



# South Korea

## Introduction

Official Name: Republic of Korea

Nationality: Korean

Area: 98,480 square kilometers (38,023 square miles)

Languages: Korean, English

Currency: won (KRW)

Location: Eastern Asia, bordered by North Korea with coastline on the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan

## Statistical Information

Population	49 million
0-14 years	18.3 percent
15-64 years	72.1 percent
65+ years	9.6 percent
Birth rate	10 births/1,000
Death rate	6 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	1.3 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	0.394 percent
Life expectancy	77.2 years
Literacy	97.9 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	less than 0.1 percent
Below poverty line	15 percent
Ethnic groups	Korean (except for 20,000 Chinese)
Religion	21 percent Protestant 8 percent Roman Catholic 24 percent Buddhist 2 percent other 45 percent nonreligious

## Economy

Before the 1960s, South Korea's economy was comparable to poorer countries in Africa and Asia. A system of close government/business ties, including import restrictions, government sponsorship of certain industries, and a strong labor effort, has made South Korea's economy today comparable to that of the smaller European Union countries. South Korea's economy has experienced incredible growth over the past four decades, and is now completely in step with the high-tech modern world economy. South Korea's

economy is characterized by low unemployment, moderate inflation, an export surplus, and relatively equal distribution of income.

## Government

Capital: Seoul

South Korea is a republic. The president is elected by popular vote to serve a five-year term. The president appoints the prime minister with the approval of the National Assembly. The legislature consists of the unicameral National Assembly, or *Kukhoe*. The *Kukhoe* has 299 members, who serve four-year terms. Two hundred and forty-three members are elected by single-seat constituencies, while the remaining 56 are elected on the basis of proportional representation.

## Climate

South Korea has a temperate climate, with warm summers and cold winters. Precipitation is heavier during the summer; the country experiences a short rainy season during the summer known as *jangma*. In Seoul, January temperatures range from 19°F to 33°F, and July temperatures range from 71°F to 83°F. South Korea is also subject to typhoons.

## Environmental Concerns

Large cities experience significant amounts of air pollution. Some areas of the country also experience acid rain. Improperly treated or stored sewage and industrial effluents pollute water. Many South Korean fishermen practice drift net fishing, which is controversial due to its impact on non-target marine life such as turtles and dolphins.

## History

According to Korean legend, Tangun established the Old Choson civilization in northwest Korea in 2333 B.C. The first ruler of Korea in historical records is Wiman, a Chinese invader who overthrew Old Choson and established his rule in 194 B.C. By 100

B.C., the Chinese had conquered the eastern half of Korea. The city of Lolang, close to modern Pyongyang, served as the center of Chinese rule.

The native Korean kingdom of Koguryo, traditionally founded in 37 B.C., gained influence in the north along the Yalu River during the first century A.D. By the end of the fourth century, Koguryo had conquered Lolang and driven the Chinese back. During the reign of King Kwanggaet'o, from 391-413, the kingdom of Koguryo occupied much of what is now Korea and northeast China. It resisted several Chinese invasions in the sixth and seventh centuries.

While Koguryo ruled the north, two main kingdoms emerged in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. The kingdom of Paekche, begun around 250 A.D., controlled the western half of the peninsula, while the kingdom of Silla, begun around 350, ruled the east. The kingdom of Silla formed an alliance with T'ang China and conquered both Paekche and Koguryo by 668. Silla then expelled the Chinese and unified much of the Korean peninsula.

The arts flourished and Korea grew prosperous under the kingdom of Silla. Buddhism, brought to Korea in the fourth century, became the dominant religion.

In 935, Wang Kon of the Koryo dynasty overthrew the declining Silla dynasty. The word "Korea" came from the Koryo dynasty. Buddhism remained the state religion, but Confucianism dictated the pattern of government.

Mongol forces from China invaded Koryo territory in 1231. Battles raged for nearly 30 years, until the Korean royal family agreed to accept Mongol sovereignty. The kingdom remained under Mongol domination until 1392, when popular general Yi Songgye seized the throne in a coup.

Songgye established the Choson dynasty, and built a new capital at Hanseong, or Seoul. Confucianism was the official state religion of the new dynasty, and Buddhist priests lost their preferred status and much of their wealth. Printing with moveable metal type was introduced during the 15th century, leading to the development of the Korean alphabet.

In 1592, Japanese shogun Hideyoshi invaded the Korean peninsula. Korean admiral Yi Sun-Sin improved upon earlier designs to produce the famous turtle ship. The turtle ship was a heavily armed warship with a covered deck to protect its crew from enemy arrows. To discourage boarders, the curved decks of turtle ships were covered in iron spikes.

Turtle ships were extremely maneuverable and proved very effective against the Japanese navy, but they were expensive, and the Choson army could not afford to build many of them. The Japanese caused much devastation and suffering before the Choson finally drove them out of Korea in 1598.

Following a series of invasions in the 17th century, the Manchu dynasty of China made Korea a tributary state in 1637. By the 18th century, Korea was experiencing economic growth and a cultural renaissance. It resisted establishing trade relationships with the West longer than either China or Japan, which earned it the moniker "The Hermit Kingdom."

Japan forced Korea to sign a trade agreement in 1876. Korea negotiated trade agreements with the United States and other European countries in the 1880s to counterbalance increasing Japanese influence. Japan continued to exert influence over the Korean peninsula; during the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, Japan moved troops through Korea to attack Manchuria. After the war ended, Japanese troops remained in Korea. In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea.

Korea experienced massive economic and social changes as the Japanese built modern industries and railroads, but Japanese rule was oppressive and harsh. The Koreans made several attempts to oust the hated Japanese, but were never successful.

After Japan's loss in World War II, Korea was partitioned. American troops occupied South Korea, and Soviet troops occupied North Korea. The partition was expected to be temporary, since the United States, Great Britain, and China had all promised Korea independence, but the Soviet Union continued to block the United Nations' efforts to facilitate nationwide elections and reunify Korea under one government. When relations between the United States and the Soviet Union soured, all trade between North and South Korea ceased. This proved devastating for the country, since the two halves of the country were economically dependent upon each other. Trade and industry were centered in North Korea, while the majority of agriculture occurred in South Korea. South Korea struggled with energy shortages and a flood of refugees from North Korea. Inflation soared and unemployment levels rose.

In 1948, two separate, independent regimes were established. The United States helped establish the democratic Republic of Korea in the south, while the Soviet Union created the communist People's

Republic of Korea in the north. By the middle of 1949, American and Soviet troops had been withdrawn, leaving the two rival Korean governments to fend for themselves. Both regimes wished to see all Korea unified under their government.

In June of 1950, North Korea launched a surprise attack on South Korea, sparking the Korean War. The United Nations denounced North Korea's aggression, and placed the United States in charge of the combined forces of 15 member nations. The U.N. and South Korean armies initially drove the North Koreans steadily back until the Chinese joined the war on the side of North Korea in late 1950. The fighting raged around the 38th parallel; neither side was able to gain the advantage and break the stalemate.

In 1953, negotiations between North and South Korea finally produced an armistice. North and South Korea would remain separate countries. The armistice called for a two-kilometer-wide buffer zone along the 38th parallel, known as the demilitarized zone, or DMZ. The DMZ was considered a no-man's-land, belonging to neither country. Relations along the DMZ remained tense during the latter half of the '50s and throughout the '60s. Thousands of soldiers remained stationed on either side of the DMZ, ready to go to war at a moment's notice.

In 1971, further negotiations between North and South Korea discussed the possibility of peaceful reunification. In 1972, the two countries agreed on a plan to work toward reunification. Negotiations between the leaders of the two countries in 1990 achieved small-scale results, such as allowing family visits between the two countries. Despite promising negotiations, significant problems remain obstacles to complete reunification. Two incidents of terrorism in South Korea have been blamed on North Korea, and in 1996 North Korea announced that it would no longer recognize the DMZ, sending troops into the heavily guarded zone.

A 2000 agreement between the two Koreas calls for eventual reunification, but does not specify how. In the meantime, trade between the two nations continues to grow, and South Korea sends substantial amounts of aid to North Korea. In 2007, a railroad running through the DMZ was rebuilt and reopened.

### **Ethnic Groups**

South Korea is ethnically homogeneous with the exception of around 20,000 ethnic Chinese and a very small number of indigenous peoples. Koreans equate

nationality with ethnicity, and find the idea of a multiracial or multiethnic country such as the United States strange. Ethnic Koreans speak the Korean language.

### **Religion**

Nearly half of the South Korean population claims to be either nonreligious or to have no religious preference.

Slightly more than one-quarter of South Koreans profess to be Christians. Around 20 percent of these are Protestants, and the remaining six percent are Roman Catholic. South Korea is the second-largest missionary-sending nation in the world, after the United States. Eleven of the world's 12 largest churches are located in Seoul. Yoido Full Gospel Church, founded in 1958, is the largest Christian congregation in the world, with 830,000 members.

While theirs was once the dominant religion of Korea, the number of Korean Buddhists has fallen to around 10.7 million, or 23.2 percent of the total population. Korean Buddhists belong to the East Asian school of Buddhism, and are characterized by their attempts to resolve what they see as inconsistencies in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Wŏn Buddhism is another small sect of Buddhism native to Korea. The name literally means "Circular Buddhism." Its first religious order was founded in 1924 by Pak Chung-bin, who felt that increasing materialism would enslave the human race.

Jeung San Do is a new spiritual movement born in Korea. The name signifies "the highest truth that surpasses all other truths." According to the teachings of Jeung San Do, humans have always achieved their goals through conflict at the expense of others, but that will soon change. Gang Il-Sun, or Jeung San Sangjenim, the founder of Jeung San Do, was a twentieth-century teacher known as a prophet, miracle worker, and healer. After observing the destruction caused by the Donghak Uprising in 1895, he resolved to save the world from suffering. One of the central concepts in Jeung San Do is the work of renewing heaven and earth, expressed through conversations and rituals. As a fairly new religion, Jeung San Do has fewer than half a million followers in Korea.

### **Culture**

Food—Traditionally, Korean families ate rice with every meal. Urban Koreans do not always follow this pattern, and may eat Western foods such as toast and eggs for breakfast. For many Korean families, especially those

in rural areas, a common meal consists of a dish of steamed white rice, a soybean-based vegetable soup, and a dish of *kimchi*. Kimchi, a pungent and often hot mixture of pickled or fermented vegetables, is the national dish. Kimchi is most often made with Chinese cabbage or daikon radishes, but nearly any vegetable can be fermented to make the dish. There are many varieties of kimchi based on region, season, occasion, and personal taste of the cook. There is a wide variety of restaurants in Korea, including ones that serve Western food and specialty ethnic foods. There are no food taboos in Korea, although Buddhist monks may be vegetarian.

**Social status**—Korea's traditional noble class (*yangban*) was formally abolished in 1894. In 1994, 60 percent of Koreans considered themselves middle-class. The perception of social status is clearly related to the level of education—those with more formal education tend to view themselves as higher class than those with little education. One of the major symbols of class status is the size of one's home. In South Korea, the number of *p'yong* (one *p'yong* is equal to 3.95 square yards) of one's home is interpreted as a measure of one's wealth. According to government classifications, residences between 18 and 25.7 *p'yong* are medium-sized. Upper-class Koreans live in apartments or condominiums of over 30 *p'yong*.

**Marriage**—Family background and level of education are important considerations in Korean marriages. Young people almost always have their choice of marriage partner, although some initial meetings may be arranged by the parents. These meetings often take place in coffee shops. After exchanging greetings and conversation, the parents leave the couple alone to decide if they wish to see each other again. Marriage is considered the union of not only a man and a woman, but of their two families.

**Children**—Korean children are taught filial piety, respect for elders, and obedience early in their lives. Gender roles are impressed upon them early in life, and sons tend to rely upon their parents until marriage. Due to the preferential treatment that Korean males receive, Korean girls tend to grow up with more self-reliance and individualism than their brothers.

**Education**—The Korean education system consists of six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, and three years of high school. Most public middle- and high-school students are required to wear uniforms. Higher education is highly valued in South Korea; it is viewed as a way to improve one's socioeconomic status. College entrance examinations are extremely competitive.

**Etiquette**—Koreans are very conscious of status. They do not use first names when addressing another person, unless that person is a family member or very close friend. Position titles such as "professor" or "doctor" are used to politely address people. Koreans may appear rude or pushy to strangers in urban settings and often do not say a word when they bump into someone on public transportation, in the streets, or in shops.

### **Dress**

Most urban South Koreans prefer Western clothing for everyday wear. Traditional outfits are reserved for festivals and other celebrations. The traditional Korean dress is known as *hanbok*. It is characterized by simple lines without pockets and vibrant colors, especially for children. The *hanbok* is a two-piece costume, consisting of a belted, tunic-style jacket with full sleeves over a skirt or pants. Women wear the jacket or shirt, known as *jeogori*, over a full skirt called *chima*. Men wear the *jeogori* over pants called *baji*. Many different types of undergarments were traditionally worn under the *hanbok* to achieve the desired silhouette, creating a very complex garment. Today, the *hanbok* tends to be a bit simpler, especially in children's styles, since it is worn only on special occasions.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Roads in South Korea are very well-maintained. They are usually paved and have functioning traffic lights. Most South Korean drivers follow traffic laws. However, the number of traffic fatalities in South Korea is significantly higher than in the United States. Bus drivers tend to be very aggressive, and motorcyclists often drive on sidewalks to avoid traffic. South Korean drivers frequently fail to yield right-of-way to pedestrians in crosswalks, so it is safer to find an underpass or overpass intended for pedestrian use.

Left-hand turns are prohibited except where a green arrow on the traffic signal indicates otherwise. Right turns on red lights are allowed following a complete

stop. The use of seat belts is required, and children riding in the front seat must either wear a seat belt or sit in a child car seat. Motorcyclists must wear helmets.

In any accident involving a vehicle and a pedestrian, the driver of the vehicle is considered at fault. Investigations usually involve long waits at a police station. Korean police may request to hold the passport of a foreigner involved in a traffic accident if the accident is disputed or involves personal injury. It is a good idea to carry a disposable camera to document any traffic accident.

Short-term visitors should apply for an international driving permit (IDP) if they intend to drive in South Korea. An IDP is a document which allows a motorist to operate a vehicle in another nation when accompanied by a valid driver's license from their own country. An IDP is not a license in and of itself; it is a translation of your United States or Canadian driver's license.

You can apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before you travel. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20, but the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

### **Illness/Injury**

South Korean hospitals are generally equipped with state-of-the-art equipment. Western-style medical facilities are available in Seoul and other major urban centers. Not all doctors and staff, even in urban areas, are proficient in English; rural clinics often have no English-speaking doctors. A list of hospitals with medical staff who speak English is available from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul at [korea.usembassy.gov](http://korea.usembassy.gov).

Korean pharmacies are very modern. Most prescribed medications can be obtained in Korea with a prescription.

Most Korean hospitals and clinics do not accept foreign medical insurance. Advance payment, by cash or credit card, is usually expected.

### **Crime**

Although the overall crime rate in South Korea is low, major metropolitan areas have higher rates of petty thefts such as purse-snatching, pickpocketing,

and hotel room and residential burglary. U.S. citizens may be targeted in tourist areas such as large downtown market areas or the area around the U.S. army garrison in Yongsan.

### **Safety and Security**

Frequent demonstrations are a concern in South Korea. These demonstrations often concern issues such as U.S. military presence in the country, labor accords, the Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Korea, the war in Iraq, and the Korean government's decision to keep troops in Iraq. Political and student demonstrations have, on occasion, become violent, but most demonstrations in South Korea are peaceful in nature.

Westerners, especially young adults, should be careful in the Hongdae and Sinchon areas of Seoul. There are many night clubs in these areas, and they have often been the site of bar or street fights and harassment of Westerners.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

A passport is required. U.S. citizens may enter South Korea as tourists for up to 30 days without a visa. Americans must obtain a visa for stays longer than 30 days or for purposes other than tourism. Usually, foreigners staying in Korea for more than 90 days must apply for an alien registration card. Changes in visa type are not permitted once in South Korea. Any changes to the type of a visa (for example, changing a tourist visa to a teaching visa) must be done at a Korean consulate outside South Korea. For more information on visas, contact the Embassy of the Republic of Korea at 2320 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20008.

### **Immunizations**

Malaria risk areas in South Korea are limited to rural areas in the northern parts of Kyonggi and Kangwon provinces and the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Travelers who plan to visit a malaria risk area of South Korea should use the antimalarial drug chloroquine.

There is an intermediate to high risk in South Korea for both hepatitis A and B. Travelers should consider being vaccinated. Rare cases of Japanese encephalitis have been reported in South Korea, but vaccination is not recommended, especially for travelers who will be staying in urban areas.

### **Special Circumstances**

Legally, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) are at war. An armistice has maintained peace

for the past 50 years, and relations between the two countries continue to improve, but an outbreak of hostilities is still possible. In the event of a situation that necessitates the evacuation of U.S. citizens from South Korea, the government has developed an evacuation plan. More information on this evacuation plan can be found at [korea.usembassy.gov/emergency\\_evacuation.html](http://korea.usembassy.gov/emergency_evacuation.html).

Many Americans go to South Korea to teach English at private language schools, known as *hagwons*. There have been many complaints about schools or employment agencies which have misrepresented salaries, housing arrangements, insurance, and working conditions either verbally or in a written contract. For more information on teaching English in South Korea, see the document entitled "Teaching English in Korea: Opportunities and Pitfalls," which is available upon request from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul.

**Electricity**

South Korea's standard for electrical power is 220V/60Hz, with plug types C and F. A power converter is required to use American appliances on a 220-volt circuit, and plug adapters will be necessary to convert American types A and B plugs to Korean types C and F outlets. Some Korean hotels offer both 110-volt and 220-volt service, and older buildings may be wired at 110V. Types A and B outlets can also be found in some older buildings, although they are being phased out.