ON THE KIMCHI TRAIL

Pickled vegetables, island hops, and whiskey shots in the Land of the Morning Calm

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Story and photos by Gregg Bleakney
Woo-Lee looked more like a Little League baseball player than a touring cyclist. We met for the first time at an overlook above Sinseseondae Bay on South Korea’s Jeju Island. He was wearing an impeccably tight ship. He was the perfect candidate to probe for data about the road ahead.

For the past six hours, my cycling companion, Greg McCormack, and I had struggled over Jeoje Island’s consistent undulation, then we turned on and off in the bathtub for quite a while on the first night. Uncle Rick told a story about a Korean couple he hosted through President Jimmy Carter’s Friendship Force came in the form of an attractive young airport representative who was awaiting our arrival at baggage claim in Seoul. “Greg — Gregg?” she puzzled. “I’ve prepared your luggage for you.” Our bicycle boxes were already stacked on an oversized pushcart. G-Mack excitedly jumped on the back, kicked a few times, and glided through customs like Apollo Ohno over the polished floors.

We efficiently boarded a public express bus to Within one block of our downtown hotel. I pinched myself in disbelief. Was it that easy? Later, I learned that after Seoul’s airport had become overburdened during the 1988 Olympics, the government drafted blueprints for a new world-class hub capable of shuffling 100 million passengers annually by 2020. Initial construction was completed in 2001. With a connected international business center, an 18-hole golf course, and a number-one world airport ranking under its belt, it has

Hug the white line. Enjoying Ulleung-do Island’s coastal loop road.

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For the past six hours, my cycling companion, Greg McCormack, and I had struggled over Jeoje Island’s consistent undulation. For the purposes of this story, Greg McCormack will hereby be referred to as G-Mack: (1) to avoid any reader confusion with my name, which also happens to be Gregg — but with an extra g, and (2) because we determined he needed a nickname after bewildering hundreds of Koreans with our double Gregg introductions. Because neither of us had bothered to train for this tour, we decided to take the bullet train south from Seoul — skipping over Korea’s mountainous interior to cut our teeth along its flat austral coastline. As our fitness improved, we would pedal northward to burn our lungs over whatever geographical challenges the country could throw at us.

But by the time we spotted Woo-Lee on our third day in the saddle, the southland had failed to deliver the forehead promise made by our map’s widely spaced contour lines. On the contrary, the landscape was proving to be a recipe for salt-stained lycra, four-letter words, and deflated egos.

“Okay, I hope we see you guys later. I go to make my schedule today,” he said.

“Moments into our slumber, my accomplice raised his head in a burst of poutism.”

“Will, bro, at least we got to take a ride on that bullet train. And good God, did you ever expect to find views like this in South Korea?”

Truth be told — high-speed trains, ultra-tech teenagers, and beautifully-chiselled road networks were not what I expected to find in Korea. At a family dinner just before my flight, Uncle Rick told a story about a Korean couple he hosted through President Jimmy Carter’s Friendship Force program. They all enjoyed strolling along Portland, Oregon’s, riverfront and through its rose gardens, but the most memorable moment was the mystery behind the water being turned on and off in the bathtub for quite a while on the first night.

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“So is the rest of Korea this hilly?” G-Mack asked.

Woo had already racked up 1,400 kilometers over a zigzagging north-to-south traverse of his homeland. He tabbed through the elevation memory function on his GPS altimeter watch. With a youthful enthusiasm that reminded me of Dora the Explorer, he responded, “Excellent, 1,600 meters of altitude today, and I have left 30 kilometers more. No, the rest is not so hilly. Here is the most difficult cycling region I experience for Korea.”

He handed us two sweet honey candies, speed-typed a few text messages, and angled his bars downhill.

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become an economic symbol for all who go through its gates — 21st-century Korea means business, big business.

More interestingly, for cycling aficionados — the Incheon bridge, a $1.5 billion megaproject built to link the airport to the city center, opened in September 2009 and held a car-free ribbon-cutting ceremony to announce another form of progress — the government’s commitment to building a national bikeway network. In a fish chowder joint near the Busan ferry terminal, G-Mack and I watched TV coverage of thousands of elated cyclists rolling across its 7.7-mile span.

Outside the restaurant, a van full of stunning European tourists pulled up to the curb. Upon further ogling, I noticed that they were clad in high heels and pastel body suits — not your typical traveler’s garb. These were Busan’s working gals. G-Mack and I had unknowingly cycled into the heart of the city’s red-light district for lunch. A banner strung across the alley should have been a dead giveaway. In bold letters, it read, “Welcome U.S. Navy.”

By then, we had soaned a bit of muscle memory and completed our loop around Geoje Island. In fact, island life was so pleasurable, northbound migration was postponed to hit Jejudo, another one of Korea’s south-floating gems.

Jejudo Island drinks like a fine Bordeaux blend: Coastal panoramas display hints of Big Sur. Volcanic origins and subtropical climates remind you of the substratum finish of Hawaii. Shaped like a spinning top toy, it’s dominated by 6,398-foot Mount Hallasan, the highest peak in Korea.

Based in Dallas, G-Mack has made a career of traveling to far-flung corners of the planet to lead high-end natural history expeditions. Jejudo blipped on his ecocentric radar the instant Woo-Lee suggested that it would make a nice addition to our tour. Our aim after wobbling off the overnight ferry in Jeju City — the 28-mile central island road that spirals 3,600 feet up to the mountain’s “Nature Experience and Cyber-Exploration” interpretive center. In 2002 Hallasan was awarded UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status because of the diversity of its vertically arranged topography: subtropical, temperate, frigid, and alpine layers. They are home to 5,800 species of plants and animals.

Any good naturalist will say that ears are as important as eyes. As we ascended from one zone to the next, G-Mack began to wiggle his jaw back and forth, clearing any pressure in his audio canal that could possibly have disrupted the frequency to which he was tuning. He stopped repeatedly to press Texas steak-sized binoculars into his eye sockets and scribble notes in an REI weatherproof journal. I watched in awe as his gifted cochlear nucleus began to process the secret scores of the island’s ethereal symphony. There were rustling chestnut and laurel branches, vociferous brown-eared bulbuls, shuffling ring-necked pheasants, and rattling black-capped kingfishers. On those final steep kilometers up Jejudo’s crown, my cycling companion put his religion on display — and teleported himself into another universe. Still jovial at dinner that evening, he mimicked the high twit-tering call of a Japanese white-eye.

As G-Mack disappeared into his 528-page eastern Asia birding book, I was tending to a more immediate issue — food. You see, my gluteus had nudged its performance level from Hyundai to Honda, but I was lacking proper fuel to tap the extra horsepower. And our server was crowding the table yet again with small bowls of kimchi, the country’s culinary pride and joy. For those who have not had the good fortune of chop-sticking its slippery morsels, kimchi is a pickled and spiced vegetable appetizer that was born in China thousands of years ago. Koreans adopted the dish and over time rendered endless modifications based on pressure in his audio canal that could possibly have disrupted the frequency to which he was tuning. He stopped repeatedly to press Texas steak-sized binoculars into his eye sockets and scribble notes in an REI weatherproof journal. I watched in awe as his gifted cochlear nucleus began to process the secret scores of the island’s ethereal symphony. There were rustling chestnut and laurel branches, vociferous brown-eared bulbuls, shuffling ring-necked pheasants, and rattling black-capped kingfishers. On those final steep kilometers up Jejudo’s crown, my cycling companion put his religion on display — and teleported himself into another universe. Still jovial at dinner that evening, he mimicked the high twit-tering call of a Japanese white-eye.

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on season and region. It's served at truck stops, five-star restaurants, street stalls, and home dining rooms. There's cucumber kimchi, radish kimchi, kimchi stew, pumpkin kimchi, green onion kimchi, and stuffed cabbage kimchi, to name but a few.

The sad reality for a hungry touring cyclist is that you would have to consume a Hallasan Mountain of the stuff to match the high-octane charge of one Chicago deep-dish slice. Although each variation thrills with its distinctive savory nuance, they all eventually lead to an empty-calorie calamity — bowl by bowl, flowing from the same briny inspiration.

Needless to say, another tabletop helping of kimchi left me desperately searching for something to get my oomph back. I retired to my bedroom at the Jeju hiking hostel on the far side of the island in Seogwipo City. There I resorted to eating the one American standby that was guaranteed to tuck my stomach in for the night — a Snickers bar. G-Mack stayed behind, spending another 30 minutes in the restaurant to sharpen down the mucus-textured innards of a half-dozen sea urchins.

Whether it was pure luck or a blessing from Jejudo's three demi-gods born millenium before on the northern slopes of Mt. Halla, I will never know. But a phrase I uttered out loud while scanning the picture menu of lamprey eel on a stick and small soup at a breakfast stop the next morning provided the drill bit required to penetrate Korea's gastronomic bedrock. "Damn, is there anything on here that resembles spaghetti?"

"Spaghetti?" questioned the proprietor. "Korean spaghetti, yes, have!"

She shouted our order to the kitchen staff (her husband and father) — and in a flurry of clanking pots, steamy eruptions, and overhead tong twisting, our savior was plated. It was a carbo-loaded mound of boiled noodles bathed in sooty fish sauce and leftover kimchi chunks.

From here on out, the miles blurred by like the Travel Channel on fast forward. Observations were made from the comfort of a bicycle lane running parallel to the 113-mile coastal road. There were skin-diving haenyo (sea woman) matriarchs bobbing between plunges to pick abalone off the sea floor — and Sangumburi Crater, an extinct volcano that juts out of the sea on the island's southeast side.

The interior was dotted with Jeju Tangerines, tiny orbs organized between small stone walls. They were more succulent than a French kiss at summer camp. Nature's splendor, enslaved by human-directed genetic tinkering to eradicate hard-to-peel husks and pesky seeds, and leaving not a single distraction from the juicy sweet goodness within. I bought a box from a roadside vendor, ate a dozen on the spot, and buried the rest in my pantry between my electric toothbrush and French press.

With bellies full of citrus fruit, we rejoined the mainland and headed north. The hills were longer but more gradual, allowing time to find our rhythm and relax over the gentle grades. Descents were measured in minutes rather than seconds. Our target destination was Gyeongju, the country's cultural capital. Evidently, the place is a big deal because it was the hub of the ancient Silla Kingdom. But, if you want to learn more about Silla, look elsewhere because I was more interested in their living descendants.

At a twilight concert in Anapji park,
along nicely — camping in river valleys and freewheeling past chile pepper farms, grape orchards, and mining communities. Towns were fortified with coffee vending machines and rows of numbered apartment towers. Stamped on the sides of these concrete eyesores were the bright blue logos of Korea’s financial kingpin — the indomitable Samsung Group.

In 2008 Samsung’s revenue was 173 billion dollars — 32 percent of the country’s exports that year. Although the company has its fingers in a little bit of everything, it’s best known for flat-screen TVs, mobile phones, and home appliances. In 2005 it blew by its Japanese rival Sony as the most popular global consumer electronics brand. In 2007 it smashed America’s Motorola, becoming the world’s second largest cell-phone manufacturer. If Samsung were a country, it would have a larger economy than Argentina. The summary line of its 2010 UBS research initiation document reads, “Gap with competition will widen more significantly than in prior cycles — Buy.” Perhaps Uncle Ick’s Korean guests brought the idea of washing machines back to the company’s executive team who have since trumped the world in their production.

The high-speed catamaran to Ulleungdo Island motors 75 miles over the oft nauseating swells of the East Sea. The day of our passage was no exception, and the cabin echoed with the vomiting heaves of 200 passengers. Fortunately, our island hops in the south had inoculated us against the epidemic. I walked aftward to make sure our bikes were secure and struck up a conversation with the only other passenger on board (besides G-Mack) who seemed to be functioning properly — Mr. Cho.

“Ah, touring bicycles!” he exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted to take a bicycle tour break dancers amused the crowd to the rhythm of an electric string band. Between sets, I walked the loop trail around the park’s colorfully lit reflection ponds. Young couples nestled each other’s necks, old men stuffed their pockets full of loose chestnuts, and crickets buzzed and chirped. A family from Seoul asked me to take their picture. The father posed proudly with his two teenaged daughters and wife. I jokingly counted, “One, two, kimcheeeees.” The girls giggled on cue as I pushed the button. What’s odd is that underlying the peaceful serenity of Gyeongju is an unrest stirred by a long history of conflict. 200 miles northwest of Anapji Park’s glowing temples, skyscraper lights flickered in the megalopolis of Seoul. Just a stone’s throw away, across the demilitarized zone in North Korea, a dictator stands ready to push another kind of button, one that would launch a horrific attack from most the heavily fortified border region in the world. It’s an arsenal so powerful and swift that it would destroy the city’s greater metropolitan area in less than 10 minutes.

Maybe it was because of these images of war, or the fact that G-Mack had a few hundred pages of birds left to identify, but instead of finishing our tour in the nation’s capital, we re-routed to Ulleungdo Island — a remote outpost 75 miles off Korea’s west coast. To get there, we needed to hammer out consecutive 80-mile days across the country’s largest province, Gyeongsangbuk-do. The region is known for its excellent pindaeduk pancakes and bibimbap (rice with veggies) so we moved...
across the United States — maybe go to Yellowstone. But my profession would not allow it.”

I took the bait. “What was your profession?” I obliged.

“I am embarrassed to tell you right now — just look at my family.”

He signaled to a bench seat over his shoulder. His daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren were hunched over in the clutches of seasickness.

“I was an admiral of the Korean Navy,” he admitted, “and I’d like to buy you lunch.”

Captain Lee, the senior Korean military official of the East Sea, had a car ready for us at the Ulleungdo pier. We were ushered to a small restaurant where Admiral Cho plopped us full of oyster soup and “atomic bombs” — a shot glass full of Shoju whiskey dropped into a 12-ounce beer to be slammed without breaking your lip. We discussed disc breaks, leather saddles, and touring routes across North America.

At first, I thought it was the Shoju when I looked out the window and saw a cartoonish character on a bright red touring bicycle grinning up the street. However, my sobriety was quickly confirmed when Woo-Lee waved at us through the window, checked his GPS watch, and spun on by. After lunch, G-Mack and I buzzed around the island’s 40-mile road network — a showcase of transportation infrastructure, with five tunnels and a section that corked up and over a towering cliff face. It was a sunny day, and fisherman strung their odorous cuttlefish harvest out to dry on the roadside. We spent the penultimate eve of our tour camped on a bulkhead watching the offshore lights of cuttlefish boats twinkling on the horizon.

After taking the bus back to Seoul, I met an American named Tony near the bus station. He was working at a local high school, one of the 20,000 foreign English teachers recruited annually by the government’s aggressive education system. It’s a great gig with salaries that can exceed those of teachers in the U.S. He offered to show us a good time in the city’s happening Hongdae district. That evening we strolled down alleyways mixed with street performers, expats, well-heeled Seoulites, and Netbook-clutching students. Shouju flowed, the club-hopping intensified, and our revelry advanced into a haze of disco balls, camera flashes, and sticky dance floors. Korea’s economy was on the uptick, the party was big, and nobody was holding back.

The next morning, I found myself hunkered over the hotel-room bathtub washing my garments clean. There was an electronic dashboard on the toilet with dials that individually controlled seat, bidet stream, and air-dry temperatures. In the midst of wringing out my socks in this high-tech wonder closet, I couldn’t help but think, “Uncle Ick, if you could only see me now.”

Gregg Bleakney is a writer and photographer with a storage unit based in Seattle, Washington. He’s currently working on a bike-culture project in Mumbai, India. This is his third feature for Adventure Cyclist. For more about what Gregg’s up to, check out www.gbleakney.com.