



Street food in Seoul; exotic, tasty and an almost endless choice

South Korea in gear

Often overshadowed by its bellicose northern neighbour, South Korea has everything a visitor could want. **Clive Nicholls** drives a top-of-the-range car to the demilitarised zone

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS



DINNER TONIGHT is a little different. I've got some of the finest Korean cuisine spread out before me and I'm just ordering my starter: grilled octopus legs.

The chef turns them over on hot coals a few times before dishing them up – in a paper bag. This isn't silver service, but the food is fresh and unbelievably tasty.

I'm on the street market in downtown Seoul and as I munch my way through the octopus legs, I contemplate the choice of mains. Stalls stretch out over hundreds of yards. Some dishes look a bit too exotic for me so I settle for spicy rice cakes, sweet potato sticks with some fired chicken thrown in. The taste is amazing and the ambience is pretty special, too.

I stop to eat and take in the scene before me. Neon flashing, food sizzling, beautiful aromas and everywhere people like me enjoying the nightlife in this so vibrant city – it's just a wonderful experience. If this is what South Korea has to offer, I like it.

After my culinary, and cultural, night out on the town, jet-lag kicks in and it's time for bed. I've got a big day tomorrow and I don't want to waste a minute of my Korean holiday.

I had planned an early start but am just running a bit behind schedule. The treat for today is that sitting in the hotel car park is a brand-new Kia Optima for me to drive up to the demilitarised zone with North Korea.

This is a posh hotel and the car park is full of limos and top-of-the-range models, but this beauty in pearlescent white looks as good as anything on the lot.

Firing up, it's time to take on the morning rush hour in Seoul. The early start was planned to try to beat the traffic but running that bit late means I'm in the thick of it. I had been warned that local drivers could be aggressive and didn't take prisoners, but I actually find it okay.

A truck driver left a little gap and gave me the nod so I slid the Optima in front of him. The traffic is heavy but



Clockwise starting from the far left: Clive with the Kia Optima at Imjingak; the DMZ – that's North Korea in the distance; ribbons tied to the border fence; the interior of the Optima; Clive driving out of Seoul



“Ribbons tied to the barbed wire fence not only remember those families split by the separation, but are also a symbol of hope for the future”

manageable: just keep your eyes open and watch out for the curve-ball. Mine came in the shape of a local on his moped.

Stacked high with fruit trays, his load would have been unstable in a truck – on the back of a moped it was positively lethal. He saw the smallest of gaps, switched on tunnel vision and went for

it – a sharp tap on the brakes from me and the truck driver and he lived to cause mayhem on another day.

The traffic eased as, after some miles, I reached the outskirts. Seoul is a very big city (more than ten million population) and it takes some time to get out of town. Finally I slid the Optima into sixth gear and cruised north. Here, the traffic police come in the shape of speed cameras, but at least they give you a countdown in the metres before you arrive at the camera. And, with the soft tones of the satnav

giving you dire warnings of the approaching camera, it's almost impossible to get caught out.

This car is loaded with gadgets. Switching on the cruise control, I tested out the sound system; I found a music station that sounded just like Radio 2 and settled in for the drive north. Driving was easy, Dolly Parton tapping it out through the Optima's sound system. The Hangang River on my left, flowing out to the Yellow Sea – this was a drive to remember.

All too soon I reached Imjingak – as far

as I could take my new friend, the Optima. From here, if I want to enter the demilitarised zone between South and North Korea, I have to take the official tour bus. The park at Imjingak was built in 1972. Many here hope for reunification with the North and ribbons tied to the barbed wire fence not only remember those families split by the separation, but are also a symbol of hope for the future.

The DMZ (demilitarised zone) is a bit of a contradiction for this is the most intensively militarised border in the world.

Warning triangles indicate minefields and soldiers from both sides monitor each other across the 2.5-mile wide zone.

First stop is tunnel No 3, the third of four tunnels discovered by the South so far. Built by the North in 1970, it's more than a mile long, 240ft deep and a bit over 6ft wide and high. It's thought that if the North had planned to invade the South, they could have moved 30,000 soldiers through this tunnel within an hour.

A defector passed information to the South about the tunnel and it was



Clockwise: The beautiful gardens at Bulguksa Temple; Korea's KTX train at the station at Gwangmyeong; hand work on the grass at Bulguksa Temple; the burial mounds at Cheonmachong



been a good day. Korea is packed with history and next morning I take the Bullet train (KTX Korea Train Express) cross-country to Gyeongju, 230 miles south-east of Seoul. At one time (57BC to AD935) capital of the Kingdom of Silla, Gyeongju and the surrounding area hosts historic temples and graveyards of the kings from the fifth and sixth centuries.

The graveyard, which was the final resting place for 155 kings, queens and noblemen, together with its associated pond, were restored in the Seventies.

There is some evidence that the Japanese, during their occupation between 1910 and 1945, plundered some of the sites in the name of research, but still the graveyard makes an interesting visit and you can go inside one of the tombs and see replicas of artifacts found there.

The original Bulguksa Temple took more than 20 years to build and was completed in 774. Unfortunately little remains of the original structures, but what we see today is a working Buddhist temple that has been fully restored over centuries on original foundations and based on evidence uncovered during excavations.

The four giant, brightly painted figures at the entrance are the guardians of the temple – they are spectacular and, in all, there are seven National Treasures of Korea on this site, including the original Buddha. It's a fascinating place; it's a World Heritage Site and even on a wet day in September it was bustling with

discovered in 1978 after drilling boreholes and filling them with water. The North claimed it was a coal mine and had painted the walls with coal dust as part of the deception but it is clear that its purpose was either for clandestine raids or full-on invasion. Hard hat on, I went down into the tunnel. It's brilliant that the South have opened it up to tourists as it's a fascinating insight into the conflict that, even today, can best be described as edgy.

I'm 6ft tall and in several places my hard hat scraped against the roof of the

tunnel – North Korean soldiers must be a bit shorter! You obviously can't go all the way through as the South have taken it out of commission by blocking it off in the middle. Returning to the surface, you can't help but wonder how many other tunnels there are still to be discovered...

Then it was back on the bus to the Dora Observation Post. Here you get the same view as the soldiers as you scan the North Korean side through binoculars. I didn't see anyone staring back at me but it's a strange feeling knowing that they

probably were. Nearby, Dorasan Railway Station inspires hope of reunification. It was here that President George W Bush spoke of the United States' wish for that reunification on his visit to the station in 2002: "South Korea has become a beacon of freedom, showing to the world the power of human liberty to bring down walls and uplift lives. Today, across the mines and barbed wire, that light shines brighter than ever. It shines not as a threat to the North, but an invitation." Powerful stuff – he probably had a speechwriter

knock out the words for him, but I'm sure the sentiment was heartfelt: good on him.

Back on the bus to the checkpoint, get counted back in, and pick up my car again. I'm looking forward to this; I want to give the Optima a bit of exercise on open roads before we do battle with the evening rush hour in Seoul. The engine is a 1.7-litre turbo diesel which, despite its lack of thirst (combined mpg of 57.6), is pretty lively and we have some fun before I mix it with the evening traffic on the outskirts of Seoul. No one takes any

prisoners here; gaps are closer than we are used to in the UK, motorbikes seem to take ridiculous risks, but as long as you keep calm, it's safe enough and actually quite enjoyable.

Dolly Parton has given way to The Beatles as the sound system keeps me company over the last mile or two before pulling into the hotel car park. Sadly, I have to hand back the keys to the man from Kia. I've enjoyed the car, I've enjoyed the open roads and I've enjoyed the cut and thrust of rush-hour Seoul – it's

visitors from Korean schools and tourists from all over the world.

It was wet at Bulguksa but on my visit to the nearby Seokguram Grotto I got a real soaking. The walk was about 20 minutes from where the coach dropped me off. I was offered a poncho but, as it was only drizzling and I was stupid, I declined.

As I approached the grotto, the heavens opened – and I mean really opened. This was torrential, monsoon-type rain, and as I entered the grotto (which was undergoing restoration) I was embarrassed by the pool of water at my feet. I quickly paid my respects, admired the historic Buddha and made a rapid exit back on to Mount Tohamsan and braved the storm. I couldn't get any wetter so it really didn't matter, but 20 minutes later when I reached the coach, the look on the driver's face suggested he didn't really want me back on his bus. He soon realised that everyone getting back on board was soaked through and took it on the chin.

I've enjoyed my historical break over on the east coast, but for now it's back to the bullet train for the return trip to Seoul. It's a bit like our Eurostar: it doesn't hang about. As we flashed through the countryside I spotted ginseng growing in the fields alongside the railway. Korean ginseng is one of the top-selling herbs worldwide and you can see why the farmers lavish so much care on their crop.

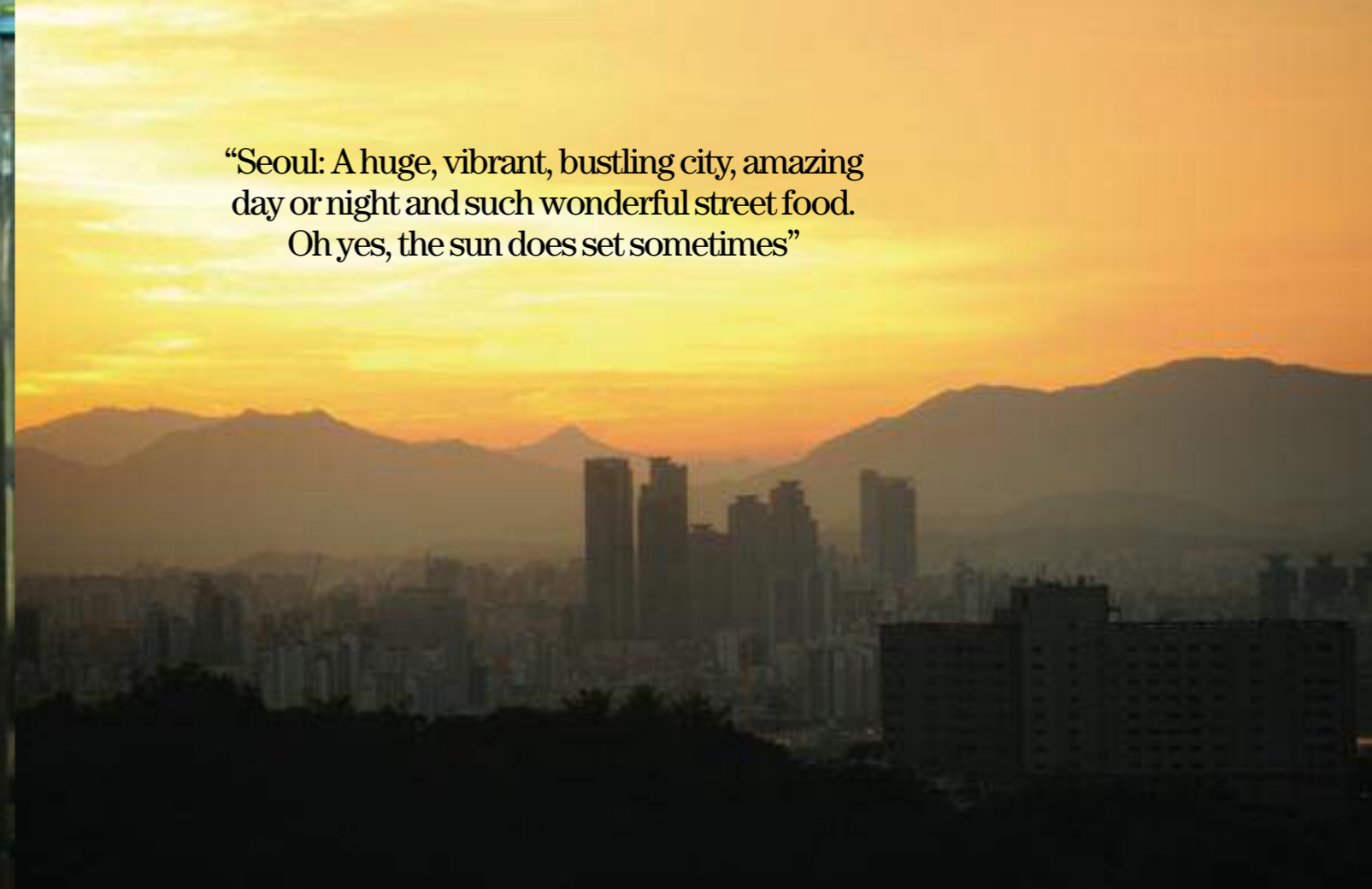
The train hit the outskirts of Seoul long before we arrived at the station – it's a really big city and running through the outlying townships is a tourist treat in itself.

Tomorrow I've got a special day – a visit to the Research and Development site for Hyundai-Kia. Setting out from Seoul on Highway 1 to the R&D facility is exciting. The road itself has its own story. Stretching 260 miles from Seoul to the country's second city, Busan, it must set records in construction. Including all the preparation work, the start to fully opened time was just two years five months, but the actual construction time for the 260 miles was just 290 days.

In total nine million workers were involved in the project and when you think this was built in the late Sixties, the commitment is nothing short of amazing. The next time you are stuck in roadworks



The wonderful granite Buddha at Seokguram; sundown in beautiful Seoul; Guardians, Buddha and temple at Bulguksa



“Seoul: A huge, vibrant, bustling city, amazing day or night and such wonderful street food. Oh yes, the sun does set sometimes”



on the M1 with no visible sign of work going on, think about what should be possible.

Impressed as I was with Korea's road-building skills, it wasn't long before we turned off and reached the gatehouse of Hyundai-Kia. I had to hand in my cameras and mobile phone, for this is a top-secret facility.

First to their museum, showcasing their cars over the past 40 years – I'd forgotten just how ugly the original 1974 Hyundai Pony was; launched at the Turin Motor Show, this was a real dog. Thinking back,

however, so was the Austin Allegro! The difference is that Hyundai-Kia has invested and made dramatic progress – British Leyland has sunk into oblivion.

The test facility here is vast, with a 70km (44-mile) proving ground. It's a strange experience seeing cars driving by wrapped in camouflage covers, driverless cars on the test tracks with no one at the wheel, and cars whizzing past on the banked circuit at vast speeds.

Apparently there are five or six accidents a year as test cars are pushed way beyond

the normal limits. There's a climate chamber where cars are tested for the country they'll be driven in, wind tunnels, dust tunnels, a microwave dome, and in the crash test facility they write off more than 700 cars a year. On the site there are 7000 Hyundai and Kia models under test and 700 cars from competitors being evaluated – this is a big operation.

As with all car companies, recycling is becoming important. At the moment 85 per cent of scrap cars are recyclable, Kia's target is 95 per cent. It has a unit where it

can reduce ex-test cars to component parts in less than two hours. I got to press the button that fired off all the airbags on a Kia Forte before the engineers reduced it to a pile of bits.

The whole facility was so impressive, which probably explains why the company has developed into one of the world's leading manufacturers and the likes of British Leyland have just become part of motoring history.

I did get to have dinner with Thomas Oh, senior vice-president and chief

operating officer of Kia's International Division – he taught me the right way to tackle a Korean banquet: what to eat with your fingers, what to take on with chopsticks.

For me it's back to Seoul to soak up the atmosphere. I had spotted an LP bar the other night and wanted to check it out... walls lined with vinyl LPs, drinks at reasonable prices. You are given Post-it notes to request tracks for the bar to play. Within seconds they'd got Aretha Franklin's *I Say a Little Prayer* on the



Seoul by day, below: shopping is a different experience



turntable for me. My second request took a bit longer but, sure enough, within about ten minutes *Here Comes the Night* by Them (from 1965) was filling the room.

I'm not sure the local Koreans totally got it, but they were tapping the tables and gave me the thumbs-up so I guess it went down okay.

I was impressed with South Korea, impressed with Kia and loved Seoul. I know that, for many, reunification with the North is their hope for the future. Maybe it will happen some time, but it's not around the corner. I'd say, don't worry; as I see it, you've got it all.

Passport to South Korea

Getting there

- Direct non-stop flights from London Heathrow to Incheon International Airport. Seoul takes around 11 hours and flights are available from Korean Air (www.koreanair.com). Economy flights are from £722

- Travelling from Seoul to the old capital city of Gyeongju takes around three hours by the high-speed KTX train (www.letskorail.com)

- Imjingak (Nuri Peace Park), where you can begin an official tour of South Korea's de-militarised zone, is approximately 45 minutes by car from Seoul, with easy driving on excellent motorways.

Where to stay

- Grand Hyatt Hotel Seoul (<http://seoul.grand.hyatt.com>). The food is excellent and the Korean BBQ dining outside by the hilltop

pool is a particular highlight.

- Ragung Millennium Palace Resort & Spa (www.smpark.co.kr/eng/rakkung/rakkung01.asp). A one-of-a-kind luxury hotel designed in a traditional Korean style. The hotel consists of 16 interlocking houses, each with their own outdoor hot spring positioned in an inner court.

Cars driven

- Kia Optima Kia's mid-size saloon is available with an efficient 1.7-litre diesel engine, offering 57.6 mpg for the manual and 47.1mpg for the automatic transmission. Priced from £19,595 on-the-road. The Kia Optima is available in three trim grades

Find out more

- Kia Motors Ltd (www.kia.co.uk)
- Official Korea Tourism Organisation (www.english.visitkorea.or.kr)
- DMZ (<http://dmz.gg.go.kr/eng>)