

Korea's Kaleidoscope

This country of curious contrasts blends ancient and modern with rare grace.

by Lina Zeldovich



I'M ADMIRING

the beautiful carvings of the Gyeongbukgung Palace in Seoul while clad in the traditional Korean *hanbok* dress — a short jacket top and a long, full graceful skirt. “One more photo, please!” I plead with my husband Dennis, posing against yet another multicolored chiseled arch.

Around me, men and women, young and old, locals and tourists alike, are sporting similar attire — it's both a ritual and a fashion statement to explore Seoul's ancient royal palaces dressed in vintage outfits while snapping loads of selfies. “We Koreans have no problem being old-fashioned one minute and modern the next,” Michelle Hong, my guide from Intrepid Travel, tells me. “We love blending both.”

Just a few years ago, South Korea, nicknamed “Land of the Morning Calm,” may have been off the beaten path for Western travelers. But K-pop hits like “Gangnam Style,” bands like BTS, foods like kimchi, and the quadruple-Oscar-winning *Parasite* placed this country on the map. Whatever city you visit, the cultural kaleidoscope never ceases to surprise you.



SEOUL

Stretching over 200 square miles and home to almost 10 million people, Seoul has been the country's capital for more than 600 years — and it shows. Here, historic palaces hide among skyscrapers, traditional markets coexist with extravagant shopping malls, and old-fashioned teahouses elbow fancy coffee shops.

Adjacent to the Gyeongbukgung Palace lies the Bukchon Hanok Village, (*hanok* means “traditional home”) where residents still live in houses built over 500 years ago. Over time, plumbing and electricity arrived, but the distinct clay-tiled roofs and carved wooden doors remained. Many homes still use a traditional heating system called *ondol*, which translates as “warm stones.” Laid underneath the floor, an

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ondol system consists of stone channels that direct and trap the hot air from the kitchen fireplace underneath the rooms, keeping the house warm all night long.

Later, when we head to Gwangjang, a 120-year-old traditional market that sells everything from spices to clothes to medicinal herbs, we walk along Cheonggyecheon, a 6-mile-long urban stream hugged by trees and plants, with fish lurking inside it. A masterpiece of modern engineering, Cheonggyecheon was rebuilt from a decommissioned highway to make the city greener.

As darkness descends and Seoul lights up, its landmark Namsan Tower soars above the city, overlooking broad boulevards lined by high-rises and narrow alleys packed by family-run shops.



SOKCHO

“One day when I was at school, bombs started falling from the sky,” Kim Yong Jae, now over 80, shares how her family came to live in the Abai Village in Sokcho, one of South Korea’s port cities. “My mother came and grabbed me — and we ran.”

Today, Kim acts as a cultural ambassador, working with Intrepid and other tour operators to introduce travelers to South Korea’s lesser-known history, but back in the 1950s, she was living in North Korea. When the Korean War broke out, her family fled, settling in Sokcho with about 7,000 other refugees, waiting for the war to end to go home. “We’re still waiting, 70 years later,” Kim says. Meanwhile, the refugee camp was named the Abai Village, which stands for “Uncle” or “Aged Person,” symbolizing the wisdom of the elders needed in difficult times. Over time it evolved into a cultural center and more recently into a tourist attraction, known for North Korean culinary specialties, like Abai *sundae*, a sausage made from pig intestines stuffed with sweet rice, vegetables and blood, or *ojingeo sundae*, a similarly stuffed squid.

Kim’s children and grandchildren grew up listening to stories about their relatives in villages up north. “One day the two Koreas will unite, and we’ll go home,” Kim says with conviction. “Until then, we mustn’t lose hope.”

 **BUSAN** 

Busan, South Korea's largest port, welcomes us with an evening fireworks cruise that dwarfs the Fourth of July festivities I'm used to, and with Haedong Yonggungsa, a nearly 650-year-old Buddhist temple carved out of a seaside cliff overlooking the waves. As we stroll through Jagalchi Sijang, Busan's endless seafood market, we marvel at live squid and crabs. But the real treat awaits us at at Yeongdo Haenyeo Culture Exhibition Hall, where the seafood we savor is harvested not by trawlers but by human hands.

As we sit down at a table, Yun Yeun Oak, an 80-year-old female freediver, brings out a tray of seafood, naming the delicacies — abalone, squid, sea cucumber. She is a *haenyeo*, which translates as “seawoman,” who can hold her breath for over two minutes while diving 60 feet underwater, foraging for the ocean's bounty. A centuries-old subculture that originated on Jeju Island, haenyeos use an ancient breathing technique called *sumbisori*, passed from mothers to daughters. “I started learning at 8,” the old diver shares, but stresses that she didn't want her daughter to follow her path. “It's too dangerous, and there are better ways to make a living now. So my generation is the last of the haenyeos,” she says.



Namsan Tower, Seoul



Haedong Yonggungsa Temple, Busan



Korean “tree tunnel”



Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul



It's thrilling to uncover so many cultural riches, especially those that may not survive the test of time. Ten years from now, there may not be any seamstresses left.

“Koreans are very dedicated to preserving traditions, but some may cease to exist despite our best efforts,” Hong had told me. We feel so fortunate to experience Korea's kaleidoscope before some of its treasures disappear into history—and I hope others can too. ●