

Japan for Beginners: 3 Vacation Itinerary Ideas

We asked travel pros to plan a dream vacation in Tokyo and Kyoto for this aunt-nephew duo. Visits to sacred shrines, lessons in martial arts and excursions to street-style districts and World Heritage sites await them.

By Janet O'Grady

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KATHERINE KENDRICK, 62, wants to give her nephew Henry Kendrick, 21, a trip to celebrate his graduation from Reed College in Portland, Ore. The destination of their dreams: Japan. "I've been to Tokyo for work but never had time to tour the country," said the Los Angeles lawyer, who canceled plans to attend the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games because of Covid restrictions.

Since its late reopening in October 2022, this compelling destination has seen tourism soar. How can the Kendricks see authentic Japan with prices surging, and choice accommodations and restaurant reservations booked far out?

One idea: Skirt the spots on must-see lists and visit places offering the cultural immersion both desire. While you might think their age difference would mean different wish lists, the like-minded pair want to focus on enriching activities and sights in Tokyo and Kyoto for the two-week trip, with a jaunt outside those cities if time permits.

Here, three travel planners specializing in Asia offer ideas and places to visit for Katherine and her eager first-time visitor.

Option 1: Custom and cuisine up close



Tea for two: a traditional ceremony in a private home.

“With its rich cultural heritage, Japan is the perfect destination for educational travel,” said Boston-based Tesia Smith, of Smithsonian Journeys by Audley Travels. Experiences that introduce the pair to Japan’s ancient traditions, as well as its contemporary worlds, said Smith, would make an appealing mix. On one day, they might learn to prepare a popular dish such as gyoza (dumplings) on a family-run farm; on the next, the Kendricks would enjoy chado, the traditional tea ceremony, at a private home. A side trip to Kyoto by the Sea would take them to Ine, a scenic fishing village facing the Sea of Japan. The pair might want to stay overnight in a funaya (a floating boat house) and the next day, observe artisans at work at Tamiya Raden, a textile studio.

Pros: Hands-on fun brings Japan into focus for the multigenerational duo.

Cons: So much activity doesn’t always make for a relaxing time.

Option 2: Outdoor beauty and art with an insider



The Kiyomizu-dera temple bell tower in Kyoto. PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Japan’s contemporary art scene, centuries-old architecture and diverse natural landscapes invite visitors to “treasure the moment”—the concept of *ichigo ichie*—said Gerald Hatherly. The executive director at Abercrombie & Kent Hong Kong suggests touring Tokyo art galleries with an influencer from the city one day, then day-tripping to Kyoto’s Buddhist Kiyomizu-dera Temple the next. A visit to Hakone, a town near Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park, affords outstanding views of Mount Fuji as well as access to its 8th-century Hakone-jinja Shrine. In Kanazawa, they could check out a contemporary art museum or walk the Nagamachi District, historic Samurai quarters.

Pros: Insider access makes Tokyo’s art world come alive.

Cons: In the fall, temperatures in Japan get chilly, so a visit to coastal towns or time spent outside at the national park means bundling up.

Option 3: Street style and martial arts



Extravagant street style in Tokyo's Harajuku district. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Atlanta-based Georgia Schley Ritchie, an independent affiliate of Protravel International, suggests pairing with experts to enrich activities, whether deconstructing street style with a Tokyo fashion designer in the boutique-packed Harajuku district, or studying iaidō, the art of drawing a sword from its sheath, with a martial arts expert. Arrival in Kyoto should include a contemplative walk on the Fushimi Inari Shrine trail through the dramatic vermilion torii gates before checking into Sowaka, a serene ryokan, or inn, with its own onsen, or hot springs, and Michelin-starred restaurant, La Bombance. If you have more time, make a stop at World Heritage site Shirakawa-go, an 11th-century village showcasing gasshō-zukuri, or “praying hands” architecture, featuring steeply pitched thatched roofs.

Pros: Learning esoteric traditions like iaidō deepens cultural immersion.

Cons: This activity-intense trip may challenge both young and older visitors.

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