

Namsan: A bird's-eye close-up of Korea

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Six hundred years ago the founder of the new Choson Dynasty asked a monk who had tutored him in his youth to select a site for the dynasty's new capital. This monk was a geomancer and knew of the auspicious features of a village on the Han River a hundred kilometers to the south.

He also used geomancy to plan the general layout of the new capital. There was a mountain to the north and one to the south of the village; the new palace would be situated at the southern foot of Pugaksan to the north and face Namsan to the south, with the city between the palace and Namsan.

The new capital would be well protected by mountains. In addition to Pugaksan and Namsan there was one more mountain to the east and yet another to the west. Within a few years all these mountains would be connected by a fortress wall.

Namsan has always been the premier of these mountains. It was at the shrine on its peak that every Choson king represented the nation in his spring and autumn offerings to the Great Mountain Spirit for protection against natural disaster and human foe. The mountain's gentle beauty has been the inspiration for hundreds of poems. Its easy proximity makes it the modern Seoulite's favorite escape from the madding crowd.

And for the twentieth-century visitor to Korea it's the best of any place in Seoul to see and hear and feel the past and present of Korea. It is here that you can get a bird's-eye perspective of the things you will see in Seoul later to orient yourself better for the rest of your trip. At the same time it offers a close-up introduction to the people.

Your first lesson in the Korean language: The Korean word for cable car is "cable cah." Tell the taxi driver "Namsan cable car": He'll graciously overlook the final *r* and have you there within a few minutes and a couple dollars from anywhere in central Seoul. Across the main road from the cable car entrance and fifty meters to the left is Namsan Park Road, which is closed off now to vehicles for restoration of the mountain back to what it was in the good old days. The road starts a quarter of the way up Namsan and meanders around the perimeter at about the same elevation, thus providing a delightful walk, whether you take one of the roads branching off to the peak or just keep on going.

For now, walk a couple hundred meters up this road from the cable car and you'll come to a mineral spring, one of several on Namsan. There is a sign that reads "Tiger Rock Mineral Spring" in Korean. A path leads down to a large grotto with candles here and there in natural niches and shelves in the rock wall and an individual here and a couple there have already quenched their thirst at the spring and now have their hands folded in prayer in front of these candles. Is this Buddhist or Shamanistic? Or Taoist? Don't ask the surly owner of the refreshment shop there; she'll just grunt she doesn't know. Ask the sad

lady in her traditional dress praying at the candles. Are you praying to Buddha or to the Mountain Spirit? She'll manage a wan smile and whisper yes. To Buddha? Yes. Not to the Mountain Spirit, then? Yes, to the Mountain Spirit. And then she'll add on second thought that she's praying to Tan'gun, the mythical founder of Korea.

Back to the road, take another left, continuing the gentle ascent. A couple minutes later appears a simple green iron gate with two Chinese lanterns. Just inside this gate is another gate, this an old wooden one with a Taoist crest. A short walk up the quiet narrow path is Waryongmyo, a shrine to Zhuge Liang (Chegal Yang in Korean) of *History of Three Kingdoms* fame. In the second half of the sixteenth century China sent forces to help Korea beat back a devastating Japanese invasion; afterwards the Korean king, as an expression of gratitude, erected a series of shrines to distinguished figures in Chinese history. Zhuge's shrine was built specifically in commemoration of one fierce battle fought at Namsan between the Japanese and the combined Korean and Chinese forces.

The door to the shrine is locked, but a healthy knock will alert the lady who keeps house for the resident monk. Anything at all in any language will get her to open the door, and appropriate body language will get you a look around inside. In the main shrine are two full-scale statues of Zhuge and Guanyu (Kuan-U in Korean; he was Zhuge's compatriot in the Three Kingdoms). Three subsidiary shrines perch at different levels up the mountain-side. One houses the Dragon Spirit, another is dedicated to Tan'gun, and the other to a Taoist spirit and two indigenous cult spirits, the Mountain Spirit and the Spirit of the Pole Star. There are several other Taoist and Chinese and Korean shamanist spirits represented in smaller structures throughout the complex. To add one more element for good measure: the person who watches over this mosaic is a Buddhist monk.

Peek through the trees down on the muffled roar of the city. Listen to the quiet here.

Back to the cable car for the ride to the top of Namsan. The blaring pop song Muzak tests the strength of the car's walls as it waits to pack solid before it can take off. Then the welcome clang-clang, the gentle tug, and off the car glides toward the top of Namsan. Now the Muzak's off and you forget the other sardines. The car skims the treetops and jumps plunging valleys as the city and its surrounding mountains open before us.

The restaurants at the cable car's upper terminal offer meals and beverages at reasonable prices and provide a fine view of the city. Walk up the path another 50 meters and there, at the mountain's peak, is an octagonal pavilion, fronted by a large paved square glaring in the hot sun but bordered with maple and sycamore and a wisteria bower. And off to

the right, Seoul Tower, commonly known as Namsan Tower.

Kuksadang, where the king used to make offerings to the Great Mountain Spirit, was situated on the site now occupied by the pavilion until it was removed by the Japanese occupation authorities in 1925 to make space for their Shinto shrine. Soon the concrete pavilion is to be replaced by a reconstruction of Kuksadang, authentic in every detail from measurement to materials.

The area around the tower is not impressive in itself, but the visitors there present quite a show. Many of them are on group tours from the provinces and find this area just the spot for a party, which calls for the traditional hard liquor *soju* and dried cuttlefish and song and dance. The international visitor who wears a big enough frown will probably avoid being pulled into one of these parties and required to sing.

On two sides at the very base of the tower, shaded tables provide an idyllic spot for a beverage and a long look out over the city. For an even better look, take the thirty-second elevator ride up to the top of the 240-meter tower (about 500 meters above the city). Visit the first-floor observation deck for informative windowsill photographic indicators of the most noteworthy structures within sight, then try the open third floor for an invigorating breath of fresh wind, and then the revolving restaurant on the fourth floor. The restaurant provides a leisurely two-dollar-and-45-minute cup of coffee's 360-degree view of Seoul in an air-conditioned, smoke-free environment.

From this tower the visitor can see that at least 95 percent of the mountain is lushly forested, mostly with deciduous trees. Classical poems sing of Namsan's pine-covered slopes, but much of the pine growth has disappeared over the centuries. Until the country's reforestation policy took firm hold in the 1970s sections of the mountain were largely denuded. One knee-jerk explanation for this is based on Koreans' identification with the red pine; it goes that the Japanese occupiers of the country in the first half of the century tore out all the pine trees in order to uproot the tenacious Korean spirit and facilitate their assimilation into the Japanese empire. Contradicting this is a fifteenth-century document which complains, long before the Japanese came, that too many were cutting Namsan's trees for firewood. Namsan and the other three principal mountains in Seoul had been off limits since the beginning of the dynasty, but this restriction was apparently not effectively enforced.

For five hundred years, ever since the beginning of the dynasty, Namsan was the terminus of the Choson dynasty's nationwide early-warning network. There were five posts at various points on the two peaks of Namsan, which received signals in smoke by day and fire by night across several hundred mountains tops from the farthest corners of the peninsula. (One puff or blink: All clear; two: Something's up; three: On their way; four: Contact!) These days, with the radio, television, and satellite transmitters here and there, including the one on the great tower, Namsan is still the communications center for the

nation. Mr. Kang Hong-bin, Seoul Metropolitan Government Director General of Research and Planning, says though that in a few years, when it looks economically feasible, these towers, along with Seoul Tower, will be removed to complete the restoration of the mountain. (There are also plans for a park belt to extend from Pugaksan in the north, through the city, all the way to the mountains south of the Han.)

The view from the tower shows us Seoul present and past. There are the gorgeous mountains ringing the city, which have always provided more beauty than protection. To the north are the palaces and temples, the skyscrapers, the neighborhoods which blanket the steep hills throughout the city. To the south is the grand band of the Han River, which was once Seoul's hem but is now the belt girding the city's waist. South of the Han stretch miles and miles of apartment complexes and new office buildings, and this "River South" area is now beginning to rival the area within the walls as the city's center.

The path back down Namsan forks below the tower area. One branch leads back to the cable car terminal and the other offers a 15-minute walk down the mountain. A tile-faced stone wall, with delusions of replicating the original city wall, follows the path for a short while. Pay it no mind. Stretches of the original wall can still be seen at the foot of Namsan's east peak, near the Tower Hotel; it's also embedded in the cliff that forms one side of the Hilton's parking lot at the foot of the main (west) peak. In fact, the road that leads up from South Gate to the Hilton rides atop the wall. (The city is in the process of renovating and rebuilding the entirety of the wall.)

On either side of this pleasant path are vendors inviting you to sit with them on their ground mats for a cup of makkolli, the indigenous rice brew, with a snack of silkworm a la cocoon, clams, tiny sucking snails, large munching snails, or boiled octopus. If creepy, crawly creatures aren't your dish, try *pin-daettok*, the griddlecake which even the most finicky will down like an old pro. (To impress the folks at your slide show back home—and to wake them up—take a shot of the whole spread and intimate that you tried it all.) Possibly the most enjoyable thing here, though, will be your conversation with the vendor or with the office workers who come here at noon for a relaxing lunch or at the end of the day to have "one for the road."

And there are the big-time gamblers with their wheel-of-fortune dart boards, whom you can do out of a pack of Lotte Juicy Fresh Gum or even a five-pack of King Edward Cigars. Before the wheels of fortune, better pay a visit to one of the fortune tellers, who read the palm, the hand, or the horoscope with equal expertise.

By and by there is another fork in the path. Exhausted? Call it a day and follow the path to the left, where a taxi will be waiting, or a bus back downtown. Up for more? Follow to the right to Namsan Park.

A fountain, a greenhouse, a small zoo with unhappy deer and bored peacocks, a memorial hall, lest anyone forget, to a turn-of-the-century patriot with its harangue on the horrors of the occupation, and a gnarled old pine in front which must have been there 20 zillion years and will keep you gawking twice as

long. In terms of eye-openers, the park, except for the pine, isn't much. As a place to get a sense of Seoul and Korea, it's a must.

That's Namsan. China has a fancier shrine to Zhuge Liang, Switzerland has longer cable cars, and

the Sears Tower is about as high as you can get. But you can't beat Namsan for its bird's-eye and close-up perspective of a great city.