Deepening encounters

An Adult’s Time to Canoe the Autumn Wetlands

A comfortable feeling

Trace the culture and quaintness of Esashi, Matsumae, and Hakodate, Southern Hokkaido during the heart of Autumn
The Kushiro River flows endlessly through ancient landscapes of the Kushiro Wetlands. If you canoe near the lower reach of the river where the current is rather calm, you can hear the sound of water, the whisper of wind, the chirps of birds, and even the faintest sound of small animals moving among the trees that line the river.

An Adult’s Time to Canoe the Autumn Wetlands

~Kushiro River, surrendering to the wind that blows gently through the wetlands~

Looking back on the day, you wonder how many times you have checked the time.
In everyday life, being surrounded by reminders of time, watches, wall clocks, clocks at the park, station, on our computer or on our cell phone, we subconsciously check the time.

Here, it is amazing how such daily actions become completely meaningless.

Autumn in the Kushiro Wetlands. In this season when rays of sun shine through the mist, let your body and soul be gently carried away with the graceful flow of the wide river that glides through the wetlands. Could it be that a watch isn’t needed? Apparently, the answer can be found as soon as you set out.
Looking up from the Kushiro River at the full moon, it was calling, "Come to Hokkaido."

"The most attractive aspect of canoeing is being on the same eye level as ducks."

These are the first words that were uttered by Mr. Hidekazu Ujihara, who is a guide for canoeing and other activities in the Kushiro Wetland National Park. It was as if he could read the thoughts of the reporter, for he expressed in a single phrase what was most fascinating about canoeing. To experience a duck’s point of view is truly something new. What could it be like?

Mr. Ujihara’s main work area is the Kushiro Wetlands. These wetlands spread over a large amount of the eastern part of Hokkaido which is called “Douto”. They are a sort of “water land,” where primitive nature remains. In comparison, the area is not quite half of the area of Tokyo’s 23 districts, the largest in Japan. Furthermore, it is a “spring of life” where over 2 thousand kinds of wildlife, including the Japanese cranes, a special natural monument, live. One way to enjoy canoeing with Mr. Ujihara is to take the Kushiro River which meanders through the Kushiro Wetlands. The Kushiro River is a mainstream river, its source being Lake Kussharo, one of the largest caldera lakes in Japan, and flows through the Kushiro Wetlands, Kushiro Port and out to the Pacific Ocean.

There is a sense of adoration and longing for the Kushiro River among canoeers. I remember having a desire to go there someday when I first began canoeing." Mr. Ujihara, presently 47 years old, is from Kansai and his Kansai accent is evident in conversation with us. When he was in his 20’s, his work led him to Yokohama where he picked up his hobby, outdoor recreation. On weekends he would escape the noise of the city, grab his fatboat (folding kayak) and head for the river. It was when he, at the age of thirty-two finally made the long awaited visit to Kushiro River, that he had a life-altering experience.

"I remember it was autumn then as well. I had canoed down the Kushiro River near the iwabokki flood gate when I saw the full moon pecking out from above the mist like a brush painting. I thought, ‘it’s like being in the heavens above earth.’" It was as if this view the like of which I have never seen in my life before, was beckoning me, “Come here”.

From Recreation
To Resetting the Heart

Shortly after his fateful encounter, Mr. Ujihara decided to move to Hokkaido, and in the year 1996, his dream of living near the Kushiro Wetlands came true. However, living meant an income was necessary, so he looked up a guide that he had once been in the care of and asked to assist in his work. The income was unstable compared to the office job he had held in Yokohama, but his involvement with the canoes made him more than happy.

"Unfortunately, as soon as I began working for this guide, he decided to close the business, and although it was out of necessity, I decided to independently take over the business."

This was the beginning of Mr. Ujihara’s company, “R”. The name is derived from not only the “R” which stands for “river”, but also from the word “reset” and “reborn”, which means to begin again.

"It is often thought that canoeing is only for those who have a love for it, but I would like to see people begin canoeing as just fun and easy recreation. It would be great if people could get on a canoe just for the sake of recreation, and then realize, as they surrender themselves to the gentle flow of the river, that they are able to relax and refresh their hearts."

Time spent floating on a river that progresses through wilderness is one way to be freed from stress of daily life, relationships, and mental exhaustion, a way to REST the mind and body. It seems that time flows differently here than in the city. "You don’t have to work too hard at it. Just a little practice and even beginners can learn how to row. That is why I ask first-timers if they would like to try rowing.”

Relaxing time of canoeing
As you set out into the quiet of autumn,
Much as a duck, you gaze up at the Ezo deer.

It is good to hear that even first-timers can row a canoe. Mr. Ujihara says “In most cases those who endeavor canoeing are girlfriends, couples and married couples. For first-timers I take about 15 minutes on land to explain safety and how to row properly, and then I have them practice in the lake where there is little or no current for about 15 minutes. So after a total of approximately 30 minutes, most people can enjoy canoeing without difficulty. “

The 10km route from Lake Toro to Hosooka is a suitable route for first-timers. Even for beginners it takes only about 2 hours total. The speed is about 4km per hour, no different than walking. While canoeing downriver, Mr. Ujihara and another guide in another canoe follow closely, and when a scenic point approaches, they catch up and explain the wildlife in the wetlands.

“Although Kushiro is known as the “city of fog”, autumn is refreshing and there are more sunny days compared to summer. As you leave Lake Toro, the starting point, you first run into Arekinai River, a tributary of the Kushiro River. Here the width is narrow, allowing the canoe to see wildlife and vegetation of the wetlands up close.”

Autumn comes early to the wetlands. While the rest of Japan is still overcome by heat, the reed and sedges that cover this area begin their preparation for winter, changing color from green to yellow, and then to a reddish brown. The trees along the river banks begin to shed their leaves as well, and through the web of branches, a glimpse of landscape that was not visible in summer is unveiled. “In autumn the wetlands become a world of silence. However, if you concentrate, you can hear the songs of birds, the sound of wild animals moving among the trees, and even feel the whisper of the wind as it breathes across the river.” The soundless canoe and low viewpoint gently bring free all events.

“If you are lucky, you may encounter Japanese cranes or kingfishers. In September, ducks from other areas can be seen. You can tell newcomers by the way they appear frightened by the canoes. By being here every day, you learn to tell the difference. Speaking of ducks, if you look up at the sky from a duck’s viewpoint, the sky appears extremely vast, like you could become completely absorbed into it. I especially appreciate the time of day when the autumn sun, slowly sinking over the wetlands, casts a reddish glow over me and the entire area. Looking up at the river banks, the forests appear as jungles, tangled with trees that have lost all foliage.

Although it is rare, sometimes in late autumn Steller’s sea eagles have been sighted. When the Ezo deer appear, sometimes our eyes meet, and if I am still, they don’t run off. Have you ever had a chance to “closely look up” at a deer? This is only possible if you are in a canoe.”

Become engrossed for a little while, or for a long time.
Discover “two different clocks” through canoeing.

It has been 15 years since Mr. Ujihara moved to Hokkaido. Has anything changed in the Kushiro Wetlands since he first moved here?
“Nature constantly changes with the weather conditions. For this reason, you never see the same scenery.” It seems this is one of the reasons why so many who experience canoeing become repeaters.

“People have been touched and healed by the wetlands that have not changed for 4 thousand years, and they marvel at the minute changes of nature. I believe the opportunity to taste both aspects of change makes the Kushiro Wetlands so fascinating.

Though the Kushiro Wetlands show different beauty with each season, Mr. Ujihara abides by several rules he has set for himself.
“First of all, no canoeing in winter. When it is enveloped in crisp winter air, the Kushiro River is definitely beautiful, but swans and ducks that have lost their feeding grounds due to the marshes freezing, come to the river where there is still a flow, to rest. So in winter I change into snow shoes, and try to guide people through the wetlands all year round.”

This is Mr. Ujihara’s way of interacting with the natural environment. There are things that Mr. Ujihara says he notices because he is not originally from Hokkaido. “If I had been living here all my life I would have taken the scenery for granted. This is why for some time now, I have continued to hold outdoor classes aimed at students of elementary and vocational schools in Kushiro, and teach canoeing.”

Mr. Ujihara claims that the nature in this area should be protected by the people who live here. “Through canoeing, I want people to actually feel the wonders of the Kushiro Wetlands, and to naturally feel the desire to protect it. There would be no joy beyond this.”

One final question to Mr. Ujihara. Does time really pass slowly when you are canoeing? “Most people who experience canoeing are surprised and ask “has it already been two hours?” In other words, they are completely preoccupied as they experience the primitive nature that surrounds them.”

Maybe this is a bit of an exaggeration, but it seems similar to the “your life as a clock”. If you were to compare the endless flow of the river and the scenery of the vast wetlands to a lifetime of 80 years, then those 80 years could be like that of the canoe experience, layers of days that pass by with a blink of an eye.

The moment Mr. Ujihara became conscious of this fact of “two different clocks,” may be the moment when one will start living life by his or her own values.

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Kushiro River MAP

Lake Kussharo
Kushiro River
Lake Shirarutoro
Kushiro Wetlands
Lake Toro
Iwabokki
Hosooka
Pacific Ocean

For tourist information in Kushiro, including canoeing in the Kushiro Wetlands
Kushiro Tourism Association
http://www.kushiro-kanko.or.jp/
The Kushiro River crimsoned by the evening sun. A serene closing of the day.

The autumn skies are clear even in foggy Kushiro, the perfect season for canoeing.

Relaxing time of canoeing

Lobelia sessilifolia announces the end of a short summer in the wetlands.

If you are lucky, you may encounter the Japanese cranes which are a special natural monument of Japan.

There are several observatories within the wetlands. After you have experienced the “duck’s viewpoint”, please try the “eagle’s overhead view” of the wetlands.
Trace the culture and quaintness of Esashi, Matsumae and Hakodate, southern Hokkaido during the heart of Autumn

Explore the tasteful castle town, stroll the exotic city streets, taste the savory blue fin tuna which is in season... Hakodate, Esashi and Matsumae, part of southern Hokkaido, are overflowing with enticing features that are sure to satisfy journeys of the sophisticated.

Story: Junji Fujita

Autumn is the season for the popular blue fin tuna which can be enjoyed in the form of sashimi, or in other local dishes.

Matsumae, along with Oma and Toi, is a region famous for blue fin tuna. Fishing begins in late July, continuing into September, when they are in their prime. Now is the perfect season to eat blue fin tuna!

So, this time we head to southern Hokkaido in autumn; “strolling the historical city, and tasting Matsumae’s seasonal blue fin tuna” is the mission. Setting out from Hakodate around 9:00 AM, with the clear blue sky above, we travel along the coast for about 2 hours. Just before lunch we arrive in Matsumae.

First, you must enjoy the flavor of Matsumae blue fin tuna raw. The way the fatty meat melts in your mouth is something that can only be experienced here. While you are at it, try the Matsumae Tuna Sanshoku Donburi, the new and hot local dish.

Matsumae Tuna Sanshoku Donburi is made up of ground and sautéed tuna, marinated raw tuna and deep fat fried tuna in 3 individual rice bowls. Savor the delicious tuna three different ways. Being the region for tuna, by knowing every aspect of it is the reason why the tuna dishes in Matsumae are so delicious. You can enjoy the dish at various restaurants around the city and at road station as well. Now when the stomach is full, it is time to explore the city. Matsumae is famous for having the northern-most castle and cherry blossoms in the spring. The quaint city, also known as “Little Kyoto in Hokkaido” is perfect for a leisurely stroll.
Our recommendation is to saunter through the temple town, which is reminiscent of the Edo period. As you walk along the streets lined with temples, you are sure to get a feel of ancient Japan and its history. Guided tours are available for those who would like to be shown around the temple town. (Reservation necessary)

After you have had your fill of the temple town, take in the Sea of Japan as you head for Esashi. As you walk along the Inishie Kaido (ancient road) lined with numerous historical monuments, historical sites of old commercial buildings, wholesalers, warehouses, temples and stores, you will glimpse the bygone flourishing era when herring fishing was prominent. Don’t forget to visit the reproduction of the Japanese battleship Kaiyo Maru, which sailed through the convulsions of the ending Edo Period.

When you have indulged in seasonal gourmet dining and taken in the charming ancient city, it is time to head to Yunokawa Hot Springs in Hakodate. Yunokawa is one of the few hot spring areas in Hokkaido that is located along the coast. A luxurious time to unwind in the soft hot spring water while you contemplate the day awaits you.

**Take a Stroll through History, In Romantic Hakodate**

Following your previous day of exploring the Matsumae Peninsula, we urge you to saunter through the streets of Hakodate. Take the retro Hakodate Haikara street car from Yunokawa to Goryokaku.

When you have been to the top of Goryokaku Tower and seen the beautiful star shape of the grounds, proceed to the inner gates of the castle. Here you must see the reproduction of Hakodate Bugyo-sho (magistrate’s office during the shogunate), newly opened in July.

When the Hakodate Port was to be opened in Bakumatsu (the end of the Edo Period), the office was built by the Edo Bakufu for the purpose of uniting all Ezo (Hokkaido) areas. It has taken four years to completely reproduce the building at the exact location it formerly stood, using the same materials and methods that were used to build the original office. The Bugyo-sho is divided into four parts, each exhibiting the history and reproduction of Goryokaku and the Bugyo-sho through visual and other materials on display. One step inside and you will feel as though you are in the last years of the Edo Period.

After you have experienced the romantic Bakumatsu Period, next you will want to move to the Jujigai area.

There are many historical monuments, memorial halls and museums in Hakodate. You can hear about the great men such as Takuboku Ishikawa and Toshizo Higakata who were associated with Hakodate. Jujigai area especially is fortified with such places to make your stroll enjoyable.

When you tire of walking, let the sea breeze relax you while you take a break in the bay area. Here you will find many souvenirs, and it may be a good time to check out popular Hakodate confectionery.

For the finale, of course you must observe the night view from Mt. Hakodate. The sparkling lights are sure to enhance the memory of your travels.

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**Recommended memorial halls and museums**

1. **Hakodate Bugyo-sho**
   - Find out about the history of the Bugyo-sho and Goryokaku. Follow the process of reproduction through visual and other materials.
   - **Open:** 9:30 AM - 6:00 PM (Closed: Dec. 25th)
   - **Address:** 4-3 Goryokaku Cho, Hakodate
   - **Phone:** 010-02-31-606

2. **Hokkaido Sakamachi Ryoma Memorial Hall**
   - Displays actual writings by Ryoma Sakamoto, a visionary committed to pioneering Sakamachi.
   - **Open:** 10:00 - 17:00
   - **Address:** 6-5 Sake-shi Hakodate
   - **Phone:** 010-13-24-1115

3. **Hakodate Takadaiya Kahei Museum**
   - Exhibits that define Kahei’s life are displayed in the building.
   - **Open:** 9:00 - 17:00
   - **Address:** 10-32 Sannome-Cho, Hakodate
   - **Phone:** 010-28-37-5339

4. **Hokkaido International Tourism and Convention Association**
5. **Matsumae Tourism Association**
6. **Esashi Tourism Convention Association**

**Drive Route**

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**Map**

Photos provided by: Hakodate International Tourism and Convention Association, Cultural Assets Division, Department of Lifelong Learning, Hakodate Municipal Board of Education, Matsumae Tourism Association, Matsumae Museum Lamplush, Tamakuma Senollect, Esashi Tourism Convention Association, Esashi Town Industry Promotion Section, Tourism Division.
The largest outlet mall in Hokkaido

Over 4 hundred brands are available at everyday outlet prices at 145 stores.

Rera is close to both the airport and train station.

Hokkaido Tourism Organization
Itsukushima Park, 3-7-4 Itsukushima Park, Sapporo, Hokkaido, 060-8788
TEL: 011-431-0541
Visit: hokkaido-tourism.com

Hokkaido Sapporo Food and Tourism Information Center
JR Sapporo Station, 2F West Concourse, Jichi, Sapporo, 060-8006
TEL: 011-213-5885

Hokkaido Economic Affairs Department Tourism Bureau
Kita 3, Meisho, 6-2 Chuo-Ka, Sapporo, 060-8088
TEL: 011-231-4111

Business Hours
10:00-20:00

* Some restaurants open from 11:00 AM
* Subject to change with season