

# hokkaido *life*

## QUEER HOKKAIDO

*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.*

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### **Intro: Perspectives on Queer Life in Hokkaido**

*From Tara Robertson:*

Welcome! There's a vibrant queer community here in Hokkaido. Lots in the big cities, and [\[AJET's Stonewall group\]](#) is available for everybody. Of course you will probably have to be more discreet about your personal life, but that is no different from straight JETs. I had a bit of a hard time adjusting to being back in the closet, but I have come out to a few close Japanese friends with no problems. You have a unique opportunity to access a part of Japanese society that most JETs and many Japanese people don't even know exists.

*From Michael Snyder:*

Hokkaido is indeed one of the "gayest" places in Japan. I live in Sapporo, which is the hub of Hokkaido gay life. There are many small gay bars here to choose from, and there are regular "gay nights" at various clubs and bars downtown. If you follow the house/club music scene, you're also bound to run into a lot of gay people here too.

Sapporo is also home to the longest-running gay pride parade [\[The Sapporo Rainbow March\]](#) in Japan. It's widely popular, with folks flying up from Tokyo just to attend. Also the mayor of Sapporo addresses and thanks the gay community after the pride parade – something totally unheard of by public officials elsewhere in Japan!

This kind of recognition shows that Sapporo is a little bit ahead of the curve when it comes to gay rights and visibility in Japan. In many other places, homosexuality "doesn't exist." But in Sapporo and other parts of Hokkaido it does, and people are OK with that. (Although it's still not a major issue or is discussed much in the public

square.)

While I don't consider myself to be "in the closet" here, my sexuality is something that's just not talked about very often in the office or in social situations. But when conversations reach a point where it's best for me to just say who I am, I do, and I've never had any problems.

In fact, Japanese people find it very interesting and often strike up an insightful conversation about it. For many Japanese people, it'll likely be their first time meeting an "out" person, so use that opportunity to dispel stereotypes, share your culture, etc.

Another thing I've noticed since moving here is that sexuality is not as black and white as it is in most Western countries. In the West, you are either gay or straight (or maybe bi). But here I've noticed that it's not uncommon for men to have a wife and kids, and also have a male lover "on the side," or engage in anonymous, random gay sex on occasion.

In some respects, I think it's more acceptable for people (men especially) to engage in homosexual sexual behavior – as long as it's not discussed or mentioned in public. It's sort of an "anything goes" culture – as long as you don't talk about it!

In Japanese culture, this mentality has pluses and minuses. On the plus side, there's nothing "immoral" or "evil" about being gay (likely due to the lack of a Judeo-Christian "values" system). So you don't have to worry about violence against homosexuals or most other forms of retribution and discrimination.

On the minus side, it drives visibility of gay culture/rights underground, and you end up with a lot of people denying its existence. So it becomes something that's just not talked about much. Moreover, because there's a lot of sleeping around and a lack of HIV education/prevention programs, Sapporo is the HIV epicentre of Japan. Please be aware of this and protect yourself!

*From Anonymous:*

For me, being gay in Japan is not an easily-explainable experience; you'll have to figure out your own way of being queer here. Based on what's important to you, your previous experience with your own queer identity, and based on your community (e.g. your town, local JETs, your co-workers), you will learn what you're comfortable talking about and with whom.

I've chosen to be gay in the same way I would be gay in America, except I don't talk about it with co-workers. When I'm with my JET friends or even some of my Japanese friends, my gay identity is pretty much the same as it was at home. However, I do not talk about my sexuality with anyone at work nor does it come up with any acquaintances in the community.

I've chosen to follow the social norms around me in the regard that I don't talk too much about my personal life in professional settings, like the office. Co-workers have asked if I have a girlfriend, a boyfriend, or a lover, but I politely decline to talk about

it; I change the subject. Even if they're curious, "gay" doesn't mean the same thing here as it does in other places I've lived and I'm not interested in explaining myself, so I've decided to make it a non-issue. I think it's **extremely** important to be yourself and to have friends you can talk about sex with or make gay jokes with or check out boys (or girls). But for me, those friends are not my co-workers. No gay way is better than another; it's your choice.

*From Tiffany Mc Michael:*

I find being a lesbian in Japan to be both interesting and frustrating. Interesting, because the culture is so different than what I was used to in the United States. In the US, people are all about other people's business. They want to know all about your personal life (for whatever reasons – to judge, for gossip, etc.) and thus we tend to feel that we should let it all hang out – exposing all the details of our lives to the public.

In Japan, however, no one really cares about who you're dating or why. There is definitely a public and private face for both gay and straight people in Japan, and the private is just that... private. I find that there are no opportunities to really "come out" so to speak, thus, though I'm not living out loud and proud like I was in the US, I'm not really in the closet again either. It's a very strange balance, but one that I find almost comforting.

The frustrating part about being a lesbian in Japan is that it's kind of hard to meet other gay/lesbian people because the society is so quiet about personal lives. Don't try to depend on your trusty "gaydar" here, because you will be severely disappointed.

It's also hard to read cultural signals at first, particularly when you first meet someone. Questions galore run through your mind "Is this person gay?" "Are they interested in me or are they interested in foreigners in general?" "How does dating work exactly?" The ambivalence can be a killer here, but I find that the more you get accustomed to the culture, learn the language, and just take it easy, the more you'll discover the Hokkaido GLBT scene.

When I first arrived on the island, I didn't think there were any lesbians in Hokkaido. But, as time went by, I discovered that there were many of them. They were just very quiet about being lesbians.

Anyway, my advice on meeting people or hooking up in Hokkaido as advised to me by a Chinese lesbian living in Sapporo... learn Japanese. There is nothing more attractive than being able to communicate.

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## QUEER ADVOCACY GROUPS

**Hokkaido Sexual Minority Association** (HSMA), or Sapporo Meeting, as it's called by locals, organizes many different events. The Rainbow Parade, Sapporo's Gay and

Lesbian pride event, was the only pride event in Japan two years ago, and one of the only a few in Asia. There are very few people who speak English, so be prepared to use your Japanese. Tel/Fax: 011-242-3321, e-mail: hsa@ce.mbn.or.jp

### Queer Media and Event Information

**Luminaire** (ルミアール) is a "gay shop", mostly gay male porn, but some non-porn books and mags and assorted rainbow stuff. Japanese guy magazines *Attitude* and *Fabulous!* are sold here, as well as *Happy Swing*, a local Sapporo zine. *Anise* is one of the few Japanese publications for lesbians and bisexual women. Luminaire is an excellent place to go to and check out the posters and fliers to find out what's going in Sapporo and the rest of Japan. The boys who work here are amazing. (South 5, West 5, 2F. Tel 011-531-1168). Open noon till 1AM. For magazines like *Out* and *Curve* go to Tower Records in Pivot.

Special events for gays and lesbians happen at various times in Hokkaido. Check out [Qwere](#) (Event Hotline: 011-552-0054, email: qwere@geocities.co.jp), which organizes different events including Hole, Luv Bites, and Queer.

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## NIGHTLIFE

### Sapporo Boys Bars

There are many gay bars in Sapporo, mostly located in the SA Building (South 6 West 6). As with the rest of Japan, most bars are sex segregated, but attitudes are more relaxed in Sapporo than the rest of Japan. (for descriptions of gay bars, see the "Sapporo Gay Bar Info" section below)

Be aware that gay bars in Japan aren't as lively, big or vibrant as they are in most Western countries. Typically they are tiny places that seat 10-20 people. Some bars have karaoke, but most just play music quietly. People come and go randomly, so there's no "peak" time at these bars. The aim is to actually talk with people and maybe take them home afterward, or go on over to another gay bar for another drink.

The typical deal is that each bar charges a "charm charge," usually about 1,000 yen per person. This gets you a seat in the bar and a small snack basket. Then you order drinks, which are typically priced a la carte (nomihodai isn't typical). Afterwards, the bartenders will usually flirt with you and "practice" their English.

If you plan to be a regular at a particular bar, a more economical option is to buy your own bottle of booze, which will be kept behind the bar with your name on it. The next time you come in, you only have to pay the charm charge, as you can have the bartender make drinks using your bottle of booze. You can also share your bottle with other patrons, if you want to impress them or be generous.

## Dancing/Clubs

**Club Mirror** (South 6 West 2 Tel. 011-562-8779) is where many of the gay boys go to dance, as there is no regular gay disco in Sapporo.

A straight bar called Bar **Locotonte** (South 7 West 4, Suskino Kaikan Building 4F) has had a few gay nights and women-only nights.

Although they are not queer clubs, **SoundLab Mole** [[www.mole-sapporo.jp/](http://www.mole-sapporo.jp/)] (South 3, West 2, 2-block of Tanuki Koji) and **Precious Hall** [[www.precioushall.com/](http://www.precioushall.com/)] (South 4, West 7, Basement level of the No. 9 Green Building) are two locations that Western gays and lesbians would feel comfortable in. They are large dance venues that play decent house music and host special DJs from time to time. You're also likely to run into other queer people here too.

## Drag Shows

If you miss seeing a good 'ol drag queen show, there's a few places that put on these shows. The best one is called "**Newhalf Showclub**". The show is called "new half" because the top of each boy is "new", i.e. they have boobs! Their bottom half is still male, however. This is a top-notch show, worth every yenny! They have a nomihodai period before the show, followed by an amazing show with 20 drag queens. Many of the numbers are performed in matching costumes, and there's some cheeky comedy skits (in Japanese) by two male MCs.

This is an excellent place to celebrate birthdays! It's popular, so you should make reservations in advance: 011 533 7220 or 011 512 7000. For more info, go to [[www.lalato.com](http://www.lalato.com)]

Price for a 90 min. show plus a pre-show nomihodai (lasts about 45 min.) is 5,000 yen. If you have one of the performers order drinks for you and entertain you before the show, each person should tip "her" about 1,000 yen. There's an early show at 8:45 and later one at 10:45.

Location: Sapporo-shi, Chuo-ku, South 5, West 2 on the 5F of the サイバーシティビル (Cyber City building)

## Sapporo Lesbian Bars/Events

Lesbian-friendly venues are few and far between, even in Sapporo. But there are some events and places to go around town. (See the "Sapporo Lesbian Bar Info" section below.)

For updates on lesbian life in Hokkaido, check out the [Dyke Island](#) - a popular website for "lesbians in Hokkaido, Tohoku and on this planet."

**Bar Orb** (Tel. 090 2742 7070) [<http://ip.tosp.co.jp/i.asp?I=kaekinky>] This is a lesbian-friendly bar in Sapporo. It has a relaxed atmosphere, wonderful cocktails, and an awesome bartender/owner. Location: Sapporo, Chuo-ku, South 5, West 2, 4F in the 社交会館 building.

## Sapporo Gay Bar Info

The majority of gay bars in Sapporo are located on the south-west west side of the Susukino entertainment district. Hubs are the SA Building (エスエービル, next to the Swanky Hotel), the 5-6 Building, and the 第6旭観光ビル ("Number 6 Asahi Tourist Building"). Gay "*cruising spots*" are not far away, and there are many love hotels in the area too. Pick up a copy of the Sapporo Gay Town Map at Luminaire or any of the gay bars for a complete listing of bars and stuff.

**Café Bar Break** (Tel 011-562-0007) on the second floor of the SA building is one of the only mixed snack bars in Sapporo. So gay ladies and gents are welcome to mingle here.

**Hearty Café:** (NOT located in the SA building!) seems to draw more foreigners, although not many, and is somewhat nice and low key; staff is pretty friendly and engaging, but overall the bar is just okay.

**ID:** (NOT located in the SA building!) This is where a younger crowd tends to hang out. Bartenders are very flirty and nice. Also the place plays pretty good music, although it is very small and crowded sometimes.

**DAN:** small bar (like most) with an older crowd; not very lively but the owner and other patrons will often engage you in English conversation; nothing too special but can be fun if you're in a chatty mood.

**Kid.ing:** This is a somewhat larger bar with a nice karaoke system. If it's not being used, the bartenders might ask you to sing some songs for everyone in the bar. This can be very fun, as they love to hear foreigners sing in English. (But be aware, you're singing to the whole bar!) There's also a little lounge area with tables and couches off to the side. Overall it's one of the nicer bars in Sapporo.

## Sapporo Lesbian Bar Info

**Ku: for Women**, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Keiwa Building (South 5 West 6 Tel 011-533-0222, website [www.geocities.co.jp/Foodpia-Olive/2202/](http://www.geocities.co.jp/Foodpia-Olive/2202/)). The owner, Keiko, and her girlfriend, Kaori are wonderful. Several parties are hosted here. It's also the offline meeting place for the Dyke Island website: [www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Vega/1356/](http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Vega/1356/)

## Gay "*Cruising Spots*" in Sapporo

In Sapporo there are some places gay men can go to get some anonymous action. They are like gay bathhouses in the West, only there's no steam rooms or anything. Instead they are dark, warm lounge rooms where you "meet" other men. (There are showers for cleaning up afterwards.) These places are typically open after 6PM and remain open until dawn. Clientèle is random and varies from night to night. You pay an entrance fee (usually about 2,000 yen), are given a towel and a locker, and wear

nothing but the towel into the “cruising” rooms. Also be warned: you will probably see people engaging in risky sexual behavior, so insist on protection!

**BYCS:** Sapporo, Chuo-ku, South 6, West 8. [<http://lagoon-bycs.com/bycs.php>] BYCS is small, quiet, and not too busy, but usually a few people there; definitely has clientele who practice unsafe sex (beware); overall, not too bad.

**Spike:** Tel: 011 563 3155 website: [[www.otoko-spike.com](http://www.otoko-spike.com)] Sapporo-shi, Chuo-ku, South 6, West 7. (in the 文化 building). Bigger than BYCS and often busier but with a slightly more standoffish crowd and less relaxed atmosphere; definitely has clientele who practice unsafe sex (beware); is more like Western saunas in layout (more rooms, more cruising, no tatami).

### Other Hokkaido Queer Bars

Asahikawa: **Ballarde** (6-7 Ofuna Building near Toyo Hotel, Tel 0166-25-0592). The owner is a gay man but the clientele is mixed gay/straight. No women come here apparently.

Hakodate: **Members Only** (19-17 Wakamatsu-cho, Tel 0138-26-8104) and **Yorozuya** (Tel 0138-27-0061) are both mixed gay/straight. As with Asahikawa, no women come to these bars. The owners believe there are no lesbians in Hakodate (whatever).

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### STD CLINICS

If you engage in risky or questionable behavior and need to be tested for something, go to the **Iwazawa Urology Clinic** near the Nishi 18-choume subway stop in Sapporo. Location is: Chuo-ku, South 1, West 16, (south side of the block) in the Rebus Building (レブス), 2F.

It is a gay-friendly clinic, and the doctors there are discreet and speak English and accept national medical insurance cards. The hours are random, but they do take walk-ins on Saturday mornings. Here's a link to the clinic from the Health Hokkaido Website: [[www.healthhokkaido.com/hosp\\_maps/iwazawa\\_map.cfm](http://www.healthhokkaido.com/hosp_maps/iwazawa_map.cfm)]

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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!*

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## USEFUL RESOURCES

HAJET   Forum	<a href="http://www.hokkaidojets.org">www.hokkaidojets.org</a>
Japan Guide	<a href="http://www.japan-guide.com">www.japan-guide.com</a>
Dyke Island	<a href="http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Vega/1356/">www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Vega/1356/</a>
The Sapporo Rainbow March	<a href="http://www.rainbowmarch.org/">www.rainbowmarch.org/</a>
SoundLab Mole	<a href="http://www.mole-sapporo.jp/">www.mole-sapporo.jp/</a>
Precious Hall	<a href="http://www.precioushall.com/">www.precioushall.com/</a>
BYCS	<a href="http://lagoon-bycs.com/bycs.php">http://lagoon-bycs.com/bycs.php</a>
Spike	<a href="http://www.otoko-spike.com/">www.otoko-spike.com/</a>
Newhalf Showclub Reservations	<a href="http://www.lalato.com">www.lalato.com</a>
Iwazawa Urology Clinic	<a href="http://www.healthhokkaido.com">www.healthhokkaido.com</a>

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