



Seoul

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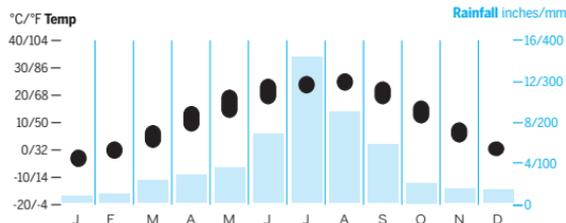
Why Go?

An old Korean proverb goes 'even if you have to crawl on your knees, get yourself to Seoul!' Never has this been more sound advice. Asia's fourth-richest city, Seoul (서울) is a dynamic mash-up of markets and K-Pop, teahouses and temples, palaces and mountains, skyscrapers and pulsing neon. This Unesco City of Design also offers several contemporary architectural marvels, including the Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park and the giant glass wave of the new City Hall.

Gaze down on this sprawling metropolis of 10.5 million people from atop any of Seoul's four guardian mountains and you will innately sense the powerful *pungsu-jiri* (feng shui) that has long nurtured and protected the city. Public transport is brilliant and whatever you want, at any time of the day or night, Seoul can provide. The joys of eating, drinking, shopping and general merrymaking are all in abundant evidence, from Apgujeong's chic boutiques to Hongdae's bars and restaurants.

When to Go

Seoul



May Enjoy good weather and top events such as the Jongmyo Daeje and Lotus Lantern Festival.

Aug Cool off at the outdoor swimming pools located along the Han River.

Oct Hike across mountains coated in brilliant autumn colours; enjoy Seoul's fireworks festival.

History

When Seoul became the capital of Korea following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty in 1392 its population was around 100,000. Just over 600 years later this has ballooned to 10.5 million (or 24.5 million if you consider the wider metro area), making Seoul one of the world's largest cities.

During the 20th century Seoul suffered first under Japanese colonial rule and then during the Korean War when it was almost entirely destroyed. Rebuilt from the 1960s, Seoul is the country's centre of cultural, economic and political power. Past mayors have gone on to become South Korea's president, including Lee Myung-bak who finished his term of office as president in December 2012.

When Park Won-soon, a former human rights lawyer and independent candidate, was elected Seoul's mayor in October 2011 it was a watershed moment not only for Korean politics but also for the city itself. Under the previous mayors, top of the agenda had been construction-led growth that resulted in flashy, expensive projects such as the reclamation of the Cheong-gye-cheon and the commissioning of Dongdaemun Design Plaza. Park's winning mandate promises to shift the focus to greater welfare spending for Seoul's citizens.

Sights

You'll spend the bulk of your time north of the meandering Han River that splits Seoul into two distinct regions, that are

themselves split into 25 *gu* (administrative districts). This is home to historic Seoul, a relatively compact, walkable area.

Seoul's fascinating feudal past can be glimpsed in the palaces around Gwanghwamun (the main gate to Gyeongbokgung). Nearby Insa-dong (인사동), Samcheong-dong (삼청동) and Bukchon are all packed with souvenir shops, teahouses, restaurants and small museums, often in converted *hanok* (traditional wooden houses). Note that the narrow streets in these areas can get jammed on weekends and holidays. There are a few other sights of note further north around the remains of the fortress walls that once encircled the city.

Namsan, crowned by N Seoul Tower, the green hill at the heart of the old city, is sandwiched between Myeong-dong shopping district to the north and the foreigner-friendly zone of Itaewon to the south. Not far off to the west are the youthful party districts of Hongdae (the area around Hongik University), Sinchon and Edae.

South of the river, Gangnam's suburbs are thin on major sights but good for shopping and entertainment. Here you'll also find giant complexes such as COEX Mall and Olympic Park.

GWANGHWAMUN & JONGNO-GU

광화문, 종로구

Gyeongbokgung

PALACE

(경복궁; Map p42; <http://english.cha.go.kr>; adult/child ₩3000/1500; ☀9am-5pm Wed-Mon Mar-Oct,

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SEOUL IN...

Two Days

Stroll around **Bukchon Hanok Village**. Grab lunch and go shopping in **Insa-dong**, then attend the changing of the palace guard at **Gyeongbokgung** or join the day's last tour of **Changdeokgung**. Enjoy dinner in **Gwangjang Market**. On day two visit the splendid **Leeum Samsung Museum of Art**. Move on to either the **National Museum of Korea** or the **War Memorial of Korea**. Freshen up at **Dragon Hill Spa**, ride the cable car to **N Seoul Tower** atop Namsan, then return to **Itaewon** for dining and late-night carousing.

Five Days

Follow Seoul Fortress Walls up **Bukaksan** and down to the temple **Gilsang-sa**. In Dongdaemun view the **Dongdaemun Design Plaza & Park**, pick up a new outfit from the market here, then follow the **Cheong-gye-cheon** back to the heart of the city. On day four visit **Seodaemun Prison History Hall** and hike up **Inwangsan**, where you might come across shamans performing ancient ceremonies. End the day with a traditional performing-arts show and royal-cuisine meal at **Korea House**. Cap your Seoul visit off with a meal at the fascinating **Noryangjin Fish Market**, hire a bike in **Yeouido** and cycle along the Han River, and soak up the buzzing nocturnal vibe of **Hongdae**.