

KOREA BIKE TOUR: PEOPLE & HOSPITALITY



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Korea, for the most part, is a single culture society - although the larger cities do offer a more cosmopolitan vibe. The language, Korean, which unites the country and helps forge the strong national identity, is unrelated to other language groups and so unique to Korea. English (more so than any other language) is becoming more prevalent than was the case only a couple of decades ago - again particularly in major population centres.



However this doesn't mean Koreans are introspective - far from it. Religion is something that isn't universal with large Buddhist and Christian (both Catholic and Protestant) groups, although nearly half the population profess to have no religion. Koreans are united though by their strong national identity and sense of pride, which is shown by their attitude to foreigners. They are extremely respectful, hospitable and friendly.

On our first tour day one of our party took a different route (i.e. got lost). One of our Korean chaperones did catch up with him but by that stage they were too far from the rest of the group to re-join. However it was far from being a wasted day - they went to a local (bike) shop and ended up being wined and dined and treated to genuine Korean home life (a priceless experience when exploring a new country!).

A personal example is when I was riding the Seoul subway - all seats were occupied and a lovely (older) woman actually offered me a seat, as I was a foreigner obviously visiting her country. I politely declined although my middle aged masculine ego was somewhat bruised. Everywhere we went people were friendly and courteous or even more – like the group of ladies who treated us to yummy desserts at one lunch stop while on tour.

We couldn't have asked for more from the Koreans (and one Frenchman!), from **bikeOasis** who were hosting us – and showing off their country and it's many virtues. Not to mention other friendly folk who joined us in parts, Ms. Ho, Mr. Sun and Mr. Na (blogger/photographer, reporter and intrepid adventurer respectively). I'm sure there are exceptions but the worst reaction I (rarely) experienced in Korea was indifference (or perhaps shyness) – which is pretty good and is often a positive to make visitors feel welcome or at ease.

Of course no discussion on a cycling website would be complete without mentioning that great global bone of contention, the attitude of motorists towards cyclists. That was a bit hard to gauge as the fantastic bike network is usually well away from roads thus keeping the groups apart. However in the areas (mainly in or near towns and cities) where infrastructure is shared, I found motorists to be more patient and courteous than in many urban areas I've experienced around the world. Yes, taxis had a tendency to stop wherever they liked and some places were better than others for co-existence. However one sound that I rarely heard was the tooting of car horns – not just in relation to bikes but also in traffic generally. That was a pleasant surprise!



I hope this doesn't all sound too gushing and I'm sure there are people with less happy experiences and memories – the locals themselves may perceive things quite differently. However my point is that, although Korea isn't well known overseas, it's people and hospitality are certainly no worse than anywhere else in the world and probably significantly better - so making this country well worth a visit.

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

By: Bruce Robertson