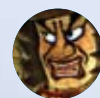


*I'd assumed the damage to the trees was caused by heavy snowfall, not by an army of Japanese bears!*

# How the Samurai learned to Ski

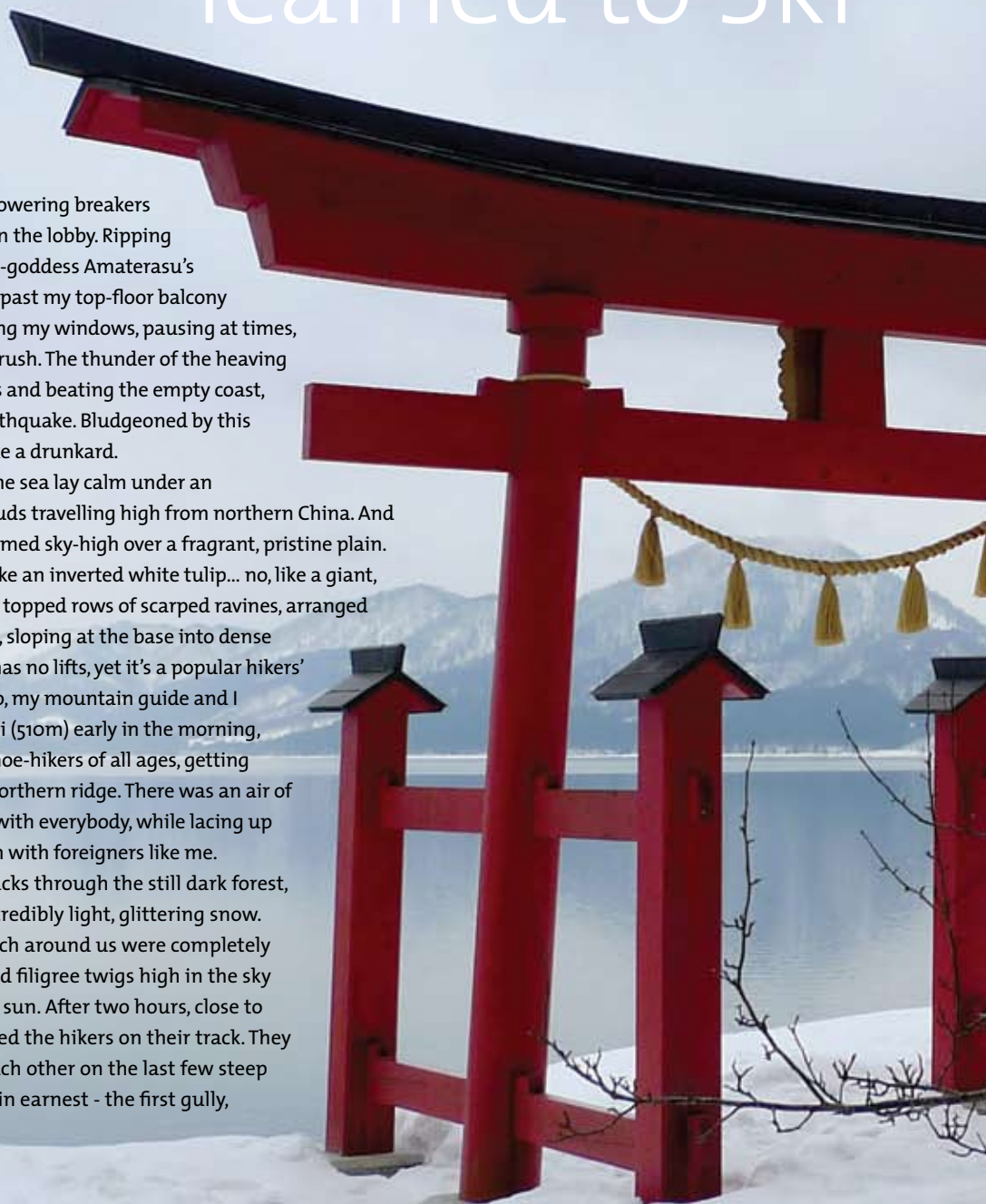


**Andreas Hofer** tries  
Japan's 'Haute Route'

Through the glass front of my nine-storey hotel I could see the boiling Sea of Japan, hurling its mud-brown water masses onto the deserted beach, its towering breakers menacing the few guests huddled at dusk in the lobby. Ripping apart all heavenly pillows, Susanno, the sun-goddess Amaterasu's unruly brother, lets his angry tempest swirl past my top-floor balcony - wild gusts of thick snowflakes drifting along my windows, pausing at times, counter-flowing, then continuing in a mad rush. The thunder of the heaving waves, pounding against the flood defences and beating the empty coast, shakes the building with the force of an earthquake. Bludgeoned by this elementary beat, my room starts to sway like a drunkard.

The next day everything was different: the sea lay calm under an ultramarine sky, adorned with cumulus clouds travelling high from northern China. And Mt Daisen, the volcano we'd come to ski, loomed sky-high over a fragrant, pristine plain. It was a steep, singular mountain, shaped like an inverted white tulip... no, like a giant, corrugated blancmange. Its truncated peak topped rows of scarped ravines, arranged in regular grooves all around the mountain, sloping at the base into dense thickets of beech and alder. Daisen (1731m) has no lifts, yet it's a popular hikers' destination, summer and winter. When Hiro, my mountain guide and I parked near the thatched shrine of Daisen-ji (510m) early in the morning, the place was already teeming with snowshoe-hikers of all ages, getting ready to tackle the steep ascent along the northern ridge. There was an air of camaraderie: everybody chatting excitedly with everybody, while lacing up boots and strapping rucksacks, joking - even with foreigners like me.

Skins glued to our skis, we made our tracks through the still dark forest, stomping through knee-deep duvets of incredibly light, glittering snow. The dark trunks and boughs of mighty beech around us were completely coated in white powder, the candy-cottoned filigree twigs high in the sky fluorescent in the first rays of the morning sun. After two hours, close to the misty, cloud-shrouded peak, we re-joined the hikers on their track. They were slipping, laughing and falling over each other on the last few steep steps to the top. And then we set off to ski in earnest - the first gully,



800 vertical metres of incredibly soft, flawless powder going down a straight line into the bushes below. Due to the steepness of the slope, they seemed to be a mere step away. Grand panoramas opened before us, offering views far into the east and west, and over the Sea of Japan. Admittedly we didn't spend much time taking it all in - the snow was too good to waste valuable skiing time on photo-stops. While our fellow hikers tripped up and down the mountain, happy like children building their first snowman, the two of us greedily hiked up again and again, to ski as many of the ravines radiating from the top as possible. As we kept reappearing on the top, we were soon the topic of the local crowd, with everybody asking where we came from, and taking pictures of us 📷

Crossing the Japan Alps from Nagano to Niigata Province, and (below) Mt Daisen: 'No lifts - yet!'





Seiji Yamada:  
'The bears are still  
hibernating'

kooks as we exchanged high fives and hugged each other in excitement after each new run. For me it was the best skiing of the season.

When one skis in other parts of the world, nothing is more tedious than a down day. On Honshu, Japan's

main island, one has to face a totally different handicap - how to stop skiing, just for a few days, to marvel at all the beauty around us. The view from Kyoto's Kiyomizu temple for instance, perched on a mountain like an eagle's nest, overlooking a dreamy valley of cherry trees and the vast city below; a stroll through the tranquil moss gardens of Ginkaku-ji, wondering about the moon pyramid and other strange apparitions; shuddering under the 'blood ceiling' of Yogen-in, built from wooden planks from the long-vanished palace of the warlord Hideyoshi, where the bloody hand-and-foot imprints of a complete household can still be seen - 384 people, including women and children, all committing mass-suicide.

To take our minds off such morbid thoughts, we tried a long fugu-dinner at the temple lodgings of Chion-in, but this had a gruesome element too - this fish is so deadly that the chef needs a special licence to prepare it.

Soon we are on our way to Yamada Ryokkan, the spa-cum-mountain lodge of Japan's most famous powder skier and premier ski instructor, Seiji Yamada.

*Yamada is linked to the very beginning of alpine skiing in Japan, when, in 1911, an Austrian army officer, Major Theodor von Lerch, arrived to inquire about Japan's*

*astonishing recent military successes in the war with Russia - and at the same time to teach them how to ski. Later, in the 1920s, some of these soldiers, a few of them grown wealthy in civilian jobs in Tokyo, encountered the celebrated Austrian ski guru Hannes Schneider, in St Anton on their travels - the star of one of Europe's first films about Alpine skiing. The film was brought back to Japan, and shown to Yamada's grandfather, an inn-keeper in Otari village, in the northern part of the Japan Alps. A family of passionate skiers was born, and when Schneider came to Japan in 1930 to demonstrate his skills in skiing seminars and nation-wide instructions on radio, the Yamadas were already fervent skiers, having taught themselves with the help of his film...*

We heard the tinkle of another skier's little brass bells long before we could see him appearing in the clearing in front of us. We were hiking through the Omigawa valley (850m) early in the morning, and his bells and the fresh ski tracks in front of us were the only suggestion of human existence. Otherwise, the snow-covered land was untouched by civilisation. Fleeting snow hares had left some hasty trails, and on a precipice above us a serow, a Japanese antelope, was struggling desperately to lift its heavy, shaggy body up-hill through the mass of slippery snow to reach a few tufts of wilted grass laid bare by an avalanche. We half expected it to fall down on us at any moment.

Yamada was taking us on Japan's version of the Haute Route: crossing the Japan Alps between Nagano province and Niigata province, from Hakuba some 60 kilometres to the north. It would be a climb of approximately 2400 vertical metres, covering 40km on Day One, followed by a few more moderate hikes the next day, and a long descent of 1600m

to the base of Myokosuginohara, the ski resort in Niigata.

The jingling of the lone hiker started to irritate me. After we'd left him behind, I asked Seiji jokingly: "Why was this guy making such a noise? He's not expecting to be attacked by bears, is he?"

"He is" came his reply. "All hikers do this here. But you're right. The bears are probably still hibernating."

"So, there are bears here?"

**On closer inspection the woollen blankets turned out to be blocks of ice. We had opted for a cosy night inside a heavy-duty deep freezer.**

"Oh yes, of course. Don't you see the claw scratches on the trees, and the broken boughs? They climb up to graze the beechnuts."

I looked up 15 metres to see each twig neatly broken at the tip. I followed Seiji without a further word, starting to wonder whether I shouldn't get some bells too. I'd assumed the damage had been caused by heavy snowfall, not by an army of Japanese bears! Once we came out of the forest into open snow fields, I saw yet more broken bushes. "Bears?" I asked knowingly. "No, of course not, this was done by the snow. We had a lot of snow this winter!"

For Yamada, the level, eight-kilometre Omigawa valley is his kitchen garden. In summer he comes here every day to pick mountain greens, dig for edible roots, and hunt for mushrooms to supply the kitchen at his *Onsen* inn. After three hours, we'd passed through it, and made our ascent to Kanayama, the Golden Mountain (2245m).

The weather started to deteriorate, but there was still enough contrast to enjoy almost 1000 vertical metres of heavenly light, feathery powder. The slope was steep, about 45 degrees, yet with good stability. We ended up in the Shinkawa valley - a narrow gorge overhung by mighty chunks of ice the size of apartment blocks and shaped like cauliflowers (1350m).



Coming out of this icy canyon, we climbed Kahedji-dake (2035m). From the summit we saw our final destination for the first time: Myokosan (2446m), a volcano shaped like a lemon squeezer, with a large outside rim containing in the centre a second, more recent volcano, steep and treeless. Far away, at the foot of the outer rim must be the Koyaike refuge (2110m), where we wanted to stay overnight.

We reached it after 10 hours' skiing, in the last glimmer of dusk. We could still vaguely see the steep roof of the hut poking out of metres of snow. Only one window under the gable of the house, which must have been the second floor, was visible. I took my skins off, and followed my companions over iron ladders to the window, which we pushed open. Inside, in the light of our headlamps and some candles, it looked like the usual Japanese room: tatamis, rugs woven from rice straw, covered the floor, and folded mattresses and blankets were heaped in neat piles along the walls. Japanese homes are often kept cold in winter, but this one was unusually challenging: it was minus 20 degrees Celsius indoors, no heating, and on closer inspection the woollen blankets turned out to be blocks of ice. We'd opted for a cosy night inside a heavy-duty deep freezer. Covered by countless layers of wool-ice, I watched in a state of comatose paralysis how Hiro and Seiji busied themselves melting snow on the gas stoves they'd brought with them, sweeping up, hanging their stuff up to dry, and preparing a supper of shark-fin soup, shitake rice and fish cakes. I was useless. Only one thought gave me a mischievous sense of superiority in my icy corset - all their vain attempts to hang out skins,

T-shirts and socks to dry would be doomed. In this frozen death zone nothing would ever dry. Not before spring time.

It was perhaps the coldest night on record. At least in my records. Whenever we made tea - no, when they made tea - the boiling water froze to ice blocks only moments later. We kept reheating the same water over and over again, to get at least some liquid into our dehydrated bodies. Our breath turned into ice crusts covering blankets and wooden beams. And to make sure our belongings didn't freeze rock solid, we had to keep everything as close as possible to our bodies: skins, boots, gloves, even beer cans. To my great surprise, I slept solidly for nine hours. I woke at dusk, my companions still buried in their woollen igloos. This time it was I who started the day optimistically by making tea, soup, and even venturing outside. It was a mistake.

A blizzard was still raging, but every so often the sun pierced the gloom. We made our ascent to the Kurosawa-dake saddle (2170m), skied down a few hundred vertical feet of powder to finally climb the rim of the 'lemon squeezer', called Midaharayama (2347m). We traversed along the rim for about a third of the full circle, north-west to south, to ski 1600 vertical feet in pristine powder, wedeling joyfully through ancient forests until we hit the lower slopes of the groomed resort at 750m. A taxi took the three of us to the coast and a fisherman's hut, where we devoured the catch of the day: king crab, whelks, squid, sea bream, mullet and yellowfin tuna, well watered with local sake.

*As we kept reappearing on the top we were soon the topic of the local crowd, with everybody taking pictures of us as we hugged each other in excitement after each new run.*



Back at Yamada's *Onsen* inn, the girls prepared a sumptuous meal for us: eel with chestnut, rape flower tempura, fresh salads, octopus carpaccio, candied crickets, fresh baby squid, a rich soup of deer meat and miso, fried mushrooms and succulent steaks of Matsuzaka beef, the most sought after beef in Japan. Kobe beef, I was told, is "only for you tourists!" Beer. Laughter. Self-congratulations. And many photos of grandpa Yamada and his buddies in those knee breeches and tweed caps, on impossibly long skis. If they could only see us now! 📷