

3 Hokkaido's Unique Identity, A La Carte

Portrait of Hokkaido around the End of the Edo Period (*Sugoroku*)

The large graphic art on the wall here depicts the game board for *sugoroku*, or Japanese backgammon. In this version of the game, players start from Hakodate and, while rolling the dice, work their way along the Sea of Japan to the Okhotsk Sea and down the Pacific Coast aiming for the goal. This version is believed to have been created in 1864 by Matsuura Takeshiro, a person deeply involved in the naming of Hokkaido. Each individual piece contains place-names within Hokkaido at the time, portrays marine products or the Ainu way of life or folklore. During that period, people who saw this version of *sugoroku* undoubtedly created various images of Hokkaido in their minds.

What comes to mind when you hear the word "Hokkaido"? People typically think about straight roads as far as the eye can see, all-you-can-eat crab, hot springs with rustic charm, ramen, jingisukan, swimming at the beach with tents, weddings where the guests chip in to cover the cost instead of offering monetary gifts, and regional dialects. Hokkaido is unlike any other part of Japan and there are many other reasons to be found. Hokkaido's uniqueness can also be found in the souvenirs and festivals unique to each community, home cooking, and place-names, to mention but a few.

For example, let's take a look at place-names. Many communities and regions in Hokkaido are named after words from the Ainu language. The reason why there are so many places that were given the kanji (Chinese characters or ideographs) "betsu," "nai," and "shiri" is because these characters were applied to the Ainu words "pet," "nay," and "sir." You might have also noticed that many of the place-names here are the same as those on Honshu. Communities formed by groups of people who emigrated to settle and develop Hokkaido often chose the names of their hometowns, such as Kagawa, for example. In addition, the names of people with close roots in the community have become place-names, while completely new names were given to other places.

Here, we have set up a corner that explores the uniqueness of Hokkaido. Various selected pieces are brought together here that provide a sense of Hokkaido's uniqueness. For example, ceramic ware made in Hokkaido typically features Ainu patterns, the Ainu way of life, or Hokkaido's scenery and events, each of which is unique to Hokkaido. Postal workers in Hokkaido used bugles to ward off bears from the Meiji Period (1868-1912) up to the 1960s. Another unique tool created for Hokkaido's cold climate was a rod used to break down the pile of frozen excrement in outhouses in the winter time.

Hokkaido's unique natural environment, historical differences from Honshu, and the collective interaction of various people have all played important roles in creating and shaping a number of unique aspects of Hokkaido as well.



A Bear as a Souvenir?

Around the start of the Showa Period (1926-1989), development of transportation and accommodation infrastructure began at famous locations and hot springs resorts across Japan. Hokkaido, too, began to receive attention as a tourism destination after national parks were created at Daisetsuzan and Akan in 1934. Around this time many souvenirs were already being sold, such as wood carvings of bears as well as Ainu folk crafts and textiles, furs, processed marine products, dairy products and soybean snacks, to name but a few. After the end of World War II, new festivals began to pop up across the island, including the Sapporo Snow Festival and Yosakoi Soran Festival.



What? You're not Hungry?

Around the start of Hokkaido's settlement and development the people ate very simple foods such as rice mixed with grains. More extravagant foods were reserved for weddings or special events. Hokkaido has also faced a number of food shortages during its history. This is why *shibareimo*, potatoes that were buried under the snow in winter and frozen, were essential during food emergencies and why preserved foods, such as pickled herring and Okhotsk atka mackerel, have become important local specialty dishes. On the other hand, there are also foods that have disappeared from local menus, such as grilled and dried big-scaled redfin which once was used to make soup stock.