A WHITE WORLD

Snowshoeing through deep snowdrifts to soak in natural hot springs brings adventure and poetic connections in beautiful far north Japan.

WORDS BY LYNN GAIL

Exploring Japan's snowy landscape is a magical experience full of serene beauty.

Big white flakes flurry around me, acting like tiny sponges as they soak up the ambient noise, turning the world silent. The tranquillity temporarily breaks as twigs snap and crack under heavy snow. Deep winter in the maple tree forest in Nakatsugawa, Honshu Island, Japan is like nowhere else.

I'm on the Tohoku Hot Spring Snow Tour with walking experts Walk Japan, and our group of seven have hiked here in short snowboard-length snowshoes. The one-size-fits-all snowshoes, which easily hook onto the shoe, make hiking through deep snow easier but we've barely covered 2km in one-and-a-half hours. It is an exercise that requires focus. It's a start-stop snail pace, and as I trudge on, I think of the Chinese proverb: "be not afraid of going slowly, be afraid of standing still", but I do just that – I stop, absorb the magical winter vista, inhale the sweet cold air of the maple trees.

"Try some syrup straight from the trunk!" our group guide, Tetsuo Sato calls from a deep gully. "It's only farmed now, in February." Keen to try nature's nectar, I sumo-size stride down a steep incline. I'm in an outdoor popsicle plantation. Shin Konnan, our mountain guide, is using an eggbeater-like tool to hand drill a hole in a 12m-high tree trunk. He pushes a hosepipe in, attaches a 10-litre container, then waits.

"Watch the power of nature." Konnan's eyes twinkle. "The tree pumps maple syrup up from its roots," he says as liquid slowly trickles from the tree. "But it's a lengthy process, it takes several days to boil 10 litres down to 250ml." He pulls a tiny bottle of the coveted syrup from his satchel and pours samples. The fresh liquid is chilled, refreshing, and the smooth sweet bottled syrup that sells in Tokyo's fashionable stores tangos deliciously across the tongue. The only thing missing: pancakes.

Sated by nature's gifts we hike down an isolated valley. "It looks like someone has spread whipped cream all over the landscape," says Sato. Pillow-soft snow stretches before us like a comfy bed, and if thawing-out onsens (hot springs) weren't calling, I'd flop and rest a while.

Japanese people have been enjoying onsen bathing as a communal tradition since the early 1600s. Today, over 3,000 onsen towns are dotted throughout Japan. Many traditional houses are without current-day bathrooms and meeting at the local onsen is very much a part of community life.

Thankfully, this nourishing ancient pastime is one of our daily highlights, and on arrival at Saikatei Jidaiya, a traditional inn (ryokan) in Kaminoyama Onsen Town, Sato explains onsen etiquette.

"Remember, birthday-suit bathing is non-negotiable," he smiles. "Shower from head-to-toe before entering the hot spring, and don't step on tatami mats (rice-straw flooring) in any footwear." In a nation where toilets have music buttons to 'absorb' ablution sounds, I'm surprised to see women washing themselves at ease when I enter a steam-filled room. Apprehension melts away, and I recline in water naturally heated to 38°C, letting sodium, calcium and chloride sulphate minerals soothe both mind and muscles as I blissfully switch off.

GRAB YOUR SNOWSHOES

The Tohoku Hot Spring Snow Tour is a fully guided tour suitable for reasonably fit people who can walk comfortably for three hours a day in snowshoes. The tour route is mostly over snow-covered flat or gently inclined terrain.

DINNER ETIQUETTE

Japan is a country full of customs, lessons in etiquette continue that night at a traditional banquet dinner fit for a Michelin-starred restaurant. "Itadakimasu – eat-a-ducky-mouse," Sato grins. "We say this before every meal – Japanese language is full of onomatopoeias." Over kobachi (small) bowls that are artfully filled with rape blossoms and crab, pâté de campagne, succulent sashimi, yaki-imo (sweet potato), and an ongoing marathon of tasty morsels, we learn dining do's and don'ts.

"Never add soy sauce to rice, it's considered bad manners. Because Japanese food is so flavoursome we enjoy plain rice at the end of each meal to lengthen the night and exchange stories," Sato explains. We learn it's a no-no to pass food between chopsticks; instead place it on a plate. The last rule is, 'try not to leave food', so when the finisher arrives – a chocolate basque cheesecake – I treat it as a nightcap before heading to my futon where I fall into a food coma.

GETTING THERE

Once you arrive in Tokyo, Japan you travel by Shinkansen (bullet train) on a 90-minute journey to reach , where the tour starts.

BRAVING THE STORM

The following morning, we head to the foothills of Mt Zaō hoping to see muhyo: a rare form of frost that grows vertically on trees. Juhyo (snow monsters) – a phenomenon when fir trees morph into giant twisted snow figures – are also on the agenda. But the season's worst snowstorm is approaching, and our chances are fifty-fifty. Hoping the odds are on our side, a cable car carries us up over a plateau of snow-blasted beech trees.

We alight at 1400m and clang a good luck bell before we set off. Our red-and-blue jackets are the only pop of colour in an otherwise white world. After pushing against a wall of wind we reach the forest's edge.

Juhyo have frozen in motion, clinging to branches, beautiful long frosted fingers of glinting icicles. The moment is fleeting.

"The storm's getting too strong!" Sato warns. We turn back, the unseen snow monsters behind us. But it doesn't matter. I'm soon descending, flying off the mountain at speed in a cosy cable-car with my new snowshoeing friend, Jeany. Two young-at-heart adventurers lapping up life. "It just threw us off the mountain," Jeany roars as we soar above towering trees.

In the afternoon I take a reflective walk up a thousand icy steps to reach Yamadera Temple. Founded in 860AD on the sheer cliffs of Mt Hoju, the Buddhist temple is where monks practice asceticism, a spiritual discipline forgoing all worldly desires. At the top I imagine being here in the dark of winter, with no material comforts, no societal ties, no pleasures, at all. A layperson at heart, I would fail miserably. On the descent all I can think of is the nightly onsen.

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The next day we head to Natagiri Pass. Matsuo Basho, Japan's beloved poet, made the area famous in his poetry book, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. A serious scholar in Buddhist teachings, Basho crafted haikus that shone light on our delicate natural world. As we follow in his footsteps, we make up haikus as we go, but they are kindergarten rhymes, lacking any deepness. We open our arms to the isolated snowscape, dive deep, making snow angels, and marvel momentarily as sunlight casts dappled light. At a tree laden with snow mounds Sato pulls the prized maple syrup out. We're bright-eyed, watching intently as he drizzles the sweet-treacle on frozen peaks, and we savour snow cones straight from the branch. In that moment, I pen a poem:

In a white world
There's stillness in silence
Connections in company
Nourishment in nature

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