

How to Enjoy Hokkaido

How to enjoy Hokkaido on the cheap! Tips for visitors from abroad!



写真提供:木古内町観光協会



As pure as the driven snow

Visitors to Hokkaido in search of a unique experience should attend the annual Kanchu Misogi Festival in Kikonai Town, the first *shinkansen* (bullet train) station in Hokkaido. The word *misogi* means a ritual washing for purification. Shinto has many purification rituals, such as sprinkling salt after attending a funeral and rinsing the hands and mouth before entering a shrine. However, in the middle of a cold Hokkaido winter, *misogi* takes on a heroic aspect! The story starts at Kikonai's Samegawa Shrine, founded in 1625. According to legend, early in the morning of January 15, 1831, the shrine guardian had a dream. He was instructed, "*Goshintai wo kiyomeyo*" (Purify the sacred object.) So, he took an icon of the shrine's *kami* (spirit) to the Tsugaru Kaikyou (Strait). There he saw a vision of a beautiful woman dressed in white on the back of a large shark. Believing this to be a holy message, he dipped the icon into the sea several times. And from that year on, the village had *hou-ryou* (large catches of fish) and successful harvests! To *kinen-suru* (commemorate) these events, four young male *gyoshusha* (Shinto ascetic practitioners) withdraw to Samegawa Shrine. They prepare to purify four sacred icons representing four *kami*. The first icon represents the main shrine *kami*, Tamayorihime-no-mikoto, the spirit of the mother of the first emperor of Japan. Next is *inari*, one of the main *kami* of Shinto. This is the spirit of foxes, fertility, rice, tea, sake, and general prosperity. The *inari* is represented by Uganomitama-no-kami. Next, *yama-no-kami* (mountain spirits) are represented by Ooyamazumi-no-kami. Finally, there is Benzaiten, one of the *shichifukujin* (Seven Gods of Fortune). She is a female *kami* with Hindu origins who is associated with music and the arts. They sound like very powerful spirits! On January 13 and 14, the four young men purify themselves over and over with icy water, day and night. On January 15th, holding the four sacred icons, they wade into the bitterly cold seawater. They pray for good catches and harvests for the year. Returning closer to shore, the four men submerge the icons and splash each other. Once back on land, they pour buckets of icy water over their heads for a final purification. Then they sprinkle water on the crowd. Every year, thousands of townspeople and tourists watch this ceremony from the shore. What an inspiring start to the New Year! **J**

寒さに負けず祈りを捧げる"いのちの祭り"を発見

北海道の冬ならではの特別な体験をするなら、本州方面から青函海底トンネルを抜けて北海道最初の駅がある木古内町の「寒中みそぎ祭り」がおすすめ。その年の豊漁豊作を祈り、穢れなき優秀な4人の青年からなる「行修者」が、昼夜を問わず何度も冷水を浴びて体を清めます。中でも、海上安全や交通安全などにご利益がある「玉依姫命」、お稲荷様として知られている商工業・農業の神「宇迦御魂神」、山を司る神「大山津見神」、七福神の一人で学芸や技能、財福の神といわれる「弁財天」のご神体を抱いて厳冬の海へ入る姿は感動を生み、毎年何千人もの町民や観光客がこの神事を見守るまでになりました。新年の始まりにふさわしい伝統ある行事といえます。

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