

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Hop between ice floes, snowshoe along the rims of caldera lakes and warm yourself in hot springs along Japan's wild eastern frontier. Not to mention the fantastic wildlife experiences that await you on this winter adventure!

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Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Contents

About the Tour.....	3
About Japan's Far East.....	3
Tour highlights.....	3
Who is this tour for?.....	3
Itinerary at a glance.....	4
Accommodation.....	4
Travel style.....	5
Adverse weather.....	5
What's included.....	5
What's not included.....	5
When do you run this tour?.....	6
What makes Hokkaido's winter special?.....	6
The Snow.....	6
The Wildlife.....	6
Hot Springs & Warm Welcomes.....	6
How to book this tour?.....	7
What is the minimum group size for this tour?.....	7
Single Supplement.....	7
Travel Insurance.....	8
Travel to the Meeting Point.....	8
Tour map.....	8
Day to Day Itinerary.....	9
Day 1 – Meet your group in Abashiri.....	9
Day 2 – Hike at Lake Kussharo & See Whooper Swans.....	10
Day 3 – Walk on the drift ice & Snowshoe at Utoro Shiretoko.....	11
Day 4 – Bird watching cruise in Rausu & Explore Notsuke Peninsula.....	12
Day 5 – Snowshoe to Kaminoko Pond & Ainu concert at Lake Akan.....	13
Day 6 – Snowshoe with Akan Ainu & See Red-crowned Cranes.....	14
Day 7 – Transfer to Kushiro & Farewells.....	15
Our recommended reading.....	15

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



About the Tour

Start	Finish	Grading	Season
Abashiri	Kushiro	Relaxed Winter Adventure	February

About Japan's Far East

Hokkaido's far east region is often described as the last unexplored frontier of Japan. This region is popular for wildlife and outdoor lovers in the summer. It is also renowned internationally in winter as a bird-watching destination.

On this tour, we will visit some of Hokkaido's beautiful national parks. We take in unique winter outdoor activities, including walking on the drift ice, watching the dancing cranes and snowshoeing on Shiretoko Peninsula among Japanese deer in their natural habitat.

You don't have to be an experienced skier or snowboarder to enjoy Hokkaido's untouched deep snow. We will use snowshoes to hike through the snowy landscape, allowing anyone to enjoy Hokkaido's winter scenery. Out on the drift ice, dry suits will keep you dry and warm despite the freezing temperatures. Let us guide your once-in-a-lifetime winter adventure!

Tour highlights

- Walk on ice that has drifted all the way from Russia's Amur River to Utoro, Shiretoko.
- Take a nature cruise off the Rausu coast, with the chance to catch sight of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles.
- Dive into the world of the Ainu. Walk in native forest with an Ainu guide and experience their food, music and dance at the Lake Akan Ainu settlement.
- Venture into Japan's eastern frontier, home to a trio of national parks: Shiretoko, Lakes Akan & Mashu, and Kushiro-Shitsugen.

Who is this tour for?

- Active travellers who enjoy walking for 3 hours a day.
- Curious travellers who enjoy a mixture of activities and sightseeing and learning about the regions they visit.
- Winter hikers and snow lovers interested in hiking in snow with the help of snowshoes (no prior experience required).
- Adventurous travellers who enjoy rural hospitality, staying in Japanese style accommodations with natural hot springs on site.

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Itinerary at a glance

Day	Activities	Meals ¹
1	Meet your group in Abashiri	D ▾
2	Hike at Lake Kussharo & See Whooper Swans	B, L, D ▾
3	Walk on the drift ice & Snowshoe at Utoro, Shiretoko	B, L, D ▾
4	Bird watching cruise in Rausu, Shiretoko & Explore Notsuke Peninsula	B, L, D ▾
5	Snowshoe to Kaminoko Pond & Ainu concert at Lake Akan	B, L, D ▾
6	Snowshoe with Akan Ainu & See Red-crowned Cranes	B, L, D ▾
7	Transfer to Kushiro & Farewells	B ▾

Accommodation

Day	Type	Location	Ensuite Toilet	Ensuite Shower	Onsen	Laundry
1	Hotel ▾	Abashiri	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Hotel ▾	Utoro Shiretoko	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Ryokan ▾ ²	Yorouchi Onsen	✓		✓	✓
4	Ryokan ▾	Yorouchi Onsen	✓		✓	✓
5	Hotel ▾	Lake Akan	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Hotel ▾	Tsurui	✓	✓	✓	

We may change the facility options if our preferred accommodation is unavailable.

¹ B = Breakfast, L = Lunch, D = Dinner

² Ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn.

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Travel style

This tour includes a series of active experiences that while easygoing will still allow you to experience the great outdoors and work up a bit of a sweat! We will be outdoors in subzero temperatures for up to 4 hours at a time before returning to the van and travelling to the next stop. While it is cold outside, it will be warm in the van and indoors. This makes it easy to warm back up, but makes good layering important – make sure you check the packing list. Your luggage will stay in our van, freeing you up to enjoy the day's adventure with only a light day pack. There is also a focus on the region's wildlife and you will have multiple chances to catch a glimpse at some of Hokkaido's incredible migratory winter creatures.

Adverse weather

While we try to organise everything, mother nature is out of our control. If the weather is too bad to safely hike or snowshoe (such as during a snowstorm) we will travel to the next inn in our support vehicle. Along the way we will still stop at local restaurants and visit indoor facilities, so you can still experience the charm of the area while travelling safely and comfortably.

What's included

- 6 nights accommodation on a twin share basis
- 6 breakfasts, 5 lunches and 6 dinners
- Guided drift ice walking tour in Utoro Shiretoko
- Guide wildlife watching cruise in Rausu Shiretoko
- Evening Ainu cultural show at Lake Akan Ainu settlement
- Guided forest walk with Akan Ainu
- Snowshoes & poles rental
- All transport as described in the itinerary
- English speaking local guide(s)

What's not included

- Airfare
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses
- Drinks with included meals

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



When do you run this tour?

We run this tour in February only as a special midwinter alternative to our regular 7-Day Wild Winter Tour. Hokkaido's midwinter is the only time of the year when we have the best chance of seeing the drift ice– and therefore, enjoying the related drift ice walk, cruise and wildlife visitors! (Although please keep in mind that the appearance of drift ice is of course dependent on currents and wind direction.) In recent years, Hokkaido's snowfall has been getting later and the thaw coming earlier, but February snow conditions still remain reliable for winter activities, including snowshoeing. It is simply the best time of year to enjoy the wonderful sensation of walking on fluffy, powdery snow!

What makes Hokkaido's winter special?

The Snow

Every winter, cold winds from Siberia pick up moisture as they cross the Sea of Japan before dropping it as snow on Hokkaido. The snow falls as big, light snowflakes, the kind you see in the movies, blanketing the landscape in white. With the thick bush buried, we are free to explore the forests and mountains, with access to areas that may be more challenging or even completely out of our reach in summer. Hike in the snow, and you will feel like you are in a private snow globe; the sense of stillness and solitude is hard to describe without experiencing it for yourself.

The Wildlife

While Brown Bears are tucked away in hibernation, many other animals are active throughout winter. Mountain Hares, Red Foxes and Japanese Deer leave a network of footprints behind as they search for food. Red-crowned Cranes perform mating dances in the fields, and giant Steller's Sea Eagles arrive from Siberia. Seeing the animals against a stark white background is a striking winter image.

Hot Springs & Warm Welcomes

It may be cold outside but step into one of Hokkaido's many cosy restaurants or lodges, and you are greeted with a warm local welcome. Tuck into a bowl of world-famous Hokkaido ramen or a local hot pot. Later, slip into a steaming hot spring to warm up your body and soothe your tired muscles. For a truly unique winter experience, brave the dash through the snow to the "rotenburo" outdoor pool.

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



How to book this tour?

We will send you a link to our online sign up form, where we ask for the travel information of all the members travelling with you.

Once we receive this, we will send you a payment link for your tour deposit, which is JPY 50,000 per person. **We will confirm your booking upon receipt of your deposit payment.**

The deposit is treated as a part of the tour price. Payment of the balance will be reminded by email, which is generally 5 weeks prior to the tour departure date.

We accept payment via **Wise** or **Flywire**. We will send you payment links for both options, and you must use one of the payment links provided by us.

Wise payments are available in Japanese Yen only and require you to have a Wise account (Wise-to-Wise transfer only). You must pay any currency exchange or transfer fees yourself.

Flywire payments allow credit card payment or domestic bank transfer converted to your home currency. Credit card payments via Flywire incur an additional service charge of 1.5%, while domestic bank transfers via Flywire do not incur this service charge.

By paying for a deposit or full amount, you confirm that you have read, understand and agree to these [Terms and Conditions](#).

What is the minimum group size for this tour?

This is a mixed group tour and **we accept bookings for this tour from one person up**. However, our scheduled group tours require a minimum number of bookings for us to guarantee the departure of the tour, and to offer the tour at the price quoted. **The minimum number of booked guests to guarantee this tour is four people.**

If you book with less than four people, we will hold your place on the tour and wait for another group to join the tour. If the number of guests has not reached the minimum number by 60 days prior to departure, we will give you the option to cancel or to upgrade to a private departure.

If you choose to cancel, we will refund the amount in Japanese Yen that you have paid us. You're welcome to check with us at any time about the status of bookings.

Please be advised that we will not be liable to compensate for any inconvenience or incidental expenses that might have incurred to you, including airline tickets.

Single Supplement

Our tours are priced on a twin share basis. Those travelling by themselves will need to pay an additional supplement for use of a single room. If you are happy to share a room with another guest – of the same gender – then let us know at the time of booking. If we match you with another solo traveller then we can discount the single supplement for both of you.

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Travel Insurance

All guests joining our tours are required to have travel insurance. Please make sure you have a valid travel insurance, covering the kind of activities you are undertaking during our tour, cancellations, loss of personal belongings, and any unforeseen circumstances while travelling.

Travel to the Meeting Point

We will meet at 6:00 pm at our hotel in Central Abashiri. The closest airport is Abashiri Memanbetsu (MMB) and you can fly directly there from Tokyo Haneda (HND), Tokyo Narita (NRT), Sapporo New Chitose (CTS) and Sapporo Okadama (OKD).

From Abashiri Memanbetsu Airport, airport shuttles depart for central Abashiri with the arrival of every domestic flight. The shuttle takes 26 mins from the Airport to JR Abashiri Station, and costs ¥1,050 per person. Our hotel is within walking distance of the station.

Alternatively, you can take a JR train from Sapporo to Abashiri if you prefer. It takes 5.5 hours and costs just over ¥10,000 for a non-reserved seat.

You can search train timetables in English on [Japan Transit Planner website](#).

Tour map

To view the route on Google My Maps, [click here](#).



Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Day to Day Itinerary

Day 1 – Meet your group in Abashiri

We will meet at our hotel at 6:00 pm near JR Abashiri Station in Abashiri, the largest city on Hokkaido's eastern Sea of Okhotsk coast.

Once everyone is gathered, we will spend some time getting to know each other and introducing the program for our upcoming adventure before we set off for dinner in downtown Abashiri. For those who aren't used to walking on icy roads, we will introduce you to the penguin-walking technique!

Meals	Accommodation
D	Hotel in Abashiri

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Day 2 – Hike at Lake Kussharo & See Whooper Swans

After breakfast at the hotel, we will head south for Lake Kussharo, where a flock of Whooper Swans spend the winter.

Lake Kussharo, found in the Akan–Mashu National Park, is the largest caldera lake in Japan. In winter, nearly all of the lake's surface is frozen, save for some parts of the shore where hot spring water bubbles up from underground. The swans flock to these hot water areas to have a warming soak!



We will hike along the lakeshore where snow typically isn't too deep, so we'll likely explore without snowshoes. Our walk takes us to a volcanically active area where we can see steam rising from the ground at the water's edge. We'll then search for flocks of swans gathered along the warm lake shore, observing these magnificent birds in their winter habitat. After our exploration, we will have lunch at a local restaurant to enjoy some regional cuisine.

Before departing for Utoro on the Shiretoko Peninsula, we'll make a brief visit to Mt. Io, an active volcano featuring impressive sulfur vents and an otherworldly landscape. We'll spend the night in Utoro, a gateway town to the Shiretoko Peninsula – a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site.

Meals	Activity	Duration	Accommodation
B, L, D	Hiking	2 hours	Hotel in Utoro Shiretoko

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special

Day 3 – Walk on the drift ice & Snowshoe at Utoro Shiretoko

Ready to wake up with a dip in the icy ocean? Well, this morning is all about that! The drysuits will keep us afloat, dry and warm – so don't worry if you are not a good swimmer.

After breakfast at our hotel, we will meet our guides, receive safety instructions and get kitted up to soak in the cold sea. We will keep our normal winter clothes on, such as fleeces and light down jackets, to act as warming layers under our drysuits.



The exact location of our walk/swim depends on the location of drift ice on the day, which has floated all the way south from northern Sakhalin to the coast of Shiretoko.

The drift ice is a natural phenomenon that can be seen on the Okhotsk coast every winter, generally from February to March. However, the scale of the ice has been observably shrinking in recent years due to climate change.

After we enjoy the experience of walking on the floating ice, we will come back ashore and have lunch in Utoro. In the afternoon, we'll continue exploring more of Shiretoko, strapping on snowshoes to discover the peninsula's winter beauty. We'll trek through forests that are natural habitats for Japanese deer, giving us a good chance to observe these magnificent animals in their natural habitat. If conditions permit, we may make it to a point where we can see the frozen columns of Furepe Waterfall. We will then drive to Yoroushi Onsen where we will spend the next two nights.

It's not just hot spring visitors who come to Yoroushi Onsen. A few Blakiston's Fish Owls visit from time to time to feed in the river running behind our hotel. The Blakiston's Fish Owl is the largest owl in the world and has lived in Hokkaido's forests for centuries. The Ainu people worship it as *kotan-kor-kamuy*, the protector of the village.

While it is impossible to know when the owls will turn up, the hotel has a comfortable viewing lounge where you can relax on comfortable sofas while you stay up and wait for their visit. When they arrive, the large windows let you photograph them from the warm indoors. What more could you ask for!

Meals	Activity	Duration	Accommodation
B, L, D	Drift Ice Walking Snowshoeing	1.5 hours 1.5 hours	Ryokan in Yoroushi Onsen

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Day 4 – Bird watching cruise in Rausu & Explore Notsuke Peninsula

Renowned for its kombu seaweed and sea urchins, the peculiar submarine topography makes Rausu a prosperous fishing town. It's not just humans that visit to fish though, the rich waters attract all sorts of wildlife and local fishermen offer wildlife watching cruises to share this experience with visitors.



We'll depart our inn at Yoroushi Onsen early this morning and have breakfast on the go to catch a morning bird watching cruise which departs from Rausu Port. During our 2.5-hour cruise off the Rausu Coast, we'll witness the magnificent Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles as they dominate the landscape, gathering on the sea ice to feed on fish. We'll also keep watch for Brunnich's Guillemots and Steller's Sea Lions. The boat brings us close to the sea ice, offering a spectacular backdrop of the Shiretoko mountain range—a breathtakingly scenic experience despite the cold.

After lunch in Rausu village, we will head south to Notsuke Peninsula, a Ramsar site. This 26km long sand spit is the largest of its kind in Japan. In mid-winter the bay freezes, providing a unique opportunity to walk on the frozen surface. It is also home to abundant red foxes and birds of prey, so we will hope to see them while exploring this special site. We will travel back to Yoroushi Onsen for our second night's stay. Tonight provides another opportunity to stay up and wait for the Blakiston's Fish Owl if you weren't able to see it the previous night.

Meals	Activity	Duration	Accommodation
B, L, D	Boat Cruise	2.5 hours	Ryokan in Yoroushi Onsen

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Day 5 – Snowshoe to Kaminoko Pond & Ainu concert at Lake Akan

After staying up late to wait for the appearance of the owls, wake yourself up with a soak in the hot springs. The onsen is open throughout the night into the morning at Yoroushi Onsen. Japanese visitors often take a bath before breakfast at these onsen retreats.

Leaving Yoroushi, we'll head to the north side of Lake Mashu for a snowshoe adventure.

Here, we'll follow a tranquil stream to

Kaminoko Pond, which is fed by spring water

originating from the lake. Even in subzero temperatures, the stream remains unfrozen, providing a vital water source for birds and wildlife. We trek through the pristine Sakhalin Fir forest, while looking for animal tracks in the snow.



On our way to lunch in Teshikaga, we will visit the Lake Mashu observatory to enjoy the magnificent view of the caldera lake and its outer rim from above. This is one of Akan-Mashu National Park's three major lakes, with pristine waters set deep in a caldera of its own. Its high, steep cliffs prevent people from accessing its shores, a feature which is believed to have helped it retain its immaculate water quality to this very day. The lake is regularly veiled in mist and fog, but if we get lucky, we will be able to catch a glimpse of its renowned "Mashu-blue" surface. We will have a late lunch in Teshikaga before transferring to Lake Akan.

We will have dinner at our lodging and then go out for an Ainu night concert at the Lake Akan Ainu Kotan (settlement). Like many other indigenous cultures, the Ainu did not have forms of writing; their folklore is deeply embedded in song and dance that varies from region to region. Tonight we will appreciate the traditions presented by the Akan Ainu.

Meals	Activity	Duration	Accommodation
B, L, D	Snowshoeing	3 hours	Hotel at Lake Akan

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special

Day 6 – Snowshoe with Akan Ainu & See Red-crowned Cranes

Forming part of the Akan–Mashu National Park, Lake Akan is a picturesque area to explore on foot, with volcanoes and old growth forests surrounding the caldera lake.

After having breakfast at our hotel, we venture into the forest, guided by a local Ainu. Our guide will teach us about Ainu history and their way of life, living in harmony with nature.



We will have lunch at a restaurant run by a local Ainu family to experience Ainu cuisine before we head south to Tsurui village.

Tsurui is famous for the successful recovery of Red-crowned Cranes. Their population has rebounded to over 1,900 birds in the area surrounding Tsurui, with a reasonably high chance to see one even from the main roads. We will visit the Ito Tancho Sanctuary to observe the cranes and learn about the community efforts which have contributed to their recovery.

Our lodging for the night is in central Tsurui, where we can have one last onsen soak before enjoying a Western-style course dinner featuring local ingredients from Eastern Hokkaido – a perfect meal to celebrate our final evening together.

Meals	Activity	Duration	Accommodation
B, L, D	Snowshoeing	1.5 hours	Hotel in Tsurui

Japan's Far East

7 Day Wild Winter Tour – February Special



Day 7 – Transfer to Kushiro & Farewells

For early birds and keen birders, we can get up before dawn to go out and see the cranes taking off in the early morning. They nest on the river next to our lodging, spending the night in a flock and leaving all at the same time to feed.

We will have breakfast at a more civilised hour at our lodging and then drive for about 1 hour to Kushiro City to complete the tour.



We can drop you off at either Kushiro JR Station or Kushiro Airport between 10 am and 11 am.

Meals			
B			

Our recommended reading

[Hokkaido Wildlife Guide](#)

[A Local's Guide to Snowshoeing in Hokkaido](#)

[Layer Up! How to Dress for Hokkaido's Winter](#)

[What to pack for Hokkaido?](#)

[How to onsen \(like a local!\)](#)

[A Local's Guide on What to Expect When Staying in Hokkaido](#)

[Vegan & Vegetarian in Hokkaido](#)

[Hokkaido Travel Tips & Common Questions](#)

[The Ainu, from a Hokkaido local's perspective](#)