

Skiing with a touch of Seoul



Gentle action: Yongpyong has 32km of pistes and 28 slopes that are easy to master



South Korea may not have the best snow but there's still plenty of fun to be had on the slopes, says **Abigail Butcher**

AS I unclip from my ski bindings at the end of an afternoon on the slopes, I see skiers queuing to wash off their skis. Not with water but air – high-pressured jet hoses that blow the snow from their skis so they don't create puddles when taken inside. You can guess this isn't the Alps – I'm in Yongpyong, the largest ski resort in South Korea, where things are orderly but certainly not ordinary.

Yongpyong is the biggest of South Korea's 17 ski resorts, lying two hour's drive north-east of Seoul in the Taebaek Mountains near Pyeongchang. Together with its neighbour Alpensia, the resort will host most of the Winter Olympic events in 2018, with Yongpyong holding the downhill ski competitions on its only black runs, curiously named Rainbow 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The fact such steep slopes exist here is, at first glance, surprising. The majority of its remaining 27 slopes over 32km are cruise blues, with just a smattering of steepness worthy of a gentle red. Bar the Rainbows, nothing is steep enough here to build up speed of any description (even if you were allowed to, which you are not) but the runs are a good length, including one of 3km, which allows plenty of time to practise your carving. It's something South Koreans do with gusto: don't be fooled into thinking small resorts equal poor skiers.

The slopes here stay open until midnight and the locals really do stay out late, practising their carving again and again. If you get up early you'll be treated to another ritual: the daily warm-up routine enjoyed by the Yongpyong ski instructors and



Light lunch: Noodle soup and kimchi hit the spot on the slopes

mountain rescue team – good enough to rival Strictly Come Dancing.

If you do want to try the Rainbow runs, you have to form an orderly queue for the 2.5mile gondola to the top of Mount Balwang (1,458m) – a ride worth taking on a clear day for the stunning views of the East Sea and the ice cream parlour at the top. The Koreans like their ice cream and you'll find them queuing for iced delights in all weather.

Talking of iced delights, there's been much made about the lack of natural snow here, and there isn't an

abundance now – like Europe, South Koreans were lamenting last season's lack of snow. Even on a good year it won't ever dump light, fluffy waist-deep powder like it does in Japan because the two countries don't share the same weather patterns.

I ask several locals about off-piste skiing and the look of surprise and concern on their faces when I explain it meant skiing away from the pistes said it all: there is none.

But despite this, skiing here is quirky, fascinating and a joy – and much of that is because of the food. The base lodge eateries are similar to what you'd find in North America, lacking character but not substance – choose your mountain lunch from myriad types of kimchi, grilled pork and fish or huge, steaming bowls of noodle soup. And if you've overdone it the night before on the local, saki-esque tippie soju (amusingly pronounced 'sod-you'), another local delicacy makes for an unlikely hangover cure – dried pollock soup.

If you're going to take an 11-hour flight to ski South Korea, I'd recommend you combine a few days on the slopes with some time in Seoul. Race around the capital, inhaling the different sights and sounds, from the ancient palaces of Changdeokgung and Gyeongbokgung or Jongmyo, a Confucian shrine, or wander round the well-preserved traditional Bukchon village. Take in the bustling Gwangjang market (I can recommend you don't try the



Cool: Yongpyong will host the 2018 Winter Olympics with neighbour Alpensia

KURT GEIGER



ALAMY

THREE OTHER SKI RESORTS IN ASIA TO TRY

YABULI, CHINA
SET on the Yabuli Sun Mountain in the Changbai Mountain Range, Yabuli hosted the 1996 Asian Games and is billed as the biggest and best ski resort in China, which has just won the 2022 Winter Olympics. It has nine lifts and 66 hectares of skiing – but it's chilly, with an average temperature of -16C.
£40 for a day pass, cnto.org



MASIK PASS, NORTH KOREA
IF you're really adventurous, Masik Pass Resort is possibly one of the world's most controversial ski resorts: European companies have turned down deals – or had them blocked – to provide chairlifts and cable cars. It has nine slopes, and foreigners are reportedly welcome.
£23 for a day pass. For details see, koryogroup.com



RUSUTSU, JAPAN
THIS is where locals go to enjoy 1,700 hectares of skiing in waist-high powder with views of the sea and a volcano. There are four gondolas and seven chairlifts and 37 runs in total. Downsides? The bars don't open until 5pm.
£29 for a day pass. seejapan.co.uk



butterfly pupa, another local snack) and mix it up with a visit to the fashionable art spaces, shops, restaurants and cafés of Seongsu-dong – an up-and-coming neighbourhood frequently compared to New York's Brooklyn – or marvel at the technological wonders of Samsung d'Light showrooms.

Another must is the demilitarised zone (DMZ), 90 minutes north of the capital, and startling evidence of the silent war between North and South Korea. The two-mile strip of land separating the two countries is still crawling with troops, guard posts, tanks, tunnels, missiles, bunkers, gun emplacements and landmines. You can walk down one of the infiltration tunnels that North Korea built to reach the South. If you hire a local guide, ask them to explain the process they must go through to visit family in North Korea. It's a sobering tale and one that will make you glad of your freedom.

Don't come here expecting to be blown away by fabulous powder but if you're after a quirky trip to the snow, it's one that's hard to beat.



Scenic: Take a ride to the top of Mount Balwang



Orderly: Skiers clean their equipment

A ten-day trip to South Korea with Different Snow (differentssnow.com) costs £1,948pp based on two sharing, based on five nights at the Dragon Valley Hotel in Yongpyong and three nights at the Ibis Insadong Hotel in Seoul. Includes international flights, all transfers, lift passes, ski and boot hire, a full day with a private guide in Seoul and DMZ excursion. See gokorea.co.uk



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