



Left: a Shinto gateway in Sapporo's Nakajima Park. Above: bicycles disappear under the heavy snow.

# Melting moments

With its cosy bars, hearty cuisine and warm welcome, Sapporo is well-equipped to fight off winter's sub-zero temperatures, writes Simon Rowe.

*Crossing half the sky,  
on my way to the capital,  
big clouds promise snow.*  
Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).

Just as the famously quick-witted haiku poet did centuries before as he trudged towards Tokyo, I, too, feel the urge to pen an ode to winter on my way to Sapporo, Japan's fifth-largest city and the capital of its northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido. Mine, however, would mention crossing an icy street filled with fashionable young women and flickering with the reflections of neon signs. The promise of sumptuous hot seafood dishes waiting in cosy restaurants would also be included.

While you're unlikely to find many wandering poets in Sapporo these days, Basho's "big clouds" still make good their promise each year, dumping an average of six metres of powder snow on its denizens and making it one of the world's snowiest cities.

Hokkaido means "north sea road" and although it conjures up travel-brochure images of murmuring volcanoes, rugged ocean outcrops, rolling farmland and spectacular snow festivals for tourists, in the minds of most Japanese, it is specifically Sapporo that best shows off the island's culinary delights and the carefree spirit of its people.

Rarely inclined to complain about the cold and quick to turn winter's wrath into nature's bounty with their love of winter sports (the 1972 Winter Olympics were held here), the locals greet outsiders with few inhibitions. Some put the easy-going attitude down to the luxury of space. After the crowded neon canyons of Tokyo and Osaka, Sapporo is a place where the breathing is easy and a quick cross-country ski before work in one of its vast public spaces, such as Nakajima-koen (Nakajima Park), is not out of the question. Streets are also wider and less congested, pedestrians are courteous and an easy-to-read grid system with addresses given in north, south, east and west combinations makes navigation easy. Towering walls of neon lights touting everything from mobile-phone

Picture: Simon Rowe

banking to Nikka whisky still turn the nights into day between the downtown subway stops of Odori and Nakajima-koen, but what would a Japanese city be without that magical glow?

Dining out remains one of the great pleasures of Sapporo and prices span the spectrum, from a steaming pork bun dipped in soy sauce for 200 yen (\$13) at a street stall to a sumptuous seven-course feast of Hokkaido crab – grilled, simmered and served sashimi-style – with the finest chilled sake to follow for 15,000 yen.

Authentic local fare awaits adventurous gourmet travellers to Daruma, a tiny restaurant tucked down an alley in the central Susukino district. The house speciality is the Genghis Khan barbecue, or *jingisu-kan*. No sooner have you pulled your wooden stool up to the counter than Daruma's elderly matrons whisk a pot of glowing charcoal and a plate of Hokkaido lamb and crisp winter vegetables to your personal grill. Don't be deceived by Daruma's poky, off-street location, however. It is so popular some determined locals will endure sub-zero temperatures outside while waiting for a place at the counter.

One man to whom brisk weather is no stranger is boutique beer brewer Phred Kaufman, a native of Oregon in the United States who arrived in Japan aged 18 and is still in residence 25 years later. Kaufman has a passion for brewing that is legendary throughout the expatriate community. His Beer Inn Mugishutei pub, which he opened in 1980, has become a popular rendezvous for beer enthusiasts, tourists and curious locals. "It's Sapporo's longest-running foreign-operated bar," he boasts over an earthy-tasting glass of his Ezo Beer, named after Hokkaido's original moniker.

One of Hokkaido's most important industries is fishing. Products such as smoked salmon, octopus, scallops and oysters, as well as the lip-smacking delicacies of salmon roe and sea-urchin eggs, are shipped daily to meet the demands of Japan's voracious domestic market. Nowhere near the size of Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, Nijo Ichiba possesses all the gritty charm of a seaside village market.

"Hokkaido crab is by far our biggest seller and because there's no seasonal slow-down in the crab business, we're flat out year-round," says Kuroda-san, Nijo Ichiba's quintessential seafood salesman. Engulfed by tubs of bright orange, spiny-backed crustaceans piled outside his corner stall, he offers samples of succulent crab flesh to passersby.

It is not the smell of fish that leads me to the Living Museum of Toyohira Salmon, but the kind and understanding words of the tourist information staff at Sapporo Station, who ignore my terrible Japanese and point me to Makomanai Park, the final stop on the Nanboku subway line. As part of a government-sponsored community project to bring salmon back to the Toyohira River, which flows through Sapporo, the museum's mission has been to educate citizens about the ecological needs of Hokkaido's most revered fish.

The salmon-spawning season may have passed, but I am still able to witness the product of all that sexual hyperactivity as millions of salmon fry dart back and forth in vast, undulating blankets across the glassy shallows of the outdoor catchment area. It is an appropriate end to a journey to the North Sea Road, an island whose culture and cuisine are inextricably linked to the ocean.

**Getting there:** Cathay Pacific ([www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)) flies from Hong Kong to Sapporo. Hotels are plentiful, centrally located and span the budget spectrum. See: [www.japanhotels.com](http://www.japanhotels.com); [www.global.city.sapporo.jp](http://www.global.city.sapporo.jp); [www.jpinn.com](http://www.jpinn.com); and [www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp). The Sapporo Snow Festival, held in the second week of February, is a hoot if oversized ice sculptures and relentless crowds are your thing. See [www.snowfes.com/english](http://www.snowfes.com/english).