

# BEYOND JAPAN'S NATIONAL PARKS

on board HERITAGE ADVENTURER

18 May - 2 June 2023



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## Day 1

Thursday 18 May

Tokyo

We arrived from all corners of the world to Japan's Capital City Tokyo and were all a little bit surprised that in the last 24hrs the temperature had risen by almost 10°C and a very unseasonal 32°C greeted us on our first day. After meeting the Heritage Expedition staff and expedition team at the wonderful Keio Plaza Hotel it was either out to explore this vibrant city or rest up after the long-haul flights.

This evening we all met up for an amazing buffet dinner with John and Lindsay, expedition team members from *Heritage Adventurer*, and our local Japanese guide Roy Aoki. After receiving our plans for the next morning, it was off for an early night as the adventures had only just begun



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**Day 2**  
**Friday 19 May**  
**Tokyo - Kanazawa**

After a great breakfast our luggage was collected and taken to *Heritage Adventurer* by truck. Roy explained how he was going to navigate us “Military Style” through the busiest railway station in the world to find our train to Kanazawa – the famous Shinkansen or Bullet Train. It was a success, Roy led us through the Tokyo’s Shinjuku Station, on to the Shinkansen all while being perfectly on time.

And we were off! We had all heard and read about it, but there was nothing like travelling at more 300-kilometres-per-hour through the Japanese countryside in such style and, at exactly 2 hour and 27 minutes later, we arrived at Kanazawa to be met by our coach and driver who transferred us to *Heritage Adventurer*.

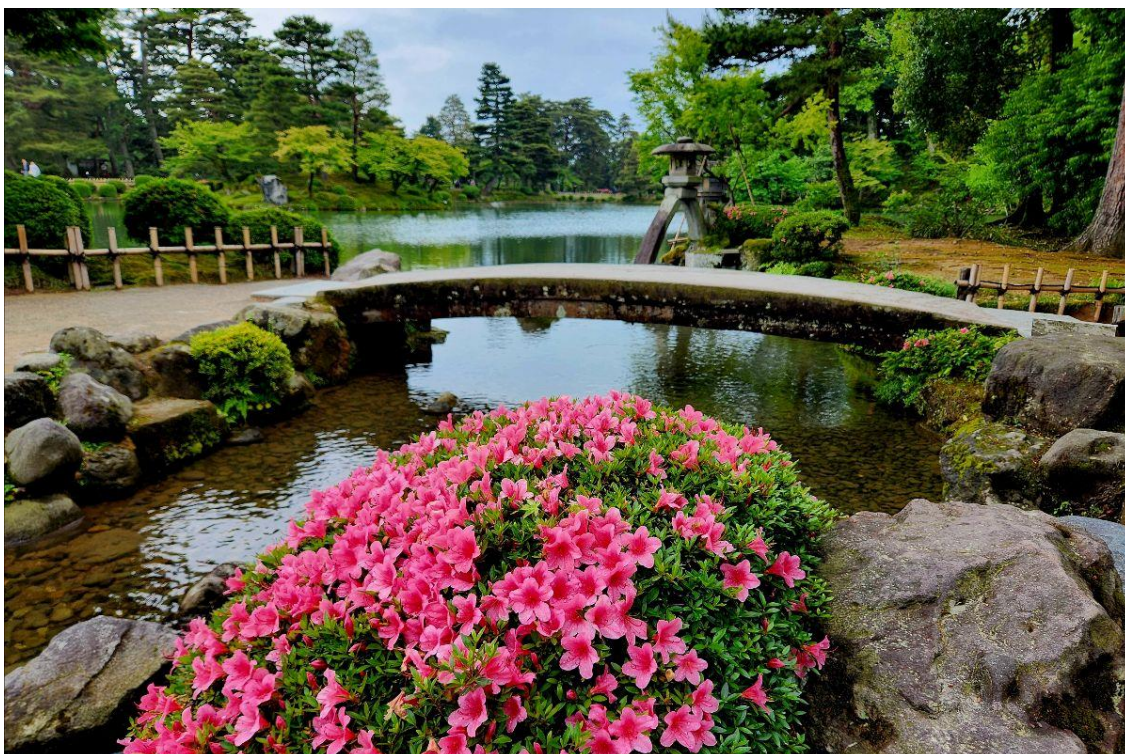
Many of us had travelled with Heritage Expeditions before, but this was the first time on board *Heritage Adventurer*,

everyone couldn't quite believe how beautifully presented the ship was!

Lunch awaited for us in the bistro, with buffet style salads, hot meal options, dessert and cheeses.

Our afternoon's visit to Kenroku-en Garden really stole the show. The garden was built during the Edo period (1603-1868), made of winding streams, mirrored lakes, the Meiji Monument, a grove of 200 plum trees of 20 different species, the Hanami Bridge and many ancient local trees like the raised root pine and the Karasaki-no-matsu Pine. We walked across to the historic Kanazawa Castle built in late 1676 by Lord Maeda Tsunanori of the Kanazawa area at the time. Roy provided us a wonderful, guided tour of both the Garden and Castle giving insight to the fascinating history while Moshe explained many of the different plant species we encountered, a wonderful way to start our expedition.

On our return to *Heritage Adventurer* there were introductions to the expedition team and crew, safety briefings and the mandatory lifeboat drill followed by a wonderful a la carte dinner prepared by Executive Chef Guenter and his team in the Galley.



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### Day 3

**Saturday 20 May**

**Kanazawa**

We started our morning with a 2-hour-drive into the mountains to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Shirakawa-go. The Gassho-style settlement at Shirakawa-go Village, in the northern Gifu prefecture, was established in 1995. Here we discovered a fascinating site of 114 Gassho-style houses in a village that prospered under the Lord of Ogimachi Castle, Yamasita Ujikatsu from 1460.

The Gassho houses, designed by a Shrine carpenter, adopted new techniques. For insulation from the heavy snow fall (thick roofs made of reed), the triangular shape for strength against earthquakes and the space in the roof structure was mainly engaged in raising silkworms. The village was also known for making nitric acid which was the ingredient of gunpowder.

In the afternoon we went down town in Kanazawa to the popular Geisha District where, after a short introduction, we explored this historic and unique area. The highlight of the afternoon other than the narrow streets, traditional buildings and young women in kimonos, was to partake in the local delicacy of gold leaf ice-cream.

On returning to *Heritage Adventurer* we received a fantastic farewell by a local youth baton dance club aged 4-16, before we were on our way to Dogojima.

To finish the day we all attended the Captain's welcome cocktails in the bar; we were introduced to Captain Tomasz as well as the heads of the hotel, galley, housekeeping and bar.



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**Day 4**  
**Sunday 21 May**  
**Dogojima, Oki Islands**

We woke after a smooth night at sea, within sight of the Oki Group of Islands and our first sightings of any sea birds, Streaked Shearwaters as Dogojima loomed in the distance.

Once through the narrow entrance to Saigo Bay, the main harbour, and town of Okinoshima, *Heritage Adventurer* dropped anchor. Then it was into the Zodiacs and everyone ashore where we were greeted by the local tourism representatives and harbour authorities who checked passports and Ship ID cards. We were the first foreign vessel to land guests at Dogojima in eight years!

Soon we were on our way to Jodogaura for amazing vistas of a small bay close to the coach parking and then around the corner to some wonderful coastal views from the cliff above. Moshe enthusiastically explained the botanical plants including a sighting of some endemic miniature White Orchids. We sighted Hototogisu (Lesser Cuckoo), Pacific Swift and Japanese Warbler, then our next stop was to Shirashima Coast Lookout with a short 30-minute walk to more stunning views of this beautiful coastline. We returned to our trusty expedition vessel for lunch with a short stop at Tamawakasu-mikoto Buddhist shrine with its ancient Japanese cedar tree.

For the afternoon both guests and expedition team were excited as we arrived to watch the Bull Sumo at the Ichiyagadake Bull Sumo ring. This is a sacred ritual dating back thousands of years to the time of the exiled ex-Emperor Go Toba (1179-1239). A ritual to please the Gods, it is a very sophisticated affair with no blood or gore and it was exactly what it says, Bull Sumo, like a head and neck wrestling match until one bull retreats or a draw is called like in our bull sumo experience.

Next to the bull ring was Mizuwakasu Shrine, the largest Buddhist Shrine on the Island situated where the previous Emperor lived and we were able to see the foundations of his residence. Roy explained to us the etiquette of visiting a Buddhist Temple, with the washing of hands, removal of shoes and placing of incense.

Our last stop for the day was the Oki Islands Geopark Museum where we had a 3D overview of the whole island group and an excellent explanation by the curator of all the important locations and why it was given UNESCO status in 2013.

A quick Zodiac ride back to *Heritage Adventurer* saw us weighing anchor and the Captain heading for Hagi. We were treated to a late afternoon of talks with Michael giving guidance on Photography for Beginners, followed by Osnat with Japan and the Sea – A Long-lasting Relationship and lastly Moshe explained Why There are so many Climatic Zones in Japan.



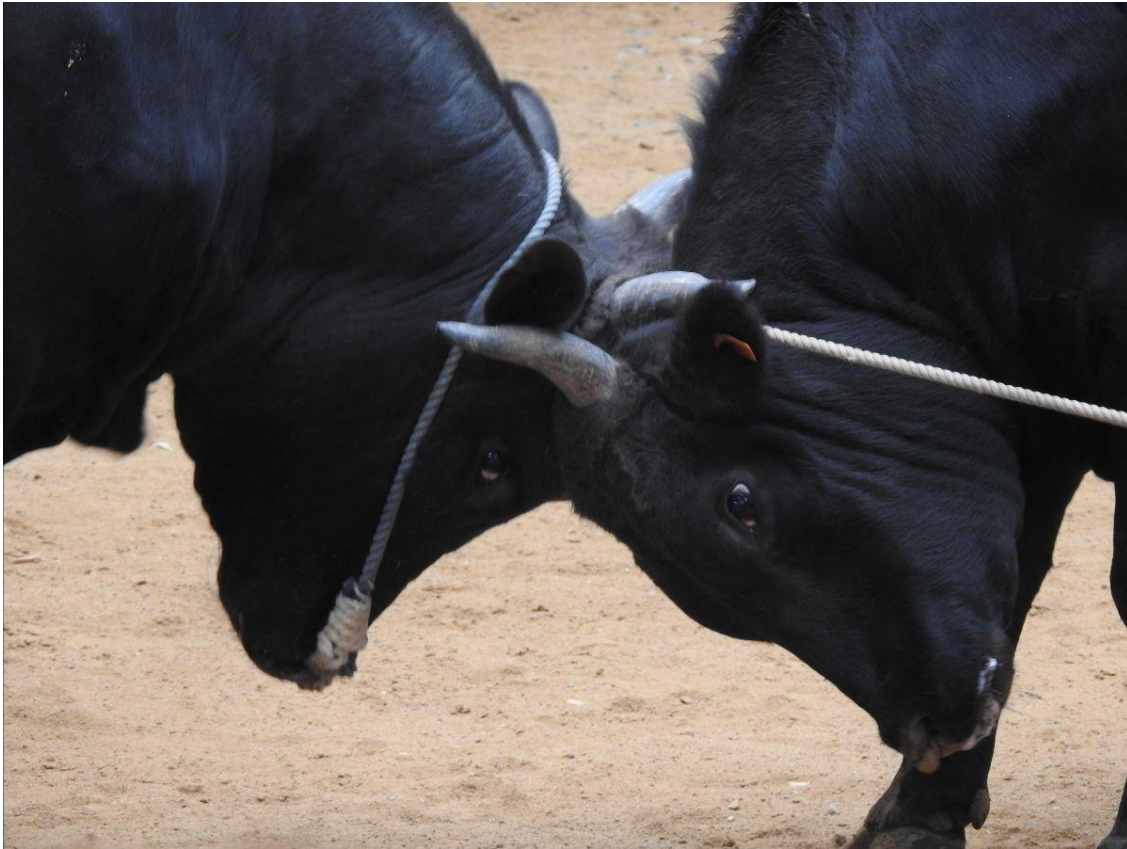
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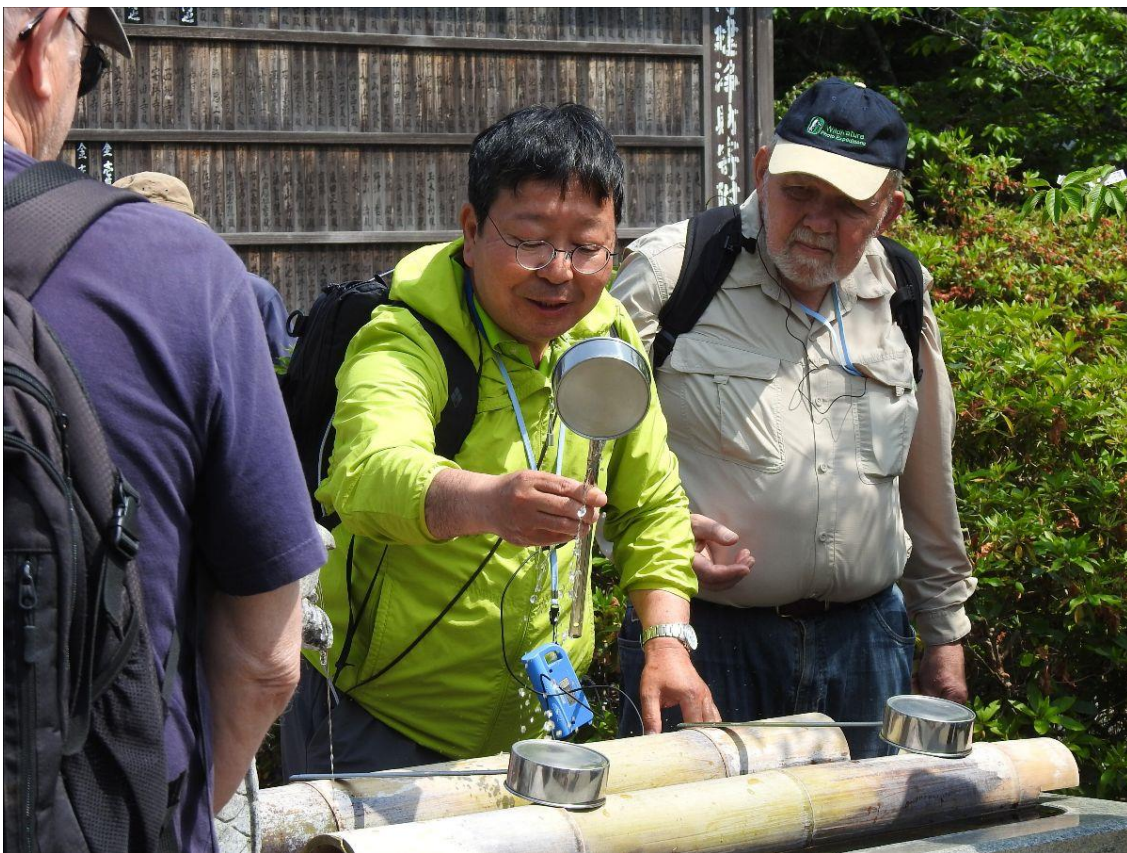
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## Day 5

Monday 22 May

### Hagi

We awoke this morning near the city of Hagi and, after a smooth Zodiac transfer, we boarded our coach at the Hagi Marina bound for the Akiyoshidai Plateau. The drive took us across Japan's largest karst plateau, a quasi-national park (4,500 hectares) designated as one of the nation's natural monuments. The limestone that formed this area was created about 350 million years ago.

Today's adventure included walking a part of this amazing cave system and, with great planning, it was a downhill walk. The cave was a comfortable 17°C temperature with all of us deciding to walk, even though there was the option of a lift, passing a multitude of stalactites, stalagmites and limestone terraces which were one of the best examples in the world. It was a 'wow' moment and one we were sure to remember for a very long time, especially with the photos we all took. The finale to this walk was the bottom exit point where we emerged into a lush green forest.

Late morning, we returned to Hagi and the choice was given to either return to *Heritage Adventurer* for lunch or stay in town and dine next to the fish market in one of four Sushi restaurants with most of us taking the latter.

In the afternoon two wonderful visits were organised. The first was to the Kikuya Family Residence, one of the oldest and best-preserved merchant houses in Japan where little has changed since the late Edo period (1751- 1867). The property has been nationally recognised as an Important Cultural Property by the Agency of Cultural Affairs, and Roy guided us through all five buildings – the main residence, the main storehouse, the treasure house, the kitchen and the rice granary, and the latest addition the garden built in the Meiji period 1867-1912.

Our second afternoon activity in Hagi was a visit to a traditional pottery studio famed for Hagi-yaki pottery. The Taibi Yoshika Museum, where Yoshika Taibi started his craft in 1936 and won his first award in 1943, continues today to produce handcrafted pottery. His art form challenged the possibilities of pottery by breathing new life into Hagi ware with his unique style now sought for traditional tea ceremonies.

After another smooth Zodiac ride we were back on board our trusty expedition vessel and greeted by the Japanese Immigration Service who processed our passports. At night we departed Japan for South Korea and the city of Ulsan.

John guided us through an overview of Japanese history followed by a recap from Phil on the importance of pottery in Japan to wrap up the day.



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## Day 6

Tuesday 23 May

Ulsan, South Korea

After a smooth overnight crossing we arrived at the Port of Ulsan, South Korea. Once we cleared Customs and Immigration we boarded our coach with our local guide Jane towards Daereungwon Tomb Complex consisting of the Tumuli Park and the Flying Horse Tomb located in Gyeongju City. The ancient tombs served as burial mounds for the remains of royalty and upper class people of the Silla period.

Our time was spent admiring the Cheonmachong (Flying Horse) Tomb where a gold crown, bracelets and other relics were found after an excavation in 1973. Its name was taken from a painting of a flying horse on a mud guard saddle flap, the horse flies into heaven with its tail turned upward and tongue darting out, showing the 'Spirit of God'. We were fortunate to see the original mud guard flap artefact which had been retrieved from the tomb, it was on display to celebrate 50 years since the opening of the tomb. It was believed that the white horse, the God of animals, carried the dead to heaven. Luckily for us there was an exhibition that only shows once a year for 10 days, of the white horse relics in detail with many more intricate gold artefacts.

Next stop was the Gyeongju National Museum with its gold jewellery, metal weapons, and distinctive pottery which we had ample time to discover at our own pace.

Lunch today was in a local restaurant serving 15 dishes of local cuisine. We experienced what a traditional Korean restaurant was like, from pork and beef to multiple fish delicacies and, of course, the spicy fermented local kimchi and all finished with a sweet bean paste treat for dessert.

Our last visit for the day, and South Korea, was to Bulguksa Temple. The construction of this Buddhist Temple was said to have started in 751 by Chief Minister Kim Daeseong. Unfortunately, most of the buildings were burnt down in the Japanese invasions but the fountains and stonework like the Chilbogyo Bridges remained. It wasn't until the mid to late 1800's that the halls were rebuilt. Daeungjeon Hall was the largest and most impressive collection of houses where Shakyamuni Buddha was enshrined. The Temple was covered in lanterns with written wishes dangling on papers below them, along with extra lanterns in preparation for Buddha's birthday in a few days time.

As we departed Ulsan most of us were amazed at the fleet of boats around us either on anchor or making their way to and from the port, like an obstacle course for navigation.

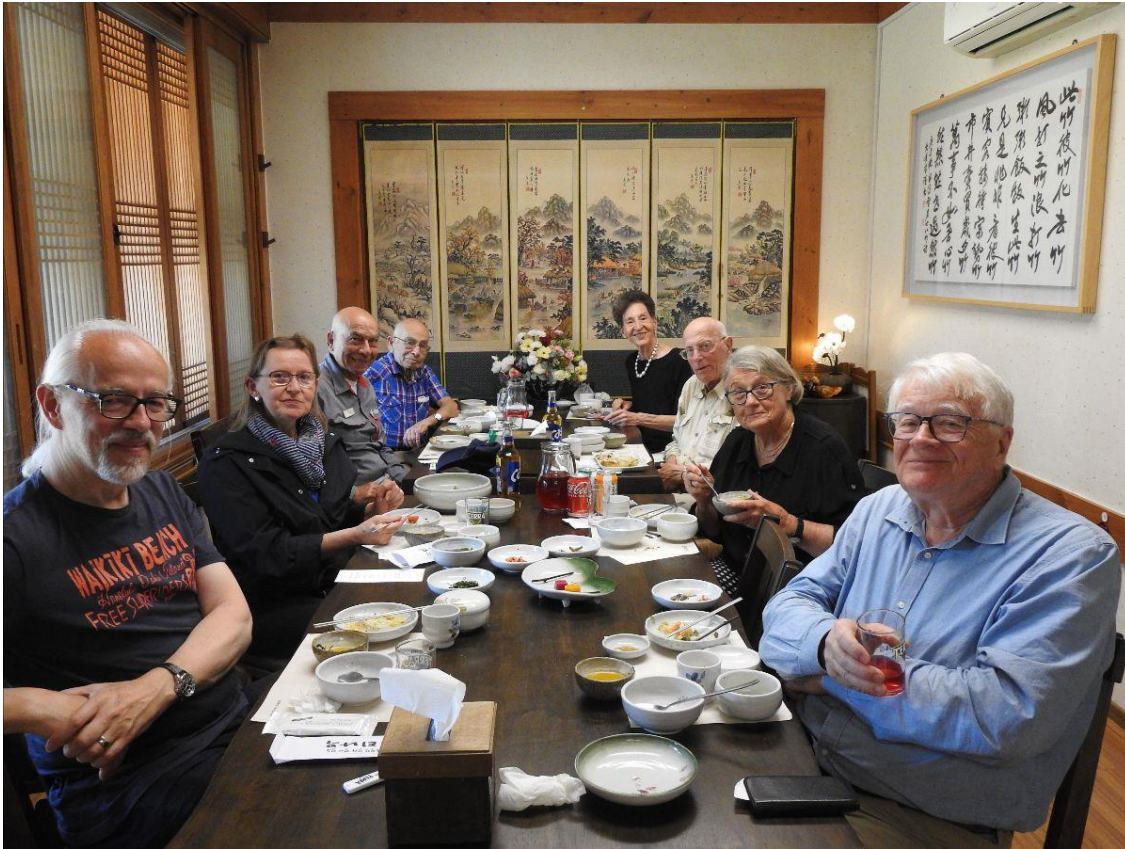
Our evening recap included insight into the Silla Period and the silk road with Phil.



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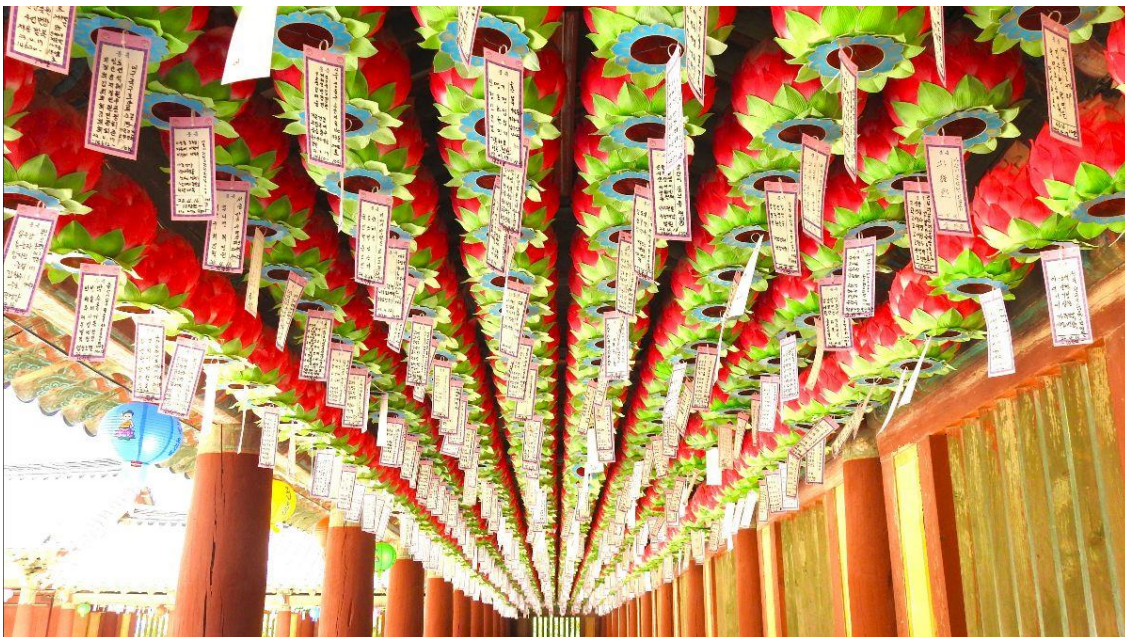
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## Day 7

Wednesday 24 May

Sakaiminato / Matsue

This morning we found ourselves still at sea, on our way to Matsue City in the Shimane Prefecture, with a morning to enjoy the views as we made our way north. John shared insights into the Japanese language followed by Osnat informing us about the Adachi Museum of Art with a talk on *A Window to Nature*.

Our return to Japan and customs clearance coincided with lunch before we departed *Heritage Adventurer* to the suburb of Yasugi to visit the Adachi Museum of Art created by Adachi Zenko. From the dry landscape garden to the white gravel and pine garden, the moss garden and the pond garden, the calm and serene views were awe-inspiring as we shared the space with a few Japanese tourists.

The other space in the Museum was the Annex which housed a collection of paintings by Modern Japanese Masters. There are over 2,000 pieces including works by Kawai Gyokudo, Hashimoto Kansetu, and Kunishi Hanako. We would have needed a whole day to be able to cover this entire complex but it at least it gave us something to come back for.

Next stop was outside Matsue Castle and the Horikawa Sightseeing Boat - the canvas roof of which can be raised and lowered when passing under bridges. There were a lot of giggles and laughs as we had to lay completely flat while the roof came down to get under the bridge. We circled the castle's moat and the outer canal system, and we enjoyed seeing some spots we would have otherwise missed, plus a bonus bit of wildlife spotting – Herons, Asian Ducks, Kites, Swifts and a Muskrat.

The Castle was built in 1611 by Matsue's 1<sup>st</sup> feudal Lord Horio Yoshiharu and became the city's symbol, nicknamed Plover Castle (Chidori-jo) for its swooping roof line which were compared to the wings of the Plover. It is one of only 12 remaining original castles in Japan.

Our return to *Heritage Adventurer* was backdropped by Mount Daisen, the largest volcano in the district, and we drove beside Lake Shinji and over the famous Eshima Ohashi Bridge. Then, in true Japanese style, we were bid farewell with traditional music, song and dance.



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**Day 8**  
**Thursday 25 May**  
**Day at Sea**

As planned, we had a day at sea while we made our way north en route to Niigata including several lectures and events during the day. With a wonderful smooth sea it was a pleasant two nights sail up the western coast of Honshu.

An array of opportunities throughout the day included Moshe on The Floral Zones of the World as he explained the different zones of the world and related them to Japan in relation to its length of 3,000 kilometres, the altitude of the Japanese Alps, and how it divides the different plants that cover the country.

Lindsay presented A taste of Ancient Japan explaining the history of miso and its place in Japanese culture from 700AD, the different types, how miso soup is made, and how it has changed and developed in modern times.

Phil & Sarah shared their love of paper in Origami for Beginners – a change of pace up in the Observation Lounge where we had a hands-on class on this world-renowned art form along with several laughs.

Sarah shared What is Hidden in Plain Sight? A presentation on the cetaceans we could encounter around Japan.

Michael shared Advanced Wildlife Photography and the intricacies of how to take not good but great photos by one of Australia's award-winning photographers.

Sarah took time to provide Calligraphy for Beginners with more fun stuff in this beautiful Japanese writing form. We had all

seen the artist at Matsue yesterday and were keen to put our hand to it.

Tina spoke on The Essence of Japanese Gardens – and who better to give us all the knowledge than someone who has created one of these gardens at home?

There was the option for down time and watching the world go by from the library or outer decks while the temperature was becoming noticeably cooler as we headed north.



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**Day 9**  
**Friday 26 May**  
**Niigata**

We were all keen to explore today and stretch our legs as we arrived in the busy port town of Niigata. With a population of 49,000 it's famous for its rice, wetlands lagoon, castle and sake. Our first stop was the 193 hectares of Fukushima-gata Lagoon, a wetlands and home to many endangered flora and fauna including the rarely seen gigantic lotus *Euryale Ferox*. Jemma, our local guide, gave us a great overview at the Vortex Museum where we also enjoyed incredible views out over the lagoon. We headed out to explore and spot some of the birdlife including Crested Grebe, Great Japanese Cormorant, Turtle Dove, Heron and more.

We spent the latter half of the morning at the amazing Northern Culture Museum which displayed what life was like in the Samurai house of a wealthy farming family from the Emori Period. The Director, one of the remaining family, provided an in-depth introduction of the Shin period with its beautiful pottery, lotus and koi ponds and the lacquerware.

For our afternoon visit to a sake factory, we were first surprised with an interpretive light show informing us of the story behind the making and history of sake. This was concluded with some beautiful sake tasting along with many other local beers and food like dashi, soy sauces, rice crackers, pickled fish, and flavoured miso pastes.

Our last stop for the day was the Shibata Castle built in 1654 and was the residence of the Mizoguchi family who ruled the Shibata domain. There remained about 350 metres of beautiful stone wall surrounded by a moat, as much of it was destroyed in the 1800s when the emperor decided to get rid of around 2,000 castles. The Castle tower was rebuilt in 2004, with the Sankai-yagura and Tatsumi-yagura towers reconstructed based on old paintings and photographs. The three-storey turret is the only one left in Japan. We followed the moat around to the main gate and bridge entrance and explored the place at our leisure.

On returning to *Heritage Adventurer* it was time to move on but not before another farewell treat as a drumming band came to send us off in style.

Our evening included a recap with Phil about Japanese Castles and the day was rounded off with a Japanese themed meal with local sake.







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**Day 10**  
**Saturday 27 May**  
**Noshiro**

As *Heritage Adventurer* approached port at Noshiro this morning those up and on deck early were treated to an amazing site of wind turbines on land and out at sea, quite an eerie and futuristic sight.

We were getting used to the warm welcomes at each port and Noshiro was no different with a drumming band to greet us. There was a strong feeling of anticipation from everyone as we headed for some walks at a different UNESCO site.

Our first morning walk was located about an hour drive north at Juniko (Twelve Lakes) park. We followed the coastal road with some beautiful views but as we turned east into the mountains the scenery changed dramatically to mature forest with a limestone canyon on the south side of the road. Japan's first UNESCO site has 33 lakes of which we see five and get to walk around two of these crystal-clear sapphire pools including the famous 10-metre-deep Aoike (Blue Pond). Nakajima our forest guide explained, as we walked, the different species we were looking at. The area was pristine, clean and smelled wonderfully fresh.

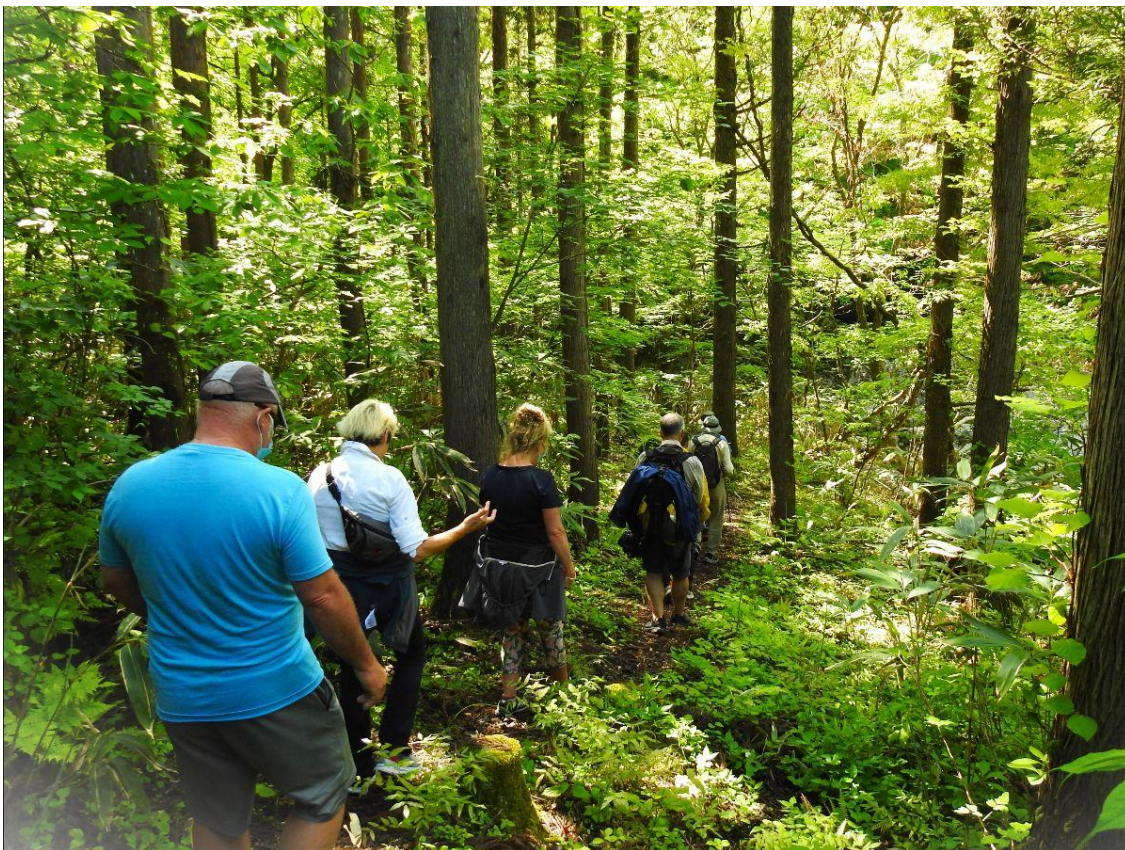
Everyone was soaking up the atmosphere and ambiance from Cicadas and many different birds in full song. Even though we could hear lots of birds they were very difficult to spot in this mature beech forest, the walk was a delight and enjoyed by all.

A well-earned lunch of bento boxes awaited at a road house en route. Armed with our lunches, everyone found some shade to enjoy a local treat of sandwiches, fried chicken, sausage, and a green salad.

Next stop was the Mase Valley where another local forest guide, Saitou, led us up a small crystal-clear river that flowed over basalt rock and through a cedar forest that had been planted to replace the original ones that had been felled for building. This forest had been left to mature while the floor was coated in many ferns and a multitude of other small plant species.

This area was quite unusual in that it had both deciduous and evergreen trees together, and there was a lack of bird song as compared to Juniko. With reluctance it was time to return to *Heritage Adventurer* as we bid farewell to our guides – Hokkaido awaited.

We received an evening talk from John on Buddha as it was his birthday today (celebrated in South Korea) before it was quiz time for some fun and factology.



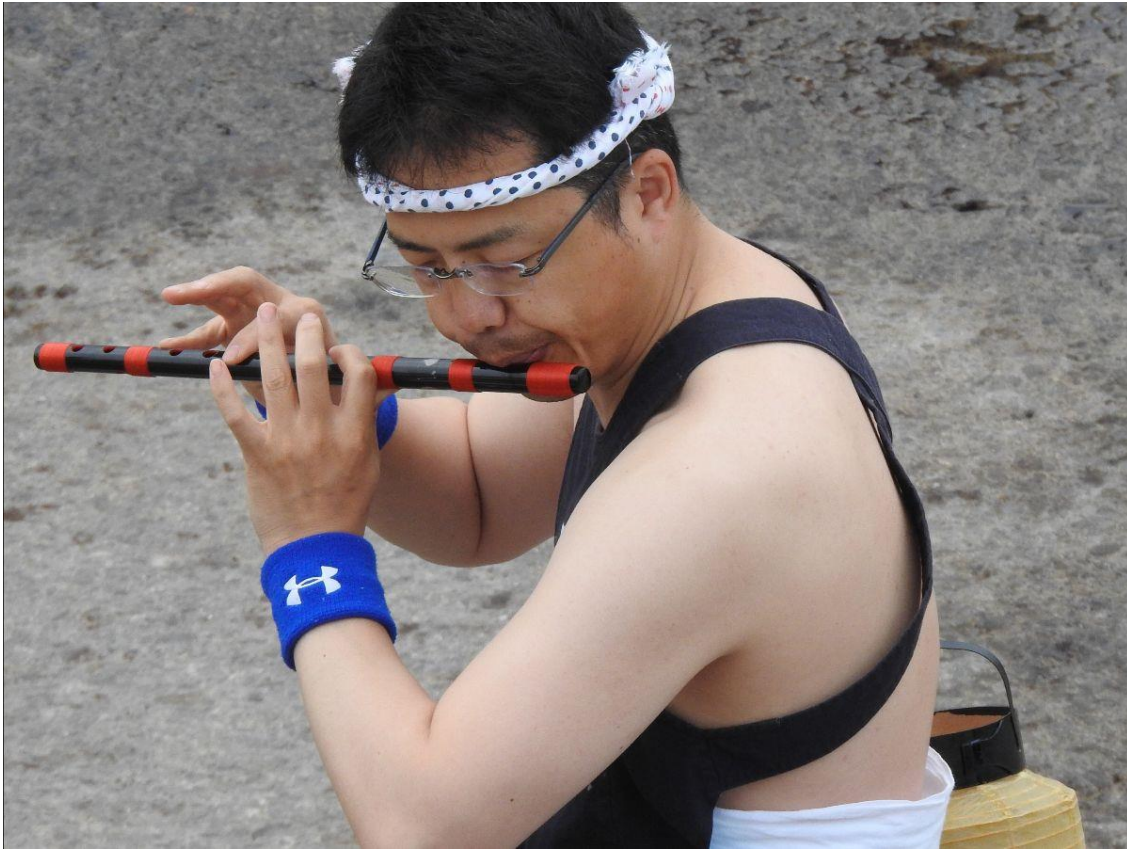
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**Day 11**  
**Sunday 28 May**  
**Muroran**

Early morning some of us were on the top deck looking for any wildlife with sightings of Black-footed Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and dolphins. As *Heritage Adventurer* entered the harbour of Muroran we sailed under the large suspension Hakucho Bridge, the back drop to the city was Mount Komagatake.

After a welcome by the locals, we met our local guide Noa and crossed the bridge heading to Mount Usu and the Usuzan Ropeway - a cable car gondola. The line climbed to the top of the active volcano in Shikotsu-Toya National Park which had erupted four times in the last 100 years. At a height of just under 700 metres we enjoyed incredible views of Lake Toya, Showa Shinzan and the central crater of Mount Usu (Ginnuma Crater). The Ropeway itself could carry 96 people and ascended 1,370 metres in just 6 minutes.

Showa Shinzan was a smaller volcano created by the geothermal activities of Usu between 1943-45. The rock that was exposed was a bright red and you could still see steam rising, Noa led us around to a number of viewing points explaining the plants and birds we saw and the timeline of eruptions in the last 115 years. We were all glad for the walk with beautiful views.

Our next stop ashore was to the Jigokudani (Hell Valley), Lake Oyunuma under Mount Hiyori and Lake Oku no Yu. Jigokudani was named for its boiling water and steam which made it look like Hell, but also had a pleasant and very easy boardwalk into the centre. Some of us decided on a bit of a climb and headed to Oyunuma which was at 377 metres and a lovely climb up through the forest to a beautiful view of this round, gourd-shaped crater with a sulphur spring reaching 130°C. From the lookout we found Oku no Yu, a black sulphur spring with a surface temperature of 85°C and was very, very smelly.

On returning to our coach those who completed the shorter walk discovered a Cherry blossom tree and observed Japanese Tit, Warbler, Wagtail and number of unusual looking bugs on the way back.

Lunch was ready on board and this time we had fireworks as a departing gesture along with enthusiastic locals waving us farewell.

Our afternoon included Moshe's talk about The Natural Pearl of Japan – Hokkaido while Joram provided some limericks about his time on board and Tina shared all things Red-crowned Cranes.



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## Day 12

Monday 29 May

### Kushiro

As we approached Kushiro we awoke to the thick fog the area was known for. As it's made by the cold currents from the north hitting the warm air from the south it was noticeably worse during spring and autumn seasons.

We cleared harbour authorities and boarded our coach with our local guide Noa. Noa explained that Kushiro was known locally as 'Fog City' with 100 days a year being foggy and a record of 40 foggy days straight. With a population of 160,000, Kushiro was all about fishing and tourism with 90% of the 1 million visitors coming from around Japan.

We headed off to the Kushiro Shitsugen National Park which, at 220-square-kilometres (22,070ha), made it the largest wetland in Japan and home of the country's iconic Red-crowned Crane. Its rich biodiversity included nearly 2,000 recorded species with some 200 birds, 39 mammals, 38 fish, 5 reptiles, 4 amphibian and 1,100 insects.

While it became a Ramsar Site in 1980, Kushiro Shitsugen National Park wasn't made a national park until 10 years later and now includes areas of greater protection within it. The thing that surprised us all was that it appeared like a savanna area but after closer inspection it definitely had wet feet.

We had a choice of two walks, medium or long, and they were both on boardwalks so not to disturb the wetland. The weather turned warm and sunny as we enjoyed a chance to have a stroll at one's own pace observing the plants and wildlife. One of the main reasons to visit is to observe the Red-crowned Crane in the wild, which we managed to with a single sighting. The flora enthusiasts among us enjoyed the reed-sedge mires, sphagnum bog, Alder swamp forest, lilies and alpine trees, while the animal lovers enjoyed Japanese Huchen, White-faced Darters, Cuckoo, Grey Heron, Warbler and Sika Deer in addition to excellent Red-crowned Crane observations including a chick.

Our second stop was at the Akan International Crane Center where we were greeted and then taken around the facility by the director who shared their ongoing research and protection of the Red-crowned Crane. Thought to be extinct until the 1920's when a group of 40 were found, there is now a population of more than 2,000 individuals. We saw a mating pair, the female at 37 years was the oldest bird in the reserve and her mate of 26 years were both doing well with a new chick



thriving, great news for another species on the brink.

We returned to *Heritage Adventurer* and had good distance to travel for our next destination of Abashiri, an area renowned for its abundance of marine life. The expedition team were positioned around the ship in spotting locations and it was not too long before we saw our first Humpback Whale directly in front of us with those in the Library/Observation Lounge enjoying great views and photos, followed by another two whales which made for lovely sightings. In a proud win for Citizen Science, several photos we submitted of the whale's fluke were matched on Happywhale, a global project aimed at tracking whale movements, to a Humpback Whale first recorded in 2004. It was incredible to compare our photos with previous sightings, noting the changes in barnacle count on the whale's fluke over the years.

Later we were treated to Jan's past Crane encounters and then Captain Tomasz explained the intricacies of navigating this evening between Russia and Japan, not only narrow, but with political issues as well and Moshe recapped on Hell Valley from yesterday's visit.



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### **Day 13**

**Tuesday 30 May**

**Abashiri**

It was an early rise this morning as we passed through the straight between Hokkaido and Kunashir Islands, reportedly a great whale watching location. Both expedition team and guests were keen to spot more cetaceans and sea birds. Alas after such a beautiful start to the day the temperature plummeted, however a pod of likely Beaked Whales were observed.

With *Heritage Adventurer* closer to shore around Shiretoko Peninsula and the possibility of bear sightings the decks filled and patience rewarded with four Brown Bears and four Sika Deer, all close by on the beach or bluffs. This part of Hokkaido is the most remote, and a real haven for wildlife.

At Abashiri we met our local guide and naturalist Yikuko who lives nearby. Bihoro Pass was our introduction to this amazing volcanic area and the observatory gave us wonderful views of Lake Kussharo, the largest crater lake in Japan. From here we followed the lake edge to the Tsutsujigahara Nature Trail. The bus dropped us all at the top of the trail at the base of a steaming valley, the colours that greeted us were reds of the soil, yellows of the sulphur deposits and the vivid green of the arctic shrubs and beech trees. The 3-kilometre walk down took us through a geothermal landscape, from low shrubs and lichens to beech forest. The changes were quite distinct in such a short distance. Moshe was once again in his element pointing out all the plants, the photographers' shutters were clicking as fast as they could while the rest of us took in the surroundings and enjoying the stroll.

We could not miss the opportunity to check out Lake Mashu, reportedly one of the clearest lakes in the world with average visibility of 22 metres, so we headed to Lake Mashu First Observatory. This lake is heavily protected and as such there was no access down to the water, only a trail that circumnavigated the crater rim, a hike of 7 hours.

Our drive back to the port took us through vast areas of agricultural cropping farms famous for potatoes, wheat, rock melon and many other brassicas, there was no rice grown in this area. With a late arrival at 1930 it was straight to dinner and then an early night as we had an early start the next day.



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**Day 14**  
**Wednesday 31 May**  
**Abashiri**

Everyone was at breakfast by 0600 this morning, looking forward to a closer look at the area around the town of Abashiri. Today was about whatever wildlife we could see, so Yukiko took us to a coastal strip right next to the famous Lake Tofutsu. The strip had been burnt off originally by sparks from the steam trains that came through from Kushiro. We all spread out -

some dipped their feet in the Sea of Okhotsk, some checked out the very early stages of the flowering season and others wandered across to a viewing of the lake to do a little bird watching.

Then it was over to the Tofutsu-ko Waterfowl and Wetland Center where the volunteers gave us a history and information session followed by a video presentation of the different seasonal changes of this very important lake, particularly for the birds migrating from Siberia to the south.

As we wandered along the lake edge someone had spotted a large colony of Grey Herons nesting. The team from the centre set up a spotting scope on the lake and we observed the many waterfowl calling the lake home. We soon learned that this was our 3<sup>rd</sup> Ramsar Site, designated since 2005 due to the following:

- 1) A Brackish moor representing wetlands of Japan,
- 2) Home to the Red-crowned Crane,
- 3) High degree of Biodiversity – brackish lagoon, saline marsh, freshwater marsh important to the ducks, geese and cranes, and plants,
- 4) Supporting up to 67,000 migratory birds and 20,000 on a regular basis
- 5) Over 1% of the total water fowl species of East Asia Region supported here.

We later moved on to the next stop at the Okhotsk Ryuhyo Museum where we learned about the drift ice that comes ashore here from the north. The display gave a very good visual description of why so many tourists come here in winter and why this happens at this latitude of 44° North.

From here it was a short walk to the Hokkaido Museum of Northern Peoples, a real highlight of the day. Telling the story of the ancient crossroads for the native peoples meeting, it was a comprehensive collection of pan-arctic artefacts of the first nations people particularly of the Ainu — deemed the original inhabitants of Hokkaido.



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## Day 15

Thursday 1 June

### Rishiri Island and Rebun Island

Breakfast started at 0600 this morning before loading the Zodiacs by 0730 for our adventures ashore on Rishiri and Rebun Islands. Seldom visited, they are the most northwestern islands of Japan. Unfortunately the weather had finally lost the spell we've had on it and the wind picked up to gusts of over 75 knots.

We managed to launch the Zodiacs and get ashore where our coach was waiting for our trip around Rishiri Island, with Mount Rishiri standing proud and its peak shrouded in cloud. At Himenuma Pond, an artificial lake with a new boardwalk circumnavigated the edge and forest all the way down to the water, we heard many birds but only a few sightings of Cuckoo, Warbler and Bush Woodpecker. It was very nice to be out of the wind and the sun made for a very leisurely stroll.

Back on board our coach we made our way to Ootomari Swamp, another lake surrounded by forest to the water's edge and with many birds on the water such as Black-tailed Gulls. The highlight for many was the two shops next to the car park, one which sold fresh scallops and clams while the other sold kombu seaweed and many other products this island was known for.

Shirley received a call from our Captain that the wind conditions have worsened and we needed to make our way back to the ship, so it was a U-turn and back to port. Our wonderful Zodiac drivers did a marvellous job of getting everyone back to *Heritage Adventurer* safe and sound. Although a little wet from the very gusty conditions, the decision was obvious to everyone that our second island visit to Rebun was not going to happen.

After lunch Sarah offered an afternoon program of origami with John, Phil and Sarah before Moshe gave us a lecture on the Sea of Okhotsk. Lindsay then spoke about the history and present-day flower and vegetable industry of Hokkaido. Then it was time for the final recap of our trip with Shirley and the fantastic slide show that Tina had put together of many photos that the Expedition Team had taken in the last 15 days.

Of course, it wouldn't have been a final night without a farewell dinner as Guenter and his team out did themselves not only with the food but also the wonderful service we had enjoyed from Bernard and his team.



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**Day 16**  
**Friday 2 June**  
**Otaru**

Our final day had arrived and it was time for an early breakfast followed by farewells to friends old and new as we soon left for different parts of Japan. Some stayed for longer to soak up the magic of this country, and others made their way home.

One thing was for sure: this had been a trip of a lifetime, with many planning to return to both Japan and Heritage Expeditions with their very unique style of exploring.



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