

Rishiri and Rebun Islands



Mr David Boyd is no stranger to Japan. A former Japan Exchange and Teaching Program participant, he returns quite regularly. His most recent visit in June this year included time on two of Japan's more remote islands located off the northern tip of Hokkaido island—Rishiri and Rebun Islands, part of the Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park. He recounts his trip around the islands.

“Eat the sea urchin first,” the stallholder advised, “then try the seaweed. Taste each component individually. Then mix everything together and eat the rest.” She was very particular in her instructions, and I felt I should trust her – but I hadn't expected to find sea urchin and seaweed as ice cream toppings [photo a]. Undeniably interesting, it was an unusual combination that would have thrown even my food-obsessed friends in Tokyo. I was visiting the islands of Rishiri and Rebun, under two hours by ferry from the port of Wakkanai, at the northern tip of Hokkaido. Known for their scenic beauty and fresh seafood, the islands boast the best sea urchin and seaweed in Japan – and as I found, they can be served in rather surprising ways.



Earlier, I had enjoyed a more conventional lunch of sea urchin, fresh off the boat. Glistening atop a bowl of rice, it had a creamy, buttery texture and a pleasant, delicate flavour [b]. I had eaten sea urchin in Tokyo before, but never of this quality. The restaurateur told me that the sea urchin here was delicious because it eats *konbu* (kelp), and Rishiri *konbu* was the best because of the nutrient-rich ocean currents that meet around the islands.

The islands benefit from a superior *konbu* harvest and an abundance of seafood that feeds off it. The *konbu* is exported to the rest of Japan for use in *dashi* stock. Locally, it is marinated in vinegar for several days, dried and shaved; with a soft texture and a light flavour, it is often served in a clear soup.

Another local dish is chanchan-yaki: *hokke* (a kind of mackerel found in the Sea of Okhotsk), seasoned with miso and eight different flavours, and grilled over coals [c]. With a high fat content, the fish from these waters is known throughout Japan for its high grade.

Food isn't the islands' only drawcard. Both islands offer spectacular scenery, which is quite different on each: Rishiri, the larger of the two, is an extinct volcano rising dramatically from the Sea of Japan; beautifully symmetrical, the mountain is known as 'Rishiri-Fuji' [d], evoking its famous namesake further south. Rebun, to the north-west, is smaller and flatter,

but with a rugged coastline, colourful bursts of alpine wildflowers during the summer and views back across the water to Rishiri-Fuji.

One can climb the summit of Rishiri-Fuji in a day, and there are numerous hiking courses of varying difficulty along the coast of Rebun. There are several impressive natural rock formations, including the peach-shaped Momo-iwa, and Neko-iwa, a rocky outcrop said to resemble a sitting cat [above]. With limited time on each island, we phoned ahead and hired a car. Driving was easy, with good roads and no likelihood of getting lost. Rishiri also has a 25 km road reserved exclusively for cyclists, traversing coast and forests of the northern half of the island. A circuit of the island by road covers approximately 60 km, and passes several pretty lakes which reflect the peak of Rishiri-Fuji on a fine day.



In the evening, most visitors eat in their hotels or *ryokan*. Our accommodation on both islands – which we booked online with ease from Australia – provided sumptuous meals using local specialties: *Nanatsuboshi* ('seven star') rice from northern Hokkaido, prized for its lustre and stickiness; various simmered fish and vegetables; and the ubiquitous sea urchin and *konbu*.

Speaking with locals, I learned that many Japanese long to visit Rishiri and Rebun, but few make the journey, and even fewer foreigners. One shopkeeper was impressed that we had come all the way from Australia, and lamented that his friends hadn't travelled the shorter distance from elsewhere in Japan. Although remote, the islands are not inaccessible – there are regular ferries from Wakkanai, and flights from Sapporo; yet once ashore, the bright lights further south seem more distant than they are.

On our last evening on Rebun, we relaxed in the hot spring, watching the silhouette of Rishiri-Fuji slowly blend with the darkening evening sky. As the evening glow faded and the stars shone, I was happy for the bright lights of Tokyo to stay far away indeed.

Text and photos by David Boyd