

# Hokkaidō 北海道



Few Japanese, and even fewer tourists, make it as far north as Hokkaidō, Japan's final frontier. A shame, since the sweeping vistas, amazing wildlife, wide open roads and spaciousness offer a refreshing contrast to the often claustrophobic density of Honshū. The northernmost of the country's four main islands, Hokkaidō offers skiing, hiking, camping, motorcycling, biking, rafting, canoeing, fishing...even bird-watching. Exciting nightlife in the larger cities lets you get into as much trouble as you want, while luxurious hot springs let you ease those troubles away. Hokkaidō comprises one-fifth of the country's land mass, yet only 5% of the population lives here, in part because of the Siberian cold that descends from November to March. Paradoxically, winter is still a major tourist time. People come to enjoy the skiing and snowboarding, look at the frozen northern waters of Wakkanai and Rebun, or enjoy the ice sculptures of the Yuki Matsuri.

The Ainu, Hokkaidō's indigenous people, have shaped this island's history. Many of the names in the area, such as Sapporo and Noshappu, come from Ainu language. Though marginalised for much of the past century, the Ainu have recently won recognition as an important part of Japanese cultural heritage and are re-establishing themselves. Excellent museums can be found in Sapporo, Hakodate and Shiraoi.

Shaped a bit like the squashed head of a squid, Hokkaidō is often divided into four major regions: Dō-nan (southern), Dō-ō (central), Dō-hoku (northern) and Dō-tō (eastern).

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Say goodbye to stress as you steam in sulphurous spas at **Noboribetsu Onsen** (p594)
- Watch cranes, deer and herons as you canoe through the wilds of **Kushiro Shitsugen National Park** (p617)
- Get a glimpse of the green flash at sunset at **Cape Sōya** (p599)
- Have a picnic in pink beneath 10,000 blooming cherry trees in **Matsumae** (p585)
- Be mesmerised by mysterious *marimo* in **Akan-ko** (p616)
- Deep-sea dive among ice floes in search of Sea Angels at **Abashiri** (p611)



## History

After the glaciers receded, the Ainu were the first to settle here. They called it Ainu Moshiri, Ainu meaning 'human', and Moshiri meaning 'world'. Until the Edo period (1600–1868), the Ainu and Japanese had relatively little contact with each other. The Matsumae clan were the first to establish a major foothold in southwestern Hokkaidō, and they successfully bargained with the Ainu, creating a trade monopoly. While lucrative for the Matsumae clan, it would prove disastrous to the Ainu people.

By the end of the Edo period, trade and colonisation had begun in earnest and by the time the Meiji Restoration began in 1868 the Ainu culture was under attack. Many Ainu customs were banned, women were forbidden to get tattoos, men were prohibited from wearing earrings and the Kaitakushi (Colonial Office) was created to encourage mainland Japanese people to migrate northward. By the time the Meiji period ended the Ainu were de facto 2nd-class citizens. By 1900 the mainland Japanese population topped one million.

One look at the rolling farmlands and fields will convince anyone familiar with New England or Europe that Western farming styles were adopted. Indeed, in some areas Hokkaidō resembles the pastoral West more than it does Japan.

With world attention focused on the island when Sapporo hosted the 1972 Winter Olympics, Japan felt the need to ease restrictions on the Ainu; however, it would take another 26 years before significant protections were written into law. Today, the Ainu are proudly continuing their traditions while still fighting for further recognition of their unique culture.

Hokkaidō's main industries are tourism, forestry and agriculture. It remains a top supplier of some of Japan's most revered delicacies, such as snow crab, salmon roe and sea urchin, and scenic kelp production is a major part of many small towns' economies. It remains a tourist destination year-round.

## Climate

Hokkaidō's temperature ranges from warm and pleasant in summer to subzero in winter. Spring and early summer can be wet and miserable. The hiking season runs from May through to October, with a peak in the July and August months when the leaves begin

## EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK

Check web-based email in a *manga-kissa* (comic-book salon), many of which also offer internet access. Rates are hourly and usually include free coffee, tea and other beverages. Some of the larger, 24-hour internet cafés and *manga-kissa* offer showers, private rooms and discount all-night packages that rival the cheapest hotels. Those bringing a notebook computer can find wi-fi or LAN access in most business hotels.

to change colour. Prices tend to be 20% to 30% higher during this time, and many of the popular areas will be booked solid. Typhoons, though rare in Hokkaidō, start to hit Japan in mid-August and can continue through to the end of October, causing train delays, power outages and even landslides. September and October are chilly, particularly in the mountains, and by November winter has come, bringing heavy snows and very cold temperatures. Bring plenty of layers and plan on bundling up.

## National Parks

Hokkaidō boasts some of Japan's oldest and most beautiful national parks. Daisetsuzan National Park, centrally located near Asahikawa City, is a must see. This stunning expanse of mountain ranges, volcanoes, *onsen* (mineral hot-spring spa), lakes and hiking tracks is Japan's largest, covering 2309 sq km. Skiing and hiking are the main attractions; if you want to escape off the beaten track you should allow a few extra days.

Akan National Park, near Kushiro, has *onsen*, volcanoes and hiking. In spring thousands of cranes flock to Kushiro Shitsugen National Park, one of Japan's largest marshlands; deer, foxes, *shima-risu* (none other than the humble chipmunk!) and a host of birds are abundant. The northern islands of Rebun and Rishiri offer superb hiking and views of seaside cliffs, volcanic mountains and (in season) hillsides of flowers.

Shiretoko National Park, in the northeast, is as remote as it gets: two-thirds of it doesn't even have roads. Ponds as glassy as reflecting pools, rivers with brown bears munching salmon, waterfalls more delicate than rice-paper paintings – the scenery is stunning, but tourists are told quite plainly that if they



## AINU RENAISSANCE

Although Ainu culture was once pronounced dead, the past few decades have seen people of Ainu descent assert their ethnicity both politically and culturally.

In 1899 the Hokkaidō Former Natives Protection Act formalised decades of Meiji-era discrimination against the Ainu, denying them land ownership and giving the governor of Hokkaidō sole discretion over the management of communal Ainu funds. Thus the Ainu became dependent on the welfare of the Japanese state. Although this law had been amended over the years, many Ainu people objected to it, right down to its title, which used the word *kyūdo-jin* ('dirt' or 'earth' people) to describe them. It was once the standard among people of Ainu descent to hide their ethnicity out of fear of discrimination in housing, schools and employment; out of an estimated 100,000 Ainu only 25,000 acknowledged it publicly.

In the 1980s various Ainu groups called for the law's repeal, and in 1998 the Japanese government replaced the law with one that allocated government funds for Ainu research and the promotion of Ainu language and culture, as well as better education about Ainu traditions in state schools.

Shiraoi's **Poroto Kotan** (ポロトコタン; ☎ 0144-82-3914; www.ainu-museum.or.jp/english/english.html; admission ¥750; ☎ 8.45am-5pm, closed 29 Dec-5 Jan) is a lakeside village of reconstructed traditional Ainu buildings, anchored by the **Ainu Museum** (アイヌ民族博物館; Ainu Minzoku Hakubutsukan). Museum exhibits are labelled in both Japanese and English, and in the village you might catch demonstrations of Ainu crafts and cultural performances.

In the village of Nibutani, in the northern part of Biratori, **Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum** (二風谷アイヌ文化博物館; ☎ 01457-2-2892; www.ainu-museum-nibutani.org in Japanese; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-5pm mid-Apr–mid-Nov, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun mid-Nov–mid-Apr, closed mid-Dec–mid-Jan) has arguably better collections more attractively displayed, although most information is in Japanese only. Visitors could easily spend half a day watching documentary videos about Ainu folk crafts, traditional dances, epic songs and traditional ceremonies. Other highlights include a loom for weaving traditional tree-bark cloth and some enormous canoes hewn from entire tree trunks.

Across Nibutani's main street, amid some traditional huts, the **Kayano Shigeru Ainu Memorial Museum** (萱野茂二風谷アイヌ資料館; ☎ 01457-2-3215; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov, 9am-4.30pm Dec-Mar) houses the private collection of Kayano Shigeru, the first person of Ainu descent to be elected to the Japanese Diet. Call ahead from December to March, as hours can be irregular. A combined ticket for both Nibutani museums costs ¥700.

Shiraoi can be reached via several bus or train connections daily from Sapporo or Noboribetsu. Unfortunately, access to Nibutani is a trial without one's own transport – check with the museums or tourist offices for current information on transport links.

Other useful sources of information include the **Foundation for the Research & Promotion of Ainu Culture** (アイヌ文化振興研究推進機構; ☎ 011-271-4171; www.frpac.or.jp/eng/index.html) in Sapporo, the **Ainu Culture Centre** (アイヌ文化交流センター; ☎ 03-3245-9831) in Tokyo and the **Ainu Association of Hokkaidō** (北海道ウタリ協会; ☎ 011-221-0462) in Sapporo.

venture into restricted areas they will be fined, eaten by Higuma bears...or both.

## Getting There & Away

Sapporo is the main hub of all Hokkaidō traffic, though Hakodate and other smaller cities also offer direct flights to many of Japan's larger cities. Be sure to check internet deals or discount ticket agencies for substantial discounts. If you are coming from mainland Honshū, consider taking a Hokutosei Express night train (¥25270) to save time and the cost

of a hotel stay. The *shinkansen* (bullet train) does not offer a service direct to Hokkaidō; take it as far as Aomori, then take the *tokkyū* (limited express) from there. Trips from Tokyo will take about 10 hours and require two train changes. A similar but much more expensive option is the *Cassiopeia* sleeper train (from ¥32,320).

For those without Japan Rail (JR) Passes, ferries are a low-cost alternative, anywhere between ¥5000 and ¥10,000. They arrive at Hakodate, Otaru, Muroran and Tomakomai

– all relatively close to Sapporo. Ferries are often fancy; some include saunas and gyms. The cheap 2nd-class tickets offer sleeping on open-area mats. Berths in a shared 2nd-class cabin cost about ¥2000 more and may be more relaxing. Though theft is unlikely, you should watch your valuables.

## FERRY TO/FROM RUSSIA

For those heading to Japan's most northern city, Wakkanai, a ferry trip to Korsakov, Russia, is an interesting option. Regular services run from early May to mid-September; there are less frequent runs the rest of the year. Most Japanese tourists go with a tour group, but if you plan ahead you can make the trip on your own. Visit [www.embassy-avenue.jp](http://www.embassy-avenue.jp) for specific details; a Russian visa requires an invitation letter from a Sakhalin tourist agency or hotel, and you must apply at least two weeks in advance (it may be faster, but give yourself two) at the **Consulate General of the Russian Federation** (在札幌ロシア連邦総領事館; ☎ 064-0914, Japan 011-561-3171; Nishi 12-chōme Minami 14-jo, Chūō-ku, Sapporo; ☎ Mon-Fri) in Sapporo. The **Japan Eurasia Association** (日本ユーラシア協会北海道連合会; ☎ 011-707-0933; <http://homepage2.nifty.com/eurasia-doren/> in Japanese) can assist with arrangements for Japan residents. **Falcon Japan Co Ltd** (株式会社ロシア旅行社; ☎ 011-207-3370; www.falconjapan.co.jp in Japanese) is a good start for those interested in going with a group.

The **East Japan Sea Ferry Company** (東日本海フェリー; ☎ Wakkanai 0162-23-3780, Sapporo 011-518-2780; www.kaiferry.co.jp/english/index.html) runs ships and has several office locations around

Hokkaidō, including one in Sapporo. Ferries take around 5½ hours and cost ¥22,500 to ¥32,500. Return fares begin at ¥35,000, and if you're short on yen you can also pay in US dollars.

## Getting Around

In Hokkaidō distances can be deceiving. The website [www.hyperdia.com](http://www.hyperdia.com) has a schedule calculator that lists up-to-date options and prices for getting around.

Sapporo has flights to all major Hokkaidō locations, but rail, car or motorcycle are preferred. Trains run frequently on the trunk lines, but reaching remote locations (like Nemuro) involves infrequent trains and pricey buses. The foreigner-only Hokkaidō Rail Pass is also available: a four-day pass costs ¥14,500.

Within cities, buses are convenient and usually cheap. Ask about a *norihō dai* (all day) pass if you're going to use them a lot; it's often a substantial discount.

If you have brought an International Driving Permit (you must get it from your home country prior to arrival in Japan), renting a car or motorcycle may save time. Local roads are often just as pretty as expressways and may yield unforeseen surprises. Car-rental rates vary, but if you walk in off the street expect to pay about ¥7000 per day, plus your first-born child for fuel.

For fans of greener ways to get around, Hokkaidō is a good place to tour by bike. *Charida* (bicycle riders) are a common sight on major roads. Rider houses (see p787) are common and cheap.

## SEIKAN TUNNEL TOUR 青函トンネルツアー

You can tour Japan's longest tunnel at either the Yoshioka-kaitei (Hokkaidō) or Tappi-kaitei (Honshū) stations. More than 100m below sea level, you'll wind through a maze of service corridors and passageways – staff use bicycles and even cars to make their rounds. Longer tours include some of the tunnel's unique features, such as a 600m-long cable-car link to the shore of Honshū and a narrow passageway between the railway tracks that gives visitors a worm's eye view of the passing trains.

You must reserve your tunnel tour at least one day in advance from travel agencies or Japan Railways (JR) reservation centres in either Aomori (Honshū) or Hakodate (Hokkaidō). Only a few trains a day in either direction allow actual through-train/tour combinations. If you already have paid your train fare or have a rail pass, the standard Yoshioka-kaitei or Tappi-kaitei station tour (in Japanese only) costs ¥840 extra; tours last from one to 2½ hours, depending on train schedules. For ¥2040 you can take the tour that continues from Tappi-kaitei station, via the cable car formerly used by construction workers, up to the Seikan Tunnel Museum on dry land. Return-trip tours from Aomori (¥4320) and Hakodate (¥4040) include the museum.

## SAPPORO 札幌

☎ 011 / pop 1.88 million

Japan's fifth-largest city, and also one of its newest, Sapporo is clean, friendly and relaxed, with numerous parks and wide, tree-lined streets. Families play on stone sculptures, people feed pigeons and there are festivals all year round. Museums and a wonderful botanical garden make for fun-filled sightseeing. The variety of shopping arcades, restaurants and nightlife in Susukino gives visitors and residents plenty to do.

### History

This bustling metropolis was once nothing but a quiet hunting and fishing town in the Ishikari Plain of Hokkaidō, settled by the Ainu. They were left alone until 1821, when the Tokugawa Shōgunate created an official trading post in what would eventually become Sapporo. The city was declared the capital of Hokkaidō in 1868, and – unlike much of mainland Japan – its growth was carefully planned. In 1880 Japan's third major railway was constructed, which linked Sapporo and the port city of Otaru.

In the 20th century Sapporo emerged as a major producer of agricultural products. Sapporo Beer (see p576), the country's first, was founded in 1876 and quickly became synonymous with the city itself. In 1972 Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics, and it continues to attract visitors from around the world.

In addition to beer, Sapporo is also famous for its particular style of *rāmen* noodles, which rank among the best.

### Orientation

Sapporo, laid out in a Western-style grid pattern, is relatively easy to navigate. Blocks are labelled East, West, North and South in relation to a central point near the TV Tower in the city centre. For example, the famous landmark Tokei-dai (Clock Tower) is in the block of North 1, West 2 (Kita Ichi-jo, Nishi Ni-chōme) – N1W1. Ōdōri-kōen, a narrow grass-covered section ending at the TV Tower, is a major city feature, dividing the city east–west, into north–south halves. South of Ōdōri is the downtown shopping district with shops and arcades. Susukino, the club and entertainment district, is located mainly between the South 2 and South 6 blocks.

### Information BOOKSHOPS

**Kinokuniya** (☎ 231-2131; 5-7 Kita-Gojō-nishi, Chūō-ku) A stone's throw from the south exit of JR Sapporo station. Look to the right as you leave; it's across the street. Foreign books are on the 2nd floor.

**Sapporo Municipal Central Library** (札幌中央図書館; ☎ 512-7320; www.city.sapporo.jp/tosyokan/ht/english.html; S22W13 Chūō-ku; ☎ 9.15am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9.15am-5pm Sat & Sun, closed every 2nd & 4th Wed) Has several thousand English-language titles as well as newspapers and magazines. Take the Chūō-Toshokan-mae tram stop.

**Tower Records** (☎ 241-3851; 7-8F Pibō Bldg, S2W4 Chūō-ku; ☎ 10am-8pm) In the Pivo building. A good resource for English CDs, DVDs and other digital entertainment. Closed irregularly.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Comic Land** (☎ 200-3003; 2F Hinode Bldg, S1W4 Chūō-ku; per 9hr ¥2000; ☎ 24hr) Has showers and offers fixed fees as well as hourly rates.

**i-café** (☎ 221-3440; http://sapporochi-i.cafe.ne.jp; N5W5 Gochōme 2-12, Chūō-ku; ☎ 24hr) Next to the station, with free food (rice porridge, miso soup, ice cream) in addition to the usual coffee/drinks. Heading south, look to the right side, near Kinokuniya bookshop.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

Dial ☎ 119 for a medical emergency. JR Sapporo and Sapporo City hospitals require that non-emergency patients arrive before noon.

**JR Sapporo Railway Hospital** (JR 札幌鉄道病院; ☎ 241-4971; N3E1 Chūō-ku) Closest to JR Sapporo station, but no emergency room.

**Medical Plaza Sapporo** (☎ 209-5410; N5W2 Chūō-ku) Conveniently located on the 7th and 8th floors of the JR Tower in JR Sapporo station. Open until 7pm.

**Sapporo City General Hospital** (市立札幌病院; ☎ 726-2211; N11W13 1-1 Chūō-ku) Offers 24-hour emergency care as well as the usual gamut of health services.

### MONEY

ATMs on the street do not accept non-Japanese issued cards, so the best place to get money is at the Postal ATMs; even the smaller post office branches have these now, and there is even an English 'Visitor Withdrawal' option to make getting yen even easier.

### POST

**Sapporo Chūō Post Office** (☎ 748-2313; N6E1-2-1 Higashi-ku) This branch is located just east of Sapporo JR station. Take the north exit, turn right, walk towards the giant white bowling pin and the building is right across

the first major intersection. Like many larger post offices, it is open evenings and weekends and offers a variety of services. The ATMs stay open longer than the window.

**Sapporo Ōdōri Post Office** (☎ 221-4280; 2-9 Ōdōri-nishi, Chūō-ku)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Several tourist offices offer excellent English brochures and the friendly staff can be relied on for more detailed help. Information can be found at www.welcome.city.sapporo.jp/english/index.html or email convention@plaza-sapporo.or.jp.

**Sapporo International Communication Plaza Foundation** (☎ 211-3678, 211-3670; www.plaza-sapporo.or.jp/english/index\_e.html; 1F MN Bldg, N1W3 Chūō-ku; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) Has an extensive list of English resources, just opposite the Clock Tower (Tokei-dai).

**Sapporo Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 213-5088; N6W4 Chūō-ku, JR Sapporo station Nishi-dōri Kita-guchi; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Located on the 1st floor of Sapporo Stellar Place, inside JR Sapporo station. Offers assistance with housing as well as other tourist-related info, along with a host of brochures. The English desk closes at 5.30pm, but other staff can help and many speak excellent English.

### Sights

**HOKUDAI SHOKUBUTSUEN** 北大植物園  
Though damaged by a typhoon in 2004, the **Hokudai Shokubutsuen** (☎ 221-0066; N3W8 Chūō-ku; adult ¥400; ☎ 9am-4.30pm 29 Apr-30 Sep, 9am-3.30pm 1 Oct-3 Nov) is one of Sapporo's must sees. This beautiful botanical garden and museum boasts over 4000 varieties of plants, all attractively set on a meandering 14-hectare plot. In addition to the outdoor sights, the Hokudai has two smaller museums: one of local animals (it claims to be the country's oldest, created in 1882) and another of Ainu culture and artefacts, such as tools and clothing. In winter the gardens aren't impressive; head to the greenhouse's hothouse flowers instead.

Across the street, the **Ainu Association of Hokkaidō** (団法人北海道ウタリ協会; ☎ 221-0462; 7F Kaderu 2.7 Community Centre, N2W7 Chūō-ku; www.ainu-assn.or.jp; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) has an office and a display room of robes, tools and historical information.

### CLOCK TOWER 市時計台

A famous Sapporo landmark, the **Clock Tower** (Tokei-dai; ☎ 231-0838; www15.ocn.ne.jp/~tokeidai/english.html; N1W2 Chūō-ku; admission ¥200; ☎ 8.45am-5.10pm Tue-Sun Nov-May, closed 4th Sat Jun-Oct) is about a 10-minute walk from the JR Sapporo sta-

tion or a three-minute walk from Ōdōri station. Enter by 5pm. Visitors can look at some clocks and get a brief history of the building, which was built in 1878 and (supposedly) has never missed tolling the hour for 120 years. It's also known as one of Japan's top three *gakkari* (disappointing) spots, mainly because the brochure photos often remove the urban metropolis that dwarfs the small building. You might walk right by before realising it's right in front of you.

### SAPPORO TV TOWER さっぽろテレビ塔

There's no way you'd overlook the Eiffel Tower-shaped affair at the east of Ōdōri-kōen: the **TV Tower** (☎ 241-1131; www.tv-tower.co.jp/index\_e.html; Ōdōri-nishi 1-chōme, Chūō-ku; admission ¥700; ☎ 9.30am-10pm Apr, 9am-10pm May-Oct, 9.30am-9.30pm Nov-Mar) is 90m high. It has a 360-degree view of the city and souvenir shops below. The city hall's **viewing deck** (Kita 1-jo Nishi 2-chōme, Chūō-ku; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri May-Nov) is free. It's just northwest of the TV Tower, on the 19th floor.

### HOKKAIDŌ UNIVERSITY 北海道大学

Established in 1876, **Hokkaidō University** (北海道大学総合博物館; ☎ 706-2658; www.museum.hokudai.ac.jp/index-e.html; N10W8 Chūō-ku; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun Jun-Oct, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Nov-May) is a scenic place to meander and has a number of unique buildings within its grounds. The bust of William S Clark is a landmark, as are the Poplar and Gingko Aves. (Caution: the odoriferous gingko nuts sometimes cause an itchy rash; it's best not to handle them.) Elms and oaks are also common. Many of the tallest and oldest trees on campus were damaged in 2004 by a severe typhoon. The Furukawa Memorial Hall and the Seikatei are architecturally noteworthy. Several campus museums are open to the public.

### NIJŌ FISH MARKET 二条市場

Buy a bowl of rice and select your own sashimi toppings, gawk at the fresh delicacies (some more delicate than others!) or sit down at a shop in **Nijō Fish Market** (S3E1&2 Chūō-ku; ☎ 7am-6pm, individual shops may close at various times), one of Hokkaidō's best. Get there early for the freshest selections and the most variety; things close up by 6pm and individual restaurants have their own hours. Sea urchin and salmon roe are favourites; as is Hokkaidō's version of 'Mother and Child' (Oyakodon), a bowl of rice topped with salmon and roe.



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## SAPPORO WINTER SPORTS MUSEUM

札幌ウィンタースポーツミュージアム  
As well as a variety of other activities, this museum (☎ 631-2000; 1274 Miyano-mori Chūō-ku; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) includes the actual ski jump used in the 1972 Olympic Games. Those wishing to ascend the jump can either walk or use the chairlift. Inside, a computerised ski-jump simulator allows you to try your skills without risking a broken leg.

## MOIWA-YAMA ROPEWAY

藻岩ロープウェイ  
Panoramic views of Sapporo can be had from the ropeway (cable car ☎ 561-8177; www.sapporo-dc.co.jp/eng/; ☎ 10.30am-9.30pm 9 Apr-May & 1 Oct-19 Nov, 10.30am-10pm Jun-Sep, 11am-8pm 10 Dec-Mar, closed 1-8 Apr), especially at night. The ropeway may be closed due to high winds and has shorter hours on 31 December (11am to 3pm) and 1 January (5am to noon). Be sure to ask for the coupon when you take the tram: there's a ¥200 discount if the conductor stamps your ticket.

## OTHER MUSEUMS &amp; TEMPLES

Hokkaidō Jingu (北海道神宮; ☎ 611-0261; www.hokkaidojingu.or.jp) is near Maruyama-kōen, nes-

tled in a forest so dense it's easy to forget that the city is just beyond the temple's grounds. Attention has been paid to labelling the natural surroundings: a large plaque lists a number of local birds and the largest trees have identification signs. To the right of the temple, near the toilets, you'll find a small souvenir shop that serves free *ocha* (green tea) and sweets. Purchasing postcards or a confection is not required.

The Hokkaidō Museum of Literature (北海道立文学館; ☎ 511-7655; Nakashima-kōen 1-4 Chūō-ku; admission ¥250; ☎ Tue-Sun, closed 29 Dec-3 Jan) offers viewers the opportunity to see the private side of many of Japan's famous novelists, primarily those with a Hokkaidō connection. Letters, memorabilia, books and short films all help viewers understand why these writers have earned a place in the canon of Japanese literature. English signage is limited.

Half aquarium, half museum, the interesting Salmon Museum (豊平さけ科学館; ☎ 582-7555; 2-1 Makomanai-kōen; www.sapporo-park.or.jp/sake/english/e\_index.html; admission free; ☎ 9.15am-4.45pm Tue-Sun, closed 29 Dec-3 Jan) is a tribute to one of the world's most delicious fish. It's located across the street from the Sapporo Winter

Sports Museum. Check out over 20 different species of salmon in varying stages of development. Salamanders, turtles and frogs are on display as well. Great place to go with kids.

The **Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art** (北海道立近代美術館; ☎ 644-6881; N1W17 Chūō-ku; adult/student ¥450/220; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) has a comprehensive collection of modern works by primarily Japanese artists. Special exhibitions feature a variety of foreign and native artists. Enter by 4.30pm.

## Activities

### JŌZANKEI ONSEN 定山溪温泉

The Jōzankei area southwest of Sapporo proper has a number of famous *onsen* and hotels, though it's famous mainly because it's conveniently close to Sapporo. The **Jōzankei Grand Hotel** (定山溪グランドホテル; ☎ 598-2214) and **Jōzankei Hot Spring** (定山溪温泉; ☎ 598-2012) are very popular. The area also has several 'foot *onsen*' (*ashiyu*) where you can soak your tired feet. To get there, take the Jōzankei-bound Donan or Jōtetsu Bus and get

off at the Jōzankei stop. It's approximately an hour from JR Sapporo station.

Lesser known but more atmospheric is **Koganeyu Onsen** (小金湯温泉). It's also on the Jōzankei bus route; come here to soak in hot, sulphurous waters and *onsen*-steamed vegetables. Some places still have facilities where you can cook your own. Get off at the Koganeyu Onsen stop, about 55 minutes from JR Sapporo station.

## WINTER SPORTS

Skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing can all be done near Sapporo. The closest place is Teine, 10 minutes' train ride away. Try **Teine Highland** (サッポロテイネ; ☎ 681-3191; www.sapporo-teine.com; day pass ¥4550; ☎ 9am-4pm) or **Sapporo KOKUSAI Skiing Resort** (札幌国際スキー場; ☎ 598-4511; www.sapporo-kokusai.co.jp/ski2006/e/index\_e.html; day pass ¥4600; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm). Mainly popular for their proximity to Sapporo, the runs at these places are packed with people, but they're a great getaway.

Sapporo KOKUSAI has five lifts, powder snow and is mainly suitable for beginner and

intermediate snowboarders and skiers. It's very, very crowded, especially on the weekends, but has more of a family vibe than Niseko or Furano.

Teine has 14 lifts and is even more geared towards beginners than KOKUSAI. It's the place to ski if you're wanting to play around for a while; it's probably a disappointment for hard-core skiers, but is good for families with children. As with other skiing resorts, all equipment can be rented when you arrive.

Intermediate to advanced skiers will want to check out Niseko (p589) or Rusutsu (p591) instead.

## Festivals & Events

**Sapporo Yuki Matsuri** (さっぽろ雪まつり; Snow Festival) Come here in early February for fantastic ice sculptures that take weeks to make. They depict historical figures, buildings, celebs and even international pop icons like Hello Kitty or Harry Potter. View them in Ōdōri-kōen and other locations around the city and enjoy food, concerts, karaoke and dancing. Finding reasonably priced accommodation can be extremely difficult, so book as far in advance as possible.

**Ōdōri Nōryō Garden** (大通納涼ガーデン) The summer beer festival (mid-July to mid-August) is held in Ōdōri Kōen. Sapporo, Asahi and microbrewers set up outdoor beer gardens, offering a variety of beers and other beverages, as well as food and snacks.

**Hokkai Bonodori** (北海道盆踊り) Families welcome back the spirits of the dead in mid-August. The festival provides viewers with glimpses of traditional songs, dances and summer *yukata* (light, cotton kimonos). Although there are other, more splendid summer festivals in other parts of Japan, this is the largest Hokkaidō has to offer and is well worth a look if you're in town.

## Sleeping

If you're just looking for a place to crash in an emergency, the cyber-café (see p572) are open 24 hours and are often cheaper than even the cheapest of hotels. Try Comic Land (p572). Love hotels in Susukino are another colourful (often zany!) option, and are as clean as (or cleaner than!) many non-love hotels. Check in after 11pm for the cheapest deals.

## BUDGET

**Our pick** **Sapporo International Youth Hostel** (札幌国際ユースホステル; ☎ 825-3120; www.youthhostel.or.jp/kokusai/in Japanese; 6-5-35 Toyohira-ku; dm ¥3200, r per person ¥3800; ☎) A 10-minute subway ride, but nicer and newer than many business hotels. Located in a brand-new facility just behind the

Gakuen-mae station, it is immaculately clean, has inexpensive dial-up internet access, a relaxing Japanese-style bath as well as Western showers, and even those fancy wash-rinse-dry computerised toilet seats. Note: unmarried male/female couples are not allowed to share a private room. The Japanese-language website has a reservation form in English.

**Sapporo House Youth Hostel** (☎ 726-4235; yh-sappo@crocus.ocn.ne.jp; N6W6-3-1 Kita-ku; dm ¥2940; ☎) More conveniently located than the International hostel, this is only a 10-minute walk from JR Sapporo station, but definitely not such a good deal. Older and very close to the noisy train tracks, it offers a choice of Western- and Japanese-style rooms.

**Kapuseru (Capsule) Inn Sapporo** (☎ 251-5571; http://capsule.side.com in Japanese; S3W3-7 Chūō-ku; per person ¥3200) For men only. Includes a berth with all the usual amenities, plus a sauna, large bathroom, coin laundry and even a 'book corner' with reclining chairs. A stone's throw from the Susukino station on the Nanboku line. Take Exit 1 and go to KFC (on the corner to the right). Turn right on the side street and Kapuseru Sapporo is on the left, about halfway down. A 6am to 6pm 'rest' is also an option (¥1200).

**Ino's Place** (イノーズプレイス; ☎ 832-1828; http://inos-place.com/e; dm from ¥3400; ☎) Come here for no curfew, private rooms and friendly, English-speaking staff. Western-style facilities and internet access (¥10 per minute) make it easy to feel at home. Take the Tōzai line to the Shiroishi stop (four past Ōdōri) and from there it's about a seven-minute walk. Free coffee and tea; breakfast is available for an additional charge. Dorm prices are increased by ¥200 in winter for heating.

## MIDRANGE

**Tōyoko Inn Sapporo Eki Kita Guchi** (☎ 728-1045; www.toyoko-inn.com/eng; N6W1-4-3 Kita-ku; s/d/tw Nov-May ¥4800/6800/6800, Jun-Oct ¥6800/8800/8800; ☎ ☎ ☎) A chain, yeah, but a simple Japanese-style breakfast is served along with coffee and tea, and the lobbies have free telephones and wi-fi. Five Tōyokos grace the JR station environs.

**Hotel Sapporo Met's** (ホテル サッポロメッツ; ☎ 726-5511; www.hotelmetts.co.jp/index.html in Japanese; N17W5-20 Kita-ku; s/tw ¥7140/10,500; ☎) One of the few places to offer reasonably priced rooms with kitchenettes and washing machines in each room. Although the website's English is hard to understand in places,

## SAPPORO BEER

Let's face it: 'Sapporo' means beer. After visiting Germany (and being favourably impressed) Kihachirō Ōkura returned and selected Sapporo as the lucky place to start what would become Japan's first beer brewery, founded in 1876.

A museum and beer garden, **Sapporo Beer-En** (サッポロビール園; ☎ museum 731-4368, beer garden 0120-15-0550; N7E9 Higashi-ku; ☎ beer garden 11.30am-10pm, tours 9am-3.40pm) is located in the original Sapporo Beer brewery, almost due east of JR Sapporo station. Two tour options are possible: visitors on the short tour (30 minutes) get a carry-home goody bag with a can of beer per person and other miscellaneous items; those wanting to belly up to the trough should take the 50-minute option, which includes a tasting (per beer ¥200). The adjoining beer garden has a variety of beverages and food, serving the local grilled lamb speciality, *jingus kân*, which has become a popular Sapporo dish.

To get here by subway take the Tōhō subway to the Higashi-Kuyakusho-mae stop and take Exit 4. Head south along Higashi-Nana-Chōme-dōri to N8E8 (about 10 minutes) and look to the left. The large brick chimney with the distinct Sapporo trademark star is unmistakable. The building itself is at N7E9. By bus, take the Chūō Bus Higashi 63 and get off at the Kitahachi Higashinana (N8E7) stop. The building will be right in front of you.

Diehard fans will want to take the 40-minute train ride out to the current brewing and bottling facility, **Hokkaidō Brewery** (サッポロビール北海道工場; ☎ 0123-32-5811; hokkaido@sapporobeer.jp; Toiso 542-1 Eniwa-shi). This mammoth production plant seems more like something out of a James Bond movie than a place where beer is made: technicians in white lab coats peer into test tubes; immaculate stainless-steel tanks are covered with computerised gauges and dials; and video cameras monitor the bottles as they whizz by. The tour is self-guided and English is minimal, but you'll be rewarded with a refreshing 20 minutes to tinkle at the end.

Take the JR Chitose line towards the airport and get off at the Sapporo Beer Teien station. Head away from the tracks towards the giant white silos with the Sapporo logo; the entrance is a 10-minute walk away.

reserving over the internet saves an additional ¥1000. Take the Nanboku line north to Kita 18-Jo station; the hotel is a minute's walk westward, across from the Hotel Sapporo-Kaikan. Offers free breakfast.

**our pick Nakamura Ryokan** (☎ 241-2111; www.nakamura-ya.com/english.html; N3W7-1 Chūō-ku; r per person high season from ¥7875, low season ¥7350) Attractive tatami rooms and delicious meals. Located directly across from the botanical garden, this is a pleasant place to enjoy the flavours of Hokkaidō, and large baths offer a relaxing way to soothe away the day's travel stress.

**Marks Inn Sapporo** (☎ 512-5001; www.marks-inn.com/sapporo/english.html; S8W3 Chūō-ku; s/d from ¥5000/7000; ☑) Another business hotel that offers a simple breakfast and the usual 'cosy' rooms. A Marks Inn discount card allows the holder to get an additional 15% off; it costs ¥1000 and can be bought when you check in.

**Hotel Sunlight Sapporo** (☎ 562-3111; www.sunlight-sapporo.com in Japanese; S8W3-1-4 Chūō-ku; s/tw from ¥6000/11,000; ☑ ☑) Offers a late-night (after 11pm) check-in of ¥3000 for a single; rooms have to be booked after 11am that day. Parking is from ¥1000 for small cars, from ¥1600 for large vehicles.

Alternative Tōyoko options if the one near the station is full:

**Tōyoko Inn Sapporo-eki Nishi Guchi Hokudai-Mae** (☎ 717-1045; N8W4 Chūō-ku; ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑)

**Tōyoko Inn Sapporo-eki Minami Guchi** (☎ 222-1045; N3W1 Chūō-ku; ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑)

## TOP END

**Hotel Sapporo Garden Palace** (☎ 261-5311; www.hotelgp-sapporo.com in Japanese; N1W6 Chūō-ku; s/d/ste low season ¥7738/17,094/28,182, high season ¥9817/20,790/34,650; ☑ ☑ ☑) A beautiful hotel, convenient for anyone wanting to sightsee downtown or visit the Yuki Matsuri in February, and relatively affordable. The magnificent lobby and attentive staff make checking in a pleasure. Rooms are well appointed; both Japanese and Western styles are available.

**Art Hotels Sapporo** (☎ 511-0101; www.arthotels.co.jp/sapporo.htm in Japanese; S9W2-2-10 Chūō-ku; s/tw/ste low season ¥10,972/17,325/27,050, high season ¥15,015/23,100/27,050; ☑ ☑) If you can get someone to navigate through the Japanese website, try to do your reservation online: you'll get a buffet-style breakfast with both Japanese and Western options. The *onsen* here seems more like something out of a Roman gala, and a number of in-house restaurant options make

it easy to find something you like. The less expensive rooms seem a bit small for the price; if spaciousness is important, go for the larger suites where you'll have some leg room.

**Keio Plaza Hotel Sapporo** (☎ 271-0111; www.keio-plaza-sapporo.co.jp/english/index2.html; N5W7 Chūō-ku; s/d from ¥8500/14,000; ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑) Deluxe, stylish option with a full-sized swimming pool, sauna and athletic training room. Some of the rooms have a 'bath with a view' of the city. Note, when you ask for a nonsmoking room: while it does have a limited number reserved for real nonsmokers, it also feels that an air-cleaner is almost the same thing.

## Eating

**Rāmen Yokochō** (☎ 11-3am) This famous alleyway is crammed with 16 *rāmen* noodle shops in Susukino centre (hours vary from shop to shop). Anyone with a yen for *rāmen* shouldn't miss it, but it can be difficult to find. Take the Nanboku line to Susukino and walk south to the first crossroad. Turn left (east); Rāmen Yokochō is halfway down on the right. Note: there is now a Shin (New) Rāmen Yokochō in the same general vicinity. Either will be fine for a tasty meal, and if you can't find it just ask – it's one place people *will* know. Hours and holidays vary for different shops.

**Esta** (☎ 7am-9pm) A giant food court under JR Sapporo station; one major path to the subway leads right through it. The variety, from *yakitori* (chargrilled skewered meat, usually chicken) and fish cakes to sandwiches, even overwhelming. Listen for the singsong 'Ikagadeshou~~ka?' (Take a look?) and you'll know you've arrived.

**Kushidori** (☎ 758-2989; www.sapnet.ne.jp/kusidori in Japanese; N7W4-8-3, Kita-ku; skewers ¥130-250, beers ¥500; ☎ 4.30pm-12.30am) A Sapporo-only chain serving a variety of *yakitori* and grilled vegetables. The place is usually packed with boisterous college kids and 20-somethings. Try the *tsukune* (chicken sausage) or the *okura* (okra).

**Shōjin Restaurant Yō** (精進 業; ☎ 562-7020; http://shoujin.com/index.html in Japanese; S17W7-2-12 Chūō-ku; dishes ¥1000-3000; ☎ 11.30am-4.30pm Mon & Tue, 11.30am-8pm Thu-Sun; E) Macrobiotic, organic and vegan fare that's attractively presented and very tasty. The shop is beautifully done with brown paper lanterns, a sushi-style bar and Zen-style flower arrangements. To get there, take the Nanboku line and get off at Horohirabashi. Go left out of the station and

veer right at the first traffic signal. The road curves, passing a park (on the right). Go straight through the next signal and turn left when you hit the next one (at the tram line). The restaurant is a few doors down on the right. The small sign is easy to miss.

**Nijō Fish Market** (S2E1 Chūō-ku; ☎ 7am-6pm) One of the best places for inexpensive sushi and sashimi, some so fresh it's still twitching. Hours vary from shop to shop. For more information, see p573.

**Sapporo Beer-En** (サッポロビール園; ☎ 742-0505; N7E9 Higashi-ku; mains from ¥1500; E) See the boxed text on p576 for more information. Many come to try the Hokkaidō speciality *jingus kani* (grilled lamb in sauce).

**Ebi-kani Gassen** (☎ 210-0411; 12F F45 Bldg, S4W5 Chūō-ku; all-you-can-eat ¥3500-5000; ☎ 4pm-midnight) Most people come here for crab, one of Hokkaidō's best-known specialities, but the restaurant serves other items as well. Try to sit by a window if you get the chance, to enjoy the view.

**Ambrosia** (☎ 271-3279; www.keioplaza-sapporo.co.jp/english/restandb/ambrosia.html; N5W7 Chūō-ku; lunch/dinner from ¥2500/7000; E) Fancy and delicious, this pricey option in the Keio Plaza Hotel offers a 22nd-floor view of the city and is a stylish way to celebrate something special. Not quite the fare you'd find in France, but it's attractively served and flavourful. Ask about the nightly specials and suggested wines.

**Soup Curry Kōbō Hirihiri-dō** (☎ 643-1710; 2-27 5 chōme Kotoni Nijō Nishi-ku; soups from ¥880; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) On the opposite end of the scale, this casual but clean place has fiery curry soup, in a variety of spices and options.

## Drinking

If you're just looking for a beer or two, an *iza-kaya* (Japanese pub) in the M's Space (M'sスペース) building near Tanuki-kōji might fit the bill. It has a variety of small cafés and bars and is a good place to begin a night on the town. The places below are all within easy stumbling distance of the Susukino subway station, but there are literally hundreds of bars and clubs throughout the city.

**500 Bar** (☎ 562-2556; 1F Hoshi Bldg, S4W2 Chūō-ku; ☎ 6pm-5am Mon-Sat, 6pm-2am Sun & holidays) Usually packed even on weekdays with a mix of foreign and local clientele. Every drink on the menu is ¥500, hence the name (pronounced 'gohyakubaa'), and you can order food as well. This is one of the franchise's several locations

in Sapporo, right across the street from the Susukino subway station's Nanboku line.

**Bules Alley** (☎ 231-6166; B1F Miyako Bldg, S3W3 Chūō-ku; ☎ 7pm-6am) A night here can be hit or miss depending on what's happening elsewhere, but it's a good place to relax and perhaps play a game or two on the full-sized pool table. Whiskey shots start at ¥700, beers at ¥600.

## Entertainment

Susukino is the place to go for clubs and dancing. Cover charges vary substantially from spot to spot and night to night, depending on who's playing where and when. On a Friday or Saturday, be prepared to spend at least ¥1000 to as much as ¥5000, which often includes a drink.

**King Xmhu** (☎ 531-1388; www.king-xmhu.com in Japanese; S7W4-424-10 Chūō-ku) This mammoth institution is a Susukino landmark, known for its elaborate concrete facade (King Xmhu, one presumes) sculpted outside the entrance. Inside, revellers dance and drink on three floors of neon and strobe. Para-para (day-glo makeup and crazy outfits) is just the beginning.

**Night Stage SHU** (www.nightstage-shu.com; B1F S6W4 Chūō-ku; cover 'charm charge' male/female ¥4000/3500; ☎ from 8pm Mon-Sat) An Okama Bar (all-male dance review) that's about as extravagant as they come. Not just for the gay and lesbian crowd, SHU is 100% chorus line-style Japanese showbiz. A dinner and show set and an all-you-can-drink (three people or more only) discount are attractive options.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Sapporo is connected by direct flights to all major cities in Japan, and many carriers also offer add-ons that allow 'direct' access (you have to change at Narita to Haneda). Look for Asia-related travel agents in your home country for round-trip packages, some of which include hotel package deals.

Sapporo's main airport is **New Chitose Airport** (新千歳空港; Shin-Chitose Kōkū), about 40km south of the city. There's a smaller airport at Okadama, about 10km north of the city.

### BUS

Bus services also connect Sapporo with the rest of Hokkaidō. Cheaper than trains and, on some routes, time-competitive as well, buses are an attractive option. Sapporo Eki-mae is the main bus station, just southeast of JR

Sapporo station beneath Bic Camera and Esta. The Chūō bus station (southeast of JR Sapporo station) and Ōdōri bus centre are also departure spots.

Buses depart from Sapporo Eki-mae bus terminal several times a day for destinations all over Hokkaidō, including Wakkanai (¥5500, six hours), Asahikawa (¥2000, two hours), Muroran (¥2000, 2½ hours), Noboribetsu Onsen (¥1900, one hour and 54 minutes), Tōya-ko Onsen (¥2700, 2¾ hours), Niseko (¥2100, three hours) and Furano (¥2100, two hours and 51 minutes).

From the Chūō bus station there are a few departures a day to Obihiro (¥3670, four hours and 10 minutes) and Abashiri (¥6210, six hours and 10 minutes). Buses to Hakodate depart from both the Chūō bus station and Ōdōri bus centre (¥4680, five hours and five minutes). Discounted round-trip tickets are available for most routes.

## TRAIN

Trains are an easy and inexpensive way to get to or from JR Sapporo station, located just north of the city centre – most of the action is less than 10 minutes' walk away. Check [www.hyperdia.com](http://www.hyperdia.com) for English schedules and up-to-the-minute pricing.

The *Hokutosei Express*, a sleeper train (¥25,270, or ¥9450 with a JR Pass), is the most convenient. It takes 16 hours and runs direct between Tokyo and JR Sapporo station twice a day. The other option is to take a *shinkansen* to Hachinohe, then an express via Aomori (¥22,780, 10 hours).

Sapporo, a central hub, has frequent trains to almost anywhere else in Hokkaidō. If you're Hakodate-bound, a *tokkyū* (limited express) will get you there in 3½ hours (¥8590). Otaru, a popular port nearby, and Asahikawa (to the north) have frequent services.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORTS

New Chitose Airport is accessible from Sapporo by *kaisoku* (rapid) train (¥1040, 36 minutes) or bus (¥1000, 70 minutes). The airport has its own train station, car-rental counters and convenient bus services to various Hokkaidō destinations, including Shikotsu-ko, Tōya-ko Onsen, Noboribetsu Onsen and Niseko.

For Okadama airport, buses leave every 20 minutes or so from in front of the ANA ticket

offices, opposite JR Sapporo station (¥400, 30 minutes).

## BUS & TRAM

JR Sapporo station is the main terminus for local buses. From late April to early November, tourist buses loop through major sights and attractions between 9am and 5.30pm; a one-day pass costs ¥750, single trips are ¥200 (basic fee).

There is a single tram line that heads west from Ōdōri, turns south, then loops back to Susukino. It's convenient for a trip to Moiwayama, and the fare is a flat ¥170.

## SUBWAY

Sapporo's three subways are efficient. Fares start at ¥200, and one-day passes cost ¥800 (weekend only ¥500). There are also ¥1000 day passes that include the tram and buses as well. Or get a pay-in-advance 'With You' card (¥1100), which can be used on subways, buses, trams, Jōtetsu and Chūō buses; unlike the one-day passes, the 'With You' card does not expire at midnight.

# DŌ-NAN (SOUTHERN HOKKAIDŌ) 道南

## HAKODATE 函館

☎ 0138 / pop 293,000

Hour-glass shaped Hakodate, built on a strip of land between two harbours (Hakodate Harbour to the west and Tsugaru Channel to the east) is, for many, the gateway to Hokkaidō. Pinched in the middle and wider at each end, Hakodate was one of the first ports opened under the Kanagawa Treaty of 1854, and as such had a small foreign community. Much of that influence can still be seen in the Motomachi district, a hillside sprinkled with historic buildings and excellent views of the bay.

Spread out along the water's edge, the city is best accessed by its trams: most of the sights can be walked to from stops along the way. Buses, trams and trains leave the station regularly. Head west, towards Mt Hakodate (hakodate-yama; 344m) and the Motomachi district, to find most historical sites; Goryō-kaku, Japan's first Western-style fort, is to the east.

## Information

The English maps and information at the **Hakodate Tourist Information Centre** (Map p582; ☎ 23-5440;

☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar, closed 31 Dec & 1 Jan) inside Hakodate Station are a good starting place. The *Hakodate Guide Map* combined with street signs (many in English and Russian) should make it fairly simple to find what you're looking for. There is also an **information desk** (Map p582; ☎ 27-3333; 12-18 Motomachi; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) in Motomachikōen. Though not fancy, [www.city.hakodate.hokkaido.jp](http://www.city.hakodate.hokkaido.jp) has useful information as well.

The PABOTs building has an **i-cafe** (Map p581; ☎ 55-7771; ☎ 24hr) advertising 'comfortable time and space' and has great doughnuts and all-you-can-drink coffee and tea. From the station, take the 27Loop 107 (27ループ107) to Tēō PABOTs Mae and it's on the 2nd floor.

Clean but expensive internet can be found straight out from the station (keep going past WAKO, but before Lotteria) at **Hot Web cafe** (Map p582; ☎ 26-3591; [www.hotweb.or.jp/cafe/shop.html](http://www.hotweb.or.jp/cafe/shop.html); ☎ 10am-8pm, Wed-Mon; per 1hr incl 1 drink ¥400).

## Sights

If museums are your thing, be sure to ask about a multi-access pass (*kyōtsūken*) for discount entry to two, three or four museums.

## MOTOMACHI DISTRICT 元町

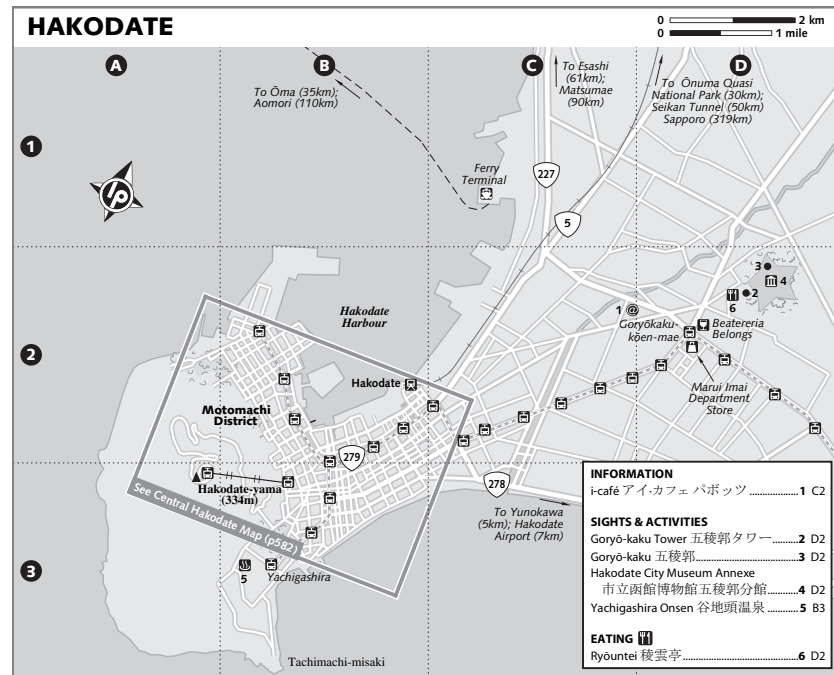
On Mt Hakodate's lower slopes, this area has many 19th-century sites and commanding views of the bay – if it's not foggy.

There's a beautiful old **Russian Greek Orthodox Church** (Greek Orthodox Church; Map p582; ☎ 23-7387; 3-13 Motomachi; admission ¥200; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, 1-4pm Sun), restored in 1916. Remove your shoes before you enter. It's closed in winter from about 26 December through to February (dates vary).

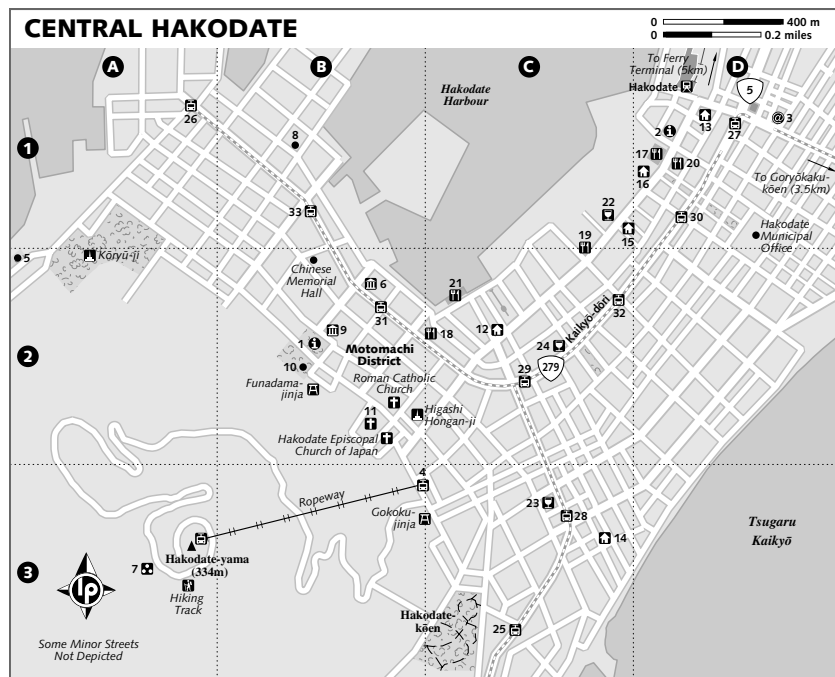
**Hakodate City Museum of Northern Peoples** (Map p582; ☎ 22-4128; 21-7 Suehiro-chō; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) is a good place to learn about the Ainu and their culture. English signs have been added to some exhibits.

**Old Public Hall of Hakodate Ward** (Map p582; ☎ 22-1001; 11-13 Motomachi; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) has a great view of the bay and the outgoing squid boats.

English-style tea-time at the **Old British Consulate** (Map p582; ☎ 27-8159; 33-14 Motomachi; admission ¥300, afternoon tea set ¥1050; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar; E) makes a relaxing afternoon that much more enjoyable. British souvenirs







INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Motomachi-kōen 元町公園	1 B2	Russian Greek Orthodox Church ハリスツス正教会	11 B2	Gagyū Lounge スカイラウンジ「ル・モン」	22 C1
Hakodate Tourist Information		Hakodate Harborview Hotel		Sabou Hishii 茶房ひし伊	23 C3
Centre 函館観光案内所	2 D1	函館ハーバービューホテル	13 D1	Yasai Bar Miruya やさいばーみるや	24 C2
Hot Web café ホットウェブカフェ	3 D1	Hakodate Youth Guesthouse 函館ユースゲストハウス	14 C3	TRANSPORT	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Asa-ichi 函館市北方民族資料館	6 B2	Aoyagi-chō 青柳町	25 C3
Asa-ichi (see 17)		Hakodateyama Yōsai 函館山要塞	7 A3	Hakodate Dokku-mae 函館どっく前	26 A1
Hakodate City Museum of Northern Peoples 函館市北方民族資料館	6 B2	Octopus (Squid Boat) Office オクトパス	8 B1	Hakodate Eki-mae 函館駅前	27 D1
Old British Consulate 旧イギリス領事館	9 B2	Old Public Hall of Hakodate Ward 旧函館区公会堂	10 B2	Horai-chō 宝来町	28 C3
				Jūjigai 十字街	29 C2
				Shiyakusho-mae 市役所前	30 D1
				Suehiro-chō 末広町	31 B2
				Uoichiba-dōri 魚市場通	32 C2
				Ōmachi 大町	33 B1

and postcards add to the nostalgia. Marmite, anyone?

There are several **Buddhist temples** here, but the **Foreigners' Cemetery** (Map p582) is more unusual, as it has the graves not only of well-known people of the time, but of sailors, clergy and others as well, all of whom unfortunately died far away from their homelands.

Many of the graves have English, Russian or French inscriptions, and it is an interesting slice of Japan's colonial history. The walk there is a sight in itself: running parallel to the edge of the bay, it affords some beautiful views of the water. At the docks there are some interesting fishing vessels, particularly the **squid boats**. Lantern-light attracts

the squid to the surface; there are few boats as picturesque.

To get to Motomachi, take tram 5 from the station and get off at the Suehirō-chō stop, then walk uphill for 10 minutes. Alternatively, get off at the end of the line and walk along the waterfront first, visit the cemeteries, then stop at the buildings as you walk uphill to Suehirō-chō.

### HAKODATE-YAMA 函館山

This small mountain (334m) offers a great view of the city, especially at night. A **cable car** (ropeway; Map p582; ☎ 23-6288; www.334.co.jp/en/index.html; one way/return ¥640/1160; ☹ 10am-10pm May-Oct, to 9pm Nov-Apr) whisks you to the top in a few minutes. Take tram 2 or 5 to the Jūjigai stop (¥200) and walk uphill to the ropeway platform (seven minutes). A summit-bound bus (¥360, 30 minutes) leaves directly from the station, is cheaper and stops at several viewing places as it winds to the top. Those wanting to rough it old-style can take the hiking track (from May to late October).

A 10-minute walk from the summit is Tsutsuji-yama carpark, a hot date spot at night, but relatively crowd free by day. At its far end there is an overgrown path that leads to moss-covered walls and buttresses, the ruins of an old fort, **Hakodateyama Yōsai** (Map p582). Unlike so many of Japan's historic sites, this one is refreshingly deserted and you can clamber around, Indiana Jones-style, among ferns with fronds the size of palm leaves.

### GORYŌ-KAKU 五稜郭

Japan's first Western-style **fort** (Map p581) was built in 1864 in the shape of a five-pointed star (*goryō-kaku* means 'five-sided fort') and was designed to trap attackers in deadly crossfire. Nothing remains of the actual fort structure, but the landscaped grounds and moat are picturesque, and one can actually climb around on them. The nearby **Hakodate City Museum Annex** (Map p581; ☎ 51-2548; 44-2 Goryōkumachi; admission ¥100; ☹ 9am-4.30pm Apr-Oct Tue-Sun, 9am-4pm Nov-Mar Tue-Sun) offers a taste of the fort's history, including weaponry and bloodstained uniforms (ugh!). **Goryō-kaku Tower** (Map p581; ☎ 51-4785; 43-9 Goryōkumachi; admission ¥840; ☹ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-6pm Nov & Mar, 9am-7pm Dec-Feb), recently rebuilt but to mixed reaction ('Looks like Big Brother', said a resident), provides an attractive view of the fort below and the surrounding city. To reach the fort, take tram 2 or 5 to the Goryōkaku-

kōen-mae stop (¥220, 15 minutes). From there it's a 10-minute walk.

### Other Attractions

The **Asa-ichi** (morning market; Map p582; ☹ 5am-noon), located just to the right of Hakodate station, is a great place for hungry seafood lovers. Like tightly packed ammo, freshly caught squid glisten in ice-stuffed Styrofoam. Most of the commerce is over by 8am, after which the tourists come for shopping, snacks and souvenirs.

If you want to catch your own squid, the cruiser **Octopus** (Map p582; ☎ 26-4705; 24-1 Bentenmachi; trip ¥6000) offers two-hour expeditions. It costs extra to have them cook the unfortunate cephalopod for you.

**Yachigashira Onsen** (Map p581; ☎ 22-8371; 20-7 Yachigashira; admission ¥390; ☹ 6am-9.30pm, closed every 2nd & 4th Tue) is an enormous hot spring south of Hakodate proper, one of Hokkaidō's oldest, with dark iron-laden water. To get there, take tram 2 from Hakodate station to Yachigashira, the final stop (¥220), continue to the first intersection and then turn right – you'll see the public bathhouse complex on the left shortly after you turn.

East of the town centre, the Yunokawa district has many high-end hot-spring resorts; some allow day use.

Though quite a distance from Hakodate proper (40 minutes by car, one hour by JR train), **Ōnuma Quasi-National Park** (大沼国定公園; ☎ 67-2170), an unusually large lake and swamp that offers beautiful canoeing, fishing and many scenic hiking tracks, is worth the trip (the JR line between Hakodate and Sapporo does stop here). Bring insect repellent, as tourists are particularly tasty. You're much better off renting a car, as the train connection is inconvenient. Many of the hills have hidden hot springs, but finding them can be difficult – your best bet is to ask a local for directions to their favourite gem.

### Festivals & Events

**Hakodate Goryōkaku Matsuri** (函館五稜郭祭り 函館五稜郭祭) Held on the third weekend in May, this festival features a parade of townsfolk dressed in the uniforms of the soldiers who took part in the Meiji Restoration battle of 1868.

**Hakodate Minato Matsuri** (函館港祭り 函館港まつり; Hakodate Port Festival) During this festival in early August, groups of seafood-fortified locals (reportedly 10,000 of them!) move like waves doing an energetic squid dance.



From Kikonai station there are direct buses to Matsumae; get off at the Matsumae-jō stop (¥1220, 1½ hours). Buses then continue to the Matsumae station across town, from where there are buses to Esashi between April and November (¥2720, two hours, four daily).

## ESASHI 江差

☎ 0139 / pop 9930

If Matsumae was Hokkaidō's Edo-period political centre, Esashi was the economic centre. It's still an important fishing town (herring – until the stocks were depleted in the early 20th century – and other seafood now). A number of *nishingoten* (herring barons' homes) once dominated the shoreline, and several are still quite well preserved.

**Yokoyama House** (横山家; ☎ 52-0018; admission ¥300) and **Nakamura House** (旧中村家住宅; ☎ 52-1617; admission ¥300) are good places to start, although there are numerous other houses to view and a trip to Esashi could easily fill the better part of an afternoon. Both are open all year round, but close on Monday during the winter. Call ahead for an appointment at Yokoyama House from November to April.

Listen to performances of Esashi Oiwake, a nationally known music style, at **Esashi Oiwake Museum** (江差追分会館; ☎ 52-0920; admission ¥500; closed Mon in winter). Shows are held at 11am, 1pm and 2.30pm. It's high-pitched, nasal singing that will either fascinate or make you want to cover your ears.

Esashi holds an annual festival, the **Ubagami Matsuri** (姥神祭り 江差姥神大神宮渡御祭; 9-11 August), when streets fill with more than a dozen floats in honour of Ubagami Daijingu, the oldest shrine in Hokkaidō, which was built to invoke a successful herring catch over 350 years ago. Some of the floats are antiques.

Esashi is also the most convenient gateway to Okushiri-tō, a sleepy island with small fishing villages, few foreign visitors, gorgeous coastal scenery and some tourist attractions.

## Getting There & Away

There are infrequent local trains between Hakodate and Esashi (¥1790, 2½ hours). From Esashi station, it's a 20-minute walk downhill to the tourist sites. Direct buses from Hakodate (¥1830, 2½ hours) stop across the street from the terminal. From April to November buses run between Esashi and Matsumae directly (¥2410, two hours, four daily). From Esashi ferry terminal, near the tourist sites,

ferries depart twice daily for Okushiri-tō (¥2200, 2¼ hours), or once daily between January and March. From late April to October ferries also run between Okushiri-tō and Setana (¥1660 one way, 95 minutes), further north along the western coast.

## DŌ-Ō (CENTRAL HOKKAIDŌ) 道央

### OTARU 小樽

☎ 0134 / pop 141,000

Escape from Sapporo to Otaru for a weekend, a day or even an afternoon. Famous now as a tourist spot and for its music boxes, it has a rich, interesting history. Building buffs will love the old warehouses and the beautiful canal district. It played an important part in the herring industry, was a terminal station for Hokkaidō's first railroad and was also a literary hotspot.

### Information

The **tourist information office** (☎ 29-1333; 2-22-15 Inaho; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Mar) is inside JR Otaru station. The *Otaru Tourist Guide*, which details most of Otaru's sights, transport and hotels, is particularly useful. There is an additional information booth at **Unga Plaza** (☎ 33-1661; 2-1-20 Ironai; ☎ 9am-6pm, 8am-8pm Apr-Nov) near the Otaru Museum and at Dec-Mar **Asakusa-bashi** (☎ 23-7740; ☎ 9am-6pm) in the canal area. internet access is at **Cafe La Fille** (フェ・ラ・フィーユ; ☎ 32-1234; per 30min ¥400; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon). Find it by turning right out of the station, pass four lights, then look for it on the right just after the pedestrian bridge.

### Sights & Activities

Take a romantic stroll along Otaru Canal beneath the old gas lamps or have a picnic on a sunny afternoon. Numerous old warehouses are still standing, many of them labelled in Japanese, English and Russian. Built in the Meiji-era and Taisho-era, these structures lend themselves to picture taking. More can be seen along Nichigin-dori, once known as the 'Wall Street of the North', including the street's namesake Bank of Japan, the **Former Nippon Yusen Company building** (旧日本郵船ビル 旧日本郵船株式会社小樽支店; ☎ 22-3316; admission ¥300; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) and the old **Mitsui Banking Corporation building**,

### HOKKAIDŌ'S TOP 10 VIEWS

- Mashū-ko (p614) on a clear day
- Winter drift ice in the Sea of Okhotsk (p611)
- Whales, dolphins and porpoises during summer boat cruises from Muroan (p594)
- Kuril seals basking below the cliffs at the cape Erimo Misaki (p622)
- The white peaks of Tokachidake mountains rising behind the lavender fields of Furano (p605) and Biei (p607)
- Tōya-ko's frisky young volcanoes and terrifying Usu-zan (p593)
- Autumn's red, gold and yellow hillsides from the slopes of the mountain of Daisetsuzan (p604)
- Sapporo skyline from Moiwa-yama Ropeway (p575)
- Sunset over Momo-iwa on Rebun-tō (p603)
- The stunning pools of Kamuiwakka-no-taki and the surrounding mountains from Shiretoko-go-ko (p619)

which finally closed in 2002 after 123 years of operation.

Self-styled as the 'Venice of Japan', Otaru is also trying to build a name for itself as a glass-blowing town. **K's Blowing** (☎ 31-5454; www.ks-blowing.net; lessons ¥1800-2200; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) offers short lessons (in English; 25 minutes) in making a cup or bowl, which you may keep. The glass can be a spittoon-shaped thimble or a pretty usable vase. It's in a lively area of craft shops. **Yuzu Kōbō** (☎ 34-1314; www.geocities.jp/yuzu\_koubou/ in Japanese; ☎ 9am-6pm summer, 10am-5pm winter), closer to the waterfront, lets you make a ring (¥1500) or bead (¥300). It uses flamework (done with a small torch) to produce small, highly detailed works of art.

The **Otaru Museum** (☎ 33-2439; 2-1-20 Ironai; admission ¥300; ☎ 9.30am-5pm) is in a restored old warehouse that was built in 1893. It's small, but has displays on Hokkaidō's natural history, some Ainu relics, and various special exhibitions on herring, ceramics and literature. English pamphlets are available, although they only scratch the surface of the explanations.

Built in 1897, **Nishin Goten** (鯨御殿; Herring Mansion; ☎ 22-1038; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm mid-Apr-Nov) was relocated to the coast at Shukustu in 1956. The original owners were herring industry barons during the Meiji and Taishō eras, living in this enormous complex along with their seasonal labourers. To get there, take bus 11 from Otaru station to the last stop at the Otaru Suizokukan (Otaru Aquarium, ¥200, 25 minutes).

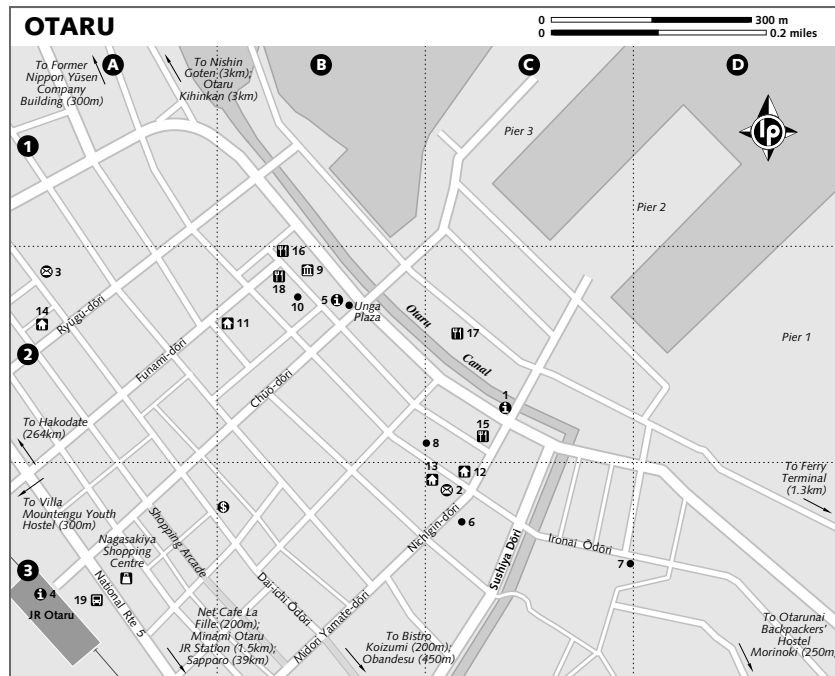
**Otaru Kihinkan** (小樽貴賓館; Former Aoyama villa; ☎ 24-0024; www.otaru-kihinkan.jp in Japanese; admission ¥1000; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) is a herring-money mansion, built by the Aoyama family in 1918. This amazing Japanese-style building has all the trimmings: a *uguisu-bari* (squeaking corridor designed to reveal intruders), a 100-tatami room, ornate woodwork and even opulent Arita porcelain pit toilets. Well worth the bus ride. To get there, take bus 11 (¥200) and get off at the Iwaizu-san-chōme stop (20 minutes).

From late April to mid-October you can take a sightseeing boat from Otaru's Pier 3 (¥1550, 85 minutes), which cruises around the shoreline and returns to the pier. It can also drop you off at the herring villa area, where you can catch a bus back to town.

### Sleeping

There are several rider houses in and around Otaru, which offer cheap accommodation in the ¥1000 to ¥1500 range. Ask at the tourist information centres for directions; a few are accessible by public transport.

**Villa Mountengu Youth Hostel** (ヴィラマウンテング; ☎ 33-6944; www.tengu.co.jp/english/index.html; 2-13-1 Mogami; dm per person incl breakfast ¥3930; ☎ ☎) This is actually two different guest houses connected to the same umbrella organisation Otaru Tengu-yama. Close to Tengu-yama cable-car and ski area. Take bus 3 to the final stop (¥200), about a 20-minute ride. Backtrack from the station just a little and it will be on the right, before you come to a park.



## INFORMATION

## Asakusa-bashi Tourist Info

浅草橋観光案内所.....1 C2

Main Post Office 中央郵便局.....2 C3

Post Office 郵便局.....3 A2

## Tourist information office

観光案内所.....4 A3

## Unga Plaza Tourist Information

Booth 運河プラザ観光案内所.....5 B2

## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Bank of Japan 日本銀行.....6 C3

K's Blowing

ケーズブローイング堺町工房.....7 C3

## Mitsui-Sumitomo Bank Building

三井住友銀行.....8 C2

Otaru Museum 小樽市博物館.....9 B2

Yuzu Kōbō ゆず工房.....10 B2

## SLEEPING

Ebiya Ryokan 海老屋旅館.....11 B2

Hotel Vibrant Otaru

ホテルヴィブランチオタル.....12 C3

Otaru Grand Hotel Classic

小樽グランドホ

テルクラシック.....13 C3

## Ryokan Wakaba-sō 旅館若葉荘.....14 A2

## EATING

Kita no Ice Cream Yasan

北のアイスクリーム屋さん.....15 C2

Mangiare Takinami

マンジャールTakinami.....16 B2

Otaru Sōko No 1 小樽倉庫 No 1.....17 C2

Uminekoya 海猫屋.....18 B2

## TRANSPORT

Bus Station バスターミナル.....19 A3

**Otarunai Backpackers' Hostel MorinoKi** (旅の家 小樽 もりのき; ☎ 23-2175; 4-15 Aioi-chō; <http://backpackers-hostel.infotaru.net>; dm ¥3400) Quiet, quaint and cosy, this place gets filled quickly so book ahead in the summer if you want to ensure a room. Just 15 minutes on foot from either Otaru or Minami Otaru JR stations. Turn right on the main road immediately in front of the JR station. Follow it and at the third traffic signal after passing under the railroad turn left. The road eventually comes to a dead end at a shrine (Suitengu). The hostel is on the right of the shrine.

**Ryokan Wakaba-sō** (☎ 27-3111; Inaho 4-3-17; r per person incl breakfast ¥3500) On a side street west of the centre, this place is small but sweet, quiet yet conveniently located. There's a 2am curfew – but if you're late, ring the inconspicuous doorbell and a sleepy-eyed owner will let you in. From the Otaru post office, head towards Chūō-dōri and look for a small alley on the right. The Wakaba-sō is halfway up on the left, across from a parking area.

**our pick Hotel Vibrant Otaru** (☎ 31-3939; [www.vibrant-otaru.jp](http://www.vibrant-otaru.jp); 1-3-1 Ironai; from s/d/tr incl breakfast ¥5140/6190/10,500; 📺) Very stylish recent renova-

tion of an old bank building. The lobby is very attractive, with wrought-iron tables and a small souvenir stand. Western-style rooms are bland, and the triples often consist of one double bed and one bunk, though various bed configurations are available. The hotel is on the left side of the road across from the main post office.

**Ebiya Ryokan** (☎ 22-2317; 2-10-16 Ironai; r per person incl breakfast ¥5800, per person incl 2 meals ¥7800) In a quiet area close to the canal (take the main road from the station; turn left at the third traffic light – the inn is on the second block). The lobby needs some renovation, but the Japanese-style rooms are perfectly up to par and are handsomely decorated.

**Otaru Grand Hotel Classic** (☎ 22-6500; 1-8-25 Ironai; s/d high season ¥12,600/18,900, low season ¥6300/10,500; 📺) In another former bank, this nicely done hotel is its own slice of history. It has tastefully styled Western rooms and lovely leaded glass. Take the main road away from the station, turn right at the third traffic light. Go one block and the hotel is before the main post office.

## Eating

The Otaru station has the usual fare, but you're better off wandering down to the far more picturesque canal area and finding something more exciting. The street of Sushi-ya Dōri has numerous sushi stands, with everything from the standard to the rather bizarre.

**Mangiare Takinami** (☎ 33-3394; 2-1-16 Ironai; set lunches ¥920; 🍷 lunch & dinner Thu-Tue; E) One block off the canal. A relaxing place with wooden rafters, brick walls and delicious pasta and fish sets. Paella is the speciality.

**Bistro Koizumi** (ビストロ小泉; ☎ 32-4965; 1-7-10 Inaho; meals ¥850; 🍷 lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) A hit with the younger crowd, this place specialises in Hayashi-rice, a tomato-based beef dish served on white rice. Get there early if you want some; it's often sold out. Salmon pasta (*sake pasuta*) is another favourite. No English menu.

**Uminekoya** (☎ 32-2914; Ironai 2-2-14; dishes ¥630-1890; 🍷 lunch & dinner; E) A combo restaurant and pub, this atmospheric warehouse was built in 1906 and was the setting for several novels of Japanese literary fame. The façade, crumbling brick laced with ivy, has been described by several famous writers.

**Otaru Sōko No 1** (☎ 21-2323; 5-4 Minato-machi; dishes ¥800-2000; 🍷 11am-10pm; E) A nice microbrewery with a selection of fresh brews on tap, plus both German and Japanese fare to comple-

ment its Bavarian décor. Potatoes and sausages are big here. Sometimes has live music to accompany your meal.

**Kita no Ice Cream Yasan** (☎ 23-8983; 1-2-18 Ironai; 🍷 9.30am-7pm; E) Serves up stomach-turning flavours such as *nattō* (fermented soy beans), tofu, crab, beer... even sea urchin. Squid ink – jet black – is about as bizarre as ice cream gets. Menu is in English, Japanese and Korean.

**Obandesu** (おぼんです; ☎ 25-5432; 1-10-8 Hanazono; 🍷 dinner-midnight Tue-Sun) A tiny *izakaya* that's little more than three booths and a bar – but the food is excellent, the owners are gracious, and the beers are fresh. Getting there is tricky: follow Daiichi Ōdōri past Sushiyadōri and continue straight. It's about halfway up the long hill on the left side of the street, on the 2nd floor, with a small white sign.

## Getting There &amp; Away

Otaru is just 30 minutes from Sapporo by *kaisoku* train or 50 minutes away by *futsū*; fares for both cost ¥620. Special airport *kaisoku* trains run via Sapporo to New Chitose Airport (¥1740, 75 minutes). Occasional local trains run south to Niseko (¥1410, two hours).

Buses run frequently to Sapporo (¥590, one hour), and less often to Niseko (¥1600, 1½ hours, three daily).

Ferries run daily between Otaru and Maizuru (from ¥9600, 20 hours), just north of Kyoto, and almost daily to Niigata (¥6200, 18 hours). To get to the Shin-Nihonkai **ferry terminal** (☎ 22-6191), take bus 10 from in front of the station (¥200, 30 minutes). Tourist-loop buses also stop at the port a couple of times a day.

## Getting Around

The main part of town is small enough to tackle on foot. Tourist buses loop through the city taking in most of the sights (¥200 per trip or ¥750 for a day pass). Buses leave about every 20 minutes from Otaru station, starting at 9am and finishing at 6.30pm.

You can rent bikes at **Charinko Otaru** (☎ 32-6861; per hr shopping bike/mountain bike ¥500/700; 🍷 8am-10pm); go straight out from the station, turn right at the third corner and it's right near the KFC.

## NISEKO ニセコ

☎ 0136 / pop 4700

One of Hokkaidō's prime ski resorts during the winter months and a hiking base during

summer and autumn, Niseko sprawls between the mountain Yôtei-zan to the east and Niseko Annupuri to the west. Views at any time of year are splendid, and there is something almost holy about the snow-covered peaks on a chilly winter day.

When snow is falling (and it does a lot), sounds are dampened, making even a walk out to the car seem like a magic sleigh ride. Locals are as laid back and friendly as the tourists (many of whom are Aussies) are boisterous. Skiing at Niseko, with its jaw-dropping views of mountains and its plethora of *onsen*, is unequalled. Like its northern cousin Furano, Niseko enjoys perfect powder snow; if you're one of the first on the slopes, you'll feel like you've left Earth as you float downhill.

## Information

Niseko station has a **tourist information office** (☎ 44-2468), which can help plan skiing weekends. Info is also available online at [www.niseko.gr.jp](http://www.niseko.gr.jp).

## Sights & Activities

Come here for canoeing, kayaking and river rafting in summer, and ice climbing, snowshoeing or even dogsledding in the winter. Hot springs are open all year round and during the ski season this town has a lively night life (which disappears as soon as the snow is gone). Be sure to check the *Local Rules Guide* as accidents do happen and avalanches are a possibility after heavy snows. The slopes are an equal mix of beginner, medium and advanced levels. A 2m to 3m snow base, the 17 lifts and varied terrain make for a challenging, exciting ski experience for just about anyone. Downsides include long queues and the usual piped music over loudspeakers, but that's standard for skiing in Japan.

The first and most popular of the major Niseko resorts, **Niseko Annupuri Kokusai** (☎ 58-2080; [www.niseko.ne.jp/annupuri](http://www.niseko.ne.jp/annupuri) in Japanese; lift tickets ¥4400, night only ¥1900; ☎ day 8.30am-4.30pm, night 4.30-9pm) is also often the most crowded. The trails are slightly more advanced, with more than two-thirds at the intermediate or advanced level, with a 60:40 mix of skiers and snowboarders. The season runs from late November to late April or early May. Ask if there's artificial snow and watch people burst out laughing.

You can buy an eight-hour lift ticket for all three resorts – Annupuri, Grand Hirafu and Higashiyama – for ¥4800.

The **Niseko Outdoor Centre** (ニセコアウトドアセンター; ☎ 44-1133; [www.noc-hokkaido.jp/noc/index\\_eng.html](http://www.noc-hokkaido.jp/noc/index_eng.html)), near the Annupuri ski slope, and the **Niseko Adventure Centre** (ニセコアドベンチャーセンター; ☎ 23-2093; [www.nac-web.com](http://www.nac-web.com)), in the village of Hirafu, can organise activities.

At the station is **Kiranoyu** (綺羅乃湯; ☎ 44-1100; bath ¥500; ☎ 10am-9.30pm Thu-Tue), where you can step off the train and into your choice of *hinoki* (cypress), rock, hot steam or bubble baths.

## Sleeping

Niseko is spread out, with nothing close to the station. Most places will provide pick up and drop off, or you can take buses or shuttles. The closer you get to the slopes themselves, the more options you'll have. Near the lifts, if you basically walk in a straight line, you'll run into a pension or two.

For really cheap accommodation, check out rider houses.

**Niseko Tourist Home** (ニセコツーリストホーム; ☎ 44-2517; <http://niseko-th.com> in Japanese; dm Nov-Apr/Mar-Oct ¥3500/2500, incl 2 meals ¥5500/4500) A perennial favourite – clean and inexpensive – though speaking/reading Japanese will help. It's 4km from JR Niseko station.

**Niseko Annupuri Youth Hostel** (ニセコアンヌプリユースホステル; ☎ 58-2084; [www.annupuri-yh.com](http://www.annupuri-yh.com) in Japanese; 470-4 Niseko; YHA members r per person ¥3250, incl 2 meals ¥4930) A mountain lodge near the Annupuri ski ground. The owner can provide local hiking and cycling maps and plenty of recommendations. Meals are delicious. If you phone ahead, someone can pick you up at Niseko station.

**our pick Niseko Kôgen Youth Hostel** (ニセコ高原ユースホステル; Pooh's House; ☎ /fax 44-1171; [kogenyh@rose.ocn.ne.jp](mailto:kogenyh@rose.ocn.ne.jp); dm per person incl 2 meals ¥5935; ☎) This *Winnie the Pooh* themed hostel may sound cutesy, but it has wonderful Japanese-style meals and the owner performs incredible accordion solos if there are enough guests to warrant a show. Call to arrange to be picked up at the station; you can be dropped off at *onsens*, hiking trailheads or the ski slopes as well.

**Jam Garden** (ジャムガーデン; ☎ 22-6676; [www.jamgarden.com](http://www.jamgarden.com); 37-89 Kabayama, Kuchan-chô; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥6000, group discounts available) Right near the ski lift at Hirafu, this deluxe farmhouse (it has its own Jacuzzi and sauna) has Western-style rooms and meals. If you need to be picked up from either Hirafu or Kuchan

stations, just phone ahead. It's a 15-minute taxi ride from JR Niseko station.

**Pension Forest Green** (ペンション フォレストグリーン; ☎ 44-2868; [www3.ocn.ne.jp/~forest-g](http://www3.ocn.ne.jp/~forest-g) in Japanese; per person incl 2 meals ¥7000) This cute five-room place is unique, offering home-cooked Chinese meals as part of the lodging package. In summer it offers fly fishing trips. There's even a pool table.

**Niseko Hotel Nikko Annupuri** (ニセコホテル日航アンヌプリ; ☎ 58-3311; [www.nikko-annupuri.co.jp](http://www.nikko-annupuri.co.jp); 480-1 Niseko, Niseko-chô; r per person incl 2 meals ¥13,000; ☎) A top-of-the-line establishment near the top of the mountain, this place boasts splendid views of the valley and easy bus access. Take the bus from JR Niseko station to Konbu Onsen, and get off at Annupuri Ski Jyo (12 minutes).

## Eating

Many of the lodges and ryokan offer great meals cooked to order, and the slopes have plenty of snacks, pizza, *râmen* and other goodies to stave off the munchies while you're in your gear. After hours, things are tricky because lodging is spread out and buses are surprisingly inconvenient.

**Bistare Kana** (ビスターレ・カナ; ☎ 58-3330; [www10.plala.or.jp/bistare](http://www10.plala.or.jp/bistare) in Japanese; Niseko 431-1; ☎ 11.30am-3pm Mon-Fri, 11.30am-7.30pm Sat-Sun & holidays, lunch & dinner 20 Dec-8 Jan; mains from ¥1500) Offers fantastic Nepalese dishes, curry, dumplings and vegetarian options. It's also a pension with cosy rooms. Irregular hours in December and January.

**Sabô Nupuri** (茶房ヌプリ; ☎ 44-2619; in Niseko JR station; cakes & curries from ¥500; ☎ 11am-8pm Thu-Tue) Just a snack shop, with cakes, curries and coffee, but it's right in the station and a convenient stop as you go to or from the slopes.

**Pizzeria Niseko Paraiso** (パライゾ; ☎ 22-2436; <http://niseko.cafe-paraiso.com>; pizzas from ¥1000; ☎ 11am-10pm; E) Sick of sushi? Swing by here for nice pizzas made with Hokkaidô-grown ingredients, thick wood-slab tables and wide windows, giving it a log cabin-like ambiance. It's very near the Hirafu Ski Jô, across from Seikomart and Hirafu Onsen.

## Getting There & Away

Unfortunately, in summer (the low season) there aren't a lot of easy ways to get here unless you want to rent a vehicle.

The tiny JR Niseko station is a shock if you've just come from Sapporo, and don't

expect to walk with your gear to any nearby hotels. Depending on where you're heading, it may make more sense to travel via one of two other stations serving the area, Hirafu and Kuchan.

Direct *kaisoku* trains run from Sapporo (¥2100, 2¼ hours); however, if you don't time it right you may have to wait when changing trains at Otaru (¥1410, two hours). Alternatively, you could hop on a direct bus to Niseko outside Otaru station (¥1530, two hours). From June to September there is a daily bus from New Chitose Airport to the Niseko Hotel Nikko Annupuri (¥2300, 2½ hours).

Winter is an entirely different story: there are frequent direct buses to the area's various ski resorts from Sapporo (¥2190, three hours) as well as New Chitose Airport (¥2300, three hours). A discount round-trip fare is also available from both places for ¥3850. Check out **CB Tours** (シービーツアーズ; ☎ 011-211-0912; [www.cbt.chuo-bus.co.jp](http://www.cbt.chuo-bus.co.jp) in Japanese; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) for packages out of Sapporo. One day with a round-trip bus fare and an eight-hour lift ticket at Niseko Annupuri costs ¥3900. One-night, two-day packages start at ¥18,000 per person. If you're stuck in Tokyo, **JAL Tours** (JAL ツアーズ; ☎ 03-5460-8221; [www.jal.co.jp/tours](http://www.jal.co.jp/tours) in Japanese) can whisk you to Niseko Annupuri for around ¥40,000 per person, which includes airfare, two nights' stay (double occupancy), lift tickets and breakfasts.

Trains are more frequent during the ski season as well, and all the major ski resorts have shuttles that run to and from the stations.

*Onsen* fans may want to check out the Niseko Yumeguri Pass, valid for six months, which allows entrance to up to three of the 15 local *onsen* for ¥1400.

## RUSUTSU

Niseko's neighbour **Rusutsu** (☎ 46-3331; [www.rusutsu.co.jp](http://www.rusutsu.co.jp); lift tickets 1/2 days ¥4950/8900; ☎ day 9am-5pm, night 4-9pm) is another ski destination that is rapidly gaining fame. Some say skiing in Japan doesn't get any better. It's much less developed here than in Niseko, so the slopes are not as crowded here and you can actually 'get away from it all'. New shuttles make day trips from Niseko a snap, which can be a good plan as there's not much to do in the evenings and meals are pricey (¥3000 to ¥5000).

But wow, what skiing! The well-groomed trails and fantastic tree runs (often you're

the first person passing through the powder!) are awesome. The resort has trails of all difficulty levels and a 50:50 mix of skiers and snowboarders. Eighteen lifts, a 100m half pipe, and numerous through-the-trees trail options means there's something for everyone. The season runs from late November to April.

If you're going to stay overnight, try the friendly **Rusutsu Powder Lodge** (www.snowjapan.com), which has firm beds and crisp linens, shared bathrooms and is seconds from the slopes. It's also right next to a convenience store: useful if you don't feel like eating out. It takes online bookings only. **Pension Lilla Huset** (ペンションリッラヒューセット; ☎ 46-3676; http://web.travel.rakuten.co.jp/portal/my/info\_page\_e.Eng?no=14935; 144

Aza Izumikawa; per person incl 2 meals from ¥7000; ☎ ) is also right at the bottom of the lifts.

The nearest train station is an hour's drive away at Kucchan.

## SHIKOTSU-TŌYA NATIONAL PARK

支笏洞爺国立公園

☎ 0142

Part of Shikotsu-Tōya National Park (983 sq km), Tōya-ko is a large and beautiful lake, though its beauty is somewhat marred by huge hotels on the southern perimeter. Its volcanoes are still making headlines: Usuzan erupted quite violently in 2000, sending boulders thousands of feet into the air.

In 1943, after a series of earthquakes, **Shōwa-Shin-zan** (昭和火山) emerged as an upstart

bump in some vegetable fields southeast of Tōya-ko Onsen. It then surged upwards for two more years to reach its present height of 398m. At the time, Japanese officials were keen to hush it up as they thought it was a bad omen and might portend an inauspicious end to WWII. Local officials were urged to douse the volcanic flames (they didn't) so that Allied aircraft couldn't use them for orientation. Shōwa-Shin-zan is still belching sulphurous fumes, creating an awesome spectacle for visitors and keeping local officials nervous about its next move.

Nearby, **Usu-zan** (有珠山; 729m), a taller and more formidable volcano, has also been just as active, erupting violently in March 2000. The ash cloud that rained down on Tōya-ko was 2700m high, and volcanic bombs threatened to down news helicopters. There's a **ropeway** (有珠山ロープウェイ; cable car; ☎ 75-2401; return ¥1450; ☎ Jan-Nov) to the peak of Usu-zan. It's closed for a week in both January and February.

Behind the tourist shops, the small **Mimatsu Masao Memorial Museum** (☎ 75-2365; admission ¥300; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Mar) is devoted to the local postmaster, who purchased the volcano in 1946 (for the princely sum of ¥28,000). He spent years diagramming its growth using an ingenious method that has become a standard among volcanologists today. English signage in the museum is limited.

The **Nishiyama Crater Promenade** (☎ closed 10 Nov-20 Apr) is a bit like walking through an area after a bomb blast. Steam hisses out of fissures, azure ponds bubble from boiling underground springs, and houses and roads are crushed and mangled. The entrance is about 10 minutes by bus (¥160) from Tōya-ko Onsen; it costs ¥300 to park your own vehicle in the expansive car-park. It is sometimes closed due to dangerous levels of toxic gas.

For something sedentary, check out the movie at the **Volcanic Science Museum** (火山科学館; ☎ 75-4400; admission ¥600; ☎ 9am-5pm) above the Tōya-ko Onsen bus terminal.

## TŌYA-KO ONSEN 洞爺湖温泉

Despite the volcanic interruptions, Tōya-ko Onsen remains a popular spot for soaking, perhaps because of its proximity to New Chitose Airport and Sapporo. From mid-April to the end of October, this tiny town displays 400 fireworks every evening. Head to the shoreline for the best view. The 37km perimeter

of Tōya-ko is both beautiful and daunting. Cruises out to Ōshima, the island in the middle of the lake, depart every 30 minutes from 8am to 4.30pm (¥1320). An evening fireworks-viewing cruise (¥1500) is a little more exciting. Get your tickets at the pier.

The Tōya-ko Onsen **tourist office** (☎ 75-2446; info@laketoya.com; 144 Tōya-ko Onsen; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is downhill from the bus station: head towards the lake, then look for it across from the Hotel Grand Tōya.

## Sleeping

Resort hotels line the waterfront; rates begin around ¥12,000 per person per night. Many of them have day-use access to their baths; rates vary from ¥500 to ¥2000. Bring your own towel to save the ¥300 hire fee.

**Naka-tōya Camping Ground** (☎ 66-7022; camp sites per person ¥330; ☎ May-Sep) On the eastern edge of the lake, several kilometres from Tōya-ko Onsen. Tents can be hired if necessary. Buses from Tōya JR station are infrequent (¥630), stopping here only two or three times each day.

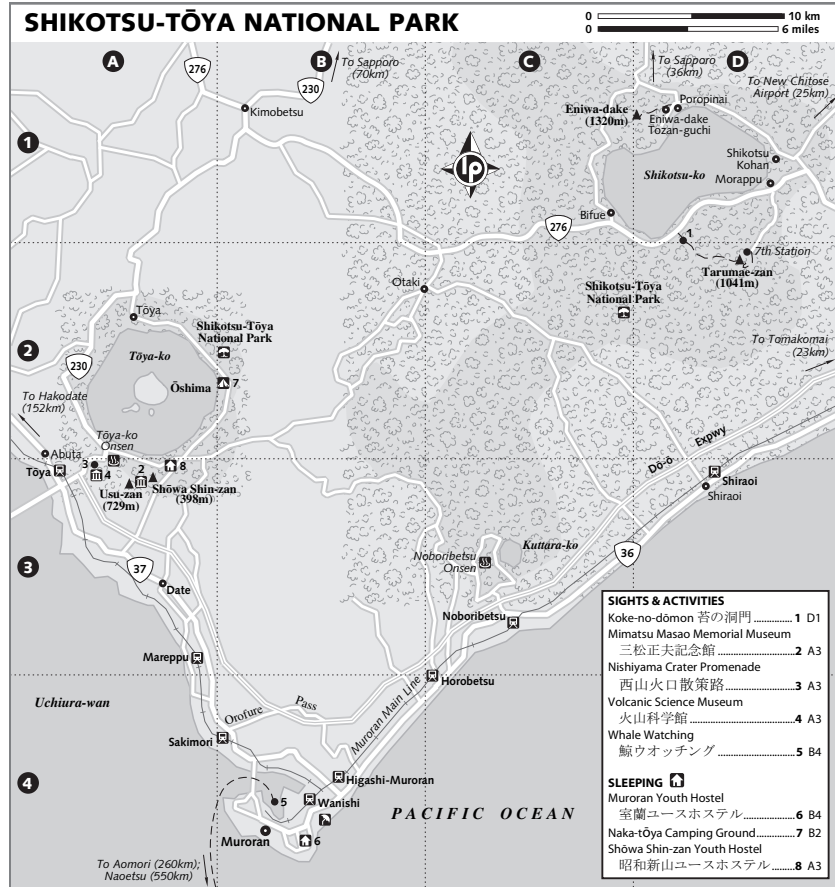
**Shōwa-Shin-zan Youth Hostel** (☎ 75-2283; 103 Soubetsu-onsen, Soubetsu-chō, Usu-gun; dm ¥1310) With comfortable shared-room accommodation, this hostel is on the road leading up to Usuzan. Bicycles are ¥1000 per day, a good way to cover ground around town. By bus it's eight minutes from Tōya-ko Onsen; get off at the Tozan-guchi stop.

**Tōya Green Hotel** (洞爺グリーンホテル; ☎ 75-3030; 144-3 Tōya-ko Onsen, Tōya-ko-chō, Abuta-gun; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥5250) Calls itself a 'business *minshuku*' (B&B) and has expansive Japanese-style rooms, full facilities (TV, mini-fridge, buffet breakfast and dinner, large and small public baths) and enormous meals. Quieter rooms are at the back, away from the main drag.

**Hotel Grand Tōya** (ホテルグランドトーヤ; ☎ 75-2288; 144 Tōya-ko Onsen, Tōya-ko-chō, Abuta-gun; r per person incl 2 meals ¥7875; ☎ ) Has nice lake views from every room. Both Japanese and Western styles are available, with bathroom in each room.

## Getting There & Away

There are more 'Tōya's here than you can shake a stick at, but don't let that confuse you. There's Tōya JR station, Tōya Onsen (on the south of the lake) and Tōya town, on the north side. And of course, Tōya-ko itself.



*Tokkyū*, *kaisoku* and local trains to Hako-date (¥5340, 1½ hours) or Sapporo (¥5760, 1¾ hours) all make a brief stop at Tōya JR station. Buses are a less expensive option, running frequently between Tōya Sapporo (¥2700, 2¾ hours) or Muroran (¥1170, 1¾ hours).

Local buses run every 30 minutes between Tōya JR station and Tōya-ko Onsen (¥320, 25 minutes).

From April to November, buses also run via the scenic Orofure pass to Noboribetsu Onsen (¥1530, 1¾ hours); some continue onwards to New Chitose Airport (¥2140, 2½ hours).

## MURORAN 室蘭

☎ 0143 / pop 98,400

This dwindling industrial city is in the process of reinventing itself. It's conveniently connected by ferry with the rest of Honshū; the trip from the pier to the **tourist office** (☎ 23-0102), which is in the oldest wooden train station in Hokkaido (built in 1912), is a 15-minute ride. Among other activities, a whale-watching boat run by **KK Elm** (KKエルム; ☎ 27-1822; www.kk-elm.jp/index.htm in Japanese; per 3hr ¥6000) leaves from the pier three times daily in summer. Whales, dolphins, porpoises and seals are best viewed from May to July, and tours are often booked solid weeks ahead.

While the industrialised section of the valley is definitely less than scenic, the shoreline between Wanishi (where the Muroran Youth Hostel is) and **Cape Chikyū** (地球岬) is quite stunning. A well-marked road parallels the shore and offers several spots to stop and admire the view. The observation areas at the cape are also pretty. Cape Chikyū is known for its returning pair of *hayabusa* (peregrine falcons) and for its almost 360-degree panoramic views of the sea.

The black-sand beach behind the youth hostel is gorgeous, a perfect place for an early morning walk as you watch the sunrise. Beautiful white cliffs, giant mystic boulders and ethereal sunlight will make you feel like you've stepped inside a Wyeth painting. Surfing (you'll need your own board and wetsuit) is a popular pastime, and hiking, skiing and snowshoeing are also available nearby.

Gourmands will appreciate Muroran's *yakitori*, but be warned: the preferred meat here is pork. In fact, many of the popular places don't serve chicken at all, only the skin, which is very popular. **Yakitori Fujitori** (焼き鳥ふじ鳥; ☎ 44-4986/4970; 1-36-3 Wanishi-chō; dishes ¥200-1000),

an inconspicuous greasy spoon in the centre of town, is a favourite with locals and serves excellent *yakitori*, tofu in broth and *rāmen* that's hard to beat. No English is spoken, unless by clientele interested in practising their skills with a traveller.

Institutional and old, but clean and practical (it even has a web cam!), **Muroran Youth Hostel** (Map p592; ☎ 44-3357; www.yjh.gr.jp/muroran in Japanese; dm ¥3990; ♿ ♿ ♿) affords fantastic views of the bay and easy access to hiking tracks along the cliff top. From Wanishi Station, turn left and follow Rte 36 until you see Lawson on the right. Turn right and follow this road all the way until it ends after a steep climb uphill. Look diagonally across the street to the left and you will see a small sign for the hostel. From there it's a three-minute walk to the hostel driveway.

Camping is possible on some of the scenic laybys along the cliffside road between Wanishi and Cape Chikyū. Several secluded areas would be easy to use, but are not officially sanctioned. Use your own judgment and caution.

Long-distance trains depart from Higashi-Muroran station, three stops east of Muroran itself; transfer to central Muroran is included in long-distance fares. Direct *tokkyū* trains run south to Hakodate (¥6180, two hours) and north to Sapporo (¥4680, 1¾ hours).

From the bus station there are frequent departures for Sapporo (¥2000, 2¾ hours), Noboribetsu Onsen (¥710, 80 minutes) and Tōya-ko Onsen (¥1170, 1¾ hours).

Ferries depart from Muroran for Aomori (¥3460, seven hours) year-round, and Naoetsu (¥8230, 17 hours, three per week) between April and December. To get to Hachinohe, head to nearby Tomakomai. The ferry terminal is about a 10-minute walk from Muroran station. The **Higashi Nihon Ferry** (東日本フェリー; ☎ 22-1668) office will have the latest details.

## NOBORIBETSU ONSEN 登別温泉

☎ 0143

Noboribetsu Onsen is the most popular *onsen* resort in Hokkaidō, boasting over 30 hotels and bath houses clustered tightly together along a narrow, winding street, but it's not as atmospheric as you might expect – with convenience stores, hotels and souvenir shops packed with fun sculptures of animals and demons. The water originates from a volcanic

sulphurous 'hell' not far above. Some of the higher-end spas are as nice as Japan has to offer. There are various interesting hikes around the surrounding hills and sulphur vents. The **tourist association office** (☎ 84-3311; 60 Noboribetsu onsen machi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) has English maps, hotel locations and good English info on the bathing hours.

## Sights & Activities

**Dai-ichi Takimoto-kan** (第一滝本館; ☎ 84-3322; www.takimotokan.co.jp/english/; onsen bath ¥2000; ☎ 9am-5pm) is the cream of the crop of the *onsen* resorts; this luxurious spa has more than 15 different kinds of baths, ranging from take-your-skin-off scalding to icy cool. Several outdoor *rotemburo* (open-air baths) offer beautiful views of the valley, and there's even a swimming pool (where you will require a swimsuit). Its English website offers online booking and reservations.

For half the price, you'll get much of the same luxury (minus the view) at the **Grand Hotel** (登別グランドホテル; ☎ 717-8899; www.nobogura.co.jp/english; onsen bath ¥1000; ☎ 12.30-5pm & 6.30-8pm), a few steps away from the bus station. The star attraction is the beautiful *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) bath, and a domed ceiling to give the spacious impression of a Roman-era bath. Men's and women's areas alternate to give each gender the chance to see both bathing areas.

**Jigokudani** (地獄谷; Hell Valley) is a short walk uphill, offering viewers a peek at what may await us in the afterlife: sulphurous gases, hissing vents and vividly coloured rocks. Pools of scalding water can be seen from **Ōyu-numa** (大湯沼; Boiling Water Swamp). For those of us who are far from Heaven-bound, it's good to know that Hell (if the Japanese have anything to say about it!) will surely include a lot of *onsen*.

The simple **public bath** (夢元さざり湯; ☎ 84-2050; 60 Noboribetsu onsen machi; onsen bath ¥390; ☎ 7am-10pm), on the 1st floor of an office building next to the tourist association office (above), has three baths, each packed with mainly wizened bathers – you'll feel spry as a spring chicken if you're under 65.

## Sleeping

**Minshuku Kikusui** (民宿菊水; ☎ 84-2437; fax 84-3302; 220-5 Noboribetsu; per person incl 2 meals from ¥6500) A decent place: looks plain on the outside but serves great crab dinners all winter long. Get

off the bus at Momijidani-danchi Iriguchi, turn right at the light and then walk about 200m. It's an unassuming white single-storey building.

**Kashōtei Hanaya** (花鐘亭はなや; ☎ 84-2521; www.kashoutei-hanaya.co.jp/english/index.htm; r per person incl 2 meals ¥12,750-26,400) A great midrange option with Japanese-style rooms, many overlooking the river. The very friendly staff speak some English. It also has its own hot-spring baths, private toilets and basins.

**Dai-ichi Takimoto-kan** (第一滝本館; ☎ 84-3322; www.takimotokan.co.jp/english/; r from ¥11,175; ♿ ♿ ♿) The *onsen* (left) also doubles as a hotel. In addition to immaculate Western- or Japanese-style rooms, meals (prices vary seasonally) are offered either buffet style in the main dining rooms or in your room, and children's menus are available. Barrier-free rooms are also an option for the elderly or those with disabilities.

## Getting There & Away

Noboribetsu Onsen and **Noboribetsu JR station** (☎ 84-3111) are about 13 minutes from each other by bus (¥330). Noboribetsu JR Station has local train connections to Higashi-Muroran (¥350, 20 minutes), Shiraoui (¥350, 30 minutes) and Tomakomai (¥810, 45 minutes), all of which have connections to Sapporo.

From Noboribetsu Onsen there are direct buses to Sapporo (Eki-mae terminal ¥1900, 1½ to 2¾ hours). There are also buses to New Chitose Airport (¥1330, 73 minutes, one to three daily) and Muroran (¥710, 80 minutes). In summer (April to November) scenic buses run the length of Orofure Pass and end at Tōya-ko Onsen (¥1530, 1¾ hours).

## SHIKOTSU-KO 支笏湖

☎ 0123

Part of the Shikotsu-Tōya National Park, Shikotsu-ko is a caldera lake surrounded by picturesque volcanoes. It's Japan's second-deepest lake after Tazawa-ko in Akita-ken (p538). The area is served by Shikotsu Kohan (支笏湖畔), a tiny town consisting mainly of a bus station, **visitors centre** (支笏湖ビジターセンター; ☎ 25-2404; www.15.ocn.ne.jp/~sikotucv/in Japanese; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar), boat pier, a few souvenir shops and restaurants. **Morappu** (モラップ), nearby, has a few more options. Both can be enjoyed as a day trip from Muroran.

## Activities

Leaving from Shikotsu Kohan's pier there are 30-minute **sightseeing cruises** (☎ 25-2031; per person ¥1100; ☞ Apr-Nov). You can take a one-hour walk on the nature trail between the pier and Morappu, which goes through a wild bird forest with two bird-watching blinds. There are birding ID boards with pictures along the way, as well as lakeside views. Not so tame **speedboat cruises** (☎ 0123-20-4131; per person ¥1300) are a faster way to take in the lake and its environs (minimum of three people per cruise).

Cycling is a nice option if the weather is good. A full circuit of the lake is 50km and the youth hostel hires out bikes for ¥400 per hour or ¥2000 per day, with a discount for its own guests.

Freshwater scuba diving in the lake can be arranged through **Blue Note** (ブルーノート; ☎ 0120-43-3340; 107 Shikotsuko Onsen; www2.on.ne.jp/~bluenote/ in Japanese; dive ¥13,800). Waterflowers, 100m cliffs and numerous freshwater fish are a few of the attractions.

Mountain **hikes** are one of the area's most popular activities, but check at the visitors centre, as tracks are frequently closed due to bad conditions or erosion. **Eniwa-dake** (恵庭岳; 1320m) lies on the northwestern side of the lake. A 3½-hour hike will bring you to a panoramic view. It's another three hours back down.

On the southern side of the lake is **Tarumae-zan** (樽前山; 1041m), an active volcano. Due to poisonous gas the crater itself is closed, but you can reach the rim from the seventh station in about 40 minutes. Japanese walkers all wear bear bells in this area, and you should stay on the main tracks to avoid an unexpected encounter.

A spectacular mossy gorge, **Koke-no-dōmon** (Map p592; ☞ 9am-5pm Jun-Oct) has recently been damaged by erosion. Visitors are not allowed to enter after 4pm, and may only view it in a specific roped-off area. Brown bears frequent the gorge and should not be trifled with (see p620).

## Sleeping

These places are clustered in or around Shikotsu Kohan.

**Morappu Camping Ground** (モラップキャンピング場; ☎ 25-2439; tent sites from ¥500; ☞ late Apr-late Oct) In Morappu, conveniently situated by the lake.

**Shikotsu-ko Youth Hostel** (支笏湖ユースホステル; ☎ 25-2311; www.youthhostel.or.jp/english/menu2.htm; dm ¥3645) Has private family rooms as well as dorms; bike hire and a hot-spring bath (¥150) are also available. To reach the hostel head away from the visitors centre; after about a three-minute walk, it's on the other side of a carpark.

**Lapland** (ラップランド; ☎ 25-2239; dm incl 2 meals ¥4900) In Morappu, this is a great little log cabin with views of the lake. Has carpeted Japanese-style rooms and private rooms are sometimes available (per person ¥5900). The owners will pick you up and take you back to the bus station or mountain trailheads. Buses bound for Koke-no-dōmon from Shikotsu Kohan pass Morappu (¥240, 10 minutes).

**Log Bear** (ログベア; ☎ 25-2738; http://web.mac.com/logbear; r per person incl breakfast ¥5000; ☞) An intimate, friendly log cabin right in the town centre. The owner speaks English quite fluently and makes a good cup of coffee as well. Walk straight (east) from the visitors centre to the small alley directly across the street. Log Bear is on the left, just after Tonton (a restaurant). If you reach Tōya-ko Kankō Hotel, you've gone too far.

**Shikotsu-sō** (支笏荘; ☎ 25-2718; www.shikotsuko.com/s-shikotsusou.htm in Japanese; r per person incl 2 meals ¥5800) A cheerful *minshuku* right behind the bus station, primarily known for its miso, *rāmen* and trout. The owner's hobby is pressing wildflowers, from which she makes postcards, plates and other souvenirs.

## Getting There & Away

Between mid-June and mid-October there are three to four buses a day from Shikotsu Kohan to JR Sapporo station (¥1330, 97 minutes). Other buses run all year round to New Chitose Airport (¥920, 55 minutes).

# DŌ-HOKU (NORTHERN HOKKAIDŌ) 道北

**ASAHIKAWA** 旭川  
☎ 0166 / pop 358,500

Asahikawa is one of the largest cities in Hokkaidō, second to Sapporo. It was built on a flat plain along the Ishikari River and was once one of the biggest Ainu settlements. It carries the dual honour of having the most days with snowfall, as well as the record for

the coldest temperature (-40°C). Though less picturesque than other Hokkaidō cities, Asahikawa is interesting both historically and as a jumping-off point to other parts: Wakkanai to the north; Daisetsuzan National Park to the southeast; and Biei and Furano due south.

In addition to its Ainu heritage, Asahikawa was also an important part of Meiji-era settlements and has a long history of sake brewing. It was the location of the first ski area in Japan. It has since become one of the major industrial cities of the island, with associated urban development.

## Orientation

Asahikawa JR station is on the southwest side of the city. A large pedestrian avenue extends out for a few blocks, and most of the hotels and restaurants listed here are within easy walking distance. Museums and some of the other sights (such as the Asahikawa Zoo) will require a bus ride, and boarding the bus can be a bit confusing, as there are more than 20 bus stops on three different streets, numerous routes and several different bus companies.

## Information

Friendly, helpful assistance can be found at the **information counter** (☎ 22-6704; ☞ 9am-7pm Jul-Sep, 9am-5.30pm Oct-Jun) inside Asahikawa station with a number of English pamphlets and sightseeing brochures. Be sure to ask for the very useful bus-stop map. The staff have a wealth of information at their fingertips, quite literally, and can share tips about the city, its sights and activities, and they may also be able to recommend places to stay. The station also has a **hotel booking desk** (☎ 22-5139), which can be relied on to find reasonable deals. If you are getting off the train, turn right once you go through the ticket gate before going out of the station building. The station's post office has a Postal ATM.

Asahikawa has several internet cafés, these are near the station.

**Compa37** (コンパ37; ☎ 21-3249; 7-5 Sanjō; per 30min ¥250; ☞ 24hr) Go straight out from the station on the pedestrian street to the 3rd intersection, turn left, then look on the left. Has a night package if you need to crash on the cheap.

**PC Terakoya** (PC-Tera 屋; ☎ 23-9789; 4F Marutoku Bldg, 9-7 Ichijō-dōri; per hr ¥525; ☞ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri) Closest to the station, a few blocks' walk. When exiting the station, take the pedestrian street for two blocks. Turn

right and go another block or so. It is on your right (if you get to Lawson at the corner, you've gone too far).

## Sights & Activities

### MUSEUMS

The **Hokkaido Folk Arts & Crafts Village** (北海道伝統美術工芸村; 3-1-1 Minamigaoka) is a collection of three museums. A free shuttle leaves every one or two hours from Kureyon Park, a three-minute walk from Asahikawa station, next to the Asahikawa Washington Hotel (note: not the Fujitakankō Washington Hotel, which is directly across from the station). Follow the pedestrian street to the first major intersection, then turn left at the light. The carpark will be on your right just after the next light. A combined ticket (¥1400) gives entry to the following three museums. The **International Dyeing & Weaving Art Museum** (国際染織美術館; ☎ 61-6161; admission ¥550; ☞ Apr-Dec) is the most spectacular, displaying textiles from around the world as well as Japanese specialities, such as embroidered Ainu wood-bark cloth and a number of spectacular silk kimonos. The **Yukara Ori Folk Craft Museum** (優佳良織工芸館; ☎ 62-8811; admission ¥450; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Apr-Nov, 9am-5pm Dec-Mar) has a number of examples of Ainu cloth in the interesting local weaving style. Paradoxically, the **Snow Crystal Museum** (雪の美術館; ☎ 63-2211; admission ¥650; ☞ 9am-5pm Feb & Mar, 9am-5.30pm Apr-Nov) is closed in the winter months of December and January. This museum has some dainty displays, a concert hall and walk-in freezers with metre-long icicles. Brrrr.

**Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Memorial Museum** (川村カネトアイヌ記念館; ☎ 51-2461; 11 Kitamonchō; admission ¥500; ☞ 8am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Sep-Jun) has a ticket office that sells an English-language booklet, *Living in the Ainu Moshir*, by Kawamura Shinrit Eoripak Ainu, the present curator and the son of the museum's founder. For more info on the founder, Kawamura Kaneto Ainu, see p598. Take bus 24 from bus stop 14 on Ichijō-dōri to the Ainu Kinenkan-mae stop (¥170, 15 minutes).

### BREWERIES

Several breweries located in and around Asahikawa are well worth checking out.

Otokoyama was frequently featured in *ukiyo-e* (wood-block prints) and old literature. Admission is free at **Otokoyama Sake Brewery & Museum** (男山酒造; ☎ 48-1931; www.otokoyama.com/english/index.html; 2-7 Nagayama; ☞ 9am-5pm)



and includes tasting. Take bus 67, 68, 70, 71, 667 or 669 from bus stop 18 and get off at Nagayama 2-jō 6-chōme. From there it's a two-minute walk.

A 10-minute bus ride from Asahikawa station, **Takasago Sake Brewery** (高砂酒造; ☎ 23-2251; http://takasagoshuzo.com/in.japanese; 17 Miyashitadōri; admission free; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-11.30pm Sat & Sun mid-Apr-mid-Oct, 9am-4.30pm daily mid-Oct-mid-Apr) has interesting pictures of the old buildings and brewing process, plus a large display room. From January to March it also has an *aisudōmu* (ice dome), a sake-filled igloo that you can tour. Take bus 1, 3 or 17 from bus stop 17 and get off at 1-jō 18-chōme. It's also possible to walk there from the Asahikawa JR station: turn right on Miyashita-dōri and walk for about 15 minutes. It's a large white-washed building with a cedar ball hanging outside the door. An English pamphlet and friendly staff help make it worthwhile even if you don't speak Japanese.

## OTHER SIGHTS

**Asahiya Zoo** (旭山動物園; ☎ 36-1104; Kuranuma; admission ¥580; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm 28 Apr-Jul, 9.30am-9pm Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm 1 Sep-21 Oct, 10.30am-3.30pm 3 Nov-7 Apr) Has a round-up of the usual zoo suspects, but a big crowd pleaser is the winter penguin march: because the birds get porky, they have to go for a twice-daily run at 11am and 2.30pm from mid-December through to March. Take bus 41, 42 or 47.

## Festivals & Events

Check with local tourist offices for specific dates for Asahikawa's various annual festivals, as many vary slightly from year to year.

### KANETO KAWAMURA – AINU GENIUS

While it's indisputable that Ainu culture suffered as mainland Japanese settled in Hokkaidō, a few Ainu managed to prove themselves purely on Japanese terms. Kaneto Kawamura, an Ainu chief, became a master surveyor and helped to lay the tracks for several of Hokkaidō's railways. After eye problems forced him to retire, he used his accumulated wealth to create the first Ainu museum, Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Memorial Museum (p597). Visitors can tour the collection of Ainu and railway-related items, as well as wear Ainu clothing and take a picture for free.

**Kotan Matsuri** (コタン祭り) Takes place in late September on the banks of the Ishikari-gawa, south of the city. During the festival you can see traditional dances, music and *kamui-nomi* and *inau-shiki*, prayer ceremonies offered to the deities of fire, the river, *kotan* (the village) and the mountains.

**Yuki Matsuri** (雪祭り) Held in Asahikawa every February. While second to the one in Sapporo (p577), it is still impressive, with ice sculptures, food and fun seasonal events.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Ryokan Tokiya** (時屋旅館; ☎ 23-2237; www.tokiyu.net/tokiyaryokan2.html; Nijō-dōri 9-6; r per person with shared/private bathroom ¥4725/5250, incl 2 meals ¥6300/7350; ☎) North of the station, this place is inviting, well decorated and reasonably priced.

**Tōyoko Inn Asahikawa Ekimae** (東横イン旭川駅前; ☎ 27-1045; www.toyoko-inn.com/eng; Ichijō-dōri 9-164-1; s/d high season ¥6400/8800, low season ¥4800/6800; ☎) This chain's clean, convenient Asahikawa clone.

**Asahikawa Terminal Hotel** (旭川ターミナルホテル; ☎ 24-0111; www.asahikawa-th.com/contents/intl/index\_english.htm; s/d ¥5800/7600; ☎) As you exit JR Asahikawa station, it's just to the left.

**Ganso Asahikawa Rāmen Ichikura** (山頭火 元祖旭川らーめん 一蔵; ☎ 24-8887; 7-3 Sanjō, Yamada Bldg 1F; dishes ¥700-1200; ☎ 11-4am Thu-Tue) One of many popular Asahikawa *rāmen* shops, and there are dozens. Bowls here come with plenty of scallions, and it's open late – really late – if you need a bite before stumbling home. Follow the pedestrian street to the jazz statue and go to one more light, then turn left. It's on the next corner, opposite a 7-11.

**Saroma-ko** (サロマ湖; ☎ 22-6426; 6-1 Sanjō; meals ¥3500; ☎ dinner) A little pricey, but if the owner is driving a four-hour round trip daily to get the freshest scallops from Saroma Lake, it's worth it. Come here for the freshest seafood prepared with care by a chef who's not afraid to close the restaurant if the shellfish doesn't meet his finicky standards. Try the scallop sashimi (*hotate no sashimi*) or the oysters steamed in sake (*kaki no sakemushi*). Find it by going straight out on the pedestrian street, then turn left at Sanjō street (shortly after the jazz player and cat statue, with Okuno on your left), then pass Compa 37 on your left. Go through the light, then look for Saroma-ko at the left corner of the next intersection. No English menu.

## Getting There & Around

Asahikawa is a central location with frequent plane, train and bus access. Flights head di-

rectly to and from Osaka, Nagoya and Tokyo. Buses between the airport and JR Asahikawa station (JR 旭川駅; ¥570, 35 minutes) are timed to connect with arrivals and departures.

Trains link Asahikawa with Sapporo (*tokkyū* ¥4680, 1½ hours) to the south, Wakkanai (¥8070, four hours) to the north, Abashiri (¥7750, 3¾ hours) to the east, and to the smaller sightseeing towns of Biei (¥530, 30 minutes) and Furano (*futsū* ¥1040, 1¾ hours).

Buses leave from 20 different stops spread out over three streets in front of the train station. If you are using Asahikawa as a springboard for a day trip to Daisetsuzan, set your alarm early and catch the 9.10am bus: the next one leaves at 10.45am and arrives an hour later, which does not leave much time for hiking – and don't miss the last bus back to Asahikawa at 5.05pm.

Unless you feel confident reading the frequently changing route schedules, you're best off asking for assistance either at the tourist information counter in the station or at the bus info booth across the street from the train station parking lot. Plan on allowing extra time for navigating if you're on a tight schedule, and be sure to check departure times – it's easy to miss a bus and end up with very little time at your destination.

## WAKKANAI 稚内

☎ 0162 / pop 41,400

Wakkanai, Japan's most northern mainland city, is closest to the island's two most northern capes, Noshappu and Soya, and that's the biggest tourist draw. Depart here for Rishiri-tō and Rebun-tō, islands off the coast, and, further off, Russia's Sakhalin Island. It's a quiet town whose economy depends on kelp fishing and tourism. The views of the water and its fishing boats are very picturesque all year round, and many brave the bitter cold to see the frozen bay in the dead of winter, a majestic (but chilly!) scene.

In late February Wakkanai hosts the **Japan Cup National Dogsled Races** (全国犬ぞり稚内大会). As the name implies, it's the biggest dogsled race in Japan. People come from Tokyo or Osaka to watch or compete – though where someone from Osaka practises their mushing is a bit of a mystery. For those with a plucky pooch of their own, their is the *wan-wan-dash*, where audience dogs can show their speed.

## Information

Wakkanai station is right next to the bus terminal and only a 10-minute walk from the ferry port. Internet access is hard to come by. **Tourist information counters** (☎ 22-2384; ☎ 10am-6pm) are at Wakkanai station and the **ferry port** (☎ 7am-3.30pm Jun-Sep). At the time of research there was no internet café – nor any plans for one.

## Sights & Activities

**Wakkanai-kōen** (Map p602), atop a grassy hill a few blocks from the train station, offers a number of walking tracks and the **Centennial Memorial Tower** (稚内開基百年記念塔; ☎ 24-4019; admission ¥400; ☎ closed Nov-Apr) has 360-degree views of Northern Hokkaidō. On clear days Sakhalin Island is visible. One monument is dedicated to the 22 dogs who accompanied Japan's first South Pole expedition. A modest **temple** is right next to the now defunct ropeway's lower terminal. The 19 Tanka (31-syllable poem) Trail leads up to the plateau – in spring, it's full of wildflowers. It's named for the 19 *tanka* poems that are inscribed on boards along the way.

Between Wakkanai and Cape Noshappu are interesting **kelp drying yards** (they look like gravel-covered carparks if they're not covered with kelp) along the shoreline.

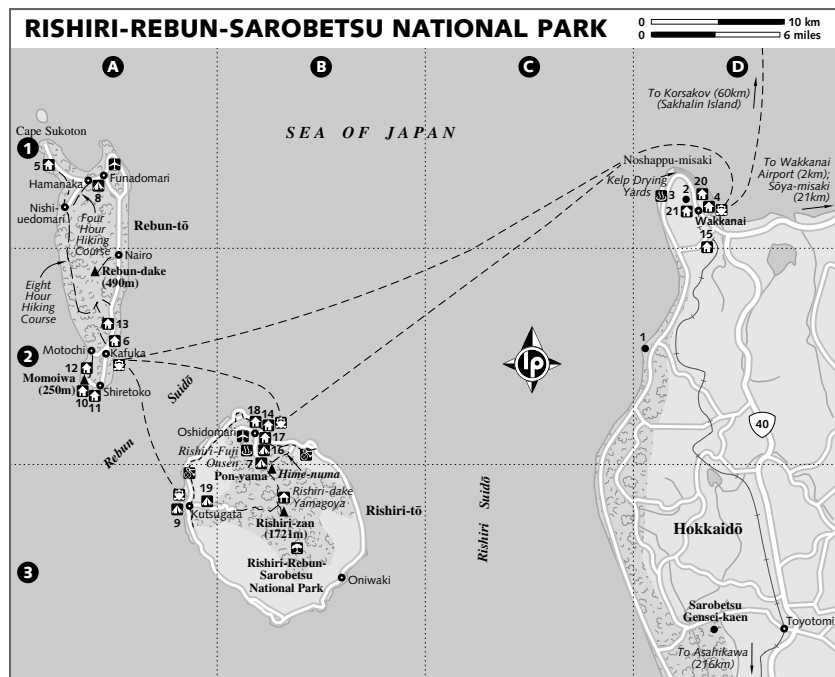
**Cape Noshappu** (ノシヤップ岬), the second-most northern point in Japan, is a nice place for a picture or a picnic, or just to watch the water for a while. If it's clear, look for the green flash as the sun slips below the horizon; if you see it, make a wish. It's a pleasant walk (35 minutes) or bike ride (15 minutes) away from town.

**Cape Soya** (宗谷岬), 30km from Wakkanai, is the real thing: mainland Japan's most northern point. A bus leaves four times a day (¥1350, 50 minutes). Among Cape Soya's various monuments is one dedicated to the victims of Korean Flight 007, shot down in 1983 by a Soviet fighter jet. Bird-watchers will love seeing hawks sitting side by side with seagulls and terns on the wave-washed black sand.

Busy and bustling, **Wakkanai Onsen Dōmu** (Map p602; ☎ 28-1160; onsen ¥600; ☎ 10am-10pm, closed 1st Mon of month) is an 18-minute bus ride from the station and offers nice views of the water, though the bath itself is more functional than luxurious.

**Harp seal viewing** (Map p602) is possible in Bakkai, where 200 harp seals arrive each year





## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Harp Seal Viewing あざらし観察所.. 1 D2	久種湖畔キャンプ場 .....	8 A1	Rishiri Family Campground Yu~ni 利尻ファミリーキャンプ場ゆーに .....	16 B2
Wakkanai Kōen 稚内公園 .....	Kutsugata-Misaki Camping Ground 碓形岬キャンプ場 .....	9 A3	Rishiri Fuji Kankō Hotel 利尻富士観光ホテル .....	17 B2
Wakkanai Onsen Dōmu 稚内温泉童夢 .....	Kāchan Yado かあちゃん宿 .....	10 A2	Rishiri Green Hill Youth Hostel 利尻グリーンヒルユースホステル .....	18 B2
<b>SLEEPING</b>	Minshuku Shiretoko 民宿しれとこ .....	11 A2	Rishiri-shinrin-kōen Camping Ground 利尻森林公園キャンプ場 .....	19 A3
ANA Hotel Wakkanai 稚内全日空ホテル .....	Momoiwa-sō Youth Hostel 桃岩荘ユースホステル .....	12 A2	Saihate Ryokan さいはて旅館 .....	20 D1
Field Inn Seikan-sō フィールドイン星鏡荘 .....	Nature Inn Hanashin ネイチャーイン花心 .....	13 A2	Wakkanai Moshiripa Youth Hostel 稚内モシリパユースホステル .....	21 D1
Hana Rebun 花れぶん .....	Pension Misaki ペンション岬 .....	14 B2	Wakkanai Youth Hostel 稚内ユースホステル .....	(see 15)
Hokuroku Camping Ground 北麓キャンプ場 .....	Rider House Midori-yu ライダーハウス緑湯 .....	15 D1		

ground is free, but often too windy to be particularly comfortable.

**Rishiri-tō Family Camp Ground Yu~ni** (☎ 82-2166 May-Oct, 82-1114 Nov-Apr; camp site per person ¥500, 4-person cabins ¥4000) This is a new camping ground, catering mainly to families. Get off at the Onsen Hoyoshisetsu bus stop.

**Rishiri-shinrin-kōen Camping Ground** (☎ 84-3551; 1-/2-person cabins ¥2500/3000) About 25 minutes' walk from the ferry terminal.

**Hokuroku Camping Ground** (☎ 82-2394; 4-person cabins ¥3000) Quite popular with hikers, perhaps because it's right near the start of the

Rishiri-zan track. Only ¥300 per person if you have a tent.

**Rishiri Green Hill Youth Hostel** (☎ 82-2507; dm ¥3990; ☹ Mar-Sep) About 25 minutes' walk from Oshidomari-kō port or a short bus ride (¥260) to the Gurin-Hiru-Yūsu-Hosuteru-mae stop. Staff will be able to provide info on hiking Rishiri-zan, and you can also rent bicycles.

**Minshuku Kutsugata-sō** (民宿くつがた荘; ☎ 84-2038; r per person incl 2 meals ¥7350) Right in Kutsugata, about 10 minutes' walk from the ferry pier near the town's (only!) traffic light. It's casual and favoured by workers as well as tourists.

**Pension Misaki** (☎ 82-1659; www.misaki.burari.biz/ in Japanese; r per person incl 2 meals ¥7875, Jun-Aug ¥8925) An informal place with harbour-view Japanese-style rooms and a Japanese bath. It's six minutes' walk from the ferry.

**Rishiri Fuji Kankō Hotel** (☎ 82-1531; per person incl 2 meals high season ¥23,000; ☹ closed Dec-Feb) A popular spot for those on bus tours, this new hotel has Japanese-style rooms with private facilities as well as a public, *onsen*-fed bath.

## EATING

Rishiri-tō is a great place for fresh seafood of all kinds, but *uni* (sea urchin) is mouthwatering. People have been known to travel all the way from Tokyo simply to eat it here. The stall **Aji-no-Ichiba** (味の市場; ☎ 82-1105; ☹ 9am-3pm late Jul-Aug) serves seafood straight from the local fishing boats to your mouth, sometimes with no cooking in between. Live *uni* cost ¥500. Look for a small, nondescript building next to a warehouse with an *uni* tank and Coca-Cola vending machine; exit to the right from the Oshidomari ferry terminal.

## GETTING THERE &amp; AROUND

From Rishiri-tō there are flights to Sapporo (¥23,200, 50 minutes). The island bus runs by the airport only once a day from Oshidomari (¥310, 20 minutes) or Kutsugata-kō port (¥520, 25 minutes). A taxi costs ¥1200. For details of ferry services, see Wakkanai (p601).

**Buses** (☎ 84-2550) run in both directions around the island's perimeter, completing a circuit in about two hours (¥2200). The trip from Oshidomari to Kutsugata (¥730) takes 30 to 50 minutes, depending on whether the bus stops at the airport and/or *onsen*.

Bicycling is another great way to see the island. Rent them from the youth hostels or shops near the Oshidomari ferry terminal. A leisurely circuit of the island (56km) takes anywhere from five to seven hours. A 29km cycling path runs through woods and coastal plains from Oshidomari past Kutsugata.

## Rebun-tō 礼文島

☎ 0163 / pop 3330

Shaped like an arrowhead (or a dock-dried squid), Rebun Island is a naturalist's dream: fields of over 300 species of wildflower explode from May through to August; the terrain is varied and each walking track is unique; and the beaches harbour all sorts of cool finds,

from interesting (and edible!) marine animals to semiprecious stones. Some people may wish to hire a scooter or motorcycle, as its one road leads past some gorgeous coastline.

The only main town is the small port of Kafuka, where the ferry arrives several times a day. From there several of the hiking tracks are within walking distance, and someone at the **tourist information counter** (☎ 86-2655; ☹ 8am-5pm mid-Apr-Oct) in the ferry terminal will point out the best routes or discuss your options in detail, as well as giving you maps and schedules.

## ACTIVITIES

Most people come to Rebun-tō to **hike**, whether it is the eight-hour version or some of the tamer three-hour counterparts. It's a good idea to take a bus to the northern tip of the island, Cape Sukoton, and hike your way back past breathtaking cliffside vistas, fields of flowers and dwarf bamboo, thick forests and tiny fishing villages tucked tightly into the island's many coves. Anyone injured has to be rescued by boat, so group hiking is encouraged.

A four-hour hike runs from Cape Sukoton to Nishi-uedomari, then northeast to the bus stop at Hamanaka. The common route is from north to south. Momoiwa-sō Youth Hostel and other lodgings have info about the nearby hiking options and how to get to trailheads.

Another popular hike is from Nairo, halfway down the east coast, to the top of Rebun-dake. The peak is modest by any standards (490m) but the hike is a pleasant 3½ hours return. Near the port in Kafuka there is a wildflower loop leading across a backbone of spectacular highlands to Momoiwa (enigmatically named 'Peach Rock', as it bears far more resemblance to a breast than to its namesake fruit) and then down through flower fields and dwarf bamboo to the lighthouse at Cape Shiretoko. It's a great two-hour taste of the island's beauty for those without a lot of time.

Watch the weather carefully and plan ahead. Warm layers and rain gear are recommended. Do *not*, under any circumstances, drink unpurified water, as fox faeces now contaminate the streams (foxes were introduced from Russia in the 1930s).

## SLEEPING &amp; EATING

A few of the more attractive *minshuku* here no longer accept foreigners, a casualty of the

fact that many foreigners did not understand they had no choice in what food was served (p600), and many close on 1 September when the relatively short tourist season ends.

**Kushukohan camping ground** (☎ 87-3110; entrance fee per person ¥600, tent ¥500, 4-person cabins ¥2000; ☞ May-Oct) This lakeside camping ground also has cabins and bungalows.

**Momoiwa-sô Youth Hostel** (☎ 86-1421; dm ¥5725; ☞ Jun-Sep) Famous for hard hikes by day and camp songs and craziness until lights out at 10pm, this eclectic youth hostel (located in an old herring house) has quite a devoted following. It has an absolutely stunning location on Rebun's west side, is just a few minutes' walk from several hiking tracks and has easy access to the rock-strewn sea. Beds are a combination of Japanese-style dorms (on tatami mats) and bunks. Staff can pick you up when the ferry docks: look for the flags and the enthusiastic guys yelling *okaerinasai!* (Welcome home!). If you're coming by yourself, you can take a Motochi-bound bus and get off at the Yûsu-mae station (15 minutes). From there it's a 17-minute walk to the hostel.

**Field Inn Seikan-sô** (☎ 87-2818; http://homepage1.nifty.com/seikanso/main/p030000.htm; dm ind 2 meals ¥6000; ☞ May-Oct) More peaceful than Momoiwa-sô and also convenient for hiking. take a bus to Cape Sukoton (ask the driver to let you off at Seikan-sô). After getting off the bus, take the unpaved road to the west. Staff can pick you up at the ferry if you phone ahead.

**Nature Inn Hanashin** (☎ 86-1648; www16.plala.or.jp/hanashin in Japanese; r per person with shared bathroom ind 2 meals low/high season from ¥6800/8190) Popular and well kept. However, despite the price, most rooms do not have their own bathroom. It does have a new wing with a toilet and sink in each room (those rooms cost an additional ¥2000). It is a 25-minute walk from Kafuka-kô: walk toward Shimadomari and you'll find it on the left. By bus, head in the Shimadomari direction and get off at 'Youth Iriguchi'.

**Kâchan Yado** (☎ 86-1406; fax 86-2188; http://web-kutsurogi.net/kaachan/index.html in Japanese; r per person ind 2 meals ¥7500, Jun-Aug ¥8000) Translates to 'Mum's Place'. Warm and (according to travellers!) has nice toilets (these are in the new 'washlet' style, which allow for wash, rinse and blow dry after the morning's business is finished). Get off the bus at the Shiretoko stop, walk five minutes along the road and the inn is on your right. You can arrange to be collected from the port if you call ahead.

**Minshuku Shiretoko** (☎ 86-1335; per person ind 2 meals ¥8400) Has great views of the water and the presiding Rishiri-zan beyond. The owner is a fisherman and prides himself on hand-catching the evening's meal. To get here just get off the bus at the Shiretoko stop.

**Hana Rebun** (☎ 86-1177; www.hanarebun.com in Japanese; r ind 2 meals ¥30,000) For honeymooners who really want to remember something special, this super-luxury hotel offers balcony *rotemburo* in each room (a choice of porcelain or slightly pricier *hinoki* - an aromatic Japanese cypress wood often used in high-end *onsen* baths) that look out at Rishiri-tô, sunken *kotatsu* (a heated table with a cover over it to keep the legs and lower body warm) surrounded by beautiful tatami and exquisite meals. Head right as you leave the port and Hana Rebun is about 10 minutes' walk on the left.

#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

From Wakkanai there are infrequent flights each day to Rebun-tô (¥9930, 20 minutes). The closest bus stop to the airport is Kûkô-shita ('Below the Airport') and you'll need to walk 15 minutes to the terminal. The ferry (two hours) leaves five times a day between May and mid-September, four times a day between mid-September and December and in March and April, and twice a day in January and February.

Many lodgings will help out with transport to walking tracks or the ferry port, but packing light can help make the trip more pleasant; you can leave luggage in coin lockers in Wakkanai JR station if need be. Five buses per day run along the island's main road from Kafuka in the south to Cape Sukoton in the north (¥1180, 70 minutes). There are bus routes to Shiretoko (¥280, 13 minutes) and Motochi (¥440, 16 minutes) as well. Service is greatly reduced from November to April, so check the timetable at the Kafuka ferry terminal on arrival.

Bikes, scooters, motorcycles and cars can all be rented; as a last resort, hitchhiking will often get you where you need to go.

#### DAISETSUZAN NATIONAL PARK & ENVIRONS 大雪山国立公園

Daisetsuzan, Japan's largest national park (2309 sq km) and one of its first, consists of several stunning mountain groups, volcanoes, *onsen*, picturesque lakes and thick forests. It also includes Asahi-dake (2290m), Hokkaidô's

highest peak. Those on a tight schedule should at least try to get to Asahidake Onsen for a quick peek, but try to give yourself two days, maybe three, if possible. It's spectacular.

Buses come to the peak from Asahikawa, Biei, Furano (all are to the west), Kamikawa (north), Kitami (east) and Obihiro (south). All have hiking information available at their tourist information offices. There is a very detailed map series (in Japanese) called *Daisetsuzan Attack* (¥1000), and Lonely Planet's *Hiking in Japan* gives thorough coverage of Daisetsuzan's most spectacular hikes and how to best prepare for them.

#### Furano 富良野

☎ 0167 / pop 25,230

Famous for its lavender fields, delicious melons, excellent skiing and the late-July **Heso Matsuri** (へそ祭り; Navel Festival). If you've been pining for a place where you can strip off your shirt and have a scary traditional mask painted onto your torso before you go reveling, you've come to the right festival. *Tobiiri odori* ('jump right in' dancing is part of the fun; as with *sumô*, it helps to be heavy.

In case you're scratching your head trying to figure out the connection between this town and belly buttons, it's because Furano is in the geographical centre of Hokkaidô: the middle.

#### INFORMATION

Outside Furano station there are two **information offices** (☎ 23-3388; ☞ 9am-6pm). Across the station you can hire bicycles for ¥250 per hour. Free internet terminals (15 minutes only) in the offices show the town's saintly goodwill towards weary internet junkies.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

For many people, **Furano** (☎ 22-111; www.princehotels.co.jp/ski/furano\_e/index.html; lift tickets full day/night only ¥4000/2700; ☞ day 8.30am-3pm, night 3-9pm) is all about the ski slopes. The FIS World Cup and Snowboarding World Cup are held here yearly at the **Furano Ski Jô** (Map p606) at the Shin Furano Prince Hotel. The slopes are a mix between beginner and intermediate, with a small section devoted to advanced. The fastest gondola in Japan whisks you to the top, where 24 runs cover three mountainsides, all with perfect powder snow. Night skiing is available. Snowboarding is allowed on all slopes; skis, snowboards, boots and poles can

all be rented at the Shin Furano Prince Hotel (p606), either as a set (¥4200) or individually (price varies). Outerwear is also available for an extra charge. The season runs from late November to early May.

If you're not going skiing or getting behind the wheel, the **Furano Wine Factory** (ふらのワイン工場; ☎ 22-3242; ☞ 9am-4.30pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Sep-May) is about 4km northwest of the station, and offers tours explaining the wine-making process. A **Grape Juice Factory** (ふらのぶどう果汁工場; ☎ 23-3033; ☞ 9am-4.30pm Jun-Sep) is nearby, about 1.5km away. Gourmands could then continue on to the **Furano Cheese Factory** (Map p606; ☎ 23-1156; ☞ 9am-5pm May-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Apr, closed 1st & 3rd Sat & Sun of month Nov-Apr), which has selected tastes - try the squid ink brie, among others. Admission also includes the **Ice Milk Factory** (ふらのアイスマルク工房; ☞ 9am-5pm May-Oct). All have free admission and (excluding the Ice Milk Factory) free cheese and milk samples. Japanese signage only, but it is fairly self-explanatory: just insert desired edible into your open mouth, then chew or swallow. For those who feel far from the farm there's even a robotic milking cow; for ¥100 you can grab a teat and go at it, but the recorded moo: *priceless*.

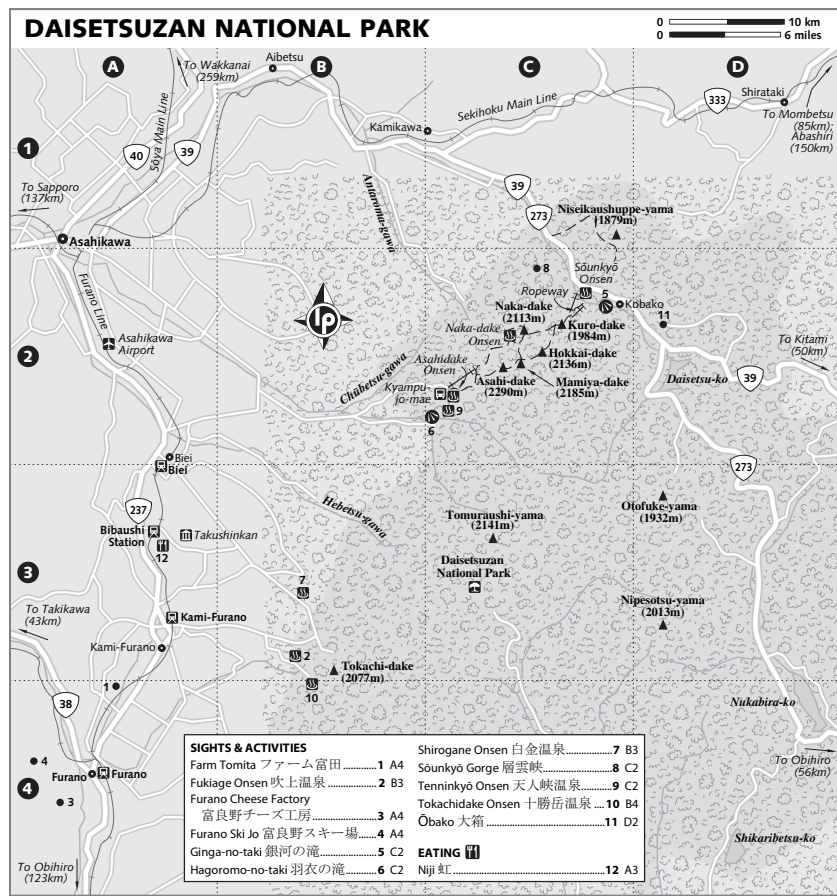
From June to September there are infrequent buses to most of Furano's attractions, including the stunning lavender fields at **Farm Tomita** (Map p606; ☎ 39-3939; www.farm-tomita.co.jp/e/index.html; admission free; ☞ 9am-4.30pm Oct-late Apr, 8.30am-6pm late Apr-Sep), or the summer-only **Lavender Farm station** (ラベンダー畑駅; ☞ Jun-Oct), where a purple, lavender-flavoured, soft-serve ice-cream cone costs ¥250.

Also in September is the **Furano Wine Festival**, with tasting and buccolic merriment. A barbecue lets you buy local produce and then grill it for yourself, while costumed revellers stamp barefoot on grapes in a barrel.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Minshuku**, ryokan, hotels and pensions abound, but if you're planning a skiing trip it's best to book lodging through an agent, as often they have very cheap packages that include lift tickets, accommodation and sometimes train fare.

**Furano Youth Hostel** (ふらのユースホステル; ☎ 44-4441; www4.ocn.ne.jp/~furanoyh/english.htm; dm ¥3360; ☐) Comfy and close to the station, it's in a big farmhouse with an expansive deck. Meals feature many homegrown vegetables.



For travellers with disabilities, the hostel is also barrier free.

**Alpine Backpackers** (アルパインバックパッカーズ; ☎ 22-1311; fax 23-4385; www.alpn.co.jp/english/index.html; bunk beds per person with shared bathroom Apr-Oct/Dec-Mar ¥2500/2700; ☑) Cosy, clean little place with a youth-hostel feel. Only a few minutes' walk from the Kitanomine lift, so it's a great choice for anyone on a budget who's planning on mainly spending time on the slopes.

**Rokugō Furarin Youth Hostel** (ろくごうふらりんユースホステル; ☎ 29-2172; www2.odn.ne.jp/rokugo-furalin/in Japanese; dm ¥3360) This place really feels like home. It's airy and un-institutional with simple decorations that seem more like a kid's room than a hostel. Rooms have bath-

rooms with basins. The breakfast is buffet style (¥600) and most ingredients are organic and locally produced. From Furano station it's a 15-minute bus ride to the terminus at Rokugō, but you can get a free lift from the station if you phone ahead.

**Sumire Ryokan** (すみれ旅館; ☎ 23-4767; 4-30 Asahi-machi; r per person ¥3800, incl 2 meals ¥6000; ☑) An informal standby, with cats and washing machines, that's only five minutes on foot from Furano station.

**Shin Furano Prince Hotel** (新富良野プリンスホテル; ☎ 22-1111; www.princehotels.co.jp/ski/furano\_e/access.html; d per person from ¥16,200; ☑) Right at the base of the gondola, recently remodelled, this top-end hotel has snazzy rooms and a variety of restaurants, bars, and souvenir stands. Ski-

included winter packages are as low as ¥8000 per person.

If you're looking to unwind after a long day at a place that's not a Japanese snack-style pub, check out **Furano Bar Bocco** (フラノバーボッコ; ☎ 22-1010; www10.plala.or.jp/bocco/English/index.htm; cocktails ¥500-700; ☎ 6pm-2.30am; E), a fun watering hole that sometimes has 'English-speaker' get-togethers; offers a good selection of both international and local alcohols. Closes on irregular days.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Most lodgings will help you arrange transport to the ski lifts and back. You can also hoof it most of the time, as many places are close to Furano station.

On the JR Furano line, *kaisoku* trains from Asahikawa reach Furano in 1¼ hours (¥1040), some continuing on to Obihiro (¥2420) in another two hours. Frequent local trains along this line stop at Kami-Furano (¥350, 20 minutes) and Biei (¥620, 40 minutes). *Futsū* trains go to Takikawa (¥1040, 67 minutes) where you can catch *tokkyū* to Sapporo (¥3410, one hour). Fairly frequent buses connect Furano with the rest of Hokkaidō as well: Asahikawa (¥860, 95 minutes, eight per day) and Sapporo (¥2100, two hours and 51 minutes, four per day) are common destinations. A *Lavender Express* special seasonal train runs direct from Sapporo (¥4340, two hours) to Furano, daily from early June to 31 August, and on weekends and holidays from September to the end of October.

### Biei 美瑛

☎ 0166 / pop 11,700

With the dramatic Daisetsuzan mountains in the background, Biei is an artist's and nature-lover's mecca. The open fields, often covered in lavender or poppies, are so different from the rest of the mainland that you'll wonder if you have left Japan and somehow ended up in rural France. The ubiquitous tour buses will bring you back to reality, particularly in late June and July when the flowers peak. It's a fun place to visit any time: walking and cycling the dirt roads in summer, enjoying the autumn leaves, then cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in winter. If you want to sit down and relax, there are many coffee shops and art galleries.

### INFORMATION

The **tourist information building** (美瑛町観光協会; ☎ 92-4378; www.eolas.co.jp/hokkaido/sikibiei/

☎ 8.30am-7pm May-Oct, 8.30am-5pm Nov-Apr) is outside Biei station. Staff here and at lodgings can supply you with cycling maps and a tourist booklet, *Hokkaidō Town of Hills Biei*, which contains an English-language map and details of local sights, outdoor activities and even art classes if Van Gogh starts whispering in your ear. Bike hire is available at several places, including **Gaido no Yamagoya** (ガイドの山小屋; ☎ 95-2277; www.yamagoya.jp; ☎ 8am-6pm), which has electrically assisted bicycles (great for those up-down hills!) for ¥600 per hour, as well as normal shopping bikes for ¥200 per hour. Across from Biei station, try **Matsuura Co** (松浦商店; ☎ 92-1415; ☎ 8am-7pm), which has both electric bicycles (¥600 per hour) and normal bicycles (¥200 per hour). Whether you walk or ride, stick to the paths and roadsides: don't tramp through the farmers' fields or steal tastes of the produce that peoples' livelihood depends upon.

### SIGHTS

There are numerous art galleries and museums in the area. One of the most famous is **Takushinkan** (拓真館; ☎ 92-3355), a lovely museum dedicated to the internationally known photographer Shinzō Maeda (1922-98), whose stunning photographs of the Tokachi area are famous for their unusual colour and composition. The museum is a 10km-drive by car or taxi from Biei in the direction of Bibaushi. The road is full of panoramic vistas of pretty hills covered at different times of year with sunflowers, lavender, white birches or snow.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Most of the lodgings are set in gorgeous areas among fields or flowers, but they're not close to the station. Many will arrange to pick you up at the station if you call ahead.

**Our pick** **Biei Potato-no-Oka Youth Hostel** (美瑛ポタトの丘ユースホステル; ☎ 92-3255; www.potatovillage.com/hpeng/engtop.html; dm ¥3800) Friendly English-speaking staff and comfortable bunks. Meals (extra cost) are available, but they are quite fancy, and usually feature Hokkaidō meats or produce. Star-gazing is included in the hostel's list of activities, and bikes can be hired by those looking to get away from it all. Pick-up to go to the hostel must be arranged at the station.

**Hotel L'Avenir** (ホテル ラブニール; ☎ 92-5555; www.biei-lavenir.com in Japanese; r per person incl 2

meals from ¥5500; ☎) Turn left out of JR Biei station, pass the tourist info booth, and L'Avenir is just beyond: a clean, modern place with Western-style rooms and hands-on crafts and activities, such as making your own butter, cheese, bread or ice cream.

**Auberge Hermitage** (オーベルジュ・エルミターージュ; ☎ 92-0991; <http://lilac.hokkai.net/~erumi/> in Japanese; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥17,500) A comfortable place plopped in the middle of gorgeous fields. Sophisticated, and with lovely Western-style rooms, it also has delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen (all of the meals are homemade by the chef on premises). The 24-hour Jacuzzi with a large picture window is a swanky addition, made better by the fact that you can reserve it for private use and thus not have to share. This upscale hotel only has six rooms, so book ahead.

**Niji** (Map p606; ☎ 95-2492; meals from ¥800; ☎ lunch-dinner Fri-Wed) Surely a great example of the international ideal: an American-style log cabin up on the Biei farmland hills, serving up authentic Korean dishes: sizzling stone *bibimbap* or spicy soups. It has great views, too. No English menu, but the owner gladly makes suggestions or points out daily specials.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Biei is on the JR Furano line between Asahikawa (*futsū* ¥530, 30 minutes) and Furano (¥620, 40 minutes). From near Biei station there are frequent buses to Asahikawa (¥520, 50 minutes).

#### Tokachi-dake, Fukiage & Shirogane Onsens 十勝岳 吹上温泉 白金温泉

Northeast of Furano, these remote hot-spring villages are less crowded than most other areas and offer good bases for hikes into Daisetsuzan National Park. You can climb the peak **Tokachi-dake** (十勝岳; 2077m) in a day; some tracks extend as far as Tenninkyō Onsen or the peak Asahi-dake, though these require three to four days of hiking. About 3km from Tokachi-dake Onsen, on the road to Shirogane Onsen, Fukiage Onsen has a free, public *rotemburo* overlooking a gorge. Locals say there have been some thefts of items left in cars, so lock your doors.

For accommodation, camping is the cheapest way to go (per person ¥500).

**Kamihoro-sō** (カミホロ荘; ☎ 0167-45-2970; r per person incl 2 meals ¥10,390), in Tokachi-dake, has large Japanese-style rooms and pleas-

ant hot-spring baths with a great view of the surrounding mountains. If coming by bus, get off at Kokumin Shukusha Mae; the bus drops you off almost right in from of Kamihoro-sō.

Very close to Fukiage Onsen's public *rotemburo*, **Hakugin-sō** (白銀荘; ☎ 0167-45-4126/3251; dm ¥2750) is a dorm-style place with a kitchen (though no meals are served, guests can cook for themselves) and beautiful baths, which are open to the public for day use (¥600, 10am to 10pm).

An inexpensive option at Shirogane Onsen is **Shirogane Onsen Shirakaba-sō** (白金温泉白樺荘; ☎ 0166-94-3344; r per person ¥3050); rates include access to the hot-spring baths.

From Kami-Furano station, it's a 45-minute bus ride to Tokachi-dake Onsen (¥500). Buses to Shirogane Onsen leave from Biei frequently (¥600, 30 minutes). There are also up to four buses a day direct from Asahikawa to Shirogane Onsen (¥1100, 1½ hours).

#### Asahidake Onsen 旭岳温泉

☎ 0166

This cosy, forested, hot-springs resort consists of some 10 small inns at the foot of Asahi-dake. At the end of the road, **Asahidake ropeway** (cable car; ☎ 68-9111; [www.asahidakeropeway.com](http://www.asahidakeropeway.com); one way/return Jul-mid-Oct ¥1500/2800, mid-Oct-Jun ¥1000/1800) runs to within easy hiking distance of the peak. Though Asahidake Onsen is not overdeveloped, it can become quite crowded, particularly during autumn when the leaves begin to change colour. An *onsen* map is available at the ropeway, listing the locations, prices and hours of the various baths.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Even if you're not a hiker, don't miss a chance to visit this area. It's simply spectacular, and the ropeway gives a good taste of the view. Those who enjoy hiking will love the variety of tracks, many of which wind through very unique terrain that offers a mix of volcanic activity, fields, forests and foliage.

#### Hiking

There are dozens of hiking options in this area. The **Asahidake Visitors Centre** (☎ 97-2153; [www.town.higashikawa.hokkaido.jp/vc/](http://www.town.higashikawa.hokkaido.jp/vc/) in Japanese; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Oct, 9am-4pm Tue-Sun Nov-May) has excellent maps that the staff will mark with daily track conditions. From June to August the flowers are at their peak; foliage turns the hills

crimson and gold shortly thereafter, peaking in mid- to late September.

One popular hike follows tracks from the Asahidake ropeway via several peaks to Sōunkyō Onsen. The ropeway is open from 6am to 7pm from late June to August and shorter hours for the remainder of the year.

For those without a lot of time, there is also a 1.7km loop track that leads for about 50 minutes around the area before returning to the ropeway's upper terminal. On a clear day the views are spectacular, but even if it's cloudy or foggy the area has an ethereal, mystical quality that is awe-inspiring, passing lakes (some of which contain the elusive Ezo-salamander), boiling pools and wildflowers. It's easy to see why this area was one of the first places to be made a national park.

There are *rotemburo* off the northern route at Nakadake Onsen; branch left at Nakadake-bunki just before ascending Nakadake. Beware: the water in Yudoku Onsen is poisonous; don't touch it. From Asahidake Onsen there's also a 5.5km track leading through the forest in about two hours to Tenninkyō Onsen, a small hot-springs resort with a scenic gorge and the beautiful **Hagoromo-no-taki** (Angel's Robe Waterfall). In winter, cross-country skiing is possible on many of the tracks, too.

#### Onsen

This area is famous for *onsen* for a reason, and visitors luxuriate in the area's many baths. Most *onsen*, even at the higher-end hotels, are open for day use to the general public, but times and prices vary considerably. A useful map and guide is available from the tourist info booth at the ropeway's lower terminal. Prices range from ¥500 up to ¥1500. Bringing your own wash cloth and towel can save the additional ¥200 to ¥500 hire fee.

#### SLEEPING

If you're planning to do lengthy day hikes, staying overnight here will be much better than wasting all morning on the bus from Asahikawa.

**Daisetsuzan Shirakaba-sō** (大雪山白樺荘; ☎ 97-2246; <http://park19.wakwak.com/~shirakaba>; dm ¥6450, r per person incl 2 meals ¥7500) Both a hostel and ryokan, with separate pricing structures. Near the ropeway's lower terminal, this lodge-style place has both Japanese- and Western-style rooms and a large kitchen where you can cook

if you prefer not to have the included meals. Has indoor and outdoor *onsen*.

**Lodge Nutapukaushipe** (ロッジ・ヌタブカウシペ; ☎ 97-2150; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7350; ☎) One of the few nonsmoking options in Japan. A cosy, log-cabin style place, it has indoor and outdoor baths with a ¥500 day-use option. It's also a *rāmen* shop, with a yummy *kitopiro rāmen* topped with Ainu scallion.

**Asahidake Manseikaku Hotel Beamonte** (旭岳万世閣ホテルベアモンテ; ☎ 97-2321; tw per person double occupancy ¥13,275-22,200; ☎ ☎) A fancy resort hotel with giant indoor and outdoor baths, several restaurants, a well-appointed lounge, massage chairs, and pleasant Western- or Japanese-style rooms. Prices vary substantially depending on the season, and it can be quite full at times; calling ahead is a good plan. Visiting the bath only is possible for ¥1500.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

For much of the year (mid-October to mid-June) the bus from Asahikawa station to Asahidake Onsen and Tenninkyō Onsen is actually *free*. In the high season the price jumps to ¥1000, but if you spend more than ¥2000 at Asahidake Onsen (that includes lodging, a ¥2800 ropeway ticket, food... anything – just save your receipts), you can get a coupon for a free return, available at the ropeway station's information counter. Buses from Asahikawa are infrequent and quite inconvenient for those wishing for a nice Daisetsuzan day hike: take the 9.10am bus at stop 4 or you'll find yourself without a lot of time. The first bus from Asahidake Onsen departs at 9.15am, the last bus is a frustratingly early 5.05pm, so keep your eye on the clock if you need to get a bus back to Asahikawa. Buses between Asahidake Onsen and Tenninkyō Onsen are always free.

#### Sōunkyō Onsen 層雲峡温泉

☎ 01658

The town of Sōunkyō Onsen, known for its *onsens*, is a gateway for forays into the interior of the park as well as the gorge, Sōunkyō, but hikers may wish to continue to Asahidake Onsen instead of stopping here. It's mainly tracks, a few seasonal attractions and some scenic views – some of which are disappointing.

The **tourist information office** (☎ 5-3350; ☎ 10.30am-5pm), on the 1st floor of the public bath Kurodake-no-yu, has several maps

and English-language pamphlets. Its booking service may be useful if you arrive in high season. Just up the hill, **mountain-bike hire** is available for ¥2000 per day. Next to the ropeway terminus, the park **visitor centre** (☎ 9-4400; <http://souunkyovc.town.kamikawa.hokkaido.jp> in Japanese; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Oct, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-May) can provide information on park conditions.

After a hard day of cycling or hiking, **Kuro-dake-no-yu** (黒岳の湯; ☎ 5-3333; admission ¥600; ☎ 10am-9pm Thu-Tue) offers handsome hot-spring baths (including *rotemburo*). It's on the town's main pedestrian street. You can also soothe your aching feet in the free **ashi-no-yu** (foot bath), next to the Ginsenkaku Hotel.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Sōunkyō 層雲峡

This **gorge** (Map p606) stretches for about 8km beyond Sōunkyō Onsen and is renowned for its waterfalls – **Ryūsei-no-taki** (流星の滝; Shooting Stars Falls) and **Ginga-no-taki** (Milky Way Falls; Map p606) are the main ones – and for two sections of perpendicular rock columns that give an enclosed feeling; hence their names, **Obako** (Big Box) and **Kobako** (小箱; Little Box).

Until recently it was possible to walk the entire 8km, but the riverside foot/bike path collapsed and has not been rebuilt, and cycling is not recommended because of hazardous tunnels. One bus runs daily to Ōbako (¥350, 35 minutes, 12.50pm) and returns about 30 minutes later, giving you almost no time to enjoy Ōbako's (albeit modest) charms.

### Hiking

The combination of a **ropeway and chairlift** (☎ 5-3031) provides fast access to **Kuro-dake** (黒岳; 1984m) for hikers and sightseers. One-way/return tickets on the ropeway cost ¥900/1750 and on the chairlift ¥400/600. Hours of operation vary seasonally (8am to 7pm in July and August, closed intermittently in winter).

In fair weather, a popular hike goes to **Asahi-dake** (旭岳; 2290m) from either Sōunkyō Onsen or Asahidake Onsen. You can arrange to leave your baggage at either end and pick it up later or, better yet, take advantage of the coin lockers inside Asahikawa station before heading into the park. You could also do day hikes from the top of the Sōunkyō lift station to nearby peaks.

From July to the end of September, one bus a day goes to Ginsen-dai, where the trailhead **Aka-dake** (赤岳; 2078m) is located. The bus

leaves Sōunkyō Onsen at 6.02am and returns from Ginsen-dai at 2.15pm (¥800, one hour), leaving you plenty of time for your ascent and descent.

A short, steep and very pretty track runs up to Sōbākudai, a scenic overlook of the two waterfalls, Ryūsei-no-taki and Ginga-no-taki. Look for the steps leading up the hill directly behind where the bus stops. It takes about 20 minutes to reach the top.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

### Hyōbaku Matsuri (氷瀑まつり; Ice-Waterfall Festival)

From the end of January to the end of March, this festival features ice sculptures, tunnels and domes, some lit up.

### Kyōkoku Hi Matsuri (峡谷火まつり; Kyōkoku Fire Festival)

This celebration on the last Saturday in July is meant to purify the hot springs and appease the mountain and fire deities. Revellers perform traditional Ainu owl dances and drumming, climaxing with archers shooting flaming arrows into the gorge.

## SLEEPING

### Sōunkyō Youth Hostel (層雲峡ユースホステル; ☎ 5-3418; [www.youthhostel.or.jp/souunkyō/](http://www.youthhostel.or.jp/souunkyō/); dm ¥2940; ☎ Jun-Oct)

Dwarfed by the Prince and Taishetsuzan hotels, this hostel is about a 10-minute walk uphill from the bus station. Mostly bunk-bed accommodation, it has information on the walking tracks in the park, organises hikes and hires out gear for braving the elements. Bike hire costs ¥500 per day.

**Ginsenkaku** (銀泉閣; ☎ 5-3003; [www.ginsenkaku.com](http://www.ginsenkaku.com); r per person incl 2 meals high/low season from ¥15,900/10,500) Ginsenkaku is a professional operation across from Minshuku Midori that has some English-speaking staff, Japanese-style rooms with full facilities (ie bathroom with bath, toilet and basin) and warm, steamy common baths, including *rotemburo*.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Sōunkyō Onsen run approximately every two hours via JR Kamikawa station to Asahikawa (¥1900, 1¾ hours). Rail pass holders may want to do part of the trip by train and get off at Kamikawa, thus reducing the bus fare to ¥770. Up to four buses a day run direct to Kitami (¥2500, 1¾ hours), where you can transfer for connections to Bihoro (¥860, 43 minutes). From May to October, there are up to three buses a day from Bihoro to Kawayu Onsen in Akan National Park (¥1920, 2¾ hours).

From Sōunkyō Onsen there are two buses a day to Kushiro (¥4790, five hours and 20 minutes) via Akan Kohan (¥3260, 3¾ hours) in Akan National Park. There are also two buses a day to Obihiro (¥2200, 80 minutes), which follow a scenic route via Nukabira-ko.

## DŌ-TŌ (EASTERN HOKKAIDŌ) 道東

### ABASHIRI 網走

☎ 0152 / pop 40,600

To most Japanese, Abashiri is as synonymous with the word prison as Alcatraz is to Westerners. Mention of the prison (still in operation) once sent chills through the spines of even the most hardened criminals. Winters here are as harsh as they come, yet this is exactly why the area's become a tourist attraction. Looking out at a snow-white plain of frozen ice floes is a surreal experience, and the sound of icebergs grinding together from the force of the sea's currents make a deep impression on all who hear it. Appreciation for nature's grandness, even for its bleakness, is very Japanese.

The town's economy now depends on fishing, tourism and trade with Russia, its nearest neighbour.

The closest major city to Shiretoko, Abashiri is a good hub for hikers but the winter ice floes, the September coral grass, its Abashiri Prison Museum (not to be confused with the prison itself) and its Northern Peoples' Museum are also worthwhile.

In the dead of winter, when up to 80% of the sea is ice-clogged, **Aurora icebreaker sightseeing boats** (流氷観光砕氷船オーロラ; ☎ 43-6000) depart four to six times a day from Abashiri port for one-hour cruises (¥3000) into the Sea of Okhotsk. In summer, the northern coastal areas are a pretty, easy walk, perfect for photography, with lots of sand dollars and other small shells.

### Information

The **tourist information office** (☎ 44-5849; [www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~abashiri/e/index\\_e.html](http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~abashiri/e/index_e.html); ☎ 9am-5pm) outside Abashiri station has the excellent English-language *Okhotsk Abashiri Tourist Guide*, maps and discount coupons for several of the local attractions.

## QUIRKY HOKKAIDŌ EVENTS

- Sapporo's Yuki Matsuri (Snow Festival) – spectacular ice sculptures grace the streets (p577)
- Marimo Matsuri in Akan Kohan – return fuzballs of algae to Akan-ko (p616)
- Orochon-no-Hi (Fire Festival) in Abashiri – fire dancers gyrate in flames (p612)
- Japan Cup National Dogsled Races in Wakkanai – watch as dogs dash and fur flies (p599)
- The Kyōkoku Hi Matsuri (Fire Festival) at Sōunkyō Onsen – flaming arrows are shot into a gorge (opposite)
- 'Come Back Salmon' night in Abashiri – grill seafood while watching salmon return to spawn (p612)
- Heso Matsuri (Navel Festival) in Furano – celebrate innies and outies in style (p605)

## Sights & Activities

Tento-zan, the main mountain presiding over Abashiri (207m), is steep enough that its 5km climb will leave you winded unless you're going by bus or car. At the top, however, are some excellent views, a park and several interesting museums. A cycling road runs for 25km from Abashiri proper to the coral-grass viewing areas and beyond, providing some beautiful views of the area's lakes, forests and pumpkin fields.

**Abashiri Prison Museum** (網走監獄博物館; ☎ 45-2411; [www.kangoku.jp/world/index.htm](http://www.kangoku.jp/world/index.htm); admission ¥1050; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) details many of the reasons that this prison was so feared. Inmates braved brutally cold winters with thin bedding and very little heat: one lone pipe ran the length of the corridors, providing almost no heat for those in the cells but a decent amount for the wardens. Unfortunately, the English signs here are quite difficult to understand (as is the website, although the pics are useful), making it harder to get the most from the exhibitions, which are worthwhile.

**Abashiri Prison** (網走刑務所), across the river and still a working penitentiary, has a **gift shop and tiny museum** (☎ 43-3167; ☎ 9am-4pm) where crafts made by inmates can be purchased. It's also possible to walk around outside the prison walls, though further entry and photographs are prohibited.

**Museum of Northern Peoples** (北方民族博物館; ☎ 45-3888; www.hoppohm.org/english/index.htm; admission ¥450; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is a few minutes' walk downhill from the summit of Tonto-zan. It is a state-of-the-art place with numerous exhibits of Ainu culture, as well as Native American, Aleutian and other indigenous peoples. An English pamphlet and small signs help visitors make the most of their tour.

Recently renovated, the unique **Okhotsk Ryūhyō Museum** (オホーツク流氷館; Museum of Ice Floes; ☎ 43-5951; www.ryuhokan.com in Japanese; admission ¥520; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) has odd ice-related exhibits. One of the more interesting is a display relating to the tiny *kurione* (aka Sea Angels), a funky relative of the sea slug, which is sort of an Abashiri mascot.

**Tartaruga** (タルタルーガ; ☎ 61-5201; www.tarzuga.co.jp; per day, 2 dives ¥30,000; ☎ Jan-Mar) will bring you face-to-face with that odd mollusc, the *kurione*. Non-*kurione* dives are possible the rest of the year, too.

Stare out at the frozen landscape while grilling your preferred foods and drinking an alcoholic beverage of your choice on the **Ryūhyō Norokko Sightseeing Train** (流氷のろっこ観光列車; admission ¥810; ☎ late Jan-mid-Mar). The train slowly runs through a field of utter white snow, and from the window you can see the frozen Sea of Okhotsk. It stops at Kitahama station (right at the coast) for 10 minutes, and travellers can get a close look at what these waters become in wintertime. Steel yourself for the cold (dress warmly) and for the aroma of dried toasted *surume* (squid), as both are part and parcel of this interesting ride.

**Wakka Gensei Kaen** (ワッカ原生花園; ☎ May-Oct), the biggest coastal wildflower garden in Japan, is 20km long and up to 700m wide and boasts more than 300 species. It's an hour's bus ride from Abashiri station; take a bus from stop 2.

If you're looking to spend a day on the slopes, you'll find powder at **Kamui Ski Links** (カムイスキーリンクス; ☎ 72-2311; www.kamui-skilinks.com; lift ticket ¥2500; ☎ 9am-5pm Dec-Apr). This top-rated resort is the site of several snowboarding competitions and has an even mix of beginner, intermediate and advanced slopes, including one of Japan's longest – 3500m. Eight lifts and 10 courses help to keep crowds down, though at times it gets windy, especially at the top. There's no night skiing here, but

Kamui is less pricey than some of its southern competitors, and much less crowded than any of the resorts outside Sapporo.

## Festivals

**Orochon-no-Hi** (オロチョンの火) A fire festival held on the last Saturday in July, derived from the shamanistic rites of the indigenous Gilyak people, who once lived in the Abashiri area.

**Coral Grass Viewing** (サンゴ草群落地) Known as salt pickle or glasswort in other parts of the world, this humble marsh plant gets its 15 minutes of fame in mid-September, when it turns bright red. Busloads of tourists flock to a few boardwalk-viewing spots. Nature lovers will enjoy the bird life, as the marshes attract not only seagulls, but curlews, terns, egrets, herons and more.

**Come Back Salmon Night** (カムバックサーモンナイト) A welcome to the lake's most famous (and delicious!) fish. Each year (mid-October to mid-December, depending on the fishes' schedule) the salmon run upstream, greeted by bright spotlights that illuminate the fish as they pass into Abashiri Lake. Nearby grilling stations serve *sanma* (a dark, oily and delicious seasonal fish that's distantly related to mackerel, but smaller), scallops, squid and venison, often with free tastes. Salmon – the guest of honour – is *not* served... *not that* night anyway.

## Sleeping

**Minshuku Hokui 44** (民宿ほくい44; ☎ 44-4325; www.11.plala.or.jp/hokui44/in Japanese; dm incl 2 meals ¥4300) This *minshuku* is a Toho network member and offers dorm-style beds. The rate includes free admission (and a ride) to the nearby *onsen* hotel. If you phone ahead, someone will pick you up at the station and save you the 20-minute walk; however, no English is spoken.

**Abashiri Gensei-kaen Youth Hostel** (網走原生花園ユースホステル; ☎ 46-2630; http://sapporo.cool.ne.jp/genseikaen; dm incl 2 meals ¥5200) In the middle of a wildflower reserve, the hostel offers views of Shari-dake and Shiretoko-hantō. It is a good idea to call ahead as the opening hours vary.

**Abashiri Central Hotel** (網走セントラルホテル; ☎ 44-5151; www.abashirich.com; s/tw ¥7350/12,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Another nearby option, with LAN access in all rooms. Rooms are equipped with fridge, PJs, slippers, and even shaving kits. Unlike some hotels, this place accepts all major credit cards.

## Eating

There are small eateries – the usual *rāmen* shops, *izakaya* and *yakiniku* places – in the

side streets along the main arcade that runs the length of Abashiri, but the ones that aren't snack/whiskey bars close early.

**Kandō Asa-ichi fish market** (感動朝市; ☎ 43-7666; ☎ 6.30-9.30am Mon-Fri, 6.30-10.30am Sat & Sun mid-Jul-15 Oct) A great option for fresh fish lovers: select your own seafood and cook it on one of the open-air grills. Free shuttles leave from several major hotels; ask your lodging for details. Salmon (which can be fished right out of the river!) is superb.

**Abashiri Beer Kan** (網走ビール館; ☎ 45-5100; meals ¥700-2000; ☎ lunch & dinner) A microbrewery with various flavours on tap; offers mainly Western-style food, but some Japanese dishes, including a crab special, are also available. No English menu, but pics make things easy. The jumbo croquette (*korokke*) is tasty comfort food.

**Murakami** (むらかみ; ☎ 43-1147; www.drive-net.com/murakami/in Japanese; from ¥945) Delicious sushi in a small, Japanese-style place. The owner changes the menu daily based on what's fresh from the boat each morning. In season, *sanma*, a thin, oily fish somewhat like mackerel, is fantastic. No English menu.

## Getting There & Away

Memanbetsu airport links Abashiri with Sapporo, Fukuoka, Nagoya, Osaka and Tokyo. Airport buses (¥750, 30 minutes) are approximately timed to flights and run from the bus station via Abashiri station (they're about 1km apart) to the airport.

Abashiri is the terminus for the JR Seki-hoku main line, which runs across the centre of Hokkaidō to Asahikawa (*tokkyū* ¥7750, 3¼ hours). Local trains run along the same route and stop at Bihoro (¥530, 30 minutes) and Kitami (¥1040, 50 minutes). From May to October there are up to three buses a day from Bihoro to Kawayu Onsen in Akan National Park (¥1920, about 2½ hours). From Kitami you can catch buses to towns near Daisetsuzan National Park (¥2500, two hours).

Abashiri is the terminus for the JR Senmō main line, which runs east to Shiretoko-Shari station and then south to Kushiro. One direct bus daily links Abashiri and Shari (¥1120, 65 minutes).

Direct buses from Abashiri to Sapporo (¥6210, six hours) leave from the bus terminal, a 10-minute ride east of Abashiri station. Between June and mid-October there are three buses from Memanbetsu airport via Abashiri

to Utoro in Shiretoko National Park (¥3000, 2½ hours).

Hiring a car may be the best option for those who want to get to the more remote sections of Shiretoko-hantō or Akan. Car-rental agencies such as **JR Hokkaido Rent a Lease** (ジェイアール北海道レンタリース; ☎ 43-6197; car hire per day from ¥6000; ☎ 8am-6pm Jan-Apr & Nov-Dec, 8am-8pm May-Oct) are located near the station, and you will need a valid International Driving Permit.

A ¥900 ticket gives all-day entry on a tourist-loop bus which stops at many of the major sites, including the museums (not the coral grass), as well as the bus and train terminals. Bikes may also be hired from **JR Hokkaido Rent a Lease** (ジェイアール北海道レンタリース; ☎ 43-6197; bike rental per hr ¥500; ☎ 8am-6pm Jan-Apr & Nov-Dec, 8am-8pm May-Oct), right in front of the station, though you should make sure the tyres have been inflated well if you're heading up Tonto-zan or out to the coral grass areas.

## AKAN NATIONAL PARK 阿寒国立公園

This expansive park (905 sq km) contains volcanic peaks, large caldera lakes and thick forests. Its scenic views attract over 6.6 million visitors per year, but it is big enough that even at peak times there are ways to get away from it all, particularly if you're looking to hike or meander around the forest tracks. There are numerous day-hike options and a few longer ones. Bears are a possible problem, and foxes, both common and cunning, often steal unguarded food or even sleeping bags.

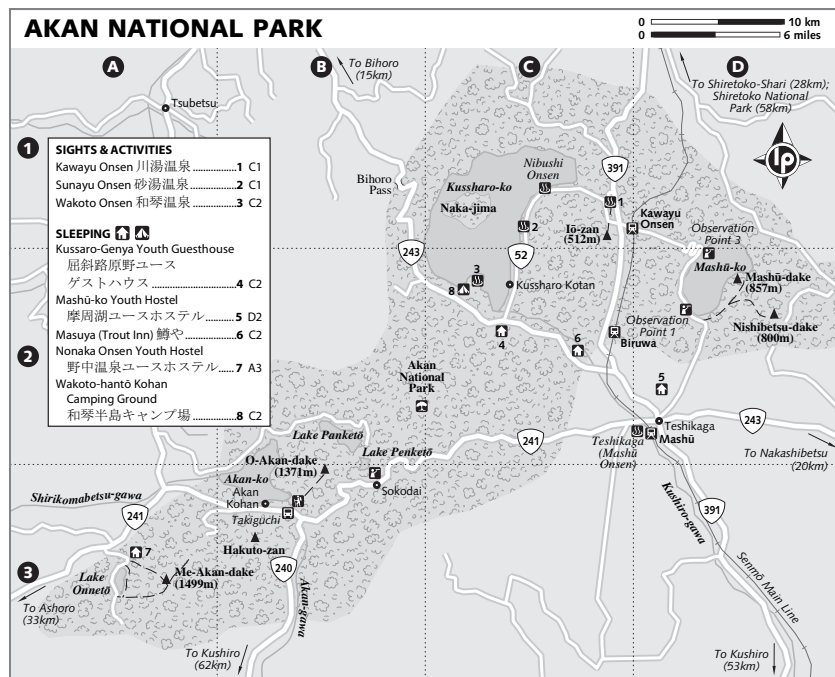
The main access points are Abashiri and Bihoro to the north, and Kushiro to the south. Kawayu Onsen and Akan Kohan are its two main towns. Teshikaga (aka Mashū Onsen) is a useful transport hub.

**Akan Bus Company** (www.akanbus.co.jp in Japanese) provides tours and a running commentary (in Japanese) about the sights and attractions, stopping here and there for picture taking at some of the most scenic viewpoints. If that's unappealing to you, hire a car and don't look back. With your own wheels you'll be free to travel anywhere, even to hop over to Shiretoko National Park.

## Kawayu Onsen 川湯温泉 ☎ 015

A quiet *onsen* town, Kawayu has numerous *ashiyu* (foot *onsen*) where travellers can soak tired feet in hot water, in addition to the usual





spas. Often free, they are sprinkled throughout the town and there is even one in the town's JR station. This area is accessible by train from Kushiro city, a do-able day trip.

The **tourist information office** (☎ 483-2255; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-May) is about 10 minutes on foot from the Kawayu bus station, and a good source of information. Pick up a copy of the English-language *Teshikaga English Guide Map* and, if you need to, ask the staff to help you book accommodation. Mashû, a little further south, is an alternative access point for the park and may actually be closer to some of the following attractions.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Sumo fans will enjoy **Koki Taiho Sumô Memorial Hall** (川湯相撲記念館; ☎ 483-2924; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-May), a small museum dedicated to a hometown hero.

**Iô-zan** (硫黄山; 512m) is a hellish mountain with steaming vents, sunshine-yellow sulphur and *onsen*-steamed eggs. You'll hear the sellers calling *Tamago! Tamago! Tamago!* (Eggs!) even before you reach the carpark. Though highly touted and a sickly

brownish-green, they don't taste much different from a regular kitchen-boiled egg.

The walk from Kawayu JR station to Kawayu Onsen (4km) is very pretty and passes Iô-zan along the way (1.5km). Its birches, stunted pines and other greenery can be pretty any time of year but are particularly nice in the autumn months of August and September.

Considered by many to be Japan's most beautiful lake, **Mashû-ko** (摩周湖) once held the world record for water clarity, with visibility of 35m. The island in the middle was known by the Ainu as 'Isle of the Gods'.

**Kussaro-ko** (屈斜路湖), the other major lake, is famous for its swimming, boating and volcanically warmed sands. Naka-jima is the aptly named 'middle island' that's in the centre of the lake, which has its own version of the Loch Ness monster, named 'Kusshi'. No one has yet claimed it to be a hoax, so if you're a Nessie fan, at least here in Hokkaidô you still have hope.

**Sunayu Onsen** (Map p614), a stretch of hot sand along the edge of Kussaro-ko, has too many souvenir stands, paddle boats and

tourist-trap kitsch to really be relaxing, but it's nonetheless quite popular.

**Wakoto Onsen** (Map p614) is special not for what it *has*, but for what it *doesn't*; it just doesn't get any simpler than this: a scalding hot pool in the middle of nowhere on the southern shore of a beautiful lake. Best reached by car or bicycle, Wakoto Onsen has none of the razzle-dazzle of most spa resorts. There's no electricity, no soap, no buckets, not even any doors on the bathhouse: you just strip, dip and enjoy. Not for everyone, but true *onsen* buffs will appreciate it. It has a view of the western side of Lake Kussahro and, in season, snow geese fly overhead as the sun slips behind the mountains. Not for the modest either, as it's a *konyoku* (mixed sex) bath and there's algae on the rocks, which makes getting in and out a slippery affair. If it's too hot when you stick a toe in, try moving further away (towards the lake, not the bathhouse) and you'll find it's a slightly cooler shade of scalding.

A **Museum of Ainu Folklore** (斜路コタンアイヌ民族資料館; ☎ 484-2128; admission ¥310; ☎ 9am-5pm mid-Apr-Oct) at Kussaro Kotan displays tools and crafts.

### SLEEPING

Camping is an option, as there are seven camping grounds in the vicinity.

**Wakoto-hantô Kohan Camping Ground** (☎ 484-2350; tent sites ¥450, cabins ¥4500; ☎ mid-May-Oct) One of the nicest camping grounds, it also has Spartan cabins. Canoes and kayaks are available for hire. Accessible by bus from Mashû, Bihoro and Kawayu Onsen.

**Mashû-ko Youth Hostel** (☎ 482-3098; www.masyuko.co.jp; dm ¥3900; ☎) A handsome farmhouse south of Mashû-ko. Internet access available (30 minutes for ¥100). If you know you will arrive after 4pm, call ahead for a lift. Opening hours may vary in December.

**Kussaro-Genya Youth Guesthouse** (☎ 484-2609; www.gogogenya.com/intro/e-intro.htm; dm from ¥4700; ☎ Jan-Mar May-Oct; ☎) Fancier than the average hostel and surrounded by pretty farmland. Unlike many comparable places, here it's OK to pay by credit card.

**Masuya** (Trout Inn; ☎ 482-5489; dm incl 2 meals ¥5700; ☎) Toho network member. The owner loves trout fishing and is happy to talk shop with fellow flycasters. Call ahead to be collected from Mashû station.

**Onsen Minshuku Nibushi-no-Sato** (温泉民宿にぶしの里; ☎ 483-2294; www1.ocn.ne.jp/~kussie; r per

person incl 2 meals ¥8550; wi-fi) Log-cabin feel and casual, with mountain bikes for hire and an indoor, lake-view, hot-springs bath.

**Misono Hotel** (御園ホテル; ☎ 483-2511; www.misonohotel.com in Japanese; high/low season incl 2 meals ¥10,650/8550; ☎) Luxurious hot-spring baths, private facilities (bath, toilet and sink) and a choice of Western- or Japanese-style rooms. A free *ashiyu* outside marks the carpark.

### EATING

**Genpei** (源平; ☎ 483-3338; 1-5-30 Kawayu Onsen; dishes ¥600-1000; ☎ dinner) Across from the tourist centre, this is an atmospheric *izakaya*: follow the aromas of *robatayaki* and *râmen*. Yum!

**Marukibune** (丸木舟; ☎ 484-2644; dishes ¥400-1500; ☎ 11am-7.30pm) Next door to the Museum of Ainu Folklore in Kussaro Kotan. The 'white *râmen*' (noodles in milk broth) is unique and fun. Gourmands looking for adventure will enjoy the sashimi of *parimono* (a local river fish): so fresh that the head arrives still moving. Ainu music performances (¥3000) are given on certain Saturday nights: be sure to call for a reservation as seating is limited.

**Great Bear** (グレートベア; ☎ 482-3830; breakfast ¥800, dinner ¥1000-1500) The 'de facto' hall of the Mashû-ko Youth Hostel. Serves a variety of food, including steaks and curry with rice, but make sure your dinner is ordered before 7pm.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

The JR Senmô main line runs north from Kawayu Onsen to Shiretoko-Shari (*kaisoku* ¥900, 53 minutes) and south to Kushiro (*kaisoku* ¥1790, 111 minutes) via Mashû station. Kawayu Onsen station is a 10-minute bus ride from the town centre (¥280) but the buses are infrequent, and while they are timed to meet most of the trains there is not much time to transfer. A soak in the *ashiyu* or a quick trip to the toilet may leave you with a long wait... or walk instead.

From Kawayu Onsen bus station there are up to three buses a day to Bihoro (¥1920, about 2½ hours). The Bihoro service runs via scenic Bihoro Pass, and some of these buses continue onward to the Memambetsu Airport. These buses also pass Nibushi, Sunayu and Wakoto Onsen.

Between May and October a sightseeing bus service runs four times a day from Kawayu Onsen bus station via the main sights

in the park to Akan Kohan (¥2100, 2¼ hours). It stops for sightseeing and picture taking (all the major places are covered). If you're low on time and don't mind a tour, this is a nice way to see the area.

Buses between Kawayu Onsen and Mashū station cost ¥1080. Direct buses between Mashū Onsen and Wakoto-hantō (¥880, 35 minutes) pass the turn-offs for the Trout Inn, Sussharo Genya Youth Guesthouse and the camping ground at Wakoto-hantō.

Between Mashū station and Akan Kohan is a particularly scenic stretch on Rte 241, with an outstanding lookout at Sokodai that overlooks the lakes Penketō and Panketō.

Cycling is a good way to get around – but check distances carefully before a lengthy ride. Mashū-ko is a steep climb...and a quick return. Bikes can be hired at the bus station, Kawayu Onsen JR station or at the petrol station down the street (two hours for ¥600).

### Akan Kohan 阿寒湖畔

☎ 0154

Busy Akan Kohan has one of the largest Ainu *kotan* settlements in Hokkaidō and is a hot spot for anyone interested in the ancient culture. The resort area isn't scenic, but the walking tracks are a great getaway. The **tourist information office** (☎ 67-3200; 2-1-15 Akan-ko Onsen; ☎ 9am-6pm) has pamphlets about the park in English, including excellent alpine trail guides with contour maps of O-Akan-dake and Me-Akan-dake.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The Ainu village is on the western side of town, with woodcrafts, leatherwork and other handmade items on sale. At the top of the hill is the **Ainu Seikatsu Kinenkan** (アイヌ生活記念館; Ainu Lifestyle Memorial Hall; ☎ 67-2727; admission ¥300; ☎ 10am-10pm May-Oct), but it's small – perhaps a disappointment if you've already seen other Ainu exhibitions elsewhere. **Onnechise** (オンネチセ; admission ¥1000) is next door and better value: Ainu dance performances take place six times a day in the high season. Shows are at 11am, 1pm, 3pm, 8pm, 9pm and 10pm from April to October, and at least once a day the rest of the year (there are only one or two shows at night during winter). The **Akan Forest & Lake Culture Museum** (森と湖の美術館; ☎ 67-2001; admission ¥500; ☎ 10am-5pm May-Oct) has more Ainu displays and the friendly staff are happy to explain exhibits, run the slide show and offer you a cup of coffee.

Akan-ko is famous for *marimo* (*Cladophora aegagropila*), spheres of algae that are both biologically interesting (it takes as much as 200 years for them to grow to the size of a baseball) and very *kawaii* (cute). Only growing in a few places in the world, Akan *marimo* became endangered after being designated a national treasure: suddenly, everyone in Japan wanted one. The building of a power plant (which lowered the lake level several inches) did not help the plight of these green benthic fuzballs. The Ainu finally came to the rescue by starting the **Marimo Matsuri** (まりも祭り), held in mid-October, which returns *marimo* to Akan-ko, one by one. Their numbers are growing but they are sometimes affected by natural disasters: typhoons can push as much as 50% of them out of the lake. Luckily, locals quickly return them to the water as soon as the winds have subsided.

The **Akan Kohan Eco-Museum Centre** (阿寒湖畔エコミュージアムセンター; ☎ 67-4100; admission free; ☎ Wed-Mon) is a good way to see *marimo* up close without spending a bundle on the **boat trip** (☎ 67-2511; www.akankisen.com in Japanese; 1hr trip ¥1350); there is an option of a 45-minute or one-hour trip, but only the hour-long boat trips include 15 minutes of *marimo* viewing. The museum has well-maintained exhibits with lots of photographs, and a number of *marimo* in aquarium tanks. It also has hiking maps and displays about the local flora and fauna. The *bokke* (bubbling clay pools) walk makes a shaded, breezy loop out to the lake and back through some pine forest, with views of obliging tufted-eared squirrels, chipmunks and birds.

### Hiking

About 6km east of Akan Kohan is **O-Akan-dake** (雄阿寒岳; Male Mountain; 1371m). Buses to Kushiro pass the Takiguchi trail entrance five minutes out of Akan Kohan. The ascent takes a fairly arduous 3½ hours and the descent takes about another 2½ hours. From the peak there are very fine views of the lakes Penketō and Panketō, and in summer the top is covered with alpine wildflowers. On clear days one can even see as far as Daisetsuzan National Park.

The highest mountain in the park, **Me-Akan-dake** (雌阿寒岳; Female Mountain; 1499m), is an active volcano and is often closed due to emissions of poisonous gas. Ask at the tourist information office about current conditions

and pay careful attention to noxious effects of sulphur fumes as you hike.

The shorter climb to the observation platform on Hakutō-zan (650m) affords fine views of the lakes and the surrounding peaks. Starting at the Akan Kohan skiing ground 2km south of town, the ascent takes about an hour, winding through birch and fir forests and past several groups of bubbling sulphur hot springs (too hot to bathe in: don't try!).

### SLEEPING

There are several small *minshuku* in the Akan Kohan area.

**Nonaka Onsen Youth Hostel** (Map p614; ☎ 0156-29-7454; Ashoro-chō Moashoro 159; dm ¥2910) Provides Japanese-style rooms, its own *onsen* and a base for climbing. Often booked in advance, so make reservations early.

**Yamaguchi** (山口; ☎ 67-2555; www.tabi-hokkaido.co.jp/~yamaguchi; 5-3-2 Akan Onsen; r per person incl 2 meals ¥5925) Clean and friendly with (yep, there's a theme here...) nice hot-spring baths with a high mineral content. Don't get confused and think the water's dirty; the colour comes from the minerals in the water itself. It's family run and one of the few places that's still quite reasonably priced. It has Japanese-style rooms and a fancier meal option (costs extra) is also offered.

**Minshuku Kiri** (民宿桐; ☎ 67-2755; www10.plala.or.jp/kiriminsyuku/in Japanese; 4-3-26 Akanko Onsen; r per person incl 2 meals ¥6500) Above a souvenir shop, opposite the Emerald Hotel. Famous for its hot-spring baths.

**New Akan Hotel Shangri-la** (ニュー阿寒ホテルシャングリラ; ☎ 67-2121; www.newakanhotel.co.jp/english/index.htm; d per person incl 2 meals ¥11,700) The luxurious multipooled baths here rotate genders daily (meaning what's used by men one day is used by women another, allowing guests who stay multiple nights a chance to see all the baths, despite the fact they're gender segregated), and it has both Japanese- and Western-style room options. A fake planetarium in the lobby – though impressive – is a bit over the top.

### KUSHIRO SHITSUGEN NATIONAL PARK 釧路湿原国立公園

Japan's largest expanse of undeveloped marshland (269 sq km), this wetland is nearly the size of Tokyo and provides shelter for thousands of different species of wildlife. Among them is the *tanchō-zuru* (red-crested white cranes),

a traditional symbol of both longevity and Japan. They're also just plain cool, and several viewing areas let you watch these enormous birds in relative comfort as they land, feed, tend their young or do their mating dance. The peak crane season is winter to early spring, but even in August a few stragglers may be around if you're lucky. Binoculars are a must for any serious bird-watchers. If you're staying at the Kushiro Shitsugen Tōro Youth Hostel, you can use their spotting scope for free.

The park has a slow scenic train (with wood-finished cars) that runs along the eastern edge and provides good views of the marsh; the *futsū* train also follows the same tracks. Sit on the left for unhindered glimpses of the marsh.

Deer are so common in this area that the trains have a special *shika-bue* (deer whistle) to scare them off. To see even more wildlife, take a night train and stand in the front to look straight out at the tracks. You're sure to see deer; foxes are common and you could see other animals as well. It's an unorthodox but effective way to see wildlife and (usually) the beasts have the sense to stay off the tracks as the train passes by.

The park is best reached by train or car from Kushiro, the nearest large city, about 20 minutes away. You can take either a scenic train or a regular train to **Hosooka Observatory** (細岡展望台; ☎ 40-4455; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm summer, 9am-5pm winter) on the eastern side, or a bus (¥660, 40 minutes) to the **Kushiro Observatory** (釧路湿原展望台; ☎ 56-2424; admission ¥360; ☎ 8.30am-6pm summer, 9am-5pm winter) on the west. The former is atop an overlook where one can appreciate the grand scale of this wetland preserve. Kushiro station also has an **information booth** (☎ 22-8294; ☎ 9am-noon & 1pm-5.30pm) and a **Postal ATM** (☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun).

### Sleeping & Eating

Kushiro has a number of inns, hotels, *minshuku* and ryokan. It is also the birthplace of *robatayaki* (meat or seafood slow-grilled over hot charcoal) and is the sister city of Burnaby, Canada.

The breakfast, served on the top floor of **Kushiro Royal Inn** (釧路ロイヤルイン; ☎ 31-2121; www.royalinn.jp; low season s/d internet booking ¥5000/7200; ☎ ☎ ☎), is wonderful. The rooms are what one expects in a business hotel, small but efficient, and it's (literally) a stone's throw from the station.

Redone and very spick-and-span, the comfortable, cosy **Kushiro Shitsugen Tōro Youth Hostel** (釧路湿原とうろユースホステル; ☎ 87-2510; www.sip.or.jp/~tohiro/sub1.htm in Japanese; dm ¥3360) is more like a *minshuku*, and as such is a great deal. Meals are delicious and the bunk-style rooms are big enough for you not to feel cramped. A viewing deck and excellent train station access make it even more convenient, though it can be (infrequently) noisy due to its proximity to the tracks.

**Kawamura** (川村 かわむら; ☎ 22-5692; 12-1 Suehirocho; meals ¥1500-2500) is where salarymen come when they're sick of *izakayas* and want good Japanese cooking. It's packed after 6pm... for good reason: platters of specialities are set around the counter, easy to point at when something looks good. Sake is served the way it should be: overflowing into a *masu* (measuring cup made of *hinoki* wood). The mackerel-in-miso (*miso saba*) is superb. From the station, turn left and look for the small alley behind Tōkyū Inn (on your right). Follow the alley and turn left at the first intersection. Kawamura is on your right, just after your turn.

Just to the right of Kushiro station on the corner after Lawson convenience store, the impressive **Washō Market** (和商市場; ☎ 22-3226; www.washoichiba.com; 25-13 Kurokane-cho; items from ¥200; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) features every possible seafood one can imagine, plus a food court of *bentō* boxes and other prepared dishes. It's a great place to buy a rice bowl and add your own toppings as *o-bāsan* (grandmotherly women) hand out treats for you to try.

## SHARI 斜里

☎ 0152 / pop 13,310

Shari is the closest train stop to Shiretoko-hantō (an hour's ride away). Unless you miss

the bus, you probably won't need to stay here, but the **tourist information office** (☎ 23-2424; 17 Minato-machi; ☎ 10am-5pm mid-Apr-mid-Oct) near the train station can provide maps and book accommodation.

**Koshimizu Gensei Kaen** (小清水原生花園; ☎ 63-4187; admission free; ☎ closed Nov-Apr) is an 8km stretch of wildflowers along the coast, only 20 minutes from Shiretoko Shari. Visit in late June to catch it at its peak: over 40 flowers simultaneously blooming.

If you need to spend the night, there a few options. The inexpensive **Kurione Rider House** (クリオネライダーハウス; ☎ 23-1889; tent & 1 person ¥1000) is about 25 minutes' walk from the station and has its own onsen. Bring your own bedding and expect things to be very casual. Another option that's right near the station is **Ryokan Tanakaya** (旅館たなかや; ☎ 23-3165; www.ryokan-tanakaya.com; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7350). The **Shari Central Hotel** (斜里セントラルホテル; ☎ 23-2355; r per person from ¥5800) is well maintained, and credit cards are accepted.

Infrequent trains connect Shiretoko-Shari station with Abashiri (*futsū* ¥810, 45 minutes) and Kushiro (*kaisoku* ¥2730, 2½ hours). Shari's bus centre is to the left as you exit the station. There are between five and nine buses daily, all year round, to Utoro (¥1490), but only three in summer that continue on as far as Iwaobetsu (¥1770, 70 minutes).

## SHIRETOKO NATIONAL PARK 知床国立公園

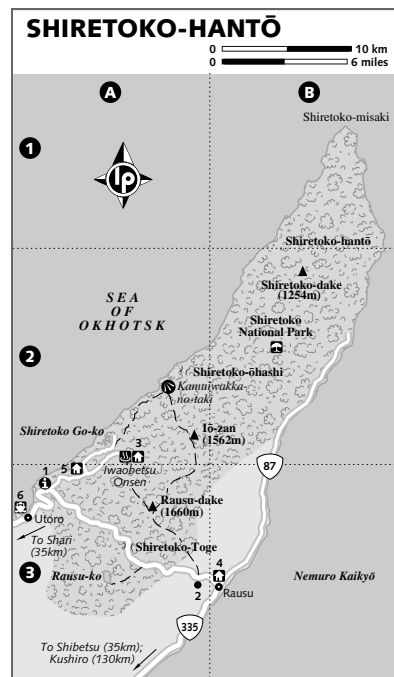
Shiretoko-Hantō, the peninsula that makes up Shiretoko National Park was known in Ainu as 'the end of the world', and it's aptly named. As remote as Japan gets, this magnificent park has no sealed roads within its boundaries save for a short northwest-southeast road that connects

### ACCIDENTAL TOURISTS

As remote as they are, Hokkaidō's indigenous species have recently been facing threats from accidentally introduced non-native animals and plants. Up north, Shiretoko's native *tanuki* (raccoon dog) is now competing with the robust non-native raccoon and, in the south lakes such as Tōya, introduced crayfish are taking over habitat that once belonged to native creatures.

Paradoxically, foreign visitors can often identify feral species more quickly than a Japanese tourist (many of whom haven't seen a lot of wildlife), so you can help by reporting to rangers any animals or plants that look just like the ones you see at home. A Shiretoko ranger said that Japanese people often misidentify a raccoon as a *tanuki* and don't bother to report it. If you're in doubt, look at the tracks – a raccoon has five toes on its front paws, the *tanuki* only has four.

Taking the time to rinse off your hiking boots and carefully check your hiking gear for stray seeds prior to a trip overseas can help minimise your own effects on the planet.



the town of Utoro (on the northwestern edge) with Rausu (on the southern side); two-thirds of the park has no roads at all. The hiking tracks to Shiretoko-misaki (知床岬) are for expert hikers only: remote and poorly maintained, they wind over slippery boulders and disappear at times on cliff sides. If the weather turns frigid or you slip and break an ankle, you'll need to hope that a passing fishing boat spots you before the bears do. Hiking must be arranged in advance: there are steep fines for anyone caught hiking off limits or after hours.

**Boat rides** (☎ 24-2147; trips ¥6000) can be an option for those who want to see Cape Shiretoko but can't make the hike. It's expensive, but the 3¼-hour trip may be your only way to see the spectacular cliffs that Shiretoko is famous for. Otherwise, postcards will have to suffice.

The **Shiretoko Nature Centre** (☎ 24-2114; info@shiretoko.or.jp; slide show ¥500; ☎ 8am-5.40pm mid-Apr-mid-Oct, 9am-4pm mid-Oct-mid-Apr) has maps, info and a 20-minute slide show about the peninsula. So few people get here that humans haven't ruined it yet: hikers will see pristine forests, remote vistas without a sign of habitation and lots of wildlife, including bears (see

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### SLEEPING

Iwaobetsu Nature Lodge  
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p620) and foxes. The latter can be dangerous too, so don't take any chances: some have been known to steal food or sleeping bags. In addition, fox faeces have contaminated the water with the parasite *echinococcus*, which can be deadly. Don't drink any water that hasn't been properly purified.

Unfortunately, Iwaobetsu Onsen (岩尾別温泉) and Kamuiwakka-no-taki (カムイワッカの滝), a stunning *rotemburo* waterfall, are closed for five years for maintenance and restoration, but Shiretoko-go-ko (知床岬; Shiretoko Five Lakes) offers hiking with beautiful views of the ponds and mountains behind them.

## Sleeping

**Shiretoko Iwaobetsu Youth Hostel** (☎ 24-2311; www.noah.ne.jp/shiretoko-ax; dm ¥4300; ☎ Mar-Nov) is in Iwaobetsu, a small village within the park and is a good spot for those wanting to hike. It offers briefings on hikes and also has mountain bikes for hire, but is closed much of December and April, so call ahead. **Iwaobetsu Nature Lodge** (岩尾別ネイチャーロッジ; ☎ 24-2311; www.noah.ne.jp/shiretoko-ax; dm ¥4300; ☎ Mar-Nov) is another option on the premises of the youth hostel. Things are casual, even shabby, but the chance to see wildlife is unparalleled. Bear, deer and fox are all regulars in the surrounding woods, and the staff know exactly when is the best time to see them.

**Kinoshita-goya** (木下小屋; ☎ 24-2824; dm ¥1575; ☎ Jun-Sep) is a mountain hut offering very basic accommodation right at the Rausu-dake trail-head. It is often booked solid, so call ahead.

## Getting There & Around

Do yourself a favour and hire a car in Kushiro if at all possible, as public transport is scarce (and comparably expensive). From late April

**WARNING: BEAR ACTIVITY**

The peninsula, Shiretoko-hantō, is home to around 600 brown bears, one of the largest bear populations in Japan. Park pamphlets warn visitors that, once they enter Shiretoko National Park, they should assume that bears could appear at any time. Favourite bear haunts include Shiretoko-go-ko (知床岬; Shiretoko Five Lakes) and the falls Kamuiwakka-no-taki.

Hikers are strongly advised not to go into the forest in the early morning or at dusk, and to avoid hiking alone. Carrying a bell or some other noise-making device is also recommended (bears don't like surprises). If you're camping, tie up your food and do not bury your rubbish. Bear activity picks up noticeably during early autumn, when the creatures are actively foraging for food ahead of their winter hibernation. Visitors should be especially cautious at this time.

to October buses run four times daily from Utoro (¥900, 50 minutes) along the northern side of the peninsula, passing the nature centre, the youth hostel, Shiretoko Go-ko and Kamuiwakka-no-taki before terminating at Shiretoko-ōhashi. For the rest of the year, buses run only as far as the nature centre. From mid-June to mid-October there are also buses four times daily to Rausu via the dramatic Shiretoko-Toge pass (¥1310, 55 minutes). Overnight buses direct from Chitose or Sapporo to Utoro (¥8000, seven hours and 25 minutes) or other nearby cities.

The one-way journey to Shiretoko-ōhashi takes 50 minutes, including breaks for gawking at deer, foxes and possibly bears. A few buses a day continue on to Utoro.

**RAUSU** 羅臼

☎ 0153

This fishing village once grew wealthy on the herring industry, though there's not much here now other than a few very beautiful hikes. A challenging but well-marked track to Rausu-dake starts a few kilometres outside of town towards Shiretoko-Toge, near the (free) camping ground at **Kuma-no-yu Onsen** (熊の湯温泉) – yes, that's 'Bear's Boiled Water', you heard right!

Hiking out to the tip of the peninsula is no longer possible: you will be heavily fined if rangers catch you on the unmaintained track, which is often eroded beyond recognition.

From Rausu, head towards the tip and keep an eye out for a large overhang on the left, marked by a small carpark. Peek under the overhang at **phosphorescent moss**, which humbly glows a bright shade of green and is visible even in daylight.

There are not many reasons to stay overnight in Rausu, but right by the seaside the well-regarded ryokan **Marumi** (☎ 88-1313; www

.shiretoko-rausu.com in Japanese; r per person incl 2 meals ¥9300; ☑) has Japanese rooms, lovely seafood meals, a *rotemburo* and sauna.

From mid-June to mid-October four buses a day (¥1310, 55 minutes) run between Utoro and Rausu via Shiretoko-Toge. From Rausu, buses run five times daily (¥4740, 3½ hours) all year round to Kushiro. Hiring a car and driving from Kushiro will save you a lot of time.

**NEMURO** 根室

☎ 0153 / pop 31,940

This tiny town's main attraction is its view of several islands, which (though a subject of heated debate) currently belong to Russia. It's the easternmost part of Japan, so those travellers who like to collect '–mosts' should be sure to come here. That said, there's not much else to do, and if the weather doesn't cooperate you end up looking at fog. On a clear day you get a view of some islands in the distance: the Hoppōryōdo islands are in dispute mainly because of their prime fishing grounds below the surface. English signage is limited, mainly plaques protesting the donation of these lands to Russia. Loudspeakers often blare from black trucks with *hi-no-maru* (the rising sun flags, discarded post-WWII) flags on them calling for the islands' return.

**Sights & Activities**

At the tip, Nosappumisaki, you will find a pricey souvenir shop, a **museum centre** (根室市観光物産センター; ☎ 28-2445; ☎ 9am-5pm Mar-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Feb) with information in Japanese only, the monuments near the cliffside, a **viewing tower** (ノサップ岬平和の塔; ☎ 28-3333; admission ¥900; ☎ 8.30am-15 min after sunset) and a few restaurants.

The bus between Nemuro JR station and Nosappumisaki passes a number of interesting

**kelp-drying areas**, which are self-explanatory if kelp is being dried: it looks like black strips of twisted leather stretched in rows on the ground; otherwise, these areas look like well-maintained gravel carparks.

To the south of Nemuro there are several pretty rock formations in what is by all measures a quite spectacular coastline. The **Wheel Rock** (車石) is the most famous. To get there take the (infrequent) train between Kushiro and Nemuro, getting off at the unmanned Hanasaki station. It's a 3km-walk to Hanasaki lighthouse and the rock is nearby.

Those on the train will only get a passing glimpse of it, but the estuary between Akkeshi and the mainland is a good place to see hawks, kites, herons and even sea eagles (which are easy to mistake for hawks until the two are together and you'll realise just how darn big they are!). A car makes stopping here for a picnic or picture a possibility.

**Akkeshi**, on the train route between Kushiro and Nemuro, is famous for oysters, seal watching and canoeing. Info about all three can be derived from **Akkeshi Mikaku Terminal Konkirie** (厚岸味覚ターミナルコンキリエ; ☎ 52-4139; www.conchiglie.net; ☎ 9am-9pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-9pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar). Reserve three days in advance for the active sports.

**Getting There & Around**

Renting a car in Kushiro for a trip to Nemuro really makes sense and will allow more freedom for those who want to explore. The bus ride from the Nemuro JR station out to the Nosappumisaki is long (50 minutes) and comparatively expensive (one way/return ¥1040/1900). A discount coupon (buy it at the info centre *before* boarding the bus) knocks a few yen off the return price. It is timed to just barely meet the train, so make sure you don't dally at the station or you'll miss it. Buses leave Nosappumisaki about every two hours until 6.35pm.

**TOKACHI** 十勝**OBIIHRO** 帯広

☎ 0155 / pop 171,600

Once an Ainu stronghold, Obihiro – a modern city squeezed in between the Hidaka and Daisetsuzan mountain ranges – was founded in 1883 by the Banseisha, a group of 'land reclaimers' (colonial settlers) from Shizuoka

Prefecture. It's a friendly, laid-back city without much for tourists, but it makes a convenient back door to Daisetsuzan National Park; you may also find yourself passing through en route to Ikeda or Erimomiasaki.

**Tokachi Tourist Information** (☎ 23-6403; ☎ 9am-7pm) is on the 2nd floor of the Esta shopping mall at the new Obihiro station. It can assist with various tourist-related issues and has a pamphlet for tourists with Obihiro info, including a *butadonburi* (see below) map.

**Onsen** buffs (or the very filthy) will enjoy a trip to Tokachikawa Onsen, about 20 minutes outside the city. It's a cluster of resort-style *onsens* and hotels along the Tokachi River. Most are open for day use, and some are quite snazzy. **Haniu-no-yado** (はにうの宿; ☎ 46-2225; www.11.plala.or.jp/haniunoyado/no105.html; onsen bath ¥320; ☎ 2-9pm Mon, Tue, Fri & Sat, 10am-9pm Wed, Thu & Sun) is a middle-of-the-road option that's open until 9pm.

Obihiro has a number of restaurants and hotels around the station. As the city is less frequented by travellers, you should have an easier time booking accommodation. **Toipirka Kitaobihoro Youth Hostel** (トイピルカ北帯広ユースホステル; ☎ 30-4165; http://homepage1.nifty.com/TOIPIRKA/english/main\_eng.htm; dm ¥4360) is an attractive log house with Western-style beds and nightly tea time. It's near Tokachigawa Onsen, so you'll need to take a bus there. Staff can pick you up at the station if you phone ahead.

Those who want a business hotel with reasonable rates and Japanese-style rooms should try **Hotel Musashi** (ホテル ムサシ; ☎ 25-1181; www.hotel-musashi.net in Japanese; s/tw ¥5091/8190; ☑). From the bus/taxi/parking area in front of the station go diagonally to the right, heading for Mazda Rentacar (on the corner). With Mazda on your left, go parallel to the tracks for two blocks, turn right and look for Musashi on the right. Step outside the station and look up if you need other business hotels – just about every popular chain has an Obihiro location; almost all are within sight of the station.

*Butadonburi* (barbecued pork over rice) is an area speciality. If you're short on time, **Kikyō** (桔梗; ☎ 27-3771; dishes ¥750; ☎ 10am-10pm) is right in the station in Esta shopping mall and is a popular choice for salarymen and commuters. **Panchō** (ばんちょう; ☎ 22-1974; dishes ¥850-1300) is across from the station, and *butadonburi* is all that's on the menu. Expect long queues during peak times.

Flights connect Obihiro with Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. Buses leaving from the front of Obihiro JR station are timed to meet most flights. *Tokkyū* trains run from Obihiro to New Chitose Airport (¥5900, 2 hours) and Sapporo (¥7020, 2½ hours). The JR Nemuro main line runs east to Ikeda (*kaisoku*, ¥440, 30 minutes) and Kushiro (*tokkyū* ¥4680, 1½ hours).

Buses leave in front of the station for Sapporo (¥3670, 4½ hours), Kushiro (¥2240, 2½ hours) and Asahikawa (¥3150, 3¾ hours). Those to Asahikawa go around Daisetsuzan to the north or to the west, passing either Sōunkyō Onsen or Furano/Biei, respectively. Local buses to Ikeda (¥590) take about an hour.

## IKEDA 池田

☎ 015 / pop 8470

In the eastern Tokachi plain, Ikeda is a small farming town that became famous when the municipal government began making wine there in the 1960s. The name Tokachi is as synonymous with wine in Japan as Napa or Beaujolais is for Westerners, but oenophiles should decide for themselves whether to pull out a bottle of Ikeda when they have company. Judging by the giant corkscrew sculpture in the station, the folk here hope you will. Even if wine's not your thing, it's fun coming here just to stop someone on the street and ask, 'Can you tell me where Happiness is?' and have them answer (without batting an eyelash), 'Oh, just ahead on the right' (see below).

Town maps are available at the **tourist information desk** (☎ 572-2024; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) inside the JR Ikeda station.

Wines are made at the **Wain-jō** (ワイン城; wine castle; ☎ 572-2467; www.tokachi-wine.com in Japanese; 83 Kiyomi, Ikeda-chō; admission free; ☎ factory tours 9am-5pm) on a hillside overlooking the town; head for the Ferris wheel. A tour guides you through the production process and there's a tasting afterwards. To get here head south along the train track from the station you will see the hill on your left shortly afterwards.

**Happiness Dairy** (ハッピーネスデューリィ; ☎ 572-2001; http://happiness.present.to/index.html in Japanese; 104-2 Kiyomi, Ikeda-chō; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-6pm Sat & Sun & holidays in summer, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5.30pm Sat & Sun & holidays in winter) is a pleasant walk through wheat fields. It sells ice-cold gelato (¥250) and fresh cheese. From Wain-jō head east on Rte 39 about 200m, then

turn left at the T-junction, head 500m north and turn right at the cross section. Go 300m, and the shop is on your right. The brandy and rum-raisin flavour is to die for.

**Moan Face Gallery & Cafe** (画廊喫茶ムーンフェイス; ☎ 572-2198; 132 Kiyomi, Ikeda-chō; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon) displays works by local artists. **Spinner's Farm Tanaka** (スピナーズファーム・タナカ; ☎ 572-2848; www.12.plala.or.jp/spinner/ in Japanese; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5.30pm Nov-Mar, closed 2nd Sat of each month) is an Ikeda wool-weaving workshop.

Friendly management and delicious diners (¥1000, including a glass of wine) make **Ikeda Kita no Kotan Youth Hostel** (池田北のコタンユースホステル; ☎ 572-3666; www.11.plala.or.jp/kitanokotan/ in Japanese; dm incl meals ¥5620; ☎ ) a treat. You can hire a bike, but the hostel is within easy walking distance of the Toshihetsu station, one stop west of Ikeda (¥200). From the station take the main road south, turn left at the first intersection and the hostel is where the road ends. The entire place is nonsmoking.

Ikeda is 30 minutes by local train from Obihiro (¥440). Frequent buses run between Ikeda and Obihiro (¥590, 55 minutes). On the privately owned Furusato-Ginga Line there are four trains daily to Kitami (¥3410, 2½ to three hours), from where you can catch buses to Sōunkyō Onsen in Daisetsuzan National Park or take the JR Sekihoku main line east to Bihoro and Abashiri.

## ERIMO MISAKI 襟裳岬

☎ 01466

This remote cape is far off the beaten path, but with its windswept cliffs and dramatic ocean vistas, and kelp strung up to dry like giant shoelaces, it's a good day trip for anyone with a car and a little extra time. The history of this unique place is something of an ecological miracle. Beginning in the Meiji era, the hills surrounding this kelp-farming community were gradually deforested, so by the 1950s it was nicknamed 'Erimo Desert'. Sand blew into the ocean, destroying the kelp, and the community faced a stark choice: reforest or leave. Thanks to the locals' perseverance and a vast number of seedlings, the hills now boast a Japanese black pine forest. Those same great offshore winds and Pacific swell make for spectacular surfing breaks for anyone daring enough to bring along a board and wetsuit, but check with locals about rips and safety before paddling out into the waves. Across

from the deserted JR bus stop there's a small bluff that makes a good spot to take a snapshot of the fishing boats below. A lone post office and Postal ATM is near the city hall.

Ten minutes' drive further, at the cape itself, are a lighthouse and a wind museum, **Kaze-no-Yakata** (風の館 襟裳岬「風の館」; ☎ 3-1133; www.9.ocn.ne.jp/~kaze/ in Japanese; 366-3 Tōyō, Erimo-chō; admission ¥500; ☎ 8.30am-6pm May-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Apr, closed Dec-Feb), with weather-related films and displays; you can also be blasted by gale-force winds inside a manmade wind tunnel. During calm seas, Kuril seals bask all year round on the rocks below, while nearby fishing boats harvest the kelp beds, which have finally returned. The seals are called *zenigata-azarashi* (money-shaped) because the white spots on their black bodies are reminiscent of old Japanese coins. You can pick out your own crab or conch and have it grilled at the restaurant-shacks beside the carpark. Bring a windbreaker: outside feels just as gusty as the wind tunnel does.

A 20-minute walk from the cape, **Minshuku Senba** (民宿仙庭; ☎ 3-1144; http://homepage2.nifty

.com/erimorie/ in Japanese; 236-6 Erimo-misaki, Erimo-chō; dm from ¥2900, r per person from ¥3900) offers rustic accommodation and seafood dinners. Prices include two meals. **Minshuku Misaki-sō** (民宿みさき荘; ☎ 3-1316; www.goodinns.com/misakiso/ in Japanese; Erimo-misaki Tōdaimoto, Erimo-chō; r per person ¥4200, incl breakfast ¥5250, incl 2 meals ¥6300-8400) is another homey option nearby. Prices vary according to choice of dishes. Credit cards not accepted.

There's also a **camping ground** (百人浜オートキャンプ場; ☎ 4-2168; camping per person ¥300; ☎ 20 Apr-20 Oct) on the beach at Hyakunin-hama, 8km northeast of the cape, right near the lighthouse.

Erimo Misaki is pretty darn remote and hiring a car or motorcycle would make sense for many travellers. Those without transport will have to make do with a lone daily bus from Sapporo (¥3500, four hours), which arrives at 8.15pm and leaves at 5.30am, or trains from Tomakomai to Samani (¥3150, 3½ hours, five daily) and take a bus from there (¥1300, one hour, five daily).

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