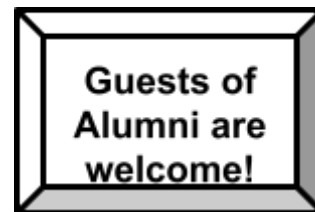


Backcountry Skiing in Western Hokkaido

Kimobetsu - Otaru, Hokkaido

January 18 - January 26, 2026



Features

- Incredible powder skiing in the Hokkaido backcountry, one of the world's deepest snowpacks
- 8 days/8 nights
- 1 - 5 miles of hiking each day with some lift-accessed powder
- Hiking and skinning elevations between 500 and 4,000 ft
- Ryokan (Japanese inn) and hotel accommodations included
- Opportunities to eat sushi, ramen, and other local cuisine
- Travel within Japan during trip is included once the trip begins

Cost: \$4,995

*includes pre- and post- trip lodging *does not include rental gear

Minimum Age: 18

Maximum Trip size: 12 participants
3 NOLS Instructors

Trip Description

Come and experience legendary Hokkaido powder with the epic backdrop of volcanoes and coastline. Although this part of Hokkaido is a popular ski destination, we'll leave behind the bustle of resorts and strap skins on our skis to access some of the best snow in the world. This is NOLS' most recent Japan trip and we are excited to roll it out to our Alumni audience. It showcases different areas and new terrain, any of our trips are great for someone looking for the quintessential Japan backcountry experience.

The trip is a vehicle-supported trip, with four-wheel drive vans that allow us enough space for everyone and our ski equipment. The group will base out of hotels, ryokans, or onsens for the entire trip (these are all different types of inns). We won't move lodging every night to ensure that we hit the best backcountry in the area for several days before moving on to fresh tracks.

We will begin with a one-day avalanche review to ensure that everyone is well versed in avalanche awareness and expectations while on the course. Next up is seven straight days of skiing. This is a lot of skiing in the backcountry and we recommend that you already have several days of skiing under your belt for the season. Our logistics have us on the move frequently so there is little chance for rest days. The terrain and difficulty of the days lend itself to experienced backcountry skiers who are strong - intermediate to expert - level downhill skiers.

The goal of this trip is to ski the best snow in one of Japan's most beautiful coastal regions. To do this, some days we'll take lifts to access the backcountry, while others we'll start hiking straight from the parking lot.

To start, you will travel to Rusutsu, Hokkaido for an orientation and dinner in the hotel at 7 p.m. the first night. There, your NOLS instructors will talk about things to expect and answer any questions.

The next day is dedicated to picking up rental equipment, checking our systems, and practicing avalanche training and awareness. After a late morning breakfast (to try and combat that jet lag), we'll meet at 9 a.m. to pack up the vans and start our day. We will check out rental equipment before starting the avalanche training and awareness review skills practice utilizing our transceivers. This is critical to ensure that we're all on the same page for expectations around avalanche safety and communication.

After our training, we'll have a tutorial on the traditional customs of onsen, a Japanese hot-spring bath, and then go for a relaxing soak at Goshiki before dinner at the onsen. We'll then leave the hectic town of Niseko and move our base to the more remote town of Kimobetsu.

Finally, after review and orientation to expectations of skiing and traveling in Japan, it's time to go skiing! The following seven days will be full of backcountry powder as we move towards the coastal port city of Otaru. We'll start with three days skiing on mountains like Rusutsu, Shiribetsu and Mount Yotei. This will be followed by two days on the Shakotan peninsula and finishing with two days of skiing near Otaru. During this time, we'll have the opportunity to eat at local restaurants, eat meals prepared by our group, and dine in a ryokan wearing classic *yukata* (an informal style of kimono that is often worn when hanging in a hotel, ryokan or onsen).

We'll finish the trip in Otaru, where we will have a closing dinner (and maybe even some karaoke. Yes, karaoke is a classic Japanese late-night pastime!). There are regular trains that leave to the airport from Otaru and instructors will return all rental equipment to Niseko.

Expect to leave this trip with a subtle understanding of Japanese culture, some "overhead" powder photos and a sense of camaraderie with your fellow participants.

As is common for any NOLS Expedition, there may be logistical mishaps or other wrinkles that will benefit from an extra dose of "expedition behavior" and tolerance for adversity. Part of the joy traveling in a different culture is learning how to move within it with good humor and grace.

Trip Environment

Western Hokkaido in January and February is considered one of the coldest areas in Japan, with frequent overnight lows of zero degrees Fahrenheit and temps during the day ranging between 5 and 15 degrees. It also averages one of the deepest overall snowfalls in the world. The group will spend an average of six hours a day in these conditions, skinning or skiing through the snow you came to Japan for.

But don't worry, if you run cold, we often wrap up some of our ski days with an optional soak in an onsen that's either nearby or in the group hotel. Onsens are commonly heated geothermally and the waters are said to have healing properties. The onsens we will be visiting are traditional in nature, which means they are divided into male and female bath houses and do not currently recognize gender fluidity. The local recommendation is to choose based on your outward presentation because Japanese culture focuses more on the comfort of others over a single person's identity. Your instructors are happy to help you negotiate this if you have questions or concerns. In the bath house it is expected that everyone cleans before bathing and then soaks in the nude. Additionally, there is a complicated history between onsens and people with tattoos (think Yakuza- the Japanese mob). More modern Japanese culture sees beyond this, but if you are someone with tattoos this is something to be aware of. If you would like to err on the side of caution, look into methods of coverage.

Every evening will be spent in a hotel, onsen, or ryokan in shared or dormitory-style rooms. Dinner will be eaten at different restaurants or hotels every night, so be prepared for a few nights out on the town.

NOLS Staff

Our staff are employees of NOLS, trained and certified accordingly. This means they maintain certifications in wilderness medicine and are trained to NOLS' high standards in risk management. They are senior staff at NOLS who have spent years working and teaching in backcountry environments all over the world. Additionally, our staff specializes in bringing together groups of strangers and building the group culture and camaraderie that makes NOLS trips great.

A Day in the Life

Most days begin with breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m. From there, we will usually allow an hour for everyone to eat and get ready for the ski day. The group will meet and then drive an hour or less to where we will ski for the day, or even start skinning right out our front door.

Ski days will last around six hours and sometimes include stops for lunch on the ski hill, while other days will entail us carrying our lunches for the day. Expect to skin most, if not all, of the day every day. We'll wrap up most ski days around 3 or 4 p.m. and then head back to the hotel, onsen, or ryokan. On transfer days, expect to finish skiing a little earlier so we can drive to our next destination immediately after.

Every evening we'll convene for dinner around 7 p.m. to eat out or have meals prepared in the hotel. Dining preferences will be taken into account when choosing where and what to eat.

Difficulty Scale

This trip is rated 5 out of 5 on our difficulty scale.



We use a difficulty scale to help participants evaluate if a trip is right for them. It considers probable weather conditions, physicality of activities, and food and accommodations. You don't need to be a honed athlete, but pre-trip work to improve your strength, flexibility and endurance, is highly encouraged to improve your enjoyment of the place. If you have specific questions regarding physical preparation and your readiness please reach out to the Alumni Trips Department.

Food on the trip

There will be plenty of food provided on the trip for everyone. We are happy to ensure that folks who have reasonable dietary needs and/or preferences are well taken care of throughout the entire trip. Listing those needs on your registration paperwork is critical for our success here.

If you would like to bring your own snacks along, that is highly encouraged. We all have treats that we enjoy and bringing something special is a great way to keep motivation high and not have to rely on the group's schedule for your munchies.

Of note, it is exceptionally difficult to be strictly Vegan in Japan and even somewhat difficult to be strict vegetarian due to a seafood heavy diet. Your Instructors will do their best to help navigate food options but if you maintain a strict vegan diet, this might not be the best trip for you.

Curriculum

This trip focuses on many traditional NOLS skills, competencies, and concepts including map reading, skiing, and group travel. The instructors will provide information necessary for the group to comfortably travel as well as optional topics as desired by participants. These could include natural history, local history, leadership, decision making, and team function, among other things. Outside of our avalanche class at the start of the trip, formal "classes" are few and mostly optional, but informal discussions are plentiful. Anticipate a required base level of group management and cohesion.

About Japan

Welcome to the Land of the Rising Sun. Japan is an island chain off the east coast of the continent of Asia, with the Sea of Japan to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. The country is made up of five islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku and Okinawa.

Japan has a deep and complicated history dating back well before its original foundation by Emperor Jimmu in 660 B.C. Since then, Japan went through a long succession of military dictators and feudal lords known as Shoguns and Daimyos before unifying under the Tokugawa Shogunate. Over the following 220 years, Japan practiced isolationism and barred foreigners from entering the country while keeping the Japanese inside its borders. This lasted until 1853 when Japan was again open to trade and commerce with the outside world under

the Meiji Imperial form of government. In 1947 after World War II, a new constitution was signed that currently governs the modern Japan we know today.

Hokkaido, for its part, was home to the native Ainu people for most of this time period. They often had turbulent relations with the Japanese shogunates who were viewed as using up limited island resources without leaving any for the Ainu themselves, who had been there for centuries. It wasn't until the early 1800s, when Japan began to fear the expansion of Russia to the north, that they placed adequate resources and representation in Hokkaido. This alleviated the plight of the Ainu but never totally settled the tensions.

Since then, Hokkaido's economy has relied primarily on fishing and farming. This has kept the overall population of the island low, even during Japan's immense population growth of the 1900's. The rest of Japan's economy, on the other hand, relies mostly on tech, automobiles, and free-market trading.

Skiing and snowboarding has a relatively young history in Japan, with many of the first ski areas popping up in the 1930s. Since then, the sport has really taken off and now you can find at least a small ski hill in almost every town you drive through in Hokkaido.

Expectations of Participants

The alumni trip atmosphere is more relaxed than a typical NOLS expedition. However, it's not a full-service vacation or guided experience. You'll have to participate, carry your load, and help out as needed. These expeditions are fun, but they still require self-reliance, self awareness, risk management, and sound decision making as we ski through remote backcountry where evacuation to medical facilities could take several hours. Like all NOLS courses, these expeditions emphasize hands-on learning and the application of new skills in a variety of situations.

All participants need to complete and submit application materials, including a medical history form. These forms highlight the intersection of your trip's anticipated physical rigor and your current health and fitness status. Your forthright and timely completion and submission of the forms sets you and your trip up for success in the outdoors.

Alumni trips allow electronics and alcohol (for those of legal age in the country of the trip). Many participants find that these luxuries can add to the trip experience and local flavor. Excessive alcohol consumption is not a part of the culture of Alumni trips.

Trip Itinerary

Jan 16	Travel from your home city will likely start this day or sooner. You will probably lose a day on travel and total travel times will take 1-2 calendar days.	
Jan 18	Trip orientation at 7 p.m. in the bar. Dinner at 8 p.m. in the hotel.	Lodging by NOLS: The Lobs

Jan 19	Equipment and Avy Review day. Breakfast is at 8 a.m. and then pack vans. After finalizing any last rental equipment and making a stop at 711 for lunch supplies, we'll drive to Goshiki where we will practice skills. Afterwards, we'll visit Goshiki Onsen where we will learn the traditions of <i>onsen</i> and soak in the hot pools. Dinner at onsen and then drive to Kimobetsu.	Lodging: The Lobs
Jan 20	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Depart for Rusutsu ski area after breakfast. Lunch will be at the ski area. Dinner at a local restaurant in Kimobetsu.	Lodging: The Lobs
Jan 21	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Depart for backcountry ski day on Yotei or Shiribetsu at 8 a.m. 711 lunch. After skiing we will go to Makkari Onsen for a soak and dinner.	Lodging: The Lobs
Jan 22	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Pack vans and then depart for backcountry ski day on Yotei or Shiribetsu. 711 lunch. After skiing we will drive to Shakotan and eat dinner en route.	Lodging: Hotel MEGA - Shakotan
Jan 23	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Depart for backcountry ski day on Shakotandake. 711 lunch. After skiing we will go to the Shakotan onsen and then have dinner at the hotel.	Lodging: Hotel MEGA - Shakotan
Jan 24	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Pack vans and then depart for backcountry ski day on Shakotandake. 711 lunch. After skiing we will drive to Otaru where we will have dinner out in the city.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito
Jan 25	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Depart for backcountry ski day near Kiroro or Kokusai. 711 lunch or lunch at ski area. After the ski day we will return to Otaru and then eat dinner out in the city.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito
Jan 26	Breakfast at 7 a.m. Depart for backcountry ski day near Kiroro or Kokusai. 711 lunch or lunch at ski area. After the ski day we will return to Otaru and then have our Closing Dinner out in the city.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito
Jan 27	Onward travel. Breakfast at 7 a.m.	

Trip Logistics

Getting to Furano:

Chitose International Airport (CTS) is the largest airport in Hokkaido and will have the most flight options.

Our recommendation for people with quick turnaround times: fly into New Chitose Airport on the morning or afternoon of the orientation and reserve a seat on the [Hokkaido Resort Liner](#). The bus ride is about 2 hours and you should plan on 90 minutes between landing and the bus departing. The website has a map of where to catch the bus. Take the bus to Rusutsu Resort

Hotel and Convention. From here it is a 10 minute taxi ride to The Lobs in Kimobetsu. Taxi drivers should be able to get you to this address:

163-7 Kimobetsu, Abuta District, Hokkaido 044-0201, Japan

For your return, we recommend taking the train the morning after the trip concludes from Otaru Station to Sapporo station and then transferring to the Rapid Airport train to New Chitose Station. Instructors will be sure to return any rental equipment back to Niseko so that you can focus on the travels ahead.

Lodging

Lodging throughout the trip will be in hotels and hotel-like establishments called onsens. The word onsen can describe a hot spring/bathing facility and is also used as a reference to a traditional inn that is situated around a hot spring. Some of these will be in shared rooms and some will be more bunk room style. For the smaller rooms on the trip we'll team you up in single gender rooms, unless we know that you're a partner with someone on the trip.

Personal Belongings

We'll be traveling with everything we bring, so we ask you to stick to the packing list with some extra space for purchases along the way, so that we preserve our vehicle space for transfer days.

Additionally, there will be opportunities to do laundry at the end of the trip at Hotel Torifito. In the gear list you will notice that we recommend multiple base layers as we can get quite sweaty when hiking and skiing, and you may want some clean options for later in the trip.

Rental Ski Gear

If you know that you plan to rent any equipment, it is recommended that you make plans as soon as possible to ensure you are able to rent equipment. Below are a couple of options with both delivery and pickup from local stores.

[Niseko Basecamp](#) has a location near Hirafu that offers a wide selection of premium backcountry skis and snowboards. We can stop by the location to pick up rental equipment on our way to Goshiki Onsen.

[Rising Sun Guides and Rentals](#) has a location near Hirafu that offers a wide selection of premium backcountry skis and snowboards. We can stop by the location to pick up rental equipment on our way to Goshiki Onsen.

Currency

In Japan, yen is king. We recommend always having cash on you as many stores and restaurants still don't accept cards—though that is changing.

Getting cash out of an ATM is pretty straightforward at a 7-Eleven ATM, which is the only convenience store ATM to work for international cards. The exchange rate is fair at these machines and you have plenty of opportunities to get money out if you like.

Tipping

In Japan tipping is not common practice and can sometimes be frowned upon. We recommend that you ask your instructors about tipping before doing so.

While tipping is common in the outdoor guiding culture, your NOLS Instructors are not driven to excellence by tips but rather a love for taking people outdoors. You are welcome to tip the Instructors if you choose, but many instructors are honored by [a donation in their name to the NOLS Annual Fund](#) which supports scholarships for future NOLS students.

Travel Insurance

Travel insurance is worth exploring in case unforeseen events cause you to change your plans or if NOLS has to cancel a trip for any reason. Check with your personal insurance carrier and credit card to understand what you already might have or check out cat70.com for a wide variety of options.

Carbon Footprint and Offset

Current estimates are that the Travel Industry accounts for ~8% of global emissions. This percentage includes everything from transportation to accommodation and shopping. NOLS recognizes that our business contributes to this problem but we do not have a comprehensive strategy at this point.

If you would like to offset part or all of the carbon emissions related to your Alumni trip, we recommend [South Pole](#). [Their calculator](#) can help easily calculate your footprint and choose a project to contribute to. [Here is a link to their calculator.](#)

Immunizations / Vaccinations / Travel medications

International travel poses special health considerations. NOLS strongly advises that all participants traveling to international locations carefully consider what vaccinations or inoculations are required, recommended, or suggested for their specific travel itinerary. Consulting with a physician, travel medicine specialist, or other healthcare professional is strongly advised.

Visa / Passport

Your passport must have **6 months of validity** from the time you enter Japan in order to be admitted into the country.

USA passported tourists entering for less than 90 days do not need an actual Visa, but you will pass through customs and have their passport stamped on arrival. They are free and last 90 days. For people with passports not from the U.S., make sure to check the necessary Visa requirements before booking your flight as they vary from country to country.

Electricity stuff

Electrical adapters are needed in Japan for most plugs that aren't the classic two-prong.

Trip Registration

The best way to register is through the trip information page on the nols.edu website. A non-refundable deposit secures your spot on the trip. If any issues arise, please call the NOLS Alumni Department at (800) 332-4280. Your enrollment is complete with receipt of your full tuition and your completed application forms; these are **due 60 days before the start of your trip**.

All participants are required to submit registration materials, including a medical form. These forms highlight the intersection of your trip's anticipated physical rigor and your current health and fitness status while also providing NOLS information about things like your dietary needs.

NOLS is not responsible for additional costs incurred by late arrivals or evacuations. Those expenses are the responsibility of trip participants and we recommend purchasing travel insurance to mitigate the impact of unforeseen circumstances.

Do not book travel greater than 60 days before the start of the trip unless you have confirmed with NOLS that the trip will run. On rare occasions, we do cancel trips due to low enrollment.

Cancellation and Transfer Policy

For your reference, here is the [Alumni Trips Cancellation and Transfer Policy](#). When enrolling on a trip, you will need to agree to this policy.

Your Gear List

This list focuses on the Skiing Portion of your course. These are guidelines to help you, but if you have layer systems that you prefer then please don't hesitate to bring them. Some of these items can be rented in Furano and are noted accordingly.

Upper Body Clothing

Equipment	Notes
Base layer (2-3)	Synthetic or wool long underwear style.
Mid Layer (1-2)	A light fleece or medium wool layer
Vest (optional)	Fleece or puffy vest to keep your core warm
Top insulating layer	A medium weight puffy layer
Ski or Snowboard Jacket	A sturdy, waterproof jacket shell with a hood— coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable.
T-shirt (2-3)	A lightweight synthetic or merino wool t-shirt
Sports Bra or Tank (2-3)	Synthetic sports bra or a synthetic sports tank are recommended
Warm hat	Synthetic or wool
Sun hat	Baseball cap or full brim

Gloves or mittens	One pair liner gloves and one pair ski gloves or mittens
Buff or Balaclava (1-2)	These are great to keep both your head and neck warm
Lower Body Clothing	
Midweight base layer (2-3)	Synthetic or wool long underwear style
Ski or Snowboard pants	Coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are best. Bib-style pants work great, side zips for breathability are a huge plus
Ski Socks (2-3)	Wool ski socks work best
Bathing suit	Needed at some natural onsens
Footwear	
Ski or Snowboard Boots	Though ski boot rental is possible, we strongly recommend you bring your own ski boots as it may save your feet the agony that sometimes comes with wearing new boots
Gaiters (optional)	Can help to keep your feet warmer
Boot warmers (optional)	Battery-charged inserts that keep your feet warmer throughout the day. Please have them installed in your boots before coming to Japan
Miscellaneous Personal Gear	
Equipment	Notes
Medium backpack - rentable	Must be big enough to carry personal items like water, food, clothing layers, and avy gear 20-30 Liters
Collapsible Shovel - rentable	Shovel used as part of your avy gear
Probe - rentable	Should be able to go deeper than a meter and a half
Transceiver - rentable	Worn throughout the day and transmits a signal of your location that is searchable by other transceivers. Tracker, Pieps and Ortovox are classic brands
Skis or Splitboard - rentable	An ideal size of ski is between 105 and 115 mm underfoot. Need to be mounted with touring bindings that are compatible with your ski boot Splitboards need to be mounted with touring bindings and compatible with the boot as well
Skins - rentable	Sized to your skis or splitboard and come with some sort of skin-saver that you can store them with
Trekking poles - rentable	Adjustable for skiers and collapsible for snowboarders, large baskets for better snow usage
Helmet - optional, though highly recommended.	A sturdy ski helmet that is breathable is recommended

Water bottles/hydration bladder	1-2 liter water bottles. The hoses on hydration bladders often freeze in the winter so we don't recommend them unless you insulate it
Lip balm (1-2)	SPF 15 or greater
Sunscreen	SPF 30 or greater
Sunglasses	Good-quality sunglasses with 100-percent UV protection
Headlamp	Bring extra batteries
Hand sanitizer	Valuable in the backcountry where hygiene facilities are scarce
Other Items	
Toiletries	Toothbrush, toothpaste, medications and eyewear - there will be shampoo and conditioner at all the places we stay, but feel free to bring that too if you use something special
Book or e-reader	Bring something fun to read
Camera	We would love to see your photos post-trip!
Casual clothes	Shirt/pants/skirt for dinner or hanging out around the town.
Rain boots	Tall waterproof boot will prove handy in deep snow and slush
Games	Cards or some other lightweight game to play with others
Travel adapter	If you need to plug things in
Cell phone - optional, though recommended.	Though your cellular provider may not offer service in Japan, it is still recommended that you bring your phone so that you can communicate easily with your instructors and the group. If you can, renting a data sim card is extremely easy and affordable. This way you can use WhatsApp and make calls using data instead of the network. Make sure to download WhatsApp to your phone free of charge before leaving your home country.