

RETURN TO JAPAN



Clockwise from top left: Niseko Village; creative cooking at Shiguchi; hot springs at KAI Poroto; a tranquil lodge at Shiguchi

NORTH STARS

Tohoku and Hokkaido promise deep culture and powder snow

The six prefectures of northern Honshu, known as Tohoku, are some of Japan's least travelled. In Akita, on the Sea of Japan coast, the remote Oga Peninsula is a land steeped in folklore. Its 800-year-old Zen Buddhist temple Dairyuji is the place to recharge this November as it restarts its annual retreats, offering three days of mindfulness, zazen, walking meditation and yoga.

Believing that the best way to get to know a place is on foot, Walk Japan has launched a new hike from Hachinoe to Kesenuma, along part of Japan's newest long-distance route, the Michinoku Coastal Trail. The full path winds 1,025km along Tohoku's Pacific coast, which took the full force of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

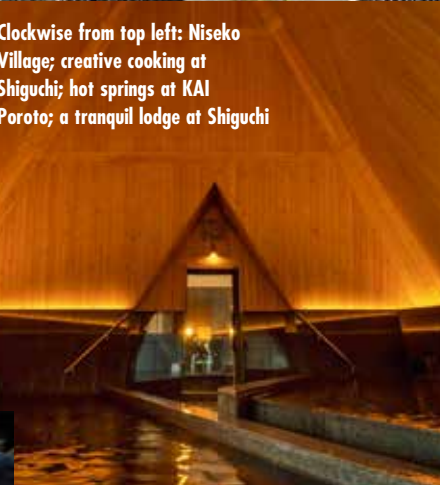
For a different way to get around, try skiing. Tohoku boasts up to 20m of powder annually, with "loads of snow – and no skiers," according to Nick Coates of Japan ski specialist Different Snow. Look out for three new hotels in Appi Kogen resort in Iwate – home to northern Japan's largest open-air onsen bath.

On Hokkaido, Niseko is Japan's foremost international resort for winter-sports lovers. Entering its third season but still largely untried by overseas visitors, Higashiyama Niseko Village, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, has new hot-spring footbaths for tired legs, while in nearby



Grand Hirafu, 190-suite Setsu Niseko opens in December, with five restaurants and a 750sqm wellness centre. On the north side of Mount Niseko-Annupuri, designer Shouya Grigg has opened luxury lodging Shiguchi in five reimagined kominka folk houses salvaged from across northern Japan.

If the snow doesn't draw you, then the culture should. South of Niseko, in Shiraoi, is new contemporary ryokan KAI Poroto, inspired by indigenous Ainu art and architecture. It is ideally located for the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park that opened



CONTACTS BOOK

Walk Japan walkjapan.com

Dairyuji Retreat dairyuji-oga.com

Different Snow differentssnow.com

Higashiyama Niseko Village, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/japan/higashiyama

Setsu Niseko setsuniseko.com/en

Shiguchi shiguchi.com

KAI Poroto hoshinoresorts.com/en/hotels/kaiporoto/

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in 2020, but is also worth the journey for its striking lakeside bathhouse, whose soaring structure echoes the tripod-shaped Ainu log houses known as ketunni. Its onsen waters are drawn from a rare, mineral-rich peat spring.

In Teshikaga, in the wild Akan-Mashu National Park in eastern Hokkaido, regional travel expert Wondertrunk & Co can arrange hiking, canoeing and cycling among active volcanoes and breathtaking caldera lakes, or even introduce travellers to a local Ainu couple who will share their unique culture. It's a whole new side of Japan to discover.