

Les Clefs d'Or Japan

Key News



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Fukui Fam Trip

By Rise Kamei

On September 4-5, 2025, twelve members from Les Clefs d'Or Japan and the Japan Concierge Association participated in a Fam trip organized by the Fukui Prefectural Tourism Federation. Following the March 2024 extension of the Hokuriku Shinkansen line from Fukui to Tsuruga, the number of tourists and tourism-related spending in fiscal year 2024 reportedly reached a record high, indicating a growing economic impact. The purpose of this tour was to deepen our understanding of Fukui's tourism resources and explore ways to attract more visitors in the future. The focus of the tour was ZEN x CRAFT x FOOD—a journey celebrating Japan's beauty and living traditions.



Our first stop was Urushiya, a long-established soba restaurant in Echizen City that once served oroshi soba to Emperor Showa. We enjoyed a soba kaiseki meal, including their signature green tea-infused Nadai Oroshi soba. In Echizen, soba is typically served cold with grated daikon radish, and the combination of flavorful soba and the slightly spicy daikon was exquisite.

Next, we visited the Echizen-Sabae area, a hub of traditional craftsmanship. Within a 10 km radius, the area is home to five traditional crafts—Echizen paper, lacquerware, cutlery, pottery, and tansu (wooden chests)—and two local industries, eyewear and textiles. It is rare in Japan to find so many crafts and industries concentrated in one area.

In the Imadate district, we explored Echizen Washi, renowned for its 1,500-year history and exceptional quality. During the Edo period, the first watermark technology for counterfeit prevention on Japanese currency was developed here which is a technique still applied in modern banknotes. At Taki Seishi Paper Mill, the only factory in Japan producing large-format washi, we observed both handmade and machine-made paper production, as well as a demonstration of artistic patterning.

This experience highlighted washi's potential as a medium for creative expression.

We then visited Okamoto Shrine and Otaki Shrine, dedicated to the paper god. The shrines' roofs, said to be the most complex in Japan, and the intricately carved main halls were truly impressive.



Next, we visited Shitsurindo, a historic lacquerware workshop in Sabae City founded in 1793. It preserves traditional techniques while offering modern, colorful pieces suited to today's lifestyles. The dishwasher-safe lacquerware is highly recommended for overseas guests as a practical and attractive souvenir. Watching the young female was inspiring, showing their dedication to carrying this centuries-old tradition into the future.



We then visited ESHIKOTO, a complex developed by the KOKURYU Sake Brewery. Set along the scenic Kuzuryu River, the facility appeals not only to sake enthusiasts but also to guests interested in architecture and design.

The on-site accommodation, Kanshuku-en, features eight elegant villas with semi-open-air baths for a luxurious and private stay. The Ishidaya ESHIKOTO shop offers a wide selection of rare sake available only here. The complex also includes Bakery HAREYA and Soba Yamaya, a soba restaurant designed by renowned architect Kengo Kuma.

Dinner was served at Apero & Patisserie acoya, where we enjoyed dishes made with locally sourced ingredients.



Our accommodation for the night was at Courtyard by Marriott Fukui, a two-minute walk from Fukui Station, offering comfortable rooms and sweeping city views.



On the second day, we began at Heisenji Hakusan Shrine, an important site of Hakusan worship. The moss-covered stone paths and tall cedar trees created a mystical atmosphere, which was enhanced by a light rain.

Next, we visited Kippo-ji Temple, where Zen master Dogen trained before founding Eihei-ji Temple. Nestled in a quiet valley, the temple allows visitors to follow Dogen's footsteps. We joined a guided tour led by Zen Master Ishigami with English interpretation and enjoyed Shojin Ryori (traditional Buddhist

We then explored Awara Onsen. At Kofuyuden Beniya, every room features a private hot spring bath, providing a serene and secluded retreat. Grandia Housen welcomed us with attentive staff and a bright, lively atmosphere, showcasing why it is so popular.

Many Ryokans in Awara Onsen are family-run, with relatively low concerns about succession.

The younger generation collaborates to support the town, creating a vibrant and thriving community.



vegetarian cuisine) for lunch. Experiencing the Zen teaching of approaching each action with care. Gave me a meaningful moment to reflect on the mindset I hope to bring to my daily life and work.



Mr. Mark Patterson Mini Seminar

By Shuta Takeuchi

On September 2, we welcomed Mr. Mark Patterson, who has been long active with Les Clefs d'Or, shared timeless insights on hospitality: people prefer to engage with those they know, trust, and like. Markets and technologies may change, yet this Principle remains central, especially in luxury service.



He posed a scenario: two identical hotels, one less expensive and one pricier, but guests often choose the more expensive hotel, if trust and human connection are present. Patterson also shared his background, where his career began as a Bell person at the Sheraton Copenhagen in 1979, mentored by Mr. Arshad Khokhar (Former President of Les Clefs d'Or Denmark), whose kindness shaped his path. That early lesson, "hospitality is human connection" remains his guiding truth. He emphasized the Concierge's world of chaos and unpredictability, urging professionals to embrace it through networks, like fishing nets or webs, that create order and opportunity. He encouraged visualizing one's network as a living map of strong ties, weak ties, and growth areas. While strong ties build trust, weak ties often open doors to new opportunities. Diversity and "hubs"; well-connected individuals across fields, further enrich these networks. Mr. Patterson noted that post-pandemic networking still lags, but this highlights the value of face-to-face connection, where concierges excel.

On the topic of Artificial Intelligence, he was clear; while it is a super power for us and the technology aids efficiency, but cannot replace empathy or warmth. What truly endures is generosity, giving time, attention, and trust.

Mr. Patterson concluded that "The Relations Code" is as old as humanity. For concierges, embodying it through diverse networks and authentic giving ensures hospitality thrives, not by algorithms, but by people. In my perspective, I fully agree; especially AI may enhance us, but it will never replace the human touch that defines our profession.

Finding the story of Kii Mountain Range

As part of the Japan Tourism Agency's model tourist destination project, four of us participated in an inspection tour of the "Kii Mountain Range" area. From June 25, 2025, for one night and two days, we visited Yoshino and Dorogawa Onsen in Nara Prefecture, Tenkawa Village, and Koyasan in Wakayama Prefecture.

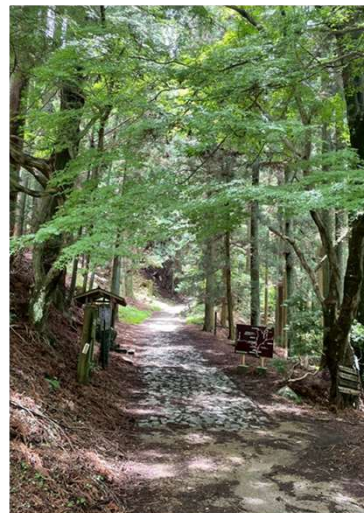
Kinpusen-ji Temple

The area is famous for its cherry blossoms, drawing large crowds during the sakura season. However, on the day of the inspection, it was very quiet, allowing a peaceful visit. Before touring the temple, we watched beautiful video focused on the hidden Buddha statue of Zaō Gongen and others at SOWA, a newly opened facility where you can have a rest. The presentation included English subtitles, which made the explanation was very helpful to understand Kinpusen-ji Temple. Kinpusen-ji was founded by the person who is called En no Gyōja, considered the founder of Shugendō, who practiced ascetic training for 1,000 days on Mount Sanjōgatake, located at the summit of Mount Kinpu during the Hakuho period (A.D661-A.D863). Afterward, he attained enlightenment of Kongō Zaō Daigongen and established this deity as the

principal object of worship in Shugendō. En no Gyōja carved the deity's figure into a Japanese cherry tree and enshrined it both at the summit of Mount Sanjōgatake and at Yoshinoyama at the mountain's base, which is said to be the origin of Kinpusen-ji. Although Yoshinoyama is very crowded during the cherry blossom season, visitors in the fresh green season can enjoy this greenery all to themselves.

Yoshino

During the cherry blossom season, Yoshino reportedly becomes as crowded as Harajuku, Tokyo. In the green season, it feels like you have the place all to yourself, allowing you to fully enjoy the deep greenery. From vantage points overlooking the foothills, the vast green scenery spreads before your eyes. At the 22nd Century Yoshino Sakura Appreciation Association, it is possible to purchase and plant cherry trees. Buyers receive a name tag for their tree and a map showing its location.



Sakura Honbō Temple



About a 20-minute walk later, we reached Sakura Honbō. The deputy chief priest is German and well-versed in Buddhism, Shinto, and Shugendō. Experiences such as goma fire

rituals, sutra copying, and Buddhist figure drawing can be explained in English and German.

Lunch at SEN (Watershed Cuisine) and TENKARA GELATO for following day.

Based on the concept of coexisting with the mountain and river ecosystems, we enjoyed a calm, relaxed atmosphere along with healthy and delicious dishes.

Chef Toshiharu Sunayama, born in London, served as sous-chef and chef at two- and three-star restaurants in France. After marrying, he moved to Tenkawa Village in Nara Prefecture and opened “TENKARA GELATO.” In 2025, he opened SEN, offering cuisine unique to this area. Tenkawa Village, located at the uppermost reaches of the Kumano River, is known as Okuyoshino. Chef Sunayama considers the spirit of protecting the local natural environment and food culture, emphasizing local production for local consumption, as the essence of his cuisine, which he calls “watershed cuisine, Ryuikiriyori” in Japanese.”

From the wide windows of the restaurant, you can enjoy views that reflect the passage of time throughout the day.

On the tables, there are plates and cutlery rests made from Yoshino cedar, crafted by local artists, allowing guests to appreciate local art.



Accommodation at Dorogawa Onsen

We stayed at Dorogawa Onsen, a historic base for Ōmine faith. In Shugendō, where nature is regarded as divine and mountains are considered the body of gods, yamabushi (mountain monks) purify themselves before entering the mountains and spend many days practicing ascetic training inside. Dorogawa Onsen prospered as a lodging place for these yamabushi. All inns in Dorogawa Onsen feature long verandas called Engawa. Yamabushi wash their soiled feet on these verandas after training in the mountains before resting at the inn.

Yamabushi purify themselves and practice in the mountains, then return to “half monk,

half just a person” life in the human world. This practice reflects the Buddha’s teaching of the “Middle Way.”

We stayed at Kadojin, a long-established inn with 350 years of history, which is the only inn in



Dorogawa Onsen. They have two rooms with open-air baths and a private open-air bath in the house. It is renovated in 2006. Lanterns are lit under the eaves of all buildings in Dorogawa Onsen to preserve the town's atmosphere, creating a nostalgic and magical ambiance at night, thanks to the cooperation of the entire community. Dinner featured local mountain delicacies: duck and wild boar hot pot, including tofu made with "Gorogoro Water," a famous local spring water. The meal ended with a risotto, a particularly exquisite dish rich in broth flavor.

Next day, Goma Fire Ritual and Water Purification at Ryusen-ji Temple
 The day started with participating in goma fire and water purification rituals at Ryusen-ji Temple. The goma fire ritual was conducted in the dimly lit main hall accompanied by the sound of conch shells, overwhelming all participants with its powerful atmosphere. The water purification took place in a pond filled with "Ryūnokuchi no Reisui," a spring water that remains at about 10°C year-round. Initially, the water felt very cold, but gradually a sense of warmth emerged, and afterward, a refreshing, clear feeling was experienced—a mysterious sensation. Being able to experience both the purification from ascetic practice and the ritual to burn away earthly desires before returning to the town was a very special, valuable experience.

At the end of the goma fire ritual, the chief priest instructed us to "grasp the flame," symbolizing the burning away of desires. After shedding desires, we warmed up in the hot springs before heading to Koyasan. On the way, we enjoyed gelato at TENKARA GELATO, savoring the joy of returning to the "secular" world.



Lunch at Shojoshin-in Temple

We had a vegetarian curry lunch served in a Japanese-style room with golden walls. Each herb was deeply infused into the dish, which was also generously portioned, making it very satisfying.

Tour of Rengejō-in Temple Lodging

The lodgings featured luxuriously furnished rooms unlike typical temple lodgings. Suites with baths and toilets were newly established to meet broader needs.



Oku-no-in and Danjō Garan

The guide who is licensed as a guide for Kongōbu-ji Temple grounds, led us through the area. During the guided tour, we learned extensively about Koyasan's history, culture, daily temple life, and the teachings of Kūkai, with the guide answering many questions attentively.

English guidance is also available, which we felt would satisfy visitors interested in Japanese religious perspectives and spirituality.

Oku-no-in is part of Kongōbu-ji, the head temple of Shingon Buddhism located in Koya Town, Wakayama Prefecture, and houses the mausoleum of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai. It is said that since 834 AD, Kōbō Daishi has entered eternal meditation there and is still meditating today.

The two-kilometer path from Ichinohashi Bridge, crossing three bridges, is considered the boundary between this world and the afterlife. Crossing the third bridge leads to Kōbō Daishi's mausoleum.

Gorintō (five-ring towers) are highly significant memorial towers in Japanese Buddhist culture. They are not mere gravestones but sacred pagodas symbolizing the universe's fundamental principles, depicting the five elements—earth, water, fire, wind, and void—starting from the bottom stone. The moss covering graves are not just decoration but part of a landscape where nature, history, and religion merge. In Shingon Buddhism, the universe itself is Hotoke, awakness, and all existence on earth is considered manifestations of Dainichi Nyorai, showing strong affinity with animism.



Shingon Buddhism, known as Esoteric Buddhism, uses metaphors, such as Kōbō Daishi's analogy comparing the human mind to the moon and life to a lotus flower. The moon is inherently round, though it appears to wax and wane from Earth's perspective. The lotus blooms beautifully



from the mud, paralleling human life. These motifs of the moon and lotus are commonly used in Esoteric Buddhist art. The essence of Esoteric Buddhism is to understand one thing by illustrating it to another.

It felt like a special place that expands the spiritual world of its visitors in Koyasan.

Danjō Garan

Located at the center of Koyasan, this complex was founded by Kōbō Daishi as the root training hall of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism. Inside, the mandala symbolizing Kōbō Daishi's teachings is expressed in three dimensions. The term "garan" means a place where monks train, derived from Sanskrit. This area, where one can immerse themselves in mountain faith, Shugendō, ascetic training, and temple lodgings, offers a unique experience even for Japanese visitors, and will likely fascinate foreign guests as well. Being in contact with nature, immersing oneself in it, and confronting one's own heart is the essence of the Kii Mountain Range. While some old customs and traditions might cause slight inconveniences, these also form part of the cultural experience. With proper advance guidance, we hope customers will fully enjoy this region, rich in magnificent nature and spiritual faith.

Discovering the Charms of Ise-Shima

By Misa Yamamoto

As part of the Japan Tourism Agency's initiative to foster high-value-added inbound tourism in regional areas, we participated in an inspection tour to the Ise-Shima area—an officially designated model tourism region—from June 16th, 2025, for one night and two days.

We started the tour aboard the Kintetsu Limited Express Shimakaze. The train offers spacious, electric-reclining seats that provided a comfortable setting for enjoying the scenic views along the way. Before long, we arrived at the final stop—Kashikojima Station. We were warmly welcomed by representatives from the Japan Tourism Agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the Chubu District Transport Bureau, the Japan National Tourism Organization, the Ise-Shima Tourism & Convention Organization, and a certified interpreter-guide.

After a briefing lunch at the nearby Japanese restaurant Miyagino, we departed by car toward the Goza district in Shima Town.

Leaving the main road behind, we ventured along a narrow mountain road that opened up to reveal the breathtaking vista of Ago Bay—part of Ise-Shima National Park and one of Japan's premier pearl cultivation regions. The retro charm of Showa-era pearl factories and floating rafts on the water evoked the historic pearl industry that once flourished in Goza and Ikanoura.

Our first destination was Pearl Miki, where the owner, Ms. Yamaoka, explained the

history and techniques of pearl cultivation. She described in detail how young Akoya oysters are raised, nucleated, and meticulously cared for. Despite such efforts, nearly half of them reportedly fall victim to disease or environmental stress.

On a pearl raft, we observed the growth stages of Akoya oysters and were given the rare chance to extract a pearl ourselves. The moment the pearl emerged from the oyster was quietly moving—an experience that offered a glimpse into the time, care, and delicate balance behind pearl cultivation. It reminded us that pearls, nurtured over many months, hold a quiet beauty that endures across generations.



Leaving Ikanoura, we headed to our accommodation, COVA KAKUDA. This private villa, which opened in 2023, was created by renovating a former pearl factory (in operation until 1970) while preserving its original framework. Set gently on the edge of the inlet, the villa blends into the landscape and seems to hover above Ago Bay.



During a serene sunset cruise across Ago Bay, we lost all sense of time as we breathed in the gentle breeze and watched the stunning evening sky. Dinner featured “Satoumi Cuisine,” a creative blend of Japanese, French, and Italian dishes using local seafood and ingredients to capture the essence of Ise-Shima. Later, we reclined on camp beds beside a bonfire under a star-filled sky—fully relaxed in body and mind. The peaceful setting offered a refreshing change of pace and an opportunity to appreciate the surrounding natural environment.

Guests can enjoy exclusive activities such as harvesting seasonal vegetables, herbs, and fruits in the surrounding Satoyama, a traditional Japanese rural landscape where nature and human life coexist, as well as beekeeping experiences.

Thanks to the warm hospitality of General Manager Mr. Amou and the entire staff, every activity was enjoyable, relaxing, and memorable. We felt that one night was simply not enough to fully appreciate the experience.



On the second day, we visited the Naikū of Ise Jingu, which enshrines Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess and Japan’s most revered deity. During the Edo period, it is said that as many as five million pilgrims made the journey to Ise in just six months—a tradition known as O-Ise-Mairi. Accompanied by a certified interpreter-guide active in the Ise-Shima area, we explored the key sites of the Shrine while learning about the recommended worship routes and the cultural significance of its rituals. One of the most profound traditions is the Shikinen Sengu—a major ritual held every 20 years at Ise Jingu, where the shrine buildings and sacred objects are completely rebuilt, and the deity is ceremonially moved to the new sanctuary. This ritual not only preserves religious tradition but also passes down



ancient architectural and craftsmanship techniques to future generations.

After our visit to the shrine, we strolled through Oharaimachi, an 800-meter-long stone-paved street leading from Ise Jingu, where



we enjoyed a traditional rickshaw ride. We then visited Isuzujuku, a cultural facility dedicated to preserving and sharing the unique customs and traditions of Ise. There, representatives from Isefuku Co., Ltd. and the Ise-Shima Tourism & Convention Organization introduced us to cultural tourism programs featuring hands-on experiences such as crafting Shimenawa (sacred ropes used in Shinto rituals), weaving Matsusaka cotton, braiding Kumihimo cords, and making Gikakushi (a traditional Japanese craft material—faux leather made from washi paper). Following this, we continued our walk through the bustling and nostalgic Okage Yokocho, a recreated townscape from the late Edo to early Meiji period, filled with over 50 local shops and eateries. The lively streets and local craftsmanship offered further insight into the cultural heritage of the area.

Our tour concluded with lunch at Daiki, a Japanese restaurant near Uji-Yamada Station that serves exquisite dishes made from locally sourced ingredients.

Afterward, we participated in a feedback and discussion session at the Mie Prefectural Government Office, joined by

officials from the Japan Tourism Agency, the Chubu District Transport Bureau, the Japan National Tourism Organization, as well as representatives from the tourism divisions of Mie Prefecture and Ise City, the Ise-Shima Tourism & Convention Organization, and various stakeholders involved in the initiative.

We also exchanged insights with Kintetsu Group Holdings and Mie Kintetsu Taxi regarding access and transportation issues in the region. Feedback from our site visit was shared with COVA KAKUDA, Pearl Miki, and our interpreter-guide.

This visit reaffirmed that the Ise-Shima area, cherished by Japanese travelers since the Edo period, continues to hold many distinctive charms that cannot be experienced or felt anywhere else.

The beautiful scenery we encountered, the special time and atmosphere specific to the Ise-Shima region, its culture and traditions, and above all, the warmth of the local people are treasures we sincerely hope will be preserved forever. We also strongly feel that many more travelers should come to know and appreciate this remarkable place. Based on the many wonderful discoveries from this visit, we hope to contribute to sharing and introducing the true charms of Ise-Shima to travelers visiting Japan.



MONTHLY MEETING

September

The regular monthly meeting in September was held in the VIP room of “BAY” at The Ritz-Carlton Fukuoka.

During the first session, committee members shared updates on ongoing initiatives and outlined plans for upcoming activities.

The Asian Congress scheduled to begin on October 23rd, and the joint seminar with the Japan Concierge Association planned for January 2026—were unveiled. These announcements further elevated the collective enthusiasm, and members reaffirmed their commitment to working together in preparation for these significant occasions.

The second session featured a special visit to the exclusive “Kinsei Lounge,” the dedicated lounge for JR Kyushu’s luxury train, Seven Stars in Kyushu. As access to this space is typically restricted, the opportunity to explore it was truly exceptional.

Following the lounge tour, participants were guided along the same route taken by actual passengers to the platform, and then moved to a meeting room where JR Kyushu staff graciously shared insights into the train’s concept and the philosophy behind its operation.

October

The October regular meeting was held at the Shimoda Tokyu Hotel, Grand Banquet Hall in Shizuoka Prefecture.

In Part 1, we shared activity reports and progress on the joint seminar scheduled for January.

We also discussed methods for interacting with young concierges aspiring to join Les Clefs d’Or. Since the Les Clefs d’Or lunch alone cannot be held regularly, opinions were gathered on establishing new opportunities for exchange. We will continue to explore to make it easier for those who are interested to join, and creating new networking opportunities.

In Part 2, we went on the tour of Shimoda City.

We traveled by bus to the Shimoda Underwater Aquarium and met up with JCA members.

Afterwards, we explored Uragisaki and the Geo Area, then boarded the Black Ship sightseeing boat. We enjoyed lunch at Kinmatei and disbanded at Izukyu-Shimoda Station. It was a great way to learn about the history and sightseeing spots of Shimoda.

