SAMURAI TOURS

Adventures in Discovering Traditional Japan

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Best of Hokkaido and Tohoku Self Guided



15 Day/14 Nights

Best of Hokkaido and Tohoku Self Guided

Tour Overview

Experience more of Hokkaido and Tohoku on the Best of Hokkaido and Tohoku Self Guided tour. The northernmost of the main islands, Hokkaido, is Japan’s last frontier. It is a natural wonderland of mountain ranges, deep caldera lakes, active volcanoes, numerous thermally-heated mineral springs, and virgin forests. The attitudes of the inhabitants are akin to those of the pioneers of the American West, but still unmistakably Japanese. Tohoku is the northern part of Honshu, the main island of the Japanese archipelago. It is known as a remote and scenic region, and for its numerous traditional onsens, lakes, mountains, high quality rice, and welcoming people. You will enjoy exploring Tohoku’s rich cultural heritage and history, and the beautiful scenery that it has to offer.

📍 Destinations

Tokyo, Sapporo, Otaru, Noboribetsu Onsen, Hakodate, Aomori, Hiraizumi, Sendai, Matsushima, Yamadera, Aizu-Wakamatsu, Ouchijuku, Kinugawa Onsen, Nikko

Tour Details

Among the Japanese, Hokkaido has become synonymous with sensational food, stunning scenery, and some of the best onsens in Japan.

You will enjoy Sapporo, Hokkaido’s largest city and host to the 1972 Winter Olympics, with its many fine restaurants. You will have the opportunity to explore the morning market of Hakodate where you can try the local specialties of crab, sea urchin, or squid prepared for you. Here you can learn about Hokkaido’s original inhabitants, the Ainu, whose culture almost disappeared until recent efforts of restoration.

Tohoku may share the main island of Honshu, but it is a world apart from the crowded and busy south. The mountain villages are more remote, the forests more untamed, the traditional onsens more secluded, and the people friendlier. Better yet, Samurai history lives on in Aizu Wakamatsu, a castle town with a long Samurai tradition.

You can climb the 1,000 steps to Yamadera, a mountainside temple founded in the 9th century. You will have the opportunity to visit Chusonji, another temple established in the 9th century. Here you can find the Konjikido, built in 1124, and like Kinkakuji (the Golden Pavilion) in Kyoto it is completely covered in gold leaf. You will enjoy the natural beauty of Matsushima, ranked as one of the three most scenic spots in Japan. Lastly, you will visit Nikko, one of the most elaborate shrines in Japan dedicated to the memory of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first of the Tokugawa Shoguns who ruled Japan for more than 250 years.

Tour Highlights

- ✔ The former fishing village of Otaru
- ✔ Sapporo, host of the Winter Olympics
- ✔ Noboribetsu Onsen
- ✔ Aomori, home of the Nebuta Festival
- ✔ Matsushima, one of the 3 most scenic spots in Japan
- ✔ Aizu Wakamatsu with its Samurai history and traditions
- ✔ Nikko, dedicated to Tokugawa Ieyasu
- ✔ Three Separate Rides on Shinkansen (Bullet Train)

Tour Inclusions

- ✔ 14 Day JR Rail Pass
- ✔ Meeting service at the arrival airport
- ✔ Domestic Airfare from Tokyo to Sapporo
- ✔ Baggage transfer from city to city
- ✔ Electronic version of Tour Handbook and Japanese History
- ✔ 8 Hours with a guide
- ✔ SUICA Card Pre-charged with 2500 Yen for the subways in Sapporo and the trains to Nikko
- ✔ Detailed, easy-to-follow directions on how to travel between cities
- ✔ Bi-lingual maps, addresses and phone numbers for all your lodging
- ✔ English-speaking emergency contact number in Japan

Tour Exclusions

- ✖ International airfare is NOT included.
- ✖ A printed itinerary is not included
- ✖ Alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and desserts are NOT included

Map



Tour Destinations

Tokyo

Sapporo

Otaru

Noboribetsu Onsen

Hakodate

Aomori

Hiraizumi

Sendai

Matsushima

Yamadera

Aizu Wakamatsu

Ouchijuku

Kinugawa Onsen

Nikko

Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive in Tokyo

You will be met at Tokyo's Narita Airport by a Samurai Tours meeting staff who will help you board the shuttle bus to the hotel next to the airport. After checking into the hotel, the evening is free. No meals are included.

Travel: 1-15 minutes

Day 2 Fly to Sapporo; Tour Sapporo

After breakfast, you will take the shuttle bus to Narita Airport and fly to Sapporo's New Chitose Airport, and then take a local train into Sapporo, the largest city on Hokkaido and the host of the 1972 Winter Olympics. The evening is free to explore Sapporo. Breakfast at the hotel is included.

Day 3 Tour Sapporo with a guide

After breakfast you will meet with the licensed, English-speaking guide who will escort you around Sapporo. There is no pre-defined itinerary, as the guide will adjust the itinerary based on your preferences and interests. You can visit the JR Sapporo Tower where you will be able to get a bird's eye view of Sapporo, while getting your bearings at the same time. You can tour the Hokkaido Historical Museum where you will discover the rich history of Hokkaido, including Hokkaido's original inhabitants, the Ainu. Here you can discover how the taming of the wilds of Hokkaido was very similar to the settling of the American West. You may wish to explore the Hokkaido Historical Village open air museum where many buildings from around Hokkaido, both modern and traditional, have been relocated. You can tour the original Sapporo Beer brewery, and sample the many freshly-brewed beers, or visit the Sapporo Botanical Garden, established in 1886 by Hokkaido University, and a wonderful place for a picnic lunch. In the garden, you will find a small, preserved virgin forest which shows how Sapporo once looked, as well as a small alpine garden and greenhouse. Or you can time your tour to be in town during the Sapporo Snow Festival! In the evening, you can have dinner at the Sapporo Beer Garden, located next to the original Sapporo Beer brewery, where you can try the local specialty of grilled lamb, cooked yourself at the table. Breakfast at the hotel and lunch with the guide included.

Travel: 3 1/2 Hours

Day 4 Travel to Otaru; Tour Otaru; Return to Sapporo

Today you will take a day trip to Otaru which once served as a major trade and fishing port. You can stroll through the beautiful canal area lined with Meiji period warehouses, and the Sakaimichi street with its Music Box Museum and Glass workshops. The area was restored in the 1980s when the warehouses were transformed into museums, shops, and restaurants. Breakfast at the hotel included.

Travel: 1 1/2 Hoiurs

Day 5 Tour Sapporo; Travel to Noboribetsu Onsen

Before checking out you will transfer your main luggage to Hakodate, and will be traveling to Noboribetsu Onsen and Hakodate with an overnight bag only. The morning is free to enjoy

Sapporo before traveling by express train and bus to Noboribetsu Onsen, one of Japan's most popular onsens. Breakfast at the hotel and dinner at the ryokan are included.

Travel: 2 Hours

Day 6 Tour Noboribetsu Onsen

The day is free to explore the Noboribetsu area. Enjoy the many hot springs or walk around the Jigokudani (Hell Valley) where you will find many steam vents, thermally heated pools, and small geysers. You may also just want to relax and enjoy one of the 17 separate baths at the ryokan! Breakfast and dinner at the ryokan included.

Travel: N/A

Day 7 Travel to Hakodate; Tour Hakodate

After breakfast you will travel to Hakodate. Hakodate was one of the first cities in Japan open to foreigners after the Meiji Restoration. After arriving in Hakodate we suggest visiting the Goryo-Kaku, Japan's first western-style fort. Built in 1864 by the Tokugawa Shogunate in the shape of a five-pointed star, it was designed to trap attackers in a deadly crossfire. You can go to the top of the Goryo-kaku tower next door to the fort, providing a view of the fort and the surrounding city. We also recommend visiting the Moto-machi historic area. Overlooking the western bay at the foot of Mount Hakodate, there are numerous sloping streets lined with 19th century churches, consulates, shops, and homes of the foreigners who first opened this area of Japan to commerce. In the evening, we suggest taking a cable car to the top of Mt. Hakodate where you can enjoy a panoramic view of Hakodate's night lights. You will retrieve your main luggage from the hotel in the evening. Breakfast at the ryokan included.

Travel: 3 Hours

Day 8 Tour Hakodate; Travel to Aomori; Tour Aomori

In the morning you will prepare your luggage to be transferred to Sendai, and will travel to Aomori, Hiraizumi, and Sendai with an overnight bag only. We suggest you begin the day at the Hakodate Morning Market where fresh seafood such as crabs (kani), salmon eggs (ikura), sea urchin (uni), and fresh produce are sold. Many restaurants can be found in the market area, offering fresh seafood breakfasts/lunches, such as uni-ikura domburi. Next you will take an express train and Shinkansen (bullet train) to the city of Aomori in northern Tohoku. Here you can stop at the Nebuta Warasse Museum, dedicated to the city's famous Nebuta Matsuri (Nebuta Festival) held every year in early August. The Nebuta Warasse Museum attempts to capture the spirit of the festival and gives visitors a taste of its lively atmosphere, history, and traditions. We recommend eating lunch at the museum's restaurant that offers many local foods. Breakfast at the hotel included.

Travel: 2 1/2 Hours

Day 9 Travel to Hiraizumi and Tour Hiraizumi Or Tour Sannai Maruyama Archaeological Site; Travel to Sendai

After breakfast you will continue your adventure by taking a Shinkansen (bullet train) and local train to Hiraizumi. During the Heian Period, the Fujiwara family was the most powerful family in Japan after the Imperial family. In 1105, Hiraizumi was chosen as the seat of the northern branch of the Fujiwara family. The city steadily grew in cultural sophistication and political power, and even came to rival Kyoto. However, in 1189, Hiraizumi was destroyed by Minamoto Yoritomo, the man who would go on to become Japan's first Shogun (Yoritomo was looking for his brother and rival Yoshitsune who was given refuge by the Fujiwara family). The city never recovered its former

prominence, but it still has some of the Tohoku region's most historic and cultural properties. Hiraizumi's most famous attraction, Chusonji, was established in 850 as a temple of the Tendai sect of Buddhism. The temple came to prominence in 1105 when the Fujiwara family moved to Hiraizumi. At its peak the temple consisted of a large network of dozens of buildings. With the fall of the Fujiwara at the end of the 12th century, Chusonji likewise suffered so that now only two buildings from that era are left remaining. One of these is the Konjikido. Similar to Kyoto's famous Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion), Konjikido is completely covered in gold. It was built in 1124, and is considered to be so important that it is kept inside a protective building. Konjikido was the first antiquity in Japan designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Konjikido also serves as a mausoleum for three leaders of the 12th century Fujiwara family. The Sannai Maruyama Archaeological Site is the largest and one of the most complete and best preserved Jomon Period (13000-300 BC) villages in Japan. Unearthed by accident while surveying land to build a community baseball field, the former Sannai Maruyama Village once included over 700 structures and dwellings including long houses, storage structures, roads, and trash and burial pits.Later in the afternoon you will travel to Sendai and retrieve your main luggage from the hotel. Breakfast at the hotel included.

Travel: 4 Hours

Day 10 Day Trip to Matsushima

Today you will take a day trip to Matsushima, starting with a local train to Hon-Shiogame Station. From here you can board a boat for a cruise around Matsushima Bay that will eventually take you to Matsushima. For hundreds of years, Matsushima has been celebrated as one of the Japan's three most scenic view along with Miyajima Island and Amanohashidate. Matsushima Bay has more than 200 small islands covered with pine trees, and the best way to see these is by boat. After arriving at Matsushima, we suggest touring Zuiganji. Zuiganji was a former Tendai sect temple founded in 828, but later changed to a Zen temple in the 13th century. After years of decline, Zuiganji was restored to prominence by the feudal lord, Date Masamune, who rebuilt it as his family temple in 1609. You can then visit Godaido which was originally built in 807 and contains five statues which were enshrined there by the same priest who founded Zuiganji. The statues are displayed to the public only once every 33 years, and were last displayed in 2006. The present building is a 1604 reconstruction by Date Masamune. We recommend finishing your day by enjoying tea and sweets at Kanrantei, a Momoyama-style tea house originally built in Kyoto by Toyotomi Hideyoshi who gave it to Date Masamune for his service. Date's son eventually moved it to its current location on a hill overlooking Matsushima Bay. You will return to Sendai by local train. Breakfast at the hotel included.

Travel: 1 1/2 Hours

Day 11 Travel to Yamadera; Tour Yamadera; Travel to Aizu Wakamatsu

Before checking out you will transfer your main luggage to Aizu Wakamatsu, and travel to Yamadera and Aizu Wakamatsu with an overnight bag only. You will start the day by traveling to Yamadera, a scenic temple located in the mountains northeast of Yamagata City. The temple grounds extend high up a steep mountainside (the name Yamadera literally translates to "mountain temple") from where there are scenic views overlooking the valley below. The temple was created over a thousand years ago in 860 as a temple of the Tendai sect. Later in the afternoon you will travel to Aizu-Wakamatsu. Aizu Wakamatsu is a former castle town with a long Samurai tradition. Breakfast at the hotel included.

PLEASE NOTE: There are between 800 to 1,000 steps at Yamadera. If you are not able to climb this many steps, there are many shops near the temple.

Travel: 4 1/2 Hours

Day 12 Tour Aizu Wakamatsu

Today is a free day in Aizu Wakamatsu. We recommend exploring the city by the local city loop bus, starting at the Tsuruga Castle. Tusruga Castle was originally built in 1384. However, it was destroyed after the Boshin War of 1868, a rebellion against the newly formed Meiji government by Samurai still loyal to the Tokugawa Shogunate. Tsuruga Castle was one of the last strongholds of the Boshin War. The castle was rebuilt as a concrete reconstruction in the 1960s. In renovation works completed in 2011, the colors of the roof tiles were changed from grey to the original red tiles. The inside of the castle houses a museum with displays about the history of the castle and the Samurai lifestyle. Next, we recommend vising the Suehiro Brewery. It is one of the largest and most famous sake producers in Tohoku. Founded in 1850, it has been a family-owned business for eight generations. Suehiro's sake is famous throughout Japan and annually wins domestic and international awards. Suehiro Brewery is the official sake supplier of Toshogu Shrine in Nikko and some sumo and kabuki events, and has been featured in a number of movies and TV dramas. Suehiro Brewery is open to visitors and offers hourly guided tours. The tour includes a walk through the brewing areas with explanations of the sake making process, a small museum with displays of the brewery's history and the history of sake making, and a visit to the factory store with a tasting bar where you can sample from and buy nearly their entire product line. At the end of the tour you can stop at the cafe that features original deserts which incorporate sake in their recipes, developed by the owner's wife. The sake jelly and sake infused cakes are refreshing and recommended. We suggest ending the day at Iimoriyama. After the fall of the shogunate in 1867, forces still loyal to the shogun were concentrated in Tokoku. They attempted to resist the new government, but suffered a decisive defeat of Tsuruga Castle in 1868. Looking out from Iimoriyama Hill, a group of young soldiers called the Byakkotai (White Tiger Corps) saw their castle engulfed in flames and committed seppuku (more commonly know as hara-kiri). The twenty soldiers, aged 14 to 16, had made a grave error. The castle had not actually been taken. The flames they had seen were from outside the castle walls. Nevertheless, the story of their loyalty and devotion has become well known in Japan, and numerous movie and manga adaptations have been made about them. You will retrieve your main luggage when you return to the ryokan. Breakfast at the ryokan included.

Travel: N/A

Day 13 Travel to Ouchijuku; Tour Ouchijuku; Travel to Kinugawa Onsen

Before leaving for the day you will transfer your main luggage to Tokyo, and will travel to Ouchijuku, Kinugawa Onsen, and Nikko with an overnight bag only. After breakfast you will travel by local train to Ouchijuku. Ouchijuku is a former post town along the Aizu-Nisei Kaito trade route, which connected Aizu with Nikko during the Edo Period. Restrictions set by the shogunate required travelers to make their long journeys on foot, and as a result post towns developed along the route to provide travelers with food, accommodations, and rest. Ouchijuku has since been restored to look as it did in the Edo Period with telephone and electrical wires buried. The unpaved main street is lined with thick thatched roof buildings which house shops, restaurants, and inns. You will continue on by express train to Kinugawa Onsen where you will stay overnight. Breakfast at the ryokan included.

Travel: 3 1/2 Hours

Day 14 Travel to Nikko; Tour Nikko; Travel to Tokyo

After breakfast you will travel by local trains to Nikko. In the past, Nikko was the center of Shinto and Buddhist mountain worship for many centuries before Toshogu Shrine was built in the early Edo Period. Toshogu Shrine is the final resting place of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled Japan for over 250 years between the years of 1603 and 1868. The lavishly decorated shrine complex consists of more than a dozen buildings set in a beautiful forest. Countless wood carvings and large amounts of gold leaf were used to decorate the

buildings in a way not seen elsewhere in Japan where simplicity has been stressed in shrine architecture. In addition to touring Toshogu Shrine, we also recommend touring Rinnoji and Taiyuinbyo. Rinnoji is Nikko's most important temple, and was founded by Shodo Shonan, the Buddhist monk who introduced Buddhism to Nikko in the 8th century. The temple's main building houses 3 large gold lacquered wooden statues of Amida, Senju-Kannon (Kannon with a thousand arms), and Bato Kannon (Kannon with a horse head). The three statues are regarded as Buddhist manifestations of Nikko's three Shinto mountain deities which are enshrined at the nearby Futarasan Shrine. Taiyuinbyo is the mausoleum of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, the grandson of Ieyasu. Iemitsu's lavish mausoleum complex resembles Toshogu Shrine in its layout and architecture, but it was intentionally built somewhat more modestly than Toshogu due to Iemitsu's deep respect for his grandfather. Later in the afternoon you will travel by local train and Shinkansen to Tokyo where you will spend your last night. You will retrieve your main luggage after checking into the hotel. Breakfast at the ryokan included.

Travel: 2 1/2 Hours

Day 15 Return Home

It's time to say "sayonara" (goodbye) to Japan. You will take the express train to Narita Airport for your flight back home. Breakfast at the hotel included.

Travel: 1 1/2 Hours

Dates & Pricing

Low Season-
$4,274.00 (per person, based on double occupancy)
January 6 – February 28
June 16 – August 10
August 19 – August 31
November 16 – December 24

Regular Season-
$4,541.00 (per person, based on double occupancy)

March 1 – March 16
May 7 – June 15
September 1 – October 14

Peak Season-
$4,809.00 (per person, based on double occupancy)
March 17 – May 6 (Cherry Blossom & Golden Week)
August 11 – August 18 (Obon Holiday)
October 15 – November 15 (Fall Foliage)
December 25 – January 5 (New Years)

Add-On Tours

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Inclusions

- Accommodations in 3 Star hotels including all taxes, fees and breakfast every morning (contact us about accommodation upgrades)
  - Narita: Western-styel hotel such as Hotel Mystays Premier Narita
  - Sapporo: Western-style hotel such as Keio Plaza Hotel Sapporo
  - Noboribetsu Onsen: Japanese-style ryokan such as Daiichi Takimotokan
  - Hakodate: Western-style hotel such as Route Inn Grantia Hakodate Station
  - Aomori: Western-style hotel such as Hotel Sunroute Aomori
  - Sendai: Western-style hotel such as Garden Palace Sendai
  - Aizu Wakamatsu: Japanese-style ryokan such as Aizu Higashiyama Onsen Mukaitaki
  - Kinugawa Onsen: Japanese-style ryokan such as Kinugawa Onsen Hotel
  - Tokyo: Western-style hotel such as Shinagawa Prince Hotel

- Detailed, easy-to-follow directions on how to travel between cities
- Bi-lingual maps, addresses and phone numbers for all your lodging
- 14 Day Ordinary Car JR Rail Pass
- English-speaking emergency contact number in Japan
- Meeting service at the airport (only available for NRT arrivals)
- Airport transfers
- Full Day Tour with a licensed, English-speaking guide
- Suggested train schedules including train schedules for 2 hours prior and 2 hours after the suggested time to allow you to choose your own times
- Flight from NRT to Sapporo
- SUICA Card pre-loaded with 2,500 Yen for local trains and subways, and for the trains to Nikko
- Breakfast every day
- Electronic version of itinerary
- A copy of our “Gaijin on Getas” tour handbook (this is the same popular handbook our escorted tour members receive) which contains 180 pages of Japan travel tips, Japanese language tips, Japanese customs and etiquette and Japanese history to prepare you properly for your trip and allow you to enjoy Japan even more after you arrive
- Baggage transfer forms (we will provide the necessary forms in Japanese to transfer your main baggage ahead, allowing you the freedom of traveling light. The actual transfer fees are not included and will be paid by you at the time of transfer. These fees normally run between 1,250 Yen and 2,500 Yen)

What’s Not Included

- Airfare to/from Japan is not included
- Local transportation (subways, buses, taxis, etc.)
- All admission fees
- Lunches and dinners (except where noted)
- Desserts at any included meals (except where noted)
- Drinks other than water and tea at any included meals (except where noted)
- A printed itinerary is not included

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