Discoveries of Korea

"Korea holds a great deal of interest for veteran travelers and newcomers alike. Many parts of the country are virtually untouched and just beckoning to be explored. My reasons for coming here largely stemmed from a keen desire to get out of my comfort zone and quiet my nagging wanderlust.
I hadn't counted on falling in love with the culture here, nor did I ever anticipate the warm reception I would receive throughout my time here."
— from *Seoul, Football and an Undying Passion*

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Discoveries of Korea 20 Expats' Tales

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Korean Culture and Information Service
Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism

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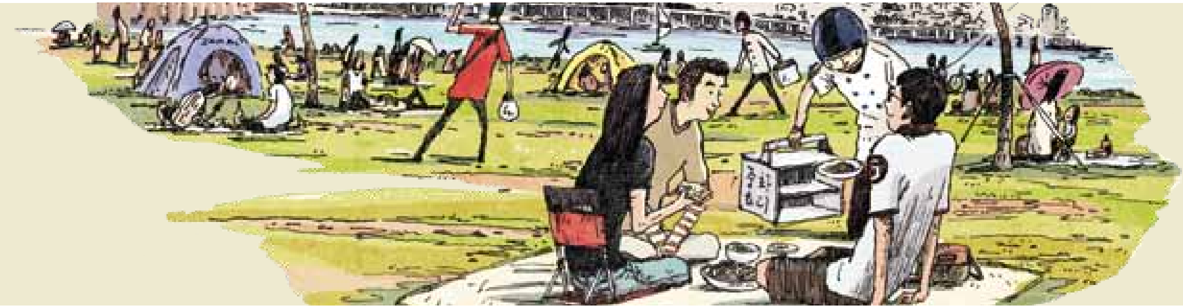

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Introduction

This book is a compilation of the "My Korea" articles as published in KOREA magazine from February 2010 to September 2011. Each of the stories is written by expatriates living in Korea and introduces an aspect of the local culture from a unique point of view. KOREA, which seeks to promote the country overseas, is sponsored by the Korean Culture and Information Service.

Discoveries of Korea

20 Expats' Tales

Singin' in the ROOM

Noraebang Nights

The sternest
of middle-aged
office managers
transform into
louche rockers
and heartfelt
crooners
in the accepting
spaces of
Korea's
karaoke
rooms.

Ask a Korean the biggest cultural oddities facing a Westerner in his country, and you will likely hear a commentary on terrifyingly spicy food, unfailing reverence for the elderly or the perils of trying to master chopsticks. Ask a Westerner, however, and the list transforms. What the heck is with these devil-may-care drivers? They will demand.

Why do older people barge through me as if I don't exist? And how can Koreans gather in a small room, and sing and dance with complete abandon? True enough, karaoke, or *noraebang* (literally "song room") as it is known here, is one of those oddities, but it is far from unique to Korea. My earliest brush with it actually took place in Hong Kong, where I lived and worked for three years in the mid-'90s.

My first time, as such things tend to be, was unforgettable. Though a lifelong lover of rock and pop music, and a passionate shower singer, I had never for a second countenanced going out with friends to a karaoke bar, much less singing at one. After much prompting, and emboldened by generous amounts of beer, I finally summoned the courage to unleash my debut song — ABBA's *Dancing Queen*, if memory serves — on an expectant public. Gradually shedding my stiff British reserve, my voice grew from a timid crackle to a triumphal bellow, drawing whoops of approval from my companions. It was nothing short of liberating. Having been thus blooded in karaoke, I was at something of an advantage when the noraebang call inevitably came in Korea. In my earliest visits there, I could see much of what I recalled from my previous karaoke experiences: the disco lights, cavernous rooms and tinny musical accompaniments were all present and accounted for.

Yet things were a bit different here, too. For one thing, the song lists, while containing the usual English-language standards, also had strikingly outré inclusions (who could resist a sing-along to metal titans Helloween or Pantera?). For another, in a country not known for its abstemiousness, most noraebang were, and still are, completely dry (although, thankfully for my own singing career, some places do sell booze). And crucially, thanks to the relative ease of learning the Korean alphabet, *Hangeul*, I was able from a very early stage to sing a song or two in Korean, which, for an audience unaccustomed to hearing a foreigner speak Korean, never mind sing it, was often met with something approaching hysteria.

Subsequent noraebang visits with local friends

yielded glimpses of Korea that no guidebook, and certainly no visit to the usual tourist sights, could ever provide. For me, this was especially the case after I took up a job in a big publishing firm, where all the other staff were Korean. Every few weeks our department or, on bigger occasions, the entire office would troop off for the infamous *hoesik*, or after-work food and drinks, gorge on barbecued pork and *soju* (the local grog) and then, with thudding certainty, make our way to the nearest noraebang.

The change in the people I worked with was often extraordinary. On coming into contact with a mic, a squelchy soundtrack and a backing video depicting unfeasibly happy people bounding through a Swiss hamlet, the sternest of clients and middle-aged office managers would transform into louche rockers or heartfelt crooners. The daintiest, most introverted young women would open their mouths to reveal lungs of fire. And while the famous Korean office hierarchy persisted even in these unceremonious surroundings — the most junior staff would sing first, drinking etiquette was scrupulously maintained and no one left until the boss did — there was, at least through the mist of several shots of whiskey too many, an undeniable sense of camaraderie, a feeling that tonight, at least, everyone was as one in the crucible of behaving very foolishly indeed.

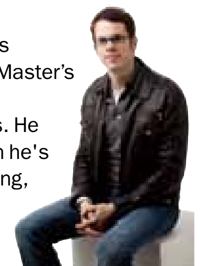
On the times I subsequently went in groups including newly arrived foreign friends, I was reminded of just how alien karaoke was to many of them. Some would refuse outright to sing, while others would flick endlessly through the pages of the song catalog, never quite finding the right one. Still others would choose a song, raise the mic to their mouths, then freeze and shrink back into their chairs. Having never experienced the joys of karaoke at home, these greenhorns were consumed with the kind of deep-rooted dread that only singing in front of their peers could inspire: A fear that their voice would be so bad, it would make a gaggle of alley cats sound like a barbershop quartet.

As I had once done, though, the karaoke refuseniks were rather missing the point. As I've discovered through my many visits, there can be few places anywhere where notions of making a fool of yourself are not so much disregarded as simply irrelevant. While a few of my Korean noraebang companions have been accomplished singers who clearly put in a bit of practice, the overwhelming majority were unashamedly poor, murdering everything from K-pop songs to old, maudlin Korean ballads to Gloria Gaynor with the same relentless vigor. But just by taking to the floor and warbling along as best they could, they invariably prompted claps, cheers and equally woeful dancing among the onlooking crowd. In just this way, I have had some of my most hilarious nights out in Korea (the best ones, admittedly, helped along with a drink or six).

I've done P. Diddy in my native Scottish accent. I've sung late night Scorpions duets with old friends. I've pogoed to A-ha's *Take On Me*. And, most stirringly of all, I've stolen the show with stuttering renditions of Korean pop songs. Just as my friends back home would find moments of genuine poignancy by getting sloshed on beer, putting their arms around each other's shoulders and howling along to the jukebox, Koreans, it has always seemed to me, find a real sense of togetherness in their song-room serenades. And as mystifying as karaokes may be for the uninitiated, the friendships formed over drunken, cacophonous noraebang nights may just be the ones that stay with you the longest. *by Niels Footman | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

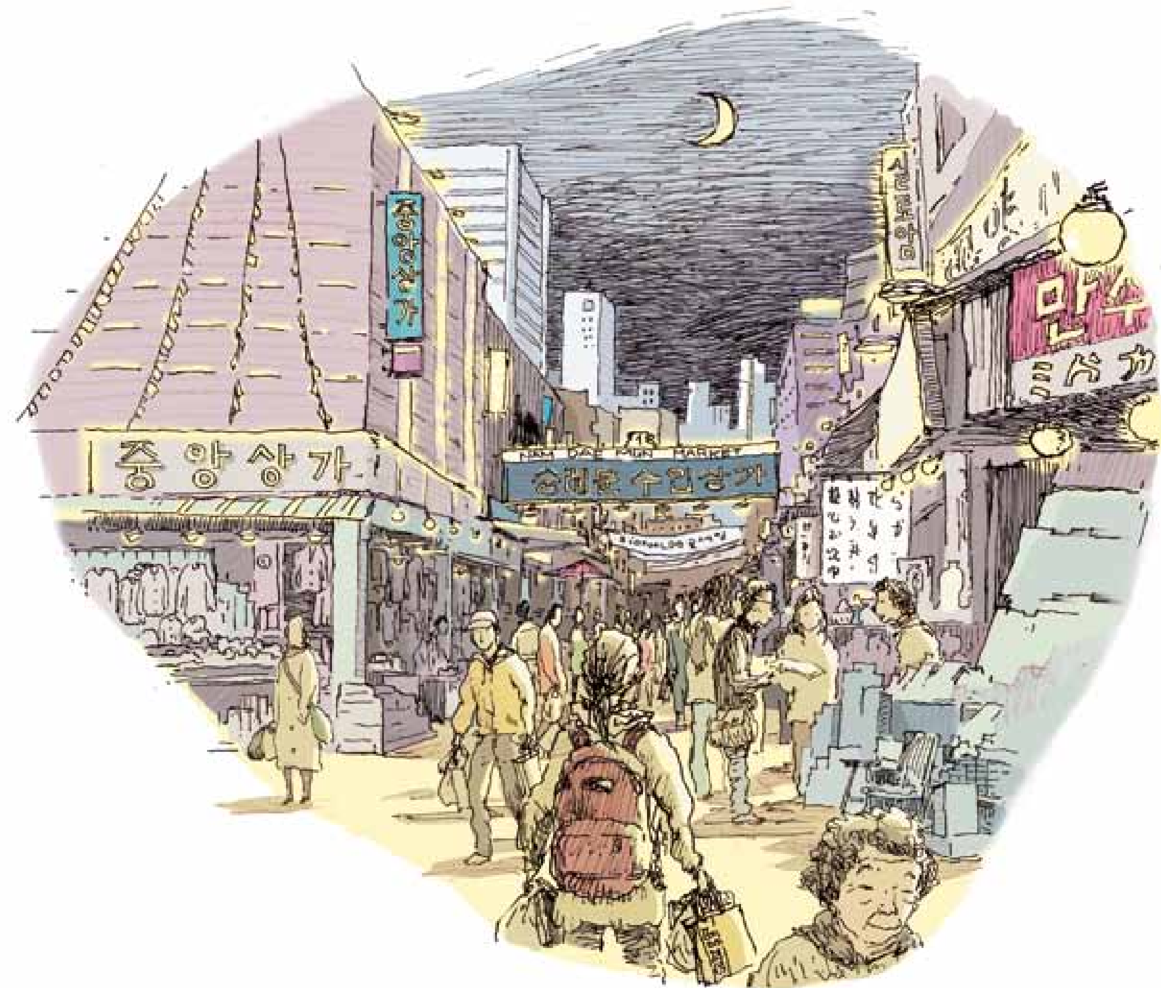
PROFILE

In his nine years in Korea, UK native Niels Footman has taught English, received a Master's degree, edited at a local newspaper and magazine, and worked in public relations. He is now working toward his MBA and when he's not busy studying, he loves writing, reading, getting outdoors and, of course, the occasional visit to the noraebang.



midnight madness REDEFINED

In my corner of small-town Canada, thrifty fashionistas would compete for the best bargains around. Inarguably, no season is more sacred than the weeks preceding Christmas, during which holiday bargain events are advertized in every local newspaper and magazine. As a notoriously last-minute shopper in college, with a jam-packed class schedule and frugal budget, I recall awaiting the annual event known as “Midnight Madness,” a shopping extravaganza that typically lasted from 8pm to midnight. Equipped with comfortable shoes for rushing, credit cards and shopping lists, my fellow consumers and I would line up outside the town’s modest one-story shopping mall an hour in advance just to get the goods. Since my arrival in Seoul in 2002, however, “Midnight Madness” has taken on an entirely different meaning.



As it happens, on a chilly Wednesday evening I found myself suddenly in need of American two-dollar bills framed in glass, a hammer, some live eels, Shaun Cassidy on vinyl and a neon-pink faux-fur shawl. Well, not really in need, but had those purchases actually been necessary, I knew I would be able to find each and every one at Seoul’s oldest market, Namdaemun, named after the iconic south gate of the formerly-walled city. Eagerly skipping past the neon-lit tiger honoring

the Lunar New Year, I embraced the labyrinth of alleys: from the crisp outdoor air to the strong aroma of roasted silkworm larvae accosting my nostrils. It's been said that shoppers can find everything under the sun at Namdaemun Market "except nuclear weapons and tanks," so I was keen on the prospect of emptying my bank account and testing out the bold claim. Surely there was something that belonged in my clutches.

I armed myself with comfortable walking shoes, as the size of Namdaemun rivals that of my entire suburban hometown. Turning left at the first narrow alley, I began to understand what I was getting

myself into. It was an attack on the senses: vendors packed themselves closer and closer together, grills sizzled, feet shuffled, and animated speech and laughter grew louder. Although the crowd was largely Korean, there was a notable modicum of international faces and tongues. Locals swarmed around stalls for late night eats, paired with bottles of the domestic beer. Rows of pig's feet, freshly plucked chickens, mammoth-sized oysters, live seafood, *sundae* (Korean blood sausage), the fiery but irresistible rice cakes known as *tteokbokki* and a popular glass noodle dish called *japchae*, are in high demand. I immediately detoured to pick up a dinner-plate-sized *kimchijeon*, a spicy, pancake-like goodie that can be described as a "kimchi pizza," comfort food for late night winter wandering.

Having recharged my batteries, I paused at a wide intersection to get my bearings. Around me, in no particular order, was: an optical shop (cheap glasses in an hour); a ginseng store with glass jars containing specimens of the stimulating plant that bring to mind the shelves of a mad scientist's lab; a souvenir shop featuring child-sized *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing, embroidered with Mashimaro, Pucca and other pop culture characters; and a shop selling Ed Hardy knockoffs. Another 50m and it's an assortment of blinking windup toys, hats of every imaginable style, a TonyMoly makeup franchise and two side-by-side shops selling football jerseys featuring every player from the UK's David Beckham to France's Zinedine Zidane.

There's more. Past the bare outskirts of this vast shopping mecca are entire alleyways dedicated to bedding and pillowcases, pots and pans, and still another area selling mostly fruit and preserved goods in bulk.

Several tourist information booths in and around Namdaemun Market are helpful in keeping track of where you are in relation to the subway, but they close at 6pm and, if you want to know what is sold in the popular arcades, you will have to go in to find out. In my opinion, exploration is the only way one should tackle the maze-like Namdaemun. After all, what is madness without a little mystery? As the evening progresses to the midnight hour, I make my way to

the markets of Dongdaemun, which is within walking distance of Hoehyeon Station, a common access point to Namdaemun proper. This is where the hardcore shoppers do their greatest damage and the action lasts until after the sun rises. As a fashion district where traditional markets and towering, modern shopping malls sit side by side, Dongdaemun boasts an estimated 30,000 shops. Due to its vastness, it's tough to know where to begin.

I boldly venture into Pyeonghwa Fashion Town in Dongdaemun, an enormous, multistory complex buzzing with activity. The shops operate from 10pm until 6pm and focuses on apparel for middle-aged women. I'm greeted by colorful displays of umbrellas, earrings, scarves and other items that appeal to the female demographic. While digging through a promising array of blouses, I'm politely informed that there are no dressing rooms, no refunds and to make my choices carefully. Although it is a wholesale market at night, selective shoppers are welcome, but don't make the mistake of spending too much time mulling over one item, as you're sure to see it throughout the evening. Getting the best deal is a trick of the shopper's trade and I recommend testing out a few vendors, assuming you're up to the challenge.

Once again in need of fuel, I stop for *odeng*, and am treated to the fish cake served on a bamboo skewer hot off the grill. While indulging, I meet a fellow lady from my native country in search of merchandise for her local boutique. She is shouldering two gigantic bags containing various Ed Hardy T-shirts, which she tells me are trendy in Toronto. She will have to make several trips to retrieve her wares, as her stash includes a Korean-style lantern, numerous pillows and a curtain set. She showcases her bounty of metallic buttons and beads for hand-made jewelry, a variety of monogrammed scarves, a dozen feather-adorned headbands and a handful of mini-photo album cell phone charms. By now the pedestrian streets are thronging with merchants, hagglers in animated action and people eating, mingling and resting. It's 2am and the night is young for the Seoul shopping scene.

Strolling around the lively streets, I am frequently surprised by the sheer volume of goods that people are carrying, and the multiculturalism of the crowd. Buyers from Japan, China, Russia, the United States and Latin America create a lively, if not chaotic, combination. This madness appeals to my inner explorer, and I am constantly discovering new shops in this city I've long called home. There's a sense of community in this megaplex of shopping mania, united by the common goals of a good bargain and jovial experience. This is the shopping mall that never sleeps. In the words of Bo Derek, "Whoever said money can't buy happiness simply didn't know where to go shopping."

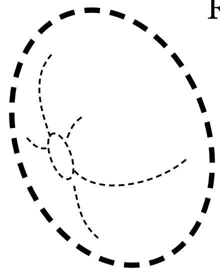
They certainly didn't give the streets of Seoul a shot. *by Kelly Frances McKenna | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

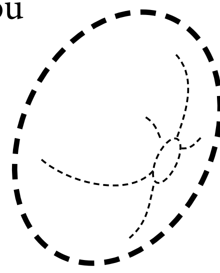
PROFILE

During her eight years in Korea, Canadian Kelly Frances McKenna has worked as a fashion model, performance artist, graphic designer and media coordinator. She established an NGO that specializes in saving Korean moon bears. She currently co-owns a website aimed at increasing tourism while helping fellow Seoulites maximize their time here. When she isn't busy hitting the mean streets of Seoul's shopping districts, Kelly enjoys animal welfare work, jogging and good conversation over Korean food.

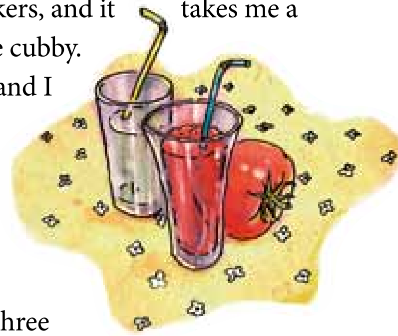
A JOURNEY INTO STEAM

It's late on Friday night, and the quiet sauna my friends and I have come to in Apgujeong-dong is in sharp contrast to the frenetic clubs and bars on nearby Rodeo Drive. Sometimes, all you need is something to soothe your bones, weary from Seoul's fast-paced life.





There are many public baths and *jjimjilbang* (spa and sauna complexes) scattered throughout Seoul. My friends and I are at an old favorite, an upscale facility hidden in a dark glass skyrise. The man at the counter gives us three plastic bands with numbers on them. Mine is 110. We pass through a curtain and down a small hallway to reach the changing room. The bracelets are the keys to our lockers, and it takes me a moment to manage to unlock and open the cubby. As we are stashing our clothes, my friends and I are the only ones in the locker room. Soon, we are as naked as the day we were born, and we head to the shower room.



The room to shower and bathe is sparsely populated; a handful of weary salarymen are boiling in the hottest of the three baths. Another man is showering along one of the walls. Typically, one showers first before slipping into the large stone baths found in nearly all saunas in Korea. One of the things that makes this particular sauna better than most is the showers themselves: Unlike at the majority of baths, these stay on until you turn them off. Nearly everywhere else, they turn off every minute. Here, you can luxuriate under a torrent of perfectly heated water. Soap, shampoo and even conditioner are provided, though the germophobe will want to bring his own. Some saunas sell amenities such as disposable razors.

Luxuriate is the operative word here. After the shower, I opt for the merely scalding bath; there is no temperature reading as there are at many saunas, but it's probably around 40°C. There are two other baths here: an even hotter bath with an herb infusion and a cold bath. Some spas will have more options as well. Often the herbal bath — jasmine is common — will be a reasonable temperature, in the upper 30s. A few saunas have individual baths in addition to the ubiquitous large basins, which can fit 10 to 30 people.

For several minutes, my comrades and I sit and soak in silence, our thoughts drifting away with the plumes of steam. My friends had just come from the basketball court, weary and sore from the exertion. The bath is a perfect end to their rigorous day. Others are now arriving in the shower room, more salarymen fresh from *hoesik*, the mandatory, fun Korean business dinners that demand both drinking and *noraebang* (Korean karaoke). Like us, they are quiet; the sauna feels like a sacred place, a temple where the repentant come to scour away their sins and be reborn in the searing waters.

Eventually though, we do start conversing. One of my companions is a Japanese executive who visits Seoul regularly. Surprisingly, he'd never come to a Korean sauna or jjimjilbang before, though he had been to public baths and spas abroad.

"In Russia, after sitting in the hot bath, everyone gets out and dives into the snow," he tells us.

"Dives in naked?"

"Yes!"

This sauna has no snowbanks, but it does have an icy-cold bath. Well, perhaps icy is a little strong, but it is certainly cold. Only one of us has the fortitude to get in.

"It's good for circulation," he insists. I'm fine staying in the warmth, thank you very much.

One of the main attractions of this sauna is the outdoor bath. Adjacent to the shower room is a partially enclosed patio. A sharp wind, kisses from Siberia, strikes us as we make our way to this bath. Unlike the ones indoors, it is enclosed in wood. Copses of bamboo grow around the bath, muffling the nightscape sounds of the city. We quickly climb into the bath and resume our luxuriating and conversation. The icy wind now feels invigorating as we sit half submerged in the water. The appropriate Korean word for this sensation is *siwonhada* (refreshing).

After awhile, our skin wrinkly as a pug's, we decide to check out the rest of the facility. In fact, the floor we are on is the sauna proper; below us is the jjimjilbang. A jjimjilbang is something like a spa, community center, recreation center and cheap hotel wrapped together. First though, we put on the uniforms provided. Such facilities always offer uniforms, often a T-shirt or robe/shirt and shorts — in coed jjimjilbang, the men's and women's uniforms are different colors.

Dressed in the earthy beige of the sauna's threads, we head downstairs. There are more people here than there were in the baths, but it's still reverentially quiet. A few older men are playing *janggi* (the Korean equivalent of chess), a couple of guys are laying on the floor in front of a large television with the volume on low. Others are sitting at the bar of the tiny coffee shop or in the little restaurant next to it.

Our first destination, though, is the oven. The oven, as we call it, is a large room constructed like a traditional stone and thatch building, the walls convex and ending in a conical point at the top. It is stupefyingly hot inside. We have to climb in through a hobbit-sized door. A large hourglass sits on the mats in the middle of the room. We flip it over

and settle in. Our Japanese friend has never experienced this.

"The air's heavy; it's a little hard to breathe," he tells us when we ask what he thinks of it.

"Yeah, that's normal the first time," we assure him. We are conversing, quietly, in English; another man comes, sits for a moment and then leaves.

The last of the sand slipps away in the hourglass. We scamper out of the oven and towel away the sweat. It felt good to sweat in there, expelling untold levels of toxins, as some say.

"What's next?"

"The ice room."

Just to the left of the oven is a walk-in freezer that would not be out of place in any number of restaurants. The air is still and crisp, but despite the frost-caked coils lining the walls, it doesn't feel cold exactly. Again, we need the Korean word: siwonhada!

After a while, 10 minutes maybe — time seems like such an alien concept in this palace of relaxation — we do begin to feel the room's deep chill working its way into our flesh. We adjourn to the next room, the charcoal room. It's another dry sauna room, not as hot as the oven but still quite warm, with the heavy scent of aromatic wood and charcoal permeating the air. And a TV. A couple of younger men sit watching the news. We stay long enough to get the general idea and then retire to the coffee bar.

The menu is fairly extensive, with a variety of juices, teas, coffees and other beverages. Our Japanese friend orders tomato juice, a lassi for me, and simple green tea for my other friend. The tomato juice and

lassi are made from scratch. People leave their belongings upstairs in their lockers, so the sauna charges our electronic bracelets.

We aren't hungry but we do take a look at the little restaurant's offerings. Basic Korean food — *bibimbap*, *seolleongtang*, *doenjang-jjigae* — are, of course, the specialties of the house.

We've been in the sauna and jjimjilbang for quite a while now. More men have come in and are sleeping on the mat by the large TV. At this jjimjilbang, the provided pillows are small firm rectangles. Other places often use pillows — and I use this word generously — made from beaded bamboo strands or even wooden blocks. For those that need a darker and quieter space, a room off the main area is set aside for sleeping.

If this were a coed jjimjilbang, the central space would be shared by both men and women. While our jjimjilbang is more luxurious, and thus more expensive than most, it is still considerably cheaper than a hotel. Thus, jjimjilbang are popular for many workers and travelers. Should a business dinner run late, it is often better to crash at the nearest spa than to try catching a taxi to the suburbs or driving drunk. Whole families can also be found at night in many jjimjilbang, especially the large and famous ones in the far reaches of the peninsula.

Our drinks finished and our energy wavering, we decide to make our way back upstairs. Another quick shower and a few minutes in the bath to wash away the dry, sauna-induced sweat finish us up. Just out of the shower room are all the basics needed to make ourselves presentable: hair dryers, gels and mousses and the like. Some jjimjilbang have barbers available during the day. Professional masseuses are often on staff as well. Coed jjimjilbang usually have nail technicians, play rooms for kids, PC rooms and a host of other amenities. It is entirely possible for a family to spend a whole day in a jjimjilbang and never get bored.

The only thing we missed in our visit, I realize as we're dressing, is the salt room. Salt rooms vary from sauna to sauna. In some, the room — a hot, dry sauna — is liberally coated in coarse salt. In this one, however, there is a large bowl of salt outside the room. It is the patron's responsibility for gathering his own and then scouring his body with the white pillars. This is supposed to help exfoliate the skin, draw out excess water and toxins and improve your skin's overall health.

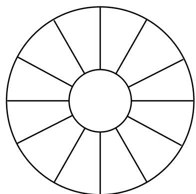
"Whenever I go to the sauna, I sleep like a baby afterwards," my friend explains to our Japanese companion as we're getting into the car. I take a look back. From the outside of the jjimjilbang building, you'd never know it was there. Even the outdoor bath's enclosure is completely hidden from the outside. I wonder how many other wonders the city hides within its glass and concrete facades. *by Chris Sanders | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

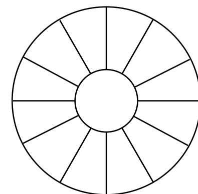
PROFILE

Chris Sanders is an American expat who has lived in Seoul for several years and works as a university instructor. In 2007, he cofounded the Seoul Writers Workshop, a community of writers that holds regular critique sessions and publishes the yearly anthology *Every Second Sunday*. More of his writing can be read on Seoulstyle.com. He can be reached at crfsanders@gmail.com.

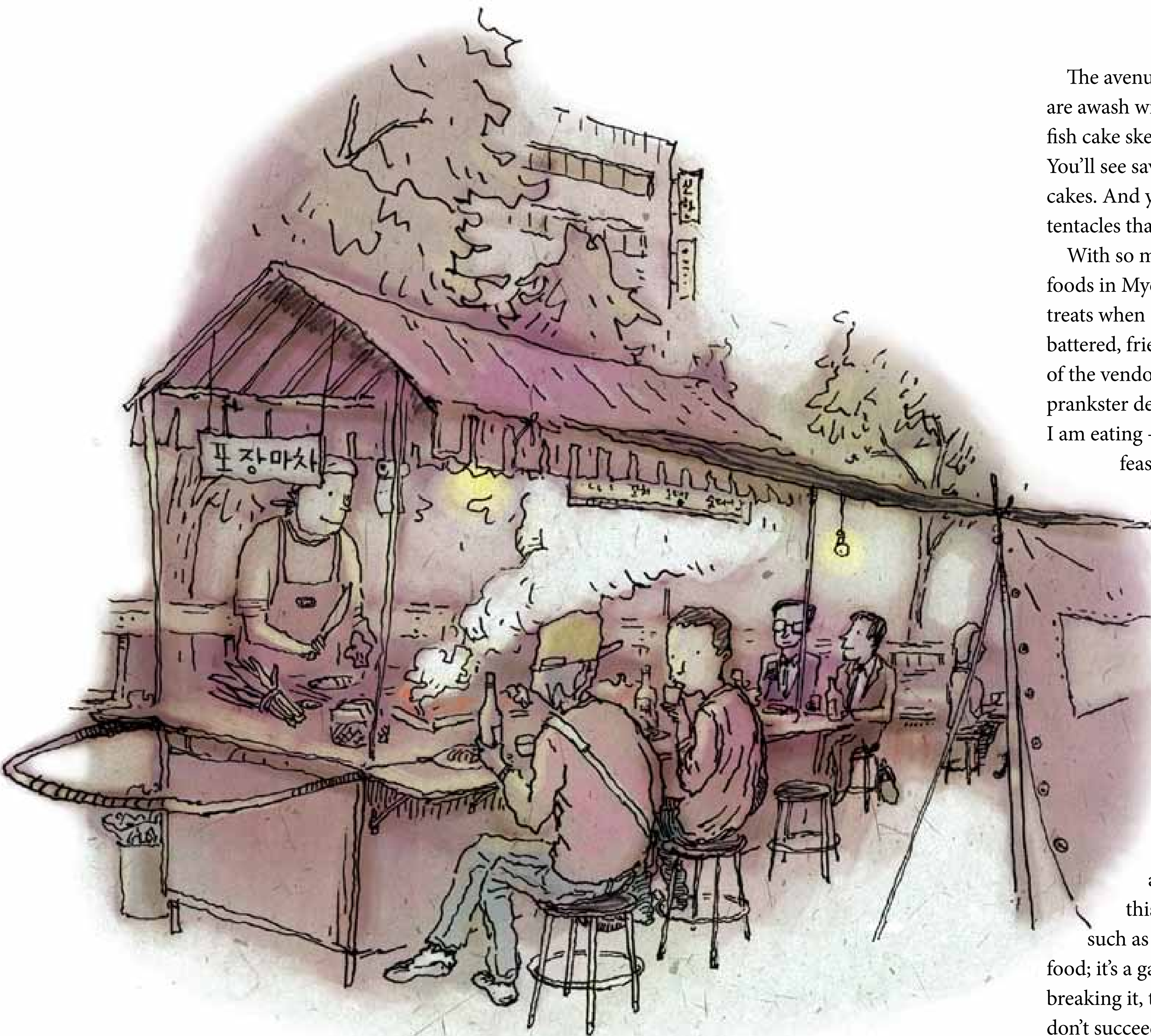
KINETIC STREET CUISINE

On every corner, on every street in Korea, you'll find food stalls selling the new, the bizarre and the playful. All the food is designed to travel and you'll often see high-heeled women walking with a hot dog on a stick or suited men waiting next to a food stall to grab a quick bite. In Korea, this is the original fast food.





Korean street food is a wonderful fusion of creativity, culture and mobility. Some of the foods, like braised silkworm larvae, are simply bizarre, while others are playful, such as the tornado potato: A whole potato cut and fried to look like a spiral staircase. Others seem to have come straight out of the TV show *MacGyver*. The ColPop, for instance, is a soda cup with a bowl on top for a lid. Pieces of crispy fried chicken sit on top, so you can sip your soda and eat your chicken on the run. The Korean streets are a wonderland of interesting treats and you can eat three full meals (and between-meal snacks) on the go.

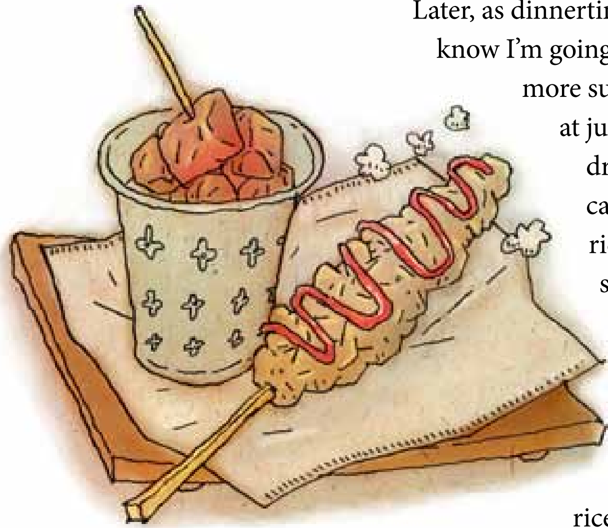


The avenues of Myeong-dong, besides being rammed with shoppers, are awash with fabulous street carts. Here, you'll find thick ribbons of fish cake skewered on long wooden poles and cooked in crab stock. You'll see savory hamburger patties wrapped around chewy white rice cakes. And you'll certainly smell the massive dried and smoked squid tentacles that are sliced and grilled on heated black stones.

With so many of them fighting for the attention of passersby, street foods in Myeong-dong have to make a statement. One of my favorite treats when I visit is the "*dokkaebi* hot dog," a hot dog on a stick that is battered, fried and then studded with crinkled French fries. I ask one of the vendors what dokkaebi means, and she explains that they are prankster demons who carry spiked clubs — not unlike the hot dog I am eating — which they bang on the ground to bring forth magical feasts or golden coins.

I take my demon club hot dog and continue down the road to find my next treat. These days, seemingly everything is available from street food vendors. As with the city's restaurants, street foods are increasingly picking up foreign influences, with Myeong-dong itself home to vendors selling kebabs, 30cm-tall ice cream cones, hamburgers and much more.

After I finally finish my hot dog, though, I know just what I want next: *bbopgi*. Served on a popsicle stick, bbopgi is a lollipop that smells just like crème brûlée. You'll see old women squat on the ground as they heat up sugar in a small metal pot until it melts to a rich, caramel brown. Add a pinch of baking soda and the candy bubbles up and thickens. They'll then put this sticky mixture on a board, flatten it and stencil a shape such as a cloud, a star or maybe a bird. Now, bbopgi isn't just a food; it's a game, too. If you can eat around the stenciled shape without breaking it, then the vendor will reward you with another bbopgi. I don't succeed, but one was enough.



Later, as dinnertime approaches, I know I'm going to need something more substantial. Luckily, at just this moment, I draw near a street cart selling spicy rice cakes and fried snacks. Sauteed along with fish cakes in a spicy and sweet red chili paste sauce, these *tteokbokki* rice cakes are typically served along with your choice of battered, fried treats including sweet potato slices, dumplings, egg, noodle rolls and vegetable fritters. It's all about the sauce with this streetside delicacy, so what I like to do is order a selection and have the vendor mix it up in the sauce. Yummy and cheap: only 3,000 won (US$2.73).

In the evenings, tented food bars will open right on the edges of Seoul's streets. One of the best places to experience this is over by Jongno 3-ga near the middle of town. Here, on most nights, the main drag will be lit up by a procession of orange tents and yellow lights.

There is something peculiarly enticing about sitting in these tents at night with friends. The conversations are more down to earth and personal. The foods you order there are made to accompany alcohol — typically *soju*, Korea's best-known fire water, but sometimes *makgeolli* (milky rice wine) or beer. Soju is served in small glasses and throughout the evening everyone will propose continuous toasts and, more often than not, down the drink in one. It could be a toast of congratulations but often it is simply a toast of togetherness, of friendship. Koreans drink to build relationships and a sense of comfort — you'll never see a Korean drinking alone.

As I look around the tent, I can see people of all backgrounds united under one plastic roof. Next to me sits a group of elegantly dressed women in business attire, bottles of beer spread around their table. They are wearing clear plastic gloves and eating chili sauce-coated chicken's feet (full of gelatin, which is supposedly good for your skin). Adjacent to them is a middle-aged couple in casual attire sitting across from a Korean man wearing a beret and, though night has fallen, sunglasses. A movie star, perhaps?

They have plates of rolled egg omelette dishes specked with small pieces of carrot and green onion with a drizzling of ketchup on top. The soju has already begun flowing, and three green bottles sit atop their small red plastic tabletop like emeralds on a royal carpet. Then, on the corner of the bench where my friend and I are eating, two older men, looking like they've just finished construction work, pull up a seat. Loud and boisterous, they seem on the verge of fighting each other, before their booming laughs clear the air. They sit and recount stories to one another as they take turns pouring white rice wine into little tin bowls.

Inside this roadside tent, in the middle of the night, I feel like I am seeing the real Korea. When people ask me to tell them stories of life here, I will invariably talk about the street foods and the atmosphere in these tented restaurants. Just like the city that they and I call home, street foods here are fast, piquant and always on the go. *by Daniel Gray | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

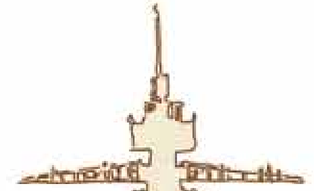
PROFILE

Daniel Gray, a Korean-American, is the creator of the popular restaurant review blog www.seouleats.com. When he is not writing about food, eating food or taking pictures of food, he sleeps. He works at O'ngo Food Communications where he writes books on Korean food and develops culinary tourism programs and cooking classes for travelers to Korea.

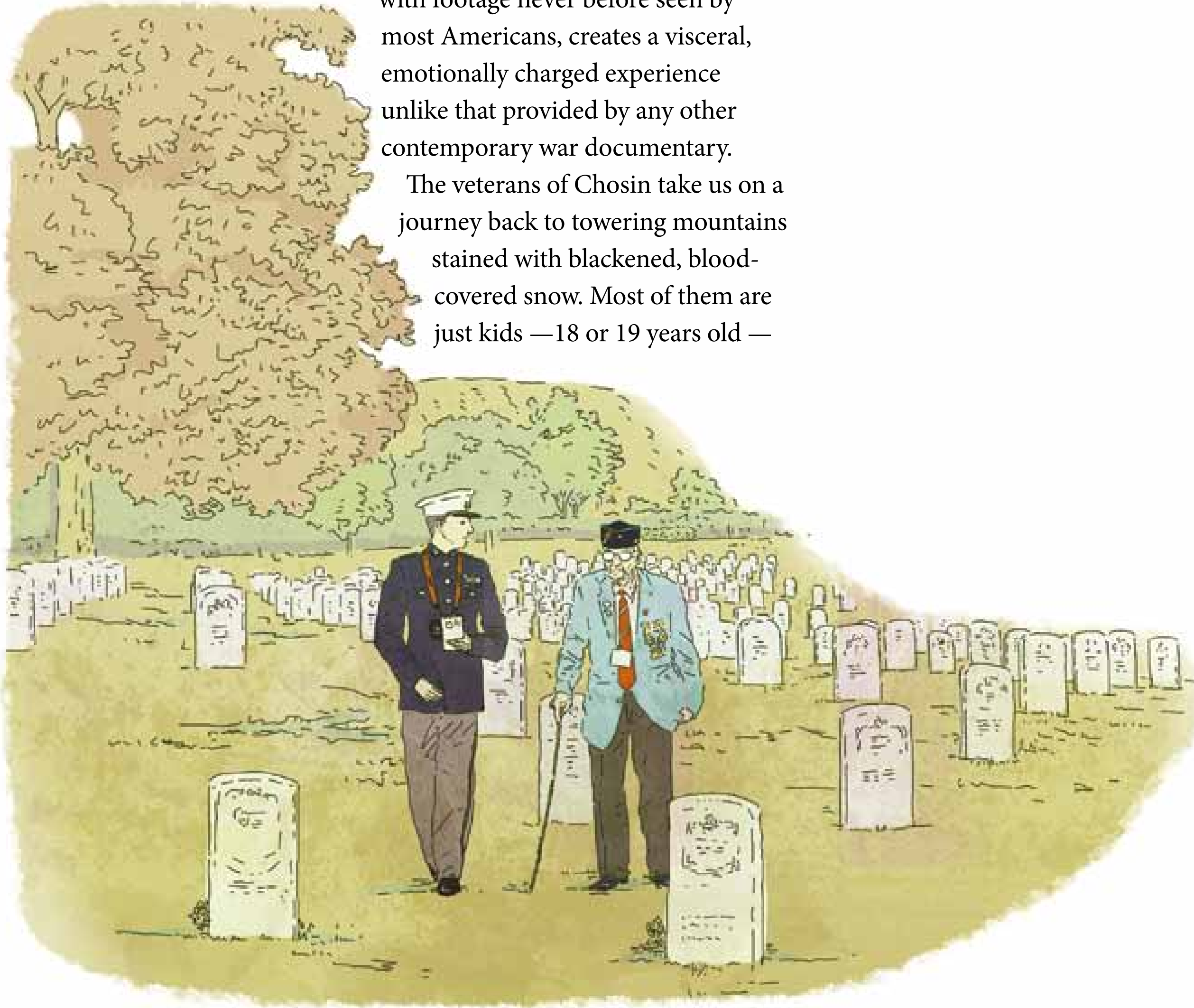
CHOSIN'S HEROES AND THE STORIES OF

THEIR LIVES

In 1950, at the height of the "forgotten war," 15,000 US forces found themselves surrounded. After 60 years of silence, the men who survived are telling their stories.



Chosin is the first-ever documentary on the battle of the Chosin Reservoir Campaign. Presented in high-definition video, the stories of these Korean War (1950-1953) veterans are supplemented with rare black-and-white and color archival footage gathered from hundreds of hours of research. Firsthand accounts of the battle, combined with footage never before seen by most Americans, creates a visceral, emotionally charged experience unlike that provided by any other contemporary war documentary.



The veterans of Chosin take us on a journey back to towering mountains stained with blackened, blood-covered snow. Most of them are just kids —18 or 19 years old — and they are outnumbered and cut off behind enemy lines. As the sun goes down each night, bugles and war cries echo through the mountains, followed by massive human wave attacks lasting until dawn. Subzero temperatures render weapons inoperable and fighting devolves into terrifying nights of savage hand-to-hand combat. Unable to dig into the frozen ground, the Marines build parapets out of dead bodies in order to withstand each night's onslaught.

Despite overwhelming odds, the men never lose faith in each other. They refuse to surrender. Instead, the men fight their way to freedom through 125km of unforgiving, mountainous terrain and ultimately save the lives of 98,000 civilian refugees.

Following their unbelievable journey, the survivors then embark on a lonely homecoming. America is enjoying newfound wealth and relative peace after World War II. The country has lost its taste for war and has no concern for the returning veterans of a "police action." Surrounded by friends and family who are unable to relate to their combat experiences, the Chosin veterans make an uneasy adjustment to civilian life, quietly bearing the burden of physical and emotional scars that they will carry for the rest of their lives.

After 60 years of silence, the men express their pride in contributing to the freedom of the South Koreans, their grief for their fallen brothers and their hope that the Korean War will not be lost in the pages of history as "the forgotten war."

Chosin has been a dream project of mine since learning about the battle while enlisted in boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, in 1995. I initially had an academic approach in mind until I had experienced intense combat as an Infantry Platoon Commander during two tours in Iraq. My second tour in Iraq had a significant impact on me and changed my outlook for my first film.

Using my own combat experience to shape the film, I made the decision to focus on the human element aspect of going to war, rather than the academic viewpoint. I don't remember specific dates or tactics, rather I am left with a sharp recollection of the emotions, the

sights, the sounds and the smells of war. My experience also left me with the lasting impression that although I witnessed dramatic feats of sacrifice and heroism, war is not a John Wayne movie. My focus was to tell the amazing story of Chosin from the viewpoint of what it was like to be on the ground, fighting for your life and the lives of your buddies. Being a combat Marine has given me an unprecedented access to these stories. What you will find here is a unique and unmatched look into the spirit of a combat veteran.

In January 2009, a mutual friend introduced me to Anton. We discovered that we had both fought in the same city in Iraq: Ramadi, one of Iraq's most violent and heavily contested areas. There was an instant bond and trust in one another. I had written a draft for *Chosin* and shared the idea with Anton. We teamed up and just 30 days later we began shooting. The film had no financial support besides our own personal savings, credit cards and a few cashed-in retirement accounts, but we were armed with faith in our abilities and a passion for the story.

Earning the title of Marine means inheriting the legacy and reputation forged in sacrifice by the Marines who have gone before. The Chosin Reservoir Campaign is taught to every single recruit at boot camp, along with Belleau Wood and Iwo Jima, as one of the seminal battles of the Marine Corps' proud history. During our research, we discovered that not only had there never been a documentary made about Chosin, but nobody, not even the Marine Corps, had archived or filmed first-person accounts of the battle. The men who survived Chosin were either gone or in their twilight years, and we realized that this revered piece of our heritage would be lost forever unless we took action.

We hired other veterans, graduates of the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation (www.woundedmarinecareers.org), a program that takes disabled Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans and trains them for careers in media. We reached out to veterans' organizations across the country, to include the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American

Legion and Marine Corps League, and they all provided us locations to film and places to sleep (along with a few cold beers). The *Chosin* team spent eight months on the road living out of a van and eating military rations in order to collect the stories from 185 Korean War veterans in 27 cities across the US. As fellow combat veterans, we forged a unique connection with the men we interviewed. We were proud to give them a gift 60 years overdue: An environment where they felt comfortable unburdening themselves of the intimately sad, horrific, funny and triumphant moments from the most defining experience of their lives. Time and time again, these men told us stories that they had never told anyone — not their wives, their children or their closest friends.

As the men of Chosin fade into history, their story fades with them. Many men we attempted to contact during production had passed away just weeks before our phone calls. Already, we have lost one of the veterans we had the privilege of interviewing. The importance of honoring these heroes during their lifetime is the driving force behind *Chosin*'s very intimate and human story of triumph and tragedy. *by Brian Iglesias | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon*

PROFILE

Brian Iglesias is a US Marine Reserve Officer and independent filmmaker. He was an honor graduate from boot camp and combat training, and also earned awards and meritorious promotions to corporal and sergeant. He decided to be a filmmaker while he was engaged in an eight-hour firefight in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2004. The movie *Chosin* was a journey of remembrance and healing.

SEOUL, FOOTBALL AND AN UNDYING PASSION

Seoulites turned their city into a sea of red as they rooted for their team at the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, reawakening an expat's love for Korea.

As Korea celebrated victory against Greece in its first FIFA World Cup match in South Africa in 2010, the energy coursing through Seoul brought back a flood of warm memories of when I first arrived nine years ago, just a few months shy of FIFA World Cup 2002. Granted, nothing compares to the energy of when the country is hosting the event, but Korea's relentless enthusiasm was

on display just as it was then, with tens of thousands of screaming fans clad in red shirts, united in spirit, filling the streets near City Hall and sharing in the excitement. It was an unforgettable experience, and one that served as a pleasant reminder that, thanks to the nature of sport, for a brief moment in time all the world's problems can be put aside, leaving just a throng of passionate fans cheering on their favorite team. I can't think of a more opportune time to have come here.

It was, though, quite a foreign experience for me to witness this level of feverish excitement. Football or soccer, as it is referred to in some parts of the world, just isn't all that big where I come from. Instead,

Canadians take their ice hockey very seriously. Yet, as riled up as fans can get inside a hockey arena, it pales in comparison to the sheer scope of the open stadiums of Europe (and now Asia) housing over 60,000 screaming fans cheering on the home team. Add to that the boisterous hordes parading through the city waving banners and signs, and one gets a much clearer picture of just how colossal an influence football has over people.

In fact, I remember witnessing what looked to be a riot in Gangnam in 2002. Crowds of people stomped on top of buses, yet I was pleasantly surprised (and not just a little relieved) to learn that everyone was just overjoyed at Korea's place in the group standings. There wasn't the slightest bit of aggression or hooliganism. That was something I remember very distinctly. I would usually take to the streets with several friends and without fail one or all of us would get asked where we were from or how we were enjoying Korea. It was that level of genuine warmth that cemented my good impression of Koreans, and it has stayed with me to this day.

But I didn't only watch the 2002 games from inside bars or celebrate in the streets. I had the good fortune of taking in three games in stadiums: Korea versus Germany, Spain versus Ireland and Korea versus Portugal. The latter I watched at Jamsil Stadium in Seoul, though the game was actually taking place in Incheon. It was the deciding match of the group stages, and the excitement had reached such a degree that many large venues threw their doors open and let fans watch the action on vast screens. Supporters of all ages flooded in through Jamsil Stadium's gates that day, raising noise levels to deafening heights. In our group were some of the only foreigners in the stadium on that particular day, and before we knew what was happening, we were whisked to the VIP section to get better views. I don's think we were told the reason behind our sudden four-star treatment, or if there even was one. Looking back, I think it was simply a case of the host country wanting to share as much as possible with their foreign guests. It was, to say the least, a humbling experience.

The biggest game that year was, of course, the semifinal, when Korea faced Germany. Having made it so far, defeating both Italy and Spain, Korea stood on the cusp of a place in the final and a place in football immortality. For the life of me, I don't know how I managed to snag tickets, but there I sat, surrounded by over 60,000 fans, rooting for the Taegeuk Warriors. Though, sadly, Korea's glorious winning streak finally came to an end that night, with the Germans winning 1-0, as I left the stadium afterward, I couldn't help but notice just how orderly everything was, and how good spirited all the Korean fans were despite the loss.

At that stage, it was hard to remember that just a few weeks previously, with demonstrations or other disturbances deemed a real possibility, the authorities had ramped up security measures in the capital. During the event, there was nothing of the sort. Not at the stadiums, nor in the streets. Plenty of cleanup needed, but nothing worse than you'd expect after a city-sized party. I was really amazed by that level of safety and genuine mutual respect. It was Korea's chance to introduce itself to the world, and it couldn't have made a better impression.

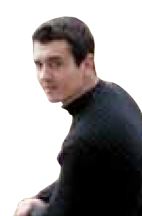
At the time, when I related these stories to friends back home, many of them couldn't even find Korea on a map. And while Korea remains less well known than its neighbors, the 2002 FIFA World Cup definitely raised its profile in their eyes and gave them an idea that there was this distinct, fascinating culture in a country on the far side of the world.

For me, though, being here at that time was simply incomparable, like being a part of history. It has left impressions that have stayed with me ever since. I will take a mental scrapbook of memories with me when I leave Korea, but that year — my first year — and that experience will be near the very top of the first page. It was, I am convinced, the central reason why I have remained in Korea until now.

As they say, first impressions are lasting impressions. And in this, I think I couldn't have had a more apt introduction to the country I still call home. In its fervor and friendliness, the 2002 FIFA World Cup was the best possible introduction to Korea's embracing spirit and incredible passion. Though Seoul changes as quickly as almost any city on earth, it's reassuring to know that its people remain enthusiastic about sharing their culture with outsiders.

Korea holds a great deal of interest for veteran travelers and newcomers alike. Many parts of the country are virtually untouched and just beckoning to be explored. My reasons for coming here largely stemmed from a keen desire to get out of my comfort zone and quiet my nagging wanderlust. I hadn't counted on falling in love with the culture here, nor did I ever anticipate the warm reception I would receive throughout my time here. I had initially planned to stay for one year, but I am now well into my ninth. Though much of the reason for this is the opportunity and creativity I have found here, I would definitely say that much of it is also down to sheer luck at arriving at such a pivotal time.

Korea was on the cusp of change in 2002, but still shows no signs of slowing down. Now, as then, I'm happy to be along for the ride. *by Gregory B. Curley | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon*



PROFILE

Canadian-born Gregory Curley is a professional photographer based in Seoul. His work has appeared in *The Korea Herald*, *The Korea Times*, *SEOUL*, *Elle*, MTV, *10 Magazine*, *MorningCalm*, CNNGo and CNN. He now works for LG Ad as a copywriter, and for *SEOUL* and CNNGo as a photographer and regular contributer.

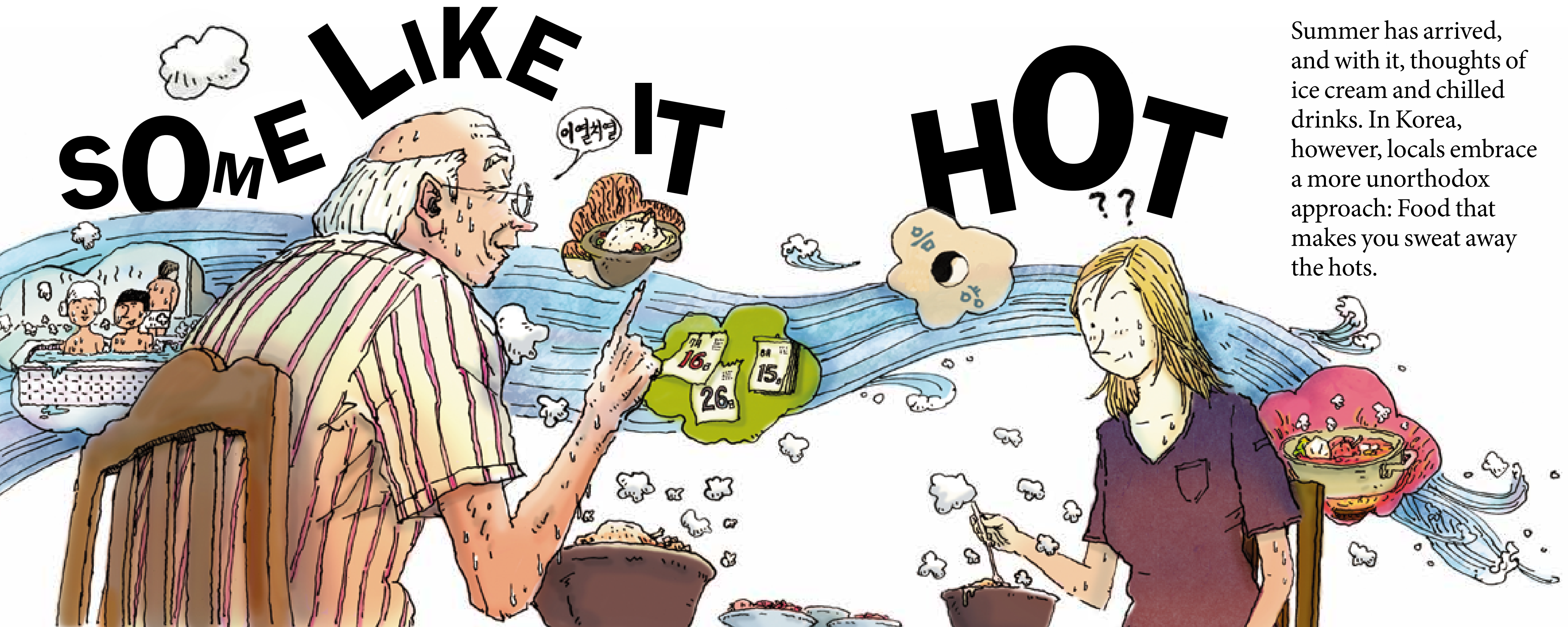
SOME LIKE IT HOT

Summer has arrived, and with it, thoughts of ice cream and chilled drinks. In Korea, however, locals embrace a more unorthodox approach: Food that makes you sweat away the hots.

All of the signs are here: long days, warm air and humid nights. Summer has, once again, found the Korean Peninsula and as I sweat, live and struggle to breathe, I am searching for my own piece of *siwonhada* to ease the pains of summer. Siwonhada is a Korean term similar to the English expression "cool." That is, in a literal sense, as an internal feeling of revitalization and refreshment. So, on my quest for summer coolness I promised myself I would try anything at least once, in hopes of banishing the heat and reaching a new level of "cool."

Summer in Korea is a beautiful thing, save for the hot sun and humidity which, when left unchecked, can leave anyone lifeless and drained. When faced with moments like these I have options, three, to be exact: adapt, relocate or die. Despite my healthy love for the dramatic moments of life, death seems a bit much and, like most people, I hate moving house. I am then, in all of my sweaty glory, dedicated to adapting. Like any good expat, this is one more reason to get out there, dig in and go native.

When it comes to Korean people, some of the rumors are true. They love active, outdoor sports, they are one of the tallest groups of Asians



and they thoroughly enjoy sweating over boiling hot stone bowls of spicy soup. Now, I would let the former slide if it were winter, but in this oppressive summer heat, I never really understood why an entire group of people would punish themselves with scalding soup on the hottest day of the year. So, like the curious foreigner I am, I asked. Lo and behold, I discovered a treasure trove of cultural insight. As I listened to my 78-year-old surrogate grandfather, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

Grandpa Kim laid it all out for me — Koreans fight fire with fire. Initially, I didn't understand if he was speaking to me about the recent tensions with North Korea or something more culturally subtle. Thank heavens he is a patient man and had the wherewithal, as well as the English-language capacity, to verbally flowchart it for me. He explained to me that Korean people have a tradition of seeking hot and spicy foods to cool them down when the summer heat arrives. Now, I have heard of people drinking warm beverages to cool themselves, like taking in a hot mint tea in Morocco. But the idea of seeking to sweat it out, in an already balmy climate, was a lot like me: foreign.

I learned a lot from Grandpa Kim and his aged-to-perfection wisdom. An ancient belief in the East dictates that the human body will only enjoy good health and harmony when the elements of fire, water, earth and metal are balanced. Apparently, my yin and yang was out of balance and my *gi*, or chi, was in need of a good tune-up. "So," he told me, "you must release the heat." Of course, during summer in Korea that is easier said than done. If I were left to my own devices, I might just lock myself in my house and blast the air conditioning. But because this is not a practical option, "fighting fire with fire," or *iyeolchiyeol* in Korean, must be my succor.

Much to my dismay, the real summer heat lies ahead. The three hottest days in Korea are referred to as *chobok*, *jungbok* and *malbok*, and collectively as *sambok*. In 2010, they fell on July 19, July 29 and Aug 8. So, with my newfound cultural insight, I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and hit the scalding pavement in search of Grandpa Kim's cure-all, *samgyetang*.

Samgyetang is a traditional Korean chicken soup belonging to the group of foods referred to as *boyang* foods. These foods are said to replenish and nourish depleted yin and yang, gi and energy meridians. There now seemed to be hope for my tattered gi, and although I was eager to find my own sense of siwonhada, I didn't want to do it alone. Any new experience, heavy lifting or excessive sweating calls for good friends, and this was no exception. I called in a lifeline, phoned my dear friend Danae and committed to the experience.

After thoroughly researching nearby restaurants, I decided on one specializing in this revitalizing soup. On arriving, we were greeted by the owner of the establishment who gave us a broad, curious smile. Then, he handed me a pink Post-it bearing the number 17. Yes, there was a waiting line. Apparently, iyeolchiyeol is no joke. Danae and I,

along with what seemed like an ever-growing number of Koreans, were all in search of summer coolness. By the time 17 was called, another 15 people were in line behind us.

We were ushered to a table, pre-set with all the necessities: copious amounts of spicy kimchi, a dish of locally-grown hot Korean green peppers, cucumber sticks, fiery hot pepper dip and what appeared to be a bone-bucket. Interestingly enough, we never placed an order. They knew what we had come for and, within minutes, two bubbling, boiling and steaming earthenware bowls were placed on our table. With a delight matched only by children on Christmas morning, I blew on the bowl to part the steam and catch my first glance of this tasty treat. The feast my eyes beheld was truly awesome.

Samgyetang is a whole, young chicken stuffed with glutinous rice, jujubes, chestnuts, gingko nuts, garlic and young ginseng roots, served in a clear broth. It all made sense now. I finally understood this Korean insight. Grandpa Kim's seemingly infallible wisdom had not led me astray. The restorative properties of all of the foods used in samgyetang had the potential to zap my muggy summer blues.

I rotated my chicken, investigating it, looking for the most logical place to begin. Still not knowing, I took to social cues from my fellow diners. The conclusion I arrived at was "just eat." So I did. I alternated between tender chunks of chicken, perfectly prepared rice and savory broth, tipped my bowl and consumed every drop. Danae wasn't far behind me and, between the two of us, we managed a dish of kimchi, two peppers each, diced peppery radish, and the whole lot of cucumbers. Needless to say, we filled the bone-bucket.

We cleaned each dish on the table and stared at each other in amazement. There we were, sweating brows and massive smiles, full and happy. Then we looked around. We were not alone. The whole restaurant was filled with diners, eating and sweating, sweating and eating. Audible murmurs of the word *masisseo* (delicious) filled the air, and there wasn't an unhappy face to be seen. The line at the restaurant hadn't diminished — rather, it had grown considerably — and we made our way to the cash register and happily paid for our first iyeolchiyeol experience.

As we left the protection of the covered awning, I felt a cold drop. Somehow, while searching for coolness, the humidity broke and for the first time in a long time, big, cold drops of rain began to fall. There was a new skip in my step. Whether it really was the soup, or some imagined benefits of it, I felt phenomenal. I couldn't hold back and began to sing the first song that came to mind: James Brown's *I Feel Good*. Through the corridor, down the hall and out the door, we sang the whole song. I'm sure, as Koreans walked past us smiling, they were thinking, "must be the samgyetang."

The rain didn't last, but it cooled the air. Finally, the Korean summer felt as light and fresh as I did. Danae and I didn't go home right away. We loitered a while in the breeze of a new summer night, laughing and talking. We gushed about how satisfied and rejuvenated we felt, and the incredible energy now running through us. And in a small pause, between our laughs, I thought I heard a whisper. It was my gi. Do you know what it said? "Siwonhada." *by Katie Klemsen | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

PROFILE

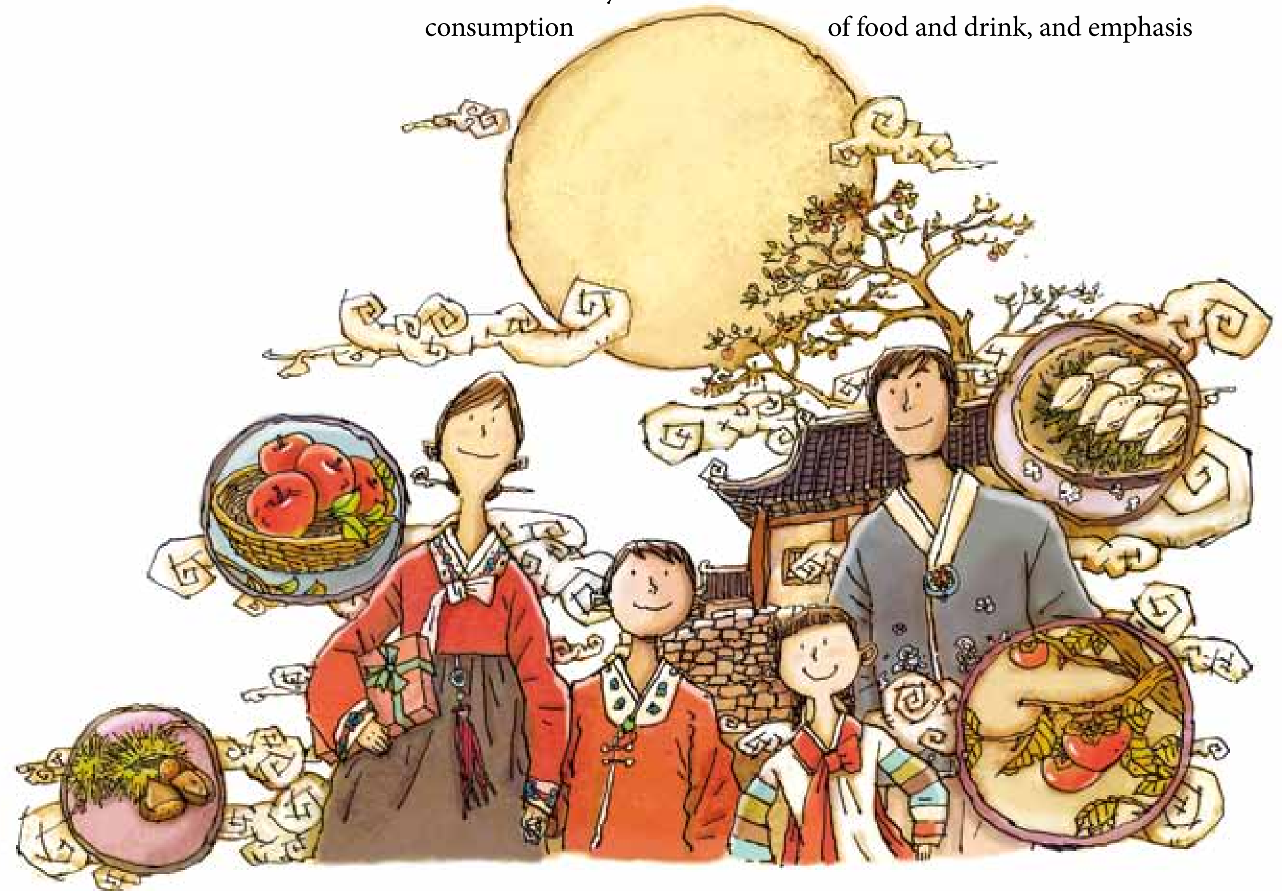
Katie Mae Klemsen is an American expat living in South Korea. She is a professor of English language and literature at Hanyang University in Seoul. With a joyful disposition, she enjoys running marathons, drinking coffee, talking politics and tuning her *gi* (vital life force in the body). When she isn't getting lost on the beaches of Asia, she can be found in Bundang, Gyeonggi-do Province. Lost or found, she can be reached at Katie.Klemsen@gmail.com.

THE SWEETEST AUTUMNAL CONNECTION

Besides the gorgeous fall weather, the arrival of Aug 15 on the lunar calendar means one thing: *chuseok*, the Korean harvest holiday. In a swiftly-changing country, chuseok offers a reacquaintance with the ways of old, solidifying one expat's affections for his new home.

To me, few sights in this world are as stunning as a persimmon tree against a brilliant blue autumn sky, its branches sagging under the weight of swollen orange fruit. This is a common sight across the Korean countryside, but one that I never tire of seeing. By tradition, when the fruit is plucked from the boughs a few persimmons are left behind for the magpies, heralded in Korean folklore as the bearers of good news. This act embodies Koreans' connection to nature, the harvest and their agrarian roots. Those who have visited Seoul, with its bustling streets, endless crowds of people, skyscrapers and bright lights might laugh, but I would argue that Korea is still largely rooted in its agrarian past and the countryside.

Korean society and culture continue to revolve around the consumption of food and drink, and emphasis



is always placed on using the freshest and healthiest ingredients. It goes without saying that to a people so deeply intertwined with their agricultural past, celebrating the harvest would be of the utmost importance. *Chuseok*, sometimes referred to as *hangawi*, is a Korean harvest festival that lasts for three days around the autumnal equinox. Every chuseok, the crowded metropolis of Seoul becomes a ghost town as people leave en masse for their ancestral hometowns in the countryside. Buses and trains are sold out months in advance, and even the relatively low demand for domestic air travel skyrockets. Cars pack the highways and slowly snake, bumper-to-bumper, out of Seoul and to remote locations throughout the peninsula. Drive times quadruple and hawkers freely walk between traffic lanes selling their wares to Korean travelers engaged in this yearly exodus.

The final destination on this journey is the *keun-jip*, literally translated as "big house," but referring to the residence of the oldest living male family member. All immediate family members gather at the keun-jip to celebrate the harvest and to pay thanks to their ancestors by preparing and sharing a great feast.

Foods traditionally eaten on this day tend to vary by household, but commonly one can find meat dishes like *bulgogi* or *galbi*; *japchae*, a dish prepared with various vegetables, meats and cellophane noodles; *jeon*, a pancake-like side dish prepared with panfried vegetables, fish and meat, coated in a batter of flour and eggs; and of course a wide variety of fruits, nuts and herbs. The food most commonly associated with chuseok, however, has to be *songpyeon*. This delicious dessert is a type of *tteok*, or glutinous rice cake, filled with a sweet mixture of sesame seeds, honey, sweet red bean or chestnut paste placed in the middle as filling. The flattened rice cake is folded around the mixture making a half-moon shape. The cakes are then loaded on a bed of pine needles and steamed into a

delicious treat.

Traditionally, songpyeon was exchanged between neighbors, reminiscent of the American tradition of exchanging sweets during the Christmas season. All of this food, however, serves a greater function than to just be eaten. Before anyone even touches the food, it is given as an offering to the ancestors in a ceremony called *charye*. The food and rice wine are arranged in an impressive display on a table next to the ancestral burial mounds or in the family's home. The family gathers together in front of the table and recites prayers while offering the rice wine. Then, family members make full bows, prostrating on the floor, offering thanks for the blessings received and memorializing their deceased family members.

After the ceremony is finished, the family sits down together and partakes of the bountiful feast. During this three-day reunion, cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents spend a great deal of time together. Traditionally, families took part in folk games like tug-of-war, archery or *ssireum*, a form of Korean traditional wrestling. However, in more recent times, it's much more likely that family members will share beers while munching on squid and peanuts, watch TV or play Go-Stop, a popular Korean game played with cards.

From start to finish, the holiday emphasizes the connection between people and their hometowns, families, ancestors and the earth. *Sintoburi*, a Korean idiom that says the agricultural products of one's hometown are the best, is literally translated as "the body and the earth cannot be separated." This typifies Koreans' attitudes when it comes to

chuseok. Koreans' respect for their traditions is only trumped by their passion and desire for sharing them with others.

During my seven years in Korea, I have had ample opportunities to participate in Korean traditions with my friends and acquaintances. I first encountered this hospitality as a young man living in the small town of Gunsan. One of my coworkers, Mr Yu, was so concerned that I would be lonely or go hungry during the extended holiday when shops close that he invited me to spend the holiday with him and his family. While never having experienced chuseok, nor understanding fully what it would mean to a Korean to be alone on such an important day, I was touched by his concern.

On the first morning we rose early, packed our lunches, and headed to the mountains to trim the grass around his family's tombs. With four generations of the Yu family sprawled on the side of the mountains, by grass-covered mounds and stone pillars, there was a lot of ground to cover. Armed with clippers, each of us took painstaking care to trim the grass to a uniform level in the brisk autumn air. Coming from a land where we pay cemeteries to look after the remains of our loved ones, this felt more intimate.

When we were finished and the sun began cresting on the ridge of the mountain adjacent, we sat down beside the graves and ate our lunch, while taking in the fall landscape. Mr Yu took great pride in telling me the history of his ancestors and explaining the auspicious location where their burial mounds were placed. He said that the location, flanked on either side by a mountain and overlooking a small stream, was built under the optimum conditions in feng shui (*pungsu* in Korean). He informed me that as a result of this auspicious positioning, the spirits of his ancestors were resting in peace and could pass on more blessings to his family.

The next day, when we visited the mounds again with his family in tow, I watched as his wife took care to set up a small wooden table at the base of the mountain where she arranged the food. This was followed by recited prayers to the ancestors, the pouring out of a few shots of a rice wine that smelled heavily of herbs, the cutting and offering of fruit, bowing and a few informal words imparted from a father to his children about the importance of family.

After the ancestral rite finished, we gathered together on a shiny silver mat and began to eat and talk and laugh with one another. As I gripped a fried pepper between my chopsticks and began raising it to my mouth, it occurred to me that I was seated there with six generations of this family. This was a family reunion that spanned hundreds of years. Never in a million years before I came to Korea could I have imagined such a gathering. As we were preparing to leave, I saw the brilliant orange of the persimmons with the wide blue fall sky behind it stretching into eternity for the first time in my life. Mr Yu, sensing my gaze, began reciting a poem entitled, *Persimmon Tree, Food for Magpies*. The poem is a tale of the ripe sweet fruit growing on the branches of a persimmon tree. It goes on to describe how the tree offers this fruit as food for the magpie to share with his family as they prepare for the winter, and how the branches, recently lightened of their fruit, reach into the sky.

He went on to relate the tradition of leaving a few persimmons on the tree, and it was then that I first realized that Korea is about connections. Connections to others. Connections to the past. Connections to the earth. Thanks to the experience of that chuseok and all the others that followed, when I was invited to participate with friends' families or brought leftover food, I now understand this and feel connected as well. In a sense, I am the magpie and Korea has been my persimmon tree. *by Joel Browning | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

PROFILE

Joel Browning is an American living in South Korea. He has spent the past seven years here, received his MA in Korean studies from Seoul National University and currently works as the Star Alliance liaison at Asiana Airlines. He likes taking long walks along the Hangang River.

It's HOESIK TIME

In any culture, food is of the utmost importance. In Korea, however, that importance is increased tenfold as eating together signifies unity and commonality. From the outside looking in, the Korean tradition of *hoesik*, or eating together, can be overwhelming for those who are unaccustomed to spending time with coworkers outside of the office. But as an American expat discovered, this warm tradition sheds insight on Korean culture and offers the opportunity for friendship and bonding in the most unlikely of settings.

My first dinner with my coworkers surprised me. I was told that we were having a staff dinner after school, and that I was invited. I couldn't help thinking, "I'm supposed to be with my coworkers after school, too?" It was a bit of strange concept, coming from a culture where you can't wait to get out of work and go home to your family and friends. Enjoyment quickly replaced skepticism, however, as a group of smiling colleagues encouraged me to eat. Every time I finished my drink, it was immediately refilled; every time a side dish

ran out, yells of "*Yeogiyo,*" or "Excuse me," brought more *Banchan*; every time I stopped my flying chopsticks for a breather, waving hands encouraged me to continue eating. Just when I had stuffed myself to the brim, the question of, "*doenjang-jjigae* and rice?" brought yet another course to the table. Needless to say, it was a good thing my apartment was directly across the street from the restaurant, so I could have a coworker give me a push and let me roll across the street into the building. I got home thinking, "Welcome to Korea."

In the US, we may make a few friends at work to spend time with at lunches and some evening excursions, but Koreans consider bonding with coworkers of the utmost importance. *Hoesik* culture (literally, "eating with colleagues") is experienced at every workplace. From office workers to teachers to salespeople, coworkers are expected to get together for dinner and drinks after the stressful hours of the workday. To an outsider like me, this may seem weird — who wants to spend all evening with the people you see all day? — but it's a tradition that enhances relationships in the workplace better than anything else.

To gain some insight into why this is such an imperative part of the culture, I talked with my coworker and friend, Ms Choi, about hoesik. She explained to me exactly why this tradition is so essential in Korea, saying, "It gives us a chance to become familiar with one another. If you don't eat outside of school, you are not a friend." Eating together outside of work provides a unity that cannot be experienced within the office. Due to the influence of Confucianism, a strict hierarchy is to be maintained in the workplace. Eating with coworkers, however, is a way in which that hierarchy can relax a bit, and people can speak freely. "If I go to hoesik with English coworkers whom I am more familiar with, I can say anything, and we can show our true selves," Ms Choi said. "We can share the same story, so it is fun." By eating together after work, coworkers are allowed to bond in a way that unites them when they return to the workplace, a bonding experience like no other.

Hansotbap sikgu is an idiom in the Korean language that means, "We eat from the same bowl." This idiom comes from the way families eat together. In the past, Korean family members would mix a bowl of *bibimbap* (rice with vegetables and spicy red pepper sauce), the father would begin eating, and then the family would all eat out of the same bowl. Similarly, coworkers who eat together after work will introduce their friends saying, "We've eaten from the same bowl for five years." It is a way of saying, "We are family." Not only does eating with coworkers offer a chance to become familiar with each other, it allows them to consider themselves a family.

For this reason, Koreans who are beginning a new job or retiring are treated to the largest parties. It's almost like a family reunion or a wedding. It is a way of welcoming people into their new "family," or thanking them for all of the years they've spent in it. My husband attended one of these large parties when his principal retired. Since this was not just a regular teacher, but the principal, there was quite the farewell party for him. All of the staff and the principal's family attended the celebration. There was a nice buffet, drinking, toasts and, most importantly, gifts. Every person left the party with a memory book of the principal's service in teaching, as well as a beach mat with the school name emblazoned on it. "It was similar to a wedding feast we would have in the US. There was a guest of honor

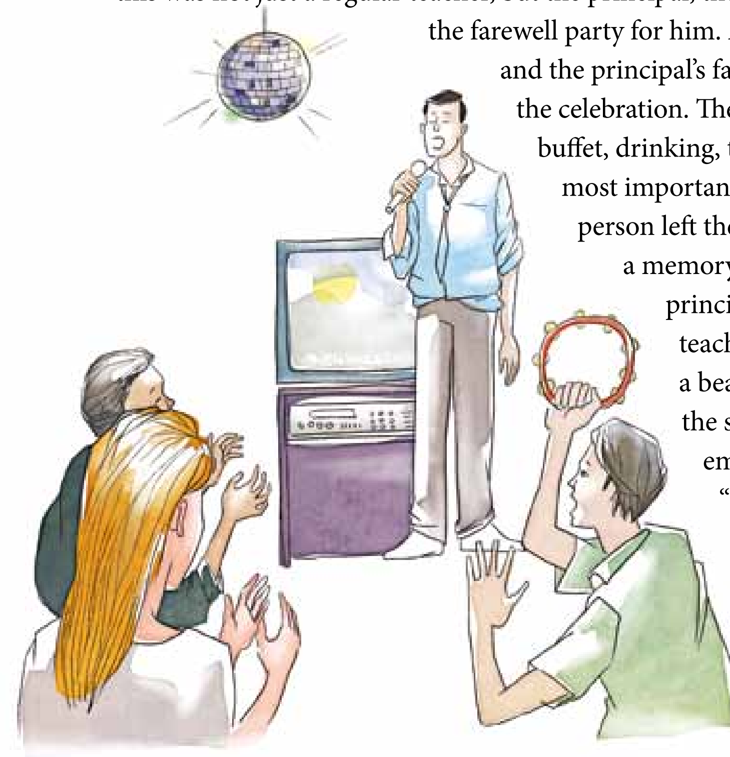


table raised above everyone else, and all of the principal's family was there," my husband explained. "Everyone was so helpful, giving rides and making sure everyone got involved in the gathering, including me."

My experiences with hoesik culture have been relatively tame, if you don't count the teacher retreat I experienced where our music teacher drank a little too much and was yelling toasts throughout the night. My husband even had a teacher begin singing opera as he doled out toasts throughout an evening of hoesik. Every time I'm invited to a teacher dinner, I say yes. As a foreign teacher, I'm already at a disadvantage when it comes to bonding with my coworkers, so anything I can do to create unity and friendship in the workplace is a plus for me. Eating with my colleagues is a great way for me to get to know them. People I've never spoken to suddenly speak phenomenal English, and even my Korean language abilities get a little better. Little did I know how rewarding a staff dinner could be in relationships at work.

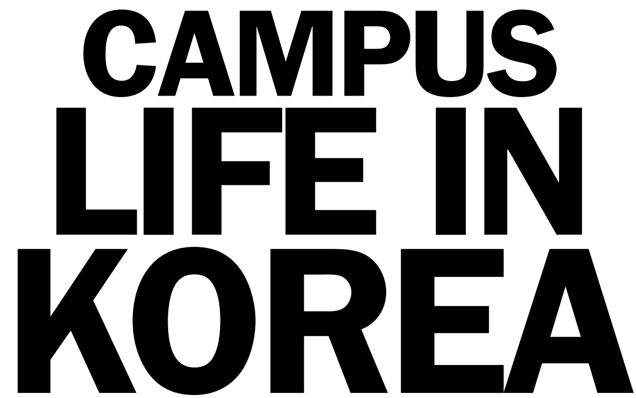
My three female English coworkers and I decided to take an afternoon this past summer to engage in a hoesik of our own. When I say an afternoon, I mean an entire afternoon. This was no ladies luncheon at noon. We began our bonding at a buffet with seafood, pasta, salad, steak and chicken. Ms Choi was the first to break the ice, asserting that whoever ate the least number of plates at the buffet was the loser. Trip after trip was made to the buffet area, and story after story was shared in the bites between those trips. Everything from students to teaching theory to summer plans were discussed. Once again, when I thought I could eat no more, it was time to hit the dessert counters. After piling our dishes with sweets, we sat down to more conversation. At this point, disaster hit our group as the kitchen began filling with smoke. We were forced to pay and leave the restaurant, with grumbles of, "But we didn't even get coffee yet!" Even though lunch had ended, our bonding was not yet over. Being in need of coffee (Every good meal must end with coffee, right?), we headed to a delightful European-style cafe not far from the buffet. My coworkers emitted squeals of delight, sighing, "It's just like *Sex and the City*," and then began assigning characters to each of us. As soon as coffee cups were clasped in each of our hands, we began anew our conversation, continuing where it had left off. Only when one of us had to leave because of a hair appointment did our group begin to disperse. After a buffet, dessert, coffee and a million words, our hoesik had ended.

This was my first real experience of "letting my hair down" with my coworkers. It was truly invigorating, and I left with a sense of being a kindred spirit with my coworkers that I had not yet felt since beginning my life in Korea. I also realized that there really was something to this whole concept of hoesik. We had "eaten from the same bowl," and a bond had been created that continued when we went back to work the next day. I now knew I had people on my side as I prepared for the tough days of students, lessons and preparing for tests. I had a family of fellow English teachers.

In the minds of Koreans, eating brings unity. Language barriers are broken, conflicts resolved, and true selves are revealed in an effort to bring unity and friendship into the workplace. I hope to find and engage in this type of communal family no matter the workplace in which I find myself. *by Kate Engelkes | illustrations by Kim Hyeong-geon*

PROFILE

Kate Engelkes and her husband are American expats living in South Korea. They are both English teachers in the public school system in Busan. Formerly an English Education student at Iowa State University, Kate now enjoys discovering the cultural differences between American and Korean school systems, eating Korean foods of all kinds and curling up with good books after school. She can be reached at engelkes.km@gmail.com.



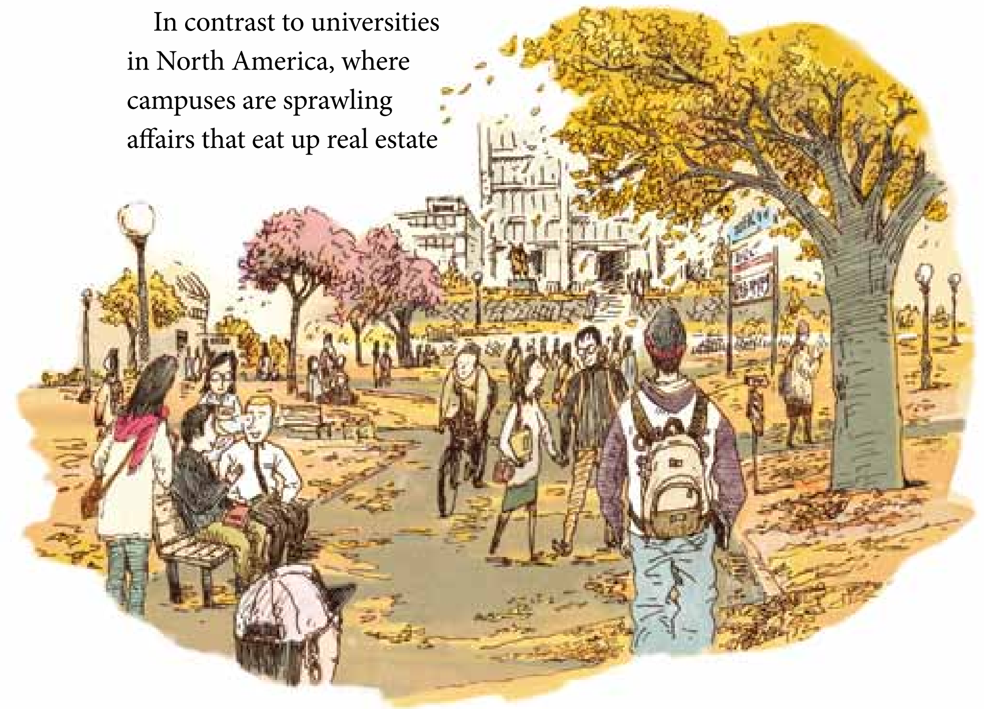
CAMPUS LIFE IN KOREA

When he first arrived here as a professor, one expat's first impression of Soongsil University was of a densely populated complex of towering buildings, wide brick staircases and throngs of young students hurrying to class, relaxing on benches together or just hanging out. Though it's been a few years since college, and Korea is a long way from home, he doesn't think student life has changed much.

Education in Korea has a long, hallowed history, but modern schooling didn't begin here until the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the late 19th century. The roots of Soongsil University, where I teach, date back to 1897, when an American evangelical minister Dr William M Baird began teaching a handful of students in the guest room of his home. From its modest beginnings, Soongsil went on to survive the Japanese colonial era and the Korean War (1950-1953) to become the fully accredited institution with 13,000 students that it is today.

Located south of the Hangang River, Soongsil is accessible on Subway Line 7 via its namesake station. Occupying approximately 12.9 hectares, it is a bustling, self-contained community with dormitories, cafeterias, convenience stores, an on-site bank and pretty much every other amenity you could want as a student. While it offers a full roster of science programs, engineering and humanities programs, Soongsil is known for its reputation in IT, computer studies and robotics.

In contrast to universities in North America, where campuses are sprawling affairs that eat up real estate



with wild abandon, the most striking aspect of this campus is the relative modesty of its grounds. With little room to spread out, the buildings have been constructed upward, with many reaching 15 stories or more. However, planners have still managed to include ample green spaces complete with pathways, manicured gardens and abundant natural forests that alleviate the concrete jungle of Seoul.

Directly across the street from campus is a strip of inexpensive restaurants, fast food outlets, bars, coffee shops and convenience stores, all catering to the university crowd. It is a lively, vibrant place, and day or night the street is filled with students blowing off steam or feverishly cramming together for the next exam.

If there is one thing all Koreans are serious about, it is education. With a literacy rate of 99%, Korea is among the most literate countries in the world. In addition to a historically high regard for education, modern South Koreans recognized education as invaluable in pulling the country out of abject poverty after the Korean War. The strategy has been highly successful, turning the country's fortunes around from being one of the world's poorest nations just a few decades ago to one of its richest today.

That drive to survive, followed by the drive to prosper, is reflected in a curriculum that includes English-language education from as early as elementary school, and sometimes even before. Recognizing English as the language of commerce, Korean schooling places enormous emphasis on English language skills. This fact has allowed me to come here as a teacher and experience this amazing country firsthand.

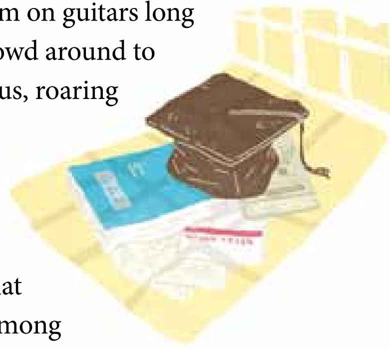
Most students I encounter have been studying English since elementary school — about 10 years. I tell them they must all be like native English speakers, which invariably elicits gales of laughter. Indeed, they can write, they understand the spoken word, they know all the grammar rules, but speaking has been a stumbling block for all but a few of them. A pervasive shyness and lack of confidence has held them back from becoming completely bilingual. My students study all different disciplines and come from every corner of the country. Perhaps the one common thread that binds them all together is their desire to improve their English speaking skills.

My students are generally serious and attentive. At the same time, they are young, energetic adults, inquisitive about the world and looking forward to a bright future. They are the same as young people anywhere who seek a good job, love, family and security. They are predominantly alert, sensitive, polite and considerate. They are like sponges wanting to know everything about Western culture. When I discuss any aspect of Canada, be it geography, people, customs or food, they sit in rapt attention. I am always amazed by their constant thirst for knowledge.

The day starts early for my students, with even the more easygoing ones displaying a dedication that would put most Canadian students to shame. Many rise before dawn to arrive for the first class at 7:30am. Some have to get up at 5am and ride the subway for an hour to get here on time. By the time my second class ends at 9:30am, the campus is teeming with eager students rushing to class, texting on cell phones or meeting up with friends.

All of their hard work is rewarded in the first week of October, which is dedicated to the school festival: a week of partying equivalent to the Canadian Frosh Week. Student organizations and clubs set up tents from which they serve food, beer, *makgeolli* (sweet, fermented rice liquor) and the ever-present *soju* — a clear, strong Korean alcohol that is enjoyed in great quantities by Korean men and women of all ages (of course, adults only). Temporary stages spring up all over

campus, and entertainers croon and strum on guitars long into the night. Thousands of students crowd around to dance, cheer and sing along. It is a raucous, roaring reverie.



Campus life is no different from any other campus at any large university, at any cosmopolitan city in the world. The big difference for me, of course, is that this is Seoul. The students are Korean. Among young people there is a huge concern with appearance and the energy spent on fashion and appearance is enormous, almost to the point of obsession. A great deal of time, concern and money is devoted to how the girls present themselves to the world. The people are generally slim, fit and dressed to impress — or excess, depending on your perspective.

Students scurry to lectures, study, chat, laugh, drink coffee, argue, dream and plan for their futures. From a very early stage, many display huge drive to find a job. It is the great motor powering every student's academic journey. It can't be just any job. It has to be with a big company. The most sought-after positions are with Samsung, Hyundai, LG and other corporate behemoths. Taking a position at a lesser company seems unacceptable. Such jobs are, for the most part, considered beneath the dignity of graduates.

In North America, graduates may take any job, anywhere just to have work while they look for the "right position." Here, culture demands more. It could be something of an embarassment to the graduate and his family to take a lesser position. As a consequence, many unemployed graduates sit at home waiting for opportunities. This unfortunate circumstance means that many small- to medium-sized companies have had trouble filling positions. This attitude is changing, however, as the harsh reality of a new emerging economy has forced students to reevaluate their career options.

But for now, none of this matters. The students at Soongsil are focused on getting through the next physics exam or scoring high marks on the OPI and other English proficiency tests like the TOEIC. They don't have time to ponder an uncertain future of "what if." Right now, their lives are filled with early morning English classes and long nights in the chemistry lab. On weekends, they let loose and get ready for the Monday morning grind all over again. They have been taught from an early age that if they work hard, they will succeed. Several of my Korean friends said that from a young age they have been obsessed with the idea that working hard will guarantee material success, and a good education is key. It saddens me to see elementary school children spending countless hours at studies and neglecting the play that is so much of a North American child's life. From grade school through university and on to their career, there seems to be no relief from the stress of study and work.

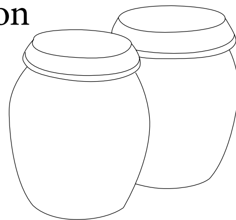
For my part, I want to do what I can to help shepherd them through to the next phase. I have been touched by every single one of them — from the academic geniuses to the artistic souls. I may have been most affected by the ones who "don't get it" as quickly as the others. They struggle so much. There is a pervasive attitude here of never giving up, a kind of "you can do anything" approach to the world. I think this can be partly explained by the obligatory military service that all the male students have been through. Two years of being pushed to do more with less has created a society of people who are independent and resourceful. It is inspiring to be among these young students. So much of the time I feel as though I am not the teacher here, but the student. It is a privilege to be a part of their lives. *by John Larsen | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Park Jeong-roh*

PROFILE

John Larsen is a Canadian living in Seoul and currently teaches English at Soongsil University. He first traveled to Korea in 2004 when he stayed for three weeks at a Buddhist temple near Gyeongju. During that time he studied martial arts, meditated and found a connection with Korea that was to be profound and life changing. He has since then traveled extensively throughout the peninsula.

CONVERTED TO KIMCHI

Despite living just a few kilometers from a big Koreatown in the United States, Charles Montgomery knew practically nothing of Korea or its food. But when an opportunity arose to try Korean cuisine with a Korean student studying nearby, Montgomery discovered how much he liked Korea's barbecued pork, zingy, indigenous liquor and the unforgettable spicy condiment that comes with everything. Now teaching English translation at a university in Seoul, Montgomery's passion for all things Korean continues to grow — especially for Korea's fiery, fermented favorite, kimchi.



The first bite of kimchi (fermented cabbage) is one of my favorite moments during any meal. From hot and spicy, to refreshing and even cool, there are hundreds of varieties of Korea's national dish. In homes or restaurants, kimchi comes to the table with the rest of the *Banchan* (side dishes) and I sneak a first peek. Is it fiery red? Elegant white? Does the cabbage look crisp, or cling to the plate? Is it cabbage or cucumber? Then, chopsticks descend, kimchi ascends and my mouth closes. Tastebuds begin to dance and a rush rises up my nose and into my brain. This meal is going to be delicious!

This is not how I used to begin my meals. Although I grew up in California, less than 20km away from the Koreatown in Santa Clara, I knew little about Korea. Passing through Koreatown, I couldn't tell the difference between signs in *Hangeul* (Korean alphabet) and the Japanese or Chinese ones. And the food? I had no idea.

Many years later I ran the night tutoring program at Chabot College in Hayward, California. One of the tutors was Ed Park, a young Korean. Ed was studying for his MA in Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley, and tutoring because he knew it was a good way to improve his own English skills. One night he asked me if I'd like to have a beer, and after shutting the center down, we went out. Our friendship developed, and eventually Ed asked if I had ever eaten Korean food. I said no, so he took me out for a meal.

We began with *samgyeopsal* (barbecued pork) and *soju* (a distilled Korean spirit), a combination that, Ed helpfully pointed out, was quite similar to barbecues in the Western world. But then, out came Banchan. This, I had never seen before: little plates covered with different kinds of (to me) very unfamiliar food. On one of those plates there was something red and sort of scary looking.

Ed pointed to that plate and asked the question that I've been asked scores of times since moving to Korea, "Do you know kimchi?" By the end of the evening, I thought I could answer that I did. In fact, my knowledge of the inimitable side dish had only just begun.

Several years later, I now know that kimchi, the "soul food" of Korea, is a simple dish with a deep role in Korean culture. It is so embedded in the Korean psyche that instead of saying "1, 2, 3, cheese!" when taking photos, Koreans say, "1, 2, 3, kimchi!" The fiery side dish has roots stretching as far back as the 7th century, with the first written mention of it appearing nearly 3,000 years ago.

Kimchi is, along with rice, the staple of every Korean meal, and so important that in many Korean homes (and in the homes of ethnic Koreans across the world) there is a special "kimchi refrigerator" to hold it. But kimchi is more than just food to Koreans. It also represents solidarity, community and survival.

Perhaps most importantly, kimchi is the food that has sustained generations of Koreans. When the cold winds of winter rushed down the Korean Peninsula, it was impossible to grow crops. In order to survive this cold season, Koreans had to develop a nutritious food with a long shelf life. Kimchi was the answer. Not only did the fermentation process preserve the food, the final product was also a nutritional bonanza: high in fiber, low in fat, loaded with vitamins A, B and C, and also containing lactobacilli, a "healthy bacteria" that aids digestion and may even prevent yeast infections.

There are hundreds of kinds of kimchi, made of vegetables including cabbage, radish, green onion, cucumber and chili pepper. Each region of Korea has its own special, representative version. Besides *baechu-kimchi*, well-known kimchi include the crunchy *kkakdugi*, a kimchi made with cubed radish; the scallion based *pa-kimchi*; and a cooling kimchi made with cucumbers called *oi-sobagi*.

Kimchi is generally divided into two types: seasonal, which is made from locally-sourced vegetables, intended for immediate consumption, and *gimjang*, which is made in large quantities in late fall. Kimchi's characteristic red color didn't actually appear until the 19th century, when red chili peppers were introduced to Korea and red chili pepper flakes were added to the recipe. The latest addition to the kimchi we know today was the introduction of the Chinese cabbage in the 1900s.

Kimchi preparation is uniquely Korean. Following the cabbage harvest in fall, Korean villages would traditionally spend part of November conducting gimjang, a communal process of kimchi-making that united generations in preparation for the winter. This tradition continues today, with some families buying hundreds of heads of cabbage, as well as the other ingredients necessary to make kimchi. Women wash and trim the produce, prepare the brine, painstakingly interlace layers of ingredients and carefully fold the cabbage before storing it in kimchi pots for fermentation. Gimjang

goes beyond mere food-making, however, as it is also a social event in which Koreans interact at all steps in the process, and then help each other prepare kimchi. As I came to know kimchi, I came to learn these things, and others, about Korean culture.

Driven by an interest in Korean literature and culture, I arrived in Korea 10 years after my introduction to kimchi. I landed in Daejeon and my personal "kimchi education" really began. While I was fairly used to baechu-kimchi as a side dish, I was mostly unaware of the wide range of kimchi and completely unaware of the many dishes that feature kimchi as an ingredient. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the summery oi-sobagi, which is frequently eaten before it has time to ferment. White kimchi (which leaves out the red chili pepper) was also a bit of an eye-opener, but refreshed me during Korea's hot summers.

At first, I did my exploring alone. But my wife followed me to Korea six months after I arrived. In the United States she had been afraid of kimchi's strong taste, but once in Korea she quickly came to love it. I can still remember the first time we sat down together and, while we waited for our *galbitang* (beef soup) to arrive, she sank a pair of tongs into the communal kimchi bowl on the table, slapped a hefty pile of kimchi onto a Banchan plate, scissored it once, lifted a piece to her mouth and ate it. She looked at me and said, "It's good, it has a kind of hot aftertaste." Now, it's impossible to get my wife to eat plain rice.

To me, certain foods seem to go together naturally. In the United States we have pizza and beer, cookies and milk, turkey and stuffing, and macaroni and cheese. Now, I have added to these eternal combinations, kimchi and rice (and, although my wife does not drink, I'd also like to say a kind word about samgyeopsal and soju).

We also discovered dishes with kimchi in them that we had been unaware of. *Dubu* (tofu) and kimchi pairs soft, silky tofu with chewy, tangy kimchi, and is also excellent chopstick practice as the tofu can be quite elusive. *Kimchi-jjigae* is a spicy stew made with kimchi, pork and tofu and is a perfect dish for a cold Korean night. *Kimchijeon* is savory pancake, crunchy at the edges and soft inside, made with kimchi, flour, water, eggs and sometimes seafood. Mix in a bowl, panfry and eat!

Last but not least, the delicious "fast food" *kimchi-mandu* are dumplings filled with kimchi, tofu and often pork and glassy noodles called *dangmyeon*. They can be boiled, steamed, fried or added to soups and stews. A little bit meaty, a little bit tangy, they are great for adding a bit of substance to everyday soups. I like to buy my kimchi-mandu from the vending trucks that park on corners in many neighborhoods in Seoul.

Now, of course, after the initial success of Kogi taco-trucks in Los Angeles and elsewhere, kimchi has gone international. World famous restaurants such as New York's Momofuku serve it in dishes like kimchi-jjigae with rice cakes. Online you can find recipes for making kimchi as well as a wide variety of kimchi inspired dishes, even including kimchi-deviled eggs! In Seoul this year, I visited the Kimchi Festival and was amazed at the variety of gourmet dishes that chefs had concocted using kimchi. I got to watch the making of kimchi and felt as though I was watching something timeless.

I have been in Korea for three years and will stay at least another two. My wife and I have not determined where in the US we plan to move to, but we have decided one thing — we won't move anywhere there isn't a Korean market or restaurant. Five thousand years of food tradition have converted us! *by Charles Montgomery | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon*

PROFILE

Charles Montgomery teaches in the English Interpretation and Translation Department at Dongguk University. He has spent four years in Korea. He is a big fan of modern Korean literature (in translation) and comments about it at www.ktlit.com. And he also loves kimchi!

THE LABORS OF LOVE

The course of true love, as they say, never runs smooth. And when partners come from countries that are cultural opposites, that course becomes even more treacherous. But one expat discovers that for those who stay the course, lasting love is the prize.

The first time I stepped foot in Korea was in 2001. Skirts were longer, and public displays of affection were more unusual. In fact, at that time, my biggest clue for figuring out a couple's relationship status was whether or not they were wearing matching outfits.

Ten years later, I walk down the streets and find it common for couples to snuggle while waiting for a bus, sitting in a coffee shop and whispering into each other's ear. If you ask me how I feel about this, I would say I find it refreshing; it's not, on the whole, openly sexual, but mostly sweet. When I see a man carrying his girlfriend's purse, I can't help but smile. However, catch me on a day when I'm painfully aware I'm single, and "refreshing" may not be the word that comes to mind.

So what's a single girl to do? In Korea, one of the most common ways to meet the opposite sex is online. Dating websites such as Duo claim almost 23,000 members. As in most countries, it's common to meet at work or in school, while a great many dates are also set up by friends or even family members. I giggle when I hear female friends talk about constantly being asked by concerned *ajumma* (older women) if they are married or have a boyfriend. I've listened to more

than one Korean friend lament about her mother's excessive concern for her being single. The idea of becoming an old maid is definitely something to worry about in this country. When a female crosses the age of 30, she is getting close! The average marrying age is 28 for women and 31 for men. But marriage in Korea isn't merely between a man and woman. It's a marriage between families.

Due to the high value placed on marriage, it is not unheard of for a family to hire a matchmaker to find their son or daughter a spouse — especially in upper-class society. A couple could also be introduced through their parents, an arrangement referred to as a *seon*, which allows screening to be done by the family. However, in both cases, neither party is bound if they are uninterested.

In the last 20 years, dating and marriage in Korea have begun to feel the influence of Western thought. Mindsets are beginning to broaden with the influx of foreigners moving to Korea, as well as changing attitudes in the media. Things that were considered taboo are becoming openly acceptable. Tradition that had been firm and unyielding is beginning to loosen its grip on the younger generation. Is it good? Is it bad? That depends on who you are talking to.

Before I began writing this assignment, I held a somewhat blinkered view of Korea's conservative culture. While I had many Korean friends that I loved, I didn't understand why Korean parents were so controlling of their grown children. I didn't understand why friends were pressured to pay such large amounts for wedding gifts. Why did my friend need to save money for years just to get married? Why were some parents so harsh with foreign daughters- or sons-in-law? From my liberal Western point of view, these things seemed so unnecessary.

The main complaint I heard from foreigners who dated Koreans was regarding their partner's family. "What difference should a family's opinion make?" they would demand. I know the passionate side of me would say, "If he loves you, he should fight for you — no matter what."

However, I feel there's an element to this equation that many of us, myself certainly included, struggle to ever really understand: honor.

Honor is laced into every aspect of Korean culture. Because Korea is more collectivist in nature than most Western societies, honoring the family is often regarded as more important even than one's own feelings — and this certainly extends to marriage.

In researching this piece, I had the pleasure of interviewing an Australian woman engaged to a Korean man. Several of my friends had dated Korean men, and it had often ended suddenly or rather badly. But as I sat down with Karen, I gained a deeper insight into these international relationships. Rather than being rejections or expressions of bad will, I discovered that many of the problems I'd heard about could have been mere misunderstandings.

For my new friend Karen, it took almost two years for her fiancé's family to give their approval. She told me of her frustration in the beginning when her boyfriend would leave her to be with his family, or go to family events where she wasn't welcome.

The night her boyfriend's mother finally gave her blessing, she sat them down and warned them about how hard it would be for them as a couple. Karen began to realize that what had felt like rejection in the past was actually concern. With family being such a high priority,

how would a mother be able to communicate with a foreign daughter-in-law? How would Karen cope with all the responsibility that is placed on the daughter-in-law of their eldest son? Would this foreign woman take her son away to another land? They weren't just worried for themselves — they were genuinely concerned for her, too. Several months later, however, Karen is treated as part of the family.

I've noticed that many Korean women seem higher maintenance than the average American girl. I only say American, because I can't judge for other countries. My friend interviewed a male friend of hers for me, and he mentioned that as a Korean man, he felt pressure when he dated a girl to buy her presents and do things for her.

On a first date, it is not uncommon for a man to drop a lot of money, and it is normal for a man to pay for more throughout the relationship. Could it be that when a guy has to work harder for a girl and save money for marriage, he appreciates her more? Is it possible that in cultures where marriage is no longer regarded as valuable and women insist on meeting men halfway, that women have unknowingly stolen something of their worth in a man's eyes? As I dig into understanding another culture, I increasingly find myself questioning my own.

So what happens when a Korean couple decides to get married? Most men and women start saving from the time they get a job for their future marriage. It is common for a man to save upwards of 100 million won (US$93,000) and the woman 40 million won. The 100 million won goes toward the house where they will live, and the 40 million toward furniture and appliances. Scrimping and saving for so long may not sound like fun, but when I think of it in the long-term — how much more my future husband and I might appreciate the house, and each other, if we'd saved for so long — it starts to make sense.

Marriage is a huge deal in Korean culture. Family and friends chip in large amounts of money to bless the new couple. I listened as one of my friends, who I knew wasn't exactly rolling in cash, told me she gave 100,000 won (US$88) to a friend for her wedding. Shocked, I asked why. "It's to honor and help the new couple."

If you come from a country with an ingrained culture of gift giving, this may seem normal. However, I know when I'm stretched financially, giving wads of cash to newlyweds isn't high up on my list of priorities. Watching how my Korean friends help each other out and honor their families leaves me thinking: Maybe this culture that shares one another's burdens really does have something on the "my four and no more" environment that I was raised in.

For a person who prioritizes choice, equality and individuality, it's easy to perceive a culture that values tradition and honor as narrow-minded. However, taking time to step back and look at the dating and marriage world of Korea has caused me to do a lot of my own re-thinking. I believe one of the keys to Karen's success in being able to marry a Korean man comes from her desire to adapt to the Korean culture as well as appreciating the cultural value of honor. I found myself admiring her as I realized that what could have embittered her (as it had my other friends), actually gave her greater respect for the man she was to marry.

When I asked Karen what she loved about dating a Korean man, she replied: "I love the way intercultural relationships open up our minds to new possibilities and perspectives. I experienced Korea in a deeper way because I've seen the way Korean families do things, and I've fallen in love with Korean culture."

So are Korea's methods for dating, weddings and marriage really so unique? To be honest, I don't know. But in my quest to learn more about these topics, I found myself growing in appreciation for this culture, and discovering that there really are many different ways to find true love. *by Ann-Cherise Simmons | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Park Jeong-roh*

PROFILE

Ann-Cherise Simmons is an American who first came to Korea in 2001, and later received a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Maryland, Yongsan Army Post. In 2007, she moved to the US, and is currently back visiting Korea for a few months. She enjoys traveling, meeting people and going to coffee shops.

HERE COMES THE SUN

It isn't until a month after Jan 1 that many Koreans celebrate the New Year — the Lunar New Year, that is. In 2011, Koreans celebrated *seollal* with family reunions and a age-old traditions on Feb 3. And as one American expat discovered, those traditions remain vibrant and alive — even among the country's younger residents.

Imagine, for a moment, darkness. You're sitting on the beach, holding hot chocolate or coffee between knitted gloves. The smell of the sea drifts faintly toward you like an apparition weary from endless motion. Or perhaps in the darkness you're walking among trees on the slope of a mountain, your breath puffs in front of you, warm from your upward trek. Choose a place of your own liking, but wherever it is, you must have a clear view of the eastern horizon.

Now, looking out through the morning mist, you wait, perhaps telling stories or sitting in silence. The crease along the skyline begins to glow, first deep orange, then radiating yellow, becoming brighter as the minutes tick by, giving credence to Korea's nickname: The Land of Morning Calm. The sun peaks up over the ocean, or tree-lined horizon, and the morning chill is warmed by the sun's rays. You've just participated in a Korean custom, watching the first light of the New

Year. Or at least, the Solar New Year.

Korea also celebrates the Lunar New Year, which they call *seollal*. Though it takes place on the first day of the lunar calendar, the date changes every year because it is based on the phases of the moon. In 2011, for example, it fell on Feb 3, whereas in 2012 it will be celebrated on Jan 23. A full three days of rest are set aside for seollal, which is often spent with family, partaking in traditional activities.

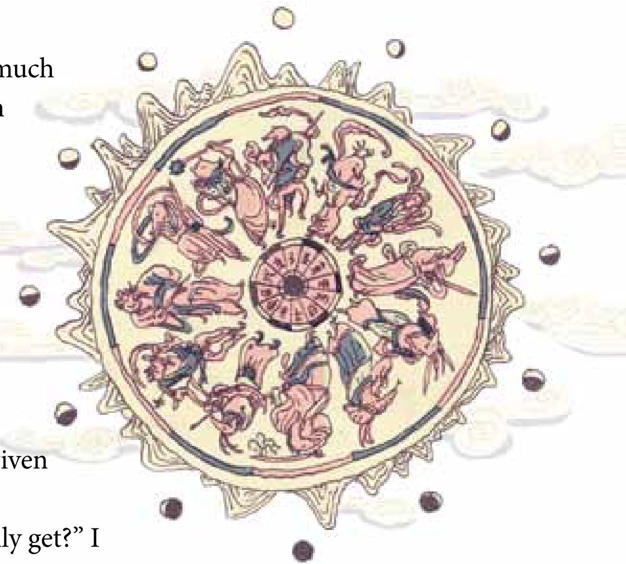
Since seollal is a traditional holiday, it is far more significant in Korea than the Solar New Year. Indeed, Korea's strong sense of tradition really becomes evident during its two major holidays, *chuseok* (a harvest holiday) and seollal, which are both based on the lunar calendar. The holidays consist of eating traditional food, and often include visiting the graves of relatives while dressed in traditional Korean clothing called *hanbok*.

I teach at Kwangmu Girl's Middle School in Busan, so I discussed seollal and its accompanying traditions and customs with my students and coworkers. We were having class at an English library and a handful of students sat quietly at their tables with my fellow teachers.

"Kyung-ju," I said to a colleague, "Do men wear hanbok?" Replying in the positive, Kyung-ju explained, "Men will wear blue or red, and women wear bright colors, like yellow, orange or pink." During some traditional holidays, Koreans travel all over the country to see family and visit ancestral graves, and wearing hanbok is a sign of respect. They offer food and give a deep bow, and then they pray to the deceased, asking for blessings in the new year. "It is typically a happy time, celebrating their memory," said Kyung-ju. "We tell stories and try to enjoy the memories we have of them."

These bowing rituals are known as *sebae*. Starting in the morning, after dressing up in hanbok, children will bow to their elders and say (in Korean, of course), "Please receive many blessings in the new year."

I asked Hee-won, one of my most outgoing students, if she'd show me how to perform sebae correctly. But asking middle school girls to do something out of the ordinary is like ramping up production at the local giggle factory. "How much will you give me?" Hee-won asked.



"What do you mean?"

Hee-won explained, "You get money. *Sebaedon*." *Don*, with a long "o" sound, is the Korean word for money, and after the bow is performed, children are given money.

"How much do you usually get?" I asked.

By this time, everyone was listening in on the conversation, so I sat at a table surrounded by seven giggle-crazy girls. "Ten thousand won," (US$9) one said. Another told me 30,000 won. But the amount didn't really matter. What mattered was that after the bow, they would receive some kind of remuneration for their efforts.

Since I was holding out on the cash, no one volunteered to bow. Instead, they had me get on the floor while they instructed me on how to do it. Boys and girls, I learned, bow differently. Boys place their left hand on top of their right and girls vice versa. As I got down on my knees to perform the bow, Na-young joined me on the floor, sitting across from me in the traditional girls' bowing posture — cross-legged, right hand on top, bending over and touching the floor.

During seollal, many families play traditional games to ring in the New Year. One such game is *Yunnori*, which is a bit complicated to explain but, I've been told, is fun to play. From what I can surmise, it's like combining Yahtzee with a board game, only instead of dice, four, two-sided sticks (called *jang-jak*) are rolled.

Jae-hee, one of my students who's taught herself most of the English she knows, approached me and looked at my computer screen. "What

is that?" she asked.

I scrolled up to show her a picture of the Yunnori board and pieces. She nodded to show she understood.

"Do you like this game?" I asked.

"Yunnori? Yes, teacher, I like this game," she replied.

"Why?" I asked.

"It is fun. Every holiday my family plays this game."

Other students heard Jae-hee and I speaking, and their familiarity with the topic drew them in. "Yunnori?" I heard them say among a barrage of Korean. Kyung-min smiled, acknowledging the game.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

"Yes," she told me, "We play it every year."

All of my students agreed: this was an annual family tradition. The game is strongly tied to the feelings of nostalgia and the sanctuary that family provides, just as perhaps eggnog or carols are tied sentimentally to the United States' winter holidays.

"What about you?" I asked, motioning toward Hyun-jeong, a student fluent in English and in the process of learning French.

"Teacher, I do not like this game," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I like to play computer games," she said.

Ah-young, a fellow teacher, chuckled at Hyun-jeong's response, which caught my attention. So I asked her what she thought of it.

"It's fun. I played it mostly as a child. But it's more fun when you bet money on the winner," she explained with a mischievous laugh.

Kyung-ju, who had been listening in, added, "A popular game among adults is called Go-Stop, which is similar to poker." You need at least three people to play and small amounts of money are gambled. "This is a common modern tradition," Kyung-ju explained. She smiled. "And I'm not very good at it."

After recording this information, I turned to my coworkers and asked, "What else can you tell me about seollal?" They thought for a moment, then both agreed: "*Tteokguk*."

With any kind of cuisine, there are dishes that some people don't like — but I've yet to see any Korean refuse tteokguk. It's a simple dish, typically consisting of a light beef and anchovy broth with thin sliced *tteok* (Korean rice cakes), roasted *gim* (seaweed) and egg as a garnish. It's basically a soup that is made to bring luck for the new year.

Though ritual plays a large role in the celebration of seollal, not all ceremonies have to be steeped in historical custom. The lunar calendar has 12 earthly branches, which are represented by animals. The year 2010 was the year of the tiger, and in 2011 it was the rabbit's turn. Rabbits were all over clothing, stationery, calendars and just about anything else you can think of. Certain coffee shops are selling rabbit-shaped donuts and there were rumors of discounts at various shops for those born in rabbit years. The Everland Zoo near Seoul even created a miniature obstacle course for these cute and tiny animals. Visitors would have seen fluffy rabbits, dressed in tiny winter sweaters jumping over hurdles and through hoops.

The sun shines, whether in the morning, breaking through the mists of the horizon or illuminating desk tops in English libraries. It is in the sunlight that Korea partakes in customs, rituals and ceremonies, but it is the moon upon which these are based. It was intriguing to hear my students and coworkers reveal to me, for the first time, these personal and common aspects of their culture. As I bowed on the floor, my left hand on top of my right, my students giggled with amusement at the sight of their teacher learning something that was completely foreign. So I leave you now with the words spoken after the sebae: Please receive many blessings in the New Year. *by Steven E Athay | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon*

PROFILE

Steven E Athay is an aspiring writer. He has a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature with an emphasis in creative writing. He lives in Busan with his beautiful and witty wife Kimberly and his long-haired dachshund, Sasha. You can follow him on Twitter @steveneathay.

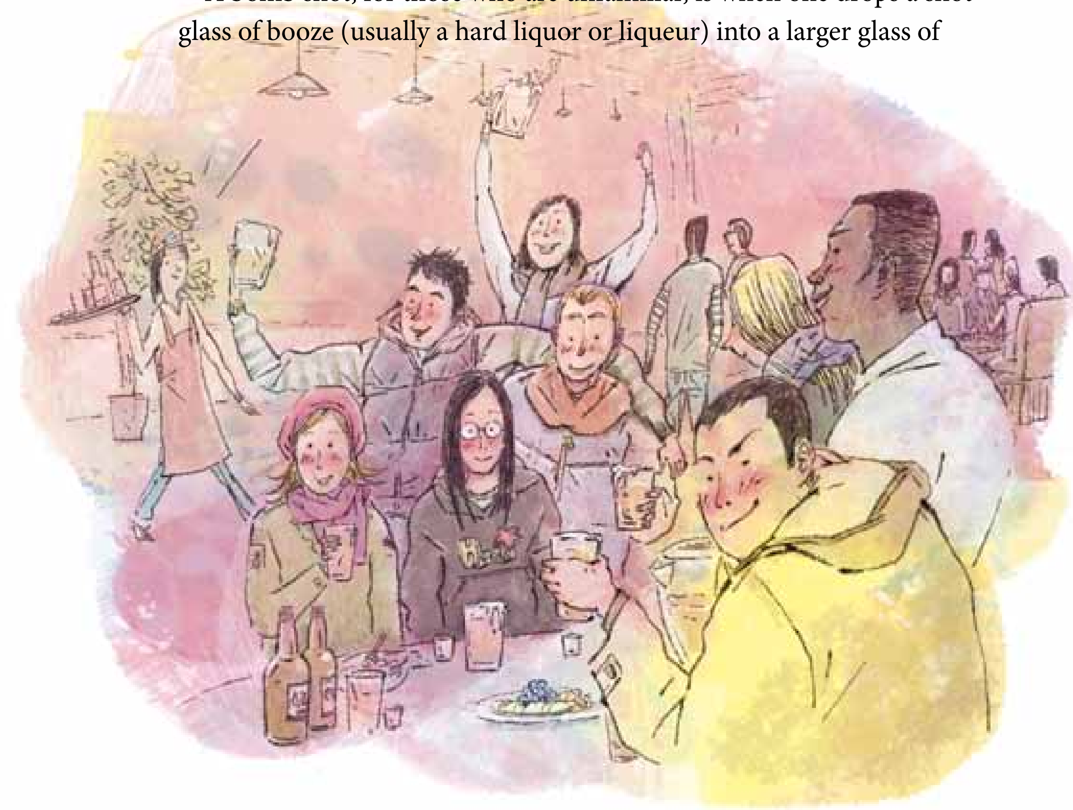
Poktanju: GETTING BOMBED KOREAN STYLE

Knocking back a Boilermaker might seem like a good way to get tipsy quickly. But the Korean bomb shot, called *poktanju*, is a central part of Korean communal drinking culture. The traditions and customs that go along with poktanju help colleagues bond while getting bombed on a festive night out. "One shot!"

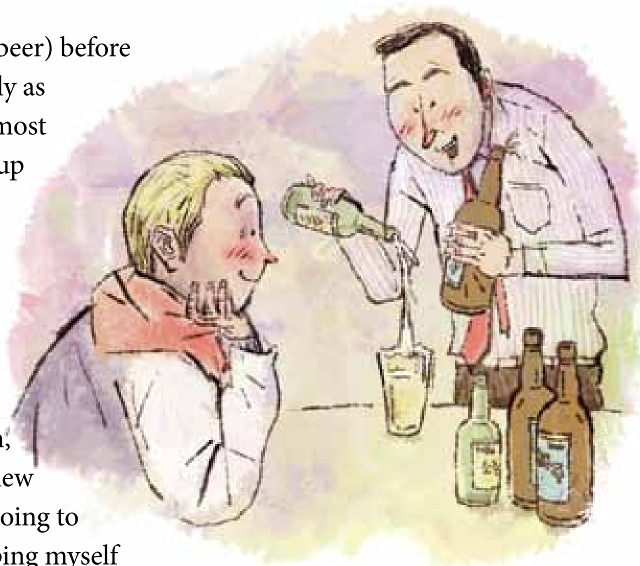
When I arrived in Korea for the first time in the spring of 2009, some cultural aspects seemed very foreign and unusual to me, though others, while still different, felt very familiar.

It had been only three years since I had graduated from college, during which I had learned about a lot more than just journalism. I had lived in something of a fraternity house, and while it wasn't exactly *Animal House*, we explored the various creative manners in which to consume alcohol like it was our job. Be it Boilermakers (beer with a shot of whisky) or Jägerbombs (beer with a shot of Jägermeister) or, on St Patrick's Day, Irish Car Bombs (Irish cream and whisky dropped into a pint of Guinness), I was already well acquainted with bomb shots upon my arrival in Seoul.

A bomb shot, for those who are unfamiliar, is when one drops a shot glass of booze (usually a hard liquor or liqueur) into a larger glass of



something else (normally beer) before chugging it down as quickly as possible. In Canada, it's almost always consumed by a group of people simultaneously — unless you happen to be the loser of a drinking game — as part of an evening of merriment.



It wasn't something my friends and I did that often, but when we did, we all knew what kind of night it was going to be. When I would be scraping myself out of bed the next morning, feeling the agony of too much drink the night before, it wasn't uncommon for me to think to myself, "I never should have had that bomb shot. It all went wrong after that."

Little did I know that in Korea, bomb shots are a significant part of the drinking culture. In my first job in Korea, I worked at a newspaper, where I quickly learned about a corporate culture that promoted evenings of drinking as staff bonding experiences, where sobriety is sacrificed in the name of camaraderie. And there are few quicker ways to sacrifice sobriety than drinking *poktanju* (literally, bomb alcohol).

The first time I encountered the Korean version of a Boilermaker was after a company football game, when the boss took everyone out for barbecue, despite our outfit's loss at the hands of a rival media company. While some Korean bosses can be very conservative and traditional, their serious demeanor often disappears the moment they leave the office.

My boss at that time, who on any given work day wore a dour expression of disappointment, was in his element sitting at the middle of the table, happily handing out drinks to one and all like it was Christmas Day. Immediately after we sat down, bottles of *soju* (distilled rice liquor) and beer arrived at our table and the fun began.

I watched as he took a small beer glass and filled it halfway, then half-filled a shot glass with soju. He then floated the shot glass inside the beer glass and topped it off until it was just about to sink. Once he had prepared two glasses, he handed them out to the first two victims.

They stood up and promptly downed these little cocktails in "one shot," to light applause. Those same two beer glasses and two shot glasses were then refilled for the next people. Two-by-two, everyone took his or her turn.

Sitting at that long table of newspaper journalists, there were a few distinct groups: those for whom downing a few poktanju meant just another day at the office, so to speak; those who recoil in disgust when the glass is handed to them, dreading each time it's their turn to drink and the attention and embarrassment they will face if they refuse; and those who can't wait for it to be their turn again.

When it came to me, I was anxious to give it a try. Along with one of my foreign colleagues, we rose and knocked them back, and I gave the glass a little shake to show I'd drank it all. I know many foreigners who dread the taste of soju. But this, I thought to myself, was really good! Truly, a cultural experience I could embrace wholeheartedly.

The poktanju ritual, where everyone takes his or her turn drinking from the same glass, is central to the Korean communal drinking culture. The boss, or the most senior person at the table, has "bottle rights," which means he or she will be the one pouring the drinks for everyone (except him or herself, of course). But with great bottle rights come great bottle responsibility: to ensure everyone at the table is on their way toward intoxication, whether they like it or not.

And really, getting drunk as fast as possible is what a bomb shot is all about. For us Canadian beer drinkers, we might have a Boilermaker on a special occasion like a birthday or a going-away party. But visit a busy *hof* or barbecue restaurant in central Seoul around quitting time and you'll see that poktanju needs no special occasion.

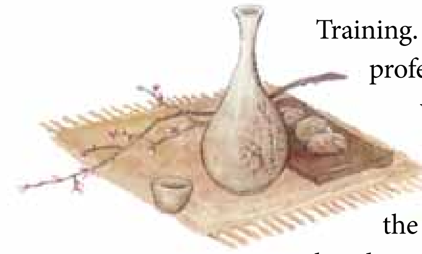
Many countries' drinking habits and traditions play a big role in the nation's overall cultural reputation. Russians are known for their consumption of vodka, Germans for their love of giant mugs of beer. But if there is one thing that separates Korea's drinking culture from all others, it's speed.

Perhaps it's because of the famed *bballi, bballi* (hurry, hurry) mentality that predominates here, but at happy hour (or even lunchtime), the soju flows fast and easy. I learned very quickly that in this environment, an empty glass rarely stays empty for long. It's customary for someone to give you a refill as soon as they notice you've consumed it all. It doesn't take long until you begin to spot "bombed" office workers heading for home, perhaps destined to fall asleep on the subway, awakening only after they've completed a round trip on Subway Line 2, as a friend of mine once did.

Because soju is so cheap and ubiquitous, it is the most common liquor used in poktanju. But it can also be a whisky and beer mix. I've always been puzzled by the practice of dropping an expensive fine whisky into a glass of beer. It seems like such a waste of a quality liquor to dilute its taste in beer. Some dispense with the placing of the shot glass in the beer glass, and simply mix the two together, a drink referred to as *somaek* if it's made with soju. While some disagree, I feel that adding a little soju to beer makes it taste a little better. While Korean beer is refreshing and crisp, it's also quite plain.

It's been my experience that bomb shots, ironically, are not that popular among university students, even though a similar drinking culture does exist. Some friends of mine introduced me to a drinking game called Titanic, where each person takes turns pouring soju into a shot glass floating in a glass of beer. The one who sinks it, drinks it.

While in North America, institutions of higher learning are the centers of this type of drinking activity, the poktanju ritual seems to be most common among office workers here. In Korea, it's quite common for companies to hold retreats, where the staff goes away for a few days to a hotel or resort under the auspices of Membership



Training. In many cases, these MT retreats are less about professional development and more about bonding with your fellow coworkers. As you might expect, poktanju serves as a catalyst.

On one company outing, at the end of the day, we gathered in one big hotel room. We played a game where we all took turns singing a solo. When it was my turn, I was handed a cup of beer and soju and was told it was my turn to sing. As was the custom, I downed my poktanju in "one shot" and launched into my own rendition of *Hotel California*. Then it was my turn to mix a drink and hand it off to the next vocalist.

Back on that spring day in 2009 when I had my first taste of Korean bomb shots, we ate *galbi* (roasted ribs of pork or beef) and drank many more poktanju at the urging of my boss. By the end of the evening, he told me he was proud of me, and assured me that I'd do just fine in Korea. I felt good about that, although by the next morning I wondered whether all those bomb shots were really such a good idea.

Korean drinking culture can be a little complex for some, especially when it comes to drinking with colleagues. From the way you hold your glass, to the way you touch glasses during cheers, to who gets to pour the drinks for who, it can be a lot to remember. But for me, these traditions make it a little more interesting. All over the world, people gather together and drink to get to know each other a little better. Through experiencing the poktanju culture, I did a lot more than just get bombed. I became closer with my colleagues and gained some insight into the Korean way of life. *by Matt Flemming | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Park Jeong-roh*

PROFILE

Matt Flemming is Canadian who has been living in Seoul for almost two years. He is currently the English editor of *MorningCalm*, the in-flight magazine for Korean Air. He enjoys exploring Seoul, indulging in delicious Korean cuisine and playing ball hockey near Olympic Stadium.

My family and I drove up Mount Washington once when I was young, although I don't really remember the visit. I only know we made the trip because my brother stuck a bumper sticker that we got on that trip on the mirror of my bureau. I was forced to go through all of high school looking in the mirror and seeing a "This car climbed Mount Washington" bumper sticker plastered across my forehead. The point of this story is that I was never really into mountains.

So when I moved to Korea and found out that 70% of the country is mountainous, it didn't register in my head what that really meant. I knew mountains were out there, but I just thought those mountains were over in Gwangju or Daegu or some other far-off sounding "gu."

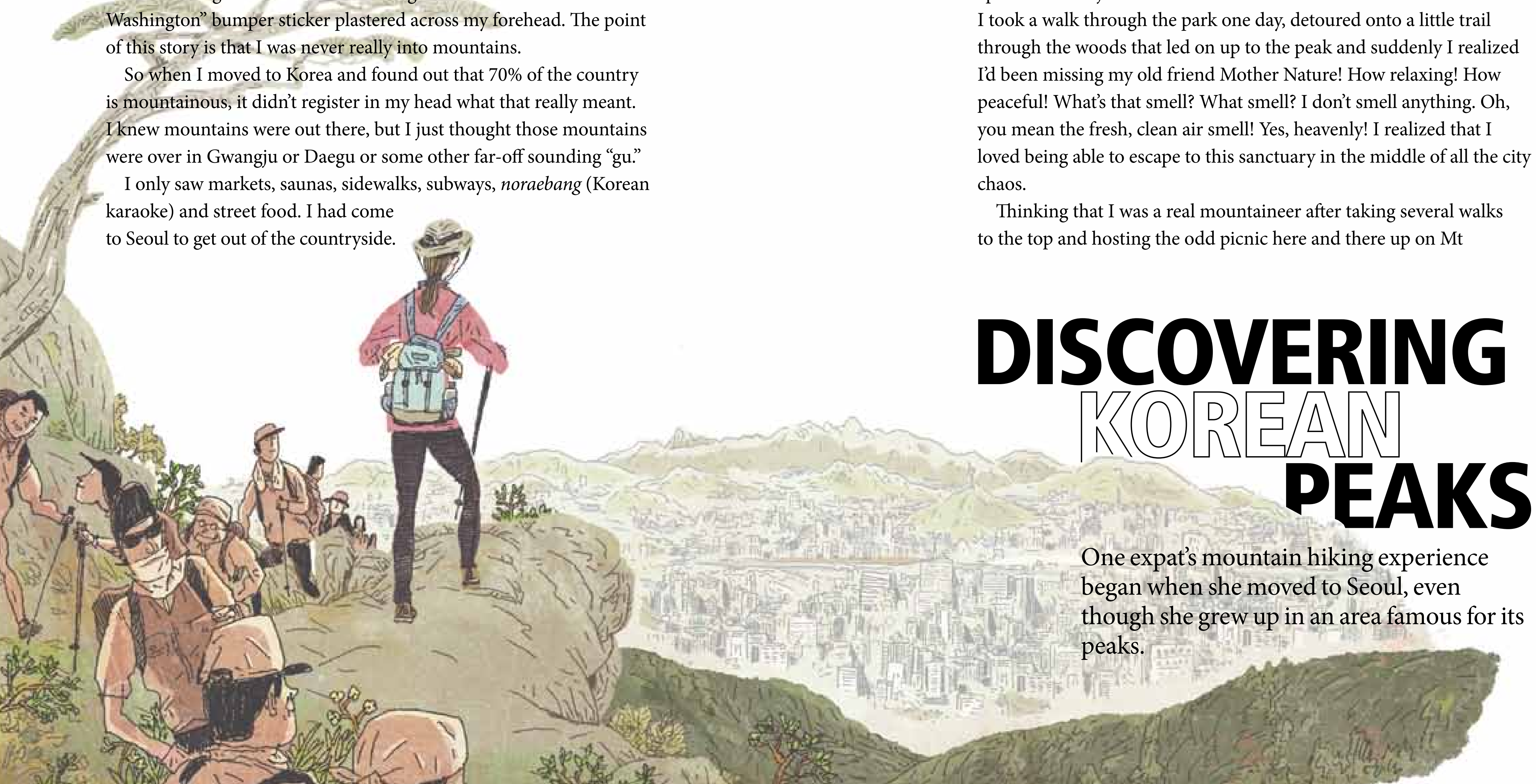
I only saw markets, saunas, sidewalks, subways, *noraebang* (Korean karaoke) and street food. I had come to Seoul to get out of the countryside. I was sick of living in the woods! I was reinventing myself as a city girl, a modern woman! My Seoul experience would not include mountains.

I guess I started noticing that I was living in the midst of a massive city among mountains when I first moved to Itaewon. My new apartment was just a 10-minute walk from the base of Mount Namsan. I took a walk through the park one day, detoured onto a little trail through the woods that led on up to the peak and suddenly I realized I'd been missing my old friend Mother Nature! How relaxing! How peaceful! What's that smell? What smell? I don't smell anything. Oh, you mean the fresh, clean air smell! Yes, heavenly! I realized that I loved being able to escape to this sanctuary in the middle of all the city chaos.

Thinking that I was a real mountaineer after taking several walks to the top and hosting the odd picnic here and there up on Mt

DISCOVERING KOREAN PEAKS

One expat's mountain hiking experience began when she moved to Seoul, even though she grew up in an area famous for its peaks.



Namsan, I was convinced to join a trip organized by a hiking group my friend found on Facebook. We all gathered at the meeting place at 11pm and climbed onto a bus for a six-hour drive to Mt Wolchulsan in Jeollanam-do Province (the southwestern corner of the Korean Peninsula).

The trip started out great with lots of snacks and light conversation with new friends. I just knew I was going to love hiking! We arrived at the mountain at daybreak. Please keep in mind that it was January and my first time hiking a mountain other than Mt Namsan. I didn't know it, but I was in for a surprise. Wearing old sneakers, cotton sweatpants and not nearly enough layers, I quickly got uncomfortably wet and freezing cold. Not only was it unbelievably cold, but it was nothing like a hike up my perfect little Mt Namsan.

There were ropes we had to climb, chains we had to hold onto so that we wouldn't fall 100m down a rock face to our deaths. There was ice, so much ice, as there also happened to be a sudden freak blizzard when we got to the top so we couldn't even enjoy the view we had worked so hard to see. The hike took eight hours both ways. It's 800 times longer than my typical jaunt up and down Mt Namsan. I can say with confidence that the hike was a complete disaster.

Until the end. The glorious end! Once we made it down the mountain, we slowly gathered our cold, wet, shaking, shivering selves at a little nondescript restaurant at the foot of the mountain. *Ajumma* (a name given to middle-aged Korean women who have grown children) had wood stoves burning where we could warm our hands. They cooked us hearty and delicious spicy *dakbokkeum-tang* (Korean-style chicken stew) and served us life-giving, mood-lifting, soul-soothing *makgeolli* (Korean rice wine). I'm not sure I would be alive to tell you this story today without the warmth, food and makgeolli at the end of that hike. Despite the good eats at the end, I swore I would never, ever hike again!

But then, as it always does whenever I say "never," it came back to bite me in the proverbial buttocks. My buttocks were bitten, so to speak, when I met Kevin, who is now my boyfriend, a few months later. Kevin loves mountains, hiking, running and all the gear that goes along with it. He has never tried rock climbing but he already knows he loves that too. He loves the many easily accessible mountains in Seoul's backyard and takes advantage of hiking them every chance he gets.

So when he suggested that we join another hiking group and hike Mt Seoraksan in Gangwon-do Province, I agreed that it sounded like a lovely idea and that I couldn't wait. "What?!" you may ask in surprise, "After your horrible hiking experience, hiking Mt Seoraksan sounded lovely?"

"Well," I say to that, "You know how it is when you start dating someone: 'Sounds great, honey!'"

By this time, I had also realized the reason why the Mt Wolchulsan hike had been such a disaster: It was simply because I had not been prepared. I needed the proper gear, and I was determined not to let the same unpreparedness ruin this trip to Mt Seoraksan (or my new

relationship, for that matter).

I headed over to the hiking section of Namdaemun Market and bought hiking boots and clamp-ons (snow chains and spikes for the bottom of your shoes), hiking socks, a rain jacket, a headlamp, quick dry shirts and towels and waterproof gloves. When we gathered at the meeting place at 11pm to get on the bus to Mt Seoraksan, I had a backpack full of snacks, several additional layers of clothing, about 12 pairs of socks, and multiple reserves full of water.

I had no idea how I was going to carry all of this stuff up the mountain. I looked ridiculous, but no one would ever say that I was unprepared.

We arrived at Mt Seoraksan around 2am. Kevin convinced me to leave about 75% of my supplies on the bus, but I kept the essentials and a few extra items. We put on our headlamps and started heading up the mountain. That's the only way I can describe the beginning of the hike, "up."

Although it was intimidating and tough, and there were some ropes and chains we had to use, we had a big, supportive group with all different levels of hikers and we all made it to the top. We stopped for breaks and snacks along the way, and I was surprised that I was generally having a pretty good time. It was dark, quiet, fresh and clean. Night hiking by headlamp … an experience only found in Korea!

Around 8am we reached the peak. But wouldn't you know, it had started raining and we couldn't see the landscape around the mountain. Again! No view! The rain was coming in from all angles. But oddly enough, in my hot pink waterproof rain coat and, in my opinion, cute purple waterproof hiking boots, the situation was funny rather than exasperating and discouraging. A great anecdote to tell friends later, instead of a disabling longing to lie down and wait to get airlifted from one of the helicopter pads. We rested in a little camp near the peak, and shared snacks and stories. We were exhausted, but accomplished. We were soggy, but happy.

When we finally got to the bottom around noon (10 hours later), we found ourselves a little restaurant with an ajumma to feed us some scrumptious fried seafood pancakes, warm tofu and freshly fermented kimchi. Of course, we imbibed in a little of the Korean hiker's nectar: makgeolli. This time, I swore I would definitely be hiking again.

It is amazing to me now how blind I was to the mountainous landscape when I first arrived in Korea. When I look out of almost any window in Seoul the first thing I see now, is a mountain or even a whole range of mountains in the not-too-far distance. Are you in Seoul now? Look outside. Look right now. I bet you can see at least one mountain.

While I still love visiting Mt Namsan, the thrill is checking out the many different mountains in and around Seoul. Kevin and I regularly travel around Seoul to climb different mountains during all weather conditions. Mt Gwanaksan provides a great panoramic view of the city, Mt Cheonggyesan is a solid morning stair workout and Mt Bukhansan has enough trails to keep you busy for a month of Sunday hikes. Hiking around Seoul is an easily accessible escape to the outdoors and has contributed greatly to the quality of my life and experience in Seoul.

Just get on the subway, or head to the bus stop and follow the Koreans with the hiking sticks and backpacks. Get yourself some gear, and get out there! *by Michelle Farnsworth | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Park Jeong-roh*

PROFILE

Michelle Farnsworth is an American who has been living in Korea for eight years. She is the Foreign Client Relationship Manager at the Shinhan Bank Seoul Global Center. She can be reached at farnsworth@shinhan.com.

FINDING ROOM TO BREATHE

Seoul, for the most part, is a crowded, bustling city with hardly any space to move. But the Buddhist Templestay program allows city dwellers a respite from the din of the metropolis while introducing visitors to a slower, more peaceful Korea.

I try to be a healthy and calm person. I exercise three times a week, eat lots of vegetables and avoid fatty foods when I can. But after living two years in Seoul, one of the largest metropolises in the world, I find myself becoming impatient and sliding into bad habits.

I overindulge in alcohol and fried chicken during after-work parties, I eat discount ice cream from Family Mart almost every day during the summer and I frequent some of Seoul's thousands of coffee shops more than I really should.

Worse than my dietary choices, however, are some of the ways my personality has changed here. In a city that seems to shove you in every direction, I now unabashedly push back when the crowds seem bent on smothering me against the metal doors of the subway car.

But Seoul isn't all just hustle and bustle. It's also home to a dozen or so mountains and even more Buddhist temples and retreats. So after a particularly hard-hitting evening spent at a Doosan Bears baseball game, indulging in KFC, nacho chips and cheap beer, I decided to put aside my worldly attachments and spend the weekend at a Buddhist Templestay program.

My husband and I arrived at Geumsunsa Temple early on a Saturday afternoon. The temple was established on Mount Samgaksan in Bukhansan National Park over 600 years ago. And while it is just a short bus ride and walk from Gyeongbokgung Palace in central Seoul, it's worlds away from the pressures of city life.

When we first arrived at Geumsunsa, we changed into monk's garb and learned basic temple etiquette such as how to prostrate in the ceremonial hall and hold our hands while we walked. We then went on a tour of the temple grounds led by the female monk that was to be our guide during our stay.

Like most temples, Geumsunsa's grounds are broken into several buildings including a hall for ceremonies, living and dining quarters and a memorial building for the ashes of the dead. Men and women

sleep in separate buildings, though everyone dines and worships together.

The monk introduced us to the three outdoor meditation areas at the temple. She explained the importance of slow, methodical breathing during meditation and listening to the world around you. Below a 200-year-old pine tree near the front of the temple, for example, one could hear the wind rustling through the ancient tree branches. On a grass platform below the main ceremonial hall, we were encouraged to try a walking meditation. Taking tiny steps and breathing deeply, we listened to the mewing of the temple cats and singing of the magpies. In the final outdoor meditation area, a mountain spring, we heard the water flowing down Mt Bukhansan from the Bibong and Hyangnobong peaks.

After the tour, the monk explained some of the sutras that would be recited at that evening's *yebul* (ceremonial service). Before attending the Templestay program, my interactions with Buddhism had mostly been as a tourist. I've seen the Seokguram Grotto and stone-carved Buddhas in Gyeongju, attended Buddha's birthday lantern parade in downtown Seoul and enjoyed the fall harvest feast at Buryeongsa Temple in Uljin, Gyeongsangbuk-do Province. But through all that sightseeing, I still didn't have a clear understanding of the tenets of Buddhism or the meaning of various rituals. So I was looking forward to spending the weekend learning more about one of Korea's most practiced religions.

Unfortunately, while the Geumsunsa Templestay program was advertised as English-friendly, no translators were provided for the monk's lectures. I was left piecing together the Korean phrases I understood with the abbreviated interpretations of my fellow Templestay participants.

This often led to comical exchanges where the monk asked us typical Buddhist questions such as "Where is your life?" only to have the foreigners in our group answer "at home" or "at work." (The answer, the monk explained, is that our life is located in the time between when we inhale and when we exhale, since if we can't exhale we die.)

For dinner, we gathered in the temple dining room where we ate on the floor with the other monks and workers at Geumsunsa. As expected, we ate healthy vegetarian food — rice, kimchi, wild greens salad and *miyeokguk*, or seaweed soup. The food was simple, but tasty, and the *tteok* rice cakes served with fruit after the meal were some of the best I've had in Korea.

After eating, we climbed the 108 steps up the hill to Vairocana Buddha Hall for the yebul service. As the monk had instructed us, we bowed three times upon entering the hall to the three Buddha statues representing the Buddha, his followers and teachings. As the head monk began the sutra chant, we prostrated on the ground, bowing once at the waist and then again on the ground with our hands palm up.

While I didn't understand the words of the prayer, I tried to take in the beauty of the moment. The candles glowed softly against the golden statues and prismatic paintings of the guardians of Buddhism. The chanting was mesmerizing, and it was easy to lose yourself in the systematic act of prostrations.

The meditative prostrations continued after the service in Paramita Hall. Keeping time with a tape recording, we bowed 108 times for the different kinds of delusion described by the Buddha and our efforts to change negative thoughts into positive energy.

We asked for forgiveness through the prostrations for such wrongs as not remembering the people who built our homes and made our clothing. This was a world away from the Seoul I knew in the packed stores of Myeong-dong and bustling offices of Gangnam.

After the prostrations, we did some light yoga that warmed up our bodies for a period of meditation. The monk instructed us to clear our minds and once again focus on our breaths. Easier said than done. Only minutes into the exercise, my mind was running with all the phone calls and e-mails I had to send when I got home and worries about upcoming work projects. When my mind finally calmed down, I was overcome by an extreme fatigue and had to try hard not to fall asleep.

Before turning in for bed, my husband and I walked back up the steps to the top of the temple grounds to get a view of the city. The dark woods along the mountainside stood in stark contrast to the lit-up metropolis below. Above the temple we could make out a handful of stars ringing the night sky, while beneath us all we could see were the glowing clusters of cement apartment buildings and offices flooding the valley.

I was woken up at 5am by the sound of a *moktak*, or wood block instrument. We quickly dressed and folded our *yo* (Korean traditional floor mattress) before going to the 5:30am yebul and reading of the sutra. For breakfast, we had *Barugongyang*, a traditional Buddhist meal with bowls. In an orderly fashion akin to the Jewish Seder, we took turns serving each other *juk* (rice porridge), kimchi and water.

After eating the kimchi and juk, we used water and a *danmuji* (yellow pickled radish) to clean the juk and kimchi bowls. To teach us both cleanliness and the importance of being frugal, the monk then instructed us to drink the water we used to wipe clean the bowls. Some of the Templestay participants balked at this, but the water simply tasted like rice and kimchi.

Next came the community work, which consisted of sweeping the temple grounds, washing dishes and our rubber shoes and shaking out the bed sheets. I was tasked with sweeping away pine needles near the small stream that ran beside the mountain spring. The weather was perfect, and it was nice to have a break from spending so much time inside my head.

As our final activity together, we hiked up Mt Samgaksan to a rock platform overlooking the temple. There, we enjoyed lotus leaf tea and mini Snickers bars as we took in the scenery.

With the cool wind swirling around us, we tried meditating once again. And to my pleasant surprise, as I breathed in the mountain air, I felt calm and at peace. *by Nissa Rhee | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

PROFILE

Nissa Rhee is an American journalist who has been living in Seoul for two years. Her work has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* and the *Korea JoongAng Daily*, among other media outlets. In her free time, she enjoys hiking on Mt Bukhansan with her husband.

DREAMING OF PIGS

EXPLORING GOSA CEREMONIES

A Canadian expat goes to a traditional *Gosa* ceremony, a folk ritual that comprises showing respect to a pig's head. Practiced to ward off bad luck and bring good fortune when a new business is opened, a new house is built, to appease the spirits and just because it's tradition, the ceremony is one of the unique aspects of life in Korea. And, whether or not you believe in it, Gosa holds a certain charm.

Pigs have always been a constant feature in my life, since long before I came to live in Korea. In one form or another — though not really inhabiting my daily thoughts — pigs have loitered on the fringes of my life.

I've never tried to ride a greased pig, but I do admit that, growing up as a child on a farm on Prince Edward Island in eastern Canada, I did indeed try to ride an everyday, run of the mill, ungreased pig. I've never seen the proverbial pigs fly, though I have on occasion enjoyed listening to *Pigs on the Wing* by Pink Floyd. I've enjoyed their culinary offerings and delighted in cute piglets squealing in the pen and scrambling for scraps my grandfather would dump into their pen. Ours wasn't primarily a pig farm, however, and we just had a few that we would raise for our own meat. It was a small farm with seldom more than 10 of any animal at any given time.

And I, bent more on becoming the next Keith Moon or John Bonham, didn't really spend as much time feeding cows, or shoveling that smelly gold that made crops grow, as my father would have liked. I was constantly aware that we had pigs, cows and horses, yet I didn't really give much thought to them. At times you could almost forget there even were such creatures as pigs, being more interested in footballs, playing hockey in my grandmother's kitchen or beating drums.

But in a certain season each year, a particularly odiferous and unmistakable fragrance from our neighbor's pig farm on top of the hill reminded me that pigs do most definitely exist. Even today, coincidentally, before I'd even had the slightest notion I'd be writing an article about a pig ceremony, I named my percussion group Seoul Rhythm Pig. Pigs are just everywhere, even if you don't notice them.

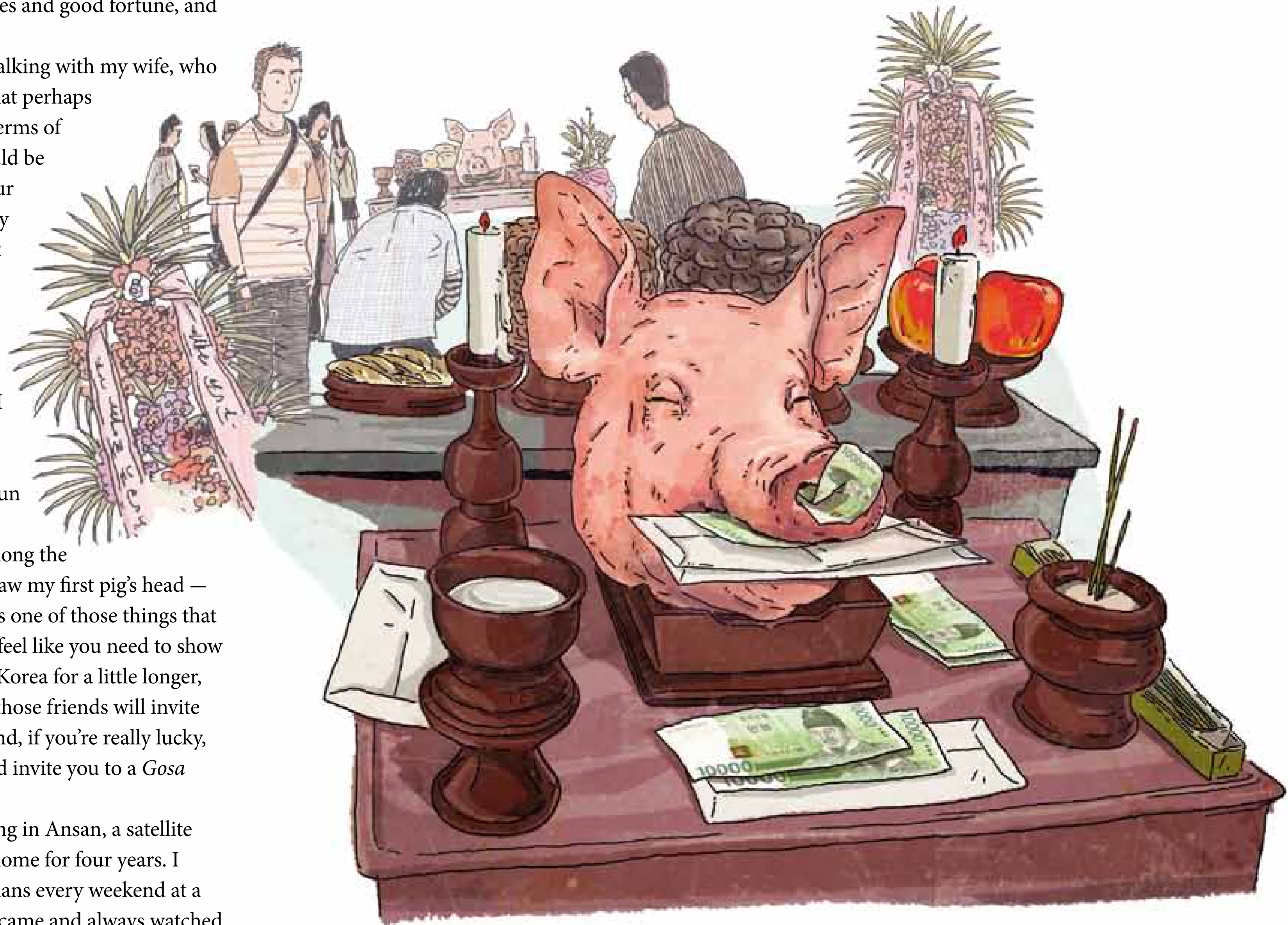
As to whether or not pigs should be thought of in positive or negative terms in daily life, I was a bit ambivalent. I just never gave much thought to them before Korea. Whether or not we of the Western world can decide on whether pigs are cute and clever, or smelly and unfortunate animals, one thing is for sure: in Korea, pigs

are lucky. If you've lived here for any amount of time, you've probably heard a Korean friend or coworker tell you how lucky you are if you have a "pig dream." They are symbolic of riches and good fortune, and are also said to ward off bad luck.

I wondered where this belief came from. Talking with my wife, who is Korean, and her friends, they speculated that perhaps it was because pigs have many babies. So in terms of reproduction, they are productive, which could be a metaphor for the productivity you hope your business has. At first, I was surprised that they didn't know automatically why pigs represent such good fortune, but, thinking more on it, I realized that it's similar to my way of using idioms. When my students ask me why a phrase means what it does, I struggle to give them a good answer. It's one of those things; I just say it because it's what people say.

If you are an expat in Korea or even just a visiting tourist wandering around Namdaemun Market or one of the many *sijang* (traditional markets), you are likely to see a pig's head among the mazes of stalls. It was at Namdaemun that I saw my first pig's head — I remember thinking how exotic it was. It was one of those things that makes you reach for you camera, makes you feel like you need to show this to folks back home. If you are staying in Korea for a little longer, you will probably make Korean friends, and those friends will invite you to weddings, first year birthday parties and, if you're really lucky, perhaps a friend will open a new business and invite you to a *Gosa* ceremony. Just such a thing happened to me.

It was about four years ago while I was living in Ansan, a satellite city to the south of Seoul, where I made my home for four years. I used to play drums with some Korean musicians every weekend at a bar that is no more. One of the regulars who came and always watched



us play was a local painter name Du Chan. Although Du Chan spoke little English and my Korean was pretty bad, we soon became friends. He would say things like "you drum power," and I would smile and try to make small talk in turn.

Later when he established his own art studio, he invited me to the opening. I accepted the invitation with keen expectations that I'd be able to drink in his creations and match his compliment with my own broken-Korean equivalent.

The day of Du Chan's studio opening arrived, and I left my apartment to make my way to his new place. I got off a tiny, worn-down elevator and walked down the length of the old building's hall. I could hear voices inside, so the party was already underway. It was a fair sized gathering, and I recognized most faces as regulars from the bar. The studio was large and the walls were lined with huge billboard-sized paintings.

As I moved closer to the crowd, the smell of incense curled its way to my nose. The sounds of friendly chatter, laughter, congratulations and wishes of good luck were all present, standard to any gallery opening. But then my eyes made a beeline to a table with an abundant spread of food: rice cake, seaweed soup, fruit and vegetables, all lorded over by a severed pig's head. The head sat in the middle, like the center of a shrine. I thought to myself, "What's going on? Do they have voodoo in Korea?" I was pretty sure they didn't practice voodoo and mentally reminded myself not to watch so many movies.

As I watched, people bowed to the pig, on their knees with their foreheads to the ground, palms on the floor, in what looked like a form of Buddhist prostration. I've since learned that this bow shows up in many other traditional Korean ceremonies. Koreans do it to pay one's respects to the deceased during *jesa* (ancestral rites) on the anniversary of their passing. Children perform the bow to their elders on *seollal*, the Lunar New Year, and I did the same to my wife's parents when we were married.

As if the presence of the pig's head and the bowing were not bizarre enough to my expat eyes, people were also placing colorful bills into the pig's nose, mouth and ears — basically any orifice. I followed suit but later, upon researching Gosa more thoroughly, I regret that I only offered a mere 10,000 won (US$9). I was later told by a friend that if it's the Gosa of a close acquaintance, offering upwards of 100,000 won is considered acceptable.

The ceremony is based on a shamanistic ritual, of which there are many in Korea, some of which offer food and drink to spirits or ancestors. In this particular ceremony, the pig's head is placed in the middle of the table, then other incense, fruits, *tteok* (rice cakes) and more are organized around the centerpiece. You then bow to bring good luck and bounty, and to protect the new venture from misfortune or angry spirits. Afterward, you offer the pig money, and it's said that it's good luck if it's is smiling.

It's hard to remember for certain now if the pig smiled or not, but I know I sure did. *by Trevor Clements | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

PROFILE

Trevor Clements is a professor in the International Business Language Department at Seokyeong University in Seoul. He lives with his wife Lee Eun-ju in west Incheon and plays drums in The Dirty 30s, Kimchi Cowboys and Seoul Rhythm Pig.

BEATING BACK MONSOON BLUES

After braving the sweltering heat and humidity in Seoul for four summers, one urban dweller believes he is living proof that the old adage "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" is true.

Emerging from the air-conditioned Daewoo car into the heart of downtown Seoul in August was like having my body shrouded in an invisible pillowcase while simultaneously being shoved into a sauna. Clad in jeans and a T-shirt, I immediately began to sweat. I considered trying to get my hands on an egg to see if it really was hot enough to fry it on the sidewalk, but was dissuaded by the daunting idea of walking across the steaming road to the supermarket. All around us, businessmen in suits hustled back to their offices from lunch, seemingly undisturbed. Man, I thought, how have these guys not melted like sharply-dressed snowmen in this heat?

My girlfriend and I had just landed in Korea, and a co-worker from our new school had taken us straight from the arrivals terminal at the Incheon International Airport to the hotel that was to serve as our temporary home. Luckily, the eighth floor room had a powerful air conditioner, as well as a mini fridge that we quickly stocked with beverages. Although my girlfriend and I hail from cooler climates — she from Edinburgh and I from Toronto — we had lived in Hawaii without air conditioning for six months preceding our arrival in Seoul, and were well-adjusted to high temperatures. The humidity, however, was something else.

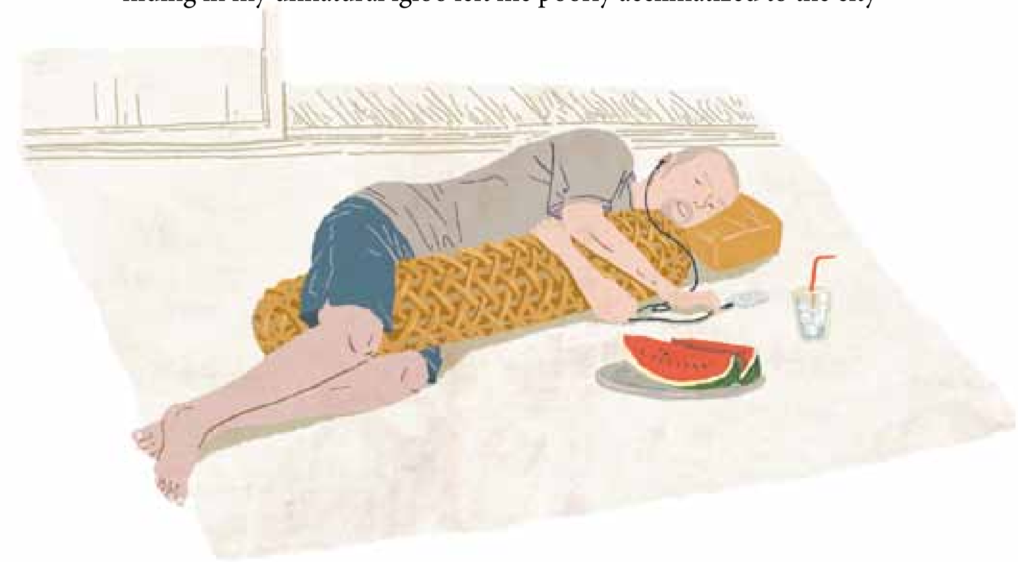
While not especially wet for most of the year, Seoul receives — like many places in East Asia — a healthy drenching of rain in the summer. Generally called monsoon season in English, *jangma* begins in mid-June and lasts roughly two months. The average rainfall in Seoul during July is 369mm, and when it comes down, it tends to be more in the force of "garden hose" rather than "Windex spray bottle." To put 369mm into perspective, the highest average rainfall for any month in New Orleans (the rainiest city in the US) is 151mm, less than half of Seoul's level. The rain is then quickly vaporized by toasty summer temperatures—the July average high is just over 29°C, slightly warmer than Los Angeles' average. Seoul is also dotted with several small mountain ranges that block out most breezes, and is home to more than 3 million vehicles whose emissions tend to add to the greenhouse effect over the city center. When you add it all up, being in Seoul during the heart of jangma can make you sweat like a guilty politician on a polygraph.

So how does one beat the heat, rain and humidity in one of the world's largest metropolises? Despite the heavy summer rains—or perhaps because of their frequency—life seems to go on exactly as normal in Seoul during a rainstorm. At the first drops, a sea of umbrellas opens in one near-audible POP! But otherwise there is very little change; it's even common to see elderly people slowly riding their bicycles through markets and lush parks with an umbrella carefully balanced in one hand. Without a doubt, the worst thing about the rain is the humidity it causes.

It was grizzly at first: I relied on air conditioning at home and at work, but anytime I had to be outside, I perspired, wheezed and was generally miserable. Walking 10 minutes outside in that merciless pressure cooker would leave patches of sweat on my shirt. Even sundown offered only minimal relief; though the temperature might drop 6 or 7 degrees, the humidity would be ever-vigilant and constantly overwhelming. Our best-laid attempts to cut down our eco-footprint by only running the air conditioner for the hour or so between arriving home from work and sundown went straight out the window after the third night in a row of barely sleeping. My shirts were salt-stained and my legs chafed whenever I walked. Old people and small children chuckled as I dripped and shuffled by. "Bah! Wussy foreigners!" I imagined them thinking. In short, I appeared to be as much as a duck out of water as someone that damp could look.

As it turned out however, all that sweating, combined with a more active lifestyle, was rather good for weight loss. In my first six weeks in Seoul, I lost 4.5kg. By the time fall had arrived and the humidity had subsided, I was 7kg lighter and feeling fantastic, thanks to Seoul's food, climate and lifestyle. Korea's adult obesity rate is among the lowest of any developed nation, just 3.2%, compared to the 14.1% average for all other countries. Having less natural padding to lug around certainly helped make me feel more comfortable.

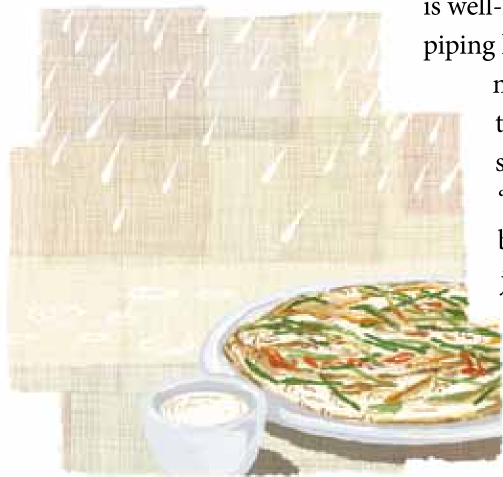
Though I was happy to be carrying less weight, I knew that I would have to be prepared for the heat of the next jangma when it came. I didn't want to run my air conditioner at all hours of the day and night like I had the previous year; the electricity bills had been high and hiding in my unnatural igloo left me poorly acclimatized to the city



for times I needed to be outside. So a Korean friend recommended a solution that was traditional, sensible, cost-effective, and one that has no trouble waiting in your bed all day while you're out and about: he recommended I try a Dutch wife.

The Korean word for the item, *jukbuin,* literally translates to "bamboo wife," and has been used to keep cool at night for hundreds of years in Korea as well as the rest of Asia. It was nicknamed a Dutch wife in English because Dutch traders who spent time on the Spice Islands (Indonesia) introduced it to the Western world. Jukbuin are made by weaving thin strands of bamboo into a cylindrical lattice roughly the size of a petite human body. The idea is to "spoon" them—drape one arm and one leg over the structure whilst lying on your side. This is both comfortable and exposes the maximum amount of surface area of one's body to the air, rather than to one's bed or other sleeping surface. Bamboo mats can also be laid on top of a blanket and slept on, allowing a small cooling distance between your body and the soft bedding.

Getting a good night's sleep is key, but if I hadn't found little strategies to keep cool during daylight hours, I likely would have turned tail and flown back to the Great White North long ago. Korea is well-known to boast spicy food served piping hot all season long, but these days, more and more people are opting to eat *naengmyeon* for lunch in summertime. Naengmyeon means "chilled noodles," and is a dish of buckwheat noodles served with julienned slices of cucumber, pear and slices of tender beef in a tangy broth cooled with ice cubes. Top that meal off with a popsicle or cold drink, and for the rest of the afternoon you'll have your core body temperature safely outside of the red zone.

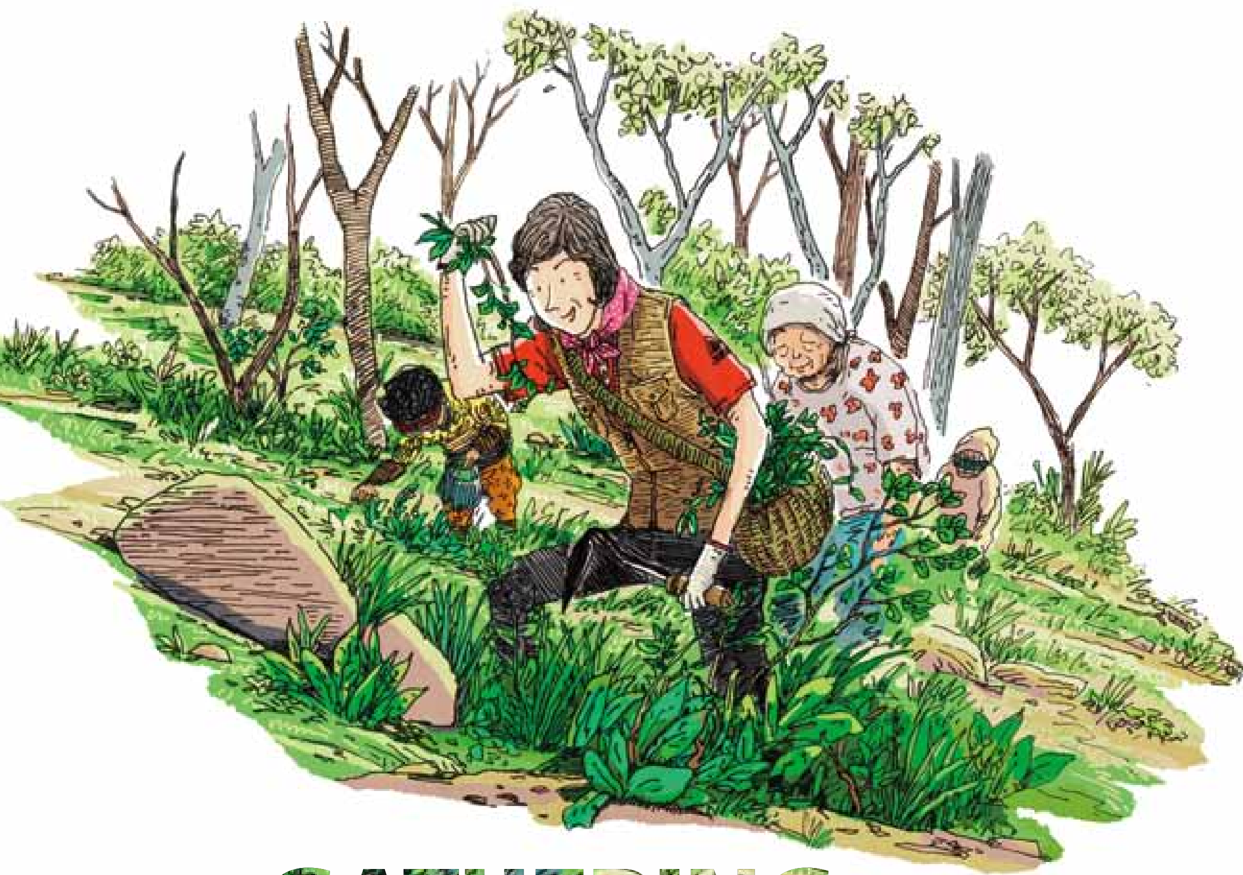


Eating a thermally or spicy hot lunch may be a bad idea if you're prone to overheating in the sun, but at night huge droves of Seoul denizens go out and do just that all over the city. Cuts of beef and pork barbecued on grills embedded in serving tables, *dak-galbi* (spicy chicken with rice cake, sliced sweet potatoes and mixed vegetables) and giant spicy communal soups like *kimchi-jjigae* are common meals, and all are adept at activating sweat glands. And on rainy days, Koreans cook up *pajeon* (a savory pancake made with green onions) because the sound of the rain falling on leaves reminds them of the sizzling of the pan. This brings us to the biological explanation as to why spicy food is eaten in hot climates: sweating cools you down. And whether Seoul's hungry masses eat spices to get their sweat on or not, washing the meal down with a few cold glasses of beer and some *soju* Korean liquor tends to help a person forget about the heat for a while.

My girlfriend—who is now my fiancée—and I have been in Seoul almost four years, and we're as close to perfectly acclimatized to the heat as a person can get. We have one fan in our apartment to circulate air flow but don't use the air conditioner. We have no trouble sleeping, and though I still sweat a little, we don't fear the task of walking up a large hill in 30-degree humid weather to eat some kimchi-jjigae. Yes, I feel like I'm finally a proper denizen of Seoul; I recently saw a gaggle of pale, sweating, scarcely-clad new arrivals seeking refuge in the shade and fanning themselves with magazines while complaining loudly about the heat. Bah! I thought, wussy foreigners! *by Adam Bencze | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Park Jeong-roh*

PROFILE

Adam Bencze is a Canadian national who loves traveling. He and his fiancée have recently decided to return to Canada, but will employ the cooling tricks they learned in the land of morning calm in their new home, should the need ever arise.



GATHERING GANGWON GREENS

If kimchi is the only side dish that comes to mind when you hear the words Korean cuisine, you need to think again. For the savvy cook, the country's outdoors offers a wide variety of vegetable delights.

When I first moved to Korea, I was quite hesitant to try Korean cuisine. Ten years down the road though, and it's hard to believe that was once me. Spicy sauces, pickled vegetables, soybeans, fish, barbecue, seaweed, garlic — could it really have been the case that I didn't like all that? But Korean cuisine quickly lured me in, and what once seemed unfamiliar quickly became addicting. Now, life without *hansik* (Korean food) seems very undesirable, indeed.

Something I took to from the very beginning, though, was the various vegetarian side dishes. When eating out, there would always be so many varieties of vegetables I had never seen. The produce section in the supermarket was a totally new experience, with items I would never even have guessed were edible — but they obviously were, and I soon became curious. On closer inspection of all these new foods, I realized that the local greens are called *namul*. They include various sprouts, leafy plants like spinach, herbs and even tree leaves.

Though I'm not a particularly skilled cook, if I really like a certain dish, I try to recreate it at home. So with the help of my Korean mother-in-law, who proved to be a very patient and knowledgeable teacher, I first experimented with the three standard namul — spinach, fernbrake and soybean sprouts. These vegetables are traditionally prepared for *charye* (ancestral rites), which are performed during the two major holidays: *seollal* (Lunar New Year) and *chuseok* (a harvest holiday). On those days, an opulent meal is prepared for the deceased (though it is eventually eaten by those still well alive and hungry). Not only are the three namul, with their green, brown and yellow colors, indispensable for charye, but they are generally basic dishes in Korean traditional cuisine.

As a matter of fact, they are so basic that Koreans don't often get very excited about them. I soon learned that proudly presenting these three seasoned vegetables to guests didn't kindle much enthusiasm. It might have been the equivalent of serving mashed potatoes to Westerners: You eat it, and maybe you even like it, but it's not something a host wins laurels with. Every Korean I have met so far

loves, needs and craves kimchi, but my three humble namul don't get a lot of recognition and tend to be overlooked. Being an avid fan of the dishes, I wondered why this was, but having learned my lesson, I stopped offering them to guests and prepared them mostly when cooking for myself.

Several years after learning this first lesson in namul, my husband and I decided to buy a small, traditional farmhouse and move to the countryside. This decision, as it turned out, was a huge change in our lives. When we came to Korea in 2000, we lived always in, or near Seoul. But being from a small German town, I couldn't help but feel constantly overwhelmed by the metropolis: Seoul was just too much. No matter how interesting the city was, I couldn't handle all the buildings, cars and people. It was an endless jungle of streets and high-rises, all speed and constant change. Living in Seoul was somehow beyond me and I knew, in the long run, that I didn't stand a chance — I was too slow-paced. So when my husband wanted to move to Gangwon-do Province, where he had grown up, it didn't take much to convince me.

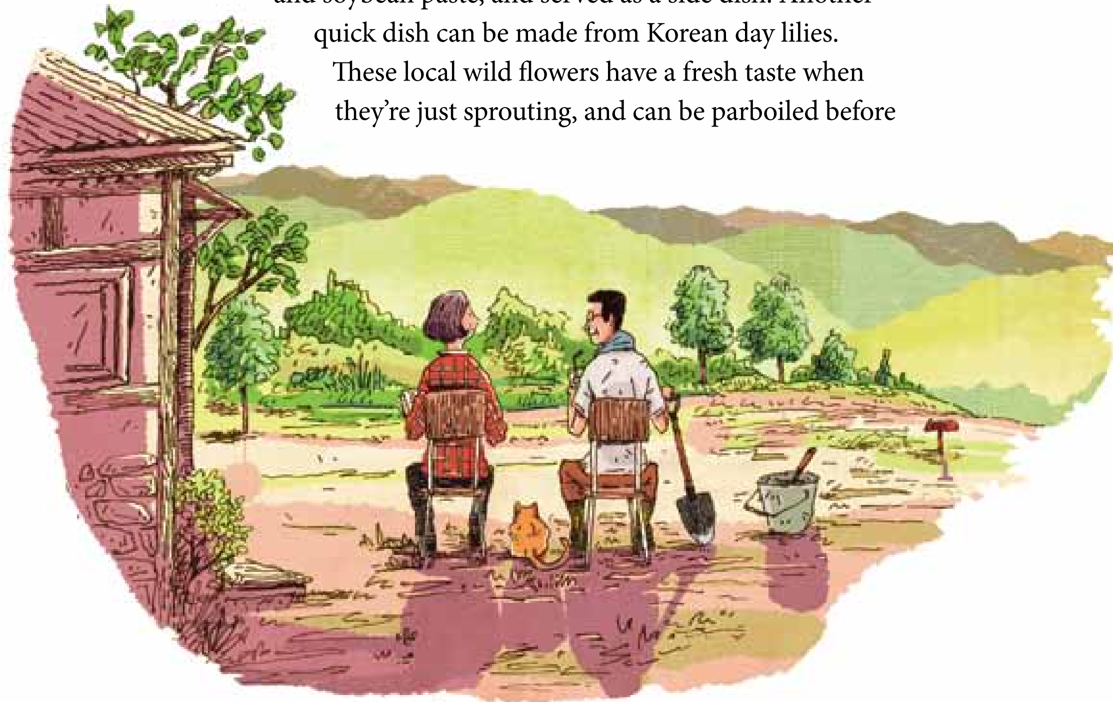
And what a relief it was. After seven long years in Seoul, Gangwon-do Province was heavenly. The clear blue East Sea, the breathtakingly beautiful mountains with woods filled with the scent of pine trees, and the little villages nestled in the valleys. Suddenly, it came to me all at once, how much I had missed nature. Why on earth hadn't we moved earlier? Having all this beauty surrounding me changed my feelings towards Korea literally in one day. Looking back, I now realize that I was quite unhappy living in Seoul. No matter how much I tried to adjust, no matter how much I tried to like it, Korea didn't seem to be the place for me. Somehow I just didn't seem to fit. Was it the culture, the different mentality or was it my introvert temperament, my own inflexibility? At the time it was hard to pinpoint, but now I know that it wasn't Korea or Koreans, it was the enormity of Seoul that wasn't for me. Here, in Gangwon-do Province, things fell into place. Living in Korea was suddenly so easy. With a feeling of surprise, I realized that I wasn't secretly longing to go back to Germany any more. For the first time since I'd arrived, I started to make Korean friends. And I wanted to stay. Here in this place, I finally felt at home.

After moving to the countryside, I also learned a lot about Korean traditional life. It wasn't that I had been ignorant of how locals used to live before industrialization swept them into modernity. In Seoul, I had dutifully been to museums and read books about Korean history. But when we started to renovate and live in our little farmhouse high up in the mountains, I had a chance to experience firsthand the old way of life. Of course, we changed a lot of things in the house to make life more comfortable and adapted it to our modern needs. But we tried to keep the original structure of the house as much as we could. We still use *ondol*, Korean traditional floor heating system, with the fireplace; the big kettle over the fireplace is our source for hot water; in winter we get our natural water with a traditional pump; and year-round our favorite spot is out on the *maru*, the wooden floor that surrounds part of the house, providing a sheltered, sunny place to sit outside in the winter, and a cool breeze in the hot Korean summers.

Living in the countryside also gave me ample opportunity to learn more about Korean traditional cuisine. I watched our neighbors make tofu and experienced a *gimjang* (the communal process of preparing large amounts of kimchi for the coming winter months). And, something which pleased my vegetable-loving heart most, I also found out that the elderly grandmothers in the neighborhood are highly adept gatherers of *sannamul*. *San* means "mountain," and sannamul

are the wild namul found in Korea's woods and meadows, usually in early spring. While I had thought that early spring was a season where not much happened outdoors, our neighbors quickly enlightened me. Many of the greens that I had thought were weeds were actually fragrant, tasty ingredients for a healthy meal. I quickly found that sannamul are definitely not the Korean equivalent of mashed potatoes: This was a whole new league. First, I learned when to gather wild fernbrake, how to look out for poisonous snakes while doing it and how wild fernbrake is so much better straight from nature than the ones I used to buy at the supermarket.

My next lesson was in *meowi*, or bog rhubarb. I first discovered it when weeding our flowerbeds, as it seemed to be everywhere in our garden. To cook, the stems of the rhubarb are peeled, boiled briefly in salted water, then can be mixed with garlic, sesame oil, salt, leeks and soybean paste, and served as a side dish. Another quick dish can be made from Korean day lilies. These local wild flowers have a fresh taste when they're just sprouting, and can be parboiled before tossed with garlic, sesame oil, red pepper *gochujang* paste, a dash of vinegar and sesame seeds. But, as with every food, the spices can vary, depending on the cook's personal tastes. Other wild greens to try are *dollamul*, a stonecrop that can be eaten as a salad, which has a fresh, almost lemony taste. *Naengi*, or shepherd's purse, adds a deep, earthy flavor to the popular *doenjang-jjigae* (fermented soybean paste stew). However, my absolute favorite are the shoots of the *dureup* tree (Aralia elata) which are also first boiled and then mixed with garlic, sesame oil, soybean paste and any other seasonings as desired. If you have a chance to get a hold of them at a traditional market, try them, as they are a delicacy. The list of sannamul I would like to recommend is long, including *dallae* (wild chive), *gondre* (Cirsium setidens), *ssuk* (mugwort) and many more I just haven't learned about yet.



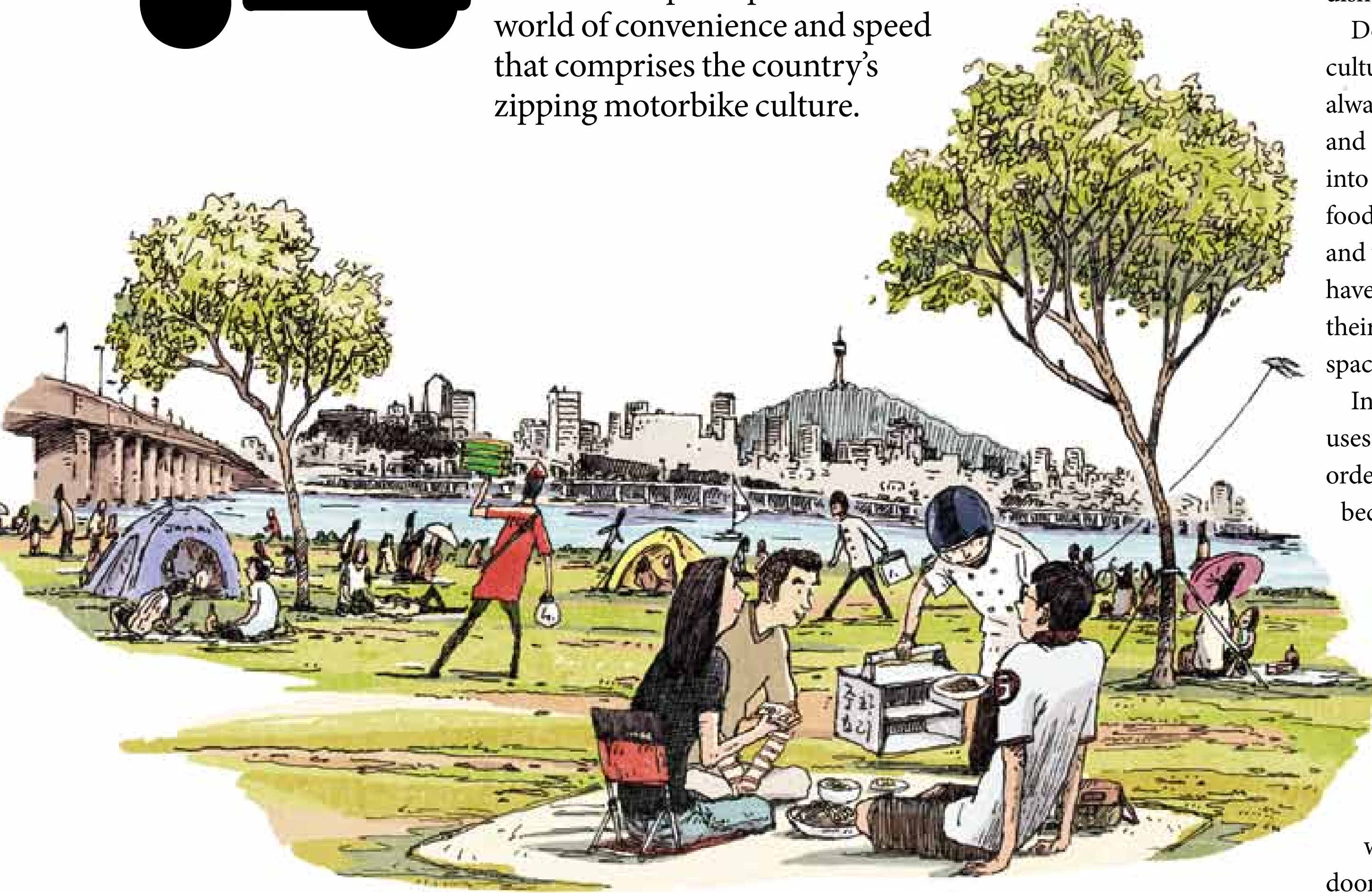
While in most Western countries, such wild edible plants or herbs are usually only known about by botanists or experts, in the Korean countryside this knowledge is still very much alive. After all, it was just a few generations ago that wild plants were common ingredients in daily cooking. Fortunately, there are still many who know that sannamul are a unique, healthy and tasty part of hansik that should be preserved, explored and — above all — eaten. So if you think that Korean cooking means only kimchi and *bulgogi* (seasoned meat), you've missed out on something that is just as delicious, and just as Korean. Why not visit a traditional market and try sannamul? They are worth it, I promise. *by Judith Quintern | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Lee Hee-won*

PROFILE

After seven years in Seoul, German native Judith Quintern now lives with her husband in a Korean traditional house, *hanok*, deep in the mountains of Gangwon-do Province. When not teaching German at Gangneung-Wonju National University, she works on her book of experiences in Korea and hones her skills as a novice farmer.

DARING DELIVERY

In Korea, delivery service is not only ubiquitous, it's a must. One Canadian expat explores the world of convenience and speed that comprises the country's zipping motorbike culture.



My second day in Korea, the bubbly English teacher I replaced showed me a Post-it note on the fridge I would inherit. "Here's how you tell the delivery person your address in Korean," she explained cheerfully. That note spelled out my new address in Korean words with English letters: "Beck sa hoe, beck sheep eel Bang-ee-dong." This was my first introduction to Korea's amazing delivery culture. Though I only had a stitch of knowledge about the Korean nation, culture or language, I could order Korean food by phone. Once I learned the names of some dishes, of course.

Delivery is *baedal* in Korean, and my wife says Korea has a "baedal culture." The speed and convenience of delivery fits a nation that is always on the go. Drivers here share the road with legions of motorbike and moped-driving delivery men and women who dodge and dart into every obscure alleyway in Korea, bringing packages, supplies and food to anyone who needs it. Along with the bikers, delivery trucks and vans bring larger items around. The small, dark blue delivery vans have the proportions of the lunchbox I carried to school as a child, and their drivers fit them around sharp corners, into unbelievably narrow spaces. And what can be delivered? Almost anything.

In the 1995 movie *The Net*, Sandra Bullock plays a woman who uses the Internet so much that nobody knows what she looks like. She orders everything online and has it delivered to her door, until she becomes a virtual hermit. If our world's wired-in future really leads to home-delivery shut-ins, no nation will live better than Korea.

Laundromats, clothing stores, package pickups, flower shops and baby supplies are either online or a phone call away, and delivery speeds can be astonishing. My wife once ordered an outfit from a store in the morning, and it arrived that same afternoon. We haven't set foot in a pet supply store in over a year, though we own two dogs, and when I was out of the country during her birthday, I had flowers delivered to my wife's workplace. Even moving to a new house in Korea includes door to door service. Entire moving crews will empty a house (with

a lift, through the window of your apartment), load it, ship it and set everything up in the new place — they only ask where each wardrobe and desk should go. My wife found a moving company with a bookshelf specialist, who packed away her considerable library and restocked the shelves in the new house, in exactly the same order as before, thanks to a system he'd developed. Me, I can barely organize the photos on my computer's hard drive!

Meanwhile, my two favorite grocery stores both include free home delivery if you spend more than a certain amount. This means we do not have to bring our car when we shop for food. Of course, the speedy bike-delivery workers may corner sharply on their way. Some places suggest you carry the eggs home yourself, and don't have ice cream delivered, in case there's traffic. Is even going to the grocery store too much strain? No problem; there are online shopping websites.

While online clothing stores are multiplying, the most popular delivery item is probably still food. The most often-ordered cuisine includes fried chicken, pizza and Chinese food, but everything from rice dishes and soups, to cutlets, fried things and even sushi, are available. Couriers lug stainless steel boxes of Saran-wrapped dishes to the offices of dedicated workaholics logging overtime, or to the convenience store where my friends drink beers lazily on the patio together, or to the park where my wife and I let our dogs off the leash — so long as I can explain the basics of where I am in Korean, the deliverymen will always find me. If I'm in my apartment and the food was delivered on real, non-disposable dishes, I can leave the dirty plates outside my apartment, and the courier will come by and pick them up again later for re-use.

The delivery bikers know their neighborhoods, some with side-streets intricate and treacherous as spider webs, almost with their eyes closed. Thanks to the population density in Korea's cities, running deliveries only within several city blocks remains viable for some types of delivery. Within that zone, service is amazing!

During a difficult time in my life, I discovered that *yangnyeom*

chicken (fried chicken marinated in a sweet and very spicy sauce) was one of the few comfort foods that tasted good even on my worst days. I once tried to order yangnyeom chicken at my house, but the shop I called explained apologetically that my address was outside their delivery area. Ten minutes later, I received a phone call from the franchise in the next zone of the same chain, which did deliver to my house.

So how does one know what to order? Restaurants with delivery service advertise by distributing copies of their menus, sticking magnetic versions onto apartment doors or taping them onto staircases. This kind of marketing is one of the measures delivery services take to stay ahead in a competitive business.

And competition is steep indeed. Recently, major Korean news outlets carried discussions about competitive food delivery services, first when a mega-store offered barbecue chicken as a loss leader, at less than half the price charged by neighborhood delivery franchises (which are usually independently owned). Local shops could not compete, and there was a backlash against the corporation for endangering the livelihoods and existence of purveyors of Korea's beloved chicken delivery. Not long after, several university-aged pizza delivery workers were killed in car accidents in the same month, prompting a discussion about the pressure on employees to drive dangerously, or be charged for losses caused by lateness. Because of the bad publicity, several

chains dropped their 30 minute-delivery guarantees. Convenient as quick delivery is, any sensible driver in Korea, as well as any sensible pedestrian, supports lessened pressure on the reckless drivers who share the road with us.

Delivery is not just limited to dense cities, nor to homes with street addresses, either, as evidenced by a friend of mine who lived in the hometown of one of Korea's best dishes: *Andong-jjimdak*, a rich and spicy chicken stew made with chewy glass noodles, in a soy-based dark and sweet sauce and bits of vegetables. It's a heavy meal, and best eaten when you have time for a stroll afterwards, but it is also a wonder of a dish.

Jjimdak is the name of the chicken stew and Andong is a small town in the southeast where they make it so well that my friend who lived there refuses to eat it anywhere else. Even out in Andong, a small town

by Korean standards, she remembers sitting by the dam outside the city and calling jjimdak delivery. The small-town chicken restaurants dispatched a bike to the spot on the riverside where she and her friends were watching the sunset.

The problem with Andong-jjimdak? By car, Andong is more than two hours from Seoul, so I can rarely spare an entire weekend just to settle a food craving. Yet my greatest delivery memory in nine years in Korea is the time my wife (with two days advance notice) ordered jjimdak from Andong, and they brought it all the way up, right to our front door in Seoul. We had to heat it up, but it was as good as it is in the southeast, and despite the distance there wasn't even a big markup. I don't think I've ever eaten a more satisfying, or surprising, meal.

Some of the more specialized delivery services, like groceries and supplies, require a strong working knowledge of Korean, and maybe also a Korean ID card, to navigate all-Korean websites and make online purchases. Not many expats I know capitalize on the full range of delivery services available in Korea. After getting over the initial shyness about placing a phone call in Korean, and with the aid of a few YouTube videos that can teach useful phrases, getting food delivery isn't hard at all. Even better, at every place I have called repeatedly, the dispatcher got to know my voice, and filled my order with as few awkward sentences as possible. My chicken place is on speed dial now, and while I'm not completely wired in, I'm enjoying one of Korea's best conveniences. *by Rob Ouwehand | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

PROFILE

Rob Ouwehand, known online as Roboseyo, came to Korea out of curiosity in 2003, and got hooked. He has written about Korean life, society, news and culture old and new, on his blog, roboseyo.blogspot.com, since 2006. His writing can also be found at the bridge blog nanoomi.net. He lives in Seoul with his wife, two dogs and an extensive book collection.