



Powder by the bucketload

By RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

There's been a lot of noise about Hokkaido in ski circles. As Japan's most northern island (it's in line with Siberia) Hokkaido gets a huge load of snow — up to 14 metres per ski season, to be precise.

But while the majority of my fellow travellers on the flight to Sapporo are heading west to Niseko, where Australian developers are selling apartments and powder skiing, I am heading east.

Japan has more than 700 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 just one chair lift.

A 20-minute drive from Shintoku train station, Sahoro is a purpose-built ski field with only two resorts at the base of the hill and not much else.

I wonder how I am to fill my nights in a resort almost half an hour's drive from a town that counts the Chuck Wagon as one of its only bars.

But there was no need to wonder, as Club Med is a purpose-built village within a purpose-built resort on the side of a purpose-built hill for skiing.

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.

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 ski instructor, an Australian with an Italian history. At first I think we are missing lift queues because we are in a private class. When I

ski on my own hours later there are still no queues. Many times Romeo and I find ourselves alone on runs, with not a soul around, and skiing first tracks even though it's already mid-morning.

For the beginner and intermediate skier, Sahoro provides easy transition between the levels. The groomed runs are picture perfect, providing the



Dry runs: Sahoro (above) has some of the world's best powder snow, with picture-perfect groomed runs

most fun on the edge of each run where the Japanese don't go, meaning pockets of powder in which to play.

The seasoned skier can ski Sahoro in a day, but the same can be said of most Japanese resorts. The challenge comes when the snow dumps overnight and the same runs feel brand new under fresh snow. When it keeps dumping, then off piste provides both clear and tree runs in thigh-deep powder.

The Sahoro Club Med ski instructors are not contracted from outside, so this means that the 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?

This is a family resort, with kids' club, early-even kids' shows and soft-serve ice cream at the dessert buffet. But come kids' bed time, the instructors descend upon the bar, waiting for guests to buy them drinks.

They're a mixed bag: cuddly Jeff from New Hampshire, cheeky Laurent from France, strong and silent Shinji from Japan, suave Chris and Romeo from Australia. All addicted to the snow, and all relishing the Club Med way of life with its long hours, six day weeks and perpetual entertainment.

The barman turns DJ in the

early hours, mixing it up in the basement nightclub as though we were on the sunny shores of Ibiza, and not the ice white hills of Japan.

Who needs the Chuck Wagon when you have an open air ice rink, lunch time snow games played out in full view of diners behind the glass wall, a Canadian hot tub, day trips to traditional onsens and a nightly international buffet — meaning you need never know you're in Japan, if that's what you want.

And no queues.

The writer was a guest of Club Med and Australian Airlines.

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Australian Airlines flies from Cairns to Sapporo twice weekly, connecting flights from all capital cities. www.australianairlines.com.au or 13 13 13.

STAY: Club Med Sahoro has 7-night packages from Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide from \$3360pp adult, from \$2517pp child 4-11. Includes six nights at Club Med, one night in Sapporo, all meals plus wine at lunch and dinner, daily lift pass and ski school, kids' club with ski school and nightly entertainment.

MORE: 1800 258 263, www.clubmed.com.au

SKI FACTS: Average snow depth is 240cm; 13km of groomed runs; 3km longest groomed run; 30% advanced runs, 40% intermediate runs, 30% beginner runs.