



Sapporo & Hokkaidō

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Why Go?

Hokkaidō (北海道) defies the image of Japan as a crowded nation. It's a whole different world up here, or at least it feels like it, with 20% of Japan's land area but only 5% of its population. Japanese identify this northern land with its wildlife and mountains, greenery and agriculture, snowy winters, temperate summers and long arrow-straight roads disappearing into the horizon.

But there's more to it than the scenery. The Ainu, Hokkaidō's indigenous people, are making a determined return after a century of forced assimilation. Sapporo is a bustling modern city that can meet all your urban needs before you head out to explore. And the island is winning a reputation as a haven for thrill-seeking travellers wanting to ski and hike in its mountains, explore its magnificent national parks, relax in its hidden onsens, and to experience its offerings at their own pace. Enjoy it at your leisure.

Best Hikes

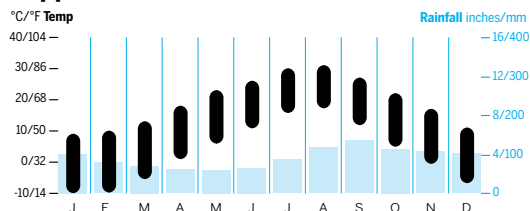
- Rishiri-zan (p588)
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Best Brewery Pubs

- Sapporo Beer Garden (p555)
- Abashiri Biru-kan (p592)
- Taisetsu Ji-biru-kan (p574)
- Hakodate Beer (p560)
- Otaru Sōko No 1 (p563)

When to Go

Sapporo



May–Aug Hiking season, peaking in the drier months of June and July.

Sep & Oct A brief but intense autumn is marked by the changing leaves.

Dec–Feb Sub-zero chill and Siberian snowfalls herald the ski season.

History

Hokkaidō was connected to north Asia via Sakhalin and the Kuril islands during the glacial age 30,000 to 40,000 years ago. The native peoples who settled in these northern lands called them Ainu Moshiri – Ainu meaning ‘human’ and Moshiri meaning ‘world’.

Remarkably, the Ainu and the Japanese had relatively little contact until 1590, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi granted the Matsumae clan land at the southwestern tip of Hokkaidō and charged them with defending Japan from the ‘barbarians’ to the north. At this time, Hokkaidō and the people who lived there were known to the Japanese as Ezo (or Yezo). As well as building up exclusive trade relations with the people now known as the Ainu over the next few centuries, the Matsumae also had Japan’s first tentative relations with Russians in the 1700s.

By the end of the Edo period in 1868, trade and colonisation had begun in earnest. With the Meiji Restoration, the new government introduced the name of Hokkaidō in 1869, and established a Development Commission with the primary purpose of colonising the northern islands to prevent the Russians furthering their expansion in the region. One of Hokkaidō’s sub-divisions created at this time was Chishima (meaning ‘1000 islands’; now part of the Kuril islands and still in dispute with Russia). Mainland Japanese with little future at home – such as second sons and the newly unemployed samurai class – started to head north, much in the way that Americans were heading west at about the same time in history.

By the start of the 20th century, the mainland Japanese population on the island topped one million, and when the Meiji period ended, the Ainu had become de facto second-class citizens in their own land. Many Ainu customs were banned, women were forbidden to get tattoos, and men were prohibited from wearing earrings. An 1899 Japanese government act effectively forced assimilation. The Ainu’s land was taken and they were granted Japanese citizenship, denying them the status of an indigenous group. Many Ainu even hid their ethnicity out of fear of discrimination in housing, schools and employment.

After the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese war, won by Japan, Karafuto (now Sakhalin; before 1905 known to Japanese as Kita-Ezo)

was added to Japanese territory and by 1940, 400,000 Japanese were living there as part of a continuing colonial policy.

The ‘northern territories’, which included Hokkaidō, expanded, but by the end of WWII they were contracting. Both Karafuto and Chishima (now the disputed Kuril islands) were captured by Russia and remain Russian to this day.

World attention briefly focused on Hokkaidō in 1972 when Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics, only eight years after the Summer Olympics were held in Tokyo.

In 1998 the act that had forced assimilation on the Ainu peoples was replaced with one that recognised that there are ethnic minority groups in Japan. Finally, in 2008, the Japanese government recognised the Ainu people as ‘an indigenous people with a distinct language, religion and culture’. Today, the Ainu are proudly continuing their traditions while still fighting for further recognition of their unique culture.

Geography & Climate

Shaped a bit like the squashed head of a squid, Hokkaidō is a very big island and is far and away Japan’s largest prefecture. In terms of area, it is almost exactly the same size as Ireland. However, many will find it surprising to hear that in terms of latitude, Hokkaidō is closer to the equator than Ireland.

Surprisingly, Sapporo, at about 43° N, is about the same latitude as Marseille in the south of France. It’s not that far north!

Hokkaidō’s winter weather, however, is affected by its proximity to Siberia and cold northwesterly winds. That means frigid weather and significant snowfall, especially on the Sea of Japan side of the island – the kind of powdery snow that excites winter sports enthusiasts! On the Sea of Okhotsk side of Hokkaidō, winter brings drift ice from the north, which clogs up the sea.

Hokkaidō supposedly misses out on *tsuyu*, the rainy season in June and July that brings rain, humidity and a stickiness to the rest of Japan – but in these days of climate change, there are claims that Hokkaidō is getting hotter and more humid. Summer is generally warm and pleasant, cooler in the mornings and evenings.

Another bonus – *taifu* (typhoons) seldom make it as far north as Hokkaidō, usually petering out after pounding southern Japan, and/or heading out to sea.