

# Korea

To paraphrase one of my favorite authors, to begin my trip at the beginning of my trip, the flight from SFO to Incheon Seoul was arduous. At roughly fourteen hours it is exceedingly long and personally, there is something unnerving about being over vacant ocean for so long. For roughly 12 hours all you see is a vast blue desert that if you were to crash in there is NO chance of coming across anything.

However we made it safe and upon arriving in Incheon, I was immediately greeted by a group of students from the university. Jong-Moon, my buddy, introduced himself and we immediately hit it off, but more on this later. After hearing so much about the size of Seoul and its crowds, I was surprised at the bus ride from Incheon to the university in that we went across a series of open fields and agricultural area. I didn't realize that the airport was a good two hours outside of the city. Upon getting into the city, I realized just how massive it is. The best compression I can make of Seoul is that it is like the Strip of Las Vegas only multiplied 100 times. There is neon everywhere the eye can see, along with bustling crowds and attractions.

The university itself I tucked away in the city with the campus being roughly the same size as SFSU. The dorms are clean and were brand new, though somewhat unfinished. We were actually required to change rooms so that construction could finish. The rooms themselves were spartan, but had a nice desk and comfortable enough bed. Linens were provided, but the pillow could best be described as airplane headrest, small and uncomfortable. High-speed internet access is accessible, but does require installation of virus and computer tracking software. I consider this unnecessary and even draconian but given I was only there for a month I didn't complain. However, upon returning home, I learned just how deep the software installs itself requiring a complete reformat of my system to get rid of this. Another student there also had to reformat during our stay and a third never got online because of it. If I was to stay any longer, I would have complained from a technology standpoint that these measures were unnecessary. At the very list, there should have been warnings about the software, an acceptable use policy, AND a privacy statement. This is my major complaint of the trip and I would warn anyone else planning on going to the University and staying on campus.

The greatest part of the experience is your buddy. Jong-moon has become a great friend of mine, though it was an awkward process. To start when we were introduced, I had placed down my two bags to shake his hand. As we started to head out, he picked up both my bags and carried them out. A very nice gesture, but it left me feeling awkward since I was walking along side him with nothing. He then paid for cabs periodically and was often doing things for me like grabbing dinner for us without giving me a chance to pay my share. It is all incredibly nice, but made me feel awkward, like the mooching friend. This went on for the whole trip including him buying us tickets to see a local baseball game. Though there was nothing I could do for him there to say thanks, when I got home, I sent him a care package including a lot of local Giants memorabilia. It was a small gesture, but he appreciated it. I would recommend to anyone going there bringing a

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small gift for your buddy to give them when you leave. Beyond just hanging out your buddy helps you immensely in class, makes sure you get everywhere and teaches you so much about the city. We learned in class a lot of words and talking, but it was Jong-moon who taught me how to barter in the markets and find all the great places to eat. I can't think of a single good experience I had in Seoul that Jong-moon didn't have something to do with.

The classes themselves were confusing, not in the way the material was presented but what the expectations were. Some classes it seemed like this was a vacation and we were there just to learn a little whilst hanging out. Others were more rigorous than full upper-division courses at SFSU taught in the summer. My beginning language class was one of the more difficult. Everyday for 3 hours were given word lists and vocabulary and drilled in it. It was too much to fast and unfortunately much of it went in one ear and out the other. The History and Culture class was the polar opposite with light reading and a more lets talk about history attitude with almost no homework. In both cases, Jong-Moon helped out a lot with my studying as well as telling me things that teachers often wouldn't say or would phrase more politically correct.

Beyond classes there are a lot of pre-planned activities. Some are better than others, but I did them all and all were worthwhile. From trips to the DMZ, and Nanta, to even simple things like movies and a tea ceremony each one taught me something else about Korea and gave me a memory I won't soon forget. Since all of the costs of these are included in the trip, it is amazing just how much you get to do.

All of this lead to learning a lot about Korea, but a surprising aspect of the program was how much I learned about other countries. Participants in this program come from many places you would expect, China and Japan, but many also come from places that many don't know about and might have difficulties finding on a map, Vietnam, Russia, Mongolia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan. This proved to be very interesting and informative getting to know all these people with diverse backgrounds. Since the program is based in English all participates had at least a basic conversational level though some were better than others. In any case though, I now have friends not just in Korea but in much of Asia.

Now costs are of course a concern for everyone. My plane ticket cost just under 1000 but I got 450 back from the program making it a pretty cheep flight. The Korean Won was at a good rate while I was there. Food was dirt cheep running the equivalent of about 2 dollars a meal on campus. Off campus we would usually spend about 5 dollars a meal. All the food was excellent though very spicy at times. I should also mention I hung out with a person of Muslim faith while there and he had a difficult time finding food that was halal. Another vegetarian who was there also had difficulties since most every dish in Korea has pork or seafood and apparently there is no direct translation for the word vegetarian. Other costs included metro passes that were about 2 bucks a day in cost and buying various souvenirs. Costs for electronics were not cheaper than America despite what I was told nor were other regular goods. It should be mentioned that many areas and shops like Dongdaemun have negotiated prices. Meaning, nothing is priced and when they see white-American-tourist coming they jack up the prices high. Hence why one of the first thing you learn from your Korean buddy is how to negotiate in Korean. If you get good at arguing for prices you can find cheep knock-off goods but with good quality. Overall my required cost including plane ticket, food, and other regular expensive came

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out to be only about a seven hundred dollars for the whole month, which is really cheep considering over half of that was the plane ticket after discount. I then spent a few more hundred on extra activities and souvenirs. My bank account all said and done was just over 1000 dollars lighter at the end of the month. For a month in Korea, I would gladly pay that money again because the experience and friends are well worth double or triple that amount.