



Winter wonderland

Kate Farr travels to South Korea for a snowy family adventure



Balcony view from the Elf Pension

If you're looking for a last-minute snow break that won't break the bank, or are planning ahead for next winter's adventures, then the Land of the Morning Calm might be just the place for your next cold-weather holiday. Just under four hours' flight from Hong Kong, South Korea – host of the 2018 Winter Olympics – has a well-established and affordable winter sports scene that runs through until early April, with plenty to offer families.

The seeds of our recent Korean adventure were sown when our seven- and three-year-old boys – both bone fide Hong Kong kids who have never experienced a 'proper' winter – declared that they were desperate to see snow. As their only goal was to "have at least one snowball fight every day", we decided to look at destinations that offered more in the way of activities than simply hitting the slopes, which eventually led us to South Korea's Olympic region. Here's how our trip panned out...

Day one

The ski region of Pyeongchang County is a relatively easy two-and-a-half-hour drive from downtown Seoul or Incheon Airport. Collecting our hire car, we headed down the highway, pulling into Bongpyeong-myeon at around lunchtime. Home to the Phoenix Ski Resort, which hosted many of the 2018 Winter Olympics' ski and board events, this small town is centred around the slopes,



Christmasy vibes in the hotel lobby



Bedroom at Elf Pension



Seven-year-old Alex checks out the white stuff

with plenty of coffee shops, restaurants and ski hire shops lining its main street. Although there are apartments and a hotel at the main resort, the region also has plenty of independent lodges and pensions, offering families a little more space and flexibility.

Grabbing a few supplies from the local supermarket, we headed to our accommodation at Elf Pension. A series of wooden lodges overlooking a quiet valley just outside of Bongpyeong-myeon, each of Elf's suites comes with its own private balcony or terrace plus charcoal barbecue. Aimed squarely at families, Elf's grounds are ringed with child-friendly nature trails, and feature a small sledding hill, playground with bouncy castle, on-site convenience store, barbecue restaurant, and even a candy-floss machine. Although relatively basic in terms of décor, our two-bedroom family suite worked well for our needs, with a small kitchenette and living area, a kids' bedroom packed full of toys... and the all-important under floor heating!

Day t w o

The temperature had fallen dramatically as we'd driven up into the mountains, rarely climbing above -12°C during daytime hours, and bottoming out at a breath-taking -21°C during our stay. Having quickly realised that our Hong Kong winter coats and thermals were no match for Pyeongchang's frigid temperatures, we headed straight into town to hire ski gear for the day ahead. While the multi-coloured waterproofs may not have seen us at our most stylish, we were mercifully warm and ready for a day of snowy fun.

Although Phoenix Park has a ski school for budding boarders aged four and above, our kids just wanted to get straight into the snow, and so we headed up to the resort's sledding park. A powder-covered hill carved into six steep and slippery lanes; grab a helmet and a lightweight plastic sledge at the bottom and you're all good to go. The course is well-supervised by friendly staff who were on hand to fish speeding kids out of drifts, or to help them back onto their sledges when they (frequently) came flying off, and at just HK\$85 per adult and HK\$70 per child for four hours' entry, this was easily the biggest bargain of the trip. Tickets are valid for re-entry, and there is a convenient mall and food court opposite the park, so you don't have to venture far from the action to thaw out every couple of hours – necessary when the mercury doesn't nudge -10°C all



The drinks are on Zach!

day! The sledding track was just as fun for the adults as for the kids, and we thoroughly enjoyed a day of hurtling down the slopes.

An added bonus activity was the ten-lane bowling alley in the nearby food court basement. This gave us a handy bribe when it was finally time to leave, and was a fun way to round off an extremely active day.



Fun at Phoenix Park

Day t h r e e

The Pyeongchang Trout Festival is an annual celebration of all things fishy. During the month-long event, up to 30,000 people per day descend on the sleepy town of Jinbumeon to seek out the region's most famous fish. Fortunately, the festival is also a hugely fun family day out, featuring plenty to keep even the most trout-averse entertained.

At 10am the festival was already in full swing, with long lines at the food court, where you can sample everything from trout sushi to trout pizza. Those wishing to try their hand can opt to rent equipment for tented ice fishing; we headed instead to what is modestly described as the 'playground' – actually several fields and frozen lakes packed with exciting activities. HK\$175 per person buys you unlimited entry to tube sledding, petrol go-karting across a frozen lake, ice-biking, skating, ATV riding, ice-dodgems and – a clear winner with my daredevil children – being dragged at high speed behind a snowmobile in a giant inflatable ring. There is also a small selection of fairground rides, along with snack tents that are warmed with giant wood-burning stoves for when the cold gets a little too intense.

A full day of high-octane activity required some serious refuelling, and so we stopped at Daegwalnyeong-myeon on the way home



Checking out the terrain at The Pyeongchang Trout Festival

to eat at Hanwoo Town. A Korean barbecue restaurant with a twist; buy your own meat, veggies and even locally produced cheese at the on-site farm shop, before cooking them up yourself over charcoal burners in the casual restaurant. Finally, a good reason to play with your food.

Day f o u r



Three-year-old Zach and brother Alex

Leaving Pyeongchang after three exhilarating days of snowy fun, we reluctantly made our way back towards Incheon Airport, and the relative warmth of a Hong Kong winter.

And although it will take a little while for me to drum up the enthusiasm for another round of numb fingers and red noses, the boys are already clamouring for a return visit, meaning that I need to find a good compromise for our next trip.

I hear Dubai has a great indoor ski slope... 📍



Snow-rafting is fun!