

Journey in Eastern Hokkaido, Japan

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Introduction

From the 28th to the 31st of August 2003 we, two exchange students at the Otaru University of Commerce (Park Yoonseon, South Korea and Kerstin Maier, Austria), went to travel the East of Hokkaido.

This report is designed to give the Hokkaido government that provided us with the necessary funds detailed information about our experiences and impressions during our trip to this area.

We try to give a structured overview over our activities by reporting about the route we planned, the preparations we made, the difficulties we faced in carrying out our plan, and the impression we gained on a day-by-day basis.



Kushiro Shitsugen

Planned route – Overview

1st day: Otaru → Sapporo → Kushiro → Masyuko

2nd day: Masyuko → Akanko → Utoro → Shiretoko

3rd day: Shiretoko → Abashiri → Saromako

4th day: Saromako → Abashiri → Sapporo → Otaru

Preparations before the trip

With exception of the names of the places we wanted to explore we did not know much about the East of Hokkaido.

As far as transportation is concerned we decided to buy a JR rail pass that is valid for 7 days and costs about 23.700 yen, but we noticed that it was cheaper than paying for each ticket separately. Reservations for our train ride from Sapporo to Kushiro were made at the University Co-op travel counter.

As a main source of information before going on the trip we used the Internet.

First of all, we made a reservation for a youth hostel. The English and Japanese information about the hostels on the Internet (<http://www.youthhostel.or.jp>) was helpful in doing so.

One can also find plenty of useful information about the sights of Eastern Hokkaido on the Internet in Japanese and English, for example on the homepage of Kushiro (<http://www.kushiro-kankou.or.jp/> and the English version on <http://www.kushiro-kankou.or.jp/english/>).

As the East of Hokkaido is an excellent area for hiking and outdoor activities we found it important to take durable, waterproof and comfortable shoes as well as equipment for possible rain and colder weather, but luckily we had good weather conditions.

Moreover, one has to remember that it is always advisable to travel with just light baggage. If you change your accommodation and go to another city every day, a light backpack with just the necessary things (washing machines are provided in every youth hostel) is much more convenient than a heavy suitcase. There are also lockers in all the JR stations, which make it easier for travelers to move around.

1st Day (Otaru- Kushiro- Masyuko)

The plan for our first day was to get from Otaru via Sapporo to Kushiro, go from there to Touro and look around there, then back to Kushiro Shitsugen and the Hosooka viewpoint to see the wetland and after this return to Kushiro to do some sightseeing there.

With all the preparation (mentioned above) finished we started our trip at 6 am from Otaru Station and arrived at Kushiro around 10.30 am. This was the perfect time to change from Kushiro station to the observation train Merokko to go to Touro and the wetland in Kushiro Shitsugen National Park. In Touro we noticed that all the activities offered from there



Yonemachi Park

would take a long time (like canoeing and so on), so we went back right away to Shitsugen and were hiking around the view point and the wetland area, which was quite nice, but unfortunately there are not many trains back to Kushiro from Shitsugen station, so we had to spend quite a long time in the national park and had less time to do sightseeing in Kushiro (we had to catch the train from Kushiro to the Masyuko Youth Hostel in the evening).

However, we managed to see the Yonemachi Park, the MOO, the statues of the four seasons, and Sakaemachi kooen before we headed to the JR station in order to go to Masyuko. There the owner of the hostel at Teshikaga picked us up.

The impressions we gained the first day were the following:

Getting around by train in Hokkaido is relatively easy, reliable and convenient, but you should always check the timetable before you decide where to go, because you could end up waiting for a train in a remote area several hours. The sightseeing train in Shitsugen national park was very interesting. However, the announcements in the train about the sights along the route were in Japanese only, so sometimes we didn't know why people were suddenly getting up from their seats and taking pictures.

In Touro we noticed that the activities offered there would take at least half a day, so we could not take part in them, but if a traveler plans ahead of time and spends a day in Touro he/she would probably be able to enjoy the nature a lot. However, all information about activities there was in Japanese, so one really has to plan before going there and maybe book it or look it up on the Internet at home already.

According to the Kushiro Guide Map (in English) from the tourist information, which was very useful and helped us a lot, there is also a City museum in Kushiro that we wanted to see, but it was difficult to find out the bus that goes there in such a short time, so we did not get there.

What we liked best about this area was the amazing view over the wetland in the national park as well as the fascinating nature that we saw when we were hiking around there. (Once again, backpacks and light luggage proved to be much more advantageous!)

2nd Day (Masyuko- Akanko- Utoro- Shiretoko)

On the second day we planned to go to Masyuko, Akanko and Utoro.

We were not sure about our accommodation for this day yet, because the Youth hostel that seemed closest and most convenient for next day's sightseeing in Shiretoko national park was quite far away from Utoro and we did not know about the bus schedule from Utoro to the hostel yet.

Early in the morning we took the bus that departed right in front of our hostel to Masyuko. Masyuko was an overwhelming view in the morning.



Masyuko



Marimo



Akanko

From the observation point we took the bus to go to Akanko town where we locked our backpacks in the station lockers and went for the ship tour around the lake, which took around 1.5 hours. We found out about the tour on the Internet (information in Japanese and English) and it showed that 1220 yen for the tour really paid off. Before our bus from Akan left for Masyuko station we had some time to wander around the little town of Akan, get some money out of the cash dispenser and look at the popular Marimo souvenirs. From Masyuko station we took the train to Shiretoko Shari

There we had to decide on where to stay this night.

Utoro's hotels seemed to be very expensive, but on the other hand the well-located Shiretoko Iwaobestu Youth Hostel was 9 km away from Utoro and there was no bus anymore at this time at night.

Trying to solve this problem we went to the tourist information in Shiretoko, which is right outside the station. The friendly lady at

the information counter really helped us immensely and phoned the Youth Hostel to give us a ride from Utoro to Shiretoko Iwaobetsu. Late at night we arrived at our accommodation and were lucky that we bought dinner at a convenience store beforehand, as there was no such a possibility around the Youth Hostel.

Looking back at this day, we can say that the main difficulty was to find out about the buses to Masyuko and Akanko and to plan the sightseeing around this kind of remote area, because there are not many buses per day. However, as soon as we received the bus schedule from the Youth Hostel receptionist, it became easier for us. (the bus schedule was all in Japanese, but the friendly staff at the Youth Hostel always tries to help if you have problems in understanding).

A positive aspect was that the announcements on the Akanko boat tour as well as the signs around Akan town were also in English. Thus, we could learn about lake Akan and the Marimo and get around in the town without any problems.

3rd Day (Shiretoko- Abashiri- Sarumako)

The preparation for this day was definitely made easier by the fact that the Youth Hostel in Shiretoko Iwaobetsu had set up an information event the night before.

The staff told us about the park, its dangers – it is an active bear zone - and the best ways to get around there. (Everything was said in Japanese only, but we are sure that you can get help from the people there even if you don't understand this language.)



Kamuiwakka hot springs

Therefore, we soon noticed that a rental car is almost a must-have if you want to go for some long hikes around this area. In our case, the Kamuiwakka hot springs and the five lakes were our sightseeing-goals for this day. The staff at the hostel told us that

we would be able to get to these places by bus and provided a helpful bus schedule.

So we left in the morning for a hike up the most gorgeous waterfall and had to be careful not to fall into the hot water. After a 30 min climbing (it is really important here to bring durable shoes, although it was good to know that we also could have rented them at the waterfalls) and a refreshing bath in the natural onsen, we took the next bus to Go-ko lakes, where we were walking around for about an hour. The signs around the lakes area are just in Japanese, so if you cannot read simple kanji you may not always be able to know whether you are at the first or maybe fourth lake, but in this case it is advisable to look at the big map set up in front of the entrance before you get into the forest.

Coming from the lakes to Shiretoko Shari by bus, we took the train to Abashiri. The first thing to do there is to go to the tourist information (although no signs in English) and ask what you can see and do there as well as about accommodation.

At the information counter the employee was once again very friendly and told us that it is convenient to stay in the Saromakoyo Youth Hostel in order to get to the Saromako Nature Center easily the next day.

After walking to and looking at Abashiri prison we returned to the station and took the public bus to the Youth Hostel. We had called from the tourist information center beforehand and again the owner was so kind to pick us up at the bus stop, because it was already around 8 pm and dark when we arrived.

Summarizing this day, we can say that every traveler in Eastern Hokkaido must see the Kamuiwakka hot springs, since they are simply stunning and offer the unique experience to take a hot bath in the middle of one of the most beautiful natural surroundings in Hokkaido.

The Go-ko area is great for easy hiking and amazing scenery as well as relaxing in the forest.

The tourist information is *the* place to go if you need help of any kind and even provides a map of Abashiri in English (although more detailed and exact information is available in Japanese only).

4th Day (Saromako- Abashiri- Sapporo- Otaru)

On our last day we had the goal to take a bicycle ride along Saromako Lake, visit the Abashiri prison museum and catch the train home to Otaru.

Our preparations presented themselves as not very difficult as we had got plenty of information from the Abashiri tourist information along with a bus schedule.

From the conveniently-situated Youth Hostel we could have taken a bus, but one of our roommates in the hostel that we had become friends with the night before offered us a ride to the Saromako Nature center, where we rented bikes and went for a ride in the middle of one of the most beautiful landscapes we have ever seen.

After we got back to Abashiri (there is a bus from the lake to Abashiri) we went to the prison museum. At the counter we noticed that there is a student discount (university students pay 730 yen instead of 1050 yen). Along with the admission ticket we also got an information pamphlet in English. The signs in the museum are bilingual – Japanese and English- but when you walk around the area you notice that more detailed information about the things displayed are just in Japanese, which may lower the interest of some foreign visitor. Moreover, the translation on the bilingual signs and pamphlets sometimes does not make much sense to an English speaking person, because there are mistakes in the writing and expressions. This makes understanding more difficult. There is really a lot to see at the museum, but we heard that many adults find it a little too expensive to pay 1050-yen entrance fee.



The prison museum in Abashiri

The prison museum was our last stop for sightseeing, as we went back to the station to eat and catch the train to Sapporo and from there home to Otaru.

One thing that may cause some minor troubles when you are visiting the same sights as we did this day is that the bicycle rental ticket machine is just in Japanese and without the help of a Japanese person there we would have not easily figured this machine out.

General Impressions, Conclusion

In general, we can say that traveling in Eastern Hokkaido is one of the most amazing experiences a foreigner can have in Japan. However, travelers have to be aware that preparation and planning ahead is essential if you want to be able to fully enjoy Eastern Hokkaido's gorgeous nature. This means preparation in many aspects has to be done before leaving for the trip: one has to plan the route according to the train and bus timetables, because in remote areas it is possible to have to wait quite a long time for means of transportation. It is also important to take proper, light luggage and a big part of your travel-money in cash. Hokkaido is a really safe area and as cash dispensers in these areas may be rare and credit cards are not always accepted, it is better to think ahead.

Many youth hostels are in surroundings without shops and such, so it is an advantage if you always plan ahead on food, too.

Ordering in restaurants may sometimes cause problems, as the kanji are difficult to understand, but pictures on the menu card or displays outside the restaurant help.

Moreover, we experienced an unlimited readiness to help and a great amount of friendliness from everyone that we met during our trip. Language problems should not make anyone hesitate to travel the east of Hokkaido. There are always people around that are doing a lot to help foreigners. On the whole, we agree that our trip was a unique and unforgettable experience. We enjoyed our time in the east of Hokkaido a lot and will try to come back there some day, but until that we thank the Hokkaido government many times for giving us this great opportunity.