

Five Thousand Years in Four Days

A road trip through summertime Korea

Check out the photos at <http://www.koreamosaic.net/PhotosHTML/CountryPhotos/Korea/summer06.htm>

(Pronunciation: All vowels are pronounced as they are in Latin, with the exception of the rounded o — spelled “eo” — which is pronounced like the ou in bought.)

Sunghak's wife's offer to let me use her car triggered this summer trip through a country where I live but whose beauty I have been ignoring in the last few years. I just had to pay 14,000 won (w1,000 = \$1) for a week's full insurance. (If you have trouble on the road, you call the number and they send out a tow truck, free of charge, even to just change a tire. If the car needs a few hours' attention in the repair shop, they lend you a car, free of charge.) Boy, driving here is fun! Lots of stress, too, because I hadn't driven in Seoul since 1969 (I had 24-hour personal use of a car in those “good old days” in the army), when there were more oxcarts and bicycles on Seoul's streets than motorbikes and automobiles. Driving in Seoul is an exciting challenge, the countryside is a piece of cake, and both of them are exhilarating.

We first hit the temple Beopjusa (“sa” means temple) at the foot of Songnisan, in North Chungcheong Province, where I wanted to photograph the famous “Second Minister” tree and his “wife,” and were happy to find that Beopjusa and the Minister and his wife were all in excellent condition. (The Minister had been on his last legs a few years ago and it took that few years of constant attention to revive him, with inoculations and netting to ward off the insect that was bugging him. See “The Multicentenaries,” at www.koreamosaic.net; click on Articles.) At the Minister's tree we had the first of many pleasant encounters with the locals — just very nice conversations about the site and what's going on with them and their town — that were just as important as anything else in making the trip a success. Before we left Seoul I had asked people and researched on the Internet about the location of the Minister's wife, and got several different stories, one of them locating her all the way over in Samcheok, on the east coast a seventy miles away. The people sitting under the trees near the Minister told us his wife was just a few kilometers off. It's about 10 kilometers away, and it definitely is the Minister's wife because there's a sign right there, put up by the government, saying she is.

After we left the Minister's wife, we visited Beopjusa and bestowed our approval upon their operation of it. On the banks and in the bed of a shallow stream that runs along the long walk into the temple we discovered a colony of cairns, some impossibly balanced. Seems the Buddhists have become much more public-minded; at this major temple they run several social programs for youth during the summer, and probably throughout the year. (My colleague Bob says it's because they're in competition with the Christians, who have always had that evangelical bent and been very socially active.) Then we drove down through an endless reservoir of stunning beauty (heck, just about the whole peninsula is stunningly beautiful, especially in the summer), stopped for a soft drink at a restaurant in an idyllic setting on that lake, and continued on down to southern Daejeon.

We slept our first night there. Hotels were a problem throughout the trip — I was willing to pay big bucks — up to \$50 or 60 — for decent (3-star) hotels, but couldn't find them, or even if they thought of themselves as 3-star, there was always a problem with the air conditioning. (Everything else is fine.) Either it was directed right at the head of the bed (nights one and three, in 30,000-won hotels) or it simply didn't work (night two, when I paid 80,000 won). So we got about 2 and 3 hours of sleep a night because of the heat. The second day we took the Daejeon-Tongyeong Expressway down to South Gyeongsang Province and Jinju, then a particularly interesting and beautiful local road to Namhae. In the years since I last came by here, very recently in fact, they've built short bridges hopping from Samcheonpo to the first, second and third islands of Namhae — graceful, delicately beautiful things, and the sight of the chain of the three against the surrounding islands is awesome.

By the way, the road system throughout Korea has been immensely improved, with well-marked 2-lane highways to any village you want to go to and expressways connecting all cities. Drivers are more skilled and courteous than they used to be, except for three crazies we encountered (but weren't harmed by) throughout the trip. Still, in general people don't drive as carefully or as courteously as they do in the States; that's according to my experience driving in the States every time I visit.

We drove down the eastern coast of Namhae Island, almost always in view of the mountainous islands dotting the blue sea. At Hwacheon-ri we stopped at the young 150-year-old village tree and

gabbed with a couple village elders enjoying its shade. (A good opener: ask for directions.) Across from us was an expansive rice paddy glowing a vibrant summer green, of which Ikgyun got a great photo. Further along is Mulgeon-ri, a poor village that boasts a wind-breaking row of trees about three or four deep. The villagers now extort 2,000 won from the rich tourists to park there. The trees form a very inviting shady, cool grove for picnicking; but a party who came in a van was cooking their ribs right in back of their van, on the gravel of the parking lot that bordered the grove. Go figure.

Twenty or thirty kilometers on down the coast is the small port city Mijo. We stopped there for lunch; I got tricked into ordering a galchi (scabbard fish) meal for 25,000 won. (I say tricked in weak defense of my ignorance of prices for fish dinners.) But we got out of there with some good photos of the fishing boats in the harbor.

At the southern tip of Namhae, after driving back and forth about four times looking for the road up Keumsan (“san” means mountain) to Bori Hermitage and finally finding it after we realized we should have driven about 20 meters farther, we drove all the way up to the parking lot a kilometer below the hermitage, and then after climbing to the hermitage we continued up almost to the peak, where I was hoping to find the inn that I had stayed at back around 1973. We had planned to stay the night there, because from that peak you can see the sun rise and set. (See “Kumsan,” at www.koreamosaic.net; click on “Articles.”) The heat was so overwhelming, though, even so high up the mountain, that we couldn't make it up to the top; instead, we followed the sign directing us to an inn below the peak. That inn had a two-story stone building in front of it that the attendant there told me had been built, along with the inn, about 50 years ago, and when I asked him about the inn at the peak, he told me that had disappeared around 1920. I'm really confused, because I don't remember that stone building and remember two inns being at the peak, and will have to ask the friend who visited with me back in 1973 about it.

We stayed in a hotel on the coast that night, in the general vicinity. I paid 80,000 won for a suite of two rooms (they didn't have anything else), but the air conditioner in mine didn't work so it was another almost totally sleepless night. Why didn't I go to the other, smaller room and tell my young companion Ikgyun to move to my nice, more prestigious big room?

The next day we followed the winding roads of Namhae — as usual, taking 5 times longer than most drivers because, in Ikgyun's words, “The sparrow can't pass up a grain mill” and we couldn't pass up a good village tree — up to the older and bigger Namhae Grand Bridge. Across the bridge we got lost briefly, got set right by another friendly local, and then entered South Cheolla Province. We lunched in the charming town Beolgyo and then continued, on a divided expressway over high mountains for a while and then on roads winding through more gorgeous steep hills and past more lovely lakes, on to Kangjin.

On the outskirts of Kangjin we visited the centuries-old Kangjin *Hyanggyo* (country school for Confucian classics). We were able to get in the main gate to the school, but couldn't get into what we presumed was the shrine. The attendant said he didn't have a key; they go through all the expense of maintaining the structure and putting up information and hiring an attendant, but keep half of it closed! A couple hundred meters to the side, another well-maintained centenarian structure, Namgang Shrine, which houses the memorial tablet for a 17th-century Confucian scholar. In the front are the living quarters where the scholar's disciples resided and taught and maintained the shrine and where now a caretaker resides with his family; in back of this is the shrine. The doors to the shrine are locked, of course, and the caretaker is off somewhere.

When we see so many traditional structures in Seoul sacrificed to land developers' purposes (gorgeous old buildings and their spacious grounds replaced by sterile high-rises and tacky 3- and 4-story flats) we feel the country is totally abandoning its history, but when we see in the provinces how much is maintained and how well it is maintained, the sense of alarm abates.

The map didn't show much else in the immediate vicinity of Kangjin. In a tea room back in town an older gentleman spent a long time giving directions for two temples — Baeknyeonsa and Mihwangsa — down at the southern end of the peninsula, what we call “Land's End.” We got to both with no trouble; it's amazing how deep you can go into the countryside without running out of good roads and good direction signs (well, good except when they're as confusing as hell). Baeknyeonsa is visually appealing with its aged (but not decrepit) buildings in slightly worn (not garish) dancheong colors, vista of sea and mountains, few visitors; a real gem, very peaceful. We also stopped at Dasan Chongsa, a simple house where the scholar Dasan spent his years of exile; nice but nothing noteworthy except that it's also the place where, in 2006, the famous Lim Ikgyun tripped running up the root-stepped path, tearing his trousers and breaking the porcelain cup that he had bought for his mother. Mihwangsa, about 20 miles further, is recommended by many for its beauty, but it's

undergoing renovation now. Ikgyun had a good question: How on earth did they get that huge crane up that tiny road and then up to the main level of the temple? There we ran into about 30 primary school kids spending the vacation learning Chinese characters, breaking the posted request for silence for the monks who were supposed to be meditating. They looked bored and dispirited, like they'd had enough of Chinese characters and traditional stuff and all that, and wanted to get back to the city and their computer games.

In South Cholla Province they're doing a great job of keeping all of the traditional structures well-maintained, not for tourists but for themselves (with substantial support from the government), in very good taste. Around the temples the commercial concerns are kept at a distance, family ancestral shrines are all over the place, each village has its tree to protect and to provide a place to gather, many village folks' houses are roofed with tiles (unlike the ugly slate that you see elsewhere).

On the way back to Kangjin, at Maehwa Village, we stopped at a cluster of four elms shading a large platform for the village folk to rest. It was dusk, and we had the place to ourselves. The sense of peace and intimacy (with who? and what?) that you feel in a situation like that is almost overwhelming, though the intimacy is not overwhelming enough to break the sense of peace. We hung out there till the sun set.

An hour later we were back in Kangjin, where we made sure to find a hotel that would promise a good sleep. The fifth hotel we checked out was just right. Ikgyun treated me to a samgyetang (whole chicken stuffed with rice, in a soup) because it was the last hottest day on the lunar calendar, then we checked into the hotel. Thirsting for a beer after three days of sun and fatigue, we looked all over Kangjin for a nice hof (something like an American sports bar without all sports), but there was nary a one. How can a town be "charming" and "pleasant" if it doesn't have a hof? We settled for a pretty rustic cafe that incongruously boasted a lovely guitar-slinging lady singer, where I guzzled the two best beers I've ever had, and Ikgyun sipped his way through one. Back to the hotel, where, when we finally got around to going to bed, we found that our room, like the one a couple nights previously, had the air conditioner aimed right at your head, and the huge bed couldn't be moved because the room was too small. We hadn't thought to check out the direction the air conditioner was aimed, we paid several hours of sleep for our carelessness.

We left Kangjin early the next morning, and headed for Songgwang Temple. Songgwangsa, while one of the major temples in Korea and popular with tourists, is not as publicly oriented as Beopjusa (in North Chungcheong Province), where they have a camp for younger people; is a temple for meditation and is dedicated more to the monks' individual development. A couple hours there (it's as beautiful as everyone told me it would be) and up to Seoul. We got waylaid by a few more village trees but finally made it to the outskirts of Seoul just in time for the evening ruse hour. After an hour stalled at the toll gate that welcomes us to Seoul, the traffic opened up and I was able to enjoy the rest of the trip in the middle of the stock car race that Seoul streets provide.

It was a trip filled with wonderful people — from the companion whom I was lucky enough to have always at my side to the smiling young lady at the toll booth to the two-toothed granny selling corn on the cob — and beautiful sites. The roads are great now (and there is some hope that the highway numbering and marking will soon catch up with them), and the towns are no longer the tired, discouraged, drab, dusty towns of yesteryear with their mean, slovenly houses and shops. There is still poverty, but there is also a sense of hope and something happening.