



Mountains to

Marshes

Words
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Japan's northern island.

I am totally alone. Clothes flung on nearby rocks, I step cautiously into the steaming waters of an onsen lying at the end of a solitary, snowy pathway on a remote mountainside.

Snowflakes of perfect proportions – thick, white and surprisingly consistent – are tumbling out of light pink skies. The deeply serene silence that envelops the scene is broken only by the sharp intake of my breath and ripples of water as I submerge myself.

There are many reasons to visit Hokkaido, the sprawling northernmost island capping the long, thin necklace-trail archipelago that comprises Japan – from its small but perfectly formed mountains, dense forests, big skies, rolling hills and volcanic caldera lakes to its exquisitely fresh seafood and seasonal vegetables.

But there is perhaps one reason that trumps all others, guaranteeing that it is always worth the pilgrimage to Japan's topmost tip: Hokkaido's ice-tinged winter landscapes.

As the last season of the year approaches and the days darken, the island is transformed into a snow-layered tableau, as poetically evocative as it is chilly (thanks to the cold air that rolls across the Sea of Japan from Siberia, before its white powdery magic is unleashed across the island).

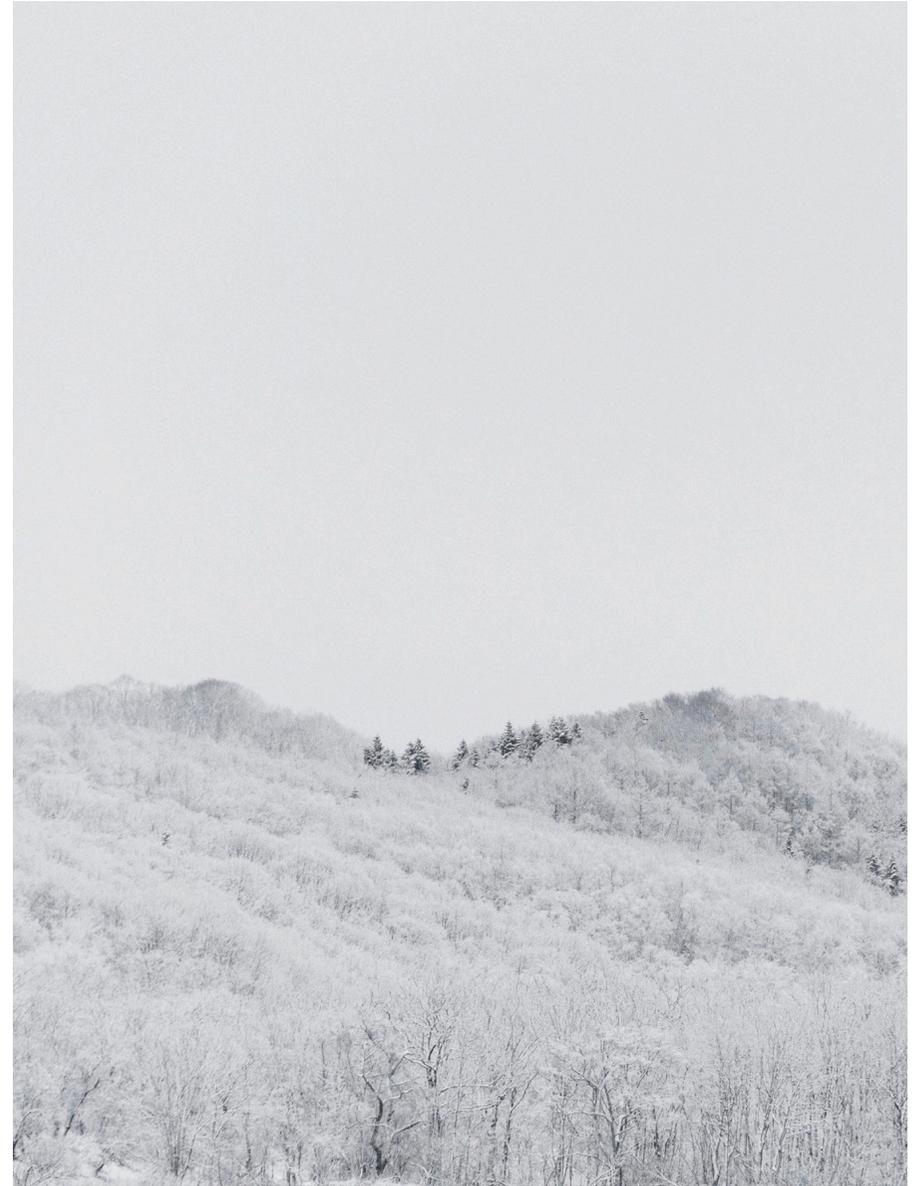
Whatever the time of year, it doesn't take long for visitors to Hokkaido – an island spanning 83,000-plus sq km – to realise that the region is not separated from the rest of Japan by the waters of the Tsugaru Strait alone.

Something deeply different is ingrained into the DNA of the island – from its

animals and insects to its marshes and mountains. It was the 19th century Englishman Thomas Blakiston – a naturalist and explorer who was curious of mind, hirsute of face and more than 5,000 miles from home – to highlight that there was something tangibly unusual about Hokkaido.

Blakiston highlighted how Hokkaido was home to species that were completely different from the rest of Japan, but could instead be found in Russia – from its birds and bears right down to its bees (not to mention its chipmunks, squirrels, foxes and flowers).

His acute observations led to international (and still-standing) recognition of the so-called Blakiston Line, a demarcation between Hokkaido and the rest of Japan, denoting how the









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flora and fauna above and below the line fall into two distinct categories.

Such a line may be physically intangible but is deeply intertwined with the history, spirit and culture of Hokkaido. Geology experts widely agree that at least 20,000 years ago, Hokkaido was once connected to Siberia by land, the physical connection now broken into a string of far-flung northeasterly islands.

Not to forget its indigenous Ainu population, again distinct from the rest of Japan in culture, language, physiology (experts believe their bodies adjusted over centuries to deal with the cold climate). The Ainu have lived on Hokkaido – formerly known as Ezo – for centuries, at times struggling to maintain their unique identity following their forced assimilation into Japanese society, after the island became formally known as Hokkaido in 1869.

Today, many winter visitors are drawn here, seduced by a wilder side to Hokkaido's icy winters and its unique landscape, culture and geography. One such place which is impossible to ignore, quite literally, is Mount Asahi – known as Asahidake - a cloud-brushing volcano right in the centre of Hokkaido (and, at 2,291 metres, its tallest peak).

Although the mountain is increasingly famed for its snow (around 14 metres-worth every season, to be precise), its limited facilities and dimensions ensure it rarely feels busy.

And so visitors can enjoy the mountain's countless angular facets; the naked winter trees with tangled hair-like branches that look as though they've been etched onto the snow in pencil; the fairytale-like reflections of peaks and skies on the surface of caldera lakes.

Meanwhile, a small town, less than an hour's drive to the west, appears to inhabit another world entirely from the mountain's lofty peaks: Biei, made up of undulating low-rise hills which are transformed into a patchwork-like expanse of rainbow-bright flower fields in the summer months.

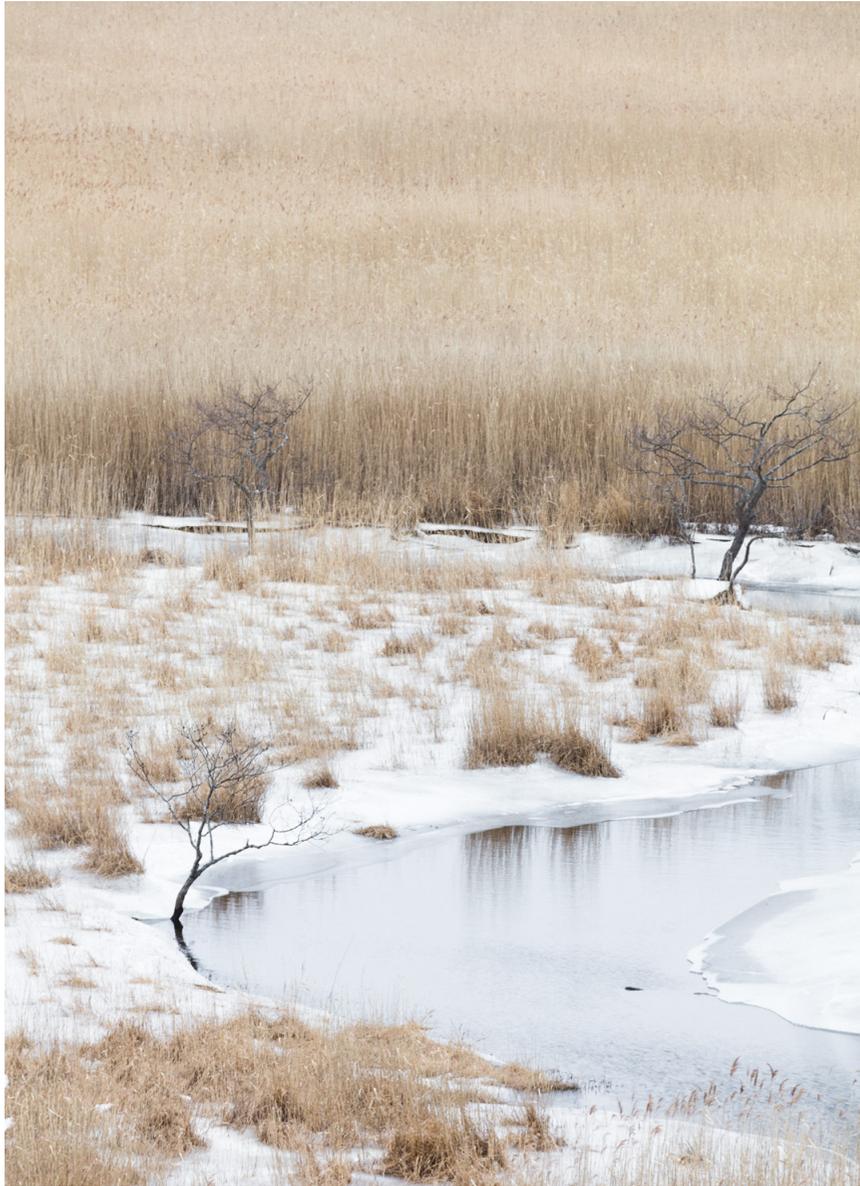
Come winter, however, and Biei is a serene symphony of a thousand shades of white, the minimal landscape marked by gently, curving, lines where the snowy hills meet the skies.

Edging into a wilder, more desolate northeasterly direction across the island leads to Lake Kussharo, its glass-smooth waters spanning the largest area of any of Japan's caldera lakes (it covers close to 80 sq km) in the Akan-Mashu National Park.

The lake showcases a microcosm of Hokkaido's winter ecosystem, from the







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steaming volcanic onsen baths fringing the lakes to a cornucopia of wildlife (the eagle-eyed might spot a Sika Deer, a Siberian chipmunk, a brown hawk owl or a yellow-breasted greenfinch).

The stars of this winter scene are, however, the hundreds of elegantly long-necked whooper swans who stop off at the lake on their migratory path every winter, their yellow and black beaks providing a vibrant splash of colour to the otherwise whitewashed landscape.

Just below the lake is another landscape entirely: the marshes of Tsurui, with constellations of birdlife residing in its wetlands – and king of them all is the rare Red-Crowned Crane (known as tanchozuru in Japanese).

Today, the remote wetlands are the only surviving habitat in Japan for the

iconic – and now endangered – birds, with thousands of visitors drawn yearly to the marshes that span the Kushiro-Shitsugen National Park in the hope of catching a glimpse of the dancing birds, their elegantly monochrome feathered form crowned with a splash of scarlet.

But for the truly intrepid, there is one place that must be added to the Hokkaido trail: Shiretoko National Park, whose narrow, nature-packed peninsula juts into the harsh waters of the Sea of Okhotsk (it's the southernmost spot in the world where it's possible to spot ice drifts).

Perhaps one of the most remote places in Japan, Shiretoko lives up to its Ainu-inspired name meaning "the place where the earth protrudes". It is here, among its dense forests and flowing rivers that many of Hokkaido's most

awe-inspiring residents can be found: Yezo Brown Bears, known in Japanese as higuma (fortunately for those not too keen to cross paths with Japan's largest land animal, the bears tend to tuck themselves up in dens and hibernate during the winter months).

Shiretoko is as historically poignant as it is geographically dramatic: it looks out towards a string of Moscow-controlled islands that once connected Japan to Russia by land – but today are the subject of a decades-long territorial dispute between the two nations.

Yet anyone fortunate enough to make it to this region's jagged coastline, snow-covered mountains, dense forests and fractured history will perhaps share the same thought: that there are few spots which more powerfully sum up the spirit of Hokkaido.

