

hokkaido *Life*

DOING IT OUTDOORS

The links in these documents contain information to make your life in Hokkaido easier and more enjoyable. Access each link and add it to your favourites list.

Congratulations on choosing - or being chosen - to live in Hokkaido. You have arrived in arguably the most beautiful part of Japan, insofar as the outdoors goes. There may be more culturally-rich places, places with more history, places with more artificial entertainments, but if forests, mountains, lakes, clean air, open roads and *space* are your thing, you may never want to leave.

The aim of this article is to introduce you to the range of outdoor activities available to you on this wonderful island. Please understand that this list is not exhaustive, it's just what this writer has seen, heard about or experienced over the course of nearly three years.

ORIENTING YOURSELF

Hokkaido boasts the largest national park in Japan, Daisetsusan National Park, which is right in the middle of the island. To the east of Daisetsusan is Akan National Park and the Shiretoko peninsula, way over on the east coast. Akan contains (amongst other things) some stunning lake-and-mountain settings: Lake Akan itself, Kussharo, Masshu, and Onneto - which is small but a stunning colour.

Shiretoko is so spectacularly gorgeous that it achieved World Heritage status a few years ago, guaranteeing that it was safe from the depredations of Hokkaido's hunters, and the Japanese mania for pouring cement everywhere for no apparent reason. Most winters you can see drift ice stretching from the eastern coastline out to the horizon - if you ever felt the urge to walk on water, this is where you can do it.

Abashiri town is a good launch point for this (and you can also take a short cruise on an ice-breaker if you're a wuss). If you're really lucky, you can occasionally see seals, sea lions, dolphins and whales in these waters.

Head southwest from Daisetsusan and you'll eventually hit the Toya National Park, which boast a couple of beautiful lakes, Toya and Shikotsu. They set off fireworks over Toya *every night* (AFAIK) from April through to November. And there's a volcano there (Mt Usu) that erupted only 8 years ago... awesome!

A little further west and north of Toya is Hokkaido's version of Fuji-san, Mount Yotei - not quite as high, but just as perfectly-shaped - [\[the quintessential mountain\]](#). And right behind it is Niseko, a snowsports mecca and travel destination for thousands of Australians every year. And who doesn't love Australians en masse, am I right?

Head south down the peninsula from Niseko and you'll eventually hit Hakodate, which boasts the worlds third-most beautiful night view (from the top of Mt Hakodate). Nobody knows who makes judgements like that and whether they're accurate or not... best you drive down there and decide for yourself. There is a rail tunnel under the ocean that connects Hokkaido to Honshu - according to the Japanese, this tunnel cut the throat of the dragon that slumbers beneath Japan, and that's why the economy crumbled in the '80s. Sounds plausible to me! This rail line will eventually host a Shinkansen all the way to Sapporo... but don't hold your breath.

North of Niseko are Otaru and Sapporo. Otaru is small and interesting, with lots of beautiful crafts to be bought (you can try your own hand at glass-blowing!) and old stone buildings to admire.

Sapporo, on the other hand, is big and lively without being an ubertropolis like Tokyo. When you need an urban fix, or a mocha venti from Starbucks, or have to buy some new outdoor equipment, this is where you want to go. The Sapporo Factory complex boasts a plethora of famous brand-name outlets like North Face, Eddie Bauer, Victorinox, Japan's own Montbell, and many more.

Follow the coast north from Sapporo and just before you run out of land you'll hit Wakkanai - from where you can take a ferry to Rebun or Rishiri island. These small islands are great places to spend a day or two, riding bicycles or scooters around, hiking, or whatever takes your fancy.

Do NOT leave Hokkaido without seeing the places mentioned above!

DISORIENTING YOURSELF

Festivals

One of Japan's major attractions are its festivals, and Hokkaido has no shortage of excellent ones to enjoy.

The **Sapporo Yuki Matsuri** in early February is world famous and rightly so. Do check this out at least once. And since it's on at the same time and it's so close, also catch the train to Otaru and see the **Snow Light Road Festival**. Both events are not to be missed. UNLESS you decide to head in the opposite direction and go to

either the Mombetsu or the Abashiri-Okhotsk **Drift Ice Festival**. The drift ice is spectacular - you could walk out to the horizon, it seems. If you do head east, pop down to Utoro and watch the **Shiretoko Fantasia** show, held at the town dockyard every night.

The **Yosakoi Soran Festival** in early June is huge - possibly bigger than the Snow Festival. Hundreds of teams of dancers in colourful costumes dance all day long, rain or shine. Huge crowds make Sapporo a huge street party. LOTS of fun! One month later, in July, is the **Sapporo Beer Festival**. Beer. Festival. What else do I need to say?

Not Enough?

How about, the **Lavender Festival** in Kami & Naka-Furano - *July*. Look at the pretty flowers... then go for a walk up Tokachidake, because it's right nearby! **Abashiri Orochon Fire Festival** - *July*. If you've checked out the various snow and ice festivals, you owe it to yourself to see a Fire Festival, if only to keep your elements in balance. Plus, Abashiri is close to Shiretoko, and you CAN'T spend too much time there!

Noboribetsu Hell Festival - *August*. Doesn't the name just make you want to go and check it out? Sure, it does!! It's a HELL festival! Also in August is the **Hakodate Port Festival**. Lasts a whole week and includes a street parade of 10,000 dancers. A good excuse to head down there and check out the night view of the city.

The Ainu Kotans (Shiraoi and Akan, for example) hold mini-festivals every night in the warmer months, where traditional dances and songs are performed by the light of huge fires. There are plenty more festivals to enjoy, too. Every town holds its own, and if you're a participant, they are even more fun than being a spectator.

For more information on festivals in Hokkaido, check out the [Festivals](#) article.

Hiking

I could write a book on the wonderful hiking and mountain-climbing that is available throughout Hokkaido. Fortunately, Lonely Planet's '*Hiking in Japan*' made a good start on it already. There's a number of great hikes described in there in detail, to get you started. Some notable hikes are Yotei-san, the Daisetsuzan Grand Traverse, Me-Akan and O-Akan, Rishiri-dake, Rausa-dake (or indeed, anywhere in Shiretoko), Tokachi-dake... the list is virtually endless.

If technical mountaineering is your thing, there are plenty of challenging peaks in the Hidaka mountain range, which stretches southwest from the bottom of Daisetsuzan.

If you're inexperienced or unsure where to go, consider hiring a guide: Leon, the [\[Hokkaido Bush Pig\]](#), is a very genial and laid-back Kiwi who has hiked pretty much everywhere in Hokkaido and knows where a lot of 'secret' mountain huts can be found. You can contact him on [\[hokkaido@japan-adventures.com\]](mailto:hokkaido@japan-adventures.com).

There are mountain-climbing clubs in all the larger towns throughout Hokkaido which cater to both hikers/walkers and those that want to try something a little more challenging. You might not find too many English-speakers amongst these people, but they'll be happy to meet you half-way if you put in the effort.

River Sports *and other things*

River kayaking and canoeing are very popular in Hokkaido, and a large number of guiding companies exist to rent you equipment, take you to and from the rivers and even guide you should you so desire. These include [\[Donkoro\]](#) (near Minami-Furano), [\[Hokkaido Outdoor Adventures\]](#), [\[SAS\]](#), the [\[NAC\]](#), and many more.

If you prefer a little more open water when you go for a paddle, the NAC offers sea kayaking trips. These adventure companies also offer dog-sledding, canyoning, river climbing, bridge-swinging and other fun activities.

Rockclimbing

Rock-climbing ('*freeclimbing*' in Japan) is available in Hokkaido, but finding good rock can be a challenge. There are guidebooks available to buy, but only in Japanese. Bolted sport routes are usually on trustworthy rock and good pro (although damp, moss and lichen can be an issue), and are pumpy and challenging. Unbolted routes can be found, but be careful... there is a lot of loose rock around, and this may be why a cliff has been left unbolted and largely unused. Be careful and wear a helmet.

If you hate the outdoors for some reason, there are rock-climbing gyms scattered around bigger towns like Sapporo and Asahikawa, and smaller establishments like the NAC or [\[Shugakuso\]](#) outdoor store have small walls as well. You may well find keen rock-climbers amongst the members of the mountain-climbing clubs.

Motorcycling

The thing to remember about Hokkaido is that you will probably be doing a lot of driving around to see all these outdoor attractions. This can alternately be frustrating and frightening, as a result of the generally slow pace of local drivers, their predilection for suddenly stopping anywhere it suits them, and the surreally creative approach to line markings that most towns adopt. Many of these problems can be reduced by travelling on two wheels rather than four.

Hokkaido is a great place to own a motorcycle (at least during the summer)! Beautiful countryside, delightfully-curvy mountain roads and a network of [\[rider houses\]](#) (where bikers can find accommodation for next-to-nothing) make cruising a delight. Furthermore, 250cc and below bikes are not required to undergo the dreaded biennial *shaken* inspection. Cheap road tax, too.

Biking (*not buffet-ing*)

Hokkaido's mountains are covered in fire-trails and hiking tracks. The flatter areas are criss-crossed with rivers and the embankments that often run alongside them. Put all that together and you have a lot of great places to take a bicycle for a ride.

If your riding-fancy is more whimsical in nature, there is a [\[12-hour bicycle endurance race\]](#) held each year in the summer, in which the competitors ride mamacharis (the ubiquitous 3-speed, cane-basketed bicycles ridden by oba-chans and oji-sans everywhere). Many teams dress up - you haven't lived unless you've watched a team of Darth Vaders, armed with glowing lightsabres, pedaling past you in the night.

Running

Hokkaido breweries manufacture an impressive range of tasty beers, and you might find it necessary to take up jogging to keep the weight off. Throughout the warmer months, there seems to be a foot race every weekend somewhere in Hokkaido. There is usually a full, half and quarter marathon, as well as 5km and 3km races for kids and beginners.

Some of the races have nice participation awards for all competitors, like towels or fish...that's right, you can walk home after the race carrying a 3kg salmon. For the more ambitious, there is even an ultramarathon to try, at Lake Saroma on the east coast. This [\[website\]](#) has a calendar of events, and you can register for most of them online... but be warned, some of the registration deadlines are well in advance of the race itself. The NAC also sponsors a series of [\[adventure races\]](#) - trail running, mountain biking and rafting, for example - that you can enter individually or in teams.

Sky Sports

If sweating it out on foot is not your thing, maybe you prefer skysports. Hang-gliding, [\[paragliding\]](#), skydiving and gliding are available all over the island. This writer can recommend JMB Rusutsu paragliding school (ph: 011-892-6822), southwest of Sapporo, and Tokachigawa Nature Centre (ph: 0155-32-6116) in Otofuke, near Obihiro. Not much English is spoken at either place, but the people are very friendly and accommodating.

Hot air ballooning is also popular in Hokkaido, and flights are readily available. Kamishihoro, at the south end of Daisetsuzan national park, holds a hot-air balloon festival in August. At night, the gas burners light up the balloons - it is spectacular.

Snow Sports

There is plenty more to love about the warmer months in Hokkaido... but we all know that Hokkaido is all about the snow, right? Japan is notorious for claiming that all sorts of things are 'famous', but Hokkaido's powder snow is one of the few claims

that actually has some validity. Whether you're a grungy snowboarder, spandex-clad downhill racer, or enlightened back-country telemarker, you'll find more places to go in Hokkaido than you have enough weekends for. Trust me, the season could be 12-months long and it STILL wouldn't be long enough!

The season varies in length from year to year, but snow can usually be found from December through to April. Up on top of Daisetsuzan, you can even see die-hard skiers in June. Notably-good ski resorts are Niseko, Kiroro, Kokusai, Teine Highland, Tomamu, Sahoro (they have a Club Med there), Furano, and Kamui Ski Links. Most resorts have off-piste areas that are lots of fun for the experienced skier, but be aware that the Japanese do not look on 'ducking under the fence' with approval, and ski patrols may confiscate your lift pass in some places. Great back-country areas can be found most anywhere, but Yotei-san, Asahidake, Tokachidake, and the mountains west of Sapporo are all worth visiting.

XC Skiing

The same fire trails that make trail-running or mountain biking so good in the summer make for great cross-country skiing in the winter. In addition, there are XC ski marathons almost every weekend. <http://runnet.jp/runtes/> also holds the ski race calendar and registration details.

Ice-Climbing

Rock-climbers frustrated by the weather might like to give ice-climbing a try. There are a number of magnificent waterfalls scattered around Hokkaido which freeze up and can be climbed.

The season tends to be short - February to March - but the climbs are all in beautiful areas. Sounkyo Gorge, Oketto, Maruseppu and Abashiri are good places to head for. Equipment outlay for this sport can be expensive, so you might want to try one of the mountain-climbing clubs and beg an experienced climber to take you along one weekend.

On the Ice

Ice fishing is extremely popular amongst the Japanese, and it is not uncommon to see tent villages magically appear on top of frozen lakes every weekend all over Hokkaido. Some lakes around Hokkaido boast another kind of village: ice kotans. Lake Shikaribetsu, in the southern Daisetsuzan foothills, has an elaborate ice bar, ice onsen and (somewhat rudimentary) ice hotel every year, from January to March. You can drink hot buttered rum out of an ice glass while you listen to live bands play on the ice stage in the ice concert hall. Dress warmly, and take kaero for your feet.

Under the Ice

If you're not sick of all the ice after that, and have a scuba ticket, there is ice diving

available in the east.

The [\[Iruka Hotel\]](#) diving staff can rent you a dry suit and all the equipment, and accompany you on two dives beneath the drift ice. Ask to speak to Hiroe-chan, who speaks passable English and is a real charmer. If you are lucky, you might see the tiny clione, or sea angels, which live down there.

Yuki Gassen

For the slightly more aggressive amongst you, how about a snowball fight tournament? Your team wins by either stealing the other team's flag, or by eliminating other team members with well-aimed, regulation-sized snowballs.

There are tournaments in Toya (the Sobetsu Mt Showa-Shizan International Yukigassen) and Tokachi (the All-Tokachi International Yukigassen, Nakasatsunai) in February and March respectively. The Japanese teams take this very seriously, wear uniforms, and train throughout the year.

Onsens and Recovery

After all this outdoor fun, your muscles might be feeling a little the worse for wear. The best thing you can do for them (after eating a banana or two) is to soak them in a hot spring. There is no shortage of wonderful places in Hokkaido.

Most onsens cost between 500円 and 1000円 for a visit, although there are a few that cost more. I don't know why we don't use these things in the west - they are the best thing for guaranteeing that you can get up the next day and do another 20-odd downhill runs. Hakuginsou, on Tokachidake, has awesomely hot water as well as a fantastic view. It gets this writer's vote as Best Overall. Two minutes up the road is Fukiage Rotenburo, which is so awesomely hot that I have to keep dumping snow in to avoid boiling alive... and it's free (but no view). Check with 2nd and 3rd year JETs for their onsen recommendations.

For more information on onsens in Hokkaido, check out the [Onsens](#) article.

SAFETY

Outdoor activities can be hazardous, and sometimes fatal. Be careful out there. Many of the activities mentioned above could leave you injured, crippled or dead. Your JET insurance might not be paid if you participate in some of them (read your insurance manual!!) A helicopter rescue could leave you short of cash for a very long time... assuming they are not lifting out your dead body.

Treat the outdoors with respect. Plan for every contingency you can think of, and know what you are doing... or accompany those who do. But do NOT assume that just because someone talks the talk and has been out there once or twice that they

know what they are doing, safety-wise. Tell someone where you are going, what you are doing, and when you expect to be back... and call them when you do get back.

Educate Yourself

Do winter survival and [\[avalanche training courses\]](#). A group of experienced Japanese climbers died in an avalanche late in 2007... climbing a mountain they had probably climbed every year for decades. It CAN happen to you. Don't become a statistic. If nothing else, it will inconvenience your supervisor, ruin our Prefectural Advisor's week, and eventually result in the introduction of rules that will hamper the rest of us in our pursuit of outdoor fun.

Be aware that there ARE huge bears in these woods, but you could be killed just as dead by an aggressive, rutting deer. Or by skiing into a tree at top speed. Or by losing control on an icy road on which you were driving too fast. Plan to enjoy Hokkaido's outdoors for as many years as you possibly can. And PLEASE preserve its beauty for everyone else to enjoy.

Finally

Hokkaido is not the end of the fun, either. There are a bunch of small islands scattered around, and one very big one (Honshu) just to the south. Aomori has some fantastic skiing and festivals, and arguably the most romantic onsen anywhere - Aoni. And it's only a ferry or train ride away. There are also Rishiri and Rebun, Teuri, Sakhalin....

Have fun, and play safe. See you out there!

As always, the official [hajat|forum](#) is where you will find all the answers to any questions you may have regarding life in Hokkaido.

HAJET kindly asks you to use paper wisely and only print this document if you really, really must. LOVE HOKKAIDO, LOVE THE ENVIRONMENT!

USEFUL RESOURCES

HJET | Forum
Youth Hostel Association Hokkaido
How to Walk Hokkaido
Snow Japan
Hokkaipedia

www.hokkaidojets.org
www.youthhostel.or.jp
www.youthhokkaido.com
www.snowjapan.com
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Hokkaido Powder Guides
Outdoor Japan

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