



A Winter Caravan through...

Hokkaido – the Land of the Ainu

DETAILED DOSSIER

15 day itinerary

Tokyo – Sapporo – Tsurui – Abashiri –
Asahikawa – Asahidake – Hakodate – Tokyo

Travel dates

Sun 3 February – Sun 17 February 2013

INTRODUCTION

Hokkaido is a land of haunting, natural beauty where vast, virgin forests are cut through by raging icy torrents and huge, brown bears roam in the shadow of towering snow-capped volcanoes - a magical, and in many ways still unexplored, wilderness. Despite being Japan's second largest island Hokkaido remains its least populated region and it retains a distinct frontier feel, partly explained by the fact that it has only relatively recently come under true Japanese control. Both in climate and culture this stunning island represents a refreshingly different side to Japan, unique among the country's many jewels, and with this new trip it becomes the last of the archipelago's four main islands to be touched by the ever turning wheels of The Oriental Caravan.

Our journey takes place in February when the winter wonders of Hokkaido really come into their own. From the bright lights of Tokyo we head straight for the island's vibrant capital Sapporo and the city's annual Snow Festival, famous for its utterly spectacular ice sculptures. After time to enjoy Sapporo's unique nightlife (not to mention remarkable beer museum!) we start our train journey eastwards through an unfolding wilderness to Kushiro where the tranquil marshlands of Tsurui are home to the beautiful Red-crowned Crane. Perhaps the coolest bird in the world we should be able to witness its truly enchanting February mating dance, something that has to be seen to be believed. Further north we reach the delightfully intriguing town of Abashiri and take an unforgettable ice-breaking cruise through drift ice caused by the flow of the River Amur into the Sea of Okhotsk. We also visit the town's Prison Museum which details the disturbing history of the area as a penal colony – a rare and thought-provoking insight into the real, human story behind modern Japan. In Asahidake we have a chance to ascend, by cable car, the highest mountain in Hokkaido, go snow shoe walking to observe the woodland wildlife and – a real treat – bathe in hot springs in the snow just like the locals! Before leaving Hokkaido we spend two fascinating nights in Hakodate, with its Nagasaki-like ambience, turn-of-the-century Western-style buildings and amazing fish market.

Who are the Ainu? Once the sole inhabitants of Japan's archipelago, the indigenous hunter-gathering Ainu were, over many centuries, gradually pushed North by Japanese newcomers until Hokkaido became their last refuge. During the nineteenth century even this sanctuary was taken from them and they became completely subjugated by their newly modernized neighbours from the South. It is only in very recent years that state suppression has ceased and the remaining Ainu have begun to rediscover some of their cultural identity. Known for their enchanting music and beautiful textiles we will, as an adjunct to this trip, endeavour to learn a little more about this mysterious people and their almost lost world.



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ITINERARY

Day 1 Tokyo Group rendezvous in Tokyo, and, after time to relax in and around our centrally located hotel, the opportunity to explore the city. Tokyo is well-known for its bustling energy and futuristic architecture. However, it also has a gentler side and its citizens often reveal themselves – particularly outside of working hours – to be some of the friendliest of any capital city in the world. Behind the skyscrapers and neon signs, there are many vestiges of the past, with historic temples and shrines still to be found in some of the most unexpected places, as well as an abundance of parks and gardens.

Overnight – hotel

Day 2 Tokyo Today we have a varied, full-day tour of the city beginning in the lively Senso-ji temple district of Asakusa, with its many interesting handicraft stalls. After lunch we are afforded an alternative view of Tokyo as we relax on a short cruise down the Sumida River. Our boat drops us off at the delightful Hama Rikyu gardens where we have time to stroll along paths that were once the sole preserve of the *Shogun*. Later in the afternoon we make our way to the shopping district of Ginza where, depending on the theatre schedule, those with a Thespian bent have the opportunity to take in a short performance of *Kabuki*, one of Japan's more spectacular performing artforms. We will then meet up again in the evening over dinner for a trip briefing.

Overnight – hotel

Day 3 Sapporo Leaving the great metropolis of Tokyo behind we fly north from Haneda Airport to Sapporo, capital of Japan's second largest Island. Sapporo is consistently voted by Japanese as the city that, given the choice, they would most like to live in and, with its plethora of idiosyncratic bars and famed brewery it's not hard to see why. Broad boulevards, attractive public parks, grand buildings and an impalpable civic optimism give the city an almost utopian feel. We arrive with the city's stunning ice festival in full swing. This is a great time to be in Sapporo when the city is at its liveliest and most welcoming and on arrival we spend the rest of the day soaking up its atmosphere. In the evening we have our first chance to sample Sapporo's renowned cuisine and pay a visit to Susukino, home of the city's legendary nightlife.

Overnight – hotel

Day 4 Sapporo Today we have a full day to take in the wonders of Sapporo's famous Snow Festival. This is an event that really has to be seen to be believed. Its biggest draw being the incredible Ice Sculptures, some over 15 metres tall, carved by sculptors from all around the world from huge blocks of compacted snow. Themes are taken from both Japanese and World culture, with models of both buildings and personalities – don't miss the massive bust of John Lennon! – and are particularly visually stunning at night when this winter wonderland is fully illuminated. To add to the spectacle some of the sculptures are host to musical as well as theatrical performances. In the south of the city more snow fun is to be had at Satorando Park where ice slides, a massive snow labyrinth, hot air balloon rides and horse-drawn sleighs are all available. Of particular note is the Ice Bar where the tables, chairs, glasses and even ice cubes are made from ice!

Overnight – hotel

Day 5 Sapporo Sapporo is considered by some to be the Philadelphia of the Orient and has much more to offer than just its Snow Festival. The confidence of conquest can be sensed in every snow-kissed boulevard and the objectified ambition of modern Japan marvelled at in a stationary dance of architectural glory. Today has been left free to explore these other sights and it may or may not be wise to begin this day of exploration at the fascinating Sapporo Beer Museum. It was here in 1876 that the opening of the country's first brewery brought an exponential thrust to the development of Japan's civilisation. As well as the free samples at the end of the tour, of particular note is the collection of advertising posters for Sapporo Beer, some of which date back to the 1890's, and which are in themselves a visual meander through modern Japanese history. Elsewhere Sapporo is home to several impressive Western-style wooden buildings from the Meiji period and, opposite the Botanical Gardens, a small Ainu Museum as part of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. Other museums include the Winter Sports Museum and, just outside of town, the atmospheric Historical Village of Hokkaido with a collection of Meiji and Taisho period buildings. For a bird's eye view of the city, including the ice sculptures, the *eiffellesque* TV tower affords great vistas over the town and as far as the snow-capped mountains that effortlessly ring the city.

Overnight – hotel

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ITINERARY *continued*

Day 6 Tsurui Today the first in a series of highly scenic train journeys brings us to the mesmerisingly non-descript Kushiro, Japan's most easterly city. On the last part of the journey the train closely skirts the shores of the Pacific Ocean where a variety of seabird life can be seen from the train. On arrival we board our bus for Tsurui village which is situated on the edge of the magnificent Kushiro Shitsugen National Park, Japan's largest expanse of undeveloped marshland. This is one of the best places in the world to see the amazing Japanese *tancho* Red-crowned Cranes. We stay in a charming and very comfortable wooden lodge nearby to the nature reserve where we should be able to witness the awe-inspiring mating dance of these majestic and utterly graceful birds as the sun sets over the surrounding snow covered fields. *Overnight – lodge*

Day 7 Abashiri We continue to Abashiri through the hauntingly beautiful Akan National Park, home to Lakes Akan and Masho. As with almost everywhere in Hokkaido, nature is very much in control here and we have numerous opportunities to see the local wildlife with wild deer particularly commonplace. Despite its surprisingly pleasant ambience Abashiri is nonetheless infamous in Japan as home to the country's most forbidding prison. At the end of the nineteenth century many of Japan's most dangerous criminals as well as political dissidents were sent as unwilling pioneers to help develop this inhospitable land. The Prison Museum here is a definite must-see including original, less-than-luxurious cell blocks that were in use until the early 1980's. The harsh, cold prison conditions were only relieved by the weekly hot bath (see the tattooed *yakuza* mannequins in the inset photo). Another similarly high-quality attraction is the nearby Museum of Northern Peoples featuring several ethnic groups including the Ainu. Close to the town's river is a Shell Mound, with accompanying museum, a testament to the Ainu people's long residency in the area.

Overnight – hotel

Day 8 Abashiri Abashiri looks out over the Sea of Okhotsk. By February, this sea becomes covered by blue-white drift ice created by the mixing of fresh water from Siberia's River Amur with Okhotsk's salt water. Today, in one of this trip's many highlights, we board our specially-designed ice-breaking boat and are able to observe this astonishing phenomenon from close up. The bow of the boat crunches dramatically through the ice sheets throwing up huge slabs. As well as Steller's Sea Eagles we may also see seals and other wildlife.

Overnight – hotel

Day 9 Asahidake Another day of high scenic reward as our train snakes its way along a single track through narrow forested valleys of thundering rivers and into open plains whose fields of snow are broken only by the sight of isolated farmsteads. Timetables on this stretch are hard to keep as the train often has to stop to allow deer and other fauna to remove themselves from the track. We leave the train at Asahikawa which was once one of the largest Ainu settlements in Hokkaido and remains today one of the island's largest cities. We continue by bus to our snowy home for the next two nights nestled at the foot of Hokkaido's highest mountain, Asahidake. Either this afternoon or on the following day we can take a cable car to a point close to the summit for fantastic views of the surrounding countryside. Our comfortable lodgings have an on-site viewing tower perfect for a sunset beer but nothing can beat sitting under the stars, surrounded by snow, naked, save for an aperitif, in the guesthouse's *rotemburo* (outdoor hot spring).

Overnight – hostel/ryokan

Day 10 Asahidake We have a full day to relax and explore this pristine area which is popular with local skiers and snowboarders. One great way to get closer to the local flora and fauna is by means of snow shoe. The use of snow shoes is very easy to pick up and we will soon find ourselves following one or more of the 'snow shoe trails' where we hope to see rabbit, fox and other animals – its highly unlikely that we will see one but, as throughout Hokkaido, there are also said to be bears in this area!

Overnight – hostel/ryokan

Day 11 Hakodate We return to Asahikawa where after a little time to explore the town we continue via Sapporo to Hakodate. En route we skirt the beautiful Uchiura bay and are afforded great views of the still active Mount Komagatake volcano. We are in Hakodate for two nights and this evening a great way to begin our stay is to ascend, by cable car for those who wish, Mount Hakodate to take in one of Japan's most famous night views with a sea of electric lights stretching out across the isthmus into the distant wilderness.

Overnight – hotel

Day 12 Hakodate We have a full day to explore this laidback fishing port. Perhaps the best way of seeing all the town is by foot and a pleasant walking tour of around 3 miles takes in many of the city's sights including the museum, the charming colonial buildings of the old foreign quarter as well as the historic Foreigners Cemetery with graves dating back to 1854. Also of interest is the Five pointed Goryo-kaku fort, the first western fortress in Japan and once the last redoubt of forces loyal to the Tokugawa *shogunate* when in 1869 they declared an independent state in Hokkaido (recognised by France and Britain!).
Overnight – hotel

Day 13 Tokyo After an (optional!) early morning visit to Asa Ichi market, particularly notable for its giant crabs, we bid farewell to Hokkaido and head back to the island of Honshu. We do so by passing through the Seikan Tunnel - opened in 1988 this is the longest underwater tunnel in the world. By mid afternoon we should be back in the arms of Japan's pulsating capital. Bewildering as it may at first seem Tokyo is in the end, like London, merely a collection of villages that can be a joy to explore. We arrive in time for the weekend when the city relaxes and night-time Tokyo comes alive. This evening we discover some of its many highly atmospheric back streets.
Overnight – hotel

Day 14 Tokyo Today the whole day has been left free for further independent exploration or shopping. It is also possible to arrange day-trips outside of Tokyo, including perhaps a daytrip to Yudanaka to see the famous Snow Monkeys, oblivious to the encircling tourists, bathing in a hot spring. In the evening we will all meet up for a farewell meal at one of Tokyo's fine restaurants.
Overnight – hotel

Day 15 Journey's end... The Oriental Caravan heads home.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour price (excluding international flights) – £2,795 per person on a twin share basis

Group size & Leader The group will comprise between 6 and 12 members, and be escorted throughout by an experienced Japanese-speaking tour leader from the UK.

Transport For most of the trip we make good use of Japan's well-developed and highly efficient train system, travelling on super fast bullet trains as well as sleepy branch-line locomotives. It is felt that use of the public transport system allows for a more in-depth and personal experience of Japanese life – and is also invariably a lot of fun. We will, on occasion, also be using private taxis, local or private buses and an ice-breaker boat in Abashiri. For the journey from Tokyo to Sapporo we fly. Some of the sightseeing will involve a certain amount of walking.

Accommodation In Tsurui we stay in a charming wooden lodge with fine views (particularly from the traditional Japanese hot bath!). In Asahidake we stay in a handsome wooden ryokan *cum* hostel with a fine outdoor hot spring. Elsewhere we stay in good quality tourist-class hotels. An optional single supplement for the nights spent in hotels is available at a cost of £416.

Food Breakfasts are included throughout except in Tokyo. Three dinners are included at Tsurui and at Asahidake. Elsewhere meals are not included but are easily arranged en route according to individual preferences and with the help of the tour leader. Depending upon appetite and choice you can expect to spend, on average, between £15-25 a day on food and drink. It is possible to eat more cheaply than this, or to spend considerably more. It is worth mentioning that Japanese cuisine is generally of a very high quality and extremely varied, and for many visitors it is a distinct highlight of any visit. As elsewhere in Japan 'piscivores' will find themselves well-catered for in Hokkaido, with some of the finest fish dishes in the world on offer, especially in coastal areas. Vegetarians can get by though sometimes the choice of meat/fish-free meals is limited.

Weather Japan has a temperate climate with four distinct seasons. Our visit is in February which is generally accepted to be the best season for appreciating Hokkaido's unique winter attractions and when we can expect, though not of course be guaranteed, crisp weather and clear skies as well as the occasional heavy blizzard. It will be cold at times but the cold is generally a dry cold and as long as appropriate clothing low temperatures this should not be a problem. A detailed list of clothing suggestions will be sent closer to departure.

Insurance It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of emergency repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all participants take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they, for any reason, need to cancel prior to departure. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single trip insurance policy. Please enquire for details).

Health Formalities There are currently no statutory vaccination requirements for visiting Japan.

Passports & Visas All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of departure from Japan. For most nationalities – including British – a single-entry ('temporary visitor') Tourist Visa is issued on arrival in Japan. This tour is not available to those of other visa status (e.g. business or student).

Luggage Requirements Detailed information on what to pack, and other practicalities, is included in the PDI (Pre-departure Information) that will be sent to group members closer to the date of departure.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time, and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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