

Hokkaidans are well known throughout Japan for their pioneer spirit. They are a relaxed but progressive people, open to new ideas and new faces. Although they have a strong sense of regional patriotism, Hokkaidans are a welcoming people who are fond of saying "live here three days and you're a local."

Geography and Transportation

Covering 83 500 km², Hokkaido is Japan's second-largest island and compares in size to Austria. It is separated from mainland Japan by the Tsugaru Straits and surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and the Japan and Okhotsk seas.

Fourteen per cent of the island is cultivated farmland (23 per cent of Japan's total farm acreage), while roughly half the region is covered in mountains or forests.

Hokkaido lies at the same latitude as southern Ontario and its climate is comparable to that of Toronto. While year-round temperatures average 8.2°C, Sapporo thermometers register a chilly -5°C in February and a comfortable 23°C in August. The annual rainfall is between 937 and 997 mm.

Although few Japanese envy Hokkaidans their winters, summers on the island are not nearly as hot and humid as in other parts of the country. The region is also spared the rainy season that makes Tokyo extremely unpleasant during June and July.

Long isolated from mainland Japan, Hokkaido is on the verge of being transformed from a regional centre to an international gateway, as major transportation infrastructure projects near completion.

The world's busiest air route runs from Tokyo to Chitose. The route is so busy (approximately 150 flights daily) and landing slots so scarce that Boeing 747s are used almost exclusively for the 90-minute flight. In 1987, 75 per cent of the approximately 12.8 million passengers that used Hokkaido's dozen airports passed through Chitose.

Currently Japan's only major airport open 24 hours a day, Chitose International Airport is undergoing expansion and renovation. Construction of a second 3 000-m runway, international passenger terminal and extensive air cargo facilities is underway, and plans call for a high-speed, magnetic-levitation transit system to connect the airport with central Sapporo, just 45 km away.

Sitting astride the major great-circle air routes that connect North America and Europe to Asia, and 700 km closer to North America than Narita Airport in Tokyo, Chitose is well situated as a trans-Pacific gateway.

Hokkaido authorities hope that Chitose's many attributes will lure international carriers and make the airport a major trade centre. Although Narita handles 85 per cent of Japan's international air cargo, Chitose hopes to capture approximately 25 per cent of total traffic by the year 2000.

Korean Airlines, Cathay Pacific and Continental Airlines provide international passenger service to Chitose. British Airways, Qantas, Thai International, Air India, and Garuda have announced plans to service the airport in the future. Among freight-only carriers, United States forwarders Emery Worldwide and Flying Tigers are developing hubs at Chitose. Although Vancouver and Edmonton are the closest North American airports to Chitose, as yet there are no plans for direct service to Canada.

More than 30 ports dot Hokkaido's coastlines. The largest, Muroran and Tomakomai, are located on the south coast. Tomakomai handled approximately one-third (64.1 million tons) of all cargo which passed through Hokkaido ports in 1990. Ishikari, a new port, has become an important gateway for lumber shipments from Canada and other foreign destinations.

Although the Seikan Tunnel now links the island to Honshu, ferry and coastal traffic continues to thrive. Every week, ferries make over 200 trips between Hokkaido and mainland ports.

Japan is in the midst of constructing a vast, nationwide network of express toll roads, several of which run through Hokkaido. However, even without these new corridors, it is much easier to travel by road on the island than in other areas of Japan. Because of wider urban road allowances and better maintained rural highways, Hokkaidans use their cars more frequently than people in other regions of the country.

Since Japan National Railways was restructured in 1985, the island's rail system has been run by JR Hokkaido. The trip from Sapporo to Tokyo takes just under 11 hours via the Seikan Tunnel, but JR Hokkaido hopes to further reduce travel times by extending the northern shinkansen (bullet train) line to the north end of Honshu and, eventually, to Sapporo.