



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Creative manhole covers abound in Sapporo; sulphur billows from the ground in Hell Valley; a *chirashi don* (rice topped with a variety of sliced or diced fish) at Curb Market; Meiji-era beer barrels on display at the Sapporo Beer Museum



GET OUTTA HERE ●

In Scoot's "Get Outta Here Adventure", we send a writer to a city undisclosed to them until the day they fly.

DESTINATION UNKNOWN: SAPPORO

Many visitors descend on Japan's northernmost prefecture for its world-renowned ski slopes, but fewer stop to appreciate its urban charms. **Delle Chan** finds a few of her favourite things – including seafood and cooler weather – in Hokkaido's highly liveable capital

The first thing that strikes me when I touch down in Sapporo is just how incredibly *tidy* it is. Everything here is organised to a T. The entire city is laid out in a regular grid pattern, the tree-lined streets are virtually spotless, and systems all run like clockwork – from rail transportation right down to refuse collection. Dustmen sprint from house to house as they collect rubbish (sorted into different recycling bags, no less), while residents arm themselves with tongs and meticulously rid the streets of excess litter. It's an unusual sight for a first-time visitor, but I'm not surprised. After all, this is Japan.

When I first find out that I am headed to Sapporo for an impromptu adventure, I'm filled with glee. I had my first taste of Japan when I visited Tokyo earlier this year, and have been hungry to return ever since. Besides, Hokkaido's capital is laden with impossibly fresh seafood and in October, a crisp, cool autumn climate – perfect for a human polar bear like me.

Upon arrival, I soon discover that Sapporo is worlds apart from the hyperactive Japanese capital. Tokyo throbs with a sort of frenetic, feverish energy; by contrast, Sapporo feels more low-key, even placid. ➤



👉 What the city seems to lack in quirky character, it makes up for with natural splendour 🗨️

Even the crowds milling about in JR Sapporo station – the greatest point of confluence in the city – can't quite compare with the seemingly endless ebb and flow of pedestrians at Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing.

But what the city seems to lack in quirky character, it makes up for with natural splendour. Odori Park is a 1.5km-long green belt that runs through the heart of the city, and the sprawling Maruyama Park, a popular *hanami* (flower-viewing) spot, is home to

more than 1,700 cherry blossom trees. Then there are the mountains. A ropeway and cable car take me up 531m above sea level to the open-air observatory at the summit of Mount Moiwa, one of several peaks that cradle the city. I welcome the chilly winds as I soak in views of the urban sprawl, which stretches for miles, all the way to Ishikari Bay in the north.

On day two of my adventure, it becomes clear that Sapporo is not entirely strait-laced. I find myself traipsing around Susukino district, the seedy underbelly of the city. There's a strong sense of disarray here, which is a far cry from the ordered streets of the rest of the metropolis. The air is thick with the cacophony of loudspeaker announcements, while the neon-washed streets are lined with gaudy bars, *pachinko* (arcade game) parlours and karaoke shops. Burly pimps in sombre overcoats solicit business at traffic intersections, while skinny punks sporting platinum-blond hair skulk along the sidewalks.

Somewhat incongruously, Susukino also serves up some of the best grub the city has to offer. It's here that I stumble upon Gotsubo, a tiny, gritty izakaya. It's quite literally a hole-in-the-wall joint, and its name reflects as much – in Japanese it means "five square metres". There's a grand total of six stools crammed into the dimly lit space, as well as a rickety sidewalk counter for the less fortunate patrons – who include me. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the other diners, I order a platter of plump, juicy scallops fresh off the grill, and devour them with great gusto. They're simply divine, especially on a cold night like this.

Hungry for more, I seek out Suage+, a popular resto serving up the local speciality known as soup curry. As ➤



FROM TOP:
The entrance of Maruyama Shrine, located in Maruyama Park; the bright lights of Susukino

👉👉 **The unctuous, creamy slab of tuna belly melts in my mouth like a dream. This is every pescetarian’s paradise – including mine** 👉👉

its moniker suggests, the dish is essentially a watery, spicy soup that’s topped with various ingredients and served alongside rice. I tuck greedily into a bowl of vegetable curry, which comprises chunks of lightly fried mushrooms, potatoes, carrots, corn, green peppers and even avocado, all swimming in an umami broth. It’s the ultimate comfort food.

En route back to my hotel, Gindaco – a shop selling the ball-shaped, flour-based Japanese snacks known as *takoyaki* – catches my eye. I still have room in my stomach, so I order a plate of piping hot octopus balls slathered with copious amounts of *mentaiko* (cod roe) sauce, and chomp contentedly. In Sapporo, evidently, any dietary ambition rapidly goes out of the window.

Over the next few days, I have ample opportunity to sample yet more of the region’s bounty. I hit up Nijo Market and Curb Market for *donburi* (rice bowl dishes), which come crowned with the freshest cuts of raw fish imaginable. I also enjoy an exquisite set of *nigiri* – sliced raw fish or vegetables on mounds of rice – set at Masazushi, a restaurant in the nearby harbour town of Otaru. The pièce de résistance of the meal, though, is undoubtedly the *otoro* (fatty tuna belly), so I save it for last, carefully biting into it with reverence. The unctuous, creamy slab of tuna belly melts in my mouth like a dream. This is every pescetarian’s paradise – including mine.

It’s a universal truth that good food is best washed down with alcohol. Sapporo is known for its eponymous beer, so I decide that a visit to the Sapporo Beer Museum is in order. Housed in a restored red-brick building – a relic from the Meiji era – the exhibition is simple but informative, providing a detailed overview of the history of beer in Japan. There’s also a beer hall on the first floor, where I quench my thirst with a glass of ice-cold Sapporo Classic. To my pleasant surprise, the golden ale tastes light and refreshing, and I end up downing the entire contents of the glass in no time at all.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Kitanogurume, a shop and restaurant at Curb Market; king crab legs for sale at Nijo Market; a nigiri set at Masazushi



👉👉 **The air is thick with the stench of sulphur, but it's the wondrous alien moonscape that takes my breath away** 👉👉

All this eating and drinking fuels me with plenty of energy for more sightseeing, so I decide to venture out and explore the greater region. Sapporo is a great jumping-off point for nearby towns, such as Noboribetsu, which is less than a two-hour *shinkansen* (bullet-train) ride away. While this south-western town is the *onsen* (hot-spring) capital of Hokkaido, I'm more excited about the prospect of visiting Jigokudani or "Hell Valley", so named for its volcanic activity. In fact, the geothermal crater's sulphurous geysers, vents and streams are what supply the town's thermal springs.

Here, the air is thick with the stench of sulphur, but it's the wondrous alien moonscape that takes my breath away. The raw, rugged terrain is scarred by pockets of scalding water, which in turn belch thick grey clouds of steam. I eventually tear my eyes away from the otherworldly scene and plod along the main walking trail, which leads me to other spectacular sights – among them the gourd-shaped Oyunuma Pond, whose smooth surface belies its roiling, boiling depths. True to its name, the whole valley really does seem infernal – and I'm utterly bewitched.

CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP:
Hell Valley is a
hotbed of volcanic
activity; tranquil
Nakajima Park



Back in Sapporo, I take a breather at Nakajima Park, a serene sanctuary located south of Susukino. As it turns out, it makes for the perfect *dénouement* to my adventure. At the heart of the park is a large, glassy pond framed by trees; their leaves bear the first blush of autumn, glinting a burnished gold in the late-afternoon sunlight. The whole scene is a thing of neat, immaculate beauty.

It then dawns on me that the same can be said about the whole of Sapporo. Reclining on the grassy bank, I drink in the picturesque view and think to myself: I could live here. 📍



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