

From De Rijp to South Korea, studying a month in Seoul.



Do not flush toilet paper, scissors as cutlery to cut your food, Kimchi, eating live squid, put off your shoes everywhere, K-pop crazy and a lot of eyelid corrections. These and many more details of South Korea.

Each year Amsterdam University offers summer programs that enable students to follow courses at universities within and outside Europe for a short period of time. So I came at Korea University. Because I have a home and a job in Amsterdam, which I did not want to lose, I looked for a middle course that wouldn't oblige me to change my home base permanently. I preferred to acquire experience in a non-Western culture and besides that the place should not be too obvious. Geographically speaking, South Korea is quite typical. Except for North Korea it has no neighbouring countries and furthermore the country is surrounded by water. Currently it is no option to reach the country via North Korea and thus, for me, only accessible by plane. I concluded that if I ever decide to make a trip through Asia, I probably will not visit South Korea. So, when South Korea will not be my holiday country, then it will be the country to study.

First I will simplistically describe what I expected from South Korea. Please note, I have done little research in advance, because I wanted to fill my the picture of the country by means of my own experience. In the first place I thought that with my long Dutch body (I'm 1.80) I would rise high above everybody. Friends of me thought that I would be considered a kind of attraction and that all Koreans would want to have a picture with me. With my Western arrogance I thought that the Korean development certainly would behind the times and the country wouldn't be as I am used to. I expected that I had to cross roads with great danger of being knocked down by Tuk Tuk's and draught donkeys. I could continue with such assumptions, but I would rather emphasize my total misunderstanding of South Korea.

On June 19th I flew to Seoul for more than a month. First of all, I wanted to discover the city for a few days. After that I would study two courses at Korea University and live on the campus. Once arrived it took a day or two before I got out of my jet lag in the right rhythm and had landed figuratively. The aforementioned assumptions could into the trash can right away. I noticed that Koreans are quite tall and really are dressed very stylish. And I was not asked by anyone either if they could to take a picture. Besides that I never felt like being caped at.

Seoul's infrastructure has been meticulously organised by a subway system, on almost every corner of the street there is a subway station from where you can go to every corner of the city. The Netherlands can learn a lot of it. I also did not see an animal on the road, and I could, quite logically of course, just cross over at green light.

It is true, unfortunately, that there is little diversity in Korea. Next to my fellow students, I have not seen many Westerners. I also noted that, without exaggerating, Koreans commuters fall asleep everywhere. In particular in the subway, as illustrated alongside. I have never been able to realize a stronger bond than with this stranger.



After four days in Seoul alone, I checked in at the university campus and six other students from Amsterdam University joined me. Reason enough to celebrate the kickoff of our adventure and get acquainted with Soju. This rice liquor is the national drink, sweet to taste and at first glance rather innocuous. You could compare it with the Dutch “kopstoot” (head punch), the combination of a gin (Dutch ‘jenever’) next to a glass of beer. In the picture, we are still smiling together with a record number of bottles of Soju, which we have not been able to or even want to match in the future of our stay in Korea, but the hangover came later and the drink never tasted as good as at the first evening.



I consider myself as a village girl who can settle herself in a city like Amsterdam. If I need some rest around me, I'm going to my parents in De Rijp. In a city with a size like Seoul, looking for green and rest is a little more difficult. That's why we went for a hike during two weekends. The first weekend we went to Sokcho, on the east coast of the country in the province of Gangwon-do.





The following weekend we flew to Jeju Island off the southern coast of the country, to climb a volcano. This is the island where Jan Janszn. Weltevree came ashore in 1627.



On average weekdays I followed five lectures on international relations from eleven till half past four. After the lectures, I usually studied for a few more hours in a coffee shop, usually with Jaap, where I spent many hours studying / laughing / complaining and eating.



After four weeks of lectures, the program was completed with a graduation ceremony and we were honoured by being allowed to hoist ourselves in flattering gowns.



The day before our departure I did the DMZ tour and without doubt this has been the most impressive part of my trip to South Korea. The DMZ is the border area between North and South Korea, four kilometres wide and also compared to the Iron Curtain. With an organized tour we started at the Joint Security Area, an area where North and South Korea are face to face with each other. American soldiers escorted us to the JSA Territory with the warning to lie doggo. We would be closely watched by soldiers from the North Korean army. In the

middle of the terrain, exactly at the border, there are barracks where the two countries meet sporadically. We were allowed to enter one of those barracks. In the middle of this barrack is a conference table which clearly indicates the border. Two whole minutes we were allowed to stand at the other side of this table and thus technically speaking I have been in North Korea. This glorious moment has been recorded at the picture below.



After our visit to the JSA we went to the station where South Korea has a direct connection with the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang. This connection is out of service and the station has been abandoned almost. The escalator to the platform is out of order and leads into darkness.



The tour continued to the so-called 'third tunnel', the third of the four discovered tunnels which have been dug by North Korea under the border with South Korea. An estimated twenty tunnels have not been discovered yet by South Korea. We walked the tunnel all the way and I was pleased that I had protection, the yellow helmet had a few dents due to the low ceiling. Finally, we have been on a lookout point from which North Korea can be seen. At this lookout it was almost impossible to hear each other because of the infernal din that came from the speakers, propaganda from South to North Korea. In spite of the fog, it was possible to see exactly where North Korea started, because the country has cut down all its forests in order to be able to watch the enemy better. North Korea also has built a ghost town near the border, no

one lives there and it is only meant to make South Korea believe in their prosperity. Only people are spotted who maintain the place and people told us that the buildings have no real doors and windows, these are painted on it.

And then at the end of my stay, to hit the rocket, I have visited our friend Jan Jansz. Weltevree at the Grand Children's Park. A couple of weeks before I had attempted it already,

but after contact with the home front I found myself in the wrong park. This featured one of the many moments I was totally lost in Seoul. After clear instructions from De Rijk, I finally have found him and my trip was complete!



South Korea is a special country and well worth a visit. For more tips, everyone is welcome!
Love, Tosca