

Alone



in a Crowd

South Koreans hike in droves. And they like it that way. What can an American who craves solitude learn from the party?

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY SCOTT YORKO



From left: At scenic overlooks, hikers line up for photos; the GSP Seoul Metropolitan Mountain Club disembarks at Songpan National Park.

THE LIMOUSINE BUS smells like octopus. Plush leather seats recline almost horizontally, but at 6 a.m., each passenger, dressed in brightly colored hiking clothes, is sitting upright, listening attentively to the PA system. It's a Saturday morning in Seoul, South Korea, and the 4050 Seoul Metropolitan Mountain Club is heading to the trailhead. But first, some formalities.

The club president, wearing a black fedora and neckerchief to match his ventilated button-down, speaks softly into the microphone, introducing himself and wishing everyone a safe hike. The entire busload claps, then, one by one, each financial "sponsor" of the club comes to the front and gives a similar address, followed by the chairman, VP, captains, directors, and finally each member, bashfully murmuring, bowing, and scurrying back to his or her seat. A woman in charge of morning snacks passes out warm kimchap rolls wrapped in aluminum foil. The same ritual unfolds in three other tour buses, each equally full, and our caravan proceeds toward the mountains.

"Our club is the biggest in Korea because it has 24,000 members," whispers Jun Lee, a 40-something sitting next to me. "Not so small," he says with pride and a brief giggle.

It's the club's 124th hike, and I've tagged along to experience how Koreans' ideas of hiking differ from what I'm accustomed to in the United States. Back home, crowds are a constant nemesis to my outdoor pursuits. When I leave the city, I want solitude, but as with hiking areas all over the country, that's getting harder to find on trails near my home in Colorado's Four Seasons. On weekends, popular Fourteens attract so many hikers that trailhead parking was break out.

The effort to escape the hordes can feel like losing battle, and I've begun to wonder: If I should stop fighting against the current. Maybe Koreans are on to something. Maybe "crowds" and "solitude" aren't necessarily opposites after all. Can Koreans' approach to hiking—large, inclusive, festive—help our jam-packed trails feel more like a celebration of the outdoors than an intrusion on wilderness privacy?



THE 4050 SEUL Metropolitan Mountain Club's destination, Chilboosa Mountain, lies 80 miles southeast of Seoul. The day's objective is a 3-mile hike in Songjisan National Park. The route follows a stream up steep, well-maintained trails with granite steps. It tops out at 6,283 feet on a rocky ridge where several sharp peaks jut out from the pine canopy.

As we pull up to the trailhead parking lot, I see a solitude seeker's nightmare. It's a mob scene. Middle-aged hikers dressed in multicolored nylon spill out of giant buses. They perform group-stretch routines and joint selfie sticks through the air. It's a moderate, half-day hike, but everyone looks outfitted for alpine battle: mountaineering pants with reinforced knees, heavy hiking boots, carbon-fiber trekking poles, Engelberg gloves, rain hats, headlamps, and sun sleeves. A few women wear masks to cover their cheeks on this partly cloudy, fall day. Every pack looks full enough for an overnight. What could they possibly be carrying? I wonder, as some of them look nervously at my minimalist trail runners and collapsible nylon summit pack.

A muscular fellow wearing all-white technical gear and a serious face is clearly the leader of today's hike. With a bulging 50-liter pack and a radio on his left shoulder strap, he barks at everyone to get ready while pointing to his tactical wristwatch. The congregation has swelled to 82 members. After a safety spiel and more formal introductions, someone unfurls the club's banner and we pose for a group shot with two professional photographers. It's an all-around procedure for a club hike.

When the leader finally pushes off around 10:30 a.m., we immediately bottleneck at a turnstile. Eventually, we file onto the trail, crossing small streams and switchbacking through trees that lie in streaks of light. It's a steep path, and between the grade and the crowding, it would be generous to call our progress slow. But despite the pace, not one hiker asks to pass the single-file train or elbows his way to the front.

At one point I leap onto a flat granite rock beside the trail and run along its edge to catch a few hikers up ahead of me. "Slow, slow," calls out a fire-looking man. "We are all together."

THIS ENTHUSIASM FOR outdoor recreation may seem like a new fad for Korea's burgeoning middle class, but mountain culture runs deep in the country's history. "Thousands of years before modern religion made its way onto the peninsula, Koreans worshipped mountain spirits, which they believe to be a powerful source of mountain qi," says David A. Mason, a 30-year American expat and local guide with a master's degree in Korean Studies who has written nine books on the subject, including *Spirit of the Mountains: Korea's SAN-SHIN and Tradition of Mountain Worship* (via a vital life force) and, Mason says, while Buddhism and Christianity now dominate here, many Koreans still believe that one can refresh and amplify their piety by going into nature, especially on top of mountains.

In the 1960s, hiking as a widespread recreational pursuit got an unlikely jump start. After military dictator Park Chung-hee forced rural citizens to move into the cities for rapid industrialization, hiking was promoted as a teambuilding activity with coworkers. In 1967, Chung-hee established a national park system, which supported the growing adventure scene and brought economic development to remote areas. Though it's a tiny country the size of Indiana, South Korea now has 43 major public parks, 40 of which are in the mountains. Several high-speed trains from Seoul will get you within 10 minutes of a trailhead.

Add easy access to a population of 51 million and a cultural enthusiasm for group activities, and you have a recipe for some seriously busy trails. One South Korean park, Bukhansan, long held a world record as the national park with the highest number of visitors per square foot. It hosts 6 million people per year, and the whole park covers only 51 square miles. That's about the same number of people who annually visit the Grand Canyon, which encompasses 1,902 square miles. But no one's complaining.

Suyem Kim, a 23-year-old student working the front desk of my hostel back in Seoul, says hiking with other people—lots of other people—is what Koreans prefer. When I asked her about hiking clubs, she told me, "They do it to have a group to belong to, to find community. I don't really see anyone who hikes alone."



From left: Pre-hike accommodations and introductions; hiker on his first solo summit marker flying the 4050 Seoul Metropolitan Mountain Club flag; hiker "back" no passing laws in Songjisan National Park.

IN THE CONGA LINE plodding up Chilboosa, a tall man in a navy polypropylene long-sleeve introduces himself as Reason and Heart. He's 63 years old and hikes with a few different clubs twice a week. "Relationship is the most important thing in Korea," he tells me.

"OK, but do you need all this gear to hike together?" I ask. He laughs and tells me that everyone's backpack is mostly filled with lunch. As if on cue, 50 hikers stop at a flat spot along the trickling creek and dig out gallon bags of fresh trout to share. This happens twice more in less than an hour as we march toward a scenic overlook where each person takes a turn posing for photos. The process lasts 20 minutes and, although I'm not in a rush, I can't help but feel anxious. Like being stuck in a traffic jam, it makes me antsy even if I'm not late. I try changing ahead but don't get far before I'm called back to pose in photos with eight giggling women.

Just after 1 p.m., we reach the top. The flat summit is barely distinguishable in the trees, but small openings reveal a green-canopied valley. Time for another picnic. Blankets and chairs appear, as do thermoses, bottles of rice water, and an elaborate spread of food: more kimchi, bulgog (beef), stir-fry tempura, three types of kimchi, beef pancakes, and a whole cheese board of seaweeds, apples, grapes, plums, and peaches. I'm starting to understand that here, hiking is meant to be an end as much as an end in itself. And the end is delicious.

Everyone shares like it's a competition, piling food on my plate. Shot glasses of soju appear from every direction and the shared clinking grows louder and louder. One woman in a giant visor motions for me to drink more every time I look her way. (In fact, excessive drinking has become a problem in Korean parks, leading to an increase in accidents. A new law introduced in 2018 prohibits alcohol consumption on certain peaks and visitor areas.)

When everyone seems just the right amount of jolly, a guy hiking with me asks that we all bow our heads in a moment of silence to appreciate the mountain. A long few seconds go by with just the sound of birds chirping and the



wind blowing through the trees. The terrain isn't unlike the mountains of New England, with steep granite outcroppings shaded by oak trees. The low clouds have a calming effect and take a deep breath, sucking in the fresh mountain air. For the first time all day, I have that old familiar feeling of peace and quiet. Then the silence is broken by a guy in red pants and a Tillet hat who rises a loud, loud fart. After a moment of wide-eyed shock, the group erupts in laughter.

After lunch, the women roughly subdivide before the hour-long hike down a series of steep, wooden staircases. On the descent, I'm a much more relaxed, content to smile and wait patiently while a slower hiker cautiously navigates a rock feature. I fall in next to a 49-year-old hiker for Samsung nicknamed Hampton, who says he's excited to be on his first hike with the club. "A big group gives you the chance to meet many more people," he says.

I don't argue. Sure, there will still be times I want to truly alone outdoors. But here, I realize that maybe I don't need to fight the tide all the time. Maybe hiking with friends, even if it's me, is different than swimming in a sea of strangers.

At the end of the nearly four-hour hike, we stop at the stream to remove boots and soak our feet. Everyone offers congratulations all around, then the bus takes the entire group to a restaurant for a long dinner of Korean barbecue and round after round of soju and plum wine. On the slow ride back to Seoul, the drinking and laughing continue. If there's one thing I've learned after a 14-hour immersion in Korean hiking culture, it's that the celebration is never over. ☺

Scott Yorko will never go back to the gopler.