Footbathing And Flower Trekking In Northern Japan's National Parks

By Jennifer Bain
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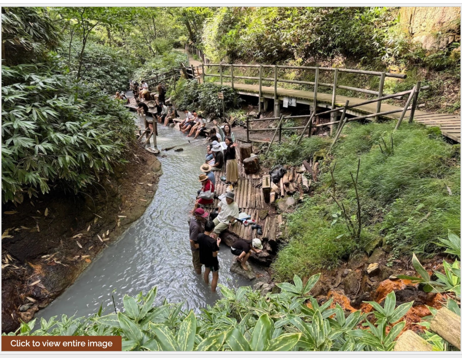


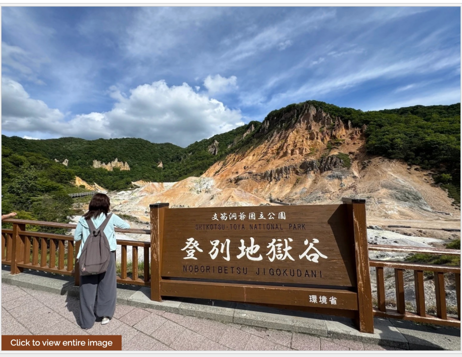
In Shikotsu-Toya National Park in northern Japan, hikers soak their feet in the thermal waters of the Oyunuma Brook Natural Footbath/Jennifer Bain

The sulfurous scent of boiled eggs hung in the forest air as Hell Valley hikers neatly arranged themselves along a wooden platform, kicked off their shoes and plunged their aching feet into milky-blue water.

Most people relaxed on the comfortable "pads for footbathing" you could borrow from a waterproof tub. But a few of us restless sorts waded over to the base of a small waterfall to test the temperature of the thermal waters as they spilled over rocks from above.

"Hot water and mud may erupt suddenly and the footbath could be too hot," a sign warned in four languages.

Nothing that dramatic happened, but those contemplative moments at the Oyunuma Brook Natural Footbath in Shikotsu-Toya National Park sure left a multi-sensory impression. So did the volcanic landscape and the benevolent Japanese demon statues around the nearby town of Noboribetsu Onsen that serve as guardians of the hot springs.



Known locally as Jigokudani, Hell Valley is one of Shikotsu-Toya National Park's most popular spots/Jennifer Bain

Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost region, is home to seven of the country's 35 national parks. Flying into Wakkanai and out of Sapporo, I got to experience two of them and see how they differ from what we're used to in North America.

For starters, there are no gates or admission fees so it can be hard to know when you're in a park. Some protected land is government owned, but much is in private hands and managed by Japan's Ministry of the Environment. You won't likely see any rangers unless you arrange to meet them for interviews like I did.

"People don't always know they're even in a national park," ranger Hitoshi Nakamura from the Wakkanai Ranger Office told me through a translator when we met in a hotel lobby. "A lot of Japanese people travel because of national parks, but I'm not sure those who visit national parks always mean it or if they understand it's a national park or not."

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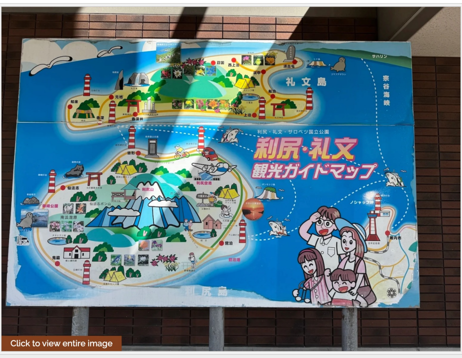
Hitoshi Nakamura, a park ranger with the Wakkanai Ranger Office of Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park in Hokkaido, Japan talks about the alpine flowers of Rebun Island during an interview in a hotel lobby/Jennifer Bain

Wakkanai is so far north that you can see Russia's Sakhalin Island from Cape Soya on a clear day because it's just 26 miles away.

This city is the launch point for Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park. Japan's northernmost national park is made up of parts of two tiny islands (Rishiri and Rebun) with entirely different personalities, plus a stretch of coastline that's home to the Sarobetsu Plains, bird-friendly wetlands and two visitor centers.

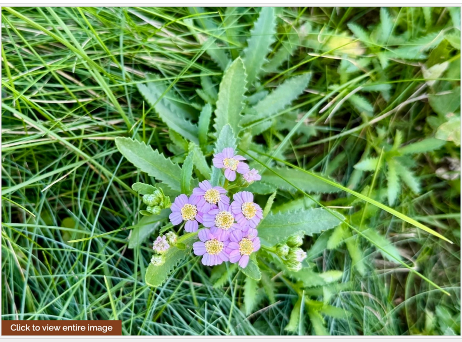
When you arrive at Wakkanai's ferry terminal, expect to be bombarded with posters and pictures of Rebun Island's famous alpine flowers. Some 300 species bloom here thanks to the high latitude and cool climate, and can be appreciated along the coast and at other low-lying spots.



Rebun Island (top) is known for its alpine flowers while Rishiri Island (bottom) is known for Mt. Rishiri, the iconic image for Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park. Parts of each island are actually protected national park land/Jennifer Bain

Flower trekking is popular and "flower rangers" (locals, not park staff) keep tabs on things and help deter the poaching that was a significant problem several decades ago. Maps have tantalizing notations like "Large Field of Rebun's lady slipper orchid" and "Large field of Asian skunk cabbage."

After a two-hour ferry crossing to the sleepy island of just 2,200 people in the Sea of Japan, I posed for photos with a cute statue of the island's mascot character Atsumon, who was inspired by the yellow-white *Rebun Atsumoriso.* It was as close as I would get to the lady slipper orchid.



Flower trekking on Rebun Island is best done between May and July. By August, only a few flowers are still blooming/Jennifer Bain

Rebun — just 18 miles long and five miles wide — is known as the "Floating Island of Flowers." I visited two coastal viewpoints, found the fading national park sign in one of them, and hiked part of the Momoiwa Observatory Trail.

The only catch was that it was late August, blessedly cooler than Tokyo with temperatures hovering under 70F, but just a smidge too late for the famous orchid and the "Princess of Alpine Plants" (Rebun Usuyukiso), whose pale leaves resemble "a light layer of fallen snow."

There were a few late-season beauties still blooming, and clear views of Rishiri Island, a conical volcanic island formed from the extinct volcanic peak of Mt. Rishiri.

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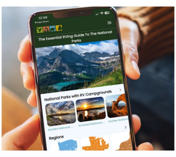
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Through some August flowers on Rebun Island, you can see Mt. Rishiri on nearby Rishiri Island. Parts of both islands in the Sea of Japan make up one of the Hokkaido region's seven national parks/Jennifer Bain

The next day I caught a one-hour ferry south to Rishiri, a buzzing island with 5,000 people and Japan's northernmost whisky distillery. It's about 19 miles long and barely nine miles wide, and you can rent bikes and cycle around the island.

The waters surrounding both islands are home to Rishiri kombu, a high-grade kelp, and sea urchins, a local delicacy that shows up in everything from ramen to ice cream creations (really).

It takes about 10 hours to hike the mountain, lovingly dubbed Rishiri-Fuji because it resembles Mt. Fuji. It's the symbol of the park. Erosion is a problem with the fragile volcanic soil near the peak and since there aren't any outhouses along the trail, you're encouraged to buy mobile toilet bags at the local Seicomart and use them behind special privacy "booths."

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In Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park, nature guide Hiroto Kumagai leads a leisure stroll around Himenuma Swamp. On clear days, Mt. Rishiri's reflection can be seen in the pond's water/Jennifer Bain

Nature guide Hiroto Kumagai took me for a much easier walk.

The park's Himenuma Swamp is an artificially created pond that combined several small swamps and springs and got its name because it was stocked with landlocked kokanee salmon (himemasu).

You can often see the upside-down reflection of Mt. Rishiri on the surface of the water, but the 5,656-foot-tall mountain was cloaked in clouds when I visited. Instead, I looped around the swamp on a tranquil path through primeval forest hoping to see Japanese robins and Black woodpeckers, but making do with cormorants.

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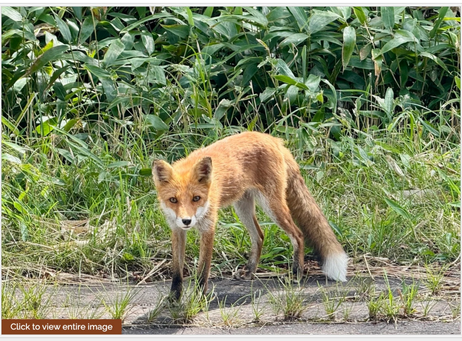
On Rishiri Island, Ezo no yomogigiku (tansy boreale) flowers greet people exploring the Himenuma Swamp/Jennifer Bain

I did stop to ponder some of the posted national park rules.

What we call rules are politely translated here as "field manners." Bring back your trash. Don't pick plants. Don't feed wild animals. Don't smoke while walking. Bring a portable ashtray and take your cigarette butts home. Smoke only in designated areas.

"Nature is not only yours," one sign stressed. "Nature belongs to nobody. Care about all living things and nature."



An Ezo red fox, widespread in Hokkaido, appears along the road on the road to Shikotsu-Toya National Park/Jennifer Bain

Of all the living things I dreamed of seeing in Hokkaido's national parks, a raccoon dog (tanuki), Ezo red fox and Ezo squirrel topped the list. So did the Shima-Enaga, the Long-tailed Tit that looks like a snowball and is nicknamed the Snow Fairy.

Only a single fox sighting was meant to be. That happened after flying from Rishiri Island to Sapporo, and escaping the city of two million for that footbathing day trip to Shikotsu-Toya National Park.

That road trip was rounded out with time admiring Lake Shikotsu (a caldera lake) and meeting four park rangers for a ride up the Mt. Usu Ropeway (an aerial tram) to talk about the volcanic landscape and how the park became Japan's first UNESCO Global Geopark.

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Four national park rangers enjoy the Mt. Usu Ropeway (an aerial tram) in Shikotsu-Toya National Park. From left: Shinji Okada, Kazumi Komura, Shuichiro Tajima and Shingo Arakawa.

There was a whirl through the Toyako Visitor Center and Volcano Science Museum, learning how locals live with the threat of volcanic eruptions.

There were moments that felt very North American, like reading about invasive signal crayfish in the lakes and hearing that bike rentals had been suspended because of a brown bear sighting.

There were kitschy swan pedal boats and an outdoor sculpture gallery.

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Summer Wang and Chiyuki Okada enjoy the thermal waters of the Oyunuma Brook Natural Footbath/Jennifer Bain

Through all these adventures, Chiyuki Okada, who has been guiding people through Japan for 30 years, was most excited to share the footbath.

For logistical reasons, we had to do things backwards, but you should make a day of it. Start at the park service center, hike some of Hell Valley's trails, meander through the shaded forest and end with your feet dipped in warm water for half an hour, an hour or even more.

"On a beautiful day like today, it's heaven," said Okada before we reluctantly dried our feet and prepared to leave Hell Valley.

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One of the benevolent Yukijin demon statues that protect the hot springs around Noboribetsu Onsen. This blue praying demon is beside a larger standing red demon at a site with a small shrine called Oni-Bokora/Jennifer Bain

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