

The gingerbread village known as Ginzan Onsen, in Yamagata prefecture.

JAPAN IS THE SKIING CAPITAL OF ASIA, BUT MOST TRAVELERS DON'T GET BEYOND HOKKAIDO. HEAD OFF-PISTE WITH **ADAM H. GRAHAM** TO LESS-KNOWN RESORTS WITH CLASSICAL-PAINTING VIEWS, NEARLY EMPTY SLOPES AND DAILY FREE REFILLS OF THE DREAMIEST POWDER YOU'LL EVER HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO WIPE OUT IN.

# WINTER, WINTER EVERYWHERE

COURTESY OF GINZAN ONSEN



COURTESY OF GRANDECO RESORT HOTEL AND SKI. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF DOGO ONSEN. SHINSUKE MATSUKAWA



FROM ABOVE: Historic Dogo Onsen was the inspiration behind *Spirited Away*; steamy replenishment at Nishimuraya Honkan, one of the country's best *ryokan*. OPPOSITE: On the slopes above ski-in/ski-out Grandeco Resort Hotel and Ski in Fukushima prefecture.



**IT FINALLY HAPPENED.** I wiped out, yard-sale style, on Hakuba Goryu's Soft Cream course in a two-meter bank of snow at the Nagano resort. I'd been clumsy all day so had been anticipating a collision: I'd crossed skis with my fluent Japanese-speaking friend Nicola after getting off the Cosmo Four lift, knocking us both over. I'd left my helmet atop a vending machine after slamming a hot can of Van Houten cocoa. And I'd made a pinball-like obstacle course of a group of hipster Tokyo snowboarders passively sitting on their Burtons waiting for a white-out to blow over (unlike the daredevil snowboarders in Europe, who'd relish the chance to bomb down piste in a blizzard). It just wasn't my day on the slopes.

But the wipeout was a revelation. Snow in this part of Japan is so soft and powdery that falling into it is like cocooning in a down, baby blanket. Deep inside the snow bank's embrace, it's warm and safe and I felt like a hibernating cub. Wipeouts are not something to fear in Japan. They're a total luxury.

There are 598 ski resorts in Japan and I've skied at a handful of them. Many spots in Japan claim to be the snowiest place on the planet, with meters of "free refills" almost guaranteed every night. While these claims are hard to prove, what is true, and perhaps more important, is that 36 of Japan's 47 prefectures have ski resorts, so you're never more than an hour or two from piste. While Hokkaido gets a lot of ink for its 120 ski resorts including Niseko—Japan's cosmopolitan equivalent of St. Moritz is the most popular but arguably most generic of ski resorts in the country—334 micro-ski resorts are in Honshu, including two in sight of Mount Fuji. The island of Shikoku is home to five ski resorts and three are even found on subtropical dangling Kyushu.

I spent a week skiing in Hokkaido but was disappointed by how un-Japanese it was. English is ubiquitous on the slopes, the Japanese etiquette was missing, and the ramen and *karaage* (Japanese fried chicken) was ridiculously overpriced and not nearly as tasty as it is in other parts of the country. Like many things in the Land of the Rising Sun, good things come in small packages, and over the course of my five years of Japanese ski trips, I've discovered that smaller resorts, in Honshu for example, are generally more Japanese and more authentic than the big names.

Even if they don't offer as much varied terrain and on-slope services, the payoff is that you may have the entire piste to yourself on a weekday and will surely get a less expensive (and better) meal than in Niseko. And while clear-sky bluebird days are not as common in Japan as they are in the European Alps or North American Rockies, a rare sunny day is possible. Anyway, since you can find runs so close to most major Japanese cities, all you really need is a bluebird hour or two.

**HAKUBA**, three hours from Tokyo in Nagano prefecture, was host of the 1998 Winter Olympics. My visit there marked the first time I skied in Japan. Nagano has a whopping 102 ski resorts, and Hakuba alone has

nine ski areas, with five gondolas, 138 lifts and 200-plus runs. Altitude tops out at 1,800 meters, almost half the height of Europe and the U.S., and there are 400 hectares of skiable terrain, as opposed to France's 26,000-hectare Trois Vallées or even British Columbia's 3,200-hectare Whistler. But there was no shortage of space on the mountain during my visit.

Which was lucky for me, because I quickly learned that skiing in Japan takes some getting used to. It started with the equipment: Hakuba had ski boots in my size, but most other resorts didn't cater to *gaijin* feet. Naturally, then, I shouldn't have been surprised to find that lifts are designed for shorter skiers and require more abdominal might to hurl yourself out of. Tall skiers like me (189 centimeters) should also take care to not dangle their sticks from the lift during take-off because snowbanks pile up fast and you could easily snag your ski on one. Occasionally, unlike in the West, there's a lift attendant dusting off the seat and bowing to you as you get on, to help you avoid these errors.

And the piste itself? It's generally much tamer in Japan, a reminder of the country's "safety first" culture—though there are increasingly more challenging black trails and a slowly growing tolerance for off-piste skiing, including free-riding, slackcountry, and split-boarding. Amusingly, the skier-snowboarder dynamic is flipped in Japan. Here, it's the skiers who shred the catwalks and make chowder of the moguls, while blue trails are peppered with overly cautious new boarders, like the ones I pinballed through during my wipeout. Japan, like Switzerland, values safety over speed. But unlike in Switzerland, the slopes here are filled with Thais, Hong Kongers, Singaporeans and mainland Chinese who may be encountering snow for the first time. Once during a near-collision, Nicola yelled out to a helmeted boarder, who answered her perfect Japanese warning call with a tonal Cantonese yelp. While the newbies might hamper slope traffic, they offered me one upside: In Switzerland, I'm used to being the slow steady skier. But here in Japan, I was downright advanced. Little triumphs are everything.

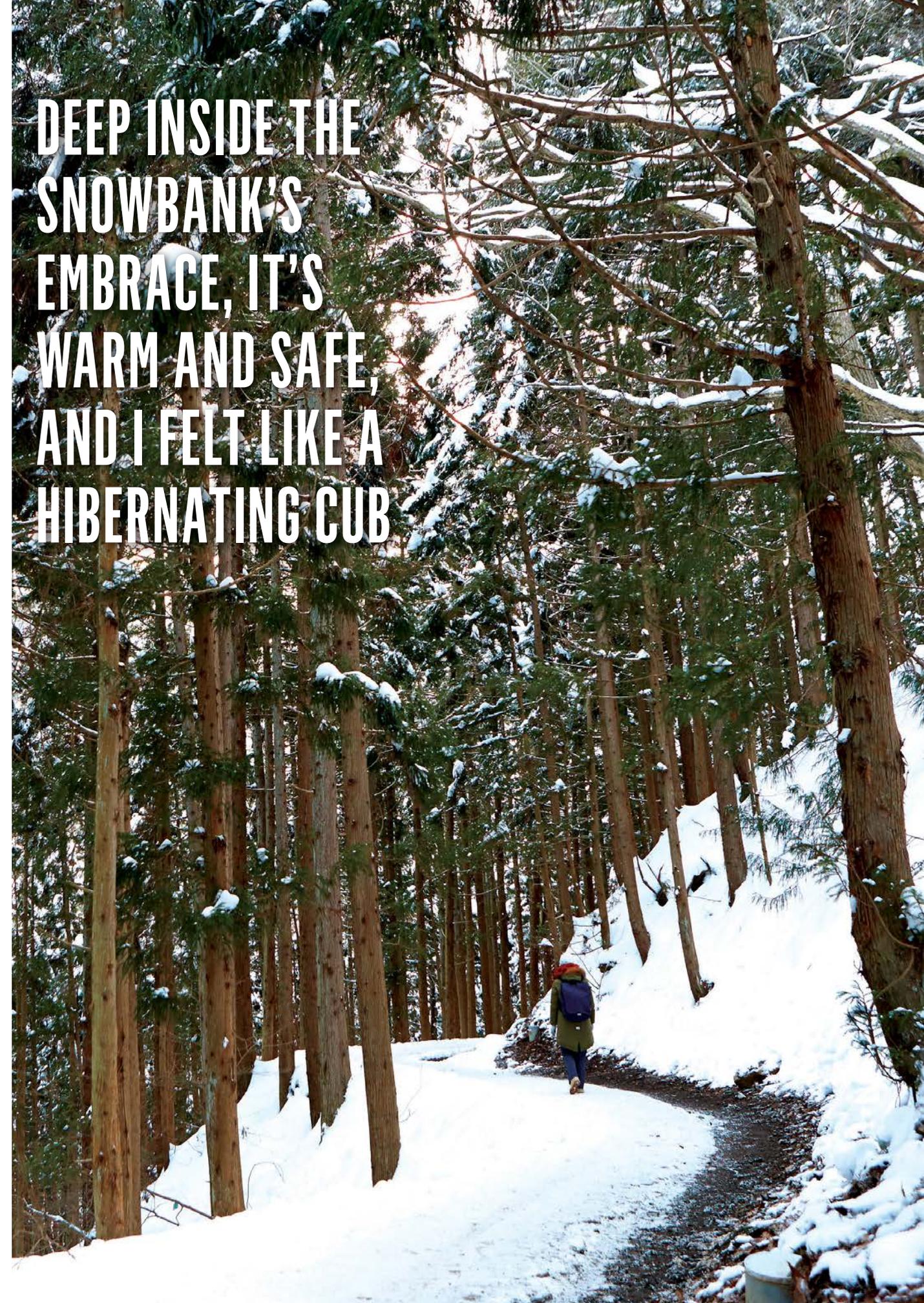
Overall, the pros of skiing here far outweigh any cons, particularly when it comes to après-ski options. Just outside of Hakuba, I spent a glorious few nights soaking in an *onsen* in woodsy Karuizawa, the former haunt of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, and current summer escape for Bill Gates and the Japanese royal family. Karuizawa is also home to a boomlet of new hotels including the ski-in/ski-out Karuizawa Prince Hotel East, part of a constellation of five local Prince hotels, and the Tobira Onsen Myojinkan, a divine 44-room room Relais & Château *ryokan* where I soaked in *onsen* baths that elicited deep sighs of envy from those who know the historic 1931 property. I also made a brisk winter walk to Kumano Kotai Jinja Shrine. I found a nest of *musasabi* (giant flying squirrels) during a woodsy stroll. I tried and won several ends of curling at the local ice rink's curling hall (beginners luck!). And I made a pilgrimage to the nearby Jigokudani Yaen-Koen National Park, where I



FROM ABOVE: Monkeys take to the waters at Jigokudani Yaen-Koen National Park; opened this July, Kai Sengokuhara resort in Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park boasts *onsen* fed from Owakudani Valley. OPPOSITE: Hiking beneath the towering woods of Jigokudani.



DEEP INSIDE THE  
SNOWBANK'S  
EMBRACE, IT'S  
WARM AND SAFE,  
AND I FELT LIKE A  
HIBERNATING CUB



©JUNTO. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: ©JUNTO. COURTESY OF HOSHINO RESORTS



FROM ABOVE: It's 1,015 snowy steps up to the Yamadera Temple in Yamagata prefecture; organic French cuisine is served with forest views at Tobira Onsen Myojinka's Nature French SAI restaurant.



spied on beet-faced snow monkeys soaking in their very own hot pool. You won't find *that* in Whistler or Megève.

**SKIING IN HISTORIC TOHOKU**, a region made up of Honshu's six northernmost prefectures, was another personal highlight, with excellent ski terrain and dozens of rarefied cultural sites from which to cherry-pick. Mount Zao Onsen, three-hours from Tokyo, may look a bit ramshackle, but the skiing is excellent, with skilled and friendly English-speaking guides, like mine, Takako from Zao Freezeit Ski and Snowboard School. During my two ski days with her, she pointed out the sublimely beautiful Jizo Buddhist statue at the top of the Sancho Ropeway and a few good-luck temple bells, which I'd seen on other Japanese ski slopes. And during a blast of cold Siberian air that momentarily turned the gossamer skies cobalt blue, we ventured high atop the mountain to see the notorious Snow Monsters. The summit was fog-sacked when we first arrived on the lift, but slowly emerging from the mist were tall creaking fir trees sealed in ice and coated in a lustrous fondant of snow, making each resemble a sort of giant gingerbread biscuit from *The Great British Bake Off*. I didn't know if I should be scared or hungry.

Skiing isn't the only way to dive into winter here. Two hours away from Zao at the ski-in/ski-out Grandeco Resort Hotel and Ski in Fukushima Prefecture, I took a three-hour snowshoe hike in meter-high snow banks around a fragrant pine-lined ridge to turquoise Lake Bishamon, one of five volcanic lakes inside Bandai-Asahi National Park. Snowshoeing is not for the thin-blooded or faint of heart. Even on flat landscapes, it can be grueling glute work in deep snowbanks. But the reward is a twinkling ice-age world unlike anything you'll see on the busy, groomed slopes. Freshies here refer to animal tracks in the fluffy crystalline snow, and the piercing calls of birdlife are vibrant reminders that life goes on in this winter wonderland. Unlike downhill skiing, where gravity pulling you down the slopes will always save you from the extremes of high-altitude weather, snowshoeing relies solely on your own power. So, as beautiful and tranquil as it is, any excursion for me is also peppered with fearful moments of freezing to death.

Do as I did, and warm back up over a dinner of tender sukiyaki, the shiitake, tofu and marbled slices of beef, simmering in a sweet soy-and-mirin broth. The next morning, the mountain snow-replenished as promised, I had the entire Lavender B slope (one of eight named after herbs) to myself and did a few real freshies in the golden morning sunlight.

The Tohoku region's rich cultural offerings are also worth getting off the slope for. In Iwate prefecture I took a short boat ride through the scenic two-kilometer-long Geibikei Gorge, filled by the ice-blue Satetsu River and surrounded by vertiginous 50-meter cliffs. In Yamagata prefecture—where those seeking to extend the season should hit up Gassan Glacier Ski Resort; it only opens in April due to thick snow blocking its roads during its >>

Snow Monsters take in the view from Mount Zao.



aggressive winters, but offers skiing on the glacier until July—I ascended the 1,000 or so snow-dusted steps to the craggy Yamadera Temple, a pilgrimage site of the poet Basho who visited in 1689. And I descended another set of steps on Mount Haguro, one of three sacred mountains that is home to Yamabushi (a hybrid of Buddhist-Shinto mountain monks) and Gojunoto, a 12th-century, five-story pagoda that lays quietly in a snowy cedar forest said to bring rebirth to anyone who visits it.

Each sublime excursion was profound and a reminder that Japan has its own take on winter. It also didn't hurt that they racked up the likes on my Instagram feed. And while the ancient sites awed, a stay nearby in the ultra-contemporary Ginzan Onsen Fujiya, with a soaring timber-slat *onsen* conceived by Kengo Kuma is enough to push architecture fans over the edge into design nirvana.

## CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF,

Southern Honshu is no stranger to skiing. In Shizuoka prefecture, two hours southwest of Tokyo, is Snowtown Yeti with jaw-dropping views of Mount Fuji. It's the first ski slope to open every year in Japan, typically in early October with the help of artificial snow groomed in corduroy grids throughout the season. There are two lifts and four runs, plus snow-tube routes, sledding areas, and new terrain areas, like Jib Park, which opened in 2017. While I'm personally content with blue and green trails, advanced skiers will like Yeti's black Slope D for its 25-degree drop. Like many of Honshu's ski resorts, it has been refurbishing and rebranding to draw >>

### THREE MORE MAGICAL MICRO-RESORTS



Snow tubing at Sol-Fa Oda.

#### IKAWA KAINAYAMA, TOKUSHIMA PREFECTURE

Less than an hour from the secret, misty Iya Valley, often considered Japan's Shangri-La, this two-lift micro-resort offers 1.8 kilometers of piste at elevations up to 1,175 meters. [ikawaski.jp](http://ikawaski.jp); day pass from ¥3,500.

#### SOL-FA ODA, EHIME PREFECTURE

Near the jazz and haiku city of Matsuyama is this wee three-lift resort with a mogul course, snow tubing, and sled lanes. Warm up after your run to the tunes of the all-female jazz band Lady Bird at Monk Club; with a soak in the

historic Dogo Onsen, the inspiration behind Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away*; or on a haiku cocktail crawl with local poet Iris. [sol-fa.com](http://sol-fa.com); day pass from ¥4,100; [matsuyama-haiku.jp/haito-matsuyama/eng/bar](http://matsuyama-haiku.jp/haito-matsuyama/eng/bar).

#### ESASHI SHIEI KOEJI, IWATE PREFECTURE

In the northern stretch of Tohoku's Ou Mountains, this four-lift resort in the valley basin is best known for its slopes that are protected from strong wind gusts, and offers a dedicated kids' ski day the third Sunday of each month. [esashi-iwate.gr.jp/koeji/course.html](http://esashi-iwate.gr.jp/koeji/course.html); day pass from ¥2,600.

FROM TOP: LDESIGN/AMANA IMAGES/©JNTO; COURTESY OF SOL-FA ODA

international tourists, and is even rumored to be tripling its night-skiing dates in 2019. A day here may not offer the variety of other resorts, but viewing the autumn foliage in the distant mountains from the snowy piste is another “only in Japan” moment that’s hard to beat.

Fujiten Snow Resort, an hour away in Yamanashi Prefecture on the other side of Fuji, is expanding its downhill offerings with snowplow safaris, fireworks nights, family ski days, beginners’ camps, and even “lady skier” days, which I’d never heard of in Europe, for the 2018/2019 season. Fujiten’s seven courses and four lifts are enough to keep any level skier occupied for a day.

This region has also seen an uptick of new places to stay, each one giving 17th-century artist Hokusai’s *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* a run for its money. The elegant 32-room Fufu Kawaguchiko, another newcomer on the shores of Lake Kawaguchi, is close to ice-caves and lava tubes, but also offers great access to Japan’s wine country, where I hiked through vineyards and sampled wines made from unique Japanese Koshu grapes, like Muscat Bailey, a dry, fruity red increasingly found on slope-side izakayas and winebars. Even after 10 visits to Japan, I found it impossible to not be dazzled by the privileged views of Fuji-san here. While soaking in various *onsen*, I watched Fuji-san disappear and reappear in the clouds and meditated on its role in Japan’s cultural history.

Nearby in Kanagawa, design-minded Hoshino Properties has bolstered its portfolio with two new affordable, alpine-adjacent hotels. This July brought Kai Sengokuhara, located in Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park, with 16 rooms offering cypress tubs and *onsen* fed from mineral-rich spring water from the Owakudani Valley. In Shizuoka Prefecture, Kai Ito Onsen will open this month, and promises equal amounts of Zen and luxury.

Further afield is Setouchi’s Hyogo Prefecture, home to 16 ski resorts less than two hours from Osaka and Kyoto. Last December, it saw the opening of Japan’s first new ski resort in 14 years: Mineyama Kogen White Peak in the town of Kamikawa, with three trails and two lifts, plus Karmin Park dedicated to kids-only skiing. Make the most of a visit to the region, as I did, by staying in Kinosaki Onsen, 45 minutes from three micro-ski resorts including Oku Kannabe, Kannabe Kogen Apple, and Manba. The charming 8th-century *onsen* town is home to seven historic hot spring baths fed by the willow-shaded Otani-gawa River.

Much as I love skiing, I love eating and soaking even more. It seemed all my shooshing across Japan earned me the right to seriously submerge, so donning my *yukata* and clunky, wooden *geta* sandals, I *onsen*-hopped around Kinosaki for a few glorious nights. And after my thighs and calves were sufficiently relaxed, I settled into one of Japan’s best *ryokans*, Nishimuraya Honkan. There in my spacious *tatami* mat room, I dug into edifying plates of cold, briny sashimi, simmered sesame tofu, and crab marinated in warm sake, while outside in the lush bamboo forests and the enveloping Tajima mountains, the free refills began to fall yet again. ☺



## DOWNHILL JAPAN

Head beyond Hokkaido for a more serene, decidedly Japanese ski trip. And save some time to hop off the slopes for snowshoeing, hiking and lots of soaking.

### GETTING THERE

There are daily nonstop flights to Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, Nagoya and Sapporo from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei on multiple airlines. Driving in Japan’s ski areas is difficult; you’ll need a Japanese-translated driver’s license and the ability to control a car on steep roads in deep snow. It’s hard to beat the **JR Rail Pass** ([japanrailpass.net](http://japanrailpass.net); seven-day pass US\$258 when bought in Japan until March 2019) for convenience.

### HOTELS

You might consider selecting your destinations based on dream accommodations. Below are just a few of the newest and best mountain-view resorts.

### NAGANO PREFECTURE

**Tobira Onsen Myojinkan**, a historic 1931 property, is a 44-room Relais & Châteaux *ryokan* with *onsen* over Yatsugatake Chushin Kogen Quasi-National Park. [relaischateaux.com](http://relaischateaux.com); from US\$450.

### TOHOKU REGION

**Ginzan Onsen Fujiya** is an ultra-contemporary *ryokan* designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma with soaring timber slats and meditative *onsen*. [fujiya-ginzan.com](http://fujiya-ginzan.com); from US\$1,000.

### KANAGAWA PREFECTURE

**Kai Sengokuhara**, which opened in Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park in July, has 16 rooms with cypress tubs. [hoshinoresorts.com](http://hoshinoresorts.com); from US\$260.

### YAMANASHI PREFECTURE

**Fufu Kawaguchiko**, another newcomer, has 32 rooms on Lake Kawaguchi’s shore, close to Yamanashi’s vineyards, ice caves and lava tubes. [fufukawaguchiko.jp](http://fufukawaguchiko.jp); from US\$750.

### SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE

**Kai Ito** opens this month after renovations upgraded the 30 *ryokan* rooms and mountain-fed *onsen*. [hoshinoresorts.com](http://hoshinoresorts.com); from US\$260.

### HYOGO PREFECTURE

**Nishimuraya Honkan**, arguably one of Japan’s best *ryokan*, offers spacious *tatami*-mat rooms and private *onsen* overlooking the swaying bamboo forests and thickly forested Tajima mountains. [nishimuraya.ne.jp](http://nishimuraya.ne.jp); from US\$600.

### TOURS

Upmarket agents **Remote Lands** emphasize lesser-known spots in Japan like in Tohoku and Hyogo and can create a bespoke trip based on your ski level, cultural interests and other factors. [remotelands.com](http://remotelands.com). — A.H.G.