



Japan

by **MARC DOLMAN** Japan Specialist

With many clients choosing to travel for two weeks, due to work constraints or other reasons, we thought we would start a series of features on the perfect 14 days in some of our favourite destinations. Marc Dolman kicks off the series with his perfect 14 days in Japan.



Kinkakuji Golden Pavilion, Kyoto

IHAVE BEEN LUCKY enough to travel all over the world but no country, in my opinion, can quite match Japan. It's an extremely foreign place to visit, different on so many levels and I think it is this, coupled with the juxtaposition of the old and the new, that makes it so fascinating.

My trip would have to be at a leisurely pace with a mixture of town and country. I like to meet the locals, visit some of the major sights, as well as exploring some of the more off-the-beaten-track places. I also love food, so my perfect itinerary would have to include at least one cookery lesson along with plenty of visits to good quality, local restaurants. Accommodation-wise I would opt for a smattering of top-class hotels, ryokans, mixed in with a handful of boutique and character properties. I would choose to visit Japan in the Autumn when it is a little less crowded and you get those wonderfully crisp clear days. It is also the time of "Koyo" or changing of the leaves and this makes the countryside come alive with deep reds, golds and oranges.

Days 1 to 4 Tokyo

The trip would begin in Tokyo. This is an amazing metropolis and one I will never tire of visiting. The sheer size of the city is incredible with swaths of skyscrapers intertwined with every imaginable type of transport, blazing neon lights and hordes of people rushing about their daily lives. It is, however, riddled with contradictions and away from the blaring sales pitches of Shinjuku or Akihabara you can wile away your time in the many peaceful parks and temples which hint at a less frenetic, bygone era.

Four nights would be ideal and I'd make sure I get up early to visit the fantastic fish market at Tsukiji – this is the world's largest fish market and is buzzing with life in the early mornings. You can see all manner of fish and seafood including huge yellow fin tuna. Having strolled around the markets I'd then indulge in the freshest sushi breakfast ever! Other notable sights would include the futuristic man-made island of Odaiba, the skyscraper district of Shinjuku and the famous Hachiko crossing at Shibuya. Laidback Shimo Kitazawa and the tranquil Hamarikyu gardens would also be

on my list and I'd try and time my trip so I could be in Harajuku on a Sunday to see all the latest fashions of Tokyo's youth.

There are a host of accommodation options in Tokyo but while exploring the city my favourite place to stay is the Peninsula; the newest addition to a suite of luxury five-star hotels in the city and one that boasts views over the Imperial Palace – a great location to begin any trip.

Days 5 to 8 Tsumago

Leaving Tokyo behind I would then make my way to the tiny postal village of Tsumago in the Kiso Valley. This is very much rural Japan and an almighty contrast to Tokyo. Protected by a local charter which forbids any satellite dishes, TV cables, phone lines or street lights, Tsumago offers a real taste of traditional Japan, with its dark wood lattice fronted buildings which line the lantern-lit cobbled streets. I'd stay at the family run Fujioto Ryokan which is a firm favourite of mine and, although the actual accommodation is simple, aesthetically it is stunning with rooms looking out onto manicured Japanese gardens complete with Koi carp. The food is also delicious.

Mr Fujihara serves up delicious, locally sourced kaiseki meals, which consist of a variety of small dishes all served at the same time. The meal starts with an assortment of appetisers, some delicious, some, such as bee larvae, maybe not so! All this is followed by some fine pieces of sashimi, then grilled trout (caught fresh out of the river that day), along with a succulent beef dish (sometimes served on a hot plate or in a bubbling nabe pot), and rounded off with a cleansing miso soup.

Days 8 to 10 Kyoto

Once the ancient capital of Japan, Kyoto was spared the devastation of the Second World War and therefore boasts an array of grand palaces, ornate shrines and exquisite gardens. With so much to see, I would have a total of three nights here, allowing me time to take in the major shrines and temples and also indulge in my passion for food with a unique cookery lesson with the ladies of the local WI. This was the highlight of a recent trip and, although my host didn't speak much English, she was certainly able to kindly mock my attempt at sushi rolls – apparently they had a closer resemblance to swiss rolls!

