

INFRASTRUCTURE



South Korea's bike paths are amongst the best in the world (if not actually the best!).

That's a bold claim as I haven't

travelled everywhere in the world (yet!). The Korean government has invested quietly (well to the rest of the world anyway) over the last few years, huge sums in improving and building over 2,500km of bike paths across the country – and this is not just painting markings on existing roads which is laughably what many countries think is investment in cycling.



This investment was largely part of the Four Rivers project that had the laudable aims of ensuring water security, controlling floods and droughts and optimizing conditions for food production. Whatever the environmental merits of this enormous undertaking (there have been many detractors), opening up the countryside for recreational use and access has rightly allowed Korea to show off its spectacular scenery, landscape and culture to locals and the rest of the world. And they are still building – the east coast path is scheduled to open in 2015.

Approximately 70% of the network is completely separated from roads with the remainder mainly being quiet country roads – the result being that is quiet and peaceful with rarely a car in sight. You regularly come across fellow cyclists doing the same routes. The paths are wide with smooth paved surfaces and are mostly adjacent to Korea's magnificent rivers, which means they are generally flat. Even when you move from one river valley to another the paths are joined seamlessly, although there are some hilly sections particularly in the central regions of the country. But don't we all love a bit of variety on our tours?!

Over 50 million people live in Korea and the population density is quite high - similar to the Netherlands. However riding along the bike paths you'd be forgiven for forgetting this – even though you could be quite close to a large town or city. This also means that another important aspect of cycle touring is relatively accessible most of the time – of course I mean food and accommodation. Obviously the further you are from Seoul and other big cities the further you will have to go to find these facilities – however there are cafés and convenience stores aplenty. To make this even attractive, food and accommodation are relatively inexpensive compared to other developed countries that attract far more touring cyclists.



In Seoul, like other big cities around the world, it is a challenge to maintain this fantastic infrastructure and network with all the competing uses for space and facilities. However the Han River, its tributaries and the canals all have great bike paths alongside, usually on both banks. This makes the city very accessible and traversable by bike – and you do see a lot of Koreans out riding. An interesting fact is that many locals wear scarves or masks over their faces – this is partly due to the smog over the city but probably more to do with the cultural desire to avoid the sun and keep their skin as fair as possible.

Water is the single most important requirement for cyclists out on the road. Fortunately this is provided free (and often chilled) at numerous locations such as cafés and service stations. You definitely get the impression that

cyclists are welcomed in Korea with open arms and are good for the economy. To paraphrase a line from a popular movie - if you build it, they will come! This applies to cyclists and facilities to service them – on our tour we stopped several times a day to stock up on snacks, drinks and ice-cream or even just to have a coffee or chill out (this was in the summer which may not be the best time for travelling).

Other cyclists' requirements such as internet and Wi-Fi are catered for quite well although out in the country reception is more sporadic – however Korea (the home of Samsung!) is the most connected country in the world with the best broadband speeds.

So given all this praise and plaudits, are there any downsides? In my opinion probably not – communication is an issue as English is not commonly spoken and signs and information are often in Korean only. But then, why not? We come as guests to their country to experience Korea – and that is why we use a guide! There will always be people who want more from their destination but I believe too much convenience and ease take away from the exploration and discovery that make touring exciting and interesting. Korea strikes a good balance and I have no hesitation in recommending it as a cycle touring destination – I can't wait to go back!

[The author was a guest of bikeOasis and the Korean Tourism Organization]

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