

# Life & Seoul

Get ready to shop until you drop – and party hard. South Korea's capital city is hectic in a friendly, heart-warming way

BY SHARON STEPHENSON



Left: Times Square luxury mall. Middle: Shopping, Gangnam style. Far left: Techno Mart in Guui-dong.



*When we* weren't looking, this city of 24 million reinvented itself as an economic powerhouse



It's 3am on a Monday, a time when only nursing mothers, die-hard clubbers and shift workers are awake.

I'm none of the above, yet I'm trying on jeans, wondering if I'm too old for coloured denim. All around me, locals are busy emptying their wallets. Are we crazy? Quite possibly, but when my guide told me about Seoul's 24-hour shopping culture, I knew I had to see it for myself. Slapped around by jetlag, with sleep nowhere to be found, 3am seems as good a time as any to go shopping.

I'm in Dongdaemun, originally the South Korean capital's east gate, now home to 26 malls, 30,000 speciality shops and 50,000 manufacturers. Like so many in this 24-hour city of K-pop and kimchi, it never closes.

One retailer, whose postage stamp-sized shop is doing a roaring trade, is surprised when I tell her New Zealand doesn't have 24-hour shopping. "But if you're at work all day, when do you shop?" she asks, genuinely perplexed by our weird Western ways.

I've wanted to visit Seoul ever since Mrs Patterson, my primary school teacher, unfurled a map of the Korean peninsula and started bandying around words like Joseon Dynasty, Korean War and the River Han. For most of us, however, Seoul barely bothers our radar: we may talk on Samsung phones, drive Hyundai cars and watch news of South

Korea's ongoing skirmishes with the North on our LG TVs. We might be aware of Koreans' love of fermented vegetables and have kids who know the words to last year's annoyingly catchy Gangnam Style hit song. But while visitors flock to neighbouring Tokyo and Bangkok, Seoul has been slow to tuck itself into tourism's bed. Yet when we weren't looking, this city of 24 million reinvented itself as an economic powerhouse that oozes style and confidence.

Known as the 'The Miracle on the Han' after its rapid post-war rebuilding effort, Seoul is fast emerging as Asia's hidden diamond. It's kinder on the budget than Tokyo and is a much friendlier Beijing. Seoul is the department store of holidays – there's something for everyone under one roof.

We visit Gyeongbokgung Palace – me in my new jeans (black, NZ\$30, the most comfortable I've ever owned) – one of five royal palaces and handily located in the middle of the city. As eight lanes of traffic roar by, we wander through the UNESCO heritage-listed buildings, stone gates and elegant courtyards that have been destroyed and rebuilt several times. If you like your history lessons simple, here goes: the Joseon Dynasty ruled a united Korea from the late 14th century until 1910, with an ideology based on peaceful Confucian principles.

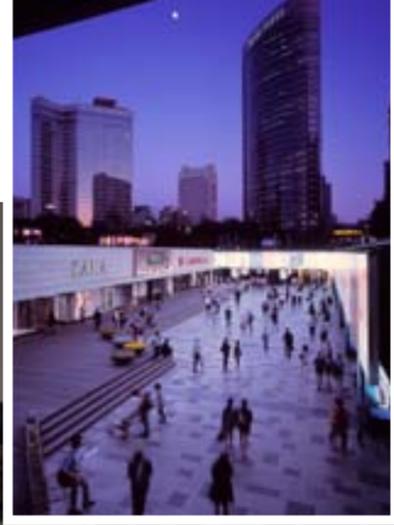
However, that didn't insulate the country from one of the world's most wretched histories, with centuries of slavery and more than 90 invasions by everyone from the Chinese and Japanese to the Mongols. Then came the Korean War, which eventually split the peninsula into Stalinist north and commercial south. Perhaps it's their Confucian beliefs, but the locals seem surprisingly forgiving towards those who've plundered their land.

They even recognise its economic value: the DM (pronounced dee-em-zee), a 4km-wide buffer zone that divides the north and south, is Seoul's number one tourist attraction. An hour's drive from the capital, the most heavily fortified border on the planet is a magnet for visitors eager for a glimpse of the mysterious north. Former US President Bill Clinton called it the "scariest place on earth", and the 250km border is a little surreal. Fortunately, the city fathers have resisted the urge to turn the place into a Cold War theme park; visitors are left with no doubt this is an active war zone where both sides have itchy trigger fingers.

We hand over our passports, put on hard hats and venture underground to the Third Tunnel of Aggression. This invasion route was discovered in 1974 by the South Koreans, who claim the North dug it for a surprise attack. The North denies such a thing. >>



Gyeongbokgung Palace is extra impressive at night. Far right: The gigantic COEX Mall in Gangnam.



*When the sun* goes down, the same energy that's gone into your top-of-the-range smart phone goes into having a good time

Crossing the Han River, which stretches across the city like a fat, grey cat, we embrace Seoul's racing commercialism at Gangnam, the affluent suburb satirised by Psy, the K-pop singer who thrust Seoul onto the global stage. His cheesy grin is plastered on socks, watches, adverts for noodles and the walls of the clean and efficient subway.

It's obvious why Gangnam was a target of ridicule: it's known as the Rodeo Drive of Seoul and shops such as Prada and Louis Vuitton are full of pretty young things whose designer handbags weigh more than them.

Gangnam also has one of the highest concentrations of plastic surgery clinics on the planet. It's said one in five South Korean women have gone under the knife, apparently the highest per capita in the world. "Korean women want to look more 'Western', with big eyes, high noses and slim jaw lines," says our guide, Jenny. "Most Koreans are not born with those features," she adds, before saying she'd love to get her eyes done.

Seoul does food particularly well: open-air stalls outnumber pedestrians. Seoulites are all about social eating, with dishes loaded in the centre of the table and everyone helping themselves. Most popular is bulgogi, beef or pork ribs grilled on charcoal at your table. A common denominator is heat: hot pepper sauce seems to find its way into every dish. There's also no avoiding kimchi, the spicy, fermented cabbage/radish/cucumber dish that's so critical to the Korean diet most Korean houses come with a special kimchi fridge. There are more than 200 varieties and while it may not look, or smell, pretty, you'll endear yourself to the friendly locals if you give kimchi a go.

There is, of course, much that falls into the 'you've got to be kidding me' category. We try sannakji, freshly butchered baby octopus tentacles. It's not easy to swallow the still-writhing flesh, and apparently hundreds of people die of asphyxiation this way each year. At Suwon's Jidong Market, Jenny points out silkworm larvae and cow kneecap soup. South Korea's infamous Mung-Mung Tang (literally woof-woof stew – yes, dog) is more popular in rural areas and in a week of criss-crossing the capital we happily avoid it.

South Koreans are said to work some of the longest hours of any nation, which could explain why they party so hard. When the sun goes down, the same energy that's gone into your top-of-the-range smart phone goes into having a good time. An expat friend calls the locals 'the Irish of Asia', and they do put

away a lot of soju, the national drink. Packing a mule kick, this vodka-like rice liquor can reach 45% alcohol. Fortunately, it's often served with food but after a few shots, it's hard to follow the complex soju rituals (such as not filling your own glass or using two hands to accept a drink as a mark of respect). There are other ways to wet your whistle, such as makgeolli, (a milky, fizzy beverage), fruity bokbunja ju (think sangria) or oddly addictive potions distilled from ginseng, mushrooms and other vegetables.

The next morning we try a Seoul favourite, hangover soup. The local equivalent of a fry-up, it contains beef broth, congealed ox blood and cabbage. Not being carnivorous, I pass but my companions tell me it's like so much in this city – unexpected, slightly bewildering, but perfect. □

### What the locals know

- When bargaining, if a price is posted, it generally isn't open for negotiation. If paying in cash, ask about a cash price – using a credit card will add a percentage to the final sum. Department stores won't charge extra but you won't be able to haggle.
- You'll either love or hate Korean pop (K-pop) music, but there's no avoiding it. It's worth \$5 billion to the economy, and *Time Magazine* calls it "South Korea's greatest export".
- The language barrier isn't too high, but don't be surprised if the locals mistake you for an English language teacher and want to practise their conversational skills with you.
- Don't miss tteokbokki, spicy stir-fried rice cakes smothered in hot red pepper sauce. The hot chips of Seoul, they are sold at every food stall and are eaten standing up. And in the neighbourhood of Sindang numerous restaurants serve their own riff on this humble dish.
- Shopping is a contact sport in Seoul and the best place to see the action is at COEX, Asia's biggest underground mall. As well as the convention centres and exhibition halls that give the mall its name, there are hundreds of shops, two food courts, an aquarium, cinemas and a museum dedicated to kimchi, Korea's national dish.
- Korean Air ([www.koreanair.co.nz](http://www.koreanair.co.nz)) flies Auckland to Seoul four times a week.

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