

THE HWACHEON ICE FESTIVAL

How a City Can Turn a Disadvantage into an Advantage

By Johan Moerman



At the invitation of IFEA Korea, I made a trip to South Korea in January, 2014. Starting at Pai Chai University in Daejeon, I took part in a lively workshop with the students there. Their knowledge of international trends was current and it was inspiring to see that no matter where you are in the world today, you can meet the same kind of professionalism and enthusiasm for festivals and working in the festival industry. International knowledge exchange is a fact today and the IFEA plays an important role in that exchange.

After visiting Pai Chai University, we moved to Hwacheon, many hours away from the Korean capital, Seoul. A city with a lot of disadvantages, Hwacheon is hidden in the mountains at the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Located in South Korea's coldest region, Hwacheon has bitterly cold winters. For many years, it was a very poor region, but the visionary city leadership there discovered the power of the leisure industry and special events.

During the month of January, the Hwacheoncheon (stream) freezes over and Hwacheon holds an Ice Fishing Festival. The impressive river is packed with thousands of visitors, all competing to catch trout through holes in the ice using small

rods. The very tough even catch the fish with their bare hands! Despite the bitter cold, everybody has a great time. It really is something to see in order to believe it. I was impressed that a festival under such circumstances can be such a striking success. It reminded me of when I saw Ottawa's Winterlude Festival for the first time, another festival taking advantage of their cold weather environment.

The festival is well organised, attracting a few hundred thousand people in less than a month. In the two days we were there, we saw ice skating, beautiful ice sculptures, an ice tunnel and many other great things. The city dressing was outstanding. The main street of the city

was decorated with thousands of colorful fish paper lamps that created the ultimate fairy tale festival atmosphere in the city. Several American television networks and representatives from European newspapers were even in attendance. During the Summer months, the city uses the river for a Water Raft Festival and a Dragon Festival.

Although being in the coldest region of South Korea and having many potential disadvantages due to that location, I found Hwacheon an excellent example of how cities can benefit from special events, turning their disadvantages into an advantage.

During my time at the Ice Festival, I also had the opportunity to attend the World Winter Cities Conference for Mayors. While there, I presented the well-deserved IFEA World Festival & Event City Award to the Mayor of Hwacheon. Hwacheon won this great honor at the IFEA's 58th Annual Convention & Expo in Pittsburgh, PA on September 16, 2013 and I was honored to be able to represent the award in person to the Mayor and his city this past January.