

You'll fall for the slopes and luxurious spas of alpine Japan despite recent nuclear disaster

WORDS JULIA HORTON

SHE'S going to feel like they've unzipped her skin and filled her with baking powder!" That was easily the most entertaining British commentary I heard while watching the Sochi Olympics.

It was inspired by the new sport of slopestyle, although Team GB competitor Katie Summerhayes had little reason to feel explosively excited because her somersaults on skis did not win her the medal that exuberant commentator Tim Warwood thought they had.

A month later and I'm facing an unexpected chance to try the sport myself. My instructor Riki has just shot past me with a mischievous grin, ready to demonstrate his skills as a former competitor at national level.

Now it's my turn to jump. Or is it? Unsure whether he actually means me to follow, I veer off to one side, before turning back and deciding to go for it. Sadly my dithering loses me so much speed that I fail to become airborne at all and am in serious danger of sliding backwards instead. It's unlikely that Tim would mention baking powder to describe my efforts if he was here, unless to compare me to a loaf failing to rise due to a complete lack of the stuff. Still, I have done my first "jump".

I'm in Japan, where the focus is already very much on 2020 when the summer Olympics will be held in Tokyo for the first time in more than 50 years. Like many international sporting events, it brings the promise of a major tourism boost. I am skiing in a region which many here hope will benefit particularly this time - Fukushima.

Just an hour and a half north of the capital by bullet train, the region was devastated by the deadly 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown. By the following year the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan was reported to have returned to pre-earthquake levels. But few go to Fukushima, now forever synonymous with nuclear disaster as Chernobyl. The obvious question for any visitor is, "Is it safe?"



Fukushima mon amour

Unfortunately there is no simple answer. Experts and officials are divided over what the radiation levels are, the health risk they present and whether monitoring is adequate. That said, the most dangerous period is over and three years on the chances of experiencing any ill effects from spending a few weeks here are arguably zero. The only UK government travel advice is the fairly obvious warning not to visit any of the remaining exclusion zones around the nuclear plant.

One of the most enticing attractions in the region is the Alts Snow Park and Resort at Mount Bandai. Around 70 miles inland from the site of the disaster

it is "100 per cent safe", according to general marketing manager Kei Ishiuchi, who has skied and surfed around the world. He admits that the public are still afraid though, and while skiing helter-skelter through the trees is great fun, I can't help thinking briefly about the fact that any radiation still here is most likely to be in wooded mountainous areas just like this.

It's easy to relax in the resort which, like Kei, is laid back and friendly. It advertises itself as having English-speaking staff on duty 24/7 and at dinner the waitress goes to great lengths to explain the dishes to me in detail. The food is delicious and, being

Japanese, beautiful to look at, which is good, as I spend far longer doing that than I would normally owing to my less than impressive chopstick skills.

Luxuriating later in the hotel onsen, or traditional Japanese spa, it strikes me as odd, given Japan's conservative reputation, that one of their most beloved pastimes is hanging out together naked in pools. Men and women bathe separately, however. Onsen originate from natural hot springs that once attracted footsore travellers on the road, and the enterprising locals who built inns to cater for them. In the nearby town of Aizu-Wakamatsu the Higashiyama



TURNING JAPANESE Clockwise from main: skiers at Mount Bandai; beautiful food is assured; the lantern festival at Nagasaki's Confucian shrine; the Higashiyama Onsen Harataki. Main photograph: Eye Ubiquitous/Rex



Onsen Harataki offers a more authentic and decadent spa experience and traditional Japanese-style ryokan rooms with futons, low tables and legless chairs. Lying down, I'm lulled by the hypnotic sound of a waterfall cascading down the hillside outside. Dinner here is a bit of a mystery tour as a seemingly endless supply of delicate bowls are put before me by smiling waitresses who know only slightly more English than I do Japanese. Whatever it is, it's tasty.

Meanwhile, although many want to escape the nuclear spectre, some want to turn the Fukushima power plant into a future visitor attraction. In the south of the country, the Nagasaki Atomic

Bomb Museum is one of the world's oldest and most famous examples of what is now known as dark tourism.

Nearly 70 years after the horrific Second World War attack, it serves as a powerful reminder of the lethal nature of nuclear weapons. Maybe Fukushima could benefit from something similar. But if that doesn't happen, there are already good reasons to visit. □

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For more information on visiting Japan and Nagasaki contact the Japan National Tourism Organisation and Nagasaki Tourism Association (www.seejapan.co.uk, www.at-nagasaki.jp/foreign/english)

FACT FILE

* Return flights with Cathay Pacific to Tokyo/Fukuoka from London Heathrow via Hong Kong start from around £889 return (www.cathaypacific.com). Flights from Scottish airports to Heathrow cost from around £80 return.

* A Japan Rail Pass providing unlimited travel on most trains starts from 29,110 yen (£170) for seven days.

* Double rooms at the Mount Bandai Hot Spring Hotel in the Alps Snow Park & Resort, 6838-68 Shimizudaira, Sarashina, Bandai-Machi, Yama-Gun, Fukushima-Ken 969-3396, Japan, (+81 242 74 5002, www.alts.co.jp/english/lodging/index.html) from £90pp including breakfast, dinner and two-day lift pass. A two-hour private skiing lesson costs from £30.

* Double rooms at Higashiyama Onsen Harataki, 99, Higashiyamamachi Yumoto, Aizu-Wakamatsu shi, Fukushima 965-0814 (Tel +81 242 26 3690, www.yumeguri.co.jp/en/dining/) start from 29,160 yen (£171) per room including breakfast and dinner. For bookings in English visit <http://www.japanican.com/en/hotel/detail/2519005/?ar=07>

* Double rooms at The Gate, 2-16-11 Kaminarimon, Taito, Tokyo Prefecture 111-0034 (81 3 5826 3877, www.gate-hotel.jp/english) start from 25,110 yen (£146) per room including breakfast.

* Double rooms at Garden Terrace Nagasaki, 2-3, Akizuki-cho, Nagasaki-shi, Nagasaki 850-0064 (81 95 864 7776, www.gt-nagasaki.jp/?lang=en) start from 50,000 yen (£290).

DO NOT DISTURB CHICKEN COOP COTTAGE, ELISHAW FARM, NEAR OTTERBURN, NORTHUMBERLAND

THE dark days of the year are often far from gloomy – just think of Halloween and guising, fireworks, golden leaves, Christmas, sledging, the first snowdrops. But it has to be said there are large chunks which can be a bit dismal. Much of November, for instance. January. And February.

It takes more effort to get outdoors at this time, even though a good blast of country air is therapeutic. A weekend break, though, gives you the impetus to get out and about – and country air is in abundance in north Northumberland, just a two-hour drive from the central belt, yet a surprisingly empty part of Britain. Just at the junction of the A68 and A696, on the edge of the Northumberland National Park, lies Elishaw Farm.

ROOM SERVICE

Elishaw Farm has two holiday cottages, both converted cow byres still with their original beams and vaulted ceilings. They also have log burning stoves, perfect for wintry days. Our home for the weekend, Chicken Coop cottage, has two bedrooms, one double and one twin, a bathroom and a living room/kitchen, all simply furnished with tiles and wooden floors and no chintzy bits. On one side, its own little private garden borders Sooty and Sweep's field – the farm's miniature Shetland ponies, who are rather partial to apples and carrots. On the other is a courtyard with a barn in which to keep muddy boots and wet coats – and with a pile of games to while away the dark evenings.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

Owners Tina and Alan, dog owners themselves, designed the cottages so that they would be welcoming for those with dogs and children yet still be pristine and luxurious enough to attract all kinds of holiday-makers.

WINING AND DINING

Breakfast is the best meal here – the children loved getting up, sticking wellies on with their PJs and tramping across to let the “girls” (the farm's resident chickens) out of their henhouse, then checking to see if they'd laid. Luckily they always had and they came back bearing their warm finds for a fresh eggy breakfast. The cottage also has a fully equipped kitchen and there are plenty of eating places in the surrounding area, including in Otterburn, two miles down the road, for those less important meals.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

The Scottish Borders, the coast, Alnwick Castle and Garden, Hadrian's Wall and a host of stately homes are all within easy reach. But our draw was Kielder Water and Forest Park, a 250 sq mile woodland with Europe's largest man-made lake in the middle, famed for its water sports, cycle tracks, and other outdoor pursuits. In November



there's rather less of that going on – although you can't keep a good mountain biker down – but for us the dark days were a plus point not a drawback. A few months ago, the area was awarded Gold Tier Dark Sky Park status and it's now the third-largest protected dark sky area in the world. At its astronomical heart is the Kielder Observatory, dedicated to bringing stars to the masses, and which has just revealed an £8.5 million scheme to build the biggest public observatory in the world. The current observatory runs a host of public events – we went along to a Saturday family astronomy session when, sadly, it wasn't just cloudy, it was foggy, with no chance of even a glimmer of a star breaking through. But the children still got to peer through huge telescopes, watch lasers beamed up into the night air and be entertained by astronomer Daniel's child-friendly talk.

LITTLE EXTRAS

The highlight for the children, however, was trying their hand at the various swings and rope ladders in the orchard at Elishaw Farm. Favourite was a knotted rope hanging between two covered hay bales in a barn, which my daughter challenged herself to be able to swing between by the end of the weekend – and within 48 hours she could do it. The farm also has its own private stretch of the River Rede to walk along and spot leaping salmon, or build a campfire in one of the riverside fire-pits.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

Our children both sobbed their hearts out when we had to leave, and we'd only been for a weekend. The cottages' popularity is demonstrated by the fact that people come back year after year and in the range of visitors it attracts – from singletons looking for a quiet week walking with their dog, to couples celebrating anniversaries with romantic strolls and nights by the fire and families with active outdoor kids. □

Judy Vickers

Elishaw Farm Holiday Cottages, Elishaw Moor, Otterburn, Northumberland NE19 1JH (01830 520942, www.elishawfarmholidaycottages.co.uk). Winter breaks from £195 for three nights for four people. Family astronomy nights run on Saturdays at the Kielder Observatory (07805 638469, www.kielderobservatory.org) until the end of April. Family ticket £45.04, booking essential.