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The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Drift Ice
JET Spotlight: Devina Tan (Kitami City ALT)



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The Red Brick Bulletin (English edition) is written by Armi Henriksson, a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government.

Flying Through the Skies to a World of Ice

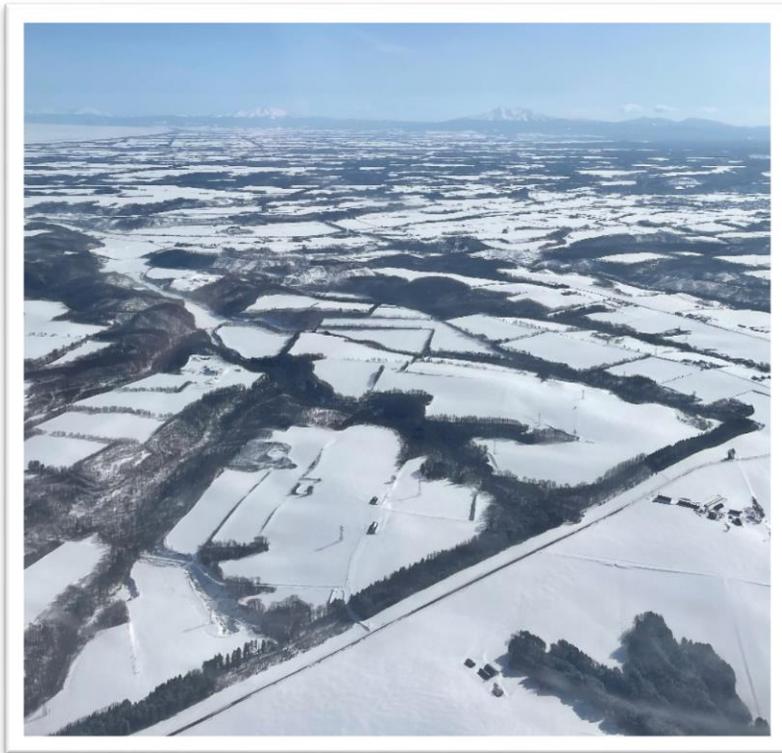
This edition of the Red Brick Bulletin is coming out at a time when winter in Hokkaido has finally given in to spring and it is possible to walk on actual pavement instead of a thick layer of ice. Even so, I would like to take you back in time to a wintry adventure I had back in February.

My journey started on a crisp Saturday morning by making my way to the Okadama Airport in Sapporo. Having never taken a flight within Hokkaido before, this was the first time I visited the small airport: compared to the big and buzzing New Chitose Airport, it was a sleepy, tranquil place. I met up with my Korean coworker, Ms. Kim, and we boarded the airplane that was to take us on a trip to northeastern Hokkaido.



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▲ Countryside of Hokkaido

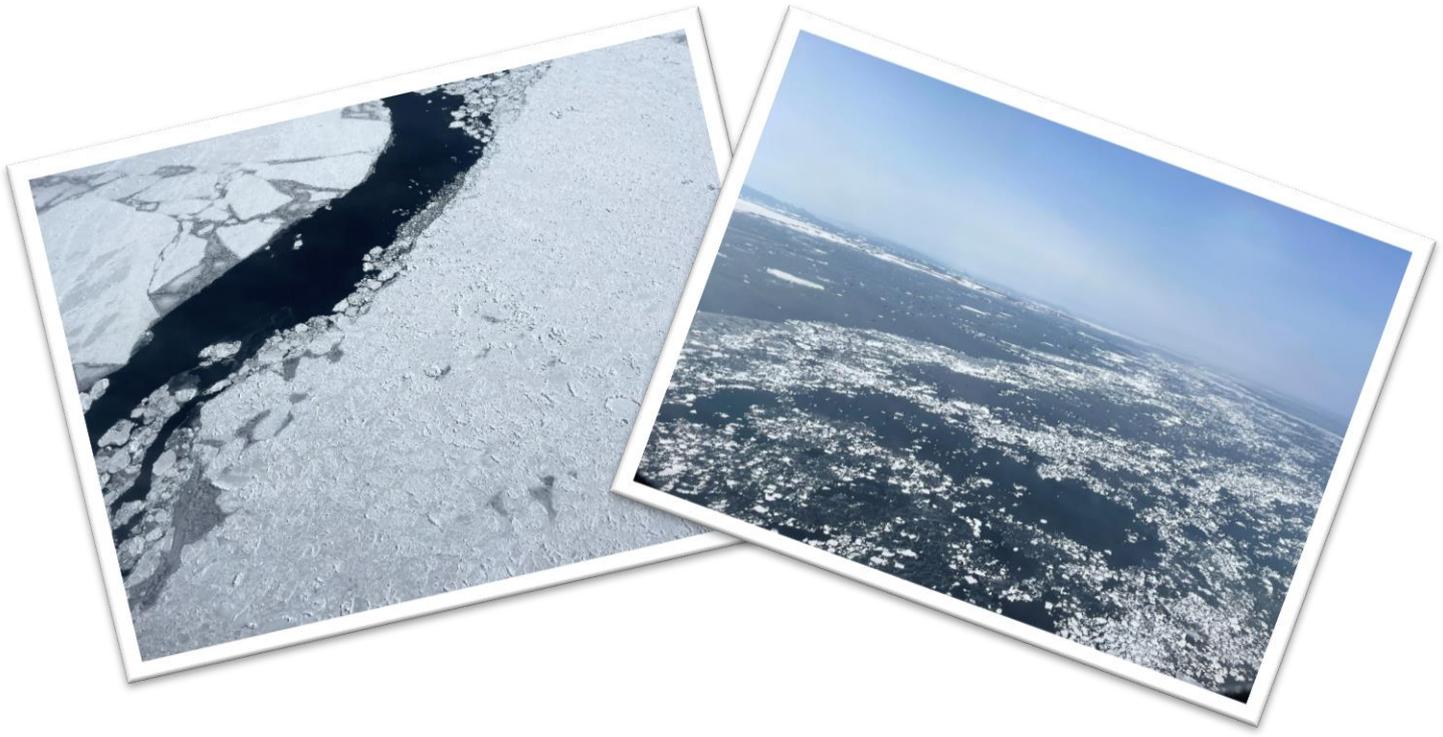
Crossing over Lake Abashiri, we were soon flying above the Sea of Okhotsk. This time though, the sea did not look like your average watery expanse: it was covered by ice floes that had traveled here from the more subarctic waters up north. This drift ice, a pride of the Okhotsk region, was indeed the very reason we were now on board of the charter plane.

When I first heard I could have the privilege of taking part in a drift ice viewing tour, I was intrigued but at the same time a little skeptical. Coming from Finland where the sea freezing over in winter is the most natural thing in the world, I had never quite understood the fuss over drift ice in Hokkaido. It would be just... ice, right?

The small plane felt like a big cat leaping forward as it took off from the runway. We flew over a frozen Hokkaido where all color seemed to have disappeared, leaving behind a monochrome landscape of white plains and leafless trees that looked like stubble on Mother Nature's skin. After about 45 minutes, we landed at Memanbetsu Airport, only to immediately transfer to another small plane: a charter flight that would take us from Memanbetsu back to Memanbetsu, via an especially scenic route.



▲ Hokkaido tourism mascot Kyun-chan checking out the view



But now, gazing down at the patchwork of ice and water below us, I began to see the beauty of drift ice. I felt as though I was looking at abstract modern art with mesmerizing patterns. The sky above was clear and blue, but the sea was a navy so dark as practically black, giving a striking contrast to the white ice. And even where the ice had formed large unbroken areas, it was not like the smooth snow cover of the fields and lakes we had flown past on our way here: the surface of the ice was textured with ridges and craters, and the longer I looked at it, the more I felt this landscape was from an altogether different planet.

The plane flew at a low altitude all the way to the tip of Shiretoko Peninsula before turning back towards the city of Abashiri. Shiretoko is famous for its bears, so I peered out of the window half hoping to see one, even though I was fully aware that no ursine residents of the area would be awake this time of the year. What caught my attention instead was the unmistakable sign of a very different kind of big mammal: a single burst of steam emerging from a circle of ripples in the sea. A whale! Although I couldn't see the fellow who had come to take a breath, it was most likely an orca, as they are common in the region.





▲ Ice cream with blue salt crystals at the Okhotsk Drift Ice Museum

Traveling to different parts of Hokkaido usually takes several hours even by the fastest train, but now that I had experienced my first regional flights, the prefecture felt much smaller. I was able to fly from Sapporo to a far end of the island and back with sightseeing in the middle, all within a regular workday's time.

The drift ice viewing flights are planned to be a new way to experience the wonders of winter in Hokkaido. This year they were still in testing phase, but when the next drift ice comes, you might have the option of admiring its cold beauty from the skies. Until then, there is plenty to see and experience during the other seasons, too!

Having marveled at the sights of Okhotsk for around 40 minutes, it was time to descend back to ground level. Ms. Kim and I still had a good while left until our return flight to Sapporo, so the kind people of the airline took us to the Okhotsk Drift Ice Museum, followed by a tasty sushi lunch in Abashiri.



▲ Our charter plane

For more information on drift ice and other unique features of the Okhotsk region, check out the guide to Eastern Hokkaido:

<https://www.visit-hokkaido.jp/en/feature/doutou>

Plans for next year's drift ice viewing flights are currently pending, but information may appear on the Abashiri City Tourism Association's website:

<https://visit-abashiri.jp/> (Japanese only)



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are over 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. They come from all over the world and they all have a very unique experience with the island. In this issue, we introduce a JET participant working as an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) in Kitami, a city in Okhotsk Subprefecture.



MEET DEVINA TAN

Tell us a bit about yourself.

Hi, I am Devina Tan, a third year JET in Tokoro Town which is part of Kitami City. I am from Singapore, the Garden City. Singapore is an island country located in Southeast Asia, very near the equator, so we have tropical weather all year round. Being a homebody, I like to knit, cook and grow plants during my free time here. However, in the recent year, I have been really busy trying to complete the Hokkaido Michi-no-eki (道の駅) Stamp Rally, giving me the perfect excuse to explore Hokkaido as much as possible and finding interesting ingredients to experiment with when I cook.

What brought you to the JET Programme?

Living and working in a foreign country that has four seasons has always been a childhood dream of mine and on the top of that list of countries I want to stay in is Japan. While I was working as an ESL teacher in Singapore, a colleague of mine told me that I should try out for the JET Programme since Japan was where I wanted to be. That was way back in 2019 when I applied, I got shortlisted in 2020 and COVID came swiftly so I didn't get to Japan till September 2021. It took a long time for me to get here and I never imagine that I would grow to love Hokkaido as much as I do now.



▲ Lake Notoro in autumn when the glasswort turned red

What kind of work are you doing as a JET participant?

I am the ALT for Tokoro Town. I teach at 5 schools, 3 elementary schools, 1 Junior High and 1 Senior High. Since I was an ESL teacher back in Singapore, teaching English feels natural to me. I work with 10-15 co-teachers weekly to plan and execute activities in class for our students to learn English in a fun and engaging way.

What in your experience are some of the differences between Japan and where you're from?

Singapore is a melting pot of a variety of cultures, so we grow up appreciating cultural differences, regardless of race and religion. This can be seen through our cuisine, architecture and many parts of our daily life. Japan on the other hand is still pretty much a homogenous society, steeped in a rich traditional culture. It is interesting to observe the differences and find similarities at times.

I appreciate having the four seasons here in Japan a lot. I find myself revolving my activities around the four seasons a lot, such as doing more gardening and flower watching in spring, touring around Hokkaido or fruit picking in summer or hiding under my kotatsu in winter.

Tell us of a memorable moment you've had in Hokkaido!

There are so many that I find it so hard to choose one! I think the most memorable had to be our first winter here when my daughter and I went on a trip to Tomamu. We visited the ice village, had drinks in an ice dome, watched fireworks, went winter horse-riding, tried riding on a snowmobile and even made our own Baumkuchen over a fire in a teepee. It was an experience of a lifetime and we bonded over the creation of many first experiences in our lives.



▲ Ice Village in Tomamu

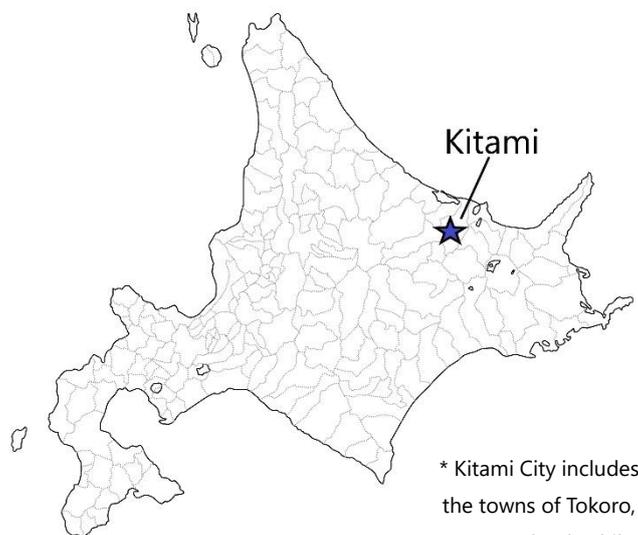
What are your favorite things about Kitami or the surrounding region?

Scallops from Tokoro Town are the best! You must try them at any one of the eateries in town. You can have them raw, cooked in butter, fried with garlic or in a curry. They are so good!

Other interesting things which I love in the region would be the drift ice festival in Abashiri in winter, where you can see many ice sculptures made by the locals and the glasswort at Lake Notoro in September. The entire lake just turns into a sea of varying degrees of red.



▲ Scallop and salmon roe rice bowl at Matsu Sushi, an eatery in Tokoro Town



* Kitami City includes the towns of Tokoro, Tanno, and Rubeshibe.