



CHIC KOREA

For the stylish youth of Southeast Asia, the slopes of Gangwon province are the place to be. In 2018, the whole world will join them there.

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On my first morning at the Yong-Pyong ski resort, I meet another journalist over the breakfast buffet. He is a newspaper writer from Frankfurt, Germany, on assignment in Korea to see the place that beat out Munich in its bid to host the 2018 Winter Olympic Games. His goal is to answer the question that is currently echoing through the Bavarian Alps, a question he asks loudly and nonacronymically: “WTF?”

“This is not skiing!” he fairly spits at me. “This is an amusement park!”

It is easy to agree with him. There is no equivalent to Garmisch’s legendary Kandahar downhill course here in Yong-Pyong, the main venue for Korea’s ski-racing competitions. There is no glacier, unless one counts the plastic iceberg at Peak Island, the penguin-themed water park that abuts the base lodge. And the culture of skiing? Well, let’s just say it’s a new — though admittedly vibrant — phenomenon.

Still, if “amusement” is the crime, Korea is guilty as charged.

PYEONGCHANG — THE HOST CITY (actually, more of a county) of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games — sits in Korea’s mountainous Gangwon province in the northeast quadrant of the country, just below the demilitarized zone with North Korea, and on the Sea of Japan (which is, for reasons provincial and post-colonial, known here simply as the East Sea). The craggy terrain isn’t hypothetically bad for downhill, though with mountains topping out at just over 5,600 vertical feet, these are no Andes. The climate is not ideal for a ski industry, since the long, cold winters tend to be very dry.*

This is the part of Korea where locals go to get back to nature, especially during spring and fall. There is plenty of hiking through the mountains and around lakes, and the place is just generally rural — there

are farms everywhere, growing the greens and vegetables that become thousands of varieties of *kimchi*, and raising the richly marbled beef that becomes the internationally famous delicacies *hanu* and *kalbi*. Industry here is tucked out of sight, in stark contrast to Seoul and surrounds just to the west, and is most visible in the wind turbines that line the ridges of the mountains.



Dragon Peak, the gondola-served hilltop lodge at Yong-Pyong — which translates as “Dragon Valley” — offers majestic views of South Korea’s highest peaks and, thanks to a Korean soap opera, is a destination itself.

Quaint villages pop up wherever river meets road.

In winter, only two industries are in evidence. One is pollack, a relative of the cod fished from the East Sea and brought up to the cold and dry slopes of Gangwon to dry. Some 80 million are dehydrating in Gangwon any given winter, all strung on massive trellises that might at first be mistaken for grape arbors.* It’s an odd sight in the mountains but a constant reminder of how close this area is to the sea.

The other industry, apparently, is ski shops. Village retail areas here seem to consist of a few small markets, traditional restaurants, a tractor sales center, a coffee shop, and half a dozen snowboard shops, each lit up like a roadside casino. Rows of hundreds of tiny lights flick on and off, and bright LED screens flash rental rates and specials between jerky pixel animations.

Through the front window, rolling racks of boards barely obscure walls crowded with brightly colored jackets, pants, helmets, and fleece tops.

They are there because skiing is good business. In 2001, Korean ski resorts logged 3,482,075 skier days. Ten years later, the number was 6,479,493. That makes Korea a shining beacon of hope in the snow-sports industry, and the hope is that the rest of Asia will follow.

I AM IN THE DRAGON PLAZA, the main base lodge at Yong-Pyong, the country’s most challenging ski area. It is also the nation’s oldest, dating all the way back to 1975, and is currently owned by the Unification Church (once, arguably, Korea’s most famous export, now supplanted by Hyundai and Samsung*). The Dragon Plaza is massive, multilayered and thoroughly escalatored, with mall-size food courts, a shopping promenade, ski schools, and rental windows for equipment and ski clothing. It resembles an international airport terminal done up like a medieval

Baronial Hall, with beams made of entire trees seemingly supporting a four-story atrium. On a weekend, 7,000 to 8,000 people will pass through this building on their way to the slopes, most of them young. Seventy percent are Korean, and of the remaining 30 percent, nearly three-quarters are from Southeast Asia.

The ski resorts here do no real marketing to Europe or America; the runs are too short to justify a flight so long. The few non-SEA skiers on the slopes are here for other reasons: continental Russians temporarily



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These young Koreans are, to a person, decked out — there is no duct tape, no frayed Cordura, no anything that says “last year.”

Fish for the region's *hwangtae* dishes come to shore in the city of Gangneung, where European ski labels mix with local brands in the shopping district.



stationed in the East, GIs stationed in one of the U.S. bases here, Chinese-Americans taking a stop in Korea before visiting family, and Australians who will go anywhere just to say they've been there.

The very few foreigners aside, the crowd here is amazingly young, and not in the elementary-kids-in-ski-school way. Sixty percent of the people here are snowboarding, and are in their 20s. The skiing demographic is a bit older, with most in their early 30s. These are the young adults of the sort who clog the trendy neighborhoods of Seoul, swinging designer purses

and walking expensive shoes into coffee shops and this week's hottest restaurants. And it's very clear that on the weekends, the ski slopes of Gangwon are the place to be.

THESE YOUNG KOREANS ARE, TO A PERSON, decked out — there is no duct tape, no frayed Cordura, no anything that says “last year.” The girls are layered in free-ride chic, with long T-shirts and long jackets, all thoughtfully coordinated with baggy pants and helmets, scarves, bandanas, neon-rimmed shades; they raise their fingers in the V-shaped cute salute that every teen and 20-something female in Korea seems to flash when a camera is raised. The young men are, if anything, even more style-conscious. Underneath their helmets, their hair is gelled, and it's not uncommon to see eyeliner behind the goggles.* Outside the building, the lift lines do duty as fashion runways and singles bars.

Some of this crowd is made up of daily visitors. At 6:30 a.m., they leave from Seoul aboard great, big Hyundai coaches (often outfitted with disco balls and dance music) that wend their way over modern motorways to the resorts. They ski all day, have dinner and quite a few Hite beers at the resorts, and are back on the buses heading for home by 7 o'clock the same evening.

But some 60 percent to 70 percent are overnight guests. They are the party crowd, the young and stylish who pile into condos for an entire weekend, sleeping in shifts in a resort that never sleeps.

While YongPyong offers the best terrain in the country, the best party is at Phoenix Park Ski Resort. Here, on weekends, busload upon busload of young people make the two-hour trip from Seoul on Friday evenings, and pour out directly onto the slopes, or into the restaurants and nightclubs. There's little downtime for those who



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The center of skiing for the Olympics will be Alpensia, a resort founded just five years ago. Its name, a mix of "Alps" and "Asia," reflects a grand ambition.



can do without sleep; the slopes are open from 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 the next morning, with only a two-hour break at 6:30 p.m. to groom the runs. From every lift pole, some pop anthem blares, a medley of Western and K-Pop, an endless rotation of Orange Caramel, Girls' Generation, and Adele.

Right in the center of Phoenix Park is a fenced-off ski run reserved for private lessons. It's all but empty, even on a crowded day. The well heeled of Seoul (who are easily identified by their Bogner and Chanel outfits among the sea of snowboard fashion), buy instructors for the season, and perfect their runs behind them on this slope. Most of this crowd are also members of a private slopeside buffet and drinks are available, along with video games for the kids, a reading room, a small gym, and a concierge staff.

PHOENIX PARK, IN LINE WITH its youthful vibe, will be the host to the freestyle Olympic events, and the downhill races will take place at YongPyong and the newly created Jungbong resort. But the center of skiing for the Olympics will be Alpensia (the resort name is an amalgam of "Alpine" and "Asia"), a resort that is only five years old, having been founded in 2007. It is the home to the Olympic ski jump, destined to be the icon of the 2018 games, which overlooks a viewing area for 15,500 people. That amphitheater was slated to be expanded to hold 65,000 for opening and closing ceremonies, until organizers announced a shift in venue, citing weather concerns.

The best lodging to be found in Alpensia is the Holiday Inn — a surprisingly swanky hotel that pushes into five-star territory even on the American scale. The common areas are grand, the restaurant a delicious mélange of Western and Korean, and the suites are centered on magnificent spa

bathrooms, many with indoor/outdoor hot tubs that look out onto the slopes. A nearby InterContinental hotel is not as nice but benefits from name recognition to be the most popular with foreigners. There is, of course, plenty of lodging being built nearby before the games.

But no experienced skier is likely to find a challenge on the hill, where the runs are



Phoenix Park is the party place for the youth of Korea's cities. Their money has invigorated an agricultural and aquacultural economy — and not just at the resorts but at every intersection leading to them.

cleverly labeled from left to right alphabetically, starting with Alpha. But by the time you've reached Foxtrot, you're done.

ON THE WALL OF MY HOTEL ROOM BACK AT YongPyong, there is a promotional calendar for the resort, which shows a bluebird sky peeking between snow-covered trees, and 10 or so skiers on the piste in the foreground. It's a beautiful scene, except one skier is in a snowplow, two others are stopped at the side of the run and appear to be chatting,

and three snowboarders have their asses firmly planted in the snow. Only one rider seems to actually be skiing, and in a stiff beginner's crouch. This photo does not depict an action sport, the heroic embrace of gravitational inevitability so common in the West.

And there is a totally different attitude toward skiing here. The slopes themselves are lined with safety netting, and there is simply no tree skiing, or even gladed runs. Resort owners do not want their guests to hurt themselves.

Western skiers are used to legal skier's codes that boil down to, "Please try not to hurt anyone else please." At YongPyong, there is actually an etiquette code* that includes the bromides:

"When you receive help or the staff says hello, please respond in kind in acknowledgement.

"Often, it is hard to know the age and gender of fellow skiers due to shades, masks, and hats. Please use formal speak when addressing other skiers, just to be safe.

"Advanced skiers tend to have a lot of experience, not only in terms of skill, but in how to act in ski areas. If an advanced skier tells a beginner to use an easier slope first to build skill before taking on a more difficult slope, it would be a good idea to follow that advice."

Those advanced skiers seem to be few and far between (though I more than once got dusted by a 50-something gentleman in an '80s padded racing suit, running laps down the world cup course on YongPyong). In fact, the whole mountain seems to be a teaching factory — some of it formal instruction, most not. Notably, one does not rent poles at Korean resorts; they simply hang from their straps in racks at every lodge and at the bottom of most lifts. This is not for the sake of courtesy but efficiency, for underneath every lift are hundreds of poles dropped by fumbling beginners, leaving the snow looking like a cornfield after a hailstorm.



Old and new Korea
— here represented
by Woljeongsa
Temple and the
Holiday Inn at
Alpensia — exist
seamlessly in the
Korean Alps.



The poles are harvested every few weeks and returned to circulation.

BUT BEGINNERS GET BETTER. ON A SUNDAY afternoon at Phoenix Park, there are hundreds of white numbered vests massing at the bottom of the hill for a boarder-cross event. Some racers are clearly new to competition, but there are also plenty of aggressive racers flying over the jumps. Sixteen other resorts operate in the country, and they are just as crowded on winter weekends. The Korean ski industry has in its grasp every industry's most prized demographic:

young, urban, and unafraid to spend money in the pursuit of style, even in the face of worrisome unemployment rates.

There is some worry that this resort-as-party is merely a trend, no more lasting than the roller disco that it can often resemble. Indeed, there is some speculation that the fantastic growth of skiing's popularity is directly related to the popularity of *Winter Sonata*, a Korean soap opera partially set at YongPyong Resort.* A life-size cardboard cutout of the show's protagonists seems to be around each corner, and a group of 20-somethings always seems to be surrounding it for a photo.

What these Olympics might do is engrave winter sports on the national consciousness. The country is justifiably proud of landing the games, and the government (and no little bit of industry) is pouring money into infrastructure. High-speed rail will soon supplement the fleets of buses serving the resorts, and the resorts themselves are set to explode. All along the highways of Gangwon, the only billboards blocking the views are ones proudly proclaiming the region as host of the Winter Games, and congratulating all of the residents on a job well done.

South Korea has, in a little more than 60 years, turned itself from a war-ravaged country into a technological and industrial powerhouse, and there is no doubt that they'll put the same force of will behind making the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics a success. In the process, they'll create the infrastructure for training not just athletes, but a generation of snowsports enthusiasts from all over Asia. They will leave behind the modest hills of Gangwon for the steeps of New Zealand, the endless powder of Japan, and — very soon — the slopes of Whistler, Vail, Lech, and even Garmisch, where, perhaps, they'll try a little glacier skiing. 9

