

That's Aomori

JOANNA TOVIA discovers that the little-known Japanese prefecture of Aomori is a destination the whole family will love.



From Tokyo's busy streets, where workers swarm across intersections and stride purposefully into subway stations, we board a bullet train for the mountains at the northernmost point of Japan's main island.

High rises give way to fields of white and towns of snow-covered roofs as we zip by at 300 kilometres per hour armed with a bento box packed with delicious morsels. It's a three-hour ride north to **Aomori City**, a 700-kilometre journey that would take eight hours by car.

Alighting from the train is an experience in itself. Sleet whirls about as we crunch along the icy platform and head out into the snowy street. Across the street is a humble haven of warmth and good food at **Hotate Goya** restaurant. Here you can fish for your own scallops in a tank – though you have just two minutes on the clock to do so – and whatever you catch, you eat.

Next door is the **Nebuta Museum WA-RASSE**, which is worth a visit to learn about the colourful Aomori Nebuta Festival that swells the city from 300,000 to around three million every August in celebration of summer.

Sensational skiing

At **Aomori Spring Ski Resort's Rockwood Hotel**, I've just missed the US, Finnish and German Olympic teams that spent the week before the PyeongChang Winter Olympics finessing their moves. The hotel is comfortable and well located for skiing and snowboarding, no matter your level of expertise; a gondola and chairlift are mere metres away.

This is the third time 11-year-old New Zealander Cam Melville-Ives has visited Aomori with his parents and twin brother, and says it's the best place he's ever snowboarded. "There's constant snow and the powder is never tracked out; the whole mountain is full of powder and it's all yours!" Cam says. "I've done the black runs and all the park runs but my favourite has got to be The Corkscrew."

As for the hotel, Cam says he loves the buffet and bistro and goes for a soak in the onsen each evening after coming in from the snow. "I love the onsen," he says, adding that he got used to not wearing clothes in the hot springs because "that's just what the Japanese do".

It's my first time downhill skiing and I have a two-hour private lesson with a friendly instructor who speaks little English beyond "stop", "turn" and "brakes". Actions speak louder than words when it comes to skiing, however, and we have no problem communicating. He soon adds the word "help!" to his English vocabulary.

I quickly get the hang of it, and love every second as I make my way down the easiest run – spills, shrieks of terror, whoops of joy and all. My only regret is that I didn't learn to ski as early as the young kids I see zipping past me.

Aomori is a hidden gem in the skiing world, catering to everyone from beginners to advanced backcountry adventurers. And now I understand what all the fuss is about Japow, the amazing powder skiers and snowboarders seek out for the ultimate ski experience.

Winter wonderland

The snow deepens as we head into the **Hakkoda Mountains** the next morning, and I do mean deepens. Walls of ice three metres high line the road winding through snow-laden forest. Be sure to get out and make a snow angel – standing up!

The friendly **Hotel Jogakura** is the place to go if you're a family of intermediate to advanced skiers. There is one beginner run, but if there is an adventurer in the family wanting to go backcountry skiing, stay here for at least a couple of nights. Soak up the hot springs and delicious food and take the Hakkoda Ropeway (gondola) up to see the "snow monsters" on the mountaintop. These trees become so encased in snow and ice over winter that they



01 Snow fun with little ones 02 The food in Japan is to die for 03 Street food is also a popular option among families 04 Snowboarding tricks make for great entertainment 05 Traditional Japanese lanterns 06 A room at Rockwood Hotel & Spa. Images 01–03 © Joanna Tovia. Images 04 & 06 © Rockwood Hotel & Spa.



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“Now I understand what all the fuss is about Japow.”

take on the look of hunched white monsters dotting the upper slopes. There are two family-friendly walks, with views that stretch all the way to the ocean on clear days.

Japan is the land of festivals and I'm thrilled that my trip coincides with one. We rug up to go to **Lake Towada Winter Story Festival**, a 40-minute shuttle bus ride from the lovely **Oirase Mori no Hotel** (where bathing must be done in the onsen rather than your room). Twinkling lights and swirling snow greet us at the small but fun festival, where music, street food and activities such as sledding and banana boat rides make for an exciting night for kids. There are igloos and indoor eateries when they need a break from the cold, and mulled wine to warm up chilly parents.

Japanese cuisine is mild and child-friendly. Kids have fun playing "guess that food" as it's not always easy to figure out what you're eating from explanations (usually in Japanese)

on menus. In Aomori few people speak English, so download a translation app to make your life – and theirs – a little easier.

Japanese traditions

From the nearby **Hoshino Resorts Oirase Keiryu Hotel**, where we have lunch the next day, we strap on snowshoes and head out into the wilderness for a one-hour walk. Kids as young as six will enjoy this snowy Oirase Gorge adventure; walking along the snowy tracks is easy and fun in snowshoes. It's a treat to pass frozen waterfalls and snow-laden trees and cross bridges over icy streams. The landscape is otherworldly and spectacular.

More fun awaits a two-hour drive away at Misawa's **Hoshino Resorts Aomoriya**, which has the feel of a traditional Japanese inn and is popular with visitors from all over Japan.

To enter the hotel is to step back in time. Pyjamas and traditional shoes are provided

(these are worn by most guests around the hotel) and there is plenty to do: go on a horse-drawn carriage ride around the lake, wander through the lantern-lit floors to a festive dinner and a show, soak in the incredible hot springs outdoors and indoors, and take part in a traditional craft workshop.

It's a fitting grand finale to my whirlwind trip to Aomori, a little-known travel destination that won't stay a secret for long. ●

Aomori Report Card



Info en-aomori.com

Getting there Qantas has direct daily flights from Sydney to Tokyo. qantas.com
From Tokyo, travel by bullet train or plane to Aomori City. Buses, private transfers and train travel within Aomori are easily arranged via your hotel.

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