



TRACKLESS & PURE

Rachael Oakes-Ash makes her first-ever foray into the backcountry in the Japanese Alps at Hakuba

Photography by Chris Hocking

There's a renewed buzz about skiing in Japan these days. The decade-long slump in the country's economy impacted many of the traditional resort areas, but now there are more hopeful signs as new ideas and new investment stimulate a comeback.

One thing that hasn't changed is the quality of the snow. Thanks to its proximity to Siberia, from December to April, Japan is drowning under dry powder, especially on the northern island of Hokkaido and along the line of high peaks that form the Japanese Alps on Honshu. Simply grab a map, point a finger and land on one of the country's 500-plus ski fields on offer.

Not all fields offer the same level of experience. Being Australian, I was aware in particular of Hokkaido's reputation for super-dry snow. There the once-sleepy ski village of Niseko has been transformed into 'Little Australia' since a contingent of down-under business folk set about making some serious yen from skiing and property development. Today it is impossible to walk Niseko's quirky back lanes without hearing "g'day mate".

This isn't everyone's cup of *cha* though. If you want to ski where there are more Japanese, with local-style accommodation and where the closest thing to a burger is a *katsudon*, then you need to look elsewhere.

I had chosen to stay closer to Tokyo and try the main island of Honshu where big mountain skiing beckoned with peaks touching 3,000m and a near-vertical pitch.

The Japanese Alps run for 150km, straight

across Nagano Prefecture, home to the Winter Olympics in 1998. The jewel in their crown is Hakuba, a whole valley-full of resorts known especially for a 5km top to bottom run as well as for Austria's superhuman Herman Maier wiping out spectacularly at 110kph while going for gold.

We had come to this area to get off-piste though, a crazed idea that doesn't even occur to the majority of the millions of local skiers and boarders. The Japanese are sticklers for



Opening spread: With more than 10m of snow annually, skiing in Japan often leaves you with a powdered nose. **Facing page:** Photographer Chris Hocking waist-deep and loving it. **Above:** Happo One resort – jewel of Hakuba and gateway to the backcountry.







rules, you see. It makes them impeccable skiers, technically correct and forever in search of the perfect turn. Most of them are obsessed with piste, in love with groomed corduroy and almost ski in formation — at least they used to. Now the foreigner's obsession with twin-tips and freeriding have permeated the once-inflexible Japanese snow culture.

The peaks and steeps of the Japan Alps taunt freeriders and skiers from the resort's gondola windows. But to enter these distant powder bowls you need to know what you're doing. There's no ski patrol out in these hills,

no helicopters at the ready to drop you atop of powder heaven and pick you up when you're out of steam, no cafes, no groomers.

The ski fields of Japan are well policed by ski patrol, but you may on occasion find one who will turn a blind eye to those who sneak under the ropes and take on the powder tree runs. You do so at your own peril though. The off-piste terrain within ski areas of Japan is not avalanche bombed nor patrolled and those who don't know what they are doing can find themselves in dangerous situations.

Luckily we were in the capable hands

of Dave Enright, founder of a local outdoor operator. This former Canadian ski patroller looks like a rule breaker but his looks are deceiving. His CV isn't: Canadian Avalanche Association Instructor, ski patroller, outdoor emergency care technician and member of the Federation of Mountain Guides. First rules of thumb when choosing a backcountry guide: check their credentials and ask around about their reputation.

I'm relatively new to snowsports, having taken to it in my early thirties. An average three months a year on snow, and a mountain

of private instruction, has since fast-tracked me enough to play with the big boys. Until this trip I had relied on snowcats, skidoos and helicopters to get me into the backcountry but in Japan I had to rely on my own feet.

To get to the untracked slopes I was lusting for, we had to first climb a ridge that starts at the boundary of Happo One ski field and leads to the peak of Karamatsu Dake. It sounded simple enough, but I was quickly cursing the weight of my rental skis as I strapped them to my backpack and began snowshoeing. I was still cursing them two hours later.

We were well equipped for our day in the backcountry. Avalanche transceivers are a must if you intend to venture past the ski boundaries, as is an experienced guide. But there is no point wearing an avalanche beacon if you don't know how to use it or if you're on your own so we ran through the transceiver basics to ensure we knew how to work it should we find ourselves caught in an avalanche.

That was hopefully only a remote possibility as Enright had brought along his trail guide, Rod McDowan, a hardy mountain man also from Canada who dug snow pits along the way to read the layers and composition of the snow to help steer us away from any areas of pronounced avalanche danger.

Our guides were also kitted out with snow shovels and probes, both essential tools for an expedition going out of bounds. Probes help locate a body trapped under the snow and shovels ensure quicker access to that body when time is ticking.

It's no joke, there are memorials on the mountain to those who have taken on the backcountry and not survived. Slope pitches of 30-45° can be avalanche prone and we intended to ski at least 30° runs so it was important that we understood what to do if we were caught by the white dragon.

It all sounded like common sense, though I couldn't be sure I'd remember it all in the heat of the moment. We're told first to 'swim' to the surface of the avalanche, as the closer to the surface you are the better chance of being found. Throwing off your backpack to stop it weighing you down helps; also, don't cry out while in the avalanche as your mouth will fill with snow; and punch the air in front of your face as the snow slows down to create an air pocket – once it settles, it sets like concrete and

then you will not be able to move at all.

Hoping not to need any of this sobering advice, the party switched into avalanche-traversing mode. Moving one person at a time, we crossed using safer spots such as anchored trees or large rocks and avoiding slope faces that showed signs of recent avalanche.

The mountain decides who stays and who goes. If you're not fit enough you won't make the two hour climb to the peak and if you're not competent on planks or a board you won't make the run back down.

I struggled with both though my lack of forethought was partly to blame. Used to the swanky experience of heli-skiing with its food, drink and sherpas on tap, I had neglected to pack sustenance. Two bottles of water was all I had and my photographer had a mere eight almonds. I made him hand over four of them. I'll tell you now: you don't want to be stuck with me in a snow cave during a three-day blizzard – I'll inhale my food and reach for yours before the first hour is out and start gnawing on your flesh by day-break.

To access the backcountry from Hakuba's Happo One ski resort is simply a matter of catching the gondola to the top, gearing up and going under the boundary rope to head to the peak. Theoretically anyone can do this but it is frowned upon, and foolish, to go without an experienced guide. Just for the record, many riders and skiers think a few times in the backcountry makes them experienced enough to guide their mates. It doesn't.

No one will stop you from going on your own at Happo One but you will pay around US\$20,000 should choppers and rescue be required if you get lost or injured. It's not Disneyland out here, though it's five times the fun when done right.

The boys reached Karamatsu Dake's ridge peak first where we were surrounded with a landscape of icefalls, peaks and troughs, chutes and gullies lined with deep perfect powder so dry you couldn't make a snowball out of it.

Our guide led off and then one at a time we got our first taste of legendary Hakuba backcountry. Watching my fellow powder hounds make their virgin run straight down a 35° pitch howling with pleasure as their boards

At last comes the payoff after hours of trekking, with the Japan Alps looking on.

*There are memorials
on the mountain
to those who
have taken on the
backcountry and
not survived*



rode the white wave set my own adrenaline pumping. By the time I had done the same you could light a Stones concert with the mega watts from our smiles.

There was then a fair bit of ski-touring, traversing across open faces to get to the next run and then the one after that. Come lunch-time we had skied three runs that had taken a fair bit of traversing or hiking to get to and we rested atop a cornice and drank in the view of the best face of the day, the one we were going to ski once our food was down. In my case, that wasn't long!

Almonds – and more substantial and exciting fare in some cases (damn them) – all gone, we dropped into an open face lined on one side by trees and on the other by rocks. It was steep and the daring got air off the cornice. I was less daring and traversed around to a rocky chute on the side that acted as a pathway onto the face.

Right: Looking east from Hakuba's rooftop.
Facing page: Backcountry highway to the high peaks – foot patrol only.



Practicalities

When to go

From December to April or even May.

How to get there

Direct trains from Tokyo's Shinjuku station reach Hakuba in four hours, or take a shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo station itself (90 minutes) and then catch a bus.

How to get around

If you have no transport of your own, your operator may be able to offer a ride. Failing that, buy tickets for the Genki-go shuttle at hotels and shops (not available on the bus) which connects many of the major ski fields and accommodation centres. Runs from late December to early March.

Where to stay

There is a wide range of accommodation at all levels of budget, though the traditional pensions are often a good choice: affordable and offering a warm welcome. As the resort area spans 30km though, be careful to book something within reasonable distance of the ski-field of most interest.

Who to ski with

There are a number of guiding companies

for backcountry experiences in Japan.

In Hakuba, the author used Evergreen Adventure Tours, www.evergreen-hakuba.com. Find them near the Mominoki Hotel at Happo-One.

Alternatively, Backcountry Snow Tours specialise in 12-day backcountry packages. www.backcountrysnowtours.com

Further north, on the island of Hokkaido, you can join Hokkaido Powder Guides to tour the Tokachi mountains near Furano with experienced heli-ski and backcountry guide, Chuck Olbery. www.hokkaidopowderguides.com

For further info on destinations and more, see www.snowjapan.com

How much will it cost

Expect to pay around ¥9,000 for a fully guided backcountry day.

Evergreen have several levels of course, from the Bunny course for intermediate skiers starting out in the backcountry at ¥8,400, to the Fox for those with some experience backcountry at ¥9,450, and the Kamoshika for experts at ¥10,500.

¥5000 gets you a five-piece backcountry rental set of beacon, probe, shovel, snowshoes and pack.

They call this Mumei Zawa (Nameless Valley). It drops 1.4km vertically and runs for 2.5km with a pitch of 30–40° depending which route you take. Super-dry snow flew in our faces with every turn as we broke into the perfect untouched terrain.

This was real thigh-burning powder, a long pummelling run down to the waiting group below who cheered me on as I finally got the hang of skiing backcountry with on-piste skis. "Next time I'm travelling with my own equipment", I thought — not relying on rentals from a Japanese retail outlet that thinks twin-tips are hair highlights.

By 3pm we were all run ragged, exhausted but happy after hiking, traversing and taking on eight downhill runs. My feet were refusing to respond to my commands and I found myself finishing the day ignominiously, upside-down in a ditch.

We crossed a creek, skis back in hand, then ski-toured down a back traverse track that led to an open hot-spring pool. I would have dived in for sure if I hadn't been even more intent upon reaching the bar where the cold beer was calling me. ΔΔ

