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2018 Winter Olympics

For Olympic fans, the real fun starts after the games

By **SCOTT MAYEROWITZ**

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A fan from United States watches women's curling matches at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea, Tuesday, Feb. 20, 2018. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)

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PYEONGCHANG, South Korea (AP) — The Olympics aren't just about fierce competition between the world's best athletes.

It's a time for fans to let loose, party with folks from around the world, try some new food and maybe pose for a photo with the official mascot.

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity," said Sarah Renner of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

But despite the international draw of athletes, fans this year have been mostly South Korean.

Even Renner didn't fly over from South Dakota for the Pyeongchang Games. She teaches English to elementary and middle school students in Jeonju, about a five-hour bus ride away.

Only 20 percent of the 1 million tickets sold so far have been purchased outside South Korea, according to the local organizers.

"A year ago, when people started making plans, there were heightened tensions with North Korea," said Rob Prazmark, president of 21 Sports and Entertainment Marketing Group. He's done marketing for decades for the International Olympic Committee, various corporate sponsors and cities bidding for future games.

Fans wondered if the games would even happen, he said. Could they get a refund?

Corporate sponsors that might normally fly over large delegations of employees and high-ranking board members held back.

The next two Olympics are going to be in Tokyo and then Beijing, making it three consecutive games in Asia. Prazmark predicts those Olympics will benefit because a core group of folks won't want to miss out again.

For those that are already here, they aren't letting anything stop them for missing out. Here is a look at some of their stories:

THE OLYMPIC FRAT HOUSE

A big draw outside the sporting events are the "houses" sponsored by national Olympic teams or tourism boards. Some of them, like Casa Italia, are reserved for athletes, their families and friends. But many are open to the public and are big party spots.

Guests get to taste a bit of each country's culture — and beer — and maybe root for the home team, even if it isn't your home country. There's even a chance to pretend to be an Olympian: Sweden House offers a biathlon shooting game; Canada House has a table hockey game.

The House of Switzerland tries to replicate Alpine life with outdoor fire pits and a cluster of small chalets. Fans sit in comfy chairs — under warm blankets — and snack on fondue and bratwurst. If they are lucky, there is a performance of South Korean musicians yodeling.

"It's like a mini Epcot center of sorts. Everybody is showing off their culture and foods," said Blake Taylor, a fan from Baltimore, Maryland, who is stationed in Seoul for the U.S. Navy. "You don't normally get to see so many nations together."

The real party spot is the beachfront Holland House, sponsored by Heineken. Another fan favorite has been "Sports House," which is really the home base for Russian athletes who are competing under the Olympic flag following a doping scandal.

Czech House is right across the street from the athletes village but was pretty subdued recently with fans playing miniature ping pong and drinking Pilsner Urquell.

THE PIN MAN

You can't miss Daniel Presburger.

The tall, bearded high school history teacher wears a long apron covered in Olympic pins.

As he walks around the venues, Presburger, from Thousand Oaks, California, is approached by everyone.

Most just want a photo or selfie with him.

"It starts with one and then sort of builds," he said.

Fans who have pins are met with a simple phrase to break through any language barrier: "Change. Change." He is particularly interested in the pins cities and countries issue as they are bidding to get future games.

Each day, he's been walking close to 12 miles. The soles of his new snow boots have already worn out. This is his 14th Olympics.

"This is what I do to relax. I do this 20 hours a day while here," Presburger said. "I tend to have people approach me. I'm pretty much out there."

A TASTE OF KOREA

Fargo, North Dakota, is a long way from the Olympics.

But Amelia and Kyle Young and the couple's friend Troy Davis — all part of a local curling community at home — decided in November that it was a trip they needed to take.

"We primarily came here for the Olympics," Amelia Young said. "We aren't certain when or if we will get back to South Korea, so we also want to experience the culture here."

After shopping at e-mart — South Korea's version of Walmart — on Sunday night, the group asked some locals for dinner recommendations. After some translation issues and problems with a GPS, Young said, "they offered to drive us to the restaurant" and then stayed and helped order the best dishes.

"The food was amazing, but the experience was unreal," she added. "There was a small language barrier, but we were able to work through that using technology and gestures. To be able to experience the cuisine the way the locals eat it, was invaluable."

THE SUPERFANS

South Koreans have turned out in force to support their athletes.

The cheers during one of the speedskating medal races were practically deafening.

But hockey?

The passionate cheers, collective gasps and squeals were enough to bring one hockey-loving Canadian to tears.

Rebecca Darling, of Calgary, grew up with hockey and was in the stands Sunday night for Canada's 4-0 blowout of the South Korean team.

After a shutout loss, their third of the tournament, the players lined up and bowed to all four corners of the stadium, she recalled, "with the grace and dignity befitting the standing ovation they were receiving."

It was unlike any other hockey game she'd ever seen.

"As a Canadian, we take very seriously the ownership of hockey," she said. "To see our game played and beloved by Korean fans literally brought tears to my eyes."

MEETING STRANGERS

Pille Muni added the Olympics to her trip through Asia. She's from Elva, Estonia, and always wanted to see South Korea. Upon arriving at the games, she waited in line to pose for a photo with the Olympic mascot Soohorang, a white tiger.

Wearing an Estonia hat and waving her country's flag, she mingled with others waiting for a shuttle bus. She had tickets to freestyle skiing and ice dancing but was just grinning with joy as she struck up conversations with strangers.

"I want to taste the food. I want to experience the culture," Muni said. "I've never seen so helpful people."

STANDING ROOM ONLY

Not everything is a celebration.

For those commuting daily from Seoul, the trains are crowded and sold out during peak hours. Spectators cram into any available train, sitting on the floor or standing in vestibules.

Josie Hooks and Dallas Sartorio, fans from Calgary, Canada, found refuge after a hockey game one night on the floor behind two train seats. They somehow managed to take a brief nap.

Lauren McCleary is on a two month-long business trip from Sydney, Australia, to Seoul. Her company gave her and some coworkers Olympic tickets. There was just one catch: the hockey game didn't start until 12:10 p.m. and the only train from Seoul with spare seats was at 7 a.m.

So the group spent the cool February morning at a beach a few miles away, drinking coffee and wasting time.

"It was cold, but the boys dipped their toes in. Now they have cold feet. Idiots," McCleary said hours later.

QUEUE HERE

Navigating around the venues can be its own challenge.

There is a complex network of buses shuttling people from one spot to another. There is a code to figure out which buses are for spectators, athletes, media and workers. And then each venue has its own three-letter acronym.

Once at the right stop, there is still likely to be a long, cold wait to get onto a bus.

On Saturday, Canadian Stephen Noakes and his friends — all who teach English to students in South Korea — decided to search for the Olympic flame. Instead, they got on the wrong shuttle. After a 90-minute detour ate up their day, they gave up on the search.

"It's a lot bigger than you'd think," Noakes said of the venues, scattered more than an hour apart.

It even takes time to part ways with your money.

The giant "super store" selling souvenirs outside the ice rinks always has a line snaking back and forth outside

Inside the hockey arena, fans are adapting. Many returning fans were buying two beers at time, hoping to avoid another long wait. Several noted that during past games, the wait was almost an hour.

Scott Mayerowitz can be found on Twitter at: <https://twitter.com/globetrotscott>

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