

Inside Asia

SMALL GROUP TOUR

Soul of Korea

10 DAYS / 9 NIGHTS



Tour overview

Korea's distinctive dramas have their own section on Netflix. Their skin care products are highly prized. You'll find Korean barbecue in every major city. And yet, despite being travel media's 'hottest new destination', it's still relatively quiet for Western tourists.

Travelling in a group offers a window into what it means to be Korean. Collective culture shapes everyday life – from restaurant meals designed to be shared, to generous group discounts at major sights. That's why we created our first Korea Small Group Tour: Soul of Korea.

This trip covers the full spectrum of South Korea's appeal: deep-rooted tradition, fast-paced modernity, and eye-catching natural beauty. From sea temples to folk villages, skyscraper skylines and all points in between, it's an ideal introduction for first-time visitors.

South Korea's *ppalli ppalli* (quick quick!) culture means it's always changing – and there's always something new to see. So, we dedicate a day for your tour leader (we call them Insiders) to showcase whatever's new, local and lively at the time, from niche festivals to new pop-up bars.

Food is a cornerstone of Korean culture: and it's not just what you eat, but how. Collective dining is part of South Korea's social fabric – eating as a group unlocks some of Korea's most authentic experiences.

Whether you're here for the temples, the traditions or the K-pop and KBBQ, this Small Group Tour shows you Korea through the eyes of the people who live it for themselves.



Highlights

Designed for first timers to discover South Korea's ancient past and ultra-modern culture, all in one trip

Explore Seoul, the uber-cool capital city – with a day set aside for your Insider to show you what's hot and currently trending

Head out of the capital for a day trip to Chuncheon – ride through the mountains on a rail bike and taste fresh mountain ginseng and *makgeolli* rice wine

Sleep Korea-style in a traditional veranda-fronted *hanok* house

Visit Busan's famous fish market to sample fresh sashimi or spicy fish soup

Experience Korean BBQ for yourself – grilled right at your table

Tour the oldest sites of Gyeongju – South Korea's 'museum without walls'

Bar hop through Busan: sample snacks, craft beers and feel part of the Haeundae beach atmosphere

Classic tours

- Maximum 14 people per group
- 4*/ traditional accommodation
- En suite rooms in all locations
- Airport transfers
- Breakfast every day, five lunches and five dinners
- Selected entrance fees included
- Solo travellers: a single room is available throughout for an extra cost

Day by day

Many of our customers choose to arrive a day or two early to get over jet lag and start exploring (if you're interested in a DMZ tour, for example, we can make that happen).



Day 1 – Seoul

Landing at Seoul Incheon airport you'll be met by private vehicle and taken to our hotel. Your Insider will help you settle in before you spend an evening getting to know the group over dinner and drinks.

Day 2 – Seoul

Our day kicks off with a walking tour of Seoul, led by a local Korean guide, combining the city's most interesting and famous sights with their favourite local spots. It's an excellent way to get your bearings on foot. We'll visit Gyeongbok Palace – built in 1395, it's the largest and grandest of Seoul's palaces.

We'll head to Bukchon Hanok Village – a time capsule of heritage architecture and enduring tradition – where we'll turn our hands to some local crafting – Korean knot making. Your guide will point out the iconic views of Namsan Tower against a backdrop of mountains.

You'll then have some time to explore Ikseon-dong, a neighbourhood where traditional *hanok* houses are repurposed to become part of Korean coffee shop culture (think weird and wonderful cafes turned into bamboo groves, bakeries that are world-famous for their fluffy steamed bread and tiny train tracks cutting across entrance ways).

Stop by the lively Gwangjang Market (sit at any stall and expect an elderly Korean *imo* to bring you a bowl of what *she* thinks you should eat) to keep you going until dinner.

Head back to your hotel to refresh before our welcome dinner at a restaurant close by – get ready to be introduced to Korea's food obsessions! You'll get bottomless *banchan* (side dishes) and take a crash course in how to eat in Korea: who pours first, where to put your chopsticks, and when to cheers *soju* cups (always), arming you with Korean dining etiquette for the rest of the tour.

Day 3 – Seoul

This morning, we visit the Cheonggyecheon stream – a slice of natural calm in built up Seoul that our team can't stop talking about. You'll learn just how much of Seoul and Korean history flows within its waters, and is built into its bridges.

For the rest of the day, we'll experience what's hot right now in Seoul. In a country that moves as fast as Korea does, there's always something new to explore. Your Insider will take you to whatever currently best showcases the country's absolute joy for life – whether it's an entire building that's been turned into a living terrarium, a festival dedicated to lights, or an emerging area with pop-up bars on every corner. Some of South Korea's best bits are there for a moment and gone in a flash. Locals will have moved on by the time these trends have hit your guidebook – which is what makes them all the more special to experience.

In the evening, we'll come back together for a Korean BBQ. Perched on bar stools, with a central grill on our table, we'll enjoy meat and vegetables marinated in soy sauce, sesame oil and garlic. This is an ultimate, classic dining experience for South Korea – prepare to leave full and happy!

Day 4 – Seoul – Chuncheon

Today we leave the city behind for a day in Chuncheon. The area is famous for Nami Island – popular with tourists and a known K-drama filming spot. But, we steer away from these crowds, heading for the lake, mountain forests and temples beyond.

Long before overseas travel was common in Korea, Chuncheon was *the* destination for university trips – friends taking a break from Seoul and school to bond, often forging lifelong friendships and even romances. The old train line here earned the nickname "Love Train", and you can relive that nostalgic spirit on the Gangchon Rail Bike, pedalling through themed tunnels, emerging against a mountain backdrop.

We'll cross Soyang Lake by boat – so vast it's known as "inland sea" and stop for lunch at a lakeside restaurant. Expect local favourites: crispy *jeon* (Korean pancakes), fried mountain ginseng, and *makgeolli* rice wine.

Refuelled, we'll follow the mountain path to Cheonpyeongsa Temple, passing a statue from the legend of the Princess and the Snake and Guseong waterfall along the way. Built over a thousand years ago and surviving the Korean War, the temple today is festooned in colourful paper lanterns. We return to Seoul later this afternoon.

Day 5 – Busan

Today we take a train (luggage-free, thanks to the forwarding), cutting down to one of our favourite coastal cities – Busan. On today's tour, led by a local Busan guide, we visit the famous Jagalchi fish market, where downstairs you'll find live tanks of otherworldly sea pineapples and giant crabs, and upstairs there are kitchens cooking up the day's catch. We'll grab a seafood lunch nearby.

Fuelled for the rest of our day, we'll visit Gamcheon Cultural Village. Originally a refugee village from the Korean war, it's now a collection of colourful houses dotted with street art murals. It's a great place to take photos and buy souvenirs, and to explore the smaller streets to find local tea houses and boutique art galleries. We'll visit Gukje Market (ask your Insider about its history of smuggling!) and the home of Busan International Film Festival (spotting K-celeb handprints) before exploring the famous Haeundae Beach.

This evening, you'll bar and restaurant hop your way through the Haeundae area, right by your hotel, with your Insider guide. We recommend sipping Korean craft beer or soft drinks you'd never find at home and munching your way through as many *anju* (bar snacks) as possible.

Day 6 – Busan

This morning, we take a tour of the sea temple Haedong Yonggungsa, further up the coastline from Busan. Built in 1376, it is deemed to be one of the most beautiful in South Korea. You'll walk up through forested mountain paths, reach a colourful entrance gate and descend a set of steep steps before being rewarded with epic views of the temple against a dramatic coastline. We'll spend a morning exploring, taking photos and spotting statues of turtles and Buddhas, before travelling back to the Haeundae area by private vehicle. The rest of the day is yours to explore – we recommend the beaches, people watching in cafes, or relaxing at Spa LAND, a high end *Jjimjilbang* with 13 saunas to choose from and (if you're feeling brave) a traditional Korean scrub.

Day 7 – Gyeongju

Gyeongju is the ancient capital city of the Silla Kingdom. With more well-preserved history than anywhere else in the country, it's fondly known as 'the museum without walls'. We'll head there by private vehicle and enjoy a slower pace: staying in a *hanok* on the outskirts of the walkable and well-preserved historic centre, where no new buildings are allowed.

Today, we have a full day guided tour. We'll start just outside the city, visiting the brightly painted UNESCO World Heritage Site of Bulguksa Temple. Then, we'll head to Seokguram Grotto to see the famous giant stone Buddha, with a view of the East Sea.

We'll head back to the city to explore the Daereungwon Tombs, where we'll go inside the exhibition of the Tomb of the Heavenly

Horse and learn about the excavations. At night, we'll head out to experience the sights lit up, strolling around Wolji Pond and Asia's oldest observatory – Cheomseongdae.

Day 8 – Gyeongju - Yangdong Folk Village

This morning we visit our most rural spot of the trip, with a private vehicle taking us to Yangdong Folk Village. Set in the foothills, scattered with juniper trees and dating back to the Joseon dynasty, Yangdong offers a beautiful, remote break from Korea's cities. People still work and live here today – it's not set up just to please the tourists – and we'll eat lunch in a local restaurant, with money going directly back into the community. In the afternoon, back in Gyeongju centre, you'll have time to explore Hwangnidangil, where traditional *hanok* buildings have been converted into cool cafes and rooftop bars. A contemporary pocket within ancient Gyeongju.

Day 9 – Seoul

We take the train back to Seoul, for your final afternoon of the tour. In contrast to the start of the trip, we'll stay in Hongdae: an up-tempo neighbourhood, where K-Pop hopefuls perform dance routines in the streets. We'll be staying in a hotel with a vinyl magazine library, a Michelin-starred chef menu and a skate park in the basement (and if that doesn't sell it, we're not sure what does!). Today's your chance to grab some final K-Beauty products, Korean snacks or anything else you've had your eye on before we enjoy our final meal together and say *geonbae* (Cheers!) before you fly.

Day 10 – Seoul and home

It's time to head home (or to the next leg of your adventure...). You'll be picked up by private vehicle and taken to Seoul airport.

Want to extend your stay?

This Small Group Tour gives you the highlights, but there are plenty of easy additions to extend your trip.

If you're an outdoor adventurer, head out to South Korea's mountains, forest and temples at Seoraksan National Park. Or, for nature lovers, catch a flight to Jeju Island, a Korean holiday hot spot, complete with volcanic landscapes, tea fields, coastal walks and plenty of beaches. And if you'd like to visit the infamous DMZ, marking the border between North and South Korea, we can arrange this for you – with an additional pre or post tour night.

We're always happy to arrange independent add-ons and extensions. Please speak with your travel consultant for more details.

Where you'll stay

Please note: accommodation can sometimes change. We'll include final details in your Info-Pack, which we'll send you approximately four weeks before departure. If you'd like to know more, please speak to your travel consultant.

● SEOUL

NineTree by Parnas Seoul Insadong

NineTree sits within one of Seoul's most traditional neighbourhoods – Insadong – but the hotel itself has a modern minimalist style.

Head to the roof terrace for incredible views over the city and pick up some “dragon's beard” candy on the surrounding streets.

● BUSAN

L7 Haeundae

A classy spot to rest your head, the L7 is set among the skyscrapers of the Haeundae district – with the beach on your doorstep, too.

Whether you spend your time bar hopping and dining at some of the city's best restaurants in Haeundae, or you catch the subway to other districts – this hotel sets you in the thick of Busan's action.

● GYEONGJU

Wadamjeong and 1st Hanok Street Hanok Hotel

This is your chance to stay in a traditional Korean *hanok* style house on the edge of the city. Simple, serene and very Korean with futon beds, these rooms look out onto the pristine *hanok* gardens and further out to the surrounding mountains, half-hidden in mist.

● SEOUL

RYSE Autograph

Stay in the artsy neighbourhood of Hongdae – home of the hipster Hongik art college, where indie arts thrive, and students hang out.

Rooms are suitably bright and bold, with contemporary Korean art dotted around the walls. Bathrobes are by designer fashion brand IISE, and you can visit the library, stocked with niche magazines and vinyl. With live music, cocktails and a restaurant menu designed by Michelin-starred chef, it's a real treat to end your trip.

What's included

- ⊙ Your InsideAsia Tours Info-Pack
- ⊙ Private transfers to your arrival and departure flights
- ⊙ T-Money card with 30,000KRW credit for city transport
- ⊙ Full time service from your expert InsideAsia Insider (tour leader)
- ⊙ 9 nights' accommodation including traditional Korean *hanok*
- ⊙ Breakfast every day, five lunches and five dinners
- ⊙ Entrance fees for sights included on the tour and local transport at most destinations
- ⊙ Knot making in Bukchon Hanok Village
- ⊙ Food tasting in Gwangjang Market
- ⊙ Two days of private guiding in Seoul
- ⊙ Full day private guide and transport in Busan
- ⊙ Full day and half day private guide and transport in Gyeongju
- ⊙ Entrance to Yangdong Folk Village
- ⊙ Entrance to the Gamcheon Culture Village
- ⊙ Shared portable Wi-Fi access throughout the trip
- ⊙ Luggage forwarding from Seoul to Busan and from Busan to Seoul

Not included

- ⊗ International flights
- ⊗ Any local transport (subways, taxis, buses) unless covered by the included transport passes (see above)
- ⊗ Any entrance fees not included on the tour
- ⊗ Baggage handling and luggage forwarding, unless otherwise specified. You will be expected to carry your own luggage

Important tour information



Fitness

Activity rating: Active

This trip requires a moderate level of fitness. Activities will generally involve walking and being on your feet for most of the day.

Dietary requirements

This tour will be challenging for those with any dietary requirements. Korean dining is communal. Most dishes are meat-based and are often shared with no option to order your own dish. If you have dietary requirements, you might feel you're missing out. We recommend speaking to us about more independent travel options.

Policy on single rooms

Single rooms are guaranteed at all night stops on this tour through payment of a mandatory single supplement.

Double rooms

In South Korea, twin rooms are very much the norm and there are far fewer double rooms available, which means we won't be able to offer a double in every hotel on this tour. A double grade does not guarantee double rooms throughout.

Your tour leader - Insider

Our tours are led on the ground by a fluent English and Korean speaker, who knows the ins and outs of Korean culture, food and transport logistics. We call them Insiders. They hold the local knowledge that will make your trip smooth running and enjoyable. Your Insider travels with the group and stays at the same hotels as you, so please feel free to ask for help or advice at any time.

Your Insider is not a guide – so may not know every historical detail of every shrine, temple or palace. That said, they're available pretty much all day every day and will even be happy to accompany tour members out at night on occasion!

Please note, your Insider reserves the right to deny participation in an activity if they feel it's in the safety or best interest of you and/or any other members of the group. Similarly, dangerous weather conditions may lead to some activities being cancelled.

Luggage

We highly recommend that you pack reasonably light to make your stay more enjoyable. Large suitcases could be an inconvenience as you'll have to carry your bags for short distances and some stations don't have escalators or lifts.

For ease of transit, we'll be forwarding your luggage between Seoul and Busan and then between Busan and Seoul. You'll therefore be without your main baggage for two nights in Gyeongju. You'll need a small overnight bag (e.g. backpack) for use when we forward our main bags to the next location.

Transport on tour

There's a mix of transport during the trip. Some transfers are by public transport, making use of South Korea's first-rate transport network. Where more convenient, some are via private transfer. This tour uses a mixture of trains, taxis, public buses, as well as private coaches for some transfers and sightseeing.

International flights

This tour starts and finishes in Seoul for arrivals and departures at Seoul, Incheon. The included airport transfer to the first hotel is ONLY available from this airport.

Check-in

Upon arrival, you'll probably be tired after a long international flight. Rooms at the Seoul hotel are only available from 3pm (and hotels in South Korea tend to be inflexible on this point). If you have an early arrival, you can either book an extra night for any-time check-in, or the hotel will be happy to securely store your luggage for you while you go for a drink or explore the local area. Your Insider will be staying at your hotel before the tour starts, so will be available for advice if you choose to book pre tour nights. We recommend booking at least one extra night to check in and relax before the tour begins.