

SNOW COUNTRY



ALL PHOTOS TADASHI AIZAWA

Bathers unwind in the hot spring on the ice at Lake Shikaribetsu

Tourists drink from ice glasses at the Lake Shikaribetsu Ice bar.

During the winter season, many different festivals and events that benefit from cold weather and heavy snowfalls take place in the Tohoku region, in Hokkaido and elsewhere, in northern Japan. We look at two wintry tourist attractions that draw large numbers of visitors.



Lake Shikaribetsu Igloo Village

Lake Shikaribetsu is located in the Daisetsuzan National Park near the heart of Hokkaido. At an approximate altitude of 800 meters, it is the highest lake in Hokkaido. In winter, it is so cold that the lowest temperature may fall to -30 degrees Celsius. It is said that its water freezes earlier and the ice melts later than in any other natural lake in Japan's northernmost island.

Lake Shikaribetsu is the venue for what this year is the 30th Lake Shikaribetsu Igloo Village, which runs from January 22 to March 31. A village made solely of snow and ice appears on the lake surface, which looks like a snowfield.

One of the highlights of this event is the open-air hot spring bath on the ice, something that probably has no equivalent in the world. A large bath tub is placed on the frozen lake surface about 100 meters away from the bank, and hot spring water is pumped from the bank into the tub so that you can take a bath there. The changing room is also made of snow and ice.

There is also an ice bar, made of snow and ice, where you can have a drink from a glass made of ice. At the ice theater, movies are projected to the ice screen. Concerts are held in the ice hall. You can stay overnight in an ice lodge, also made from snow and ice.

The Kotan offers opportunities to enjoy a range of experiences and activities, such as ice glass making, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling on ice.



Igloo Village on the iced-over, snow-covered Lake Shikaribetsu



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Kamakura in Yokote

A *kamakura* is a snow dome created by hollowing out compacted snow. Originally, it was a traditional wintry event in the snowy areas of the Tohoku region, in which the deity of water was honored inside the dome. Today, *kamakura* are built at many events held in different places during the winter season.

For instance, the event of building *kamakura* in the city of Yokote in Akita Prefecture can be traced back about 400 years. For the Snow Festival in February, the local tourist association sets up nearly 100 *kama-*

kura. Each is three meters high and three meters across. In addition, many snow domes are built at home and in the grounds of the workplace. During the festival, visitors can enjoy making a *kamakura* with the help of the locals. In the evening, local children play inside the domes and enjoy chatting with the tourists.

The city has a *Kamakura* Museum, where a *kamakura* made of local snow is stored in the exhibition room, with the temperature kept at -10 degrees Celsius, so that it can be viewed year round.



The Yokote City Tourist Association dispatches skilled kamakura builders with decades of experience to set up full-size snow domes made from Yokote's snow in other regions. It also sells miniature kamakura, which are dome-shaped foam containers of 30 cm x 30 cm packed with Yokote snow.

Miniature kamakura illuminated by candles on a Yokote riverbank

