# Sakura & Shrines

**Exploring Anime, Cherry Blossoms and the Japanese Countryside** by Laurie Harris

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Exploring Anime, Cherry Blossoms and the Japanese Countryside

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This photobook was compiled because I have been away from Japan so long, I needed to remind myself of why I need to go back.







#### The Arrival

On my third trip to Japan, I had the ambitious desire to simultaneously take in the annual AnimeJapan anime convention, see the annual cherry blossoms in full bloom at four Tokyo locations and also travel through the Japanese countryside on the Nakasendo Way, the ancient path linking Kyoto to Tokyo.

On my previous two trips to Japan I went direct from Toronto and direct from Los Angeles. This time I would go from Toronto to Shanghai, China and then onwards to Tokyo. Not only would my layover in Shanghai be my first time on the Asia continent proper but the flight from Toronto to Shanghai would also be my first time crossing the Arctic Circle.

Once arriving in Tokyo, I would set up my main base of operations at the Remm Hibiya hotel on the outskirts of Ginza in central Tokyo. This location was ideal as it was central to all of the many locations I would visit during my first five days in Japan. Around the corner from the hotel was the Toho Cinemas Hibiya with its iconic statues of Godzilla inside and outside the theater.



China Taiping Insurance Company's blue elephant mascot statue at Shanghai Pudong Airport



### AnimeJapan

For my first full day in Japan I would be attending the AnimeJapan convention at Tokyo Big Sight in Odaiba. AnimeJapan was first held in 2014 as the merger of the Tokyo International Anime Fair and the Anime Contents Expo. Not only does the convention attract many of the top names in anime but also many top cosplayers with a Cosplay Parade held in the afternoon.

Shortly after the Cosplay Parade I would walk to DiverCity Tokyo, the location of the life-size Gundam mecha. During my first trip in 2015 the original RX-78-2 model was still standing. On my second trip in 2017 it had just been taken down leaving a vacant spot. Later in 2017 it was replaced with a larger RX-0 Unicorn model. As I first arrived I was able to take photos of it in its Unicorn mode. After dinner at the Khazana Indian Restaurant, I was able to return after dark to see the Gundam transform into Destroy mode with full lights on display.













### Hanami!

The following day would be my primary day for "hanami" or sakura (cherry blossom) viewing. I planned to take in three main locations over the course of the entire day. I was extremely fortunate that my first few days in Japan coincided with the sakura in peak bloom. The sakura only bloom in Tokyo as the spring temperatures increase usually at the end of March to the beginning of April covering a two week period. It can therefore be notoriously difficult to plan a trip around hanami.

My first viewing location was Ueno Park, a large park which is home to a number of museums, a concert hall and a zoo. After grabbing some lunch at the "Mozesusannokebabu" Turkish restaurant in nearby Ameyokocho, I would move on to my next location.

My second viewing spot was Shinjuku Central Park. I also took the opportunity to visit the observation deck of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building next door, even catching a glimpse of Mt. Fuji in the distance.

My final viewing location was Meguro River in Nakameguro. Easily the most popular and iconic hanami location especially at night where the trees stretch across the narrow river and are dramatically lit up and ordained with paper lanterns.











Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building

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The much larger Shinjuku Gyoen park

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#### Mount Fuji in the distance

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Meguro River

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### Graveyards & Gyoza

The next day was spent in Ikebukuro. Ikebukuro is also considered an otaku mecca, second only to Akihabara. Before I would venture into the heart of the anime district, I would first stop off at Zoshigaya Cemetery. Zoshigaya Cemetery is the resting place of a number of famous Japanese but also Patrick Lafcaido Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo). Hearn was a Greek-Irish writer whose writings and books in the late 1800s introduced Japanese culture, stories and legends to the world.

My next stop was the Sunshine City complex, home to an aquarium, a museum, a shopping mall, and the indoor theme parks J-World Tokyo and Namja Town. My main stop in Sunshine City was Namja Town. Although mostly for a younger audience, my main reason for visiting the small theme park was for its numerous gyoza (Chinese dumpling) stalls and large variety of exotic ice cream flavors for sale.

I would complete my visit to Ikebukuro with a stop at Animate, a popular anime/manga store, and the Evangelion Store Ikebukuro.





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### Shibuya

My day in Shibuya would accomplish a number of things. I began the morning with breakfast at Starbucks overlooking the famous Shibuya Crossing. I was able to visit the Hachiko statue representing the ever loyal dog. Hachiko was known to wait for his owner at Shibuya Station every day after work. He continued to do so for nine years after his owner's death. Not far away I tried melon pan ice cream for the first time before entering Yoyogi Park for some more hanami.

After leaving Yoyogi Park I would walk through the popular Harajuku district to Aoyama where I would purchase a pair of jikatabi sneakers from Sou Sou Kyoto. Following this I would have an early dinner at "Moja in the House" an American themed restaurant known for its delicious chicken and waffles.





Melon pan ice cream

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Chicken & Waffles at Moja in the House

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Agi River, Ena, Gifu Prefecture

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### Walk Japan - Ena

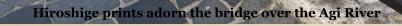
My Walk Japan tour would take me on a 5-day hike of the Nakasendo Trail, one of two ancient highways linking the former capital Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo). While the Tokaido Trail travels along the eastern coast between Kyoto and Edo, the Nakasendo route wends its way along an inner mountainous path. I would be hiking the Kiso Road portion of the Nakasendo - a mid-section portion of the Nakasendo.

My journey started by taking the shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo Station to Nagoya Station where I met my fellow tour travelers and guide Miwa Fujinuma. From Nagoya we would take a train north to the city of Ena. We would stay at the Ena Ichikawa ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn run by the same family for the last 400 years. Each ryokan is run by the grandmother, mother and daughter. We would find many of the locations we visited still had their Hinamatsuri displays setup. Hinamatsuri or "Girls' Day" is a religious holiday held on March 3rd. Families would setup ornate displays of dolls representing the Emperor and his court.

Before dinner we would walk to the nearby Hiroshige Print Museum. We would learn how the Japanese developed a unique method of mass production of artwork using carefully carved wood templates. We were then given the opportunity to create our own art pieces using these ancient methods. We would then return to the ryokan for a beautiful kaiseki dinner.



Mount Fuji as seen from the shinkansen



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中浦川

My attempt at recreating one of Hiroshige's prints

Ena Ichikawa Inn

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Hinamatsuri display

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I stayed in the aptly named Sakura room

Lion sculpture at Suwa Shrine

#### Walk Japan - O-tsumago

The first day of hiking would be a pretty full day. After a traditional Japanese breakfast we would take a train to the town of Nakatsugawa. From there we would take a taxi to the southern gate of the Kiso Valley and the start of the Kiso Road portion of the Nakasendo.

Our hike would take us past ancient shrines, open farmlands and fields until reaching the well preserved post-town of Magome. Situated on a hillside, once we walked up to the top of the town, we would be treated to a beautiful vista of the surrounding countryside and the sacred Mount Ontake.

After leaving Magome we would take a 4-mile hike through the mountains to the very small village of O-tsumago. Along the way we would pass by a few more shrines and make a short stop at the traditional Japanese teahouse Ichikokutochi for afternoon tea. After tea we would hike another mile to reach the Odaki-Medaki waterfalls. These twin waterfalls are associated with legendary swordsman and samurai Musashi Miyamoto known for his iconic book "The Book of Five Rings" on swordsmanship and martial arts. Shortly thereafter we would reach our destination O-tsumago and the Maruya ryokan. Maruya is a relatively young inn having only been around since 1789 and also run by the same family since its start.

Before dinner we would take a short drive to the upscale Hotel Kisoji with its onsen (hot springs) to bathe and soak our weary bones after a long day of hiking. After returning to Maruya we were again treated to a kaiseki dinner with fresh ayu (sweetfish) from O-tsumago's communal fish farm.



#### Traditional Japanese breakfast

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Landmark marking the entrance to the Kiso Road

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Shinchaya Inn at the start of the Kiso Road





## 中山道ぎふ17宿御 👘 🕬 🕬

江戸日本橋から京都三条大橋まで六十九宿[百三 十五里二十四町八間(約五百三十二キロ)]。この中 山道の四分の一相当(約百二十八キロ)が美濃国、 ノまりが収平旅です。「ハの市場を行う実置中山風は 残しています。山の形成に沿った温料園に作られ 山間を通る道程で、木々や渓谷に四季折々の自然の た全国でも珍しい「坂の宿場」で、大自然を来らめ 美しさがある街道です。

わいをみせています。

The 17 Nakasendo Post Stations in Gifu Post Stations in Citica and advance where the There were 60 pear stations (concerned and are easily of the post of the stations of the stations of the of the post of the stations of the stations of the add station (concerned 33) between Nobel 33 in 1,24 obs add stations of the stations of the stations of the station of the stations of the stations of the station of the stations of the statement of the stations of the statement of do is home to 16 post st sts, hills, a one-juku, which is not co Nakasendo but is still lov the Millio Nakasehoo out is still weat ling sightsceing destination where station atmosphere is well preserved

馬籠宿

木曽十一宿の最南端に位置する、江戸の日本橋 から数えて四十三番目の宿場町で、狭い中山道の 両側に軒を連ねる集落は、江戸時代の面影を今も 残しています。山の尾根に沿った急斜面に作られ 交じさかある街田です。 本留路馬籠宿は、景観を保存した観光地として副 の生まれ絵種の地でもあり、単料起金銀(馬富新 にはいいか かれめてお知らからいのありは日本 の主まれ収集の地でもあり、銀村広念館(馬蘭留 本碑)には、代表作「夜明け前」などの作品原稿な どをはじめ、約6千点の資料を展示しています。

# The Nakasendo Highway's Magome-juku

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Magome

Village proclamation banning Christianity and encouraging the reporting of secret Christians

**Mount Ontake** 



Medaki (Female) Waterfall

Odaki (Male) Waterfall



O-tsumago communal fish farm

Delicious ayu dinner

Staying in the Yuri (lily) room



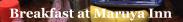
### Walk Japan - Kiso-Fukushima

After another delicious traditional Japanese breakfast, we would make an early start to reach the nearby post-town Tsumago before the tourist crowds arrived. Known as one of the best post-towns in Japan, Tsumago retains its authenticity by banning any above ground telephone poles, electric lines and vending machines from its main street. Our first stop in Tsumago would be to visit the Honjin - an inn for government officials as they travel the Nakasendo including the emperor. We would next visit the Tsumago Historical Museum with its exhibits detailing the history of the area and its logging industry.

From Tsumago we would continue our hike to Nagiso a little over 2 miles away. Along the way we would stop at the Kabuto Kannon Shrine. Upon reaching Nagiso, we would stop for lunch before taking a train to Kiso-Fukushima. Once in Kiso-Fukushima, we would take a taxi to the old Hida Highway. While not on the Nakasendo it would allow us to explore the Karasawa waterfall while hiking over the Jizo Pass to the Kaida Kogen plateau with its views of Mount Ontake. Due to the altitude and early spring season, there was still snow on the ground in many areas. After descending the plateau we would stop at a unique train-themed coffee shop run by a friendly retired couple.

After coffee we would take the bus back to Kiso-Fukushima where we would check-in at the Iwaya ryokan, a 350-year old inn that had once hosted the Emperor of Japan. Unlike our previous inns which still retained much of their original structure (excluding plumbing and electrical upgrades), Iwaya had been heavily renovated and upgraded. Each room had its own television, mini fridge and en suite bathroom as opposed to the communal bath found in most ryokans. That evening we would be treated to a very large multiple course meal before retiring for the night.





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Oshagojisama Shrine

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Mascot of the region a tanuki

Entering Tsumago

Koi pond at the Tsumago honjin

Western-style high table made for the Emperor's visit

Bathtub at the honjin

#### Hinamatsuri display at the honjin

Display commemorating the Emperor's visit to the honjin

Logging display at the Tsumago Historical Museum



Special wooden toilet seat made for the Emperor Ancient raincoat at the Tsumago Historical Museum Large Hinamatsuri display in a Tsumago building

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The Station Master plays the shamisen

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Mount Ontake

The Station Master's wife plays the nationalica

Thomas the Tank Engine





## Walk Japan - Matsumoto

The following day was Easter Sunday and we would start our journey by taking a train to nearby Yabuhara. In Yabuhara we would walk to the entrance of the Torii Toge, a mountain pass and the second highest point on the Nakasendo. The hike up the mountain would be the toughest part of our hike on the Kiso Road. Once at the top of the pass we would visit the Ontake-jinja Shrine with its views of Mt. Ontake and its many foreboding statues, stone lanterns and stone torii gate. Our descent down the mountain pass would actually signal our departure from the Kiso Valley and the Kisa Road and our entry into the Narai Valley and the well preserved post-town of Narai.

At the entrance to Narai we were greeted by the Shizume-jinja Shrine with its bright red torii gate. While in Narai we would stop for lunch at the Tokuriya soba noodle shop. We were treated to 6 courses before even reaching the final course of soba noodles. As a gift on departure we were given boiled eggs in honor of Easter. After taking in the sights of Narai, we would take the train to our final destination, the city of Matsumoto.

Because we arrived in Matsumoto so early we decided to visit Matsumoto castle today rather than the next day. Matsumoto castle is one of four castles listed as National Treasures in Japan and one of twelve remaining original castles in Japan.

Our hotel for our final night was the Matsumoto Hotel Kagetsu - a Western-style hotel with a combination of Western and traditional Japanese rooms. For our final dinner together we would gather at a local izakaya (Japanese-style bar/pub) for typical izakaya fare of two types of yakitori (chicken skewers), salad, karaage (Japanese fried chicken), French fries, sashimi, sushi, crab croquettes, chicken meatballs, burdock & lotus plant, egg omelette and pork gyoza.





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Water filling station

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Yabuhara in the distance

Mount Ontake

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## →御嶽神社









#### 熊除けの鐘 Bear Alert **万**

熊は臆病で、音やにおいに敏感です。 熊が歩道に出るのはまれですが、念のため、鐘 を鳴らして、人間がいることを伝えましょう。

It is very often but,keep in mind that you may encounter bears. We recommend that you ring this bell.

#### 子産みの栃(トチ) "Baby-bearing" Horse Chestnut

音、この木の空洞に捨て子があり、子室に恵まれな い材人が育てて幸福になった事から、この木の皮を 煎じて飲めば、子宝に恵まれると言い伝えられている。

A long time ago, a villager who had no children found an abandoned baby in the tree hole. He looked after the baby, and they lived happily ever after. It is said that you will be blessed with baby if you made tea with the tree bark.

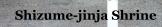
Narai in the distance



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鎮神社 Shite

inja Shrine 治(二二世紀後期)のころ 味める 氏が



结神

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Narai







### 守六階

(周囲に3元(90、m)通りの入側 D一部屋となっている。 無目 いるのて、豊多 なくことも可 録むを除き京風に6畳となる)。 弊部の司令塔(城主の座所)と ある。 は地上22.1m、堀水面上23.9

山辺谷から美ヶ原高原、南は 心部と塩尻・木曽方面、西は り、その向こうに北アルプス 岳・常念岳・茶岳など)、北は 文開智学校から放光寺・城山 ぎる。

#### The Sixth Floor

The sixth floor lies 22.1 meters above the ground and could be covered with 16 pieces of nush-woven "axeen" it was designed to a used as the headquarters of the "War Lord" (*daims*)) if the castle was under attack Lowend from the ceiling, the Goddess of Nijmski-vasile (26 hight goddess of the month) is enshrined. There is a legend connected to the Goddess.

On the night of January 26,1618, in a vision one of the young vasails on duly save avoman dressed in baseutur clothes. Handing him a brocade bag, she said, "If the lot of the castle enshrines new with 500kg of nee on the 26 night of every month, I will protect the castle from fire and enemy." It is believed that because the bag was defined the castle was preserved and has survived to be the eldget castle in his original ferm.



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Shrine in the rafters









## **Back in Tokyo**

With the conclusion of my Walk Japan tour, I would head back to Tokyo taking the Super Azusa 18 train from Matsumoto to Shinjuku. While slower than the shinkansen, it was faster to take this direct route as the nearest shinkansen station was in Nagano, an hour and a half away. Once back in Tokyo I would head to Chiba Prefecture on the outskirts of Tokyo and home to the Tokyo Disney Resort. I would be staying at the Disney Ambassador Hotel and spending my remaining two days wandering around the nearby Ikspiari (Tokyo Disney's version of Downtown Disney/ Disney Springs).

The following day was an open day in the event the cherry blossoms bloomed later or to take in any additional shopping. Since I had already done everything I needed to, I watched the movie "Tomb Raider" at the Ikspiari Cinema (ignoring the Japanese subtitles).

The day after I would wrap up my time in Japan with a traditional teriyaki burger at the MOS Burger Cafe at the Haneda Airport before heading to Shanghai, Toronto and then home.



Caramel & Banana Waffle at Cafe Kaila

Katt

**Chocolate filled pie from Pie Face** 



ショコラ&ラズベリー
禁断の一度がっチョコ

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Disney Ambassador Hotel

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Cheerleading Competition at the Maihama Amphitheater

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My third trip to Japan would allow me to visit Japan during its most popular season - Springtime and the ephemeral blooming of the cherry blossoms. I would also use the opportunity to attend the 2018 AnimeJapan anime convention at Tokyo Big Sight in Odaiba.

Following my time in Tokyo, I would depart the city for the countryside. I would join Walk Japan's tour to hike the Kiso Road portion of the Nakasendo Trail - the ancient highway linking the former capital Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo).

