



## THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY: A BIKE TOUR IN KOREA



The time is finally here. We land at Incheon airport at 6am and are met at the gate by a friendly guide from [bikeOasis](#) holding a sign – a nice welcome and a great help given we'd just come off a long overnight flight and are not quite ready to take on a new city.

The trip to the hotel takes nearly an hour and there we meet the rest of the group who flew in the previous day. The tour officially starts after lunch with a city tour (not on bikes). However with a few hours to kill, what better way to recover from a tiring flight than at a traditional Korean bathhouse (jimjilbang). A soak in pools of different temperatures, in a gender-segregated area, is followed by chilling out downstairs (metaphorically speaking, although there is an ice room available).

Lunch is at the Gwangjang Market, the first of many culinary experiences over the next week. The oldest market in Seoul, Gwangjang at lunchtime is mostly about food but later on, and round-the-clock, the many clothing stores become the focus. A short taxi ride away we get to Gyeongbok Palace, the oldest and grandest of Seoul's five palaces. An interesting guided tour means that we missed the hourly changing of the guard outside. However particularly memorable were the guide's pride in the underfloor heating and chimneys used

by royalty for centuries, and the number of Korean tourists, some in traditional dress like the guide, who were using selfie sticks with their smartphones!

On to Insa-dong, a busy precinct popular with tourists and a great place for shopping, eating, or just hanging out till dinnertime. The welcome dinner was Bulgogi (a delicious marinated beef dish) washed down by a personal favourite, somac (a mixture of soju and beer). Then back to the hotel by subway for a good night's sleep before the cycling begins.

The next morning we get set up with bikes and head off along the bike paths down to the Han River. It is a warm sunny day with the first blush of autumn colour just starting to hit the trees. The official bike path stretches all the way to Busan, over 600km to the south-east. Today being a perfect autumn Sunday, the path is very busy until quite a distance from the city. It is immensely satisfying to see the excellent and well thought-out cycling infrastructure being so well used.

For the most part the paths are wide and follow the river, they are segregated and usually far from road traffic. When you do leave the river it is often on converted rail trails – including sometimes amazing tunnels. However the infrastructure is more than paths; toilet blocks are found at frequent intervals (at least near urban areas) as are cafés that cater almost exclusively to cyclists. Most cafés and convenience stores will have freely available drinking water that is a lifesaver on long rides.

Not specifically aimed at cyclists, but often located on or near bike paths, is a network of excellent local restaurants. One of the key features of this tour is the range and quality of dining experiences and amazing Korean food. We are given as broad a menu as possible our limited time in Korea - favourites included Chogyeguksu (Vinegar Chicken), Dakgalbi and the ever-popular Bibimbap. Sundae (blood sausage) appealed to more adventurous tastes and the ubiquitous kimchi (fermented vegetables) was served with almost every meal, even breakfast. Part of the dining experience, at least in more traditional restaurants, involved sitting cross-legged at a low table - perhaps not as comfortable as it sounds.



Tradition and heritage are a big focus on the tour and something Korea can rightly be proud of. The cycling is great, but even better is being able to travel and see sights at your own pace – not amongst hordes of tourists just descended from their coaches for a limited amount of time before moving on to the next spot.

The popular Dasan Heritage Site commemorates a prolific 19th century scholar, author and inventor. Danom Confucian School has existed for several centuries, despite several rebuilds, and still has students – although today it was deserted and serene on the hillside. One sunny but cold morning we visit Silleuksa Buddhist Temple dating from the Silla dynasty (6th century). Early morning was a peaceful and picturesque time to visit – we just missed a large, and loud, school group.

More contemporary stops included the very popular Sangju Bicycle Museum, and Chungju's Liquoreum. Both of these showcase exhibits from Korea and around the world. As does the Hahoe Mask Museum, but back on the theme of tradition and culture. We see the Korean side of this in action at a Mask Dance performance at a nearby packed-out outdoor theatre.

Hahoe Folk Village in Andong occupies two days towards the end of the tour. The village has been in the hands of the Ryu clan for centuries and we enjoy a guided tour from one of their number. Today tourism is the main support for this beautiful village with many houses or hanoks now available as tourist accommodation.

The hanok is truly traditional with a number of rooms, including a shared bathroom, grouped around an open courtyard. Common to these and all traditional style buildings in Korea, you take off your shoes at the entrance. The bedrooms were small with pasted paper doors and wooden floors, where you sleep on one or more quilts. The best part was the ondol, or underfloor heating, which kept the room toasty warm. Flavoursome meals, endemic to the area, were at a separate but equally quaint hanok.

Some free time in Hahoe allowed us to explore the area, including a cliff walk a short ferry ride across the river. The climb was easy and views were magnificent with the village laid out below. Some chose to ride bikes around the village and explore nearby restaurants and souvenir shops, while others just took in the beautiful autumn day relaxing with a good book.

The final day was mainly taken up by a four-hour bus ride back to Seoul, but before that was a trip to the Andong Hot Springs and Spa. This was similar to the bathhouse in Seoul, but better, and included naturally heated outdoor pools. An excellent way to unwind after covering 350km over 5 days in the saddle.

We got back to Seoul a bit ahead of schedule - our trusty tour guide, Eddie, was still with us and took us to the War Memorial where we wandered through the grounds that contained planes, tanks and equipment from and since the Korean War. This is a large site worthy of a longer visit – we didn't even venture inside the enormous building.

Other things will keep for next time too, including the demilitarized zone to the north and Jeju Island and Busan in the south. Even the route we covered constantly varies. We met the group doing the tour the following week and gave them some pointers but, with some wet weather and more advanced autumn colours, their experiences would have been quite different.

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