

# Introducing Seoul

**Nothing is permanent in this fashion-filled, helter-skelter city that completely rebuilds itself every decade and vibrates with energy night and day. Every evening a tsunami of Seoulites sweeps into entertainment districts, where smoky barbecue restaurants, goblin-sized teashops, plush mugwort saunas, DVD mini-cinemas and more are stacked up 10-storeys high along narrow alleys. Seoul spreads a virtually unknown culture and cuisine at your feet.**

Yes, the future has already arrived, but the past has not been completely uprooted – Seoul's mighty fortress wall and gates still stand, as do World Heritage palaces, royal shrines and tombs. A neighbourhood of *hanok* (traditional Korean one-storey wooden houses with tiled roofs), built by *yangban* (aristocrats), has miraculously survived the Korean War and the rush to bulldoze and modernise. Traditional cultural performances, feisty festivals, folk villages and folk museums allow visitors to peep into Seoul's feudal past when Confucian scholar noblemen in *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing) wore black horse-hair hats and lorded it over their wives, concubines, peasants and slaves.

Some hotels still offer rooms where you can sleep on a padded quilt on an *ondol* (underfloor-heated) floor in a room furnished in *yangban* style. In traditional restaurants furnished like folk museums everybody sits on floor cushions, feasting on a table-top barbecue of beef, pork or chicken along with rice, seasoned soups and a multitude of piquant sauces and vegetable side dishes.



## LOWDOWN

**Population** 10.7 million  
**Time zone** GMT plus nine hours  
**Budget en suite room** ₩35,000  
**Three-star room** ₩90,000 upwards  
**Sauna sleepover** ₩5000  
**Subway ticket** ₩900  
**DVD room ticket** ₩8000  
**Public museum admission** up to ₩3000  
**Cup of coffee** ₩500-₩5000  
**Cup of beondegi (silkworm larvae)** ₩1500  
**Packet of rice cakes** ₩3000

The wide-ranging and healthy Korean cuisine is another of the city's attractions. Discover the delights of ginseng chicken, meat-and-lettuce wraps, spicy tofu soup, *hotteok* (sweet pita bread) and *omijacha* (berry) tea. Restaurants in every price range also offer Japanese, Western, Chinese and fusion food as well as the chance to sample special meals, such as royal court cuisine, which are hard to find outside Seoul.

The weather is at its best in spring, which is also festival time – Buddha's birthday celebrations and picnics under the cherry blossom make this a popular season to visit, but autumn with its transcendent tree tints, blue skies and music concerts is also highly recommended. Even the freezing winters are tempered by the *ondol*, while the hot and humid summers are made bearable by air-conditioning. Seoul hosts an endless

stream of small festivals, so whenever you visit you can expect a special cultural event or two to be taking place.

Splashes of nature are beginning to appear out of the blue: Cheonggye stream, which used to be covered by a road, has been uncovered and reborn, and an instant woodland, Ttukseom Seoul Forest, has been planted on what used to be a racetrack and sports fields.

Thousands of expats live and work in Seoul – most enjoy their stay and a few never leave. Their main struggle is usually with the language as English is not widely spoken or understood. Seoul has its rough edges: traffic congestion, ugly high-rises, and not all the characteristics that have led to the city's astonishing economic success are endearing. But as with working abroad anywhere, a positive attitude, adaptability and understanding are the keys to an enjoyable long-term stay.

Recommended excursions include touring the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is a fascinating but stark reminder of the dangerous division of the country; walking around the rebuilt walls of Suwon's World Heritage fortress; and boarding a ferry to the beaches and seafood restaurants on unspoilt islands in the West Sea.

No other Korean city approaches the size and importance of rush-rush Seoul with its nearly 11 million residents and another eight million who live within commuting distance. It is the dynamic political, financial, educational and cultural hub of the world's 11th largest economy. Seoul is a 600-year-old capital, a complex, rarely explored Asian city that is a fascinating cultural *bibimbap* of rude energy, Confucian rules and democratic values, where Buddhists and shamanists rub shoulders with Christians and atheists.

## ESSENTIAL SEOUL

- Gyeongbokgung (p49-50)
- National Museum of Korea (p62) and Seodaemun Prison (p62)
- Namdaemun market (p123) and Dongdaemun market (p122)
- War Memorial & Museum (p63)
- Nightlife in Hongik (p105) and Itaewon (p104)

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## SEOUL TODAY

Call it a geographic metaphor for Korean can-do, an El Dorado of some 'Korean Dream' of a better tomorrow. It's also, however, an unrivalled rat race, but one with style, grace and efficiency.

Economy, government, culture, education, health care, whatever – in South Korea it *all* starts here. About 10.7 million people live in Seoul proper, but the figure increases to 21 million-plus if you include its five satellite suburbs. Twenty-five per cent of Korea's population live in Seoul city and 47% live in Greater Seoul, the largest chunk of a nation's population in one city in the world. It is, indeed, the 'soul' of South Korea.

Each generation of Seoul's hardy citizens – many of them sucked in as youngsters from around the country – has contributed to its Herculean post-Korean War rebuilding project: from poverty amidst rubble to the centre of the world's 11th-largest economy (by GDP in 2004). So apt is the 'hurry-up culture' moniker you often hear that in 2005 South Korea officially chucked its longstanding tourism pitch of 'Land of Morning Calm' to tell it like it is: 'Dynamic Korea'. The efficient bustle of Seoul was a driving force behind this.

Yet what pains have come with the miracle. Sclerotic traffic patterns (don't even mention parking). Greenspace – what greenspace? A planned relocation of the capital. A sluggish but accelerating recovery from the 1997 economic crisis. Unnerving spikes in the cost of living, particularly housing.

And most telling: some Seoulites today do at times seem to be showing signs of an existential big-city angst and whether 'I' might not at times trump 'we' – a watershed event in a city that has long prided itself on clutching onto its past while hustling towards tomorrow.

Stroll the streets, though. Really *see* the city, this 'dynamic' street-by-street melding of history and modernity. You'll soon enough appreciate the population's admirable never-say-quit work ethic and unvanquishable faith in their future.

### HOT CONVERSATION TOPICS

- President Roh's woes
- White-hot *hallyu* (Korean Wave) stars overseas
- The coaching merry-go-round of the Red Devils, Korea's national soccer team
- The meteoric rise and nearly immediate fall into disgrace of Hwang Woo-suk, 'father' of the world's first cloned dog Snuppy (true) and cloned human embryo (fabricated)
- Dokdo, the island chain hotly disputed by South Korea and Japan
- Young men dodging mandatory military service
- University entrance exam cheating
- Kim Il Sung's odd sleeping habits (one of many juicy tidbits published in a 2004 bestseller)
- (Notice how North Korea and nukes weren't in that last one?)

## CITY CALENDAR

Show up anytime in Seoul and you'll find a festival or celebratory blowout of some sort. Seoul has traditional cultural and religious festivals, yet you may be surprised by the many fêtes to the ultramodern city.

September's Chuseok (Thanksgiving) and April's Cherry Blossom Festival offer unparalleled weather. During Lunar New Year and Chuseok, transport tickets out of the city must be purchased well in advance (up to two months for some), and roads nationwide are utterly gridlocked. Most businesses, except essential services, shut down for at least the main celebration day.

Home-grown holidays and festivals follow the lunar calendar, while the rest follow the Gregorian (Western) calendar.

For a list of public holidays, see p167.

## JANUARY/FEBRUARY

### LUNAR NEW YEAR

Begins 17 February 2007, 6 February 2008, 26 January 2009. Seoul empties itself and the nation shuts down during this three-day holiday when Koreans return to their home town, visit relatives, honour elders and eat traditional goodies.

## APRIL

### CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

Dates determined by nature, but generally early April, when the cherry blossoms go from first peek out to full colour riot within a week. Eating and drinking under the blossoms in Yeouido's Cherry Blossom Park (Map p210) is the best way to celebrate this festival, though groves of cherry trees are ubiquitous in Seoul.

### WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVAL IN SEOUL

<http://wffis.or.kr>

This festival features over 100 films from 30-plus countries.

## MAY

### BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

For over a millennium, temples have honoured the Buddha's birth by adorning courtyards with resplendently coloured lanterns. The Sunday before Buddha's birthday, Seoul celebrates with a huge evening lantern parade – the largest in South Korea – by 100,000 Buddhists from Tapgol Park (Map pp202–3) to Jogyesa (Map p205). Upcoming dates are 24 May 2007, 12 May 2008, 2 May 2009.

### HI SEOUL FESTIVAL

[www.hiseoulfest.org](http://www.hiseoulfest.org)

First week of May. This festival officially welcomes summer with nonstop citywide events – traditional performances, concerts, food fairs, fashion shows, tea ceremonies, parades, laser light shows, and more – all family-friendly and most free.

## JUNE

### DANO FESTIVAL

On 19 June 2007, 8 June 2008, 27 June 2009. Held according to the lunar calendar, this festival features shamanist rituals and

mask dances in many locales. At Namsang Hanok Village (Map pp206–7), you can ride a *geunettwigi* (a traditional Korean swing), gape at *ssireum* (traditional Korean wrestling) and get a traditional hair treatment with iris-infused water.

## AUGUST

### SEOUL FRINGE FESTIVAL

[www.seoulfringe.net](http://www.seoulfringe.net)

International misunderstood geniuses in all artistic media converge on the trendy Hongdae area to flee the mainstream.

### SEOUL INTERNATIONAL CARTOON & ANIMATION FESTIVAL

[www.sicaf.or.kr](http://www.sicaf.or.kr)

Half a million cartoon geeks pack auditoriums to see why Seoul is such a hot commodity in animation (fans of *The Simpsons* can thank Korean artists).

## SEPTEMBER

### CHUSEOK

Begins 5 October 2006, 24 September 2007, 13 September 2008, 3 October 2009. This is the Harvest Moon Festival, a major three-day holiday when families get together, eat crescent-shaped rice cakes and visit their ancestors' graves to perform *sebae* (a ritual bow).

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**SEOUL NET & FILM FESTIVAL**

www.senef.net

Open any cinematically-themed medium and you'll see how trendy Korean auteurs are. May through September you can peruse the online screenings; offline screenings are held the first week of September.

**OCTOBER****HANGEUL DAY**

This popular event is held every year on 9 October. The festival began in 1926 during the period of Japanese occupation as a means of maintaining Korea's cultural identity. Many of the historic attractions have hands-on demonstrations – it's great fun learning *hangeul* (the Korean phonetic alphabet) under the watchful scrutiny of local school children.

**CULTURE**

Seoul's frenetic pursuit of the future is eminently apparent: high-end fashion; up-to-ears debt for spiffier cars, flats, and up-to-the-nanosecond mobile technology; everywhere, everywhere wired to the outside world; a heads-down beehive pace on the streets.

Yet for all that, beneath the manic modernity Korea remains arguably the most Confucian nation in Asia, and here the past does smack quite hard at times into the present. Older generations and opinion pieces fret and grouse about the slow drift away from social mores. However, like nowhere else in Asia, younger generations of Koreans, particularly in Seoul, still feel (and do consider themselves devoted to) the firm pull of culture and tradition.

**TOP FIVE BOOKS ON KOREA**

- *The Koreans* by Michael Breen (updated 2004), written by a long-time Seoul expat journalist, remains the most accessible examination of Korea and its people in the modern era.
- *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee (1995) proves that an extraordinary novel – here, focusing on the changing family of the Korean-American diaspora – can rival any textbook.
- *Korea's Place in the Sun* by Bruce Cummings (1997) focuses on Korea's history since 1860.
- *Sourcebook of Korean Civilisation*, edited by Peter Lee (1993), is a fascinating book of themed original historical documents with a commentary.
- booksonkorea.org – not a book but over 1700 from the Korea Foundation, a phenomenal resource for titles on every piece of the Korean mosaic.

**GUGAK FESTIVAL**

www.gugakfestival.or.kr

Hip hop *gugak*? You'd be surprised how well traditional Korean music crosses over into a modern context at this annual 10-day Seoul-wide festival. From classy arts centres to basement grunge clubs, it does an amazing job of mixing traditional with trendy.

**NOVEMBER****KIMCHI EXPO**

kimchi.munhwa.com

Early November. It wouldn't be Korea without a *kimchi* fête, would it? Hundreds of purveyors and distributors show their stuff at this festival held at COEX (Map pp214–15); the public also gets an eye- (and mouth-) full of the national dish. Celebrity cook-offs, taste testing and lots of demos make for a super (and super hot) experience.

**IDENTITY**

The country's harmony and uniformity is often overstated, as family, clan, school, company, trade-union, religious, regional and social-class loyalties frequently cut across national unity. (And the world has little to rival the sight of Koreans when they do erupt.)

Seoul in the 21st century is a test tube of nascent Korean footloose-and-fancy-free cosmopolitanism. Seemingly every week a Seoul university or think-tank has a seminar on Korea's consistent erosion of trust in institutions, the increase in materialism, growing egalitarianism towards women, and ever more individualism. Sure, Seoul, more than other regions of Korea, is in flux.

That said, don't assume that that blond Seoulite you see has also bleached his or her traditional core values away. Korean culture can appear maddeningly inscrutable, at times contradictory.

**MEET THE NEW BOSS(ES)**

The neologism 386 Generation is generally applied to those Koreans who were born in the 1960s, participated in student protests in the 1980s, and are now entering positions of economic and political power. Having grown up essentially removed from the Korean War but during the rule of South Korea's dictatorial, development-minded governments, many still consider themselves to shoulder the responsibility of righting wrongs in the country's past and present and many are rising to positions of power in government and industry. Some see nothing wrong with those who refuse to forsake idealism for the status quo (read, money); others berate them for having been knowledgeable hooligans – and borderline traitors – in the 1980s, and essentially hypocritical (preaching with one side of the mouth while being consumed by the monster 'machine' they once fought).

The 'P' generation, also coined by political scientists only very recently, is the up-and-coming wave of power; the 'P' stands for: (potential) power, passion, and – most important – participation, the latter of the Internet kind. Nowhere on the cyber planet is grass-roots activism as alive as with Korean youth. Organising and lobbying has never been so quick and effective in Korea – as exemplified by the social explosions following a South Korean speed skater's disqualification in the 2002 Olympics, the death of two Korean schoolgirls hit by a US military vehicle – even the presidential election. After president Roh Moo-hyun's election in 2002, the UK's *Guardian* newspaper dubbed him the world's first 'online president' and not necessarily for his cyber-skills!

**Social Hierarchy**

Korean relationships are complicated by a social hierarchy. Neo-Confucian ideals dictate that fathers, husbands, teachers, bosses and governments should be authoritarian rather than democratic, and this is changing, but only – grouse many youth – glacially. At the heart of this doctrine are the so-called Five Relationships, which prescribe behaviour between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, old and young, and between friends.

All relationships require a placement in some sort of hierarchy, which ultimately dictates etiquette. The middle-aged male office worker jumping the queue at a store does not even register your presence because you have not been introduced and he has nowhere to place you on the scale of relationships. An introduction and an exchange of business cards would immediately place you into a category that would demand certain behaviour from him.

This notion of social status is one aspect of Korean culture that many foreigners find thorny. For short-term tourists, this is seldom a problem; since courtesy is highly valued and most Koreans are anxious to make a good impression, visitors are accorded considerable kindness and respect (and help). You should naturally return the favour – be polite and smile even when bargaining over prices in the markets. (Although even this depends on which country you are from – people from rich countries have a higher position in the social hierarchy than those from poorer countries.)

**Han**

Ask Korean friends to explain *han* (or its equally untranslatable cousins, *gibun* and *nunchi*) and expect widened eyes, a polite smile, and not much more than rising intonation indicating befuddlement. Even Korean texts spend pages hemming and hawing over this.

What is it? Carefully put, it's a deeply sublimated, at times achingly frustrating, spiritual-psychological stew of equal parts rancour and helplessness, with some lamentation thrown in. Textbook definition keywords include 'deprivation', 'discrimination', 'grief', 'grudge', 'heartburning' and 'deploring'.

The roots of *han* lie in the suppression of self by millennia of Confucian order, simmered in the overarching need to preserve group harmony (*gibun*, or 'feelings/state of mind/mood/face' and including but not limited to the individual; Koreans do this by an innate sense of comprehending subtle meaning called *nunchi*). Not to be understated as a major cause is Korea's grief-filled history of subjugation by outside cultures.

*Han*, this ember of the national soul, has long been the source of an ineffable 'Koreanness' in folk songs and literature. Indeed, Koreans can discuss an 'aesthetic of *han*'.

In the 1970s it became central to cultural analysis in virtually every field, particularly for psychologists, who now fret over how *han* is transforming the society. Lingering

## GAY IN KOREA

In 2001 the country's National Security Act was modified to declare homosexuality 'dangerous to youth'. This could hardly have surprised Hong Seok-chun, a popular children's programme host, who in 2000 came out as gay, only to see his career end amidst intense public criticism (so bad his parents considered suicide). Amid the furor, his words: 'I expect our society will develop into a more generous society that will embrace these minorities with a warm heart.'

He may have been as prescient as he was hopeful. Seoul hosts semiregular gay film festivals and the Korean Queer Cultural Festival ([www.kqcf.org](http://www.kqcf.org)) is an annual event. Two-thirds of Koreans recently polled believe homosexuality is wrong, but nearly the same number said Hong Seok-chun's public shaming was utterly wrong. Two years after his firing, the very network that fired him aired a documentary on his story – the highest-rated show that night.

Chingusai ([www.chingusai.net](http://www.chingusai.net)), Korea's first gay rights organisation, is a good place to begin any investigation.

rage over Japanese colonialism in WWII (and newer anti-Americanism), the Korean War's unspeakable devastation to the family structure, and the country's light-speed modernisation have all led to a fracturing of the delicate internal 'balance.' The result – a looming society-wide rift; Seoul, walking the point into the future, sits at the epicentre.

## Geomancy

Based on Chinese feng shui, geomancy (*pungsu*) is the art of remaining in proper physical harmony with the universe. If a Korean finds that their business is failing, a geomancer might be consulted. The proposed solution? Perhaps move the door to prevent good fortune disappearing through it, or relocate an ancestor's grave to placate a restless, unhappy spirit.

In this day of modern high-rises and housing estates, most Koreans have had to let much of this slide; however, the positioning of a relative's grave is still taken very seriously.

## Fortune-telling

These days most people visit one of the city's street fortune-tellers for a bit of fun, but no doubt some take it seriously. For a *saju* reading of your future, inform the fortune-teller of the hour, day, date and year of your birth (if you know it); another option is *gunghap*, when a couple give their birth details and the fortune-teller pronounces how compatible they are. Expect to pay W10,000 for *saju* and double that for *gunghap*; you'll also need an English-speaking Korean to translate.

## RELIGION

South Korea – even the urbane and sophisticated city of Seoul – seriously dents the myth that modernisation necessitates secularisation, that fashion precludes faith. South Korea has seen numbers of religious affiliation increase steadily since the 1960s; actual participation, except for Christianity, hasn't increased as much.

## Shamanism

Shamanism lacks a body of written scriptures and is technically not an organised religion. Nevertheless, it remains fundamental to Korean culture.

Central to shamanism is the *mudang* (shaman) who nowadays is almost always female. Their role is to serve as the intermediary between the living and the spirit

## A GIFT FOR GIVING Martin Robinson

During my first month of teaching English, I was showered with free meals and drinks, trips, and more. 'It's my treat,' all would say – and they meant it.

Gifts kept appearing on my desk. When a fellow teacher had a birthday, bought a new car, or returned from holiday, they often bought everyone a gift. One teacher had twins and bought everyone dog soup for lunch. When a foreign teacher in a nearby high school got sick, the teachers collected W300,000 for him as well as loading his hospital room with presents.

At Chuseok (Thanksgiving), gift-giving reaches fever pitch and the shops are filled with mountains of gift packages. One foreign teacher had to hire a taxi to transport all his gifts: 10kg each of pears and grapes, 1kg of *kimchi*, six pairs of socks, five tubes of toothpaste, a telephone card and a department store voucher!

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world. Mediating is carried out through a *gut*, a ceremony that includes ecstatic dancing, singing and drumming.

Shamanism is often regarded as superstition today, yet official records show that 40,000 *mudang* are registered in South Korea (the actual figure could be closer to 100,000).

On Inwangsan (p78), a wooded hillside in northwestern Seoul, is a shamanist village where *gut* ceremonies are held.

## Buddhism

Buddhism in Korea belongs to the Mahayana school and, since its arrival in AD 370, it has split into numerous schools. About 90% of Korean Buddhists belong to the Jogye sect, which has its headquarters in Jogyesa (p53) – a large temple located near Insadong. The sect claims to have 8000 monks and 5000 nuns, and is an amalgamation of two Korean schools of Buddhism: the Seon (better known by its Japanese name, Zen) school, which relies on meditation and the contemplation of paradoxes to achieve sudden enlightenment; and the Gyo school, which concentrates on extensive scriptural study.

The small Taego sect distinguishes itself by permitting its monks to marry, a system installed by the Japanese during their occupation of Korea.

Buddhism has coexisted closely with shamanism. Many Buddhist temples have a *samseonggak* (three-spirit hall) on their grounds, which houses shamanist deities. Some Buddhist monks also carry out activities associated with shamanism, for example, fortune-telling.

South Korea's growing concern about the environment and materialism is encouraging a revival of Buddhism. Visits to temples have increased, and more money is flowing into temple reconstruction. Approximately 25% of South Koreans are Buddhists (though not necessarily practicing).

## Confucianism

Confucianism, properly speaking, is a system of ethics rather than a religion. Confucius (552–479 BC) emphasised devotion to parents and family, loyalty to friends, justice, peace, education, reform and humanitarianism. He also urged that respect and deference should

be given to those in positions of authority – a philosophy exploited by Korea’s Joseon ruling elite. Confucius firmly believed that men were superior to women and that a woman’s place was in the home.

These ideas led to the system of civil service examinations (*gwageo*), where one gains position through ability and merit, rather than from noble birth and connections. Confucius preached against corruption, war, torture and excessive taxation. He was the first teacher to open his school to all students solely on the basis of their willingness to learn.

As Confucianism trickled into Korea, it evolved into Neo-Confucianism, which combined the sage’s original ethical and political ideas with the quasi-religious practice of ancestor worship and the idea of the eldest male as spiritual head of the family.

Confucianism was viewed as being enlightened and radical when it first gained popularity, but during its 500 years as the state religion in Korea, it became authoritarian and conservative. It still lives on as a kind of ethical bedrock (at least subconsciously) in the minds of most Koreans, especially the elderly.

Visit the spirit shrines of the Joseon kings and their queens at the splendid Jongmyo (p50). A grand Confucian ceremony honouring them takes place there every year.

## Christianity

Korea’s first exposure to Christianity was in the late 18th century. It came via the Jesuits from the Chinese Imperial court when a Korean aristocrat was baptised in Beijing in 1784. The Catholic faith took hold and spread so quickly that it was perceived as a threat by the Korean government and was vigorously suppressed, creating the country’s first Christian martyrs.

Christianity got a second chance in the 1880s, with the arrival of American Protestant missionaries who founded schools and hospitals and gained many followers.

Nowhere else in Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, have the efforts of Christian missionaries been so obviously successful. About 25% of Koreans are Christian, but their influence is greater than their numbers because members of elite groups tend to be Christian. Gaze out of any bus or taxi window as you cross the city at night and count the neon crosses!

The Catholic Cathedral (p55) in Myeong-dong is a national symbol of democracy and human rights, and the outspoken Cardinal Kim is the conscience of the nation.

## Cheondogyo

Cheondogyo is a home-grown Korean religion containing Buddhist, Confucian and Christian elements that was started in 1860 by Choe Suun. Born in 1824, and the son of an aristocratic family, Choe Suun experienced a religious revelation and put his egalitarian ideas into practice by freeing a couple of his family’s female slaves. The church was originally part of the Donghak (Eastern Learning) reform movement and embraced the idea of the equality of all human beings, a new concept in the conservative Neo-Confucian order of the time.

The church is still going and followers believe that god is within, and support humanist principles of peace and equality. The church headquarters, Cheondogyo Temple (p53), was built in 1921 near Insadong.

## BREAK A LEG

Young Koreans nowadays often roll their eyes at the ‘quaint’ superstitions of their grandparents. Yet before major exams, particularly the gruelling university entrance tests, out come a few time-honoured good luck traditions. Friends give taffy (the word for ‘stuck’ represents the posting of the passing grades sheet), a small axe (so you can ‘break’ through the answer), or special tissue (‘sneeze’ in Korean has the same pronunciation as ‘solve’).

Absolutely no-one eats seaweed prior to an exam – they don’t want to ‘slide’ (get it, it’s slippery). Hard-core superstitionists even let their hair go unwashed and nails uncut prior to any test – there’s an ick factor, but many swear by it!

## Religious Services

English-language Christian services are listed in the Saturday edition of the *Korea Times*. See p164 for details of Buddhist temple stays. The Korean Muslim Mosque (Map p209) in Itaewon has prayers in English and Arabic every Friday at 1pm.

## LIFESTYLE

The pace here is still much more ant farm than spa – just spend a month in Seoul, then head for the countryside and compare! – though urbanites don’t feel guilty about taking the kids to the park on a Saturday or hanging with chums. As nuclear rather than extended families are the norm, less time is also required for taking care of elders, but, like everywhere else on the planet, this free time gradually dwindles after marriage and even more later, in direct proportion to the number of kids one has.

The best thing for a Seoultite’s lifestyle was the move in 2005 to an official five-day work week for many businesses and public offices. Official altruism played a part but really it is hoped that Koreans will dispose of more of their average salary of W2.3 million, thus jump-starting the economy.

## Education

‘A person without education is like a beast wearing clothes’ is a proverb that nails Korea’s obsession with education. Two or three degrees are the norm, preferably including one from overseas. However everyone incessantly complains about this manic pursuit and a few families are now encouraging a get-rich-quick attitude in their kids, unheard of earlier.

Seoul now has more than 40 universities – including the best, or at least most famous in Korea. To get into one of the top universities, high-school students go through examination hell, studying 14 hours a day, often in private cram schools at night. Almost from the cradle, mothers are preparing their offspring for those all-important exams that will determine their child’s fate and status in life. An only-in-Korea phenomenon is a *girugi appa* (wild-goose father), a man who stays in Korea to work while the mother takes the children overseas to live (meaning, study).

There is an inexhaustible desire for studying English – see p174 for information on teaching English in Seoul.

## MR & MRS SEOUL

Sweethearts since high school, he (30) and she (28) married three years ago, a bit younger than the median age for marriage (for women, in 2004 it finally reached 30). He, an IT office worker at a *jaebeol* (huge family-run corporation) subdivision and she, a schoolteacher, together earn around 4m won monthly (they both work – out of necessity, like most other couples). It’s tight, but OK.

Two years later they had a son; they also hope to have a daughter – as do most couples (though over half of Korean women of childbearing age surveyed are ‘unopposed to remaining childless’).

Should they ever divorce, in 2005 the government began phasing out the family headship system, a legal framework heavily influenced by Neo-Confucianism in which the family name and legal authority went with first-born males, utterly disenfranchising women. (Sons other than the eldest were also a legal afterthought.)

No touchy-feely Mr Mom, Mr Seoul nevertheless defies the perpetuated stereotype of the ‘Korean husband’ (silent, domineering), at which young Koreans bristle; ‘husband’ and ‘housework’ aren’t just words on the same page of a dictionary (though in social gatherings for school or work, young women still do all the work!).

Maternity leave of three months is legally guaranteed (a year is not uncommon). She is lucky – her school gives up to three years (not all paid). Luckily, her mother can watch the baby – many aren’t so blessed. Free time? Ha!

The government faces serious family problems of its own: birth rates are the world’s lowest (1.15%) while the population is ageing rapidly (life expectancy is 73.3 years for men, 80.4 years for women) and by 2010 it is estimated there will be a 128/100 ratio of men/women of ‘peak marriageable age’ (reread that part above about the family headship system for a partial explanation).

## FASHION

Seoul has a thriving fashion industry which aims quite seriously to rival Tokyo in Asia (at present Andre Kim is probably the best-known designer abroad). The Seoul Fashion Design Center ([www.fashionnet.seoul.kr](http://www.fashionnet.seoul.kr)) in Jung-gu is sponsored by the Seoul government. Seoul also hosts an annual Seoul Fashion Week in mid-April.

## Hanbok

*Hanbok*, the striking traditional clothing that followed the Confucian principle of unadorned modesty, was as much a part of the local culture as *hangeul* 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.

Hardly anyone wears *hanbok* now except at weddings or festivals. Waistcoats are still popular but only among hikers. Elderly men sometimes wear trilby hats, which are a kind of modern *hanbok*, while *ajumma* (older women) sport brightly-coloured baggy trousers with clashing multicoloured patterned blouses.

Fashion designers are reinventing *hanbok*; ramie (cloth made from pounded bark) is particularly fashionable. Everyday *hanbok* is reasonably priced, but the formal styles, made of silk and intricately embroidered, are objects of wonder and cost a fortune. *Hanbok: The Art of Korean Clothing* by Sunny Yang (1997) is an excellent primer.

## SPORT

Soccer may soon (gasp) eclipse baseball as a national pastime following the heroic efforts of the South Korean team in the 2002 FIFA World Cup finals, which were cohosted by South Korea and Japan. The South Korean team reached the semifinals, defeating Poland, Portugal, Spain and Italy along the way. Keeping ahead of their Asian neighbours and rivals, Japan and China, is South Korea's aim in the future – and not just on the soccer field.

Yet, for now, baseball rules. Major League Baseball in North America has a handful of Korean players; watch the scurry in Seoul stop dead when their games are shown on public big screens.

Visit someone's home for a holiday, and grandfather may be watching *ssireum*, Korean-style wrestling, akin to Mongolian wrestling (never call it sumo). Wrestlers start off kneeling, then grab their opponent's piece of cloth, called *satba*, which is tied around the waist and thighs, and try to throw each other to the ground.

Taekwondo is an increasingly popular Korean martial art with millions of followers world-wide. In Korea all young men are taught taekwondo as part of their compulsory

## DOS & DON'TS

### Shoes Off

In temples, private homes, Korean-style restaurants, guesthouses and *yeogwan* (small family-run hotels) you should take off your shoes and leave them by the front door. Wearing socks is more polite than bare feet, particularly in temples.

### Losing Face

It is important to bear in mind the Korean concept of *gibun* (face/harmony – individual *and* group). Great efforts are made to smooth over potential problems; if you say something silly, there will be, at the most, an embarrassed laugh before someone steers the topic on to safer ground. Arguments or any situation that leads to one party having to back down will involve a loss of face, and this is a huge no-no.

### Keep it Neat

Here you are judged by your appearance, more so than in the West. Travellers who dress like slobbers will be treated with less respect than someone dressed casually but neatly. This is particularly apparent in Seoul, and out-of-towners always dress up to come to the capital city.

### Greeting

A short nod or bow is considered polite and respectful when greeting somebody or when departing, but don't overdo it.

### Gift Giving

It's customary to bring along a small gift when visiting somebody at their home. It can be almost anything – flowers, chocolates, fruit, a book, a bottle of liquor, tea or something from your home country. It's also appropriate to have your offering gift-wrapped.

Your host may at first refuse it (so as not to look greedy). You should insist that they take it, and they should accept it 'reluctantly'. For the same reason, the recipient of a gift is not supposed to open the package immediately. Receive gifts using both hands.

### Body Language & Respect

Don't use your forefinger to beckon someone. Put out your hand, palm *down* (palm up is for animals) and flutter all your fingers.

Don't force eye contact, which can make a Korean extremely uncomfortable; they will also likely angle themselves ever so slightly rather than face you directly (and don't cross your legs).

### Embarrassed Smiles

A driver almost runs over you then stops and gives you a big grin. The driver is not laughing at you – it's a sign of embarrassment, a form of apology and a gesture of sympathy.

two years' military training. The headquarters and main hall for taekwondo competitions is Kukkiwon (p114).

See p112 for more details on other sports venues and schedules.

## MEDIA

Korea leads the world in online access and citizen cyber-participation; Koreans also have some residual mistrust of news corporations, recalling that the large media conglomerates started under military dictatorships. This perhaps explains the monkey-wrench gang that is OhmyNews ([www.ohmynews.com](http://www.ohmynews.com)), a guerrilla news operation whose reader-journalists have been regularly scooping major news operations since its 2000 launch and is now considered a real-deal, albeit pesky, media player. President Roh Moo-hyun gave his first exclusive interview to these renegades.

For a run-down of all media in Seoul, see p169 for newspapers and magazines, p170 for radio stations and p171 for TV channels.

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## ECONOMY & COSTS

Seoul is home to the universities, scientists and companies at the forefront of Korea's expanding and enormous economy. The list of successful export industries led by Seoul-based *jaebeol* (huge family-run corporations) is a long one indeed. South of the Han River is Teheran St, which is Seoul's Silicon Valley, a fascinating place to get a gander at the remarkable cutting-edge position of Seoul in the world IT market.

Sounds great, yet Seoul has found itself mired in economic funks following the fiscal crisis of 1997, continuing *jaebeol* corruption and bankruptcy scandals, and government inertia. Economists fret over Seoul's dying (no hyperbole) middle class, which has shrunk nearly 10% to 15% since 1997. Pundits and politicians thus have even been known to quote that Clintonian nugget: 'It's the economy, stupid.'

Interminable 'reform plans' have become the butt of jokes; cynics insist any changes are charades. The government has tried to force *jaebeol* to have no more than 5% ownership from any one family and has indeed at least finally started a modicum of oversight (average debt-to-equity ratio of *jaebeol* is down from stratospheric levels of nearly 400% to 172%). Then again, now that Samsung's stock value has surpassed that of Sony – hugely symbolic, given anti-Japanese sentiment – even some vociferous protestors have fallen back in love with the *jaebeol*. Also, given that the top four *jaebeol* still account for nearly 60% of the nation's exports (Samsung itself over 20%) and 50% of foreign investment, how on earth can things change quickly?

The institutional disgust Koreans feel is also in part fuelling an enormous rise in Korean entrepreneurship; venture companies are proliferating like cherry blossoms in the spring!

## GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

An unprecedented shift in local power came in 2002, when the national government – the erstwhile real power in Seoul – granted the city autonomy; the ruling party plans to divide Seoul further into five cities by 2012. Optimists say that the new direct election of the mayors and city councils will usher in a utopic level of civic participation.

The current mayor, Lee Myung-bak, is fascinating. Formerly the hard-nosed CEO of the Hyundai construction *jaebeol*, he is known as 'Bulldozer' – derisively for those who loathe him, glowingly for his supporters – for his physiognomy and his penchant for simply ramming through his policies (revamped bus systems and neighbourhood gentrification are two hot button issues), group opinions be damned.

The city government's website, [www.english.seoul.go.kr](http://www.english.seoul.go.kr), is well-designed and helpful.

## ENVIRONMENT

During South Korea's economic rise, nature was an afterthought foundation for concrete and steel. Things began to improve in the 1980s – the city's standards exceed the

national government's – but after 1997's economic crisis, standards were 'relaxed' to help rejuvenate development and the environment again swooned.

However, at least superficially, most foreigners find Seoul quite clean – litter (outside of stray cigarette butts) is fairly uncommon. Seoul's government has been quite consistent in efforts to reduce waste tonnage and increase recycling of organic and inorganic matter. The public has responded admirably – recycling has skyrocketed since 2000.

## CLIMATE

Korea has four seasons and a notable feature is the summer and winter monsoons (seasonal winds). The city's most magnificent weather – crisp but comfy temperatures, little rain and an artist's palette of colours – is enjoyed from September to November.

During the winter, temperatures plummet to frigidity (and below) due to the icy Siberian winds blowing from the north, but at least it's dry; the worst of the cold is usually over by mid-March.

Spring temperatures are mild, but more prone to rain than autumn; then again, they do coax out those preternaturally lovely blossoms! Summers equal swelter – high temperatures and humidity – and occasional nearly biblical rains.

Destructive typhoons are also a possibility from late June through to September.

See p163 for climate charts, or log on to [www.kma.go.kr](http://www.kma.go.kr) for daily weather forecasts in English.

## THE LAND

Seoul is in the northwestern corner of South Korea, 37° 30' north of the equator. The city covers an area of 605 sq km and is 32km from Incheon, its airport and seaport on the West Sea. Seoul is surrounded by eight modest mountain peaks; Namsan, the proud sentinel, proudly overlooks the Han River, which cleanly bisects the city.

## GREEN SEOUL

With the highest population density in the world (true, factoring in inhabited areas rather than area as a whole), there's only so much that can be green. Korea uses more energy per capita than any Asian nation and this doesn't seem to be ebbing. Korea's water consumption rate is the fastest growing in the world, worrying the UN of a looming water crisis. Air quality is generally decent, and natural gas buses are helping a great deal (the lion's share of air pollutants is from buses and trucks), but international pollution blowing in from China is gradually worsening.

## URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Seoul has recently begun a massive, 25-neighbourhood 'urban renewal' project. In October 2005 the first link – the Cheonggye Stream Project – was opened. Connected to this is the equally new 1.15 million sq m Ttukseom Seoul Forest. Proponents insist this will improve water tributaries, provide much-needed greenspace chains for recreation and parks (a common complaint is that sure, Seoul has plenty of parks, they just aren't where anyone lives), and even moderate the city's radiant heat from buildings and concrete. Detractors roll their eyes at this and point out that for the sake of a few fountains, one of the funkier

## TECHNO-KONGLISH & MORE

**Cypein** (literally, 'cyworld-holic') A person who spends way too much time and money on the super-cool website Cyworld.

**Dica** Digital camera.

**Henpon** Shortening of 'hendepon', or mobile phone (get it, handphone?).

**-jjang/yeolla-** Like young folk everywhere, young Koreans adore/overuse the emphatic; the suffix *-jjang* (best) and prefix *yeolla-* (totally, er, totally) are ubiquitous (eg last year's craze in Korea was to attain *momjjang*, or 'knockout body').

**Mini-hompi** What everyone who is anyone has: a personal homepage.

## HOW MUCH?

Seoul is a big city in a developed country, yet you can actually get by on a low budget. Public transport, basic meals, admission prices and accommodation are all relatively cheap, although luxury hotels and famous restaurants are expensive. Allow around W90,000 for a two-star hotel room and three decent meals per day; for a four-star stay, this jumps to W300,000 (to infinity). The exchange rate is a key factor and the stronger the won is, the more expensive Seoul is for foreign visitors.

In Seoul, 'free' is often found only after 'duty', but it's not impossible to spend an admission-free day. Searching the keyword 'free' on the city's tourism website ([www.visitseoul.net](http://www.visitseoul.net)) or chatting with the staff at information centres will yield lots of ideas. See also p46.

2km taxi ride W1900

Apple W1000

Cinema ticket W7000

Litre bottle of water W1000

Litre of petrol W1500

Local beer in a bar W3000-W5000

One bowl of *jjajangmyeon* (noodles) W3500

Palace entry ticket Free-W3000

Souvenir T-shirt W6000-W12,000

Top-class dinner W50,000

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extant 'real Seoul' neighbourhoods fell to the wrecking ball (and that the Cheonggye stream renovation actually worsened traffic).

Once again, Mayor Lee Myung-bak has 'bulldozed' in more than a few ambitious traffic plans: the city has put over 8000 natural gas-fuelled buses into service – a 20-fold increase since 2000 – and reorganised traffic flow (albeit not always successfully).

## **NATIONAL & PROVINCIAL PARKS**

Straddling the northern border of Seoul is Bukhansan National Park (p81), a stunning area of steep granite peaks and cliffs, which also includes a 16th-century fortress and a number of Buddhist temples. Only 25km southeast of Seoul is Namhansanseong (p83), a provincial park that includes impressive 17th-century fortress walls that stretch for 9km, as well as fortress gates, Buddhist temples and a village of traditional restaurants.

# The Authors

## Martin Robinson



This is Martin's second edition of *Seoul*. For this guide he inspected over 100 Seoul hotels, ate in as many restaurants, and walked down almost every lane and alleyway in the city. Previously he spent two years in Korea

teaching English, and also worked for the Jeollabuk-do governor's office.

Martin has travelled widely through Asia, and has written for magazines and newspapers. He's the author of a hiking guide to Jeollabuk-do province, and coordinating author of Lonely Planet's *Korea*. Born in London, he now lives in New Zealand – when he's not negotiating his way around the planet.

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

### DONALD N CLARK

Donald N Clark is a professor of history and Director of International Programs at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He is a specialist on Korean affairs, drawing on experience that began with his childhood in Seoul. Donald earned his PhD in East Asian History at Harvard University in 1978. He is the author of a number of books, including *Culture and Customs of Korea* (2000). His latest book is *Living Dangerously in Korea, 1900–1950* (2003). For *Seoul*, Donald wrote the History chapter.

### THOMAS HUHTI

Studies for a major in linguistics took Thomas to Asia for half a decade as he attempted to suss out Mandarin and Thai. Not confused enough, he later spent two years studying in South Korea, oddly delighted by the grammatical complexities of its language and, more, touched by the graciousness of its people. Thomas hails from Wisconsin in the US and still walks its forests with his Labrador Bobo, when

not travelling East Asia for Lonely Planet. Thomas wrote the City Life chapter.

## PHOTOGRAPHER

### Anthony Plummer

Growing up in Melbourne, Anthony unearthed a seething nest of travel and photo bugs. He has since dedicated years to soothing those itches, via the nunataks of Antarctica and the ashrams of India. But neither bitter Kyrgyz kumiss nor smooth Belizean Beliken beer could cure his hankering for a peripatetic life. Perhaps even stronger than the call of the road is Anthony's fondness for photography. His work has appeared in various Lonely Planet publications, as well as magazines and government and advertising publications.

## MARTIN'S TOP SEOUL DAY

After a bagel breakfast at the Witch's Table, I drop into Seoul Selection to rent DVDs of the latest Korean movies, then stroll around the Insadong galleries for a modern-art fix. Development never takes a rest and I notice the Sex Museum, which used to be a guesthouse, has now morphed into a Chinese restaurant. For lunch I'll tuck into *wang-mandu* (big dumplings) or ginseng chicken *juk* (rice porridge) followed by a fruit tea and rice cake in an atmospheric teashop. Next I jump on the subway to the wondrous COEX Mall, south of the river, to up my scores on the free PlayStation games and listen to the latest CDs at Evan. If I bump into someone we'll down a homebrew or two at O'Kim's Brauhaus. Friends text to say it's Daehangno tonight so I hop back on the subway and meet them sitting on the floor at Nollboojip listening to live *gay-ageum* (zither) music and praising the *dobu jjigae* (spicy tofu stew). Later we enjoy a blast of karaoke before listening to some decent singers at one of the live jazz venues. We'll then join the cheerful young crowd in Bier Halle until it's time to catch the last subway train home.

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