

PACK LIGHTLY

PALACES, VOLCANOES, AND A BULLET TRAIN

South Korea

When to come for the blossom, when to come for the colour, and the four-stop loop the KTX makes easy.

- p. 34 Blossom or autumn: the call that defines the trip
- p. 38 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt
- p. 46 Etiquette and payment, the chapter that replaces scams

48 PAGES

KRW PRICES

VISA-FREE 90 DAYS

EDITION 2026.06

photo: Wikimedia Commons / Seoul Tourism Archive

Start here

the shape of a Korea trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Korea is a compact country with a fast spine. Seoul anchors the north, Busan the southeast coast, Gyeongju holds the old Silla capital between them, and Jeju floats off the south as a volcanic island apart. The KTX bullet train stitches the mainland together in hours, which is why a first trip can cover palaces, a fishing port and a temple city without ever renting a car. This guide is built around that spine: which sights repay the queue, when to time the trip, and the handful of things to lock before you fly. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

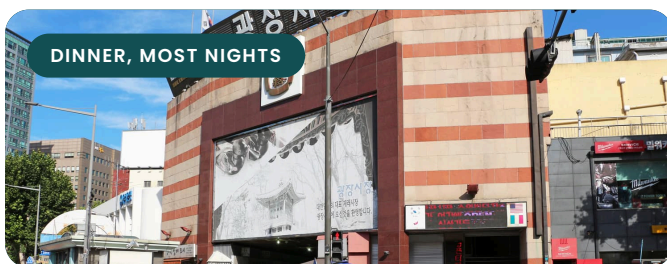
The classic loop runs Seoul to Gyeongju to Busan by train, then a short flight to Jeju. Seoul for the city and the palaces, Gyeongju for history, Busan for the coast, Jeju for the volcano. Ten days does it comfortably.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 50 USD a day, mid-range around 100, captured June 2026. Korea costs more than its Southeast Asian neighbours. The full receipt is itemised on page 38.

Sort before you fly

Most passports enter visa-free for 90 days, but a K-ETA travel authorisation may apply, so check yours. Add an eSIM and a T-money transit card plan. Page 41 lists what to book early.



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01	The country	08
02	Seoul, old and new	10
03	Beyond Seoul	15
04	What to do	22
05	Routes and itineraries	28
06	When to go	33
07	Practical	39
08	Safe, smart, tools	45

QUICK JUMPS

	Blossom or autumn: the timing call	34
	What a day really costs	38
	Seoul, old and new in one spread	10

Your trip on one page

10 days • 50 to 250 USD/day • best Apr-Jun and Oct-Nov

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The first-timer loop runs Seoul to Gyeongju to Busan on the KTX, then a one-hour flight to Jeju. Budget from the bars below, not from hotel rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else is easy to arrange once you land, and the train rarely needs reserving more than a day out except on holiday weekends.

THE ROUTE



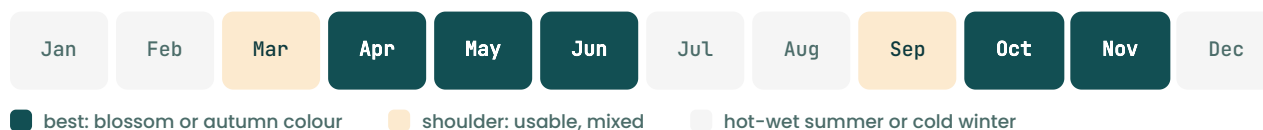
BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		50 USD
Standard		100 USD
Comfort		250 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01 International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02 Seoul to Jeju flight, 3 weeks out **12Go**
- 03 eSIM, install before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



South Korea at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure

90

Safety

90

Cities

90

Food and drinks

90

Culture

85

Nature

70

Budget friendly

55

Budget travel

50 USD/day

Mid-range

100 USD/day

Luxury

250 USD/day

CITY

CULTURE

FOOD

ISLAND

HIKING

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country

What Korea is, who goes, and the four regions you need to know before you pick dates. The mainland is small and fast; Jeju is its own decision.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, four regions, four readers

07

What South Korea is

52M people • 4 regions • the fast, safe East-Asia entry

A democratic republic of 52 million people on the southern half of a peninsula, with North Korea sealed across a fortified border and the sea on the other three sides. Seoul is the capital and the centre of gravity: roughly 9.6 million people in the city, the main airport hub through Incheon, and where almost every trip starts. Korea is one of the easiest countries in Asia to travel. The transport is world class, payment is near-cashless, the food works at every price point, and the KTX bullet train puts Busan two and a half hours from Seoul. The trade-off is cost: Korea sits well above its Southeast Asian neighbours, so plan in hundreds of dollars a day, not tens. This guide shows you the version that earns the price.

CAPITAL

Seoul

~9.6M people

POPULATION

52M

Korean speaking

CURRENCY

KRW

1 USD = ~1,350 won

BEST MONTHS

Apr-Jun, Oct-Nov

blossom or colour

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CHARACTERS



Capital region: Seoul, Incheon

hub • palaces vs hyper-modern • all year

Where every trip starts. Five royal palaces and hanok lanes pinned against glass towers, plus the DMZ border within a day-trip.



Southeast: Gyeongju, Busan

Silla history • coast • seafood

The old kingdom and the second city. Gyeongju for tombs and temples, Busan for beaches, markets and a port-town pace.



Jeju: the volcanic island

island • UNESCO geology • rent a car

A short flight south and a different country: lava tubes, a dormant volcano, black-rock coast. Public transport is thin, so a car earns its keep.



East and Gangwon: Seoraksan, Sokcho

mountains • hiking • east-coast beaches

Granite ridges and day-hikes near the coast. Best in October when the slopes turn, snow country in winter.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-timer

7 to 10 days, mid-range, the Seoul to Busan to Jeju combo by train and short flight.

Culture and food couple

Palaces, hanok stays, Korean BBQ and market crawls. Slow Seoul, two nights Gyeongju.

Family

Easy transit, very safe streets. Jeju for the outdoors, Seoul for the museums and theme parks.

Solo backpacker

50 USD a day, guesthouses, T-money everywhere. Korea solo is low-stress and walkable.

02

Seoul, old and new

A capital that holds six-hundred-year-old palaces and the densest subway in the world inside the same skyline. Where to stay, what to skip, and the day-trips worth the train.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Seoul, old and new	10
Neighbourhoods and where to stay	12
Seoul day-trips: DMZ, Suwon, Nami	13

Seoul, old and new

capital · 3 to 4 nights · the whole trip in one city



GYEONGBOKGUNG, THE OLD

The old Palaces and hanok

North of the river sits the Joseon-era core: five royal palaces, the tiled-roof hanok lanes of Bukchon, and the temple at Jogyesa. Gyeongbokgung is the headline, and the one verdict that saves your morning is to arrive at opening, before the rented-hanbok crowds fill the courtyards. Changdeokgung next door is the quieter, prettier palace, and its Secret Garden is the better walk if you only have time for one.

Gyeongbokgung + Bukchon

Palace at opening, then walk uphill into the hanok lanes before they fill. Free entry in hanbok.

Hongdae and Ikseon-dong

Student nightlife and alley cafes. Where the city is youngest after dark.



GANGNAM, THE NEW

The new Towers and cafes

South of the river the city flips to glass and neon: Gangnam's shopping blocks, the Hongdae student quarter that runs late, and a cafe culture taken to extremes in Seongsu and Ikseon-dong. The contrast is the point of Seoul. You can stand in a 600-year-old throne hall in the morning and a rooftop espresso bar by sunset, ten subway stops apart.

Changdeokgung

The prettier palace and its Secret Garden, timed-entry tour. Pick this one if you skip a palace.

N Seoul Tower, Namsan

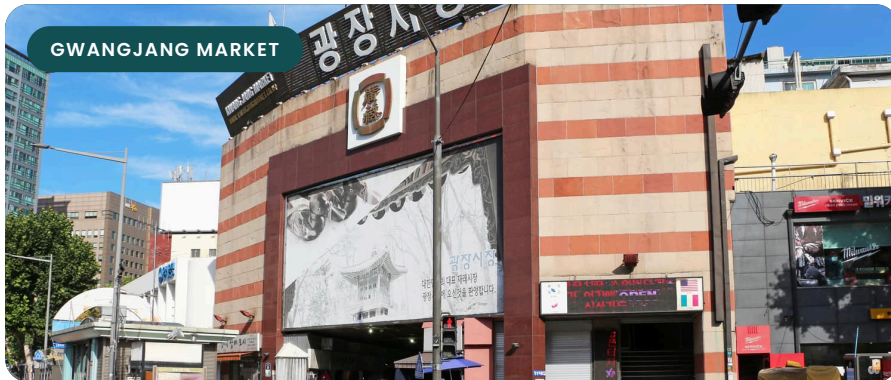
Cable car up Namsan for the skyline. Go at dusk; the climb beats the queue.

GO DEEPER

The ten-pick rundown in the [Seoul write-up](#), the lanes mapped in the [Bukchon Hanok Village page](#), and the wider region in the [most beautiful places breakdown](#).

Eating Seoul

markets by day • BBQ by night • cafes in between



GWANGJANG MARKET



BBQ houses often want two diners minimum for the set. Solo? Order a stew (jjigae) or a rice bowl instead.



Side dishes (banchan) are free and refillable. Ask for more kimchi; nobody charges for it.

Seoul eats in shifts. Mornings and lunch belong to the markets: Gwangjang for bindaetteok mung-bean pancakes and live octopus, Tongin for a coin-lunchbox crawl. Evenings belong to the grill, where samgyeopsal pork belly cooks at your own table and the side dishes never stop arriving. Late at night the pojangmacha tent bars pour soju next to skewers.

The local move is to follow the queue and ignore the menu in English. A stall with a line of office workers at noon is the safest bet in the city, and the bill rarely tops ten dollars a head outside the BBQ houses.

Gwangjang Market

The classic food hall: bindaetteok, mayak gimhap, raw beef. Lunch beats dinner here.

Mangwon and Tongin

Neighbourhood markets without the tour buses. Tongin runs a brass-coin lunchbox game.

BBQ in Mapo

Galbi and samgyeopsal grilled at the table. Mapo and Hongdae for the local version.

Cafe streets

Seongsu, Ikseon-dong, Yeonnam. Korea's cafe scene rivals anywhere; the desserts are the show.

READ ON

What to order and what it costs in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and the city picks in the [Seoul write-up](#).

Where to stay in Seoul

prices per night, double room • pick the line before the hotel

Seoul rewards picking a neighbourhood by what you want from the night, then a hotel near a subway interchange. Jongno puts the palaces on your doorstep, Myeongdong is central but touristy, Hongdae runs late and cheap, Itaewon is the international quarter, and Gangnam is glossy and pricier. Wherever you land, you are minutes from a station; the metro is the real reason any of it works.

Jongno (palace side)

hostel 22 USD mid 70 USD comfort 160 USD

The walkable old core: palaces, Bukchon, Insadong tea houses, Jogyesa temple. Best base for a first trip. [See what a room near Jongno costs tonight](#), or sleep cheap in a guesthouse through [Hostelworld](#).

Hongdae and Mapo

hostel 20 USD mid 60 USD comfort 130 USD

Student energy, live music, the late-night food. Cheaper beds and the best value BBQ. Backpackers cluster on [Hostelworld](#); for a quieter private room, [pull up the live map around Hongdae](#).

Mid-range and up across every Seoul district, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Seoul essential history walking tour for first visitors

from 13 USD
5.0 (52 reviews)
2 hours

Korean home-style cooking class in Gangnam

from 62 USD
5.0 (51 reviews)
1.5 hours

Brew your own craft makgeolli rice wine

from 65 USD
5.0 (99 reviews)
2 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Seoul day-trips, ranked by whether to bother

the DMZ verdict • Suwon fortress • Nami and Everland

Three day-trips get pitched at every Seoul hotel desk. The honest order: Suwon first, the DMZ only if the border genuinely interests you, and Nami or Everland only with kids or in blossom week. The DMZ is the big-ticket booking and the one most likely to disappoint. The standard bus tour is a lot of coach time for fences, a tunnel and a viewing deck, and the Joint Security Area portion that makes it worthwhile is often suspended at short notice. Read the small print before you pay.

Suwon, by contrast, is a 40-minute train ride to a UNESCO fortress wall you can walk in a half day, with a folk village beside it. It is the day-trip that reliably repays the effort.



DMZ tours need your passport and book days ahead. The JSA section closes without warning; confirm it is running before you pay.



Suwon Hwaseong is a self-guided walk: take the metro to Suwon, walk the wall, no tour needed.

Suwon Hwaseong

UNESCO fortress wall, 40 minutes by metro. Walk the ramparts, see the folk village. The reliable pick.

The DMZ

The border, the tunnel, the viewing deck. Worth it for the history; skip if you want scenery.

Nami and Everland

Nami's tree-lined island for autumn photos, Everland for the theme-park day with kids.

MORE ON THE SITE The border in the [DMZ rundown](#), the fortress in the [Suwon page](#), and the island in the [Nami breakdown](#).

03

Beyond Seoul

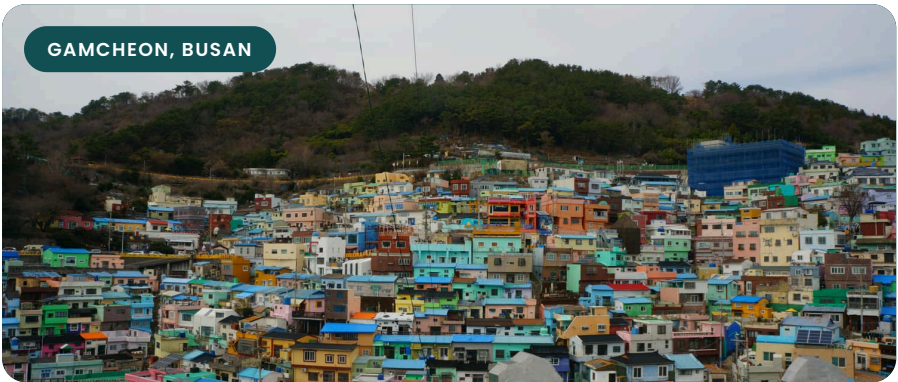
The coast city, the old capital, the volcanic island, the mountains. Five regions the KTX and a short flight put within easy reach.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Busan	15
Gyeongju	16
Jeju Island	17
Seoraksan and Gangwon	19
Jeonju, the food capital	20

Busan

southeast coast • 2 to 3 nights • 2.5h KTX from Seoul



Busan is the looser, salt-air counterweight to Seoul: a port city built up hillsides, with beaches inside the city limits and the country's biggest fish market on the waterfront. The set pieces are Gamcheon, a hillside of painted houses that photographs like a Korean Cinque Terre, and Haeundae, the city beach lined with towers. Two and a half hours on the KTX from Seoul, so it slots into any loop.

The local rhythm is seafood at Jagalchi market, a soak at a spa-land jjimjilbang, and a sunset at Haedong Yonggungsa, the rare temple built right on the sea. Two nights covers it; three if you want a slow beach day.



Jagalchi market: pick the fish downstairs, eat it cooked upstairs. Agree the price before they weigh it.

Busan (Haeundae)

hostel 20 USD mid 65 USD comfort 150 USD

Haeundae for the beach and the towers, Seomyeon for the central transit and nightlife. Dorms sit near both on [Hostelworld](#), and [the live map around Haeundae](#) shows what hotels are charging tonight.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Busan small-group city and culture tour

from 80 USD

5.0 (46 reviews)

8 hours

Gyeongju day tour from Busan, Silla history

from 64 USD

5.0 (28 reviews)

14 hours

Busan small group with Sky Capsule and local guide

from 87 USD

5.0 (121 reviews)

9.5 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Gyeongju

old Silla capital · 1 to 2 nights · the museum without walls



Gyeongju was the capital of the Silla kingdom for nearly a thousand years, and the city is often called a museum without walls. The grass burial mounds of Daereungwon rise out of parkland in the centre of town, and a few kilometres out sit two UNESCO set pieces: Bulguksa temple with its stone bridges, and the Seokguram grotto Buddha looking out to sea. It is the one stop on the loop that is purely about history.

The verdict is to base in town, rent a bike for the central mounds and ponds, and take a taxi or tour to Bulguksa and Seokguram, which sit up a mountain road apart from the centre. One night works; two if you want it slow.



The central sites (mounds, Anapji pond, Cheomseongdae) cluster in a flat ring. Rent a bike near the station.



Bulguksa and Seokguram are a 20-minute drive uphill, not walkable from town. Pair them in one half-day.

Gyeongju (old town)

hostel 18 USD mid 55 USD comfort 120 USD

Stay near the mound park and Hwangnidan-gil for cafes and night-lit ruins. Guesthouses and hanok stays book through [Hostelworld](#); [check live room prices around the old town](#) before you settle.

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Gyeongju guided car tour with a local guide

from 67 USD

4.9 (46 reviews)

4 hours

Gyeongju UNESCO sites full-day tour with lunch

from 190 USD

4.8 (109 reviews)

8 hours

Private Gyeongju UNESCO sites tour

from 187 USD

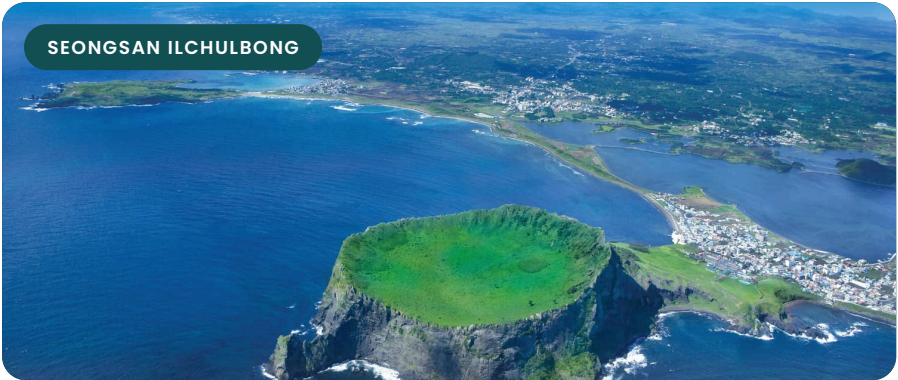
5.0 (310 reviews)

9 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Jeju Island

volcanic island • 2 to 3 nights • rent a car



Jeju is the volcanic island an hour's flight south, and the one part of Korea where the rest of the country's logic stops applying. Hallasan, a dormant volcano, sits in the centre with hiking trails to the crater. The coast is black basalt, lava tubes run under the fields, and Seongsan Ilchulbong, a tuff cone rising straight out of the sea, is the sunrise climb everyone does. The haenyeo, the island's free-diving women, still harvest the shallows by hand.

The one piece of advice that changes the trip: rent a car. Buses exist but they are slow and infrequent, and the best of Jeju is the coast road between sights. Base near Jeju City or Seogwipo and drive a loop. Two nights is tight, three is comfortable.

Seongsan Ilchulbong

The sunrise tuff cone on the east coast. Twenty-minute climb; go at first light, beat the buses.

Hallasan

The volcano at the centre. Day-hike trails to the crater; the Yeongsil route is the gentler one.

Manjanggul lava tube

A walkable kilometre of UNESCO lava cave. Cool and dark; bring a layer.

West coast and waterfalls

Cheonjiyeon falls, the haenyeo diving spots, and quiet basalt beaches off the main road.



Rent the car at the airport. An International Driving Permit plus your home licence is required; bring both.



Hallasan summit trails fill early and gate by quota. Start before 8am or you may be turned back at the ranger hut.

KEEP READING

The ten-pick island rundown in the [Jeju write-up](#), the volcano in the [Hallasan page](#), and the wider archipelago in the [islands breakdown](#).

Where to stay on Jeju

prices per night, double room • split city and coast

Jeju splits into a north side around Jeju City and the airport, and a south side around Seogwipo, closer to the waterfalls and Seongsan. With a car either works; without one, stay in Jeju City for the bus links. Many travellers do a night each side to halve the driving.

Jeju City

hostel **18 USD** mid **55 USD** comfort **130 USD**

Near the airport and the ferry port, best for a short stay and bus access. Backpacker beds run through [Hostelworld](#), and [the live map around Jeju City](#) covers the hotels and guesthouses.

Coast resorts and Seogwipo hotels across the island, cancellable while your route is still forming.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Jeju south UNESCO and Mt Hallasan day bus tour

from 54 USD

5.0 (20 reviews)

9 hours

Jeju UNESCO highlights with lava cave and haenyeo show

from 52 USD

5.0 (51 reviews)

10 hours

Jeju full-day UNESCO highlights tour

from 59 USD

5.0 (52 reviews)

10 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Seoraksan and the east coast

Gangwon • best in October • hiking plus a beach



Seoraksan is the most dramatic of Korea's accessible mountains: granite spires, suspension valleys and a cable car that does the climbing for you. It sits behind Sokcho on the east coast, so you can pair a morning of ridgelines with an afternoon on a quiet beach and a bowl of the town's famous seafood. The mountain peaks in mid-October when the slopes turn red and gold, which is also when the trails are busiest.

Day-hikers take the cable car to Gwongeumseong for the view, or walk the valley to Biseondae and the Ulsanbawi rock if legs allow. Gangneung, an hour south, adds coffee shops, a beach and the Jeongdongjin coast for a slower stop.



Express buses run Seoul to Sokcho in about 2.5 hours. No KTX line here; the bus is the way in.



Autumn colour peaks mid-October at altitude, late October lower down. Book a Sokcho room weeks ahead for that window.

03

Seoraksan cable car

Up to Gwongeumseong fortress ruins for the big view without the climb.

Sokcho

East-coast town for seafood, the fish market and a beach below the mountains.

Gangneung

Coffee-town beaches an hour south, on the KTX from Seoul for a quicker stop.

THE LONG VERSION

Trail picks in the [Seoraksan page](#), the coast town in the [Sokcho rundown](#), and the full list in the [national parks breakdown](#).

Jeonju, the food capital

hanok village · 1 night · where bibimbap comes from



Jeonju holds the largest preserved hanok village in the country, around 700 traditional houses you can stay inside, and a reputation as Korea's food capital. This is where bibimbap comes from, and the local version, served in a brass bowl with dozens of toppings, is the one to eat at the source. The village fills with day-trippers; the move is to stay a night in a hanok guesthouse and have the lanes to yourself after the buses leave.

It sits off the main KTX spine, about two hours from Seoul, so most travellers fold it into a southwestern detour rather than the standard loop. Worth a night if food and tradition are the reason you came.

Hanok village lanes

700 tiled houses, tea rooms and craft workshops. Walk it at dawn or dusk.

Jeonju bibimbap

The dish at its source, brass bowl and all. Worth the detour for food travellers.

Jaman mural village

A hillside of painted alleys above the hanok roofs, quiet and quick to walk.



Sleep in a hanok: ondol floor heating, paper doors, a courtyard. The village empties beautifully after dark.



Eat the bibimbap and the kongnamul gukbap (bean-sprout soup) here, then the street food along the lanes.

ON THE WEBSITE The eight-pick city rundown in the [Jeonju page](#), the lanes mapped in the [hanok village breakdown](#), and quieter heritage towns in the [off the beaten path rundown](#).

04

What to do

The six dishes to calibrate on, the palaces and temples that hold up, the mountains worth the climb, and the modern Korea of cafes, spas and K-pop.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Korean food, the six dishes	22
Palaces, temples, hanbok	23
Nature and hiking	24
Modern Korea: cafes, spa, K-pop	25

Korean food: the six dishes

BBQ, markets, stews • 2 to 15 USD a plate

Korean food runs on fermentation and the table itself: a meal arrives as a spread of small dishes, the grill or the hot stone bowl does the cooking in front of you, and kimchi turns up at every one. The tourist mistake is treating BBQ as the whole cuisine. Order the six dishes below across your trip and you will have the map: a grill night, a market lunch, a stew, the national rice bowl, a street snack, and the restorative soup. Prices come from the food-and-drinks dataset, June 2026.



Samgyeopsal samgyeopsal

USD 9-15 • BBQ houses

Pork belly grilled at your table, wrapped in lettuce with garlic and ssamjang. The social meal; usually two diners minimum.



Bibimbap bibimbap

USD 5-9 • everywhere

Rice, vegetables, egg and gochujang, mixed at the table. The dolsot version arrives in a sizzling stone bowl with a crisp crust.



Bulgogi bulgogi

USD 9-14 • restaurants

Thin beef marinated in soy, pear and sesame, then grilled or pan-cooked. The mild, sweet entry point to Korean meat.



Kimchi kimchi

USD 4-8 • the free side

Fermented cabbage or radish, served free at every meal and refillable. The backbone of the cuisine, not a garnish.



Tteokbokki tteokbokki

USD 2-4 • street stalls

Chewy rice cakes in a sweet-hot gochujang sauce. The classic market and after-school snack; cheapest plate on the list.



Samgyetang samgyetang

USD 11-17 • restaurants

A whole young chicken stuffed with rice and ginseng in a clear broth. Eaten in midsummer to beat the heat, oddly enough.



Soju is the default pour with a grill; one green bottle is a couple of dollars and shared around the table.



The two-person minimum at BBQ and stew houses is real. Solo travellers do better at gimhap and noodle counters.

MORE DETAIL

Dishes, drinks and what they cost in the [food and drinks rundown](#); budget context in the [travel budget breakdown](#).

Palaces, temples, and the hanbok question

after the first three they blur • these earn the time



Korea's old architecture is Joseon palaces and Buddhist mountain temples, and after the first few they can blur. The ones that hold up have a reason beyond age: Changdeokgung for its Secret Garden, Bulguksa for the stonework, and a working temple-stay for the silence. Renting hanbok at a palace is touristy but practical, since it gets you in free and the photos are the souvenir most people actually keep.

The dress code is light: temples ask for covered shoulders and quiet, palaces ask for nothing. The timing rule is the same as everywhere, arrive at opening, before the rented-hanbok crowds and tour groups.

Changdeokgung, Seoul

The prettiest palace and its Secret Garden, by timed tour. The one to pick if you choose one.

Bulguksa, Gyeongju

UNESCO temple of bridges and pagodas, plus the Seokguram grotto Buddha up the hill.

Haeinsa, Gayasan

Mountain temple housing the Tripitaka Koreana woodblocks. The temple-stay heartland.



Renting hanbok near a Seoul palace gets you in free. Shops cluster by Gyeongbokgung; a few hours runs about 15 USD.



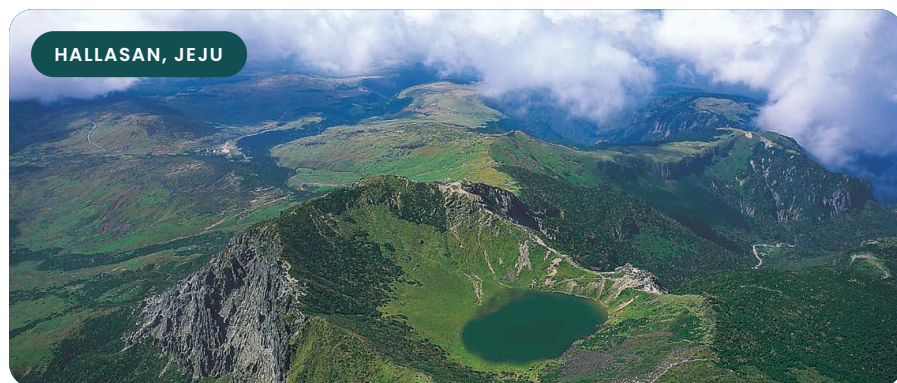
A temple-stay (templestay.com) is a night in a mountain monastery: tea ceremony, dawn chant, simple meals.

WORTH A READ

The eleven key sites with visiting notes in the [religious landmarks rundown](#), traditions and etiquette in the [culture write-up](#), and one famous temple in the [Tongdosa page](#).

Nature and hiking

22 national parks • day-hike country • best in October



Korea is two-thirds mountains, and hiking is close to a national sport. The parks are well marked, well trodden and built for day-hikes rather than multi-day treks, so you can summit and be back for dinner. Three stand out: Seoraksan in the northeast for granite drama, Hallasan on Jeju for the volcano crater, and Bukhansan inside Seoul itself, a genuine mountain a subway ride from downtown.

The season that matters is autumn. Mid-October to early November turns the slopes red and gold and brings out the whole country in matching hiking gear. Spring blossom is the softer alternative; midsummer is humid and stormy, midwinter brings crampon weather to the higher trails.

Seoraksan

The dramatic one: spires, a cable car, valley trails. Northeast coast behind Sokcho.

Bukhansan

Granite peaks inside Seoul, reachable by subway. The easiest big hike on the trip.

Jirisan and Naejangsan

The mainland's highest ridge, and the autumn-colour park people travel for in late October.



Bukhansan is a real mountain inside Seoul. Subway to the trailhead, granite scramble, city skyline at the top.



Korean trails are steep and often all-steps. Decent shoes matter more than distance; the elevation does the work.

SEE ALSO All the parks in the [national parks rundown](#), the summit climbs in the [mountains breakdown](#), and the autumn-colour park in the [Naejangsan page](#).

Modern Korea: cafes, spa, K-pop

the other half of the trip • all of it in Seoul



THE NEW CITY, SEOUL

Korea exports its present as hard as its past. The cafe culture is a destination in itself, with whole districts of design-led coffee shops and absurd desserts in Seongsu and Ikseon-dong. The jjimjilbang, a 24-hour bathhouse and sauna, is the cheapest novelty in the country and a place locals nap, eat and socialise. And the Hallyu wave, K-pop and K-drama, has its own circuit of agency stores, themed cafes and the Hongdae busking scene.

None of this needs planning. The verdict is to leave an evening loose in Seoul: a spa-land soak, a cafe-hop, and whatever is busking in Hongdae after dark. It is the modern half of the city the palaces do not show.

Cafe districts

Seongsu, Ikseon-dong, Yeonnam. Design-led coffee and dessert as theatre.

Jjimjilbang

The 24-hour bathhouse: hot pools, salt rooms, sleep floors. Cheap, local, oddly restful.

Hallyu and shopping

K-pop stores, Myeongdong cosmetics, Hongdae busking. The present-day souvenir run.



A jjimjilbang runs about 10 USD for the day and night. Single-sex bathing nude, mixed sauna floors in clothes they hand you.



Hongdae street performers play most evenings, free. The K-pop agency stores cluster around Gangnam and Seongsu.

DIG IN

City picks and quarters in the [Seoul rundown](#), and the culture context in the [culture breakdown](#).

05

Routes

Five ways through the country, the loop drawn on the real map, and a day-by-day plan for ten days and for seven.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip, 5 paths	26
The loop on the map	27
10 days, day by day	28
7 days, the short loop	29

Pick your trip

five paths · find yours, then read the matching timeline

How long you have and what pulls you decides the route. The two timelines that follow cover the seven and ten-day classics in full; the blossom and autumn variants just shift the dates and add a mountain. Find your row below.

FIRST TRIP · 7D · STANDARD

Seoul, Busan, a taste of Jeju

USD 1,400 for 1 · trains + 1 flight

- Seoul 4n: palaces + food
- KTX to Busan 2n
- Fly Jeju 1n or skip

FIRST TRIP · 10D · STANDARD

The classic loop

USD 2,000 for 1 · the full circuit

- Seoul 4 · Gyeongju 2
- Busan 2 · Jeju 2
- All by KTX + 1 flight

COUPLE · 14D · COMFORT

Loop plus Jeonju and the east

USD 5,500 for 2 · hanok stays

- Seoul 4 · Jeonju 2
- Gyeongju 2 · Busan 3
- Jeju 3, rental car

BLOSSOM CHASER · 10D

Late March to mid April

USD 2,200 for 1 · peak dates

- Seoul palaces in bloom
- Jinhae blossom festival
- Gyeongju, Busan, Jeju

AUTUMN HIKER · 10D

Mid October to early November

USD 2,100 for 1 · colour season

- Seoul + Bukhansan
- Seoraksan in colour
- Naejangsan, then Busan

FAMILY · 10D · STANDARD

Seoul base plus Jeju

USD 4,800 · family of 4

- Seoul 5: museums + Everland
- Fly Jeju 4: outdoors
- Easy transit throughout

THE FULL
PICTURE

The two-week version in the [14-day itinerary](#), the short trip in the [7-day itinerary](#), and the slow version in the [21-day itinerary](#).

The classic loop, on the map

south by rail, then a short hop to the island

The mainland legs run on the KTX bullet train, fast and frequent enough to buy a day ahead outside holiday weekends. Only the Jeju leg needs a plane, and those flights are cheap and constant. Book the Seoul to Jeju flight through [12Go](#) a few weeks out; the trains you can leave until you are in the country.



— KTX train — regional train — flight

[Plan the legs on 12Go](#)

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS

Seoul to Gyeongju KTX · 2h ~40 USD	Gyeongju to Busan train + bus · 1h ~10 USD	Busan to Jeju flight · 1h ~50 USD
Seoul to Busan (direct) KTX · 2.5h ~45 USD	Seoul to Sokcho express bus · 2.5h ~15 USD	Jeju to Seoul flight · 1h ~55 USD

fares: indicative one-way per person, KTX standard class and budget air, 2026

10 days, the classic loop

days 1-5 • Seoul and Gyeongju

Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Reserve only the Jeju flight ahead through [12Go](#); the KTX legs you can buy a day out except over Seollal or Chuseok holiday weekends.

1 Arrive Seoul ICN • day zero	AREX train from Incheon. Buy a T-money card at the station. Dinner in Hongdae, sleep early.
2 Palaces and Bukchon Seoul • 9am start	Gyeongbokgung at opening, walk uphill into Bukchon, Insadong for lunch. Changdeokgung garden after.
3 Markets and the new city Gwangjang + Gangnam	Gwangjang market lunch, an afternoon across the river in Seongsu cafes, Namsan tower at dusk.
4 Suwon or the DMZ day-trip from Seoul	Self-guided fortress walk at Suwon, or the booked DMZ border tour if the history pulls you.
5 KTX to Gyeongju 2h train • bike the mounds	Morning train south. Rent a bike for the burial mounds and Anapji pond, lit ruins after dark.



Buy and top up a T-money card at any station or convenience store. It runs every subway, bus and most taxis.



KTX seats sell out only on Seollal and Chuseok holidays. Otherwise a day's notice is plenty.

10 days, the second half

days 6-10 • Busan and Jeju

The second half trades history for coast and volcano. One train, one short flight, and the rest is easy. Keep the last day clear of the airport rush; Jeju flights are frequent but the island is bigger than it looks.

- 6

Bulguksa, then Busan
Seokguram + 1h train

Morning at Bulguksa and the Seokguram grotto, afternoon train to Busan. Haeundae dinner.
- 7

Busan coast and Gamcheon
market + hillside village

Jagalchi fish market, Gamcheon's painted houses, sunset at the sea temple of Haedong Yonggungsa.
- 8

Fly to Jeju
1h • pick up the car

Morning flight, rent the car at the airport, drive east. Manjanggul lava tube on the way in.
- 9

Seongsan sunrise
tuff cone + coast loop

Climb Seongsan Ilchulbong at first light, then the east coast and waterfalls by car. Seogwipo night.
- 10

Hallasan or home
half-day hike • fly out

A short Hallasan trail in the morning if energy allows, then the flight back to Seoul or home.



Pick up the Jeju car at the airport, not in town. The best of the island is the drive between sights.



Two weeks? Add Jeonju and Seoraksan before Gyeongju; the loop stretches without doubling back.

7 days, the short loop

Seoul and Busan • Jeju optional

A week does Seoul and Busan properly, with Jeju as a stretch goal if you fly rather than train the last leg. Cut Gyeongju to a Busan day-trip and you keep the history without the extra base.

1 Arrive Seoul ICN • settle in	AREX in, T-money card, an easy first night in Hongdae or near Jongno.
2 Palaces and hanok old Seoul	Gyeongbokgung at opening, Bukchon lanes, Insadong lunch, Changdeokgung garden.
3 Markets and modern Seoul food + cafes	Gwangjang lunch, Seongsu cafes, Namsan tower at dusk, BBQ in Mapo to close.
4 KTX to Busan 2.5h • coast city	Morning train south. Haeundae beach, Gamcheon village, dinner at the fish market.
5 Gyeongju day-trip Silla history	An hour up to Gyeongju for the mounds and Bulguksa, back to Busan for the night.
6 Sea temple and spa slow Busan	Haedong Yonggungsa at dawn, a spa-land soak, a last seafood dinner on the coast.
7 Home or Jeju fly out	Fly home from Busan, or hop to Jeju for an extra two nights if the week can stretch.

GO DEEPER Day-by-day detail in the [7-day itinerary](#) and the [14-day itinerary](#).

06

When to go

Four real seasons, and one decision that shapes the whole trip: spring blossom or autumn colour. Plus the month-by-month calendar and what a day costs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Blossom or autumn: the call	33
Weather, crowds, price	34
What a day costs	35

Blossom or autumn: the call that defines the trip

the two windows worth timing for • and where to spend them

Korea has four real seasons, but only two are worth building a trip around, and they are mutually exclusive. Spring cherry blossom runs late March to mid April, soft and pink and brief. Autumn colour runs mid October to early November, red and gold and a touch more reliable. Summer is hot, humid and monsoon-prone; winter is cold, dry and good only for snow and quiet palaces. The decision is which of the two windows you want, because you cannot have both in one trip.

LATE MAR TO MID APR

Spring blossom



- **The look** palaces and river paths under pink
- **Go for crowds** the Jinhae festival near Busan, worth the press
- **Skip the crush** Yeouido in Seoul on a weekend
- **Risk** the bloom is brief; a week early or late and it is over

MID OCT TO EARLY NOV

Autumn colour



- **The look** mountain slopes in red and gold
- **Go for it** Seoraksan and Naejangsan at peak colour
- **Skip the crush** the popular trails on a Saturday
- **Edge** the window is a touch longer and more predictable



Blossom moves north up the country: Jeju and Busan first in late March, Seoul about a week later in early April.



Autumn runs the other way: northeast mountains first in mid October, southern parks into early November.

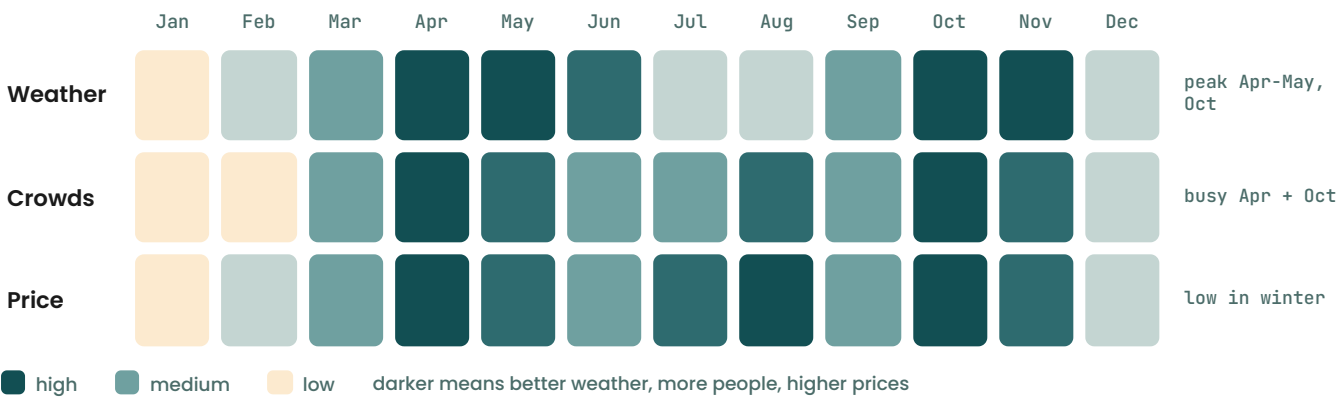
READ ON

The month-by-month logic in the [best time to visit breakdown](#), and the holidays to plan around in the [public holidays calendar](#).

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · mainland-weighted

Korea's year has four distinct seasons, which is rare for the region and the whole reason the timing matters. The two shoulder windows, spring and autumn, are mild and dry and busy. Summer is hot and wet, with a July rainy season and an outside chance of a late-summer typhoon. Winter is cold and clear, cheap and quiet, and fine if palaces and snow are the plan. The calendar below tracks all three pressures at once.



source: country-comparison best-months (Apr-Jun, Oct-Nov) · 2026-06

THE FOUR SEASONS, IN ONE LINE EACH

APR-MAY

Spring

Blossom, mild days, the busiest and priciest window. Book rooms early for the bloom.

OCT-NOV

Autumn

Colour on the slopes, clear and dry. The hikers' season and the most reliable light.

JUL-AUG

Summer

Hot, humid, a July rainy spell and the odd typhoon. Beach and island weather, with caveats.

DEC-FEB

Winter

Cold, dry, cheap and quiet. Good for snow, ski country and empty palaces.

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Korea costs more than its Southeast Asian neighbours, and daily budgets hide that in averages. Here is the day itemised instead: a bed, three meals, transit, one thing worth doing, and the drink at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday, in US dollars.

A DAY IN SOUTH KOREA		A DAY IN SOUTH KOREA		A DAY IN SOUTH KOREA	
* backpacker *		* standard *		* comfort *	
guesthouse dorm	20.00	3-star double, half	35.00	4-star double, half	110.00
gimbap breakfast	3.00	cafe breakfast	6.00	hotel breakfast	incl.
market lunch	6.00	restaurant lunch	10.00	restaurant lunch	22.00
street dinner	7.00	BBQ dinner with soju	22.00	dinner, good table	45.00
subway day, T-money	4.00	subway + a taxi	9.00	taxis + KTX seat	30.00
palace entry	3.00	museum or tour	12.00	private tour, half day	incl. above
soju + snacks	5.00	jjimjilbang spa	10.00	cocktails x2	20.00
cafe + water	2.00				
TOTAL / DAY ~50 USD		TOTAL / DAY ~100 USD		TOTAL / DAY ~250 USD	
country-comparison data · 2026-06		country-comparison data · 2026-06		country-comparison data · 2026-06	

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

 The gap between tiers is the room and the transport. Eating well stays cheap; the bed and the taxis are where it adds up.

 Cards work nearly everywhere, even at street stalls. Keep a little cash for old markets and traditional guesthouses.

07

Practical

Booking order, the transit card, paying for everything by phone, the K-ETA and visa rules, and the etiquette that is load-bearing.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	37
Getting around	38
Money and payment	39
Connectivity and entry	40
Etiquette: do and do not	41

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

Korea rewards travelling light on the planning. Hotels, trains and most tours are easy to arrange in the country, and the KTX rarely needs more than a day's notice. Four things genuinely repay booking ahead, in a natural order. Most nationalities enter visa-free, so the entry step is a check and a possible K-ETA, not an application.

8 wk
before

International flights
Fares to Seoul bottom out six to eight weeks ahead. Incheon is the main hub; Busan's Gimhae is a useful alternative for a south-first loop.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk
before

Entry check + K-ETA
Confirm your nationality's rule. Most enter visa-free for 90 days, but a K-ETA travel authorisation applies to many passports, filed online for about 7 USD and valid for years. Apply at the official portal, not a copycat site.

Check entry rules per passport

3 wk
before

Jeju flight + first nights
Book the Seoul or Busan to Jeju flight and your first two hotel nights. The KTX legs and the rest of the beds can wait until you are there.

Book the Jeju leg on 12Go

1 wk
before

eSIM
Install before departure, activate on landing. Korea's networks are fast and blanket; 10 GB covers two weeks of maps, translation and uploads.

Set up a Saily eSIM


Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival. The K-ETA must be approved before you board; allow 72 hours.


A foreign card with no foreign-transaction fee covers almost everything. Bring a second as backup, not for cash.

07

page 36 of 48

pack-lightly.com

Getting around

KTX for distance • T-money for everything else • a car only on Jeju

The transport is the easiest part of Korea. One rechargeable T-money card runs every subway, city bus and most taxis across the whole country, including Jeju. The KTX bullet train covers the long mainland legs, the subways are signed in English, and intercity buses fill the gaps the rail misses. The only place you genuinely want a car is Jeju.

LEG	MODE	TIME	FARE
Seoul to Busan	KTX	2.5h	USD 45
Seoul to Gyeongju	KTX	2h	USD 40
Seoul to Sokcho	express bus	2.5h	USD 15
Any subway hop	T-money	varies	USD 1.10
Busan to Jeju	flight	1h	USD 50

indicative one-way per person, standard class and budget air, 2026

WHAT BEATS WHAT

KTX for the long mainland legs, the subway for cities, intercity buses where the rail does not reach, and a rental car only on Jeju. Book trains and the Jeju flight through [12Go](#) if you want them locked before you land, though same-week reservations are usually fine. Inside cities, the Kakao T app summons taxis and reads English; ordinary taxis are metered, cheap and honest, with none of the meter games common elsewhere in Asia. For navigation, download Naver Map or KakaoMap before you arrive; Google Maps walking directions are unreliable in Korea by law.



Naver Map or KakaoMap, not Google. Korea restricts mapping data, so Google walking routes often fail.



Driving on Jeju needs an International Driving Permit plus your home licence. Get the IDP before you leave home.

MORE ON THE SITE

Domestic legs in the [domestic flights write-up](#), and the road rules and IDP detail in the [driving page](#).

Money and payment

near-cashless • the won • T-money for transit

Korea is close to cashless. Cards and contactless work nearly everywhere, including most street stalls and market counters, and tipping is not a thing, so the printed price is the price. The won runs at roughly 1,350 to the dollar, which makes the numbers feel large; a 13,500-won lunch is about ten dollars. Carry a little cash for old markets, temples and the occasional traditional guesthouse, and let the card do the rest.

THE FOUR THINGS TO SET UP

- ☐ A foreign card with no foreign-transaction fee, for nearly all spending
- ☐ A T-money card, bought and topped up at any convenience store, for all transit
- ☐ A little cash from a bank ATM (look for "Global ATM" signs that take foreign cards)
- ☐ A second card kept separate, as backup

WHAT ABOUT NAVER AND KAKAO PAY?

Locals pay by phone through Naver Pay and Kakao Pay, but both need a Korean bank account or registration most visitors will not have, so they are not worth the setup for a short trip. Your contactless card covers the same ground. The one local app worth installing is Kakao T for taxis. Skip the airport currency desks; a bank ATM withdrawal gives a better rate when you do need won.



Pay in won when a card terminal offers your home currency. The dynamic-conversion rate costs 4 to 7 percent.



Tipping is not expected anywhere, restaurants included. Rounding up is unusual, not generous; the price is final.

KEEP READING The won and exchange basics in the [currency rundown](#), and how to keep costs down in the [travel budget breakdown](#).

Connectivity and entry

eSIM • K-ETA • 90-day visa-free

ENTRY: THE 90-DAY RULE AND THE K-ETA

Most EU and US passports enter South Korea visa-free for up to 90 days. The catch is the K-ETA, a travel authorisation many nationalities must file online before boarding, valid for multiple years once granted. It costs about 7 USD and takes minutes, but apply only at the official k-eta.go.kr portal; copycat sites overcharge. The rules shift, so confirm yours before you book, then apply at least 72 hours before you fly.

Signal. Buy an eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on landing. Korea's coverage is fast and total, even in the mountains and on Jeju. A 5 GB plan covers a week, 10 GB a fortnight of maps, translation and uploads. Airalo is the alternative if Saily lacks your device.

[Set up a Saily eSIM](#)

THE TWO-WEEK PACKING NOTES

- ☐ Layers: Korea swings between seasons fast, and palaces mean walking
- ☐ Comfortable shoes you can slip off (homes, temples, some restaurants)
- ☐ Type C/F plug adapter, 220V
- ☐ A second card and your IDP if Jeju is on the plan
- ☐ Modest cover for temples; the cities have no dress code

THE LONG VERSION

The entry rules in detail in the [visa write-up](#), data plans compared in the [eSIM rundown](#), and what to wear in the [dress code page](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • the rest smooth the day

Eight things that matter. Korea runs on age hierarchy and quiet manners more than on hard rules, so most of this is about reading the room. The first four cause real awkwardness if you miss them; the rest just mark you as someone who paid attention.

DO

Take your shoes off indoors

Homes, temples, guesthouses and many traditional restaurants. Watch for the step up and the shoe rack.

DO

Give and receive with two hands

Money, cards, gifts. A small bow with it reads as polite to anyone older or in service.

DO

Defer to age

Elders sit, eat and leave first. Let them set the pace; it is the quiet rule under most interactions.

DO

Use the bin system

Korea separates waste strictly: food, recycling, general. Cafes and stations label the bins.

DO NOT

Pour your own drink

Pour for others, let them pour for you. Hold the bottle and your glass with two hands for elders.

DO NOT

Stick chopsticks upright in rice

It echoes a funeral rite. Rest them on the holder or across the bowl instead.

DO NOT

Be loud on transit

Subways and trains run near-silent. Phone calls on speaker mark you out instantly.

DO NOT

Tip

No one expects it, and it can confuse staff. The listed price is the whole price.



A small bow on greeting and thanks goes a long way. A handshake with the left hand under the right arm is the formal version.



Sharing food is normal: dishes go in the middle, everyone reaches in. Refusing a poured drink outright reads as cold.

ON THE WEBSITE

Traditions, religion and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and the holidays that change the mood in the [public holidays calendar](#).

08

Safe, smart, tools

One of the safest countries you can visit, the few real things to watch, the numbers to save, and the live tools this guide was built from.

IN THIS CHAPTER

How safe is Korea	43
Emergency numbers + phrases	44
Take the live tools with you	45
Print cards, sources, disclosure	46

How safe is South Korea

among the safest countries you can travel · the short list of what to watch

Korea is one of the safest countries a traveller can pick. Violent crime against visitors is very rare, the streets are calm at any hour, and the scam economy that shadows tourism elsewhere in Asia barely exists here. People leave laptops on cafe tables to hold a seat. The honest watch-list is short and unglamorous: late-night taxi refusals, a few rowdy nightlife districts, and the weather. The one real seasonal risk is the late-summer typhoon window, when ferries and Jeju flights can cancel at short notice.

THE FEW THINGS THAT ACTUALLY COME UP

Taxi refusals, late at night

Some drivers wave off short fares after midnight. Use the Kakao T app and the issue mostly disappears.

Nightlife districts

Itaewon and Hongdae get drunk and crowded late. Normal big-city caution, nothing Korea-specific.

Typhoon season

Late summer brings storms that ground Jeju flights and ferries. Build a buffer day around island legs in Aug-Sep.

The border, in context

The North dominates headlines, not daily life. Seoul carries on regardless; it is not a travel risk for tourists.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Dial 112 for police and 119 for fire or ambulance, both with English support. The 1330 tourist hotline is the one to save: it runs 24/7 in English and several other languages and handles everything from directions to interpreting a problem at a hospital. Care is excellent and hospitals are used to foreign patients; pay up front and claim on insurance after.

MORE DETAIL The full safety picture in the [safety breakdown](#), hospitals and pharmacies in the [medical rundown](#), and cover compared in the [travel insurance write-up](#).

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now • the phrases change how locals respond

POLICE

112

English support

FIRE / AMBULANCE

119

nationwide

TOURIST HOTLINE

1330

English 24/7

US EMBASSY SEOUL

+82 2 397 4114

citizen services

SEVERANCE HOSPITAL

+82 2 2228 5800

Seoul • intl. clinic

MEDICAL INTERPRETER

1339

health helpline

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND		
ENGLISH	KOREAN (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	an-nyeong-ha-se-yo	the all-purpose greeting
Thank you	gam-sa-ham-ni-da	formal, always safe
Yes / No	ne / a-ni-yo	"ne" doubles as "I hear you"
How much?	eoL-ma-ye-yo?	markets and taxis
Excuse me	jeo-gi-yo	to call a server over
Where is the bathroom?	hwa-jang-sil eo-di-ye-yo?	"hwajangsil" = toilet
Sorry / excuse me	joe-song-ham-ni-da	apology, or squeezing past
Help!	do-wa-ju-se-yo!	emergencies only



Save 1330 in your phone before the first night out. It is the tourist line that solves almost anything, in English.



These phrases print as a wallet card on page 46; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same South Korea data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

South Korea: ~50 USD/day backpacker, 250 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Country Map

Korea spots mapped, Seoul to Jeju, with what to do in each.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/country-map/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: Apr-Jun and Oct-Nov. Month-by-month for 140+ countries.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



What to Eat and Drink

Tteokbokki from 2 USD, plus the rest of the Korean menu with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

KOREAN • ESSENTIALS <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Hello</td> <td>an-nyeong-ha-se-yo</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Thank you</td> <td>gam-sa-ham-ni-da</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Yes / No</td> <td>ne / a-ni-yo</td> </tr> <tr> <td>How much?</td> <td>eol-ma-ye-yo?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Excuse me</td> <td>jeo-gi-yo</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Where is bathroom?</td> <td>hwa-jang-sil eo-di-ye-yo?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Help!</td> <td>do-wa-ju-se-yo!</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sorry</td> <td>joe-song-ham-ni-da</td> </tr> </table> pack-lightly.com	Hello	an-nyeong-ha-se-yo	Thank you	gam-sa-ham-ni-da	Yes / No	ne / a-ni-yo	How much?	eol-ma-ye-yo?	Excuse me	jeo-gi-yo	Where is bathroom?	hwa-jang-sil eo-di-ye-yo?	Help!	do-wa-ju-se-yo!	Sorry	joe-song-ham-ni-da	EMERGENCY • SOUTH KOREA <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Police</td> <td>112</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fire / Ambulance</td> <td>119</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist Hotline</td> <td>1330</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Medical helpline</td> <td>1339</td> </tr> <tr> <td>US Embassy (Seoul)</td> <td>+82 2 397 4114</td> </tr> </table> My hotel: _____ Address: _____ Insurance #: _____	Police	112	Fire / Ambulance	119	Tourist Hotline	1330	Medical helpline	1339	US Embassy (Seoul)	+82 2 397 4114
Hello	an-nyeong-ha-se-yo																										
Thank you	gam-sa-ham-ni-da																										
Yes / No	ne / a-ni-yo																										
How much?	eol-ma-ye-yo?																										
Excuse me	jeo-gi-yo																										
Where is bathroom?	hwa-jang-sil eo-di-ye-yo?																										
Help!	do-wa-ju-se-yo!																										
Sorry	joe-song-ham-ni-da																										
Police	112																										
Fire / Ambulance	119																										
Tourist Hotline	1330																										
Medical helpline	1339																										
US Embassy (Seoul)	+82 2 397 4114																										

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live South Korea hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/south-korea/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is at the hotel.



Save your hotel's address in Korean in your phone. Show it to a taxi driver and the language gap disappears.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source

WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, a performance-marketing background, and data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Country scores and cost estimates: Pack Lightly country-comparison dataset, captured 2026-06.
2. Best-travel-time windows (Apr-Jun, Oct-Nov): country-comparison best-months, 2026-06.
3. Food prices: Pack Lightly food-and-drinks dataset (KR), captured 2026-06.
4. Entry and K-ETA policy: the official k-eta.go.kr portal, retrieved 2026-05-15.
5. Currency rate: roughly 1,350 KRW to 1 USD, mid-market, 2026-06.
6. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last checked 2026-05.
7. Pack Lightly South Korea cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [eSIM](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months. Budget figures come from the country-comparison cost estimate (50, 100 and 250 USD a day), the climate verdicts from its best-months window, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first South Korea release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered here: a diving deep-dive (it has its own [page](#)), winter ski resorts, and the smaller offshore islands.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows Gwanghwamun gate and Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul. Tour data and prices come from the Viator Partner API, captured June 2026.

Image credits

every photo, its author and license

All location, food and wildlife photographs come from Wikimedia Commons. Each is reused under the Creative Commons or public-domain license noted below, with attribution to the photographer. Under CC BY-SA, this list and any reuse carry the same share-alike terms. Click any title to open the original file on Commons.

1. **Bibimbap in dolsot stone bowl, top-down.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

2. **Bukchon Hanok Village traditional tiled-roof alley.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

3. **Bulgogi Korean marinated beef in bowl.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 2.0 kr.

4. **Bulguksa Temple stone bridges and pagodas.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, Public domain.

5. **Daereungwon royal grass burial mounds, Gyeongju.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

6. **Gamcheon Culture Village colourful hillside houses.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

7. **Geunjeongjeon throne hall, Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

8. **Gwangjang Market food hall, Seoul.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

9. **Gyeongbokgung Palace hero: Gwanghwamun gate.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, KOGL Type 1.

10. **Haeundae Beach.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.
11. **Hallasan volcanic mountain aerial.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

12. **Jeonju Hanok Village.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

13. **Jinhae cherry blossom avenue, South Korea.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

14. **Kimchi varieties in bowls.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 2.0 kr.

15. **Samgyeopsal pork belly Korean BBQ.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

16. **Samgyetang ginseng chicken soup bowl.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

17. **Seongsan Ilchulbong tuff cone aerial, Jeju.** Korean Culture and Information Service, CC BY-SA 2.0.

18. **Seoraksan National Park granite peaks panorama.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

19. **Seoul city skyline panorama.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 2.0.

20. **Tteokbokki spicy rice cakes Korean street.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A hotel area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated sight is still called overrated, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: Aviasales · Booking.com · 12Go Asia · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · Viator · via Travelepayouts



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/south-korea.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.