



# Ski by Shinkansen

*An idea from track maintenance workers leads to the first ski resort in the world connected to a shinkansen.*

Courtesy: GALA YUZAWA SKI RESORT

"The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky". — Snow Country, a novel by Nobel Prize winner, Yasunari Kawabata, opens with this famous phrase. Back in Kawabata's time, people travelled to Echigo Yuzawa by night train. Now, they go by the Joetsu Shinkansen from Tokyo Station, but the scenery has not changed. After leaving the tunnel, a blanket of snow still greets visitors from the train window. Before long, the train arrives at Gala Yuzawa Station. Visitors get off, ride up the escalator, and walk through the ticket gate, which is connected directly to the ski resort reception area. At the bottom of the area, there is a rental shop with the latest equipment, including Rossignol and Salomon. Visitors use the locker room, change into a ski suit, and take the ski lift up the slope. GALA YUZAWA is the first ski resort in the world connected to a Shinkansen station.

"What about extending the Shinkansen to the base of a mountain and constructing a ski resort there, so customers could ski straight after leaving the train?" suggested seven workers at JR East—GALA YUZAWA is based on their bright idea.

These seven men were track maintenance workers when they had this idea. They enjoyed skiing and often spent their holidays skiing together. On one of these occasions, the idea of connecting a ski resort to a Shinkansen station

came up in casual conversation.

GALA YUZAWA is located on Mt. Takatsukura, 3 km north-west of Echigo Yuzawa Station. It is 1181 metres above sea level, has excellent snow, and good slopes. At the bottom of the mountain, about 1.8 km from Echigo Yuzawa Station, was a Shinkansen maintenance base. The mountain was clearly the ideal location for extending a Shinkansen and constructing a quality ski resort.

Supporters of the workers rallied to them saying, "The railway is not only an instrument of transport, it has other purposes (like servicing skiers) too". Coincidentally, they proposed this idea just before the birth of JR East, after the privatisation and break up of JNR in February 1987.

The new JR East was aiming to strengthen itself by diversifying into related business areas. It adopted the idea and about 1 year later founded a company to develop GALA YUZAWA with the approval of the local government.

Messrs. Kyusaku Toyono, Hiroaki Tamura, Toshimasa Kawai, and Masaru Nakajima are four of the seven maintenance workers who first recommended the ski resort, and they now work at GALA YUZAWA.

Since this project started, these men have completely changed jobs. To lay out the slopes, they explored the mountain by following animal tracks. In summer, they carried axes and hatch-

ets. In winter, they wore skis. They also completed the office work required to construct a ski resort. Quite often, it was necessary to work through the night. They said, "We were all green—everything was the first time. We had no training and learned our business by doing it". The difficulty of this task is understandable and they were just maintenance workers.

GALA YUZAWA opened on 20 December 1990. One might imagine that everyone was excited, but these four workers were not. "Feeling excited came later. We were more concerned about whether the business would succeed or not. We felt a lot of pressure and there was a ton of work to do". They said.

Now, Mr. Toyono does safety and maintenance work like monitoring the condition of the ski slopes and the wind velocity, as well as guarding against avalanches. "This job is challenging because I must live with nature and sometimes battle it, too". he says. Mr. Toyono must decide when to open and when to close the resort. The day's profits hang on his judgement. He always



■ Mr. Kyusaku Toyono

looks for better ways to communicate with nature and plans to study for a weather forecaster's qualification. Looking back to when he and his co-workers began the project he says, "We endured many hardships, but it gave me a positive mind and the courage to face challenges". As he said this, his well-tanned, dauntless face smiled, beaming with confidence and fulfilment. As a sportsman, Mr. Toyono has passed the SAJ (Ski Association of Japan)'s 1st Grade Badge. He is also a professional-level golfer and bowler. Mr. Toyono's son also passed the SAJ's 1st Grade Badge at the age of 21.

Mr. Hiroaki Tamura is now chief instructor of the Ecole de Ski GALA YUZAWA. He has a trained body, a charming smile and teaches 100 students a day. The skiing ability of his students varies widely from beginners to intermediate, including children's classes. Privately, he is interested in management and is very studious spending his free time reading books on management. Participating in construction of this resort changed his outlook. "I don't only do a job and follow orders, I think about what I'm doing", he says. Mr. Tamura is also a certified SAJ ski instructor and the father of a son and two daughters. Unfortunately, during the ski season, he is too busy to ski with his children.

Mr. Toshimasa Kawai sports a charming moustache. He is an affable ski-lift operator and maintenance person. To prevent injuries, he helps the skiers get on and off the lifts. Since the lifts do not stop when maintenance personnel work on them, accidents are possible and Mr. Kawai can never relax. He also has an assistant instructors license from the SAJ. When asked, "How long have you been skiing?" he answers with a smile, "As long as I can remember". His wife is also a certified skier



■ Mr. Hiroaki Tamura



■ Mr. Toshimasa Kawai

with a 1st Grade Badge. His son started skiing last year at the age of 4 and has a good future too.

Mr. Masaru Nakajima handles reception work. He is in charge of guiding visitors and selling ski-lift tickets. He has a down-to-earth, sociable personality, which is surprising, given his classical, picturesque features. His blazer also suits him well. Last year, he helped maintain the ski slopes and was a member of the ski patrol. Since his present and former jobs appear unrelated, you might think he suffers some angst, but he denies this. "I will do any-



■ Mr. Masaru Nakajima

thing necessary to become president", he says half jokingly. Hearing this, all the spectators laughed. He also said seriously, "In the ski business, workers who can handle any job are necessary". As one proof of his flexibility, he studied hard to become an SAJ-licensed ski patrolman. He is now eager to take other licenses that might help business. In his private life, he is a good father and his most pleasant times are spent teaching his son (6) and daughter (3) how to ski.

GALA YUZAWA really is a lovingly-created ski resort. ■

