

Lake Mashu

Akan: Remembrance of Things Past

Akan National Park

Hokkaido

Tokyo

Continuing our series introducing Japan's thirty-four designated National Parks, we visited Akan National Park in Hokkaido.

ALEX HENDY

JUST one hour and forty minutes from Tokyo and yet a world away, Akan National Park in Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's four main islands, packs a primeval punch no traveler will ever forget.

The journey begins gently enough. Five minutes' drive out of Memanbetsu Airport finds you in farming country. Deep, wide fields either side of the road are cultivated with wheat, potatoes, spinach and melons. Only the odd tractor slows your progress on Hokkaido's long, straight roads. In the summer, that is. In the winter, when Hokkaido is blanketed in snow, driving is more of a challenge. Overhead reflective arrows mark the shoulders of the road to keep drivers from sliding over the edge.

The views become more elevated, rugged and coniferous as one approaches the calderas of Lake Kussharo and Lake Mashu. Observatories situated around Lake Mashu are the visitor's first platform for deep contemplation. Untouched for millennia by anything but the wind, the cobalt blue water of still Lake Mashu is as natural, and yet other worldly, as anything can possibly be.

Kaminokoike, a much smaller but equally magical lake, can be found up a long bumpy path nearby. The clear aquamarine spring water of this lake is crisscrossed on its floor by trees which fell



Kaminokoike



900 Prairie





Mt. Io



Lake Kussharo



An AINU dance performance

perhaps thousands of years ago. The water temperature remains at a constant 8°C, so the trees will never rot. The sense of prehistory that emanates at this little lake in the woods is accentuated by the loud chorus of cicadas of numerous species wheezing and croaking invisibly in the trees.

At 900 Prairie, so named for the 900-plus hectares of this enormous cow ranch, a 360° panoramic view of Hokkaido’s characteristic grasslands can be enjoyed – along with an ice cream and a round of “park golf” if you are so inclined.

Along the way, Mt. Io belches out thick plumes of sulfurous steam, reminding the visitor that the hills are alive. A nature trail around the mountain is surrounded by wild rosemary, whose pretty white flowers are in bloom in June and July. From October to March, Mt. Io is a popular destination for stargazers.

Mt. Io is presently closed to climbers owing to the danger of falling rocks, but the nearby mountains of Mt. Oakan (1,370 m) and Mt. Meakan (1,499 m), two of the “100 Famous Japanese Mountains,” as well as Mt. Mokoto (1,000 m) and Mt. Nishibetsu (800 m), all have picturesque trails to their summits that are suitable for walkers of all levels.

Many a weary traveler chooses to take advantage of the hot springs near Mt. Io and stay the night in the delightfully down-to-earth *onsen* resort of Kawayu. A hot bath in the woods awakens something ancient in the soul.

Refreshed, the very early riser could do worse than head for the hills to look down on Lake Kussharo and take in the famous sunrise glow and white “sea of clouds” that follows it.

Deeper into the National Park at AINU Kotan near Lake Akan, Hokkaido’s indigenous AINU community

preserves and promotes its culture through the Kotan’s (meaning “Village” in the AINU language) craft shops, restaurants, museums and a most excellent theater. The 30-minute show of music and dance here is spellbinding. “*Futtarechui*,” a festival dance in which the female dancers repeatedly and quite violently throw back their long hair is stunning, while the duet by two women players of the *mukkuri* mouth harp, an AINU instrument played by vibrating the long bamboo reed in the mouth with a string or by plucking it with the finger, is almost hypnotizing.

The nearby Eco Museum Center provides visitors an opportunity to find out more about Akan’s natural habitat, the star attraction here being living samples of the lake’s famed *marimo* balls of green algae. Designated a special national monument, the almost perfectly spherical *marimo* of Lake Akan are formed by the gentle action of the crystal-clear lake’s currents over a long period of time.

Back on the surface, a speedboat tour into the dark, lush corners of this prehistoric lake is a must for anyone making the quick trip from the city to Akan National Park. 



Marimo