



Snow-go zone

Japan's 'powder triangle' is more than just a skier's haven

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Perched on the surface of a frozen pond, I feel like I'm in an episode of survivalist TV show *Alone*. I stare intently at the tip of my fishing rod and the line that drops through a hole in the ice, waiting for the slightest jiggle. My next meal may not depend upon it, but I desperately want to catch a fish. Desperation soon turns to delight as I haul in a glistening rainbow trout. Yugi Yamaguchi, manager of ice-fishing operation Big Fight Matsumoto, leaps into action, gently removing the hook from the fish's mouth and showing me how to lower the flapping creature back into the water.

It's the first of many fish I land (and release) on this two-hour excursion from the ski resort of Rusutsu on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. With January temperatures below zero, Yamaguchi has decked me out in thermal gloves, rubber boots and a life jacket – just in case. Afterwards, I defrost by the wood burner in his shack, sipping tea as he reveals his passion for the Beatles, Oasis and a host of other Western rock acts. The outing has taken me temporarily away from Rusutsu's slopes. It's a pleasant diversion that gives my legs a much-needed rest, and makes me realise Hokkaido in winter has much more to offer than endless ski runs.

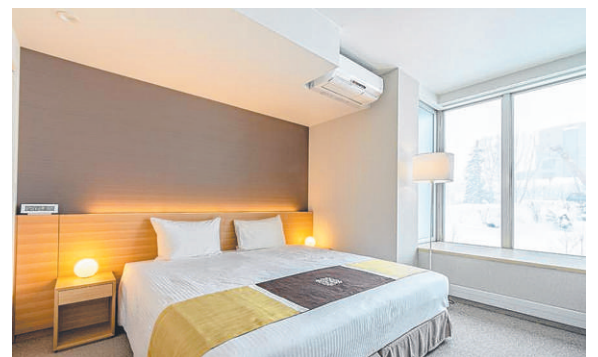
Along with peak performer Niseko and the increas-

ingly popular Furano in the island's centre, Rusutsu is the largest single resort in Japan's famed "powder triangle", a triumvirate renowned for abundant soft dry snow. In the 2025-26 season, Niseko clocked up more than 13m of so-called "Japow". In comparison, Perisher in NSW received about 3m of the white stuff. No wonder Japan has become the second-most popular destination after New Zealand for Aussies in need of a snow fix.

In Rusutsu, my party of five is staying at The Vale, a sleek, modern property named Japan's best ski hotel in 2024. It has a range of accommodation and our rooms are cosy, with dark interiors giving a homely feel and large windows delivering views of snowy forests sliced with ski runs. Friendly staff are super-responsive when we need a courtesy van to head out to nearby restaurants, and the spacious adjoining onsen is a stunner. Newcomers might find the wider resort's labyrinthine layout, accessed via a network of lifts and passageways, challenging when finding their way around.

There are some disorienting cultural encounters, too. I stumble across a bar incongruously called Pub Cricket adorned with bat-and-ball paraphernalia. There's a bemusing Disneyesque display where mechanised figures sing *Carolina in the Morning* on repeat,

The Maples, Niseko, Hokkaido, top; the Maples guestroom, right; Penthouse suite, below right





while Scottish country jigs are piped through the corridors of the Rusutsu Resort Hotel, where I briefly became lost.

But the real appeal of Rusutsu is in the skiing, which takes place on a collection of 37 trails sprawled across three mountains. We take the gondola across the valley to Mount Isola. Pine trees are cloaked in snow, but as the lifts take us higher the vegetation changes and spindly wind-sculpted branches are encrusted with ice. Mid-afternoon, as the mountain light turns pale blue, the wide runs are free from skiers and boarders, and there's barely a soul at the lifts. Where is everyone? Probably in Niseko, where we started our journey around the powder triangle.

I first visited Niseko Hirafu, one of the four resorts that make up Niseko United, in 2007. On my return the place is virtually unrecognisable, although the humble three-storey apartment building I stayed in is still there, dwarfed by much grander and newer accommodation. Among these is The Maples, ensconced at the upper end of town and backing on to the Ace Family Quad chairlift for seamless ski-in, ski-out access from the locker room at the back of the complex, where we spy Aussie actor Joel Edgerton wrangling kids and ski gear. Our accommodation is a capacious, light-filled penthouse suite with towering triangular windows looking across town to the volcanic hulk of Mount Yotei. The modular lounge looks big enough to accommodate a team of sumo wrestlers and there is a host of attractive design features, including 1960s origami-style pendant lights over a gorgeous dining table made from a sizeable timber slab.

While my gang organises equipment and lift passes, I head to Hanazono, a family-focused resort about 40 minutes' drive away, where mountaineer and trekking

From top: The Vale, Rusutsu; Premier residence at Intuition Niseko; view of Mt Yotei from the slopes of Rusutsu Ski Resort



There's no sound but the soft tread of the horses' hoofs and the plop of snow clumps falling from branches



guide Rina Takaya is waiting. She spends her summers leading hikes on the remote islands of Rishiri and Rebun, havens for wildflowers and birds off the northwest tip of Hokkaido. Nothing quite so arduous is required this winter afternoon. Instead, Takaya shows me how to slip on snow shoes and leads me up a hillside away from the buzz of the busy ski slopes. She points out Sakhalin fir trees, which found their way to Japan via Russia, and sasa bamboo, the leaves of which have antibacterial properties and are used to keep food fresh. We keep eyes peeled for signs of foxes and a cute endemic raccoon dog called tanuki, to no avail. Our peaceful stroll through the forest ends with hot chocolate and toasted marshmallows back at the resort.

On another afternoon, my daughter and I swap skis for saddles at Niseko Country Farm. Owner Hiro Kawai introduces us to a piebald called Monaco and a bay, Daifuku. Once we've got to know our steeds in the yard, he leads us on a placid parade through a forest of birch and

pine. There's no sound but the soft tread of the horses' hoofs and the plop of snow clumps falling from branches. It's early in the season but in a month or so, these mounts will be tramping through narrow corridors of snow 2m high.

Our Hokkaido adventure coincides with New Year's Eve and a 21st birthday among our posse, so the youngsters are delighted to be in the thick of Niseko's action. Even when we move to Intuition Niseko, the elegant condo-hotel reportedly favoured by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on the forested edge of town, the bars and clubs are just a 200m stroll away. From our three-bedroom premier residence, we can gaze at Mount Yotei and watch skiers come and go. A sleek Daiki armchair with sheepskin throw becomes my favourite haunt for a cuppa in the morning while everyone is still snoozing. The in-house onsen is a godsend after a long

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day on the slopes. It's serene to ease into the steamy outdoor pool as snowflakes drift down.

And so to the top of the powder triangle, Furano, a town of 22,000 straddling the Sorachi River about 120km northeast of Hokkaido's capital, Sapporo. Furano has the frontier feel of a ski town on the rise. It doesn't yet have the glamorous eateries and retail appeal, but its frigid winters bring unbeatable snow quality that is proving a strong drawcard for Australians. A huge, upgraded Rhythm Sports shop appears to augur well for the resort's future.

Our hotel, Fenix Furano, has pride of place at the top end of town, directly opposite the main ticket office with unrivalled lift access to Kitanomine, one of the two ski areas. The soaring foyer has a cool industrial vibe, with raw concrete and an eye-catching pop art painting of a colourful rhino. Furano is famous for its high quota of bluebird days, and our rooms have far-reaching views downhill to the township and across to a string of imposing peaks rising to almost 3000m. Although the hotel has a restaurant, there are few alternatives nearby so we use our hire car most nights to explore the local dining scene, with prices that contrast starkly with Niseko. A feast for our quintet at a yakitori restaurant, replete with drinks, costs about \$75. In comparison, I pay \$30 for a cheese toastie served from a caravan in Niseko. It's a good thing the yen is so weak against the Aussie dollar.

We see plenty of skiers and boarders kitted out with avalanche survival kits venturing to Furano's ungroomed reaches, but as a powder newbie, I'm not ready to go off piste or tackle the more challenging runs. Instead, I hire a pair of shorter skis and find plenty of bouncy fun playing around on the powdery verges of the intermediate trails, which make up 40 per cent of the terrain. And when Mother Nature delivers a 15cm dump of fresh snow, there's plenty more fun to be had.

With the weather closing in and visibility on the slopes reduced, my husband and I join a father-and-son

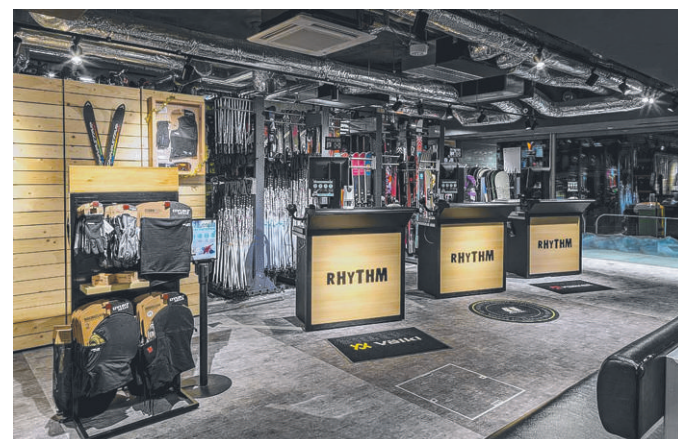
duo for a snowmobile tour, zooming around a 10km track out of town as fat flakes pour down. When our hosts put me in front position on the route, I realise I'll have to hit the throttle hard to avoid holding back my companions. The downside of being a speed demon means we complete the circuit in record time, so we spend the final 10 minutes zipping around a paddock with abandon, trying our darnedest to spray snow in our wake.

Dawn breaks on a spectacularly sunny and cloudless day after the blizzard, and Iski Kitanomine until my legs get the wobbles. Our time in Furano is drawing to a close, but there's one more detour to tick off the list.

Fenix Furano three-bedroom suite, above; Daisetsuzan and the Tokachidake mountain range from Furano ski resort, below; Fenix Furano, bottom left; Rhythm ski hire at Furano, bottom right

Hokkaido's dairy industry produces half of Japan's milk, and the Furano Cheese Factory is a short drive from town. It produces a range of hard and soft cheeses, but there's something else luring customers here. Despite the fact it's minus-8C outside, people are queueing for decadent spirals of soft-serve vanilla ice cream. I join the lineup and am quickly converted to the confectionery's rich, smooth creaminess. It seems there's more than one white, frozen commodity drawing visitors to Hokkaido's powder triangle.

Penny Hunter travelled at her own expense and was a guest of The Luxe Nomad.



IN THE KNOW

The Luxe Nomad is a luxury vacation rental management company with more than 100 properties across the Asia-Pacific.

It has an extensive accommodation inventory in Hokkaido; guest services can arrange a host of activities, including private transfers from Chitose Airport in Sapporo and ski hire.

The Maples Niseko has rooms from \$300 to \$1800 a night; Intuition from \$384 to \$2030 a night; The Vale Rusutsu from \$380 to \$1880 a night; Fenix Furano from \$270 to \$990 a night.

theluxenomad.com

Public buses are available for transfers between Chitose and the various ski resorts; Sapporo City to Niseko is about \$55, one-way.

access-n.jp

Car hire is another way to get around but it can be challenging to fit five people, skis and snow gear in what is classed as a large vehicle in Japan. A mini-van is a good option. It's convenient to have a car in Furano.

car.orix.co.jp

The one-hour guided Hanazono Resort showshoe tour costs \$53 a person.

hanazononiseko.com

Horse-riding at Niseko Country Farm is priced at \$445 for two people.

niseko-countryfarm.com

A two-hour ice-fishing excursion from Rusutsu Resort costs \$195 a person.

rusutsu.com

The 10km snow-mobile course with Asobiya Furano is \$100 a person, with upgrades and longer courses available.

asobiya-summer.rezio.shop