HOKKAIDO / SAPPORO · SHIRETOKO · AKAN · NOBORIBETSU · 14 DAYS · ROAD TRIP

Lavender, bears & boiling lakes: Hokkaido's wild north by car

Updated October 2026 · Best time: Jun–Oct

Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/hokkaido-summer-autumn-road-trip

Hokkaido is Japan's wild north: wide skies, volcanoes, crater lakes and farmland that looks more like Europe than Asia. Distances are big and public transport thins out quickly, so this is the island where a car really pays off.

The loop starts in Sapporo and ends at New Chitose Airport, and works from June to October. **July** is lavender time in Furano. From **mid-September** the first autumn colours in Japan appear on Asahidake, and by early October they reach Shiretoko and the lakes. The last nights belong to two of Hokkaido's great onsen stops: **Noboribetsu** and Lake Toya.

14 days	**~1,400** km by car	**9** stops	**Jun–Oct** best time
from ~¥240k per person*			

*Accommodation and rental car for two, sharing a room. Flights not included.

The route at a glance

1. **Sapporo** — Nights 1–2
2. **Otaru & Shakotan** — Night 3
3. **Furano & Biei** — Nights 4–5
4. **Daisetsuzan & Sounkyo** — Night 6
5. **Shiretoko** — Nights 7–8
6. **Lake Akan & Lake Mashu** — Nights 9–10
7. **Tokachi** — Night 11
8. **Noboribetsu** — Night 12
9. **Lake Toya** — Night 13



The route: about 1,400 km by car from Sapporo to New Chitose Airport, plus the train from the airport into Sapporo on day 1.

Prices are per room for two per night. Ryokan prices include dinner and breakfast. ⭐ = famous / worth it · ⭐⭐ = splurge.

Stop by stop

01 Sapporo 札幌

Nights 1–2 · Hokkaido's capital: beer, ramen & jingisukan

PLAN

- Day 1: land at New Chitose Airport, JR Rapid Airport train to Sapporo (~37 min)
- Odori Park and the TV Tower, the old Clock Tower, Nijo Market for a seafood breakfast
- Sapporo Beer Museum, then the Mount Moiwa ropeway for the night view
- Eat: miso ramen, soup curry and jingisukan (grilled lamb)

WHERE TO STAY

⭐ **JR Tower Hotel Nikko Sapporo** above Sapporo Station, big views	¥30–45k
Dormy Inn Premium Sapporo onsen bath & free late-night ramen	¥18–28k
Cross Hotel Sapporo design hotel near the station	¥18–30k

> **Good to know** Pick up the rental car on the morning you leave (day 3). In the city, subway and trams are easier than driving.

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02 Otaru & Shakotan 小樽・積丹

Night 3 · Canal town & the 'Shakotan blue' coast

PLAN

- Day 3: pick up the car in Sapporo, drive to the Shakotan peninsula (~2 h): the ridge path out to Cape Kamui above the clear blue sea, sea-urchin bowls (uni-don) in summer
- Evening in Otaru: the canal at dusk, Sakaimachi street with glass workshops and the music box museum, then sushi

WHERE TO STAY

☆☆ **Otaru Ginrinsou** historic herring-merchant mansion, now an onsen ryokan above the sea — ¥60–90k

Hotel Nord Otaru right next to the canal — ¥18–30k

Hotel Sonia Otaru canal-view rooms, walk to everything — ¥18–30k

> **Good to know** Uni season on Shakotan is roughly June to August. The path to the cape closes in strong wind.

03 Furano & Biei 富良野・美瑛

Nights 4–5 · Lavender, patchwork hills & the Blue Pond

PLAN

- Day 4: drive ~2.5 h to Furano; Farm Tomita's lavender fields (peak mid–late July)
- Day 5: Biei's Patchwork Road and Panorama Road, the Shikisai-no-oka flower hills, the Blue Pond and Shirahige Falls
- Evening: Furano cheese and wine, the craft cabins of Ningle Terrace in the forest

WHERE TO STAY

Furano Natulux Hotel modern hotel next to Furano Station — ¥18–30k

New Furano Prince Hotel resort hotel with onsen, next to Ningle Terrace — ¥25–45k

☆ **Shirogane Onsen** small onsen hotels up by the Blue Pond, under Mount Tokachi — ¥30–50k

> **Good to know** Biei's fields are private farmland: stay on roads and paths. The lavender only peaks for about three weeks in July; in autumn the hills turn gold instead.

04 Daisetsuzan & Sounkyo 大雪山・層雲峡

Night 6 · Japan's first autumn colours

PLAN

- Morning: Asahidake ropeway up to Sugatami Pond, then a 1–2 h loop walk past steaming vents (autumn colours from early to mid-September)
- Afternoon: drive round to Sounkyo Gorge, the Ginga and Ryusei waterfalls, the Kurodake ropeway
- Evening: onsen in Sounkyo

WHERE TO STAY

Sounkyo Choyotei big onsen hotel with gorge views — ¥30–50k

☆ **Lodge Nutapukaushipe** small log lodge at the foot of Asahidake — ¥25–35k

La Vista Daisetsuzan onsen hotel near the Asahidake ropeway — ¥40–60k

Good to know At the top it can be close to freezing even in September. Bring layers; this is bear country too.

05 Shiretoko 知床

Nights 7–8 · UNESCO wilderness at the end of the road

PLAN

- Day 7: the long drive (~4 h) via the Sea of Okhotsk coast to Utoro; sunset from Yuhidai
- Day 8: Shiretoko Five Lakes (the elevated boardwalk is free; the ground trail needs a short lecture or a guide in bear season), Furepe Falls, and a boat cruise along the cliffs to look for bears
- Optional: cross the Shiretoko Pass (Route 334) to Rausu for whale watching (spring to autumn)

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Kitakobushi Shiretoko Hotel & Resort** onsen hotel on the coast at Utoro	¥35–55k
Shiretoko Daiichi Hotel big onsen hotel above Utoro	¥30–45k
Utoro guesthouses small family-run stays	¥15–25k

Good to know Never approach or feed wildlife. Bears are common here: carry a bell and follow the park rules. Route 334 over the pass is closed from about November to April.

06 Lake Akan & Lake Mashu 阿寒・摩周

Nights 9–10 · Caldera lakes & Ainu culture

PLAN

- Day 9: drive ~2.5 h to Lake Mashu, one of the clearest lakes in the world, seen from its crater rim
- Lake Kussharo: dig your own warm pool in the sand at Sunayu; the steaming sulphur vents of Iozan
- Day 10: Lake Akan: the Ainu Kotan village with crafts and the Ikor theatre for traditional dance, a boat to the marimo (moss ball) centre, the Bokke mud-pot walk

WHERE TO STAY

Akan Yuku no Sato Tsuruga large onsen resort on the lake	¥35–55k
☆ **La Vista Akangawa** stylish onsen hotel with river-view baths	¥45–70k
☆☆ **Akan Tsuruga Besso Hinanoza** small luxury ryokan	¥90k+

Good to know Lake Mashu is often hidden in fog. Keep a second chance for the viewpoint, ideally early in the morning.

07 Tokachi 十勝

Night 11 · Farmland, butadon & moor onsen

PLAN

- Day 11: drive ~2.5 h south-west to Obihiro; butadon (grilled pork on rice) for lunch and Rokkatei's sweets
- Tokachi's open farmland and flower gardens; Tokachigawa Onsen's brown 'moor' water, rich in plant minerals

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Sasai Hotel** onsen hotel with moor-water baths — ¥30–45k

Tokachigawa Onsen Daiichi Hotel garden ryokan with big baths — ¥30–50k

08 Noboribetsu 登別

Night 12 · Hell Valley & Hokkaido's most famous onsen town

PLAN

- Day 12: expressway west (~3 h) to Noboribetsu
- Jigokudani (Hell Valley): boardwalks through a steaming crater; walk on to Oyunuma pond and the Oyunumagawa natural footbath, a warm river in the forest
- Evening: soak in several different types of spring water in one bathhouse

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Dai-ichi Takimotokan** huge bathhouse with many spring types, overlooking Hell Valley — ¥35–55k

Noboribetsu Grand Hotel classic onsen hotel in the town centre — ¥30–45k

☆☆ **Takinoya** refined ryokan with private baths — ¥80k+

09 Lake Toya 洞爺湖

Night 13 · Caldera lake, volcanoes & fireworks

PLAN

- Day 13: ~1 h to Lake Toya; the Mount Usu ropeway with views of Showa-shinzan, a volcano that rose out of wheat fields in 1943–45
- Lakeside onsen town; fireworks over the lake every night from late April to October (about 20 minutes, around 20:45)
- Day 14: ~1.5 h to New Chitose Airport, return the car, fly out

WHERE TO STAY

☆☆ **The Windsor Hotel Toya** hilltop resort above the lake and the sea — ¥60–100k

Toya Sun Palace big lakeside onsen resort — ¥25–40k

Nonokaze Resort lakeside onsen hotel, lake-view rooms — ¥40–60k

Budget

Estimates for October at ¥150 ≈ US$1 · ¥165 ≈ €1. Ranges, not promises.

Version	Accommodation (2 people)	+ Car (12 days)	Per person
Value: business hotels, guesthouses and simpler onsen hotels	≈ ¥350k	¥130k	≈ ¥240k
Middle: first option at most stops, ryokans with dinner	≈ ¥480k	¥130k	≈ ¥305k
+ Splurge: one night at Ginrinsou, Hinanoza or the Windsor	+ ¥50–80k		+ ¥25–40k

MY RECOMMENDATION

Take the middle version, **about ¥300k per person**. Best splurge: the Windsor Hotel Toya on the last night, with the lake below you.

🚗 Compact car, full insurance, picked up in Sapporo and returned at New Chitose Airport: about ¥120–150k for 12 days.

NOT INCLUDED

- Flights
- Fuel and tolls: about ¥40–60k in total (the Hokkaido Expressway Pass helps)
- Lunches, and dinners on hotel-only nights
- Boat cruises, ropeways and entrance fees
- July–August and autumn weekends: up to +30%

Booking & practical tips

DRIVING LICENCE

You need an International Driving Permit (1949 Geneva Convention) or, for some countries, an official Japanese translation. See my rental car guide.

DISTANCES

Hokkaido is big: 250–350 km days happen on this loop. Fill up when you can, because rural petrol stations close early.

WILDLIFE

Deer jump onto roads at dusk, so slow down. Foxes look cute but can carry a dangerous parasite: never feed or touch them. Bears: bells on trails, no food left outside.

TOLLS

Ask the rental company for an ETC card and the Hokkaido Expressway Pass for foreign visitors; it covers the long expressway days.

SEASONS

Lavender: July. Autumn colours: Asahidake mid-September, Sounkyo late September, Shiretoko and Akan early to mid-October. The Shiretoko Pass is closed in winter.

BOOK EARLY

July, August and autumn weekends are Hokkaido's peak. Book the car and Shiretoko hotels months ahead.

Frequently asked questions

When is the lavender in Furano at its best?

From about mid to late July, for roughly three weeks. In June the fields are green; from August the hills turn golden with other flowers.

Are bears a real risk?

They're common in Shiretoko and the mountains, but encounters are rare if you follow the rules: bells on trails, no food left outside, and never approach wildlife. Join a guided walk for the Shiretoko Five Lakes ground trail in bear season.

Is 14 days enough for Hokkaido?

For this loop, yes, with some long driving days. With 10 days, skip Shiretoko and Tokachi; with 18, add a night in Biei and a second night in Shiretoko.

Do I need an expressway pass?

It helps. The Hokkaido Expressway Pass for foreign visitors comes with the ETC card from your rental company and covers the long toll days.

Can I do it in autumn instead of summer?

Yes. The first colours appear on Asahidake in mid-September, then move to Sounkyo, Shiretoko and the lakes by early to mid-October.