

{ SEOUL }

ASIA'S HIDDEN TREASURE

Most of what you've heard about Seoul is true. Yes, it's one of the world's largest cities with gleaming skyscrapers, inspired temples and grand palaces. But that's only part of the story.

For starters, getting around the city is simple. Seoul's efficient subway is a traveller's dream with well-marked English signs at every station. Did someone mention shopping? If your idea of travel includes round-the-clock bargain hunting, you've come to the right place. Or try world-class museums, stunning galleries and the rich diversity of Korean cuisine. When it's time to slow down, spend a day at the park, an afternoon at the horse races and an evening on a Hangang River cruise.

Seoul City Government has asked the experts at Lonely Planet for their views on the most rewarding corners of this 600-year-old city. The result is this concise booklet – so now you can walk, hike, eat, drink, bathe and explore one of Asia's hidden treasures.

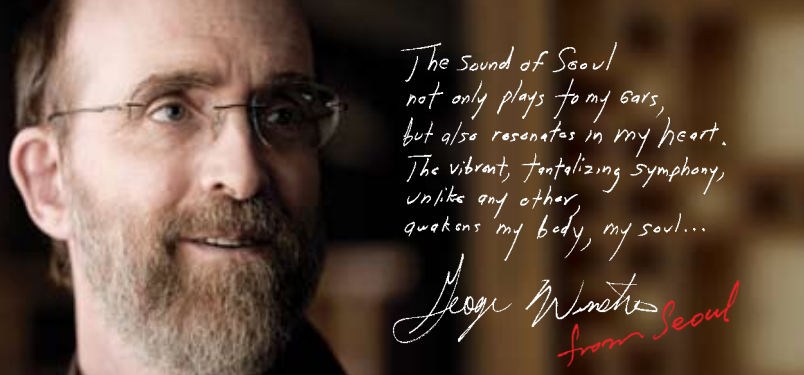
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*The Sound of Seoul
not only plays to my ears,
but also resonates in my heart.
The vibrant, tantalizing symphony,
unlike any other,
awakens my body, my soul...*

*George Winnetto
from Seoul*



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Hi! Seoul
SOUL OF ASIA



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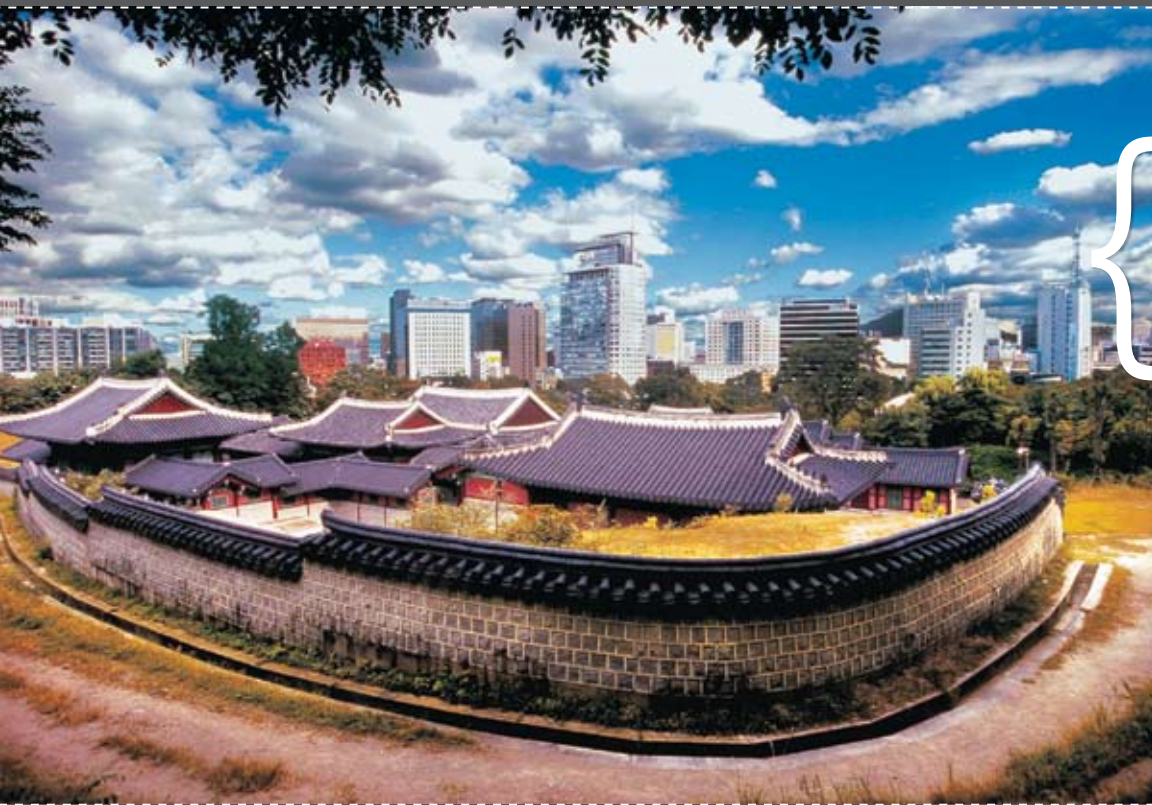
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WAY BACK IN THE 20TH CENTURY, SEOUL WAS A BUSTLING METROPOLIS LOOKING TO MAKE ITS MARK ON THE WORLD STAGE. WITH UNBRIDLED ENERGY, SPIRITED PASSION AND A SENSE OF IDENTITY FORGED BY ITS OWN ASIAN MYSTIQUE AND 21ST-CENTURY DREAMS OF PEACE AND PROSPERITY, SEOUL CAN NOW CLAIM ITS PLACE AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT CITIES. IT'S NOTHING LIKE YOU EXPECTED, AND EVERYTHING YOU COULD HOPE FOR.



3

MYTHS ABOUT SEOUL

1 IT'S EXPENSIVE.

It doesn't have to be. Superb accommodation options are available to suit any budget. International properties are widely available from ₩175,000 (US\$175). Midrange 'motels' combine stylish rooms with high-speed internet, home theatre and steam showers for about ₩90,000 (US\$90). Korean inns – *yeogwans* – are suitable for budget travellers who aren't put off by austere surroundings. ₩25,000 (US\$25) rents a room with private bath. For hostel accommodation, backpackers gravitate towards guesthouses where ₩15,000 (US\$15) gets a bunk,



breakfast, laundry facilities and opportunities to make friends with global travellers.

Affordable eating is effortless. A meal with rice, *kimchi*, vegetables, soup and fried fish costs ₩7000 (US\$7) or less. If *kimchi* isn't on the menu, eggs, toast and coffee cost ₩8000, or much more, if you eat in hotels.

2 LANGUAGE IS A BARRIER.

Not true, sort of. Seoul's extensive network of information booths, staffed by multilingual personnel, has enough maps, brochures and directories to fill a backpack. Virtually every destination catering to international travellers is set up with English-speaking staff. If so inclined, Seoul's highlights can be reached without encountering any communication hurdles.

To experience Seoul's vast urban landscape and its pockets of rich heritage, moving beyond the tourist areas should be on every traveller's agenda. True, English-language capabilities outside Insadong and Itaewon drop off sharply, but is that a barrier, or an opportunity?



Part of Seoul's charm is the prospect of becoming an explorer. Test your mettle by stepping into a different social milieu. Stroll lanes where English is hardly spoken. Experience the wonder of ordering a meal by pointing to what looks good on another table. Seoul is more than a travel destination. It's an adventure.

3 SEOUL IS JUST ANOTHER ASIAN MEGACITY.

False. Long rows of cement high-rise apartment buildings jostling

for space along the Hangang River create the impression that Seoul is a labyrinth of buildings. Scratch below the rough exterior and you'll find a *joie de vivre* unlike any Asian city.

Seoul's unrelenting spirit is sustained by human geography and shaped by the forces of history. Compress 10 million people into a landmass smaller than New York and you've got verve on par with Manhattan. You've heard of a New York minute? In Seoul, they ask why does it take so long? Seoul's hurry-hurry mantra can be

unsettling, until you realise it's the product of a national sentiment forged by a legacy of continuous rebuilding and decades of heart-wrenching sacrifice.

Seoul's world view is also shaped by an overriding concern for social harmony. Infused by Korea's take on 2000-year-old Confucian values and a confluence of philosophies like Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity, social etiquette is one of the city's most alluring features. There's a graciousness in social settings that speaks to a time

when etiquette meant something. Finding the right seating arrangement at a dinner party before anyone dares sit down. Establishing a business rapport with a handshake demonstrating respect for the other person's social position. Or, refilling a glass of *soju* for the person next to you, with dignity and *élan*. By Western standards, seemingly minor social interactions have no import. Maybe that's why Seoul is so unique. It's a place where respect and good manners are still valued and prized.





TOP 5 CITY Highlights

Cultural Experiences

- Changdeokgung Palace and the rear garden
- Bongeun Temple
- N Seoul Tower
- Nanta
- Public bath and *jjimjilbang*

Museums & Galleries

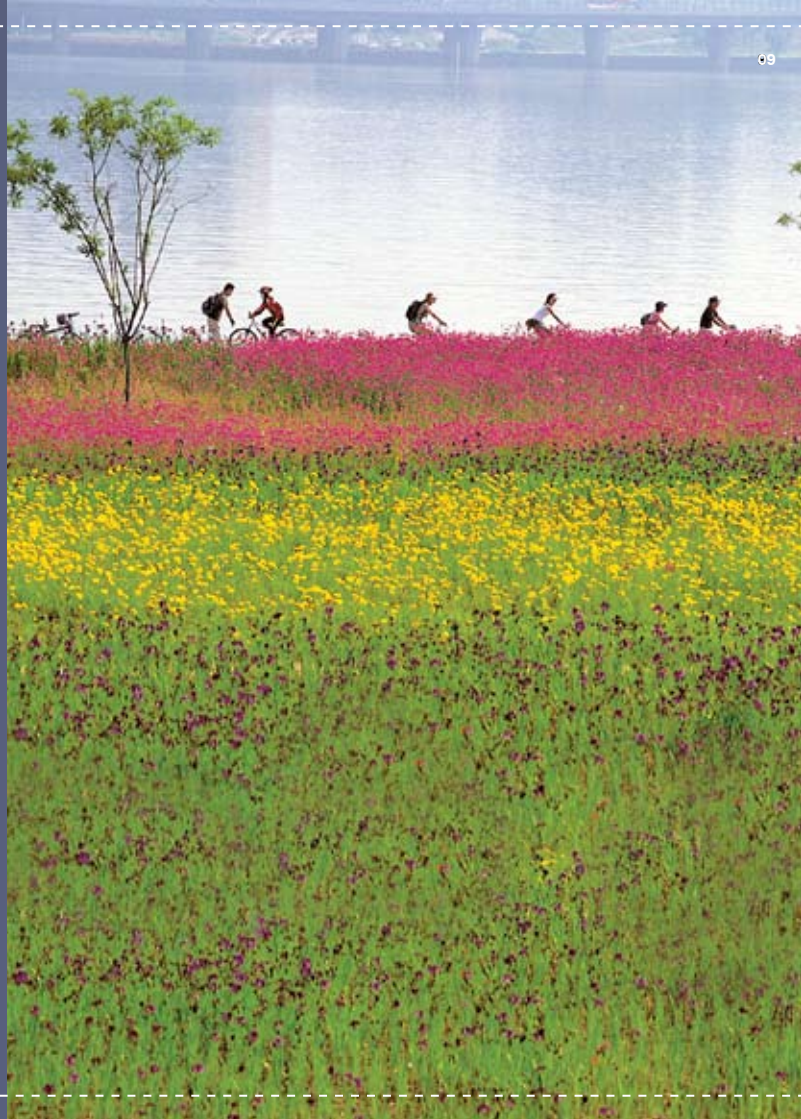
- Samsung Museum of Art, Leeum
- The War Memorial of Korea
- National Museum of Korea
- The National Folk Museum
- The National Museum of Contemporary Art

Shopping

- Namdaemun Market
- Jangnpyeong Antique Shops
- Galleria Department Store
- Noryangjun Fish Market
- COEX

Walks

- Inwangsan and the Zen Rock
- Cheonggyecheon Stream
- Samcheong-dong
- Bukhansan National Park Hikes
- Hangang River



SEOUL Facts

10 Number of Fortune 500 companies based in Seoul, including Samsung Electronics, LG and Hyundai Motor Company.

1988 Seoul hosts the summer Olympics. A pivotal moment in South Korea's history that helped propel the transition to democratic government.

2002 South Korea and Japan co-host the FIFA World Cup. Korea finishes fourth after losing to Turkey in front of 63,000 fans sporting Red Devil T-shirts.

2007 The ICSID selects Seoul to be the '1st World Design Capital' in September 2007.

2008 Seoul is scheduled to host the Seoul Design Olympiad 2008 from 10-30 October.

2009 The C40 Climate Leadership Group, with a total of 500 professionals from 80 countries, is in town from 18-21 May.

2010 Scheduled completion of Dongdaemun World Design Plaza & Park by British architect Zaha Hadid.

\$31 Billion Estimated budget for Yongsan International Business District, Seoul's signature redevelopment with a 2016 completion date.



5 Festivals

1. Hi Seoul Seasonal festival with events along the Han River, light shows and concerts: Spring (4–11 May), Summer (9–17 August), Autumn (3–26 October), Winter (15 December to 15 January).

2. Seoul International Cartoon & Animation Festival Screening almost 400 films from 36 countries, this festival proves there's more cartoon talent here than the *Simpsons'* animators. Usually runs mid-May.

3. Lotus Lantern Festival Buddha's birthday party culminates in a downtown parade with 100,000 lanterns. Usually starts early May, though dates vary with the lunar calendar.

4. Fringe Festival Indie artists hit the streets near Hongik University for concerts and experimentation. Usually held last two weeks of August.

5. Seoul Drum Festival Percussionists beat a path to Seoul with three days of banging at City Hall, the the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts and Hangang River. The music starts in October.



EXPLORE: **The Heart of Seoul**

THE BEST SIGHTS IN SEOUL AWE WITH BEAUTY OR DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CITY. Downtown Seoul does both. Ancient palaces and old-world architecture are richly juxtaposed against a decidedly modern urban design with wide boulevards, narrow lanes and endless opportunities waiting to be discovered. A dynamic cultural tapestry and exotic cuisine are all here in Asia's hidden treasure. Most downtown sights can be reached on foot. All you need is a sense of adventure and a good pair of walking shoes. For longer stretches, or the sheer joy of trying something new, ride Seoul's subway. It's very affordable and, because every important sign and map is written in English, remarkably accessible.



Insa-dong

Almost every visitor to Seoul ends up in Insa-dong, and with good reason. Centrally located and surprisingly compact, it's a single road and a mishmash of twisty lanes dotted with antique dealers, *hanji* (traditional Korean paper) and calligraphy shops, souvenir hawkers, eclectic teashops and restaurants serving a narrow cross-section of Korean dishes. *Kimchi* (like *bibimbap*), stew and pumpkin soup (which tastes much better than it sounds) are all excellent choices for a late breakfast or lunch, although you'll probably want to go beyond Insa-dong for dinner if you're craving barbecued meat cooked at your table.

Window-shopping will take up most of your time in Insa-dong, but don't be in a rush to try everything at once. Consider Insa-dong as home base, the familiar place you return to time and again for a quick bite and a soothing cup of tea while mapping out the next stage of your journey to the surrounding sights.

Gyeongbokgung Palace

West of Changdeok Palace, follow the tourist traffic flowing into Seoul's most important palace. Resist the temptation to immediately start exploring the stately **Gyeongbokgung Palace** (82-2-3700-3900; www.royalpalace.go.kr/html/main/main.jsp; ₩3000/US\$3). Instead, head directly to the back of the compound and begin your tour in the quaint museum to set the social and historical context for everything you'll see as you explore the palace and the rest of the city.

The **National Folk Museum of Korea** (82-2-3704-3114; www.nfm.go.kr; free admission included with Gyeongbokgung Palace fee) fleshes out the tedium of existence for less regal folk with pictorial descriptions, recreations of family scenes and a thought-provoking presentation of life shaped by Confucian values. Although it borders on kitsch, the mental footprint created by these exhibits will heighten your understanding of Korean civilisation and appreciation for the magnitude of its progress.

The small exhibit of Joseon Dynasty scholarly thought is



particularly informative. Once you understand the Joseon world view, you'll be able to interpret the symbolism of the **Jongno Tower**, downtown Seoul's most intriguing architectural statement. It's just a 10-minute walk from Insa-dong, outside Jongsak station.

Changdeokgung Palace

A short walk northeast of Insa-dong, **Changdeokgung Palace** (82-2-762-8261; www.cdg.go.kr/main.html; admission ₩3000/US\$3) should be high on your list of things to see. On the

2.5km tour, you'll amble past handsomely preserved architectural stylings dating back to the 15th century, while the tour guide provides insights into pavilion symbolism, ancient social customs and details of building construction like *ondol*, the traditional Korean heating system.

The highlight of the 90-minute tour is a visit to the **Secret Garden**. Down the tree-lined path and around the bend, a canvas of breathtaking beauty unfolds before your eyes – a tranquil lily pond embraced by lush trees and a solitary pavilion

where royal courtesans used to reflect upon poetry.

Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997, Changdeokgung Palace and the Secret Garden are only available on a **guided tour** (English tours daily at 11.30am, 1.30pm, 3.30pm, closed Mon).

Theatres

Modern and traditional theatre performances are within walking distance from Insa-dong. Down the lane opposite City Hall that runs alongside Deoksu Palace, **Chongdong Theater** (82-2-751-1500; www.chongdong.com; tickets from ₩20,000/US\$20) puts on a nightly 70-minute showcase. Performances will be enjoyed by those who like viewing a combination of traditional arts at the one time, although some travellers may find *samullori* and *pansori* a challenge.

For a novel twist on classic themes, **Nanta's** (82-2-739-8288; <http://nanta.i-pmc.co.kr>; tickets from ₩40,000/US\$40) non-verbal performance spices up *samullori* rhythms with banging, chopping and shouting in a restaurant kitchen. The slapstick humour

is fun, especially if you're picked by the cast to go on stage.

N Seoul Tower

A trip to Seoul simply wouldn't be complete without the requisite visit to **N Seoul Tower** (82-2-3455-9277; www.nseoultower.com; ₩7000/US\$7). Renovations completed in 2005 have given this 236m tower, sitting on top of a 243m mountain, a fresh makeover including a spectacular after-dark light show. Daytime views of the city from the T3 observation deck can be great, but it's in the evening when the city really shines, with millions of shimmering lights that seem to go on forever.

Hiking up to the base of the tower through **Namsan Park** is popular with fitness enthusiasts in need of an intense one-hour workout. Others less inclined to break into a sweat can take the cable car (₩7000/US\$7 return trip). From Insa-dong, the cable car is a quick taxi ride (₩3000/US\$3), or from Myeongdong subway station, it's a 20-minute walk up a mildly challenging hill.

