

Seoul: Trains, fast cell service, palaces, and food

By Amir Bibawy
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's hyper-efficient capital doesn't immediately spring to mind when you think of exotic Asian destinations. But this megacity offers much to tempt travellers beyond a layover from the ultra-modern international airport in nearby Incheon. One can explore Korea's rich historic heritage visiting temples and palaces, wandering around the enormous National Museum of Korea, and savoring the delights of its surprisingly varied cuisine.

As in Tokyo and Hong Kong, Seoul's transportation network puts most European and North American cities to shame. A Seoul City Pass Plus card can be used not only on the trains, which run both under and above ground, but also on busses and even taxis. It's also accepted for payment at many tourist sites and convenience shops, offering discounts on some tours and museum admissions.

High on your list will be one or two of Seoul's five palaces. Most guidebooks recommend Gyeongbok-gung, the grandest of all of them. But I headed to Changdeok-gung, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, instead. The sprawling palace grounds can only be visited on guided tours; check the schedule to make sure you catch a tour in the right language. There's one tour of the famous gardens and another of palace buildings.

Strategically and culturally, Korea is wedged between East Asia's superpowers, Japan and China. While travelling around Seoul, you'll understand the intricate connections among the three countries. Many links are evident in the collection at the National Museum of Korea, a must for those seeking to go beneath Seoul's veneer of technology and learn about the country's history.

The museum, the largest in area in Asia and sixth-largest in the world, is suitably impressive from the outside, with a futuristic architectural design that pays tribute to Korea's modernization. Inside, many of the more than 300,000 pieces are designated National Treasures of Korea. The building design utilizes natural light



HISTORIC HERITAGE. Food stalls are seen at Seoul's popular Gwangjang Market, where some of the best dishes in the Korean capital are offered at cheap prices to tourists and locals alike. Seoul's hyper-efficient capital draws visitors with its exquisite restaurants, historic palaces, and ultramodern infrastructure. (AP Photo/Amir Bibawy)

from the Japanese room-temperature tradition.

For traditional Korean food beyond the market, skip Korea House — it's touristy and expensive. Do venture into one of the tent restaurants that serve food late into the night in popular nightlife districts. And get your fix of *bibimbap* — a rice dish with vegetables, egg, meat, and chili or soy sauce served all over the city — along with a traditional seafood stew, which is hearty and warm.

Bukchon Village, a neighborhood of traditional Korean houses with slanted roofs, is a nice place to stroll. The area is flanked by two palaces, and dotted with chic boutiques and cafés.

One striking thing you'll notice is that Seoul's residents are glued to their cellphones — usually Samsung or LG, brands that have played a role in Korea's strong economy. During my visit last winter, everyone was streaming the Olympic games live on cellphones on the subway — a testament to how fast and reliable the 4G network is. Even my American phone worked faster there than in New York.

Finally, don't leave Seoul without venturing up to the N Seoul Tower, the city's highest tourist point, offering a view from the top at nearly 1,600 feet above sea level. You can hike through Namsan Park, Seoul's Central Park, to the base of the tower, or take a cable car up. It's busy at dusk, but it is a nice time to watch as the city below you transforms into a stunning and colorful display of lights.

in many galleries, which makes it easy to explore for hours without that stuck-in-a-vault feeling of a big museum.

Highlights of the museum include Buddhist bells on the third floor (one each from Korea, China, and Japan) and the piece-de-resistance, the Ten-Story Pagoda — a unique marble structure built in the 14th century — looming over the ground floor. It was taken to Japan before World War II (Japan occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945), but was returned to Korea in 1960, disassembled. It's been painstakingly restored and is an enduring symbol of an architectural style little-known outside the country.

Koreans love to shop and there's nowhere better for it than the pedestrian shopping district of Myeong-dong, where I stayed. Streets are lined with brand-name stores (both Korean and western) open late into the night. It also has countless restaurants and cafés. On my first night there, I ventured out to find a restaurant near my hotel and nearly had a panic attack. There were so many choices, but none familiar to me, though I'd gone to many Korean restaurants in New York.

I ended up in a brightly-lit place that was almost ready to close. I pointed out a few menu items and a hot barbecue top was turned on at my table, ingredients meticulously lined up to cook. I tried to stir them together but the waitress,

half-amused but also stern about my culinary ineptitude, took the ladle from my hand and set it aside. "Needs to cook more," she mumbled. Every time I tried to touch the food with my chopsticks, other diners looked on with amusement. Clearly, I had no idea what I was doing. Mercifully, the waitress ultimately came over and stirred up a delightful chicken and vegetable dish with rice. I added *kimchi* from the buffet.

Another essential stop is Gwangjang Market, which bustles with street food vendors and little restaurant shacks in the evening when its shops have closed. Locals go there for Korean pancakes made from mung beans called *bindaeddeok* and cheap street food. I opted for one of the ubiquitous dumpling soup places, where for about \$5 you get a huge bowl of steaming soup with pork dumplings, freshly made before your eyes. In winter, the stall benches are even heated. On my second visit to the market, I had sashimi and rice wine. The sashimi was near frozen, a common way of serving it and different



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6	4			8				
		7		1				
9			4					7
		6	1				5	
	9						4	
	8			6	9			
3				7				6
			8		5			
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Difficulty level: Hard #64871

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last week's puzzle

Puzzle #51442 (Medium)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

5	3	7	2	8	1	6	9	4
9	4	2	7	6	3	1	8	5
8	6	1	9	4	5	2	3	7
4	9	6	5	2	8	3	7	1
3	2	8	6	1	7	4	5	9
1	7	5	3	9	4	8	6	2
2	5	3	4	7	6	9	1	8
7	1	9	8	3	2	5	4	6
6	8	4	1	5	9	7	2	3



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