

So Very Niigata: Lerch and Reruhi

Skiing has long been one of the most popular winter activities the world over. But did you know that skiing has only been practiced here in Japan since 1911, and that it was first taught right here in Niigata? That's right, Niigata is the birthplace of Japanese skiing, and we owe it all to an Austrian soldier by the name of Theodore Von Lerch. And in 2009, Niigata created the character of Reruhi-san to honor and remember the man who brought skiing to Japan.

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Major Lerch



Born in Bratislava in what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Theodore Von Lerch looked to follow his father's footsteps in joining the army. He was noted for his sense of responsibility, leadership, and smarts, and in 1902 began to study skiing under Mathias Zdarsky, one of the founders of modern Alpine skiing.

Major Lerch first visited Japan in 1910 to study the Japanese army which had recently defeated Russia. While there, Japanese military leaders became interested in his skiing abilities, and commissioned him to teach Japan's first skiing lesson Mt. Kanaya in what is modern day Joetsu. He taught a unique one-pole skiing method to 14 students, and also made trips to teach to Hokkaido and even China.

Though many years have passed, his influence is still felt, especially in Niigata.

Reruhi-san



First appearing in 2009 to celebrate the upcoming 100th anniversary of the first ski lessons in Japan, Reruhi-san has become one of Niigata's most well-known and well-loved mascots, or *yurukyara*.

The character is advertised as being Major Lerch come back after 100 years to see how skiing had changed and grown in Japan.

Nowadays it's not uncommon to see Reruhi-san just about everywhere in Niigata, from posters to clothing and even at prefectural events! There's even a song about him and a festival to celebrate him in Joetsu, held every year in late January or early February.

Height: 2.7 meters

Likes: Skiing, fun things, and sledding

Dislikes: Swimming, dogs, and heights

Things to Do While the Weather is Cold: Skiing

Niigata is not only the birthplace of skiing in Japan, it also boasts some of the best slopes around. This winter, try getting out and experiencing some of the great skiing and snowboarding Niigata has to offer.

Akakuraonsen Ski Area and Akakura Kanko Resort

Akakura has long been well loved as one of Niigata's best winter sports. The Akakura Onsen Ski Resort is known as one of the finest combination onsen-skiing resorts in Japan, and the Akakura Kanko Resort has lots of fun opportunities for families with young kids, including a children's play area.

Open Until: April 5th (Akakura Onsen Ski Resort), May 6th (Akakura Kanko Resort)

Hours: 8:30-16:30 (Night skiing available at Akakuraonsen from 17:00-21:00 and until 22:00 on weekends)

Access: 25 minute bus ride from the JR Myoko Kogen Station.



Gala Yuzawa

One of the easiest slopes to access by train, Gala Yuzawa has 15 trails and an onsen nearby; the perfect recipe for a fun day and relaxing night.

Open Until: May 6th **Hours:** 8:00-17:00

Access: Immediately next to the JR Gala Yuzawa Station.

Ninox Snow Park:

Located on the western side of Mt. Ninoji, this snow park has a 3km long course for the more experienced guests, and plenty of other more manageable runs, making it a great place for beginners or families.

Open Until: Late March

Hours: Mon-Thurs: 8:30-21:00, Fri: 8:30-23:00,

Sat: 8:00-23:00 Sun: 8:00-21:00

Access: 20 minutes by car from the JR Shibata Station.

Ishiuchi Maruyama

This resort has a huge, wide open slope and ski area, along with a top of the line half pipe and snowboard area, meaning it's great for skiers and snowboarders of any level.

Open Until: April 5th **Hours:** 8:00-17:00 (Night pass available from 17:00-20:50 until March 22nd)

Access: 15 minutes by bus from the JR Echigo Yuzawa Station.

Mt. Naeba

Mt. Naeba actually has two different ski resorts, the Naeba Ski area and the Kagura ski area. By buying a shared ticket you can access both ski lifts, giving you an access to a whole 39 runs! The Naeba ski area also has the Naeba Prince Hotel, one of the biggest ski resort hotels in Japan.

Open Until: May 6th (scheduled) **Hours:** 8:00-17:00 (Night skiing available from 16:00-21:00)

Access: Shuttle busses available from the JR Echigo Yuzawa Station. Busses to Kagura take roughly 30 minutes, and 50 minutes to Naeba.

Ikenotaira

One of the friendlier ski areas in Niigata, Ikenotaira is great for everyone from experts to the very beginners! The ski slopes are impressively wide, and the park has three different terrain parks for skiers and snowboarders who want to test their skills.

Open Until: April 5th (scheduled) **Hours:** 8:30-16:30

Access: 15 minutes by bus from the JR Myoko Kogen Station



いただきます! Winter Dishes

No matter the country, winter is a time when people tend to like warm, filling foods. In America and Europe, that food tends to be soups and broths, filled with rich, hearty meat and vegetables. And Japan is much the same; ask any Japanese person what foods go best with winter and most will likely say “Nabe,” or “Oden,” two types of hot-pot soups that are just perfect for getting through those long winter nights in Niigata. Be sure to get your friends together and try some this winter!

Nabe



Nabe is a type of Japanese food, and many people have “nabe parties” with their friends to share the delicious meal. One nabe that is particularly popular in winter is “chanko nabe.” Often used by sumo wrestlers looking to bulk up, this nabe is filled with filling, healthy ingredients, and is sure to warm up any home on a cold winter night.

It makes for a great winter

Chanko nabe:

Water:	4 cups
Chicken soup stock:	3 tbsp
Salt:	1 tsp
Grated garlic:	3 to 5 pieces
Ginger paste:	2 tsp
Chinese cabbage:	5 leaves
Negi:	2
Shiitake mushrooms:	5
Deep fried tofu:	1 block
Enoki mushrooms:	1 block
Chicken thigh:	1
Garlic chive:	1/2 bag
Tofu:	1 block

Directions:

1. Add the water, soup stock, salt, garlic, and ginger paste to the pot and start warming it.
2. Cut all other ingredients into easy-to-eat sizes.
3. Add everything besides the garlic chives to the pot and cover.
4. Bring the mix to a boil on a high heat, then turn to down the flame and check if the ingredients are done.
5. Once the ingredients are thoroughly cooked, spread the garlic chives on top.
6. Add salt to bring out a deeper flavor, serve, and enjoy!

Fugu

Fugu is one of Japan’s more well-known dishes abroad, though not due its flavor. Rather, Fugu, a type of pufferfish, has become famous for the poison it carries. Supposedly, just one wrong move in the preparation process can cause death among anyone who eats it!

The truth is that, while the fugu fish does contain poison, it’s mostly concentrated in the liver, which is now illegal to

serve in Japan, and nearly all fugu-related incidents are due to regular people trying to prepare the fish on their own.

Though fugu can be eaten in a variety of ways, the most popular method is to eat it raw as *sashimi*. A thin knife is used to slice the fish into almost translucent slices. The meat has a very light taste and chewy texture that meshes well with a variety of sauces and sake. Try some this winter!



ALT Interview: Rebecca Rolston

Rebecca Rolston is currently an ALT on Sado Island.



sights I've ever seen.

Q) Do you have a favorite spot or thing to do in Niigata?

I have several favorite spots. One is at the Marutai restaurant here on Sado, a family owned place in Kanai that serves some of the best fried chicken I've ever had anywhere. It has a wonderful atmosphere and the owners are always happy to meet foreigners! Another is the Osado Skyline, the scenic drive that goes from Kanai to Aikawa along the Osado mountains in the north. Driving there in the late afternoon, watching the sun set over Mano Bay with my fiancé, was one of the most romantic things I've ever done.

Q) Why did you decide to come to Niigata?

I was sent to Niigata through the JET Program, and although I didn't choose it it's one of my favorite places in Japan!

Q) What was your first impression of Niigata and Japan? Has that impression changed?

My first impression was that I was going to be stuck in snow drifts half the time, but living on Sado Island I don't see the huge amount of snow I thought I was going to. Other than that, I wasn't expecting much because there weren't a lot of materials about Sado on the internet. Through being here I've found that Sado actually has a wide variety of great restaurants, beautiful shrines and temples, and some of the best nature to hike through. Driving in the Kuninaka region in the center and seeing the towering Mount Donden covered in snow is one of the most beautiful

Q) Did anything surprise you about life in Japan?

I think what I was surprised about was that life on Sado wasn't as isolating as I was expecting it to be. I've had a lot of fun exploring small shopping districts and living here nurtures your sense of adventure.

Q) Is there anything you really like about living in Niigata? And do you find anything difficult about living in Niigata?

One of the best things about living in Niigata is the people. The foreign community here is active and there are many fantastic events throughout the year. The Japanese people who live here as well are very friendly and welcoming, and have made my quality of life here a lot better. One of the difficulties is one thing many people on Sado struggle with: the ferry schedule. The two and a half hour ferry ride makes it difficult to

come to events on the mainland sometimes, and also difficult in getting back as the last ferry leaves at 7:30 pm.

Q) Have you shared any aspects of your own culture with the people in Niigata?

I have tried to share my culture, most often at school with my students and coworkers, but also with my Japanese friends that I've made here. I always wanted to more in the terms of sharing food, but visiting five schools a week makes it hard to prepare anything on a large scale, but soon during the spring break I've been thinking of doing something for my coworkers.

Q) What are your future plans?

My current future plans are to explore more of Japan during the spring school break with my fiancé. We want to go to Tokyo, the Kansai area, and Hiroshima.

Q) Do you have any advice for anyone else living in Japan?

The biggest advice I could ever give is to get involved in your local community and to make a good relationship with your coworkers. I feel like my life here has been greatly enriched by the people I've met, and I have learned more about my area and about fun activities to do from them than any guidebook could tell me.

If you would like to give an interview, please contact the Niigata International Association at:

nia21c@niigata-ia.or.jp

Things to Do While the Weather is Cold

Snow Festivals

Winter can be a rough time for many in Niigata; the long nights, cold temperatures, and especially the heavy snowfall can be quite trying for many of us. So it's important to find occasions to remember all of the fun snow can bring us! This winter, why not try attending some of Niigata's famous snow festivals!

Minamiuonuma Snow Festival

There will be something for everyone at this snow festival, with traditional local food on sale, winter fireworks, and a number of shows on the "snow stage". There will also be displays of "Kamakura," an ancient tradition where an alter to a deity is set up inside a snow igloo.

Dates and times: February 14th, 12:00-21:00; February 15th, 10:00-16:00

Location: Special location built beneath Muikamachi Bridge, Minamiuonuma

Access: 8 minutes on foot from the JR Muikamachi Station

The 66th Tokamachi Snow Festival

The Tokamachi Snow Festival began in 1950 based on the idea that snow was something to enjoy, not bemoan. Snow sculptures will be on display all over the city, and visitors can pick up a guide pamphlet to explore on their own or ride the festival bus which makes a loop around the city. Although it lasts for 3 days, the carnival and fireworks on Saturday night are generally considered the highlights. The carnival, held on an elaborate stage made of snow, will play host to a kimono fashion show, fireworks, and performances by Masatoshi Nakamura, Passpo, Haji→ and hy4_4yh. Be sure to dress warmly, since this festival is all outdoors! Detailed information is available in Japanese at <http://snowfes.jp/>

Dates : February 20th-22nd

Location: Various locations in Tokamachi; the snow carnival is held in central Tokamachi near the citizen's center (市民会館) and Tokamachi Elementary School.

Access: The snow carnival area is a 30 minute walk from the JR Tokamachi Station

Yuzawa Onsen Snow Festival

The Yuzawa Onsen Snow Festival has all kinds of things to enjoy, with the crowning of Miss Komako, portable shrines being carried in the snow, and an amazing fireworks display!

Dates and times: March 7th, 18:00~21:00 **Location:** Yuzawa Kogen Ski Area **Access:** a 15 minute walk from the JR Echigo Yuzawa station.

Tsunan Snow Festival

The Tsunan Snow Festival is held in conjunction with one of the most exciting events in Niigata, "SNOW WAVE," a snowboarding straight jump competition! The festival is also noted for the hundreds of paper lanterns set loose into the night sky.

Date: March 14th, 12:00-21:00

Location: Tsunan, Akinari 12300 (New Green Pia Tsunan)

Access: 20 minutes by car from the JR Tsunan Station.

Echigo Matsudai Fuyu no Jin

Though this festival has plenty of great things like stage shows, fireworks, food stalls, and a performance by Niigata's very own Negicco, the main draw is the race "Take Matsudai Castle!" where participants scramble over 10 obstacles on a 3km course to be the first to reach the castle. Entrance 3,000 yen, applications are accepted until Feb. 20th, and you can find instructions at

<http://www.tokamachishikankou.jp/matudai/event/fuyu/youkou.html>

Date: March 14th – 15th

Location: Tsunan, Akinari 12300 (New Green Pia Tsunan)

Access: 5 minute walk from the JR Matsudai Station



Events Calendar

Akatani Dontsuki Festival

Despite the festival's 700 year history, the Akatani Dontsuki Festival is still thought to be one of the strangest festivals in Japan. Men in the village who have entered their year of calamity (age 25, 42, or 61) gather together in the cold of Akataniyama shrine, clad only in fundoshi, a headband, and white socks, and jostle together all while yelling out. Visitors occasionally toss snow in too, and at the climax of the festival all the men grab the head priest of the temple and toss him into the air in celebration.

Dates and times: February 21st, 19:00~

Location: Kamiakatani Chinjuyuyama Shrine, Shibata

Access: 40 minute bus ride from the JR Shibata Station, followed by a 15 minute walk.

Ojiya Balloon Festival

Watch in amazement as a huge number of colorful hot air balloons majestically lift off into the sky! The main event is the Sea of Japan Cross Country Championship hot air balloon competition, but there are also fireworks and hot air balloon rides. Please note that there are two locations, and events vary with location.

Dates and times: February 28th to March 1st

Location: Nishinaka (hot air balloon competition) and Hirasawa (hot air balloon rides), Ojiya

Access: Shuttle buses operating from the JR Ojiya Station; 10 minutes by car to both locations from the Ojiya IC on the Kan-estu Expressway



The 15th Murakami Machiya Doll Festival

About 4,000 Hina-matsuri (Girls' Day) dolls from as far back as the Edo era will be displayed at about 70 old-fashioned houses throughout Murakami. Visitors can walk from house to house and see the displays. Admission is free and maps are available, plus participating houses will have signs in front to make them easy to identify.

Dates and times: March 1st to April 3rd; times vary with houses

Location: Various locations in Murakami

Access: 8 minutes by foot from JR Murakami Station, 6 minutes by car from the Murakami-Senami Onsen IC on the Nihonkai-Tohoku Expressway

Echigo Urasa Bishamon-do Naked Jostling Festival

Named one of the three strangest festivals in Japan, at the Naked Jostling festival crowds of half-naked men jostle each other in order to be the first to pay worship to Bishamon, the Buddhist god of war and wealth. Some men also carry giant candles weighing as much as 30 kg, so it's also called "Giant Candle Festival."

Date and times: March 3rd. There will be a children's parade and free rice cakes during the day. The jostling festival will go from 18:00 to 23:00

Location: Bishamon-do, Urasa Fukoji Temple grounds, 2495 Urasa, Minamiuonuma

Access: 5 minutes by foot from JR Urasa Station, 15 minutes by car on route 17 from the Koide IC or the Muikamachi IC on the Kan-etsu Expressway

Yamakoshi Bullfighting

The Yamakoshi bullfighting ring will be holding its first event of the year. Come and see powerful bulls face off in a thrilling clash of horns and strength. There will also be a festival running at the same time.

Date and times: March 7th, Grounds open at 10:00, event starts at 13:00 **Price:** 2,000 yen

Location: Yamakoshi Bullfighting arena, Yamakoshi Nanpei Area, Nagaoka

Access: 30 minutes by car from JR Nagaoka Station

Sake no Jin

Niigata's sake is well-known and well-loved all across Japan, and the Sake no Jin even gives sake lovers a chance to try dozens of different kinds of sake, all in the same day! Nearly all of the sake makers in Niigata will gather together to show off all of their delicious sake brands. And for just a few thousand yen, you get a free sake cup, and then can use that to go around to any booth and try a free sample of their delicious sake. This is not an event to be missed!

Date and times: March 14th, 10:00am-6:00p.m., 15th 10:00a.m.-5:00p.m.

Location: Toki Messe, 6-1 Bandaijima, Chuo-ku, Niigata City

Cost: 2000 yen for a ticket in advance, 2500 yen at the door. (Tickets only for 1 day)

Access: 15 minutes by bus from JR Niigata Station, take any bus headed to Sado Kisen (佐渡汽船) from platform 5 of the Bandai Bus Terminal (outside the Bandai exit) and get off at the Toki Messe (朱鷺メッセ) stop; 5 minutes by taxi from JR Niigata Station; 30 minutes by car from the Niigata-Nishi IC on the Hokuriku Expressway or 20 minutes by car from the Niigata-Kameda IC on the Nihonkai-Tohoku Expressway



Niigata Charity Musical: "The Frog Prince"

Every year, the Niigata Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (Niigata AJET) puts on a charity musical in English to raise money for a cause that they believe in. As a non-profit group, all of the proceeds from ticket sales go towards that goal. This year, Niigata AJET is working with Habitat for Humanity Japan to help build houses in the Philippines.

The participants (foreign residents working in Niigata) write an original script based on a famous fable or legend, create their own versions of some famous songs, choreograph entire dances, and build a magical world for the audience to enjoy.

This year's story is a creative and comedic retelling of *The Frog Prince*, featuring laughs a plenty, and songs and dances set to some of the best fits of the 1980s. Doors will open 30 minutes before the show starts, so be sure to get there in time!

For more information, see the AJET Charity Musical Website: <http://www.ajetniigata.com/frogprince/>

Tickets: 1,000 yen for adults, 500 yen for students (children under 5 are free)

Location	Date	Venue	Start Time
Joetsu	Sat., February 14	Region Plaza Concert Hall(リージョンプラザ上越)	7:00pm
Tokamachi	Sun., February 15	Kawanishi Community Center (千手中央コミュニティセンター)	2:00pm
Niigata City	Sun., March 15	Higashi-ku Plaza (東区プラザ)	2:00pm
Sado	Sat., March 8	Toki no Mura Genkikan (トキのむら元気館)	TBA

Any further questions can be e-mail to: niigatacharitymusical@gmail.com.

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