



Swooshing down the slopes at Sado Wonder Valley. Below, clockwise from right: Takahan's atmospheric *onsen*; mad drumming at Obon; Manotsuru sake.



WHY GO

SNOW COUNTRY

A new Shinkansen route has cut the travel time from Tokyo to Niigata prefecture in half. Scott Haas shares five reasons to go now.

Because sake connoisseurs call this “the Burgundy of Japan.”

Typically made from highly polished rice, the sake produced here has a smooth taste thanks to the use of pure water from melted snowfall. The island of Sado hosts two of Japan’s finest breweries. One is **Hokusetsu** (*sake-hokusetsu.com*), which produces the sake sold outside Japan exclusively at chef Nobu Matsuhisa’s global empire. “I met Nobu 25 years ago,” says Fumio Hazu, CEO, “and we closed the deal with a handshake.” The other, **Manotsuru** (*obata-shuzo.com*), is run by one of the few women in this business, Rumiko Obata, whose sake is so good that you find it in first class on Air France and Vietnam Airlines. Arrange a tour for superb sipping.

Because the historic *ryokan* here are deeply rooted in Japanese culture. “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.” So begins Nobel-prize-winning novelist Yasunari Kawabata’s iconic tale of illicit love in a *ryokan* in Yuzawa, Niigata. Stay in that very same, deeply atmospheric inn, **Takahan** (*takahan.co.jp/english.html; doubles from ¥8,640*), for a sense of the region’s history and romance. Who knows—maybe while soaking in the *onsen* you’ll feel inspired to pen a sequel.

Because this is a place where you can really make some noise. Although sleepy Sado is generally revered for its serenity, every August the ancient Buddhist



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF SADO-CITY; COURTESY OF TAKAHAN; COURTESY OF SADO-CITY; COURTESY OF MANOTSURU

festival of Obon, held to honor the dead, is a time of mad drumming. The Kodo drummers as well as musicians from around the world participate in what amounts to a three-day celebration of peace and love in a pristine natural setting. It might go by a more modern, hippy moniker—"Earth Celebration," (*kodo.or.jp; August 21-23, 2015*)—these days, but the locals will always know it as Obon.

Because the skiing here is pure powder and pure pleasure. The alpine regions of Niigata prefecture get a whopping average nine meters of fluffy, white snowfall a year, making for some of Japan's best skiing. On Sado, **Wonder Valley** (*snowjapan.com; adult day passes ¥1,600*) has great runs for all experience levels. And no better après-ski experience exists than a

steaming bowl of udon in broth accompanied by warm sake.

Because "farm-fresh" takes on a whole new meaning here. Niigata's produce snags top billing at some of Tokyo's hottest tables. Depending on the season, you can visit farms and pick your own pears, grapes, edamame and strawberries. Koshihikari, a type of heirloom rice with plump, toothsome kernels, also grows here. **Shirone Grape Garden** offers everything from organic blueberries to figs. For a flat rate, they'll let you eat as much of this sweet bounty as you want. *enjoyniigata.com/english/04/shirone-grape-garden.html; all-you-can-eat strawberry picking from ¥1,000 per person. +*



Picking organic strawberries.



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