

JAPAN

FUNNY INN A GATEWAY TO JOY

GREAT HOSPITALITY, FABULOUS FOOD AND TOP SKIING

Cilla Cole

WHEN I first contacted Mayumi of The Funny Inn about accommodating our family of six during our ski trip to Japan, she immediately replied offering availability in two rooms saying: "I promise special time in both room which is very popular for foreigners guests".

Feeling this was an offer too good to refuse, I made the booking.

Now six months later, as we arrive in Hakuba, a large ski resort in Nagano, North-West of Tokyo, I am filled with apprehension. My family is questioning my choice of such an oddly named hotel.

Despite only brief communications by email, however, the owners, Mayumi and her husband Hide, now welcome us like old friends and I immediately relax.

As they show us around, I can't help thinking The Funny Inn is appropriately named.

Nestled in the woods behind the main street of Echoland, a quiet suburb connected by shuttle bus to the ski areas, it looks more like a movie set for the New Hamptons than a Japanese village.

Our room has a small sitting room and an onsen or hot tub with views over the mountains.

The children all share a room with futon-style beds and have the use of two steaming onsen style baths downstairs, one open to a snowy courtyard.

It is not modern or fashionable but cosy and quaint and we instantly feel at home.

So at home that when we come down to breakfast the next morning we find our children already seated, wearing their onesies.

The Japanese guests think the zebra, panda and cow at the next table are hilarious and are busy snapping photos.

Mayumi, taking dainty, imperceptible steps as if wearing a kimono, shuffles around at great speed looking after our every need.

She serves a three-course breakfast, brings us maps, pours the coffee and explains about the three main ski resorts: Happo One, Goryu/Hakuba 47 and Iwatate.

As it is a public holiday weekend she advises Hakuba 47 might be the quieter resort for today and arranges discounted lift tickets.

We have already hired our gear, conveniently delivered to the lodge the previous afternoon, so by 9.30am we are riding the gondola.

Despite being a public holiday, the slopes are quiet by Australian standards and we ski a full day, unable to



Cilla Cole's daughter Claudia at Happo One Ski Resort, one of three main ones to choose from in Hakuba.

stop lest we freeze.

We are unprepared for the wind chill factor and vow to wear more layers tomorrow. Over the week however, the skies clear, the weather warms and we enjoy the varying terrain of the three resorts: the long forest trails of Goryu, the powdery groomed runs of Skyline at Happo One and the wide pistes radiating from a central peak at Iwatate.

The deep, dry snow makes black runs negotiable and falling generally painless and we refuel with anything from wood-fired pizza to miso soup.

After a few early mistakes we learn to ask Hide's recommendations for restaurants.

We certainly would not have ventured into Mate otherwise, where we enjoyed excellent Japanese curries and the crumbed pork tonkatsu.

At night it is a short stroll to some of the local restaurants including Korean barbecue and traditional Izakaya or Japanese pub style fare.

One night we eat at Sumotei - one of a chain of restaurants run by retired Sumo wrestlers.

We can't finish the sumo-sized portions of nabe, a specialty hot pot, but somehow manage the sumo-sized beers.

The best meals, however, are served at home. Before

becoming a ski instructor, Hide was a French trained chef in the cosmopolitan harbour town of Kobe.

As well as serving up delectable breakfasts of French toast, omelets and eggs benedict (which even the normally fussy eight-year-old zebra devoured) he will also prepare dinner if ordered in advance.

We have done just that for our first night and on the menu is wild mushroom pasta, salt encrusted Hakuba pork with fresh local wasabi, and soft centred chocolate fondue with berry coulis.

While the smells from Hide's kitchen waft up the stairs, I defrost in the onsen,



The deep, dry snow makes skiing an ideal sport in Hakuba (above), and Mayumi from The Funny Inn is keen to cater to your every need during your stay (below).



soaking my tired muscles.

I take a sip of my Asahi and watch the mountains turn pink outside my window and think to myself: I could get very used to this routine.

It seems we will indeed have a special time here, just as Mayumi promised.

The writer travelled to Hakuba at her own expense

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