

Winter in Japan—

Warm feelings for snow



Winters in Japan can be harsh. On Hokkaido and the main island of Honshu, especially the Japan Sea side, heavy snowfalls are common. In Japan, many ways have been found to make the most of the season.



In Hokkaido and Tohoku, several festivals began in the mid-twentieth century which capitalise on this bounty of snow and show us how beautiful snow can be.

Today, Sapporo Snow Festival is one of the most famous of all Japan's festivals, drawing visitors from around the country and from overseas. Held in early February each year, it first took place in 1950 when local junior and senior high school students created snow sculptures in Oodori Park in the centre of Sapporo, Hokkaido's capital. The sculptures soon grew larger in scale, often depicting famous buildings. Today there are multiple sites and visitors can also marvel at ice sculptures. All show great detail and skill (c).

While Sapporo's might be the most well known, there are other winter festivals that are regular events. The Asahikawa Winter Festival for example is also in Hokkaido and it claimed the Guinness world record for the largest snow sculpture. While spectacular sculptures are a feature of this festival, simple *yukidaruma* at Asahikawa above (a) show you how expressive you can be when making your own snowman.



beautiful candle-lit lanterns and lamps which are actually made of snow (f).

There are many more winter festivals to discover in Japan.

Over the last decade or so, Japan's ski fields have been a popular destination for Australian skiers during the southern summer. There are ski fields throughout the north with Hokkaido's Niseko now a well known name among aficionados. For those with less time, the ski resorts of Nagano (e) with their easy access from Tokyo have long been a popular weekend getaway with Japanese living around Tokyo .

Many ski fields have *onsen*, traditional hot springs, nearby. There is nothing nicer than being in an outdoor *onsen* surrounded by snow—even better when snow falls gently. This is something the monkeys in Japan have also figured out. Here monkeys relax in the Nagano town of Yamanouchi (d).

The amount of snow that builds up in some remote mountain areas can cut off access for months and some mountain roads close for the winter. The spring opening of the Alpine Route through the majestic Japan alps has become a favourite with tourists. They and their buses are dwarfed by metres-high walls of packed snow (b). Standing in the man-made valley, you feel at once the power of nature and of human ingenuity to live in this environment.



Snow and ice sculptures are often lit up at night, and fireworks are also a feature. In Yamagata, part of Tohoku, the Yuki-toro Matsuri at Yonezawa City features

Winter festivals and events www.jnto.org.au/tips_detail.php?id=8 **Sapporo Snow Festival** www.snowfes.com/english/ **Asahikawa Winter Festival** <http://asahikawa-tourism.com>
Yonezawa Tourism www.yonezawa-kankou-navi.com/ **Ski Japan** www.jnto.org.au/5picks/ski_and_adventure/ **Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route** www.alpen-route.com/english/



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