

The Japanese call it “mi-te mi-na-i fu-ri” but it’s a phrase you will rarely hear, as to say it would be to acknowledge its existence. And if it isn’t spoken of, then it agreed by most that it cannot possibly exist.

Roughly translated, the phrase means “voluntary blindness” and anyone who has ever boarded a train in Tokyo will recognize the symptoms of the temporary optical deficiency. The drunken salaryman singing karaoke to himself cannot be seen; the young couple kissing by the sliding doors are not really there; the horse reading the book is just a figment of everyone’s imagination. The horse? Eh?

In an experiment to test Japanese reactions to abnormal behaviour I travelled around Japan wearing a horse’s head. This type of eccentricity in a land of such strict conformity produced some interesting results – I became invisible. From the boutiques of Tokyo’s fashionable Ginza district to the freezing slopes of the ski resorts in the west I was unseen, unnoticed. Unbelievable. To stand out so far in this country is to go full circle: extreme cannot be seen and so you blend in.



*In the centre of Shibuya, Tokyo’s shopping hub*

“Japanese people will not laugh at first,” says Takahashi, the guide for my trip to Nagano, “but when you tell them that you are playing a joke they will laugh.” And so it proved. After I explained the reasons for my somewhat unusual behaviour the natives did seem to see the funny side, though their funny side may have been a different side from the one that I was seeing.



*Buying a ticket on the busy Tokyo underground system*

In the Olympic city of Nagano the snow is fresh and unrelenting and it's time for a gallop on the famous Happo One slopes. The snowboarding is what I came here for, the equine antics just a sideline. But when the ski-lifts are full and it's a long wait in the queue, the horse proves to be a more than adequate tool for jumping to the front. Teenagers wearing the latest ski gear step aside for the man sporting the horse's head just in case he turns out to be a wild one, or even a terrorist. No-one is up for confrontation. There are no raised eyebrows, no recognition. Politeness combined with voluntary blindness – it's a society perfectly balanced for the overconfident foreigner to abuse.



*The horse in action on the slopes in Nagano*

It's not easy snowboarding when you are only able to see through a horse's mouth (I now know how it feels for a horse to wear blinkers) and I soon tumble to the ground. Offers of help are fairly uncommon on the selfish ski-slopes nowadays, so dressed as I am there are none. I almost forget that I have ceased to exist. But then I hear some familiar English and the words "Get out of the way, you dickhead!" bring me to my feet. Within seconds I am surrounded by a group of Australians, all screaming "Hey look. It's a horse!" and no-one feeling the need to ask me "Why?" It's nice to be appreciated again.

"You should practise with that thing tomorrow," says Jamie from Melbourne, "the runs are empty after the weekends." The Japanese are famous for their long working hours and short holidays, so trips away for two nights and one day are pretty standard. You can have the slopes to yourselves during weekdays as the salarymen wouldn't dream of taking a day off to "play". "But you should be careful," Jamie warns me. "They eat horse sashimi in this prefecture."

But not in my hotel. I tuck in to a delicious dinner of fresh fish and vegetables, including a curious side dish of octopus that has only just stopped wriggling. The only raw horse was the area of skin where I had fallen.

Aching bones and bruised egos can be revived in one of the many natural onsens dotted around the area. It is possible to spend an entire evening sitting outside in a steaming hot bath while the fine powder snow settles around you. If only I could fall so gently.

A few days later and I am back on the train to Tokyo, attracting unwanted stares from frozen schoolchildren who are forced to wear shorts in the winter. Without my equine attachment I too feel vulnerable. I have again become visible. A mother spies my snowboard and strikes up a pidgin conversation about ski areas "Did you went to Hakuba?" she asks me. I tell her that I did, and so she takes out a pen and paper, and explains how the resort got its name. "The first character, ha-ku, means white, and the second character, ba, means horse. Because the mountains look like a horse shape." Perhaps this explains why I wasn't so noticeable after all.



*One last jump before the sun sets ...*



*then it's time to head back to the stable.*