

## THE TOUR

Story and photography by  
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# The North Remembers

Get a glimpse into the culture of the Indigenous Ainu people in Hokkaido, Japan



Kengo Takiguchi, wearing an embroidered kimono and patterned headband, sits cross-legged near the shore of Lake Akan. He dips a carved willow stick (*ikupasuy*) into a wooden sake bowl and puts a drop of alcohol into the flame of a candle, then waves the stick in the air while praying out loud, a gesture to the spirits the Ainu people call *kamuy*.

“In *kamuy*’s world, one drop of alcohol becomes a barrel of alcohol, so *kamuy* is happy about it,” Takiguchi explains to a tour group. The Ainu, an Indigenous group that lives mostly on the northern island of Hokkaido, has practiced this prayer ritual, *kamuy-nomi*, for hundreds of years, but the Ainu are little known around the world. In fact, the government of Japan only legally recognized the Indigenous group in 2019. The Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park opened in 2020, though, and now four tours offered by the Akan Ainu Industrial Arts Association are helping visitors to reopened Japan learn more about this unique culture.



Today, I’m on one of those tours, the 90-minute Forest Time itinerary, which begins with Takiguchi performing *kamuy-nomi* at the edge of the woods in Akan Mashu National Park. He explains that for the Ainu the forest is a source of food, tools, and clothing, and the prayer ceremony is a way to show appreciation. He then leads us on a walk into the woods, explaining the symbolism and uses of the trees along the trail. (The *katsura* tree was fashioned into dugout canoes, while the sap of pines was used as a skin balm.) “This lets people touch wood and see what the surface feels like and what it is used for,” he says. Our guide also demonstrates how to play the *mukkuri*, a small



mouth harp made from bamboo that can mimic sounds from nature—the cries of bear cubs, the drip of rain drops, even the roar of thunder.

Aside from being a guide, Takiguchi is a wood-carver and one of about 100 people who live in the traditional Ainu *kotan* (village) at Lake Akan.

Visitors to the village will find handicrafts shops, a theater for music and dance performances, and Ainu cuisine such as *pocche-imo* (baked fermented potato dumplings), salmon, and seaweed dumplings. For a full cultural immersion, consider attending the two-day Akan Yukar Utasa Festival, which debuted in February 2020 and is set to host guests again next month (February 4-5) after two years of virtual editions. In

the Ainu language, *utasa* means “intersecting with each other”—an activity that Japan-loving travelers are surely overjoyed to be able to participate in once more. *Tours, en.anytimeainutime.jp*



Clockwise from top left: Kengo Takiguchi leads a tour; a song and dance performance at the Akan Yukar Utasa Festival; a wood-carving on display at the festival; Takiguchi works on a piece of wood