

hokkaido *Life*

DRIVING IN HOKKAIDO

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

Hokkaido is the biggest and most sparsely populated prefecture in Japan. If you are one of the few who have been placed in Sapporo, it may be likely that you will not buy a car, as public transport can be easily utilized to access most of the areas in and around the city.

On the other hand, if you have been placed in a rural area, the idea of owning a car will be on the top of your list of things to do. The first hurdle is actually buying the car, which can be a complicated and very drawn-out process. Please refer to the [Buying a Used Car](#) article for more information.

Once you've got your car and you think you're ready to hit the highways with the windows down and your favorite tracks filling the air, there are a few things you should know before you explore this beautiful land.

ROADS AND RULES

Japan is a right-hand drive country, which means cars drive on the left-hand side of the road and the driver sits on the right-hand side of the car. If you are from the UK, Australia, New Zealand or any other country where this is the norm, then you will have no problems. Those coming from America, Canada and any other country where it is the reverse it may take a short time to get used to this.

Hokkaido, being the most northern part of Japan, is subject to severe winters and mild summers, causing some interesting conditions even for the most experienced of drivers. The roads are relatively wider and straighter in Hokkaido compared to other parts of Japan because of the harsh winters, which makes driving a little easier. Much of the island has expressways, which provide even faster and more direct routes. Expressway's however, are always toll roads and therefore can be expensive. All road signs and rules follow international standards with a large majority of them in English

(some translations can make for an entertaining trip).

The speed limits here are relatively slower compared to other parts of the world. Expressways have an average speed of between 70–100kmph (45–60mph) 40kmph in urban areas, 30kmph in side streets and 50–60kmph everywhere else (though it is not uncommon for drivers to exceed the speed limit by up to 20kmph). With the slower driving speeds, people tend to get impatient, so sometimes you have people passing at ridiculous places on blind corners and with traffic approaching.

If you need to be somewhere at a certain time, leave early!

The laws for driving in Japan are very different to those in our own countries and the fines and penalties can be very high. Japan's traffic laws are based on a demerit point system where you lose points for doing bad things - the worse the infringement the more points you lose. A Japanese license begins with 15 points. In addition to point deductions, each infringement incurs a fine. For example, if you are caught driving at 20kmph over the speed limit, the fine is 15,000円 and you lose 2 points from your license. For a complete listing of fines and demerit points - [\[click here\]](#). They have been revised recently to make them stricter.

Public servants (*like you!*) have to be especially careful - your office will most likely be informed of any infractions and you may have to write a letter of apology to your Board of Education (or apologize in person!). This is fairly lenient, considering that your Japanese counterparts can be formally reprimanded with salary deductions on top of the fines imposed by the police. Needless to say, please be very careful!

Drinking and driving is strictly prohibited in Japan. The tolerance is zero with a maximum fine of up to 1,000,000円 or a prison sentence of up to 5 years!! In other words, if you are going to drink, DON'T drive.

For an excellent listing of Japanese road signs - [\[click here\]](#).

SPEED CAMERAS

You'll probably notice that almost every teacher in your office has a radar detector to alert them of upcoming speed cameras. You can't rely on them to give you enough warning to slow down before the camera takes a picture of your license plate, so the best bet is not to speed.

If you are caught by a speed camera, you'll receive your citation in the mail, often several weeks later. Interestingly enough, many speed cameras in Hokkaido are clearly marked with several (usually three) warning signs before the actual camera. The signs are bright neon yellow-green and hang about the same height as a speed camera. Once you start looking for them, you'll notice them everywhere, or you can have a fellow JET point them out to you.

WINTER DRIVING

Hokkaido being the winter wonderland of Japan means driving throughout the island can be very treacherous at times. With temperatures as low as -35 Celsius, an average of 5+ meters of snow, snowfalls of up to 40, 50 or 60cm per day, blizzards and black ice, it is not uncommon for expressways to be closed, 4 hour traffic jams in blizzards and numerous accidents.

So, ALWAYS check road & weather conditions before leaving home and during your journey, watch for signs giving updates. Avoid any sudden turns, hard braking, accelerating or steering. Also, avoid braking or accelerating when cornering. All of the above could cause sliding or loss of control of your car. Instead, when approaching a curve (or intersection, or decline) slow gradually, using the gears if possible, then gently accelerate AFTER completing the turn, etc. Remember that on slippery surfaces, it takes at least twice the distance to stop a car as it does on a clean, dry road.

Before winter arrives you should prepare your car for harsh conditions. Below is a list of things to do:

- Change your summer tires to winter tires (cars are not allowed to use snow chains on the main highways).
- If your battery is around 3 – 4 years old, replace it! There's nothing worse than waking up on the coldest morning or the heaviest blizzard to find your battery is dead!
- Change your oil to a thinner winter type.
- Check and/or replace the anti-freeze coolant in the radiator.
- Fill the wiper reservoir with non-freeze windshield wiper fluid.
- Replace any worn wiper blades with new rubber-covered winter ones.

It's good policy to give your car a full service during November. This could include changing over to winter oil and tires, but should also focus on an inspection of brakes, steering, engine tune, and all hoses and belts.

When parking overnight, try not to apply your handbrake - it can freeze! Leave it in first gear or in park. If parking on a slope, chock the wheels.

LICENSES

Many people have heard stories about driving in Japan, about getting a license, and the hell that Japanese drivers go through to get it. We won't be talking about that here though! We will outline the steps and precautions you need to take when changing over your home country's license to a Japanese license, a process called *gaimen kirikae* - 外免切换.

If you are planning on staying in Japan for more than 12 months then you NEED to get a Japanese license to drive. Otherwise, you run the risk of coping a 300,000円 fine plus loss of all privileges of driving in Japan for a year.

Test Non-Required

Applicants holding drivers licenses issued in the following countries do not need to sit either the written or driving tests when converting their foreign licenses:

Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Korea Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, United Kingdom.

This means all you have to do to convert your license is the following:

- Have your drivers license translated into Japanese by the Embassy/Consulate or the JAF; (JAF cost 3000円). Click here - [\[http://www.jaf.or.jp/e/switch.htm\]](http://www.jaf.or.jp/e/switch.htm) for more information.
- Call and make an appointment with the nearest Japanese Licensing Office to you. Addresses, phone numbers and maps to all Hokkaido offices can be found here - [\[http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chapiv.html\]](http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chapiv.html).
- Tell them you want to do a '*gaimen kirikae*' and that you have all the documents - '*shorui wa mou zenbu soroimashita*'.
- Take the following documents with you to your appointment:
 - Home drivers license
 - A certified Japanese translation of home drivers license
 - Certificate of Alien Registration
 - Passport photograph (3cm in length x 2.4 cm in width)
 - Fee of 4150円 for processing and issuance of license
 - Your Passport

Those who pass the eye-test and prove that they were in the license issuing country for at least 3 months after obtaining the drivers license can obtain a Japanese drivers license. The process can take from one day to up to 2 weeks if you forget any of the

above documents.

Test Required

Applicants holding drivers licenses from countries not listed under the 'Test Non-Required' heading above are required to pass both written and driving tests to complete the conversion process. So what does this mean?

The following is a rough step-by-step guide of what to expect:

- Have your drivers license translated into Japanese by the Embassy/Consulate or the JAF; (JAF cost 3000円). Click here - [\[http://www.jaf.or.jp/e/switch.htm\]](http://www.jaf.or.jp/e/switch.htm) for more information.
- Call and make an appointment with the nearest Japanese Licensing Office to you. Addresses, phone numbers and maps to all Hokkaido offices can be found here - [\[http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chapiv.html\]](http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chapiv.html).
- Tell them you want to do a '*gaimen kirkae*' and that you have all the documents - '*shorui wa mou zenbu soroimashita*'.
- Take the following documents with you to your appointment:
 - Home drivers license
 - A certified Japanese translation of home drivers license
 - Certificate of Alien Registration
 - Passport photograph (3cm in length x 2.4 cm in width)
 - Your passport
 - Fee - Written test: 2400円, Practical test: 1000円, Issuance of license 1750円

A good idea before taking the practical test is to take a 2-hour driving course with a registered driving school (the course can be a little expensive, around 10,000円, but can save you having to repeat the actual test if you fail the first time). There are numerous ones around - ask at your BOE for the best one near you.

Step-by-step guidance and answers to all your questions regarding the practical test can be found here - [\[http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chap5.html\]](http://www.supermelf.com/japan/ajetdrivingbook/chap5.html)

CAR INSURANCE

All drivers must be covered by compulsory insurance, with the option to enroll in elective insurance schemes for more complete coverage.

Compulsory Insurance

Compulsory insurance only covers costs of reparation in all circumstances – meaning that if you have an accident you will not be covered for repair expenses for the third party or yourself, AND you will NOT be covered for death or injury to the driver. The insurance comes with the inspection certificate.

Optional Insurance

Optional insurance schemes cover damage to possessions, car, passengers or self, depending on the items deemed necessary by the applicant. ALTs have at times been able to join their workplace insurance policy – cutting premiums to bring down their monthly expense. Be careful that you are aware of there being an age-bracket limit attached to some insurance plans – stating that only drivers 30 years and above will be covered while operating the vehicle. Always check your insurance policy carefully.

Contacting your insurance company following an accident

Regardless of the insurance held by the driver, the police MUST be contacted prior to reporting to the insurance company. Following the police report taken at the scene, please call your insurance company (there is usually an accident report hotline), where you will be expected to provide information on the nature of the accident, as well as the name, address, phone number, car registration / make / model, AND workplace. The insurance company then negotiates with the other party's, and the amount of the individuals' liability determined.

Be warned that one party will never be held solely accountable – that blame and thus payment is generally divided between parties according to very set rules.

For example, if a car hits you in a car park then it is likely that the driver of the other car will be held 80% accountable and you the remaining 20%. This may sound unfair, but that's the way the system works here.

Take the following action *immediately* if an accident occurs:

- **Eliminate hazards:** Move the vehicle to a safe place to avoid disrupting traffic, and turn off the engine.
- **Provide assistance:** If someone has been injured, call an ambulance (119) and provide first aid.
- **Report the accident to the police:** The person responsible for an accident must report it to the police, even if it is a minor accident. Victims also should

report the accident to the police (110). A Traffic Accident Certificate - which is required for a damage claim can only be issued if the accident is reported to the police.

- **Note the particulars of the other parties:** Confirm the name, address, work place, phone number, and insurance company of others involved in the accident. In the case of a hit-and-run incident, note the license plate number, if possible.
- **Note the conditions of the accident site:** Write down the conditions of the accident site so that you will not forget them. If there are any eyewitnesses, write down their names and addresses and ask for their testimony
- **Call your PA as soon as you can:** Your Prefectural Advisor is going to want to know an accident occurred, and this information is always better shared sooner, rather than later.

What to do after an accident:

- **Contact your insurance company:** Contact your insurance company immediately after the accident
- **Contact your supervisor or BOE:** No matter how serious the accident, always inform your supervisor as they need to know so they can help with dealing with insurance, police etc
- **See a doctor:** Even if you are not injured and assume you are all right, serious physical problems sometimes arise later

Without a valid license, any insurance coverage will be nullified. please take a moment to think about this point, and to consider the consequences of having an accident without any insurance.

Edited by: *Wayne Bennison, HAJET Northern Representative, 2008-2009*

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

HAJET | Forum

www.hokkaidojets.org

Japan Guide

www.japan-guide.com

Japan Automobile Federation

www.jaf.or.jp

Northern Road

www.northern-road.jp

Japan Driver's License

www.japandriverslicense.com

AJET | Driving In Japan FAQ

www.ajet.net/modules/articles/

Nagoya International Center

www.nic-nagoya.or.jp/en/dailyliving/

Hokkaido Association of Japan Exchange and Teaching

www.hajet.org

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