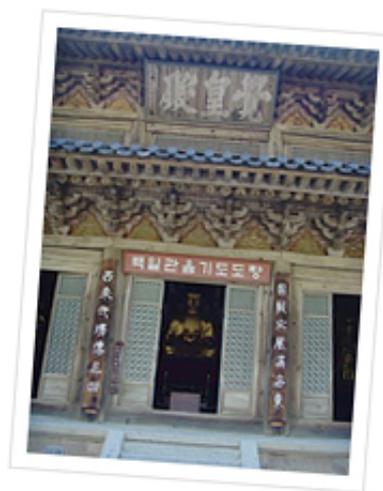


## A Two Thousand-Year Journey in Three Days

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When I awoke at six in the morning on May 14, I did not know that I was about to travel some 2,000 years back through time on a three-day bus journey to experience many wonders of Korean history, dating as far back as the Baekje Kingdom (16 B.C.-660 A.D.). I was looking forward, though, to a culturally and historically enriching field trip organized by the Korea Foundation to Jeolla provinces (Jeolla-do) in the southeastern parts of the Korean Peninsula.



Our first stop from Seoul was Jeonju, the provincial capital of Jeolla province until 1896, where we were introduced to the art of making traditional Korean paper, hanji, from the pulp of mulberry trees, and later tasted Jeolla-do's most renowned dish, bibimbap, a popular sumptuous Korean dish comprising an assortment of fresh and fragrant homegrown vegetables on steamed rice, and served with a wide array of banchan (side dishes).

A short drive later took us to Gyeonggiyeon Shrine to view life-size portraits of Yi Seong-ye – founder of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) who became known as King Taejo – and several of his descendents. Built in 1410, the 10th year of King Taejong's reign, to mark the epitome of his power, the shrine was partially destroyed by Japanese invaders in 1592-1598, but was later rebuilt in 1614. The mortuary tablets of the King and his Queen are enshrined here.

The bamboo tree-lined paths through the park made for a pleasurable stroll. So was the surrounding Jeonju

Hanok Village, which earned its name for the rows of majestic-looking wooden houses with octagonal roofs and meticulously carved pillars. The villagers had built these Korean-style homes in the 1930s as a reaction to the increasing number of Japanese merchants who came to occupy the area, after the Eulsa Treaty in 1905 gave Japan complete control over Korea's trading ports and foreign affairs. Judging from many Korean visitors' countenances that day, it was apparent that these buildings were also a symbol of national pride.

Our next stop was Hwaeomsa on Jirisan, one of the three "mountains of the gods" in Korea, along with Hallasan and Gunggangsan. Built in 544, in the 22nd year of King Seong of Baekje, a few centuries after Buddhism was introduced into Korea, Hwaeomsa houses many stone artworks dating as far back as 600 A.D., and is the largest and best known among seven major Buddhist temples in Korea. Though destroyed by Japanese invaders, in the late 1500s, Hwaeomsa was restored in 1630, the eighth year of the reign of King Injo of Joseon. The temple's name – Hwa and Om – came from the Avatamsaka Sutra, a major Korean Buddhist scripture which teaches the universal oneness of all things. At the top of the temple grounds is Gaghwangjeon (Hall of the Enlightened Emperor), built in 1703 and home to a large golden Buddha. The panoramic view of Jirisan was breathtaking. The inscrutable sense of serenity and oneness with nature that I had felt still lingers within me even today.

Our appreciation of nature continued at Suncheon Bay the next day. Herons, egrets, sandpipers, plovers, sea eagles, mudskippers, and crabs graced us with their presence as our boat cruised leisurely through the meandering reed beds and tidal flats in one of the most beautiful estuaries in Korea. It was delightful to see spawning salmons jumping and skidding along the gentle flowing waters as playful dolphins often do.

It was more assuring to note that rapid industrialization and modernization had not eradicated much of the natural beauty in Korea. Suncheon Ecological Park, located at the southernmost tip of the Korean Peninsula, is the world's fifthlargest tidelands, despite being near Gwangyang city, home to the largest steel facility in the world, Gwangyang Steel Works of POSCO.

Preservation was indeed a dominant theme of our journey, as were nature, culture, and history. At Naganeupseong Folk Village stands the last remaining Joseon castle in Jeollanamdo. A 1.41-kilometer long and 4-meter high earthen wall was built in 1397 to enclose and protect hundreds of villagers from Japanese invaders, and was rebuilt with stone 300 years later. A walk along the roof of the fortress gave the most stunning aerial view of the cottages, which were built with sand, clay, mud, wood, and stone, capped with various sizes and shapes of thatched roofs, and separated by low stone hedges covered with pumpkin vines. The village looked like an aesthetic patchwork of varying shades of warm earthy colors: beige, yellow, copper, ochre, orange, brown, and red. Time seemed to have stood still in this idyllic environment, where many people still live in cottages huddled together on a plain surrounded by luxuriant mountains and the glistening waters of nearby lakes and rivers.

Another enviable area was Boseong Dawon Tea Plantation, where gentle rolling hills of green tea trees shimmered in the sun like a giant covering of green velvet. The plantation was built in 1957 and produces some of the best green tea in Korea today. An enchanting grove, a natural sandy path flanked on both sides by 20-meter tall cedar trees, guided us to beautifully undulating hills of luscious green amid gentle choruses of songbirds. The town of Boseong was part of the Mahan confederacy during the Samhan era (57 B.C.-668 A.D.), and was named Boseong during Unified Silla (668-935). The temperate climate and high altitude, reaching 350 meters above sea level, makes the area ideal for green tea cultivation.

No wonder tea drinking in Korea is said to date as far back as the reign of Queen Seondeok (632-627) of the Silla Dynasty. The sun soon took its leave, as rain and mist chaperoned us through miles and miles of rolling hills, green valleys, gentle flowing rivers, and rice fields, enhancing the charm and mysterious aura all the way to Yudalsan, in Mokpo, the hometown of former President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003), who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001. A port city located at the southwestern tip of the Korean Peninsula, Mokpo was a small

fishing port in 1439 and one of the largest cities in Korea until the late 1970s. Yet, Mokpo has not lost its charm. From Yudalsan, which forms part of the Noryeong mountain range, you could see the mouth of Yeongsan River in the south despite the rain and mist, and catch a glimpse of the countless islands sprawling in the distance.

Our last stop was the most mysterious and enthralling Unjusa. Unlike most other temples in Korea, Unjusa has 1,000 stone statues of Buddha and stone pagodas of varying sizes and heights. Little is known about its origin, though it is believed that Unjusa was built by Buddhist monk Doseon during the Silla Dynasty (57 B.C.-935 A.D.). According to a popular legend, the monk had applied principles of Korea's ancient geomancy and summoned stone masons from the heavens to build 1,000 Buddha statues and pagodas in the night, in order to avert any calamity. However, the rooster's cry at the crack of dawn recalled the stone masons to the heavens before the last two, albeit the biggest and most impressive Buddha statues, Wabul (Stone Statues of the Lying Buddha), could be completed. Everywhere we strolled, we were greeted by Buddha statues, resting under massive rocks, and towering stone pagodas. The most impressive was a nine-story stone pagoda, which was completely covered with geometrically carved motifs and flourished with a cylindrical spire. It was mesmerizing to stroll in the rain, with the cool and crisp air accentuating the sense of mystery.

This was the longest and the shortest three-day journey that I had ever experienced. That a journey covering only one area in Korea could be as educational, enriching, and enchanting as this leaves me wondering about what I could expect when I embark on my next journey across the rest of the country.