



Ski lift

# “SNOW COUNTRY” - NIIGATA, JAPAN’S WINTER WONDERLAND

Winter is coming and if last year is anything to go by there will be plenty of good quality snow in ‘Snow Country’, Niigata Prefecture, Japan writes **Mike Smith**



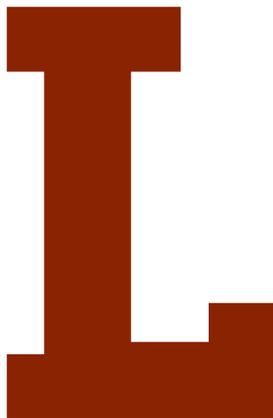
Snow trees



Snowmobile



Snowboarder



Daruma dolls

Looking to get itself on the ski brigade’s “must visit” list Niigata has much going for it: excellent food and sake, culture, natural beauty, wonderful ski resorts and a great location being near to Tokyo. Tour operators are taking note and arranging packages to the area which may well become the next skiing “hot” spot.

### Daruma Dolls

Arriving early morning at Narita Airport Tokyo we headed straight to Takasaki City, the homeland of Daruma Dolls, where we not only saw these popular Japanese traditional lucky charms being made from Paper Mache, but we also got to paint our own doll and make a wish.

The unique shape is based on the rotund Zen Buddhist monk named Daruma. Legend has it that you should colour one eye of the doll as you make a resolution and the other when the goal has been achieved. I guess I blew it, just as I do most of my New Year resolutions, by colouring both eyes at once!

From Takasaki we travelled underground through some magnificent engineering projects. Japan builds lengthy tunnels through its rolling hills. Near Echigo Yuzawaa we entered a tunnel in sunshine and emerged 10km later into a land covered in two meter snow drifts.

### Trains and Sake

We drove to Echigo Yuzawa Railway Station, which is a tourist attraction in its own right with a huge array of shops, restaurants and most surprisingly a sake bar where you place a glass under your sake of choice, put in a token, and

out pours a shot of your favourite tippie. Only in Japan!

The statues of fallen drunks reminding you not to drink too much are hilarious. There are more than 10 ski resorts and 16 Japanese style inns and six public baths in this small town which receives more than 2.5 million visitors a year. Over 95% are Japanese.

### Ski Mount Naeba

Our lovely accommodation was at the 1,200 room Prince Hotel at Naeba with its adjoining ski resort. Skiers simply kitted up and skied out of the hotel door to the ski lift. I took the 5.5 km Dragonbola cable car up Mount Naeba to enjoy the snow, beautiful ghostly white trees and absolute silence. It was a comfortable

ride despite the blizzard as we were enclosed but the open ski chairs looked much less comfortable.

The Igloo Bar is one of the most unusual pubs I’ve ever been in. Crafted from compacted snow it was very cold inside, had a low roof and the floor was quite slippery – a challenge after a few drinks!

The food at the resort is excellent and there are dozens of restaurants to choose from to suit all budgets. All ski and snow boarding gear can be rented and there are skiing lessons and ski slopes for all capabilities. Snow mobiles and assorted rides are available to keep non skiers entertained. It seems highly likely, that with the current emphasis on marketing, Niigata Prefecture will soon be giving Hokkaido competition for the winter travellers’ dollars.

### Niigata City

Many tours to Naeba, including ours, continue to explore more of Niigata Prefecture by visiting the capital Niigata City. To break up the journey we stopped at Nishiki-Goi no Sato in Ojiya City to see a pond full of some of the most expensive ornamental fish in the world –

Koi carp. Initially bred in paddy



Sake room

fields for food they now attract buyers from all over the world. At the other side of the car park a small museum displaying traditional woven clothing and a live weaving demonstration is worth a quick peek.

Lunch was at Cave d'Occi Winery. It is a bit off the beaten track, but serves excellent Japanese wine and French cuisine. The cellars are extensive and the estate, which produces 60,000 bottles a year, also has nice gardens, a limited number of rooms and of course hot springs and a spa.

### The Rich Were Rich

There are only a few noteworthy sights in Niigata city. Trips to The Saito Family Summer Villa with its well-maintained Japanese Garden and to the Northern Culture Museum, a wealthy landlord's home, gave a good glimpse of how the rich used to live. However, I preferred the simple pleasures of drinking the superb sake and dining on the outstanding sushi. Niigata grows some of the best rice in Japan and has an active fishing industry so all the high quality ingredients for sake and sushi are locally sourced and readily available.

### Sado Island

At 70km/hr it only took an hour by jetfoil from Niigata to Sado Island which boasts a rich culture and unspoiled nature. Toki or Japanese crested Ibis are the symbols of Sado. We spotted a couple of these magnificent, protected birds flying in the distance, but got up close and personal with them at Toki no Mori Park conservation centre. The rocky coastline, Lake Kamo, with its mountain views and oyster farms, and Sado's historic goldmines and tub boats made it an ideal spot for a two day visit.

### Obuse

We returned to Niigata and drove to Obuse for lunch. It is a very picturesque small town with lots of narrow lanes and boutique shops, but its main claims to fame are that it was home to Hokusai, the famous painter and printmaker from Japan's Edo period, and it is also known for its chestnuts. The sweet chestnut desserts are to die for. A foodie's paradise! Making full use of the chestnut trees, cross sections of the trunk are even used for decorative paving tiles.

## Pocket Guide

### Airline

ANA flies from Singapore to Tokyo  
[www.ana.co.jp](http://www.ana.co.jp)

### Hotels

Hotel Ogura Niigata  
[www.okura-niigata.com](http://www.okura-niigata.com)

Naeba Prince Hotel  
[www.princehotels.com](http://www.princehotels.com)

Hotel Sado: Yoshidaya  
Tel: +81 259-27-2151

Karuizawa Prince Hotel  
[www.princehotels.com](http://www.princehotels.com)

### Travel Agent

Dynasty Travel  
[www.dynastytravel.com.sg](http://www.dynastytravel.com.sg)

Support from City of Niigata, Sado City,  
Niigata & Nagano Prefectures

## A Spa for Monkeys

By mid-afternoon the temperature had started to drop as we began a tricky walk on compressed snow and ice outside Yamanouchi Town in neighbouring Nagano Prefecture. It was quite a trek to Jigoku-dani Snow Monkey Park, but at 850m in elevation, just past a geyser, which was surrounded by snow yet spewing steam, we got our first sight of the famous snow monkeys, or Japanese Macaques. Like many Japanese they love hot spas and when the weather gets cold, or they want pampering, the females and youngsters jump, splash or just sit and bathe in the hot springs as the males keep guard. The spa treatment continues as they are groomed by members of their troop.

I was quite apprehensive about approaching these primates as in many Asian locations, including Singapore and Bali, macaques can be quite aggressive, but they were very calm and comfortable in our presence. It was possible to stand very close to them as they frolicked, searched for food in the snow, or simply chilled out. I found this to be a wonderful encounter and a highlight of my trip to Nagano. I was told that it would have been even better to go when it's very cold (below -10° C) as more monkeys bathe in the hot springs!

## Karuizawa

The final night before returning to Tokyo was at Karuizawa Town at the foot of Mt



Snow monkey



Street scene

Asama-yama, a popular summer resort because of its favourable climate and larch and birch trees. There was also a massive shopping plaza at the Karuizawa Prince Hotel with designer outlet shops, which closed rather early by Singapore standards, and a pleasant stroll along a mountain stream to Karuizawa waterfall.

After last minute sightseeing and shopping in Tokyo we returned to Singapore from Haneda Airport. Niigata Prefecture's "Snow country" is a great place for winter adventure and adding both Sado and the Snow Monkey Park to our itinerary made this one of my best trips for quite some time. **A**