

The Best of South Korea

South Korea is very much a land of contradictions. Rugged mountain ranges slope down to pristine beaches, and bustling, cosmopolitan cities are surrounded by farmland. An exotic land of colorful celebrations and beautiful landscapes, it's rife with traces of its thousands of years of history. At the same time, the country has industrialized so profoundly and so rapidly that, in urban areas, you may sometimes have to look a bit deeper to see the beauty amid the high traffic and towering concrete apartment blocks.

Looking at a map, you might think it would be easy to traverse South Korea's 99,237 sq. km (38,316 sq. miles). But nearly 70% of South Korea is made up of seemingly impenetrable mountainous terrain. That terrain has helped many of South Korea's regions maintain their unique charms and has gifted the country with some of the most stunning national parks in all of Asia.

Viewing a larger map, traces of South Korea's tumultuous past emerge. Extending south from China, and just north of Japan, the Korean Peninsula has long been strategically desirable to both countries. As a result, Korea has fought off invaders from Mongolia, Manchuria, China, and Japan over the course of its 5,000-year history. But the most traumatic moment in Korea's past came after a 35-year Japanese occupation that ended with the close of World War II. The Soviet Union was to oversee the northern half of the peninsula, while the U.S. oversaw the south, ostensibly until fair elections could be held. But it was not to be. The Soviets and the U.S. were unable to agree on how to reunify the country, and on June 25, 1950, Soviet-backed troops from what had become known as North Korea crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea. The United Nations sent troops (predominantly American soldiers) to the South's defense, but Korea had fallen victim to the Cold War.

Though an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, it resulted in the formal division of the peninsula into North and South with a buffer, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), in between. Its name is a tragically ironic one, as the DMZ is one of the world's most heavily guarded places. But while North Korea remains essentially sealed off to outsiders, South Korea, which makes up 45% of the peninsula (making it the same size as Portugal), is one of the most fascinating tourist destinations in the world.

Most visitors to the country see Seoul and think that they've experienced all that South Korea has to offer. Sure, Seoul is an exciting city with crowded markets, centuries-old palaces, and gourmet restaurants. But the real excitement of South Korea lies outside its modern confines.

All the more reason then to get out of the major cities and explore. You'll be well rewarded by the quiet beauty of the mountains and the sea, and the mystical charms of South Korea's ancient temples and fortresses, as you explore a vast countryside rarely visited by international tourists. Although English speakers are hard to find in some of these more remote areas, it's all part of the excitement and adventure of taking the roads less traveled.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Staying Overnight in a Buddhist Temple:** Many temples in South Korea offer overnight stays, where you can enjoy true solitude and quiet, and perhaps a bit of inner peace. Wake up early to the sound of prayers, and cleanse your mind, body, and spirit with a bath and a meal of mountain vegetables. See chapter 4.
- **Sipping Tea in a Traditional Teahouse in Insadong** (Seoul): In the middle of Seoul's cosmopolitan madness, you'll find a bit of tranquillity within the walls of a traditional teahouse. Enjoy the music of a *gayageum* (a traditional stringed instrument) while calming your spirits with a cup of history. See p. 127.
- **Haggling with a Vendor in an Open Market:** South Korea's markets are bustling centers that can be found along winding alleyways and crowded streets. You haven't truly experienced South Korea until you've elbowed your way through the crowd and convinced a vendor to drop the price on something by at least a couple of won. Even if that souvenir is already dirt-cheap, it's fun to get caught up in the excitement of bargaining.
- **Being Naked in Front of Hundreds of Strangers:** Okay, so nudity isn't the real attraction. That would be the traditional bathhouses (or even better, the water parks featuring hot springs) scattered throughout South Korea. Don't leave the country without relaxing in a hot sauna with a bunch of old ladies (or old men) or getting a water massage at one of South Korea's many spas.
- **Seeing a Traditional Performance:** Whether you're in Seoul or hanging out in a rural village seemingly in the middle of nowhere, there is probably a festival going on nearby. Try to catch a performance of *pansori* (Korea's wailing blues), a mask dance, or just the hallowed sound of the bamboo *daegeum* (flute).
- **Visiting the DMZ:** The Demilitarized Zone is probably one of the least aptly named places on the planet. A result of the last vestiges of animosity between Soviet Russia and the U.S., since the Berlin Wall fell Korea has been the only divided country in the world. See chapter 6.

2 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS

- **Icheon** (Gyeonggi-do): Just outside of Seoul, this town is one of the foremost ceramics centers in the country, famous for its traditional artisans. The dozens of active kilns in the area are a vital part of Korea's cultural heritage. Don't miss the famous rice meals. See chapter 6.
- **Boseong** (Jeollanam-do): In late March and early April, the first new tea leaves peek out from tea bushes along these terraced farmlands. The hillsides here are gorgeous even in the dead of winter, but seeing dozens of older women hand-picking green tea is quite a treat. Finish off your visit with a cup of (what else?) green tea, green tea noodles, or some green tea ice cream. See chapter 8.
- **Damyang** (Jeollanam-do): The bamboo capital of South Korea, this town is famous for its bamboo forests and for producing pretty much anything and everything you could imagine from this versatile plant. My advice is to lose yourself in the midst of the bamboo

and listen as the leaves of these tall grasses whisper secrets to the wind. See chapter 8.

- **Gurim** (Jeollanam-do): A tiny village located just outside of Wolchulsan National Park, this historic locale is known for its ancient pottery and its replicas of antique works. See chapter 8.
- **Andong** (Gyeongsangbuk-do): Andong's folk village is the best in the country, bar none. It even warranted a visit from Queen Elizabeth II, as locals

will be happy to inform you. If you can, try to visit in October when the mask dance festival is on, to experience traditional folk performances. See chapter 9.

- **Tongyeong** (Gyeongsangnam-do): Tongyeong is the hometown of world-renowned classical composer Isang Yun. Once you see the magnificent views from the city's oceanside cliffs, you'll see why the composer, who spent much of his career in Germany, yearned so much for his hometown. See chapter 9.

3 THE BEST TEMPLES & HOLY SITES

- **Magoksa** (Gongju-si, Chungcheongnam-do): One of the few temples that wasn't destroyed during the Joseon Dynasty's crackdown on Buddhists, it's worth a visit as much for its scenery as its ancient structures. See p. 176.
- **Shilleuksa** (Yeoju, Gyeonggi-do): Although it's a bit out of the way, the country's only lakeside temple is worth the trip. Founded in A.D. 580 and nestled amid low hills, Shilleuksa is the perfect spot for quiet reflection. The carved reliefs of dragons and lotus blossoms are lovely, but the big draw is the scenery, particularly in the spring, when the flowers are in bloom, or fall, when the ginkgo trees' yellow leaves light up the landscape. See p. 152.
- **Beopjusa** (Boeun, Chungcheongbuk-do): Although the views are pretty spectacular and the five-story wooden hall quite impressive, this temple's main attraction is its giant bronze Buddha, which towers over the mountain scenery. See p. 195.
- **Baegyangsa** (Jeollanam-do): Known for the beautiful colors of its surrounding landscape in the fall, it's smaller than its sister temple Naejangsa, located in the same national park. See p. 247.
- **Hwaeomsa** (Masan, Jeollanam-do): One of South Korea's 10 most important temples, it is the only one in the

country with a two-story pavilion. Destroyed five times since it was originally built in A.D. 544, it was last rebuilt in the mid-17th century. If you can spare the time, the rest of Jirisan is worth exploring as well. See p. 241.

- **Hyangilam** (Suncheon, Jeollabuk-do): Perched on a precarious mountainside, this former hermitage is now a temple complex. Wake up early to climb up its steep steps and catch the sunrise over the ocean. You'll also miss the bus loads of tourists, who usually arrive in the late afternoon. See p. 233.
- **Songgwangsa** (Suncheon, Jeollanam-do): It's quite a trek to reach this temple, but once you do, you will be rewarded with both a fabulous view of the surrounding foliage and some brilliant red and gold murals representing a range of religious figures. Try to time your visit for the noon or evening prayers, as you'll be treated to the echoing of the meditative gong. See p. 234.
- **Unjusa** (Hwasun, Jeollanam-do): This temple complex not only is easy to reach (no giant mountains to climb to get here!), but also houses the most fascinating array of Buddhist statuary in the country. See p. 245.
- **Bori-am** (Namhae, Gyeongsangnam-do): Climb up to this hermitage, one of the three main holy sites in the country,

and pray to the Bodhisattva of Compassion. If you're pure of heart, your wishes will be granted. Even if you're not, you'll be treated to a spectacular view. See p. 306.

- **Bulguksa** (Gyeongju): A testament to Shilla architectural ingenuity, this famed temple—possibly the country's most visited—has had its wooden structures rebuilt multiple times, but its stone statues have hung on since A.D. 528. Early mornings are best to enjoy a taste of its former tranquillity. See p. 256.
- **Haeinsa** (Hapcheon, Gyeongsang-do): Home of the famous Tripitaka Koreana,

this famed temple (and UNESCO World Heritage site) sits in a deep forest. Try to go in the late afternoon to see the wooden blocks (through locked slats), but stay past sunset to hear the sound of the gong echoing through the valleys. See p. 301.

- **Naksansa** (Gangwon-do): Although this expansive temple was largely destroyed by a fire in 2008, a bright new temple has been constructed in its place. Including the cliffside **Hongryeon-am** hermitage on its grounds, visit during lunchtime and be treated to a free bowl of *janchi gooksu* (feast noodles). See p. 357.

4 THE BEST HISTORICAL SITES

- **Changdeokkung** (Seoul): If you want to see how Korean royalty used to live, this palace is a prime example. Its famed Biwon ("Secret Garden") alone is worth the visit. See p. 95.
- **Jongmyo Royal Shrine** (Seoul): There's a reason this *myo* (royal shrine) is a World Heritage site—it's the most important one in the country and is home to the longest traditional wooden building left in Korea. Try to time your visit for the spectacular annual memorial ceremony for the dead Joseon kings (usually the first Sun in May). See p. 102.
- **Suwon Hwaseong** (Suwon, Gyeonggi-do): The best restored fortress in the country, this impressive wall has historic gates and towers climbing a mountain in the middle of the now-modern city. See p. 134.
- **Ganghwa-do** (Incheon, Gyeonggi-do): This island off the coast of Incheon is

home to about 80 dolmen, prehistoric rock tombs, dating back thousands of years. See p. 147.

- **Gwanghallu-won** (Namwon, Jeollabuk-do): Home of the legend of Chunhyang (a traditional love story about a nobleman's son who falls in love with a courtesan's daughter), this garden is not only a mecca for lovers, but a spot where *pansori* made its debut. Try to visit between April and October and catch the free performances at noon. See p. 211.
- **Daereung-won Tumuli Park** (Gyeongju): There's something eerily peaceful about the *tumuli* (tombs) that house the remains of Shilla kings. Although only one of the tombs has been excavated, just seeing the soft, grassy mounds is interesting enough. See p. 256.

5 THE BEST PLACES TO ENJOY THE SCENERY

- **Cheonggyecheon** (Seoul): Years ago, a small river that flowed through Seoul

was paved over. Although Cheonggyecheon is no longer a "natural" stream,

this restored green space in the middle of the city gives new perspective to the skyscrapers towering on either side. See p. 110.

- **Songnisan** (Chungcheongbuk-do/Gyeongsangbuk-do): This national park has some of the best hiking trails in South Korea. In a country where hiking is the unofficial national sport, that's saying something. See p. 194.
- **Juwangsan** (Gyeongsangbuk-do): The smallest of the country's national parks, it is still one of the prettiest. **Jusanji Lake**, whose clear waters reflect the surrounding peaks, is well worth the hike. See p. 279.
- **Hong-do** (Jeollanam-do): If you have a day to spare, take a ferry to this "red island" in the middle of Dadoha Maritime Park. A protected area, its pebble beaches and quaint seafood restaurants

are overshadowed only by its magnificent scenery. See p. 246.

- **Inner Seorak** (Gangwon-do): Although all of Seoraksan boasts beautiful landscapes, the less traveled inner section is worth the extra trek, especially in the fall when the autumn colors light up the mountainsides. See p. 353.
- **Sanbang-gulsa** (Jeju-do): This island grotto and nearby **Yongmeoli Haebyeon** (Dragon Head Beach) are stuff of legend and wonderful examples of the volcanic island's natural beauty. See p. 403.
- **Seongsan Ilchulbong** (Jeju-do): This isn't called "Sunrise Peak" for nothing, since it's a choice spot for watching the morning's rays. This former parasitic volcano is now home to beautiful rape flowers that bloom in the spring. See p. 404.

6 THE BEST MARKETS

- **Namdaemun** (Seoul): If you shop in only one market in the entire country, this is the one to visit. They say that if you can't find it here, the oldest and largest traditional market in Korea, it probably doesn't exist. See p. 116.
- **Jang-anpyeong** (Seoul): The best place to find antiques, Jang-anpyeong is one of the largest specialized markets in all of Asia. If you're looking for a unique treasure, this is the place to go digging. See p. 119.
- **Noryangjin Seafood Market** (Seoul): This is the city's oldest and largest fish market. Try to make it here at the crack of dawn to see the fish auctions while the fishermen unload their night's catch. See p. 116.
- **Yongsan Electronics Market** (Seoul): Even if you're not a computer geek, you can appreciate the electronic mayhem

in this marketplace that spans 22 buildings. See p. 120.

- **Hanbok Street** (Daejeon, Chungcheong-do): Whether or not you're in the market for a traditional Korean outfit, check out the hundreds of stores that specialize in the national costume (a short bodice and voluminous skirt for women; a vest, an overcoat, and pants that tie at the waist and ankles for men), which is still worn for weddings and other formal occasions. See p. 169.
- **Yakjeon-golmok Market** (Daegu): The city of Daegu's biggest draw is this 350-year-old market that sells all manner of traditional oriental herbs and medicines. See p. 265.
- **Jagalchi Market** (Busan): Korea's largest seafood market, they have everything squiggly, shiny, wet, and fresh from the ocean. See p. 342.

7 THE BEST FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

As a general note, most celebrations happen in the spring or autumn. For dates and contact information, see also “Calendar of Events,” on p. 23.

- **The Day the Buddha Came (aka Buddha’s Birthday)**: throughout the country): During what is sometimes referred to as the “Festival of Lanterns,” every temple in the country gets lit up like a Christmas tree in celebration of the birth of the Enlightened One.
- **Baekje Cultural Festival** (Buyeo or Gongju): Every October, this historical event celebrates the great Baekje kings with over 100 traditional performances and events throughout the area.
- **Boryeong Mud Festival** (Daecheon, Chungcheongnam-do): Held on the muddy beaches of Daecheon every July, this is basically organized mud play. Not only is it a great photo op, but you also get a beneficial skin treatment while rolling around in the mud. The

dirty activities include mud wrestling, mud slides, and making mud soap. Mud pies are optional.

- **Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF; Busan)**: The largest and most renowned of Korea’s film festivals, it is a wonderful showcase for current films from throughout Asia. Usually held sometime in October.
- **Andong Mask Dance Festival** (Andong, Gyeongsangnam-do): Although the highlight of the festival is the Korean *talchum* (mask dance), performers from other countries show off their masked splendor, as well.
- **Gangneung Danoje Festival** (Gangneung, Gangwon-do): Celebrating the traditional “Dano” (the fifth day of the fifth month of the Lunar year), it is one of the few places you can see traditional shamanistic rituals. It usually happens sometime in June.

8 THE BEST LOCAL ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Holiday In Korea Hostel** (☎ 02/3672-3113): Great for budget-conscious travelers in Seoul, this hostel is cozy and centrally located. The owners throw a party every Saturday night, which is especially great for single travelers looking to make new friends. See p. 77.
- **Kim’s Guest House** (☎ 02/337-9894): It’s hard to find a better bargain in Seoul with this kind of hospitality. You’ll get a simple dorm-style room, but the owner makes you feel like you’re visiting family. See p. 78.
- **Sarangchae** (☎ 054/773-4868): Walking distance to Tumuli Park, this family-run *minbak* (homestay) in Gyeongju is not only a bargain, but a

great way to experience warm Korean hospitality firsthand. See p. 259.

- **Busan Youth Hostel Arpina** (☎ 051/731-9800): For the price, the location, and the convenience, this is the best budget accommodation in Busan. The rooms are modest, but some of them have views of Haeundae Beach. Suites are great for traveling families or groups. See p. 320.
- **Jazz Village** (☎ 064/738-9300): This Korean-style pension in Jeju-do has both hotel-style rooms and “condo”-style facilities, complete with kitchens. A bit off the beaten path, its facilities are great for vacationing families, and the piped-in soft jazz is a fun touch. See p. 396.

9 THE BEST HOTELS

- **Westin Chosun** (☎ 02/771-0500): Just like an old standard, this hotel is dependable and delightful for travelers who want a place that's high-tech and centrally located. Leave your shoes by the door and they'll be shined by the next morning. The friendly, professional staff is helpful with everything from dining recommendations to hailing you a cab. See p. 71.
- **The Shilla Seoul** (☎ 02/2233-3131): It's located in the green oasis of Namsan in the middle of the city, and you won't find quieter digs anywhere else in town. The service is also nearly perfect. Spacious rooms and polite staff add to a nice stay. See p. 75.
- **Chungmu Marina Resort Condo** (☎ 055/643-8000): Convenient for traveling families or groups, this resort has oceanview rooms complete with kitchens and living rooms. This apartment-style spot is a great place to enjoy the dramatic beauty of Tongyeong. See p. 298.
- **Novotel Ambassador Busan** (☎ 051/743-1234): With a prime location on Haeundae Beach, the Novotel is perfect for spur-of-the-moment beach strolls. Here, at one of the best luxury hotels in Busan, you'll find up-to-date facilities and 24-hour dining on-site. See p. 319.
- **Hyatt Regency Jeju** (☎ 064/733-1234 or 800/492-8804 in the U.S. and Canada): A Jungmun Beach standard, this elegant resort hotel is one of the best on the island. Unlike the newer tourist properties, this hotel has kept its understated elegance. The open lobby with glass elevators is a nice touch. See p. 395.
- **Jeju Lotte Hotel** (☎ 064/731-1000): The top hotel in the Lotte chain, this expansive resort overlooks the ocean in the Jungmun beach complex. Look past its cheesy Las Vegas-style water show to see its expansive grounds and spacious rooms. See p. 395.

10 THE BEST DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Noshing in the Food Alley in Namdaemun Market** (Seoul): You haven't really experienced the charm of an outdoor market until you've had a bite to eat from the street vendors in this *shi-jang* (market). Fuel up for your next round of shopping with a fresh flatcake hot off the griddle or a plate of *soondae* (blood sausage). See p. 116.
- **Enjoying a Cup of Tea while Overlooking the City's Shoppers** (Seoul): Seoul's Insadong district is chock-full of traditional tea shops. Opt for one on the second floor and watch the world pass by on the streets below, while sipping a fragrant brew from a hand-crafted teacup. See p. 127.
- **Cooking Your Own Meat on a Table-top Grill**: For the full Korean dining experience you really must try *galbi* (beef short ribs), *ssamgyupsal* (sliced pork belly), or *dak galbi* (spicy chicken) that you've cooked yourself on a grill at your table.
- **Dine on Top of the World** (Seoul): Okay, so you're not technically on top of the world, but you do get a pretty great view of the city below when you dine at Top Cloud. Come for dinner, when the lights of Seoul twinkle below. See p. 84.
- **Drinking Homemade Rice Wine in a Remote Village**: If you get a chance to travel to one of South Korea's small

villages, stop under one of the thatched-roof joints to enjoy a gourd full of the milky rice wine, *makgeolli*, and some good old-fashioned, home-style food.

- **Having Hot Chicken Soup on an Equally Hot Day:** Certain Koreans believe that fighting fire with fire is the way to go. So to beat the oppressive summer heat (especially during the three hottest days of the year), the masses get their own steaming bowl of *samgyetang* (young chicken soup). If that doesn't keep the doctor away, nothing will.
- **Picking Your Catch at Jagalchi Market:** There's a certain power to deciding which fish is going to get sliced up for your *hwae* (raw fish) meal. Luckily you just point and the work is done for you.

It doesn't get any fresher than that. See p. 342.

- **Eating Fresh-Caught Live Squid:** There's nothing like having to catch your food with your chopsticks before it has a chance to wriggle away. Adventurous eaters should look for this exciting delicacy in Jeju-do, Busan, or other seaside towns.
- **Enjoying Everyday Jeolla-do Cuisine:** The Jeolla-do region has the most delicious food in the country—and it's not just Jeolla residents who'll tell you. You can walk into any restaurant and get an excellent meal without breaking the bank. A *hanjeongshik* (Korean traditional meal) is a great way to enjoy the area's seasonal vegetables and rice.