
Summer 2024 Korea University International Summer Campus

“SEOUL, MY SOUL”

Journaling my Learning Abroad Experience in South Korea



Who am I, and why did I choose to study at Korea University?

My name is Hoan My Thanh Le, and I am a Vietnamese American 2nd-year college student majoring in business at the University of Houston in the United States. Learning abroad has been my dream since young when I was first introduced to the concept in my second year of high school in 2019, and five years later, *I finally turned my dream into a reality.*

Here I am, studying Artificial Intelligence for six weeks in Summer of 2024 as an international student at Korea University International Summer Campus (KU ISC).

...But how did I end up in Korea? („°□°) !!

While researching where I wanted to study, there were many countries I considered. My choices included: South Korea, Japan, France, China, Italy, Singapore, Canada, and Thailand. Making a decision was not easy, but my home university advisor helped me make an *informed* decision by taking the following factors into consideration: Safety, finances, academic reputation, culture, lifestyle, and other personal preferences. In the end, I chose Korea University in Seoul, South Korea for one main reason: *I wanted to experience culture and language in a society that is significantly different from the United States* (and prices are cheaper). Although I had a general idea of what to expect, my initial limited scope and knowledge about South Korea’s culture, language, and society changed drastically as I continued to explore and live here for the duration of my stay.



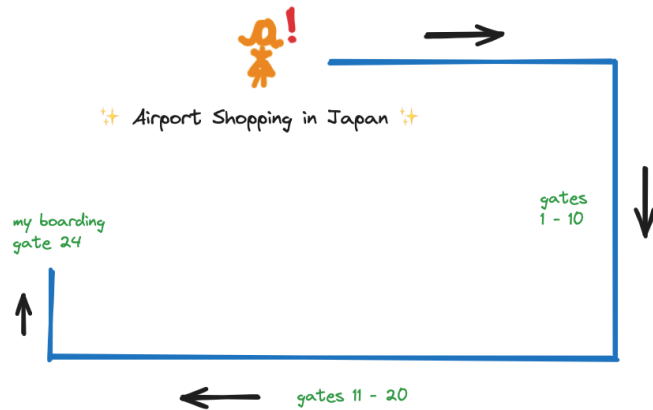
As someone who had never traveled outside of her home country before, taking an opportunity to learn abroad truly widened my view and understanding of the world. A multitude of my friends and family members questioned my ambitions or advised against it, suggesting that staying in Houston—home to over 2 million people, abundant food spots, and many networking opportunities—was a safer and more cost-efficient choice or urged me to finish my studies before venturing abroad alone. However, my desire to discover myself and explore the possibilities of what I would do when faced with the challenge of being placed in the unknown outweighed their concerns, starting with my flight there.

Flying from Houston, TX to Seoul, KR

During my 16-hour 32-minute journey from Houston to Seoul (excluding layovers), with a brief stop in Tokyo, I *almost* missed my connecting flight to Korea...

Upon arriving in Tokyo’s airport at 3:20 PM with two hours to spare until my next flight at 5:40 PM, I found myself captivated by the myriad of interesting shops to explore, and lost in the allure of all the little gimmicks and cute accessories, I paid no heed to the announcements that seemed

to struggle pronouncing my name. "...Le" was the only part I could make out from the static-like sound of the speakers, a common name amongst Vietnamese, Chinese, and Koreans. My name was called at least three more times before I realized they were paging me.

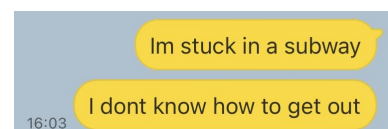


Unsure of what to do, I hurried towards the nearest flight attendant and identified myself as the person they were calling, and she informed me that my flight was about to depart soon. Suddenly, another flight attendant appeared, and together, we sprinted towards my boarding gate at the very end of the hall at lightning speed, one

carrying my backpack while the other holding my boarding ticket and passport. I was tired and out of breath, but I was immensely grateful to the two flight attendants who helped and encouraged me to keep running. Confused, I looked at my flight ticket from Japan to Korea again; it was written in military time. It read 15:40, *not* 5:40... $\zeta(\cdot\pi\wedge\pi)\delta$ The time difference between Houston and Seoul is 14 hours. I contacted my family and friends to tell them that I reached my destination safely with no troubles!

Living Day to Day Life as a KU ISC Student

Very quickly, I learned what my advisor meant when she told me I would encounter a large “culture shock” if I traveled to Korea. In comparison to Houston’s heavy traffic jams, restaurant mannerisms, and behavior in society, Seoul was a walkable city with an amazing interconnected network of public transportation lines and conveniently close restaurants and cafes (with different businesses operating on each floor of the building); interestingly, the people here seemed to have a personality switch depending on the location – Koreans act independent and quiet in subways and buses but become loud and boisterous when they are with their good friends. And like every other first-time traveler, I got lost in the subway system and found myself stranded at Samgakji Station (with 2% phone battery left)!



Thankfully, Seoul is accustomed to having many tourists and foreigners visit and offers many machine settings in English, but as you travel to different cities, it can get more and more difficult. It is important to note that not everyone here can speak English, so although my



collection of Korean words and phrases is brief and not enough to get around as efficiently as I would have liked it to be, I have found it especially useful when I want to go to new restaurants. I would not recommend coming to Korea if you only know how to say “안녕하세요”...

The only place where you do not need to know any Korean is in class (unless you’re taking a Korean language course)!! Personally, I decided to only take one course in order to have more flexibility for travels and due to other personal commitments back home, but all KU ISC courses are taught in English, and you can choose to take up to three classes during the program. My first week in class was nothing out of the ordinary; in fact, it was hard not to fall asleep in the middle of class time because of how quiet the classroom is and how tired I was walking around and exploring each day, but your life is what you make of it.

You can't add days to your life, but you can add life to your days. So that's exactly what I did. 31 2□2) ✧

I came to class 30 minutes early to sketch a portrait of my professor on his whiteboard and turned it into the liveliest day our class has ever experienced.



Being a student and sitting in class isn't hard. Being an interactive, involved, and animated student who asks questions and actively tries to learn is harder. Traveling alone and making friends at KU ISC was especially difficult for me, as many people quickly started their own small groups or had already traveled from their home university with their own friends, but fortunately, I signed up for KU's Buddy Program and several cultural activities, which were made to help

international students form friendships with one another and become familiar with Korea's customs and culture. I don't know about you, but I love eating and trying lots of new dishes!!



My favorite event among the four KU ISC cultural activities I participated in – going to Lotte World, ice skating, watching a baseball game, and touring Changdeokgung Palace – was ice skating at KU Ice Skating Rink.

Don't make excuses for yourself not to go! Even though I did not know how to ice skate, it was fun to learn, fall down, and get back up on my feet again (and I left with new friends to hang out with)!! (˘ ˘ ˘)>



There is not a single boring moment at KU ISC if you show up and get involved in the activities and programs they have to offer. I went to the baseball game with the same girls I met at the ice skating social and we made more friends along the way.

I am extremely grateful to all the new people I've met (and will continue to meet) during my stay and last two weeks here. Wherever we start our journey, whether that be at the airport, in class, studying at a cafe, while eating, at a cultural activity, or at a photobooth, I hope we never forget the cultural exchanges we've made and the memories and the good times we've had with each other!



Day & Night Life in Seoul: Side Quests and Solitary Adventures

While traveling with a group has its charms, embarking on a solo journey was just as rewarding. With the freedom to explore at my own pace without any constraints on time or place, I enjoyed immersing myself in the vibrant city life of Seoul, always bustling with energy day and night.



There were many times when I struggled and missed my friends and family back at home, but my biggest takeaway from this journey is: *Live your life with no regrets, and make the most of your time here.* Six weeks feels like a long time right now, but it will be over before you know it. Chances like this may only happen once in a lifetime.

Learning abroad expands your horizons, and it's an opportunity to learn about the world that you've never learned about before in the classroom back at home.



Because of the Internet, we have access to learn about almost everything there is to know about every part of the world, but these are experiences you really have to see for yourself. What is the meaning of “*Seoul, My Soul*”? Come to Korea with me and find out! (눈 - ㅈ - ㅈ - ㅈ) + ° ♡

Special shout-out to everyone who helped make my dream possible! For future foreigners and international students, below is a list of general need-to-knows for traveling in Seoul and living in KU ISC dorms.

Tips for US Citizens Traveling in Seoul

- Many places (especially tourist areas) accommodate for English speakers, but not everyone can speak English; learn some useful Korean phrases and download Papago (most well-known Korean → English app) to aid in translation and/or to read food menus
- Download and learn how to use NAVER Map (or Kakao Map), KakaoTalk, and Kakao T
- Watch YouTube videos about how to use the subways in South Korea
- Buy a T-Money transportation card and carry it with you everywhere you go; the Climate Card is also available for tourists who like to travel by subway/bus/bike a lot
- The restroom stalls appear dark but the light turns on if you close the door once you're inside of the stall
- Most places have glass doors with auto-push buttons that you need to press in order for the door to open
- Expect it to be silent in subways (since talking loudly and eating in subways is considered rude)
- Do NOT sit on any pink seats in subways; they are reserved for pregnant people (but it is not a crime to sit there...)
- If you're legally allowed to drink, someone else usually pours the drink for you
- Pack larger values of cash; a \$100 USD bill will often yield a higher exchange rate compared to a \$20 USD bill, and smaller bills may generally not be as widely accepted
- If you plan to buy a lot to take back home, pack all of your items inside your carry-on suitcase and then put it inside of your checked bag :)
- South Korea has a lot of CCTV cameras, so you rarely have to worry about theft
- Most food places, especially Korean restaurants, only have spoons and chopsticks!
- Some restaurants have barrel chairs where the top part of your chair is detachable and there is a hollow space under the chair for you to put your bag/purse in
- Some restaurants have call buttons, so if you need to talk to the waiter, you can press the button instead of raising your hand



- Some restaurants are traditional but others also operate digitally (so you can place and pay for your order from a screen)

Tips for KU ISC Students Living in the Dorms

- Make sure to attend the Welcome Ceremony to collect free KU ISC merch (like notebooks and stickers)!!
- Memorize your Student ID for quick and easy access to your course portal on Blackboard
- The Frontier House (student dorm) has no access to a kitchen, gym, or refrigerator, but it is the closest dorm to the subway station and metropolitan area
- Your dorm card needs to be placed in the card holder near the front door of your room to give your room electricity and Wi-Fi
- KU ISC does not provide toilet paper, laundry detergent, fabric softener, shampoo, body wash, hand soap, towels, trash bags, or female toiletries
- Join KU's Buddy Program and participate in at least two cultural activities; seats fill up quickly, so set an alarm to fill out the sign-up form as soon as it's released!



Have fun and stay safe in Seoul! ☆~(> . ∂)