

Welcome to Seoul

Dive into this dynamic mash-up of night markets and K-Pop, temples and majestic palaces, skyscrapers and pulsing neon.

Design Matters

Seoul is evolving from a hardened concrete-and-steel economic powerhouse into a softer-edged 21st-century urban ideal of parks, culture and design. Following on from the disinterring and landscaping of the central Cheong-gye stream and upgrading of the Han River parks comes the sprucing up of hiking trails on Namsan, a mountain escape in the city's midst. The 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.

Historical Fragments

Gaze down on this sprawling metropolis of 10.5 million people from atop any of Seoul's four guardian mountains and you'll sense the powerful *pungsu-jiri* (feng shui) that has long nurtured and protected the city. Having endured the catastrophe of the Korean War barely 60 years ago, the 'Miracle on the Han' has its eye clearly on the future, while history clings tenaciously to many of its corners. You'll encounter fascinating fragments of the past in World Heritage-listed sites such as Jongnyo shrine, as well as in the alleys winding between the graceful *hanok* (traditional wooden homes) that cluster in Bukchon.

24-Hour City

Whatever you want, at any time of day or night, Seoul can provide. An early morning temple visit can lead to a palace tour followed by teahouse sipping in Bukchon and gallery hopping in Insa-dong. *Soju* (a vodka-like drink) and snacks in a street tent bar will fuel you for shopping at the buzzing Dongdaemun or Namdaemun night markets, partying in Hongdae or Itaewon, or playing online games at a PC *bang* or watching the latest Korean blockbuster at a DVD *bang*. Follow this with steaming, soaking and snoozing in a *jjimjil-bang* (sauna and spa). By the time you look at your watch, it will be dawn again.

Beyond the Walls

Public transport is brilliant, so there's no excuse for not stretching your travel horizons beyond the Fortress Walls. Most visitors are inexorably drawn to the fearsome modern-day barrier: the Demilitarised Zone, or DMZ, splitting South from North Korea. Day trips here are a must, and nearby is the charming arts and culture village of Heyri. To the west, Incheon is a fascinating port where the modern world came flooding into Korea at the end of the 19th century, while south is Suwon, home also to impressive World Heritage-listed fortifications.



Why I Love Seoul

By Simon Richmond, Author

Seoul is heaven for passionate foodies. Whether tucking into the snacks of commoners or the cuisine of kings, you just can't lose. A *hanjeongsik* (multicourse banquet) is a feast as much for the eyes as the tummy, as are the creations of chefs crafting neo-Korean dishes. Equally satisfying is scoffing down piping-hot, crispy *hotteok* (pancakes with sweet or savoury fillings) on a street corner, or delicious, fresh and fiery crab soup in Noryangjin Fish Market. And don't get me started on the wonderful universe of teas served in charming teahouses: this is where the soul of Seoul lies.

For more about our author, see p216.