

MOON



LIVING ABROAD IN SOUTH KOREA

JONATHAN HOPFNER

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JONATHAN HOPFNER







THE WEST

JEJU ISLAND

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At Home in South Korea



After decades in which South Korea languished in the shadow of larger neighbors, it's safe to say the secret is out. The country's pop culture has taken the Internet by storm, its gadgets fill pockets from Boston to Beirut, and its people helm some of the world's leading think tanks. Couple that with an economy that continues to expand at rates the indebted West can only dream of, and it's easy to see why foreigners are flocking to South Korea in ever greater numbers. Yet for all this, the diminutive peninsula jutting from China's eastern flank toward the islands of Japan remains something of an enigma, and its bellicose northern half still tends to dominate global headlines. At least compared to places like Hong Kong or Singapore, nonnatives are

thin on the ground. This makes a visit to South Korea an exercise in the unexpected for most new arrivals, as it was for me over a decade ago.



In a way, that's for the best, because it's a place with a knack for confounding expectations. Many of the pleasant surprises will be immediately apparent—striking mountain landscapes, top-notch

infrastructure (built in barely a generation!), healthy, inexpensive, and delicious food and drink, a vibrant foreign community, and a local populace happy to help foreign residents make the most of all of these things.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is the deep emotion, the sense of attachment, this relatively small country can evoke. That may be because of its history, the way it dragged itself into prosperity against unimaginable odds. Or the culture, a rich bedrock of ritual that continues to govern much daily interaction. But in the end I've come to believe it's because few other places on earth cram in such contrasts. The neon-drenched streets and clamor of Seoul give way in a few short hours to emerald rice fields or gaily painted temples nestled in secluded valleys; fortune-tellers pitch their tents outside trendy boutiques (and often draw more customers); lush, almost tropical summers are followed by near-arctic winters; joyful abandon and deep melancholy engage in a continual tug-of-war in the Korean art.



The constant interplay, and frequent struggle, between modernity and tradition mean life in South Korea can sometimes be bewildering, even frustrating—for Koreans themselves, never mind foreign visitors. The country's turbulent past still manifests itself in troubling ways. As a former "Hermit Kingdom," closed to the outside world, it is still coming to terms with its place in a globalized age—and its expanding foreign population.

But development and change are virtually hardwired into the national psyche, and the government and the South Korean people continue to make significant strides in improving the legal and social climate for the country's expatriate residents. There's arguably never been a better time to enjoy the opportunities—and ability to astonish—that are South Korea's stock-in-trade. Arrive with an open mind and be prepared to explore—and enjoy.



WHAT I LOVE ABOUT SOUTH KOREA

- The culture and pastimes on tap. Most countries boast long-standing traditions, but South Koreans go out of the way to make theirs accessible to nonnatives. Whether you're keen on meditation, martial arts, tea, calligraphy, traditional drumming, online gaming, or even starting a business, you'll find well-established support networks here that will help you explore your passion and make new friends in the process.
- The sense of discovery. Much of Korea has yet to be seen by visitors. Take to the roads and you're bound to be treated to the rare feeling of stumbling upon something truly new--well, to non-Koreans anyhow. You'll also find locals who go out of their way to be hospitable to the few foreign visitors that do turn up.
- A customary level of service that makes just about everywhere else seem uncivilized by comparison. Meals nearly always come with a bottomless array of accompaniments, pubs ply loyal customers with complimentary snacks, and purchases at markets, grocery stores, and even gas stations will

often result in an extra treat or two being tossed into your shopping bag by a pleased proprietor ~~trying to encourage you to come back. And all this is in a country where tipping is virtually unheard of.~~

- Autumn. The crisp temperatures, radiant foliage, and azure skies of late September to November are a delight, and perhaps the only time of year when foreign residents understand the national tendency to wax poetic over the seasons.
- The mountains, especially the way locals take to them each weekend in the thousands, usually decked out in carefully color-coordinated hiking gear and enough equipment to make an Everest climber envious. As many peaks are dotted with temples and ruins, exploring them is as much a cultural experience as an athletic one.
- *Ondol*. These networks of pipes carry hot water under every home, warming the floor (but nothing else) to near frying-pan temperatures, which keeps your mattress toasty even as the wind howls and the snow falls outside.
- A broadband infrastructure that's nothing short of phenomenal. The network is always on, dizzying fast, and comparatively cheap.
- The countryside. This is still a rural culture at heart, and outside the crowded cities there's an abundance of lovely scenery, fantastic produce, and some very friendly people.
- The socializing. South Koreans approach play the same way they approach work: very seriously. Nights out are usually lengthy affairs that include gut-busting communal meals, plenty of drinks, singing, and good cheer. And whoever is hosting is highly unlikely to let you pay a cent.
- Public transportation. It's completely possible to jump on a taxi, bus, and even a bullet train with complete confidence that you'll be ferried wherever you need to go on time and in comfort at a very low price.

WELCOME TO SOUTH KOREA



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INTRODUCTION

The Lay of the Land

COUNTRY DIVISIONS

WEATHER

FLORA

FAUNA

Social Climate

SOUTH KOREA AND FOREIGNERS

A small rocky outpost in a volatile neighborhood, South Korea is situated among far larger powers that have traditionally received a lot more attention. But it's a far more complex place, geographically and socially, than its size and rather muted global profile suggest, and taking some time to learn about this ancient country and its people is one of the best preparations you can make for a successful life here.

Let's be blunt: Although it shares some traditions with neighboring China and Japan, and has more recently been a devoted student of Western economic and pop culture, South Korea is different—very different. It's one of the most ethnically homogeneous places on earth, but interracial marriage rates are skyrocketing. It prides itself on its technology yet clings to traditions that often appear outdated. It's technically in a state of war yet calmly goes about its business. People race to stuff themselves into crowded cities but get misty-eyed over mountains and autumn leaves. Non-Koreans may be viewed with sincere admiration, suspicion, or utter indifference, sometimes all on the same day.

So it's natural that this place can surprise, confuse, and yes, irritate foreign residents. But arming yourself with knowledge and a flexible attitude will better position you to enjoy the positive aspects of living here, and there are many. The locals can be almost overwhelmingly friendly and hospitable. Food and drink are generally a fantastically good value. You'll soon get used to having just about any convenience you can think of at your doorstep 24 hours a day. And despite the occasional posturing from its isolated counterpart to the north, this is a very safe country with a rich history and landscape to explore. Arrive with an open mind, apply liberal doses of patience, and you're sure to soak up loads of exciting (and sometimes bizarre) experiences, form lasting friendships, and develop a great deal of respect and affection for a place that has managed to preserve its identity against almost overwhelming odds. Just remember that you're far more likely to be changed by South Korea than you are to change it.



The Lay of the Land

South Korea consists of the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, which juts out from China's northeast toward Japan's southern islands. Flanked by the Yellow Sea to the west and the Sea of Japan (or the East Sea, as the Koreans would prefer everyone called it) to the east, and bordered to the north by the tightly sealed Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates it from North Korea, South Korea is effectively an island itself. With a total area of around 100,000 square kilometers (38,600 square miles), the country is about the same size as Hungary or Portugal. Some 70 percent of the peninsula is covered by mountains, which make for some inspiring scenery but also leave little land to cultivate or settle on; hence the population is largely clustered in a few dense cities.

The largest of these agglomerations is the capital, Seoul, which lies in the northwest just a few dozen kilometers from the inter-Korean border. Seoul is hemmed in by mountains and bisected by the broad Han River, which flows through the northern stretch of the country before emptying into the Yellow Sea near the west coast city of Incheon, a major port and industrial center.

Other major waterways include the Nakdong, which stretches from the country's center to the southeastern port of Busan, South Korea's second-largest city. With its seaside perch and many hilltop homes, Busan enjoys one of the country's more unique locations; it is the nexus of the southern industrial heartland, which also encompasses the nearby towns of Ulsan and Daegu. This region developed a reputation for grit and pollution in the rapid urbanization of the 1970s and 1980s, but tighter environmental regulations have improved things greatly. The northeastern province of Gangwon, by contrast, was and still is known for its green spaces and the alpine vistas of the Taebaek

mountain range.

The lush coastal plains of the west serve as South Korea's agricultural center, a place characterized by wide expanses of rice fields, orchards, and tea plantations, as well as sizable cities such as Gwangju and Jeonju.

Much of the South Korean coast is rocky and windswept, though the southeast in particular boasts a few pleasant sand beaches. Scattered in the surrounding oceans are dozens of picturesque islands, the most renowned of which is Jeju, an oval-shaped outcrop 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of the peninsula that draws holidaymakers with its balmy temperatures and distinctive geological features, including a network of lava caves and cone-shaped Mount Halla, a dormant volcano that is the country's highest peak.



hills outside Yongin, Gyeonggi-do

COUNTRY DIVISIONS

South Korea is divided into nine provinces (*do*), one of which, Jeju-do, has special autonomous status. While provinces have directly elected their own governors since 1995, the power of provincial administrations remains limited, and most major policies are implemented at the national level. Provinces are further subdivided into counties (*gun*) and cities (*si*) as well as villages or townships. Distinct from the provinces, six major cities of more than one million people—Incheon, Busan, Daegu, Daejeon, Gwangju, and Ulsan—have been designated *gwangyeoksi* or metropolitan cities, meaning they are administered separately from the provinces around them. Towering above them all is the capital, Seoul, the only place in the country to bear the *teukbyeolsi* or special city title, which

effectively elevates it to provincial level. Major cities are further split into districts (*gu*) which are made up of smaller neighborhoods (*dong*).

WEATHER

The country's four distinct seasons are a great source of pride to South Koreans, and while it is true that they can be differentiated easily, some last a lot longer than others. South Korea has a temperate climate characterized by sweltering humid summers and chilly winters—but the all-too-brief spring and autumn are just about perfect. Despite its limited size, there's a fair amount of climactic variation from one end of the country to the other, with the southeastern port of Busan five degrees warmer in winter on average than Seoul in the north.

Spring comes to the peninsula in mid-March to early April in a shower of blossoms and foliage, with temperatures rising rapidly until June, the onset of summer, when they average over 20°C (68°F). While the country isn't as vulnerable to flooding or typhoons as some of its southern neighbors, late June and early July are often ruled by the *jangma*, the local name for a seasonal monsoon that dumps most of the national annual rainfall in a few short weeks and pushes humidity up to 80 or 90 percent. August and most of September are also hot and fairly sticky, with temperatures peaking at around 30°C (86°F). By October the peninsula has dried out somewhat, and autumn is well under way; it is a glorious time of year when the air is crisp, the skies clear, and the mountains are swathed in vivid shades of gold and red. This usually lasts just a few weeks until mid-November, when temperatures drop and winter begins to take over. January and February are the coldest months, with strong winds, temperatures regularly dipping below 0°C (32°F), and snow not uncommon in northern areas or at higher elevations.

FLORA

South Korea's complex topography has made it home to a wide variety of plant life, with more than 4,000 plant species and around 1,000 varieties of trees. Most of the peninsula's mountains were thickly forested, but war, rapid population growth, and development took a severe toll on these resources, with virtually all natural tree cover stripped away by the 1960s. Since then the tide has turned somewhat. Four decades of ambitious planting programs and the designation of about 20 national parks restoring many of the country's hills to their previously green state—although very few old-growth forests remain.

Needle-leaved trees such as pine and fir are common, as are oak, ash, and sumac. Fruit trees, including apple, pear, and persimmon, are cultivated nationwide, and the warm shores of Jeju-do are home to more than 70 species of broad-leaved evergreens. Groves of bamboo, much loved in Asian cultures for its strength and resilience, are also found throughout the country. Among the more common varieties of flowers are roses, orchids, and chrysanthemums, and the brilliant pink cherry blossoms that herald the coming of spring. South Korea's national flower is the *mugunghwa* ("eternal flower") or rose of Sharon, a pink or lavender hibiscus renowned for both its beauty and ability to withstand harsh conditions. The flower blooms continuously from summer to autumn, and *mugunghwa* blossoms appear regularly on government and military signs and seals.

While South Korea was once a haven for a wide variety of large mammals, including tigers, bears, and deer, deforestation and hunting—often for animal parts used in traditional medicine—has drastically reduced the animal population over the last century or so. The tigers are gone, although a few are still believed to inhabit the remote mountain stretches of North Korea, and only small numbers of black bears, roe deer, and Siberian musk deer remain, mainly in national parks such as Jirisan and Seoraksan. Wild boars, wolves, foxes, rabbits, and squirrels are more common.

Due to its position on the migration route of the bird species that flee Manchuria and Siberia in the winter for the warmer climes of Southeast Asia, South Korea is something of a haven for bird-watchers. There are only around 50 varieties indigenous to the peninsula, but another 400 or so visit regularly. Residents include the black-billed magpie and Eurasian tree sparrow, while hooded cranes, vultures, geese, and falcons make regular stopovers at wetlands such as Suncheon Bay in the southwest.

Interestingly, arguably the most ecologically rich area on the peninsula is the DMZ dividing the Koreas. With any kind of human presence in the area—4 kilometers (2.5 miles) wide and 248 kilometers (155 miles) long—strictly forbidden for the last 50 years, animals and plants have been free to take it over, making it one of the world's best-kept swaths of temperate land. It is home to around 50 species of mammals, including the leopard and rare Asiatic black bear, as well as at least two endangered types of crane. While some environmentalists and officials have mulled transforming the Zone into a nature reserve when the two Koreas eventually reunite, its fate remains highly uncertain—like most post-reunification scenarios.

Social Climate

It's easy enough to view South Korea and the Korean people as a monolithic entity. The country has no significant minority groups, and the people share only a handful of surnames. The lives of most citizens are governed by a nearly identical series of experiences and milestones—intensive tutoring and do-or-die school entrance exams for children, mandatory military service for young men, marriage and children for young women—and most people strive to work at one of only half a dozen large companies that dominate virtually every segment of the economy. A relatively rigid hierarchy based heavily on the Confucian ideals of respect for authority and filial piety continues to dictate the relations between government and citizen, employer and employee, husband and wife, and parents and offspring.

With such a common pool of experiences to draw on, South Korean society, not surprisingly, is highly cohesive. People tend to harbor similar beliefs and outlooks, and are also quick to band together in the face of real or perceived slights or threats. This single-mindedness was a major contributor to the country's meteoric rise from the ashes of the Korean War, and it means there's little evidence in South Korea of the alienation or tensions that sometimes plague larger, more diverse nations. But it also means the country can be highly intolerant of different lifestyles or opinions, and tough on those on the lower tiers of the social ladder—namely women, young people, and the poor.

Look a bit closer and it becomes apparent that South Korea is a more varied place than initial impressions suggest—and that it is in a state of massive flux. Some of the country's divisions have existed for generations, such as those between the wealthy labor-shy nobility (*yangban*) of the past—now represented by the Seoul elite—and the working underclass. People from the heavily industrial Gyeongsang provinces of the southeast and their counterparts in the southwestern Jeolla provinces—historically a hotbed of insurgency and left-wing sentiment—have for centuries viewed each other with such unbridled suspicion that they'll still hesitate to marry someone or vote for a politician from the opposite side. And residents of Seoul have long looked on places outside the capital with a certain degree of disdain.

These frictions have been augmented by a host of new tensions that have accompanied South Korea's rush into modernization and increasing prosperity. Elderly people gripe that the young have let traditions slip, by, for example, daring to smoke in front of their seniors or neglecting to support their aging parents. The current generation, having no experience with war or hardship, can't understand why older folks are always harping on about the need for discipline and a modest lifestyle or sticking to formalities that no one else seems to have time for. Fewer youth—and politicians—seem to be willing to toe the government's official line that the North Koreans are the enemy, directing their anger instead toward the larger powers they believe have conspired to keep the Koreas apart. An increasing number of young women are ignoring the wishes of their parents and getting married late, if at all, and having only one or two children when they do. Rather than rushing to the carmakers and shipbuilders that gave their fathers jobs for life, young men are pursuing riskier but more personally fulfilling careers in areas like animation and electronic gaming. As recently as 20 years ago, passports were issued only reluctantly, but trips abroad are no longer exclusively the domain of the rich and connected. More South Koreans are coming into contact with—and marrying—foreign nationals, challenging the country's heavily race-based identity. It's anybody's guess how these struggles will play out, but what does seem certain is that South Korea is on its way to becoming a very different place.

SOUTH KOREA AND FOREIGNERS

Unfortunately, much of South Korea's contact with foreign nations has been of the negative variety. Most of the peninsula's earliest exchanges were with neighboring China, which was alternately a rival and a "big brother" of sorts to which Korea's rulers paid tribute in return for China allowing their shifting territories to function quasi-independently. But not every empire was so amenable; from the 13th to the 20th centuries Korea endured a nearly constant barrage of attempted conquest, invaded and ruled on and off by the Mongols, Chinese, and Japanese. A move by the battle-weary nation to close its borders to the outside world in the early 19th century was repealed under pressure from trade-hungry Western powers. Some of the Korean wariness of outsiders turned out to be justified; most of the world stood by as Japan took over the peninsula in the early 20th century, and there was a similar lack of protest when World War II ended and newly independent Korea was divided into what were essentially U.S. and Russian client states. The Korean War of 1950-1953 involved massive numbers of foreign troops on both sides, and a significant U.S. military presence remains in South Korea to this day, proof to some of the two nations' stalwart alliance but a major source of resentment to others.

Since so much of South Korea's foreign relations have been characterized by strife, betrayal, and bloodshed, it is perhaps understandable that views on foreigners are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, South Koreans are immensely curious about other countries and highly appreciative—envious, even—of their assets and achievements. They desperately want foreigners to have a positive impression of their nation and are deeply concerned about the way the country is portrayed to the outside world. The result, desirable or not, is that expatriates tend to come in for plenty of special treatment. Nearly every foreign resident will have a story or two to tell about being offered assistance when they looked lost, strangers pressing umbrellas into their hands when they were stuck in the rain without one, or restaurant servers bringing them free extras. Any foreign resident showing a genuine interest in the country—by learning a few Korean phrases, for example, or enjoying the local cuisine—will find no shortage of delighted would-be guides, friends, or teachers. The former “Hermit Kingdom” also seems to have both feet squarely in the globalization camp: Learning English is a priority for most of the population, new foreign restaurants spring up in Seoul every weekend, and much fuss is now made about the need to build a more multicultural society.

On the other hand, a lot of old suspicions and resentments die hard. With some justification, given the country's turbulent history, South Koreans sometimes seem to feel the world is out to get them, or at least to hold the country back. Any perceived insult or injustice—Japan's claim to a set of islets that South Korea insists are its territory is a current example—can send the entire nation into what looks like paroxysms of rage, sparking angry outpourings in the media, protests on the streets, and other behavior that looks downright xenophobic. Foreign nationals will sometimes find their countries singled out for criticism or be roped into emotional debates about wrongs that the South Koreans view as grave but that they know little about. These sorts of exchanges tend to be most charged when they involve the two countries that have influenced South Korea's modern history the most—the United States and Japan, which are regularly cast as bullies in any bilateral issue or dispute. Foreigners may also find that locals react somewhat defensively to talk that (intentionally or not) denigrates South Korea or compares it to other places—a casual remark that one prefers Thai to Korean food, for example, may elicit stony silence.



An Islamic clothing shop in Seoul testifies to Korea's growing multiculturalism.

Some foreign residents find the regular extolling of South Korea's supposedly unique characteristics or achievements, both by the media and South Koreans themselves, a tad tiring—and indeed, heartfelt dissertations on the nutritional value of the local staple kimchi or the “scientific” properties of the local script tend to lose their appeal when you've heard them dozens of times. Some also find that while South Koreans are big proponents of the “when in Rome” philosophy—meaning that foreigners should conform to local cultural norms—they seem to stick to the “Korean way” wherever they happen to be, and genuinely believe their culture is one that non-Koreans will never “get.”

It's difficult to deny that Caucasians sometimes receive better treatment than visitors of other ethnic backgrounds, especially at the hands of officials or employers. This is mainly the result of a naive but still common view that “developed” nations have more to teach South Korea and that their people are therefore more deserving of respect. Japanese and U.S. nationals may find some South Koreans are less than enamored of their home countries due to the checkered history Korea shares with both places, but this prejudice rarely manifests itself as anything serious. Basically South Koreans find *all* foreigners equally confusing and curious.

While it is not much of an issue in Seoul, foreigners in less cosmopolitan parts of the country may experience what some have termed the “freak” factor. Non-Koreans are a relatively rare sight in many places and can find themselves being stared at, trailed by schoolkids shouting greetings, or otherwise singled out for attention, which can be traumatic or a lot of fun, depending on the mood of the victim.

So how does one deal with these sometimes exasperating experiences? First, don't take it personally—most South Koreans have little trouble differentiating between individuals and their

nation or government, and any negative sentiment directed toward where you happen to be from is almost never intended as a personal slight. Second, practice understanding—this is a country that has suffered at the hands of larger nations more than most, and it is still to some extent rebuilding its pride and identity. Third, remember that the South Koreans are relatively new to all this—overseas travel was rigorously controlled for years by dictatorial governments, and it's only in the last decade or so that the country has had a sizable contingent of nonmilitary foreign residents, so it's natural that some of the interactions between foreigners and locals can be a bit gaffe-prone and awkward. And finally, remember that despite what the government and some media outlets may lead you to believe, many South Koreans are highly conscious of their country's failings and discuss them exhaustively—it's simply a dialogue that, for reasons of language and pride, foreign nationals are rarely involved in. South Korea has become a much more diverse and tolerant place over the last few years, and it will become even more so as non-Koreans become a greater part of the social fabric.

Foreign Population in South Korea

The number of non-South Korean nationals in the country passed the 1.4 million landmark in 2012 and now accounts for almost 3 percent of the population. By far the largest minority group in the country is Chinese, representing almost half of non-South Koreans, followed by U.S. nationals, Vietnamese, and Filipinos. Many of the country's Chinese residents and a sizable number of expatriates from Western countries are of Korean descent. Most non-South Koreans are concentrated in a few districts of Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi Province, but there are also significant numbers in the port of Busan and industrial centers like Ulsan.

Until relatively recently, most of the Western foreigners in South Korea were soldiers, missionaries, or English language teachers (and sometimes a combination of all three), but the country's growing wealth and internationalization has seen a spike in the number of foreign executives—increasingly in the employ of local firms—as well as independent foreign entrepreneurs, consultants, and restaurateurs.

A couple of local social issues have also helped spur a rapid expansion in the foreign population, legal and illegal, since the late 1990s. First, with domestic labor getting increasingly more expensive and fewer educated South Koreans willing to buckle down and do the backbreaking factory work that the nation's export success was originally built on, more and more local manufacturers are forced to look for their employees abroad, particularly elsewhere in Asia. Second, the country's widening gender disparity—men outnumber women by a significant percentage—and the reluctance of many South Korean women to marry into rural families has created a thriving business in the import of foreign brides, especially from China and Vietnam, whose people share many physical and cultural traits with the locals.

The ballooning number of foreign residents has forced the country to grapple with identity questions in a way that was unthinkable just a generation ago; it used to be that being South Korean meant having Korean blood, but now a lot of people aren't so sure. For the most part, South Koreans seem to be dealing with the changes in their country with characteristic speed and vigor. The national and local governments have steadily rolled out initiatives to make everyday life easier for non-Koreans, including on-demand translation services and one-stop offices that can help confused

foreigners with everything from filling out tax returns to signing mobile-phone contracts. Crisis centers have been established to help foreign laborers facing legal or other issues, and many cities now run free classes to acquaint nonnatives with the Korean language and culture. Even issues such as discrimination are being addressed, in ad campaigns and television programs that highlight the issues faced by multiracial families. Biracial Koreans, in the past viewed as one of the more shameful legacies of the Korean War and consequent U.S. troop presence, are no longer unrepresented in the media or music scenes. South Korea is still a long way from being a cultural melting pot, but it has made some recent admirable advances for a place that for centuries defined itself by its stubborn resistance to all outside influence.

HISTORY, GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMY

History

PREHISTORY AND THE THREE KINGDOMS PERIOD

BIRTH OF A MODERN STATE

THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

THE KOREAN WAR AND POSTWAR DIVISION

TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY AND THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

Government

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

THE GOVERNMENT AND EXPATRIATES

Economy

EXPORTS AND MAIN INDUSTRIES

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

INTANGIBLE ASSETS

THE ECONOMY AND FOREIGNERS

Every country has suffered its own misfortunes, but South Korea has been privy to more than most. Its roots stretch back thousands of years, but as a small and relatively reclusive state, it was constantly buffeted by larger forces, with its attempts at development and unification regularly interrupted by prolonged periods of war and conquest. The turmoil of the last century has left it a divided nation with a short history of stability and self-government. But while there's an ample amount of tragedy in South Korea's past, there's also plenty to inspire. It has steadfastly held on to its independence and cultural identity despite numerous attempts to quash both, transformed itself from a poverty-stricken, largely agrarian society into a prosperous exporter of cutting-edge technology in a couple of generations, and traded heavy-handed dictatorships for a functioning (if sometimes messy) democracy.

with a healthy respect for human rights and a free press.

A basic understanding of how this astonishing metamorphosis took place, and the despair and extensive struggle on which modern-day South Korea has been built, will prove invaluable in any attempt to figure out some of the country's cultural quirks or why Koreans act the way they do. This one place where some knowledge of history may very well improve your quality of life, for there are few nations where history has as direct a bearing on the present.



History

PREHISTORY AND THE THREE KINGDOMS PERIOD

Korean legend has it that the nation was founded 5,000 years ago by the offspring of a divinely assisted tiger and a bear, but most anthropologists tend to disagree. Instead they trace the country's origins to a loosely associated assortment of town-states dotted throughout the present-day Korean peninsula and Manchuria and populated by the descendants of wandering Siberian, Manchu, and Mongol tribes that developed into a relatively unified empire between 700 and 400 BC Gojoseon, as the first Korean quasi-state was known, was a force to be reckoned with, regularly provoking conflict with the feudal states of northeastern China. It was known to the Chinese as the land of "barbarians of the east." Unfortunately it eventually took on one battle too many and lost most of its northern territory to Han China, which basically confined the state to the peninsula and hastened its disintegration.

From Gojoseon's demise, several independent states with clearly defined borders and ruling

dynasties sprang up. The three that came to dominate the peninsula by the 1st century AD were Goguryeo, which spanned the northern section of the peninsula and parts of Manchuria; Baekje, which occupied much of the south and west; and Silla in the east. The Three Kingdoms Period, as the era is known, was a relatively stable time that saw the rapid proliferation of laws, literature, and religion, much of it imported from neighboring China. The three states pursued independent strategies with regard to their neighbors, with Goguryeo regularly skirmishing with China, Baekje establishing ties with the Japanese, and Silla grooming a strong army to fend off the other two states and marauding Japanese invaders.



a depiction of a mythological tiger-like guardian, Seoul

In the end it was Silla's approach that seemed to win out; by the late 7th century it had sealed an alliance with Tang-Dynasty China and easily overran its two competitors. When its Tang partners turned on Silla in an effort to seize the entire peninsula for themselves (probably their plan from the beginning), Silla warriors managed to press them back into Manchuria. While Silla failed to win all of Goguryeo's lands from the Chinese, it did have the rest of the peninsula under its control, and after the Tang Dynasty formally recognized Silla's claim to the territory it held in the early 8th century, a period of relative tranquility and rapid cultural flowering began in Korea's first genuinely united kingdom.

BIRTH OF A MODERN STATE

The unification of the peninsula under the Silla Dynasty, which lasted until around AD 900, was a cultural and political golden age in which the seeds of a genuinely national consciousness were

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