





JAPAN'S POWDER PLAYGROUND

WHEN NORTH AMERICANS THINK OF SKIING, THEY RARELY THINK OF JAPAN. THEY SHOULD.

It is the stuff that skiers' dreams are made of. Feathery, white piles of frozen water particles blanketing mountain slopes, bowls and chutes, waiting to reward the faithful with hours of downy delight. As surely as surfers scour the seven seas for the ultimate wave, skiers and snow boarders alike will search far and wide for that holy grail of snow sports—perfect powder.

On a blustery winter's day in February my brother and I arrive at the ultimate powder playground, made in Japan. It's called Niseko, the country's largest and most famous ski resort. Located on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, Niseko encompasses four interconnected ski areas, radiating from the same volcanic peak, that together span nearly 900 hectares of mellow terrain and a decent thousand metres of vertical. It doesn't just snow in Niseko. It never *stops* snowing. From the moment we check into our hotel at the base of the mountain, until we board the shuttle bus to catch our flight home, the flakes keep falling. And falling.



NISEKO VILLAGE IS HOME TO SEVERAL TRADITIONAL IZAKAYA, A TYPE OF INFORMAL JAPANESE GASTROPUB.



THE TRADITIONAL OPEN-AIR UNISEX ONSEN AT THE NISEKO GRAND HOTEL IS THE LARGEST IN THE NISEKO-KONBU AREA.

Geography and orography have blessed Niseko, which averages over five metres of fresh snow during a typical January; compare that to Whistler's average of about a metre. Dry, frigid Siberian winds mop up moisture over the comparatively warm Sea of Japan before reaching mountainous Hokkaido, where water turns not into wine, but into the finest, fluffiest champagne powder falling directly over Niseko.

On our first morning on the mountain, our guide—a British expat and longtime resident named James Winfield, who co-runs a boutique guiding company here called Hokkaido Collective—gives us an orientation tour despite the near whiteout conditions. James has brought along backcountry beacons, probes and shovels, enabling us to safely follow him through the gates that demarcate

the resort's boundaries into Niseko's expansive 'slack country', where we slice leisurely down through expansive glades of powder-encased birch trees the locals call *juhyo* ('ice trees'). The near-zero visibility and untracked runs bring a welcome sense of serenity; we virtually have Niseko's pitch-perfect off-piste powder all to ourselves.

Hokkaido's indigenous Ainu people first called this slice of alpine paradise Niseko, which means "a cliff jutting over a riverbank deep in the mountains" in their language. In 1912, an Austrian military trainer, Lieutenant Colonel Theodor von Lerch Edora, is said to have been the first person to ski down Mount Yotei, the volcano facing Niseko that has been dubbed 'the Mount Fuji of Hokkaido' for its resemblance to Japan's most enduring symbol. Word quickly spread of his achievement and skiing's popularity took off for a time here. But it wasn't until 1961 that the first lifts were installed, and not until the 1990s that Niseko began to appear on the bucket lists of serious powder hounds.

AUTHENTIC JAPAN

Snow-smothered slopes aside, a visit to Niseko is also an immersion in rural Japanese culture. Sure, there are more 'authentic' parts of Hokkaido where the ratio of *gaijin* to locals is much lower. But even at this foreigner-friendly resort, where you're as likely to hear an Aussie-twanged "G'day, mate" as you are a crisp Japanese greeting of "*Ohayou gozaimasu*" (or "good morning!"), opportunities for sampling the local lifestyle are still ample.

Soaking in Japan's version of natural hot springs, called *onsens*, is one such pleasure. According to a Japanese law passed in 1948, an onsen is classified as "any water, water vapour or gas that gushes forth from the earth at either a temperature of over 25 degrees Celsius at the source or containing one of 19 different minerals." Hokkaido alone has the third most onsens at 1,165, out of Japan's more than 21,000 of them. They can be found all over this volcanic island, and provide a soothing, rejuvenating means of escape for Japan's famously over-worked populous. Several of Niseko's hotels have their own natural *onsens* like the one at the Greenleaf, where we 'take the waters' each afternoon.



MOUNT YOTEI, THE VOLCANO FACING NISEKO

In a rules-compliant society like Japan's it's not surprising to encounter strict *onsen* protocol, as outlined in the illustrated bathing manual prominently displayed in our hotel room. Nudity is the norm, at least for men, who are nonetheless requested to have a 'modesty' towel on hand for entering and exiting, placed on the head while bathing.

Mention must also be made of the exquisite food, an absolute highlight of any trip to Niseko. We seize the opportunity to sample some of Hokkaido's celebrated seafood, like *ika* (squid), *ikura* (salmon roe), *hotate* (scallops) and *kani* (crab). The frigid waters surrounding Japan's northernmost prefecture are ideal breeding grounds for fish and sea vegetation. At the Crab Shack near the Hilton Niseko Village, we are surrounded by rustic fishing memorabilia as we dig into a steaming mitten crab hot pot. Also on offer, huge slabs of thinly sliced Hokkaido *wagyu* beef perfectly paired with fresh seasonal vegetables in a savoury broth. After a day spent playing in Niseko's giant snow globe, this hearty fare feels like the icing on the proverbial powder cake.

HOW TO GET THERE

Several daily flights from Tokyo's Haneda and Narita airports serve Hokkaido's New Chitose Airport. From there, shuttles reach Niseko in about three hours. Alternatively, you can ride the new Shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo to Hokodate, on the southern tip of Hokkaido, and then connect to local trains to Niseko. This scenic trip takes about eight hours. Obtaining a Japan Rail Pass is a cost-efficient way to go. / jrailpass.com

WHERE TO STAY

Like any world-class resort, Niseko offers plenty of accommodation options, from five-star luxury (The Hilton Niseko Village) to *ryokans* (traditional Japanese inns typically featuring tatami-matted rooms and communal baths). We opted for the Greenleaf Niseko Village, a four-star property with ski-to-door access, natural onsens and panoramic views of Niseko's wilderness. / thegreenleafhotel.com

If you're stopping off in Tokyo en route to Niseko, the new Prince Gallery Tokyo Kioicho is a great choice. Spanning seven floors of a high-rise in the Tokyo Garden Terrace Kioicho business and entertainment complex, this posh hotel is a five-minute walk from Akasaka-mitsuke metro station. It has three stylish restaurants and three bars, as well as a sleek spa, an indoor pool, plus an art gallery and a garden. / princehotels.com

GETTING AROUND

Hiring a good guide to show you around the mountain and lead you safely on off-piste adventures is essential. Hokkaido Collective offers full service programs from slope and beachcountry guides to lessons. / hokkaidocollective.com

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