

My Korea Travels 2010

Marc H. Mehlman

17 August 2010

Seoul

8 August

Friends and Family,

Korea, as always, was great. This year I stayed in Fraser Place, a very nice residency inn located in downtown Seoul. About half of the Korea University summer program faculty chose to stay there. The summer program arranged shuttle buses to campus and back. With laundry facilities in my room, a large indoor pool downstairs, free breakfasts each morning and the best of Seoul just outside the front door, I did well.

Korea is obviously doing quite well too, economically. There are construction cranes everywhere. In the history museum there was a 1,500th scale model of the city that cycled from day to night and back every ten minutes or so. During night, in each individual building, the lights went on. The model obviously took many man-years to build. Along with the new floating island on the Han River, complete with a new opera house, there were two new skyscrapers that will be built in the next two years. One is 123 stories high; the other is 130 stories high. Both of these tall buildings are dwarfed by 155 story twin towers near the Incheon international airport scheduled for completion in 2014. That building will be the second tallest building in the world (the Arb Burgus in Dubai is the tallest).

While the standard of living is greater in Japan than in Korea (the greater cost of living in Japan makes the difference appear greater), it is credible that Korea will close the gap in the next decade or two. Samsung is the world's biggest producer of computer chips and televisions (though Laura and I, each, bought LG television sets recently – also Korean).

As always, the Koreans are a pleasure to be with. They are honest, hard working and cheerful. They seem not to be prone to walking around with their underwear exposed, pants to their knees, or to pierce their bodies and faces in an narcissistic attempt to model themselves after lazy, immoral Hollywood anti-heroes who themselves often look like a cross between Borneo head hunters and inner city gang bangers. Still, South Koreans, as with the rest of the world, love American culture.

Many of my Koran students were absolutely excellent students. The number of American students was greatly reduced due to concern stateside over the current political situation with North Korea. Oddly, the South Koreans are much less focused on the dangers North Korea poses. As in past years, some Korea University students even had a pro-communist festival on campus. Many ordinary South Koreans expressed a wish for a quick passage for these students to the worker paradise up north. However, the communist event was much more muted this year.

Laura came out to Seoul on August 1st. We went to a traditional Korean restaurant and witnessed a dispute between two American Black males about thirty years old and a middle age Korean waitress. The two Blacks got more and more belligerent. In an attempt to intimidate the waitress, the two Blacks began rapping, dancing and rhyming (stuff about put putting a cap in ass of the Korean waitress hoe, I believe). The waitress did not speak a word of English, but I think she got the jest. The waitress was not amused. Far from being intimidated, she was visibly repulsed by what she deemed as less than human behavior and immediately expelled the two rappers from the restaurant.

Marc

Geonju

8 August

Friends and Family,

After classes ended, Laura and I took a train ride (high speed with a local train connection) for an overnight at Geonju, the ancient capital of the Shilla Kingdom (100–500 AD). Geonju is a combination of historical sites, hotels and resorts. It is also about twenty degrees cooler than the surface of the sun. Koreans are hard working people and they all have vacation time during the “platinum weekend” when we went. Hotel rooms were scarce and priced double what they normally go for. We walked from the train station to the Royal tombs, to the Royal observatory, through the Royal gardens to the Royal pond and then onto the museum. Everything was very impressive (including the heat) and interesting. Laura was particularly fond of a Kiwi flavored, Korean-styled Popsicle and we both loved the air conditioning on the bus to our hotel.

Our hotel was overpriced and was a particular mix of luxury and dilapidation. The hotel charged extra for soap and the dinner was very expensive. The next day we found a traditional Korean restaurant nearby that was great (and inexpensive). That day we visited xxxx and xxx. There is something quite impressive about Buddhism. Judaism has its book, Christianity has its faith, cathedrals and doctrine, Islam has its distinctive Mosques and tribal roots, but Buddhism has its aesthetics. And quite appealing aesthetics too. It was a nice day.

Later me made our way back to Seoul and the next morning we were Taiwan bound.

Marc