



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Japan’s top ski gems, and the guys who can guide you there

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HOKKAIDO, Japan — Locals in the Japan’s northernmost prefecture have been known to complain about the snow: “There’s too much,” some say, and for that inconvenience they used to get a ticket refund at some resorts. Times have changed — you can’t get a refund anymore — but the snow hasn’t, and if you visit you’ll soon realize that you’ve landed in a winter wonderland, a place that averages about 600 inches of fluffy powder annually, and where soaking in onsens (Japanese spas) and sipping hot miso soup are a part of the daily ski ritual.

So why does this region get so much snow? Moisture coming off the warm currents of the Japan Sea meet the cold high-pressure winds from nearby Siberia, resulting in a prolific dumping of champagne powder on Hokkaido, Japan’s second-largest island.

This island, just a 90-minute flight from Tokyo, boasts more than 100 ski resorts, many of which are an easy train or car ride from the main city of Sapporo. While it’s relatively easy to get to these ski areas, it’s not always easy to organize a trip there: It can be tricky navigating resorts’ websites and knowing exactly what you’re getting for your yen. Enter Charlie and Jake Cohn, two Colorado brothers who launched a travel company called SnowLocals eight years ago that specializes in organizing trips for people who prefer to travel on their own but want someone to handle logistics. The Cohns will find out your travel style and preferences, and then book hotels, make travel arrangements (from private transfers to car rentals and train tickets), organize ski tickets and local guides, and even arrange child care. They can also pull together group trips if you’re traveling with extended family, friends, or colleagues.

Jake, 32, a former big mountain ski competitor, and Charlie, 31, a skier and videographer, grew up in Telluride, but have spent years exploring Hokkaido. They know the island and its many resorts and can bridge the gap between Japanese and North American cultures — and quirks — so travelers can make the most of their ski vacation.

“There are 500 ski resorts in Japan, but you never know what’s there — some may have one lift and it will be you and the Japanese army,” says Charlie Cohn. “We’ve spent years finding resorts you really don’t hear about. We like sending people to places that are somewhat off the map, but really worth visiting.”

One of those places may include Rusutsu Resort, where you can often hop on a lift at 2 p.m. and still find fresh untracked snow, where the ski racks on the gondolas are too narrow for fat powder skis (that’s the norm at resorts here,



From top: Skiers prepare to drop over a cornice into the trees on Heavenly Ridge at Rusutsu Resort in Hokkaido, Japan; a person skiing near Heavenly Ridge; Yubari Sekitan Kuro Ramen, also known as black noodle soup; a skier passes by seasonal amusement rides at the bottom of a run at Rusutsu Resort.

despite the abundance of snow), where you get ocean views when it isn’t snowing, and where skiing off-piste means wending your way around giant snow mushrooms — tree stumps topped with mounds of snow. Even more unusual: The run-out for a couple of ski trails takes you by a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, and other rides at the resort’s seasonal amusement park.

Rusutsu Resort in southwestern Hokkaido has three ski mountains — West Mountain, East Mountain, and Isola Mountain — that are connected by lifts, a monorail, and gondolas, including one that runs from the base area over a road and a golf course where people go snow rafting — laying on a big raft and getting towed

tors to sprawling Rusutsu Resort Hotel, which has 231 rooms and five slope-side cabins, an extensive breakfast buffet, and a random assortment of kitschy displays along the hallways, including musical fountains, a singing tree, and a two-story merry-go-round. Or you can opt for the 210-room Westin Rusutsu Resort Hotel, which opened across the street four years ago and offers two-story rooms for up to seven people, a whiskey bar, and a guest-only onsen with multiple hot and cold pools for soaking. The 156-room Vale Rusutsu hotel plans to open in April.

Jake and Charlie may also steer you to Mount Racey Ski

Area in Yubari, a former coal-mining town that went bankrupt when the last mine closed in 1990, and then reinvented itself as the melon capital about 12 years ago (each year, the season’s first Yubari melons can sell for \$30,000). The resort offers groomed runs, a park, and a variety of terrain leading up to a 38-degree slope off the gondola, but look out for the ice balls buried beneath the deep powder and the gullies under the chairlift (it’s easy to get stuck in here). The free-to-use snowboard tools aren’t on chains at Yubari since “no one steals here,” according to Charlie.

Melon Kuma, the town mascot, also hangs out at the resort come wintertime. This green creature with a half-melon/half-bear head likes to chase small children and pretend to swallow their heads, much to parents’ delight.

Many travelers stay at the Mount Racey Resort Hotel at the base of the ski area, which has a newly refurbished onsen, a buffet breakfast with no shortage of melon, and vending machines in the hallways that sell cans of beer (buy a Sopporo Classic for 310 yen, or about \$2.85). Stroll across the parking lot to a place that locals call Bari Yatai, a collection of noodle shops in a rustic building where

you sit at communal tables and eat traditional black noodle soup (the renowned Yubari black noodles get their color from charcoal).

A Star Wars-like tunnel connects the hotel and the base of the ski area, which has a day lodge, a crooked house (the entire house is intentionally built to look crooked), and lifts. Each gondola’s seats face outward (looking up or down the mountain), and passengers with fat skis get a blue cloth sack for putting over their ski tips so the skis don’t scratch the windows (the skis won’t fit in the gondola racks on the outside).

Traveling to Hokkaido from Boston may be a journey — it can take a full day or longer to get there — but it’s worth the effort, for the abundance of deep powder and the fun cultural aspects of traveling here.

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