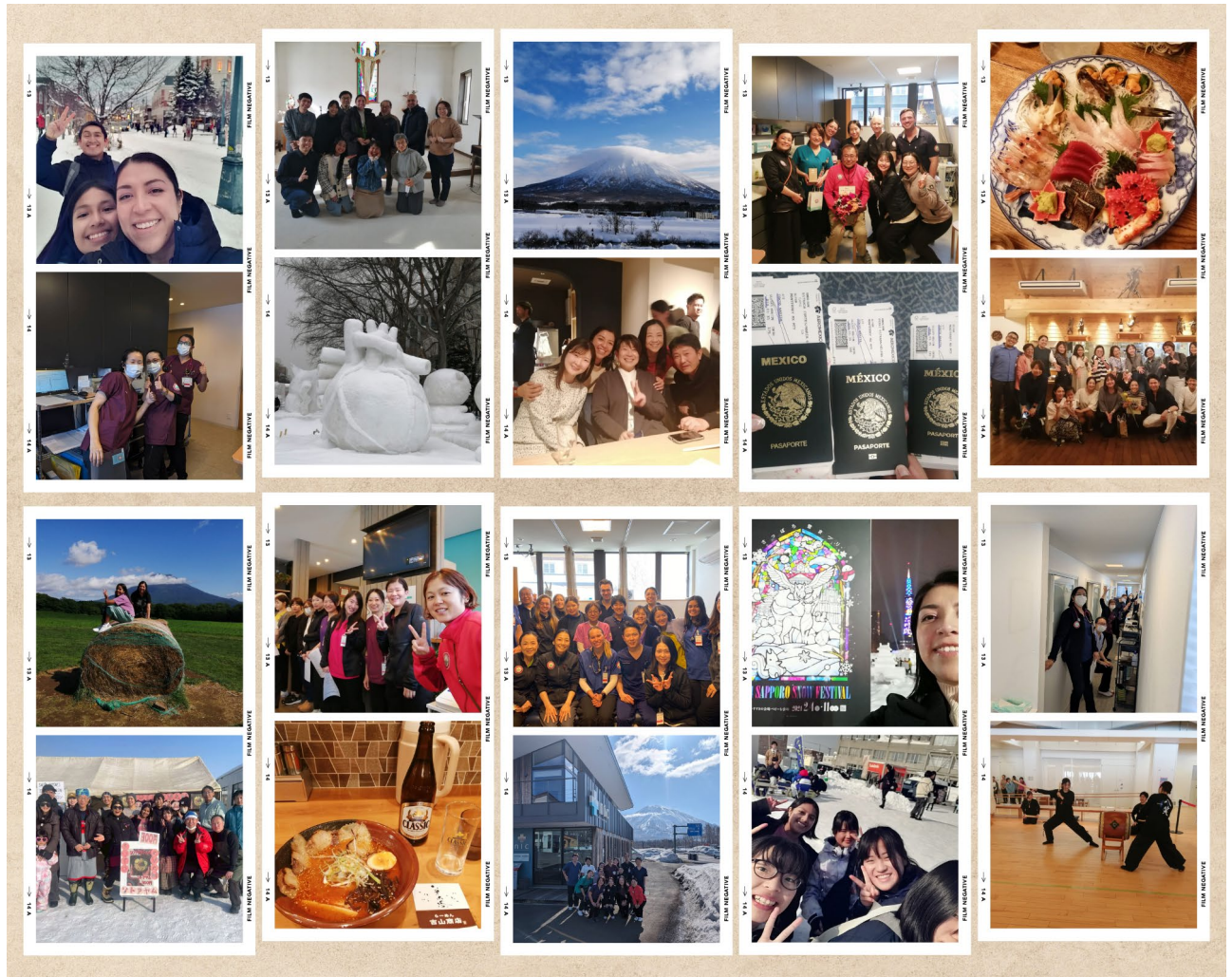


My Niseko International Clinic (NIC) Experience



By Maria Guadalupe Estrada Cortes, MD
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Certified GP with 15 years of experience in Mexico (public/private). Includes 8 years specializing in international patient care, having completed a third winter season at NIC and now extending for a longer-term stay.

1) NIC: Size, Function, and Work Environment

The clinic is a highly functional facility located in Kutchan, Hokaido a rural area of Japan, in a ski resort. It operates during the day, with no inpatient services or 24-hour emergency care.

During the winter, the clinic expands its operations for maximum efficiency:

- Main Clinic: Focuses on non-infectious pathologies and injuries; equipped with X-ray, ultrasound, and a basic laboratory.
- Fever Clinic: Specializes in infectious diseases with access to rapid testing.
- Mountain Clinic: Focuses on immediate on-site care; most cases are managed there without requiring referral to the main clinic.

Overall, it is an environment of continuous improvement and innovation.

Since my first season in winter 2023-2024, the clinic has acquired its own ambulance and opened the Niseko Wellness Center (physiotherapy). In 2024-2025, the Mountain Clinic was inaugurated. For the 2025-2026 season, the team was reinforced with more orthopedic surgeons and experienced paramedics. We also introduced the Pentrox inhaler (green whistle), which proved invaluable for reductions and mobilizing patients with unstable, highly painful fractures. Additionally, an agreement was established with Kyokai Hospital in Iwanai to facilitate MRI and CT scans.

Japanese work culture is reflected in the immediate correction of processes and error prevention. I have been positively surprised by the solidarity of the Japanese staff—always ready to help and foster teamwork—as well as the diligence and dedication that each one brings to their daily duties. It is truly motivating!

Working here involves a multicultural environment (Japanese/International) where English is the common language, allowing for an enriching exchange of medical experiences and culture.

The winter season has two peaks: Christmas/New Year and Chinese New Year. We see an average of 80 to 120 patients per day, with 3 to 5 doctors on shift. Notably, Japan takes about 6 days off for the New Year; businesses, banks, and even our external laboratory remain closed. Pharmacies operate on reduced hours, and Kutchan General Hospital limits patient intake due to saturation. This increases our patient flow and occasionally leads to temporary shortages of certain medications.

A major challenge is securing hospital acceptance for patients with severe injuries. Although the nearest hospital is 20 minutes away, the high volume of patients in a rural area with limited resources sometimes requires referring patients to hospitals 2 hours away, often after long waits on the phone for acceptance.

2) Medical Training

The clinic offers the opportunity for foreign doctors to practice in Japan under the mentorship and supervision of certified local physicians. This is a requirement to obtain the *Certificate of Permission for Advanced Clinical Training*, which is valid for 4 months and up to a maximum of 2 years.

Personal Experience: As the first foreign doctor accepted into this training, and having completed my third winter season, I have witnessed the evolution from "on-the-job" learning (amidst staff shortages and heavy workloads) to a more structured system. In the 2025-2026 winter, a 3-day induction was implemented for all seasonal staff—including doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, medical students, paramedics, drivers and administrative staff — and 10-minute daily clinical case reviews.

Skills Developed:

- Evaluation, diagnosis, and conservative treatment of acute knee injuries.
- Reduction of wrist fractures and shoulder dislocations.
- Advanced X-ray interpretation.
- Use of tools like the Pentrox inhaler (common in Australia).
- Understanding how early-onset physiotherapy improves pain and functional recovery.
- Increased confidence in managing international patients and traumatic injuries.

Challenges:

- Differences in dosages, and prescription durations.
- Encountering medications common in international guidelines that are not covered or approved by the Japanese Health System.
- During high-volume periods, immediate supervision for complex diagnoses may be limited despite the existing oversight.
- The variety of pathologies from international travelers requires constant self-study.

Compensation: While the position does not receive a conventional medical salary, the benefits provided by the clinic include covering the costs of the visa and clinical training permit, complemented by provided housing, travel and personal expenses, professional liability insurance, and access to the Japanese health insurance system.

3) Life Outside the Clinic

Living in Kutchan is peaceful and safe. It is 25 minutes by bus or 15 minutes by car from the clinic. It is a small but foreigner-friendly town with essential services and great connectivity by train/bus to Yoichi, Otaru, Sapporo, and Chitose.

Activities: The local food is delicious, fresh, and affordable. Leisure options range from skiing and ice fishing to cultural experiences like onsens, karaoke, and the Sapporo Snow Festival. There is even a local Catholic church with Mass in Japanese.

Family Life: For the first two seasons, I came alone. While it was challenging to be away from my family during such meaningful dates like Christmas, it allowed me to understand the lifestyle here and build a network of friends. Together with the clinic, this network supported me in making my dream a reality: bringing my family with me. They helped us settle in, found a part-time job for my husband on a local farm, and enabled us to enjoy a longer season here together (from August 2025 to March 2027).

Currently, my 13-year-old daughter attends the public junior high school in Kutchan. Although it is quite a challenge, she is truly enjoying it—making friends, improving her English, and learning Japanese. It was also a joy to see her excitement during her first ski lessons, a sport that doesn't exist in our home country.

I thoroughly enjoy my days off with my family. We love visiting the Japanese language space (Nico-chan) at the community center, which facilitates language practice and helps us expand our social circle. It's also where we find upcoming cultural events; in fact, we even volunteered through Nico-chan at Yukitopia (the local snow festival in mid-February).

Every Sunday, besides attending Mass, we enjoy dining at local restaurants, visiting the community gym (for table tennis, volleyball, basketball, or badminton), or taking trips. Sapporo is less than two hours away, offering the big-city experience with shopping and cinemas, while nearby towns like Otaru and Yoichi are also well worth a visit.

4) Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Why choose this training? For the unique opportunity to practice legally in Japan, broaden your international medical perspective, and immerse yourself in a culture of respect and dedication to duty.

Lessons Learned: Beyond orthopedics, the greatest gain is the international experience. Managing patients from diverse cultures, collaborating with healthcare personnel from various international backgrounds and working within the Japanese health system transforms a doctor's career.

The Challenges: The cold climate, foggy days, and early sunsets (around 4:30 PM). Managing mental and physical health during peak season while being far from home.

Most Satisfying Aspect: My cultural background helps me to adapt quickly and deliver warm, empathetic care. Speaking Spanish is a huge advantage, offering relief to Spanish-speaking patients in moments of vulnerability. It was also very rewarding to share my clinical knowledge, such as when I diagnosed the first case of Dengue fever in Hokkaido.

Most Memorable Moment: So far, providing medical coverage for a princess in Niseko stands out as my most memorable experience. Serving as part of her royal entourage in late March 2025 was a unique honor, and I look forward to what the next period here may bring!

Recommended for:

- Doctors with an open and flexible mindset, both professionally and personally.
- Professionals seeking real-world international experience beyond theory.
- Those not looking for a "vacation," but rather an intense work challenge compensated by invaluable personal, professional and cultural growth.

Final Advice: "Pack only the essentials; Japan offers everything you need with an excellent quality-to-price ratio."