

UPOPOY: National Ainu Museum and Park



Before Hokkaido was Hokkaido it was known to the inhabitants of Honshu as Ezochi, among other names. To them, it was a wild, untamed island to the north that was not really “Japan,” but was rich with trading opportunities, and even provided a foothold to protect Japan from Russia’s eastward expansion in the late 18th, early 19th centuries.

However, the Ainu, the inhabitants of that northern land, called it by a different name. It was known as “Yaunmosir,” and it was a land that they knew well. Where their southern neighbors saw only wilds and opportunity, the Ainu who had walked the land for years and years knew it only like those who lived there could. To them it wasn’t an untamed wilderness waiting for settlement; it was home. The Ainu reveled in trade with the peoples and other societies they encountered. However, when in the 18th and 19th centuries, Japanese expanded north to “protect Japan,” the land of the Ainu—Hokkaido, the Kuril Islands to the east, and Sakhalin to the north—became an area caught between to countries fighting over territory and resources; Russia encroaching from the north and those in Japan creeping up from the south.

The Ainu have a long history that is as variable as the seas that surround the island, oscillating between periods full of peace and those full of conflict. They have their own culture, their own language, unique instruments, art styles, and many other things. Unfortunately, the last few generations—at least—have not been kind to the Ainu and their culture, almost causing the culture and language to be lost. However, with the building and opening of UPOPOY, the National Ainu Museum and Park, in the south-central of Hokkaido, a center has been created where the Ainu culture can not only be showcased and taught, but where it can be renewed and evolve for a future where people from various cultures can live together with respect and reverence for each other.

All pictures were taken July 9, 2020 at the Press Viewing Event

Before opening weekend, the park was opened to a few visitors, as a tour for the press. Even though I am not press, I was able to attend with my coworkers and experience the park that has been at the forefront of Hokkaido PR since last year.

UPOPOY (meaning “singing in a large group”) sits nestled among the forests near Shiraoi, a town known for beef and eggs, in south-central Hokkaido. While the town is a stop on the rapid train line, visitors to Hokkaido are probably more familiar with the port town Tomakomai to the north and Noboribetsu, known for its hot springs and Hell Valley Festival, to the south. The quaint Shiraoi overflows with delicious food and the sounds of farm animals, and is surrounded by the beautiful nature that Hokkaido is so famous for. And now, it has one more attraction.

UPOPOY is an interesting and engaging mix of traditional walk-through museums and hands-on experiences, and also showcases traditional buildings, crafts, and instruments. It has shows and stories, nature and technology. And one of the most interesting aspects, in this writer’s humble opinion, was the blending of past and future, mainly through the use of projection mapping. I would like to go back to the park and experience it when it is open to the public, as opposed to being only for the press. I believe there will be a different atmosphere and even more to explore. But for now, here are some of the things I enjoyed on my pre-opening jaunt through the park.



PROJECTION MAPPING: One of the things I enjoyed the most about UPOPOY is the combination of traditional and modern. That combination has always been something that drew me to Japan in the first place, and to see it and its implementation here was really something amazing.

Japan uses projection mapping, something I had never heard of nor experienced until I came to Japan. I first saw it used when I went to the illumination at Osaka Castle many years ago, and I thought it was so creative and amazing. Over the past year or so, there have been various instances where projection mapping and other digital tools were used to help promote the opening of UPOPOY. In the park itself, there is, of course, the nighttime projection mapping show—which I, unfortunately, did not get to see on my pre-tour—which is hinted at even in the daylight with the various apparatuses set up around the park, stark white against the natural greens, browns, and murky blues.

However, it goes beyond just the “traditional” side-of-the-building projection mapping. It is used in the theatre—bringing to life the dance of the cranes in the snow and showing a physical picture of what is being represented in the dances. It is used in the workshop area to give visitors the chance to experience the world from different points of views, like an eagle soaring over the mountain or a fox wandering the brush. And I’m sure there were other places where it is used and I didn’t get to see.



SCENERY: The lake and surrounding mountains are a beautiful backdrop to the park and help to sell the idea that you have stepped out of modern day Japan and stumbled into a world that is both similar and foreign all at once.



FOOD: UPOPOY is home to various restaurants and food stores, and they had samples for the press. I love food and these samples were delicious. They even had deer meat (on sale in the regular restaurant)!



OWNING UP TO HISTORY: Another thing I really, really enjoyed is the fact that one of the storytellers in the Workshop Area spoke about the fact that claiming Ainu heritage hasn't always been a good thing, and the struggles that the Ainu have gone through in the past. The storyteller spoke about her grandmother, and how her grandmother embraced being an Ainu and wanted to retain the knowledge of that culture, even when her own parents told her to give it up, told her there was no reason for her to learn the culture. And because this storyteller's grandmother held on to a culture that was shunned and looked down on, she passed the passion for her heritage on to her granddaughters—both of whom now work at the park.

The relationship between Japan and the Ainu has not always been peaceful and pretty. Many, many countries have a checkered past when it comes to the treatment of indigenous people, and Japan is no different. I appreciated that they didn't shy away from it; instead it was presented as part of the past, and now people are moving forward, trying to create a better future for the Ainu, as well as create a society where people from various cultures can live together in harmony and mutual respect.

AINU NICKNAMES: All of the employees have nicknames, which they told us, and then they explained why they had those nicknames. I thought it was a simple, interesting way to incorporate the Ainu language and culture into every interaction that employees have with park visitors.



MENTIONING THEIR MODERN-DAY LIVES: Something that will be really helpful and meaningful, especially to students who come to UPOPOY on field trips, is the fact that these employees, while being Ainu and dressing in traditional Ainu garb, go home at the end of the day, take off those traditional clothes, and live life in modern Japan. I think that it will help students and other visitors to realize that there are broader definitions of “Japanese” and it makes a point that these people, the Ainu people, are not just a thing from history, but that they are existing in modern Japan. Even though there are these traditional things, they are also a people of the modern world, and I like that message.



There are many things left to explore in this park that I wasn't able to see on my singular visit. Physically, the park is beautiful, surrounded by nature, shiny and new. I hope that, in the years to come, the meaning and message of the park will continue to grow and spread. I hope that not only will they succeed in preserving and passing on the Ainu culture, but will enable it to change and grow in this modern age, and that it will become the center from which a new spring of multicultural tolerance and respect will gush forth and spread.



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are about 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. Read on to learn more!



Meet JR!

My name is Jose Raoul Claveria but I introduce myself as JR Claveria – just like the train! I'm from the Philippines and I'm a High School ALT JET in Tomakomai City. I've been teaching English to foreign language learners for almost a decade so working as an ALT isn't quite novel for me. However, I've lived my whole life in a tropical country where the temperature dances from 32 to 37 degrees Celsius so living in Hokkaido has been quite shocking, to say the least.



What brought you to Japan ?

Teaching English basically led me to the JET program. However, I've always had an interest working in Japan. I grew up in the 90s where anime was at its peak in the Philippines. My fascination with anime brought me to Japanese dramas and J-pop. When an opportunity came to pack up my life and work here, I didn't let my age stop me from doing it.

How has your experience been so far?

You know that feeling when you're doing something for the first time yet it feels strangely familiar? I'm almost finished with my first year but I still feel like I'm in a strange *déjà vu*. It still feels surreal when I experience something here that I've only seen on TV - the sun rises in different times in different seasons, the mountains always peek in the horizon, and the snow, oh the snow. I've never been frozen looking at such a blanket of pure white in my life before.

Still, I could say that I'm adapting better than I expected. A lot of people have been so kind to me and working in my base school has been a godsend. I couldn't ask for better colleagues and more energetic students that reminded me of that childish curiosity I lost a few years back. Both amazing and uncomfortable moments were unexpected and I am loving every minute of it.

What has been your most memorable moment?

By far it has to be being heckled by a student while doing my self-introduction during my first day in class. It's not as bad as it sounds and it really wasn't a big deal. A student decided to put in the effort to search a bad word in Filipino and proudly shout it at me. It was unexpected and I just smiled the whole time feigning ignorance to what she was calling me. I knew that she really didn't know what she was saying. This just reminded me that even though I'm in a different country, students will be students. It made everything feel less foreign at that time. So, what did I do after? Of course I killed her with kindness and now we have a decent teacher-student relationship. Decent being the operative word. I'm still working my GTO magic in teaching her a life lesson.

What is your favorite thing about your region?

The natural scenery around my town makes it difficult to take it for granted. There are a lot of times when I find myself just staring outside the window beside my office desk. I'm just mesmerized at how Mt. Tarumae seasons its mood every single day. I'm shocked at how nature obviously creeps into the lifestyle of the people in my town. Tomakomai feels like a city and a countryside and the people who live here definitely reflect that. Being near Lake Shikotsu and Mount Tarumae while also near the bigger cities like Sapporo and Chitose, there's a good mix of staying busy and being laidback - perfect for those who enjoy both city life and country charms. I'm slowly falling in love here in my home in Japan.

