



SAPPORO

THE OTHER FACE OF JAPAN

Travel writer and Japan adoptee **Mark Andrews** on why Sapporo is the perfect place to spend a week – whatever the season



Your first thoughts of Japan probably include high-energy cities, chic, minimalistic design, bullet trains, Mount Fuji, historic temples, serene gardens, and, of course, the world-famous tea ceremony. The contrasts are diverse, but tend to be quite urban. There is another Japan, one that is more town than city, with lush hillsides taking the place of the pulsating metropolis.

An ideal getaway and a different Japan

One of the islands north of Tokyo is a world quite distinct from the Japan you probably know best. The mountainous island of Hokkaido, and its capital Sapporo, beckon Japanese and international travelers equally. There is a relaxed vibe to this year-round destination that sets it apart and makes it an ideal stop for a Japanese adventure.

In recent years, Japan's fifth-largest city has been enjoying the influx of the young and active looking for a balanced lifestyle that embraces fun and leisure. They are well catered for in Sapporo, with beautiful, easy-to-reach environs that are perfect for hiking in the summer before transforming into powdery slopes in the winter. As an outdoor paradise, you might compare it to Colorado.

Sapporo's center is easy to navigate and was designed by European and American architects who created a grid of tree-lined streets divided (north and south) by Odori Park. The park is the focal point for many of the city's festivals, including Sapporo Summer Festival and the Sapporo Snow Festival.

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Sapporo when it's warm

Odori Park truly takes center stage for the Summer Festival and the foodie-orientated Autumn Fest. Part of the events that make up the Summer Festival is the month-long beer festival, with seating for 13,000 in one giant beer garden. It features beverages from all major Japanese brewers (including the eponymous Sapporo, which was founded in 1876) and representatives from beers around the world. There is a burgeoning craft beer scene here offering a hipster vibe and a hoppier alternative to the effervescent Sapporo.

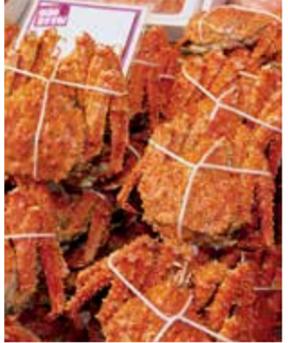
Odori gets gloriously noisy during the week-long Bon Odori, which brings dance and drum performances in honor of the spirits of ancestors.

Summer fireworks are common throughout Japan, but the Hokkaido Makomanai Music Fireworks Festival takes them to a new level, combining music with 22,000 pyrotechnics that create a sky that looks like a painting in motion.

Art lovers will enjoy Sapporo Art Park, with 74 sculptures dotted around 100 acres. The work

Opposite page, top to bottom: TV Tower at the end of Odori Park; Hokkaido shrine in winter

This page, clockwise from right: Sapporo 19th-century Clock Tower; Miso Ramen Noodle Soup; Sapporo cityscape at night; crabs at a street stall; Japanese beer Asahi



of 64 contemporary Japanese and foreign artists can be found here, and many pieces are interactive. Look for the *Portlandia* figurative work by Raymond Kaskey, which has a twin version in Portland, Oregon, Sapporo's twin city.

Nature lovers will find summer months a highlight. Farm Tomita in Furano is famed for its lavender in July, along with other seasonal flowers. Be sure to try the lavender ice cream, made using Hokkaido cream. Biei's Blue Pond is also worth a visit: its blue hue is actually from minerals from nearby hot springs. Hikers will love the Shikotsu-Toyo National Park. The challenging Yotei-zan peak resembles Mount Fuji. Ease hiking aches with a stop at an *onsen*, or hot spring. The small town of Hokkaido is home to the area's best-known *onsen* at Noboribetsu.

sapporo



Sapporo in the winter

Schedule February for the Snow Festival – reason enough to visit the city. Huge snow sculptures up to 50 ft high transform Odori Park. During the 2017 festivities, a recreation of the Kofukuji Temple of Nara used 300 truckloads of snow. Families will particularly enjoy the snow rafting and slides. Clip-on snow cleats will keep you safe, something I've learned from painful personal experience. Evenings come alive with food and drink stalls and musical performances, all with sculptures as a backdrop.

The Susukino district is the city's neon-bright, all-year-round entertainment hub where you'll find some of the best bars and clubs for wining and dining. The epicenter of Sapporo's foodie scene is the famous Ramen Yokocho, an enticing alleyway full of small restaurants fueling the Japanese noodle soup obsession. The local version is miso, typically topped with pork, vegetables, and a knob of butter. More sophisticated options feature local seafood – just the thing to ward off the cold.

During the festival, Susukino's main street closes to traffic and

Susukino's main street plays host to an ice festival, where ice sculptures line the street



plays host to an ice festival, where ice sculptures line the street and ice bars and karaoke – another Japanese obsession – provide entertainment. Look out for the chainsaw-wielding ice sculptors at work.

The lesser-known Otaru Snow Light Path festival takes place every February and sees coastal Otaru, with its canal, old warehouses, and historic Temiya railways, ablaze with charming snow candles.

Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics in 1972. A museum commemorating the Games is located near the Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium. Here is your opportunity to try an Olympic event like ski jumping or bobsleigh run without risking life and limb, thanks to simulators. You can always try the slopes at Niseko for a real experience.

Of the oldest buildings in the city, the best-known is the Clock Tower. Built in 1878 to an American design, the wooden building now houses a museum.

For a taste of old Hokkaido, visit the Historical Village on the edge of the city. In winter months, a horse-drawn sleigh takes you through a tree-lined street to a former Sapporo station. The place has been rebuilt to recreate scenes from town, farm, and fishing village life.

It's true, *onsens* really come into their own in the cold weather. Head to Jozankei Onsen, on the outskirts of Sapporo. Here, hot spring water surfaces around the resort town at Jigokudani, which translates to "Hell Valley." If you'll excuse the pun, you'll find it is actually more like a taste of heaven when you take a dip in the warming waters.



GETTY

Clockwise from top left: Horyuji Temple snow sculpture at Sapporo Snow Festival; animal shapes sculpted in snow; Miso Ramen; snow and ice slide

Where to stay



Keio Plaza Hotel Sapporo

With its convenient location in the heart of Sapporo, this luxury hotel is within walking distance of the city's main attractions. Guestrooms are spacious and comfortable with Simmons mattresses designed for a relaxing night's sleep. Eight restaurants serve up a selection of Asian and European cuisines, including Hokkaido specialties at Akizu, and the bartenders in Cross Vault are masters at mixing the perfect cocktail.

➔ For information and reservations, visit PreferredHotels.com. For a full list of properties in Japan, see page 98