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SEOUL

DISCOVERY

The diverse neighborhoods of South Korea's capital pulse with commerce, culture and technology.

By Glenn Kaufmann

NEON signs flash "Samsung" and "LG" on Seoul's downtown streets almost as fast as its army of delivery men on scooters carry kimchi pots, pizzas and kitchen sinks. This fast-moving city of more than 10 million people (21 million if you count the surrounding communities) continues to reinvent itself. DVD shops compete for the eye's attention with the blue and green of ornate palace woodwork. From its friendly, English-speaking teenagers to its octogenarian shopkeepers text messaging on BlackBerrys, Seoul offers visitors the rare



From Top: Kimchi, Korea's national dish, inspires colorful variations; The sprawling Namdaemun (South Gate) Market features vendors selling everything from traditional seaweed and fish to iPods and Nikes. Opposite page: A costumed performer at Korean Folk Village, south of Seoul.

opportunity to witness a culture at the moment that it defines itself.

Despite the constant hum of progress, Seoul's diverse neighborhoods make up the city's strong cultural core. In this memorable Asian destination, there are several required stops. As the leaves change and a chill fills the air, Seoul shakes off the dust of summer and beckons visitors before the winter rain arrives.

North of the Han River

The Han River cuts through the middle of Seoul and forms a natural dividing line. Many of the Joseon Dynasty palaces, museums and ancient markets are north of the river—but even in this “traditional” part of town, the talk in cafés revolves around *meids* (Korean slang for American TV dramas like “Prison Break” and “Desperate Housewives”), MP3 players and the newest electronic gadgets.

With a view of much of the city, the **Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art** (747-18 Hannam-dong, Yongsan-gu; Phone: 82-02-2014-6636) shines as the perfect symbol for contemporary Seoul. Multiple galleries showcase works ranging from traditional Korean pottery and ceramics to modern art from around the world. This massive collection, started by a former chairman of the Samsung Corp. and now managed by the Samsung Foundation of Culture, is curated by personal digital hand-helds that automatically activate when patrons step close to one of the works. In a typical Seoul moment, a sleek piece of modern technology enlightens visitors about a 16th-century handcrafted ceramic bowl.

Seoul is well known as a culinary and shopping paradise. While electronics markets dominate the streets, the city's most interesting

finds rest along smaller roads and alleys. The two well-known shopping districts of **Itaewon** and **Insa-dong** offer a wide variety of shops, restaurants and bars. Itaewon, however, is known to be a bit dodgier—with its GI crowd from the U.S. military base located nearby.

By contrast, Insa-dong's wide, walkable main street offers shoppers a pleasant outdoor setting that attracts as many locals out for a stroll as it does visitors hunting for gifts and souvenirs. Insa-dong is best known for its art galleries and furniture stores, found on many of the smaller side streets. Sidewalk stalls offer snacks (both savory and sweet) and handcrafts, while stores sell products ranging from brass Buddhas to kimchi pots and *chops* (custom-made ink stamps).

On one of Insa-dong's back alleys, **Min's Club** (66-7 Gyeongun-dong, Jongno-gu; 82-02-733-2966) offers an upscale fusion of Korean and Western cuisine in a traditional Korean setting. For those new to Korean cuisine, this Insa-dong favorite is a delicious and accessible introduction to Korean specialties such as kimchi, abalone porridge and *neobiani*, a charcoal-grilled meat dish. Until 1910, when Korea ceased to be a monarchy, neobiani was traditionally made just for the king.

The **Hongdae** neighborhood, located near Hongik University, is another local favorite for shopping and nightlife. Hongdae's broad streets, lined with restaurants, boutiques, musicians and performers, captivate visitors and allow for leisurely browsing.

With the Korean love of grilled meats and fresh ingredients, Seoul's diners have embraced the cuisine at **Byeokdol Jip** (1st Floor, Shinsadong, 655, Kangnam; 82-02-5454-789). At this casual restaurant chain with three locations in Seoul, customers order fresh meats and vegetables that are delivered

Photo by Steve Silver & NDisc/AGE



South Korea offers the chance to look to the future while experiencing its glorious past.

uncooked to each table. At personal charcoal grills, customers cook their meal to suit their own taste. The open seating around the grills creates a party atmosphere, and patrons converse among tables and often share tips and treats.

To catch a bit of old Seoul at its best, rouse yourself early and make your way down to **Namdaemun (South Gate) Market**. At the crack of dawn, visitors can witness Seoul wiping the sleep from its eyes and starting the day. In the narrow alleys of this sprawling market, vendors sell

ginseng, seaweed—and iPods and Nikes. Bargaining is encouraged and expected, so determine your price limits and have some fun.

South of the Han River

Prior to the 1960s, rivers, fields and farms dominated the area south of the river. Today, Seoul changes drastically in tone and style south of the river, having traded royal palaces for high-rise corporate headquarters and ancient markets for sprawling

underground shopping malls.

Just west of Olympic Stadium, **COEX Mall** stretches for blocks in a massive underground entertainment facility featuring high-end boutiques, Chicago-style pizza, movie theatres, dim sum and a large aquarium. The mall connects to the COEX Convention Center, COEX Intercontinental Hotel and the Grand Intercontinental Hotel, the city's premiere luxury hotel south of the river.

The **Seven Luck Casino**

(continued on page 72)



Photo by Jon Arnold Images / Alamy

FEAST OF FESTIVALS

In a culture rich with history, tradition and energy, it seems only natural that South Koreans find plenty to celebrate. The Seoul calendar is packed with festivals. Here's a sampling of popular celebrations:

HI SEOUL FESTIVAL

Gather at Seoul Plaza in front of City Hall and Gwanghwamun Gate to take part in this festival in May, which boasts a variety of attractions that highlight all this incredible city has to offer. (Phone: 82-02-774-1119; hiseoulfest.org).

SEOUL DRUM FESTIVAL (EARLY OCTOBER)

This international arts festival with a special emphasis on percussion performances, showcases both local and international performers (82-02-3444-7633; drumfestival.org).

BORYEONG MUD FESTIVAL (JULY)

Take a bus from Seoul out to popular Daecheon Beach and revel in vitamin-rich mud known for protecting and enriching the skin. Where else can you make hundreds of new friends by throwing mud at people? (82-041-930-3822; mudfestival.or.kr).

(continued from page 55)

(7luck.com), also connected to the mall and operated by the Korean Tourism Board, offers visitors a glimpse of Korean notions of good fortune. Open exclusively to non-Koreans, the Seven Luck Casinos in Seoul (the other is at the Millennium Seoul Hilton near Namdaemun Market) are smaller and more understated than most Western casinos. Their intimate atmospheres give players an opportunity to experience Korean hospitality and VIP treatment reserved for out-of-town guests.

While in Korea, you are likely to find some variant of kimchi, the national dish, at every meal. In its simplest form, kimchi is pickled or brined cabbage with spices.

However, Korean cooking has elevated kimchi to a symphony of seasonings and ingredients that includes many types of radishes, onions, peppers and spices. The dish is so popular that the **Kimchi Field Museum** (B2, COEX Mall; 82-02-6002-6456) is dedicated to the history and traditions of this dish.

Like Insa-dong and Hongdae in Old Seoul, the **Sincheon** neighborhood south of the Han River offers a wide range of restaurants, clubs and shops that are open late and make for a colorful and exciting night out. If you have time, step into a *DVDbang* (DVD room) and catch a movie. In these shops, visitors select from a large menu of films and snacks, and watch the latest DVD releases in private screening rooms. Bring a friend, as

the price is the same for one or two people. It's not much different from renting a DVD and taking it home, but the experience feels more like a night out, the picture and sound are of much higher quality, and many DVDbangs are open quite late.

For a more public night out, don't miss Seoul's hottest theatrical event: "**Nanta**" (nanta.co.kr; 82-02-739-8288) wows its audience with a performance that can best be described as Iron Chef-meets-Cirque du Soleil. Performed since 2000, the performance follows four energetic young chefs as they attempt to prepare a huge menu for a wedding banquet in just 90 minutes. With cabbages, peppers and carrots flying through the air and cleavers whirling, performers dazzle the audience and occasionally drag them

The Seoul Drum Festival in early October showcases colorful local performers.

up on stage to participate in the madness. Presented in two local venues (one north of the river), "**Nanta**" is more than just exciting theater—it's the perfect expression of Seoul's passion for food, fun and creative energy.

Old Seoul

Within the city limits, Old Seoul offers its inhabitants the chance to step back from the rush of progress and enjoy nature. Whether you want to get away from it all or just investigate a bit of Seoul's past, several attractions north of the Han River offer memorable experiences.

The moment your cab turns off the main road and leaves behind the frenzy of Seoul's packed thoroughfares, **Namsam Park** exudes peace. The road winds ever upward into the park, a massive green space in the heart of Old Seoul that affords

visitors the chance to retreat into lush verdant woods, stroll on sculpted walking paths, take in a meal and savor a panoramic view of the city atop **Seoul Tower** (82-02-3455-9277).

Looking north, take in the buildings auspiciously situated at the foot of the mountains—the blue-roofed home of the Korean president and **Gyeongbokgung, Palace** (1, Sejong-no, Jongno-gu; 82-02-732-1931), the royal home during part of the Joseon Dynasty.

In addition to Gyeongbokgung, where you'll also find the **National Folk Museum** (82-02-3704-3114), the north-central area of Old Seoul (north of the Han River) is the best place to explore Korea's rich cultural heritage. Numerous palaces and museums reveal the tumultuous history of the Korean people and acquaint visitors with their ancient

customs. In particular, **Changdeokgung Palace** (82-02-762-0648), a UNESCO World Heritage site, offers a glimpse at the lives of the ruling class during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), revealing how they relaxed in the natural splendor of the *huwon* (Secret Garden), the private retreat of the Joseon rulers.

Located within a mile or so of both Changdeokgung Palace and Namdaemun Market, **Korea House** (80-2 2nd Pil-dong Jung-gu; 82-02-2266-9101-2; koreahouse.or.kr) offers visitors a lesson in traditional Korean clothing, furnishings and crafts, as well as Korean wedding ceremonies. The real highlight of any visit to Korea House, however, is the multi-course meals with such traditional favorites as *gujeolpan* (a colorful platter of nine ingredients served with thin crepes) and the

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LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

NWA insiders share their tips for experiencing Seoul.

The revitalized **Cheonggyecheon**, with its new fountains and waterfalls, is a must see, according to Jae-Kyoung Choi, Finance and Human Resources Manager for NWA.

"The Cheonggyecheon, or Cheonggye Stream as it is sometimes called, is a natural stream located in downtown Seoul," Choi says. "Cheonggyecheon is a beautiful escape in the heart of the city." She also recommends visiting **Bukhansan National Park**. "[Hiking] during weekends makes me feel the power of nature. It takes only a couple of hours, as it is located in the center of the city."

David Ha, NWA General Manager – Korea, says, "I like to take my family to **Itaewon** for shopping, as we find great deals, and my children really enjoy **Insa-dong**—learning

about traditional Korean customs and visiting antique shops."

Chung Hie Lee, Manager - Marketing Programs, recommends the restaurants and wine bars of **Samcheongdong**. "You can choose Korean traditional cuisine, fusion food or a lot of international food," Lee says.

Sam Park, an NWA Marketing Coordinator, recommends **Dongdaemun Market**, South Korea's largest wholesale clothing market. "There are a lot of items including accessories, shoes and bags," he says.

B.H. Lim, an NWA Customer Service Agent, recommends riding bicycles along the Han River. "I take beer and snacks riverside and have fun with my friends," he says.

daily folk art performances featuring multiple acts of music and dance.

Beyond Seoul

While Seoul offers more than enough to keep visitors occupied for a lifetime, the areas outside the city offer truly spectacular scenery and

the chance to experience some unique aspects of Korea.

Bukhansan Mountain lies just beyond the royal Joseon palaces and the Korean president's home. Until 2006, the mountain had been classified as a military security zone for 38 years, so the area has remained

gloriously undeveloped and rich with wildlife. More than 2.5 miles of strenuous hiking trails cover the mountain, and some lead to spectacular views of downtown Seoul and a number of isolated mountaintop cultural sites.

An hour or so south of Seoul, the

Visitors take in the massive beauty of Changdeokgung Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site and former royal home during Korea's Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). The palace offers a unique look into the private lives of the Joseon rulers.

Korean Folk Village

(koreanfolk.co.kr; 82-031-288-0000) provides an expansive look at Korea's traditional cultures. Costumed artisans re-enact life in Korea's ancient farming villages and bring to life the crafts and skills used for centuries throughout the country.

To satisfy curiosity about the most famous border region in the world, numerous travel agencies offer half-day and full-day excursions to the **DMZ (Demilitarized Zone)** and Panmunjeom. Peer through binoculars at border guards, explore the infiltration tunnels uncovered in the 1970s, and stand on the North Korean side of the conference table where peace talks and negotiations are held.

Returning to Seoul from South Korea's infamous northern border, it's clear why the Joseon rulers picked this region as their home and the seat of their kingdom's power. A massive river winds through a vast open plane, and according to feng shui, the towering mountains in the distance offer blessings and good fortune to those who build a home at their base. If the rulers had known just how far those blessings would carry their kingdom, the kings and queens of old would feel confident that settling this region was indeed a wise choice.

As befits one of the world's great cultures, South Korea offers the chance to look to the future while

experiencing its glorious past. Exploring Seoul, you are likely to catch glimpses of the latest Western media export, then turn a corner, narrowly miss a delivery bike carrying a flat-screen TV, and step into an 18th-century palace garden. As you step off Seoul's busy streets,

take in the lush ginkgo trees turning golden in the crisp fall air. ▼

Glenn Kaufmann is a freelance writer based in Bloomington, Ind. His story about Fredericksburg, Tex., appeared in the Nov. 2006 NWA World Traveler.

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