

Japan Winter Highlights: Winter Festivals, Kawazu Cherry Blossoms & Snow Monkeys 2017 - 2/9

Experience Japan's best winter attractions

Tour Code: GTD2032437

Tour Information

Land cost: from USD \$7498

Single supplement: USD \$1600

Tour duration: 21 days 20 nights

Destination:

*Sapporo / Otaru / Shiraoi / Noboribetsu / Lake Toya /
 Hakodate / Seikan Tunnel / Aomori / Hirosaki / Towada /
 Kakunodate / Yokote / Hiraizumi / Matsushima / Zao //
 Aizu / Nikko / Omiya / Tokyo / Hakone / Kawazu / Lake
 Kawaguchi / Matsumoto / Yudanaka / Takayama /
 Shirakawa-go / Kanazawa / Kyoto / Uji / Nara / Osaka /
 Himeji / Kurashiki / Hiroshima / Shimanami Kaido /
 Oobokeyo Gorge / Kotohira / Takamatsu / Kobe*

Tour cost includes:

- 16 nights Western style and 4 nights Japanese style accommodation
- Meet and greet upon arrival at Chitose Airport
- Airport transfers on arrival and departure
- Private coach transfers between destinations in Japan
- Comprehensive escorted with AJT professional English speaking tour guide
- Gratuities

Meals

- Breakfast everyday
- 15 lunches and 9 dinners

Admission fees and activities

- All entry fees to sites, activities listed in the itinerary

Dates & Price

2017

Start Date	End Date	Twin / Triple	Start City	End City	Style	Status
Thu. Feb 9, 2017	Wed. Mar 1, 2017	USD \$7498.00	Sapporo	Osaka	Deluxe	View Tour

Itinerary

Tour Code: GTD2032437

Day 1 Chitose Airport

Welcome to Sapporo! An AJT representative will meet you at the arrival gate and direct you to the hotel.

Hotel:

ANA Crowne Plaza Hotel Chitose or similar class

NOTE 1: The meet and greet is ONLY available for flights arriving after 11:00 AM.

Day 2 Sapporo (Mt. Okura Observatory / Historic Village of Hokkaido), Otaru (Glass Workshops / Music Box Museum / Otaru Snow Light Path)

Let's start of the day with a breathtaking scenery at the Mt. Okura Observatory. The 90-meter ski jump portion of the Winter Olympics 1972 was held in the Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium. Taking a chair lift to the Okurayama Observatory at the top of the hill, then experiencing a breathtaking view of Sapporo's best views from above. From there, we go into the Historic Village of Hokkaido where horse-drawn carriages and trolleys are still seen and used. The village offers insight on its history and an open-air museum as well as through their buildings, which exemplify architectural evolution from the Meiji and Taisho eras into the modern age. From there, we travel into the romantic and nostalgic town known as Otaru. The warehouses that were onced used for storage spaces are now stores, resturants, and museums. Once there, we will go to the glass workshops and see the great designs and fine figures. Next, the Otaru Music Box Museum where a collection of music boxes of all shapes, sizes, and sounds are seen all around. Finally, we stroll around the Otaru Snow Light Path where candle lights illuminate the snowy surrounding, making the atmosphere a pleasant one for even the coldest of hearts.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

ANA Hotel Sapporo or similar class

Day 3 Sapporo (Sapporo Snow Festival)

This morning we will visit the Sapporo Snow Festival (the Odori Site), the biggest snow festival in Hokkaido, by train. The festival's famous large snow sculptures are crafted by citizens who compete against each other's work of arts. It is normal for these snow figures to measure more than 25 meters wide and 15 meters high. Most are exhibited in the Odori site. Even so, many more snow sculptures of varied sizes and shapes are exhibited in events and concerts at other locations apart from the main stage in Odori's park. For those who want a view to remember, they can consider taking a view from the Sapporo TV Tower at the eastern end of Odori Park. The afternoon is free for you to enjoy, along with lunch on your own. Our tour guide will be there to help you make arrangements or take you to places depending on the group's need.

Meals:

Breakfast

Hotel:

ANA Hotel Sapporo or similar class

Day 4 Sapporo (Nijo Market / Sapporo Beer Museum), Shiraoi (Ainu Village), Noboribetsu (Jigokudani)

This morning we continue to enjoy a tour of Sapporo at the Nijo Market where there are variety of fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish. Then, we will visit the Sapporo Beer Museum, dedicated to all things beer. Sapporo is Japan's oldest brewery and exports its beer throughout the world. A visit to the Ainu Village at Shiraoi, where you will learn about and meet the Ainu, the native people of northern Japan. Here you can enter their traditional thatch roof houses, watch a dance demonstration, listen to indigenous music, and sample prepared traditional smoked salmon that were hung from ceiling rafters. Then, we go to Noboribetsu's Jigokudani, translated as "Hell Valley". These hot springs are appropriately named due to the steamy areas that release hot sulfur smells. Then, we have dinner upon our return back to the hotel.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Noboribetsu Manseikaku or similar class

Day 5 Lake Toya (Usuzan Ropeway), Onuma Park, Hakodate (Fort Goryokaku / Mt Hakodate Ropeway)

Today, we continue our tour with a visit to Lake Toya, and a ride on the Usuzan Ropeway. The lake is part of the Shikotsu-Toya National Park and the lake is said to never freeze, even during winter season. From the Usuzan, we will go to Onuma Park, an attractive and natural environment with peninsular features and smaller islands within the area. After taking a relaxing view in Onuma Park, we head towards Hakodate where we will visit the Goryokaku fort. This fort was first built over a hundred years ago just as the end of the Edo Period in defense against the Western nations who appeared to threaten the Japanese government. From here, we will take a ropeway ride up to Mt Hakodate from where we can look down upon the twinkling lights that surround Hakodate Bay. The views from the mountain are spectacular and included among Japan's three best night views alongside the views from Nagasaki's Mount Inasa and Kobe's Mount Rokko.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Loisir Hotel Hakodate or similar class

Day 6 Undersea Train from Hakodate to Aomori (Nebuta Warasse), Hirosaki (Hirosaki Castle / Hirosaki Castle Yuki-Doro Festival)

Today we will travel across the Tsugaru Channel between the islands of Hokkaido and Honshu by train via the undersea train tunnel, before arriving to Aomori. We will visit the Nebuta Warasse, a museum in Aomori exhibiting some of the greatest parade displays about the Nebuta Matsuri in Japan. Afterwards, we will visit Hirosaki Castle and go to the Hirosaki Castle Yuki-Doro Festival. This Yuki-Doro Festival, also called the Snow Lantern Festival, is a mixture of illuminations and snow sculptures that reflect architecture and the imagination of the human mind. Fireworks are also put on display for the visitors, lighting up the sky and the eyes of those who come to celebrate the event.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Hotel Naqua City Hirosaki or similar class

Day 7 Towada (Oirase Gorge / Lake Towada), Kakunodate (Samurai District - Aoyagi Samurai Manor Museum), Yokote (Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival)

Let's start the day off by going to see Towada's Oirase Gorge. Oirase is not only preserved for its distinctive picturesque spots and its trees like the Japanese beech, white cedar, and maple trees, but also because of its various waterfalls seen along the road. Then, we visit Kakunodate's Samurai district where we will also see the Aoyagi Samurai Manor Museum. This manor is one of the more notable samurai homes due to the simple difference in size and elegant features compared to those in the area, which were smaller and more humble. From there, we can then go to Yokote, which also has its Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival. The kamakura are actually small igloo-like houses where children may be found. Inside these houses are people who pray to the water gods, asking for another year of clear water. Amazake (low-alcohol content and sweet sake) and mochi (rice-gluten snack) are usually served during this annual event.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Hotel Plaza Annex Yokote or similar class

Day 8 Hiraizumi (Chusonji Temple), Matsushima (Matsushima Cruise / Zuiganji Temple), Zao Onsen (Zao Snow Monster Festival)

This morning we ride by private coach to Hiraizumi for a cultural interlude and to stroll around the magnificent Japanese Cedar Trees and photogenic buildings at Chusonji Temple. Hiraizumi is now listed as a World Heritage site and is home to Konjiki-do (Golden Hall) within Chusonji Temple, which attempts to re-create an ideal Buddhism world. As such, it is host to an ensemble of exquisite "culture of gold" remnants from the brand of Buddhism that developed independently in the Tohoku region far away from the cultural center of Kyoto in the late Heian era of the 11th century. UNESCO has recognized this area as being a globally rare example of local culture to manifest on such a high level in the transitional period from the ancient era to the medieval period. Next is Matsushima, a picturesque bay full of pine tree covered small islands, where we explore ancient caves once frequented by meditating monks. Matsushima is famous for being one of Japan's three most scenic views alongside Miyajima and Amanohashidate. The bay is dotted by over 200 small islands covered by pine trees. We will take the best way to view the islands by boarding one of the sightseeing boat. Afterwards, we visit one of the most distinguished temples of the Tohoku region, the Zuiganji Temple (founded in 828 A.D.). The temple is so notable that it has been received as a national treasure in Japan especially because of its elegant Peacock Room. Finally, we depart for the Zao Snow Monster Festival. This festival takes place on the first weekend of February each year at Zao Onsen. There, the illuminations light up trees covered in snow, appearing as monsters to most in the audience.

Meals:

Breakfast / Dinner

Hotel:

Zao Kokusai Hotel or similar class

Day 9 Zao (Zao Snow Monster - Ropeway / Okama Crater), Ouchijuku, Aizu (Oyakuen Garden / Suehiro Sake Brewery)

This day will begin with a ride on the Zao Snow Monster Ropeway to take a great image of the snowy land around us. Once there, we will also visit the Okama Crater, a lake that is guarded by three mountains Kumanodake, Goshikidake, and Zao mountain. This spectacular site is enhanced when snow is settled all about this harmonious scenery. Next is a scene back from the Edo period, when the shogunate restricted their modes of travel post towns like Ouchijuku were built up for weary travelers looking for food and board. Travelers once stayed in these kind of towns to continue their journey to places from Nikko to Aizu, and vice versa. As we continue our own travels to Aizu, we will arrive at the Oyakuen Garden, a garden once used to encourage cultivation of medicinal herbs per a feudal lord assistance. Then, we end the day with a visit to the family owned sake business, the Suehiro Sake Brewery. This sake is one of the most recognized sake products in the Tohoku region and has won awards internationally and domestically.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Kinugawa Onsen Hotel or similar class

Day 10 Nikko (Toshogu Shrine / Kegon Waterfall), Omiya (Omiya Bonsai Art Museum)

The Japanese have a saying: "Don't say kekko (wonderful) without seeing Nikko." Today we head off to visit the shrine of the great Tokugawa Ieyasu. Nikko is famous for the Toshogu Shrine, which holds the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the famous founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled for over 200 years (1603-1868). Next is Kegon Waterfall, which is one of the more famous waterfalls in the region visited by both foreign guests and Japanese citizens alike. Lastly, we will go to Omiya's Bonsai Art Museum that was first opened in 2010. Here, we will see the collection of bonsai art, woodblock prints, bonsai pots, and the history of bonsai including the tools that they used long ago for this fine craft.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Tobu Hotel Levant Tokyo or similar class

Day 11 Tokyo (Asakusa Sensoji Temple / Tokyo Edo Museum / Imperial Palace / Tokyo Tower / Odaiba)

In the morning you will be taken to Asakusa Kannon Temple, an active place of worship where you can see the largest paper lantern in Japan. Here, discover the difference between a Shinto Shrine and a Buddhist Temple, then explore Nakamise Market, which resembles a traditional style shopping street of a bygone era. Next is a visit to Edo Tokyo Museum, where you can learn the history of Tokyo from the time when it was a small village called Edo. The museum also offers many good picture taking opportunities, for example with vehicles and items which were used in the past. Then we will proceed to the Imperial Palace, the former site of Edo Castle. You can explore the park, surrounded by moats and stone fortifications, in the heart of the city. In the afternoon, we will visit the the world's tallest self supporting steel tower. At 333 meters high, Tokyo Tower is 13 meters taller than its model, the Eiffel Tower. We will go up 150 meters to the main observatory deck and get a bird's eye view of Tokyo. From there we will cross the Rainbow Bridge, and be treated to stunning views of Tokyo Bay. We will travel to the man made islands of Odaiba and see cutting edge architecture, as well as the night view of Tokyo Tower and Rainbow Bridge.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Tobu Hotel Levant Tokyo or similar class

Day 12 Hakone (Laka Ashi Cruise), Kawazu (Nanadaru Falls / Kawazu Cherry Blossom Festival)

Travel to Hakone, which is among Japan's most popular hot-spring resorts, and view the forested slopes of Hakone National Park. We will cruise around Lake Ashi will be taken not on just any boat, but on a pirate ship. There are three different ships called Royal II, Victory and Vasa. Each ship has something unique as with each port. Lake Ashi is famous for having Mount Fuji in the background in combination with the lake, for example. Travel to Kawazu to visit to the Nanadaru Falls, or Seven Waterfalls, Kanidaru, Odaru, Kamadaru, Ebidaru, Hebidaru, Shokeidaru and Deaidaru. The falls differ in sizes with the smallest one, Kanidaru, just 3 feet wide and 6 feet tall. The largest waterfall, Odaru, is about 20 feet wide and 100 feet high. Then, enjoy the famous Kawazu Cherry Blossoms Festival. Kawazu cherry blossoms are known as one of the earliest to bloom in Honshu region. They are different from Somei Yoshino cherry blossoms (the most common kind of sakura in Japan) in that Kawazu cherry blossoms are pink and last longer in full bloom. During the festival, more than one million people visit the town to see cherry trees lined along the Kawazu River in full bloom.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Izu-Imaihama Tokyu Hotel or similar class

Day 13 Lake Kawaguchi (Kubota Itchiku Museum / Kachi Kachi Ropeway), Matsumoto (Matsumoto Castle)

We will depart from Izu to Mt. Fuji on our private coach. Along the way, enjoy the changing scenery, from thick vegetation to lowlands and rolling clouds. At one of shores of Lake Kawaguchi is the Itchiku Kubota Art Museum. The museum displays the beautiful kimonos done by Itchiku Kubota with the tsujigahana dyeing technique. His unfinished masterpiece called the "Symphony of Light," is a kimono 80-piece set depicting the four seasons and his own universe. Currently 40 of the 80 set pieces were completed by Itchiku, the rest was continued by his children. Next, we get ready to ride the Kachi Kachi Ropeway, which often depicts a tanuki (raccoon dog) in its vicinity due to a children's story based on that area. The ropeway extends from the top of Mt. Tenjo to the shores of Lake Kawaguchiko, along the way you can enjoy a spectacular view of Mount Fuji. We will then travel to Matsumoto where we'll visit the photogenic Matsumoto Castle, or Black Crow Castle, dating back over 400 years. Tonight, we will stay at the Onsen Ryokan at Yudanaka, where you can soak in the therapeutic waters of a spa bath and feast on a traditional Japanese Kaiseki banquet dinner.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Ryokan Biyu no Yado or similar class

Day 14 Yudanaka (Snow Monkey Park), Takayama (Old Town / Takayama Jinya)

This morning Yudanaka gives us the chance to see the famous snow monkeys as they enjoy their hot spring baths. From Yudanaka, we will continue on to Takayama. This city is located amongst the Japanese Alps and is known as "Little Kyoto" for its preserved historical structures and environment. Due to its remote position in the mountains, it was cut off from the rest of Japan for most of its history and, thus, has maintained a very unique and traditional atmosphere. We'll explore the old town of Takayama, a place that creates a sense of tradition and nostalgia. Along the way you'll notice the huge cedar balls hanging from the eaves of several shops - these indicate that the shops are sake shops. Next, visit Takayama Jinya, the only traditional local government office in existence and a fine example of a miniature palace containing offices, an interrogation room with torture devices, and a 440 year-old rice granary.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Hotel Associa Takayama Resort or similar class

Day 15 Takayama (Morning Market), Shirakawa-go (Shiroyama Viewpoint / Gassho-zukuri Minkaen), Kanazawa (Kenrokuen), Shinkansen Bullet Train Ride from Maibara to Kyoto

This morning we'll enjoy the lively city market before heading to the World Heritage site in the rural area of Shirakawa-go. In this very photogenic village, we will walk past thatched roof farm houses and cultivated fields and see unspoiled Edo period wooden buildings. Once there, we will also go to the Shiroyama Viewpoint, which allows us to have a scenic view of Shirakawa-go from higher grounds. From Shirakawa-go, we will depart to Kanazawa to visit Kenrokuen Garden, one of three most beautiful gardens of Japan. The name "Kenrokuen" literally means a garden combining the 6 attributes of a perfect landscape: spaciousness, seclusion, artifice, antiquity, water features, and panoramas. Here, you'll find the oldest fountain in Japan and Kotoji-toro, the two-legged stone lantern that is iconic of Kenrokuen and Kanazawa. Next, experience a Shinkansen bullet train ride from Maibara to Kyoto, which can reach speeds of up to 300 km/hr. We will stay two nights in Kyoto, a historical city. During World War II it was spared from air raids and saved from the atomic bomb for its cultural and historical value.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Grand Prince Hotel Kyoto or similar class

Day 16 Kyoto (Nijo Castle / Nishijin Kimono Show / Golden Pavilion / Kiyomizu Temple / Gion Geisha District)

Today we will start our tour of Kyoto, once the capital of Japan and still considered its cultural center. First is a visit to the Nijo Castle, built in the early 17th century. Ninomaru-goten, renovated in 1626, is a building renowned as a priceless example of the architectural style of that period. At the Nishijin Textile Center, you can view displays of kimonos and even watch a kimono fashion show. Visit the Kinkakuji Temple (Golden Pavilion) covered with 18 carat gold leaf. This three story structure was originally built by the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1397. Next is the famous Kiyomizu Temple, best known for its wooden stage that juts out from its main hall, 13 meters above the hillside. The stage affords visitors a nice view of the numerous cherry and maple trees below that erupt in a sea of color in spring and fall, as well as a picturesque view of Kyoto in the distance. Lastly, we will tour Gion, the old Geisha Quarter, and Pontocho, whose cobblestone alleys vibrate with night life.

Meals:

Breakfast / Dinner

Hotel:

Grand Prince Hotel Kyoto or similar class

Day 17 Kyoto (Fushimi Inari Shrine), Uji (Green Tea Ceremony), Nara (Todaiji Temple / Deer Park), Osaka (Dotonbori - Shinsaibashi)

The day begins with a visit in the scenic and historic Fushimi district, which is also one of the brewing capitals of Japan. First is a visit to the stunning vermilion colored Fushimi Inari Shrine, whose 4km long tunnel of scarlet torii gates was featured in the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*. This complex wraps around a bamboo wilderness that includes mountains, streams, and ponds, the perfect backdrop for a scenic hike. Then, we proceed to Uji where we will experience a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. From there we continue to Nara, the oldest capital city of Japan. We will visit Todaiji Temple, the largest wooden building in Japan. The temple also houses the largest bronze statue of Buddha at 16.3 meters high, and the surrounding park is filled with over 1,000 Sika Deer. In the afternoon we will travel to Osaka by private coach. Our last visit for the day is Dotonbori, which runs parallel to the Dotonbori canal. Popular for its shopping, entertainment, and food district, Dotonbori is known for the hundreds of neon and mechanized signs that line the street, including the famous Glico Running Man and Kani Doraku Crab signs.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Hotel Elserine Osaka or similar class

Day 18 Himeji (Himeji Castle), Kurashiki (Canal Area / Ohara Museum of Art)

Today we take a 2-hour ride by private coach to Himeji to visit the Himeji Castle. It is known as "White Egret Castle" and "White Heron Castle" because of its brilliant white exterior, resembling a bird taking flight. Himeji Castle is the largest and most visited castle in Japan, and is one of the few remaining original castles in Japan. This splendid example of traditional architecture was declared one of the first UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Japan. Next is a visit to Kurashiki. In merchant days, this scenic town thrived as a port for rice shipments. Several old rice granaries and examples of historic architecture still remain, in addition to the stone lined canal. We will also visit the Ohara Museum of Art, which is considered the first museum of Western art in Japan. It is a private museum consisting of three adjacent buildings next to the canal. In the afternoon, we will continue our journey to Hiroshima.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch

Hotel:

Hiroshima Grand Prince Hotel or similar class

Day 19 Hiroshima (Peace Memorial Park / A-Bomb Museum / Miyajima - Itsukushima Shrine), Shimanami Kaido (Scenic Driving / Kirosoan Observatory)

Today we will visit the Peace Memorial Park and Atomic Bomb Museum. After lunch, we will take a short ferry ride to the island of Miyajima. At high tide, the famed vermilion torii gate of the Itsukushima Shrine looks like it's floating in the middle of the sea. The shrine complex is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Miyajima has been selected as one of Japan's three most scenic places (nihon sankei). In the afternoon, we will drive through the Shimanami Kaido to Shikoku Island. The Shimanami Kaido is a 60 kilometer long toll road that connects Japan's main island of Honshu to the island of Shikoku, passing over six small islands in the Seto Inland Sea. It is also known as the Nishiseto Expressway. We will stop by Kirosoan Observatory where you can take in views of the Kurushima Kaikyo Bridges standing among hundreds of islands beautifully scattered over the Seto Inland Sea. The modern observation deck was cleverly designed and built halfway into the ground of the hillside so as not to spoil the natural surroundings.

Meals:

Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner

Hotel:

Imabari Kokusai Hotel or similar class

Day 20 Oboke Gorge (Oboke Gorge Boat Ride), Kotohira (Kotohira-gu Shrine), Takamatsu (Ritsurin Park), Kobe (Wagyu Beef Dinner)

After breakfast, we continue our journey to Oboke Gorge, one of three hidden mountain regions of Japan. Oboke is the valley located upstream of the Yoshino-gawa River. "Boke" means "dangerous to walk along," and Oboke (big "boke") was named for its jagged V-shaped rocks and narrow path which, no matter how carefully or slowly you walk, makes walking dangerous. Enjoy a relaxing boat ride and take in the panoramic view of the valley. Then, climb the 1,368 stone steps to the Kotohira-gu Shrine, a Shinto shrine. In Takamatsu we will visit Ritsurin Park, a masterpiece of Japanese landscape 100 years in the making. This sprawling park features beautiful ponds and pavilions, with Mt. Shiun as the perfect backdrop. From there, our private coach takes us across Awaji Island through a series of spectacular bridges. In the evening we continue to Kobe, where we will savor the world famous Wagyu beef.

Meals:

Breakfast / Dinner

Hotel:

Hotel Nikko Kansai Airport or similar class

Hotel Elserine Osaka or similar class (NOTE 2 & 3)

NOTE 2: If you wish to stay in the center of Osaka for the last night instead of Hotel Nikko Kansai Airport, we can arrange for you to stay at Hotel Elserine Osaka (or similar class). In this case, airport transfer is not included, but we will provide full instructions for you to get to the airport in advance.

NOTE 3: If you will be flying out from Itami Airport (ITM) instead of Kansai International Airport (KIX), we can arrange for you to stay at Hotel Elserine Osaka (or similar class) instead of Hotel Nikko Kansai Airport. In this case, airport transfer is not included but we will provide full instructions for you to get to the airport in advance.

Itinerary

Tour Code: GTD2032437

Day 21 Tour End

After breakfast, our tour officially ends. Checkout time is 11 am and Osaka Kansai Airport can be reached in a three minute walk.

Meals:
Breakfast

NOTE 4: If you would like to stay longer in Japan, please contact us to book hotel accommodations.