

A Land Blessed with a Bounty of Volcanic Activity

To many people, it may seem strange to talk about the “blessings” bestowed by volcanoes, and yet that is exactly the situation in Hokkaido. Most of Japan’s national parks include volcanoes—not because park visitors wish to study volcanoes, but because those areas blessed with volcanic activity tend to also have beautiful forests, lakes, rivers, and other features that make them ideal natural conservation areas. They are rich in flora and fauna and reward visitors with a sense that this is the essence of what a national park should be. Shikotsu-Toya National Park is no exception.

Here you will find dense, green, virgin forests growing next to impossibly blue lakes so clear that in places they seem to be made of glass. There are hot springs born just decades ago from volcanic activity and others with much longer histories, but it is interesting that the beautiful, cold lakes we can see above ground are balanced by giant pools of hot water below ground.

All the Japanese islands have a long history of volcanic activity, and in Hokkaido that history is still very much alive. Major eruptions have occurred in this century and multiple times in the previous century. Because Mount Usu was the first place in the world where people studied eruption timing and prepared for civilian evacuations, volcanoes came to be respected as part of nature, not just feared as potential disasters. This, too, may seem strange to outsiders. Why would anyone choose to live near an active volcano? Yet the fact remains that many towns in the vicinity of Shikotsu-Toya National Park are not only comfortable with the situation, but actually embrace their volcanic roots.

This positive approach to “living in harmony with volcanoes” may not be unique to Hokkaido, but it is certainly a characteristic of this region. And nowhere are the effects of nature’s power more obvious than here in this beautiful land. In addition to producing columns of smoke and ash and ejecting hundreds of basketball-sized rocks resembling glowing balls from children’s fireworks, volcanic activity helps to redraw local geography, creating small mountains and welcome hot springs where before there were none.

For those who wish to explore this natural beauty and coexistence with a sometimes-fearsome nature, it is a short drive from Sapporo or New Chitose Airport. Depending on which side of the park you wish to reach, it can take between one to two and a half hours.