

A winter wonderland in Japan...

KAMILLA OLIVER

We are at the height of winter right now. It is cold, rainy and windy.

Snow is for us a rarity in the Western Cape, but it can be spotted in Southern Africa on a few days in winter, for example in Cederberg or Eastern Cape.

But can you imagine a winter when snow covers everything? A winter lasting six months and longer when cars must be swapped for snowmobiles? With snow falling from the sky almost every day, making up for an annual snowfall average of 15m and more?

This happens on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, and actually nearly nowhere else in the world.

Hokkaido has the best and most of snow on earth. It is actually surprising, since Hokkaido sits on the same geographical latitude as Rome. But the masses of snow which Hokkaido gets in winter are due to Japan's sea-effect snow.

Cold Siberian winds that blow across the length of Asia, pick up moisture off the Sea of Japan, and then dump it as snow when they hit the mountains on the coast of Japan. The mountains there are up to 3 000m high, and they force that moisture-laden air to quickly rise and drop it as snow. No magic, but once you are there you will hardly believe your eyes, I can guarantee you.

Well, I am kind of used to snow in winter, and do miss it while I live in South Africa, but the snow masses in

Japan are just huge, it is a fantastic, true winter wonderland. How people go about it is yet another story.

Since the 1998 Winter Olympic Games in Japan, the incredible snow conditions are no secret.

Being a passionate skier and also a ski-instructor, working occasionally at ski schools mostly in Europe, I decided to venture there and check out the Japanese snow potential. I have gone to Japan to ski twice, most recently in February this year.

The skiing there is epic. It is the best snow I have ever encountered; light, deep and dry and superb fun for skiing. Dry snow is less dense than wet snow; you can't make snowballs out of it as it's not "sticky", it does form instead "champagne powder" and this powder to a skier is the equivalent of a perfect wave to a surfer.

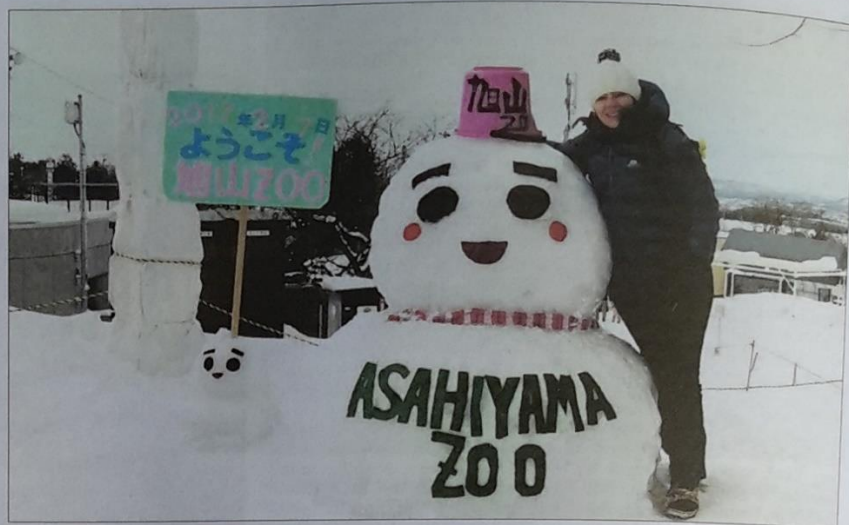
And, in fact, skiing powder does have some similarities to surfing. But let's not be too technical.

Hokkaido is dubbed as a powder-paradise, in skiers' jargon "japow", but there are actually many other ways to enjoy the snow.

The very landscape in winter is very appealing, and photographers find it most photogenic. One can relax in Onsen, at hot springs which are like an open air bath with snowy scenery around.

Even monkeys like to bathe in the hot springs during cold winter months. And it can be very cold indeed, with temperatures in the region of -20 C not uncommon at the height of winter.

But most fun in the snow-rich areas



■ The author at Asahi-yama Zoo (near Asahikawa).

of Japan provide their famous winter festivals (Yuki Matsuri) which are the very celebration of snow and cold.

The most famous one is the Sapporo Snow Festival, which is held in Hokkaido's capital during one week in February. It features around 200 spectacular snow and ice sculptures, buildings, castles, animals, etc.

This year among the fancy works even a head of Donald Trump made of snow was on display...

The sculptures are very detailed and as big as 25 m high. They are illuminated when dark, creating a truly magical display. During the festivals there is lots of entertainment for children and adults alike, snow slides, snow rafting, snowball fight competitions and many more.

After two days in Sapporo, I headed to Asahikawa, for the Asahikawa Winter Festival, which apparently is not quite as famous as the one in Sapporo, but is more popular with the locals.

I was lucky to be there for the official opening of the festival which was staged by Toshiba. It was an incredible laser, sound and fireworks display played on a huge snow stage 20m high and 130m wide, and truly mind blowing.

There was also a cultural programme, lots of activities and fun attractions for visitors, including an area where everybody could decorate their own snowman, and all this basically for free.

The Asahikawa Winter Festival also features an international ice sculpture competition held at a different location in the city.

Ice sculptors from all over the world compete in different categories, alone or in a team.

Using chainsaws and a few simple tools, they transform eight blocks of ice, each weighing 125kg and one meter high, into works of art of incredible beauty and for its completion each participant has two days only.

At night the sculptures are illuminated and the whole city is decorated with snowmen. All this can be admired as long as it lasts... it is only snow and ice!

● Kamilla Oliver is a resident of Somerset West, and will be sharing some more of her journeys and adventures to faraway places with Bolander readers in future editions.

Next up: Greenland...



■ The powder snow skiing in Japan is epic.



■ Ice sculptures are all over the city during the winter festival.



■ Penguins at Asahi-yama Zoo.

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