

KUSHIRO

CRANES, TRAINS AND NO AUTOMOBILES AWAIT VISITORS IN HOKKAIDO

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARK ANDREWS

A LONG, DEEP WHISTLE BREAKS THE CRISP MORNING

air. Wheels slip for grip in the freshly fallen snow as the steam-powered train leaves Kushiro station in a cloud of thick smoke. This is the best way to enter the icy marshes, playground of the majestic red-crowned crane.

Winter sees Kushiro, an otherwise uninspiring coastal town in eastern Hokkaido, transformed into a wonderland. The area's Kushiro Shitsugen National Park is home to the largest wetlands in Japan, and automobiles are strictly prohibited in an effort to preserve its ecosystem and pristine beauty. This is the home of the rare Japanese crane (*Grus japonensis*), and there is no better time to see them than when the ground is covered in snow. And the best way to accomplish this is with a seat on JR Hokkaido's SL Fuyu-no-Shitsugen-go, which passes through the marsh on its way to Shibebea.

The train started service in 2000 and operates the 48km route during the first three months of the year. Power comes from the C11 class tank engine 171. Manufactured in 1940, it ended up hauling freight around Hokkaido before being retired in 1975. After static display for many years at a children's park in Shibebea, it was restored to operation in 1999.

While the line is not the same as that featured in Yasuo Furuhashi's 1999 hit film *Poppoya*, the image of a steam train going through the snow makes it difficult not to think of this iconic movie. Passing through the cold sparsely populated area, you can't help but experience the isolation felt by Ken Takakura's character.

Chugging away from Kushiro, the train crosses the river's mouth before heading inland. As it passes through woodlands, it is possible to see large Ezo deer searching for food. Later, the railway line rejoins the river and follows its course. Woodland gives way to the reed beds of the wetland. Around Kayanuma it is common to see cranes in the fields alongside the tracks.

These birds are known to Hokkaido's native Ainu people as the deity of the marsh, or *sarurun kamui*. Though the cranes were once thought to be extinct in Japan due to overhunting, a small population was discovered in 1924. Today, there are around 1,000 of the birds in eastern Hokkaido, which unlike populations elsewhere in Asia are resident year-round. The best time for viewing them is between late October and late March, when they congregate at the feeding grounds around Kushiro.



Tsurumidai is a popular location to see up to 100 cranes coming to feed and frolic in the powder. The air resonates with the unison calls of pairs, who mate for life. If you're lucky, you may bear witness to them bowing and jumping into the air, reinforcing their bond. Airborne activity is constant, with groups coming in and departing. And just like the stream of birds, there is a constant stream of human spectators.

The *tancho zuru* (the Japanese name for the crane) is integral to the culture of the area. Pictures and models are everywhere. When the local government needed an image for the ID plate of the SL Fuyu-no-Shitsugen-go, what else could be chosen but a crane?

Kushiro itself is a pleasant enough Japanese city. The harbor area by the river can make for an interesting stroll, especially in winter. The first weekend of February sees the Kushiro Ice Festival held in Sakaemachi Park. A bit further afield is Lake Akan, which freezes over in colder months. It is possible to go snowmobiling across the lake or even ice fishing. At night, Ainu ceremonies and fireworks take place as part of the Ice Akan festival.

One of the best areas to relax after chasing cranes or trains is Toraya. This friendly *robata* is run by a Hanshin Tigers fan, and the walls are decorated with the team's memorabilia. Tanaka-san mans the coals grilling fresh seafood, cigarette in mouth, while dressed in a black Toraya T-shirt bearing his own image. People huddle around the grill and bar area, craving the warmth of the small

wooden building. Dried fish hang from the ceiling above the bar. To wash all the food down, have an Asahi, which is not just "super dry" but super cold as well, with occasional ice chips. Just the order to refresh for another day in this winter paradise. ☺





TRIP TIPS

JAL has three daily flights from Haneda to Kushiro and ANA has two. Alternatively, Kushiro can be reached from Sapporo by air or train. There are five Super Ozora trains from Sapporo and the trip takes just

under four hours. The 7:03am train will get you there just in time to catch the SL train to Shibeche. Daily SL trains operate from January 26 to March 9 and also March 15-16. One-way tickets cost ¥1,840 and a schedule can be found here: www.marimo.or.jp/JR_Kushiro/sl19/sl08topg.html. The better views are out the left side of the carriage (Shibeche bound). There are many places to stay in Kushiro. Ekimae Hotel Palude Kushiro (tel: 0154 22-3111) is a cheap place convenient for the station starting at ¥3,900 a night. A more luxurious option is the Kushiro Prince Hotel (tel: 0154 31-1111), starting at ¥11,000 a night. The Kushiro Ice Festival takes place February 1-3. For more information see the website of the Kushiro Tourism Association (www.kushiro-kankou.or.jp/english).

travelogue

Ishin Hotels (www.ishinhotels.com) has announced that it's acquired Hotel Sunroute Ikebukuro. The 175-room hotel, which lies just three minutes from the station, is the latest acquisition of the group, which currently owns 25 hotels and operates 20 others, including boutique "b" brand. The Ikebukuro area is currently undergoing redevelopment in the lead-up to the June opening of the city's 13th and final subway line, which will connect Ikebukuro, Shinjuku, Shibuya and Yokohama (via the existing Toyoko line). • **Japan Airlines** (www.jal.co.jp/en) has doubled its entertainment line-up on international flights fitted with its state-of-the-art Magic-III system. The device is installed on planes flying to London, Frankfurt, Paris and Southeast Asia, and will soon be added to US-bound flights. Options include 50 movie channels, 50 audio channels and 30 games, plus a channel from Berlitz for passengers who want to study a foreign language. • **The New Otani** (www.newotani.co.jp/en/group) has increased its tie-ups with airlines that offer its guests frequent flyer points. Guests staying in New Otani hotels can now earn bonus points for United, American, Northwest, Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, JAL and ANA. Conditions apply, so see the website for details. **CB**

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