

ASIA · FOOD · CITY BREAKS · CULTURE · HISTORY · HIKING · NIGHTLIFE



South Korea

South Korea moves fast: Seoul's palaces, neon districts and late-night food culture sit alongside Buddhist temples in the hills, Gyeongju's royal tombs and Busan's seafood markets and beaches. Jeju Island adds volcanic coast and hiking. KTX bullet trains link Seoul and Busan in under three hours, making a two-week trip easy without a car.

i Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for South Korea and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 14 May 2026.

CAPITAL Seoul	CURRENCY South Korean won (KRW) £1 ≈ ₩1,772	LANGUAGE Korean	BEST TIME Apr–May, Sep–Nov
DAILY BUDGET £50–£240 ££ Moderate	PLUGS Type C, F 220V · adapter needed	FLIGHT FROM LONDON 13h 30m direct ~£650–£1,200 return	TIME ZONE UTC+9 standard time

South Korea fits Joseon palaces, Silla tombs, mountain temples and one of the world's most wired societies into a country smaller than England. A first trip typically starts with four or five days in Seoul for the palaces, Bukchon's hanok houses, markets and a trip towards the DMZ, then takes the KTX south-east to Gyeongju, the former Silla capital, and on to Busan. Jeju, an hour's flight from Seoul, adds volcanic craters, lava tubes and the Olle coastal trails. Temple stays, hanok guesthouses and the Seoraksan mountains reward extra days.

Costs are moderate: Seoul hotels approach European prices, but food, transport and entry fees are cheap, and the subway and buses are spotless and simple to use with a T-money card. Koreans can seem reserved with strangers but are very helpful, and English signage is good in cities, less so in the countryside. Spring blossom and autumn foliage draw big domestic crowds, and the summer monsoon (late June to July) gives way to a hot, sticky August. It suits food lovers, city-breakers, hikers, K-culture fans and first-timers to Asia looking for an easy, efficient introduction.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

HISTORY

Gyeongbokgung and Bukchon

The largest of Seoul's Joseon palaces, founded in 1395 and largely rebuilt after demolition in the Japanese colonial era. Watch the gate guard ceremony, then wander Bukchon's hanok lanes; visitors wearing hanbok enter the palace free.
- 2

HISTORY

Gyeongju

Capital of the Silla kingdom for nearly a thousand years, scattered with grassy royal burial mounds and the Cheomseongdae observatory, while the hills hold Bulguksa Temple and the Seokguram grotto Buddha, both UNESCO-listed.

3

NATURE

Jeju Island

A volcanic island an hour's flight from Seoul: climb Hallasan, South Korea's highest peak at 1,947 m, watch sunrise from the Seongsan Ilchulbong crater, walk the Olle trails and see the haenyeo women divers at work.

4

NATURE

Seoraksan National Park

Granite peaks, maple-red valleys in October and Sinheungsa temple's giant bronze Buddha, near Sokcho on the east coast. A cable car climbs to the Gwongseumseong fortress ruins; tougher trails reach Daecheongbong at 1,708 m.

5

SACRED SITE

Haeinsa Temple

A mountain temple in Gayasan National Park housing the Tripitaka Koreana, more than 80,000 13th-century woodblocks of Buddhist scripture. It is one of the best places for an overnight templestay with the monks.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Seoul

≈ 26 million people

A capital of five Joseon palaces, hanok lanes and mountain hikes within the city limits, with districts ranging from Hongdae's live music to Gangnam's malls; give it at least four days.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Busan

≈ 3.3 million people

Korea's great port city mixes beaches at Haeundae and Gwangalli, the Jagalchi fish market, the hillside Gamcheon Culture Village and the seaside Haedong Yonggungsa temple.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Daegu

≈ 2.4 million people

A hot inland city known for Seomun Market's night stalls, the early-20th-century missionary houses on Cheongna Hill and the Kim Kwang-seok mural lane; Haeinsa temple is an easy bus trip away.

Seoul's figure is for the Seoul Capital Area, which takes in Incheon (about 3 million people, including Korea's oldest Chinatown) and Gyeonggi province; the city proper has about 9.4 million. Busan and Daegu are city populations.

When to go to South Korea

Best time: **Apr–May, Sep–Nov.**

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

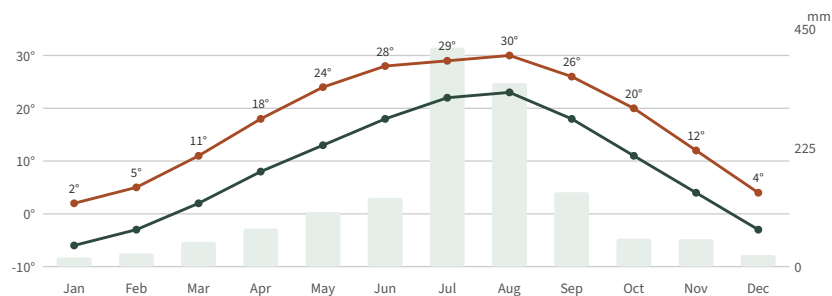
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Seoul

— High °C — Low °C — Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Mar–Apr	Jinhae Gunhangje Festival Korea's biggest cherry-blossom festival fills the naval port of Jinhae, in Changwon, with hundreds of thousands of trees in bloom; Seoul's Yeouido and Seokchon Lake follow within days.
May	Lotus Lantern Festival Before Buddha's Birthday, a parade of glowing lanterns flows through central Seoul to Jogyesa temple, a UNESCO-listed tradition, while temples nationwide hang lanterns in their courtyards.
Jul	Boryeong Mud Festival A summer festival of mud slides, mud wrestling and pools on Daecheon Beach, using mineral-rich mud from the Boryeong tidal flats; hugely popular with foreigners and young Koreans.

How much does South Korea cost?

SHOESTRING £50 per person / day ≈ ₩88,625 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £110 per person / day ≈ ₩194,975 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £240 per person / day ≈ ₩425,399 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

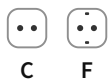
Bibimbap Rice topped with seasoned vegetables, gochujang chilli paste, a fried egg and often beef; order the dolsot version, served sizzling in a hot stone bowl.	Samgyeopsal Thick slices of pork belly grilled at the table, wrapped in lettuce with garlic, ssamjang paste and kimchi; best shared with friends and soju.	Kimchi jjigae A bubbling stew of well-fermented kimchi, pork and tofu, the everyday comfort food served with rice in cheap restaurants across the country.
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Getting around

KTX high-speed trains link Seoul with Busan, Daegu, Gyeongju, Jeonju and Gangneung, and express buses reach almost everywhere else cheaply. Seoul and Busan have excellent metros, and a T-money card works on metros, buses and most taxis nationwide. Domestic flights serve Jeju from most cities. Naver Map and KakaoMap are far more detailed than Google Maps in Korea, and Kakao T is the main taxi app.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



220V — bring a UK-to-C/F adapter

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance: **119**

Fire: **119**

Police: **112**

Dasan Call Centre (**+82 2 120**) – available 9am to 6pm
Monday-Friday

Danuri Call Centre (**1577 1366**) – available **24/7**

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

DIALLING CODE

+82

TIME ZONE

UTC+9 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Generally safe to drink

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Not part of Korean culture and can cause confusion; prices include service, though some upmarket hotels add a service charge to the bill.

ETIQUETTE

Bow slightly when greeting, give and receive things with both hands, and pour drinks for others rather than yourself. Remove shoes indoors, and never stand chopsticks upright in rice.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Incheon International Airport (ICN), Seoul; Gimhae International Airport (PUS), Busan; Jeju International Airport (CJU), Jeju

Visas & entry for South Korea

Shown for a British passport.

Apply online before you go (travel authorisation)

You can enter South Korea for up to 90 days for short-term business or tourism. You must have an onward or return ticket. It's illegal to be employed in South Korea while visiting visa-free, whether as a teacher or in any other capacity.

South Korea operates an electronic travel authorisation system called K-ETA. Anyone eligible for visa-free entry to South Korea is usually required to get K-ETA approval before departure. However, British nationals travelling visa-free to South Korea are temporarily exempt from requiring a K-ETA until December 31, 2026. Further information about the K-ETA exemption can be found on the K-ETA notice board.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Hepatitis B Japanese encephalitis Rabies Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

No yellow fever certificate is required to enter.

MALARIA

Very low risk of malaria

- There is a very low risk of malaria in the northern areas of South Korea, in Gangwon-do and Gyeonggi-do Provinces, and Incheon City, near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in South Korea

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Fri 25 Dec 2026	Christmas Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Sat 6 Feb 2027	The day preceding Korean New Year
Sun 7 Feb 2027	Korean New Year
Mon 8 Feb 2027	The second day of Korean New Year
Tue 9 Feb 2027	Alternative holiday for Korean New Year
Mon 1 Mar 2027	Independence Movement Day
Sat 1 May 2027	Labour Day
Mon 3 May 2027	Alternative holiday for Labour Day
Wed 5 May 2027	Children's Day
Thu 13 May 2027	Buddha's Birthday
Sun 6 Jun 2027	Memorial Day
Sat 17 Jul 2027	Constitution Day
Mon 19 Jul 2027	Alternative holiday for Constitution Day
Sun 15 Aug 2027	Liberation Day
Mon 16 Aug 2027	Alternative holiday for Liberation Day
Tue 14 Sep 2027	The day preceding Chuseok
Wed 15 Sep 2027	Chuseok
Thu 16 Sep 2027	The second day of Chuseok
Sun 3 Oct 2027	National Foundation Day
Mon 4 Oct 2027	Alternative holiday for National Foundation Day
Sat 9 Oct 2027	Hangul Day
Mon 11 Oct 2027	Alternative holiday for Hangul Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Korean

ENGLISH	KOREAN	SAY IT
Hello	안녕하세요	<i>an-nyeong-ha-SEH-yo</i>
Thank you	감사합니다	<i>kam-sa-ham-NEE-da</i>
Please	주세요	<i>JOO-seh-yo</i>
Excuse me	실례합니다	<i>shil-leh-ham-NEE-da</i>
How much is this?	이거 얼마예요?	<i>ee-guh UL-ma-yeh-yo</i>

Know before you go

- Download Naver Map or KakaoMap, plus Papago for translation, before you arrive; they remain far more reliable than Google Maps for walking, driving and public transport directions in South Korea.
- Buy a T-money card at any convenience store or station; it covers subways, buses and most taxis, but top-ups are usually cash only, so keep some won handy.
- Book hotels early for cherry-blossom season in early April, autumn foliage in October, and around Chuseok and Lunar New Year, when much of the country travels at once.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.