

THE REAWAKENING OF HAKODATE



CHIARA TERZUOLO VISITS THE QUIET, UNASSUMING JAPANESE PORT TOWN OF HAKODATE, THE GATEWAY TO THE ISLAND OF HOKKAIDO AND THE NEWEST DESTINATION FOR THE COUNTRY'S ICONIC BULLET TRAINS.

As the plane began its wobbly descent, the dark six pointed star of the Goryokaku, Japan's first (and most beautiful) Western-style fortress, filled the little window beside me, an unusual welcome to the port town of Hakodate, which is once again reclaiming its position as the gateway to Hokkaido.

Hakodate's dramatic rise to prosperity started in 1859, when it was selected to be one of

the first trading posts with the West. The world poured into Hakodate, leaving its mark in the dramatic cupola-topped churches, colourful mansions and red brick warehouses that circle the port. The advent of air transport, however, slowed sea trade, and the city settled into being a beloved, if minor, spot for a quiet vacation.

However the city is once again stirring. In March, that miracle of Japanese engineering, the shinkansen (bullet train), came streaking

through the chunnel from the mainland. I arrived in Hakodate only a month before the event, and you could almost hear the bated breath, the scrubbed up city proof of excitement and expectation. During every conversation I had, someone mentioned the bullet train; the excitement was palpable. After a whirlwind of interviews, bowing and handshakes, it was all I could do to drag myself to a small, foggy-windowed ramen shop, slurp down a steaming bowl of the city's famous shio ramen (fine noodles in a salt-

(left) The Goryokaku;
(right) the city's trading past can be seen in its architecture; a traditional market

based broth, somehow light despite the fragrant oil) then fall asleep to the sound of foghorns from the bay.

The next morning I rose early and slipped out of the sleepy hotel, the starched clerk bowing me out the door, and meandered towards the fish market, soon to be waylaid by a tanned lady with an adorable bonnet and serious waders.

"It's as fresh and genki (lively) as me!" she said, striking a pose and fearlessly holding up a crab the size of my face. The red snow crab was destined to become a grilled breakfast for the gentleman beside me, who snapped a picture of this bit of fisherman's pride and gazed thoughtfully at the sinuous squid in the fishmonger's tank nearby.

Outside the well-scrubbed market the streets of Hakodate remained quiet, and I was the only one to board the historic tram, a lovely rumbling, chiming bit of nostalgia that connects the city from end to end. I jumped off at the Suehirocho stop and then climbed the nearest slope, away from the misty harbour. Hakodate is a narrow strip between two bays; at its thinnest point only one kilometer separates the waves. My walk started at the Old Public Hall, a Meijiera folly in buttercup and robin's egg pastels, which deftly combines Western and Japanese architecture. Due to the early hour I had the neighbourhood basically all to myself, save for a few spritely Hokkaido grandmothers, seemingly half my height and at least twice my age, cheerfully lugging groceries up steep stairways.

The fog cleared away, and I got the full effect of Hachimanzaka Slope, a straight street buttressed by solid paving stones and orderly trees that lead the eye directly to the blue of the harbour and cloud-flecked sky. The Western style mansions, the onion domes of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, and the bright red bricks of the retro warehouses by the water below make the scenery timeless. Hakodate retains the faded gentility of its prosperous commercial past, as well as distinct reminders that it was once the Wild West of Japan. The outpost of Russia's Far Eastern Federal University, a reminder of Hakodate's proximity to the contested Sakhalin Island and its ties to that northern giant, seems less old fashioned and quaint here than it would in Tokyo.

I picked my way down a random slope, admiring the rooster on the turret of one of the many Catholic churches, when the hypnotic smell of fresh bread turned my head. I honed in on a yellow stucco building, and peeking through the window saw a wood burning stove in action. The owner was surprised, but cut a few slices of thick raisin-dotted bread and ground me a fresh cup of coffee. The mug was a piece of art, covered in flecks of gold, swirling patterns and hidden creatures, a dove slowly peeking out with every sip. The warm wood-floored room was lined with more examples of this intricate pottery.



"Are these your work?" I asked my host. "My father's," he responded.

Later I learned that his father is a well-known Hokkaido artist, the cup a museum quality piece. Hakodate hospitality at its best.

The day passed in a flash, and before I knew it I was riding the cable car up to see the city's famous 'Million Dollar Night View'. The sparkling lights of the town shaped by the water on either side make an indelible impression of a woman, waist tightly corseted with jewels and her arms spread wide to welcome travellers to Hokkaido's shores. Over the clicking of camera shutters I heard English, Chinese, Thai, even French, and couldn't help but feel glad that the world is once again coming to Hakodate.