


japan's deepest secret: **MT MYOKO**

Sounds unbelievable, but Mt Myoko, a massive volcano close to the west coast of Honshu, gets even more snow than Niseko - 14m plus a season - and there are a lot less people chasing it, as **Owain Price** found out



perhaps we should just say we hated it, stay away, repeat stay away!

After years of hearing how deep Niseko gets it we were a bit sceptical about the claims for Mt Myoko getting more, but day one put our minds at ease and day two just blew us away - we lucked out and got first ride on the bubble express quad to the top of **Myoko Suginohara**, the largest, steepest and best of the three areas on Myoko mountain.

Trust me, you can spend all season somewhere and not get that lucky, yet here when they dropped the rope it almost didn't seem to matter as our only competition for fresh lines came from a handful of hot local boarders.

The only off trail skier I saw had telemark gear mounted on a massive pair of spatula style skis, and after pausing for a leak at the top of the chair (not something you normally see in Japan) he was off into the wilderness.

Run after run we lapped in the powder, only seeing our skis on the run-out back at the lift. We found some beautiful lines in the trees and even under the chair - again, not something you normally see in Japan as they pull your pass for it at many areas. Apart from the small posse of local boarders everyone else was way down on the lower slopes, where miles of empty cruising are available served by a long 8 passenger gondola and several more express chairs. Total overkill this day, though presumably on weekends they get a bit more usage.

For a resort powder day to get fresh lines until your thighs can take no more, with zero waiting for lifts and virtually zero competition, is every keen skier's dream and only the chill air and occasional face-plant let us know the whole deal was real.

Perhaps we should just say we hated it, stay away, repeat, stay away! And maybe it would help keep the lid on Japan's deepest powder secret a while longer if we did say that.

But don't count on it - we spotted a couple of Aussie riders in a rental shop, and met a couple of students working on the mountain on exchange visas, who said there were only four Aussies total working in the area, so the discovery process is already getting underway regardless.

Yet with no English language signage and little English spoken around the area or in town, plus being that bit further away, close to the west coast, Myoko probably won't get overrun by Aussies any time soon.

The nightlife is so light on for foreigners that we got away with a karaoke performance (a homage to environment minister Peter Garrett's other career) that in any self-respecting establishment would have provoked a Phillipines style karaoke-rage killing. Still, we had the crowd's tambourines tapping when we switched from Oils to Wham's Last Xmas for our encore. I guess like a lot of Japanese skiing the area is stuck in an 80's time warp. After the second bottle of whisky it sure felt that way anyhow.

japan's deepest secret: MYOKO KOGEN



APOLOGIES TO SKIING READERS, BUT IT WAS ALL BOARDERS IN THE POW HERE, 'OUR CRAIGEY' SHOWING THE FLAG AGAINST SOME HOT LOCALS

Foreigners may still be rare, but the Mt Myoko resorts include one of Japan's oldest and most famous ski areas, Myoko Akakura, which is the favourite ski haunt of the Japanese royal family. Like Klosters is for the next King of Australia (don't laugh, it's true, he'll be Chaz the 1st of Oz & Charlie IV of England), Akakura is for Japan's royals. They block off a wing of the historic and spectacularly positioned Akakura Kanko hotel here, which sits alone on the mid-mountain slopes. The hotel is the best place to stay if you can afford it, but if not just ski past and stop for the very reasonably priced lunch or the delicious patisserie cafe.

Being a volcano, of course onsens are everywhere around Mt Myoko, including many outdoor natural ones and indoor ones in most hotels, making the perfect finish to the unbelievable powder days.

These are big ski mountains, Suginohara offering an 1,124m vertical and runs nearly 9km long, but overall the skiing is pretty cruisy on the main lower slopes, with flat spots to avoid if you are on a board, so if you are good and looking for powder you will stay up high on the top lifts.

Happily they are generally relatively lax on letting you ski the trees at both Suginohara and Akakura, with easy access. Just watch out for the steep, deep gullies and impenetrable scrub lurking ready to snare the unwary. At best you'll have a real struggle and waste half a day getting out, at worst you could do serious damage or just disappear till spring. Since you end up using just a couple of lifts at each area for accessing the good stuff it doesn't take long to get reasonably well orientated, but venturing far above the lifts shouldn't be done without a good local knowledge guide.

Anyone who likes deep snow and doesn't mind a bit of a challenge in terms of not having everything laid on will love it here, and Myoko makes the ideal addition for a few days to a week or so in Hakuba.

For getting here a JR East Pass is all you need, it's just a short 40 minute train trip on from Nagano, then 15 minutes or so to the resorts. Several operators now offer Mt Myoko options, including Deep Powder Tours and Alpine World.

Yokoso!
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