

Niseko: An Emerging International Resort Destination

By Ross FINDLAY

NISEKO has always been one of the best places on earth to ski. There are endless days of deep powder snow and courses that are always soft. These are skiers' dream conditions and in Niseko that is the norm. Although there are good aspects of the increased international tourism in the area of late, it is almost a shame that word of Niseko escaped Japan and the rest of the world learned of its incredible conditions. Probably the biggest loser was people like myself who had had Niseko all to ourselves. We would ski knee-deep powder in the morning and go back and ski the same place waist deep in the afternoon.

Now, Niseko has started its transformation into becoming one of the world's major ski destinations.

Word of Mouth

The winter of 2001/2002 saw a sudden increase in foreign skiers, mainly from Australia. From the usual 20 or so, a couple of hundred Aussies came to Niseko. Australians being friendly talka-

Photo: NAC



tive people, soon those couple of hundred had told quite a few more than that and by the next season most of Niseko was booked out by Australian skiers.

Niseko had everything for them. Foremost, the snow was unbelievable. Also, most of the skiing in Niseko is done under 1,000 meters. This means that the skiing is mostly within the tree line and protected from most adverse weather. Niseko is fairly warm around the minus 10-15 C mark in the peak of winter. There were no lift queues as the Japanese ski market had boomed in the early 1990s and was down to under half its peak. There was the unique Japanese culture, food and resort lifestyle that is polite, patient and bend-over-backwards, do-anything-for-you hospitality. The resort was safe enough to leave your skis (and your kids) outside without having to worry about them being flogged. Furthermore, it was reasonably inexpensive in comparison to ski resorts around the world. Niseko is closer than other major ski resorts; an overnight flight from Australia and you are skiing the next afternoon. Only one hour's time difference, no jet lag and more holiday time skiing than in travel were seen as a definite advantage over resorts in Europe, America and Canada.

Word of Niseko soon found its way to Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Now skiers from all over the globe have been attracted to Niseko.

From "International Resort" to International Resort

Though Niseko was a dreamland in so many ways, international guests found it lacking in some of the services and infrastructure that they had become used to in other resorts. One of the main differences between local skiers and interna-



Beautiful silver birch trees and Niseko powder

tional skiers is the length of stay for their ski holiday. The Japanese skier usually stays for around two nights, while international guests stay for an average of 10 days. To accommodate international guests, Niseko had to change in several ways.

The four main resorts of Niseko had luckily introduced a high-tech computerized ticket system. This allows for many new combinations of ski lift tickets to be created. Until then, a two-day pass was the only other option to a one-day ticket. Now, for example, one- or two-week tickets and even 30-hour tickets are available.

Accommodation needed to be modified, and in some cases made anew. Most Japanese ski resorts have very small rooms. These are fine for one or two nights, but for a couple of weeks you need somewhere you can relax. To answer this need, people started to renovate their hotels, creating larger rooms and relaxing foyers. Pensions changed to a B&B style so guests could enjoy the restaurants of the area. But probably the biggest change has been the building of condominiums – until now a rarity at Japanese resorts.

Findlay in his winter dreamland

Photo: NAC

If you are staying somewhere for a couple of weeks, it is almost like you are living in that town temporarily. This means people will want lots to do other than skiing. For them, everyday is Sunday. International ski guests want restaurants, cafes, shops and activities beyond skiing. They also want weeklong ski lessons for their kids, child-minding and babysitting. After all, you do want to make the most out of your holidays.

The Hirafu area of Niseko is the biggest of the ski areas. In the last three years there have been about 60 new restaurants, cafes and retail shops opened up in the resort. What's more, these economic effects have started to reach the local town of Kutchan 6 km away. A free bus service linking the resort to the town has been very successful. New businesses are springing up and old businesses are going under renewal. Country towns in Japan can be very staid and with an aging community a lot of shops are closing their shutters. So it is very encouraging to see the local town and townspeople of Kutchan have been revitalized.

Revitalizing a Local Community

There are many different stakeholders in Niseko's growing tourism industry. For the townspeople of the area, there have been many benefits. There are a lot of new infrastructure and services that the

Photo: NAC



Rafting is a smily business.

town alone could not have economically supported. This has also created a diversity of job opportunities, not usually found in a country area. This and the highlighting of the area as a year-round outdoor resort have seen an increase in people wanting to live in the Niseko area.

International guests have also sparked a development boom, with developers trying to keep up with the demand for condominiums, hotels and holiday houses. Consequently, Hirafu has had the fastest rising land prices in Japan for the last two years. While the developers are tearing down old buildings and making new ones on most of the vacant plots of land, it has been done without any central sort of planning. For the government, it has been a case of trying to catch up with the fast pace of development while balancing out the different needs and future visions of all involved. Whilst investment and increased tourism are the envy of many other areas, it is necessary to have good management of the growing resort to ensure its sustainability and benefits continue for all.

Looking to Future, Blending All & Making It Sustainable

In answer to this, a new body – the Niseko Promotion Board – was created. The Niseko area has always been a fragmented area of two towns, three main resorts, three tourism associations etc. etc. To be able to cope with the international scale of everything, Niseko needed to work together and coordinate its efforts centrally. By pooling resources together and getting all the stakeholders involved and establishing the board, Niseko has probably taken one of its biggest steps in ensuring continuity of its successful tourism.

Niseko has fantastic potential, not just as a winter resort, but as a four-season resort. It is already popular within Japan over the summer months. Niseko has a range of outdoor sports, including rafting, trout fishing, and lots of trails for hiking and mountain biking as well as many great uncrowded golf courses. There is also an abundance of natural hot springs to have a relaxing bath in. The drinking water, even coming out of the taps, is natural delicious spring water coming from the scenic Mt. Yotei. Most of all, while



Niseko lifestyle: JoJo's cafe

most of the rest of Japan and Asia is sweltering in the summer months, Niseko is a comfortable 25-odd C. In autumn, Niseko is painted with the reds and yellows of autumn leaves, whilst spring is the light green of new leaves as they grow from their buds.

Niseko's sudden increase in popularity as an international resort destination and even as a gateway to Japan has been quite an abnormality and surprise to the Japanese. It is certain that Niseko will become a model for not just international tourism, but also for a new style of infrastructure-supported long-stay tourism for the Japanese market.

Now, so long as there is some powder snow left for me, I'll be happy. **JS**

Ross Findlay is Managing Director, NAC Niseko Adventure Centre. After graduating with a bachelor of sports study from University of Canberra in Australia, he established the center in May 1995. He has been an active competitor in many sports, including soccer, karate, swimming, running, mogul skiing, rodeo kayak and most recently road cycle racing.