

Gang-won-do

강원도



Gangwon-do, northeast of Seoul and bordering the ocean and North Korea, holds many of Korea's natural gems. Roads wind through wildflower-dappled valleys, rivers chase and meander their way to the sea, and verdant green mountains cloaked in mist rise up suddenly. Come here to trade the crazy neonscape of Seoul for rural majesty, or visit the quiet but still fun cities of Chuncheon or Gangneung.

Gangwon-do has several of South Korea's most beautiful national parks, including Seoraksan, whose evocative, jagged peaks seem like giant, nature-made sculptures and whose trails offer hours – even days – of hiking. More sedate pleasures can be found in the beaches of Gangneung and Naksan, where Seoulites arrive in droves in the summertime to sunbake on smooth, white-sand beaches and splash in the sea. Bungee jumping, skiing, cycling, and white-water rafting are other outdoor options. Most of the more beautiful parts of the province are found in obscure valleys with dramatic gorges, raging rivers and dense forests, and the sandy coves and rocky headlands south of Samcheok provide serene sea views.

Approaching the northern border you'll see tank blockades, barbed wire and lots of military: North Korean spies still slip through from time to time, and it's a bit odd to see lines of spotlights that illuminate the beaches – they're not for tourists, they're to spot intruders.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike the breathtaking peaks of **Seoraksan National Park** (p172)
- Tour the North Korean villas and view lots of barbed wire at **Hwajinpo** (p171)
- Marvel at the giant penis totems at Sin-nam's **Haesindong Gang-won** (p183)
- Lounge in the white-sand splendour of **Gyeongpo Beach** (p176)
- Sample delicious, scaldingly spicy chicken at **Chuncheon** (p163)
- Explore the Coal Museum and Dan-gun's mountain-top altar in **Taebaeksan Provincial Park** (p184)
- View the artistic Buddhist treasures at **Woljeongsa** (p177) and **Sang-wonsa** (p177) in Odaesan National Park



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 033

■ POPULATION: 1.5 MILLION

■ AREA: 16,874 SQ KM

History

Historically the province has been isolated due to its rugged terrain, and during the Korean War it was the site of many fierce battles for strategic mountain tops. After the war, the area's rich natural resources, including coal and timber, were industrialised, bringing road and rail links. With the closure of many coal mines during the 1990s, the province was forced to create alternative employment opportunities. Tourism was the solution.

In summer 2006 a 100-year rainy season brought torrential downpours, and with it flooding, landslides and death. The disaster killed over 60 people, washed away roads and trails (including many in the Seoraksan National Park and other hiking areas) and de-

stroyed homes and businesses. By the time this book is published much will be back to normal thanks to aid and industrious rebuilding, but the memory of the loss is fresh and painful.

National Parks

Seoraksan National Park and Chiaksan National Park are the two biggest and most famous parks of the province. Both are spectacular. Seoraksan offers grand vistas, forest-darkened hiking trails, rushing rivers, beautiful autumn and winter trips, and stunning scenery all year round. Chiaksan, smaller and less visited, has a more subtle beauty that is just as charming, and its temples and peaks are some of the highest in the country. While both parks are well-equipped to handle large

numbers of visitors, at peak times (usually July and August) the swarms of visitors take a bite out of the beauty. Escape them by hiking in the early morning, just after the trails open, or choosing to come at other times of the year.

Getting There & Around

Public transport is so good in South Korea that getting there and around is deceptively easy, and inexpensive too. The roads are probably the quietest in the country, except in July and August when crowds flock to the east-coast beaches. Buses and trains run frequently from Seoul to all major cities. From there, local buses or taxis go the rest of the way.

CHUNCHEON 춘천

pop 260,000

The 'City of Lakes', proud birthplace of the scrumptious yet mouth-scalding *dakgalbi* (chicken, rice cakes and veggies cooked with spicy chilli paste), still retains the charm and quiet of a small town, despite its size. Four pretty artificial lakes surround the city (the provincial capital), making for beauty, nice bike rides and (in season) mosquitoes. Whether you are up in the surrounding mountains, on the shoreline, or in the lakes themselves, you'll find that it's a gorgeous spot; however, outside the obvious outdoor activities and the *dakgalbi* restaurants, there's not a lot to do and the water, pretty at a distance, is quite dirty up close. In spring a section of rice fields outside town becomes a haven for visiting cranes. Fans of Asian TV dramas will recognise this as the setting for the wildly popular *Winter Sonata*, posters of which still fly all over town.

Orientation

Nam (South) Chuncheon train station is the main station, but it is located 2km (about a 30-minute walk) from the town centre and the bus terminal. You'll need to walk or take a taxi to reach the lake shore, bike rentals or the town centre. Much of the city proper is clustered near the shoreline. Jungdo is a small island just offshore.

Information

A large and helpful tourist information centre (% 250 3896; www.iccn.co.kr; h 9am-6pm) is near the bus terminal and has free internet access and brochures on the whole of Gang-won-do. A smaller office (% 252 3600; h 9am-6pm) is near the lake, Uiamho.

Activities

BICYCLE TOURS

Jungdo Cycle Ride

Hire a bicycle from the bicycle rental stall (per hr/day W3000/5000; h 9am-7pm) near the lakeside tourist information centre. You will need to leave some form of ID. Cycle to Talbang Makguksu (p165) for lunch and then pedal to the ferry pier for Jungdo (중도). Alternatively catch bus 74 (W900, 10 minutes, many daily).

This pretty little lake island has horse-and-carriage rides (per person W5000 for 10 minutes), water skiing (W30,000 for 10 minutes), rowing boats (W5000 per hour), an outdoor swimming pool (open in July and August), sports fields and picnic areas. Herons, ducks and other water birds occupy the reeds, more so at the island's western end. You can look for ancient tombs as well. At the bicycle rental stall, Heukeyomsotangjip Restaurant sells *bulgogi* (barbecued beef and vegetables) and *seolleongtang* (beef and rice soup) but most visitors picnic under the trees.

The **Jungdo Ferry** (adult/child W4300/2400 return, every 30min; h 9am-6pm) takes 10 minutes and bicycles are charged W1000 (return fare).

Lakeside Cycle Ride

A cycle path runs along Uiam Lake to the Korean War Memorial and beyond. It's a magical ride if you do it as the sun sets behind the mountains. The War Memorial is a reminder of the Chuncheon battle when the North Koreans lost 6600 men and 18 tanks.

BOATING

Row boats (W6000 per hour) and swan paddle boats (W10,000 per hour) can be hired from near the Ethiopia Café. Don't fall in – the water is nasty.

ICE SKATING

The ice skating rink (% 263 7302; adult/youth W3000/2500; h 1pm-6pm Tue-Sun) can be reached by bus 75 or you could cycle there.

Sleeping

Grand Motel (% 243 5021; Okcheondong 39-6; r W30,000; a i) Dark rooms are brightened by art on the walls, and some have balconies. The lino floors are a bit characterless, but the owners are kind and they provide a free pick-up service from the bus terminal and train station.

Youngbinjang Hotel (% 253 1530; www.hotel-youngbin.co.kr; Gunhwadong 1727; r W30,000; a i) Nicely

