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Rachael Oakes-Ash had a hard time working out whose reputation was growing faster – Furano’s or a cocky young Australian who rules the roost in the burgeoning ski town.

Luke Hurford believes in fate. Three and a half years ago he’d jumped on a bus at Sapporo, the capital city of Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. Unable to read Japanese, he prayed he was heading in the right direction. The bus stopped at Furano.

At 22, with not much more than a snowboard and a beanie, Hurford discovered powder paradise. What he first thought to be a sleepy Japanese country town, turned out to be a snow sports Mecca. After one run down the slopes he decided to unpack his duffel bag and set up camp.

» Buffed out: Buff Farnell rips into some light and dry Furano-style  
PHOTO: Luke Hurford

# Japan



As the only gaijin (foreigner) in the village, he soon gained a reputation and the curiosity of the reserved Japanese. Forget any preconceived ideas you have of Asia, Japan is in another category alone. Hello Kitty is akin to royalty with a national obsession that matches the average western woman's fascination with Diana.

Toilets have movement sensors that detect motion in the cubicle and let off a musical accompaniment to your ablutions. Not so you can pee in time to the beat, but more so no one else can hear what you are doing.

Love hotels line the highways, fantasy rooms rented by the hour for Japanese couples who can't get cosy at home due to paper-thin walls and extended family. But that's not all.

This is the land of the vending machine. Thirsty? Put coins in the slot. Hungry? Put coins in the slot. Need something to read, bring your coins. Feeling perverted? Bring more coins for virgin underwear hermetically sealed.

It is only fitting that I meet the legendary Luke at Furano's local 7-11 where he shouts me a hot coffee in a can. The owners are shaking his hand and pointing at his picture in the paper. As the original westerner in town, Luke finds himself followed regularly by documentary crews and stalked by journalists of the Japanese variety.

It's all in good fun but cult status has its drawbacks. As we strap on our skis and head for Furano's 27km of groomed runs, ski patrol are on our backs, spotting the boundary-pushing Luke and his foreigner guest.

The Japanese don't like to break rules. Exceedingly polite, they travel in packs and follow each other daily. When skiing in nearby Sahoro days before in a class with my Australian instructor, Romeo, he and I slip under the ropes to take advantage of the free run used by training racers earlier that day and yet to open. Our excuse? We can't read Japanese. But the rest of our class won't follow, despite our pleading. They are Japanese locals and won't break the rules even if fresh snow is on offer.

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參肆伍陸柒捌玖零壹貳參拾  
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“ I find myself purchasing bad 1980s soft porn movies for Luke, which I hand over in a paper bag feeling like an over age stalker buying alcohol for a minor. ”

Furano ski patrol is no different. Luke likes to go off-piste, and I am inclined to join him. When we sneak behind these ropes, even ski patrol don't want to follow and we are left alone but they are waiting at the bottom to give Luke a 'tsk tsk' when we arrive. To be fair, they smile at me, always polite.

Furano is known as the belly button of Hokkaido, sitting in the island's dead centre. They even have a Belly Button Festival to celebrate every year. There's already a lot of hype about Hokkaido thanks to the development of little Australia, Niseko, and its three ski resorts around the one mountain. Planeloads of Aussies looking for powder offload at Sapporo and head west.

When asked where in Niseko I am staying, I simply shake my head and say: "not heading there." When the Australians asking the question want to know more, I stay silent for fear they may follow.

There are no lift queues in Furano, none. There's the country's fastest cable car covering 2.3km and some dinky one-seater chair lift to take you to the peak, but no

queues. Which means first tracks can last up till mid morning and runs can be skied solo. With an average snowfall of nine metres and no sea air, the snow is dryer than anywhere else on the island.

Furano isn't a ski resort; it's more a traditional Japanese country town of 26,000 that happens to have an awesome ski field with a vertical drop of over nine hundred metres. It's the kind of town where locals don't own house keys. Crime is virtually nil and the main industry is farming and agriculture.

Luke is mad as a cut snake and Furano suits him. He can get away with a lot here. Offered the job of tourism officer within moments of his arrival, he wields free reign when journos are in town. "There goes the crazy white man," they say as he throws himself off cliffs.

His enthusiasm seems to grow the longer he stays. He has brought along his Japanese extreme ski mate who carves through the trees as though they were toothpicks. Remember, this is serious racing territory. Our very own Steve Lee won a World Cup super G here back in 1985.



**MAIN** Navel gazing: skier Keisuke Sakai heads towards the "belly button" town of Furano  
**PHOTO** Luke Hurford  
**ABOVE** Buff, having another crap day  
**PHOTO** Chris Hocking  
**LEFT** Soothing the weary muscles in the Ryounkaku Onsen  
**PHOTO** Luke Hurford  
**INSET** The snow dome ice bar at the base of Furano

Now there's one thing even Luke can't get away with and that's skiing underneath the lifts. It's strictly forbidden here and frustrating as all get out when riding high on the chair looking down at the virgin snow begging to be broken. At home I would never dream of skiing beneath the lifts for fear of ridicule should I stack, but here I want to just because they tell me I can't.

First timers to Furano need not despair, Luke has set up ski hosting with English speaking hosts offering a free mountain guide service to help you get round the hill on your first day. The hill consists of two mountain zones on which to play and night skiing is offered daily. Translated? More time to spend on snow.

Come sundown, however, and Luke and I get naked. Literally. Trekking four hundred metres in the nearby parkland to an illegal onsen where the locals have placed a pipe straight into the town's volcano, filling a rock pool with fresh hot spring water.

As the snow falls upon our heads, our bodies emersed in wet warmth, there is not a sound to be heard. This is a

truly natural Onsen, though re-dressing in snow-laden clothes in our birthday suits is an experience only to be tried once.

The world's smallest bar exists in Furano, or so it seems as we enter Kitsutsuki, with only two tables and every inch of wall space covered with kitsch memorabilia. It's impossible not to meet people here, our host Kubyashi is particularly helpful - pouring drinks with one hand and playing guitar with the other.

Twenty-four hours in Furano is only enough to taste the dulcet tones of Karaoke in private rooms, have a few jugs of beer and indulge in the Furano cheese fondue at the North Country Inn.

My journey finishes the next day at the hundred yen store searching for Hello Kitty earmuffs for my friends back home. Instead I find myself purchasing bad 1980s soft porn movies for Luke, which I hand over in a paper bag feeling like an over age stalker buying alcohol for a minor. It's yet another Luke drawback for being famous in a town that knows his every move. ❄️

## ❄️ FAST FACTS

### WHERE

Furano, Hokkaido, Japan  
[www.furano.ne.jp/kankou/english/](http://www.furano.ne.jp/kankou/english/)

### GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct to Sapporo from the Australian east coast. See [www.qantas.com](http://www.qantas.com) for details or phone 13 13 13

### CONTACT

Where to find Luke for accommodation and transfer bookings: Furano Tourist Association (0167) 23 3388

