

Tour Report

Japan's Winter Wildlife – A Photography Special

31 January – 10 February 2025

Snow monkey



Steller's sea eagle



Whooper swan



Red-crowned crane



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Friday 31 January 2025

Day 1:

London Heathrow to Tokyo

The first day of this awesome trip to explore Japan's winter wildlife kicked off with a morning flight from London Heathrow to Haneda International Airport in Tokyo. We got on a plane that had plenty of empty seats, which was nice, and, as usual, the service with Japan Airlines was top-notch!

Saturday 1 February 2025

Day 2:

Arrival in Kushiro

We arrived in Tokyo right on time and breezed through immigration. After collecting our bags and clearing customs, we dropped our luggage at the baggage transfer desk and caught a bus to the domestic terminal.

Everything went smoothly, and I met up with the rest of the group in the departures area for our flight to Kushiro. Kushiro is located on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. We enjoyed a pleasant flight and landed on a surprisingly mild day for the area—just around freezing. All our bags made it without any issues, and then we were greeted by our wonderful local guide, Chieko.

Having worked with her before, it was nice to be welcomed back with a hug and a huge smile, and she quickly led us to our bus. As we hit the road, driving through Hokkaido's snowy landscape, we were on our way to our first destination, Tsurumidai. This location is well-known for the cranes that visit every winter to feast on the grain provided by a kind farmer. It was our first opportunity to see these elegant birds up close.

They were once nearly extinct, but thanks to dedicated conservation efforts, including registered feeding sites like this one, they are making a remarkable recovery. While we were there, we spotted a few cranes foraging in the snow, and nearby, brown-eared bulbuls and long-tailed tits flitted among the trees.

As the day began to fade, we decided it was time to head to our hotel. Driving north across the island, the open fields transitioned into forested hills, Our driver expertly navigated the dropped us off at the Kawayu Kanko Hotel. On arrival, the overwhelming smell of sulphur was apparent. We had a bit of time to unpack and refresh after a long day of travel before gathering for our first traditional banquet dinner.

These incredible meals are one of the highlights of staying at Japanese Onsen hotels. This particular hotel is famous for its natural thermal hot spring baths. When we gathered in the banquet hall, an amazing feast awaited us. With Chieko there, we got a great overview of each dish.

Sunday 2 February 2025

Day 3:

Otowa Bridge, Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary & Lake Kussharo

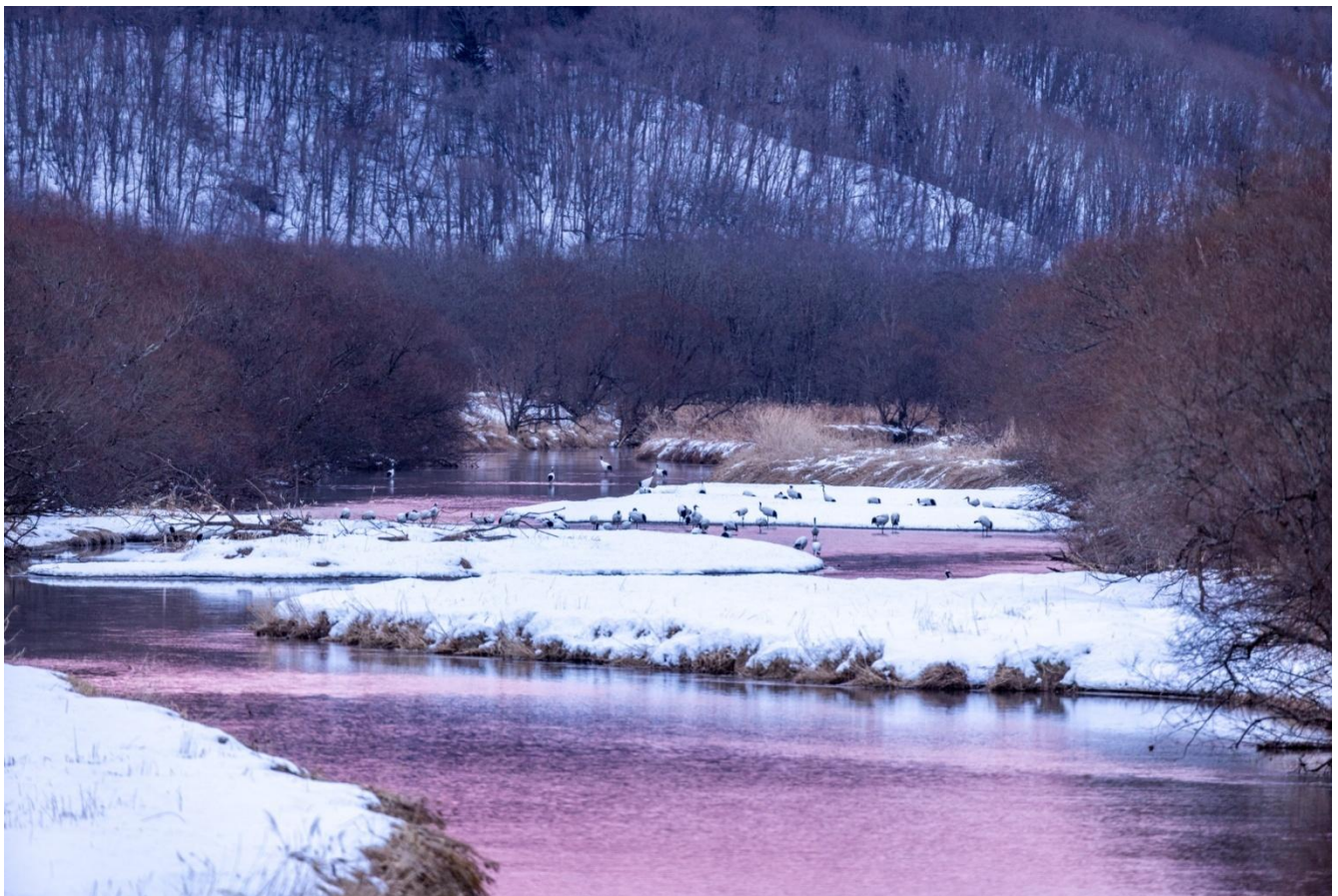
We kicked off our adventure bright and early, making our way to Otowa Bridge, which was about an hour's drive away. The hotel arranged bentos boxes up for breakfast, along with hot coffee and tea, and we ventured into a stunning winter landscape. By the time we got to the bridge, it was still dark, but we quickly set up our tripods, excited to catch the sunrise and see the cranes waking up. These cranes roost in the river at night where the water stays warm enough to keep them safe from predators.

Despite the chilly morning of around -18°C everyone was wrapped up warm. It was not looking too promising for a nice sunrise, and while this spot is usually pretty magical, the clouds didn't cooperate, so we missed out on that gorgeous golden light. Unfortunately, our photo ops were limited.

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Even so, it was still a lovely morning, and everyone had a great time watching the cranes go about their business in the wild!



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We climbed back onto the bus, enjoying the warmth of the heating as we prepared for our next quick stop. Just a short distance from the bridge, there is a roosting pair of Ural owls that like to hang out in a tree hollow, so we figured it would be fun to go on a little adventure to try and spot them. When we finally reached our destination, we had to trek a few hundred meters through some slightly uneven and snowy ground to reach the tree where they usually rest. It didn't take long until we found one single owl snuggled asleep in the hollow of a tree.



To avoid upsetting the owl, we left it in peace as soon as everyone was happy with their pictures. We quickly returned to the warmth of the bus and set off for the Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary. Upon arrival, we arrived early before the feeding had started and the birds were slowly starting to appear from different directions which gave the group some opportunities of some in-flight shots. In total, there were a good 100 cranes around. The sun was shining brightly and it was a little challenging with the direct light. Each person in our group chose a spot to capture moments of their behaviour and take portraits whenever they could.



We faced some tough lighting conditions this morning with the really harsh sunlight, which forced us to work with what we had. However, where there is a will there's a way and I found it was fantastic conditions to produce some nice high-key imagery. Deliberately blowing out the background and rendering it white whilst retaining the detail in the cranes. We spent a good few hours at the crane sanctuary. After some time we decided to leave and head back to Tsururumidai where the cranes were yesterday and found a lot more birds!



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After a hectic and whirlwind morning, we finally set off for Lake Kussharo. By the time we got there in the afternoon, shortly after lunch, I was taken aback to see that the lake was still unfrozen. It was a sight I had never encountered before, and it made capturing photos of the whooper swans a bit tricky. This winter in Hokkaido has certainly been the warmest we've experienced in several years. Nevertheless, we had a fantastic time and ended up snapping plenty of pictures.



Swans usually gather along the shore where the warm thermal waters keep the ice at bay. However, this year, with no ice in sight, they seemed to come together just to soak up the warmth and escape the cold. I suggested to the group that we focus on capturing the finer details, aiming for close-up portraits and then the wider shots of the swans gliding on the water amongst the scenic background. It was starting to get very cold and windy and the light started to fade, so we agreed it was time to call it a day and head back to the hotel. We had a few hours of downtime so some people chilled and backed up their images and a few others chose to unwind in the hotel's onsen. Chieko was kind enough to go to the onsen with the ladies to show and explain Japanese etiquette. For dinner, we indulged in our second banquet, which featured another incredible array of Japanese cuisine. Tomorrow, we will head further north to the coastal town of Rausu.



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Monday 3 February 2025

Day 4:

Sulphur Mountain, Kawayo to Rausu

We woke up and had a nice start to the day. We headed down to the hotel for breakfast. And let me tell you, it was a real treat! They had this fantastic buffet that featured a delightful mix of traditional Japanese dishes alongside classic continental favourites. They even had a pick-and-mix which I joked about filling up a pot with some of the guests. Knowing we had a long drive ahead of us, everyone made sure to fill up on food before we headed back to our rooms to grab our bags and meet up in the lobby. Once we hit the road, the breathtaking snow-covered landscape was like something out of a postcard. Eventually, we arrived at the amazing geothermal wonders of Sulphur Mountain. We were awestruck by the sight of numerous luminous green sulphurous vents puffing out steam and boiling water, creating a surreal, barren landscape that felt like it belonged in a sci-fi movie!

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It was soon time to head off as the next leg of the journey was quite a bit longer, so we hopped onto the bus and made our journey north to the charming coastal town of Rausu. The drive took about three and a half hours, and we decided to take a quick break at a local shop to grab some lunch and snacks to keep us fueled for the trip. Upon our arrival in Rausu, we had a bit of downtime to relax before heading to the dock where our boat was eagerly waiting for us! This year, we noticed that there was hardly any sea ice in the Sea of Okhotsk due to a very mild winter, which meant we missed the chance to photograph eagles perched on the pack ice. However, the serene waters and the sturdy sea wall covered in a heap of snow offered fantastic opportunities for photography. I actually preferred this option to sea ice as it allowed us to get completely eye level with the birds making for some exceptional imagery which you cannot achieve with the sea ice. We were thrilled at the prospect of capturing images of Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles. Plus, since we were the only group on the boat, we could fully immerse ourselves in taking pictures without any interruptions, and could also direct the captain of the boat to where the better images were.





We started our adventure on the open water, capturing photos of both eagle species as they swooped down to catch fish from the surface. It's impressive how fast and agile these large birds are, making it quite a challenge to snap them mid-dive. Everyone in the group had different techniques to enhance their skills, and with three more boat trips planned, we were looking forward to the opportunities ahead. Many of the eagles took their catches back to the harbour wall or the trees on the mountains overlooking the town. So, we decided to anchor the boat next to the sea wall to get some shots as the birds gathered. The photography was fantastic here, especially with a light dusting of snow on the wall, allowing us to create a stunning portfolio. The group did an incredible job, capturing some truly breathtaking images.

After a couple of hours of shooting, it was time to head back to the dock and disembark. What a fantastic first outing, with some amazing shots already in the bag. Being early in the season meant we had the birds all to ourselves, with a steady stream of them coming and going whenever we were ready. Once we were back on land, we took a quick drive to a rest stop for some facilities. We then made our way back to the hotel to check into our rooms and settle in.

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After an incredible day filled with photography, we had just a brief moment to drop off our gear in our rooms before gathering in the lobby for our final photo session of the day. We were excited to head to a nearby spot where we hoped to catch some glimpses of a Blakiston's fish owl.

With our camera equipment ready, we positioned ourselves by the large windows that could be opened to enhance our shots. However, our time was tight since we had dinner reservations at a local eatery. Unfortunately, after a few hours of waiting, we didn't have any luck with the owls, so we made our way to the restaurant on two separate trips because the shuttle minibus couldn't accommodate everyone at once.

Everyone enjoyed a delicious meal before we returned to the hotel, once again splitting into two groups for the ride back.

Tuesday 4 February 2025

Day 5:

Rausu Harbour

Today, we were hit by a huge snowstorm that dumped around 30 centimetres of snow on us. The winds were really fierce, which meant we had to cancel both our morning and afternoon boat trips! So, we decided to take it easy in the morning, enjoying a hearty breakfast before heading out to explore the Shiroteko Nature Reserve to check out a geyser. It was super cold at -14°C and the snow was coming down hard. We rented some snowshoes to make our way to the geyser.

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The walk only took us about 20 minutes to reach. Once we got there, we ended up waiting around for about 40 minutes to see the geyser erupt, which was pretty spectacular as it shot steam up to 10 meters high. While we waited, we had a blast playing in the snow, jumping into the powder, and capturing videos of our antics. We were even lucky enough to watch a nature documentary about the local ecosystem in the visitors centre.

It was such a great time! We even spotted a sika stag in the deep snow, munching on some evergreen bushes. Although we didn't have our cameras, we managed to snap some fun photos and videos on our phones.

After our snowy adventure, we grabbed some lunch and headed back to the hotel for a few hours to recharge before heading out to the Blakiston fish owl site. We didn't have to wait long before an owl appeared and swooped down to snatch a fish from the stream. What an incredible experience! In total, we were lucky enough to see two different owls make three visits, which was just amazing. After an amazing evening of action packed owl photography it was time to head back to our hotel and rest up and prepare for some more eagles tomorrow.





Wednesday 5 February 2025

Day 6:

05/02/25

Rausu Harbour, Shibetsu & Yoroushi

Following a fantastic first afternoon in Rausu the other day, we kicked off the day with an early morning boat trip, excited to take additional pictures of the magnificent eagles.

The gorgeous morning light filled us with enthusiasm as we hoped to capture images of these stunning birds both in the harbor and in the open sea. As the sun started to emerge above the horizon, we climbed aboard the boat, eager and excited for the amazing photographic opportunities that lay ahead. Capturing those ideal in-flight shots proved somewhat difficult due to the dim lighting, but as the sun climbed higher in the sky, we found ourselves with an abundance of chances for stunning backlit photographs.

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As we sailed further and the sun beamed overhead, we made our way toward the harbor wall, where we discovered the most incredible chances for photography that morning, and the scenes taking place around us were truly breathtaking. The fresh dumping of snow from yesterday covered the harbour wall with fresh powder snow making it the perfect location for some high key eagle photography!



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What a fantastic morning it was! After we made our way back to shore, we disembarked from the boat and jumped onto the bus. The ride back to the hotel was quick, and upon arrival, we were handed breakfast boxes to savor in the comfort of our rooms.

This was a great opportunity to recharge our devices and back up our photos before our next boat adventure after lunch. For lunch, we strolled over to a charming little restaurant in Rausu, just a short walk from the harbor and our boat. The meal was hearty and delicious, exactly what we needed to warm up before heading out for another chilly photography session on the water.

The light this afternoon was absolutely stunning, and we decided to start by capturing some flight shots. With the big blue skies and soft light reflecting off the water, the conditions were ideal for photographing the eagles as they gracefully soared around us, snatching fish from the surface.



After spending a few sessions out on the boat, we started to see a noticeable improvement in our success rate. This boost in our skills allowed us to capture a wider variety of images than before. The fantastic lighting conditions played a big role in this, as it enabled us to use faster shutter speeds. This was crucial for getting those crisp, clear shots of the quick dives we were trying to photograph.

Noticing the eagle numbers dropping as they were getting tired, we were excited to see a bunch of birds back on the harbour wall resting. This resurgence sparked our interest, and we thought it would be a great idea to head over to the wall for another photo shoot. We couldn't resist capturing the beauty of these magnificent birds in their natural habitat!

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As the session came to a close, we headed back to the designated area where we could hop on a coach. It was now ready to prepare for the next leg of our journey. Today marked our departure from Rausu as we made our way to Yoroushi, where we would spend our final night in Hokkaido.

We grabbed some lunch at a convenience store on our way and then made our way to our final stop, which turned out to be the most incredible ryokan we had ever experienced. Upon arriving at Hotel Daiichi, a stunning traditional ryokan nestled by a picturesque riverside, we immediately noticed a Japanese pygmy woodpecker at the feeders just outside the lobby window.



Even though the sun was setting, some guests decided to head back to the feeders to see if any other birds would make an appearance. Later on, we all came together in the hotel lobby for our last dinner in Hokkaido. We were escorted to our private dining area for yet another amazing banquet. The meal was a feast for the senses, showcasing a variety of dishes and the dining customs we were eager to follow. It was a lovely final dinner with Chieko.

That evening, our dinner was interrupted by the waiters running in to tell us that the Blakiston fish owl had appeared at the feeding site, just outside the hotel lobby. We all grabbed our cameras and enjoyed one last spectacle with this gorgeous owl before returning to the table to finish our meal. What a fantastic way to end the day!

Thursday 6 February 2025

Day 7:

Yoroushi to Kushiro, flight to Tokyo

Typically, we would rise early and make our way to Lake Furen on this day, but sadly, this year the lake hadn't frozen due to the unusually warm weather before our arrival. So, we opted to relax at the hotel this

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morning and take in the birdlife from the large windows. With an afternoon flight back to Tokyo, we weren't in any rush and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.



It took us a couple of hours to get back to Kushiro, with a quick stop at a convenience store for sandwiches and snacks. Once we reached the airport, it was time to bid farewell to Chieko, after a sad goodbye we headed through security to catch our flight back to Tokyo.

We arrived in the afternoon and took the train from the airport to Shinagawa, which was just a short walk to our hotel. The group quickly checked into their rooms and had the evening free to explore Tokyo. Most chose to stay nearby for dinner and hit their beds early after a packed few days.

Friday 7 February 2025

Day 8:

Tokyo to Nagano, on to Yamanouchi

This morning, we dropped off our main suitcase at the hotel's storage and gathered in the lobby with just our camera equipment and a small bag for the next few days. Once everyone was together, we crossed the street and hopped on a local train from Shinagawa station to central Tokyo. From there, we boarded a Shinkansen (bullet train) heading to Nagano, a city known for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics. Riding the Shinkansen is always a delight; these super smooth and incredibly fast trains are the best way to travel long distances in Japan. We arrived in Nagano over an hour late due to a technicality issue. Which is incredibly rare for Japan. We switched to a local train that took us through stunning scenery to Yamanouchi. After we got there, we took a short ride on the hotel shuttle. Unfortunately, we couldn't check in for a couple of hours.

I suggested to the group that if we were quick we could get to the snow monkey park and have a few hours

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there before it closed. So that is what we did. I arranged the hotel shuttle bus to take us there. It was a great



few hours and a good introduction to the group of what magic was to come tomorrow.

Later, we all gathered on the top floor of the hotel in a private banquet hall for our final traditional dinner in Japan. We savored another fantastic meal before heading off to our rooms.

Saturday 8 February 2025

Day 9:

Yamanouchi; Jigokudani Monkey Park

We woke up to a stunning winter scene with a snow dumping of a whopping 30cm of snowfall forecast today, it was the perfect weather for the most magical day with the monkeys. The snow had already blanketed the town in fresh snow.

After enjoying a traditional Japanese breakfast, we gathered our belongings and hopped on the hotel shuttle



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that took us to the trailhead for the monkey park. We had a 1.6-kilometer walk ahead, and everyone donned their snow grips before setting off along the path to spend the day capturing photos of the famous snow monkeys.

Since everyone walked at their own pace, I lingered at the back to make sure everyone arrived safely, while our local guide distributed tickets as each person reached the entrance. The hotel had arranged specific shuttle times, allowing group members to leave whenever it suited them. There's also a great café at the start of the trail, perfect for anyone wanting to take a break during the day (even though it means a bit of a trek back to the monkeys). As we got closer to the monkeys, the snow around us was absolutely breathtaking. We couldn't have asked for better weather!



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Observing the macaques is truly captivating as they display their intricate social dynamics. Some of the higher-ranking members get to enjoy a soak, while others are pushed away from the cozy waters. The longer they linger in the pool, the more vibrant the pink hue on their faces becomes. This creates a fantastic chance to capture a remarkable collection of photos in a brief period. Plus, the snow that fell during our time with the 'snow monkeys' added an extra dimension to the incredible photography moments available to us.



Usually, the ideal spot to spend your time is at eye level with the bathing macaques. But every now and then, it can be beneficial to try out different perspectives. You can also get some great environmental shots of the nearby rocks and the deep snow.



Most of the group set off around lunchtime, hopping on a shuttle back to the hotel, while a few of us decided to hang around until mid-afternoon. It was extremely cold at that point and photography in these conditions were becoming tough on the body.

With the snow still falling and the cold starting to seep in, we figured it would be nice to take a leisurely walk back to the café for some warm drinks and a famous apple pie before catching the shuttle back to the hotel. Since there wasn't a dinner planned at the hotel that night, we all decided to go out together to find a place to eat. It was a busy Friday night, so we ended up at an American diner close to the train station, while some of the others went off in search of traditional Japanese cuisine. As our time in Yamanouchi was coming to an end, we made our way back to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

Sunday 9 February 2025

Day 10:

Yamanouchi to Nagano, Zenko-ji temple; Shinkansen to Tokyo

Today we were set to leave Yamanouchi and head to Tokyo. We enjoyed another traditional Japanese breakfast before grabbing our bags and meeting in the hotel lobby for our shuttle to the train station. When we arrived, the station was bustling, with a long line of people waiting to board the incoming train.

Our train ride to Nagano was smooth, and after stashing our luggage in lockers, we hopped into a couple of taxis to a restaurant close to Zenko-ji temple. We had a fantastic lunch there before exploring the stunning temple and its historic surroundings.

Soon enough, it was time to return to the train station, retrieve our bags, and catch the Shinkansen back to Tokyo. As expected, the journey was incredibly smooth, and we arrived in Tokyo right on schedule. We took the train to Shinagawa, checked into our hotel (after a brief delay), and picked up our main luggage.

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I invited everyone to join me that evening to go to Shibuya crossing and enjoy the view from a rooftop bar there, we all enjoyed an inclusive drink while soaking in the amazing views of the sprawling city below.



We had a great time sipping drinks while soaking in the amazing view before we set out to find dinner. I found a lovely Thai restaurant that I had visited the year before. So we decided to enjoy our final dinner in Japan while enjoying some Thai cuisine. It was a gorgeous meal and a lovely farewell dinner. With another early morning ahead, we headed back to our hotel via the metro and everyone wished each other goodnight, and we headed back to our rooms for our last night's sleep in Japan.

Monday 10 February 2025

Day 11:

Tokyo to London Heathrow

A big chunk of the group made their way to breakfast as soon as the restaurant opened at 6 am, since we had a minibus scheduled to take us to the airport at 7 am. The drive to the airport was smooth, and we quickly checked in for our flight back to London. Our flight was on time and we managed to land on schedule at London Heathrow. By the time we got through immigration and reached the baggage claim area, the first bags were already coming out. After grabbing all our luggage, we said our goodbyes and wished everyone safe travels on their way home.

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