

Chapter 5

The Viewpoint of Foreigner Living in Tohoku I

What Makes Tohoku Special – From a Foreigner’s Standpoint

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1. Introduction

When most foreign people think of Japan, they imagine the neon city lights of Tokyo, high-tech skyscrapers with trains weaving in between. They think of the pristine Buddhist temples and peaceful gardens of Kyoto. They may even think of the snowy wonderland that is Hokkaido. But it’s rare for them to think of Tohoku¹, the area of Honshu north of Tokyo. Tohoku is one of the least visited regions in Japan by foreign tourists, and perhaps only known abroad as the place struck by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. It’s a shame, because it offers an experience unlike any other in Japan.

2. The Food of Tohoku:

Traditional cooking, agricultural products, sake, wine, and more

As a whole, Japan’s mountainous terrain makes it unsuitable for large-scale farming, but the immense land area of Tohoku makes it the breadbasket (or rice basket, as it were) of Japan. Five out of seven of the prefectures within Tohoku have a food self-sufficiency rate above 100%, with Akita Prefecture reaching 196% self-sufficiency rate in 2015². Tohoku rice is renowned for its quality, and Hitomebore, a cultivar largely grown in Iwate Prefecture, has gained the Top-A rank for rice more than 21 times. There is so much variety of vegetables, and a strong sense of seasonality – in February, you can get *fukinoto* (butterbur) for frying in tempura and serving with a light sprinkling of salt. In summer, the shelves are stocked with zucchini and okra. And fall is truly the harvest season, with amazing *matsutake* mushrooms and *satoimo* potatoes on sale in an abundant amount of farmers markets.

It is popular nowadays to cook with locally grown food, which is something that has always been done by the people of Tohoku. There are many small inns that serve traditional-style meals that are dynamic with the seasons (and with whatever they’ve bought from the local produce stand that morning). As with most Japanese cooking, each meal is comprised of 5-10 different items, and the time and care spent with each component is truly felt. There’s always a story behind every dish, and some of the best times I’ve had in Tohoku have been being taught how to make *hittsumi*, a hearty stew made in southern Iwate, or juice from the leaves of the *shiso* plant.

※Unauthorized copying prohibited.

1 The Tohoku region includes Aomori, Iwate, Akita, Miyagi, Yamagata, Fukushima and Niigata prefectures.

2 From a 2015 study by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries.

Small towns in Tohoku strive to attract more visitors to their towns, and some of them, like Kamaishi City on the coast of southern Iwate, have promoted homestays at local farms using services like Airbnb. There, guests can help work the fields, cook dinner, and have an experience getting to know the local people, something not easily found in the tourism attractions that are most well known in Japan. This kind of agritourism could be used to boost Tohoku's profile and increase foreign visitors, but the challenge remains in making this profitable and sustainable for the small towns that take part. Agritourism has been developed for a few decades in Japan, but it has not seen returns that would make it worth it to the mostly elderly farmers that provide such homestays.

Its climate is a little colder than Tokyo and the rest of southern Japan, but temperatures oscillate between hot and cold more than the northern island of Hokkaido. This improves both the taste and the hardness of its agricultural output. That climate has proven a boon for winemaking. Perhaps a more upscale experience, similar to Italian agritourism, could be developed where guests would tour wine-making (or sake-making) areas and stay in the area for shopping and sightseeing. Southern Japan has seen some success with renovating unused civic halls into modern yet Japanese accommodations, with meals being made by local residents using local ingredients. Perhaps such a model could be used in Tohoku as well.

3. Local Tohoku Culture:

Thousands of years of history

Summer in Tohoku is a literal whirlwind of culture and history. Around August, almost every day you'll find a large-scale festival being hosted somewhere in Tohoku: Sansa Odori drum festival in Iwate, Nebuta festival with its massive floats in Aomori, Kanto festival in Akita with men balancing 10 meter poles on their heads. Foreign visitors could probably fill an entire month with such a memorable pilgrimage, full of sights they can't find in their own countries. But tourism cannot be sustained through one season alone – that's where Tohoku's immense amount of experiential tourism can come into play.

I'll provide Tono Furusato Mura (Tono Heritage Village) as a case study. Tono Furusato Mura is located in central Iwate Prefecture in the city of Tono. It's a cultural complex with a collection of old traditional *magariya* style houses, and many of the houses provide an experiential program or educational lesson about life in agricultural Tono centuries ago. It's a beautiful place, especially in winter with a covering of snow on the thatched roofs of the *magariya*. However, without Japanese ability, the facility is largely closed off to foreign guests. There is very little signage in English, and the park assumes a knowledge of Japanese culture that most foreign visitors will not have. This excludes the fact that the park itself is far away from the train station with no public transportation in sight.

However, with a little work, the park could become a very attractive place for foreign visitors. Live English interpreting would require a lot of capital, but an investment in translating signs and visitor's information, as well as the installation of audio tours, would go a long way in opening the window into old Tono culture. An English website, with an online process for reservations for experiential tours, is also key. Installing staff at each site, who can communicate their culture to visitors, would also give them a chance to chat with a local citizen, and bridge the gap between country and culture.

These sorts of experiential tours could be developed throughout Tohoku. Become a farmer for a day. Haul fish with local fishermen. Try painting a lacquerware bowl (a traditional craft of Iwate, one of the prefectures within Tohoku). While most of these tours are only available in Japanese, there is much interest in providing this to the foreign market, in which case Tohoku would be the only place in Japan to provide a deep form of tourism where one can learn deeply about the local culture, and make connections with people that isn't possible with traditional sightseeing.

4. Accommodations and Restaurants for a Foreign Visitor

Any tour of Tohoku will be a little rustic. There is not a huge market for upscale tourism, even for Japanese tourists, so the majority of accommodations are business hotels and *ryokan* (Japanese style inns where you sleep in futon on tatami flooring). However, there are upscale hotels in cities and in *onsen* areas. However, as a foreign person, I've never had anything less than a stellar experience, whether it's a fancy hotel in the city, or a humble *ryokan* by the coast. Restaurants are full of local food and cuisine, and they exist in every genre and price level. The issue with both of these is the lack of English signs. Hotels and restaurants are slow to put their information online, and when they do, it's only in Japanese. However, TripAdvisor, Instagram, and Youtube are slowly gaining popularity as ways to promote hotels and restaurants, and perhaps crowd-sourcing the translation of vital information can be done in the future.

Many areas in Japan are publicizing themselves as "unique" within a unique country. But Tohoku's abundant natural resources and wide land area make it both an attractive destination for people looking to escape from the hustle and bustle of the big cities, as well as provides amazing food. It is also home to an amazing amount of festivals, skilled traditional craftwork, folk performances, and much more rich culture with thousands of years backing it. However, without Japanese language skills, much of Tohoku's beauty and charm remain locked behind a language barrier. Tohoku is probably the hardest place to visit in Japan without Japanese skill. Much work has to be done to provide a smooth experience for foreign tourists, as well as build attractive accommodations in areas outside the major cities. But for someone looking for adventure and a paradise hidden from the rest of the world, Tohoku is the place to go.

Pictures related to the contents of this paper are as follows.

Picture 1. Morioka City's Sansa Odori Drum Festival



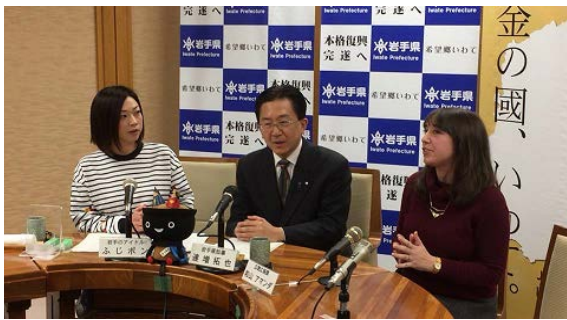
(Source: The author's homepage)

Picture 2. The author in Sansa Odori Drum Festival costume



(Source: The author's homepage)

Picture 3. An Appearance on the Governor of Iwate's Online Streaming Show



(Source: The author's homepage)

Picture 4. At an Booth Showing off the ILC Project



(Source: The author's homepage)

Picture 5. Akita Kanto Festival



(Source: Akita Kanto Executive Committee's homepage)

Picture 6. Aomori Nebuta Festival



(Source: Tohoku-Electric Power Co.,Inc.'s homepage)