All cultures are a mix of the indigenous and the assimilated, but Japan is singularly defined by its ability to preserve the ancient while thriving amidst the modern. Among the high-rise glass and concrete and 21st century technology, ancient rituals flourish, traditional festivals endure and a reverence for nature remains a defining trait. Highly ritualized yet simple, elegant yet dynamic, Japan’s contradictions are utterly fascinating.

This journey unlocks the door to understanding and appreciation—demystifying Japanese religious traditions, providing access to its fabulous cultural wealth, and revealing the meanings behind the rituals. On this superb itinerary, visit Japan’s cities, countryside, temples and ancient capitals, experience the highlights of Tokyo and Kyoto, meet a geisha, access gorgeous temples and gardens, stay in a ryokan (Japanese inn) and sample delicious Japanese cuisine. Join us for an intimate, insightful exploration of unique and captivating Japan.

GROUP SIZE: 12 to 20 travelers

PRICING: Per person double occupancy: $12,995 / Per person single supplement: $3,950

STUDY LEADER: Theodore J. Gilman (Ted) is the Executive Director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (WCFIA) at Harvard University, a leading research institute focusing on comparative, international, global, and transnational topics. With 210 faculty associates across the university, the Weatherhead Center covers the entire world from a broad array of disciplinary perspectives. The WCFIA supports undergraduate and graduate student research, and it hosts visiting scholars and practitioners from around the world.

Ted was a tenured member of the Political Science Department at Union College for ten years before coming to Harvard, where he taught courses on Japanese Politics, East Asian International Relations, and Urban Politics. He was the Executive Director of the Reischauer Institute for Japanese Studies at Harvard prior to assuming his current post at the WCFIA. Ted has spent more than three years in Japan, teaching and doing research. He has published a book entitled No Miracles Here: Fighting Urban Decline in Japan and the US (SUNY Press), and he has lectured on this topic in Europe, Asia, and North America. Ted has led student groups on semesters abroad in both Japan and Vietnam. He has served as a consultant on curricular development issues at the K-12 and university levels. He is a graduate of Tufts University and has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Michigan.
SCHEDULE BY DAY

B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19
DEPART THE U.S.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 20
ARRIVE TOKYO

After clearing Immigration and Customs, a local representative will meet you to assist you with your transfer to your hotel by airport shuttle (join-in with others). The transfer will take approximately 90 minutes, depending on traffic.

Settle into your room with the evening free to relax after your long international flights.

Overnight: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21
TOKYO

In the morning gather for a brief trip orientation followed by a full day exploration of Tokyo.

Begin by visiting the nearby East Garden of the Imperial Palace (Kokyo Higashi Gyoen), part of the inner palace area. These gardens are the former site of Edo Castle’s innermost circles of defense. None of the main buildings remain today, but the moats, walls, entrance gates, and several guardhouses still exist.

Proceed to Harajuku to stroll the wooded grounds of Meiji Shrine, a perfect example of pure Shinto architecture with its huge torii gates at the entrance. Tragically, like so many other cultural monuments, the shrine was destroyed in WWII bombing raids. However, unlike many other shrines, the reconstruction of Meiji Shrine, completed in 1958, is authentic. Tour the shrine and learn about Japan’s ancient indigenous Shinto religion.

Venture into nearby Harajuku and stroll Takeshita Street with its trendy shops geared toward the pop culture of Tokyoites. Sundays are when the local students and young people gather wearing the newest trends. It is quite interesting, but crowded, so be sure to stick together. Also stroll down tree-lined Omotesando Avenue, Tokyo’s top fashion street, and continue to the Ukiyo-e Ota Memorial Museum of Art with its wonderful collection of woodblock prints.

In the afternoon visit the Aoyama District where a special Taiko Drum lesson has been arranged. Taiko is a Japanese drum with a long history, first used as a means of communication and later incorporated into performance arts such as Kabuki and Noh. It is still used in this fashion today. Your private Taiko drum lesson is a fun and participatory activity for all ages.

End the day with a walk through the Shibuya District, one of Tokyo’s most popular shopping and entertainment districts. This is the Tokyo of one’s imagination—with large buildings, flashing neon advertisements, giant video screens, and busy streets. Witness the scramble crossing in front of the Hachiko exit of Shibuya Station.

Overnight: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo (B, L, D)

MONDAY, OCTOBER 22
TOKYO

Begin today at the Roppongi Hills complex, a redevelopment project and a symbol of contemporary Japan. Tour the ground level art installations and view the city from the Observation Deck, overlooking Tokyo from 250 meters above sea level and providing a full 360-degree view.

Continue to Hama-Rikyu Garden, located on Tokyo Bay at the mouth of the Sumida River. This garden was once the family garden and official duck hunting grounds for the Tokugawa Shogun. Stroll through
the garden before boarding a boat up the Sumida River, disembarking at one of Tokyo’s most traditional areas. Asakusa, with its Sensoji Temple and the adjacent shopping street, Nakamise, has been a mecca for travelers and entertainers since the 1600s. This area still remains vibrant and charming. In the afternoon proceed to Ueno Park, which opened its gates in 1873 and is famous for its thousand cherry trees. Visit the Tokyo National Museum located within the park. The museum exhibits a comprehensive collection of art works and antiquities from Japan and other Asian countries.

Dinner is on your own tonight to discover some of Tokyo’s culinary delights.

Overnight: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo (B, L)

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23
TOKYO / KAMAKURA / HAKONE

This morning depart Tokyo for the drive south to Hakone, stopping en route in Kamakura, a quiet town surrounded by rolling hills and sandy beaches. This town was the capital of Japan from 1192 to 1333. Once in Kamakura, get off the beaten path to the often overlooked Hokoku-ji Temple, also called “Take-dera” (bamboo temple). Here about 2,000 thick and fine moso bamboo grow densely and vigorously towards the sky. If you would like, enjoy a cup of matcha (powdered green tea) in the lovely tea house.

Then visit Kamakura’s most famous site—Kotokuin, home of Daibutsu, the Great Buddha. This bronze figure was cast in 1252, and at one time was enclosed in a massive wooden temple, which was destroyed in 1494 by a colossal tidal wave. Kamakura and the temple were flattened, but the Daibutsu remained and has braved the elements ever since. This giant Buddha measures 11.4 meters (37.4 feet) high and weighs 122 tons.

Afterwards continue to Hakone, a popular resort since the great warrior Toyotomi Hideyoshi discovered natural hot springs in this beautiful mountainous area in the 16th century. During the Edo Period, Hakone was also a very important checkpoint along the old Toakaido Road linking Edo (Tokyo) with Kyoto.

Arriving in Hakone, transfer to your ryokan, or Japanese Inn. Staying in a ryokan is as much a part of the Japanese experience as the sites and places visited by day. Settle into your room, enjoy the hot springs and relax by donning a yukata (a cotton robe generally used for lounging) and enjoying the exquisite taste of refined Japanese cuisine for dinner tonight.

Overnight: Kai Hakone, Hakone (B, L, D)

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 24
HAKONE / KYOTO

This morning, visit the fabulous Hakone Open-Air Museum (Chokoku-no-mori). This world-renowned outdoor sculpture garden focuses on 19th and 20th century works, featuring artists including Bourdelle, Despiau, Rodin and Moore. There is also a small indoor Picasso exhibition. It is a wonderful place to stroll and a visit here is not to be missed.

Next take a cable car ride to get up close and personal with the steaming Owakudani Crater—it is considered lucky to eat an egg cooked in the boiling water. From here, enjoy a spectacular view of Mt. Fuji (weather permitting). Then enjoy a boat ride across picturesque Lake Ashi. The big, colorful boats tend to be amusingly kitsch, sporting Disneyland-esque pirate themes and indulging the Japanese affinity for cartoon characters.

Transfer to Odawara Station to board the shinkansen (bullet train) to Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan for over a thousand years. Kyoto is home to invaluable treasures and is a repository of much of the best Japanese art, culture, religion and thought. Seventeen UNESCO World Heritage sites reside in Kyoto alone.

Overnight: Okura Hotel, Kyoto (B, L, D)
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25
KYOTO

Begin exploring Kyoto in Southern Higashiyama, the city’s most popular sightseeing district, packed with first-rate sights. Walk along Chawanzaka, the quaint, old lane lined with handicraft and pottery shops. From here, continue to the side entrance of Kiyomizudera, the temple of "pure water." While many other famous temples are the preserves of certain sects, Kiyomizudera seems to belong to everyone. For over 1,000 years pilgrims have climbed the slope to pray to the temple's 11-headed Kannon image and drink from its sacred spring. The main hall's verandah offers wonderful views of Kyoto. To view the temple itself, walk to the pagoda across the ravine, and see why the expression "to jump off Kiyomizu's stage" is the Japanese equivalent of "to take the plunge."

Proceed to Tofuku-ji, a temple complex that is often overlooked by the ordinary tourist. This temple contains the Honbo Garden which has been designated as a National Site of Scenic Beauty. Tofukuji also houses the Tsutenkyo Bridge, spanning a valley of lush maple trees.

After exploring Tofuku-ji, drive to the magnificent Fushimi Inari Shrine, made famous as a filming site in the critically acclaimed Memoirs of a Geisha. Here there is a pathway covered by more than 2,000 red painted torii gates stretching nearly two miles up the hillside to the main shrine.

Continue to Gion, Kyoto's traditional entertainment district and the realm of geisha and hostesses where your day culminates with a visit to an ochiya (teahouse) and an appointment to meet with a maiko (apprentice geisha). Spend some time talking to her, learning about the role of geisha in Japanese society.

Overnight: Okura Hotel, Kyoto (B, L, D)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26
KYOTO

After breakfast, transfer to Kinkakuji (the Golden Pavilion), one of the most visited temples in Kyoto, with its authentic and exquisite Japanese-style garden. Its three-storied pavilion is entirely covered in gold foil with a golden phoenix perched on the roof. Originally built in 1397 by the shogun Yoshimitsu as a retirement villa, Kinkakuji was deliberately burnt to the ground in 1950 and an exact replica was erected.

A short distance from Kinkakuji is the Zen temple of Ryoanji (Temple of the Peaceful Dragon), which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is home to one of the most famous rock gardens in Japan. Simply composed of sand and stone, this dry garden is reminiscent of abstract art.

Next, venture west to the base of Kyoto's western Arashiyama Mountains and visit the magnificent Tenryuji Temple, founded in 1339. This UNESCO World Heritage site is one of the major temples of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. Although fires ravaged the temple eight times and the present building dates from 1990, the 14th-century Zen garden is one of the oldest in Japan.

Afterwards, you'll be peddled in a rickshaw through the Bamboo Forest to the base of Mt. Ogura. There you will continue by foot to Okochi-Sanso, the exquisite former villa of Denjiro Okochi, one of Japan's greatest silent screen stars. Stroll the villa's five-acre grounds along winding, wooded paths which Okochi-san spent the last 30 years of his life creating.

Overnight: Okura Hotel, Kyoto (B, L)

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27
KYOTO (NARA)

Today, enjoy an excursion to Nara, the former Imperial Capital (710-784), predating Kyoto. Second only to Kyoto as a repository of ancient Japanese culture, Nara boasts no fewer than eight UNESCO World Heritage sites, each considered a priceless national treasure.
Upon arrival in Nara, visit Kinkouen, where traditional Japanese calligraphy ink is made. Stroll Issuien Garden, one of the most beautiful gardens in Japan and then wander through Nara Deer Park where more than 1,000 tame deer roam freely. Proceed to Todaiji Temple, home to the Great Buddha. This temple is the world’s largest wooden building—a wonder of religious architecture. Also visit Kasuga Shrine, the most famous and beautiful Shinto shrine in Nara, featuring more than 3,000 antique stone and bronze lanterns. Both Todaiji and Kasuga are listed among the registry of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.

Late this afternoon, return to Kyoto with the evening at leisure.

Overnight: Okura Hotel, Kyoto (B, L)

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28
KYOTO / KOYASAN

This morning, embark on an overnight excursion to Koyasan, the center of Shingon Buddhism, a sect which was introduced to Japan in 805. In this small town there are over one hundred temples, all surrounded by mountains and giant cypress trees. At an elevation of approximately 3,500 feet, Koyasan is a bit cooler than the lowlands, so please take some warm layers.

Once in Koyasan, walk amongst the forest of tombstones on the path to Okunoin, mausoleum of the great priest Kobo Daishi. Visit the impressive Kongobuji Temple, the head temple of the Koyasan branch of the Shingon School and home to the largest rock garden in Japan. Also visit Kondo Temple (Great Hall), a majestic and austere-looking building rebuilt in 1932 after a disastrous fire. This temple denotes the union of wisdom and action, a central tenet of Shingon.

Later, check in to your shukubo. All accommodations in Koyasan are shukubo, or temple lodging. Rooms are comfortable and Japanese style, much like in a typical ryokan. All meals at shukubo are shojin ryori, the vegetarian cuisine of monks.

Overnight: Soji-in, Koya-san (B, L, D)

MONDAY, OCTOBER 29
KOYASAN / OSAKA

Early this morning, there is the opportunity to participate in or observe the morning prayers inside the temple. This typically starts daily at about 06:00 AM and continues until approximately 07:30 AM.

After breakfast, further explore Koyasan with a visit to Garan Temple, one of the most sacred temples in Japan. There will be some free time to walk in the woods, explore the shops in town, or perhaps just enjoy some quiet time on your own to reflect and absorb the magical environment of Koyasan.

Early this afternoon, begin the overland drive to Osaka. After checking into your hotel, wander through the flashy neighborhood of Dotombori. This area was once known as the theater district, and is now packed with small bars and restaurants sporting large, brightly colored neon signs. Explore the atmosphere here before reconvening for a farewell dinner.

Overnight: Imperial Hotel, Osaka (B, L, D)

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30
OSAKA / DEPART

Transfer to the Osaka airport for your return flights home. (B)