

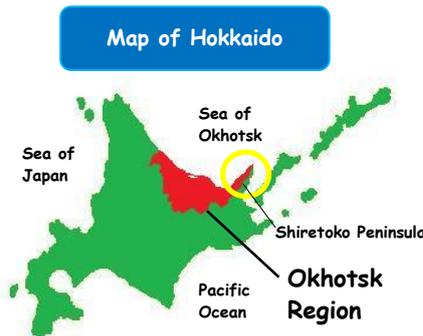
The Okhotsk region is located in the northeastern region of the main island and is blessed with a 280 km coastline along the Sea of Okhotsk. With an area of 10,691 km², the Okhotsk region occupies 12.8% of Hokkaido's total land area. The Okhotsk region's 18 cities, towns and villages have a total population of over 320 thousand people.

Home to 14% of Hokkaido's arable land and forestland, the Okhotsk region is a significant contributor to the prefecture's agricultural and



forestry industries, particularly as Hokkaido's largest scale producer of onions, wheat, beets, and potatoes. However, the Okhotsk region is perhaps most famous

for its fisheries and tourism industries, both of which make locals proud and attract others to the region all year long. Fresh scallops and salmon are staples of the Okhotsk catch but processed seafood is also popular. Some of the signature dishes and foods include a variety of Abashiri zangi-don (rice topped with salmon caught in Abashiri and deep-fried using an icefish and soy sauce-flavoured oil), and many kinds of kamaboku, which is made by steaming



cured surumi (minced fish meat usually made using white-fleshed fish).

The Okhotsk region is also appealing for its various attractions which cannot be found elsewhere. Although limited to the coldest corners of the globe, drift ice appears annually on the Sea of Okhotsk, making this body of water

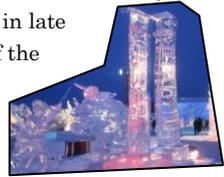


Drift ice photo courtesy Abashiri Kanko Kyokai (Abashiri Tourism Association).

the southernmost part of the northern hemisphere where the beauty of drift ice can be seen and experienced.



The impressive Sea of Okhotsk drift ice is a result of collisions between drift ice formed in the waters of Hokkaido's Sea of Okhotsk and drift ice native to the Amur (Russian)/Heilong (Chinese) River in Far East Russia/northeastern China. Before this encounter occurs, ice crystals begin to appear gradually in late November at the mouth of the Amur/Heilong River and increase in number while growing into drift ice and flowing south. Drift ice remains visible along Hokkaido's Sea of Okhotsk coastline from late January until mid-March.



Abashiri Drift Ice Festival (Abashiri).

Besides drift ice, there is an abundance of breathtaking natural beauty such as Shiretoko. Designated a World Heritage Site in 2005, Shiretoko extends approximately 70 km from the precipitous peaks in the center of the area to the tip of the peninsula and includes the surrounding marine area. Shiretoko is home to numerous endangered and endemic species, and its ecosystem demonstrates the importance of the interaction between the land and ocean.

NEW ZEALANDERS IN HOKKAIDO

From one land of lamb to another, New Zealander Simon Daly has found himself feeling at home in Hokkaido – Japan's prefecture famous for a



lamb dish oddly named after the notorious Ghengis Khan. While talking to Simon, it becomes clear that he has a keen interest in cuisine stemming from his culinary studies and restaurant experience. However, it was not cuisine which had originally caught Simon's attention. Simon reveals that his interest in Japan originated in his hometown of Wellington where he had a close childhood friend of Japanese heritage whose impressive toy figures (particularly a metallic version of his plastic Voltron) left him infinitely curious.

Simon presently lives in the small northeastern town of Engaru with his wife and four children and works as an Assistant Language Teacher through the Japan and Exchange Teaching (JET) Programme. Having immensely enjoyed himself while accompanying his wife to Hokkaido in 2002-2003, the decision to return in the fall of 2009 was simple since both he and his wife had agreed that Hokkaido would be an ideal location to live and raise a family.

Simon also reminds me about **Hokkaido charm** found in the presence of large mammals such as Hokkaido brown bears not found in his home country; the enormous lantern floats which charge into one another at the Numata Lantern Festival; the frighteningly low temperatures and frosty air of Hokkaido's frigid



Yamabiko Falls frozen (Engaru).



Numata Lantern Festival (Numata).

winters which have allowed him to represent New Zealand at the Sapporo Snow Festival International Snow Sculpture Contest in consecutive years; the opportunity to ride ice-breaking boats during the breathtaking drift ice season which occurs only on Hokkaido's northeastern coast; the freezing of the enchanting Yamabiko Falls; the ability to swim in Lake Kussharo during the day and soak in its natural hot spring baths at night. "It feels like luxury camping!" he exclaims.

Similarities in foods such as lamb but differences in preparation are also points of interest for "Chef" Simon who is accustomed to

preparing joints of meat rather than thinly cut slices. He has also modified his traditional fish and chips recipe by using tuna fish in place of white fish, and began using real crab meat instead of imitation crab meat in his crab dish recipes. A couple of his Hokkaido favourites are scallop shabu-shabu (Japanese variant of hotpot using Hokkaido scallops) and zangi-don (rice topped with Hokkaido-caught salmon deep-fried using an icefish and soy sauce-flavoured oil). Pleasure has also been found in school lunches which have introduced various Japanese dishes to Simon and his family.



Scallop shabu-shabu.

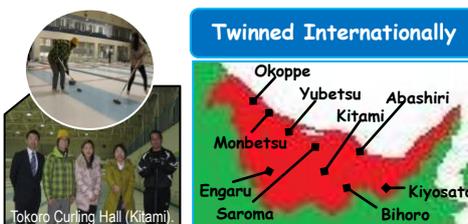
In a culture where socializing is often conducted outside the home, making friends has been surprisingly challenging for the husband and father of four. However, this has most often been overcome by Simon's bright personality together with people who he tells me could not be any more accommodating. It is in this fantastically welcoming setting that Simon thrives and continues to give generously back to his local and wider communities, most recently having designed a t-shirt which helped fundraise over \$3000 dollars for ongoing post-disaster relief efforts.

The Meiji restoration period in the late 19th century ushered in Hokkaido's major pioneering age. Labour was in very high demand since the Meiji government aimed to develop Hokkaido and defend its frontiers against the eastern advancement of Russian forces. To facilitate the movement of essential supplies and reinforcements between eastern and western Hokkaido, it was decided a major road would be necessary. The Abashiri Prison



was built in 1890 and its countless inmates built a major road under dreadful conditions which resulted in hundreds of their deaths.

A Region Close to Home – Okhotsk



Many years later, in recognition of the contribution made to the region by Abashiri Prison and its inmates, the Abashiri Prison Museum was opened in 1983 at a new location. Many of the original structures were moved to the new site, including the radial five-winged prison house which gives officers an obstructed view of all five wings without allowing any interaction between the wings themselves.

This and many other quirky features and stories are clearly explained all across the vast indoor and outdoor museum grounds which offer visitors a unique perspective on the history of Okhotsk, Hokkaido, and Japan. The Hokkaido Museum of Northern Peoples is also a treat for those interested in learning more about the diverse peoples who have inhabited the world's north from ancient times

up to the present day. The long history of interaction between natural and human forces is told through exhibits displaying sculptures, artifacts, and models from various northern regions. Incidentally, nine Okhotsk municipalities are twinned with others around the world, not all of which are in the north!



A Look at Okhotsk Connections...

Monbetsu:

- Newport, USA (1966)
- Fairbanks, USA (1991)
- Korsakov, Russia (1991)

Kitami:

- Elizabeth, USA (1969)
- Barrhead, Canada (1991)
- Poronaysk, Russia (1972)
- Jinju, South Korea (1985)

Engaru:

- Bastos, Brazil (1972)
- Moirans-en-Montagne, France (1998)



Saroma:

- Palmer, USA (1980)

Abashiri:

- Port Alberni, Canada (1986)

Okoppe:

- Stettler, Canada (1990)

Bihoro:

- Cambridge, New Zealand (1997)

Kiyosato:

- Motueka, New Zealand (1997)

Yubetsu:

- Whitecourt, Canada (1998)
- Selwyn, New Zealand (2000)

Canadians



Hokkaido

Born in a small rural town in British Columbia called Chase, June Sanders went on to study history and Canadian studies at Simon Fraser University.



She found employment in Vancouver, British Columbia, as a social worker and has been engaged in a variety of hands-on activities and vigorous research projects.

However, she had felt as if living and working in the big city had disconnected her from nature; as if an undesirable but very real space had been created. Looking to escape the hustle and bustle of the big city, June Sanders could have fled to the outskirts of Vancouver. She could have found solace in the world-renowned scenery which British Columbia boasts. Instead, she came in August 2008 to Hokkaido, Japan.

Now 36, June tells me she did not want to just revisit with nature; she wanted to reconnect with nature. When asked why she did not choose to do this in British Columbia, she tells me that doing so while finding a satisfying job which she was qualified for was extremely difficult. With reconnecting to nature as a prerequisite for deciding where she would live and work, June wound up landing a job in Abashiri, Hokkaido as

an Assistant Language Teacher through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme.

June lived in Abashiri for three years and has experienced much of what Hokkaido has to offer. From the most marvelous to the most frightening, she tells me candidly how she has felt both as alive and as close to death as she ever has in her life. From atop Mount Rausu on a clear afternoon, she enjoyed an absolutely breathtaking panoramic view of distant islands, the Sea of Okhotsk, and Shiretoko (Hokkaido's natural World Heritage Site), but she also encountered an increasingly precipitous ridge and dangerously poor visibility due to a winter blizzard while attempting to ascend Mount Tokachi Dake.

"I chose Hokkaido. If I were anywhere else, I would have been gone in a year."

Nature was what June yearned for, but she also has enjoyed interacting with locals doing a variety of activities. Beyond the boundaries of schools where she has worked with teachers and students, June has also tried her hand at pottery, picked up snowboarding, climbed many of Hokkaido's beautiful



June & Nipopo - Ainu people's good luck charm and symbol of Abashiri.

mountains, and participated in a range of brilliant festivals. She openly raves about all public events held at Sapporo's Odori Park, but tells me that her favourite festival is the Abashiri Drift Ice Festival, where an impressive ice maze,

live entertainment, and spectacular ice sculptures all complement the drift ice blanketing the Sea of Okhotsk.

For June, **Hokkaido charm** came unexpectedly. After falling asleep on the five hour bus ride from Abashiri to Sapporo in early December 2008, June was taken aback to the magical winter scene greeting her still slightly glazed eyes. She also vividly recalls her visits to nearby Rubeshibe where she was intrigued by locals' genuine fascination with other countries and cultures. This engagement was particularly refreshing for June who missed her native cosmopolitan surroundings.

This August, June has taken home a wealth of new experience and knowledge. She also tells me she can now claim that she has conquered Mount Tokachi Dake... in the summer.