

Excursion to Korea 2011



Starting Out

6.30 am is the meeting time near Departure Desk E – and by 7.00 we were all there. Nine of us are going on this excursion: 5 students

- Matt Fergusson
- Jaime Fergusson
- Angus Middlebrook
- Alanna Warland
- Zachary Jarvis-Soars (a ring-in from Tomaree HS)

We also have 4 adults:

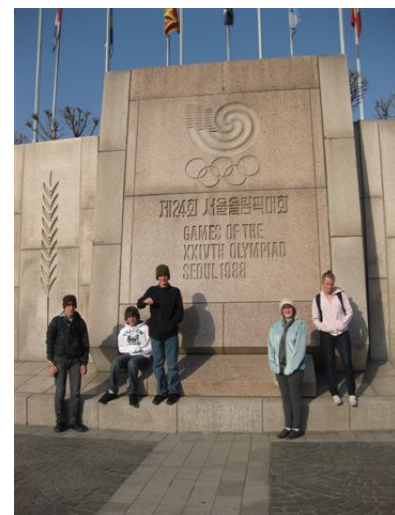
- Ms Jarvis
- Mr Middlebrook
- Mr Fergusson
- Ms Allen

Groups from Waratah HS, Dapto HS (near Wollongong) and Wollumbin HS (near Murwillumbah) are also going on the excursion. The check-in is quick and efficient; we are all in the departure area and through customs with an hour to spare before the flight at 9.30.

Monday April 11th Day 1- a 10 hour flight

Does anyone still think that a long flight is interesting?? It has its moments: 5 minutes at the start and the end. In between, long hours of tedium where the most interesting thing is “What’s for lunch?” The food and service on **Aseana Airlines** are very good, so no complaints there, but the movies weren’t too exciting; a good book is a must.

We arrive at Incheon airport at 7.30pm, one hour lost in travel. It’s very cold outside after we have collected our bags, but the buses are there and ready to take us to the **Olympic Parktel**, our hotel for the next 2 nights.



The trip takes about an hour – in the darkness we can't see much of the landscape until we are close to the city of Seoul, with its many bright streetlights and advertising signs. The traffic is fairly heavy, even for this time of night but when we see the first sign of the 1988 Olympics, our spirits rise in spite of the tiredness.

The hotel is attractive and modern – it was built for the **1988 Seoul Olympics** and is past its newest, but is very comfortable and beautifully situated on the edge of a large park with many walking trails. There is no question of going out tonight – everyone is ready for sleep. We soon found that the Korean idea of a comfortable bed is a lot harder than ours – the very soft and comfy doona covers a mattress with all the softness of a plank of wood. Tiredness won.



Tuesday April 12th Day 2

Korean breakfast at the hotel– soup, rice, seaweed, an egg slice. Actually very nice – has to be healthy.



Our group had enough time before we left at 8.30 to go for a walk around the lake. There were many mementoes of the Olympics – flags, stadiums in the distance, a picturesque bridge, engraved monuments with details of the builders and organisers. Very attractive in the cool, crisp, morning air.



The Demilitarised Zone was our first stop of the day. The trip took an hour; when we left the main part of the city and travelled next to the river, we saw many manned guard posts – protecting against any incursions. We went to the Observatory that has been specially built to allow visitors to look over the Han and Imjun Rivers into North Korea. A small theatre ran a film about N Korea and the difference between life there and in S Korea; then we were able to use telescopes and look through the murky, foggy air into the north. There were displays of N Korean life and education – important for S Korean children to see

and get an idea of the differences between their lifestyle and that of others, probably members of their extended families. The sadness of the division of the country is very evident here.

It seemed a natural segue to our next stop – the **War Memorial**. This covers battles over four thousand years in great detail and colour; vivid exhibits inside the building, particularly of the Korean War.



Australia's participation as part of the United Nations force is remembered in the uniform exhibit, the lists of names of those killed in action and in a section that details the contribution of each UN nation. Outside the building is an amazing collection of military hardware, all accessible – tanks, huge guns and artillery pieces, aircraft of all sizes and the piece de resistance: a patrol boat,



floating in its own pond. This boat was fired on by the NK forces in 2002 and lost 6 crewmen killed. Each shell that hit the boat is outlined in red paint – how it survived the battle is amazing.

Our last major visit of the day was to the **National Museum**; wonderful collections of Korean art, sculpture, gold and jewellery dating from prehistoric times to the present. A magnificent building that encloses the treasures of an ancient culture.

After dinner, we ventured out to a local department store – 7 floors of every type of clothing, homeware, etc etc... Unfortunately, we arranged to meet at 8.45, not knowing that the shop closed at 8.00. This led to some interesting missed meetings – we all made it home at a variety of times. The best story was one pair being stuck in a lift, going up and down while knowing the whole place was closing up – not a good feeling.



The bed didn't get any softer on the second night.

Wednesday April 13th Day 3

The **Royal Palaces** – an hour through the traffic of Seoul (10 million people and counting) to the most important historic buildings in Korea. They survived the Japanese invasion and are in excellent shape today. The main entry gate was destroyed by the Japanese, but has been rebuilt over the past

five years. It is now the place for the guards, dressed in traditional uniforms, to stand on duty. We see the changing of the palace guard, with loud drums and a marching band of horns and cymbals. The palace buildings are not our Western vision of a palace – they are very similar to other Asian palaces with open throne room, working spaces for bureaucrats, women’s quarters behind the main areas. A place of quiet in the middle of a sprawling, noisy city.

Only a short space of time was available for the **Folk Museum** next to the palace – a very brief look at costumes, art and calligraphy. This alone could have taken many hours of close study.



A ten minute walk took us to **In-sa-dong**, the traditional shopping street. We had an hour and a half to walk around the shops and stalls: traditional masks, images of Korean landscapes, clothes, silk, jewellery, swords.... It seemed never ending. Street sellers accompanied their sales with performance – making the experience even better.

A two hour drive to **Cheong-ju**, accompanied by **Noriban** (Karaoke in Korean). Lots of energy and noise, occasionally in tune. By this stage, we were with the groups from Waratah and Wollumbin; the Dapto students had gone to another city for their homestay. We dropped the Waratah students at Cheong-ju Middle School and went with the Wollumbin students to **Cheong-ju Foreign Languages High School** to meet our homestay students. Our students were a little nervous but seemed to relax a little when they met their partners. It was around 4.30 by this time – we thought they would go straight home, but Korean high school students are at school until 6.00, so they stayed in the classrooms until it was time to leave for their Korean family homes.





Thursday April 14th Day 4

Our students rejoined us for a trip to one of the most important museums in South Korea – the **Independence Hall**. This was built in the 1980's specifically to ensure the Korean people remember their past; the struggle their people have been through over many centuries to ensure that they maintain their freedom and culture.



A soaring monument is our first view of the halls – there are 7 of them, each one covering a period of Korean history. The monument represents two wings joined at the base: one nation, one culture, two separated countries that may one day reunite.

Like all the other museums we have visited, this one is superb: the displays are detailed and powerful, the buildings impressive; even the English information is accessible and interesting. The halls dealing with the period of Japanese colonisation are vivid – even gruesome in their detailing of the torture of independence fighters. All this memory is set in beautiful gardens, flowers and shrubs at the start of their blooming. It is a place for reflection and thought about the security of nations – and deep thankfulness for the life we live here in Australia.

The deep thought of most students centred around the unusual ice-creams available here – they look like coloured shotgun pellets – and being able to check out some of the torture implements in a display area outside the last hall. This, and fun bikes that we hired, were the hits of the day and a



great way to work out some of that energy worked up in the more serious elements of this trip.



After lunch, a short bus ride into the countryside – including a hair-raising final few kilometres up a single-lane, winding and uphill track – took us to a **Buddhist monastery**. This is a small but very beautiful shrine to Buddha and home to a group of nuns who worship there and maintain the shrine. Again, beautiful gardens surround the shrine, tulip and other buds just pushing their heads through the soil. We visit the small temple buildings, each with an aspect of the Buddha covered in gold. The main temple is a 3 level pagoda; on the main level, beautiful statues of the Buddha face in each direction, each statue showing one aspect and a different positioning of the hands. We climb up to the third level to see the wonderful view of the valley – a place of serenity and quiet, fitting for a community whose aim is reflection and contemplation. In keeping with the gentle mood of the place, most of us lit candles in the main shrine, asking personal wishes for

our families and friends

This is more than an interesting place – from its peaceful surrounds, the clear spring water that we drink from a huge stone basin, the beautiful trees and gardens to the magnificent statues and shrines, it is out of the modern world. The experience of visiting a place that is so different from our normal lives is one of the joys of travel – a wonderful experience for our students.



Friday April 15th Day 5

This is a school day for everyone except the visiting parents – they were taken on a tour of the city by our guide. Students went to classes with their school buddy – an interesting experience in a school where some students study three languages.

Teachers were taken on a tour of the school by the Principal, Mr Cho and the Vice Principal. We were quietly appalled when the VP told us his work hours: each day he arrives at 8.00am and usually leaves school at 10.00pm. The Principal arrives a little later and is able to leave early – around 6.00pm. They work 5 day weeks and every second Saturday.

Mr Cho took us around the school; we looked into classrooms that are similar to ours in many ways.

Because they specialise in languages, their science labs and library are smaller than we are used to but computer use is very high. Students must be in the top 30% of achievement in their middle school to gain a place at this school – there are no discipline issues (what does the VP do all day??). Competition to gain entry to the “best” university is very high so students study very hard; one of our students said that her buddy spent 4 hours at home studying after getting



home from school – she spent the evening talking to her buddy’s mother. Korean education is highly regarded in comparison to other national systems – it is ranked 3rd, while Australia is ranked around 8th. The high level of competition and expectation of high achievement are characteristics of this system that are not so typical of Australia. Which is better is a matter of opinion about what is important in the lives of young people – and the values of the nation.

One of the more interesting aspects of the school was explained after we asked why there were rows of mops placed around the school. Each day, students spend 20 minutes cleaning their rooms and other areas – the Principal said it was part of their education, learning to take care of the places where they lived. Hmmm – how would our students react to this??? Or to being at school for 10 hours each weekday and 4 hours on Saturday? I think I know the answer to that.

The Principal took us on a tour of the local area, including a walk up to part of the wall that surrounded the town. This was part of the history of the area – Cheong-ju was a **walled fortress** town, near the border of one of the three Kingdoms that were constantly at war in past centuries. Now the stone wall and the guard houses are walking trails, surrounded by pine forest and blossoming shrubs. After a traditional lunch at a nearby restaurant (low table and no chairs, pain for non-Koreans not



practiced in yoga positions) we visited the **traditional markets** in the centre of Cheong-ju: colourful



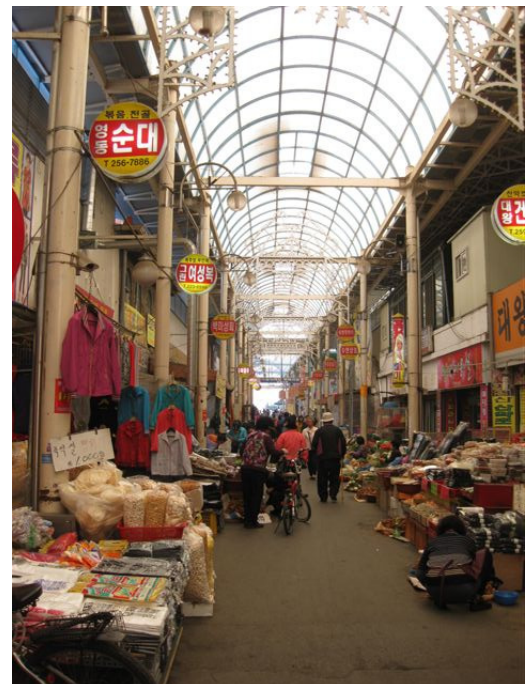
stalls with local vegetables, fish and meat, clothes.



Our last visit of the day was to a very unusual museum – it tells the story of **Jikji**, the origin of moveable type. I had always believed that this was invented in Europe by Gutenberg and that the Gutenberg Bible is the first example of modern printing, but the Jikji manuscripts predate Gutenberg by nearly 100 years. The story of the development of printing was told by holograms and movable displays; an

interesting subject and an eye-opener for most Western visitors.

Korean hospitality is very generous – we were taken to a traditional dinner by the Principal and staff. This was again a traditional restaurant, so no chairs – twice in one day had me wishing I had practiced those yoga positions more regularly. It was very difficult to say no to the delicious food; we did check this time how many courses were coming and did a better job of pacing and eating only small amounts of each dish. Koreans eat communally – one main pot and many side dishes that everyone shares. The variety was extensive and the tastes ranged from subtle to very spicy. Anything red was to be treated with care: Koreans love chilli.



Saturday April 16th Day 6

This was the last school day and a special treat has been organised for us all. We were to take part in a lesson on **traditional dress and manners** – including dressing in traditional clothing and learning to bow. Staff brought in their own clothes and had invited a special teacher of Korean traditions to take us through the complicated tasks. Women's clothing is many-layered with each layer made of delicate silk. The overdresses were exquisite, beautiful colours and embroidery with bell shaped skirts billowing from tight bodices. Masculine clothes are equally elaborate: wide pants that are tied in at waist and ankle, shirt, waistcoat and jacket all embroidered and brightly coloured.

The girls seemed to gain instant grace when they wore the dresses – bowing with elegance and style. The boys' first thought were of tai-kwan-do kicks; slowing down and gracefully bowing were outside their repertoire, but they did try. This was a fun experience for all of us and we are grateful to the teachers for giving us this very special experience.

In the afternoon, students went home (yes, this was Saturday) and teachers and parents were taken to see the **Presidential Summer Palace**. This wasn't the main palace, which is in Seoul, but the summer get-away home that the Presidents used on holidays. It is an hour's drive out of Cheung-ju, beside a lake formed by a dam. Lunch on the way – we thought we were stopping to look at some greenhouses, but the restaurant is in the greenhouse – Korean barbecue, wonderful food and flavours and, best of all, "normal" table and chairs.

At the palace, we were astonished at the number of people making the same trip – it is obviously a very popular spot for ordinary Koreans to visit, sit and admire the scenery, have a picnic or walk along the many trails around the lake. The palace has been gifted to the people – the President no longer stays there, so people can visit at any time of the year. Inside the palace – no pictures allowed – the rooms are beautifully preserved, French Provincial furniture in each room, lots of light through windows overlooking the lake. Many bedrooms, obviously available for the family and important visitors. It would certainly have been a perfect retreat from the busy, noisy world of politics in Seoul – the lovely rooms and views, the clear air, swimming pool,



walking trails would be an antidote to the pressure of the President's daily life.

The gardens outside are still suffering from a harsh winter and late spring. We can see the outline of the beauty to come, but the grass is still recovering from frost. In one section of the gardens we find a display of bonsai and a performance area – all ready for the coming warmth of spring. We are fortunate to see many cherry blossom trees in bloom.

Sunday April 17th Day 7

This is our “free” day where everyone had different experiences. Students' reports of the day vary widely: shopping with buddies in Cheung-ju, a visit to LotteWorld – a Korean Disneyland – an overnight trip to a wedding in Busan (at the far southern tip of Korea – what an experience!). Teachers and parents also went in different directions – we were taken to a national park with a beautiful small temple, very popular in summer because of the clear mountain stream that runs through it.

The enterprising Principal and HT from Wolumbin decided that the local markets weren't a big enough challenge: they would take public transport to Seoul and look around the main markets there. A 1 ½ hour bus ride, subway and getting directions from a variety of helpful locals (most with little English) made a great story and convinced us further of the great generosity and friendliness of the Korean people.

Monday April 18th Day 8

This was the coldest day of our trip – we guessed the top temperature at around 8°C. It was also our visit to the largest monastery in the Sok-ree Mountain (highest in this part of Korea) National Park. This monastery is the most impressive we have seen – many small temples spread over a large area, obviously home to a large congregation of monks.

The most amazing sight is a statue of the Buddha – 20(?) metres tall, covered in gold. The statue dominates the area and is a permanent reminder of the reason for the monastery in this peaceful, beautiful valley. We are able to go into the temple that is underneath the statue, a place of reverence



and reflection. Our students saw the beauty of the shrine and the devotion of the monks and visitors; it was a moving experience to be invited to observe a belief system different from our own in such superb surroundings.

Time allowed us to spend a few hours at the monastery site, quietly wandering around the many temples. When it was time for lunch, we left the monastery and found ourselves in a street dedicated to much more commercial ideas. Our restaurant was traditional, and

students experienced a typical Korean meal : communal central pot, side dishes, sitting at low tables.

Teachers had the same meal but with a choice of a standard table and chairs – my back approved this choice.



The bus was parked at the far end of the shopping street, so we had a chance to see the many shops lining the streets – sadly, the cold had kept away most of the market traders and most other customers. Shopkeepers were very happy to see us.

This was our last night in Korea – students had special meals with their host families and teachers and parents were taken to a small traditional restaurant for a final experience of Korean hospitality. None of the staff

spoke English, but it is amazing how far expressive gestures and good will contribute to communication.

Tuesday April 19th Day 9

This is our last day – today we will travel back to Seoul and then on to Incheon airport to fly home overnight. The saddest part of the trip is this morning – leaving the new friends we have made. Getting students into the bus isn't easy – lots of hugs, tears and promises to keep in contact. Final photos and words of farewell from Mr Cho and Mrs Song and we are on our way.

On our return trip to Seoul, we will stop at the Folk Village, a re-creation of Korean lifestyles from many areas of Korea over past centuries.



The **Folk Village** is a major hit with students, teachers and parents. It covers many hectares and, with four hours to spend there, we have ample time to fully enjoy the experience. As well as the houses and villages recreated, there are a traditional wedding ceremony, Mongolian horse riders, acrobats and folk dancers to see – a happy and interesting place for us to enjoy, with what sounds like every primary school student in from the surrounding 100 kilometre radius.

Koreans live very organised lives – with 45 million people in the same space as Victoria, they need to be. But when children get a chance to run and shout, Koreans are exactly the same as children everywhere in the world – and they have a lot of fun doing it.

Our visit to Korea ends that evening at **Incheon** airport. We are booked on the overnight flight to Australia, leaving at 8.30pm and arriving at 7.30. The duty free shops at Incheon are excellent, so it's easy to while away the few hours before the flight. The flight itself is uneventful; most people manage to sleep for at least part of the night.



Arrival in Australia brings gladness and regret that our experiences in a foreign country and culture are over – but what a great store of memories we all now have!

My hope is that these exchanges to Korea will continue so that other young people and parents can see what we have seen and learn about this ancient and vibrant culture. We will see more young Korean students when they visit us in August – we hope that they enjoy Australia as much as we enjoyed Korea.