

From super-thrilling cable-car rides to assured nirvanas at hot springs, the Japanese Alps are a storehouse of myriad experiences, with the country's hallmark traditions intact.

■ BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI

# Blowing Hot and Cold

**R**odak moments popped all around us. Had we strayed into the Ice Age? The entire landscape was painted in blinding white brush strokes, and thick bands of mist had settled in the silent valleys that surrounded us like a still white ocean.

## THE GREAT ROPE TRICK

Our fantasy collided with reality as our double-decker cable car on the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway in the Japanese Alps, in central Honshu, swayed upwards. The earth tilted and we skimmed over pine trees that groaned under the weight of snow, interspersed with bare trees that stretched their gnarled old branches upwards in prayer. Cameras clicked to the orchestrated oohs and aahs of awed tourists in the cable car.

*Opening page: The seemingly never-ending Japanese Alps house numerous experiences for the adventurous traveller. The thrill is further heightened by the dense snow and mist carpeting their surface, lending the range a mystical look.*

*Top: Riding in a cable car on the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway comes with a host of goodies — a real-life taste of the mountain cold, a fulfilled thirst for adventure and, of course, awe-inducing panoramic views.*

*Right: A snowman standing firm at the foot of the ropeway, an epitome of fun and frolic amid the ambient desolation of the Japanese Alps.*



All photographs by Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

The Shin-Hotaka is a two-stage ropeway to heaven — said to be one of the longest in Asia — that whisked us up close to the peak of Nishi Hotaka-dake (2,909 m). On the observation deck, we donned gum boots, clambered onto snow-packed slopes and soldiered into the white vastness beyond. Soon, we were trekking down an icy maze aptly called Snow Wall, which comprised pathways cut deep into banks of snow. Along the way, we grabbed clumps of ice and snow to lick with child-like delight.

Even as we imagined ourselves to be born-again Marco Polos, we encountered two elderly Japanese couples on a hike into the higher reaches. Nature's amphitheatre encircled us and the frozen frieze of mountains had a wind-buffed brilliance. In parts, the landscape was as smooth as an ice rink; elsewhere, rivers of snow seemed to tumble into the valleys. As we walked through walls of ice, we felt a sense of ethereal desolation, as though we were the only people left on Earth. In contrast, a man-made snowman looked small and vulnerable, an extraterrestrial being that had wandered into this snowy haven to become a prop for tourists in colourful parkas.



It was in the late 19th century that foreigners stumbled upon this region — so huge, ancient and timeless. A British missionary named Reverend Walter Weston scaled the peaks and sparked in the Japanese a passion for mountaineering as a sport. These mountains have now become a paradise for hikers, climbers and even walkers who like to explore its folds and serene valleys.



Top: The Hotakaso Yamano Hotel, whose hospitality teems with all things Japan.

Centre right: A traditional-Japanese-style fine-dining set-up at the Hotakaso Yamano Hotel.

Humbled by nature's power and beauty, we stopped in the cafeteria for a coffee and then swung down once again in the cable car. The views were unrelentingly vivid, the earth silent and the land pure white. When we landed on terra firma, an amazing sight awaited: tourists sat with feet soaked in cedar wood tubs or foot baths that bubbled with steaming water. Their faces exuded an air of sheer bliss, the foot bath a refreshing respite after the biting cold of the mountains. We were in the Shin-Hotaka Onsen or the hot springs region.

#### BATHED IN BLISS

The welcome warmth at the 86-room Hotakaso Yamano Hotel, a short drive away, thawed us out once again. In our Japanese *ryokan*- (traditional inn) style room, with tatami (woven straw) mats and shoji paper screens, we felt enfolded in a very snug Japanese world that imposed order on a part of a country that is volcanic yet unbelievably beautiful.

There was artistry — understated and elegant — even in the cuisine. We got to experience it that evening when we savoured an elaborate feast, fit for the ancient Shinto gods that the Japanese worship. The feast was a regal procession of lacquered boxes and bowls artfully presented. The sizzling fresh sushi and sashimi, slurp-worthy noodles, slivers of choice meats cooked in a

hot pot — all of which we ate with delicately clicking chopsticks — were irresistible. We were served by a kimono-clad waitress, the acme of Japanese style, who served us with grace and charm, her movements resembling a choreographed dance.

But the highlight of the evening was our plunge into the hot springs. Dressed in traditional *yukatas* (casual cotton kimonos) and Japanese-style slippers, we got into the cable lift outside the hotel which seemed to burrow into the deep innards of the earth. Outside our warm cable lift, the silent white mountains seemed to breathe quietly, eerily filling the earth with their chilled breath. But at the private hot springs area, we felt like we had entered the devil's backyard.



Smoke curled from the bubbling, hissing pool of water rimmed by seal-smooth rocks interspersed with gnarled trees and glistening shrubs. The area was romantically lamp-lit and had an air of misty, mysterious beauty that verged on the menacing. But it was Mother Earth all right, volcanic and given to temper tantrums. She was spitting hot water from her centuries-old fissures and scars, yet her warm embrace was healing.

Once in the pool, a sweet languor swept over us, even as snowflakes fluttered on our bare shoulders and felt like a million pinpricks. A snow monkey or a deer might stop by for a dip and a dunk, the hotel staff had warned us, but we did not see any. We stayed in the swirling

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therapeutic waters for close to 15 minutes and then ascended upwards again in the cable lift to the hotel, fragrant and ruddy. We slept like babies that night.

#### NATURE'S SNOW ART

The next morning, we stepped out into a winter wonderland, where kids built snowmen and tossed snowballs at each other. The lady receptionist who helped us load our luggage bowed low and long as our vehicle pulled out of the hotel's driveway and arrowed through the eerie forest. Occasionally, we would drive past little villages with cottages painted in snow.

Just as our senses were being lulled into accepting nature's spectacular handiwork as a given, she wowed us with a wall of icicles. It was like walking through a cave draped with stalactites and stalagmites — only here,

Top: A stroll on the streets of Takayama exposes a traveller to the countless gems of the city — sake breweries, shops and settlements that exude the destination's vintage charm.

Below: Resembling a multi-tiered cave full of stalactites and stalagmites, these set of icicles, which can be encountered on the road to Takayama, deserve space in your camera!



the display was painted in glacier blue, a stage curtain that was the show and the main attraction.

#### TOWN DELIGHTS

In stark contrast was the quaint yet modern city of Takayama. Studded with old Japanese inns, shops and sake breweries snuggling in what were once vintage wood homes, its old-world air jostled yet co-existed with its 21st-century spirit. We indulged in some sake tasting at a brewery, allowing the smooth Japanese rice wine to thaw us out after the cold spell in the mountains. Around us, on the cobbled stone streets, locals and tourists strolled, taking in the fresh air. We dove into boutiques and galleries that showcased lacquer work and folk craft, admiring all the while the low-slung architecture of a charming 16th-century town. The heaven-high Japanese Alps had made Japan, for us, a new lover with the ability to surprise.

#### FACT FILE

- Tokyo's Narita International Airport is well connected with India by air.
- From Tokyo, travel by train to Takayama which is the base for the Alps as well as the Shin-Hotaka hot springs region. One can also travel by road as there are many convenient bus connections.
- Incidentally, the hot springs are said to add a glow to one's complexion and are also beneficial for those who have arthritis or have incurred athletic injuries.
- For more information, visit Japan National Tourism Organization at [www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp)