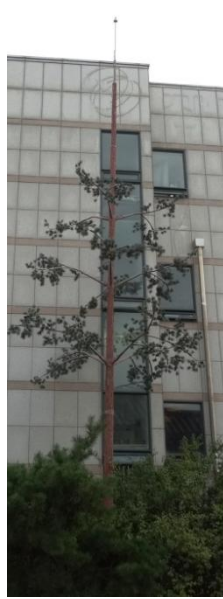


Dear Friends and Family,

November, 2014

South Korea is a land of contrasts. Primary exports are K-Pop, fashion and high technology products, while the government has a priority to rebuild their heritage sites which were largely destroyed during the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. There is a system of cultural designations not only of structures but intangible items such as traditional games and music.

Most Koreans live in high density urban areas, but with 70% of the country mountainous they are great fans of the out of doors - there were more sports clothing stores than any other type in every region we visited. Despite the mountains S. Korea is considered one of the most "connected" countries in the world with 97% coverage for cell phone and internet and they do a very nice job of camouflaging all the communications towers required to achieve that!



Korea is a monoculture. Fewer than 1% of Korean citizens are not ethnic Koreans which could explain why during our three weeks my traveling companion, another older American lady, and I were clearly objects of much curiosity. Outside of Seoul we didn't see any other Occidentals. The primary tourists in S. Korea are Chinese plus Koreans themselves.

Our objectives were to visit sites of Korean cultural significance plus a few recent buildings of international architectural renown. I arrived by ferry from Vladivostok at Donghae on the east coast and my friend at the international airport at Incheon on the west coast. So we hired a driver/guide for the first three days who collected her, drove across country to collect me and then took us to Andong, our first stop further south in the center of the country – 10 hours of driving on his first day! After his days we used public transport – bus, subway, train and the occasional taxi.

In Donghae the major attraction is the Cheongok cave, unusual in that it is located right in the center of town, an easy walk from my hotel. I find it is always difficult to get good photos inside caves, but here are a couple. I actually got lost, passing the same point four times trying to find the entrance/exit. Fortunately I heard some other visitors and was able to find them and just stay with them until they exited. Since it was close to the end of the day I was worried that I



would be stranded inside for the night.

Accommodation choices are quite interesting. There are a large number of motels and love hotels with modern accommodations, but no restaurant or communal areas and a huge collection of toiletries including brushes, combs, lotions, perfumes were in every room. Almost all hotels gave a choice of western style rooms or Korean Ondols, a sleeping mat on a heated floor. Tourist hotels will have a restaurant which is where I had to go to find breakfast in Donghae. There is a well-developed system of Hanok guest houses – traditional houses (Korean-style sleeping only) that are B&B. These seemed of very high standard and popular with urban Koreans for get-away weekends. There are also campgrounds and hostels and a temple stay program that I did not investigate. Apart from top end hotels, and even those outside of Seoul, you will not find English speaking staff.

Lunch at Donghae foreshadowed the next three weeks.



Anything that lives in the sea, often served raw, to be accompanied by a soup, rice and many side dishes – usually 6-10. These are normally eaten after the main meal except for the kimchi (fermented cabbage or other vegetable with chili sauce) which is a condiment normally mixed into the main course. At one tiny Japanese restaurant in Busan we were brought so many of these dishes, including shrimp and grilled octopus, that we thought they had forgotten (or not understood) what we had actually ordered! There are also regional specialties such as salted mackerel, bibimbap (vegetables, meat and an egg layered on top of rice) which originated in Jeonju but is definitely a national dish and pajeon, a pancake which is thin, usually cut into portions with a scissor, and might contain cabbage or green onion. A pitcher of chilled filtered drinking water is always brought immediately to the table.

Hahoe Village near Andong was our first heritage stop. This traditional town of 250 residents,



continuously-occupied for over 600 years beginning in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), is a great place to see agriculture and artisans, such as weaving rice straw, calligraphy and mask making.



There is a mask museum that has a collection of masks from most regions of the world. Explanations are in English so I was able to learn a lot about the masks of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Mongolia and Thailand as well as Korea. This Hahoe Aristocrat mask is one of the most

common seen in Korea.



Here we had the first of many unplanned-for traditional experiences – a wedding. The guests were all assembled and eating when drummers arrived to kick off the beginning of speeches by community leaders in traditional dress. Then the bride and groom (in blue) arrived with their sponsor/attendant couple. We understood the festivities would continue for several hours.



The tiles of the hanok roofs were in use as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and the end tiles are usually decorated with a raised pattern, often lotus flower or dragons.



Previously the

thatch roofed houses would have been those of servants and the main house had a precise layout with separate men's and women's quarters. The house on the highest point with the highest roof was usually that of the village chief family. The door usually has some sort of blessing written on it and totems often introduce the family. There is an under floor heating system since sleeping is on mats, and usually large storage jars containing kimchi, chili pastes, soy and other condiments. In Hahoe there is also a sacred tree that is 600 years old.



Andong itself, with a population of about 200,000 is a busy commercial center with a



pedestrian street where we saw the first of many love themes (as well as Baskin and Robbins).



I was impressed that there were murals decorating almost every available bit of concrete wall. Although we didn't partake of Domino's pizza, present in every town, we did breakfast often at Paris Baguette Cafe – a widespread chain with excellent bakery and coffee. By the way, the coffee cafes are everywhere and populated with youth on their smart phones.



The next stop was Gyeongju, the former capital of the Silla dynasty which ruled Korea for almost 1000 years (57 BC to 935 AD) and unified the entire peninsula into one kingdom. As we approached we encountered the emblem of this dynasty. En route we stopped for lunch and, lo and behold, there was a traditional orchestra and singer in the amphitheater next door to the restaurant so we were entertained while waiting for our meal. The singer was getting the



audience, especially the children to sing along. Lonely Planet calls Gyeongju the “museum without walls with more tombs, temples, rock carvings, pagodas, Buddhist statuary and palace ruins than any other place in South Korea.” The national museum here gives great insight into this kingdom, the adoption of Buddhism in 527, and artifacts found in burial mounds including golden crowns and slippers, and jewelry. The burial chamber was made of wood and then covered with layers of rock and soil. We visited the tomb of the one female queen during the



Silla dynasty, set in a forest of interestingly twisted pines. My curiosity regarding how the



mounds were mowed was satisfied! At the peak of its power this walled city had a population of close to one million people, and today has around 275,000.

There is also an important Buddhist temple complex, Bulguk Sa, nearby which we visited. This UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site is considered to have the

most outstanding examples of Silla temple architecture, including the carpentry, painted decoration and a magnificent landscaped setting. Interior photos were not permitted but I did sneak a few photos of Buddha's.



One of the most interesting buildings of the trip is the Expo Center in Gyeongju which has a cut out of the 80 meter tall 9 story pagoda that was the centerpiece of the Hwangnyongsa Temple built in 643 during the Silla dynasty and later destroyed by the Mongols. A full scale replica is currently under construction across the street. There happened to be an Istanbul festival occurring in several sites in town and we were treated to excellent music and a very enthusiastic Korean audience.







I finally felt as if I was in Asia as our hotel was near the traditional Jungang market with its wide



of vendors and especially the “street food” offerings.

We took an intercity bus to Busan, one hour away in the far southeast. Along the highways are mega-rest stops with shops, all manner of food, entertainment for kids and, of course, sparkling clean rest rooms. Busan is the one city that the North Koreans did not reach during the Korean War.

For us one of the attractions was the United Nations cemetery, the only official UN burial ground. Seventeen countries participated in the UN Forces during the Korean War, including Turkey whose representatives were having a memorial service during our visit. The cemetery was established in 1951 before the war ended. Many of the 2300 buried here (only 36 Americans) did not die during the war but chose to be interred here due to their service. Of the 40,895 casualties of UN forces, 36,492 were Americans (plus, of course millions of Koreans).



From here there is an amazing view of just one of the modern high rise neighborhoods of this city of 3.5 million. At a different scale there is Chinatown next door to the central Busan train station and metro stop where we partook of a Chinese foot massage and Russian dinner – lots of signs in Russian – suggests there must be much Russian maritime activity at this busy port.





Busan has many harbors, one of which contains Jagalchi fish market where women fish sellers are preparing all your fresh seafood into ready-to-eat status. This harbor abuts one of the few low rise neighborhoods in town.



And on another side of town the Haeundae Beach area with extensive sand beaches, hotels and an interesting sculpture called Chamber by American Sculptor Dennis Oppenheim who was born in 1938 in Electric City Washington, a town of 900 people where his father was working on the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam. He was an avant garde leader of many artistic movements in each decade of his life, and died in 2011, one month before completion of this installation.



Another one of our unplanned cultural events occurred – an evening of Chinatown entertainment on the plaza at Busan station – including a women’s drumming group and a men’s. We then took a taxi to see the famed Gwangan bridge lighted at night. There was no sound and light show as expected, but there was a rock concert!



Busan has an annual international film festival (BIFF) which is the largest in Asia. I wanted to see the Busan Cinema Center with its column-free 85 meter cantilevered roof (twice the width of an Airbus 380 wing) designed by Austrian

architectural firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, which covers outdoor theater and multipurpose plaza



spaces.

Next door was Shinsegae Centum City ten story shopping center, at one time the world's largest, including an indoor ice skating rink and small zoo on the roof.

Busan has an excellent subway which we learned to navigate in preparation for Seoul. Fortunately stops are listed in both English and Korean. There is seating for handicapped and elderly which was largely honored. There are elevators, escalators and rest rooms in the stations. When Koreans visit Paris they must think we are barbarians with no toilet facilities in the Metro system.

From Busan we took an intercity bus to Jeonju – 4 hours further northwest on the peninsula. This is supposedly the food capital of Korea and is the birthplace of national dish bibimbap which we were eating frequently. We had a challenge finding our hotel – none of the taxis at the bus terminal would take us there. I finally found an English speaker at a nearby pharmacy, she tried and had the same problem. So she called the hotel and learned that it was only about three blocks away and walked there with us! By the way, after the taxi driver haggling in Russia it was a real pleasure that in Korea taxis are metered and the drivers didn't even expect you to tip them and were very pleased when we did. You always need to have your destination clearly written out in Korean.

The objective here was another traditional Hanok village known for paper making, fans, a soju museum (the local fermented drink similar to vodka) and a Sori heritage center. Here we were lucky again – a performance was scheduled for the afternoon. When we arrived we were ushered to the front row next to the local dignitaries! The performance was to be broadcast on tv so several dry runs were conducted with the choir, drummers and audience participation cues. We enjoyed six of the most famous Sori singers in Korea each accompanied by a musician

with a contemporary instrument – saxophone, electronic key board, electric and acoustic guitars – as well as the traditional drummer. The Sori music style began in the middle of the Joesan dynasty around the 15<sup>th</sup> C and is basically a musically spoken telling of a story. It regained popularity in the late 20thC and is one of those intangible heritage properties of both



Korea and

We wanted to take we could find on concierges at two have to change which seemed too (at least by now no longer walking stopped by the showed us a brand Jeonju to Yongsan tickets for the next there was a Dunkin more breakfast sandwich shop to take on board.



on the platform who was catching the train before ours was astonished to learn about the new direct service!

UNESCO.

a train to Seoul but all the information line (including help from multiple different hotels) showed that we would trains with very short connecting times, strenuous to attempt with our luggage my knee had healed enough that I was with the cane). On a chance we railroad station and the ticket seller new semi-high speed direct train from station in Seoul, so we bought our day. The train was super comfortable, Donuts at the station that provided choices than just donuts, and a making nice fresh sandwiches to order A Korean businessman we talked with

Seoul can be very expensive – especially accommodation. We had selected a guest house that turned out to be a hostel but with single rooms barely larger than the single bed. But it is fabulously located in a pedestrian restaurant district, across the street from the 24 hour Namdaemun market, a 10 minute walk to famous Myeongdong shopping area, and midway between two significant subway stations.

We visited Changdeokgung Palace, the palace of the final king before Japanese occupation. Its garden, known as secret garden, is really more of a forest with many small pagodas used for



quiet contemplation, writing poetry, etc.

In Seoul I wanted to see the New City Hall which looks like a giant wave overarching the old City Hall. The Korean architect, iArc, states “The spatial relationship between architecture and urban structure of Seoul is very different from the western one. The Korean living space has no axis or facade which can be seen from the entry, because it consists of mountains and valleys”.

The new grass roofed design center by London based Iraqi-born Dame Zaha Hadid actually consists of three buildings wrapped into one and the surrounding public space. It was built around ancient city walls and cultural artifacts discovered during an archaeological expedition before construction.





Nearby is The Stream, which ran historically through the center of Seoul and following removal of an overhead highway its 11 kilometers spanned by 22 bridges has been developed into a very pleasant peaceful promenade amid the intensity of a major Asian capital. Some areas of Seoul's perimeter wall still exist as well as several of the original gates.

The snacks were another interesting aspect of Korean cuisine. There is a so-called potato chip – a single potato cut in a spiral, put on a skewer then cooked in hot oil. The purchaser chooses which coating to roll it in - choices might be chili, onion, garlic, cheese, etc depending on the vendor. Other unique items included spun honey wrapped around chocolate and nuts, a



curly shaped ice cream cone for soft ice cream, small pancakes of various types and, of course, seafood brochettes.

Two day trips completed our Seoul agenda, one to Suwon where a Joseon palace from the 18thC has been rebuilt complete with furnishings and life-sized mannequins depicting daily court life. Here is seen the traditional five mountains backdrop for a King's throne.





A forty meter long mural on a rear wall displays all the court personnel of the era in their



various garb. A “dragon train” drives along the wall of the city with its observation towers and innovative design for the era. We were lucky to be there at the time of the daily demonstration of the weaponry of war pre-invention of gunpowder, as well as archery – still a major national sport. (S. Korea took several medals in archery during the Asian games that were occurring in Incheon during our visit. We watched excerpts each evening on TV which further added to our



experience of the country.)

The second day trip was to Icheon, about an hour southeast by bus. This is a major pottery



center for the country, with a particular focus on celadon.

We spent our final two nights near the Incheon Airport on Yeongdongdo Island. Although you can see the city of Incheon (population 3 million) in the distance, connected by its beautiful suspension bridge (2009), this is a quiet area of small fishing villages, camping sites and seafood restaurants on a series of bays.

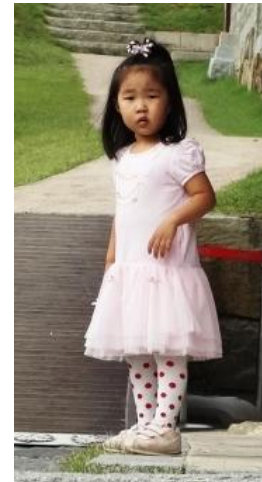


This was a holiday weekend, so the campsites and restaurants were full of Korean families enjoying this seaside only 35 kilometers from Seoul. We enjoyed the low key comparison to the big city as we prepared for our departure. Which is not to say that the ladies of the restaurants were not on the sidewalk competing with each other for the business of passersby!





It is clear that Koreans work hard and are competitive. However they still value many of the Confucian principles including obedience and respect towards seniors, importance of formal education, loyalty, status and dignity and families are more important than individuals.



Grounded in these values I suspect South Korea has a bright future.

