castle and were constructed by the ruling Maeda family over a period of nearly two centuries. Opened to the public in 1871, Kenrokuen features a variety of flowering trees which provide the garden with a different look every season.

The name Kenrokuen literally means "Garden of the six sublimities", referring to 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. A stroll around Kenrokuen will help with understanding this landscape theory as the grounds are teeming with water features, bridges, teahouses, trees, flowers, stones, viewpoints and hidden nooks.

Water is diverted from a distant river by a sophisticated water system constructed in 1632 to feed Kenrokuen's various streams and ponds including the two main ponds in the garden, Kasumigaike and Hisagoike. The over two-meter tall Kotojitoro Lantern, uniquely built with two legs instead of one, stands at the northern bank of Kasumigaike Pond and is an iconic symbol of Kenrokuen. In

addition, a fountain below Kasumigaike Pond is one of Japan's oldest, and is powered by the drop in elevation from the pond which causes water to shoot out 3.5 meters high. Meanwhile, nearby Hisagoike Pond features a small waterfall.

In spring, visitors can see plum blossoms in the southern end of the garden as they bloom around mid February to the end March, just before the cherry blossom season begins. Cherry trees, which usually bloom around Kenrokuen around mid April, can be found along the streams through the northeastern side of the garden. There are also other varieties of flowers that grow in the garden during the warmer summer months when visitors can expect to see a lot of greenery as well.

In autumn you can see fall colors, which are mainly provided by the cherry and maple trees and usually change colors from around mid November to early December. The orange and red maples are mostly found near Yamazakiyama on the garden's eastern side near the Kodatsuno Gate. In the same general area, visitors will find a large bronze statue of a legendary prince, called the Meiji Monument. The statue is dedicated to the soldiers who died in the Seinan War, a civil war that followed the Meiji Restoration.

While there is far less foliage in winter, freshly fallen snow gives the garden a different, attractive seasonal look. Many of the garden's large pine trees feature traditional winter protections to prevent damage by snow. Of special note is the Karasaki Pine, one of the garden's most prominent trees. Planted from seed, it now stands tall next to Kasumigaike Pond with some of its branches extending far over the pond's surface.

Some walking trails in the park lead to higher ground from where visitors can have an overview of the garden. There are also teahouses in the garden where visitors can drink tea and eat traditional Japanese sweets while looking at the scenery. Finally, a pleasant pedestrian way lined with cherry trees, shops and restaurants lies just outside of the garden's paid area, between the Katsurazaka and Renchimon gates. The street is a particularly beautiful rest spot in spring when the cherry blossoms are in bloom.

Day 12 - Kanazawa to Shirakawago

Travel to Shirakawago, see the nice village and stay overnight at a gassho-zukuri farmhouse.

Day 13 - Shirakawago to Takayama

Head to the beautifully preserved old town of Takayama in Gifu Prefecture.

The Shirakawa-go (白川郷, Shirakawagō) and neighboring Gokayama (五箇山) regions line the Shogawa River Valley in the remote mountains that span from Gifu to Toyama Prefectures. Declared a UNESCO world heritage site in 1995, they are famous for their traditional gassho-zukuri farmhouses, some of which are more than 250 years old.

Gassho-zukuri means "constructed like hands in prayer", as the farmhouses' steep thatched roofs resemble the hands of Buddhist monks pressed together in prayer. The architectural style developed over many generations and is designed to withstand the large amounts of heavy snow that falls in the region during winter. The roofs, made without nails, provided a large attic space used for cultivating silkworms.

Ogimachi, Shirakawa-go's largest village and main attraction, makes a good day trip from Takayama, or a stop on the bus journey between Takayama and Kanazawa. The best way to experience the town, however, is to stay overnight at one of the farmhouses, many of which now serve as minshuku.

Gokayama is a little more difficult to access and requires a change of buses in Ogimachi. Less developed and less crowded than Shirakawa-go, its villages are smaller, more intimate and with less intrusion from modern buildings. Gokayama's nicest villages are Suganuma and Ainokura.

Day 14 - Takayama to Tokyo

See more of Takayama before returning to Tokyo.

Takayama (高山) is a city in the mountainous Hida region of Gifu Prefecture. To differentiate it from other places named Takayama, the city is also commonly referred to as Hida-Takayama. Takayama retains a traditional touch like few other Japanese cities, especially in its beautifully preserved old town. It ranks as a prime candidate among travelers wishing to add a rural element into their itineraries.

Takayama gained importance as a source of high-quality timber and highly skilled carpenters during the feudal ages. For these important resources, the city was put under direct control of the shogun and enjoyed quite a bit of prosperity considering its remote mountain location. The Takayama Festival, held in spring and autumn, is considered one of Japan's best festivals.