



Around Seoul

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Why Go?

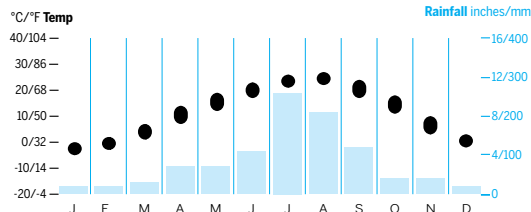
Though Seoul is one of the world's busiest, most populated and modern cities, remarkably only within a 45-minute journey by road, you can be transported to rural, mountainous surrounds that feel an entire world away.

In the provinces surrounding the capital – Gyeonggi-do and Incheon-gwangyeok-si – you'll find illustrious World Heritage-listed historical sites, snaking fortress walls, enchanting palaces, timeless temples, cultural villages, lively cities, national parks, sandy beaches, remote islands and picturesque mountains perfect for hiking and skiing.

From the thrilling trip to the North Korean border along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), to staying overnight in Buddhist temples, the diversity of experiences is impressive. And beyond the traditional sites are ski resorts and world-class theme parks, plus cutting-edge contemporary art, meaning there's pretty much something for everyone.

When to Go

Incheon



Dec–Feb Hit the slopes at Gyeonggi-do's ski resorts for skiing and snowboarding.

Apr & Oct Head to the hills to hike among cherry blossoms in spring or colourful foliage in autumn.

Jul Enjoy summer by the beach at Muuido, or further afield at Deokjeokdo.

GYEONGGI-DO

경기도

Gyeonggi-do was designated as a province after the Korean War. The seat of regional government has been Suwon since 1967. You can find out more about what this province offers the visitor at <http://english.gg.go.kr>.

The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) & Joint Security Area (JSA)

The 4km-wide, 240km-long buffer known as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) slashes across the peninsula, separating North and South Korea. Lined on both sides by tank traps, electrical fences, landmines and armies in full battle readiness, it is one of the scariest places on earth. It is also one of the most surreal, since it has become a major tourist attraction with several observatories allowing you to peek into North Korea (aka the DPRK; Democratic People's Republic of Korea). For history buffs and collectors of weird and unsettling experiences, a visit here is not to be missed.

The place most people want to go is the Joint Security Area (JSA), 55km north of Seoul, inside of which is the truce village of Panmunjeom – there's nowhere else in South Korea where you can get so close to North Korea and DPRK soldiers without being arrested or shot, and the tension is palpable.

The only way into this heavily restricted area is on an organised tour. To visit the JSA you'll need to bring your passport. Note citizens of certain countries are not allowed on these tours. There are also strict dress and behavioural codes; usually collared shirts for men, and no ripped jeans, revealing clothing or open-toed shoes. Alcohol consumption is also prohibited. Only children over 10 years are permitted.

Sights

JSA (Panmunjeom)

MILITARY SITE

Unquestionably the highlight of any trip to the DMZ is the JSA at Panmunjeom. An improbable tourist destination, it's here where the infamous Military Demarcation Line separates South and North Korea. Soldiers from both sides often stand metres apart eyeballing one another from their respective sides of the blue-painted UN buildings. You'll be taken inside the meeting room – where the truce between North and South Korea was signed –

the only place where you can safely walk into North Korea from South Korea.

Tours kick off with a briefing by US or ROK (Republic of Korea) soldier guides at Camp Bonifas, the joint US-ROK army camp just outside the DMZ, before being transferred to another bus to the JSA.

Within the blue conference room at the JSA, where official meetings are still sometimes held, microphones on the tables constantly record everything said, while ROK soldiers stand guard inside and out in a modified taekwondo stance – an essential photo op. Their North Korean counterparts keep a steady watch, usually, but not always, from a distance.

Though your tour will be a quiet one, the soldier guide will remind you that this frontier is no stranger to violent incidents. One of the most notorious was in 1976 when two US soldiers were hacked to death with axes by North Korean soldiers after the former tried to chop down a tree obstructing the view from a watchtower. Camp Bonifas, the joint US-ROK army camp just outside the DMZ, is named after one of the slain soldiers.

Back on the bus you'll be taken to one of Panmunjeom's lookout posts from where you can see the two villages within the DMZ: Daeseong-dong in the South and Gijeong-dong in the North. You'll also see the site of the axe-murder incident and the **Bridge of No Return** where the POW exchange took place following the signing of Armistice Agreement in 1953.

The forested surrounds are Korea's most ecologically pristine and allegedly home to the Siberian tiger.

Dora Observatory

OBSERVATORY

(binoculars ₩500; ☀10am-5pm Tue-Sun) Peer through binoculars for a closer look at Kaesong city and Kaesong Industrial Complex in the DPRK, where cheap North Korean labourers are employed by South Korean conglomerates.

Third Infiltration Tunnel

TUNNEL

(제3땅굴; ☀9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Since 1974, four tunnels have been found running under the DMZ, dug by the North Koreans so that their army could launch a surprise attack. Walking along 265m of this 73m-deep tunnel is not for the claustrophobic or the tall: creeping hunched over, you'll realise why they issue hard hats. The guide will point out how the North Koreans painted