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 ramped in a 2001 Land Rover with five other passengers and four hulking snowboard bags, we bounced along the snow-covered narrow streets of Hakuba, Japan. Luggage shuffling had become a part of our daily callisthenic routine. Today, we were moving from our original rental house to the Happo-One Ski Con, an equipped B&B our friend Shin Biyajma had found for us the night before. The driver of the SUV was Kenji Kato, our primary contact in Japan and the kind soul who had greeted our delirious, jet-lagged brains four days prior when we stumbled off a bus from Tokyo. Among the colorful patches and stickers decorating the Rover's ceiling, I noticed an anti-nuclear energy sticker above

Kenji's rear-view mirror. Back in November 2014, when I was first brainstorming a trip to Japan, I was eager to find some sort of environmental or social issue to explore during the voyage. I started to research Fukushima, only second to Chernobyl as the largest nuclear disaster the world has ever seen.

On March 11, 2011, an off shore earthquake and its resulting tsunami wreaked havoc on Japan's western coast. The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was subsequently damaged, causing three of its six reactors to melt down, releasing radioactive particles into the atmosphere and ocean, contaminating groundwater,

soil and seawater, and effectively closing local Japanese fisheries. According to a 2013 National Geographic article, TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) admitted that contaminated radioactive water has long been leaking into the Pacific, defying containment efforts. In addition, more than 129,000 people were displaced and there were 20,000 fatalities from the combined tsunami and nuclear fall-out. With very little compensation from TEPCO or the Japanese government, thousands of people are still displaced four years later. Many worry that the Japanese government, and the world, will forget them unless a greater global audience hears their voice.

As December approached and my Japan travels took shape, I asked a few friends who had lived in Japan if they had heard anyone talk about Fukushima, or what kind of effect it had on day-to-day life.

“As far as Fukushima goes, to be honest, I have never once heard anyone mention it in Japan,” answered my buddy Pete Connolly. He had lived on the north island in Hokkaido for two winters helping run Sass Global Travel’s Japan program. “That does not mean it isn’t an issue, but it is not a topic that seems to be spoken of very openly,” he continued. “They are very proud people, and it seems like it is a bit of a sore spot with them.” Needless to say, with this feedback, I was a little nervous to talk to just anyone on the streets in Japan and ask for their opinion. Offending someone was the last thing I wanted to do as a visitor in foreign land. Yet I definitely needed to talk with a Japanese person in order to get a grasp on how big of a deal this really was, and how it had affected their lives.

The anti-nuclear energy sticker was my tow-in, and I wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass. “Kenji, I noticed your sticker,” I began. “What are your thoughts on nuclear energy and the Fukushima meltdown?”

It was a big question and everyone in the Land Rover went silent.

“It was awful. So many people died and the government is barely doing anything to help with the clean up or to help the victims ... I’d like to see us move towards green energy practices but even that is being blocked by the government,” Kenji said. “It’s scary to think, but with the nuclear bombs from WWII and now

Fukushima, I don’t think there’s anywhere you can live in Japan that isn’t somewhat contaminated by radiation.” Kenji had lived in Seattle for five years and spoke fluent English, making him the perfect individual to answer such a loaded question. His words stayed etched in my mind, even as I tried to momentarily set them aside while we enjoyed Japan’s legendary powder.

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After our second round of calisthenics for the day and settling into our new home for the week, our buddy Nagasawa Yusaku arrived to take us to his favorite ramen house just down the street. Kenji had connected us with Nagasawa a couple days prior to guide us around the sidecountry of Hakuba resorts till we got our feet under us. I had never particularly cared for the ramen I’d tried in the U.S. I thought it a preservative-packed dehydrated carb load reserved for emergency situations. I figured sushi would be the primary meal. Oh how I was wrong! A Japanese culinary staple, traditional ramen broth takes three days to make and has an endless depth of flavor. Its varieties are plentiful, from seafood to spicy vegetables, and each bowl is full of chewy, homemade noodles. Plump on ramen and Japanese whiskey, we jubilantly walked back to our hotel, stopping along the way at Nagasawa’s favorite shrine. He walked us through the ceremonial way to approach the shrine and we prayed to the spirits of the mountains to watch over us and keep us safe for the remainder of our journey.

The next morning we woke with a fairly

clear idea of the location of the Happo-One terrain park. After a couple wrong shuttle pick-ups and drop-offs (no big deal, we were accustomed to being “lost in translation” by now), our crew miraculously reconvened at the gondola without the assistance of cell phones. The event was a scene – about 120 snowboarders eager to session the banks, berms, and quarter pipes of varying size and shape. It looked like a class 4 wave pool frozen in time. It was so cool to watch the local riders get groovy – huge banked turns, hips and method mania. The Japanese have the most uniquely shaped boards I’ve ever seen, swallow tails, blunted tips and styled-out surfer turns dominated the scene.

The flurries that had been depositing plump snowflakes in our mouths all morning had picked up momentum. Now it was dumping six centimeters per hour. After our lunch of noodles prepared five different ways, we headed out to the sidecountry with Nagasawa to find some untracked Japow. Wandering upon an abandoned cat-track, we decided to test the snowpack. Taking off our boards, we sunk up to our hips and waded through stomach deep powder. When one ski cut triggered a remote 12-inch storm slab and multiple people heard whomping on the ridge line, we reached a consensus it was time to get out of there and back to the resort. As we jibbed our way down Happo-One, I caught a glance of some huge loaded avalanche barriers and knew it might just be what we needed to get some air. I asked Yusaku for his thoughts and he replied with a half confident “Yeah, I think, OK... maybe...”

The next morning we scouted out some avalanche barriers outside the resort’s boundaries in order to avoid any potential

Glorious pow slashing by Halina in the Land of the Rising Sun.



“rule bending,” and made our way through the boundary gate and down the ridge. After verifying we wouldn’t sink up to our necks landing in between the three tiered suspended netting, we started patting down our run-ins. The afternoon turned into a method, roast beef, chicken salad and backflip huck buffet. Jolly on stoke and footage from the day, we were shredding our way down the valley drainage when one of the ladies noticed a kamoshika teetering on a smaller avalanche barrier on the other side of the valley, staring at us. These Japanese mountain goats appear to be part wolf and part boar due to their thick grey winter coats and pointy ears. Turns out they’re super curious animals, and this one

had been watching us for the better part of the afternoon. “So cool! I love this place! Hi goat!” I squealed. As we made our way down the drainage, I almost rode over a hippidy-hoppidy white snow hare the size of a two-year-old child and glimpsed one more kamoshika dart through the trees. The magic of the Japanese Alps was all around us.

When you’re getting lost in the trees, riding deep Japow and dodging mythical snow hares, it’s easy to forget about Fukushima. But the beauty of this place has imbued me with the desire to learn more, to protect and fight for Japan’s reverent people, unique wildlife and stunning mountains. This

winter as snowboarders flock to Japan’s sacred terrain, we must question what has happened there and the long-term effects the Fukushima disaster will have on Japan’s people and environment.

Perhaps what we can learn from Fukushima is that we cannot sit back and point fingers at previous generations for the problems we face today. Those of us that depend on nature’s splendors to do what we love have a special opportunity to be the architects of environmental change, to demand safe and clean energy. After all, nuclear reactors are located near many beloved places, including one just a couple hours from Jackson Hole.



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