

WISH YOU WERE HERE



## A little bit of heart and Seoul

The capital of South Korea proves a feast for the eyes, ears and tastebuds of **Barbara J Zitwer**

I felt I knew Seoul before I ever stepped foot into the South Korean capital. As a literary agent specialising in Korean works, I had read many novels set in the city. Through books I walked along Seoul's wide boulevards and tiny alleyways. I had tasted dumplings and ginseng chicken soup, stepped inside ancient temples. Yet when I finally visited Seoul, my expectations would be surpassed on every level.

The city of nearly 10 million is sprawling, and vibrates with 24/7 energy. It satisfies my thirst for every experience imaginable: shopping, art both modern and classic, Korean massages and spa treatments, meditating at a Buddhist temple, hiking, history and Korean barbecue.

My advice for exploring Seoul – go to bed early. Your days will be intense, your senses stimulated in the best possible way. From historic palaces to traditional markets, luxury designer shops, cosmetics or K-pop, there are sections of the city jam-packed with specialty shops and landmarks that cater to your taste.

A note about getting around: the subways are easy to use, but also consider taxis, they are very affordable. And while most Koreans do not speak English, they are helpful, and Google Translate will make your visit easy and workable.

Start your morning with coffee and bread at my favourite café, the Fritz Coffee Company in Dobso (17 Saechang-ro 2-gil, Dobso-dong, Mapo-gu, Seoul).

While situated in an old building, inside it is modern and renovated. Koreans love coffee and breads, and Korean-inspired pastries and breads are baked daily. Try the red bean croissant or bread loaf with your latte to fortify you for the day ahead.

Your first stop – travel back 600 years to the Bukchon Hanok Village, a magnificently preserved area of historic Seoul filled with houses known as hanok, and restaurants.

*Young people dress up in traditional garb to experience history more fully*



Night time view of the cityscape, main; the older world Bukchon Hanok Village, above

On weekends, the Hanok Village is a favourite destination for young people who dress up in traditional Korean garb to experience history more fully. There are many rental shops where you can rent a dress for the day or weekend for about £12 (Bukchon Hanok Village 37, Gyeongdong-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul). Plan to spend two hours at the village, and when you're done, my bet is you will be starving. That's good, because we are going across town to Jaha Son Mando, the best dumpling restaurant in Seoul.

The owner serves the original rustic dumpling recipe passed down from her mother and grandmother. Their signature dish is mandu guk

plump pork, bean curd and vegetable dumplings in a delicate beef broth, seasoned with homemade soy sauce (Jaha Son Mando - 12 Baekseokdong-gil, Jongno, Seoul).

Now, satiated with delicious food, you are ready for some great art, and only a few steps away is the Whanki Museum, dedicated to the famous Korean abstract artist Kim Whanki.

With influences as broad as Ferdinand Legrr and Mark Rothko, Kim lived in Paris and New York, dying tragically young. The museum, designed by architect Kyu Sung Woo, houses the largest collection of his work – while the building reflects the elements of nature: the mountains, moon and clouds that Kim considered important, and is well worth a visit (Whanki Museum - 63 Jahamun-ro 40-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul).

After the museum, it's time for some shopping Korean style. The traditional Korean markets in Seoul are cities unto themselves, with miles of stalls filled with fabrics, housewares, shoes, hats, furniture, street food, jewellery, souvenirs, and everything else you can and cannot imagine. Motor scooters zip in and out, so be on guard. At Dongdaemun Market I had two dresses made overnight with gorgeous silk

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fabric for around £82 each. The fit was perfect.

Make sure you eat some street food while there, the mung bean pancake is always a good idea (Dongdaemun Market - 18-221 Euljiro 6 (yuk)-ga, Jung-gu, Seoul).

Beauty junkies can't go past the Myeong-dong district, with endless blocks of K-Beauty stores and products. This is where I discovered snail mucin cream and salmon egg face masks (don't forget to ask for samples with your purchase).

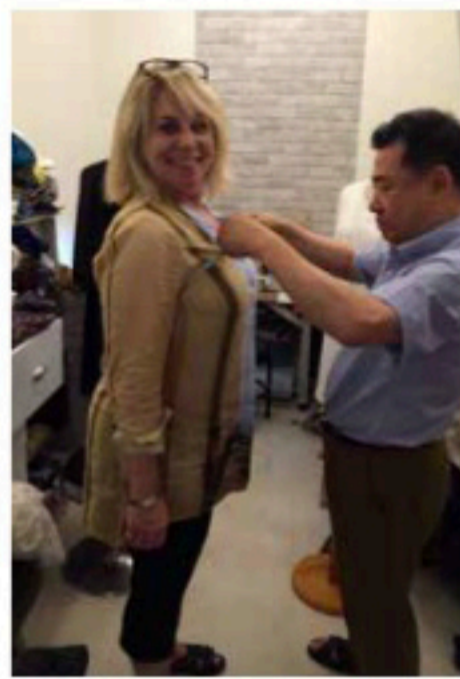
And for some midday entertainment take a taxi or subway to Insa-dong, considered the equivalent of New York City's Greenwich village.

This is where I discovered the famous Dragon's Beard Candy makers, who have tourists and locals crying with laughter as they co-ordinate their candy-making while regaling you with jokes, songs and conversation. After the performance you can buy a box of candy to take home.

Of course, after several hours of shopping, you will need a massage to soothe your tired joints and get ready for the evening.

Korean bath house spas are called jimjilbang, and they provide every kind of soak and massage, considered essential for maintaining good health. Spas are part of every day life for Koreans, and families often go together. Yes, you will be naked, but nobody stares or cares. For an inexpensive jimjilbang try the Siloam Bulgama Sauna Spa (Siloam Sauna, 173 Yongmasan-ro, Gwangjin-gu, Seoul) where you can wander into huge steam rooms or saunas, and lie in tubs of mineral water along with the locals. After this full day, sit back and enjoy a meal of Korean barbecue, bulgogi.

Barbecue has been a staple of Korean cuisine for centuries. During the 18th century, cooks grilled meats for royalty. Today there are hundreds of barbecue restaurants in Seoul, but my pick for bulgogi is Woo Lae Oak, (62-29 Changgyeonggung-ro, Jung-gu



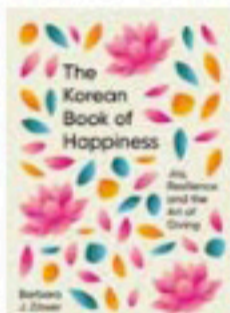
gu Seoul), a restaurant that has been in business since 1946 and serves North Korean cuisine, including cold buckwheat noodles, which you must try. As with all Korean BBQ, plates of beef, chicken or pork along with vegetables will be brought to the table. You do the cooking yourself on a hotplate in the centre.

I find there is nothing so special as when a group of friends joins in with the cooking and sharing of food. Don't hurry. Relax and savour your meal and order some soju, a favourite Korean liquor that puts the final exclamation mark to the meal.

While Korea is famous for such K-Pop stars as BTS, PSY and Blackpink, I discovered that Seoul is filled with some fabulous jazz clubs and the scene is thriving. So end your evening at Soul to God (89-4 Chungdam-dong, Seoul), a club that showcases established as well as emerging jazz players.

This is the time to close your eyes and let the music seep in. It's been an exciting but non-stop day in Seoul, and it's finally time to unwind.

**The Korean Book of Happiness: Joy, Resilience and the Art of Giving by Barbara J Zitwer (Short Books £12.99)**



Food market, above; Barbara sees her tailor at Dongdaemun Market, top