

# Les Clefs d'Or Japan

# Key News



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# Fukui Prefecture FAM Trip

By Mai Hashitani

Just under three hours from Tokyo by the Hokuriku Shinkansen, Fukui is now more accessible than ever. Together with travel designers and tourism professionals, we began our journey from Fukui Station under the theme **“A Journey to Discover ZEN × CRAFT × FOOD.”**

Our first visit was to the Fukui Tourist Information Center, a reliable starting point with multilingual staff ready to assist international visitors. From there, we headed to **ESHIKOTO**, a refined destination set along the Kuzuryu River. Exploring its sake cellars and facilities, we enjoyed lunch at the soba restaurant *Soba Yamaya*, savoring handmade soba. This time, Ms. Sasaki made local dishes so we got knowledge of the history and the lifestyle too while taking in the serene riverside scenery.



Next, we visited Eiheiiji Temple, the head temple of Soto Zen Buddhism. Surrounded by deep greenery and historic architecture, we experienced a short zazen meditation session—an opportunity to step away from daily life and quietly reflect. Nearby, the Zen-inspired hotel Hakujukan offers guests the chance to participate in morning prayers, enjoy shojin-ryori, and relax in an incense bath prepared using the same aromatic blend as Eiheiiji Temple

At Kaikatei, we enjoyed seasonal cuisine made with Fukui’s local ingredients, paired with sake from regional breweries—an experience that beautifully highlighted the area’s culinary depth.



Day 2, We visited artisans representing Fukui’s proud craft traditions: Echizen forged blades, Echizen washi paper, Sabae eyewear, and Echizen lacquerware.

Meeting the craftsmen and observing their work offered a powerful insight into the skill, care, and passion passed down through generations. felt both timeless and intimate.



**Echizen Forged Blades – etoe × Yamamoto Uchihamono** -Echizen forged blades are among the earliest traditional crafts in Japan to receive official designation. At Yamamoto Uchihamono, we were greeted with warmth and a touch of playfulness, as the craftsman welcomed us wearing a traditional *Hyottoko* mask inspired by a beloved anime character. All of the machines still in use today were built during the Showa era and are carefully maintained by the craftsman himself. Watching the forging and sharpening processes up close, and witnessing the incredible sharpness of the finished blades, was a powerful reminder of the skill and dedication behind each piece.



On the afternoon of the second day, we divided into two groups—one visiting local craft workshops, and the other heading to the Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum.

### Craft Workshop Visits (Echizen-Sabae Area)

One of the unique charms of the Echizen-Sabae area is that seven traditional industries are concentrated within a 10km radius.

We visited three workshops:

#### Echizen Washi – Taki Paper Mill

Japan's very first banknotes were made from Echizen washi, and this area remains a center of papermaking tradition. The workshop we visited produces both handmade and machine-made paper, selecting the method according to purpose. Their work is trusted by renowned artists, luxury hotels and brands around the world. A dynamic two-person demonstration using a self-designed machine left a lasting impression.



**Aisansō** is a registered cultural property built in the Taisho period in an elegant sukiya-style. With its meticulously maintained garden, the residence was designed to enjoy the changing seasons while gazing toward Mount Hino, once celebrated in poetry by Murasaki Shikibu. Here, we enjoyed a refined soba kaiseki meal in a setting that felt both timeless and intimate.

## Sabae Eyewear – Taniguchi Optical

Over 90% of Japan’s eyeglass frames are produced in Sabae. Each frame takes nearly 200 steps to complete, with specialists handling each process. The frames are carefully designed to suit Japanese facial features, with attention paid to balance and comfort. Seeing the craftsmen repeatedly inspect their work by hand conveyed a deep sense of pride and care.



## Echizen Lacquerware – Shitsurindō

Lacquerware production relies on many specialized processes and losing even one can halt production entirely. To preserve the craft, Shitsurindō has begun handling all processes in-house. The workshop was lively, with many young artisans at work. In addition to traditional lacquerware, they offer modern, colorful pieces that are dishwasher-safe, making them both beautiful and practical. They also produce wooden boxes used for the year’s first sea urchin auction—an exciting tradition.



Over two days, this journey revealed Fukui as a destination where **Zen spirituality, traditional craftsmanship, and exceptional food** come together in quiet harmony. It is a region we would be delighted to recommend to our guests.

Our sincere thanks go to the Fukui City Tourism Association, the General Incorporated Association SOE, Mr. Sasaki, and all the local community people

# Setouchi Area Fam Trip

Participants:

Hiromi Maruyama and Hiromi Yamada

From October 20 to 21, 2025, we visited the Setouchi area for a two-day inspection. This area is one of the model destinations designated by the Japan Tourism Agency for “creating high-value-added inbound tourism destinations in regional areas.”

The inspection of the Setouchi area had already been conducted once in June by other members, making this the second inspection.

## Day 1

The tour began at Mihara Station in Hiroshima Prefecture, where we were warmly welcomed by representatives from Setouchi DMC and the Japan Tourism Agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Shikoku District Transport Bureau. From there, we headed to Mihara Port, just a few minutes away by car, to embark on a cruise experience.

The JOY CRUISE is a luxurious Italian-made cruiser featuring 3 bedrooms and accommodating up to eight guests. Equipped with a BBQ setup and a jacuzzi, it offers a variety of private cruise options tailored to guests’ preferences. The staff, deeply knowledgeable about the Setouchi region, provided exceptional hospitality and went above and beyond to ensure a memorable experience. Even seasoned travelers would surely be impressed. The lunch served onboard was a delightful showcase of fresh, seasonal ingredients sourced locally, allowing us to savor the authentic flavors of Setouchi.



Afterward, we visited WAKKA, a tourism facility catering to cycling enthusiasts, before heading to the port to join a fishing tour. There, we observed the outstanding skills of Mr. Junichi Fujimoto, known as the world’s leading fisherman, including his impressive *shinkei-jime* (*ikejime*) technique. Witnessing firsthand why Setouchi fish are so highly regarded was truly educational, and we were especially touched by the warm hospitality shown by Mr. Fujimoto, his wife, and the entire team.

At Akakichi, where we dined, we were amazed by the abundance of Setouchi seafood and the chef's remarkable skill in preparing each dish swiftly and exquisitely. And we were captivated by the dignified yet warm, welcoming atmosphere and the friendly personality of the chef, Mr. Akase.

We stayed at AZUMI SETODA, a ryokan that has been beautifully restored from the former residence of a wealthy merchant in Setoda on Ikuchijima Island. The two-story building houses 22 comfortable rooms in four distinct styles. Each room features a spacious *hinoki* or Japanese cypress bath, allowing guests to relax in the soothing aroma of *hinoki* wood. Breakfast was served in a sunlit dining room and was inspired by the meals once enjoyed by the Horiuchi family, who had lived in the house for 140 years. The dishes, served in heirloom tableware, featured seasonal local ingredients and offered a nostalgic, comforting taste.

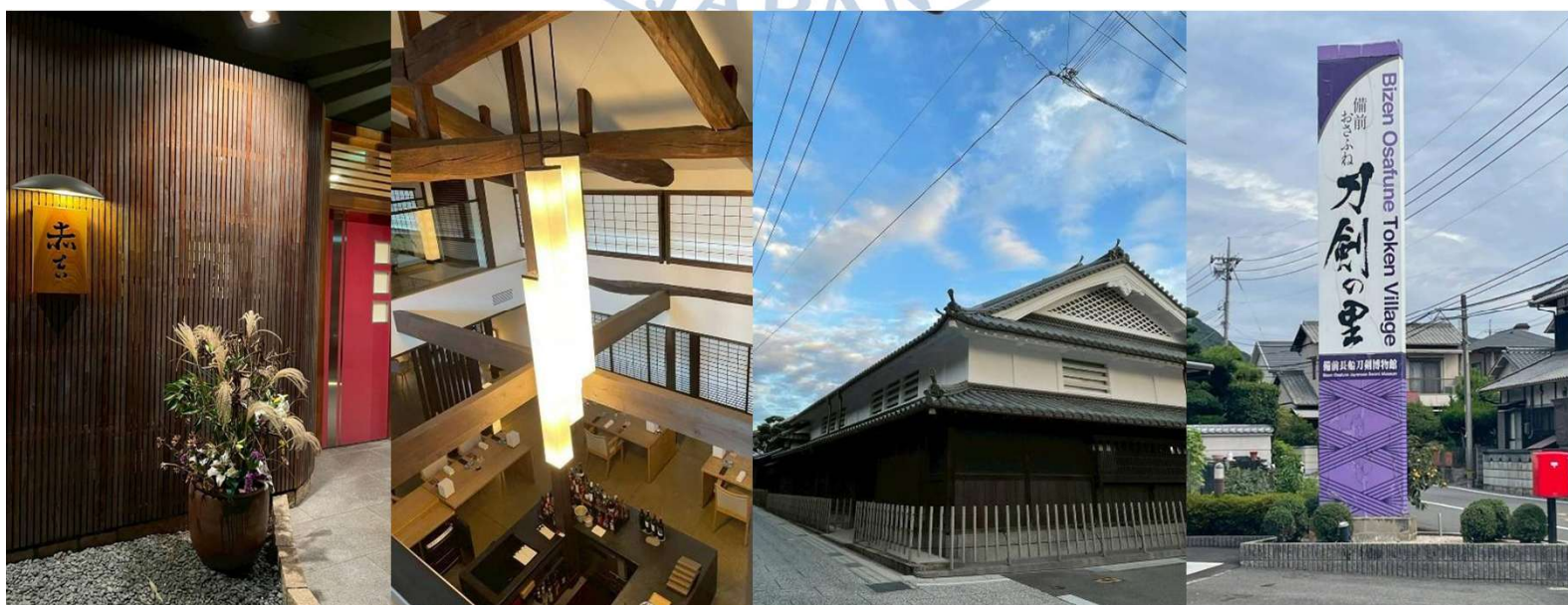
## Day 2

On the second day, we began with a visit to the Bizen Osafune Japanese Sword Museum, about 90 minutes away by car.

Bizen is a region where abundant raw materials were brought in by water transport from the Chugoku Mountains and Mimasaka, sources of iron sand, and where many swordsmiths resided. Since ancient times, it has been revered as a sacred place for Japanese sword-making. The museum director gave us an insightful explanation of the sword-making process and its history. We then admired a collection of masterfully crafted swords on display.

The museum also features an open workshop where visitors can observe artisans at work.

On the second Sunday of each month, traditional forging demonstrations using *tamahagane* or steel made from iron sand are also held.



Lunch was at Arate Saryo in Okayama, a long-established kaiseki restaurant with a 90-year history located in the outer garden of Korakuen. The restaurant occupies the former residence of the Igi family, senior retainers of the Okayama domain, and is associated with the Imperial Family. We enjoyed exquisite Japanese cuisine in this historic setting.



These two days were a valuable opportunity to experience the natural beauty and culinary delights of Setouchi, as well as the rich history and traditions of Bizen, including Japanese swords and samurai culture. We strongly feel that this is a region well worth recommending to meet the diverse needs of international visitors.

Our final stop was the adjacent Korakuen Garden, one of Japan's Three Great Gardens. It is a rare example of a *daimyō* (Japanese feudal lord) garden in province that has retained much of its original Edo-period appearance.

Once used as a place for entertaining important guests and also as a spa of sorts for the *daimyōs*, it is now managed by Okayama Prefecture and designated as a "Special Place of Scenic Beauty." Strolling through the beautifully manicured *kaiyū* ("scenic promenade") style garden while gazing at Okayama Castle was a truly elegant and memorable experience.



# Les Clefs d'Or Japan & Japan Concierge Association Joint Seminar 2026

By Satoru Masuda

The 2026 seminar by Japan Concierge Association and Les Clefs d'Or Japan was held on January 14<sup>th</sup> at Grand Hyatt Tokyo. This seminar was “The Concierge Network – Our Roles and Responsibilities.” We were honored to welcome Mr. Dean McWhinnie, Area Director for the South Asia & Oceania Region, President of Les Clefs d'Or Australia, and Chief Concierge of The Grace Hotel, as our guest speaker. Mr. McWhinnie’s passionate and compelling presentation, grounded in his extensive personal experience, offered profound insights for all of us in the concierge profession. In particular, the concept of “The Strength of Weak Ties” left a strong impression. It reminded us that not only strong, established networks matter, even light, casual connections can become powerful catalysts. It reinforced the idea that consistent, thoughtful communication, even in small forms, ultimately leads to meaningful results.



In the second half of the seminar, we held group discussions based on Mr. McWhinnie’s message, focusing on the unique strengths of the concierge network in Japan and the connections we experience through our daily work. Each group engaged in active and enthusiastic discussions. This became a valuable opportunity to deepen our awareness of our responsibilities as concierges and to reflect on the essence of accountability in our profession. We reaffirmed that when each of us continues to fulfill our individual roles consistently, it strengthens trust within our network and further enriches its foundation. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. McWhinnie for his inspiring contribution. With hopes of welcoming him again in the future, the seminar concluded in a warm and collegial atmosphere.



# MONTHLY MEETING



## January

The regular monthly meeting in January was held at Grand Hyatt Tokyo banquet room “Basil”.

At the meeting we mainly discussed about the details of the joint seminar of Les Clefs d’Or Japan and Japan Concierge Association held in the afternoon.

\*Please refer to the separate seminar article for details

## February

The regular monthly meeting in February was held onboard the Joy Cruise cruiser Ocean Point VII. During the first session, committee members shared updates on ongoing initiatives and outlined plans for upcoming activities. The International Congress in Sydney will take place from April 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>. A total of 11-Les Clefs d’Or members from Japan will participate this year. We are pleased to share that Mr. Shuta Takeuchi Chief Concierge of Aman Tokyo has been nominated for the Les Clefs d’Or Award. Japan members offer our full support on-site and send strong encouragement from Japan.

During the second session, After a warm greeting from the Joy Cruise representatives, the vessel set sail smoothly toward Onomichi. Under splendid weather conditions, the captain expertly navigated the route, accompanied by the heartfelt hospitality of the crews. We enjoyed a wonderful meal prepared by the Executive Chef, who showcased regional ingredients in an elegant and generous manner. The approximately 2 hours cruise from Mihara Port to Onomichi Port offered breathtaking scenery throughout. The views were truly a feast for the eyes and made for a deeply enriching experience.

