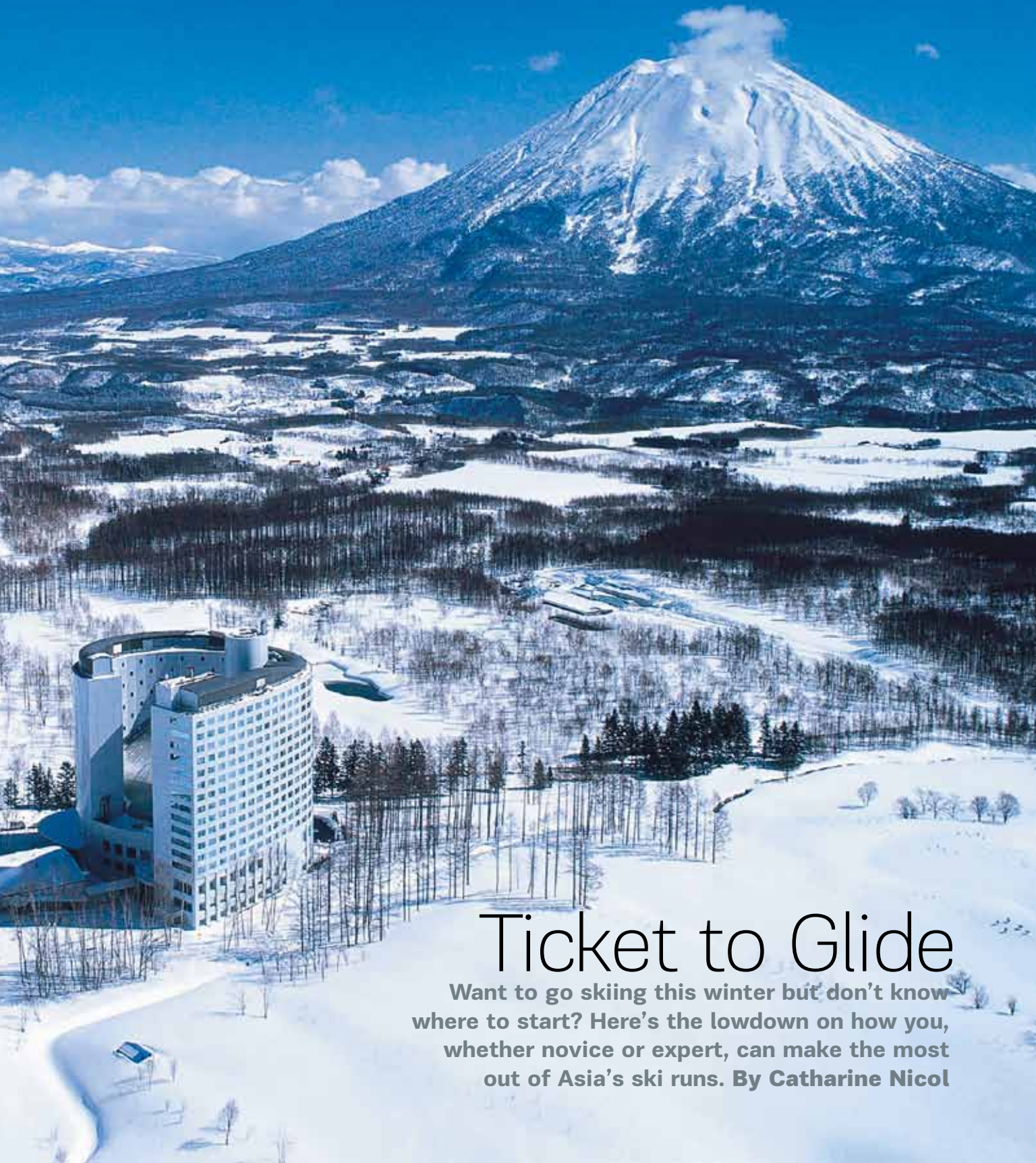


The Hilton Niseko  
and the ski village.



# Ticket to Glide

Want to go skiing this winter but don't know where to start? Here's the lowdown on how you, whether novice or expert, can make the most out of Asia's ski runs. **By Catharine Nicol**





Skiing in Japan, Korea and China has never been more popular.



e slid gingerly up to the edge of the piste, pointing our skis towards the entrance of Gate 3, where the deep virgin powder dipped away. Above us were the tiny figures of boarders and skiers trudging up to the absolute peak, higher than the lifts, ready for the thrill of the first run. Below us, Hirafu's maze of pistes and forest fell away, while breaking the far horizon was the perfect cone of Mount Yotei in Hokkaido. Through the crisp, clear air the lifts echoed faintly across the

mountain as if in musical conversation. But enough procrastinating—we were skiing out of our first gate, far from the groomed safety of the trails. My ski buddy and I shared a complicit look, a clear “let’s go” despite the muffling layers of scarfs, hats, helmets and goggles, and we were off.

Leaning back, our ski tips cut up through the powder’s surface, sending sprays of talc-light snow up into the air where it floated momentarily, diamond dust glinting in the sun. Our turns became gradually smoother and less panicked until nonchalance and muscle exhaustion had me catching an edge and tumbling in a flurry of snow, skis and poles. Laughing and unhurt, I brushed the snow from my goggles and set about righting myself, not easy when in thigh-high powder.

Back on-piste, more or less in one piece, we returned to my favorite slopes, weaving through the laden trees, their shadows painting gray gnarled fingers on the sparkling snow, trying to beat our 70 kilometer-per-hour top speed measured on our new favorite app, Ski Tracks. Hunkered down, scanning for bumps, straining to keep balance, we were on a skiing high. Who needs Europe when Asia has such great mountains?



The sleek and stylish penthouse at The Vale in Hirafu.

## JAPAN NISEKO

Skiing in Niseko is seriously addictive, attracting foreigners as far back as the late 80's. The four main interconnected ski areas, making up 61 runs accessed by 38 gondolas and lifts with one ski pass, include Hirafu, which leads up from the center of the town, sandwiched between Hanazono on one side, beloved by freestylers, and Niseko Village and An'nupuri on the other. Further out are Moiwa and Weiss. The long season stretches from the end of November to early May on a good year, thanks to the Siberian winds that help produce the airy powder.

The Aussies have made Niseko their home away from home, precipitating a property boom of modern condos and chalets that has gone somewhat flat over recent years. Shared chalets are the most popular form of accommodation, but there are a few ski-in ski-out hotels. Among them are the **Hilton Niseko** (81-13/644-1111; *niseko.hilton.com*; doubles from ¥24,500) and **Green Leaf Niseko Village** (81-13/644-3311; *thegreenleafhotel.com/en*; doubles from ¥19,000); both are in Niseko Village, a few minutes drive away from Hirafu. The Hilton's *onsen* is one of the best in the area—take a dip at night overlooking a lake and horizon of pines. Most exclusive is **The Vale** (81-13/621-5811; *thevaleniseko.com*; doubles from ¥28,000) a great example of the sleek, stylishly modern condos that pepper Hirafu, with elegant, spacious rooms sporting open fireplaces.

Whatever your thoughts of being in a Japanese town where the conversation is peppered with “g'day” more often than “konnichiwa,” the Aussies have brought their “no worries mate” attitude with them, and are apparently largely responsible for insisting on the off-piste skiing culture, forbidden in many other areas. These days Cantonese and Mandarin, as well as Malaysian and Singaporean accents join the mix, especially around Chinese New Year.

Almost as famous as the powder is the après-ski in Hirafu. In fact, there's also pre-ski with big breakfasts at J Sekka's Deli, and mid-ski with lots of places to fuel up on the slopes. Avoid the characterless canteens and head instead for log cabins with early ramen lunches at Boyoso, a thawing hot chocolate mid-afternoon at Paradise Hut and a cheeky sake at the 1,000-meter-high Hut. Après-ski, an *onsen* dip is the perfect thing to soothe the aching muscles, ensuring they recover to ski another day.

And last, but certainly not least, Hirafu's narrow streets are full of bars like the cozy Big Foot Lodge or J Sekka to start the evening reliving the day's action over a few beers

Hirafu's narrow streets are full of bars to start the evening reliving the day's action over a few cocktails in front of a crackling fire

## Take to the slopes and you may be following the Chinese ski team in training on the renowned A5 slope nicknamed 'Road for the Brave'

Alpensia  
Pyeongchang  
Resort, just three  
hours from Seoul.

or cocktails in front of a crackling fire. Restaurants like A-Bu-Cha-2 and Izakaya Raku serve up Hokkaido specialties, like the delicious in-shell scallops cooked in butter. After dinner, walk along the freezing streets to hidden Gyu bar; Blo Blo and its X-rated wallpaper; the Ice Bar that's recarved in a different site every year; and Wild Bills where it all gets dangerously messy. [niseko.ne.jp/en](http://niseko.ne.jp/en); *ski passes from ¥3,300.*

### RUSUTSU

**Rusutsu Resort** (81-13/646-3111; [en.rusutsu.co.jp](http://en.rusutsu.co.jp); *ski passes from ¥5,300*), slightly closer to Sapporo's Chitose International Airport, is more family-oriented, with the Rusutsu Tower providing two-wing accommodation in Western or tatami-style rooms, plus the more attractive log houses and cottages, for 37 runs and 42 kilometers of skiing.

While queues in Niseko can pile up, in Rusutsu, especially mid-week, you often have the piste to yourself. Set out for first tracks in the morning to ski the pristine corduroy (left by the ploughs) before the slopes get carved up, or take advantage of a fresh layer of snow by booking the early Snowcat Tour up Mount Isola to ski virgin slopes.

Moguls, wide piste highways, narrow lanes weaving through the forest, and tree skiing keep Rusutsu varied. There are cross country trails and a chance to go snow shoeing too. Have kids? This slope has plenty to keep the little ones occupied, from dog sledding, a park and a day care center. Now that you have time to yourself, you can relax in the *onsen* or wave pool.

West Mount has slopes for beginners as well as black diamond runs. Cruise across to West Mountain, weaving your way over to Mount Isola. Super East, leading down from East Mountain, and Isola-A, leading from Mount Isola, are two of the higher double diamond black runs, with moguls and occasional ice upping the challenge.

Follow your fellow skiers to Steamboat, the huge canteen-style restaurant where refueling comes in the form of Japanese comfort food, and windows fog up as bodies thaw and *tonkatsu* with curry sauce and ramen fragrantly steam. Rusutsu is sadly devoid of the charming log cabins found in Niseko and the nightlife is more PG too, with the hotel's two Japanese restaurants predictably the best bet in-house. There's a handful of *izakaya* well worth the short walk down the road for a bit of village charm.

### KOREA

#### PYEONGCHANG

Korea's ski areas are developing fast, buoyed by the upcoming 2018 Winter Olympic Games. Several mountains rely on artificial snow, however, compromising the quality of skiing. A rule of thumb is that the further you travel from the capital city the better the snow and the fewer the crowds.





Set within the Taebaek Mountains about three hours from Seoul, **Alpensia Pyeongchang Resort** (82-33/339-0000; [ichotelsgroup.com](http://ichotelsgroup.com); doubles from W129,900) is the ski resort of choice in Korea. Off-piste activities include Ocean 700, a huge water park, Kids Club Planet Trekkers and the Spa Club CMA. As the nearest slopes are best suited to intermediate and beginner skiers, advanced skiers stay at the luxury resort but follow the athletes-in-training to Yongpyong for the day.

With 28 slopes that run as flat as beginner and as steep as expert **Yongpyong** (82-33/335-5757; [yongpyong.co.kr/eng](http://yongpyong.co.kr/eng); ski passes from W65,000) is the biggest ski resort in the area. Several runs are international racing standard, and while boarders head for Dragon Park, most skiers head straight for the Rainbow slopes, a 20-minute ride up, and the intense workout that is Rainbow Paradise, more than 5 kilometers long.

## CHINA

### YABULI

In China's northeast, Yabuli is best accessed by flying into Harbin or on an overnight train from Beijing. It's made its name as the birthplace of China's ski culture. Take to the slopes and you may be following in the tracks of the Chinese national ski team in training, on the renowned A5 slope nicknamed "Road for the Brave."

**Club Med Yabuli** (86-2/8760-7401; [clubmed.com.cn](http://clubmed.com.cn); seven-night minimum, all-inclusive packages from RMB16,000) has brought plenty of international attention to the area. With their all-inclusive deals, including ski hire, ski school and après-ski drinks, as well as ski-in ski-out location, it's a tempting destination. There is plenty of family-friendly fun with a 2-kilometer sledding route, ski tubing, an indoor flying trapeze and, of course, Karaoke. [yabuliski.com/english](http://yabuliski.com/english); ski passes from RMB180. +

One of the ski runs at Club Med Yabuli in China.



## Other ski runs around Asia

### JAPAN

**Furano, Hokkaido, Japan** has some of the longest and steepest runs in the country. There are two mountains of pistes here, all accessed with one lift ticket, but off-piste skiing is prohibited. 81-16/722-5777; [skifurano.com](http://skifurano.com); ski passes from ¥4,500.

**Sahoro, Hokkaido, Japan** is home to another Club Med destination, renowned for its back-country forest skiing, local cuisine and Zen-style *onsen* soaking. 81-15/664-7111; [sahoro.co.jp](http://sahoro.co.jp); ski passes from ¥4,820.

**Nozawa Onsen, Nagano, Japan** is based around a traditional village, where skiers can immerse themselves in the local culture and numerous hot springs while staying in *ryokan* accommodation. 81-55/532-6026; [nozawaholidays.com](http://nozawaholidays.com); ski passes from ¥4,600.

**Shiga Kogen, Nagano, Japan** is just an hour and a half from Nagano. A huge area of 21 resorts, it is famous for the snow monkeys soaking themselves in nearby Jigokudani Monkey Park's hot springs. 81-26/934-2404; [shigakogen.gr.jp](http://shigakogen.gr.jp); ski passes from ¥4,800.

### KOREA

**High1, Korea** A four-hour ride from Seoul on a train equipped with a DJ, High1 is one of the highest ski areas in the country. The long trip from Seoul thins the crowds somewhat and the snow is mostly real on its 18 pistes. 82-1/1588-7789; [high1.com](http://high1.com); ski passes from W54,000.

**Deogyusan Ski Resort, Korea** Deogyusan Seolcheon Mountain rises up to 1,520 meters and challenges skiers with the country's longest piste, an exhausting 6.1-kilometer, non-stop run. At its foot is a natural hot spring. 82-63/322-9000; [mdysresort.com](http://mdysresort.com); ski passes from W68,000.

### CHINA

**Nanshan Ski Resort, China** An easy drive for Beijingers at the weekend, try to target Nanshan's eight multi-level pistes mid-week to avoid the crush. 86-2/8909-1909; [nanshanski.com](http://nanshanski.com); ski passes from RMB120.