

# Guide to Skiing and Snowboarding in Niigata Prefecture

By Ben Thorpe

The following guide is written using a Question and Answer format. Hopefully this will answer most of questions out there. There may, of course, be others so I'll leave my e-mail address at the bottom. Anyone who has a question is more than welcome to write to me.

## First, though, a couple of disclaimers(!):

I have not been to all the resorts in and around Niigata-Ken and therefore may not be able to provide good information about everywhere you might want to go. I am not a skier. Nothing against it, just decided to focus on one of the two. I chose snowboarding. As a result I can't really give advice on specialist places to buy ski equipment, although most big sports shops will have a wide variety of both ski and snowboard gear.

## (Following on from the above:)

Most ski grounds / hills / resorts have more than enough options to keep both skiers and snowboarders happy. However, some places are more suited to one than the other, depending on whether you're looking for nice, smoothly-groomed runs or off-piste action or a big park to play in etc. (beginners, don't worry, nearly all the places you can go to will be more than fine for your first season). I will do my best to bear this in mind when I recommend a few places later on, but please remember I'm writing as someone who has never skied there.

Throughout the guide that follows I will more often than not use the word resort rather than ski hill, ski place, ski ground, ski-jo etc. I should point out, though, that most places in Japan that offer skiing and snowboarding are not resorts in the same way as places you may have been to in Europe, North America(?) or elsewhere are. Although accommodation is available, you generally won't arrive and find a place with hundreds of runs, shops, bars, night-clubs etc. What I'm trying to say is that the *apres ski* is not quite there. Usually you'll find a couple of restaurants and a rental shop and not much else. This is because Japan is very mountainous and snow falls everywhere, not just at the higher elevations.

The good thing about this is that there are resorts all over the place. In Niigata-ken alone there are more than 70 resorts. People get up, drive to a ski resort, ski, and then drive home at the end of the day. Basically, wherever you live, there will be somewhere nearby that you can get to. For example, if you live in Joetsu, it will take you about 20 minutes to get to Arai by car and you can be in Myoko 45 minutes after leaving home. And I would hazard a guess that every ALT in this prefecture is within an hour drive of a ski resort. Not too much to complain about, really. And then, after a hard day on the slopes, there is always an onsen close by... (more on which later.)

Hope that hasn't put you off. The guide starts here.

### When is the ski season?

Generally speaking, most resorts are open from around the second weekend of December until the middle of April. Some resorts, located in areas that get more than the average amount of snow, open earlier and/or close later (Arai in the Joetsu area was open until the 22nd May last year). And some resorts, like Okutadami, get so much snow that they open for a while before becoming completely inaccessible for a few weeks. As a result they then close down completely and open again later in the season. If you enjoy winter sports, or think you will, you can expect to get a good 4 or 5 months on the slopes (this is dependent on snowfall and in no way to be taken as a guarantee!).

### What costs am I looking at if I want to start snowboarding or skiing?

You may have heard that skiing and snowboarding are expensive sports. And you already know that the cost of living in Japan is not the cheapest around. As with most things, you can spend a lot of money getting yourself kitted-out for skiing and snowboarding. However, it is also possible to do it relatively cheaply. I'll look at ways to save money a bit later, but for now here are a few general costs to think about:

- **A ski pass:** At most resorts you would pay for a Day Pass. This would allow you full use of the lifts and gondolas for the full day (usually from about 8 am until 4.30pm). Each resort charges different prices depending on their size and the facilities they offer, but I'd say you're looking at between 3,500en and 5,000en for the day. In addition to the full day, most places do a Half-Day Pass in case you just fancy a few hours skiing or get delayed by a hangover. Usual timing on a half-dayer would be 8 am 'til 1pm or 12pm until 4.30pm and cost anywhere between a little less than the full day itself and half what you'd pay to spend all day on the hill. Some resorts also sell single lift tickets for a few hundred yen. These are ideal for beginners, allowing you to get good value rather than paying the full amount and only taking 2 or 3 lifts in the day. In addition to skiing during the day there is also Night Skiing. This is offered at a lot of resorts and lets you ski or 'board under floodlights for 2 or 3 hours in the evening. It shouldn't cost more than 2000en. Be aware, though, that at most resorts that offer 'nighters', only the lower run will be operational. One way of keeping these costs down is by buying a season pass. More on this later.

- **Clothing:** This is really up to you. You can get a jacket for a few thousand yen or you can splash out 70,000en on something that claims to keep you warmer and drier than anything else while making you look really cool and being ipod compatible. Best advice; shop around and get something that suits your needs. There is a vast array of choice out there. Be aware, though, that ski wear and snowboarding wear are slightly different (styles, aerodynamics etc.) and some specific brands (if you're happy splashing out on them) only make clothing for one or the other.

- **Gear:** I'm afraid I can't be very useful here if you want ski gear. Sorry. For snowboarders, if you know that you want a Burton board and bindings and Salomon boots, for example, then you should already have a rough idea of how much money you'll be putting down on the counter. A beginner will not be so familiar with which brands are good

and which don't have such a good reputation. And, to be honest, you probably don't care. The costs are already stacking up. As well as board, boots & bindings you're going to need a hat, a pair of gloves and some goggles. Which are extra, often unthought of, expenses. Fortunately, the number of people taking up snowboarding in recent years has been so great that the number of manufacturers making snowboards has greatly increased. This means there is a much broader range of products and prices. Added to this, many of the bigger sports shops want those new to the sport to start their love of snowboarding at their store, leading to good deals. You can now pick up a brand new board, bindings and boots set for under 20,000€ at many sports shops. From what I've seen of them they are more than sufficient to last you at least your first season and, what's more, they're designed with beginners in mind. If this is going to be your first time, though, you'll probably be thinking something along the lines of, 'How do I know I'll like it? What's to say that I won't buy a load of new stuff only to find I hate it or can't do it?' This is a very fair point. Not everyone starts skiing or snowboarding and enjoys it enough to continue through to the end of the season, or at least get value for money. Therefore, it's worth asking...

Should I buy or rent? If I buy, should I buy new or 2nd hand?:

This ultimately comes down to you. The following questions may help, though: How interested are you in skiing or 'boarding? How often will you be able to go? How much do you want to / can you afford to spend? Renting is certainly an option. It gives you a chance to try the sport before spending a substantial amount of money. It is worth noting, however, that renting itself is not cheap. If you rent gear (and clothing) more than a few times you could well end up saving a lot less than you imagine. An alternative is to buy 2nd hand. That way you don't spend too much money and get to have full use of what is now yours whenever you want. You may find, though, that what is available is somewhat limited and the condition may not be the best. Nevertheless, bargains can be found.

My personal recommendation would be to invest in clothing, especially the jacket, pants (trousers) and a hat. The reason for this is that, once we get towards the end of October and it gets colder, these are items that you will find yourself using on a daily basis, not just for skiing or 'boarding. This is especially true of the jacket. Spend a few extra yen and get yourself a decent jacket that is both windproof and waterproof. It will make a big difference. These qualities are far more important than thickness and heaviness. You can always put more layers on underneath for warmth. If you're walking around outside in a good jacket and pants and it's raining or snowing and blowing a gale you will feel very warm and comfortable. It's a good feeling. Good snowboarding clothing is very well made so don't be surprised to find yourself wearing it to and from school, on the slopes and out at the weekend. It's hard now to imagine the need for it but IT GETS VERY COLD, VERY WINDY AND THERE IS SNOW EVERYWHERE.

If you plan on snowboarding and find a decent pair of boots at a reasonable price I would suggest getting them. Firstly, they're warm and waterproof and will come in handy when you have to trudge through snow to the local convenience store or dig your car out of the snow (you could just buy wellies, but hey...). The second reason is that it's much cheaper to just rent a board and bindings than a full set that includes board, bindings AND boots. Once you have the clothing sorted, ask yourself how interested you really are in skiing or snowboarding. If you're not crazy with enthusiasm then I would suggest renting or

borrowing a couple of times to make sure skiing/boarding is something you'll want to continue with.

NB. Some resorts do a season-long rental service.

#### How do I know what size board is the right size for me?

This can vary slightly; its not like buying shoes where you have an exact size which you should stick with to avoid discomfort. The general rule is that when you stand a board upright the top of the board should be somewhere between your chin and your nose. As a beginner this is a good guideline to work with. Those of you a little more advanced who may have left a board behind coming to Japan or be in search of a new playmate can obviously fiddle with this a little (you may wish to use a slightly longer length if you'll be hunting fresh powder all season or a shorter board if you spend all your time in the park).

#### How do I know whether I'm Goofy or Regular (What are Goofy and Regular)?

Goofy and Regular are terms used to refer to your stance on a snowboard. Imagine the front (or nose) of your snowboard is going straight down the slope. If your left foot is in front then you are Regular. If your right foot is in front then you are Goofy. If you've ever surfed or skateboarded then you will probably use the same stance. If you play baseball (or cricket) then it will probably be the same stance you use when you're at (or in) bat. If you don't know or are unsure which foot should be in front then try the following: Get a friend to stand behind you. This friend should wait until you are unsuspecting and give you a short, sharp push in the back, enough to unbalance you. Whichever foot you instinctively put forward to balance yourself should be your front foot. This works the majority of the time. If you are still unsure, or you try the above a couple of times and get a different result each time then its probably best to get out there and give both a go (your bindings can be changed round in a matter of minutes). If, after trying both, you feel equally comfortable standing Regular and Goofy then you're very lucky and may never have to learn to ride fakie.

#### Where can I buy ski or snowboard clothing and equipment?

This being 'Snow Country' there are plenty of options when it comes to where to buy. If you want to buy new then you have a couple of main options; the big, national sports shops that sell snow sports gear along side equipment for many other sports, and the smaller, more specialised dealers that focus on skiing and/or snowboarding (and probably surfing in the summer). A couple of years ago I would have said go to the bigger sports shops if you're starting out and stop by the smaller stores if you are more experienced and know what you're looking for. The national sports shops would sell cheaper, 'non-brand' gear and the small stores would sell the more expensive, established brands. This has changed somewhat, though, as snowboarding's popularity has rocketed over the last few years. Established snowboard companies, for example Burton, now make a wider range of boards encompassing beginner, intermediate and advanced levels and their products are priced accordingly. You will find most snowboard companies now have a selection of their range in the majority of shops that sell winter sports equipment. However, it still holds true that if you have a preference for particular companies you'll find a more

extensive selection in the smaller stores who specialise.

Some recommended shops are as follows:

**- Larger, national shops**

Sports Depo  
Xebio Sports  
Himaraya  
Alpen

**- Smaller stores**

Masa (In the Cowboy area of Joetsu)  
Boogie (In Niigata, in the shopping street between Meike and Sakuragi I.C.) Chu's (In the Bandai area of Niigata, behind Billboard Place 2)

**- Second hand**

There are many 2nd hand shops around, some of them national chains, some one-off. The most well-established is probably Off-House.

NB. My knowledge doesn't really extend much beyond Joetsu and Niigata. If there are specific snowboard and ski stores in your area please let me know the name, area and how to get there and I'll update this later. Thank you.

When should I buy my ski or snowboard clothing and equipment?

If you're not sure whether to buy before you try then you probably shouldn't worry about it yet. If, however, you plan on buying and you plan on buying new then the time is NOW! This is because of the trend in Japan for wanting the newest gear with the latest looks / styles / enhancements / improvements etc. As a result shops will wait until a couple of months before the beginning of the new season and then bring out all the stock they have left over from the previous one. And the discounts will be big. Sometimes 30% off the original price. More often than not, however, clothing and equipment prices will be slashed by 50%. For brand new stuff! There's absolutely nothing wrong with it. The only reason is that it's 'last year's style'! No complaints, though. Get on out there and snap it up!

NB. A couple of stores this year didn't even put last year's stock away, leaving it out over the summer instead. So the sooner you look around the more likely you are to pick up a few bargains. A watchful eye won't hurt if you're looking for second hand gear, either. Obvious as it is, the closer you get to the start of the ski season the more people there are looking to make purchases.

Where should I go snowboarding; are there any places that merit a special recommendation?

Due to the size of Niigata Prefecture it's probably best to talk to people in your area to find out the best resorts near where you live. You won't be too far away. Once in a while, though, you will want to try somewhere different and maybe venture a little further a field.

As a result there follows here a few suggestions of places you might like to check out, their whereabouts and a brief description.

**Myoko, Niigata Pref.** There are many ski resorts in this area. The best known three, all of which are on Mt. Myoko and therefore close to each other, are Akakura, Ikenotaira and Suginojara. The main course at Suginojara is 8.5km long making it perfect for skiers who get fed up with stumpy little runs and want to stretch their legs! Myoko is a popular destination with ALTs, especially those living in the bottom half of the prefecture. From Joetsu it's a 45 minute drive along route 18. Go through Myoko City(!) and you will find yourself in Myoko Kogen where most of the bigger resorts are to be found. All are sign posted.

**Yuzawa, Niigata Pref.** All of you will have been through the Yuzawa area at least once - the shinkansen stops at Echigo Yuzawa station roughly half way between Tokyo and Niigata. In the winter you really can enter the long tunnel, leaving sunny Tokyo behind, and come out the other side in snow country. There are many resorts in this area. The most popular / well-known are probably Naeba and Gala Yuzawa. Stay away during long weekends or get a place to stay in Yuzawa and then visit one of the less busy resorts such as Kagura where the powder is DEEP.

**Hakuba, Nagano Pref.** One of the main areas to host the 1998 Winter Olympics, the centre of town has a nice, almost cosmopolitan feel to it. Again, many different resorts to choose from, including Hakuba 47, Happo-one and Iwatake. Easily accessible from Niigata-ken.

**Shiga-kogen, Nagano Pref.** Another area used extensively for the 1998 Olympics. Very Big! Very accessible from Niigata-ken.

**Zao Onsen, Yamagata Pref.** I've never been, but comes highly recommended. Famous for its 'snow monsters', trees covered in snow that freeze in midwinter. In Yamagata, the prefecture above Niigata so should be highly accessible to those of you in Niigata, Shiibata, Murakami etc.

**Arai, Niigata Pref.** Has a (rather unfair?) reputation for being expensive. It will cost you on average 500en more than most places and the onsen certainly isn't cheap. And the bottom half of the mountain is too thin and windy. On the plus side the top half of the mountain is conditional meaning, basically, that there is no off-piste. You can go anywhere you want and if it's dumped the night before you're in for a real treat. Owned by Sony and the resort part certainly looks pretty swanky. 20min from Joetsu, on the way to Myoko, via route 18.

**Cupid Valley, Niigata Pref.** Not a very big resort by any means but popular with ALTs because of its location. Found in the middle of Joetsu, Tokamachi, Kashiwazaki and, of course, Kakizaki. Good for beginners, fun for intermediates. All you can eat (real) curry at one of the bottom restaurants. Nice onsen and rotomburo with nice views.

You mentioned season passes earlier. Is this something I should be considering? If so, when should I buy one?

Once again, this is something it's worth looking into in your own area. Ask people around you who might know of any good deals. What is a good deal? Some resorts sell season passes for 20,000 or 25,000en. This may seem like a lot of money to pay up front, especially if you don't know how much you'll be skiing or snowboarding. Basically, though, if you can see yourself going to the same resort at least 5 or 6 times over the winter then you'll make that money back. If you're likely to go to the same resort once, twice or more a week on average then you're laughing at how much money you can save. I've bought season passes the last couple of years and, even with visits to other resorts and weekend trips away, the amount I would have spent on snowboarding at the places where I had a pass would have cost me close to 70,000en each year. So I would highly recommend a season pass, but only if you think you'll use it enough to make it worthwhile.

NB. It's worth noting that a season pass doesn't just get you free use of the ski lifts. Many resorts will give season pass holders small discounts on things like food and onsens. And as a season pass holder you may also be sent discount tickets for your friends, as well as information about competitions, events, festivals etc.

#### When should I buy?

Season passes can be purchased throughout the season. However, cheap season passes need to be bought BEFORE the season starts. Possibly as early as the end of November. In my experience, season passes are heavily discounted until the day before the resort officially opens for its 'white' (winter) season. It's also worth noting that, while many resorts offer season passes for one person, some have special deals for couples or for 'teams'. You don't have to be a highly competitive ski team to qualify for a team season pass. It simply means that discounts are available for a minimum number of people who group together and buy their passes at the same time.

#### I don't have a car. How can I go skiing?

Make friends with people with cars who like getting up stupidly early at the weekend when it's really cold. Make friends with people who live in 'strategic areas' like Joetsu or Yuzawa (perhaps turning up on a Friday evening with a bottle of sake or whisky?). Many of the bigger resorts (and some of the smaller ones) have free buses that run from nearby stations. Talk to teachers and 2nd & 3rd year ALTs in your area. More than likely they will have the information that you need.

#### Er, what do I do if I have no interest in skiing or snowboarding?

If you're not really interested in winter sports then, firstly, thank you for reading this far! What should you do? Join the musical? Apart from that, snow festivals and onsens. There are lots of snow festivals all over Japan throughout the winter, many of which are in Niigata Prefecture. They often include lots of food, drink, music, snow sculptures and lots of sake. Festivities abound! I mention them because they're good events to go along to, meet up with people, brighten up the winter. More importantly, though, due to their nature, snow festivals are usually held in, around or near to ski resorts. This makes them a good venue for spending a couple of hours after skiing and before heading home and a fine excuse to

head to a different area to check out the action there. As for onsens, they're great! And the colder it gets the more sense they make. Best way to relax after relaxing on the snow all day.

I'll leave you with my perfect saturday in winter:

Wake up early, not too hung over, not too cold, able to resist the urge to hide in bed and go back to sleep. Meet a couple of mates. Drive to the resort. Meet a couple more mates. Spend the morning looking for fresh powder. Find loads of it. Don't get shouted at for being off-piste. Curry-rice for lunch. Work up the courage to attempt a couple of rails and jumps. Don't hurt myself. Don't look too stupid. Do a couple more tree runs to end the day. Meet up at the bottom with those who got separated/went too far off-piste and ended up in another resort. Hot drink. Head to onsen. Soak for an hour. Get food and entertainment at a snow festival on the way home. Get home. Put on a snowboarding video and have a beer with mates. Call a taxi. Taxi arrives. Go outside to find that it's started snowing again. Get out of taxi. Go into warm bar for a couple of cheekies. Leave and find it's still snowing - heavily now. Go to bed. Realise that tomorrow could be the same.

Grin. Sleep. Dream.

Well, I think that's about it for now. I hope you found some of the answers you were looking for, or picked up some information that will come in useful. I've tried to cover most of the issues that usually arise. Please feel free to send me any questions:

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For a much more comprehensive guide to enjoying the Japanese winter, check out Snow Japan at;

[www.snowjapan.com](http://www.snowjapan.com)

Have a fantastic season!

Ben.