

Willis's Walkabouts HOKKAIDO

29 September – 12 October 2019

This trip will be led by Walkabouts guide Rod Costigan. Rod first 'discovered' the surprising wildness of Japan's mountains while visiting Japan for work almost 30 years ago. A private trip in September/October this year (2018) gave him the opportunity to research options for a Willis walk.

This trip takes you into Japan's fabulous mountain scenery in Autumn. Think botanic gardens on mountainsides.

Yes, Japan has lots of people, but you are thinking of the valleys. The mountains are surprisingly quiet. They are also steep, rugged and spectacular, supporting forests that are varied and downright gorgeous. That is, gorgeous even in summer. But we are trying to time this trip to take in the turning of the leaves. It's hard to predict which leaves will be turning when we are there, because each year is different and the main display starts at the top and gradually descends the 1500 - 2000m to the adjacent valleys. But that is just part of the charm. In the unlikely event that we miss the leaves, you still won't be disappointed.

Past years' feedback suggests that it would suit many Willis clients to bookend this trip with say, a week, of private mainstream travel. So, while previous Willis Japan offerings have focused on two or three long walks across three weeks, this year's itinerary is shorter, focuses on one region but is aimed more at being a selection of walking attractions. If you have more time, you might consider exploring other parts of Hokkaido or the famous landmarks of Honshu before or after this trip.

Japanese traditionally regard Hokkaido as Japan's remote, wild frontier. That is probably a lingering legacy of 150 years ago, the period of colonisation because it is now a populated, modern region. But it still has wild mountain country, some of which is actually too remote for this trip.

The comparison with Tasmania is a deeper one than just land area and wild terrain. Being at a similar latitude, its summer climate is also similar. And it shares a similar history, its indigenous people having been progressively marginalised by force, expulsion from lands and cultural repression since colonisation by mainstream Japanese from Honshu beginning in the early 19th century. A significant Ainu population remains but the traditional culture is now restricted to showcase examples and museums. However there is a sense there that the citizens of Hokkaido now value and honour their connection with that tradition and the slightly fanciful notion that they live, as the Ainu did, in an untamed environment. There is a small Ainu population in the Akan area where we will spend two days.



Volcanic landscapes dominate above the tree line (here, the summit ridge of Me Akan)



An ever present feature of urban and village landscapes: Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples

Overview

Highlights

Spectacular mountain terrain, gorgeous forests of birch, maple and pine, Autumn colours, more waterfalls than you can count.

Classic northern hemisphere wildlife: most notably deer, red squirrels, the Sakhalin fox, Ezo weasels and shrew, as well as less common gliding squirrels, the “crying rabbit” and many beautiful birds if you are lucky enough to see them. (The sound of woodpeckers is common background noise in the forests). Bears also get a lot of hype but we will be very unlikely to see one.

- A day of wildlife spotting with an experienced bear and deer hunter.
- Volcanos
- Standing on the highest points of Hokkaido’s two main ranges.
- Both open air hot springs and indoor hot springs, ie a hot bath at the end of some walks.

Group size

Minimum 4, Maximum 7

Biei, Asahi Dake – 1 day, 2 nights

Description

Asahi Dake (Mountain of the Rising Sun) on the Daisetsusan (Big Snow Mountains) Range is the highest peak in Hokkaido. But this is our first day walking so we will take the cable car most of the way! It is a steep climb but a short walk overall with great views. For the energetic, there are some options to do a little extra walking on the descent. We will then stop off at a hot spring. If by any chance the weather has let us down, all the better for the spring.

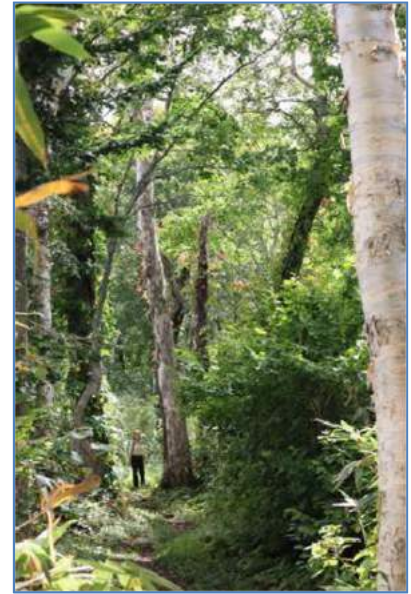
Distance: 5 km

Relief (diff highest/lowest points): 700m

Starting climb: 700m

High point 2291m asl

Accommodation: A local ryokan (guest house).



Most of Hokkaido’s forests are dominated by species of birch, maple, fir, spruce and pine, with affair smattering of oak, cercis and ash.



The upper slopes of Asahi Dake
Movie version: https://youtu.be/gEBdEo_9YbA.

Nukibetsu to Obihiro – 4 days, 3 nights (including 2 camping)

This walk traverses the most remote part of Hokkaido's high country. The only country less accessible is probably the mountain range continuing north from here in one direction and south in the other, because those sections of ridge are untracked and consequently very arduous. But we will be following paths that the guide has previously walked from one side of the range to the other, traversing the highest peaks on this range Poroshiri Dake (apparently from "Big Hill" in the indigenous Ainu language) and Kita Tottabetsu Dake ("North Scrubby River Mountain" in Japanese and Ainu).



There is a hut in there somewhere



Following the Nukapifu River to Poroshiri Sanso

beyond the peak in a cirque and continue along a narrow mountain ridge for two more days. A pickup from the foot of the eastern descent will take us through the regional city of Obihiro and on to our accommodation in a spacious modern, traditional style guest house in the town of Ashyoro.



More cascades than you can poke a stick at..

but wet and slippery on river stones. Day 2, a steep sustained climb on a well formed track. Thereafter, well formed track may be a bit overgrown in places along a ridge with smaller ups and downs.

We get set at a hostel in a small farming community. We will then be driven close to a road head and walk up a narrow mountain valley lined with cascades until we reach an isolated but staffed mountain hut. There are quite a shallow river wades to negotiate and a few awkward – but not dangerous – scrambles, so you must be willing to get wet boots.

Next day we climb Poroshiri Dake, camping a little



See the tarns? That's our campsite, day 2.

Distance: 35km Relief 1500m
Starting climb (on day 2): 1100m
High point: 2052m asl

Conditions

Care required and wet feet inevitable on the first afternoon approach up the river. Not treacherous, but wet and slippery on river stones. Day 2, a steep sustained climb on a well formed track. Thereafter, well formed track may be a bit overgrown in places along a ridge with smaller ups and downs.

Wildlife spotting – 1 day

Our local guide will take us into the forests in the hope of spotting the animals that haven't presented themselves thus far. With any wildlife related activities there can be no guarantees but it should be a fascinating experience either way. Our guide is a keen hunter of bears and deer, but for safety reasons he is unlikely to show us a bear. However we might be lucky enough to see smaller mammals as well as deer..



Hakkaido deer: common, but not so easy to photograph, hence photo courtesy Wikipedia

Me Akan and Akan Ko – 2 days

An easy mountain that takes us through forests of Sakhalin Fir to the volcanic cone of this mountain which is only 4000 years old. We will then take a long ridge passing various craters and vents, down to Akan Lake where mountain forests suddenly give way to a lakeside resort town which is also something of an Ainu centre. We finish with an optional visit to an indoor hot spring. The following day, a short mountain walk directly overlooking Lake Akan, or a rest for the tired or culturally curious.

Me Akan Distance 15 km

Relief (diff highest/lowest points) 1000m Starting climb 650m

High point 1499m asl Conditions

A steep but easy walk on walking tracks. Mild fumes may pose some risk to asthma sufferers. Alternative arrangements can be made.

Oakan Dake Distance 8 km Relief 920m Starting climb 920m

High point 1370m asl Conditions

A steep but easy walk on walking tracks.



Me Akan

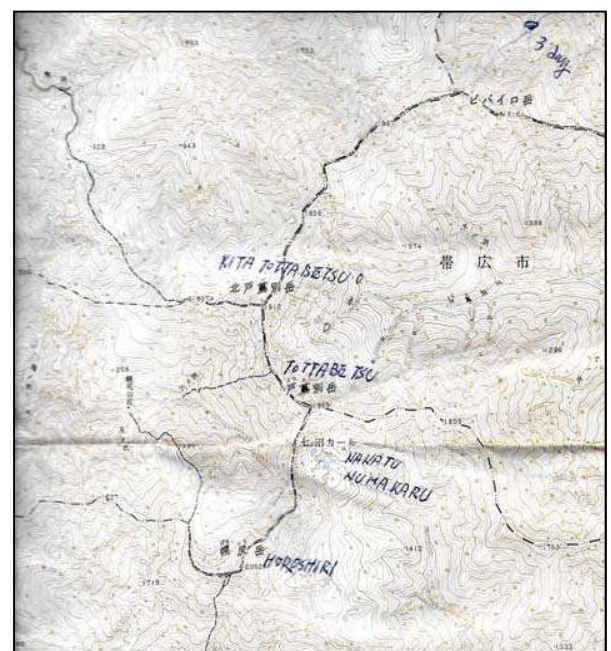
Shiretoko Peninsula ridge walk – 2 nights

We will walk the high ridge along the Shiretoko Peninsular that “sticks out” of the Hokkaido north west, with views towards the volcanic Kuril island chain that is claimed by Japan but occupied by Russia. Views to the sea on both sides. For a different spin on taking a swim at the end, the walk finishes at a hot waterfall. Sometimes done as two days but we will take three.

Distance 25 km Relief 1600m Starting climb 1600m

High point 1660m Conditions

A ridge walk in a volcanic landscape with approaches from/to sea level. Some short steep scrambles.



One of the topo maps we will use: you can leave maps to us

Shiretoko Penisnsula – wildlife cruise

The peninsular is regarded as a brown bear enclave (although still regarded as safe walking), so we will take advantage of that to take a short commercial ocean cruise in hope of sighting brown bears (and other wildlife) along the shores, before driving and flying back to Sapporo.

Notes

Accommodation

Before the trip

Suggest you try AirBnB rather than we recommend something. Generally, Japanese can be relied on more than more than most people to be trustworthy and clean.

Between walks

Simple hotel, ryokan or BnB accommodation will be arranged for you.

On walks

Self-sufficient camping. You need to be prepared as you would for a walk in the Australian High Country in Autumn or Western Tasmania in Summer/Autumn.



A room at the inn, Ashyoro

Catering

On the track

Leave dinners to the guide. Either catered by the guide or provided at accommodation. Basic breakfasts provided but may be Japanese style savoury foods. Provide your own if preferred (not included). Provide own lunches. The guide will be available to assist with supermarket shopping on the day prior to the trip and on occasions during the trip.

Between walks

Japanese dinners included. Generally these will be savoury with lots of vegetables and rice, which is a description that doesn't do them justice. If that doesn't suit, there is often an alternative down the street somewhere and convenience stores are everywhere. These days convenience stores sell some western style products like bread, muesli and chocolate. Fruit in these stores is limited in range but outstanding in quality.

Last minute shopping.

It is best if you bring everything you need but if you forget anything, there are camping stores. In Sapporo, Mont Bell in Ekimae Dori near Kita 3-jo Dori and a cluster of camping shops in the "Sapporo Factory" shopping mall on Kita 3-jo Dori. For food, if a supermarket doesn't jump out at you, you will find a well stocked convenience store in every station and every major city block.

Hours

We will normally walk 4-8 hours per day.



Difficulty

While walking will almost all be on tracks, the tracks may vary in condition, to the point of being rough at times. Each walk will unavoidably begin with a stiff climb, so you should climb a few big hills in preparation.

Campsites

Those few nights of camping will be on improvised sites in the alpine heathlands.

Clothing and equipment

These are mountain environments. Although it is unlikely, a cold snap could bring snow. Pack and dress as you would for the Snowy Mountains in May or June.

Packs and Waterproofing

We can expect plenty of fine weather, but it can rain. You need a waterproof pack or a pack liner/cover and sleeping bag waterproofed when packed, just to be sure.

Culture

If you have any interest in the language, strangely, bushwalking is a good way to get exposure. You certainly won't be doing it all day, but when you do meet someone in the mountains, a simple casual conversation comes so much more easily than anywhere else. In small ways the Japanese aesthetic is all around you all the time, whether in the mountains or the city, even though in built up areas it's sometimes hidden in nooks and crannies. Celebration of Hokkaido's wild, frontier identity is everywhere in small ways, as are Ainu references. The Ainu culture no longer exists as a daily way of life, but we will pass through the Ainu population centre of Akan Ko where displays provide some insight into the ways of the past. Shinto and Buddhist shrines are common and opportunities to visit them for anyone who has that interest.

Swims

Mountain streams offer washing opportunities but the combination of mountain climate and water temperature will make swimming uninviting. Between trips there will be opportunities to visit hot spring bath houses. A cultural warning though: clothes at these springs are optional, perhaps even mildly disapproved of, so you will have to be accepting of local people following the local custom, or perhaps just defer bathing till reaching roofed accommodation. Facilities built over hot springs are generally segregated, those in the open air generally not.

Highlights

High peaks, long views, stunning forests, wildlife, meeting Japanese people with similar interests.

Lowlights

Walking will be confined to tracks – except perhaps won the wildlife watching day - as off-track is mostly way too thick. Such camping as is required will be on improvised sites in alpine heathland. One of them will be quite tight. Lots of hill climbing, generally in short bursts but beginning each walk with a generous climb. As with snakes in Australia, there is an almost universal apprehension about bears in Hokkaido and it is difficult to



No escaping a few steep climbs

assess how much risk there really is, except to say that it is small. Your guide is yet to meet anyone who has accidentally encountered a bear, but to be on the safe side, we will wear bells, as many of the local walkers do.

What does it cost?

Full Trip		
2 weeks		
Start	29/09/2019	28/09 Guide will be available to meet planes, help with shopping.
	Sapporo	
Finish	12/10/2019	Briefing at 5pm location tba.
	Sapporo	
Price*	\$ 4,990	

*

Does include: Dinners and breakfasts, accommodation and transport beginning Day 1 and concluding with arrival at Sapporo on Day 14.
Does not include: Lunches not included.



Based on exchange rate, travel costs and accommodation costs on offer Oct 2018. Price may be subject to change.

Japan is not a cheap country. Our fee is more than most of our other overseas trips but we include transport and accommodation which we do not include on most of the other trips.

What do you get for the fee?

You get all main meals, accommodation and transport beginning Day 1 and concluding with arrival at Sapporo on Day 14.



You get expert advice on the things to bring, the probable weather, etc. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will provide all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences.

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. You must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Important footnotes

Note 1. A large majority of those who have taken part in our overseas tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 2. The itinerary may change due to unforeseen conditions. Such disruptions are unlikely, but bad might be caused by typhoons (cyclones), earthquakes or volcanic eruptions.

Note 3. Our price is based on exchange rate, travel costs and accommodation costs on offer October 2018. The price is subject to change if any of these change substantially before the trip is confirmed.



Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk, have never camped in windy and wet conditions, it will be harder for you to cope if conditions turn against us than for a person who has had that experience. Our past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. Final payment is due by August 1.
2. Our cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 June, \$1000 before 10 August and the full \$4990 after 1 September.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance. We need to see proof of your travel insurance before departure. We need this as a condition of our own insurance.

If you would like more information, please email walkabout@bushwalkingholidays.com.au and cc to rod@greenstock.com.au.

More photos..

