



Touring Lake Toya

A DAY EXPLORING ONE OF HOKKAIDO'S
MOST EXQUISITE NATURAL GEMS

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT KAISER

Known as one of the clearest lakes in Japan, Lake Toya is a glistening topaz in summer. Surrounded by the lush mountains of Shikotsu-Toya National Park and with plenty to see and do both on and off the water, it's an idyllic day trip from Niseko.

Feel Hokkaido's fresh air on your face and discover hidden local delights all at your own pace via a guided tour, as Matt Kaiser discovers.

LEAD THE WAY

We embarked on a customised tour with Rhythm Japan, to include a sightseeing cycle from Niseko to Lake Toya, stopping off at points of interest and photo opportunities along the way. Then, a ride along the shore of Lake Toya, followed by a delicious lunch and some afternoon water-action with standup paddle boarding or "supping".

Our trip took us up and down along the mountainous roads and past some remarkable sights and scenery. The beauty of a custom tour is you can choose one to suit the ability of you and your group and tailor the trip to suit your interests, like a cycle-only tour or one which includes hiking if you're feeling more adventurous!

MEETING THE LOCALS

Our first stop at Niseko Ostrich Farm made us realise that ostriches are surprisingly big creatures. You see them on TV or in a book and you can tell that they are large, but face-to-face, nose-to-beak, they are almost unnerving!

The farm commands a respectable view of Mt Yotei in the distance. The ostriches provided us with plenty of entertainment.

For just ¥100, we bought a packet of ostrich feed which ended up providing us with a couple minutes of furious head-bobbing as they pecked away at the feed trough.

TASTING TREATS

Our next stop was only a bit further along from the ostrich farm. Apparently, the little bakery named Boulagerie Jin, which really is out in the middle of nowhere, is said to be one of the top two bakeries in all of Hokkaido!

From what our friends at Rhythm told us, in order to be certain to get something you need to be there before 10 am. The sooner you get there the warmer and fresher the bread is and the greater the selection there is to choose from.

'ROUND WE GO

The circuit around the lake is an easy ride, mostly flat sections with the occasional rise and drop. It wasn't hard peddling on the cross-bikes we borrowed from Rhythm. They even brought along a pair of electric-assisted bicycles and we all took turns trying them out.

The lakeside is lined with lovely rice farms, tiny temples and plenty of great spots to stop and take a photo.

SKIPPING STONES

Each stop was a great chance to chat about the area, take a few photos and sip some water before hopping back on the bicycles. At one point not too long into the day, we walked down to the lakeside along a little rocky beach.

We spent about 10 minutes cooling down and a few of us went in search of smooth, flat stones to skip along the water. It was a nice moment to soak up the amazing views.

CREPES FOR LUNCH

We didn't ride all the way around the lake that morning, but we had definitely worked up an appetite! Our guides loaded the bikes onto the support van when we got back to our starting point.

There are a number of different restaurants and cafés to choose from at Toya. We chose a little creperie called Cafe Lake Toya, where we fueled back up before the day's final adventure.

ONTO THE WATER

We spent about two hours out on the lake on the stand up paddle boards (SUPs). It took a little while for us to figure out the balance and build up our confidence as we were all first-timers, but once we did it was a real blast. Trying to bump each other off our boards and playing some great games that the Rhythm team taught us really made the day.

A few of us worried over the water temperature before going out on the lake. It was the end of June and summer had only just started, but the water was actually really warm. Lake Toya is a geothermal lake and it never freezes over, even during the winter. This probably means it warms up a bit quicker when summer rolls around.

When the day was done, we brought our SUPs back to the support van, changed into dry clothes and headed back to Niseko-Hirafu with Rhythm, all the while playing back the incredible day we had.

■ Want to tour Toya? Visit www.rhythmjapan.com for more information.

