

JR Otaru Station: The Gateway to the Port City

Visitors arriving in Otaru by rail can see the harbor as soon as they come out of the Otaru Station building. Chuo Street runs downhill from the station to the water, and when strong westerly winds blow in winter, waves running along the breakwaters are visible from the front of the station building. Passengers arriving at Otaru Station in the early twentieth century would have seen dozens of sailing ships and steamships moored in the harbor, with barges ferrying goods and passengers to shore.

New connections

Otaru Station opened in 1903 and the line to Hakodate, Hokkaido's southernmost city, opened a year later. Before Otaru Station was built, Minami-Otaru Station was the city's main station and connected to the coal-loading pier in the northern part of Otaru Port.

A modern station for a growing city

The current station building is made of steel-framed reinforced concrete and was completed in 1934. The symmetrical Art Deco design of the entrance hall is typical of large station buildings at the time.

A brass bell in front of the station entrance was rung to announce the imminent arrival of each train, a tradition that continued until around 1965. There is still a bell in front of the station, and it is a popular spot for taking photographs. Anyone is free to ring the bell.

Illuminating the entrance hall

Natural light floods the entrance hall through six tall windows along the front of the building, supplemented by the light of 333 glass lanterns donated by local glass company Kitaichi Glass. Although they are powered by electricity today, they resemble the original hand-blown glass oil lamps that the company began making in 1901.

Memories on Platform 4

Platform 4 looks much as it did in 1903, apart from some modifications made in 1934 and recent additions such as an escalator and additional lighting. The original steel beams used for the roof frames and support pillars along the platforms were imported from overseas. One of the pillars on Platform 4 is inscribed with the name “BV & Co Ltd” and the date 1902. It was sourced from Bolckow, Vaughan & Co., Ltd in Yorkshire, England, one of the world’s biggest steel producers at the time.

At the north end of the platform, a framed life-size image of popular actor Ishihara Yujiro (1934–1987) commemorates his visit to Otaru to film a long-running television drama. Although born in Kobe, he spent some of his childhood in Otaru and often returned to visit. In the image, taken in 1978, he stands on Platform 4, known locally as “Yujiro’s Platform.”