

Long house part of hotel-museum near Quebec City. Page h7

TRAVEL

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PHOTOS: KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION, SEOUL TOURISM

Seoul is a booming city that works and plays virtually 24 hours a day.

A hand-crafted, traditional Korean costume demonstrates the blend of old and new that exists in the city.

A pavilion on the grounds of Gyeongbokgung Palace, below, has history that dates to the Joseon Dynasty of the 1300s, although much of it has been rebuilt.



SURGING SEOUL

South Korea strikes a balance of modern and traditional to create 15th most prosperous economy

ROCHELLE LASH
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Seoul radiates a yin-yang of venerable old and futuristic new, a city where you will be thrilled by dynasties of priceless art and decades of contemporary innovations.

But there is more for visitors, intangibles that are to be admired and respected. South Korea is as clean, polite and safe as Canada. And it's an outstanding success story. A mere 60 years after the devastation of the Korean War, the country boasts the world's 15th most prosperous economy and powerful diplomatic leverage

between East and West. Seoul is also bursting with know-how in technology, shipbuilding, manufacturing, fashion, beauty products and medical advances. And all this blithely built and nurtured not 50 kilometres from the threat of a volatile rogue state.

Please see SEOUL, Page H2

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SEOUL Yin and yang make for success in city

CONTINUED FROM H1

We know. The products of Hyundai, Kia, Samsung and LG are household names around the world. South Korea's second Olympic Games will take place in 2018 at a majestic mountain resort that will be one hour from Seoul via a new high-speed train. While UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon works on world peace, Psy, the Gangnam Style kitsch king, has focused attention on the K-pop wave.

Seoul rocks with 24-hour nightclubs, a National Digital Library of e-resources, Formula One Grand Prix racing and the video masterpieces of Nam June Paik at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. How cool is this town? Very. The mixologist at Coffee Bar K in

Wedged between China and Japan, Seoul is within a three-hour flight of one-third of the world's population.

Cheongdamdong district is ranked among the top in the world for his creative cocktails made with the Korean liqueur soju, often distilled from sweet potatoes.

The Lotte Corp., the biggest name in Korean hospitality, operates hotels, cinemas, department stores and duty-free shops and will open Korea's first six-star hotel in 2014.

The new Lotte World Tower and Mall will be among the tallest skyscrapers anywhere, with a breathtaking observation deck a half-kilometre high.

Wedged between China and Japan, Seoul is within a three-hour flight of one-third of the world's population, so it is becoming tourist-friendly in a hurry, welcoming up to 12 million people a year, about 130,000 of them from Canada. Two major airlines, Korean Air and Air Canada, fly to Seoul from Toronto and/or Vancouver.

Seoul is busy, sometimes frenetic and sprawling, but has ways for easy immersion into local attractions. If you are simply on a long layover at Seoul's Incheon Airport, you are eligible for free sight-seeing tours. If you are on your own, the subway is safe, efficient and fully bilingual (Korean and English). Landmarks include the cable car up N Seoul Tower in Namsan Park (Seoul's version of Mount Royal), Gyeongbokgung Palace and the Han

River, which runs through the city.

Seoul's historic culture is based on an exquisite food and craft tradition dating back 5,000 years. Its palaces are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, prized for their intricate architecture and moody gardens. On an intimate level, I recommend Bukchon Hanok Village, a cloister of traditional life with guest houses; the World Taekwondo Headquarters, where you can learn how to break a slab of wood with a quick, sure chop of the hand; and Insadong St., an antique alley of Asian collectibles, tea shops and galleries.

Here are a few diversions that are not on most tourist routes. Try to meet a Seoul-mate so you can explore and share with someone.

The markets: So many markets, never enough time. Dongdaemun Market reminds me of Montreal's Chabanel St., with manufacturers selling high-fashion, low-priced clothing at showrooms. Myeongdong is a trendy tangle of streets lined with cosmetics shops, particularly ones selling ginseng-laced skin creams, which have anti-aging properties. Gyeongdong Market is a hotbed of herbal medicine, with teas and lotions made from mushrooms, mint, roses and hundreds of flora.

My favourite is Gwangjang Market, partly for the wondrous choice of Korean silks and ceremonial costumes (hanbok), which are mostly worn for weddings. This market also is a foodie haven. Pull up a stool at the most tempting kiosk and watch your cook fry tiny crabs, octopus and sizzling pancakes.

More food: The vast Lotte Food Halls, on the lower level of the Lotte Department Store, are an enormous and fun-filled single stop for the complex realm of Korean cuisine. As many as 100 counters display a staggering variety of vegetables, noodles and rice dishes, fish and meat, all marinated, artistically chopped and expertly prepared in spicy chili sauces. If you're not sure of how to navigate, simply point, add kimchee and feast for \$6 to \$15.

On a more universal note, it turns out that chicken soup is a restorative cure-all even in Seoul. Samgyetang (ginseng chicken soup) is one of the most accessible and traditional Korean dishes. Even limos line up at Tosokchon Samgyetang, a historic, rustic diner where chicken-in-the-pot with rice stuffing, a shot of ginseng liqueur, bar-



The Bukchon Hanok Village of traditional Korean houses offers visitors a glimpse back in time.

KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION

ley tea and dessert costs \$13. **The future:** Samsung D'Light is a dazzling three-storey gallery of the next generation of smart stuff, including wearable devices, interactive classrooms, home theatres, software, cellphones, video gear and games. Picture this at-home application: You and your mate are watching the same television, but one is channelling Downton Abbey and the other is fixated by Game of Thrones. All it takes is a specialized Samsung dual-vision screen with two sets of headphones.

Besides technical proficiency, Samsung has a sense of humour about the galaxy it helped to change.

The futuristic showroom also houses a display of historic artifacts. Remember leather-bound books, fountain pens, VCRs and cameras with film?



LOTTE CORP.

The Lotte World Tower and Mall, rendered above, will open in 2014 with South Korea's first six-star hotel and an observation deck at approximately a half-kilometre high. It will be among the world's tallest buildings. You might see elaborate, traditional silk dresses, below, called hanbok, which are now worn mostly for weddings and Korean holidays



KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION

IF YOU GO

Korean Air (800-438-5000, koreanair.com) flies to Seoul from Toronto and Vancouver. **Air Canada** (888-247-2262, aircanada.com) flies from Vancouver.

Korea Tourism Organization: 800-TOUR-KOREA/800-868-7567, visit-korea.or.kr. Seoul information: visitseoul.com. When in Korea, dial 1330 for a tourism hotline

in English. Top mobile apps: Visit Korea 3.0 and Seoul City Walking Tour. Free tours from Incheon Airport: hanatouritc.com.

Lodging: Five-star hotels such as Lotte Seoul (lottehotel-seoul.com, Jung-gu district) start at about \$300. The contemporary, four-star Ibis Ambassador Myeong-dong, starting at \$130, is at the heart

of a trendy shopping area.

The Korea Tourism Organization runs a lodging-culture program in charming hanok, or old-style houses, with platform beds, heated floors and papered windows. In Bukchon Hanok Village, prices range from \$60 for two in a simple guest house up to \$250 for more luxury.



KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION

Traditional Korean court cuisine is available at the mountainside restaurant Samcheonggak where geisha-like women once entertained great rulers.