

# Skiing Japanese

WHERE TO FIND 500 INCHES OF POWDER, STASHED IN SECRET OFF-PISTE OASES

**BORING A SKI POLE INTO** two feet of powder, the crow's-feet of his crinkly grin peeking out the sides of his goggles, Yutaka Takanashi nods and says, "Niseko no bai wa, kore wa heikin desu yo." Translation: "This is about average for Niseko." We're traversing east through glades of adolescent birch trees with the sound of dueling woodpeckers in the distance. Takanashi, our 34-year-old guide, is one of Japan's top telemark skiers, and we've just finished skiing three off-piste glades of powder that, were it not for fat skis, might have been classified as too deep.

Sitting in the southwest corner of Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, Niseko is one of the snowiest places on the planet, receiving well over 500 inches of snow a year. Storms from Siberia pick up a sudden surge of moisture from the Sea of Japan and slam into the 4,000-foot peaks of Niseko, exploding like a piñata that's been hit by Barry Bonds.

Niseko is actually composed of three areas—Annapuri, Higashiyama, and Hirafu—all tied together at the summit, where a tangle of five lifts ferry skiers up into treeless, intermediate-level terrain. All told, Niseko has 2,191 skiable acres and 30 miles of trails. Only a few trails measure more than 30 degrees in pitch, but Niseko's 15 square miles of backcountry offer plenty of steeps—you just need to know how to find them. Which is where Takanashi comes in. Six foot one with a mane of black hair, Takanashi is light-years from the stereotypical small-frame Japanese salaryman. The name of his two-year-old guide service, Toyru, is taken from the language of Hokkaido's indigenous people, the Ainu. It means "to go into the mountains."

So we go, riding three lifts to the top of the ski area, hiking for ten minutes, then dropping over to the north side of 4,295-foot Annapuri. After three turns in some hard crust, I'm skeptical about Takanashi's slope choice. But a moment later I'm almost thigh-deep in fluff. For the rest of the day it's the same formula: heaping doses of powder, a final collapse at the end of the run, followed by a flurry of Japanese and English superlatives. When we started, I was worried there'd be no untracked powder; now I'm just hoping my legs will hold out.

My legs survive, but just barely. And as with all the best Japanese après-ski experiences, we wind down at an *onsen*, or hot spring—namely, the milky-green 108-degree waters of Goshiki, a 25-minute drive from the ski area. The bath even has a floating slab of wood, perfect for resting a frosty can of Sapporo. For Niseko, this is an average day.

## THE FACTS

**SUMMIT ELEVATION:** 3,839 feet  
**VERTICAL:** 3,117 feet  
**SKIABLE AREA:** 2,191 acres  
**ANNUAL SNOWFALL:** 551 inches  
**PRICE:** An all-day lift ticket costs \$38  
**WHEN TO GO:** Mid-December through April is best  
**CONTACT:** [www.niseko.ne.jp](http://www.niseko.ne.jp)

## WHERE TO SKI

For backcountry enthusiasts with proper gear, traversing north off the top of lift seven will lead to more sustained, open terrain, with plenty of powder. Warning: The backcountry isn't bombed or patrolled, so ski at your own risk.

## WHERE TO STAY

Niseko Higashiyama Prince Hotel is a Japanese version of the Marriott and

## JAPAN: The Right Gear

### GOOD NEWS FOR POWDER GODDESSES: FAT SKIS AND OTHER DEEP-SNOW ESSENTIALS ARE RIPPING IT UP WITH AN X CHROMOSOME

**SKIS:** For years, petite women with a penchant for ripping big mountains on fat skis ended up floundering on boards that were too long and stiff for them. Enter the new **K2 PHAT LUV**, a women's-specific version of the company's renowned AK Launcher and the first softer-flexing powder stick available in lengths below 165cm. (\$675; 800-972-4063, [www.k2sports.com](http://www.k2sports.com))

**BINDINGS:** The **SALOMON SB10 TI AXE** binding is a lock for most female skiers: Titanium in the heel track and housing keep it light and durable, while a lower release range accommodates less torque. It's a high-performance alternative to men's overbuilt race clamps. (\$245; 800-225-6850, [www.salomonssports.com](http://www.salomonssports.com))

**BOOTS:** The **ROSSIGNOL BANDIT B1 WOMEN** boot proves how far we've come since gals suffered in pink-accented mush buckets. This advanced freeride boot (guys, look for the Bandit B1 Men) is soft enough to absorb a big huck yet stiff enough to rail your edges through the corduroy. (\$499; 802-863-2511, [www.rossignol.com](http://www.rossignol.com))

**PANTS:** The **ORAGE'S AWD2** pants are highly technical—and highly stylish—trou. The svelte denim-look duds are actually waterproof and breathable poly-nylon wonders. You'll remain drier, and infinitely more hip, than the kids still cruising the slopes in their Levi's. (\$220; 800-250-5056, [www.orageski.com](http://www.orageski.com))

**SHELL:** The **MARMOT** women's **SUPER SHERO** isn't just a smaller version of the popular men's Super Hero soft shell; it's specifically cut for narrower waists and shoulders. The jacket, a synthesis of Gore N2S Windstopper and Polartec WindPro and PowerShield fabrics, stymies even the nastiest mountain weather. (\$225; 888-627-6680, [www.marmot.com](http://www.marmot.com))

**MIDLAYER:** The **SALOMON W'S MOTO MESH ZIP NECK** midlayer moves effortlessly from street to snow. Credit the uncluttered design and a proprietary fabric that combines warmth, breathability, and quick-drying qualities. (\$69; 800-225-6850, [www.salomonssports.com](http://www.salomonssports.com))

**EYEWEAR:** **SPY'S SONIX** evoke sixties styling in gogglelike shades that seem plucked from an early Godzilla flick. But the optics are pure 21st century, built around a single glass lens engineered to eliminate distortion and boost peripheral vision. (\$160; 800-779-3937, [www.spyoptic.com](http://www.spyoptic.com))

**HAT:** The **RLX SKI HAT** mixes an old-school tassel with a contemporary, close fit that's not at all boxy. Made of ultralight itchless wool, it's ideal for thick-maned women who don't require an expedition-weight toque. (\$35; 866-897-7656, [www.polo.com](http://www.polo.com))

**GLOVES:** Available in sizes down to extra small, the **BLACK DIAMOND STRATOS** glove offers four-way stretch in the fingers for dexterity and removable waterproof inserts for quick drying in the field. (\$100; 801-278-5533, [www.bdel.com](http://www.bdel.com))

**PACK:** The **DAKINE HELI PRO SMALL** is a 900-cubic-inch pack designed for spontaneous backcountry forays. It keeps your gear in order with loops for an ice ax or shovel on both sides, a separate pocket for a shovel blade, and a mesh nest for your beverage reservoir. (\$80; 800-827-7466, [www.dakine.com](http://www.dakine.com))



has English-speaking staffers—a boon for dog-tired ski bums (doubles, \$130–\$230; 800-542-8686, [www.princehotels.co.jp](http://www.princehotels.co.jp)).

## WHERE TO EAT

B's Café, a five-minute walk from the Hirafu lifts, offers Sapporo on tap, Western-style sandwiches, and made-to-order vegetarian dishes.

## GEAR & GUIDES

The Niseko Adventure Center (011-81-136-23-2093, [www.nac-web.com/e\\_index.htm](http://www.nac-web.com/e_index.htm)), founded by Australian Ross Findlay, can provide rental gear, guides (including Yutaka Takanashi), and evening snowshoe tours.

## GETTING THERE

Fly to Sapporo from Tokyo on All Nippon Airways (\$250 round-trip; 800-235-9262) and then take the train from the airport for \$24, one-way. In less than three hours you'll arrive at Niseko station. From there it's just a few minutes in a cab to most hotels. —DAVID WOLMAN

## FOR DOMESTIC VOLCANO AND DEEP-POWDER ACTION

Mount Bachelor, Oregon (541-382-2442, [www.mtbachelor.com](http://www.mtbachelor.com)). Niseko and Bachelor share four common bonds. They have heaps of snow, wide-open terrain, and laid-back locals, and they're both volcanic.

**SPAIN [Baqueira]** Home turf to Juan Carlos, the world's most ski-crazed king, the Pyrenees may be smaller than the Alps, but the ski scene is also more low-key, less expensive, and less likely to lure fellow Americans. Expect a heavy dose of authentic Spanish culture, including lots of tapas and dinner at 10 p.m. But the real charm of Baqueira is big-mountain terrain. How white-knuckle gnarly can it get? Escornacrabes, a favorite area of Baqueira experts, roughly translates as "the place where goats fall and die." SEASON: December through April. CONTACT: 011-34-973-63-9010, [www.baqueira.es](http://www.baqueira.es). PACKAGE DEAL: Book a seven-night stay (including breakfast) and six days of lift tickets for \$750 per person through the resort. KINDRED SPIRIT: Grand Targhee, Wyoming (800-827-4433, [www.grandtarghee.com](http://www.grandtarghee.com)), is often passed over for Jackson Hole, to the east, but is blessed with some of the best powder in the U.S.



POWDER BLAST: RIPPING TURNS AT NISEKO

## High-Speed Quad

Traveling with a full quiver? DAKINE's CONCOURSE DOUBLE can swallow up to four pairs of skis and the same number of poles. Full padding and ripstop nylon protect against dings, and urethane wheels help ease that long run to International Check-In. (\$130–\$140; 800-827-7466, [www.dakine.com](http://www.dakine.com))

