

ICE AND SNOW TIME

How the market is heating up in the run-up to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics

Rovaniemi, a city in Finland located at the Arctic Circle, sent its most famous resident, Santa Claus, to Beijing to attend the 2019 World Winter Sports (Beijing) Expo in October. He was one of the busiest people at the event. Donning Santa's signature red cap and magnificent white beard, an actor introduced his town to visitors.

"In my hometown, it is already winter," the actor said. "The ground is covered with snow and 2 to 3 centimeters of ice."

Rovaniemi is one of the most famous winter sports resorts in Finland and boasts a wide variety of top-quality training facilities. Santa was in good company at the expo, which drew exhibitors representing some 600 brands from home and abroad and many visitors. Inaugurated in 2016, the expo has been held in Beijing for three consecutive years, with the aim of promoting winter sports in China and developing the ice and snow industry in the country and the world.

Hot Winter Sports

Beijing won the bid in 2015 to host the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The capital will co-host the games with Zhangjiakou City in Hebei province, which lies about 200 kilometers away. During the bid, China set the goal to motivate 300 million people to engage in winter sports.

According to a research report on the development of China's snow and ice industry released at the expo, the bid has spurred the development of winter sports in China.

The report was presented by Zhang Li, vice president of International Data Group (China).

It also revealed impressive growth in winter sports facilities, showing that as of the end of June, there were 388 indoor skating rinks in China, up 16.2 percent year on year, nearly half of which were located in Beijing and Shanghai municipalities, as well as Heilongjiang, Guangdong, Jiangsu

and Shandong provinces.

During the past three years, the number of ski fields has maintained steady growth, up from 607 in 2016 to 761 as of June. During the 2018-19 snow season, Chinese residents made approximately 23.45 million visits to ski fields all over the country, up 21.5 percent from the previous season, the report said.

It also predicted that the value of China's ice and snow industry will reach 600 billion yuan (\$84.8 billion) by 2020, and 1 trillion yuan (\$141.4 billion) by 2025. In comparison, the total value of China's sports industry in 2025 is estimated to be about 5 trillion yuan (\$707 billion). The report also said that in the next three to five years, the number of skiers in China will be approximately 55 million.

Popular Resorts

Although north China has relatively rich ice and snow resources, Zhang said recently, winter sports have developed faster in the southern part of the country.

In recent years, the Shennongjia Zhonghe International Ski Resort located in Shennongjia Mountains of Hubei province in central China has seen an increasing number of tourists, Wang Zuhong, assistant general manager of Hubei Shennongjia Tourism Co. Ltd., told Beijing Review. He said the resort received approximately 120,000 visits last year and expects to get about 150,000 this year.

Shennongjia is a

picturesque mountain range that is home to some rare flora and fauna. It has an average altitude of 1,700 meters, with the highest peak rising more than 3,100 meters above the sea level and covered with snow for more than three months a year. "The right latitude, temperature, humidity and altitude make the quality of the snow close to that of the Alps," said Liu Qijun, head of Shennongjia Forestry District, adding that it is an ideal place for ice and snow sports.

"Nowadays, tourists from all over the country and the world come here to enjoy the rime and the snow, ski and taste delicious food," Liu told the media in March. For four consecutive years, the local skiing market has surged at a rate of 80 percent. With five ski resorts, the district received 300,000 visits during the 2018-19 winter season, Liu said, adding that as of March, Hubei had 16 ski fields, with four more under construction.

Although the growth is impressive, there are also challenges, Liu said, pointing out that the hardware and software of ski slopes, especially small ones, still need to be improved, while efforts should be made to turn first-time skiers into regular ones because currently only one out of every 100 first-time skiers will become a regular skier. He suggested combining winter sports with ecological tourism and fitness, along with teaching students winter sports at school.



A coach trains an ice hockey player in Shicheng, a county in Jiangxi Province, east China, on July 17, 2019

XINHUA



Chinese tourists at the Jungfrau, a well-known mountain resort in Switzerland, on October 4, 2018

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Vibrant Cooperation

In addition to stimulating snow and ice sports and the industry, the upcoming Beijing Olympic Winter Games has also brought China and countries with strong winter sports cultures closer.

For instance, this year marks the China-Finland Year of Winter Sports. "The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Finland have a long history in sports cooperation," said Hanna Kosonen, Finnish minister of science and culture, at the opening ceremony. "In 1950, China sent a team to the Helsinki 1952 Olympic Summer Games. This was the first time the PRC took part in the Olympics."

She said that in the run-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics, the two countries

have decided to deepen cooperation in winter sports. "Currently, this cooperation plays an important role in our bilateral relations," she said.

The Finnish Pavilion at the expo featured nearly 40 key winter sports companies and organizations, said Jarno Syrjala, ambassador of Finland to China, adding that the bilateral cooperation in winter sports will go beyond the games.

"Last year, about 400,000 Chinese tourists visited Finland, half in winter and half in summer; this year, the number will grow 15 percent," said Virpi Aittokoski, a project manager with Visit Finland, a sports travel agency.

Chinese tourists can live like locals, thanks to a mobile app developed by the Tencent

Group, which helps them overcome the language barrier and access local services, Rebekka Mikkola, a consultant to the city of Helsinki, told Beijing Review. She grew up in China, has worked in China for over 10 years and speaks Chinese as fluently as a native. "We will continue to improve our services to make traveling more convenient for Chinese tourists," she said.

In addition to Finland, representatives from about 20 other countries also attended the expo. Signe Brudeset, ambassador of Norway to China, said some Chinese athletes are being trained in Norway in fields such as cross-country skiing and ski jumping.

Some Norwegian companies exhibited their products at the expo. Terje Smevold, an employee of Brav Norway AS, told Beijing Review that this is his

first time in China because the company sees opportunities here, and he believes he will come more often in the future.

Emanuele de Maigret, head of the Economic and Commercial Office at the Italian Embassy in Beijing, said cooperation between China and Italy has been carried out at both national and local levels. Some Italian companies have participated in the construction of Winter Olympic venues in China.

Michael Mayr, sales director of TechnoAlpin Asia, said, "It's an honor for us to join this winter sports boom." His company, based in Italy, has been chosen as a supplier for the Beijing Olympic Winter Games, providing snow- and ice-making equipment and automatic systems.

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