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5 ways to avoid the crowds at Japan's popular ski resort town Niseko

Home to fresh, powdery snow, Niseko is a skier's dream, but avoiding the crowds makes this popular Japanese ski resort even more attractive



Aja Ng
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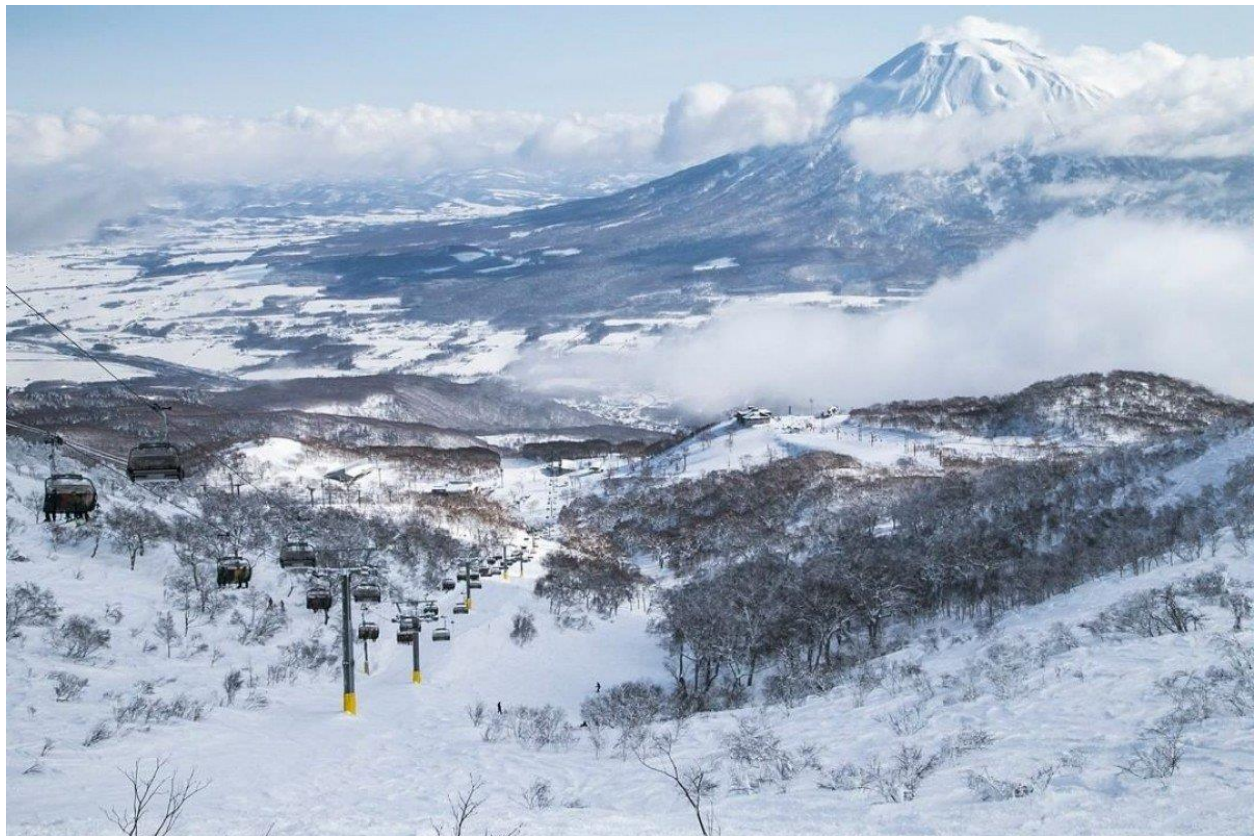
Beat the crowds at one of Japan's most popular ski resorts, Niseko. Photo: Instagram

5 ways to avoid the crowds at Japan's popular ski resort town Niseko

Home to fresh, powdery snow, Niseko is a skier's dream, but avoiding the crowds makes this popular Japanese ski resort even more attractive.

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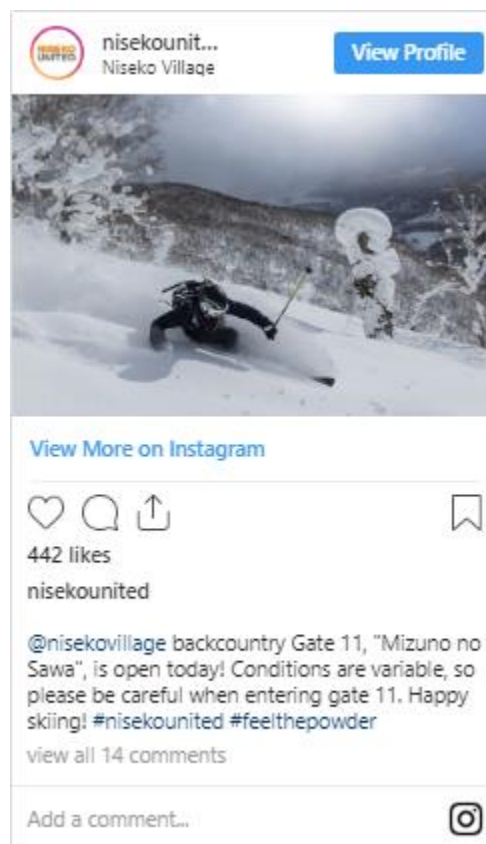


Beat the crowds at one of Japan's most popular ski resorts, Niseko. Photo: Instagram

For skiers, the Japanese town of Niseko's allure is hard to resist, given its world-renowned "japow" (low-humidity powder snow), delectable cuisine and unique après experiences. Here are our top tips to avoid the crowds when you go.

1. Go later in the season

Go in the festive season and you'll be running into someone you know every five steps, so do your best to avoid that time period.



Visit later rather than early in the season; the crowd, costs of accommodation and flights begin to ease mid-February, and travelling later also means you'll see that famed powder in its glorious depths, all 15 metres it averages. Don't worry, that fluffy snow continues to fall right into April.

2. Stay beyond Hirafu

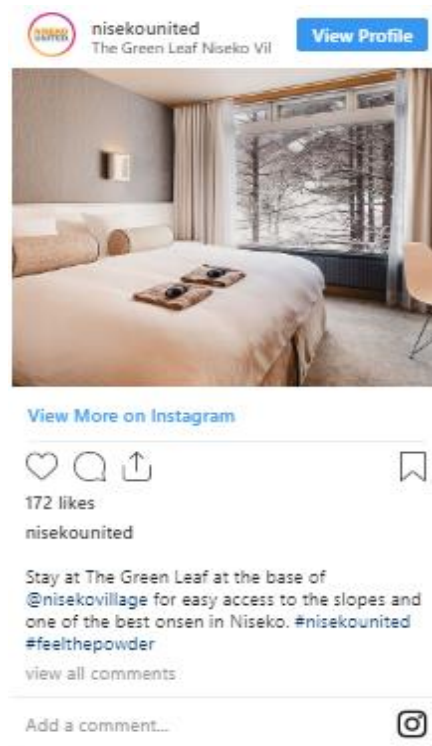
There are four ski resorts on Mount Annupuri, collectively known as Niseko United, or as we know it, Niseko.



The most popular one, Hirafu, has the highest concentration of developments. Restaurants, shops and more than 400 accommodation options are available, making it extremely convenient and buzzing with energy. These are all crowded in a loose grid flowing from the Grand Hirafu Gondola and the luxury hotels which flank it, right down to Lower Hirafu. Buck the trend by staying at one of the other three ski areas. Trust us, it's a better idea.

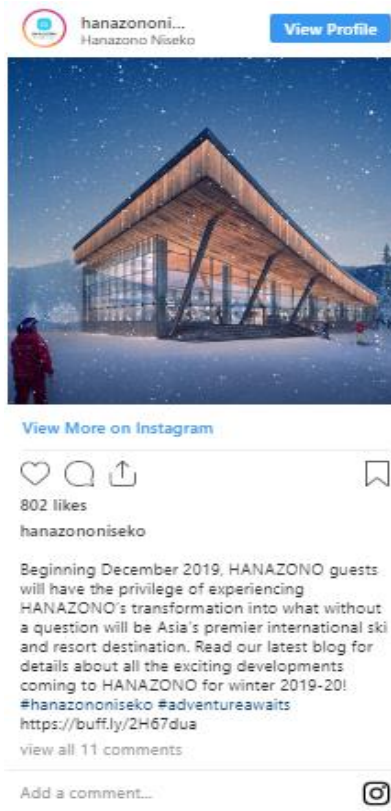
Directly west of Hirafu, Niseko Village has a collection of luxury ski-in, ski-out properties, including family-friendly Hilton Niseko Village and The Green Leaf, the ultraluxe Kasara town

houses and newly-launched Hinode Hills. A shopping village with restaurants, cafes and boutiques complete this elegant ski resort.

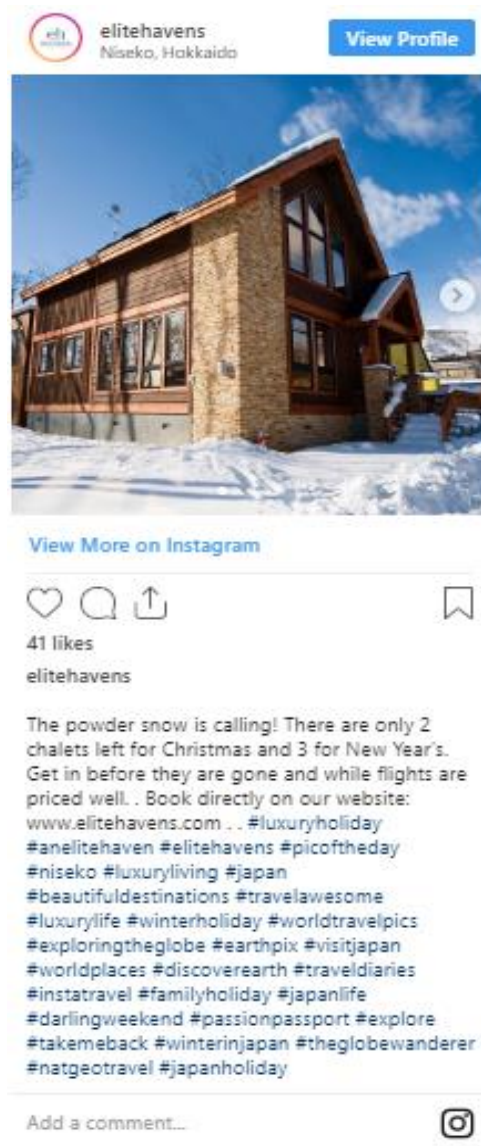


For an authentic, small-town vibe, Annupuri is the place to be. There, Annupuri Garden provides elegant cocoons with bespoke concierge services to relax within, while surrounded by a tranquil winter wonderland. There are a smattering of pensions and chalets, such as Niseko Negula which offers a quainter experience.

On the other side of the mountain, northeast-facing Hanazono is the quietest of the resorts. There's a mere handful of stand-alone chalets and inns here, but the sleek Park Hyatt Niseko Hanazono opens this month. The much-anticipated property is ski-in, ski-out and will offer multiple restaurants and ski valet serving the 100 guest rooms and 80 residences.

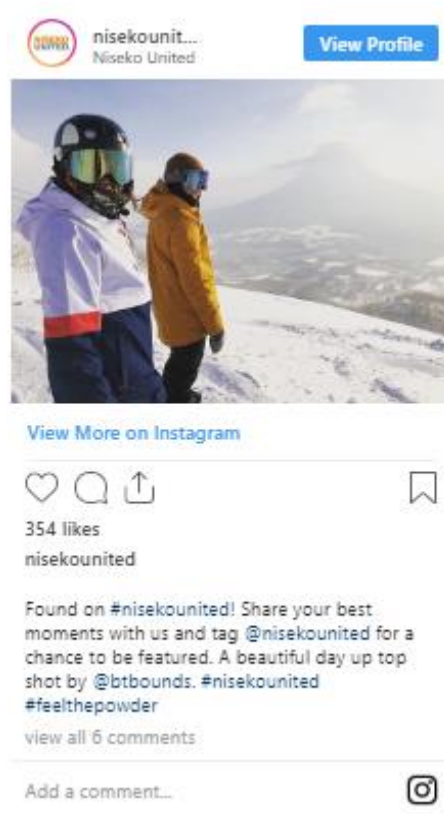


If you must stay in Hirafu, Elite Havens has an excellent selection of luxury self-catering chalets in Lower Hirafu, with complimentary driver service to take you to and from the mountain base.

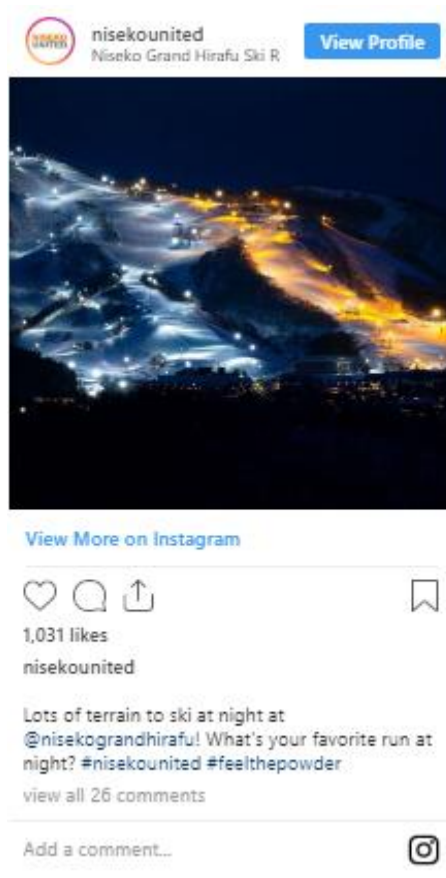


Whichever you choose, it's easy to explore all four ski areas of the mountain by traversing the mountain top.

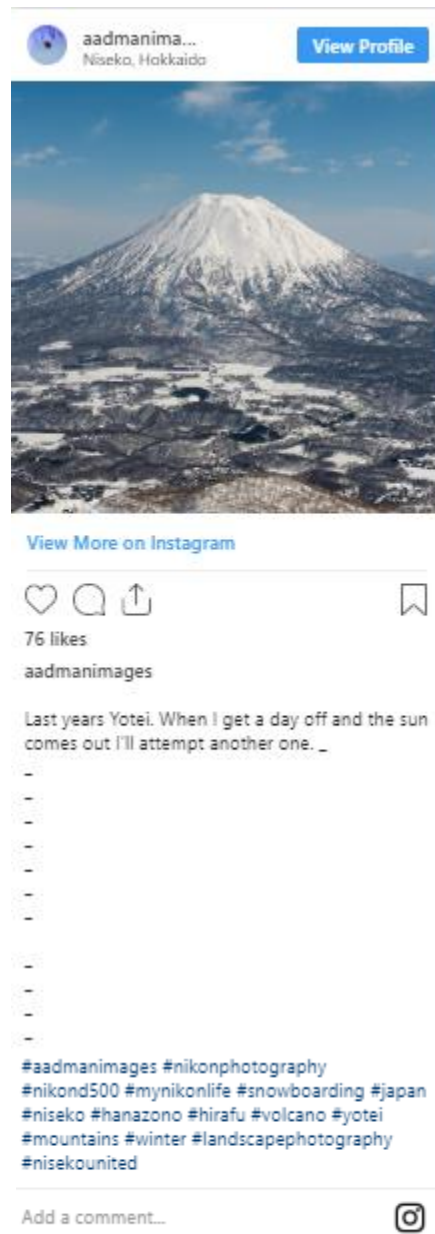
3. Shake up your slope schedule



The generic formula: everyone is out on the slopes post breakfast to noon, then after lunch till 4pm, so to experience the best of the mountain (especially after a night of heavy snowfall), go out earlier in the morning, pause for brunch, then hit the slopes again come lunchtime.

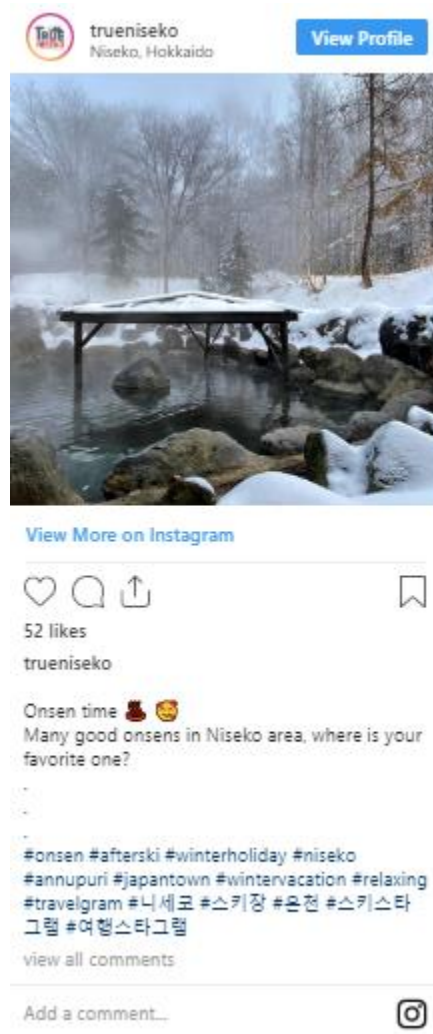


Niseko also has the largest night skiing areas in Japan, so take back the slopes at twilight when others have adjourned to the bars and restaurants.

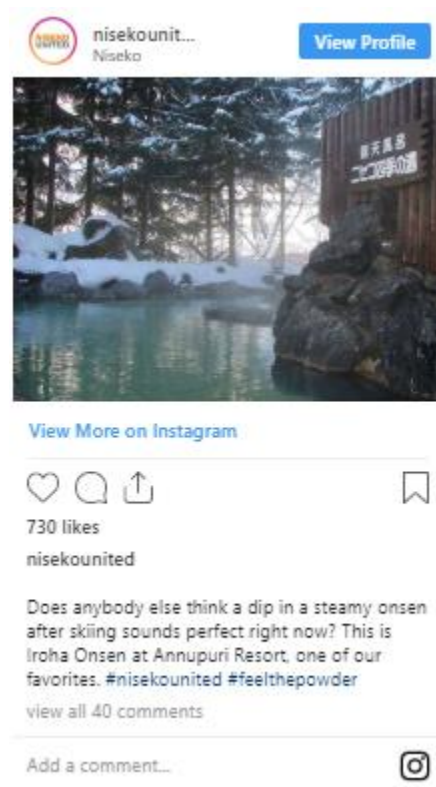


East to west: Hanazono is known for its wide intermediate runs, tree skiing and deep powder bowls; Hirafu has slopes for every level of skier and snowboarder but they do get mighty packed in peak season; Niseko Village has exciting, narrower runs with quirky names such as Snorkel (snow so deep you need a ...) and Miso Shiru; Annupuri's beautiful, gentle runs with no crowds are perfect for beginners, while skiing off the back bowl at the mountain peak is a thrilling challenge for expert powderhounds.

4. Onsen après



To do the Japanese alpine experience authentically is to embrace the onsen. Indoor or outdoor onsen are fed by geothermal mountain springs, therapeutic because of their heat and mineral content. The best time to go is between 2pm to 4pm, and again to fully relax you before bedtime. To partake, one sheds all clothing, then showers in a communal space before sinking into the baths and letting the 40 degrees Celsius to 42 degrees Celsius waters work their magic. Onsen are accessible at a fee in each ski area, and most higher-end stays have dedicated ones for guests. Soaking in silence in an outdoor rock pool, as big fat snowflakes fall around you is one of the most magical, calming experiences to be had. Observe the rules: no clothes, no noise and no phones.



For a more traditional après, watering holes serving everything from craft beers to natural wine and classic cocktails are available.

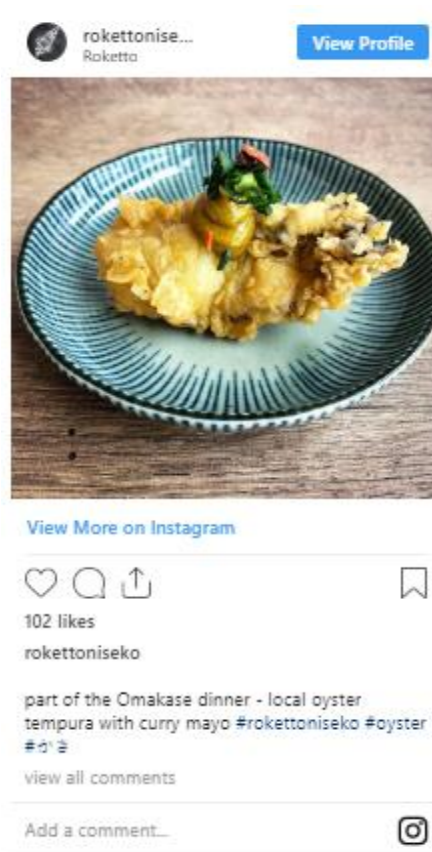
5. Eschew the must-go restaurants



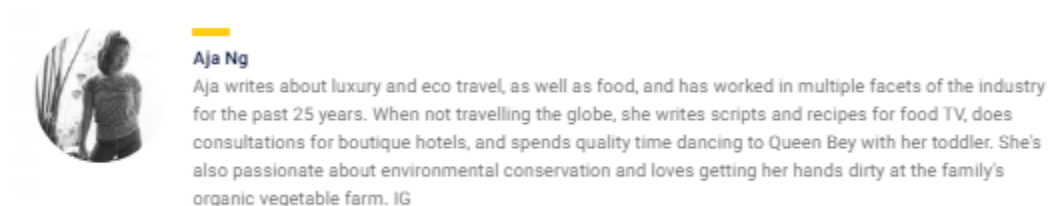
Thanks to the fertile volcanic soil, Hokkaido's fruit, vegetables and dairy products are stellar, and the seafood pulled up from the cold waters surrounding the island is some of the best in the world. Michelin-starred restaurants and family-run izakayas are a huge part of its attraction, but that does not mean you can only get good food in restaurants that need to be booked a minimum of three months in advance.



In Annupuri, Luckyfingers is a modern izakaya with a mix of Japanese and western dishes and the best fresh bean curd in the world. Over in Niseko Village, The Crab Shack's amazing shabu-shabu hotpots teem with local herb-grazed Makkari pork or king crab warm the belly.



In Hirafu, chef Willin Low of Singapore’s Michelin-starred Wild Rocket operates the winter-only Roketto, where he’s just begun omakase dinners for 2020. Out in the wilderness of Hanazono, the wonderful Somoza Gallery offers an incredibly serene Italian-Japanese dining experience surrounded by snow blanketed birch trees. Finally, venturing into the streets of Kutchan town, hole-in-the-wall spots such as Nakama Ramen and Yakitori Torimatsu offer authentic meals off the beaten track.



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