



Playground of the GODS

Florentyna Leow shares her recent experience hiking the rugged, history-steeped mountains of Hokkaido, Japan



*Furanodake region, Hokkaido.
Photos: Florentyna Leow*

Kamui mintara is the old Ainu name for Hokkaido," our guide tells us as we trudge through Alpine shrubs. "It means 'playground of the gods'." When we reach our second major pitstop of the day, his face breaks into a broad smile.

"I guess this must be their sandbox."

In front of us is a yawning cream and copper-coloured chasm stretching two kilometres wide, sloped with lush, emerald vegetation. We have arrived at Ohachi-daira, a massive caldera ringed by a series of equally impressive mountains, the result of a volcanic eruption over 30,000 years ago. It is a stunning, otherworldly sight in this clear mid-August weather. In this moment, I understand perfectly the meaning of the Ainu people's name for this land. It feels as though I have stumbled upon sacred ground. I am here with my colleague and tour leader Jamie Dwyer from Walk Japan, which operates off-the-beaten-track tours of the country, and our guest, who has flown in from France: we are here to experience the remotest, wildest areas of Hokkaido.

Hokkaido is Japan's northernmost prefecture, and was formerly known as Ezo to the mainlanders. Hokkaido enjoys an almost mythical status among urban Japanese as the final frontier, for it was only in the mid-1800s when the Edo Shogunate finally wrested control of this northern island previously settled by the indigenous group collectively known as the Ainu. It has remained a part of Japan since 1868, and Sapporo, its capital, is a modern metropolis on par with the likes of Tokyo and Osaka – albeit with wider streets to accommodate the snowfall.

Still, the vast caldera stretching out below us reminds us how obstinately different Hokkaido remains from anything on the mainland. Its proximity to the Arctic winds make for colder temperatures even at the height of summer; its landscapes are wonderfully diverse, ranging from verdant mountains seemingly plucked straight out of the Scottish Highlands to swampy marshland housing deer and brown bears. Another reminder of its difference: while Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are a dime a dozen in Japan, Hokkaido's short history as part of Japan means that the usual religious



trappings which can be found willy-nilly on the mainland are virtually unseen outside major cities. Where Honshu – Japan's largest and most populous island, housing metropolises such as Tokyo and Osaka – would have centuries-old shrines, statues or temples on virtually every mountain, such cultural monuments are few and far between on the Hokkaido highlands. Our first hike takes us on a trail to Akan-Fuji, one of the volcanic group of mountains surrounding Lake Akan in East Hokkaido. In just a few hours, we traverse an extraordinary range of terrain. Lush, mossy firs and pines towering over us give way to shorter Alpine vegetation such as dwarf stone pines and mountain ash. As we climb, Jamie points out rare mountain flowers: the iwabukuro ('rock-bag flower') and the deep pink komakusa ('horsehead bud'). We also see strangely anatomical violet blossoms which turn out to be wolfsbane, one of the deadliest plants known to mankind. Historically used by the Ainu to make poison-tipped arrows, this beautiful flower still grows freely in some forests here. Yellow pine cones litter our route hither and thither, and eventually, we spot one of the culprits. A Siberian chipmunk darts out of a bush several metres in front of us, stopping

to nibble on a pine cone, then scampering away as we approach.

We reach a fork in the trail, and find that the left path to Me-Akan is blocked off. It is clear why when we look up: languid, billowing clouds of volcanic smoke. Leaving the Alpine bushes behind, we turn right towards Akan-Fuji, and zig-zag slowly up what seems like a steep brown wall, but which upon closer inspection turns out to be loose volcanic scree, broken rock fragments of all shades ranging from magenta to deep rusty reds and greens. It is barely 11am when we reach the peak, but we wolf down our rice balls and chocolate almonds, enjoying the panoramic view of the mountains and the valley, listening to the slow rumble of Me-Akan puffing away opposite us.

Around us are a few stacks of rocks, often to which hikers passing through will add one or two. This practice, explains Jamie, stems from the Japanese belief that the souls of unborn children must remain in limbo, building stone towers in order to accrue merit for their parents afterlife. Every night, demons knock these towers down, and so people often make piles of stones - often next to statues of bodhisattva Jizo, the protector of traveler and children - to help

these lost souls achieve their goals. Afterwards, I cannot stop noticing heaps of rocks on the more well-worn trails we walk. That being said, on some stretches it feels like all you can see are rocks in front of you - or rather, around your feet as you try not to lose your footing. On our third day, in Daisetsuzan National Park, we face our hardest climb. Mount Asahidake, or Nutakukamu-usuppe in the Ainu language, is Hokkaido's highest mountain at 2291 metres above sea level. It is a steep, slippery upward struggle over scree, and my body threatens to let loose and slide back down the slope. But at the summit, a sea of clouds greets us, and I am thrilled at having made it to the top – until we begin our two-hour descent down on the other side. To our right is Jigokudani, or Hell Valley. It is named perhaps for its hissing, roaring fumaroles, or for the state of my knees as they carry me at a snail's pace down the mountainside. At the bottom of the valley, however, we are rewarded with one of the loveliest sights I have ever seen: Sugatami Pond, small and perfect, mirroring the gentle plumes of smoke from the volcanic vents above it. It is with deep regret that I snap a photo, turn around and sprint the last 700 metres in order not to miss the last ropeway, which carries us down to the foot of Asahidake. Sugatami Pond is just one of many bodies of water we pass on our hikes, several of which are formed by snowmelt. Our highland trail from Daisetsu Kogen Onsen - nicknamed the Bear Loop, for its dense population of brown bears - takes us through swampy marshland dotted with ponds. Though the

weather is mild, there are few hikers, and we have the trail mostly to ourselves. At Sumo Pond, we take a breather to admire the glassy waters, as well as the red dragonflies mating furiously, skittering across the water and in the air around us. Walking through bear country feels like stepping into a Super Mario Brothers video game. The plants grow larger the further north you are in Japan, but the flora and fauna are especially impressive on this trail. The fuki (giant butterbur) leaves are so huge that I contemplate using one as an umbrella in case of rain. Our trail is flanked by giant skunk cabbages, a favourite bear food. Its Japanese name, however, is far more appealing. Mizubasho, or water banana, is a far more elegant description of its long petal-like leaves. Already short at just 155cm, I feel extra miniature in this forest, and find myself scrambling and clambering over gnarly, writhing tree roots and the occasional moss-covered boulder. I begin to imagine myself as a video character trapped in this vast, verdant world, trying to outrun a rolling stone along this hiking trail. Almost immediately I trip on a fallen branch. GAME OVER. The soundtrack to this video game is a constant jingling, thanks to the bells we have strapped on to our backpacks to ward off bears. "These bells don't work with the black bears on the mainland," says Jamie. "They're too used to humans." Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), mostly herbivorous, can be found on Honshu. However, it is the omnivorous Ussuri brown bear (*Ursus arctos lasiotus*) or

black grizzly which reigns supreme in Hokkaido. The association between Hokkaido and bears is so entrenched that not only can you buy brown bear-themed stickers, spoons and other ursine gewgaws at most tourist shops, it's even worshipped as a god by some Ainu people.

Over a lunch of rice balls, Jamie describes Iyomante (pronounced Ee-yo-mahn-tay), a traditional and somewhat controversial Ainu ceremony grounded in the belief that bears are one of the manifestations of gods on earth. Towards the end of winter, trappers poach a newborn bear cub from its hibernating mother, bring it back and raise it in the village. When the bear comes of age, at perhaps one or two years old, it is sacrificed, becoming a bear idol to be worshipped. Then, the spirit of the bear returns to the divine plain to sing the praises of its human caretakers... or so the legend goes.

Iyomante itself is rarely practiced these days, if at all, though you can watch a tourist's version of the ceremony performed as a dance sans bears at the Ainu Village in Lake Akan. Nevertheless, there remains a lingering fascination - mixed perhaps with awe and dread - with brown bears up north. When we reach the edge of Ohachi-daira caldera, we notice perched on its edge a scraggly group of young lads. It transpires that they are members of the Society for the Study of Brown Bears at Hokkaido University. They have been camped out here for a month, equipped with a few pairs of binoculars propped on tripods and clipboards. Under the column on their notes

Kurodake, Day 3





reading 'bears spotted today,' the number 'one' has been marked with a circle, and the president of the society explains that it had been a brief sighting. Little chance of a bear encounter on today's walk then, especially as we follow the Japanese hiking custom of wearing bear bells religiously. Fortunately - or unfortunately - we never run into any bears. Other wildlife makes appearances, which is quite a thrill for a city slicker like myself.

Public transportation in Hokkaido is scarce and far in between, so we travel from place to place by taxi. Near the forests Ezo red foxes jump out in front of our taxi, slowing us down in hopes of being fed. Road signs in Japanese crop up time and again warning people not to feed or approach the foxes, or risk contracting the echinococcus parasite. When it becomes clear that we're stopping only to photograph them, they invariably slink back into the bush. On the highway to Furano City, we encounter a black kite hawk squatting imperiously in the centre of the road, before it flies up to perch atop the lamp post and watch us drive away.

"Shh." Our guide has suddenly stopped, and motions for us to be quiet. We are descending Mount Furano-dake, and the winds were so strong on the ascent that they threatened to buffet us into the mountainside - perhaps a sign that the mountain goddess does not want us trespassing today. But the winds have calmed, so we creep over to where Jamie is standing below a slope of bushes. Then we hear the cheeping sounds: it is the naki-usagi (Japanese pika), a mouse-like relic of the Ice Age which swept the Siberian areas thousands of years ago. It

sounds like there is an entire city of pikas surrounding us. But before we are able to catch a glimpse, a hiker comes striding by, jingling bear bell and all, and we never get to meet a naki-usagi.

At the end of our hike, Ryounkaku at Tokachidake Onsen awaits us. With the daily six to eight-hour trudges across mountains, we find that hot spring baths are not optional luxuries but absolutely necessary for our muscles to recover. At every resort we stay at, as soon as check-in is over we make a beeline for the onsen, peel off our clothes and soak our aching muscles in the hot water. After several hours of hiking in howling winds, this is exactly what our bodies need. Shivering, I open the door, which leads to the outdoor bath, shimmy into the cloudy, iron-rich hot spring water and watch the clouds rolling through the mountains surrounding the bath. There are no power lines, no buildings, nothing to suggest the human presence. This is as far away from my emails as I will ever be. I have never been an outdoors person, but weeks later, I find myself still thinking about waking up at the crack of dawn, and climbing mountains in Hokkaido. W

Florentyna Leow is a writer and photographer based in Kyoto who has written for outlets such as Silverkris, ZenVita and Londonist. Her interests include food, doors and Thomassons.



furochan.wordpress.com



www.instagram.com/furochan_eats

EXTRA INFORMATION:

The best time to hike in Hokkaido is generally during the summer months of July and August, though some trails are open as early as June and are closed as late as early November. It's a popular summer destination for both domestic and inbound tourism, so book flights early. Chitose Airport serves international routes, but for less central airports such as Kushiro or Memanbetsu in east Hokkaido, domestic flights from an airport in Tokyo are usually the only option available.

Public transportation options are relatively scarce in Hokkaido, and taxi transfers can be costly, so renting a car is the most convenient option for independent travel if you have an international driving license. Hitchhiking, while not orthodox, is not uncommon.

Tours

A number of tour companies offer English-language hiking tours in various parts of Hokkaido. Walk Japan's Hokkaido Hike, aimed at regular hikers, takes you on a moderately challenging 10-day, 9-night traipse through some of the most scenic trails up north, mainly in Daisetsuzan National Park in central Hokkaido.

Accommodation

Modern Western-style hotels are the norm in Hokkaido. Traditional Japanese-style inns are relatively uncommon, though some hotels have tatami mat rooms. Bookings are easily made through aggregate websites or can be arranged with a tour company. Rudimentary English is usually spoken at the front desk for hotels in larger cities such as Sapporo, as well as at chain hotels. However, learning a few key phrases before travelling will take you a long way.

With its vast and generally well-maintained national parks, Hokkaido has a good selection of campgrounds to choose from.