

White powder

WITH METRES OF DRY SNOW, GOOD ACCOMMODATION AND CHEAP TICKETS, IT'S SKIER HEAVEN, WRITES **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**.

Japan is the hottest ski destination in the world for Australian skiers and snowboarders. The northern island of Hokkaido and its 14 metres of fresh powder each winter in the resort town of Niseko has seen antipodeans flocking there in droves. With direct flights from Sydney to Tokyo and a two-hour time difference, Japan makes sense for winter lovers. There's no jetlag, the altitude is lower so there's little sickness and the exchange rate is in our favour, with lift passes starting from \$30 and a katsu don lunch of crumbed cutlet, rice and sauce a mere \$7.

Add volcanic hot-spring onsens for post-ski soaking, ancient fire-festival spectacles, vending machines serving hot coffee in a can and toilets that play music, and you've entered a country affectionately referred to as Planet Japan.

And with more than 500 ski fields across the country, you don't have to share the chairlift with fellow travellers you'd find back home. You can also head south to the main island of Honshu, where the snow is just as bountiful, still super dry and blankets the 150-kilometre spine known as the Japan Alps.

At ¥4800 (\$50) for a day lift pass, Shiga Kogen offers exceptional value for money. Skiers and snowboarders will love the night skiing and skiers will delight in the three "skiers-only" resorts in the area. And don't miss seeing the snow monkeys soaking in their own snow-laden hot springs at Jigokudani Yaen Koen park.

Chalet Shiga is a mid-priced hotel run by an ex-Thredbo ski instructor and Japanese local whose father was also a skier and a guide to the Royal Family. The chalet, like most Japanese hostels and pensions, includes dinner and breakfast daily. Or there is the upmarket Prince Hotel with its 690 rooms.

If you're looking for a mix of traditional Japanese culture and some spectacular ski terrain, go directly to Nozawa Onsen in the Nagano prefecture. This farming village is a feudal town from 724 and was originally settled for its healing onsen waters.

You'll find about 50 private and public onsens in Nozawa Onsen for some serious soaking. Streets are narrow and cobbled leading to the ancient village hot spring where breakfast eggs and rice are boiled in volcanic waters. Unique "foot onsens" line the streets where skiers and snowboarders remove their boots, roll up their pants and soak their feet.

Visit Nozawa Onsen on January 15 and be witness to one of Japan's most impressive fire festivals when the streets are lined with locals who descend on the village square. It's difficult to describe but suffice to say the festival involves a three-storey burning effigy, local men in flammable straw and "sake men" distributing cups of sake from barrels on their backs.

The hill itself is a mix of groomers, tree runs, open bowls and powder perfection with 50 kilometres of mapped runs and one eight-kilometre run from the top back down home. There are a number of well-serviced

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lifts and even a covered escalator to get you from the village onto the snow. Lift tickets at Nozawa Onsen are ¥4600 (less than \$50).

The locals are friendly and most restaurants are traditional Japanese. Westerners on a weekend break from Tokyo head to the basement Stay Bar for live music and Heaven private karaoke rooms once the sake has kicked in.

It's possible to stay in Western lodging but traditional ryokans make the experience all the more authentic. Choose either a tatami-mat room or a Western bedroom at Sakaya Ryokan, which has private onsen and private dining rooms with gourmet Japanese cuisine.

The ski industry is tipping Hakuba Valley as the next Niseko, so get in before everyone else does. Hakuba covers a 30-kilometre stretch of the Japan Alps and is a combination of 10 different resorts. A ¥500 shuttle bus operates daily between the resorts.



On a high ... one of the chairlifts at Shiga Kogen.

Photo: Mike Powell/Allsport



NEED TO KNOW

Where Nagano and Niigata districts of Japan on the island of Honshu

Getting there Japan Airlines flies daily from Sydney direct to Tokyo. www.au.jal.com

The shinkansen (bullet train) goes from Tokyo to Nagano in 90 minutes. www.japanrail.com/JR_shinkansen.html

Buses and private shuttles run from Nagano to your ski field of choice.

Which resorts Shiga Kogen, Nagano www.shigakogen.gr.jp/english

Nozawa Onsen, Nagano www.vill.nozawaonsen.nagano.jp/info/english/start.htm

Hakuba Valley, Nagano www.hakubatourism.com

Myoko Kogen, Niigata myoko-nojiri.com

While Hokkaido has grabbed all the headlines, the prefectures of Nagano and Niigata have world-class ski resorts, offer a mix of traditional culture with premium snow conditions and are, as yet, to be fully discovered by the Western hordes.

The Nagano region of Honshu is less than two hours in the shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo and is famous for hosting the Winter Olympics in 1998. Often known as "the roof of Japan", Nagano is home to the Northern, Central and Southern Alps. From Nagano City it's possible to drive or take a bus or car to a host of ski resorts within one to two hours.

Perhaps the most famous of Japan's Nagano resorts, Shiga Kogen, is the country's largest ski area with 21 linked resorts in the Johshinetsu Kogen National Park.

The resorts offer one lift pass for all of them and shuttles to get between those you cannot ski to. The snow in Shiga Kogen is fine, light and powdery with plenty of both groomed and ungroomed runs among giant snow monsters – fir trees laden with snow. Groomed runs combined make up more than 80 kilometres, with the longest run clocking in at six kilometres.

Expect a mix of seriously retro ski gondolas shaped like eggs to super-modern sky trams. The resort has a heavy Austrian influence with a number of ski schools offering exchange programs between Japanese and Austrian ski instructors, so don't be surprised to find a Tyrolean-designed restaurant mid-mountain serving Japanese cuisine.

There's not a lot to do at night unless you fancy some karaoke at the Prince Hotel but the skiing here is mammoth. So you'll probably just want to soak in your lodge's onsen to soothe those weary muscles after the day's skiing.

Happo One ski resort made its mark when Austrian skiing legend Hermann Maier spectacularly crashed at 110km/h and came back two days later to win gold at the Nagano Olympics. The resort has its own ski village, Wadano, which caters for a variety of hotel, lodge and family-run pension accommodation options. La Neige is a boutique French-style hotel for a higher-end clientele, while the Mominoki Hotel is a good mid-range option with its own onsen. The White Horse Hotel is lodge-style accommodation run by an Australian and offers three options, one in Echoland and two in Wadano.

The Happo One ski field is steep with wide, open groomers and powder off piste above the tree line. The mountain resort is well-serviced and even has a Virgin Cafe at the peak. A shuttle ride away is Hakuba 47 and Goryu Toomi, resorts that feature a modern lift system and some funky slopeside cafes.

Back-country enthusiasts who are willing to hike with a guide can take an Evergreen Outdoor Centre ski tour with Dave Enright for some super sweet untracked powder lines. But be warned, you will be hiking a lot.

Apres-ski in Hakuba requires some planning as there are a number of village enclaves serving up cuisine and drinks. But most folk head to The Pub in Wadano village.

An hour north of Nagano City sits Myoko Kogen in the Niigata prefecture. It is ideal for families, with a mix of terrain suitable for everyone and both Western and Japanese hotel and hostel options. Mt Myoko-San ski area is made up of nine mountains and the area boasts an annual snowfall of 13 metres, as well as stunning lake views and silver-birch trees. The village is known for its onsens and intimate bars as well as more than 40 restaurants and a variety of hotels. Akakura Kanko Hotel is a luxury hotel with the best views in the region and is also ski-in ski-out.