Winter's End

A photo dump of my winter travels

Feb 18, 2021

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It doesn't feel the winter is over yet (it just snowed in Seoul again this week), but the spring semester starts next week and the temps are being above freezing, so I'm choosing to be optimistic and spend as much time outdoors as possible. Before I know it, I'm sure I'll be back in the classroom, so I'm trying to make the most of my time. A full of this video around the country, another lamp trip to Jeju, my graduate school orientation, and lots of studying to prepare for the challenges ahead!

To start things off, I had my graduate school orientation this month, unfortunately over zoom. Many students are living in other parts of the country until classes start, so a zoom orientation allowed for everybody to attend. It was a full day of introductions, talking about our interests and the political science curriculum here, some unique opportunities available to students (study abroad programs, internships, research etc.), it turns out that I'm the only foreigner in my department beside one fluent woman from Myanmar, so I was a bit nervous talking about myself in Korean. I was also nervous because I'm not sure what I'm actually interested in, I'm just here because I randomly ended up in a conference due to the topics (military security, US politics, etc.) and had to stay silent and on my toes to properly respond or react. There's still lots of political science vocabulary that is new to me, so I get my first taste of the challenges lying ahead. I also registered for my classes this upcoming semester, I'm taking the Korean political system, a seminar on international relations, and a research seminar (shouldn't add too much to my plate, I was going to just take the 2 core political science classes (in Korean) and the mandatory research ethics course, but there is a regional security class taught in English through another department that was too interesting to pass up, so I signed up for that one as well.

Zoom orientation

To practice my Korean while waiting for the semester to start, I've been continuing to attend small language exchange gatherings, and found one that is usually 70%+ Koreans which suits me well. Some of the larger more popular language exchanges have too many people and too many people speaking English, so I prefer to find a much more intimate and structured for natural conversations. We've also done extra activities together like hiking, archery, and of course restaurants and coffee shops!

Korean-English language exchange

Korean-English language exchange

This month also included lots of traveling around the region! While I still had some unscheduled time on my calendar, I decided to take a ferry trip to Japan. I mostly started an excuse to try the overnight ferry from Busan to Fukuoka, and a side benefit was that Fukuoka has incredible food.

Checking out the ferry from Busan to Fukuoka, Japan. Cabin costs vary, I chose a cheap option (pictured) and it was comfortable

Arrival in Fukuoka, Japan

A dinner for the price of a coffee, only at a Japan Yoshoku Group

Fukuoka Airport, one of the cheapest flights I found

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I did a lot of biking this month too! On warmer days, I biked around Seoul including up to the top of Namsan (pictured below), and I also knocked off two official bike trails this month to continue filling out my bike passport.

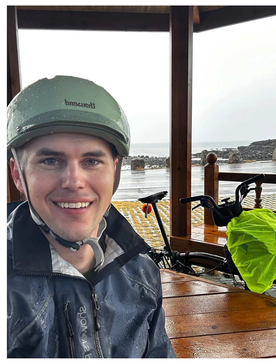
Biking around Namsan

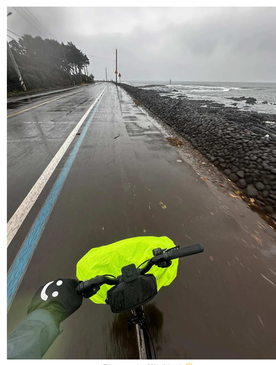
First, I did the Namgangi Bike trail in southeastern Korea. I hopped on a train with my little folding bike and cycled from Dongnae city to the port city of Mokpo. It rained nearly nonstop the entire trip but I was able to still have fun, eat some good food, and complete the trail.

Cycling the Namgangi Bike Trail

Mokpo, Korea

I passed several of these giant ancient lava domes. Jeju is an island formed by a volcano, so there are these huge imposing rock domes scattered around the main volcano.

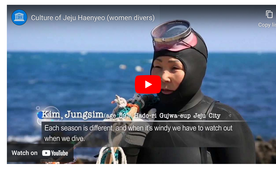




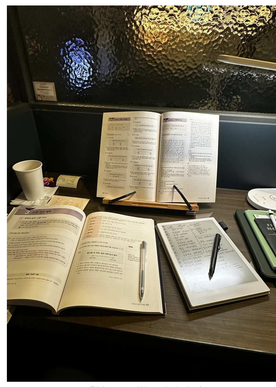
This was my view 90% of the trip 😅

The final stamp booth in Jeju city!

Jeju island was such an interesting place. I learned a lot about the history of the Jeju people and the Jeju language (제주어), which I previously thought was more like a Korean dialect. Turns out, it's generally classified as a separate and endangered language. Jeju Island is also known for its fishing industry. At night, I saw the iconic squid boats brightly lit with their massive lightbulbs that attract squid (Interesting New Yorker documentary linked here which shows what it's like to fish on a Chinese squid boat), and during the day, saw many of the famous 해녀 (Haenyeo) fearlessly diving for seafood in rough seas. Below is a short video talking about their unique diving culture if you're interested.



Besides all the cycling this month, I've of course been studying as well. Korea has "study cafes" dotted around and they make focused studying much easier. The one I usually go to has a big room of cubicles with no typing allowed (to limit distracting noises) and a break room area with coffee, tea, and small snacks. It comes out to roughly a dollar an hour to study there if you buy small blocks of time so it's much more economical than buying coffees at loud coffee shops to study. It's also weirdly motivating seeing these hardworking Korean students focused before I arrive and still there long after I leave...the study culture almost makes me want to study longer and harder!



This is my go-to cubicle at my local study cafe.

That's all for this month — I start classes on Monday and will have a full schedule until the summer break in June, but I'll send out an update in the meantime.

Until next time!