



South Korea

Royal palaces, mountain temples, kimchi and bright modern cities, on the southern half of the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea, covers the southern part of the Korean Peninsula in East Asia. Its only land border is with North Korea, and across the sea its nearest neighbours are Japan to the east and China to the west. Mountains cover much of the land, and many islands lie off the south and west coasts, the largest of them the volcanic island of Jeju.

AT A GLANCE

Facts to know

CAPITAL

Seoul

POPULATION

About 51.7 million (UN estimate, 2025)

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Korean; Korean Sign Language is also official by law since 2016

CURRENCY

South Korean won

AREA

About 100,000 km²

GOVERNMENT

Presidential republic with an elected National Assembly

HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

Hallasan on Jeju Island, 1,947 m

LONGEST RIVER

The Nakdong, about 510 km

NEIGHBOURS

North Korea by land. Across the sea: Japan and China

DRIVES ON THE

Right

CALLING CODE

+82

A 45-minute trip to South Korea

Everything you need is in this pack. No preparation beyond printing. Adapt the timing to your group.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 0 to 5 min | Welcome. Show the map page and find South Korea together. Ask: who has been there, or knows someone from there? |
| 5 to 15 min | Read the facts at a glance, then three moments from the story: 2333 BC: The legend of Dangun; 1910: Japan annexes Korea; 2018: PyeongChang hosts the Winter Olympics. |
| 15 to 25 min | At the table: talk about Kimchi and Bibimbap. Idea: bring a small taste (bread, cheese, fruit, tea) if your kitchen can help. |
| 25 to 30 min | Say it like a local: practise "Annyeonghaseyo" (Hello), "Gamsahamnida" (Thank you), "Mannaseo bangapseumnida" (Nice to meet you). Everyone says them together. |
| 30 to 40 min | Quiz: read the questions aloud, or play the big-screen version at https://worldstroll.com/countries/south-korea/group . No scores needed. |
| 40 to 45 min | Talk about it (questions page), then stamp or sign everyone's passport page. |

You will need

- This printed pack (one per table, or one each)
- Pens for the quiz
- Optional: a world map or globe, a small tasting, music from the country

South Korea and its cities



- Seoul (Seoul Special City): Gyeongbokgung and Changdeokgung palaces, The Han River parks, Markets such as Gwangjang and Namdaemun, The 1988 Summer Olympics
- Busan (Busan Metropolitan City): Haeundae Beach, Jagalchi fish market, Gamcheon Culture Village, The Busan International Film Festival
- Incheon (Incheon Metropolitan City): Incheon International Airport, Korea's only official Chinatown, The Incheon landing of 1950
- Daegu (Daegu Metropolitan City): Apples, Seomun Market, Yangnyeongsi herbal medicine market, Textiles and fashion
- Daejeon (Daejeon Metropolitan City): Daedeok Innopolis research town, KAIST university, Expo '93, Government offices
- Suwon (Gyeonggi): Hwaseong Fortress, Suwon galbi (beef ribs), Samsung Electronics

- Gyeongju (North Gyeongsang): Bulguksa Temple and Seokguram Grotto, Royal tomb mounds, The Cheomseongdae observatory, Gyeongju National Museum
- Jeonju (Jeonbuk (North Jeolla)): Jeonju bibimbap, The Hanok Village, Hanji, traditional paper, A film festival
- Andong (North Gyeongsang): Hahoe Folk Village, The International Mask Dance Festival, Andong jjimdak (braised chicken), Andong soju
- Sokcho (Gangwon): Seoraksan National Park, Fresh seafood, Abai Village, founded by wartime refugees from the north
- Jeju (Jeju Province): Hallasan, the highest mountain, Haenyeo women divers, Tangerines, Dol hareubang stone statues

A short history of South Korea

Korean tradition counts almost 5,000 years of history, starting with the legend of Dangun. For most of the last 1,500 years the peninsula was ruled by a few long-lasting kingdoms and dynasties, before the upheavals of the 20th century divided it in two.

2333 BC **The legend of Dangun**

According to a legend first written down in the 13th century, Dangun, grandson of the lord of heaven, founded the first Korean kingdom, Gojoseon, in 2333 BC. South Korea still celebrates this on National Foundation Day, 3 October.

AD 668 **Goguryeo falls to Silla and Tang**

For centuries three kingdoms, Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla, shared the peninsula. Allied with Tang China, Silla defeated Baekje and then, in 668, Goguryeo. By 676 Silla had pushed the Tang armies out and ruled most of the peninsula from its capital, Gyeongju.

AD 918 **Goryeo is founded**

The general Wang Geon founded the kingdom of Goryeo, which ruled Korea until 1392. The English name Korea comes from Goryeo, a time famous for its green celadon pottery and Buddhist art.

1377 **Jikji is printed**

Monks at Heungdeok Temple in Cheongju printed Jikji, a collection of Buddhist teachings, with movable metal type. It is the oldest surviving book printed this way, 78 years before Gutenberg's Bible.

1392 **The Joseon dynasty begins**

General Yi Seong-gye took power and founded the Joseon dynasty. It lasted more than 500 years, until 1897, and made Confucian values the basis of government and family life.

1394 **Hanyang becomes the capital**

The new dynasty moved its capital to Hanyang, the city we now call Seoul, on the Han River. Seoul has been the capital ever since, apart from the wartime years.

- 1446** **Hangul is proclaimed**
King Sejong the Great and his scholars created a new alphabet, first presented at court in 1443. It was proclaimed to the people in 1446 in a book called Hunminjeongeum, 'the correct sounds for the instruction of the people'.
- 1592** **Japanese invasions begin**
Japanese armies invaded Korea in 1592 and again in 1597. Admiral Yi Sun-sin, with his armoured turtle ships, won battle after battle at sea, and the invaders withdrew in 1598.
- 1910** **Japan annexes Korea**
In August 1910 Japan formally annexed Korea, which had been under growing Japanese control for several years. Japanese rule lasted until 1945.
- 1919** **The March First Movement**
On 1 March 1919 a Declaration of Independence was read in Seoul, and peaceful protests spread across the country. The day is a national holiday in South Korea.
- 1945** **Liberation and division**
Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945 ended its rule over Korea. The peninsula was then divided at the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces in the north and American forces in the south.
- 1948** **The Republic of Korea is founded**
On 15 August 1948 the Republic of Korea was proclaimed in the south, with Seoul as its capital. A separate state was set up in the north a few weeks later.
- 1950** **The Korean War begins**
On 25 June 1950 North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel. United Nations forces, led by the United States, fought alongside South Korea, and China later entered the war on the side of the North.
- 1953** **The armistice is signed**
An armistice signed at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953 stopped the fighting and created the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas. No peace treaty has been signed.

1988

Seoul hosts the Summer Olympics

The Seoul Olympics, held from 17 September to 2 October 1988, brought 159 nations together and showed the world how far the country had come since the war.

2018

PyeongChang hosts the Winter Olympics

The mountain county of PyeongChang hosted South Korea's first Winter Olympics. Athletes from North and South Korea marched together at the opening ceremony.

What people eat in South Korea

A Korean meal is built around a bowl of rice, a soup or stew, and many small shared side dishes called banchan, with kimchi always among them. Everything is brought to the table at once, and people help themselves from the shared dishes. The flavours come from garlic, sesame oil and three fermented seasonings: gochujang (red chilli paste), doenjang (soybean paste) and ganjang (soy sauce).

Kimchi

All of Korea

Vegetables, most often napa cabbage or radish, salted and fermented with chilli, garlic, ginger and spring onion. It is served with almost every meal, and older, sourer kimchi is used for cooking stews and pancakes.

Bibimbap

All of Korea; Jeonju is famous for it

A bowl of warm rice topped with seasoned vegetables, meat, an egg and a spoonful of gochujang, all mixed together just before eating. The name means 'mixed rice'.

Bulgogi

All of Korea

Thin slices of beef marinated in soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil, garlic and grated pear, then grilled or pan-fried. The name means 'fire meat'.

Samgyeopsal

All of South Korea

Thick slices of pork belly that diners grill themselves on a hot plate in the middle of the table, then wrap in lettuce leaves with garlic and a dab of ssamjang, a spicy bean paste.

Kimchi stew

All of Korea

A bubbling, spicy stew of well-fermented kimchi, pork and tofu, one of the most common home dishes in Korea. It is served boiling hot in the middle of the table with rice.

Japchae

Created for the royal court in the early 1600s

Glass noodles made from sweet potato starch, stir-fried with vegetables, mushrooms and beef and seasoned with soy sauce and sesame oil. It is a favourite dish for

birthdays, weddings and holidays.

Seafood and spring onion pancake

All of Korea; Dongnae in Busan is famous for it

A large, crisp pancake of batter packed with whole spring onions and seafood such as squid, prawns and clams, cut into pieces and dipped in soy sauce with vinegar.

Tteokbokki

Seoul

Chewy rice cakes shaped like thick fingers, simmered in a sweet and fiery gochujang sauce with fish cakes and spring onions. It is the classic street food of Korea.

Ginseng chicken soup

All of Korea

A whole young chicken stuffed with sticky rice, ginseng, jujube dates and garlic, simmered in a clear broth and served in its own bowl.

Cold noodles

Pyongyang and Hamhung, in today's North Korea

Long, thin, chewy noodles, often made with buckwheat, served in an icy beef broth (mul-naengmyeon) or with a spicy chilli dressing (bibim-naengmyeon), topped with cucumber, pear and a boiled egg.

Dak-galbi

Chuncheon, Gangwon

Pieces of chicken marinated in a spicy gochujang sauce and stir-fried at the table on a big iron pan with cabbage, sweet potato, rice cakes and perilla leaves.

Pork and rice soup

Busan

A milky pork bone broth with slices of pork, served with rice, chives and small dishes of salted shrimp and chilli so each person can season it to taste.

Jajangmyeon

Incheon's Chinatown

Thick wheat noodles covered in a glossy black sauce of fermented black bean paste, pork and onions. It is a Korean-Chinese favourite, often ordered for delivery.

Hotteok

Brought by Chinese merchants in the late 1800s; now all of Korea

A chewy, pan-fried pancake filled with brown sugar, cinnamon, honey and chopped nuts, sold hot from street stalls, especially in winter.

Soju

All of Korea; distilling arrived in the 1200s

A clear alcoholic spirit, most of it under 20 percent alcohol today, drunk from small glasses with food. It contains alcohol, so enjoy it in moderation.

GOOD MANNERS

At the table

- Wait for the oldest person at the table to start eating before you begin.
- Rice and soup are eaten with a spoon, and side dishes with chopsticks. Chopsticks and spoons are usually made of metal.
- Leave your rice bowl on the table instead of lifting it to your mouth.
- Never stand your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice: it looks like a ritual for the dead.
- When someone older pours you a drink, hold your glass with both hands, and when you pour for them, use both hands too.
- Side dishes are shared and usually refilled for free, so it is fine to ask for more.

Bibimbap

A bowl of warm rice topped with seasoned vegetables, meat, an egg and a spoonful of gochujang, all mixed together just before eating. The name means 'mixed rice'.

Ingredients

- 2 bowls of hot cooked short-grain rice
- 150 g minced beef or thinly sliced beef
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce and 1 teaspoon sugar for the beef
- 150 g spinach
- 150 g bean sprouts
- 1 carrot, cut into thin strips
- 1 courgette, cut into thin strips
- 2 eggs (a runny yolk is traditional; cook them until firm if serving pregnant women, young children, older people or anyone with a weak immune system)
- 2 tablespoons sesame oil, 1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds, salt, 1 clove garlic
- 2 tablespoons gochujang (Korean red chilli paste)

Method

1. Mix the beef with the soy sauce, sugar and crushed garlic, then fry it in a little oil until cooked through.
2. Blanch the spinach and the bean sprouts separately in boiling water for 1 minute, squeeze out the water and season each with a pinch of salt and a little sesame oil.
3. Fry the carrot and courgette separately in a little oil for 1 to 2 minutes, adding a pinch of salt.
4. Fry the eggs in a pan until the whites are set, or until the yolks are firm too if you prefer.
5. Put the rice in two large bowls, arrange the vegetables and beef in small piles on top, add an egg and a spoonful of gochujang, and sprinkle with sesame seeds.
6. At the table, mix everything together well with a spoon before eating.

Bulgogi

Thin slices of beef marinated in soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil, garlic and grated pear, then grilled or pan-fried. The name means 'fire meat'.

Ingredients

- 500 g beef sirloin or rib-eye, sliced very thin (partly freezing it makes slicing easier)
- 4 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 3 cloves garlic, crushed
- Half an Asian pear or 1 ripe ordinary pear, grated
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 2 spring onions, sliced
- Black pepper and toasted sesame seeds
- Rice and lettuce leaves to serve

Method

1. Mix the soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil, garlic, grated pear and a little pepper in a bowl.
2. Add the beef and onion, mix well with your hands and leave in the fridge for 30 minutes.
3. Heat a large frying pan or grill pan until very hot and cook the beef in batches, spread out in one layer, for 2 to 3 minutes until browned and cooked through.
4. Sprinkle with spring onions and sesame seeds and serve with rice, or wrap bites in lettuce leaves.

Kimchi stew

A bubbling, spicy stew of well-fermented kimchi, pork and tofu, one of the most common home dishes in Korea. It is served boiling hot in the middle of the table with rice.

Ingredients

- 300 g well-fermented (sour) kimchi, cut into bite-size pieces, plus 3 tablespoons of its juice
- 200 g pork belly or shoulder, sliced
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon gochugaru (Korean chilli flakes) or 1 tablespoon gochujang
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 500 ml water or anchovy stock
- 200 g firm tofu, sliced
- 1 spring onion, sliced
- Rice to serve

Method

1. Heat the oil in a pot and fry the pork for 3 to 4 minutes until it starts to brown.
2. Add the kimchi, chilli and garlic and fry for another 5 minutes, stirring.
3. Pour in the water or stock and the kimchi juice, bring to the boil and simmer for 15 minutes.
4. Lay the tofu on top and simmer for 5 more minutes. Taste and add a little salt or soy sauce if needed.
5. Sprinkle with spring onion and serve hot with rice.

Japchae

Glass noodles made from sweet potato starch, stir-fried with vegetables, mushrooms and beef and seasoned with soy sauce and sesame oil. It is a favourite dish for birthdays, weddings and holidays.

Ingredients

- 200 g Korean sweet potato glass noodles (dangmyeon)
- 150 g beef, cut into thin strips
- 150 g spinach
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 carrot, cut into thin strips
- 4 shiitake mushrooms, sliced
- 4 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons sesame oil
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- Vegetable oil and toasted sesame seeds

Method

1. Cook the noodles in boiling water for 6 to 7 minutes, drain, rinse and cut them a few times with scissors.
2. Mix the soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil and garlic to make the sauce.
3. Blanch the spinach for 30 seconds and squeeze it dry.
4. Stir-fry the onion, carrot and mushrooms in a little oil for 2 to 3 minutes, then set aside. Stir-fry the beef until cooked through.
5. Put the noodles in the pan with the sauce and stir over medium heat for 2 minutes.
6. Add all the vegetables and the beef, mix well and sprinkle with sesame seeds. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Seafood and spring onion pancake

A large, crisp pancake of batter packed with whole spring onions and seafood such as squid, prawns and clams, cut into pieces and dipped in soy sauce with vinegar.

Ingredients

- 100 g plain flour
- 2 tablespoons rice flour or cornflour
- 150 ml cold water
- 1 egg
- A bunch of spring onions (about 8), cut into 10 cm lengths
- 150 g mixed seafood (squid, peeled prawns), chopped
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- For the dip: 2 tablespoons soy sauce, 1 tablespoon rice vinegar, a few drops of sesame oil

Method

1. Whisk the flours, water, egg and a pinch of salt into a smooth, thin batter.
2. Heat the oil in a large frying pan and lay the spring onions in it side by side.
3. Scatter the seafood on top and pour the batter evenly over everything.
4. Cook over medium heat for 4 to 5 minutes until golden underneath, flip carefully and cook for another 4 minutes, pressing down, until crisp and the seafood is cooked.
5. Mix the dip, cut the pancake into squares and serve hot.

Useful phrases

Annyeonghaseyo

ahn-nyung-HAH-seh-yo · Hello

Gamsahamnida

KAHM-sah-hahm-nee-dah · Thank you

Mannaseo bangapseumnida

mahn-nah-suh bahn-GAHP-sum-nee-dah · Nice to meet you

Annyeonghi gaseyo

ahn-NYUNG-hee KAH-seh-yo · Goodbye (go in peace)

Annyeonghi gyeseyo

ahn-NYUNG-hee KYEH-seh-yo · Goodbye (stay in peace)

Joesonghamnida

chweh-SONG-hahm-nee-dah · I am sorry

Jeogiyo

CHUH-gee-yo · Excuse me

Gwaenchanayo

kwen-CHAH-nah-yo · It is fine, I am okay

Eolmayeyo?

UHL-mah-yeh-yo · How much is it?

Igeo juseyo

ee-GUH JOO-seh-yo · This one, please

Mul juseyo

MOOL joo-seh-yo · Water, please

Hwajangsil eodiyeoyo?

hwah-JAHNG-sheel UH-dee-yeh-yo · Where is the toilet?

Jal meokgesseumnida

CH AHL muhk-GESS-sum-nee-dah · I will eat well (thank you for the food)

Jal meogeosseumnida

CH AHL muh-GUHSS-sum-nee-dah · I ate well (thank you for the meal)

Masisseoyo

mah-SHEE-suh-yo · It is delicious

Geonbae!

KUHN-beh · Cheers!

Yeongeo haseyo?

YUNG-uh HAH-seh-yo · Do you speak English?

Hangugeo mot haeyo

HAHN-goo-guh MOH-teh-yo · I cannot speak Korean

Dowajuseyo!

toh-WAH joo-seh-yo · Help, please!

Things you might not know

1. The English name 'Korea' comes from Goryeo, the kingdom that ruled the peninsula from 918 to 1392.
2. Hangul, the Korean alphabet, has 24 basic letters: 14 consonants and 10 vowels. South Korea celebrates Hangul Day every year on 9 October.
3. Koreans used to count a baby as one year old at birth and add a year for everyone on New Year's Day. Since 28 June 2023 the international way of counting age has been the official standard.
4. Jikji, printed in Korea in 1377, is the oldest surviving book printed with movable metal type. The only surviving volume is kept in the National Library of France in Paris.
5. The 50,000 won note, first issued in 2009, shows the 16th-century artist Shin Saimdang, the first woman from history on a South Korean banknote.
6. About one in five South Koreans has the family name Kim: 21.5 percent of the population in the 2015 census.
7. On Jeju Island, haenyeo, 'sea women', dive for shellfish and seaweed holding their breath, without oxygen tanks. Their culture has been on UNESCO's intangible heritage list since 2016.
8. As of 2026, South Korea has 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In July 2026 the city of Busan hosted UNESCO's World Heritage Committee.
9. The Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas is about 250 km long and 4 km wide. Because people have kept out of it since 1953, it has become a refuge for wildlife such as rare cranes.
10. Korean homes are warmed from the floor up. The old ondol system sent smoke from a fire under a stone floor; today hot-water pipes do the job, and people often sit and sleep on the warm floor.
11. Taekwondo, the Korean martial art whose name means roughly 'the way of the foot and the fist', has been an Olympic medal sport since the Sydney Games in 2000.
12. In 2020 the Korean film Parasite became the first film not in English to win the Oscar for Best Picture.
13. Since 2016, by law, Korean Sign Language has been an official language

of Deaf Koreans, equal in status with spoken Korean.

TALK ABOUT IT

Questions for the group

- Have you ever been to South Korea, or has someone in your family? What do you remember?
- Have you ever tasted Kimchi or Bibimbap? What is a dish you remember from a trip?
- The armistice is signed (1953). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Seoul hosts the Summer Olympics (1988). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Have you seen Gyeongbokgung Palace, in person or in pictures? Which famous place would you most like to see?
- If you could spend one day in any city of South Korea, which would it be and why?

QUIZ

How well do you know South Korea?

Circle the right answer. The answers are on the last page.

1. Which family name does about one in five South Koreans have?

- A) Lee
- B) Choi
- C) Kim
- D) Park

2. What is the capital of South Korea?

- A) Incheon
- B) Seoul
- C) Busan
- D) Daejeon

3. Which palace in Seoul is famous for its Secret Garden?

- A) Changdeokgung
- B) Gyeongbokgung
- C) Gyeonghuigung
- D) Deoksugung

4. On which date does South Korea celebrate Hangul Day?

- A) 1 March
- B) 3 October
- C) 9 October
- D) 15 August

5. How do you say 'thank you' politely in Korean?

- A) Gamsahamnida
- B) Masisseoyo
- C) Joesonghamnida
- D) Annyeonghaseyo

6. In South Korea, cars drive on the right-hand side of the road.

- A) True
- B) False

7. Taekwondo first became an Olympic medal sport at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

- A) True
- B) False

8. In Korean, 'ne' means 'no'.

- A) True
- B) False

9. What is the highest mountain in South Korea?

- A) Jirisan
- B) Bukhansan
- C) Seoraksan
- D) Hallasan

10. What kind of electric plug is used in South Korea?

- A) Three flat angled pins, as in Australia
- B) Two flat pins, as in the USA
- C) Round two-pin European plugs
- D) Three square pins, as in Britain

11. You see the word 'yeok' on a sign. What is it pointing to?

- A) A temple
- B) A station
- C) A market
- D) A toilet

12. The English name 'Korea' comes from the name of which kingdom?

- A) Goryeo
- B) Baekje
- C) Silla
- D) Joseon

Quiz answers

1. C) Kim

Kim is the most common family name, with 21.5 percent of the population in the 2015 census.

2. B) Seoul

Seoul has been the capital since 1394, when it was called Hanyang. About half of all South Koreans live in and around it.

3. A) Changdeokgung

Changdeokgung, built in 1405, has a large rear garden with ponds and pavilions known as the Secret Garden.

4. C) 9 October

Hangul Day is on 9 October. 1 March marks the independence movement, 15 August liberation, and 3 October National Foundation Day.

5. A) Gamsahamnida

Gamsahamnida is the polite thank you. Annyeonghaseyo is hello, joesonghamnida is sorry and masisseoyo means it is delicious.

6. True

True. Korea switched to driving on the right in 1946, after the end of Japanese rule.

7. False

False. Taekwondo was a demonstration sport in Seoul in 1988 and became a medal sport at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

8. False

False. 'Ne' means yes. No is 'aniyo'.

9. D) Hallasan

Hallasan, the volcano at the heart of Jeju Island, is 1,947 m high. Jirisan, at 1,915 m, is the highest on the mainland, and Seoraksan, at 1,708 m, comes third.

10. C) Round two-pin European plugs

South Korea uses round two-pin European plugs (types C and F) and 220 volts.

11. B) A station

It points to a station: 'yeok' means station, as in Seoul-yeok, Seoul Station.

12. A) Goryeo

Goryeo ruled Korea from 918 to 1392, and traders carried its name to the rest of the world

as Korea.

South Korea visa page

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