

NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR

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The American novelist travelled to South Korea to meet the free-diving fisherwomen of Jeju, and it changed the course of her career

I arrived on Jeju Island a novelist and left a non-fiction author. Visiting the magnificent volcanic island — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — changed my life and, most pointedly, the direction of my writing career. I'd been in my New York City apartment working on a new novel about a businesswoman from Manhattan who goes to Jeju to meet the island's famous *haenyeo* women divers, and later starts a company with them.

I'd long been fascinated by the fisherwomen of Jeju who dive without oxygen, known as the mermaids of Korea. For centuries, they've farmed the ocean collectively to support themselves and their families, some still diving as they reached their eighties and nineties. I knew their lives would be rich material, but I was struggling to make my narrative hold together. So, I decided to go to Jeju and meet these amazing women in person.

My friend, the Korean author Kyung-sook Shin, knows the island well and offered to accompany me. We flew an hour from Seoul and landed on Jeju, then picked up a rental car and drove into the countryside to the Jongdal-ri Road, the longest coastal road in the eastern part of Jeju.

Soon the landscape, dotted with hotels, motels and tourist restaurants, morphed into a dramatic black volcanic shoreline hugging the turquoise sea. We were heading for the tiny village of Jongdal-ri. Centuries ago, this was the largest salt-producing area on the island but now the salt fields have disappeared, replaced by rice paddies.

As we neared Jongdal-ri, Kyung-sook pointed out the small huts made of black rock that jutted out from the sea. They were the original shelters used by the *haenyeo*, where they gathered before diving to change their clothes and arrange supplies, and on returning, to count their catch, which they sold at market. There were statues, too, of the women carved out of black rock, a sign of the honour in which they were held.

As we continued along the ocean road, we saw new buildings made of concrete built by the *haenyeo* in recent years to replace the older stone huts, decorated with colourful murals depicting the divers. My heart raced. Finally, I was going to enter their world.

We arrived at a local inn, Feel House, and sat down to a meal that felt like a banquet. The owner was a young mother in her thirties,



and she carried her infant on her back while serving us small plates of vegetables, tofu, soup and fruit. As we ate, her baby giggled and cooed.

Kyung-sook took charge of arranging my meeting with a *haenyeo* diver. The women farm abalone, shellfish and conch, yet only dive three months of the year, and it was now off season. So, while I wouldn't be able to watch them work, the island's charm had captivated me, and I was happy nonetheless.

That afternoon, we visited Jeju's museum dedicated to the *haenyeo*, with its stunning recreations of ancient *haenyeo* huts, clothes and fishing gear. A 30ft wire sculpture of a pregnant woman diver stood valiantly in the entrance. I watched video interviews with the women and learned so much about their hard lives coupled with their love of the sea. One *haenyeo* explained the ocean was like a bank that just kept giving her money (by selling fish). These were strong women, healthy women, extraordinary women — one-of-a-kind women.

Later that day, I was privileged to meet a *haenyeo* called Yang Chunja, who spoke so movingly about her life and work. She was in her seventies — young by *haenyeo* standards — and spending time with her was transformative. I saw that my decision to fly all the way to Jeju to meet her was the right one. Yang Chunja was a strong, vibrant woman soon to enter her eighth decade, yet still diving as if she was 15, still contributing to her family and her sisterhood of divers. She embodied the Korean qualities of *han*, *heung* and *jeong* — grit, joy and community — that are part of the cultural DNA. I believe these qualities are the secret to leading a fulfilling life.

After I returned from Jeju, I threw out the novel I'd been working on and decided to write *The Korean Book of Happiness* instead. After meeting the *haenyeo*, I understood their real-life stories were more resonant, more poetic, than any fictional tale I could weave. I love New York City — it's my home. Yet sometimes, the most powerful lessons you glean in life are waiting for you on an island halfway around the world, and your teacher is a modern-day mermaid. And that's the story you have to tell.

The Korean Book of Happiness: Joy, Resilience and the Art of Giving by Barbara J Zitwer is published by Short Books, £12.99.

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