

Niigata, Sado Island & Tokyo Spring Explorer Tour

April 11TH – 20th, 2021



8 nights/10 days from: \$3495 double or triple \$3795 single

Reserve by November 1st - Save \$50 per person!

Cancel for any reason up to 60 days prior-FULL REFUND!

Maximum Tour size is 24 tour members!

Little visited and often overlooked, Niigata is a beautiful remote region with fabulous sights, great food and excellent countryside landscapes -deserving much more attention than it gets.

Located nearly 200 miles northwest from Tokyo, the Niigata-Sado Island region offers visitors a very different experience to the hustle and bustle of the Tokaido seaboard.

Along with a leisurely 2-night stay on Sado Island, we have included four hands-on experiences, a ride on a tarbi bune (traditional washtub boat), sake tasting, a ferry ride to and from Sado Island and the bullet train.

We end with 3 days in Japan's capital, Tokyo. Enjoy time at Tsukiji Outer Market and Ameyoko for omiyage shopping, a free day in Ikebukuro, one of Tokyo's top neighborhoods, and teamLabs Borderless, a world of artworks without boundaries, a museum without a map.

Itinerary

Day 1 – April 11th Sunday – Depart from Honolulu

Hawaiian Airlines #855 Departs Honolulu at 12:55pm - Arrives Haneda at 5:10 pm + 1

International check-in begins 3 hours prior to the flight departure time. Please meet your Panda Travel representative at the Hawaiian Airlines international ticket counters, located in Terminal 2, Lobby 4.

After checking in, please proceed to the TSA security check which at times can also be long as they now open and check all food items that you bring through. From here we will meet up at the departure gate.

If you are arriving in on Hawaiian Airlines flight from neighbor island and have checked your bags through to Tokyo, please go directly to the departure gate on arrival in Honolulu. Your Panda Travel escort will contact you once she gets there. It is NOT necessary to come out and then go through TSA a second time.

Day 2 – April 12th - Monday – Haneda

After clearing customs, our local English-speaking guide will be waiting and join us for the short drive to Hotel JAL City Haneda Tokyo.

If you arrive hungry, the hotel's restaurant is open until midnight or just across the street is a 24-hour convenience store for small kine items.

Accommodations: Hotel JAL City Haneda Tokyo



free

Day 3 – April 13th - Tuesday – Tokyo – Takasaki – Kusatsu (B/L/D)

After breakfast, please meet your guide by 8:00am in the lobby. We have a full day ahead beginning with a Charter Coach ride to Takasaki and Kusatsu.

It's approximately a two-hour bus ride with a rest stop before visiting the Takasaki Byakue Daikannon.

From the summit of Mt. Kannonyama at an altitude of 190 meters stands the magnificent statue of Kannon, the White-Robed Goddess of Mercy. Built of concrete in 1936 by businessman Yasusaburo Inoue, the statue measures 41.8 meters in height, weighs 5,985 tons, measures 48 meters around the waist and 0.4 meters around the thumb. The statue is a popular tourist spot and known as the first stop on the pilgrimage of the 88 holy grounds of Kanto. It was chosen as one of the One Hundred Togoku Flower Temples because of the more than 3,000 cherry trees and other seasonal flowers that adorn the surrounding hills.

The inside of the statue is divided into 9 levels and visitors can enter and climb the stairs to the shoulder of the Goddess. There are 20 small Buddhist statues enshrined along the way and the top level provides a sweeping view of the city as well as the Three Mountains of Jomo, and the distant Nikko, Chichibu and Yatsugatake Mountain Ranges.

Next, a western style lunch at a local restaurant.

From here we will visit Shorinzan Daruma Temple to enjoy a hands-on Daruma painting workshop. Paint the pupils and beard of a 12cm tall doll, for your own one-of-a-kind souvenir.

The Fuku-Daruma is a good-luck charm which many Japanese purchase at the beginning of the New Year with hopes that it will bring good fortune. Presently, more than a hundred local farm families make Fuku-Daruma, producing over one and half million annually.

This good luck charm originated here. Shinetsu, the founder of this temple, began a custom of giving the farmers pictures of Bodhidharma, which he would draw with a single brushstroke, as a talisman to ward off evil during the year. Later, during a famine in the Tenmei period, Tohgaku, the ninth priest, made a wooden effigy of Bodhidharma based on the pictures. He taught the farmers how to make these "Daruma dolls" so that they would have some income to carry them over in bad years.

Everywhere in the prefecture, in shops, stations, hotels, you will see a Daruma doll. This traditional artefact is famous for making every wish come true: people make wishes, and Daruma dolls give them emotional and moral support, and they will be there for them until their wishes are granted.

Now, off to Yorokobi no yado Takematsu, an onsen hotel, surrounded by lush greenery and mountains. Our arrival will be approximately 5:00pm. Enjoy free time before dinner to freshen up and enjoy the onsen. The hot spring waters here are known to have antibacterial properties.

Please meet in the lobby by 6:15pm for a Japanese Dinner. After dinner, the remainder of the evening is free.

Accommodations: Yorokobi no yado Takamatsu



Free *- Japanese style bedding

Day 4– April 14th – Wednesday – Kusatsu – Yuzawa – Niigata (B/L)

After breakfast, please meet your guide by 9:00am as we are off on a full day of touring by motor coach for Echigo Yuzawa.

The morning begins with a traditional Yumomi and dance show, a well-choreographed performance that lasts about thirty minutes. Yumomi is the traditional way to cool the spring water.

The temperature of the Kusatsu onsen water is from 51°C to 94°C, which is too hot to bathe in. Yumomi (water stirring) is a way to lower the temperature without cutting it with cold water. The water from the spring is stirred with boards that are 30 cm wide and 180 cm long while the song is sung.

From here, a Japanese lunch at a local restaurant.

Next, we are visiting Tsukiyono Vidro Park, a glass-themed park, which centers around glassworks. There is also a museum, shops, restaurant and café. Enjoy your glass orgel making experience and time to browse and shop.

Now we're off to visit the popular Kokoro Yuzawa Ponshukan Sake, best described as a "theme park" for sake. There are 3 locations, all inside major JR stations. Today, we are visiting the Niigata location.

On entering notice that one wall is lined with sake dispensers that look like mini vending machines. For 500 yen you will receive a sake cup and five tokens. Choose your sake, place a token in the slot and receive a full cup of sake. Enjoy five tastings from no less than 96 varieties, all produced in Niigata.

After the sake tasting, stop by the shop where all 96 varieties are available for purchase along with other rice-related products and pickled foods.

If the sake tasting has made you hungry, do try a bakudan onigiri, which is literally a "bomb" onigiri (rice ball). Why bomb? Because of its size and looks! Wrapped in seaweed, it is larger than your average rice ball.

The name was inspired from the shape and size of cannonball used in earlier times. It is said that if you shoot one down your stomach, you will be full for the whole day!

Now, of to our hotel for the evening, Hotel Sunroute Niigata, less than a 5-minute walk to the JR Niigata Station. A variety of shops and restaurants are all just steps away.

Accommodations: Hotel Sunroute Niigata



Free

Day 5– April 15th – Thursday – Niigata – Sado Island (B/L/D)

After breakfast, please meet your guide in the lobby by 8:30am as we are off to Sado Island with a full day of touring ahead of us.

The morning begins with a short drive to the pier for the Sado Island Ferry. The ferry ride is approximately 2.5 hours.

Welcome to Sado Island, also called the Butterfly Island due to its shape. Sado is known to have been occupied for more than 10,000 years. This historic island's name appears in the Records of Ancient Matters "Kojiki", which is Japan's oldest historical record.

In part due to its maritime climate and the wealth of natural produce growing on its unique terrain, the interactions of people coming here over the many years have fostered a unique history and culture.

Upon arrival on Sado Island, we will be enjoying a Japanese lunch at a local restaurant.

The afternoon begins with a visit to the Sado Gold Mine, the remains of a once flourishing large gold and silver mine on the island, annually producing nearly 400 kg of gold as well as smaller amounts of silver and copper. The mine was in operation throughout the Edo Period, and served as a major source of funding for the Tokugawa Shogunate which directly controlled Sado Island and its mines.



Sado Gold Mine

From here we are off to the Sado Gold Park, a hands-on facility on the old site of Nishimikawa Gold Dust Mine. This mine dates back over 1,000 years and while no longer in operation you can get an idea of what the gold mining process looked like. You will also have an opportunity to try your hand at panning for gold. Who know, you might just hit the jackpot.

Accommodations for our two nights on the island are at the Sado Resort Hotel Azuma, located at the western-most point in the northern Sado mountains. It is an ideal spot for sunset viewing. With our arrival at 5:30pm, we should be able to enjoy the view.

After a dinner, Japanese, the remainder of the evening is free. The hotel offers open-air hot spring baths or just enjoy the peaceful surrounding as the night passes.



Accommodations: Sado Resort Hotel Azuma **Free**

Day 6– April 16th – Friday – Sado Island (B/L/D)

After breakfast, please meet your guide in the lobby by 8:00am. We have a full day of tour!

The morning begins with a visit to Toki Forest Park where you will have the opportunity to see the rare Japanese Crested Ibis, or Toki in Japanese. Once a very widespread breed in Japan, it is very rare to see one of these birds today. Currently, the park has about seventy birds in the park for visitors to observe and learn about.

The park houses an exhibition hall that focuses on the crested ibis and its history in Japan. It also contains various enclosures, mostly off-limits to the public, where crested ibises are being bred and a few other varieties of ibis are kept. A short walk away from the rest of the park is the Toki Fureai Plaza, a semi-natural enclosure with a toki family on display.

Since 2008, Toki Forest Park has been reintroducing crested ibises into the wild. Today, several hundred toki are living in the wild again, with more birds being released every year. As a result, it is now possible again to spot crested ibises around the rice fields of Sado Island with some luck.

Do try the popular soft ice cream made with Sado-grown green edamame beans.

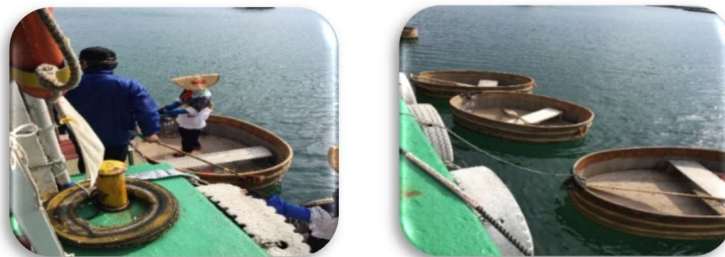
From here, a visit to Sado Rekishi Densetsukan, a history museum featuring displays centering around Sado's history as a place of exile. It also introduces three of the island's most prominent, involuntary visitors: the former Emperor Juntoku, the Buddhist monk Nichiren, and Zeami, the founder of Noh.

On the first floor, famous scenes with historical significance are introduced by robots in elaborate clothing which are exact replicas of historical figures. Witness Emperor Juntoku mourning his fate with the moon at the place of his exile, or a famous Tsukahara debate between Nichiren and other priests from other schools, and Zeami (14th-15th-century Noh actor and playwright) dancing to pray for rains. On the second floor, photographs and art objects inspired by Sado's ambiance are on exhibit. Shodo Sasaki Museum is located within the museum, where the works of lost-wax casting by Shodo Sasaki, a living national treasure, are on display.

After lunch at a local restaurant, a special experience, a barrel boat ride (taraibune) steered by a local lady from Sado Island. Women from Ogi, a port town on Sado Island's south coast, historically paddled wooden tub-shaped boats around the cliffs to collect seaweed and shellfish to put on the table. Although few of these barrel boats or taraibune are made today, it's still possible to take a ride out into the waters around Ogi Port. A local fisherwoman in traditional dress including a curved straw hat will paddle your boat; standing upright she draws the paddle in a figure of eight balancing careful so that the boat moves forward. You can give it a try yourself, but controlling these boats is not as easy as it looks!

If you have seen the a 2001 Japanese animated coming-of-age fantasy film, *Spirited Away*, you will feel at home as it is a scene in the movie.

“These tub boats are made of local sugi (Japanese cedar) and madake (timber bamboo). The construction is the same as Japanese coopering, except that the bottom of the tub boat is slightly concave, and the boats are oval. The planking is doweled together with bamboo nails, but the braided bamboo hoops are what really hold these boats together. The braiding of the hoops is now an extremely rare skill. Each hoop is comprised of four 45-foot long strips of bamboo. The hoops are pounded onto the hull and each must fit precisely since the hull is slightly tapered. “



Taraibune barrel boat ride

Now, off to visit and explore the fishing village of Syukunegi, that once prospered as the center of shipbuilding industry during the Edo era. After the Meiji Restoration, the industry fell into decline due to the overall Westernization and the development of other transportation networks like railways

Hidden behind a large wall of windbreakers near the rough Sea of Japan, the village seems quiet, almost deserted but for a lone cat strolling through its stone-paved alleys.

About 200 old houses are nestled together, as if to seek shelter from the harsh wind from the sea, connected by small alleys and passageways. A small stream runs through the village and you might see a lone woman washing her vegetables in the water. It is eerily quiet during the day as most of the very few villagers who still live here are out for work.

The village was once almost forgotten; however, the descendants stood up to restore the legacy of their ancestors and still today continue to do so. They also built an exact replica of an old Edo-era sailing ship to show their enthusiasm and solidarity.

On our village stroll you can visit one of the ship owner's home, "Seikuro" that is open to the public. Enjoy seeing the skillfully built houses by ship carpenters.

Our touring day ends with a visit to the Sado Island Taiko Centre for a Japanese drum session experience. The center, also called Takakokan was built was built from local Sado Island timber. The facility has large balconies that overlook Mano Bay and the Osado mountain range that provide stunning natural views all year round.

Tatakokan is home to two huge taiko drums that were hand-carved from an enormous 600-year-old keyaki (Japanese zelkova) log by members of taiko performing arts ensemble Kodo. These one-of-a-kind drums are on display and ready to be played by visitors to the center.

Come, enjoy as members of Kodo teach us how to use bachi drumsticks and play taiko drums of various types and sizes with this hands-on learning experience.

From here, a Western dinner out at a local restaurant. The arrival back at our hotel will be approximately 8:00pm.



Sado Resort Hotel Azuma



sunset at the hotel



hotel grounds

Accommodations: Sado Resort Hotel Azuma



Free

Day 7– April 17th – Saturday – Sado Island-Niigata (B)

After breakfast, please meet your guide in the lobby by 8:00am as we make our way back to Niigata.

Now, off to Ryotsu Port for our ferry ride back to Niigata, departing at 9:15am and arrives in Niigata at 11:45am.

Once back, we will be visiting Teradomari Fish Market Street, more popularly known as Sakana no ameyoko. Enjoy free time to shop and have lunch on your own along this seaside street lined with souvenir and seafood shops.

As you walk along, hear the cries of merchants selling their wares. The street bustles with tourists seeking fresh, local ocean delicacies. The selection includes seasonal items like sweet shrimp, squid, Japanese amberjack, horse mackerel, and sea bream, to high class selections like famed crimson snow crab and black throat seaperch, all at reasonable prices. Hamayaki, freshly caught fish and seafood grilled on the spot is a popular choice.

Our last stop of the day is a visit at the Northern Culture Museum. It originally served as a mansion of Ito Bunkichi, who lived in the Edo Period and was one of the greatest landowners in Japan. Nowadays, the museum houses calligraphy and ceramics, lacquer ware and documents related to Ito Family's history. Here you can find copies of his works and documents related to him. You can also visit the garden; it is a "walking" garden with a big pond.



Accommodations: Hotel Sunroute Niigata Free

Day 8– April 18th – Sunday – Niigata – Tokyo (B)

After breakfast, please meet your guide by 8:30am as we are off on half day of touring, ending the day with a bullet train ride from Niigata Station to Ueno Station.

The morning begins with a fun strawberry fruit picking experience at Shirone Grape Garden. This farm is known for their organically grown fruits.

Next, a visit to the Shirone Kite Museum, where you can enjoy learning about the lore and history of the giant kite battles of Shirone. The exhibits are well laid out, with English subtitles.

Every June, the annual Shirone Kite Festival with origins back to the mid 1800's takes place along the banks of the Nakanokuchi River. Legend has it that residents of Shirone who were celebrating the end of a construction project to reinforce the banks of the nearby Nakanokuchi River accidentally crashed a kite into a West Shirone field which damaged a significant amount of the crops. Retaliation seemed like the only answer at the time, so the residents of West Shirone decided to crash their own kite into the Shirone side of the river.

Despite the festival's origins having been centered around revenge, today it's all done for fun. While here, we are going to enjoy our last hands-on experience, kite painting.

Now, off to the Niigata Station to catch our bullet train to Ueno Station in Tokyo. We suggest you may want to purchase a lunch bento to take along and enjoy on the train. Once at Ueno Station, we will board the charter bus for the ride Sunshine City Prince.

Arrival at the hotel will be by 4:45pm. After checking in, meet your guide in the lobby as we go and discover this Ikebukuro neighborhood.

The hotel offers a direct access from the lobby to the Sunshine City Mall, offering 4-floors of shops and restaurants. From here, a walk underground and out to the neighborhood, dotted with large department stores, smaller independent shops, and many restaurants and fast-food eateries.



Accommodations: Sunshine City Prince Hotel Free

Day 9– April 19th – Monday – Tokyo (B)

After breakfast, a complete free day! Whether it's to catch up on shopping or off to explore the city, enjoy your day!



Accommodations: Sunshine City Prince Hotel Free

Day 10– April 20th – Tuesday – Tokyo-Haneda (B)

After breakfast, please meet your guide in the lobby by 8:30am. While it's our last day on tour, there is still much to see and experience before our flight home later this evening.

The morning begins with a visit to Tsukiji Outer Market. If you've ever dreamed about melt-in-your-mouth, out-of-this-world sushi, then you might have heard of Tsukiji, the largest fish market in the world. Most of Tokyo, and even high-end sushi restaurants in Hong Kong and San Francisco, gets their fish from this cultural landmark near the center of Japan's capital city.

While the inner, auction market has moved to a new location, the popular outer market is thriving with tourist and many of the same vendors.

Opened in 1935, Tsukiji sprang to life after the Great Kanto Earthquake destroyed most of Tokyo in 1923. It has since become one of the most popular tourist destinations in the city. Every morning sightseers start lining up at 3 a.m. to watch the frozen tuna auction. The more expensive fresh tuna auctions – where a single Bluefin once sold for nearly \$1.8 million- are privately conducted.

If you're a foodie, love markets, enjoy photography – or simply like visiting unique places – then you'll probably love Tsukiji.

After a good stroll around the market, there's nothing like a sushi lunch to complete the experience. There are plenty of sushi shops – make sure to choose one where you see locals dining. If you don't feel like sushi, there are other options including ramen, *donburi* and more.

We will remain here for 1.5 hours so that you can browse, shop and have lunch on your own.



Tsukiji Fish Market

From here we are off to Ameyoko Shopping Street, famous throughout Japan for its wide variety of products.

The name "Ameyoko" is a short form for "Ameya Yokocho" (candy store alley), as candies were traditionally sold there. Alternatively, "Ame" also stands for "America", because a lot of American products used to be available there when the street was the site of a black market in the years following WWII.

You can get just about EVERYTHING here, clothes, bags, cosmetics, fresh fish, dried squid, and spices are sold along Ameyoko. It is quite the scene to just walk around through the very crowded and narrow streets. An awesome place to sightsee, shop and eat! Enjoy some free time here to explore on your own.

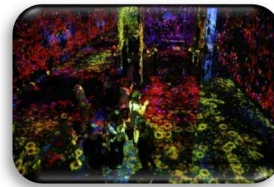


Ameyoko- best spot to find omiyage items

In case you didn't find lunch at the market, here is a second opportunity to find hot and cold snacks while you shop and browse. Here again, we will spend just under 2-hours.

This afternoon, we are off to Odaiba and it begins with a fun experience at teamLab Borderless. It is best described as a world of artworks without boundaries, a museum without a map.

Enjoy time here as you discover this group of artworks which forms one borderless world. The artworks move out of rooms, communicate with each other, influence, and sometimes intermingle with each other, all with no boundaries.



teamLab Borderless

After this, off to the Haneda Airport.

Once at the airport, please claim your bags and begin the check-in process. Once complete, there is time to enjoy a variety of dining and shopping opportunities.

The shops and restaurants of Edo Ko-Ji, or Edo Market, on the fourth floor of the international departure lobby offers are a great way to experience Japanese culture and cuisine one final time before heading home.

Dining options include wagyu beef sukiyaki, tonkatsu, as well as several udon shops. If you desire something a bit more western, there's omurice (Japanese omelet) and hamburger steak.

Aside from tempting Japanese cuisine and sweets, Edo Market offers great last-minute gift and souvenir shopping.

Hawaiian Airlines #864 Departs Haneda at 8:15pm- Arrives Honolulu at 8:30am

