



a spring caravan...

in Search of the Last Samurai

DETAILED DOSSIER

15 day itinerary

Kyoto - Kinosaki Onsen - Matsue -
Hagi - Kumamoto - Hitoyoshi -
Kagoshima - Osaka

Travel dates

Fri 27 March – Thu 09 April 2015

INTRODUCTION

This unique and innovative itinerary has been forged deep in The Oriental Caravan's foundry of new tours and tempered with the precision usually preserved for the keenest of samurai swords. Loosely based on the extraordinary story of warrior-statesman Saigo Takamori, on whose life the film 'The Last Samurai' was based, we will journey off-the-beaten-track visiting some of Japan's most fascinating but least visited areas. Beginning in the enduringly lasting city of Kyoto we will head west to explore the castle towns, fishing villages and *onsen* resorts that dot the ruggedly spectacular San-in Coast. Later we travel through the heart of rustic Kyushu staying in charming *ryokan* and visiting some of the sites associated with Saigo's heroic but ultimately doomed 'Satsuma Rebellion' against the newly restored, American-backed Meiji Emperor. From Kagoshima, where we visit the site of the last samurai's last stand (and also make a nearby trip to the astounding 'kamikaze' museum!), we conclude our journey in the exciting metropolis of Osaka.



Who was the Last Samurai? Saigō Takamori (January 23, 1828 – September 24, 1877) was one of the most influential samurai in Japanese history, living during the late Edo Period and early Meiji Era. He has been dubbed the last true samurai. The film the Last Samurai was based on his life. He was a brilliant military leader who was influential in the restoration of the Emperor and defeat of the shogunate. The changes that this restoration ultimately brought about, especially in its abolition of the samurai as a class, and deference to western ideas, lead Saigo to resign from politics and instead reluctantly lead a doomed samurai rebellion. Ultimately in true *samurai* style he is said to have committed *seppuku* ritual suicide rather than surrender to overwhelming government forces.



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ITINERARY

Day 1 Kyoto After arrival in Japan transfer to our centrally-located hotel in Kyoto. For those group members who have arrived early there are plenty of opportunities to explore the various attractions nearby to our hotel, including the Imperial Palace Park. In the evening we all meet up and have our first chance to experience some of Kyoto's legendary cuisine. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 2 Kyoto Flanked on all sides by lush, forested hills, and with the shallow waters of the cherry tree-lined Kamagawa river flowing gently down its length, Kyoto lies in a delightful setting. Originally modelled on Xian in China, the city's long and rich history reaches back to a time well before its choice as imperial capital in the 8th century. Since then generations of artisans and benefactors have helped build a legacy of almost 2,000 Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and Zen gardens. The ensuing centuries have seen the city become a paradise not just for the pilgrim but also for the pleasure-seeker, and in the cobbled streets of the Gion quarter it is still possible to steal a glimpse into the enigmatic and often misunderstood world of the *geisha*. With such a limitless wealth of treasures and traditions the city of today stands proudly at the country's cultural heart, still managing to effortlessly encapsulate all that is magical and refined about Japan. Kyoto remains, for many a visitor, the finest city in Asia.

It was to Kyoto that the young Saigo Takamori was sent in 1864 by Satsuma Daimyo Shimazu Hisamitsu in order to take command of the Satsuma troops based there. This morning an orientation tour takes us to some of Kyoto's more important samurai sites, including the imposing Chion in Temple, headquarters of the Jodo (Pure Land) school of Buddhism. This temple was also used as a set for many of the scenes in the Last Samurai. Later we will visit the extravagantly decorated Kinkakuji temple, which was immortalised in Yukio Mishima's novel "The Golden Pavilion". From here it is also possible to walk or drive the short distance to Ryoan-ji, perhaps Japan's most famous Zen garden. The rest of the afternoon is free, or offers the possibility of walking in the eastern hills at Daimonji Yama for fine views over Kyoto and beyond. For samurai fans there is also a museum dedicated to among others Ryoma Sakamoto, it is called Ryozen Rekishikan, and is located near Kiyomizu temple (www.ryozen-museum.or.jp). Then, in the early evening, there will be an introductory briefing followed by dinner at one of the city's many delightful restaurants, situated near the new and architecturally astounding railway station. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 3 Kyoto Today is either a free day or for those who wish we will make an excursion by train via Himeji to the intriguing mountain-top temple complex of Engyoji. Our journey will involve a cable car ride and a pleasant walk along paths lined with statues of Avalokitesvara to the various temples open to the public, including the Daiko-do where scenes from the Last Samurai were filmed. This temple and its surroundings are particularly beautiful at the time of the cheery blossom in April. For those who prefer more time in Kyoto there are of course a great many things to see and do; in particular this is a city that lends itself to walking, and there are many differing routes that can be taken during this day at leisure. Recommended is a gentle stroll through the eastern hills along the 'Path of Philosophy' that links Ginkaku-ji, the Temple of the Silver Pavilion, with Nanzen-ji Temple. This walk can be extended south via the Heian shrine and on through well-preserved old town areas to Kiyomizu-dera (lit. the Temple of Clear Water). From here there is a justifiably famous view across a wooded gorge toward Kyoto. Closer to our hotel are the architecturally impressive Higashi Honganji temple and the almost surreal Sanjusangendo, home to 1001 statues of Kannon the bodhisattva of compassion – whose name, incidentally, was later taken up by the camera company Canon. Both make for an interesting visit. In the late afternoon, for those who wish, there will be a short walking tour of Gion – the *geisha* district – with its many old teahouses, some of them mentioned in the widely acclaimed novel "Memoirs of a Geisha". Later a traditional dinner will be served in one of the many restaurants of the Pontocho area. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 4 Kinosaki Onsen This morning we head north by train from Kyoto as we make our way to Amanohashidate famous as having one of Japan's 'three great views'. Amanohashidate means 'Bridge to Heaven' – it is certainly an impressive sight but is in reality a long sandspit lined with numerous pine trees. We have time to explore before continuing our journey to the delightful hot spring resort at Kinosaki. Kinosaki is a classic *onsen* town with a willow-lined canal running through its centre. As well as the pools at our establishment the town is famous for its seven hot springs and *onsen* aficionados can spend a lovely time taking in the waters before sampling some of the town's justifiably famous fresh crab. Also of interest is the Mugiwarara museum with exhibits pertaining to the areas curious form of barley-made handicrafts. *Overnight – ryokan*

ITINERARY *continued*

Day 5 Matsue Today we travel to Matsue passing en route through the stunning San-in Kaigan Coastal park. At Tottori we may break our journey and take a short trip to the Tottori sand dunes, location of Hiroshi's classic 1964 movie *Woman of the Dunes*. The dunes are an important stop for Japanese tourists who love to pose with camels but they might nonetheless still be worth a visit for those with a penchant for sand. We return with fine views of the Tanega-ike pond before continuing our journey to Matsue. Situated on the shores of Lake Shinji Matsue is a refreshingly unspoilt and relaxing town and a great place to spend time exploring small town Japan. Among its historical associations one, that is of particular interest to the west, is that of being home to the Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo). At the turn of the century Hearn was one of the few scribes who interpreted the mysterious Japanese world for the mind of the incredulous western reader. His 'Glimpse of Unfamiliar Japan' (1894) was a particular classic and has a fine description of Matsue as it appeared to this gifted observer over a hundred years ago. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 6 Matsue We have a full day to explore Matsue's many sights. In particular its castle is well-renowned and has one of only a few original keeps in Japan. It is known as Plover castle due to the gracefulness of its eaves and houses an impressive selection of treasures once belonging to the locally powerful Matsudaira clan. As might be expected from somewhere often known as "The Venice of the Orient," a novel way of viewing the castle is by boat on one of the cruises that explore the town's many canals. Also of interest is the Lafcadio Hearn former residence, where he wrote 'In a Japanese Garden', and its associated museum. The Buke Yashiki Samurai residence is also of architectural note and is immaculately preserved. Outside of town art lovers are recommended to visit the Adachi Art Museum which, as well as an outstanding art collection, has a garden rated as one of the best in Japan. At the end of the day one of the ways for fish lovers to quell an accumulated appetite is to try and complete a feast of Matsue's 'Seven Delicacies from the Lake'! *Overnight – hotel*

Day 7 Hagi This morning we continue our journey eastward along more of the beautiful san-in coastline eventually reaching Hagi, another attractive and historically important coastal town. This town was once headquarters of the powerful Choshu clan who were influential in the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and the restoration of the Meiji Emperor. Although famous as being a centre of some of Japan's best ceramics, *hagiyaki* ware, Hagi is very much a castle town and has one of the best preserved Samurai quarters in all of Japan. With its high white-washed walls the residential area is quite expansive and stretches right across to the castle moat. Of the three areas, Jokamachi, Horiumachi and Teramachi, the Jokamachi is arguably the most interesting with its Kikuya and Kubota houses both being worthy of a visit. *Overnight – ryokan*

Day 8 Kumamoto After a morning to either relax on the beach or further explore Hagi we continue on to Kumamoto, crossing over the Shimonoseki straits and taking advantage of Kyushu's new bullet train service. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 9 Kumamoto Today we have the full day to explore this vibrant and confident city with its sidewalk-lined streets and easy-going atmosphere. A highlight of any visit is Kumamoto castle, which although much reconstructed is nonetheless an imposing site. It is its historical connotations that make a visit here such a memorable one for it is here that during the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion Saigo Takamori's forces tried in heroic vain to storm the mighty walls of the castle, before retreating south. The castle has beautiful grounds and the nearby Hosukawa samurai villa is also worth a visit. Kumamoto also has literary associations and the former homes of both Lafcadio Hearn and Natsume Soseki (of *Botchan* fame!) are to be found here. For samurai aficionados there is also the chance to visit Reigando, the shrine and cave of Miyamoto Musashi author of the *Gorinnosho* (The Book of the Five Rings). Further afield is the site of the Battle of Tabaruzaka, one of the most decisive of the entire Satsuma Rebellion. Kumamoto is famous for its night life and this evening we have a chance to explore the lively Namikizaka entertainment area. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 10 Hitoyoshi We begin our slow but delightfully scenic rail journey to Hitoyoshi where we will stay in a beautiful old ryokan. The town is another place important in the story of Saigo Takamori and we may have a local historian enlighten us as to some of the more esoteric aspects of his campaign. Elsewhere in town the ruins of the castle make for an atmospheric stroll especially during the time of the cherry blossom. Also of note is Eikokuji, a temple famous for a hanging scroll on which is drawn the terrible image of a ghost! *Overnight – ryokan*

Day 11 Kagoshima On one of Japan's most scenic rail journeys, complete with switchbacks, we continue to Kagoshima, another candidate for 'Naples of Japan'! Kagoshima is an important city in the modern development of Japan being home of the Shimazu clan and also site of the arrival of missionary Frances Xavier. The town is back-dropped by the impressive Sakura Volcano, one that is still active and obliging the locals regularly use their umbrellas to protect themselves from the ash. In the afternoon we have time to visit the beautiful Iso-Teien Garden. There should also be time to visit Shiroyama, the site of Saigo Takamori's heroic last stand and ultimate *seppuku*. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 12 Kagoshima Today we make a day trip to the lovely little village of Chiran to visit its beautiful Samurai Houses and fascinating Kamikaze Museum. Chiran's location led it to being one of the major bases for *kamikaze* raids against the approaching American enemy and there is now a Kamikaze Peace Museum with moving collections dedicated to the young officers of the ill-fated Special Attacks Corps. Of perhaps greater note are the mid-Edo period samurai houses which line the main street and which are possessed of exquisite Japanese gardens. In the late afternoon we return to Kagoshima.

Overnight – hotel

Day 13 Osaka This morning we transfer to the airport for a short flight back to the island of Honshu and Osaka, Japan's second largest city. Our hotel is centrally located close to the exciting Dotonbori district, the perfect place to bid Japan and friends farewell. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 14 Caravan concludes...

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour price (excluding international flights) – £2345 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 bi-lingual tour leader from The Oriental Caravan assisted by a local guide in Kyoto and other local guides where applicable..

Transport We make good use of Japan's well-developed and highly efficient train system, whether it be the quaint, sometimes bizarre, local trains of Kyushu or the futuristic bullet trains in Honshu. 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. Other forms of transport used include tram, public and private bus and private taxis. Much of the sightseeing is done by foot, and it should be noted that use of the train system necessarily entails a certain amount of walking. From Kagoshima we take a domestic flight back to Osaka.

Accommodation We stay in a variety of styles of accommodation, both Western and Japanese. In Kinokuni Onsen we stay at an old style family-run *ryokan*, an exclusive establishment with fine hot springs. At Matsue we stay in a beachfront *ryokan* with great views over the Sea of Japan. At Hitoyoshi we stay in another fine old traditional *ryokan*. Elsewhere we stay in comfortable tourist class hotels. At the *ryokan* in Kinokuni, as is often the case in Japanese *ryokans*, it may on rare occasion be necessary to sleep 3 or more to a room. The tour is sold on a twin share basis. If required a single supplement, available when staying at hotels, is available at a cost of £198. All hotel rooms have en suite facilities. For the nights spent at *ryokans* we will be sleeping on the floor on Japanese-style *futons*, which most people find to be very comfortable.

Food Meals are not included in the cost of the tour except in Kinokuni, Hagi and Hitoyoshi. Where we eat at our lodgings, food is something of a highlight of the trip and expected to be of an excellent quality. As always the tour leader will be on hand to suggest restaurants and, where necessary, assist with ordering meals. On the days when meals are not included, depending upon your appetite and choice you can expect to spend, on average, between £15-25 per day on food and drink. It is possible to eat more cheaply than this or to spend considerably more. It is worth mentioning that Japanese cuisine is generally of a very high quality and extremely varied. For many visitors it is a distinct highlight of any visit. For those with more conservative tastes Western food is generally available at all the places that we visit. There is the option of some great vegetarian food – both Asian and Western – along the way but at certain places en route the choice of meat/fish-free meals may be limited.

Weather Japan has a temperate climate with four distinct seasons. Our visit is in April 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 at the time of booking all participants take out cancellation insurance so that should they need to cancel prior to departure and do so within the terms of their policy their costs at least in part will be recoverable from their insurer. (For your convenience, The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable insurance policy, on request).

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, including British passport-holders, a single-entry (Temporary Visitor) tourist visa is issued on arrival in Japan. Prospective group members of other visa status (e.g. business or student) should include details of their visa on their booking form.

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 nearer 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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