Closer to mainland Russia than to Tokyo, Shiretoko Peninsula has always had the exotic appeal of a “foreign land” among the Japanese from Honshu and beyond, but closer inspection reveals the unique atmosphere to be of distinctly Hokkaido origin. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005, the region continues to be an unspoilt outpost of natural splendour, and the habitat of countless species of flora and fauna.

One of the best ways to explore Shiretoko is from the deck of one of the pleasure cruisers that trace the contours of its coastline. Marvel at the inaccessible lofty cliffs, sea caves, waterfalls and lush green forests visible only from the sea. Sightings of Steller sea lions, Hokkaido Sika deer and brown bears on the land are not uncommon, while seafowl and white-tailed eagles hover above. Seagulls that fly alongside can be fed from the hand as they adjust their speed to that of the boat. In early summer, dolphins can often be seen escorting the boats, and with a bit of luck you might even see one of the whales or killer whales that inhabit the offshore waters. After an invigorating day in the wild, an evening of comfort and fine cuisine await at one of the hotels or inns situated in the nearby town of Shari. Hot-spring baths and dishes made from fresh Hokkaido ingredients ensure a perfect end to the day.

Dining Hokkaido

Ramen is one of the main Hokkaido food groups.

By Phred Kaufman

If you ask five people their favorite ramen shop you will get six different answers. It’s traditional after a night of drinking to end with a bowl of ramen, but it was also the first choice dish of the wife of the VIP of China during a traditional visit to Sapporo.

A wise local (my wife) once told me the way to tell good ramen is that it doesn’t leave a salty taste in your mouth. The Higuma (brown bear) ramen shop in the famous Ramen Alley or Raman yokcho meets the aftertaste test and is great to eat. A third generation shop, it is one of the most crowded but it is worth the wait. My favorite is the Koku (rich) Miso Ramen, but the Butter Corn and Scallop Ramen are popular among tourists. Try the Brown Bear Beer, an oatmeal stout.

Open 10 am to 2 am on weekdays, 5 am on weekends, and 10 pm on Sunday.

Another Food Group is genghis khan, a favorite dish when Hokkaidokles gather together. Genghis khan, which for some reason is named after the Mongolian warlord but in fact has no other connection, is lamb that is cooked at your table with vegetables and then dipped in a special sauce.

Three major beer companies have enormous genghis khan halls but if you find yourself hungry in Susukino, you should try the Sapporo Beer Club.

As well as genghis khan, raw oysters and various seasonal Hokkaido foods are also available at Sapporo Beer Club, and if you mention the Hokkaido Walk-a-pedia when ordering the 100-minute all-you-can-eat genghis khan course complete with free drinks, the price will be reduced from ¥3,750 to ¥3,000.

Open 5 pm to 1 am on weekends, 11 pm on weekdays and Sunday.

The zoo’s enclosures were revamped and reopened this spring, creating habitats that enable the animals to live more naturally while providing even better viewing conditions for visitors.

Buses to the nearest town of Shari, from which you can catch the Sapporo Beer Club.

By train

Access: approximately four-and-a-half hours by car from Sapporo to Ashoro, via the Hokkaido and Doto expressways. Lake Onneto is roughly 30 minutes from central Ashoro via National Route 241 and Prefectural Route 664.

For more details, contact Ashoro Town’s Committee and Tourism Department on +81-156-251-2141.

Ashoro
http://www.town.ashoro.hokkaido.jp/

Hokkaido Heritage
http://www.hokkaidoheritage.org/map/