

Snow sculptor scoops again

Metres of crisp white snow and temperatures plummeting as low as minus eight degrees celsius may not be every New Zealander's idea of how to spend February.

But Hamuera Orupe (Joe) McLeod, a 25-year-old chef who is now on a working holiday in Britain, wouldn't have passed up the bitter cold for any amount of sea and sunshine.

For the second year in a row Mr McLeod scooped a major prize with a traditional Maori carving in Japan's Sapporo Snow Festival, held annually since 1949.

Last year — the first time New Zealand had competed — he took the "fighting spirit" prize with his snow statue of a proud Maori warrior standing at an intricately fashioned canoe prow.

This year, with the assistance of Auckland Club chef, David Woolf, who lives in Forrest Hill, it was second prize in the B section — designed for teams which had not been major prizewinners in past years.

From a 25-tonne block of compressed snow they carved out a Maori storehouse or pataka, measuring three metres in height.

Switzerland was first with a snow chalet.

Like last year the New Zealand entrant created considerable interest among the festival goers — believed to be nearly two million this year — most of whom snapped many pictures with their ever-ready cameras.

The media also enthused over the Maori storehouse, with a number of newspapers and television channels featuring it in various stages during the building and then again during the prizegiving ceremony.

The team had a maximum of four days to construct their exhibit, and to take full advantage of the allocated time, the chefs put in long hours — often carving, moulding and sculpting until midnight.

Mr Woolf said they felt the cold — "Joe, in particular — so we made good use of a nearby 'get warm house'."

He said they were also supplied with woollen scarfs, hats, and mittens as well as padded ski suits emblazoned with Air New Zealand's koru logo. The airline sponsored their trip with the Foreign Affairs Department and a thriving organisation of Japanese business people, the New Zealand Sapporo Society.

The festival was a fascinating experience Mr Woolf said; one that New Zealand visitors to Japan should aim to see.

"It's hard to image the splendour of it

all unless you've seen it. The snow carving is just one small part.

"They actually give over the main street of the city of Sapporo (population 1.1 million) to the most sensational ice carvings," he said.

There was a massive carving of Buckingham Palace which had been made over a two-month period by 3000 soldiers from the Japanese army. There was an enormous Egyptian sphinx, a railway steam engine, robots, a family land with all sorts of slides and sculptures for children... all in ice, much of it clear like Venetian glass".

At another site, half an hour from the central city, the United States Olympic mascot eagle, Sam, reigned over cold subjects of a space policeman, an American courthouse and a selection of Oriental statues.

Once the snow carving section of the festival was completed, Mr McLeod and Mr Woolf took part in several promotions of New Zealand food.

"The first was at the New Oji hotel near Sapporo where we supervised the preparation of a New Zealand dinner for 200 people.

"We served oysters, crayfish, lamb and a tart made with kiwifruit and

cherries. The meal was accompanied by New Zealand wines," said Mr Woolf.

They were presented with a set of delicate porcelain teacups with a commemorative spoon in thanks for their efforts.

The following day the New Zealand chefs headed for Otaru, three hours drive from Sapporo, where they did demonstrations at a cookery school.

Then it was back to Tokyo to prepare New Zealand fare at a sumptuous Waitangi Day reception hosted by the New Zealand Embassy.

The pair then took part in a New Zealand Fair at Mitsukoshi, Tokyo's oldest department stores which opened 300 years ago.

Mr McLeod then headed for Jakarta and on to London, while Mr Woolf returned to Auckland to recount his experiences to his wife Doris and their family.

He said he clocked up a number of firsts during his visit to Japan.

"Carving in snow was a whole new thing for me.

Joe had been there the year before and he's a very gifted artist, so I was very much his assistant.

