

WASABI POWDER

AS JAPAN'S MOST NORTHERN ISLAND, AND IN LINE WITH SIBERIA, HOKKAIDO GETS A LOAD OF SNOW. UP TO FOURTEEN METRES PER SKI SEASON, TO BE PRECISE. **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH** INVESTIGATES.

While the majority of travellers on my flight to Sapporo are heading west to Niseko, I, am heading east. Japan has over seven hundred ski fields and when making the two hour rail journey from Sapporo to Shintoku it's easy to see why. Many small villages sit at the base of a hill that features a single ski run and one chair lift. Not enough to keep this ski bunny happy.

A twenty minute drive from Shintoku train station, Sahoro is a purpose built ski field with only two hotel resorts at the base of the hill and not much else. I am to lay my ski beanie at Club Med Sahoro, an all-inclusive resort with a ski camp feel.

Welcome to Japan where everything is regimented and group activities are a given. Stand solo on the hill with skis strapped to your feet for longer than a second and a line of Japanese skiers will stop beside you as though in a class and waiting for the instructor.

Forget anything you know about Asia, Japan is another world, a different planet. Hello Kitty is a national pastime, love hotels exist by the hour for the amorous couples living with extended family, vending machines serve hot coffee in a can and toilet ablutions are drowned out with movement sensed musical speakers lest another person hear you ablate.

The snow is some of the best in the world, dry powder that falls by the bucket load and feels like air under the feet. Romeo is my Club Med ski instructor, pronounced Roh-may-oh, an Australian with an Italian history. Many times we find ourselves alone on runs, not a soul around, skiing first tracks even though it's already mid morning. I pinch myself often.



For the beginner and intermediate skier, Sahoro provides easy transition between levels. The groomed runs are picture perfect providing the most fun on the edge of each run where the Japanese dare not go, meaning pockets of powder in which to play. And no lift queues. For the seasoned skier, Sahoro can be skied in a day. The challenge comes when the snow dumps overnight; the same runs feel brand new under fresh snow and when it keeps dumping then off piste provides both clear and tree runs in thigh deep powder that change every hour.

Club Med offers its usual all inclusive fare with three meals a day, accommodation, lift passes and daily group lessons but the difference with Sahoro Club Med is the ski instructors entertain guests by night in cabaret style shows, dine with them at breakfast, lunch and dinner and dance when the disco is open. Who knew Romeo could ski by day and line dance, Irish jig and make a rabbit disappear by night?

It's a bit like I imagine American 'spring break'. Come bedtime, and the instructors descend upon the bar, waiting for guests, such as myself, to buy them drinks. No doubt there are a lot of sober instructors now I have left the resort for I hate to partake alone.

Sahoro has served its purpose, providing me with an appetite for Japanese snow

but Luke Hurford and Furano provide the cream on the cake. An hour west of Sahoro, this country town is known as the belly button of Hokkaido for its dead centre location on the island. Three and a half years ago Luke jumped on a bus at Sapporo. Unable to read Japanese he prayed he was heading in the right direction. The bus stopped at Furano. What he first thought to be a sleepy Japanese country town turned out to be a snow sports Mecca. One run down the slopes and he unpacked his duffel bag and set up camp. I meet the legendary Luke at Furano's local 7 Eleven where he shouts me hot coffee in a can. As the original westerner in town, Luke finds himself followed regularly by documentary crews and stalked by journalists of the Japanese variety. "There goes the crazy white man," they say as he throws himself off cliffs.

First timers to Furano need not despair: Luke has set up Ski Hosting with English-speaking hosts offering a free mountain guide service to help you get round the hill on your first day. The hill consists of two mountain zones on which to play and night skiing is offered daily. Translated? More time to spend on snow.

It's not often a woman gets naked with a man or woman within the first three hours of meeting without alcohol, but naked I get as we hike the volcanic hills behind

Furano. The locals have placed an illegal pipe into the hot springs of the town's volcano, filling a rock pool in the parkland with fresh hot water. Luke takes me on a three hundred-metre trek through shoulder high snow banks, with a moonlight quick strip and a jump in the water as fresh as the day we were born.

As the snow falls upon our heads, our bodies immersed in wet warmth, there is not a sound to be heard. This is a truly natural Onsen, though redressing in snow-laden clothes while naked is an experience not to be repeated. For those who like their modesty, nearby single sex Onsens such as Ryoukaku provide change rooms and hair dryers for post-soak grooming.

Twenty four hours in Furano is only enough to taste the dulcet tones of Karaoke in private rooms, Furano cheese fondue at the North Country Inn and drinks at Sol's Bar for Miserable Smokers (don't ask).

My journey finishes at the hundred yen store searching for Hello Kitty earmuffs for my friends back home. Instead I find myself purchasing bad 80s Japanese bikini movies for Luke which I hand over in a paper bag feeling like an overage stalker buying alcohol for a minor. It's yet another Luke drawback for being famous in a town that knows his every move and the only time I have to stand in a queue. ☹️



FAST FACTS

Where: Hokkaido, northern island of Japan
Why: To ski dry powder with no lift queues
How: Australian Airlines fly to Sapporo from Cairns www.australianairlines.com.au
Info: Club Med Sahoro www.clubmed.com
 Furano Tourist Association (0167) 23 3388