

South Korea: finding sanctuary at a Buddhist temple

By Barbara J Zitwer 28 April 2012 - 12:00am

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I discovered Templestay in South Korea quite by accident. I was in Seoul on business and, jet-lagged on my first night, I found myself watching the hotel television channel at 3am. I was mesmerised by an "infomercial" on something called Templestay...

It turns out that Templestay was devised by the Korean Cultural Organisation as a way for foreigners coming to the 2002 World Cup to gain experience and knowledge of Korean culture and Buddhism.

I chose the Jeondeungsa Temple in Incheon. This is the oldest temple in Korea, said to have been built by three sons of the founder of the first Korean kingdom of Gojoseon as a shrine to their family ancestors.

Located on the top of Mt Jeongjoksan, Jeondeungsa comprises 10 wooden buildings of various architectural styles, from the first dynasty to the mid-Joseon Dynasty.

But though the temple does feel like a museum, it isn't just an ancient treasure - it houses a thriving, working Buddhist temple, complete with internet connection and a drinks vending machine.

It was mid-January and I was the only guest. Most temples provide special uniforms for visitors, so dutifully I put on the large quilted pink vest and purple balloon temple pants.

I was just appreciating the utter joy of some much-needed solitude when a man's voice called out, "Would you like me to take your picture?" Behind me was a Korean man who had come to pray at the temple.

Everything was so clean: from the mountain air to the spring water that flows from stone fountains and tastes better than any fine wine from Bordeaux.

Each temple offers an early-morning chanting ceremony at 4am, Zen meditation during the day, a tea ceremony and conversation with a monk, community work, hiking and participating in evening prayers.

You can do as much or as little as you like. Even though there is electricity, it's a good idea to leave electronic communication devices turned off.

I was determined to hear the early morning service, which began at 3.30am, and asked my translator to make sure I awoke in time.

"I felt like a hippo trying to dance Swan Lake. I must be getting old," I lamented to the young translator sitting next to me.

Later, I was invited to take tea with a monk, just the two of us and the translator. At one point, I got rather upset as I talked about my husband's successful liver transplant a year and a half before, and how stressful it had been.

There was another benefit of my Templestay. One of the rules of the temple is that you must eat everything on your plate and wash it up yourself.

So I returned from my Korean Templestay a happier, more relaxed and, yes, a slimmer version of my former self.

• The JM Barrie Ladies' Swimming Society' by Barbara J Zitwer is published by Short Books (£7.99)

GETTING THERE Lufthansa (0871 945 9747; lufthansa.com) flies to Seoul from £903 return in May. You can take a bus to the Jeondeungsa Temple on Ganghwa Island from Seoul's Sinchon Bus Terminal, reached via Exit 7 of Sinchon Station, Line 2.

Alternatively, you can rent a private taxi for about £50 from the centre of Seoul. There are two types of taxis in Korea: first class and second class. There is virtually no difference in comfort but a big difference in cost: the second-class taxis are half the price.

TEMPLE STAYS Reservations can be made at templestay.com and the website offers detailed information about different itineraries and programmes at each temple throughout the country. The cost is around £25-£40 a night, which includes all meals.

THE INSIDE TRACK The temple provides bedding and uniforms but bring extra clothes, toiletries and hiking boots, especially if you visit in the autumn or winter. Wear wool and layers of clothes as the weather goes from extremely cold at night to sunny and warm in the afternoon, depending on the location.

It is required that you take off your shoes before entering each building, so bring sturdy slippers or loafers - easy to take off and put on.

Bedtime is early but there is electricity in all the rooms, so you can read. Be prepared to share a room with a stranger, if the Templestay is crowded.

Children are allowed all the time, but there are special programmes for families which you can find out about from each temple.

Mihwangsang Temple Located at the tip of South Korea and 1,300 years old. The Buddhist paintings date from 1342 and are hung outside the temple hall for large outdoor ceremonies.

Seonunsa Seonunsa means "hidden spring" and according to legend, the most famous calligraphers of the Joseon Dynasty painted some of their best illustrated books in this temple.

Golgulsa An awe-inspiring place, with its 12-ft stone Buddha sculptures dug into a 100-ft-high limestone cliff. The image of Buddha is seen from the highest spot on the rock face and the temple itself is in a cave.

What to avoid Don't leave bookings to the last minute because there is limited space and you need to make sure that a translator is available.

Don't compare yourself to other practising Buddhists, who can easily perform the 108 deep bow ceremony or other rigorous rituals. Just do what you can and what you feel like doing. It's not a competition.

Templestay food is nutritious and plentiful, so don't sneak in chocolate and biscuits. Part of the purpose of the visit is to "cleanse" the body as well as the soul.

Once at the temple, there are no shops so don't bank on buying any necessities. Take everything with you.

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