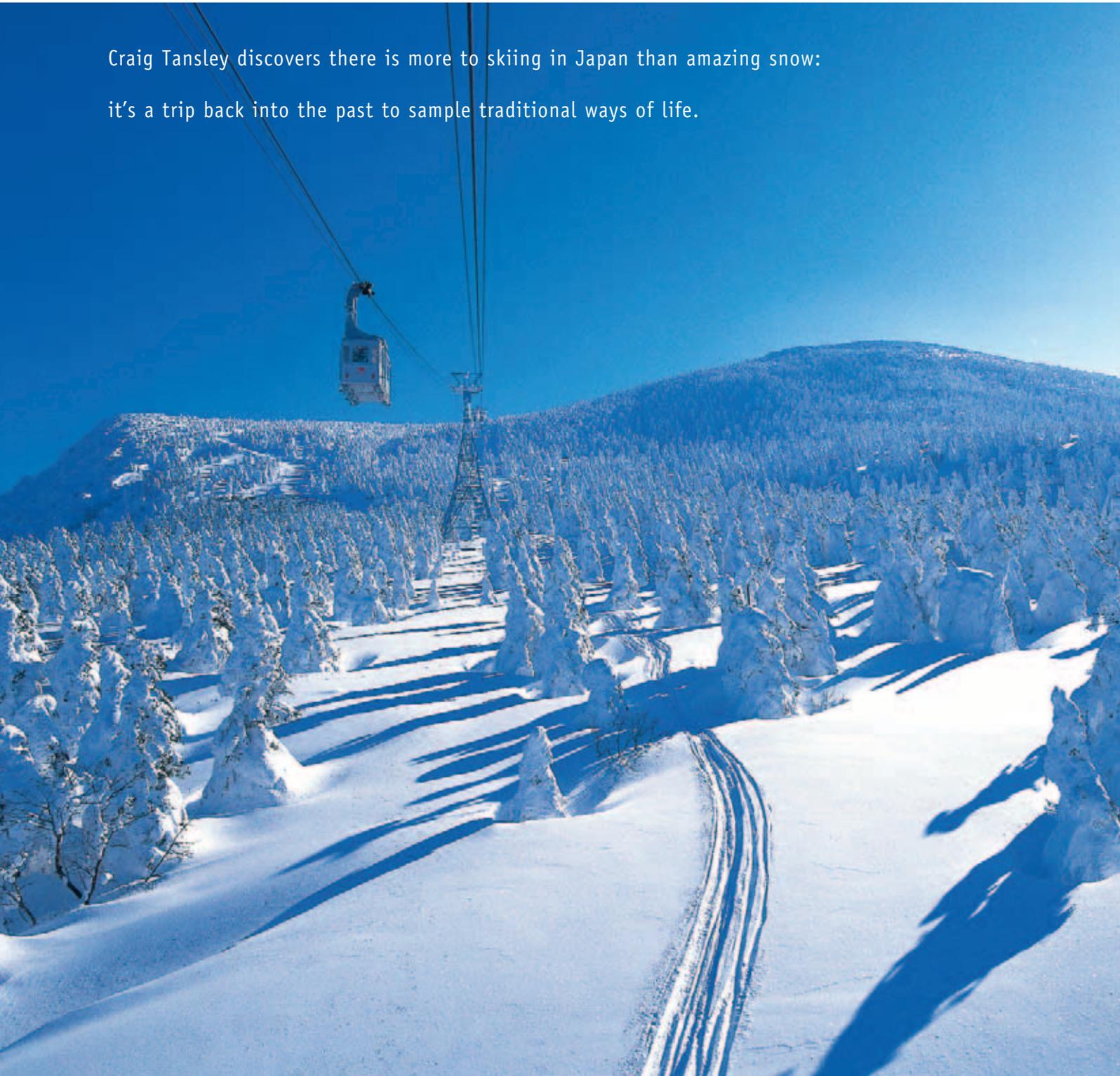


# made in *japan*

Craig Tansley discovers there is more to skiing in Japan than amazing snow:  
it's a trip back into the past to sample traditional ways of life.





**Of all the inventions** credited to the Japanese, it's hard to believe that this one, by far the most cunning, has been overlooked. It smells and shakes and rattles just like a regular train, albeit a faster one, but this is the creation that allows tourists to do what only Hollywood dared believe possible: time-travel.

From the bright, flickering lights of Tokyo, the future's proudest city, where brilliant patterns emerge across entire cityscapes, then disappear, just like that; where the young folk are the snappiest-dressed in the cosmos; where monorail tracks wrap around gigantic skyscrapers like they did in *Blade Runner*; where even toilets look like props from an *X-Men* set (warm seat, anyone... how about a warm



Main: Snow-covered trees at Zao in Yamagata  
Above: Inside the ice cave at Tamamu resort in Hokkaido

spray?), I'm transported, kilometre by kilometre, year by year, to a countryside lost deep in the past.

It happens gradually at first, don't worry about that, but then, the process seems to speed up. Sharp,

modern office blocks dissolve into older apartments – 2009 becomes the 1950s. Bright lights dull and people appear to age: their backs stoop, their dress-sense dwindles. Agricultural blocks emerge about 30 kilometres from Tokyo; old men tend the earth; cars disappear; roads get dirty; trees dot the landscape.

And then a landscape emerges, one where Ninja may well still rule the forests; where temples, not fancy office buildings, rise high into the sky; where the bird noises that were piped into Tokyo's elevators become real; and where the plastic wrap that covered everything in the city with a tangible level of artificiality is stripped back, and an earthy reality hits you square between the eyes. You can smell it in your nostrils.

Likewise on the northern island of Hokkaido: once you leave the modernity of Sapporo's new Chitose International Airport, you're transported into a magical, old world.

Japan must surely be the most schizophrenic country on Earth; a living contradiction of itself. In Tokyo, Osaka and other large cities, Japan provides the blueprint of how our own cities may evolve, at some time in the future. Anything can be bought from a vending machine here; it would be quite possible to go a week without having to speak to another human being. People have become almost obsolete in Japan's cities: personalities seem outdated and ridiculous, a relic of a flashy past.

But get to the Japanese countryside, where you'll find Japan's snowy regions, and everything is reversed. Here, in the snow, you can't get money out of a cash machine; storekeepers sit by shopfronts, occasionally shooing pesky snow monkeys away from their wares and



Above: A view over Niseko

Left: After a day of skiing there's nothing on earth quite like a soak in a hot onsen

Top right: Speeding down a green run at Hakuba

offering *manju* (sweets) to children passing by.

There's an emphasis on personalised service and extreme manners that seems outdated in 2009. Look around at the cobbled streets, lit up like Christmas trees by lanterns; watch the graceful old locals tiptoeing up the streets in wooden slippers and kimonos on their way to and from the local *onsen* (hot-spring baths): this is so different to Mount Hotham or Falls Creek that you might as well be travelling to a parallel universe. And the best thing is that there are more than 600 resorts from which to choose.

That's the thrill of skiing in Japan: it's not so much a skiing experience as an out-of-body one. It is space travel without the rocket ship – find a slice of Japan free from Australian incursion and you could just be Marco Polo. For some travellers, the overload

of culture can prove too much, though nowadays, there are plenty of places you can go to sip VB and watch a football game. But for travellers wanting something different, skiing in Japan is as cultural an experience as riding a rickshaw through the streets of Beijing.

Put that aside for a second, though, and consider the other key component to any ski holiday: snow. There's more of it here – so soft and dry, just try and mould it into snowballs – than there is in any other country on the planet. Australia's favourite Japanese destinations, the snow regions around Nagano, north-west of Tokyo, and on the northern island of Hokkaido, receive over 14 metres of snow in a year.

In five years, Japan has established itself as the powder capital of the world while resorts

such as Shiga Kogen, with its 21 interlinked resorts, gives you a greater choice of ski runs than just about anywhere on Earth. Just because you can't use ATMs here doesn't mean you're compromising your ski experience. Lift tickets here are also much lower-priced than their equivalents in Australia, Europe and North America.

Hakuba, which hosted a variety of events in the 1998 Winter Olympics, is home to 10 ski resorts in one and has more than 200 runs from which to choose (Happo-One gets some of the highest snowfall and has some of the longest vertical pitches in Japan, while Tsugaike and Hakuba Iwatake, with their long, cruising runs, are perfect for intermediate-level skiers).

The island of Hokkaido offers the driest snow of any ski resort in the world, courtesy of storms that come across the sea directly from Siberia.



In four visits here, I've hardly seen my legs; they are generally trapped under waist-deep powder snow. It's only the pitch of the mountains that keeps you moving through it.

On the northern island of Hokkaido, Hokkaido Tomamu Resort is one of the world's most cutting-edge resorts. It even has Japan's biggest indoor wave pool – who

would've thought you could surf and ski at the one destination? There's far more to do here than lounge in an *onsen*: you can take snowmobile tours, dog-sledding rides, go fishing on the lake and hot-air ballooning, or take the kids to play in an ice dome village.

Japan also offers snowboarders and skiers some of the most advanced

freestyle parks in the world. Alts Bandai is the biggest, and bills itself as the 'number one' park destination in Asia. Alts boasts Asia's first Burton Progression Park as well as Global Park, with its six-metre-high super half-pipe, where you can watch the world's best snowboarders compete.

Meanwhile, at Nozawa Onsen, there's a choice of more than 30 *onsen* in which to soak your weary muscles; there are also more than 50 kilometres of slopes. Then there is Niseko on the island of Hokkaido. It's easy to understand why this was the resort that first attracted Australians *en masse* to Japan; it's rare to go two successive nights in this part of the world without a snowstorm dumping flakes the size of fists.

But it's the things you weren't expecting from Japan that always stay with you.

I'd heard about the snow but wasn't prepared for how it felt to scrub myself clean alongside 20 naked Japanese men, before sitting outside in a steaming-hot volcanic spring.



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I'd been told of the passion with which the Japanese take to the 'sport' of karaoke but it wasn't until I was challenged to a late-night karaoke contest in Nozawa Onsen that I truly understood. It became a question of honour: me, a fresh-faced Australian snowboarder, pitted against a mournful, scarred former Olympic skier. As we matched each other, *skoll* for *skoll*, with hot *sake*, this became a war of attrition. Needless to say, he wore me down: I chose poorly with George Michael's *Careless Whisper*; his dark, soulful Japanese love song had the room of locals reaching for their tissues.

I knew there were ski areas in Japan that rarely see Westerners but it wasn't till I ate a meal of the strangest meats I'd ever tasted while three families of wide-eyed children watched me eat every mouthful, barely daring to believe I used chopsticks just like them, that I realised I was an oddity in these parts.

I'd heard the Japanese had some strange customs but it wasn't till I nearly killed an elderly man in Furano that I understood their importance. I'd been warned that when drinking with a Japanese person, you must be sure to fill that person's drink for them when it's empty: in Japan, custom dictates that a person should never refill his or her own cup. It

wasn't till after 10 beers, when the old man's face had turned bright red, that his wife stopped me pouring and told me he had a heart condition and wasn't supposed to touch alcohol. If it hadn't been for her, his honour would've dictated that the old gent drank until he dropped.

It's the sum of all these parts that makes any ski trip to Japan a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Here, you're experiencing an extraordinary traditional culture while skiing on the deepest, softest snow on Earth.

It's the birch trees. It's the snow-ploughs that work day and night just to clear the roads for you to get through. It's the steaming bowls of rice; it's a fresh crab *ramen* after a morning of minus-20-degrees-Celsius, chest-deep powder. But most of all, it's the journey from the world's most advanced cities to places that time forgot; where old-fashioned Oriental values still account for more than any computer chip and skiing becomes secondary to life's real priorities – such as soaking naked in a hot tub and singing shockingly bad karaoke. •

*Photography courtesy Snowave and Japan National Tourist Organisation*

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Japan Airlines, phone 1300 525 287 or go to [www.jal.com.au](http://www.jal.com.au)  
Jetstar, phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com](http://www.jetstar.com)  
Qantas, phone 13 1313 or visit [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)

### gettingaround

Deep Powder Tours, phone 02 9525 9774 or visit [www.deepowdertours.com](http://www.deepowdertours.com)  
Ski Max, phone 02 9267 1655 or visit [www.skimax.com.au](http://www.skimax.com.au)  
Travelplan, phone 1300 754 754 or visit [www.travelplan.com.au](http://www.travelplan.com.au)

### wheretostay

Club Med Sahoro has packages that include ski passes and lessons. Phone 1300 855 052 or visit [www.clubmed.com.au](http://www.clubmed.com.au)  
In Niseko, stay metres from the chairlift in the cosy Niseko Alpine Apartments. Phone 1300 137 411 or visit [www.snowave.com](http://www.snowave.com)  
The Windsor Hotel TOYA is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World. Phone 1800 222 033 or visit [www.lhw.com](http://www.lhw.com) or [www.windsor-hotels.co.jp/en/toya](http://www.windsor-hotels.co.jp/en/toya)

### wheretoski

Tomamu, visit [www.snowtomamu.jp](http://www.snowtomamu.jp)  
Alts Bandai, visit [www.alt.co.jp](http://www.alt.co.jp)  
Niseko, visit [www.niseko.ne.jp](http://www.niseko.ne.jp)  
Nozawa Onsen, visit [www.nozawaski.com](http://www.nozawaski.com)  
Hakuba, visit [www.ski-hakuba.com](http://www.ski-hakuba.com)  
Furano, visit [www.skifuranojapan.com](http://www.skifuranojapan.com)

### furtherinformation

JTB Oceania International has a range of holiday ski packages to Japan. Phone 1300 739 3300 or visit [www.japantravel.com.au](http://www.japantravel.com.au)  
Snowave has skiing and snowboarding packages in Japan. Phone 1300 137 411 or visit [www.snowave.com](http://www.snowave.com)  
Japan National Tourist Organisation, visit [www.jnto.go.jp/syd/](http://www.jnto.go.jp/syd/)



Left: The Ice Village at Tomamu in Hokkaido