

Happy accident for an extended visit

 SUE YEAP enjoys the sakura and the smiles as she pays a visit to Sapporo

Accidentally booking five nights instead of three in Sapporo to conclude our 16-night Japan holiday turns out to be one of the best things I've done.

In my haste to secure a sale fare on All Nippon Airways with a bonus internal flight, I pick Sapporo in Hokkaido, Japan's most northern island — somewhere too far to catch a shinkansen. I haven't factored in that we will be travelling from Kyoto, not Tokyo.

What ensues is almost eight hours of trains, planes and automobiles, with a taxi to Kyoto Station, a shinkansen to Shinagawa Station, a rapid train to Haneda Airport, then a 90-minute flight to New Chitose Airport.

New Chitose is about an hour from Sapporo Station, so more rapid train tickets are acquired.



April in Sapporo is peak spring sakura viewing time.

Emerging from Sapporo Station, it's 8C, but it feels like 2C. It's a refreshingly chilly 10-minute walk to our hotel, Onsen Ryokan Yuen Sapporo, but it's easier without the big case we sent ahead by Yamato Transport to Narita Airport.

Our 24sqm twin room is clean and compact with a semi snow-capped mountain view. Each day we walk past the stately red brick Former Hokkaido Government Office and gardens.

This is our chance to relax and spot sakura — cherry blossoms — which are, fortuitously, in full



Sapporo Beer Museum is framed by flowering sakura. Pictures: Sue Yeap

bloom. I see a social media post about a sakura illumination event, but details are scant. We catch a train to the middle of nowhere and eventually a growing crowd leads us to a river. The lights are pretty, not so the makeshift toilet I need to use at a first aid post.

We see few tourists in Japan's

fifth-biggest city, and in many spots, English isn't spoken.

We happily manage with smiles (there's a smile in Sapporo's official logo) and Google Translate. Fluffy pancakes are a satisfying first meal. Chicken karaage from the food hall of department store Mitsukoshi is the best of the trip.

French toast for breakfast proves elusive, with many cafes only serving it after noon.

I break out Lacteeze tablets to indulge in Hokkaido's famous dairy products without repercussions. Hello soft cream

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Genghis Khan grill-your-own meat is popular at Sapporo Beer Garden.

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cones, and a cake set at Kitakaro, the dreamy bakery cafe in Hokkaido's century-old first library, redesigned by Tadao Ando.

While hunting sakura along the Sosei River behind the Sapporo TV Tower, we come across an outdoor food festival in full swing.

Soon we are lunching alongside locals on whole fish and octopus on sticks, tempura asparagus and buttery Hokkaido scallops. Afterwards, we browse the colourful Nijo Fish Market.

JR Tower Observatory T38 acknowledges it is short compared with many observation decks, but a ticket to the top is only \$9.

It's not crowded, and there is a cafe/cocktail bar to enhance the views.

On our third day in Sapporo, I wake in fright. An alarm is blaring, and a voice is warning of an earthquake. It's the NERV app on my phone, and I am grateful to know what is happening in English as we lie on the floor and wait for the shaking to stop.

It's a 6.1 quake, revised to 6.3, and happens exactly a week after the 7.7 magnitude quake officials predicted would be followed by a megaquake.

This casts a new light on the triangular "emergency" boxes in the corner of skyscraper lifts. Yes, they are for medical and toilet emergencies.

Sapporo has great transport but is very walkable. Every day we stroll through Odori Park, a series of tree-lined interconnected parks enhanced by fountains, food vendors and something rarely seen



Ganso Ramen Yokochi Sapporo, aka Ramen Alley. Below right, it's all smiles at a tiny ramen restaurant in Sapporo. Pictures: Sue Yeap

in Japan — rubbish bins.

We don't see many places serving the famous Jingsukan/Genghis Khan barbecued lamb dish, named after the shape of the grill it is cooked on.

This becomes our motivation to

visit Sapporo Beer Museum for dinner, albeit meaning we miss the exhibits. There are multiple restaurants but we're after the \$42 all-you-can-eat Genghis Khan buffet in the Poplar Hall wing of Sapporo Beer Garden.

We grill our own chicken, beef, lamb and veggies, with dishes ordered by tablet and arriving via a robot waiter.

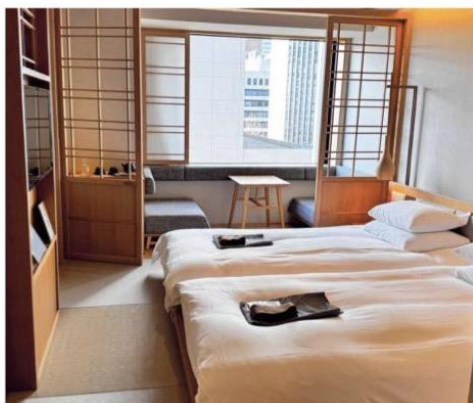
Our favourite Sapporo dish is the vegetable-heavy soup curry, first eaten at Soup Curry King, and later at Rojiura Curry Samurai, which has a branch in Perth.

We can't leave Sapporo without trying the famous miso ramen with butter and corn, so one night we cram into the narrow Ganso Sapporo Ramen Yokochi, aka Ramen Alley.

Picking somewhere that looks busy, we wait in line, but not for too long.

Inside, we pay for our ramen at the ticket machine, perch on two of the seven seats, and start slurping.

The chef smiles, we smile, Sapporo smiles... and we start planning a return visit.



A Hollywood twin room at Onsen Yuen Sapporo.



fact file

- A Hollywood twin room at Yuen Sapporo typically starts from \$210.
- sapporo.travel/en/
- uds-hotels.com
- nerv.app/en/
- sapporo-bier-garten.jp/