

## Concord Uniting Church Trip to Korea 29 September – 12 October 2008

The idea for a Concord Uniting Church trip to Korea arose from a conversation between Lorma Melham and Mi-Yong Son a couple of years ago. Rev Yangrae Son approached some travel agents to come up with an itinerary for a two week tour in spring 2008. Kana Travel put forward a very good itinerary and sixteen members of Concord Uniting Church and two friends had a most enjoyable holiday in Korea.

Korea is a divided country where the South and the North are still officially at war. Our visit was to the South. It has 47 million people and has the 11th highest standard of living in the world.

The travel party included, Rev Yangrae and Mi-Yong Son, Don and Judith Hughes, Kevin and Chris Morris, Russell and Lorma and Jayden Melham, Rev Ken Cornwell, Maurice Samosir, Ruth Lees, Miriam Renta, Flo Gutierrez, Ruth Penniah, Grace Vaughan, Kay Smith and Ada Mackay. In addition there was the tour guide, Lee Bo Kyung.

Bo proved to be a very well informed, experienced and caring travel guide. Most of her previous groups had been Americans and having an Australian Church group was a novelty to her. Visiting the Ilsin Hospital and Pusanchin Church in Busan were new experiences for Bo. She also enjoyed our daily devotional sessions. Bo arranged many meals for us which were not included in the tour package. She would make a suggestion, tell us the cost and when we agreed rang and booked for us. This meant we had most enjoyable food which was ready for us when we arrived. The traditional Korean food was very healthy and enjoyed by most of us.

We visited many different venues including museums, folk villages, palaces, Buddhist temples, gardens, interesting rock formations along the coast line, boat cruises, city towers and sites where movies had been made.

Included in the highlights were the Buddhist temple stay, attending a service at Daehyun Presbyterian Church, visiting Ilsin Hospital and the Pusanchin Church in Busan, a visit to the very modern and clean Jagalchi Fish Market, the Jeju Orange Research Farm, the Third Tunnel at the Demilitarised Zone and nearby Dorosan Station, Nanta Theatre and Hyundai Heavy Industries at Ilsan. In addition some tour members visited public baths with their saunas and spas, travelled on the subway and shopped the grand Lotte Department store and the markets.

Travel modes included plane, boat, bullet train, taxi, subway, monorail and cable car, but we spent quite a lot of time in a large tour coach with 46 seats for 19 people. This, combined with excellent driving by Jong, made travel very comfortable.

The Korean people were very welcoming. South Korea up until the late 1980's only allowed people to travel out of the country for business and education and few people visited. The government saw the benefit of tourism to the economy in the late 1980's and looked into ways of supporting their visitors. Road and street signs are now in both Korean and English and the President asked the people to be kind and helpful to visitors. When we asked for help we found some English speakers but others tried to help anyway. We were spoken to on a number of occasions by Koreans who asked where we were from and they were interested in how we were enjoying our holiday.

*Ada Mackay*

***The following has been written by a number of people who were invited to report on particular times and events.***

### **Travelling to JeJu Island** *by Kevin and Chris Morris*

We're travelling along the side of the southern bank of the Han River on the way to Gimpo Airport. Bo, our, Korean guide asks us, "How many bridges are there in Seoul"? The answer - twenty eight. We notice the numerous clumps of apartment blocks named 509, 512.... A quarter of 47 million South Koreans are in Seoul.

Jeju International Airport. The island off the southern coast of Korea is famous for wind, women and volcanic rocks. The first woman we encounter, an airport traffic hostess - ten seconds to cross the road. The JeJu words for hurry up, "jaga jaga"! There appeared to be few westerners, or as they may say, "foreigners," at the airport.

JeJu is seventy three odd kilometres long and forty wide. There are hotel resorts and locals. Many Koreans holiday on JeJu if they are not enticed away to other Asian destinations. We retire for lunch featuring soup, salted fish and many and varied condiments and side dishes. Oh, and seaweed is one of those dishes.

In the early afternoon we visit a garden built around some lava tubes. The lava from the volcano flowed down to the sea. In these caves the lava solidified around the edges forming a cave and, as the hotter lava flowed out,

left a cave tunnel. Now there are also stalactite deposits, making it the only volcanic limestone cave in the world.

We notice the stone guardians that look like Easter Island men although these guardians are a pair of a male and female and on JeJu they like to collect and showcase interesting rocks. The guardians have large eyes and noses. The soil of the island, being volcanic, doesn't retain moisture. In days of old women water carriers, single women, carried water from the volcano highlands to the coastal towns.

Women in the past did most of the work because the men had died from dangerous fishing or were enslaved by China or Japan and taken off to fight for those nations. Hence there were more women on JeJu than men. Some fifty-year-old-plus women still dive for shellfish and marine life off the coast of JeJu. Traditionally there were no doors, thieves or beggars on Jeju.

We went to a show and saw Chinese guest worker acrobats and seven motorcyclists in a wire cage, reminiscent of "the barrel of doom" of the old Royal Easter Show, driving their bikes in the same cage, at the same time, in the dark, with lights flashing and horns honking.

The first afternoon on JeJu was not over yet. We went to the coast at Sanban Mountain where there is a Buddhist temple. There is amazing architecture at these temples, meticulous pattern repetition and fresh offerings as the temple is used and cared for daily. From a disciplined mind, unattached to pursuits and feelings, comes some sense of order.

We watched the sunset on JeJu at a seafood restaurant and, as it had been a full-on day, retired to our hotel resort. We ate local food during the day. Back at the hotel, fireworks exploded just outside our window, about fifty metres away at the Lotte Resort. It was Armed Forces Day in Korea celebrating some sixty years since the formation of the Republic of Korea (ROK) armed forces. I haven't tried the bidet yet!

### **More on Jeju Island** *by Ada Mackay*

JeJu Island is very well set up for tourists, both local and overseas, and has many attractions ready to receive visitors. One such attraction was the Orange Research Farm. Much citrus fruit is grown on the island. A scientist explained the industry and the research being undertaken into citrus and ginseng.

*Ginseng is used as a 'pick-me-up' tonic to build stamina, boost immune function and restore mental and physical*

*functioning. It might be used when fatigued, after illness, or during times of prolonged stress, chronic disease or low vitality. It is very popular in Korea.*

One of the very interesting and attractive features of the JeJu coast line is the volcanic rock formations. We joined a boat and went for a cruise to see Seogwipo Island and weren't disappointed. Further around the coast we found Seopjikoji with a lighthouse and more interesting rock formations. It was being visited by many bus loads of elderly ladies and school groups. When I say school groups they came by 7 to 9 large coach loads at a time and we found them in many places.

Many of the traditional houses in Korea have been replaced by large high-rise blocks of units even in the country areas. Some villages have been preserved as living museums. Seongup Folk Village is such a place where visitors can go to see life as it was last century. An interesting feature of this village was the toilet in the middle of the houses. One sat above a hole in a pile of rocks about a metre above the ground and in public view.

We had a later start on our last day which began with a walk through the Jungman Resort gardens. The Jungman Resort consists of many hotels along the coast line. The beaches were almost empty, as the swimming season finishes at the end of summer. However we were able to explore the extensive gardens that we had walked through the previous night looking for a fireworks display.

### **Dokkaebidoro Road** *by Ada Mackay*

We tested out the mysterious Dokkaebidoro Road where vehicles 'roll' uphill. The bus driver stopped the bus and let it roll up the hill! We poured some water on the road and saw it run up the hill too.

### **Visit to the Demilitarized Zone** *by Lorma Melham*

The visit to DMZ gave me a feeling of ambiguity but at the same time curiosity as to what would happen on that day. The information I have read prior to the visit gave me clues of what the place would be like but it was difficult to visualise a place which is the only one existing in the world. I was very curious to see the North Koreans and compare them to the South Koreans. The comparison I was hoping to see most especially was their livelihood. I had a picture in my mind of North Korea as a typical third world country with shanty houses and primitive buildings.

The place for me was very strange and sterile. I felt like I was in a different country altogether. There are visitors there but I have this weird

feeling that no one resides there. Walking into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tunnel, which is believed to have been dug by the North Koreans in an attempt to attack South Korea, gave me a feeling of insecurity and the imminence of danger. Up to this day, I think about the danger and uncertainty that the Korean people are facing and the lives of families that are torn by the separation of the two countries.

### **Daehyun Presbyterian Church** *by Ada Mackay*

We were made very welcome at Daehyun Presbyterian Church where both Yangrae and Mi-Yong had grown up. Rev. Ken Cornwell preached the sermon and Yangrae translated it into Korean. Don Hughes presented a gift to the Church and we were each given a book about the 95-year history of the Daehyun Presbyterian Church and a pen. After the service we shared a traditional Korean lunch with the Pastor and some of the elders of the Church. Pastor Young-tai Choi took us on a tour of the extensive facilities of the Church.

Mi-Yong had been the choir leader in this church and had led the choir to win many church choir competitions.

### **Travel: Seoul to Busan** *by Chris and Kevin Morris*

Jong was up early driving our luggage from Seoul to Busan. We took the KTX very fast train at 300km per hour. The exquisitely attired train hostess (taking on-train shopping orders) bowed entering and leaving the carriage.

In Busan we undertook a diplomatic mission, the Uniting Church visiting Ilsin Women's hospital. We were shown a presentation and given light refreshment. The hospital cherishes its historical connection with its Australian Presbyterian mission founders.

Surprisingly they also took us to the local church. Ever-polite Koreans seem to rely on hierarchy contributing to their social order. In a country with supposedly an equal forty percent mix of Christians and Buddhists the senior pastor of this church asked, "Are you a deacon or an elder?"

A high vantage point in the industrial city of Busan is Busan Tower. Older Korean men played games in the park. We overlooked the industrial / port city of 3.6 million. Like Korea itself it had grown so much over the fifty five odd years since the end of the Korean War.

Busan has the largest wholesale fish markets in Asia. Not just fish from Korea or international waters but fish from the coastal waters of China and Russia. We saw the retail Jalgachi fish markets: all types of live and dead

fish, eels, octopus and pulsating aquatic life. I pondered about "over-fishing" because there were fish aplenty, How could they sell all this?

I tasted but the slightest portion of Asian pepper. It numbed a part of my lower lip. Whilst locals on crowded buses wended their weary way home in Busan we went to our buffet. I had some abalone. I picked up their rice wine, Soju, without knowing. It's twenty per cent alcohol, was tasteless but had a lasting slow-release impact.

The next day we saw the 2005 ASEAN Heads of Government meeting leaders' retreat. Better set up than Sydney. The building houses a very large oval table, which included a place for the two Chinas and Hong Kong. Leaders have access to two buttons - Call for senior adviser and Call for refreshments. The retreat is set on a beautiful coastline. Hyundai Beach, the most crowded beach imaginable during the two month Korean summer, is just around the corner.

We had lunch at Busan Lotte, a more sedate Lotte than the intensely crowded southern Seoul CBD Lotte world store. Urban South Korean apartment dwellers seem brand-conscious. The food courts expose us to different choices. I noticed business banner signs up high rise buildings and hardware stores with goods sprawling over the pavement – a pragmatic approach yet less utilitarian and indifferent because "no harm to others" is an attitude, not a commodity.

In Ulsan we visited the world's largest shipyard, Hyundai's, founded in 1972 in what was then a coastal fishing village. This is serious "can do": nine drydocks; ten thousand apartments for workers' families; thirty ships built per year including tankers, bulk chemical carriers, containerships, oil and gas processing platforms and submarines. Building ships is like a big jigsaw puzzle. Bits and pieces have to be designed, cut, fabricated and assembled.

We left Ulsan for the capital of the old Shilla Dynasty which is in the region of Gyeongju where we stayed at the Hilton. Unlike our breakfasts, our evening meal was traditional Korean at a local restaurant. Korean meals are low-fat and healthy. A part of me yearns for my food. Another part knows that the Korean / Asian diet, stapled on rice, has a continuity of its own.

### **Buddhist Temple Stay** *by Judith Hughes*

The overnight stay at the **Golgulsa Buddhist Temple** in the same area of Korea that was once the centre of the Silla Kingdom proved a most interesting experience for the travellers. Programmes catering for Korean school children and foreigners provide insights into the simple life of those

monks who follow the tenets of Son Buddhism and who seek to attain enlightenment through a regime of meditation and physical fitness resulting in purity of mind and body. Originally aspirants to the elite bodyguard of the Silla King trained in this manner.

At Golgulsa buildings cling to the thickly wooded sides of a very steep hill on the top of which Buddha images are carved into the living rock. Votive shrines surround them.

Very few members of our group attained these dizzy heights, most finding the ascent to the dining hall quite strenuous enough. Here, men and women are segregated and sit at low tables eating plain but pleasantly nutritious vegetarian food. Notices warn guests against waste.

Once on the downwards slope towards the meeting hall where a program of intensive exercise awaited them, our group felt the need to fortify themselves with stimulants from the coffee machines.

Sleeping accommodation is in clean, well-appointed rooms with a heated floor on which we slept. Warm showers and a western style toilet adjoin each room.

A grey robed monk striking a clapper and chanting passes by, summoning people to meditation and physical training about 4.30 in the morning. Later in the morning the Grand Master conducts the tea ceremony where he answers questions about Buddhism.

That night, most of our travellers were relieved to be back in a four star hotel.

### **The Last Day** *by Ada Mackay*

Our last official tourist day brought a visit to a folk village which represented life and pre-industrial manufacture from all of South Korea. We were able to watch the “Farmers Dance”, a high wire acrobat, girls “seesawing” and a traditional wedding. The wedding is usually undertaken by actors but had a real couple the day we visited.

The last big chance to shop came on Saturday afternoon when we went to Dongdaemun market which sold about everything and was very full of shoppers.

Our final night’s dinner was at a thirty-first floor restaurant with night views of Seoul.