

Ski & sushi

JAPAN'S NORTHERN ISLAND OF HOKKAIDO IS KNOWN FOR ITS GREAT POWDER SKIING, BUT IT IS ALSO THE SOURCE OF SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S FINEST SEAFOOD, SAYS KATE CROCKETT



y hands are defrosting around a bowl of steaming carbohydrate that smells like the most delicious thing I'll ever eat. I'm ravenous. The door swings open and in tramp four snowboarders in a swirl of powder snow; helmets and gloves are pulled off and jackets hung, like mine, beside the old wood stove in the centre of the room as they call out their lunch orders. The elderly proprietor calls back. It's cosy in the hut – the perfect place to recharge after a busy morning's skiing. But here it's not tartiflette and fondue that fuel the afternoon's adventures but rice topped with salmon roe and thick, slippery udon noodles with mountain vegetables.

KATE CROCKETT, JINGO, NISEKO PROMOTION BOARD

I'm in Boyo-so, the oldest hut on Mt Niseko-Annupuri, an extinct volcano that is the hub of Niseko ski resort, on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido is Japan's second-largest island and the country's frontier land; Mt Niseko-Annupuri is covered by snow up to four months of the year. It's a mild 2°C outside but it is windy and snow is still falling, topping up the many metres already beneath my skis. I've spent the morning exploring with my guide Rupert, a British instructor in his second season. Like me, he was drawn to Niseko by its reputation as one of the world's best destinations for powder skiing but also its relaxed atmosphere and cosmopolitan crowd. He's also here for the food, hence he's brought me to his favourite place on the piste. We've both ordered tempura soba, hearty buckwheat noodles topped with a huge prawn in crisp, golden batter. It's simple but delicious.

Recharged, we speed towards the summit via the Hirafu Gondola and a series of chairlifts. At the snow-park boundary, Rupert wants to hike to the 1,308m summit to view the vast backcountry playground that drops off the back of Mt Niseko-Annupuri. We reach the ceremonial bell at 1,000m, but get no further: the weather has closed in and the lifts have shut. In the whiteout, we head down, via the network of red

AT THE SUMMIT, A VAST BACKCOUNTRY PLAYGROUND DROPS OFF THE BACK OF OF MT NISEKO-ANNUPURI



3 OF THE BEST

NISEKO RESTAURANTS

1. KAMIMURA

A long-established favourite in Hirafu and its chef-patron – Hokkaido native Yuichi Kamimura, who once worked at Tetsuya in Sydney – is still at the top of his game. Expect multi-course fine dining on Hokkaido's best produce, reflecting the minutiae of the changing seasons. For a less formal taste of Yuichi's cuisine, his second eatery, Bistro Kutchan Sakaba, in nearby Kutchan town serves Japanese-style tapas. kamimura-niseko.com

2. RAKUICHI SOBA

This 12-seat soba shop, located in a rural setting in the Annupuri resort area, is run by elderly soba master Tatsuru Rai and his wife and is a local institution. The dough is prepared fresh daily and the noodles are cut and cooked as you watch from the counter. Try the hot duck noodles. The soba is so good that there is always a queue from long before opening (11.30am) until the lunchtime dough runs out – usually well before the official 3pm closing time. Rakuichi is also open for dinner from 5pm: sweet-talk your concierge into securing you a reservation. [431 Niseko, Niseko-cho, Abuta-gun; 00-81-136-58 3170](http://431-niseko.com)

3. SESSA

Newly opened in 2015, this is the best-value lunch in Hirafu. The £7.50 set menu includes Wagyu beef sukiyaki, Hokkaido scallops and other seasonal seafood (including puffin fish when we were there) – and that's just the appetiser! sessa.boj.jp



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Mt Yotei provides a dramatic backdrop. The hot spring at Ki Niseko, discreetly hidden from view behind a snow drift. Boyo-so hut on Mt Niseko-Annupuri is a charming spot for a hearty bowl of noodles. OPPOSITE Niseko is one of Japan's most popular resorts for off-piste skiing. The lounge at Moku no Sho ryokan

and green runs, to Hirafu, the base for my stay. We're not alone; in fact, in Niseko it is usual to ski from around 8.30am until 2pm and then retire for a restorative soak in a hot spring.

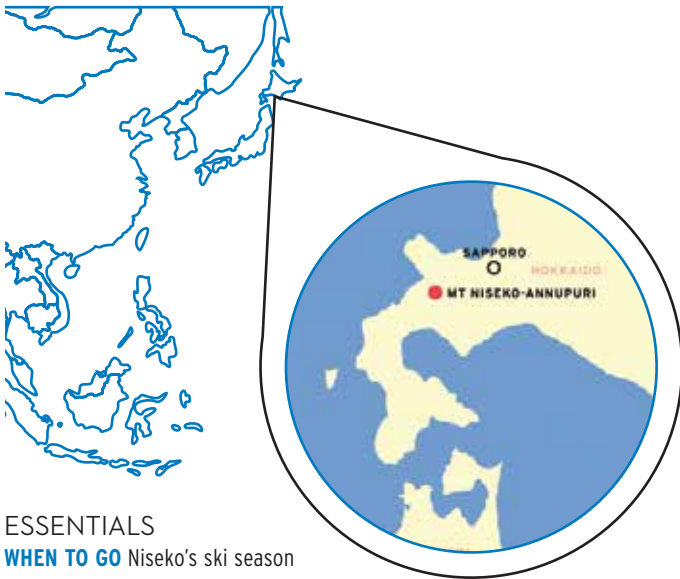
Hirafu is one of the four main resorts – alongside Niseko Village, Niseko Annupuri and Hanazono – that cluster at the base of Mt Niseko-Annupuri. It is also the largest and liveliest, and the location of most of Niseko's finest eateries – one of

DESTINATIONS

JAPAN

which, An Dining, just happens to be within the hotel in which I am staying, the smart Ki Niseko, which is entering its second season. An Dining is the domain of Shinichi Maeda, a young Hokkaido chef with a passion for local produce. That evening I sample his signature multi-course menu, which is a roster of the great and the good of Hokkaido's winter delicacies, such as scallops, surf clams, sea urchin and king snow crab. By the time the rare black Wagyu beef – reared on the wild Shiratoko peninsula in Eastern Hokkaido – is served, I'm full, and more than impressed by the island's abundance.

'The produce here is good enough already so you do not need to do too much,' smiles Shinichi, as he pours a local sake he's just discovered. 'Our winter seafood is exceptional but it's also great in summer.' That's reason enough to return. ☉



ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

Niseko's ski season lasts from late November until the first week in May, with Chinese New Year by far the busiest time. Visit in February and March when there are fewer crowds, more sunny days and the snow is still falling.

HOW Stay in Western-style, ski-in, ski-out hotel Ki Niseko (kiniseko.com) which opened last season a snowball's throw from the Hirafu Gondola. Doubles from £200. Or go native and stay at Moku no Sho (mokonusho.com/en), a stunning contemporary Japanese inn, a 10-minute drive from the Annupuri resort area. Doubles from £121. Niseko is a one-hour, 45-minute drive from New Chitose airport, south of Sapporo. Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.co.uk) flies five times a week between London and Sapporo via Hong Kong. For more information on travel to Japan, visit seejapan.co.uk.



FROM TOP Fresh seafood from chef Maeda at Ki Niseko. The hotel exterior. View from the piste



SKIING IN NISEKO

WHAT TO EXPECT

QUIETER SLOPES than the Alps. **ENGLISH-LANGUAGE** ski lessons and guiding, with mostly Australian, New Zealand and British instructors.

HELMETS – most people wear one.

NEW INFRASTRUCTURE, such as the Hirafu Gondola and heated pavements in the main town, but still lots of old hooded chairlifts.

CHALET RENTAL a third of the price of Europe, with lift passes approximately half the price.

FREE WIFI on board all resort shuttle buses, which are free to use with a lift pass.

APRES-SKI CULTURE that revolves around restaurants and bars in the evening rather than en-route down from the mountain.

ACTIVITIES FOR NON-SKIERS AND CHILDREN, including snow shoeing, sledging, snow-tubing, snowmobiling (including mini ones for children). Plenty for adrenaline seekers, such as heliskiing, cat skiing (taking a snow tractor/piste basher to less-accessible areas of the mountain) and even a snowkite school.



FRESH FROM HOKKAIDO TO TOKYO

Even if you are not venturing north, Hokkaido's seafood makes up a large share of that sold at Tokyo's remarkable Tsukiji market, which is earmarked for closure in November 2016 (for a move to new premises) and is well worth a visit before it's gone forever. Sample a famous Tsukiji sushi breakfast in one of the market's best sushi shops with a guide from Inside Japan (insidejapantours.com) who will whisk you in through the back door (to avoid the two-hour queue out the front) for a feast of the freshest tuna, squid, shellfish and prawn that you will ever taste. If a seafood breakfast is not your thing, the Andaz Tavern inside the nearby Andaz Tokyo hotel (tokyo.andaz.hyatt.com) features Hokkaido specialities such as scallop, hairy crab, sea urchin, monk fish and wild venison on its hearty pub-style menu of comfort dishes, perfect for winter.