

Korea

South Korea is a country of 50 million and Seoul has 10 million. Although it was completely destroyed during World War II and the Korean War, Koreans were able to re-build their country, and in just few decades it became a developed country. It is a highly industrialized country, and their computer and mobile technology in among the leading countries in the world. I had a chance to spend the Eid holiday in Korea. The weather was nice and cool. I found Koreans to be polite and respectful and they value their social traditions. When they meet a person, they bow. In parties and ceremonies they wear their traditional costumes.

Koreans are also patriotic and take pride in learning and speaking their native language, i.e. Korean. In Seoul there is a Techno Mart, in which each storey is devoted to computers, laptops T.V. sets, or digital cameras and 3 storeys are devoted to mobile phone models. I was overwhelmed by the variety and quantity of mobile phones displayed which makes it difficult for the shopper to choose. Moreover, each shop, restaurant or hotel is connected to the internet connection through computer terminals. When you ask a question, they would check the internet for the answer right away. At the airport, you can browse the internet for free.

Koreans love education. The illiteracy rate is less than 1%. 300 colleges and universities offer graduate and undergraduate courses to students and workers in a variety of disciplines. Reading is an extremely important to Koreans. Every year, 110,000 new book titles are published. While riding the train, people of all ages, even young teenagers, read, even late at night.

Seoul is a shopping haven. The city center consists of one shopping area after another: underground and above the ground. At night, you are dazzled by the lights. Signs with Korean script look like colorful paintings. It is difficult to walk through the crowds of shoppers. Around the lit water fountains, people gather to take pictures.

Korea has a sophisticated transportation system and people find it convenient and faster to travel by train. A huge underground system takes you everywhere in Seoul and trains and buses take you to all towns in Korea at a reasonable fare price. Going to Gyeongju, a city in the south of Korea where I had a conference, I was speechless when I saw the fall colors on the mountains along the way and in the city. The many Buddhist Temples and old Palaces are built in the heart of mountains that are green in the summer and colorful in the fall. Cable cars take visitors to the Sorak mountain top. Many visit hot springs, national parks, lakes, rivers, the sandy beaches, and fishing villages where one can eat raw fish on the beach or in a restaurant made of straw. Fruit sellers display their products along the main street and in the many narrow alleys, one can buy spices, dry fish, sea weed, ginseng and other local products. It is completely safe to walk around even late at night and the streets are always full of nicely-dressed people wandering around or going home from work.

When I first visited Korea in 2002, it was difficult for me to communicate with people as they only speak Korean. Koreans are proud and patriotic and they only speak Korean. I could rarely see a sign in English and very few speak English and if they do, they are difficult to understand. It was linguistically enriching for me as I could perform a pronunciation error analysis and learn something about the Korean pronunciation system. It was also difficult for me to read signs as they are all in Korean, a language that uses a non-Romanized alphabet. Despite that I was examining the Korean script and trying to learn something about it. When in Korea, it is important to get a map and a tourist guide at the airport Tourist Information Center and find where you are going before you leave your hotel. As a Muslim, it was difficult for me to eat at a restaurant where they serve mostly pork and non-halal beef, lamb or chicken. I could not order fish from the menu which is in Korean. I could only buy milk, fruit, or French pastry at the supermarket. The cost of living is also very high: the hotels, food and clothes are expensive. In general, visiting Korea offers a person insight into a great culture and great people.