

Did You Know?

- Korea is traditionally known as *Choson*, which means “Land of the Morning Calm.”
- Between 1.4 and 2.4 million Koreans died during the Korean War.
- In 2002, Seoul helped host the world’s most popular sporting event, the World Cup, an international soccer tournament.
- *Ssireum* is the name for a kind of Korean wrestling similar to Japanese *sumo* wrestling. The Korean version requires the wrestlers to be thrown to the ground instead of pushed out of the ring.
- Koreans wear a *hanbok* for special occasions or holidays. A man’s *hanbok* includes trousers and a loose-fitting jacket or robe. A woman’s *hanbok* is a long and colorful two-piece dress with a large bow in front.
- Korea is home to some of the best professional video game players in the world. Some of them practice 16 hours a day. They make millions of dollars a year and are often treated like rock stars.
- Snuppy, the world’s first cloned dog, was created at Seoul National University, in South Korea.
- Many buildings in South Korea don’t have a fourth floor because the number four is considered unlucky.
- There are more than two hundred different kinds of *kimchi* (pickled vegetables), and it is one of the most popular foods in South Korea. Popular types of *kimchi* are made from cabbage, cucumbers, or radishes, and some are extremely spicy.
- The island of Jeju is famous for its *haenyos* (female divers), who earn a living for their families by diving for marine products such as shellfish and seaweed. Some *haenyos* can hold their breath for three to five minutes! The island is also a popular honeymoon spot for newly married couples.
- Koreans greet each other with a short, quick bow or nod as a sign of respect.
- Most floors in traditional Korean homes are heated through a system of pipes called *ondol*, which run from the kitchen stove under the floors. Modern apartments also use the *ondol* system, and many Koreans sleep on a pad on the floor, as it helps them keep warm during the winter.

Flag

The national flag was adopted in 1883. The white background symbolizes purity. The red yang and blue yin show balance. The four line groups represent the four universal elements: earth, air, fire, and water. They show that yin and yang apply to all creation.



National Image

The *mugungwha* is the national flower. Also known as the Rose of Sharon, it can bloom even in the cold. *Mugung* means “endless,” which represents how Koreans have been persistent through many hard times.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)
38,502
Area (sq. km.)
99,720



South Korea is located on the southern part of the Korean *peninsula* (a piece of land mostly surrounded by water). It lies between North Korea and Japan and is bordered by the East Sea (also known as the Sea of Japan) to the east and the West Sea (also known as the Yellow Sea) to the west. An artificial boundary called the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separates North and South Korea. South Korea is about the size of Iceland or the state of Indiana. This includes several thousand small islands. Jeju is the largest of these islands, with a total area of 712 square miles (1,845 sq km). It is home to Mount Hallasan, an extinct volcano that is also the highest point in South Korea. The east of the country has many mountains and hills, while the west and south are mainly plains. The T'aebaek and the Sobaek are the two main mountain ranges. Woodlands cover 65 percent of the land.

South Korea has a four-season climate. It is humid in the summer and very dry in the winter. Summers and winters are both long, while the spring and fall seasons are brief. In July, giant rainstorms called *monsoons* bring half of the year's rain. Winter temperatures can get as low as -4°F (-20°C).

Population

Population
49,115,196



Most South Koreans live in cities in high-rise apartment complexes; in fact, almost half of the population lives around Seoul, the capital. Other large cities include Busan, Incheon, Daejeon, and Daegu. Except for a small percentage of Chinese and other foreigners, just about everyone in Korea is Korean. But that doesn't mean they are all alike. Koreans have strong regional differences, from language to politics. In fact, Koreans don't often marry people who come from outside their own region. South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. As a result, the population is not growing very quickly.

Language

Korean is the official language. The Korean alphabet is called *hangul*. It is made of vowels and consonants that are written together as pairs. Some Chinese writing (called *hanja*) is mixed with Korean writing in newspapers, city signs, and other documents.

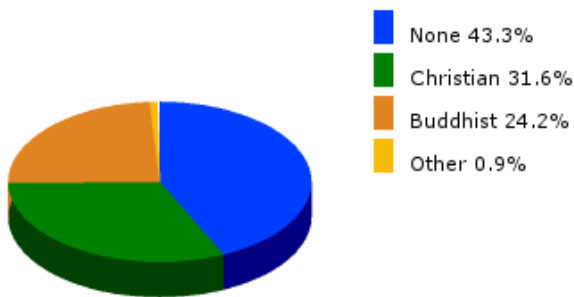
Following the traditions of the teacher and philosopher Confucius, South Koreans are careful to use respectful language. A Korean uses special words to talk to someone who is older or who has an important title. In fact, there are seven different levels of speech, depending on how much respect a person wants to show and how formal or casual the conversation may be. People who are the same age and know each other use a casual form of speech. Koreans can usually tell exactly what region a person is from by the *dialect* (way of speaking or pronouncing) or accent they use. The Seoul *dialect* is the one taught in schools.



Can You Say It in Korean?

Hello	<i>Annyong haseyo</i>	(ahn-NYONG hah-say-YOH)
Good-bye	<i>Annyonghee kasipsio</i>	(ahn-NYONG-hee kah-ship-SHEEOH)
Please	<i>Put'ak hamnida</i>	(POOT-ahk hahm-nee-dah)
Thank you	<i>Kamsahamnida</i>	(kahm-SAHM-knee-dah)
Yes	<i>Ne</i>	(neh)
No	<i>Animnida</i>	(ah-neem-knee-DAH)

Religion






Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*

Confucianism influences many areas of Korean society, but it is a philosophy and not a religion. Confucianism places importance on social order, devotion to family, and ethical behavior. Children are expected to honor their parents and perform certain duties for them in life and after they die. Confucian *rites* (ceremonies) performed on behalf of ancestors encourage respect for the family and family unity. Even Christians perform these rites in honor of their dead.

The South Korean constitution guarantees freedom of religion. About 30 percent of South Koreans are Christian. Most belong to various Protestant churches. Another 24 percent of the population is Buddhist. Just under half the population belongs to no religion at all.

History

Time Line

2300 BC		
2300 BC	Ruler Tangun establishes <i>Choson</i> (Korea), according to legends	
108	China conquers the northern part of Korea	
75	Korean tribes begin to unite into three kingdoms, the Koryo, Silla, and Baekje kingdoms	
57	The three kingdoms force the Chinese from much of Korea	
AD 600		
AD 300s	The Koryo kingdom adopts Buddhism	
660s	The Silla period, or golden age, begins	
918	The Koryo Kingdom overpowers Silla and rules for four hundred years	
1231	Mongols invade Korea	
1300		
1392	General Yi Song-gye begins the Choson (Yi) Dynasty, which lasts five hundred years	
1446	King Saejong introduces <i>hangul</i> , the Korean alphabet	
1500		
late 1500s	Japan attacks Korea; Korea pushes Japan out with Chinese help	
1800s	China, Japan, and Russia fight over control of Korea	
1900		
1910	Japan takes over Korea	

1945	Soviet (Russian) troops invade northern Korea just before Japan is defeated in World War II	
1948	An independent government is established in the south	
1950	Troops from North Korea invade South Korea; the Korean War begins	
1953	The Korean War ends without a peace treaty	
1961–92	The military rules the country, but the economy grows quickly	
1986	The constitution is changed to allow people to directly elect the president	
1988	The Summer Olympics are held in Seoul	
1991	North and South Korea both join the United Nations	
1992	Military rule ends; free elections are held	
1998	President Kim Dae-jung begins the Sunshine Policy to encourage positive relations with North Korea	
2000		
2000	Leaders of North and South Korea meet for the first time in 55 years to discuss their relationship; Kim Dae-jung is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize	
2006	Han Myung-sook becomes South Korea's first female prime minister	
2007	The presidents of North and South Korea meet and commit to increase cooperation between the two countries; passenger trains cross the North-South border for the first time in over 50 years	
2008	In response to the global financial crisis, the South Korean government announces its plan to help rescue the country's banking system and financial markets	

2012	Park Geun-hye, daughter of former president Park Chung-hee, is elected the first female president of South Korea
2013	South Korea successfully puts a satellite into orbit, the first using a rocket designed in and launched from South Korea
2015	Nearly one hundred people contract MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) after a South Korean businessman returns from a trip to Saudi Arabia; thousands of people are put in medical isolation, and over two thousand schools close
PRESENT	

Ancient Korea

Wandering tribes of hunters lived in Korea for thousands of years. The ancestors of today's Koreans are believed to have come to the area from what is now Siberia and Mongolia. These people raised animals, built villages, and used tools. Around 75 BC, Korean tribes united into three kingdoms that ruled for seven hundred years. This led to a golden age for Korea—a time of improvement in art, science, and trade. The lives of *peasants* (poor farmers) also improved. The Koryo period (918–1392) brought more growth and the spread of a religion called *Buddhism*, which emphasizes mental and moral purity in order to overcome challenges and suffering. Hundreds of Buddhist temples were built during this time, and the English word *Korea* comes from the native Korean word *Koryo*.



Choson (Yi) Rule

The Yi family ruled Korea from 1392 to 1910—more than five hundred years. They introduced many changes to how people lived. One change was the system of rules and behavior taught by the Chinese thinker Confucius. Confucius taught respect and reverence for ancestors and elders. Also during this period, the world's first book created using a metal movable type system was printed in 1377. In 1446, Yi ruler Saejong created an alphabet called *hangul* to help people learn to read and write easily. Yi rulers also fought off invading Japanese armies, with Chinese help. In the late 1500s, Choson leaders actually closed Korea's borders so that no outsiders could enter, and the nation became known as the Hermit Kingdom. However, Japan eventually became too strong for Korea.



Japanese Rule

Japan controlled Korea as a colony from 1910 to 1945, when World War II came to an end. Japanese rule was strict. Koreans were forced to learn Japanese, adopt Japanese names, and grow rice for Japan. The Japanese wanted to wipe out Korean culture and replace it with their own culture. Korean newspapers were not allowed to print in Korean, and people were expected to worship at Japanese shrines. Despite repeated Korean protests and uprisings, Japan maintained tight control over Korea. Many Koreans went hungry in World War II, and thousands of men had to fight for the Japanese side.



The Korean War

The Soviet (Russian) army took control of Korea when Japan lost World War II. Russia and the United States agreed to divide the country into two parts. Russian troops moved into North Korea, while U.S. troops entered South Korea. Neither country officially recognized the other. With Chinese and Russian help, North Korea built a huge army and invaded South Korea in 1950. North Korea hoped to make Korea a single country that would be controlled by a communist government. The United States and other countries sent troops to help South Korea. Millions of people died, but no one won the war. A peace treaty still has not been signed. North Korea and South Korea remained separate countries.



Asian Tiger

After the war, military leaders ran South Korea. These leaders were more like *dictators*, taking away many of the people's freedoms and punishing those who disagreed with them. Students upset with the rigid government control often protested. Government forces responded by beating and sometimes killing the protesters.



Over time, the government changed, and Koreans worked hard to build new factories, roads, and schools. Farms became more efficient. Small businesses made toys and clothing to sell in Europe and America. South Korea became more free and *democratic* (government by the people) as more and more college students demanded change. By the 1980s, South Korea's strong economy and good government led the world to compare the country to a tiger. In 1992, Kim Young-sam was elected the first *civilian* (non-soldier) president in decades.

Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Korean kids play soccer and basketball, and many like baseball and swimming. Hiking in the mountains is also popular. Almost all young children learn *tae kwon do* (a Korean martial art, similar to karate) after school, and they participate in tournaments. Most kids love to play computer games.



One traditional game is *pee-gu*, which is like dodgeball. Another is *kong-gi*, which is like jacks: you spread five small stones or game pieces on the ground, throw one in the air, and try to pick up another before catching the falling piece. Then you toss one and grab two, then three, and finally four before the tossed piece hits the ground. Some children play a game called *dakji*. The game is played with rubber pieces shaped like cartoon characters, and each player tries to knock the other players' pieces over.

Holidays

Korean children love to celebrate the Lunar New Year and Children's Day (5 May). Because it is based on the lunar calendar, the date of the Lunar New Year changes each year. Usually it falls in January or February, and families get together for a big meal. *Mandu* (pork, tofu, or vegetable dumplings) is the traditional food. Families get together and make hundreds of *mandu* in preparation for the meal. Children bow to their grandparents and other adult relatives as a special sign of respect; the adults then give them gifts or money. This tradition is called *sae bae*. Many families dress in traditional clothing for this special day and make offerings to their ancestors.



On Children's Day, schools are closed and children often go to amusement parks. They also are taken out to eat for lunch and given presents by family members.

Food

Korean food can be spicy, and red pepper is one of the main ingredients. Rice and *kimchi* (pickled vegetables) are served nearly every day. Koreans also like soup, and rice mixed with vegetables and meat. Popular soups include doenjang *jjigae* (fermented soybean soup), *galbitang* (beef bone soup), and *meeyook* (seaweed soup). *Meeyook* is also a favorite birthday dish. Seafood, beef, and chicken are cooked in many ways and are popular. *Bulgogi* (marinated and barbecued beef) and *jook* (rice porridge) are favorite dishes. Most Korean restaurants have grills right at the tables, and customers cook the meat themselves. Koreans love to wrap their meat in cabbage or sesame leaves. Side dishes are an important part of Korean meals. Common side dishes include spinach, radish, *kimchi* pancakes, salad, mushrooms, and pumpkin.



City kids often stop at a *pojangmacha* (food cart) for a snack after school. *Bungo pang* (a fish-shaped pastry with sweet red beans), *ddokbokki* (spicy rice cake), and *tempura* (deep-fried seafood or vegetables) are favorite snacks. Ramen is also a popular snack because it is easy to cook. When children don't have access to hot water, they often crunch up the noodles and eat them raw.

Koreans use chopsticks to eat most foods, but spoons and forks are also common. Korean chopsticks are usually made of stainless steel, but Koreans generally use a spoon when eating rice. Children are expected to wait for the oldest person to start eating first.

Schools

Adult Literacy
98%



Korean children attend school Monday through Friday and have a large amount of homework in all grades. Math, science, Korean, and English are studied from a young age. In elementary school, the day starts around 8:20 a.m. and lasts until 2 or 3 in the afternoon. After school, most Korean kids (even young ones) go to a *hokwon*, a study or "cram" school, often until 10 or 11 p.m. Popular *hokwons* subjects are English, Korean, math, Chinese, music, art, and science. Some students go to three *hokwons* after school. Many also attend classes during the summer and hire private tutors to teach them.

Students must bow when they meet their teachers. School vacations usually go from January to February and July to August. Education is free. All healthy young men are required to serve two years in the military after they finish high school. Many young men complete this service after their freshman or sophomore years of college.

Life as a Kid

Korean kids love being with their families or playing with friends. However, they spend most of their free time doing schoolwork because their parents are often very competitive and want them to study at a top Korean university to get a good job. When kids do get free time, they like to play computer or video games, read comic books, play sports, and watch movies. They love watching soccer and baseball. Korean kids learn how to use computers when they are very young. When with adults, children must show respect by speaking with more polite language than they would with friends. They are expected to always obey their parents.



Society

Government

Capital

Seoul

Head of State

President Park Geun-hye

Head of Government

Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is made up of nine *do* (provinces). It is a *democratic* (government by the people) country with a *constitution* (a set of basic laws on which other laws depend). South Korea is led by a president, who serves for five years and who holds most of the power. The president appoints a prime minister to assist him. The official home of the president of South Korea is known as the Blue House, or *Cheongwadae*, because of its blue-tiled roof. South Korea's *legislature* (lawmaking body) is called the *Gukhoe*. The *legislature* has 300 members, all of whom serve four-year terms. Korean citizens may vote starting at age 19.

Money and Economy

Currency

Won



South Korea has several large industries that produce steel, cars, ships, and building materials. You might have a television or cellular phone in your home that was made in Korea or has parts made in Korea. Samsung, Hyundai, and LG are three of the most famous Korean brands. Korea sells fish, rice, barley, and vegetables to other countries.

Getting Around

Because of its large cities, South Korea has one of the world's most developed transportation systems. Subways, trains, taxis, and buses are common. Most South Koreans have cars, so traffic can be heavy. Motorcycles and scooters help some people slip through crowded streets and highways. People sometimes even drive these vehicles on the sidewalk, so kids have to pay close attention so they don't get run over. People often ride bicycles, especially in the countryside.



Culture Facts & Contacts

Tae kwon do

Tae kwon do is the name of Korea's ancient *martial art*, which is a way of using your body to fight or defend yourself. Koreans have practiced this art for more than two thousand years. In the early days of Korea, soldiers trained in *tae kwon do* to protect their leaders and kingdoms. Today, children and adults learn *tae kwon do* in classes and gyms all around the world; it is also an Olympic sport. You can recognize *tae kwon do* by its fast, high, and spinning kicks. It uses the feet more than some other *martial arts*.



Learn More

Contact the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, 2450 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 939-5600; web site <http://usa.mofa.go.kr>.

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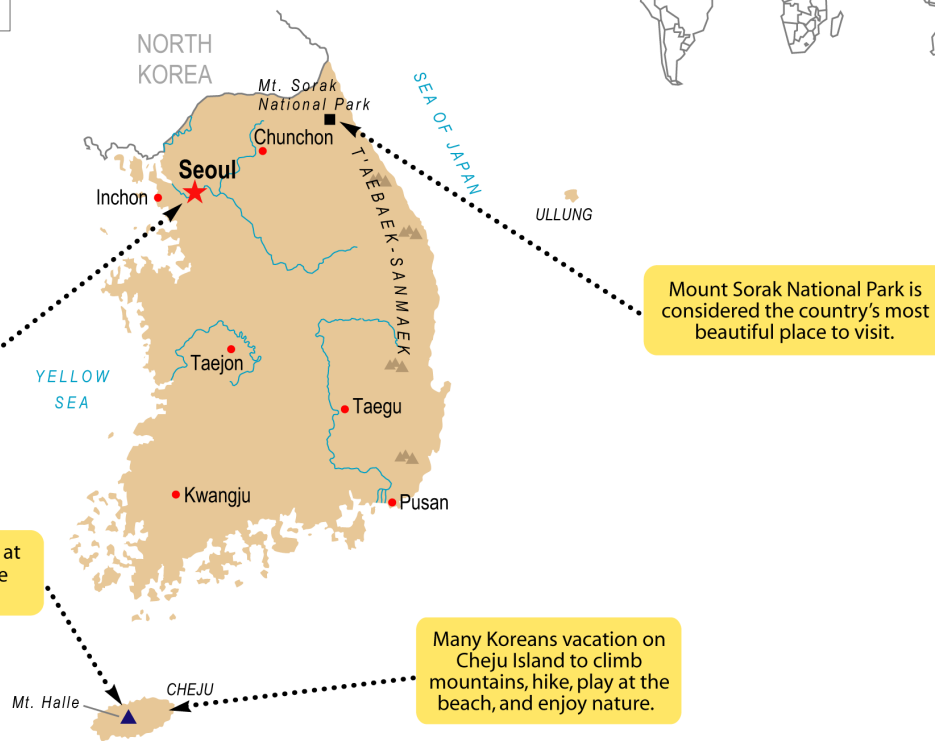
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South Korea



Winter temperatures average around 30°F (-1°C); the summer average is below 80°F (27°C).



Seoul is the capital and largest city.

Mount Sorak National Park is considered the country's most beautiful place to visit.

Mount Halle, which stands at 6,398 feet (1,950 m), is the country's highest peak.

Many Koreans vacation on Cheju Island to climb mountains, hike, play at the beach, and enjoy nature.