

escape

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Canoeing with a twist on the volcanic Lake Kussharo

Neath sun or snow, roam Hokkaido's lakes with a paddle and canoe

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It is midmorning and the sun is just warming the day as we approach the entrance to Lake Kussharo, in eastern Hokkaido. The water is cobalt blue, and the surrounding mountains mirror off the calm surface. The sun glistens off the water, too, forcing me to put on my sunglasses with building anticipation.

The owners of North East Canoe Center, Kazuaki and Ai Hiratsuka, and their guide and friend Kaname Nagumo, work to unpack the vans with a practiced efficiency that showcases their many years of canoe guiding in eastern Hokkaido. Off the top of the vans come three canoes, followed by an assortment of homemade food, first-aid supplies, spare gear, life jackets and paddles. They stow everything in the boats in such a way to balance the weight, all while speaking rapid-fire Japanese, little of which I understand.

Despite the language barrier, I get the message: It's going to be a spectacular day.

Hokkaido is to the outdoors what Tokyo is to big cities. To experience the best of canoeing in Japan, many choose Hokkaido for its wide-open spaces and relatively easy access to wilderness. Hokkaido boasts six national parks, 12 prefectural parks, and

countless wetlands and undisturbed forests. Lake Kussharo is in Akan National Park and is the largest caldera lake in all of Japan.

On this early autumn day we have the area practically to ourselves. A few picnickers are set up at a nearby table and a hiker emerges from a walking path just as we set off, but the

only distinct sounds are the occasional tap-tap-tapping of a distant black woodpecker (one of the region's resident bird species) and the dripping of water off our oars as we paddle.

This 79-square-kilometer lake is one of the best places to paddle in Hokkaido, says Kazuaki Hiratsuka. His other favorites include upstream of the Kushiro River, Kushiro Shitsugen National Park, Bekanbeushi River and Kiritappu Wetland near the town of Hamanaka.

"Lake Toya, located in Western Hokkaido, is also good, although kayaking rather than canoeing is more enjoyable there," he says.

The Bibi River, close to New Chitose Airport, is another recommendation. He continues: "Its streams are calm, and the surroundings are rich in nature. It is particularly good for beginners."

Still, Kussharo is special. The active sulfurous vents, where hot volcanic spring water bubbles to the surface, are unique only to caldera lakes such as Kussharo. Paddling along the shoreline, it is not uncommon to look over and see fumaroles rising from the



Above: Ai Hiratsuka of North East Canoe Center, guides Ayami Saga of Sapporo, on Lake Kussharo. Left: Guide Kaname Nagumo carries fresh boiled eggs from the steaming fumarole to our picnic site. MELISSA DEVAUGHN

water's edge. Not many lakes such as these are so accessible to the public.

A few minutes into our trip, we pull alongside the shore where overhanging trees disguise a private paradise. A circle of rocks forms a natural pool where a hot springs beckons. It would be easy to stop paddling right now and spend the rest of the afternoon soaking in this hidden lagoon, but we are eager to see more of this massive lake, and move on.

Fall is just beginning, and the leaves are changing colors, which gives the area a serene vibrancy. Indeed, late spring and early autumn are the best times to visit, says Nagumo, who owns his own guiding business and helps the Hiratsukas when they are busiest.

"I love the vastness of this place," he says. "The lake is attractively different by season. In spring, we enjoy wild vegetables, in summer fresh greens, and vivid autumn colors in fall." Winter tours of the lake are available too.

As we reach a sharp bend in the shoreline,

our bows point into a headwind. In the distance are the telltale signs of rough water: Small whitecaps checker the lake's surface, indicating strong winds and larger waves. While still easily manageable, Hiratsuka and Nagumo take no chances, and we search for a place to land. The lake is big enough that it can turn quickly dangerous, Hiratsuka explains. Because of that, renting equipment can be difficult.

"Because there was a fatal accident a couple of years ago on a canoeing trip, no company rents canoes without guides (for fear) of accidents," he says. "Kussharo Lake is huge, and when winds suddenly become stronger, canoes can be toppled."

Once ashore, the highlight of the day unfolds quickly: Ai Hiratsuka sets up a table brimming with meals prepared with locally sourced ingredients that speak to the region's agricultural significance.

"I prepare meals for guests, imagining their happy smiles as they eat my dishes," she says. "I sometimes take three days to prepare the food."

The pork comes from locally raised pigs, the eggs from free-range chickens and the vegetables from a relative's garden, she says. To prepare this camp cuisine on site, the Hiratsukas simply submerge the meals into the steaming pools of volcanic water

and cook them on the spot. I watch, amazed and in awe of this very special experience.

"Hokkaido is blessed with nature and cooking materials provided by nature," Ai says, clearly pleased with the results of our shore-side picnic. It's what she and her husband love most about sharing their home with visitors from around the world.

"My pleasure is serving guests from outside of Hokkaido meals that they can eat only in Hokkaido," she says. "I believe eating homemade meals in nature will make guests happy and relaxed, which is difficult to experience in a big city."

Get paddling

Canoe tours are offered by a number of tour companies in lakes across Hokkaido. To arrange a paddle, visit one of the following companies:

North East Canoe Center:
www.north-east.jp
Somokuya:
www.somokuya.com
River and Field:
www.riverandfield.com
ZZCanoe:
www.xn--i9ja3tueyj.com

A journey by kayak through Iriomote's mangroves

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Untamed, undeveloped and largely undiscovered, Iriomote Island is the largest of Okinawa Prefecture's Yaeyama Islands. A wildcat haven and covered almost entirely in dense jungle and mangroves, exploring it requires some alternative transport. Thanks to the maze of narrow waterways that crisscross the land, kayaking is a popular choice for anyone wishing to venture deeper into the jungle. And, paddling your way through these dense mangroves offers a chance to see the natural wonders of an island unlike any other in Japan.

Our guide for the day, Naoya Ojima, explains the rules in place to protect the habitats as we drive up to our starting point. Stopping off along the way to see early-blooming cherry blossoms amidst jungle leaves, we ask after the famed Iriomote cat. Shaking his head, we are told it is almost impossible to

spot one as there are only 100 left in the wild. Ojima had caught sight of them only a handful of times, and always at night — but our eyes remain glued to the forest's edges just in case.

As our truck reaches the end of the muddy track, we don our life jackets, arm ourselves with paddles and make our way along a narrow path to the water's edge. This first taste of the rainforest, with its winding tree roots and unfamiliar bird calls, creates a world further removed from the rest of Japan than we had thought possible. Soon, brightly colored kayaks perched on weather-beaten racks appear between the leaves and we set out onto the river to explore.

Heading upstream on the Mare River with guidance from Ojima on technique, we begin to settle into our own rhythms. Narrow at times, the river allows plenty of opportunities to get close to the mangrove trees and study their unusual formations. Ojima points out the differences in shape that develop in the roots as we move from the mostly freshwater

river to saltwater, picking out prime examples along the way. We hover close to the sandy shore as small crabs scuttle under roots, keen to catch a glimpse of the elusive birds whose calls floated from the treetops.

Eventually, Ojima guides us to a small landing bay and we disembark to head into the forest. Beneath the leafy canopy, we spot lizards and insects as they slink out of our way and we admire the unique and varying shapes of the trees. Forever watching our step as we endeavor not to trip on the snaking ends of buttress roots, we heed Ojima's calls of when to duck and where to walk.

Hearing the impending rush of Pinaisara Falls through the dense growth, we step out onto its rocky base, enveloped in mist. It is the tallest waterfall in Okinawa and reaching the top seems optimistic at best, so we rest beside its plunge pool for a moment before heading deeper into the jungle. As we make our way up, grappling with ropes, we are once again enveloped in the peaceful quiet of the deep

jungle, far from the swimmer's shrieks below.

Triumphant, we reach the smooth plateau of the waterfall, wading through the shallow flow to perch on the edge and admire the view. There we enjoy a simple lunch of local Yaeyama soba. Looking out across the treetops and to the sea beyond, we trace our route along the ribbon-like rivers below, excited to return to the water for a final glimpse into the mangroves.

To reach Iriomote, catch a ferry from Ishigaki Island (25 or 45 minutes depending on whether you travel to Ohara Port or Uehara Port). During the off season, Uehara is often closed, but buses run between the ports. Kayaking, hiking and snorkeling tours can be arranged through the Iriomote-Sanpo company at <http://english.iriomote-osanpo.com>.

Welcome to the jungle: Kayaks stacked in the mangrove forest, ready to be paddled through the swampy waters. LILY CROSSLEY-BAXTER

