

Niseko, Japan: Downhill Skiing in the Land of the Rising Sun



Charles Pertwee for The New York Times

Night skiing at the Niseko resort on Hokkaido in northern Japan.

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[JAPAN](#) is a country with extensive mountain ranges, literally hundreds of ski resorts and plentiful snow, yet a language barrier and the country's distance from Western markets have long prevented it from becoming a major international ski destination.



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So many tourists visit there from Australia that some local businesses have signs in English.

That's starting to change, especially at a resort called Niseko. Situated on Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's main islands, Niseko has become wildly popular among Australians, who are attracted by the chance to ski world-class snow without suffering the jet lag they associate with North American and European resorts.

Australian-run tour operators based in Niseko have also played a major role in Niseko's boom, and visitors will find that the language barrier has been greatly diminished, as many Japanese-run businesses have begun to cater to English-speaking tourists. The changes explain why Niseko's real estate market is booming — and why the resort's buzz is now reaching [Europe](#) and North America.

Language aside, Niseko's selling point is snow. Especially from mid-December through February, the resort gets socked with winter storms that blow off Siberia and bury the mountain in some of the lightest, driest powder on the planet. The town of Kutchan, the seat of local government, records an average of nearly 500 inches a year. On-mountain averages are harder to come by, but local ski businesses say that Niseko frequently gets more than 600 inches a year. [Vail in Colorado](#), by comparison, averages 348.

If you're after bluebird skies, in other words, the Niseko winter is not for you.

The atmosphere can be surreal. Snow accumulates in the crooks of Niseko's trees, forming huge, white pillows that give the mountain a Dr. Seuss-style air of unreality. Mount Yotei, a 6,227-foot volcanic cone that resembles Mount Fuji, dominates the view to the east — at least when snowstorms don't blot it out.

On the slopes, Niseko has decent on-piste offerings. But experiencing the best of this mountain means ducking into the trees — mainly well-spaced silver birches on inclines that are exhilarating yet not too scary for skilled intermediates. Many visitors, in fact, have a hard time skiing anywhere else.

"Any time I'm on the groomed runs, it's just to get back to the lift," said Chieh (Cheech) Chen, an Australian snowboarder in his 20s who spent nearly three months in Niseko last season.

Niseko also owes its reputation among serious skiers and snowboarders like Mr. Chen to its out-of-bounds policy, which is liberal by Japanese standards. Except for a few areas, visitors can go outside ski area boundaries at their own risk; the resorts do not patrol, groom or avalanche bomb outside their borders, and injured skiers are charged for rescue operations.

For those with the ability and desire to run the risks, the policy vastly increases Niseko's size, putting in play the treeless powder runs off 4,293-foot Annupuri peak and several square miles of surrounding bowls, gullies and backcountry trees.

Of course, hitting many of these areas means walking back to the lift, as well as risking avalanches and falls into unmarked holes in the snow pack. Still, last March, long lines of skiers and snowboarders traversed out of bounds. Many were with friends, though it's safest to get a guide.

That's what a 20-something Japanese snowboarder named Tetsuo Ono did, following a guide past the out-of-bounds rope and into calf-deep powder hidden in a grove of silver birches. By all appearances, it had been a great run. But back on the lift, Mr. Ono complained that the snow wasn't great.

What would a good day be? He grinned and pointed to his waist.

WHEN most people visit Niseko, they come to a conglomeration of three separate ski areas — Grand Hirafu, Higashiyama and Annupuri — which offer a common lift pass and connect near the top of the 4,293-foot mountain they share. A few smaller resorts also operate in the Niseko area but do not connect with their bigger neighbors or participate in their shared lift ticket.

Taken as a whole, the three bigger areas are each of respectable size, but not huge by North American standards. With a 3,084-foot vertical drop, the terrain is perfect for advanced intermediates, but experts won't find it terrifically steep. Of course, Niseko isn't the only skiing option in Japan, either. Andrew Lea, editor of the Japanese snow-sports Web site SnowJapan.com, estimated the total at 500 to 600 areas, many very small. That's more than the [United States](#), which has 478 ski areas, according to the National Ski Areas Association.

Most of Japan's biggest and best-known resorts sit on Hokkaido, the north island, or on the northern half of Honshu, Japan's main island. Hokkaido currently has most of the buzz, but the 1998 Winter Olympics took place at several well-regarded resorts in Nagano prefecture, on Honshu. Some of the Honshu areas, like the mammoth, multi-resort Hakuba area, are also starting to attract international attention, Mr. Lea said.

Despite this infrastructure, the Japanese ski industry has never recovered from the collapse of the "ski boom" of the 1980s, when skiing became trendy, slopes stayed packed and resort investment soared.

Since then, Japan's economy has stagnated and youth tastes have shifted toward other entertainments, like video games and the Internet, said Mr. Lea and others. As the ski fad ended, the number of domestic skiers plummeted.

Niseko, however, has become a striking anomaly: a skiing boomtown where the growth is driven mostly by foreigners.

The number of non-Japanese visitors to the resort has increased more than elevenfold since 2000, judging by figures from the municipality of Kutchan, the district where most foreign visitors stay. And of the 9,563 foreigners who visited last season, 80 percent came from [Australia](#).

The sheer numbers of Australians in Niseko's streets, bars and restaurants surprised even visitors from Down Under.

"We knew they were coming," said one visitor, Ruth Eskin of [Sydney](#), "but we didn't expect to see them absolutely everywhere."

Australian developers and investors have also driven up once-depressed land values in Hirafu village, the cozy town at the base of the Hirafu ski area. Last year, assessed values in the village climbed more than 30 percent — the fastest rate in Japan, according to government figures. Actual selling prices have risen even faster — recently around 50 to 100 percent a year, according to several local realtors and developers. Luxury condos are also multiplying, supplementing the area’s cozy B&B-style accommodations and the somewhat dated hotels at the mountain’s base. And an Australian-run company has bought a portion of the Grand Hirafu area called Hanazono, and announced plans to spend more than \$600 million to develop an 8,000-bed, four-season resort village at its base. Everywhere in Niseko, developers talk confidently about becoming the next Telluride, [Aspen](#) or Val d’Isère, [France](#).

But while many Japanese residents are thrilled that their town is thriving again, Niseko’s growth is not without controversy. Young, hard-partying Australian visitors have developed a reputation for drunken rowdiness, and some local property owners dislike real estate speculation or complain they are being left out of the boom. Some Australian business owners and many tourists also voiced another fear — that the new boom is robbing Niseko of its quiet charm and Japanese character. Nick Blake, of [Melbourne](#), first snowboarded Niseko in 2003, when the Australian presence was less obvious. Not anymore.

“It’s like leaving Australia and coming to Australia,” he said. “It’s lost a little bit of its uniqueness, I guess.”

DESPITE the worrying, Niseko can still be charming — a small, once-sleepy resort not quite accustomed to the spotlight. In addition to its slopeside hotels, Hirafu village has two main streets, a few lodges and some bed-and-breakfast-style pensions. The restaurants tend to be intimate, and the best book up days in advance during the high season. There’s sushi, naturally, but also izakayas (a sort of Japanese tapas bar), bakeries, pizzerias and even a restaurant housed in a Mongolian-style tent.



Charles Pertwee for The New York Times

Skiing students in Niseko, on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, where storms from Siberia drop huge amounts of snow.

As to shopping, the high fashion outlets and luxe home décor shops that populate American resort towns are, for the most part, absent. The same goes for the neon overload associated with [Tokyo](#). Niseko is a slower, simpler place; the nearest A.T.M. that accepts international cards is a 15-minute bus ride away, and credit cards are still not universally accepted.

Still, Niseko has plenty to do off the slopes. Hot springs, or onsen, are among the best things about many Japanese resorts, and each has its own personality. At the rustic Yukoro onsen, for example, Japanese and Australian visitors sipped beers while leaning against pleasantly rough rocks near a snowbank.

For those who can pull themselves out of the water, large swaths of the slopes are also lighted until 9 p.m. One night last March, shadowy whirlwinds tore across the upper mountain as eerie yellow lights illuminated the slopes' twisted, leafless trees. The effect was like skiing through a Tim Burton movie.

Then there are the bars. Japan is not known for its après-ski tradition, but Niseko has become an exception to the rule, with bars that tend to be small, cozy and quirky. There's one made of two tractor-trailers, one with an old Coke vending machine door for an entrance and — at least last season — one sculptured of ice.

In short, the off-slope diversions are there, and multiplying. Still, most visitors focus on something simpler: snow.

"I've been to [Canada](#), I've been to Europe, I've been to America," said Ms. Eskin, the visitor from Sydney, "and this is the best powder snow I've ever skied."

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