

World's biggest market for beginner skiers embraces winter sports as more resorts and indoor centers open

By PRIME SARMIENTO
in Hong Kong
prime@chinadailyapac.com

In 2006, a group of Chinese archaeologists declared Altay prefecture in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region the birthplace of skiing. Such declaration challenged the International Ski Federation's findings that skiing originated in Russia. But the Chinese archaeologists based their statement on the cave paintings that they discovered in the Altay Mountains. The paintings depict skiers with a herd of animals running below them.

The paintings have not been carbon dated. But Wang Bo, an archaeologist from Xinjiang Museum, estimates that they are more than 10,000 years old.

"The pattern and paint used, and tools made of stones discovered in nearby caves, all suggest that the painting could have been made by the primitive people who used the cave as shelter in the late Paleolithic Age," he told *China Daily* in an earlier interview. He said that these skis were used for hunting around the snow-covered region.

Fast forward to the present and Altay remains a haven for skiers. This time, however, the skiers are not hunting for food but rather indulging in one of China's most popular winter sports.

And while the cave paintings show that skiing may have originated in China, it has only been in recent years that large numbers of Chinese have taken to skiing. Tourism industry players attributed this fresh interest to a more affluent populace and the government's promotion of winter sports ahead of Beijing's hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics.

"The (standard) of living in China has improved tremendously and people can afford to (spend more on) leisure activities," Laurent Vanat, a Geneva-based ski industry researcher, told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

He said Beijing's success in winning the bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics has likewise boosted the Chinese ski industry, giving rise to some of the world's biggest and state-of-the-art ski resorts.

According to Wu Bin, president of consultancy firm Beijing Carving Ski Sports Development Co, more people are now traveling around China to ski. "But I see the Chinese ski market as a beginners' market," he said.

Wu authors the *China Ski Industry White Book*, an oft-quoted annual report that traces the development of the nation's ski industry. According to the latest edition, the number of ski resorts in China in 2017 was



Holidaymakers at a ski resort in Altay prefecture, in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. Skiing has become one of China's most popular winter sports, with 703 ski resorts in the country in 2017, an increase of almost 9 percent from the previous year. IMAGINECHINA

More Chinese putting on skis

703, an increase of nearly 9 percent from the previous year.

Roughly 20 percent of these ski resorts are located in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang. It is also here that some of China's earliest ski resorts were built, as the town of Yabuli hosted the 1996 Winter Asian Games.

The number of skiers has likewise increased, reaching 12.1 million in 2017, a jump of 6.8 percent.

The rising interest in skiing has boosted enrollment in ski schools. The white book said the Magic Ski School, a popular chain of ski schools in China, had 10 branches by the end of 2017 — up from three outlets in 2016. Teaching staff surged to 23,000 last year from 10,900 in 2016.

Speaking to Xinhua News Agency, Zhang Yan, dean of the Magic Ski School, credited the 2022 Winter Olympics for his school's success. Winter sports have become part of education.

"Previously, many schools in Beijing considered skiing as a dangerous sport that they did not let us teach, even the ski lessons we provided for free were not allowed. But now, we are warmly invited to school and they pay for the ski lessons," he said.

Wu of Beijing Carving Ski said skiing only started to evolve into a leisure activity in China around 2000. Prior to that, skiing was reserved for athletes heading to the northeastern

provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang, where the mountainous terrains and long, bitterly cold winters are ideal for skiing.

But when an indoor ski center using artificial snow opened in Beijing about 18 years ago, it enticed the capital city's residents to ski during the winter season.

In the following years, several ski resorts would launch to cater to growing numbers. Most of these ski resorts are in Beijing's Miyun District and in the northern province of Hebei, just a three-hour drive from Beijing.

Wu said the nascent interest in skiing escalated after China won the 2015 bid to host the Winter Olympics, which saw President Xi Jinping encouraging more people to take up skiing and other winter sports.

The national government has issued a development plan that aims to develop the ice and snow sport sector into a trillion-yuan industry by 2025. Under this master plan, China aims to build a total of 650 skating rinks and 800 ski resorts by 2022, and encourage 300 million people to get involved in winter sports.

The strong government support has encouraged the rapid growth of the industry in the past three years alone.

New ski resorts and indoor ski centers were built around China. Industry researcher Vanat said China now has 21 indoor ski centers — the most in the world.

Some of China's biggest companies, including property developer China Vanke and conglomerate Wanda Group, and international companies like Malaysia's Genting Group, have invested in ski resorts and snow parks.

Industry players welcome China's growing interest in skiing.

Wu said China is now the world's biggest market for beginner skiers. Vanat said China is one of the world's fastest growing ski markets, and he expects China to have more than 1,000 ski areas by 2022.

But the challenge is how to sustain such interest to grow the industry in China. Vanat said one way to do this is to customize the ski teaching curriculum to suit the domestic market. "The traditional alpine ski teaching methods are mostly designed for skiers staying for one week at a ski resort, and may not be the best method for the current Chinese consumption pattern," he said.

Vanat said that while the likes of Wanda Changbaishan International Ski Resort in Jilin and Genting Resort Secret Garden in Hebei have modern ski facilities and upscale hotels, most of China's ski resorts are still poorly equipped and only cater to beginners.

"You have a ski market which is 90 percent beginner and they're happy to ski anywhere. But what happens if they become more experienced and they want to explore a larger terrain?" said Jeff Oliveira, Boston-

based founder of research and consultancy firm skiChina.

Oliveira has tested the slopes in several Chinese ski areas over the past few years. He likes "big mountain backcountry skiing" and said that Altay in Xinjiang and Changbaishan in Jilin have the potential to draw in more experienced skiers.

Oliveira said these areas need to be developed to become world-class ski destinations that will attract both Chinese and international skiers.

Indeed, while China's ski industry caters mainly to the local market, it is also attracting the interest of foreign skiers.

Club Med's Asia-Pacific snow holiday report revealed that China is now among the top winter holiday destinations for Asian travelers. Most of the tourists surveyed came from Southeast Asia, and spent most of their holiday time skiing and snowboarding.

Filipino sales manager Dominic Hormigos is one such tourist. He has skied at Nanshan in Beijing, and in Hebei, and considers the sport a unique holiday experience, having grown up in a tropical country. After learning how to ski while traveling in Japan, Hormigos went to China to flex his skiing muscles and enjoy the snow.

"Snow makes the place enchanting. Even simple places which look boring during summer become magical during winter," he said.