

Traversing the Natural Wonders of Kushiro Marsh

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The Kushiro Shitsugen Norokko is a popular sightseeing train that chugs along at a leisurely pace through Hokkaido's Kushiro Marsh from spring to early autumn. The train gives passengers the chance to take in one of Japan's signature forest and water paradises.

“WON'T you watch Japan's best sunset at Kushiro Marsh?” That's the tagline for the Kushiro Shitsugen Norokko open-air train, which takes you on a 27-kilometer journey from Kushiro to Toro Station in southeastern Hokkaido. The sightseeing train began operations in June 1989, has four cars—three of which are reserved seating only—and runs from April to early October. The trip one way takes an hour, and the train makes one or two round trips a day. Sometimes slowing down to a leisurely speed of just ten kilometers an hour, the Kushiro Shitsugen Norokko lives up to its name (*norokko* in Japanese is a portmanteau word combining *noroi*, slow, and *torokko*, meaning an open-air rail car).



Waving at visitors canoeing down the Kushiro River is part of the fun



The Iwabokki Suimon sluice gate is just one of the scenic spots on the train ride

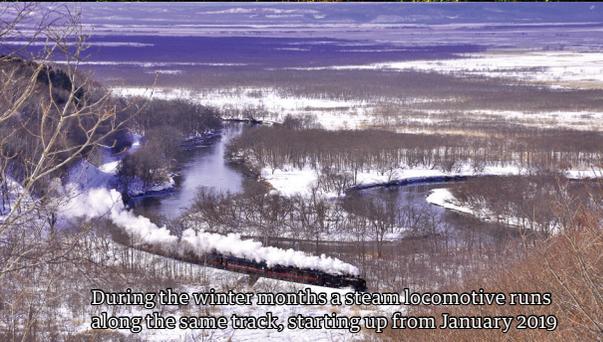


The Kuroishi
Shitsugen Norokko

The Kuroishi Shitsugen Norokko slowly winds around the beautiful Kuroishi Marsh in Hokkaido



From the Hosooka Observatory, visitors can get a great view of the marsh and mountains



During the winter months a steam locomotive runs along the same track, starting up from January 2019

Much of this train's appeal lies in its slow cruising speed, allowing passengers to fully take in all the scenic spots along the way. Traversing the vast Kuroishi Marsh—a national park that makes up roughly six percent of all of Japan's wetlands—the train offers sights and vistas that can only be glimpsed along this route, including the chance to see far northern wildlife such as Ezo red foxes, red-crowned cranes and Ezo deer.

The train's retro design evokes a nostalgic feeling, and the second car has a refreshment space where they plan to sell boxed lunches packed with Hokkaido ingredients as well as the special Kuroishi Shitsugen Norokko custard pudding. The side of the reserved seating cars that looks out onto the marsh is lined with tables that seat six people. After leaving Kuroishi Station and running along the highway for a bit, densely packed Japanese marsh alders come into view, signaling the start of the Kuroishi Marsh.

As you listen to the conductor's announcements, you'll catch sight of an entrancing panorama out the windows. The train will begin to slow down just before Kuroishi Shitsugen Station. The first scenic spot, Iwabokki Suimon, will be visible on the left-hand side. The sight of the sluice gate blending into the horizon that divides marshlands from blue sky is nothing short of stunning, and as the ride continues you'll see the Kuroishi River flowing down. Shortly after passing through Kuroishi Shingen Station and Hosooka Station, the train will slow once again.

The second scenic spot is where the rail line and the Kuroishi River come closest together. The river, with its smooth curves and calm beauty, sometimes offers glimpses of people headed downriver in canoes. The passengers on the train and the canoeists typically wave to one another, a charming and peaceful sight.

At the last stop, Toro Station, you can get off and enjoy an easy hike to the shores of Lake Toro. One popular way to enjoy the lake environs is to canoe down the Kuroishi River to Hosooka Station. Another recommendation is to get off at Kuroishi Shingen Station and visit the Hosooka Observatory, which offers views of the marshlands' splendor as well as Mount Meakan and Mount Oakan of the Akan Volcanic Complex soaring up in the distance.

In winter, a JNR Class C11 steam locomotive runs along the same track (check the JR Hokkaido Railway Company website for dates and details). Experiencing Hokkaido's winter wonderland from a retro steam locomotive in a way only possible in Kuroishi sounds like yet another fun thing to do. 