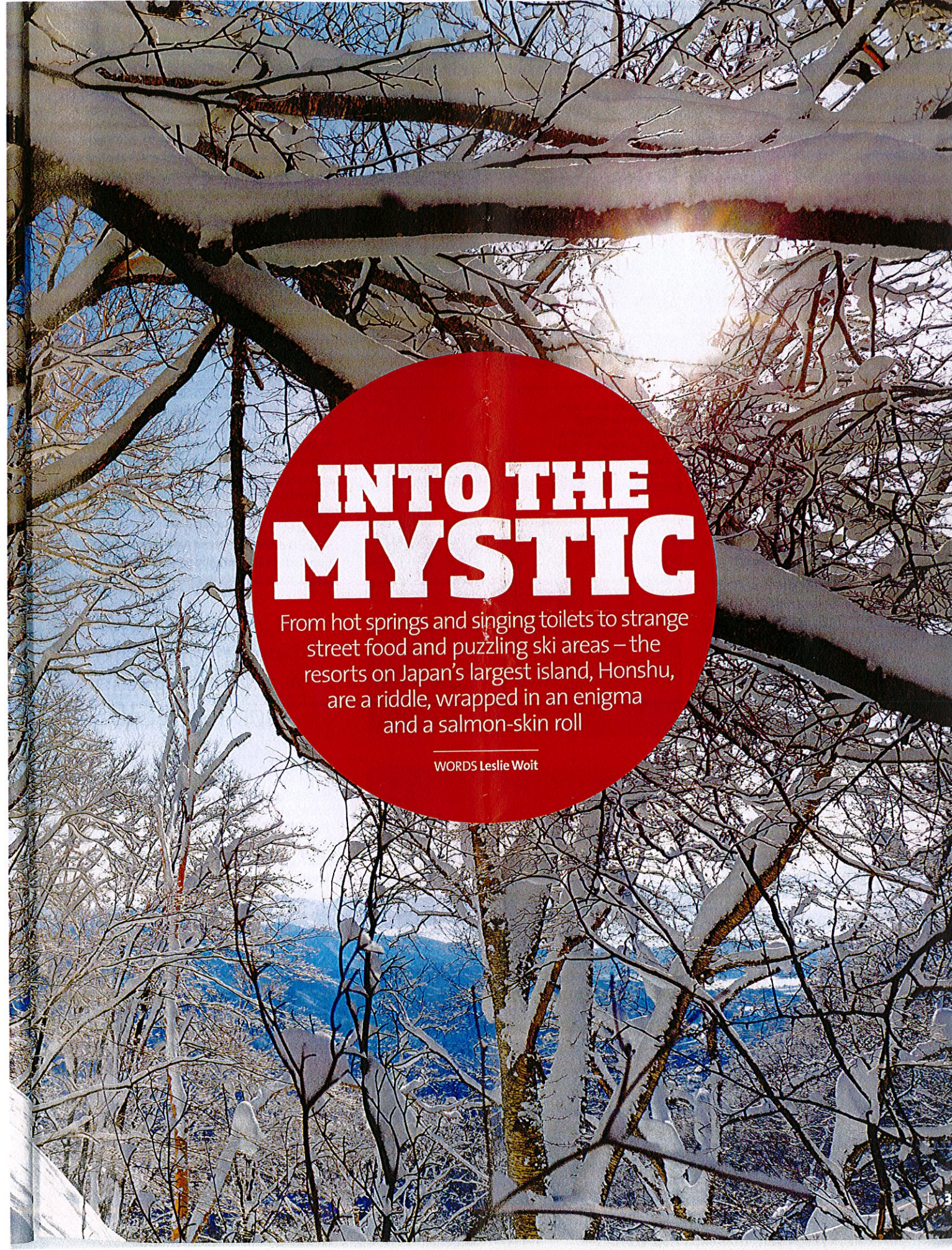




GRANT GUNDERSON



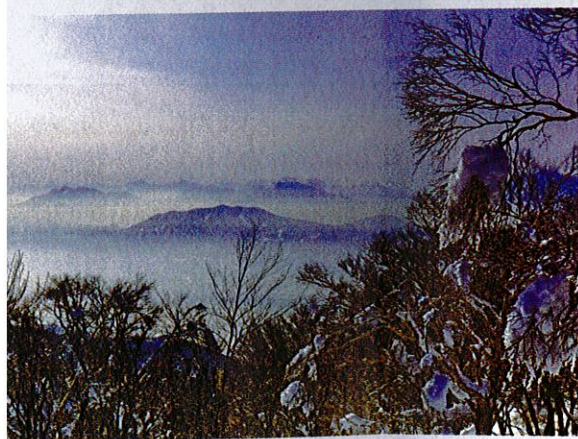
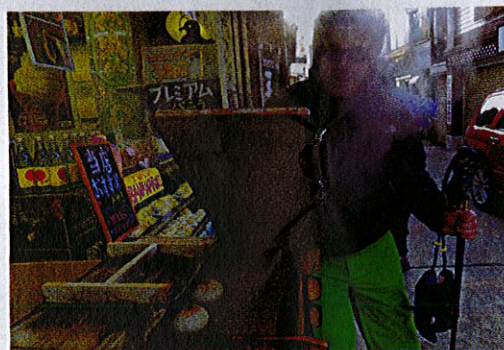
INTO THE MYSTIC

From hot springs and singing toilets to strange street food and puzzling ski areas – the resorts on Japan's largest island, Honshu, are a riddle, wrapped in an enigma and a salmon-skin roll

WORDS Leslie Woit



Clockwise from top: Japan's (faster than a speeding) bullet train; "Miscellaneous foodstuff, anyone?"; Picture perfect Nozawa Onsen; Ex-World Cup racer Katsuyuki Kono guides Leslie in Nozawa



FAST FACTS Myoko
ISS ¥3,900 // **MORE INFO** myokokogen.net



HONSHU

Two years ago I met a Buddhist monk in the backcountry," our Alaskan guide Bill says as we sit on our backpacks eating sushi with chopsticks on the peak of a silvery mountain above the resort of Hakuba. "The shaved head – that was my first clue. He was loving the mountains," the story continues. "On a day like today – hideous sticky snow, socked in with cloud – he rode it all with a bemused smile. He was not attached to the outcome."

It's good to be philosophical about snow. Especially when the ooyuki – big dump – we're expecting is stalled somewhere between Siberia and the Sea of Japan. As our group of four advanced riders skins up among the gorges and thick-wooded forests that dot the Northern Japanese Alps like visual poetry, our big-bearded Evergreen Backcountry Tours guide and avalanche specialist Bill Glude embodies the yin and yang of mountain life. Part Zen Buddhist, part straight-talking ski bum, Bill has even invented his own religion. "The main tenet of Powderism," he explains, "is to maximise planing time in fluid media." Translation – spend as much time as possible in soft snow. "On a good day here it can be like Alaskan heliskiing for about \$15. Just not today!"

Life is different in these Alps. Japan is home to hundreds of ski areas, the product of an economic boom in the Eighties. But when the economy went

On a good day here it can be like Alaskan heliskiing for about \$15

downhill, the Japanese didn't. They recommitted themselves to hard work, and skiing became a frivolous use of hard-earned cash. Honshu, unlike the northern island of Hokkaido which is home to the now internationally-known resorts of Niseko and Furano, has yet to experience an Australian invasion. Here on the largest island, little has been invested since the downturn – the vast lift systems have seen better days. Yet snow in the Northern Japanese Alps, which are situated in the Nagano and Niigata prefectures, commonly falls by the metre, and there's a huge choice of accommodation – from giant purpose-built, slopeside hotels to charming traditional ryokan where tatami mats are unfurled nightly. From soba noodles and saki to hot spring baths and cheeky snow monkeys, not only are there fantastic slopes to explore, there's a cultural X factor in these Alps you'll struggle to find in the European equivalent.

TOUCH DOWN IN TOKYO AND IT'S a 90-minute shot on the bullet train to Nagano City, host of the 1998 Winter Olympics. It's then on to Myoko (an hour's drive away), the first of four



very different ski areas we'll be exploring in a week, all less than two hours apart from each other. Myoko is close to the Sea of Japan and receives the biggest dumps in the region, while Shiga Kogen's many lifts link several villages. Nozawa Onsen is a traditional village with character and hot springs a-gogo, and Hakuba, the largest and best known, promises the biggest vertical.

It's very early on day one at the Akakura Hotel Annex in Myoko and already I've had a bath in the sink, which is almost bigger than the tiny shower/bathtub arrangement, and negotiated a toilet that acts like a shower – spray, pulse, massage, blow dry. Sneaking downstairs in my kimono at 6am, a nice man bows with a sign saying "Self-service coffee begins at 7am" in front of a full steaming coffee pot. I wait till he walks away before pouring. I sip from my illicit cup before a gold candlelit Buddhist shrine, and pray for forgiveness.

To the uninitiated, Japan is a puzzle. "If you get some time," says Bill, "just go to a store and try to figure out what stuff is."

The slopes here aren't exempt from mystery either. Under the shimmering sun, five small, separate, unlinked areas – Myoko Akakura Onsen, Ikenotaira Onsen, Myoko Sugiharara, Seki Onsen and Shin Akakura – line the 2,454m face of Mount Myoko. Dating back to 1937, Myoko is Japan's original winter resort. These days, pop tunes from the Seventies and Eighties blast from lift tower speakers alongside disembodied voices giving directions in Japanese. Between silvery birch trees, I arc through light dustings of powder all morning and then stop for lunch in a French restaurant. Unlike many Japanese resorts, which restrict access to off piste and tree skiing, in Myoko, if you can see it, you can pretty much ride it. You can even book a guide for a two-hour snowshoe hike to an off-piste

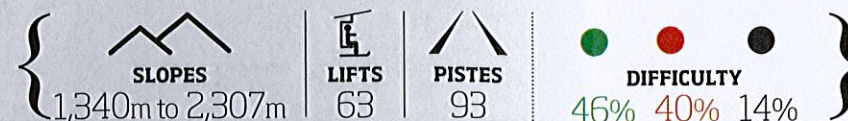
I sip from my illicit cup before a gold candlelit Buddhist shrine, and pray for forgiveness

run accessed from family-run Seki Onsen – one double chair, one single chair, and the pipe-smoking owner who loads them both.

Not only are there no queues by day, an evening stroll in Myoko further proves this is no Méribel – from the hole-in-a-wall Skate Bar populated by costumed superhero characters to a street-side self-serve hard-boiled egg dispenser ("Please spend money before you eat," pleads a sign above), cooked by boiling water that spews from a monster's head. Indeed, hot water is everywhere; rivulets stream through snowy streets, escaping from the ground at near boiling temperatures. It's the source of a great après activity – communal bathing in the onsen. As with so many things here, this too requires study before you get stuck in. Some onsens are mixed, some same-sex. First, you shower with a bucket, then soak in the buff – the tiny towel is for modesty and best stored on top of your head while soaking.

ON THE ROAD, OUR STALWART TOUR GUIDE for the week, Akiko, continues the education. She is armed with pictograms that display the correct approach to squat toilets (face the door, or is it the wall? I forget) and salutary tales involving the wearing of clothes that fall outside the norm. Food is a big topic. Over the course of a week, every

FAST FACTS Shiga Kogen
ONE-DAY LIFT PASS ¥5,000 // **MORE INFO** ski-shigakogen.net





Myoko is a powder hound's paradise, known for receiving the biggest dumps in the region



CHEAP AT THE PRICE

The value of the Japanese yen has dropped 30 per cent against the pound in the past two years, making everything from lift passes to pints cheaper. In November 2012, £1 bought ¥128, now £1 buys around ¥177. The 2013/2014 Post Office Holiday Money Report even declared Japan a cheaper destination than the US, Italy and France.



MONKEYING AROUND

Near the resort of Shiga Kogen, snow monkeys have a favoured hangout in winter – the waters of the onsen, or mineral baths. It's a 45-minute walk from the resort to observe the Japanese macaque at play. Native to Japan, they're the most northern-living non-human primate. They've been known to grab the odd iPhone too.



LOSE THE SHOES

Before entering a building in Japan, it's customary to remove your shoes. At the entrance, slippers will usually be provided for you to change into. Then, before entering toilets, you're often asked to exchange your indoor slippers for toilet slippers.

HONSHU

We cut off the piste into tight trees and bushes, finding cuff-deep soft snow

single meal is a delicious blowout feast for both eyes and tongue. And even if you've eaten your body weight in kelp, chrysanthemum and raw tuna, one extra bite of rice is always required at the end, in order to avoid insulting your host.

NINETY MINUTES SOUTH WEST OF MYOKO at Shiga Kogen, there's a whiff of Trois Vallées in the air. It's one of the country's largest combined ski areas. On a clear day, you can use Mount Fuji and the Sea of Japan to get your bearings, but you'll still need the map to orient between more than 20 linked areas and 63 lifts positioned along the Shiga Plateau. Not only is the ski area big, so is the 900-room ski-in/ski-out Shiga Kogen Prince hotel we're staying in. You need to allow extra time in the morning just to locate your ski locker. The resort is also proud of its coffee. Beside a mountain-top bakery that's been operating for 50 years on Mount Yokote, 2,307m, a brand new Starbucks offers the highest cup of coffee in Japan. But only coffee. "We would not want to cut into the business of the bakery next door so we don't sell food," says Kazuhiro Iwama, the manager.

After a froth-topped latte on Yokote, we spend the morning cruising mile on mile of snaking groomed runs that lead up and down and along a series of higgledy-piggledy ridgelines. At Kumanoyu, long chairlifts deliver wide swaths of red and green piste terrain. Towards Higashidateyama, host of the slalom and giant slalom events of the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, we cut off the piste into tight trees and bushes, finding cuff-deep soft snow. Similar to Europe's large ski areas (and in contrast to many of the resorts here) Shiga Kogen's many slopes are linked – the connected villages seem to go on forever. The All Mountain lift pass gives access to all the areas. If you end up too far away at the end of the day – and you can bank on it, if you don't keep an eye on the map – shuttle buses connect the various villages.

THE NEXT DAY SKIES CLEAR TO REVEAL a circular panorama of blue layered peaks around Nozawa Onsen, around a 90-minute drive north from Shiga Kogen. From the top lift, Yamabiko at 1,650m, we cruise long, wide runs, trying to keep up with ex-World Cup racer Katsuyuki Kono – our guide for the day. Katsu leads us through natural halfpipes carved through trees, over winding, rolling pistes, and some steepies like Grand Prix, a bumpy catapult of 39 degrees. By the end of the day it feels like we've covered all 36 pistes and ridden more than 20 lifts – the final one a covered travelator that leads down to the cobbled streets ▶



Clockwise from top: Tearing up the piste in Nozawa Onsen; Leslie is turning Japanese, she's really turning Japanese; An easy cruiser in Nozawa Onsen; Japan's signage can be misleading



FAST FACTS Nozawa Onsen
ONE-DAY LIFT PASS ¥4,600 // **MORE INFO** nozawaski.com/winter

 SLOPES 565m to 1,650m	 LIFTS 21	 PISTES 36	 DIFFICULTY 40% 30% 30%
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HONSHU

The birds are tweeting
and a stream gurgles
– and that's just the
noise the loo makes

of the otherwise traditional village. A quick plunge in the onsen, and we're straight into a night of hopping between izakaya – places that are part bar, part restaurant – and indulging in the requisite sake-fuelled karaoke session. I make sure I'm nowhere to be seen when it's my turn on the mic. Sake glasses are served in pretty wooden boxes for the cold liquid to spill into. The overflow symbolises bounty. All that bounty makes for a short night on the tatami mat of my traditional ryokan inn.

A TWO-HOUR DRIVE SOUTH WEST IS OUR last stop, Hakuba, home of the 1998 Olympic downhill and a clutch of resorts – Tsugaike Kogen, Norikura, Cortina, Iwatake, Happo-one, Goryu, Sanosaka, Minekata and Hakuba 47 (some of which are linked) – 150-plus lifts, and more terrain and vertical rise than anywhere else in Japan. As we head out in search of fresh snow, the birds are tweeting and a stream gurgles – and that's just the noise the loo in the gondola station makes when flushed. It's snowed a foot overnight. It seems the gods are back on side, delivering the legendary Japanese powder that people move continents for.

As we make our way to the top, the snow quality improves and Bill extends a snow-filled glove to illustrate why Hakuba powder isn't just any powder. "Stellar dendrites – they're the Christmas card-shaped flakes that are thin and light, the kind of flakes that fall by the metre here. Moving through these flakes is analogous to life. Sometimes you're pushing the bow, railing against the wave. And other times you're floating and in balance.

"But hey, after this run, we can go to an onsen to soak. Or just go down to the store and try to figure out what stuff is..." ■

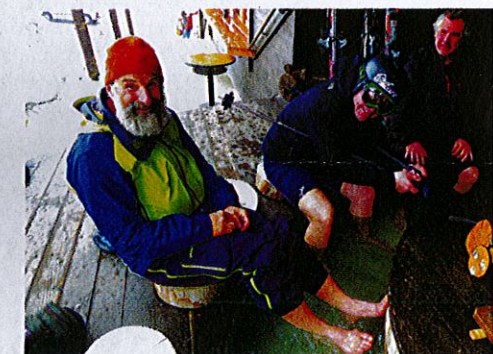
► NEED TO KNOW

Evergreen (evergreen-hakuba.com) runs one-day backcountry tours for a range of abilities. For example, an advanced-level Kitsune tour – participants should be able to ride powder in gladed trees and steeper terrain and have a reasonable level of fitness – costs ¥12,000 per person. Price includes guide, shuttle to the slopes and taxes. Ski and avalanche equipment is not included, but Evergreen offers a rental service. A day's on-piste guiding costs ¥50,000 per group (up to six people).

The Tokyo to Nagano bullet train costs ¥8,200 one way. Ski Safari (skisafari.com) organises packages to Japan. From £1,999 for 14 nights, including accommodation, flights and transfers between resorts. Additional excursions to the snow monkey park, a sake brewery and Zenkoji Temple in Nagano city can also be arranged. For further details on Japan, visit seejapan.co.uk. For more info on these resorts, visit snowlove.net/japan.



Clockwise from top: Powder to the people in Nozawa Onsen; Guide Bill chills out and warms up at Hakuba's hot springs; Giving piste a chance; The inspiring backdrop in Hakuba 4



FAST FACTS Hakuba (For Happo-one, Goryu, 47, Iwatake and Tsugaike Kogen)
ONE-DAY LIFT PASS From ¥3,900 // **MORE INFO** vill.hakuba.nagano.jp/english

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