

# In Splendid Isolation



Shouya Grigg at his Zaborin complex of luxury villas close to Niseko's Hanazono resort in Hokkaido

Shouya Grigg's successful brand of boutique hotels and restaurants on Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido only goes to show that remoteness is a highly desirable thing.

**Born in England, raised in Australia... How do you come to find yourself in Japan?**

I came to Japan about twenty-four years ago to study the language, mainly because I wanted to work in the film industry here. I went straight to Hokkaido and cycled around the island for about four months. I had a working holiday visa, and after a spell at a nature center moved to Sapporo, but couldn't get much work as a photographer [Grigg's passion] because I didn't know many people and didn't have the necessary language skills. I ended up getting a job as a DJ [another of Grigg's talents], which helped me to meet more people and find more work as a photographer. I was then able to set up my own media design company. My clients came to include *ryokan* inn owners, beer companies, magazines... I got to photograph some beautiful places for Japanese magazines. So I was running my media design company, but really wanted to do some interior design work. I decided the only way to do this would be to start my own project. Around that time, Niseko [then relatively undeveloped but now a major ski resort area] was

starting to look interesting. My wife and I decided that instead of looking at [property in] Sapporo we should look at Hirafu [an area of Niseko]. We found an old pension and renovated it. It was a very organic process; great fun.

#### **That was the first Sekka-brand restaurant...**

Around that time [certain companies] started to bring Aussies to Niseko skiing and snowboarding. [These people] started coming to our restaurant, where you could get a decent bottle of wine and Italian-type food cooked by Japanese chefs using local ingredients. The design was a little bit edgy. We used a lot of old Japanese pendant lights and screens and stuff, so for a lot of people the restaurant had a Japanese feel to it, and it became a bit of a hit. For the first couple of years, I was working on the floor and managing the place. When people found out I was local, they would say, we like this and we see the potential; we're thinking about buying some land.... That's when I started to work on a few projects. I would go looking for land and come up with the concept of what to build on it; use my contacts and hire an architect.

#### **How many projects have you completed under the Sekka brand?**

Around a dozen. Just a couple of weeks ago I opened a new restaurant and lounge bar in Kutchan [biggest town in the Niseko area]. It's similar in a way to the original Sekka, although as someone said to me the other day... more *elegant*. Rough around the edges is my style, but I've been learning and improving over the last decade or so, I guess. I buy interesting junk, antiques or found objects and think about how and where to use them. I have a collection of Japanese windows, doors, lights... things that I like. Another new project I am working on is kind of in my "garden." On one side of my house is [the luxury ryokan

complex] Zaborin; on the other side, on the cliff, I am rebuilding a 150-year-old *kominka* farmhouse, which I have brought up from Tochigi Prefecture. That should be opening in a couple of weeks' time. In the main old structure we'll have a crafts shop; beneath that will be my photo gallery.

#### **Tell us a bit about Zaborin.**

Zaborin opened about a year and a half ago. I spent a lot of time traveling around Japan, staying at different ryokan and noticing things that were lacking. A lot of it is subjective; but for me, I don't want to do something that is there just to please everybody: I want to do something that is unique. That is what I did with Zaborin. Zaborin is located on the "other" side of the mountains from Hirafu, making it exclusive. The landscape is pristine. Zaborin is close enough to the ski resort, but far enough away to be private. Business at other properties in this area is quite seasonal, but at Zaborin we've been getting good occupancy year round. I was speaking to Adrian Zecha [famous hotelier] who said that for wealthy people, remoteness – the getting there – is a big part of the appeal. I don't see remoteness as a disadvantage; I use it to work in my favor.

#### **Is there scope for further expansion in Niseko/Hokkaido?**

Tourism is going crazy all over Japan. I can't see that slowing down. And there is a lack of beds. I see a lot of smaller hotels and pensions in Hokkaido – and all around Japan – with so much potential, but... It's as if they're stuck. Either there are not enough creative people out there thinking differently or the local authorities and investors are playing it too safe and not giving enough credit to people with interesting ideas. ■

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Interview by ALEX HENDY

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