

A New Era for Japan's Ski Resorts

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Japan's leading ski resorts are undergoing a wave of infrastructure investment as international visitor numbers increase. With travel demand now exceeding pre-pandemic levels and interest broadening beyond a single region, resorts across Hokkaido and Nagano are investing heavily in infrastructure upgrades and improved guest facilities that will shape the future of Japan's winter tourism.



Ben Thorpe, Director, Japan Ski Experience

Modernising Core Infrastructure

At the centre of these developments there are lift upgrades including the new gondola under construction at [Hakuba](#) Happo-One, scheduled to open in December 2027. The new system will connect the Nakiyama base with the Usagidaira mid-station, replacing the existing triple chair and dramatically improving uplift capacity. Alongside the gondola, Happo-One is redeveloping the Nakiyama base area with modern parking, rentals, and guest amenities.

In Hokkaido, [Niseko](#) United's Grand Hirafu entered the 2024-25 season with the launch of the new Ace Gondola, a 10-person system that has doubled uphill capacity from the base. Its upper terminal will soon feature a new mountain-top restaurant, set to open during the 2025-26 season, offering views of Mt Yotei during clear weather and enhanced on-mountain dining options. These upgrades are part of Niseko United's ongoing infrastructure investment plans, including the long-planned future expansion of Niseko Hanazono resort.

"After many years working alongside resort operators in Hokkaido, I've seen just how much the

resorts have changed. Investment is no longer viewed as a luxury or a response to visitor demand; it's recognised as a requirement for maintaining quality and efficiency. Faster lifts, better-designed base areas, and improved transport networks all make day-to-day operations smoother and reduce the small inefficiencies that used to affect guests' time on the mountain. The current wave of projects shows a shared understanding that to sustain Japan's reputation for world-class skiing, continual improvement has to be part of the culture." - Ben Thorpe, Co-Founder and Director [Japan Ski Experience](#).

Enhancing the Guest Experience at Japan's Ski Resorts

Resorts are also investing in facilities designed to improve comfort and service quality. Hakuba Iwatake will complete a major base area facelift for the 2025-26 winter season, transforming the space around the gondola station into a modern plaza with new restaurants, cafés, and retail outlets. The development includes improved pedestrian flow between ticketing, rental, and dining areas, and landscaping that supports year-round use. The upgrades have revitalised Iwatake's base and brought it in line with the broader redevelopment taking place throughout Hakuba Valley.

Further north in Hokkaido, Furano continues to refine its offering with the opening of the Rhythm Japan Furano flagship store for winter 2025–26. Located near the Kitanomine base, the facility will feature large-format rental, retail, workshop, and café spaces, providing an all-in-one experience comparable to Rhythm's established Niseko locations.

At Rusutsu Resort, preparations are underway for the reopening of the Lone Pine base complex on 1 December 2025. The East Mt. facility has undergone a full renovation, introducing a modern restaurant, expanded seating, and upgraded guest facilities. At the West Mt. base, room and common-area refurbishments continue as part of a phased modernisation program led by Kamori Kanko.

In Niseko, Yukoro Onsen has been completely rebuilt in a modern style and is now reopened, bringing back Hirafu's long-loved public hot spring. Yukoro provides an incredible Japanese onsen experience in the heart of the village, complementing the area's growing mix of international-standard and traditional amenities.

Improved Access and Connectivity

Broader transport improvements are also being made to improve travel to the resorts. The Hokkaido Expressway extension toward Niseko, connecting Kutchan IC with the resort area, is progressing steadily and will ultimately shorten travel times between Sapporo and Niseko while improving winter driving safety, though there is currently no scheduled opening date.

International access to Hokkaido will also improve this winter with Qantas reintroducing direct Sydney–Sapporo flights for the 2025–26 season, providing Australian travellers with a non-stop

route to Japan's northern ski regions for the first time.

Expanding Tourism and Future Outlook at Japan's Ski Resorts

This wave of investment closely aligns with Japan's ski resort traveller trends, including the recently released booking trends data from Japan Ski Experience. For the 2025–26 winter, Hakuba has overtaken Niseko in overall booking share for the first time, while both destinations continue to see strong growth in total volume. In Hokkaido, Niseko's total nights stayed have risen each year since the border reopening, reflecting continued international interest and confidence in Japan's ski market. Hakuba received a record 1.7 million winter visitors last winter which was a 12% increase over the previous year, while Niseko reported a record 2.2 million winter visitors which was a slight increase over the previous 2018-19 season record of 2.1 million.

The scope of ongoing projects across Hakuba, Niseko, Furano, and Rusutsu shows confidence from both government and business sectors and their long-term commitment to continued development of Japan's ski industry.

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