

# GETTING STARTED

Seoul is in many ways a casual traveller's dream: lightning-fast public transportation, English emblazoned on many signs, and generally light-on-the-wallet itineraries. To top it off, the streets are clean and crime is low.

Still, even the most intrepid explorer could require some adjustment. The often-fieri cuisine can catch you unawares, and sometimes comes only in group-sized portions. Make sure you know what you're about to tuck into. If you're staying in a *hanok* (traditional guesthouse) you'll be down on the floor with a thin mattress or blanket.

Though some planning ahead is recommended (see boxed text, p15), most things can be done on the fly and on the cheap, and work out just fine – not something that can be said too often.

## WHEN TO GO

Seoul's weather leans toward the extremes. Summer is sweltering and muggy; winters are nasty, brutish and long, with Siberian winds hurtling down the peninsula.

However, spring and autumn are uniformly pleasant. Soft cherry blossoms signal the end of winter, followed by a wet, wonderful surge of green trees and colourful blooms. The autumn sky is impossibly high, with thin, wispy clouds against bright blue, and Koreans have their own word for this season's breathtaking foliage (*dampung*), which has to be seen to be believed. Two caveats: sandstorms sometimes blow over from China between March and May, and typhoons are also a possibility from late June through to September.

No matter when you show up, there's always something to do in Seoul. Over Chuseok and New Year's (see p179), much of the city is shuttered as families travel to their ancestral homes, but there are always events planned for those who stay in town.

See p176 for climate charts, or log on to [www.kma.go.kr](http://www.kma.go.kr) for daily weather forecasts in English.

## FESTIVALS

Seoul hosts a cornucopia of festivals throughout the year, ranging from the traditional to the high tech. The majority of celebrations take place downtown, with Seoul's beautiful palaces often showcased.

April's famed Cherry Blossom Festival is a particular highlight, with a number of areas blanketed with pale, fragrant petals. Buddha's birthday brings a kaleidoscope of light and colour, as rows of delicate paper lanterns are strung down the main thoroughfares and in temple courtyards and lighted at dusk.

Home-grown holidays and festivals follow the lunar calendar, while the rest follow the Gregorian (Western) calendar. For a list of public holidays, see p179.

## January/February

### LUNAR NEW YEAR

This three-day holiday is Korea's most important. Seoul empties out as locals make the trip to their home town to visit relatives, honour ancestors and eat traditional foods. That said, there are a number of events for travellers in Seoul during this time, held at the major palaces as well as the Korean Folk Village (p164), Namsangol Hanok Village (p55) and the National Folk Museum (p39). For more information visit [www.visitseoul.net](http://www.visitseoul.net) or [www.visitkorea.or.kr](http://www.visitkorea.or.kr). In 2010 Lunar New Year begins 14 February, and in 2011 on 3 February.

## April

### CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

Nature determines the dates for this event, but early April is generally when the cherry blossoms go from first peek into full colour riot within a week. The best way to take them in is to pack a picnic and head to Yeouido's Cherry Blossom Park (Map p65), Olympic Park (Map p70) or Namsan (Map pp56–7). The blossoms are particularly beautiful – and some say most fragrant – just after the sun sets.

### WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVAL IN SEOUL

[www.wffis.or.kr](http://www.wffis.or.kr)

Featuring over 100 films from 30-plus countries, this midmonth festival attracts internationally renowned directors and some of Korea's best independent filmmakers.

## May

### JONGMYO DAEJE

1st Sun in May

This ceremony honours Korea's royal ancestors, and involves a parade of the royal carriage from Gyeongbokgung (p38) through downtown Seoul to the royal shrine at Jongmyo (p42), where spectators can enjoy traditional music and an elaborate, all-day ritual. Check at either location for details.

### BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

For over a millennium, temples have honoured the Buddha's birth by adorning their courtyards with strand upon strand of resplendently coloured lanterns. Seoul's temples, such as Jogyesa (p49) and Bongyesa (p71), are no exception. The Sunday preceding Buddha's birthday, Seoul celebrates with a huge daytime street festival and evening lantern parade (see [www.illf.or.kr](http://www.illf.or.kr)) – the largest in South Korea, attracting over 100,000 Buddhists and revellers. The route runs from Tapgol Park (p51) to Jogyesa. Buddha's birthday is celebrated on 21 May in 2010 and 10 May in 2011.

### SEOUL WORLD DJ FESTIVAL

[www.worlddjfest.com](http://www.worlddjfest.com)

Dozens of DJs from all over Korea and the world descend upon an outdoor arena in central Seoul for two nights and three days of nonstop partying.

### SEOUL INTERNATIONAL CARTOON & ANIMATION FESTIVAL

[www.sicaf.org](http://www.sicaf.org)

Half a million animation geeks can't be wrong, right? They pack auditoriums in

Seoul each year to see why the city is an epicentre of animated craftsmanship (fans of *The Simpsons* have Korean artists to thank).

## June

### KOREAN QUEER CULTURAL FESTIVAL

[www.kqcf.org](http://www.kqcf.org)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual minority communities in Seoul are represented in this series of citywide events, culminating in a parade through downtown. Usually held in conjunction with the [Seoul LGBT Film Festival](http://www.seulff.com) ([www.seulff.com](http://www.seulff.com)).

### DANO FESTIVAL

Held according to the lunar calendar, this festival features shamanist rituals and mask dances in many locales. At Namsangol Hanok Village ([Map p55](http://www.map.p55)) you can ride a *geunnettugi* (a traditional Korean swing), gape at *ssireum* (traditional Korean wrestling) and receive a traditional 'shampoo' with iris-infused water. On 16 June 2010 and 6 June 2011.

### BUCHEON INTERNATIONAL FANTASTIC FILM FESTIVAL

[www.pifan.com](http://www.pifan.com)

The festival brings films and filmgoers from across Asia and the world to Bucheon (Puchon), just outside of Seoul, to feast on the best in sci-fi, fantasy and horror. The all-night viewings are the ultimate challenge. Theatres are within walking distance from Songnae Station, Line 1, toward Incheon.

## HELLO THERE, SEOUL

The whimsically named Hi Seoul festival has been entertaining city denizens for several years running, and has expanded into a four-part, year-long assortment of activities celebrating various features of the capital city. Go to [www.hiseoulfest.org](http://www.hiseoulfest.org) for more info.

**Palace** Held in early May, this part of the Hi Seoul festival features light and media shows, dance events, parades and events at Seoul's palaces, with the aim of merging Seoul's majestic past with her tech-savvy future.

**Hangang Festival** Held in late July and early August, this part of the festival centres on the mighty Han River. A range of concerts, water-sport opportunities and art displays lure people to the riverside.

**Art Festival** Held throughout October, this third phase celebrates Seoul's thriving arts community with concerts, parties and art markets.

**Light Festival** From mid-December through to mid-January, various locations around central Seoul are ablaze with displays of light. Ice-skating rinks and other activities take advantage of the climate.

## August

### SEOUL FRINGE FESTIVAL

[www.seoulfringe.net](http://www.seoulfringe.net)

International misunderstood geniuses in all artistic media converge on the trendy Hongdae area to flee the mainstream.

## September/October

### CHUSEOK

The Harvest Moon Festival is a major three-day holiday when families gather, eat crescent-shaped rice cakes (get it?) and visit their ancestors' graves to make offerings of food and drink and perform *sebae* (a ritual bow). Visitors in Seoul can check the National Centre for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (p76), Namsangol Hanok Village (p55) and the National Folk Museum (p39) for activities. Begins 22 September in 2010 and 12 September in 2011.

### KOREA INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR

[www.kiaf.org](http://www.kiaf.org)

Nearly 70,000 art lovers descend upon COEX (p68) to gaze at the offerings of more than 200 local and international galleries and participate in a range of programs and workshops.

### SEOUL MEDICINAL HERB MARKET FESTIVAL

☎ 969 4793

Held at Seoul's biggest herbal medicine market at Gyeongdong (p91), this festival offers free medicinal consultation and shamanist ceremonies, affording attendees a rare glimpse into this fascinating tradition.

### SEOUL DRUM FESTIVAL

[www.drumfestival.org](http://www.drumfestival.org)

The Seoul Drum Festival has kept the beat going for nearly a decade early each October. While focusing on Korea's fantastic percussive legacy (see Music p25), the event brings together all kinds of ways to make a lot of noise from around the world.

### HANGEUL DAY

9 Oct

This popular festival began in 1926 during the Japanese colonial period as a means of maintaining Korea's cultural identity. Many of Seoul's historic attractions feature hands-on demonstrations – it's great fun learning *hangeul* (the Korean phonetic alphabet)

under the scrutiny of local school children. Check at any of the palaces or the KTO Tourist Information Centre (Map p40) for specifics.

### GUGAK FESTIVAL

[www.gugakfestival.or.kr](http://www.gugakfestival.or.kr)

Hip-hop *gugak*? You'd be surprised how well traditional Korean music crosses over into a modern context at this annual 10-day Seoul-wide festival.

## November

### KIMCHI EXPO

It wouldn't be Korea without a kimchi fete, would it? Held in early November at COEX (p68), this pungent large-scale exhibition and taste-off brings together those addicted to the red-hot national culinary symbol.

## COSTS & MONEY

Seoul is a major city in a developed country, but one can enjoy good food, a warm bed and all of the major sights on a relatively low budget. Public transport, basic meals and snacks, admission prices and some accommodation are all relatively inexpensive.

That said, if you're planning to stretch your won, be sure you know exactly what you're going to get. For a dorm bed and meals purchased from cafeteria-style eateries or street vendors, plan for about W50,000 daily. Allow around W90,000 a day for two in a motel room and three big sit-down meals; for a three- or four-star stay and lavish spreads, this jumps to W300,000 (and from there to infinity).

### HOW MUCH?

- Litre bottle of water W1000
- Small cup of coffee W3400
- Pint of local beer W3000-5000
- Litre of petrol W1550
- Palace entry ticket free to W15,000
- Souvenir T-shirt W6000-12000
- One-hour bike rental W3000
- Pineapple slice on a stick W1000
- One bowl of *jajangmyeon* (noodles) W3500
- Movie ticket W7000

## ADVANCE PLANNING

**Bballi!** (Quick!) – you'll probably hear this cry ring out constantly on the streets of Seoul. The local stereotype is that everything – plans included – can be done hurriedly, all at the last possible minute. While this is never the best way to plan a trip, Seoul doesn't present a lot to fret about before you touch down.

Think about booking ahead if you wish to stay at a *hanok* (traditional house) as by design these old structures only house three to four rooms in total. In addition, the top-end international chain hotels can book up when conferences are in town. Hiking on the weekend can be a madhouse – all 10 million men, women and children in Seoul seem to hit the trails. If possible, consider taking a hike on a weekday instead – the same goes for skiing trips in the winter.

Call a few days ahead for the best seats at cultural events, and book the USO tour to the DMZ and the Kaesong trip to North Korea as soon as you can, as these fill up. If you're planning on leaving Seoul over any of the major holidays, you should book your bus or train travel well ahead of time.

If you're the type of traveller who likes doing things for free (rather than merely duty-free), Seoul does have some options. The city's tourism website ([www.visitseoul.net](http://www.visitseoul.net)) lists plenty of free events. See also the boxed text, p59.

Public galleries and museums usually charge admission fees lower than their private counterparts, and admission is free at the National Museum of Korea (p73). A guided tour at Changdeokgung (p39) is actually the cheapest option; if you want to roam freely (available Thursdays between April and November) it will set you back an extra W12,000. Look for discounts for children and the 65-and-over crowd.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**About Korea** (<http://joongangdaily.joins.com>) Check out the nifty 'About Korea' series from local paper *JoongAng Daily* on the whimsy and mystery behind Seoul's culture (it's under the 'Foreign community' tab).

**Galbijim** (<http://wiki.galbijim.com>) Fun wiki site offering detailed, often quirky information about Seoul's districts.

**Korea4Expats** ([www.korea4expats.com](http://www.korea4expats.com)) Good listings of Seoul events on this comprehensive expat-penned site.

**Life in Korea** ([www.lifeinkorea.com](http://www.lifeinkorea.com)) Features an overview of Seoul's tourist offerings.

**Visit Korea** ([www.visitkorea.or.kr](http://www.visitkorea.or.kr)) Offers a handy travel planner for those who sign up.

**Visit Seoul** ([www.visitseoul.net](http://www.visitseoul.net)) The Seoul government's site gives a good background on the city's major attractions.

## SUSTAINABLE SEOUL

Keeping a trip to Seoul totally eco-friendly is a challenge from the start. You can take a boat in from China or from Japan (see p173), but it is unclear how many carbon credits that would save – and you'd have to get to those places first!

Once in Seoul, however, it's easy for travellers to make a smaller impact. Seoul's public transportation system is wonderful, and thousands of buses run on low-polluting natural gas. Several 'mild-hybrid' buses are also in operation, with full-hybrid buses due to join the mix in 2011 and fuel-cell electric buses in 2013.

A city with extraordinarily high population density and soaring energy demand, Seoul has been actively recycling for years. Nearly every subway station or public building will have containers for your bottles and cans.

Bike rentals are available at many parks, though bike-rental places in the city itself are scarce, save for some services for long-term residents. Bike paths are virtually nonexistent on major roadways – and those that do exist are usually ignored by Seoul's 'creative' drivers. Wear a helmet and exercise extreme caution.

With a new 'wellbeing' movement in full swing, organic and vegetarian restaurants have been cropping up. You can buy organic food and drinks from Huckleberry Farms (p91), or hit the Beautiful Store in Hongdae (p88) and near Bongeunsa (p71) for guilt-free secondhand items.

# THE AUTHORS

## Martin Robinson



This is Martin's third edition of *Seoul*. Yet again he has tramped the city's streets and alleyways to check on old haunts and many new places. He toured every tourist sight, walked every walk and sampled many strange brews,

including sweet potato latte. He chomped through more than his weight in Korean food, and inspected hundreds of hotel rooms from the grotty to the grandiose. He even ventured north across the border to Korea's dark side.

Born in London, Martin has travelled widely throughout Asia. He's written for magazines and newspapers, and authored a hiking guide to the province of Jeollabuk-do. He worked for two years in South Korea, pounding English into 11-year-olds and grappling with gobbledyenglishgook in a provincial governor's office. Martin wrote all the listings chapters, and also the Transport and Directory chapters.

### MARTIN'S TOP SEOUL DAY

After a bun and black coffee brekkie in a bakery, I'm off round the Insadong galleries, checking out the latest art shows – everything

from Buddhist-themed art on the impermanence of life to surrealist sculptures. Then I sink a mug of quince tea in Yetchatjip, the quintessence of quaint, and stroll down to Jongno. With a couple of hours to kill, I nip into a DVD *bang* (p138) and catch up on a subtitled Korean movie. Hungry afterwards, I grab some street eats (p100) – my favourite octopus balls and a homemade sausage hotdog. I need to buy a birthday present so catch the subway to Dongdaemun and join the fashion scrum in Doota Mall (p83). Then my vegetarian friend texts about dinner. Sanchon (best atmosphere; p101) or Gamrodang (best food; p99)? Whatever. He texts back about trawling Hongdae after, Jane's Groove (p118), Tin Pan (p118). Whatever. I want to show him my latest discovery, the wondrous Dragon Hill Spa (p140). It's so good we'll probably stay all night.

## Jason Zahorchak



After a completely unplanned move to Seoul after college, Jason found himself working for an English-language newspaper and exploring the city's hidden nooks with the help of some very in-the-know Seoul-

ites. He liked his first year so much, he came back two years later, this time working for his former paper's rival. In his nearly three years in Seoul, he's lived in the city's far northeast and far northwest corners – with imposing mountains right in his backyard – and in a Hongdae 'studio', 8 *pyeong* in size (conversion: room to lie down in). He'll always be back for food – and friends. Jason wrote the introductory chapters for this book, plus the Seoul's Hidden Byways colour section.

## LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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