

Left to Right: (top) Sapporo, Obihiro farm cabin, celebrity gardener, Meakan, Shiretoko; (middle) Ainu-Akan, Kurodake, jumpsuit farming, Cape Soya, Reibun Momoiwa trail; (bottom) corn, Yamunaisawa & Rishiri, Asahidake & Daisetsuzan, Biei flower fields

Despite a lifelong interest in Japan, it took me a few decades to finally visit. Ellen, who lived in central Honshu for over 12 years in the 1990-2000's, did not think I could handle the country because I have a low tolerance for crowds and smoking... and I agreed. Over the past few years, though, I have ramped up my interest in Japan via a PBS weekly called Journeys in Japan - in particular: episodes about Hokkaido's Garden Path and Flower Islands (Rebun and Rishiri). I also love Alan Booth's The Roads to Sata (and Craig McLachlan's lighter Four Pairs of Boots), both early thru-walks down the western and wilder/rural side of the country. Indeed, I hope to do my own multi-stage version of the length of Japan. With surprisingly little arm-twisting, Ellen agreed that beginning in Hokkaido would be less crowded and a little more familiar-feeling to me. Because my stress fracture recovery has been bumpy, we agreed to attempt 3-4 hard hikes – interspersed with walks along the Garden Path. Knowing Ellen always wants to practice her Japanese, I decided we should make a strong effort to stay with Japanese families. Initially, I wasn't sure how we would accomplish this – but then I discovered some farm-stay places around Hokkaido. These became some of our most special experiences.



Left to Right: Sea-Tac airport, Chitose airport hotel, Sapporo hotel interior, mountainous Sapporo skyline from hotel

June 19-23: Star Wars Plane to Sapporo

Unbeknownst to me at the time of booking, ANA (All Nippon Airways) has invested in a number of theme jets over the years... and I was about to ride the Star Wars/R2D2 plane to Tokyo! Of course, I did not notice the plane until I was in the line-up because, yes, I

paid for premium economy and was up in the too-busy lounge loading up on free food. My jaw momentarily dropped when I saw the plane, and it dropped even farther when I entered the plane to the Star Wars soundtrack... and then I chuckled when all the flight attendants put on R2D2 aprons during service. At the end of the flight, I even received a commemorative R2D2 plane card. Aside from these wacky features, the flights between Seattle, Tokyo/Narita, and then Chitose (an hour south of Sapporo) were non-descript. The views were limited because of clouds, my seatmate was a silent middle-aged Japanese businessman, and the meal was mediocre. But everything was on time, "Hidden Figures" was excellent, customs at Narita went smoothly, and the flight to Hokkaido was short and uncrowded (high season isn't until July 1). Landing around 7:45 p.m. and quickly finding my luggage, I thought my final tasks would be straightforward – but, probably because I was tired, I struggled with everything: restaurants were closing (reducing my options to "hot chicken" at the Bourdain-touted Lawson convenience store), the directions to the in-terminal hotel were not clear, and I could not get the hotel's business computer keyboard to switch to English. Oh well – my room had a boiling water kettle (so I made tea and oatmeal to accompany my chicken), I slept well, and I did not have to get up early. I did not partake in the available hotel onsen (hot spring bath facility), which banned anyone drunk or with tattoos (rules were displayed next to an brochure of available porn, the funniest program of which was called "Lesbian High School" and featured a bunch of girls in above-the-crotch-length Catholic School skirts).

The next morning, I was up around 8. Although most people ride the train into Sapporo from Chitose (~45 minutes, \$11), I was uncomfortable lugging my junk through that gauntlet – and so I opted for the Chuo "limousine bus" (~90 minutes because of multiple hotel stops, \$10). Given that Chuo reservations are first-come/in-person at the airport, I visited them and got my 12:30 ticket (1 of only 2 time options) before tackling the hotel breakfast buffet. Here, I was the only non-Asian person – of about 40 tables. The buffet had western food on one side (e.g. scrambled eggs, sausages, potato croquettes, fruit cocktail, yogurt, rolls) and "Japanese food" on the other (at the time, I didn't know what most of it was – other than the rice and soup). I pretty much went all western. Just as I was getting ready to bus my tray, this Caucasian guy showed up and so I had to see what he ate: ALL Japanese food! After another leisurely bath, some Japanese cooking TV (trying to get kids to eat natto, the stinky fermented soy bean product that will make some appearances later), and repacking, I headed back to the now BUSY airport and caught my nearly-empty bus. Driving into Sapporo, I was struck by how much green there was; the scenery reminded me of a cleaner and more organized version of northern Vietnam – farming interspersed with industry. Although Sapporo is home to 2 million people, it never felt that big – even though we seemed to drive through its outskirts forever. Driving in, I mapped out my walking plans for the next couple of days. For example, I had not appreciated 12-block Odori Park – but driving by/along it multiple times made me realize I had to add that to my list. I arrived at my hotel (Keio Plaza) around 2; while I liked Keio's location, views (I was on the 20th floor), and AMAZING breakfast buffet, it was shockingly overpriced (twice the airport hotel, and the most expensive place I stayed on this whole trip!). Indeed, the hotel was clearly trying to serve a fancier clientele than me (I am sure they found my hiking attire novel and amusing). After settling in, I became hungry and decided that my one trip for the day was going to be a short reconnaissance walk to the university. Anticipating hotel dinner options were too expensive, I had found that several people rated university cafeterias and co-ops well. That first afternoon, however, I was unimpressed with my food discoveries (although the campus was green and lovely). What I did find was a food cart in front of the Slavic Studies Building: amazing grilled fatty chicken wraps with cabbage and garlic sauce. I was then honored when 3 engineer-ish alumni asked me to take their picture next to the bust of William S. Clark, a Civil War-era science/agriculture professor hired to advise/organize the emerging university in Sapporo (he famously advised: "Boys Be Ambitious"). After some more walking, I bought a few snacks (yogurt, rice crackers, fruit juice) at the co-op and then headed back to the hotel around 5. I ended up renting a laptop for \$10 overnight (mostly because I am the lead author on a pending publication for which we are awaiting galley proofs) but was more dismayed to learn that what had been a gorgeous forecast the next few days (sunny, 70's) was now poor and rainy.



Left to Right: Clark bust , Furukawa Hall, Science Building/Museum - dinosaurs, moulage/wax skin disease room

As recorded in my journal: "shitty night of sleep" (waking multiple times, wide awake 2 straight hours around 3). That is was rainy and cloudy outside did nothing for my mood. By around 7:30, I decided it was time to eat breakfast and commit to caffeine (something I rarely do) to wake up and hopefully reset my clock. The Keio buffet was ALMOST worth the exorbitant room cost; I enjoyed 2 platefuls of western fare, including pulling a Rick Steves by stealing 4 phenomenal rolls for the rest of my afternoon. Heading to the university around 9 under my umbrella, I was surprised to find the museum closed until 10 and thus walked around some so-so garden areas, causing me to wonder whether the highly-rated official Hokkaido University Botanical Garden (on the docket for the afternoon) was as good as folks said. I spent about an hour in the museum after it opened. The main floor was devoted to university history, current research projects, and the Nobel Prize winning work of organic chemist Akira Suzuki. The second floor had exhibits and collections related to the various fields of study, including a dinosaur room that was not too shabby. The third floor was the "weird archive floor" and featured my favorite room: the moulage/wax modeling of skin diseases, including microbial smallpox, leprosy, and herpes. After touring the facilities, I bought some flower guidebooks and ate a VERY farmy and grainy soft serve vanilla ice cream cone (believably said to be made on site from their dairy cows) that chilled me despite the otherwise warm muggy air. Drenched in sweat and drizzle, I

headed back to my hotel to clean up, eat my lunch booty, and take a short nap. By 1:30, the skies were lighter and so I headed next door to the official Botanical Garden.



Left to Right: (top) Botanical Garden path, lady slipper with vending machines, edelweiss, "Japanese Garden," HUGE bluebells! (bottom) impressive marsh boardwalk areas, dogwood, 1888-era Former Government Building with Japanese tourist selfie in situ

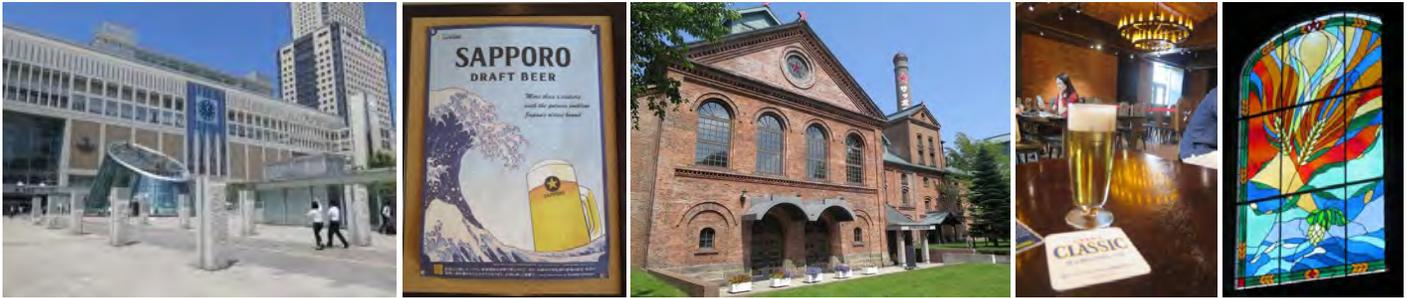
Somehow, I missed the line about the gardens costing \$4 – but that was OK because they were some of the best I have ever visited. Highlights were the flowering plant exhibit that included Reibun-famous Japanese Leontopodium (edelweiss or usuyukiso) and Cypripedium (lady slipper orchids), the dogwood-lined pathways, and the lush marsh walk-thru boardwalks. There was also a TINY Ainu Museum on the premises (no good photos... plus Ellen and I later visited a larger/better Ainu Museum in Akan). From the museum, I could see the brick 1888-era Former Government Building – and devised a walking tour there and then back to my hotel. A block-long array of food venders was selling things I was too afraid to try – amidst crowds of Japanese tourists with selfie-sticks. After another hotel cleanup, I headed to the nearest university cafeteria (Clark Memorial Student Center) for plain udon and Orangina. Afterwards, it was outright sunny – so I soaked up some rays for 20 minutes. As noted in an email to Bryan (because the university runs a summer institute for visiting faculty that has always intrigued me a little): it occurred to me watching the professors walking home that (a) nearly all were men; and (b) all wore suits, something I won't do. I then made my mandatory co-op stop for yogurt, drinks, and Pringles, which I ate in the bathtub after returning to the hotel.



Left to Right: Odori Park – end to end – gardens, slides, flower set-up, fountain, TV tower/views, corncob cart

The next day was my last full day in Sapporo and, thankfully, the forecast was great. Given bus-ride impressions, I focused my morning energy on walking Odori Park (GREAT!) – and then I aimed to venture far afield to the well-rated Sapporo Brewery and Beer Garden (SUCKED!). Odori was about 6 blocks away, and I hit the 12-block park at the 8+4 position (i.e. 4 blocks to the rose garden, 8

blocks to the TV tower). Here, a crew was setting up a block devoted to tomorrow's Belgian Beer Weekend. Much of the rest of the park (also the sight of the Sapporo ice festival) was devoted to a MASSIVE flower festival, the likes of which I have never seen. But first I walked to the rose garden area where the people watching was GREAT: a bunch of older people, some with sketchbooks drawing the flowers, some young Japanese women taking pictures in big Victorian dresses, and many grade-specific flocks of kids (all in matching uniforms) with their teachers/care-takers (all in interesting aprons or smocks). The funniest were the toddlers who were carted around in giant wagons. Down the next block, there was a big wide slide like the one at Ellen's school in the Netherlands; watching the elementary school aged kids go down that was very funny. Later, there was a big fountain (which reminded me of Seattle Center in the 1970's) and the kids were clapping each time the fountain burst. It was here that I saw my first Hokkaido corn cob cart and eventually bought and ate my effective lunch (supplemented with stolen breakfast rolls). By this point, I had made up my mind to go up the TV tower - \$7 and TOTALLY worth it. Shockingly, there was no line and hardly any tourists... just another pack of children. The views from the top looking down to the park were highly impressive; I also noted that even though it was very sunny/clear here that Mt. Moiwa, which also offers a commanding view of the city, was totally in the clouds. Moiwa had been plan B (it would have involved a cab or bus-ride, followed by a gondola ride up). So I think I made the correct decision.



Left to Right: confusing train/bus station, Sapporo Beer Museum... no Beer Garden shots (the place was dead!)

Following my corn cob lunch, I was ready to go back to the hotel, floss my teeth, change my clothes, dry out, rest up... and then head out for the Sapporo Beer Museum and Beer Garden (23 blocks east of my hotel). Having already walked about 25 blocks, I earnestly tried to find the Lonely Planet-recommended bus at the block-away train/bus station... but, alas, it was too confusing and nutty. So I walked, and walked, and walked, and walked. I saw more of "real" Japan on this walk – grittier, unkempt sidewalks, lower wage dwellings... but nothing unsafe. Although my map-reading tends to be good, I overshot the beer facilities by one block and then had to backtrack because there were few legal crossing areas on the final busy/wide street. When I finally arrived, it was pretty dead. Uninterested in a formal tour (because there were none in English), I did the "free/on-your-own" walk. Amusingly, I ran into the same 2 American tourist parties I saw at Odori earlier (a young couple self-guiding, and an older couple with a Japanese guide). The walking tour was boring: reading a bunch of stuff and looking at old pictures. There was no functional brewery and the museum gift shop sucked. I then attempted to walk over to the beer garden... but virtually every venue was closed. Thoroughly unimpressed, I returned to the museum and enjoyed a Sapporo Classic (for \$2) in the dark bar. Cranky, I spent \$10 on a cab ride home; the car was a vintage white Mercedes with blue velvet seats, lacy doilies on everything, and the driver wore white gloves. Apparently, this is a thing. I also decided to rent the hotel laptop again so I could communicate with Ellen as she arrived; she was flying into Chitose via Frankfurt and Osaka (arriving around 5:30), renting our car, and then driving into Sapporo. After learning she was having trouble with the rental car, I decided to do a quick dinner at the university cafeteria. Unfortunately, I picked something more adventuresome tonight (udon WITH tempura chicken) and wound up with tuna flakes; anything fishy makes me physically gag, even after I seemingly pulled the flakes off. Fortunately, I also got some great pork gyoza dumplings and a big mango jello-like dessert. Ellen arrived around 8 and, given that I'd already eaten, she made her way on foot to a convenience store a block away. We agreed to hit the road at 10 tomorrow.

June 24-26: Garden Path and the Obihiro Farmln Cabin

For the next 3 nights, we stayed in Obihiro – not a seemingly big tourist destination (YET!), BUT the epicenter of Garden Path destinations. But our first goal of the day was the Farm Tomita (not officially on the Garden Path, but famous for lavender fields... and what looked to be delicious food!) a couple hours away in Furano. After a long breakfast, we hit the road around 10:15 – in light rain and under cloudy skies. I would describe our drive as follows: a third in cities or towns (e.g. Sapporo/outskirts and Furano), a third on fast/efficient toll expressways with clean pavement through countryside, and a third on rough-ish mountain roads (not toll) that were very curvy, potholed, and showed the damage of Hokkaido's harsh winters. Expect to spend \$10-20 per long traveling day (if not more) on driving Hokkaido's many toll expressways. We arrived at Tomita at 1:30 – definitely hungry. Of course, the first thing we did was down some lavender soft serve ice cream cones (the BEST ice cream we enjoyed on this trip!), and then we wandered the gardens. Even though the lavender wasn't quite ready (it would be better when we returned at the end of this trip), there were lots of people visiting... and the farm did a good job planting other colorful alternative flowers.





Left to Right: (top) leaving Sapporo, Farm Tomita, lavender and ice cream, crazy-\$\$\$ cantaloupe; (bottom) asparagus and corn croquette lunch, famous pink car with mountains en route to Obihiro, working the fields, sunset near farm cabin

After visiting the grounds, we turned our attention to MORE FOOD. Ellen ordered a potato croquette with brown curry over rice and I ordered a cream corn croquette with super-fresh asparagus (albeit: 3 asparagus for \$3). And after that, we found the melon-o-rama stand: you could buy boxed cantaloupe for \$20 per melon, a 1/12 wedge of cantaloupe for \$3, or cantaloupe soft serve. Ellen went with the wedge and I got more ice cream. We then waddled up the hill to look at the higher lavender fields and enjoy the view of the mountains; at the time, Ellen thought they were Daisetsuzan National Park and Asahidake (which we'd visit/climb later) but we later learned they were the adjacent Yubari range (which includes Mount Ashibetsu). At 3:30, we decided it was time to be on our way. Our farm cabin was over 2 hours away and we were planning to visit one more garden (Windy Garden or Kaze-No) en route. Said plans, however, were foiled... the gardens consumed by some HUGE horrible hotel chain (the fact that said gardens were featured on some popular TV show may be to blame). And so we headed to Obihiro, driving mostly through farmlands and run-down villages (we stopped for snacks at one decent grocery) and over a couple low passes (larger mountains visible much of the drive to the west).

About the Obihiro Farmln – The Toyama Family Farm

I was extremely proud to have found was the Guesthouse Route 55 Farmln cabin run by the amazing Toyama Family, a multigenerational farm since 1917. The on-site Toyamas included grandpa, mom, three sons (all in their 20's or 30's) – one married to a delightful wife, another prepared amazing breakfasts. A fourth son lived in Sapporo. Some of the Toyamas spoke a little English (with Ellen translating as needed) and we truly enjoyed our extended breakfast conversations with this personable and down-to-earth family. The Toyamas' focus was beans but they also grew other kinds of produce – most impressive was the greenhouse filled with the BEST lettuce I have ever eaten. In general, meals with raw lettuce seemed a surprising rarity in Japan; a couple of the Toyama brothers were dieting and literally ate these HUGE mixing bowls of salads for breakfast, which we devoured as well. Indeed, the Toyama breakfasts were some of the best food on this trip – amazing because we were only paying \$40 a night for the cabin and breakfast (included if you were willing to get up early). The Toyamas built a one-room cabin guesthouse (sort of like a mobile home trailer). The cabin did not have a toilet, meaning we walked outside, crossed the property, entered the family home, and worked around bathing schedules. I personally viewed it as fancy camping. If this had been any other comparable place, it would have been \$80 (or MORE) per person a night. It will be interesting to see if the Toyamas expand their accommodations into a bigger farm destination with breakfast AND dinner (which would be great given that the cabin is 30 minutes outside Obihiro) – and charge accordingly. My advice: go there now before you can't experience it the way we did.



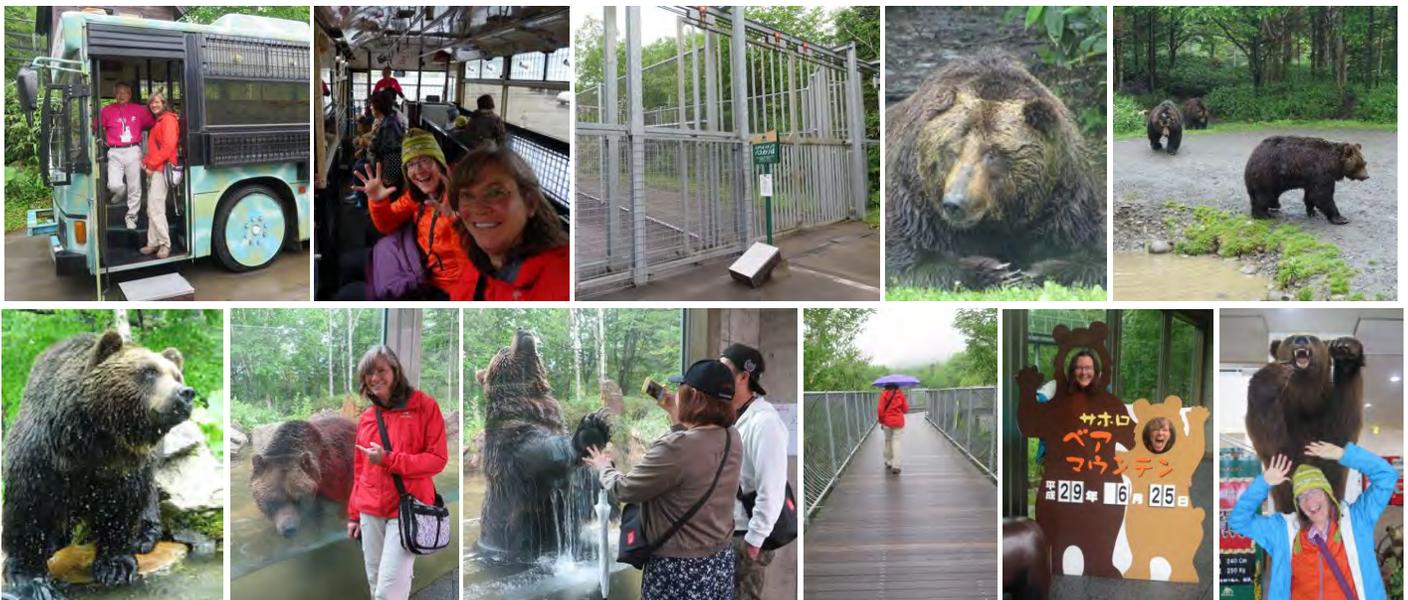
Left to Right: Toyama facilities – cabin outside, inside; main house with solar), kitchen, bathroom, the BEST lettuce!

Our one error during the drive was that we did not check email because the Toyamas had suggested we stop in Obihiro (which we'd hit first) for dinner. Instead, we arrived at the cabin at 6:30 and hungry Ellen was not happy about driving back to town – now in the dark. Indeed, Hokkaido lies at the same latitude as Oregon but it does not use daylight savings - meaning light at 3 a.m. and dark at 6:30 p.m. Before leaving again, we discussed tomorrow: breakfast could be delayed until 7 a.m. (normally it was 6:30), bathing was best done after breakfast (the family bathed in the evenings after working all day), and – full disclosure – tomorrow was a big day for mixing manure into the fermenting compost mound behind the cabin. After all this exciting news, we unpacked and made the dark drive back to the recommended dining location: at a downtown yatai (a few dozen food stalls that each seated 8-20). While it was amazing to walk through the lively alleyways, there were few available seats – and, as Ellen noted, LOTS of smoking. Who knew Obihiro was such a happening town? We eventually ended up at a ramen shop that flanked one of the yatai alleyways. Real ramen (mine was pork in soy broth) is SUPER heavy... but the gyoza were spectacular. Unfortunately, the night ended stressfully when Ellen could not find her wallet, concerned it fell out of her purse when she pulled out her camera to photograph the yatai. After agreeing that maybe it was in the cabin, there was another panic moment when it wasn't there either... but then we found it in the car after a more careful inspection.



Left to Right: Obihiro yatai, ramen shop, morning view of cabin – note tractor in the back moving manure, manure pile

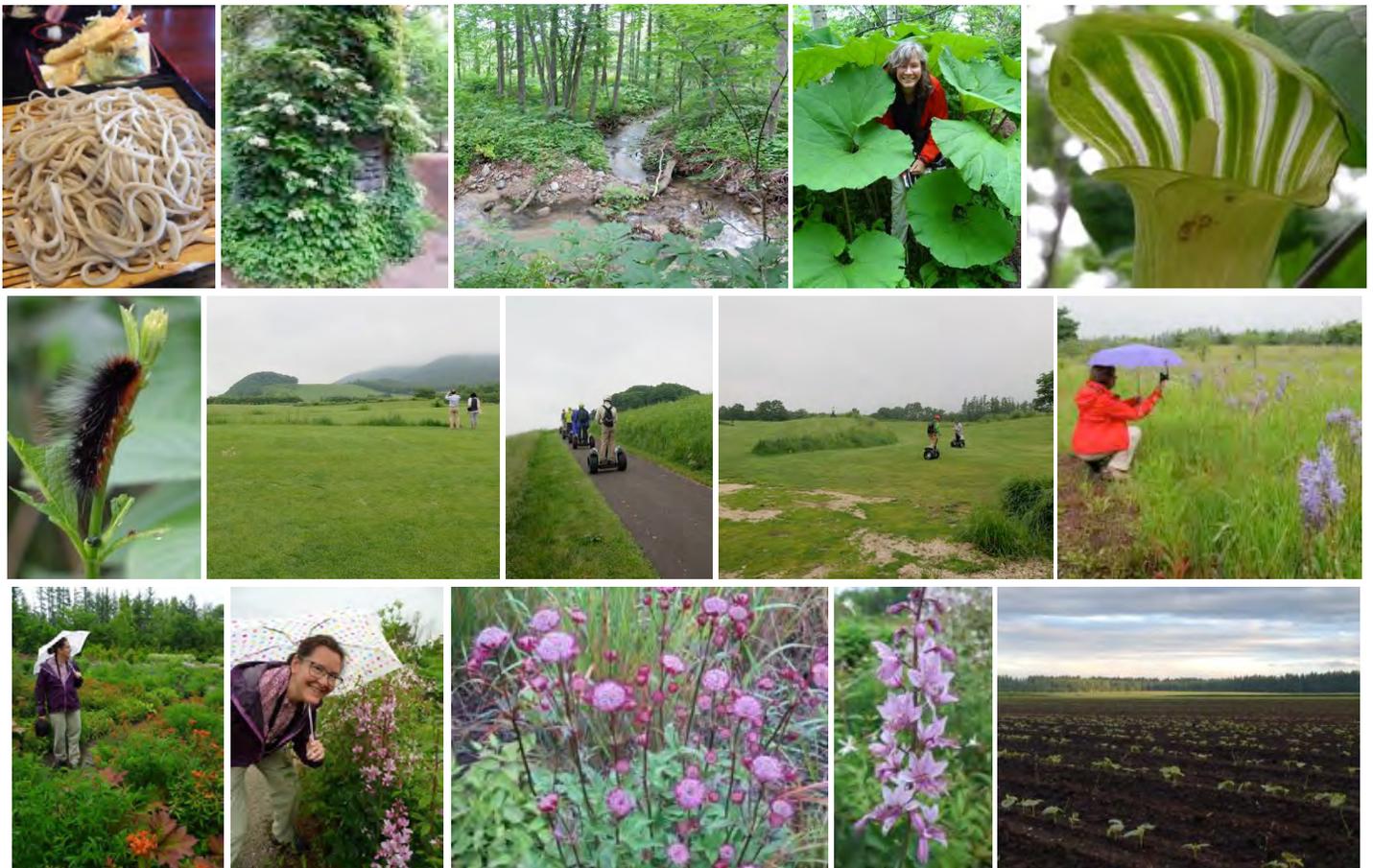
The next morning, we were up at 7 to an AMAZING breakfast of eggs Benedict (alas, no pictures): Hollandaise and English-style muffins made from scratch... a huge tray of fresh asparagus and bottomless salad bowls. After breakfast, Ellen and I took turns showering – before visiting the manure-mixing operation (NONE smelled – honestly!): they were mixing fungus, manure, and ash into the compost heap using all kinds of large equipment, including a truck-wide auger. Our plans for the day were to visit Bear Mountain and the Tokachi Sennen-no Mori (Tokachi Millennium Forest) Garden Path site. Although it wasn't raining when we left the cabin, it poured during the final 15 minutes of the climb to Bear Mountain, a big fenced-in lot adjacent to a ski resort. Bear Mountain is more like a zoo than a nature reserve. Most of the 12 male bears were born in captivity for the purpose of exhibition, and all of the bears are fed to attract them during/for tourist viewing. The choices for viewing them are to either pay about \$10 to tour the skywalk, or to pay about \$25 to take the armored bus “Jurassic Park” style to the center of the compound and then return via the skywalk. Needless to say, we chose the armored bus – Ellen skeptical we'd see anything. Given the rain, there were few people visiting today. As in Jurassic Park, you drove through these double-gate chambers before entering the bear compound. Almost immediately, giant bears appeared. Although cool, it occurred to us over time that landrover-type vehicles preceded us, throwing food pellets to bring the bears out as the bus rounded different corners. But my goal of seeing a live Hokkaido grizzly bear (a.k.a. Higuma) was totally fulfilled.



Left to Right: (top) armored bus, double-gate entrances, bears along the drive; (bottom) upper visitor center star bear... bear hijinks!

After 25 minutes (and ~8 bears), we were dropped off at the upper viewing center, which featured a big pond that you could view through glass (above and under water). Here, their cutest bear played with balls and roughhoused when another bear showed up. After 45 minutes watching the bears, we returned via the skywalk – not nearly as exciting in terms of seeing bears. After a pass

through the gift shop (hiking bear bells and several bear-cantaloupe fusion charms), we were ready to return to a good-looking soba shop we'd passed on the way up. Although they did make their own soba (in a fishbowl prep room), all that was going on when we ate lunch was dough mixing. I enjoyed cold soba with tempura and Ellen mostly enjoyed cold soba with slightly undercooked burdock root. Following lunch, we visited the Tokachi Sennen-no Mori (Tokachi Millennium Forest, TMF) – purchasing a ticket that covered 3 Garden Path sites (saving us about \$10 each over today and tomorrow). Of all the Garden Path sites we visited, TMF was the largest – and we definitely needed to do some walking... even if it was raining lightly. TMF, like most Garden Path sites, was highly engineered, offering creekside forest walks as well as manicured garden plots (Japanese and English style) as well as this big sculpted meadow with a climb up a scenic hill. The funniest thing, though, was the fat-tire Segway instruction and touring (about \$80 per person). So - yes, we were passed by a hilarious group of Japanese tourists on Segways zigzagging through the sculpted meadow. TMF's obligatory rest area/gift shop sold a variety of local cheese (cow and goat), none of which we bought/tried. Given how long yesterday felt, we wrapped up the day around 5:30 and headed back to the cabin. Then Ellen – who thought she had planned sufficient time for dinner and an onsen back in Obihiro – discovered she had left one of her laptop power cable converters in Sapporo. Uninterested in another hectic night out, I remained at the cabin – content to eat my stash of bread, apples, peanut butter, and yogurt. Meanwhile, Ellen left cranky (again) just as the sun disappeared; adding insult to injury, an epic rainstorm began within 10 minutes. Although my evening journaling was good, it was not trouble-free: the cabin's solar power converter broke, causing some screeching alarm to sound – which meant I had to negotiate an all-English request for assistance. The problem was solved by running extension cords down the cabin length and out the door to some alternative power source. Ellen returned around 10:30, having readily found a new power cable converter at the Obihiro mall – and a prepared meal from the nearby supermarket. Indeed, she was in much better spirits!



Left to Right: (top) soba, TMF – climbing hydrangea, creekside walk, giant leaves, Jack in the Pulpit; (middle), crazy caterpillars, meadow and climb with Segways; (bottom) manicured gardens in the rain... last shot – Toyama beans!

The next morning, we were up at 6:30 – having assumed that the Toyamas only gave us a break yesterday. In fact, they thought we wanted breakfast at 7 today as well. Today's breakfast was Japanese and I was 80% successful: egg custard (great), grilled prawn with asparagus (great), rice/beans with natto (not as bad as they say – but I only ate 80%), seaweed gelatin noodles (pretty good), pickled bean sprouts (pretty good), sausage (good) and tuna (gagged)... and the usual salad and yogurt sides. Our plans for the day were to visit the following Garden Path sites: (1) Rokka no Mori; (2) Shichiku Gardens; and (3) Tokachi Hills. Although we drove the least amount of time today, there were a fair number of GPS/navigational errors that we had to solve, mostly because the last typhoon season devastated several small highways and bridges. Although we had wanted to eat a famous local dish called Genghis Kahn BBQ at a recommended Obihiro restaurant, we learned today that MOST restaurants are closed Mondays. Thankfully – according to the websites – Garden Path facilities were open as this was high season. Our first site, Rokka no Mori, was half engineered garden (similar to TMF, but smaller) and half art installation (both outdoor modern sculptures, including a Rodin, and indoor studios – most with rotating art). The two permanent collections were a series of floral magazine covers (the journal published children's poetry) and the work of Sakamoto, a mountain and flower painter. Many of his subjects were from Mount Ashibetsu, which we had seen above Furano a few

days ago. After returning home and re-reading the Garden Path website, there is a reference to Sakamoto designing the Rokkatei confection company symbol... which is interesting because Rokka no Mori sold many fancy confections and I definitely enjoyed their flavored shortbread sandwich cookies – and everything else in their spectacular gift shop!



Left to Right: Toyama Japanese breakfast, RnM – creek, Rodin hill, art, Ellen & knotweed, Sakamoto's Mt. Ashibetsu

Our second stop, Shichiku Gardens, was founded by now-90-year-old Akiyo Shichiku when she was 63, following the death of her husband. Her colorful garden is English style, with long grass walkways and lots of seating. It reminded Ellen and I of our grandmother's (Besta) garden – busy, homey, charming. There was also a nursery selling plants, and a tearoom style café/bakery. The gardens are pet-friendly, and it was the first place I saw Japanese people with dogs (pushing them in a stroller) a beloved resident cat, and cartoonish squirrels. After a sunny and hot walk through the grounds, we were eyeballing the bakery when, lo and behold, Akiyo Shichiku herself strolled by. Even though I was the one who had first seen her on TV, Ellen will tell you that SHE was the one who ID'd Akiyo. That Akiyo is 4' 6" (if that) could be why I missed her – although she was wearing her classic floral outfit. After chatting with Ellen in Japanese and taking a picture, Akiyo invited us to join her as she took a Chinese tourist on a longer walk through the back vegetable gardens where she was going to do some gardening. Refusing all assistance, she pushed a big cart with supplies over the grounds, picked radishes and cucumbers for us to eat, and then shooed us away because it was time for her to get some work done.



Left to Right: (top) Shichiku entrance, walkways, hilarious squirrels, Besta's irises, Akiyo and I; (bottom) Akiyo and Ellen, gardening, radishes, main sign of Akiyo and I

By now, it was around 2 and we were REALLY hungry; unfortunately, we bypassed food here because we were under the impression that Tokachi Hills was going to be similar to Farm Tomita in terms of plentiful eating options. Alas, however, Tokachi was a MAJOR letdown after our brush with celebrity... and a general feeling of garden overload. Driving 45 minutes up onto this scenic plateau, we enjoyed some distant views of snow-covered mountains before entering the garden proper. With food on the brain, we reviewed what seemed to be four eating options (advertised on a board in the parking lot). Choosing a good-looking buffet, we headed to the target building but it was CLOSED. Our only option was a small cafeteria... MOST menu items SOLD OUT. Ironically, we ordered Japanese spaghetti (which Ellen said is just noodles in ketchup) BUT it didn't suck! The chef did use ketchup – but added enough flavorings to make it palatable. I also got some red bean soft serve but it was a little gritty and could have been sweeter. After lunch, we walked around for maybe an hour. The only novel things Tokachi featured were extensive Monet-style ponds, fields of peonies, and the farm/petting zoo area (the rabbits and goats did not seem interested if you didn't have food). There were also these fascinating pens with hairy boar-like pigs. Our final stop was the gift shop, which featured smoked hairy pig bacon, a gardening center with gardening tools/art, and LOTS of local agricultural products (including Toyama beans and the biggest selection of "sweet beans" we saw on this trip). Indeed, sweet beans were one of my favorite foods – Ellen commenting that sweet beans were one of the first Japanese foods she enjoyed as an exchange student in her 20's. Of course, to me they were like American pork and beans... but they were fresher,

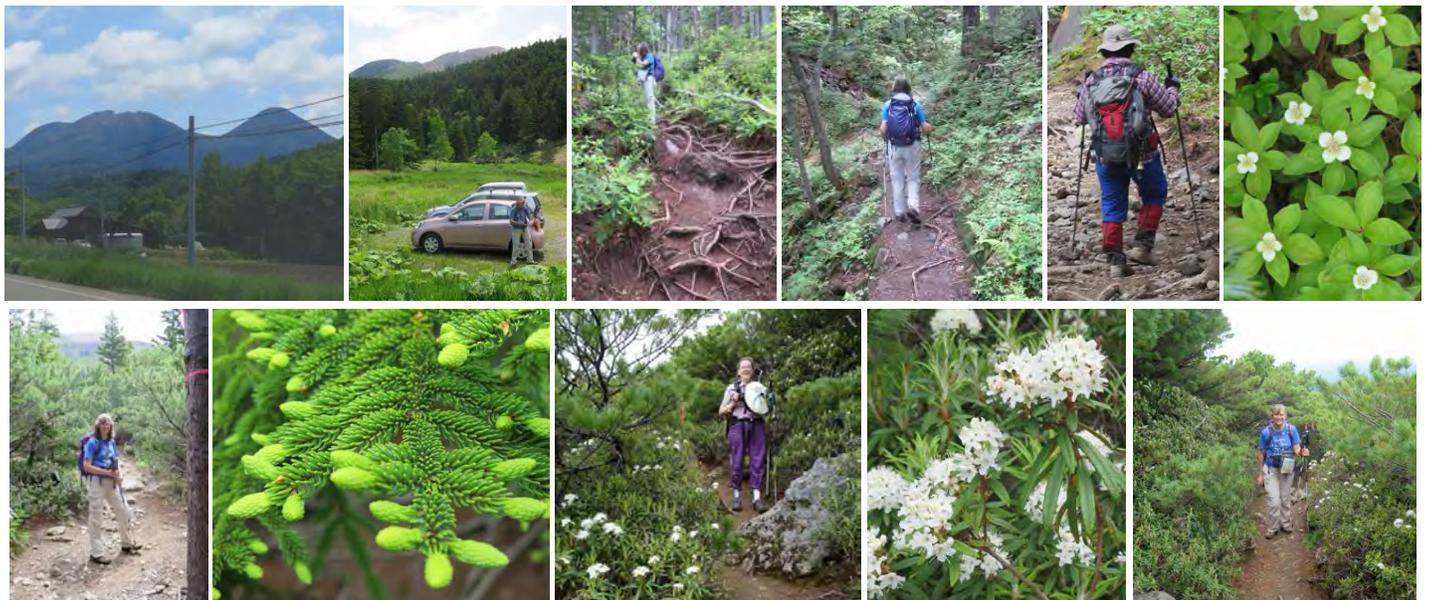
there was more bean variety, and the syrup was less BBQ and more straight sugar. Ironically, the best were sold at 7-11 (yes, the convenience store). And speaking of convenience: Ellen convinced me to do a grocery store dinner at Obihiro on our way back, but I was not as impressed (or adventuresome) as her. I ate veggie gyoza, yogurt, fruit, and a delicious French-style bakery pastry.



Left to Right: Tokachi Hills – hill views, Japanese spaghetti, Monet-style pond/garden, petting zoo, hairy pork and sweet beans

June 27-29: Akan Confusion, Shiretoko Good Fortune, The Lesser Akan

Knowing we were leaving to climb my first Japanese mountain today (Meakan), the Toyamas sent us off with breakfast at 6:30, including another big American style meal (ham and egg sandwiches... and lots of salad!). It was hard to say goodbye because we knew what a special experience staying with them had been. Meakan (and its neighbor Oakan) are both large volcanoes that tower over Lake Akan, in what I would call “upper Akan National Park” (to be distinguished from “lower Akan National Park” – over an hour away via a very curving mountain road). Given that Ellen (and Bruno) thoroughly enjoyed Meakan on their 2013 trip AND our forecast was good, I was looking forward to this climb – although I was apprehensive because it would be the hardest thing I’d done since my fracture (6 miles, 2700 up/down). It took 2 hours to drive to Meakan onsen, which Ellen thought was the way they had approached it (and which the Lonely Planet hiking guide recommended). My interpretation of the map, though, was that this was the shorter and steeper of the two options... the other coming up from Lake Onneto. Eventually (as in – near the summit), Ellen realized that she and Bruno had actually done the traverse (Onneto to Meakan onsen) and their favorite part was the section from Onneto to this high plain below the summit – none of which we got to do. Indeed, Ellen will tell you I was a cranky hiker on much of this steep and rocky trail.



Left to Right: (top) Meakan & Oakan from road, trailhead with Meakan, rooty trail, good trail, my hiking hero, bunchberry/mini-dogwood; (bottom) Ellen at start of shrub tunnel, new growth, me and my plants, mountain azalea, Ellen along trail

For being one of the most popular hikes in the area, the trailhead/area was quite nondescript; the adjacent hot spring facilities also seemed run-down and too quiet. Thankfully (given that we were officially in grizzly/higuma country), there were other cars at the parking area and the climbing registry/log had 14 people ahead of us (!). Given that I’d seen a couple YouTube videos about climbing Meakan, I was fully expecting part one (representing the first 3 stations – of 10 - to the summit): a forest trail of roots, roots, roots and, given recent weather, MUD. My journal notes: “the worst root/steep forest I’ve seen in years.” I would rate only half of this section as “civil” although the familiar plants (like bunchberries) were nice to see. In 45 minutes, we entered part two (representing stations 4-7): the shrub tunnel, interspersed with pretty mountain azalea and a LOT of scrambling on loose or high-step rocks (50% “civil”). Although we could sort of see out, the trail was definitely cut out of the pines – meaning you had to crouch or push your way through foliage at times. About halfway up this section, we crossed a rocky ravine – dropping 20 vertical feet and then scrambling back up on loose rock. Here, we enjoyed our first views down to very blue-green Lake Onneto (possibly because of the famous marimo algae balls that grow here). After this point, the way became significantly steeper and rockier and I could tell that my right knee was NOT liking all the twisting and high stepping (the jury was still out on my foot). After a short flattish reprieve around station 8 (which reminded me of

Cooper Spur on Mt. Hood), we proceeded straight up this crazy rocky mess that reminded me of upper Aasgard Pass. At the time, we were passed by this large group of young men wearing orange jumpsuits – firemen/rescue unit on a practice and stay-in-shape outing. Also at the time, the sky turned quickly from blue and warm to white and these massive wet, cold marine clouds blew over, regularly enveloping the upper 500 feet of the mountain.



Left to Right: (top) typical upper trail, fireman and the “Aasgard Pass” section, final climb along crater; (bottom) brief view of crater (Ellen’s scenic plain visible on left), on the summit, views over other more lower craters and Lake Akan in the distance

At the top of this steep climb, we reached the crater rim (station 9) but still had to walk about 15 more minutes to the summit, a series of ropes meant to keep you from falling in. This was when Ellen looked across the crater and realized that we were not on the right side of the mountain in terms of the scenic plain (and better views of the crater and neighboring Oakan) that she so enjoyed last time. By this point, though, it was cold and windy and nothing about the climb was particularly amusing to me; the clouds were so frequent that I barely acknowledged that we were near a crater. In contrast with other parties who didn’t spend much time on the summit, we donned all our warm gear and I even set up my lightweight “easy-chair” so I could properly put my feet up and enjoy lunch... while trying not to think about piecing my way down this volcano-bastard on a now-lame knee and an unknown foot. Thankfully, I had saved a second French-style pastry for the top (Mmmm Mmmm)... and a couple times the clouds relented, revealing all kinds of volcanic stuff before us, Lake Akan in the distance. It had taken us just over 2 hours to summit (in line with Lonely Planet’s assessment for this approach) and it would take us the same amount of time to descend – largely because my ITB was definitely achy (so I had to stretch frequently) and I rested my foot every 30-45 minutes given that that was the most pressure on the old fracture (I’d been doing that all year while ramping up hiking). While the overall descent was less hideous than I had been expecting (thank god for my new lightweight, fixed-length hiking poles) and my foot survived, my knee would be messed up for a week, causing me to have to baby that along.



Left to Right: cold and socked in most of the way down, Lake Onneto, begging fox, Akan-mmodations (the next morning)

Under the impression our inn was closer to nearby Lake Akan, we visited tiny Lake Onneto to see the campground where Ellen and Bruno stayed (and the trailhead we should have used). The place seemed dead other than a begging red fox. We then began driving to our inn - but our navigator sent us past Akan’s towering hotels and mega-Ainu Village facilities... and we found ourselves driving this LONG winding mountain road, descending to a lower basin with all kinds of other lakes set beneath bumpy old volcano cones long covered in green. While Ellen seemed fascinated with the terrain, I was concerned that I had majorly fucked something up in my planning. Mostly, though, we were HUNGRY – and glad to have a restaurant on site, even if it was overpriced and seemed to pride itself on so-so western fare (I had grilled garlic chicken breast, onion soup, asparagus salad, and a ratatouille-like side; Ellen had some kind of scrambled egg on rice dish). We were also glad to have our own bathroom adjoining a spacious tatami room with on-floor futon. Ellen was MOST pleased that the inn had a mini-onsen on site (she got to enjoy that all by herself). The most promising news, though,

was that we HAD NOT missed Genghis Kahn BBQ because our inn, with a day's warning, would do it... and so we made sure to set up said reservations for tomorrow night (did I mention that we were HUNGRY)!

The next morning, we paid \$16 each for a very small inn breakfast (1 egg, 1 sausage, a little fruit, and 3 small rolls with jam) – causing us to question whether the Genghis Kahn BBQ was going to be worth its steep price (3X breakfast). Done and ready by 9, we headed for famously gloomy Shiretoko peninsula under cloudy skies and expecting very little. Yesterday, we had discovered that our planned hike of Shiretoko National Park's Five Lakes requires a guide this time of year because of bear activity – leaving us scrambling a little to secure spots around noon (at \$50 a head, much to Ellen's chagrin). Shiretoko represents some of the most pristine land in Japan (and Hokkaido's only UNESCO-World Heritage site). Lying between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific, the weather there is SUPER-bad. Ellen and Bruno considered this area in 2013 but, between the weather, bears, and remoteness, it was too intimidating. Harder things one can hike here include a multi-day traverse of the dragon-like backbone peaks (some with impressive high thermal areas), or a climb up Rausu, the highest peak on the peninsula (notably by the one peninsula-traversing highway).



Left to Right: Oshin-Koshin Falls, Five Lakes diorama-map, more bear hijinks, setting out, higuma scratchings (under grape vines)

Today, Ellen and I made a leisurely drive – stopping in the large town of Shari to pick up convenience store lunch items and then visiting an adjacent home center where I bought some irresistibly cheap Japanese gardening clothing. We then began driving along the peninsula proper, the Sea of Okhotsk to our left placid under clearing skies. We stopped at FREE (and not too busy) Oshin-Koshin waterfall and then continued on to Utoro, the last outpost before the park (famous for shitloads of seafood and boat-based sightseeing tours along the wild coastline). Arriving at the end of the road/national park entrance around noon, we ate lunch in the car and then checked in at the modest visitor center/ranger station. I had to make a short detour to the gift shop to purchase a human waste bag, should I not be able to hold it for 3 hours (keeping in mind that the course was MAYBE 3 miles). We were only allowed a bottle of water (NO food or other scented items) – and encouraged to wear boots for the mud (Ellen and I went overkill in tall gaiters).



Left to Right: (top) first lake, Indian Pipe, reflection, third lake; (bottom) marsh, island, boardwalk - dragon-back, Sea of Okhotsk

After a short safety presentation, we entered the gated area. We were the only 2 non-Japanese in our group of 9, all others on an organized cruise side-trip. Although the guide spoke some English, the tour was in Japanese; I asked Ellen to translate things that she thought were super-important. I think she learned that her nature/flora/fauna vocabulary was more limited than she thought - but I didn't feel like I missed anything. For all bear whoopla (there were, in fact, 3 sightings that day elsewhere in the park – including a mother/cubs), I thought the guide was very casual... he even somehow missed the obvious Indian Pipe by the first lake – which I pointed out to the group. Although I liked our guide, I sensed he had a very set program and the fact that our group was sociable and asked a lot of questions messed him up a bit. The most interesting thing on his program was this tree with many impressive bear scratches; upon further inspection, you can see all these wild grape vines higher up; hence, Shiretoko bears forage wild grapes -

sometimes fermented. Our calm-weather day meant there were amazing reflections in the lakes – made more beautiful because as we walked the cloud deck kept rising, ultimately yielding blue skies all around. Even Ellen was impressed and glad she did this tour. At the end of the tour, we exited by way of another gate and climbed onto this elevated walkway open to everyone. In contrast with the forested lake walk, this area was all open (the ground covered with this 1-2 foot tall bamboo-like “grass”) – meaning GREAT views of the dragon-like backbone peaks (including Rausu) and the Sea of Okhotsk. I asked the guide if this was a natural “prairie” but he said no – all the open areas along this section had been cleared by farmers/ranchers before the park existed. Indeed, back at the visitor center, Ellen and I read about ALL the efforts Japan had taken to clean this area up over the last few decades; even after the farm/ranch removal, the early park was so mismanaged in terms of too many people doing all kinds of stupid things with bears that today’s system was installed (strangely – the Lonely Planet refers to this as a “bureaucratic quagmire,” which I disagree with entirely).



Left to Right: Genghis Kahn BBQ – AWESOME! Ellen isn’t shy with her meat. Time to get that cholesterol checked.

Given that our tour ended a little after 3:30, we were feeling pressed for time (our BBQ time was 6:30). It was super-tempting to drive up to Rausu Pass (about 10 miles up from the seaside highway) – but we decided to stick to visiting a nature center and waterfall along the highway that we’d skipped. Unfortunately, we didn’t understand that this waterfall required a 45-minute walk – which was also currently closed because of the aforementioned mother/cub sighting. And so we started driving back in earnest – only to discover that one of our tires was dangerously low during our exciting gas station stop in Shari. The 5 well-dressed gas station attendants who enthusiastically swarmed our car began removing the tire to check for holes (as Ellen called our inn to let them know we might be a little late). In the end, they didn’t find any holes and just inflated the existing tire, recommending we check the tires more often. In the end, we arrived back at 6:15 and still had time to shower – having delayed the BBQ by only 15 minutes. I will almost let the photos speak for themselves; things to know: they put us in our own private outdoor cabin (because of the smoke we generated), the meat was lamb and pork – accompanied by a couple different dipping sauces (yuzu-based was the best), lots of vegetables... and there was pickle salad and rice. Howsoever amazing this meal was, it was – believe it or not – partially upstaged a few days later when our next farmstay did backyard Genghis Kahn in the barn during a rainstorm.



Left to Right: looking down on Kussharo Lake from Bihoro Pass (later that day), Ainu bear cage, design, yes – we will dress up...

Since our inn was not where we thought it was going to be (i.e. by Lake Akan) and we did not want to backtrack (because that was in the opposite direction from tonight’s second farmstay), we made the best with what we were close to: Kusshuro Lake, Iozan Volcano, and Masho Lake. It was not an easy decision because I wanted to see the mega-Ainu complex (village, museums, live song/dance performances)... but driving so much was clearly wearing Ellen out. After an in-room grocery store breakfast, we set off for the smaller, cheaper, and more subdued Ainu Folklore Museum at the southern end of Kussharo Lake (near the scenic outdoor onsen, which we regretted not soaking in at the time). All sources recommended watching the museum video first, which we did – and appreciated. The museum was circular and took me 30 minutes to cover. I was impressed with how many Ainu Villages (koton) there had been around this lake and its downstream river/marshlands (which we had considered visiting/canoeing). Given the opportunity to dress up in Ainu clothing, Ellen and I did our thing and posed for pictures in front of the lake. As there was no museum gift shop (I was interested in Ainu-style woodcarvings of bears and owls), the staff sent us down the block, next to this (IMO) ugly hotel that Lonely Planet raved about in terms of all things Ainu. In general, almost everything along the shores of Kussharo Lake seemed eerily dead and old (some places felt like things that were built/popular in the 1970’s but were now in an economic crash-hole). Next, we visited Iozan (“Sulfur Mountain”) which, although part of Akan National Park, isn’t even mentioned in Lonely Planet. We had seen Iozan from the road yesterday; it was located between Kussharo and Masho. Iozan was a giant solfatera, although there were a couple spots with bubbling water (in general, I was surprised to find no geysers on this trip... perhaps they are piping all the water into onsen?). We walked up to some of the overlooks and then it was lunchtime at the mega-giftshop: hot spring eggs, corncobs, and ricebowls. Given decently-priced gifts representing everything Hokkaido (including lots of Hello Kitty booty), we bought the majority of trinkets for

friends/family here. We then took a walk on this nature trail in search of an elementary school group we had seen from the road - Meakan-like shrubs and azalea everywhere. Ellen was excited to find them all completing botany worksheets using clipboards that hung around their necks (as noted to Bryan: he REALLY needs these for his Field Botany class).



Left to Right: (top) me and my bears and owls, lozan – solfatera and corn (sulfa-licious!), corn tea (Hokkaido-licious!), Field Botany for third graders; (bottom) more kids, lozan and Kussharo from Masho, Masho walk and crater lake, middle school presentations

From lozan, we drove UP to Masho Lake, a crater lake reminiscent of Oregon's national park – the views impressive (including distant Meakan and Oakan). Ellen was stunned how undeveloped it was: no trails to the water, no watercraft, no hotels cluttering the rim... only one low visitor center that was flooded with teenagers wearing matching school tracksuit uniforms. Teams of 4 were given the task of making presentations about the area to tourists. We entertained a couple groups, although this time Ellen did not disclose that she spoke Japanese. Despite learning English in school, few of the students spoke – or even tried to speak – it to us. While the girls were more open to ad-libbing and attempting English, the boys mostly recited their Japanese scripts and made no effort to communicate with two dope middle-aged American women. That said, the funniest response was from a boy who resolutely said his hometown (Teshikaga) should be known for having the best rest-stop bathrooms in Hokkaido (we failed to confirm or deny this). From Masho, we dropped down to small-town Teshikaga (population 8K) - but promptly continued back to Kussharo, where we hoped to take a dip in the aforementioned outdoor onsen. Alas, it was occupied by pasty nude young adult males with impressively large black man-bushes visible from the parking area (at least 200 feet away). And so we continued – heading over highly scenic Bihoro Pass... a nice surprise given that I didn't know we'd get to look down on the whole of Akan. By this point, Ellen and I were both addicted to amazing Hokkaido corn tea; not found in any chain-stores, it was usually sold in roadside gift shops (like the one at Bihoro). Japan, in general, has all these "tea blend" drinks that are zero calorie, usually grain-based infusions... weirdly delicious.

About the Ezura FarmStay – The Ezura Family Farm

After finding the Toyamas, I googled "Hokkaido farm-stay" and Ezura Farms was one of three major hits. The Ezura location east of Daisetsuzan worked perfectly with our plans. In contrast with the Toyamas, the Ezuras were first-time farmers who left big city professional jobs for what seem to be some sweet government incentives designed to reinvigorate Hokkaido's aging and diminishing population (google "Hokkaido Comprehensive Development Plan"). The on-site Ezuras included mom and dad (in their 30's) and daughter (age 8). Both parents spoke a fair bit of English and ran a cosmopolitan farm in the sense that they regularly hosted people who worked on site (when we were there, 2 Japanese and 2 Koreans – all in their 20's - were in residence); an exuberant former guest from Okinawa dropped by our final evening as well. It was harder to have as lively and intimate conversations here (as with the Toyamas) because there were so many people, languages, and age groups. Indeed, the Ezuras maintained farming, art/music, and exchange relationships with communities in Finland and the local community. While we were there, the father left for a day to present a regional conference and, the following week, the farm was hosting an art/music festival with Finns and locals in attendance. The Ezuras' focus was potatoes and wheat – which Ellen and I know well from four hours weeding said fields. At the Ezuras, we had our own room upstairs and ALL of us shared one bathroom downstairs (honestly – it was not difficult). We paid for home-cooked breakfast and dinner with the family/guests – and one day, like I said, we worked the fields for lunch. All the meals were amazing! That said, staying here was more expensive (roughly \$80 per day per person for lodging and 2 meals – en par with comparable farm-stays I have found elsewhere in the world), but cheaper than many hotels (e.g. like the Akan inn and anything in Sapporo).



Ezura Family/Guests, House

From Bihoro Pass, we were still over 2 hours from Ezura Farm – mostly on rural backroads to near Engura, where a more significant highway headed west to/through popular Daisetsuzan National Park. Unfortunately, our GPS navigator repeatedly failed in the final valley – we think because a newer expressway (surprisingly – free!) ran parallel to an older highway. Hoping to arrive by 5:30 (to unpack and clean up for the set 6:30 dinnertime), we arrived around 6 because we got all screwed up (ultimately adding 15 miles of extra driving). Dinner that night was a medley of potato and corn dishes (some are shown below; the only one I couldn't handle was the potato pizza... because it included really fishy anchovies!). Unfortunately, the HARDEST activity I encountered on this whole trip happened at the Ezuras: namely, trying to eat dinner from a sitting position on the floor. With my knees still recovering from Meakan, I could not kneel directly on my knees... and so I assumed any number of awkward shifting positions at the corner of the low table. Given a 7 a.m. breakfast and plans to tackle climbing Kurodake tomorrow, dinner and preparing for bedtime felt a little rushed.



Left to Right: Ezura dinner, Kurodake gondola station, gondola views, Kurodake summit from chairlift “aerial flower tour”

June 30-July 2: Kurodake, Naked and Afraid - Onsen Edition, Jumpsuit Farming, Roads to Wakkanai

Following a Japanese-style breakfast at 7, we were off to Sounkyo – the onsen-based village that serves as the jump-off for climbing Kurodake in the northeast corner of Daisetsuzan National Park. Given that Sounkyo was an hour away from Ezura, we picked up our lunch from a 7-11 in a town en route. This was great because, like I said, 7-11 carried the best sweet beans; the other convenience store food item I began to regularly buy was Japanese raisin bread (super-white and super-fluffy). We arrived at Sounkyo and parked free in the gondola lot – easily making the waiting gondola (\$20 each roundtrip). Sounkyo is set in a deep rocky gorge with an impressive whitewater river and several tall waterfalls (we visited some of those at the end of the day). Riding up 3000 feet, we walked 10 minutes from the first platform to a chairlift – along with several parties of older hikers. Ellen and I do not like chairlifts and so when we saw that this one (\$7 each roundtrip) was less than 10 feet above the flower-carpeted ground, we were thrilled (brochures called the experience an aerial flower tour). Given that skiing is popular here in the winter, the cables/chairs could be raised to a higher level in the snow. During our slow ride up, the entire climbing face of Kurodake was visible – a few BIG patches of snow more than obvious. Although park information insisted the route was 70% snow-covered, we didn't want to believe it because it looked SO green. From the uppermost station, we hit the trail and, alas, discovered snow within 5 minutes. Long-story-short: it was too scary and treacherous for me and my unhappy knee... but Ellen persevered and, along with a few dozen intrepid hikers, made it to the top – the top being the vast high plateau that makes up inner Daisetsuzan National Park. In a week, we would both stand kitty-corner to Kurodake on Asahidake, Hokkaido's highest point (visible from Kurodake) – defining the northwestern corner of the plateau.



Left to Right: Ellen's Trip (top) setting out on trail, the snow begins – Ellen leaves, Ellen's climb – big snowfield, brushy snowfield, clear trail; (bottom) more clear trail, the last snow traverse, the high plateau, summit marker and plateau trail marker

Ellen definitely said I would have hated the climb and the snow would have freaked me out (particularly the biggest/longest field – which was the most visible from below). Even she questioned going up after she got screwed up in some brushy snow and fell/cut herself up

a bit. Ironically, the upper parts of the mountain were the less snowy – and the high plateau area looked doable (there are several traversing trails, including one between Kurodake and Asahidake); although Ellen and Bruno hiked the plateau in 2013, they skipped Kurodake – so Ellen was excited to make it up. For safety reasons, Ellen seemed to keep close to different hikers/climbers as she ascended and descended; I know this because she exchanged hello's with some of them after we met up later. All in all, it took her just over 90 minutes to summit and about the same to come down. We agreed to meet back at the upper station for the gondola.



Left to Right: Sarah's Trip (top) me and Kurodake from wussy hiker path – sorrel, anemone, mystery white flower, avens, chocolate lily (bottom) azalea, columbine, heather, view from observation deck at upper gondola station... not too shabby!

Meanwhile, I engaged in SLOW botanizing – first on this short trail by the upper chairlift station (LOTS lot newly opened white flowers – e.g. anemones and sorrel). After that, I took the chairlift back down and did another short lower flower trail (more colorful azaleas, columbine, heather). I then ate my delicious lunch and explored the gondola complex. I wanted to order some gyoza but, believe it or not, you ordered using a vending machine that only took small bills (which I did not have). Instead, I climbed to this phenomenal observation deck with multiple viewing telescopes. Eventually, I returned to a bench near the trail – where I soon recognized Ellen by her distinctive bearbell. We both agreed that we enjoyed our respective days at the Kurodake corner of Daisetsuzan.



Left to Right: back to Sounkyo, Daisetsuzan visitor center, Ellen and current snow conditions info, more bear hijinks, gorge waterfalls

After an efficient gondola ride back to Sounkyo, we explored the little village (which felt very European) – visiting the Daisetsuzan visitor center first. Ellen agreed with all their current snow condition information, which included daily-updated images of the hike/climb. There were also amazing glass display boxes with painstakingly accurate plastic representations of alpine flowers. And of course there was another taxidermy higuma specimen. Hungry for real food, we found a nice noodle shop that made udon (not as common as I would have liked in Hokkaido – as udon is my favorite Japanese noodle)... and followed that up by splitting a bowl of pumpkin soft serve (which we only gave medium marks). We then headed briefly up the highway to walk around the waterfall area, which wasn't too extensive. By this point, it was around 4 – which wasn't enough time to hike up to a high viewpoint (signs indicated this took an hour) – because Ellen wanted to soak in the recommended onsen, located at this posh resort complex. SO – the onsen experience was a topic of moderate discussion (and moderate stress) prior to this trip. Some of it had to do with the fact that none of us are into being naked in public, and Ellen and I haven't been naked together since bathing as little kids. That said, Ellen loves onsen – something she picked up during her later years in Japan. But I think, for her, it's one of many things she feels freer doing in Japan. A week before my departure, Ellen sent me a few YouTube videos explaining all the onsen procedures but I remained on the fence. Well – today, I agreed to accompany her. Ellen will tell you I was stressed out and didn't enjoy it much. Some of it was the naked part, some of it was the being naked with Ellen part, some of it was that the baths were WAT too hot, and some of it was that sitting in baths was boring. Which is funny - because I enjoyed hot-springing in Yellowstone on student research trips... but those involved natural settings with exciting cold rivers to negotiate – and everyone wore a bathing suit. Ellen did say that we came at a good time because there were

very few people – plus, several pools had low lighting. Most onsen, like this one, are gender-specific... and naked-only. We paid \$12 each to go in (extra if you needed a towel, which I did). After storing valuables in a locker, you undressed fully in a changing room, leaving your clothes in a basket. There is a special onsen towel (which is as wide as the distance between your nipples, and as long as the distance between your boobies and your junk) that you can use for frontal modesty. Ellen and I, however, seemed to be the only ones holding our little towels daintily over our front bits. You then cleaned off fully in a seated shower area (soaped up, washed hair, rinsed) before finally heading to one of several onsen pools. The onsen towel is supposed to be folded on your head while you are soaking. I was not good at keeping my onsen towel out of the water. Although it was – like I said – not too busy, everyone else strolled around with perfectly skinny bodies and no modesty towels. As with the aforementioned Kussharo man-bush incident, I was fascinated to note that even the impressively uninhibited women were totally out there with equally large black woman-bushes. Indeed, I could easily see how long-term foreigners in Japan (particularly American women) could succumb to body image issues in the face of all this intense thinness. As a 50-year-old woman who should lose 10 pounds, I felt like a giant with my lumpy Norwegian physique... BUT at least my wild bush felt at home. After an hour, we were back on the road – returning to Ezura for another amazing meal.



Left to Right: jumpsuit fitting, heading to the fields, in the fields – Daisetsuzan in background

During our last full day at Ezura, Ellen and I spent the morning (8-12) working the fields with the 4 volunteers (who would be doing this work ALL day, ALL summer in exchange for room and board). Not going to lie: it was hard work and, much as I love gardening and visiting farms, I could not do this for real. After a delicious western breakfast of AMAZING stuffed French toast, Ellen and I donned exciting jumpsuits with rubber boots and gloves (masks were optional). Given how stylish the jumpsuits looked, I will have to think about incorporating them into my working wardrobe. We then headed out to one of the far wheat fields in the back of a mini-pick-up truck; although the skies were hazy, you could see the high Daisetsuzan plateau soaring in the distance. Our job was to meticulously search about 3 rows of wheat for young potato plants and hand-weed these out of the fields, slowly walking through the sea of plants. The hardest things about the work were the heat/humidity, the bending-over (my quads and hamstrings grew fried... and my knee did not like any turns), and the challenge of not stepping ON wheat-plants and breaking them (although we definitely did from time to time). It was also hard to successfully pull the entire potato plants out of the hard soil, meaning we ripped off only the leaves probably 30% of the time. At around 10, we took a short break back at the truck: Oreo cookies, tea, and cola were distributed from a cooler. Shortly before noon, I finished my row and called it a day – dehydrated, soaked with sweat, and itchy (I made a B-line for the house to get in a quick sit-down shower before lunch). Ellen, 10 minutes behind me, had an even stronger reaction to the wheat than me – her hands and face (which brushed the plants whenever she bent over) were red and bumpy. Even though the work was hard, the morning was very scenic and memorable and we were glad we did it... plus, we enjoyed one of my favorite lunches on this trip (for services rendered): cold somen noodles with vegetables and dipping sauce (near the end of this trip, we would enjoy a similar dish done in the traditional style – bamboo waterfall, “flowing noodles”).



Left to Right: Engaru/Maruseppu Park Family Fun Complex Map - The Insectarium... need I say more?

Given accurately forecast afternoon rain, Ellen and I decided to visit an Insectarium that was supposed to be about 20 minutes away. Unfortunately, the Insectarium was in the GPS-navigator's no-mans-land – and so we drove too far and then had to backtrack (for a total of 45 minutes!). The Insectarium was part of a sprawling family entertainment/education complex with many facilities (e.g. campgrounds, onsen, a steam train/track system, history museums, model farms/petting, go-carts...). Ellen said these kinds of complexes (which felt like small, low-tech, rural versions of Disneyland) were popular all over Japan, allowing families to concentrate and economize their limited vacation time. Given navigation problems and an early dinner, we did not explore beyond the extensive Insectarium (with attached butterfly pavilion). We were not disappointed – mostly because they had so many live bugs (in particular: fierce-looking beetles that Ellen says many children raise as pets in Japan). While this was not one of our more earth-shatteringly deep travel moments, it was good given the weather... and the fact that working the fields all day was not going to happen. Back at the

Ezuras, tonight was a special BBQ (with elements of Genghis Kahn) planned for 6 (when a former guest was supposed to arrive from Okinawa). We helped with some food preparation, including harvesting and cleaning “young garlic” from the family’s home garden (AMAZING!). We also helped set up outdoor seating, which then had to be moved into one of the open barns when this DELUGE came down (delaying things a little). With news that the Okinawan guest was running very late, we commenced with the meat-fest: I swear dad had this “neverending meat box” and round after round was placed on the grilled - then gobbled up ravenously (beef slices, lamb slices, sausages, chicken skewers, pork rib slices, pork belly slices, poop-chute-y intestine rings...). Vegetables were cooked Genghis Kahn style with lamb, or – in the case of the garlic – grilled in foil. One notable BBQ addition was that udon noodles were added to finish the Genghis Kahn mixture, sopping up ALL the fat and juice! There were several side dishes – grilled corn salad, lettuce for wraps, and omeboshi (impressive salty-sweet pickled plums)... along with Sapporo and Asahidake beer.



Left to Right: BBQ beginnings, meat-fest, pork belly fat on fire, Genghis Kahn early, udon finish

The next morning, we enjoyed our final Ezura breakfast at 7 and were on the road by 8 - a nearly 6-hour driving day on the docket: Ezura to Wakkanai via Cape Soya (the northernmost point of Japan). Unfortunately, there isn't a lot to say about most of the coastal drive because the weather was drizzly and the views were poor much of the way. We made one stop at a boat-shaped rest facility in large coastal-industrial Mombetsu – adjacent to extensive signage about spring drift ice and seal tours. We thought we'd hit more towns around lunchtime – but, honestly, much of the coastal drive seemed rural/undeveloped... leaving us lunch-snacking at a convenience store (Seicomart) in sad Esashi, a gray, nondescript town of 10,000. Indeed, Seicomart (a very large chain in Japan) is about to figure WAY too prominently in our eating existence – largely because MOST places along the coast served only seafood. Were I to repeat this trip, I would drive a different route that cut more northwest from Ezura/Engura, bypassing Mombetsu entirely. Although this alternative cut off a fair bit of the coast, it traversed interesting mountains, waterfalls/gorges, gardens (e.g. Pink Moss Park, Herb Garden), and the Komu Forest Art Museum that probably would have been worth a visit – even in the rain.



Left to Right: (top) Cape Soya and Sea of Okhotsk – from above, famous scallop restaurant and extra shell gardening, KAL memorial (bottom) foxy scallop fox, farmer statue with detail, Dormy Inn and view of Wakkanai

Soon after Esashi, we arrived at Cape Soya. For me, Soya was anticlimactic because I had so many expectations of it. My first Journeys in Japan introduction to Hokkaido was a show where the guide/speaker walked the 7 km “white path” (white because it is made of recycled scallop shells) from Wakannai to Soya (we knew, given the weather and limited time, that THAT was not an option today). Cape Soya comes across as a larger-than-life place in the thru-hiking books by Booth and McLachlan. In reality, it is a small highway-side attraction following a nondescript bend in the road. Of course, the good thing was that – with the bad weather – it wasn't nuts... but there was an entertaining line-up to take pictures. Ellen had been here once before but didn't know there was a bigger plateau above the monument – complete with a famous/old scallop seafood restaurant (and hungry fox!), and several statues – the largest being the memorial to the Korean Airliner 747 the Russians shot down near Sakhalin Island in 1983, killing all 269 (sadly – not

the last time the Russians shot down a passenger jet!). There was also a nice statue dedicated to the farmers of Hokkaido; its depiction of a strong, good-looking young couple reminded us of the Ezura family and all the Japanese government hopes they will come to represent. Soon after Cape Soya, we arrived at Wakkanai. Although modern (to the point of lacking charm), I found Wakkanai straightforward and utilitarian. As with most of the MANY visitors here, our goal in staying here was because it was the jump-off point for tomorrow's ferry rides to Rebun and Rishiri. To that end, we first visited the ferry dock to confirm what would be happening tomorrow and then, being a little low on cash, we set out looking for an ATM. Although most convenience stores had obvious ATM's, none – as we learned today – seemed to accept international cards. Having passed a big shopping mall, Ellen insisted they MUST have a better ATM... and so while she ran through said facilities, I used her computer/mobile wi-fi to determine that the ONLY reliable international ATM's were at Japanese post offices (you've got to be shitting me... how are we figuring this out only today?). Of course, by the time we put all that together AND located the closest PO it was 5:02 (closed at 5!). Even though we were nervous heading out to Rebun and Rishiri with limited cash, every on-line source said there were several PO/ATM's there. At our hotel, the valet equivalent put our car in one of those vending machine-style parking garages. And then had to get it back an hour later when we headed out to dinner (a good test for tomorrow morning's early departure). Given seafood EVERYWHERE, Ellen had scoped out a "family restaurant" (a term that sort of means "Denny's") called Victoria Station a few miles away; it seemed to have a steak focus, an open soup/salad bar (a great value even though there was little green lettuce), and a 50's decor. Tough steaks were served on sizzle platters and, of course, I managed to burn 2 fingers by handling it wrong. Even so, this was our last proper dinner for the next 2 nights. Returning to the hotel, you could feel the energy of SO many visitors heading to Rebun/Rishiri tomorrow – most retired couples or small parties of older women. Thankfully, Ellen got to use the hotel's free onsen and I got to enjoy some original Ninja Warrior on TV.

July 3-4: Flower Islands – Rebun and Rishiri

When I first proposed this trip to Ellen, I had secretly made a 2-night hotel reservation on Rishiri because I knew island hotels were going to get booked fast. At the time, I thought that round Rishiri would be more interesting because of its namesake volcano (even if I wasn't entirely confident I could handle said 5000 foot up/down climb). Over time, I came to realize that squid-shaped Rebun (the adjective Lonely Planet accurately uses) was more interesting – not to mention more in my ability range. By the time I figured this out, we were a month from leaving and there were no accommodations on Rebun... BUT I did convince Ellen that we should spend our first day on Rebun, leaving on the earliest 6:20 a.m. ferry. Sadly, the latest ferry from Rebun to Rishiri left at 4:30 – meaning we had only 8 hours to play with. In studying Rebun, Ellen and I were disappointed to learn that there was a popular hike across the whole island... but it was rated "10 hours" (everyone seemed quite serious about this time requirement). In the end, we decided to parse the Rebun day into car-heavy touring on the north end, followed by a 3-hour hike on some newer Momojiwa trail near the ferry terminal.



Left to Right: (top) Dormy Inn buffet, island cartoon, Heartland Ferry, car-deck; (bottom) cheap seats, Rishiri view, driving Rebun

Before describing Rebun, though, I need to get through some ferry details. First of all, taking a car on the ferry is expensive – but Ellen knew I wanted that freedom and was going to pay for it regardless of the cost (\$350 for all 3 legs: Wakkanai to Rebun, Rebun to Rishiri, Rishiri to Wakkannai). After waking up at 4:45, our first task was to take our luggage down and get/pack the car. After the car was retrieved from the vending machine lot, we "illegally" parked it in a shopping complex lot across the street (nothing was open – and we'd be gone by the time it was). By this point, the hotel lobby was HOPPING with ferry-bound travelers (most would travel to the ferry on foot, relying on buses once on the islands) – ALL of us waiting for the breakfast buffet to open at 5:30. We had 30 minutes to stuff our face (which we did as the food was plentiful and delicious), brush our teeth, and drive 3 blocks to the ferry terminal. There, I sat in the car in a loading zone while Ellen procured our final tickets. The only unexpected issue was that ferry staff technically only allowed the driver in the vehicle during loading... so Ellen had to convince them that I spoke no Japanese and would be a hot mess if they forced me to walk on unaccompanied. Once on board, we were in the lowest class – meaning our seating area was a carpeted floor area where most people were already laying down and trying to sleep. There was one outdoor deck – but, of course, the smokers were there in force (one of the few places on this whole trip that involved offensive levels of smoking). Today's weather was overcast and

cool – the cloud-deck around 3500 feet; you could see only the base of Rishiri (5600 feet tall), and you could see most of the low hills of Rebun. Over the course of the day, there was a fair bit of clearing – and thankfully we never saw any rain or high winds.



Left to Right: Cape Sukoton/northernmost tip: urchin/uni-o-rama, walk to actual tip, flowers, the buses have arrived!

We landed at Rebun's south-end ferry terminal (in Kafuka) around 8:30 and quickly hit the sea-hugging highway before the waiting line of tour buses. The drive to Cape Sukoton, the northernmost tip, took about 40 minutes. En route, we passed at least 3 moderate-sized towns – in between regular coastal structures. Given how much development there was along the road, I cannot say I was immediately enchanted with Rebun. Where were all these alpine flowers growing at sea level? At Sukoton, there was – of course – a substantial gift shop loaded with seafood. Ellen was very excited to find whole squid stuffed with rice and urchin – all boiled and vacuum-sealed, the claim being you could take that anywhere unrefrigerated and then heat it up and eat it later... which is exactly what Bruno did when she returned. Behind the gift-stand was a short walk to a peninsular viewpoint (notably above this seaside pension-style inn), the path lined with alpine flowers! Of course, the buses arrived within 5 minutes – an old-lady frenzy of flower enthusiasts POURING down the trail. Had ALL of our stops been like this, I suspect I would have been annoyed... but the spectacle here over flowers was charming, honestly. Returning to our car, we became confused because we could find no evidence of the 10-hour/over-Rebun trail, which was supposed to begin here. We briefly followed what looked like a very overgrown path in the grass – but this vanished into nothingness. Meanwhile, it seemed as though many serious-looking hikers with walking sticks were marching right down along the road. Sadly, we eventually figured out that, yes, that was the first part of the famous trail.



Left to Right: (top) looking back on Sukai Misaki trailhead, views of Gorota Beach from Sukai Misaki; (bottom) the much more rudimentary across-Rebun trail – heading towards Gorota Beach and Cape Gorota (north of which is Cape Sukoton)

Our next goal was to drive over to the Sukai Misaki overlook and attempt to hike a bit of the across-Rebun trail towards Gurota Beach (a 4-hour option, called the cape-to-cape, connects Sukoton, Gurota, and Sukai). En route, we passed a signed colony of Cypripedium (lady slipper orchids) – but these were clearly no longer in bloom, their season back in May. At the bottom of this big hill, we parked in a small fishing area and hiked up a good trail to the Sukai Misaki overlook – which peered into this blue cove surrounded by serrated rocky cliffs that felt like Norway's Lofoten Islands. In the distance, you could see HUGE Cape Gorota – but, again, no obvious trail. Back near the car, we noticed some signage indicating the trail was – you guessed it – along the road. Tracing it back, we found a more legitimate track heading up in the grass. At that time, I think Ellen was still holding out hope that we were somehow going to hike to Gorota... and so we headed up, visiting a small shrine just above the road. Beyond that, though, the trail was rough and steep, littered with loose rock, deeply rutted or overgrown with plants. We topped out on this windy flat area that had a few orange lilies and then began descending the other side towards the Lofoten-like headland (with a tiny shrine on its tip). But it was clear the trail was very poor – at times obscenely precipitous, and highly indistinct after it rounded the corner. Making matters less interesting, another big fishing area (giant concrete barriers and walls everywhere) dominated the land before crescent-shaped Gurota Beach. And so we

called it quits and headed back, Ellen losing faith that Rebus was going to be a satisfying side-trip. But it was finally more than clear why the across-Rebus hike required 10 hours (and the cape-to-cape 4): poor trails, lots of funky elevation changes!



Left to Right: shrine parking with Rishiri, seaweed, shrine – exterior, interior, cranes

After snacking on some delicious cantaloupe-filled mochi, we continued our driving tour, backtracking through Hamanaka – which seemed like a fairly touristy town. In trying to find more information about Hamanaka on-line (e.g. population, hotels...), I couldn't find any town spec's – BUT there seems to be a lot of information about a long-term international archaeology project there. Ellen seemed determined to drive around the entire northern portion of the island (a portion of which we'd cut off earlier) and so we proceeded around desolate Funadomari Bay. Joining the main highway within about 15 minutes on the other side, we stopped in the town of Nairo at a scenic shrine by the ocean, fields of huge seaweed fronds laid flat and drying under nets. In the distance, Rishiri was partly visible, the cloud deck seeming several hundred feet higher. In general, there are fewer and simpler shrines on Hokkaido – but we could find no evidence of the historically rich pilgrim routes you see in Southern Japan. The town of Nairo seemed an important spot for people with more time and equipment: it offered actual camping, and it was the turn-off for the road if you wanted to climb Rebus-dake, the highest point on the island (a 4-hour route that seemed to be mostly in clouds today).



Left to Right: Momoiwa (top) sign, ranger station, start of trail – views to parking/sea, paved trail at first; (bottom) HUGE tourist groups to Peach Rock overlook... then MUDDY trail beyond, views of Rishiri

Even though it was only about 12:30, we decided to head back and then up to the Momoiwa trail – hoping it was as good as all the websites (and on-line pictures) suggested. Momoiwa took off from near the ferry terminal back at Kafuka. Heading up into the steep green hills, Ellen became concerned when the road pinched off into one really narrow lane - a couple tour buses parked in a pull-out right before the road change. Things became more alarming when we had to drive through a HUGE pack of flower tourists walking down the road (probably down to the parked buses, which we'd passed). Above, though, we could see at least one other passenger car was still heading up the road... but it was definitely a stressful drive for about 10 minutes because we were unsure what the rules/etiquette were. The road ended in a gravel parking lot with a little wooden ranger station and detached restroom (imagine that!). There were about 5 passenger vehicles in the parking lot. We conferred with the rangers (i.e. 2 old men in the cabin) that we were legal and this was the trailhead; they expressed skepticism at our plans to complete the whole traverse from here to seaside Shiretoko (yes – the same name as the national park we visited earlier) – and recommended we stop at the Motochi lighthouse to avoid the steep descent and re-climb. They also emphasized the route was SUPER-MUDDY. For the record, they were accurate on all counts. We then took 20 minutes to finally eat a proper lunch in the car – mostly convenience store booty we'd been collecting the last few days (apples, bananas, bread, peanut butter...). As we ate, HUGE packs of flower tourists (again – mostly little old ladies) were pouring down the trail. Virtually all bus tours only walk up the first quarter mile of paved trail to this observation area that overlooks Peach Rock - the flowers prolific, and the views over the blue sea and green velvet island impressive. Amusingly, even though we passed at least

TWO major signs indicating the possibility of finding edelweiss, Ellen and I somehow bombed right by them – unaware we were heading into some prime edelweiss. Speaking for myself, I thought – based on reading before this trip – that the only edelweiss colonies were near Rebun-dake.



Left to Right: (top) down the stairs, looking up the stairs, MUD, edelweiss, snail; (bottom) amazing views, Motochi lighthouse & Rishiri

Unfortunately, the edelweiss required hiking 45 minutes past the paved overlook – on some REALLY boot-sucking mud (i.e. none of the bus groups made it out that far). But Ellen and I – and a few non-tour-group hikers - had a grand couple of hours strolling across the velvet rolling hills above the sea... flowers everywhere. As can be seen in most of the pictures, the path was well-defined in terms of either ropes or fencing. The worst sections of mud were along the flat areas; during the 3 hill-climbs I did, the route was drier and there were wood steps in place. After the second hill-climb and descent, we came to a short little valley with a lot of wood planking. Ellen had already started up the next hill-climb and was about 200 feet away when I glanced down and saw the first edelweiss. She will tell you I was very excited – to the point that she actually came down to look at it as well. We then climbed up together – making our way to near the top of the far hill in the top/first picture above. Even though the lighthouse was just under a mile away, I was ready to start heading back – mostly because I knew I was going to take longer than Ellen to climb back... and I wanted to do some careful searching for more edelweiss. While I started back, Ellen completed the walk to the lighthouse. En route, I found an even better edelweiss colony that we had totally missed (it was along the long stair-climb shown in the top/second shot above). I also did my best to show or explain to at least 4 parties of Japanese hikers where the edelweiss was – including, in one case, resorting to singing a portion of “Edelweiss” (from “Sound of Music”) to communicate that word (because I did not know “usuyukiso”). One of the parties, a sweet older man, was especially happy to be shown the edelweiss because he said he lost his wife last year and was doing this trip for her (she had always wanted to come to Rebun and see the flowers). I replied that my sister and I were here the weekend our dad passed away several years ago – and he would love this hike too. I think Ellen was taken aback when he later ran into her (coming down) and he knew who she was after talking to me. Ellen and I met back at the paved overlook area about 3:15; I arrived about 10 minutes before her and was busy cleaning all the mud off my shoes and out of the tread.



Left to Right: convenience store dinner on the walking path, Rishiri makes an appearance, sunset – Rebun profile in the distance

With the ferry departing at 4:30, we headed back into town hoping to find a bakery or a convenience store (the former was closed and we could not find the latter – even though we knew we’d seen a Seicomart somewhere this morning). We ducked into this huge community center to use the bathroom and clean up a little; it was here that, of course, I left/lost yet another favorite hat (my lime green toque from Chile – notably purchased after I lost my flaming orange toque from Italy on the streets of Punta Arenas). We then parked the car in the line-up area and were soon on board, heading across the sea to the Rishiri ferry terminal at Oshidomari, 30 minutes away. Knowing our hotel was another 30 minutes around the island, we spent a frustrating 20 minutes driving around Oshidomari in search of some kind of noodle-focused restaurant. Despite phone-calls and a list of half a dozen places I’d researched on-line before

this trip, though, we came up empty handed – ultimately settling for a higher-end Seicomart (higher end = they had a hot food section where fried foods were prepared throughout the day). We ate our meal ON the trail up this little headland, interrupting at least one evening sightseer from the youth hostel across the street. My dinner consisted of: cold soba noodles with dipping sauce in a plastic drinking cup, fresh-out-of-the-fryer corn croquettes, a can of Sapporo classic, and an entire box of Japanese corn-soup flavored Bugles. Sadly, this was not the low eating point of our time on Rishiri. More promisingly, the clouds parted multiple times, revealing the entire summit of Rishiri... and we enjoyed a beautiful view of Rebun across the sea. By 6:00, we headed to our hotel in the sleepy town of Oniwaki. Even though our hotel was called a “ryokan” (which evokes “charming inn” to most American ears), it looked and felt like a brown boxy warehouse. The building seemed like recent construction from the outside but felt more retro inside. The downstairs had a giant bar and a big dining room (all floor seating with low tables - ugh); the upstairs had 6 rooms and a totally open smoking nook at the end of the hall – with a window that could be raised. Not surprisingly, the owner was a round man with a smoker’s cough; the only time he earned good marks with us was when he reluctantly agreed to let us run one load of muddy gear from Rebun. Our tatami room was an open box with little furniture – the mini-fridge broken. Shortly after we got settled in, you could smell cigarette smoke coming under the door from the nook. I was not pleased... even though we could see magnificent Rishiri from our room. Thankfully, the windows were screened and we could open them and not worry about the bugs (lots of those all over Hokkaido in the evenings!). Ellen notably described this hotel – and this hotel experience in general - as typical of most places around the rest of Japan.



Left to Right: hotel room view of Rishiri, hotel room, hotel, close-up of Rishiri from hotel the next morning

When I first booked accommodations for July 3-5 on Rishiri, it was because I hoped to climb the namesake volcano in remembrance of our father, who passed away on July 4, 2006. Even though today’s weather was PERFECT, neither Ellen nor I felt up to it. In my case, my knee was not going to put up with a 10 mile/5000 foot up/down climb; meanwhile, Ellen had doubts soloing Rishiri because snowy Kurodake had been stressful (and that was only 6 miles and 1500 feet!)... plus, she had not brought what she thought were heavy enough boots. Instead, we decided to pursue a couple shorter hikes (including a very satisfying off-the-beaten path trip up to the Yamunaisawa valley on the eastern flanks of Rishiri), followed by a driving tour around the entire island. But first we had to get through a VERY Japanese breakfast. Had this been my first day in Japan, I would not have done well... but, as it stood, I made it through a lot of the traditional food: all my vegetables, all my pickles, and all my natto (mixed VERY slowly with 2 bowls of rice). Ellen did not eat her natto but did eat BOTH of our crab and fried fish portions. Neither of us could handle the raw egg – meant to be cracked over the rice and eaten lukewarm and clucking. Although we rated our efforts excellent, we did not impress the ryokan cook – who fried our eggs the next morning and gave us more western/wimpy food than the other Japanese guests. Oh well. Heading out, our first stop was at famous Oatmarinuma Pond, 15 minutes past our hotel. Initially, we were one of 4 passenger cars at the lake. After walking less than a mile around the lake, we returned to 9 buses dumping tourists everywhere. Braving the crazy gift shop, Ellen learned that a famous Japanese chocolate (“White Lover”) uses Rishiri from this angle for their box cover. Definitely not into this level of tourism, we headed back to Oniwaki to look for the road to Yamunaisawa. So - Yamunaisawa was never on my radar before this trip. I discovered it while we were in Shiretoko: an impressive photograph of the cirque was featured in a big book about Japan’s National Parks. In addition to 2 blog accounts about hiking there, we found a guide service website indicating there would be no trips in 2017 because the road was closed. Said road, we also learned, headed up right from our hotel - BUT our hotel owner insisted it was open.



Oatmarinuma Pond before the... BUSES ARRIVE, “White Lover Chocolate,” construction signs, lower bridge

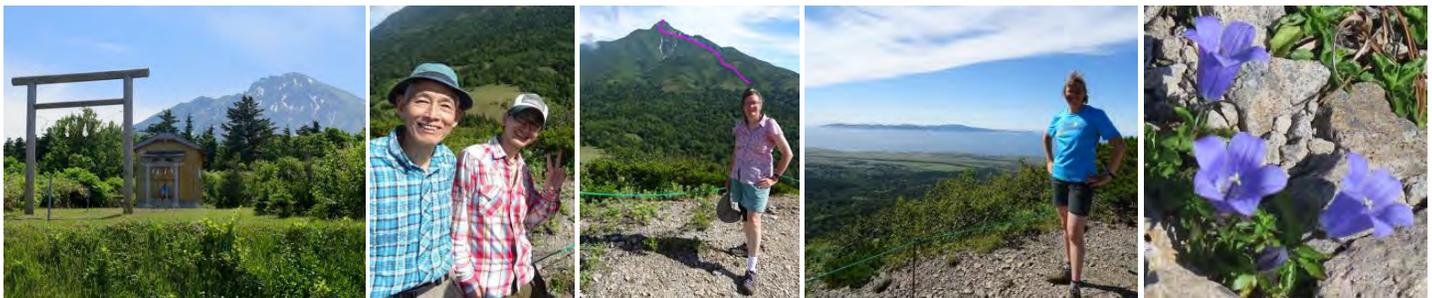
And so we headed up. Within a mile from town, we entered thick forest – and then the unfriendly construction zone signs appeared. Ellen decided we should go back into town and make a few more inquiries. The first place we tried was the local history/folk museum... but the young woman there had NO idea what we were talking about. Near the outskirts of town, there was a big construction project and so Ellen flagged down a construction-looking guy in a truck and he also said the road was open. We decided (or convinced ourselves) that the unfriendly construction signs were more about making sure you stayed on the road and didn’t enter the actual

construction site – which we did eventually find (it was off the road - focused on building some kind of flood control system high on the river). After driving about 5 miles on pavement in woods, the gravel began at this bridge over the river – several concrete barriers in place here (presumably, the construction crew was adding similar things upstream). The pink car lasted 1 more mile but then the road became fishtaily and washboard. We found a pull-out and parked, estimating that we had about 2.5 miles to hike before we reached the valley end/Rishiri cirque. For the hotter-than-hell time we hiked, we saw no one... and LOVED that we were the only ones here (even though we remained a little concerned we were going to come back to a ticket or worse). The way climbed persistently up the gravel road; half a mile from where the road ended, we nervously passed the construction camp. After the trail ended, we hiked above the rocky river valley on a higher earthen plateau for about a quarter of a mile... and then that ended so we pieced our way down into the rocky river valley for our final great view. After an enjoyable rest, snack, and lots of pictures, we hiked back down – this impressive HUGE vista of the sea from the road. We didn't realize how high up we were – but I suspect we actually were up at around 1500-1800 feet, having gained 800-1000 during the hike. Where is Allison and her GPS when I need her? Much to Ellen's relief, the car was still there – no notes, no tickets, no wheel-locking devices (an apparently popular law enforcement tool in Japan).



Left to Right: road-hiking, final cirque & Ellen jumping, heading back on trail-less section – big sea view

Heading back to Oniwaki in search of a real lunch, we settled on the ONE restaurant we could find, downing a plate of extremely plain cold soba with dipping sauce. The owner gave the impression he'd never served American women. By this point, it was 1:30 and Ellen and I tried to lay out what we were doing for the rest of the day. Making it clear she was not interested in a bunch of Otatmarinuma-style stops, Ellen wanted to attempt a 1-2 hour hike on the Oshidomari side of Rishiri (its easiest climbing route). I was fine with this as long as we still got to drive around the island and see Rishiri's many faces before the sun went down. Although we mostly accomplished these wishlists, we did have a few moments because Ellen is not a schedule person – and it goes without saying that I am. Over time, we also found ourselves stopping at Rishiri's more prolific shrines, including the first one (below), 10 minutes from Oniwaki. Rishiri's profile here reminded me of Mt. Rainier's sunset amphitheatre face. We then drove through Oshidomari and up the mountain to the end of the road. It was hotter than biscuits – but we set out to climb satellite peak Mt. Pon. I'm not sure why but NONE of my on-line searches before this trip yielded Mt. Pon – even though it was a great little hike (about 3 miles/600 feet)! For the first 15 minutes, the Pon and Rishiri trails were the same – and so we saw many hikers (most Japanese couples, 45-65 years old) returning from a clearly-excellent summit. While I enjoyed seeing them, I think it might have rubbed some salt in Ellen's decision not to go for it. Leaving the main trail, we then took a quiet forested side-trail up to Mt. Pon, Ellen powering up ahead of me. In a thin forest section 5 minutes from the top, I stepped 15 feet off the trail to pee (having seen NO ONE the whole time). Just as I was trying to wrestle up my super-sweaty underwear, this father-son pair strolled by. Awkward. Up on the summit, they asked us where we were from. When we replied the US, the father chuckled "Ah – Terumpu... ha, ha, ha" and then I learned some new vocabulary (aho). Honestly, I was expecting to hear a lot more of that response on this trip. Mt. Pon's summit offered a sweeping view of Rebun and the Rishiri summit route side (which reminded me of Mt. Hood from McNeil Point). While the final mile looked obscenely steep and scary, the rest of the hike looked civil and fabulous; indeed, I always figured that I could make it to the upper shoulder with Ellen – and then she could just do the summit herself. Oh well. Next to a rope-cordoned colony of vivid purple gentians, I sat on a nice bench and polished off my bag of "Crunch-O" potato snacks, a snack I LOVED in elementary school (but has since vanished from America's snack aisle).



Left to Right: shrine near Oniwaki, father-son, me and Rishiri with route in pink, Ellen and Rebun, gentians

Ellen had wanted to hike down to Hime Lake – but that trail was closed so she climbed Mt. Pon's secondary summit (a side-trail along the ridge). Because I wanted to save my knees for Asahidake, I headed back – the parking lot a celebration of summiteers. Ellen returned – but I could tell that all these hikers were making her feel like she needed to do more. "More" was a 30-minute walk up Cape Peshi above Oshidomari harbor (no pictures because it looked exactly like our dinner spot night one). By now, it was 4:45 and I knew that driving around the island took an hour - so I firmly expressed concerns about losing daylight and views (because small clouds were

forming from the east). And so we began our clockwise drive: first passing the airport and visiting a scenic rest area. We soon arrived at Kutsugata, which felt like the biggest and most functional town on Rishiri. In retrospect, we should have driven up the mountain from here (to the second easiest route on Rishiri). Rishiri's spires and red landslide scars reminded me of Mt. Washington, the surrounding terrain a series of high tabular lava flows. We also should have made a concerted effort to EAT here given that our ultimate dinner SUCKED!!!! Instead, we continued – the highway right by the sea (the mountain no longer visible behind the high lava flows). Rishiri's coolest shrine was this miniature red cupboard on a seaside rocky outcrop. Ten minutes beyond, we drove through a small community of roadside houses and visited another shrine with empty urchin shells (no pictures). And 15 minutes after that, the landscape flattened again – Rishiri appearing as it did at Oatmarinuma this morning. While searching for some famous "White Lover" viewpoint Ellen heard was popular for marriage proposals/weddings (which we never found), we stumbled onto this lovely Oatmarinuma-like pond – nothing but a sunset view and a great restroom! And soon we were back in Oniwaki – specifically: at a Seicomart we'd passed this morning... the only problem: low end, no hot food section with freshly fried foods. After throwing away 2 soggy croquettes, my cold burdock root salad with tofu was palatable, as were the repeat cold soba noodles in a cup. Ellen felt so bad she suggested we share a can of Japanese plum wine. Of course, the WORST news of the night had yet to hit: as we entered the building, the hotel owner (who looked like he'd forgotten we were there until THAT moment) informed us that the aforementioned big town construction project had cut into some water-main, meaning that we were going to lose all water between 8 p.m. (40 minutes away) and 3 a.m. while they repaired it. We were advised to fill the bathtub after promptly showering so that we could scoop buckets from it to wash our waste down the toilet overnight. Thankfully, we had plenty of our own bottled water for other hygiene needs and drinking.



Left to Right: red shrine, Katsugata views of Rishiri and its volcanic teeth, unnamed pond, BAD dinner!

July 5-6: Funky Roads to Asahidake, a Fine and Civil Volcano Climb, the BEST Lodge Ever

The next morning, we were up at 6:45 for our tamed-down ryokan breakfast – and then on our way to the ferry (which departed at 8:30). There were no views of Rishiri at any point because a thick layer of marine clouds fully socked in the island. The ferry was 10 times more crowded, HUGE groups of people and PILES of luggage taking up nearly all of the floor/carpet space. Fortunately, the ferry ride lasted only 90 minutes – an hour shorter than expected. Arriving in Wakkannai at 10, things seemed promising for our 5-hour drive to Asahidake Onsen. But, as noted in my journal, "the early part of the drive was annoying and unsuccessful." Given NO expressways, the driving was SLOW... country roads through small farming communities (population 800-2000) . By 1, we headed into the town of Horonobe, intent on visiting a Reindeer Dude Ranch/Blue Poppy Garden that had a website as impressive-looking as Farm Tomita... but, alas, it was NOT Tomita. The parking lot was empty, the animals looked sad, the grounds sat in the shadow of a nuclear research facility (painted with a happy blue poppy cartoon character), and the restroom doors had placards about depression, spousal abuse, and alcohol/drug hotlines (painted with a sad blue poppy cartoon character). Indeed, I was reminded that Hokkaido is a lot like Alaska – snowbound several months of the year, extra prone to the problems that come with that level of cabin fever. Ellen and I tried our best to quietly escape the Reindeer Dude Ranch, having gotten the staff's hopes up by reading the empty cafeteria menu when we first strolled in. We headed, instead, for this large grocery store – buying several prepared dishes from the deli-equivalent... and then driving to a nearby park for lunch. Unfortunately, the mosquitoes were insane (I saw 3 different varieties, including disease-famous Aedes aegypti!) and the food was greasy and unappetizing – particularly after 2 nights of convenience store purgatory.



Left to Right: sad reindeer, Ellen is not happy, blue poppy, nuclear research facility, sad poppy hotline placard

Hitting the road once again, we arrived at the BIG city of Asahikawa (population 350,000) around 3:30, the traffic annoying to the point that we took a nice break by visiting Daiso, the decent-quality "dollar store" chain in Japan... followed by a big Montbell store, Japan's favorite outdoor store. When we hit the road for the last time, it was easy-going until the lodge – which was surprising given how popular Daisetsuzan had seemed when we visited it from Sounkyo. The likely difference: Sounkyo lies along a big expressway that traverses Hokkaido, where Asahidake Onsen was a dead-end road with about 8 very diverse lodge options, a park visitor center, and

the gondola. How pleasant and quiet! And even more AMAZING: our Lonely Planet-touted Lodge Nutapukaushipe. As correctly noted, though, Lodge Nutapukaushipe has NO web presence and your only option for reserving a room is to be able to physically call them (which Ellen was able to do!). The lodge is small (~10 rooms?) and features a lot of natural, carved wood design and built-ins; the second floor rooms have no bathrooms and so everyone shares a common sink/toilet area, and the Japanese baths (one for men, one for women) are first-floor/downstairs (as with onsens, you clean yourself at a shower/bucket vanity and then there is a big wooden soaking tub). In addition to the bathing facilities, there is a mixed gender outdoor onsen built using natural stone above a forested stream. The first floor also has a beautiful eating/sitting area – and meals (breakfast and dinner) were second only to the delicious home-cooked meals at our farm-stays. It should be noted that they ONLY take cash – which, thankfully, we were prepared for.



Left to Right: Lodge Nutapukaushipe – note Asahidake view, hall, bedrooms, sink, pre-bath, bath, bi-level outdoor onsen, dining room

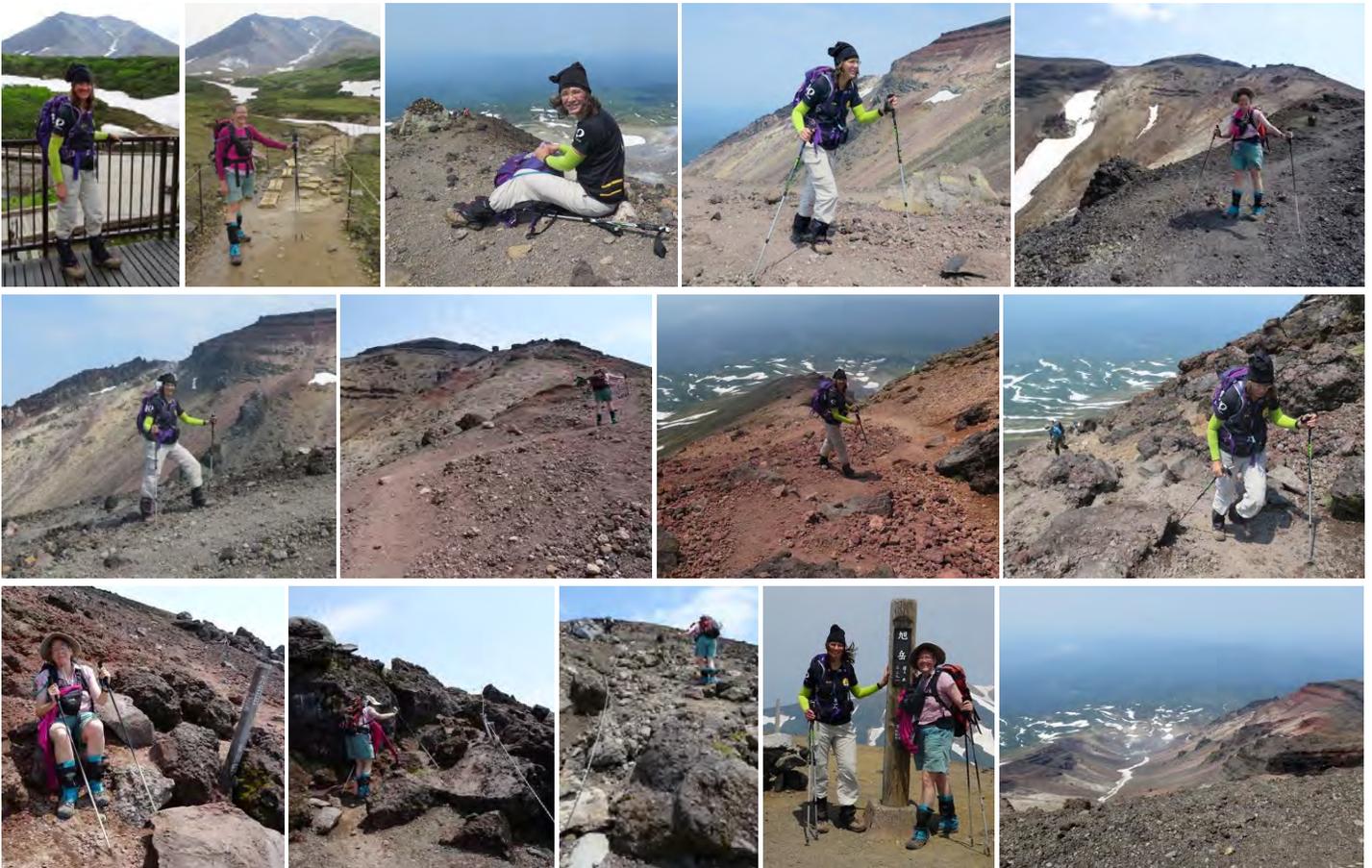
When we checked in at 5, the innkeeper recommended we use the outdoor onsen now since the only other party staying at the lodge tonight would not be back until dinner at 6:30. And so Ellen and I found ourselves appearing in Naked and Afraid II – which was even funnier because there were 2 pool levels... and climbing between them involved awkward naked scrambling. All I could think about was the Seinfeld episode where Jerry becomes uncomfortable with his new nudist girlfriend because so many everyday moves are unflattering (Jerry: "There's good naked and bad naked. Naked hair-brushing, good. Naked crouching, bad." To which I would add: Naked scrambling, BAD!). It was a nice onsen, nonetheless. Tonight's massive dinner featured chicken with greens, roasted cauliflower, Japanese eggplant, tempura vegetables, something kimchee-like, tofu... and oranges for dessert. The other party was a very friendly family - an American father, a Japanese-American mother, and their teenage daughter - who lived near Tokyo. They had DRIVEN here and were doing their first road trip around Hokkaido – a mix of camping and lodge-based accommodations.



Left to Right: first night dinner, me and my yukata, gondola arriving at Asahidake (towering in background), big park sign!

After a pretty good night of sleep (despite hard beds with thin futon mattresses), we were up at 7 for a great breakfast (eggs, sausage, vegetables, rice, soup, and a cookie). Even though the gondola station was only about half a mile away, I asked to drive (mostly because I wanted to save everything for today's big Asahidake climb – Hokkaido's HIGHEST point at just over 7500 feet tall!). Ellen may have grumbled as we drove past a few dozen Japanese hikers walking from respective lodges – and then she may have grumbled again when we paid \$5 to park. Oh well – we easily made the gondola and were promptly whisked up nearly 2000 vertical feet up to the Daisetsuzan plateau (elevation 5200 feet), Asahidake TOWERING prominently. Although the skies looked hazy at the beginning of the day, the winds were fierce and cool – ultimately clearing local skies to blue. Unfortunately, more distant views to other parts of the Daisetsuzan plateau were never particularly clear. Doing the math, it should be clear that climbing Asahidake is not quite as demanding as Meakan – and that is why I was highly motivated to accomplish it. Having rested and worked hard at stretching my knee (mostly the IT band) the last week, I felt pretty confident that if I took the climb slowly and carefully that I could do it without problems. That I made the summit completely surprised Ellen, who patiently waited for me the whole time (2 hours up, 2 hours down). But I am

ahead of myself. The first mile was on a trail that reminded of me hiking to Panorama Point on Mt. Rainier – lots of rocks and heather. We then arrived at this observation area with a bell-tower and cabin – the lower path continuing on a loop away from the mountain... and the climbing route proceeding up through more rocks! The climb reminded me, at times, of a smaller version of South Sister: there was a clear path the whole time, through several different-colored layers of lava. Although not as overall steep as South Sister, there were 3-4 steeper sections where there were more rocks (and less trail). The worst of these sections was after station 8 and you can see in the last row of shots below that I look like I'm leaning IN to the mountain because it felt so steep. After a quick scramble through some big black lava, the final pitch up to the summit was on very loose rock/dirt and steep.



Left to Right: Climbing Asahidake (top) setting out, lower crater rim; (middle) getting steeper; (bottom) even steeper – summit, crater

Asahidake's summit was HUGE and you definitely felt like you were on a massive plateau – the trail continuing down a gentle slope covered with fairly large ground-covering azaleas (Kurodake visible in the distance – a popular day-traverse, if you can arrange transportation!). There were 50-75 people on the summit, 25-30% donning full backpacks because this was day one of the famous 3-5 day Daisetsuzan traverse (that Ellen and Bruno did in 2013). We had shared the trail with many of our summit friends, including my FAVORITE group of mostly middle-aged women backpackers – several definitely sporting my familiar lumpy Norwegian physique. For a good 45 minutes, we enjoyed lunch, the view, the flowers, and the company.



Left to Right: summit azalea, summit crowd, looking across the plateau, Kurodake (pink arrow), my favorite "real" woman of Japan!

Hiking down gave Ellen some Switzerland Via Alpina déjà vu because I was SO cautious and slow – inching my way down, and stopping to stretch every 30-45 minutes. Even so, I did it in 2 hours (the Lonely Planet time). It's just there were lots of crazy men passing us – sliding down the dirt and rocks... and that apparently affects Ellen more than me. We arrived hungry at the observation area around 2:30, enjoying another break where we ate everything we could find in our packs. We took the slightly longer loop trail back, enjoying views of the lozan-esque solfatera area, the wet-looking marshland area, and several cool mini-crater lakes – most full

of snow with partial blue melt-out pools (the best is shown in the cover montage). Back at the gondola station, we bought a few trinkets before descending... and then we wandered around the visitor center - which, as compared with that at Sounkya, was pretty run-down.



Left to Right: one of MANY pictures of me descending, observation area, thermal area, marsh viewpoint, Asahidake from lodge

Back at the lodge, Ellen paid \$20 for the multi-pool onsen experience at the adjacent, hoity-toity hotel (they allowed non-guests ONLY during non-peak hours before 5 p.m.). Meanwhile, I cleaned up for no extra charge in our lodge's women's bath – realizing as I got into the hot water that I had sunburned my legs (despite those sexy gaiters!). Although I sat-showered in private, a skinny older woman showed up just as I was quickly jumping out of the HOT tub. Hopefully I did not scare her. And speaking of scaring people: hiking in shorts is frowned on in Japan, several people expressing concern about my attire on the mountain (I can hear the “told you so's” now!). Dinner featured just as big a spread as last night: tonkatsu pork (which Ellen had been craving) with cabbage and dipping sauce, rice, soup, eggplant, cauliflower/carrot medley, stewed kohlrabi, sweet beans (Mmmm), and a big slice of cantaloupe for dessert. The lodge was busier tonight: a couple of young American guys, an older Japanese couple (the wife was my bathing visitor), and a solo Japanese man who used to be some kind of ranger - totally into mountains and alpine flowers. Only the Japanese guests were interested in talking – which meant we spent 2 hours chatting away and eating. And then Ellen and I played “no-score” SCRABBLE!



Left to Right: another amazing dinner, Ellen loves her pork tonkatsu... WITH cantaloupe and sweet beans, old man ranger and – as determined - his favorite alpine flower from our hike (a wedgeleaf primrose/Primula)

July 8-10: More Fun With Flowers, The Funniest Meal EVER, Home... and Epilogue

The next morning, we requested a slightly later 8 a.m. breakfast (eggs, bacon, greens, soup, rice, dates, and cookies) before we hit the road. Today was mostly flexible – the only HARD deadline being that we had to be at the Chitose rental car lot by 5:30 (the estimated drive time between Asahidake and Chitose = 3 hours). Our loose plan was to hit some flower fields in Biei, just north of Furano; we had also internet-determined that the lavender was now good – and so we wanted to hit Farm Tomito one last time, closing the circle on that part of our trip. Biei was less than an hour away, the first half of the drive along a reservoir, the second half through rice fields (which Ellen said is unusual to see on Hokkaido) – with a short ATM stop at a friendly small-town PO along the way.



Left to Right: rice fields, Zerubunoka Atomunooka – yes, that would be flower ORV touring

Although we had generated the names of a couple Biei flower fields, we came upon a good-looking one that we just HAD to visit: Zerubunoka Atomunooka. Amusingly, one of their hooks was being able to rent ORV's and driving a dirt track around the gardens. In retrospect, we should have done it just to say we did it – plus it was weirdly cheap (\$8 per person) by comparison with the \$\$\$ Segway cost near Obihiro. Instead, we took a short walk, visited the gift shop, and enjoyed a snack at their small cafeteria (in my case, overpriced and NOT-worth-it corn ice cream) before hitting the road again. Within 10 minutes, we were very much in downtown Biei –

which felt like a strip-mall in South Tacoma. Somewhere in there, Ellen miraculously caught a glimpse of signage for a rare kind of eating establishment she had seen/been to only a couple times in Japan: a flowing noodles stand. Turning around, we pulled into this big gravel parking lot next to a very pink pachinko parlor. The stand consisted of a small building/kitchen next to a garage-sized tarped seating area – several older women in cute aprons and bonnets preparing food. We learned they would open at 11 (in about 40 minutes) and that it was all you can eat for \$5. We decided to kill said time by visiting another garden 10 minutes away (TOTAL waste of time... can't even remember the name!). While we walked through the paltry fields, Ellen explained what flowing noodles was and kept asking for reassurance that I could handle it. Flowing noodles involve handfuls of cold cooked somen being served down a long bamboo trough via the action of flowing water; patrons sat at long tables with the bamboo troughs and used chopsticks to grab the noodle-wads as they came down (along with occasional vegetables – pickles, tomatoes...) and dip them in a thin sauce. If you missed the noodles, they were caught in a colander at the end of the table (and then you could pour them into your dipping sauce). Ellen seemed concerned that I would question the microbial/hygiene-level at such a facility... but I did not have concerns, having been healthy on this trip (and no big trips in the next couple of weeks!). And so we returned, the command center matriarch (i.e. the one placing handfuls of noodles into the feed-tubes) was, amusingly, another great chuckler (“Ah – Terumpu... ha, ha, ha”) and clearly thought Americans ate a LOT (i.e. we could NOT keep up with her wads... and were full within 20 HILARIOUS minutes). There was a pair of older men eating one table away from us – but they did not laugh as much; as we were cleaning up, 3 pre-teen boys sat down and were laughing almost as much as us while they tried to catch their food. Easily – the MOST entertaining meal I've ever eaten!



Left to Right: flowing noodles – pretty self-explanatory!

After lunch, we visited one more flower field in the Biei area: Shikisai no Oka, located about 15 minutes outside the city center in what are lots of rolling hills (and part of some popular bike path). Although Shikisai no Oka is clearly a major destination, it was too big and crazy for our tastes... and it was pushing WAY too many gimmicks (e.g. TOO MANY ORV's, tractor rides, golf cart rides, alpaca petting zoo – OBSCENELY huge gift shop...) to be charming (like Farm Tomita). Also, many of the vehicle options were driven very badly by visitors – and, in contrast with Zerubunoka Atomunooka, people and vehicles used the same paths... so this place is asking for accidents. But Shikisai no Oka was huge and its claim to fame was the vast striped flower fields on the hillsides – all with impressive views of the aforementioned Yubari mountain range. The grounds were free to enter but you had to pay \$5 to enter the alpaca petting zoo; after walking about half of the fields, we did visit the sad alpacas. Ellen will never forgive me for insisting we do that.



Left to Right: gimmicky Shikisai no Oka – crazy buses and all kinds of transportation for rent, sad alpacas, vast flower fields

And so we departed, enthusiastic about revisiting the one and only Farm Tomita. During the short (under 30 minute) drive to Furano, we made a short stop at a visitor center (that's where we finally learned about Yubari and Ashibetsu mountains), and then another longer stop at a roadside “cheap cantaloupe” stand where Ellen ate an entire fruit half for \$6 (recall – Farm Tomita sold 1/12 for \$3) and ordered some whole fruits for friends she was visiting in Gifu (where she would spend another week after I left). Even though Farm

Tomita was a little crazier than last time, we loved it all the same. After sampling LOTS of soft serve ice cream across Hokkaido, their lavender one remains the best (after consuming LOTS of food across Hokkaido, one ice cream cone is all we had this time around). The lavender was much better but I am not sure it was as crazy-good as we hoped it would be.



Left to Right: lavender, field-tilling, obligatory Japanese toilet sign with helpful English

Our drive back to Chitose initially took us along the same, familiar highway towards Obihiro – but then we veered west on a HUGE expressway with MANY short tunnels. Our only break was at this eerily empty rest stop. Very close to Chitose, we encountered a big construction zone that messed up the navigator’s recommended route, causing some stress. But we made it to the rental car lot on time, followed by a short shuttle bus to the airport. While Ellen waited in line to drop off her luggage, I checked in to my hotel (same one as before) and then we enjoyed a short final dinner at a Chinese restaurant (it was OK – chicken soup, gyoza, and soup dumplings) before parting ways. Given that I had been feeling run-down and was worried I was getting a sore throat, I went to bed and slept 10 hours straight... before a final excellent buffet breakfast. This time, I ate a mix of western and Japanese food – all the while watching this jetlag-faced American couple cautiously eat nothing but white bread with jam. Given that my plane didn’t leave until 1:30, it was a LONG wait – particularly because the ANA lounge was closed. In contrast, the Narita lounge was THE BEST lounge I’ve seen in terms of spectacular food: all kinds of Japanese beers, high quality green salad, grilled rice balls, tofu-wrapped rice falls, croquettes galore, fried chicken pieces, a full-on noodle bar, and oh-so-many desserts. Definitely worth all the nothingness from the morning. The flight back was fine; my seat-mate was a friendly American teenager who lived in Indonesia and she was on her way to Alaska to participate in a multi-week outdoor leadership program because she wanted to change herself and lose weight. She helped me with all kinds of electronic seat adjustment things I didn’t know about, and I helped her stop a bloody nose.

Epilogue

This trip was definitely one of my favorites – although it cannot be compared to typical hiking/mountain things I have done before because it was so different. At times, I have wondered if I regretted not going to Japan earlier in my life. I remember when my dad first visited Utah in his mid-50’s and he really kicked himself for not discovering that when he was younger. But, honestly, I think it is best that it took me this long to visit Japan – because I do not believe I was mature enough to enjoy it until now. Every day was filled with a high degree of unexpected things that were interesting, entertaining, and/or significant. The things I was afraid of – crowds and smoking – never pervaded this trip. The things I looked forward to – staying with real families on farms – were more satisfying than even I thought they could be. I will say, though, that traveling with Ellen was what made this trip so meaningful. It occurred to me early on that I definitely could not do this trip – either on my own or guided - with this level of enjoyment or flexibility. Ellen’s ability to speak the language was certainly part of that – but also, as Ellen likes to note, she experiences a different level of freedom in Japan... and she feels more sociable and open because she is so obviously different. I would certainly agree with that – although I will probably never embrace onsens! Needless to say, I have asked Ellen when I can start planning the next leg (Northern Honshu - Aomori, Akita, and Yamagata, all rich farming prefectures)... and I think it will likely be a 2-year cycle.



Sarah’s List of Favorite Foods – Mmmm Mmmm (Ellen Would Add Cantaloupe and Pickled Foods)

<p>Toyama Lettuce Sweet Beans (7-11) Somen (Ezura & Flowing Noodles) Peach Konnyaku Corn Tea</p>	<p>Raisin Bread (7-11 and Seico) Lavender Soft Serve Ice Cream (Tomita) BBQ (Akan & Ezura – Ellen Loved the Udon Finish) Roasted Young Garlic (Ezura) Creamed Corn Croquettes (Seico & Tomita)</p>
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