

## **Armchair Traveller – July 2021 – Guest Speaker – Bill Parris**

### **Jane's Journal – 'Travels in Korea'**

We flew out of Taipei an hour late and when we arrived in Seoul we did not find a representative of the travel company waiting for us waving a 'Parris' sign. Bill wandered around the arrivals hall looking at all the signs being held by various people who were obviously waiting to pick up someone. One kind Korean gentleman asked if he could help, so Bill asked if he could ring the travel company for us – luckily, we had the name and number of the driver. We were told he would be 10 mins and eventually he turned up. It took nearly one hour to drive the 32kms from Incheon airport to Seoul and we arrived at our hotel at 10.45pm. We are staying in a serviced apartment which comes complete with a kitchen and laundry. There is a combined washer/dryer so we threw a load in, pressed all the buttons for wash, rinse, spin and dry and hit the Start button. It said that the program would take 3 hours 40 mins so we went to bed. Luckily, we planned to get up at 6.00am as the dryer part doesn't automatically flow on from the end of the wash cycle and all our clothes were still damp. I reset the drying cycle for 90 mins and we headed down for breakfast.

The clothes dried just in time for us to be picked up at 7.40 and driven to the meeting place for our five-day tour of Korea. It turns out that there is just the two of us and a Japanese father and son, so our guide James Chung is also our driver and we are travelling in a Hyundai 8-seater people carrier.

### **Korean background**

Korea is just east of Japan. In size South Korea is about 45% of the area of Victoria with a population of 49 million. Fifty percent of the population claim to have no religion and the other fifty percent is half and half Buddhist and Christian. Of the Christians the split is 60:40 Protestant and Catholic. The Pope is visiting Korea while we are here and our guide said he thought that his visit would result in there being more Catholics than Protestants after this – I'm not sure where he thinks they will come from, as I doubt if many of the Protestants will convert. Perhaps some of the non religious residents will become Christian.

Korea was a kingdom from 2333BC through to 1595AD when the Japanese invaded and took the country over. There were three kingdoms between 57BC and 676AD – the Goguryeo, Silla and Baekje. These three unified as the Silla kingdom between 676 – 935 AD. The Japanese gave Korea their independence in 1945. In 1948 the country split into North and South Korea and the Korean war followed from 1950-53.

### **Day 1 Sunday August 17**

We set off and headed south for 130 kms to the town of Gongju to visit the royal tomb of King Muryeong and the nearby fortress of Gongsanseong.

It rained heavily most of the way but that didn't stop our driver from reaching speeds of over 140 kph even though the limit was posted as 100 kph. At regular intervals there are fixed speed cameras. His GPS alerted him to these and he slowed down enough to pass each one at just over 100.

The rain eased off as we got to Gongju and we were able to walk around the sights reasonable comfortably.

We drove on for 90mins to Buyeo and had a typical Korean lunch of beef strips cooked in a hot pot and rice with a large assortment of accompaniments. After lunch it started to rain heavily and we were to walk around the Goransa temple and Nakhwaam bluff. As the guide said this has quite a lot of steps and steep sections I chose to stay in the van while the others went off to see what they could see through the rain. When they came back about 90 mins later we drove off to a nearby Baekje cultural land where traditional buildings of the sixth and eighth centuries have been recreated to illustrate a typical palace, fortress, castle and other buildings. The rain had eased off again and it was easy walking around the well laid out area on flat ground.

After 90 mins looking around this complex, we drove further south for a further 50 mins to Jeonju, to visit a village called Hanok of 700 traditional houses and a village street with lots of eating houses and street food sellers. This is the third day of a holiday weekend in Korea and there were lots of people about. We arrived at about 5.30pm

just as the rain started to come down again. We were expected to pick up something as our dinner, but neither Bill or I felt the slightest bit hungry after our big lunch so we took some pictures and wandered back to wait to be picked up.

We had a further 60 mins of travel down to the city of Gwangju in the Honam region where we booked in to a Holiday Inn for the night.

## **Day 2 Monday August 18**

This morning we left the hotel at the leisurely time of 9.00am. On the itinerary it said we were to visit the nearby museum, but this is closed on Mondays. Instead, our guide chose to take us to visit one of the largest Buddhist teaching temples in Korea. It had been raining steadily during the night and on our journey to the temple. Just before going uphill to the temple, we came to a large man-made reservoir. Our guide was amazed – Korea has had a drought during this rainy season and this lake was getting quite low. When he was here only the Monday before it had been 5 metres lower and now it was full again. As we got nearer the temple, we could see small streams bursting their banks and raging torrents of water pouring downhill towards the lake. At the temple itself the usually placid stream was so swollen that it prevented access at the normal crossing, and we had to walk further uphill to visit the temple complex. Our guide was so amazed that he pulled out his phone and took photos himself!

The rain eased off as we left the temple and drove to Bosung to a viewing area overlooking green tea plantations. We sampled some green tea latte, ate a green tea ice cream each and some green tea flavoured rice crackers.

We drove south-east from Bosung to Suncheon to visit the Songgwangsa temple and then on to lunch at another typical Korean restaurant serving shellfish. These were basically pippis but once again we had a hotpot soup as well and a wide range of accompanying condiments. After lunch we went to the nearby Suncheon Ecological Park which is of world significance. There are reed beds and mud flats which are home to a wide range of birds at different times of the year. Some stop there on their way to Australia from Siberia. It had stopped raining altogether this afternoon and it was a very pleasant walk around the wet lands.

After 90 mins we drove on for an hour to the port of Yeosu and parked for an hour near the CBD so we could purchase some food for dinner. Once again we didn't feel hungry but we picked up some 2 minute noodles in a convenience store. Then we were driven on to our resort hotel for the night arriving at about 7.30pm.

## **Day 3 Tuesday August 19**

It rained steadily most of the night and quite heavily as we were having breakfast. We left our hotel at 8.30 am and drove through the industrial area of Yeosu. We travelled through many kilometres of petroleum refineries – the largest petrochemical industrial area in Korea. Korea does not produce oil and has to import all its crude oil from the Middle East. Despite this it has a huge export industry in petroleum products to surrounding countries. Eighty minutes later we arrived at Jinjuseong fortress which had a part to play in the war against the Japanese in 1592. We drove on for another hour to Busan, spending 90 mins wandering around the largest fish market in Korea and picking up lunch. This time Bill & I shared a seafood soup hotpot which again came with rice & extras.

After lunch we drove out over the double decker Diamond bridge to Haeundae Beach, which our guide seems to think is the most famous beach in the world – I think he means Asia. It is the equivalent of Brazil's Copacabana beach and on a single day in the first week of August this year 70,000 people visited it. It is one of the most popular summer holiday destinations for Koreans. Nearby is the circular APEC centre which was used for the 2005 APEC summit. It was raining again but eased off during the 60 min drive to our next overnight stop Gyeongju.

## **Day 4 Wednesday August 20**

Extraordinarily it is still raining this morning when we set off after breakfast to visit the nearby Seokguram Grotto. After a 10 minute stroll along a misty mountain path we arrived at the shrine built by someone to honour his parents in his past life. Buddhists know that they have three lives – their past life, their current life and their future life. This man was paying his respects to parents he didn't know personally in this life, but knew he had had

in the past. The next temple Bulguksa was built to honour the parents in his present life. The rain had stopped for a period so we were able to walk around without getting drenched. We left Gyeongju at midday to travel to Andong, about 2 hrs 30 mins away. After an hour we stopped at a service centre on the freeway to partake of a typical Korean lunch on the road. Just as we arrived there the rain was bucketing down and we dashed across from the car park. By the time we finished lunch the rain eased a little and by the time we got to Andong it had stopped for long enough for us to spend an hour walking around the World Heritage village. At 5.15 we left the village and drove on to our overnight hotel in Wonju about 90mins drive away.

### **Day 5 Thursday August 21**

Today is the last day of our round the country tour and it will be a long one. It had been raining again during the night. We left the hotel after breakfast at 8.00am and drove north for 90 mins to Pyeongchang which will be where the 2018 Winter Olympics will be held. There are several ski resorts in the area being used for the games, and we stopped to look around Alpensia where the ski jump events will be held.

We then drove east for an hour towards the coast to Seongyojang to visit a typical mansion of the nobility in the late Joseon dynasty, built in 17???. It was lived in by successive generations of the same family until 1980? when it became a museum. Some of the pavilions which would have been used by visitors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are now used for tourist accommodation.

At midday we moved to the coast and stopped to look at the East Sea (known in Japan as the Sea of Japan) at Costco? and to have lunch. Bill impressed our guide by ordering a spicy version of a tofu and seafood soup and by managing to eat it without breaking out into a sweat, unlike our Japanese travelling companion. We purchased some rather large peaches to eat later.

During lunch the rain started in earnest again, but we pressed on regardless uphill to the Mt Seorak National Park – according to the tourist pamphlet the peaks of the Seoraksan Mountains break through the clouds while jade like water flows through the valley, creating breathtaking views and making this Korea's most famous national park. There are a number of rare species found here and in 1982 UNESCO designated this park a Biosphere Preservation District. As we arrived the rain seemed to get heavier if anything, and visibility was very poor, so the delightful views were not seen. We had been offered the option of a cable car ride to fully appreciate the scenery but even the operators had no doubt that no-one would be taking it up in that weather and it wasn't even running. Bill and the others took the twenty minute walk up to a temple and a statue of Buddha while I stayed warm and dry in the car!

We departed the National Park at 3.00pm for the three to four drive back to Seoul, depending on traffic in the city. Korea is very mountainous and the mountains are steep sided and pointy with deep ravines in between. On the trip back to the capital city we drove through tunnel after tunnel, sometimes seven or eight in a row. The shortest might have been 400 or 500 metres and the longest four or five kilometres, but we would no sooner be out of one than we had a 400m break and straight into the next. Then we might travel along a river valley for forty or fifty kilometres and then through another chain of tunnels. We were dropped off at our hotel at 6.30pm.

### **Day 6 Friday August 22**

This morning we were picked up after breakfast and taken on a half day tour of Seoul. First we visited the Jogye-sa temple, then we were dropped off at the north gate of the Gyeongbok Palace. There were kings in Korea until after the independence from Japan. This palace was badly damaged during the Korean war and is only 25% reconstructed. The first section we visited was a special exhibition in the National Folk museum about the lifestyle of traditional Koreans – they used to have a major birthday party when a baby was 100 days old, because the level of infant mortality was so high. Then they also have a major party for 60<sup>th</sup> because that was considered old. We walked past the beautiful Concubines garden (Korean kings had 500 concubines but only 1 Queen), the Queen's quarters, the King's quarters, the Banqueting hall and finished up at the south gate for the changing of the guard. We finished our tour at the Korean ginseng centre which explained how it grows but was really a sales pitch \$US510 for 6 months worth of pills at two a day. Supposed to cure everything.