

We asked travel writer Yumi Yamaguchi about Quality Japanese Inns and Hotels

[Final Installment]
Photography/Yuko Iida

Japan Beautiful Stay



Q

Where can I stay to best take in the natural grandeur of Hokkaido?

(Male, 48, restaurant owner)

This summer is shaping up to be a scorcher in Tokyo, especially with the expected power restrictions. For my vacation I've decided to leave the capital for the cooler climate of Hokkaido. Can you recommend somewhere to stay that will allow me to relax and enjoy the natural surroundings?



A

For what you want to do, Hinanoza is the ideal spot.

(Yamaguchi)

Hinanoza in the Lake Akan hot spring region of Hokkaido is a modern hotel distinguished by indigenous Ainu design and handcrafted work with a contemporary twist. The lounge, which features traditional woodcarvings, offers picture-perfect views across Lake Akan. Akan is famous for its colonies of marimo moss balls, and in fact apart from the town itself the whole of the lake shore is native forest. This is the place to immerse yourself in the majestic natural splendor of Hokkaido.

Tasty cuisine perfect complement to natural splendor

On entering Hinanoza one is greeted by a gallery of dramatic design and decoration. First to catch the eye is a shimafukuro (Blakiston's fish owl) perched on a bench, wings spread wide as though it were about to take flight. According to hotel staff, the bird was carved from wood by a group of local craftsmen. Next, guests are lured into the main entrance hall. At first glance the hotel appears to be a conventional Japanese inn. Beyond the tatami matting, however, an exotic space with carved wooden furniture is positioned to perfect effect against the breathtaking backdrop of Lake Akan. Carvings of wild animals are dotted throughout the hotel. The hotel staff members who kindly explain it all

wear uniforms incorporating Ainu motifs. Judging from its interior, Hinanoza is a hostelry suffused with the very essence of Hokkaido.

Ushered into a room of extraordinary luxury, I find a panoramic view of Lake Akan. Rooms at Hinanoza also featured in the Chinese film *If You Are the One*, triggering a boom in Hokkaido tourism in China. Bathing in the cypress wood outdoor tub attached to the room, I gaze across the lake to indigenous forest devoid of human habitation. Soaking in the soothing waters while drinking in views of the beautiful lakeshore, I feel all that pent-up fatigue dissolve away.

Visiting the bar before dinner, I find an Ainu pattern resembling sharp sword tips decorating a massive natural wood counter, and contemplate the setting sun while listening to slow music wafting from

vacuum tube amps.

Dinner is served in a private room at the hotel's "Hina" restaurant, and consists of a succession of delectable dishes with a definite seasonal flavor, sourced from the land and seas of Hokkaido. With the sake tasting just as good, it would be a waste to stop these fresh, tasty morsels coming. I decide to forget about calorie-counting just for today.

The following day starts with a post-breakfast stroll along the nature trail circling the shores of Lake Akan. Bokke (mud pools) bubble out of the ground quite close to the hotel. This place is also said to have been home to the Ainu since ancient times. The sun's rays are powerful, but the breeze blowing through the trees is cool, tirelessly rustling the fresh young leaves.

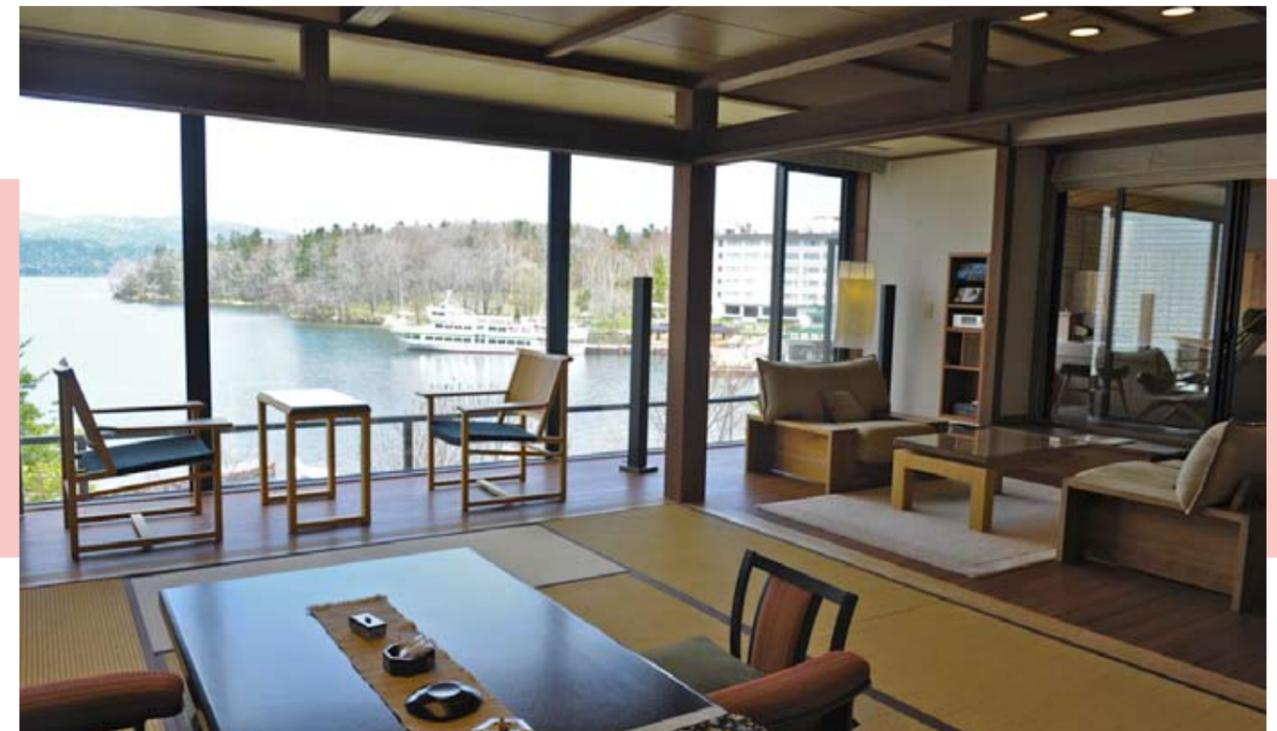


The bedroom is separate from the living room and tatami room facing the lake. The spacious sleeping space is partitioned off by paper doors to ensure privacy, also making it perfect for families.



The outdoor baths attached to the rooms have a constant supply of fresh running spring water. After a warming soak in the cypress wood tub, take a seat on the terrace overlooking the native forest and cool off in the bracing mountain air.

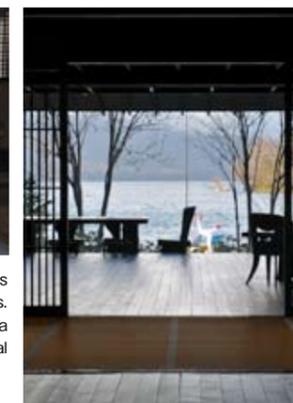
Seafood sourced that same day from Kushiro, Abashiri and other local fishing grounds graces the table. Dishes made from local ingredients such as Hokkaido Sika Deer tatakai and tempura of smelt caught in Lake Akan make for an unforgettable dining experience.



The Amanozu Suite overlooking Lake Akan with interconnecting tatami room, living room and bath. The view opening up across the lakeshore is simply superb.



In the listening room guests can enjoy the mellow tones emanating from handcrafted wooden JBL Paragon speakers. The lounge overlooking the lakeshore also boasts a collection of books on Lake Akan, the Ainu and other local subjects.



Akan Tsuruga Besso Hinanoza

2-8-1, Akanko Onsen, Akan-cho, Kushiro, Hokkaido, Japan
Tel: 0154-67-3050
Prices start at ¥29,000 per person per night including dinner and breakfast
<http://www.hinanoza.com/>

[Getting there]

- By train from Sapporo
Super Ozora limited express from Sapporo Station to Tsuruga Station (approx. 230 minutes), then highway bus to Hinanoza (approx. 100 minutes)
- By bus from Kushiro Airport
Approx. 80 minutes by highway bus from Kushiro Airport to Hinanoza

Yumi Yamaguchi

Travel Writer. Author of *Teikoku Hotel · Wright kan no nazo* (Mysteries of the Imperial Hotel and Wright Buildings), *Shueisha Shinsho: Kieta shukuhaku meibo~hotel ga kataru senso no kioku* (A Register of Vanished Hotels: Memories of War that Hotels can tell us), *Shichosha; Tabi no mado kara* (Window Scenes from my Travels), *Chihaya Shobo*, and others.