

Naked indulgence

Words: Paul Ewart

FINDING YOURSELF IN HOT WATER CAN BE A GOOD THING – IF YOU'RE IN HAKUBA

➤ **After a busy day on the slopes, there's one sure-fire cure** for cold, numb extremities and sore leg muscles: the onsen. This Japanese word is a blanket term for the country's naturally occurring hot springs and the spas that pop up around them.

For the Japanese, indulging in this steamy treat is part and parcel of any ski-resort experience, and after spending several days in the Japanese snow capital of Hakuba, I've decided it's now part of mine. As a dedicated spa-goer, I quickly realised that this village is a literal hotspot for onsen, making it easy to fill a few days dipping into them all.

Soaking in an onsen is not only extremely relaxing, but also very good for you. Balneotherapy, the practice of bathing in hot springs to treat physical problems, has been a go-to remedy in Japan for centuries. In fact, enthusiasts believe the mineral-rich pools can heal virtually any ailment.

With all this in mind, I began taking the waters at Sierra Resort, home to Hakuba's largest onsen. Sitting in its picture-perfect outdoor pools, I absorbed the natural beauty of the snow-capped Northern Alps. Trust me – being immersed in hot water up to your

neck while snowflakes fall gently onto your exposed head is an experience worthy of any bucket list.

From the resort, I made a post-ski pit stop at the Hakuba Genryu no Yu onsen. Here, giant copper baths function as receptacles for the hot alkaline water.

However, for the ultimate bathing high, you must visit Yari Onsen. At approximately 2,100m above sea level, it's the highest open-air bath, or rotenburo, in the country. Though I had to hike for a good four hours to reach it, Yari's heavenly 360-degree views across the surrounding mountain ranges made the trek more than worthwhile.

Back on earth at the Hakuba Happo-one Resort, I headed straight to Hakuba Massage in the village, whose therapists provided me with an expert pummelling to eliminate my residual post-skiing aches and pains.

Interestingly, humans aren't the only animals who want a piece of the onsen action. After the two-hour drive from Hakuba to Jigokudani Monkey Park, I learned that the famous Japanese 'snow monkeys' seek respite from the harsh temperatures in their very own onsen. And who can blame them?



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

- Ski, soak, ski, soak... in Hakuba it's all about balance.
- Japanese snow monkeys seek respite from the cold in their own onsen at Jigokudani Monkey Park.
- Snowboarders take in the stunning views, presumably reflecting on another day in paradise.
- Spa-ing and massages galore at Hakuba Happo-one Resort.



➤ Locals sometimes use the volcanic mineral water of Nozawa onsen for cooking.

Same slopes, different adventure

Words: Stephanie Williams

NOZAWA ONSEN LETS YOU ENJOY THE SNOW WITH OR WITHOUT THE KIDS

➤ **As the sun set on our last day of skiing Nozawa Onsen** as a couple, I thought we'd had our last skiing and après-ski sessions for a long time. Now, I know that becoming a parent doesn't mean our adventures have to stop – they simply take a different turn, on the same slopes.

Nozawa Onsen is fantastic for families. You fly into Tokyo, jump on the Shinkansen (the bullet train) and then take a local train to arrive four hours later. When you have kids in tow, train travel is great. They can move around, enjoy the quirky Japanese snack trolley and watch the scenery change frame by frame.

As a small resort, Nozawa is easy to navigate. In the traditional village you'll see steam rising from cobblestone paths outside temples and shrines, onsens (hot springs) soothing locals everywhere, and street vendors selling tasty local delicacies. Of course, this area also offers kids special sights, including the opportunity to meet the region's native 'snow monkeys', so why not take them on a daytrip?

We checked into Villa Nozawa, which an Australian, Mark, runs with his Japanese wife, Yoshiko. Ideal for couples and families, the villa has spacious areas where everyone can gear up, comfortable rooms with tatami mats, and shared bathrooms. Most Japanese

still bathe the traditional way: in gender-segregated onsen. Be sure to enjoy a soak, but just remember that these pools have rules, not to mention naked oldies, so be respectful.

Many of Nozawa's cosy restaurants double as bars. (Who says parents can't enjoy an après-ski drink?) Snag one of the limited seats at Hamacho, where sushi master Maru turns the daily catch into well-priced rolls, balls and sashimi. Alternatively, head to Yoshimi Soba, where sumo-wrestler-size owner Yamazaki-san talked me through the finer points of eating soba noodles like a pro.

And now to the snow. Beginner courses are long, wide and oh-so pretty; intermediate tracks are powder packed; and advanced runs are difficult enough to challenge even the most experienced skier. The best part? You'll find a nursery for littlies and English-speaking skiing instructors, so you can race down the runs as fast as you like. **PC**



Getting there

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