

Korean cities now tourist destinations

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Seoul, Korea – Americans learned the geography of this East Asian country the hard way when in the early 1950's they became involved in a "United Nations Police Action" to repel the invasion of the north into the south.

An uneasy cease-fire line was drawn along the 38th Parallel in an area called the Demilitarized Military Zone or the DMZ. Today it is a popular tourist destination where American military presence is still felt. According to our guide, 42,000 American G.I.'s are stationed in Korea.

In the past 60 or so years the country has rebuilt, and signs of the three-year war have mostly disappeared. Tourists come to Korea now because it is a fascinating Asian country with a 5,000 year old history. Most visitors fly into Seoul, then visit one or more historical or recreational areas.

On a recent trip to Korea, I was able to tour Seoul, fly to Cheju Island 60 miles south of the mainland, and then go on to Pusan in the southeast to visit the important historical areas of Kyongju.

I found the people very warm and friendly though extremely hyper. Our guide illustrated it with this story. "A man measured the number of steps taken by the average person per minute. In New York it was 27, in Tokyo 37, and in Korea it averaged 47." While Korea calls itself "the land of the morning calm," don't believe it.

The young people in Korea were a delight. We ran into thousands of them at all the national monuments, and they were eager to make friends, even asking for our autographs and, in one instance, requesting a pen pal be established with a young woman in our group. Their enthusiasm, in fact the enthusiasm of the Korean people in general, was refreshing.

Prices in Korea at the tourist hotels and shops area high, but it is easy to get a little off the beaten path. The country also has a serious smog problem which needs addressing for the sake of their own population as well as visitors. English is widely spoken by people working in tourist related industries.

Seoul: This city of some 11 million inhabitants is the capital of the country and the heart of all its business activities. Highlights of Seoul include the 14th Century South Gate which now sits isolated in a stream of traffic, and the Changduk Palace built in 1405 to serve as a royal villa by King Taejong. He was the third ruler of the "Choson Period."

King Kwonghaegun moved the government to this palace in 1615, and kings have ruled from here for 300 years. The spacious grounds, ancient wooden buildings painted in bright colors and secret garden make it worth a visit.

The Han-Gang River running through Seoul has been cleared to provide parks and picnic areas along its banks.

One of the highest buildings in Asia, the 63 DLI building which is 630 feet, is a fun place for lunch and to enjoy the view from the Observation Tower. We ran into hundreds of kindergarten kids all dressed in bright yellow. Their teachers would have them squat down when trying to round them all up, and they reminded me of buzzing little bumble bees.

My favorite place to visit just outside Seoul was the Korea Folk Village, a recreation of a "Typical" 19th Century village spread out over 249 acres. You can see a farm or a rich man's manor house, Chinese Herb Shop, sailing ship or a monument to a Dutiful Son. We watched the performance of a mock Korean wedding followed by a wedding parade, learned how mulberry paper was manufactured and about silk and cotton weaving. The Korean Village has more than 250 houses and other buildings.

The most popular shopping area in Seoul is called Itaewon. It caters to foreigners, and a shuttle from our hotel took passengers to the area every 30 minutes. I didn't have much time to shop but found a gorgeous leather jacket for about half of what it would have cost in the U.S.

Kyongju City: We flew to Kyongju City to visit the number one attraction in Korea, the Royal Tombs and Pulguksa Temple. This was once an extremely important area when the Shilla Dynasty united the three ancient kingdoms in the late Seventh Century. Kyongju City became the capital of the entire country.

The Pulguksa Temple dates from AD 751 and was the center of Shilla Buddhism. Over the years there have been fires and restorations of the temple with recent work done between the years 1969-1973. We were able to photograph some cheerful old men in colorful Korean costumes waking among the ancient halls and pagodas.

Nearby was the Sokkuram Buddhist Grotto which houses an ancient Buddha (751 AD) and was rediscovered by a postman in the 19th Century. We also visited a stone tower which was thought to be the oldest astronomical observatory in East Asia (reign of Queen Sontok, 632-647 AD).

One of the most fascinating places we saw was the Tumuli Park and Tombs. The burial sites are round hills covered with green grass. The excavation of one uncovered a golden crown, a selection of gold and silver ornaments, weapons and beautiful vessels. One such tomb was open for tours and housed a small museum inside. It was a fabulous collection of artifacts which illustrated the richness and importance of Korea's ancient civilizations.