

Northern Japan

Exploring Hokkaido and the Tohoku region of Japan

by Laurie Harris



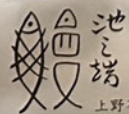
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For my Dad ...





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伊豆栄

上野不忍池畔 本店 (3831) 0954 8906

伊豆栄 不忍亭	(3832) 0785
伊豆栄 梅川亭	(5685) 2011~2
吉祥寺 東急店	0422(21) 5688
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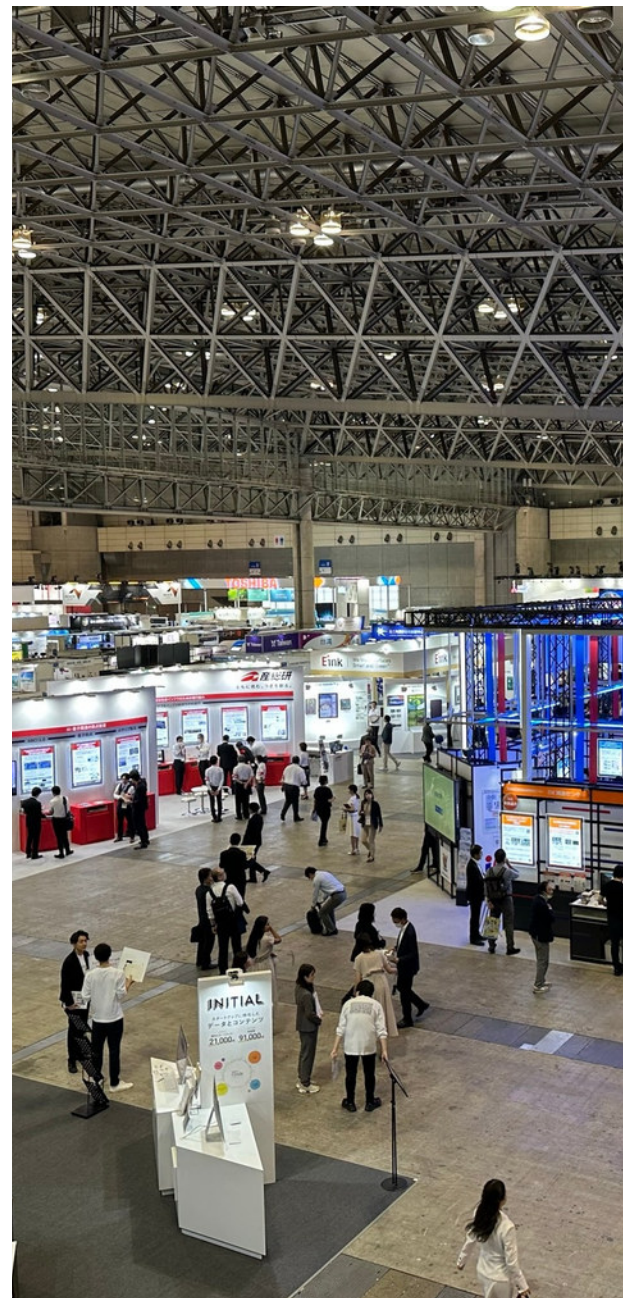
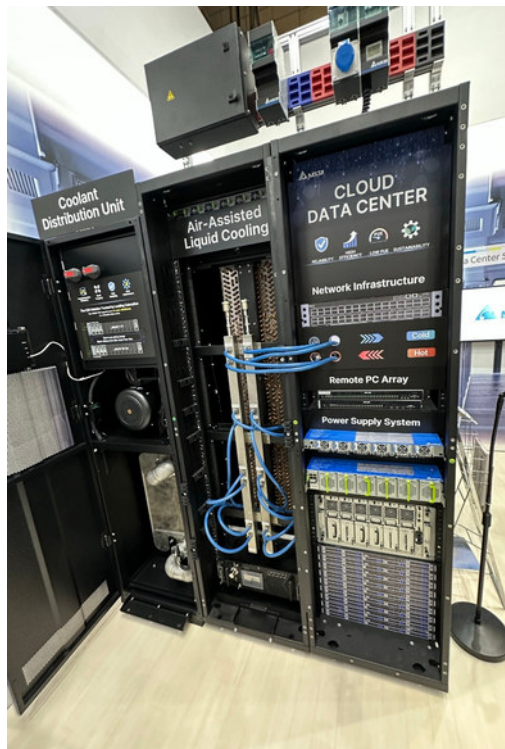
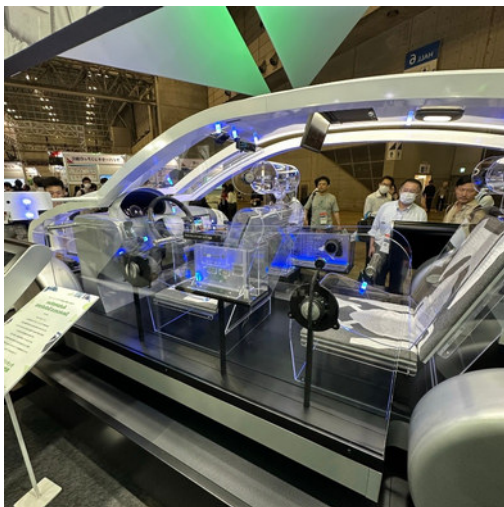
Tokyo

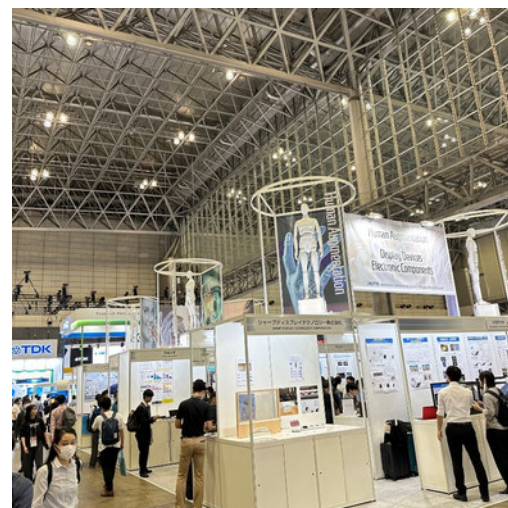
While my third trip to Japan was all about viewing the cherry blossoms (hanami), my fourth trip was all about viewing the fall colors (koyo) specifically in the northern regions of Japan. Before that, I would first visit the Combined Exhibition of Advanced Technologies (CEATEC), Japan's version of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held at the Makuhari Messe Event Hall in Chiba. This year the trade show had a large focus on artificial intelligence, augmented reality and sustainability. After the exhibition I would travel to Narita Airport to pickup Shannon on his first visit to Japan.

The next day we would take a whirlwind tour of otaku mecca Akihabara with its many stores focused on manga, anime and video game culture. In the evening we would travel to Odaiba with its iconic life-sized Gundam Unicorn statue, Rainbow bridge and replica of the Statue of Liberty. We would have dinner at Gonpachi Odaiba izakaya (Japanese-style pub) known as being the model of the restaurant featured in the iconic fight scene in the movie Kill Bill Vol. 1.

On our return to Tokyo at the end of the trip we would visit the Ameyokocho open-air market in Ueno, known for its street food stalls and great shopping. While staying at a hotel in Shinjuku we would also venture into the nearby, much reformed, red-light district of Kabukicho.

















Sapporo

Our main stop on this trip would be Sapporo on Japan's northernmost island Hokkaido. After arriving we would travel to the top of nearby Mt. Moiwa by cable car. We would have dinner at the upscale The JEWELS restaurant with its scenic views overlooking Sapporo.

The next day we would begin our first day of koyo by visiting Gingko Avenue on the grounds of Hokkaido University with its iconic golden leaved trees. Before reaching the avenue we would stop by monuments for Dr. William S. Clarke, who established Sapporo Agricultural College (now Hokkaido University) and Nitobe Inazou, one of the first students under Dr. Clarke and author of the book Bushido which codified the ethics of samurai culture.

After leaving Gingko Avenue we would head to Shiroi Koibito Park. Shiroi Koibito is the flagship chocolate filled cookie of the confectionery company Ishiya. Shiroi Koibito Park is very much like the Hershey Park Factory Tour.

We would then travel back to downtown Sapporo to explore Odori Park, a 1.5km stretch of park space that ends with the Sapporo TV tower. We would capture beautiful sunset views of Odori Park from atop the Sapporo TV tower before having dinner at Fugetsu okonomiyaki restaurant.

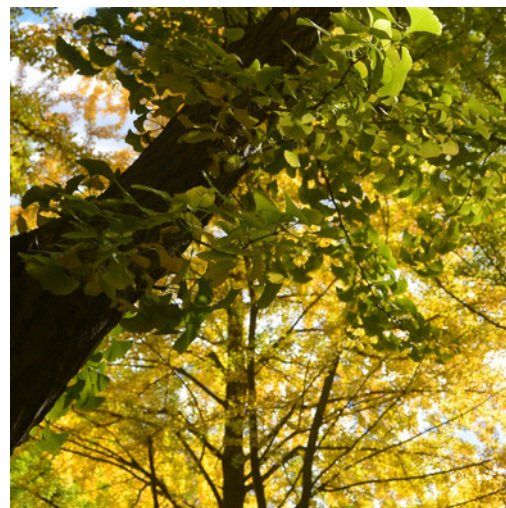
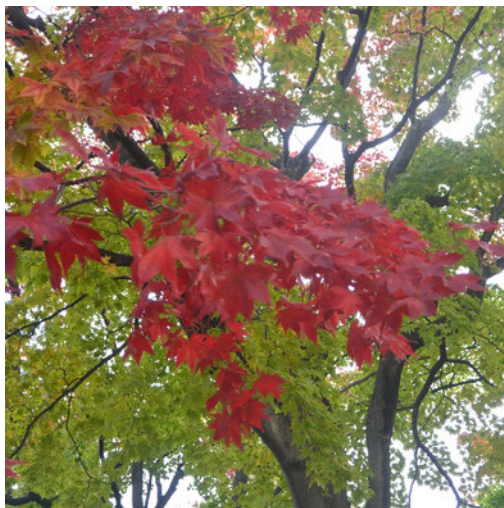
On our final day in Hokkaido we would travel an hour south of Sapporo by train to Shiraoi, home to the Upopoy National Ainu Museum opened in 2020. The museum celebrates and delves into the history and culture of the Ainu, the indigenous people of northern Japan.

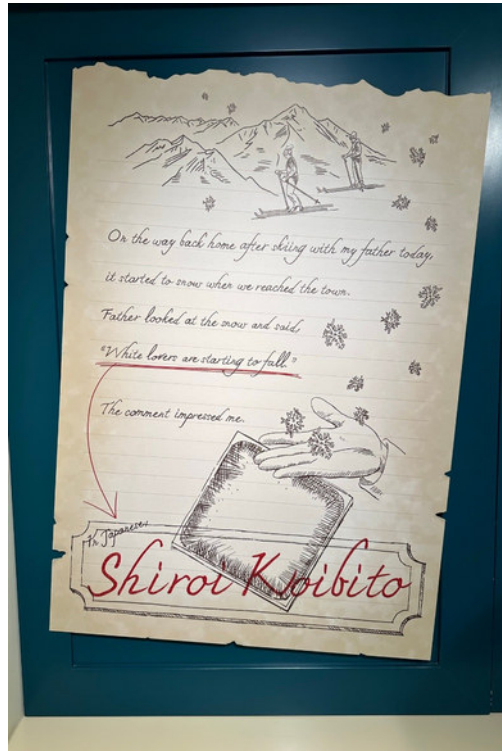
Upon arriving back in Sapporo we would have breakfast for dinner at A Happy Pancake known for its souffle style pancakes. We would close off this visit to Hokkaido by once again going to the top of the Sapporo TV tower to view Odori Park at night.









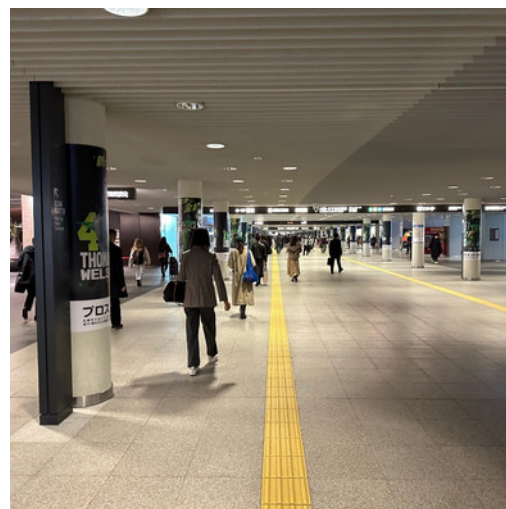
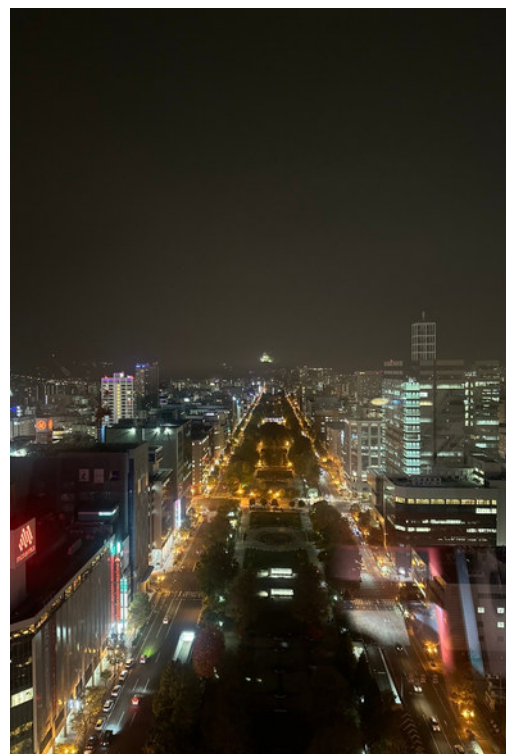














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優秀
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Aomori

From Sapporo we would fly south to Aomori in the northern part of the main island Honshu known as the Tohoku (northeast) region. Aomori is known for its enormous, delicious, sweet Fuji apples. After checking in to our hotel we would take an early dinner at A-Factory, a duty-free marketplace that sells all manner of apple related products. Unfortunately we were unable to try the famous wagyu beef hamburgers but did enjoy the in-house brewed Aomori Cidre. After dinner we would walk to the nearby A-shaped Aomori Prefecture Tourist Center (ASPAM) to view Aomori City from its 13th floor observation deck.

Our plan for the following day was to go hiking on Mount Hakkoda, however a mixup led us to board a local bus rather than a long distance bus to Mount Hakkoda, an hour outside the city. We did however have a backup plan in the event the mountain ropeway was closed due to bad weather. The local bus fortunately took us to this alternate plan of visiting the Sannai-Maruyama Historical Site, a prehistoric site from the Jomon period, discovered and excavated at the heart of Aomori City. The site includes a museum with exhibits showing how the Jomon people lived. We would then walk to the nearby Aomori Museum of Art to have lunch at the Cafe Los Cuatro Gatos.

We would end the day by taking the bus back to our hotel which was conveniently located next to the Nebuta Museum WA RASSE which celebrates Aomori's signature summer festival. The museum houses many of the intricately designed floats that are carried during the parade. We were able to take part in the festivities by playing the taiko drums during a musical performance.



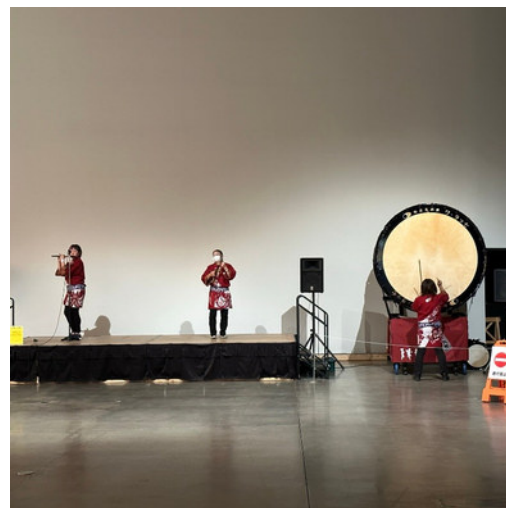
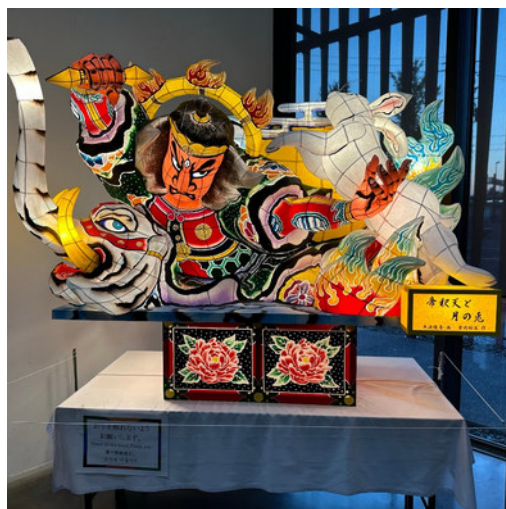














Naruko Gorge

We would next travel further south via shinkansen (bullet train) to the remote, rural village Naruko-Onsen. Naruko-Onsen is known for its many onsen hot springs and also the nearby Naruko Gorge, a prime location for koyo in the fall. We would stay at the upscale, centuries old Naruko Kanko Hotel, an onsen resort hotel.

After dropping off our luggage we would take the 1 hour, 2.5 mile and 350 foot elevation hike to the Naruko Rest House situated at the top of Naruko Gorge. When we arrived we would be greeted by a festival-like environment with many food vendors setup for the numerous koyo visitors. After grabbing some lunch we would marvel at the views both above and below after venturing down into the gorge. On the walk back to the hotel we would stop at the Japan Kokeshi Museum. The museum displays the history of the iconic hand carved wooden dolls that originated in the Tohoku region.

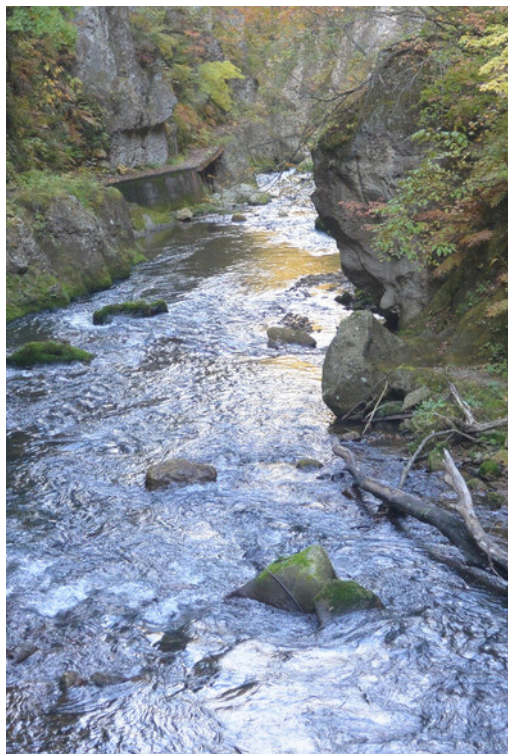
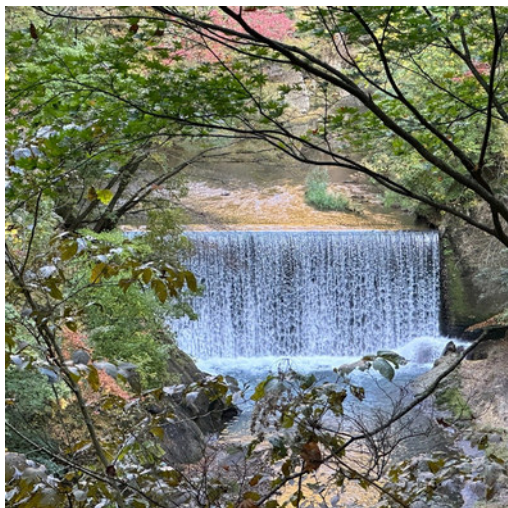
After arriving back at the hotel, we would soak our weary bodies in the relaxing mineral hot springs. After this refreshing experience we would enjoy an exquisite kaiseki dinner, the traditional Japanese multi-course meal.

















Sunshine City

出口

Sunshine City

STARBUCKS COFFEE

Ikehalo

We would take the shinkansen back to Tokyo to attend the Ikebukuro Halloween Cosplay Festival (Ikehalo) the following day. Ikehalo is held every year on the weekend before Halloween in Ikebukuro centered around the Sunshine City complex. In 2023 Ikehalo celebrated its 10th anniversary.

On display were various characters from classic Japanese series such as One Piece, Final Fantasy VII, Silent Hill, Attack on Titan, Golden Kamuy and Ultraman. Korea's Squid Games also made an appearance alongside iconic Marvel and Star Wars characters.

We would have lunch at Namja Town inside the Sunshine City complex, known for its delicious gyoza amongst other popular Japanese dishes. We would end our final full day in Japan by further exploring the various attractions of Ikebukuro and later Shinjuku.









My fourth trip to Japan allowed me to experience Fall in the northern regions of Japan. I would start this trip at the 2024 CEATEC technology trade show at Makuhari Messe in Chiba. I would be joined by Shannon for a quick exploration of Akihabara and Odaiba

Our next stop would take us to Japan's northern most island Hokkaido and its capital Sapporo. Our explorations of Hokkaido would let us view Japan's golden and fiery red autumn leaves. We would also delve into the culture of the Ainu, northern Japan's indigenous people. From Sapporo we would fly south to the Tohoku region, the northern portion of Japan's main island. We would explore Aomori City known for its sweet Fuji apples. A bullet train would take us to the breathtaking fall colors and beautiful vistas of Naruko Gorge.

We would complete our trip by returning to Tokyo to attend the Ikebukuro Halloween Cosplay Festival.

