

Guide to Skiing and Splitboarding in Japan

Pandemic Considerations.

- As of the end of July, Japan has its border closed to most countries, and despite talk of opening, it is looking unlikely to be open for inbound travel this winter. In particular, the failure of US virus intervention makes it highly unlikely that our citizens will be allowed into Japan before there is a new US administration, and an effective vaccine or treatment that can bring the spread under control.
- The Japanese government is eager to present the appearance of having the virus under control, but it appears that testing is being limited in an effort to deliver a false impression. In fact, widespread mask-wearing and good hygiene have helped immensely, but many people are being careless about maskless indoor gatherings, and further outbreaks are inevitable..
- International air travel remains high risk, with airports and aircraft being primary sources of infection.
- Ski areas could open, with masks required in lodges, lift loading lines, on lifts, and in unloading areas; and with chairs/cabins limited to family groups. On slope, on chairlifts not shared with strangers, and outside of lodges, skiing and snowboarding are excellent activities with minimal risk. But sanitizing the air in enclosed lifts between parties remains a problem, and day lodges, bathrooms, and restaurants will remain high risk areas.
- With room service meals and carefully sanitized and aired-out rooms, hotels and overnight lodges could be reasonably low-risk. Restaurants, bars, and onsen will not reach acceptable risk until there is a vaccine or treatment.
- All of these factors mean that the 2020-21 winter season for foreigners visiting Japan will probably not happen. Even if borders and ski areas open, visitors should carefully evaluate the risk of international travel before deciding to go. Absent either a vaccine or an effective treatment, risk will remain high through this winter.
- The good news is that tourism will be depressed for at least one year after vaccine or treatment drop the risk to acceptable levels, so there should be a season of uncrowded slopes and facilities, bringing back the “good old days” of untracked lift-accessed powder all day. Travelers who jump on that opportunity will have an epic trip.
- If by some miracle, an effective vaccine becomes available in time, this could all change. Best estimates, though, are not before midwinter; likely too late for the January-February powder season.

Consider your carbon footprint before you travel.

- The powder snow we love is scarcer every year, and it is inescapable that our human activities are the cause! In Alaska, our ski area in Juneau has only been able to operate fully in three out of the last six winters. Glaciers are disappearing, hydroelectric power reservoirs are low, forest fires are widespread, thawing permafrost forcing communities to relocate, and the thaw releases methane gas, contributing to further warming. Hungry bears roam our towns, salmon returns are down, and dead whales, seals, and seabirds are washing up on our beaches. In Japan, I never used to see wet snow, but now every storm in Hakuba comes in wet before it cools and drops powder. Our season has lost as much as a month on each end. Storms are windier, and the combination of shifting weather and more wind makes the snowpack much less stable. We still have the best powder skiing on earth, but now the odds on good snow are more like fifty-fifty than the 90% we had just 15 years ago.

- Travel is essential to building bridges of understanding and solidarity in our world, so no one realistically expects us to all immediately stop traveling, and we live in an imperfect society where carbon neutral travel is not yet an available choice. So we can't expect to achieve perfection in our travel, but we do need to take steps to minimize our impact:
 - Do more activities near home; don't travel for what you can do in your backyard.
 - Choose the lowest-carbon travel alternatives. Trains are great; buses are good. Most powerboats, cars, and aircraft are not very good. But electrics, hybrids, and fuel cells are better, and even among internal combustion alternatives, some are lower-carbon than others. Always choose the best alternatives, even if the monetary price is a little higher.
 - Consolidate your trips, make a loop with multiple stops rather than several round trips all the way from home.
 - Travel less frequently, but stay for a longer time once you are there. Take time to learn and connect. Dive deeper; make your travel really count. Don't waste fossil fuels on superficial thrills and short trips!
- We as travelers have an obligation to minimize the carbon footprint of our everyday lives. Use bicycle or transit to commute and run your daily errands, trade the big pickup for a hybrid or electric car, weatherize your house, use LED lights and efficient electric appliances, put in a heat pump, trade the fast motorboat for an efficient displacement hull or sailboat, minimize business travel, push for a carbon neutral workplace, have fewer children, and get rid of the snow machines and ATVs in favor of skis, kites, and bikes.
- And finally, as citizens of our societies, we have an obligation to be involved with politics, to use it as the tool for change that it is intended to be. It does not matter if you don't "like politics"; it is your duty as a user of this planet's resources to take care of the place - just get over yourself and do it! Work to elect only politicians committed to the strongest and swiftest climate action, and to ensure that they do that job once in office. Pressure institutions to divest from fossil fuels, press insurers to drop their insurance, get politicians to end our massive fossil fuel subsidies, and redirect all those resources into making the transition to a carbon neutral society. We need to go all out on the technologies we have, and target development of those we still lack. We need full life cycle accounting; with social justice and environmental responsibility from resource extraction through manufacturing and use, to recycling and reuse. We need to work with nature, rebuilding soil and forests to sequester carbon and provide all their myriad and necessary ecological functions.
- As travelers, we need to push especially hard for sustainably-powered long distance travel alternatives, like high speed electric rail for continental transport, and carbon neutral aircraft or ships for intercontinental travel.
- The timetable for action is NOW! We need to reach zero carbon in ten years if we are to save winter! We will likely lose winter for a generation if it takes us twenty years to reach zero carbon. Losing winter may be the least of our problems, with massive die offs and social disruption likely if we fail to reach our goals; but for those of us who live for winter, saying goodbye to snow would devastate our souls.
- So please don't travel to Japan, or to anywhere else, if you aren't willing to at least take the steps outlined here to offset your increased carbon footprint. It would be truly pathetic if we ended up with the nightmare scenario of skiers and boarders flying all over the world, desperately seeking the last remnants of winter, as those remnants are being destroyed by their very seeking!
- So if you are going to travel to Japan, make it count! Stay for a while; dive deep into the experience and the culture; come to learn, not just for trivial place-collecting! And be sure you pay your dues in action and political activism!

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 all our popular backcountry areas are now crowded and overused. Consider whether Japan is a good fit for you; and you for it.
- Our untracked snow 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 closer to home, in the powder areas of North America or Europe.
- On the other hand, if the culture, history, and customs are at least as much a draw as the snow; then Japan is a good match for you.
- My recommendation to my friends now is to avoid coming to Hakuba in high season; January through mid-February. Over-promotion has stressed Hakuba’s creaky infrastructure and crowded its backcountry during high season, and the peace of the mountains is marred by hordes of loud, rude, pushy, ill-mannered foreigners. I still highly recommend it after mid-February, when the crowds thin and you can appreciate the big mountains and local culture; and I hope that local businesses will respond proactively over time to manage the crowds, get rid of the problem staff and visitors; and transition to a sustainable, zero-carbon tourism model.
- In the last few years, the backcountry in all the popular spots in Japan has been heavily impacted by an invasion of big foreign guiding companies following a thoroughly colonial business model. When I began guiding in the early 2000s in Japan, I considered very carefully whether it was appropriate for me as a foreigner to guide here. At the time, there was a need for English-speaking guides. I was bringing customers to economically depressed areas that needed the business. I was providing needed avalanche and guide training. I worked with a Japanese company that paid taxes, followed local laws and customs, and was part of the community. But I quit guiding in Japan this year because I don’t want to contribute to the overcrowding, even though most of it is from newcomers working for big overseas companies; and because I would rather make room for and bring business to local Japanese guides!
- I’m now working on a new ethical travel project that will take small select groups on lengthy, minimal-carbon trips that maximize the experience; with a vow of media secrecy as to where we go; connecting people with the best local Japanese guides, places, and services; working with and helping the locals; bringing business rather than taking; helping communities control the way they develop; working to ensure that the local economies benefit, not just big-money foreign investors.
- If you are coming on your own as a backcountry traveler, hire local Japanese guides. Keep that wonderful secret spot a secret; don’t post locations more specific than “Japan” or “Japan backcountry” on social media; don’t post photos that give away locations; turn off the automatic location notes! Places that get shared on the Internet get trashed rapidly these days. Don’t rob others of the joy of discovering a special place!
- If you are a foreign guide company, it’s time to decolonize your business model and work with locals, or stay home! If you feel you must come to Japan, please at least work with Japanese companies and local guides who know the place, language, and customs. Hire locals; be connectors rather than imperialists! Consider your impacts carefully, do not exceed the carrying capacity of our our backcountry, avoid the January through mid-February high season, keep your groups small, and respect the territory of the Japan-based guiding operations already here.

Everyday Politeness; Being a Good Visitor

- Japan can seem exotic to visitors, but is super safe. The tap water everywhere is good to drink, you can eat food from any stand, and the food standards are stricter than they are 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 in Japan will be so nice to you that it is unthinkable to not return the favor. Politeness is key in Japan; be sure you reciprocate! The rude visitors overrunning popular tourist spots 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.
- Perhaps the most key thing for visitors to understand about Japan is that it runs on the honor system. Bikes are left parked, with at most a lock that only prevents one wheel from turning. Bike “thefts” occur when drunks pedal an unlocked bike home and ditch it nearby, after which it usually finds its way home.
- 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; 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!
- People in Japan avoid confrontation; don’t assume that something is okay just because you did it and no one confronted you about it! Ask if in doubt, and watch reactions closely! People don’t like to give a flat no; if they are less than enthusiastic, don’t do it!
- Follow everyday Japanese etiquette carefully: shoes off at the step of the genkan entrance; step from shoes directly up to the clean indoor surface without dirtying your socks by touching the genkan floor, 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; do not bring food or drink or wear any clothing into 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 or restaurants; yield train seats to elders and pregnant or disabled folks; don’t eat on local trains; always keep your voice down. Bathe often, go light on scents; don’t stink! Be well-behaved, humble, and considerate. Bow; at least a shallow acknowledgement, as you see others do.



- Don't drink if you are a rowdy drunk! We have far too many knee-walking, puking, 3:00-am-obscenity-screaming, loud, fighting, stealing, and vandalizing drunks in the tourist spots already. People may drink a lot in Japan; but they behave well; this sort of rowdy behavior is unthinkable. Even if it is only a few visitors and staff, their behavior reflects badly on every foreigner here.

Etiquette in the Mountains - DO's

- You are a guest here, and the Japanese get to run their country however they please. Ski area 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, then go soak in the onsen, and complete your day with a nice leisurely dinner. Take time to watch the snow fall in the forest, lose your crazy 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. Thank the trail-breakers! 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" or ski out backcountry slopes in Japan! The limit is two runs before you move on to a more-remote slope. Always leave snow for the next party!
- Do not share routes, place names, or other information that will lead crowds to the good spots. Don't write a guidebook or post locations and routes on the internet! You can share the stoke without the hype that destroys! 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.
- Do not push in lift lines; that is just not done in Japan.
- Do not be pushy and competitive on the slopes; that is not done in Japan either.
- Snaking someone else's line off-piste or 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, anywhere, please do not come to Japan!

Weather, Terrain, and Snowpack

- The big mountains have kept me based in Hakuba, but rude crowds in high season have driven me to explore Touhoku and Hokkaido in the last few years, with an eye to relocating. There are no mountains quite like Hakuba's up there, and I still love Hakuba outside of high season, but there are decent and far less-crowded mountains with longer, colder winters up north. Avoid famous spots like the resort areas in Niseko; they suffer from the same rude foreigner issues! I'm not going to say anything online about the special spots, come with me on a trip if you want to visit them! As a starter, choose places you have not heard of or read about; it's a good assumption that if you have heard of a place, so has everyone else!
- Japan's weather and terrain, even on Honshu, 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!
- This should not even need to be said, but do not bootpack the skin track, anywhere! It makes the track unusable for all other travelers. Other users will be very upset with you if you try, and you may be subjected to well-deserved direct interference. Get skis with skins, a splitboard, or snowshoes!
- Be especially wary of overhead hazard these days, from groups above you that may trigger slides onto you, especially in the near-resort slackcountry. This is a big issue now; we have had friends seriously injured by thoughtless people triggering slides onto them from above!
- Hiring a local guide is a really good idea; guides are not just a luxury in Japan!
- Don't be fooled by Japan's 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; coastal areas have a cold maritime climate, but the air masses are continental, and both persistent weak layers and storm snow instabilities are common. If you ride the Japanese backcountry like you are in a ski area, you will get into trouble!
- Inland ranges in Japan have interior climates: thinner snowpack; colder, drier weather, and the resulting persistent instability.
- 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 change very rapidly, weather in the Hakuba valley and touring elevations is usually mild. It rarely reaches -15°C any more, and that is usually on clear mornings that warm rapidly as the sun rises. Typical cloudy day temperatures are in the 0°C to -5°C range now as climate warms; cooler at the top of the skintrack. Hokkaido and Touhoku are colder, with -5° to -10° cloudy day valley temperatures, and more -10° to -20° days with wind.
- Hakuba is at the same latitude as Mammoth Mountain, California, so it has California-strength warm sunshine. Hokkaido is at Oregon latitude, so the sun is weaker, but still strong by our Alaskan standards.
- Japan's touring altitude is moderate. The Hakuba valley is at 850m, just high enough to get dry snow. Usual touring elevations are in the 1600m to 2200 m range; only rarely reaching 2500m in winter. The highest lift reaches just over 2300m. The big 3000m mountains are mostly inaccessible until spring due to very harsh weather up there. Hokkaido and Touuhoku mountains are lower, with the highest summits 2,200m or less, and lifts often topping out around 1,200m or lower.
- Because Hakuba is far south, the season is often just getting underway at Christmas time. There used to usually be a big snow by New Years, and January was powder month. February could have good powder too, and was a better bet if you want to have some clear days and settled-snowpack. March was springtime, with a chance of powder but also nice corn snow days. April and May were the time to hit the high mountains for prime corn snow and long trips, with sakura blossoms in the valleys in May. There was not much snow left by June.
- Hokkaido's season came earlier and ran longer, usually good by Christmas and New Years, with powder well into March.
- Those were the seasonal guidelines for before global climate started really collapsing. Recent winters have had warmer and more erratic weather patterns than we have seen before, with

more wild weather swings, including such bizarre ones as powder dumps in April. The future is highly uncertain; be grateful for what powder you find! We are no longer entitled to nonstop face shots!

Gear

- You don't need crazy-wide rockered skis for Japan. Moderate width skis 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, so long as they have 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 quality. But suit your taste; preferences are individual.
- My current skis for my 82 kg weight, plus rucksack, are 188cm x 110mm waist early-rise tip Prior Husumes that have the all-around balance I like; custom-built with the lighter-weight carbon layup and straight non-rockered tails; my favorite-ever skis!
- My 172 cm Prior Swallowtail splitboard is great when it is deep, and is fun on soft groomers too! I have also used a 172 cm Prior Spearhead split, that floats almost as well, and handles better on firm snow.
- I had a short but wide little 160 cm Jones Hovercraft splitboard that floated like it was much longer and was great fun in the tight spots, such as early season when the brush is still not fully covered. I could not get the stance my bad knees needed on it, so passed it on last year.
- I am trying a solid 157cm Moss Snowstick U5 out this season. I already know it is an incredibly fun carving ride on groomers; will see how it floats me in the deep!
- I'm also looking forward to testing some Gentemstick splitboards in December in Hokkaido; I'm still looking for a 160cm range splitboard for early season brush and shallower snow that carves well on groomers and in spring snow. Some of theirs look promising!
- 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. Other brands have full canisters available for rent or purchase at some mountain shops; but you'll have to track them down. The whole canister airbag thing is a hassle you don't need; go with the fan-operated packs like the Black Diamond Jetforce for travel!

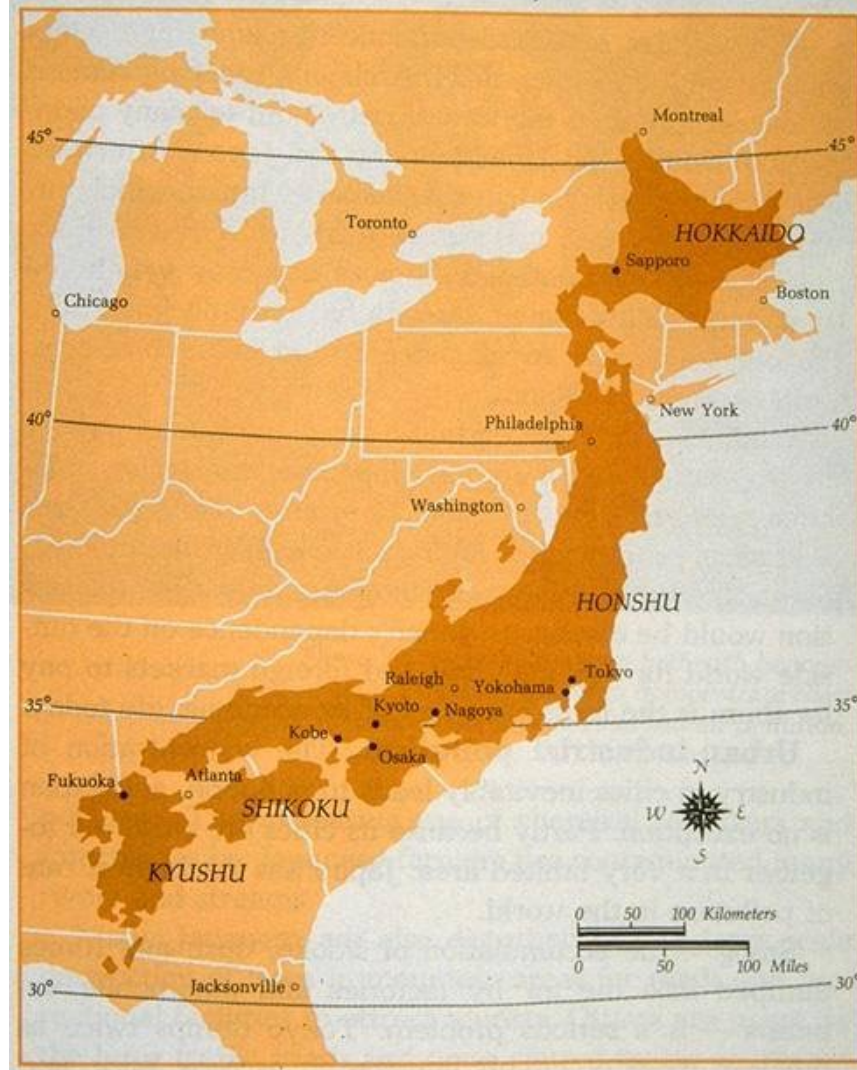
Japan Travel

- 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 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 worth about a US cent each, 0.92 cents as of fall 2019, 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 \$0.92 US. Coins go up to the very handy ¥500 (go hyaku en; \$4.58). Bills are ¥1,000 (sen en; \$9.16), ¥5,000 (go sen en; \$45.82), and cash machines give you the very handy ¥10,000 (ichi man en; we think of them as \$100, but currently they are worth \$91.65) 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, where

they are meticulously sorted for recycling. Convenience stores, many train stations, and highway rest stops have trash/recycling bins that travelers can use.

- Trains in Japan are awesome, and everyone uses them! Until you get to Hakuba, where a rented car can be handy, you won't need a car. Use trains and buses!
- 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. If you are on a reserved-seat express, you can exchange tickets, but it is easier to just be on time. If you are lost, you can ask anyone who isn't in a 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 when they give you multiples; 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 a couple days or more is to pick up a SUICA card at a SUICA fare machine in the green JR section of any station. Choose the English menu on the machine. 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. Focus on central Honshu, or Touhoku (northeast Honshu), or on Hokkaido on each trip.
- 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 ATM and get some yen. The best exchange rates are ATMs, and they are at the Post Offices and convenience store, and in main bus and train stations. 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!

Japan Superimposed on the East Coast of the United States



- 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 through Tokyo, 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 connecting to Hokkaido, note that there are no early morning or late night trains to Narita, so schedule an 09:30 or later departure, unless you are staying at the airport.
- 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. Be sure to buy both the basic fare and the second ticket for the reserved seat; very confusing yes but you need both; it is embarrassing to not have an assigned seat when everyone else does! 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 (<http://kimiryokan.jp>) in Ikebukuro, just off the Yamanote line, and Taito Ryokan (<http://www.libertyhouse.gr.jp/index.htm>) in Asakusa, also near the Yamanote Line. Check their advice on whether to take the Skyliner or NEX for easiest access. Kimi is more user-friendly for first-timers, with good online booking; 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. Taito is a beautiful, charming, well-worn but nice 1950s vintage building; and a bargain. Bookings are by e-mail, and payment is cash up front. Free wifi in the lounge. It's a little hard to find; the map could use updating; but my favorite if all my friends' places are full, or for a short overnight when I don't want to bother them. It is convenient to Ueno station if you have an early Shinkansen train north.
- 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 the train station, and to the Happo village bus station for most lodges, and for my place in Misorano.
- 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.
- The other, often overlooked, train that connects all the way from Shinjuku station in Tokyo to Hakuba is the Azusa. If the timing works for it on your trip, it is a nice train, simpler and not much slower than the Shinkansen and bus combination. Some routings may require that you switch trains in Matsumoto city, an hour from Hakuba.

Lodging

- The lodge owners in Hakuba are 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 nicer than the backpackers’ places, are Hakuba Powder Lodging (<http://hakubapowderlodging.com/>), which usually books full of European freeriders, but also has several nice rental cabins now for groups, and Monkey Rider (<http://www.whitehorse-hakuba.com/>), owned by the friend I used to rent 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 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 crowded from Christmastime through the middle of February now; lodge bookings for those times are filling up in August and September!

Guiding

- I used to do my guiding in Japan through Evergreen Outdoor Center in Hakuba. I am now just teaching avalanche courses there, and traveling while I research my next phase of organizing trips with local Japanese guides. If you want to meet up, I am still based in Hakuba, but am often traveling. Drop me a note and we can see if dates work out.

My Field Office and Schedule

- I'd love to be able to invite all my friends to come stay with me, but the half of a cabin I rent as the Alaska Avalanche Specialists Japan Field Office is small, 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 am not here on vacation; this is business travel, and I often work long hours and travel around Japan a lot, 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. So if you stay with me, keep in mind that 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! Morning comes early.
- If we can't get out, let's at least try to grab a dinner, lunch, or coffee!