

# Niseko winter special

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## Powder hub offers outdoor activities, culinary treats

Fresh powder, lots of it, almost every day — that simple combination is enough to bring hundreds of thousands of skiers and snowboarders to the slopes of the western Hokkaido town of Niseko every winter.

Niseko's snow bounty is thanks to a steady stream of wet, cold air blowing across the Sea of Japan from Siberia, which, halted by the mountain ranges of Niseko and the towering Mount Yotei, dumps anywhere from 10 to 40 centimeters per day on the area's resorts like clockwork. Major storms often lay down an entire meter of snow in a single day.

These four resorts — Annupuri, Grand Hirafu, Niseko Village and Hanazono — offer a wide variety of terrain, views and conditions. All are close enough that visitors can go from one to another without having to take off their skis.

Annupuri borders a large national park and thanks to its aspect often receives the most snow. The base of Grand Hirafu is where most of the hotels and restaurants in Niseko are centered. Skiers and snowboarders of all levels can find slopes to challenge them here, and many runs are lit up at night for those times when the snow is too good to quit. While Niseko Village features gentle runs for beginners near

the base, up top has steep and demanding terrain for those looking for an extra challenge. The village here is more low-key than Hirafu, but still offers a wide variety of lodging and dining options. Hanazono is the smallest of the four areas but is the access point for a major area of off-piste powder. It also boasts two terrain parks with jumps, rails and kickers for snowboarders looking to polish old tricks or learn new ones.

The legend of Niseko powder is enough to draw visitors from thousands of kilometers away, including many seasoned powderhounds who have sampled the premier slopes of the American Rockies or European Alps. Yet if the snow is the main event, part of Niseko's attraction is also the chance to experience the culture of Japan, Hokkaido in particular.

Two of the top ways to experience the local culture are by immersing one's taste buds in the rich flavors of its cuisine and by immersing one's body in the soothing waters of its hot springs. It would be difficult to imagine a more perfect day than one in which the daylight hours are spent carving through fresh powder, then soaking tired muscles in a steaming outdoor bath with a view of the nighttime winter wonderland, and topped by a hearty meal of



local delicacies.

Many of the larger hotels have hot springs that are open to non-guests for a small fee. Some smaller lodgings also have baths, while several facilities are open to all comers, including some that rent out private "family baths" by the hour for those who are not ready to take the plunge in front of others.

Niseko's dining scene runs the gamut from elegant sushi establishments and cutting-edge foodie joints to down-to-earth spots serving hearty Sapporo miso ramen and juicy hamburgers made with Hokkaido beef. A local specialty is soup curry, a spicy stew with chunky vegetables and usually, chicken or pork, served up hot for

lunch and dinner at Tsubara Tsubara. For dessert, dairy products are a Hokkaido specialty. Milk Kobo can satisfy a sweet tooth with its creamy ice cream, pudding, cream puffs and many other items. Deciding what to have for dinner might be tougher than Annupuri's black diamonds. A visit to Musu, Toshiro's Bar, Bar Gyu + or one of the many other stylish establishments is a great way to relax with friends or meet new ones.

No matter how good the powder is, even the strongest legs may need a rest after a few days. Other options for outdoor thrills include snowmobiling through the area's forests and meadows, or flying down slopes on inner tubes or inflatable rafts.

Cultural and sporting events are another way to experience Niseko. Several celebratory and traditional events are held around New Year's, including fireworks, mochi rice pounding and sunrise gondola rides. The resorts host many ski and snowboard tournaments. Toward the end of the season is the Niseko Shootout Short Film Festival, which also hands out awards for an ongoing photo contest. The winner of this year's grand prize was "The Secret of Bottom Turn Island," a cheeky spy story about the search for a snow paradise.



Niseko's quality powder snow offers an unmatched environment to experience winter snow activities such as snowmobiling, skiing, snowboarding and more.

As the coronavirus pandemic began affecting Hokkaido and the rest of Japan around the end of the 2019-20 ski season, Niseko's resorts, hotels, restaurants and other businesses have had all summer to prepare for the coming winter. In addition to following the national, prefectural and town governments' recommendations, many local businesses and organizations have announced their own plans to keep visitors safe while ensuring they can still enjoy everything the area has to offer.

On the slopes, nearly all lifts will be limited to half capacity unless riders are part of the same family or group. Services at some restaurants and lodges will be simplified, and a few will not open at all this year. Still, most businesses are planning on operating normally, or as normal as can be expected

in these times. At present, Hokkaido's official alert level is stage 1, the lowest, which means infection numbers are low. However, people still should be careful about infection control, such as through social distancing and wearing masks indoors or in crowded places.

Niseko will continue to develop into one of the world's top winter resort areas. This year may be a little different due to the pandemic, but the coronavirus will not affect the snow. Niseko has something to suit any taste and fit any budget, from luxury suites and exquisite *kaiseki* traditional Japanese multicourse dining to cozy pensions and homestyle *teishoku* set meals. Yet its best asset, that fluffy powder snow, is both priceless and free in the way only a gift from nature can be.



Musu offers quality drinks in a stylish setting.



After a day of activities, Niseko's natural hot springs provide soothing warmth.

## Snowy fun, education made easy

Niseko in winter can almost feel like a trip abroad with an international community, a variety of luxurious accommodation options and cuisine from around the world. The area is famous for its world-class powder snow that can be experienced from Niseko United's 900 hectares of skiable terrain, over 47 kilometers of groomed slopes that cater to all levels and nine gates to the backcountry for advanced skiers who don't need to hike far for deep powder turns.

In addition to the well-earned powder haven reputation, Niseko is now being recognized for its family-friendly options. Mnk Niseko is an integrated real estate, property management and hospitality company that provides parents, children, grandparents and friends with accommodation options featuring generous amounts of space, modern amenities, and on-site concierge services from our EdVenture activity center or reception areas.

An increasingly popular activity for children and their parents is the EdVenture winter camp. Now in its fifth year, EdVenture provides an English language experience for children that features educational activities in the morning, semi-private ski lessons in the afternoon and a pickup and drop-off service — so parents can enjoy a full day on the mountain or relaxing.

With few tourists, residents of Japan can enjoy an international style of holiday in Niseko with the added benefit of few skiers on the mountain, cheaper accommodation via the Go To Travel campaign, and easier access to all of the amazing local restaurants and experiences that are typically reserved months in advance. This winter, guests can try the local legend Gentem Stick snowboard or enjoy the popular Michelin-starred Kamimura restaurant. Mnk can arrange this along with all other aspects of the holiday from transportation to and from the airport, ski lessons or guiding, snowshoe tours, in-house dining, massage and various other activities.

This article was provided by MNK and edited by The Japan Times.



Mnk's EdVenture all-day winter camp program offers children English educational activities and ski lessons.



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Left: Guests can enjoy magnificent mountain views throughout the hotel. Right: The Park Suite Deluxe Bedroom with Onsen offers views of the surrounding winter wonderland. AARON JAMIESON

## Luxury resort stay in snowy utopia

The opening of the Park Hyatt Niseko Hanazono brings a new level of luxury and comfort to the winter adventures to be had in amid some of the world's best powder.

Located only a few steps away from the Hanazono resort's quad lift, which can be used to access all four of the Niseko resorts, the Hyatt is one of the newest additions to the mountain community, having opened its doors on Jan. 20.

This stylish year-round mountain escape has 100 rooms, including 28 suites, all with stunning views of the surrounding mountains. Guests can access a spa, health club, indoor pool and natural hot spring bath. Several of the suites have their own private hot spring baths.

A diverse array of dining options feature the specialties of Hokkaido in many forms. Moliere Montagne, led by Michelin-starred chef Hiroshi Nakamichi, offers French cuisine centered around local products. Other choices for the palate include sushi, Chinese, Italian and *teppanyaki* iron-grill cooking. Dining and entertainment selections include two lounges, two wine cellars

and private karaoke rooms. Room service is available from morning to night.

Of course, the snow is the main attraction for wintertime visitors to Niseko. Park Hyatt aims to ensure all its guests can enjoy every possible minute of the area's perfect powder.

Group and private lessons are available for all ages and skill levels, and the nearby Niseko Sports branch rents out the latest in ski and snowboarding gear. Guests can also work with artisanal ski crafters to create a pair exquisitely suited to their needs, a life-long treasure.

There may be no better way to test oneself than on a backcountry powder tour. Niseko Weiss Powder Cat Tours give guests the incomparable opportunity to lay down fresh tracks on the privately owned Mount Weisshorn, while Hanazono Powder Guide Tours take on more challenging terrain in the backcountry of the Niseko resorts.

For the artistically inclined, the Hyatt provides intimate access to local artisans. Tours can be arranged to the workshops of master potters, blacksmiths and cal-

ligraphers. The techniques and aesthetic sensibilities of these traditional artists have roots going back centuries, in some cases, even millennia. More hands-on experiences include a demonstration of how soba noodles are made (with a meal of the results afterward) and photography excursions on how to best capture the magic of the season.

Important events, including weddings, corporate meetings, and social gatherings, can be held in the Events Village's multifunctional spaces, which include a chapel, show kitchen and wine cellar. The Kabanoki Lodge can host receptions of up to 100 guests or banquets for 70, while the 56-seat chapel is perfect for intimate weddings. The stunning natural backdrop will imbue any occasion with a sense of inspiring grandeur.

In its first full winter as part of the Niseko community, the Park Hyatt Niseko Hanazono aims to secure its place as a premier mountain resort. The staff are ready to show this season's guests that the magic of Niseko does not end with the powder.

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