

Skiing and Splitboarding in Hakuba

Being a Good Visitor - Are You a Good Match for Japan?

- Japan is not for everyone. The mountains and snow have been discovered by the masses now, and even the backcountry is getting crowded and overused. Consider your impact carefully, and whether Japan is a good fit for you; and you for it.
- Our untracked resource is getting too much pressure to accommodate the needs of those who come only to get as much powder as possible. If you are coming primarily for the powder, or if you really have to count your vertical meters and will not be satisfied without doing multiple “laps”, you will have a much better time in the powder or heliski areas in North America or Europe.
- On the other hand, if the culture and customs are at least as much a draw as the snow; then Japan is a good match for you.

Everyday Politeness

- Japan can seem exotic, but is super safe. The tap water everywhere is safe to drink, you can eat food from any stand, and the food is safer than it is in the deregulated US. Assaults and theft are almost nonexistent. People may be shy to use their school English, but are super-helpful, and embarrassingly kind and thoughtful.
- People here will be so nice to you that it is unthinkable to not return the favor. Politeness is key in Japan; be sure you reciprocate! Hakuba is now being overrun by so many rude and thoughtless visitors that our wonderfully considerate Japanese culture is in danger of being lost; and the rude visitors are missing the whole point of coming to Japan. Please help us keep what we most value here! I know my friends are the thoughtful type anyhow, but the rules are not always obvious in Japan, so I have outlined the important courtesies here.
- Perhaps the most key thing for visitors to understand about Japan is that it runs on the honor system. Bikes are left for months here at the Hakuba station bike lot, with never a thought of them being stolen. Many foreigners seem to assume that because enforcement is weak and no one is standing there to ensure that you behave properly all the time, whatever you want to do is okay. Nothing could be further from the truth. Japanese society is based on trust, and the most terrible thing visitors can do is violate that trust and show themselves, and by extension all foreigners, to be without honor. It undermines what we most value about this place, and what you as a visitor should be able to benefit and learn from. Please be a good visitor; follow and honor the rules here; be humble, quiet, and respectful, and you will find that your time in Japan enriches your life in wonderful and unanticipated ways.
- Politeness in Japan depends more on observation



and humility than knowledge. Just look around you, check what the Japanese people (NOT the foreigners!) are doing, and follow suit!

- Follow everyday Japanese etiquette carefully: shoes off at the step of the genkan entrance; wear slippers indoors if available; use “sumimasen” (excuse me) and “arigatou gozaimasu” (thank you; always with both words) liberally; bathe thoroughly and rinse off all traces of soap and shampoo before entering the onsen; let others go first in lines and at doors with a smile and a slight bow and sweep of the hand; do not blow your nose in public (sniffing is fine); do not step outside the bathroom with the bathroom slippers on your feet, don’t talk on your cell phone on the trains; yield train seats to elders and pregnant or disabled folks; don’t eat on the local trains; always be quiet, well-behaved, humble, and considerate. Bow; at least a shallow acknowledgement, as you see others do.

Etiquette in the Mountains - DO’s

- You are a guest here, and the Japanese get to run their country however they please. The rules will often not make sense from your perspective, but respect demands that you follow them anyhow. Stay out of the closed areas! Just skin a little and you can go wherever you want, so long as you are not on slopes that would threaten a ski area if they slid.
- Help conserve the snow! Japan is a land where common resources are always shared with careful consideration for others. Follow the locals’ lead: do one or at most two runs, go soak in the onsen, then complete your day with a nice leisurely dinner. Take time to watch the snow fall in the forest, lose your modern urban rush, and always leave snow for the next people.
- If you must do more than two runs, please move on to another slope farther back from the access point; always leave untracked snow for the next group!
- Discuss where you will ride with other groups you encounter. Be sociable; stop and talk to the others! Japanese groups will readily understand and appreciate that you are trying to share the mountains thoughtfully. Always defer to the first group, and leave their intended line untouched.

Etiquette in the Mountains - DON’T’s

- Do not “lap” backcountry slopes here! The limit is two runs before you move on to a more-remote slope.
- Do not share routes, place names, or other information that will lead others to the good spots. Especially do not write a guidebook or post routes on the internet! You can share the stoke without hyping the place out of existence! Let people hire a local guide, or find their own way as part of their adventure. Don’t take that experience away from them by making it too easy.
- Snaking someone else’s line in the backcountry, as some of the ruder foreigners have been doing lately, will quickly and permanently earn you disfavor. If you think that is appropriate backcountry behavior, please do not come here!

Weather, Terrain, and Snowpack

- If you are looking for information on Hokkaido, I really don’t know much. I have never been there. I fell in love with the big mountains, powder, and people in Hakuba; and have been quite content to stay here.
- Japan’s weather and terrain make Alaska seem mellow by comparison! Do not go dropping into places you don’t know without being prepared to skin right back up and out the way you came. Do not attempt point to point trips unless you know that the route goes through and you are very skilled at navigation. You are likely to end up lost and wandering into severe avalanche terrain and deep gorges full of dams and open water, or waterfalls.

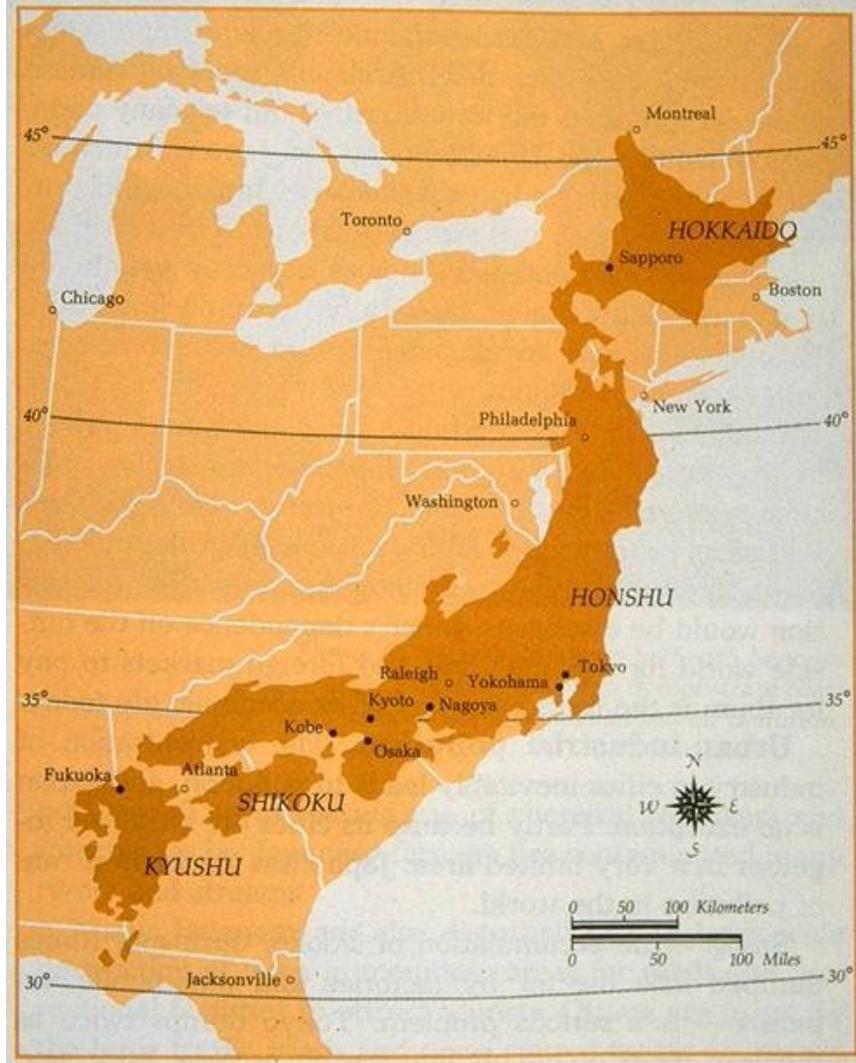
- Do not follow tracks or assume the other guy knows where they are going or what they are doing. Clueless foreigners are randomly dropping in everywhere these days, beware!
- Be especially wary of overhead hazard, from groups above you that may trigger slides onto you, in the near-resort slackcountry.
- Hiring a guide is a really good idea; guides are not just a luxury here!
- Don't be fooled by our southern location; the weather comes from Siberia and it can go from sunny and mild to cold, fog, and blizzard faster than you have ever seen. Or it can switch abruptly to flow from China that brings thunder, lightning, warm air, and heavy rains to the ridges. Snowfall rates of 10+ cm/hr are common here; far beyond what you will find anywhere else in the world.
- Snowpacks in Japan are not forgiving; our west coast is a cold maritime climate but our air masses are continental, and both persistent weak layers and storm snow instabilities are common. If you ride our backcountry like you are in a ski area, you will get into trouble!
- Use full backcountry travel protocol. Ride strictly one at a time, and don't go above, cut through, or leapfrog past other groups.
- Though it can drop to -20°C with wind when the weather comes in strong off Siberia, and it is harsh all winter on the high ridges, weather at our Hakuba valley and touring elevations is usually mild. I rarely see anything past -17°C at my cabin, and that is usually on clear mornings that warm rapidly as the sun rises. Typical cloudy day temperatures are in the -5°C to -10°C range; a little cooler at the top of the skintrack.
- Similarly, our altitude is moderate. The valley is at 850m, just high enough to get dry snow. Our usual touring elevations are in the 1600m to 2200 m range; only rarely reaching 2500m in winter. The big 3000m mountains are mostly inaccessible until spring due to very harsh weather up there.
- We are at the same latitude as Mammoth Mountain, California - pretty far south. So our season is often just getting underway at Christmas time. We generally get big snow by New Year's, and January is powder month. February can have good powder too, and is a better bet if you want to have some clear days to see the big mountains, and some settled-base days to travel farther afield. March is springtime, with a chance of powder but also nice early corn snow days. April and May are the time to hit the high mountains for prime corn snow and long trips, with sakura blossoms in the valleys in May. There's not much snow left by June.
- Those are the guidelines for before global climate change started really kicking in. Recent winters have had warmer and more erratic weather patterns than we have seen before. The future is uncertain; be grateful for what powder you find, we are no longer entitled to nonstop face shots!
- You don't need the crazy-wide or rockered skis. Narrower ones are a lot more fun on the trip to and from the powder. I am heavy, and my packs are too, but I am fine with 105-110mm waist width skis even on the deepest days, so long as they have a bit of early rise in the tip, combined with a straight, non-rockered tail to aid planing. If you like tail rocker, you have to go wider to get the same planing ability. But suit your taste; preferences are individual. My current skis are 188cm x 110mm waist early-rise tip Prior Husumes that have the all-around balance I like; custom-built with the lightweight carbon layup and straight non-rockered tails; great skis!
- I have a short but wide little 160 cm Jones Hovercraft splitboard that floats like it is much longer and is great fun in the tight spots, such as early season when the brush is still not fully covered. But when it gets deep, the 172 cm Prior Swallowtail split rules! I have also had great fun with a 172 Prior Spearhead split, a great board that floats in powder and rails on hardpack.
- It is best not to bring a canister-operated airbag pack if you are coming from the US; you can't fly with full canisters, and the only ones you can refill here are the Japanese-model of the BCA. If you have a connection with the US military, I am told you can refill all the ones that use

ordinary compressed air at the dive shops on the bases. The fan-operated packs like the Black Diamond Jetforce are the best for travel.

Japan Travel

- The electric service in Japan is 110 volts; close enough to the US for our devices to work, but there are no three-prong outlets. Bring three-to-two prong adapters, or buy them at the big electronics stores in Tokyo.
- Cash machines, especially those at the post offices and many convenience stores, work with most foreign cards. Japan is not much of a credit card place because the banks here charge very high fees for their use. Many businesses do not take credit cards, so you will need lots of cash in your pockets. Charge the big stuff like lift tickets at the bigger ski areas, long train rides, and lodging; use cash for everything else.
- Yen are usually worth about a US cent each, 0.91 cents as of August 2017, so the conversion is easy for US visitors. Just move the decimal point over two places and you are close enough: A ¥100 coin is about \$0.91 US. Coins go up to the very handy ¥500 (go hyaku en; \$4.55). Bills are ¥1,000 (sen en; \$9.07), ¥5,000 (go sen en; \$45.37), and cash machines give you the very handy ¥10,000 (ichi man en; we think of them as \$100, but currently they are worth \$90.73) bills that you can use anywhere with none of the weird suspicion you get when paying with a hundred in the US.
- Foreigners seem to often be unable to find the trash cans and recycling bins in Japan. Bottle and can bins are right next to the vending machines; which are virtually everywhere! You are expected to take paper garbage, wrappings, and plastic bags home to your own trash. Convenience stores and highway rest stops have trash/recycling bins that travelers can use.
- Trains in Japan are awesome, and everyone uses them! The big stations are full of large underground passages lined with shops; a whole city underground that you pass up and down through to reach your line. If you get confused when navigating, head to the green JR (Japan Rail) ticket window where someone will speak English, or ask the attendants at the turnstiles for information. Don't be in a rush; go early and know that if you miss the first train, there will be another. You can ask anyone who isn't in a big hurry for help. Someone will set you straight. Rush hour can be impressively busy and fast-paced, just take your time to navigate the flood, and enjoy the show!
- The overhead signs are best for navigation; be sure to look to the sides as signs for your destination may not be straight ahead, or it might not be listed on every sign.
- It is always hard to know which tickets to put through the turnstile slots; try the combination you think makes sense and the attendants will straighten out any problems. Use your best "Sumimasen" (excuse me) and "Gomennasai" (I'm sorry.), and smile generously; someone will help.
- The slick trick if you will be in Tokyo for more than a couple days is to pick up a SUICA card (Say "SUIKAno ka-do o kaitai desu.") at any convenience store. Charge it up with ¥2,000 and you can cruise all over town by just slapping the card's side of your wallet down on the sensor as you pass unhindered through the turnstiles. You can recharge them as needed at machines in most stations. No more figuring fares, puzzling to read station names on the maps, or holding up the line!
- Don't try to go too many places in one trip! Japan is bigger than you think it is. Check the map with Japan superimposed on the eastern US. North Americans in particular seem to plan their trips with way too much travel. If you are only coming for ten days to two weeks or less, stay in one spot. Otherwise you will miss the good snow while you are traveling from place to place. There are lots of ski areas and backcountry spots in each region; you won't get bored. Hokkaido and Honshu do not fit easily in one trip, unless you are here for a month or more.

Japan Superimposed on the East Coast of the United States



- Plan your flight so you arrive in the evening or late afternoon if possible, and spend a night in Tokyo. That way you go right to sleep and wake up in the morning here, minimizing the jetlag. But beware late-night flights, the trains stop where they are at 1:00 am and you will have to cab the rest of the way if you are not at your lodging by then.
- Tokyo flights arrive at either Narita, the bigger airport, farther from town; or Haneda, smaller and closer to town. Either is fine; go with the best fares and timing. Check too for flights to Nagoya airport, near Osaka. There are sometimes great fares to this less-popular airport, and you can travel by bus to Hakuba from there.
- If you arrive at Narita Airport, as most flights do, exit customs, find the currency exchange, change some money to yen, but not too much because ATMs have better exchange rates and are at the Post Offices and convenience stores. Then look for the Kuro Neko (Yamato

Transport) takkyubin delivery service desk to ship your checked bags directly to your lodging in Hakuba. Their logo is a black cat carrying a kitten. Your bags will be waiting for you at your lodge in Hakuba when you arrive the next day. Do not try to navigate the Tokyo rail system or any public transport except the highway buses that go direct to Hakuba with skis or snowboards and big bags; they are not set up for it!

- On the way back, the takkyubin services require 48 hours to be sure your gear is at the airport when you arrive. Either plan a day in Tokyo, and set up the delivery with your lodge, or take the direct bus to Narita if you want to ride on your last day in Hakuba.
- They don't speak much English at the takkyubin counters, but give them the address in writing and they will send your gear. It's about \$50 each way for a big ski bag and a big duffel bag; well worth it!
- Be sure to grab out what you need for a night in Tokyo and a day of travel; and to put any excess bulk and weight in the bags you ship. The flying weight limit does not apply to takkyubin, and the lighter you travel, the more fun it is!
- If you arrive at Haneda Airport, as some flights do now, the takkyubin seem to be on the right, and I have found only ANA. Their service is just fine.
- If you are only going to Hakuba and back, a JR (Japan Rail) rail pass is unnecessary; but if you want to travel around Japan, be sure to buy a pass before you come over. Japanese trains are the best in the world, but they are expensive without a pass. The passes are for visitors only; you can either have them mailed to you before you leave, or pick them up in Japan, but you have to buy them from outside Japan.
- From Narita, the Keisei Skyliner train to Tokyo's Yamanote ring train line and JR's NEX to the more-central Shinjuku Station, are about the same price now. Show your passport for a visitors' discount. It is likely that everywhere you want to go in Tokyo will be on or near the Yamanote, and Shinjuku Station is central to most points of interest in Tokyo.
- If you choose the Skyliner, tickets are at the Keisei desk near the bottom of the prominently marked stairs ("Railroads") down to the trains. Get a ticket to Nippori and be sure to get off there if you are changing to the Yamanote Line in the direction of Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, and Shibuya. The train continues one more stop to Ueno, also on the Yamanote, so all you lose is a little time and fare if you miss Nippori. Get your ticket and ask which way to the platforms. Seats are reserved on this line; your car number and seat number will be written in English on the ticket. Car numbers are by the doors.
- When you leave the Skyliner for the Yamanote Line at Nippori, go through the "To JR Trains" gate and turnstiles. The turnstile will need both your Skyliner ticket, and a ticket or card for the JR lines. Ticket machines are next to the turnstiles, over to the side.
- For the NEX train, look for the green JR (Japan Rail) ticket window, and get a ticket. There's a deal on round-trip, but only if you visit for two weeks or less. Seats are reserved; find the number on the signs above the platform for your car, make sure you are on that car, then find your seat in that car. Depending on where you stay, the NEX can be a simpler connection, as it connects with the Yamanote Line at both Tokyo and Shinjuku stations.
- From Haneda Airport, take the Monorail to its end at the Yamanote line, then the Yamanote to your destination. Signs are prominent.
- The Yamanote Line is a ring route around the city, so be sure you board it in the right direction! Take a moment to read the signs, looking for the stations that are in your direction. Seats are not reserved on these local trains; just get a ticket and hop on. If unsure, grab a ticket for whatever amount you have handy, and you can pay the balance when you exit, at the fare adjustment machine or in person at the window by the turnstiles.
- I usually stay with friends now in Tokyo, but I also have two favorite spots to stay if I need lodging: Kimi Ryokan in Ikebukuro, just off the Yamanote line, and Taito (or Tokyo) Ryokan in

Asakusa, also near the Yamanote. Check their advice on whether to take the Skyliner or NEX for easiest access. Both can be booked online, just search on DuckDuckGo. Kimi is more user-friendly for first-timers; just be sure to print out the map to find it from the train station; it is hard to find otherwise. They speak English, it's clean, the rates are good, and they have free wifi in the lounge.

- I hear good reviews on the Nui Hostel in Shimokitazawa, near Asakusa. Prices start at a very reasonable ¥2800, but that is for simple hostel-style bunk rooms with 8 people. Their cafe and bar are reputed to be great; photos look modern. http://backpackersjapan.co.jp/nui_en/hostel.html
- If you want to skip Tokyo and go direct from the airport to Hakuba, there are the Chuo Taxi shuttle vans, and a direct bus. Have your lodge in Hakuba set up Chuo if that is your choice, and direct you to where to meet them. They have no ski racks so it is best to takyubin the big bags. There is now a highway bus that runs several trips a day: <http://naganosnowshuttle.com/>

Getting to Hakuba from Tokyo

- Trains in Japan are great, but the cheapest way between towns is by bus, and Japanese buses are clean, spacious, and comfortable. The cheapest way from Tokyo to Hakuba is the Keio/Alpico bus from Shinjuku direct to Hakuba. It costs ¥4850, less than half the cost of the high-speed shinkansen train and bus combination and is a pleasant trip that only takes about five hours, not terribly much longer than the train and bus, depending on your connections.



The bus makes ten-minute stops at rest stations with food along the way. The schedule is here. http://www.alpico.co.jp/access/express/hakuba_shinjuku/#timetable_winter. Book online here <http://highway-buses.jp/hakuba/>

- To get to the bus, use train or subway to Shinjuku station, which is the busiest train station in the world. The equivalent of the entire population of Juneau passes through every 12 minutes! So allow extra time to navigate the maze; watch the overhead signs closely. The bus terminal has moved from its old location on the west to the top (4th) floor of the New South Entrance building. Follow signs for the New South Entrance, then out through the turnstiles and up to the “Shinjuku Expressway Bus Terminal” on the fourth floor.
- They will check your ticket before you board, and steer you the right way. Make sure you are at the right stop, they are numbered. Ask if in doubt. Your bus should say Hakuba on the lighted route sign on the side. It arrives 5 to 10 minutes before departure, and like everything in Japan, leaves exactly on time. Be sure to allow extra time to find your way to the bus station, or scope it out the day before while exploring the city.
- The first Hakuba stop is Goryu; get off there if you are staying in that area. Continue to Hakuba Chou for my cabin and the train station, and to the Happo village bus station for most lodges.
- For the shinkansen high speed train to Hakuba, you take the Yamanote Line to Tokyo Station, then the shinkansen to Nagano city station, and finally the Alpico bus for the last hour and a quarter to Hakuba. This combo costs over ¥10,000 but the ride on the shinkansen is an experience not to be missed if you have not done it before, and you should definitely go that way if you have a rail pass purchased overseas before your trip. In Nagano, exit the station on the east side, go down the stairs outside to the convenience store, buy a ticket there, and check the schedule to Hakuba. The bus pulls up at the north end of the bus stops near the store.

Lodging

- The lodge owners in Hakuba are all my friends, so at the risk of upsetting those left out (contact me if I should add you, lodge-owner friends!), here are a few spots to stay:
 - In the backpacker budget range, my friend Mitch runs Snowbeds in Echoland. Good value. <http://www.snowbedsjapan.com/>
 - Still in the budget range, with-cooking facilities, but a little nicer than the backpackers' places, are Hakuba Powder Lodging (<http://hakubapowderlodging.com/>), which usually books full of European freeriders very early, and Monkey Rider (<http://www.whitehorse-hakuba.com/>), owned by the friend I rent my cabin from, which usually fills with Aussies. Nice folks run both places; and both are over in the Misorano area.
 - In the midrange are Morino Lodge and the properties they manage, mostly in the Wadano area. These are friends who have helped me out a lot over the years. They are great people and their lodges are all really nice (<http://www.morinolodge.com/>). My landlord friend Tony also owns the White Horse Hotel in Echoland, also nice but usually booked solid early. He made up a list of other places to refer people to that is well worth a look; check the White Horse website: <http://www.whitehorse-hakuba.com/>
 - Some friends stayed at this place right in Happo Village recently and loved it. <http://gakueikan.com> gakuei@smile.ocn.ne.jp, 011-81-261 72-2378 from the US. They said it was reasonable, a nice place with friendly people, and it had rooms on shorter notice than the places better-known to foreigners.
 - At most of my friends' high end is Shirouma-so, a recently remodeled and very beautiful ryokan with excellent location in the middle of Happo Village, great staff, private onsen, and very good meals. Not cheap, but really nice! <http://www.shiroumaso.com/english/>

- There are a zillion other places to stay; many are good. Search online.
- There are free shuttle buses to most of the ski areas from anywhere in the valley; the system is a bit confusing so just check with your lodge owners for schedules and routes. Some lodges are within walking distance of the lifts; others may have a bit of a walk or less-frequent shuttles.
- Plan ahead! Hakuba has been discovered and is a bit overrun by foreigners from mid-December through February now; lodge bookings for those times are filling up in August and September!

Guiding

- I do my guiding in Japan through Evergreen Outdoor Center in Hakuba. We can set up whatever combination of off-piste and backcountry riding you want, both in Hakuba and at the other central Honshu ski areas most foreigners have probably heard of, like Nozawa Onsen and the Myoko resorts, plus a number of secret spots whose names we keep quiet.
- If you'd like me to guide your group, I am happy to whenever I am available. Ask for me to be your guide when you book through Evergreen: <http://www.evergreen-hakuba.com/japan-ski/>

My Cabin and Schedule

- I'd love to be able to invite all my friends to come stay with me, but the cabin I rent is small, and it is on a holding tank so I can only handle one or two very considerate close friends at a time, and only for short stays.
- I am in Japan on a longterm project, working to expand my avalanche business. I work long hours forecasting, doing mitigation work, guiding and teaching out in the snow, and setting up our groups; so don't have anywhere near as much time as I would like to be social. When I come home, I hang gear to dry, cook dinner, eat as I download and do a quick edit of the day's photos, post them and check messages, then fall asleep. I'm pretty boring, socially! I know when you are on vacation, you are full of energy; but even though I love my work, it is exhausting and I need to rest! The 4:30 am alarm comes early.
- I usually have one day off every week to go backcountry with my friends. Ask me what day that is and we can plan to get out together. I love to do that whenever I can.
- If we can't get out, let's at least try to grab a dinner, lunch, or coffee!