



Korea is good for the Seoul

The capital is an inspiring mix of ancient history and cutting edge modernity, with a side of K-Pop, finds Kate Wickers

I warm to Seoul immediately, even though it's minus 16 degrees when I visit in February, falling for the city's combination of ancient history and cutting-edge modernity. Korean culture has taken the world by storm in recent years, elevating fried chicken to a whole new level (if you didn't already know, Kentucky is so last decade), making kimchi (fermented cabbage) practically mainstream (even Asda stocks it these days), giving us the phenomenon that is K-Pop, and, most recently, the TV series *Squid Game*, to shock and hook in equal measures.

Seoul is a metropolis of 9.7 million, and to get the measure of its sprawl I head by cable car up Namsan Mountain, then whizz a further 236 metres to the top of N Seoul Tower,

built as the country's first TV and radio mast in 1971. With 360-degree views, I can pick out landmarks such as the Han River, and the Lotte World Tower (the sixth tallest in the world at 555 metres). By foot is the nicest way to travel back to ground level, and on my hour-long wander, along wooded pathways, I pass small Buddhist shrines and temples, and see local life unfold (passing dog-walkers, keep-fit fanatics, and young couples on obvious first dates). At the foot of the mountain, I wander into Namsangol Hanok Village, a free, open-air museum, consisting of five hanok (traditional wooden houses) that have been rescued from dereliction and relocated that offer a great introduction to time-honoured Korean life.

Because of the intense cold, I look for the occasional



Starfield library, where shelves reach 13 metres high, main; Kate Wickers in Gangnam, by the bronze crossed hands in honour of Psy's 2012 hit *Gangnam Style*, above

“To check out the city's coolest spot, the subway delivers me to Hongdae

indoor diversion, spending an absorbing few hours at the National Museum of Korea (highlights here include the ten storey stone pagoda, dating from 1348, and a Buddhist document printed with moveable type in 1377, beating Gutenberg's Bible by 78 years), but mainly I wrap up to explore outside. At the grand palace complex of Gyeongbokgung (built in 1394) the throne hall is impressive, set against a backdrop of pine-clad mountains, and in the palace of Changdeokgung, on a Secret Garden tour, I trudge

through pretty pavilion-filled gardens. Nearby is the bustling road of Bukchon-ro, full of independent businesses (pop into Jaiso for mandarin flavoured sweet treats made with rice dough), and the newly opened Hansik Space E:um, a swish government initiative set up to promote hansik (Korean cuisine), where you can book in for a free tasting of five traditional drinks, including makgeolli, a cloudy, white, unpasteurised, rice wine.

I'm saying centrally in the district of Jongno, at the five-star Four Seasons Seoul. My room has a pleasing sense of place in use of local silks and ceramics. Views are epic (even more so if you bag a room that looks out on the palaces), through floor to ceiling windows. As temperatures drop by evening, I hunker down to feast on Korean homestyle classics such as bowls of steaming Hanwoo beef and mushroom soup, and plates of fried kitchen at cosy Maru (meaning living room). Tucked away in the basement, the glamorous speakeasy-style

bar of Charles H. is the place to be seen, but I favour hanging out in Bar Oul to watch the mixologists at work, while snacking on Korean tapas, such as kimchi bombs made with aged kimchi, pork and tofu.

Normally, I'd lunch in local food markets, but discover buying direct from vendors is a little overwhelming. To help me, I take a tour with Secret Food Tours in Gwangjang market, which begins at stall number 39 and with a family who've been making fresh mandu (steamed dumplings) for more than 50 years. Their bestseller filling is the highly prized seafood delicacy of abalone, a large, flat sea snail. We sample pancakes made from mung beans, several different kinds of kimchi, and Janang soya bean ice cream.

On another day, I head out with Chef Ashley Hwang to shop in Jayang market, then spend a happy few hours learning how to rustle up modum jeon, savoury pancakes stuffed with aubergine, pumpkin, tofu, and minced beef.

To check out the city's coolest spot, the subway delivers me to Hongdae, where stylish (mainly teenage) Seoulites strut and browse the wares of up-and-coming designers, and find diversions in street art, novelty cafes, and gachapon arcades. Gangnam is Seoul's most commercial district, put firmly on the map by singer Psy when he sang of Gangnam Style in 2012. Psy's trademark horse dance has been iconified as a pair of massive, bronze crossed hands (indicative of his most famous dance move).

It stands next to the Koex shopping mall, home to the epic

Starfield library, where shelves reach a height of 13 metres, and Koreans, of all ages, congregate to flick through new releases.

The most popular day excursion from the city is to the DMZ (the demilitarised zone) that separates South Korea from North. I'm not sure what to expect of the experience and staring from the border into the no man's land between the two, is nothing but melancholic. From here, through binoculars, I see the fake town built by the North Koreans to display to the South just what a high quality of life they were enjoying (which was never occupied). I spy the guard points, the barbed wire, and hear the insults directed at the South through loud speakers from the North (the South's reply to this is to drown them out with K-Pop).

I need a life-affirming scene that evening, heading into lively Myeong-dong where catchy K-Pop hits play from neon-lit karaoke bars and aromas from Korean barbecue restaurants waft through the streets. I'm soon knocking back a Cass Fresh beer, frying steak on hot coals like a pro, and humming along to K-Pop girl band sensation HI-Key's biggest hit, Seoul, Such a Beautiful City. The lyrics say it all.

Double rooms at Four Seasons Seoul from £285, www.fourseasons.com/seoul. Virgin Atlantic and Korean Air fly direct from London Heathrow to Seoul, with returns from around £830, www.koreanair.com; www.virginatlantic.com. Hayes & Jarvis offer a 10-night trip to Korea, including 4 days in Seoul. From £4,690 per person, www.hayesandjarvis.com



The Charles H bar at the Four Seasons Hotel Seoul



Snapshot of a city I love

Cat Thomson takes a trip down memory lane when she returns to her old beat in London on a visit to Covent Garden

In the 1990s I was a newspaper photographer for local papers in London. Our newspaper's office was in Hammersmith, in the west of the city. But our news patch ranged from Fulham, Marylebone, Paddington, Kensington and Chelsea into Westminster and the city of London. Back then I knew my way around the streets of London like a cabbie. One minute I would take photos of the Queen arriving at the Chelsea Flower Show, and the next I would climb up a crane to get a bird's eye view of a construction site. A conference invite means I have the perfect excuse to revisit some of my old stomping grounds, after decades of absence.

Despite the vast size of London being overwhelming at first, I

quickly felt at home and part of a patchwork of communities. Years later I returned north to Edinburgh for a new role and to raise a family. But I still have fond memories of my twenties, living, working and playing hard in the capital.

Returning here the sense of familiarity hit me in waves. First, the rumbles and dusty smell of the Underground, and then the push to get in a crowded tube. Nowadays I opt for the lift at Covent Garden instead of climbing the 193 stairs like I used to. But stepping out in daylight, of James Street The Nags Head pub is still there – although there has been a pub on this site since the 1670s, so it is not a surprise. There's still the same hustle and bustle of performers in Covent Garden Plaza.

My room for the night is at the

stylish AMANO Hotel on Drury Lane. En route, I take a wrong turn and gaze up at the exterior of St Clement Danes School. I know I have been here before, most likely photographing a school concert or a visit from Chelsea pensioners, but the exact details are lost with time.

The AMANO Covent Garden is a boutique lifestyle hotel in the stable of the uber-cool Berlin-based AMANO hotel group. They aim to provide beautifully designed spaces in the best city centre locations for a reasonable price. I'm impressed they've transformed a dull 1980s office building and turned it into a stylish 141-bedroom hotel.

It's located directly opposite the stage door at The Theatre Royal on Drury Lane. Currently, it's where Tom Hiddleston is starring in Much Ado About Nothing with Hayley Atwell and Forbes Masson. Perhaps, I should have brought a long lens to snap them leaving like an old-school paparazzi.

Inside the sleek foyer, I see statement lighting and cool features curated by London-based design studio Woods Bagot. The hotel restaurant Penelope's, located on the ground level, is led by London-born Fez Ozalga. The female executive chef accepted her

role in 2022, and with her Turkish Cypriot heritage, her culinary style reflects a melting pot of Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and Latin Spanish cuisine. The word is that the baklava cheesecake is divine.

After an effortless check-in and a short elevator ride, I arrive at my spacious room, with its dark floorboards and sixties-inspired headboard, which oozes way more city chic than I do. The bathroom walls feature charcoal metro tiles and an impressive walk-in rainforest shower. The Daluma toiletries offer divine scents to wash away the city grime.

My room window overlooks the Peabody Trust's Wild Street Estate, which I'm sure I have visited before. The Bronx-style caged basketball court is a more recent addition. Just beyond I spot The Church of Scotland Court. Despite working here for years, I never knew it existed. Intrigued, I stroll around the block to see what else I've missed on my patch in this corner of Westminster.

At night, the area comes alive. Around Covent Garden, you can find around 20 theatres, so this is the ideal location to stay if you want to take in a show. Operation Mincemeat is on at The Fortuna Theatre, or The

The 141-bedroom Hotel AMANO Covent Garden has been converted from an office building

Play That Goes Wrong at The Duchess Theatre. I head back towards Drury Lane walking past Mamma Mia! at the Novello Theatre, and Tina at the Aldwych Theatre. But if you prefer high culture, the Royal Opera and The Royal Ballet are nearby.

There's no shortage of places to eat, drink and be merry, but I have a table for the hip seventh-floor Hotel AMANO Rooftop terrace. I am here solo, so I decide to play it cool and sip a signature cocktail while drinking in the impressive panoramic skyline. The selection of tapas plates makes the perfect accompaniment.

Time vanishes for me on the rooftop terrace. Maybe it's the sundowners and sweeping views of the London Eye and Big Ben, but it feels good to be back in London.

A stay at Hotel AMANO Covent Garden starts from £160 per room per night. For further information or to book, visit: <https://www.amanogroup.com/en/hotels/london-hotel-amano-covent-garden>

'I loved it and I didn't see enough of it'

Gary Barlow talks to Sarah Marshall about some highlights of his trip to Australia for his new ITV series



Gary Barlow in Uluru in Northern Territory, Australia

Adventure
After watching the immersive Indigenous light show Sunrise Journeys projected above Uluru, he also found inspiration for his next tour. "We were surprised at how many things we were able to do in the Northern Territory, between Alice Springs and Uluru, it was quite a start to the adventure."

Cities
Whether taking a backstage tour of Sydney Opera House or sampling the perfect coffee in Melbourne's famous ACDC Lane, Gary enjoyed the laidback pace of urban living. "It could be a southern hemisphere thing, but in Australia, the light it's focused. It's so brilliant. We were there in November so we couldn't have hit the weather better."

How to plan your trip...
Hays Travel have packages to Australian locations featured in Gary Barlow's Food and Wine Tour: Australia from £1,953pp for a 10-night room-only stay including flights. Visit haystravel.co.uk. Wexas Travel offers a Wine & Wildlife Safari in South Australia and Western Australia, including stays in Kangaroo Island and Margaret River, from £5,855 per person, including international flights. Visit wexas.com.

Gary Barlow's Food and Wine Tour: Australia airs on ITV and ITVX