HONSHU / SOUTH HONSHU / TOKYO · KANAZAWA · SHIRAKAWA-GO · KYOTO · OSAKA · 18–21 DAYS · BY TRAIN

From gold leaf to neon: the Golden Route, rerouted through Kanazawa

Updated October 2026 · Best time: late Mar–May · Oct–Nov
Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/better-golden-route-by-train

The Golden Route (Tokyo, Mount Fuji, Kyoto, Osaka) is the classic first trip to Japan for good reason. The usual version has a weak spot, though: it goes straight down the Tokaido line and back the same way. This loop goes out on the **Hokuriku Shinkansen** to **Kanazawa** instead, one of the best-kept old cities in the country, with a side trip to the farmhouses of **Shirakawa-go**. From there it continues to Kyoto and returns to Tokyo on the Tokaido Shinkansen, so you never repeat a journey.

The core version takes **18 days**, and you choose how to do Kansai: stay in Kyoto the whole time and visit Osaka and Kobe as day trips, or split it with three nights in Osaka, which makes Kobe and the old onsen town of **Arima** easy. With **21 days**, stop for two nights on the way back to Tokyo: Lake Ashi in Hakone, Lake Kawaguchi under Mount Fuji, or the temples and beaches of Kamakura.

18–21 days	**train only** no car needed	**5–6** stops	**late Mar–May · Oct–Nov** best time
~¥290k per person*			

*Accommodation (sharing a room) and trains, 18 days, middle version. International flights not included.

The route at a glance

1. **Tokyo** — Nights 1–4
2. **Kanazawa** — Nights 5–7
3. **Shirakawa-go** — Day trip, or night 7
4. **Kyoto** — Nights 8–12 (or 8–15)
5. **Osaka** — Nights 13–15

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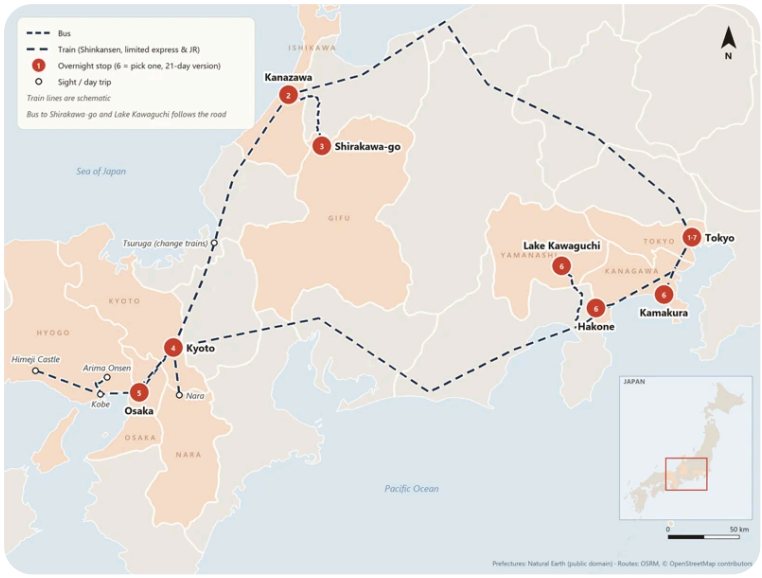
Hakone, Fuji or Kamakura

21-day version · 2 nights

7

Tokyo

Nights 16–17 (21 days: 18–20)



The loop by train: Tokyo → Kanazawa (bus to Shirakawa-go) → Kyoto → Osaka → Tokyo, with the 21-day options of Hakone, Lake Kawaguchi or Kamakura.

Prices are per room for two per night. Ryokan prices include dinner and breakfast. ⭐ = famous / worth it · ⭐⭐ = splurge.

Stop by stop

01 Tokyo 東京

Nights 1–4 · Neon, shrines & the best food city on earth

PLAN

- Asakusa and Senso-ji early in the morning, then Ueno or Akihabara
- Meiji Shrine and Harajuku, Shibuya crossing at dusk, then Shinjuku's Omoide Yokocho and Golden Gai
- Ginza, Tokyo Station and the Imperial Palace gardens, teamLab, Odaiba
- Get your IC card (Suica or PASMO) on day 1; it works on every train and bus on this trip, in every city

WHERE TO STAY

Mitsui Garden Hotel Ginza Premier high floors over Ginza, 5 min to Tokyo Station — ¥30–45k

Hotel Gracery Shinjuku the Godzilla hotel, right in Kabukicho — ¥22–35k

⭐⭐ **The Okura Tokyo** Tokyo's classic grand hotel, rebuilt in 2019 — ¥80k+

Good to know My full shortlist of Tokyo restaurants, bars and neighbourhoods is in the Tokyo city guide.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Suga Shrine stairs
the staircase from the film "Your Name"

Shimokitazawa
vintage shops & small cafés

Cat Street (Harajuku)
shopping street between Shibuya & Harajuku

Kappabashi kitchen street
knives & kitchenware, e.g. JIKKO

Kabukicho batting centers
late-night batting cages in Shinjuku

Capcom Store & Square Enix Garden (Shibuya)
for gamers

BrewDog & Bauhaus (Roppongi)
craft beer, then live rock covers

WHERE I EAT

Teppanyaki Keyakizaka · Kisentei Midtown
teppanyaki & wagyu

Sushi Banya Ginza · Sushi Satake · Fukube Sushi
sushi in Ginza

Sushi Yajima
omakase sushi

Tonkatsu Aoki (Daimon)
tonkatsu

Matsuo Jingisukan Ginza
lamb barbecue

Gyoza Hohei Ginza
gyoza

Monja Moheji Ueno
monjayaki

Otoko no Omurice Egg Bomb
omurice

Perfect Beer Kitchen · stand Bar Joker
Shimbashi after-work drinks

Michi Naki Michi · BW Cave
izakaya in Shibuya

02 Kanazawa 金沢

Nights 5–7 · Geisha districts, samurai lanes & a perfect garden

PLAN

- Day 5: Hokuriku Shinkansen Tokyo → Kanazawa (~2 h 30–3 h). Afternoon in the Higashi Chaya teahouse district, gold-leaf ice cream included
- Day 6: Kenroku-en, one of Japan's three great gardens, Kanazawa Castle, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art
- Nagamachi samurai lanes, the Ninja Temple (guided tours, book ahead), seafood bowls at Omicho Market
- Day 7: Shirakawa-go as a day trip, or move there for the night (next stop)

WHERE TO STAY

Hyatt Centric Kanazawa modern hotel right at the station — ¥25–40k

Mitsui Garden Hotel Kanazawa central, between the station and the old town — ¥15–25k

☆☆ **Asadaya** a tiny, 150-year-old ryokan with only a handful of rooms — ¥120k+

Good to know Kanazawa is compact. Walk, or use the loop bus. The gardens open at 7:00 from March to mid-October; be there early.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Higashi Chaya District
geisha teahouse district

Geisha House Shima
Edo-era teahouse you can visit

Nagamachi
samurai district

Omicho Market
seafood market

Myoryu-ji, the Ninja Temple
temple full of trap doors (guided tours)

D.T. Suzuki Museum
calm architecture & water garden

WHERE I EAT

Unagi Yondaime Kikukawa
grilled eel

Osushi to Genshiyaki Nakamura
sushi & open-fire grill

京祇園ねぎ焼 粉
negiyaki

Higashide Coffee · Curio Espresso
coffee

03 Shirakawa-go 白川郷

Day trip, or night 7 · Thatched farmhouses in the mountains

PLAN

- Bus from Kanazawa Station (~1 h 15–1 h 30), reserve seats online. These are the only easy public transport links
- Ogimachi village: the steep thatched gassho-zukuri houses, the Wada House museum, the Shiroyama viewpoint above the village
- **As a day trip**: go on the first bus and come back in the late afternoon (night 7 in Kanazawa)
- **Overnight**: sleep in a farmhouse inn. When the last tour buses leave around 16:00, the village goes quiet, and the morning is yours

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Farmhouse minshuku (gassho inns)** family-run thatched houses, shared baths, dinner by the irori hearth ¥25–40k

Good to know Staying the night? Send your big suitcase from Kanazawa to your Kyoto hotel by takkyubin. Next morning, take the bus back to Kanazawa and continue to Kyoto. In January and February the village is lit up on a few evenings, and visits on those dates are by reservation only.

04 Kyoto 京都

Nights 8–12 (or 8–15) · Temples, gardens & old wooden streets

PLAN

- Day 8: Hokuriku Shinkansen to Tsuruga, then the Thunderbird to Kyoto (~2 h 15 in total)
- Fushimi Inari's torii tunnels at sunrise, Kiyomizu-dera, the lanes of Ninenzaka and Gion in the evening
- Arashiyama: the bamboo grove early, Tenryu-ji, the monkey park; Kinkaku-ji, the Golden Pavilion, and Ryoan-ji's rock garden
- Day trip to Nara: the giant Buddha of Todai-ji and the bowing deer in the park (~45 min)
- **Kyoto-only version**: stay until night 15 and add day trips to Osaka (~15–30 min) and Kobe (~50 min)

WHERE TO STAY

Mitsui Garden Hotel Kyoto Sanjo central, walk to Gion and Nishiki Market — ¥20–35k

Cross Hotel Kyoto stylish hotel by the Kamo River — ¥25–40k

☆☆ **Hotel The Mitsui Kyoto** built around an Edo-period garden, with its own hot spring — ¥120k+

Good to know Kyoto's big sights fill up by 9:00. Do one icon at opening time, and spend the rest of the day in the quieter temples nearby.

WHERE I EAT

Sushi Kaiseki Kozuki
sushi kaiseki

05 Osaka 大阪

Nights 13–15 · Street food, Kobe beef & Arima Onsen

PLAN

- Day 13: 15–30 min from Kyoto by JR or private railway. Osaka Castle, then Dotonbori and Shinsekai for takoyaki, okonomiyaki and kushikatsu
- Day 14: Kobe: the harbour, the Kitano district of old foreign houses, Nankinmachi Chinatown, and Kobe beef for lunch
- In the afternoon, take the bus or train up to **Arima Onsen** (~30 min from Kobe): one of Japan's oldest hot-spring towns, with rust-coloured kinsen (gold) and clear ginsen (silver) water. Stay for an evening soak
- Day 15: Umeda Sky Building, Kuromon Market, or a half day at Himeji Castle (~1 h)

WHERE TO STAY

Cross Hotel Osaka a few steps from Dotonbori — ¥25–40k

Hotel Hankyu Respire Osaka above Osaka Station, easy for Kobe days — ¥18–30k

☆☆ **Conrad Osaka** on the top floors of a tower in Nakanoshima — ¥80k+

Good to know Want a ryokan night? Stay one of the three nights in Arima itself. Taketoritei Maruyama and Hyoe Koyokaku are classics (¥50–90k).

WHERE I EAT

Yakisoba Baby / Okonomiyaki Baby, Dotonbori
okonomiyaki & yakisoba

Zeniya Nishinakajima
kushikatsu

06 Hakone, Fuji or Kamakura 箱根・富士・鎌倉

21-day version · 2 nights · Pick one stop on the way back

PLAN

- **Hakone & Lake Ashi**: Shinkansen to Odawara, then the Hakone loop on the Free Pass: mountain railway, cable car, the ropeway over the steaming Owakudani valley, a pirate ship across Lake Ashi to the torii in the water. A ryokan night with a private bath
- **Lake Kawaguchi (Fuji Five Lakes)**: Shinkansen to Mishima, bus around Mount Fuji (~2 h). The Chureito Pagoda, lakeside walks, a room facing Fuji; highway bus to Shinjuku afterwards (~2 h)
- **Kamakura**: ~1 h south of Tokyo by JR. The Great Buddha, Hase-dera above the sea, Hokoku-ji's bamboo garden, the Enoden line to Enoshima island
- Option: the onsen towns of Yugawara and Atami are just south of Odawara, an easy detour from Hakone

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Fujiya Hotel (Hakone)** historic hotel from 1878, onsen and old-world dining room — ¥50–80k

☆☆ **Hakone Ginyu** every room has a private bath above the valley — ¥120k+

☆ **Kozantei Ubuya (Kawaguchiko)** ryokan where every room faces Mount Fuji — ¥60–100k

Hotel Metropolitan Kamakura modern hotel next to Kamakura Station — ¥20–35k

> **Good to know** Fuji hides in cloud most of the time from June to September. The clearest views come in the early mornings from late October to February.

WHERE I EAT

Mugitoro Warabe (Atami)
mugitoro (grated yam on barley rice)

Beer Stand Kadoya (Yugawara)
craft beer in the onsen town

07 Tokyo 東京

Nights 16–17 (21 days: 18–20) · Last shopping & a final feast

PLAN

- Day 16: Tokaido Shinkansen Osaka or Kyoto → Tokyo (~2 h 15). Sit in seat **E** for the view of Mount Fuji
- The Ghibli Museum (book weeks ahead), Shimokitazawa or Kichijoji, last shopping in Ginza
- Last day: Haneda is ~30 min from central Tokyo, Narita ~1 h

WHERE TO STAY

Mitsui Garden Hotel Ginza Premier high floors over Ginza, 5 min to Tokyo Station — ¥30–45k

Hotel Gracery Shinjuku the Godzilla hotel, right in Kabukicho — ¥22–35k

Good to know Same hotel as the first nights? Leave a suitcase there with everything you don't need for the loop.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Ginza shopping
MUJI, Onitsuka Tiger, Daiso, drugstores

Tokyo Video Gamers Cafe & Bar (Akihabara)
retro games with a drink

WHERE I EAT

A Happy Pancake Ginza
soufflé pancakes

Gyūan Ginza
beef

Sushiro Kagurazaka
conveyor-belt sushi

Budget

Estimates for October at ¥150 ≈ US$1 · ¥165 ≈ €1. Ranges, not promises.

Version	Accommodation (2 people)	+ Trains (per person)	Per person
18 days, value: business hotels, one farmhouse night	≈ ¥380k	≈ ¥55k	≈ ¥245k
18 days, middle: the first hotel at most stops	≈ ¥470k	≈ ¥55k	≈ ¥290k
21 days: + two nights in Hakone, Kawaguchiko or Kamakura	+ ¥60–140k	+ ¥10k	+ ¥40–80k
+ Splurge: Asadaya, Hotel The Mitsui or Hakone Ginyu	+ ¥80–120k		+ ¥40–60k

MY RECOMMENDATION

Take the middle version, **about ¥290k per person for 18 days**. If you add one thing, take the 21-day version with a Hakone ryokan. Prices in Kyoto and Tokyo climb sharply in cherry-blossom season and in November.

🚗 Trains include the Hokuriku Shinkansen Tokyo → Kanazawa, Kanazawa → Kyoto via Tsuruga, the Shirakawa-go bus, local trains in Kansai and the Tokaido Shinkansen back to Tokyo.

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Food and drinks
- Entrance fees, the Hakone Free Pass, ropeways and tours
- Late March to early April and November: up to +50% in Kyoto

Booking & practical tips

JR PASS?

Usually not worth it for this route: the Japan Rail Pass got much more expensive in 2023, and the long journeys are spread over 2–3 weeks. Price single tickets against the Hokuriku Arch Pass, which covers Tokyo → Kanazawa → Kyoto/Osaka.

LUGGAGE

Send big suitcases ahead by takkyubin (hotel front desks handle it, delivery the next day). Many Shinkansen also require a reservation for oversized luggage.

KANSAI: ONE BASE OR TWO?

Kyoto-only means no hotel change and quiet evenings; Osaka means cheaper hotels, better nightlife and easy Kobe and Arima trips. Both work. Osaka is the better pick if you want the onsen night.

SEASONS

Cherry blossoms: Tokyo and Kyoto late March to early April, Kanazawa a week later. Autumn colours: Kanazawa early November, Kyoto mid to late November. Summer is hot and humid; winter is calm and cheap, with snow in Shirakawa-go.

BOOK EARLY

Kyoto in spring and autumn, the Shirakawa-go farmhouse inns and Hakone ryokans sell out months ahead. Ghibli Museum tickets go on sale on the 10th of the month before.

EAT

Sushi and wagyu in Tokyo, gold-leaf sweets and seafood in Kanazawa, kaiseki and tofu in Kyoto, takoyaki and okonomiyaki in Osaka, Kobe beef in Kobe.

Pick your version

18 DAYS · KYOTO AS THE ONLY BASE

1. Tokyo (4 nights)
2. Kanazawa (3), with a Shirakawa-go day trip
3. Kyoto (8), with day trips to Nara, Osaka and Kobe
4. Tokyo (2)

18 DAYS · KYOTO + OSAKA

1. Tokyo (4 nights)
2. Kanazawa (2) + Shirakawa-go farmhouse (1)
3. Kyoto (5), with a Nara day trip
4. Osaka (3), with Kobe, Arima Onsen and Himeji
5. Tokyo (2)

21 DAYS · WITH FUJI OR KAMAKURA

1. Tokyo (4 nights)
2. Kanazawa (3)
3. Kyoto (5)
4. Osaka (3)
5. Hakone, Lake Kawaguchi or Kamakura (2)
6. Tokyo (3)

Frequently asked questions

Is 18 days too long for a first trip?

No. It's what makes this route relaxed: four nights in Tokyo, three in Kanazawa, and enough Kyoto time to see the famous sights early and the quiet ones in the afternoon.

Should I base myself in Kyoto or also stay in Osaka?

Kyoto-only is calmer, with no hotel change. Splitting with Osaka means cheaper hotels, better nightlife and easy trips to Kobe and Arima Onsen. If the onsen night matters to you, add Osaka.

Is Shirakawa-go worth an overnight stay?

If you can book a farmhouse inn, yes: after the last tour buses leave around 16:00, the village is completely different. Otherwise, a day trip from Kanazawa is easy.

Is the JR Pass worth it?

Usually not since the price increase in 2023. Single tickets for Tokyo → Kanazawa → Kyoto → Tokyo cost less than the national pass. Price the Hokuriku Arch Pass for the Kanazawa leg.

Hakone, Lake Kawaguchi or Kamakura for the 21-day version?

Hakone for a ryokan night and a mountain loop, Lake Kawaguchi for the best views of Mount Fuji, Kamakura for temples and the sea without changing trains much. Fuji is clearest from late autumn to winter.