I much enjoyed visiting Korea: people are very helpful and there's lots to see and do. It is easy and safe to walk around and explore. It also has a very handy subway. People don't speak much English, and getting busses outside Seoul is very difficult but fun. The food was fantastic!

Seoul, with 10 million inhabitants, has hundreds of high-rise apartments (though buildings are hard to find) and many lack air-conditioning, so people spend evenings out, e.g. sitting on the Namsan Mtn overlooking the city, picknicking along the Hangang river, and taking the elevator to the 59th floor of Building 63.

There are mountains to climb in the national parks, e.g. Bukhansan in the north of Seoul, and in general trees are very much part of the city.
Seoul has at least two faces. There are the big streets with four lanes of traffic going in either direction and lined with concrete high-rises and the narrow alleys with electricity poles and motorbikes that make deliveries of produce, eggs, and other things. Some of the main streets have shops on street-level that can be closed by what look like garage doors, and hence a street can change from very colorful to grey quickly. The lonely planetguide (2007: 79) says “[a]rt, urban panache and public amenities are on a par with what you’d expect in an iron-ore-mining community […] but there are pockets of world-class quality”. There is no graffiti and the streets are very clean; the subways have some homeless but I don’t know much about the facilities for them.

The reason for my going was to attend a conference (the Korean Generative Grammar Circle's SICOOGG 10; see above banner) but also to get a sense for a country where many of our students at ASU come from (or used to come from). I met up with three of my former students, and that was great. One of them, I hadn't seen in almost 12 years. Two of the three are single and that's hard in Korea. There is enormous pressure from family and friends and unmarried women have to be 'taken care of', even though they have successful careers. One of my current students had just gotten married and came back to the US quickly, not wanting to spend weeks in her in-law's house. The birthrate is low, partly because childcare etc. is so expensive.

There is no risk yet, as in Norway or The Netherlands, that English is taking over in certain sectors. Apart from people working in English departments, few people speak English fluently. Taxi drivers typically don't speak any but better hotels have basic English. The Korean writing system (Hangul) is relatively easy so that makes it a little easier to decipher e.g. where to stand in line for a bus to Seoul. The letters are arranged by syllable but it is alphabetic so each sound has its own shape: the upside down v is an s-sound followed by a vowel with the next syllable starting with a dummy circle, because that syllable starts with a vowel, then the vowel which is t-like and then the l-sound which looks s-like.

<table>
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<th>서 울</th>
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There is a TV-station for 'foreigners', arirang, and that's wonderful. It gives great news analysis (e.g. on the Japanese imperialistic statement saying that the islands of Dokdo are part of Japan) but also cultural program (e.g. a documentary on the last maker of the traditional hat, the ghat, and of the bamboo shades). I bought the beautiful mosi, a type of linen, some wooden masks, and lots of ceramics. There is still a lot of distrust of Japan. In the early part of the 20th century, Japan
annexed Korea and tried to replace Korean by Japanese, etc. Just as a reminder, I put a map in with the approximate position of the disputed islands. Fishing rights and oil are at stake.

Crosses can be seen everywhere, though the population is officially half Buddhist. Buddhism is more prevalent in the countryside. Catholicism was here early on 18th century, and came to be associated with village life, while Protestantism (called ‘Christian’ in Korea) was seen as modern. It started by building hospitals and schools in the late 19th century.

Animism has pervaded Buddhism: people pray and give money to temples to get their sons in to the best colleges etc. I loved the totem poles that used to stand at the outskirts of a village to protect it: lovely faces in the poles. There were also stone poles (generally smaller) of figures that were supposed to talk to the dead. There is a lot on the internet, e.g. a blog on the Jangseung from which I have taken the picture below. A visit to the Folk Museum had made me aware of this custom, very thought-provoking carvings.

In addition to Seoul, I went to the Icheon Ceramic Village with a colleague who was there for another conference. It was fun and had amazing pottery but not your idyllic country village. I also shopped in a market with a Korean family and we got delicious tea and saw amazing ginger roots.
Finally, there was a theatre production of actors cooking and throwing and cutting. There is a [youtube of ‘Cookin Nanta’](#) with as much sound and color and excitement as I remember.

I would love to go back: great food (not shown above) and just many hidden gems and I am sure a lot of change!