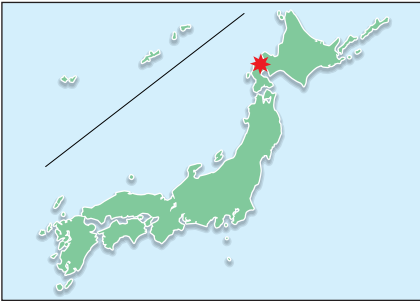


# Popular Spots for Overseas Visitors —The Allure of the Japanese Countryside—

By *Kyodo News*

## Aiming to be the Whistler of Asia: Niseko has been “discovered” by Australians

Hokkaido – Niseko



**N**ISEKO in Hokkaido is Japan’s premier ski resort, and has been gaining a lot of attention from Australian visitors. News of the world’s best powder snow has crossed the equator and reached the ears of Australian skiers, and the number of visitors has rapidly increased – 10 or 20 fold – in recent years. With the purchase of the ski area by Australian investors, and the growing number of resort homes and condominiums being built, it appears that an Australian Village is about to be created in Niseko. The people in

the tourism industry here are recognizing the potential for the area to become Asia’s version of the world-class Canadian ski resort, Whistler.

Niseko is about two hours by car from Sapporo, the prefectural capital of Hokkaido. With a population of 16,000 people, the town of Kutchan lies at the foot of Mt. Niseko Annupuri (1,308 m) on the eastern side of the mountain. Asagami Isao of the town’s Business and Tourism Department began to notice a change about two years ago. Suddenly the Australian visitors seemed more numerous at the town’s Niseko Mt. Resort Grand Hirafu, and Australian English could be heard everywhere. “The Australians began to outnumber the Japanese almost overnight. The local authority had done nothing to encourage Australian tourism, and we were puzzled by what was going on.”

According to the town of Kutchan, the total number of guest nights for Australians visiting the town jumped

from 1,700 in fiscal 2001, to 23,500 by fiscal 2003. The number of people from Hong Kong, the second largest segment of overseas visitors, has remained relatively unchanged over recent years, fluctuating by around 1,000 guest nights. Only visits by Australians have seen a rapid increase, a trend that Asagami says is limited to Niseko and no other ski resort in Japan. Meanwhile, the number of domestic ski visitors is decreasing, revealing an unexpected “Australian boom” for the town.

One of the reasons for the popularity of Niseko with Australians is that Hokkaido is closer to Australia compared to Canada or Europe, with much less time difference, and the cost of tours to Hokkaido is also more reasonable. However, the industry people agree that the biggest reason is that Australian skiers are talking about Niseko as having the best snow conditions in the world. Therefore, it was not the Japanese that discovered the world-class qualities of Niseko, but the Australians who first starting coming to Kutchan in the 1990s.

“Compared to Australia where peo-



An real estate advertisement targeting Australian customers



Top-class snow, wonderful slopes

ple can only ski slopes with fresh snow a few days each season, you can enjoy powder snow every day at Niseko,” explains Ross Findlay, who was born in Melbourne. After working as a ski instructor in the United States and Switzerland, he moved to Kutchan in 1992, and established the Niseko Adventure Centre as an outdoor adventure business in 1995. He has been the key person responsible for turning Niseko from a winter-only ski area, into a year-round resort with adoption of summertime rafting. Findlay recalls Niseko in the 90s, “Top-class snow, wonderful slopes, and lifts without lines – it was a mystery why this place did not deserve Japanese notice.”

Peter Murphy runs a travel company in Australia. In 1996 he began to organize Niseko tours, and eventually set up a local affiliate in Kutchan called “Ski Japan” in 2001. “At first the tours had less than 10 people, but the visitor reaction was excellent. In the last few years, the number of tour participants has doubled annually as more and more people hear about it through word of mouth, and the rate of repeat visitors is extremely high.” The popular tour options include hot springs, *karaoke* and all-you-can-drink events. Murphy concludes that the secret of Niseko’s popularity is “the fun of experiencing a culture different from the West, as well as the fine snow conditions.”

Along with the rise in Niseko’s popularity comes an influx of Australian capital. Japan Harmony Resort (based in Tokyo), which is financed by an Australian ski resort management company, decided to purchase Niseko Hirafu Hanazono Ski Field. The president of the company, Roger Donazzan, is married to the Chairwoman of Qantas Airlines. In November, a subsidiary of Qantas announced it will offer a new direct flight service from Cairns to Shin Chitose (the gateway to Sapporo), which will mean that, starting next winter, even more tour visitors will be coming here from Australia.

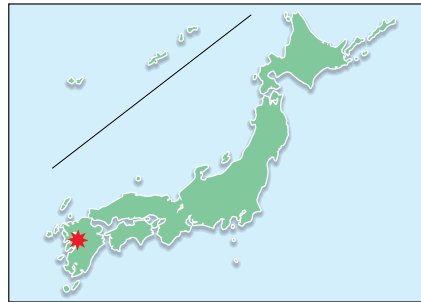
Kutchan has been welcoming the

rush to build new resort homes and condominiums for the upcoming season. As the English “for sale” signs indicate, most of these new properties are being built by Australian individuals and companies to accommodate Australian visitors. Murphy, whose company is also in the process of building condominiums, is looking to turn this small little ski area into a world-

class ski resort like Whistler in Canada. “All the Australians said ‘we can’t miss out on this’ and began to set their sights on local real estate. Niseko has the potential to become a resort that rivals Whistler. We are now taking over the resort building that has been neglected since the end of the bubble economy in Japan.”

—by *Tabira Takashi*

## A huge success in attracting South Korean visitors: Kikuchi in southern Japan Kyushu – Kikuchi



**K**IKUCHI is a city with almost 30,000 people in northern Kumamoto prefecture. Noted for its hot springs and narrow valleys, tourism is a major source of revenue for the city. Just like resorts nationwide, it has been struggling for many years with low visitor counts due to the flagging Japanese economy, and has therefore put efforts into attracting visitors from South Korea. Achieving great results in a short period of time, the city has gained attention from across the country.

The initial idea for this effort came in January 2003 when the city proposed as a part of the Japanese Government’s special structural reform zone proposal, to allow South Koreans to visit Kyushu without a visa. Soon after there was a flood of protest e-mails and faxes from Japanese who feared an increase in the number of illegal Korean residents, but the proposal was picked up by Korean newspapers, magazines and television, and resulted in a huge PR success in Korea for the city of Kikuchi.

The Mayor of the city, Fukumura Mitsuo, recalls “It all started when we wanted to invite some South Korean high school students to a *kendo* (Japanese fencing) tournament, but there wasn’t enough time for them to get visas and they weren’t able to make it.”

Although the visa exemption proposal was not adopted due to security concerns, in March 2004, the exemption was allowed for students on school trips, and Kikuchi received a lot of praise for its major achievement.

The city seized this golden opportunity and decided to begin a full-scale effort to attract South Korean visitors.

Kikuchi Hot Springs originally catered to groups of visitors coming for banquets, and the main source of revenue was from company-sponsored trips for employees. But after the collapse of the bubble economy fewer trips were being made and the number of visitors had greatly decreased.

While the hot springs resort welcomed 440,000 overnight visitors a year in its heyday, in recent years the number had fallen by nearly half.

The staff of the Kikuchi Hot Springs Inn Cooperative Association soon flew to Pusan and Seoul and made the rounds of travel providers to promote Kikuchi. Mayor Fukumura also visited the South Korean Embassy and the South Korean National Tourism Organization, and carried out top-level sales. He also appeared on local TV

and radio shows in South Korea.

Signs are posted in Korean in the city, and leaflets have been prepared in Korean as well. Korean language classes have been set up for inn staff and taxi drivers, and preparations have been made to receive Korean visitors.

The results were soon apparent and the number of South Koreans that stayed in the city last year jumped eightfold over the previous year to 4,000 people, and this was the major force behind the city's first increase in the number of overnight visitors in seven years.

The citizens of Kikuchi also participated in exchange activities with South Korea. In July 2003, 70 students on a school trip from South Korea stayed with local families, and in August this year, 80 junior high school students from Kikuchi visited South Korea. Also in August the city sponsored the Korean Film Festival in Kikuchi, which ran for three days introducing popular South Korean films to the residents.

Iwanaga Etsuro, Head of the Kikuchi Inn Cooperative Association, stated that, "We hope to keep attracting visitors from South Korea, especially in the summertime when overnight visitors usually drop off. We also want to establish a sister city relationship with a city somewhere in South Korea in order to deepen exchanges."

However, when asked if the city is welcoming the increase of South Korean visitors, the Association members became strangely quiet. This is because there are problems with the accommodation rates and the establishments themselves.

Iwanaga lamented, "The accommodation rates for South Koreans are lower than those for Japanese, which lowers the profit rates. With rates as they are, some inns won't think that they are being paid fairly for their services." Goto Sadamu, Head of the Kikuchi International Exchange Office, said, "It seems the margin for South Korean travel agents is very high. If we don't resolve this issue, it will be difficult to expand our promotions to



Kikuchi city has prepared signs and leaflets in Korean

South Korean visitors."

The shortage of accommodation facilities is also serious. Although South Korean visitors prefer to stay at large hotels, Kikuchi Hot Spring has many *minshukus* or small Japanese-style B&Bs. This means that there are only three or four establishments that meet their criteria.

Goto indicated that he is struggling with this, "At this time it is difficult to expand facilities and make physical improvements. Although we try to encourage them to stay in small inns, it is very hard."

The city of Kikuchi has determined that there are limits to their individual visitor promotion activities, and the city is trying to find a solution with neighboring municipalities. Goto stressed that, "We need to prepare tourism infrastructure across the whole

of Kumamoto prefecture, including sightseeing spots and accommodation facilities." He is now calling for cooperation from Kumamoto prefecture and the surrounding municipalities.

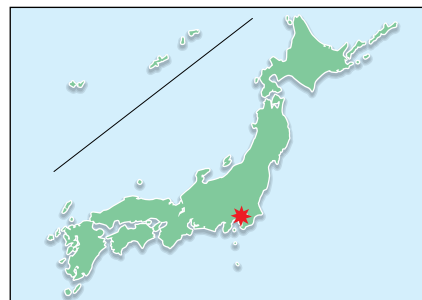
Mayor Fukumura talked about future development, "With Kikuchi taking the lead, I hope we can build support for the attraction of South Korean visitors, not just in Kumamoto, but all over Kyushu. It would be great if someday 'Kikuchi' is synonymous with 'Korea.'"

Although the connection between Kikuchi and South Korea that began with the call for visa exemptions continues to strengthen, there are still a lot of issues to be addressed. Resorts across the country are watching with great interest to see whether the city will continue to take on new challenges in the future.

—by Fukuoka Yosuke

## Tokyo's Sugunami Ward strives to attract visitors with *Anime*

Tokyo – Sugunami



TOKYO'S Sugunami Ward has launched an effort to attract visitors using Japanese animation films, or *anime*. Anime production studios first began to congregate in this district in the late 60s and early 70s. Sunrise, the company that produced *Mobile Suit Gundam* is one of these studios. Among the 400 animation studios across Japan, 70 are in Sugunami Ward. This characteristic of the district is

Photo: ©HIROMU ARAKAWA / SQUARE ENIX, MBS, ANX, BONES, dentsu 2004



"Fullmetal Alchemist," produced by BONES, INC., one of the anime production studios in Sugunami

being highlighted for business promotion and attracting overseas visitors.

Although still small in number, in the last two years the number of visitors to Sugunami Ward from places like Australia, the United States, and Germany has reached 1,000. This is quite amazing considering that, compared to major sightseeing areas like Akihabara and Asakusa, Sugunami Ward has a strong local flavor. The visitors are varied, from students and professors from a university in Germany, who are interested in the overseas development of the Japanese anime industry, to media people from China and Southeast Asia. The increase in foreign visitors over the last two years is not the result of any special efforts to invite tourism to the area, and the Sugunami Ward official in

charge was rather puzzled as to how the overseas anime fans found out about Sugunami Ward in the first place. The number of repeat overseas visitors also appears to be high.

The main purpose that visitors have in coming to Sugunami Ward is taking studio tours. There is a deep-rooted desire by both Japanese and foreign fans to see where the anime are actually made, and there was a sudden increase in inquiries about studio tours starting last year. In the past, the Sugunami Ward municipal government has always contacted studios and arranged tours each time a request was received. However, since these visits were an interruption for those who were actually working there, the Sugunami Ward official in charge explains that they had to develop a system that is also beneficial for the studios.

The Anime Museum was an idea for a facility to attract these kinds of visitors. Although it had just opened, since it only had 100 m<sup>2</sup> of floor space, and a shortage of material to exhibit, the museum decided to begin a renovation program after a year. Now the museum is preparing to reopen next spring. It will be greatly expanded to 800 m<sup>2</sup>, and will be a place where visitors can learn about the entire anime production industry in Japan. Although the museum image has been very low-key in the past due to restrictions on using copyrighted characters, they decided that it was necessary to use popular characters in order to make

it enjoyable for the visitors. Now the museum's management has been entrusted to the Association of Japanese Animations, which plans to make exhibits using well-known characters. The museum is also looking into the possibility of recreating a studio interior. The goal is to create a facility where visitors can feel like they are taking part in the production process.

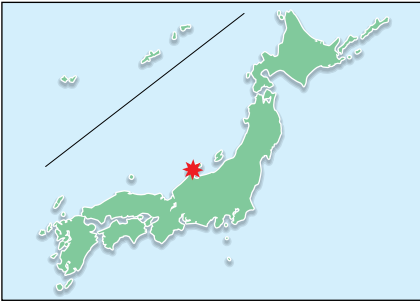
Travel agencies also are selling Sugunami Ward studio tours. Travel companies like JTB are planning tours for overseas fans from the United States and Europe to coincide with the Tokyo International Anime Fair. The fair is now in its third year, and while the number of overseas visitors who come independently is increasing more than those in groups, JTB is also planning an exclusive tour that combines Sugunami Ward studio tours with a visit to the Ghibli Museum, Mitaka, which is overseen by the famous anime director, Miyazaki Hayao. The number of participants for the tour held in conjunction with the fair last spring totaled 11 Australians and Americans. It consisted of children who love anime and their parents, as well as ardent adult anime fans, who were happy to visit studios that cannot usually be seen. JTB has noticed a strong tendency among Europeans and Americans to prefer "tours with a particular focus such as Japanese culture and gardens in order to see something special, rather than general sightseeing tours." With the anime industry as one of the important sightseeing themes, JTB intends to plan more fascinating tours with the cooperation of Sugunami Ward and other local governments undertaking similar endeavors.

When the museum reopens with its new look, Sugunami Ward will have to actively promote other measures in order to welcome visitors. By using anime as an incentive to bring in visitors and help revitalize the district, the ward is determined to make the entire area, including the shopping streets, a place that visitors will love.

—by Hamamoto Noriko

## A Japanese *Ryokan* wins the hearts of the Taiwanese guests Tateyama's *Yuki-no-Otani* attracts them

Hokuriku – Wakura



“WE are the most famous Japanese hot-spring inn (*ryokan*) in Taiwan.” These are the confident words of Torimoto Masao, General Sales Manager at Kagaya, a long established ryokan located at Wakura Hot Springs in Ishikawa prefecture. About 8,000 of the 350,000 people that stay at Kagaya each year are from Taiwan. Noto Airport, which opened about a year ago, has set up direct charter flights from Taiwan and will welcome 10,000 people this year.

In Taiwan people wear swimsuits when bathing at a hot spring. Most have never tried on *yukata* robes, or slept on a *futon* spread out in a *tatami*-mat room. However, when Taiwanese

people stay at a Japanese ryokan, they can bathe naked in the hot spring like the Japanese do, wear a *yukata* robe and sleep in a *futon*. The fascination for them is to experience the differences between Taiwanese and Japanese culture in this way.

However, the reason that Taiwanese visitors want to stay at Kagaya instead of other ryokans is the excellent customer services. Kagaya arranges special food for vegetarians and people who do not enjoy raw fish upon advance request. The staff politely explain the proper way to tie a *yukata* robe to those who have never worn one before, and make up for their limited foreign language ability with friendly smiles when talking to guests. The proprietress and staff also travel one hour by car to the Noto Airport in order to welcome their guests arriving on Taiwanese charter flights.

As Torimoto says, “I want our Taiwanese guests to enjoy an authentic Japanese ryokan experience.” For the last 24 years, Kagaya has been ranked number one by an industry newspaper. It seems the service that makes the

Japanese happy can also capture the hearts of the Taiwanese.

Along with Kagaya, the Tateyama Kurobe Kanko Co. of Toyama is also putting effort into attracting Taiwanese visitors. This company manages the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route for tourism in the northern Japanese Alps. Horiguchi Yoshihiro, head of the company's overseas sales center, wants overseas travelers to account for 10% of the 1.1 million visitors each year.

The sightseeing route is 90km long with a climb in altitude of 2,000m, and allows for transfer between cable car, bus and cable way. It also includes Japan's largest dam, the Kurobe Dam, along with numerous walking trails for enjoying alpine nature and scenery. Viewing the fall colors in this area at the beginning of October has also become renowned.

The biggest attraction is the *Yuki-no-Otani* or snow corridor. For about one month from the middle of April, buses wind their way along a roadway with 20m high walls of snow on either side. Near the highland called Murodo at an altitude of 2,450m, visitors can get out and walk next to the snow walls.

According to Horiguchi, “The Taiwanese visitors have fun touching the snow, writing their names in the walls with their fingers and taking souvenir photos, throwing snow at their



The hot spring (left) and a guest room in Kagaya



Gold leaf atelier, Hakuichi

friends.” He went on to explain that many Taiwanese really enjoy this because they have never seen or touched snow before, and Yuki-no-Otani is featured prominently in the advertising in Taiwan. As of August 2004, the number of Taiwanese visitors has risen to 30,000, exceeding the number in the previous year, and now represents 90% of the overseas visitors to this area.

Although there has not been much effort to attract overseas visitors to see the traditional crafts of Hokuriku, a gold leaf atelier in Kanazawa called Hakuichi is changing this. Each year 70,000 people tour the production process at Hakuichi, which includes artisans using bamboo chopsticks to apply thin gold leaf, 0.1 micron in thickness, to Japanese handmade paper. Although only 1,200 of these are over-



Visitors can try decorating small boxes with gold leaf

seas visitors, Hakuichi has English leaflets on hand in expectation of more such visitors in the future. The number of overseas visitors is increasing each year, especially those from Taiwan. Ninety-minute classes, where visitors can try decorating small boxes with gold leaf, are popular. The person in charge explained the popularity of the classes, “In addition to the fascination people have with gold, there are few who have seen the gold leaf manufacturing process and people are probably quite amazed by it.”

In the Hokuriku region, people are looking forward to the tourism potential not only from Taiwan, but also China and South Korea. The three Hokuriku prefectures of Toyama, Ishikawa and Fukui have jointly produced Korean leaflets for individual travelers that cover the whole region.

Also, with the start of regular flights between Shanghai and Ishikawa’s Komatsu Airport in November, and the lifting of the Japanese visa requirement for people on guided tours from Shanghai and other Chinese cities, representatives from the three prefectures plan to jointly visit China this winter to promote Hokuriku to local travel agents.

However, the name recognition for Hokuriku in China is nil. Ishikawa Prefecture and local companies are expecting benefits from a Taiwanese and Chinese joint production of a TV drama series, and are footing ¥100 million for location costs in the prefecture. The drama is a love story about a Chinese woman and a Japanese man, and locations in Ishikawa include a hot spring inn, the Notojima Glass Art Museum and *Kutaniryaki* pottery. The producers also plan to feature Kanazawa’s Kenrokuen, one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan. The Ishikawa Prefecture Tourism Division is hoping that the prefecture will become famous thanks to the filming locations, and visitors from Taiwan and China will increase. In fact, after other Japanese dramas were broadcast in Taiwan, many of the filming locations in Tokyo and other places became sightseeing spots.

—by *Yamamoto Hirofumi*



Enjoying Alpine nature at Murodo Highland



Yuki no Otani