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The Korean experience

Posted on July 26, 2013 by BikeToursDirect

The old woman wore a long, black dress, her hair pulled back in a bun. She waved me over the way Koreans do: fingers pointed down with a couple of flicks of the wrist and a nod. It would have been easy to act like I didn't understand. Or have an excuse to keep walking. No time. Too weird. Language barrier. But I was on a bike tour through Korea and I had made a conscious decision to say yes to new experiences.

Hot, tired, smelly and sweaty, I had just ridden into a small town outside of Andong on the fifth day of a week-long bike tour. I was representing BikeToursDirect on a Korea familiarization bike tour sponsored by BikeOasis and the Korea Tourism Organization. I had just explored the town's outdoor market with other representatives of bike tour companies from around the world. We had been looking over unusual fruits, fish over ice and cheap household goods. The perimeter of the market bumped right up to other interesting buildings and this woman stood in front of one of them. I walked toward her.



Our fearless guide, Jin Ho.

She slid the glass door to the side and I walked into the oldest structure I've ever stepped into in Korea—a country where wars and conquerors and progress have changed the landscape time and again. It was cement; no frills, small. It was hot outside. "Too hot," she said as she guided me to a seat and put the lone fan in the room on me. She then quickly shuffled over to the refrigerator, grabbed a yogurt drink and handed it to me. "Very hot," she said as she readjusted the fan to make sure I was getting a cool breeze.

We sat awkwardly smiling at each other and tried to communicate with each other in what little Korean I know. It didn't matter. This was *enyeon* (인연) as Koreans call it. Fate. Or destiny. The world brought us together for a reason and language wasn't necessary.

It was the unofficial theme of the week. Scott, from Bike Asia, got separated from the group on the first day and was rescued by a journalist on our trip just as a heavy rain descended on Seoul. They took shelter in a nearby bike shop where they were given drinks, food and even free gear. This, the Korean bike storeowner insisted to Scott, was *enyeon*.



A smile goes a long way in Korea.

Enyeon is an optimistic approach to daily interactions. It doesn't necessarily mean that something big is going to happen, but that we should be mindful of our exchanges with others. Maybe the old woman was there to give me energy to keep riding, and maybe I was there to give her maternal instincts an outlet.

We sat for a while. She offered me coffee. Asked me questions I didn't understand. At one point she took my hands and clapped them together. She looked like a woman who had seen a lot. Life, death, violence, peace, instability, economic boom. I got as much energy from her age as she seemed to get from my youth. Eventually, I got up, thanked her and met back up with my group. I rode my bike by her shop as we left for one last goodbye. She stood in the door, smiled and waved, and said, "*chal ga*"—go well.

Though I've lived in Korea for four years, this was the first time I had heard of *enyeon*, but it wasn't the first time I have experienced it. The man who bought my wife and me goat soup for just being in his small town. The couple that we twice shared drinks and dinner with on a remote island late into the night. These were people that we could hardly communicate with, but felt connection with. Korea is a country where you should be open to this destiny, *enyeon*. It might just be Korea's greatest tourist attraction.



Each stop in Korea held an interesting experience if you opened yourself up to it.

By *BTD staffer Whit Altizer*

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One Response to The Korean experience



B Choi says:

What a beautiful and earnest piece of writing on Korea...The writer must have a heart and eyes coped with curiosity that will allow him to experience a wider horizon of cultures and life.

July 29, 2013 at 5:08 pm

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