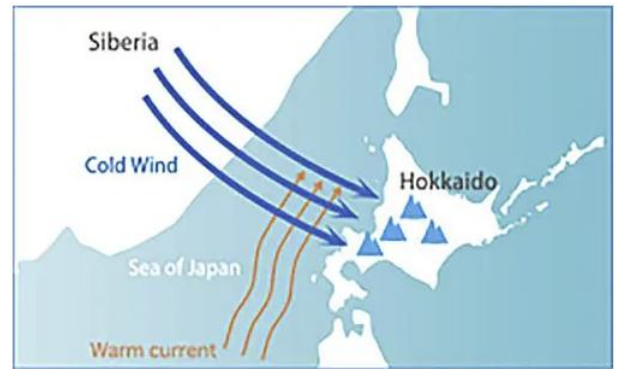


# Skiing Hokkaido, Japan with *Whiteroom's Central Hokkaido Powder Tour*

February 2023

**Why Hokkaido?** While cat skiing with Steamboat Powdercats, in the Buffalo Pass area north of Steamboat Springs, CO where we became enamored with skiing powder, we'd heard tales of the famous powder found on Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido usually gets about 15 meters or nearly 600" of snow annually (compare that to Steamboat's average of 300").

Why exactly does Hokkaido have such amazing powder snow? A warm current runs off the coast of Hokkaido that borders the Sea of Japan, keeping the waters warm even in winter. Above the surface is steam that rises from the water, which, when cooled by cold winds from the Siberia air mass, forms clouds. These clouds are blown inland by the wind, and cause snowfall when they hit the hillsides of Hokkaido's peaks. Hokkaido's "Powder Belt," referring to the Asahidake, Kurodake, Kamui, Furano, and Tomamu areas (some of which we'd be skiing), has extra dry powder that can only be found inland on the island. There's even a term of this kind of snow: JAPOW.



When Steve suggested we should do this trip, my response was "better do it sooner rather than later" as 1) we weren't getting any younger; and 2) while my arthritic knee issues are being managed successfully, that could certainly change. We signed up for a [Whiteroom Central Hokkaido Powder Tour](#) back in early 2022, not knowing if it would actually happen as Japan was still mostly closed to foreign visitors due to COVID. In early October, 2022, we got word that the trip was "a go." We booked our airline flights by burning copious mileage points – a trip involving over 24 hours of travel demanded, in our minds, business class seats!

In preparation for the trip, we fortunately were able to get in a fair amount of skiing here in Colorado before we headed to Japan. A week at Copper Mountain and 2 ½ weeks in Steamboat Springs (both cat skiing and at the resort) and more, allowed us to hone our ski muscle memory and endurance. I got VERY lucky during our Steamboat time ... an injury to my left calf hobbled me for a couple of days while walking but never really affected my ability to ski ... so, while my lower leg and foot were swollen and looked awful due to bruising and pooled blood, I could fortunately still ski without pain.

Both Steve and I had been to Japan previously. I was last there in 1974 when my parents lived in Tokyo while I was in college. Steve had been there in the early 90's to climb Mt. Fuji and visit his cousin Eric who was teaching English in Tokyo at the time.

**Getting to Hokkaido:** Since United wasn't operating its direct flight from Denver to Tokyo, our travel involved ...

- Flight from Denver to LAX (approx. 2 ½ hrs)
- Layover in LAX (approx. 1 ½ hrs)
- Flight from LAX to Tokyo's Narita Airport (approx. 11 ½ hours)
- Car transfer from Tokyo's Narita Airport to Tokyo's Haneda Airport (approx. 1 hr 10 min)
- Waiting in Haneda Airport (approx. 2.5 hrs)
- Flight from Haneda Airport to Hokkaido's New Chitose airport (approx. 1 ½ hours)
- Car transfer to city of Sapporo (approx. 55 min) -- where we spent 2 nights to help adjust to the time zone change of 8 hours plus 1 day ahead of Denver's time
- Train from Sapporo to city of Furano (approx. 3 hrs), where our *Whiteroom* adventure started (most folks took the ski bus shuttle from New Chitose airport to Furano but since we'd be coming from Sapporo it made sense to take the train instead)

**COVID Impact:** We wore masks pretty much constantly once we left our house and until we arrived in Furano. Not many folks wore masks while we were in the US but once we arrived in Japan they were the norm. In Sapporo, many of the restaurants still had Plexiglas dividers on and/or between tables. At the breakfast buffet at our hotel, plastic gloves were

provided and expected to be worn before serving ourselves. Before being seated at one Sapporo restaurant, our temperatures were taken (we held up our wrists to a machine) and hand sanitizer was provided and expected to be used immediately. Once in Furano, we wore masks anytime we were indoors in public areas unless we were eating. While skiing, face coverings were expected to be worn in the trams/gondolas though not necessarily an actual mask – neck gators pulled up to cover nose & mouth sufficed.

**Sapporo:** We didn't know much more about Sapporo other than it hosted the 1972 Winter Olympics. It seemed, however, a good place to pause our travels for a couple of nights and try to readjust our bodies to local Hokkaido time. Since we arrived very late at night, we basically had one full day & evening to check out some of the city. Some of the things we discovered ...

- Sapporo is the capital city of Hokkaido, Japan's northern-most prefecture (kind of like our states) and has a population of about 2.67 million
- It averages about 190 inches of snow each year and annually holds the "Sapporo Snow Festival" (which we just missed). Contrast that to our Denver area which only gets about 65" of snow annually (and we're the mile high city while Sapporo's elevation is less than 100 feet).
- Like many cold and snowy cities, much of Sapporo's wintertime (and hot summer) activity happens "below deck" via its underground pedestrian walkways lined with shops & restaurants. We were more than happy to take advantage of them as we walked around the city a bit.
- The *haskap* berry (aka honeyberry) grows in Hokkaido (and is now also grown in part of the US/Canada) and when its pulp is mixed with Hokkaido butter, it makes a delicious spread for bread as discovered at the breakfast buffet at our Sapporo hotel.
- Hokkaido is known as Japan's *dairy land* as it produces about half of all milk produced in Japan and over 90% of its cheese. Hence, lots of cheese and milk products (think ice cream) are featured foods on the island (not food products usually associated with Japanese cuisine).



*The Sapporo television tower, built in 1957, contains an elevator that shoots you up to an observation deck with great views of the city - when it's not snowing.*



*Wandering around the shops underneath Sapporo is a great way to find oversized (and cute) product placements.*



*On the observation deck of the Sapporo TV Tower*





Interesting **thermometer** displayed on side of building in downtown Sapporo (3 Celsius about 37 Fahrenheit)



Part of the Sapporo greeting committee



The Sapporo Snow Festival ended the day before we arrived – its ice structures were mostly already demolished by the time we walked by ... the picture at LEFT is all that was left of the ice structure in the picture ABOVE

Only intact ice sculpture we could find, the Sapporo “Clock Tower” in miniature in front of the actual Clock Tower building, which was built in 1878





Feeling more rested than when we arrived, we took the train from Sapporo Station (conveniently next door to our hotel) to Furano via a train change in the city of *Asahikawa* (Hokkaido's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city with a population of approx. 326,000). It didn't take long to leave the city behind and encounter the agricultural fields and small towns along the route. We were in a "quiet car" so had to whisper to one another. At one point, we spotted an Ezo Red Fox (aka Hokkaido Fox), with its very bushy tail, casually trotting along a stand of evergreen trees.



*Hokkaido Fox (Ezo Red Fox)*

Our train was a bit late getting into Asahikawa (a train ahead of us caused our delay) so we arrived several minutes past the departure time of the connecting train. After piling out of the train car with boot bags & suitcases, we asked a conductor standing nearby where to go to catch the train to Furano ... he yelled across a couple of tracks at the engineer of a one-train-car length train to verify that was where we needed to be ... we scurried downstairs from our arriving track, through a short tunnel and then back upstairs to board the train which left soon after we boarded. We were the only *gaijins* (Japanese word for foreigners) on board. This final leg of our journey took about 1 hour as the train was a very local one that stopped at every "station" along the way – some stations consisting only of a small shed-like building. In these cases, our train engineer also acted as the conductor and checked tickets of departing passengers.

**Furano:** From the city's train station, we were picked up by Caroline, a Whiteroom staff member who hails from Texas, and driven to *The North Country Inn*, our home away from home for the next 10 nights. There, we settled into our tatami room – our "bed" was a thick pad laid upon a 9" or so raised wooden platform with a thick duvet as top sheet/comforter. While we both enjoy a firm mattress, this was a bit firmer than ideal but we managed just fine (I discovered it made a great surface for doing various stretches when I awoke at 4AM from unresolved jet lag!). Our room also included a private bath – quite compact but with all the necessary elements including the requisite "smart toilet"! Note: these toilets are EVERYWHERE in Japan, including all the ski areas we visited. The only place we did NOT



see them was at the United Club at Narita Airport (good old Kohler toilets there).



*Pre-fab houses are a very common site in Hokkaido*

The city of Furano, with a population of just under 24,000, is nestled in a valley which is famous for its lavender fields (which, of course, were buried under snow during our time there) and the *Furano Ski Resort*. Its main industry is agriculture with key crops being onions and carrots (Hokkaido is Japan's top carrot producer) as well as watermelons and "Furano Melons" (type of cantaloupe) – unfortunately out of season for us. The area also cultivates grapes

and there is a municipally-managed winery – we especially enjoyed the *Green Apple Riesling* served at our hotel. Dairy products, such as milk & cheese) are also important area products. Furano would be our base of operations for our *Central Hokkaido Tour (CHT)*.

**Our Whiteroom CHT Group:** Led by our two Aussie guides, Greg (boarder) and Tay (skier), a group of 10 of us would be skiing or boarding together for the next 8 out of 9 days (1 off day planned). Our tourmates were:

- Alex – Sydney, Australia (skier)
- Angela (Ang) & Bevan – Nelson, New Zealand (boarders)
- Ben - London, England (skier)
- Curtis & Jenny (Jen) – Melbourne, Australia (boarders)
- Glen – Kona, HI/Cincinnati, OH (skier)
- Marcello (Marcy) – New Zealand (boarder)



*At our last night's dinner ... from left: Greg, Marcy, Steve, Melissa, Jen, Ang, Tay, Curtis, Ben, Bevan, Glen, and Alex*

The group was nicely split 5 skiers & 5 boarders plus one guide for each group so that's the way our transportation van loads were established. And, as it turned out and might be expected, the *skier* group skewed older (from 43 to my 67, led by our baby guide Tay at 31) while the *boarder* group was made up of the young pups (29 to 40-ish).

While most of the group had brought their own skis/snowboards, Ben, Steve & I had not. We only have all-mountain skis and you definitely want powder skis (at least 105mm underfoot) for skiing Hokkaido. So, the first morning Greg popped us over to the nearby rental shop and we all got fitted for some nice Rossignol powder skis (which worked out great for us). We had brought our own boots and helmets/goggles.

Our general daily *schedule* went something like ...

- 7am breakfast buffet at hotel
- 7:30am WhatsApp message from guides providing info on day's destination area and weather conditions
- 8am load ourselves and gear into the guide-driven vans and head out for the day's adventure
- Optional stop at 7-11\* for morning coffee/snacks depending on each van's desires
- Arrive at day's ski area and head to the slopes/backcountry
- Break for lunch (sometimes just a quick snack, other times more leisurely)
- Around 3:30pm, call it a day of skiing/boarding
- Mandatory stop at closest 7-Eleven\* for post-skiing/boarding refreshment
- 5-ish return to hotel
- 7-ish dinner, either as a group (every other night) or as desired by individual/small group
- 9:30-ish bedtime (some nights it was really tough to stay awake that late)

\*NOT a U.S.-type 7-Eleven, see more below under FOOD

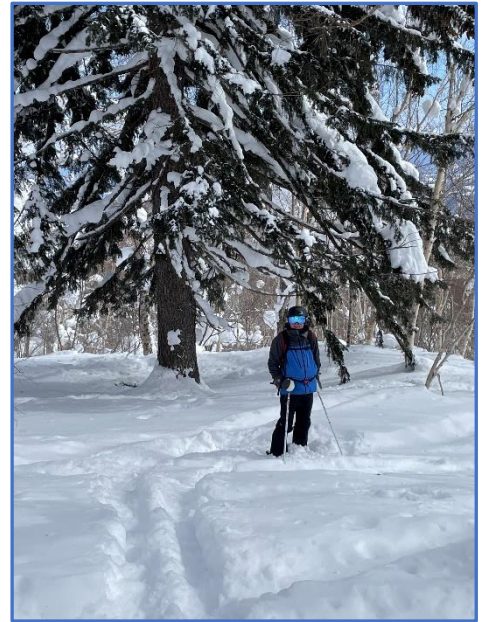
**Whiteroom CHT Style Skiing/Boarding:** We specifically signed up for Whiteroom's CHT because it offered "lift-assisted backcountry skiing" ... meaning, we would use an area's lifts to get up the mountain, but coming back down we'd mostly be skiing "off piste." Thus, we'd be skiing down the tree-covered areas between runs or areas beyond the resort's official boundaries. What this meant was ...

- **Avalanche Prepared:** We all wore avalanche beacons and carried avalanche packs (with probe and shovel) even if the vast majority of the terrain we skied was NOT avalanche prone (37 degrees or above) ... and had training on how to use them. When skiing potential avalanche areas (e.g., Furano's Chute 1), we skied avalanche style (one at a time)



and skied defensively with a more diagonal path to avoid the snow slough we each created ourselves. Guide Tay was ever vigilant about testing the snow in any suspect area.

- **Untracked Powder the Goal:** Other than our very first run on the very first ski day, we basically avoided actual ski runs. Instead, we followed our guides to areas where we'd find ungroomed and untracked powder snow (i.e., off piste areas). Floating on and through such conditions provides an unparalleled skiing experience. Hence, the purpose of our long trek to Hokkaido! Oh, and those pesky roped off areas in a ski resort, under the direction of a guide we seemed to somehow either ski under them or even over them to reach the pow!
- **Initial Traverse/Side-Step/Hike:** To get to where a backcountry run started, from the top of a lift, we'd often have to first hike and/or traverse up and/or side-step up to the desired area. Sometimes this was just a short distance, other times quite a bit longer carrying our skis. Once such hike at *Sahoro* was up a relatively steep ridgeline with a very strong headwind which kept trying to blow me over – with the assistance of Tay, I switched from carrying my skis on one shoulder to instead carrying them secured to my pack – having both hands free to use my poles and a much better-balanced load made the rest of the climb quite doable. The effort was well worth it – we had one of the best runs of the trip with knee deep, incredibly light powder.
- **Tree Skiing:** The forests of the Hokkaido ski areas we visited (see list below) were population with a variety of species, including: Mongolian oaks, painted maple, Japanese larch and elm, birch, and different species of spruce and fir, as well as bamboo thickets and various brush-like vegetation. In some areas, the trees were very nicely spaced and, in others, rather tight. We also found some vine-like plant growth, both hanging



*Steve enjoying some untracked pow at Furano*



*Melissa in amongst the tree branches at Kamoidake*



*Tay taking "tree skiing" to a whole new level*

from trees as well as peaking up from the snow. Steve had a near-miss when his goggles/helmet hit a sturdy vine hanging from a tree – it fortunately went up and over the helmet rather than getting caught below his chin. Unfortunately, fellow skier Alex wasn't so lucky – a nearly completely buried vine/small tree branch caught his left ski at ankle height causing a very painful tear to his left calf muscle. With assistance from boarder guide Greg and boarder Marcy (called in to help via radios that the guides carry), Alex was able to be roped up (while standing on his skis) and hauled back uphill to the nearest actual run where he gingerly and slowly made his way back to the base. Of course, Alex happened to be



*Melissa skiing under a very heavily snow-loaded tree at Furano*



GoPro-ing himself so we all got to watch his tragedy in living color! While his injury put an end to his skiing on the trip (after just 3<sup>rd</sup> ski day), we now know he's already booked a return CHT trip next January! The other aspect of tree skiing is that it's easy to get "lost" (i.e., not come out at the same place the rest of your group does). Following the guide's instructions, skiing with the person in front of you in sight, making lots of noise whooping and hollering (easy to do with good conditions), etc. are all good practices. Neither Steve or I ever got *lost* but I did once find myself a bit off course and having to do some uphill climbing when during a glorious untracked powder run at Canmore I suddenly realized I was well left and below the area I needed to be in. At the very end of our 1<sup>st</sup> day at Furano, our guides left us to do groomers if we wished while they joined in the search for a missing skier from another group (all ended well).

- **Listen to Your Guide:** Having a guide knowledgeable in the ski areas is critical to successful off-piste skiing as hazards are not marked nor are there any signs indicating when you need to start a traverse to get back to the base area. We all listened carefully as Tay or Greg provided info on the terrain ahead – areas to avoid so as not to end up in a creek for example OR taking the left trees meant tighter conditions while the right trees were a bit more open OR be sure to not ski below where the guide stops unless you want to do some uphill hiking. I will confess: I "sort of" ended up in a creek at Canmore ... well one ski got a bit wet and I ended up with an ice blob on the bottom surface that needed to be scraped off ... but, *really*, it wasn't my fault.
- **Finishing Traverse/Skate/Hike:** The ski areas we skied at tended to have "bench-like" topography – you'd ski down a ways, then across a flatter bench area and then perhaps a repeat or two before bottoming out. Definitely a different topography than the more straight-slopes mountains we're used to here in Colorado. In practical terms, this often meant we'd have to traverse, skate, and/or even hike at the end of a run to get back to the base area so we could do it all again. For example, some of our runs at *Furano* ended with a traverse to a large water pipe, a steep side-step to get up and over the pipe, followed by another traverse. At *Sahoro*, several runs ended with lots of skating and then some hiking for most of us (Tay was strong enough to keep skating but the rest of us had to take our skis off and carry them). It's no wonder that the combined initial get-to-run exertions, plus the actual run skiing, and then the finishing exertion we were both pretty nuked at the end of each ski day.
- **Car Drop/Car Lift Runs:** Some of our favorite runs were ones that ended at a road some distance away from the ski area we started from (we had such runs at both *Sahoro* and *Kamoidake*). In order to get us back to the ski area, the guides had either pre-positioned one of the vans in an off-the-road parking spot (i.e., a "Car Drop") OR if no such parking was available, one of our guides (or another Whiteroom guide skiing at the same area) would drive a van & come give us a lift (i.e., a "Car Lift" run). In these "car lift" situations, we would carefully stack all the skis/boards next to the road and then all stand back about 20 feet. When the van arrived, we promptly, as we had been instructed, either helped shovel the gear into the back of the van and/or got ourselves (& poles) into the van as quickly as possible. Depending on the number in the group, we often ended up with more folks than seats in vans for the return drive to the ski area (nothing that some sitting on laps couldn't fix).
- **Skier vs Boarder Runs:** As a CHT group, the two sub groups (skiers and boarders) sometimes did runs together, sometimes did the same runs but with slightly different profiles (e.g., boarders would take a different line so as to minimize end traverses), sometimes did totally different runs, and sometimes a sub-group would buddy up with another Whiteroom guide and his/her group to facilitate a car drop/car lift opportunity.



*Vans could get pretty crowded on Car Drop/Car Lift runs*

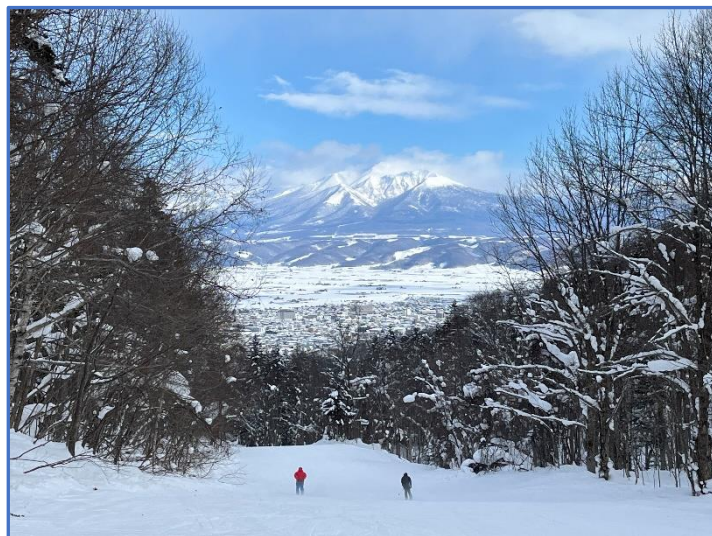


*A mixed skier/boarder Car Drop/Car Lift van ride... from left: Ben, Marcy, Melissa, Curtis, and Steve*



**Where We Skied:** During our eight skiing days in Hokkaido, we visited 6 different areas:

- **Furano** (Ski Days 1 & 5): 470 Skiable Acres, Base – Top Elevations: 804' – 3524', Vertical Drop = 2720', 9 Lifts. The *Furano Ski Resort* was the largest ski area we skied. It has a *Ropeway* (aka tram), a gondola, and several chairlifts. The ski area is divided into two parts, the Furano Zone & the Kitanomine Zone, linked by a chairlift. Backcountry Chutes 1 - 6 provide excellent steep terrain, though with potential avalanche risk.
- **Sahoro** (Ski Days 2 & 7): 346 Skiable Acres, Base – Top Elevations: 1345' – 3379', Vertical Drop = 2034', 8 Lifts. This resort is located right next to a brown bear sanctuary. We skied by some of the sanctuary's fencing but never saw a bear. Its gondola was so old we had to bring our skies/boards inside the cabins as they were too fat to fit into the exterior ski racks. Its "North Bowl" lift wasn't running but we traversed/hiked our way into it several times and enjoyed some great conditions both day



*Looking across the Furano valley from the Furano Ski Resort*



*Steve & Melissa at Sahoro*



*Sign atop Sahoro gondola - note that someone tried to correct a spelling mistake*



*Sahoro doesn't have the friendliest looking mascot*

- **Kamoidake** (Ski Day 3): Called *Woodpecker* by guides, 131 Skiable Acres, Base – Top Elevations: 709' – 1532', Vertical Drop = 823', 4 Lifts. This was the smallest area we skied and it is considered a "ski association," not a ski resort. Its backside lift has been closed for a few years but we enjoyed some great runs there thanks to our "car drop" option. The day we visited, there were only about 25 total skiers/ boarders, including our group of 12. There is even a small church just upslope of the main building.

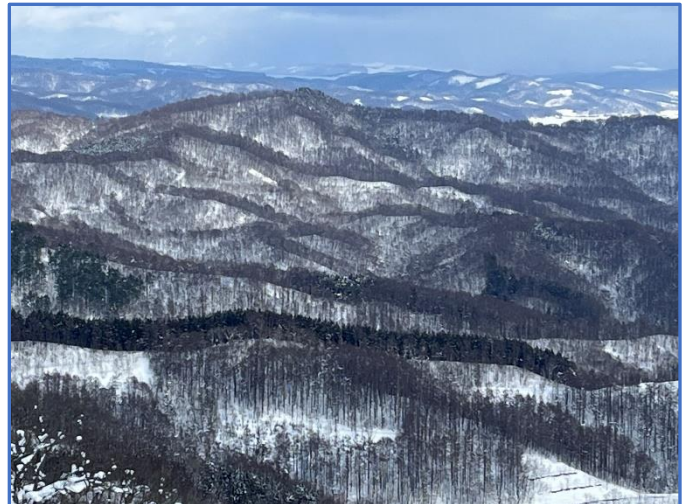


*Melissa atop Kamoidake*





*Closed backside lift @ Kamoidake provided great powder skiing as long as you provided own "car drop" transportation*



*View of Hokkaido's tree-topped ridged mountains from atop Kamoidake*

- **Asahidake** (Ski Day 4): Base – Top Elevations: 3608' – 5249', Vertical Drop = 1641', 1 Lift/Tram. This dormant volcano is Hokkaido's highest mountain. It is not actually a "ski resort" but instead a National Park which runs a single tramway (originally built to take hikers up the mtn which it still does at other times of the year). While it has 2 ski "courses" (think wide cat tracks), skiing/riding its forested slopes is what brings the majority of folks here in the winter. The day we were there, we had quite low visibility so extra happy to be with a guide.



*Steve in tram at Asahidake*



*Skier group at Asahidake ...Ben, Melissa, Glen & Steve*



*A low visibility day at Asahidake – view from the Tram*



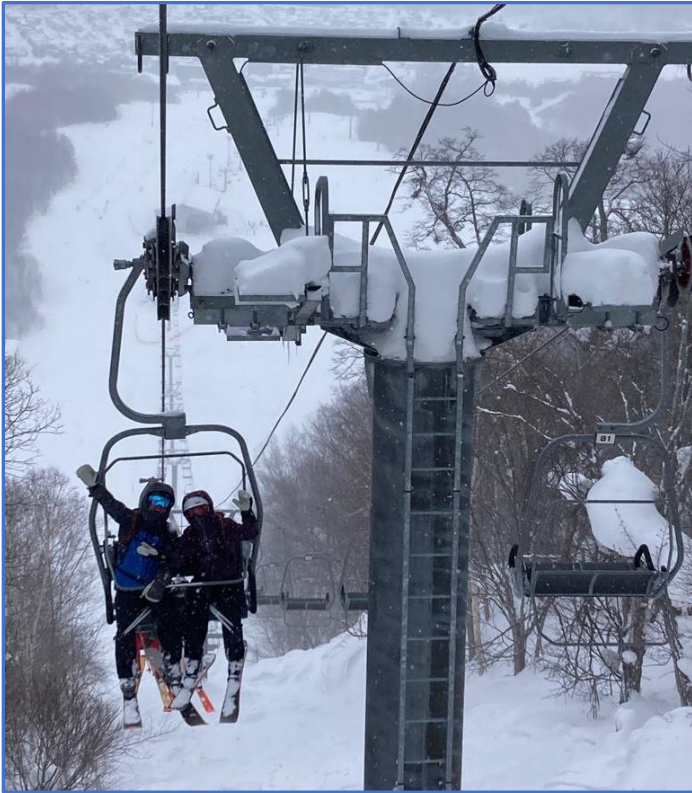
*Ice- and snow-covered trees at Asahidake, Tay in background*

*English translations and subsequent spelling not a strong suit of many Hokkaido ski areas*





- **Canmore** (Ski Day 6): 676' – 1476', Vertical Drop = 800', 2 Lifts: We diverted here when our planned 2<sup>nd</sup> day at *Asahidake* didn't happen due its ropeway/tram being down for several hours. The resort is named for the area's "sister city" in Canada (located near Banff), hence the Canadian motif. It also has a temple of some sort hidden in the trees that we skied past numerous times.

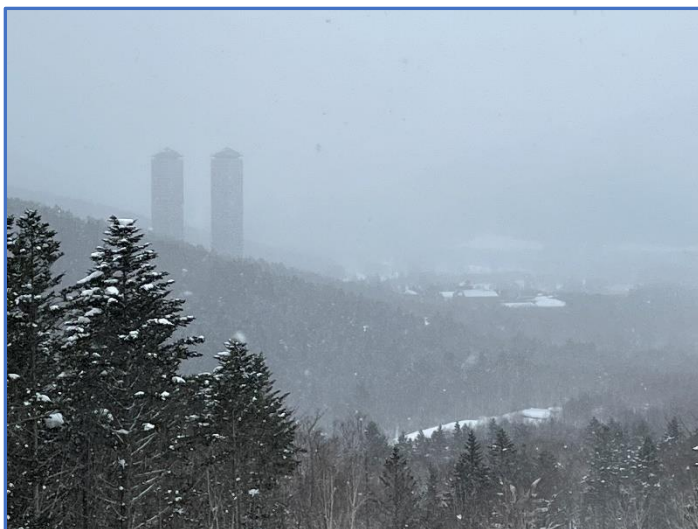


*Steve & Melissa at Canmore*

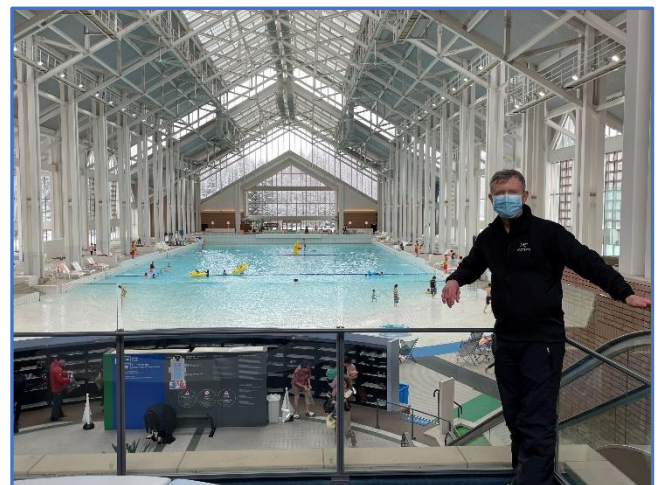


*Steve & Melissa at Canmore*

- **Tomamu**: (Ski Day 8); 385 Skiable Acres, Base – Top Elevations: 1922' – 3842', Vertical Drop = 1920', 6 Lifts: Built during Japan's ski bubble era (1986-1990), it boasts its own rail station, multiple lodging towers connected by enclosed walkways, and a huge indoor pool. Club Med operates a large facility here as well. Non-skiers who ride up with the gondola can walk with to tennis match style *umpire chairs* to take in the view.



*Tomamu Towers ... a bit out of place with the landscape*

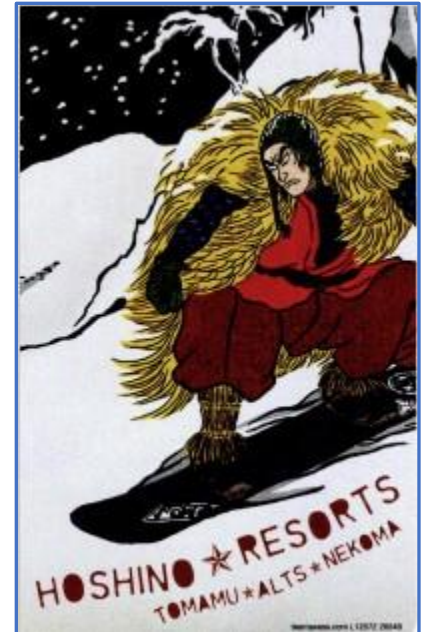


*Steve overlooking Tomamu's huge indoor pool, complete with wave machine – attendants are in shorts & t-shirts*



**Key Differences Between Hokkaido & Colorado Ski Areas:** We noted several key differences between skiing in Hokkaido and our experiences in the States, including:

- **Lower Altitudes:** The Hokkaido ski areas are at a much lower elevation than we're used to. Here in Colorado, we live at 5830' and are used to skiing at much higher elevations (e.g., base of Copper Mtn is 9712' and it tops out at 12,313'). Thus, skiing Hokkaido basically eliminates any altitude-related issues for visitors.
- **Smaller Ski Areas:** While we didn't ski Hokkaido's largest ski area, Niseko United, it only has about 2,100 skiable acres. Compare that with the largest U.S. ski resort, Park City, which has about 7,200 skiable acres or even our home resort of Copper Mountain which has over 2,500 skiable acres. You wouldn't want to come to Hokkaido and only ski at one ski area for multiple days ... being chauffeured around to a variety of ski areas was terrific!
- **Reduced Vertical Drops:** With Hokkaido's lower elevation mountains comes a correspondingly less vertical drop than is usual here in Colorado. For example, Copper Mtn has a vertical drop of 2,738' and Steamboat Spring's is 3,668'.
- **Cheaper & Prettier Lift Tickets:** Our most expensive ski lift ticket was about \$48 while the cheapest was just \$14. So yes, significantly cheaper than the well over \$200/day at most Colorado ski resorts but the Hokkaido resorts are significantly smaller.
- **Lack of Ski Patrol:** We saw basically no presence of any ski patrol during our ski days; the only exceptions were 1) seeing ski patrol office at *Tomamu*, and 2) at *Furano*, we did spy some rescue sleds in the Ropeway's top station. When skiing in Colorado, the sight of ski patrollers is a common one. As our guides explained things to us, we couldn't count on any ski patrol assistance IF a situation occurred. Thus, our guides carried radios, extensive medical supply packs, rope, etc. with them. Both our guides were *Wilderness First Responder* certified and Tay is a ski patroller back home in Australia during its winter season.
- **Lifties Age Bracket:** Here in Colorado most "Lifties" (folks who work the lifts) are pretty young (think late teens through mid-twenties). In Hokkaido, while there certainly were some youngsters manning the lifts, we also saw a large number of men & women in at least their 40's and 50's (likely farmers supplementing their incomes during their off season).
- **How Snow is Cleared from Lift Seats:** In Colorado we'll often see the lifties using a standard broom to brush off snow from the chair lift seat when needed. In Hokkaido, we saw handmade twig brooms being used as well as handheld leaf blowers and at one area, stationary electric fans were used to help blow snow off incoming lift chairs – definitely some new approaches to us!
- **Music Blasting from Lift Poles:** We heard a variety of music being played at the ski area bases (which we're used to) but it was often also being blasted from speakers atop the lift poles so we were serenaded while riding up the lifts (something we are not used to and frankly, would prefer didn't happen). Our favorite, however, was the very familiar 1960's and 70's classic rock music being blasted out at the *Kamoidake* ski area. According to Greg, this type of music is always being played here just because management likes that type of music. It was much preferred over the J-pop or melodic tunes we heard at other places.
- **Nearby Onsen Hot Springs:** Japanese *onsen* are hot springs/bathing facilities, usually volcanic in nature. There are over 250 onsen on Hokkaido. The vast majority of onsen are segregated by gender, as was the one we visited after skiing at *Tomamu*. The basic etiquette is wash BEFORE you enter the pools and enter the pools naked (you use a small provided "modesty towel" when walking between bathing area and pools), and don't dunk/get your hair wet in the pools. Some pools may be inside, while others are outside. Visiting an onsen is a wonderful way to soak those tired muscles after a day on the slopes.



Tomamu Life Ticket - yep it is RFID enabled



Handmade twig brooms were a common sight at Hokkaido ski areas



**Snow/Weather Conditions We Encountered:** We seemed to have brought some of the Colorado sunshine with us – we had heard about the usual gray Hokkaido skies so enjoyed some unexpected sunny days. The flip side being, of course, is that it usually isn't snowing while the sun is shining; thus, less fresh powder on the slopes. The weather was consistently chilly but not unbearably cold -- think single digits to mid-teens but no below-0 Fahrenheit days but plenty of below-0 Celsius days. The windchill factor was felt a couple of days but we all dressed for the conditions appropriately so was comfortable the vast majority of the time. And, for those times when we were putting in extra effort and generating excess heat (think skating/hiking), helmet vents and pit zips are excellent tools for use when needed.

The Whiteroom guides take the business of finding the best possible conditions each day very seriously ... detailed info from guides who were at a particular area the prior day, weather station readings of temperature, humidity, wind direction & speed, precipitation received as well as forecasts, plus more informal data collection methods (e.g., being buddies with a cat operator who gets an early firsthand look at onsite conditions) and more are all taken into account. **Bottom Line:** We found untracked powder every day! However, it's depth, weight and consistency was certainly variable by day. At best, we had over the knee, very light powder on a few runs that we could float through seemingly effortlessly and was just such a treat to ski in (a 10 on a scale of 10). A few runs started out with lovely light powder and then deteriorated into heavier, less manageable stuff as the elevation decreased (a 5 rating). Overall, Steve and I would rate the powder conditions we encountered as a solid 7 or 7+. We didn't experience an epic Hokkaido dump of half a meter or more of snow but regardless, we had a blast!

**Food, Critical for Fueling all the Skiing We Did:** Let's just say, we certainly didn't hold back on consuming calories on this trip! Some observations about the food and food service we encountered:

- **Breakfast Buffet – Interesting Mix of Japanese and Western Offerings:** The traditional Japanese breakfast consists of steamed rice, miso soup, grilled fish and an egg/egg dish. These were available as well as such non-traditional Western breakfast items such as cabbage salad, noodles, meatballs, and more. Pancakes are a popular Japanese food item so they were served daily. To provide us gaijins with our more expected foods, the buffet also offered cold cereal/muesli, sausages or bacon, a variety of breads/rolls/croissants with butter and jams/jellies, yogurt, etc. French toast, and hot dogs in buns also made an appearance a couple of times. I especially enjoyed the available *acerola* juice, which was new to me (it is similar to a cherry and is aka a Barbados Cherry).
- **Limited Fresh Fruit & Veggies:** The vast majority of food we had available to us lacked *fresh* fruits and vegetables. As it was wintertime, most of these products were not able to be grown locally and thus, were just not offered. The couple of green salads we did have contained no tomatoes and we never saw any fruit salads on a menu. Common vegetables included cabbage and carrots. Our breakfast buffet's fruit offering included fresh orange wedges and a delicious blueberry sauce to put on yogurt, pancakes, etc. On our one non-ski day while in Furano, Steve and I walked into *Furano* proper and checked out the Coop grocery store. It offered a variety of fresh fruits and veggies but many had quite high prices (e.g., a single small avocado for about \$3). We were craving some fresh stuff so we purchased and subsequently enjoyed a basket of fresh strawberries and a couple of fresh apples.



*Grocery store offered bags of HUGE carrots for sale for about \$1.50 per bag*

*Steve admiring the huge 4-liter bottles of whiskey available for purchase (Suntory at less than \$49 ea. and only about \$25 ea. for Nikka Black)*



- **Vending Machines are Everywhere:** Indoors and out, you'll find great quantities of vending machines in Japan. Food, beverages (including alcoholic ones), toys, and more can easily be procured from vending machines.

- **Translate Apps Critical:** How do you know which ice cream to choose from a vending machine in Japan? Point & click your phone's translate app of course! Need to order lunch at the ski area's order kiosk? Use your translate app to figure out which button's label corresponds to your desired lunch item ... a hamburger curry perhaps?



*Enjoying some vending machine ice cream*

- **Japanese 7-Eleven's Are Awesome:** Fortunately, there seems to be at least one 7-Eleven in every town on Hokkaido! We could wax poetic on the differences between Japanese 7-Elevens' and those here in the US but until you experience them yourselves it is hard to convey the vast quantity of food & goods sold and, just as importantly, the level of quality of said items. Our daily post-skiing stop seemed to be a must for the entire group – whether it was something sweet, savory, alcoholic or otherwise that was being craved. One day, Steve and I not only got some post-ski snacks & beverages but we also picked up some sandwiches for our dinner that night (they were incredibly fresh and delicious).

- **Sushi Train Dinner:** One night our group went out to eat at a Furano sushi train restaurant (although the so called “train” or conveyor belt was not operating). Despite my not eating any fish/seafood, we were able to order a variety of scrumptious dishes including: cheese sushi, egg sushi, hamburger sushi, fried chicken, udon noodles, etc. Steve and I ate our fill and I even had a soft drink -- the entire bill was ONLY \$11.50 for the both of us! The other amazing thing about that dinner: Steve used only chopsticks to eat with!

- **Japanese Hot Pots and BBQ Meals:** These staple methods of Japanese cooking are a great way for a group to enjoy a meal together, which we did on multiple occasions. Our final group dinner was at a BBQ place and we had a budget of about \$30 per person. Despite copious beers and other alcoholic beverages ordered, bowls of salad, platter upon platter of various meats and veggies brought out to be grilled, and bowls of ice cream for all, we just could NOT spend the entire allocated budget.

- **Cute Food:** Japan is famous for its cute anime and other characters. This culture of cuteness extends into food and even has a name: *kawaii*. Thus, you'll see lots of shaped and adorable looking food items as well as its packaging.

- **Gift Giving Culture with Food a Common Gift:** Japan has quite the culture of gift giving with specific names associated with the occasion. For example, *omiyage* are souvenirs brought



*Panda shaped milk bread with added Panda packaging décor—at a Japanese bakery which offer wonderful sweet & savory goodies*



*Delicious - a bottle of “hot” hot chocolate from a vending machine (less than \$2)*



*Japanese 7-Elevens must be experienced to understand what makes them so special*



*Cheese Sushi - yum*



*Taiyaki, a classic street vendor food, a fish-shaped waffle/cake traditionally filled with red bean paste but also made with custard or chocolate filling ... when enjoyed some hot off the presses at Tomamu Ski Resort*



home from a trip while *temiyage* are thank-you gifts you bring when you visit someone. Food is a common gift item. Thus, in any airport or large shopping area, you'll see vast varieties and quantities of food items all prettily boxed/wrapped up. We watched hordes of school students, in their uniforms, in the New Chitose Airport carrying huge bags full of such gift items as they waited to board their plane to Tokyo (we surmised they had been on a school trip to Hokkaido and were returned home with their *omiyage* for their families).

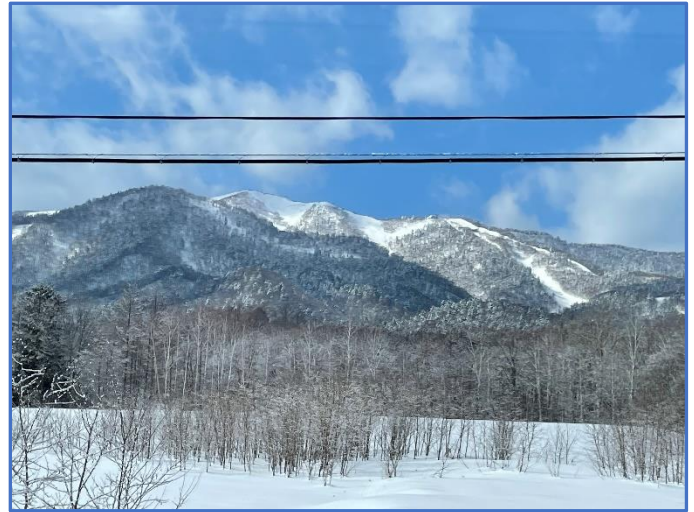
**Saying Goodbye to Hokkaido and Returning Home:** The ski bus picked us up at the North Country Inn to whisk us back to the New Chitose Airport. We overnighted there, before returning to Tokyo to fly home, so we had plenty of time to check out its extensive shopping, dining, and entertainment offerings.



*Of course, there is a Pokémon Store at the New Chitose Airport*



*Snow Miku, Hokkaido's Ice Princess, has her own store and museum in the New Chitose Airport. She gets an updated look each year. You can even watch her hologram singing & dancing there (or check out her YouTube videos)*



*Final view of Furano from ski bus back to airport*



*Melissa getting chummy with a new friend in the New Chitose Airport*

Both Steve and I ranked the trip as a great one! Despite the long hours of travel, experiencing a different culture, many new foods, beautiful scenery, unique skiing adventures, and more was such a fun, complete package! While we're unlikely to do another ski trip to Japan, we are definitely planning to visit Japan again before too long.