

Toya Caldera and Usu Volcano Geopark

This February the Hokkaido Government CIRs were invited to experience the town of Toyako. Located in the Iburi sub-prefecture near the city of Date, Toyako is home to some marvels of nature. The town stands on the banks of the ocean and Lake Toya, but also sits at the base of Mt. Usu – and active volcano! Known for its stunning nature and plethora of onsen, Toyako is also home to the Toya Caldera and Usu Volcano Global Geopark which is the topic of this month's Red Brick Bulletin.

What is a Geopark?

The 90 Geoparks worldwide are defined by UNESCO as *A territory encompassing one or more sites of scientific importance, not only for geological reasons but also by virtue of its archaeological, ecological or cultural value.* The goal of UNESCO is for these sites to be protected and promoted through sustainable tourism which in turn benefits the local economy and preserves the site's cultural heritage.

The Toya Caldera and Usu Volcano Geopark showcases the fascinating geological activity in the area and the way this activity has influenced the relationship between the people of the region and the volcanoes. For thousands of years the often unpredictable volcanoes have defined the local landscape. The untrained eye would not be able to guess that the placid Lake Toya, was formed some 110,000 years ago after a massive volcanic event caused the ground to collapse into a giant crater. The smoking mountain peaks only hint at the fact that the lava domes of Ogariyama, O-Usa, Meiji-Shinzan, Showa-Shin-zan, Usu-Shinzan, and 2000 Shinzan have all formed in the last 150 years. The lively town of Toyako also does not reveal that volcanic eruptions have caused the evacuation of the townspeople three times in the last fifty years. While visitors may not immediately suspect what lays just beneath their feet various museums, experience venues, and knowledgeable people help them to learn about the ever-changing nature of our Mother Earth.

There are many ways to experience the Geopark in Toyako. A good place to start is at the site of the volcanoes themselves. The Showa Shinzan Volcano Mura is located at the base of Mt. Usu and offers a variety of ways to learn about the volcanoes. Visitors to the area will want to ride the ropeway up Mt. Usu to better view the surrounding area. One of the highlights is the Showa-Shinzan peak which can often be observed with smoke billowing out from the top. Trails in this area are open seasonally with guided tours of restricted areas offered once or twice a year. There is also a learning center dedicated to chronicling the study of the volcanoes. Visitors are able to learn about the men and women who pioneered the research on the park's volcanoes. As well, the centre chronicles the contributions this research has made to international studies on volcanism and how this research helps to protect the local community with prediction and early detection of volcanic events.



Hokkaido CIRs pose in front of the Showa-Shinzan peak (above, left) and displays from the Park Service Center (right).



Learning about Volcanoes

Volcano Science Museum

Beyond viewing the volcanoes directly there are two very good ways of getting more in depth information at the Toya Caldera and Usu Volcano Geopark. There have been five eruptions of the volcanoes in the Geopark in the last 150 years. This geological activity and the affect it had on the residents of the area is documented at the Volcano Science Museum in Toyako Town. Visitors are able to experience a volcanic event through an eruption simulator as well; the eruption theatre takes visitors through a detailed account of recent eruptions. Artifacts from previous volcanic



eruptions are preserved and on display so that visitors can get a feeling of the devastation a volcano can wreak in a community.

Left: Ruined truck in Volcano Science Museum
Below: Volcano Meister teaches Hokkaido CIRs about the Geopark and its history

Volcano Meister Program

One unique feature of the Geopark is the Volcano Meister Program. It is a network of 23 highly knowledgeable volcano enthusiasts and professionals who help to educate locals and visitors alike about living in harmony with the volcanoes. The group holds regular classes on topics like disaster preparedness or the history of previous eruptions for the local population. They also lead walking tours of the Geopark for visitors ranging from a half day's stroll to a 3 and a half day trek. Finally, meisters can usually be found at many of the volcano museums or discovery centers in Toyako Town and are always willing and eager to talk about volcanoes!



Enjoying Toyako's Nature

The Toyako area is also a wonderful place to take in Hokkaido's natural splendour. The peace and quiet of Lake Toya can be enjoyed in many ways. There are plenty of hiking trails that crisscross the area. There is a ferry that takes visitors on a tour of the lava domes called the Nakajima islands in the centre of Lake Toya in the wintertime, but in the summer tourists can walk around the main

island and feed the deer that live there. As well, there are various activities run by local businesses to allow people to get closer to nature. One of the most popular is trekking via horseback!



Taking in Japanese Culture

Onsen

In 1910 two great things happened in the town of Toyako, the Meiji Shinzan cryptodome was formed and because of the impressive geological activity onsen, the Japanese word for naturally occurring hot springs, were discovered. There are a multitude of beautiful onsen in the area to enjoy for locals and visitors alike. There are 12 free foot and hand baths as well as nine onsen hotels that day guests can also visit. The minerals in the Toyako hot springs are said to help relieve nerve and joint pain as well as alleviate exhaustion.

Local Events

Fireworks

While there are many events that are held throughout the year in the Toyako area perhaps the most famous is the fireworks which run from late April until the end of October. The impressive 20 minute display is held every evening on Lake Toya. Normally fireworks displays are held only in the summertime in Japan so the length of the Toyako event makes is the longest running firework show in the nation!



Access to Toyako

By Train: JR Toyako station is on the Hakodate Line, 90 minutes from Minami-Chotose Station and 105 minutes from Sapporo.

By Bus: Approx. 2h 40m from Sapporo Station to Toyako Onsen area. Other busses from Toyako JR station run to the onsen area as well.

Toyako Tourist Information Center:

TEL: 0142-75-2446

Hours: 09:00~17:00, every day.

Website: <http://www.laketoya.com/>