



# Pretty vacant

If there's one thing guaranteed to take the shine off your skiing break, it's waiting in line while hordes of other skiers cut up the slopes. Rachael Oakes-Ash finds Hokkaido, in Japan, as quiet as it is beautiful.

There's been a lot of noise about Hokkaido in skiing and snowboarding circles. As Japan's most-northern island, Hokkaido gets a lot of snow: up to 14 metres a season. Japan has more than 700 ski fields and on the two-hour rail journey from Sapporo to Shintoku, it's easy to see how this number is reached. Many small villages sit at the base of a hill that features a ski run and one chair lift. They're pretty, but not enough to keep this ski bunny happy.

Sahoro, however, a purpose-built ski field with two hotels, will do just fine. I am to lay my ski beanie at Club Med Sahoro, an all-inclusive resort with a ski-camp atmosphere. Welcome to Japan, where group activities are a given. Stand solo on the hill with skis strapped to your feet and a line of Japanese skiers will stop beside you as though in a class and wait for the instructor. The snow, however, is some of the best in the world; dry powder that falls by the bucket load and feels like air under your feet. Romeo, an Australian of Italian descent, is my instructor.

At first, I imagine we have avoided the ski-lift queues because we are in a private class, but when I ski on my own hours later, there are still no queues. Many times, Romeo and I find ourselves alone on runs, not a soul around, skiing first tracks even though it's mid-morning.

There are plenty of rules to be broken in Japan; since every sign is written in Japanese it's easy to say, "I couldn't read it". Lifting the rope to go off piste is worth the risk of having the ski patrol on one's tail – though I am soon to learn the ski patrol does not break the rules either, so won't come after you if the sign says "closed for World Cup training", even though you're out of bounds.

Sahoro provides easy transition between beginner and intermediate levels. The groomed runs are picture-perfect, providing pockets of powder in which to play. The whole place can be skied in a day by the seasoned skier. But the challenge comes when the snow dumps overnight; the same runs feel different under fresh snow. When it keeps dumping, off-piste skiing provides both clear and tree runs in thigh-deep powder.

Club Med's packages all feature three meals a day, accommodation, lift passes and daily group lessons, but the difference at Sahoro is the ski instructors are not contracted from outside. Working as an instructor at Club Med Sahoro means you entertain guests by night in cabaret-style shows, dine with them at breakfast, lunch and dinner, and dance with them when the disco is open. Having seen Romeo ski, who knew he could line dance, Irish jig and make a rabbit disappear as well?

Club Med is also a family resort, with a children's club, early-evening shows to entertain them and soft ice cream at the dessert buffet.

After the evening's entertainment has finished, 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.

Although Sahoro gives me an appetite for Japanese snow, Furano provides the icing on the cake. An hour west of Sahoro, the country town is known as the belly button of Hokkaido thanks to its dead-centre location on the island. Furano has an awesome ski field with a vertical drop of more than 900 metres. It's the kind of town where locals don't own house keys. Crime is virtually non-existent and the main industry is farming.

Four years ago, Furano's current tourism officer, Luke Hurford, jumped on a bus in Sapporo. Unable to read Japanese, he prayed he was heading in the right direction. The bus stopped at Furano, which turned out to be a snow-sports Mecca. One run down the slopes and he unpacked his duffel bag and set up camp.

He shouts me a hot coffee in a can at the 7-Eleven. The owners are shaking his hand and pointing at his picture in the local newspaper. As the original westerner in town, Hurford is followed by documentary crews and stalked by Japanese journalists on a quasi-regular basis. Hurford is as mad as a cut snake and Furano suits him. "There goes the crazy white man!" locals say as he throws himself off

cliffs. He can get away with a lot here. Offered the job of tourism officer within moments of his arrival, he wields a free rein when journalists are in town.

To make things easier for first-timers to Furano, he set up the Ski Hosting programme, whereby English-speaking hosts offer a free mountain-guide service to help you get around the hill on your first day. The hill consists of two mountain zones on which to play and night skiing is an option.

It's not often a woman gets naked with a man within three hours of meeting him, but naked I get as we hike the volcanic hills behind Furano. The locals have placed a pipe illegally into the hot springs of the town's volcano, filling a rock pool in the parkland with fresh hot water. Hurford takes me on a 300-metre trek through shoulder-high snow banks, followed by a quick moonlit strip and a jump into the water.

As the snow falls, our bodies immersed in wet warmth, there is not a sound to be heard. This is a truly natural *onsen*, though redressing in snow-caked clothes is not an experience to be repeated.

For those who like to preserve their modesty, nearby single-sex *onsens* provide changing rooms and hairdryers for post-soak grooming.

My journey finishes at the 100-yen store, with a search for Hello Kitty earmuffs for my friends. Instead, I find myself purchasing bad 1980s Japanese bikini movies for Hurford, which I hand over in a paper bag, feeling like an over-age stalker buying alcohol for a minor. For Hurford, it's yet another drawback to being famous in a town that knows your every move – and the only time I have to stand in a queue.

**Getting there:** Cathay Pacific flies six times a week to Sapporo. See [www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com). Further information: Club Med Sahoro ([www.clubmed.com](http://www.clubmed.com)).