



Niseko with the snow-capped Mt Yotei in the distance.

MOUNTAIN RETREAT

POWDER SKIING IN JAPAN

BORED OF SUMMER ALREADY? THEN FLY FOR WINTER ON A TRIP THAT PACKS MORE A-GRADE SNOW THAN TONY MONTANA.

"Perisher with chopsticks" is how a colleague described Hirafu, one of four ski resorts that comprise Niseko on Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido.

It's a region famed for its annual deluge of snow – a dumping equalled by the number of goggle-wearing Aussies who now land there each season in search of superior white stuff.

Yet here, at the Hilton's delightful Sisam Japanese restaurant, feasting on grilled scallops with truffle sauce, bogans and their collective predilection for garish ski kit have been welcomingly replaced by the stylish local set.

The reason? This isn't Hirafu per se, but Niseko Village: an exclusive resort on the same mountain (Mt Annupuri) that attracts discerning clientele who

prefer fine dining and ski-in/ski-out convenience over sake shots and blurry karaoke.

To ski Japan is to ski powder. But is it as good as claimed? Short answer – yes.

We won't spend the next half page waxing lyrical about the grin-inducing highs that come with navigating knee-deep champagne powder – except to say it feels so good you'll think it should be illegal. Oh, and you'll probably never again point a car in the direction of the so-called Australian Alps.

All four of Niseko's resorts are interconnected, delivering 72 runs spread across 887 hectares. Best yet – for those not *au fait* with black diamonds – beginner and intermediate runs make up 74 per cent of the terrain. For advanced skiers, there's an

innovative program that allows you to tackle more extreme slopes – though you'll need to first sit a one-hour avalanche safety course.

From wide-open and sweeping groomers to narrow, snaking tree-lined chutes, the runs are nicely varied. Boarders are well looked after with more than 10 terrain parks – think kickers, rails, boxes, jumps and half-pipes – and there are also two designated kids areas.

The one thing you won't experience, generally speaking, is a string of blue-sky days. Niseko scores 16-18m of snow each year (Colorado's Vail and Chamonix in France get around nine) meaning if it's not already snowing, it will be soon. The good news is these fronts are whipped over from Siberia –

delivering snow so dry it blows off your hand. And when the skies do occasionally clear, the horizon is dominated by the mesmerising sight of Mt Yotei, a 1900m snow-capped volcano much like the formidable and picturesque Mt Fuji.

Part of Niseko Village's exclusivity is the fact there are only two accommodation options – the imposing 506-room Hilton and the more discreet 200-room Green Leaf.

While the Hilton's exterior is a cross between a grain silo and a missile launcher, inside is a welcoming haven of Japanese courtesousness with an impressive foyer and suspended fireplace. There are seven restaurants, ranging from casual buffets to upscale gourmet – plus several bars including Snow Lounge, an



THE FACTS

GETTING THERE

Korean Air flies to Chitose via Seoul. Niseko is then a 2-3 hour drive (100km). koreanair.com

ACCOMMODATION

Hilton Niseko Village or **Green Leaf Niseko Village**. hilton.com; thegreenleafhotel.com

TOP TIP

Try the resort in March – a slight gamble snow-wise, but the pay-offs are fewer tourists, shorter queues and a more “Japanese” experience.



From top: Niseko Village's Hilton hotel; a decent snowfall; Hirafu, one of Niseko's four ski resorts.



igloo-style creation sculpted from snow and ice by local artist Hirohiko Takenaka. Inside it's a magical grotto of frozen columns, soft lighting and the sort of nooks and crannies ideal for some serious après-ski shenanigans – were you not wearing five fiddly layers.

The Green Leaf, meanwhile, is quite low-key with just one restaurant and an intimate lounge bar where you can sip cocktails on a burnished chesterfield before a flickering fire. A recent renovation introduced striking graphic installations by Emi Shiratori, and each and every room now features a print by local artist Soichiro Tomioka.

Both properties have spas and gyms but it's the outdoor efforts that are the real crowd-pleasers. If anyone's found a better way of relaxing after a day on the slopes than watching the sunset from a steaming 40°C geothermal-fed pool, do let us know.

For all-important après-ski, there's the Hilton's Ezo bar – though you'll find livelier fare – and Aussies – in Hirafu. It's an easy trip by free shuttle and on our last night we bar hop between an unexpectedly eclectic mix of establishments. Highlights include Barn, a sexy, upscale Manhattan-style restaurant and cocktail bar with an impressive wine list, and Fridge Door Bar, a homely, friendly joint which (no prizes for guessing) you enter via a fridge door. Fridge's Baileys-infused hot chocolate is Beyoncé-level sexy, in a mug.

We finish the night in the Asian-inspired blo*blo, in a room artfully adorned with '60s soft porn. One hand cradles a wickedly potent cocktail containing yuzu fruit while the other hangs from a stripper pole. Now, you can't say that happens in Perisher. ■

THE EUROPEAN ALTERNATIVE

Prefer strudel over sushi? Head to Austria's Arlberg, a winter playground draped over the Tyrolean Alps, where Hannes Schneider invented modern ski techniques in the early 1900s and established the world's first ski school in 1920.

The region is made up of five villages (St Anton, Lech, Zürs, St Christoph and Stuben), all of which have access to a thigh-burning 280km of slopes and 180km of off-piste terrain.

St Anton is the most cosmopolitan of the five and the pick of the bunch for restaurants and night-life, set against the town's traditional, low-rise alpine architecture.

For lodgings, try Valluga Hotel (vallugahotel.at), a chalet-style property whose traditional exterior belies its contemporary interiors. For fine-dining, go to the Museum St Anton (museum-stanton.com), a 1912 villa that is now part-museum, part-elegant eatery.

St Anton claims to have invented après-ski and a stumble down its main drag reveals no shortage of options. Two refined offerings are Hotel Post (hotel-post.co.at) and the new, three-storey Murrel Bar (murrel.at). That's assuming you survive the ski down after the on-slope carnage at Krazy Kanguruh (krazykanguruh.com).