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White January figures in

Official stats prove it - we had a lot of snow in January! In fact it was the second biggest January we've had in six seasons.

The final figure was 3.24m after getting just 1.77m in December. But the season total is now up to almost 7m which is just shy of last year's total of 8.39m.

The biggest single dumps came on the 9th and the 17th with 33cm and 35cm. There were only four days where it didn't snow at all and the average was just over 10cm a day.

At the time of going to press there was a buzz about town we were in store for a very big mid-February storm. Let's hope it keeps coming for the remainder of Niseko's peak season this year.

Swedish skiers drop into Niseko

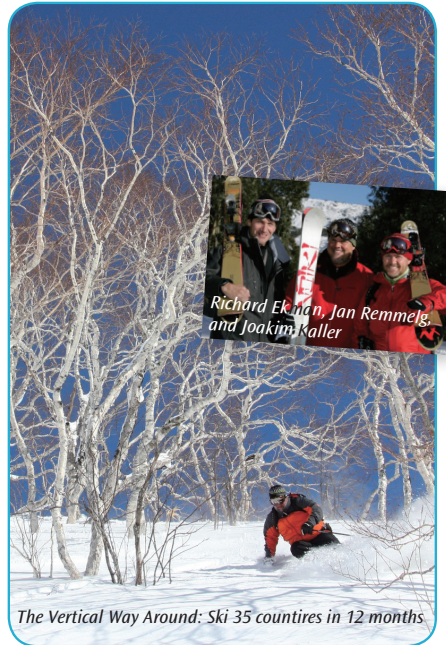
Three Swedish friends living in Chamonix, France posed the question to each other over a few drinks one night: "What would you do if you had a year off work and few money restrictions?"

All three decided the ideal year would be to ski all the continents of the world on a non-stop skiing journey. They promptly tidied up their affairs, employed a film production company to produce a DVD of their trip and packed their bags, cameras and skis and took off in May 2007.

They recently arrived in Japan for this leg of their trip and were lucky enough to encounter a few rare bluebird days along with the ubiquitous great snow while they were here.

Being on the home leg of their journey to 35 countries and more than 70 ski areas, they rated Niseko's snow up with the best they have experienced. They also loved the quality of the food, the friendliness of the people and the chance to experience a really different culture as key elements of their Japan experience.

From Niseko, the verticals move onto China, Tibet, through to the Middle East and back to Europe to complete the journey in April. For more information on the "Verticals" see: www.verticalwayaround.com.



The Vertical Way Around: Ski 35 countries in 12 months



Surfanic jacket giveaway

It seems that no matter what you buy these days it's iPod compatible.

And Surfanic are right on their game with the Royal iPod Jacket with a soft control pad on the sleeve. So cool! These things aren't in shops yet but Powderlife has one to give away to readers.

To win, simply email ed@powderlife.co.jp and tell us why you deserve it. Haven't got an iPod? Don't worry, you'll feel you need to buy one soon to make use of all your iPod compatible gear!

Avalanche deaths highlight dangers

A couple of chilly reminders to always exercise caution in the mountains, even inside ski resorts.

In two separate incidents at mainland resorts this month, two women died in an avalanche and seven snowboarders spent two nights lost before being found.

Police called the snowboarders discovery alive 'a miracle'. Some of the snowboarders in their 30s and 40s had some food and portable stoves, although they did not have tents or other winter climbing gear.

"We spent the nights eating candy in a cottage that was like an abandoned hut," Kyodo news agency quoted one of the survivors as saying.

Hundreds of rescuers, including soldiers and police officers, had conducted a massive operation on the 1,346-metre mountain where the men had gone missing. The mountain was covered with two metres of snow.

Snow monkeys beating the cold in Hokkaido

Watching the contemplative, human-like faces of snow monkeys soaking in an onsen is an experience unique to the snow-covered mountains of Japan, but most people will tell you that you can't see them in Hokkaido.

While the snow monkey, or Japanese macaque, is not native to the northern island, a troupe of 70 inhabits an onsen in Hakodate on the southern tip of Hokkaido. Twenty were brought over about 30 years ago to make a snow monkey onsen attraction. The venture was almost a flop as the original members couldn't be persuaded to take the plunge. Park owners eventually enticed them in with food, and now they can't get them out.

The most famous place to see them in the wild is on the mainland at Yamanouchi in Nagano, home of the 1998 Winter Olympics.

If you can't make it down there, check them out in the botanical gardens of Yunokawa in Hakodate, Hokkaido's most famous onsen district, about three hours drive or train south of Niseko.



Seeking the warmth: rare Hokkaido snow monkeys

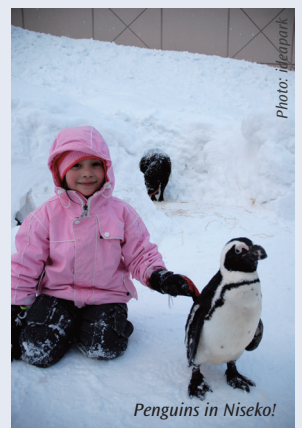


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Penguins in Niseko!

Alpen Hotel's penguin parade

The Alpen Hotel has a pet penguin and a whole farm yard of exotic animals for kids to play with. If you've never seen an emu or a llama in the snow, head up to the Mate Kids Park behind the hotel. There's also a goat, ducks and a mini-pig. You can touch and feed the animals and get your photo taken with them. Entry is ¥500 and kids under three years of age are free. From 10.30am till 4pm daily and until 10.30pm on Saturday as a night zoo.