

South Korea



Map



Background

- **Land and Climate:** Covering 98,480 sq km, South Korea is slightly larger than Indiana. Its only border is shared with North Korea at the 38th parallel, where the Korean Peninsula was divided at the end of World War II. At its closest point, South Korea is 123 miles (196 kilometers) from Japan. Around 65 percent of South Korea's territory is forested and approximately 20 percent is suitable for cultivation. Hills and mountains dominate the east, while plains are found in the west and south. South Korea's climate is temperate, but high humidity makes summers seem hotter and winters colder. The nation experiences all four seasons; spring and fall are the most pleasant times of the year. The monsoon season is from mid-July to mid-August. During this time, South Korea receives half of its annual rainfall. Korea is traditionally known as Chosŏn (“Land of the Morning Calm”).

People

- **Population:** South Korea's population of 49 million is growing by 0.4 percent annually. About 80 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Seoul is the largest city, followed by Busan, Daegu, and Incheon. Except for small Chinese and Southeast Asian minorities, South Korea is an ethnically homogeneous country. However, regionalism divides the population and creates biases and tensions that have impacted politics and social interaction throughout the nation's history. A person's dialect or accent can identify his or her home region. Inter-marriage between regions is relatively uncommon. Political rivalries between leaders from Gyeongsang province and Jeolla province are most pronounced.
- **Language and Greeting:** The Korean language plays an important role in national identity. It is written in Hangeul, a phonetic alphabet created in 1446 because classical Chinese (the only written language available) was difficult to master. Hangeul also instilled a national pride in Koreans that helped them preserve their culture during periods of foreign occupation. The Seoul dialect is the standard taught in school. Korean used in South Korea mixes numerous Chinese characters with Hangeul script in newspapers and government documents, but Korean is not closely related to Chinese. Modern Korean has adopted many English and other foreign terms associated with Western culture. English is taught in schools and many people in urban areas can speak it. Within the Confucian social structure, how one is greeted depends on one's age and social standing relative to the greeter. A bow is the traditional greeting, but it is usually accompanied by a handshake between men. As a sign of respect, the left hand may support or rest under the right forearm during the handshake. Women shake hands less often than men do. Among friends and relatives, a simple nod is acceptable. Children bow when greeting adults.
- **Religion:** Confucianism permeates all aspects of Korean society, but it is a philosophy and not a religion. It orders social behavior, stressing virtue, morality, and filial piety. Children are expected to show deference to their parents and perform certain duties for them in life and after they die. Confucian rites conducted on behalf of ancestors promote this respect and family unity. Even Christians will perform these cultural rites in honor of their dead. Christians comprise about 29 percent of the population. Most belong to a variety of Protestant churches. Some 23 percent of South Koreans are Buddhist. Less than 1 percent of the population engages in Shamanism, including geomancy, divination, avoiding bad luck or omens, warding off evil spirits, and venerating the dead.
- **General Attitude:** Korean society is vertically ordered according to tenets of Confucian philosophy. Nearly all interaction is determined by one's place in various social groups or one's status in a relationship. One's status is determined by age, gender, education, family background, wealth, occupation, and/or political ideology. Success depends on social contacts. Koreans are quick to make friends and they rely on each other for just about anything. Giving gifts as a means of obtaining favors is common, especially in the workplace, and accepting a gift carries the responsibility of reciprocity. Open criticism and public disagreement are considered inappropriate because they can damage another person's reputation. Out of respect for the feelings of others, Koreans may withhold bad news or adverse opinions or express them in an indirect way.
- **Personal Appearance:** Most South Koreans, except for the elderly in rural areas, wear Western-style clothing. The youth wear modern fashions, and Korea has an active fashion

industry. Clothing often depends on the event. In public, conservative dress is important. Bare feet are inappropriate. In the business world, Western-style suits and dresses are the norm. On special occasions or holidays, however, people often wear a *hanbok*. For women, a *hanbok* is a long two-piece dress that is often very colorful. For men, it includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe.

Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** Korean food is generally spicy. Rice and *kimchi* (a spicy pickled cabbage) are staples at almost every meal. Various soups are common. Rice sometimes is combined with other ingredients, such as red beans or vegetables. *Bibimbap* is rice mixed with seasoned vegetables; an egg is usually put on top, and sometimes bits of meat are added. Chicken and beef are common meats. Koreans also eat large amounts of fish, seafood (clams, oysters, squid, octopus, sea cucumbers), and *ddŏk* (pounded rice cake). Barley tea and *soju*, a common alcoholic drink made from rice, are served with most meals. South Koreans eat three meals a day, though busy schedules make it difficult for the family to always dine together. Chopsticks and spoons are the most commonly used utensils. At a dinner party, the meal usually is served before socializing begins. People pass items and pour drinks with the right hand, supporting the forearm or wrist with the left hand. Eating while walking on the street is not considered appropriate for adults.
- **Recreation:** The most popular spectator sports in South Korea are baseball, basketball, soccer, and volleyball. Some South Koreans swim, play tennis, bowl, or golf. Children enjoy training in *taekwŏndo* (a martial art), and most men have some experience with it from their compulsory two years of military service. Badminton, table tennis, and billiards are popular games. Unique to Korea is a form of wrestling called *ssrŏm*, in which contestants hold on to pieces of cloth tied around their opponent's legs during their match. Mountain climbing and hiking are favorite activities for weekends and vacations. Music and television attract the attention of the youth. Computer games are especially popular among young people.
- **Holidays:** For the New Year (1–3 Jan.), families gather to exchange gifts, honor the dead, and enjoy large meals. South Koreans celebrate the Lunar New Year (January or February) by visiting hometowns or vacationing in resorts. The other major family holiday is *Chuseok* (Harvest Moon Festival) in September or October, when family members visit ancestral tombs (including those of immediate ancestors) to clean the grave site and leave food offerings in honor of the dead. Larger family reunions are common during this festival. Other holidays include Independence Movement Day (1 Mar.), Children's Day (5 May), Buddha's Birthday (in April or May, observed according to the lunar calendar), Memorial Day (6 June), Independence Day (15 Aug.), National Foundation Day (3 Oct.), and Christmas. Arbor Day (5 Apr.), Armed Forces Day (1 Oct.), and Korean Language Day (9 Oct.) are marked by various celebrations but are not public holidays.
- **Commerce and Currency:** Small family-owned stores are usually open every day from early in the morning until 10 or 11pm. Other businesses generally open from 9am to 6 pm. Banks and government offices usually close earlier. The official currency used in South Korea is the South Korean Won. The exchange rate is 1 US dollar to 1,511.03 South-Korean Won.

Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** Air, rail, and bus connections provide a good transportation network between cities. A bullet train travels between Seoul and Pusan in two and a half hours. Roads are paved and in good condition. Buses, private cars, and taxis handle urban transportation. Seoul has efficient subway and bus systems. Taxis are plentiful and inexpensive. Drivers will often stop for additional passengers during busy hours. Driving habits are aggressive and accidents are common. South Korea has many daily newspapers, numerous radio and television stations, and efficient postal and telephone systems. Cellular telephone use is widespread.
- **Health:** All segments of the population have access to good health care. The best medical facilities are in Seoul. Care progressed with economic growth; most people now have safe water and adequate nutrition. Nearly all women receive prenatal care and medical attention during delivery. More than 90 percent of all children are immunized.