

Kiwi's Korean Sojourn

This kiwi had a tough time coming to grips with South Korea because it is so different from New Zealand. The language, the food and the sheer number of people crowded into the cities was all a little overwhelming. My article will look at these areas in a little more depth to gain insight into what is a fascinating land of extremes.

Never having been exposed to Asian languages I felt thoroughly confused by Korean writing when first encountering it. It helped having an English translation under the Hangeul words everywhere I looked so it was not long before I had some Korean place names committed to memory. I then began to learn the Korean alphabet and how to pronounce the letters. As I walked to the subway and down the street I often read Korean words aloud and was pleasantly surprised when I discovered English words written in Korean. I could understand these but Chinese characters used in Korean (Hanja) were a different story. I eagerly bought books on the subject though and began devouring the meanings of Chinese characters.

Korean food is very spicy. Koreans use a lot of red pepper paste and hot sauce. Koreans love spicy food so much they will eat powdered sauce on its own. Noodles are a popular snack food and each packet has a sachet of powdered sauce inside which you flavor the noodles with. I saw Koreans eating just this sauce and then gasp for water because they had burnt their mouths. Seafood, rice and seaweed are main staples in the Korean diet. Rice and meat wrapped in seaweed is an appetizing meal and very cheap. I was not game enough to eat live octopus which were kept in tanks outside fish restaurants. You just walk in, choose your fish and the establishment cooks it (or not) for you. If this is not your thing there is lots of western food available such as pizza which Koreans absolutely love. There are literally dozens of pizza stores around including international chain stores like Dominos and Pizza Hut offering tremendous variety in the way of pizza toppings. The prices vary so it pays to shop around. I think my favorite Korean food has

to be pizza ('It's Yammy' was one sign that I saw) and my least favorite would have to be silkworms.

In Korea there are so many people and such a lack of space that the vast majority live in eighteen storey buildings. There is no such thing as individual sections over there. You have flower and vegetable gardens outside the apartment blocks and play areas for the children. These things are communal and are for the use of all, not just one particular family. I remember buses and trains sometimes being so full of people I had to stand for most of the journey. I was glad when the vehicle stopped, the doors opened and everyone poured out onto the street or platform. There was finally some room to move.

In this article I have offered you a brief glimpse of my life in South Korea. On the map Korea as a whole looks tiny but in reality it is a big country in terms of population and economic power. The country is a melting pot of ideas and languages, a mix of eastern and western food, roads are clogged with vehicles and it seems there are skyscrapers everywhere you look. In Korea civilization is never far away from you. How different that is to New Zealand and how long it took for this kiwi to come to grips with one of Asia's tigers.

Hedley Bengé

Word count: 604