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From the Land of the Thunder Dragon to the Land of Fire: An AFICS-Philippines Journey to Bhutan and Kyushu, Japan

Bhutan

As part of its programme to raise funds and strengthen camaraderie among members, families, and friends, AFICS-Philippines organized two special tours in 2026. The first was a cultural immersion tour of Bhutan, aptly described as a journey to unlock the mysteries of the "Land of the Thunder Dragon." Held from February 24 to March 3, the tour brought together 19 travelers eager to experience the unique heritage, traditions, and way of life of one of the world's most fascinating countries.

The tour provided a deeper understanding of Bhutan's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, where ancient traditions continue to thrive amidst breathtaking Himalayan landscapes. Participants explored the country's deeply rooted Buddhist philosophy, which influences every aspect of Bhutanese life, from governance and education to architecture and environmental conservation.

A highlight of the journey was the exploration of Bhutan's vibrant arts and crafts traditions through visits to its handloom weaving centers where skilled artisans create intricate textiles and colorful silk fabrics and the Arts and Crafts Academy, where young Bhutanese are trained in traditional wood carving, sculpture, embroidery, and the intricate art of mandala and thangka painting—sacred forms of Buddhist artistic expression.Members of the group were given the rare opportunity to try their hand at the delicate craft of creating mandala, an elaborate geometric design composed of millions of grains of colored sand.

The travelers also enjoyed authentic farm-to-table Bhutanese cuisine during a homestay visit, providing a glimpse into rural life and the warm hospitality of local families. Dressed in traditional Bhutanese attire, the group participated in the vibrant Punakha Spring Festival, where they witnessed colorful cultural performances, traditional dances, and folk songs,

The itinerary included visits to some of Bhutan's most revered religious and historical sites, including majestic dzongs (fortress-monasteries), sacred temples, chortens and stupas, and the towering Buddha Dordenma statue, one of the largest Buddha statues in the world.

More than a sightseeing trip, the Bhutan cultural tour was a transformative experience that allowed participants to immerse themselves in a society where happiness,

spirituality, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship remain central values.

Kyushu, Japan

The second AFICS-Philippines tour for 2026 took 22 members, families, and friends to the enchanting island of Kyushu, Japan, from April 1–8, at the height of the country's celebrated cherry blossom season. Known for its stunning natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, active volcanoes, soothing hot springs, and historical landmarks, Kyushu provided the perfect setting for an unforgettable springtime journey.

From the very first day, the group was welcomed by the breathtaking beauty of sakura in full bloom. The magnificent cherry blossoms adorned the pathways and lakesides of Ohori Park and framed the historic grounds of Kushida Shrine, creating scenes reminiscent of traditional Japanese paintings. Throughout the tour, participants were treated to endless displays of pink and white blossoms in parks, castles, temples, and city streets.

The tour also included a moving visit to Nagasaki Peace Park, a solemn reminder of the devastating atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 and a powerful symbol of humanity's enduring quest for peace.

Kyushu's spiritual heritage was experienced through visits to some of its most revered shrines. The Yuutoku Inari Shrine, one of Japan's three great Inari shrines and the Takachiho Shrine, nestled within an ancient cedar forest that offered a serene atmosphere deeply connected to Japanese mythology.

The group also visited renowned porcelain, ceramic and pottery villages celebrated for centuries of craftsmanship and where many membrs took home beautifully crafted pieces as treasured souvenirs of the journey.

One of the most charming experiences was the Yanagawa Canal Cruise. Aboard traditional wooden boats, participants drifted leisurely through the city's network of picturesque canals while local boatmen entertained them with folk songs and stories. Among the tour's most spectacular natural attractions was Takachiho Gorge, one of Japan's most scenic landscapes. Carved by volcanic activity over thousands of years, the gorge is renowned for its dramatic basalt cliffs, emerald waters, and cascading waterfalls.

Kyushu is often called Japan's "Land of Fire" because of its remarkable geothermal activity. The group explored the famous "Hells of Beppu," a collection of extraordinary hot spring pools featuring steaming blue, red, and milky-white waters, bubbling mud pools, and other fascinating hydrothermal phenomena. The island's geothermal riches also gave rise to its celebrated hot spring culture. Participants enjoyed time in Kurokawa

Onsen, widely regarded as one of Japan’s most picturesque hot spring towns. Surrounded by forests and traditional ryokan inns, the town offered a peaceful retreat where some members experienced the relaxing and therapeutic pleasures of natural hot spring baths.

The journey concluded in the charming town of Yufuin, known for its artistic atmosphere and idyllic countryside setting. Strolling along Yunotsubo Street, members explored stylish boutiques, artisanal shops, cozy cafés, galleries, and specialty stores showcasing local crafts and delicacies. The whimsical Yufuin Floral Village added a touch of storybook charm with its European-inspired architecture, flower-filled pathways, themed cafés, and artisan shops.