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## Active Family Vacation in Japan

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If you'd have told my sun-worshipping teenage self one day I'd willingly book a vacation that saw me walk for up to eight hours a day in the Far East with my family in tow, I'd have thought you were insane. Back then, my idea of a perfect vacation was sunning myself on a beach in Mexico covered in cooking oil and sipping swank cocktails.

But after four days on a guided walking tour of one of [Japan's](#) most beautiful regions accompanied by my husband and seven-year-old son, I am now a happy and willing convert to active holidays.

[Walk Japan](#) offers many guided tours around the "Land of the Rising Sun." Its most popular destinations include Kyoto, Mount Fuji, Kyushu, Tokyo and Yakushima, but we chose the [Kiso Road](#), along Nakasendo Way between [Kyoto](#) and [Tokyo](#). It's close to the stunning southern Alps and an old postal trail, offering us the chance to really get to know the traditions of the country as well experience its breathtaking nature.

We were there in cherry blossom season, and everywhere we looked we were in awe of nature. Walk Japan is the purveyor of the off-the-beaten-path tours, and we were not disappointed. The company tours small groups of up to 12 people, and with only eight in our group we were very well looked after.



This trip not only made me a huge believer in active vacations, but I also learned a very valuable lesson: It's okay to hand over the reins to someone else. I'm well traveled and used to making my own plans, so the idea of putting my vacation in the hands of a stranger is alien to me. Turns out, it was one of the best decisions I ever made. Thank you, Walk Japan.

A friendly face told us where to be and at what time every day, showed us to our accommodations, fed us day and night,

and was on hand to answer every silly question we had. Because of their joy and care, we came back from the trip feeling healthier, happier, and well rested. Sometimes it's OK to not do the thinking.

My sister-in-law saw me when we arrived home and exclaimed, "You look amazing, and you've lost weight!" How many times does that happen when you get back from holiday?

My husband lost weight, too. We agreed we both felt vibrant, challenged, and extraordinary. My son also enjoyed his immersion into a magical new land, where he was educated and entertained in equal measure.



Japan is so different from America, it's like the world is playing a giant trick with your brain. I never thought I'd say this either, but some of the most exciting moments happened in the restrooms. I kid you not. This is a country where the heated toilets do everything short of singing the national anthem every time you flush!

We really didn't expect our bathroom activities to be so exciting, but we experienced so many types the three of us held a judging competition every time we used the restroom. I particularly loved the one in a Subway in Kyoto that played birdsongs to hide embarrassing lady noises. Even the McDonalds in Tokyo offered a nice warm seat, and we loved the slippers that, as custom, you are required to wear while using most bathrooms. As long as you pack a sense of humor you will be fine.

My husband became so enamored of Japan's toilet technology he bought one for the house. "Let's pass on the refrigerator magnet and take home a toilet," he said, when he told me about his heated sit-on-and-spray purchase. It's in our home now and continues to deliver delight and giggles.

On the first day of our organized tour we boarded a train from Tokyo to Nagoya to meet our tour guide from Walk Japan, who was unbelievably sweet. I'd recommended you book a [Japan Rail Pass](#) in advance online, while still in America. You will save a bunch of money and a lot of confusion. Japanese rail travel is exceptional, and while it's not always easy to understand the signage it meant we got to see more of the country.



There's a long list of things you'll need on a Walk Japan tour, such as good walking shoes, sunscreen, raincoats, backpacks, and fleeces, but they're very good at letting you know in advance what to pack so we were super prepared. I'd also pack extra socks because it's tradition in Japan to take your shoes off inside any building or restroom (and shows good manners), which means your socks are constantly on show.

We visited a little post town called Magome, which was once home to renowned Japanese author Shimazaki Toson, who wrote "Before the Dawn," a classic Samurai novel set in the early days of Japan's industrial revolution. He died at age 71 in 1943, but literary buffs travel from all over to visit his old home. From there we hiked to Tsumago through beautiful,

lush ancient forests and bubbling brooks. At the end of the walk we settled into a traditional inn and enjoyed a thermal hot spring bath (luxury!) before dinner. At the first inn we slept on traditional floor mats, which were phenomenal. Our guides also provided us with traditional Japanese gowns at dinner, which was pure joy for our son who loves dressing up and a nice change from sweats. The total walking distance for Day One was 6.2 miles.



On the second day, we set out early for a walk to Tsumago, another beautifully maintained, traditional post town, before continuing on for another four miles to Nagiso, where we had a break from walking and caught a train to Kiso-Fukushima. Here we walked the Kaida Plateau through more stunning forests. It felt very alpine and we reached almost 5,000 feet, which tested my fitness. It should be said the Japanese idea of an easy to medium walk is for hearty travelers, not couch potatoes. The views over Mount Ontake, which is volcanic, were incredible, but I also enjoyed my second thermal hot spring bath that evening. I had aches where I didn't know it was possible to ache! This day's walking distance also totaled 6.2 miles.

We returned to Kiso-Fukushima station on Day Three for a short but fun train ride to Yabuhara. We trekked over the Torii Pass, where because it was such a clear day we had distant views of Mount Ontake, and then walked on to the post town of Narai. We did some shopping here—this is an area known for its delicate Lacquer ceramics—and enjoyed a traditional tea and snack in one of the cafés. It was lovely to have a small change of pace. There was also an opportunity to join our tour leader at a couple of nightclubs, but my aching muscles dictated another early night, which I have to say was heaven.

All this time our son was having the time of his life. We'd been reading him "Harry Potter," so he was smitten with the Japanese brooms, which looked like something you'd use for Quidditch. We spent the evening taking photos of him "flying" on his broomstick. It was a magical evening and those photos will be cherished forever. The total walking distance for Day Three was 5 miles.



We were all sad to get to the final day. We had become immersed in a magical world, which would have not been possible without being on an organized trip. After breakfast we headed back to the train station, where we traveled to Nara and Kyoto, before heading back to Tokyo for our flight home.

There's always a risk of upset when you take a small child a long way from home, but if you plan well it's not hard. After our glorious Walk Japan portion of the trip ended, we took our son to [Tokyo DisneySea](#) and [Tokyo Disneyland](#), which was super fun. We live an hour's drive from the Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California, so we are no strangers to Mickey and friends, but we unashamedly enjoyed our burger and fries after endless bowls of fish noodles and tofu.

Without a doubt Japan is an incredible country but demands you be a little culture smart before you arrive. Before we

traveled we bought a tiny pocket guide called "The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture in Japan" by Paul Norbury, which my husband read to my son. It helped us get to know a fascinating new world.

My advice is to do a little studying before you go. Learn three words in Japanese: hello, thank you, and bathroom. It will be appreciated.



I was truly grateful we opted for an organized tour with guides. They booked us into adorable B&Bs we would never have found on our own and explained many customs. We also hired a Walk Japan tour guide during our three nights in Tokyo, where we toured the local markets, arcades, and a karate school. That last visit wouldn't have happened if we'd been left to our own devices.

It was so successful that from now on I will be on the lookout for vacations that involve physical exercise and the help of a knowledgeable guide. Not that I will never be sitting on a beach ever again, but why only do that when you can move your body and have a wild, unique experience?

I'm determined more than ever to continue this new tradition while seeking out the old.