

A pillar or a portal? Afternoon sunlight finds a hole in the clouds and spreads warmth on the trees below.

---

# GARDEN OF THE GODS

---

AN ORANGE DREAM IN  
CENTRAL HOKKAIDO

Words, Photos and Captions Colin Wiseman

“It’s a sun pillar,” Yama-san says. “A portal?” Tim Eddy replies. “A pillar,” Shark Boy confirms.

Maybe you’ve seen a sun dog before, the atmospheric interaction between frozen water crystals and low-angle sun that produces ethereal columns of effervescent light. This isn’t one of them. This is something grander in scale. It dwarfs the lower slopes of Asahidake, the distant peaks of Daisetsuzan National Park. Behind us, Hokkaido’s tallest mountain crackles and roars and belches steam thousands of feet into the air, as it has all day under cold blue skies. The pillar beckons above a bank of low clouds. Yama will show us the way.

**KAZUSHI YAMAUCHI**, better known as “Orange Man” or “Yama-san,” is a snowsurfing legend on Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido. He’s been leading us around the mostly agrarian expanse of North Pacific volcanic soil, chilled to perfection by the January jet stream. Hailing from Asahikawa and the heart of the Daisetsuzan mountain range, Yama moves in yogic breath, whether hiking, riding, or simply observing. Arms spread wide he taps gravity with little wasted effort. In through the nose, out through the mouth, left then right down the path of least resistance. Always clad in orange from head to toe, he rides an orange-sprayed swallowtail in the 180-something-centimeter range and drives a small orange van decked out in car danchi fashion with prayer flags under the back hatch. It’s hard to miss in a parking lot.

Yama and his main man Hayato Doi—aka “Shark Boy”—are our guides, hired by Chandler Lee Kane to show itinerant foreigners the goods of central Hokkaido with the outfit known as Stealth Backcountry. Both Yama and Shark Boy used to send—they’d ride halfpipes, catch air, launch cliffs, grab their boards and spin. But not so much

anymore. Now in their 40s with wives and children, they’re more about hiding in the trees and finding the deep, followed by a good curry, a good stretch, and a good night’s sleep. Yama asks in thickly accented English why we are in such a hurry. If you’re racing up the mountain, they’ll let you go ahead and meet you at the top of the bootpack or skintrack. Maybe intentionally, maybe unintentionally, it feels like spiritual guidance. Slow down, breathe. Be here now. This is central Hokkaido, way north, and there’s plenty of Siberian-borne cold smoke to go around. Even during this “bad” snow year.

Back home, at least for me, it’s dumping. A foot or more per day at Baker. A slow start had led to a deep-as-it-gets early January. Does it matter? We’re here, now, with Tim and Hannah Eddy, over from their home in Tahoe. Niseko sender Daisuke “Dice-K” Watanabe. Filmer Danny Kern. Young Aussie Jye Parkinson. Then George Plsek, Reagan West and Jeremy Bryant from southern California, with Chandler behind the wheel of the big white van with tinted windows, Grateful Dead on loop, scouring icy roads for that day’s turns.



**RIGHT**  
In a display of generational Hokkaido style, Young Niseko-ite Daisuke Watanabe channels the orange vibes of Hayato Doi (aka “Shark Boy,” middle) and Kazushi Yamauchi (aka “Orange Man,” right) in the Asahidake parking lot.





Toward the end of the trip, we visited a small, off-the-beaten-path resort. Yama and Shark Boy took us off the backside where Daisuke "Dice-K" Watanabe found a few airs through the low-tide bamboo.



On our second day at Asahidake, we traversed into a few steeper ridges and Hannah Eddy enjoyed her first turn.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
A trip to Japan wouldn't be complete without a high-end sushi dinner. Chandler Lee Kane and a plate of jumbo toro.

Daisuke Watanabe, Reagan West, and Tim and Hannah Eddy try to channel Yama-san's flexibility.

Young Australian Jye Parkinson spends his winters in Niseko and is fully tapped into Hokkaido snowsurf style. Afternoon slash at Asahidake.

Shark Boy on the throttle in the Asahidake backcountry.

Although the snowpack was too low to ride many lines near this abandoned vacation resort, the onsen-fed footbath may have been worth the trip. Dice-K, Tim and Hannah warm their toes after a walk in the Central Hokkaido cold.

Yama-san on piste and in the groove.

**CHANDLER HAD INVITED** this diverse crew to join him on a Stealth tour back in the fall, to stay in a 100-year-old remodeled farmhouse, to find the deep with Yama and Shark Boy. Originally from Newport Beach, CA, Chandler worked in a Boston snowboard shop during high school, then went west for college in Los Angeles. He moved to Mammoth and helped launch the Unbound terrain park in the early 2000s. He switched his focus to health care and medical sales for 15 years, still holding that Mammoth season pass. Then, in late 2013, inspired by *The Pathology Project* and following the death of his father, Chandler made his first soul-searching pilgrimage to Hokkaido with a handful of friends. He ran logistics, seeking to get off the beaten path. On that trip, he met Yama in a gondola, discovered the farmhouse hostel/restaurant, and saw the potential for something more.

"Yama and Shark Boy would always take good care of us when we were here," Chandler says. "For a week or two they would literally ride with us all day, every day and we became really good friends. They would come out and visit me in California. We would go surf Baja, chase powder in Mammoth, travel together to the [Gerry Lopez] Big Wave Challenge [at Mt. Bachelor, OR]. Long story short, I flew out here in the fall and met with the lodge owners as well as Yama and Shark Boy and proposed the idea of paying them daily to go snowboarding, onsen after, eat chocolate cake and coffee and basically treat them as well as I could."

In 2017, Stealth Backcountry was born. Yama and Shark Boy hustle six days per week from the first Saturday after Christmas through the end of February, leading like-minded souls into the forested highlands of central Hokkaido. Chandler runs marketing and logistics and

guides, too. He doesn't get a lot of sleep, but he loves it. In the spring, he flies back home to Leucadia, where he earns a living selling a self-invented "consumer product" and prepping for the next winter. So then, why do it? Why not just chase powder on your own?

"I do it for the joy," Chandler says. "I've had everyone from your traditional snowboard, ski bum that lives in the mountains to billionaires. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, the joy that I see in people's faces when they take their first deep run in Japan, the joy from going to 7-Eleven and pulling out all the weird food, going to sushi with the crew—Japan is a different, wild place and it's not your run-of-the-mill ski-trip experience. It's definitely hard to be away from my daughter for nine or 10 weeks, but I do like to think I'm providing a good example to her on chasing your dreams. In the end, I do it to spread joy."

**DESPITE THE GOOD VIBES,** I can't help but wonder if this is a particularly difficult year to spread that joy. We spend the first day cruising the local resort, dipping into a few tree stashes. There's knee-deep powder, but a thin snowpack has reduced the amount of rideable terrain. It's tough to find untracked lanes. On a big year, I imagine this resort would hold waist-deep top-to-bottom burners, but due to an ill-positioned jet stream, we'll have to settle for wide-open groomers and occasional jaunts into the woods. It's a great day on-hill, but not the ultra-deep Hokkaido standard that Japanese veterans have come to expect. Still, the crew meshes well, the onsen is hot and healing, and the onigiri (seaweed-wrapped, stuffed rice triangles) from Seven & i Holdings (Japan's ubiquitous convenience store) provide ideal fuel.



Tim Eddy lays into a frontside hack on the edge of Asahidake's crater towards the end of a perfect day.



#### TOP TO BOTTOM

A clear blue day from sunrise to sunset is the ultimate rarity atop Hokkaido's tallest mountain of Asahidake. Here, Tim Eddy (front), Hannah Eddy (middle) and Daisuke Watanabe (back) tour toward the fumaroles in the very active caldera of a volcano that last erupted in 1739.

Yama-san's frontside flow on display in the Asahidake sunshine.

On the second day we head for Asahidake. After dropping the SoCal quartet at the lifts, Orange Man leads the media crew back down the road in his orange van, up a fissuring mountain road all the way to the end, where we find an abandoned summer resort with snow blowing through its glass double doors and up its escalators. Unfortunately, the steep lines above still show a bit too much bamboo. So we return, buy a one-ride ticket, and find our way into the tram and up through the clouds.

By 3 p.m., we're going right. The snow, knee-deep at first, is so light that a snowboard's nose will flow under the surface until it reaches speed and brings you on plane, like a speedboat on the throttle. It must be why Yama and Shark Boy ride those big, spoon-nosed sleds—in central Hokkaido, it's all about surface area and hydrodynamic lift. We find a gully and the snow deepens. The sun pokes through, an orange glow on the southwestern horizon. It gets dark early here near the 44th parallel in the thick of winter. One run and we're done, finding our way back to the farmhouse after dark.

The next day we set our sights again on Asahidake, this time leaving earlier, riding the single tram all day, following Yama and Shark Boy down a gully to the left, then the right, then a small hike into a ridge-line beyond any tracks. Still, we can't see more than a few hundred yards. Tim's been here before and knows the area a little. He says there's a steeper pitch to the right. We follow him while Yama and Shark Boy bring up the rear, waiting their turn to drop in and flow, finally leading the long traverse out near sundown.

Returning to town late, not many restaurants are open. After a few laps around the block, Chandler locates a hole-in-the-wall establishment, maybe eight tables and pictures of various soup curries to choose from. Hanging on the wall are a couple of thrift-store prints with a classic caricature riding a broomstick. The seats hold stuffed pillows with cat-themed covers. A stout older woman works the kitchen slowly, smiling cheerfully as she presents homestyle Hokkaido fare. On the way out, we ask about the interior design theme. "I am a witch," she replies with a laugh. The riding's been getting better each day, but I wonder if she can brew up clear skies and pillow lines.

**THE SUN HASN'T QUITE** crested the western horizon, but we're up and ready to go. A single benign cloud fades from orange to blue-gray above a snow-covered orchard, with the steeps of Mount Tokachi, only accessible via splitboard, beckoning beyond. The smell of a wood fire and tobacco smoke mingle as we load the van. It's negative 17 degrees Celsius. A bluebird day is rare during the central Hokkaido winter, especially in mid-January.

Soon we're driving northwest, bound once again for Asahidake. Chandler squints into the sun as he negotiates a skating-rink high-

way, occasional glimpses of the 7,519-foot volcano drawing closer by the minute.

We reach the parking lot a touch after 9 a.m. The scent of sulfur permeates the air. At the top of the 15-minute tram ride, a small roll hides the crater and we quickly ascend. The volcano last erupted in 1739. Approaching the fumaroles, it feels ready to pop again at a moment's notice. Our group of 12 pauses for a photo, then we split into two parties as the Californians make for lift-accessed powder lines while the rest of us head straight for the crater. Donning a face mask, I follow Tim and Hannah right below a towering fumarole. It's one of many vents, which send pungent steam billowing upward with a crackling flourish, drifting in the ever-changing wind. I wonder if we should be here, if this could possibly be safe. But we aren't the only folks treading the edge of cold snow and hot earth, watching the primal source of so many onsens down below display the magnitude of its tectonic power.

Danny and I remain in the crater while the rest of the crew begins hiking. We'd originally hoped for a summit, but the top looks stripped of snow by arctic winds. They settle for a gully on the western ridge. Tim drops first, opening a hole in the snowpack in his wake, then Hannah and Dice-K follow gingerly. The wind shifts easterly, and the line disappears behind a cloud of volcanic vapor. Several minutes later, Yama cruises out of the mist, followed by Shark Boy and Jye. We pause for a final moment in the belly of the crater, then make our way to lower ground and better snow, spending most of the day milking a small slope of cold, consolidated powder.

By 3:30, we've tracked out most of the good lines. We follow Yama and Shark Boy out of the calder to the east, seeking a final descent before darkness falls. And there, the portal.

A stratovolcano, Asahidake is known as Kamui-mintara, or the "garden where gods play," to the indigenous Ainu people. It feels like a divine presence is calling us down from this rarest of bluebird days high on the mountain. We traverse a rock-strewn panel to a powder-filled gully and point it for a broad plateau. Yama tells us to stay in his track then takes the lead on his trail-breaking 186. Arms wide open, he traces mellow downhill contours into a globe of obscured warm light. The slope blends seamlessly into the cloud cover, steepening just a bit. We follow one by one, alone and together on the mountain, gliding through an orange dream. ▲

*Arigato gozaimasu to Chandler Lee Kane, Yama-San, Shark Boy and Stealth Backcountry. Chandler just bought his own farmhouse-style lodge for future tours, with backcountry riding potential right out the door. To book your own Hokkaido powder tour, visit [stealthbackcountry.com](http://stealthbackcountry.com).*