

Ken's Guide to Korean ESL



What to expect for prospective teachers of ESL in South Korea

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An ESL instructor is a teacher of English as a Second Language. Some specialists disagree with this term and use English Language Learners (ELL) or other acronyms, but for simplicity I will use ESL. As well, I'm using the term to cover anything from a private or public school teacher to university professors who teach English composition, although this site is directed primarily at foreigners who have come from English-speaking countries.

At this time of writing I have lived in Korea for seven years, on and off since 2003. I have compiled this informal guide for friends, or friends of friends, or anyone who is interested in coming to South Korea to teach English. The information here is directed at potential teachers and not tourists, so it may seem dry to a non-ESL audience. Some of the information has been gleaned from discussion forums on [Dave's ESL Cafe](#), and no doubt there will be people who have been here longer or had different experiences who disagree with my opinions. The site is only my two cents, and if you want to come here it's a good idea to consult more than one source anyway. *Caveat emptor...*

Sometimes I complain about Korea in this guide and on my website. Take it with a grain of salt. There are legitimate things that irritate me here. But overall it's a nice country, there are great people and beautiful things to see, and life can be good; much of my griping is done with affection. Teaching here is not a prison sentence, and if you feel that it is, the same airplane that took you here can take you home. I was very unhappy in my first half year or so in Korea and it helped to keep reminding myself of that until I began to enjoy life here.



Why Korea, anyway? Why not a more exotic country such as Vietnam or China? Why not a more westernized country such as Japan? Why not a warmer country such as Thailand? Those are all legitimate choices and they all have their own benefits. I spent a year previous to my time in Korea in Mexico, and that was awesome. But in sum I think Korea is a good choice, and here are some of the reasons I considered in deciding where I should go in 2003.

Country	Pros	Cons
Vietnam / China	Decent weather; exotic culture; low living expenses	Wild west regulations; the pay will be poor, assuming you <i>get</i> paid.
Japan	Good pay; westernized comforts	High cost of living unless you want to live a Spartan life.
Thailand / Mexico	Beaches; sun; party atmosphere	Pay around \$500-1000 a month. Not easy to pay off that student loan. But slowly getting better.
Europe	It's freaking <i>Europe!</i> Architecture, food, culture!	High costs of living in western Europe. Competition for jobs from English speakers with EU passports.
Saudi Arabia	Excellent pay and benefits	Can feel isolated on compounds. Restrictions on Christians. Dating scene not so hot.

I made the decision to go to Korea; I judged that spending a few weeks on vacation in other countries was better than living there and working for peanuts. Wages and benefits are rising in southeast Asia and will probably give Korea some hard competition in five to ten years, but they're not there yet. I lived on \$600 a month in Mexico quite well the year before, and the costs of living in Vietnam might also allow you to have a good time, but if your intention is to pay off a student loan or to save for the future these places are not a good long-term plan.

To me, at least, Korea is a good balance. There's a *somewhat* regulated ESL industry and the pay is good. As your housing is likely paid for and your flight to Korea will be paid or reimbursed, typical wages will be about \$2000 a month, and you can make between US \$1600-3000 a month without spending very much on living costs. You could augment that wage with private lessons, but if you're saying, "What, that's all!" your expectations may be beyond what ESL can offer you. But for a new liberal arts graduate, it's pretty good pay.

Finding a job in South Korea is easy. Finding a good job is less so. Here the cliché is true: if you want something done right, do it yourself. My strongest advice is that you *avoid* the easiest route, which is to list your name with a recruiting agency. There are exceptions; [EPIK](#) is somewhat straight-up as it's government run, and they're fairly good at placing a scared-stiff first-time teacher. Otherwise, recruiters are generally much more interested in collecting their commission than in placing you in a good school. When I first came to Korea, I tried a recruiter and had to argue with her every day before breaking off with her; with each phone call she would try to fast-talk me into a job teaching small children, and I would remind her that I would only teach adults, to no avail.

Some unlucky teachers are given promises that are simply ignored by the school when they arrive, as many unscrupulous recruiters will say and promise anything to make a teacher agree to come. If you can tolerate being called constantly with yet another hard sell from the recruiters, then go ahead, but I don't recommend it. These people have no personal investment in you being a comfortable and well-functioning teacher like a school director might and should have.

It's not hard to tell the recruiter ads on the website listings from the single-school ads. The latter will be for one school or one chain of schools, e.g. XYZ English School, Cheong-Ju. The former will give no geographic details or specifics on openings— it will just have **FUN FUN FUN COME TO DYNAMIC KOREA EARN up to NINE MILLION WON A WEEK YOUR WILDEST DREAMS COME TRUE CALL US NOW ANYWHERE YOU LIKE IN KOREA HIRING ALL CITIES NOW NOW** without ever giving any information, because the recruiters have so many different openings in their file. Do not believe the salary promises as they will be ridiculous.

What websites are good? Look through the offerings on websites such as [Dave's ESL Cafe](#) or [TEFL.com](#). If you choose a different website, make sure it's not just a recruiter site ("funny how only one company is hiring in Korea!"). If you have a graduate degree, the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) is useful too.

So how do I choose a job? I can only give you a few bits of advice in summary.



- Avoid recruiters. Run far, run fast.
- Do *not* assume a government position is safe. There are reports of the same old contract violations with state positions. In August 2009, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education hired a massive number of foreign teachers, and then reportedly told a portion of them not to come the day before they were flying to Korea at their own expense. Class act, guys. The same goes with the large franchise chains, which also have a mixed report.
- So what's fairly safe? Really, I would go with a gut instinct. Are the benefits and pay good without sounding suspiciously over-the-top? Does the person you are communicating with *work* there and does he or she provide you with details and information, or do they fudge and dodge? How long has the school been in operation? Is the school willing to give you contacts of teachers who work there? Do they give you a vibe as decent people?
- They're not *all* crooks. Don't get jaded by the online forums. I can't say it enough that there *are* nice directors, like mine was.

Frankly, ESL is a slightly sleazy world. Along with the many kind and competent directors there are dishonest and cruel ones who ignore contracts or cheat on wages. English school directors are generally considered little better than criminals by many Koreans. And— it must be said— there are bad westerners who take unfair advantage of the Korean desire to learn English. Some “teachers” have phony degrees; others are burnouts or losers running from something, usually themselves; some want to cheat a school themselves; some are only interested in womanizing. Korea is xenophobic enough already, and these teachers make it rougher for everybody. If you don’t have a university degree, you risk being rounded up (and maybe briefly jailed) in one of the periodic purges that the government launches against fraudulent ESL teachers. It’s partly prejudice but also because of past jerks that a requirement for teaching here now is a criminal check and medical tests.

I’m going to assume you’re not an angel, but that you do have some honest reasons for coming here, and that you at least have a Bachelors degree that you didn’t buy in Bangkok. That is the legal requirement for a visa to teach, and if you are hoping I will give you advice on sneaking into a job without a degree, you will not find it here. If you still want to teach, consider countries like Mexico or possibly China where a high school diploma might be adequate.

Nevertheless, it’s maybe a good thing if you’re not too innocent. You need to look out for yourself in ESL sometimes and it needs to be right for you. If you like being around people, are intelligent, open to new experiences, and are able to take care of yourself, it can be a good life. There’s nothing so pathetic as someone 50 who is broke, trapped in ESL, and hitting on 20-year-old students; but many willingly stay here, have families, and have happy lives and decent vacations back home. Others spend a year or two here, make some money and have a good time, and then move on or return home. There’s nothing wrong with that. But be aware that you’re being judged by people on the street on your actions and that the media image of ESL teachers is consistently negative. Don’t assume that the *Korea Herald* and *Korea Times* are on your side because they’re in English. The latter tends to run the same hyperbolic rants against foreign teachers that the Korean-language media does.



Practical Decisions

- **What level do you want to teach?** Some people are content with the kids. If you do like small children, Korea is your oyster—particularly for males. You will have a better choice of jobs, locations, and better pay and easier hours. Working in a glorified daycare is not for everyone, but there are good hogwans (the Korean word for after-school programs) which take the education semi-seriously. North Americans have a 1970s cliché, maybe more applicable to Japan, that Asian children are well-behaved, quiet, and extremely respectful of teachers. Excuse me for a moment: *bwahahahaha!* Again, you’ve got to like children to do this, or else you’ll want to strangle the little screaming rugrats.

Teaching adults may be a saner route. You can have adult conversations, and maybe have more of a social life—the eight-year olds are not going to invite you to the bar after class. You will not be bothered by helicopter mothers who all universally believe their incredibly gifted child will attend

Seoul National University and be a doctor-engineer-president. I liked teaching adults. The downside is that you will have to be less choosy in taking a job, and adult hogwans often have split days which can be very draining. I worked from 7 AM to 11, and then from 5 PM to 9. I learned to have mid-day Mexican siestas. Part of the reason I lost my first hogwan job is that I was always so tired that it was making me ineffective as a teacher.

University jobs worth having, except for the very lucky, will not be offered to first-timers without experience. It is possible to combine a Bachelors degree and extensive ESL experience, but normally any university post that's not a 'unigwon' will want a Masters or Doctorate degree holder. If you do have a graduate degree it's possible to get a university job as a first-timer, but I advise you to read the contract details. Korean universities, like hogwans, can range from respectable to very dodgy. Some sneaky universities, like one I considered in Daegu years ago, have 'affiliated' hogwans and will try to coerce you into teaching children during the winter or summer vacation. Hogwan pay is usually pretty consistent from school to school, but university salaries vary much more, and there is probably more scope for negotiation. Be suspicious of a university where all of their English "professors" are BA holders.

My experience of teenagers in hogwans is that they're not a discipline problem, but they can be a motivation problem because they're always so tired after their carefree 16-hour schooldays. High school students in Korea have ridiculous schedules of endless school and after-school prep classes and hogwans, all for that one hellishly stressful college entrance exam which determines whether they'll be heart surgeons or bricklayers. Once Koreans have gotten into university— yippee! It's party time and *everybody* passes! Plagiarism is illegal, wink, wink, nudge, nudge, but seldom seems to be prosecuted. I taught in a pretty good program, but it was not possible to get a grade less than 80%, even if you did nothing. If you don't approve of grade inflation as the normal practice... don't teach in a Korean university unless it's in the top ranks or a special program.

- **Where do you want to live in Korea?** Not everyone will agree with me on this. I think it's a shame that people automatically insist on working in Seoul. It has the action, the nightlife, the western amenities (such as they are), but also the highest prices, the pollution, and the madding crowds. You could consider Daejeon or Daegu in the interior of the country, if you like the mountains, or Busan, if you like the beach. I'm a beach bum, and I went to Busan. The traffic jams were just as bad as Seoul, but I find the city more interesting, the culture more authentic, and the weather is gentler and much like a Vancouver climate (maybe too much— summer can be rainy). I find guys in Busan more down to earth than in Seoul and the women more tomboyish and easygoing, but that's just me. My present job is in Daegu, and I admit I like the dryer weather and wider roads as compared to Busan's haphazard and narrow streets, and Busan can be a little grimy in places. Daegu's downside is that it's a conservative city ("the Regina of Korea"), and I often find there simply isn't much to do here.

Anyone who comes to Korea for surfing and bikini girls needs their head examined. The beaches are nice, but the water is really only warm enough for swimming for a few months, and at that time everyone else on the peninsula has the exact same idea. But they are a pleasant getaway from the noise and rush, and Busan's beaches are quite pretty. Daecheon on the west coast (near Daejeon, not to be confused) is nice too. Maybe Korea is better known for its mountain parks, especially Seoraksan in the north-east. They are stunning, particularly in autumn. It's very hard to beat Korea for beautiful hiking trails, and they're designed for comfort— sitting in an outdoor pub after a hike with some booze and some warm Korean pancakes (*jih-jim*) is very pleasant.

Some head to Jeju Island (Jeju-do), billed as the Hawaii of Korea. My opinion is that it's overrated. If you go, you'd *better* like seafood because that's all there is to eat. The island has palm trees but it gets winter like anywhere else, and because there's a perceived mystique about Jeju the schools pay poorly. Mainland Koreans think of Jeju people as a little quirky and find their dialect odd, but admittedly the climate is closer to tropical and the waterfalls are beautiful. Personally, I would find Jeju too isolated. If you want to spend time in Jeju I would work on the mainland and go on a weekend trip as it's a quick jump by airplane. I'll put out the extra to go to Thailand anyway even if it means fewer holidays.

Many people are scared of the countryside but I don't mind a smaller city or village if it's near a KTX station, the bullet train of Korea. In that case you will not feel isolated at all because you can easily do a day trip to Seoul or another large city. The pay can be good because fewer foreigners want to go to a rural area, and I find the people friendlier and the pace of living easier. I had a small motorbike and felt much safer on the roads, and I loved hearing frogs croak at night from my window.

I'm told it is actually possible to find some form of teaching position in North Korea, as the regime does need a limited number of teachers and translators. I'm skeptical and I won't say anything else about it as I haven't been to the north and know nothing about such opportunities. Obviously I wouldn't recommend it except for the *truly* courageous and those with some experience in Asia.



Generally, schools are pretty good at making it fairly easy for you to show up and settle in, as they will want you to start teaching as soon as possible. I've heard horror stories of people stepping off the airplane jet-lagged and being shoved into a classroom ten minutes later, but generally you will have a few days to acclimatize. When you are hired, usually the school will provide airplane tickets in advance, or at least compensation for tickets, and will help with things such as work visas. You may have to send your original diploma papers for verification. Koreans are very big on pieces of paper and forms proving qualifications, and interviews may be only that—they generally don't care about your 'mission statement' or ask stupid personality questions, such as whether you'd rather be a duck or an elephant.

There are several classes of visas in Korea. The most typical is E-2, for hogwan and public school teachers. Professors can get an E-1, and all teachers can get an F-2 if they have a Korean spouse. The F-2 is optimal because you will be able to legally teach privates. In the past, it was fairly easy even for E-2s to teach extra classes illegally, but as of late there has been an increasing government and media vendetta against foreign teachers, and E-2s are sometimes busted and deported. I just would not chance this. One immediate result of this grudge is a recent requirement for E-2 applicants to have AIDS tests and criminal record checks.

On a lighter note, either before or after arriving, you will need to go on a 'visa run,' typically to Japan, to get a work permit. Some or all of it will be paid for or compensated for (find out in advance). Don't complain— Fukuoka's a fun place to spend a few days and the women are easy on the eyes. You could even justify a fast trip to China or elsewhere for this purpose.



The conditions of your workplace can vary. Sadly, many hogwans are admittedly in the edutainment business, and care nothing about education and everything about making money for the owner. Some legitimately want to teach English and have good books and resources, and others just want to have a token native speaker working there because it looks good, regardless of whether he or she is supposed to do anything meaningful. Some foreign teachers start to get a throw-the-monkey-a-peanut feeling when they're just used to show off to the mothers that the school has a real, live foreigner.

If you work with Korean teachers at the hogwan, be nice to them. They are often more qualified than you are and are paid less, treated worse, and given more paperwork because they are not native speakers. Realize that discrimination which works in your favor can be just as unfair. Some pleasantness might smooth over the resentment Korean teachers can have over working with alcoholic packpaker teachers in the past who have shown up late and then hit on them. Oddly, at my first hogwan job the foreigner teachers were not very sociable and I was closer to some of the Koreans.

If you are an EPIK or SMOE teacher, which refers to government-run programs which place you in a public school with a co-teacher, again, don't expect the worst, but they can vary widely. You may get a principal and co-teacher who are supportive, and you may get a school which grudgingly accepted you and has a lazy co-teacher who muddles through the textbook and undermines your efforts. What else can I say except that teaching here is a bit of a gamble?

Big Things

Maybe it is a good idea right from the start to think about whether you have the right disposition to be an ESL teacher in Korea. I think this is almost as important as academic qualifications. Think about my little analogy:

A foreman hires a team to dig a ditch to lay a pipe in. On the first morning, everyone shows up and is given teaspoons to dig. One group of workers tells the foreman, “This is absurd—why don’t we use shovels? This will never get done!” The foreman answers, “Thank you for your opinion. This is the rule. Go dig the ditch as we asked you.” The group protests and complains until all are either fired or quit in frustration. The second group shrugs and says, “As long as I get paid, I’ll dig with a toothpick if they want me to. What the hell do I care if the ditch is ever finished?” This group can last a long time, but at times they feel a little bitter for having prostituted themselves in this way. A third group says, “I am paid to dig a ditch with a spoon. Maybe I can try a tablespoon or a soup spoon without causing problems. It will not be perfect, but at least I feel like I’m making things better.”

Teaching ESL in Korea can be like this. You need to use the soup spoon. You may be given crappy, cheap textbooks; you may have pointless meetings; you might have rules for the sake of rules. If you are the sort of Type-B person who can roll with it and make the best of things, you can get through bad days. If you imagine yourself organizing everyone to demand shovels, spare yourself an ulcer and do not choose this career.

This is my experience, and others are free to disagree. My experience is that hogwan directors will give you considerable freedom in your teaching practises. My schools gave me a curriculum schedule, a textbook, a box of activities, and sent me out to go do it. Maybe because the directors often aren’t teachers and want to preserve the distance between the two roles, they are more willing to leave you alone. It’s a good thing.

Where most hogwan directors will give you little or no freedom is in making suggestions about the curricula, students, resources, or other practises of the school. In the west, meetings are often sessions where ideas are shared and discussed freely. In Korean meetings, the bosses talk and everyone nods, and then everyone goes out to eat roasted pork and get drunk. It is a Confucian society, and you will have to get used to this reality: you are not the boss; thus your opinion doesn’t matter. In a way, Korea can be like imperial Rome. Getting permission to do anything at work will be impossible, but if you just go and do it and it makes things work better and doesn’t create difficulties for the bosses or embarrass them, forgiveness is easier.

The most common problem with the ESL industry in Korea can be reduced to a simple self-fulfilling syllogism:

1. Foreign teachers are assumed to be drunken, incompetent losers who are only after the local women.
2. Serious and qualified teachers get frustrated after being treated with disrespect and contempt, and leave.
3. The remaining ESL teachers tend to be drunken, incompetent losers who are only after the local women, justifying the prejudices of the media and school administrators.

I’ve been teaching in a hogwan and in a university long enough to almost predict who can last and who will burn out. Type A people— the ambitious, those who feel strongly about improving education, women’s status, getting ahead, etc.— they don’t last. Type B people— the type who are willing to, within limits, tolerate arbitrary policies which sometimes hinder their work, and can laugh about it and be content to do their best and work around things— they can last. Simply put, neither Korea nor your employer cares about your culture or your personal philosophies. They care about you being on time, doing your job, and producing satisfied students and / or parents.

I'm sorry to say this, but it's true. Keep a little idealism, but accept that the system is not going to change quickly. Why do I have to attend a special meeting which is held in Korean when I can't understand it? How does my having office hours, arranging paper clips for two hours, help anyone? Why is this person my superior because he's a man and he has three degrees in an unrelated discipline, when he has no classroom experience in his life? How can the grammar memorization method of teaching English be better when it hasn't worked since World War I? If your blood pressure is already rising, maybe you should rethink ESL.



Little Things

You don't need a suit and tie every moment, but dress well. Appearances are important here and you will notice that the Korean teachers generally dress well and conservatively. If your goatee, snake tattoo, and blue punk hair are important to you, fine, but expect to be treated accordingly. Yes, you have the freedom to dress like a biker or a slut. But expect people to stare at you for it, and for the school to treat you badly for it. You can wear what you want *after* work.

Take the time to plan your lessons and have back-up activities; improvisation doesn't go over well here. Try to read at home. *Real* reading, not just internet chat sites about anime. Try to keep your mind active. Your ability to speak English will actually deteriorate over time without immersion in (or vacations in) an English society. Learn to be flexible and not to whine when the directors make changes without telling you, or at the last minute, which they always will.

When I first came to Korea, I tried to teach as I would in Canada or Mexico. Koreans want to learn English, but they don't necessarily want to learn about English society or English ways of learning (though some do very much). The Korean mode of teaching is also top-down. If you give students a lot of choices or run the class like a democracy, they will be confused, or complain that the class is disorganized to the directors. Be sensitive to the fact that younger adult students will defer to older adults, and often women will defer to men. Many students will find the English class somewhat liberating from those social expectations, but they are persistently ingrained in the culture.

Lesson planning usually isn't difficult at a hogwan because you can usually just follow the text, but that can get a little dull and so you should be working on building activities and handouts to augment it, or at least working on picking out parts of the textbook that will be more useful or interesting in class. Koreans tend to learn English the way western students learn Latin or French. They know the grammar intimately but have little feel for informal conversation. If you try to teach grammar you might find your students know more than you do, and my advice is that you find yourself a book or site on usage so that you won't be embarrassed when you're asked whether something is a gerund or a participle.

Go with your strengths as a native speaker, which is your knowledge of cultural semantics and expressions— that is, saying natural-sounding things appropriate to the situation. For example, Korean has levels of respect built into the statement and English doesn't, so beginner Koreans don't understand the difference between "Give me a hamburger" and "I would like a hamburger." They don't know the

meaning or significance of current expressions like you do and this is a more productive area to discuss. The culture makes very little use of sarcasm and Koreans often need help understanding western humor. If you personally have a dry or sarcastic sense of humor you need to check this around students as they will often have no idea when you are being serious or not. You can also check my site for [handouts](#) and [more on issues of teaching language](#).

To me, freely discussing issues or encouraging creative, non-linear thinking are good things in class, but you have to introduce these classroom styles gently as it hasn't been a large part of Korean education. Older Koreans are sometimes odd in that they are so very uncreative and by-the-book, but they do respect creativity in those who have it. Sometimes art or music goes over well in a class if it's not too unconventional. Again, I stress; if you're teaching children you can have more games and be more freewheeling, but for older students or adults keep classes fairly predictable and organized. The style of Koreans in the workplace is *bali, bali, bali!* (Hurry up!). Classes don't need to have long periods of reflection and calm; have lots to do and move on, and don't let people get bored.

When Things Go Bad

Much is made on Korean discussion boards about dismissals and contract violations. I've had pretty good luck myself, but it can happen. ESL contracts simply aren't enforced well here, and there are occasionally dishonest directors. If you're paid fully and on time, you're doing pretty good. Here are things that typically happen when things aren't going well.

- We have to let you go because you're a bad teacher. Well, maybe it's true. But maybe it's not, and the director just wants to get rid of you eleven months into your twelve-month contract, usually to avoid paying you the one-month salary bonus that employers **must** pay after a one-year contract is finished. That cannot be negotiated away; it's the law.
- Times are tough, and we have to reduce your salary / have you teach 'special classes' of Russian chemical engineers on Saturdays / tie salaries to student levels / be late with the pay.
- Oops! Your employer forget to contribute to your government-mandated pension plan, but still deducted pension contributions from your paycheck. Funny how that happened!
- Worst case scenario; the director just won't pay, period, and refuses to pay your airplane ticket or one-month bonus (severance).

What can I say? I don't have experience with these nightmare scenarios. Don't let fear of these events stop you from coming to Korea, but be aware that sometimes the worst happens. If so, try to reason with the directors— they generally respect a polite but firm business negotiation. If you can get partial payment when leaving, maybe it's better to be satisfied with that than to tilt at windmills. If not, there are somewhat effective legal solutions open to you, but be realistic; you're a foreigner in the legal system, and even for Koreans justice moves slowly. Koreans also have less patience for litigious North Americans who run whining to courts without exhausting other options, such as diplomacy.

Do not assume that because it's a university job you will be treated like a professor. At some unigwons or 'institutes' teachers are just as expendable as anywhere else. The university program I worked for at KNUE is run by the ministry of education, but I was still occasionally cheated out of wages (in my case it was disputes over vacation pay) just like I might be anywhere else. My workplace also exploited a legal loophole to avoid paying instructors on sick days. These things are going to happen.

I don't encourage teachers to do the infamous midnight run— simply packing up and sneaking out of the country, forever—as it makes things harder for everyone else. But sometimes people feel they don't have

a lot of choice, and so I won't judge them. Just don't do it over something petty; if you want to return to Korea someday it could come back to you.

And— I keep qualifying everything in this website— don't start out being antagonistic and expecting the worst. Your bosses are human beings (*most* of them). My first boss picked me up at the airport, got me on my feet, and even though he forced me out of the job he was pretty fatherly sometimes and helped me get a better position with his contacts. Over time I've realized that he was a person too and was worried about his business and the other teachers. The separation between work and home life is less here. Be pleasant and realize that building a friendly and respectful workplace relationship means a great deal here. It may happen that if the hogwan owners say they're having a rough time with the finances that they're telling the truth. Maybe you want to find out what kind of car they're driving.



Apartments

Your apartment will probably be included in your contract, although some schools may give you assistance in finding your own place if you're an old hand and are confident doing so. Westerners grow up with the idea that middle-class people usually live in houses and apartments are in the 'projects,' but some apartment suites in Korea are pretty luxurious and are packed with space-age appliances and roomy balconies.

A hogwan will usually have its own housing arrangement for you, but some will offer you "key money" to find your own place. Some Korean apartments pay straight rent, some are owned, and a third system which isn't common in North America is *jonseh*. In a *jonseh* setup, a large payment of anywhere between \$50-100,000 is paid to an apartment management. The management invests the money and pays it back when you move out, usually with a two-year commitment. The hogwan may pay that money for you and then charge you the interest payment. It's not a bad system, although having straight-out housing is simpler.

A hogwan job is probably not going to have a penthouse suite, but as with work, conditions vary. There are *awful* stories: out-and-out lies about living arrangements given by recruiters; people in hovels above dog-meat restaurants or all-night bars; people forced to live with relatives of the directors and obliged to give their children extra freebie lessons; horribly dirty, tiny, or noisy apartments. My first suite in Korea was in a low-income area, with the typical vegetable trucks yelling out their wares on megaphone at 7 AM, schoolchildren playing their weekend game of scream-at-the-top-of-your-lungs-in-the-parking-lot-for-eight-hours, and the crappy, overcrowded bus taking me to work. They even turned off the hot water in summertime. I think those old stories about filling a bathtub with boiling water from a teakettle are hogwash; it certainly never worked for me!

It's a small country, short on space, and most apartments will probably be snuggler than you expect. But I've also seen decent places. My second apartment was in a quiet area of campus with each instructor in their own comfortable suite. Even my first place had a nice ocean view, was near a beach, and was furnished. That's a plus; older Korean apartments usually don't come with anything, but schools will usually take care of these things for you so that you won't have to worry about basic furnishings like beds and stoves. It's worth asking about before you come.

Check to see if the supplied housing is free or if the school deducts part of your pay for rent, as mine did. The various fees you pay for water, telephone, internet, or 'guard' fees (my guard only watched the inside of his eyelids) can add up. Cable television, Internet connections, and cell phones are cheap and the technology is very advanced. Heating is generally provided by an *ondol*, a system of hot water pipes under the floor. Some Koreans like to sleep on the floor where it's toasty, and it is admittedly very nice on a cold winter night.

Apartments are usually quoted in *pyeong*, which is a measurement of area squared. One *pyeong* is 36 sq. ft. or 3.1 square metres. A liveable apartment, even for two, is 14-20 *pyeong*. 10-14 is a little tight but okay. Any less is ridiculous, and may be a dorm room. Avoid a dorm anyway; you don't want to live next door to other students who will get drunk and watch soccer at three in the morning. And if you're offered 25 or more *pyeong*, e-mail me so that I can apply for the job! :->



My old apartment

Many people won't drink the water, but I lived in the countryside and Brita-filtered water was fine for me. You can cook, and basic foodstuffs and cooking equipment is quite cheap, but if you're a lazy bachelor like I was, you can get addicted quickly to Korean convenience. Your apartment door will soon be covered with take-out pizza or chicken flyers, and delivery by crazed chain-smoking motorcycle driver is free and quick. Some places, like Chinese food restaurants, even send someone back later to pick up the dirty dishes from your hallway. Learning to order delivery in Korean is a must!

There is some haggling in the street markets, but one thing I like about Korea is that you don't have to fight over every price the way you often do in southeast Asia. The peddlers in Vietnam and Bali pestering you to buy something all day aren't here. Usually the prices of goods are more or less fixed, and there's no 'Chinese prices'— i.e. triple for foreigners— to irritate you.

Pets

Compared to the first time I came to Korea (2003), since I returned in August 2009 I have been impressed by how pet-friendly Korea has become. Apartments seem to have a sort of don't-ask-don't-tell policy

with pets, and in practice there will be no problem with either bringing your pets from your home country or buying them here. Unusual animals such as lizards or rare fish won't be found, but common companions such as fish, turtles, hamsters, dogs, and cats are all available and food and other supplies such as litter, tanks, and toys are readily found in pet shops, supermarkets, and home shopping websites. You won't be able to let animals go outside freely as they will be assumed to be strays and will get kicked or run over, but if you're with them the locals can be very fond of pets.

Your only issue will be getting your pet here if you want to do so. When I flew from America this summer it was an expensive surcharge to bring pets (\$150 each for two cats), but I was able to keep them under my seat instead of checking them into cargo, and this is much less stressful for your dog or cat. Airport immigration will look at the pets to make sure they're visibly healthy and they will require forms showing that they have had shots, but otherwise having a pet is very doable here.

Getting Around

If you don't want to walk, local taxis run on meters, and if you want to negotiate the price it's usually fair. By north American standards taxis are reasonably priced and can be cheaper than buses if you're sharing the ride with others. Cab drivers aren't pillars of society anywhere in the world, but they're pretty honest in Korea and personally I have never been cheated here. Sometimes the drivers are quite pleasant and are curious about you.

Subways and buses can be impossibly crowded, but they're safe and fairly cheap. Seoul, Daegu, Daejeon, and Busan have large subway systems and you can buy little tap-cards instead of putting in change on the turnstiles. If you're teaching adults, keep an idea of how far you have to travel to work; you might be making that trip four times a day if you have a long break in the afternoon and want to go home for a nap. In a small town or countryside, you could pick up a bicycle or a used scooter cheaply. If you intend on riding in a big city— well, it was nice knowing you. Where should we send the body?



Getting around from city to city is relatively easy and inexpensive, especially if you're near a rail link. The high-speed train (the KTX) screams across the country in only a few hours. It's an ideal system— frequent, inexpensive, easy to use, and clean, with nice seats: everything that north American cities should have. The subway systems link to the KTX stations as well as a network of intercity buses. Some people like the buses but I find them slow and only convenient for places not connected to rail. An exception is the very plush airport buses connecting Incheon airport to Seoul.

If you need a convenient place to sleep in your travels, there's always a love hotel somewhere. Love hotels are usually located near nightclubs, train stations, singing rooms (*norebangs*), or beaches. The call-girl cards strewn on the sidewalk and the rent by-the-hour or by-the-night prices should clear up any doubt about what love hotels were designed for, but if you can get past that they're cheap, safe, and can be fun to stay in with their porn-movie decor and general cheesiness. *Chuka-wow!* And not everyone there is after quick lovin'; people taking an early flight or even travelling families enjoy their convenience. But if you want to rent a movie, you can guess what type of videos are available at the desk.

One of the unfortunate drawbacks for international tourists in Korea is that there are few actual hotels in the country other than the pricey high-end ones in major cities. You will never see a mention of love hotels in tourist brochures or websites because, of course, they don't exist— all Koreans are sexually chaste and only *foreigners* have extramarital affairs. You will have to trust my word that there are plenty of love hotels and that if you trust your instincts, some of them are very clean and surprisingly well-appointed with entertainment systems and whirlpools.



A love hotel room, for extra-klassy customers. Jacuzzi rooms on request!
I haven't seen a mirrored ceiling yet, but they probably exist.



In brief, Korean food is tasty and healthy, but the lack of international alternatives can be frustrating.

Home-cooked meals are full of vegetables, kimchi (spicy fermented cabbage), and rice— a nutritionist's dream— but restaurant meals are surprisingly meaty, with *galbi* and *samgyupsal*, both variations of meat-cooked-over-a-grill, highest in popularity. Beef is pricier than pork but it's around. Also nice are *samgetung*, a type of chicken stew, and *bibimbop*, a mix of greens, rice, and egg. There are several tasty noodle-and-beef soups such as *galbitung*. Street snacks such as *gimbab*, a sort of vegetable sushi, is also common, and in winter there will be little pancakes and skewers on sticks to warm you up.

On the table, some large bowls are individual, but most are shared. In many restaurants you will sit on the floor on a mat and the table will be low. Most people use metal chopsticks, but spoons are also used. It is not a tipping culture, and restaurant meals are generally inexpensive. You can get up and get your own water, and you'll need to ask for your bill. In a rural mom-and-pop restaurant it can feel like dinner at home. Western TGIF-type restaurants will be more familiar with tables and chairs.

Koreans have quite a lot of mealtime rules of etiquette. Koreans do not like to drink from the bottle and beer will always come with glasses. Typically, others may fill your glass for you. You can do this too, but wait until someone's glass is empty so that they don't feel rushed. As with anything else, when giving or

receiving something it's considered polite to use both hands. If you ask your students about table manners they will tell you not to blow your nose at the table; I don't know a culture which *likes* that sound, but Koreans find it particularly rude. Koreans tend to eat quickly and do not have a lot of conversation until after the meal, and some older people won't drink anything until after the dinner when there's time for chatting.

Westerners, if it's a group of friends, will usually go out for supper and then split the bill in some manner, whether it's everyone throwing in ten bucks or a to-the-penny calculation. If you go out with your class or with a student in Korea they will usually insist on paying. If you go out with them often you should sneak away to pay for everything sometimes. The students will make a theatrical show of protest, but they will appreciate you doing so. It is a delicate social nuance you should learn so that no one feels you are becoming a freeloader.



Being a dishwasher is not a nice job here!

You will also see street food at stands or in little “soju tents” with plastic tarps in wintertime. Street food, or dishes such as *dakgalbi* (chicken) or *duc boki* (rice ball, noodles and egg) should wait until you are acclimatized to the spice level, which can be ridiculous. Koreans will prattle on endlessly about how healthy their food is, but too much *gochujung* (red pepper sauce) can damage your stomach, and some college students seem to feel it's a contest, just like westerners with hot chicken wings. The rate of stomach cancer is high here from the spice. Too much *ramyeon* isn't good either, as it's full of MSG. Some people like squid (*ojinga*), but for those who don't (like me), sometimes it's hard to avoid tentacles in your dinner. Few foreigners like *bundaygee* (boiled silkworms!), but a few do. My favorite snack is *hote-duck*, a sort of cinnamon-fried waffle that's wonderful on cold days.

Because home-cooked Korean meals are usually pretty light on meat, it's not hard to be a vegetarian in Korea if you're not too strict about it, and the concept will be easily understood. It is much more difficult for vegans, as Koreans will tend to see vegetarianism as a dietary choice and not an ethical one, and vegans may get frustrated continually explaining the reasons for their choices.

Everyone has a pet peeve about Korea, and I suppose mine is the food nationalism. Again, I like the food, but if you get sick of it you're out of luck. If you live in a small town or eat in a school cafeteria, it *will* be Korean food, every meal, every day, every week, every year. It's gotten better; when I first came here in 2003 I was a hero if I could find a tin of beans. Now I can find some increasingly odd things in the more international supermarkets such as Italian pastas or cheese (Koreans usually don't like cheese except on

pizza). There are some things which Koreans generally dislike the taste of, such as mint and root beer, and these will be next to impossible to find. I've never met an ESL teacher who didn't like Mexican food, and sadly it's almost unobtainable here. This may change. I notice that suddenly taco chips are all the rage as bar snacks.



You can go out to a restaurant, or your stomach can develop a sense of humor.

As far as restaurants, excepting fast food, there will be almost nothing except Korean food. Even the fast food will be Koreanized, with potatoes on the pizza and kimchi in the hamburgers. Busan is a city larger than Vancouver. When I lived there, this city of several million had some Japanese sushi restaurants, two or three Indian, a few pricey American-style eateries, two Vietnamese, and that's it. A Mongolian barbecue restaurant opened and closed within three months for lack of customers—to be replaced by yet another grilled-pork restaurant. Younger Koreans, or those who have traveled, will be open to other dishes, but do *not* criticize Korean food or things will get nasty. I was told of a tour group that went to Italy and never even *tried* the food—they brought their own. You're just going to have to get used to it, or be prepared to buy more expensive imported groceries. I know some tenacious teachers who do this.

Koreans will complain that western food is greasy and salty, and that desserts are sickeningly sweet. Admittedly, western food *is* somewhat so in comparison—when I moved to the US I found I had lost the taste for some dishes and my tolerance for grease, salt, and sugar was reduced. Nevertheless, remember that most Koreans have only had western fast food, and assume that everyone eats that way at home in America. Many are surprised to learn that westerners eat salad! By the way, *salad* here can mean anything from a vegetable mix to assorted greens, and it seems that there's only one creamy dressing available in the whole country...

Things will be somewhat better in Seoul, which is more westernized. Here you will find the trendy coffee shops and the Italian or donair restaurants, next to the opera house. For a wider choice of food or art or culture, you need to go to Seoul. You might not feel very authentically Korean if you're sipping on your low-fat latte to Herbie Hancock, but there are some advantages to living there! Yet I've noticed that even in smaller centers, there are now coffee shops everywhere. The country seems to have gone coffee-crazy in only a few years.

It's hard to get good bread in Korea, although you might occasionally find familiar flavors in a bakery, and like everything else with foreign food in Korea, things are getting better. Koreans seem to traditionally view bread as a dessert, and so you might bite into a piece and find it too sweet or filled with some type of jam. I brought a breadmaker back from Canada and started to make my own. There are

many different types of teas, from green to black (orange pekoe) to all sorts of roots or fruits or Chinese flavors. Traditional coffee shops are called *tabangs* and are often fronts for prostitution, so don't use that translation if you went to a Dunkin' Donuts the night before or your students will giggle.



What's in the soup?

Relax. You are not going to eat a bowl of Rover stew by mistake. The consumption of dog is in a legal grey zone and is usually only done in back-alley restaurants. Increasingly, it's seen as old-school among young Koreans. Besides, *boshintung* is an expensive delicacy. Would you waste *escargot* on someone without telling them?

You can decide about the ethics. I don't have a problem with others eating dog, but I don't myself because farmed dogs are treated harshly (as opposed to pet dogs, which are babied and spoiled!). The thing you must *not* do is to strongly condemn or mock it. Canadians generally don't eat much wild meat nowadays; but I think of how annoyed I would feel if people made fun of "barbaric moose-eating Canadians!"

Korean booze is highly underrated. The beer is predictable but abundant; it tastes like American lagers and is cheap. *Cafri* tastes suspiciously like Corona if you add a lemon slice. My favorite is *Hite*. *Soju*, a kind of Korean vodka-ish moonshine made with potatoes and imbibed straight, is less than a dollar a bottle! Older male Koreans may think of beer as a sissy drink and will insist on soju. Other variants are *bekseju*, a kind of mix of soju and wine, and *bokbunja*, which is like a sweet raspberry wine. *Macalee* and *dongdongju* are strong milky beverages, nice after a hot day of mountain hiking. Japanese sake is surprisingly uncommon outside of Japanese restaurants and will be expensive.

Actual wine is not popular here, although it is becoming trendier as for social climbers. I find good wine hard to find as most of the plunk is sparkling wine or too sweet for my taste, but things are definitely getting better as the EU free trade pact takes effect. Mixed drinks are more difficult to find and are expensive—try finding tequila!—although gin imported from Russia (usually served with tonic) is often dirt cheap, and *gintonic*, as it's called, is popular. Guinness drinkers will have to shop around, but it can be found, and there is even pricey draft Guinness to be found in some fashionable parts of Seoul. The country is changing fast, and I am beginning to see more unusual beers in supermarkets such as Belgian or South Asian brands. For some reason Hoegaarden can be found everywhere.



The level of English fluency on the street is rising in Korea, but it's still very low and gets worse the farther you are from Seoul. Many people who do know English are shy to speak it— if you're a Canadian, you likely learned some French in school, but try using it now in a conversation! For your own sanity, you need to know at least a little emergency Korean for when you go out. At the very least learn some Hangul so that you can read a restaurant menu or a bus sign— and so that you don't look like a total clod to others. It's obvious that you're a foreigner, and you will never be expected to be fluent, but no one appreciates someone who makes no effort to learn your nation's language in any country. And Koreans, especially, are grateful for even the most halting attempts.

Purists will notice that my spellings of Korean foods are more phonetic than standard, if there can be said to be a standard. There are at least two systems of representing Korean characters into English, and misspellings abound anyway. When I first came here I was confused and thought *Busan* and *Pusan* were different cities! They're just two ways of spelling the same one, just as you will see *Jeju* and *Cheju*.

Apparently, whether Koreans want to admit or not, they genetically derive mostly from southeast Asia and not the Mongolian steppes. The language is a different story. Most linguists think that Korean descends from Mongolian and not from Chinese— although the influence is strong, just as Latin influenced English, a Germanic language. It's a difficult language for English speakers, although I would say that Japanese is even harder and Chinese is more difficult to learn to read because of its non-alphabetic system. There are few instantly recognizable words in Korean, and the grammar is very different from Modern English. It lacks the massive vocabulary and variety of expressions of English, although there is a healthy literary tradition of poetry and philosophical writings in Korean. Korean can also be more compact than English. Pronouns are normally omitted and articles (a / the) are unnecessary.

Modern English has only one level of respect (*you*), but Korean has numerous levels based on relationships. Koreans often ask lots of personal questions to a new person, partly because (I think) they are inquisitive people, but also because they need to know what grammatical level of respect to use in order to not seem rude. The most common involves a *-yo* ending on verbs, and when you first hear Korean you seem to hear a lot of *yo, yo, yo* all the time.

Korean is an agglutinative language, whereas English is analytical. What this gibberish means is that English builds a statement by putting words in order (The dog bit the man) whereas Korean makes a statement by adding the parts together: (Dog-object-man-subject-bite-did).

Early Koreans spelled their words using Chinese characters, but around 1446 scholars under the famous King Sejeong created a writing system for Korean *ex nihilo*. It is one of the only true alphabetic writing systems in Asia, and Koreans are justifiably proud of their efficient and phonetic *Hangul*. It isn't hard to learn, even for lazy people like me, and the written words are mercifully lacking in the exceptions and silent letters that English has. Many Korean scholars of the time snobbishly thought that Hangul was *too* easy to learn, even for mere women, and that Chinese was a more sophisticated writing system.

I learned Hangul by noticing that the characters slightly resemble the shape your lips make when you say them. Modern Korean writing does borrow from English, though, in its left-to-right arrangement and in the punctuation marks. One other nice thing about Korean is that, unlike languages such as Vietnamese, you don't have to worry about pitch. And unlike English, all syllables are unaccented— that is, they are equal in volume. You need to remember this so that you are understood. It's our natural tendency to emphasize the first or second syllable in words, and that accenting will confuse Koreans. English says "We went to the beach," saying some words slowly and others very quickly, but Korean does not so much; it is not a stress-timed language the way English is.

The standard form of Korean is the Seoul dialect. There are many regional variants. As a beginning speaker, you don't need to worry about this as the dialects are mutually intelligible, although people do complain that Jeju Korean is very distinct and sometimes hard to make out, and refugees from the North are also said to have an antiquated and hillbilly vocabulary and pronunciation. I first lived in Busan and my wife is from there, and so my Korean has lots of Kyeongsan dialect expressions. You should know when something isn't standard, but Koreans often find it amusing and endearing when foreigners use dialect, particularly if they're from that area of the country.

Many learn-to-speak Korean books are crap, in my opinion, and are either out of date or simply list complex translations of phrases without teaching any grammar. Some of the university texts are better. *Roadmap to Korean* by Richard Harris is very good. Pick up phrases from students or friends. Look at some internet learning sites such as [Transparent](#) or [Learn-Korean.net](#), for a start; or watch the cheesy but light *Let's Speak Korean* show on Arirang TV, which is also available on YouTube. You can, of course, use my [tutorial](#), which is aimed at the bare beginner so that you can learn some necessary utterances. I've learned more from my students and from websites than from books, with the exception of Harris' work.



This may be the most contentious part of my guide, and I write at risk of offending the many kind and generous people I've met here. Again, try, *try* to take what I say with a sense of humor and a grain of salt, and realize that I complain with some affection.

One of the great things and worst things about internet discussion groups is that anybody can add their opinion. Among the intelligent and funny posters at Dave's ESL Cafe are the Korean-haters, for whom everything is a snub against foreigners, the Korea Nazis, who blast anyone who criticizes the country for lacking cultural sensitivity, and the usual America-haters, fundamentalists (both Christian and atheist), and trolls who try to stir up flame-wars. It can be great fun but reading too much Dave's is a way of scaring off potential teachers and can make you alienated and cynical. A lot of posters can be very mean to people on the forums. If you take the site literally, Korea will start to sound like hell for foreign teachers, plagued with cheating directors, xenophobic institutions, sheep mentalities, America-hating media, scheming women, and a culture with a martyr complex perpetually blaming its problems on America and Japan.

Well, it's **10%** true... you can get discouraged by the institutional and social lack of respect for foreigners. It is generally the little things: the alien card you must carry; extra difficulties in getting credit cards and cell phones; the woman who takes your money at the counter and gives the change to your Korean friend in order to avoid you; the woman who won't mix an ice cream combination for you because 'Koreans don't like that flavor'; the people who make a racket or enter the room to get photocopy paper during church because it's *only* an English service; the dignitaries who visit your department and are introduced to everyone except the *faculty* because they're *only* the foreigners (it happened frequently to me); the drunk man in the park by the train station shouting at you and picking a fight for being with a Korean

woman; the feeling when you are the very last person on the subway or bus to be sat next to that you are a well-treated guest but never, ever, ever accepted as belonging.

There are ingrained assumptions that seem impervious to information or common sense. Korea seems convinced that it is the only country in the world with four seasons, that double doors last longer if one is permanently locked, and that it is a miracle of technical skill for a westerner to use chopsticks. The national persecution complex can get equally fatiguing. The national media is incredibly sensitive to insults or slurs by foreign celebrities or media. There's only so many times you can read a plaque saying "burned down in 1592 by the hated Japanese bastards" in front of every historical site in the country before it starts to sound a little overwrought. And after students try to pull down a statue of General MacArthur, you wonder why the Americans don't pull out and tell the country to pay for their own bleeding defence.

But consider four things before passing judgment.

- Don't overgeneralize— people tend to remember only the bad. You can get worn down by the occasional incident or jerk, but there's no shortage of jerks and racism in North America too. Don't forget the stranger on the street who gave you directions, or the old woman in the restaurant who did something nice for you without charge, or the fellow who told you welcome to Korea. Or the curious girl who sat next to you on the train and flirted with you in her best broken English. Korea can have a bad attitude collectively— but so can Americans or Canadians sometimes. There are some Koreans who know very well that the country has problems but are embarrassed to discuss this with foreigners. How many people want to air their dirty laundry to outsiders?
- Korea is geographically a small country, hemmed in by imperial China on one side— "Who do those Americans think they are, interfering in other countr— HEY! Somebody said something nice about Taiwan! It's ONE CHINA!"— and militaristic Japan on the other. Of course these are unpleasant stereotypes. But these unpleasant stereotypes have stomped in and occupied the country or burned it down more than once. The country is faced on all sides by potentially (or explicitly, in the case of North Korea) hostile forces. People here can be forgiven a little paranoia about foreign influences.
- The country wasn't called the hermit kingdom for nothing. The presence of *any* foreigner is very new here and people deserve some credit for moving this quickly in the space of a few years. Be patient. Not everyone is used to this wonderful globalization system yet.
- The influence of Confucianism. This is absolutely key to ever understanding the social nature of Koreans. The country is slowly shedding its old value system, pressed by international influences such as Christianity and globalization, but Confucianism (or more accurately, Neo-Confucianism) casts a long shadow. The modern west espouses a system which values change and equality. [Confucianism](#) stands for stability and hierarchy. Everyone fits into the pecking order somewhere based on factors such as gender or age, and there are several basic social relationships, such as a father and son, a husband and wife, or a ruler and subject. The *ajoshi* (older man) who shoves in front of you to pay for a candy bar at the 7-11 may not be conscious of what you take to be rudeness; he doesn't know where you relate to him in the hierarchy, and thus you don't exist. After an introduction he could be very pleasant!

There are good things about (Neo) Confucianism too. It's the reason that teachers are treated with a relatively high amount of respect, and why students give you candy or compliments, or take you out for lunch; because when there is a social relationship formed in the hierarchy, there can be a lot of affection and loyalty in that relationship. Koreans won't do *anything* for a stranger; but they will do *everything* for someone they like and accept. Confucianism can create a corporate climate of stagnation because no one ever challenges the boss, but Korea is also relatively free from the western obsession with individualism and all of the social problems it has brought. There is little public charity in Korea, but partly because there doesn't need to be; the social expectation for family members to support each other is far stronger.

I only hope that Korea eventually synthesizes the best of both cultures, because, to be honest, now that I've lived in Las Vegas, Koreans can be wonderfully polite if the occasion demands. Sometimes you will get bumped in the streets, and Koreans seldom say "sorry" to strangers the way westerners do. But overall it is a culture that emphasizes respectable conduct, particularly between students and teachers.



Busan ajumma (*badpermus volumae maximus*) cooking at an outdoor stand. Some of the fried food is pretty good on a blustery day. I don't need to warn you about *bundaygee* (cooked silkworms) as the smell will knock you over anyway. Ajummas, technically meaning 'married woman' or 'auntie', but with the humorous nuance of 'crotchety old nag,' can be pushy and loud and can have the femininity of a cement truck, but they work harder than anyone else in Korea, and sometimes they can be inexplicably motherly to you. If it's raining at the bus stop, they might share their umbrella!

The cliché of Koreans and Asians in general is that they are dour and unsmiling, and only care about work. This is only surface appearances. True, you're not going to see many spontaneous outpourings of joy on the street like you might see in the Philippines, or a lot of lovers smooching. But when Koreans have accepted you as an acquaintance, they really are much more romantic and social than you might think (*all* Korean pop is love songs). The standard Korean outing is to go out for supper, and then for another round at a lounge, and then a third round at the *norebong* (singing room) for karaoke. More rounds might follow if anyone can still stand up; the entire evening is often soaked in booze, and it's amazing how good some Koreans are at singing after all that drinking...



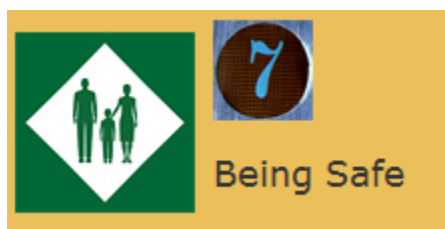
Church in Korea

You will see the reddish-neon crosses everywhere in Korea, as there are churches ranging from giant building complexes to little office-suite congregations in office buildings. The problem is that all the services will be in Korean, and you'll have to look for the odd one with an English service or which has simultaneous translation over headphones.

There isn't a lot of what I would call liberal Christianity in Korea. I am often met with surprise when I tell students that I both go to church and enjoy a beer. Christianity is growing very rapidly in the country and is now a majority religion, but at times people can take it a *little* too seriously and will try to evangelize the class every minute; it is as irritating as the western liberal-arts atheists who sniffingly want to 'free' everyone's mind here. The dominant denomination here is Presbyterian and Catholic, but there are pockets of many types. The traditional faith system in Korea is Buddhism, but I do not meet many who actively practice it.

Korean church services can be hardcore at times, but the English services will be tailored more toward the expatriate community and will vary in style. I've seen female pastors and fairly liberal service formats. My only general gripe with the English-only services is that some Korean parents will send their kids there for a freebie ESL lesson, and the children will be unsupervised and noisy. You will also find mega-church type services in Korean with little headsets with English translation. If you are religious, church is a good place to meet people who aren't in your narrow school circle, and it won't kill you to befriend some locals.

I would recommend the same if you aren't religious. Try to join a sport or band or hiking club or Korean class or some other activity. Koreans like playing soccer and I've even seen an expatriate ice hockey league. You need that sometimes for the days when you're sick of your job and everyone you work with and you need to get away from it.



For Men

It's generally a safe country. I've been attacked and robbed on a Mexico City subway; I've been threatened in England for declining drugs. This will *not* happen in Korea. You can walk down almost any downtown street at night. Try this in Cleveland. There is plenty of white-collar crime such as embezzlement or bribery, but personal theft is fairly unusual; in how many countries can you forget a camera on a park bench and still find it later? There are only a few situations you *must* avoid in Korea in terms of personal safety:

- Stay away from political demonstrations, particularly obviously anti-American ones; saying you're Canadian or Aussie might not help much. The media will not report such stories, but I've heard of foreigners put into the hospital in 2002 after US soldiers accidentally ran over two Korean girls. Sticking your nose in local politics could also get your visa revoked if you become a nuisance.
- For some older men, a night out of drinking might include a massage parlor, or hired girls in the karaoke room. I don't want to give a bad impression, but it happens. Maybe you're up for the idea, but if not, be prepared for a way out.
- The police take drug possession *extremely* seriously, even for marijuana. Being booted out of the country is a *best-case* outcome, and you might be more likely to do some jail time before deportation. This is *not* Thailand; a bribe is *not* going to get you out of it!
- Don't go asking for it; there still is *some* burglary and vandalism, particularly in Seoul.
- Don't openly show affection with a Korean girlfriend in public.

The last point needs explanation. We men are funny people. Women just bring out the ape in us. Everywhere I've been in the world, men seem to feel that foreign women are more sexually available (*aaarooo?*), but we're often jealous of our own women from foreigners (*rurhr! rurhr!*). If you were in a bar and saw a man hit his girlfriend, you would probably be angry and protective— but think how additionally incensed you would be if the man was of a different race or ethnicity.

In Korea, the protectiveness is not always hidden. A foreign man with a Korean woman has to expect the occasional glare or muttering. Don't be obvious— sometimes even holding hands can irritate older ajoshis or resentful college students if they know the girl. Be especially careful at night in flashpoint areas between American soldiers and Koreans, such as the Itaewon district in Seoul. I often seem to get the uncomfortable 'eye' near train stations where older men idle and drink. This sort of thing does not happen in reverse— i.e. with a foreign woman and a Korean man. The last thing Korean women are worried about is western women taking away their men.

Rarely, but it happens, things get ugly if you're in a club or if it's a middle-aged man bombed on soju, and someone tries to make it an issue. Keep cool and walk away if you can. If you can't, I'm told that taking pictures or videos on your cellphone often discourages troublemakers. But avoid escalating the situation by fighting back or others may join in—and not on your behalf. Korea is **not** a country for hotheads or heroes. The last thing you want is police involvement in such a situation. Generally, Asian policemen also seem to operate on a simple syllogism:

1. You don't belong in our country.
2. If you weren't here, this wouldn't have happened.
3. Therefore, the foreigner is in the wrong.

But keep things in perspective. Relative to most of the world, if you aren't looking for trouble your personal risk in Korea is fairly minimal. In four years, I had two such incidents, and only a bicycle has been stolen from me, which I got back. That's not bad. Again— it's a safe country. The worst physical attack I ever had was in Cape Breton— a rural part of Nova Scotia, Canada! Things can happen everywhere. Fear leads to hate.. and ha.. now I'm sounding like Yoda.



Keeping Your Yap Shut

I have to be careful when discussing romances between foreign men and Korean women. No one wants to talk about this in a serious way, but I'm going to because I think it's important for you to know. As I've mentioned, many Korean men (and some eye-rolling western women!) are *extremely* touchy about this, and believe that all foreign men are losers and players here to prey on 'their' women. Granted, there *are* enough western men doing this to justify the stereotype— and there *are* Korean women in nightclubs looking for adventure.

If you're a good guy, I have four pieces of advice. That's a lot, but I want to make things easier for you by helping you navigate this territory. I am certainly no expert on dating, but I have worked here. Anyway, you're not obligated to agree with me:

1. Don't tolerate "dates" with girls who are using you for free ESL lessons.
2. It's more common in the west than in Asia for men and women to form platonic friendships, and if you think going on a picnic with a Korean girl is "just friends" you may be leading her on. Make your outings in larger mixed-gender groups if you do not want someone to think you are courting her.
3. Remember that your job is to teach and not to hit on the hot students. If a student asks you out, go for it, but try to keep work and play separate and discreet. I'm speaking about hogwan students; as in the west, dating someone you grade is obviously asking for trouble.
4. A delicate point. A lot of guys here were not successful with western women. If we were, the probability would be higher that we would be married and not here. If you suddenly have a Korean girlfriend, do not take out your spite for all the western women who never gave you the time of day on your foreign female co-workers. I've seen it. Female foreigners have their own particular difficulties (which we'll examine in a moment) and you need to be supportive of what they go through.

If you're going to wear a shirt to work with pizza stains on it, and you're just not 'into bathing,' then don't be surprised if Korean girls aren't any more responsive than women back home. Pay attention to personal hygiene. If you were a slob at home, do not expect to be magically transformed in Korea. Women here, as anywhere, can smell you (and desperation).

If you're a player, you're probably not going to take advice from a website anyway, but for everyone's sake don't be a selfish jerk about it. Be aware that casual sex is seen differently here. In a marriage-minded society, you can permanently ruin a woman's reputation with friends and parents if you're just in it for a good time, and you might bring on yourself violent reprisals from her male peers. I'm not kidding, and I've had co-workers who were beaten. If that's your lifestyle, go to the clubs and stick with the loose women who know what they're getting into. Otherwise, be aware that you'll make it harder for everyone else if you're seen as corrupting a "good" girl. Most of all, don't incite the locals' fury by bragging to people in person or online about it.

Korean students giggle if you even say the word 'bikini.' What seems like you to be harmless joking about sex will be proof to your students that you're a perverted westerner, because they've never heard of sex, and all Koreans are faithful to their spouses, and there are no prostitutes or homosexuals or pornographic media in Korea except for the use of US soldiers, *ad nauseum*. I can joke a little because I taught older adults, but don't talk about s-e-x with younger adults or teenagers. I know nothing about homosexuality or lesbianism and am not going to pretend to know what it's like, but if you are of this

nature and think you're going to defend it frankly to your students, you may be looking for a new job soon, even in relatively liberal Seoul. Don't blame the messenger.



For Women

I didn't generate enough controversy with my remarks on Koreans; now I have to stir up trouble with the women. I know I'm a man and I don't know what it's like, but I'm going to discuss it anyway.

I know western men aren't perfect. Sometimes I cringe in Korea when I hear hip-hop in coffee shops and think about what vulgar values my culture is promoting in the lyrics, hoping shamefully that no one understood what is being sung. But one of the good things about north America is that women generally have the positive traditions of Germanic Europe, which had less differentiated gender roles (the women of *Beowulf* are strong and influential), as well as the positive influence of Latinate Europe, which gave us chivalry and the courtly gentleman. Asian society offers women neither equality or chivalry. In Confucianism, man is the sky and woman is the ground, and that's about it.

There is the occasional stereotype here of the Busan ajumma who henpecks her husband, but generally women are not treated well in Korea by north American standards. Korean women joke (a little enviously?) about how badly men are treated in Canada. In Korea the cards are stacked the other way in laws and hiring. Wives are expected to serve both husband and his mother; spousal abuse is certainly not legal but is more accepted and common than in North America. Child custody may not be given to the mother after divorce, as often happens automatically in the west. Unmarried women are *constantly* nattered at to find a husband, and women who smoke may be scolded, as it is considered a man's privilege.

The workplace is not always better. Women with degrees are expected to make the photocopies and the coffee while the men are in the meeting doing important things. Prostitution, despite claims that it's only degenerate foreigners supporting the industry, is relatively common and tolerated. An article I read in the [Korea Herald](#) claimed there are more sex trade workers than school teachers in the country, despite the occasional government crackdown on red-light areas. In some barber shops and coffee shops there may be clear hints that there are more services than a haircut available.

Foreign women who choose to be ESL teachers face a triple whammy in Korea. One, they have the disadvantage of being a foreigner. Two, they are foreign *women*. Many older male students will disrespect a younger female teacher. *Some* men, who have watched too many Baywatch reruns, assume that all western women will sleep with anybody, haven't you heard, and will treat them that way. Things can be worse for a blonde, because they can be mistaken for a Russian prostitute, particularly in Busan.

Third, the foreign men are all out chasing Korean hotties— some of them came here bitter over western women already— and the women are left alone. Unless you are in Seoul and into the American G.I. scene, one of the problems many foreign women face here is loneliness. I had a few female co-workers who I thought were developing drinking problems because of their isolation. A foreign man marries a Korean girl about every ten seconds. Foreign woman + Korean man marriages are increasing in number but are still relatively rare. In Korea, it's usually the wife who has problems with the mother-in-law.

Around 2003, several teenage girls in Miryang, a town north of Busan, went to the police, accusing a gang of boys of repeated sexual assault. The police response was to scold the girls for shaming the town. Imagine how a foreign female would fare— “she asked for it, dressed like a western slut...” I say this *not* because Korea is generally a dangerous place, but because Korea generally *isn't* a dangerous place, and women can be under the impression it never happens. Take the same obvious precautions you would at home. I have seen the occasional online report about western women being sexually assaulted here; it will never be reported in the media, but it happens. A blonde foreign woman living alone can be seen as a vulnerable target.



I sometimes had problems in my classes with older men treating younger female students rudely. My experience is that western women who get on their soap boxes and lecture about gender equality will just be tuned out as another mouthy know-it-all foreigner. I keep saying these delicate things because, again, it is not a country for rugged non-conformists or social activists with a mission. I treat my female students well and respect their opinions, and I think by modeling such attitudes it does more good.

I keep qualifying myself by saying **some**. I don't want people or former students becoming angry or having hurt feelings. I know there are good, kind men in Korea as anywhere else; I've seen Korean teenage boys who are very cute in their innocence, and fall in love like puppy dogs. Some older men take to the idea of chivalry quickly and can be very generous and fatherly to younger female teachers. Some Christians can be pushy about their faith in Korea, but on the whole I think it has made many men in the country gentler. The younger generation of males is very different now, and a lot of the older attitudes are fading away; I see young men dressing better and being more concerned with their conduct and appearance. As the country demographically shifts to having fewer women, young men are learning to treat women better or they will stay single. Foreign women just need to be tougher to survive here.

One last sensitive point is race. Women and men of darker skin need to be doubly tough in Korea as they aren't always treated with much respect. I'm sorry to tell you this. It may be part of the reason why schools always want a photograph with your application. Happily, that's also changing a little with the younger generation. I think the election of President Obama has also been helpful. Still, sometimes I walk through a craft store and see some 'minstrel-show' figurine set that makes me cringe.

North Korea

When I go back to Canada for vacations, I'm always asked if I've been there (absolutely not) and if I'm not worried about the North doing something crazy (not really). The North Korean crime family has lasted through skillful bluffing and threatening, not by gonzo insanity. Perhaps my flippancy is because I've lived and worked with the locals for so long. Every Korean has an opinion on North Korea, but people here are fairly jaded and nonchalant about the constant blustering, provocation, and saber-rattling from the North; they've been living with it for half a century.

Obviously, you want to read the newspapers and to be informed, and if something **big** did happen you would want to make decisions. But overall, it's more likely that I'll be killed driving to the airport than by a missile from the North. It is not a risk that would keep me from coming here.



Holidays in Mexico: Girls dress in skimpy outfits in a street parade for some saint no one remembers. Everyone dances and gets drunk.



Holidays in Korea: Everyone spends eight hours in traffic to go home and honor their ancestors or observe how evil the Japanese were.

If I sound peevisish or arrogant, my apologies. I think it's better that I give my honest opinion. There's things I like very much about Korea, but to me it's not a very pro-fun culture. This can be a difficult country for foreigners to accommodate to, as it's not a society which exactly praises leisure time or festive expressions of joy. If you are going to thrive here you will need to cultivate friends and interests other than retreating to your apartment and surfing, or sitting in bars. Not that there's something wrong with drinking in a bar— Koreans, like the British, have a good pub culture— but you need more to do in your free time or you can become unhealthy and cranky. One feature Korean cities really do shine at is night life, and when the sun goes down and the neon comes on, the downtown or shopping districts can be a fun place to mill around.



Try to get exercise. Try to get out of the city. Try to take advantage of the limited cultural activities there are, whether it's orchestras, museums, plays, or festivals. Try to have hobbies, whether it's some volunteer work, church, sports, or just walking or taking pictures. I do think that Korea is a beautiful

country for photography. When the cherry blossoms come out all over the country in May the scenery can be stunning. Korea excels at places for hiking, for little fish markets or odd buildings or unusual plants or trees, and it's sad when foreign teachers get so miserable that they stop trying to enjoy these different things.

Holidays



I want to end on a happy note. What's one of the best things about teaching here? You can build experience on your resume and make some good money. You can make things better for people who want to learn. I've taught in North America too and I missed teaching classes of motivated people who all valued education. Generally, the students in Korea do not view school as wasting their time until they can begin their lucrative and glamorous careers as international models and hip-hop gangsters. You can meet some nice people or students and go out and have some fun. You can enjoy a new culture and lifestyle. You can get a good job in a society that doesn't sneer at your English degree and make snide remarks about frying hamburgers; for all the misgivings about foreigners with bogus qualifications, in general teaching is considered a highly honorable profession in Asia.

And instead of teaching in Thailand or Vietnam for peanuts, you can go there in style on your holidays. Places such as Bali, Thailand, and the Philippines are close by, and flights within southeast Asia are relatively cheap and aren't taxed to death and beyond and back and there again like Canadian ones are. When it's snowing or just plain blah in Korea, take your holidays (though book your tickets long ahead! I'm warning you). If you want to stay in the country, there are things to see within Korea as well, such as beaches and mountain parks.

There are numerous travel agencies in Korea which will have someone who speaks English to help the foreigner teachers who are going home for a visit or are heading for some surfing at a nearby resort. The best deals are to be found by having someone who speaks the language, as there will be far more sites and competition for your business. I would recommend, though, that you avoid the quickie Korean all-inclusive package deals. They are deceptively cheap, but corners will be cut as you'll be rushed around, you'll be pressured to buy expensive upgrades, and nothing can be sadder than eating stale Korean food with everyone else on the tour with so many wonderful, fresh local dishes tantalizingly out of reach. I've had much better luck buying flight & hotel combinations and making my own itinerary. For more travel advice you can see my [photograph section](#).

Typically, your contract will have vacation time spelled out. It may vary from a few weeks to a month, and university positions may give you anywhere from a month to a whopping four months. Again, read the fine print. Because classes are out does not mean that you are on holiday. Korea, even if it is emerging from the third-world ranks, is still a country with a frustrating amount of "show-up-ism." Being at work is being *productive*, whether you are teaching or staring at your pencil sharpener. You may be required to have office time or to come in for extra administrative work or special classes. Still, compared to North America, you can get quite a lot of holiday time here.

One last difficulty: you might miss the place and the people while you're gone. I've given you the horror stories, but on the whole it has been a wonderful time for me. One of the greatest occupational dangers of ESL is that when the bug has bit you, it can be hard to give up teaching and go back home. Some of my co-workers in Korea never have. There are not many jobs in your home town which will ever be this interesting. When I came back to America, I experienced a bit of reverse culture shock. I missed not being able to telephone someone and have dinner delivered for free on a motorbike. I missed the politeness of store workers and students. One of my students here once said that living in Canada is "boring heaven." You can find yourself missing "interesting hell."

