

Green Tree Growth

MnK builds sustainable business and community in Niseko

After skiing in Niseko for five winters, Eddie and Chi Guillemette found that Hokkaido's beauty and wide-open spaces were an antidote to their hectic, city-based lifestyle. Knowing that other families could also benefit, they bought land in 2007 and built nine spacious houses. The aim was to create a family-friendly resort that could offer guests an escape, a chance to get back to nature, rest, and explore, or even a place from which to work year-round.

Today, their company MnK, short for *midori no ki* or green tree in Japanese, has grown to offer more than 100 modern and beautifully furnished properties in three communities at the foot of the Niseko ski resorts, whose powder attracts skiers and snowboarders from Australia, Southeast Asia, and even the United States.

Getting Started

When the first development, Country Resort, opened in 2008, a community of rental houses was rare in Niseko. Most people stayed in hotels or *ryokans* (traditional Japanese inns). The development is an eight-minute drive from the village of Hirafu, a bustling

ski slope hub. Some local residents felt the distance was too great to draw visitors, but the Guillemettes wanted space and a break from crowded cities. Over time, Country Resort has proved popular with vacationers, many of whom come from Hong Kong, where Eddie and Chi were originally based.

To better serve the owners and guests, they set up MnK Management Company and added a permanent reception building with a restaurant. They began spending nearly half their time in Niseko to grow and improve their new venture. "We started putting in services that we would want ourselves," Eddie said. They changed or added things based on feedback received from owners and guests.

Their second development, Akazora, a serviced apartment building in the middle of Hirafu, was completed in 2012 as an option for guests who wanted to be in the village. As the business grew, they started another community of standalone homes from scratch. Called The Orchards Niseko, in 2015 the development was named Asia's Best Resort Residencies for Japan by online property portal group Property Report, a regional luxury property and lifestyle magazine and website that publishes news and insights on investment destinations.

Family Friendly

At all three communities, MnK's service goal is to be family friendly—a mission guided by the Guillemettes's experiences raising their own children.

Soon after they began their Niseko business, the couple started a summer camp for their children and those of other families staying at Country Resort. Theirs were city kids used to living in apartments in Hong Kong, and the Guillemettes wanted them to explore nature. The project also provided an additional rationale to visit Niseko in the summer, when camp counselors would look after the kids. This has grown into a full-blown summer program called EdVenture—combining education and adventure—that draws more than 300 children each year.

A key part of the summer program is visiting local farms, where the children milk cows, get eggs from the henhouse, and harvest vegetables to help them understanding where food comes from. "The kids love the hands-on experience," Guillemette said. "Then we take the produce back to the clubhouse and fry up a nice breakfast with the kids and the parents, which is always a lot of fun."

A few years later, they branched into winter day camps after receiving feedback from guests that their children didn't want to ski all day long. Camp staff pick up the kids at the rental homes and go sledding, make snow caves, or enjoy snowshoeing. This is mixed with some indoor playtime. After lunch, they have an afternoon group ski lesson.

In recent years, MnK has added more programs, including a camp experience in English for Japanese students that is popular for birthday parties. "All our expansion has come from solving a problem or challenge. Each new business has been a building block on top of an existing one," Guillemette said. "As Covid-19 hit our international business, our team found a new customer base of Japanese families and groups wanting to explore Niseko and Hokkaido through an English immersion experience."

Year-round Work

Niseko's local economy is very much driven by the seasons. There are plenty of winter jobs, but many disappear during the warmer months as hotels and restaurants shut down.

The Guillemettes want to employ their staff year-round to benefit both the workers and the resorts. "We don't want to rely on our winter seasonal staff to be

our main source of customer service. We want to provide year-round, viable career options at MnK. I think that's very important. The level of service you receive from someone who lives here, who has a connection to the community, is so different from what you get from seasonal staff," Guillemette said.

"A lot of operators in Niseko are understandably winter-only, and they are foreigner-focused businesses. We have always stayed open for summer and we were ready to pivot to the domestic market because our Japanese staff are fully plugged into how travel works in Japan."

This summer, with the pandemic likely to continue restricting international travel, Niseko offers city dwellers from the Kanto and Kansai regions an accessible, easygoing escape that feels a world away.

"Hokkaido has always been a popular destination with a small group of domestic travelers," said MnK general manager Patrick Ohtani. "With everyone looking at options in Japan for their summer holidays, perhaps this year, more than ever, we have found a new audience for accommodations and services."

MnK welcomes visitors for weekend, weekly, or even monthly stays during summer, and excellent, stable internet service makes remote work easy.

"Niseko is a great place for a long stay, because there is something for everyone. Just from a climate perspective, it's pleasant in the summer—much cooler than Honshu. And there is fresh produce from the farms and Hokkaido's famous seafood to enjoy, as well as plenty of outdoor activities to keep you busy," said Guillemette.

Green Trees

Looking to the future, MnK is committed to being ecologically responsible, and has started measuring its environmental impact and adopted some best practices in environmental, social, and corporate governance policy to improve the business for stakeholders. The company is trialing one measuring system, EaSyGo, with local partner Goyoh, an exclusive concierge service.

"Given our company name, being environmentally conscious has always been there," Guillemette explained. "Now, there are tools to measure this and help change behavior."

Preserving Hokkaido's abundant nature is vitally important, he says. And whatever time of year visitors come, he hopes people will feel at home. "We want you to stay as a guest and return as a friend." ■



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