

SKIING IN NISEKO – 2017

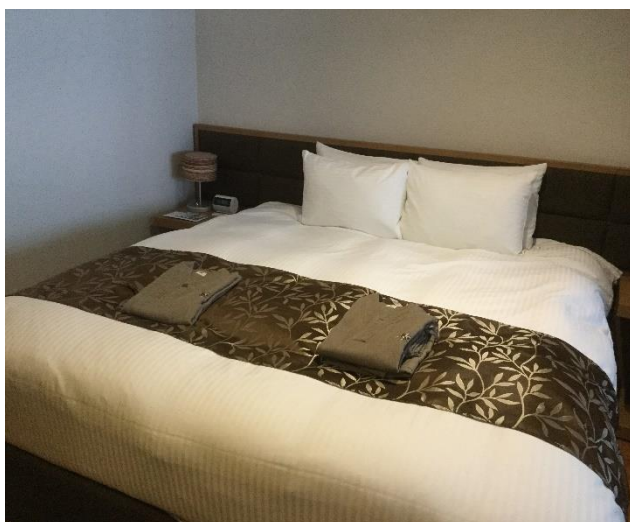
By Sally Blyth ©

“Skiing in Japan” is a phrase that evokes a holiday both exotic and desirable, perhaps even a little exclusive and definitely with a hint of intrigue. It’s the combination of these elements, along with the legendary light dry powder snow, that makes a ski trip to Niseko so rewarding.

Getting Going

I’ve skied in resorts throughout the world, and in February 2017, the time came for me to find out what skiing in Japan was all about. Our Air NZ flight to Tokyo was only half-full (a rarity) and very pleasant and, as expected, our transfer in Tokyo and connecting flight to Sapporo Chitose, the main hub in Hokkaido, were seamless. With some time to kill before hopping aboard our pre-booked coach for the 2½ hour drive south to Niseko, we sampled the local Sapporo beer which got things off to a great start.

Our Excellent Hotel – Ki Niseko <https://www.kiniseko.com/>



Arrival and check-in at our fantastic hotel, Ki Niseko, may have been after midnight but we were greeted with just the right measure of attention for tired travellers. Soon enough we were settled in our Resort View apartment, ready to grab some welcome sleep before getting our first taste of Japanese skiing.

When morning dawned, we were able to fully appreciate our superb apartment as well as the wonderful scene outside the panoramic window – acres of the glorious white stuff we had been dreaming of. Inside, we could enjoy well-appointed, stylish and spacious design, with every amenity at our fingertips, including cooking and washing facilities.

Ski Hire – Rhythm Japan <https://www.rhythmjapan.com/>

Our first task was to head into town to hire skis from Rhythm Japan. The hotel runs a regular shuttle into the township but we opted to make the short and snowy walk by foot to assure ourselves we really had switched firmly from summer into winter mode. The main street is heated to prevent snow turning to ice, but there were plenty of slippery patches that required a careful step. The clever rubber spike contraptions that many people attach to their shoes are surely a wise investment to avoid the chance of any bumps and bruises.

Rhythm Japan is one of the larger ski hire places in town and their premier service, offering the latest models of top brand skis and snowboards, is definitely worth the extra investment. The friendly crew, mostly expats, will take time to select the right skis for your ability and requirements but if you want to swap and try a different model at any time during your stay, no problem. They also store your skis overnight if you wish. Even better, for Ki Niseko guests, Rhythm have their own service counter within the hotel’s Ski Valet room. It was easy to get adjustments sorted or switch to wider skis when the deep powder arrived.

We deemed our hotel ski valet service to be one of the most valuable, removing all hassle around ski gear. Each morning we would arrive in ski socks with a large dose of excitement. Our boots, poles and skis were brought promptly to us. Then, after skiing in at the end of the day, euphoric and weary, the staff took care of our gear while we headed off to put our feet up. Best thing ever.

Up and Down the Slopes

The Niseko United ski area is comprised of four resorts on the Niseko Annupuri mountain: Hanazono; Niseko Village; Annupuri; and Grand Hirafu, the largest of the resorts, and where we were based. All resorts, except Hanazono, have gondolas that take you high up the mountain and each resort offers its own point of difference, as we were to discover on our ski travels across the mountain in the following days.

There is no doubt that our hotel, Ki Niseko, sits in a truly boastable ski-in ski-out location, a minute's walk from the Hirafu Gondola station and the busy Mountain Centre. Being able to walk two minutes to your uphill ride beats a bus or a trek through town in ski boots any day! Location is everything, but so is quality and service, and Ki Niseko has it all.

Gondola Snowsports (GoSnow), based between Ki Niseko and the gondola, is a slick operation offering lessons, guiding and workshops for all ages and abilities. Lessons are in English and the instructors hail from everywhere on the planet. <https://www.gosnowniseko.com/>

Armed with our trail map, and eager to get our ski legs working, we chose to spend our first day exploring at our leisure. The gondola whisked us up high in no time at all, as we chatted with skiers from all over the world. Especially Australia. The lift system is extensive and efficient, with several new chairlifts installed. Many have hoods, offering a warm cocoon against the elements; it can get pretty cold here. Higher up, there are several dinky single chairlifts, with no safety bars, but when something like this is taking you to ski paradise, it's okay.

We explored three sections of the mountain on our first day – Annupuri, Niseko and Grand Hirafu. It is easy to find your way around, with trails that are mostly clear-cut and well signposted. If you're in a group of people with different ski abilities and speeds, the setup is ideal. There are various routes down, catering for all levels, so you can each enjoy your preferred style of run in your own time, regroup at the base and then go up and start all over again.

This is fine as long as things go according to plan. Alas, we had a couple of "took wrong route" and "ended up in wrong place" fiascos where we lost each other, but if you do get split from your skiing partner, the staff at the base offices can locate them by tracking their ski pass. Great technology – and invaluable if you haven't got your phone on you.



We skied hard and fast all day, familiarising ourselves with the mountain and, even when dusk arrived, we weren't ready for our first day to end. Thankfully, Niseko is known for its extensive night skiing and at around 4.30pm the lights come on, so we happily carried on skiing into the evening. Skiing under night lights is an enchanting experience; the visibility is excellent and another layer of mystique comes into play. It is also makes for a captivating scene from our hotel window.



One of our favourite discoveries of the day was the rustic and charming Boyo-so, a log cabin that serves fantastic food. Secreted in the trees between a couple of steep black runs, it is not on everyone's radar, which makes it all the more wonderful. It's a place where steep and deep is celebrated and ski yarns abound. With its own resident cat and a bevy of hard-working staff, some of whom would give Methuselah a run for his money, Boyo-so is the Japanese equivalent of a Swiss mountain chalet. Warmed sake is the go-to drink, rather than schnapps, but the ambience is very much aligned. It's a world away from the large cafés

dotted across the mountain, and half the price. Having said that, the big places are efficient, serve great food and have superb toilets with all the bells and whistles, including heated seats. At Boyo-so, be prepared for cold seats and old style ceramic pans that require squatting (not so easy in ski pants).

Observations and Insights

Traversing to and from the different resort areas is easy with a wide variety of downhill terrain and uphill transport available. There are some areas where connection and crossover of runs can be confusing but overall it's well-designed and the word "immaculate" pertains to just about every facet of the mountain.

Queues were minimal during our stay, and fast moving, which ensured maximum skiing time. I was surprised to regularly find myself skiing long runs virtually on my own, a rarity. Zipping off through the trees for a bit of fast-paced fun is also largely solo.

On mornings after a fresh powder dump, a solid queue of powder hunters builds up at Gate 3, the access to the peak. It's a reasonably tough trek up (about 20 minutes) and we didn't join them – with a dicky knee, I prefer mechanical assistance to get uphill. The ant trail weaving its way skywards goes on forever, and the run down is surely worth it. Another option is the shorter climb to Anupuri peak.

Whilst there are some excellent beginner areas, much of the terrain leans towards being challenging. The easier green runs, which are mostly long and sweeping, can incorporate some testing sections. Most of the red runs have marvellously steep gradients and ideal fall lines that urge you onwards. As far as the black runs go, expert skiers will be fully challenged, endlessly enthralled and utterly satisfied. If you're a powder hound who loves to venture through the many gates dotted along the boundaries, you'll be rewarded with joy-inducing snow up to waist level.

The powder here is superb and I fully understand the fervour of wanting to be the first one down an untouched stretch of piste; it is one of life's ultimate pleasures and happily I got to do it quite often during our six days on the slopes. Even though this was apparently one of the worst snowfalls on record, there was still an abundance of it. It's all relative I guess.

A word of warning – never be tempted to go through a closed gate or under a roped-off area; you will be quickly swooped upon by ski patrol. One morning we watched an overenthusiastic Russian skier duck under a rope to get first off-piste tracks and the patrols were there within seconds. His pass was confiscated and everyone else got the freshies while he was sent off the mountain.

Instructors and service/hospitality workers are mainly expats, but the mountain workers are almost exclusively Japanese. Expect to be helped on the lifts and met off them with a bow and a greeting.

Expansive and Enjoyable

On our second day we explored the Hanazono ski area which, unlike the rest of the mountain, was in brilliant sunshine. Niseko is known for its snow rather than blue skies, so this was a bonus. The

surrounding landscape is impressive and the area is also a popular retreat in the summer months. Although sunny days are somewhat rare in winter, on a clear day you can see across to nearby Mt Yotei, a majestic Fuji lookalike. We enjoyed the privilege.

Hanazono offers long cruisy yet demanding runs, one of my favourites being “Stairway to Heaven”. There are also some steep black runs that go off-piste through the trees, the most well-known being “Strawberry Fields”. Guaranteed fun and daring if you’re up for it. The beginner facilities in this area are second-to-none with wide open spaces and state-of-the-art facilities, including the impressive Hanazono 308 which offers food, drink, retail, information and refuge – everything a skier needs. We could have played here all day, but the rest of the mountain beckoned us back.

Back on Grand Hirafu side we came face to face with a sudden and severe whiteout, my mountain nemesis. Talk about chalk and cheese. We coped our way through it and hotfooted it straight to Boyo-so for a well-earned sake or two. The weather changes constantly on the mountain as does the snow. If there hasn’t been a snowfall in a while, it can get slick and icy in parts but, when the snowflakes come, there is some truly awesome skiing to be had. It can get very cold if there is wind about, but we didn’t struggle too much with temperature issues.

Back at Ki Niseko, we donned the provided *samue* (Japanese wear). It was time to visit the onsen (hot spring bathing facility – no bathing suits allowed). Ki Niseko has its own exclusive spring water source, with a high mineral content, and there are separate male and female onsen, with inside and outdoor baths, saunas and plunge pools. There are also two private onsen which guests can reserve. If your hotel doesn’t have one of their own, there are public onsen in the resort towns. Tired limbs, tranquil setting, onsen rituals and natural spring water make for an après-ski treat that is hard to beat. I’m undecided as to whether spending time soaking in such mineral-rich water is best suited to revival for the night ahead, or something much more soporific.

Hirafu Village Life



Hirafu village is compact and easy to get around, a lively place but not too rowdy. There are a couple of convenience stores, which sell just about everything, including wine, but beware of the nightly “raid” at the end of the day when hungry and thirsty skiers invade. It can get very crowded and goods fly off the shelves, but the camaraderie is infectious. Bigger supermarket stores are in the nearby town of Kutchan (sister city to St Moritz), which is where many of the locals live.

There are plenty of restaurants and ramen bars in town but it pays to book in advance as most of them are small and fill quickly. You can’t go wrong ordering a hearty miso ramen or a tasty katsu curry, but wine options are limited.

Overall, drinks and food are well-priced, and service, whether from a local or an expat, is streamlined and friendly. Not too many local Japanese speak English so if your knowledge of the language is scant, gestures and pointing all become part of the fun.

Toshiro’s Bar is a whisky bar with over 350 bottles lined up behind the counter. Run by a husband and wife team, who serve in Kimono, this bar has exquisite lighting and a sophisticated yet relaxed feel. The cocktails are made to perfection, and the choice of whiskies from Japan and around the world is eye-popping. It’s a truly uplifting experience to enjoy a drink in such a refined environment in a small ski village.

One thing to note is that, despite Japan being a seriously hi-tech country, this is still very much a cash-based place. Credit cards were not welcome in most restaurants and bars, especially up the mountain. There is only one ATM in town that accepts foreign cards, and cash deposits and bonds are required for a number of things. Carry cash! (As at 2017).

The pharmacy stocks a huge range of products, way beyond the pharmaceutical variety. They even have an extensive range of wines. The staff don't speak much English and most of the medications don't have an English translation so, if you get sick, it's not easy to determine what you might need. (Wine and whisky may be the best option!) The pharmacist will help, but it is likely to involve a bit of guess work and trust to determine the best medication for your ailment. There is no English-speaking doctor in town so a trip to the hospital in Kutchan is required, where there are medical staff who speak English. We discovered this because we both got sick over there with head/throat and chest issues. It wasn't what we ordered but we made a few trips to the pharmacy to try to quell the coughs and aches. I'm happy to report that the dreaded lurgies didn't stop us making the most of our ski days, although our apres-ski wasn't quite as lively as usual.

In Summary

The Niseko Village ski resort contains some of the longest ski trails on the mountain with amazing runs through the trees, and Annupuri offers a raft of superbly groomed runs as well as a series of gates that take you to fresh powder tree runs. The base areas at both are well-designed and humming.

A ski resort brings people together effortlessly and is without doubt one of the best places in the world to meet new people and make new friends. Niseko is no exception. It's a well-designed resort with streamlined facilities and a sophisticated air where fun has top priority and sharing tales of days on the slopes is part of daily life.

By the end of the week we have skied just about every run, met a heap of friendly locals and visitors, enjoyed great food and kicked back and relaxed in onsen, bars, and our wonderful apartment.

Accommodation options in Niseko are generally of a good standard, as it's a quality ski resort, but Ki Niseko (opened December 2014) is in a realm of its own and I can't recommend it highly enough. There was a large dose of accommodation envy when we mentioned where we were staying, and rightly so.

The season of our visit didn't generate the serious snowfall that has been the norm but we sampled a wide range of Niseko's fabulous offerings in just one week – and if a “worst” season is that amazing, I can barely begin to imagine how incredible a “best” season might be. I hope I can return to find out!

