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COURTESY JULIE KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

SOOTHE *your* SEOUL

The Korean capital is a mix of modern amenities and cultural attractions

By Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

South Korea's capital of Seoul has been in the news nearly nonstop because of its proximity to the Demilitarized Zone with North Korea, just 35 miles away.

However, while both locals in Seoul and foreign expatriates discuss the situation with their northern neighbor, life in Seoul goes on as normal.

Whether it's an interest in Korean culture, arts, cuisine or business that brings one to Seoul, it's a vibrant, energy-driven city full of historical sights, museums and art galleries. There are also world-class hotels, great restaurants and plenty of neon-lit clubs for night owls.

Where to stay

With 317 large rooms on 28 floors, the Four Seasons



At top, a young Korean woman in traditional hanbok costume poses on the grounds of Gyeongbokgung Palace. Above, a variety of kim chee is on sale at the Sunday open market near the palace.

Hotel Seoul has a traditional Korean spa with several soaking pools, and a steam room and sauna. One floor down, there's an enormous state-of-the-art fitness center with city views. There are personal trainers and daily exercise classes, including yoga, tai chi, zumba, taekwondo and spinning. It's the most beautiful, spacious and well-equipped city hotel fitness center I have encountered anywhere in the world.

In a cheerful space, the "Kids for All Seasons" club had me wanting to connect with my inner tot. There were organized activities, computers and a primary-colored bouncy area.

No doubt inspired by the likes of Willy Wonka, the kids club is outfitted with goodies lined up artfully in large clear jars along the length of an entire wall. This fantasy land for the under-12 set no doubt inspires the sweetest of dreams.

For adults, a golf center features large screens for

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virtual play with separate stations for men and women, and distinguishing between right-handed swingers and left-handed ones. A golf specialist is available for additional tips.

What to eat

If you are walking around the Dongdaemun area and engaging in serious shopping, a colorful respite for a quick lunch or early dinner is Gwangjang Market. Open-air stalls abound with communal seating where smiling vendors wave their utensils to get you to sit. Here all manner of grilled animal parts are served, along with several spicy noodles and rice-based vegetarian options.

In Seoul's Itaewon neighborhood, Parc Seoul has tasty Aussie beef bulgogi. Vegetarian options include that comfort-food staple, kim chee fried rice.

In the popular Insa-dong area, tea-rooms, restaurants and small shops line the narrow streets. If visiting on a Sunday, traffic is prohibited, which makes strolling the neighborhood a pleasure. There is excellent street food including grilled chicken skewers, soft-serve green tea ice cream and boong-a-bang, a scrumptiously sweet, black bean-filled, fish-shaped pancake.

Seoul's best-kept culinary secret — indeed its entrance is extremely difficult to find — is Dosa Restaurant that recently received a Michelin star. (Hint: When you arrive at the front of Itaewon section's Park Building, which is Dosa's street address, do not enter the building. Instead, with your back to Coffee Bean, turn right and walk around the corner. Look for a black door with a moniker that can't really be called signage.)

Dosa is housed in a minimal space where white and gray walls are adorned with large acrylic-painted canvases made by the mother of owner/chef Back Seung-Wook, better known as Aldra Back. The atmosphere dissipates the moment one samples the first of nine mouth-watering courses of the tasting menu prepared by the extremely talented California-raised, New York-trained chef de cuisine Jason Oh. For all courses, including the mackerel with sour chili paste, pork with soy bean paste and kim chee and roasted chestnut soup served with spinach sponge cake and black charcoal bread, the dish presentations are magnificent, deliciously edible art.

The Four Seasons Hotel Seoul has a hidden speakeasy, the Charles H. And it is indeed well hidden. Take the elevator to the lower lobby level and opposite the Market Kitchen hostess station, look for the solid marble wall. Search for an oddly placed door handle. If you still can't find it — I couldn't — return to the lobby and the concierge will escort you down. With its secretive nature, mood lighting and period furnishings, Charles H is an

Visitors dressed in South Korean traditional hanbok attire take pictures at Gyeongbokgung Palace. At top, South Korea's capital is seen from the N Seoul Tower.

excellent spot to enjoy after-dinner cocktails while you focus on the clandestine stories, real and imagined, of other patrons.

Where to go

Locals — both singles and couples — often rent colorful, traditional Korean silk hanbok costumes and come to Gyeongbokgung Palace to take photos near the entry gates and inside the peaceful, picturesque grounds. If you're at the main gate at 9:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. (except Tuesdays), you can also see the traditionally dressed Royal Guards ceremoniously change their palace posts.

A 10-minute walk brings you to the entrance to Bukchon Hanok Vil-

IF YOU GO...**Seoul**

>> **Airfare:** Nonstop service from Honolulu to Seoul is offered on Asiana, Korean Air and Delta starting at \$800.

>> **Accommodations:** The perfectly-located Four Seasons Hotel Seoul has large rooms with separate sitting and work areas and fabulous city views. Marble bathrooms have soaking tubs, rain showers and dual vanities. Rates start at \$338 per night. 97 Saemunan-ro, Jongno-gu, 800-819-5053, fourseasons.com

DINING:

>> **Parc Seoul:** Traditional home-style Korean food in Itaewon, near Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, 743-1 Hannam Dong, Yongsan Gu, 82 2-792-2022, parcseoul.com

>> **Dosa Restaurant:** A culinary experience you won't soon forget. Make reservations and allow plenty of time to find the inconspicuous front door, B1 Park Building, Dosandaero 67 gil-7, Cheongdam-dong, Gangnam-gu, 82 2-516-3672, dosaseoul.com

>> **More information:** Visit English.visitseoul.net/index



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Serenity awaits at Namsangol Hanok Village for visitors who make the 20-minute walk from Mount Nan

Museum of Art houses the private art collection of Samsung founder Lee Byung-chul and his son Lee Kun-hee. In a stunningly beautiful curated space that is light-filled and modern yet warm, these collections shine.

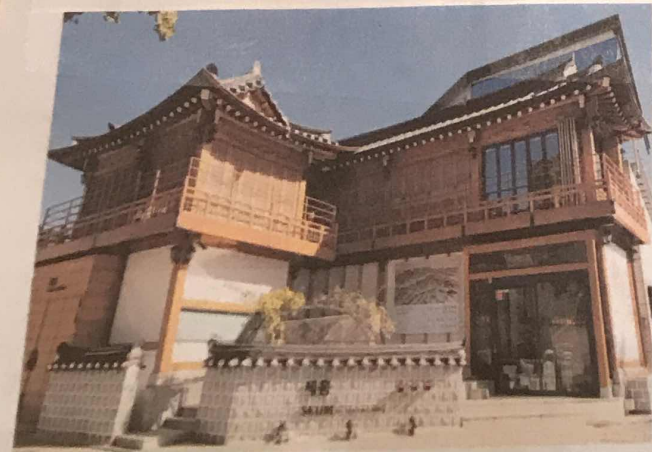
Leeum Building One contains traditional Korean art including celadon pottery, Buddhist art, calligraphy and metalware, juxtaposed with a smattering of modern pieces by Mark Rothko and an Alberto Giacometti sculpture. Building Two houses the modern collection, including pieces by Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol and Takashi Murakami. Bursting with verdant color is Kim Chong Hak's "Green Shades and Fragrant Plants" marvelous and imposing canvas. Do not miss Damien Hirst's 10-foot oval butterfly piece and his "Nothing to Fear" prescription drug shadow box. You will never look at aspirin in quite the same way.

Lessons learned

A city bound in tradition, Seoul has a modern, energized pulse in a country known as the land of the morning calm.

There are excellent hotels, restaurants and museums. The city's difficult-to-find gems are worth exploring. With plenty of taxis and an admirably efficient subway system, one can experience and savor much of what Seoul has to offer in just a few days.

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An art gallery is housed in traditional Korean structures near the Four Seasons Hotel Seoul.

Nearby, the Namsangol Hanok Village is one of the most serene places in all of Seoul. Several traditional wood homes from the Joseon dynasty were moved here, preserved and placed amid well-maintained lovely gardens and a small, tranquil lake.

In Itaewon, the Leeum, Samsung