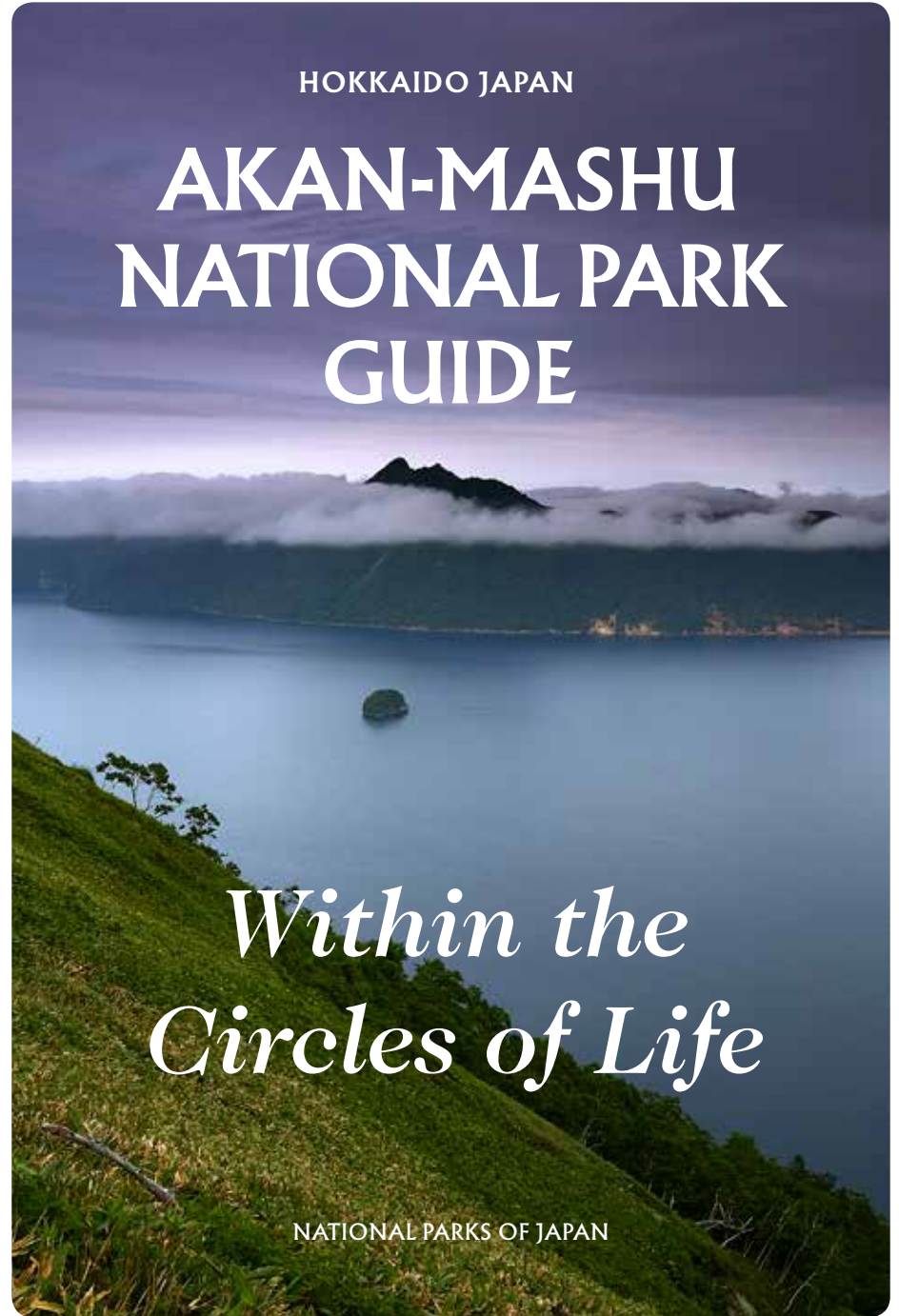




www.japan.travel/national-parks/parks/akan-mashu/

HOKKAIDO JAPAN

AKAN-MASHU NATIONAL PARK GUIDE



*Within the
Circles of Life*

NATIONAL PARKS OF JAPAN

Introduction

A land of volcanoes, lakes, and forests, Akan-Mashu National Park is rich with stories from ancient times. Located in Eastern Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island prefecture, volcanic eruptions approximately 150,000 years ago created Akan Caldera, resulting in this region's topography. Over the course of thousands of years, constant volcanic activity has altered the land, shaping mountain ranges, calderas (large volcanic craters), and lakes. Today, the area's pristine environment is home to several unique ecosystems and exploring the vast national park reveals fascinating interconnections between volcanoes, waterways, flora, and fauna.

Akan-Mashu National Park is 91,413 hectares in size and is divided into two main sections: Akan to the west and Mashu to the east. The Akan-Mashu area was designated a national park in 1934. The Ainu people have lived on this land from ancient times. The indigenous Ainu people of Japan coexist peacefully with nature as fishermen, hunters, and plant gatherers. They believe that all living things were spirits sent to Earth with a purpose. For example, brown bears are worshipped as reincarnated mountain gods that give people meat for food and fur for clothing. Although the remaining Ainu population no longer practices their traditional lifestyle, their customs and culture are kept alive at places such as the Akanko Ainu Kotan village and Kussharo Kotan Ainu Folklore Museum.

There are many outdoor activities available throughout the year at the Akan-Mashu National Park. In summer, many visitors go canoeing and camping, and this is also the best season for fishing. In autumn, hiking through the vibrantly-colored forests is popular. Winter's sub-zero temperatures cause the lake to freeze and allow visitors to try ice fishing for smelt, or snowshoeing. Spring comes later to Hokkaido than the rest of Japan; warmer temperatures usually return around May, when the landscape explodes into a bouquet of colorful flowers including the yellow Meakan-kinbai (*Potentilla miyabei Makino*).

One of the traditional homelands of the Ainu, Akan-Mashu National Park is full of wildlife and awe-inspiring natural wonders. It is a hidden treasure of Japan waiting to be discovered and explored.

Access



Getting to Akan from Tokyo

- Haneda Airport**
✈️ Airplane (approx. 95 min.)
- Kushiro Airport**
🚌 Akan Bus (approx. 70 min.)
- Akanko Onsen Bus Stop**

Writer's note

Rob Cottle

Olympus Mentor

As a nature photographer, I couldn't help but smile at the prospect of photographing the stunning scenery visible out of the window as we flew in over the Hokkaido landscape. I was itching to get out of the plane and start capturing images as soon as we landed.

Visiting Hokkaido is like entering a nature lovers' playground. Wildlife abounds. Wherever the eye wanders, it finds spectacular vistas: emerald forests, cobalt blue lakes with crystal clear waters and volcanic mountains that seem asleep until they exhale clouds of steam from the depths of the earth. The experience is like being embraced by Mother Nature herself.

The volcanoes lie dormant for now, yet they feel as if they are alive. They puff out sulphur-infused plumes of smoke like a

person's breath on a cold day. The bubbling *bokke* mud volcanoes constantly change their form, boiling waters seep into rivers and lakes and ancient walls of rock wrap around nature, as if to protect it.

I have always felt an affinity with those who pay reverence to the land, like the Ainu people, one of the indigenous cultures of Japan. The Ainu are the custodians of this spectacular location, coexisting with the spirit of nature and the land. This is a place where I also feel at home.

The Ainu have a greeting, "*Irankarapte*", but unlike a simple "hello", it has a deeper meaning that translates as "allow me to softly touch your heart." The sentiment in this greeting captures exactly what Hokkaido did to me, and it will do the same to you when you visit.

Getting to Mashu from Tokyo

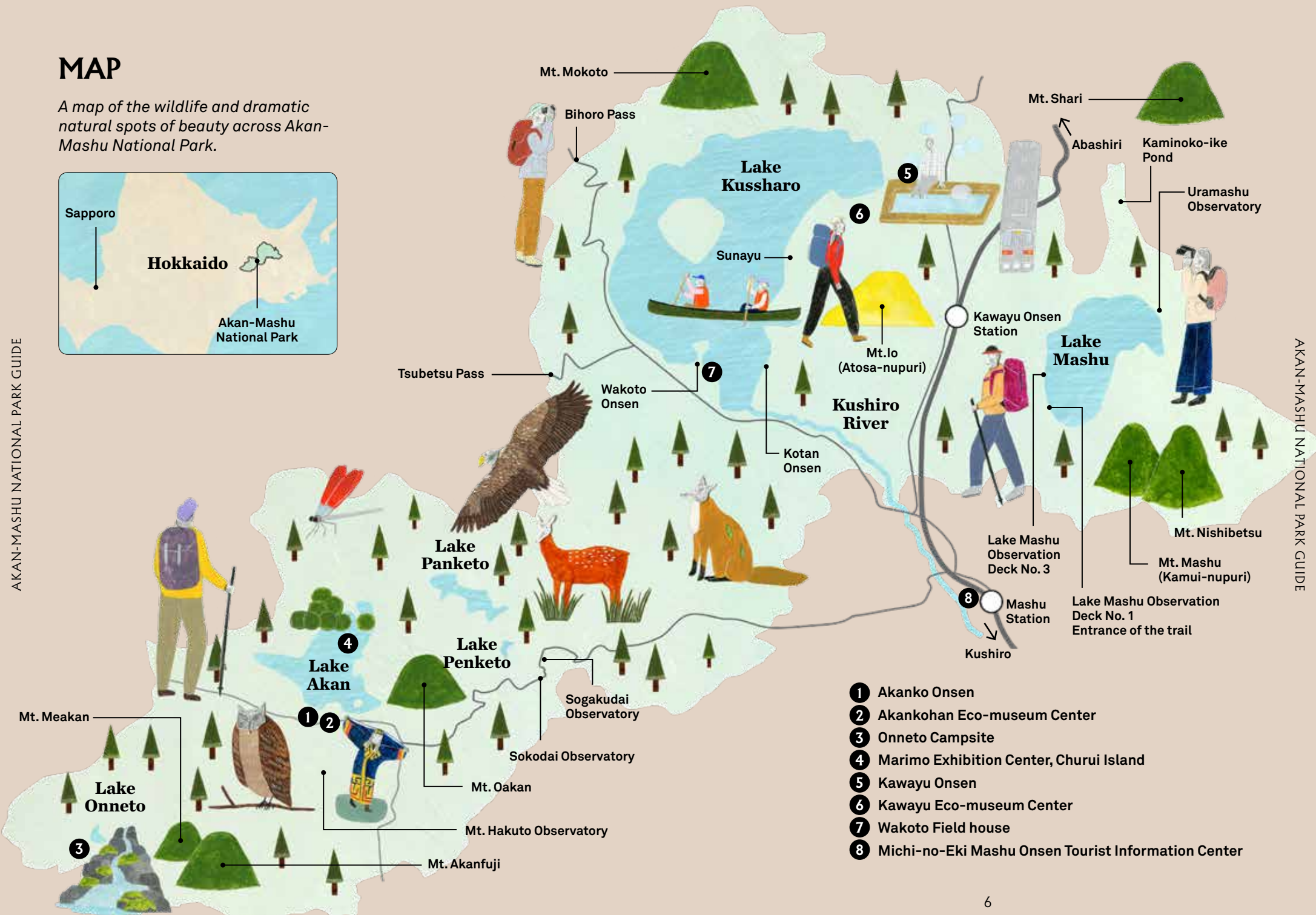
- Haneda Airport**
✈️ Airplane (approx. 105 min.)
- Memambetsu Airport**
🚌 Abashiri Bus (approx. 30 min.)
- Abashiri Station**
🚆 JR Senmo Line (approx. 120 min.)
- Kawayu Onsen Station**

Please contact the relevant transport company websites for further details and times.



MAP

A map of the wildlife and dramatic natural spots of beauty across Akan-Mashu National Park.



- 1 Akanko Onsen
- 2 Akankohan Eco-museum Center
- 3 Onneto Campsite
- 4 Marimo Exhibition Center, Churui Island
- 5 Kawayu Onsen
- 6 Kawayu Eco-museum Center
- 7 Wakoto Field house
- 8 Michi-no-Eki Mashu Onsen Tourist Information Center



1 AKAN

A thick wonderland of lush, green forests



Akan-Mashu National Park is so full of natural treasures that it is almost impossible to know where to begin, but a good place to start is a guided trek into the forest of light, Hikari-no-Mori, that is managed by the Maeda Ippoen Foundation. As soon as I set foot in this lush, verdant forest and the fresh air filled my lungs, my soul felt rejuvenated and all the tension that had built up from my life back in the city disappeared. As its name suggests, the light in the forest was spectacular. The dappled sunlight seemed to dance as it streamed through the forest canopy. It was like watching nature's very own glitter ball. The sight of damselflies and



Previous page: The glittering waters of Lake Akan | **Above:** Discover Ainu life at the Ainu Life Memorial Museum | **Below:** Clothes and ritual accessories used by the Ainu people.



dragonflies amongst the trees and flora added to the magical feel of the forest. The telltale droppings of yezo sika deer indicated that they were close at hand, perhaps peering through the foliage, hidden in the shadows. The Ainu believe that humans, nature and spirit are all intertwined and I couldn't help but feel a spiritual connection here, something I was aware of throughout my visit.



Previous page: A deer on the Bokke (mud volcano) Walking Trail is spotted amongst the ferns | **Above:** A white-tailed eagle soars above the park | **Below:** An owl is a symbol of God and is positioned above the entrance to Akanko Ainu Theater <Ikor>



During our walks, we came across the boiling pools of water that were a constant theme of the trip. Called *bokke*, these bubbling mud pools were constantly bursting and boiling, each one uniquely different, like a grey kaleidoscope. These *bokke* were most evident near the Akankohan Eco-museum Center on a specifically designated Bokke Walking Trail. If you walk to the end of this trail you are rewarded with spectacular views of Lake Akan and its tree-lined shore.

Not far from Lake Akan is Lake Onneto. Its stunning, blue-green waters are perfectly offset by Mount Meakan and Mount Akanfuji looming in the distance. There was a lovely sense of



Above: Hikari-no-Mori (forest of light) can only be accessed when accompanied by a certified tour guide | **Below:** A bokke, hot mud volcano boils over by the lakeside | **Next page:** View from the walking paths around Lake Onneto



calm walking around the perimeter of the lake, and the sound of the birds was a constant companion. I saw wagtails, coal tits, flycatchers and doves and could hear the tapping of woodpeckers and the shrill call of the goldcrest.

From the Onneto Campsite by Lake Onneto, I visited the cascading waters of Yunotaki Falls, a beautiful, 40°C hot waterfall that leaves deposits of manganese oxide as it falls, an element usually formed at the bottom of the ocean. Due to microorganisms in the waterfall, it is the only place on earth where this element is formed above ground at this scale. The waterfall is a designated Natural Monument.



Above: Owing to the clear and changing colours of its waters, Lake Onneto is sometimes referred to as the five coloured marsh. | **Below:** Yunotaki Falls are a famous hot-spring waterfall in Onneto

Guide to Akan

A round up of different cultural sites and beauty spots



1 Akanko Onsen

The hot-spring onsen resort around Lake Akan offers many facilities including camp-site and hotel accommodation where onsen waters can be enjoyed. Pop into the Lake Akan Ainu Kotan, an Ainu village settlement to experience traditional crafts and culture, or visit the Akanko Marimukan tourist information center for further details.



3 Onneto Campsite

Located next to the shore of Lake Onneto, although the campsite is basic in its offerings, it is a scenic spot in the middle of the forest where time stands still. The location is the starting point for trails to Yunotaki Falls and for visitors wishing to climb Mount Meakan.

Opening months are June until October



2 Akankohan Eco-museum Center

Visit this museum to learn about the rich natural environment around Lake Akan including its wildlife and plant life and find out more about the hiking paths the area has to offer. The starting point of the Bokke Walking Trail that leads you to a tour of the park's bubbling geothermal mud pools, or bokke.

Opening hours are 09:00-17:00 (Closed Tuesdays and occasionally on Wednesdays)



4 Marimo Exhibition Center, Churui Island

Access to the museum is a short ferry ride from Lake Akan pier. Visitors will see the only algae in the world that grows into ball-like shapes. Magnificent views of Mount Oakan and Meakan can be viewed from the museum's observation deck.

Opening months are May until November



2

MASHU

A landscape made up of huge and dramatic calderas

MASHU



AKAN-MASHU NATIONAL PARK GUIDE

An early rise found me at Lake Mashu Observation Deck No. 1, the starting point of a 7km hike up Mount Mashu. I had visited the observatory the previous day when the sky was clear and afforded spectacular views of Lake Mashu; but, on the day of the hike, everything was obscured by its infamous fog. Called the “sea of clouds”, it is a natural phenomenon that makes the clouds resemble rippled water. Shortly after adding my name to the register of people climbing the mountain, the fog became even

denser and wrapped itself around the ghostly birch trees like a misty shroud. The effect was otherworldly.

Along the way, wind-bent branches created natural, curved archways over the winding path. It was a tough hike with steep inclines and narrow paths. Our clothes became drenched with sweat, but each step brought us closer to the summit, and that made us excited with the anticipation of what was to come.

Previous page: Lake Mashu is famous for the thick fog that is called the sea of clouds | **Above:** Birch trees on Mount Mashu Trekking Trail are wreathed in fog



During the last water break, as if by magic, the fog began to clear from the top of the mountain. As we started the final ascent, our muscles burned, but when we reached the top, the pain was worth it because the 360° views were utterly spectacular. As a small pallid swift flew by, I looked down below at Lake Mashu, a lake formed in a crater said to be one of the clearest lakes in the world, and at its rocky slopes carpeted in green and dotted with alpine flowers. Beyond Lake Mashu, both Mount Nishibetsu and Mount Shari stand enticingly, waiting to be

“Mashu lives and breathes through its volcanic nostrils. Here, achingly beautiful views, serene lakes and hot soothing waters can rejuvenate the soul.”

Above, Below: The view of the vast and verdant caldera landscape from Mount Mashu



climbed another day. Looking down at the magnificent crater, it was like looking at a land that time forgot, an unspoilt natural landscape.

Shortly after we started our descent, the fog rolled back in and enveloped us like a cold sauna, bringing welcome relief after the hot and sweaty hike. There was time to stop and admire the mystical Kaminoko-ike Pond that is said to be connected below the ground to Lake Mashu. In the Ainu language, Lake Mashu means “the mountain god’s lake” and this smaller pond was seen as the child of the larger body of water. The site has a peaceful, mysterious

and spiritual atmosphere and attracts many visitors who come to see the waters change colour depending on the amount of sunlight. The water is



Above: The cobalt-blue water of the Kaminoko-ike Pond flows from the Lake Mashu that is called the Lake of God | **Below:** Enjoying a footbath in Kawayu Onsen hot-spring town



so clear that you can see right to the bottom and admire the fish as well as the fallen trees that remain perfectly preserved in the water. It is like looking at a beautiful piece of modern art.

When we returned to our base for that evening at Kawayu Onsen hot spring town, I treated my tired feet to a well-earned footbath of hot, sulphuric spring water. I liked to think of the water as being delivered by some god of feet, a gift from the surrounding volcanoes.

I started the next day with a tranquil canoe ride on Lake Kussharo and my mind was at peace. As the canoe cut through the water, a white-tailed eagle soared above. On the

shoreline, a heron held a still, statue-like position as it waited to catch its breakfast. The water was amazingly



Above: Canoeing along the still waters of Lake Kussharo | **Below:** The fog settles over the surface of the lake



clear and I saw a shoal of sockeye salmon as we traversed into the waters of the Kushiro River. After a while, we stopped for tea and biscuits that were served on a paddle. Then we travelled further, admiring the surrounding banks that were lined with grasses, reeds and the familiar green canopy that gave the light that streamed through it a dappled quality. As we stopped at the riverside, I couldn't help thinking that this is how everyone should start their day.

In preparation for my guided hike up Mount Io, I enjoyed a quiet walk along the lovely Tsutsujigahara Nature Trail that finishes at the foot of the



Previous page: Trekking up Mount Io that is also called Atosa-nupuri . It can only be accessed when accompanied by a certified tour guide | **Above:** A lump of crystallised sulphur that has formed from the Mount Io's sulphuric gas emissions | **Below:** View from Mount Io



volcano. As we got closer to Mount Io, the flora changed and the lush green vegetation faded. This was due to the acidity in the soil and air that is caused by Mount Io. Forests of spruce, white birch and oak were replaced by views of marsh Labrador tea bushes and the hardier stone pine and alpine plants that mingle among the heavy earth of shallow ash.

As we hiked up the gravel- and rock-strewn floor of the volcanic Mount Io, hot steam burst from its cracked surfaces. The effect of the stark colours of the stone was like being on an uninhabited planet, a scene from a sci-fi film. Listening to the earth breathe through its volcanic nostrils, I was once again reminded of the deep connection between the land and humankind. As I walked onto the brow of the mountain, I was met

with fabulous sweeping views of the surrounding countryside and Kawayu Onsen hot spring town below. Just a little bit further along, I found myself at the edge of the crater.

As I took in this amazing place, something passed by so close to me that I felt the wind whip my face. I realised that it was a pair of peregrine falcons, who had made their nest on one of the smelliest volcanoes imaginable. As I made my way down the mountain, I was both amazed and horrified to learn that sulphur was mined here in the 20th century and the tracks that were once used to transport the sulphur still remain. As we reached the foot of the mountain, the extraordinary, sulphur-infused rock formations belched out steam from between the stones as black kites and crows soared in the sky above.

Guide to Mashu

A round up of different cultural sites and beauty spots



5 Kawayu Onsen

The Kawayu Onsen are easily accessible from the JR Kawayu Onsen station and is the main area for both hotels and ryokan accommodation in the Mashu area. Visit the hot-spring river that locals use to bathe their feet and enjoy bathing in spring waters renowned for a high acidity that helps to kick start the body's natural healing abilities and leaves skin silky smooth.



7 Wakoto Field House

A visitor's centre that manages the campsite behind it is located at the base of Wakoto Peninsula in Lake Kussharo and has exhibitions about the surrounding environment. Wakoto Peninsula is home to an abundance of wild flowers, birds and Eurasian red squirrels that can be seen on the 2.5 km nature hike around the peninsula. See the marvel that is the pot-holes of natural steam at the tip of the peninsula.

Opening hours are 8:00-17:00 (late April until October)



6 Kawayu Eco-museum Center

Learn about nature and wildlife around the Mashu area as well as local activities and hiking trail information. Enjoy views of the Sakhalin Spruce forests at your leisure from the second floor café.

Opening hours are 8:00-17:00 (April to October); 9:00-16:00 (November to March) Closed on Wednesdays. Open 7 days a week from the end of July until August 31st



8 Michi-no-Eki Mashu Onsen Tourist Information Center

Located at the Akan Crossing Road that connects Akan and Mashu areas, this center provides local information about the region including the national parks. Stop here to rest and enjoys its cafés and local products. It is also a short walk to the nearby Kushiro river.

Opening hours are 8:00-18:00 (May until October); 9:00-17:00 (November until April)