

November, 2008

We arrived in Seoul, Korea safely after an unscheduled overnight in Tokyo due to issues with our 747's cargo door. We were given an introductory tour of Seoul by our friends Larry, Nancy, Sarah and Josh Dickinson. Larry is an expatriate GM manager stationed at the GM Daewoo Assembly plant in Incheon. We were expecting Korea to be part of the Third World, but Seoul is modern, clean and safe. Nobody expects tips, and even taxi drivers seemed completely honest. They politely give change without being asked. The roads and infrastructure are better than what we are used to at home. The subways had the cleanest, free public toilets that we've seen anywhere. There are some magnificent palaces, temples, and shrines and we enjoyed a ten-mile hike along some ancient fortress walls.



Larry provided an introduction to Korean culture and food. Galbi is an assortment of meats cooked at your table over charcoal. It comes with an obscene number of side dishes. If you dare to finish any one of the side dishes, it will be promptly replaced. It was impossible to leave with a clean plate. Speaking of dares, we passed on the still squirming seafood and the dog meat soup. At least we don't think that we ate any bow-wow burgers. We did see someone field-dressing a horse. The most popular Korean dish is Kimchi, or spicy decomposed cabbage. It appears at every meal and comes in many flavors. It was the end of the growing season and we found many enthusiastic people harvesting cabbage and pickling it in large plastic tubs.



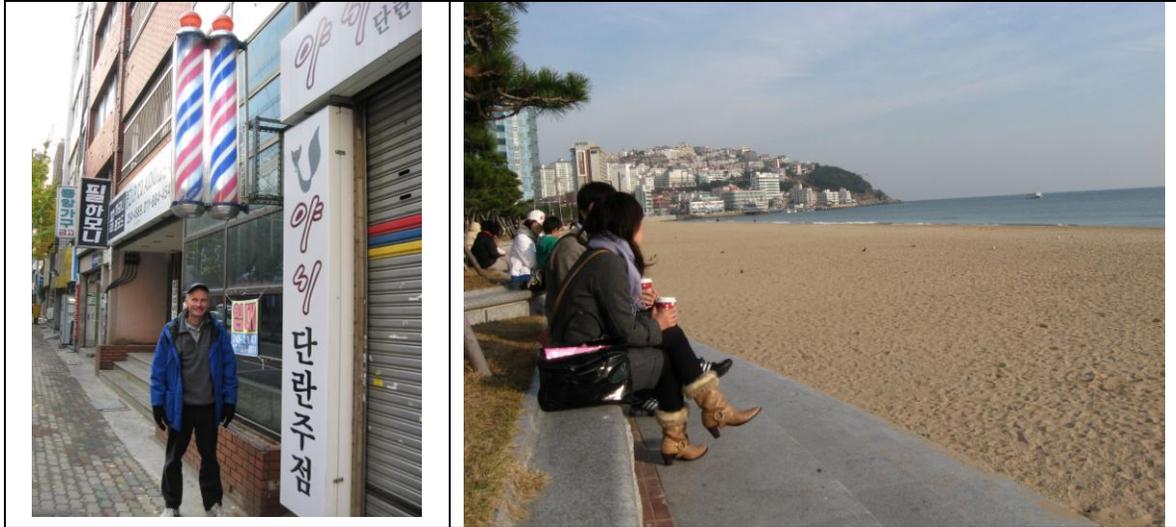
Again and again, we happened upon groups of protesters blocking sections of the sidewalk. They were always peaceful, and usually surrounded by well-armed riot police. Without Korean language skills, it was difficult to determine the nature of their complaints. They could be upset about anything from job rules to corruption. Protesting is just part of the Korean culture. Apparently every Korean must, at least once in their life, tie on a bandana or put on a sash and stand in a public place chanting and holding a sign.



The east coast of the country is absolutely gorgeous with steep mountains falling down to the Sea of Japan. The rugged coast is interspersed with sandy beaches and quaint fishing villages. At least it looks great from a distance. Upon closer inspection you will find that most of the beaches are lined with barbed wire and dotted with military watchtowers. The Korean War armistice agreement was signed in 1953, but the South Koreans still take the threat of invasion by North Korea very seriously. We crawled through a North Korean spy submarine captured as recently as 1996 and visited a tunnel dug under the border. It's unclear where this version of Mad Magazine's "Spy versus Spy" will end, but there is strong sentiment in the south for reunification of the Korean peninsula similar to what has taken place between East and West Germany.



We expected to find a lot of poverty, but most everyone was living a very middle-class lifestyle. The Koreans are helpful and polite and put in long hours. They are also very stoic until you get to know them. Rich did his best to extract smiles, but had very limited success. Koreans work hard and play hard. There were many "barber shops" with two poles outside. While technically illegal, everyone knows that two barber poles mean that haircuts come with happy endings. Some even had three barber poles. Just imagine what that means! The poverty is well-hidden, and we only found it late at night when over a hundred people lined up on the floor in neat rows to sleep on cardboard mats in the subway station near our hotel.



We travelled to Seoraksan National Park in the northeast corner of the country, and then worked our way south to Pusan. Along the way we hiked some wooded trails through granite mountains sprinkled with icy waterfalls and Buddhist Temples and shrines.

The prices in Seoul were generally comparable to those in the USA, but considerably cheaper in the countryside. We went looking for a room in Chuncheon and only found lodging establishments with names like "Happy Time" and "Feeling Good Motel". We selected what appeared to be the best of the bunch and paid \$20 for a room that included an assortment of body lotions and satellite TV with free Korean soft-core "instructional videos." The vibrating bed was not operational. Cheryll refused to stay at any more "love motels."

The Koreans are hopelessly devoted to gimmicks and gadgets that aspire to answer the questions nobody has yet asked. There is belief that Korea's largest company, Samsung, will soon lead the world in electronics. Tables in some restaurants come with handy waitress call buttons. Many hotels try to attract clients with out-of-place architectural features and absurd contraptions. We stayed at a "Swiss" castle decorated with giant plastic teddy bears up the road from a "ship" hotel where you can look through your porthole into the middle of the forest. Great ambitions are often accompanied by poor execution. The manager at one hotel had to teach us by flashlight how to repeatedly reboot the temperamental remote-control combination light switch/TV/thermostat/electric bidet controller. Maybe some day the world will look to Korea for the latest innovations. For now, they should probably stick to proven concepts.

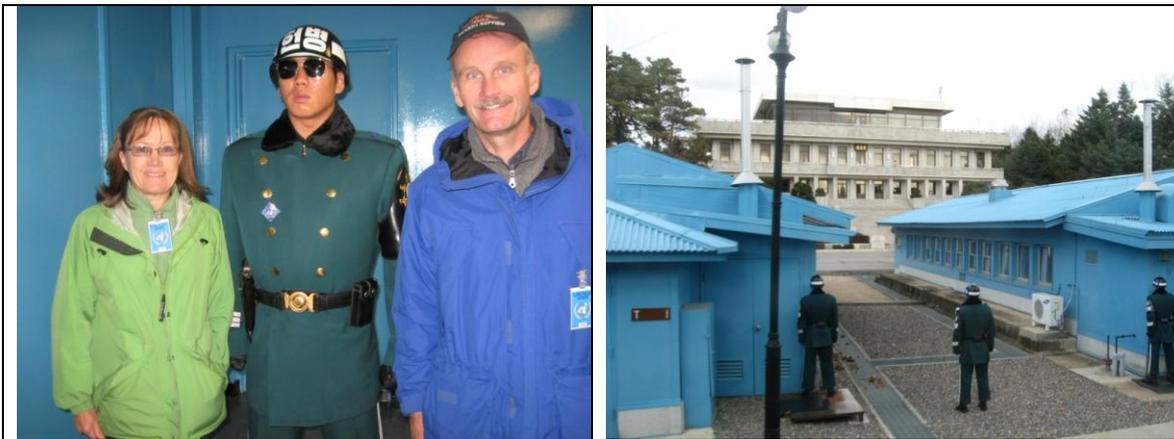


We stopped by Haesindang Park. It's a curious place; quite unlike anything else in the world. We're not including pictures here in order to keep this report rated PG. We also don't suggest Googling "Haesindang Park" from a work computer or with children present.

Pusan is a working port city. It has some nice beaches and temples. It also has a dodgy Russian section with some of the world's roughest bleached-blond hookers hanging out in front of numerous "cafes." We visited the world's most high-tech fish market shaped like a five-story high wing. It had a high-tech central pump system constantly circulating fresh seawater to thousands of tanks. We passed on a visit to the dog butcher shop. We returned to Seoul via the high-speed KTX train and joined the Dickinsons for a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner brought over from the nearby US Army base.



When we returned to Seoul, we were notified that our visas had been rescinded and our one-day tour to North Korea had been cancelled. North Korea has closed the border crossing. It seems that the North is upset that the South has not been doing its best to live up to recent agreements, and we were to be pawns in the continued blustering and posturing. The North is ostensibly punishing the South by closing the border and kicking out the managers from the South Korean owned factories in the special North Korean industrial zone. The South Koreans had been manufacturing goods in the North using cheap labor contracted through the Communist North Korean government. The pain from the resulting loss of trade is likely to be much greater on the northern side of the border. Larry likens it to the North declaring; "You better do what I say, or I'll poke myself in the other eye, too." As an alternative, we were able to visit the De-Militarized Zone one hour north of Seoul. After an extensive briefing, warnings and signed disclaimers we were organized into two columns of tourists and marched into the conference room straddling the border where over 700 negotiating sessions have taken place between North and South Korea. We were allowed to step 10 feet into North Korean territory and have our pictures taken with United Nations soldiers. We have no passport stamp to prove it, but we were there, and we'll count North Korea as the 131st country that we've visited.



For Christmas, Rich's dad has most generously offered to host an Odendahl Family Reunion in Playa del Carmen at a Mexican all-inclusive beach resort. Stay tuned for future reports at <http://www.odendahls.com/>.

Some of Our Favorite Korean Signs

