

More than just Good Powder

Skiers and snowboarders are happy to go the distance for the good stuff, but that sort of effort needs to be rewarded. Among the many ski resorts, there are still a few that have a great local culture to explore. After all, isn't that what we really travel for?

PARK CITY, UTAH

I'm afraid of Park City, Utah. Yes, I've come for what marketers dub "the greatest snow on earth", but a girl still likes a drink after a day on the hill.

Utah is a Mormon state where polygamy and the Osmond clan once ruled. Brigham Young led the first party of Mormon emigrants across the Wasatch Range to settle on the Salt Lake of Utah in 1847, a mere half-hour from Park City. Followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are forbidden to drink alcohol, and in a place where religion and state are so closely linked I fear that the chances of rum and Coke getting together are slim.

Stepping onto Park City's Main Street for the first time, I swear I am on a movie set. It is the kind of town where everything is perky and apple pie. Then I notice the

architecture, old mining town facades in their original state, with the odd new coat of paint. Where there are miners there are saloons, or so it goes in the movies.

When silver was discovered in the Wasatch Range in the late 1860s, Park City became the camp for thousands of thirsty non-Mormon miners out to make their fortune. Hard-working men who live underground need their creature comforts, and as Park City grew so did thriving alcohol and bordello industries. When the Great Depression set in it was left to the ski resorts to save Park City from total ruin. No ski town would survive without booze, so Park City has remained the black sheep of the Utah family.

It's easy to get around the strict Mormon-inspired state government licensing laws. Park City bars run as private clubs and

you sign yourself in. Mixed drinks are made with a shot of spirits small enough to please the regulators, and you order a 'sidecar' shot of the same straight spirit to add to it.

It feels complicated to start but it's not long before "vodka and tonic with a sidecar of vodka" begins to roll off my tongue. I'm not usually this obsessed with alcohol, honestly, it's just that when you think you can't have something, you want it even more. In a state filled with social taboos, Park City combines politics, religion and sport without offending.

www.parkcityinfo.com

NOZAWA ONSEN, HONSHU, JAPAN

Japan has anywhere between five and seven hundred ski fields, depending who you talk to. But I'm only interested in one, the birthplace of skiing in Japan - Nozawa Onsen on the main island of Honshu.

The story goes that a monk discovered the hot thermal springs in 724AD and ailing pilgrims followed, seeking the springs' healing qualities. The cobbled lanes of Nozawa Onsen's village have changed little since then. Five hours from Tokyo, this 5000-strong farming village is now home to 30 private and public hot spring onsens and one kick-ass ski field. One ancient Buddhist cemetery and laneways just wide enough for a horse-drawn cart mark the village centre. Locals use the central thermal spring to cook rice and boil their breakfast eggs; the rest of us take off our ski boots and soak our frozen

feet in the public foot onsens that line the narrow streets.

For the past 140 years on 15 January, the Dōsojin Fire Festival has had the town's 25- and 42-year-old males quivering in their boots. Both ages are considered unlucky in Japan and these villagers have concluded that their punishment should involve being tied to a tower made from wood which is then set alight. I'm invited to witness the lighting of the fire at the village elder's home, in the company of the high priests. It's rare to have a *gaijin* (foreigner) in these hallowed halls, let alone a woman. I feel particularly privileged.

Once the tower is lit, the unlucky sake-sozzled men carry a burning torch through a crowd of villagers. They then light a mammoth bonfire and the 42-year-

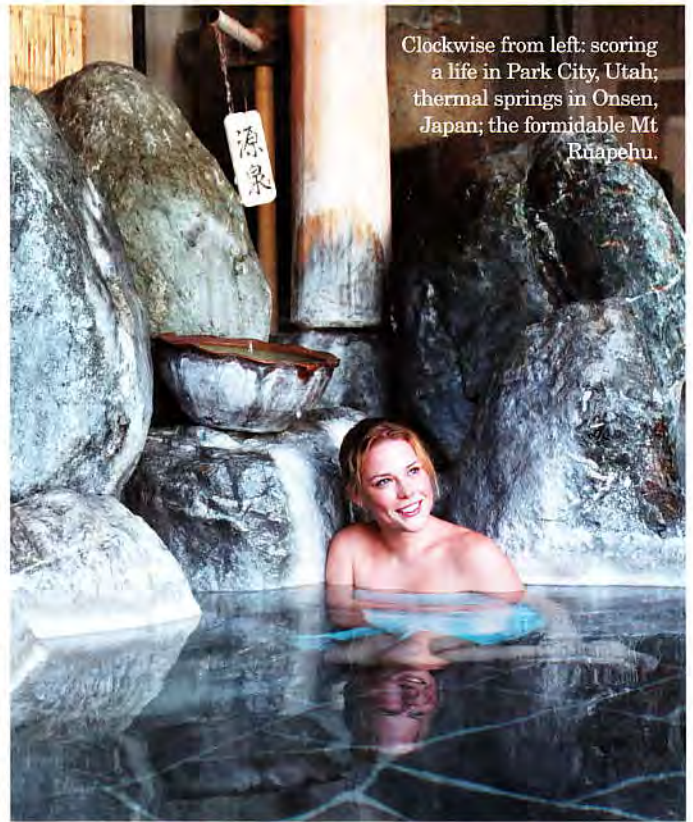
olds climb to the top of the tower while the 25-year-olds guard them from below. The other local males charge the tower, trying to light it with flaming torches and the crowd becomes increasingly frenzied. It all takes three hours. The men escape, and the town's handful of bars are filled with charred locals in need of a drink.

I ask the family who own the Ryokan I am staying in what the point is. All they do is nod their heads and point at me then at the television, saying "TV star, TV star". Apparently the local news crew has caught my own sake-drinking ceremony on film. It seems that technology is now fighting with tradition for attention in this old feudal town. Get there before it wins.

[www.vill.nozawaonsen.nagami.jp/inf/english/start.htm](http://www.vill.nozawaonsen.nagami.jp/inf/en/english/start.htm)

Hitting the slopes in an explosion
of snow at Park City, Utah.





Clockwise from left: scoring a life in Park City, Utah; thermal springs in Onsen, Japan; the formidable Mt Ruapehu.



MT RUAPEHU, NEW ZEALAND

Mt Ruapehu has *mana* (that's Maori for power). With a mountain-load of hot lava, it should have. This impressive and active volcano rises from the plains in the middle of New Zealand's North Island, flanked to the north by Mt Ngauruhoe, known to *Lord of the Rings* devotees as Mt Doom. There's something extreme about skiing an active volcano that erupted last September ... even if its seismic activity is constantly monitored and the ski field is closed if it's about to explode.

Mt Ruapehu is home to the country's largest ski fields, Turoa and Whakapapa (the 'wh' is pronounced 'f'). Together they offer over 1000 hectares of ski-able terrain. The Whakapapa Pinnacles are revered around the country for their steep narrow chutes; freeskiers compete in the Marmot Extreme championships here every year.

More relaxed skiers prefer the groomed natural half-pipes and open rolling snow dunes created by solidified lava.

The mountain's ski town, Ohakune, is home to only 1400 locals, who I assume are not all related. As I arrive in Ohakune I pass the giant carrot, a fibreglass shrine to the town's fame as the 'carrot capital' of New Zealand.

A night out on Ohakune's Thames Street introduces me to 'Dribble', 'Little Hands' and 'Chubb', locals who come with a story told for the price of a beer. Thames Street is a short strip of two pubs, the Projection Room fusion bar and a handful of restaurants. The bars close for the summer.

Five nights here and I've skied three magic, thigh-burning days. The other days I spend hanging in Utopia cafe with others

dressed to ski, but we're all sent back down when the mountain is closed due to wind. It would seem Mt Ruapehu rumbles from outside and in. *Mana* decides when you can ski and when you can't and in a town like Ohakune, you don't want to mess with *mana*.

www.mtruapehu.com