

Hokkaidō 北海道

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking the length of **Daisetsu-zan National Park** on a five-day traverse over the roof of Hokkaidō (p256)
- Scaling conical volcanoes such as the dormant **Yotei-zan** or the still-active **Meakan-dake** (p270)
- Spy on Russian islands from atop the sea-to-summit walk on **Rishiri** island (p278)
- Want wildlife? Bump into foxes, deer and the occasional bear on **Shiretoko-hantō** (p273)
- Stomping along the roller-coaster ridges around remote **Poroshiri-dake** (p267)
- Zip out of Sapporo city to the quiet lakes and peaks of **Soranuma-dake** and the tough traverse beyond (p253)

Hokkaidō is the northernmost and second largest of Japan's islands. Although it accounts for over one-fifth of the nation's land area, only five percent of the Japanese population lives there. The real beauty of the place lies in the wilderness regions where there are few cultural monuments but superb opportunities for outdoor activities.

Hokkaidō is the place many stressed out Kansai and Kantō city dwellers dream of escaping to, for the summer at least. With its snow-peaked mountains, clear lakes, abundant hot springs, green pastures and, most importantly, wide open spaces, this is the most un-Japanese of regions. Indeed, for visitors from cities in Honshū it is like a trip to a foreign country. The reality is true to the poster images, enticing hordes of domestic travellers to Hokkaidō's tourist spots, especially during the summer holidays, from the end of July to the middle of August, and then again during the winter ski season.

Waterproof your hiking boots, dust off your fishing rod and be ready for mountain, river and outdoor fun in all its guises in a temperate summer climate that allows you to exert yourself without physically exploding. And if you hit the shores during a cold spell there is nowhere better to track down a free outdoor hot spring that will cure you of all your ailments – except the desire to go home.



HISTORY

The Ainu were the first to settle this island, living as nomadic hunter-gatherers among the rich natural ecosystems that surrounded them. Contact, and then trading, with the Matsumae Clan from the south brought an end to their traditional way of life as they slowly became second-class citizens in their own land. In the Meiji Period, the establishment of a Colonial Office and passing of laws that favoured the Japanese settlers hastened the demise of the Ainu but laid the foundations for the economic development of the region.

If you want to see how the Ainu wish to portray themselves, make a point of visiting the **Ainu Museum** and slightly touristy Poroto Kotan village in Shiraoi, which has excellent displays and sells a catalogue sensitively compiled by the **Shiraoi Institute for the Preservation of Ainu Culture** (☎ 0144-82-3914; www.ainu-museum.or.jp/).

Despite being the new frontier of Japanese development, Hokkaidō is still endowed with plenty of open space, most of which has been protected with the formation of six national parks, five quasi-national parks and 12 prefectural parks. Surprisingly, this hasn't resulted in the creation of a great network of trails that connect the various parts of the region. Most of the trails take one-day with the rest forming two-day hikes – Daisetsu-zan is the notable exception. The scarcity of trails is the result of Hokkaidō's short history and attendant lack of ancient pilgrims' and traders' routes, which are the basis for many trails in Honshū. Also, the region is so large and undeveloped that further trail-breaking is prohibitively expensive.

ENVIRONMENT

Hokkaidō's mountains are nearly all of volcanic origin: the Yūbari and Hidaka ranges are the result of ancient tectonic uplifts and with their smaller, gentler outlines, they are distinctly different from the volcanic peaks.

There are 29 volcanoes in Hokkaidō, mostly concentrated in a band running northeast to southwest from islands in the disputed Northern Territories. Five of these are considered active and occasionally closed to hikers. When open, it can be an exciting

experience to scale an active volcano with sulphur shooting out of vent holes (fumaroles) in the rocks. These volcanoes have endowed this important agricultural region with fertile soils and geothermal energy. Any Japanese person will, without any prompting, immediately tell you how delicious Hokkaidō's potatoes are, not to mention the rich dairy products.

Although Hokkaidō's peaks (mainly lying in the 1700m to 2100m height range) are dwarfed by their Honshū cousins, there are many challenging trails that will give hikers a great wilderness experience.

One of Hokkaidō's special attractions is the variety of flora. There are up to 500 different flowers in the alpine areas, many of which are only found in Hokkaidō. Whole mountainsides are covered in flowers of varying colours, especially during July. Some of these flowers are found in Honshū but, because of the colder climate in Hokkaidō, they grow at much lower altitudes than in the south. To a camera and tripod-wielding photographer the shorter climb can be a major drawback.

CLIMATE

Lying between the northern latitudes of 41° to 45°N, winter conditions dominate the Hokkaidō calendar. The hiking season is therefore very short but generally more comfortable than other regions, with less humidity and no substantial typhoon or rainy season to contend with.

The Japanese will tell you there is no rainy season but Hokkaidō still gets its fair share of rainfall as a result of weather patterns in Honshū. Similarly, although typhoons don't officially get this far north, the odd one does go astray. This results in a long period of heavy rain and strong winds, which can play havoc with the hiking trails, particularly on the Pacific Ocean side.

Its position between the Pacific Ocean, Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, combined with its mountainous terrain, make Hokkaidō's weather notoriously hard to predict. The national forecasters seem to be less accurate than the locals, who understand their own microclimates much better. Japanese hikers are often packed-up and on the trail by 4.30am, convinced the best of the weather is to be had in the morning before an afternoon build-up of rain cloud.

