

48 hours in Seoul

The South Korean capital is famous for its diverse culinary scene. **Tamara Hinson** gets a flavour for the tastiest spots

From a cook-your-own barbecue to stirring up a sizzling *bibimbap*, Korea has some of the world's best and most interesting cuisines. *Kimchi* even has Intangible Cultural Heritage status, with 2023 marking 10 years since the making and sharing of the spicy fermented cabbage dish was deemed worthy of Unesco's list. Seoul is, of course, one of the best places to get a taste of Korea's finest eats – with thriving street food markets and a restaurant scene that runs the gamut from traditional to hip. And entry to South Korea is now easier, with the country lifting its e-visa requirements for travellers from 22 countries, including the UK, until the end of 2024. So now's the time for a trip to indulge in some Seoul food. ➤



PICTURE: Shutterstock/Fimstock



DESTINATIONS

HOTELS

L7 Myeongdong by Lotte is centrally located with simple yet trendy rooms. Prices from £78 per night, room-only. lottehotel.com

Jasun Palace Seoul in Gangnam is part of Marriott's Luxury Collection and features classic-meets-modern decor – and a pool. From £240 per night, B&B. marriott.com

Inspired by traditional Korean palace architecture, **Fairmont Ambassador Seoul** in Yeouido fits the bill for a plush stay. From £271 per night, B&B. fairmont.com/seoul

FROM FAR LEFT: Tteokguk, a traditional broth; a daigona lolly; Osulloc Tea House; meat at a hotpot restaurant; banana confectionery; Gwangjang Market; selling street food; Charles H bar

PICTURES: Tamara Hinson

DAY ONE

09.00: Get your bearings (and a caffeine fix) at the beautiful Osulloc Tea House in the Jongno-gu neighbourhood in central Seoul. Visitors select their brew by looking at tasting note cards displayed at the counter, and tea is served with a timer to ensure optimum brewing periods. Try the Moon Walk tea, which has notes of Korean pear and honey, or one of the delicious tea cocktails. Feeling hungry? Treat yourself to some green tea-drizzled waffles before browsing the boutique downstairs – the most-sought after items include green tea-infused soaps.

11.00: South Koreans might not exist solely on kimchi, but it is a key staple, and one you can learn more about at the Museum Kimchikan. Visitors can taste different types and sign up for kimchi cookery classes, too. The museum is just a short walk from Bukchon Hanok Village – an area filled with beautiful traditional Korean houses known as hanok. And pounding the narrow, steep

streets is a great way to offset any food-related excesses.

14.00: Jongno-gu is also home to the National Palace Museum of Korea. Its most fascinating galleries explore traditions relating to events such as weddings and births, and several cover food. For example, you will learn that *injeolmi* (rice cakes) made with red beans are given as housewarming presents due to the colour red's associations with protection.

16.00: A hike to the top of the N Seoul Tower, on the city's Namsan Mountain, isn't just a fantastic opportunity to soak up 360° degree views – if you ditch the funicular and hike to the top, there are plenty of opportunities to refuel. The most popular snacks sold along the route include *daigona* – honeycomb lollies with symbols carved into the surface – which had a starring role in the hit TV show *Squid Game*.

19.00: A growing number of chefs are putting contemporary

stamps on South Korean cuisine. A brilliant example is the Fairmont Ambassador Seoul's Mariposa restaurant, where executive sous chef Andre Lee adds a European twist to classic Korean dishes. There's a focus on local ingredients – the fish, for example, comes from Noryangjin Fish Market. Highlights of the tasting menu include pan-seared lobster with coriander sauce and sea urchin, and Hanwoo Korean beef with morel mushrooms.

21.00: For a nightcap, head to the Four Seasons Hotel Seoul's speakeasy-style Charles H bar, which recently bagged seventh spot on the Asia's 50 Best Bars list. The hotel is in the downtown district of Gwanghwamun and this subterranean bar's signature drinks include the Far Eastern Gimlet, a gin-based concoction made with lime blossom tea.

DAY TWO

09.00: Like Tokyo, Seoul has no shortage of *kawaii* (the culture of cuteness), much of which can be found in Hongdae, a

neighbourhood similar to Tokyo's Harajuku area. Wander around this rainbow-hued neighbourhood and you'll find everything from cat cafes and video game-themed bars to K-beauty stores and selfie shops (unmanned kiosks where visitors can snap selfies with all manner of props). It's also the location for various themed restaurants and food-themed pop-ups (such as the AK& mall's recent Cinnamoroll Sweet Café, a sickly-sweet tribute to Sanrio's floppy-eared bunny).

10.00: The AK& mall is near the northern end of the 6.3km Gyeongui Line Forest Park, a walking path in the footprint of the former Gyeongui Line railway. It has plenty of picnic areas, sculptures and cafes, and once you've walked up an appetite, there are many spots at which you can grab some street food for an alfresco mid-morning snack. Short on time? Opt for the northern half – this is where you'll find a section known as Gyeongui Line Book Street, where bookstores are squeezed into former train carriages.

13.00: Gwangjang Market is a brilliant location for sampling street food. You'll see everything from enormous, freshly caught octopus and slabs of seaweed to fishcake skewers and doughnuts made with red bean paste. Specialities include mung bean pancakes and *kimbap* – seaweed (*kim*) wrapped around rice (*bap*). Keep an eye out for the sprightly Korean lady whose stall has a huge photograph showing her feeding Gordon Ramsay one of her *kimbaps* – she loves nothing more than recreating the photo with hungry visitors.

15.00: South Koreans adore coffee, and one of the best spots to pause for caffeine is Cheonggyecheon. This 10.9-kilometre river and urban renewal project transformed a stream that has flowed through the area since the Joseon Dynasty. There are paths either side of this greenery-lined waterway, which twists past Seoul's tallest skyscrapers, and plenty of benches where you can watch herons pluck fish from the water. The route can easily be broken down into

smaller sections – it passes under 22 bridges, with stepping stone crossing points that make it easy to hop from one side to the other.

17.00: Wander around the hillside Bongeunsa Temple, which dates back to 794. It's surrounded by smaller monuments and halls, many adorned with beautiful woodblock carvings. It's a wonderfully tranquil spot, despite its location opposite the sprawling Starfield COEX mall, which is also worth a visit, if only because it's home to the stunning Starfield Library. Here, 13-metre-tall shelves curving around a sculpture-filled two-storey atrium are loaded with more than 50,000 books. The library is filled with art installations and there are plenty of spots to grab a bite to eat, including the Billy Angel Cake Company: try the cakes created with layer upon layer of stacked crêpes.

19.00: For pre-dinner drinks head to Gangnam, a neighbourhood made famous by South Korean rapper PSY. The area is famous for its K-beauty stores and nightlife, as well as the larger-than-life

'Gangnam Style' sculpture next to the metro station. Huge crossed bronze hands depict the dance move: strike your best Gangnam Style pose beneath.

20.00: Hongdae has some brilliant bars, although it's also famous for its barbecue restaurants, where custom-made tables have built-in barbecue grills. Staff will bring over platters of raw meat that you'll then cook to perfection. Afterwards, head to one of the neighbourhood's bars, but be prepared to do some detective work – many are hidden away on upper floors of the area's mixed-use buildings. Make sure that you take the time to soak up the energy of Eoulmadang Street, where wannabe K-Pop stars perform energetic dance routines for the public. **TW**

BOOK IT

InsideAsia's eight-day South Korean Highlights trip costs from £2,384 (excluding international flights), including four nights in Seoul. insideasiatours.com

ASK THE expert

"One of the greatest things about a trip to Korea – and Seoul in particular – is the food. Take a private street-food tour sampling *hotteok* pancakes at Gwangjang market, spicy *tteokbokki* rice cakes at Namdaemun Market and fresh seafood at Noryangjin Market. For a little light exercise, stroll along sections of the Hanyangdoseong city walls, which date back to the 14th century and stretch for almost 19 kilometres."

Rebecca Barry, South Korean product executive, InsideAsia

