

HELLO HOKKAIDO

JAPAN'S NORTHERN-MOST ISLAND WELCOMES A MULTITUDE OF SKIERS EVERY WINTER. HOWEVER, FEW PEOPLE REALISE THE SUMMER MONTHS IN THE SKI REGION OF NISEKO ARE WARM AND IDEAL FOR GOLF.

WORDS: **STEVE KEIPERT**

Golf and Japan represent a curious mix. On one hand, the world knows of the Japanese obsession with our sport and the paparazzi-like pursuit of its superstars, such as Ryo Ishikawa. Yet on the other hand it has a reputation for expensive green fees and a climate seemingly ill-suited to playing the game.

Perceptions can be misleading. During six days last August I was part of a touring group that sweltered in the long, hot summer days of Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido, and enjoyed four rounds of golf in a region that is better known for sensational skiing than golf. It was an eye-opening visit to a land I'd long been intrigued by but never felt overly compelled to visit. I soon found cause to change my mind as before departing, one golf-writer colleague had explained to me why it's his favourite country on earth.

"I would live there half the year if I could," Andrew implored. "It's amazing how many people don't have any desire to go there but nearly everyone who goes there loves it. I fell in love with the place on my first visit in 1998 and have spent more than a year there in total, if you add up all my visits."

Why the attraction? "The people are super polite, everything runs like clockwork, it's extremely safe – almost no crime – there's great food of every cuisine, it's extremely clean and has the best service industry in the world. The rest of the world is basically a dirty, unorganised sewer by comparison. If you don't love it I'll be shocked."

And this remarkably similar evidence from Japan Tour caddie Simon Clarke, who loops for Kurt Barnes: "Japan is a wonderful place to work and to visit; a fascinating, ancient culture that has really worked

something out among themselves on how to exist with such a large population on such a small collection of islands. Their respect for each other is really something to behold. There is no graffiti, very little crime and everything works like clockwork."

WHITE WINTERS, GREEN SUMMERS

Japan is home to about 147 million people but only five million live on Hokkaido, which is an island shaped like a stingray. Hokkaido has about 180 golf courses, so picture a Sydney-sized population with double the number of courses but only half the length of golf season. Niseko, located towards the western edge of the island – roughly where the tail of the 'stingray' joins the body – is an established and popular ski-resort region amid an extensive farming industry that's dominated by potatoes. Niseko is a region rather than a town and is home to several towns dotted throughout the area.

Australian skiers and snowboarders flock to Niseko each winter but fewer golfers arrive each summer, perhaps due to a lack of exposure of all that's on offer. Yet some Aussie golfers have 'found' it. John Barton, an Englishman who has spent the past five years teaching at the Niseko Golf Academy, says he sees one group of Australians every June as they escape the winter at home to play golf in northern Japan.

The ski season lasts from November to as late as the start of May. The lingering, mid-spring end to the season is thanks mostly to the high amount of total snowfall, as 15 to 19 metres of snow descends most winters, which is more than in Alaska. Hokkaido's proximity to Siberia sees it cop the wintry effects of Russia's coldest region. Indeed, from

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FAR LEFT: The scenic Niseko Village course. MIDDLE: Niseko is beautiful under snow in the winter months. LEFT: A commanding view over the region. MAIN: Mt Yotei provides the backdrop to many holes throughout the Niseko region.



ABOVE: The par-6 10th hole at Niseko Village measures some 659 metres from the back pegs and asks the question, can you get there in three shots? RIGHT: Water and sand surround the green at Niseko Village's difficult 382-metre par-4 11th hole.

this western portion of Hokkaido, Russia is just a Bass Strait-like skip across the Sea of Japan.

The summers are short but warm, and the ambition is for the half-dozen golf courses in and around Niseko to complement the outstanding ski season when the snow melts each May to October. In the crossover period of early May, there is a seven-day period known as Golden Week, a designated holiday time when it is possible to ski in the morning then play golf in the afternoon.

Australian Peter Murphy put Niseko on the map in the 1990s and helped develop it into one of the best ski resorts in the world. The energetic skier and surfer would like nothing more than to see Niseko become the Japanese version of Whistler in Canada or Queenstown in New Zealand where the skiing is world-class but the golf is both scenic and exceptional in season. Niseko is now the No. 1 overseas ski destination for Australian skiers and even in our late-summer visit several Aussies were around, including Liam, who hails from Brisbane but has lived in the area for a decade and runs a B&B, while sub-letting a Thai restaurant in Hirafu.

Niseko provides a different Japanese experience to that which many tourists expect because of its slower pace and rural setting. Yet the cleanliness of the streets and friendliness of the Japanese people remain even if there are no neon lights or Bullet Trains here. And, yes, we managed to find a good karaoke bar one night in nearby Kutchan. The variance in the seasonal activities on offer is stark. One day, instead of playing golf, our group went whitewater rafting down a bustling river and afterwards swam in the warm waters of an old volcanic lake at Lake Hangetsuko.

Our group's introduction to Japanese golf didn't take place on a traditional golf course. Dotted around the Niseko region are a handful of 'park golf' courses, a version of the game that is best described as a cross



The long par-3 17th at Hanazono adds strength to the tail end of the round.

between regular golf and croquet. Using croquet-style balls and a mallet-like club, you strike these heavy balls into broad, shallow holes roughly the size of a big dinner plate. Some courses feature obstacles akin to mini-golf and a group of four players can power through nine holes of park golf in about 30 minutes.

Mt Yotei, which is regarded as Hokkaido's version of Mt Fuji because of their similar appearance, is the iconic mountain of the region. As you play each of the Niseko courses, Mt Yotei will disappear from view and then reappear to frame several shots and holes. Capturing Mt Yotei best is **Niseko Village Golf Course**, where summer tee-times start at 4:30am, as the absence of daylight saving sees the sun rise early in this part of the Land of the Rising Sun. These are not member clubs, so you won't fight for tee-times most days. Midweek, the courses are not crowded and 18 holes is easy to squeeze in as well as other attractions, such as kayaking, whitewater rafting, hot-air ballooning and more. Golf in Niseko is also far less expensive than in other parts of the country. A midweek round might set you back A\$60-70.

Playing golf in Japan is different. It's not unusual for 18 holes to extend into an all-day pastime, as the two nines become separated by a long lunch with a lengthy practice-range session preceding play then an 'onsen' mineral bath experience and meal to close the day. Another difference is the little line on the scorecards to note your birthday, while by far the most intriguing facet is the four-person golf carts. When restricted to paths

only, as you almost always are, moving down a fairway can become like a family outing with the driver needing to be certain all three passengers are on board before driving off. On a couple of occasions, our foursome turned around to see the cart parked 50 metres or more behind us because none of us had moved it forward as we located our balls across the fairway and hit our shots. It definitely adds unnecessary time to a round although makes it arguably more social.

Par-4 and 5 holes feature a directional aid in the fairway placed at a consistent distance from the tee to show you the ideal line (although it's usually in the centre of the cut grass, which doesn't always yield the best angle) and to provide a guide as to how far from the tee certain hazards are located.

Many Japanese courses feature narrow fairways with a lot of internal out-of-bounds. After four rounds I came to think of OOB as OOOB, as in, omnipresent out-of-bounds. At Niseko Village for instance, much of the thick, shoulder-high foliage off the fairway is marked as internal OOB and many holes are lined with this vegetation on both sides. And as most OOB posts are positioned half a club-length or so inside where the thick stuff starts, you can find situations, such as I did on the dogleg-right 5th hole, where your ball is just outside the trouble but technically OOB. Hmmm.

Some clubs and courses offer an additional option when you do knock one OOB. A set of yellow tee markers are positioned down the fairway just past the driving zone of the par-4s and 5s and if your tee shot finishes OOB you have the option of playing your *fourth* shot from between these markers instead of the time-honoured institution of hitting three-off-the-tee.

Niseko Village also features another oddity – the par-6 10th hole. At 721 yards (659 metres) and uphill to the green, it is a long slog. A creek crosses the fairway about 80 metres short of the green and the decision becomes whether or not you can reach the green in three. Determined to make at least a par on my first-ever par-6, I tangled with the right rough but still had only 90 metres remaining to cover for my fourth shot. Alas, my sand wedge came up short, as did my chip, and I carded the only seven of my life that cost just one shot to par.

Elsewhere on this very pleasant and enjoyable layout are some little gems. The downhill par-5 2nd hole presents your first glimpse of Mt Yotei, which provides a backdrop to the shot into the green. A couple of the downhill par-3s are both enticing and well designed, but the pick of the holes is the par-4 11th, which descends to a green almost encircled by a narrow bunker that morphs into a water hazard. Your approach from the

top of the hill is likely to be with a mid-iron played off a downslope with all manner of trouble lurking nearby.

The layout is flat in places, which is unusual for a course at the foot of a mountain, and is immaculately groomed, the greens in particular in excellent shape. The design is a little repetitive in places and the complete absence of fairway bunkers makes many tee shots appear and play similarly, especially with the number of silver birch trees lining most fairways and, of course, that ubiquitous out-of-bounds. Yet this is a good golf course in an attractive setting with one of golf's rare par-6s so should be on your Niseko itinerary.

Niseko Tokyu Golf Course (Hanazono) is similar to Niseko Village in that the style of the course is familiar. Once again the course is largely tree-lined, there are few fairway bunkers and areas that really should be marked as lateral hazards are instead staked as out-of-bounds. Don't tell the R&A but in the end our group overruled the Rules of Golf and treated these areas as lateral hazards instead of OOB.

Hanazono rises and falls more than Niseko Village and the design of several holes makes great use of the natural elevation changes. Hanazono also features a terrific set of par-3s, highlighted by the signature 17th, a 214-yarder (196-metre) played from an elevated tee that required drivers for everyone in our group thanks to a strong headwind. There's water short and left and sand to the right and behind the green, placing a premium on a good long iron, hybrid or fairway wood in still conditions. Earlier, the iron shot into the 12th hole is framed by five bunkers positioned in Olympic-ringing formation left of the green. I'm not sure how the officious IOC would feel about this design feature so perhaps keep quiet about that, too.

Hanazono is a very good course in another fantastic setting, but if it lacks one thing it's a gambling par-5 to provide some temptation. Its four three-shotters are more 'golf by numbers' as you drive, lay up to an obvious area and then pitch on as the design spoon-feeds you the strategic decisions and asks you to execute.

Arguably the pick of the Niseko courses is **Rusutsu Resort Riverwood Golf Course's Wood course**. This club has two layouts, the short **River course** and the more robust Wood. Several steep falls and climbs characterise the Wood course as you watch many a drive hang in the Hokkaido air before it plummets to the fairway below. The course is tight off the tee in most places but on the longer holes there is ample space, however, the penalty for a wide miss are those ubiquitous white stakes.

Dual US Open winner Curtis Strange, who supervised the design, notes ♦



FAR LEFT: Your correspondent tries to conquer his first par-6. LEFT: There is little room for error on Niseko Village's par-3 17th hole. BELOW: Arnold Palmer's Niseko course covers undulating land.



PHOTOS: PAUL MYERS; STEVE KEIRTY X 2; SUPPLIED X 3



LEFT & ABOVE: Niseko boasts rafting and golf in summer and skiing in winter. TOP RIGHT: The Rusutsu Tower resort course covers some hilly but interesting terrain, which give rise to some good holes. BOTTOM RIGHT: The well groomed Toya Lake Hill covers hills surrounding the lake.



the setting and layout style on a plaque inside the pro shop from August 1992. "Riverwood was designed to enhance the magnificent beauty of the land by blending each hole with the natural environment. I hope you enjoy this challenging course with its spectacular landscape."

Two of the tougher par-4s stand out. The 372-yard 6th has a deep dip to carry from the tee to find a plateau fairway then a ravenous ravine to fly on the approach. The second shot looks more difficult than it plays as the ravine, which appears to extend all the way to the front of the putting surface, actually ends a good 40 metres or so short of it. The 410-yard 14th is one of the downhill drives on the Wood course with the fairway turning sharply left and uphill over another ravine. The hole plays shorter if you hug the left side from the tee but doing so brings the jungle and a rare Niseko fairway bunker into play. Perhaps most memorable is the tee shot on the par-3 8th. It plays shorter than its 176 yards thanks to a huge drop to the green with Mt Yotei as a backdrop once again.

Our group found the conditioning of the Riverwood courses to be a step above the rest but the greens, although in fine shape, were noticeably slower. Make sure you stay for a while after your round to enjoy a Genghis Khan-style barbecue on the verandah of the clubhouse that overlooks the course. A cook-it-yourself set-up, golfers are provided raw meat and vegetables to cook on a large hotplate embedded in the outdoor table.

A scenic 90-minute drive south of Niseko is Lake Toya and the 27-hole

Toya Lake Hill Golf Course. Parts of this layout offer stunning views of the lake, nearby mountains and even an active volcano. The course features multiple dramatic elevation changes and several holes turn around stands of trees or use sideslopes to impact strategic decisions. Many greens play like three greens in one, such is their size and design, while also being slightly quicker than the putting surfaces at their Niseko counterparts.

Two of the par-3s deserve special mention: the 2nd on the Toya nine, which has a long, narrow green that pinches in the middle and separates the surface into three distinct lobes, plus the long downhill 5th on the Shinzan nine, which requires a heroic long iron or fairway wood to find a green guarded by sand and a sneaky pond short and left. This full-bodied par-3 can stretch as far as 251 yards from the back tee.

I liked Toya Lake Hill's scale, scenery and variety, and its overall quality matched the Niseko courses. Definitely make the effort to play here if time allows as the drive around the edge of the lake and the course itself are absolutely worth the time and travel.

Golf in this part of Japan is very affordable – much more so than many tourists believe – but the trade-off for value is at-times the lacklustre conditioning of the courses. Depending on the severity of the recent weather, patchy fairways and tees can be common but the greens are routinely excellent. So save a few dollars and play some preferred lies and you'll enjoy all the great golf Niseko has to offer. ●



FACT FILE

PLAY HERE:

Niseko Tokyu Golf Course, Hanazono
(www.yoteigolf.com/golf-courses/hanazono)
Niseko Village Golf Course
(www.yoteigolf.com/golf-courses/niseko-village)
Rusutsu Resort, Riverwood Golf Course
(www.yoteigolf.com/golf-courses/riverwood)
Toya Lake Hill Golf Course
Niseko Fukui Golf Course
(www.yoteigolf.com/golf-courses/niseko-fukui)
Rusutsu Resort, Tower Golf Course
(www.yoteigolf.com/golf-courses/rusutsu-tower)

STAY HERE:

Alpen Ridge Apartments (www.alpenridge.com)

DO THIS:

Park golf – part of the "Pure Activities in Nature" at Hilton Resort Niseko Village (www.hilton.com/Niseko-Village)
Whitewater rafting – Noasc Adventure Tours (www.noasc.com)
'Onsen' – a warm mineral bath you'll find at a host of resorts, hotels and golf courses

GETTING THERE:

Cathay Pacific flies to Sapporo, the largest city on Hokkaido, from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane via Hong Kong. Visit www.cathaypacific.com for more details.

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