

Nikko, Japan: A Travelogue

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

If you haven't heard of Nikko, don't worry, you're not alone. It was a name that was new to me and that I only discovered when I started to research our recent trip to Japan.

Everyone's heard of the capital, Tokyo, and a lot of people will have come across Kyoto, well known for its historic temples and shrines, and Hiroshima, known for the terrible events of World War Two [Ed. - Cheryl has written about all these for this newsletter]. But for many people, myself included, that's about as far as their knowledge goes. However, like most countries in the world, outside of the obvious tourist spots, there are some amazing places to discover and Nikko is most definitely one of those.

The town is located about 80 miles north of Tokyo, but is within easy reach of the capital, thanks to Japan's excellent rail service. There are two main train companies that run to Nikko, Japan Railways, and Tobu Railways.

For anyone with a Japan Rail Pass, Japan Railways is the way to travel, as it will be covered by the pass. The pass is an excellent value, but it has to be pre-purchased before you leave home, as it's only available to foreign visitors. You can purchase passes for either 7, 14, or 21 days, and it will easily pay for itself with just one or two long distance journeys.

Despite its benefits, we didn't get the Japan Rail Pass, mainly because we got an excellently-priced package to visit Kyoto and Hiroshima, our two main stops outside of Tokyo on our trip. Because of that, we took the other rail service to Nikko, on Tobu Railways. I also knew, from their [web site](#), that Tobu Railways offers various passes that give you access to the attractions at Nikko and this seemed like a sensible option, rather than paying for the rail travel and admission separately.

As a result, we headed for Asakusa station to the north east of Tokyo for the trip to Nikko. What I wish I'd known sooner was that you need to visit the Tobu Railways Information Centre about 100 yards away from Asakusa station. However, it was easy to find and well marked, once you understood what you were looking for. They speak perfect English and explained the options to us. We could either take the slow train to Nikko, or the express train for an extra amount, which worked out to about \$12 each. It's definitely the way to go, as it was much faster and a lovely way to travel. The seats were more spacious than many airlines

we've been on and we were very impressed. However, there are only a few of these express trains that run each day.

The journey took about two hours and we passed some wonderful scenery on the way, before getting to the station where we had to change to the Nikko train. This couldn't have been simpler. As our train pulled in, the next one was waiting just across the platform, with English signs everywhere. Once we got to Nikko, we came out of the station and saw the bus stop to the attractions straight ahead of us. Again, very simple, with English signs.

This place very much reminded us of a ski resort, as we were fairly high into the mountains already. You could look at the buildings here and almost imagine you were somewhere in the Swiss, French, or Italian mountains. It was beautiful.

We arrived at our first destination, the Rinno-ji Temple, a few minutes later. This was the first temple to be founded at Nikko in 766 A.D., and has the largest hall here, containing various treasures including 1,000 volumes of Buddhist scriptures. Sadly, we never got to see them, as only the outside of the building was open on the day we visited. Like many temples or shrines in Japan, it was a beautiful vermilion red color and surrounded by tranquil Japanese gardens.

A short walk up the hill was the Toshu-gu Shrine and this is what everyone comes to Nikko to see. It's rated as Japan's best shrine and was created as a mausoleum in the 17th century by around 15,000 craftsmen. It's something that would fit in perfectly at any palace around the world, with gold and carvings everywhere you look. In fact, there's so much to see that you just can't take it all in at first.

Plans of the shrine show its scale. You enter through a basic wooden Torii gate and immediately your attention is drawn to the five-story pagoda to your left, in brilliant red with colorful gold decorations all over it. That sets the theme for what you see as soon as you pass through the next gate. You don't know which way to look, with sacred stone houses straight ahead of you, with similar designs all over them.

To your left is the sacred stable, which is a real must-do for any visitor to this shrine. Remember the [three wise monkeys](#), who saw, heard, and spoke no evil? This is the place that inspired that famous phrase.

Once the obligatory photo call is complete, there's another set of buildings to see, including the sacred library and fountain, before you pass through another Torii gate, climb another set of steps, and pass through the Yomeimon Gate, which is lavishly decorated with beasts

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and flowers. The 12 columns here were carved upside down and, watching over you, are statues of Imperial ministers. This is a real highlight and you can't believe how much detail went into the carvings here. Looking at these, you can easily see how it took 15,000 people to create this masterpiece.

From here, you enter the sanctuary area, a rectangle of buildings with more lavish gold and exquisite carvings everywhere you look. It truly deserves its title as one of Japan's top shrines. It's perhaps one of the most opulent places in the world outside of famous Royal palaces, and is definitely worth the trip out to Nikko on its own.

After seeing the Toshu-gu Shrine, nothing else compares, but there are other sights in Nikko to see. The Taiyyin-byo Shrine is nearly as grand, follows a similar layout, was also designed as a mausoleum, and dates from a similar era. You'll need to be fit here, as there are a number of staircases leading up to the main inner sanctuary. It's not one for the faint hearted!

Closer to the station is the picturesque red-lacquered, wooden Shinkyō Bridge, which is a beautiful sight but is sadly not the original. That was wiped out by floods and was rebuilt in 1907. It's still a favorite picture spot for many.

The town of Nikko also deserves a mention. It's very much a place dependent on visitors and it's got a selection of shops and restaurants to sample here. It's easily somewhere you could spend a couple of hours exploring, and was bigger than we expected.

If you don't fancy using the train system to get to Nikko, there are various day trips out there, many of which include a visit to nearby Nikko National Park and the stunning Kegon Falls that cascade more than 300 feet. Whatever way you choose to get there, on any trip to Japan, add Nikko to the list of places you must see.

[Ed. - Now that you've toured with Cheryl, try this collection of photos of [Nikko from Google Images](#).]

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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