

Body and Seoul

Words and Photography by Daniel Allen

WITH SO MUCH TO EXPERIENCE, SEOUL MAY LEAVE YOU

A LITTLE JADED. THE CITY'S TRADITIONAL BATHHOUSES AND SPA TREATMENTS

ARE PERFECT FOR TONING UP AND TUNING OUT.

“SHIWONHADA!” EXCLAIMS BUSINESSMAN JONG-HAN SHIN AS HE SLIDES INTO A GENTLY BUBBLING POOL AT SEOUL’S DRAGON HILL SPA.

Korean for “it feels so great”, this is a word that tourists may find themselves using on a regular basis if they frequent the South Korean capital’s numerous *jjimjilbang*, or Korean-style bathhouses.

“Jjimjilbang essentially means ‘steam room’ in Korean,” explains Michael Spavor of the Seoul Tourism Organisation. “They are large, segregated, public bathhouses, complete with hot and cold water pools, showers, saunas, sand baths and massage tables. Some even have a ‘doctor fish’ facility, where users immerse themselves in warm water and shoals of tropical fish feed on the body’s dead skin cells. It’s totally painless.”

“Large jjimjilbang can stretch across five or six floors,” he continues. “Other areas, which are usually unisex, have restaurants, Internet cafés, TV rooms, beauty therapists, snack bars, and sleeping quarters. Most jjimjilbang are open 24

hours – it’s quite common for Koreans to spend the entire day and night there.”

“You can find jjimjilbangs of all shapes and sizes across Seoul – they’re an essential and unique part of Korean culture that all visitors should try at least once,” adds Stephen Revere, founder of the city’s popular expat 10 Magazine. “Apart from being a fascinating cultural experience, they make a great place to unwind, have fun, and meet everyday Koreans.”

So what is it that Koreans find so appealing about their traditional steam rooms? “I love jjimjilbang because they’re a total one-stop

shop for enjoyment and entertainment,” says Myung-Shin Kim, a Seoul student. “Sure you can wash yourself, sit in a steam room and get a massage, but you can also eat, sleep, date, read, watch TV, e-mail and play computer games. I go to jjimjilbang with my boyfriend all the time.”

Older Koreans tend to look on jjimjilbang as the perfect antidote to the stresses of working in one of Asia’s most dynamic countries. “Seoul is a hard-working, fast-paced city, and most Seoulites put in long hours at the office,” says Jong-Han Shin. “We think that visiting a jjimjilbang once or twice a week is the best way to completely rest both the body and mind.”



CONNECT

SEOUL
SOUTH KOREA

Distance from Doha: 7,116 km

Flight time: 8 hrs, 55 mins

Frequency: Daily

سيؤول

المسافة: 7,116 كم
مدة الرحلة: 8 ساعات و 55 دقيقة
معدل الرحلات: رحلة يومية

"My friends often tell me they're attracted to jjimjilbang because they miss the *ondol*, the heated floor that most Koreans slept on until they began moving to apartment blocks and sleeping in beds," says Stephen Revere. "The hot floors in jjimjilbang are so popular some families will spend the whole night in the common room just lying down."

"The heat from the sauna and the heat from the floor both help blood flow around the body," explains Jong-Han Shin. "Boosting the metabolism is good for your skin and relieves aches and pains. Afterwards I like to drink *shikae*, a sweet drink made from fermented rice that really cools you down. Slow-baked eggs are another jjimjilbang specialty – they have

the delicious taste of roasted chestnuts. Koreans believe they are a good source of protein and stop you getting dizzy from the heat."

The origins of the jjimjilbang are not entirely clear. Many Koreans claim they date from the 15th century, during the time of the Joseon Dynasty (1392 – 1897 CE), when royal chronicles state that *hanjeungmak* (kiln saunas) were used for medicinal purposes.

The most traditional of Seoul *hanjeungmak* are still heated by burning pine wood; *hanjeungmak* users are wrapped in jute clothing to protect against the intense heat. Interiors are lined with all manner of different materials, such as yellow earth, minerals, and salt. As you sweat, toxins and wastes from the

body are released, and energy and minerals from the walls and floor are supposedly absorbed.

Despite their long history, it's not until far more recent time that jjimjilbang began to offer such a vast array of amenities and services, and truly became a ubiquitous part of Korean life. Thanks to their popularity, visitors to Seoul today have a huge choice of jjimjilbang from which to choose.

Multi-storey jjimjilbang such as Dragon Hill Spa and Itaewonland are great for kids, with a range of play areas and outdoor pools. Many Seoul-based institutions of luxury hotel and resort chains – such as W Hotels, Banyan Tree, and Hyatt – have also incorporated elements of jjimjilbang and Korean

JJIMJILBANG ETIQUETTE

For first-time visitors, a trip to a traditional jjimjilbang can be a little bewildering. Although staff at many speak English, it's worth doing a little homework to understand what's expected of you, and what you can expect in return.

Everyone has to take a shower before they enter the jjimjilbang. Showers are communal and separated by gender. Afterwards patrons enter the *mogyoktang* (public bath) section, where they scrub thoroughly, using small, rough cloths to rub away outer layers of dead skin. This area often contains several soaking tubs, many featuring natural ingredients like **green tea** or **ginseng**. Afterwards, make sure you follow signs to either the men's or women's section.



All jjimjilbang have lockers where patrons can hang their clothes. Many also offer a laundry service, so that when you walk out at the end, it's not just your body that feels fresh and clean. There's no need to bring towels, but you might want to bring your own soap or shower gel.





bathroom philosophy into their spas, offering a more exclusive, bespoke service.

The award-winning Away Spa at W Seoul-Walkerhill features one of the most luxurious jjimjilbang-style experiences in town, attracting both locals and overseas visitors. "Our signature treatments feature an eclectic mix of old and new age, from traditional Korean yin yang therapy and super antioxidant facials to Turkish *hamam* ceremonies and aroma stone massage," says PR Manager Eileen Park.

The Grand Hyatt Spa is another top destination for a spot of personal pampering. The spa's

meticulously choreographed services, offered in the confines of 12 spa suites, are a combination of traditional Korean and modern European.

"One of our most popular Korean-style treatments is '*kyungrok* therapy,'" says PR manager Seolye Kim. "This involves massaging the body's meridian system for better circulation, and balancing yin and yang. We also offer a Korean Balance Program, using elements of traditional remedies in body massages and scrubs, and in facial treatment. Our treatment using six-year-old ginseng and a blend of traditional Korean herbs is all about promoting Korean-style wellness."

Having opened in April, the Banyan Tree Club & Spa Seoul is home to one of the city's newest and most prestigious spas. "Our spa employs the 'high-touch, low-tech' approach," explains PR manager Yu-Jin Nam. "This couples human touch techniques with the use of natural herbs, spices, and aromatic oils. The exotic treatments we offer are inspired by Asian traditions, and our treatments feature native Korean products such as ginseng and sesame oil."

Whatever the season, weather, or time of day, Seoul's jjimjilbang and spas are always open for a session of Korean-style R&R. If you're in town and need a lift, just let the steam take the strain. ☘

LISTINGS

The Spa

Grand Hyatt Seoul
747-7 Hannam 2-Dong,
Yongsan-Ku, Seoul
Tel: +82 (0)2 797 1234

Banyan Tree Club and Spa Seoul

San 5-5
Jang Chung-Dong 2-Ga
Jung-Gu, Seoul
Tel: +82 (0)2 2250 8000

Away Spa

175 Achaseong-Gil
Gwangjin-Gu, Seoul
Tel: +82 (0)2 465 2222

Dragon Hill Spa

Seoul-si Yongsan-gu
Hangangno3-ga 40-713
Tel: +82 (0)2 797 0002

DREAM STREAM



With its futuristic skyscrapers, wall-to-wall neon, and obsession with high-tech gadgetry, Seoul can still throw up a few green surprises. Many visitors are amazed to discover a burbling, six-kilometre waterway, complete with crystal-clear water, elegant fountains, and verdant vegetation, flowing right through downtown.

This is Cheonggyecheon, a stream that until recently had been covered with concrete. Thanks to a multi-million dollar restoration project, completed in 2005, it has now become a haven of natural beauty amidst the bustle of city life. Today Cheonggyecheon is a major draw for residents and visitors, who come to dip their feet, stroll, exercise, and picnic on the banks, check out the burgeoning flora and fauna, and enjoy regular art and architectural displays.

“Cheonggyecheon is like the new green lung of Seoul,” says Michael Spavor of the Seoul Tourism Organisation. “People complained it would cause traffic problems, but it has actually lowered temperatures and improved air quality. It’s been a huge success.” 🌿



Ad