History

An Ancient People

Koreans emerged as a people on a mountainous peninsula. Someone once said that if the Korean peninsula were flattened with an iron, it would be as big as China; although Koreans don't try to compare their country to China, they are more than willing to compare it to Japan and to say that theirs is a significant, important and, when prompted, world-beating country. Koreans associate their origins with one of the most beautiful points on the globe, the great mountain on their northern border, Paekdusan (or White-Head Mountain), with a crystal-pure volcanic lake at its summit. (The North Koreans say that Kim Jong Il was born there, even if most historians think he was born along the Sino-Russian border.) Koreans remain today a 'mountain people', who identify with hometowns and home regions that, so they argue, differ greatly from other places in Korea. Koreans are also an ancient people: they are one of the few peoples in the world who can trace a continuous history and presence on the same territory going back thousands of years. Since Korea has had next to no ethnic minorities, Koreans have traditionally thought that they are a homogeneous and unique people – and that they always have been.

Sourcebook of Korean Civilisation (1993) edited by Peter Lee has a wide selection of original historical documents and materials, in translation and with commentary.

The imagined beginning of the Korean nation was the 3rd millennium BC, when a king named Dan·gun founded old Joseon. Joseon (Choson) remains the name of the country in North Korea, but South Koreans use the term Han·guk, a name dating from the 1890s.

The first Korean – Dan·gun – was not just a person but a king, and a continuous presence from his time down to the present, a kingly vessel filled by different people at different times, who drew their legitimacy from this eternal lineage. Under its first president, for example, South Korea used a calendar in which Dan·gun's birth constituted year one – setting the date at 2333 BC. If the two Koreas can't agree on many things, including what to call their country, they can agree on Dan·gun. In 1993 North Korea announced with great fanfare the discovery of Dan·gun's tomb at a site close to Pyongyang: 'The founding of Kojoson (old Joseon) by Dan·gun 5000 years ago marked an epochal occasion in the formation of the Korean nation… The Koreans are a homogeneous nation who inherited the same blood and culture consistently down through history'. All the scribes came forward to proclaim Koreans as the oldest (and therefore finest) people in the world, with one continuous line of history from the 30th-century BC down to the present.

A New History of Korea by Lee Ki-baik (1984) takes a cultural and sociological perspective on the country's history.

Unfortunately there is no written history of Korea until the centuries just before the birth of Christ, and that history was chronicled by Chinese scribes. But there is archaeological evidence that human beings inhabited this peninsula half a million years ago, and that an advanced people were there seven or eight thousand years ago in the Neolithic period – as revealed by the ground and polished stone tools and pottery they left to posterity. These Neolithic people practiced agriculture in a settled communal life, and are widely supposed to have had consanguineous clans as their basic social grouping. Nationalist historians also trace many Korean social and cultural traits back to these Neolithic peoples, but around the time of Christ three ancient kingdoms emerged that influenced Korean history down to our time.

The first state to emerge in the Three Kingdoms era (57 BC–AD 668) was Baekje (Paekche), which was a centralised, aristocratic state melding Chinese and indigenous influence. By the 3rd century AD, Baekje was strong enough to demolish its rivals and occupy what today is the core area of Korea, around Seoul. The common Korean custom of father-to-son royal succession is said to have begun with Baekje king Geun Chugo. His grandson inaugurated another long tradition by adopting Buddhism as the state religion (in 384). The northern kingdom, Goguryeo (Koguryŏ), conquered a large territory by AD 312 and expanded in all directions, especially toward the Taedong River in the south, which runs through Pyongyang. Peninsular geography shaped the political space of Baekje and Goguryeo and a third kingdom called Shilla (Silla), which fills out the trilogy. Approximately three-quarters of the way down the peninsula, at the 37th parallel, the major mountain range veers to the southwest, dividing the peninsula. This southwest extension of mountains framed Baekje's historic territory, just as it did the Shilla kingdom to the east. Goguryeo, however, ranged over a wild region consisting of northeastern Korea and eastern Manchuria, giving rise to contemporary dreams of a 'greater Korea' in territories that now happen to be part of China and Russia. While South Korea identifies itself with the glories of the Shilla kingdom, which they say unified the peninsula in 668 AD, the North identifies with Goguryeo and says the country wasn't truly unified until the founding of the Goguryeo dynasty. Meanwhile people in the southwestern part of the country felt abused by dictators and left out of the growth of South Korea for decades until one of their own was elected president in 1997 (Kim Dae-jung), and often identified with the Baekje legacy.

Korea by Angus Hamilton (1904) is a rare and lively description of life in Korea under the last dynasty.

Buddhism in Korea

Buddhism came to Korea from China in the latter part of the Three Kingdoms era, establishing itself first in Goguryeo and Baekje in the late 4th century and then in Shilla in the early 6th century. With royal support the faith spread throughout the peninsula and became the official religion in all three states – and remained so until the end of the 14th century. It wasn't quite the familiar Buddhism of ascetic monks, however – some monasteries became wealthy and owned large estates and thousands of slaves, and some monks dressed in silk robes, rode fine horses and indulged in wine, women and song. Korean Buddhism also incorporated indigenous shamanist beliefs; many of the colourful wooden temples you can still visit in the mountain temples have a small hall dedicated to shamanist deities like the mountain gods and have histories that stretch back over a thousand years.

Far from being pacifists, Korean monks often came to the defence of their country. Many mountain fortresses found throughout the Korean peninsula contained temples and were garrisoned by warrior monks. Toughened by their spartan lifestyle and trained in martial arts, monk warriors played a major part in resisting the Japanese invasions in the 1590s – even though Confucianism had become the state doctrine and the

TIMELINE

2333 BC Mythical founding of the Korean nation by Dan·gun and his bear wife

668–918 Shilla kingdom rules a Korea unified up to the Taedong River from its capital Gyeongju

918–1392 Goryeo dynasty rules Korea and produces some of the most exquisite celadon pottery

1231 Mongols sweep through China and invade Korea

new rulers treated them as lowborn and no better than beggars. Monks were not allowed to enter the gates of Seoul, for example, which is why many temples are hidden away on remote mountains. Today Buddhist sects in Seoul sometimes come to blows over their disputes, and some monks even marry and have children; the ascetic Seon (Zen) doctrine is the most common one, but has many rivals. If all this sounds heretical, the Korean approach to religion is often eclectic – the same person might be a Christian, a Buddhist and a Confucianist, depending on the day.

Shilla Ascendancy

Shilla emerged victorious on the peninsula in 668, and it is from this famous date that South Korean historians speak for the first time of a unified Korea. This brought an end to the era of the Three Kingdoms, but not before all of them had come under the long-term sway of Chinese civilisation by introducing Chinese statecraft, Buddhist and Confucian philosophy, Confucian practices of educating the young, and the Chinese written language. Artists from Goguryeo and Baekje also perfected a mural art found on the walls of tombs, and took it to Japan where it deeply influenced Japan's temple and burial art. But it is the blossoming of Shilla that still astounds contemporary visitors to Korea, and makes its ancient capital at Gyeongju (Kyŏngju) one of the most fascinating tourist destinations in East Asia.

Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History by Bruce Cumings (2005) offers an overview of Korean history from year one to the 1860s, followed by a close examination of the modern period.

Shilla had close relations with the great Tang dynasty in China, sent many students to Tang schools, and had a level of civilisation high enough to merit the Chinese designation 'flourishing land in the East'. Shilla culture melded indigenous and Tang influences: in 682 it set up a national Confucian academy to train high officials, and later instituted a civil-service examination system modelled on that of the Tang. But Shilla had a flourishing indigenous civilisation clearly different from the Tang, one that was among the most advanced in the world. Its capital at Gyeongju was renowned as the 'city of gold', where the aristocracy pursued a high culture and extravagant pleasures. Chinese historians wrote that elite officials possessed thousands of slaves, with like numbers of horses, cattle and pigs. Their wives wore solid-gold tiaras and earrings of delicate and intricate filigree. Scholars studied the Confucian and Buddhist classics and developed advanced methods for astronomy and calendrical science. 'Pure Land' Buddhism, a simple doctrine, united the mass of common people, who like today's Hare Krishnas could become adherents through the repetition of simple chants.

The crowning glory of Gyeongju is the Bulguksa (Pulguksa) temple, which was rebuilt in the 1970s, and the nearby Seokguram Grotto. Both were built around 750 and are home to some of the finest Buddhist sculpture in the world. Buddhists came on pilgrimages to Gyeongju from as far away as India and Arab sojourners sometimes came to the temple to stay.

In spite of Shilla's military strength, broad territories of the old Goguryeo kingdom were not conquered and a section of the Goguryeo elite established a successor state known as Parhae (Balhae), above and below the Amnok and Tuman boundaries that now form the border between China, Russia and Korea. Parhae's continuing strength forced Shilla to build a northern wall in 721 and kept Shilla forces permanently below a line running from present-day Pyongyang in the east to the west coast. As one prominent South Korean historian wrote, 'Shilla and Parhae confronted each other hostilely much like southern and northern halves of a partitioned nation'.

Like Shilla, Parhae continued to be influenced deeply by the Chinese civilisation of the Tang, sending students to the capital at Ch'angan, on which it modelled its own capital city. But it was cold in Parhae territory, up to 40°F below zero in winter, and Parhae people bequeathed a lasting invention to the Korean people: sleeping on *ondol* floors, a system that uses flues from a central hearth to heat the floors of each room – still in wide use in contemporary Korea, with the stone flues covered by waxed and polished rice paper. Ice may form in a water jug on the table while a person sleeps comfortably on a toasty warm *ondol*.

Unification under Goryeo

A formidable military leader named Wang Geon had defeated Shilla as well as some Baekje remnants by 930, and established a flourishing dynasty, Goryeo, from whence came the name Korea. Korea was now fully unified with more or less the boundaries that it retains today. Wang was not just a unifier, however, but a magnanimous one. Regarding himself as the proper lineal king of Goguryeo, he embraced that kingdom's survivors, took a Shilla princess as his wife and treated the Shilla aristocracy with unprecedented generosity. His dynasty ruled for nearly a millennium, and in its heyday was among the most advanced civilisations in the world.

'Korea was now fully unified with more or less the boundaries that it retains today'

With its capital at Kaesong, a town north of Seoul bisected by the 38th parallel, the Goryeo dynasty's composite elite also forged a tradition of aristocratic continuity that lasted down to the modern era. By the 13th century there were two government groupings: civil officials and military officials. At that time the military people were stronger, but thereafter both were known as *yangban* (the two orders), which became the Korean term for aristocracy. Below the hereditary aristocracy were common people like peasants and merchants. Below them were outcaste groups of butchers, tanners and entertainers, who were called *cheonmin* and who lived a castelike existence, often in separated and ostracised villages, and whose status fell upon their children as well. Likewise, slavery was hereditary (matrilineally), with slaves making up as much as 30% of Goryeo society.

The elite fused aristocratic privilege and political power through marriage alliances and control of land and central political office, and fortified this class position to the point of impregnability by making status hereditary. Goryeo established a social pattern in which a landed gentry mixed its control of property with a Confucian- or Buddhist-educated stratum of scholar-officials, usually residing in the capital. Often scholars and landlords were one and the same person, but in any case landed wealth and bureaucratic position became powerfully fused. At the centre, a bureaucracy influenced by Confucian statecraft emerged, which thereafter sought to influence local power and which was a contrast with the Japanese or European feudal pattern of castle towns, landed domains and parcellised sovereignty all backed by a strong military class (although Korea came

1392 Establishment of Joseon dynasty by General Yi Seong-gye, who makes Seoul the capital

1443 Invention of *Han-geul*, Korea's unique script, by scholars working for King Sejong

1592–1598 Japanese invasions devastate Korea

1801 Thousands of Korean Catholics executed

close to the feudal pattern in the 9th and 10th centuries, when strong walled-town lords and military commanders challenged central power).

The large landed families held their land in perpetuity and could bequeath it to their survivors; its produce was at the service of the owner, after taxes were paid. Worked mostly by peasant tenants who paid rent in kind, this land system often produced vast estates of great wealth worked by hundreds of tenants or slaves, and in its essential form persisted through the subsequent Joseon period and the Japanese colonial period. Family landholding became more important than office-holding in perpetuating aristocratic dominance over time. The wealthy, aristocratic landlord became a beneficence or a plague (depending on your point of view) from early Goryeo down to modern times, and an egalitarian redistribution of the land became a focal point of Confucian reformers, capitalist modernisers and communist agitators alike.

The Goryeo aristocracy was by no means a class without merit, however. It admired and interacted with the splendid Chinese civilisation that emerged during the contemporaneous Song dynasty (960–1279). Official delegations and ordinary merchants brought Korean gold, silver and ginseng to China in exchange for silks, porcelains and woodblock books. Finely crafted Song porcelains stimulated Korean artisans to produce an even finer type of inlaid celadon pottery – unmatched in the world before or since for the pristine clarity of its blue-green glaze and the delicate art of its inlaid portraits. Buddhism was the state religion, but it coexisted with Confucianism throughout the Goryeo period. Buddhist priests systematised religious practice by rendering the Korean version of the Buddhist canon into mammoth wood-block print editions, known as the Tripitaka. The first was completed in 1087 after a lifetime of work, but was lost; another, completed in 1251, can still be viewed today at the Haeinsa temple (p195). By 1234, if not earlier, Koreans had also invented movable metal type, two centuries before its inception in Europe.

Hendrick Hamel's fascinating account of his 13 years in Korea, after he and 36 other sailors were shipwrecked on Jeju Island in 1653, is available in Gari Ledyard's *The Dutch Come to Korea*, with full scholarly annotation.

This high point of Goryeo culture coincided with internal disorder and the rise of the Mongols, whose power swept most of the known world during the 13th century. Korea was no exception, as Kublai Khan's forces invaded and demolished Goryeo's army in 1231, forcing the government to retreat to Ganghwado Island, a ploy that exploited the Mongol horsemen's fear of water. But after a more devastating invasion in 1254, in which countless people died and some 200,000 people were made captives, Goryeo succumbed to Mongol domination and its kings came to intermarry with Mongol princesses. The Mongols then enlisted thousands of Koreans in ill-fated invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, using craft made by Korea's great shipwrights. The Kamakura Shogunate turned back both invasions with help, as legend has it, from opportune typhoons known as the 'divine wind' or *kamikaze*.

Last Dynasty

The overthrow of the Mongols by the Ming dynasty in China (1316–1644) gave an opportunity to rising groups of Korean military men to contest for power. One of them, Yi Seong-gye, grabbed the bull by the horns and overthrew Goryeo leaders, thus becoming the founder of Korea's longest and last dynasty (1392–1910). The new state was named Joseon, harking back to the old Joseon kingdom 15 centuries earlier, and its capital was built at Seoul. General Yi announced the new dynasty by mobilising 200,000 labourers to surround the new capital with a great wall; it was completed in six months in 1394, and scattered remnants of it still stand today, especially the Great South Gate (Namdaemun) and the Great East Gate (Dongdaemun). He was generous to his defeated Goryeo antagonists, sending them off to comfortable exile. Such magnanimity encouraged one writer to wax poetic about Yi Seong-gye's virtues – a typical example of how Koreans sing the manifold praises of their leaders, especially dynastic founders:

> His presence is the mighty warrior, firm
> He stands, an eagle on a mountain top;
> In wisdom and resource none can compare,
> The dragon of Namyang is he.
> In judgment on the civil bench,
> Or counsel from the warrior's tent, he rules;
> He halts the waves that roll in from the sea,
> And holds the sun back from its heavenly course.

The deep Buddhist influence on the previous dynasty led the literati to urge the king to uproot Buddhist economic and political influence, which led to exile in the mountains for monks and their disciples. Over many decades the literati thus accomplished a deep Confucianisation of Joseon society, which particularly affected the position of women. Where many women were prominent in Goryeo society, they were now relegated to domestic chores of childrearing and housekeeping, as so-called 'inside people'. Up until recent times the woman's role in Korean society seemed to be as old as the bones in ancestral graves: just as central, just as hidden, and just as unchangeable.

Chihwaseon (2002) directed by Im Kwon-taek is based on the true story of a talented but wayward painter who lived at the end of the Joseon dynasty. The painter's nonconformist life was a series of personal misfortunes that nevertheless inspired his best art. The film won the director's prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Goryeo society had a relatively strong matrilineal system. It was by no means a matriarchy, but it wasn't nearly the patriarchy of later centuries. A new husband was welcomed into the wife's house, where the children and even grandchildren would live. Many men were happy to take this route because women shared rights of inheritance with their male siblings. Women were so valuable that men wanted several; a Chinese envoy in 1123 found a wealthy man in Gaeseong with four. But plural wives were not dependent on one man; often living apart, they had their own economic underpinnings. Detailed ritual did not surround the act of marriage, nor the relations between sexes: 'the general free and easy contact between the sexes amazed…Chinese observers.' There were no restrictions on widows remarrying; women took serial husbands, if not several at the same time.

Influential literati in the Joseon dynasty were ideologues who wanted to restore Korean society to its proper path as they saw it, which meant using the virtues to discipline the passions and the interests. The reforming came in the name of Neo-Confucianism and Chu Hsi, the Chinese progenitor of this doctrine. The result was that much of what we now see as 'Korean culture' or 'tradition' was the result of a major social reorganisation accomplished by self-conscious ideologues in the 15th century. Many foreign observers would declare that Korea was 'more Confucian than China'.

The unquestionable effect of the new reforms and laws was a slow-moving but ultimately radical change in women's social position and an expropriation of women's property, more or less complete by the late 15th century. From then on, the latticework of Korean society was constituted by patrilineal descent. The nails in the latticework, the proof of its importance and existence over time, were the written genealogies that positioned families in the hierarchy of property and prestige. In succeeding centuries a person's genealogy would be the best predictor of his or her life chances; it became one of Korea's most lasting characteristics. Since only male offspring could prolong the family and clan lines and were the only names registered in the genealogical tables, the birth of a son was greeted with great fanfare.

War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-sin edited by Sohn Pow-key (1977) is a straightforward and fascinating account by Korea's greatest admiral of the battles, floggings and court intrigues that were his daily preoccupations.

Such historical influences remain strong in both Koreas today, where first sons and their families often live with the male's parents and all stops are pulled out to father a boy. Hereditary aristocratic principles became so ingrained that according to the late Edward Wagner, a relative handful of elite families were responsible for most of the 14,000-odd exam passers of the civil-service examination system in the 500 years of the Joseon, exams being the critical route to official position.

The self-conscious Confucianisation of Korean society had clear deleterious effects for women and common people, but it also reinforced some of modern Korea's most admirable qualities: the deep concern for family; the broad respect for education (scholars and philosophers were at the pinnacle of Confucian reform), more or less automatic admiration for elders (and the elderly); and a belief that ultimately human society should be governed by the virtuous, not the powerful or the wealthy.

Korea & China: An Enduring Relationship

Smack in the middle of the grand boulevard approaching the central government offices in Seoul is a gigantic statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, whose artful naval manoeuvres and command of the *geobukseon* (the first metal-clad ship in the world) saved Korea from Japanese conquest in the 1590s. This statue is a nice symbol of the general idea that for most Koreans most of the time, foreigners might be people intent on invading Korea. Japan is the best case, of course, with the warlord Hideyoshi laying waste to the peninsula only to be turned back by Admiral Yi, and with Japan's victories over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, establishing Japanese colonial rule in Korea. Mongols, Manchus and others usually grouped as 'barbarians' came charging across Korea's northern borders. But the Mongols and Manchus were also conquerors of China, which made them barbarians, too, and led many Koreans to think that China was not just the centre of an admirable civilisation but also a good neighbour, giving to Korea more than it took away.

General Yi Song-gye founded his dynasty when he refused to send his troops into battle against a Chinese army, and instead turned around and used them to overthrow his own government and make himself king. Not surprisingly, he received the blessing and support of the Chinese emperor, and Korea became a 'tributary' country to China – but more than that, it became the ideal tributary state, modelling itself on Chinese culture and statecraft. Most of the time China left Korea alone to run its own affairs, and Korea was content to look up to China as the centre of the only world civilisation that mattered. This policy was known as *sadae* (serving the great). Because of this special relationship, when Hideyoshi's forces attacked in the 1590s, Chinese troops were sent to help repel them. In just one battle as many as 30,000 Chinese soldiers died. *Sadae* was in the background during the Korean War as well, when a huge Chinese army intervened in late 1950 and helped rescue the North from certain defeat. Meanwhile, many South Koreans felt that the behaviour of the Chinese troops during the Korean War was superior to that of any other force, including the American troops. Today China is South Korea's largest trading partner, with thousands of Korean students studying there, while China maintains its long-term alliance with North Korea. So, it can be said that Korea's relationship with China is one of the only foreign entanglements that most Koreans seem happy with, and it's likely to grow ever stronger in the 21st century.

Wearing a topknot was a traditional male custom that went back to antiquity and was particularly widespread during Korea's pleasant relations with the Ming dynasty – and then it became a symbol of 'Ming loyalists' in Korea after that dynasty fell. In 1895 King Gojong had his topknot cut off, but conservatives did not follow his example or share his enthusiasm for reforms.

Of course, it isn't clear what the common people thought about China until the modern period, nor were they asked; the vast majority were illiterate in a country that marked its elite according to their literacy – in Chinese. The aristocrats were enthusiastic Confucianists, as we have seen, adopting Chinese painting, poetry, music, statecraft and philosophy. The complicated Chinese script was used for virtually all government and cultural activities throughout the Joseon period, even though the native alphabet, *Han·geul*, was an outstanding cultural achievement. Developed under Korea's greatest king, Sejong, in 1443, it was much simpler and easier to learn than Chinese characters. *Han·geul* is a phonetic script: concise, elegant and considered one of the most scientific in the world in rendering sounds. But the Confucian elite opposed its wide use, hoping to keep the government exams as difficult as possible so that only aristocratic children had the time and money to pass. *Han·geul* didn't come

DONGHAK DEMANDS

The Donghak rebellion, which had been building for decades, erupted in 1893 in Jeolla province, attracting large numbers of peasants and lowborn groups of people. The rebels were only armed with primitive, homemade weapons, but they defeated the government army sent against them. The rebellion then spread to neighbouring provinces, and when King Gojong called in Chinese troops, Japanese troops took advantage of the uproar to march into Seoul. The rebels were defeated and their leaders, including Jeon Bong-jun, who was known as the 'Green Pea General' because of his small size, were executed by Japanese firing squads.

The demands of the rebels reveal their many grievances against the Joseon social system:

- Slaves should be freed.
- The low-born should be treated fairly.
- Land should be redistributed.
- Taxes on fish and salt should be scrapped.
- No unauthorised taxes should be levied and any corrupt *yangban* should be severely punished.
- All debts should be cancelled.
- Regional favouritism and factions should be abolished.
- Widows should be allowed to remarry.
- Traitors who support foreign interference should be punished.

into general use until after 1945, and then only in North Korea; South Korea used a Sino-Korean script requiring the mastery of thousands of Chinese characters until the 1990s. Today, though, Chinese characters have mostly disappeared from Korea's public space, to the consternation of Chinese and Japanese travellers who used to be able to read all the street and commercial signs.

Royal Pomp & Ceremony

Many of the premier cultural attractions in Korea today, such as Seoul's Gyeongbokgung (p83), Namdaemun (p103) and Changdeokgung (p101) are imperial relics of the long-lived Joseon dynasty. They are windows into a time in Korea's history when absolute monarchs ruled. Pomp and ritual also became an essential aspect of royal power, with attention to ritual and protocol developed into an art form. Koreans appeared to break sharply with this royal system in the 20th century, but when we look at the ruling system in North Korea, or the families that run most of South Korea's major corporations, we see the family and hereditary principles of the old system continuing in modern form.

Soup, fish, quail, pheasant, stuffed and rolled beef, vegetables, creams, glace walnuts, fruits, claret and coffee were on the menu when Isabella Bird Bishop had dinner with King Gojong and Queen Min.

It is difficult to imagine the wealth, power and status of Joseon kings in these more democratic times. The main palace, Gyeongbokgung, contained 800 buildings and over 200 gates; in 1900, for example, palace costs accounted for 10% of all government expenditures. In the royal household were 400 eunuchs, 500 ladies-in-waiting, 800 other court ladies and 70 *gisaeng* (female entertainers who were expert singers and dancers). Only women and eunuchs were allowed to live inside the palace – male servants, guards, officials and visitors had to leave at sunset. Most of the women lived like nuns and never left the palace. A *yangban* woman had to be married for years before daring to move in the outer world of society, and then only in a cocoon of clothing inside a cloistered sedan chair, carried by her slaves. In the late 19th century foreigners witnessed these same cloistered upper-class women, clothed and swaddled from head to toe, wearing a green mantle like the Middle Eastern *chador* over their heads and bringing the folds across the face, leaving only the eyes exposed. They would come out after the nightly curfew, after the bells rang and the city gates were closed against tigers, and find a bit of freedom in the darkness.

Isabella Bird Bishop visited the newly restored Gyeongbokgung in 1895 and noted in *Korea and Her Neighbours*: 'What with 800 troops, 1500 attendants and officials of all descriptions, courtiers and ministers and their attendants, secretaries, messengers and hangers-on, the vast enclosure of the palace seemed as crowded and populated as the city itself'.

In James Scarth Gale's *History of the Korean People*, Harriet Heron Gale, a missionary, observed the pampered life of the crown prince: 'An army of attendants and maids in long blue silk shirts and yellow jackets hover about his little kingship all day long, powdering his face, painting his lips and finger tips, shaving the top of his head, pulling out his eyebrows, cutting his food into the daintiest of morsels, fanning him with monstrous long-handled fans, never leaving him alone for a moment…even at night guarding and watching by his bedside, singing him to sleep with a queer little lullaby'.

Eunuch (1968), an artistic film directed by Shin Sang-ok, is based on a story about a lady who is forced by her father to become the king's concubine although she loves someone else. The film depicts the inner sanctum in those now empty and dusty palaces.

Because the eunuchs were the only 'male' staff allowed to live inside the palaces, they were privy to all the secrets of the state, and had considerable influence because they waited upon the king.

LIVES OF THE EUNUCHS

The eunuchs were the most extraordinary people. They could become as powerful as leading government officials because they were around the king and the royal family 24 hours a day. All access to the king was through them, as they were the royal bodyguards and responsible for the safety of their master. This was an easy way to earn money and they usually exploited it to the full. These bodyguard eunuchs, toughened by a harsh training regime of martial arts, were also personal servants to the king and even nursemaids to the royal children. They played so many roles that life must have been very stressful for them, particularly as any mistake could lead to horrific physical punishments.

Although often illiterate and uneducated, a few became important advisors to the king, attaining high government positions and amassing great wealth. Most were from poor families and their greed for money was a national scandal. Eunuchs were supposed to serve the king with total devotion, like monks serving Buddha, never thinking about mundane matters like money or status.

A surprising aspect is that the eunuchs were usually married and adopted young eunuch boys who they brought up as their sons to follow in their footsteps. The eunuch in charge of the king's health would pass on his medical knowledge to his 'son'. Under the Confucian system not only gays but also eunuchs had to get married. The system continued until 1910 when the country's new Japanese rulers summoned all the eunuchs to Deoksugung and dismissed them from government service.

Korea & Japan

In 2005 the South Korean president refused to hold a summit meeting with the Japanese prime minister because the latter insisted on visiting the Yasukuni shrine, a memorial to Japan's war dead that happened to include Class A war criminals from WWII, and because all year long both countries squabbled over the ownership of an uninhabited pile of rocks in the East Sea, known as Dokdo (that is, Takeshima). Relations between these two countries have not always been difficult and controversial, but certainly they have been for at least four centuries, since Hideyoshi sought to subdue Korea on the way to conquering China.

In 1592, 150,000 well-armed Japanese troops, divided into nine armies, rampaged throughout Korea looting, raping and killing. Palaces and temples were burnt to the ground and priceless cultural treasures were destroyed or stolen. Entire villages of ceramic potters were shipped back to Japan, along with thousands of ears clipped from dead Koreans, which were piled into a mound in Japan, covered over and retained into modern times as a memorial to this war. Fortunately a series of brilliant naval victories by Admiral Yi Sun-sin, using iron-clad warships called *geobukseon* (turtle ships), helped to turn the tide against the Japanese. Ming troops also arrived from China, and by 1597 the Japanese were forced to withdraw. A year later Hideyoshi died a broken man. Stout resistance on land and sea thwarted Japanese ambitions to dominate Asia, but only at the cost of massive destruction and economic dislocation in Korea.

Samurai Invasion by Stephen Turnbull (2002) is a detailed account of the Japanese invasions of Korea in the 1590s.

Japan's ambitions to seize Korea resurfaced 300 years later, at the end of the 19th century, when Japan suddenly rose up as the first modern

1945 Korea liberated following the surrender of Japanese forces to the Allies

1948 Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea established

1950–1953 Korean War

1961 Park Chung-hee seizes power in a military coup

great power in Asia. Seizing on the Donghak peasant rebellion in Korea, Japan instigated war with China, defeating it in 1895. After another decade of imperial rivalry over Korea, Japan smashed Russia in lightning naval and land attacks, stunning the world because a 'yellow' country had defeated a 'white' power. Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and a colony in 1910, with the acquiescence of all the great powers. It was a strange colony, coming 'late' in world time, after most of the world had been divided up, and after progressive calls had emerged to dismantle the entire colonial system. Furthermore Korea had most of the prerequisites for nationhood long before most other countries: common ethnicity, language and culture, and well-recognised national boundaries since the 10th century. So the Japanese engaged in substitution after 1910: exchanging a Japanese ruling elite for the Korean *yangban* scholar-officials; instituting central coordination for the old government administration; exchanging Japanese modern education for the Confucian classics; building Japanese capital and expertise in place of the Korean versions – Japanese talent for Korean talent; eventually even replacing the Korean language with Japanese.

My Innocent Uncle by Chae Man-shik is a shocking short story, written in a direct, colloquial style, that portrays a pro-Japanese Korean opportunist who refers to Japan as his home country and wants to marry a Japanese girl. His uncle is innocent of such treacherous views but his opposition to Japanese rule is ineffective.

Koreans never thanked the Japanese for these substitutions and did not credit Japan with creations. Instead they saw Japan as snatching away the *ancien regime*, Korea's sovereignty and independence, its indigenous if incipient modernisation and, above all, its national dignity. Most Koreans never saw Japanese rule as anything but illegitimate and humiliating. Furthermore the very closeness of the two nations – in geography, in common Chinese civilisational influences, and in levels of development until the 19th century – made Japanese dominance all the more galling to Koreans and gave a peculiar intensity to the relationship, a hate/respect dynamic that suggested to Koreans, 'there but for accidents of history go we'.

The result: neither Korea nor Japan has ever gotten over it. In the North countless films and TV programmes still focus on atrocities committed by the Japanese during their rule, and for decades the descendants of Koreans deemed by the government to have collaborated with the Japanese occupation authorities were subject to severe discrimination. South Korea, however, punished very few collaborators, partly because the US Occupation (1945–48) reemployed so many of them, and partly because they were needed in the fight against communism.

At the Court of Korea by William Franklin Sands gives a first-hand account of King Gojong and his government at the turn of the century.

The Independence Hall (p322), in Chungcheongnam-do, is the South Korean shrine commemorating the heroes of the anti-Japanese resistance. March 1 is a huge national holiday, honouring the day in 1919 when the death of ex-king Gojong and the unveiling of a Korean declaration of independence sparked massive pro-independence demonstrations throughout the country. The protests were ruthlessly suppressed, but still lasted for months. When it was over the Japanese claimed that 500 were killed, 1400 injured and 12,000 arrested, but Korean estimates put the casualties at ten times these figures.

A certain amount of Korean collaboration with the Japanese was unavoidable given the ruthless nature of the regime under the Japanese colonialists, and then in the last decade of colonial rule when Japan's expansion across Asia caused a shortage of experts and professionals throughout the empire. Ambitious Koreans found new careers opening to them just at the most oppressive point in this colony's history, as Koreans were commanded to change their names and not speak Korean, and millions of Koreans were used as mobile human fodder by the Japanese. Koreans constituted almost half of the hated National Police, and young Korean officers (including Park Chung-hee, who seized power in 1961), and Kim Jae-gyu (who, as intelligence chief, assassinated Park in 1979) joined the aggressive Japanese army in Manchuria. Pro-Japanese *yangban* were rewarded with special titles, and some of Korea's greatest early nationalists, like Yi Gwang-su, were forced into public support of Japan's empire. Although collaboration was an inevitable result of the repression of the Japanese occupation, it was never punished or fully and frankly debated in South Korea, leaving the problem to fester until 2004, when the government finally launched an official investigation of collaboration – along with estimates that upwards of 90% of the pre-1990 South Korea elite had ties to collaborationist families or individuals.

Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea by Hildi Kang (2001) is a fascinating and accessible memoir of a Korean woman growing up under Japanese rule.

Westernised Japanese and Korean bureaucrats ran the colonial government. They implemented policies that developed industries and modernised the administration, but always in the interests of Japan. Modern textile, steel and chemical industries emerged along with new railroads, highways and ports. Koreans never thanked Japan for any of this, but it left Korea much more developed in 1945 than, say, Vietnam under the French. Still, the main trauma of the occupation was probably psychological rather than political or economic, because Japan tried to destroy the Korean sense of national identity.

www.twotigers.org has a dozen personal testimonies by Korean 'comfort women' that give a unique insight into their horrifying ordeals.

The burst of consumerism that came to the world in the 1920s meant that Koreans shopped in Japanese department stores, banked at Japanese banks, drank Japanese beer, travelled on the Japanese-run railway and often dreamed of attending a Tokyo university.

By 1940 the Japanese owned 40% of the land and there were 700,000 Japanese living and working in Korea – an enormous number compared to most other countries. But among large landowners, many were as likely to be Korean as Japanese; most peasants were tenant farmers working their land. Upwards of three million Korean men and women were uprooted from their homes and sent to work as miners, farm labourers, factory workers and soldiers abroad, mainly in Japan and Manchukuo, the Japanese colony in northeast China. Over 130,000 Korean miners in Japan – men and women – worked 12-hour days, were paid wages well under what Japanese miners earned, were poorly fed and were subjected to brutal, club-wielding overseers. The worst aspect of this massive

A LONG PROTEST

Since 1992, Hwang Geum-joo and a handful of other Korean 'comfort women', survivors of the WWII camps where they were forced to have sex with Japanese soldiers, have protested outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul every Wednesday at noon. 'Our numbers are dwindling every year and nothing has changed,' she has said. With their young supporters, the old ladies hold up placards demanding an apology and financial compensation. Hwang Geum-joo has taken part in over 554 protests outside the embassy but has refused to give up. 'We are still full of anger and they should apologise for what they did to us!'

1979
Park assassinated by his own intelligence chief

1988
Olympic Games held in Seoul; publication of Lonely Planet's first guide to Korea

1991
Agreement signed between Seoul and Pyongyang to make the Korean peninsula nuclear free

1992
Kim Young-sam elected president, ushering in a more democratic political era

mobilisation, however, came in the form of 'comfort women' – the 100,000 to 200,000 young Korean women who were forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese armed forces (p37).

It was Korea's darkest hour but Korean guerrilla groups continued to fight Japan in Manchukuo; they were allied with Chinese guerrillas but Koreans still constituted by far the largest ethnic group. This is where we find Kim Il Sung, who began fighting the Japanese around the time they proclaimed the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932 and continued into the early 1940s. After murderous counter-insurgency campaigns (participated in by many Koreans), the guerrillas numbered only about 200. In 1945 they returned to northern Korea and constituted the ruling elite from that point down to the present.

The marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics was won by Kitei Son of Japan, but his real name was Sohn Kee-chung and he was from Korea.

Japan's surrender to the Allies in 1945 opened a new chapter in the stormy relationship between the two countries. Thanks to a very soft peace and munificent American support, Japan began growing rapidly in the early 1950s. South Korea got going in the mid-1960s, and today companies and workers in both countries battle each other to produce the best ships, cars, steel products, computer chips, mobile phones, flat-screen TVs and other electronic equipment. The new rivalry is a never-ending competition for world markets, just as sports became another modern-day battleground to decide who is top dog.

The Korean War

In the immediate aftermath of the obliteration of Nagasaki, three Americans in the War Department (including Dean Rusk, later Secretary of State) drew a fateful line at the 38th parallel in Korea, dividing this nation that had a unitary integrity going back to antiquity. The line was supposed to demarcate the areas in which American and Soviet forces would receive the Japanese surrender, but Rusk later acknowledged that he did not trust the Russians and wanted to get the nerve centre of the country, Seoul, in the American zone. He consulted no Koreans, no allies and not even the president in making this decision. But it followed on from three years of State Department planning in which an American occupation of part or all of Korea was seen as crucial to the postwar security of Japan and the Pacific. The US then set up a three-year military government in southern Korea that deeply shaped postwar Korean history.

The Soviets came in with fewer concrete plans for Korea and moved more slowly than the Americans in setting up an administration. They thought Kim Il Sung would be good as a defence minister in a new government, but sought to get him and other communists to work together with Christian nationalist figures like Jo Man-sik. Soon, however, the Cold War rivalry overshadowed everything in Korea, as the Americans turned to Syngman Rhee (an elderly patriot who had lived in the US for 35 years) and the Russians to Kim Il Sung. By 1948 Rhee and Kim had both established separate republics and by the end of the year Soviet troops had withdrawn, never to return again. American combat troops departed in June 1949, leaving behind a 500-man military advisory group. For the only time in its history since 1945, South Korea now had operational control of its own military forces. Within a year war had broken out and the US took back that control and has never relinquished it, illustrating that the US has always had a civil war deterrent in Korea: containing the enemy in the North and constraining the ally in the South.

In 1949 both sides sought external support to mount a war against the other side, and the North succeeded where the South failed. Its greatest strength came from tens of thousands of Koreans who had been sent to fight in China's civil war, and who returned to North Korea in 1949 and 1950. Kim Il Sung also played Stalin off against Mao Zedong to get military aid and a critical independent space for himself, so that when he invaded he could count on one or both powers to bail him out if things went badly. After years of guerrilla war in the South (fought almost entirely by southerners) and much border fighting in 1949 (with both sides at fault), Kim launched a surprise invasion on 25 June 1950, when he peeled several divisions off in the midst of summer war games; many high officers were unaware of the war plan. Seoul fell in three days, and soon North Korea was at war with the US. The Americans responded by getting the UN to condemn the attack and gaining commitments from 16 other countries, although Americans almost always bore the brunt of the fighting, and only British and Turkish combat forces had a substantial role. The war went badly for the UN at first, and its troops were soon pushed far back into a small pocket around Busan (Pusan). But following a daring landing at Incheon (Inchon) under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, North Korean forces were pushed back above the 38th parallel.

www.kf.or.kr has video lectures on history (though the sound is not very good) and has a link to *Koreana*, a magazine with some history articles.

The question then became, 'was the war over?' South Korea's sovereignty had been restored and UN leaders wanted to call it a victory. But for the previous year, high officials in the Truman administration had been debating a more 'positive' strategy than containment, namely 'rollback' or liberation, and so Truman decided to march north to overthrow Kim's regime. Kim's long-time relations with Chinese communists bailed his chestnuts out of the fire when Mao committed a huge number of soldiers, but now the US was at war with China.

By New Year's Eve US forces were pushed back below the 38th parallel, and the communists were about to launch an offensive that would soon retake Seoul. This shook America and its allies to the core, Truman declared a national emergency, and WWIII seemed to be at the doorstep. But Mao did not want general war with the US, and did not try to push the UN forces off the peninsula. By spring 1951 the fighting had stabilised roughly along the lines where the war ended. Truce talks began and dragged on for two years, amid massive trench warfare along the lines. These battles created the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the truce talks bequeathed the *quonset* huts at Panmunjom, where both sides have met periodically ever since to exchange heated rhetoric and where millions of tourists have visited.

At the end of the war, Korea lay in ruins. Seoul had changed hands no less than four times and was badly damaged, but many prewar buildings remained sufficiently intact to rebuild them much as they were. The US Air Force pounded the North for three years until all of its cities were destroyed and some were completely demolished, leaving the urban population to live, work and go to school underground, like cavemen. Millions of Koreans died (probably three million, two-thirds of them in the North), millions more were left homeless, industries were destroyed and the entire country was massively demoralised, because the blood-

1994
Kim Il Sung dies in July

1996
Korea achieves US$10,000 per capita income and puts two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, on trial

1997
Kim Dae-jung elected

1998
Kim Jong Il takes full power on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the regime

letting had only restored the status quo. Of the UN troops, 37,000 were killed (about 35,000 of them Americans) and 120,000 wounded.

Post-War Period

The 1950s were a time of depressing stagnation for the South but rapid industrial growth for the North. Then, over the next 30 years, both Koreas underwent rapid industrial growth. However, by the 1990s huge economic disparities had emerged. The North experienced depressing stagnation that led finally to famine and massive death, while the South emerged as an economic power ranked 11th in the world, with roughly the GNP of Spain. The North's industrial growth was as fast as any in the world from the mid-1950s into the mid-1970s, and even in the early 1980s its per capita GNP was about the same as the South's. But then the South began to build an enormous lead that soon became insurmountable.

This great triumph came at enormous cost, as South Koreans worked the longest hours in the industrial world for decades and suffered under one military dictatorship after another. Corrupt, autocratic rulers censored the media, imprisoned and tortured political opponents, manipulated elections and continually changed the country's constitution to suit themselves; meanwhile Washington backed them up (except for a brief moment in the 1960s) and never did more than issue tepid protests at their authoritarian rule. Student protests and less-frequent trade-union street protests were often violent, as were the police or military forces sent to suppress them. But slowly a democratisation movement built strength across the society.

www.kimsoft.com has a wide range of history articles, people profiles and useful links.

When the Korean War ended in 1953, Syngman Rhee continued his dictatorial rule until 1961, when he and his wife fled to Hawaii following widespread demonstrations against him that included university professors demonstrating in the streets of Seoul. Ordinary people were finally free to take revenge against hated policemen who had served the Japanese. Following a military coup later in 1961, Park Chung-hee ruled with an iron fist until the Kennedy administration demanded that he hold elections; he won three of them in 1963, 1967 and 1971 by spreading enormous amounts of money around (peasants would get white envelopes full of cash for voting). In spite of that, a young man named Kim Dae-jung nearly beat him in 1971, garnering 46% of the vote. That led Park to declare martial law and make himself president for life. Amid massive demonstrations in 1979 his own intelligence chief, Kim Jae-gyu, shot him dead over dinner one night, in an episode never fully explained. This was followed by five months of democratic discussion until Chun Doo-hwan, a protégé of Park, moved to take full power and the citizens of Gwangju rebelled in May 1980. That rebellion was put down by such brute and wanton military force (see p254) that it became a touchstone in Korean life, marking an entire generation of young people in university in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally in 1992 a civilian, Kim Young-sam, won election and began to build a real democracy. Although he was a charter member of the old ruling groups, he surprised everyone by putting Chun Doo-hwan on trial, where he was convicted of treason and monumental corruption. That was a great victory for the democratic movement. One of the strongest labour movements in the world soon emerged, and when former dissident Kim Dae-jung was elected at the end of 1997, all the protests and suffering and killing seemed finally to have been worthwhile. Kim was ideally poised to solve the deep economic downturn that hit Korea in 1997, as part of the Asian financial crisis. The IMF demanded reforms of the conglomerates as the price for its $55 million bailout, and Kim had long called for restructuring the conglomerates and their cronyism with the banks and the government. By 1999 the economy was growing again.

South Korean presidents serve a five-year term and cannot run again, so when President Kim retired his party selected a virtual unknown, Roh Moo-hyun, a self-taught lawyer who had defended many dissidents in the darkest periods of the 1980s. To the surprise of many, including

TRIBUTE TO CHINA

Starting from 1637, three official embassies travelled to China every year, at the New Year, the birthday of the emperor and the birthday of the crown prince. Later they were supplemented with another mission at the winter solstice. A new king in Korea or the death of an emperor in China occasioned special missions, since the Korean kings sought approval of the Chinese Son of Heaven. From 1637 until the end of the practice in 1881, Korea sent a total of 435 special embassies and missions to China. The tribute was a tangible symbol of Korea's formal status, which was subordinate to China's, with Korea's kings needing (and wanting) the legitimacy of investiture by the Chinese emperor. The emperor sent gifts in return, even if they did not match what he received, and the lavish hospitality provided to the Chinese emissaries when they came to Seoul was very expensive and could take up 15% of the government's revenue. But the envoys were not allowed to visit the interior of the country, and had to take a single route from the border through Pyongyang and down to Seoul. The Chinese would arrive at Seodaemun, the West Gate of Seoul (demolished by the Japanese in 1915) and be greeted by the king. In 1898 Koreans erected the Independence Gate (located down the road from where the old West Gate stood), when King Gojong declared Korea to be an empire and himself to be Emperor Gwangmu.

The missions were also covers for a lot of Sino-Korean trade. Goods carried to the Forbidden Palace in Beijing varied, but one agreement listed 100 tael of gold and 1000 tael of silver (a tael weighed about 40g, so that meant 4kg of gold and 40kg of silver). The emperor was also to receive 100 tiger skins, 100 deer skins and 400 other animal skins. Also on the gift list were a thousand packs of green tea, rice, ginseng, pine seeds and other Korean delicacies; not to mention horses, swords and buffalo-horn bows; and large quantities of paper, cotton, ramie cloth (an almost transparent textile made from bark) and floral-patterned straw mats from Ganghwado. Less publicised were the eunuchs and virgins destined for the emperor's vast harem. In return the Chinese emperor would send the best-quality silk, herbal medicines, porcelain pottery and a library of books, amounting to hundreds of volumes. Tribute trade was thus a cultural and economic exchange between the two countries.

The 300-strong tribute party took one to two months to cover the 1200km route to Beijing, and spent the same amount of time there before beginning the arduous journey home. The embassy included generals, scholars, painters, doctors, interpreters, heralds, secretaries, grooms, umbrella holders and sedan-chair carriers. Jesuit missionaries to Beijing in the 16th century (like foreigners in China today who encounter North Koreans) thought the Koreans they saw in the capital were surly, standoffish and all too self-contained – just as Europeans in the same city three centuries later spoke of 'these strangely-coated people, so proud, so thoroughly uninterested in strangers, so exclusive, so content to go their own way'.

officials in Washington, he won the 2002 election and represented the rise to power of a generation that had nothing to do with the political system that emerged in 1945 (even Kim Dae-jung had been active in the 1940s). That generation was mostly middle-aged, having gone to school in the 1980s with indelible images of conflict on their campuses and American backing for Chun Doo-hwan. The result has been a growing estrangement between Seoul and Washington, really for the first time in the relationship. Still, the country's economic system remains considerably more developed and sophisticated than its political system.

In 1998 President Kim Dae-jung began a 'Sunshine Policy' aimed at reconciliation with North Korea, if not reunification. Within a year Pyongyang had responded, various economic and cultural exchanges began, and in June 2000 the two presidents met at a summit for the first time since 1945. Often seen by critics as appeasement of the North, this engagement policy was predicated on the realist principles that the North was not going to collapse and so had to be dealt with as it is, and that the North would not object to the continued presence of US troops in the South during the long process of reconciliation if the US normalised relations with the North – something that Kim Jong Il acknowledged in his historic summit meeting with Kim Dae-jung in June 2000. By now tens of thousands of South Koreans have visited the North, big southern firms have joint ventures using northern labour, and Koreans have discovered that after 50 years of division they still have a great deal in common.

'In 1998 President Kim Dae-jung began a 'Sunshine Policy' aimed at reconciliation with North Korea, if not reunification'

Samsung has become the new Sony in the eyes of many and Koreans have taken so quickly to the internet that it is now the most wired nation on earth. The talented younger generation has produced such a dynamic pop culture that *hallyu* (Korean Wave) is now a big phenomenon in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, and is gaining popularity in the West. Within a relatively short time and after a tumultuous 20th century, Korea has regained its place as one the great nations of the world. The single anachronism in Korea's progress in the new century is the continuing dispute over the North's nuclear programmes. The Clinton and Bush administrations had very different policies toward the North, with Clinton's people talking directly to the North and getting an eight-year freeze on its plutonium facility, and a near buy-out of its medium and long-range missiles in late 2000. The Bush administration refused bilateral talks with the North and placed it in an 'axis of evil' along with Iraq and Iran. The North responded by saying it feared a US attack along the lines of the invasion of Iraq and needed a nuclear deterrent to stop it. Deeply worried about the possibility of conflict, China sponsored six-party talks (China, Japan, Russia, the US, and both Koreas) to get Washington and Pyongyang talking and negotiating, but as of this writing the talks have yielded no significant result. The North went ahead with its threat and successfully tested a small (one kiloton) plutonium bomb in October 2006.

2004

Hallyu (Korean Wave) takes East Asia by storm

2006

North Korea tests missiles in July and a small atomic bomb in October

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Korea is probably the most Confucian nation in Asia. At the heart of the Confucian doctrine are the Five Relationships, which prescribe appropriate behaviour between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, old and young and between friends. People in senior positions should be authoritarian rather than democratic, which is why some teachers and company bosses act arrogantly towards those with lower status. Determining one's status is usually based on age and occupation.

Establishing a relationship of any kind implies that each person knows who is senior and junior. Based on this awareness, there is an expected behaviour that includes the appropriate usage of honorific language. That's why gestures are fraught with social landmines: use the inappropriate level of language and you may insult the other person and make yourself look uneducated. People rarely use direct questions, such as 'how old are you?', to learn about someone. Critical information of this nature is generally provided by a third party before any meeting, otherwise it's a social two-step with indirect methods of enquiry like, 'I graduated from university in 1986. When did you finish school?'

Relationships are like a circle. If you're on the inside, boundaries define obligations and expectations. If you're on the outside, well, it's a veritable state of nature. If you haven't been properly introduced, there is no obligation to be polite, let alone acknowledge the other person's existence. This worldview explains, in part, why people jump the queue, push their way through the subway door, or drive vehicles with reckless abandon.

Queue jumping and reckless driving are two manifestations of another Korean trait: tenacity. The country's recovery from the ashes of the Korean War, construction workers on the job seven days a week, or computer game addicts: they're all strands cut from the same cloth, the country's tenacious, pit-bull spirit. Once Koreans lock onto something, it's difficult to break away. Life is competitive and everything is taken seriously, be it ten-pin bowling, hiking or overseas corporate expansion.

Koreans are also fanatical about health. The millions of hikers who stream into the mountains at weekends are not only enjoying nature but are also keeping fit. Saunas and hot-spring baths are big attractions. Thousands of health foods and drinks are sold in markets and pharmacies, which stock traditional as well as Western medicines. Health drinks include vitamin-packed canned drinks and alcoholic beverages flavoured with medicinal herbs and roots such as ginseng. Nearly every food claims to be a 'well-being' product or an aphrodisiac – 'good for stamina' is the local phrase.

Another aspect of the Korean character is generosity. Fighting to pay the bill is a common phenomenon, though the *quid pro quo* is that one person pays this time and the other fights a little harder to pick up the check next time. If a Korean takes you under their wing it's difficult to pay for anything. When someone comes back from a holiday they often hand out a small souvenir to everyone. At New Year and Chuseok (Thanksgiving Day), gift-giving reaches fever pitch and stores are so filled with mountains of gift packages of grapes, pears and Spam that you can hardly squeeze inside.

LIFESTYLE

The dream of most people in an urban centre is to buy an apartment equipped with the latest gadgetry, like door locks with fingerprint recognition and high-speed internet. Although the amenities are modern, many people prefer to

THE CONFUCIAN MINDSET

The cultural divide separating Western and Korean thinking can be synthesized into two questions. Westerners ask *why* something is the case. In Korea, the great existential question is, 'how can I live in society?'

The answer comes from Confucius. Confucianism is a social philosophy, a prescription for achieving a harmonious society. Not everyone follows the rules but Confucianism does continue to shape the Korean paradigm. It's what makes Koreans different from Westerners.

- Obedience towards seniors is crucial. Never argue with parents, teachers or the boss. Be polite to older brothers and sisters. Don't start eating before your seniors. Expect a heavy penalty (including physical punishment) if you step out of line.
- Seniors get obedience, but it's not a free ride. Older sisters help out younger siblings with tuition fees and the boss always pays for lunch.
- Education defines a civilised person. A high-school graduate, despite having built a successful business, still feels shame at the lack of scholastic credentials. Students accepted into one of the country's top-three universities (Seoul National, Korea or Yonsei) are recruited by the best companies, where they quickly settle into fast-track management positions and arranged marriages with equally ambitious spouses.
- Men and women have separate roles. A woman's role is service, obedience and management of household affairs. Men don't do housework or look after children. In the past women rarely inherited anything and widows couldn't remarry. Until 2005, the courts upheld laws that barred women from being the legal head of a household.
- Status and dignity are critical. Every action reflects on the family, company and country. Don't do anything that would cause your boss to lose face, even in a minor way, and he will always pay the bill when you go out eating and drinking.
- Everything on and beyond the earth is in a hierarchy. Never forget who is senior and who is junior to you.
- Families are more important than individuals. Individuals are an insignificant part of a family that stretches backwards and forwards in time. Everyone's purpose in life is to improve the family's reputation and wealth. No one should choose a career or marry someone against their parents' wishes – a bad choice could bring ruin to a family. Everyone must marry and have a son to continue the family line. For these reasons homosexuality is considered a grossly unnatural act.
- Loyalty is important. A loyal liar is a virtuous person.
- Be modest and don't be extravagant. Only immoral women wear revealing clothes. Be frugal with praise. Life is serious rather than fun.

sleep the old fashioned way, which is on a *yo* (a mattress, similar to a futon) on the floor. Most modern homes have tables and chairs but many people sit on the floor when family comes over for a special occasion. Floors are heated from underneath by the *ondol* system.

In 1995, internet access and relatively inexpensive home computers were available but the big explosion in usage didn't occur until the late 1990s, after the government offered telecom companies a W1.5 billion package to upgrade the nation's level of connectivity. Broadband was available but demand didn't surge until the emergence of Starcraft, an online multiplayer game that captured the imagination of virtually every male from 15 to 50. But in order to play well, a fast connection was needed. Enter broadband. Today, three-quarters of all homes have broadband access. Nearly 25% of the population has a home page – called minihompy – on Cyworld, a service provider that sells gimmicky accessories like online wallpaper and music which web page

owners use to spruce up their minihompy. Gaming is wildly popular; a Korean game called Lineage is the world's most popular online time waster.

Except for the important national holidays like Chuseok and Lunar New Year, Koreans rarely entertain at home. Instead, restaurants, cafés and bars are popular places to meet and entertain friends and colleagues. A proper evening of entertainment involves extensive preparation, cooking and cleanup in order to provide the banquet of side dishes and main courses normally associated with a meal. Going out to a restaurant is just a lot easier. It is precisely for this reason that the wife of the first son dreads big holidays: she's expected to prepare and serve a feast for the husband's family.

Most parents are obsessed with their children's educational progress and will spare no expense to push their kids to the top of the class. Every educational decision is geared towards the standardised university entrance exam. Parents of elementary-school children push their kids so that they attend an elite middle school, which increases the probability of getting into a top high school, which increases the odds of doing well on the university entrance exam. Going to school is never enough, however, so middle-income families send their children to after-school private institutes – called *hagwon* – to study science, math, Korean and English. Families of wealth forgo the institutes and hire private tutors. Kids from lower-income families are left to fend for themselves as best they can.

Preparing for the university entrance exam is a three-year test of endurance. Top high-school students survive on as little as four hours sleep per night while torturing their brains with multiple-choice questions on calculus and the bizarre intricacies of English grammar. It's not all doom and gloom because there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: university. Schools of higher learning are little more than a four-year vacation. There is remarkably little educational value inside the classroom and virtually everyone passes.

Korea spends more on private education as a percentage of GDP than any other OECD country, but ranks 25th for public spending.

The race to the top has created opportunities for expat teachers. Most teach English but there is a demand for professors to teach content in English, especially in the business and engineering fields. An expat English teacher can expect to receive W2 million a month as well as free accommodation, return flights, health insurance and a bonus at the end of a one-year contract. It's enough to live on but you won't be banking big money on this wage alone. The country's average household income is W3 million per month. An office worker with a degree starts at about W1.5 million a month, or W2 million in a big company, while doctors, lawyers and pilots are in the W5 million to W20 million a month bracket.

In a country like South Korea, where social pressures to conform to a rigid standard of 'normality' are intense, it's not surprising to learn that Koreans are intolerant of homosexual behaviour. Lack of tolerance is hardly unique to Korea, but what is interesting is the lengths to which Koreans will go to deny, dismiss or rationalise the existence of gay and lesbian relationships. For most of mainstream Korea, homosexuality is a) non-existent or so rare that it's hardly worth mentioning (so don't); b) a freakish crime against nature; c) the manifestation of a debilitating mental illness; or d) a social problem caused by foreigners.

There is a small gay and lesbian scene in Seoul, with a pocket of bars in Itaewon. Outside the capital, opportunities to socialise with openly gay people are spotty. Gays and lesbians coming to Korea seeking employment as English teachers are best served by keeping their sexual orientation in the closet at work.

Korean attitudes towards gays and lesbians may be changing if the experience of Hong Suk-chun is an indicator of values. His career as a TV personality seemed bright until he came out in 2000, at which point

he was banished from the airwaves. As the first public figure to come out, his personal life also took a turn for the worse: he was shunned by friends and taunted by strangers. Three years later, he's back on TV with an active professional career and a public persona moulded by his efforts to change the way people think about homosexuality.

If a single truism could ever capture the essence of life in Korea, it is this: everything is in a constant state of change. As Korea zooms down the highway of modernisation, it often seems this society doesn't notice the changing landscape. The basic fabric of society – marriage, family and purity of Korean blood – is currently undergoing a shift of tectonic proportions. The traditional pattern of arranged marriages at a young age organised by parents, with the wife forced to stay home and be subservient to her husband and in-laws, is disappearing fast. A high rate of divorce – now on par with Western countries – coupled with the cost of raising a family has driven down the birth rate. With an average of 1.17 children per woman, it's the lowest rate in the world.

'If a single truism could ever capture the essence of life in Korea, it is this: everything is in a constant state of change'

The number of children is on the decline, but that's only part of the statistical story. The number of girls is sharply lower than that for boys. In 2002, 109 boys were born for every 100 girls, and by the year 2010 it is estimated that there will be 128 single men at 'peak marriageable age' (27 to 30 years old) for every 100 single, eligible women (24 to 27 years old). Most young families want a maximum of two children, and one of each gender is seen as ideal – two sons are acceptable but two daughters less so. Ultrasound scans can be used to discover the sex of any foetus and if female, she will sometimes be aborted. It is illegal for doctors to inform prospective parents of the sex of their foetus, but it does happen in some cases.

Korea's demographic shift is already being felt in the countryside where many men cannot find a Korean bride. The shortage of local marriageable women has led to the birth of a new industry: imported brides. For a fee, local agencies connect Korean men – mostly from agricultural communities – with brides from poor nations such as Vietnam and the Philippines. In 2005, one in four marriages involved a Korean and a partner from another country.

Koreans are proud of what they see is a pure bloodline (even if historical evidence suggests otherwise). If current marriage trends continue and couples choose to raise a family here, the country will experience a new phenomenon: a multiracial population that will challenge the country's less-than-tolerant racial attitudes. But attitudes might change: everything else in this country does.

POPULATION

South Korea's population is 48.4 million, of whom 10.4 million live in the capital Seoul. The greater-Seoul agglomeration, including Incheon and Gyeonggi-do province, has a population of 23.5 million people, making it the second-largest urban area in the world after Greater Tokyo. The population density of 480 per sq km is one of the highest in the world, but it actually feels more crowded because half of all people live in one of the country's seven major cities.

Farming and fishing villages are in terminal decline as older people die and young people leave for a more alluring life in the cities. Villages are losing 3% of their population every year, and only 4% of the rural population is under 40 years old. Local governments are essentially powerless to stem the outflow of people who are attracted by educational facilities, health services, entertainment venues and job opportunities that aren't available in regional communities.

ECONOMY

Out-migration from the smaller communities to urban centres is a reflection of the country's uneven pattern of economic development. Although there are pockets of industrial development scattered across the country, such as shipbuilding on Geoje Island and automobile manufacturing in Ulsan, the disparities between regions is significant. Power, finance and prestige are located in or around the capital, which is home for 90% of corporate headquarters, 70% of venture companies and 85% of state-run firms.

As part of his election campaign, President Roh Moo-hyun proposed a balanced regional-development strategy that included moving the country's administrative capital out of Seoul. When details were announced, the legal basis of the plan was challenged and the Supreme Court concluded that it was unconstitutional. Undeterred, the Roh government formulated Plan B, which called for the relocation of state-run companies to regional cities and provinces. If the programme is fully implemented, some 32,000 employees will be living in another city by 2012.

KOREA AND YOU

Almost everything you'll experience in Korea is going to be different. The food, customs and non-Romanised writing system are unlike anything in Western countries. What should you do? Embrace the differences and view your trip as a cultural expedition.

There's no sugarcoating the fact that travelling in Korea does have its annoyances. Pushy people, absent-minded pedestrians blocking escalators, scooter drivers on the sidewalk who simply don't care if you move out of the way or not and '*bali bali*' (hurry, hurry) are part of the street scene. You'll also encounter a people with unsmiling faces. Koreans are often reserved initially but if you are outgoing they respond in like manner. The key to an enjoyable journey is to be open-minded and positive.

Few people speak English with any degree of communicative competency, so the onus is on you to be prepared. It only takes a few hours to memorise the Korean alphabet along with some numbers and phrases. Many restaurants in larger cities have menus with some English writing but in the rest of the country, well, that's a different matter. That's also part of the charm of exploring the countryside. To prepare yourself, study the Food & Drink chapter (p62). Korea is a relatively crime-free country, but precautions should be taken. Women travelling alone at night should, for instance, avoid taking a taxi whenever possible.

Foreigners travelling in Korea are not expected to understand or follow the complex web of rules and subtleties that define social intercourse. But you can make a favourable impression by observing a few, simple rules. When visiting temples, homes, Korean-style restaurants and guesthouses, always remove your shoes and leave them by the front door. Wearing socks or stockings is more polite than bare feet. Korean travellers leave their shoes outside the door of their motel room; it's a quaint custom but probably not appropriate for international travellers with large shoes (eg American size 12) because it's almost impossible to find a replacement pair if yours should happen to go missing.

Always remember that you are judged by your appearance. Causal clothing is fine in most situations as long as it is neat with a conservative tone. In the hot and humid summer months, men almost never wear shorts. Women with blonde hair and blue eyes who dress provocatively may be approached by Korean men enquiring if they are Russian prostitutes.

When visiting someone's home, it's customary to bring along a small gift. Fresh fruit (often more expensive than meat) or boxed sets of Spam or tuna are always appreciated. When presented with a gift, your host may at first refuse it. This doesn't mean that he or she doesn't want it – the idea is not to look greedy. You should insist that they take it, and they will accept it 'reluctantly'. For the same reason, the recipient of a gift is not supposed to open the package immediately, but rather put it aside and open it later. When receiving a gift or business card, always use two hands.

Talk to Koreans about the economy and they may use the word depression to describe both the state of national affairs and their emotional quotient. Prior to the economic crisis in 1997 that brought the country to its knees, the robust economy regularly experienced double-digit rates of annual growth. Ten years later, Koreans have had to acclimatise themselves to a comparatively modest 5% rate of growth. Although high by Western standards, it's a level that hardly fosters optimism in Korea. Things can't be all bad, however: in 2005, the number of international trips taken by Koreans passed 10 million for the first time.

SPORT

Baseball

There are eight professional teams in the Korean baseball league, all sponsored by major *jaebeol* (huge, family-run corporate conglomerates). The season generally runs from April to October and each team plays 126 games. A few Korean players have made it to the American Major Leagues, including Park Chan-ho, who had considerable success with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Another pitcher, Kim Byun-hyun, might be remembered for flipping his middle finger towards the hometown Boston Red Sox fans, but he surely will live forever in the minds of trivia buffs as the man who gave up the home run that moved Bobby Bonds past Babe Ruth on the home-run list.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Witty insights into Korean society at The Marmot's Hole, www.rjkoehler.com

Learn about Korean cinema at www.koreanfilm.org

English essays about the Korean arts scene at www.clickkorea.org.

Basketball

Ten teams play in the Korean basketball league and matches are played from October to March. Two foreign players (usually Americans) are allowed in each team.

Soccer

Soccer is a popular recreational sport played by men and children on the dirt fields at local schools. Outside the World Cup, which gives Koreans a reason to wear red shirts and wave the flag, interest in professional soccer is lukewarm. There are 14 teams in Korea's professional soccer league.

Ssireum

Ssireum is a traditional Korean sport. It's called Korean-style wrestling but it's actually closer to grappling. Two competitors start off kneeling, and then grab the *satba* (cloth tied around the opponent's waist and thighs). The object is to use leverage to force your opponent to the ground. This near-dead sport lacks both public and corporate support and may soon go the way of the Korean tiger. Choi Hong-man was a *ssireum* champion who left the sport to earn a living as a K-1 fighter.

Taekwondo

Taekwondo is recognised around the world as a Korean martial art. Unlike most martial arts that claim to have a history dating back thousands of years, taekwondo has been around for about 50 years. It was cobbled together at the end of WWII by fighters who wanted a sport that, on the surface at least, was unrelated to anything Japanese. Bits were taken from (ahem) karate and blended with lesser-known Korean fighting skills such as *taekkyon*, which relies primarily on leg thrusts. By the mid-1950s the name 'taekwondo' was born.

MULTICULTURALISM

Korea is a monocultural society with marginal hints of multiculturalism. About 800,000 foreigners live in Korea, half of whom are migrant workers toiling for low wages in small and medium-sized factories. Foreign residents tend to congregate in pockets, such as Westerners or Nigerians in Seoul's Itaewon, Russians on Busan's Texas St or international tradespeople on Geoje Island, though none qualify as a distinct cultural community.

The Korean monoculture experience has two features: distrust of foreign cultures, which occasionally peaks into hypernationalism; and rigidity. Speak with any Korean adult about Japan and you'll be on the receiving end of an outburst detailing every wrongdoing ever committed by the Japanese during the past 500 years. You'll also hear how every cultural advancement that made its way to Japan first passed through Korea. Elementary school children will tell you they hate Japan, but they don't know why. The American military is also a common whipping horse. The deep distain which many people feel towards the US military is especially intense in these heady days of historical revisionism, as traditional allies – like the US – are seen as barriers to unification, while the North – despite it's significant cache of weapons pointing south of the 38th parallel – is viewed with greater sympathy. It should be noted that Korea's historical gripes or attitudes about the US military are almost always directed at the governmental level; protestors or angry citizens rarely target individual travellers.

Despite the country's attraction, perhaps addiction, to economic and technological change, attitudes about cultural diversity sometimes appear fossilised. A Korean university student with a good command of English was asked if he enjoyed Thai food. His answer was: 'No, I'm Korean. I like Korean food.' This simple exchange encapsulates the Korean conception of multiculturalism: it's un-Korean. It's an age-old idea, a cultural leftover from the Hermit Kingdom that may be tested in the near future as the country moves through demographics change, which include a growing multiracial population that could literally change the face of the nation. It's also a mindset that seems out of place, given the financial and human capital directed towards transforming the country into a regional centre.

'In some circles, it's fashionable to claim that Korea is becoming a hub of Asia'

In some circles, it's fashionable to claim that Korea is becoming a hub of Asia. Many kinds of hubs are bandied about: logistics hub, finance hub, hub of Northeast Asia. Noble ideas indeed but at times it sounds like hubbub. Korea lacks the social infrastructure (eg international schools, English-language access to medical and governmental services, etc) to support a sizable international population. Moreover, Korea does not possess the cultural tools to accept or work within a multicultural society. At a deep instinctual level, Koreans aren't especially fond of foreigners. They are tolerated for specific and beneficial purposes, like migrant workers doing the dirty, dangerous and difficult work (locally called 3-D work) that Koreans prefer not to do, or expats teaching English to children, but the idea that foreigners living in Korea should be treated as equals under the law is, for many people, a new idea that's difficult to accept.

RELIGION

There are four streams of spiritual influence in Korea: shamanism, which originated in central Asia; Buddhism, which entered Korea from China in the 4th-century AD; Confucianism, a system of ethics of Chinese origin; and Christianity, which first made inroads into Korea in the 18th century. Approximately half the nation professes to be Buddhist or Christian with the remaining 50% uncommitted.

Shamanism

Shamanism is an important part of Korean spirituality. It's not a religion but it does involve communication with spirits through intermediaries known as *mudang* (female shamans). Shamanist ceremonies are held for a variety of

reasons: to cure illness, to ward off financial problems or to guide a deceased family member safely into the spirit world. A *gut* (ceremony) might be held by a village on a regular basis to ensure the safety of its citizens and a good harvest of rice or fish.

These ceremonies involve contacting spirits who are attracted by lavish offerings of food and drink. Drums beat and the *mudang* dances herself into a frenzied state that allows her to communicate with the spirits and be possessed by them. Resentments felt by the dead can plague the living and cause all sorts of misfortune, so their spirits need placating. For shamanists death does not end relationships, it simply takes another form.

On Inwangsan, a wooded hillside in northwestern Seoul, ceremonies take place in or near the historic Guksadang shrine (p116). Food offerings to the spirits include a pig's head.

Buddhism

When first introduced during the Koguryo dynasty in AD 370, Buddhism coexisted with shamanism. Many Buddhist temples have a *samseionggak* (three-spirit hall) on their grounds, which houses shamanist deities such as the Mountain God. Buddhism flourished through the unified period and contributed important works such as the Tripitaka Korea (81,340 carved woodblocks), which is at Haeinsa (p196). Buddhism was persecuted during the Joseon period, when temples were tolerated only in remote mountains. It suffered another sharp decline after WWII as Koreans pursued worldly goals. But South Korea's success in achieving developed-nation status, coupled with a growing interest in spiritual values and the environment, is encouraging a Buddhist revival. Temple visits have increased and large sums of money are flowing into temple reconstruction.

Today, about 90% of Korean Buddhists belong to the Jogye sect, which claims to have 8000 monks and 5000 nuns. Buddha's birthday is a national holiday, which includes an extravagant parade in Seoul (p102).

Confucianism

Confucianism is a system of ethics rather than a religion. Confucius (555-479 BC) lived in China during a time of chaos and feudal rivalry known as the Warring States period. He emphasised devotion to parents, loyalty to friends, justice, peace, education, reform and humanitarianism. He also urged respect and deference for those in authority and believed that men were superior to women and that a woman's place was in the home.

As Confucianism trickled into Korea, it evolved into Neo-Confucianism, which blended the sage's original ideas with the quasi-religious practice of ancestral worship and the idea of the eldest male as spiritual head of the family. During its 500-year history as Korea's state philosophy, it became authoritarian and ultraconservative. Today, it continues to shape the way Koreans see the world. For an account of how Confucianism underpins modern Korean values, see p44.

PROVERBS

Traditional sayings provide an uncensored insight into a nation's psyche:

- Koreans' strong belief in the importance of education is reflected in this proverb: 'Teaching your child one book is better than leaving him a fortune.'
- The hope of all Koreans of humble origins is to improve their lifestyle and be 'a dragon that rises from a ditch'.
- The blunt, peasant humour of the Korean character is expressed by this poor man's lament: 'I have nothing but my testicles.'
- Koreans distrust lawyers and governments and prefer to settle disputes in their own way: 'The law is far but the fist is near.'
- An unblemished character is a Korean's most treasured possession. To avoid any suspicion of being a thief, 'Do not tie your shoelaces in a melon patch or touch your hat under a pear tree'.
- Koreans have often needed guts and determination to overcome defeats and disasters: 'After the house is burnt, pick up the nails.'

Christianity

Korea's first significant exposure to Christianity was via the Jesuits from the Chinese imperial court in the late 18th century. The Catholic faith spread quickly – so quickly, in fact, that it was perceived as a threat by the Confucian government and was vigorously suppressed, creating thousands of Catholic martyrs. The Christian ideal of human equality clashed with the neo-Confucius ethos of a rigidly stratified society. Christianity got a second chance in the 1880s, with the arrival of Western Protestant missionaries who founded schools and hospitals and gained many followers.

WOMEN IN KOREA

The traditional role of women as housewife and mother is changing rapidly. In the 1980s, only 15% of women in the marrying age bracket – 25 to 29 – were single. Twenty years later, more than 40% of women in that cohort are single. Women who marry are discovering that their lives look quite different from that of their mother's. Economic necessity is driving women out of the kitchen and into the workforce. Today, 60% of women with a college diploma or university degree are working, while half of all women 15 years and older hold a job, a 50% increase compared to three decades past.

'The traditional role of women as housewife and mother is changing rapidly'

Despite changes in the labour pool, the Korean workplace continues to challenge women. Sexual harassment is prevalent though it is becoming less tolerated thanks to several high profile cases, including one involving a male politician and a female reporter. Although working women put in just as many hours, they earn about one-third less than men. In the professional fields, there is still a glass ceiling based partly on the belief that women in their thirties stay home to raise a family, and therefore should not be promoted over men who are the traditional breadwinners.

MEDIA

TV

Like all countries, Korean TV is a wasteland of home-shopping channels, B-grade English-language shows and local programming that fills the void in a lonely person's life. The only English TV station in the country – excluding the TV arm of the US military, which is available in limited areas – is Arirang, broadcasting a steady stream of cheery, uplifting and thoroughly sanitised news about Korea. Korean comedies are popular and usually involve a team of wannabe celebrities who square off in contests that invariably involve a man carrying a woman sporting high-heel shoes and hot pants.

TV dramas are a refreshing change for compelling plots and superior production quality. Love triangles, revenge, odd twists of fate involving hospitalisation and memory loss, along with stirring music, are packaged into tender, innocent stories that have captivated women across the globe. Spurred on by soap operas, the growing international demand for Korean pop culture is called *hallyu*, or the Korean Wave.

The wave started in 2002 with *Winter Sonata*, the first Korean TV drama to capture the hearts, and wallets, of Japanese women, but it certainly wasn't the last. The historical drama *Dae Jang-geum* tells the story of a woman who worked as a cook in the royal court. Through perseverance she became the first female royal doctor during Joseon. Memory loss plays an important role in *Stairway to Heaven*, a serious tear-jerker about two sweethearts that become separated. The woman is involved in a car accident, loses her memory and changes her identity. The man comes back to her but his efforts to rekindle the relationship are complicated by another woman, a greedy stepmother and eye cancer.

TRADITIONAL COSTUMES

The striking traditional clothing that used to be worn all the time by Koreans is known as *hanbok* and was as much a part of the local culture as *Han·geul* and *kimchi*. Traditionally, women wore a loose-fitting short blouse with long sleeves and a voluminous long skirt, while men wore a jacket and baggy trousers. Both sexes wore socks. Cotton replaced hemp as the main clothing material during the Joseon dynasty. In winter, overcoats were worn over padded clothes and people piled on lots of undergarments to keep out the freezing cold. Men sometimes wore a wide waistcoat. The exact designs have varied over the centuries, especially female *hanbok*, but the clothes have maintained their basic pattern of simple lines without any pockets.

Hanbok style followed the Confucian principle of unadorned modesty. Natural dyes were used to create plain colours, although some parts of clothing could be embroidered, and the very rich could afford silk. In the Joseon period clothing was strictly regulated and poorer people generally had to wear white. In those days you could tell a person's occupation and status from the *hanbok* they wore. For instance, only *yangban* (aristocrats) could wear the black horsehair hats that were a badge of their rank, while a fancy *binyeo* (hairpin) in a big wig was a female status symbol. Scholars (invariably male in those days) wore a plain white gown with wide sleeves. At court, government officials wore special black hats and *heungbae* – embroidered insignia on the back and front of their gowns. Peasants and slaves wore white hemp or cotton clothes and straw sandals.

High-class women hardly ever left their home during the day, and if they did they had to wear a headscarf as a veil and were often carried about in a curtained palanquin by their slaves. Women of lower rank were not veiled and in some respects had more freedom than their wealthier sisters.

In the summer, lightweight, almost transparent ramie –a cloth made from pounded bark – provided cool and comfortable clothing for those who could afford it. Ramie clothing, with its unique texture and look, is making a comeback in the fashion world.

The problem with *hanbok* is that hardly anyone wears it. Up until the 1960s it was common but urbanisation and Westernisation have made it seem old-fashioned. The only horsehair hats you are likely to see are in dusty folk museums or on the heads of actors in historical TV dramas. *Hanbok* is usually only worn at weddings, festivals or other special occasions, and by waitresses in some traditional restaurants and residents in touristic folk villages. Men prefer Western suits or casual wear, and most women find *hanbok* uncomfortable and unflattering: it restricts their movements, has no pockets and is difficult to clean.

Today, fashion designers are reinventing the *hanbok* for the modern world. In markets and shops you can buy modern or traditional *hanbok*. The everyday *hanbok* is reasonably priced, but the formal styles, made of silk and intricately embroidered, are objects of wonder and cost a fortune.

Waistcoats are still popular but only among hikers. Elderly men sometimes wear trilby hats, which are akin to modern *hanbok*, and *ajumma* (married women) sport brightly coloured baggy trousers with clashing multicoloured patterned blouses. Men used to have long hair tied in a topknot but King Gojong had his cut off in 1895 and yet another custom gradually died out.

Hanbok: The Art of Korean Clothing by Sunny Yang (1997) gives a comprehensive history of traditional clothing with masses of pictures.

KOREAN SOAP CLEANS UP IN ASIA

Winter Sonata was the first Korean TV drama to gain an international following. It's the story of two high-school sweethearts whose innocent love was quashed by fate and a car accident. The boy discovers that the father of the girl he loves might be his long lost daddy. Overcome by the realisation that he might be in love with his half-sister, he decides to run away, only to be hit by a car. The girl thinks he is dead and moves on with her life. While he's in hospital, the boy's mother hires a shrink to erase her son's painful memories of growing up as an illegitimate child, gives him a new identity and sends him off to America. Fast forward 10 years, and the hero with a new identify is back in Korea and, coincidentally, bumps into his old high-school sweetheart. The balance of the programme is about how the relationship unfolds and how the man with a new identity recalls his past.

Bae Yong-joon plays the man with two identities. He's well known in Korea and is a certified superstar in Japan where middle-aged women fantasise about having a man like Mr Bae: soft, loving and totally into the relationship. Every shop frequented by Japanese tourists in Korea has larger-than-life images of Mr Bae.

Newspapers

The country's two English-language newspapers – *Korea Times* and *Korean Herald* – are useful resources for students studying English but receive an 'F' for news coverage. The *International Herald Tribune* is a better read. It's widely available in Seoul but hard to find in other cities (and often a day late even if you can find it).

ARTS

Architecture

The best examples of traditional architecture are in Buddhist temples, with massive wooden beams set on stone foundations, often built with notches instead of nails. Roofs are usually made from heavy clay tiles. The strikingly bold and colourful painted design under the eaves is called *dancheong*.

Modern architecture, in contrast, reflects a keen interest in budget rather than urban design. Large concrete towers that look like shoeboxes define most city landscapes. There are notable exceptions, such as Seoul's Jongno Tower, a magnificent structure with a Joseon influence. To experience how modern architecture can manipulate space in a playful manner, Seoul's Leeum Samsung Museum of Art (p104) is a must-see. For sheer power and strength, there is 63 Building on Yeouido (p114), or go even bigger with Tower G in Gangnam, which stands 73 stories.

Cinema

The Korean film industry is protected by a screen-quota system. For 40 years cinemas were required to screen Korean films for 146 days per year, but after several years of wrangling and pressure from US interests that figure was dropped in 2006 to 73 days. Korea's film culture is, however, strong and produces films that may not compare with Hollywood in terms of budget although the quality is often outstanding. Since being launched in 1996, the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) has grown quickly to become the most respected festival in Asia, and attracts crowds of film enthusiasts.

Visit a DVD *bang* and you can watch Korean movies with English subtitles in the comfort of your own minicinema.

Some great Korean movies include the following:

- *The Host* (2006) has everything a great Korean monster movie needs: a beast in the Han River, family devotion and a story that blames the US military for wreaking an environmental disaster. It was a smash hit.

- *Old Boy* (2003) is a disturbing yet brilliant piece of cinema. It's the story of a man imprisoned for 15 years who seeks revenge on his captors.
- *King and the Clown* (2005) is a story of two court jesters during the Joseon dynasty with a homosexual subtext. A surprise Korean blockbuster.
- *Shiri* (1999) is about an elite squad of North Korean terrorists threatening to unleash a dastardly weapon on the South.
- *Memories of Murder* (2003) is based on a true, unsolved case. It's the story of two cops investigating the rape and murder of ten women in Gyeonggi province between 1986 and 1991. This thriller was directed by Boon Jong-ho, who also directed *The Host*.
- *JSA* (2001) is a thriller directed by Park Chan-wook about a friendship that develops between soldiers on opposite sides of the Demilitarized Zone.
- *Taegukgi* (2004) is a Korean War flick about two brothers with some terrific battle scenes.

Literature

In the 12th century, the monk Iryeon wrote *Samguk Yusa* (Myths and Legends of the Three Kingdoms), the most important work of early Korean literature. During Joseon, three-line *sijo* poems based on Chinese models continued to be written in Chinese characters even after the invention of *Han·geul* in the 15th century. In 1945 there was a sharp turn away from Chinese and Japanese influence of any kind. Western influence increased dramatically and existentialism became the guiding cultural philosophy. A growing body of modern English-language literature deals with Koreans living abroad and their struggles with identity.

Still Life with Rice by Helie Lee (1997) recounts one family's struggle during the Korean War.

The Gingko Bed (1996) blends dreams, time travel and two pieces of wood into a love story.

War Trash by Ha Jin (2004) is a gritty novel about the life of a POW during the Korean War from the perspective of an English-speaking Chinese soldier.

Native Speaker by Lee Chang-rae (1996) is a political thriller about a second-generation Korean-American man on the outside looking in. Also take a look at Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999), the story of an older Japanese gentleman who uses grace to mask past mistakes as a soldier in Burma while overseeing Korean comfort woman.

Appointment With My Brother by Yi Mun-yol (2002) is a brilliant novella about a man from the South who meets his half-brother from the North. It's an emotional and stressful meeting for both of them, a collision of two worlds.

A BANG LIFESTYLE

In every city and town you can find plenty of *bang* (rooms) which play a large role in the modern Korean lifestyle. They always charge reasonable prices. Some of the different types of *bang* include:

Bideobang Grubby rooms with a sofa and a screen that show your video choice.
Board game bang A large room to play board games.
Da bang Teashops where the 'coffee girls' deliver more than the name suggests.
DVD bang Small rooms with a sofa and a big screen that show your choice of DVD film in English or with English subtitles. Popular with courting couples.
Jjimjilbang Sport loose fitting uniforms and partake in the Korean art of doing nothing.
Noraebang Small rooms full of happy groups of all ages singing along to their favourite songs. English songs and soft drinks are available.
PC bang Big rooms full of young, chain smoking male computer-game addicts and the occasional emailer.

A Dwarf Launches a Little Ball by Cho Se-hui (1976) is a passionate novella about a family made homeless by urban redevelopment. The story is memorable in spite of the inferior translation.

The Descendants of Cain by Hwang Sun-won (1997), one of Korea's most celebrated authors, tells the story of life in a North Korean village between the end of WWII and the beginning of the Korean War.

Music

Gugak (traditional music) is played on stringed instruments, most notably the *gayageum* (12-stringed zither) and *haegeum* (two-stringed fiddle), and on chimes, gongs, cymbals, drums, horns and flutes. Traditional music can be subdivided into three categories: *jeong·ak* is a slow court music often combined with elegant dances; *bulgyo eumak* is played and chanted in Buddhist temples; *samul·nori* is a lively style originally played by travelling entertainers. It died out during Japanese colonial rule but was reinvented in the 1970s by musicians playing four traditional percussion instruments.

Korea's traditional music is unlikely to catch on overseas, but that certainly hasn't been the case with the country's pop music, called K-pop. Riding the *hallyu*, K-pop artists have attracted significant international attention though none have attained BoA's level of commercial success. In some respects she is the Korean Madonna, a woman with considerable vocal talents and the ability to exploit new markets.

'Korea's traditional music is unlikely to catch on overseas, but that certainly hasn't been the case with the country's pop music'

Rain's sugary love songs have a following across Asia where his third album sold one million copies. In 2006 Rain performed at New York's Madison Square Gardens to two sold-out shows. Other groups and singers that have gained notoriety include Se7en, Hyo Lee and the wildly popular boy band Shinhwa.

Painting & Sculpture

Chinese influence is paramount in traditional Korean painting. The brush line, which varies in thickness and tone, is the most important feature. The painting is meant to surround the viewer and there is no fixed viewpoint. Zen-style Buddhist art can be seen inside and on the outside walls of hundreds of temples around the country. Murals usually depict scenes from Buddha's life.

Stone Buddhist statues and pagodas are the most common examples of ancient sculpture. Cast bronze was also common for Buddhas and some marvellous examples can be seen in the National Museum of Korea (p104). Stone and wooden shamanist guardian posts are common and Jejudo has its own unique *harubang* or 'grandfather stones' (p272). Many towns have sculpture gardens – including Seoul's Olympic Park (p113).

Korea's best-known modern sculptor, Baek Nam-june, who died in January 2006, was a Korean-American artist who used video monitors instead of stone to create inspired, sometimes bizarre, work. One of his larger creations, 'The More the Better,' is an 18m-tower with 1000 video monitors on display at the National Museum of Contemporary Art inside Seoul Grand Park (p141). His experimentation with video began in the 1960s, a time when information technology was beginning to enter the mainstream. Baek's unique artistic representations of technology's interface with society invite parallels with Marshal McCluhan, a media analyst who taught us that 'the medium is the message'.

Other modern artists include painter Kim Whanki, mixed-media artist Min Yong-soon and Kim Tschang-yeul, a painter noted for his dedication to water drops; one of the latter's paintings is at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul (p104). For an international taste of modern art, Gwangju hosts a two-month modern festival every two years (p254).

Pottery

Pottery on the Korean peninsula dates back 10,000 years, but the 12th century is regarded as a special moment in time when skilled artisans turned out celadon earthenware with a green tinge. Nowadays Korean celadon earns thousands of dollars at auction. Pottery fans shouldn't miss out on a visit to Icheon Ceramic Village (p148) near Seoul and two pottery villages in Jeollanam-do: the Pottery Culture Centre (p266) and the Gangjin Celadon Museum (p262).

Theatre & Dance

DANCE

Popular folk dances include *samul·nori* (drum dance), *talchum* (mask dance) and solo improvisational *salpuri* (shamanist dance). *Samul·nori* dancers perform in brightly coloured clothing, twirling a long tassel from a special cap on their heads. Good coordination is required to dance, twirl and play a drum at the same time. These dancers appear at every festival.

'Good coordination is required to dance, twirl and play a drum at the same time'

Talchum dance-dramas were performed by low-class travelling showmen on market days and usually satirised the *yangban* class. Masks indicated the status of the character – a *yangban*, monk, shaman, grandmother, concubine or servant – and hid the identity of the performer. Mask dance-dramas involved vigorous leaping, comedy and big gestures, together with shouting, singing and reciting. The performers usually mingled with the audience once their part was over. Today, masks are usually made of wood and every souvenir shop sells them.

There are two major modern dance festivals held in Seoul each year. The MODAFE festival (www.modafe.org) has been operating for over a quarter or a century and usually holds performances in the spring. The Seoul International Dance Festival (www.sidance.org) has been around for about a decade, with local and international performers taking the stage at numerous venues across the city including the Seoul Arts Centre. During the festival, which usually runs in October, there are workshops with noted choreographers.

THEATRE

Korea's small, modern theatrical experience is primarily based in Seoul. Commercially safe, non-verbal shows like Nanta and Tobekki appeal to an international audience (p133). There's an experimental scene in Daehangno but it's entirely in Korean, though the Hakjeon Green Theatre has subtitles on a screen (p133).

KOREAN OPERA

Changgeuk is an opera that can involve a large cast of characters. Another type of opera is *pansori*, which features a solo storyteller (usually female) singing in a strained voice to the beat of a male drummer. The performer flicks her fan to emphasise dramatic moments. For details on Seoul's traditional theatres that stage these shows, see p133.

Environment

South Korea's economic growth since 1960 has transformed the country from an agricultural to an industrial society. Sprawling apartment-block cities and huge industrial complexes have been constructed, rivers have been dammed and freeways have been bulldozed through the countryside. Authoritarian governments stamped on any opposition to development projects and the environmental impacts were ignored. Fortunately the 70% of Korea that is mountainous and forested is still largely undeveloped, and the hundreds of offshore islands are also unspoilt. For a developed country Korea is surprisingly green, as 90% of the population is packed into high-rise city apartments.

Nowadays politics is more democratic, mayors win votes by promising green policies and citizen environmental groups are no longer ignored by the media. Unpopular construction projects can face fierce local opposition – the government has been searching for a nuclear waste site since 1986 without success, as every site suggested has been met with a storm of local protest.

THE LAND

South Korea's land area is 99,538 sq km, the same size as Portugal and almost as large as North Korea. Its overall length from north to south (including Jejudo) is 500km, while the narrowest point is 220km wide. Forested mountains cover 70% of the land, although they are not very high – Hallasan (1950m) on Jejudo is the highest peak. Many mountains are granite with dramatic cliffs and pinnacles, but there are also impressive limestone caves to visit.

Living History of the DMZ by Hahm Kwang Bok (2004) covers the unique ecological zone that separates the two Koreas.

To the south is Jejudo, a volcanic island with spectacular craters and lava tubes, and off the east coast is another volcanic island, Ulleungdo, which is remote, rural and mysterious. Korea is not in an earthquake zone, but there are dozens of mineral-laden *oncheon* (hot springs) that bubble up through the ground and have been developed into health spas. Most large rivers have been dammed, but the man-made lakes created by them are scenic. World-class ski resorts lure winter-sports enthusiasts into the snow-laden mountainous regions in the colder, northern half of the country.

The plains and shallow valleys are still dominated by irrigated rice fields that are interspersed with small orchards, plastic greenhouses growing vegetables, and barns housing cows, pigs and chickens. In the south are green-tea plantations; on frost-free Jejudo citrus fruit is grown. Despite huge government subsidies and 50% tariffs on agricultural imports, the rural population is greying and shrinking every year. In some villages everyone is over 60 years old. Very few young people want to be farmers and fewer still want to marry a farmer, so foreign wives are being imported from Southeast Asian countries.

Caves by Kyung Sik Woo (2005) is a lavishly illustrated book on Korean caves by a geological expert and cave enthusiast.

The hundreds of sparsely populated islands scattered around the western and southern coasts of the peninsula have a relaxed atmosphere, unspoiled by second-home owners, and a few have attractive sandy beaches. Here you can go way off the beaten track to islands where the inhabitants have never seen a foreigner. The west-coast mud flats are a vast larder of shellfish and crabs that not only support thousands of migrating birds, but also supply countless seafood markets and raw fish restaurants. Reclaiming the mud flats for farmland has become a highly emotive and divisive issue (p60).

ANIMALS

Korea's forested mountains used to be crowded with Siberian tigers, leopards, bears, deer, goral antelopes, wolves and foxes. Unfortunately these animals are now extinct or rare in Korea, and all that hikers are likely to

see are cute little Asiatic chipmunks, squirrels and birds. Efforts are now being made to build up the number of wild animals in the country (see boxed text below). Magpies, pigeons and sparrows account for most of the birds in the towns and cities, but egrets, herons and swallows are common in the countryside, and raptors, woodpeckers and pheasants can also be seen. Although many are visiting migrants, over 500 bird species have been sighted, and Korea has a growing reputation among birders keen to see Steller's sea eagles, red-crowned cranes, black-faced spoonbills and other rarities.

A hundred bird species can be seen in just one day on Eocheongdo, a small island off Gunsan in Jeollabuk-do.

PLANTS

Northern parts of South Korea are the coldest and the flora is alpine: beech, birch, fir, larch and pine. Further south, deciduous trees are more common. The south coast and Jejudo are the warmest and wettest areas, so the vegetation is lush. Cherry trees blossom in early spring followed by azaleas and camellias. Korea's mountainsides are a pharmacy and salad bar of health-giving edible leaves, ferns, roots, nuts and fungi. Many of these wild mountain vegetables end up in restaurant side dishes and *sanchae bibimbap* (a meal of rice, egg, meat and mountain vegetables). Wild ginseng is the most expensive and sought-after plant.

NATIONAL & PROVINCIAL PARKS

Korea has 20 national parks that cover 38,240 sq km of land (6.5% of the country). The first national park, Jirisan, was established in 1967 and is the third most-visited park with 2.6 million paying customers a year. Only Seoraksan (2.8 million) in Gang·won-do and Bukhansan (4 million), located on Seoul's doorstep, have more visitors. There are also 22 smaller provincial parks (covering 747 sq km) and 29 county parks (covering 307 sq km) that are just as worthy of a visit as the national parks. Entrance fees to the parks vary but they are all a bargain at W3000 or less. All the parks have well-marked hiking trails that can be so popular that trails have to be closed to protect them from serious erosion.

Field Guide to the Birds of Korea by Lee, Koo & Park (2000) is the standard bird guide, but doesn't include all feathered visitors.

The parks can be enjoyed in every season. In spring cherry blossoms, azaleas and other flowers are a delight; in summer the hillsides and river valleys provide a cool escape from the heat and humidity of the cities; during the summer monsoon, the waterfalls are particularly impressive; in autumn red-coloured leaves and clear blue skies provide a fantastic sight; and in winter snow and ice turn the parks into a white wonderland, although crampons and proper clothing are needed for any serious hikes at this time of year. Korean winters can be Arctic, especially if you're high up in the mountains.

Gaily painted wooden Buddhist temples and hermitages grace nearly every mountain, and river valleys, waterfalls and rocky outcrops abound. It's not surprising that many visitors rate the national and provincial parks as the country's top attraction.

www.birdskorea.org has wonderful photos of Korean birds and loads of info for bird lovers.

Koreans are enthusiastic hikers, so most parks are crowded at weekends, particularly in summer and autumn. Many hikers go hiking every week and like to dress up in smart hiking gear – red waistcoats with plenty of pockets are a long-standing favourite, although ninja black is the latest hiking fashion. Proper hiking boots (not backpacker sandals!) are *de rigueur* for serious hikers, although you may see young women (usually from Seoul) struggling up a mountain trail in high heels. Korean women have the strongest ankles in the world.

Take a bottle of *soju* (Korean vodka-like drink) or *dongdongju* (fermented rice wine) and a picnic along. All the parks have tourist villages near the main entrances with restaurants, market stalls, souvenir and food shops, and budget accommodation where big groups can squeeze into a small room. Camping grounds (W3000 for a three-person tent) and mountain shelters (W3000 to W5000 for a bunk) are cheap, but provide only very basic facilities.

HALF-MOON BEARS

Manchurian black bears (sometimes called half-moon bears because of the crescent moon of white fur on their chests) were thought to be extinct in South Korea. But in 2001 video-camera footage proved that a few bears were living in a remote part of Jirisan National Park, perhaps six of them. The **Jirisan Bear Project** (% 061 783-9120) was established with the aim to build up a self-sustaining group of 50 wild bears in Jirisan. As a start four bears from bear farms were released in late 2001. One female bear died and a second female kept pestering hikers for food and had to be removed. The two male bears, Bandol and Jangun, survived longer, but started raiding farmers' beehives. They are now involved in retraining farm and zoo bears to survive in the wild.

By 2006, 14 bears from North Korea and Russia had been released in Jirisan, and another eight were in the training programme.

The Korean bears are bigger, with a wider face and shaggier hair than the Manchurian black bears that are common in Japan. They are nocturnal and shy so hikers rarely see them, but if you do bump into a bear, stand still so as not to frighten it, and give way.

Unfortunately numerous bear products are still sold by the traditional medicine industry in Korea and throughout Asia. A bear produces around 2kg of bile a year which sells for as much as US$10,000 per kilogram.

JIRISAN NATIONAL PARK ANIMALS *Han Sang-hoon*

The last **Siberian tiger** in Jirisan was captured in 1944. Plenty of people have claimed to have seen a tiger since then, or a footprint or whatever. But there is no definite evidence or proof. Siberian tigers are critically endangered as less than 500 survive in the wild, mostly in east Russia or northeast China, but they are occasionally reported in North Korea. **Amur leopards** used to be common in Korea but the last wild one was captured in 1962: now there are less than 50 living in the wild around the world.

The **grey wolf** is probably extinct in the wild in South Korea, as there has been no confirmed sighting of one for over 10 years. However there are a few in North Korea near Paekdusan. I know that because I was lucky enough to see one when I was there on a joint project.

I estimate that 20 to 30 **red foxes** are living in the wild in the South. I've seen red foxes three times – in 1993, 1995 and 1997 – twice in Jirisan and once on Namhae island in Gyeongsangnam-do. There are perhaps less than 10 in Jirisan but they've never been photographed or videoed. If any visitor sees a fox please photograph it and send me a copy, addressed to the Bear Project at Jirisan National Park HQ.

Sika deer died out in the 1940s. Unhappily **musk deer** are also on the verge of extinction in Korea despite government protection. However the number of **water deer** is increasing, which is good news because they are a special sub-species found only in China and Korea. **Roe deer** can also be found at higher elevations in Jirisan, and many more live on Hallasan on Jejudo.

River otter numbers are decreasing due to dam and road construction disturbing their habitats. **Badger** numbers are increasing in Jirisan but illegal hunting still goes on and is reducing their numbers elsewhere – badgers are a popular food for women after they've given birth. **Racoon dogs** were doing well but recently they've been hit by a mystery virus. **Leopard cats**, **martens** and **wild boars** also live in the park but are rarely seen.

Dusk or dawn is the best time to see the park's animals. Find a little-used trail and just stand still, and they will come out if they are around.

Han Sang-hoon, Director of Jirisan Bear Project

Top national parks include:

Park	Area	Features & Activities
Bukhansan	78 sq km	Great hiking, and subway access from Seoul (p141)
Dadohae Haesang	2344 sq km	A marine park of scattered, unspoilt islands (p270) (2004 sq km marine)
Deogyusan	219 sq km	A top ski resort, a fortress and a magical valley walk (p301)
Gyeongju	138 sq km	Strewn with ancient Shilla and Buddhist relics (p197)
Hallasan	149 sq km	This extinct volcano on Jejudo is Korea's highest peak (p292)
Jirisan	440 sq km	A giant park with high peaks that is popular with serious hikers (East p247 and West p258)
Seoraksan	373 sq km	Korea's most beautiful and second-most popular park (p172)
Sobaeksan	320 sq km	Limestone caves and Gu·insa, an impressive temple complex (p343)

Goral antelopes have been released into Woraksan National Park. Keep a lookout for them when you visit.

Top provincial parks include:

Park	Area	Features & Activities
Daedunsan	38 sq km	Granite cliffs, great views and a hot-spring bath (p300)
Gajisan	104 sq km	Scenic views and a famous temple, Tongdosa (p242)
Mudeungsan	30 sq km	Near Gwangju with an art gallery and a green-tea plantation (p253)
Namhan Sanseong	36 sq km	Take the subway from Seoul, hike round the fortress wall and eat in the restaurant village (p144)
Taebaeksan	17 sq km	Visit the Coal Museum and hike up to Dan·gun's altar (p184)

View www.npa.or.kr for information on all 20 national parks.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Open any newspaper these days and you are likely to come across an environmental controversy of some kind. The NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) syndrome is starting to catch on as Korean society becomes more democratic and Westernised. Two long-running environmental issues concern where to store nuclear waste and the reclamation of mud flats at Saemangeum in Jeollabuk-do.

South Korea relies on nuclear power to generate one-third of the country's electricity, but the government has so far failed to find a permanent storage site for the radioactive waste that continues to be produced. It's all in temporary storage. Many sites have been proposed since 1986 but they have all provoked fierce opposition despite the billions of won in compensation offered to the local communities affected.

The huge US$2 billion Saemangeum project in Jeollabuk-do has involved constructing a 33km sea wall to reclaim 40,000 hectares of mud flats, mainly for agricultural use. Opponents see little economic benefit in creating more rice fields at the expense of the mud flats, which are an important fish and shellfish breeding area and provide a vital feeding ground for more than 100,000 migrant birds, including black-faced spoonbills and 12 other threatened species.

View www.greenkorea.org for a pressure group with practical ideas such as Buy Nothing Day, Car Free Day and Save Paper Day.

In February 2005, when the project was almost finished, at the eleventh hour a court supported the opponents and work on the project was suspended, but a year later a higher court allowed the scheme to go ahead. The sea wall was finally completed in April 2006, 15 years after it was begun. Plans are afoot to run an annual marathon along the wall and to open it up as a tourist road.

In response to the Saemangeum protests, in 2006 the government declared 60 sq km of wetlands at the Han River estuary in Gyeonggi-do a protected area. Ten smaller wetland areas (covering a total of 45 sq km) had already been protected.

Environmentalists are monitoring the impact of the Saemangeum project on migrant bird numbers – see http://english.kfem.or.kr.

Green policies have also become a hot potato in Seoul's local politics. The greening of the capital has just started after decades of delays and excuses. The new Ttukseom Seoul Forest (take subway line 2 to Ttukseom subway station, and leave by exit 8) and the expensive but splendid restoration of the Cheonggye stream (Map pp88–9) now flowing through downtown, are two examples of this new trend. One-third of Seoul's buses now run on environmentally friendly CNG (Compressed Natural Gas) rather than diesel. Seoul mayors these days are now more likely to be nicknamed 'Green' Lee rather than 'Bulldozer' Lee. Trees and gardens are part of all new property developments, and Seoul's city hall now has a grass plaza in front and some trees at the back. Hopefully the next step will be the development of fully pedestrianised streets, starting with Insadong-gil.

Most garbage is recycled and tourists can help by putting their rubbish in the appropriate bins for paper, cans and plastic. If you rent an apartment you will need separate rubbish bags for food waste, plastics, metal, paper and so on. The concierge will show you the system.

Another small way that tourists can help is by refusing unnecessary packaging. A few stores such as E-Mart and Buy The Way are already discouraging the use of plastic bags by charging for them.

Food & Drink

Korea has one of Asia's richest culinary traditions, and sampling all the quirky delights of the local food and drink is one of the joys of visiting the country. Listings in this chapter focus on Korean food, but Western fodder is nearly always available in bakeries, convenience stores and pizza and fast food outlets, which are numerous and easy to spot.

A typical Korean meal is based around boiled rice, soups and as many as a dozen side dishes, called *banchan*, which normally include Korea's national dish, *kimchi* (pickled or fermented vegetables). Diners in Korea are not expected to finish everything – in fact if you do, the side dishes will probably be refilled until you burst!

Garlic, ginger, green onion, black pepper, sesame oil, soy sauce and vinegar abound. But the big spice is chilli pepper, which usually takes the form of *gochujang* (red pepper paste). A good general rule is: red = spicy.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Bibimbap

Bibimbap is a tasty and foreigner-friendly mixture of vegetables, meat and an egg on top of rice. Mix it all together with your spoon before digging in. If you don't want it too spicy, remove some of the *gochujang* before mixing. *Bibimbap* is usually served with soup but don't mix that in too! *Sanchae bibimbap* is made with mountain greens while *dolsot bibimbap* is served in a stone hotpot. Vegetarians can usually order it without meat or egg.

Bulgogi

The Korea Tourism Organisation website at www.tour2korea.com has an extensive food section, including regional recipes.

This signature Korean meal is thin slices of beef, marinated in sweetened soy sauce, that are cooked on a small barbecue grill on your table. To eat, take a lettuce or other leaf, put a slice of meat on it, add garlic, sauce or side-dish items, wrap it all up and enjoy. *Bulgogi deopbap* is slices of beef served on a hotplate with vegetables and rice.

Chicken

Samgyetang is a small chicken stuffed with glutinous rice, red dates, garlic and ginseng and boiled in broth. It's commonly eaten in summer, often accompanied by ginseng wine. *Hanbang oribaeksuk* is similar but served with medicinal herbs. *Dakgalbi* is pieces of chicken, cabbage, other vegetables and finger-sized pressed-rice cakes, which are grilled at your table in a spicy sauce. Even zingier is *jjimdak*, a hot-hot-hot mixture of chicken pieces, transparent noodles, potatoes and other vegetables. On almost every street, informal bars serve a plate of fried or barbecued chicken along with pitchers of beer.

Desserts

As in other Asian nations, desserts are not traditional in Korea, but nowadays Western-style bakeries and yogurt and ice-cream parlours have spread just about everywhere. Can't find one? Pop into a convenience store.

Sometimes at the end of a meal, you'll be served a few pieces of fruit plus a tea or *sujeonggwa*, a refreshing drink made from cinnamon and ginger, served cold. Free self-serve coffee is provided in some restaurants.

Cakes are generally saved for special occasions such as weddings and milestone birthdays, but *tteok* (rice cakes), flavoured with nuts, seeds and dried fruit, are a less sweet and healthier alternative.

WE DARE YOU

Beondegi Silkworm larvae
Bosintang Dog-meat soup
Doganitang Cow kneecaps soup
Mettugi Fried grasshoppers
Sannakji Live baby octopus
Yukhoe Seasoned raw minced meat

GRILL YOUR OWN

If there's any food for which Korea is famous worldwide, it's barbecue. Barbecue restaurants typically have a grill set into the table, on which you cook beef ribs *(galbi)*, thin slices of beef (*bulgogi*), pork *(samgyeopsal)*, chicken *(dak)*, seafood or vegetables. Often your server will get you started by putting the meat on the grill; after that, generally you're on your own to turn the meat and remove it when cooked. All are delicious, but *samgyeopsal* is belly pork and tends to be fatty.

The meals usually include lettuce and sesame leaf wraps. Take a leaf in one hand (or combine two leaves for different flavours) and with your other hand use your chopsticks to load it with meat, sauces and side-dish relishes to taste. Then roll it up into a little package and eat it in one go. Tip: use half a leaf for a more bite-sized package. The garlic can be eaten raw or cooked on the grill. Rice isn't usually served, so some diners order *naengmyeon* (buckwheat noodles in an icy broth) as a kind of dessert.

Barbecue meals are usually only available in servings of two or more. Sharing food goes to the heart of Korean life and culture, which is still communal. In Korea nobody likes to eat alone.

Gimbap & Samgak Gimbap

These cheap snacks consist mostly of *bap (*rice) rolled in *gim (*dried seaweed); often the rice is flavoured beforehand with sesame oil. Circular *gimbap* contains strips of vegetables, egg and ham in the centre, while its less famous brother, *samgak gimbap* (triangular *gimbap*), only available in convenience stores, has a savoury fish, meat or vegetable mixture on top. Nude *gimbap* has no dried seaweed cover, while some restaurants sell fancy-looking *gimbap* at even fancier prices, calling it 'Californian roll'.

View the excellent www.koreankitchen.com for recipes to cook your own Korean meals.

Hanjeongsik

This traditional banquet comes all at once and includes fish, meat, soup, *dubu jjigae* (tofu stew), rice, noodles, steamed egg, shellfish and a flock of cold vegetable side dishes. It's a good way to sample a wide range of Korean food at one sitting. Like barbecue dishes, *hanjeongsik* almost always needs to be ordered for two or more people. In the past only the king was allowed twelve side dishes, but now anyone can order it.

Hoetjip (Fish & Seafood)

Haemul (seafood) and *seongseon* (fish) are generally served raw, but can also be broiled or grilled. Koreans love raw fish and seafood despite the high prices. When fish is served sushi-style (raw over rice) it's called *chobap*. Sashimi (without the rice) is called *saengseonhoe* and is often served with seafood side dishes and followed by a red-pepper fish-bone soup. Another preparation is *hoedeopbap*, which is like *bibimbap* except that it contains raw fish instead of egg and minced meat. Restaurants near the coast serve squid, barbecued shellfish, octopus and crab.

Korean Cooking Made Easy by Kim Young-hee (2006) is a handy-sized, simple, get-you-started choice of well-illustrated and well-chosen recipes.

Jeon

These savoury pancakes usually have seafood and spring onions, but other ingredients are possible. Another kind of pancake is *bindaetteok*, which is made from freshly ground mung beans and has a meat or seafood filling, along with vegetables.

KIMCHI

The national dish is served at virtually every Korean meal, whether it's breakfast, lunch or dinner. The most common type is *baechu kimchi,* made from cabbage mixed with garlic and *gochujang* and left to pickle for months. But *kimchi* can be made from radish, cucumber and just about any other vegetable, even broccoli. Some varieties are aged for hours, others for years. Some are meant to be eaten in tiny morsels or wrapped around rice, while others, such as *bossam kimchi,* are flavour-packed little packages containing vegetables, pork or seafood. Belying its fiery reputation, *mul kimchi* is a fairly bland cold soup, similar to gazpacho. Many regions, restaurants and families have their own distinctive style of *kimchi,* and recipes are jealously guarded and handed down from generation to generation.

Traditionally, *kimchi* was made to preserve vegetables and ensure proper nutrition during the harsh winters. Even now, late-November to early December is the season for *gimjang,* or making your own *kimchi.*

Kimchi dates back to at least the 13th century, although red pepper was added only in the 17th century. Nowadays most *kimchi* is bought from stores, and some is even imported from China. It isn't just for winter anymore – it's eaten year-round to add zest and a long list of health benefits to just about every meal. Consumption of *kimchi* is reducing but still stands at 25kg per person per year.

Kimchi is the one thing that no Korean kitchen can be without. Yet *kimchi* storage can be problematic. The temperature must be kept just so – if it's too warm, the *kimchi* can over-ferment; too cold, and it will freeze. That's to say nothing of the odour it can impart to more delicate foods in the fridge. *Kimchi* is no longer buried or kept in big jars in the yard, so instead many families invest in a special *kimchi* refrigerator.

Jjigae

These stews are thicker than soups, often spicy, and served in a stone hotpot. Popular versions are made with *dubu jjigae* (tofu), *doenjang jjigae (*soyabean paste) and *kimchi*. They're served bubbling hot, so let them cool down before eating!

Juk

Juk is rice porridge, which comes mixed with almost anything: savoury versions include ginseng chicken, mushroom, abalone or seafood, while sweeter incarnations include pumpkin and red bean. The thick, black rice porridge is sesame. Look out for small, modern chain restaurants that specialise in *juk* meals, perfect if you are after a healthy, filling and fairly bland meal.

Korean Breakfasts

At fish restaurants diners choose live fish, squid, crab or shellfish from a tank, which are often served raw with side dishes and a spicy fish soup.

Traditional Korean breakfasts are centred on soup, rice and *kimchi*. If that sounds like lunch or dinner, it is, except with fewer side dishes. For something freshly baked head to a bakery, or for sandwiches, bakery items or coffee just pop into the nearest convenience store. Both are open early. Cornflakes are available in grocery and convenience stores. As in other countries, many young people make do with a quick cup of coffee and a fag.

Mandu

An inexpensive favourite, these small dumplings are filled with meat, vegetables and herbs, and are often freshly made on the premises by restaurant staff when business is slack. Fried or steamed, they make a tasty snack or light meal. *Manduguk* is *mandu* in soup with vegetables and seaweed, while *wangmandu* is a king-sized version.

Noodles

A popular noodle dish is *naengmyeon*, buckwheat noodles in an icy beef broth, garnished with finely chopped vegetables and half a boiled egg – add red pepper paste or *gyeoja* (mustard). It's especially popular in hot weather, and is often eaten after *galbi* (beef ribs) or other meat dishes as a kind of dessert.

Bibim naengmyeon pairs the noodles (still cold but not in soup) with the vegetables and other ingredients found in *bibimbap*.

Japchae are clear noodles made from sweet potatoes, stir-fried in sesame oil with strips of egg, meat, mushrooms, carrots and other vegetables. It used to be served to Joseon monarchs.

Kalguksu are thick wheat noodles in a bland clam-and-vegetable broth, while *ramyeon* is instant noodles served in fiery soup. A Koreanised Chinese dish is *jajangmyeon*, noodles in a bland dark-brown sauce that children (and nostalgic adults) adore.

Soups

Soups (*tang* or *guk*) are a Korean speciality that vary from spicy seafood and crab soups such as *haemultang* to bland broths such as *galbitang* or *seolleongtang*. *Gamjatang* is a spicy peasant soup with meaty bones and a potato. *Haejangguk* (bean-sprout soup) is said to cure hangovers. Some soups are served hot and some cold, even icy. Tip: if a soup is too spicy, tip in some rice.

DRINKS

Virtually every restaurant serves good old *mul (*water), either filtered or bottled, when customers arrive. If not, look for the self-serve water dispenser.

Tea is also popular. *Nokcha* (green tea) is grown in modest quantities and you can visit green-tea plantations in Jejudo (p291) and Jeollanam-do (p262), but black tea can be hard to find. Many other health teas are not made from the tea plant and include *boricha* (barley tea), *daechucha* (red-date tea), *omijacha* (five-flavour berry tea), *yujacha* (citron tea) and *insamcha* (ginseng tea). They are served hot or cold.

A Korean Mother's Cooking Notes by Chang Sun-young (2003) proves that a mother's cooking is always the best.

For a country with a tea tradition, Korea has taken to coffee in a big way. In addition to coffee shops, there are vending machines (from W300 per cup), and in some restaurants you can serve yourself coffee. Sorry decaf drinkers, you're probably out of luck but it never hurts to ask.

Bottled and canned soft drinks are everywhere, and you'll find some unique Korean choices like grape juice with whole grapes inside, and *sikhye*, rice punch with rice grains inside.

Health tonics, made with fibre, vitamins, ginseng and other medicinal herbs, are available in shops and pharmacies. They're usually sold in small (100mL) glass bottles. The top two brands are Bacchus D (박카스 D), which is only sold in pharmacies, and Vita 500 (비타 500).

SAUCY SIDE DISHES

Korean cuisine is well-known for *banchan (*side dishes), which are generally spicy and accompany nearly every meal. At least one *kimchi* (cabbage, radish or cucumber) will be included, but other common ones are green vegetables, acorn jelly, quail eggs, bean sprouts, small clams, anchovies, tofu, lettuce, seaweed, spinach, garlic or just about anything the chefs can dream up. It's always fun to try a new one.

The side-dish system is wasteful because lots of food is thrown away. The government periodically tries to reform it, but Koreans are innately conservative and resist any meddling with their culinary culture.

LOCAL SPECIALITIES

- *ureok* (raw fish) – Busan, Gyeongsangnam-do
- *dakgalbi* (spicy chicken grilled with vegetables and rice cakes) – Chuncheon, Gang·won-do
- *maneul* (garlic) – Danyang, Chungcheongbuk-do
- *oritang* (duck soup); *tteokgalbi* (grilled patties of ground beef) – Gwangju, Jeollanam-do
- *okdomgui* (grilled, semi-dried fish); *jeonbok-juk* (abalone rice porridge) – Jejudo
- *sundubu* (tofu stew) – Jeongdongjin, Gang·won-do
- *ojing-eo* (squid) served *sundae* (sausage) style – Sokcho, Gang·won-do
- *galbi* (beef ribs) – Suwon, Gyeonggi-do
- *chungmu gimbap* (rice, dried seaweed & *kimchi*) – Tong·yeong, Gyeongsangnam-do
- *gatkimchi* (leafy mustard *kimchi*) – Yeosu, Jeollanam-do

If you're looking for something stronger, *maekju (*Korean beers) are mainly lager, but recently dark beers have started appearing, and Guinness and other imported beers are increasingly available. A few microbreweries have started up, mainly in Seoul (p130). Wine is much more common than it used to be, although the choice is limited.

Koreans consider it unhealthy to drink on an empty stomach, so bars invariably serve *anju* (snacks) such as peanuts, popcorn, dried squid or fried chicken.

S*oju* is the local firewater (at least 20% alcohol) and is often likened to vodka in that it's clear, nearly flavourless and cheap to produce. For sale even in grocery and convenience stores, it comes in many flavours, including lemon, maple, cherry and bamboo. Innovative bartenders have been known to mix it with just about everything, including yogurt.

A tempting range of traditional alcoholic drinks are brewed or distilled from grains, fruits, roots and anything else to hand. Koreans could make alcohol even out of rocks. Each region has its own local specialities – try *bokbunja* (made from berries), plum wine, *insamju* (made from ginseng) or whatever takes your fancy.

Makgeolli, also known as *dongdongju*, is a traditional brew made from unrefined, fermented rice wine that has a cloudy appearance and a sweetish yogurty flavour. It has a much lower alcohol content than *soju* and is traditionally served in a kettle and poured into small bowls. 'Ganbei!' ('Cheers!')

CELEBRATIONS WITH FOOD

Tteok (rice cakes) are associated with many traditional Korean festive occasions, and small family-run *tteok* shops are a common sight. Lunar New Year is celebrated with *tteokguk* (rice-cake soup); Chuseok (Thanksgiving) with *songpyeon* (crescent-shaped rice cakes with red-bean filling); and the winter solstice with *patjuk* (red-bean porridge with rice-cake balls).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Restaurants

Sikdang is the general word for restaurant in Korean. Beyond major cities, few restaurants have English menus, but many have food photos or plastic food replicas.

Many Korean meals, like *bibimbap* or *samgyeopsal*, cost under W7000, while *galbi* or *bulgogi* cost from W13,000 to W20,000 but can be shared. Soups, stews and food court meals are generally around W5000. Side dishes will automatically be included in the price. If rice is not included, it's usually W1000. If you see a dish for W20,000 or up, chances are it's meant for sharing, such as a whole fish, whole duck or a large seafood stew. Most restaurants offer a very limited range of soft drinks and alcohol.

Food Courts

Department stores and shopping malls usually have a food court, often in the basement. All styles of food are available for around W5000, including Koreanised Italian pasta and pizza options and Koreanised Chinese food. Some pile up heaps of food on big platters. Coffee, fruit juice and ice cream are available too.

Street Stalls

Common street foods cost from W500 to W4000 and include *tteokbokki* (rice cakes in a spicy orange sauce), *dakkochi* (skewers of marinated, grilled chicken), *sundae* (sausages containing vegetables and noodles) and *odeng* (processed seafood).

A night out with Korean friends often involves three stops and can be exhausting: the first stop is dinner, then it's off to a bar, before ending up in a *noraebang* (karaoke room).

If you're in the mood for something sweet, try *hotteok* (pitta bread with a cinnamon and honey filling), a waffle, a bag of tiny machine-made walnut cakes or an *aiseukeurim* (ice cream) cone.

In summer *soju* tents appear as if by magic in city streets, offering alcohol, snacks and meals until the sun comes up.

Convenience Stores

Korean convenience stores are clean, well stocked and open 24 hours. With names like Mini-Stop, Family Mart, Buy the Way, LG25 and 7-Eleven, they can be found on every street corner from one end of the country to the other. They're great places to pick up snacks, soft drinks and on-the-run meals, as well as everyday items. Many have stand-up counters or a table and chairs. Staples include instant noodles (boiling water is available), *gimbap*, *samgak gimbap*, sandwiches, soft drinks, ice cream, biscuits and chocolate, all at reasonable prices, although fruit can be expensive. They even sell beer, wine and *soju*.

Budget Diners

Diners serve a wide variety of budget meals that cost from W2000 to W4000, including *mandu*, *gimbap*, *bibimbap*, *donkasseu*, fried rice and *naengmyeon* that provide a quick and simple lunch.

Fast-Food Outlets

Global fast-food restaurants like McDonald's, KFC and Subway offer the usual fare with some Koreanised additions such as *bulgogi* burger. Check out the local competitor Lotteria if you want to try a squid burger. Pizza Hut, TGIF and steakhouses all serve Western food. Koreans have taken to pizza in a big way and even the smallest towns have pizza restaurants and takeaway shops, although (like the burgers) the food may come with a Korean twist. Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin Robbins both provide dessert options.

WHY METAL BOWLS & CHOPSTICKS?

Given that Korea has one of the world's great ceramic-making traditions and is surrounded by nations which use ceramic bowls and chopsticks made of plastic or wood, many visitors find it surprising that Korea uses stainless-steel bowls, dishes and utensils.

The most common explanation dates back to the Joseon dynasty, when the kings, ever vigilant about security, would insist on using silver chopsticks and bowls because silver would tarnish in the presence of poisons. The custom caught on and was passed down to the common people, although they could only afford baser metals. Metal is also easy to clean and hard to break.

DINING DOS & DON'TS

Dos

- Do take off your shoes in traditional restaurants where everyone sits on floor cushions. You may sit with your legs crossed or to the side. Tip: sit at a table near a wall so you can lean back against it.
- Do pour drinks for others if you notice that their glasses are empty. It's polite to use both hands when pouring or receiving a drink.
- Do ask for *gawi* (scissors) if you are trying to cut something and your spoon won't do it.

Don'ts

- Don't start or finish your meal before your seniors and elders.
- Don't touch food with your fingers, except when handling leaves for wrapping other foods.
- Don't try to eat rice with chopsticks – use a spoon.
- Don't pick up bowls and plates from the table to eat from them.
- Don't leave your chopsticks or spoon sticking up from your rice bowl. This is done only in food 'presented' to deceased ancestors.
- Don't blow your nose at the table.
- Don't tip.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Despite Korea's meat, fish and seafood reputation, there's enough variety of vegetables that vegetarians can usually find something. Plain, boiled rice is served with many meals and most side dishes are vegetables, although some are mixed with meat, fish or seafood. The same goes for *kimchi*, and watch out for stews and soups which are often made with beef or seafood stock. If all else fails, you can order *bibimbap* minus any ingredients you don't eat, or else eat rice with side dishes.

Click onto www.freewebs.com/vegetariankorea for vegetarian views and restaurant reviews.

EATING WITH KIDS

Fill children up with *jajangmyeon* (noodles with a dark brown sauce), *donkkaseu* (cutlets), *juk* (rice porridge), barbecue chicken, sandwiches, bakery items, *hotteok* and ice creams. Food courts have a wide choice of food and often have play areas, and Western fast food joints are usually around as a bribe or last resort.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Typically, you'll order a main course, such as *bulgogi*, and it will come with rice, soup, *kimchi* and other side dishes selected to create balance in terms of saltiness, spiciness, temperature and colour combinations. Don't feel guilty about leaving food as no one is expected to finish all their side dishes.

In traditional restaurants diners sit on thin cushions on the floor (the *ondol* heating system is beneath). Tip: take two or three cushions to be more comfortable. Remove your shoes, putting them on shoe racks if provided.

If the table is not set, there will be an oblong box containing metal chopsticks and long-handled spoons.

Meals are generally informal and eaten communally, so most dishes are placed in the centre, and diners eat a bit from one dish, a bite from another, a little rice, a sip of soup, mixing spicy and bland in whatever way they want. The main point is always to enjoy the food.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Useful Phrases

We'd like nonsmoking/smoking, please.
geumyeon seogeuro/heupyeon seogeuro juseyo 금연석으로/흡연석으로 주세요

Do you have an English menu?
yeong-eoro doen menyu isseoyo? 영어로 된 메뉴 있어요?

Do you have seating with tables and chairs?
teibeul isseoyo? 테이블 있어요?

Is this dish spicy?
i eumsik maewoyo? 이 음식 매워요?

Could you recommend something?
mwo chucheonhae jusillaeyo? 뭐 추천해 주실래요?

Excuse me! (please come here)
yeogiyo! 여기요!

Water, please.
mul juseyo 물 주세요

The bill/check, please.
gyesanseo juseyo 계산서 주세요

Bon apetit.
masitge deuseyo 맛있게 드세요

It was delicious.
masisseosseoyo 맛있었어요

I don't eat meat.
jeon gogireul anmeogeoyo 전 고기를 안 먹어요

I can't eat dairy products.
jeon yujepumeul anmeogeoyo 전 유제품을 안 먹어요

Do you have any vegetarian dishes?
gogi andeureogan eumsik isseoyo? 고기 안 들어간 음식 있어요?

Does it contain eggs?
gyerani deureogayo? 계란이 들어가요?

I'm allergic to (peanuts).
jeon (ttangkong)e allereugiga isseoyo 전 (땅콩)에 알레르기가 있어요

Han's Culinary Academy in Seoul (p118) has English-speaking staff eager to teach foreigners the secrets of Korean cooking.

Menu Decoder

FOOD

Chinese Dishes

bokkeumbap	볶음밥	fried rice
jajangmyeon	자장면	noodles in black-bean sauce
tangsuyuk	탕수육	sweet and sour pork

Fish & Seafood

chobap	초밥	raw fish on rice
garibi	가리비	scallops
gwang-eohoe	광어회	raw halibut
hoedeopbap	회덮밥	vegetables, rice and raw fish
hung-eo	홍어	ray, usually served raw
jang-eogui	장어구이	grilled eel
jeonbok-juk	전복죽	rice porridge with abalone
kijogae	키조개	razor clam
kkotge-jjim	꽃게찜	steamed blue crab
modeumhoe	모듬회	mixed raw fish platter
nakji	낙지	octopus
odeng	오뎅	processed seafood cakes in broth
ojing-eo	오징어	squid
ojing-eo sundae	오징어순대	stuffed squid

Can't find it in the Menu Decoder? View www.zkorean.com for a simple, user-friendly Korean–English dictionary.

saengseon-gui	생선구이	grilled fish
saeugui	새우구이	grilled prawns
samchigui	삼치구이	grilled mackerel
ureok	우럭	raw fish

Gimbap 김밥

chamchi gimbap	참치김밥	tuna *gimbap*
modeum gimbap	모듬김밥	assorted *gimbap*
samgak gimbap	삼각김밤	triangular *gimbap*

Kimchi 김치

baechu kimchi	배추김치	cabbage *kimchi;* the spicy classic version
kkakdugi	깍두기	cubed radish *kimchi*
mul kimchi	물김치	cold *kimchi* soup
oisobagi	오이소박이	stuffed cucumber *kimchi*

MEAT DISHES

bossam	보쌈	steamed pork with *kimchi*, cabbage and lettuce wrap
bulgogi	불고기	barbecued beef slices and lettuce wrap
dakgalbi	닭갈비	spicy chicken pieces grilled with vegetables and rice cakes
dakkochi	닭꼬치	spicy grilled chicken on skewers
dwaeji galbi	돼지갈비	barbecued pork ribs
galbi	갈비	beef ribs
jjimdak	찜닭	spicy chicken pieces with noodles
jokbal	족발	steamed pork hocks
kkwong	꿩	pheasant
metdwaejigogi	멧돼지고기	wild pig
neobiani/tteokgalbi	너비아니/떡갈비	large minced meat patty
ogolgye	오골계	black chicken
samgyeopsal	삼겹살	barbecued bacon-type pork
tongdakgui	통닭구이	roasted chicken
yukhoe	육회	seasoned raw beef

Noodles

bibim naengmyeon	비빔냉면	cold buckwheat noodles with vegetables, meat and sauce
bibimguksu	비빔국수	noodles with vegetables, meat and sauce
japchae	잡채	stir-fried noodles and vegetables
kalguksu	칼국수	thick handmade noodles in broth
kongguksu	콩국수	noodles in cold soy milk soup
makguksu	막국수	buckwheat noodles with vegetables
naengmyeon	물냉면	buckwheat noodles in cold broth
ramyeon	라면	instant noodle soup
udong	우동	thick white noodle broth

Rice Dishes

bap	밥	boiled rice
bibimbap	비빔밥	rice topped with egg, meat, vegetables and sauce
boribap	보리밥	boiled rice with steamed barley
daetongbap	대통밥	rice cooked in bamboo stem
dolsot bibimbap	돌솥비빔밥	*bibimbap* in stone hotpot
dolsotbap	돌솥밥	hotpot rice
dolssambap	돌쌈밥	hotpot rice and lettuce wraps

gonggibap	공기밥	steamed rice
gulbap	굴밥	oyster rice
honghapbap	홍합밥	mussel rice
kimchi bokkeumbap	김치볶음밥	fried *kimchi* rice
ojing·eo deopbap	오징어덮밥	squid rice
pyogo deopbap	표고덮밥	mushroom rice
sanchae bibimbap	산채비빔밥	*bibimbap* made with mountain vegetables
sinseollo	신선로	meat, fish and vegetables cooked in broth
ssambap	쌈밥	assorted ingredients with rice and wraps

Snacks

beondegi	번데기	boiled silkworm larvae
delimanjoo	데리만주	custard-filled minicakes
mettugi	메뚜기	fried grasshoppers
hotteok	호떡	pitta bread with sweet filling
jjinppang	찐빵	giant steamed bun with sweet-bean paste
norang goguma	노랑고구마	sweet potato strips
nurungji	누룽지	crunchy burnt-rice globe
odeng	오뎅	processed seafood
tteok	떡	rice cake
tteokbokki	떡볶이	pressed rice cakes and vegetables in a spicy sauce

Soups

bosintang	보신탕	dog-meat soup
chueotang	추어탕	minced loach fish soup
doganitang	도가니탕	ox-leg soup
galbitang	갈비탕	beef-rib soup
gamjatang	감자탕	meaty bones and potato soup
haejangguk	해장국	bean-sprout soup
haemultang	해물탕	spicy assorted seafood soup
hanbang oribaeksuk	한방 오리백숙	duck in medicinal soup
heugyeomsotang	흑염소탕	goat soup
kkorigomtang	꼬리곰탕	ox tail soup
mae·untang	매운탕	spicy fish soup
manduguk	만두국	soup with meat-filled dumplings
oritang	오리탕	duck soup
ppyeohaejangguk	뼈해장국	meaty bones hotpot
samgyetang	삼계탕	ginseng chicken soup
seolleongtang	설렁탕	beef and rice soup
tokkitang	토끼탕	spicy rabbit soup

Stews

budae jjigae	부대찌개	ham-and-scraps stew
doenjang jjigae	된장찌개	soybean paste stew
dubu jjigae	두부찌개	tofu stew
nakji jeon-gol	낙지전골	octopus hotpot
sundubu jjigae	순두부찌개	spicy uncurdled tofu stew
dakjjim	닭찜	chicken stew
galbi jjim	갈비찜	barbecued beef ribs stew
gopchang jeon-gol	곱창전골	tripe hotpot
kimchi jjigae	김치찌개	*kimchi* stew

Other

bokbunja	복분자	wild berry
bindaetteok	빈대떡	mung-bean pancake

dongchimi	동치미	pickled radish
donkkaseu	돈까스	pork cutlet with rice and salad
dotorimuk	도토리묵	acorn jelly
gujeolpan	구절판	eight snacks and wraps
hanjeongsik	한정식	Korean-style banquet
jeongsik	정식	meal with lots of side dishes
juk	죽	rice porridge
kongnamul gukbap	콩나물국밥	spicy rice bean sprout porridge
mandu	만두	filled dumplings
omeuraiseu	오므라이스	omelette with rice
pajeon	파전	green-onion pancake
sangcharim	산차림	banquet of meat, seafood and vegetables
shabu shabu	샤브샤브	DIY beef and vegetable casserole
sigol bapsang	시골밥상	countryside-style meal
siksa	식사	budget-priced banquet
sujebi	수제비	dough flakes in shellfish broth
sundae	순대	noodle and vegetable sausage
sundubu	순두부	uncurdled tofu
twigim	튀김	seafood and vegetables fried in batter
wangmandu	왕만두	large steamed dumplings

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic

cha	차	tea
daechucha	대추차	red-date tea
hongcha	홍차	black tea
juseu	주스	juice
keopi	커피	coffee
mukapein keopi	무카페인 커피	decaffeinated coffee
mul	물	water
nokcha	녹차	green tea
omijacha	오미자차	berry tea
saenggang cha	생강차	ginger tea
saengsu	생수	mineral spring water
seoltang neo-eoseo/ppaego	설탕 넣어서/빼고	with/without sugar
sikhye	식혜	rice punch
ssanghwacha	쌍화차	herb tonic tea
sujeonggwa	수정과	cinnamon/ginger punch
sungnyung	숭늉	burnt-rice tea
uyu	우유	milk
uyu neo-eoseo/ppaego	우유 넣어서/빼고	with/without milk
yujacha	유자차	citron tea

Alcoholic

dongdongju/makgeolli	동동주/막걸리	fermented rice wine
insamju	인삼주	ginseng liqueur
maekju	맥주	beer
sansachun	산사춘	rice wine
soju	소주	vodka-like drink

Korea Outdoors

Mountainous Korea is an outdoors destination that is especially attractive to hikers, with well-signed and well-maintained footpaths around the forest-covered slopes of the national and provincial parks that are served by regular bus services. Every weekend the parks fill up with Koreans of all ages who go there to enjoy nature, burn off calories and visit Buddhist temples. Fresh spring water is available at the temples and along most of the hikes, and country-style restaurants and food stalls cluster around the park entrances.

If two wheels rather than two feet is your style, cycling opportunities abound in tourist areas. Hiring a bicycle is often the best way to tour small offshore islands, and riverside cycleways in Seoul, Daejeon, Jeonju and other cities are also highly recommended. Mountain biking is yet to catch on, but you can link up with expat mountain-bike-club members in Seoul.

In July and August the nation's beaches are officially open and holiday-makers flock to the coasts to relax, eat raw fish and have fun. Korea is not known as a scuba-diving location, yet Seogwipo on Jejudo is outstanding, and all along the eastern and southern coasts are virtually virgin sites just waiting to be explored. Adrenaline junkies can go head to head with sharp-toothed sharks in Busan Aquarium.

Although mainly indoor, Korea's hot-spring spas and saunas are a health-and-beauty bargain that are popular 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can simmer in ginseng, green-tea and mud baths as well as bake in mugwort and jade saunas.

Korea is 70% hills and mountains and in winter the snowy slopes tempt skiers and snowboarders outdoors to Korea's fast-improving ski resorts. Ice skating outside Seoul City Hall is another great winter activity. Contact United Service Organizations (p159) in Seoul for ski package trips in winter as well as daylong water-rafting trips in summer (US$45).

The Royal Asiatic Society of Korea (www.raskb.com) organises excellent and inexpensive weekend tours to all parts of Korea, which nonmembers are welcome to attend.

CYCLING & MOUNTAIN-BIKING

Almost every city with a waterfront and hordes of tourists has a stand where bikes can be hired. Most are geared towards leisure riders with couples and families in mind, so expect well-marked, paved, flat trails designed for pleasure rather than intense cross-country exhilaration. To hire a bike, some form of ID is usually required; a cycle helmet or lock is almost never included. If you're looking for off-road mountain-bike trails in Seoul, there are a couple of useful websites with decent maps. Try www.mtbk-adventure.com or www.angelfire.com/ga/achamtb.

People who value full mobility in their limbs rarely venture onto Seoul's streets with a bike between their legs, but the bicycle trails along the **Han River** (p114; single/tandem bicycles per hr W3000/6000) are ideal for a comfortable, car-free family outing. Watch out for speeding in-line skaters. Bikes can be hired on Yeouido, which is a good starting point for a 90-minute, 7km sprint to the World Cup Stadium or a more ambitious 38km ride to Olympic Park. The paved paths are dotted with parks, sports fields, gardens and the occasional snack bar. Further east and north of the river, bikes of similar quality and price can be hired at Ttukseom Resort.

View www.adventurekorea.com for hiking adventures and activity tours from Seoul organised by enterprising Seok-jin.

Travellers in good shape can circumvent **Jeju Island** (p279; per day W5000-8000). The 200km pedal trek around the oval island takes about three to five days depending on the condition of the road and your legs. Hwy 12 runs around the entire island and has bicycle lanes on either side. Shore roads also have bike lanes but it's a less developed system and not always bike-friendly. The inland

scenery is greener and the roads are less busy but they lack bicycle lanes. Bikes can be hired near Jeju-si bus terminal, Yongduam Rock or the seafront.

Off Jeju Island's eastern coast, **Udo** (p283; per 2hr W5000) or Cow Island offer a comparatively short but testing 17km island spin. Sights include a lighthouse perched on top of a 132m cliff, lush green fields, pretty fishing villages, and with luck, a glimpse of the famous Jeju women ocean divers. Hire your bicycle at the port near the ferry docks. May to October is a good time to ride but July and August can experience heavy rain not to mention the occasional typhoon. Other times of the year can be windy.

The Korea Plant Conservation Society (2003) will encourage you to stop and ID the flowers with photos of 200 Korean flowers.

Located in the centre of the Gogunsan Archipelago, 50km off the coast of North Jeolla province, **Seonyudo** (p305; per hr W3000) is a pretty, undeveloped island, ideal for travellers looking for a day-trip escape to a picture-postcard setting. Pedal around laid-back fishing villages, cross bridges over to neighbouring islands or follow the paved trail alongside a 2km white sandy beach and aqua ocean. Bring a picnic or enjoy a fresh seafood meal by the ocean.

Pretty and relaxing **Chuncheon** (p163; per day W5000), the antithesis of most busy Korean cities, was the setting for the popular tearjerker TV drama *Winter Sonata*. During the day, ferry your bicycle over to Jungdo for a short island

HIKING

Taekwondo might be the country's national sport, but hiking surely ranks as the number-one leisure activity. Over 1700 trails stream across the country with everything from easy half-day walks to strenuous mountain-ridge treks. Maybe it's the intoxicatingly fresh air, or the occasional *soju* pick-me-up, but Korea's hiking trails are frequented by some of the country's most hospitable people.

Most of the exhilarating mountain trails, like those on Jirisan and Seoraksan, are located in the country's outstanding national parks. Basic shelters are available but expect a full house during holidays, summer months and autumn weekends. If you're planning a major overnight mountain trek, shelter reservations two weeks in advance are recommended. About one-quarter of the trails may be closed at any one time to allow the mountain to regenerate itself. Visit the National Park Authority's website (www.knps.or.kr) for contact numbers, trail-closure information and online reservations.

Hallasan

Hiking up this ancient volcano is a highlight of any Jejudo trip. The best plan is to take the **Eorimok trail** for outstanding views of dwarf fir trees, hillsides of springtime azalea and the occasional midget deer. After 2¼ hours you should reach **Witseoreum shelter** (1700m), which has no accommodation but sells pot noodles. Hallasan's peak and the crater lake are up the trail but it's been closed for a lengthy period to allow for plant regeneration. On the way down, try the **Yeongsil trail** for a spectacular two-hour hike to the bus stop. The climb up is only 700m and many young children reach the top, but it is tiring and you should prepare for bad weather, which can arrive faster than a KTX train.

Nearest town: Seogwipo or Jeju-si (p292)
Entrance: adult/youth/child W1600/600/300
Information: ✆ 064 713 9950

Yeonhwado

Located off the picturesque Tong·yeong coast in Gyeongsangnam-do, this undeveloped, and largely undiscovered, island is a splendid escape for travellers looking for a leisurely three-hour hike. From the ferry terminal, walk left and follow the cement path uphill past a temple. On the mountain ridge, a dirt trail cuts left with views of a cascading rock formation that dribbles into the ocean; locals call it **Yong Meori**, or Dragon's Head. At just 215m, the ridge doesn't offer a challenging hike but the ocean vistas are breathtaking. The early-morning ferry from Tong·yeong provides a spectacular sunrise view and puts you ahead of the groups that usually hit the island around lunchtime.

Nearest town: Tong·yeong (p242)
One-way ferry ticket: W7700
Information: http://tongyeong.go.kr/eng/

Mudeungsan Provincial Park

One of the country's higher peaks, **Cheonwangbong** (1187m), is in this popular park that is easy to reach from Gwangju and fills up with cheery hikers every weekend. A myriad of trails leads up to the peak, some of which can be challenging. On the way up, you pass an art gallery and the Choonsul green-tea plantation. If the steep hike to the tea bushes looks uninviting, join the masses marching over to **Tokkideung** (460m), a popular picnic spot. Odd rock formations and colourful fields of azalea, magnolia and maple trees give the mountainside a fresh look each season. There's no shortage of mountain grub; the hills are alive with the sound of ravenous eaters in shacks selling meat and vegetable meals.

Nearest town: Gwangju (p251)
Admission: free
Information: http://eng.gjcity.net/main.jsp

Responsible Hiking

- Pay any fees required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about route conditions.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment. Do not hike closed trails.
- Walk only on trails within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions can change quickly and seasonal changes alter trails. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.

ride amid horse-drawn carriages, while looking out for waterbirds nesting in the reeds. In the late afternoon, cruise on two wheels along the shores of Uiam Lake for a pedal-stopping sunset view. Bikes can be hired outside the lakeside **tourist information centre** (bikes per hr/day W3000/5000; h 9am-7pm).

DIVING

Korea has a surprisingly active scuba-diving scene and the best place to start is on the web:

Aquatic Frontier (www.aquaticfrontier.com) Runs dive certificate courses for $300.
Deep Blue Quest (www.deepbluequest.com) An English-speaking scuba-diving club in Seoul that organises PADI certificate courses and two dives every month for all skill levels.
Scuba in Korea (www.scubainkorea.com) A top site with the low down on courses, diving clubs and dive sites in Korea, including diving with sharks in Busan Aquarium.
Suwon Scuba (www.suwon-scuba.com) The Suwon scuba club runs courses and dive trips mainly off Sokcho or in lakes.

Korea's top dive site is just off Seogwipo on Jejudo's southern coast, which has good visibility, coral as colourful as in the tropics, kelp forests inhabited by

schools of fish, and dolphins that swim by now and again. The subterranean ecology around Jejudo (like the land where pineapples and oranges grow alongside strawberries) is a unique mixture of the tropical and temperate.

The best diving operation in Seogwipo is **Big Blue** (p287; % 064-733 1733; www.bigblue33.co.kr; 2 dives W105,000), run by Ralph Deutsch, an experienced diving enthusiast who speaks English and German.

For another unforgettable underwater experience, go scuba diving with the sharks, turtles, rays and giant groupers in **Busan Aquarium** (% 740 1700; www.scubainkorea.com; certified/noncertified divers W65,000/W85,000) on Hae·undae Beach. Even nondivers can do it after a two-hour training session, and there's an experienced English-speaking guide-instructor. The 30-minute dives take place on Saturday and Sunday. Don't forget an underwater camera as the lemon, sand tiger, nurse and reef sharks are big and certainly look like man-eaters. They haven't attacked anybody yet, but keep your arms by your side!

Many Korean spas and saunas cost less than US$10 and even luxury ones are usually less than US$20.

Besides Seogwipo on Jejudo; Hongdo off the south coast; Pohang, Ulleungdo and Dragon Head off Sokcho; and a wreck dive off Gangneung, all underwater sites on the east coast are worth exploring. Even the west coast has some dive operators, for instance at Daecheon beach, but visibility can be poor. Much of the country's coastal waters are unexplored, so who knows what you might discover.

HOT-SPRING SPAS

Koreans love hot food, hot baths and hot saunas – the hotter the better. Korea has many *oncheon* (hot-spring spas) where the therapeutic mineral-laden water that wells up from the depths of the earth is piped into communal baths. Equally popular are all kinds of saunas. Some saunas are fairly spartan but modern, luxury ones called *jjimjilbang* have a gym, hairdresser, café, TV, internet access and more. In Korean spas you can bathe like Cleopatra in just about anything: hot and cold mineral water, green tea, ginseng, mud, mugwort, coffee, seawater and pine needles. Prices vary with the luxuriousness of the facilities and most are open 24 hours in this nation of insomniacs and workaholics who pride themselves on not wasting much time sleeping.

Spa etiquette is simple enough. Undress completely (no swimwear or underwear!) in the locker room (Adams and Eves have separate bathing facilities) and then take a shower, as you must clean yourself thoroughly before getting into any communal bath. Soap and shampoo is supplied, as well as toothbrushes and toothpaste. A thorough cleansing is part of the bath experience. The ladies section has hairdryers, foot massagers and a line of lotions and perfumes. You can often have your hair cut or shoes shined as well.

The water in the big public baths varies from hot to extremely hot, but there may also be a cold bath, including a 'waterfall' shower. Relaxing in a hot bath is good therapy as the heat soaks into weary bodies, soothing tired muscles and minds.

Most spas also have sauna rooms, usually made of wood or stone, but all are as hot as a pizza oven. If you want to suffer more, you can be pummelled by a masseur, which costs extra. Many bathers take a nap lying down on the dormitory floor with a block of wood for a pillow. Stay all day, or all night, if you want to; nobody will hassle you to leave.

Slip into the gown supplied to visit the shared facilities outside the bathing area.

A spartan spa in the student area of Hongik is **Dongbang Sauna** (p115; admission W4000), but it has everything and is a good place to take the plunge into the Korean public-bath experience for the first time.

In Icheon, an hour south of Seoul, is the wonderful and ultramodern **Spa Plus** (p147; admission W10,000-W12,000) where you can play all day. Dip into (but don't be tempted to sip) the rice-wine bath, and try pine, fruit and herbal baths along with alternating hot and cold baths and a waterfall bath.

In the west of Daejeon city is the famous **Yousung Spa** (p309; admission W4500). Depending on the day, ladies can immerse themselves in exotic baths containing pine needles, mugwort and coffee. Coffee? Yes, coffee, which like the other baths provides aromatherapy in a bath format. Both the women's and means sections have a ginseng and green-tea bath plus hot and cold saunas.

In Geumsan, south of Daejeon, is **Geumsan Wellbeing Sauna** (p311; admission W5000). Relax in the ginseng bath and then nip smartly in and out (and in and out) of the hot and ice-cold sauna, like the Finns do, to really get your senses tingling. Then email your friends in the PC *bang* (internet room), let off some vocal energy in the *noraebang* (karaoke room; W500 a song), raise a sweat in the minigym and get thumped by an unsmiling masseur (W10,000) before finally sleeping it all off in the napping room.

A super new West Coast facility on Daecheon beach is **Mud House** (p320; admission W3000) that offers skin treatments using its special mud, as well as a sauna and an aroma spa. It's packed with merrymakers during the famous-among-expat-English-teachers, anything-goes mud festival.

Near Uljin in Gyeongsangbuk-do is **Deokgu Hot Springs Hotel** (p224; admission W6000) where the spring water is said to cure skin and digestive problems. If the water is too hot, start by dangling your feet in the water, followed by the lower half of your body. Even Koreans can find complete submersion too hot. Mixed bathing is allowed in the outdoor swimsuit section.

The country's largest spa is the domed **Hurshimchung** (p231; admission W7900), where you can spend all day and even get lost.

Yulpo Haesu Nokchatang (p262; admission W5000), on Yulpo beach on the south coast, offers you the chance to gently simmer yourself like a large *mandu* (dumpling) in green tea or hot seawater.

WINTER SPORTS

Korea offers winter-lovers so many different options for outdoor sports that the question isn't what to do, but what to do first. You will find enjoyable skiing in Seoul's many nearby resorts – the resorts in Gang·won province are modern, well maintained and beautiful. The ski season runs from December to February.

Alps Ski Resort (p174) gets the heaviest powder of the province and is set in a spectacular area right near the North Korean border. It is smaller than YongPyong, but well worth visiting for its location, views, ambience and powder. Further south, **YongPyong Ski Resort** (p179) boasts 18 sweet slopes that provide skiers with everything from bunny options to teeth-rattling, heart-racing thrills, and there are also courses for cross-country lovers as well. So this should be on the top of any ski bum's wish list. Olympic hopes or no, YongPyong Resort offers sublime skiing and snowboarding, with the usual comforts of ski-resort towns.

YongPyong Ski Resort in Gang·won-do is a leading contender to host the 2014 Winter Olympics, having missed out in 2010 by just three votes.

Getting there, or to any of the resorts, is usually only a bus ride away. All the resorts offer day packages (around W80,000) and overnight packages: prices vary with the accommodation rates, which vary from W50,000 or under for *minbak* (a room in a private home) and youth hostels, to over W250,000 for flash condos and stylish hotels). Packages can be bought in travel agents and include bus transport to and from Seoul as well as lift tickets, ski and clothing rental, and, if required, lessons and accommodation. Day, evening and night skiing is the norm. It's important to avoid the overcrowded weekends, especially at resorts near Seoul, as Koreans ski like they drive.

Travellers heading further south can still enjoy winter sports – at least for a while. In Jeollabuk-do, look for **Muju Ski Resort** (p301) in picturesque

Deogyusan National Park, which also has a beautiful and easy (three hours return) riverside hike to a temple, Baengnyeonsa. The ski resort is relatively new (it opened in 1990) and has become one of the country's top winter playgrounds – its 26 slopes have something for everyone, from bunny beginner to mogul-hardened monster. In 1997 it hosted the Universiade Winter Games and its après-ski facilities are the best. The resort has snow-making machines and Jeonju, Jeollabuk-do's capital, has an indoor skating rink.

Less than 2km from the spa hotels of Suanbo Hot Springs in Chungcheongbuk-do, **Sajo Ski Resort** (p338) is modest, but has seven slopes and three lifts, and the hot springs make for an oh-so-relaxing return after you're done conquering the slopes.

'After a decent snowfall, why not join the excited family groups who head for the nearest slope and sled down it on homemade sleds'

There are other winter activities besides what's on the slopes. Hiking trails in the national parks include **Bukhansan** (p141), just a short subway ride from downtown Seoul. The country's 20 national parks are as beautiful in winter as they are in summer, and snow on temple roofs provides a wonderful photo opportunity. Keep in mind though that appropriate clothes and exposure precautions are a must as temperatures can reach Siberian levels and whiteout blizzards are possible up in the mountains.

Chuncheon (p163) has lakes, bike paths and ice skating, and ice-climbers may want to try their skills in nearby **Gangchon** (p166), site of a frozen waterfall, Gugok pokpo. This 50m waterfall is spectacular any time of year, but provides ice-climbers with challenging excitement when it freezes between December and February. Ask for information about *bingbyeok deungban* (ice climbing).

Indoor **ice skating** is available all year at **Lotte World** (p113) and Koreans are ace short-track skaters. Expat workers in Seoul can join an **ice hockey** team, which is organised by **Gecko's** (p128). In winter Seoul joins in the fun as swimming pools along the Han River become ice-skating rinks, although *the* place for a magical skate is on the rink in the heart of downtown Seoul outside **City Hall** (Map pp88–9). Skates can be hired and prices are a giveaway.

After a decent snowfall, why not join the excited family groups who head for the nearest slope and sled down it on homemade sleds, which vary from fancy numbers to the basic tea tray.

Keep a lookout for **winter festivals** (p388), where barbecue snacks and *soju* are sold from igloos, ice sculptors carve wondrous (temporary) designs and everyone cuts holes in the frozen lakes to go fishing for dinner.

However cold the temperature outside, sleep on a traditional *yo* floor mattress and you'll be snug as a bug in a rug with the *ondol* (underfloor heating system) keeping even your toes as warm as toast.