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## KOREA BIKE TOUR: CULTURE



The bicycle was introduced to Korea in 1884, by an American military officer. Despite this being relatively recent, cycling has become integral to Korean culture and life – particularly so in the past decade. The professional Tour de Korea began in 2001, and the investment in cycling infrastructure throughout the country has accelerated this trend.

Not only have Koreans started in droves to go out and get on their bikes, but also they celebrate both cycling today and the history of the bicycle around the world. The now annual Korea Bicycle Festival was kicked off in 2009 with centres all over the country. Possibly the main one is in “the city of bikes”, Sangju – there are more bicycles per person here than anywhere else in the country (although Changwon competes for the title of bike capital of Korea). It is quite fitting that in Sangju you can find the Bicycle Museum, which celebrates the history of the bicycle around the world as well as cycling today – you can even borrow one of the free rental bikes outside.

Another perhaps surprising museum is Chungju’s Liqueureum, which is to liquor what the Sangju museum is to bicycles. Yes it explores the history and culture of alcohol in Korea - which of course we have to try numerous (!) times during our tour. This includes the rice beer makgeoli as well as the national drink soju (a distilled rice spirit). A popular drink in some circles (mine included) is somak, which is a shot of soju in a glass of beer (maekju). However I digress...the majority of the museum is given over to liquor from around the world.



The Haheo Mask Museum at the entrance to the Andong Folk Village is more traditional, although as with those above, is largely dedicated

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to masks used in various cultures around the world – including Korea. This showing of Korea (whether historical or contemporary) in the context of global cultures seems to be a recurring theme.

However Koreans are rightly proud of their own unique traditions and culture. Historically, as in many societies, this has been moulded by religion – here it has been predominantly Buddhism and Confucianism, and more recently Christianity. There are temples and 'historical' buildings all around the country, but unfortunately most of these (including the royal palaces in Seoul) are restorations or reconstructions due to Korea's history of war and invasion over the centuries. One interesting place we visit is a school of Confucianism so it is good to see traditions are still being maintained by younger generations.

It is not all history and religion – Korea has its fair share of myths and legends. Although there is an abundance of stories, we hear about the kindly daughter-in-law to a rich family who was turned into a rock at Jaraseom Island (which is best known for its annual Jazz Festival). There is also the traditional song about the Soyang River Maid - now a bronze statue in the lake at Chuncheon.



Culture is a blend of history, mythology, anthropology, food and so much more. People experience it in their own individual way – that is the beauty of travelling. A week only gave me a taste but what an experience, and what better way to do it than on a bike!

[The author was a guest of [bikeOasis](#) and the Korean Tourism Organization]

Blog Tags: [BruceR](#), [Korea](#)

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Blog Date: 02/08/2013 10:23AM

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