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Jewish EXPONENT July 23, 2009
Volume 226 Issue 18

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Southern Comfort

North Korea talks of bombs; South Korea of bonhomie
July 23, 2009 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

While frightening news comes out of North Korea these days, things are different for American visitors to South Korea, where the Korean Tourism Organization's global campaign can be brilliantly summed up in a single word: sparkling.



Seoul style

Avid shoppers need not know how to read or speak Korean to intuit that South Koreans want to present their nation as an enchanted place where a high quality of life is one of its priorities.

For history buffs, the region is a complex gem that rose from a tumultuous history, emerging as one of the most progressive countries in terms of technology, commerce and lifestyle -- especially from 1988 forward, when Seoul hit the world stage to host the Olympic Games. The mix of these things makes for one alluring package to vacationers of all stripes.

For Philadelphia native Nadine Postol, all things that make Korea sparkle for vacationers also make it a great place to live, especially if you have inquisitive children and relatives who enjoy travel.

"I love living in the third-largest city in the world because there is so much to do here," says Postol, now based in Washington, D.C., but who lived in Seoul for three years with her family. "I would bring my friends and family from back home to places they [could] find nowhere else in the world, like the Namdaemun, Dongdaemun and Insa-dong markets, Gyeongbokgung Palace and various teahouses around town.

"I would also encourage them to get outside Seoul to visit the rural villages and countryside. Busan is a



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wonderful, stunning place, and Jagalchi Fish Market is fun because it is fascinating to see what people are eating."

In the past, more observant Jewish visitors or those maintaining kosher diets may have overlooked Korea as a vacation destination because of the lack of a Jewish presence (in comparison to cities like Beijing and Shanghai). However, a new Chabad center and the efforts of Rabbi Osher Litzman and his community endeavor to change that for all denominations of Jews.



City life in Busan

"We arrived before Passover 2008, and had 50 people over for our first Passover," recalls Litzman. "A sign that the center was blessed was that the package with our supplies for the seder arrived that morning."

"This year," he says, "we had over 100 people over for Passover. Altogether, we have a community in Korea that numbers about 400 Jews, who are mostly from the U.S., Canada and Israel. Koreans have been so generous towards us, and I say this from experience, having traveled the world for Chabad."

The community continues to grow steadily, which prompted the Litzmans to relocate the center to a larger space near Seoul's Embassy Row area, as well as open a Jewish library dedicated to the memory of Chabad emissaries Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg, who were slain last year in the attacks on the Mumbai Chabad house in India.

Local Koreans, such as guide Sharon Choi, have voiced an interest in learning more about Jewish culture.

"We are effectively the Jewish embassy, even though we do have an Israeli embassy here," notes Litzman, who predicts by this time next year they may be located in an even bigger space, between the growth of the expat community and queries from Jews now interested in visiting Korea from around the world.

"What was the most challenging thing for us was that we were the first Jewish community in Korea," he continues. "At first, there were no [holiday] services, mikvahs or even kosher food, so we had to start from scratch, as everything was initially confined to the army base."

Postol, however, points out Jewish culture in subtle ways can already be found within the collective Korean consciousness.

"The first person I met when we got here invited me to go to church with him," she recalls. "When I explained I was Jewish, he was stumped, and then said, 'Mohammed, right?'"

"I said, 'Not Mohammed, Jewish.' He thought about it for a moment and said, 'Oh, Moses! Oh, Talmud!'"

"Once he got it, I asked him how he knew about the Talmud, and he explained that educators take stories from the Talmud and translate them into English to use as great teachings of life lessons, as well as tools to teach students English. Sure enough, we went to a multilingual bookshop in Seoul and found these little Talmud texts."

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Eating and Architecture

With some guidance from the locals, those keeping kosher can learn how to be mindful when navigating menus, even with vegetable-heavy offerings at traditional Korean restaurants (such as Yongsusan in Seoul) and the country's many chic, upscale buffet restaurants (including Top Cloud in Seoul and Camellia at the Westin Chosun Busan).

Several common items may include shrimp paste, so ask about what is in dishes and how they are prepared.

However, once the food thing is figured out, visitors -- kosher and otherwise -- can get down to the business of appreciating Korea's sensory and cultural buffet.

Seoul is a dazzling maze of gravity-defying skyscrapers, neon and winding highways that are best showcased at night.

Yet the soul of Seoul can be found by day within that maze, via the many temples and palaces that can be found in every corner.

Bosingak Bell Pavilion, Jogyesa Temple and the complex housing the Gyeongbokgung Palace, National Folk Museum of Korea and National Palace Museum of Korea are cultural immersions into Korean history, anthropology, landscape and architecture, where the modern skyline of Seoul almost seems to vanish.

Meanwhile, the North Seoul Tower and its surrounding park offer a graceful look at modern urban recreation at its best.

For more information, see: www.visitkorea.or.kr and www.koreanair.com, as well as www.jewishkorea.com.

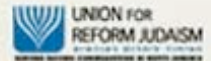
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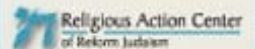


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