



*“Everywhere we’d been, locals could be found performing even the most menial daily tasks with care, attention and a kind of Zen devotion.”*

# SLOW SNOW

In one traditional Japanese village, a snow holiday moves at a gentle pace, rich in local culture and history, far from the bar-hopping hordes. *Tim Baker* soaks it up

Oddly, it was while hurtling through the Japanese countryside at 300 kmh, enroute to a popular ski resort, that I realised why I found Japanese culture so delightful.

As a uniformed lady wheeled a food and drink trolley to the end of our carriage on the bullet train, or Shinkansen, she paused, turned to face the rows of seated travellers, and slowly bowed, then turned and continued on her way.

It was such an unexpected, small show of gracious courtesy while we enjoyed the latest in high-speed travel that it gave me pause for thought. As we sped from Tokyo to the snowfields

of Nagano, I realised that the teeming metropolis of 13 million souls we were leaving behind could only function, and not descend into chaos, because of the countless small courtesies its people display every day. Everywhere we’d been, locals could be found performing even the most menial daily tasks with care, attention and a kind of Zen devotion – whether preparing squid balls, sharpening knives, serving breakfast or selling train tickets.

But my regard for Japanese culture was about to be elevated to new heights by the beguiling charms of a quixotic, snow-coated, farming village built over hot thermal springs.

Nozawa-Onsen is a town of just 3800 permanent residents that swells with visitors each winter, attracted not just for the bountiful snow and world-class skiing, but also for the charming traditional onsen, or hot thermal spring baths, that have sprouted throughout the village. Tradition and law forbids drilling to reach the hot thermal spring water that runs under the village and so the onsens have arisen around natural springs, where the piping-hot underground water naturally pushes to the surface. Ornate buildings that resemble temples have been built around the hot springs and house free public baths that attract locals and visitors, day and night.



This is a world far removed from the popular Japanese ski resorts overrun by loud Australians determined to ski all day and party all night. Its traditional charms first attracted Australian traveller Mark Baumann back in 1991 and he's still here, running Nozawa Holidays with his Japanese wife, Yoshiko, and now with two young children. He calls it not a tree change or a sea change, but a ski change.

Mark first arrived as a young backpacker looking for work, after running out of money in Tokyo and heading to the country, where he camped by a river and literally begged the local bakery for old crusts of bread. He spotted a job as ski patrol in a place he'd never heard of called Nozawa-Onsen and managed to score the job. He fell in love with the traditional village life and untracked powder and eventually decided to start his own business introducing other visitors to this little known, winter Shangri-La.

"If you come to Nozawa you don't just come for the skiing (which is world class by the way), you come to Nozawa to also get a taste of a traditional Japanese town," says Mark. "Nozawa is a special place even for the Japanese tourists. The temples and shrines, the amazing local food, the Onsen baths and most importantly the friendly locals."

The annual Fire Festival each January celebrates births in the village and banishes bad luck. The festival focus is a six-story wooden shrine that is set alight by villagers carrying flaming torches. 42-year-old local men sit atop the structure, and 25-year-old men defend its base from the crowd,

but eventually concede defeat and the shrine goes up in the flames, but not before the 42-year-olds have scammed to safety. According to Japanese tradition, these two ages are considered unlucky and the dramatic pyrotechnics are meant to cleanse them of misfortune.

The ubiquitous Dosojin statues visible throughout the village depict a pair of young lovers, and are said to be fertility Gods. "They must be working as we have had two kids since we have been living here," says Mark. Indeed the number of marriage proposals, weddings, honeymoons and, yes, even conceptions that seem to have occurred among visitors over the years lend weight to the legend.

The onsen is at the heart of village life. Thirteen

*Elderly locals can be seen shuffling to their nearest onsen each evening at the end of a day's work, carrying the trademark basket containing soap and towel*

onsens are dotted throughout the small village of narrow, cobblestone streets, so one is never far away. A soak in the onsen is a daily ritual for most locals and strict protocols govern their use. There are separate men's and women's baths at each onsen, and users strip naked and wash vigorously with soap and hot water before soaking in the bath. A quiet, respectful decorum is observed, though social chat and laughter appears to be a key part of the appeal

especially for the local women. Elderly locals can be seen shuffling to their nearest onsen each evening at the end of a day's work, carrying the trademark basket containing soap and towel. They remind me of the senior citizens from the movie Cocoon who have discovered the fountain of youth.

Indeed, after 14 years without skiing, my ageing body remained remarkably ache-free throughout a week skiing fresh powder every day, I'm convinced in a large part due to a regular soak in the onsen. It was not all smooth sailing with our onsen experiences, however.

We had enjoyed a family onsen at our ryokan (a traditional guesthouse) in Tokyo, where you could lock the door and have the bath to yourself. But my first experience at a public onsen in Nozawa

with my young son was not without incident. It was only when we approached the quaint timber building a short walk from our villa that the reality of the communal bathing experience dawned on my nine-year-old. "You mean we are supposed to get nude with a whole bunch of randoms?" he demanded incredulously. I suspect it was only the chilly night air and the warmth emanating from the building that even got him inside.





Fortunately, we had the place to ourselves but did a less than perfect job of removing the snow from our boots at the entrance. We disrobed, stashed our clothes and began to wash, when an elderly Japanese gentlemen arrived. He looked disdainfully at the small mounds of snow littering the entrance and barked his disapproval at us in Japanese. I attempted to apologise profusely and set about sweeping the snow out the door, while nude, wet and cold. Finally we sank into the hot bath gingerly, feet first to become accustomed to the searing heat, then legs, then slowly, gradually lowering our bodies. My son took some convincing that the heat was bearable but eventually succumbed to its soothing effects. Just as I was relaxing into the cultural experience, he announced that he needed to pee. “Don’t you dare pee in the onsen,” I warned in a hushed command.

“I’ll hang on,” he promised, grimly.

The spectre of disgracing ourselves on our onsen debut kept our bath brief. We emerged into the frigid evening deeply warmed to the core, yet my son remained sceptical about the entire arrangement. “That’s the grossest thing ever,” he declared.

The onsen tradition stretches back hundreds of years. The village was reputedly founded by a Buddhist monk in 724 AD during the reign of Emperor Shomu, although ruins of dwellings and artefacts dating back 3000 years have recently been found. By 1250 AD it was already a popular travel destination. The first private bathhouse was built during the Edo period, around 1700, and a strict set of rules, called Sodai, were framed for its use which are still observed today. The free public onsens today are run and managed by town members and small donation boxes allow for their upkeep.

The geothermally-heated and mineral-rich spring water flows directly into the baths from natural springs, and each onsen is said to have a slightly different mineral composition, suited to addressing particular ailments. Outdoor onsens

allow the more modest to soak in their swimsuits, and one outdoor onsen is even used to cook vegetables.

Skiing peaked here in the ‘90s when the Japanese economy was booming and skiing was seen as fashionable, but numbers have dropped dramatically since as economic recession has bitten. While numbers of local visitors have declined, foreign visitors have been on the rise, particularly over the past five years as tourists search for a more authentic Japanese snow experience, away from the bar-hopping hordes. The exchange rate favours Australians and prices are surprisingly affordable. Our family of four ate out, even on the mountain during a day’s skiing, for a total of around A\$40. Ski hire, lift passes and

*A recent meeting of the local tourism board decided they already had enough visitors and they should now focus on attracting the right sort of visitors, those looking for a cultural immersion along with their snow holiday.*

accommodation are also surprisingly affordable, well below what you’d pay in the Australian ski-fields.

The village population has been in decline for some years, from 5000 20 years ago to around 3800 today. Yet it is being supplemented by a steady trickle of Japanese city dwellers looking for their own ski change. Like the young couple we met running the delightful Neo Bar, serving an international array of beers, local-style hotpots and crepes to a young, hip, snowboarding clientele. He had left Tokyo to pursue his passion for snowboarding and in the off-season works on a local rice farm to make ends meet. When I remarked that it was surprising to find a Japanese bar selling the Tahitian beer Hinano, he explained his wife was a professional Tahitian dancer when she wasn’t working in the bar – a career that I imagine might not be in high demand in a traditional Japanese farming village. A tiny, hole-

in-the wall sushi bar is run by an eccentric chef who freshly prepares every order, wielding his sushi knife brazenly as he delivers a comic, running commentary in broken English. A small corner bar with no signage, just a small room with a long wooden bar and a neat row of gleaming metal taps, serves up locally brewed beers, including an intriguing Soba Stout. An eighth generation sake-brewer produces an exquisite local sake. Nozawa seems full of such quirky, family-run establishments serving fresh, local, quality produce. Nozawana is a local, green, leafy vegetable that grows nowhere else in Japan and is served pickled with almost every meal, a necessary nutritional staple in winter.

There is local concern that Nozawa-Onsen could become too popular and go the way of

other snow resorts overrun by foreign tourists and investment from those with little regard for local traditions. The *New York Times* named it one of its top 50 travel destinations for 2014, an honour that alarms some like Mark, who hope to see the old Nozawa ways preserved. A recent meeting of the local tourism board decided they already had enough visitors and they should now focus on attracting the right sort of visitors, those looking for a cultural immersion along with their snow holiday. I’ll confess to some nervousness about even writing of the place, hopeful as I am of returning one day to find it as I left it.

To wander down cobbled streets after a day’s skiing, snowflakes fluttering from the night sky, the aroma of hot dinners beckoning from dozens of eateries, warmed to the core by a recent soak in the onsen or ingestion of local sake, all this makes for a magical travel experience with few peers. Long may it remain that way.