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Land of the falling snow



White goods ... snow covers pretty Hirafu village and the distant Mount Yotei.

Photo: *Matt Hampton*

February 20, 2006

Niseko gives Australian skiers a dream run, writes Susan Bredow.

Finally, said the kid, looking out the window, we have a sun in the land of the rising sun. It was the first clear sky in several days and it was fleeting. On the late December day when we arrived at the Japanese resort of Niseko, we asked when the weather was forecast to clear. "At the end of February," was a laconic Aussie's reply.

The seven days that followed brought snow, snow and more snow. Great blankets of white spread lavishly across Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. Dense white flakes buried cars in a few hours and snowploughs worked around the clock to keep roads open and dig alleys around houses and lodges so the interiors still saw daylight.

On the mountain each day we buried ourselves in light and dry snow, thankful that the ski hire company on the internet had recommended powder skis - big, fat boards that give stability in the deep stuff but chatter and shudder on a normal hard piste.

We were in an ethereal powder heaven, the kind of place we had dreamed about - mostly on days when we had been lodge-bound in places such as Thredbo and Mount Buller.

In Niseko normal winter precipitation is reliably good - more than four metres a season - but December saw the biggest snowfall for 25 years.

Here was true powder snow. The light, fluffy stuff they call champagne and through which you float almost effortlessly, feeling little more than a feather's tickle somewhere around knee level.

The brief moments of sunshine opened up magnificent views from the slopes of Mount An'nupuri across the crater-pitted white plains to neighbouring, conical Mount Yotei. Near the peak of the mountain, as skiers and boarders frolicked down virgin powder slopes, we got a brief perspective of the size of this great volcanic pile, despite its relatively low 1309 metres.

This is the place that makes people so happy that grown men and women giggle as they navigate their way downhill through groves of birch. It is also where, after little more than 10 hours on a plane, they are in the northern hemisphere, at some of the best snowfields in the world, with just two hours' time difference from home.

That's the beauty of Japan. You don't go through the jetlag associated with a trip to Europe, Canada or the US, you're in a world-class resort - and you can throw in a unique cultural experience that is totally positive. The low rise above sea level eliminates altitude sickness, which can ruin a long and expensive trip to the snow.

A notable thing about visiting Japan is the enormous respect people have for each other. For the visitor this is translated into service. Nothing appears to be too much trouble.

Niseko, about 100 kilometres from Sapporo, is divided into three distinct areas: Grand Hirafu, Higashiyama and An'nupuri. A fourth, Hanazono, is being developed as part of Grand Hirafu and funded largely by Australian dollars.

There is no doubt that Australian property agents who have set up offices here, such as Niseko Real Estate and Hokkaido Tracks, are making their mark in this town. Whereas traditionally you would never see a sign advertising a property for sale, today the streets are punctuated with billboards with "SOLD" slapped across them. As with any substantial change, the Australian influence has its detractors, who feel Niseko's growth is for the worse.

All areas are inter-skiable by riding lifts to the top of the peak and traversing a fairly short distance to the next resort. There are regular shuttle buses between the areas, which makes it easier for beginner skiers and boarders to get a feel for the enormous variety at Niseko. An'nupuri is a particularly beautiful and cruisy place to be, mainly for its wide, tree-lined runs. Higashiyama has steeper, narrower pistes, enjoyable at any time but worth a visit for the amazing Niseko Higashiyama Prince Hotel and its garish foyer at the bottom. Grand Hirafu is the most crowded area, as most of the accommodation is in the village at its base, but venture across to Hanazono for the best off-piste skiing and boarding and the adventure park at the bottom, where you can have a go at snowmobiling or take a gentler ride through the forests on horseback.

While there are plenty of restaurants and cafes dotted about the slopes, the Hazano Rest House at Hanazono's base has kani rahmen (noodles in miso soup with crab), which has to be one of the best mountain lunches anywhere.

Nature has a big place in Hokkaido, with road signs advertising the presence of bears and foxes.

I first visited this area and stayed in An'nupuri in the late 1980s. While the facilities have always been good, there have been a lot of changes in 18 years. On that first visit we saw just one other Western couple in a week; now Australians, Americans and Britons are thick on the ground among the locals.

The lift ticket system, Skidata, is unique to this part of the world and works really well. A key card pass for which you pay a 1000 yen deposit (about \$12) goes into a left-side jacket pocket. The pass

is scanned each time you pass through turnstiles before a lift - a bit like entering a supermarket - and the deposit is refunded by a machine that claims back the pass at the end of your stay.

Trail guides are available in English and highly detailed. As terrain is fairly evenly divided between easy (30 per cent), intermediate (38) and advanced (32), no one in your party can claim to be bored. You could learn to ski or board here or find increasingly challenging runs (keeping in mind avalanche danger) on the steep tree runs. Anyone looking for a good knee-trembler can try the 5.7-kilometre run from top to bottom.

Holiday eating never feels more earned than when you have had a good day on the snow. In the main Niseko village of Hirafu, the food is high quality and varied. The night we went to Gentem Cafe, a mongolian yurt filled with diners sitting cross-legged on the floor at low, round tables, we were surprised but not disappointed to find Indonesian and Thai food. There's all the usual Japanese fare including sushi, sukiyaki, shabu-shabu and tempura. There is also Nepalese, Vietnamese, Chinese, French and Italian.

Yakatori (barbecued fish and meat on skewers) is a great favourite and Bang Bang and Senchou¹ do it really well. We committed ourselves to eating Japanese or Asian throughout the trip, but if you need to bail out JoJo's does a decent burger or bowl of pasta.

Gyu+ is one of the coolest bars with a Coca-Cola fridge door as its entrance, a wall of LPs and an eclectic array of furniture and knick-knacks. The drinks are generous, too. Barunba, with reggae music and a great Hawaiian atmosphere, is another popular bar.

Accommodation varies, although onsen (hot mineral water baths) are common to almost all. Hirafu village is a compact and pretty place with everything you need, including the skiing, at an easy walking distance or a short ride on the free shuttle bus. You can stay at an on-snow hotel, in a self-contained unit or, with names like Carrot, Hurry Slowly, Popcorn and You & Yuki, a good pension (or B&B).

We stayed at Korukoni as part of a package holiday because it was one of the few available over a busy new year period, but were far from disappointed. Rooms are basic but good service from the managers, Australian James Gallagher and his wife, Kaiko, made up for everything. Our tiny attic room was cosy and warm and on that occasion when we saw the sun out the window there was a big view of Mount Yotei.

Destination Niseko

The most economical way to ski at Niseko is with a package costing from about \$2000, for the flight, transfer from the airport at Sapporo, accommodation, usually with breakfast, and lift passes.

This (northern) season Japan Airlines is trialling a direct charter flight from Sydney to Sapporo. A flight departs on March 6, returning on March 14. Travel.com.au has a special for the charter including the air fare, a seven-day ski pass, eight nights' B&B accommodation, and transfers from \$2569 a person, twin share. See <http://www.travel.com.au/ski> or phone 9290 1060. Ski and snowboarding equipment can be hired at the resort. Australian-owned Rhythm & Beats opened in Hirafu this season and has top-quality gear for good prices. Rental clothing is fairly limited, but Niseko 343 has a good selection.

TRAVEL TIPS

Take plenty of cash. Credit cards are rarely used.

It's cold, especially early in winter. Take your thermals.

MORE INFORMATION

<http://www.alpineworld.com.au/japan/resorts/niseko.html>.

<http://www.jalpak.com.au/seasonal/niseko.htm>.

<http://www.nisekoholiday.com/niseko.html>.

www.skimax.com.au/niseko.asp.

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