

Japan: 'Spirit of the North' Tour

Hokkaido & Tohoku Explored

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Sapporo

Today we arrive in Sapporo, the largest city on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, known for its untamed wilderness, vast natural landscapes, and rich cultural heritage. From the rugged coastlines and volcanic mountains to the fertile farmlands and pristine lakes, Hokkaido's diverse geography has shaped the island's history, cuisine, and way of life.

Sapporo is a vibrant metropolis with a blend of urban sophistication and rustic charm. As the former host of the 1972 Winter Olympics, Sapporo has a strong affinity for winter sports and outdoor activities. But beyond its snowy landscapes, the city boasts a rich cultural scene, delicious local cuisine, and a warm hospitality that's sure to make us feel welcome.

Overnight in Sapporo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Sapporo City Touring

Today we explore the heart of Sapporo, discovering the city's rich history and culture. We'll start the day with breakfast at our hotel, fueling up for a morning of leisurely walking and bus-supported sightseeing.

First, we head to Odori Park, a beautiful green oasis that stretches through the centre of the city. In the spring, the park is a lovely spot to see tulips and cherry blossoms in bloom, while in the autumn, the changing leaves create a picturesque backdrop for our stroll. From Odori Park, we make our way to the historic Sapporo Clock Tower, a beloved symbol of the city. We'll take some time to admire its charming architecture and learn about its significance in Sapporo's history.

After a break for lunch, we'll continue to Hokkaido University, where we can explore the campus and appreciate its beautiful surroundings. In the spring, the campus is surrounded by trees in bloom, while in the autumn, the fall colours are a treat to behold.

Next, we'll head to Nijo Market, a great place to experience the sights, sounds, and flavours of Sapporo's food culture. The market has a long history dating back to the post-war period when it was established as a wholesale market. Over time, it has evolved into a popular destination for both locals and visitors alike. The market's energy is lively and informal, with many vendors calling out to passersby and offering samples of their products. We can wander through the stalls, taking in the sights and smells of the market, and sampling a variety of foods along the way.

As the day comes to a close, we'll head to a nearby restaurant for dinner, where we can enjoy a delicious meal featuring some of Hokkaido's distinctive local cuisine.

Overnight in Sapporo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Sapporo - Furano

Today we board our bus and venture into the countryside, heading to Furano, a picturesque town known for its stunning natural beauty and rich agricultural heritage. Our day is dedicated to experiencing the agricultural heart of Hokkaido, exploring the island's rich farmland and learning about the local produce that makes this region so distinctive. We'll discover how Hokkaido's unique climate, soil, and geography have shaped the island's agricultural industry, and how the freshest ingredients are used to create some of Japan's most delicious food. As we travel to Furano, we'll take in the scenic views of the surrounding countryside, with its rolling hills, vast farmlands, and majestic mountains.

Upon arrival, we'll visit Tomita Farm, a renowned farm that produces some of Japan's finest lavender and other crops. We'll stroll through the beautiful fields, learn about the farm's operations, and maybe even pick up some local products in season.

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We'll also visit the Furano Wine Factory, where we'll learn about the wine-making process and sample some of the region's excellent wines. Although wine production is not as deeply rooted in Japan as it is in other countries, the Furano region's climate and soil conditions make it an ideal place for growing a variety of grapes, including Riesling, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir.

Next, we'll head to Tada Farm, where we'll learn about the importance of agriculture in Hokkaido's economy and culture, and how the region's unique climate and soil conditions make it an ideal place for growing a wide range of crops. As we explore the farm, we'll get a glimpse into the daily life of Japanese farmers and learn about the latest farming techniques and technologies used in the region. We'll discover the farm's commitment to sustainability and quality, and appreciate the hard work and dedication that goes into producing the freshest and tastiest produce for local markets and restaurants.

We'll then check in to our hotel, nestled in the heart of this picturesque region.

Overnight in Furano.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Furano - Asahidake Ropeway - Sake Brewing Museum - Asahikawa

Today we embark on a scenic adventure, exploring the natural beauty of the area. We start the day with breakfast at the hotel, fueling up for a day of stunning views and cultural discovery.

First, we'll transfer to the famous Blue Pond, a picturesque spot known for its crystal-clear waters and serene surroundings. We'll take some time to admire the pond's beauty and capture some memorable photos.

Next, we'll head to the Asahidake Ropeway, where we'll ride the cable car up to the summit of Mount Asahidake, taking in the breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. As we ascend, the scenery transforms from lush forests to rugged mountainsides, and at the summit, we'll be treated to stunning vistas of the Daisetsuzan National Park. We'll take a moment to soak in the views, breathe in the fresh mountain air, and enjoy the sense of adventure that comes with exploring one of Hokkaido's most beautiful natural wonders.

After a break for lunch, we'll visit the Otokoyama Sake Brewing Museum, where we'll discover the art and tradition of sake brewing in Hokkaido. Here we'll embark on a fascinating journey into the world of sake, Japan's national beverage. With a history dating back over 1,000 years, sake has played a significant role in Japanese culture, featuring prominently in traditional ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings. Even if you don't indulge in a tasting, the experience offers a unique glimpse into Japan's rich cultural heritage and the significance of sake in Japanese tradition.

We end our day in Asahikawa, known for its beautiful landscapes, heavy winter snowfall, seasonal blossoms/leaf colour, and ramen noodles.

Overnight in Asahikawa

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Asahikawa: Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Museum

Today we'll explore the rich cultural heritage of the Ainu people, Japan's indigenous community. We'll start the day with a visit to the Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Museum, where we'll learn about the history, traditions, and way of life of the Ainu people.

The Ainu culture is deeply connected to the natural world. Traditionally, they lived in harmony with the land and sea, relying on hunting, fishing, and gathering to sustain their communities. We'll learn about the Ainu's rich spiritual traditions, including their unique animist beliefs and ceremonial practices. By exploring the history and customs of the Ainu, we'll gain a deeper understanding of Japan's diverse cultural heritage and the importance of preserving indigenous traditions. This visit will provide a meaningful opportunity to appreciate the Ainu's resilience and creativity, and to learn from their unique perspective on the world. The museum showcases a fascinating collection of Ainu artifacts, providing a unique insight into this ancient culture.

As part of our visit, we'll participate in a cooking demonstration showcasing traditional Ainu dumplings, known as "cimeda" in the Ainu language. We'll get hands-on experience with Ainu cuisine and learn about the ingredients and cooking techniques used by the Ainu people. And of course, we'll get to sample some of these delicious dumplings for ourselves!

This afternoon, we'll take a stroll along Heiwa Dori Shopping Street, Japan's first permanent pedestrian shopping street. This lively shopping street is lined with a variety of stores, cafes, and restaurants, offering something for everyone. We'll browse the shops, pick up some souvenirs, and soak up the atmosphere of this bustling shopping district.

Overnight in Asahikawa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Asahikawa - Shikotsu-Toya National Park - Shikotsuko

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll embark on a scenic drive to Shikotsuko, a picturesque lake town surrounded by natural beauty. On our spring tours, we'll pass by/stop at Takikawa Nanohana, a lovely spot that's particularly stunning in May when the bright yellow nanohana flowers are in bloom.

After a break for lunch en route, we'll arrive at Shikotsu-Toya National Park, where we'll take some time to soak up the calm vibe on the shores of Lake Shikotsu. We'll breathe in the fresh air, enjoy the serene surroundings, and maybe even take a stroll along the lake's scenic trails.

In the afternoon, we'll check-in to an onsen resort with a serene and peaceful atmosphere. Guests can relax in hot springs or communal baths, and experience the warm hospitality of Japanese culture. Unlike more traditional ryokan accommodations common in southern Japan, Hokkaido's onsen resorts reflect the island's more recent development and its practical, welcoming spirit - they're built with accessibility and comfort in mind, making them ideal for international travellers seeking an authentic Japanese experience without the challenges that can come with older, more formal establishments.

Overnight at Shikotsuko.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Shikotsuko - Jigokudani - Noboribetsu

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll depart Shikotsuko and head to Noboribetsu, a town famous for its natural hot springs and unique landscapes. We'll visit Jigokudani, or "Hell Valley," a surreal volcanic valley with steaming hot springs, vibrant rocks, and a unique atmosphere. Jigokudani is a testament to Japan's unique volcanic landscape. This area is dotted with hot springs, steam vents, and bubbling mud pools, showcasing the intense geothermal activity that shapes the country's terrain. Japan's location on the Pacific Ring of Fire makes it one of the most volcanically active countries in the world, with over 100 active volcanoes. This volcanic activity has created a distinctive landscape, rich in natural hot springs and scenic beauty.

Later in the day, after a break for lunch, we'll stroll along Gokuraku-dori, a lively shopping street lined with stores, cafes, and restaurants. Noboribetsu is Japan's largest hot spring resort town, nestled in a scenic valley surrounded by lush forests and rugged mountains. The town is famous for its Daiichi Takimotokan, a massive hot spring bath complex with numerous tubs and unique bathing areas, offering a rejuvenating experience amidst nature. We'll browse the shops, pick up some souvenirs, and soak up the atmosphere of this charming town.

Overnight in Noboribetsu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Noboribetsu - Hakodate

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll embark on a scenic drive to Hakodate, a charming port city with a rich history and stunning views. The drive will take around 3-3.5 hours, giving us plenty of time to enjoy the passing landscapes.

Upon arrival in Hakodate, we'll take an orientation walk around the city, starting with a visit to the bustling market. We'll enjoy a break for lunch, savouring the local flavours. After lunch, we'll head to the Goryokaku Tower, where we'll take in panoramic views of the historic star-shaped fortress and the surrounding city. From this elevated vantage point, we'll get a glimpse into the strategic significance of

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Goryokaku, a key stronghold in the final years of Japan's samurai era. The tower's observation deck offers a unique perspective on the fortress's distinctive pentagonal design and the city's modern landscape. Season-permitting, the grounds here are famous for spring cherry blossoms. We'll explore the Goryokaku park, visiting the Hakodate Magistrate's Office, a beautifully-preserved historic building.

As the day winds down, we'll stroll through the charming Kanemori Red Brick Warehouse district, admiring the beautifully restored brick buildings and browsing the shops and cafes. We'll soak up the atmosphere of this historic district, enjoying the unique blend of old and new that Hakodate has to offer.

Overnight in Hakodate.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Hakodate: Sushi Making Class & Time at Leisure

We'll start the day with some free time to explore the Hakodate Morning Market on your own (near the hotel), browsing the stalls and sampling some of the fresh seafood and local specialties. With around 250 stalls, the market is a treasure trove of Hokkaido's freshest delights. It pulsates with energy, as vendors' lively voices and passionate sales pitches create an infectious atmosphere.

After exploring the market, we'll transfer by bus to the Trappistine Convent, a serene destination nestled in this historic port city. Founded by a community of Cistercian sisters, the convent has become a beacon of peace and spirituality in the region. As we visit the convent, we'll have the opportunity to learn about the sisters' way of life, which combines prayer, work, and hospitality. Perhaps we'll even have a chance to shop for some of their famous local products, such as handmade cookies or other treats.

We'll then head to our 11am sushi-making class, where we'll learn the art of creating delicious sushi with fresh Hokkaido ingredients. Sushi is one of Japan's most iconic dishes, with a rich history and cultural significance that goes far beyond just being a meal. We'll get hands-on experience rolling and shaping sushi, and enjoy the fruits of our labour for lunch, savouring the fresh flavors and textures of this beloved Japanese cuisine.

After lunch, we'll have some leisure time to explore the city at your own pace. We might want to visit the famous Hachiman-zaka slope, a picturesque street lined with historic buildings and charming shops. Alternatively, you can stroll through the Motomachi district, known for its Western-style architecture and scenic views of the city. We'll have plenty of time to soak up the atmosphere and take in the sights and sounds of Hakodate before dinner.

PLEASE NOTE: For tomorrow's train journey, we will arrange to have your main piece of luggage sent ahead to Aomori (you will collect your bag at our Aomori hotel tomorrow).

Overnight in Hakodate.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Hakodate, Hokkaido - Bullet Train to Aomori, Honshu

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll board the Shinkansen, Japan's famous "bullet train" from Hakodate to New Aomori, enjoying the scenic views of the Japanese countryside as we zip through the tunnels and across the landscape. The train ride, during which we change islands, will take approximately 2 hours, giving us a chance to relax and take in the views.

Upon arrival in Aomori, we'll have some time for lunch after which we'll visit the Sannai-Maruyama Archaeological Site, a fascinating glimpse into the lives of ancient Japanese people. We'll explore the ruins and learn about the history and culture of the Jomon period.

Next, we'll head to the Nebuta Museum WA RASSE, where we'll learn about the vibrant Nebuta Festival, one of Japan's most spectacular summer events. The museum showcases stunning Nebuta floats and provides insight into the history and significance of the festival. After the museum, we'll take a short walk to A-Factory, a modern building featuring Aomori's local products, including its famous apples.

In the evening, we'll enjoy dinner at a local restaurant, savouring the flavours of Aomori's unique cuisine.

Overnight in Aomori.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Aomori & Hirosaki

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll transfer to Hirosaki for a day trip, exploring the city's rich history and culture. We'll visit Tsugaru-han Neputa Village, which offers a fascinating glimpse into the history and significance of the associated summer festival, with stunning displays and floats on show. We'll get to appreciate the craftsmanship and artistry that goes into creating these incredible floats, but without the summer heat and crowds.

We'll take a break for lunch at Hirosaki Shopping Street, where we can sample some local specialties and browse the shops and cafes.

After lunch, we'll visit Hirosaki Castle, a beautiful and historic castle that offers a glimpse into the region's feudal past. The castle's stunning white walls and red-tiled roofs are particularly picturesque during cherry blossom season, when the surrounding park bursts into bloom with hundreds of cherry trees, creating a breathtakingly beautiful landscape.

We return to Aomori with some leisure time before dinner.

PLEASE NOTE: For tomorrow's train journey, your main piece of luggage will be forwarded to our hotel in Tokyo. You will need a day bag, which you can keep on the bus that meets us in Tokyo prior to being reunited with our luggage at hotel check-in after tomorrow's Tokyo touring.

Overnight in Aomori.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Aomori - Bullet Train to Tokyo - City Touring

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll transfer to the station and board the Shinkansen bullet train to Tokyo, enjoying the scenic views of the Japanese countryside as we zip through the tunnels and across the landscape. The train ride will take approximately 3 hours, giving us a chance to relax and take in the views.

Upon arrival in Tokyo, we'll have some time for lunch, before visiting the Meiji Shrine, a serene Shinto shrine located in a tranquil forested area, dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shoken. We'll take a stroll through the beautiful gardens and tranquil grounds, experiencing the peaceful atmosphere of this sacred site. After visiting the shrine, we'll explore the vibrant Harajuku district, known for its unique fashion, shopping, and energy.

Later in the day, we'll visit the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace, a beautiful and tranquil oasis in the heart of the city. We'll stroll through the gardens, admiring the beautiful landscaping and architecture.

After our tour we'll check into our hotel before enjoying dinner at a local restaurant, savouring the flavours of Tokyo's diverse cuisine.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Tokyo Sightseeing Continued

After breakfast at the hotel, we'll head to Ueno Park, a beautiful green oasis in the heart of Tokyo. We'll visit the Tokyo National Museum, which houses a vast collection of Japanese art and artifacts, including ancient pottery, samurai armour, and ukiyo-e woodblock prints. The museum offers a fascinating glimpse into Japan's rich history and culture.

After a break for lunch we'll head to Shinjuku, a bustling district known for its skyscrapers, shopping, and entertainment. We'll take some time to explore the area, browse the shops, and take in the vibrant atmosphere.

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Finally, we'll end the day with a visit to Asakusa, where we'll explore Senso-ji Temple, a colourful and historic Buddhist temple famous for its giant lantern. We'll and take a stroll through Nakamise Shopping Street, enjoying the sights and sounds of Tokyo's oldest neighbourhood.

In the evening, we'll enjoy our farewell dinner at a local restaurant, reflecting on the memories of our trip and savouring the flavours of Japan one last time.

Overnight in Tokyo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Tokyo.

ITTE RASSHAI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast