

Seoul, Korea – Just South of the DMZ

In November of 2003, I was invited to present a paper at the “8th International Seminar on Envisioning Cyber Geospace and Spatially Enabled e-Government” in Seoul. Audrie’s Limo picked me up at exactly 8:30am as I had scheduled, so I knew that Keith wasn’t the driver since he was always 15 minutes early! The trip to LAX was slower than usual due to the new driver who was not as “aggressive” as Keith and tended to “follow” the traffic regardless of the speed. But we arrived at the airport in a decent time (1 hour 30 minutes). However, I had to give her directions to the Bradley International Terminal. Upon arriving at the terminal, I checked in at the Korean Airlines Prestige Class (Business Class) counter in a matter of minutes. I enquired about upgrading to First Class but was told it was fully booked. With my boarding pass in hand, I headed to the TSA security checkpoint and the usual hassle of “shoes off, coat off, belt off, computer out of the bag”, etc. Once I was beyond the security checkpoint, I found the Korean Airlines First and Business Class Lounge upstairs – a very nice, quiet place with soft, soothing music and plenty of delicious things to eat and drink. After an hour of relaxing in the lounge, boarding was announced, and I made my way to the departure gate. A lovely Korean flight attendant showed me to my business class seat at the front of the huge 747-400 aircraft main deck, and it was very comfortable!

The inflight service on the 13 and half hour flight was excellent. The delicious dinner of Italian codfish in creamy garlic and basil sauce was superb, as was the chilled glass of Cabernet Sauvignon from New Zealand. Later in the flight, a tasty dish of spicy Chinese chicken in hoisin sauce was served before the lights were turned down. While I watched a couple of movies, including “Terminator 3”, I still had time for some sleep. (note: as I watched Terminator 3, Arnold was being sworn in as the new Governor of California, and I had to wonder how many passengers were even aware of the “irony” of that moment?)

We landed at the new Incheon Airport – a manmade island just off the coast and about an hour and half drive to downtown Seoul. The new airport was a beautiful facility, very bright and spacious – such a contrast to the old, dreary “Gimpo Airport”. In addition, immigration and customs formalities were very efficient, as was baggage claim. Mr. Choi and Chung-min from Esri-Korea were there to meet me and drive me to downtown Seoul along a new modern expressway parallel to the Han River. But it wasn’t long before we encountered some horrendous traffic that took us almost two hours to reach the city. During the trip, when Mr. Choi announced that he had plans for dinner with me, I tried to break it to him “gently” that I wasn’t up for dinner. He got the subtle message and didn’t pursue the dinner invitation any further. Finally, we arrived at the beautiful new “COEX Intercontinental Hotel” located adjacent to the Convention Center, the venue for the “seminar”, and above a huge underground mall! When I checked in, the front desk gave me a lovely room on the 25th floor which had an incredible view of the brilliant lights of downtown Seoul!



COEX Intercontinental Hotel



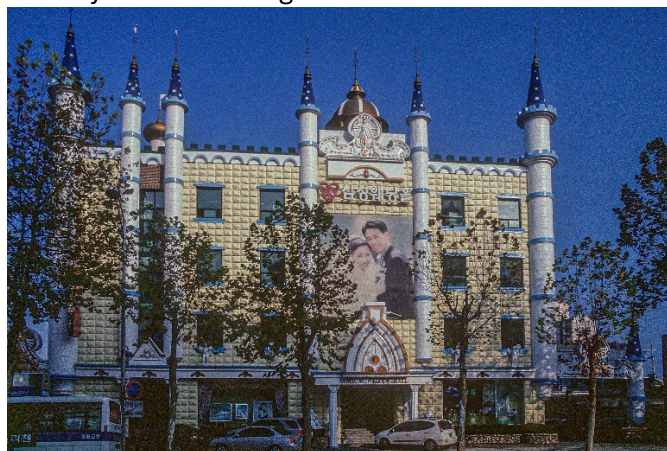
View from my hotel room

I woke up around 7am the next morning and had the day off until 3pm when I was scheduled to meet Mr. Choi at the Esri-Korea office to discuss the seminar. After a huge breakfast buffet, I headed to the COEX Mall, a massive underground shopping and entertainment complex of absolutely enormous proportions! It was designed with different colors and themes to designate unique areas of the mall, such as the “Forest Walk”, “Tropical Walk”, “Sea Walk”, and so on – very ingenious! After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, I finally found an ATM that would accept one of my credit cards. As I continued to explore the complex, I found the Convention Center “Grand Ballroom” where the seminar was scheduled to begin the next morning. And just around the corner from the ballroom was “O-Kim’s Brauhaus” – a new micro-brewery and the first of its kind in Korea!



O'Kim's Brauhaus microbrewery – COEX Mall

From the mall, I took a long walk past the huge 1988 Olympic stadium to the Han River, and along the way I passed the “Get Rich Café” and the “Seoul Wedding Palace” which was a very “over the top” fake fairy tale castle decorated in gawdy bright blue, white, and gold colors, with towers and gilding everywhere! It would have fit much better in Disneyland or Las Vegas!



“Seoul Wedding Palace”

Then I came to a large parking area on the edge of the river just below the Olympic stadium mostly filled with tour buses. But at one end of the huge lot were two small outdoor “Drive-In Theaters”, both right next to each other! They were obviously meant to be “inexpensive” since there was no sign of any individual speakers around, just two monstrous ones on either side of the giant screens! Immediately I thought “what happens when each theater shows a different movie?” From there I followed the Han River on a bike path for a couple of kms, though the map showed the bike trail extending for more than 30 kms along the river shore. Meanwhile, the rugged mountains to the north were slowly emerging from the morning mist. Just then, the Samsung Bicycle Team rushed by me in their very colorful, and fashionable, bright orange, and yellow suits.

Then I walked back to the hotel following the same route and checked my email using the super-fast Internet connection in my room. Later I went downstairs to the lobby lounge for a beer as I wrote in my journal, before taking a taxi to the Esri-Korea office. I was told it was supposed to be a 20-minute ride, but traffic was very heavy, so it ended up being double the time. The taxi driver did U-turn in front of 4 lanes of oncoming traffic (a common maneuver in the city) to drop me off on the opposite side of the street and as I was about to leave the taxi, he pointed to a large building. Since all I had was a small map to the office in Korean that I had given him, I had to take his word that this was the correct location. As I walked up to the building and saw the name “Diplomatic Center”, I was beginning to wonder if the taxi driver had made a mistake, especially since he had continually checked the small map as he drove!



“Diplomatic Centre” building

As I entered the building, I saw no sign for “Esri-Korea”, and there was no one at the information desk! Then suddenly I spotted Chung-min standing outside the door and he led me upstairs to the office. After many “introductions” and a tour of the new office, Mr. Choi took me to dinner at a small, local Korean BBQ restaurant nearby where we joined other staff from the office. We sat on the floor at a low table, and I was able to put my briefcase behind my back, which helped a little to ease the discomfort of having to sit cross-legged on the floor for 2 hours – but it was still very uncomfortable, however, the food was incredibly good! In the middle of our table were two large, round charcoal grills, each with a special funnel hanging from the ceiling to catch the smoke. When the cooking began, they were pulled down to within a few inches above the top of the grill. On the table were a great many small bowls with various fresh vegetables and seafood, as well as several different kinds of Kim-Chi. The main dish was a large amount of very thinly sliced Wagyu beef that was still connected to the rib bone and had been seasoned with many hot spices for several days. Our servers were beautiful young women in traditional Korean dress, and they constantly “fluttered” around our table, cooking the meat and vegetables on the charcoal grill. They cut the thin strips of beef into small pieces using a large pair of sharp “scissors”! The meat from the grill was extremely tender and very tasty. We were instructed to place several pieces of it in a leaf of fresh crisp lettuce, and then top it with a dollop of spicy red pepper sauce, a piece of raw garlic, and a slice of grilled onion. Then we rolled up the leaf of lettuce and quickly popped it into our mouth. The combined sensation of cool, hot, spicy, crisp, and tender was unbelievable! (it was a taste I can still remember to this day!) There was also plenty of ice-cold Korean beer to quench our thirst. Then our Korean hosts began a series of “toasts” with small glasses of “Songham”, the Korean national liquor. It was a very pleasant evening, and I was ready for bed by the time we arrived back at the hotel, in spite of the heavy traffic downtown.



Traffic in downtown Seoul

The next morning, I had another delicious buffet breakfast in the hotel before I met with Mr. Choi to register for the seminar. After having registered, I joined Mike Goodchild, the keynote speaker, as well as the other presenters who had been invited as “foreign guests” from Australia, USA, and South Africa. And by some strange coincidence, I was seated on the stage next to Eve Kleiman from Oracle Corporation, one of our biggest competitors! But as we got to know each other, she was a very nice, fascinating woman, and business competition was never part of our conversation. Mike Goodchild delivered a great keynote speech, as we all expected, and as I sat at the head table on the stage, I spent most of the day listening to many presentations about e-Government and GIS. I found most of the presentations by university academics to be quite repetitive and frankly very boring! The Convention Center provided an excellent simultaneous translation service; however, it didn’t do anything to improve the boring presentations!



Jung-Rhy, Me, Eve Kleiman

At the break for lunch, our “group” (the foreign guests) was invited to a delicious 10 course traditional Korean meal that started with charcoal grilled beef tenderloin, together with sauteed scallops – superb! And although our “designated” Korean host sitting with us could speak very little English, he was definitely proud to be our host! After lunch, we returned to the Convention Center for the continuation of the seminar,

and once again, the presentations by the Korean academics were exceedingly boring. And I was certain that it wasn't due to the translator, whom I suspected must also have been bored!

Following the full day of presentations, our "group" was invited upstairs to the top floor of the COEX Intercontinental Hotel to a private dining room on the 30th floor where we were seated with a spectacular view of downtown Seoul. Over the next three hours, we enjoyed a fabulous dinner of delicious traditional Korean food, along with lots of toasts of "Songham"! It was rather late when dinner ended, but since I was staying in the hotel, all I had to do was take the elevator down five floors to my room. I watched a bit of the international news on TV before heading to bed as rain began to fall outside.



Dinner in private dining room on 30th floor

The next morning, after another amazing buffet breakfast, I walked down to the Convention Center to meet Mr. Choi before the start of the second day of the seminar. Later in the morning, I gave my presentation, and it was very well received, despite the seminar beginning a bit late due to the rain and usual heavy traffic. After my presentation, our group was treated to another fabulous 10 course lunch of traditional Korean food in the restaurant atop the hotel where we had a gorgeous view of the city bathed in brilliant sunshine following the morning rain. In the afternoon there were a couple of very interesting presentations between those of the usual boring academics. One that I remember quite well concluded with an old Korean poem about space and time. It went like this: "A frog in a well can't understand the sea because he is bound to **space**, a summer insect can't understand ice because he is bound in **time**, a stupid scholar can't understand truth because he is bound in **dogma**"!

Following a rather lengthy closing panel discussion, our group was invited to dinner at a famous Korean restaurant owned by the father of the legendary LPGA champion Grace Park. It was beautifully decorated in the traditional Korean style, and luckily, we didn't have to sit on the floor this time. Dinner was a delicious BBQ of beef cooked over a huge charcoal grill at our table, along with fresh vegetables and fruit. As the evening went on, there were many toasts of Songham, each followed by everyone shouting "Gombay", which means "bottoms up" in Korean. After each toast, one was required to place the empty glass on top of the head to complete the toast. It always seemed that a drop or two would inevitably slowly drip down one's forehead as everyone laughed! After dinner, it was suggested that we have a bus driver take us to the "Itaewon" district known for having lots of nightclubs and bars. There we found a great little jazz club called "Cheers" – a welcome warm spot on a very cold night! We all enjoyed listening to the local jazz band as we celebrated the successful conclusion of the seminar. We learned from our host that just a few blocks away was a huge US military base where 37,000 American soldiers were stationed, and that Itaewon was very popular with the troops!

Early the next morning, I woke up to a spectacular clear day but very cold (25 degrees F) and quite windy. After breakfast, I joined a small group for a tour of the Royal Palaces in Seoul. Our first stop was at the Gyeongbokgung Palace that was originally built in the "Joseon Dynasty" 1,000 years ago but destroyed

in 1592 during the invasion of the Japanese army. The palace was rebuilt in the 1800's to become the home for the royal family which lived there until the death of the last king in 1989.



"Gyeongbokgung Palace"

The second tour stop was Changdeokgung Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site built in the 1400's. It has a beautiful "secret garden" with spectacular Japanese Maples whose leaves were turned a brilliant, deep red color. Our group had arrived just in time for the changing of the Royal Guard who were dressed in bright yellow, red, and blue uniforms, in keeping with the ancient period of history.



"Changdeokgung Palace"



Changing Guard



Japanese Maples

Later we made a short but very interesting visit to the National Folk Museum housing many displays of life in ancient times, including a scene depicting the age-old process of making Kim-Chi! Nearby was an Amethyst shop where several huge "geodes" were on display, each with massive crystals of brilliant purple Amethyst inside.



"Amethyst geode"

Then we had lunch at a small Korean restaurant in Itaewon, and we all had to sit on the floor once again. Seated next to me was a Chinese couple from Dallas, Texas who were originally from Beijing. We were served a hot bowl of thinly sliced beef in a very tasty spicy stew. After lunch, we toured a large outdoor market that was very busy and quite crowded with shoppers. A young Korean man entertained the crowd with his guitar as he sang “La Bamba” and joked with his audience – quite a good street performer! As we strolled around the market, we passed many small antique shops, huge fresh vegetable displays, and street vendors. I bought some ginger candy from one street vendor who “shaved” it off a huge block of candy. As we were leaving the market, a small troupe of street performers were setting up to do a traditional Korean “opera”.



Outdoor Market

Late in the afternoon, we made our way through heavy traffic to the hotel where I met up with Jong-Rhy who was to take me to dinner. (Koreans seemed to have dinner around 6pm in the evening, which was just fine with me) But I was not looking forward to a long drive through heavy traffic to his favorite restaurant, As I was about to suggest that we go to someplace close by, he said exactly the same thing – thankfully! So, we “walked” to a small Chinese restaurant in the vast underground COEX Mall. It was a noodle restaurant called “Congee Go Go” and the food was quite spicy and very nice. Afterwards, we walked to “O’Kim’s Brauhaus” for a couple of beers they brewed on the premises while we listened to a band from Bulgaria with two very attractive young Korean singers. The band played an incredible variety of music – everything from “Jingle Bells” to “We Will Rock You”! Excellent and fun to listen to. Jong-Rhy and I had a great time talking about the seminar and his plans to travel to San Diego for next year’s Esri International User Conference. On the way back to the hotel, we passed a huge wedding reception in the Grand Ballroom that had massive flower arrangements everywhere – spectacular!

The next day, I decided to take a tour to the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), a narrow strip of land extending for 155 miles, separating North and South Korea. The tour was very well organized and the only way to visit the DMZ - we were subjected to several security and passport checks by the US Military before we reached the Dorasan Observation Point located on a hill just above the very edge of the barbed wire barrier! We were escorted into a small amphitheater by a South Korean soldier who gave us an explanation of what we were looking at through the huge window in front of us. He pointed out the “no man’s land” directly below us where thousands of land mines lay hidden in the thick brush and to the small village of Panmounjan, the site of continued “peace” talks between North and South! (ironically, due to the fact that the DMZ has had no human contact in over 50 years, it’s a pristine natural environment where many species of birds from Siberia migrate during spring and fall) Just on the North Korean side was another small village that

apparently was established solely for the purpose of broadcasting propaganda using monstrous loudspeakers. The soldier also pointed out a small bridge near Panmounjan that was filled with dynamite to block access from the north. In the distance we could see a fairly large North Korean city with a population of 400,000 where the South Koreans had set up some industry as an attempt to aid the country. We were permitted to stand outside on the platform overlooking “no man’s land”, where there were several binoculars set up for viewing, however, photos were only allowed behind a yellow line at the very rear of the platform.



DMZ “Visitor Center”



Viewing Platform

Besides the view of North Korea, it was the high level of military security in the area that overwhelmed all of us and would be my strongest memory of the trip to the DMZ. From the observation point we went to the brand new Dorasan Railway Station, which was constructed a couple of years ago in anticipation of reconnecting the railway link between North and South that was severed more than 50 years before. It’s a beautiful, very modern station, complete with ticket windows and a train schedule posted on the wall, but there has yet to be a train leaving the station, despite the fact that it was opened by President George Bush! The hope is that it will open soon though! (a hope that has still to be realized)



“Dorasan Railway Station”



Railway Time Table

Not far from the new railway station was the “Freedom Bridge” where the last Koreans to leave North Korea crossed over. It is now the site of a new railway bridge and a new, modern 4-lane highway waiting to cross the DMZ at some time in the future. (to be determined!) There was even an immigration border post that sat empty, awaiting the opening of the highway and railway.



“Tourist Map” of the DMZ



New Railroad Bridge to North Korea

Our last stop in the DMZ was a visit to the “Third Tunnel of Infiltration”, constructed by the North Koreans under the DMZ in an attempt to prepare for an invasion of the South. The tunnel, cut through solid Granite, was more than 1.2 KM long, 78 meters deep, and large enough for tanks and trucks to drive through! We boarded a small cog railway to make the long descent into the heart of the tunnel, and upon reaching the bottom, it was incredible to see how the North Koreans could have spent years on the project without being detected. And even more incredible, they constructed a fourth tunnel several years later, which was just recently discovered! So, it’s still not known how many more tunnels might exist or are being planned! The tour of the DMZ, less than 35 miles from downtown Seoul, was one of the most unique and fascinating tours I’ve ever taken and one I’ll remember for a long time.

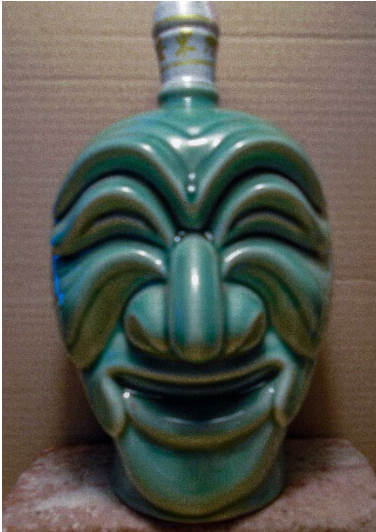


Cog Railway into the “Third Tunnel of Infiltration”

When I returned to the hotel that evening, my last night in Seoul, I decided to have dinner on my own at O’Kim’s Brauhaus. German schnitzel was on the menu, and what arrived were 3 schnitzels on a huge plate, along with a monstrous portion of German potato salad! Together with the liter stein of beer, it would have been right at home in Germany! I was pleasantly surprised how authentic it was and I really enjoyed the meal. Meanwhile, a young rowdy group at the bar was busy drinking “yards” of beer and having a fun time.

The following morning, Mr. Choi and Jung-Rhy picked me up at the hotel and drove me to the airport to catch my return flight to Los Angeles. I made sure that I thanked them for the wonderful hospitality they had

shown me during my visit to Korea. At the airport I checked in at the Korean Airlines Business Class counter and received my boarding pass. Then it was on to the immigration and security checkpoint before stopping in the Duty-Free shop to buy a bottle of “Songham” in a special bottle shaped like the face of a traditional Korean opera character.



Bottle of “Songham” from Duty Free



Korean Airlines Business Class Lounge

I was able to spend an hour in the Business Class Lounge before boarding the flight, and once on board I settled into a very comfortable seat for the 12-hour flight to LAX. It was a long but wonderful flight while being pampered by young Korean flight attendants dressed in traditional Korean style, intent upon making certain that I did not forget the warm Korean hospitality of which they were very proud! The trip remains one of my most memorable and favorite journeys!

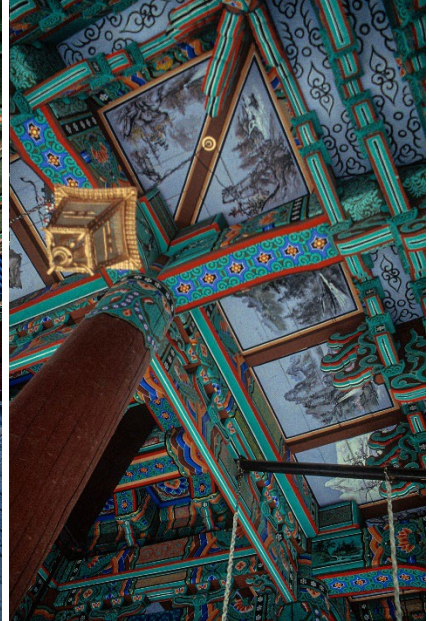
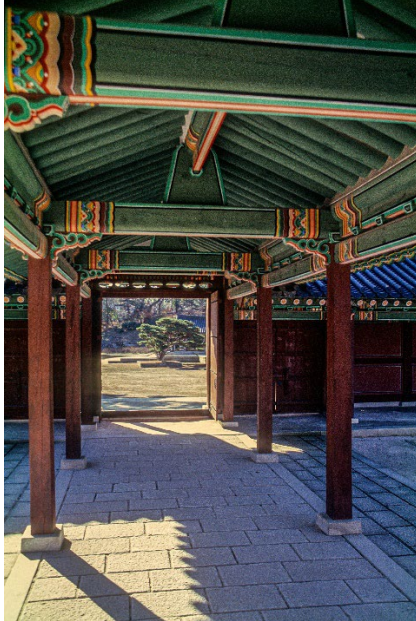
Map of South Korea



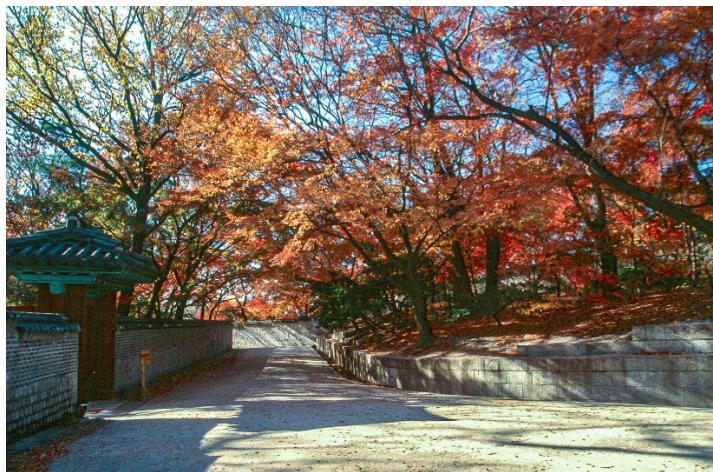
Photo Gallery



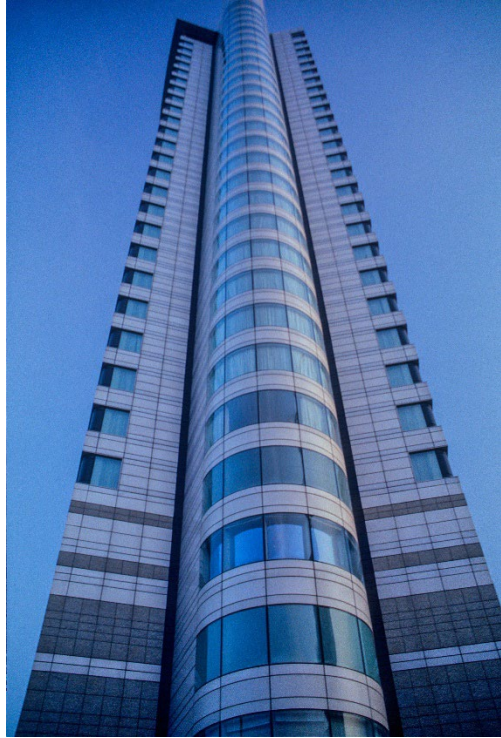
“Changdeokgung Palace”



“Deoksugung Palace”



“Tapgol (Pagoda) Park”



“Seoul Tower”



Downtown Starbucks in old bank building