

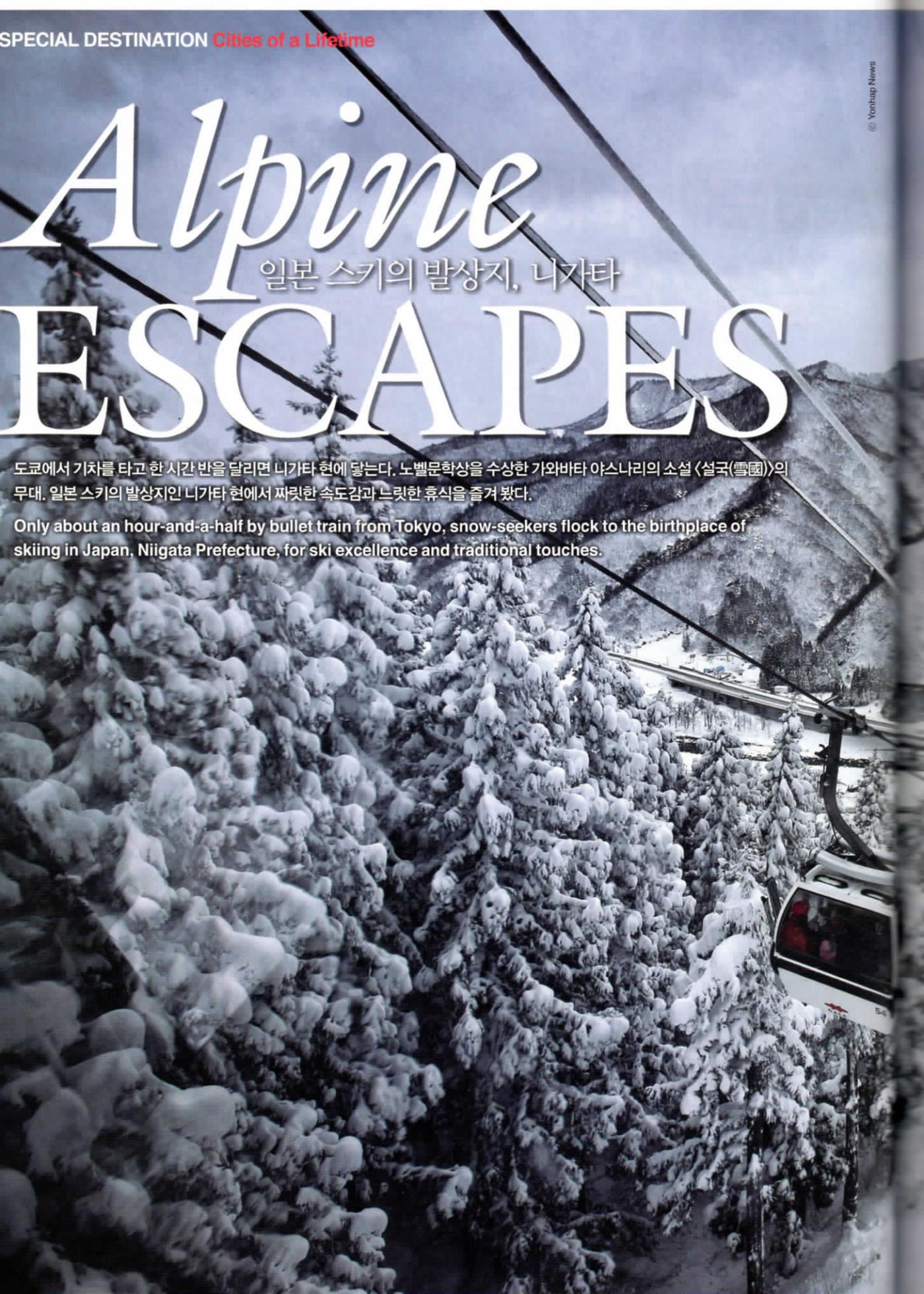
Alpine

일본 스키의 발상지, 니가타

ESCAPES

도쿄에서 기차를 타고 한 시간 반을 달리면 니가타 현에 닿는다. 노벨문학상을 수상한 가와바타 야스나리의 소설 <설국(雪國)>의 무대. 일본 스키의 발상지인 니가타 현에서 짜릿한 속도감과 느릿한 휴식을 즐겨 봤다.

Only about an hour-and-a-half by bullet train from Tokyo, snow-seekers flock to the birthplace of skiing in Japan, Niigata Prefecture, for ski excellence and traditional touches.





나에바 프린스 호텔의 스키 리조트에서 내려다본 나에바 마을 풍경. 아카쿠라 온천 스키장의 눈꽃이 핀 나뭇가지. 그 자체가 눈 결정체를 닮았다. 나에바 프린스 호텔의 슬로프를 활강하는 스키어(왼쪽 페이지 위부터 시계 방향으로).

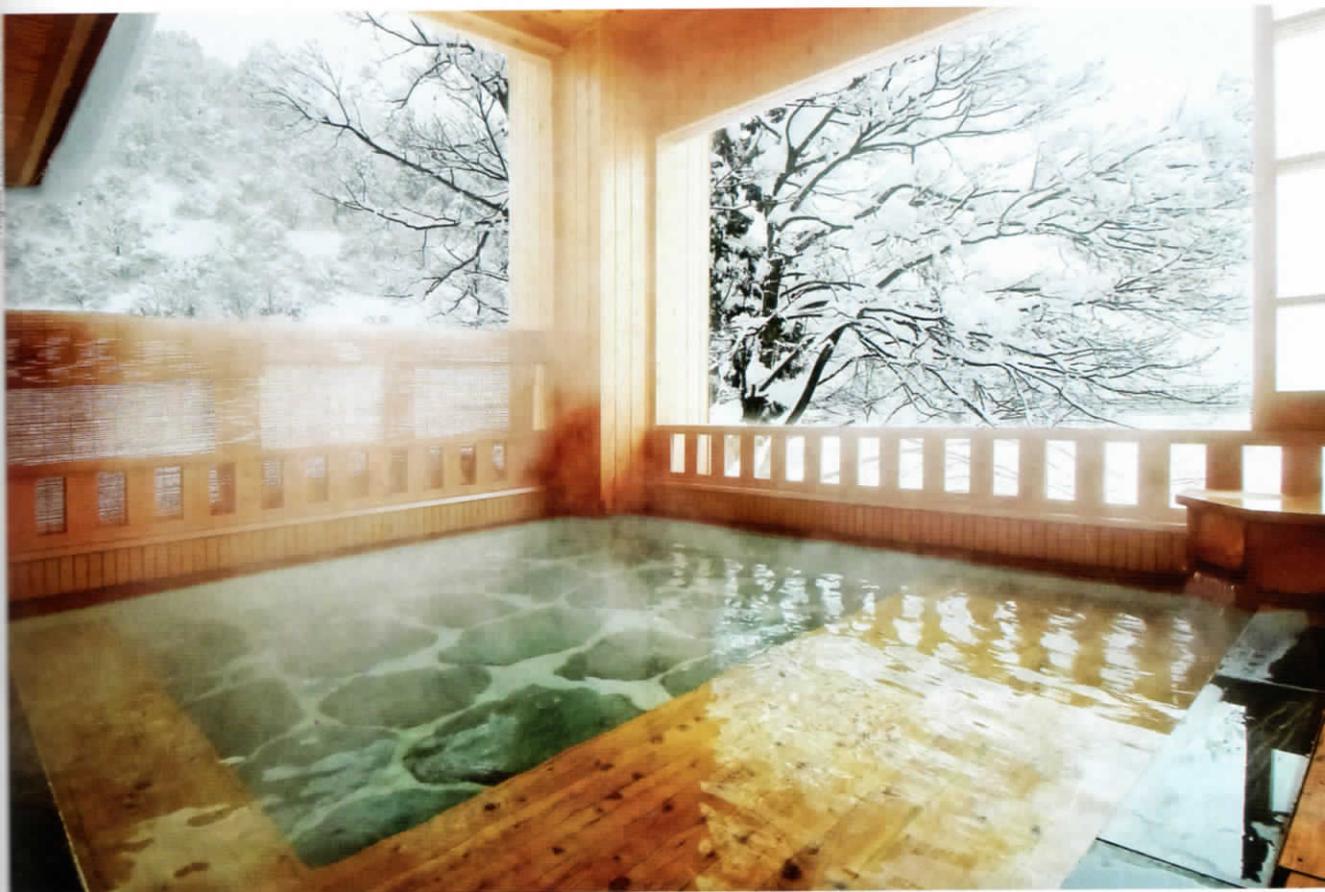
(Clockwise from opposite top) Looking down on the Naeba Prince Hotel ski resort; the snow-piled branches at Akakura Onsen Ski Area; a skier makes tracks through fresh, powdery snow at Naeba.

The cable car wobbles forward as everyone scrambles aboard, trying to jam their skis into the ski rack and grab a seat before the car starts its ascent into the mountains. Everyone seated, it begins to climb sharply, rising over snow-capped trees as the ski lodges and hotels of Niigata's Yuzawa Town below begin to shrink from sight. Then they are gone, and the car is traveling above an expansive sea of white. Save for tints of green below, the crisp blue sky is the only other color on display.

A few minutes later the cable car arrives at its mountain top station, slowing just enough for everyone to scramble off. Then they are off to the slopes, where skiers of all ages work their way down long, curving runs. Snowboarders twist and jolt their way down bumpy moguls, shooting up clouds of fine powder snow as they go while young kids teeter, tumble and laugh on the almost flat nursery slope.

The skiing in Niigata is some of the most renowned in the country; the most historic, too. Although neighboring Nagano and Hokkaido in the far north have garnered more international fame as winter destinations, both having played to host to the Winter Olympics, it was in Niigata where it all began for skiing in Japan. The sport was introduced in 1911 by Major Theodore Edler von Lerch of the Austrian army while on a year's sojourn in the prefecture's southwestern Joetsu area. Then it was taken up by the Japanese military and over time the sport gradually grew into a leisure activity. Within 26 years came Japan's first ski resort, on Mount Myoko in Niigata.

Today, Niigata offers a range of skiing options unmatched anywhere in the country. In the prefecture's most popular winter sports area, Yuzawa Town, there are more than 20 ski fields within a 20-minute drive of the main train station, between them offering everything from family- and beginner-friendly skiing and snowboarding to terrain parks and backcountry powder. Although the area isn't



at an especially high elevation — just 800m to 1,100m in most cases — it is blessed with a tremendous amount of snow, which guarantees high-quality skiing throughout the main December to May season. Yuzawa Town's record for snowfall in a single day is an incredible 3.2m.

Slipping into Comfort Not that the snow is the only attraction; once you are done skiing you get to enjoy a complete change of pace off the slopes. That starts back at your ryokan (traditional Japanese inn), where after peeling out your damp snow gear and slipping into a yukata — a simple, light cotton version of a kimono — you can relax in warmth on your room's tatami mat flooring, sipping green tea as the snow outside peppers the window.

At around 6pm or 7pm dinner at the ryokan is signaled by a gentle knock on your door, and a waitress in an exquisite kimono brings in several lacquerware trays laden with an array of small, intriguing dishes. She kneels then bows before gently arranging them on the low dining table in the center of the room. Among the 15 or so dishes is one of

sashimi — fresh slices of raw fish caught off the Niigata coast that are served with a wasabi and soy dipping sauce. Then there is a tempura of locally grown, seasonal vegetables. The centerpiece of the meal is a thick slice of the famed local steak, cooked on a small ceramic stove. Everything is washed down with Niigata's most famous offering — fresh, crisp sake.

Once dinner is over, it's time to experience another of the ryokan's timeless charms — a soak in an outdoor hot spring (*onsen*). It's chilly walking there in just a yukata, but once you disrobe and gently ease yourself into the almost painfully hot water you soon warm up. With no roof over the steaming bath, flecks of snow occasionally add a refreshing icy touch on your skin; others settle on the rocks and pines that surround the bathing area. Then you can feel the mineral rich water gradually soothing away all the fatigue and muscle ache from a long day on the slopes; it's the perfect way to end the day, and the perfect way to reinvigorate yourself for another wonderful day in the snow tomorrow. 📍 By Rob Goss Photographs by Mark Edward Harris