

Marlaina McElheny works at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government as a CIR and, will be spending this Red Brick Bulletin talking about her experience ice skating in Hokkaido, as well as imparting other great winter activities available across the island.

Also, big thank you to all those who helped with the Pen Pal exchange feature last month! Matching schools have been found, and students are exchanging letters!

Enjoying the Colds of Winter: Winter Activities in Hokkaido besides Skiing

Winter brings cold and snow to most of Hokkaido. It also brings winter sports enthusiasts! Hokkaido is known for having some of the best snow in the world, and in normal years, the slopes around the ‘Do, especially in Niseko, are full to bursting with skiers and snowboarders. But if you’re not a skier or snowboarder, that doesn’t mean that there’s nothing for you!

This issue of the Red Brick Bulletin will introduce the experiences of a few JETs in Hokkaido (including me, but my story isn’t as cool as the other two) who have found other winter experiences to fall in love with that might not be as well showcased.

Ice Skating: Marlaina

Skating is one of those things I don’t remember learning. My father, who grew up in Canada and played hockey during that time, taught me. And it’s one of those things that we do together, the years that we can. Not that I am particularly good at skating, and hockey skates are better, but when snow covers the mountains, I hear the ice call, and usually feel the need to go skating at least once a winter. Many places in Japan set up outdoor skating rinks around the Christmas season, but Hokkaido has some rinks that are available throughout the year. Being in Sapporo gives me access to more ice rinks than most, I suppose.

In early February, I donned my mask and set out for Tsukisamu Gym—the closest rink to me. I was able to skate a leisurely hour around the ice with a mix of others from those new to skating wobbling on the ice like newborn deer and clutching to the railing to those who moved as gracefully on skates as the most talented dancers do on the stage. I even got to see the Zamboni!

Hokkaido has numerous skate rinks open to the public, and some of them may even have hockey games, figure skating competitions, or other events that you can watch, so whether you’re a beginner or not get out there and skate, while still being careful of COVID-19!



Snowshoeing:

Shannon

I've had many exhilarating firsts since moving to Hokkaido.

First legitimate hike up a mountain, when I drug my short body up Yoteizan in the dark, first ski lesson, when I survived Pippu's frozen surface, and my first time strapped to a snowboard. I'm still convinced I fell less during the three years I played roller derby. Varying results aside, none of these firsts quite got their hooks into me, at least, not like snowshoeing has.



First Trek Dec 2015



It began when I booked a weekend with Hokkaido Nature Tours in December, 2015. To get us "freshies" accustomed to the whole business of strapping on and snowshoeing safely, we took a jaunt around our Tokachidake hotel in 60 cm of fresh powder, and I fell instantly in love.

To date, my coldest trek was in -40C winds on Shioya Maruyama (629m), & the most challenging was the 9-hour hike to spend the night at Muinedake Koya. Both were spent with my dear friends from HNT. My husband has also partaken in a few snowy walkabouts, but I'll save the one about how he broke a snowshoe jumping a small river for another time.

Maybe it speaks more to what life is like in Hokkaido, but even during the pandemic I've had to look no further than the river in my back yard for a quick stroll or a multi-kilometered trek. Somewhere in there, I also became a snowshoeing senpai, doling out advice on gear, and taking friends or former students for their first ramble.

This is my 6th winter here, and snowshoeing has given me countless opportunities to meet new people while seeing many of North Island's wild places. My only hope when I return home, is that I will still be living in or near snow country, and can continue learning and growing as a big footed, winter trekker

Now Jan 2021



May the powder be ever in your favor.

Ice Fishing: Josh



Winter can be a formidable time of year for many in Hokkaido, especially for those of us from warmer climates. While I came to Sapporo after having lived in Tampa, Florida, I had only just graduated from Carleton College in Minnesota, so I was no stranger to the cold. With that experience under my belt, I knew from personal experience I would be much more acclimated to the local climate if I chose to dive headfirst into the cold, rather than try to avoid it as much as possible. So last year, when I was invited to go ice fishing by one of my teammates on my American Football team, I jumped on the opportunity to experience Hokkaido's famed winter nature, even though I'm not much for fishing. (Shoutout Hokkaido Bulls, if you're in/near Sapporo and want to play football, please reach out, all experience levels welcome!)

We ended up departing from Sapporo at midnight, and drove all night across Hokkaido to a place near Abashiri, where we were able to get a hole in the ice just before sunrise at 06:30. Even though it was about -20 outside, drilling a hole through almost 30 cm of ice definitely kept us warm. As I mentioned, I have very little experience fishing, but I could easily see how this could become an addiction. We were fishing for wakasagi, which are a small Japanese smelt. Looking down through the hole with a light, you could see thousands of these fish as they swam around. To actually fish for them we used a small ice-fishing rod with a thin line that had 5 incredibly small hooks branching off from the main line. Baiting the hooks was a pain, quite literally. As the hooks were small and it was freezing cold even with a heater in the tent, my hands could never quite grasp the hook without messing it up, and I ended up poking myself several times. However, as we ran out of bait, we found that we didn't even need it in the first place, as these fish would even bite an empty hook.



After collecting our catch, which by numbers was something I had never seen before, we set up a small burner and bowls to batter and fry them. The wakasagi had a peculiar fresh cucumber smell, wholly different from any kind of "fishy" smell I was expecting, and we seasoned and fried and ate them whole right there on the ice. As many times as I've heard about how fresh fish is better, this was by far the freshest fish I had ever eaten, and it was just... better.

While I still don't think I will take up fishing as a regular hobby, nor do I want to become one of those "guy-holding-fish-to-camera-profile-photo" types, it was an unforgettable experience watching the sun rise across a frozen lake in Hokkaido, and I definitely recommend going full-send on embracing the Hokkaido winter, as it makes the warmer moments and seasons in between even more cozy.



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are over 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. Read on to learn more!



Meet Emanuel!

Originally from Germany, Emanuel is currently a fifth year Coordinator of International Relations (CIR) on the JET Programme placed in Niseko Town.

What has left a lasting impression on you during your time here?

The plethora of festivals in Niseko.

Among them, I really enjoy Niseko Halloween, the Scenic Yakiniku Night, and the Kaributo Shrine Festival. Every year, I look forward to such festivals. Unfortunately, many of the festivals in this past year were canceled due to COVID-19. This year, while I'm not sure if the situation will allow for these festivals I enjoy so much to be held or not (though I am holding out hope), I am looking forward to enjoying the coming summer!

What is your favorite thing about your region?

The restaurant Dog Tail and the Niseko Takahashi Dairy farm restaurant PRATIVO. They also offer lunch menus, and I enthusiastically recommend both of these places for those dining with families.

Dog Tail is a curry restaurant, but I am a big fan of the karaage! There is also a pizzeria that moved in about two years ago called "Pi-kan rollpizza" that I highly recommend. (Sorry... Only talking about food!)

What do you enjoy about your role as a Coordinator of International Relations (CIR) on the JET?

Two things: the first is that I am able to interact with those of the next generation and pass on to them that the world is so very huge and spacious. The second is exchange events. I think of something that I want to try or experience, and the reality of seeing that planning and those thoughts come to life is something that I really enjoy.

What is something that you would like to experience in Hokkaido?

I have always wanted to participate in the Wine Festival in Ikeda Town for a long time now. Unfortunately, things never seem to work out, and so I haven't been able to go even once. But I have hope for the future!

