

Old Seoul

A new non-stop flight to Seoul makes the South Korean capital more accessible than ever, finds Nick Boulos

Sleek and shiny. Polished yet powerful. The skyline of the South Korean capital appears, at first glance, to symbolise everything this city has come to represent. Recent years have seen an explosion in all things 'K', from tech to beauty to pop – but scratch beneath the surface and it's clear the foundations of South Korea's moment in the sun are rooted in its past, both recent and ancient.

With Virgin Atlantic's new daily London-Seoul link, which launched on March 29, there has never been a better time to explore the history that lies behind this city's shiny facade.

DRESS TO IMPRESS

Star of the show is Gyeongbokgung Palace, built in 1395 and the largest of the five grand residences left by

the Joseon Dynasty. Although little of what stands today is original – it was mostly destroyed by the Japanese in the 16th century – the palace remains an impressive sight and also offers a glimpse of one of Seoul's most curious spectacles: the art of *hanbok*.

Strolling among the lotus ponds, throne halls and surprisingly colourful wooden shrines are countless people in period costume. Such behaviour might be met with disdain and possibly even offence in other destinations, but in South Korea, where grace, respect and national pride rule supreme, it's positively encouraged. In fact, it's an entire industry. Widely available from *hanbok* rental shops near the palace, the practice of hiring out the eye-catching garments is designed to bring guests closer to Korean culture – with fun photo opportunities too. ➤

Gyeongbokgung Palace

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Kompon



MONDRIAN
SEOUL ITAEWON

True to its brand, the Mondrian is one of Seoul's most designed hotels. The 295-room property in the hillside district of Itaewon offers a more contemporary design than most of the city's other five-star addresses. Think bold colours, a maximalist aesthetic and large art installations under soaring ceilings in the public spaces, with a more reserved style in the rooms. But it's not all top marks: the elevators are frustratingly slow, a sore point for a high-rise hotel and something to be addressed as the city's luxury scene continues to grow, with a new Rosewood opening its doors next year and Mandarin Oriental following in 2030. Doubles from £150 per night. mondrianhotels.com/seoul-itaewon



GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic flies daily from Heathrow to Seoul Incheon year-round, on a B787-9 Dreamliner, with return fares from £849 in Economy, £1,399 in Premium and £3,239 in Upper Class. virginatlantic.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Friends gather in a teahouse; the Gangnam neighbourhood; rooftops of Bukchon village; Virgin Atlantic celebrates launch of London-Seoul service

PICTURES: Virgin Atlantic/Adam Gerrard; Shutterstock/PatChon_HK; Flying Camera; sayan uranan

A stone's throw away is Bukchon, a historic neighbourhood where quaint *hanok* houses hark back to a time before Seoul was transformed into a skyscraper-filled metropolis. More recently, Bukchon was a filming location for movie blockbuster *KPop Demon Hunters*, attracting a fresh wave of admirers to the narrow alleys that remain home to a thriving community.

In a bid to curb disruption, a strict curfew is in place (no visitors after 5pm) and the district is policed by sign-wielding 'guardians' who ask people to talk quietly – something clients might also find on trains and in other public places across this exceptionally polite nation.

When the throngs get too much, make a beeline for Cha Teul, a quaint, century-old teahouse, for a cup of traditional *ssanghwa-tang* herbal tea – slightly bitter and brewed from 12 medicinal ingredients – alongside a piece of steamed pumpkin rice cake.

CULTURE TRIPS

Back in the 21st century, the impact and influence of South Korean culture is not to be underestimated. Beyond the stratospheric success of boyband BTS, who kicked off a world tour in Seoul in March after the band members took a break to do military service, the list is ever-growing. Think Netflix hit *Squid Game*, girl group Blackpink, 2020 Oscars best picture *Parasite* and *KPop Demon Hunters*, which also picked up two Academy Awards at this year's ceremony. And no trip to Seoul would be complete without a visit to Gangnam, the neighbourhood catapulted to fame in 2012 with the

release of Psy's toe-tapping hit *Gangnam Style* (don't pretend you don't know the dance moves!).

Set on the southern banks of the Han River and once little more than farmland and scattered villages, Seoul's explosive growth in the 1970s transformed its rice paddies into a thriving hub of wealth and ambition that reflected modern Korean identity. Yet Gangnam is more than gloss and glitz. Within minutes of the modern design masterclass that is Starfield Library, where floor-to-ceiling shelves carry the literary weight of 70,000 books, sits 1,200-year-old Bongeunsa Temple, a shrine of stillness and reflection.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

But nowhere invites reflection as much as the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), 30 miles north of the capital. A visit to this heavily guarded stretch of land between South Korea and the dictator-led north lays bare the disparities of life on the Korean peninsula. Access to the 2.5-mile-wide no man's land is, as you would expect, tightly controlled and open only to pre-approved tour groups – but it's worth planning ahead for the chance to stand on an elevated viewing platform with powerful telescopes all pointed towards the world's most secretive state.

Staring deeply through the lens at grainy scenes of impoverished farmers tending their land and the dwellings of the nearby border town raises all manner of complex questions about the world, its future and our own place within it. And if that moment of insight isn't the greatest gift that travel can bestow, then what is? **TW**