

# Seoul surprise

Steve Williams visits South Korea's capital and finds it is not as dull and boring as people make it out to be

**T**he fluoro-pink stretch limo shattered any preconceived ideas.

I had it imprinted in my brain from friends and various people that Seoul is dull/grey and/or boring. I encountered the limo on the freeway into town from the airport. A wedding car, appropriately very long and very pink.

Seoul is not a spectacularly beautiful city, but there's definitely something about it, which I spent a week discovering.

From my friends at the CIA (its informative website anyway), I learn that Seoul's population is just under 10 million, which surprised me, as I was expecting wall-to-wall people everywhere I went. That wasn't the case — until I encountered the manic Myeong-dong shopping area on a weekend afternoon.

Those chaotic streets with its mass of humanity going nowhere fast made the front of Lucky Plaza at 4pm on a Sunday look like a man and his dog going for a stroll. Speaking of strolling, in an interesting comparison with Singapore (and other cities of the world), most people in Seoul stick to the "correct" side of the footpath (there, it's the right-hand side — cars are left-hand drive). I was tempted to take a picture of a crowded escalator with everyone keeping to the right, leaving the "overtaking lane" totally clear. People even behave themselves on pedestrian crossings, with two sets of lines — right and left. A lesson there?

Even the main tourist spots weren't as crowded as expected. It was very pleasant exploring the plethora of palaces, including Gyeongbokgung, which is kind of a bonsai-ed version of Beijing's Forbidden City, but with spotless public toilets. The changing of the guard ceremony was quite interesting to watch — you wonder what the guards are actually thinking under their fake beards as they're subjected to their 12,398th person cosying up to them for a peace-sign-flashing happy snap. And what's with the jumping in mid-air photo pose? I don't think the former members of the Joseon dynasty practised that ma-



The Bongeunsa Temple was founded in 794 and contains numerous shrines, halls and a 23m Buddha image

noeuvre. Unlike Beijing, I didn't get hassled by anyone lurking outside the palaces hawking plastic souvenirs.

Another very ornate palace, Changdeokgung is close to Gyeongbokgung and looked a bit more liveable, maybe it was more of a weekender back then. It was very impressive, and awash with azaleas and cherry blossoms. It is home to the famed Secret Garden, which is so secret, I didn't get to see it. To get in, you need to go on a guided tour and there are only two tours a day in English.

Adjacent to Changdeokgung is Changgyeonggung, which is also one of the five grand palaces of the Joseon dynasty — they had an excellent property portfolio. This is slightly different again, with a scenic lake and Japanese colonial greenhouse — quaint, but it also evokes memories of a not overly pleasant period in Seoul's history — the Japanese occupation from 1910.

The palaces obviously rate fairly high



Changdeokgung Palace, with its vibrant azaleas and cherry blossoms, is home to the famed Secret Garden

on any tourist itinerary — it is amazing how they are set in the middle of this sprawling metropolis, but once you wander in through the high walls, you could be anywhere.

Some of the Seoul naysayers will tell you that language is a barrier, but it wasn't a problem at all. My rudimentary few words came in handy as I discovered some interesting sights, from the man selling "designer" jeans, shirts and shoes on the footpath in the financial district — complete with a small changing room — to the octogenarian athletic auntie who raced (and beat) me up the more than 300 steps to the top of Naksan Park. She then proceeded to work out on the exercise equipment, while I had a nice sit-down (more like collapse). The park is worth a visit, with great views of the city — if you strike one of the smog-free blue-sky days — and of the old fortress wall that snakes its way down the hillside. Though I could have done without the piped John Denver muzak.

There are some parts of Seoul that have a distinctive European flavour, and I don't mean the mock Euro building façades and windmill in the indoor bit of the slightly bizarre Lotte World indoor theme park, complete with pseudo hot air balloon rides and the miniature village, where it is a small world after all. Maybe it's the narrow lanes, quaint coffee shops and restaurants, random artwork and vibrant tulips, or the fact that most people appear quite stylish in their dressing — from kids to the more senior Seoul citizens in suits.

I covered a lot of territory in a week, encountering random protest groups — Seoul loves a good protest and the same group was apparently following me. They

were very peaceful, outnumbered by the police. The protests appeared to involve someone strumming an acoustic guitar and a bit of a sing-a-long.

The Insadong area was recommended to me, but I found that a bit sterile, with its souvenir and craft shops. I preferred the Bukchon Hanok Village, which is an interesting mix of old and new, featuring the beautifully preserved aristocratic houses from the halcyon Joseon days. I had a great meal and a stroll around Shin-sa, good for food, bars and shopping. It reminded me of some parts of Melbourne and I preferred that to Itaewon, where the nightlife is a touch more "exotic".

I'd arrived in Seoul at a good time. It was cherry blossom season, with spectacular bursts of colour, kind of like fireworks on the ground. I stayed in Yeouido and, as it turned out, that's where Seoul's most famous cherry blossom street is, with 1,400 trees lining the road. Magnificent.

My favourite discovery in Seoul has to be Bongeunsa, a serene Buddhist temple founded in 794, right across from Coex Mall, Asia's largest underground shopping mall. Again, an urban retreat in the midst of the city. Bongeunsa is a surprisingly large complex, with numerous shrines, halls and a 23m Buddha image. The cherry blossoms blazed, the air was mixed with the fragrance of magnolias, bells tinkled gently and the chanting of prayers could be heard. And then I crossed the road, braving the sprawling mall for lunch.

Seoul's that kind of city. **E**

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Seoul loves a good protest, but it is mostly peaceful and involves a bit of a sing-a-long