



It's not the Fall of Snow

STEVEN THRENDYLE DECODES
THE HISTORY AND CHARM
OF TIME-WARP RESORTS
AND OFFERS SOME LESSONS
LEARNED FROM SKIING THE
FAR EAST.

Photo: GUY FATTAL





FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER.

Within 20 minutes of my arrival in Japan's Nagano prefecture, I sat swaying in a single chairlift while massive buttons of snow suddenly materialized, dropping from a windless sky. Delicate, perfectly formed flakes, finely sifted through a dense layer of cloud, left only the tiniest of droplets as they exploded on my jacket sleeve.

"So, this is the famous Japow," I thought to myself.

A Tragically Hip lyric came to mind.

"That's what I'm here for."

"Here," in this case, is Madarao, dubbed "Mada-pow" by the itinerant Aussie snowboarders who have burrowed their way into virtually every ski resort on both Hokkaido and Honshu, Japan's two major islands.

Japan has more than 500 places to ski. True, some only have 300m of vertical, but they might get 12m of annual snowfall. They are the vestiges of an economy that was firing on all cylinders for a brief but

“Wasn't Japan where ski resorts had roller coasters, ferris wheels and multi-tiered shopping malls?**”**

shining period late last century. The state of those ski resorts today is a story about what happened when that economy stopped firing, but the snow kept falling.

THE RISE

There was a time when skiing in Japan was a punchline. Didn't comedy segments of Warren Miller movies show ski runs so crowded you could barely see the snow for the mass of crashing humanity? Wasn't Japan where ski resorts had roller coasters, ferris wheels and multi-tiered shopping malls?

That was bubble-era Japan, beginning with the 1972 Sapporo Olympics and ending, roughly, with the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano. In between, no country in

the world was linked to futurism and progressive design like Japan. Sony's transistor technology put music in the palms of our hands. Honda, Toyota, and Nissan made refreshingly reliable vehicles that sipped gas compared to our V-8 land yachts.

Despite Second World War enmity, young, affluent Japanese emulated aspects of American culture. Skiing and golf became aspirational activities, and Japanese skiers became skiing's fashion peacocks, favouring bold skiwear from brands like Descente, Phenix, Asics and Goldwin. Amid this affluence and enthusiasm, ski resorts sprouted like bamboo shoots. As the 1980s wound down, the future, including that of skiing, lay in the

Far East, or so it seemed.

THE FALL

The Japanese economy, it turned out, was a house of cards.

Rampant real estate and stock market speculation, irresponsible government borrowing, and a banking scandal all rocked the country's financial foundation. The Nikkei stock exchange only last year finally reached its previous high, recorded in 1989. The 1990s were called "The Lost Decade", though to most economists it's 30 years old.

DOWN UNDER, BUT NOT OUT

The momentum that Japanese skiing had enjoyed pre-1990s ground to a halt. It's fair to wonder how much would be left of the domestic ski industry in Japan if the Australians hadn't colonized a series of resorts near Niseko on the north island of Hokkaido. Niseko, which the Aussie economic elite refer to as the "Aspen of Japan," now has nosebleed real estate prices comparable to anywhere in the world.

"Planting the flag" at modest, down-at-the-heels Japanese ski hills has become something of an Australian national sport, with fixer-upper lodges, equipment rental, retail businesses and Western restaurants being dominated by Aussies.

SWEET SPOT

On the main island of Honshu, Hakuba was one of the host resorts for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. Today it is sought out due to its proximity to Tokyo and its Epic Pass partnership, which draws in skiers from North America.

Two to three hours' drive northeast of Hakuba, the resorts of Madarao, Myoko and Arai currently fly under the radar for most Canadians. For now, they occupy a sweet spot of Japanese skiing. These resorts, along with nearby Nozawa Onsen, Shiga Kogen and Yuzawa, get the oft-mentioned Japow in copious quantities. And though warnings that "Australians are everywhere," proved accurate, there were enough signs of the "old



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Close to Nagano, the deciduous Hakuba Valley is home to 10 ski resorts open to Epic passholders.

Modern" Japan to highly recommend the Myoko region over more famous resorts like Niseko and Hakuba, even for first timers.

Last January, I took advantage of low air fares to check out these resorts. I learned a few Japanese lessons along the way:

➤ Ten days minimum, three weeks, better

Take how long your flight is in hours, and allow the same number of days to ski. (Though you'll be remiss if you don't spend two or three days apiece in Tokyo and Kyoto).

➤ Found in translation

For better or worse, Aussies own and operate many of the lodges, guiding companies and hole-in-the-wall pubs in Myoko and Madarao. You can easily spend a week skiing here and never pull out Google Translate.

➤ Drive a domestic

Trains and buses abound, but taxi-style rides are scarce for impromptu travel. If renting a vehicle for flexibility, prepare for the anxiety that comes with driving on the left side of the road. Put a 10,000 yen bill into the pot each time you turn on your windshield wiper, thinking it's the turn signal, and you'll soon have plenty of saké money. Road

pricing is in effect on freeways, and fuel costs are similar to Canada.

➤ Book now

Even a cursory preliminary plan is better than no plan at all, since the more prestigious lodges (Snowball properties in Madarao, Escape Myoko in Myoko) are booked months in advance.

➤ Lights out

Have your goggle game dialled before you go. While visibility is less of a problem in Japan's famous glades, the open pistes can be trouble in the dense fog that is relatively common at lower elevations. Choose tints rated "S-0" for high light transition.

➤ Same all over

Glide cracks are narrow, crevasse-like slots found on steeper tree runs where unconsolidated snow has failed to bond to the thick Japanese underbrush. While the Japanese snowpack has a narrow temperature gradient, the avalanche risk can still be considerable and slides do claim lives.

➤ Bottomless powder

It's just what it sounds like. After a double-ejection tumble you'll be wallowing around putting Humpty back together again. Start those

core exercises now. Fat skis are easy to rent, and worth it.

➤ Tread lightly

Guiding services are not cheap compared to the \$70 to \$90 you'll spend on a lift ticket. But backcountry info is scarce and so are rescue services. Check your extended health insurance policy if you're planning any self-guided backcountry excursions.

➤ Big horizontal

Japanese resorts sprawl, but can still feel small. Topographically, the areas resemble the hardwood forests of Eastern Canada more than the Rockies or Swiss Alps.

➤ Fair Exchange

During the bubble years, travel to Japan was prohibitively expensive. But thanks to the weak yen, there are amazing deals. On-hill lunch can be had for less than \$8. Lift tickets are seldom more than \$75. You can find exotic fixings for breakfast, like the rice and tuna triangles tightly wrapped in seaweed, at Japan's famous "Sem-Lem" (7-11) stores.

FACES SAVED

In the end, I was smitten as much by the time-warp charm of these resorts as I was by the powder,

AT HOME IN MADARAO

Madarao is the type of undeveloped, under-exploited resort we dream about when we imagine devoting our life to skiing. That's exactly what Dan and Andy Solo did when they joined the ranks of ex-pat Aussie lodge owners. Their three Madarao properties, Snowball Chalet, Snowball Apartments, and Shiki Tangram, embrace Japanese culture and are filled with fine Japanese woodcraft, artwork, paintings and antiques.

Mornings at the chalet begin with thick slabs of homemade bread, fresh omelettes, local preserves and cups of complexly brewed coffee.

Snowball staff members will make reservations for shuttles to restaurants, tours to see the snow monkeys, and other cultural and athletic endeavours. And if you're lucky, Dan will take you out for your best day of secret powder stash hunting ever.

"Madarao remains relatively unknown," he says, without understanding why. "I can get out the morning of a 50cm dump and not cross a single track all morning. The terrain is consistent and moderate; avalanches are rare. All of the backcountry runs end near a road that takes you right back into the area." snowballchalet.com

—ST

which is saying something, given dumps of 40 and 70cm. As someone who marvelled at the powerhouse Japanese economy of the 1980s, I longed to meet Japanese skiers who came of age then to find out what happened to ski culture here. Such encounters are probably impossible, thanks to tatamats, the time-honoured Japanese tradition of saving face.

The future of Japanese skiing, however, is reassuringly bright. The Australian infusion of capital is translating into forward-thinking investments at places like Madarao and Myoko. Japan's economic miracle may be over, but it left the ski industry with a solid base, upon which those button-size flakes continue to fall. ➤



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HOKKAIDO

(NORTH ISLAND)

A WINNING STRATEGY

With the Sea of Japan on one side, mountains on the other, another powder day and another adventure on Hokkaido await. Your biggest challenge, however, may be researching and organizing the perfect ski itinerary.

It's a massive understatement to say there's value in joining an organized tour led by an expert who's planned and prearranged everything for you: resorts, accommodation, après, meals and culturally rewarding stops. Run by knowledgeable locals, who are often passionate Australian expats, multi-day powder tours can move your friends or family between select ski areas, introduce you to the backcountry, or lay out a

full-on backcountry tour.

Two operators we recommend are Hokkaido Mountain Experience (hmejapan.com) and Otaru Powder Guides (otarupowderguides.com). Qualified guides offer flexibility and language skills to create a custom trip for you and your mates, or allow you to join other singles and couples on a tour that fits your level and goals. All you have to do is make it to the van each morning.

CLUB MED'S TAKE ON JAPAN

The pioneering French company that introduced the world to the concept of all-inclusive ski and beach holidays 75 years ago may be Chinese-owned now, but they have four offerings on Hokkaido versus two in all of China. Must be the snow.

During Chinese New Year (Feb 17 to March 3 in 2026), the fireworks,

feasts and festivities roar at Japanese Club Meds. In January, however, you'd think you were in a wintery Down Under as heaps of Australians on summer hols take over the buffets, bars and banter.

As far as the skiing goes, think more Quebec-sized than Alps, and an almost private setting where runs and lifts are shared with few others.

With the food and service being at a whole other level than their European offerings, prepare to be tantalized at every meal. Smiling, doting staff buzz about everywhere, and outside an international crew of ski instructors have their charges stretching, stamping, and wiggling before heading up the lifts that sit a few metres from the ski lockers. There are two Club Meds at Kiroro (one for guests aged 12 and older) west of Sapporo, and one each at Sahoro and Tomamu, a three-hour drive east. For a full report on Hokkaido's Club Meds, see *Ski Canada* vol. 53, no. 2.

NISEKO

Comparisons of Niseko with Whistler come easily: big and often busy, huge snowfalls, and a very international crowd. A major

difference is Niseko's multiple base areas which can confuse the first-time visitor. Four interconnected ski stations on the flanks of *la grande dame* of Hokkaido make up what's known as Niseko United: Grand Hirafu, Niseko Village, Annupuri, and Hanazono. A single pass (including Ikon) gets you up all lifts, although cheaper, individual resort tickets are also available. Free town and hotel shuttles buzz skiers to and fro, and you won't be the only one aboard uncertain if you're going in the right direction.

While Annupuri attracts more families and beginners, its backcountry gates lead to the summit. Next door, Niseko village has more intermediate and, in its steeper gulleys, advanced terrain. Hirafu's vastness in accommodation, shopping and eating continues on the slopes with some of the longest cruisers in the country, while the three lifts on north-facing Hanazono are favoured by park rats and tougher skiers wearing avalanche gear.

HONSHU

(MAIN ISLAND)

AKITA

Akita prefecture is for those who still travel with a Lonely Planet guidebook. It's possible to spend a week skiing the roughly 20 ski areas in this northern tip of Japan's main island without encountering a single other westerner. Getting here requires a 3.5-hour train ride or a one-hour flight from Tokyo (when booking connections, note there are two airports in Tokyo).

Accommodation choices for less than \$100 a night abound in Akita, and typically include breakfast, sometimes dinner. Hot springs hotels can offer rooms with mattresses on matted grass floors with traditional onsen clothing and slippers laid out, so you can really "blend in" with the locals, although you may find most guests are Chinese or Korean. You should be able to recognize at least 20 percent of what's on offer at the buffet, otherwise, ordering 100 percent of

your meals from menus with photos is a reasonable expectation.

Lift pass prices around Akita will send you back to the 1980s as will the rental gear should yours get delayed by the airline. Most of the skiing (and driving) in Akita is in *gosetsu chitai* or "area of heavy snowfall" so it's hard to go wrong for quantity of powder, but you do need to compare ski area stats given how small and local many of the hills are.

Tazawako is probably the largest, with more terrain available for those who don't mind boot-packing a bit. And for the ski-touring set, many dreamy summits are yours for the asking. As always, hiring a guide with local knowledge (gonorth-japan.com, for example) is strongly recommended.

ARAI

Perhaps the most unique skiing experience in Japan, this all-inclusive resort

near Nagano was founded by the Morita family in the early 1990s, but became a casualty of the economic malaise and closed for more than a decade until 2017. Lotte Arai Resort offers above treeline, Alp-like open terrain and can see mind-boggling, building-swallowing winters of 20m of snowfall. Five lifts serve a vertical drop of 1,027m, and you can ride them with an Ikon Pass. If you're looking to ski like you are heli-skiing for the price of a lift ticket, Arai Resort is it. lottehotel.com/arai-resort/en

