



A Caravan along...

## The Narrow Road to the Deep North

### DETAILED DOSSIER

**15 day itinerary**      *Tokyo – Yamadera – Tsuruoka – Haguro Mountain  
– Akita – Kakunodate – Hirosaki – Osore Mountain  
– Hiraizumi – Matsushima – Nikko – Tokyo*

**Travel dates**      **Mon 5 October – Mon 19 October 2009\***

### INTRODUCTION

Stirred to roam “*by the sight of a solitary cloud drifting with the wind*” the great *haiku* poet Matsuo Basho set off on foot to explore the remote Tohoku region of Japan. He recorded the events of this five-month pilgrimage in his poetic travelogue “The Narrow Road to the Deep North” – one of Japan’s best-loved literary classics. The Oriental Caravan follows in Basho’s footsteps, and those of the greatest *shogun* and *samurai*, and then travels even deeper north through a landscape of rugged coastlines, volcanic lakes and holy mountains, for a glimpse into a rural Japan rarely seen by Western eyes.

Far from the bustle of Tokyo, we wander the pilgrim routes to the mountain temples of Dewa San; peer into Japan’s feudal past in the Samurai quarters of Kakunodate and the castle towns of Akita and Hirosaki; stroll amidst the great Tokugawa shrines at Nikko; and marvel at the snow-capped volcanoes of Iwaki and Iwate. Adding to the magic of the journey are the nights spent in charming, characterful accommodation: mountain-top and lakeside ‘*shukubo*’ temple lodgings, as well as traditional, family-run *ryokan* guesthouses.

This off-the-beaten-track itinerary (researched by and exclusive to The Oriental Caravan) can be taken as a 15 day journey or as an extension to “the Caravan into the Land of the Rising Sun”. There is also some scope on this trip for individual exploration a fact that will appeal to the adventurous and pioneering traveller eager to take their first steps on “The Narrow Road to the Deep North”.

*\*This itinerary has been specially timed to coincide with Nikko’s Toshogu festival, noted for its daring displays of Samurai horseback archery and elaborate costumed procession.*



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## ITINERARY

**Day 1 Tokyo** Group rendezvous in Tokyo, and, after time to relax in and around our centrally located hotel, the opportunity to explore the city. Tokyo is well-known for its bustling energy and futuristic architecture. However, it also has a gentler side and its citizens often reveal themselves – particularly outside of working hours – to be some of the friendliest of any capital city in the world. Behind the skyscrapers and neon signs, there are many vestiges of the past, with historic temples and shrines still to be found in some of the most unexpected places, as well as an abundance of parks and gardens.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 2 Tokyo** Today we have a varied, full-day tour of the city beginning in the lively Senso-ji temple district of Asakusa, with its many interesting handicraft stalls. After lunch we are afforded an alternative view of Tokyo as we relax on a short cruise down the Sumida River. Our boat drops us off at the delightful Hama Rikyu gardens where we have time to stroll along paths that were once the sole preserve of the *Shogun*. Later in the afternoon we make our way to the shopping district of Ginza where, depending on the theatre schedule, we have the chance to see a short performance of *Kabuki*, one of Japan's more spectacular performing arts. We will then meet up again in the evening over dinner for a trip briefing.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 3 Yamadera** Leaving the great metropolis of Tokyo behind we take our first steps on a journey made famous over 300 years ago by the great *haiku* poet Matsuo Basho. Moving at a somewhat faster pace than that made possible by Basho's wooden clogs we speed north by bullet train through rural communities far removed from Japan's neon-filled capital. At first the scenery is quite flat – and, with its wide stony riverbeds and arable farmland, similar to the vast Huabei plateau in Northern China but then, soon after our train leaves the station at Fukushima, we find ourselves travelling through an increasingly impressive landscape of steep, pine-clad mountains. At Yamagata we change on to a narrow-gauge line that passes through a valley to the small town of Yamadera where we make our way to the charming and friendly *pension* that will be our home for the night. In the afternoon we climb the short distance up the enchanting wooded slopes behind the town to visit Okuno-in and Rissahku-ji temples which houses the same sacred flame brought here over 1,000 years ago from Kyoto. It was here that Basho wrote the famous *haiku*:

*In the utter silence  
Of a temple,  
A cicada's voice alone  
Penetrates the rocks*

*Overnight – ryokan*

**Day 4 Tsuruoka** In the morning we continue to Tsuruoka, our staging post for visiting the temples of Haguro San mountain. Tsuruoka is a small, slow-paced town, and during the afternoon we will have time to visit one or more of its intriguing sights. One of the more interesting places to visit is the Chido museum with its old Meiji buildings and large stroll garden. The area is also famous for its mysterious 'living Buddhas' – actually the naturally mummified remains of a number of ascetic Buddhist monks who once starved themselves to death in an attempt to achieve immortality. For those who wish, somewhat further away is Zenpo-ji temple with its 10<sup>th</sup> century pagoda and a pond famous for fish that appear to have human faces.

*Overnight – hotel*

**Day 5 Haguro San** This morning we take a bus to the foot (or, for those who prefer not to walk, to the top) of the Dewa San mountains. This remote site has been a place of deep religious significance for over 1,500 years, as it was here that Prince Hachiko, in emulation of the Buddha himself, gave up the luxuries of princedom to take up the life of an itinerant monk. Since then the region has been associated with *yamabushi* (ascetic mountain priests) who follow the *shugendo* sect of Buddhism – a form of worship strongly influenced by Japan's ancient shamanistic rituals. These Japanese *yogis* – dressed in white robes, staff in one hand, giant conch shell in the other – wander these same mountain paths. The walk to the top of Haguro San takes us through a beautiful forest of ancient towering cedars – one 1,500 years old – and past some magnificent, old, wooden temples, including the 600 year old Goju-no-to pagoda, all in perfect congruousness with the trees from which they were made.

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## ITINERARY *continued*

**Day 5 Haguro San *continued*** There are steps all the way to the top, ensuring that the climb – which can be done in a leisurely 1.5-2 hours – is not overly strenuous. En route we will stop for a picnic at an idyllic site made famous by one of Basho's *haiku*. Once at the summit we will spend the night at a splendid *shukubo* (temple lodgings) enjoying spectacular mountain vistas and delicious vegetarian food. *Overnight – shukubo*

**Day 6 Akita** We return to Tsuruoka, and then take the train along a section of coast that faces the Sea of Japan. Akita is a modern, down-to-earth city extensively rebuilt after the Second World War. There is a certain intrinsic fascination to the place, and as few foreigners venture this far north its citizens are particularly welcoming to visitors. We stay in a very friendly modern-style *ryokan* hotel which sees few foreign visitors but which has excellent home-cooking (including delicious rice grown by the owner) and an impressive Japanese bath. The English-speaking owner and his charming wife are always very eager to please. In the afternoon it is quite pleasant to walk around the castle grounds, and visit the small museum for a glimpse of how the heavily fortified Akita looked in feudal times. Elsewhere in town the Akarengakan Museum also provides an interesting insight into life in Akita in earlier times. *Overnight – ryokan*

**Day 7 Akita** A short train ride from Akita, we make a day trip to Kakunodate, a small town noted for its remarkably well-preserved Samurai district dating from the early 17th century. Wandering around the old wooden mansions it is still possible to get a feel for the Japan of bygone days and sense the importance of *bushido* – the Way of the Warrior – in which personal honour and loyalty to one's master were rated more highly than life itself. A few stations further on from Kakunodate is Tazawa-ko, Japan's deepest lake, where, for the adventurous, there is the possibility of short hikes in the surrounding hills. In the late afternoon/early evening we return to Akita. *Overnight – ryokan*

**Day 8 Hirosaki** Today we continue our journey north to Hirosaki, across wide coastal plains and past spruce-covered mountains. This is very much an agricultural area where the people still live in tune with the seasons, and where Japan's ancient rural rhythms can still be felt. We pass fields and orchards where peasants are busily tending the land, dressed in white smocks and 'bee-keeper' hats to protect them from the sun. Tohoku's cultural centre is an atmospheric place where the people's accents are as strong as the *saké* for which the area is famous. Dominated by the sacred snow-capped Iwaki San – a volcano almost as impressive as Fuji itself – the town is small enough to be easily explored on foot during a day left free for individual exploration. Of prime interest is Hirosaki Castle with its extensive park and fine gardens. Not far from the castle lies the tranquil Zenrin-gai temple district where many smaller shrines lead up to the Tsugaru family temple of Chosho-ji – an area that is particularly pleasant to stroll around during the late afternoon. In the evening we will attend a performance of local *shamisen* folk music. *Overnight – hotel*

**Day 9 Osore San** From Hirosaki, we travel via Aomori up the axe-shaped Shimokita peninsula to the semi-mythical Osore San mountain. This remarkable and somewhat eerie place is where the souls of the dead are considered to congregate. With its bubbling pools, sulphurous hot springs, forested hillsides and beautiful lakeside setting, this is an extremely unusual and slightly 'other worldly' place, famous for the *itako* 'blind witches' who, through their mastery of the language of the dead, are able to act as mediums between the living and the dear departed. We spend the night in comfortable temple lodgings with access to a traditional outdoor hot spring. *Overnight – shukubo*

**Day 10 Hiraizumi** Travelling back down the mountain we skirt the coast of Mutsu bay and make our way back to the junction station of Noheji where we now begin our journey south. Passing first the towns of Hachinohe and Morioka, and another great Fuji-like mountain, Iwate San, we arrive in mid afternoon at the small town of Hiraizumi. This area was once home to the Fujiwara clan who, in the 12th century, turned the town into something of a cultural and economic capital, almost rivalling Kyoto in the south. One of the clan's leading members, Fujiwara Kiyohira, set out to turn the existing temple district into a Buddhist 'paradise on earth' and some of his efforts can still be seen at Chuson-ji and Motsu-ji. Centuries after the demise of the Fujiwaras, a reflective Matsuo Basho, while visiting the area, was inspired to write the following *haiku*...

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## ITINERARY *continued*

*A thicket of summer grass  
Is all that remains  
Of the dreams and ambitions  
Of ancient warriors*

**Day 10 Hiraizumi (continued)** If time permits we may also visit one local man's small but fascinating private peace museum. In any case our stay at Motsu-ji, is made all the more special by the fact that our accommodation – a small, basic but adequate lakeside temple hostel – lies in the grounds of one of Japan's most renowned paradise gardens. *Overnight – temple hostel*

**Day 11 Nikko** Continuing south, we pause at Sendai and make an excursion to Matsushima – one of Japan's 'three famous views', famous because of its strangely shaped, pine-clad islets. On visiting here Basho was apparently so overcome with the place's beauty that, lost for words, he wrote the *haiku*...

*Matsushima ya,  
Aha Matsushima ya,  
Matsushima ya*

Later, however, after thankfully recovering his diction he penned the somewhat more eloquent lines...

*Clear voiced cuckoo  
Even you will need  
The silver wings of a crane  
To span the islands of Matsushima*

From Shiogama we take a ferry across Matsushima Bay before continuing our journey to Nikko. *Overnight – ryokan*

**Day 12 Nikko** Nikko – meaning 'sunlight' – is justifiably one of Japan's major travel destinations, and we have the whole day to explore its many interesting sights. Sacred to Buddhists since the 8th century, Nikko achieved its present grandeur during the 17th century when its forests of giant cedar and cypress trees became the site of the tombs and shrines of the Tokugawa shoguns. Grandest of them all is the wonderfully opulent Toshogu shrine which houses the mausoleum of the greatest shogun of them all, Ieyasu Tokugawa, as well as the famous 'three monkeys' carving that expresses the Zen maxim to "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". There are other attractions near Nikko, including Yashio-no-yu *onsen* (spa) or, just a bus ride away, Chuzenji Lake and the nearby Kegon-no-taki waterfalls. Our accommodation for the night is a 10 minute walk from the Nikko shrines in a small *ryokan* near the Gamman-Ga-Fuchi Abyss – a wooded riverside area. There is a lovely short walk near here passing by an interesting collection of *jizo* Buddha statues. The *ryokan* also has its own hot bath that looks out over the flowing waters of the Daiya River. *Overnight – ryokan*

**Day 13 Tokyo** In the words of Matsuo Basho, after "turning the corners of the narrow road to the deep north and soaring on the exhilaration of our hearts" we today make our way back to Tokyo. Bewildering though it can sometimes be in terms of first impressions, Japan's great capital is in the end, like London, merely a collection of villages that can be a joy to explore. We arrive in time for the weekend when the city relaxes and night-time Tokyo comes alive. This evening we discover some of its many highly atmospheric back streets. *Overnight – hotel*

**Day 14 Tokyo** Today the whole day has been left free for further independent exploration or shopping. It is also possible to arrange day-trips outside of Tokyo, including a visit to the Hakone area of Mount Fuji. In the evening, a great way to bid Japan farewell is by spending a few hours in Tokyo's unforgettable nightlife district of Roppongi. *Overnight – hotel*

**Day 15 Journey's end...** The Oriental Caravan heads home.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

**Tour price (excluding international flights) – £1,865 per person on a twin share basis**

**Group size & Leader** The group will comprise between 6 and 12 members, and be escorted throughout by an experienced Japanese-speaking tour leader from the UK.

**Transport** We make good use of Japan's well-developed and highly efficient train system, travelling on super fast bullet trains as well as sleepy branch-line locomotives. It is felt that use of the public transport system allows for a more in-depth and personal experience of Japanese life – and is also invariably a lot of fun. We will, on occasion, also be using private taxis, local buses and boats. However when visiting some of the remoter sites there will be, due to the nature of these locations, a certain amount of walking.

**Accommodation** In terms of charm, hospitality and local character, the places we stay at are one of the highlights of the journey. In Tokyo, Tsuruoka and Hirosaki we stay in comfortable centrally-located, tourist class hotels. Elsewhere we stay in *ryokan* (traditional Japanese guesthouses) or occasionally *shukubo* (temple lodgings). At all places we can expect a warm welcome and a relaxing stay, and as these are traditional Japanese properties, the experience of sleeping on *futon* mattresses on *tatami* matting floors – a system many people find to be more comfortable than sleeping in a Western bed. At the *shukubos* on Osore and Haguro San we may on occasion have to sleep more than two to a room according to the custom for Japanese pilgrims. An optional single supplement for the nights spent in hotels is available at a cost of £168.

**Food** While in Yamadera, Haguro San and Osore San evening meals and breakfasts are included. A picnic lunch is also included at Haguro san. At Hiraizumi breakfast is included and in Tokyo the group leader pays for a farewell meal. Elsewhere meals are not included but are easily arranged en route according to individual preferences and with the help of the tour leader. Depending upon appetite and choice you can expect to spend, on average, between £15-25 a day on food and drink. It is possible to eat more cheaply than this, or to spend considerably more. Often the best and most convenient way is take advantage of the typically excellent home-cooking provided by the *ryokans*. It is worth mentioning that Japanese cuisine is generally of a very high quality and extremely varied, and for many visitors it is a distinct highlight of any visit. As elsewhere in Japan 'piscivores' will find themselves well-catered for, with some of the finest fish dishes in the world on offer, especially in coastal areas. Vegetarians can get by though sometimes the choice of meat/fish-free meals is limited – that said, at the *shukubos* on Haguro and Osore San we will enjoy excellent gourmet vegetarian meals.

**Weather** Japan has a temperate climate with four distinct seasons. Our visit is in Autumn which is arguably the most comfortable season for travelling in this part of Japan when we can expect, though not of course be guaranteed, warm weather and clear skies.

**Insurance** It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of emergency repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all participants take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they, for any reason, need to cancel prior to departure. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single trip insurance policy. Please enquire for details).

**Health Formalities** There are currently no statutory vaccination requirements for visiting Japan.

**Passports & Visas** All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of departure from Japan. For most nationalities – including British – a single-entry ('temporary visitor') Tourist Visa is issued on arrival in Japan. This tour is not available to those of other visa status (e.g. business or student).

**Luggage Requirements** Detailed information on what to pack, and other practicalities, is included in the PDI (Pre-departure Information) that will be sent to group members closer to the date of departure.

*This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time, and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.*

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