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National Geographic Traveller (UK) is published by APL Media Limited, Unit 310, Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL
natgeotraveller.co.uk
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Editor's letter

Learning to dance to K-pop, eating kimchi pancakes washed down with *makgeolli* (rice wine), finding hidden cave temples in the mountains... The list of memorable moments in South Korea could go on and on.

This is, after all, a country rich in unforgettable experiences. In this guide, we've narrowed it down to our top 10 — from exploring palaces and temples to kicking back on the beach and skiing on the slopes that hosted the most recent Winter Olympics.

Read on and you'll soon know your *hanok* from your *hanbok*, the dos and don'ts of the DMZ, and where to find the best *bulgogi* (barbecue) — courtesy of two top chefs. As for the secret to K-pop dancing — I'll share some advice from my instructor at Seoul's Real K-pop Dance Studio: "More cute!"

I'm not sure I quite mastered it, but it certainly left me smiling. As did the rice wine.

NICOLA TRUP, EDITOR



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South Korea's most compelling experiences, from a K-pop fix in Seoul to adventures on Jeju Island

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How to get there and when to go

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ONE

GET A CULTURE FIX IN *Seoul*

From dressing up for a day at the palace to stocking up on K-pop souvenirs, Korean culture comes in all shapes and sizes in the capital. Words: Nicola Trup

Seoul is a glorious jumble of juxtapositions. It's steeped in history, although some of its landmarks are modern reconstructions. It's big on designer shopping, but the cheap-as-chips markets offer more of an experience. It combines teahouses and cat cafes, street food and haute cuisine, temples and K-pop concerts. It's a nexus of Korean culture, in all its forms.

Start by discovering the city's historic side at **GYEONGBOKGUNG**. Seoul's most important palace was originally built in 1395, but has been almost completely destroyed — and then restored — more than once over the years. Today, it's in impressive nick, with ornately painted pagodas, pavilions and palaces spread across the huge site. Want a truly Korean experience? Join the young couples and groups of teenage girls dressed in *hanbok* — a traditional costume, available to hire from the many specialist stores outside the palace gates.

Nearby **BUKCHON HANOK VILLAGE** was once the residential quarter for senior government officials, but today the area's hundreds of *hanok* — buildings dating back up to 700 years — contain a mix of private homes, guesthouses, cafes and restaurants. Sit cross-legged on the floor of a tea room and enjoy a herbal cuppa before taking on the steeply sloping streets.

For all the city's history, its modern side is just as much of a draw. Check out Seoul's contemporary art scene around Samcheong-ro, nicknamed 'Gallery Street' for its high concentration of, well, galleries. Start at **MMCA SEOUL**, one of three branches of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. The art deco building, a former military headquarters, was extended in 2013, and inside its huge halls are

exhibitions of Korean and international art. Just down the road, **GALLERY HYUNDAI** is smaller, but hosts some brilliant shows. Earlier this year Chilean artist Iván Navarro's neon-enhanced installations were displayed in pitch-black rooms, but you're just as likely to see paintings by the next big thing in Korean art.

One of the best ways to get a handle on modern Korean culture is through the phenomenon that is K-pop. Korean pop performers are some of the country's biggest stars, and even if you've never heard one of the cutesy tunes recorded by these baby-faced singers, the mania surrounding the scene is fascinating — and entertaining. **SMTOWN COEX ARTIUM** is a temple to all things K-pop, with memorabilia displays, walls of lifesize band photos (for selfies, of course), and a 3D concert cinema. The most compelling area is the shop, where you'll find K-pop everything, from posters and phone cases to cups and cushions.

Finally, for something completely different, pack your gym kit for a visit to **KUKKIWON**, the World Taekwondo Headquarters. The martial art goes back centuries, but the first schools opened in Seoul in the 1940s, and it's now an Olympic sport. Book ahead for the Taekwondo Experience Programme and spend an hour with a pro, learning different kicks before smashing a block of wood with your foot.

HOW TO DO IT: British Airways flies from Heathrow to Seoul Incheon from £651 return. Doubles at Novotel Ambassador Seoul Yongsan hotel from 190,300 won (£128) a night. ba.com accorhotels.com





Relax.
Refresh.
Restart
-Incheon
Airport

TWO

Visit the DMZ

Just 30 miles north of Seoul, this buffer zone lets you peep into North Korea and explore the history of the divided peninsula

So, what exactly is the DMZ?

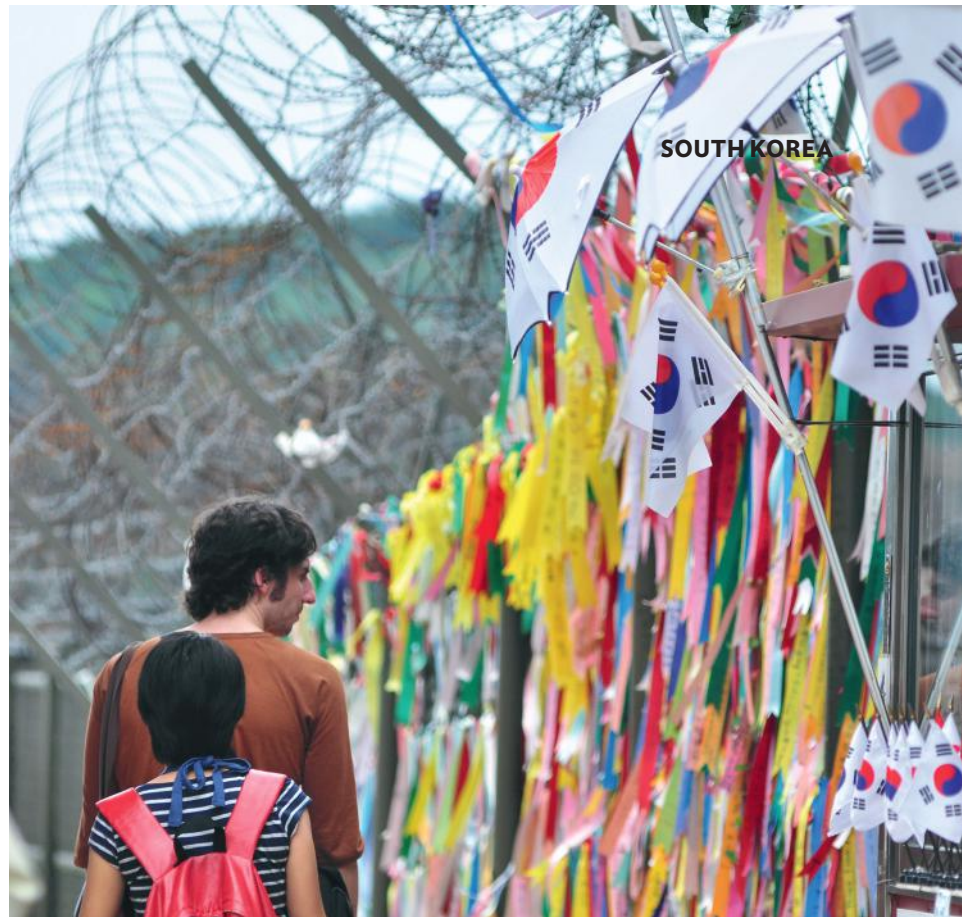
The Demilitarized Zone is where history's only communist dynasty nudges up against its capitalist neighbour. You remember the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un holding hands? That was here, at a landmark summit in April 2018. Physically, the DMZ is a 2.5-mile-wide no-man's land that runs 155 miles across the peninsula. It's been in place since the Armistice Agreement was signed during the Korean War in 1953, and remains heavily guarded by soldiers from both sides.

Sounds kind of dangerous.

Although you might feel a frisson of tension, it's pretty safe for tourists. Guides run through dos and don'ts (where and when to take photos, for example) — it's best to do as they suggest.

Will do. And apart from barbed wire, what's there to see?

Most tours from Seoul start with a bus journey to the Dora Observatory, a hilltop, camouflage-painted blockhouse with views across the DMZ into the North. Through binoculars you can see residents of Kijeong-dong (often called the 'Propaganda Village') working in the fields while children in white shirts and red neckerchiefs march off to



school. There's also the 'Third Tunnel', an unfinished invasion tunnel that was being dug by the North Korean military when it was revealed to the South by a defector in 1978. Remember to wear the hard hat you're given — you're almost certain to bang your head on the low ceiling and the scaffolding holding it up.

Noted. Anything else?

The Joint Security Area, at the village of Panmunjom, is where North and South come face to face on the line that divides them. This is the most tense part of the tour, when guides hand over control to stern-faced soldiers who deliver a reminder of the rules — including not provoking the North Korean guards, just a few paces away. You can enter the blue huts that sit astride the frontier, and cross into the North Korean side of the room.

And how do I get to the DMZ — can I go it alone?

Unfortunately not — you have to go with a travel company. Tours are extremely popular though, and can get booked up weeks in advance. Also, not all tours go to every site within the DMZ, so select your tour based on what you want to see. Companies that'll take you there from Seoul include DMZ Tours (dmztours.com), Tour DMZ (tourdmz.com), and Viator (viator.com). **JULIAN RYALL**



DID YOU KNOW?

Effectively untouched for more than six decades, the DMZ has become a haven for wildlife that once thrived throughout the Korean Peninsula. It's home to deer, bears and countless other species; there have even been reported sightings of the endangered Amur leopard.



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THREE

EAT THE WORLD'S best barbecue

Bulgogi, bibimbap, kimchi... Korea is full of delicious cuisine. Two chefs tell us what to eat — and where

Eating out in Korea is as much about the experience as the flavour, whether you're grilling your own dinner in a barbecue restaurant or slurping noodles at a bustling street food market.

As for what to order — you're spoiled for choice, but one thing that's non-negotiable is kimchi. This spicy fermented veg is served with practically every meal, and comes in more than 180 varieties, including Chinese cabbage.

Another well-known culinary export is bibimbap. The basic formula stays the same: rice topped with sauteed veg, but beyond that you might get eggs, meat, *gochujang* chilli sauce or almost anything else. The ultimate in Korean dining, however, is *bulgogi*. Translating as 'fire meat', it's pieces of marinated beef or pork cooked, DIY-style, on a table-top grill. The hot morsels are wrapped in lettuce, and pepped up with kimchi or hot sauce.



SEOUL FOOD

JUDY JOO

Chef patron of Jinjuu, London and Hong Kong. jinjuu.com

BULGOGI AT WOOSUNG GALBI

This place has some of the best barbecue in town, in no-frills surroundings. Try the pork galbi (ribs) and rinds. 372-40 Sindang 3-dong.

FINE DINING AT GAON

With three michelin stars, Gaon takes Korean food to luxurious heights. gaonkr.com

ANCHOVY KALGUKSU AT KALGUKSU ALLEY

The *ajoomas* (older women) here are all hawking the same thing: hand-cut noodles in anchovy broth. namdaemunmarket.co.kr



BEST OF BUSAN

JOO WON

Head chef of Galvin at Windows, London. galvinatwindows.com

LOBSTER AT HAEUNDAE POJANGMACHA 23

The lobster set at this stall isn't cheap, but it's a feast, with steamed and sashimi lobster, whelk and more. 236, *Haeundaehaebyeon-Ro*.

WHOLE OCTOPUS AT CHAMSAE BANGATGAN

It comes with minty perilla leaves, chilli and mustard sauce. Delicious. 1015-10, *Jung-dong*.

MILMYEON AT GAYA MILMYEON

A Busan essential: cold noodles, usually served with cucumber, slices of pork and boiled egg. 546 - 12, *Gaya-daero*.



IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

FOUR

FIND A HEAD

for heights

Seoraksan National Park's peaks are calling out to be climbed — as long as you know what to listen for. Words: Nicola Trup

The sonorous sound of chanting tumbles downhill and drifts over us. My guide leads the way up a set of carved steps, to where strings of colourful lanterns are being blown about by the wind. Behind them, underneath a huge boulder, a fellow hiker has abandoned his backpack and boots, and is prostrating himself in front of a shrine.

"In the olden days, people would use the spaces behind the rocks as secret Buddhist temples," Jenny, my guide, says. "Monks have been using this cave since the seventh century."

These days, she tells me, "Korean people come here to pray or make a wish." Their wishes — which might be for health, academic success or good luck — look like gift tags hanging from the cave's low ceiling, level with the eyes of the stone Buddha.

The chanting that drew us here to Kyejoam Seokgul Hermitage is still audible, but the monks responsible remain out of sight — they must be hidden somewhere behind the rocks. Seoraksan National Park stretches out in front of us, its jagged granite peaks poking out through green clouds of pine and oak. One of Korea's 22 national parks, it covers a swathe of the country's northeastern Gangwon province and is home to several temples, as well as a 48ft-tall Buddha statue we passed on the way up here.

The park is named for Korea's third-highest mountain, but with only a few hours to spare, we've chosen to take on Ulsanbawi, an

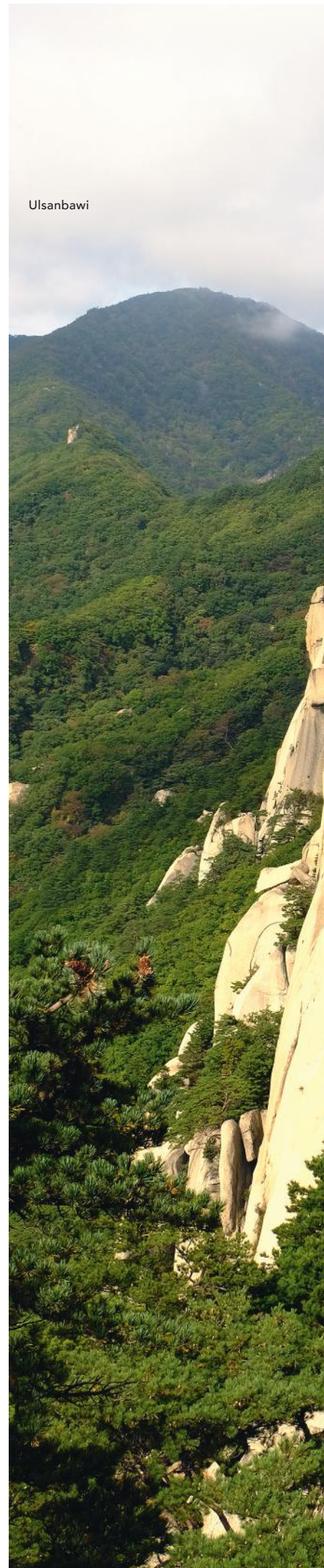
imposing granite cliff that stands 2,864ft tall to Seoraksan's 5,604ft. After our stop at Kyejoam Seokgul, we walk across streams and through woodland, the path sloping gently upwards, punctuated by viewpoints overlooking this tangibly wild landscape. The national park is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve — home to musk deer, black bears, kestrels and sparrowhawks — but the only creature we spot is a small snake. Draped across the path, it's less than a foot long and about the thickness of a thumb; hardly intimidating, though it doesn't seem bothered by our presence, either.

Eventually, we reach a vertiginous metal staircase — the only way to get up Ulsanbawi itself. As I lift my by-now aching thighs up the 808 steps, it's so steep I can't see the top; sometimes even Jenny is convinced we've reached it, only for us to realise it was nothing but a mirage.

Finally, about two hours after we first set off, we're there. The jagged rocks of Ulsanbawi's summit puncture the practically cloudless sky, and a carpet of vivid green is laid out as far as the horizon. In the opposite direction: the glinting, navy-blue East Sea, and the low-rise resort of Sokcho.

The gale that shut down the park's cable cars today whips all around, and at this height the only sound is the howl of the wind. But as we descend, I find myself listening out for the chanting, somewhere among the boulders.

Ulsanbawi



FIVE

SKI LIKE AN OLYMPIAN

Hit the slopes in
Pyeongchang's
Taebaek Mountains
— host of the 2018
Winter Olympics



IN NUMBERS

4

The number of Olympic resorts in South Korea:
Yongpyong, Alpensia, Phoenix Snow Park
and Jeongseon Alpine Centre

24.2km

The total length of the six slopes at Yongpyong,
the country's biggest and best-known ski resort

4am

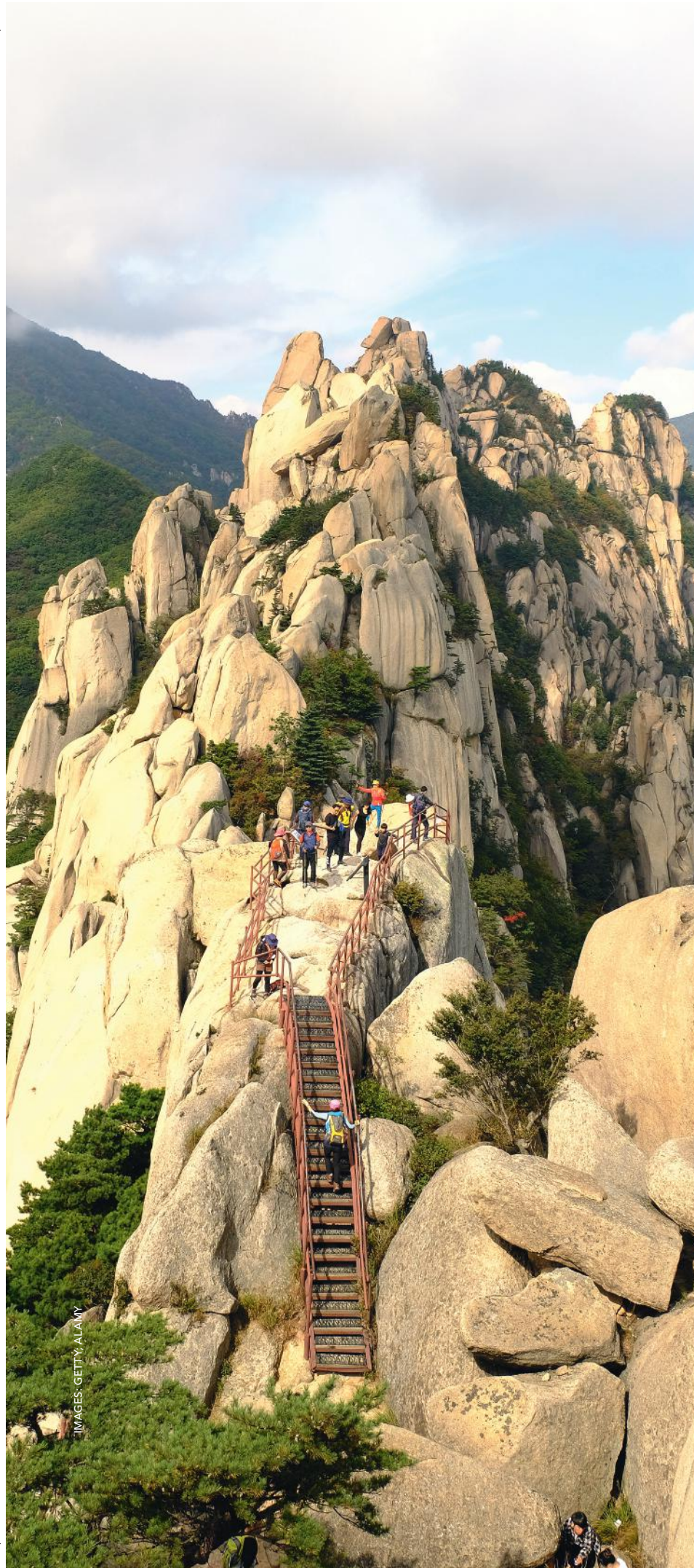
The time Yongpyong's slopes stay open
until, illuminated by thousands of
powerful floodlights

2,018m

The length of the bobsleigh track at Alpensia
Sliding Centre — to commemorate the year the
games were held

17

The number of medals South Korea won at the
2018 Games. Great Britain flew home with five
BEN CLATWORTHY





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BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN

Surrounded by spectacular palaces and gardens, the Executive Tower at Lotte Hotel Seoul is a new addition to the city, with a restaurant by Pierre Gagnaire and the largest club lounge in South Korea, offering fantastic views.

Reopened this September following a year-long refurbishment, the 225 deluxe rooms and 53 suites exude style. They're decked out with Korean artwork and furniture, plus luxurious Diptyque bathroom amenities. Throughout the hotel, a signature scent, A Walk in the Woods, transports guests to South Korea's forests with notes of woody musk, refreshing fruits and aromatic flowers.

FIVE-STAR FACILITIES

Business travellers are well looked-after at the hotel, too, with a packing and unpacking service available for busy business customers on a tight schedule. Further to this, all suites have a speedy Valet Box laundry service.

But there's more to come — Lotte Hotel Seoul is expected to attract some of the world's most distinguished guests following the multi-billion-dollar renovation of its Royal Suite. Equipped with a private TechnoGym fitness area, it also features Beautyrest Black, the largest bed available in South Korea, as well as one of the world's finest instruments, a C. Bechstein grand piano.

Don't miss

Taking tea in Le Salon, which is just for suite-staying guests, where delicious cocktails are served at the Live Station

Pulling up a chair at Pierre Gagnaire à Séoul, the legendary, Michelin-starred French chef's only restaurant in South Korea

The vibrant shopping scene and traditional *hanok* (houses) of the Gangbuk District — all just a stone's throw from Lotte Hotel Seoul

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SIX

SEARCH FOR *inner peace*

At 3.30am, the sound of drums echoes around, rousing the slumbering to action. Incense fills the air as dozens of Buddhist monks make their way to the morning ceremony. South Korea's temples are ideal for those — religious and not — who seek solace, sanctuary and simplicity. In the countryside near the city of Gyeongju, Bulguksa Temple (pictured) was originally completed in 528, but has been destroyed and rebuilt several times since then. One of South Korea's 13 UNESCO World Heritage sites, it's open to guests, who can check in and experience living like a monk for a night. eng.templestay.com **MONICA WILLIAMS**



SEVEN

Kick back ON THE BEACH

Head to the coast to surf and sip craft beer, soak up the sun on coral sand or get stuck into a shellfish feast. Words: Cathy Adams

For good looks: Seobin, Udo

Udo, off the coast of Jeju, is affectionately known as Peanut Island, thanks to the locally grown nuts that are ground into almost every foodstuff. A scoop of peanut ice cream pairs perfectly with blissful Seobin Beach, with its bright white sand and gin-clear water spanning a Pantone colour chart from topaz to turquoise. It's South Korea's only coral beach — the sand is actually tiny particles of the stuff.

For surf: Hajodae, Gangwon

With its perfect waves, this two-mile stretch isn't nicknamed 'Surfyy' beach for nothing. There's an array of surf shops, and the laid-back vibes continue at Singlefin Aleworks, where you can admire the water with a local craft beer in hand. Clinging to the clifftop above the beach is a pavilion that dates back to the 1300s, while Hajodae lighthouse, overlooking the beach, is worth the rocky climb for its views.

For urban excitement: Haeundae, Busan

Haeundae is South Korea's blockbuster beach. Busan International Film Festival takes place here each October, with some events hosted right on the sand, and it backs onto the zippy neighbourhood of the same name, meaning you'll never be short of entertainment. It's incredibly popular, so get there early to bag a spot under an umbrella — or join the crowd to ring in the new year at the Busan Sunrise Festival.

EIGHT

ADMIRE BUSAN FROM THE WATER

For families: Hamdeok, Jeju

With its shallow, crystal-clear water and sheltered rock pools, Hamdeok (pictured) is perfect for young swimmers. The soft sand is as pristine as you might find in Hawaii — and there are even a few palm trees along the shoreline too. This isn't somewhere to live out your Robinson Crusoe fantasies, though; Hamdeok is well-stocked with cafes and places to rent a kayak or book a banana boat.

For day trips: Eurwangni, Incheon

It may only be minutes from the ultra-busy Incheon Airport, but Eurwangni is a beautiful crescent with shallow water perfect for paddling. When the tide washes out, clams, crabs and trumpet shells appear from the mudflats; no surprise, then, that there are plenty of seafood shacks — ideal for preflight shellfish snarfing. It's popular with Seoul day trippers, too, hoping to catch a spectacular sunset.

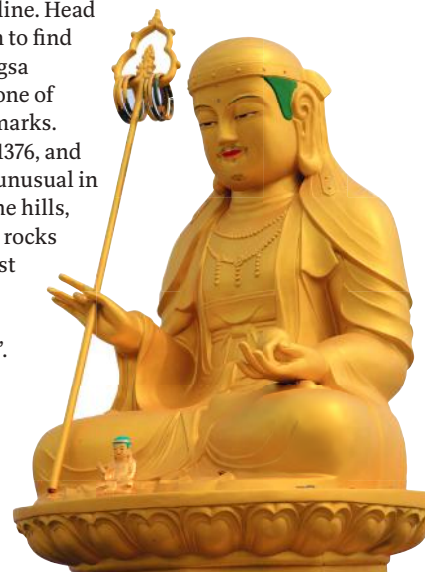


On the southeast tip of the Korean peninsula, Busan sits wedged between mountains and the coast, so the sea is ever-present. South Korea's second city is blessed with beaches, but there's no excuse for simply lying back on the sand.

You could hit the waves at Songjeong Beach, where surf schools have been springing up in recent years. Or try kayaking, which is available for free each summer at Gwangalli Beach, as well as on the Suyeonggang River, where you can admire the mountain-backed skyscrapers while you paddle. At Gwangalli and Haeundae there's windsurfing, surfing, stand-up paddleboarding and water-skiing — though how much of the city you'll be able to take in while whizzing by at 40mph is up for debate.

Yet, a day at the beach isn't the only way to check out the city's coastline. Head slightly out of town to find Haedong Yonggungsa Buddhist Temple, one of the city's key landmarks. Originally built in 1376, and rebuilt in 1970, it's unusual in that it's not up in the hills, but perched on the rocks overlooking the East Sea. Fitting, then, that it's known as 'The Water Temple'.

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NINE

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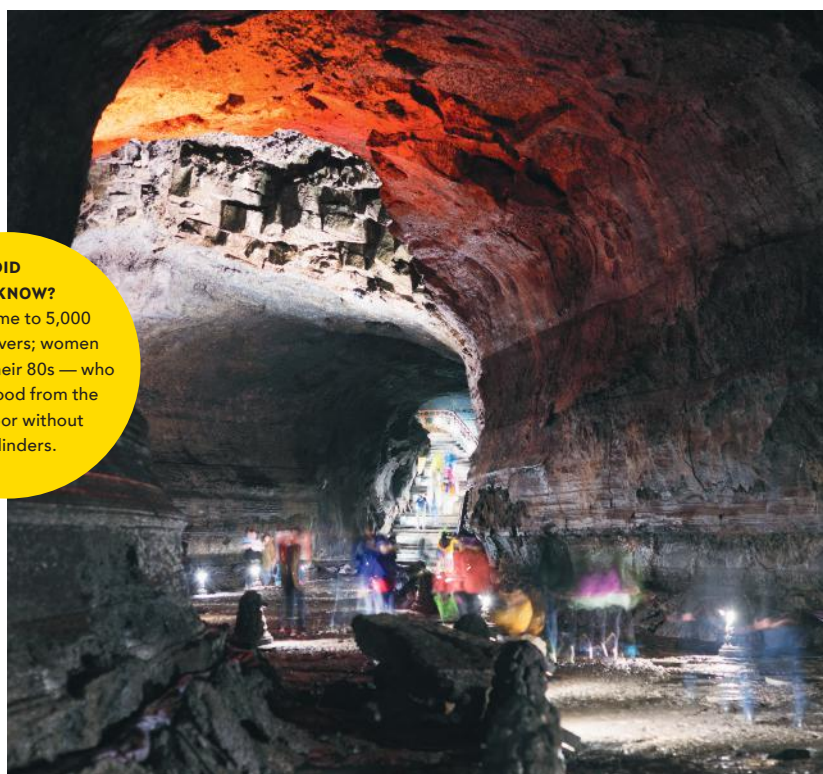
Manjanggul Cave is a volcanic natural wonder — and it's not the only way to have an adventure on Jeju Island. Words: Cathy Adams

South Korea's largest island was always destined to be exciting. Jeju exploded onto the scene two million years ago, when volcanic Mount Hallasan rose up from the sea, bringing with it a fertile isle marked with unique geographical features. A waterfall dropping straight into the sea? Check. The country's highest peak? Check. Volcanic lakes? Tropical lagoons? Check and check.

The showstopper, though, is Manjanggul Cave: a five-mile-long UNESCO World Heritage Site, deep underneath Jeju City. Less than a mile of it is open to the public, its ceiling heavy with stalactites and lava blisters. It may not be great for claustrophobics or nyctophobics — those scared of the dark — but this lava tube is a bingo card of geological formations, including the world's tallest lava column. And if holing up underground isn't your cup of (ginseng) tea, there are plenty of other adventures to be had.

**DID
YOU KNOW?**

Jeju is home to 5,000 haenyeo divers; women — some in their 80s — who pluck seafood from the ocean floor without air cylinders.



PARAGLIDING

Jeju's natural wind patterns and thermals mean there's consistently good weather for paragliding. Run off one of the island's hundreds of hills for views of farmland studded with blue roofs, pine forests, and Mount Hallasan rising up from the centre.

HIKING

For the gentler adventurer, there's the Olle walking trail network criss-crossing the isle, while for hardier types there's Mount Hallasan. It's catnip for serious hikers, who haul themselves up to silvery-blue Baengnokdam, the crater lake at the top, 6,388ft above sea level.

CYCLING

Good news: the 145-mile-long bike route ringing the coastline of Jeju is almost totally flat. And it offers a snapshot of the island: the crashing waves of Jungmun Beach, the yolky sunset over the Korean Strait, and photogenic volcanic landscapes.

TEN

STAY IN A

In traditional houses up and down the country you can sleep in style — or just bed down on the floor

With their timber frames and curved roofs, *hanok* are unapologetically photogenic. But they're not just for marvelling at; many of these traditional Korean houses have been reborn as hotels, homestays and holiday rentals.

Back in the 1970s, when the country turned its attention to technology over tradition, a large number of old buildings (some dating back to the 14th century) were demolished, with modern apartment blocks and skyscrapers thrown up in their place. But some managed to avoid the wrecking ball, and today you'll find pockets of perfectly preserved *hanok* all over the country. According to tradition, they should face a river, with a mountain to the rear, and while in chillier northern regions they're typically built around a courtyard in order to keep in the heat, in the milder south they tend to be more open.

As for the driving force behind the revival of the *hanok*, we partly have historical K-dramas to thank. Homegrown TV shows have been filmed on location at sites such as Seoul's Bukchon Hanok Village, and Jeonju Hanok Village, in the west of the country — areas which have become sites of pilgrimage for diehard fans.

Yet, even if you're not up on your K-drama, checking in for a night in a *hanok* offers a glimpse of Korean history. The government's official Hanok Stay programme lists more than 100 options, and you'll find plenty more to choose from, whether you're happy with the classic mattress-on-the-floor setup or you're in the market for something rather more luxurious. bit.ly/KTOHanokStay **MONICA WILLIAMS**



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Asiana Airlines, British Airways and Korean Air all fly from Heathrow to Seoul Incheon airport, 45 minutes from the city centre. flyasiana.com ba.com koreanair.com

Seoul's subway is cheap and efficient. Budget airlines operate to destinations such as Busan and Jeju Island, and the railway is excellent, although buses are the most popular way to travel long distances.

When to go

Autumn is the perfect time to visit, as temperatures are mild. Spring is also pleasant, but can be blighted by fine yellow

dust that blows in from China. Winter can be bitterly cold, with temperatures remaining below zero for weeks, while summer tends to be hot and sticky (around 30C).

How to do it

Bamboo Travel has an 11-day Highlights of South Korea tour from £3,395pp including flights. Includes Seoul, Busan, Gyeongju and a *hanok* stay in Andong. bambootravel.co.uk

More information

Lonely Planet Korea (RRP: £16.99)
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