



# Guide to Living in Otaru

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## Otaru English Speaking Society

Welcome to the charming port city of Otaru! Otaru English Speaking Society (Otaru ESS) is a volunteer group of English speakers established in Otaru in 1966. As residents of this city, we would like to share some helpful tips to assist you in settling down, navigating, and enjoying your new life here.

### Do People in Otaru Speak English ?

Although Otaru is a popular international tourist destination, many residents may speak little to no English. If you would like to practice your Japanese, feel free to do so; everyone will appreciate your effort. At the same time, many people in Otaru are eager to communicate in English. If you choose to speak English, try to use simple, short sentences and speak slowly. Additionally, consider using translation apps, such as Google Translate, VoiceTra, or DeepL, to facilitate communication.

### Finding General Information on Daily Life

- City of Otaru – For Foreign Residents: This webpage offers valuable information, including free Japanese classes, a list of hospitals and clinics that cater to non-Japanese speakers, disaster preparedness resources, and guidelines for rubbish disposal.

<https://www.city.otaru.lg.jp/categories/bunya/kokusaikoryu/foreignresidents/>



- Hokkaido Foreign Resident Support Center: This website offers emergency disaster information and consultations for various daily life matters. You can also sign up for a disaster mailing list by clicking the email icon at the bottom of the page.

<https://www.hiecc.or.jp/soudan/en/>



### **Resident Registration**

Upon arriving in Otaru, you must visit the city hall to register your residency within 14 days. Remember to bring your residence card (zairyu card) and your passport for processing. A city hall official will assist you in registering as a resident of Otaru, issuing your My Number card (which also serves as a health insurance card), and updating the address on your residence card.

If you do not have health insurance and pension benefits from your workplace, the city hall official can also help you sign up for national health insurance and national pension.

### **Personal Seal (Hanko)**

In Japan, it is essential to have at least one personal seal, known as a "hanko." This seal is required to open a bank account and enter into contracts, including renting an apartment. You can order your seal from various stores or purchase one online for a few thousand yen. Matsuda Inpan Ten (Inaho 16-16) is a foreigner-friendly store, and Hankoya.com is a popular online shop.

### **Banking**

- Opening a bank account in Japan can be challenging for newcomers, particularly if you lack a stable job in Japan. Many banks have waiting periods that prevent newly arrived foreigners from opening an account until they have been in Japan for a specific duration. If you find yourself in this situation, consider trying Aeon Bank; however, please keep in mind that they do not facilitate international transactions.
- Once you successfully open a bank account, familiarize yourself with how to process a domestic bank transfer (furikomi) online, as this method is typically the most economical way to send money within Japan.
- Most bills with remittance forms can be paid at convenience store cashiers. Just bring the bill along with the payment, and they will handle it for you in just a few minutes.

- For international money transfers, Wise (wise.com) is a reliable option, offering excellent exchange rates and reasonable processing fees for sending and receiving money.
- If you need to withdraw money from your overseas bank account using a debit card, you can do so at Yucho Bank ATMs located in post offices or at Seven Bank ATMs found in Seven-Eleven stores. Keep in mind that if you choose to have Seven Bank convert your funds to Japanese Yen (JPY) instead of allowing your home bank to handle the conversion, Seven Bank will charge a 4% commission in addition to the processing fee, which can make this option more expensive. Additionally, Lawson ATMs also facilitate international withdrawals, but they typically have a higher processing fee.
- Japanese banks are generally cautious when handling international remittances for individual customers. You may be required to provide detailed information about yourself, the source of the funds, and the purpose of the remittance, which can be a time-consuming and inconvenient process.
- If you have renewed your residence card (zairyu card) while living in Japan, visit your bank office with your residence card and ATM card to update your customer information. If you do not, they may lock your account.

## Transportation

- Google Maps is likely the best tool for navigating public transportation to reach a specific destination, at least in Hokkaido.
- It is recommended to obtain a Kitaca prepaid IC card. This card can be used to pay for most buses and trains throughout Japan. You can purchase the card from vending machines at JR stations and recharge it at those machines or at convenience store cashiers.
- Go (go.goinc.jp), DiDi (didimobility.co.jp), and Uber are popular taxi apps that work in Otaru.

## Shopping

- Many small businesses still primarily accept cash, so it's wise to carry some with you when you go out.
- At almost all stores, cashiers will ask you if you want a "fukuro," which is a shopping bag. Fukuro usually costs somewhere between 3 yen and 20 yen, depending on its quality and size.
- Shopping malls in Otaru
  - Wing Bay Otaru (Chikko 11): This is one of the largest shopping malls in Hokkaido, conveniently connected to JR Otaru Chikko Station. The mall features a variety of stores, including a furniture store, a DIY store, a used goods store, a movie theater, a bookstore, a supermarket, and more.

- Nagasakiya (in front of JR Otaru Station): This store has been there for 50 years, so Otaru locals have a lot of fond memories of it. It includes a discount store, Don Quijote, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors.
- Convenience stores: Japanese convenience stores (called “Konbini”) offer not only ready-to-eat food, but also a variety of services, including bill payments, ATM access, shipping, ticket purchases, and even printing and copying.
- Bookstores: If you want to browse for English books, there is a bookstore in Otaru and two bookstores in Sapporo that offer them.
  - Kikuya Shoten (Second floor, Wing Bay Otaru)
  - Maruzen Junkudo (Minami-1, Nishi-1, Chuo-ku, Sapporo)
  - Kinokuniya (Kita-1, Nishi-5, Chuo-ku, Sapporo)
- Imported food stores
  - Gyomu Super (Inaho 5chome 10-1): a discount grocery store that carries a variety of imported groceries from France, Italy, Spain, India, etc.
  - Asia Shokuhin Rakuichi (Kita-15, Nishi-4, Kita-ku, Sapporo / Minami-7, Nishi-9, Chuo-ku, Sapporo): offers groceries from across Asia, including halal options.
- Otaru is home to many excellent bakeries:
  - Difficult to access but worth the trek: Pan Yurutono (Hariusu-cho 560-16), Aigues Vives (Oshoro 1-195), Quatre Feuilles (Zenibako 2-4-6), Maruutani Seipan (Asarigawa Onsen 2-692-30)
  - Easily accessible: Ondine (Inaho 2-15-1), Saint Germain (in JR Otaru Station)

## Eating out

- If you follow a specific diet or have food allergies, dining out in Japan can be challenging. Japanese restaurants often include unexpected ingredients that may not be listed on the menu. For example, a burger might contain pork and egg. To avoid accidentally consuming something you don't want, it's essential to learn the Japanese terms for the foods you cannot eat before going out to eat.
  - Vegetarian: bejitarian (ベジタリアン)
  - Pork: buta-niku (豚肉)
  - Beef: gyu-niku (牛肉)
  - Fish with no scale: (w)uroko no nai sakana (鱗の無い魚)
  - Crustacean: koukaku-rui (甲殻類)
  - Shellfish: kai (貝)
  - Liquor: osake, aruko-ru (お酒、アルコール)
  - Dairy: nyu-sei-hin (乳製品)
  - Gelatin: zerachin (ゼラチン)

- Many izakaya and bars serve an "Otoshi" (お通し) dish when you order your first drink. This complimentary small dish, typically costing 300 to 500 yen, acts as a table charge. While you can't refuse it, it's best to ask your server about the dish beforehand if you have dietary restrictions, as they may offer a suitable substitute.
- If you're craving meaty dishes, good options include Burger King at JR Otaru Station, Victoria (Inaho 4-2-20), and Otaru Beer (Minatomachi 5-4).
- For excellent espresso-based drinks, such as espresso, latte, and cappuccino, B3 Coffee (Hanazono 1-7-6) is the best choice, and they speak English! If you prefer single-origin, hand-dripped coffee, be sure to check out Chaff (Inaho 3-11-1).

## Healthcare

- The "My Number Card" issued at the city hall also serves as a health insurance card. When you use it for the first time, you will place it in a device at the healthcare facility's reception counter. The device will prompt you to agree to several consent forms for medical information disclosure. Additionally, you must enter the PIN you set up at the city hall or use face recognition.
- The Japanese healthcare system does not require you to have a primary care doctor. You can visit most clinics directly, including specialists. However, some clinics may require an appointment, so it is advisable to check in advance.
- Many large hospitals require a referral letter from another healthcare provider to accept new patients. If a hospital allows new patients without a referral, the patient may need to pay an additional fee for the initial visit, ranging from 3,000 yen to 7,700 yen.
- Japanese ambulances are free. In case of a medical emergency, call 119 and request an English interpreter to speak with the operator.
- Sapporo Drug Store (Satsudora) at Wakamatsu 2-chome 6-8 is currently the only pharmacy in Otaru known to sell the morning-after pill (emergency contraception) without a prescription. Morning-after pills are not available online in Japan.
- Here is a list of clinics and hospitals in Otaru that welcome non-Japanese speakers; however, this does not guarantee fluency in English:

[https://www.city.otaru.lg.jp/docs/2024021900055/file\\_contents/gaikokugoikaenglish.pdf](https://www.city.otaru.lg.jp/docs/2024021900055/file_contents/gaikokugoikaenglish.pdf)



- A list of dentists in Otaru that welcome non-Japanese speakers is available here, with the same note regarding English proficiency:

[https://www.city.otaru.lg.jp/docs/2024021900055/file\\_contents/gaikokugosikaenglish.pdf](https://www.city.otaru.lg.jp/docs/2024021900055/file_contents/gaikokugosikaenglish.pdf)



- Clinics that are open on Sundays and national holidays can be found here (this page is in Japanese; please use your browser's translation function):

<https://www.otmed.or.jp/touban001/>



- For an emergency night clinic in Otaru, visit this page (also in Japanese; use your browser's translation function):

<https://www.otmed.or.jp/yakan/>



- AMDA is a non-profit organization that answers questions about the Japanese medical system and helps you make appointments with clinics. They also offer telephone medical interpretation services at no charge:

<https://www.amdamedicalcenter.com/activities>



- SEMI Sapporo is a non-profit organization located in Sapporo that provides free in-person interpretation services in clinics and hospitals for Sapporo residents. Otaru residents visiting healthcare providers in Sapporo can access their paid services:

<https://semi-sapporo.com/welcome-to-npo-semi-sapporo/>



- Care to Translate is an app offering a subscription-based AI interpretation service specifically for communication with healthcare providers. If you frequently seek medical

care, it may be worth trying. Even without a subscription, you can use the app's word list for free:

<https://www.caretotranslate.com/>



- Sapporo Higashi Tokushukai Hospital has an International Medical Support Office with in-house interpreters. However, the hospital's location may not be convenient for residents of Otaru:

[https://www.higashi-tokushukai.or.jp/la\\_en/support.html](https://www.higashi-tokushukai.or.jp/la_en/support.html)



## **Mental Health**

- TELL: This non-profit organization provides vital support, including a paid counseling service program with fees that may be discounted based on income.

<https://telljp.com/i-am-feeling-suicidal/>



- IMHPJ: Their website allows you to search for licensed bilingual mental health counselors by specialty. Payment is based on a sliding scale relative to your salary. Please note that there are currently no counselors in Hokkaido, but many are available for remote therapy.

<https://www.imhpj.org/>



- Yorisoi Hotline: This non-profit offers free consultations via telephone or chat regarding issues related to visas, nationality, family matters, work, daily living, discrimination, domestic violence, confinement, and human trafficking.

<https://www.since2011.net/yorisoi/en/>



- JET: ALTs who are JET program participants are eligible for a partial subsidy for mental health counseling and a free online counseling service.

<https://jetprogramme.org/en/mental-health-support/>



## Police

- In case of emergency, call 110 (Fire & Ambulance: 119). If you need assistance in English, the operator will connect you with an interpreter. Please note that you cannot call these emergency numbers using a foreign SIM card or via a phone app over Wi-Fi.
- For non-emergency inquiries, you can contact the Hokkaido Prefectural Police via this inquiry form:

[https://www.police.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/foreign/01\\_english/english-3-6.html](https://www.police.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/foreign/01_english/english-3-6.html)



- Although stop-and-search situations are rare in Hokkaido, it is advisable to carry your residence card (zairyu card) when leaving your home.
- If you have difficulty communicating with police officers, contact the Japan Visitor Hotline at 050-3816-2787, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This service offers free assistance to tourists in English during emergencies, and residents in Japan can also make use of it.

## Legal Support

- Houterasu (法テラス): This organization provides information on the Japanese legal system, bar associations, and relevant organizations with no charge. Their website is a valuable resource for basic legal information, and they offer a free legal service program for individuals with limited income.

<https://www.houterasu.or.jp/site/english/multilingualinformationservice.html>



## Media

- Even if you do not watch TV programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), paying the receiving fee is an obligation if you live in Japan. Register online at the website below. Otherwise, an NHK staff member may visit your place repeatedly until you agree to sign up.  
<https://www.nhk-cs.jp/jushinryo/multilingual/english/>



- NHK World-Japan is an excellent online English news source, particularly during disasters. They also have pages for studying Japanese, suitable for levels Pre A1 to B2.  
<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/>



- Nippon TV News in English  
<https://www.ntv.co.jp/englishnews/>



## Communities to Join

- **Otaru English Speaking Society** (Otaru ESS) consists of approximately 20 native Japanese speakers and 10 native English speakers. We meet on the third Saturday of each month for two hours, primarily participating in conversations conducted in English. This is a great opportunity to share information, learn new things, and make new friends. Participation is free for native English speakers, as your presence helps provide a valuable learning experience for non-native English speakers. As a volunteer organization, we also offer free community English and Japanese interpretation and translation services for Otaru residents who are not native Japanese

speakers. If you or someone you know needs assistance, please email us in advance, and we will do our best to support you.

<https://otaruess.com/en>



- Hokkaido Aliens: A Facebook community for expatriates from all countries living in Hokkaido, Japan, to share experiences, notices, stories, events, and information about life in Hokkaido and Japan in general.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hokkaidoaliens/>



- Stonewall Japan: LGBTQ community in Japan

<https://stonewalljapan.org/>

