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Press release

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Japan's Hokkaido attracts foreign visitors with 'Adventure Travel'

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Japan has long attracted foreign travelers with its ancient history, traditional cuisine and pop culture, but Asia's tourism destination also has a different style of tourist attraction–adventures in great nature coupled with deep-rooted culture.



In fact, Hokkaido is already one of Japan's most popular tourist destinations. Together with Mt. Fuji and the ancient capital of Kyoto, the island has often ranked high on the country's must-visit lists. Some 42.3 million tourists visited Hokkaido for the fiscal year to March 2023, up 21 percent from the previous year, recovering to some 80 percent of the number before the coronavirus outbreak, according to the prefecture.

Following is a special report by Rob Goss, a British travel writer based in Japan, on a special tour to Mt. Usu, an active volcano; and Lake Toya, the venue of the 2008 G8 Summit, both in southern Hokkaido.

Accompanied by a local tour guide, Goss introduces the history of the volcano and the neighboring lake, the beauty of winter scenery and people's lives in great nature, while telling the pleasure of outdoor activities such as snowshoeing.

Mt. Usu: Living with one of Japan's Most Active Volcanoes

On March 31, 2000, a series of eruptions began at Mt. Usu in southern Hokkaido. Over the next five months, 60 new craters appeared on and around the mountain, with the ongoing pyroclastic activity and hot mud flows forcing 16,000 residents to evacuate. The disaster left behind widespread damage but there was no casualty.

It wasn't the first time in living memory that Usu had flexed its muscles. In 1977, an eruption at the peak sent white plumes of smoke 12,000 meters skyward and showered the area with pumice, while activity from 1943 to 1944 saw the creation of a new mountain, Showa Shinzan, rising 402 meters above what until then was an expanse of wheat fields.

Today, Mt. Usu and its multiple peaks are part of the Toya-Usu UNESCO Global Geopark, an area that also includes Lake Toya immediately to the mountain's north. Together, the lake and

mountain open a window on the Earth's development and have become a rich study ground for volcanologists, while also offering travelers a scenic setting for soothing hot-spring baths and a host of outdoor activities.

Learning About Usu's Eruptions

As a call at the Lake Toya Visitor Center and adjoining Volcano Science Museum highlights, Mt. Usu hasn't always been active. Initially formed 20,000 years ago, the peak eventually went dormant for thousands of years, allowing Jomon-era people and then indigenous Ainu to settle in the area, before it reawakened in the late 1600s.

With multilingual exhibits and immersive videos, the visitor center and museum do an excellent job of documenting not just the lake and mountain's creation, but also local wildlife and topography, as well as giving insights into the events of 1977 and 2000. It's even better if you come with one of Toya's Volcano Meisters—guides like

Rie Egawa, who have an in-depth knowledge of the volcano and its workings.

“Locals says that Usu never lies. There are always signs that an eruption is coming,” Egawa explains, during a one-day tour that started at the museum and later took in snowshoeing and a ride on the Mt. Usu ropeway.

“We know that eruptions are likely every 20 to 50 years, but before each one there’s always at least a day of warning tremors. Not wobbling left and right like a regular earthquake, but up and down—a doll wouldn’t fall over, it would jump,” Egawa says. “There are also crustal movements, such as cracks in the road, but another characteristic is that the eruptions aren’t only at the summit: they occur through multiple craters around the mountain’s base, as the sticky magma searches for ways to break through the surface.”

Viewing Volcanic Land

A ten-minute drive away, we also stop by the Kompiler Crater Observation Deck for a first glimpse of how the land here has been marked by millennia of volcanic activity. There are broad views of Lake Toya, a caldera formed 100,000 years ago that subsequently developed a distinctive cluster of peaked islands in its center. Directly in front of us is the deep Kompiler crater, filled with a frozen pool of water.

Taking in the view, Egawa explains that this now-inactive crater was formed during the 2000 eruption, when steaming mud flows destroyed hundreds of buildings (some left as memorials) in the town below. But, as locals say, Mt. Usu also brings good with the bad.

Some 10,000 years ago, for example, a landslide that saw Mt. Usu lose its once-conical peak, reached the sea on the mountain's southern side, creating a coastline with natural bays utilized by early settlers and rock formations that nurture shellfish, crabs, and other marine creatures. More recently, a series of eruptions in 1910

uncovered Toya's natural hot springs, which today are a major draw for visitors, with hot-spring baths at hotels and a collection of piping-hot footbaths and handbaths dotted around the town.

“A several-meter layer of well-draining pumice soil brought by recent eruptions, coupled with a reshaping of the land to act as a wind break, has also led to ideal conditions for growing fruit like apples,” Egawa adds.

Heading in from the cold, we hear more about life in the firing line of an active volcano, when we stop by *Restaurant Bayern* (or Bavaria) for beef stew and a chat with Noriko Yamanaka, whose parents opened this restaurant close to the base of Showa Shinzan shortly after the 1977 eruption forced them to relocate from a different part of the area.

“I was born in Toya and grew up here, so I've always lived with the volcano. I remember being evacuated, too, but I'll still live here as long as I'm able,” Yamanaka says. “Even if I lived elsewhere in Japan,

it's a disaster-prone country. Other areas have earthquakes and floods. We just accept that we have eruptions. And we get to live with a beautiful mountain.”

Taste of Toya's Great Outdoors in Winter

Having experienced a series of major eruptions in the last 115 years, Mt. Usu is among the most volcanically active parts of Japan. Yet that hasn't stopped it and neighboring Lake Toya from becoming both a popular spot for outdoor activities and a place to unwind in the soothing hot springs. The area has year-round attractions, but in winter offers a chance to experience Hokkaido's snowy landscapes without having to work up the energy to hit the ski slopes of places like ever-popular Niseko 40km to the north.

Snowshoeing in Shadow of Volcano

You could be forgiven, if (like me) your image of snowshoeing is of a pursuit for experienced outdoor types—people trudging through deep snow in remote, frozen lands. So, there was an element of

trepidation when my guide was driving us toward a snowshoe tour around the base of Showa Shinzan. In reality, it turned out to be surprisingly easy, even for someone (also like me) who can barely stand up in skis.

Gear-wise, you can rent snowshoes and boots from your guide, and then it only takes a few minutes to tie on the snowshoes and get used to walking. You just need to be prepared for temperatures that can drop as low as minus 10°C and then keep in mind a few simple guidelines. As Egawa explains, walk normally but without lifting your feet too high, turn around instead of reversing, and keep your feet ever so slightly pointed outwards, so as not to step on your own snowshoes.

As well as having someone to teach you the basics, snowshoeing with a guide can also open your eyes to the little details you might otherwise have missed. We stop to examine the tracks of a deer that penetrate several inches into the snow, then see the faint paw prints

of something much lighter—likely a Hokkaido squirrel. While the near-bare branches of the new forest growing around the mountain’s base initially seem uninformed, with Egawa’s help the yellow tints of willow begin to distinguish themselves too.

There are also human stories to tell as we walk through the snow, like that of local postmaster Masao Mimatsu, who meticulously documented the rise of Showa Shinzan during the 1943-44 eruptions, providing invaluable data and diagrams that helped shape Japanese volcanology. Incredibly, he would go on to buy the mountain—something detailed by the small Masao Mimatsu Memorial Hall at Showa Shinzan’s base.

Mt. Usu Ropeway

After snowshoeing, we head for an even easier activity, taking the ropeway up near to the 733-meter summit of Mt. Usu, where it’s possible to trek on a boardwalk around Usu’s outer rim or just grab a coffee and enjoy the scenery. With an icy wind blowing, we take in

sweeping views of Lake Toya and Showa Shinzan, then walk a little higher for views of the the Ginnuma Crator—the largest of the craters created during Usu’s 1977 eruptions.

In an area that has been repeatedly reshaped by eruptions, the Ginnuma Crator is arguably the starkest transformation. The barren crater looks like the entrance to a Bond villain’s secret lair, with wisps of smoke ominously rising from its center, and several of Usu’s jagged peaks looming above. But when Egawa pulls out pictures of the mountaintop pre-1977, the contrast is jaw dropping: an alpine pasture, full of greenery and flowers, with families picnicking next to a lotus pond.

Toya’s Hot Springs

Beyond snowshoeing and Mt. Usu, there are plenty of other light activities possible in Toya in winter. You could visit the Lake Toya Visitor Center and Volcano Science Museum to learn about the area’s formation and recent eruptions. Then you could add a boat

trip on Lake Toya or try a spot of snow rafting and sledding at the Snow Park.

After saying goodbye to Egawa-san, I head instead for a warming soak in one of Toya's hot springs: something uncovered by the eruptions of 1910. Many of the hotels here have their own mineral-rich public baths—some open-air with views of the mountains and some also open to non-guests—but if you are after something more casual there are also a dozen footbaths and handbaths scattered around town, each said to have its own traits.

That includes the common benefits listed at hot springs around Japan, such as the ability to soothe aches and pains or relieve fatigue, but Toya also throws in a few playful claims you are unlikely to find elsewhere: one handbath is said to promote a happy marriage, another calls itself a handbath for good food. What can't be argued is that they warm you up after a day out in the snow.

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Showa Shinzan



Showa Shinzan,



Lake Toya



Lake Toya



Lake Toya



Restaurant Bayern's famous beef stew.



Sapporo, Hokkaido's provincial capital