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## Sapporo Snow Festival

The Sapporo Snow Festival is a celebration of snow and ice held for one week each February. Events are held at three locations in and around Sapporo, the capital and largest city of Hokkaido (the northernmost of Japan's main islands), and one of the world's snowiest cities. An average of 485 centimeters of snow falls there every year, and accumulations often reach 80 to 90 centimeters.

Each of the three venues has a distinct focus and character. At Odori Park in central Sapporo, snow sculptures stretch out over 12 city blocks. At nearby Susukino, a restaurant and entertainment district, ice sculptures and nighttime illumination are the main attractions. About 10 kilometers away is Tsudome, a snow park with both indoor and outdoor activities.

Each year the festival features several large snow sculptures on a different theme, including reproductions of famous buildings on an almost life-sized scale. Some require scaffolding and truckloads of snow to create. There are also several medium-sized sculptures and numerous smaller ones that are hand-formed by Sapporo residents and international teams. The celebration of cultural expression and connection developed by creating snow sculptures as a community, as well as the use of technology to enhance the experience, are hallmarks of the festival.

A Sapporo schoolteacher who helped launch the festival taught his students to think of the abundant snow as a welcome friend rather than a foe and a nuisance, and that doing so can bring enjoyment and a sense of possibility. The community embraced this view and turned a festival that began with a few snow sculptures and a snowball fight into a world-famous event that draws millions of visitors to the city every year.



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## History of the Festival

The Sapporo Snow Festival began in the winter of 1950 when a group of middle and high school students built six snow sculptures in a corner of Odori Park under the supervision of their art teachers. There were also dog races, square dances, snowball fights, and a grand snow battle involving teams and flags. The event was a fun, lighthearted way to enjoy the snow, and about 50,000 people attended the festival. The event continued to grow and has been held annually ever since, with the exception of 2021.

Members of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces began assisting with the festival in 1955. Camp Sapporo is the home of the Northern Army, the largest army of several in the SDF, and some of the festival volunteers are stationed there. In 1959, 2,500 JSDF personnel took part in building the larger snow sculptures. Their engineering and logistics skills were invaluable in constructing the massive snow sculptures that now symbolize the event.

In 1972, Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics and the snow festival gained international recognition. A 25-meter-high snow sculpture of the mythical character Gulliver that welcomed people to the festival that year was featured in media coverage of the Olympics, bringing awareness of the festival to a wider audience.

The year 1974 was one of development as well as hardship for the festival. The International Snow Sculpture Contest was held for the first time that year, and teams from six countries competed. The number of participating teams has varied from year to year, with as many as 20 locales competing in 1998 and 11 in 2020. The hardship of 1974 was due to the global oil crisis and the resulting shortage of fuel for trucks to bring in snow and to compact it. Because there was not enough snow to make the sculptures of solid snow, steel drums were used to take up space in the base of the structures. However, with less frozen material at the core, the sculptures started to melt more quickly than usual and there was concern that they might fall before the end of the festival.

In 1979, a snow sculpture by the artist Okamoto Tarō (1911–1996) boosted the reputation of the event even further. Okamoto is renowned as the creator of the iconic “Tower of the Sun,” a sculptural building constructed for the 1970 Japan World Exposition in Osaka.

In 1983, the restaurant and entertainment district of Susukino was added as a venue, followed by the addition of a winter playground at Tsudome in 2009. Susukino brought the element of ice into the festival with its Ice World event, which focuses on the carving and exhibition of elaborate ice sculptures. With Tsudome came the new dimension of outdoor activities like ice and tube slides as well as an indoor space with hands-on activities for all ages.

In 2013, projection mapping technology added motion, color, and sound to the snow sculptures. That development also brought a substantial increase in visitors, and now more than two million people visit the Sapporo Snow Festival annually.



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## Odori Site

Odori Park was the site of the original Sapporo Snow Festival in 1950 and is still the main venue. Most of the festival's snow sculptures are located in the park's 12 blocks, which extend for 1.5 kilometers. Over the years, Odori Park has regularly hosted ice rinks, ski jumps, and a food park with Hokkaido specialties.

### Highlights by Block

The 12 blocks of the park are called *chome* and are known by their numbers: 1-chome, 2-chome, etc.

1-chome is J:COM Square, the location of the Sapporo TV Tower. The observation deck in the tower is highly recommended for viewing the entire length of the Odori site, especially at night. The large snow sculptures are usually built facing the tower, making it an excellent place from which to see them all at once.

2-chome has a different theme each year. In 2020, Ainu traditions, handicrafts, cuisine, and music were the focus. It was also the site of an augmented-reality and projection mapping project onto a snow sculpture.

3-chome is the location of HTB Park Air Square, where elite skiers and snowboarders compete. They perform freestyle jumps and acrobatics on a 24-meter-high mogul-filled hill.

4-chome is STV Square, with the first of the large snow sculptures and dining options.

5-chome is the site of the next large snow sculpture, along with more dining options.

6-chome is the half-way point and is one of three "Citizens' Squares" in the park that showcase snow figures carved by Sapporo citizens. The main attraction in this block is the Hokkaido Food Park, where signature regional winter dishes are on offer. A number of assistance and information services are located there as well.

7-chome showcases a different nation each year with a large snow sculpture that depicts a famous building or scene from that country.

8-chome is HTB Snow Square, the site of another large snow sculpture, dining, and a rest area.

9-chome is Citizens' Square and features many sculptures by Sapporo citizens.



10-chome is the site of the last of the large snow sculptures, a medium snow sculpture, and dining options.

11-chome is International Square, the site of the International Snow Sculpture Contest and International Square Gourmet Street.

12-chome hosts the final Citizens' Square, with snow sculptures crafted by Sapporo citizens.

### **Information and Assistance**

Odori Park has two tourist information centers, at 6-chome and 9-chome. Volunteers who speak English, Korean, and Thai are regularly available to offer assistance, and some volunteers also serve as interpreter-guides. Communication in other languages is possible via tablet.

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## Making the Largest Snow Sculptures

Five enormous snow sculptures are among the main attractions of the Sapporo Snow Festival. The designs change from year to year, and the sculptures are often faithful reproductions of buildings or depictions of characters from popular culture. Some are as tall as a four- or five-story building, and all require a vast amount of snow. Two of these sculptures are constructed by members of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF). The remaining three are made by citizens' groups led by retired GSDF members.

Snow is brought in by truck to the sites in Odori Park where the sculptures are to be built. For many sculptures, a framework and scaffolding are constructed and cranes are used to fill the framework with snow. The snow is then packed down into a dense, solid mass. The frame is later removed and the sculpture is carved. Some designs also use handcrafted bricks of snow made by tightly packing snow into individual molds. Lighting is added in the final stages, and many large sculptures serve as a surface for video projections.

Up to 30,000 tons of snow are needed for the festival each year, about half of which is used for the large snow sculptures. As many as 10,000 people might help transport snow and shape the sculptures in a given year. The weather can have a big impact on the work. Because the dates when the festival is to be held are decided in advance, the schedule for transporting the snow is also fixed. If it rains, or if the weather is unseasonably warm and a sculpture needs to be repaired, production teams often work overtime at night.



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## Projection Mapping

At night, brilliant colors wash over the pure white sculptures and the surrounding landscape at Odori Park through the use of illumination and projection mapping.

Projection mapping transforms the snow sculptures and other objects into realistic yet fantastical scenes of color filled with motion and sound. Projections of computer-generated graphics are overlaid onto the snow, and are synchronized with music that is often created especially for the show. Each of the projection-mapping shows lasts around four minutes.

Before projection mapping was introduced in 2013, attendance at the festival peaked around noon. Now, most visitors arrive around 7 or 8 p.m., and the projection mapping shows are a prime reason.

One variation on the projection-mapping theme at Odori Park is an exclusive app that lets festivalgoers use a smartphone or other mobile device to unlock hidden content that uses augmented reality technology. Those without a smart device may borrow one at no charge at the festival site.



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## Citizen's Sculptures

The larger snow sculptures at the festival are based on planned themes, and are built by international teams, members of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, and groups organized by corporate sponsors. However, the local community also has an opportunity to participate in the “Citizens’ Snow Sculptures” category. Teams apply in advance and choose their own themes, which tend to reflect Japanese life and pop culture as well as aspects of Hokkaido. Perennial favorites are anime characters like Doraemon and the Minions.

The citizens’ sculptures are created over several days leading up to the festival. Passersby often stop to watch the sculptures take shape and cheer on the teams making them. Once the festival starts, visitors can vote for their favorite citizens’ sculpture using a special smartphone app, and the winner is announced on the last day. The citizens’ sculptures can be found throughout Odori Park, with the majority located in Citizens’ Square in 9-chome.



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## International Snow Sculpture Competition

The International Snow Sculpture Contest is a major part of the Sapporo Snow Festival. Every year, teams from countries and regions around the world compete to make the most impressive sculpture. The competition demonstrates Sapporo's commitment to fostering positive relations with the international community and has opened up avenues of cultural exchange and creativity. The international competition began in 1974 with teams from six countries, and teams from 37 different countries and regions have taken part in the competition over the years.

The subjects depicted in the international competition are often quite different from those chosen by local sculptors. A team from New Zealand once created a giant rugby ball, and one year a Polish team portrayed a young Mother Nature. Teams from tropical countries where snow never falls also regularly enter the contest. Thai teams have participated in many years, one time creating a cheerful band of elephants, and another time the imposing facade of a grand palace in Bangkok. Malaysian teams have appeared often as well, one year building a sculpture of four proboscis monkeys.

The three-person teams have a long time to plan their sculptures, but they must construct them in just five days. Visitors are allowed to watch the teams create their entries and can talk freely with the team members.

The international sculpture competition takes place in the 11-chome block of Odori Park. The Sapporo TV Tower affords a bird's-eye perspective of the competition as well as all the snow and ice sculptures in the park. From the tower, it is possible to see all the way to the Olympic ski jump on Mt. Okura in clear weather.



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## The Shiroi Koibito Park Air Jump

Many top-ranked skiers and snowboarders in Japan travel to Sapporo for the Shiroi Koibito Park Air Jump. During the snow festival, they compete in tournaments and perform exhibition jumps. The action takes place in HTB Park Air Square in Odori Park at 3-chome, on a jump hill measuring 24 meters high and 65 meters long. The steepest run of the slope has a pitch of 39 degrees, allowing competitors to reach breathtaking speeds. Elite skiers and snowboarders speed down the short course performing jumps and other acrobatics, sometimes as a synchronized team.

Both snowboarders and skiers compete in tournaments including junior sessions, night sessions, and a special mogul session. This fast and dynamic event started in 2007 and draws crowds of winter-sports enthusiasts. The events are open for public viewing, but no seating is available at the site.



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## Outdoor Activities at Tsudome

The Tsudome venue is located about 10 kilometers away from Odori Park and features a variety of outdoor winter sports and recreational activities. Nearly two dozen options offer fun in the snow for all ages.

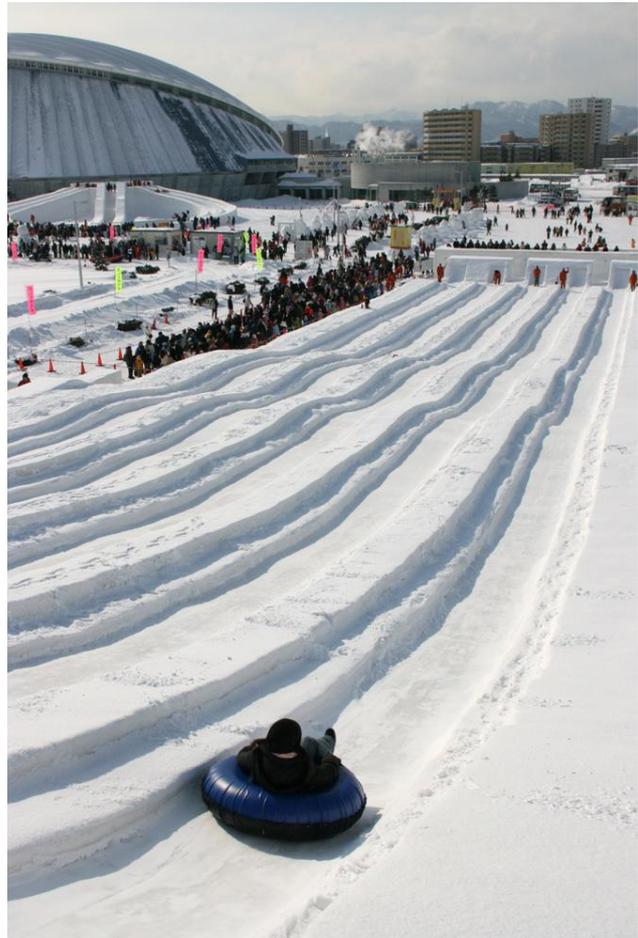
### Slides

The Tube Slide runs down a 100-meter-long slope with high sides to keep both adults and children safe. There are six lanes to minimize wait times.

The Waku-Waku Slider has several lanes for sleds and tubes, including two designed for tandem tube rides for an adult and a child.

The Ice Slide offers two “family lanes” for paired riders as well as lanes for single sliders.

Toddlers and younger children can whoosh through tunnels in the snow at the Tunnel Slide.



### Other activities

The Waku Waku Snow Park includes four areas: a snow maze, a snow tunnel, a site for building snowmen, and an area for general snow play.

Two types of snow golf are on offer: a six-hole snow golf course and snow “foot golf,” a fusion of soccer and golf.

The Snowball Challenger is a simple game of throwing snowballs at a target to win a prize.

“Snow rafts” pulled over snowy fields by snowmobiles are popular with visitors of all ages.

There is also a slope for traditional sledding, too.

### For Younger Children

Several options are open to children under four. Snow Kids Adventure offers snow striders (ski-equipped push bikes for the snow), which kids as young as two years old can use. There are ski-equipped kick scooters as well.

### Quieter Pursuits

Activities at Tsudome include a number of more sedate options, including observing snow crystals through a magnifying glass, and being partially buried in snow and having a

commemorative photo taken. At the Snow Festival Ice Café, visitors can make a glass out of ice and then enjoy a soft drink or alcoholic beverage in it. Still another option is to walk around appreciating the “welcome” snow sculptures created by local residents and the “snow objects” made by high school students.

### **General Information**

Tsudome opens on the last day of January, several days before the other venues, and remains in operation for two weeks. The venue opens daily at 9 a.m. and closes around sunset. When visiting Tsudome, warm ski clothing or snowsuits are strongly recommended, including hats and gloves. Shuttle buses and taxis run regularly between Tsudome and the center of the city.

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## Inside the Dome at Tsudome

The dome at Tsudome offers food and indoor activities during the snow festival. There are food stalls selling Hokkaido specialties, a café, a restaurant, a children's area with inflatable playground equipment, and stage events. The dome holds 3,000 people and functions as a multi-purpose hall and sports venue during the rest of the year.

### To Eat

The Hokkaido Gourmet Fair features booths offering dishes from regions throughout the island. For a sit-down meal, there is Tsudome Hot Café, serving Hokkaido specialties. Snow Festival Teahouse Yoshikawa offers lighter fare like matcha and sweets.

### To Do

The Snow Education Square provides information about snow and winter sports, complete with virtual reality (VR) experiences of winter sports such as ice hockey.

Kids Park has a large inflatable slide and other climbing and jumping activities, including a bouncing area in the shape of Hokkaido. Fees are charged for each attraction in Kids Park, and two-hour passes for all the attractions are available on weekdays.

### To See

A variety of performances including *yosakoi* dance, musical acts, and appearances by popular characters are staged each day, generally from 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

### Information and Services

Information in multiple languages is available at the Information Counter. Cash machines, luggage storage, and other services are available as well. Shuttle buses and taxis queue outside the dome to return visitors to the center of the city.



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## Tsudome's Smaller Sculptures

The outdoor venue at Tsudome includes two groups of small snow sculptures.

The first group features row upon row of small snow creatures that greet festivalgoers with messages that sometimes include photos of their creators. These “welcome” statues are snowy stand-ins for local residents who did not make snow sculptures elsewhere in the festival. They are created to convey how much the people of Sapporo, and Hokkaido in general, appreciate the presence of all who visit. These little figures are typically accompanied by larger ones from pop culture.

The second group consists of “snow objects” made by students in art clubs at local high schools. These statues tend to reflect pop-culture themes such as anime and manga characters and popular music artists. Their student-creators are much like the group of kids who built the first statues back in 1950 and helped launch the Sapporo Snow Festival.

The snow objects built by students are part of a contest. Viewers can vote for their favorite using an app called Sapporo Gourmet Coupon. Everyone who votes will be entered into a raffle to win coupons worth ¥100–¥1,000 that can be used at designated restaurants.



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## Susukino Site

Susukino is the center of nightlife in Sapporo, and Susukino Ice World is the setting for a sparkling display of illuminated ice sculptures. The event runs from early to mid-February, and the main avenue in Susukino is closed to traffic during that time. Sixty elaborate ice sculptures carved by chefs from local hotels and restaurants line the center of the street. Many of the sculptures are entered in a contest that occurs soon after the event opens in early February. Everyone can vote for their favorite at one of the five ballot boxes onsite.

Some of the ice sculptures are massive, and virtually all of them have delicate details that take great skill and patience to carve. Creatures real and imagined are a favorite theme, and past works have ranged from giant bottles of whiskey to Japanese courtly figures in traditional dress. The sculptures are bright and dazzling during the day, but take on a totally different aspect when illuminated at night.



Susukino is just south of Odori Park, and the sculptures line the street from Susukino Station in the north toward Nakajima Park to the south. Sculptures are divided into six “blocks” designated A through F.

The first thing to greet visitors is an enormous ice pagoda. Next are Block A and Block B, where the main ice sculptures are located.

Block C is where the ice sculptures entered in the contest are displayed, while Block D has an information center and the Ice Bar. The Ice Bar is built of translucent bricks of ice and serves hot beverages.



At Block E is the canopy of lights called Illumination Road, as well as the site for ice-carving demonstrations.

Block F is the place to actively engage with some of the sculptures. Visitors can go down an ice slide and climb into ice cars. Also in this block are carvings of popular TV characters.

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## Ice Sculptures at Susukino

Ice carving at Susukino Ice World has evolved into a major facet of the snow festival. Like the snow festival, it takes advantage of winter resources: an abundance of available ice and cold temperatures that keep the finished sculptures intact throughout the festival.

The ice sculptures on display are elaborate and quite detailed. They depict everything from sea creatures to motorcycles to manga and anime characters, and animals both real and imagined. Also on exhibit are blocks of clear ice with fish and shellfish embedded in them, looking like slabs taken from a sea that has abruptly frozen over. The sculptures come in a range of sizes. Some are less than 1 meter tall while others are buildings such as a pagoda and an Ice Bar that serves beverages to festivalgoers.

Ice carving is an established tradition in Susukino. Local chefs have been carving large ice sculptures for hotel banquets and platters made of ice for serving sashimi for decades. There is even a local organization called the Ice Sculpture Society, which is dedicated to the craft.

The festival includes demonstrations of this unusual art, in which the sculptors shape stacked slabs of ice into figures. A contest to determine the best ice sculpture takes place during the first two days of the festival, when visitors can vote for their favorite at any of the five ballot boxes provided.



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## **Welfare Volunteer House**

Welfare Volunteer House provides services to assist visitors to the Sapporo Snow Festival. Services include mobility support, sign-language interpretation, guidance and information in English, and help to reunite lost children with their families. The services and equipment are provided by an NPO called “Te to Te” (“hand to hand”), which is run by local residents who work throughout the year to prepare for the festival.

### **Mobility Support**

Te to Te provides special wheelchairs and canes designed for the snow. Two types of wheelchairs are available. One kind has mini skis and dozens of this type are on hand at the festival venue. The other type has balloon tires and chains for extra traction. Only one unit is available, so a reservation is essential. Wheelchair users may also borrow a Nuku Nuku, a kind of zip-front parka for the whole body that was designed by Te to Te. Special canes that have an ice pick in the tip for stability on the snow and ice are also provided.

Volunteers are available to accompany users of this equipment while they visit the festival. In addition to logistical help, these volunteers provide companionship and information about the festival.



### **Location and Reservations**

Welfare Volunteer House is located in the main Odori Park venue at 6-chome. Reservations for equipment and other support can be made in advance online, or in person at Welfare Volunteer House between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. Equipment can also be delivered to hotels near Sapporo Station and the Odori and Susukino sites. There is no charge for equipment or services.

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