

Seoul Searching

A whirlpool of pungent street foods, kaleidoscopic neon lights and eclectic boutiques awaits in Asia's heart and soul

Seoul — jam-packed with plundering skyscrapers, brightly lit neon signs and an explosive culinary scene — is truly a city of epic proportions. With a population of over 10 million people, the dynamic South Korean capital is after all one of the largest cities in the world. For decades, it has been coyly hiding behind the shadow of its neighbouring brother, Tokyo. Today, Seoul has come into its own, emerging as the latest Asian powerhouse.

For the uninitiated, Seoul is a sensory overload: its gastronomy, culture and architecture evoke expressions of superlative magnitudes. The most colourful street food scene, the oldest temple and the raunchiest red-light district — it's all here in Seoul. Amidst its futuristic buildings stand ancient palaces and pine-fringed park, and tucked between massive malls are sprawling night markets. Within 10 steps into Seoul's frenzied streets, I am seduced by its diverse undercurrents.

As the epicentre of the country, it is bursting with all that the region has to offer. An old Korean saying goes, "Even if you have to crawl on your knees, get yourself to Seoul!"

FAB EATS

Korea's gastronomy scene takes centre stage in Seoul, keeping true to traditional local flavours, be it in modern Michelin-starred restaurants or back-to-basics street-side food carts.

Chowhounds will surely be aroused by the vivacious street food culture in Seoul. Ubiquitous food carts around the city serve up typical local snacks like odeng, boiled fish rolls that resemble intestines, and tteokbokki, rice cakes dipped in a sweet spicy sauce.

Nothing says Korean more than the traditional tatami-style barbecue restaurants, where guests get first-hand experience in grilling red, fresh meat. An interesting feature of a Korean meal involves a series of gaudy side dishes that serve to complement the main platter. Hungry? Here are some essential places to dig into authentic Korean fare.

NAMDAEMUN MARKET

A labyrinth of old-style street stalls, Namdaemun Market is South Korea's biggest and oldest open-concept bazaar. For a first taste of Seoul's street fare, nothing usurps Namdaemun. Here, raw red meat glow under the bright neon

lights, while live seafood wriggle with vigour before being washed down hungry revellers' stomachs. Sample raw oysters drenched in a rich, spicy pepper paste, mixed with kalguksu (knife-cut noodles) and flush them down with a bottle of soju, Korea's firewater boasting 30 percent alcohol. Grazing is the best strategy and arriving with an empty stomach is a must.

Jung-gu, Namchang-dong 49

HANCOOK

The Korean BBQ is a quintessential culinary experience: grilling your own meat and pairing that with a myriad of side dishes. Besides being lauded as one of the best traditional Korean fine dining restaurants in Seoul, Hancook offers one of the best panoramic views of the city atop the N'Seoul Tower. Try the modum gui (grilled beef), tong galbisal (ribs) and the naengmyeon (cold buckwheat noodles). Although slightly pricey, lunch set menus (22,000KRW/US\$19 for adults and 9,900KRW/US\$8.70 for children) give you the best bang for your buck.

Yongsan-gu, Yongsandong 2-ga.
www.nseoultower.net



Clockwise from left: Street food from Namdaemun market; Seafood; Traditional side dishes; Hancook barbecue; Street vendors from Namdaemun market

BAEKNYEON TOJONG SAMGYETANG

In the last years, the Korean chicken ginseng soup, or samgyetang, trend has swept across Singapore. This specialty restaurant dubbed as Seoul's best restaurant for samgyetang only serves genuine flavours. Charmingly simple and basic, the restaurant features floor-seating and traditional wooden furnishing, giving plenty of authenticity. In addition to the samgyetang, sample the kimchi jiggae, a rich, savoury kimchi stew that packs a punch. A pot of stew for two costs 12,000KRW/US\$10.

Seogyo-dong 354-12, Mapo-gu.

Tel: 82/2-335-6688

BON JUK

If Seoul were to be a dish, it would be bibimbap. An outrageously flavourful mixture of rice with seasonal vegetables, a fried egg and thick chilli pepper paste, it is one of Korea's national dishes. For some of the best bibimbap in Seoul, head to the international restaurant chain, Bon Juk. The restaurant's specialty lies in porridges, or juk. The myriad of congee on its menu is impressive: ranging from sweet pumpkin to oyster flavour. The menu is in English and Korean and prices are under 10,000KRW/US\$9. Bon Juk has also recently opened up new chains in Singapore and Malaysia.

Apgujeongno Gangnam-gu.

Tel: 82/2-514-6233



Clockwise from left: Chicken ginseng soup; Kimchi stew; Bon Juk's bibimbap; A night of shopping in Seoul; Mall in Dondaemun Market; A scene of Insa-Dong; Hongdae Free Market; Interior of Baeknyeon Tojong Samgyetang



SHOPPING

From high-fashion shopping boulevards to charismatic indie boutiques, shopping in Seoul is a hedonistic affair. Whether you're hunting for vintage

goods, unusual souvenirs or the trendiest fashion, the multitude of products on offer is astounding. What's best: prices in Seoul are reasonably affordable and bargain buys abound.

DONGDAEMUN MARKET

If you can only fit one shopping stop into your packed itinerary, make it the Dongdaemun Market. A jumble of massive shopping complexes mashed within a warren of fashion alleys, Dongdaemun is a one-stop shopping district fit for people of all ages. Multi-storey fashion malls like Migliore and Doota are packed wall-to-wall, crammed with the latest in fashion, as well as electronics and lifestyle products. These malls stay opened until the wee hours of the morning for those who need to do a last-minute dash.

Jogno, Cheongyejeonon-no Jongno-gu.
Tel: 82/2-261-2192

COEX MALL

Imagine over 85,000 sqm of retail therapy. Asia's largest underground shopping mall stretches across the Gangnam district in Southern Seoul. Catering to the new urban shopper, the complex is home to over hundreds of international brand names the likes of Zara, and also houses a 16-screen multi-cinema complex, a massive marine aquarium and a kimchi museum. Beware: you might just not be able to find your way out!

World Trade Centre Samseong-dong, Gangnam-gu; www.coex.co.kr

INSA-DONG

For a peek into Seoul's past, weave through the atmospheric streets of Insa-dong laden with antique stores, art galleries, Buddhist shops and teahouses. It exemplifies a traditional Korean lifestyle and is a treasure trove of antiques (particularly those from the Chosun Dynasty), original calligraphy work, paintings and artefacts. You'll also find several Buddhist temples and stores tucked away in the quiet alleys in this area.

Insa-dong, Jongno-gu. Tel: 82/2-732-2240

HONGDAE FREE MARKET

A new urban movement for art expression is taking to the streets of Seoul. The Hongdae Free Market is not a flea market — instead of second-hand goods, the products on sale here are eclectic, creative, handcrafted artwork. It is a playground for young, talented artists who need a platform for free expression. Mingle with local talents and scour through quirky knickknacks, handmade jewellery, leather pouches and artistic porcelain. For those with an eye for the unconventional, you'll surely sniff out some valuable art pieces here. The free market is held from 1pm to 4pm every Saturday from March to November.

Hongik University. Tel: 82/2-325-8553;
www.freemarket.or.kr



勤政殿

正一品

기대거나 앉지 마세요
KEEP OFF 禁止靠坐

ATTRACTIONS

For those with just a few days to spare, Seoul provides a palatable feast: time-enduring palaces, temples and emerald parks. From essential tourist stops to off-the-radar secret gems, here's our pick of attractions that make Seoul stand out from the rest.

GYEONGBUK PALACE

Top on the list of most visitors' itinerary is the legendary Gyeongbuk Palace. As the largest palace built during the Joseon Dynasty, the Gyeongbukgung's grandeur is comparable to the greatest palaces in the world. Gyeongbukgung translates to mean "Palace of Shining Happiness"; it's no wonder the iridescent frescos and lavish carvings are blanketed in such resplendent colours. First constructed in 1394, the palace withstood the destructions by the Japanese government in the early 20th century and is slowly undergoing restoration to attain its original glory. Set aside at least two hours to visit the entire palace.

Gwanghuamun. Tel: 82/2-732-1931;
www.royalpalace.go.kr

NAMSANGOL HANOK VILLAGE

Steal a peek into the Korean traditional way of life at Namsangol Hanok Village, an open-air cultural museum. To revive the atmosphere of times past, hanoks, or traditional Korean houses, have been moved here from different parts of Seoul. A valley was also created to let water flow and trees planted to create a traditional garden. Try to time your visit here on a weekend, when you'll find weavers, cooks, calligraphers and kite-makers demonstrating their craft; rice-wine brewing and traditional music take place on some evenings. English-speaking tour guides (10am to 5pm) can be hired.

Chungmuro subway station, Jung-gu. Tel: 82/2-2266-6923; www.fpcp.or.kr

N'SEOUL TOWER

Perched on the peak of Mount Namsan in downtown Seoul is the flashy N'Seoul Tower. Splashed with a modern look and feel, the tower was given a complete overhaul in 2005 and now boasts several stylish restaurants (including a revolving restaurant) and boutiques offering the best panorama in town. If snapping shimmering night shots from the highest point of a city is your thing, then make sure you visit. The view from the T3 observation deck is worth the entrance fee (8000KRW/US\$7 per adult and 4000KRW/US\$3.50 per child). The easiest and most picturesque route to N'Seoul Tower is taking a taxi from Insa-Dong to the Namsan cable car. From the cable car, it's a short walk to the base of the tower. 1-3 Yongsandong 2-ga, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



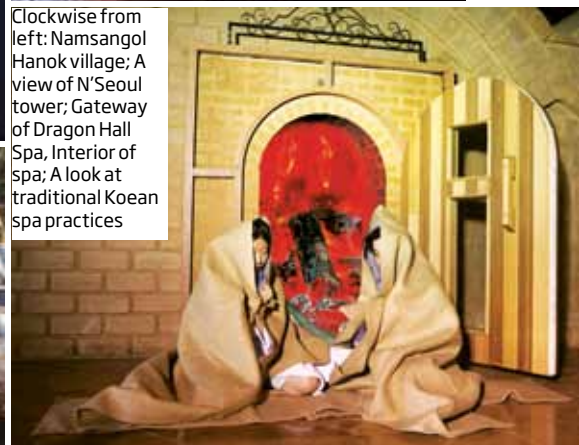
DRAGON HALL SPA

Like Japan's obsession with the onsen, Koreans are addicted to jimjibang, a traditional bath practice. Dragon Hill Spa is a glorified jimjibang designed to suit the needs of young urban Seoulites. Reminiscent of an all-rounded entertainment centre, the seven-storey establishment comes complete with in-house restaurants, cinemas and an Internet cafe. The traditional bath area offers an assortment of treatments from the popular perspiration rooms and conventional charcoal-fuelled saunas to pyramidal-shaped baths and mineral crystal rooms. What's more, the entertainment complex is open round the clock and an entry ticket (10,000KRW/US\$9) allows you all-day access.

Yongsan Gu, Hangang-ro Dong 40-713.
Tel: 82/2-798-0114;
www.dragonhillspa.co.kr



Clockwise from left: Namsangol Hanok village; A view of N'Seoul tower; Gateway of Dragon Hall Spa, Interior of spa; A look at traditional Korean spa practices



NIGHTLIFE

With the advent of swanky, slick urban bars, Seoulites are ditching their soju and makgeolli to swirl Jack Daniels on the rocks. The lure? These uber-chic bars in Seoul have the secret recipe.

WOO BAR

Designers alert! With a setting fit for sci-fi movies, the 10,000 ft Woo Bar is best known for its outlandish, futuristic decor. Featuring egg-shaped chairs hanging from a neon-lit ceiling, a spaceship-shaped DJ booth and glassed-in mezzanine lounge, the rooftop bar



of the highly acclaimed W Hotel woos the senses with pulsing sounds and an eclectic Asian fusion menu. Drinks and menu might be pricey (set dinner prices start from 20,000KRW/US\$18), but remember that you are paying for the best panoramas in the city.

21 Kwangjang Dong A, Walkerhill.
Tel: 82/2-465-2222

COFFEE BAR K

Anyone with a penchant for high quality liquor will be impressed by the planet-spanning array of whiskeys and cocktails at K Bar. Despite its name, coffee takes a backseat to alcoholic concoctions at this Japanese franchise. It holds the largest selection of single malt whisky in Korea, so exclusive that only whisky society members get to savour them. Bartenders here really know how to mix a drink; one of them has even won the first place in Korea's mixing competition with his innovation, 'Walking in Space'.

Cheongdam-dong 89-20.

Tel: 82/2-516-1970; www.coffeetark.co.jp

SKY LOUNGE

For a feel of this century, head up to the 30th floor of COEX Intercontinental Hotel in Gangnam district. And don't be fooled by the luxury hotel chain's glossy and anonymous appearance — the characteristic rooftop bar, Sky Lounge, retains a degree of personality. Helmed by Australian chef Nick Flynn, Sky Lounge also dishes up modern pan Asian fare and an impressive roster of cocktails in an aviation-inspired setting.

524 Bongeunsaro, Gangnam-Gu.
Tel: 82/2-3452-2500

MR CHOW BAR

The legendary designer, painter, actor and art collector Michael Chow has now opened an exclusive restaurant/bar in downtown Seoul, adding tasteful glitz to the capital. Chow's fourth bar after his flagship stores in Beverly Hills, London, and

New York is a three-storey entertainment centre furnished with paintings, sculptures and dark wood tables. Here, you get the sensation of joining an exclusive society party, and if you're a perfectionist, be sure to try a tippie here. Few bars get it right like Mr Chow Bar.

91 Nonhyun-dong, Kangnam-ku.
Tel: 82/2-517-2100; www.mrchowseoul.com

STAYS

Plush luxury hotel chains, funky boutique hotels or traditional guesthouses with a garden to boot? You decide.

W SEOUL

If you're looking to splurge and indulge, W Seoul provides opulence at its finest. W Seoul is the newest addition to the city's range of luxury hotel offerings, and it's already setting the golden standards. Voted as Seoul's Best Hotel by *DestinAsian* magazine, W Seoul has been in the media limelight since its opening. Poised on the

slope of Mount Acha overlooking the Han River, W Seoul is a hop and jump away from the bustling Gangnam financial district, yet a world away on 180 acres of forest greenery. The hotel's AWAY Spa is also taking the wellness industry by storm, drawing in spa fans with a unique Turkish hammam and outdoor hinoki soaking tubs overlooking the Han River. Rooms and suites come with quirky names such as the Wow Suite and the Extreme Wow Suite. Double room rates start at around US\$185.

175 Achaseong-Gil, Gwangjin-Gu.
Tel: 82/2-465-2222; www.wseoul.com

IP BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Uber-chic, trendy and stylish, the IP Boutique Hotel gives a feel of the new-generation Seoul. With a cyber, digital exterior, the hotel is best suited for edgy, urban travellers seeking creative surroundings. Once inside, you'll be engulfed by the all-white minimalistic interior décor, slick lines and avant garde design. The contemporary design of each room features mirrored walls, transparent bathroom doors and flashy paintings. Conveniently located within walking distance from the Itaewon

GETTING THERE Singapore Airlines flies direct from Singapore to Seoul while AirAsia and Malaysia Airlines fly direct from Kuala Lumpur to Seoul.

CURRENCY South Korea's currency is the Korea Won. 1000KRW = S\$1.15/RM2.80/US\$0.88

VISA No visa is required for Singaporeans and Malaysians who stay in South Korea for less than 30 days.

TIME ZONE Seoul is one hour ahead of Singapore and Malaysia, GMT +9

CALLING CODE South Korea's country code: 82; Seoul's city code: 2.

factbox:

subway station, the hotel brings the city closer to you.

37-32 Hannam-dong, Yongsan-gu. Tel: 82/2-3702-8000; www.ipboutiquehotel.com

TEA GUESTHOUSE

Looking for a slice of Korean tradition without burning a hole in your pocket?

This two-storey hanok pays tribute to the original Korean way of living. Tucked away in a quiet alley of the Insa-dong district, this humble guesthouse takes the form of a traditional home featuring bamboo walls, tiled roofs and tatami-laid flooring. Don't expect LCD TV or any flashy facilities here. Instead, immerse yourself in traditional Korean culture by spending your time sipping Korean tea, reading in its courtyard and sleeping on woven mattresses. Spend some time here and you'll find that there is more to Seoul than towering skyscrapers and fast-paced urban life.

Gye-dong 15-6, Jongno-gu. Tel: 82/2-3675-9877; www.teaguesthouse.com ♦