

SOUTH KOREA

Kimchi, Hot Springs and Cycle Paths



Leana Niemand

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Thank You

I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my ride in South Korea. It was truly a humbling experience.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.

I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.

Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.



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Prelude

South Korea was never part of a grand plan—mostly because I rarely had one. It appeared on my horizon the way unexpected destinations often do: through a combination of visa trouble, bureaucratic shrugging, and the irresistible lure of a cycle path that promised to run the length of the country. I arrived with a round-the-world bicycle, a nearly full passport, and the vague hope that things would sort themselves out. What followed was a journey of temples tucked between skyscrapers, steaming bowls of kimchi, river paths that felt like secret corridors, and the occasional encounter with public nudity I was wholly unprepared for. In short, it was exactly the kind of adventure that happens when you don't plan one.



From Hong Kong to Seoul: The Great Escape

Hong Kong had become my accidental long-term residence—partly because I couldn't renew my Chinese visa, and partly because my South African passport was apparently so exotic that no one knew what to do with it. After more than a month of bureaucratic limbo, I finally escaped via taxi to the airport, clutching my worldly possessions and bracing for the inevitable overweight baggage fee.

The fee arrived, naturally, with all the subtlety of a slap. I paid it, because arguing with airport staff is like arguing with gravity.

Three hours later, the plane dropped me in Seoul, where I discovered I couldn't draw money but could pay by card." Priority one: contact the bank. Priority two: hope for a miracle.

By evening, I was still broke but optimistic—mostly because optimism was free.







Rip Van Winkel Visits the Future

Seoul, until then, had been nothing more than a dot on a map—one of those far-off places you assume is full of neon signs and people who know how to use technology properly.

It turned out to be the most technologically advanced city I'd ever visited, and I've been to places with automatic potato peelers. Everything beeped, blinked, scanned, swiped, or glowed. I felt like Rip Van Winkel waking up in a world where cash was a myth, and everyone else had already downloaded the future.

Yet, tucked between the skyscrapers were ancient temples and palaces, as if the city had politely agreed to keep its grandparents around. Some even came with actors sporting fake beards—because nothing says “authentic cultural heritage” like a moustache glued on with spirit gum.



Kimchi, Palaces & Pedestrian Mazes

The bicycle was reassembled at a local bike shop, and with my mobile home restored, I wandered off to explore. First stop: Bukchon Traditional Cultural Centre, where old Korea was preserved beautifully—minus the occasional tourist wearing a *hanbok* backwards.

Later, I visited Deoksugung Palace, a lovely collection of old buildings that looked as though they'd been dropped into the city by a time-travelling architect.

My amble continued through Namdaemun Market, famous for its street food and its ability to lure you into buying things you don't need. I picked up my daily ration of kimchi—because in Korea, kimchi isn't a side dish; it's a lifestyle. Fermented vegetables appeared at every meal, sometimes even starring as the meal. I was hooked.

If fermentation was a religion, Korea was its Vatican.



The Accidental Discovery

I meant to leave Seoul. Truly. But the city kept revealing more treasures, like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat.

While buying camping gas, I stumbled upon a cycle path along the river—rumoured to run all the way to Busan. I was sceptical, because rumours in the cycling world often involve phrases like “mostly flat” and “just a small hill,” both of which are lies. Still, the idea of cycling across the country was irresistible.

Seoul continued to charm me with funky cafés, narrow pedestrian lanes, and architecture that looked like it had been designed by enthusiastic origami artists.

I wandered along Cheonggyecheon, an 11-kilometre stream rediscovered after someone had the brilliant idea to demolish a highway. Now it was a peaceful oasis of greenery, art, bridges, and waterfalls—proof that occasionally, urban planning gets it right.



The Joy Ride to Yangpyeong (91 km)

At nine o'clock, I pedalled out of Seoul grinning like someone who had just discovered a secret passageway. There's nothing quite like cycling into the unknown with no idea where you'll end up.

The Han River cycle path was wide, smooth, and filled with cyclists dressed as though they were competing in the Tour de France—on a public holiday. Twice I fell into conversation with fellow riders, who generously shared tips and information.

The route followed an old rail line, meaning it was blissfully flat and any hills were replaced by tunnels. I felt like I'd won the cycling lottery.

A wave of joy washed over me. This—this feeling of freedom—was exactly why I travelled.



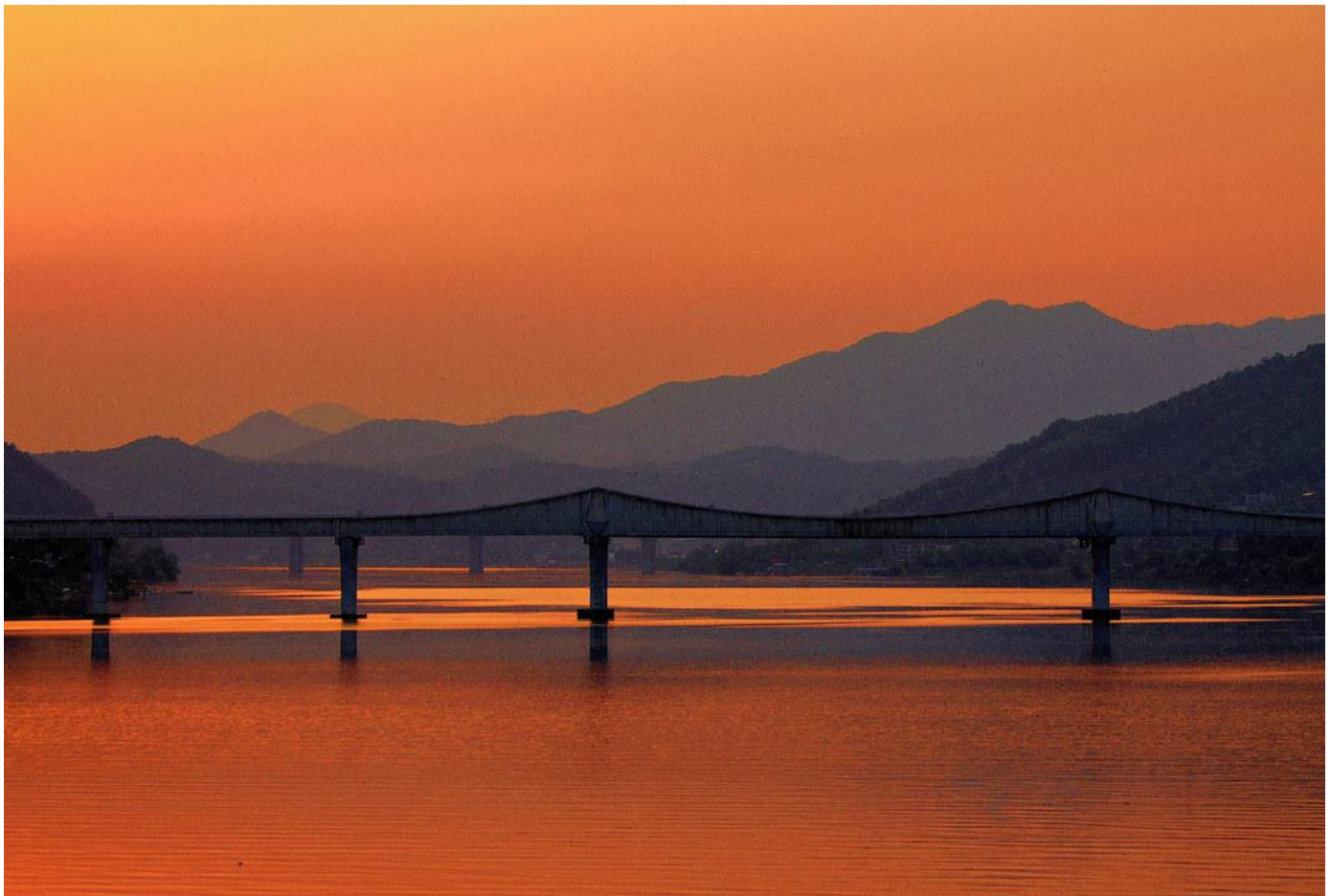


Yangpyeong to Chungju: The Silkworm Incident (100 km)

It took all day to pedal the 100 kilometres to Chungju, but the path made it delightful. Along the way, I met a young cyclist heading to Busan with nothing but a tiny backpack and the stamina of a mountain goat. His English name was Ben, and he kindly waited for me on the hills, translating information boards that were otherwise decorative Korean wallpaper.

At one stop, I tried *beondegi*—steamed silkworm pupae. Koreans eat them as a snack. I ate one. Just one. It tasted like something that had died twice.

In Chungju, Ben continued onward while I found a room. I wished him well and hoped his backpack contained something more appetising than silkworms.









Suanbo Hot Springs: The Naked Truth (25 km)

Leaving Chungju, I met another cyclist who insisted on giving me energy bars—Korean generosity was unstoppable.

Soon I reached Suanbo, a small mountain town famous for its hot springs. While searching for accommodation, I heard someone call my name. It was Ben! Koreans may be efficient, but apparently, they're also excellent at reappearing unexpectedly.

We had breakfast together, sitting on cushions at low tables, shoes off, knees politely folded. Ben paid (again) and escorted me to a *Jjimjilbang*, my first Korean sauna experience.

Inside, one must strip, shower, scrub, and then enter the pools—no bathing suits allowed. Public nudity is not my natural habitat, and I'm fairly sure the local ladies had never seen a foreign woman naked before. Their eyes followed me like I was a rare zoo exhibit.

I submerged myself immediately and stayed underwater until I felt brave enough to dash back to my clothes.

The sauna also offered napping rooms—simple mats on the floor and wooden pillows, which are exactly as comfortable as they sound. Cycle tourers often slept there for free. I wasn't convinced I'd ever get used to a wooden pillow, but free is free.











Gumi Weir: The Round Bed & Rural Charm (103 km)

Rain hammered down all night, but by morning the sky had decided to behave. I pedalled off through tiny mountain hamlets where villagers were winnowing rice outside their homes—an activity that looks wonderfully poetic until you realise it involves throwing grains into the air and hoping they land somewhere useful.

Accommodation that night was one of my usual “rooms rented by the hour.” These establishments specialise in beds shaped like geometric experiments and lighting that suggests the previous occupant was a disco ball. My bed was round—because apparently squares are too mainstream—and came with a generous selection of personal care items, most of which I didn’t dare inspect too closely.









Dalseogyo Bridge: Freedom & The Goldfish Bowl (108 km)

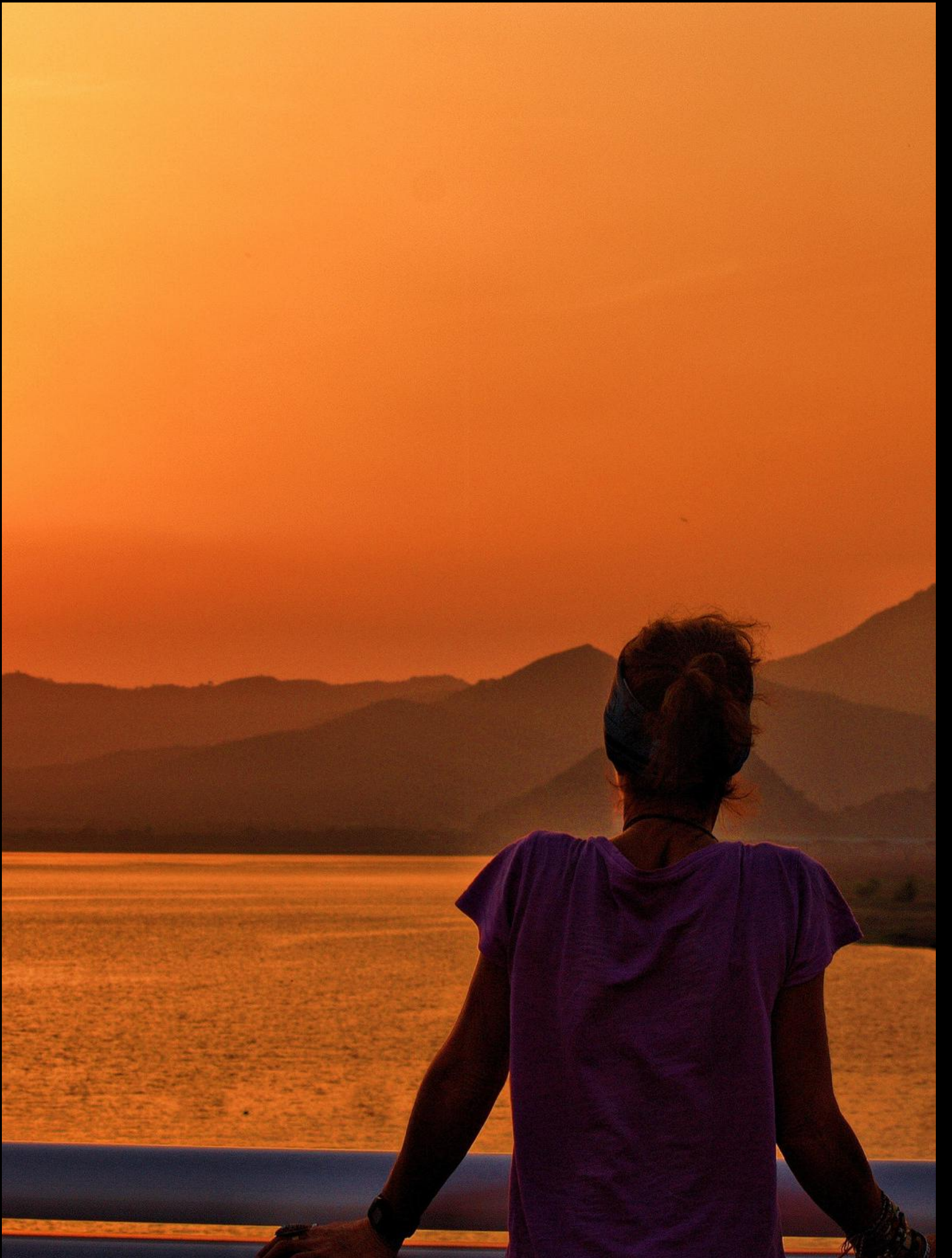
Freedom means different things to different people. For some, it's financial independence. For others, it's the ability to eat ice cream for breakfast. For me, it's pedalling off with no idea where I'll sleep that night.

The road hugged the river, winding past rural communities, old temples, and farmland so green it looked Photoshopped. It was one of those days where everything felt right—until I pitched my tent on what I thought was a quiet grassy patch.

It turned out to be Millennium Plaza, which at night lit up like a Christmas tree on steroids. I spent the evening glowing under floodlights, feeling very much like a goldfish in a bowl—minus the castle and the tiny plastic diver.









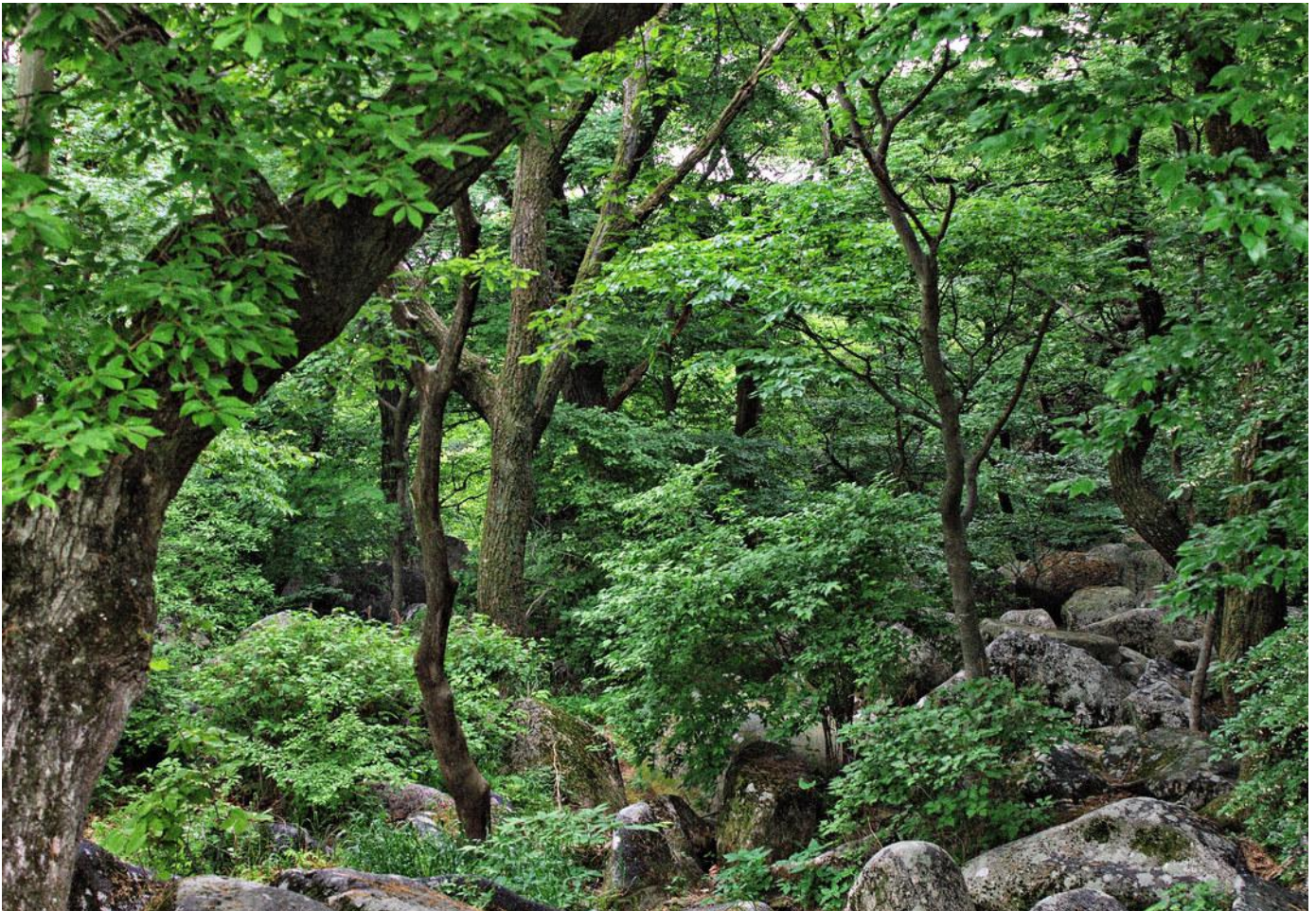
Namji: Miss Smarty Pants & The Hills (90 km)

Camping in a public square means no sleeping in. By sunrise, I was boiling water for coffee and loading up. Feeling adventurous, I attempted an alternative route—Miss Smarty Pants’ brilliant idea.

Miss Smarty Pants was wrong. She had to backtrack.

The path soon turned hilly, the kind of hilly that requires pushing the bike while muttering motivational speeches under your breath. Breakfast had been forgotten, and my energy levels plummeted until a 7-Eleven appeared like a fluorescent oasis. After inhaling lunch, I tackled the remaining hills with renewed enthusiasm.

Namji offered a room—perfect for charging my ever-multiplying gadgets. I swear they breed in my panniers.





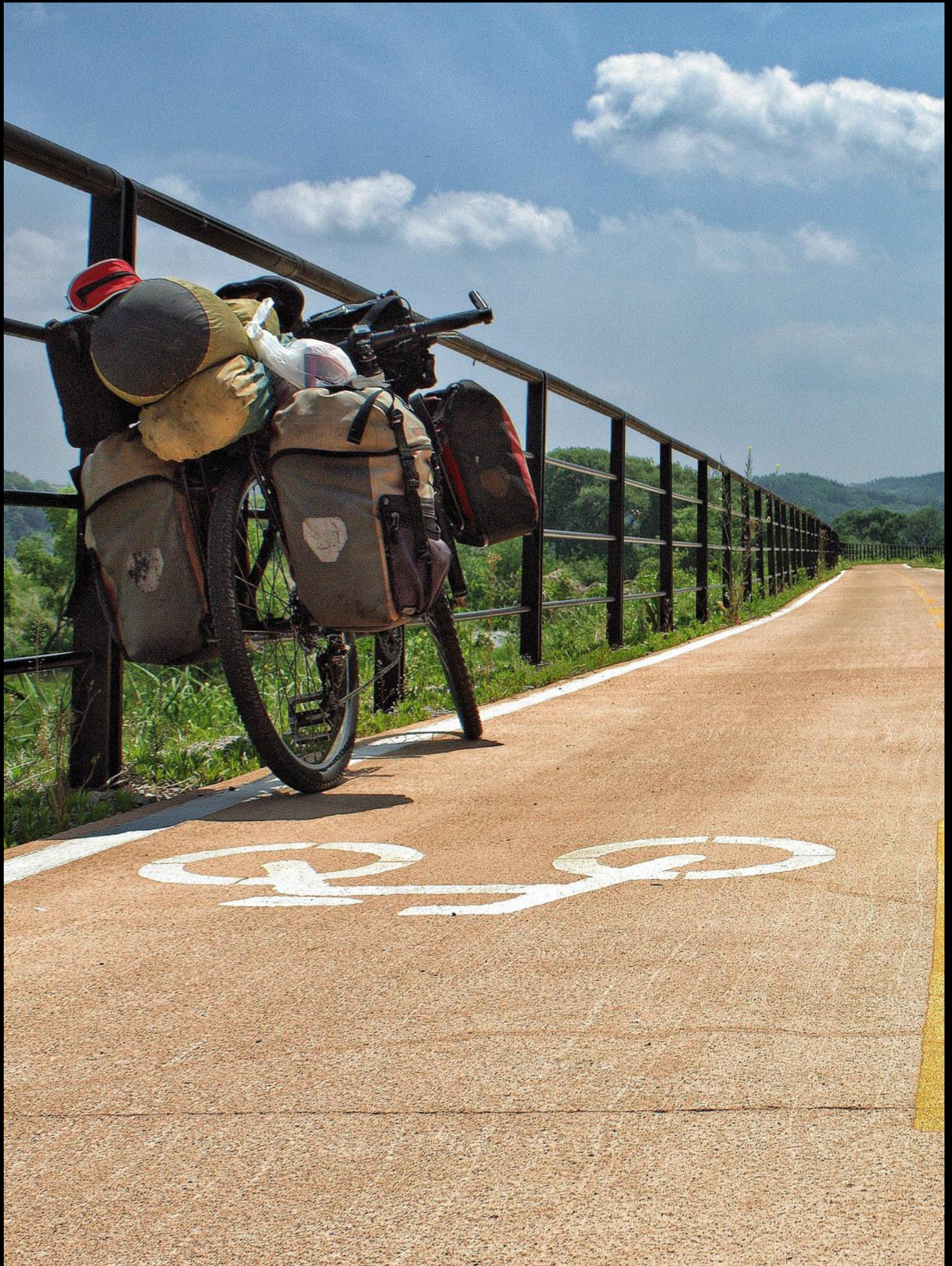
Namji to Busan: Flowers, Hills & Urban Chaos (111 km)

My final day to Busan was beautiful but not without a few “character-building” hills. The route wound through rural villages and over mountains, with spring flowers blooming everywhere, as if nature had gone slightly overboard.

By late afternoon, the peaceful cycle path spat me out into Busan’s evening traffic—a shock to the system after days of tranquillity. I braved the chaos in search of budget accommodation, feeling half triumphant and half melancholic. Reaching a destination always does that: joy mixed with the faint sadness of an ending.

A tourist information office saved the day, pointing me toward a cheap motel hidden in a narrow lane that transformed at night into a bustling food market. I checked in, dodged a few sizzling pans, and collapsed.









The Visa Plot Twist

Busan had a ferry to Japan, so I marched off to the Japanese Consulate, only to discover they didn't issue visas to foreigners. One must apply in one's home country or have permanent residency—neither of which I possessed.

Changing plans isn't my favourite pastime, especially when bureaucracy forces it. I considered flying elsewhere, but packing the bike is a hassle, and airports are where joy goes to die.

My passport was nearly full, limiting my options to countries that didn't require visas and allowed long stretches of cycling. The Americas made the most sense—I already had a U.S. visa and unfinished business there. Logically, I should return to San Francisco and pedal north.

But logic and I have a complicated relationship.



Busan: Temples, Decisions & The Big Box

I moved to Blue Backpackers, which had more facilities and, conveniently, a nearby bike shop. The plan was to get a box for the bicycle and decide my next destination at the last possible moment—my preferred method of planning.

By morning, I handed the bike in to be boxed. Several things needed repair, but I ignored them, figuring it was better to fix everything in whichever country I eventually landed in.

Busan's metro system was extensive, so I ventured underground to visit Buddhist temples on the outskirts. They were serene, green-toned (unlike China's red temples), and guarded by the four Heavenly Kings—each responsible for a direction of the world and apparently very busy.

A friendly tour group gave me a lift back to the metro, and in the city centre, rows of food stalls appeared like magic. I ate my fill, returned to the hostel, and packed for the long flight to Seattle via Beijing. From Seattle, I planned to pedal south to San Francisco (where I left off a year earlier). Hopefully aided by prevailing winds.



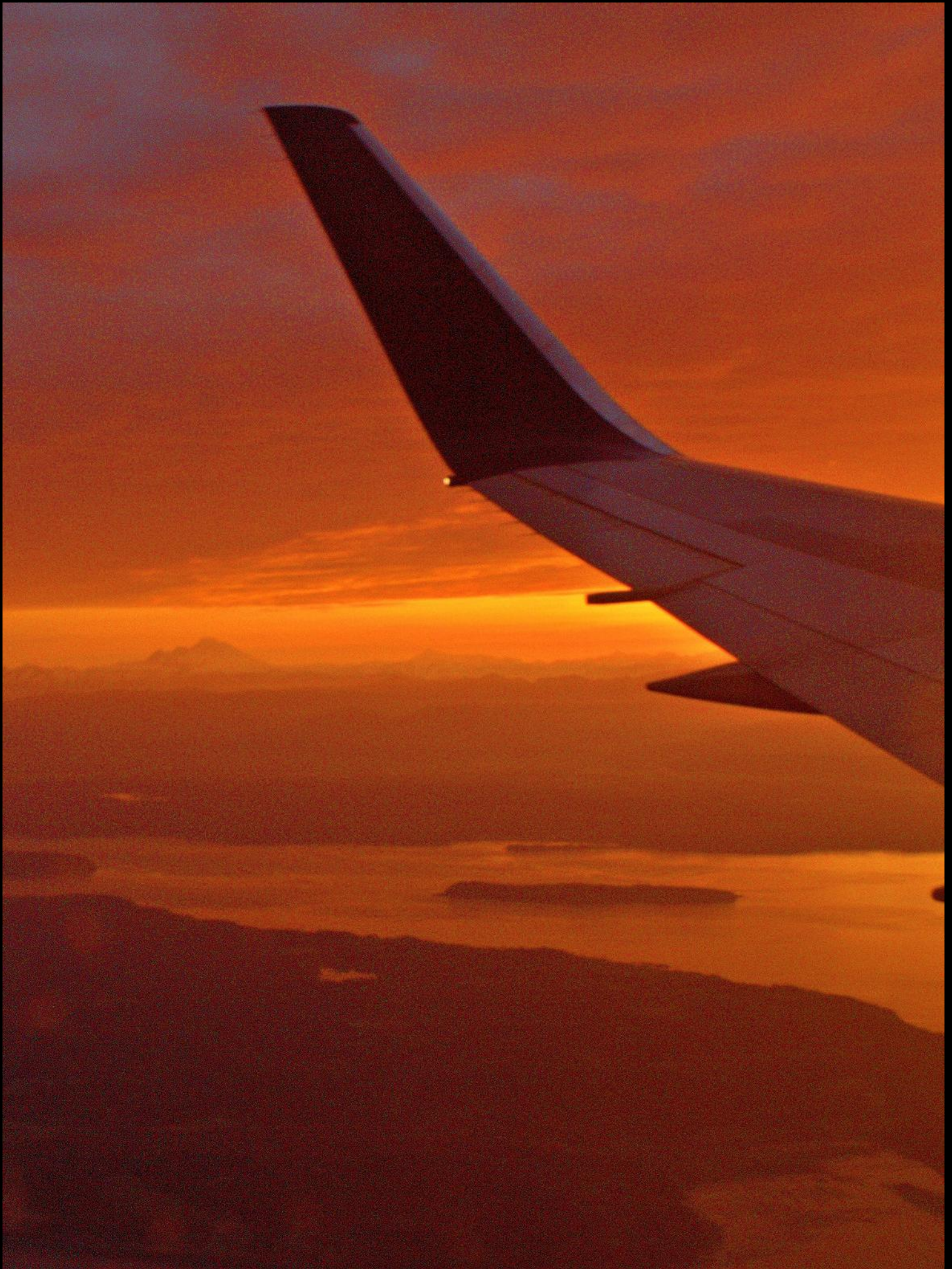




Busan to Seattle: The Case of the Missing Backpack

We landed in Seattle in the early hours, and the city looked delightful—fresh, crisp, and full of promise. The amusing part was arriving in Seattle before leaving Beijing, thanks to time zones doing their usual tricks.

Leaving South Korea felt a bit like closing a book mid-chapter—one moment I was cycling along rivers and sleeping under neon floodlights, and the next I was hurtling across the Pacific toward a city I'd technically arrived in before leaving Beijing. Seattle greeted me with crisp air, a missing backpack, and the familiar chaos of reassembling my life around a boxed bicycle. It wasn't the destination I'd planned—mostly because I hadn't planned one—but it was where the road was waiting. And as always, once the bike was freed from its cardboard coffin, the only sensible thing to do was point it in a direction and start pedalling again.



Epilogue

By the time I left Busan, my bicycle was boxed, my plans were still undecided. South Korea had given me round beds, hot springs, luminous plazas, and cycle paths that stitched the country together like a gentle thread. It had also reminded me—quite firmly—that travel is less about knowing where you’re going and more about being willing to go there anyway. As my plane lifted toward Seattle, I felt that familiar mix of sadness and anticipation. One chapter had closed, another was already unfolding, and the road—whichever continent it happened to be on—was waiting.







About this Chapter

This chapter accounts for my bike ride in South Korea from Seoul to Busan en route from China. There are hundreds of different ways, but the course described follows the bike path. If the intention is to use this book as a cycle touring guide, then please keep the following in mind:

The distances

Daily distances in this book may not be the shortest, as I occasionally deviated. The daily kilometres recorded were, however, accurate according to my odometer.

Time of year and date

My visit to South Korea took place in May 2014, and many things could have changed; roads may now be in better or worse condition. Places, where I stayed may now be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but they sure felt that way at the time.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities", including scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. I don't think cycling is considered dangerous but check the small print.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so make sure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can use any comfortable footwear. Summers in South Korea are sweltering, but winters are downright freezing, so pack accordingly. Pack personal toiletries, including insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

The bicycle

Any bicycle will do as long as you are comfortable. I use an ordinary mountain bike with a Merida frame fitted with Shimano Deore bike parts, Alex wheel rims and Schwalbe tyres. The bicycle is fitted with Tubus bicycle racks. Panniers are expensive but essential items, and Ortlieb panniers are world-renowned. Make sure that you know how to fix a punctured tube. A phone holder for the handlebar is convenient for navigation as I use Organic Maps or Google Maps. Furthermore, a handlebar bag is essential for holding a camera and other items needed during the day.

낙동강

낙동강

하구둑부터

277 km



About South Korea

Capital City

Seoul is the capital city of South Korea. About half of South Koreans live in the Seoul Capital Area.

Currency

South Korea's currency is the South Korean won. The symbol is ₩, and the code is KRW. The won is divided into 100 jeon.

Language

Korean is the official language in Korea. It doesn't share many similarities with Western languages, so even learning to pronounce a few keywords and phrases can be tricky. Written Korean is also unique, using a phonetic system called hangul.

Religion

Most South Koreans (56.1%) have no formal religious affiliation. However, Buddhism and Confucianism have been more influential than any other in Korean life, and over half of the country's listed cultural heritage is related to these two religions.

Location and size

Occupying the southern 45% of the Korean Peninsula in East Asia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea, covers 98,480 sq km, extending 642 km NNE–SSW and 436 km ESE–WNW. Bounded on the N by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), on the E by the Sea of Japan (known in Korea as the East Sea), on the S by the Korean Strait, and on the W by the Yellow Sea, the ROK has a total coastline of 2,413 km. A demilitarised zone (DMZ), 4,000 m wide, covering 1,262 sq km and located north and south of the 38th parallel, separates the ROK from the DPRK, which comprises the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

Over 3,000 islands, most of the southern and western coasts belonging to the ROK, add another 8,600 km of coastline.

Population

South Korea's current population is 51 300 000, giving it a population density of 527 per Km².

Internet coverage

Internet services are also widely available, particularly in town areas.

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About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.





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