

It's cold, beautiful and, yes, safe

What to know about the host of Winter Olympics

BY FOSTER KLUG
The Associated Press

The Olympics are coming to one of the most remote, ruggedly beautiful parts of South Korea, an area known for icy winds, a collapsed mining industry, towering granite mountains that blot out the horizon and for a tough, proud, rapidly aging population as curious about the approaching foreign masses as outsiders are about the place they're heading.

With the Olympics set to begin on Feb. 9, here are some answers to questions about Pyeongchang and the Korean Peninsula:

Is the Korean Peninsula safe?

Yes, with a half-century-old caveat. South Korea is one of the safest places in the world to live and visit. People regularly leave their cellphones and bags on restaurant tables when they go to the restrooms.

But it's also an easy drive to the edge of an incredibly hostile and nuclear-armed, North Korea. South Koreans, used to decades of threats about turning Seoul into a "sea of fire," are still fairly nonchalant about the North. The presence of 28,500 U.S. military personnel and a massive amount of U.S. and South Korean firepower aimed at North Korea helps. North Korea's dictatorship values its existence, above all things, and knows it could not win a war with South Korea and its U.S. ally.

Do people speak English?

Not many. But the government has paid for English lessons for some people in the service industry; there will be translation apps and English-speaking volunteers; phone hotlines are available. Adding to these efforts will be South Koreans' natural hospitality and curiosity.

Where am I going?

The Olympics are actually being held in three areas:



Skiers take to the slopes at Yongpyong Resort in Pyeongchang, South Korea — the host of this year's Winter Olympics.

Pyeongchang, known for mountains and winter sports; Jeongseon, a blue-collar former mining region; and Gangneung, the biggest of the three Olympic towns by far and a bustling port and vacation area along the Sea of Japan, known here as the East Sea. Together they take up South Korea's northeast corner. The inland areas have always been isolated, and while sections have been revamped for the Olympics and the coastal areas are well developed, many places are proudly as they've always been, which is to say they have little in common with the skyscraper glitz and "Gangnam Style" glamour of Seoul.

What can I eat?

Korean cuisine is some of the world's best, a daily joy to explore. Spicy, pungent kimchi; thick fermented soups filled with meat so tender it falls off the bone; barbecued everything; all of it washed down with ubiquitous soju liquor. While food options here aren't as wide as in Seoul, there are local delicacies, including dried pollock (fish), in stews and grilled; grilled and marinated pork and squid;

tofu; riced steamed with mountain herbs, and some of the country's best beef.

What's the weather like?

Bundle up. Gangwon Province is one of the country's coldest places. The wind is brutal, and the stadium for the nighttime opening and closing ceremonies is open air and has no heating system. Locals make it a matter of pride not to complain about daily wintertime life, but visitors risk misery if they're unprepared.

How will I get around?

High-speed trains will whisk people from Seoul and the Incheon airport to the area in about an hour, compared with three hours or more by car. Also available: more taxis than usual, 150 free intercity buses and shuttle buses that connect with major hotels and the local airport. Officials hope to reduce traffic by restricting locals' use of cars.

What else is there to do in Pyeongchang and South Korea?

Pyeongchang County is

famous for winter sports, with plenty of area ski rental shops. Just driving among the massive granite peaks and frozen streams can be breathtaking.

For scenic views, try Odaesan National Park and the Woljeongsa Buddhist temple, which offers overnight stays. You can hike Mount Seonjaryeong and visit sheep ranches in the mountain town of Daegwallyeong.

Jeongseon has the country's only casino where Koreans may gamble — Gangwon Land. You can pedal "rail bikes" amid the mountains at the Jeongseon Railbike Park, an abandoned coal mining railway track, or walk over a cliffside see-through floor at the Jeongseon Ski Walk on Mount Beyongbansan.

Gangneung has the vibrant Sacheon and Gyodong districts near the city's famous Gyeongpo Beach. The Ojukheon House and Municipal Museum is a well-preserved 16th-century Joseon Kingdom-era house. And Jeongdongjin Sunrise Park arguably provides South Korea's best mainland sunrise view.



Posters show the Olympic mascot near the North Korea border.

Deals of the week



ALAMY

South African Airways is offering a 10 percent discount on 2018 tour packages, some of which include three nights at a safari camp in the Karongwe Reserve.

CRUISES

Celebrity Cruises is offering up to \$300 in savings, plus perks. For the State-room Savings, the first two guests sharing a cabin save \$50 on an inside cabin, \$100 on an ocean-view or veranda cabin, and \$150 on concierge class or AquaClass. Also, two passengers in an ocean-view stateroom or one in a higher category can choose two free amenities, ranging from a beverage package to unlimited Wi-Fi. Suite-class perks include \$200 off each for two passengers and four free amenities. Additional guests in any category save 50 percent on fares. Cruise prices vary. For example, the 10-night Hawaii cruise departing Vancouver on Sept. 21 costs \$2,299 for the first two people in a veranda stateroom and \$799 for the third person — a savings of \$800. Add \$327 for taxes. Book by Wednesday, Jan. 31; travel Feb. 1 through April 30, 2019. See site for details.

INFO newsday.li/cruiseperks

PACKAGES

With **South African Airways Vacations**, save 10 percent on 2018 packages to Africa. For example, save \$339 on the Affordable Cape and Safari Break tour, which starts at \$3,060 per person double and departs April 1-May 31 and Aug. 11-Sept. 30. Price includes round-trip air from Kennedy Airport to Johannesburg; three domestic flights; four nights at the Cape Milner Hotel in Cape Town; three nights at Chisomo Safari Camp in the Karongwe Private Game Reserve; 13 meals; tours and safari drives; airport transfers; and taxes. Book by Feb. 28. **INFO** 855-359-7228, flysaavacations.com

TOURS

Save \$100 on International Culinary Tours' new **Southwest France: Yoga, Wellness and Cooking tour** in Bordeaux. With the discount, the trip costs \$3,095 per person double and includes seven nights in an 18th-century chateau in Monflanquin; all meals, including wine at dinner; two cooking classes; several excursions, such as visits to wineries, an outdoor market, a flea market and chateau; private transportation with guides; airport transfers; yoga instruction and life-coaching sessions; and taxes. Book by Wednesday, Jan. 31; depart Aug. 9.

INFO 800-341-8687, newsday.li/culinarytours

— *The Washington Post*



ALAMY / LES LADURRY

Monflanquin, France, and its outdoor marketplace are at the center of a deal by International Culinary Tours.

Prices were verified at press time, but deals sell out and availability is not guaranteed. Some restrictions may apply.

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