

**traveller's checks**

**Getting there:** Australian Airlines flies from Cairns to Sapporo twice a week. Connecting flights from Melbourne are about \$1800 plus taxes. [www.australianairlines.com.au](http://www.australianairlines.com.au) or 13 13 13  
Japan Rail has trains to Furano from Sapporo airport station. [www.japanrail.com](http://www.japanrail.com)  
**Staying:** North Country Inn has traditional accommodation. Transfers can be arranged from Sapporo airport.  
**Check:** Sumio Museum of Art exhibits, but take your bank manager. Only a seven-figure sum will buy anything. [www.goto.sumiomuseum.com](http://www.goto.sumiomuseum.com)  
**More information:** Furano Tourist Association, [www.furano.ne.jp/kankou/english/](http://www.furano.ne.jp/kankou/english/)



# Bed and 'board

*Snow bunnies with a penchant for nudity should come to Furano, writes Rachael Oakes Ash*

japan

POWDER hound Luke Hurford can't believe his luck. Taking the wrong bus 3½ years ago from Japan's Sapporo city landed him in the snowboarding mecca of Furano. One run down the powder slopes and he unpacked his bags.

Furano, on the northern island of Hokkaido, isn't a ski resort, it's more a traditional Japanese village that happens to have an awesome ski field.

It's the kind of town where locals don't own house keys.

When I meet Luke at the local store for a "hot can of coffee" from the vending machine, the owners are shaking his hand and pointing at his picture in the paper.

As the only white man in town, Luke finds himself followed regularly by documentary crews and stalked by journalists.

It's all in good fun, but legendary status has its drawbacks, as we strap on our skis and head for Furano's 27km of groomed runs. Ski patrol are on our backs, spotting the boundary-pushing Luke and his foreigner guest.



**Flying solo:** (above) many runs are skied solo and views are breathtaking.

**Naked pleasure:** (above left) onsens are natural hot springs.

**Meltdown:** (left) in summer Furano's fields fill with lavender.

Luke likes to go off-piste, and I join him, but first we must shake off ski patrol in a bizarre game of hide and seek within the snow.

Japanese don't like to break rules and, when we sneak behind the ropes, even ski patrol don't want to follow, but they are waiting at the bottom to give Luke a tsk tsk when we arrive.

What follows is three hours of some of the best skiing I have experienced, not just because of Furano's annual average 9m of dry powder snow, but because there is no lift queue.

Many runs are skied solo as though the hill is my own private playground, and the views of farmland are breathtaking.

Luke is like a kid in a candy shop. His enthusiasm seems to grow the longer he stays — and mine goes along for the ride.

It's not often a woman gets naked with a man within three hours of meeting him, but naked I get.

The locals have placed an illegal pipe into the hot springs of the a volcano, filling a rock pool in the parkland with hot water.

Luke takes me on a 300m trek along the volcanic hills behind Furano through shoulder-high snow banks. A quick moonlit strip and a jump in the water make us as fresh as the day we were born.

As the snow falls on our heads, there is not a sound to be heard.

This is a truly natural onsen, or Japanese bath. But for those who are more modest, there are single-sex onsens nearby.

Alas, 24 hours in Furano is long enough only to taste karaoke in private rooms, cheese fondue at the North Country Inn and drinks at Sol's Bar for Miserable Smokers.

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**Cover:** Rock climbing

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