



# SIX WAYS

to see Seoul  
and South Korea

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**A statue of Buddha facing towards Snow Rock Mountain in Seoraksan National Park.**

Whether you have just 24 hours or several days to travel around the country, easily accessible South Korea and its funky capital offer everything from pristine green spaces to nonstop city life.

**TEXT BY JENNIFER BARCLAY PHOTOS BY JUHA SALMINEN**

# 1. Nature tripping 하나

The path to Ulsanbawi Peak continues uphill steeply, although lithe Korean women in tight jeans and high-heeled sandals are tripping up it like mountain goats without breaking a sweat. Serious hikers wear colourful socks pulled up to their knees and the full sporty regalia. Suddenly we see a huge, sheer rock face ahead, rising up like some dragon's tooth, and a narrow steel staircase clinging to it. This is the last quarter of the way to Ulsanbawi.

With a spirit of camaraderie we march up, parents carrying children on their shoulders, one step at a time, legs aching. And finally we reach the top, looking out across the bare peaks that give way to green forest sweeping down to the valleys. Sheer rock steeples reach finger-like into the sky around us and the wind blows clouds of mist across the cliffs. According to legend, Ulsanbawi was too late to make it to Kumgang in North Korea where all the most beautiful rocks were, so it stayed here instead for the nice scenery. This is Seoraksan National Park, in the northeast corner of South Korea.

Renowned for its high mountains and sparkling waters, more than six per cent of Korea is national park, where for a modest fee you can wander on well-kept paths in beautiful surroundings. Koreans love nature; mountains have spiritual significance dating back to when shamans communed with spirits there and the mountains are now home to hundreds of Buddhist monasteries.

The 11 million people of the capital Seoul work long days with few holidays, so although the banks of the Han River that flows through the city have been transformed in recent years by eco-parks, city-dwellers have also invented endless ways to enjoy the outdoors beyond the city limits: activities such as hiking, climbing, biking and rafting, as well as festivals and concerts.

## SHADES OF FALL

Autumn is a prized season, with foliage changing colour dramatically as the humidity of the hot summer gives way to the snows of winter. Two important holidays take place in the autumn, Korean Thanksgiving Day (Juseok) September 10th to 12th and National Foundation Day on October 3rd. Korean people are warm, kind, and so delighted to see foreigners enjoying their country that they'll go out of their way to ensure you make the most of your trip and leave with happy memories. Compared with Tokyo or Shanghai, Seoul is packed with bargains, with simple café food plentifully available for about six euros a meal and a room at a good hotel for one night at around 60 euros.

## Going Global

**TO OCTOBER 25**, Incheon hosts a Global Fair featuring exhibitions on the Future City – living with technology, green and alternative energy – as well as concerts and wine and food festivals, a kite festival and taekwondo displays. Incheon, Seoul's port city, which has recently completed the bridge linking the airport (said to be the best in the world) with the developing Free Economic Zone, is focusing on becoming a model city and global economic hub and is inviting policy makers, corporations and urban planners to come and see how, and address the issues of increasing urbanisation.  
<http://english.incheonfair.org>

Most of the country can be reached in half a day by express bus or fast train, providing you avoid public holidays when roads to the hotspots get gridlocked.

Seoraksan, or Snow Rock Mountain, is one of the top beauty spots and home of the endangered grey bear, its highest peak over a mile above sea level. One of the best times to enjoy it is when the autumn leaves transform into rich yellows, oranges and reds. The food and drinks stands have a party atmosphere on popular days, while at other times you'll have the exhilarating paths to yourself.

Seoraksan requires at least a night or two away from Seoul. But the gateway to Bukhansan National Park is only a subway and short bus ride from downtown, and has sparkling rock pools and shady restaurant terraces. A few hours' hike brings you to granite peaks over 800 metres high, following the walls of the fortress first built in 132

AD. Glistening green valleys spread far into the distance, and you may hear the haunting sound of drums and bells rising up from a Buddhist hermitage below.

With another day or two on your hands, go south to Byeonsan and the pace of life slows down. Simple guest houses overlook the beach, and a road winds through green hills and farmland, passing houses where garlic, corn and peppers hang from the eaves. After an exhilarating hike up a lonely wooded trail in Inner Byeonsan National Park with only the sound of crickets, you come to a rocky outlook on the edge of the mountain cooled by pine-fragrant breezes, a breathtaking view from the ridge all the way down to the valley. Even the least intrepid trekker can spend a peaceful day following the nature trail to a series of waterfalls. In the evening, treat yourself to *fiweh* or *sashimi* at one of the beachside restaurants and watch the sun set over the islands in the Yellow Sea.

**Most of the country can be reached within half a day.**

**RIGHT: Walking down the steps from N Seoul Tower leads to Namsan Park in central Seoul.**

**TOP RIGHT: South Korea is on the cutting edge of technology and pop culture.**

## Korea in Europe

**IF YOU'D LIKE** a taste of Korea in Europe this autumn, you can catch the thrilling drumming troupe Dulsori in Belgium at the Gent Festival van Vlaanderen on September 12th and at the Tower Festival in London on September 19th. They'll end their international tour this year at the Saerasae Theatre Goyang in Korea from November 27th to 29th. [www.dulsori.com](http://www.dulsori.com)



## Art moment

**PHILIP GOWMAN** of the insider blog London Korean Links says "I always go back to the National Museum of Contemporary Art." It's located just 45 minutes from downtown Seoul by subway line 4 to Seoul Grand Park and then free shuttle bus. "The first thing you see is a giant steel sculpture of a human figure gazing out over the parkland to the mountains beyond," and from his open jaw emanates a haunting noise, "part absent-minded humming, part lamentation, part prayer or religious chant... worth a 15-minute pause, and you haven't got to the front door yet." The whole museum is built around an installation of well-known video artist Paik Nam-June. [www.moca.go.kr](http://www.moca.go.kr)

## 2. Islands in the sun 둘

**BEACHES** are busy during holidays but deserted off-season. The unspoilt island of Deokjeokdo is only an hour from Seoul's port of Incheon by high-speed ferry. It has shelving beaches of soft white sand and undulating hills carpeted with forest. Fishing boats bob at anchor and there's little to do except watch the crabs scuttle into their holes in the sand, or women collecting seaweed from the shore for cooking as morning mist rolls across the island.

The nearby island of Ganghwado from late September to early October has its Dolmen festival and salted shrimps festival which includes

the catching of eels by hand. Korea has almost half the world's dolmens or prehistoric megalithic tombs, and the island is scattered with them. Its vast tidal flats attract migrating birds. With its ancient artefacts, festivals and crafts and natural beauty, it's a beguiling place to explore Korea's rich culture.

South Korea, while on the cutting edge of technology and pop culture, clings proudly to its national traditions and heritage. It's safe, easy to travel around and relatively inexpensive.

## 3. Seoul's secrets 셋

**THE FORMER ROYAL PALACES** are islands of serenity amid the South Korean capital city's multiple lanes of traffic and streams of people. Largest of five, set against the picturesque backdrop of Bugak Mountain, Gyeongbokgung has not always lived up to its name as "Palace Greatly Blessed by Heaven." First built in 1394, it was repeatedly demolished by invading armies over the centuries, but has now been restored. Pink and green flowers decorate the eaves of the sloping roofs where the figures of animal spirits dance, and the windows are covered with handmade Korean paper to keep out summer humidity. With peaceful

treed courtyards, ponds covered in lotus flowers the grounds are enchanting.

At Jongmyo Shrine, austere and solemn halls house the spirit tablets of the monarchs of the Joseon Dynasty. Nearby in Tapkol Park, hundreds of older men discuss the issues of the day and play a kind of chess called *paduk* amidst national treasures including the monument to the Independence Movement during the Japanese occupation. From there it's a short walk to the quaint districts of Samcheong-dong, with its boho art galleries, book cafés and restaurants, and Insa-dong, a street lined with crafts and antique shops.

## 4. Seoul by night 넷

**CHONGDONG THEATRE**, near the palace of Deoksug-gung, stages traditional music and dance including the breathtaking Samulnori, a drum and dance ensemble evolved from the folk musicians who travelled from village to village and accompanied shamanist ceremonies, and the spectacular ribbon dance, where drummers leap about with a raw, primal energy while creating patterns in the air with long white ribbons trailing from their caps.

For a taste of Korean pop culture's fastest-growing trend, check out mesmerizing, acrobatic B-boy hip-hop dance at the B-boy Theatre for productions such as *The Ballerina Who Loved a B-boy*. Young men lightly somersault across the stage, balance upside down on one single hand and effortlessly flip to the other hand then spin on their head or elbow. Korean B-boy groups have had great success internationally, giving the kids in the US a run for their money. How did hard-working, obedient Korean kids get into Bronx culture in baggy clothes and pulled-down hats? It's full of energy and good humour – and their dedication to perfection gives them an edge. The "B" is for "break"

– not only break-dancing but breaking control, being wild and letting loose – and maybe being the "best."

"Special Tourism Zone" Itaewon is packed with clubs from the elite JJ Mahoney's bar in the Grand Hyatt Hotel to dozens of more rough-and-ready options like Hollywood and even the so-called Gentlemen's Entertainment clubs of Hooker Hill (explanation) – where the US soldiers play. But a Korean night out is more likely to culminate in a *norae-bang* (singing room), better known as karaoke, usually conducted in private rooms.

As the website Seoul Searching says, "Seoul is one great big megaplex of shopping and more shopping until you cannot possibly shop anymore." Missed the chance to shop during the day? Don't worry. Dongdaemun Market is open until 5 am. At night most of the stalls are in wholesale warehouses eight storeys high filled with bargain clothes and shoes. Haggling is de rigueur on all Korean markets – and don't worry about the language, just tap your offer into the vendor's calculator. Then have breakfast at one of the food stalls outside.





**TOP LEFT:** Cheonggyecheon Stream runs through the heart of Seoul.  
**BELOW:** Dongdaemun Market is open until 5 am, seven days a week.  
**THIS PAGE:** A wedding ceremony is staged for tourists in Insa-dong.





## Useful contacts:

**KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION**

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

**KOREAN CULTURE AND  
INFORMATION SERVICE**

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

<http://english.visitseoul.net/visit2007en/>



The changing of the guard ceremony at Gyeongbok-gung Palace in Seoul.



## GRAVITY

*Design: Kaisaleena Mäkelä*

*Pendant, ring,  
bracelet and earrings*

Gravity collection is inspired by the cultures of indigenous people. The square shape stands for the land and the unique engravings its deep roots.

A percentage from the sale of each piece of Gravity jewelry is donated to Women's Bank - a Finnish fund that supports the economic agency of women and their businesses in developing countries.

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