

powderlife global edition 2008

powderlife

NISEKO ニセコ

SEASON 2008/09

a look at what's in store

BACKCOUNTRY

why niseko is so unique

HOT SPRING GUIDE

niseko's best onsens

NISEKO
2008 / 2009



Niseko Property are the experts in finding the perfect lifestyle or investment property in Asia's premier snow resort destination. Our professional and experienced staff will show you how simple and exciting it can be finding a property to suit your needs.

Niseko has been Japan's fastest growing property market for the last three years. Niseko is now also appearing on the horizon of European and Hong Kong investors. Join the many Australian and international investors who are a part of this exciting market.

Our website is updated weekly and features a wide variety of quality listings. A complete step by step guide to buying property in Niseko is available online. Our team will guide you through every step of your purchase. Our comprehensive listings give you the inside edge on the latest developments in Japan's most dynamic property market.

Make an appointment to meet us or visit our office and let the Niseko Property team show you the potential and rewards of owning a piece of Niseko today.



We have many new listings for land in Hirafu and in outlying areas.

Please visit our sales office for more information.

Freshwater Penthouse

¥95,000,000   



Located in the heart of the village
- 112 m2 Dual key apartment
- 220 degree views of the mountain and Yotei
- Miele appliances and Bose stereo
- Balcony and fireplace

Hanazono Hills Land 304-52

¥36,860,000



Located in the Hanazono Hills
- The block is located on a quiet street, close to the golf course
- Perfect place to build a great family home
- Great investment opportunity

Sugi House

¥115,000,000   



Located on the cliffs edge
- 3 level house with garage
- Generous balcony and great views
- Ground level bedroom includes a kitchenette
- Completed in December 2007

Izumikyō 2 Land 83-109

¥38,500,000



220 Isubos (726 m2)
- Great development potential
- Magnificent views of Yotei
- 175,000 yen per tsubo

Alpen Ridge

¥69,000,000   



Views over the ski run, never to be built out
- Niseko's only true ski in / ski out
- Due to be completed in 2008
- True rock star location

Hanazono House

¥150,000,000   



5 big bedrooms & 2 bathrooms
- Newly built house in a quiet street
- Impeccable Western design
- Open plan living area & High Ceilings

publisher's note...

Welcome to Niseko, Japan's No. 1 ski resort and the powder snow capital of the world! Sure, we've got the best and most powder snow in the world, but there is a lot more to this area than just great snow. Niseko is now a true international destination with world-class accommodation, services and facilities that will make your holiday an absolute pleasure.

It's been a long time since Japan was thought of as a tourist destination for international travellers but this is changing quickly. Niseko is now on the 'must do' list of keen skiers and boarders all over the world. Once people have a holiday here they're taken by so many aspects of Japan - particularly the culture, the food, the respect and courtesy of the people.

Powderlife began in 2007 and we publish every second week in winter and once in summer. Our aim is to help every visitor understand more about the Japanese people and their culture as well as assist with the practicalities of enjoying a holiday in a non-English speaking country.

The 2008/09 winter promises to be the best yet - solid growth continues in the resort and more events and activities are planned than ever before. Turn to page 27 for next season's event calendar (to date). During the last two weeks of March 2009, the Niseko Promotion Board has initiated the first-ever Niseko Spring Festival. Niseko will come alive with a host of activities and events on and off the mountain. There will be something for everyone, including the kids. Keep checking NisekoTourism.com and Powderlife.com for more information on the events, festivals and everything you need to know to on Niseko.

We look forward to seeing you here!

**Bevan Colless
Publisher**



photo of the week

Wooahoo... powder!!!
by Eriko Mentzos

It's true. Nine out of 10 visitors to Niseko will do a somersault into a field of powder during their holiday! Taken a killer snap? Get it published for the world to see. Submit your pic at www.powderlife.com.

in the loop what's on in niseko this week

イベント情報をお寄せください! Tell us about your event!
www.powderlife.com 0136 222 000

December 24

Hirafu Xmas Eve Fireworks

Celebrate the night before Christmas with a bonanza fireworks display outside the Alpen Hotel. From 9.30pm.

December 22 - 25

Annupuri Snow Candle Display

Around the bottom of the quad chair lift. Free. From when it starts getting dark, about 4pm.

December 31

Hirafu NYE Countdown On-Piste

Live music, fireworks and the annual torch run at the base of the mountain above the Kogen Hotel. From 10p

January 1

Hirafu NY Day Ceremony at King Bell Hut

King Bell on-mountain at Hirafu. Opening a cask of sake which will be handed out free from 10am.

**December 22 - January 4 (except for Tuesday)
Higashiyama Daily Entertainment**

Live music everyday (except for Tuesday) Niseko Higashiyama Prince Tower Hotel 1F Lobby. Free. From 9pm.

Sundays throughout the season starting late December

Taiko Drum Performances

Free traditional Japanese drum performances. 4.30pm Sundays outside Hokkaido Tracks office (next to Seicomart).

January 26

Grand Hirafu Australia Day Festival

One of the big events of the season. 5pm to 7pm near the Alpen hotel. ¥100 hot pot with Australian beef and Japanese vegetables. Snow Flag game, Taiko drumming performance. Fireworks display at 9.30pm.

February 16 and 17

Kutchan Yukitopia Snow Festival

Races, competitions, activities. Skiing over a cold pool competition. Potato sled pulling competition. Most events held behind the Kutchan Public Hall.

February 24

Namara Ippatsu 'Big Air' Comp at Hirafu

More than 100 skiers and snowboarders will compete to see who can make the biggest and most stylish air. From 8.30am at the big jump above the Scot Hotel.

March 7, 14, 21, 28

Hirafu March Weekends Fireworks

Enjoy fireworks with family and friends every Saturday in March. Starts at 9.30pm after the night skiing!

Sunday March 22

Minami Ski & Snowboard Battle

Exciting ski and snowboard cross race at Annupuri.

Saturday April 4

Radical Air Contest in Grand Hirafu

Preliminary jam session before the Top 8 in each category battle it out on the table tops and spine.

Sunday April 5

18th Super Bumps Niseko Cup at Hirafu

Freestyle skiing competition at Furiko Course. Keep an eye out for the flips!

Sunday April 5

Grand Hirafu Bike Challenge

Crazy MTBikers descend the ski slopes. If the snow is soft expect a few tumbles!

#See www.NisekoTourism.com for changes to the above dates.

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Hokkaido Tracks, NGS, Nisade, The Niseko Company, Outdoor Travel Japan, Hokkaido Travel, Annupuri Village and Scott Adventure Sports.

PICK UP POINTS

Hirafu Australia House, Bang Bang, B's Café, A Bu Cha, Senchou 1, Senchou 2, Hotel Niseko Alpen, Komekichi Onigiri Cafe, King Bell Restaurant, Hotel Niseko Scott, Hotel Snow Universe, Niseko Kogen Hotel, Hirafutei Prince Hotel, Captain Hirafu, Sekka Deli, Sekka Landmark Deli, Gentem Café, Welcome Center, Wild Bill's, The Brick, Java Bar, The Red Bar, Dragon Wine Bar, Gentemstick Retail Store, NGS, Deep Powder Tours, Ski Japan, Larry Adler, Downtown Cafe, NAC, Nathan's, Jo Jo's, Yuki Bar, Fusion, 343, Apres Bar, The Northern Fox... and more **Higashiyama** Higashiyama Prince Hotel, Black Diamond Lodge **Annupuri** Annupuri Village, Nikko Hotel, Ikoinomura Hotel, The Nook Annupuri, Mokumokutei BBQ House **Moiwa** Hotel Kanonomori **Kutchan** Kutchan Tourist Information Centre, Loaf Lounge, Be, Blue Cielo, Nami Chan Chi, Fuji Confectionary, Shunsai **Sapporo** Sapporo Tourist Information Centre, Sapporo Clock Tower Information Centre **Tokyo** Paddy Foley's, Legend's, National Azabu International Supermarket, Nissin International Supermarket, Khaosan Asakusa Backpackers Hostel **Hakuba** Hakuba Real Estate, The Powderhouse



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This issue's cover shot was taken by talented local photographer Mark Tsukasov. We loved it so much we also ran it on the front of Issue 8, published on March 29. But unfortunately we miscredited it! Apologies again, Mark! Thanks for the killer cover, keep up the good work and we can't wait to see more of your shots next season. Powderlife.

cover photo Mark Tsukasov, HotShots skier Randy Wieman

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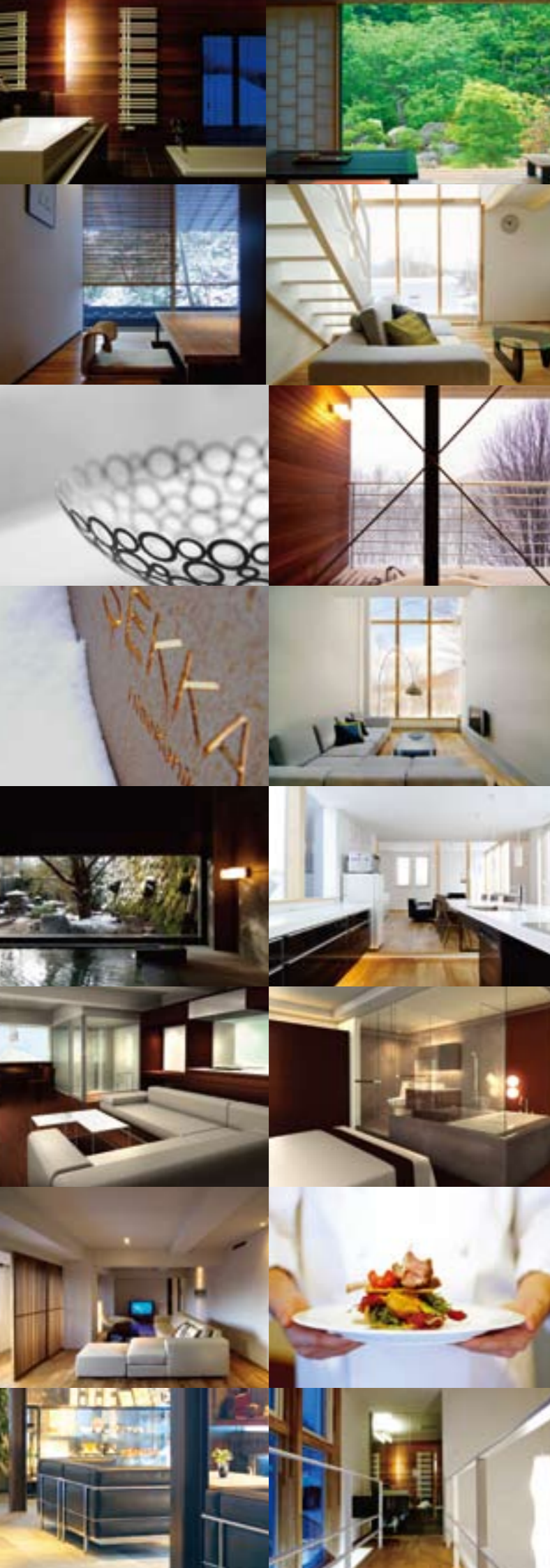
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EACH VENUE REFLECTS THE HIP DICHOTOMY OF HARD SUMPTUOUSNESS THAT IS THE CALLING CARD OF THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF JAPANESE STAR-ARCHITECT NAKAYAMA MAKOTO AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR SHOUYA GRIGG

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*The life-style photographs depicted in this advertisement are from previous projects by the J-Sekka team and are indicative of the overall appearance to be achieved in J-Sekka but remain subject to change



Aussie lady first Western geisha

AN Australian social anthropologist has become the first Westerner to be admitted to the 400-year-old world of Japan's geisha. Melbourne's Fiona Graham had to master skills such as light conversation, tea ceremony, traditional dance and the bamboo flute.



MAZDA TO NAME MX5 'NISEKO'!

MAZDA UK have introduced a special edition Mazda MX-5 Niseko model to leverage off the burgeoning global reputation of the powder-covered Japanese resort. The MX-5 Niseko is meant to point out the cute roadster's all-weather abilities and warm up the gloomy winter for UK-based motorists. On sale for £17,995 on the road, the Niseko offers up to £2,000 worth of additional or exclusive extras over and above the equivalent standard models. Buyers are treated to Niseko badging on each front wing, Niseko embroidered floor mats, front fog lamps, an icy blue limited-edition colour, dark brown heated leather seats, with matching door trim, steering wheel, gear knob, and hand-brake. Niseko owners will also enjoy a degree of exclusivity as production of this latest Mazda MX-5 model will be restricted to 800 units and will be released exclusively in the UK.



World class... across Niseko Village to Mt Yotei

Niseko makes top 10 resorts list

NISEKO has been listed for the first time as one of the world's top 10 ski resorts this season by the UK's Association of Independent Tour Operators. British Columbia's darling Whistler topped the list for the second year running, followed by Vaujany in France and Vale in Colorado.

Meanwhile Niseko was the best performing of this year's rookies, jumping straight to number six. The other newbies, Zakopane in Poland and Riksgransen in Sweden, took up the eighth and ninth spots. So what did the AITO have to say about Niseko? "With an average of 14 metres of snowfall through the winter, Niseko is known for its abundance of high-quality powder, and is fast becoming a destination for skiers and boarders looking for that something extra. While the old reliables such as Austria, Canada and France will always prove popular, there are up-and-coming destinations that intrepid skiers want to visit and cross off their list."

'Best powder trip ever': Armada skis founder

AS soon as the calendar flicked over to 2008, Hokkaido really unleashed winter. In case you were wondering if it was actually *that* good, a couple of pros whose job it is to travel the world in search of the best snow testified they'd just had their best powder trip ever.

Armada Skis co-founder JP Auclair of Quebec (see feature story p25), and California's Chris Benchetler have been coming to Niseko every year for the past few years – including the bumper 05/06 season – and say they've never had such a consistent run of powder snow of this quality. "I've been skiing for 25 years and this is the best ever – every single day has been epic," Auclair told Powderlife. "It never really stopped snowing and every day it was getting deeper – it was so deep it was ridiculous. I was amazed at how fresh the snow actually stays – skiing through the trees you do lap after lap and keep getting fresh runs. That doesn't happen much in America or Canada." He said his best-ever trip before this was cat-skiing in British Columbia two years ago. After two weeks here he decided this trip was just as good. That was before it snowed non-stop for the following five days. The final figure for January was 3.24m. The biggest single dumps came on the 9th and the 17th with 33cm and 35cm. There were only four days where it didn't snow at all and the average was over 10cm a day. So how do the pros describe Niseko's powder? "It's like skiing through butter... or cream."



Chris and JP on location. Niseko, Hokkaido



Latitude 42

DESPITE its magnificent snow, Niseko isn't actually that far north. The latitude 42 north passes smack bang through the middle of Niseko, which also passes through Spain, the Mediterranean Sea, France (Corsica), Italy, the Adriatic Sea, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia (Kosovo), Macedonia, Bulgaria, Turkey, the Black Sea, Georgia, Russia, the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, People's Republic of China, Mongolia, North Korea, the Sea of Japan, across Hokkaido, the Pacific Ocean, the United States, the Atlantic Ocean, Portugal and Andorra. We haven't been to many of those places, but we reckon there's a good chance the snow isn't as good at any of them as it is in Niseko

Snow monkeys beating the cold in Hokkaido

WATCHING the contemplative, human-like faces of snow monkeys soaking in an onsen (hot spring) is an experience unique to the snow-covered mountains of Japan, but most people will tell you that you can't see them in Hokkaido.

While the snow monkey, or Japanese macaque, is not native to the northern island, a troupe of 70 inhabits an onsen in Hakodate on the southern tip of Hokkaido. Twenty were brought over about 30 years ago to make a snow monkey onsen attraction. The venture was almost a flop as the original members couldn't be persuaded to take the plunge. Park owners eventually enticed them in with food, and now they can't get them out.

The most famous place to see them in the wild is on the mainland at Yamanouchi in Nagano, home of the 1998 Winter Olympics. If you can't make it down there, check them out in the botanical gardens of Yunokawa in Hakodate's famous onsen district, about three hours drive or train south of Niseko.



Seeking the warmth... rare Hokkaido snow monkeys

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

A four-year-old Shizuoka boy whose **heart and lungs stopped** after falling into a frozen reservoir in Aichi has made a full recovery despite the fact that his body temperature had dropped to 28C. A new DVD that shows people how to **work out while performing everyday tasks** includes such exercises as 'sock removal repeats,' 'one-legged teeth cleaning' and 'exercise for those sick of Billy's Boot Camp.'



THE WAGES OF SIN

Police in Kawasaki believe a 53-year-old construction worker who assaulted 20 women **gave ¥10,000-¥100,000** to each of his victims as 'hush money'.

It was revealed that a 28-year-old transportation official with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government **used forged Pismo train credit cards to claim refunds** of over ¥6 million because he 'needed money to buy a model railroad and repay loans'.

Police in Saitama accused eight people—including a 70-year-old orthopedist—of **staging fake auto accidents** in an insurance scam that netted ¥20 million since 2004.

A **Tokyo court ordered McDonald's Japan to fork out over ¥7.55 million** in overtime pay to a 46-year-old former manager at one of its Saitama locations.

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

A court in San Francisco told the US military to take into account **the plight of the dugong** when it relocates its Futenma air base to the northeast coast of Okinawa.

It was announced that Japan's Coast Guard dispatched **a team of officers to 'protect' its whaling fleet** from environmental activists. Previous actions against the whalers have included the hurling of stink bombs.

It was reported that a **miniature horse borrowed from a zoo** in Nagoya for 'reproduction purposes' died in a fire at a zoo in Aichi.

HERE AND THERE

Kijima Amusement Park in Oita Prefecture has created a **2kg dessert called the Queen Fruits Parfait**, which

is free to anyone who can finish it. The parfait, which costs ¥3,800, contains pancakes, cream puffs, three varieties of ice cream, and 'a healthy serving of seasonal and frozen fruits'.

A 40-year-old woman from Machida became the **first Japanese female to ski across the South Pole**.

A **note attached to a balloon** that was released by an elementary school student in Kawasaki in 1993 was found by a fisherman in the sea off Chiba. The student, now a 21-year-old undergraduate at Waseda University, said he was 'so happy someone read my letter.'

REACHING OUT

A 23-year-old Fukuoka man who lay down on a road and **pretended to be injured** was arrested for sexually assaulting a 30-year-old woman who came to his aid.

It was reported that a Japanese astronaut has been preparing for his trip to the International Space Station by throwing a boomerang because **'it remains unknown how boomerangs fly in space.'**

A Cabinet Office survey revealed that 45 percent of **Japanese feel 'uneasy' about using the internet**.

At the **Oh*Love screaming contest** in Nakatsu, Oita Prefecture, a 24-year-old single woman who shouted "I want a boyfriend" was runner-up to a 70-year-old man who declared his love for his wife.

A 38-year-old man hiking in the woods near Tokyo was **mistaken for a wild boar** and shot in the arm.

A company called Bio International Japan has released **an earplug-like device** called the Nose Mask Pit, which is intended to provide relief to hay fever sufferers.

STATS

8,349,200

Number of foreign visitors to Japan in 2007, the first time the figure has topped 8 million, according to the Japan National Tourist Organization

290,000

Estimated number of visitors to the prefectural government building in Miyazaki since former comedian Hideo Higashikokubaru became governor in April

3

Number of visitors arrested for taking nude photos of themselves in front of the prefectural government building in Miyazaki last month

34 percent

Degrees on a new rating scale proposed by 'a confederation of confectionary wholesalers' to gauge the hardness of rice crackers

71

Age of Tomiyasu Ishikawa, believed to be the oldest person to scale the highest mountain on each of the seven continents, after he summited the 4,897m Vinson Massif in Antarctica

Compiled by Reg Dunlap from reports by Japan Today, The Japan Times, The International Herald Tribune/Asahi Shimbun, Mainichi Daily News, AP, Kyodo and Digital World Tokyo (www.digitalworldtokyo.com)

Higashiyama bowls could open soon

MUCH to the disappointment of powder-loving skiers and boarders, three of Niseko's most tantalizing bowls are out of bounds to the mountain-riding public, but that could be about to change.

All three bowls are in, or border, Niseko Village, the resort in the centre of the mountain known until this year as Higashiyama. Over the past four years the resort's management has recruited avalanche experts and practiced avalanche control techniques on Mizuno no Sawa, the bowl under the main gondola, to make it safe for skiing. This summer they present their case to the local Shiribetsu Government and are hoping they'll get the green light to open next season.

In the past 20 years four deaths have occurred in three separate incidents due to skier-triggered slides. With the help of avalanche experts, Canadian Chris Stethem and Hakuba's Koji Motomura, they have practiced bombing and 'ski-cutting' avalanche-prone areas within the bowl to encourage it to slide before the resort opens each day. Bombing is commonplace in North American and European resorts but Niseko Village is the first to use the technique in Japan, where avalanche deaths are quite rare.

They are considering how to control access to the bowl with options including compulsory beacons, a sign in/sign out system, or compulsory attendance at a safety lecture.

Assistant general manager Luke Hurford suggested it's a natural progression for the resorts to consider controlling some of the other areas, with Yu no Sawa (between Higashiyama and Annupuri) likely to be next for consideration, although no clear timetable has been laid out.



Making the cut...avalanche testing



Making explosives



making Mizuno no Sawa safe

Big business backs Niseko

WHEN the history of Niseko is written, the latter half of 2007 will be seen as a major turning point in its status as a truly international winter resort.

In season 2007/08 the judgement of the pioneer Australian developers was well and truly vindicated, with significant international players moving in to stake their claims on the area's future. Simon Robinson, Hokkaido Tracks Resort Properties president, puts it simply. "The difference is that now it has moved out of the league of the private entrepreneur to big corporate companies, which should be underpinning confidence. These guys don't come in to markets that are speculative or if they have doubts about growth potential."

Niseko Property director Ruskin McLennan is similarly positive about the significance of recent months. "2007 was the year Niseko went from a funky, quirky little ski village to an international resort."

While Australian entrepreneurs still play a major role in Hirafu, in the short space of a few months last year: Citigroup bought Higashiyama, rebranded it as Niseko Village, and welcomed Hilton Hotels Corporation to manage the existing Prince Hotel; Hong Kong IT giant Pacific Century bought out the Hanazono ski area with a view to master-planned development including the construction of a luxury Four Seasons resort; and major Japanese developer Zephyr bought Moiwai ski resort and has undertaken substantial redevelopment.

Six-star resort and hotel management company Capella have secured a site at Annupuri, Aman Resorts (who first ventured into winter resorts with the spectacular Amangani in Jackson Hole, Wyoming) are known to be looking seriously at Niseko, and Banyan Tree is also rumoured to be interested.

With underpinning like this, there's now no doubt Niseko is well on its way to becoming a major international ski resort.

Summer construction boom

A RECORD amount of construction is set to begin in Niseko over the coming summer. At least five major developments are due to get underway in the upper village – The Vale, Suiboku, Snow Crystal, Alpen Views and Yama Shizen II. Niseko Alpine Development's (Nisade) president Kal Bragg said as soon as the snow melted the action would start. "It's never been busier than it is right now," he said. "It's really starting to fire up with five new pretty decent sized buildings going up in the upper village and a stack of new houses in the lower village."

Market still white hot

THE Niseko property market remains bullish in the wake of the US and European property markets' slowdown. Niseko Realty Sales president Ross Carty said properties are selling as soon as they go on the web. "Buyers are keeping an eye on the websites and as soon as I put something up there it sells," he said.



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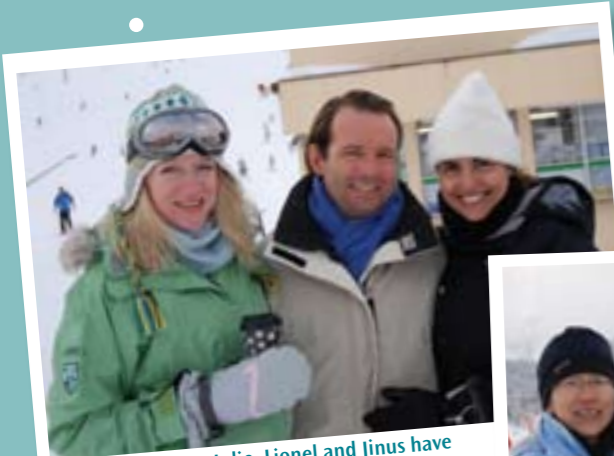
WE'VE GOT NISEKO COVERED

SNAP

by Eriko Mentzos

faces on the street

Where else in the world have you been skiing, and how does Niseko compare?



Hong Kong expats Julie, Lionel and Jinus have skied extensively in Europe and the US and reckon Niseko has 'the greatest snow' and great food!



Fiona, Christopher and Adrian are across from HK and say the snow is better than Switzerland and China.



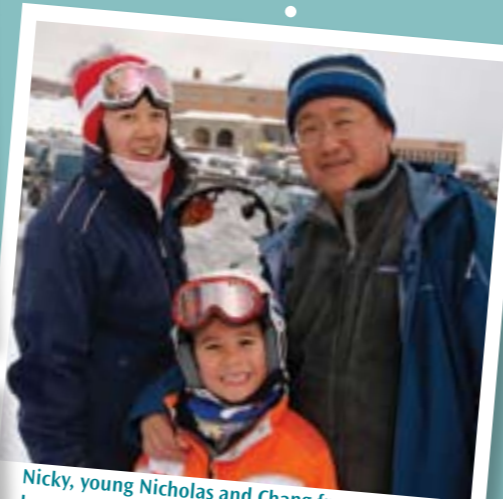
Hikaru and Sayaka are up from one of Japan's other skiing Meccas, Niigata, and love the size of Niseko's ski fields and (you guessed it) the soft, light snow!



Emi and Tom from Sapporo show their support for their city's beer brand. They've skied all over Hokkaido and reckon that like Muhammed Ali, Niseko is the greatest!



Mr Elephant and Takako's crew up from Tokyo: "The snow here is better than the mainland!"



Nicky, young Nicholas and Chang from HK have been skiing in Europe and the US and reckon the powder is first class, as is the food.



mountain style

Who was it that said anyone can look good in a pair of jeans? We don't know but they were right! Niseko's own Hara Takeshi and his Japanese original North Face Gore Tex denim pants are proof. Working at local retail store Niseko 343 we'd expect Hara-san to be well kitted out and he doesn't disappoint with his uber-cool two-tone orange North Face summit jacket, and top of the line red accessories; Giro helmet, Smith turbo-fan goggles, Hestra leather gloves and red boots. Nice one brother! He probably doesn't need any more gear but we're awarding him a Niseko fleece from Fusion anyway!



Madoka and little Yugo-kun from Sapporo; and from Osaka Yoko (back middle), Mitsuhiko, right Ikuko. They haven't done much skiing outside Japan but love Niseko's light snow, the size of the mountain, the onsens and the international atmosphere.

FLASH

niseko social scene

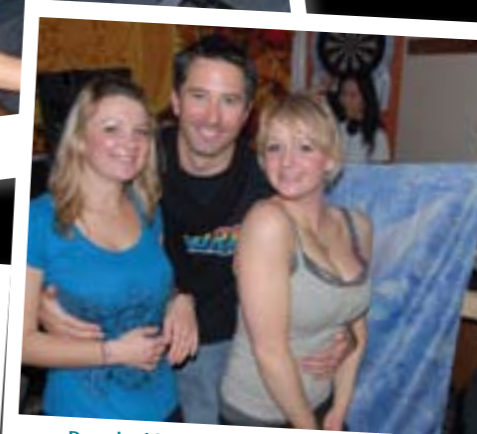
by Jimmy Edwards

Middle Village nightlife kicks off

This season the Middle Village staked its claim as Hirafu's hottest night spot. The Brick and Splash joined Barunba, The Red Bar and Java Bar, and between them hosted many of the the best parties of the season.



Even Japanese and Kiwis celebrated Australia Day! Seiko & Kat at the Brick.



Dave had his hands full with J-Sekka sisters Rachel and Nicola at the Red Bar.



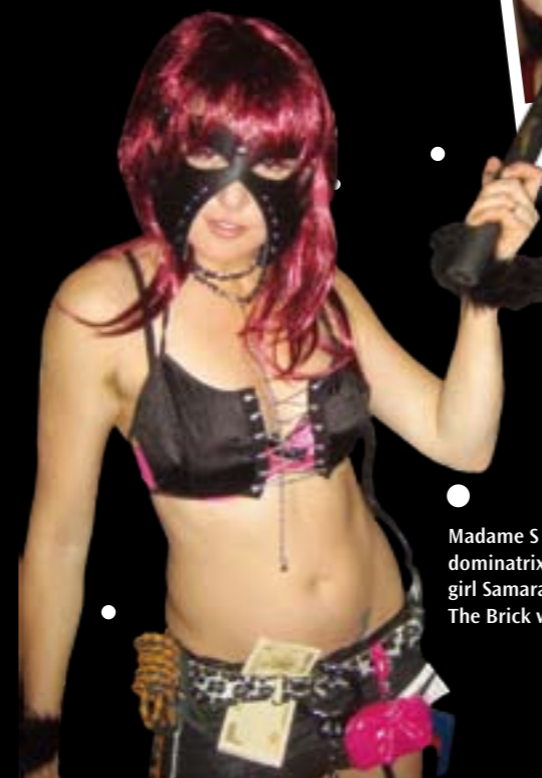
"Woo Hoo! I love this town!"...Black Diamond Babes Misato and Yui party on in 'The Red'.



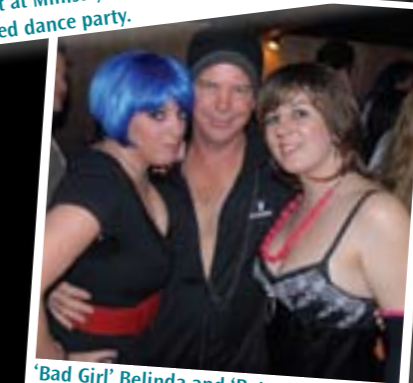
Splash's Reggae guru Shu and his crew lap up the heat at Ministry of Sound DJ Luke Walker's Konekcted dance party.



Vicki and Charlie always make a splash! Here they go again... at Splash!



Madame S (and M)... dominatrix birthday girl Samara showing The Brick who's boss



'Bad Girl' Belinda and 'Between-the-Sheets' Sheridan well looked after by 'One-bullet' Wayne. Bookings essential.



Panorama's developer Jon Atherton and 'Ton-sils' Derek Begley weren't letting their No.1-girl Kyra go for anything less than top dollar.



Hard-man Jeremy made sure 'Annie the Angel' booked the client before being interrupted by the pesky camera.



'Amourous Ayu' and 'Cutie-Queen' Kisato prepare to show new girl 'Waza the Wench' the way things work for a lady of the night.

Pimps & Ho's Party at the Brick

After a long winter of rugging up the girls were ready to show some flesh. With some heavy hitting pimp-daddies around to keep them safe, Powder TV presenter Samara Tanton's birthday bash turned into one of the best parties of the season.

Powder tools

by Bevan Colless

Gentemstick Impossible

A 182cm swallow tail that turns on a ¥10 piece? Impossible. Niseko's own board shapers Gentemstick have this year released this imposing number - a big mountain beast that will speed you through chutes at warp speed, but still allow you to navigate tight trees with the ease. Like everything from Gentem it's all about the camber - the bend in the board that lifts the centre or ends up slightly if laid flat on the floor. Compared to the effective edge, the camber is all in the tail ¼ of the board; the board is flat through the top quarter. This makes the nose lift very easily in powder and helps it turn sharply. If you love big mountain riding, deep powder, steep slopes, and are loaded, this should be in your quiver. Available from Gentemstick retail store. ¥178,500.

MSR Lightning Ascent Snowshoes

There are many products in life you can skip on. Snow shoes aren't one of them. Bypass those designer label jeans and save your pennies for a pair of these. Mountain Systems Research are leaders of the pack in snow shoeing and this is their best shoe. Serrated edges along the bottom of the frames provide 360-degree traction on steep terrain. They're nice and narrow so you can walk with a normal gait but they still float well in the deep stuff Niseko will no doubt offer up. The aerospace-grade aluminum frame is super light for all-day hikes, and the ergonomic heel lifter minimizes calf fatigue so you can climb longer and farther. ¥43,475 from NAC.



Avalung

Of 100 buried avalanche victims wearing a beacon, 50 will die. The Avalung significantly improves your chance of surviving an avalanche. When you're covered in a snowpack the exhaled air forms a cone around the mouth which prevents fresh oxygen from getting in. Once the mouthpiece is in place the Avalung functions as an artificial air-pocket, drawing oxygen in from the surrounding snowpack and redirecting exhaled air to prevent CO2 contamination. Avalanche survivors have been buried for up to 45 minutes before being rescued safely. Available in harness style or integrated into a backpack. Available at Toyru, near the Hirafu Gondola.



Armada JP vs Julien

JP Auclair is one of the best freeskiers in the world and this seasons spent three weeks in Niseko throwing everything he could at his Armada quiver. Together with Julien Regnier they created this superb all-rounder. "Super light, wide, low side cut, twin tipped... it's the ski that suits best my style of riding backcountry - my favourite," says JP. "I'm not so aggressive on my edges. I just love to get going fast and throw them sideways." The 'JJ' is the ultimate backcountry freestyle tool, designed from the ground up to perform when the only grooming for miles is provided by the shovel in your hands. JP and Julien insisted that the 188cm ski possesses a fat 103mm waist and minimal side-cut to create a super-stable landing platform. This shape, along with a tail that sits 10mm higher than the tip, provides better control when you're rolling switch. Lightweight construction ensures you'll be able to float in the air and through the pow facing any direction you choose. 188 & 178cm. Available for hire, demo and purchase at Rhythm and Beats in J Sekka. ¥90,000.



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Marker Duke Alpine Ski Touring Bindings

In peak season in Niseko these days you sometimes have to do some work to find the good stuff. So when you're trekking back to base or skinning up to Yotei's summit, it's nice to have a binding that lets your heel up. "Marker's Duke fits the bill perfectly for Niseko skiing," says local pro Tom Costa. A high performance free-ride binding on the way down and a telemark in transit. To switch from touring mode to ride mode, you have to take the ski off, pop up the underfoot lever, then put the ski back on, which guarantees it won't open in ski mode. ¥53,000 at InSki.

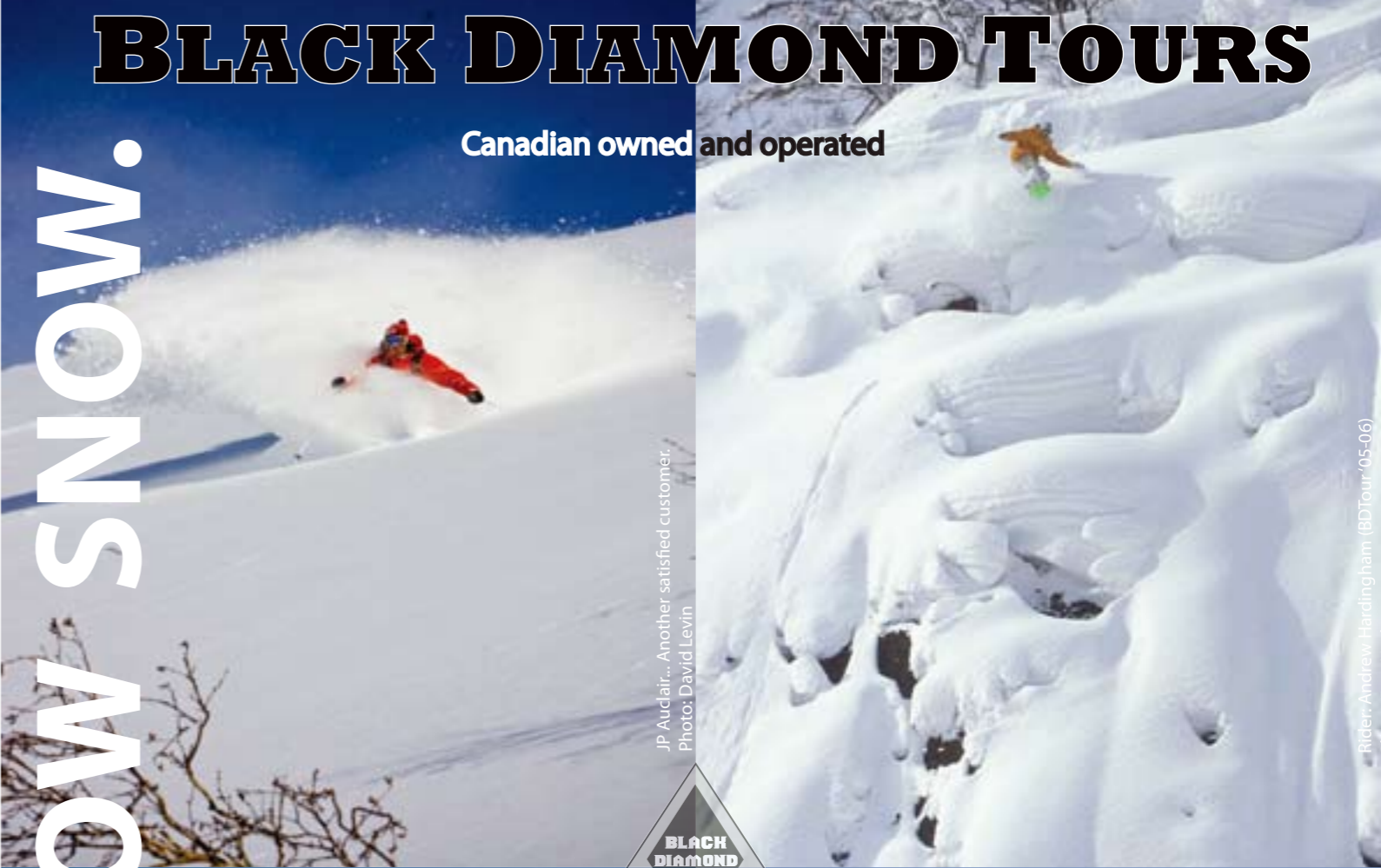


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JP Auclair... Another satisfied customer.
Photo: David Levin

Rider: Andrew Hardingham (BDTour 05-06)



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Powder turns and untracked runs in Niseko's backcountry



To find out more about activities and tours go to...
www.powderlife.com

powering through powder

by Kristian Lund

Scott Bowman has spent the last three seasons in Niseko without strapping a snowboard to his feet. "Once you've been snowmobiling you won't want to go back," he says with no hint of doubt. Drawn to Niseko eight years ago by the lure of powder, Bowman's no longer interested in letting gravity dictate the lines he can draw. Instead, behind 150hp of snowmobile he forges his paths wherever he pleases. He's so hooked he ditched the ski fields altogether, bought a base at Kanbetsu, 15 minutes drive from Niseko, sought permission from three levels of government, and started introducing people to his world – Hokkaido's alpine wilderness courtesy of a go-anywhere snowmobile. Rather than being constrained by ski resort boundaries with thousands of others, Niseko Snowmobile Adventures takes small groups into rarely seen countryside. The investment in both effort and financial terms has been enormous – as a fleet of high-powered machines, snow grooming cat and a dedicated professional staff attest.

"At the moment we're closer to Sapporo than we are to Hirafu," our guide Nick Gutry, NSA co-founder, says as we enjoy a hot cup of coffee at the halfway point of our journey. "Sapporo is 30km that way as the crow flies," he says pointing north. We're at The Basin, a football field-sized patch of pristine powder, surrounded by forest and mountain ridges, 18km out from base. We're truly in the middle of nowhere. Without a snowmobile there would be no hope of making it back to civilization alive as the deep snow would prohibit walking more than several hundred metres an hour.

Nick kicks over the engine and roars off, hitting about 100km an hour in a matter of seconds. He draws a circle out towards the perimeter of The Basin before cutting across field at full pace. The bike wheelies for 20m before the nose of the sled lands and he veers sharply to the left, the whole 200kg sled virtually laying down on its side, almost burying itself in snow. He straightens it up and with another burst of power, lurches out of the cloud of powder, wheelies into line and returns: "Now it's your turn".

We take off, cautiously at first, unsure how our steeds will negotiate the deep powder. Swinging the far leg over on the right side footrest to aid our turns we lean hard, putting all our weight to the front. The nose dips into the powder and slowly resurfaces. With 100m of untouched powder now straight ahead it's time to give it some. I squeeze the throttle and take off, only topping 50km an hour but feeling like it's twice that.

It's time to head back. The 18km trip out took about an hour through an untouched, snow-bound landscape - a revelation for a native of the sub-tropics. It's one thing to be in a car driving through winter Hokkaido on bitumen roads, but it's something else to be ploughing through half a metre of snow, over ridges and through gullies, weaving through forests for mile upon mile, without a building, car or power pole in sight.

While it might sound like a thrillseekers-only experience, NSA will tailor tours to individual needs. Our tour included a trio of less adventurous customers so NSA provided two guides with each group. All staff are trained in avalanche and backcountry safety and first aid. While the Powderlife crew was eager to get as deep into the countryside - and the powder - as we could, the other group was happy to stay seated and cruise along the groomed track while taking in the unique winter scenery at their own relaxed pace.

I can't call snowmobiling a spiritual experience, but without the roar of the engine I think it would be. While my snowboard isn't for sale just yet, I can't deny I am thinking about how I can afford to add a snowmobile to my collection.

Powderlife was guest on a half-day Niseko Snowmobile Adventure.

photos: Glen Cloydon

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Mt. Youtei with a sea of cloud shot from the peak of Mt. Niseko An'nupuri
Photo: Eriko Mentzos



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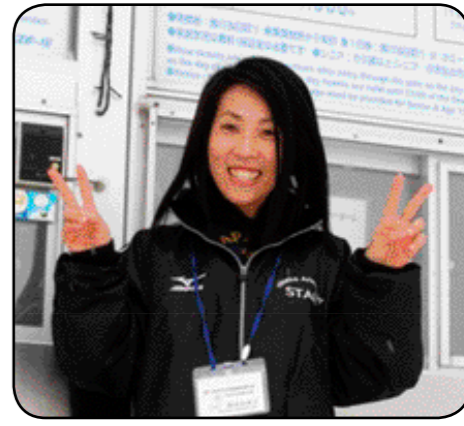
LIFTIE Layla-chan

name Reira Mizushima **名前** ミズシマ レイラ
age 26 **年齢** 26
hometown Sapporo **出身地** 札幌
time in niseko Three seasons **ニセコ来てどのくらいですか?** 3
what do you do in summer? シーズン
This summer I just want to surf! **夏は何をしていますか?** 今年はサーフボードがしたいです
do you like powder? Yes! **パウダースノーは好きですか?** はい
ski/board Snowboard **スキーヤー?スノーボーダー?** スノーボーダー
when did you start? Eight **ボード歴** 8年
years ago
why did you move to niseko? **なんでニセコに来たんですか?**
Because I love this mountain! **ニセコの山が好きだから**
Just Japanese **話す言語は?** 日本語
trips overseas? Korea, Jamaica, **海外に行った事はありますか?**
Thailand **ソウル、ジャマイカ、タイランド**
where do you want to go **次はどこに行きたいですか?**
next? New York, Australia, **N.Y.、オーストラリア、カナダ**
Canada **好きな...**
favourite... colour White and **色は?** 白, pink
brand ROXY **ブランドは?** ROXY
food Curry **食べ物?** カレー
bar BAGUS Cafe **レストラン?** 花園カフェ
onsen Yusenkaku **バー?** バグースカフェ
course Roy's **温泉?** 幽泉閣
where else in the world **コース?** ロイズ
do you want to go skiing? **ニセコ以外でどこかスキー場に**
Whistler **行きたいですか?** ウィスラー
how long will you be in niseko **ニセコにはどのくらいいる予定**
for? Just until Spring **ですか?** 春まで
what does Niseko need? A **ニセコに必要なものは?** 美容
beauty salon, a McDonalds, **室、マック、クラブ**
and a nightclub!
niseko secret? That's a secret!
what's a must have item for **ニセコの秘密?** 秘密 ^^
niseko? Heat Tech **ニセコで絶対必要だと思うアイテム**
what's your life philosophy? **は?** ヒートテック
Follow the flow of nature, **あなたの人生観は?** 自然の流れ
always smile! **に身を任せる。笑って過ごす。**



SKI PATROL Ginga Man

name Hiroshi Suzuki **名前** スズキ ヒロシ
age 36 **ニックネーム** ギンガマン
hometown Niigata **年齢** 36
time in niseko This is my **出身地** 新潟
seventh season **ニセコ来てどのくらいですか?** 7
do you like powder? Hai! **シーズン目**
ski/board? ski & telemark **パウダースノーは好きです**
when did you start? Skiing 30 **か?** はい
years ago, telemark 4 years ago **スキーヤー?スノーボーダー?**
why did you move to niseko? I **スキーとテレマーク**
wanted to ski patrol in Niseko **スキー/テレマーク歴** スキー
what languages do you speak? **30年、テレマーク4年**
Japanese (Toyama dialect) **なんでニセコに来たんですか?**
trips overseas? None **ニセコでパトロールをしたか**
where do you want to go **ったから**
next? Italy **話す言語は?** 日本語(富山弁)
favourite... colour Gingaman **海外に行った事はありますか?**
red brand Dolce & Gabana **か?** ない
food Italian restaurant **次はどこに行きたいですか?**
Hiro- **イタリア**
matsu **bar** Eddy in Kutchan **好きな...**
onsen Niimi mixed onsen **色は?** ギンガマン
run Jimoto Kobo and powder **ブランドは?** ドルチェ&ガ
course **ッバーナ** **食べ物?** イタリアン
where else in the world **レストラン?** 寛松 **バー?**
do you want to go skiing? **エディ(倶知安)** **温泉?** 新見
Tateyama **の混浴** **コース?** 地元公募
how long will you be in niseko **ニセコ以外でどこかスキー場に**
for? I don't know what will **行きたいですか?** 館山
happen tomorrow **ニセコにはどのくらいいる予定**
what does niseko need? A **すか?** 明日の事は分からない
real bistro **ニセコに必要なものは?** 本格
niseko secret? Tachikama's **的なビストロ**
oden is delicious! **ニセコの秘密?** **ニセコで絶対必要だと思うアイテム**
what's a must have item for **は?** たちかまのお
niseko? A house and wife **でんがおいしい**
What's your life philosophy? **ニセコで絶対必要だと思うアイテム**
Everything that exists in this **は?** 家と嫁
world is my master... **あなたの人生観は?** 天地万物
皆我師也



TICKET BOOTH Hashi

name Yumiko Hashimoto **名前** ハシモト ユミコ
nickname Hashi **ニックネーム** ハッシュー **出身地**
hometown Nagasaki **長崎** **ニセコ来てどのくらいですか?** 3年 **スキーヤー?スノーボーダー?** スノーボーダー
time in niseko 3 years **like powder?** Um, yes!
ski/board snowboard **スキー/スノボ** **ボード歴** 6年
when did you start? 6 years **なんでニセコに来たんですか?**
ago **冬を目的に来ましたが、一年を**
why did you move to niseko? **通してとても過ごし易いと思っ**
I came for the winter but **たから。**
I thought Niseko is a great **話す言語は?** 日本語。英語は...
place to live for a year **これから?**
what languages do you **海外に行った事はありますか?**
speak? Japanese. English in **カナダ**
the future **次はどこに行きたいですか?** ア
trips overseas Canada **メリカかなあ...**
where do you want to go **好きな...**
next? Maybe America? **色は?** 黒・白 **ブランド?** ブー
favourite... **マ** **食べ物?** お菓子 **レストラン?**
colour black and white **ブランド** **は?** うたりバー **は?** カフェ・フ
puma **food** sweets **restaurant** **ロープ** **温泉?** 幽泉閣 **コース**
Utari **bar** Cafe Grove **onsen** **は?** L字コース、大沢
Yusenkaku **course** L course, **ニセコ以外でどこかスキー場に**
Osawa **行きたいですか?** ニセコでいい
how long will you be in **ニセコにはどのくらいいる予定**
niseko for? Hopefully forever! **ですか?** 一生いれたらいい
what does niseko need? **デスネッ!**
Fast food **ニセコに必要なものは?** ファー
what's something nobody **ストフード**
knows about niseko? There is **ニセコについて自分だけが知っ**
an ostrich farm! **ていると思う事は?** カフェ・グロ
what's a must have item for **ープの常連になると...裏メニュ**
niseko? Baba shirts (under- **ーが注文出来る事!** **ダチョウ牧**
shirts for old people usually **場がある事**
very warm...) **ニセコで絶対必要だと思うアイ**
what's your life philosophy?: **テムは?:** ばばシャツ
Thinking I am lucky to meet **あなたの人生観は?:** 人との出
people! **会いに幸せだと思える事**

NEED STAFF THIS WINTER? NEED A JOB?





Tatsuru and Midori Rai

Rakuichi Soba, Annupuri

Rakuichi regulars might be a little disappointed we're exposing this hidden Annupuri gem, but it's just too good not to, and we wanted more foreign visitors to Niseko to experience this fantastic little piece of genuine Japan. Rakuichi is one of the best soba (buckwheat noodle) restaurants in the region. It's in a small unmarked wooden house set back on the block of land on the corner of the road up to Annupuri. Upon entry you'll be welcomed warmly by owners Tatsuru and Midori Rai, Midori in a beautiful Kimono and Tatsuru in traditional Japanese chef's attire. You'll need to learn some basic Japanese – there's no English menu. If you're going without a Japanese speaker, stick to hot (atatakai) or cold (tsumetai). There are other slight variations but save it for when you're with someone who can read the menu. Tatsuru grinds the buckwheat in a big black stone bowl in front of you before mixing it into a dough, flattening it out and using a large blade to cut each individual noodle while you watch. A fantastic cultural experience. Open for lunch 11am-3pm. Dinner bookings 0136 58 3170.

Izakaya Kakashi

The food at Kakashi is amazing, but perhaps what makes this charming little izakaya even better is the warmth of its owners. Kenichi and Gyoko Ogi make every visitor feel like they're dining in a five star restaurant, which is somewhat contrary to what izakaya are all about. Izakaya are probably best described as casual -dining Japanese restaurants. Seating is informal, beer and sake is served and consumed liberally, and a constant stream of small Japanese dishes are brought to the table. At Kakashi, almost every dish seems to be their speciality, although we make special recommendation of their hokke (Atke mackerel)! Kakashi opened 19 years ago because there was hardly anywhere to eat out in Hirafu. At the time there were only two other restaurants – Bang Bang and Fuji Sushi. While it's almost impossible to count how many restaurants are in Hirafu now, Kakashi is still one of the best. On the road between the Alpen Hotel and the gondola station.



Gyoko and Kenichi Ogi



Tetsuo Inoue

Jyuu Okonomiyaki

Tetsuo Inoue, 58, came to Niseko six years ago because he loves the snow. He used to come for snowboarding holidays but one day decided to make it permanent. His friend was the owner of an okonomiyaki restaurant in Osaka - okonomiyaki is Osaka's most famous dish and is best described as a pizza crossed with a pancake - and Tetsuo helped in the restaurant for two months, during which time he ate okonomiyaki every day, so much so he actually became sick of it. After moving here and talking about opening his own okonomiyaki restaurant but was warned off by people who told him Hokkaido people wouldn't go for it. He ignored the advice and went ahead with his plan, deciding on Higashiyama because he thought he'd be too busy in Hirafu and wouldn't have time to ride. Just his luck, the restaurant was a hit and he's flat out anyway! He still rides Annupuri almost every morning and despite being a little too busy for his liking, is living his dream. Jyuu is on the turnoff to Annupuri where Route 343 meets 66. Take a taxi or ask your accommodation provider about transport out there.

Graubunden

Junko Watanabe is the owner of Graubunden Café in Izumikyo 2. She's had a long association with the area - when she was little her family moved to Niseko because of her Dad's work as an employee of a chair lift building company. She always loved skiing and spent most of her childhood on the mountain. The ski business was so big in Japan at that time that many tour companies came to Niseko and asked her to be a model on skis. She was seduced by the advertising game and moved to Tokyo. Soon after she opened her own business as a stylist in Roppongi. However Niseko was always on her mind and she couldn't stay away. Jun-san returned and opened her little café. Most lunchtimes you'll find it full of seasonal staffers who love her fresh sandwiches. Don't let the locals have all the fun, pop in and say hi to Junko-san.



Junko Watanabe



Naotoshi Takiguchi

Boom Snowboards, Kutchan

Boom is a fairly appropriate word for what has happened in Niseko over the past five years, but it was almost 10 years ago that the owner of Kutchan's Boom snowboard shop came up with the name. In 1996 Naohisa Takiguchi decided snowboarding had gained enough mainstream popularity that there would be enough business to start selling snowboard gear in Kutchan. He opened a snowboard section on the third floor of his brother's ski and sporting goods shop across the road - Takiguchi Sports. Within three years he was doing well enough to go out on his own and moved into a small space across the road. Takiguchi had been to Kutchan's sister city St Moritz in Switzerland several times and decided to name his shop after its snowboard shop, Boom. These days it's run by his son Naotoshi who has been working in the business since he was 15. He travels Japan going to about 10 snowboard shows a year and unfortunately doesn't have much time to ride himself. Boom is located about half way along Kutchan's main street, Eki Mae Dori.

Yunosato Desk

Yunosato Desk make furniture, but they are artists rather than mere manufacturers. Business partners Shintaro Tashiro and Takeshi Sasaki share a love of wood, and each piece they create is handmade without using nails or screws. It really has to be seen to be truly appreciated, but joins are held firm by slots and fingers of wood. Each and every piece is meticulously designed and laboured over and nothing they put out is anything less than perfection. Their workshop and showroom is a disused school at Rankoshi, about 20 minutes drive from Hirafu. Even if you have no intention of buying anything it's worth a trip just to admire their work. Bring a Japanese speaker so you can gain an insight into just how much work goes into each piece. Their stuff isn't cheap, but once you know what goes into it you'll know why, and if you can afford it, will be happy to part with the money. Take a taxi or ask your accommodation provider about transport there.



Takeshi Sasaki and Shintaro Tashiro



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Photo: Shouya Grigg

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A THOUSAND WORDS



rider Joel Graham
riding Gentemstick Speedmaster 172cm
location Mt Annupuri, Niseko
photo Aaron Jamieson, Niseko Photography

4



1

2

3

5

6

7

...A THOUSAND WORDS



Mick Davis in the thick of White January, 2008



Levi Ratapu finds some fresh off the peak... lines in the Annupuri back bowl in the distance



Pow... JP Auclair loves Niseko's trees



Just beside the tracked-out main run



Tough job... ski guide Adrian Camp hard at work



In to Yotei's caldera



Not untracked, but does it matter when it's this deep?



High on Spring... Namara Ippatsu Big Air comp, March

photo: Randy Wicman, HotShots

photo: Glen Claydon

photo: Jennie Milton

photo: Eriko Mentzos, idapark

photo: Glen Claydon

photo: Jennie Milton

photo: Mark Tsukosov, HotShots

photo: Mark Tsukosov, HotShots

Alex Lee enjoying the early start to the season

SNOW WRAP-UP SEASON 2007/08

While 2007/08 was a great season for a whole range of reasons, once again Hokkaido's abundance of fresh, fluffy powder snow was the star. If you look at the stats it won't go down in the record books but there were periods, especially the whole of 'White January', that will be etched in the minds of locals for years to come, not to mention the visitors during that period who perhaps scored the experience of their lifetimes.



Getting into the swing of the season



For Niseko's snow report and forecast go to... www.powderlife.com

The first flakes of winter 07/08 fell on the peak of Mt Asahidake, Hokkaido's highest mountain located in the centre of the island, on September 29. Down towards the southwest corner of the island, Niseko's first snow of the season was seen on top of Mt Yotei on October 10. Over the coming weeks the snowline gradually crept its way down the mountain and a little over a month later, the first snow of the season fell on Hirafu, giving Mt Annupuri its first light covering. A week later a storm came through and finally it looked like the season was off and running. Within a matter of 24 hours Niseko went from green, brown and yellow... to white. A foot of powder dropped overnight on November 19 and on November 21 Grand Hirafu gave the nod to open the resort two days later for the equal second earliest start to a season since 2002.

Particularly after the poor previous season, hopes were high for a bumper season - traditionally early starts in Niseko end up breaking a few snowfall records. By the end of November more than a metre had fallen, one of the best Novembers of the past 10 years. Niseko was back and on track.

In December however, things cooled off, so to speak. It was actually quite warm and we even had a couple of days rain! The solid foundation that had been built up in November was going to waste. By the end of the month, Kutchan's official stats said 177cm for the month when it usually gets over 3m. It was the worst December in six years. Judging by the mood in the village though, you wouldn't have known it. Smiles were beaming and the boisterous atmosphere of visitors brought the village back to life. Large numbers of tourists started arriving as soon as calendars flipped over to December, and by Christmas the village was again at full capacity. Lift lines started building, as did queues in Seicomart.

The first day of the New Year brought with it a foot of powder. And it didn't stop there. Back-to-back storms raged throughout the month and there was barely a day when we didn't get at least a few centimetres. If there wasn't 10cm or 20cm deposited on cars in the morning, it came down throughout the day. A couple of visiting pro skiers - Armada founder French-Canadian JP Auclair and Californian

Chris Benchetler - arrived on January 5 and stayed for three weeks. They rated it hands-down the best powder trip of their lives and we'll leave it up to JP to tell you how good it was: "I've been skiing for 25 years and this is the best ever - every single day has been epic!" Auclair told Powderlife. "It never really stopped snowing and everyday it kept getting deeper. It was so fresh it was ridiculous!" To top it all off there was a couple of bluebird days thrown in - perhaps the only days it didn't snow the whole month. The local photographers had a field day and we documented it in a photo spread which had the town buzzing. It certainly was a good month and definitely the best January in recent memory.

February was a mixed bag. It started well, taking up where January left off with some big falls. During the middle of the month we got 'the storm of the season' which raged for about four days, keeping the top of the mountain closed and preserving any snow that had fallen. By the time the lifts started operating up high the mountain was primed for one of the deepest and best deep powder days of the season. A week later and another massive system came through. This time it was the same thing - while a lot of snow was falling (in fact the first day of the storm delivered the biggest single day's dump for years) the winds were so strong that virtually all the lifts were closed. Everyone assumed it was another repeat performance of the previous week and hung out until the conditions calmed down. When the time finally came to take the chairs to the top everyone had their wildest powder-specific gear out in anticipation. But when they got there they didn't know what to do with it - there was no powder to be seen. The storm had blown it all away! After a couple of runs most powder junkies realised they would be lucky to find any decent pockets of powder on the whole mountain to satisfy their cravings. Fortunately there were more big dumps over the next few days and withdrawal symptoms were soon satisfied.

And while we had an early start to the season, it also came to an early and abrupt end. We had two good dumps at the start of March but by the middle of the month it became obvious the powder season was finished for season 2007/08. The whole of Japan

was in the grip of a 'heat wave' which went as far as to bring Japan's famous sakura (cherry blossom) trees into an unseasonably early bloom and turned any potential snow storms into rain. Look at the history books though and March is often a good month. Just last season the biggest, and last, dump of the season came midway through the month. Official stats revealed that March 2008 didn't even bring a metre of snow, while the average is usually a metre and a half. March 2004 enjoyed an amazing two and a half metres! While the solid base that had been built up throughout the season remained until May, April forecasts promised nothing but sun and even a few showers. The region does regularly see a dump and sometimes two in April, but in 2008 it wasn't to be.

While in hindsight it might have seemed like a light season, that's certainly not the way it was perceived throughout the season from day to day, week to week by locals and visitors alike. Even when conditions were ordinary by locals' standards, tourists were beaming. It still seems an average day in Niseko is better than most anywhere in the world.



photo: Mark Tsukasa

"Wow... that was amazing!" Smiles all round in Niseko



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top ten additions 2007/2008

Niseko just keeps getting better. It's easy to look back to the time before it became a major international resort with rose-coloured glasses, but most long-term residents would agree the Niseko of 07/08 is much better than the Niseko of a decade ago. In no particular order, below is Powderlife's list of the top ten additions to Niseko in the last year alone.

Sunday Taiko Drumming

Street theatre and a taste of Japanese culture presented free for everyone every Sunday! Taiko drumming is captivating to everyone, and not a performance went by that didn't have dozens of locals and guests enjoying the performance from the talented and energetic Kutchan Taiko drumming group.

Kamimura's

Yuichi Kamimura's fine-dining restaurant opened in December 2007 and is a great asset to Niseko. A night at Kamimura's is such a pleasure it would be classed as a top fine-dining experience in any major city of the world. What a joy to experience it on a skiing holiday in Japan.



Yuichi Kamimura

photo: Jon Barlow

Dragon Bar

People who come to Niseko want to feel as though they are in Japan, and although many of the new bars and restaurants have been international, talented sommelier and chef Noriko Masubachi and her sister Fumie have created a fabulous Japanese wine and dining experience room in an enchanting remodelled pension that makes you feel like you're in an old Japanese shrine. A great addition to the many Japanese restaurants that have been in Niseko for some time.

J-Sekka

Niseko is lucky to have Shouya Grigg. Within J-Sekka, Shouya has created a space including bars, restaurants, and accommodation filled with style and class of the highest order.



Fine dining at home. Niseko Cuisine.

The Seicomart is the hub of the village, but the addition of Lawsons just 100 metres down the road has been a great addition to the area. With few queues, a great range of fresh produce, fast food, domestic products, techy goods and a range of Australian products – including VB – Lawsons is a winner.

Becoming a family resort

Until the 2007 season, Niseko has been known as more of an adult resort, but now there are two top-quality daycare facilities to complement the English-speaking kids' ski school classes. Parents can drop the young ones at Hirafu Kids in Hirafu or Niseko Kids at Niseko Village (formerly Higashiyama) in the morning, assured they will be looked after by trained child carers in a clean and fun environment, leaving the grown-ups free to enjoy a worry-free day on the mountain. Niseko Kids also has a magic carpet and on-mountain games.

New Hirafu chair lift

It's great to see more lifts on the mountain and Tokyu have added another lift to the already bulging Hirafu lift system. Beginners can step onto the new family lift which has opened up more beginner terrain.

Footpath clearing

In previous years, a walk down to Izumikiyo (the small village a few hundred metres from the centre of the village with accommodation and shops) meant you had take your chances on the side of the narrow road. In November last year the Kutchan Council built a much-needed footpath and now brings in heavy machinery after every snowfall to clear it, making for a pleasant five-minute stroll.

Powderlife

Toot toot! We couldn't resist blowing our own trumpet. What is a ski resort without a local mag and portal website? We hope our humble efforts have added to the resort!



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christmas and ny in niseko!

There is something magical about strolling down a quiet snow covered alpine street with a group of friends or family while snow falls steadily around you all. This feeling is amplified even more when it's Christmas or New Year and you hail from a warm or temperate climate. Each Christmas and New Year Niseko, has a myriad of different events and activities that everyone can enjoy. Be sure to book early!

Christmas Events

Christmas Eve Skiing Santa at Anupuri

Take the kids across to Anupuri to meet Santa and Niseko town's mascot Nikki handing out sweets on the mountain

Hirafu Christmas Candle Street Lighting

Check out the candles set in the snow wall from Kogen Hotel to Alpen Hotel. Free, around 6 pm.

Hirafu Christmas Eve Fireworks

Celebrate the night before Christmas with a bonanza fireworks display outside the Alpen Hotel. From 9.30pm.

Anupuri Snow Candle Display

Around the bottom of the quad chair lift. Free. From when it starts getting dark, about 4pm, from December 22 to 25.

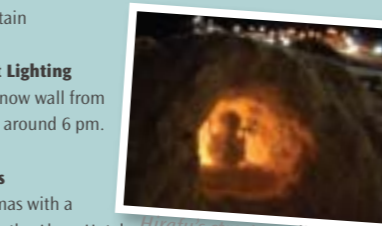
New Years Eve and Day

Hirafu NYE Countdown On-Piste

Live music, fireworks and the annual torch run at the base of the mountain above the Kogen Hotel. From 10pm.



Hirafu's New Years Eve torch run



Hirafu's street candle lighting

Higashiyama NYE Countdown

Countdown to New Year 2008 at the After Cafe and Bar. Just before midnight.

Anupuri NYE Free Night Skiing

Not in the mood to party? Day pass expired? Ski for free!! 9 – 11:30pm Anupuri quad.

Anupuri New Years Eve Countdown Fireworks

See the New Year in around the annual Anupuri bonfire.

Hirafu New Years Day Ceremony at King Bell Hut

King Bell on-mountain at Hirafu. Sake cask opening ceremony - which will then be handed out free from 10am!

Hirafu NY Day Ceremony at Alpen Hotel

Alpen Hotel, rice cake (mochi pounding) display. 100~200 fresh mochi (rice cakes) will be handed out. Opening a cask of sake. Try the sake for free, around 2pm.

Anupuri First Run NY Day

Be the first to descend Anupuri in 2008. First lift 6.45am. ¥1000 per ride.



Free entertainment and free sake!!

season 08/09 events and highlights

No matter when you arrive in Niseko there is likely to be a special event on in town. Be it fireworks, local town snow festivals, street candle lighting events or a race to watch or enter there is always something going on. Planning is well underway for the inaugural Spring Ski and Snowboard Festival from March 16-30. Be sure to check for the most up to date list of events that will be on during your stay, at www.nisekotourism.com or www.powderlife.com.

December 22 - January 4 (except for Tuesday)

Niseko Village Daily Entertainment

Live music every day (except for Tuesday) Niseko Village Tower Hotel 1F Lobby. Free. From 9pm.

Sundays throughout the season starting late December

Taiko Drum Performances

Free traditional Japanese drum performances. 3.30pm Sundays outside Hokkaido Tracks office.

Saturdays December 20-March 14

Japanese Traditional Dance Performance

Bonbori Souvenir Shop, just below Australia House (which is opposite Seicomart). Free. 8 - 9pm.

January 26

Grand Hirafu Australia Day Festival

One of the big events of the season. 5pm to 7pm near the Alpen hotel. ¥100 hot pot with Australian beef and Japanese vegetables. Snow Flag game, Taiko drumming performance. Fireworks at 9.30pm.

Bollywood meets Backyard Cricket BBQ

Celebrate Indian Independence Day and Australia Day with a game of cricket at Blo Blo. Bangin' Bangra Beats meets Aussie Hip Hop. BBQ ¥1000 From 7pm.

February 16 and 17

Kutchan Yukitopia Snow Festival

Races, competitions, activities. Skiing over a cold pool competition. Potato sled pulling competition. Most events held behind the Kutchan Public Hall.

March 7, 14, 21 & 28

Hirafu March Weekends Fireworks

Every Saturday in March from 9.30pm



Kutchan's Yukitopia festival

Events aplenty! There's something for 8 to 80 year olds to enter. Call the organisers for an entry form to be emailed. You may need to ask for an English speaker. Check NisekoTourism.com for Spring Festival events March 16-30, 2009.

March 1

Gentemstick Natural Half Pipe Masters' 2009

Race down Higashiyama's natural half pipe in an off piste GS style event for cash and prizes. Enter at Gentem store until February 28. Ski, snowboard, male and female. For info: +81 (0) 136 22 5581.

March 8

Namara Ippatsu (Hirafu Big Air Competition)

Hit the big air jump in front of the crowds at Hirafu. This is one of the events of the year. Open to everyone. Skiers, Snowboarders male and female. To enter call +81 (0) 136 23 0104.

Sunday March 15

Kutchan-cho Junior Giant Slalom

Various age group events. Good level competition. Entries close March 2 Call +81 (0) 136 22-2228

Sunday March 22

Minami Ski & Snowboard Battle

Exciting ski and snowboard cross race at Anupuri. Call for entry & more information +81 (0) 136 58 2080

Sunday March 26

Junior ski challenge

Slalom & GS. Technique and speed judged by experts. Call +81 (0) 136 22 0921. Entries close March 18.

Sunday March 30

Hirafu Old Boy's Giant Slalom (Over 50's only!)

Age races 50-54, 55-59, 60-64, 65-69, 70-74 & 75+! To enter call +81 (0) 136 23 0104 Entries close March 15.

Niseko Alpine Freestyle Weekend

Organised by local ski shop Niseko 343 this event is a long time favourite with locals and tourists. To enter any of the events below call +81 (0) 136 23 0343 for an entry form.

Saturday April 4

Radical Air Contest in Grand Hirafu

Preliminary jam session before the Top 8 in each category battle it out on the table tops and spine.

Sunday April 5

18th Super Bumps Niseko Cup at Hirafu

Freestyle skiing competition at Furiko Course. Keep an eye out for the flips!

Sunday April 5

Grand Hirafu Bike Challenge

Crazy mountain bikers descend the ski slopes. Bikes are available for rent from NOASC



Namara Ippatsu competitors

#See www.NisekoTourism.com for changes to the above dates.

photo: Erlio Mentzios, idearwork

photo: Niseko Photography

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feature

APRES-SKI ONSEN

Bath-house bliss

by Derek Chamberlain

Photos: Eriko Mentzas, ideapark



Soaking naked in the steaming hot waters of a public onsen is a Japanese institution. Traditionally used simply as public bathing places, today they play a central role in directing Japanese domestic tourism - Japanese will tailor a holiday specifically to enjoy an onsen in a new location. From the time they are children, most Japanese regularly go to onsens with their families, and adults will go with friends and even workmates. In fact, the experience is said to bring people closer together and break down barriers, even social inhibition. For many foreigners, walking completely naked and unguarded through a public place for the first time, even if everyone is of the same gender, is generally a strange and possibly daunting experience. But once submerged to the neck, gazing across a dreamlike snow-covered landscape through a veil of steam, even the most self-conscious gaijin can forget everything and enjoy a simple pleasure the Japanese have been engaging in for centuries. The total mind and body relaxation experienced in the hours after leaving an onsen is perhaps the only thing that can beat it. Niseko is blessed with a rich bounty of natural hot spring water which is almost as much of a drawcard for the domestic tourist market as the snow.

Chilling out at Goshiki Onsen

a short history of onsen

Many onsens are as shrouded in myth and legend as they are in steam. One of my favourite onsen legends is the tale about the creation of the Oigami Onsen, in the Japan Alps behind Tokyo. They say that way back in the dawn of time the Snake God of the Akagi Mountain Shrine fought with the Centipede God of the Nantai Mountain Shrine. The battle was long and hard and the first casualty was the God of Akagi who was wounded and forced to retreat. Having found a place to rest he dropped his bow and where it landed, a hot spring erupted. He bathed in the spring which healed his wounds and allowed him to return to the battle and defeat the Nantai Mountain God. The Oigami area gets its name from this mythical battle - Oigami literally means 'the chased God'.

Onsens are a recognized and treasured cultural tradition in Japan and have been around for almost 1500 years. The first onsens were what are now called rotenburo, or outside baths. They were naturally occurring rock-pools filled with water heated and infused with minerals after passing through, or near, the earth's inner core or volcanic magma. There are believed to be as many as 14,000 hot springs in more than 150 locations around Japan.

The original onsens, being natural pools, were all mixed gender bathing and stayed that way even after buildings were built around them until the mid 1800s and the Meiji Restoration period. There are still some mixed gender onsens operating in rural areas around Japan today which provide a culturally authentic experience. Even in onsens with separate baths, children under the age of eight are allowed to accompany either parent into the onsen. Some places have baths separated only by a screen so that children can pass back and forth.

Though hot springs have been used since biblical times as places of healing, it has only been in the last thirty years that scientific evidence has been found

to support what everyone else already knew. Each hot spring, with its different temperature and different mineral content, is helpful in dealing with different disorders or ailments. Just about any hot bath will be good for blood circulation and long-term rehabilitation, but hot springs are also good for neurological disorders, joint inflammation, menopausal discomforts, chronic skin diseases, diabetes, digestive disorders, high blood pressure, and clearing out arteries. It is also a great way to relieve stress. The body and mind relax, people come together without all the imposed formalities of the social structure and, surrounded as most hot springs are with the serenity of nature, they ease the spirit and mind. It has been said that the only thing a hot spring can't heal is a broken heart.

In 1949 a hot spring bill was passed which set down the legal definition of an onsen, requiring it to be naturally occurring spring with a minimum temperature and mineral content. There are 14 recognized types of mineral waters, and four classifications of hot spring based on water temperature.

Hot springs have been enjoyed around the world for thousands of years. They are mentioned in the Bible and by ancient Greek philosophers as places of healing. The earliest mention of onsens in Japan is in the Kojiki, written c. 680, which mentions a legendary prince, Yamatotakeru, who lived in the 4th century and became the 11th Emperor of Japan who, the story goes, visited Sabakoyu Onsen to be cured of an illness after his father tried to have him killed. In the Manyoshu written c. 759 there is a legend about Prince Shotoku (574-622) who visited the Dogo Onsen.

Even with all we know of the ancient world the true history of the hot spring will never be known. We will never know who the first person was to take the plunge, nor where the first 'bath' was established. Given the popularity of hot springs and spas today and the tourist dollars invested in them, it's hard to make any definitive claims, but in Japan, they've been enjoying the luxury of the onsen for 15 centuries, and that's a tradition not to be sneezed at.

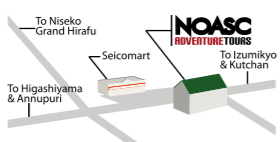
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photo: Niseko Photography

Hirafu's Popolo Onsen

an onsen virgin's tale

I don't know a single foreigner who wasn't at least a little apprehensive the first time they were invited to an onsen, and I'm no exception. I don't have the figure to cause a stir on Maslin Beach but I certainly seem to attract a lot of attention in Japan. That was the root cause of my apprehension - if I garnered so many stares just walking down the street fully clothed, what was it going to be like when I was naked?

Have you ever had that feeling that someone is watching you but when you look around you don't see anyone? That was the feeling I had as I stripped off in the changing room. The only instructions I'd been given were 'Don't soap up in the bath... oh yeah, and use the small towel... you know...' with a vague hand gesture around the mid section. Not a lot to go on. This was my first time at an onsen, and I was with my new father-in-law who still hadn't made up his mind about me yet. One faux pas and I could sour our relationship from the get go. There was, to my mind at least, a lot riding on me doing things right.

My father-in-law had ducked into the toilet and I'd hurried on ahead, hoping to be changed and in the bath before he came back, so I knew it wasn't him staring at me. I whipped off my boxers, grabbed the small towel, and, instinctively, held it where it would hide the most vulnerable portion of my anatomy. I approached the glass doors leading into the bathing room with trepidation, expecting dozens of pairs of eyes to fasten on me the moment I opened it, and steeled my face in an expression I hoped showed only disdain.

I opened the door and stepped into a steam-filled half-light. At first I couldn't see anything then a gust from the still open door cleared away the haze and revealed the rock-inlaid concrete floor and swimming-pool sized bath beyond, but no people. I closed the door and edged my way towards the bath.

There were tiled pillars rising out of the water up into the dim recesses of the ceiling and from behind one of these there appeared a bent-shouldered old man. We both stopped and stared at each other for a long moment, then he gathered his towel about his skinny hips and made a dignified dash for the change-room. I was left with the whole bath to myself.

Since then I've been to dozens of onsens and had a wide range of experiences. I've become a little more comfortable stripping off in the change-room while little boys stare at me goggle-eyed, something only little boys seeing their first gaijin seem to do. I learned to ignore everyone when I walked in, affording them the same courtesy they afforded me; learned to rinse off properly before getting into the bath and to use the scrub cloth whilst half-squatting on the little plastic stools to wash myself after. Most importantly, however, I learned the joy of stretching out in hot water, letting it ease the ache in tired muscles while I tried to count the stars, or enjoyed the feel of the snow melting on my face. And then, a couple of years ago I learned of the almost religious experience to be had from getting out of a hot bath to roll in virgin snow until you're shivering then jumping back into the bath. Actually, I think it might be time for another onsen now.

Derek is a writer who pays for his predilection by teaching English. He has lived in Sapporo with his wife and 2 children for 13 years.

niseko's top 10 onsens

Hotel Kanronomori's Paul Haggart is passionate about ensuring Niseko visitors make the most of their Hokkaido holiday by introducing them to the best and often least-known cultural experiences in the area. He also knows a good onsen when he sees one. We asked Paul to list his Niseko onsen top 10, in no particular order.

Hotel Ikoinomura Onsen

A must-try onsen. Fantastic bathing areas and great outdoor baths with a very natural feel. Located at the Annupuri Ski Field near the Northern Resort Annupuri Hotel and close to the Nook where the Free Passport buses stop. Free internet on the first floor of the Hotel. I recommend combining an onsen with lunch or dinner at the Mokumoku Tei Yakiniku BBQ House, or try some of the amazing cafes and restaurants in the Annupuri area.

Niseko Grand Hotel

The only onsen in the whole of Niseko that has a large outdoor unisex bathing area. Really natural and some of the area's best sulphuric hot spring water. Great for your skin and good for sore joints. Smocks available for those who aren't sure about the unisex bathing experience. Towels in the bath are also OK. Milky white onsen water.

Kira no Yu

Niseko Town's own onsen. Very modern setting, this is one of the region's only onsens with a private room that you can hire out. Great for those who want an onsen but aren't sure about the whole onsen experience. Possibly the best teriyaki chicken donburi in the district available in the café at the railway station across the road.

Hotel Kanronomori

Located near the base of the Moiwa ski field with easy access, try the Mori no Tenkuu Buro - an outdoor bath located on a second floor platform. Sulphuric water, fantastic for the skin and joints after winter sports or summer hiking. Try a Buddhist Ashifumi massage before an onsen. A magical experience!

Alpen Hotel

Great rooftop onsen really close to the main Hirafu skiing area. Ski in for a really healing experience. The water here has a high nitrium content and is really good for the skin. Ski in and ski out, fantastic!

Hirafu Tei Prince Hotel

Located on the main road up to the ski area, this is one of the area's more well-known onsens. The Hotel's spring water is rich in nitrium.

Yugokoro Tei

On the spa bus circuit, this is one of the region's most popular onsens. Amazing outdoor bath area with a pergola over the top of the outdoor onsen. This onsen really puts you in touch with nature all year round. Closing at 11pm, it's also one of the latest closing onsens in the area. Great after Annupuri night skiing.

Higashiyama Prince Hotel

Visit the main tower complex and enjoy an onsen while overlooking the golf course. The outdoor onsen overflows into a large pond that is home to real carp. The water seems to go on endlessly. This is a really special experience - even though there are no fish in the bath they are really close. During the day head on down to Takahashi Farm (Milk Kobo) for the world's best Choux Cream.

Koikawa Onsen

This onsen is off the map for most visitors to the area. It was actually one of the main bathhouses when the area had a bustling Geisha district and has an amazing outdoor bath looking out over a waterfall. The building is really traditional giving a real sense of the history of the area. Sulphuric spring water is great for the skin - the Geisha obviously had the right idea.

Goshiki Onsen

Located around the back of Mt Annupuri, Goshiki is frequented by a few backcountry skiers who ski in for an onsen. The area is magical in summer with lots of geothermal walks and wildlife to enjoy. This area sports some of the best onsen water in the district, leaving your skin feeling silky soft and smooth afterwards.

Yuki Chichibu

Located deep in the national park behind Mt Annupuri is the Yuki Chichibu Onsen. The water is a different type of water altogether and leaves your skin feeling soft and revitalized. This would have to be one of the most beautifying onsens in the district - great for those who are interested in keeping up appearances. Access is not easy - charter a taxi or go on an onsen tour.



photo: Niseko Photography

photo: Niseko Photography



Niseko Village Hilton Hotel's onsen spills into the carp pond below

photo: Niseko Photography



photo: Niseko Photography



Goshiki Onsen

photo: Eriko Mentzos, ideapark

ONSEN USE AND ETIQUETTE

1. Enter the changing room through the appropriate door or curtain: 女 on a red curtain for women, 男 for men.
2. Remove your clothes and put them in the basket or locker provided.
3. Take only the small wash towel and keep your mid-section covered, enter the bathing area closing any door behind you.
4. Take a seat at the showers and wash your body thoroughly.
5. Rinse off and it's time to relax in the onsen.
6. After your bath you should wash yourself again under the showers.

There is an established code of etiquette for onsen. Observing the following guidelines will result in a pleasurable experience for everyone:

- Do not wear a bathing suit unless the rules of the onsen require it.
- Never use soap or shampoo in the bath itself. Washing is done outside at the showers.
- Wash with soap or at least rinse well before entering the bath for the first time.
- Avoid making loud noises or rowdy behaviour. Onsen are places for quiet relaxation or conversation.
- Avoid staring. Respect others' privacy and modesty.



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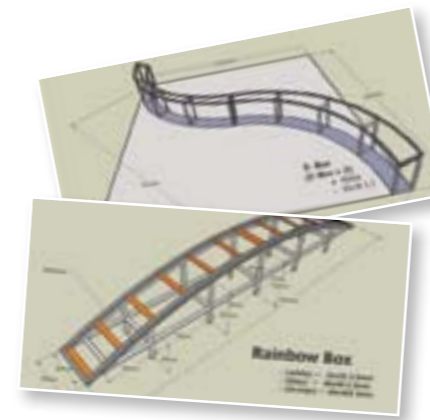
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The Parkitect, Taiki-san

hanazono's parkitect

by Kristian Lund

What do you get when you give a park rat some architecture software and a bit of creative licence? A parkitect, and one of the best terrain parks in Hokkaido.

When Hanazono's head park designer Taiki-san came to Niseko four years ago, the park was barely a few kickers and rails. Now riders can toy with eight features on the one line. The advanced line kicks off with one of the biggest and best half pipes in the region, leading into the Stomping Ground and two running 6m and 7m tabletops. There's also an 8m flat rail into a steep landing, a 6m step-up jump, and after a bit more snow the park's centrepiece - a 12m table.

"It's a good flow for the rider," says Taiki-san. "It's getting better and it's started to get famous but it's still not enough - I still have bigger ideas."

That's pretty exciting to hear considering Hanazono is serious about continuing to improve the park. They've just invested in a top-of-the-range PistenBully park cat and hired a top shaper from Australia where there isn't much powder so a good park is an essential feature of their resorts.

One of the major new features of the park this year is an old bus which not only looks extremely cool but has created a buzz among park riders. The bus itself has an interesting story. It was driven from the mainland by an old guy who parked it at Hanazono a few years ago and lived in it while he built a house. The house is now finished and with no use for the tiring old bus, he donated it to the resort.



That's one way to ride the bus

photos: Dave Pauli, HotShots



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bang bang

by Vanessa Gibson

Mention Hokkaido to most Japanese from "the south" and the first thing they think about is not snow. It's food. For them, a trip to Hokkaido is not complete without indulging in Hokkaido's famous foods: salmon sashimi and roe, ramen noodles, hairy crab, and wagyu beef. You can knock a few of these off your list in one visit to Bang Bang. Masanobu Sato's iconic restaurant has been a feature on the Niseko dining landscape for 22 years. Masa's passion in life is skiing (telemarking to be precise), as you could probably ascertain given his decision to set up shop in the world's powder capital and the fabulous photos dotted about the restaurant. Such is its popularity in winter that seasoned Nisekophiles know to book well in advance of their arrival.

As you walk in you can see yakitori being carefully turned on the counter grill by a sharply attired chef, a feature pot belly stove warming the room, and natural wooden tables with windows looking out on the snow and trees. Don't think you're in a completely isolated bubble in Hirafu, aside from the English on the menu, this is a slice of real Japan.

Bang Bang is a notch above the typical Japanese izakaya (casual dining pub/restaurant) and has some dishes that would not be out of place in a fine dining restaurant. The marbled Wagyu beef steak will set you back about ¥10,000, but you'll want to close your eyes to help you savour every bite. The tenderness and juiciness of this beef is astounding. Despite stories of Wagyu beef being fed beer and given regular massages, a fallacy started by a misinformed journalist several years ago, Wagyu do lead a life of comfort and are often kept in small herds of as few as four.

Although the beef is extraordinary, make sure you don't miss out on the fantastic range of fresh fish. You can choose between five grades of salmon sashimi. Top of the pops is the rare keiji salmon found only in the northern Hokkaido waters. Only one in 10,000 salmon caught are true keiji salmon. The fisherman can never be 100% sure a fish is actually a genuine keiji until the fish is cut open, which you can't do unless you buy it from them. They sell for about ¥50-60,000 each, and Masa estimates that about 1 in 10-15 he buys is not actually keiji, and he loses money on them. Caveat emptor indeed! The keiji salmon is to seafood lovers what Penfolds Grange is to Australian wine lovers. Keiji salmon is almost a rite of passage for a seafood lover to try one at least once in their career.

Signature Bang Bang fare also includes fresh Hokkaido oysters, char-grilled king crab and pork spare rib. The crab is pricey but delectable and the ribs are tasty but may be a bit fatty for western tastes. The meal can be balanced with a few Japanese salads, yakitori vegetable or rice dishes. Most dishes range from ¥700-1500. A word of warning - split bills often vary from ¥3,000 to ¥12,000 per head depending on how you order. They have increased their range of wines to include a great Australian selection, predominantly from the Margaret River. Luckily for you and me, Masa loves food almost as much as he loves his telemark.

Bang Bang is open evenings from 5:30-11pm. Closed on Wednesdays.
Bookings are essential, seats 30-50 people. Tel. 0136 22 4292

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While powder snow is the magnet that has attracted most first-time visitors to Niseko, by the time they leave to go home, many of the best memories they take with them are of food.

In the 'early days' of Niseko's resurgence as Japan's premier winter resort, it was often a case of not knowing what to expect, and finding charm in the simple delights of Japanese rural cooking. And in those early days, while presenting delicious fare, restaurants that existed were pretty rough and ready. In many cases, they were pre-fab huts and construction-site demountables - thrown up overnight to meet the demands of the sudden influx of hungry international skiers and boarders.

Those 'simple delights' continue to win over thousands of new converts to local Japanese cuisine every season. Apart from sushi, which has now almost attained 'world food' status, the staples are soba and ramen noodles with their seemingly endless variety of flavors, and a wonderful array of locally sourced healthy dishes of meat (including Hokkaido deer), seafood and vegetables. The secret is in the wide use of charcoal grilling and unforgettable sauces that rely heavily on soy, sesame, ginger and garlic, in addition to a number of others that are uniquely Japanese.

But what a difference a few years has made! Today the village of Hirafu alone boasts more than 40 restaurants, and is the hub of a vibrant apres ski culture that brilliantly complements the spectacular powder delights of the slopes that tower over it.

And each season sees the numbers grow in Higashiyama and Annupuri too, springing up - as the Japanese say - like bamboo shoots after rain. Add in the huge number of eateries in nearby Kutchan town, and the township of Niseko itself - easily accessible to visitors by bus or taxi - and the total number runs close to 200.

It is this rich, foreign-driven restaurant culture that sets Niseko apart from other Japanese ski areas and supports its claim to be a truly international ski resort.

It is not often realised how different the Japanese 'traditional' approach to skiing and eating was, but a close look at the remaining older parts of the Hirafu Lower Village area - with its plethora of old-style Japanese pensions - reveals a lot of the story. With far more rigid time constraints than their Western counterparts, Japanese always had to cram their passion for skiing into concentrated weekend bursts. Arriving late on Friday night or early Saturday mornings, they would ski all day till they dropped, then return to their pension for an eat-in dinner and an early night in order to get up and do it all again on Sunday morning before the long journey home. Eating out - apart from lunch at on-slope huts or a straggle of noodle bars at the base of the lifts - was unknown.

Today, some of the quaint old noodle bars and izakaya that captivated the early visitors still remain, and serve up ethnic Japanese delicacies at back-packer prices, but now they share the evening turf with an extraordinary array of culinary diversity that can genuinely claim to offer something for everybody, regardless of budget. At the top end of the spectrum is the eponymously-named Kamimura, where a disciple of the Sydney's world famous Wakuda Tetsuya nightly enthralled Niseko's better-heeled visitors with exquisitely elegant menus that would hold their own in the gourmet capitals of the world.

Interestingly, these days the message about Niseko is gaining a lot of local amplification too. More and more Japanese skiers and boarders are abandoning their 'regular' ski haunts on the mainland, and coming from all over Japan as much for the multicultural restaurant and bar scene in Niseko as for the snow. It's no exaggeration to say Niseko has changed the face of winter snow sports in Japan forever.



dummy's guide to Japanese food

- Sushi** A slice of raw fish served on a rectangular cube of rice.
- Sashimi** A slice of raw fish on its own, not on a rectangular cube of rice.
- Ramen** Chinese style Japanese noodles. A Hokkaido specialty - must try!
- Soba** Light Japanese buckwheat noodles served hot or cold in a soy-flavored, or sometimes clear, broth made from fish and seaweed stock.
- Udon** Thick noodles made from wheat flour served either hot or cold and with various toppings.
- Curry Rice** A Japanese (and now foreign!) favourite, especially on ski hills. Usually thicker, sweeter and milder than it's Indian equivalent.
- Katsu Curry** Curry rice with a bread-crumbed, deep fried pork cutlet on top
- Donburi** A bowl of rice with some other food on top - tempura (tendon), egg and chicken (oyakodon), tonkatsu (katsudon) and beef (gyudon).
- Nabe** Meat and vegetable soup prepared in a hot pot, usually at the table. Typical ingredients are negi (Japanese leek), Chinese cabbage, various mushrooms, seafood and/or meat. Especially popular in the cold winter months.
- Okonomiyaki** Extremely popular with foreigners - a Japanese-style pizza / pancake made with flour, cabbage, vegetables, meat and seafood.



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Sense of Home



Shiretoko peninsula

the end of the earth

by Greg Lund

Hokkaido is one of the world's great undiscovered tourist treasures. As global warming increasingly impacts on popular tourist destinations around the globe, Hokkaido is just starting to come into its own. The powder snow that blankets the ski resorts in winter is one legacy of its location off the coast of Siberia, but it's also just far enough north of the equator to escape the humidity which makes mainland Japan almost unbearable in summer. In short, it's the ideal all-year-round holiday destination. As more foreign ski visitors come to feel comfortable with Niseko, they might think about spreading their wings and taking in the best of the rest of this magic island – 'The Garden of The Gods'.



A higuma bear about to feast on freshwater salmon

So highly regarded is Shiretoko as a unique wilderness area that in 2006 it was formally designated a World Heritage site - only the third one in Japan to be so recognised by UNESCO.

Shiretoko in the language of the native Ainu inhabitants of Hokkaido means 'the end of the earth'. And once experienced, it is easy to imagine how it got its name.

If you take a map of Hokkaido and draw a line from Niseko, close to the west coast, diagonally across the island to the north-east coast, your attention is drawn to a long, thin, sliver of land that juts - dagger-like - out into the North Pacific.

Less than 100 kilometres long, and unpopulated for most of its length, it is one of the most remote, and spectacularly rugged places in Japan. A high mountainous spine rears sharply up from a very narrow coastal plain characterised by weathered basalt cliffs over which numerous rivers and hot spring waterfalls tumble down into almost impossibly clear, aqua ocean. About half of the peninsula is national park.

It is home to very few people, but to a wonderful variety of exotic flora and fauna. The star inhabitants are an estimated 300 or more Brown Bears. Growing to a weight of 400 kilograms and related to the North American Grizzly, these wonderful creatures can be seen at close quarters in their natural habitat for most of the year except winter.

In Autumn, when the salmon run up the streams to spawn, the bears delight visitors with their fish-catching skills as they seek to stack on protein and fat in preparation for hibernation over the long, cold winter.

Thousands of Ezoshika - a deer native to Hokkaido, roam the peninsula and are the source of excellent venison dishes in the hunting season. The peninsula is also the last safe habitat of one of the world's most spectacular owls, a very large species known locally as Shima-fukuro, but elsewhere as Blackiston's Fish Owls. Growing to a height of up to 70 cm and with a wing span nearing two metres, these extraordinary nocturnal creatures are being nursed back from the brink of extinction in the national park, and can now sometimes be seen at a small number of Japanese inns where food is left out at night to attract them into camera range.

Sitting neck deep in an open-air hot spring bath (rotemburo) under the stars with a cold beer on a still night listening to the call of the shima-fukuro is an experience not easily forgotten.

Like Niseko though, Shiretoko saves its spectacular best for winter, when floating pack ice emanating from the Siberian coast is driven by the north-west monsoon to jam up against the coastline of the peninsula, forming a shelf of solid, undulating, creaking and groaning ice that stretches to the horizon.

With the drifting pack ice (ryuhyo in Japanese) come seals, which in turn attract enormous eagles - magnificent brown birds with white heads and bright yellow beaks - that follow them over from Kamchatka on the Russian coast. They float overhead like hang gliders or perch on higher outcrops of ice waiting for a seal to make a fatal mistake.

Guides take adventurous groups out onto the ice to trek around headlands to frozen waterfalls, or to dive under the ice sheet in warm dry-suits amid teeming sea life, and ice breaker cruise ships leave out of the port towns of Utoro and Abashiri.

Accommodation is limited, but mostly comfortable and very friendly, and the seafood is to die for.

And all this is only hours from Niseko by car or by train. A great place to start your exploration of the rest of Hokkaido.

Greg Lund is a former diplomat who has lived in Japan for much of the past 30 years, the last five in Hokkaido

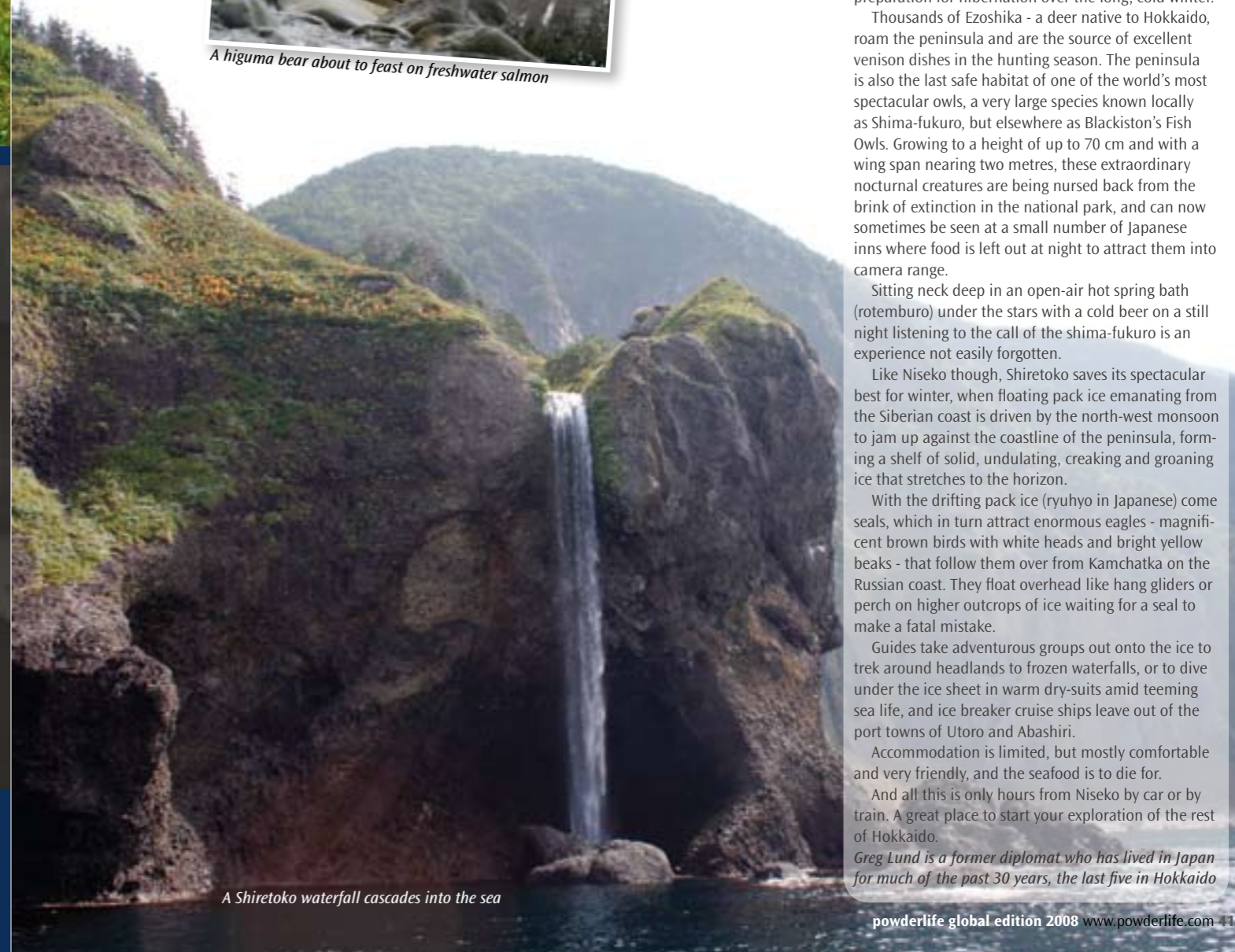


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A Shiretoko waterfall cascades into the sea

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four seasons hokkaido

summer surfing safari having a swell time in hokkaido

by Kristian Lund



Hokkaido... resembling places like Australia and Indonesia!

main photo: Kal Bragg

While Niseko has put Japan firmly on the list of top international skiing and boarding destinations, there is no similar association with Japanese surfing. Apart from occasional stories that drift out of the better known beach areas around Tokyo (the Shonan Kaigan has a 'sister' relationship with the Gold Coast in Queensland) the surfing scene is generally a bit of a black hole. Those snippets suggest waves are small, the water and beaches are dirty, and they are very, very overcrowded.

Yet rumor has it that it can get really, really good during the annual typhoon season. With so little documented, however, the hard part is knowing where to look. While Japan is largely an uncharted surfing destination, Hokkaido is truly a surfing frontier. The sport has only gained popularity among Japanese over the past 10 to 15 years. While around Tokyo and Japan's tropical southern islands that has been enough time to cultivate a young but genuine surfing culture, it still hasn't taken root in the north. There are plenty of local Japanese surfers about in Hokkaido but there's so much coastline and such a sparse population that it doesn't seem to have taken hold.

As a result when it is good, the waves are virtually deserted meaning you can take your pick of the best waves that come through – the surfing ideal and a rarity anywhere in the world these days. The traditionally beach-obsessed expat Australian community living in Niseko is revelling in the situation given the chronic overcrowding of Australian waves.

"When the typhoons come up it's fantastic," says Kal Bragg, president of Niseko Alpine Developments (Nisade).

"It's uncrowded and very often it's got some power - it's a surfer's dream. It does get very, very good, touching on world class. Not far from Niseko, there's a multitude of points to choose from at the horseshoe-shaped Uchiura Bay (on the Pacific Ocean side) so there are lefts and rights and heaps of places to choose from. There are reefs, sand bottoms - everything. Uchiura Bay is one of the best places to go from here but there are waves all over. There are really remote waves up over on the north-east of the island which is still pretty much uncharted territory."

Another local expat, Ruskin McLennan, director of Niseko Property, said he and his buddies, including colleagues Peter Murphy and Mick Davis, go surfing in Hokkaido all year round. "The water temperature on the Sea of Japan side doesn't drop much below 10 degrees and the quality of wetsuits is so good these days you can wear a 4mm (thick) wetsuit with hood, gloves and boots and go out all year round."

McLennan said while there is top quality surf on offer it can be hard to pinpoint. Perhaps more so than Australia, a bit of local knowledge of the coastline and weather patterns goes a long way. "It's all about watching the swell buoys here," he said. "Most of the swell comes in as wind swell so you've really got to time your trips out to the Sea of Japan. It's really about tracking the storms and picking up the swells as they go through. There are a lot of beach breaks, reefs and point breaks but the key is finding the right combination of swell and wind. There's not really any known spots. It's about jumping in the car and doing the old surf check. But one great thing about surfing up here is that it doesn't get crowded. There are a few Japanese surfers and they're really nice to surf with - they're very polite and respectful."

The best time for surfing is in the typhoon season, from August through November. You can expect an average of about two good swells a month during that time, whereas outside those months, swells become few and far between. Generally the Pacific Ocean side is better because it gets a better swell. The Sea of Japan side tends to be more short-range wind swell.

As for where to go... well, it's like anywhere in the world – you'll be lucky to find someone who will give away their secret spots, and there are plenty of secret spots here. Niseko is a good base to start your Hokkaido surfing odyssey. It's close to the Japan Sea coast beaches and others on the east coast beyond Chitose. There's also lots of good quality accommodation throughout the year and cheap van rentals readily available. If you do the hard yards, you're sure to be rewarded sooner rather than later in the seas off Hokkaido.



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Route 58, two metres under the snow



Black Diamond's Andrew Spragg

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BACKCOUNTRY TOURING

by Bevan Colless

Once you step into Black Diamond lodge you soon realise you're being attended to by genuine mountain men. All six male staff are Canadian, and just as most people assume all Australians know their beaches, you get the feeling that Canadians know their mountains. There's something about the laid back drawl and casual use of terms like 'vert' that gives you confidence you're in good hands. Andrew Spragg from Calgary has spent the past three seasons in Niseko guiding with the Black Diamond Lodge, taking care of their growing Black Diamond Tours business. A certified Canadian Avalanche Association operations level 1 guide, Spragg has been involved in the alpine business for almost his entire career. He was based in Whistler for some time but the ability to ski powder for more than a few hours after a snowfall has seen him relocate to Hokkaido.

Niseko has plenty of fantastic terrain that can be accessed easily enough through the gates, but unless you really know your backcountry safety, it's well worth hiring a guide to show you the best Niseko has to offer. Our backcountry tour began with a meeting at Higashiyama's Black Diamond Lodge where we received our avalanche beacons, shovels and probes and an extensive run down on how to respect the risks that the mountain can offer. We kitted up and headed straight for the peak of Mt Annupuri. Our first descent was through the back bowl to Annupuri. Dropping into the back bowl is possibly the steepest terrain in Niseko, but with the steepness comes the risk of avalanche. It's reassuring to have an avalanche expert by your side, particularly if you're yet to earn your own avalanche stripes. On this day we were lucky enough to have a blue-bird with relatively low avalanche risk, but it was great to have Spragg on hand to show us the best entry point into the bowl and take us to some special pockets of powder that were quite unique. Unfortunately for our readers, I was made to sign a non-disclosure agreement about how to get there.

After that we were straight back to the peak, from where we traversed around in preparation to descend the north face to Goshiki Onsen. The run down began with an icy patch similar to riding down a tilted ice skating rink with a thousand craters in it. As Andrew explained, the north face and back bowl are somewhat diametrically opposed - often when one side is 'on', the other side is not. After we slid down below 1000m we hit some completely untouched terrain, and at times it felt like we could have been dropped off by helicopter. Once you reach the bottom of your descent you end up on route 58, a road by summer but a deep powder pack in winter. A 15-minute walk along the deeply buried road back to Goshiki makes you enjoy the awaiting onsen even more. If you're lucky you can see some extreme riders pulling some huge air off the booters that are built down there. A Black Diamond staff member (a Canuck of course) came down to return us for more runs, thus avoiding the ¥10,000 cab ride.

If you feel you've done the Niseko thing to death, in addition to their Niseko tours, Black Diamond Tours also offer a range of tours for those wanting to experience the lesser known resorts dotted around Hokkaido.

Powderlife was guest on a Black Diamond backcountry tour.

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in focus

roku-san

Interview by Eriko Mentzos

Ninety-two years old and still going strong, Rokuro Takada - affectionately known as Roku-san - is a local insitition. Roku-san used to be the only active player of the traditional Taiko drum in the area - now the local Yotei Daiko drumming troupe he created boasts more than 200 members. Roku-san shares a truly spiritual bond with the Taiko and Eriko Mentzos was lucky enough to hear about it from the man himself.



When did you start playing the Taiko?

When I was still in my mother's stomach. My family's religion is the Nichiren sect of Buddhism. While we chant a sutra, we play a fan drum. So I always heard those rhythms when my mother was chanting, and probably drumming in her stomach!

What is the best thing about the Taiko?

Well, people say I am too crazy about it but I just love it! I could overcome anything because the Taiko was always with me and encouraged me in a great way. I think I forget everything while I'm playing. Now I go to schools, and teach Taiko to children. I'm so happy to see them enjoying themselves. Taiko is a simple instrument - anyone from a child to an adult - even an old one like me - can play the Taiko. Four generations of my family now play the Taiko. Isn't that great?

Do you ever get tired after playing the Taiko?

No, not at all. I never get tired from playing the Taiko. I get energy from it. People tell me my hands are moving even when I am sleeping.

How many members are there in your group?

We have over 200 members in this town but it wasn't big from the beginning. I used to play by myself. I brought my Taiko to many events and played. In summer to cheer baseball teams, in winter to cheer skiers in competitions. My children didn't like me doing that. They said they were ashamed. But I kept doing it and over time my children came to understand my passion. They started to play the Taiko with me, and now we have so many people encouraging us to continue.

How much does a Taiko cost?

It depends on the size and who makes it... but ours were about ¥25 million (\$250,000) for 60 drums (about \$4000 each!). That was about half price!

Is there any meaning behind the rhythms?

Yotei Daiko's 'Arashi' is about people climbing Mt Yotei during a storm, then seeing a beautiful sunrise at the end. Niseko Renzan describes Niseko's scenes - starting with peaceful nature in spring, festivals in summer, skiing in winter, then thinking about the approaching spring. We've been working on a new one called 'Daichi' (the earth) for about 10 years. It's almost ready. We're practicing it now.

Do you have any big plan with Taiko?

Well, we would like to do Sennin Taiko (drumming with 1000 people) when I turn 95 years old. I will be 93 soon in March. So 95 is not so far from now.

What are your top three tips for visitors to Niseko?

- 1 I think everyone should try the Taiko. Like I said before, it's a very simple instrument. There are some events where you can actually try our taikos.
- 2 As you know, Niseko gets great snow in winter. So I would like everyone to enjoy this wonderful snow while they are in Niseko.
- 3 The colours are amazing here in autumn. Many people from all over Japan come to see Niseko's autumn. I would like many people to visit in autumn.

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NISEKO GATE POLICY

how niseko opened up its backcountry and reaped the benefits

by Kristian Lund and Joel Westcot

There is a science to avalanches. And gravity, it has been said, is a bitch. Any slope steeper than about 45 degrees sheds snow naturally and consistently. Few slopes in Niseko fit this category. Most fall between 20 and 45 degrees, a range that holds snow and allows it to build up, and with so much snowfall, it can really, really... really build up. A number of factors can trigger the load to slide and while the risks can be assessed, there is one thing that cannot be calculated – when it's going to go.

For those unfamiliar with the mountains, it's hard to believe such light, fluffy snow can be so deadly. For an indication of just how heavy accumulated powder snow can be, you only need to take a drive out and about the countryside surrounding Niseko – frequently you'll see old houses and sheds collapsed in on themselves. Snow sliding off a roof onto a parked car can easily smash a windscreen or put a very nice dint in a roof or bonnet. Take a few thousands roof loads of snow and drop them off the top of a mountain and you get a feeling for how serious even a small avalanche can be.



The gatekeeper, Akio Shinya... keeping Niseko's backcountry safe

In 1999 two local mountain guides took two seasonal workers, Yuko and Hitomi, on a snow-shoe tour through the Harunotaki (summer waterfall) bowl – the big, cliff-lined, out-of-bounds valley to the left of Hirafu when looking up at the mountain from the village. It was a beautiful, sunny, early spring day - so picturesque it would have been hard to imagine anything bad could come of it. Perhaps fooled into a false sense of security, they made a fatal mistake. They trekked through the bottom of the gully and took a break. That's when the face slid. When snow slides it goes in the direction of least resistance – down. Where the group was standing was the lowest point of the dip in Harunotaki meaning that, like a funnel, everything above them was headed

For those unfamiliar with the mountains, it's hard to believe such light, fluffy snow can be so deadly.

their way. Through learned instinct, one guide scrambled as high as he could up the gully wall. As the avalanche reached him he got buried up to his waist. The other three weren't as lucky and as the wall of snow hit them, they were swallowed up and buried.

Australian Ross Carty, former ski patroller and now owner of NOASC adventure company, had just got on the quad lift above the Alpen Hotel. He got a call on his mobile telling him

there had been a slide and could he go and have a look. Within 15 minutes he was on the scene and found the hapless guide probing frantically. "He was pretty panicked and told me there were three people down there," says Ross. "He was working near where they were standing and I went and had a look around the base of the trees just below because that's where people will often end up. A little while later he found something. You know you've hit a body if the probe bounces back after you push down – imagine poking yourself with a pen. So we started digging."

An hour and 20 minutes after the avalanche they found the girls, Yuko on top of Hitomi, under 2.5m of snow. Yuko was dead. But by landing

on her friend, she had created an air pocket for Hitomi and perhaps saved her life. They found the other guide about five metres further down the hill. He was curled over on his side and was also lucky to be alive.

What triggered the slide is not known but one of the theories is that it was a skier or boarder who had ventured into the out-of-bounds bowl. Unfortunately, riding untracked powder snow can be an irresistibly seductive pursuit, and except for the first half hour of any day, you'll be lucky to find such virgin canvas within Niseko. It doesn't take more than an hour or two for most of Hirafu's off-piste powder to get cut up. It's about this time powder junkies are lured out of bounds.



Ross Carty... on the scene

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I think I might extend my stay another week!
See you soon,
Love Johnnie



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Don't be in the wrong place when this happens

Kuni Hosoi, former national skiing representative, enjoying what he came to Niseko for

It was not long after the Harunotaki avalanche that Niseko United conceded they couldn't stop people venturing out of bounds. So, in association with the Department of Forestry and various other local bodies, they agreed to allow off-trail and backcountry access to the greater public under certain circumstances. Part of this agreement was that a firm set of rules be established. All bodies concerned agreed on what is known as the 'Niseko Local Rules' and it's under these rules that skiers and boarders are now free to enjoy (almost) the whole mountain.

In terms of freedom to ski and ride where you want, Niseko is somewhat of a pioneer in Japan, and to a certain extent matches other forward-thinking resorts around the world. In fact, it actually allows more freedom than many resorts in the US who don't allow backcountry access at all. If one is caught ducking a rope into backcountry they may well end up in the back of a police car. Niseko follows the lead of resorts across Europe, the US and the southern hemisphere by allowing backcountry access through specific gated points on the ski area boundary.

The individual who was pivotal in the instigation and implementation of the Niseko Local Rules, and subsequent freeing up of the backcountry, is a local man named Akio Shinya. In the small community of Niseko he is a man who needs no introduction. For 20 years Shinya-san has been assessing avalanche conditions in the Niseko area. Without Shinya-san, Niseko may not have such a liberal backcountry policy, there would be much less terrain to ride, and many would argue the area may not have even boomed to the extent it has in recent years.

Shinya-san was born in Sapporo and moved to Niseko 34 years ago. Since then he has operated his small family-run lodge Woodpeckers. He's a highly experienced mountaineer both at home and abroad. "I've climbed many big mountains across Asia – The Himalayas, China, Pakistan, Russia... Actually I've done more than 10 expeditions to the Himalayas. I've climbed a few of the famous peaks there – first I did Mt Chamlang, Mt Batura and my last expedition was Mt Rakapushi in 1992. That was my most challenging climb."

Shinya-san started avalanche testing and promoting avalanche awareness in Niseko at a time when he was one of the only people in the area with a sound knowledge of avalanche risk assessment and prevention. Over many years selflessly passing on his knowledge, he's come to play an important role in the greater Niseko community of mountain users, essentially becoming a self-appointed guardian to the area. During the winter, everyday for four months after finishing the daily house keeping chores in his lodge, Shinya-san tests for and writes an avalanche report for the ski areas around Niseko – "Last winter I wrote 103 reports," he says with an obvious sense of satisfaction. He writes the report based on a combination of meteorological data, standard snow pack/avalanche analysis, and from his own vast knowledge of the area and its local characteristics.

Every morning he takes the first gondola to the top of Annupuri and stays at one of the designated backcountry access gates from about 9am until noon. He also has a protégé, Ohta-san, who helps with the daily operation by digging pits - a pit is a term given to an approximately metre by metre cavity dug into the snow to reveal the cross section of the snow pack. This is a standard technique used to gather information about avalanche likelihood for the day. Ohta-san does this in other areas such as Hirafu, Harunotaki and Mizunosawa, assessing the gathered information and relaying it to Shinya-san.

If you do venture into the Niseko backcountry you may well meet Shinya-san at one of the entry gates. He'll advise you in Japanese or English of the day's problematic or dangerous areas, and may even give you advice as to where the best powder is to be found. Shinya-san laughs that sometimes he still has to chase people who duck ropes where they shouldn't. He does all this off his own bat. He is amazingly dedicated to the safety and enjoyment

of skiers and boarders. If you are lucky enough to meet Shinya-san throw out an 'otsukare sama desu' (thanks for your hard work) as everyone who enjoys the backcountry should be truly thankful for his efforts. This is a man with a big heart who really cares for Niseko's skiers' well being.

An exciting point to note for the future is that among many others, Shinya-san would like to see some of the areas that are permanently closed under the current local rules, opened. Any skier or boarder with a lust for the extreme who has been to Niseko has gazed longingly up at the infamous Harunotaki, or out over the wide, untracked fields under the Higashiyama Gondola. As is, these are very real avalanche risks. Despite its tame appearance, under the gondola is a convex slope putting it at high risk of slab avalanche. But with management, there is a possibility these areas could be opened safely. In the meantime, don't push your luck by riding there or you risk pushing their opening further back.

With or without the aforementioned terrain Niseko is now a phenomenal place to ski and snowboard. For some who don't know the history of the Local Rules, they may seem limiting and restrictive but they are in fact there for everyone's safety and are a huge improvement on previous mountain policy. International resorts such as Jackson Hole, Squaw Valley, Treble Cone, Chamonix, and hundreds of others safely open potentially dangerous terrain through careful management and a ski at your own risk policy. If history is anything to go by, it's likely Niseko will follow their lead and open up even more exciting new terrain for riders to enjoy... safely.

ROSS CARTY'S BACKCOUNTRY SURVIVAL TIPS:

Avalanche and backcountry travel comes down to common sense – don't be gung ho and think you know everything. A lot of people get into trouble because of arrogance and inexperience.

Don't be pushed by others. Always be wary. Always ski from a safe place to a safe place. Ski to a place where you wouldn't expect an avalanche to happen.

If you are going backcountry go with a buddy. If you're not sure, don't ski down the same slope at the same time – if it slides who's going to come and dig you out?

There are a lot of companies around and a lot of experienced locals. Talk to people and find out which places you shouldn't go. Look at the maps – the areas that are off limits are that way for a reason – they are avalanche prone and people have died there.

If the gates aren't open then jump on a backcountry tour – go cat skiing, go to Moiwa, go to Chisenopuri and get an onsen and a lift ticket thrown in. Go to Iwanai and ski down slopes overlooking the ocean.

You always want to stay away from south-facing slopes in the northern hemisphere because they get the most sun. If they are loaded and they get wet, that's when they're going to slide. If you're on the mountain and you're looking at Yotei, that's east. Harunotaki is south facing. If you're skiing on a south face at 11 or 12 then exercise caution. Don't go into steep areas around that time. Avoid areas where if something happens you can't get out.

Have the right equipment – an avalanche beacon, a probe and a shovel and know how to use them correctly. Companies here can teach you how.

Avalanche info:

For Shinya-san's daily avalanche report Nadare website www.powderlife.com
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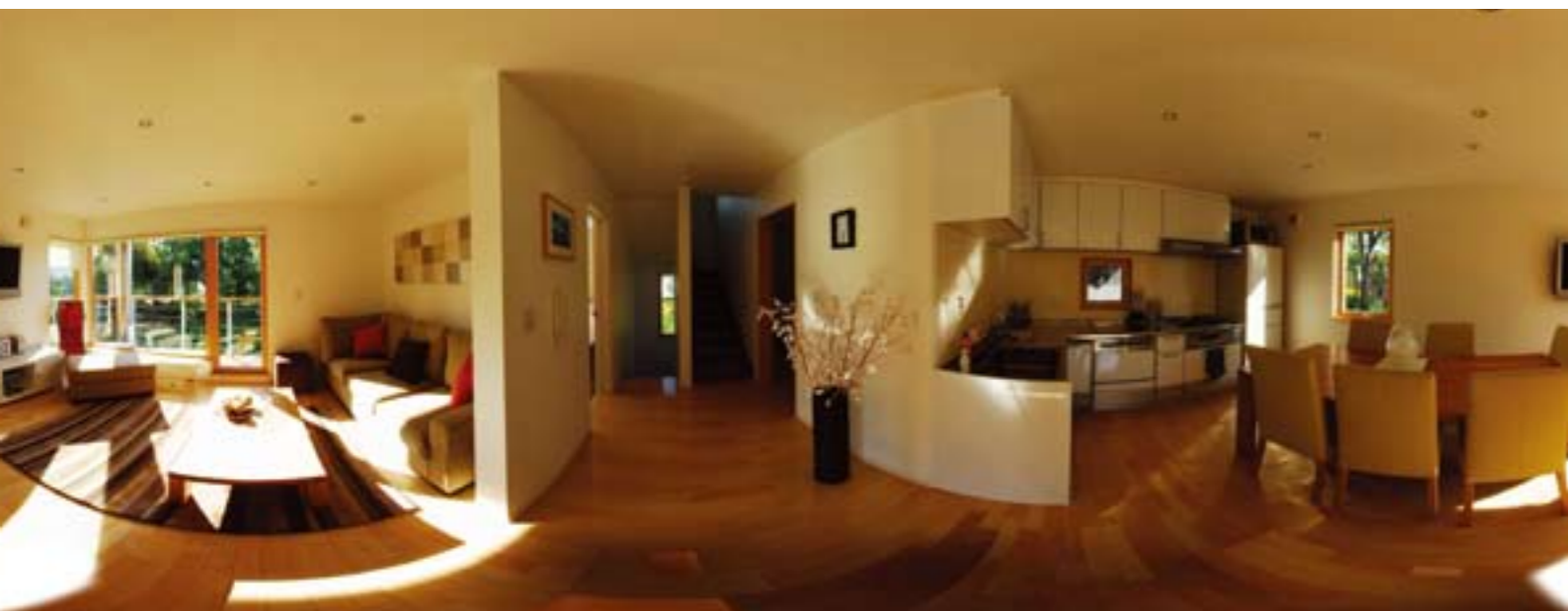
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Inside the lounge

lounging around in K-town

by Magnus Alexander

While Niseko becomes a thriving modern international ski resort in winter, just a 10-minute bus ride away is an authentic little rural Japanese town, Kutchan - affectionately known by foreigners as K-town. It's the closest 'big' town to Niseko with a population of about 15,000 people. Kutchan is the service town for surrounding rural villages in the region, including Niseko, but in years gone by it has been quite a thriving little entertainment district on the back of past ski booms in Niseko. Kutchan's nightlife these days is pretty tame compared to what most foreigner visitors would be used to, but therein lies its charm. For the younger crowd at least one night exploring the back alleys of Kutchan for a quirky little bar or karaoke joint is a must - it could well be one of the best experiences of your trip. For those not after a party, there are countless - possibly a hundred or more - unique little restaurants to choose from. For ideas about where to head check out www.powderlife.com

The Loaf Lounge is so cool. The Japanese are known for being at the cutting edge of innovation, and most often it surfaces in the form of the high-tech gadgets that, for a long time now, have been standard features in homes around the world. But with the innovation comes inbuilt style. Yo Amagai, former pro 'boarder cross' racer, and business partner Nobu Ooe, came across an old rice storage shed (formerly a supermarket and movie cinema) in the back streets of Kutchan a few years ago and envisioned a place they could eat, drink, and hang out with friends. They went on to create one of the most interesting little spaces Niseko has seen.

The Loaf Lounge's defining feature is its full-size inbuilt skateboard bowl. Especially in summer, local skaters - Japanese and increasingly foreign - head to the Lounge for their daily or weekly fix. Throw in a small retail shop stocking nothing but the hippest, underground Japanese fashion around, and a simple but spacious little restaurant/bar, and you've got the ultimate hangout that also pays the bills.

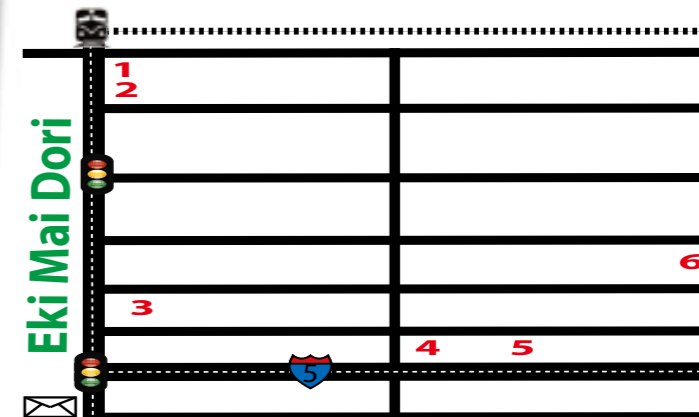
But it's not the amenities that really make it. The whole place is an ever-evolving work of art. Random, retro paraphernalia adorns the walls and floors and ceilings wherever you look. It's obvious they're not trained interior designers - nothing they've done could be learned from a text book. For one of 100 examples, two rows of 80s style truckers caps sit on top of each other in the top corner of one wall. Beside it there's a clock that looks like it's come out of the original Charlie and the Chocolate Factory movie. They've even got an old 70s-style camper home beside the bowl that they rent for ¥1000 to friends and acquaintances visiting Niseko.

Yo, Nobu and their mates now spend their days skating, snowboarding, surfing, and catering to their range of regular customers of all ages, who want to eat, drink, skate and live life like it should be - full of friends, movement and good times. If you manage to spare a half a day to check out Kutchan, spare a good few moments to hang out in the Loaf Lounge. It really is very, very cool!

Buses to Kutchan leave from the main street near Seicomart. The bus stop is a few small signs on the roadside opposite PowPow. Buses leave every half hour or so during the day and cost ¥380. The night bus is free and leaves every hour or so from 5pm. Timetable on the back of the resort's course map.

For more details on what to do in Kutchan go to...
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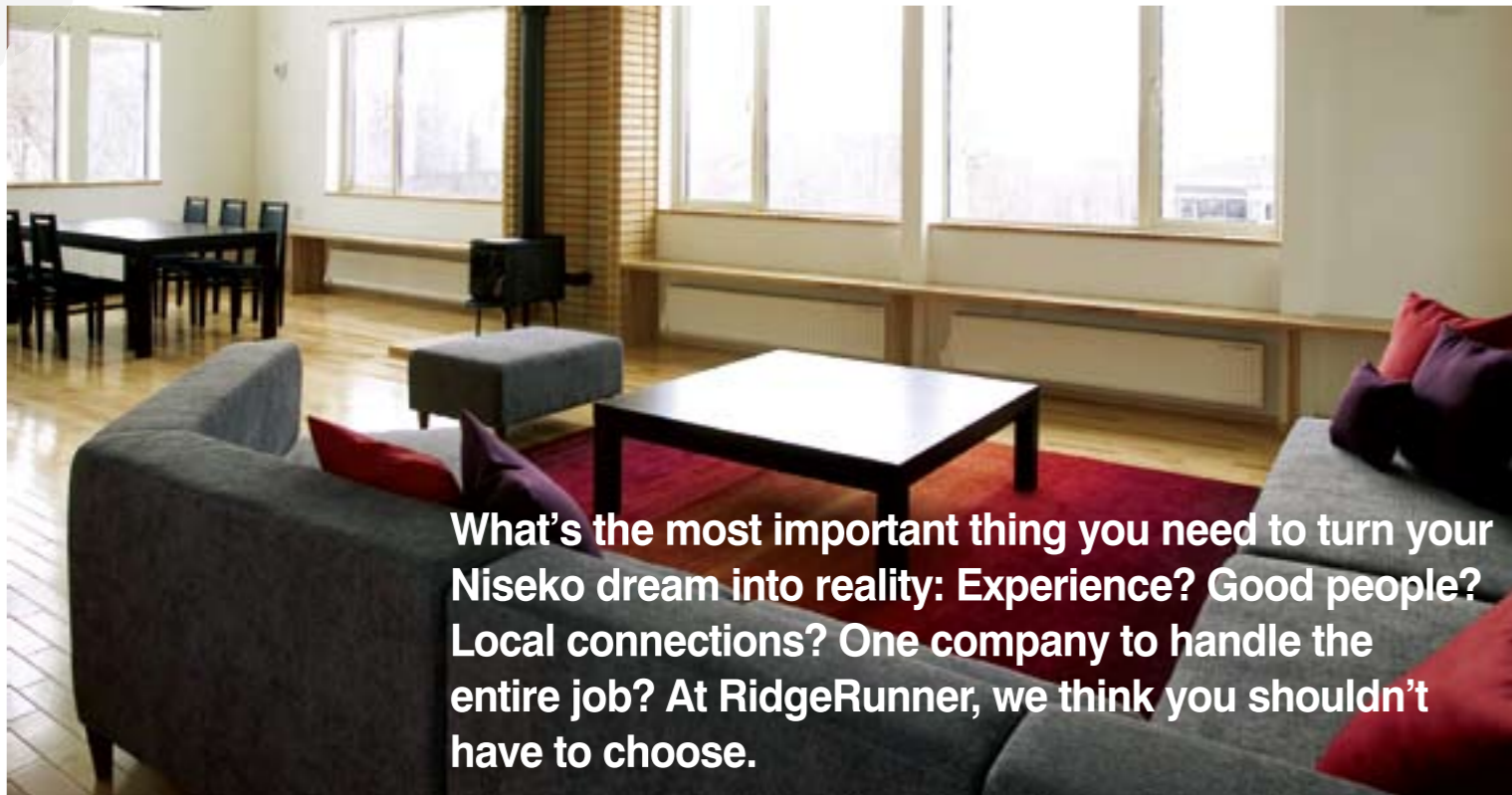
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Company Chairman, Masahide Konishi is a leading Hokkaido business figure. He opens the doors to Japan's establishment for developers working with RidgeRunner. Formerly a top civil servant, Mr Konishi founded and runs the Hokubu Sogyo conglomerate, one of Hokkaido's largest companies.



QUALITY

RidgeRunner is fully accredited for construction and holds the real estate licenses that ensure property sales are legal under Japanese law. Our staff are highly qualified and we work with quality construction materials.

We believe in continuing to partner with you after we've handed over the keys to ensure you're completely satisfied, including our guarantee on buildings.

Work with our architects or use concepts of your own: our experience includes joint projects with the most reputable architectural firms in Australia and Japan. Combine the familiar touches of home with the exotic: RidgeRunner is experienced in incorporating western designs with Japanese elements.

RidgeRunner can help you meet your goals from building a home, developing a multi-unit structure, buying land or talking things through. You shouldn't compromise on your dreams. With RidgeRunner you won't have to.



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An internationally-run Japanese company, RidgeRunner provides you with the local knowledge and experience that's essential to doing business in Japan. We put our team of more than 60 qualified architects, designers, builders and sales people to work for you.

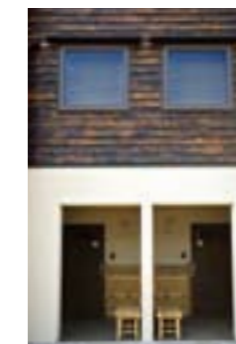
RidgeRunner combines the talents of four companies and we can lead you through the entire design, construction and sales process from start to finish. We speak your language and there's no risk of miscommunication or unexpected results.



GOOD PEOPLE

Our senior architect Ichie Wakahara-Jackson leads a group of designers, engineers and contractors who have been working in Niseko and Sapporo for 38 years. A top-ranked, class one architect, Ichie is the president of RidgeRunner joint venture company, Wakahara Construction.

RidgeRunner puts the enormous respect and resources commanded by its president, Tadashi Sasaki, to work for you. From one of the first settler families in the region, Mr Sasaki's company, Marukin Sasaki Construction, has built many of the land mark buildings in Niseko over the past 30 years.



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niseko's booming property market

Is it a bubble?

by Graeme Glen

It is said that the carrion stench of a burst property bubble attracts the foulest of vermin. Is Niseko, a booming market still very much in its infancy, headed for that most tragic of fates? Niseko has seen some of the highest land price increases in Japan for two years running. On the surface this would certainly indicate the danger of a bubble, but Niseko has some unique features working to prevent this from happening. Namely, no direct bank financing, a fledgling market and a small band of spunky ex-pats carving a place for themselves in Japan's frozen north. Rental return-driven growth results in a self-correcting market: in the land of common sense a boom becomes a bubble when return on investment drops below zero. To put it another way, when investing no longer makes any sense, you have entered the bubble. A major cause of the crisis in Western property markets is that institutional lenders and mortgage brokers do not live in the land of common sense, they live in a land where commission-based decisions rule over all. The bigger the loan a bank makes, the bigger the profit to the bank. The higher the book value of said property goes, the greater the asset value to the bank. So you can see that banks love a bubble. At least in the short term. In a perverse twist, it is thanks to this absence of bank finance that private investors still largely fund investment in Niseko. As such, property prices

in Niseko are based on investors expecting to get a return. The majority of people wealthy enough to be in a position to invest in a ski resort rental property are, generally speaking, financially savvy enough to realize that the financial commitment required must provide a suitable return. If it does not, they are probably not going to commit the money. Thus prices in Niseko remain comfortably within the bounds of common sense. An example of commissions-fuelled loan practices and their blatant disregard for common sense would be a relative of mine from London who recently sold her small three-bedroom townhouse. This property, which could be charitably described as a 'fixer upper' in a crack-dealer-infested neighbourhood sold for an astonishing \$US1.1 million. If the buyer were planning to rent it out for a return, he or she would be a very disappointed landlord (dealing crack just doesn't pay what it used to). Nobody seems to consider how the young professional couple that took out the mortgage will survive the crushing loan payments if one of them were to be so foolish as to stop work to raise a family. It is just assumed that they can sell it for \$2.2 million in a few years time and retire to Spain. Provided this couple bail in time, they might just survive. You might say the London property market is just a thinly disguised Ponzi scheme. In the short term and the long term, that sort of bubble just does not make any sense at all, and therefore cannot be sustainable. Incidentally, my cousin now lives in Spain. Currently investors in Niseko are getting a return of 3-4% on a mature rental property. This return is realized on what amounts to a short ski season of about 100 days. There is room for tremendous growth in terms of rental opportunities in this fledgling market. Summer tourism is developing. The arrival of Hilton Hotels and the rumored Four Seasons cements Niseko as an international destination. Skiing has become the sport of choice for upwardly mobile Chinese, yet China has little to offer in terms of quality skiing. Niseko being four hours from 40% of the world's population has much to offer and has really only just



Buildings continue to go up in Niseko

begun to market itself to the world. A further feature contributing to Niseko's continued success and development is the band of local ex-pats who have invested heavily in Niseko's future. These are people who have settled down, started families and committed themselves, intentionally or not, to the wellbeing of Niseko. For these people, Niseko's success and future growth is tied to their own. So you can be assured that they are taking the long-term view on the development and stewardship of the mountain.

Graeme Glen is sales manager for West Canada Properties.

For all the latest property news and views go to... www.powderlife.com



Laying the foundations



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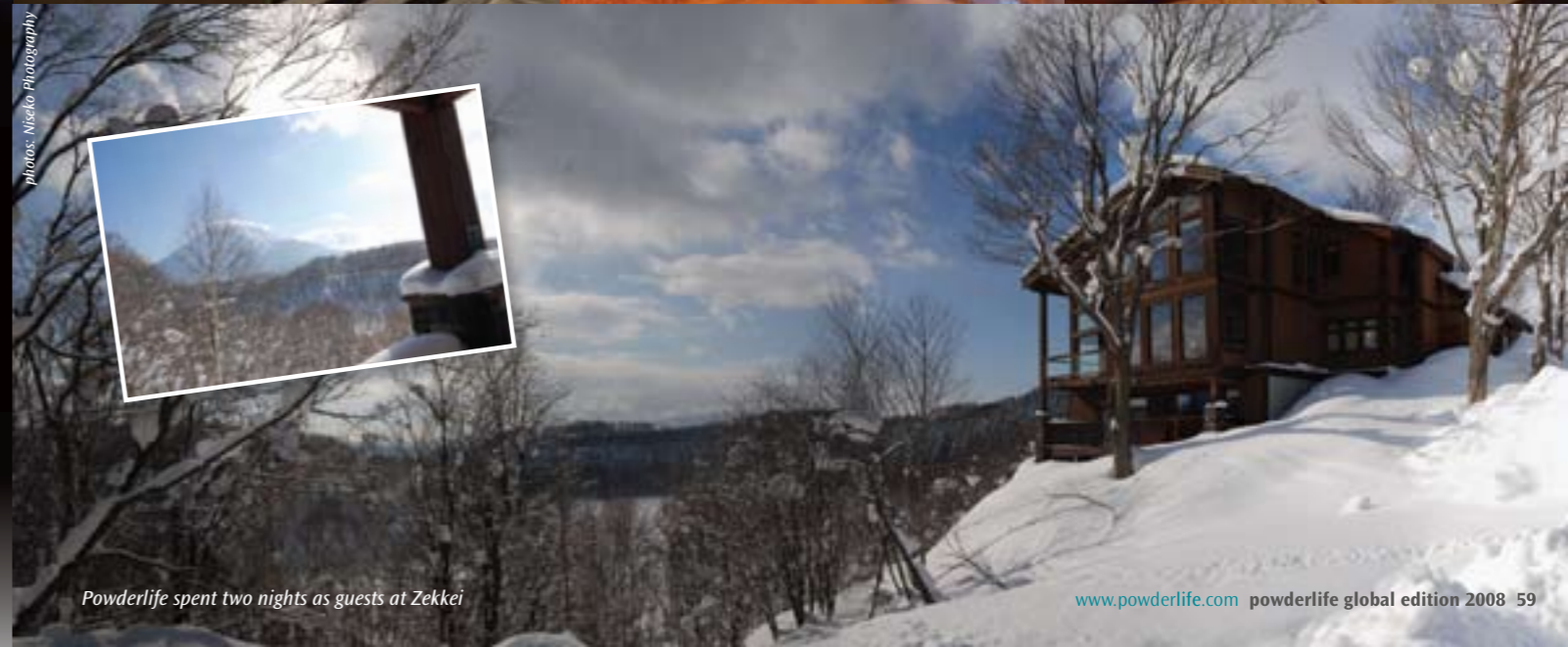
¥450 million (\$4.5 million)

Right up there at the pinnacle of the luxury chalet market in Niseko stands Zekkei. Perched spectacularly on the edge of the bluff at the bottom end of the lower village - just a short stroll from all Hirafu has to offer - its vast picture windows maximise the daily sunlight in the eastern sky and take in the panoramic vista of Mt Yotei, looming over the river valley and rice terraces below. Vaulted ceilings and the lavish use of rich, warm timbers - including in the eco-friendly geothermally heated floors convey an impressive sense of opulence on a grand scale.

With six carpeted, ensuite bedrooms, the house can sleep up to fifteen adults. It is fully equipped, and caters to all needs with wireless internet broadband, satellite TV, two x 52inch flat screens and a Bose sound system. A separate basement entertainment room with Playstation works wonders for younger guests.

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Inquiries to The Niseko Company
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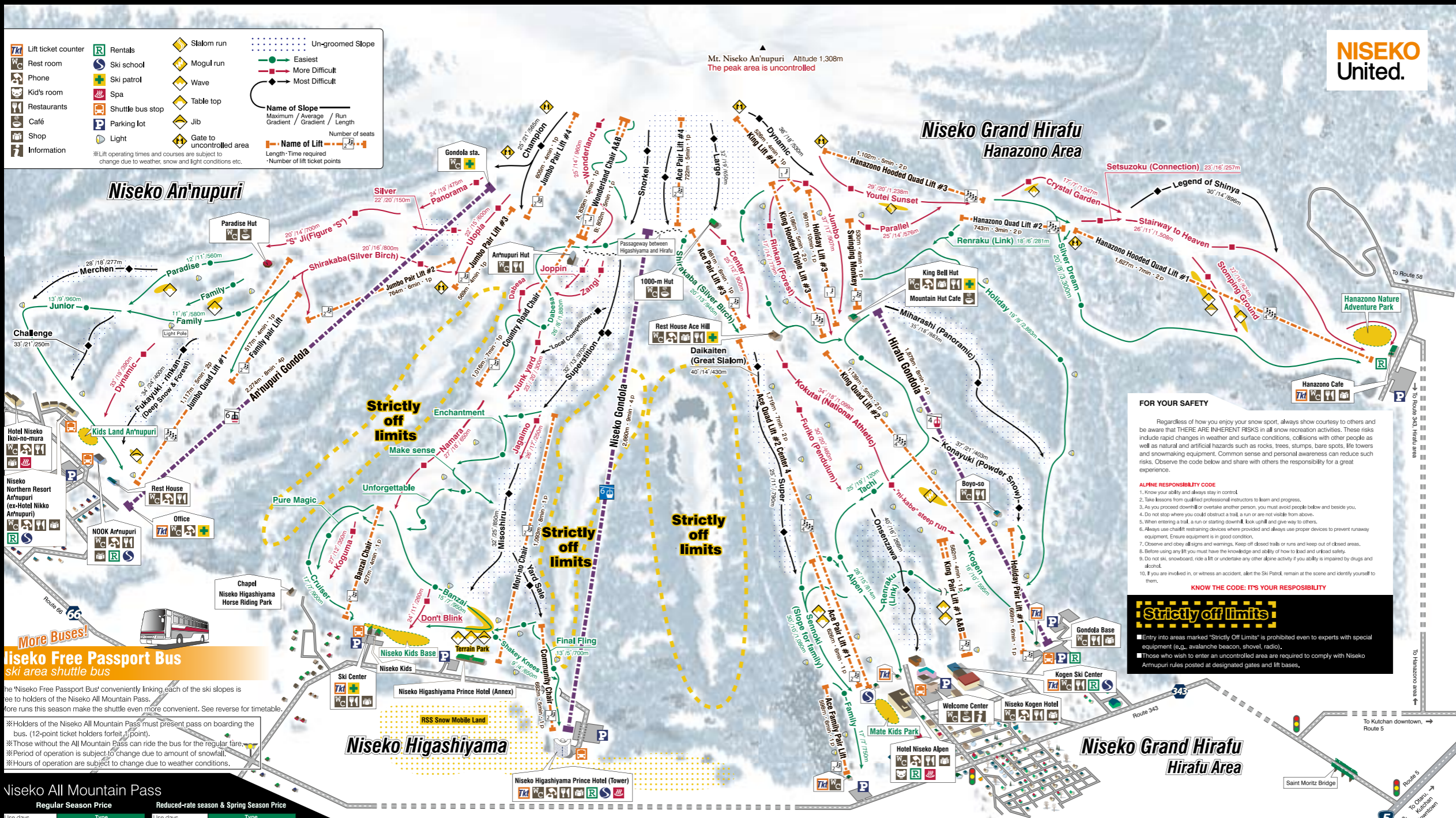
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Photos: Niseko Photography

Powderlife spent two nights as guests at Zekkei

www.powderlife.com powderlife global edition 2008 59



Niseko All Mountain Pass

Regular Season Price				Reduced-rate season & Spring Season Price			
Use days (valid)	Adult	Senior (Age 65+)	Age 3-12	Use days (valid)	Adult	Senior (Age 65+)	Age 3-12
2-point	\$3,000	\$2,800	\$2,400	12-point	\$3,000	\$2,800	\$2,400
8-hour	\$4,800	\$3,600	\$2,800	14-day (14 Days)	\$19,800	\$18,600	\$14,400
4-day	\$6,200	\$4,800	\$3,600	15-day (15 Days)	\$20,800	\$19,600	\$14,400
5-day	\$6,800	\$5,200	\$3,900	16-day (16 Days)	\$21,800	\$20,600	\$14,400
6-day	\$7,400	\$5,600	\$4,200	17-day (17 Days)	\$22,800	\$21,600	\$14,400
7-day	\$8,000	\$6,000	\$4,500	18-day (18 Days)	\$23,800	\$22,600	\$14,400
8-day	\$8,600	\$6,400	\$4,800	19-day (19 Days)	\$24,800	\$23,600	\$14,400
9-day	\$9,200	\$6,800	\$5,100	20-day (20 Days)	\$25,800	\$24,600	\$14,400
10-day	\$9,800	\$7,200	\$5,400	21-day (21 Days)	\$26,800	\$25,600	\$14,400
11-day	\$10,400	\$7,600	\$5,700	22-day (22 Days)	\$27,800	\$26,600	\$14,400
12-day	\$11,000	\$8,000	\$6,000	23-day (23 Days)	\$28,800	\$27,600	\$14,400
13-day	\$11,600	\$8,400	\$6,300	24-day (24 Days)	\$29,800	\$28,600	\$14,400
14-day	\$12,200	\$8,800	\$6,600	25-day (25 Days)	\$30,800	\$29,600	\$14,400
15-day	\$12,800	\$9,200	\$6,900	26-day (26 Days)	\$31,800	\$30,600	\$14,400
16-day	\$13,400	\$9,600	\$7,200	27-day (27 Days)	\$32,800	\$31,600	\$14,400
17-day	\$14,000	\$10,000	\$7,500	28-day (28 Days)	\$33,800	\$32,600	\$14,400
18-day	\$14,600	\$10,400	\$7,800	29-day (29 Days)	\$34,800	\$33,600	\$14,400
19-day	\$15,200	\$10,800	\$8,100	30-day (30 Days)	\$35,800	\$34,600	\$14,400
20-day	\$15,800	\$11,200	\$8,400	Season Pass	\$150,000	\$120,000	\$75,000

8-hour tickets are valid for 8 hours after entry through the gate on the day of purchase.

All day tickets are good for night skiing on the final day of the ticket.

Regular Season
December 15 (Sat), 2007 - March 16 (Sun), 2008

Reduced-rate Season
November 23 (Thu) - December 14 (Fri), 2007
March 17 (Mon) - April 6 (Sun), 2008

Spring Season
April 7 (Mon) - May 6 (Tue), 2008
Spring Season: 8-hour Ticket ¥3,500

※Hours and days of operation are subject to change according to snow and weather conditions.
※The seniors' rate applies to patrons age 60 and over. (Students go free of charge).
※Proof (student card driver's license) is required for age 13 - 15 and seniors' discounts.
※For Point Ticket holders, each gondola ride costs 4 points, each high-speed lift 2 points, and other lifts, 1 point.
※Night skiing tickets are available at each ski area.
※Lift rates are subject to change.
※Business hours in night ski season are 8:30 to 21:00(9:00 to 16:00 in Hanazono Area). On other days 8:30 to 16:30(9:00 to 16:00 in Hanazono Area).

Deposit for Niseko All Mountain Pass Keycard

A deposit of 1000 yen is added to the lift fee when the ticket is purchased. The deposit is refunded when you insert the key card to a refund machine.

※Refunding machines are located at each ski area.
※The deposit will not be refunded for damaged or expired cards.
※For more information, please contact our staff.

In Case of Emergency

Should you require assistance as a result of illness or injury, or discover someone in need of help, contact a nearby member of staff or phone one of the emergency numbers below:

Niseko An'nupuri TEL.0136-58-2080
Niseko Higashiyama TEL.0136-44-1111
Niseko Grand Hirafu TEL.0136-22-2167

Niseko Mountain Patrol will immediately come to your assistance.

Niseko Moutain Patrol

Rescue Patrol crews are identified by their black or red uniforms with NFPP on the back.

Niseko Local Rules

Niseko Local Rules are official rules that stipulate the freedom and safety of all skiers, snowboarders and hikers. These rules have been officially established by the Niseko Annupuri Avalanche Prevention Committee, the Niseko Mountain Resort Committee, the Niseko Free Passport Committee and the Hokkaido Shiroishi Alpine Accident Prevention Committee.

- Yamotsawa (Gully between Annupuri & Higashiyama area), Mauro no sawa (Gully under earth Higashiyama Prince Gondola) and Haru no taki (Gully off west of Hirafu area) are designated "strictly off limits areas" by the Niseko Local Rules. Whoever riding these areas WILL have their pass confiscated.
- Ducking the boundary ropes is prohibited. If you do, your lift pass WILL be confiscated. Use designated access gates to go out of bounds. These gates are the gateways to the Back Country.
- The area outside the mountain resort boundaries (Back Country, including the Peak) are National Forests & Parks, and are not controlled or supervised by the resort. Niseko Local Rule proclaims that hiking & riding these areas involves danger and if you do, do IT YOUR OWN RISK.
- During hazardous conditions, the gates will be closed and out of bounds riding will be strictly restricted.
- The "Niseko Avalanche Information" is the official information posted by the "Niseko Avalanche Research Center". These info can be found at lift stations and access gates.
- You will be responsible for the cost of your rescue in the back country area.
- Niseko Local Rules insist that all resort users respect the instructions of the Ski Patrol and Shiribeshi Mountain Patrol.
- The Mountain resort and the locals respect the freedom of the visitors, are concerned about their safety, and in turn, expect the visitors to respect the Niseko Local Rules.

on piste and off

Many visitors to Niseko don't realise the danger they can put themselves when they head off piste. Avalanche is an ever-present threat and people die. We can't stress enough how important it is to check the avalanche report EVERY DAY, at backcountry gates or at www.powderlife.com.

NOASC owner Ross Carty is a former ski patrolter and knows mountains and Niseko (and how deadly they can be) so we wanted to reprint his backcountry safety tips from this issue's backcountry feature here. Read it, remember it, read it again before you come to Niseko, and safely enjoy the best the mountain has to offer.

"Avalanche and backcountry travel come down to common sense - don't be gung ho and think you know everything. A lot of people get into trouble because of arrogance and inexperience.

Always ski to a safe place - where you wouldn't expect an avalanche to happen.

Go with a buddy. If you're not sure, don't ski down the same slope at the same time - if it slides, who's going to come and dig you out?

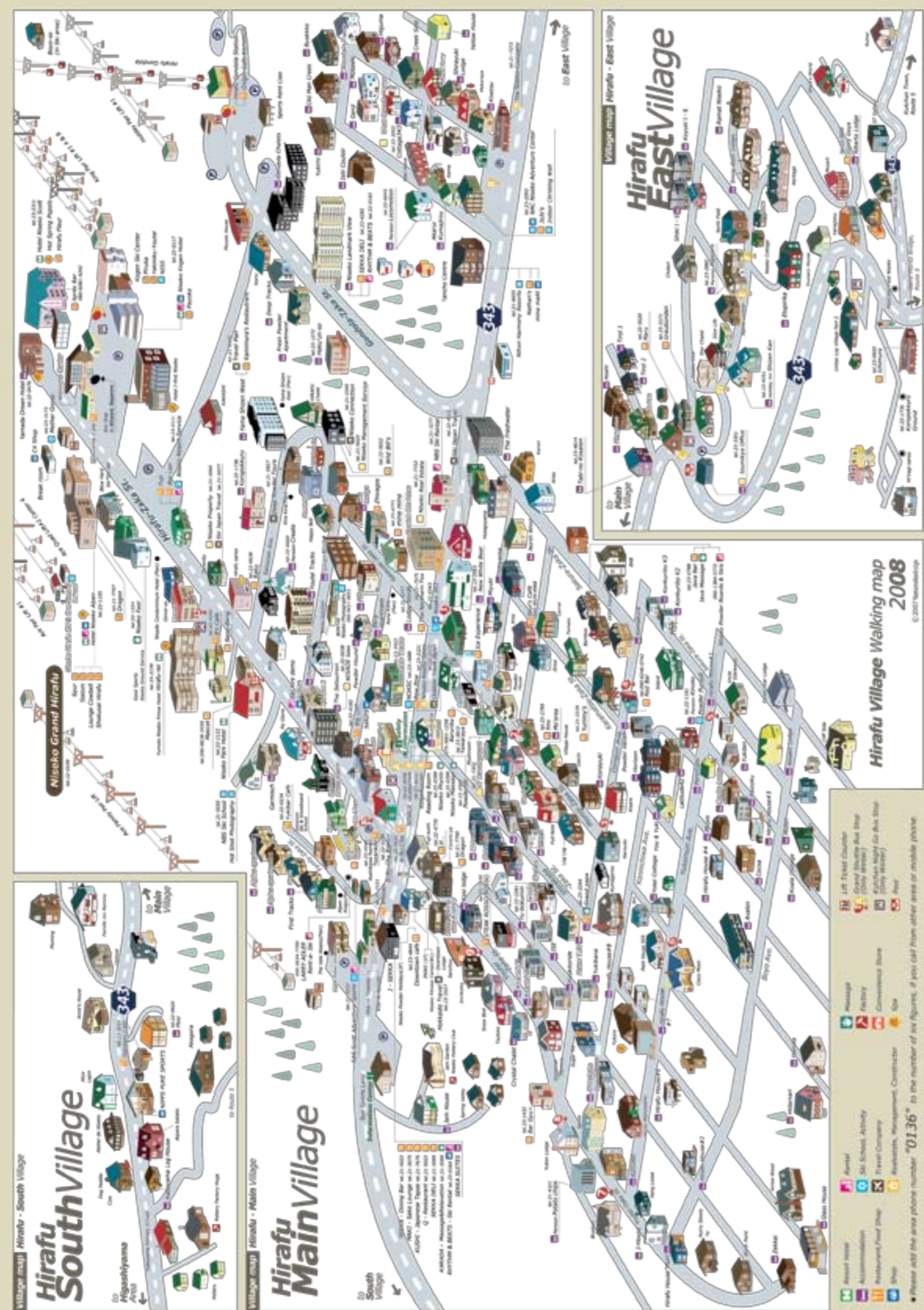
Talk to experienced locals or people and find out which places you shouldn't go. Look at the maps. The areas that are off limits are that way for a reason - they are avalanche prone and people have died there.

Stay away from south facing slopes in the northern hemisphere because they get the most sun. If they're loaded and they get wet, that's when they're going to slide. If you're on the mountain and you're looking at Yotei, that's east. If you're skiing on a south face at 11 or 12 then exercise caution. Don't go into steep areas around that time. Avoid areas where if something happens you can't get out."

For daily snow and avalanche reports go to... www.powderlife.com

Surfanic Stack of the Week

The Surfanic Stack of the Week got ever more competitive every week as the season progressed! Michael Crawford of Melbourne was 2007/08's Surfanic Stack of the Season Grand Champion with this killer snap taken by fellow NISS instructor Phillip Crumpler. Face plants are so 1990s - with Niseko's powder we're after head plants and Micky shows us the way. Submit your stack of the week pic at www.powderlife.com.



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The Australian snowsports club with its own Niseko lodge. The lodge has eight western style guest rooms (with ensuites), dining, bar and kitchen facilities. Membership is available (to all nationalities) for A\$6,500 and members also enjoy reciprocal rights at five other Australian Alpine Club lodges. Commercial bookings are available.

Map ref: D3 www.aacniseko.com T. 0136 22 3006



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www.NisekoMaru.web.fc2.com T. 0136-22-5020



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www.paulscafe.jp T. 090-9524-4968



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5.00-11.30pm. Closed Wednesdays.
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http://www.niseko.or.jp/bangbang T. 0136-22-4292



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Ichimura soba serves top quality soba (buck wheat noodles) that are made fresh on the premises. A beautiful wooden premises looking out towards Mt Yotei is the perfect location to enjoy some of the best soba you will find anywhere in Japan. Tempura Soba ¥1,300

11.00-15.00, 18.00-20.00 Closed Tuesdays
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www.Niseko-Ichimura.com T. 0136-23-0603



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www.grand-hirafu.jp/en/mountain/rental.html
T. 0136-22-0109



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www.NisekoMassage.com T. 0136 22 0399



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www.khaosan-tokyo.com T. 03-3842-8286



the last word...

on health: ski injuries

by Bevan Colless



Bevan Colless
is a physiotherapist and exercise physiologist who has spent six years in Japan operating Tokyo Physio and as of 2006, Niseko Physio.

Fortunately for us here at Niseko Physio, skiing and snowboarding are relatively dangerous activities. Recently, lower leg injuries have been on the rise with increased risk-taking behavior being cited as the major reason. If you are unfortunate enough to sustain an injury on the slopes (or on the street!),

remember the R-I-C-E-D and H-A-R-M rules for the first 24-48 hours after an acute injury, or longer for more severe cases:

Rest. From aggravating conditions.

Ice. For about 10-20 minutes several times daily.

Compression. Using an elastic bandage or tubi-grip.

Elevation. Above the heart is a good rule-of-thumb.

Diagnosis. Get it diagnosed ASAP.

The H-A-R-M factors are the ones that you want to avoid (hence the clever acronym).

Heat. Sorry to be a party pooper, but the onsen is not beneficial for a fresh ligament tear.

Alcohol. Avoid the booze. It's a vaso-dilator (increasing blood flow) and will increase swelling and inflammation, particularly for a lower limb injury.

Running. Stay away from exercise in the short term.

Massage. No deep massage in the early stages.

For those interested in what types of injuries are commonly walking (or being carted) through the door of an on-mountain medical centre, read on for a list of the major injuries and some tips on what to do if you're unfortunate enough to experience one of them.

Knee injuries

These account for about 35% of skiing injuries and about 20% of snowboarding injuries.

1. Medial co-lateral ligament

The most common knee injury is the MCL, the liga-

ment that runs down the inside of the knee. This is a common injury in the beginner to intermediate levels due to an overly wide snowplough stance, skis crossing or a fall. In advanced skiers it is likely to be "catching an edge".

2. Anterior cruciate ligament

The ACL accounts for about 10-15% of knee ligament injuries and intensive American research identified the main causes as trying to recover from a fall, or overbalancing to the rear when landing from a jump.

3. Meniscus

This shock-absorber sits deep inside the knee and is often injured in combination with an ACL or MCL. To prevent these knee injuries, ensure you do pre-conditioning exercises, regularly adjust your bindings, avoid wide snowplough stances, don't fully straighten your legs when falling and don't try and get up when falling – wait until you stop.

The Wrist

25% of all snowboarding injuries occur in the wrist. A whopping 70% of all wrist injuries are fractures – so please by-pass Niseko Physio and head straight into Kutchan Hospital if you sustain a painful wrist injury. A massive 42% of wrist fractures occur in people snowboarding for the first time. Wrist guards have been proven in various studies to be effective in reducing wrist injuries. In general, longer wrist guards are better than short and look for a degree of flexibility in the guard. Flexometre gloves are the best.

Head Injuries

These account for 15% of ski injuries, and are the most dangerous of all. Most fatal injuries occur in people skiing at high speeds, out of control and hitting a solid, fixed object. To avoid head injuries wear a helmet, ski in control, match your speed to the conditions and always look where you're going.

The Shoulder

Shoulder injuries include dislocation, AC joint injuries and clavicle fractures and are about equal between boarders and skiers at 10-15% of injuries.



Another one bites the dust. Injuries on the rise.

Skier's Thumb

This ranks second to knee injuries in skiers and occurs when the thumb is driven into the snow and away from the palm. The more severe cases require an operation to reattach the thumb ligament. Ouch! It's best not to push your thumbs through the straps on your stocks.

Spinal Injuries

These are quite rare but have devastating consequences. They are most common in young men and follow a pattern of excess speed, losing control and a bad landing from a jump.

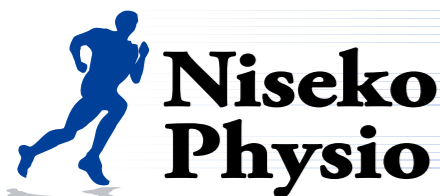
Collisions

Contrary to popular belief skiers are more likely to collide with and injure fellow skiers than snowboarders. We poor boarders tend to bite the dust much sooner when we lose control!

To sum up

Whichever way you get down the mountain try to remember these hints:

- Don't borrow gear from your friends. This increases your chance of injury a massive 800%!
- Recognize when you need a break.
- Most injuries occur after lunch when tiredness sets in. "I was going down my last run of the day..." is a common beginning to a patient history at Niseko Physio.
- Hard though it may be, avoid being persuaded to try slopes and jumps that are beyond your level of ability. You're more likely to be injured trying to keep up with more experienced friends.
- Wear a helmet! And wrist guards for boarders.



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