

Seoul, Uncovered

The choices most visitors get wrong — and what I'd do instead.

"If locals aren't there, I don't send you there."

A free taste from Korea, Uncovered

by Ixchel — a Korean who's traveled 60 countries across 17 years, mostly solo.

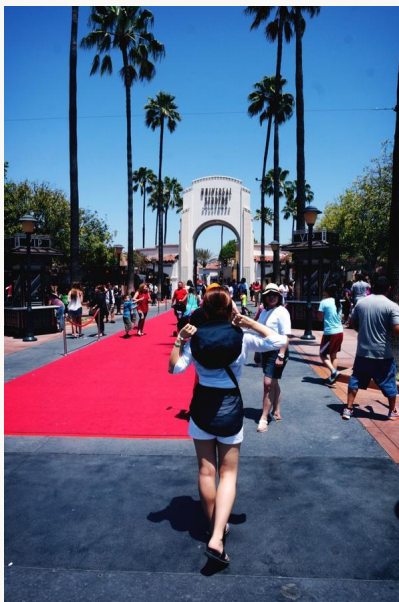
BEFORE YOU GO

Hi, I'm Ixchel.

I'm Korean, and across seventeen years I've traveled sixty countries — much of it alone. What I learned is that a good trip isn't the one with the most places. It's the one where someone helped you choose the right ones, and skip the rest without guilt.

So this isn't a list of everything. It's a set of decisions — the ones I'd make for a friend landing in Seoul alone. You'll see honesty marks, because I only point you where I'd stand behind it:

● been — I've been here myself. ○ trusted — verified by locals I trust. ○ next — on my own list, not yet visited (I'll tell you honestly).



Los Angeles, 2015.

TWO RULES OF THUMB

1. Manage your energy, not your itinerary. The best days leave room to wander. Sit somewhere long enough to watch it change.
2. Quiet neighborhoods on weekends, busy ones on weekdays. Buam-dong is lovely and calm on a Saturday; Seongsu is the real thing on a Tuesday morning, not a weekend line. (Unless there's a specific weekend event — then go for that.)

HOW TO READ THE ADDRESS BOXES

Featured places include a MAP link, address, and HOURS — tap MAP on your phone and it opens directions straight away. Hours and prices in Korea change often, so treat these as a solid starting point and double-check same-day if it matters (holidays, rainy days, and off-season closures are the usual surprises).

BEFORE YOU FLY

The 20-minute setup that saves your first day.

Do these before boarding — not while tired, jet-lagged, and standing in the arrivals hall.

1 • Entry: trust the official page, not an old blog

Check your passport's visa and K-ETA status on the official site, k-eta.go.kr. Rules change while old posts stay online. Many nationalities are temporarily exempt from K-ETA through December 31, 2026 — but the list is specific, so check your own passport before you fly.

2 • Phone + maps: make the first hour boring

Install your eSIM before the flight (or decide where you'll buy a SIM) and save the activation QR offline. Download Naver Map — Google Maps may still be less reliable for local walking and driving directions in Korea — plus a translation app. Then screenshot your accommodation's name, Korean address, nearest station, and exact exit number.

3 • Power + weather: Korea is more seasonal than it looks

Korea uses 220V / 60Hz with two round pins (the European-style Type C/F plug). Summer means heavy humidity outside and strong air-conditioning inside; winter is genuinely cold. Bring one light layer even in July, a compact umbrella, and shoes you can walk in for hours.

MY FIRST-NIGHT RULE

Get connected, eat one nearby meal, walk one block, and sleep. Your first evening does not need to prove you used every minute well.

Entry rules current as of July 2026 — recheck k-eta.go.kr before departure.

GETTING AROUND

T-money first. Climate Card only if the math fits.

Seoul transport is easy once you stop trying to choose the perfect card before you know your route.

The no-thinking default • T-money

Buy one at any convenience store, add value, and tap in and out. It works across subways, buses, and taxis, anywhere in Korea — the simplest choice if you don't know your exact schedule yet, or you'll travel beyond Seoul.

The heavy-rider option • Climate Card

Seoul's unlimited-ride pass, sold as short-term passes: 1 day ₩5,000 • 2 days ₩8,000 • 3 days ₩10,000 • 5 days ₩15,000 • 7 days ₩20,000. Worth it only if most of your riding stays inside the covered network. It excludes some subway sections and airport buses, and AREX coverage is partial — so check your hotel and airport route first.

Airport → city: choose for your luggage, not your ego

AREX if Seoul Station or one simple transfer works for your hotel. Airport limousine bus if your hotel sits near a stop and your suitcase is heavy — one seat, no stairs. Taxi if you land late, are exhausted, or are splitting the fare. Save your destination in Korean before leaving the airport Wi-Fi.

THE LOCAL DETAIL THAT SAVES YOUR LEGS

The station name is not enough — the exit number matters. Transfers can be long, and coming out on the wrong side of a major road can add ten tired minutes. Check the exit before you leave the platform.

Paying for things

Foreign cards work widely, but Korea is not fully cash-free. Keep a small cash reserve for markets, older restaurants, and T-money top-ups (top-up machines and many convenience stores take cash only for this). Tipping is not expected — anywhere.

Climate Card coverage and prices change — check english.seoul.go.kr before you buy.

SMALL RULES, BIG RELIEF

The details that prevent a perfectly avoidable bad day.

None of these are glamorous. All of them matter when you're alone, hungry, and low on battery.

1 • Restaurant portions

Korean barbecue and old-school meat joints often expect two servings or two people. Ask before sitting down when you're solo (more on this in the old-school section).

2 • Opening hours

Same-day checks matter. Monday closures, afternoon break times, holiday schedules, and sold-out items are common enough to change a route.

3 • Trash bins

Public bins are genuinely hard to find. Keep a small bag or tissue pouch until you reach a subway station, mall, or larger cafe.

4 • Bathrooms

Subway stations and malls are reliable. Tiny cafes and old restaurants may not have a restroom you'll want to depend on.

5 • No tipping

Not at restaurants, cafes, taxis, or salons. Pay the listed amount and don't make the interaction awkward.

6 • One calm first night

Working data. Korean hotel address. Route home. Transit card. One nearby meal. That's enough for day one.

SAVE THESE NUMBERS

112 police • 119 fire or ambulance • 1330 Korea Travel Helpline — 24-hour travel information and interpretation help in English (also available as online chat).

You don't need to master Korea before you arrive. You only need enough setup to make your first two hours pleasantly boring.

THE RIVER — WHERE TO GO IF YOU'RE ALONE

Everyone says "go to the Han River." The real question is which one.

Yeouido Han River Park (여의도한강공원) ● been

MAP [서울 영등포구 여의동로 330](#)

HOURS Open 24 hours, year-round

My first choice for a solo traveler. You can lay out a mat and sit alone without feeling awkward — it's open, calm, and feels like living in Seoul for an evening rather than sightseeing. Banpo has more to do (the rainbow fountain, Sebitseom, bike rentals), but it suits friends and couples better. Ttukseom is younger and livelier — great if you want energy, too much if you want to rest.

THE SOLO ROUTE

Line 5 to Yeouinaru Station, Exit 2. Buy your food first, then don't sit at the first crowded lawn — walk 5-10 minutes along the water, away from the main plaza. That's where it's calm enough to actually rest.

Come 60-90 minutes before sunset. You'll set up in daylight, catch the sky turn at golden hour, and stay for the skyline and bridge lights coming on — all in one sit.

The honest bit about chimaek

Fried-chicken delivery to the riverbank is iconic — but it's genuinely hard without a Korean phone number or a local payment app. Don't fight it. Convenience-store ramen, a triangle kimbap, and something cold are an easier option, and honestly just as Korean. That's what I actually do: a mat, ramen, a cold drink, music, and I stay until the city goes from day to night.

The Han River isn't something you need to finish. You just need to sit there a while.



Dusk on the river — bring a mat and stay a while.



Banpo's rainbow fountain — lovely, and built for company.

SEONGSU — A LIVE DISTRICT, NOT A CHECKLIST

The mistake is planning Seongsu in advance. It changes too fast for a fixed list.

For me, Seongsu is less a day out and more where I go to read what Korea is into right now — fashion, beauty, furniture, design, and the pop-ups that rotate constantly. That's exactly why a "top 10 in Seongsu" goes stale in a month.

HOW TO DO IT INSTEAD

Don't plan Seongsu too early — check what's open that week. The morning you go, look up current pop-ups on Instagram, then pick just two or three things you actually want to see. Don't fill the whole day with pop-ups; leave room.

The steadier anchors that are usually worth it: Tamburins, 29CM, ADER Error — brand spaces, not one-week pop-ups. Go on a weekday morning; weekends are lines, not the real thing.

The three steady anchors

Tamburins — 서울 성동구 연무장5길 8 · Daily 11:00-21:00

29CM (29CM Home Seongsu) — 서울 성동구 연무장길 57 · Daily 11:00-22:00

ADER Error Space 2.0 — 서울 성동구 성수이로 82 · Daily 11:00-21:00

The one thing I buy every time

Jayeondo salt bread (자연도소금빵). If you pick up one snack in Seongsu, that's it.

MAP [서울 성동구 연무장길 56-1](#)

HOURS Daily 09:00-22:00 (closes early once sold out)

NOTE Sold in sets of 4 only, no single pieces (about ₩12,000 per set).



Tamburins' Seongsu space — half shop, half installation.

I keep this week's actual pop-ups in my Instagram and email updates — not in this guide, so it never goes out of date.

OLD-SCHOOL JOINTS — AND AN HONEST WARNING

This is my real favorite. It's also the hardest for a solo traveler — I'd rather tell you that up front than have you find out at the door.

Daedo Sikdang (대도식당, 왕십리) ● been

MAP [서울 성동구 무학로12길 3](#)

HOURS Daily 11:00-22:00 (last order 21:00) · Closed on major holidays

The beef spot. Packed with Korean families — which is the whole point; who's sitting there is the only review that matters. Finish with their famous kkakdugi fried rice (radish-kimchi fried rice). That ending is what makes it a full meal, not just grilled meat.

BEFORE YOU GO — THE SOLO TRUTH

Korean grilled-meat joints like these are built for two or more, and honestly Koreans rarely go alone. If you're solo, save these for when you have company — a friend, a language exchange, a tour buddy. It's not you; it's how the format works. (This is exactly the kind of call I make for you in a travel-style review.)

Ordering without stress (works at most old joints)

There's no universal menu, so: pick whatever's marked 대표 / 인기 / 추천 / BEST, written big on the wall, or on nearby tables. Ask staff the amount — "두 명인데 얼마나 시키면 돼요?" (how much for two?). Show a review photo of what you want. Side dishes usually come automatically. And watch first: if staff grill for you, let them.

ONE LOCAL DETAIL TOURISTS MISS

A Korean lettuce wrap is one bite, not a burrito. One leaf, one piece of meat, a little sauce, maybe one side — small enough to eat in a single mouthful. And you don't wrap every bite: Koreans alternate between meat plain, meat with sauce, and a wrap.

Translation apps aren't a failure — they're part of independent travel. Save your menu photos and a few short Korean sentences before you go.



Not Daedo Sikdang — the charcoal-grill format at another old-school joint I'm saving for the full guide.

TRADITIONAL WELLNESS — THE PART VISITORS MISS MOST

If you take one thing from this guide, take this. It's the most only-in-Korea day there is.

Sup-sok Hanbang Land (숲속한방랜드) ● been

A traditional charcoal-kiln jjimjilbang near Sinchon — one of the few left in Seoul that still fires a real outdoor wood-and-charcoal kiln instead of an electric one. There are a few kiln rooms at different temperatures; the hottest is nicknamed 'kkot-tang' (꽃탕). I took a friend visiting from Mexico here, and it was the easiest way to give her a real jjimjilbang day without overthinking where to go.

MAP 서울 서대문구 봉원사길 75-7 (봉원동)

HOURS Daily 06:30-22:00 · 02-365-2700

NOTE A few sites list this place as 24-hour — the operator's own listed hours are 06:30-22:00, so call ahead if you're planning a very early or late visit.

What a jjimjilbang actually is (so you're not lost)

Two zones. First, the bathhouse: gender-separated, mostly nude — showers, hot and cold pools, and body scrub. Second, the common sauna floor: you wear the jjimjilbang clothes, it's mixed-gender, with kiln rooms, resting areas, and snacks. Knowing this split in advance is half the comfort.

Try: sikhye (sweet rice drink), a roasted egg, lying on the warm floor, and rotating between a hot room and a cool rest. The sheep-head towel is a playful photo tradition — not something every Korean wears all day.

DON'T TREAT THE HOT ROOM LIKE A CHALLENGE

Go in, come out, cool down, drink something, repeat. Skip the sauna right after alcohol or a big meal; leave immediately if you feel dizzy or your heart races; drink plenty of water.



Sup-sok Hanbang Land — the sign says charcoal kiln, and it means it.



Roasted and smoked eggs at the snack counter — get three.

TRADITIONAL WELLNESS, CONTINUED

Korean body scrub — seshin (세신) ● been

The most underrated solo activity in Korea — strange the first time, then quietly addictive. It's done in the (gender-separated) bathhouse, so mostly nude, and the scrub can feel strong.

How it actually goes, step by step

1	2	3	4
1. Undress & shower Locker room, then a full rinse before anything else.	2. Soak, 5-10 min Soak in a warm bath for 5-10 min — this softens the skin before the scrub.	3. Lie down & scrub 15-20 min on a table, an ajumma/ajussi scrubs you with a rough mitt.	4. Rinse (+ extras) Cold rinse. Oil massage & face mask are optional add-ons.

FIRST-TIMER: SAY THIS FIRST

"처음이에요. 약하게 해주세요." — It's my first time, please do it gently. Also useful: "기본 세신만 받고 싶어요" (basic scrub only), "마사지는 안 받을게요" (no massage, please), "얼마예요?" (how much?).

Phones are often not okay inside the bathing area — so save these sentences and show them at the front desk first.

Price and packages vary by place; check when you arrive. If your skin is sensitive, irritated, or has open wounds, skip it or ask them to go easy.

BUAM-DONG — A QUIET HALF-DAY (MY KIND OF NEIGHBORHOOD)

Ten minutes from the palaces, almost no crowds. Go on a weekend, when the busy districts are packed and this one stays calm.

Mokin Museum Mokseokwon (목인박물관 목석원) ● been

MAP [서울 종로구 창의문로5길 46-1 \(부암동\)](#)

HOURS Tue-Sun 10:30-19:00 (last entry 18:00); Nov-Feb 10:30-18:00 (last entry 17:00)

NOTE Closed Mondays and on Lunar New Year / Chuseok holidays · Paid admission

My favorite thing up here. You get real Korean folk culture, lovely views, and — not a small thing in summer — air conditioning, so you can wander comfortably even in the heat. Start here.



The terrace at Mokin Museum Mokseokwon — onggi jars, mountains, hardly anyone.

Around it, an easy afternoon:

Mom's Kitchen (맘스키친) — a Japanese home-style spot I love; not Korean, and that's the point. Not into Japanese food? Their affiliated fried-chicken place is well known too.

서울 종로구 창의문로 146 · Tue-Sun 11:30-20:00 (break 15:15-17:00) · Closed Mondays

Bubing (부빙) — genuinely excellent bingsu (shaved ice); strongly recommend.

MAP [서울 종로구 창의문로 136](#)

HOURS Wed-Sun 13:00-19:30 (last order 19:00) · Closed Mon & Tue

NOTE Expect a line — over an hour is common in summer. Put your name on the CatchTable waitlist remotely before you arrive.



Bubing's green-tea bingsu.

Scope (스코프) — a well-known scone bakery.

서울 종로구 창의문로 149 1층 · Weekdays 10:00-20:00, weekends 09:00-20:00 (dine-in until 19:30)

Plus a few lovely cafes nearby.

Baeksasil Valley (백사실 계곡) ○ next

MAP [서울 종로구 부암동 115](#)

HOURS Open 24 hours · Free (protected ecological zone)

NOTE It's a protected salamander habitat — entering the water or collecting anything isn't allowed. Look, don't touch.

A clean little valley hidden inside the city, salamanders in the stream — it's high on my own list, and I'll only mark it been once I've truly gone. Same honesty for Seokpajeong (석파정), a garden villa nearby, and the Whanki Museum (환기미술관) for art. The point: this one corner alone can fill a slow, lovely half-day.

Seokpajeong (석파정 서울미술관) — 서울 종로구 창의문로 11길 4-1 · Wed-Sun 10:00-18:00 (last entry 17:00), closed Mon & Tue · No standalone Seokpajeong ticket — entry is included with the combined museum ticket

Whanki Museum (환기미술관) — 서울 종로구 자하문로 40길 63 · Tue-Sun 10:00-18:00 (last entry 17:00), closed Mondays, Jan 1, and Lunar New Year / Chuseok holidays



Cheongun Literature Library (청운문학도서관), a hanok library in the same hills.

SO — WHICH TRAVELER ARE YOU?

The honest limit of this guide

You've noticed the pattern by now: the right answer keeps depending on who's asking. Yeouido or Banpo. Hike or just the sauna. Whether those old-school joints are even a good idea for you, traveling alone. A list can't make those calls. A person who plans for your traveler type can.

That's the one thing I do one-to-one. Send me the Seoul itinerary you've been piecing together — the tabs, the saved maps, the "maybe" list — and I'll edit it to your travel style: what fits, what to protect, what to rethink — plus the honest solo-safety notes I'd give a close friend. Fewer places. A trip that never feels like work.

TRAVEL-STYLE SEOUL ITINERARY REVIEW

Founding rate \$49, first 5 travelers. You're already on the list — I'll write the moment it opens. Until then, take the [30-second traveler check](#) on the website so I know how you travel. — Ixchel