



Classic Japanese design

Architecture and Design Off the Beaten Track in Japan

26 October – 7 November 2026

‘Tour leader Colin Bisset was exceptional. Passionate and knowledgeable about his subject and constantly pointing out design elements in the everyday. Every day was packed with variety.’

Kate Sullivan, Architecture and Design in Japan, October 2025



Level 3
MODERATE





Ritsurin Garden, Takamatsu

Japanese design is a philosophy as much as an aesthetic. Traditional Japanese architecture strives to be in harmony with nature, incorporating minimalistic design and using lightweight, natural materials (like wood, bamboo, straw, and paper), with porous boundaries between inside and outside. In earthquake-prone Japan, these materials were also much easier to rebuild.

Japanese design is unique. Its early influences are Chinese, but over many centuries of seclusion from the outside world it developed into something intrinsically Japanese. The impact of Japan opening to the outside world in the nineteenth century was profound, with its distinctive art and design influencing not only the Impressionist movement in France but also western architecture. The lightness and openness of many modernist buildings can be traced to traditional Japanese buildings.

This tour has been carefully mapped to give insight into various aspect of Japanese design and architecture and how these are special. Whether dipping fabrics in natural indigo, creating handmade paper from a particular pulp, or designing buildings and vehicles for a post-war world, there is a common line of beauty that unites them all.

Join Colin Bisset and Anthony Hillin on a thought-provoking journey through aspects of Japanese design and architecture, featuring some of the 20th century's most prominent architects and designers, while keeping an eye on the influences of the past. From Kobe, a centre of trade in the nineteenth century and today a treasure trove of contemporary art and architecture, to lively Osaka, to the rich design heritage of Shikoku Island, including classic Takamatsu and the artisan culture of Matsuyama, continue on a scenic ferry to Hiroshima to visit Peace Memorial Park and see the ways in which the city has reestablished itself after almost total destruction.

Throughout your journey, you will pay close attention to the signature use of materials and the skilled craftsmanship that are the backbone of Japanese design and architecture.

THIS TOUR IS CLASSED AS:

Level 3 | Moderate



Regular walking at destinations, extended standing and/or increased travel distances. Good fitness is required.

Tour Leaders

Colin Bisset (left) is a lover of buildings both old and new. He studied History of Art at the University of East Anglia where he specialised in late nineteenth and twentieth century architecture. He has worked as an interior designer in London and a feng shui consultant, as well as writing two novels and a travel book. He is best known as a regular contributor on ABC Radio National's Blueprint for Living and By Design, focusing on the significance of everything from palaces to paper clips, putting everything in context. A serial clarifier, as one listener described him. Japan is one of his favourite countries, where beauty can be found in the humblest objects and links between old and new lie at the core of all things.

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Anthony (Anth) Hillin (right) studied psychology and social work at Sydney University and has a master's degree in adolescent mental health. With over 30 years' experience as a therapist, educator and consultant, he delivered training programs in the UK, USA, Australasia and



India. While based at the NSW Institute of Psychiatry, Anthony co-developed Australia's most comprehensive interagency education program in adolescent mental health. He also co-developed the NSW Aboriginal Grief and Loss Training Program.

A gardener since childhood, Anth has long been interested in the health benefits of time in nature and how this experience can be deepened with mindfulness. Anth will assist Colin in leading this tour, including speaking about the role of mindfulness in appreciating architecture, design and gardens, leading brief mindfulness experiences as we move through buildings and natural environments.

Contemporary architecture by Tadao Ando on Awachi Island (by Colin Bisset)



Itinerary 26 October – 7 November 2026

B = Breakfast **L** = Lunch **D** = Dinner

3 nights Kobe – 3 nights Takamatsu – 3 nights Matsuyama – 3 nights Hiroshima



Day 1: Kobe (Mon, 26 Oct)

D

Pm: Arrive at the **Oriental Hotel** in Kobe, a nineteenth century centre of trade and today is a centre of contemporary architecture and art, fusing traditional design practices with western aesthetics. Take a short walk to the waterfront Meriken Park, home to the city's most iconic contemporary architecture, including Kobe Port Tower and The Maritime Museum. Stop at the Earthquake Memorial, where a small section of the damaged waterfront has been left unrepaired.

Eve: Welcome dinner at a traditional Japanese restaurant.

beauty and pragmatism of this material in the hands of skilled craftspeople.

Pm: Visit the Hyogo Art Museum and the Ando Gallery.

Eve: Dinner at a local Japanese restaurant in Kobe Port Tower.

Day 3: Kobe / Osaka / Kobe (Wed, 28 Oct)

B L

Am: Visit the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Yodoko Guest House, which blends seamlessly with the surrounding hills. It is constructed partly from the soft volcanic oya stone, which Wright also used in Tokyo's Imperial Hotel. Continue to Osaka and spend time in Nakanoshima looking at a variety of architecture.

Pm: In Osaka's neon district of Dotonbori enjoy a traditional okonomiyaki lunch. Visit the Maishima Waste-to-Energy facility. The exuberantly playful exterior was created by Austrian artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser and is based on the principle that there "are no artificial straight lines in nature". Return to Kobe.

Eve: Optional Kobe Beef dinner.

Day 2: Kobe (Tues, 27 Oct)

B D

Am: Walk to the urban oasis of elegant Sorakuen Garden. See the ornamented European-style stable, an example of western influence on Japanese architecture in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Visit the Takenda Carpentry Tools Museum to learn about traditional building methods and see the

Day 4: Kobe / Takamatsu (Thu, 29 Oct) B L

Am: Depart Kobe via the Akashi Kaikyo Bridge and learn how they accomplished this record-breaking feat of engineering. Cross onto Awachi Island and visit the Water Temple by Ando. Continue to Awaji Yumebutai Park: The World of Tadao Ando, where a stunning landscape has been created, including a memorial garden dedicated to earthquake victims. It provides a new take on the classic Japanese garden.

Pm: Following lunch drive over the bridge onto Shikoku Island and watch the craftsmanship of indigo dying and cotton cloth manufacturing at Nagao Orifu Indigo at Tokushima. Continue to Takamatsu and check in to **JR Clement Inn Takamatsu**.

Day 5: Takamatsu (Fri, 30 Oct) B D

Am: Experience the serene beauty of Ritsurin Garden and learn about cloud pruning, the method of training trees and shrubs into shapes resembling clouds.

Pm: Continue to the Kagawa East Building and see the Kagawa Gymnasium (which is facing potential demolition), where architect Kenzō Tange blended Brutalist concrete with a Japanese design language. Visit the the Shikoku Mura Open Air

Museum; a hillside park that preserves and exhibits examples of Edo and Meiji period architecture relocated from various parts of Shikoku Island.

Eve: Yatai Sushi dinner.

Day 6: Takamatsu (Sat, 31 Oct) B

Am: Visit the Isamu Noguchi Museum, a studio-like space that pays tribute to Noguchi's lifestyle and philosophy, and the George Nakashima Memorial Gallery, housing 60 of his furniture designs. Take a walk through the Bonsai district.

Pm: At leisure.

Day 7: Takamatsu / Matsuyama (Sun, 1 Nov) B D

Am: Visit the 87.5 lacquerware workshop, founded to preserve and pass on the art of lacquerware, known as shikki in Japanese. Drive to Matsuyama, stopping at Kotohira Temple. Climb 1,368 steps to the various shrines, with spectacular views back towards Takamatsu and beyond. For those not climbing to the shrine, there is a famous kabuki theatre which may be visited. Check in to **ANA Crowne Plaza**.

Eve: Local dinner on arrival.



The 100-Step Garden by Tadao Ando on Awachi Island (by Colin Bisset)



Matsuyama Castle

Day 8: Matsuyama (Mon, 2 Nov)

B L

Am: Drive to the Washi Paper Factory in Uchiko Town. Continue through the forests and through the Shikoku Karst National Park to the town of Yusuhara.

Pm: Lunch at Kusabuki. Spend time at Bridge Museum and explore Yusuhara, where the architect Kengo Kuma has designed five buildings. Return via the Forest Therapy Road amongst a variety of mountain trees, reaping the health benefits of forest-bathing with guided meditation.

Day 9: Matsuyama (Tues, 3 Nov)

B

Am: Take the ropeway to visit Matsuyama Castle, one of Japan's twelve 'original castles' and considered a perfect example of feudal castle design. Visit the Saka no Ue no Kumo Museum, containing Ando's new Children's Book Forest Matsuyama.

Pm: At leisure with options to see the historic Dogo Onsen, an historic bathhouse, or the Dogo Giyaman Glass Museum.

Day 10: Matsuyama / Hiroshima (Wed, 4 Nov)

B D

Am: Take the scenic ferry to Hiroshima on the Seto Inland Sea and check in to **ANA Crowne Plaza**.

Pm: Visit the Peace Park and Museum and walk through the beautiful gardens,

designed to commemorate the devastating consequences of a new kind of warfare. Continue to the strikingly contemporary Orizuru Tower, a symbol of peace, and enjoy stunning views across Hiroshima.

Eve: Dinner at a local Japanese restaurant.

Day 11: Hiroshima (Thurs, 5 Nov)

B L

Am: Take a guided tour of the Mazda Factory. Learn about the company's history and design philosophy as you pass through a vehicle assembly line, where you will see a variety of car models being produced. Continue to visit Hiroshima incinerator.

Pm: Enjoy a traditional Benhei okonomiyaki lunch and at leisure.

Day 12: Hiroshima (Fri, 6 Nov)

B D

Am: Take a cruise past the majestic Torii Shrine to Miyajima Island and take in the beautiful maple forest on the lower slopes.

Pm: Return to Hiroshima and at leisure.

Eve: Farewell dinner at Izakaya Eenya.

Day 13: Hiroshima (Sat, 7 Nov)

B

Am: Depart the hotel after breakfast OR take an optional extension.

All itineraries are subject to change, according to local conditions.



The Japanese Alps near Matsumoto

Pre or post extensions

For many years we have been traveling and organising tours and extensions across Japan. Please contact us if you would like us to create a tailor made pre or post extension.

Some options could include visiting the town of Hakone, known for its stunning views of Mount Fuji, its relaxing onsens (hot springs), Lake Ashi with its iconic red Torii gate, excellent art museums, and its traditional ryokans.

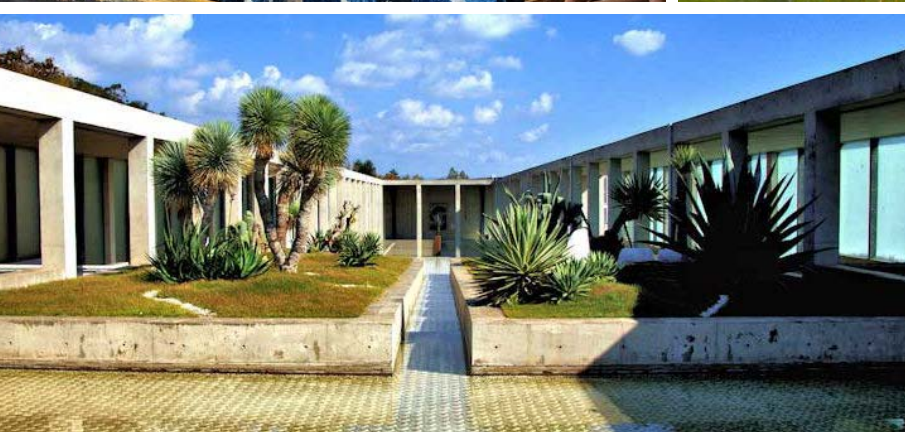
Matsumoto in the Japanese Alps is a charming small city with a castle. It is quieter than most Japanese cities, and has lovely walks in the mountains with many traditional onsens and inns.

The historic city of Kanazawa on the western coast contains intact samurai and geisha districts and is known for its traditional crafts, particularly silk, gold leaf and ceramics.

It is also home to the Kenrokuen Garden, one of the three great gardens of Japan.



Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto (top);
Lake Ashi with a view of Mt Fuji (above)



(Clockwise from top) Hundertwasser Waste-to-Energy facility in Maishima; The Golden Temple, Kyoto; Kagawa Prefectural Government Office East Building by Kenzo Tange; The hillside gallery at Awaji Yumebutai by Tadao Ando; Indigo dyeing (by Colin Bisset).



Akashi Bridge and whirlpools (top); George Nakashima Memorial Gallery; Takamatsu waterfront (Colin Bisset); Community Library, Yusu-hara by Kengo Kuma (Colin Bisset) (above)

The cost of the tour per person sharing is €5,592

The cost of the tour with a room to yourself is €5,988

The cost of the tour includes:

- The services of tour leaders, Colin Bisset and Anthony (Anth) Hillin.
- 12 nights' accommodation in twin-bedded rooms with private facilities in first class and medium grade hotels
- Meals as per the itinerary (breakfast daily, 4 lunches, 6 dinners)
- All admission fees
- Services of specialist English-speaking national guides
- All transport services, tips and taxes in Japan

The cost excludes

- International flights and airport transfers
- Meals not mentioned
- Drinks with meals
- All optional excursions, tours and visits; all personal extras such as portage, laundry and inoculation fees; travel insurance

Flights

Flights to and from Japan are not included with this package. We can help organise these flights – please contact us if you would like us to do so.

Hotel room sizes on tour:

Kobe Oriental

30sqm double/twin and single

Takamatsu – JR Clement Takamatsu

30 sqm double/twin 24 sqm single

Matsuyama – ANA Crowne Plaza

24sqm double / twin and 20 sqm single

Hiroshima – ANA Crowne Plaza

27sqm double / twin and 20 sqm single

It is possible to upgrade to larger rooms. Prices on request and subject to availability.

NB: All itineraries are subject to change according to local conditions.

About Us

To travel with us is to dig below the surface, revealing the deeper destination. Of course, you will visit the great historical sites; marvel at the wonders of architecture and engineering; be moved by the riches of culture and art; and experience the most spectacular landscapes in the world. What we also do is make sure that you see the country as it is today, giving you privileged access that independent travel and other tour companies rarely get close to. We give you a variety of experiences, from the sublime to the humble, in the company of intelligent, curious, like-minded people. And while we can be worthy, we also make sure that you have a lot of fun.

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Welfare Facility Building, Yushara by Kengo Kuma (top); Double Vine Bridge; Tori Shrine; A traditional maiko, Kyoto (Colin Sinclair) (above)



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