

LEISURE/TRAVEL

Northern dogs pulling their own

By UTA HARNISCHFEGER
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Wakkanai, the city at the northernmost tip of Hokkaido, seems like the northern outpost of Japanese civilization. In winter, when the Siberian ice hits the coastline, carrying along an icy wind, the town is virtually deserted. Wondering how the people make their livings and what tourists come here for, the city provides the answer: "wakkanai."

The ferry harbor is empty. The ferries to Sakhalin only run during summer and the Japanese tourists usually rushing through and crab-shopping on their way to the islands Rishiri and Rebun are in hibernation.

But the town does have its peculiarities. There are the shops specializing in winter footwear featuring elegant ladies' *geta* and *wayosetchu* snow boots (something between galoshes and *thermozori*). There is the steaming *okaachan-nabe* with tarabagani crab to fight off the cold. There is the Cyrillic script announcing sights and shopping possibilities to Russian visitors.

But most of all, there is the yearly echo of barking on the frontier. It's dog days in Wakkanai.

Here, on the snow-covered marshland some 10 km out of town, Japan's first dog sled race was held in 1984. This year the event had its 10th anniversary. Five hundred eighty dogs — Siberian huskies showing off their ice-cold blue eyes, Alaskan malamutes in their thick black-and-white fur coats, and a small minority of long-legged Irish wolfhounds — came together to compete.

The shortest races — junior, senior and female — are 200 meters, and the longest — the "open race" with at least eight dogs — is 20 km long. There's the "180-kg weight

contestants for the best costume or handmade sled.

The dog's drivers are known as mushers; at the turn of the century French Canadian miners and trappers called out "*marche, marche!*" (*go, go!*) to their dogs, which sounded like "mush, mush" to the English-speaking miners.

During January and February dog sled clubs, mainly from northeastern Japan and Hokkaido, drive their dogs from race to race. They don't only take along their dogs but the entire family. Their camping equipment turns the dog sled sites into huge campgrounds, featuring outdoor grilling and outdoor playing.

The mornings are busy with preparations: The dogs eat their pre-race muesli — milk, flakes and honey — and huge pieces of red meat; the adults meticulously wax sleds, make hot drinks, attach race numbers and bundle up the kids who run off with bucket and shovel. The dogs yip in shrill voices anticipating the race.

Jinya Otomo and Takashi Sato are members of Nankyoku Tankentai (South Pole Expedition). (The name of their dog sled group commemorates the first Japanese to join a South Pole expedition — and take along sled dogs — in 1912.) Like dog sled racing in Japan, clubs like Nankyoku Tankentai are young — around 2 to 3 years old. As most dogs aren't used to running long distances, only a small number of experienced mushers can participate in longer races: The winner of the 20-km race, Giichi Matsumoto, professionally breeds and trains police dogs near Kushiro.

Although people like him wear baseball caps, heavy leather snow boots, and necklaces of chains and carabiner-like hooks, they are the true "cowboys" of this frontier



THE LONGEST SLED DOG RACE ever in Japan — eight dogs, distance of 20 km — drew over 10,000 visitors from all over

PHOTOS BY UTA HARNISCHFEGER

who have lots of space to let their dogs run and little work during the winter months. To train his dogs Matsumoto has them pull his mini-car, accelerating every once in a while to give them a break.

Some, like Matsumoto, who started breeding Siberian huskies three years ago, have discovered sled racing to be their true calling. Twenty-seven-year-old Tokyoite Miki Morita used to be an actress, once playing in a movie starring a Siberian husky. To prepare for the role she lived with the dog for a year — but couldn't part ways with it after the film was finished. Feeling lonely without the dogs, she quit acting and took up part-time jobs which allow her to take off during January and February to train at a farm in Wakkanai.

Though she then trains her

