

Otaru Canal

A paved walkway and gas lamps line the historic Otaru Canal. Warehouses that were built to serve the trading port in the early twentieth century now house restaurants, stores, and museums. This scenic corner of the city was made possible through dedicated local efforts going back to the 1960s.

The canal is the result of a nine-year project started in 1914 to ease the transfer of goods between the cargo ships anchored in the bay and the warehouses along the shore. Plans to fill in the canal to make new roads in the 1960s led to a grassroots effort to preserve Otaru's cultural heritage.

A thriving frontier port

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), the port city grew rapidly through trade, the booming herring industry, and migration. The annual herring catch in the waters around Otaru had reached around 90,000 tons by the late 1880s. The port was crowded with merchant ships bringing goods and provisions from Osaka and along the coast of the Sea of Japan, then returning south laden with fertilizer made from herring. Many settlers from Honshu and other parts of the country passed through Otaru under a government scheme that offered land grants and financial assistance. Hokkaido's first train line opened in 1880 to transport coal from the inland Horonai Coal Mine to Otaru's port area to be shipped across the country to fuel Japan's industrialization.

Building the canal

By the early twentieth century, Otaru was the largest commercial port in northern Japan. The port had become congested and was running out of mooring space for the barges that transferred goods and passengers from ship to shore. The solution was to reclaim a string of narrow islands running parallel to the shore. That reclamation project ran from 1914 to 1923 and created a 40-meter-wide waterway between the islands and the shore. New warehouses were built on the islands, which stretched about 1.3 kilometers and were connected to the mainland by a series of bridges. The waterway provided warehouse

access and additional mooring space for the barges. It later became known as the Otaru Canal.

Changing fortunes

Large cargo ships gradually replaced wooden sailing ships, and in 1937, a new wharf allowed steamships to dock and unload without using barges, greatly diminishing the role of the canal. Around the same time, the main source for the nation's energy needs shifted from coal to oil, and Otaru's position as a key port for Hokkaido faded into history. The canal became a graveyard for disused barges.

Symbol of Otaru renewal

In 1966, the local government proposed reclaiming the canal and demolishing the warehouses to build a three-lane road and modernize the city. However, a group of residents organized a movement in 1973 to save the canal and the historic townscape. Grassroots preservation movements were unusual in Japan, and the residents' efforts to clean the canal and campaign for alternative solutions gained national attention. In the 1980s, the campaigners reached a compromise with the government. Part of the canal was reclaimed to make a new road, and other sections were reduced to widen an existing road. A paved walkway and gas lamps were installed along the canal and the warehouses were restored to serve as restaurants, stores, and museums. The north side of Otaru Canal remains much as it was, lined with small fishing vessels and cruise boats in place of the barges that once helped build the city's fortunes.