

Go off the beaten track, explore a city of wonder with Walk Japan

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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Japan, renowned for its gourmet feasts, insta-worthy scenery and forest trails embedded in both culture and history is a country basking in therapeutic experiences and off-the-beaten-track hidden gems - a rare wonder for tourists visiting.



Leading the way in providing authentic and enjoyable tours in the country is Walk Japan, which launched in South Africa in 2018. The company provides both scheduled and customised tours, revealing real Japan to travellers through its beauty and ancient landscapes.

With the 2019 Rugby World Cup taking place between 20 September and 2 November in Japan this year, and South Africans loving the sport, it was a prime decision for the group to branch out and cement itself in South Africa.

“ The Rugby World Cup comes to Japan in Autumn 2019 bringing this lovely nation and its people in sharp focus amongst the sports fans in South Africa and, undoubtedly, many will make the journey to support the Springboks. With the tournament spread around the country over six weeks, it is also a great opportunity to experience Japan at large. ”

A variety of off-the-beaten-track itineraries to enjoy include: following in the footsteps of samurai and monks along venerable byways and on ancient pilgrimages; walking through the little-visited, lush countryside of paddy fields and verdant forests dotted with charming hamlets and ancient shrines; and visiting onsen hot spring towns, remote islands and sleepy fishing villages.

Walk Japan's CEO Paul Christie lets us in on what the plans are for the South African market and what the overall response from travellers have been...

■ **Could you tell us more about Walk Japan – (1) What was the inspiration behind its creation (2) and to now bring it to the South African market?**

Walk Japan was founded in 1992 by two academics teaching Japanese history and social geography at Hong Kong University after experience taking their students on field study trips to Japan. Discovery and understanding are, therefore,

very much part of the company's DNA. The transition of Walk Japan from an academic pursuit to a very successful enterprise has been a 26-year journey of year-on-year growth combining our enthusiasm for Japan with learning, adaptation and humility to create the best travel company specialising in the nation. All Walk Japan staff are passionate about Japan and really care for Japan, our customers and our work.

The 2019 Rugby World Cup (and the 2020 Olympics) in Japan has been a timely catalyst to visit the country of the famed Springboks. As a company, we only take on what we can reasonably cope with. After developing markets in other regions nearer to Japan, we finally felt we could give full and sustained attention to the South African market. We are most definitely looking to the long term beyond just 2019.

■ ***What do you wish to accomplish by offering Walk Japan tours to South African tourists?***

Simply described, we are skilled at taking all of our customers, including South Africans, deep into Japan and its society in a way few others can achieve.



Paul Christie

We do not just pass through Japanese society as observers, we become an active part of it. We provide authentic, trouble-free, fulfilling and satisfying experiences from the first contact until after the tour ends; serving up delightful memories to savour for many years afterwards.



■ ***How is Walk Japan planning to grow in South Africa?***

We are in South Africa for the long term, not just the Rugby World Cup. We have employed a local PR company and from here on will be making regular visits to showcase the delights of Japan and the Japanese, and the skills of Walk Japan.

■ ***What has the overall response been from tourists visiting Japan – how have they found the Walk Japan experience?***

Our customers overwhelmingly tell us that they had a great time, that their expectations were more than met. In turn, they have been vital in helping us build up our business by introducing their relatives, friends and work colleagues; in essence, becoming brand ambassadors for us.

We achieve consistently high levels of customer satisfaction because we only provide authentic and vibrant tours that we

would want to join as customers, combined with service and attention to detail that we also demand as customers; ones used to living in Japan, a country known for its exacting standards. We combine logistical skills originally honed in demanding businesses, such as TV news production, with our expertise in both the West's mores and Japanese society, history and culture.

We have an enthusiasm for Japan and its people that comes from decades of living and working with them in many environments besides travel and epitomised by our Community Project on the Kunisaki Peninsula. Finally, we are always reassessing and refining our tours and how we go about our business.

■ ***What is the most popular tours and / or destinations that tourists like to participate in and/ or visit?***

Our original tour, the Nakasendo Way, which is literally at the heart of so much of Japan, is a classic tour of the country and a best seller. It follows the route of an ancient 544km trail that led from the old capital of Kyoto to Edo, the citadel of the samurai warriors that is now Japan's capital, Tokyo.



The Kunisaki Peninsula, where our CEO has lived for 16 years, is a blissful, lovely region of small farms and verdant forests that has been largely overlooked by the rest of Japan.

Here, our Kunisaki Trek explores the 1,300-year-old Rokugo-Manzan, a unique, mystical Shinto-Buddhist group. The temples are gorgeous, the accommodation charming and the food fantastically tasty. It also has onsen hot springs to luxuriate in after a day's walking.

The Basho Tour follows in the footsteps of Japan's greatest poet, Matsuo Basho, through the rugged northern Tohoku region; and the Izu Geo Trail explores a peninsula near the famed Mt. Fuji. All our tours, however, offer great experiences of Japan and often sell out well in advance.

■ ***What are your expansion plans from here on? Where else can the global market expect to see Walk Japan?***

We continue to introduce new itineraries to our current 25 tours at the rate of two to three each year that explore off-the-beaten-path regions of Japan.

In recent years we have introduced self-guided tours to complement our guided tours, and are now working with Japan's All Nippon Airways to roll out a new range of light-walking tours with particular focuses on gastronomy and onsen hot spring bathing.

We have already established strong presences in Australia and New Zealand, the USA and Canada, Singapore and Hong Kong, and the UK. After South Africa, we will be entering the Indian and Irish markets.

■ ***Walk Japan offers school trips – why did you choose to incorporate this market as part of your offering – what have the schools', educators' and students reactions been like?***

Deep at the heart of Walk Japan is the desire and skill to interest and educate others about Japan and its delightful people. It is a motivation that is rooted in the origin of Walk Japan in Hong Kong University and it was a natural progression to offer school tours, which began about 20 years ago with one school from Hong Kong. Now, we have schools joining us not just from Hong Kong, but from other countries including Singapore, the USA, Korea and Japan.

Most schools join us each year so I guess the proof is in our school tours' pudding! The teachers' testimonials rate us highly.

■ ***Why should people choose Walk Japan? What makes it different from other tours on offer?***

Walk Japan is the pioneering operator of walking tours of Japan. We specialise in only one country and, since 1992, have been providing the best planned, the best led and most fulfilling and enjoyable, small-group tours available in Japan. We are highly regarded by our customers and by our competitors, who try to replicate what we do – the best form of flattery!





We introduce Japan in contexts that are informative and make sense of sights and customs that otherwise too often remain elusive to many visitors. We bring this fascinating country up close by mixing in with its people and their way of life. We use public transport with its many varied, very pleasant and efficient guises; and also use delightful, local inns, the occasional temple and family-run restaurants.

All our tours are thoroughly researched and planned for experiences of Japan without peer. They are original, well-paced and carefully balanced for activity, interest and pleasure.

Our extensive planning and attention to detail ensure that our tours provide a rich experience that runs exceptionally well. We set standards far above the norm in Japan through our western approach to tour research and creation combined with our Japanese high standards of service.

The stars of the show are our tour leaders, who are rated highly by our customers and travel writers for their enthusiasm, friendliness, knowledge of Japan, ability to communicate and professionalism. Their task is not just to provide a great experience but also to engender a desire in all our customers to return to Japan - and so far many have, some many times over.

Connect with Walk Japan via [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Walk Japan tours are located close to the stadiums in Tokyo, Yokohama, Kumagaya, Shizuoka, Hanazono, Toyota (Nagoya) and Kobe.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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