

the essential guide to
customs & culture

CULTURE SMART!

KOREA



CULTURE SMART!

guides will help you to deal confidently with unfamiliar situations abroad. They tell you about the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of people in different countries, so that when you arrive you are aware of local manners and sensitive issues, and are well equipped to make friends and enter into successful business relationships. Practical advice on what to expect and how to behave enables you to avoid embarrassing gaffes, establish a rapport with your hosts, and make the very best of your visit.

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CULTURE SMART!
KOREA

James Hoare

·K·U·P·E·R·A·R·D·

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For more information contact Kuperard publishers at the address below.

ISBN 978 1 85733 669 6

This book is also available as an e-book: eISBN 978 1 85733 670 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue entry for this book is available from the
British Library

First published in Great Britain
by Kuperard, an imprint of Bravo Ltd
59 Hutton Grove, London N12 8DS
Tel: +44 (0) 20 8446 2440 Fax: +44 (0) 20 8446 2441
www.culturesmart.co.uk
Inquiries: sales@kuperard.co.uk

Series Editor Geoffrey Chesler
Design Bobby Birchall

Printed in Malaysia

Cover image: *Lanterns in a Buddhist temple, Seoul, South Korea.*

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About the Author

JAMES HOARE spent over thirty years in the British Diplomatic Service, with postings to Seoul and Beijing. His last job was *Chargé D'Affaires* in Pyongyang, North Korea, where he established the first-ever British Embassy. He has written numerous books and articles about East Asia, including *Embassies in the East: The Story of the British and Their Embassies in China, Japan and Korea from 1859 to the Present* (1999), and, with his wife, Susan Pares, *Conflict in Korea: An Encyclopedia* (1999).

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The publishers would like to thank **CultureSmart!**Consulting for its help in researching and developing the concept for this series.

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CultureSmart!Consulting and **CultureSmart!** guides have both contributed to and featured regularly in the weekly travel program "Fast Track" on BBC World TV.

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Map of Korea



introduction

The past century has not been kind to the people of the Korean peninsula. Nearly one hundred years ago, Japan's defeat of Russia paved the way for the Japanese protectorate in Korea. Then in 1910, the Japanese annexed Korea as a full-scale colony. Liberation in 1945 brought not independence as all Koreans had hoped, but the division of the peninsula that has lasted until today. North Korea attempted to reunify Korea by force in 1950. Outside intervention saved both Korean states from extinction, but the war intensified the division.

Only in the last decade has there been any significant move to heal the wounds of the past. The issue is complicated by the very different conditions of the two Koreas. The North remains a dictatorship, and having once led in economic development and industrialization, is in economic decline. The South, by contrast, once viewed as an economic disaster, built a modern economy in the 1960s and 1970s, weathered the financial storms of the 1990s, and seems well on the road to democracy. The two Koreas are now interacting as never before. Major issues remain, such as the role of outside powers and North Korea's apparent pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. Yet the future looks more positive than it has for years.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2002 World Cup, shared with Japan, have helped to increase knowledge about South Korea, but have not overcome widespread ignorance about the Korean people and their culture. Yet those who visit Korea, whether North or South, will find a place of great interest with much to offer. Koreans, when not constrained by politics or other considerations, are friendly and sociable. The peninsula has areas of outstanding natural beauty. The South's cities, if not always beautiful, are vibrant and alive. The North, while very different, is well worth getting to know.

Culture Smart! Korea shows how Koreans think and act, and the pitfalls to avoid, and introduces some of the delights of the peninsula. It is the product of an involvement that stretches back to the early 1970s, and of my residence in both North and South Korea. It derives partly from a little book called *Simple Guide to Korea: Customs and Etiquette*, which my wife and I wrote. The European Department of the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to whom we gave a copy, made this required reading for all the staff of the department, since it provided real insights into Korean thinking and behavior. I hope that *Culture Smart! Korea* will do the same for many other readers.

Key Facts: South Korea

Official Name	Republic of Korea	<i>Daehan minguk</i>
Capital City	Seoul	Pop. 10.4 million
Major Cities	Inch'on, Taejon, Taegu, Pusan, Kwangju, Ulsan	
Area	38,131 sq. miles (98,759 sq. km)	
Climate	Continental, tempered by maritime influences	
Population	47.6 million (2002)	
Ethnic Makeup	Korean: 100%	
Government	Democracy, with executive president and unicameral legislature (National Assembly)	
Borders	Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea: 151 miles (240 km)	
Currency	Won, divided into 100 chon, but the latter has gone out of usage. The South Korean won has a different exchange value from the North.	Coins are Won 1, 5, 50, 100, and 500. The first two have practically disappeared. Notes are Won 1,000, 5,000, and 10,000.
Language	Korean. People who attended school before August 1945 will have learned Japanese.	
Religion	Traditional: Buddhism, shamanism, and Confucianism. Since the eighteenth century, Christianity has grown, and over a quarter of the population is now Christian. There are a number of new religions, and Islam has about 40,000 followers.	
Media	Thriving press, radio, and TV. Widespread use of computers, the Internet, and cell phones. There are three English-language dailies: <i>Korea Herald</i> , <i>Korea Times</i> , and the <i>JoongAng Ilbo</i> supplement to the <i>International Herald Tribune</i> .	
Internet Domain	.kr	
Electricity	220 v, although some 110 v outlets may still be found. US-style plugs are the norm.	
Time	GMT + 8	

Key Facts: North Korea

Official Name	Democratic People's Republic of Korea	<i>Choson minjuju inmin konghwaguk</i>
Capital City	Pyongyang	Pop. 2 million
Major Cities	Nampo, Kaesong, Wonsan, Shinuiju, Hamhung	
Area	46,768 sq. miles (121,129 sq. km)	
Climate	Continental, tempered by maritime influences	
Population	22.3 million	
Ethnic Makeup	Korean: 100%	
Government	Authoritarian dictatorship, with unicameral legislature (Supreme People's Assembly)	
Borders	Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea: 151 miles (240 km). Border with People's Republic of China: 640 miles (1,025 km); and with Russia: 9 miles (15 km)	
Currency	Won, divided into 100 chon. The North Korean won has a different exchange value from the South Korean won. Foreigners have to use the euro as currency.	
Language	Korean. People who attended school before August 1945 will have learned Japanese.	
Religion	North Korea is an atheist state. It is officially acknowledged that there are Buddhists, Roman Catholics, and Protestant Christians, and followers of a Korean religion, Chondogyo.	
Media	All media outlets are state or party controlled. The main newspaper is the party journal <i>Rodong Shinmun</i> (<i>Worker's Daily</i>). The English-language <i>Pyongyang Times</i> is a weekly. There are also editions in a number of other languages.	
Internet Domain	.kp	
Electricity	220 v. US-style plugs are the norm.	
Time	GMT + 8	

LAND & PEOPLE

The Korean peninsula has been occupied by two independent states since 1948: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, known as North Korea) in the northern part, and the Republic of Korea (ROK, known as South Korea) in the south. The peninsula curves out from the landmass of Northeast Asia, separating the Yellow Sea between China and the peninsula from what the Koreans call the East Sea. The latter title is disputed by Japan, which calls this stretch of water the Sea of Japan. To the north, there is a long land border with China, and a short one with Russia. The border is ill-defined in places, and Korean and Chinese claims overlap. Between the two Koreas, the 38th parallel originally formed the boundary as set by Soviet and US occupation forces in 1945. Now there is a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), established by the July 27, 1953, Korean Armistice that marked the end of the Korean War (1950–53). This zone, 2.5 miles (4 km) wide, stretches some 151 miles (243km) on land and another 37 miles (59.5 km) through the Han River estuary, right across the peninsula. Despite the area's official title, both sides have brought weapons into their respective sectors

from the very start of the armistice, and the DMZ is, ironically, now one of the most fortified regions in the world. For years it was virtually impassable, although recent years have seen some movement across it. One positive side effect of its existence is that much wildlife finds a peaceful sanctuary there, despite the occasional loss to a landmine or weapons tripwire. Some 1,600 plant and animal species have been identified as living in the DMZ, including the rare white crane.

GEOGRAPHY

The peninsula is rugged, with Mount Paektu, in North Korea on the Sino-Korean border, reaching 9,003 feet (2,744 m), while the highest mountain on the South Korean mainland is Mount Chiri in the Sobaek range, at 6,250 feet (1,905 m). Mount Halla



on Cheju Island, the highest mountain in South Korea, is 6,365 feet (1,937 m). The whole peninsula is divided by a series of mountain ranges. It is spectacularly beautiful in places, with jagged peaks and fast-flowing streams. This beauty has long been reflected in Korean painting.

The total area of the peninsula is about 85,328 square miles (220,998 sq. km), or roughly the size of mainland Britain. The mountain ranges leave relatively little land for cultivation. Farming and habitation are confined to about 16–20 percent of the total land area. As both Koreas have industrialized since the 1950s, so the amount of land available has steadily shrunk. The heaviest population concentrations have always been on the western side of the peninsula, which also has the best farmland.

There are about 3,500 islands, though some of these are disappearing as both Koreas have compensated for their lack of land by reclaiming it from the sea, a process that originally began in the Japanese colonial period (1910–45). Seoul's new airport at Inch'ón, opened in 2000, is built on a mixture of islands and reclaimed land. The east coast has steep cliffs and few islands, and the waters are deep. Far out to sea is Ullung-do, a popular tourist destination, famous for squid fishing. Even further to the east is a small crop of rocks known as Tok-to in Korean, and Takeshima in Japanese, whose ownership is disputed between both Koreas and Japan. (Even more obscurely, they appear on many Western maps as the Liancourt rocks, named after a nineteenth-century French survey vessel.) Tok-to is

currently occupied by a detachment of South Korean police. The dispute flares up from time to time as one side or the other engages in a provocative action or issues an inflammatory statement, then fades back in to obscurity for a bit.

On the western side, the sea is shallow, with numerous islands and high tidal variations. This produces good fishing, which has also led to clashes between vessels from the two Koreas and from China. Off the southern coast, drowned valleys have produced many islands, creating another area of spectacular natural beauty, with a number of national parks. Further off is the island of Cheju, South Korea's only island province. Its subtropical climate and subtly different traditions have made it a popular vacation spot since the 1950s. Before Koreans had the opportunity to go overseas on such occasions, it was the main honeymoon destination.

Little remains of the original deciduous forests that once covered the peninsula, now replaced by cultivated land or secondary forest. Rice paddy is the most widespread form of cultivation, even in the northern part of the peninsula, which is not well suited to it. Other grains include wheat and barley, and potatoes are now widely grown in North Korea. In the South, the use of plastic sheeting has greatly increased the supply of winter vegetables. There is some use of it in the North, partly encouraged by foreign aid workers, but it is expensive, and it is much less used than in the South. The southern island of Cheju's subtropical climate led to the development of a citrus fruit industry in the 1970s.

CLIMATE

The climate is varied; semitropical in Cheju, where oranges will grow, but in the rest of the peninsula varying from subzero winter temperatures to summer monsoons. Occasionally, winters can be particularly hard. In the north of the peninsula in January 2001, for example, temperatures briefly plunged below -58°F (-50°C), the coldest they had been for fifty years. December 2011 also saw another very cold spell. Usually, winters are more moderate, though there are regular spells of below-zero temperatures between November and March. Visitors to South Korea will find that buildings are well heated in winter, so getting the right balance of clothing is not always easy. In North Korea, however, while individual hotel rooms will be warm, few public buildings, even hotels, can supply adequate heating in winter, so it is necessary to bundle up well.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Three Kingdoms

Koreans trace their historical origins back to the Neolithic age (c. 5000–1000 BCE), when the mythical founder of the Korean state, the half-human, half-divine Tan'gun, is supposed to have flourished. (Tan'gun is regarded as the ancestor of all Koreans, and in the 1990s, in one of the ongoing rounds in the competition for legitimacy between the two Koreas, the North Koreans claimed to have discovered his tomb near the North Korean capital,