From the soaring peaks of Seoraksan National Park to the tranquil beaches abutting the East Sea, Gangwon-do has all the elements for a postcard-perfect vacation. This is where many Seoulites escape – to get lost in the mountains, chow down on Chuncheon’s fiery chicken dish *dakgalbi* or the coastal towns’ raw fish, or leap into a frenzy of adventure sports.

While the province may not have that much by way of cultural antiquities, what it does have – Gangneung’s 400-year-old Dano Festival, for instance – it celebrates with zest. And Gangwon-do can be quirky too. Near Samcheok you’ll find a park full of unabashed phallic sculptures standing cheek by jowl with a humble fishing village, while Gangneung has a museum dedicated to its founder’s lifelong obsession with all things Edison.

Politics turned Gangwon-do into a border province with North Korea, with the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) lining its northern boundary. Along the coast you’ll see sobering reminders of the division: barbed wire, military lookout posts and, at Jeongdongjin, a captured North Korean submarine. Not far from the border, you can wander through bullet-ridden buildings near Cheorwon, crumbling but not forgotten, or at Goseong Unification Observatory train your binoculars on the legendary mountain Kumgangsan in the North.

In July and August, a surge of domestic tourists arrives on the beaches and mountains to get their fill of summer. Beaches are swarmed on New Year’s Day too, for catching the first sunrise of the year over the East Sea. At other times Gangwon-do can be a restful change from Seoul, close by yet empty and foreigner-scarce enough to give a taste of Korean life beyond the capital.
History
Gangwon-do is the southern half of a province that once straddled the border (the Northern half is romanised as Kangwon-do). Some areas north of the 38th Parallel belonged to the North from 1945 till the end of the Korean War, and it’s not uncommon to come across families with relatives in the North.

During the war this province saw many fierce battles for strategic mountaintops. Subsequently its rich natural resources, including coal and timber, were industrialised, spurring the development of road and rail links. When many coal mines closed in the 1990s, the province had to create alternative employment opportunities, such as tourism.

National & Provincial Parks
Of the province’s three national parks, Seoraksan (p182) is the most well-loved and well-hiked, with stunning peaks that have attained legendary status.

Odaesan (p191) and Chiaksan (p197) offer incredible views and challenging hikes, the latter boasting some of the highest temples and peaks in the country.

Taebaeksan Provincial Park (p196) occupies a special place in the hearts of the Korean people for its mist-shrouded associations with the mythical founding father of the country, Dangun. Meanwhile, at Naksan Provincial Park (p182), a demure Goddess of Mercy statue can be found basking in a glorious location by the seaside.