

Mingle with snowmen

The charming snow sculptures of Hokkaido will warm the cockles of your heart in winter

mark andrews

As the plane flew farther north into the Tohoku region, the ground got progressively whiter. Across the sea Hokkaido loomed as a cleansed body offering itself as a winter wonderland.

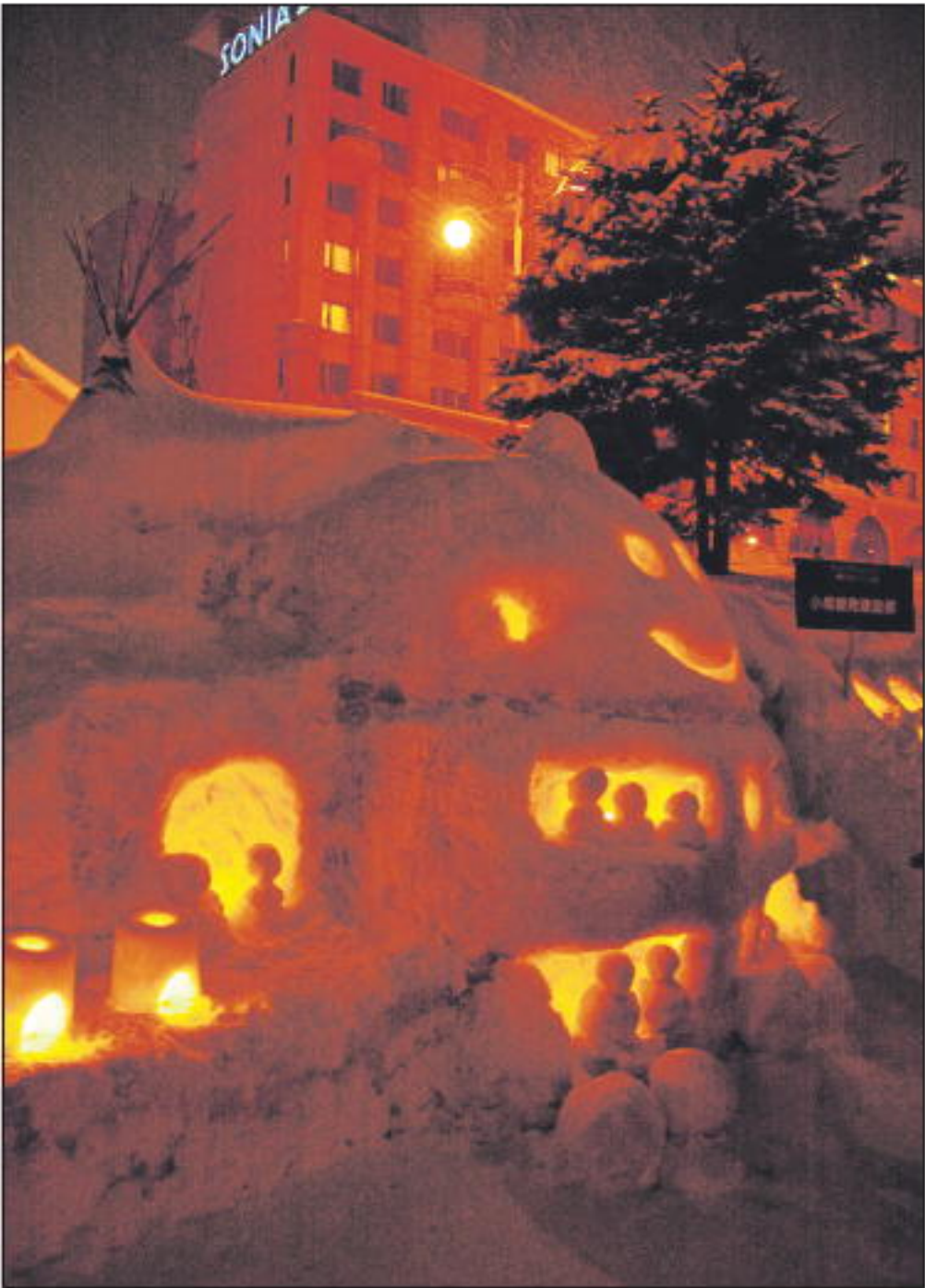
White banks piled high beside the railway line from Chitose airport to the centre of Sapporo, Hokkaido.

I knew I had arrived at the snow festival.

The event started when a bunch of bored school kids in 1950 decided to build a series of snow sculptures in the central Odori Park. Their optimism amid the hardships of post-World War



Whimsical figures populate the Sapporo Snow Festival (above) and Otaru Snow Gleaming Festival (right). PHOTOS: MARK ANDREWS



II Japan struck a chord in the population.

By the time the Japan Self Defence Force got involved in 1955, the festival was already a popular local event in the capital of Hokkaido. But it was the efforts and equipment of the force that facilitated the building of sculptures on a grand scale, some reaching up to 15m.

Today, the week-long festival is held in February at Odori Park, Suskino and Tsudome, which is outside the city. It took place this year from Feb 5 to 11.

Stretching over a kilometre between the TV tower and Sapporo City Document Museum, Odori Park is filled with snow sculptures both large and small. This year, there were 15 entries in the International Snow Sculpture Competition and an undisclosed number in the citizens' snow sculpture zone.

These are often sponsored by companies or to commemorate an event. In 2008, there was a large statue commemorating the 25th anniversary of Tokyo Disneyland. This year, the largest statue was of Dresden's Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) Lutheran church, which stood about 18m tall.

Other sculptures included the Unesco World Heritage Site of Wartburg Castle in Thuringia, Germany, and the royal palace

in Baekje, South Korea.

However, it is at night when the people really come out to play. Stages in front of huge sculptures host music concerts and there are activities such as ice skating. There are numerous stalls selling food such as jingiskan (barbecued mutton), unimeshi (sea urchin on boiled rice), kanimeshi (boiled rice mixed with crab meat), kani kourayaki (crab meat grilled and served in a crab shell), ishikari nabe (salmon and vegetable hot-pot), hotate kagayaki (scallop grilled and served in a scallop shell) and ramen noodle.

Night is the best time to see the Susukino Ice Festival, one of the main parts of

the Sapporo festival.

Ice sculptures in the famous red-light district line the centre of the street, which is closed to traffic at night. One popular highlight has real seafood frozen into the ice, a hint at the Hokkaido speciality.

Events such as the Ice Queen contest where Sapporo beauties hit the ice walk take place here.

Located nearby, the famous alley known as Ramen Yokocho is a good place to warm up with a bowl of steaming noodles.

Continued on facing page

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If looking at real seafood frozen into the ice at the Susukino Ice Festival leaves you cold, hop over to Ramen Yokocho (above) for warm noodles.

5 things to do

- 1 Do invest in clip-on studs for your shoes, which can help you keep up with the locals. The snow can become incredibly icy and it is very easy to slip.

2 Do book hotel accommodation early. Hotels charge a premium over the snow festival weekend.

3 Do eat ramen noodles, a Sapporo speciality. The best place for it is the Ramen Yokocho Alley in Susukino. This is lined with tiny shops that try to outdo one another.

4 Do try the seafood. A good place for this is Sushi Street in Otaru.

5 Do dip in a hot-spring bath. Go to the Jozankei area in the mountains surrounding Sapporo. Buses leave from the ESTA building of the JR station.
- 2 don'ts

1 Don't smoke outdoors, except in designated smoking areas. A large part of the centre of the city, including the snow festival, is a smoke-free zone.

2 Don't forget to pack plenty of warm clothes. It is cold outside, particularly in Otaru.

Handmade wonders

From facing page

Hole-in-the-wall shops pack this narrow alley and vie for you to try their take on the Sapporo version (miso flavour) of the Japanese obsession. On average, a bowl of ramen here costs 900 yen (\$\$14).

Overlapping with the Sapporo event is the Otaru Snow Gleaming Festival. This year it was held from Feb 5 to 14. Located on the coast just 30 minutes from Sapporo by train, the historic town of Otaru is easy to reach.

Although it is only in its 12th year, the festival is in many ways more charming than the one in Sapporo. Unlike its big brother, it is not plastered in sponsorship signs and hence seems to retain an innocence. Every evening at dusk, candles are lit in snow statues and cones all around the town by an army of volunteers.

The best places in Otaru to visit are the areas around the canal and along part of the former Temiya railway line.

In the canal area, gas lamps are joined by candles floating on the water and in small statues and cones along the embankment. An orange glow draws out the eerie silence of the old warehouses with icicles suspended from their roofs.

Opened in 1880, the Temiya line was Hokkaido's first railway line and Japan's third, going from Otaru to Sapporo. Along the stretch between the main street and a street full of sushi shops, the disused rail-

way line is lit up with lanterns and statues, while snow covers the tracks. At one point along the tracks, you even pass through a lantern-lit tunnel.

What is amazing is that all the statues and candles are made by hand.

While the temperature is just a little below 0 deg C, the cold wind coming off the sea chills you to the bone.

I escape this by refuelling at one of the many sushi shops at the end of the lit part of the Temiya line. While gorging on sushi, tempura and crab, I chat with a dentist who has returned with his kimono-clad wife to the peace of his hometown Otaru from Tokyo.

With a festival so heartwarming and seafood so fresh, I could see the attraction of Otaru. For those prepared to brave the cold, a winter trip to Hokkaido can be magical.

stlife@sph.com.sg

Getting there

Singapore Airlines flies daily to Nagoya, Kansai International Airport and Tokyo. Japan Airlines has daily flights to Kansai and Tokyo. Delta Northwest, United and ANA offer daily flights to Tokyo as well. There are flights from these airports to Sapporo.

the concierge

HOT AND HEALTHY
Five-star Phuket resort Indigo Pearl is rolling out a seven-day retreat package from May 3 to 7.

Priced from 51,500 baht (\$\$2,200) a guest, the highlight of the stay is a five-day hot yoga programme conducted by qualified teachers from Hot Yoga Phuket, a well-known centre there.

The package includes meals and accommodation.

Guests who book this month can enjoy the package from 45,500 baht, a discount of 6,000 baht.

For information, go to www.hotyogaphuket.com/evolution

CLUB MED YABULI
Club Med will open its first upmarket snow resort in China this November as a result of its collaboration with the country's Melco China Resorts Group.

Called Club Med Yabuli, it is located in Heilongjiang province and will have 284 rooms, including 27 120 sq m suites, as well as several conference rooms that are ideal for business functions of various scales.

For information, call 1800-258-2633 or go to www.clubmed.com.sg

TEE PACKAGE
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BANGKOK CITY
Banyan Tree Bangkok's perks package is dangling savings of up to 50 per cent on its new Club Rooms from March 17 to June 30.

Starting from 6,480 baht (\$\$278) a night, it includes a one-way limousine airport transfer, a 90-minute massage session worth 3,200 baht, a glass of cognac and cigar and a choice of one of four movie packages for in-room theatre entertainment.

Book at banyantree.com and the first 50 reservations will receive a free night's stay at the soon-to-be-open Banyan Tree Samui in Koh Samui.

BOOK A TOUR
CTC Holidays has opened bookings for its eight-day travel package to Changsha, Guangzhou and Zhangjiajie where you can visit the Peach Blossom Festival and Phoenix Ancient Town. The tour will be on an additional Shenzhen Airlines flight to Changsha, the capital city of Hunan province.

Departing on March 25 and April 2, packages start from \$688 for two to go. To book, call 6536-4733.

Cheryl Tan
Lin Wenjian

tcheryl@sph.com.sg
wenjian@sph.com.sg



Enjoy the cool climate at Club Med Yabuli in Heilongjiang province in China when the upmarket snow resort opens in November. PHOTO: CLUB MED SINGAPORE

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