



Kamui encourages freeride off-trail... we like that © Patrick Fux

safari time in hokkaido

"LOOKS GOODO!" SAYS SEIJI, OUR JAPANESE GUIDE. "GOODO IS AN UNDERSTATEMENT" MY REPLY ROLLS BACK, TO A BIG SMILE. WE ARE AIRBORNE ON THE OTHERWISE EMPTY MT KURODAKE TRAM, MY NECK STRAINING TRYING TO SEE THE PEAK OUT THE WINDOW. NEVER HAVE MY CHEEKS SMILED SO MUCH FROM ONE VIEW ..

Within two minutes of being airborne in the tram, which runs from right beside the road, I have this stupid grin that can't be wiped off my face. One of the most beautiful alpine surrounds on offer and we're gonna ski it! To our surprise we are the only ones there with 40 centimetres of fresh on the deck, one word for Mt Kurodake... Sugoi! (Japanese for mint, sweet, sick and awesome all blended into one word).

Kurodake is an amazing two lift only ski area in the middle of Central Hokkaido's Daisetsuzan National Park, the lifts being one big, long cable car (tram for the yanks) and a little double chair above it that gets you to 1520m, which is high for Hokkaido and gateway to some incredible terrain. Some hiking and we are gaining altitude towards the peak, a few too many kanpai's (toasts) from the previous evening taking their toll. At last Seiji decides we are on the right aspect to dig a snow pit to check stability and a chance for everyone to take a rest. With good snow stability and much delight the peak is bagged, photos taken, water skulled. Now for the best part, below us is untracked untouched seamless powder with blue skies above, everyone has got the giggles bad. Once at the bottom the pure satisfaction of a long powder run bridges language barriers with high touches all round (Japan's high five) and loud zoo-like noises of joy echo around the trees.

This NOASC Safari trip, which started with a few days in Niseko, was just getting better and better. The day before we had hit Kamui Ski Links, a 'wee gem' of a mountain with awesome lift accessed backcountry only ten steps from the top of the gondola. This is Asahikawa city's main ski field, but it's quite common for Hokkaido fields like Kamui to have no queues and no crowds, it's like having your own ski field. Asahikawa is only 20 minutes from Kamui and our centrally located base for the northern ski areas.

On the way back to Asahikawa we stopped off for a spot of dog sledding. This is not your usual sit on the sled and go for a short ride. This is a hands on, on your own sledding experience. On arrival we're greeted by 40 odd hyped up ready to run hounds, it's quite an excitable scene. I did notice a conveniently placed bulldozer with a thick rope attached to a sled with a rather tiny woman from Singapore looking a little nervous as she had eight dogs yanking like

mad ready for action. Dan the owner yells to me as he points to a distant tree line, "When you see my skidoo go round the corner pull the release cord!" Probably one of the funniest things I've ever seen, I never realised how quick these dogs are off the mark. A truly hands on brilliant experience.

Then it was back to the big smoke and a wander into the food district. This is the place to try something new or an all you can eat (Tabehodai) and (Nomihodai) all you can drink for two hours, plenty of kanpai's will be thrown down after a day of powder turns. The snow continued all night and next day greeted us with bluebird skies for our last challenge, Ashidake, another beautiful tram plus hike accessed mountain. This steaming active volcano is what daydreams are for, big peak, great fall line skiing with a brilliant variety of alpine runs that merge into tree runs. The bridge you ski across at the bottom even had an old Japanese man catching trout in a near frozen river right next to where you un-clip for the lift.

The bus brakes quickly, waking the dozing passengers - a few Sika deer have jumped off the high roadside snow banks right in front of us then chased for a bit before melting back into the landscape. Soon after, the bus turns into a near vacant car park in the middle of nowhere. "Onsen, grab your towel!" comes the command, and off down a snowy path we walk through the woods. Around a corner and we are there, at a beautiful natural onsen on the side of a hill. It's off with the kit and I hop in then out again as quick as I went in, much to the humour of the locals. Once adjusted to the temperature I savor a cold beer and soak in the tranquility. A magic spot for sure.

The people of Japan are friendly and welcoming, the culture and the food an amazing experience, but the snow is what you're here for, deep, light and dry powder. On a ski safari, yes, you will get face shots and lots of them.

For someone trying to get the most out of a short ski holiday, but experience the best of Hokkaido's ski fields and see more of the country without the stress of driving on Japan's winter roads, this is an amazing adventure and chance to experience real Japan with people who know it best.

— Scott Redwood

TICKET-2-SLIDE CENTRAL HOKKAIDO

KURODAKE
TERRAIN summit 1520m, 850m vertical LIFTS 2, big cable car & double chair
KAMUI SKI LINKS
TERRAIN summit 751m, 600m vertical ▶ 20% ▶ 40% ▶ 40% LIFTS 5,1 gondola
ASAHIDAKE ROPEWAY TERRAIN summit 1600m (hike to 2300m), 500m vertical ▶ 50% ▶ 50% LIFTS 1, runs hourly
WHO? 8 night/9 day Hokkaido Safari Trips are scheduled for Jan 15 - 23, Feb 12 - 20 & March 15 - 23 in 2010, ¥245000 per person, anytime for private groups of 10 or more. **Early Bird 5% discount book by 31 Aug** More at noasc.com

A DRIVE YOUR OWN DOG SLEIGH TRACK & OUTDOOR FREE ONSENS ARE PART OF THE FUN



Kurodake is seriously good © noasc.com



Seiji check the snow at Kurodake © noasc.com



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SNOW PIT CHECKS ARE AN ESSENTIAL SKILL IN BACK COUNTRY THAT GETS SO MUCH SNOW



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