

# HOKKAIDŌ

The greatest attraction of the northern Japanese island of Hokkaidō is its superb natural scenery. Somehow, it has remained primeval and wild, not only around Mount Tomuraushi, which is home to numerous bears. As if trying to counter the ruggedness of nature, the cherries here blossom more

intensely, the lilies are more strongly scented, and the sea gleams a deeper blue. And then there's the snow! In December, the entire island is blanketed and magnificently white, ideal for winter sports. After all that, the hot springs all over Hokkaidō promise a mineral-rich, limb-warming break.

This bronze statue at Cape Sōya marks the Northernmost Point of Japan – from here it is only 27 miles (43 km) to Sakhalin in Russia. It commemorates explorer and cartographer Mamiya Rinzō. Other Cape monuments are dedicated to music and to peace.

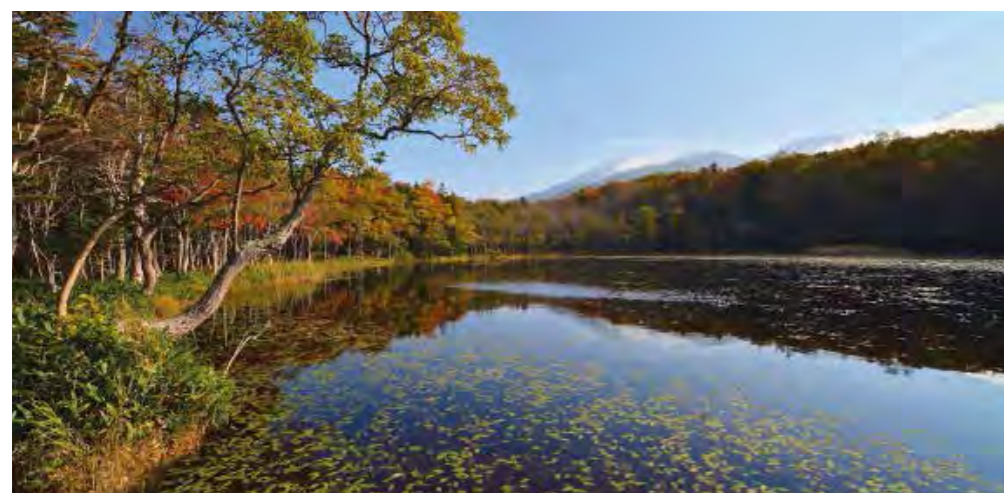


Nowhere else in the northern hemisphere do the icy winds from Siberia freeze the sea quite as deeply as here, off the coast of Shiretoko. Large quantities of phytoplankton develop underneath the ice sheet. At the very start of the food chain, the plankton is the nutritional basis for krill and other microscopic water creatures, which serve as food for crustaceans and small fish. These, in turn, are devoured by larger fish, marine mammals such as

seals and sea lions, as well as sea eagles. Salmon and trout swim up the rivers to the peninsula's interior to spawn. They are caught by brown bears as well as by Blakiston's fish owls and Steller's sea eagles – both of which are threatened by extinction. Off the coast of Shiretoko, a total of 223 fish and 28 sea mammal species have been counted. The Steller's sea lions from the family of eared seals are particularly in need of protection.



Steller's sea eagle and other sea eagles fish their prey out of the water at lightning speed (left). Yezo sika deer (large picture), a subspecies of the sika deer, live in the interior of the Shiretoko peninsula. Small pictures opposite: Kunashir Island, which is under Russian control, but also claimed by Japan; the Shiretoko National Park with its tranquil lakes and thunderous waterfalls and cascades.



If you're afraid of bears, you'd better avoid the north of this park or only visit it with an experienced guide, for there is no shortage of the brown, furry creatures here. Confident visitors can set off on their own – after a brief training session on bear safety – to explore the wild beauty of the Daisetsuzan mountains. If mountain hikes are not your thing but you still want to enjoy the view from the top, you can shorten the ascent of the 6,509-ft- (1,984-m-) high

Mount Kuro by chairlift. Japan's largest national park, the Daisetsuzan is dominated by three volcanic groups: Daisetsuzan in the north, Tokachi in the south and Shikaribetsu in the east. Around the edges of the park, hot springs such as the Daisetsu Kōgen Onsen offer a relaxing end to your visit. The park is the first place in Japan to mark the end of summer when the leaves of the deciduous trees turn red and gold in September.



Left: The mountains at the southern end of Daisetsuzan National Park near the town of Kamikawa. Sōunkyō (large picture) in the district of Kamikawa is home to a range of gorges, hot springs and numerous small and larger waterfalls, with those at Ginga and Ryusei among the most attractive. Below: a waterfall near Higashikawa in late summer.



The human mind seems to be predisposed to love all things strange and surreal – such as the Shirogane Blue Pond, which is tinted an intense blue to turquoise due to the presence of aluminum hydroxide in the water. The artificial lake was created as part of an extensive conservation project around the city of Biei, which is at constant risk of eruptions from nearby Mount Tokachi. The blue waters

are a popular photo motif because special color effects can be achieved without manipulating the image, and dead tree trunks in the lake make for strange highlights. From here it is only a stone's throw to the southern part of Daisetsuzan Park, where you will find the Ansei Crater Valley at the foot of the Tokachi Mountains. If you are fit enough, you can climb the 6,814-ft- (2,077-m-) high Mount

Tokachi; however, its summit is usually hidden in the clouds. On a clear day, the Blue Pond at Biei looks like a tiny turquoise blob in the landscape from the top.

**The Blue Pond of Biei is an unnatural turquoise. The artificial lake was created by damming the Biei River to stop volcanic mudflow.**



FLOWER GARDENS

It would seem that, in Japan, nothing designed by humans is left to chance. Aesthetics, harmony and composition permeate the everyday, and this can also be observed in the flower gardens near Biei. Fields of lavender are grown here, very beautiful expanses of purple. In addition, ribbons of meticulously coordinated flowers extend as far as the eye can see, as if these were structured parks instead

of plain fields. Be it along the Patchwork Road or the Panoramic Road – thousands of flowers sway in the light breeze, clearly defined in stretches of different hues and sweeping over the rolling hills that shape the landscape at the foot of the Daisetsuzan Park. All this beauty is best explored on foot or by bicycle. If you would like to stay motorized, without any of the noxious fumes and while enjoying the

prevailing tranquility, you can also appreciate the vivid hues of the flower fields from a golf cart.

**As if a rainbow had tumbled to Earth – this is the effect of the vibrant straight rows of flowers planted in the gardens of Japan. Opposite: a field planted with lavender and poppies.**



FLOWER GARDENS



It's not so much its cultural and historical importance or its many sights that make Sapporo attractive; rather, it's the authentically Japanese lifestyle of its inhabitants that fascinates. Visitors without guide or knowledge of Japanese are often more helpless here than in the big cities on the southern islands, where much of the tourist information is available in English. Luckily, Sapporo was laid out on a strictly geometrical plan, which facilitates ori-

entation when you're on your own and do not speak Japanese. The city is twinned with Munich in Germany, which may be due to the Japanese love of beer or to the Olympic Games of 1972, when the summer games were held in Munich and the winter games in Sapporo. Friendly exchanges, however, happen anywhere, whether you speak the language or not, while eating an ice-cream in Ōdōri Park or buying shrimps in Nijō Market, for example.



The Sapporo TV tower (far left) stands in Ōdōri Park (large picture) in the middle of Sapporo. In February, the elongated park hosts the Sapporo Snow Festival where ice and snow sculptures are displayed and attract millions of visitors to the city. The JR Tower is located above Sapporo Station (left); it is home to a shopping mall and a 38-story office building.



A feeling of happiness quickly arrives as you drive along the coastal road on the Shakotan Peninsula with its rugged rock formations, the bright sunshine yellow of the day lilies that flourish here and the almost unbelievable blue of the sea! Clear, shimmering water laps the stony coast. As you get out of the car, the impressions of this landscape become even stronger. You catch a hint of the sweet, heavy scent of delicate day lilies. The wind

pulls at your hair. The salty sea air nestles in all your pores. You will need to be sure-footed to climb down the rocky slopes to Shimamu Beach. From about mid-May you can swim and snorkel in the sea below, although it has to be said that the water is not particularly warm. This does not, however, diminish the beauty of the sea grass swaying in the waves. A word of caution: sea urchins are often known to hide among the rocks.



Cape Shakotan is located at the northernmost tip of the peninsula. Three hiking trails open up the picturesque coastal region; one of them takes visitors to the mythical Joro Koiwa Rock. According to legend, the military commander Minamoto no Yoshitsune left his wife and children to go to Mongolia, and the entire family turned to stone in their grief. Another trail goes to the Shimamui Coast and its beautiful beach.



The National Park comprises five different areas, and it is not easy to decide objectively which one is the most beautiful – they all have their own attractions. Mount Yōtei (6,227 ft/1,898 m) rises up from the surrounding forests like a volcano in a picture book; it's not for nothing that it is also known as Ezo Fuji, meaning the Fuji of Hokkaidō. The mood on the virtually circular Lake Tōya is that of a family Sunday outing. Among many other activities you

can explore the lake in swan-shaped pedalos. Lake Shikotsu is fringed by several volcanoes and – just like Lake Tōya – is itself a crater lake. From Daiichi Tembodai, for example, halfway up Mount Eniwa, you can look back to the bluish-green surface of the lake, while enjoying the peacefulness at this elevation. The villages of Noboribetsu and Jozankei are renowned for their hot springs; here you can recover from a strenuous hike.



Lakes Shikotsu and Tōya (opposite), the scenic highlights of the park, were created by volcanic activity. Left: marsh Labrador tea in bloom. Below: Jigokudani ("hell valley") is a hiking area near Noboribetsu Onsen. One route takes you to the Oyunuma Pond, whose steaming waters reach a temperature of more than 122°F (50°C). Below right: Siberian chipmunk, Japanese green woodpecker and Japanese bush warbler.



## HAKODATE

The old saying might be adapted in Japan to, “the early fish catches the worm”: selling in the Morning Market Hall starts at 5 a.m. An early visit is recommended also for non-locals – the most beautiful shrimps are, after all, always the first to be bought. A regional breakfast, a *donburi* (a rice bowl with other ingredients) packed with Hokkaidō seafood and a wedge of the legendary Yubari King melon, are the perfect start to the day before exploring the city. Your city visit should take you to the Motomachi district, where Japan turns into a 19th-century foreign country. Cultural history, when the country first opened up to the West, is palpable in the district’s museums and churches. For a perfect end to the day, take the cable car up to the popular viewing platform on Mount Hakodate and admire the city from above. As night falls, a sparkling sea of lights is “switched on” below.

When traders from Russia, China and the West settled in Hakodate, they brought with them the architectural styles of their home countries. A particularly beautiful example is the Russian Orthodox Church from 1859 (right).



## HAKODATE: GORYŌKAKU

At the beginning of May, the star-shaped park and former defensive fort, becomes a billowing sea of flowers. “Cherry trees instead of cannons”, could have been the motto for the planting strategy. And indeed, the fort, which was built to French designs, was originally full of cannons to protect the Tsugaru Strait (under which the Seikan Rail Tunnel runs today) from being taken by Western powers who were interested in a foothold in the Japanese market. It played a tragic role as late as 1869 during the Japanese Civil War, before the country finally opened up to the West and the fort gradually lost its *raison d’être*. None of the former fortress’s buildings have survived, only the walls and the moat. The star shape of the complex can best be gleaned from the Goryōkaku Tower. The tower is also home to an exhibition on the history of the citadel and the city.

The Hakodate Bugyosho, the former magistrate’s office in the fortress, is today home to a small museum which explains the history of the fort and the city. The interior features impressive Japanese architecture.



## SEIKAN TUNNEL

Human achievements tend to be replaced by even greater or more significant feats. This was also the case for the – at the time – longest mainline rail tunnel in the world. Since 2016, the Seikan Tunnel has only ranked as number two in the world, but that does not make the almost 34-mile- (54-km-) long underground and underwater route between Honshū and Hokkaidō any less impressive. The entrance to the tunnel is via a concrete frame, like many others. And yet the darkness beyond feels somewhat more profound, especially for anxious minds who would shudder at the thought of having a sea above their heads. The connecting line under the Tsugaru Strait, through which the express trains (Shinkansen) roar, lies up to 797 ft (243 m) below sea level. Only a few years ago, it was still possible during a three-hour tour to stop at one of the two underwater emergency stations and gain an insight into the construction difficulties.

The Seikan Tunnel, the second-longest underwater rail tunnel in the world (large picture), links two of Japan’s main islands. Small pictures: Hayabusa 10 and Hayate 91 trains.



## SEIKAN TUNNEL