

BACKCOUNTRY SKIING IN HOKKAIDO JAPAN

Alumni Trip

Location: Kimobetsu - Otaru, Hokkaido, Japan

Dates: January 29 - February 6, 2027



Photo by Dirk Kramer

Course Features

- Incredible powder skiing in the Hokkaido backcountry, one of the world's deepest snowpacks
- Up to 10 miles of travel each day. Skinning uphill in the backcountry or lift served sidecountry
- Skinning elevation gains between 500 and 4,000 ft
- Hotel and lodge accommodations included
- Visits to local onsens (hot springs / bath houses)
- Opportunities to eat sushi, ramen, and other local cuisine
- Travel within Japan during trip is included once the trip begins
- 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 often leave behind the bustle of resorts and skin uphill to access some of the best snow in the world. The goal of this trip is to ski the best and safest off-piste snow in the region.

This course is designed for people who already have at least **intermediate to advanced backcountry (non-lift served) skiing experience** using alpine touring (AT) skis and boots. The terrain and difficulty of the days are appropriate for experienced backcountry skiers who are strong - intermediate to expert level- downhill skiers. Experience making efficient transitions from uphill skinning to downhill skiing will allow the group to stay comfortably warm and to make more turns. If you are new to backcountry skiing check out the NOLS [Introduction to Backcountry Ski Touring - Alumni](#) course. The intro trip would be an excellent primer for taking this trip in Japan.

Expect to leave this trip with some understanding of Japanese culture, some great powder photos and a sense of camaraderie with your fellow participants. This trip is the quintessential Japan backcountry experience.

A Day in the Life

Most days begin with breakfast between 7:00 and 8:00 am. We usually allow an hour for everyone to eat and get ready for the ski day. Each morning will start with instructors assessing the weather and snowpack stability. Where we actually ski each day is based on that assessment so the schedule is flexible. Some days we'll take lifts to access the backcountry, while others we will start hiking straight from the parking area.

After the morning assessment and meeting, the group will drive an hour or less to where we will ski for the day. 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 stay in hotels and lodges for the entire trip.

Ski days will last around six hours. We will pick up lunch supplies each day on our way to our tour locations. Expect to skin most, if not all of the day every day. We'll wrap up most ski days around 3:00 or 4:00 pm and head back to an onsen (natural hotspring) and our lodging. On transfer days, expect to finish skiing a little earlier so we can drive to our next destination immediately after.

Each evening we'll convene for dinner around 7:00 pm. We'll either eat out or have meals prepared at our lodging. Dining preferences will be taken into account when choosing where and what to eat.

Trip Itinerary

Date	Description	Lodging
Jan 27/28	Travel from your home city will likely start this day or sooner. You will probably lose a day on travel, so total travel times will take 1-2 calendar days.	
Jan 29	Meet in the lobby of the main hotel (near the bus drop-off point) at the Rusutsu Resort Hotel and Convention Center at 3:00pm . Look for the fun animatronic tree in the lobby. Anyone needing Rental Gear should go to the town of Niseko (via bus or taxi from Rusutsu Hotel) and rent gear prior to meeting (@3:00) at Rusutsu Resort Hotel. There are 2 rental shops in Niseko listed below under Rental Ski Gear. Instructors will shuttle everyone from Rusutsu to our lodging in Kimobetsu. Welcome dinner catered at The Lobs and orientation following dinner.	Lodging provided by NOLS: The Lobs
Jan 30	Breakfast is at 8:00 am. Pack the van and drive to Mount Yotei volcano. Practice with backcountry ski gear and avalanche safety equipment. Time permitting, we will take a ski run at the base of Mt. Yotei. Visit Kyogoku Onsen where we will learn the traditions of <i>onsen</i> and soak in the hot pools. Dinner at the onsen and then back to the hotel.	Lodging: The Lobs
Jan 31	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for Rusutsu or Niseko ski area for a day of resort skiing and perhaps some sidecountry touring from the resort. Soak at Goshiki Onsen. Dinner at a restaurant in Kimobetsu.	Lodging: The Lobs
Feb 1	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for backcountry ski day on Yotei or Shiribetsu. After skiing we will go to Makkari Onsen for a soak and ramen dinner.	Lodging: The Lobs
Feb 2	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for backcountry ski day on Yotei or Shiribetsu or Rusutu resort side-country. Travel to our next lodging on the Shakotan coast. Dinner en route.	Lodging: Hotel MEGA - Shakotan
Feb 3	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for a full backcountry ski day on Mount Shakotan (Shakotan-dake). After skiing we will go to a local onsen for a soak. Dinner at Hotel MEGA, prepared by a local fisherman with fresh catch.	Lodging: Hotel MEGA - Shakotan
Feb 4	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for backcountry ski day on Shakotan-dake. After skiing we'll drive to Otaru where we will have dinner out in the city.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito

Feb 5	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for backcountry ski options or Kiroro Ski Resort side-country.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito
Feb 6	Breakfast at 7:00 am. Depart for backcountry or side-country ski day near Kiroro or Kokusai Resort. After the ski day we will return to Otaru and have our final celebration dinner out in the city.	Lodging: Hotel Torifito
Feb 7	Departure day. Breakfast at the hotel. Plan your travel onward today.	

Difficulty Scale



This trip is rated 5 out of 5 on our difficulty scale. The challenge of this trip is the hard physical work everyday of skinning uphill, and powder skiing downhill. There are long days and lots of elevation gain.

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.

Trip Environment

Western Hokkaido in January and February is considered one of the coldest areas in Japan, with frequent overnight lows of 5-14 degrees Fahrenheit and temperatures during the day ranging between 15 and 27 degrees Fahrenheit. It also averages one of the deepest overall snowfalls in the world.

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). As a result, most onsens in this region of Hokkaido have a very strict “no tattoo” policy. Some onsens even monitor for tattoos that have been covered. If a participant has any visible tattoos, they may have to hang out in the comfortable lobby while the group bathes.

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 opened 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 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 hoarding 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 spike in population growth during the 1900s. 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 taken off and you can find at least a small ski hill in almost every town you drive through in Hokkaido.

Food on the Trip

Each day, on our way to skiing, we will stop and pick up lunch food and snacks. The convenience stores in Japan offer an amazing array of fresh food and fun snack treats. Our breakfasts and dinners will provide plenty of food for everyone on the trip. 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.

Of note, it is exceptionally difficult to be strictly vegan in Japan and even somewhat difficult to be a 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.

Equipment 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 Niseko 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
Wind Shirt	A lightweight, uninsulated wind layer for skinning uphill
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	Breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are best. Insulated and bib-style pants may be too hot for uphill skinning. Side zips for breathability are a huge plus
Ski Socks (2-3)	Wool ski socks work best
Bathing suit	If you are inclined to dip into the chilly Sea of Japan

Footwear	
AT ski boots or snowboard boots	Though ski boot rental is possible, we strongly recommend you bring your own AT ski boots as it may save your feet the agony that sometimes comes with wearing new boots
Gaiters (optional)	Prefer ski pants with built-in gaiters
Foot warmers (optional)	Some folks like to use disposable foot warmers like HotHands or Grabber
Miscellaneous Personal Gear	
Equipment	Notes
Medium backpack(20-35 liters) rentable	Backcountry ski touring packs work best. Must be big enough to carry personal items like water, food, clothing layers. Need to have a separate compartment for avy rescue gear (shovel, probe)
Collapsible shovel - rentable	Shovel used as part of your avy gear
Probe - rentable	300 cm length is recommended
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 AT bindings that are compatible with your AT 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
Ski poles - rentable	Adjustable length for skiers and collapsible for snowboarders.
Helmet - optional, though highly recommended	A sturdy ski helmet that is breathable is recommended. Most ski packs have built-in helmet storage, used while climbing
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.

Trip Logistics

Getting to Kimobetsu:

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

Our recommendation is for people to fly into New Chitose Airport on the morning of or day before 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. Instructors will meet participants here and shuttle them to our lodging at The Lobs in Kimobetsu about one half hour away. Anyone needing rental ski gear should plan to arrive early enough to travel to Niseko to rent gear prior to meeting with the group.

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 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 VRBO style accommodations. Our first four nights will be at The Lobs where we will share a two-story building with six bedrooms, four

bathrooms, and a kitchen. Shared bedrooms here will have a combination of mattress and futon beds. At Hotel Mega (two nights) we will sleep on traditional tatami mats. Hotel Torifito (three nights) is a nice hotel in Otaru where we will have twin rooms with two beds per room. 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.

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. Participants are responsible for arranging rental gear pick-up in Niseko prior to meeting at the Rusutsu Hotel and Resort. Instructors can return gear for participants on the afternoon of departure. You will be charged rental for the return day.

[Niseko Basecamp](#) has a location outside Niseko, near Hirafu about 25 km from Rusutsu Resort, that offers a wide selection of premium backcountry skis and snowboards.

[Rising Sun Guides and Rentals](#) has a [location](#) outside Niseko, in Kabayama, about 25 km from Rusutsu Resort, that offers a wide selection of premium backcountry skis and snowboards.

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 7-Eleven. These are the only convenience stores that 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.

Electricity stuff

Japan uses [Types A and B](#) plugs, just like the USA, with two flat parallel pins, but operates at a lower 100V and usually lacks grounding, making it compatible with most two-prong US devices.

Travel Insurance

We will confirm whether your trip is running approximately 60 days prior to the start date. We strongly recommend purchasing airline tickets that are refundable or changeable and consider travel cancellation insurance in case unforeseen circumstances require you to adjust your plans, or if NOLS needs to cancel a trip for any reason.

We also encourage you to confirm any existing coverage with your personal insurance provider. Please consider purchasing additional travel medical insurance to help cover medical care or evacuation needs when traveling, whether domestically or internationally. Some examples are cat70.com or worldnomads.com for a wide variety of options. NOLS is not affiliated with any of these companies.

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.

**** Attention International European travelers - *Must read... Action Required***

ETA VISA REQUIRED for entering the UK- If your travels have you **entering or transiting** (passing through or laying over) **in the UK**, you will need to apply for and have an approved Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) to continue to your destination. Here's [the link](#) for how to apply through the UK government website. This is new since summer 2025.

ETIAS- At some point in the future Europe (EU) will be requiring an ETIAS travel authorization for most countries that are visa-exempt. This includes USA citizens. Once this system goes into effect, you will need to apply using this new system before traveling and pay a small fee for the authorization. Read updates [here](#).

Your passport **must be valid for at least 3–6 months after the conclusion of your trip**. For example, if your trip ends on **January 30**, your passport must be valid through **July 30**. Please also check the specific entry requirements for the country you are visiting.

Storage of 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. Vehicle space is limited. Efficient packing consists of one set of comfortable travel/in-town clothes and your ski gear.

NOLS Staff

Our staff are employees of NOLS and 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 specialize in bringing together groups of strangers and building the group culture and camaraderie that makes NOLS trips great.

Expectations of Participants

The alumni trip atmosphere is more relaxed than a typical NOLS course; however, it is not a guided trip; we call it an educational, participatory vacation. Alumni trips are self-reliant adventures through remote areas where evacuation to modern medical facilities can take several days. Throughout the course, you will travel outdoors, help to prepare some meals and care for yourself.

Different from our standard expeditions, alumni trips do allow electronics and alcohol for those that are of legal age in the country of the trip. We believe that these luxuries can add to a course experience and local flavor. Excessive alcohol consumption is not a part of the culture of alumni trips.

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. Formal "classes" are few and mostly optional, but informal discussions are plentiful. Anticipate a required base level of group management and cohesion.

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.

Immunizations / Vaccinations / Travel medications

International travel poses special health considerations. NOLS strongly advises all participants to carefully review the vaccinations and inoculations required or recommended for your specific trip. Regulations and recommendations can change, so consulting with a physician, travel medicine specialist, or other healthcare professional is highly recommended. The final decision about which inoculations you receive is your responsibility. There are many sources of information, and some of the information is contradictory. In addition to consulting with your healthcare provider, the following organizations provide useful information:

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control, either via the CDC International Travelers Hotline (404) 332-4559 or their [website](#).
- International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IMAT), 417 Center St, Lewiston, NY 14092, (716) 754-4883.
- Shorelands Travel Health [Online](#)

NOLS suggests specific inoculations based on guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). For more information, visit the CDC International Travelers website: www.cdc.gov/travel

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. 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**. If any issues arise, please call the NOLS Alumni Department at (800) 332-4280.

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.