

WAIST DEEP adventure

HELI-YEAH!

A pioneering new heli-ski operation just outside Niseko has opened up some incredible new terrain to visitors chasing the ultimate high.



TORQUE : VAL 3



MIKE RICHARDS



GLEN CLAYDON / JORDY SHEPHERD

PIC GLEN CLAYDON

WE'RE SEATED FOUR ABREAST ON WHAT FEELS LIKE A COUCH FLOATING INSIDE A GIANT GOLDFISH BOWL.

High above the Rusutsu Resort Hotel, the curved windows framing the ordered and symmetrical farmhouses, fields and fences of Kyogoku and Kimobetsu laid out below us like a gallery of Mondrian paintings. The corrugated roofs bringing colour to the monochrome meadows.

But we're not on the amusement park Ferris wheel, slowly going nowhere. We're airborne. Ascending. We corkscrew around the peak. With our excitement and anticipation we're looking at all the possible lines with our whole bodies.

Directly in front of us our pilot Inada-san is an oasis of calm scanning the horizon, imperceptible movements manoeuvring the machine. A stake in the summit signals our landing zone and Inada-san sets us down as softly as the snow that falls here.

We remember our landing training. Undo seatbelt; clip back together; slide along the seat to the door; step out of the helicopter single file; head down, hunker down beside the skis as the guide unloads our skis, poles and snowboards.

Hisetsu – flying snow. The roar of the rotors. The helicopter rises, the surface snow swirling all around us, hovers momentarily then banks and disappears below the top of the mountain. Silence. Smiles. Standing on the summit of Shiribetsu-dake.

Sugoi – awesome. *Subarashi* – fantastic.

If you've been lucky enough to stand on Rusutsu's East Mountain on a clear day and taken in the majestic panorama of the Niseko Range, Mt Yotei, and Rusutsu's West Mountain, your eyes will have come to rest on the open bowl and gullies of Shiribetsu-dake. This peak has been a long-standing touring itinerary for locals and most recently skiers and snowboarders on guided excursions. But the two-hour hike to the top keeps it untracked for most of the winter.

The ridge line to the Shiribetsu-dake summit stretches from the boundary rope of Rusutsu's West Mountain and there isn't a skier or snowboarder who hasn't looked up and wondered what it would be like to make turns on this magnificent peak.

Thanks to the Hokkaido Backcountry Club (HBC) you no longer have to wonder. Heli-skiing has come to the Shiribetsu region of Southwest Hokkaido, and Shiribetsu-dake is the first drop zone of what HBC hopes will be a network of heli, snowmobile and snowcat-accessed peaks offering totally unique skiing experiences."



PICS JORDY SHEPHERD

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HAJIME

Where it all started

Hokkaido Backcountry Club is the ambitious project of Canadian co-owner of Black Diamond Tours, Clayton Kernaghan, and Japanese mainland native Makoto Koizumi. Although not the first heli-ski operation in Hokkaido, it's the only one to have taken up the challenge in recent years.

"To put our operation in perspective, it may be the smallest heli-skiing operation in the world, but the largest in Japan," Clayton says. "An Olympic skier began Hokkaido's first heli-ski operation in the 1980s but a recession and rising costs meant he had to give it up in 2003. We're now using world-class guides and best practices to pioneer modern mechanised skiing in Hokkaido."

Clayton first came to Hokkaido as an English language instructor, calling the Olympic mountain Sapporo Teine his home hill for seven years. In 2003 he quit a stable job to fulfil a long-held dream. He bought a lodge in Niseko Village with his wife Ayami and set up Black Diamond Lodge and Tours.

Rather than joining the winter adventure industry on Hokkaido, Clayton has spearheaded it. Black Diamond Tours has guided the stars of the ski and snowboard world to the best that Hokkaido has to offer, then taken recreational skiers and snowboarders to those same areas. Each season they've expanded their business and geographical horizons. From day tours in and around the Niseko Resort area, they now offer multi-day trips all over Hokkaido.

Makoto-san meanwhile had been running a heli-ski operation catering to mainly Japanese clientele in Hakuba on the main island of Honshu. He was looking to move the venture to Hokkaido at the same time Clayton was looking at getting something going and they were put in touch.

"Makoto is the real driving force behind the operation and has put everything on the line to get it going," says Clayton. "It was never my dream to start a heli operation in Japan and from all accounts I thought it would be impossible. But with Makoto's samurai spirit, I feel like anything is possible again. Respect. He's put his life and soul into the operation over several years and is beating down the doors to make headway."



Commercial heli-skiing began in the late 1950s when Bengt "Binks" Sandahl started guiding skiers out of Alaska's Alyeska Resort. Heli-skiing operations based at or near ski resorts typically offer "Sunday stroll" powder skiing and boarding on glorified green slopes.

With an abundance of those sort of conditions and terrain in and around Niseko, it would have been easy for HBC to do the same. But Shiribetsu-dake is far from a Sunday stroll. So much so, that when the Warren Miller film crew returned to Hokkaido to film a segment for their 2014 ski and snowboard movie 'No Turning Back', their first port of call was the Hokkaido Backcountry Club and Shiribetsu-dake.

Why Shiribetsu-dake? "It's a short flight and van ride from Niseko Village to the staging area in Kimobetsu and at the moment it's the only mountain that we have been able to gain permission to use in six years of trying in earnest," Clayton says. "Fortunately Shiribetsu-dake is owned by the local town municipality, as opposed to the provincial level government, which has meant less bureaucracy and freer forward progress.

"It just happens to have some steep and interesting terrain with a great staging area that can hold its weight at a world-class level. Unfortunately the terrain doesn't cater to the novice skier or boarder, something we've recognised and are working on.

"From the 1109m summit our runs vary between 550m to 850m vertical, with most runs averaging 650m. On a six-run day you'll get a minimum of 3000m vertical guaranteed, but will most likely end up skiing over 4000m on slopes ranging between 30 and 40 degrees."



MIYUKIBARE

Beautiful morning after heavy snow

After heavy snowfall overnight the day broke calm and clear, and after an early breakfast I made my way to HBC HQ. Over coffee Clayton introduced me to lead guide Jordy Shepherd and tail guide Pablo Arsenault.

Jordy is an internationally certified guide (IMFGA, ACMG) who has more than 20 years heli-ski guiding experience in Canada, most notably Eagle Pass Heli Ski.

Pablo is a Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) Level II certified avalanche forecaster most recently based at Castle Mountain Resort in Alberta and Mustang Powder Cat Skiing, British Columbia.

On the heli trip with me this day were

seasoned skiers Johnnie from England, Michael from Switzerland, and Angus from Australia. Rounding out the group were local photographer Glen Claydon, and Pippy and Kondo-san from HBC sponsor NISADE.

We completed the paperwork to become members of HBC, got weighed to determine the payload, and were fitted with avalanche transceivers. Jordy gave a well-structured and easily understood briefing highlighting the snow and helicopter safety procedures which would minimise our risk in the mountains. This concise but comprehensive demonstration covered how to use the avalanche transceiver to locate a member

of the group if they became buried in an avalanche, the most efficient snow probing and shovelling techniques, and how to get in and out of the chopper safely and effortlessly.

"Safety is our absolute number-one concern," Pablo tells me. "Our Astar helicopter undergoes some of the strictest safety measures and routine maintenance in the world. The yearly inspection in Japan takes almost 30 days to complete. Our pilot Inada-san has over six years training with the Japanese Coast Guard and is the most experienced heli-skiing pilot in Japan."

After a simulated rescue we geared up for the flight to the goods.

ORIRU JIKAN

Time to take the drop

The wind has sculpted the snow into layer upon layer of what feels like polystyrene sheets, scratchy and squeaky under my skis. For safety we pair up and drop in one at a time, my skis barely breaking through the snow surface. But as I drop down the face I can feel the snow softening, slowly welcoming me in, the promise of powder. We regroup several times down the first run, Jordy and Pablo explaining the terrain and route ahead, recommending the best lines.

This is a very relaxed heli-skiing experience compared with ones I've done in British Columbia, Canada and New Zealand's South Island which feel more like military operations with little time to savour the surroundings and relax into the riding. The HBC experience is laid back while being no less safe nor professional.

Our first run finishes in a meadow at the foot of the mountain and we take turns being heli-shuttled back to the summit for more.

Not only are there 360 degree views from the summit, but also 360 degrees of skiing options. With our muscles warmed and a better feel for the terrain and snow conditions, we move around the mountain to find lines that have been less wind affected, holding deeper, lighter powder.

Looking down I pick my line. Telling myself to relax and breathe, I let my skis follow the contours of the face, which time, weather and snow has carved, gouged and shaped into natural half pipes. I watch Johnnie, Michael, Angus, Pippy, Kondo and Glen playing in the pipe and slaloming through the trees. Shouts and laughter fill the forest. The second and third runs pass in a blissful rush, the powder getting softer and deeper each turn.

At the end of our third run we continue through the forest past the pick-up zone, ending up beside Route 276 across the road from our lunchtime rendezvous, Fukuro no Mori. This unique structure is home to a restaurant serving hearty regional Italian pasta dishes and artisan wood-fired pizza. The restaurant is warm and welcoming and the pizza hits the spot. We finish with coffee and cake, and then walk the 100m or so back to the take-off point for the afternoon runs.



It snowed yesterday and it looks like it will snow later. The prodigious volumes of snow this part of Hokkaido receives is both a blessing and a curse. During heavy snowfall the helicopter could be grounded for a day or two, but this is massively outweighed by the quality, quantity and consistency of snow that falls. With plentiful and consistent top ups, the choice of line is not governed by the guides farming the slopes trying to preserve the powder for tomorrow's guests, a practice heli-skiing operations in other parts of the world are often forced to employ.

Jordy leads us to a different part of the mountain for the afternoon and just when you think it can't get any better, it does. With three runs under our belts, the muscles rested, and the body rejuvenated, we hit a steeper zone with wider gullies and knee-to-waist-deep powder from top to bottom. Then we hit it again. And again.

The pace and progression of the day has been perfect. Our confidence is high, the choice of line more assured and the execution smoother. I watch the rest of the group immersed in dry, light powder the snow streaming off the backs of their skis and boards like contrails off an aeroplane, Mt Yotei as their backdrop.

Halfway down the gully, time seems to slow. I'm in the snow, enveloped, the surface crystals glistening around me. I'm moving freely, effortlessly, the snow rising up my body like a wave. I cut back off the side, find the centre of the gully and the wave crashes against my chest, over my shoulders, over my head. Breathe in, and hold, the wave crashing, through, breathe out, breathe in. The snow flying all around me.



"I watch the rest of the group immersed in dry, light powder; the snow streaming off the backs of their skis and boards like contrails off an aeroplane."

SHOURAI

The future for HBC and Niseko heli-skiing

In their first season Jordy and Pablo guided guests from Asia, Australia, North America and Europe, flying 22 full and/or half days in the five weeks of operation (13 February to 20 March, 2014).

And it wasn't the sole preserve of 30-to-50-year-old males. A group of family and friends from Hong Kong took home the record for most runs skied in a day, while another group of Singaporean beginners took the record for longest single run, sideslipping their way down in four hours!

In 2015 HBC will be returning with the "3-Run Big Mountain Intro" and "7-Run Big Mountain Tour" on Shiribetsu-dake.

They've also partnered with a lodge on picturesque Lake Toya to offer a unique three-night accommodation/heli-ski package. For ¥376,000 per person all inclusive, a group can secure 10 heli-accessed guided runs plus unlimited guided resort skiing, touring, back-up cat-skiing or snowmobiling.

"Our biggest challenge last season was what to do while waiting for the weather to clear," Clayton says. "This season, in addition to Rusutsu resort guiding, we're introducing back-up cat skiing on an exclusive mountain directly adjacent to Mt Rusutsu Isola".

After a number of exploratory flights all over South West Hokkaido at the end of last season, one of the areas HBC is looking to access is the Kariba Mountainous District, a chain of peaks rising out of the fishing village of Shimamaki about 50km due west of Niseko on the Sea of Japan coastline. This is steep, above tree line, alpine terrain. And an abundance of it. Mt Kariba tops out at 1520m and the area offers descents of over 1000m vertical, with some of the lines dropping right down to the shoreline, Clayton says.

"This southwest corner of Hokkaido has the potential to be one of the world's best mechanised-skiing destinations."

Mike 'Mike Pow' Richards is a Welsh ski instructor who's skied and taught on five continents. He's made the annual winter migration to Hokkaido since 2006 because he can't get enough of the powder, the food, the people, the culture and the lifestyle.



HAKKODA

AWAKEN YOUR SPIRIT

Aomori's Deep Powder Paradise

Tokyo

Tokyo Sta.	Haneda Airport
Tohoku Shinkansen (Bullet Train)	Japan Airlines (JAL)
3 Hours	1 Hour 15 Min
Shin-Aomori Sta.	
Bus (JR Bus Tohoku)	Aomori Airport
50 Min	35 Min
Taxi	

Hakkoda Ropeway

Take the 101-person gondola up to the summit where you'll begin your adventure at an elevation of 1,320m from an appropriately frost-covered ropeway station.

Access from **Niseko**: Via the JR train or domestic airline

Access from **Hakuba**: Via the Nagano and Tohoku Shinkansen

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