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Tōchaku Shimashita

You Have Arrived

Stealth Backcountry, Hokkaido, Japan
with The North Face

By Jesse Fox
Photos by Todd Easterbrook

Japan isn't a secret. Travelling to snowboard isn't unique.

From this side of the world, Japan in February resembles Coachella for snowboarders. Everyone flocks there to frolic in the deep, hockey stop in pow for the gram and overuse the hashtag #japow. Somehow, our eight-day Japanese excursion felt different.

British Columbia-based North Face ambassadors Ben Poechman, Taylor Godber, Johan Rosén and photographer Todd Easterbrook were invited to Stealth Backcountry lodge by owner/operator/guide, Chandler Kane. We knew little about where we were going and what to expect from the new-ish slackcountry operation based in Hokkaido. We just knew Chandler and his Stealth Backcountry operation offered something unique.

Our story isn't a laundry list of the mountains we rode, the food we ate, the weather we were handed. And it's not about the Japanese way of life (even though we could fill pages about the people who approach every exchange and action, both mindful and deliberate. And the culture that bleeds kindness and consideration. The thoughtful welcoming nature that seems to be embedded deep in the core of every Japanese person we met along the way. Or the flavours of the food that nourishes and satisfies. The onsen ritual that acts as a reset for the soul... I digress, like I said, our story isn't about those things). This is a story about connection and the simple pursuit of floating in powder that connected us to this place and each other. Too deep? Let's start at the beginning.

Taylor is a treat. You'd be pressed to find a nicer and more genuine human in this world. But don't let that shit fool you. Taylor is a beast. Willing to hike hours for lines and turns that most wouldn't step to. The timing of this trip took us to Japan during one of the worst snow winters they've had in half a century. If this is bad we can't imagine how it looks when it's good.

Taylor Godber



Life's Too Short

Long before Stealth Backcountry was a thought, Chandler Kane was a California kid in the '90s. His parents watched the movie *White Christmas* and decided to take him to Vermont. Chandler had his first snowboarding experience at Suicide Six ski hill in Southern, Vermont. He wore Sorel boots, a Starter brand jacket over a lux pair of Obermeyer bib pants which his parents scored at Goodwill. He saw future legends, Jake Burton and Randy Gateno, riding in the trees. And he caught his heel edge so badly he broke his tailbone, "I couldn't let my dad know that happened," Chandler recalls. "I just kept riding. That was it, my first time snowboarding, our *White Christmas*." Then he and his family flew back to California.

In 1993 Chandler's family moved to Boston, he was a sophomore in high school and landed a job at Underground Snowboard shop. At the time it was the largest snowboard dealer in the country. There, he was given a crash course in the culture he was already infatuated with. He became a hot-shit salesman, earning awards for the volume of boards he was moving. More importantly, he now had a crew of snowboarding coworkers. And the shop provided passes to all of the surrounding resorts. "It was just perfect timing," Chandler remembers, making the decision that "snowboarding was going to be my outlet. So, my parents let me do it. Every weekend I got in a car at 16 years old and would drive for hours to Maine, or Vermont, or New Hampshire." These years connected Chandler to snowboarding for good.

Fast-forwarding through time Chandler made it back to California gripped with the enticing boom of snowboarding in the '90s. He called Mammoth his home mountain, worked a few jobs in the industry, helped friends start a heli operation, and connected with current and future legends of the board. And then tragedy struck. When Chandler's father passed from cancer, his world changed forever. At that same time, the Sierra Nevada mountain range had one of the worst snow years in history. In troubled times we've come accustomed to leaning on snowboarding for distraction, grounding, guidance. Chandler needed an escape. He needed the outlet his father encouraged him to embrace.

During this winter, Chandler was following the exploits of the Drink Water crew (Bryan Fox, Tim Eddie and the Japanese hosts they were with) travelling in Japan. "I was watching Instagram." He remembers, "They weren't saying exactly where they were, but they were riding pow every day for two straight weeks." Chandler super-sleuthed the feed. He scoured geotags of the people they met along the way, made notes, crossed referenced maps, timelines, and based on his findings pieced together a Japanese powder treasure map. Claiming, "life's too short." He needed a taste. He contacted a handful of friends, saying, "I'm leaving in eight days. Are you in?" And four friends said, yes.



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This Must Be The Place

During this trip, after an unbelievable day ripping through A-grade Japanese powder, Chandler's having a celebratory cigarette outside the resort lodge next to an 85-year-old Japanese man, the man starts the conversation.

Man: "You like powder?"

Chandler: "I like powder."

Man: "You like to stay in Japanese farmhouse?"

Chandler: "...Yes I do."

"So," Chandler recalls. "The man makes a phone call and then he draws me a map and that's when I found this place." Chandler was the first Western guest at the farmhouse in eight years.

On Chandler's first day riding (at a resort that is not to be named), he met Kazushi Yamauchi, the Japanese riding legend known as 'Orange Man.' Orange Man took him around for the next three days and that was it. The rest is history. He was forever connected to Japan and the Hokkaido area.

For the next few years, Chandler would travel to the farmhouse bringing friends and guests under the caveat: no tagging, no sharing locations. As this place is still somewhat unknown. On a planet you can circumnavigate from any screen with a connection, secret stashes are rare. It's almost laughable to think you can hide anything, but there's no harm in trying. Chandler explains, "This is a special place, it's real, and you feel the authenticity of the people. The snow is second to none and here you feel truly away." He's right. And it's clear as day that a massive influx of douchebags would fuck that up. What we felt here was a complete departure from the North American resort life we're a custom to. Chandler is right when he says, "Everything slows down here. There's no powder panic, there's no bullshit. When you encompass that with the people, the culture, the food and the lodging, it's like nothing I've ever experienced." After a few years of coming here Chandler made the leap turning his experiences into a business, offering it to others to enjoy. He decided to rent the farmhouse for the next two winters. "They thought I was crazy" Chandler didn't have any bookings, he operated on the instinct that others would appreciate this experience and feel the connection to something special.

"This is a special place, it's real, and you feel the authenticity of the people. The snow is second to none and here you feel truly away."

- Chandler Kane



[o] Keegan Rice

Enter The Powder Dojo

February 9th, 2020. After two days of travel, we arrived at the red-roofed 80-year-old Japanese farmhouse that captivated Chandler's life. It lives on an unassuming farm road on the outside of a small Hokkaido city. A narrow river runs through the property where the adjoined cafe backs onto. Here at the cafe; friendly, young, hip Japanese women prepare the most delicious and nourishing meals imaginable. Farm to table isn't a marketing hook or mentioned. The Dojo lives on a working farm, they cook with local ingredients, bake their own bread, roast their own coffee. And the combination of these uplifting aromas mixed with the warmth of a fire stove, while shoeless on creaky wooden floors that have been worn soft for almost a century solidify this cafe as the cosiest place in existence. We collectively experience immediate connection. The Dojo's sleeping corners connect guests with a communal bar, kitchen and a small stretching area. If we had known that a future of strict social distancing was coming we would have lapped up the close accommodations a little more.

In a time where people are tripping over themselves to accentuate authenticity it's something that comes naturally at Stealth Backcountry. "I'm the only operator in all Hokkaido that has a 100 per cent Japanese staff." Chandler claims, "They're born and raised here, they trust me, and we're a family. We feed off one another and they know I have the respect of this Valley and community." Humbly admitting, "Without them there is no Stealth Backcountry. I am not the boss, I'm not the owner, I'm a piece of the puzzle and there's eight other pieces of that puzzle and that's the staff."

CHANDLER KANE [o] Pascal Shirley



Ben is constantly looking for the next thing to ride, always making something happen on and off his board. His energy and optimism constantly reminds me of why I love snowboarding. He'll hit everything in his path then turn around and build something, hike something, keep going until there's no daylight or nothing left in the tank. He makes snowboarding look effortless and fun. The way snowboarding is meant to be.

BEN POECHMAN, *Frontside 720.*





“Life seems both like a logical evolution and an ancient way of being at the same time.”

Guided By Gurus

Our guides for the week were known to us as Sharkboy and Junior. Professional snowboarders in their golden years guiding tourists to the goods. Early every morning we would meet in the parking lot of someplace new. They'd always be early, we'd always be late, and we'd pull up to see Sharkboy and Junior stretching, smiling ready to take us on another adventure. Our days were spent hiking, scoping, riding. Après was spent relaxing in an Onsen, lingering in restaurants, and soaking up the culture alongside our new friends. Sharkboy and Junior didn't speak much English, we spoke far less Japanese. We communicated just fine though. Snowboarders are similar, our years of experience world's apart have connected us. With communal understanding of conditions, terrain, and features, we trusted they would lead us to ideal spots to document what we needed. Sharkboy and Junior were patient, kind, and they turned their snowboards in ways we had never seen before. Long drawn-out carves that accentuated the slope. Like water instinctively finds the path of least resistance. The way they rode reshaped my understanding of what it is to ride a snowboard. It made my smash and thrash mentality of pillaging powder to see snow fly seem so neanderthalic.

It was obvious to see the snow and mountains connected people in this valley. Driving by a school we saw a group of children no older than six hiking a small hill in the yard being taught how to ski. The Japanese are as passionate as the tourists here, "I care about the culture." Chandler says, "Snowboarding and powder, is one component, but I'll take you on a cultural aversion tour every single day," noting that "It's just different here and it may or may not be for everyone and we don't want it to be for everyone." We can't imagine who it wouldn't be for. The Japanese way of life seems both like a logical evolution and an ancient way of being at the same time. If you can—experience it for yourself.



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We hiked across a dam, up a riverbed, around the bend, and from the bottom of a slope we saw these two trees perfectly teepeed. Ben went to investigate and found a perfect launch opportunity to blast this Method. One of the many photos he took home as souvenirs.

BEN POECHMAN, *Method*.

Addicted to the Experience

Snowboarding is a perpetual source of motivation for exploration. Trips like this keep it fresh.

And anyone who's been on an adventure like this knows that there's a bond you'll share with those on the mission that you'll have for a lifetime. When having to leave Japan and our new friends, there was an immediate sense of loss. Knowing that our time here would be hard to top, difficult to replicate. These connections are common for those visiting Stealth Backcountry's Powder Dojo. When perfect powder mixes with proper people it's special. Seeing these experiences play out in people's lives has become an obsession for Chandler. "Watching my guests make the best of their life, whether they're 20 years old or 20-year snowboarders." He's seen this place transform others as it did to him. "You know, they come here and their life is changed." Making connections to this place, the culture, the mountains has become the driving force for Chandler. His motivation is our reward. "I burn memories in people's heads forever. And that's why I do it." Chandler solidifies his conviction. "I sacrificed a lot to do this. And I'll do this for the rest of my life. In this Valley. Until I'm dead."

"I sacrificed a lot to do this. And I'll do this for the rest of my life. In this Valley. Until I'm dead."

- Chandler Kane

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Thanks to:

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Johan hums when he eats. The more he hums, the more you know he's enjoying it. I can't hum or sing so I just yelled when Johan piloted this perfectly placed handdrag before falling 20 feet into a deep steep pitch. Johan makes snowboarding look good.

JOHAN ROSEN, *Hand Drag*.