

Total cool in a winter wonderland

It's a bitingly cold February morning in Hokkaido and I am bundled up in a hat, scarf and virtually every item of clothing I can dredge from my suitcase. Despite this, I still find myself gazing thoughtfully at a pair of long johns in a shop window. Just as I am about to swallow my pride and make the kind of sensible investment my mother would approve of, a group of giggling high-school girls breezes past, bare legs protruding from miniskirts. Suddenly, I feel a long way from home, and not at all up to the challenge I've set for myself today: a trip to the Hyoubaku Matsuri, or Ice Cascade Festival, at the dauntingly remote mountain village of Soukyo.

However, such plans hinge on the weather, which can change without warning on this northernmost of Japan's four main islands. Before I'm halfway to the station, the icy blue sky is overrun by leaden clouds and stinging little snowflakes are swirling down. Abandoning any hope of travelling on a day like this, I fall gratefully through the station door and make for the tourist information counter. There must be something else I can do, preferably indoors.

I explain my predicament to the man on duty, who, clearly amused, insists that Soukyo is easily reachable. "It's worth the trip, I promise you," he says, sensing my doubts. I stare out at the howling blizzard framed in the window behind him, just in time to see someone cycle past. It strikes me then that people here cope with the extreme conditions by simply getting on with life and that I had better do likewise. Gritting my teeth, I board the local train and head for the hills.

The train links up with a bus at the tiny station of Kamikawa and we begin the steady climb to the edge of the Daisetsuzan National Park. The scenery is inspiring: through the gathering snow-corn, we glimpse sheer basalt cliffs and 400ft waterfalls. Soukyo itself turns out to be an attractive spa resort of 600 inhabitants. The Alpine-style chalets look inviting enough from the shelter of the bus and the driver points the way to the park by the Ishikari river, which doubles as the festival site. I jump out and slither off towards it.

Outside it's nothing if not bracing. A digital display reads -16C, not including the sizeable wind-chill factor. My threadbare duflie coat is well out of its depth at this altitude. Reaching the park, I hurry for the steps, which, I realise too late, are cut from solid ice. Coming to rest with a soft thud (having negotiated most of them on my backside), I look up in astonishment.

Few sights in this world can physically take the breath away; Soukyo's Ice Cascade Festival is one of them. I am sitting in a child's drawing of a fantasy-land fortress, but seen from under water. Circular turrets rise into the darkening sky; lopsided parapets encircle a vast, snowy courtyard filled with blue igloos, green pyramids and listing yellow pillars. Grottos garlanded with pink and purple icicles lead away to either side. It's a psychedelic wonderland, created by spraying river water over simple wooden frames and leaving nature to do the rest. As night falls, the whole surreal scene, bathed in multicoloured lights, is beautiful almost beyond imagining.

In the depths of a Hokkaido winter, it takes something special to entice people out of their homes, let alone up into the mountains. For six weeks every winter, this isolated community achieves just that with its magical Hyoubaku Matsuri. It is well worth braving the cold.

I am developing a taste for Japan's winter festivals now, and there is still time to catch one more event, taking place 500 miles south in Akita Prefecture. It will take 12 hours and includes five potentially tricky connections, but my faith in Japanese public transport is unshakable and I am not surprised when I make every connection with ease, arriving in Yokote exactly on time.

Just about every town and village in Japan celebrates at least one annual festival; in smaller settlements, these are often based on the rice-growing cycle (the fertile plains and basins of Akita are a principal source of grain). Yokote's Kamakura Matsuri originated about 400 years ago as part of the lunar new year festivities. Gradually, the spiritual focus shifted towards entreating Sujiyama, the God of Water, to send much needed rains in the spring. How? By building igloo-like snow huts, known as *kamakura*.

When I get there I find that about 70 *kamakura* have been built at four seemingly random locations around the town. They are surprisingly large: each one has a diameter of 10ft and stands around the height of a phone box. Building them involves piling up snow to the desired height, leaving it to freeze for a week, and then spending a day hollowing out the interior. Finally, an arrow-shaped altar is dug into the wall opposite the entrance, and – somehow – an electric light bulb is suspended from the ceiling.

Then, on the morning of the festival, everyone turns out to line the streets with an estimated 10,000 mini-



Ice one: the winter festival in Yokote (left); and children in kamakura

kamakura, foot-high versions of the building snow huts. Many are carefully crafted by hand, others by means of production-line techniques and snow-filled buckets. Their huts are well founded; whatever the Water God might be thinking, the Sun God has gatecrashed the party. The temperature has crept up to a balmy

4C and worried faces are everywhere. Drains gurgle with meltwater, thick slabs of snow slide from roof tops and some of the *kamakura* take on an alarming translucent quality indicative of melting snow.

Fortunately the cold rains, darkness descends and local children in traditional dress take up residence inside the snow huts, now illuminated like beacons. Seated around *hobachi* charcoal braziers, they call *agemono*, the cue for visitors to remove their shoes, perch on the straw mats inside the *kamakura*, offer up a quick prayer at the decorated altar and enjoy a *mochi* – toasted rice cake – washed down with *amazake*, a sweet and creamy fermented rice drink.

With annual visiting numbers around the half-million mark, a small town like Yokote might be forgiven for exploiting the potential of its unique annual festival. Once again, though, I am heartened by the absence of any commercial interest at Japan's wonderful winter festivals: there are no entrance fees, no money stands or poncharads, and corporate sponsorship hasn't even been thought of. For the people of Yokote, it's reward enough that an ancient tradition is upheld.

Lingering on the Japanese bridge, I gaze down at the glow cast on the broad river by countless tiny lights on the river bank, each one lit from within by a single white candle. It might seem poignant that all this will be gone tomorrow, but the transient nature of the *Kamakura Festival*, making it all the more electric. These days, like the snow, its melt away.

Carl Thomson

Festival basics

Carl Thomson travelled as a guest of Japan Airlines. JAL (0845) 1747 733, www.jal.co.uk operates three daily flights from Britain to Japan, with direct connections to Sapporo. Return fares cost from £109 plus taxes.

The Ice Cascade Festival in Soukyo runs from January 28 to March 25; the Kamakura Festival in Yokote takes place on February 15 and 16.

Further information: Japan National Tourist Organisation (020) 7734 9636.