Land of the Rising FUN

★ By John Bradley

Japan's got more going for it than **BRIGHT LIGHTS** and **TEMPLES**—namely, some of the **BEST PLACES** in the world to ski, climb, kayak, bike, and surf. Bow down to the **WILD, WILD EAST.**

I've just taken a 90-minute train ride southeast from Tokyo, past the industrial waterfront of Tokyo Bay

and the rice fields of Chiba prefecture to the quiet fishing village of Ichinomiya. A jumble of small shops, two-story apartment buildings, and narrow, yardless homes on the Pacific Ocean, Ichinomiya is also the gateway to Japan's most popular surf region. In fact, somewhere nearby, Kelly Slater and the rest of the world's best surfers are competing in the Quiksilver Pro Japan, the seventh of 11 events in the world championship tour.

Only I don't know exactly where. The late-summer contest has a mobile start—organizers check the conditions along a 19-mile stretch of coast each morning and set up where the waves are breaking best. There were buses earlier in the day to take spectators to the correct beach. But after a night of Tokyo barhopping, I've arrived more than an hour late and missed them. Resigned to taking a taxi, I walk across the street to the Faith Surf shop to ask for directions.

Faith Surf could have been lifted out of any suburban U.S. mall—500 square feet, a storefront window display of boards and shorts, requisite Hawaiian decorations throughout. The automatic glass door slides open at my touch, unleashing a blast of incense and air conditioning. Kenji Sakai, the store's 27-year-old owner, sits alone behind the counter, shaking his long, blond dreadlocks to the rhythm of Bunny Wailer. "The contest is kind of far," he says. "A taxi's going to be expensive." He scans his empty shop; every surfer in town is already at the beach. "I'll take you." I try to refuse. He insists. We exchange business cards in the formal two-handed Japanese way—with a slight bow, a thumb and forefinger grasping each top corner—then walk to his car, a blue Toyota Caldina encrusted with salt spray and smelling of cigarettes and mildewed beach towels. We speed south along the coast, reggae blaring.

The 20-minute drive passes at least half a dozen more surf shops, several island-themed bars and restaurants, and an English-language school—no Japanese town is complete without one—called Surf English. When we get to the contest site, Sakai drives through the packed parking lot and up to the sand. "Can you park here?" I ask. "I can't stay," he says. "I have to go back to work."

When you get lost in Japan, people help you. And not help like draw you a map; help like close their businesses for 45 minutes to save you cab fare. Things just work out here. The generosity is as dependable as the subways.

BUT IT WASN'T the kindness of strangers that kept me in Tokyo, where I worked as a newspaper reporter for six years. Nor was it the city's bewildering blend of ancient tradition and relentless modernization: shrines next door to cell-phone shops, tattooed surfers bowing to strangers. Those things played a part. But mostly it was that, though I lived in a metropolitan area of 40 million people, I could hit the beach after breakfast and be home in time for lunch. I could ride my bike from my apartment and within 45 minutes be alone in the hills west of the city, where the only sounds were my tires on the forest floor, the chirping of summer cicadas, and the homophonic rumble of the chanting monks whose temples I rode past.

The reason I stayed in Tokyo, and the reason I've come back to visit, is that the city sits within 90 minutes of enough adventure potential to give a Kiwi pause. Japan's 21,058 miles of coastline surround an island chain that is 75 percent mountainous and home to centuries-old forested singletrack, world-class rock climbing, volcanic hot springs, subtropical beaches, 714 ski resorts (the U.S. has 477), and the world's highest average snowfall. "Shrink seven western states into California and that's what you've got here," says 58-year-old American Bill Werlin, general manager of Patagonia Japan and a six-year resident of Yokohama. "This is the best-kept secret in the world."

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To a surprising degree, even the Japanese have been slow to catch on. In the face of the country's economic might and the solemnity of Japan Inc.'s corporate PR—"Our trains are on time, our cities are safe and clean; be sure and see the temples"—few people have realized there's a whole lot more fun to be had. When I told a chef at a sushi restaurant in the U.S. that I had learned to snowboard in Japan, the Osaka native was shocked to hear that his homeland had good snow, despite the fact that the 1998 Winter Olympics were held 200 miles northeast of his home city. "It's not that the Japanese don't want to do these things," says Werlin. "They love that idea of the individual against the elements—go anywhere in the world and there's some Japanese guy doing the toughest thing possible. But they think of these activities as being connected to destinations outside the country. We have to communicate to them, 'You can have that lifestyle here.'"

TO UNDERSTAND how this is possible, one must know something about the unwavering Japanese drive for authenticity. The Japanese have a word for *hobby,* but in practice the meaning is much closer to *obsession*. I once met a Tokyo housewife who fell in love with soccer after watching the Italian team Juventus play, and instead of supporting Japan's domestic soccer league, she took Italian and began traveling to Europe several times a year to attend Juventus matches. In July of last year, a Japanese psychiatric counselor broke the record for memorizing pi, reciting it to 83,431 decimal places. That almost doubled the previous record, also held by a Japanese man. And in May, Takao Arayama, 70, became the oldest person to summit Mount Everest, having bested by three days previous record holder Yuichiro Miura, the Japanese extreme-skiing pioneer who was the subject of the Oscar-winning 1975 documentary *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*.

When the Japanese apply this drive for the genuine experience to adventure sports, which invariably have roots elsewhere, they tend to go to the source. While a secretary in

Clockwise from top left, first ascent of a 5.13 on Jogasaki beach; "shower climbing" on the Myohkeikoku River; Andy Irons at the Quiksilver Pro Japan; peak-bagging Mount Yari.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TOPHER DONAHUE/AURORA; TAKEHARU WAKATSUKI/MONTBELL; STEVE ROBERTSON/GETTY; TADASHI KAJIYAMA/MONTBELL

Tokyo might spend a year saving for a rafting trip to New Zealand, she will tend to overlook the rivers in her own country. "My first year, people who would travel overseas to go rafting said, 'There's whitewater in Japan?'" says Australian Ross Findlay, whose success as an outfitter in northern Japan has made him a media darling across the country. "But by the second year, we had just taken off."

Once a sport does gain acceptance here, the growth can be staggering, as evidenced by the ski boom that swept Japan during the real-estate-fueled bubble economy of the eighties and nineties. More recently, surfing has enjoyed a Pokemon-like burst of popularity. "It took off here because of two things: Kelly Slater and DVDs," says Yuki Tsunoda, editor of *Flow,* Japan's biggest surf magazine. "Once there was a star people could follow, and once they could see how the rest of the world was surfing, that was all they needed." There are now an estimated one million surfers in Japan, and the Association of Surfing Professionals, the sport's governing body, has been holding contests here since 1979.

"These people love youth culture, and surfing exudes that," says American John Shimooka, the Australia-based marketing manager for Quiksilver, while we watch the early rounds of the Quiksilver Pro. "And the Japanese surfers have gotten so good. Fifteen years ago, when we first started coming over here, they were still so honorable; the other guys were paddling circles around them. But now they're as ruthless as anyone."

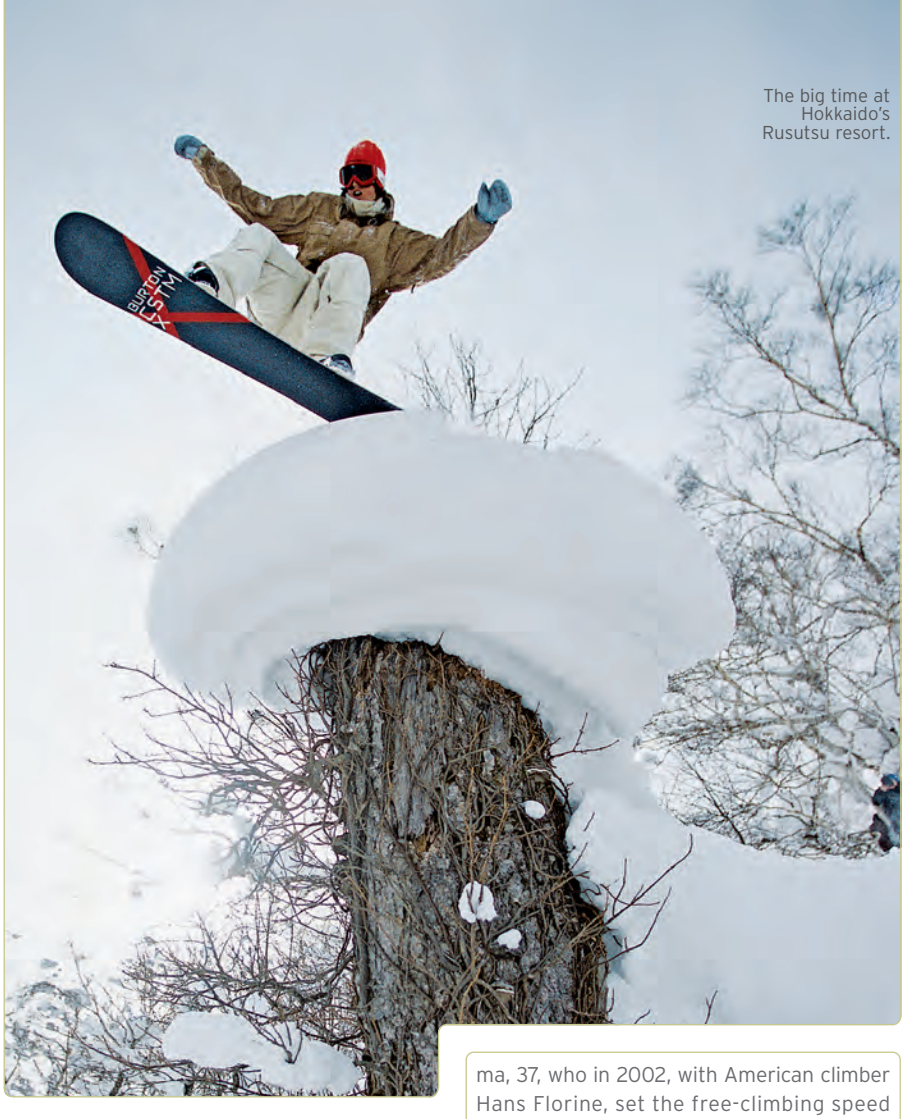
If it seems that Japan is being swept by a wave of adventure colonialism, well, that's close to the truth. Though some Japanese entrepreneurs have been at the forefront—the first time I ever kayaked was at a Japanese whitewater camp with a Japanese instructor, and MontBell, Japan's leading manufacturer of outdoor gear and clothing, has been running rafting and climbing trips for 27 years—a lot of the energy has come from outside. In the five years since I returned to the U.S., a loose confederation of expatriate businesspeople and restless English teachers has begun a more organized push into the wilds, establishing bilingual guide services for cycling, climbing, rafting, and backcountry

skiing, setting certification standards, and introducing both Japanese and foreigners to a Japan few knew existed.

"AT FIRST, I WAS just writing about the stuff my friends and I were doing," says Gardner Robinson, 35, a Portland, Oregon, native who's lived in Japan for nine years and runs OutdoorJapan.com. "But the more we wrote, the more we realized there were other people doing the same things." The site is now the leading resource for adventure travel in Japan, in any language.

"We're breaking down those notions that Japan is expensive and inaccessible," says Robinson. "It doesn't have to be. You can rent a car and stay in a guesthouse for prices comparable to those in the U.S. And skiing is so much cheaper here than in the States."

Japan's highest concentration of ski resorts is less than two hours northwest of Tokyo by train, around the city of Nagano. Host site for the 1998 Winter Olympics, Nagano sits at 1,888 feet above sea level, surrounded by four mountain ranges, known collectively as the Japan Alps, that shoot up 7,000 feet from the edge of town. In the winter, the jagged peaks scrape all the snow out of the frigid Siberian air masses that slam into them after passing over the Sea of Japan. The resulting dumps make the Alps the snowiest mountains in the world. In the summer, they're mist-shrouded and as green as



The big time at Hokkaido's Rusutsu resort.

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British Columbia, filled with trails, crags, and hot springs. "The first time I saw this place, I couldn't believe it," says Dave Enright, owner of the Nagano-based adventure outfitter Evergreen Outdoor Center. "It's endless—the wild, wild East."

Three weeks into my trip, Enright, 32, a dreadlocked, six-foot-three avalanche instructor from Vancouver, agrees to take me to Mount Ogawa, Japan's premier rock-climbing spot. He meets me at Nagano's Ueda station, where two of his guides—Canadian James Robb, 30, and Frenchman Jan Erkelens, 27—are waiting in a small white van loaded with climbing gear.

We eventually find the trailhead and scramble through dense, wet forest up to a 50-foot cliff, where Enright leads a 5.9 route called Ogawayama Monogatari ("Mount Ogawa Story"). I climb about 30 feet before a light rain hits, making the rock too slippery to continue. But before I descend, Enright, who's belaying me, tells me to look back. On the other side of the valley, a dozen narrow, 100-foot towers called the Baby Pinnacles rise up out of the forest, wet and black against the green. Through the mist, they look like a procession of monks on a pilgrimage back to Nagano.

Like the rest of the valley, the pinnacles are covered with bolted routes. But during the three hours that we're there, we don't see another person—though I wonder how long that will last. Ten years ago, when rock climbing became an officially sanctioned competitive sport in Japan, there were an estimated 20,000 climbers, according to the Japan Free Climbing Association. That figure has since jumped to 50,000 and includes Yuji Hirayama, 37, who in 2002, with American climber Hans Florine, set the free-climbing speed record of two hours 48 minutes for the 2,900-foot Nose route, on Yosemite's El Capitan.

THE BIGGEST SIGN of Japan's coming adventure makeover is probably Niseko, a once sleepy ski town on the northern island of Hokkaido. Every Japanese tourism official I've asked about outdoor travel points me to Findlay, the leader of what the Japanese media have termed "the Aussie boom." A wiry 41-year-old with sun-creased skin and a quick smile, Findlay came to Hokkaido in 1989 to work as an instructor for Everest skier Yuichiro Miura, who operated a ski school in Sapporo. After six summers of exploring the island's rivers on his own, Findlay quit in 1995 to start Niseko Adventure Center (NAC), Hokkaido's first commercial rafting service.

Ten years later, NAC has grown into a 70-employee operation that takes 30,000 customers per season, nearly all of them Japanese, down the Class III and IV water of the nearby Shiribetsu, Mukawa, and Toyohira rivers. Findlay has been featured in television, magazine, and newspaper profiles around the country. "At first, people were asking me if it was really possible to raft in Japan," says Findlay, sitting in the airy

DANNY ZAPALAC

second-story café in his headquarters. Below us about 100 customers are preparing for or returning from trips. "Now the town is turning into Japan's first true international four-season resort. I get invited to speak across the country in towns that want to do what Niseko did."

One reason Niseko has been able to transform so quickly into Japan's most international resort is that Hokkaido is the nation's least Japanese region. A key agricultural area, the 32,200-square-mile island was annexed by Japan in 1869 and thus missed out on the landmark temples that were built all over the country when the Buddhist clergy held sway, from the eighth to the 16th centuries. Niseko is nestled between three 5,000-foot volcanic cones, all of which are part of a 46,971-acre national park, which also includes three separate ski resorts that join at the top and operate off a single $42 ticket. Combine NAC's success, a lack of cultural resistance, Japan's location almost due north from Sydney (there's only a one-hour time difference), and the fact that Hokkaido's epic winter snows come during the Southern Hemisphere's summer, and people were suddenly thinking Whistler Asia.

"I walk around here and my eyes pop out of my head with all the opportunities," says Australian businessman Simon Robinson, speaking over the din of hammers in a construction trailer crowded with blueprints. Japanese ski towns can be pretty spartan—small rooms with shared bathrooms and no après-ski attractions beyond a few noodle shops. But after a ski trip here with his wife, Robinson began building the first Western-style condos in Niseko in 2003 and now has 69 one-, two-, and three-bedroom units, plus 11 houses, with more on the way. At the same time, travel agents in Australia and Canada began pushing Japanese ski vacations. Niseko now hosts about 15,000 English-speaking visitors a year, and Robinson's entire winter is booked by July. Other foreign developers have followed suit. "We're just scratching the surface," says Robinson. "Guys like Ross have created momentum, and we've picked up on it."

ONE OF THE GREATEST pleasures of doing anything in Japan is following it up with a bath. Ibuprofen's got nothing on a cold beer at one of Japan's natural hot springs (volcanically heated *onsen*) or public baths (*sento,* which use tap water).

On the first day of my trip, I dropped off my luggage at the Tokyo home of my friend Brad Bennett—a photographer and 13-year resident of Japan who recently descended Mount Fuji on a skateboard—and headed straight to a neighborhood *sento* to soak away the 18-hour flight from the States. Thirty minutes and a few beers later, I could already feel myself getting over the jet lag.

The next morning, I met up with my friends Doug Boller, an American IT executive, and Taro Yamada, a chauffeur, in the trendy neighborhood of Futakotamagawa for a mountain-bike ride on the trails that had been our weekend tradition. We rode north from the upscale shopping malls and cafés that surround Futakotamagawa station to the wide, grassy banks of the Tama River, which forms the western edge of Tokyo. After about four miles, we entered suburban Kanagawa prefecture, where miles of singletrack and dirt roads crisscross the largely undeveloped hills along the river's eastern shore. We rode for about two hours, then dropped into town to buy *onigiri*—rice and fish wrapped in seaweed—and tea, typical Japanese convenience-store fare, which we ate back up in the hills after rinsing off at a temple fountain.

Two weeks later, after I've been biking, climbing, and camping across the country—in between beer-soaked nights in Tokyo—I meet up with Doug, his wife, Takami, and several more friends on Sado Island, a former penal colony 22 miles out in the Sea of Japan. We've come for the three-day Earth Celebration, an international folk-music festival hosted by the Japanese drum troupe Kodo.

Like the rest of the country, Sado is dotted with guesthouses and inns, but we choose to camp on the beach, along with several hundred of the 7,000 festival attendees. The performances take place outdoors, rain or shine—we get both—and are reason enough to make the trip from Tokyo. But between shows, we snorkel in the midday heat, explore the island on our mountain bikes, shop for folk art, and soak it all off in the hot springs.

After a three-hour ride through the island's mountainous interior, I sit under a tree at our campsite with a salmon *onigiri* and a bottle of oolong tea and watch the sun setting over the ocean. Below me on the beach, someone is playing a Japanese flute. Doug sits next to me and asks the same question I'm asking myself: "So—why did you leave this place again?"

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The better-than-ibuprofen *onsen* cure in Kusatsu, near Nagano.

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