

# DEPARTURES

NOVEMBER 2015



**S**tanding at the bottom of an ancient blown-out volcano in Japan called Shiribetsu, I finally understood the magic of Niseko, the ski world's new star. It was January, the very best month for powder hounds. The helicopter had dropped us on the 3,632-foot mountaintop. Below us stretched the forests and snow-smothered rice paddies and buckwheat fields of Hokkaido, the country's northern island—an almost fairy-tale place a 90-minute flight from Tokyo where three-foot-long fish swim in the rivers, trees in spring burst forth in Technicolor reds and yellows before turning green, and everywhere the ground bubbles with hot mineral waters. To the northwest, noble 6,227-foot Yotei, the island's mini Mount Fuji, briefly disrobed of its clouds to take a bow.

# SNOW DAZE

The volcanic peaks of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido get more snow fall than most of the world's more famous ski destinations. On the blissful runs of Niseko United, Christopher Solomon finds the simple, elegant pleasures of the real Japan. Not to mention, great skiing.

Photographs by AARON JAMIESON

The slopes of Niseko's four ski areas receive four feet of snow each winter.

I dove in after the guide and dodged among the outstretched arms of silvery birches that shivered in the deep snows. At the bottom I was bent double and gasping through my grin. The run would be my best of the winter. Hell—I'd call it one of my top runs in 30 years of skiing.

The locals smiled. They just called it Tuesday.

Every dedicated skier carries in his head a list of mandatory pilgrimages, those famous slopes and fondue-dripping destinations that define the sport: Schussing the Hahnenkamm at Kitzbühel. Skiing the Vallée Blanche below Mont Blanc. Dropping into Corbet's Couloir at Jackson Hole. In the last few years, a new must have appeared atop this list—Niseko. The reason is simple: Here falls, nearly without pause or fail, the lightest, driest, most predictably profligate snows on Earth.

Every winter cold winds barrel across Siberia and, in what weathermen call "ocean-effect snow," they scoop up moisture over the Sea of Japan.

Then they dump their load on the first thing they run into: the volcanic peaks of Hokkaido. About 48 feet of Utah-quality stuff sifts to earth, roughly double the annual snowfall of Aspen. In Niseko, bar owners dig tunnels to their front doors. So, if porpoising through talcum *patudaa sinoo* is your passion, there's no more-reliable ski resort on the planet.

And since its discovery by skiing's cognoscenti in the past ten years, Niseko has been changing, fast. A flush of Asian money has dramatically transformed it from powder-choked backwater to a destination with world-class cuisine and accommodations. The upshot for Americans is an accessible exoticism.

Yet Niseko's turn as the world's ski-magazine darling has also led to the same intriguing tension that so many ski towns before it have wrestled with: How do you change while keeping true to your soul? Can this place built on the pure love of deep-powder skiing bridge a newer, shinier internationalism and the more graceful pace of an older, slower Japan?

Americans rarely think of skiing when they think of Japan. That's a mistake. Nearly three fourths of the country is mountainous. A nation smaller than California keeps alive more ski areas than does the entire United States. The Winter Olympics have been held here, twice, including the 1972 Winter Olympics, in Sapporo, on Hokkaido.

It's in this far north where many of the country's

stereotypes—as crowded, urban, frantic—truly crumble. Hokkaido is one quarter of Japan's landmass, yet it contains less than 5 percent of its population. It's a land not of *Lost in Translation* but of big mountains, cows, wide-open spaces. More Montana than Tokyo. Thanks to the island's position at the confluence of two volcanic belts, hot waters nearly boil from the mountains. The Japanese tradition of *onsen*, or soaking in outdoor baths, is strong. And then, of course, there's the snow. Though storms pound the island, the snows fall here with a curious, almost Asian delicacy. The flakes are so large they cast shadows. "Chicken feathers," Niseko locals call them.

To the Japanese, "Hokkaido is like the American West," an expat from Philly named Matt Naiman explained over the island's renowned sushi at Hanayoshi, a Niseko restaurant. ("You've gotta try the cod sperm!") Naiman, 50, went to Japan to work for a design company after college. Today his professorial tortoiseshell

glasses and loden vest belie his second career as owner of two hot nightclubs, in Tokyo and Osaka. But after years of visiting, in 2009 Naiman and his wife, a Japanese caterer and food writer, embarked on a third: They bought the small Annapuri Lodge. They've since relocated to Niseko, to take a step back from the rat race—just as other Japanese have done, and in the way Americans have always struck out West in search of a different lifestyle. In 2014 they even opened a small restaurant there, Luckyfingers, featuring the Sapporo-born former executive chef of Tribeca's Megu.

"People come up here to try different things," Naiman said. "To try a new life."

And, of course, to ski. So I was surprised upon arrival a few nights earlier to find that the hotel bellman was grumpy. Everyone was grumpy. It was only a few weeks after Christmas and already Niseko had received 280 inches of snow—about as much as Beaver Creek gets all winter—but now there had been three days of blue skies in a row. On the gondola a German skier chuckled. "We went to a bar," he said, "and the owner apologized: 'I am sorry we had sunshine today.'" Outside the gondola's windows, however, the world was righting itself: It was snowing again.

Niseko United, as the ski resort is officially known, is actually four modest ski areas that each operate lifts on adjoining slices of 4,291-foot Mount Niseko-Annapuri. Each has its own character and base area, sprinkled along the hem of the broad mountain, but all four are joined by ski trails and by one lift pass. Together they boast a very respectable 3,000 vertical feet and acreage about

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A red torii in  
romari village



*The onsen at  
the Green Leaf  
Hotel, in Niiseko  
Village*



equal to Alta, Utah. Hanazono has the most mellow slopes and least development. Niseko Village and Niseko Grand Hirafu, the resorts in the center, claim the steeper skiing (though nothing here is wildly steep). Hirafu is home to the area's only real ski town.

I headed out for a tour with Nee Ta, 38, a friendly, fast-skiing Australian instructor and guide for Niseko Winterlab, one of the area's many guide services. He headed to the fourth ski area, Annupuri, a locals' favorite for its laid-back vibe. On my chest I wore an avalanche beacon; on my back I carried a shovel and a probe. A big reason for Niseko's recent popularity is the establishment of ten backcountry gates that allow skiers and snowboarders (who are armed, one hopes, with proper knowledge and gear) to access the deep, wild snows just beyond the monitored trails. Alas, most of the gates were closed due to rare high winds the previous night that had created unusual avalanche danger. Nee ducked off the groomed runs into a powdery gulch. First the snow had the consistency of clotted cream. Then, in the trees, it lifted up behind him in vapor trails.

At the bottom Nee giggled and we bumped fists. It was not Niseko's legendary deep, but it was good. (As someone said later, "Even a bad day at Niseko is a good day anywhere else.") The next run Nee led into Niseko's famed glades—crowds of birches beside the ski runs, holding huge clumps of snow in the crooks of their branches as if nests for some strange winter bird. Many skiers find tree skiing stressful, but Niseko's trees are generous, wide-spaced. Forgiving, even. You can relax a little and learn the moves they call for.

"It's a little heavy," Nee pronounced at run's end, of the conditions. "Usually it's much fatter, wider flakes."

"You're very spoiled," I said.

He grinned. "I know."

It grew colder. Niseko's daily storm arrived and cinched around us. Nee led off the slopes to a high-peaked house. Inside, we pulled off our ski boots, and stepped into slippers. The room was small, simple, wooden, warm. A single counter ran the length of the place, and a dozen customers sat, shoulder to shoulder, murmuring between slurps. A paper menu before them told the spare, unchanging dishes in elegant kanji: four kinds of soba. One side dish, tempura. Behind the counter in a kimono with rolled up sleeves, Tatsuru Rai kneaded his putty-colored buckwheat dough to order in a black stone bowl. He rolled the dough with a wooden pin. He folded it. He rolled it still more, thinner. Then the master carefully cut the dough into noodles with a heavy blade and lifted it to hand. His wife, Midori, in a flowered kimono, poured Sapporo beers with thick heads. This was Rakuichi, a Niseko mainstay and one of the world's great soba houses—so acknowledged for its craft that the chef of Copenhagen's Noma

invited the couple to Denmark to show their talents. To eat at Rakuichi is to have a ski lunch unlike any ski lunch you've had before: the delicate soba, chewy but tender, offsetting the bold duck broth, and the soft crunch of local tempura leeks on the side. It is simple food, expertly made. It is the best of tradition. Leaving there, you feel warm.

Still, new is coming. Though there's been skiing at Niseko since the early 1960s, international travelers started to arrive in earnest about a decade ago—first Singaporeans, then Hong Kongers, Malaysians, Thai. A luxury boom has followed. In the last five years alone, several new accommodations have appeared, from Western-style Ki Niseko, a rare slopeside hotel that opened in Hirafu last December, to Zaborin, with its baths carved from volcanic rock, debuting in quiet Hanozano last spring. The area now boasts two Michelin-starred restaurants. At the foot of the mountain in adjacent Niseko Village, Malaysian utilities-conglomerate YTL has built the first phase of a larger vision, including homes and a nascent pedestrian village to feed the Asian love of shopping. Built in Kyoto's traditional *machiya* style—big eaves, dark wood, heavily latticed windows—the village features boutiques with handsome leather clutches by Som s (Hokkaido's answer to Herm s) and blown glass from the nearby port town of Otaru, whose makers were once known for their fishing globes.

Much of the construction to date, though, has appeared in Hirafu, a quirky little ski town built on the sloping mountainside, its warren of streets piled tall with snow that has nowhere else to go. Hirafu is a palimpsest of ski-town eras and fashions: Remnant, unfortunate '60s hotels. Incongruous Swiss chalets. New Brutalist-meets-Zen condo complexes with soaring windows and heavy concrete walls built to withstand the winter snows. In the evening, however, as skiers strolled in a post-*onsen* *passeggiata* down its snow-cramped streets, it is charming.

The changes aren't without consequence. Six-story apartment buildings now stand where ski bums once slurped cheap udon sold from a shipping container. The slopes are busy with an international crowd hungry for powder. At times Niseko can feel overrun by rowdy Australians, who can fly here without suffering from jet lag. "Bali, with snow," quipped one countryman. As Niseko grows up, how does it

## SKIING NISEKO

Japan's powder vortex of Niseko United, with its 28 ski lifts and 51 marked ski runs, is on the northern island of Hokkaido, a 90-minute flight north of Tokyo and then a 2½-hour drive southwest of Sapporo's New Chitose Airport. Niseko actually consists of several ski areas. A good place for first-time visitors to stay is Hirafu, the geographic center of the action. One other tip: Bring cash. Japan is still largely a cash society.

### HOTELS

**Moku no sho** Arguably the nicest hotel in the area, the 25-room *ryokan*-style hideaway opened in mid-2013. Rooms from \$270; 393 Niseko-cho; 81-136/59-2323.

**The Vale Niseko** The Vale combines clean lines, private *onsen*, and a rare ski-in, ski-out location in Hirafu. Rooms from \$165; 194-5 Aza-Yamada, Kutchan-cho; 81-136/21-0038.

**Ki Niseko** The Western-style 96-room hotel with *onsen* opened last December with slopeside access. Rooms from \$300; 183-43 Yamada, Kutchan-cho; 81-136/21-2565.

**The Niseko Company** represents more than 30 homes, like Kasetsu, a 4,700-square-foot modern stunner in Hirafu that blends East—a tatami room, shoji screens—with Western touches like appliances from Europe. Rooms from \$1,455; 179-22 Yamada, Kutchan-cho; 81-136/21-7272.

### FOOD + DRINK

**Kamimura Yuichi** Kamimura's French-influenced Japanese cuisine has earned him a Michelin star. Choose the chef's tasting menu paired with unexpectedly great Hokkaido wines. At Shiki Niseko, 190-4 Yamada, Kutchan-cho; 81-136/21-288.

**Bar Gyu** The best bar in Niseko. Walk through the tunnel of snow. Open the fridge door. Step inside. Taste the smooth burn of a Hokkaido single malt. At 167-21 Aza-Yamada; 81-136/23-1432.

**Rakuichi** Simply world-class soba. At 431 Niseko, off the slopes near the Annupuri ski lifts; 81-136/58-3170.

### GUIDES

Get off-piste with a guide. For real local flavor, head out with the **Powder Company** in Annupuri. Not all speak English well, but nobody knows the mountain better. Tours from \$190; 81-136/54-2820.

**Winterlab** is a good small operation with competent guides. Tours from \$415; 81-136/58-3280.

**Black Diamond Tours** takes clients wherever the snow is best that day—including ski resorts beyond Niseko. From \$135; 81-90/2054-8687. —C.S.

manage its success without losing what drew people in the first place?

The most aesthetic reply to this challenge can be found at Moku no sho, an old riverside *onsen* resort a few minutes from the slopes that was redone and reopened in mid-2013 by Hokkaido's Tsuruga Group as a 25-room *ryokan*, or traditional inn. Step inside the high-ceilinged lounge to a palette of a dozen shades of brown. See the couples from all over the world wearing traditional *samie*, or pajama-like "room wear," as they recline on caramel-colored chaises around a dramatic two-story fireplace, sipping tea or one of Hokkaido's highly popular single-malt Scotches. Hear Bobby Timmons's piano notes gently raining down from the ceiling speakers. Run your fingers over the carvings—vines, animal faces—in the style of Hokkaido's indigenous Ainu people, gracing tables and beams. Everyone wears little white socks: At Moku no sho, whose name translates as "grain of timber," the hotel does not give out the traditional slippers but encourages guests to remove their footwear and awaken to the textures of different woods beneath their feet, including the cypress floors of its tasteful *onsen*, set at the edge of a birch forest that nearly tumbles into the steaming waters.

The mood is less that of a hotel than of a sanitarium, in the most classic sense: a place to convalesce, to rejuvenate. Dinner at Moku no sho is *kaiseki*, the classic many-course Japanese meal, served for each guest in a small, private dining room. In a country that dotes on ingredients, Hokkaido is famous as Japan's larder, and these meals are showcases. There is *diakon* from the mountainside. Prawns pulled from the nearby sea that are sweet enough to count as dessert. Organic sake made from rice that's grown nearby with ducklings to gobble the insects—ducklings that then are eaten when the crop is harvested. In every interaction, in every careful piece of sashimi, one feels what is still also felt all around Niseko: *omotenashi*, a hospitality and attentiveness to the needs of others that isn't just a way of doing business in Japan but a way of doing life.

On my last day in Niseko, I skied back to quieter Annupuri. To really feel the pulse of Niseko, people had told me, you need to take a few laps with a local like Tomoki Takahashi. Takaku is a bit of a snowboarding legend—the Gory Lopez of Niseko. In person, he's a slight man with warm brown eyes and, at 43, flecks of gray in his black hair. He is one of the pioneers of Niseko's snow surfing. (CONTINUED ON PAGE 10)

*Hirafu village, on Mount  
Niseko-Annupuri, at night.*





# DEPARTURES

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## SKIING JAPAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 246



a fluid, almost Eastern style of snowboarding that doesn't fight the mountain but instead flows with it—the feet set farther back like those of a surfer, the arms thrown wide with each turn, as if embracing nature. He rides a lavender Gentemstick snowboard (“My signature model”) designed by another legend here, Taro Tamai, who makes boards precisely for Niseko's deep snow and soulful riding. They're said to be among the best snowboards in the world.

On the slopes, Takaku paused to tell me his story: how he came here in 1993 to be a pro snowboarder, but there was no terrain park. There was powder, however. “Every single day we get *this much* snow,” he said, stretching his arms as wide as he could. “I thought, this is unusual. And I wanted to share the powder experience with people.” Today he employs several instructors and guides out of a little wooden cabin on the side of the ski hill; a sign there reads, simply, POWDER COMPANY.

Conditions had closed the high-mountain gates again, with its great runs, but no one knew this place like Takaku. We dropped lower, through an open gate that others usually miss. He checked that our beacons were on, then led us over flats and through the trees to easygoing stashes of untracked snow among the glades. Elsewhere, Niseko was thrumming. But we were all alone.

The week's snowfall was hardly epic for this place—only two feet had fallen—but the snow was buttercream. I followed Takaku down the slopes, his enviable style never waning. “It's like dessert,” he said, a big smile flashing from beneath his mirrored goggles.

That grin reassured. Niseko is changing. But it doesn't feel like it's in danger of becoming a money-flashing Courchevel, or even an Aspen. It is not what this place wants to be. Niseko still feels grounded in the reasons people have long come here for—the simple, effortless pleasures of Japan, and the simple, overflowing joy of playing in the snow. No one wants to change that. ♦