

Hakuba – another Australian invasion in Japan?

Photography Lee Pouzio

At the young age of 24, Quentin Nolan already owns and operates *Liquid Snow Tours* in Japan's Hakuba valley. He explains to Lee Pouzio why Hakuba is more than just a new Niseko.

Hi Quentin, where are you from originally?

I was born on the Gold Coast, grew up in the Blue Mountains, moved to Melbourne a few years back and now spend about a third of the year in Melbourne, a third of the year in Japan and the other third in Europe. I grew up riding Perisher and Thredbo, but the last few seasons I've spent most weekends in Hotham and a little time at Falls Creek.

What sparked your interest in setting up Liquid Snow Tours rather than just being a shred hound chasing pow?

I initially started Liquid Snow Tours after working in the industry for another travel company. I saw a gap in the market to offer group trips to the local snowfields and thought this would be a good opportunity to get to the mountains as much as possible. I was never satisfied with Oz winters so I brought a group over to Japan two years ago. We ended up in Hakuba and I was so stoked with the terrain and what the town had to offer that we returned in 2008 with fifteen groups then doubled on last year's operations for the 2009 season. Now we are expanding into more resorts on Honshu.

Why Hakuba, everyone knows the only place in Japan worth riding is Niseko?

I think Hakuba has more to offer; bigger steeper mountains, more culture, closer to Tokyo, less travelling time and it gets hit with metres of that pow everyone comes to Japan for. Basically Hakuba is a bigger, steeper Niseko with more resorts and less bogans.

How have the local Japanese community reacted to the increasing foreign presence?

In the most part the tourists that have been coming have been very respectful of local rules and culture. Because of this the locals are super accommodating and will help people as much as possible. They try very hard to communicate even when their English is limited. As more and more people come over it's so important we keep it this way so Hakuba doesn't turn into another Niseko.

So do you think Hakuba is at risk of becoming the new Niseko, could it turn into an overrun Australian paradise where the local currency is made up of pineapples, green grocers and lobsters... and maybe a VB brewery in town?

This is the last thing we want and I cannot see it happening. Hakuba will become a more international resort and already many Euros and North Americans are starting to come over. This will, together with the Singapore, Hong Kong and Chinese markets, outweigh the Aussie influence and be good for the resort. But if you are looking for VB and pineapples for your next footy trip away I hear Niseko is sick.



Mkey Williams is always willing to stand for doos. With the deep Hakuba powder there's no need to hold back.

There is an argument that Australian businesses like yours, are destroying Japanese culture in towns like Niseko. What's your take on that?

The Japanese ski market has been declining consistently over the last ten or so years and as a result resorts, hotel owners and local business people have been losing a lot of money and going broke. Our business, wherever possible, deals with local suppliers, hires local staff and generates a lot of money into the local economy. We run all our guests through the local culture and emphasise how important it is to respect this. If anything, I would say we are stimulating the town and local culture by opening it up for more people to experience.

You are fairly young to have such a booming business, you have a bar, a lodge, host fifteen hundred people a year, has it been a surprise?

Not a surprise as such but definitely a challenge. I saw the potential the first time I came here three years ago when I was 21 and have started to turn those plans into a reality. Buying and setting up The Lab (our lodge that sleeps sixty and has a bar and restaurant) was a big step. We still have some big plans and projects in the pipeline so ask me in a few seasons and I'll be able to tell you whether it has been successful.

As a foreign business owner, how do the local businessmen and residents treat you?

Over the last few seasons I have built great relationships

with the hotels we deal with and suppliers we use. As a whole the local businessmen see the need to open Hakuba up to more international tourists and improve the town services. I have been lucky enough to build some solid friendships with a number of these local businessmen and that makes it a pleasure to do business over here.

Is there underground mafia presence in Hakuba that you have to pay off, the finger-missing Yakuza typo?

I wish we could pay off the ski patrol at certain resorts. But no there isn't a mafia presence as such. Business is done differently however. It is more based on trust and is very rigid in some respects; having connections and building long term relationships is important.

To your mind, what are the best places for riding in Hakuba?

For spring riding there are some short hikes off Happo, Tsugaike and Goryu where you can get some of the best turns you will ever experience. Inbounds, there are plenty of good tree lines at Happo and Tsugaike. And when the Yanaba park crew get their shit together, a night park session always goes down well.

For more on Liquid Snow Tours see snowtour.com.au For the full Hakuba travel story and gallery get online transfersnowboard.com