



Life and Seoul

Seoul is a pulsating city rich in sights and sounds. Daniel Allen explores this thriving metropolis

LEFT: Singapore has a great mix of cultures
 BELOW: Hawker centres are where you'll find some of the best food on offer



Photos: Travel-Images/Hollandse Hoogte



It's nearly Saturday morning, but for the milling crowds of Seoul's high-octane Hongdae area, Friday is just getting started. Gaggles of uber-stylish girls clip clop their way past neon-clad pubs and cafes, while young businessmen wolf down spicy snacks, check their mobile phones and indulge in some last-minute pre-club preening. This may be one of the capital's hottest nocturnal hangouts, but the emphasis is firmly on urban cool.

"I always come out to Hongdae at the weekend," says bubbly student Surh Yoo-Nah in fluent English. "It's a great place to relax and meet friends. We usually chill out in a bar for a few hours and then head to a *noraebang* (karaoke parlor). After the singing's over I might head to a *jjimjilbang* (traditional Korean sauna)."

As the hedonistic hordes filter down Hongdae's sidestreets to their venues of choice, the South Korean capital's cosmopolitan feel is as palpable as it is infectious. Work hard, play hard seems to be Seoul's motto, and local residents need little instruction in how to have fun.

"People here love to let their hair down," says Stephen Revere, founder of Seoul's popular expat magazine *10 Magazine*. "They enjoy eating and drinking together, and frequently follow that up by singing together at the *noraebang*. Even if they're terrible singers, they still have the confidence to get up and belt out a tune, and everyone just claps along."

Seoulites have every reason to be confident. Perhaps better than any other Asian capital, their city manages to balance old and new, East and West, with style and sensitivity. On the back of some spectacular economic growth Seoul has developed into an affluent, attractive boom town, with bright lights, space-age architecture and streaming traffic all lending it a progressive air. But firmly entrenched cultural practices ensure that nobody loses touch with their roots.

A large part of that culture revolves around food and drink, and a night on the tiles in Seoul usually begins (or finishes) with a communal meal. As ▶▶

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gourmands will discover, this is a city built for dining out, the only problem you'll have is running out of time to sample them all. Many first-time visitors to Seoul find Korean cuisine a taste sensation which goes way beyond the usual expectations of non-stop *kimchi* (pickled cabbage). Most restaurants will reduce the chilli content of their food out of respect for less fire-resistant palates, and a multitude of great non-Korean restaurants are on hand to give overspiced digestive systems a welcome break.

For Sang Kim, a PR manager at The National Theater of Korea, nothing beats a meal of *galbi*, or Korean barbecued meat. "*Galbi* is one of Korea's most popular dishes," he explains. "Strips of marinated beef or pork are cooked on a charcoal grill at your table. These are then wrapped in a lettuce leaf and dipped in *ssamjang*, a sauced made of fermented bean curd and red peppers. Wash everything down with a few bottles of local Cass beer and you're all set for a top evening."

"People are surprised by the eclectic range of cuisine available in Seoul now," explains Michael Spavor of the Seoul Tourism Organization. "I recommend visitors mix it up – try some Korean dishes and check out a couple of Western establishments too. A meal at Pierre Gagnaire's followed by some drinks in the bar next door is one really romantic option. Those with a head for heights can then take the cable car up nearby Nam Mountain (Namsan) and go up the N-Seoul Tower for panoramic city views."

Another Seoul venue that makes a great night out in itself is Noryangjin Market, with over 700 shops selling a cornucopia of marine produce. "Noryangjin is my favorite location for partying," says Stephen Revere. "First you choose your dinner live from a bubbling tank, and this is then sent to a restaurant of



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your choice for preparation and cooking. Seafood lovers will adore this place."

"On any given night you'll walk into a smoky, noisy Noryangjin restaurant packed wall-to-wall with people of all ages enjoying a meal," he continues. "It's unbeatable for atmosphere. Koreans are so friendly they'll probably invite you over to share a beer or two, and, if you're lucky, maybe even some live octopus tentacles."

"We Koreans love anyone who takes an interest in our country," explains Surh

Yoo-Nah. "Most younger people speak at least some English, so you'll find someone who'll befriend you day or night. This is part of what makes Seoul so special."

Seoul is divided by the Han River, the languid waters of which are crossed by a multitude of bridges (be sure to witness the spectacular 10-000 nozzle fountain on Banpo Bridge). On the southern side, overlooked by the gleaming contours of the golden 63 Building, lies the ritzy Gangnam District.



“Gangnam is classy with prices to match,” says Stephen Revere. “The nightlife, however, is unrivalled. All the beautiful people hang out here, and if you’re looking for the trendiest clubs with the hottest people, this is the place.”

One popular Gangnam bar and restaurant is the Baekseju Village, which offers a range of more than 20 traditional Korean wines. In a twist on the norm, food is carefully selected to match the alcohol, and given the fact that *baekseju* (literally “100 years wine”) is said to promote longevity, drinkers can indulge in some first-rate liquor and reverse the aging process simultaneously.

Another Gangnam area bar with an innovative take on Korean alcohol is the Chungdam Ann Sojubang, which serves up cocktails made with soju, Korea’s answer to vodka, in hollowed out fruit. Long nights in Gangnam usually end up in one of the area’s hip nightclubs, such as Club Mass and the Ritz Carlton Hotel’s Club Eden.

Those in search of more highbrow entertainment can stop by Gangnam’s jazz venue Once In A Blue Moon. Or more traditional alternatives include the spectacular music and dance show Miso, put on at the Chongdong Theater, and *pansori* (Korean opera) at The National Theater of Korea.

From taekwondo classes, amusement parks and batting cages by day to supping, swigging and shaking by night, Seoul has options galore for even the most energy-filled visitor. If you’re dropping in on the city that never sleeps, you might find the plane ride home is the best option for catching a nap. ◀◀

Seoul fact file

GETTING THERE

KLM operates xxxxx flights per week to xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx from Amsterdam Schiphol Airport.

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hyatt Seoul
<http://seoul.grand.hyatt.com>
 Luxurious, five-star resort set among landscaped gardens on the slopes of Nam Mountain. JJ. Mahoney’s Bar in the hotel basement has regular live music.

WHERE TO EAT

Samwon Gardens; +822 5483030. One of Seoul’s top barbecue locations.
 Pierre Gagnaire (French fusion); +82 2 317 7181/2. Three-star Michelin chef Pierre Gagnaire offers exquisitely prepared dishes.
 Noryangjin Fish Market (seafood); +822 8142211
 Head here in the evening to catch this seafood extravaganza at its most colorful.

BARS AND CAFES

Baekseju Village; +822 595 1003. Offers a range of specially prepared Korean traditional wines.
 Chungdam Ann Sojubang; +82 2 541 6381. One of the area’s most happening spots.

ADDITIONAL INFO

You can dial 1330 for a 24-hour, bilingual (Korean/English) help service from within Seoul for tourist information. Those outside South Korea should dial +82 2 1330.
www.seoulwelcome.com



Photos: Travel-images; Getty Images/Roslan Rahman; Getty Images/Lim Wulliang/The Straits Times