

SOUL MAGIC

From the mountainous regions of Sapporo to the cultural sanctuary of Lake Akan, Hokkaido holds many natural and cultural wonders that work magic on the soul.

WORDS: STUART DANKER
PHOTOGRAPHY: AFFANDI ABD HAMID/FND

The fifth station of Mount Kurodake allows for panoramic views of the mountain and neighbouring peaks.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A craftsman at work. Wood carvings are a prevalent form of art at Ainu Kotan; The Ainu treasure *marimo*, rare algae balls that can grow up to 95 centimetres in diameter; Sulphur vents at Mount Io stand out against the barren lands; Colours of autumn seen from the Kurodake Ropeway. Sights like these are common along the ropeways in Hokkaido; A senior Ainu member begins the Iomante Fire Festival at the Lake Akan pier.



which was 1,300 metres above ground level. Here, fall was giving way to winter, and the autumnal landscape of olive green, amber and gold offered a beautiful contrast to the whites of the surrounding snow-capped mountains. Some of the peaks seemed to ascend into the clouds that encircled them, adding a theatrical effect. I stood there for an hour that day just taking in the beautiful sight, one that could never be replicated anywhere else.

LIFE IN TECHNICOLOUR Hokkaido's natural wonders surpass its high peaks; as the island plays home to alluring sites such as the flower farms of Biei and Furano. I chose to visit the former, named Shikisai-no-Oka (which translates to colours of four seasons), where I revelled in more colours and hues than my eyes could distinguish.

With some 30 species of flowers blooming in the sprawling seven-hectare piece of land, the mingling of floral fragrances made for a

I was among the few hundred people packed into the Lake Akan Ainu Theatre Ikor on a chilly autumn night. The Iomante Fire Festival was reaching its climax, and despite the cold weather, I was perspiring under the spotlights. But to be honest, it wasn't so much the thermal conduction that had me sweating; it was standing on stage! Yes, instead of being a spectator, I was part of the act that night, and I was nervous.

I stood with a handful of volunteers who had agreed to go up on stage, and there, under the glare of the lights, with the silhouettes of the spectators looming over us, I began to feel that perhaps I'd overestimated my capabilities of performing in public.

We looked towards the guide in the centre, and then to the few Ainu dancers who were about to demonstrate the dance we were to follow. One of the volunteers asked her friend in Mandarin – the first familiar tongue I'd heard since arriving in Hokkaido four days ago – what we were supposed to do. Her friend shrugged, and when the music started, we knew that there was no turning back.

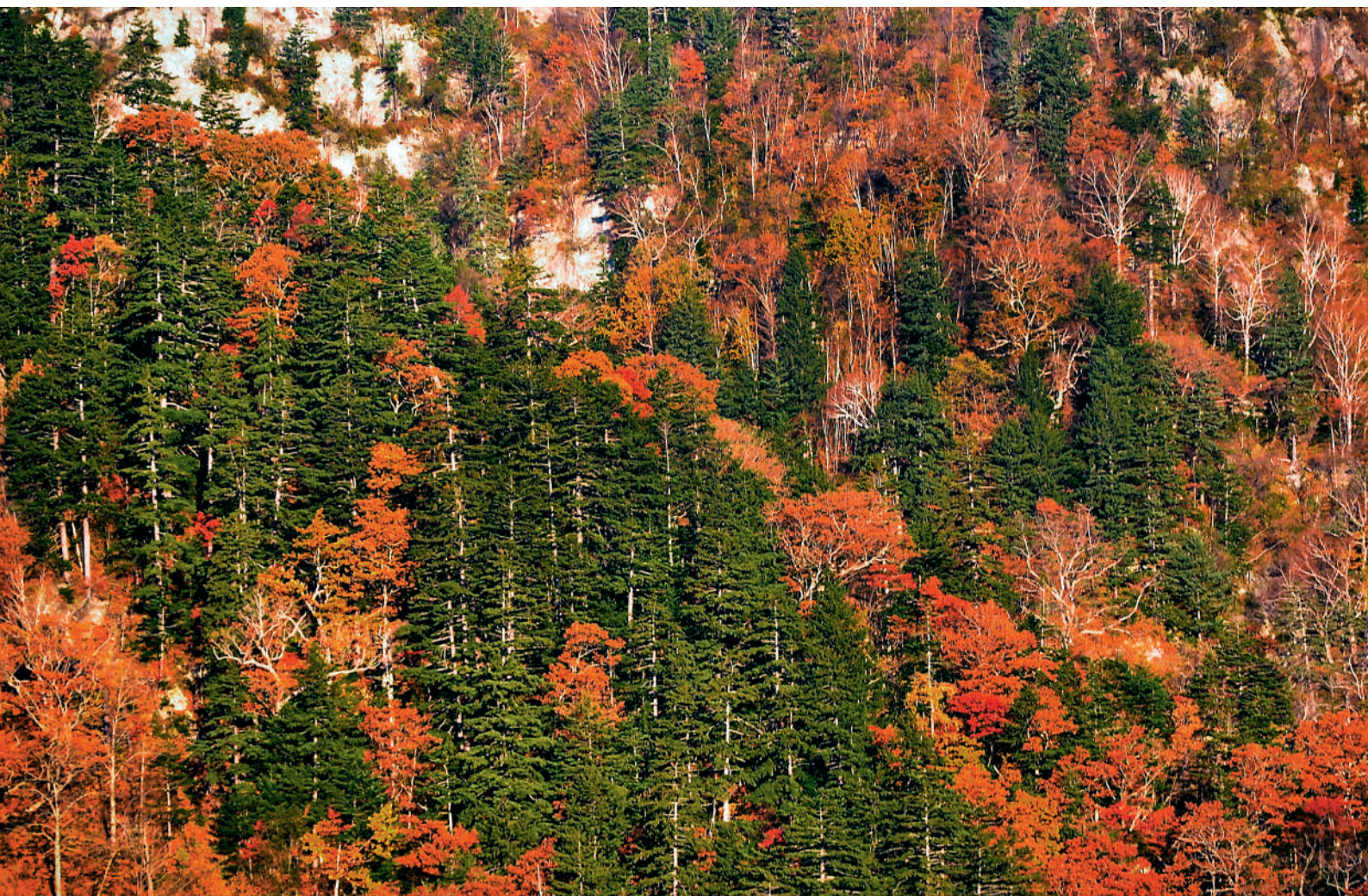
ON A HIGH Prior to the Iomante Fire Festival, I began my exploration of Hokkaido – Japan's second largest island and northernmost prefecture – by scouring its natural attractions, as I was aware of its reputation for having the least development of the four main islands.

Hokkaido's rugged terrain and unspoiled beauty make it a great destination for outdoor adventurers and nature lovers, and I was to experience this first-hand. So, what better way to begin my visit than by travelling to Mount Furano in central Hokkaido, one of Japan's premier ski destinations?

It was a comfortable ride up the mountain via the Furano Ropeway gondola, a cable system that spans 2.3 kilometres, carrying visitors 900 metres high. What I quickly learned was that ropeways are not just modes of transportation; they make for great observatories as well. Throughout the ride, I was treated to panoramic views of the jungle below, which still revealed the greens, yellows, oranges, and reds of autumn.

Despite the season, I was greeted with a blast of icy air as the gondola doors squeaked open. To my surprise, the peak was covered with powdery snow, a much sought-after texture for snowboarders and skiers as it allows for smooth rides and softer falls. Because the skiing season hadn't begun, I had the whole area to myself, and it was pure joy playing with snow that felt like cotton candy as I enjoyed views from the high ground.

As beautiful as I found Mount Furano, I soon discovered that Mount Kurodake, peaking among the Daisetsuzan Mountains at 1,984 metres, was even more spectacular, as far as aerial views were concerned. The gondola at Mount Kurodake took me to the fifth station,



The beautiful flower field
Shikisai-no-Oka can be enjoyed
up close or at a distance.







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The *emush rimse* (sword dance performed by men) done to intimidate evil spirits; Autumn is a great time to enjoy the seasonal seafood of Hokkaido; An elderly Japanese couple take a stroll at Shikisai-no-Oka; At the foot of Mount Furano lies the Ningle Terrace, a series of cottages selling arts and handicrafts; The still waters of Lake Akan are home to the rare *marimo*.



delightful stroll through seemingly endless beds of flora. It was enchanting. Everywhere I looked, photographers equipped with high-end cameras and tripods tried to capture the magic, but as conducive as Shikisai-no-Oka was for picture-perfect moments, the only way to do the place justice is to experience it in person. Seen from afar, the bands of colours just fall short of appearing as nature's kaleidoscope. The play of colours would carry on into my next destination: the Blue Pond.

Also known as Aoiike, the pond is located in Biei and showcases Hokkaido's natural settings in a more surreal tone. Taking its name from the colour of its water – a shimmering turquoise that changes depending on the weather – the Blue Pond is incredible. It is believed that the high concentration of aluminium hydroxide in the water affects how light reflects off the pond, giving it its haunting beauty. There was just something about the desolate tree stumps jutting out of the calm blue waters against an autumnal backdrop that evoked a



deep sense of appreciation within me, and if I could name a place where you would be sure to find inspiration, the Blue Pond would be it.

HOT WATER HEAVEN As I left the colourful beauty of Biei behind, I took a quick detour to Akan's Mount Io, an active volcano that last erupted in 1936. The site used to be a sulphur mine in the 1800s; to this day, there are still yellow sulphur deposits visible around the vicinity. I didn't need to look out the bus window to know that I'd arrived, as the smell tipped me off way before we even turned into the parking lot. I knew it was sulphur, as its rotten-egg odour was distinct.

Still, I wasn't prepared for the olfactory assault as I stepped off the bus, and needed a few minutes to adjust to the huge plumes of sulphuric steam bursting out of the mountain's depths. Braving my way to the barricades, all that I could see were barren lands interspersed with the odd sulphur fumaroles (vents emitting gas) and hot-water pockets. The hot water from Mount Io flows to Kawayu Onsen, a small hot spring town in the eastern part of Akan National Park, between Lake Mashu (often said to be Japan's most beautiful lake, with an island that the Ainu people call the Isle of the Gods) and Lake Kussharo, famous for its very own version of the legendary Loch Ness monster, the Kusshi! Here, the *onsen* (hot spring) is considered an acidic iron sodium sulfate chloride spring, and is particularly acidic (with a pH be-

tween 1.4 and 1.8). The average temperature is 45.9 degrees Celsius. And while many come to enjoy a rejuvenating soak for therapeutic purposes, I discovered that the hot-water pockets in the mountain are also where local traders boil eggs to sell at souvenir shops.

Naturally, I couldn't resist trying one, and came away with the conclusion that volcanic-boiled eggs taste the same as regular hard-boiled eggs! Still, I felt that this was definitely something I could brag about back home. I was having a good trip so far, but it was my last destination in Hokkaido that ended up being the most memorable part of my journey.

MEETING THE AINU At Lake Akan, I found Ainu Kotan, home to the largest Ainu community in Japan. The Ainu are an indigenous people of Hokkaido, and Ainu Kotan literally translates to 'human being settlement' in their native tongue. The only plan I had on my itinerary involved exploring this beautiful town in Lake Akan, which contains 36 Ainu households and 30 handicraft shops.

I was admiring the precise handiwork of a woodcarver when I noticed a throng of people convening at Lake Akan, braziers illuminating their faces that were otherwise darkened by night. I followed the commotion, and before long, the group was asked to vacate the pier for a ceremony. Filled with a sense of adventure, I quietly slipped in with the rest and watched the events unfold.

Wood carvings put
up for sale at the Ainu
Kotan show great
attention to detail.



TRIP FOR ALL SEASONS

Hokkaido is a region with many faces, and it changes dramatically through the seasons. Here are some things you can enjoy no matter the time of year.

SUMMER Hokkaido has mild summers, making it the perfect time for outdoor adventures. Uncover the myriad hiking routes on the islands of Rishiri and Rebun, or opt for rafting on the Saru River.

SPRING This season is when flowers such as pink moss and tulips start blooming, and it's also a great time to observe the wildlife as many animals wake up from hibernation around this period.

AUTUMN Autumn is when many seasonal foods become available, such as Pacific saury (also known as mackerel pike) and salmon. It's also one of the best times to witness Hokkaido's beautiful colours. The Hokkaido University is a great place to take a stroll at this time.

WINTER Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido, is decorated annually with beautiful lights during the Sapporo Snow Festival, making it great for night walks. The Okurayama Jump Stadium, home of the 1972 Winter Olympics, offers an observation deck with great panoramic views.

I soon learned that I was witnessing the Iomante Fire Festival, the sending away of the bear spirit. For the Ainu, the brown bear is one of the most revered animals, and is also held as the God of Mountains. A senior Ainu member started off the festival by walking in from the pier bearing a torch. He set a pit on fire, and before I knew it, I was ushered into a line and handed a torch of my own. I was about to take part in the 1,000 Torches Festival, and I didn't even know it!

PLAYING WITH FIRE The 1,000 Torches Festival is held as an offering to Ape Kamui, the Ainu god of fire, and despite my freezing fingers, I made sure to carry my torch with fervour. We marched from Lake Akan to the Ainu Memorial Museum – a 15-minute walk – where we deposited our torches, concluding the first segment of the festival.

An Ainu woman clad in a *mour* (traditional Ainu long-sleeved tunic) indicated to me in sign language that there'd be further song and dance in the Theatre Ikor, so I nodded to signify that I was interested.



The colour of the enchanting Blue Pond changes with the weather.

Later, with the help of a translator, I learned that her name was Taira, and that she would be one of the performers for the night. She told me that all the singing and dancing I was about to witness were an art handed down throughout the generations. I asked her what she wanted the spectators – and also the readers of this article – to take home from the experience, and she simply said: "I just want them to know that nature is an integral part of our lives, and I hope that they'll help preserve the Earth, no matter who and where they are in this world."

BEAUTY OF HISTORY Inside the theatre, I was mulling over the beauty of Taira's answer when two female singers broke through the murmurs of the crowd with their vocals. A man lit the bonfire in the centre of the room, not unlike what I'd just witnessed at the lake. More women walked onstage, all wearing *mours*, and began dancing to the music. Dance is integral to Ainu culture, and it's frequently used as a medium to convey gratitude to the deities that reside in nature. Ainu dances are so steeped in culture that they are preserved as a UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The ladies started the series with 'The Dance of Black Hair,' whipping their long hair from

side to side. This was followed by the *emush rimse* (sword dance), where two men clanged swords while stomping their feet with the intention scaring away evil spirits. The Ainu's musical prowess was further punctuated with their *tonkori* (five-stringed plucked instrument) and *mukkuri* (a mouth-based percussion instrument) performances, both instruments I've never seen or heard of before, turning the night into a truly magical experience.

EMBRACING AN OUTSIDER I was thrilled that I had been given the opportunity to participate in the 1,000 Torches Festival, but when I danced among the Ainu, I felt truly privileged. When the leader shouted commands, I powered through my self-consciousness and tried to follow the dancers to the best of my ability to honour their culture. We switched between outstretched arms to claps to a gesture that symbolised the act of harvesting.

It was in that moment that I realised just how rich Hokkaido was in its cultural and natural wonders, and in the midst of sending off the bear spirit, I found that I had rejuvenated mine. ③

✈ GETTING THERE AIRASIA X FLIES TO SAPPORO FROM KUALA LUMPUR FOUR TIMES A WEEK. www.airasia.com