

## ON THE WAY UP

In a recent study by leading global provider of sports insights, Nielsen Sports, Japan has seen the second highest growth rate in cycling interest globally, second to the Hong Kong market. Popularity has jumped from 14% in 2013 to 21% in 2017.

Niseko's leading cycle rental and retail store, Rhythm Japan, is one of the many businesses in the region witnessing and nurturing the cycling culture. Andy Meadows, Assistant General Manager and key facilitator in their cycling business, has seen the growth first-hand with their fleet of cycles expanding from a humble 15 to more than 130 in six years. "There's a big cycling scene going on here now—road cycling and mountain biking, with most of our business being rentals," Meadows says.

The clientele is as diverse as it is in winter with visitors from across Asia, Australia, some from Europe and a slightly higher domestic market in the summer. Meadows believes part of the increased interest stems, surprisingly, from deep winter.

"For the customers coming over here, who in the winter know the restaurants and the area, they want to understand what it looks like in the summer. It's the curiosity of people to see the different aspects of Niseko," Meadows explains.

The majority of those heading into store for rentals are beginners, and not just kids either. First-timers of all ages who have never sat on a bike saddle are welcomed with open arms, encouragement and top-quality gear.

“ The key word is freedom ”

Second to those are the fanatics headed here with only one thing on their mind. They are familiar with the exhilaration of going downhill by powder skis and this feeling flows across to cycling.

"When you speak to cyclists, the closest thing they get to powder is to ride a bike. It's the descending, coming down off the back of a mountain, along roads or a mountain bike trail. It gets your heart racing," says Meadows, who himself is a keen mountain biker.

## FREEDOM TO EXPLORE

Therein lies part of the appeal of jumping on a bike—its inclusiveness. Embracing this philosophy is UK-based Freedom Treks, specialising in cycling holidays world-wide. Niseko-based Country Manager for Japan, Kenji Matsuzawa, saw a gap in the market for cycling holidays for the non-athlete. "Niseko is the perfect destination for families or leisure tourists but no one was doing cycling holidays," Matsuzawa explains. "We focus more on the average customer, those who enjoy skiing or snowboarding in Niseko but are not serious athletes. It's cycling and sightseeing, not about how many miles per day."

Accommodation, transfers, breakfast and self-guided cycle maps are all part of the package, designed to give ease but also choice. The liberty of a bicycle is undoubtedly one of its biggest drawcards in the age of the individual. It's worlds apart from the, paradoxically, restrictive nature of a car.

"The key word is freedom," Matsuzawa says. "Cycling enables customers to choose wherever they want to go or whenever they want to stop. There are so many breathtaking views that only cyclists can enjoy because they cannot be reached by car. There is a satisfaction in that."

With the growing infatuation with curated holidays combined with the autonomy of cycling, it seems to be resonating with visitors with local self-guided and tailored day tours both increasing in popularity.

Photo: Rhythm Japan

