

WINTER SPORTS

Seasonal recreation enjoyed by millions



Niseko Annupuri Ski Resort (Photo courtesy of Niseko Resort Tourist Association)

Introduction

The popularity of winter sports in Japan is substantiated by the country's distinction of being the first Asian country to host the Winter Olympics (1972). Further proof can be found in its role as host to both the first and second Winter Asian Games (1986 and 1990). To these, of course, the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano can now be added.

Japan's climate, above all, permits a thriving winter sports season. Winters are governed by the coldest air mass in the world, the Siberian air mass. The frequent approach

of cold fronts from the Asian mainland causes Japan to experience much lower temperatures than European regions at the same latitude. Tokyo, at 35° north latitude, has an average January temperature of 4.7°C, as opposed to the similar 4.2°C January average in London, located at 51° north latitude.

As the Siberian air mass approaches Japan, it picks up moisture from the Sea of Japan. As a result, regions facing the Asian continent often receive heavy snowfall. Joetsu City in Niigata Prefecture recorded 232 centimeters of snow in one day during 1986—enough to bury a one-story building. This presents a startling contrast with the Pacific



Ocean side of the archipelago, which tends to be quite dry and receives much less snow during the winter.

Another factor that enhances the winter sports environment is that four-fifths of Japan's land area is composed of mountains. The Japan Alps—a range that is divided into Northern, Central, and Southern sectors—runs down the central part of Honshu, the largest of the four Japanese islands. Many peaks in the Japan Alps are over 2,500 meters high and are covered with snow during the winter. Since these areas can be reached easily by the rail and highway network from the three major population centers in Kanto, Chubu, and Kinki (with Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka, respectively, at their centers), it is natural that these areas are among the most popular for winter sports. A skier, for example, can board a Joetsu Shinkansen (bullet train) on a brisk and sunny day in Tokyo, and in just over one hour be at a resort in Niigata Prefecture or Nagano Prefecture where there are two to four meters of snow. Depending on the region and prevailing weather conditions, it is usually possible to ski from December through the beginning of April.



Zao Ski Resort

This ski resort in the hot spring town of Zao in Yamagata prefecture is the largest in northern Honshu, and is popular with skiers throughout the winter. (Photo courtesy of Zao Hot Springs Tourist Association)

Sports Competition

Participation in a variety of international competitive events has raised interest and helped to improve athletes' techniques. The first international winter tournament to be held in Japan after World War II was the World Men's Speed Skating Tournament. Japan has been an eager participant in the Winter Olympics since the second games, held at St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1928. With the exception of Oslo in 1948, Japanese teams have taken part in all subsequent Winter Games.

The Eleventh Winter Olympic Games in February 1972, held in Sapporo, Hokkaido,

attracted 1,128 athletes from 35 countries and marked the first time a Japanese earned a gold medal, in the 70-meter ski jump event.

In February 1998 the Eighteenth Winter Olympic Games were held in Nagano, the second Winter Olympics to be hosted by Japan. More than 2,300 athletes from 72 countries and regions participated in these games. The Japanese team captured the gold medal in 5 events, including the team ski jumping, speed skating, and freestyle skiing.

Resorts and Other Facilities

Most of the major winter sports areas on the island of Honshu are easily accessible by railway and are outfitted with chairlifts and night illumination. A large number of ski grounds are located along the Joetsu line, which terminates in Tokyo. These include Tsuchitaru, Nakazato, Iwappara, Yuzawa, Ishiuchi, Shiozawa, Urasa, Koide, and Ojiya.

Sugadaira Ski Grounds is a ski resort located along the Shinetsu line, between Mt. Azumaya and Mt. Neko.

Zao, a resort on the border of Miyagi and Yamagata prefectures, has the reputation of being the largest and best equipped ski area in the Tohoku region. It is also famous for its "snow monsters," ice-covered pine trees that make for stunning winter scenery.

Hokkaido's northern latitudes permit skiing from early December to late April. Most of the ski grounds provide a variety of slopes that offer not only challenges to experts, but safe skiing for beginners. Many of these ski facilities are located close to Hokkaido's major cities.

Skating can be enjoyed at many lakes and outdoor rinks, and also in some urban areas. Hakone, a recreational area near Mount Fuji, offers good skating facilities. It can easily be reached from Tokyo by train in less than two hours.



Catering to Modern Lifestyles

A winter vacation at a Japanese resort area means more than just sports. Like so many other aspects of modern-day living, the pace of recreation in Japan has accelerated and the ways in which people enjoy winter sports have changed. Previously, this would have involved staying in a *ryokan* (Japanese inn), or family-run bed-and-breakfast, and enjoying pleasures such as hot springs, the beautiful landscape, and of course skiing. Recently, however, there has been a surge in the number of ski resorts that have large hotels offering a wide range of facilities, and now there are a great many more things to do than just ski. They feature a variety of restaurants including those with Japanese, Chinese and European cuisines, golf courses, shopping malls and beauty spas... these days, winter resorts offer much more than sports. The availability of domestic package tours that include transportation, hotel, meals, ski lift tickets, and so on, has made the business aspect of winter sports much more competitive.

To kindle consumer interest, resorts have responded by promoting discount packages and offering new styles of skiing, such as freestyle and Telemark skiing. The popularity of snowboards has grown so rapidly that nearly all ski areas in Japan now permit snowboarding. This has required the adoption of additional safety measures.

As they have changed to better suit modern life styles, in recent years ski resorts have seen a huge rise in the number of customers from abroad as well as those from Japan. Hokkaido, which is known as the biggest winter resort area in Japan, saw a 500% increase in overseas visitors in the 10 years through 2006 as it gained recognition as an international ski resort destination.



Speed skating
(Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)