

Restaurants and Hotels in Otaru's Golden Age

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Hokkaido's most opulent restaurants and hotels were in Otaru. Starting as a fishing village in 1865, Otaru grew rapidly to a bustling port town of around 60,000 by the turn of the century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the annual herring catch in Otaru was close to 90,000 tons. The abundance of herring made fishermen and traders wealthy and brought an influx of fortune seekers looking to make the most of the "herring gold rush." Most of the herring was made into fertilizer and was in demand for the production of cotton and indigo grown in southwestern Honshu.

New wealth and leisure

Newly wealthy families built mansions in Otaru, importing the finest furnishings, fashions, and building materials from Kyoto and ports along the Sea of Japan coast. Restaurants and fine art stores catered to the rich, and inns and hotels opened to accommodate merchants from the mainland and abroad.

Lavish entertainments

High-class restaurants opened to entertain wealthy merchants, fishermen, politicians, and celebrities. They featured windows set with imported glass, gaslit chandeliers, decorative features carved from exotic woods, and large banquet halls and performance spaces for dance and music recitals. During the Taisho era (1912–1926) some 600 geisha entertained Otaru's wealthy citizens at these exclusive establishments. As the economy slowed in the mid-twentieth century, most of the restaurants closed down and merchant families moved away. The few restaurants that remain, including the Kaiyotei and Kotei, are closed for restoration or have been repurposed as private facilities.

The Kaiyotei opened near Sakaimachi Street between 1885 and 1890, hosting merchants, politicians, and celebrities until it closed in 2015. The restaurant expanded in the Taisho era, and the current structure consists of three connected wings built at different time

periods. The Kotei was a branch of a popular restaurant in Tokyo's Shinjuku district that opened in Otaru in the wealthy Shinonome-cho neighborhood in 1937. Otaru's Kotei accepted guests only by introduction and provided the services of geisha. It had tatami-floored banquet rooms and a cypress-floored stage for dance and music performances. Until the 1950s, there were at least five such restaurants in Shinonome-cho.

Luxurious accommodations

With the influx of merchants and foreign traders in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, inns opened around the waterfront and near train stations in the city. The Etchuya Hotel, which today operates as the Unwind Hotel, was Otaru's first European-style hotel. It was built in 1931 to accommodate the growing number of overseas traders and merchants coming to Otaru. The hotel was an annex of the nearby Etchuya Ryokan, a traditional inn founded in 1877. Although the inn had appeared in English-language guidebooks since the early 1900s, the owners thought a modern luxury hotel would be more appealing to international guests.