Another Perspective

My Lakeside Hideaway in Snow Country

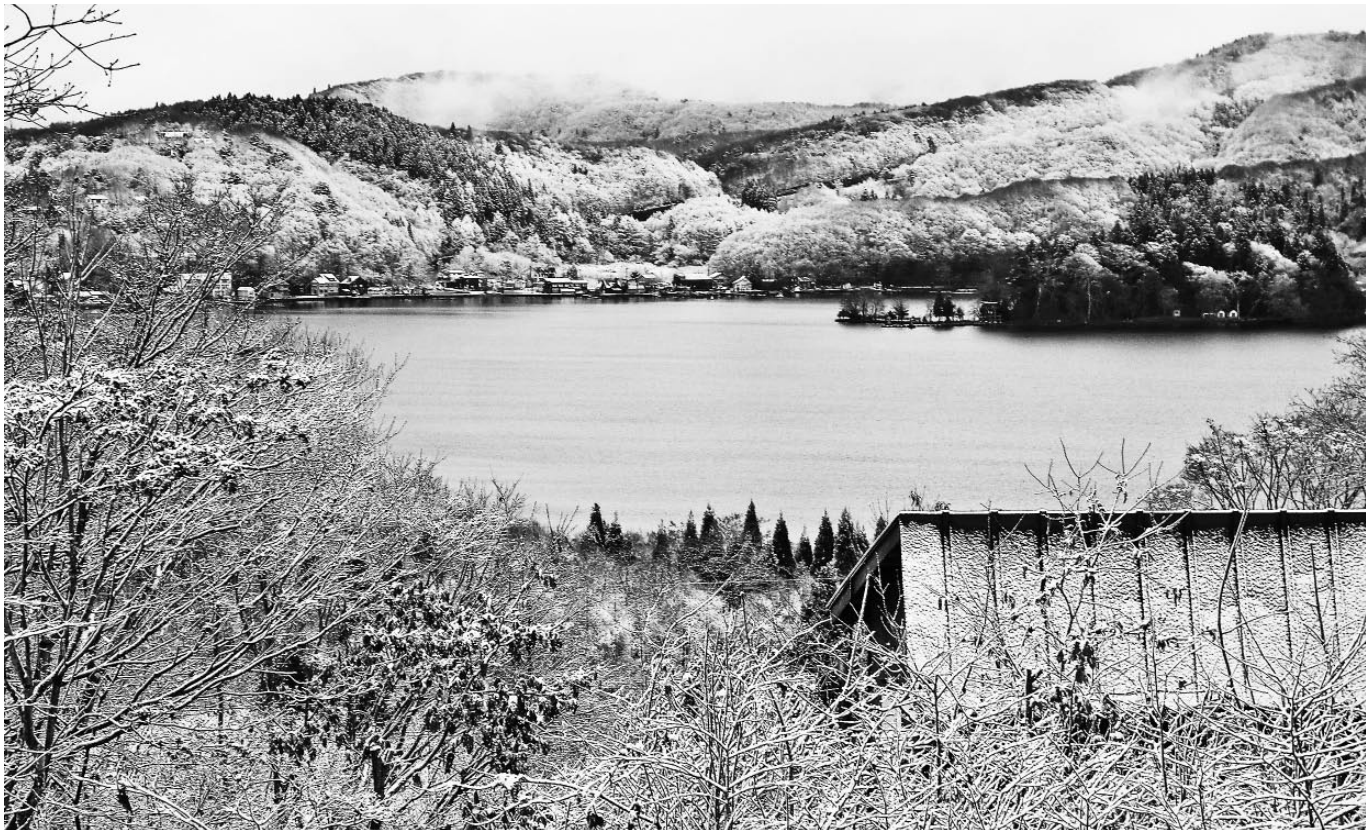
Tim Exley

During my many years in Japan, I'd often heard of the 'Snow Country' made famous by Kawabata and his book of the same name, and seen shots on TV of people shovelling meter-thick snow off their roof in winter as heavy snowfalls hit the Japan sea coast. However, despite travelling up and down the Japanese islands, I'd never visited this part of the archipelago until I recently had the opportunity to visit a friend's country cabin and experience a piece of living history. Little did I know that within 6 months I'd have my own mountain hideaway too!

Many people know that Karuizawa got its start as a summer getaway for foreign missionary families, but far less known is a second community, hidden away in remote Nagano, and still going strong since 1921. This community is the Nojiri Lake Association (NLA) on the shores of picturesque Lake Nojiri, the second biggest lake in Nagano Prefecture.

The NLA was born when a group of foreigners, shocked at the 'party town' Karuizawa had become (yes, even in the 1920s), decided to find a quieter place to spend their summers in a more pristine and tranquil environment, playing tennis, swimming, sailing and relaxing, away from the bustle and incessant tea parties. On finding Nojiri, they set about buying land and starting the community. At the beginning, facilities were basic; water came from springs at the bottom of the hill near the lake and many families slept in tents while waiting for their summer cabins to be built. Now, about 250 small, basic wooden cabins dot the wooded hillside, together with a small golf course, tennis courts, community hall, boat and swimming area.

Sitting at the base of Mt Madarao, with its back to the beautiful peaks of Iizuna (1900 m), Kurohime (2000 m) and the somewhat jagged Myoko (2400 m), Lake Nojiri is



Early snow at Lake Nojiri (Author)

Snow capped Mt Kurohime (Author)

roughly circular. The three peaks—all dormant volcanoes—make for a very beautiful sight; Iizuna and Kurohime are classic cones while Myoko is more broken and is part of a much bigger caldera. Not being too deep, the warm summer lake water is perfect for swimming and other watersports.

I got my lucky break in June 2008 when I was invited to help set up wireless Internet at a friend's cabin—heaven forbid, NLA was moving into the 21st century. We left Tokyo late morning and arrived mid-afternoon. When I saw Lake Nojiri, I was immediately reminded of other vacation lake communities, like Lake Tahoe in California or one of the many lakes in the English Lake District; different to be sure but with a similar atmosphere. In fact, it seemed very different to the lowlands of the Kanto Plain we'd just left behind and not at all like Honshu. The climate, open space and rounder mountains are more like Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. Best of all, it was cool and I could see sailboat sails flapping in the light breeze. This was good news, because I'd learned to sail at school, and couldn't wait to get out on the water.

Turning off the road by a wooded hill on the south side of the lake, we headed down a gravel track and I got my first glimpse of an NLA cabin—wooden and traditional, small and basic. We were lucky to have road access and could drive up to the cabin, because many cabins perched on the hillside and surrounded by trees, do not. Instead, a network of walking paths crisscross between them.

Entering the cabin, I felt I was stepping back in time. This cabin was built over 50 years ago with traditional straw roof and wattle-and-daub walls or *tsuchikabe* in Japanese. Small bunkroom out back for sleeping and two open lofts with futons.

Many in the community aptly call the cabins 'rustic.' Largely without connection to town water, most rely on standpipes or wells for water in summer. In winter, the community water is turned off and all water has to be carried in. Interiors are basic with simple panelling and no insulation, old exposed electrical wiring snakes across walls and over beams. Worst of all for some people might be the *botonchi* waterless toilets. Once widespread throughout rural Japan, they still live on in the NLA. Most simply open to the septic tank below, but a lucky few with well water have luxury units with minimal flush and a trapdoor to hide the view. After taking one look at a rental cabin, many a town dweller has fled to the nearest hotel for the duration of their stay. However, adapting to the quirks of NLA life is remarkably easy for the right personality. As rustic as they might seem, the cabins are the perfect escape for relaxing and taking it easy away from the noise, pollution and concrete of Tokyo or Osaka.

In fact, the whole area seems to be in a time warp. Spared the overdevelopment and urban sprawl of the 70s and 80s bubble years, there is a natural calm about a place where bears still roam the forests and the largest old-growth silver birch (*shirakaba*) still rustle in the cooling breezes.

Lake Nojiri and the cabins are a great place all year round, but turn up during July and August and you're in for a surprise, because 'the summer getaway season' has begun, just as it started 90 years ago.

As with all good things, owning a piece of paradise is not easy. A cabin cannot be bought, the community is held in trust and a cabin can only be obtained when a member leaves.

Lake Nojiri with Mt Myoko in distance (Author)

NLA cabin under maples (Author)

Placid Lake Nojiri in autumn (Author)

Rather than buying the property, an incoming member buys a share that includes the cabin. On top of that, entry requires spending 2 weeks in the community during the summer period, an interview, and recommendation by two members. Only then, after passing approval can you search out that elusive lakeside residence.

Fast-forward 6 months and now I'm the proud owner of my own Nojiri cabin for less than the price of a family car! Like all NLA purchases I don't really 'own' it and it doesn't have that wonderful lake view. But it already feels like home and is now my valued escape from the city. Once in the community, there's always the future possibility of trading-up to the sought after lake view. I can see that I'll be making the Nojiri area a big part of my life from now on. There's still a lot to discover; my next task is to search out a dinghy so I can rediscover the joys of being master of my own craft—even if it is less than 4-m long.

You might come to the lake to relax, but there's a lot to do and see. In summer, you can kick back, swim in the lake, and enjoy the cool northerly breeze blowing in from the Japan Sea. Using that breeze, go for a sail in your own boat or share with one of the many sailors in the NLA crowd. If you don't want to sail, you can take the picturesque passenger ferry and discover the lake or pedal a 'swan' boat out to the small island not far from Nojiri village. The island has a colonnade of beautiful tall pine trees leading to a small shrine and is a great place for a picnic.

The district is famous for its produce; at 500 m and more, the mild summer and autumn climate offers near-perfect growing conditions not found in many areas of Honshu. This

The author's cabin (Author)

is where some of Japan's best *soba* buckwheat is grown; in summer, delicate white flowering *soba* fields cover the landscape like early snow. From late spring to late autumn, local markets are full of produce not usually seen in the big cities. On walking into a market, I was surprised to find the fat, green-and-red stalks of rhubarb, taking me back to my childhood and school desserts of rhubarb crumble. Almost impossible to buy in Tokyo, rhubarb was introduced by local missionaries. Bicycle around the lake in summer and pick up fresh sweet corn, another local delicacy.

Close-by, the slopes of Mt Myoko have many hiking courses that can—with good planning—end at a free natural *rotenburo* open-air hot spring. For something more civilized, stop at Akakura Onsen and take a dip in one of the many hotel baths. Further afield is Togakushi, a beautiful small town famous for wickerwork. Nearby are the forbidding Togakushi cliffs and the very beautiful Togakushi shrine. According to Japanese folklore, the sun goddess is said to have hidden in a nearby cave.

Winter also offers many opportunities but you need to be prepared for some of the heaviest snowfalls in Japan. You'll need a good four-wheel drive vehicle for some of the more inaccessible parts, and make sure you have snow tyres or chains—minus zero temperatures are frequent even during the day. The area offers snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing as well as snowboarding and regular skiing and Mt Myoko boasts some of Japan's longest ski runs.

How about getting there? Nojiri is reached easily by car in 4 hours from Tokyo via the Kanetsu and Joshinetsu expressways, or in less than 3 hours using the Nagano Shinkansen to Nagano and the Joetsu Line to Kurohime Station.

If you want to know more about the NLA, go to: http://nlaweb.com. ■

Tim Exley

Mr Exley is an IT consultant living in Tokyo. He has a BSc in Genetics from Hertfordshire University. Prior to his current occupation, he was involved in biological research, photography and database consulting.