

SNOW
ACTION

SKI JAPAN

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Yokoso!
JAPAN

main island

Honshu is home to the Japanese Alps, which look and ski like, well, alps, offering spectacular alpine terrain like this face at Happpo One, and a quite different experience to the better know Hokkaido areas, as **Rachael Oakes-Ash** reports



magic

Chris Hocking, happy as pig in mud at Happpo One | Chris McLennan



Mick Gow, Hakuba trees | Chris Hocking



main island magic

Dave Enright has been skiing the Japanese Alps for well over ten years, the time it's taken to grow and cultivate his waist long dreads. Like the handful of 'geijin' (round eye foreigners) in **Hakuba** on the main island of Honshu, Dave is a legend. Foreigners are still rare in these parts, despite the Nagano Prefecture hosting the 1998 Olympics.

It seemed they came, they saw, they conquered and they left after the domestic ski boom of the 1980s that saw a hundred million local skier days per season, now reduced five fold.

They have left behind untouched powder as dry as a bushman's mouth in summer, mountains that thrust three thousand metres from the valley floor and a culture steeped in tradition. Translated? Few lift queues, open hearted hospitality and the real Japan.

Dave owns ski guiding company Evergreen Tours, (www.evergreen-hakuba.com) and has strapped my skis to my back, dropped me into snowshoes and pointed skyward. We're heading under the rope and back country from the top of the lift on Hakuba's famed Happo One ski slope. This is where Herman Maier took a spectacular high speed crash that would have killed any person made

from mortal bone and tissue. Not him, he lived to tell the tale and went on to win Olympic gold that afternoon.

Two hours later and Dave is still pointing skyward, this time to point out the views that surround our mountain top vantage point. This is Alpine country, where those that don't have beacons should not tread and those that don't know how to use them should simply go home. Folks have died in avalanches out here, a handful of kiwis in 2000 the most recent, and it's beauty is not to be taken lightly. We're the only ones on the north face, Dave and I and the other eight gun skiers and boarders that have joined us for the day.

It's six hours of ski touring, steep pitch, open bowls, chutes and drop offs on pristine snow untouched by anyone but us. You can do this on Honshu where the mountains are big and the pitch is angled, no day out the back is the same and adventure touring is part of the game.

In fact, Honshu is one big adventure most call "Planet Japan." Ski the manicured groomed slopes of the seven resorts in Hakuba Valley and experience vending machines serving up hot coffee in a can, toilets with more features than the NASA Space Shuttle, Virgin cafes and Macdonalds mid mountain.

Happo One is known for its steep pitch, wide open groomed and off piste above the tree line, its mammoth back country and its après scene. A collection of villages at the base are interlinked with a free shuttle service so revellers can dine on seafood sashimi mixed with horse at Zen, belt out a tune in the privacy of your own karaoke room at Non Jays and knock back Chu Hi (a severely potent alcoholic soda in a can for less than \$2) with Aussie stalwart, Mitch at his Snowbeds bar in Eccoland.

Yamizaki San owns Penke Panke pension (www.penkepanke.com) in the village of Wadano No Mori at the base of the Sakka lifts. His wife, his son and daughter in law all work in this twelve room pension where guests are treated like family. The Japanese are a conformed race, breakfast is served at the same time daily and if you're not there they'll come and drag you from your bed.

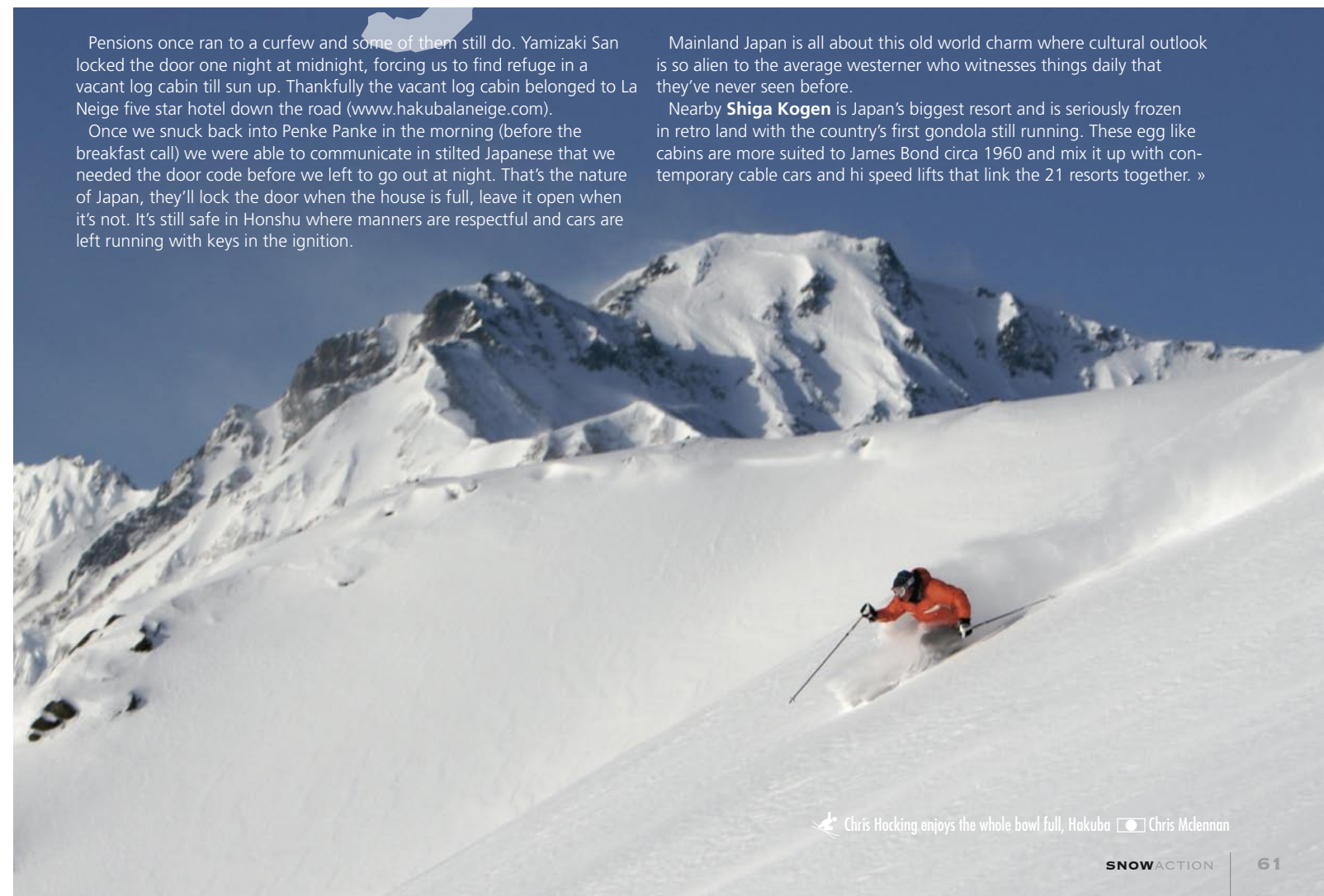
At first it's disconcerting, especially if you've had a big one the night before. Try pulling the telephone chord from the wall to stop the breakfast phone call at 7.30 and risk a knock at your door. It's not that they're nazis, it's just the way it's done for the domestic market who like their eggs raw and on time, their skis narrow and their holidays in group formation.

Pensions once ran to a curfew and some of them still do. Yamizaki San locked the door one night at midnight, forcing us to find refuge in a vacant log cabin till sun up. Thankfully the vacant log cabin belonged to La Neige five star hotel down the road (www.hakubalaneige.com).


Once we snuck back into Penke Panke in the morning (before the breakfast call) we were able to communicate in stilted Japanese that we needed the door code before we left to go out at night. That's the nature of Japan, they'll lock the door when the house is full, leave it open when it's not. It's still safe in Honshu where manners are respectful and cars are left running with keys in the ignition.

Mainland Japan is all about this old world charm where cultural outlook is so alien to the average westerner who witnesses things daily that they've never seen before.

Nearby **Shiga Kogen** is Japan's biggest resort and is seriously frozen in retro land with the country's first gondola still running. These egg like cabins are more suited to James Bond circa 1960 and mix it up with contemporary cable cars and hi speed lifts that link the 21 resorts together. »



main island magic

Yoshimi-San gives Shiga a shake  Chris McLennan



Shiga Kogen is inspired by Austria with yodeling restaurants and Tyrolean architecture. Our ski guide, Ki San and his ex-Olympic racer father owns the St Christoph Hotel and neighbouring ski school. There's a reciprocal arrangement between Austria and Shiga Kogen meaning ski instructors learn the technique obsessed teaching methods of the average Austrian Ski Instructor but without the ego. Restaurants are named in French, though I daren't tell Ki San that Mont Moi Restaurant when translated means "mount me."

This is home to the snow monsters, mammoth conifer trees laden with snow. If you're quick, and it's mid week, you can duck under the ropes before ski patrol see you and play amongst these trees while floating on powder.

There is a place in Nagano that's been kept a secret. Those that wander its streets and ski its lines don't want to share its location lest it become overrun with foreigners. But the nature of skiing is the desire to boast and **Nozawa Onsen** provides boasting rights galore.

Picture a traditional Japanese village of cobbled laneways steaming with volcanic hot springs, a maze of steep alleys hiding traditional ryokan style accommodations (Kiriya and Sakaya Ryokans are the best), Buddhist graveyards and a temple at the base of a ski hill. There's a handful of bars and a host of Japanese restaurants but generally the west has yet to infiltrate this pocket like village dedicated to hot springs since 724AD and skiing since the early 1900s.

Did we mention the snow? In a word, powder and loads of it. Lift queues are non existent and the hill is connected to the village with a 300 metre undercover moving walkway. It's easy to find an uninhabited tree run in which to let loose. Come January 15 and the village comes alight with the country's foremost fire festival involving burning flames and loads of sake which inevitably ends in someone's tears.

A week in Japan and you'll extend for two, two weeks and you'll extend for three, three weeks and you'll be buying property, opening a hostel, setting up a bar. Either way you'll be waxing the skis daily and heading out the back, just tell Dave we sent you. ●