



# Knee-deep in snow ball

Same snow, fewer Aussies.  
**Rachael Oakes-Ash**  
 finds a Japanese ski town  
 that is big on tradition  
 — and powder

**T**HERE'S lots of excitement about Japan this northern winter. Talk centres around the metres and metres of powder snow that falls from the Siberian-influenced skies, the \$40 lift tickets, the tasty but cheap cuisine and the fine hospitality.

Not to mention the karaoke, vending machines of hot coffee in a can, the immaculate piste grooming and chest-deep snow.

Though Australians have invaded the northern island of Hokkaido and its now famous Niseko ski resort, those in search of a truly authentic Japanese skiing experience travel to the main island of Honshu.

It's here that skiing made its entry into the Japanese psyche.

Brought to the Japanese island by an Austrian military commander, alpine skiing caught on in the 1930s.

There are references to the Austrian beginnings at most ski fields — faux Tyrolean-style architecture, partnerships with Austrian ski schools in the European Alps, even yodelling muzak pumped from speakers outside restaurants.

Nozawa Onsen, a feudal town founded in 724AD, is in the heart of the Japanese Alps.

It's a shrine to old Japan with cobbled laneways, Buddhist temples and volcanic hot springs.

Originally considered a curative town for its hot-springs' healing qualities, Nozawa Onsen has more than 50 public and private onsens for bathing and a giant centuries-old hot spring in the centre of town, where rice and eggs are still boiled daily.

Above Nozawa sits Mt Kenashi, a 1650m peak that receives bucketloads of Japan's renowned powder snow.



You can take the covered escalator up to the slopes and discover more than 50km of pristine ski fields.

There are plenty of trees to keep the daring happy and an 8km run home with mountain vistas.

And at the end of the day there are the "foot onsens" on the side of the street.

You take off your boots, push up your pants and soak your feet in hot springs water while sipping a can of alcoholic lemonade known as Chu Hai bought for \$1.50, again from a vending machine.

**T**HIS is regional Japan. Not many people speak English and you have to be prepared to eat what's put in front of you.

Traditional Japanese hotels, ryokans, are the best accommodation.

It's possible to get Western-style rooms, but more fun to have the tatami mat laid out for you to sleep on, and to dress in your complimentary yukata gown for dinner in the private dining rooms that serve four courses of fine Japanese cuisine for you and your friends.

We stayed at the Sakaya Ryokan,

an impressive hotel with its own onsens — one for women and one for men.

Both have seating inside and outdoors, so you can soak in the hot waters surrounded by snow.

They may have the Austrian overtones, but don't expect St Anton-style dancing festivals when it comes to apres-ski.

The inside tip is to buy French champagne at the supermarket, for about a third of the price it is in Australia, and take it to dinner.

The Foot Bar ran out of vodka when we were there but had no problem with us buying a bottle from the market across the road and pouring our own drinks, with no corkage charge.

Stay Bar is where the nightlife gets going, a basement jazz-style bar run by an Ethan Hawke lookalike, Luke, from Queensland.

Once the vocal chords have been lubricated, you can go to Heaven around the corner for a private karaoke room experience, where you don't have to battle with strangers for the microphone.

**Ticket to ride:** (above) enjoying the snow.

**Streetlife:** (right) Nozawa Onsen is a traditional town. Pictures: CHRIS HOCKING



## THE DEAL



➔ **Getting there:** Japan Airlines flies from Melbourne to Tokyo's Narita airport. [www.jal.com.au](http://www.jal.com.au) From here it's a bullet-train ride from Nagano station and a bus to Nozawa Onsen.

➔ **Staying:** Japanese Guest Houses have ryokans from budget to five-star. [www.japaneseguesthouses.com](http://www.japaneseguesthouses.com)

➔ **More information:** Japan Specialists and Ski Japan Holidays have a range of holiday packages. [www.japanspecialists.com](http://www.japanspecialists.com)