

Land of morning calm



An-nyong-ha-se-yo!

Hello! Welcome to Korea, a country fondly referred to as the "Chosôn" nation, or "Land of Morning Calm," because of its spectacular mornings.

A very spiritual nation, South Korea reflects a heritage that has well preserved much of its ancestry while having become a thriving trade metropolis on the international scene. Wherever you go in South Korea, you are reminded that Koreans take pride in their heritage and value preserving history.

But before you set foot on this exotic and diversified homeland, you'll need to understand a little about this fascinating country.

Korea rests on a peninsula on the northeastern section of the Asian continent and is bordered by thousands of islands. To the north is China and Russia with neighboring Japan to the east.

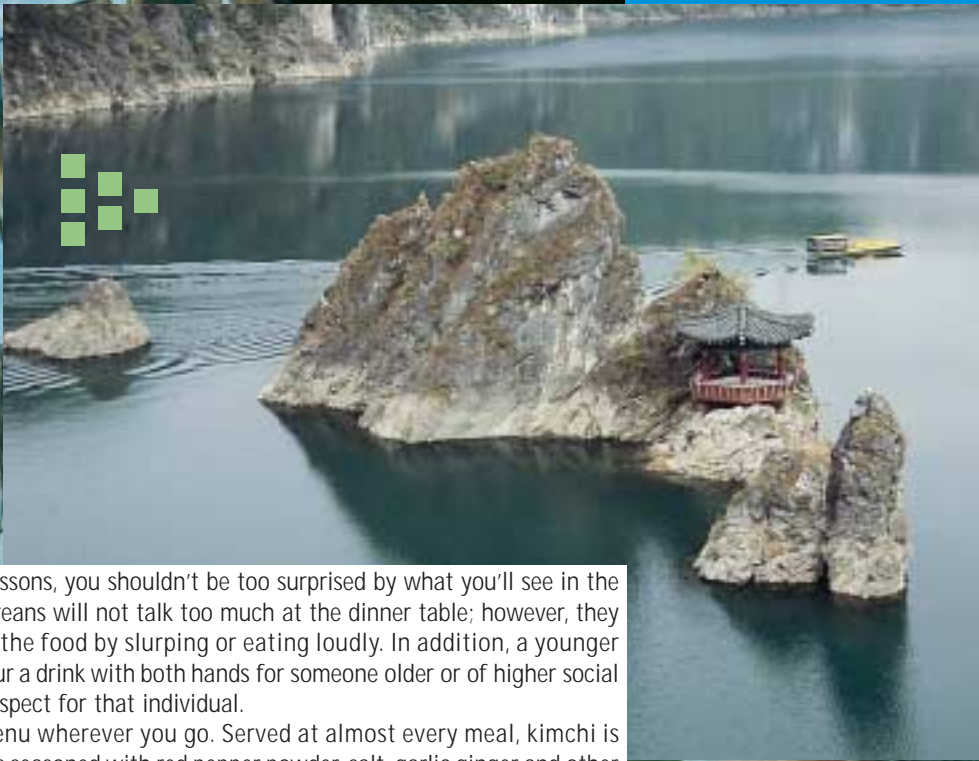
The country has a temperate monsoon climate with four seasons. Winter's hold on the peninsula is caused by the cold Siberian high pressure system that rests over the peninsula, while the summer heat and humidity are intermingled with 30 days and nights of rain beginning in late June. Typhoon season follows on the heels of raining season and lasts until September. That leaves the spring and autumn to enjoy the peninsula and its host of islands.

But before you venture out into the countryside, take a free course in basic Korean. And while you are at it, learn some cultural necessities, such as how to properly greet others and how to behave at dinner gatherings.

Whether you are told or you learn later on your own, you'll soon discover that it is customary for Korean friends to stand close together when talking or walking, and often to touch one another or hold hands. This is a sign of friendliness. In addition, you will learn that since Koreans sit, eat and sleep on the floor of their homes and prefer to have visitors remove their shoes before entering their home. It's preferable to pad around in stockings or socks in a home.

To try out your new language and etiquette, you should venture beyond the boundaries of the base to the local *shikdang* (small Korean restaurant) or an expensive formal restaurant.





And after your cultural lessons, you shouldn't be too surprised by what you'll see in the restaurant. For example, Koreans will not talk too much at the dinner table; however, they will show appreciation for the food by slurping or eating loudly. In addition, a younger individual will graciously pour a drink with both hands for someone older or of higher social status. This demonstrates respect for that individual.

Kimchi will be on the menu wherever you go. Served at almost every meal, kimchi is typically cabbage or radishes seasoned with red pepper powder, salt, garlic ginger and other flavors served with steamed rice (pap). There are many different varieties of kimchi, including *kkaktugi* (chopped radish kimchi), *chonggak* (ponytail radish kimchi) and *yolmumul* (summer green water kimchi is often served as a refreshing meal when it's hot).

If you don't have the time or money for a full meal, the *pojangmacha* (street vendor) is one of the best places to grab a bite or spend an evening drinking with friends. They offer a smorgasbord of food on sticks and finger foods eaten with chopsticks or toothpicks.

One of the most popular "fast" foods you will find is *pulgogi* or *bulgogi*, which is Korean barbecue. It is marinated beef cooked over a charcoal grill. It is eaten alone or with slices of fresh garlic and green pepper and a dab of soybean or red pepper paste or both.

Another favorite street food is *pindaettok*, a mung bean pancake that is cooked and served piping hot off the griddle and usually filled with ground meat, chilies, bean sprouts and fresh coriander.

Other popular dishes include *mandu* (a meat-filled dumpling that is fried or steamed), *kalbi* (short ribs barbecued or braised in soy sauce), and *gimbap* (also spelled *kimbap*, it is a readily available meal of cooked rice spread over dried seaweed with thin slices of meat or vegetables over the top and cut like *sushi*).

And if you expect to top off your meal with a *sundae*, the only word on the menu you might recognize, other than kimchi, you will be unpleasantly surprised if you expect whipcream, nuts and a cherry on top. Instead, you will be presented with a toothpick inserted in Korean sausage stuffed with rice, green onions, garlic and other ingredients.

You'll need to really do some exploring if you want to get to know this country for more than its food. From well-forested national parks and Seoul's sprawling metropolitan area in the north, to pristine, wide beaches along its coasts, to romantic island getaways on Cheju-Do Island south of the mainland, South Korea packs a lot into its peninsula and beyond, and almost any destination can be reached in an hour or less by air from any other part of the peninsula.

And while you are visiting the country's fabulous palaces, pagodas and scenic coastline, don't miss the opportunity to experience some of Korea's more popular festivals and ceremonies.

The *Chimjam-rye*, or Royal Silk Festival (Queen's Silkwork Feeding Ceremony) dates back to the days when the Queen held a ceremony in Changdeok to bless and encourage the country's silk industry. The festival involved her gathering the mulberry leaves, feeding the silkworms and presenting the best silk to the King. After more than 70 years, the festival has been revived at Gyeongbok Palace, Gangnyong-jeon, and includes people celebrating the King and Queen by giving them silkworms.



If you happen to be in Unhyeon Palace, Unni-dong, Chongno-gu, Seoul, on the right Saturday in the spring or autumn, you can witness a re-enactment of the wedding between King Kojong and Queen Consort Myongsong.

Or if you are traveling on Buddha's birthday (the eighth and fourth lunar month each year) you get to see the countryside all aglow. Thousands of Buddhists hang lotus lanterns of various colors outside their homes. In addition, the celebration is extended to downtown Seoul where the Lantern Parade is held.

One of the more intriguing festivals to see is the Korean version of Moses' parting the Red Sea. Each spring on Chindo Island the sea parts due to the low tide. Consequently, people can walk across a land bridge to nearby Modo Island.

Of, if you are lucky, you might happen upon the Kwangsan Kossaum Nori Festival. In the most popular competition of the festival, the Kossaum Nori, two teams from separate villages heave a large wood and straw frame onto their shoulders and push it into their opponent's framework. The team that knocks off the other's "general" wins the glory.

Some celebrations are held just strictly between family members, such as *tol*, or a baby's first birthday. At *tol*, a baby is dressed in specific attire called *hanbok* with either a vest or hood over it (for boys) or an overgarment resembling the robes worn by women of the court. Interestingly, during the celebration the baby is placed near an assortment of objects ranging from thread to ink to arrows and daggers. It is believed that whatever the baby grabs for first is what is destined for the child. If he picks up the thread first, it signifies a long life. If it's an arrow or dagger, he will be soldier. If it's rice or money, the baby will be wealthy.

As with most celebrations, guests are presented with rice cakes when *tol* is over. This in itself is very significant. In fact, rice cakes themselves are an important aspect of this highly spiritual nation and are also handed out at *honryae* (a wedding ceremony), *hwaegap* (a person's 60th birthday), and *baek-il* (a person's 100th birthday). In addition, rice cakes have been used as fortune telling portals in times past. Fortune tellers could read the future based on the shape of the boiled rice cakes. Those with well-cooked cakes would have the best fortunes. *Deokjum* (fortune rice cake) were used to predict such important matters as the sex of an unborn child.

The nation also attributes much importance to ancient patterns and symbols. The patterns represent such themes as love, happiness and good fortune.

Not surprising, money is revered as a symbol of the most precious possession one can have. From this reverence came the Korean custom of parents giving money to their children in the hopes of expelling bad ghosts.

Other symbols of importance that are derived from nature include the peacock, which represents nine virtues such as a clear voice, careful walk and tidy face; the pine tree, which represents longevity; the cat, which expels evil spirits and represents longevity (nine lives comes to mind), and the butterfly, which represents free love and happiness.

But regardless of where you go or how long your tour is, each day you'll be reminded of how this beautiful country earned its nickname as the "Chosŏn" nation.

