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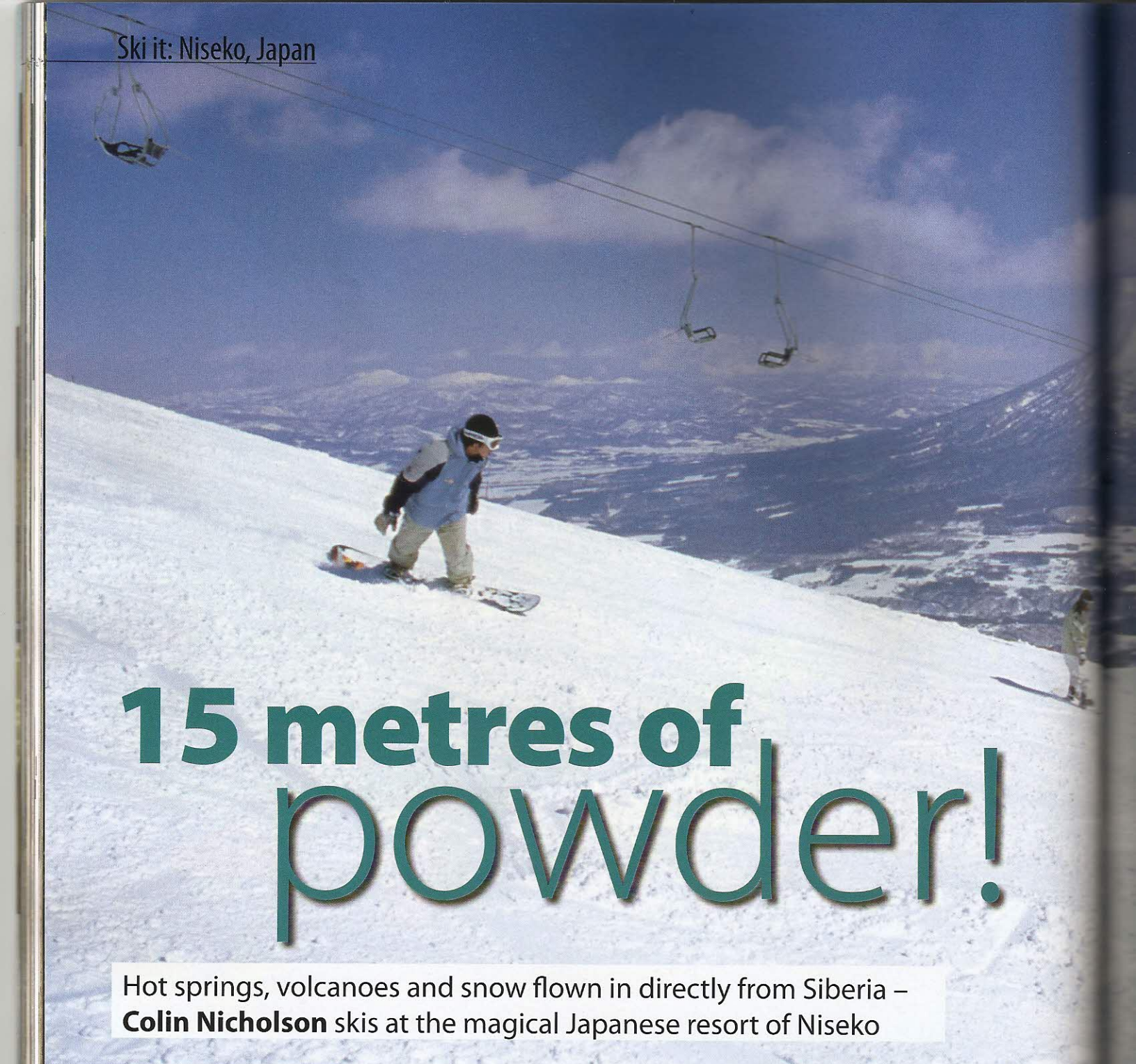
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ISSN 1368-0773



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15 metres of powder!

Hot springs, volcanoes and snow flown in directly from Siberia – **Colin Nicholson** skis at the magical Japanese resort of Niseko

It was immediately after a 12-hour flight to Tokyo, a 90-minute internal flight to the northern island of Hokkaido and the discovery that the last transfer had left hours ago that I wondered whether coming to Japan had been worth it.

My footsteps echoed as I paced the endless rows of counters that line soulless airport concourses the world over. They were all by now shut... bar one, where a couple were packing up for the evening. Hearing my plight, they lent me their mobile phones, interpreted for me and, after much to-ing and fro-ing, I had a car booked to take

me the two hours to the ski resort of Niseko. I was profoundly moved by their kindness.

I thanked them profusely, apologising for messing up their evening, and stepped into the cold night air to await my taxi. As is customary in Japan, the cab door opened automatically, in a rather ghostly fashion, and I lowered myself on to the seat, topped, as always in Japan, with a rather quaint knitted antimacassar.

As the taxi was pulling away, I noticed a car parked ahead pulling out in front of us. Peering through the window I saw it was the same couple, who had been waiting until

I was safely in the car. We waved at each other, then again when we stopped side-by-side at red lights and finally once more as I headed off into the heartland of Hokkaido, where the snow is so deep that the only road markings are flashing red arrows that hang over the road pointing to its position as it turns into a narrow furrow in the snow banks.

And that amount of snow, created as the cold air of Siberia blows across the Sea of Japan, is the main reason why the British are prepared to fly half way round the world to ski its 15 metres of powder.

Until a few years ago, skiing

Who's writing?

Colin Nicholson started skiing at the age of two in Moscow's Lenin Hills at the height of the Cold War and hasn't stopped since. As a ski correspondent for all the dedicated ski magazines and most of the national newspapers, he covers all aspects of the weird and wonderful life of the mountains. Despite being an avid downhill fan, he regularly takes a break from Alpine skiing to revisit his first experiences of the snow by donning cross-country skis.



'Heading up the chairlift as the excitement of skiing in a new continent mounted, my first thought was... 'Who let rip?' My Australian guide Stuart pointed to a steaming, sulphurous pool below us'

in Japan was virtually unknown to foreigners. But now you can go on an organised tour with the Ski Club of Great Britain, which last season started offering holidays there.

Heading up the chairlift, with the drama of the previous night behind me as the excitement of skiing in a new continent mounted, my first thought was... 'Who let rip?'

My Australian guide Stuart, the manager of the chalets where I was staying, tactfully pointed to a steaming, sulphurous pool below us. The mountains here are alive, although earthquakes are rarer than on the mainland and Hokkaido was unaffected by March's tsunami.

As I skied down I could see the impressive, but inactive, volcano Yotei in front of me. A spitting image of Mount Fuji, it's an awesome sight, but one that many visitors never get a chance to see in January or February – it simply snows too much.

Much of the deep powder in the birch woods between the pistes was untouched, even on a sunny weekend in March, and there are also 'gates' allowing skiers easy access to completely untracked off-piste areas.

These gates have a rather surreal quality. With little more than a stretch of tape or dense thicket on either side to point them out, you wonder what the significance of these invisible border crossings is, until you are plunged into deep gullies, where, with soft, quick turns through the feather-like snow you must pick your way through the trees.

Yet despite the fact that I thought I was skiing in completely uncharted territory on some rather fantastical adventure, at the end of each run I conveniently found myself at the bottom of the lifts.

Our final run of the day landed us at the Vale Bar for après-ski, where Taiko drummers put on an energetic performance every Sunday. They also give foreigners a chance to play.

And there are many foreign visitors who come here. The first were New Zealanders and Australians, like Stuart, who baffled the locals by skiing off-piste, a habit unknown to the Japanese.

But the Antipodeans soon hit a problem. With anything larger than a size nine ski boot about impossible to hire, they had to set up their own rental shops. Having done that they went on to set up cafés and lodges, and enrol as instructors at the ski school.

Which all made Niseko, Hokkaido's most popular resort, accessible to us Brits. Just a few years later British tour operators arrived on the scene and Japan became the latest exotic place to ski.

After all that drumming, my bath was soon calling me – literally. At the chalets of the Niseko Country Resort, the bath keeps the water at a steady temperature and beeps when it's ready, while the loo seats are heated. The only problem of such comfort is getting out of the bath to go for dinner. But many restaurants will pick you up and drop you off in the evening after the chalets' drivers have finished doing their rounds.

We went to Kamimura, which offers an excellent multi-course tasting menu, albeit for anything from £55 to £110, before enjoying the nightlife. Other restaurants are much cheaper and not only pick you up, but include entry to the *onsen* (hot springs), a meal and a drop-off all for about £45. On the slopes too we could get a big curry with rice for 800 yen (about £6.70) – less than you'd pay in most European resorts.

When skiing it's worth remembering that the gates do take you to genuine off-piste areas. They are not patrolled and only G3 phones work in Japan – as I had discovered at the airport – so be careful not to

