



TOUR INFORMATION FOR JAPAN in winter

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING JAPAN: All citizens need a passport which is valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure. UK citizens are not required to have a visa for stays of less than 90 days. Citizens of other countries should check with their local consulate/embassy for entry requirements.

A current Yellow Fever vaccination is required of anyone entering Japan within five days of visiting a country where the disease is endemic.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get a replacement if your original is lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopy in a separate bag to the originals.

Important: As soon as you book on the tour, please email the Sunbird office a colour scan of your passport – the page(s) with your photograph and passport details. These are needed by our ground agent in order to obtain the internal air tickets. It is then crucially important that you do NOT change your passport or get a new one, otherwise extra costs may be incurred.

FLIGHTS: Our tour begins at Tokyo's Narita Airport and concludes at Tokyo's Haneda Airport. However, if you decide to buy your own air tickets and decide to fly into and out of Narita Airport, the cost of a bus transfer between the two airports is not included in our tour price.

ARRIVAL: The tour starts this evening at Narita Excel Hotel Tokyu on Day 1 with an introductory meeting. This informal meeting gives the leader the opportunity to introduce everyone to each other and to let you know generally what to expect on the trip - pace of the tour, daily routine, etc. This meeting is then followed by dinner. The earliest room check-in time is 14.00, however we can arrange for you to check into your room earlier than this, at extra cost, if you wish. The hotel has a free shuttle bus from Narita Airport Terminals 1 & 2 which takes 15 minutes.

We recommend that you arrive at the hotel a day early if think you are unlikely to arrive in time for the introductory meeting.

AT THE END OF THE TOUR: The internal flight back to Tokyo on the last day arrives at Haneda airport around midday. Assuming the internal flight is on time, the earliest you should depart Haneda airport for home is 15.00.

Some airlines such as Lufthansa and Singapore Airlines depart in the early hours of the following morning. Most clients opt to remain at Haneda airport until they need to check-in, however you can request a room at Haneda Excel Hotel, at extra cost, if you wish. Remember that you need to allow 3 hours to check-in and pass through security for inter-continental flight departures.

If you opt to fly home from Narita airport (as mentioned above), please keep in mind that the travel time between airports is about 2.5 hours so you need to allow a good connection time in order to collect luggage from the internal flight, transit between the airports and check in at Narita. We recommend that your homeward flight does not depart before 18.00 if departing from Narita.

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CURRENCY: The local currency is the Japanese Yen. Credit cards are accepted by some establishments in Japan but less than one might expect, so bring cash (either notes that you can change at the airport or Japanese Yen) especially if you want to shop. ATMs are becoming increasingly available, and we recommend using Citibank as all airports have an ATM outlet. During the tour we'll make a few stops as needed at post office ATMs, which accept many international cards. The Japanese yen is the only accepted currency throughout Japan.

LANGUAGE: Japanese is the national language. A few younger people speak a little English but it can be difficult at times to find someone who speaks English fluently. Your tour leader speaks, reads, and writes fluent Japanese.

CLIMATE: At the time of our visit, it will be cool to very cold, especially along the coast. There will be snow and ice in Hokkaido where the average minimum temperature at this time of year is -10 C (15 F) and the average maximum -3C (25 F). Elsewhere the maxima and minima are somewhat higher, Kyushu in the south being the warmest with an average top temperature of 12C (53 F).

Weather: It might be very cold, especially in Hokkaido. Be sure to have warm clothing including boots, hat and gloves. A pair of traction devices for your boots is strongly recommended as conditions can sometimes be very icy especially in parking lots and the like. There are a number of brands – YakTrax are reasonably effective but MicroSpikes more so, albeit more expensive. Any good outdoor retailer can assist you with your selection. Please note that conditions DO vary from year to year.

PACE OF THE TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: Our birding normally begins relatively late, about 8 am, due to late sunrises and very cold early mornings when bird activity is also very low. We'll then bird mostly in the warmer and brighter parts of the day, with quick, on the run lunches from convenience stores, which have a big variety of excellent products (not at all like convenience stores in other countries!). Bird activity usually drops off markedly by 15.00. There are some drives of three to four hours, and 5 internal flights. Most of the driving is on well-surfaced roads but going can be slow in bad weather.

This tour is not strenuous. The longest walks will be at Jigokudani and Karuizawa; both of about an hour on possibly snowy trails. (On this tour, we strongly recommend you carry lightweight traction devices for your shoes, which may or may not be needed but better safe than sorry. See the Weather section for details.) There are some modest inclines and several sets of steps as it is a hilly area. Otherwise our walking is fairly easy, on flat terrain with plenty of stops for birding, and we'll often bird close to the vehicle. It is however very cold and snowy in the north and often in the central Honshu area, as well, with minimum temperatures of about -10C (15F), and sometimes lower. Fighting the cold can be in itself fatiguing.

HEALTH: It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting. Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. It is further recommended that most travellers have protection against Hepatitis A and Typhoid.

No specific vaccinations are required to enter the country, unless you are coming directly (within five days of departure) from an area with cholera and/or yellow fever.

Japan is generally a problem-free area and no special precautions are required. Most kinds of medication are also easily available in shops in cities (though they are often manufactured under a different brand name and consequently can be difficult to find). If you take any prescription medication it would be wise to ensure that you have enough supplies for the trip.

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In this ultra-modern, first world country, all water including tap water is potable and you can safely consume salads, fresh fruit and vegetables.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

Drinking water: Unless advised otherwise, all water including tap water, is potable and you can safely enjoy the salads, fresh fruit and vegetables.

ETIQUETTE: Japan is well known for its social conventions and rules of behaviour - it can be easy to offend (although westerners are probably excused to a large extent!). By and large, a few basic actions and words will go a long way.

A few examples:

- When entering Japanese-style accommodation you are expected to remove your outdoor footwear and put on slippers that are provided. When you go into the bathroom you remove your slippers and put on a pair of toilet slippers (also provided). This is the most important rule to abide by. Wearing shoes indoors, and particularly on tatami, causes offence! Chairs or stools are provided to make footwear removal less precarious.
- Learn a few words: ohayo gozaimasu (good morning); konnichiwa (hello/good day); konbanwa (good evening); arigato (thank you); hai (yes); iie (no); sayonnara (goodbye); tori (bird); gomen nasai (I'm sorry); sumimasen (excuse me); gaikokujin (foreigner), bado-uchin (birdwatching).
- Bathing. You do not wash yourself in a bath! A shower is taken to wash yourself with soap/shampoo (provided). Once you are clean you sit in the bath to have a relaxing soak. In some accommodation the facilities are shared...and occasionally public use. The bath water tends to be very hot...test it first! You are advised to bite the bullet re- the communal baths at Japanese-style accommodation- often these are an excellent way of relaxing, and white towels provided can be used for covering up if you feel shy. In particular, the thermal baths offering a range of indoor and outdoor pools in Hokkaido (segregated by sex) are not to be missed. The baths at the pensions we stay at will be smaller and more private, and we should be able to establish a rota system for those who want to bathe in peace! The western style hotels have a private shower and bath with the room.
- Be discrete when blowing your nose in public – its considered bad manners to do it openly.
- You are allowed to slurp when eating your noodles! People who chose not to are nicknamed 'cat tongue' in Japanese, as if you try to quietly ingest piping hot noodles your tongue and lips get burnt! Please be understanding when your leaders slurp their noodles with relish.

ACCOMMODATION: Our accommodation varies from Western-style hotels to more traditional Japanese inns. Be prepared for smaller rooms than one finds in Europe or North America. Bathrooms are generally very small. In some of our inns, bathrooms are shared, although in nearly all cases privacy is possible. In Japan one removes one's shoes when entering houses, traditional hotels (not Western hotels), temples and many other places. Slippers are often provided but most are too small for western feet, especially men's feet. Please do not walk around the "[genkan](#)" or entryway in your barefeet or socks.

JAPANESE TOILETS: We will not encounter any old-style squat toilets on the tour. There will be regular stops at clean, western-style facilities throughout.

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LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service will be available at some (but not all) of the hotels at which we stay in Japan; however, many of these are coin-operated, do-it-yourself machines. *Most machines accept 100 yen coins.*

ELECTRICITY: 100V AC 50Hz (Tokyo & East Japan) or 100V AC 60Hz (Osaka & West Japan). Sockets are flat two pin types. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>. A small torch or headlamp may come in handy at times for night walks or in your rooms.

FOOD: The food in Japan is often a memorable highlight of this tour. It is varied, fresh, delicious, and the presentation is often delightful. You will find yourself wanting to photograph many of your meals! One of the specialties of Japan, and especially in Hokkaido, is the seafood. If you don't like fish however, there are other choices. Vegetarian options are somewhat limited but by no means out of the question, although this is a strange concept to most Japanese so please be patient and understanding.

Most meals are served with a meat and a seafood dish, as well as miso soup and a salad. We'll experience a mix of Japanese and western style meals throughout. Lunches will often be eaten on the run as daylight birding time is limited and we'll buy tasty sandwiches or heated lunchboxes (*bento*) of your choice at local convenience stores. Hearty breakfasts usually consist of coffee, toast, and varied small salads but sometimes are more traditional.

Black tea is not readily available so if you prefer this to coffee or green tea, it may be worth bringing your own teabags. If you have difficulty using chopsticks we recommend you bring a knife and fork.

Snacks: You may wish to bring granola-type bars, dried fruit or other snacks. Convenience stores are very common and widespread; they stock many snacks and other products that will be familiar to you (and some not so familiar).

Our tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplemental food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition, we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: Wi-Fi access in our various accommodation is variable. We will find it at most our hotels and lodges but we are unlikely to find it at Yorouchi and Tancho-no-sato. Japan operates on a very different cellular technology to that in most other countries. You are unlikely be able to purchase a pre-paid SIM card on arrival. Your phone may be incompatible with the local system, so please check with your local carrier. Fortunately, with the advent of smartphones, it is easy to download applications such as Skype or Google Voice, which can make calling home free or very inexpensive.

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COTHING: Japan is a modern first world country where very similar rules to those of Europe and North America apply. In the south, winters are cool but sunny. As we venture north, temperatures drop and snow falls. The island of Hokkaido in the far north of Japan is bitterly cold in the winter, with snow guaranteed.

Please bring warm clothing including a waterproof/windproof jacket, gloves, hat and over trousers for the Hokkaido boat trip. If you bring a down jacket, consider also bringing a lightweight waterproof to go over the top in case of rain. For the cold conditions in the north, layers are best and we recommend a base layer of thermal underwear or similar.

A good quality insulated and windproof jacket is essential as are a really good pair of insulated gloves and a woolly hat. You may want to also consider a pair of insulated trousers. Although ordinary walking boots are fine, however a pair of insulated boots will be much better for keeping your feet warm especially as we stand around for extended periods in the snow. Sunglasses will be very useful when out on snow.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS: Please bring the following:

Notebook/pencil	Laundry soap
Small rucksack/daypack	Water bottle
Sunglasses	Bandanna
Torch with extra batteries	Sunscreen
Ear plugs (if you are a light sleeper)	Alarm clock
Small LED headlamp (useful for doing the birdlist in the evenings)	Laundry bag
Pocket knife (placed in your check-in luggage!)	Personal medication
Chemical hand/feet warmers (also available in Japan at convenience stores)	

Optional: A telescope and tripod will be very useful on this tour, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage) and a field guide.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will provide the following:

Telescope and tripod	Small first-aid kit
Reference books	Maps
Laser pointer	Playback equipment

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage. ***There is limited space in our vehicle so please consider carefully the size of your bag.***

Important Note: There is a weight restriction of 20 kg (44 pounds) per person, plus two small carry-ons, on domestic flights in Japan.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain, some birds such as cranes, gulls and eagles can be very obliging photographic subjects. Memory cards may be difficult to obtain and will certainly be more expensive than at home so you should bring with you all that you expect to need. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture- and dust-proof bags, as a precaution. If you wish to 'digiscope' please ensure that you bring your own telescope.

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There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However, if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

TRANSPORT: We will be travelling in a 10 seat, air-conditioned minibus throughout, driven by the leader. The leader will arrange a seating rotation and participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

SMOKING: Smoking or vaping is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential, and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Brazil, M. A. 1991. *The Birds of Japan*. Christopher Helm, London. Provides a detailed summary of the status of all Japanese birds.

Brazil, Mark & Masuda, Hisashi. 2013. *The Nature of Japan: From Dancing Cranes to Flying Fish*. Japan Nature Guides, Tokyo. The web of life that binds these Japanese islands together into a natural whole, distinguishing them and connecting them, has been Mark Brazil's fascination for more than thirty years. The distinctive biodiversity of these extraordinary islands has been the subject of his writing for equally as long. *The Nature of Japan* presents not only a broad view of this geographical and biological diversity, but through personal essays reveals Brazil's passion for the nature and seasons of his adopted home.

Brazil, M.A. 2008. *Birds of East Asia*. Christopher Helm, London. ISBN-13: 978-0713670400
Recommended.

Shimba, T. 2007. *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Japan and East Asia*. Christopher Helm, London. The only up-to-date publication on the birds of Japan in English; a photographic guide.

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ORIENTAL BIRD CLUB: Please support this charity which aims to raise money to support conservation projects, encourages an interest in the conservation of birds, and liaises with and promotes the work of existing societies within the region. You will find their contact details and further information about the Club at www.orientalbirdclub.org

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your international air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. If you have any questions, please contact us.