

A South Korean Experience: Field Guide of an Habitual Depressoid

**Alex Ritson
York University
Toronto, Canada**



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Reflection has been a big part of my life lately and I usually find writing therapeutic so I'm hoping that there will be vindication or catharsis waiting somewhere at the end of this. By way of introduction, I'll start with a bit of personal stock-taking then reflect on the already hazy dream that Seoul is becoming, before trying to understand the effects this summer has had on me.

Before Beginning a Journey

The first thing you need to know about me is that I'm ready for anything. I get anxious from routine and staying in one place for too long starts to smother me. Immersing myself in a new experience is how I learn best; and in turn, engaging with the unknown brings out the best in me.

I find it so much easier to travel somewhere new and interact with strangers than maintain the relationships in my semi-charmed life. Interactions that are transient invigorate me while the people I love and who love me have the tendency to drown me.

This comes from a place that is very low. Usually I can counterbalance melancholia with optimism, but sometimes I can't find that equilibrium. So depression notwithstanding I'm still here, trying to make these words count.

I'll be twenty-five in less than two weeks. The York University study abroad course that took me to Seoul for a month this summer is the most recent in a series of escapist episodes that seem to characterize my life. No one called it running away when I changed majors, or quit school, not even when I changed back to majoring in English – three schools in twice as many years and a soft footrace between Art and Literature vying for my attention. I allowed myself to be self-indulgent. I still allow it.

So it was with aimless desperation that I found new hope enrolling in a South Korean Political Science course. *I like politics and travel and independence*, I thought enthusiastically. *I'm not a Political Science major, but I could be! It's just a synthesis of history and civics – I love history!* Korea quickly became an escape route: something to look forward to and keep me from slipping into a dark valley of apathy. Anticipation kept me buoyant because every experience has something to offer; and, because everything teaches if you pay attention.

Getting Acclimatized

The first thing you have to do when you get to Seoul is pick a subway station. Transit is cheap and efficient so getting anywhere around a city that is frankly gargantuan is both accessible and straightforward.

Day one; pick a station. Then just take the train to any point and explore the city above you. Every station has something worthwhile to offer.

A blend of architectural beauty and space age fantasy can be found at the Dongdaemun Culture Park. Travel back into international sporting history by spending an afternoon beneath the concrete wings and waving flags of Seoul's Olympic Park. The city makes allowances for all the sacred spaces that the past (Gyeongbokgung Palace), the present (City Hall), or the future (Digital Media City) could possibly require. No matter where I lost myself, I was never disappointed.



Hongik University subway station

When I arrived in Seoul, I felt safe immediately. I've travelled a fair bit and have never felt that sense of complete security so quickly. Being a night owl, the freedom to explore a city after dark – even as late as 3 or 4 in the morning – was a luxury.

Every moment of the day was spent traversing a city that perfectly complements the natural hills on which it was built. Perhaps the reason structures within Seoul tend to err on the side of massive is the society that birthed them: one that looks to the mountains for power and instills in its citizens a hunger to strive for industrial perfection.

Travelling for Business

It is *chaebols*, the family owned companies that have made their nation both economically viable and internationally competitive (especially in technological development and the automotive industry), which hold the greatest amount of power within South Korea. The influence of national mainstays like Samsung, LG, Kia and Hyundai are ubiquitous, literally branding the metropolis.

Advertising and corporate ownership in Seoul are nearly impossible to escape. The city is like Disney World, every inch trademarked and accounted for in ledgers on high. North American style corporatization at least offers some facsimile of disguise with interconnected chains and massive conglomerates lazily pretending at independent ownership.

But in Korea, there is no pretense. Settle into your brand new condo that a Samsung-controlled construction company built – after the company lobbied for lax housing codes to reduce their costs. And take a look out your window at that view, the Samsung logo emblazoned at 50 storeys on your concrete.

I come from a family of accountants and entrepreneurs, so I can't wholly condemn a capitalist society. Eventually though, that continued economic growth will have to falter, and for a country that has suffered financial crisis within the last 20 years and had to build itself up from nothing less than a century ago, it's hard to recommend continued traversal along a path that offers such unsure footing.

The most prevalent example of how much national tech giants permeate South Korean society is in the pocket of every citizen. In the streets, everyone is plugged in to their smartphone. Wi-Fi is virtually everywhere, so people are constantly on their devices. The subway is filled with hunched shoulders and lowered gazes. Commuters of all ages are completely engrossed, intent on their live streaming video feeds, groupchats or reaching the next level of Soda Saga.

Travelling for Pleasure

One of the central facets of South Korean society I had to keep reminding myself about is its homogeneity. Before travelling to Seoul, I thought about this uniformity in only the loosest sense. Coming from Western culture where individuality is encouraged and celebrated (though not often achieved), I found the city a stark contrast. It was one thing to hear about having a national expectation to live within a predetermined trajectory, but it was quite another to observe it firsthand and hear about it from the young people I met.

Fashion is paramount in Korea, with rapidly changing trends and styles. Everyone maintains an appearance that is intensely personalized while simultaneously being completely anonymous.

You see a girl with socks under her platform sandals, and before you know it you've seen a dozen girls just like her: all identical, like a repeating background graphic in a video game. And it truly is impossible to escape the societal expectations placed on physical attractiveness and the ideal definition of beauty.

It is possible to walk down a street lined only with hairdressers. Pedestrians are constantly inundated by storefronts stocked with face masks and whitening cream, boutiques that feign exclusivity but offer the exact selection of clothing and footwear as every other. South Koreans are so vanity-obsessed that Seoul is known as the plastic surgery capital of the world.

Youth is worshipped. Celebrities dictate what products are popular via personal endorsement. Couples are inseparable, declaring their fidelity with carefully coordinated outfits.

When young Seoulites are through with a rigorous day of study or work, they turn to the other major pastime of their demographic: drinking. Clubs, soju houses and late night Korean barbecue are just some of the options while barhopping in hip neighbourhoods like Gangnam or Sinchon.

Food and drink are huge elements of an active social life. Restaurants keep late hours and lure patrons inside with streetside banners and menus. A classmate told me that something called restaurant-hopping was popular, which is exactly what it sounds like: sitting down for a meal at several different eateries over the course of a single evening.



The Ideal Way to Spend Buddha's Birthday

On April 8th of every lunar calendar year falls the observance of Buddha's birth in Seoul. Temples around the city string lanterns across their courtyards to honour the figure whose teachings were the foundation for Buddhism. There are many lantern festivals held worldwide and many different ways in which Buddhists choose to recognize the holiday, but it was truly an ethereal evening I spent visiting Bongwonsa Temple on May 25th – the Gregorian calendar day that recognized the celebration this year.

There is a ceremonial quality to most things in South Korea. For a country set on pioneering the future, there is a reverence for the past that underlies many practices. The air crackled with magic as I began to ascend the hill that is home to Bongwonsa, which lies nestled at the entrance of a picturesque forest.

Dusk began to fall as I climbed higher, past a small cemetery dotted with ornately carved headstones and other pilgrims on the roadside, the spell of spirit magic weaving itself further around me as the trappings of the city dropped away. I can't claim an affinity for religion, but ghosts and magic live in everything.

I only had a general sense of where the temple was situated, but the music emanating from above guided me up the hillside. That and a string of lanterns pulling me along the road. Just past the threshold of the temple's gate the sky was eclipsed by a canopy of lanterns: orderly, coloured rows that glowed faintly in the sunset and more brightly as darkness fell. Standing unobtrusively at the back of some arranged folding chairs I watched performances of dance and music take place in the open space that had been created before them.

After a few moments a woman noticed me behind her and approached. She was older, in her fifties probably. It didn't seem like she spoke English because she didn't say anything. But she didn't need to. She smiled and I smiled. There is a warmth that burns bright inside when you achieve that perfect harmonization between you and another human being to which spoken language would contribute nothing, only stumble and falter in clumsy inadequacy. She offered me a lantern, torn on one side, bright pink, indicating that I should take it. Hesitation froze me before I remembered to live in the moment, taking the lantern gingerly, a smile of thanks passing my lips before she turned and disappeared into the crowd from whence she had arisen.

Lantern in hand I took a slow turn around back of the main pavilion where there was no



Mural at Bongwonsa Temple

one. In solitude I watched the sun sink to the horizon, illuminating the glass edifices of the city as framed by trees and the plain houses that dotted the decline back into urban chaos.

Everywhere in Seoul confronts you with the dichotomy of old and new, juxtaposing elements that are at odds while also managing to showcase the happy symbiosis of those relationships.

There is a lot to be said for experiences that don't cost anything. There is plenty in Seoul to entice travellers desirous of no more than introspection and a reminder that the natural world looms larger than any manufactured beauty. Some journeys require money, whereas others demand only your patience and quietude.

Live and Learn

The sights and sounds of the Noryangjin Seafood Market were the last sensations I experienced before my return home. I'd been dying to go the whole time I'd been in Seoul, but the timing just kept getting away from me.

As the last week and a half rushed by, I made more time for outings with my classmates and less time for the solitary outings of exploration I had favoured during my first two

weeks in Seoul. And so it was that I made my timely visit to Noryangjin Seafood Market hours before my flight back to Toronto.

I had been warned more than once that as a Caucasian traveller in Korea, I was visually distinct and therefore immediately recognizable as an outsider. For the entire month I spent in Seoul I never once was made to feel that difference or that I was intruding someplace I didn't belong. In fairness, my personal travels had only taken me around the capital, to areas frequented by tourists and locations where it was not surprising to see foreigners. And admittedly, I arrived to the fish market hardly dressed for mucking about a concrete warehouse inch deep in shellfish runoff and wet cardboard. It was that half hour spent amid Noryangjin's colourful stalls that finally broke the spell.

Falling back through the looking glass took no time at all. Maybe I forced myself to see the looks I had been getting all along. They were from different faces, but the expression was born of a hive mind. *Outsider*, they accused. And I felt my fantasy life dry up.

At the time, my trip to Noryangjin left little in the way of lasting impressions, aside from the distinct olfactory remnants of *eau de daily catch* that still clung to my sweater. But thinking back now, I *had* to peel back that veneer. Whether the memory of those accusatory glances is real or imagined, I honestly can't say. I do know one thing. If the happiness I'd been filled with since setting foot in Seoul hadn't been replaced with uneasy discord, how could I ever have left?



Noryangjin Seafood Market

When I described South Korea as a vessel for an escape from the reality of my life in Toronto it was only a half-truth. The rest of the story is that there's always been a part of me that daydreamed about picking up and starting over in a new place; a place so different from where I had come from that joy would be able to find me this time. I would be a different person. A happy person. When prolonged satisfaction is so illusory it would have been difficult to leave a place that had woven itself so skillfully into the viscera of my body without first weakening those ties.

So what is the truth? My experiences from this course are priceless and provided the kind of educational value a person would be hard pressed to acquire during a year of theoretical study. But did my summer abroad arise from the coward in me beating a hasty retreat from the unfinished business in my life or the siren call of the impassioned adventurer's heart that lives in my breast?

I don't think there's an answer in here. Existing on both sides of a coin keeps you hidden from yourself. And I don't know if I'm ready to find out who I am just yet, but I do know there's nowhere left for me to run right now.