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Rachael Oakes-Ash, Ski Japan Holidays, Club Med  
Sahoro and Furano Tourist Association



Above: The half pipe at  
Iwatake Resort, Hakuba  
Right: Magic conditions  
at Furano



# ski japan

Skiing has been a recreational sport in Japan for almost a century. There are more than 600 ski fields, with a season that lasts from December to April and powder conditions that can only be described as 'epic'.



**In recent years, Japan** has come into its own as a winter sports destination, cemented when the Winter Olympics were held at Nagano in 1998. Japan's proximity to Siberia means cold, dry conditions that guarantee some of the world's premium snow. It is not uncommon for resorts to experience metre dumps overnight and average snowfalls of 13 metres a season. Come January and February, temperatures in Japan, like Canada, can drop as low as minus 30 degrees.

Lift tickets are half the price of Australia, queues simply don't exist at many resorts, and the Japanese are among the most hospitable and polite people in the world. The snow is not the only benefit to skiing in Japan. An eight-hour flight with only a two-hour time difference between

Sydney and Sapporo or Tokyo means no jetlag. The mountains are lower, so there's little or no altitude acclimatisation required. Step off the plane straight into your ski boots.

There's quirkiness to skiing in Japan. For example, vending machines provide hot coffee in a can. Japanese toilets are an experience, with so many contraptions and buttons they feel like they'll take off. Complimentary music is movement-sensored to ensure that when sitting down, one's ablution 'noises' are not shared with the rest of the bathroom clientele.

Après ski means mineral springs, or *onsens*. These natural rock hot tubs soothe piste-weary muscles. Some are surrounded by playful snow monkeys, others found in the remote hills and surrounded by forest.

Karaoke bars abound and are a must for anyone within reaching distance of a microphone. Food is

consistently fresh and tasty, featuring wholesome noodles, broth and seafood. Many towns, like Furano, started as farming villages and became ski towns in a later life. It's here you'll mingle with locals on the slopes, but be warned: ski patrols are vigilant and skiers on piste stick to the rules, though you can always pull the 'language barrier' when caught off piste.

Japanese skiers are technically perfect and spend hours skiing in the middle of the groomed runs, perfecting turn after turn after turn. Stand still for too long in a place like Club Med's Sahoro and expect to find a line of Japanese skiers behind you waiting for a lesson. This means more pockets of untouched powder and glade runs for those who like their snow ungroomed, light as air and deep deep deep.

The country is divided into four islands and the most accessible and popular ski fields are found on the northern-most island of Hokkaido



Above: Rusutsu is magical at night

Left: Snowboarder at Rusutsu

Bottom left: Enjoy the onsen at Niseko's Prince Hotel after a hard day skiing



and on the main island, Honshu, on which the Japan Alps are located.

## Hokkaido

### Niseko

Niseko is the buzz word for Australians in the ski industry. Developed by Australian visionaries, it's a well-laid-out ski town with a solid infrastructure that works. It's known for its mammoth amounts of snow, so bring a snorkel.

About 100 kilometres south-west of Sapporo, Niseko is made up of four ski areas, with Mount Yotei's extinct volcano towering over all. The three skifields of Annupuri, Hirafu and Higashiyama are linked, with a shared lift system that offers huge terrain. The newest resort, Hanazono, is being developed by Australian company Harmony Resorts.

A thousand vertical metres, 57 immaculate groomed runs, steep tree gullies filled with perfect powder and

open bowls ensure there is terrain for everyone. The longest run is 5.6 kilometres and the groomed terrain totals 47 kilometres.

There has been a fair bit of money pumped into this resort, with three express gondolas and 38 lifts to make the ride up easy. It's all terribly civilised, with lifts open from 8.30 in the morning till 9 at night, allowing an afternoon nap between sessions.

### Furano

This is the belly button of Hokkaido, situated right in the middle of the island. During summer, it is known for its fields of multicoloured flowers, lavender farms and the annual Belly Button Festival; during winter, it is known for snow, snow and more snow.

The resort averages nine metres of snow a year, features two gondolas and 15 lifts, an English-speaking ski school and is home to a number of World Cup downhill events yearly. The Cable Car is the fastest in the country and can carry 101 people at a time. There's a six-person gondola and eight chairlifts.

For après action, head to Kitsutsuki, claimed to be the world's

smallest bar and run by an eccentric musician with a plaited beard and trusty guitar. The more cultured may want to peruse the Goto Sumio Museum of Art, but take your bank manager; it requires seven figures to purchase an original.

### Sahoro

Two hours by train from Sapporo, Sahoro is a family skifield and home to Club Med. It doesn't get the mammoth powder dumps of other Hokkaido resorts, but it does have 13 kilometres of groomed runs, a three-kilometre longest run, 610 metres of vertical, and is evenly split between advanced, intermediate and beginner terrain.

Club Med means all meals are catered for, as is entertainment, alcohol, daily ski lessons, passes, accommodation and a kids' club to keep the young ones entertained. There's an ice rink lit up at night, evening cabaret shows and an all-you-can eat themed buffet. For first timers to Japan with kids, Club Med makes sense, as there are no language barriers. Excursions to local *onsens* ensure guests experience some traditional culture.

## Honshu

The Nagano region of Honshu is often referred to as “the roof of Japan”, as it’s home to the Northern, Central and Southern Alps. It is also home to the ski areas of Hakuba, Shiga and Myoko, for those looking for big-mountain skiing. In 1998, Nagano held the Winter Olympics and showcased Japan skiing to the world.

## Shiga Kogen

This is a big resort. To be accurate, it’s 21 linked resorts across the Shiga National Park, all accessed by the one lift ticket. It’s double the altitude of Hokkaido skifields and located 300 kilometres north-east of Tokyo. The peaks here are tall,

rugged and impressive.

Three of the 21 areas are for skiers only, no snowboards allowed. There’s night skiing, daily guiding, kids’ ski school and more. More than 80 kilometres of groomed trails ensure thigh-burning days and the longest run is six kilometres. A shuttle-bus system gets skiers from resort to resort, making it easy to access all the terrain.

It’s also home to the famous Jigokudani Monkey Park, where Japanese macaques bathe in a volcanic hot pool.

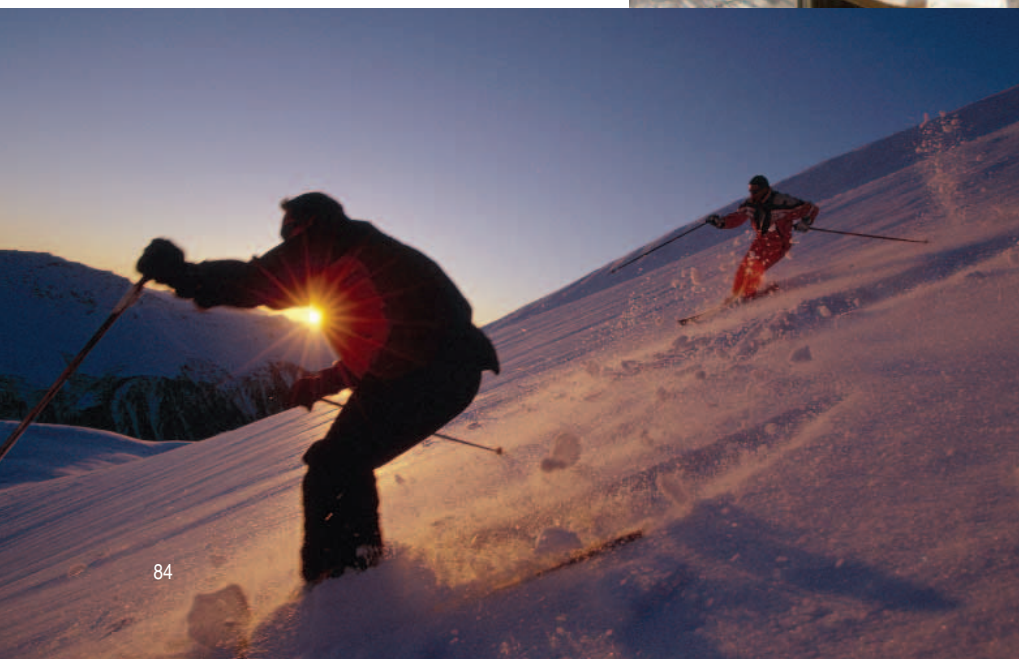
## Hakuba

Hakuba Valley is a combination of 10 different ski resorts and the longest

vertical in Japan (1,100 metres). The average annual snowfall of 11 metres-plus ensures a consistent base of three to four metres on which to play. There are more than 200 runs and a complimentary shuttle service to ensure you get to experience them all. Accommodation with access to all the resorts is in downtown Hakuba, which is known for its nightlife.

Happo-One resort is best known for Herman Maier’s wipe-out in the 1998 Olympics. Hakuba 47 and Goryu-toomis

“The Nagano region  
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Left: Ski Sahoro

Above: Hot tub at Club Med Sahoro

Top: Snowdome at Furano

“Happo-One resort is best  
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Olympics ...”

Below: Signposts at Sahoro

Right: Club Med kids

Top right: Cable cars at  
Hakuba 47 Resort





sit side by side and offer the same dry powder as Happo-One. For breathtaking alpine views, try Hakuba Iwatake, where snowboarders also have two half pipes and a terrain park.

Other resorts to watch out for include Myoko Kogen, which has the longest run in Japan (eight kilometres)

and 13 metres annual snowfall, and Mount Naeba, home to the world's largest ski hotel, the 4,000-room Naeba Prince Hotel. Japan's largest terrain park can be found here, with four interconnected ski areas for both skiers and boarders. •

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Qantas flies to Tokyo from most Australian capital cities, with connecting flights to Sapporo. Phone 13 13 13, visit

**[www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)**

Japan Airlines, phone (02) 9272 1111 or visit **[www.au.jal.com](http://www.au.jal.com)**

Korean Air, phone (02) 9262 6000 or visit **[www.koreanair.com](http://www.koreanair.com)**

Jalpak have ski packages. Phone (02) 9285 6603, visit **[www.jalpak.com.au](http://www.jalpak.com.au)**

Ski Japan Holidays offers good package deals. Visit **[www.japanspecialists.com](http://www.japanspecialists.com)**

Travelplan, phone 1300 130 754 or

**[www.travelplan.com.au](http://www.travelplan.com.au)**

### wheretostay

Most Japanese ski towns offer pension-style accommodation and many in Hokkaido are run by Australians to cater for the English-speaking market. Five-star hotels are also found in most of the larger areas.

### furtherinformation

Japan National Tourist Organization, phone (02) 9251 3024, visit **[www.jnto.go.jp/sy](http://www.jnto.go.jp/sy)**