

Summary

Seoraksan, located in the Baekdudaegan mountain range, is a famous mountain in Gangwon Province, South Korea. It spans the city of Sokcho and the counties of Yangyang, Goseong, and Inje. Its elevation is 1,708 meters, making it the third-highest mountain in South Korea, following Hallasan and Jirisan.

Seoraksan is one of South Korea's five famous mountains, along with Jirisan, Deokyusan, Hallasan, and Bukhansan. It is also included in the list of South Korea's 100 famous mountains selected by the Korea Forest Service and "Black Yak."

Seoraksan was designated as the fifth national park on March 24, 1970. The total area of the national park is 398.222 square kilometers.

Before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Seoraksan was part of North Korea, but after the armistice line was drawn, South Korea regained control of the area. This mountain is located on the backbone of the Baekdudaegan, the giant mountain range running from Jirisan to Seoraksan. It's precisely on this backbone that the border divides the two Koreas, and there have been jokes that the South Korean military stopped at Seoraksan, thinking it was Jirisan. Such stories are connected to the fact that this area was one of the most heavily contested during the Korean War. Battles like the Maebong-Hanseoksan Battle, Punchbowl Battle, and Danjang's Ridge Battle all took place along the Seorak-Gangneung axis, and in the 1980s, they were common themes in anti-communist education. It was in the Battle of Seoraksan that the South Korean military successfully repelled the North Korean-Chinese coalition and gained a substantial amount of territory and maritime areas.

However, as the entry for Geumgangsan shows, Geumgangsan and Seoraksan were originally the same mountain. So, originally, Seoraksan was more like a term meaning 'the southern area of Geumgangsan,' indicating the southernmost part of Geumgangsan. But after the division between North and South Korea, they inevitably became separate and distinct mountains. In the end, the terrain and the recognition of Geumgangsan and Seoraksan had always been worlds apart, which led to Seoraksan being pushed aside.

To access Seoraksan, there are several road routes, including the Seoul-Yangyang Expressway, Donghae Expressway, Route 44 (Hanguiryung), Routes 46-56 (Misiryung), and Route 462 (Seoraksan Road). Route 44 passes through the Seoraksan National Park, and Route 462 is used when entering Seoraksan National Park from Sokcho.

Currently, Seoraksan is home to Baekdamsa and Sinheungsa temples. Sinheungsa charges an entrance fee (4,500 won per person) for most routes starting from Sogongwon. Osak, Namgyeri, Hangu, Jangsudo, and others do not charge entrance fees.

It's essential to note that the land on which Sinheungsa temple is located was, in fact, given to the temple's ownership by the owners of Seoraksan National Park after Seoraksan became a national park. This has caused numerous discussions and disputes about land rights.

Once the Chuncheon-Sokcho High-Speed Railroad is constructed, it will pass under Seoraksan. The segment between Misiryung and Baekdamsa is part of Seoraksan, and a new station, Baekdam Station, will be constructed alongside Baekdamsa.

Exploration

Before delving into the content, it's important to note that Seoraksan is a rocky mountain. Naturally, the hiking difficulty level is the highest among domestic mountains, so remember to pack plenty of beverages and snacks for any course and maintain optimal health.

First of all, compared to Jirisan, Seoraksan has fewer shelters (mountain huts). Furthermore, most of the available shelters are concentrated on the outer Seoraksan rather than the inner Seoraksan. Therefore, when you trek via the Dinosaur Ridge, it's a bit more challenging to climb to Daechongbong through the northwest ridge. If you start your ascent from Yongdaeri, be prepared to begin climbing early in the midsummer predawn, and even then, you need to maintain a brisk pace or be prepared for an overnight stay. (The entrance control time is 12:00 PM, starting from Hanguiryung Intersection.) Moreover, the numerous rocky sections that you encounter can also make the hike more tiring. Despite the challenging nature of the climb, unless it's a very treacherous rocky section like Daeseungnyeong-Hanguiryung, there are usually ropes and stairs installed, so if you manage your physical condition well, there's no need to be overly frightened.

Just as Mount Geumgang is divided into Inner Geumgang, Outer Geumgang, Sea Geumgang, and New Geumgang, Seoraksan is also divided into Outer Seoraksan, Inner Seoraksan, Southern Seoraksan, and Northern Seoraksan, with Daechongbong as the reference point. When looking north from Daechongbong, the side facing the sea is Outer Seoraksan, while the side facing the inland is Inner Seoraksan. The southern side is referred to as Southern Seoraksan without distinction between the sea or inland. The boundary between Outer Seoraksan and Inner Seoraksan is the Dinosaur Ridge, and the boundary between Southern Seoraksan and Inner Seoraksan is the northwest ridge extending from Daechongbong to Sipjeonnyeo Tang.

There are various shelters along the trails, including Biseonsanjang, located at Biseondae, which is the starting point for Cheonbuldong and Madeungnyeong hiking, Huiungak Shelter, which marks the beginning and end of the Dinosaur Ridge, Socheong Shelter, located around Sacheonbong, and Jungcheong Shelter, situated between

Daecheongbong and Jungcheongbong. There are also shelters such as Yangbok Shelter in Cheonbuldong Valley and Sujeomdong Shelter in Sujeomdong Valley.

There are various starting points for hiking. Primarily, for those who do not live nearby and visit Seoraksan for sightseeing purposes, they usually start from Sogongwon (towards Sokcho).

Entrance Time Reservation System

"Seoraksan has designated entrance times at the trailheads, so it's advisable to check in advance as entry may not be allowed during specific time slots.

Additionally, from November 1st to December 15th and from March 2nd to May 15th each year, there is a fire prevention period due to dry conditions when entry is not permitted.

Osaek Course

The Osaek Course is the shortest route to Daecheongbong, starting from the Osaek South Seoraksan Hiking Support Center. It involves continuously ascending a steep 5 km trail, taking approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes to 4 hours and 30 minutes one way on average. The starting point at the South Seoraksan Hiking Support Center is at an elevation of approximately 450 meters, while Daecheongbong stands at an elevation of 1,708 meters, requiring a continuous ascent of about 1,300 meters. There are few flat sections for resting, and most of the trail is rocky, making the hike quite challenging.

Other routes to Daecheongbong offer various attractions such as valleys, temples, waterfalls, but the Osaek Course mainly involves an uphill battle with limited attractions along the way. However, the advantage is that it allows hikers to reach the summit quickly, which is why some hikers choose this route. The Osaek Course is also popular for its return route, as fast hikers can complete the round trip to Seoraksan's summit and descend in just 5 hours. However, hikers should be cautious of steep descents and rocky trails, which can be hard on the knees and joints.

If you take the Osaek Course for an ascent and descend to Sogongwon, you benefit from an 8 km long and challenging downhill route from Biseondae to Daecheongbong.

In the national park's hiking trails, there are multipurpose location signs that resemble poles. The Osaek Course has these signs at 500-meter intervals, numbered from 6-1 to 6-9. By checking the number on the multipurpose location sign, hikers can easily determine how far they have climbed. If you continue 500 meters beyond 6-9, you will reach Daecheongbong, so you can essentially consider 6-10 as the marker for Daecheongbong.

The Osaek starting point is known for the Osaek Oncheon Village, famous for its carbonated hot springs. Osaek Spring is also a fantastic tourist attraction.

Seorakdong Course

The Seorakdong Course starts from Sogongwon and leads to Daecheongbong, making it the most popular and well-known course among the Seoraksan hiking routes.

The starting point, Sogongwon, is easily accessible from Sokcho by city bus, and it is located on the private property of Sinheungsa Temple, which has an entrance fee. The nearest parking lot to Sogongwon also charges a parking fee.

Key points along the route include Sogongwon, Biseondae, Yangbok Shelter, Muneomigogae, Heeungak Shelter, Socheongbong, Jungcheong Shelter, and Daecheongbong.

The trail to Biseondae is a relatively easy walk suitable for regular hiking, but after that, it becomes a steep climbing path.

From Biseondae to Heeungak Shelter, you'll encounter beautiful rock cliffs, Oriyeon Waterfall, Cheondang Waterfall, and the stunning crystal-clear streams beneath them. In autumn, the vibrant fall foliage adds to the beauty, making it clear why this mountain is one of the most famous in South Korea. Proper hiking shoes are essential, and without them, there is a high risk of accidents. Most of the trail is steep, with stairs and wooden decks built into rocky terrain, so watch out for loose rocks. As you admire the breathtaking views, you'll reach Heeungak Shelter at an altitude of 1,050 meters. From here, the trail to Daecheongbong is not far (2.5 km), but first, you must conquer the infamous steep slope to Socheongbong (1,550m) with a gradient of 32.5%.

Taking a break at Heeungak is a good idea. Although the distance from Heeungak to Socheong is only 1.5 km, it involves gaining 500 meters in altitude. Once you overcome this section, the trail becomes gentler, and you'll soon see Daecheongbong ahead, with a relatively flat path leading to it. When you reach Jungcheong Shelter, Daecheongbong is visible, and the path to Daecheongbong becomes clear. Take your time and enjoy the journey, breathing deeply and savoring the joy of reaching the summit. The estimated time required is about 6 hours and 20 minutes for the 11.5 km course (1 hour for Biseondae, 3 hours and 10 minutes for Biseondae to Heeungak, and 2 hours and 10 minutes for Heeungak to Daecheongbong). During the long summer days, a day hike with a late start from Sogongwon, descending to Osaek and enjoying a hot spring bath is possible, with a descent taking around 2 to 3 hours. Including rest breaks, you can plan for a 10 to 11-hour trip, making it feasible during the long summer days.

Baekdam Course

This trail that starts at Baekdamsa and leads to Bongjeongam after passing through Sureum-dong Valley and Gugokdam Valley, then continues on to Socheong Shelter, Jungcheong Shelter, and finally to Daechungbong. The total distance is about 13km, longer than the Osake Course, and less physically demanding in the early stages in terms of elevation gain. This course offers a lot to see, as it takes you through several valleys and passes by three temples.

Key points of interest along the trail include Baekdamsa, Yeongsiam, Sureum-dong Shelter, Mansudam Waterfall, Ssangyong Waterfall, Sajabawi, Bongjeongam, Socheong Shelter, Socheongbong, Jungcheong Shelter, and Daechungbong.

The journey begins at the shuttle bus departure point in Yongdaeri, which will take you to Baekdamsa. Although you can walk the 6.5km route, taking the bus to Baekdamsa is recommended for those planning to hike to Daechungbong, as it conserves energy.

From Baekdamsa, the trail begins, initially following a relatively flat path for 3.5km. At this point, you'll reach Yeongsiam, where a trail splits. Left leads to Oseam, while the right path takes you to Sureum-dong Shelter. Most hikers continue to Sureum-dong Shelter, a 1.2km stretch that remains relatively flat.

From Sureum-dong Shelter, the trail enters Gugokdam Valley, and the elevation begins to steepen. After enjoying the scenic wonders of Mansudam Waterfall, Gwanum Waterfall, and Ssangyong Waterfall for about 4.8km, you'll reach a point leaving Bongjeongam approximately 500m away (the end of Gugokdam Valley, with 2.8km remaining to Daechungbong). From here, you'll start the challenging uphill climb of Hetaekogae (the steep path), leading to Bongjeongam. This steep path, known as Hetaekogae, climbs approximately 550m in elevation from 1,000m to 1,550m, covering a distance of 1.6km.

At the midpoint of Hetaekogae, you'll come across Sajabawi, which sits at an altitude of 1,180m. After climbing this first steep section, you'll reach Bongjeongam, situated at an elevation of 1,244m. Take a breather at Bongjeongam before proceeding on a steep ascent of 1.1km towards Socheonggalimgil, which is at an elevation of 1,550m. After passing Socheong Shelter and arriving at Socheongbong, you'll encounter a much milder slope as you approach the trailhead of Daechungbong.

From Socheongbong, travel gently along the Jungcheong Ridge for 600m until you reach Jungcheong Shelter. While covering this section, the elevation increases by about 650m, spanning a distance of approximately 1.6km. The average slope is about 34%, making it a challenging uphill climb. This section may be reminiscent of the steep Osake Course, Middle Sanri Kalbawi Course at Jirisan, and the Magok Falls trail at Chilseon Gyeokgyok at Jirisan. To put it into perspective, it's like reducing the initial slope of Mandeungryeong (48.5%) and doubling the distance.

Reason you should visit seoraksan

The main reason that Seoraksan (Mount Seorak) was historically perceived as a more challenging destination than Geumgangsan (Mount Geumgang) is quite straightforward. Geumgangsan was considered relatively accessible to the general public, offering beautiful scenery that could be explored by people of all backgrounds. In contrast, Seoraksan had lower accessibility, both in terms of its height and the difficulty of the trails, making it less appealing for the average visitor.

Firstly, even reaching Seoraksan was a daunting task. Historically, there was a route from Hanyang (present-day Seoul) to the Gwandong (Yeongdong) region, which was known as the "Gwandongbyeolgok" or the "Gwandong Arterial Road." This route took travelers from Hanyang through the rugged terrain of the Taebaek Mountain Range, passing through locations like Cheoryeong or Chwagwaryeong, leading to areas in what is now North Korea, including Wonsan on the east coast. The path then led to Geumgangsan before traveling along the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula.

In reality, it was not only the route to Seoraksan that was difficult, but also other traditional routes. The most straightforward paths from Seoul toward the east usually led through the region centered around Geumgangsan. The Cheoryeong or Chwagwaryeong route offered a relatively flat path through the inland areas of Gangwon Province, as most of the current road infrastructure was not developed at that time. Travelers had to be constantly prepared for dangers such as bandits and tigers on their journeys. Given the inherent difficulties of these traditional routes, people often chose paths like the Geumgangsan and Wonsan route that were more straightforward and safer.

This inconvenience in accessibility persisted until the late 20th century, with the arduous, winding road to Seoraksan being one of the only ways to reach the area. Even this road was not suitable for automobiles until the mid-20th century, which meant that reaching Seoraksan was a significant adventure.

Moreover, Seoraksan presented significant challenges in terms of hiking difficulty. It was only in recent decades that a hiking trail from Oeseorak to Daecheongbong was established, allowing the general public to hike from the Sokcho side to the summit. Even today, this route is around 40 years old. A notable example is the Cheondang Falls on the Cheonbuldong Course. While this section of the trail has become relatively easier for modern hikers, it was considered a dangerous and demanding route in the past. In fact, Cheondang Falls used to mark the end of the most challenging and treacherous section of the hike, and the name "Cheondang" implies that this point was a significant relief on the difficult journey. The beauty of Seoraksan's many attractions was often out of reach for the average person, as they were located in areas accessible only to professional mountain climbers.

In summary, before the Korean War and the division of the two Koreas, Seoraksan was perceived as less accessible and less explored than Geumgangsan, and it was

considered a challenging destination to visit. As a result, Seoraksan was not as widely recognized or explored by the general public, leading to its status as an enigmatic mountain. Currently, the division of North and South Korea has resulted in Seoraksan being a more accessible and visited destination, while Geumgangsan remains off-limits to South Korean citizens. Therefore, comparing these two mountains on an equal basis is not currently possible.

Nature

Seoraksan is a precious natural heritage in our country, boasting not only stunning scenic and geological beauty but also universal excellence in terms of biological, ecological, and geological values.

In 2014, it was included in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List, along with Jirisan and Odaesan.

Seoraksan serves as the southern boundary for boreal flora and the northern boundary for temperate flora, making it a unique region where special plants like *Chamaecyparis obtusa* (Korean cypress), *Rhododendron aureum*, *Carex bongorica*, and *Gagea chinensis* are found. It is also home to rare plants such as *Cypripedium japonicum*, *Schizocodon soldanelloides*, and *Eomecon chionantha*, among others. Recognizing this value, Seoraksan was designated as a natural monument and protected area in 1965. In 1970, it was designated as the fifth national park in South Korea.

Since 1982, it has been internationally recognized for its conservation value and has been managed as the first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in South Korea.

In 2013, various areas within Seoraksan, including Biryong Falls, Towangseong Falls, Ulsan Rock, and Sogongwon Valley, were designated as national cultural properties and scenic spots. However, the early stages of industrialization occurred before public awareness of environmental conservation, which sometimes took precedence over nature preservation.

One notable example is the failed attempt to designate Seoraksan as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. In 1994, South Korea registered the "Mt. Soraksan Nature Reserve" as the first candidate for the UNESCO World Natural Heritage site that met criteria (VII) and (X). The following year, South Korea applied for its World Heritage designation.

However, strong opposition emerged from local residents who were concerned that the UNESCO World Heritage designation would limit economic benefits due to development restrictions. From the outset, the application was placed on hold due to vehement opposition from Sokcho city and its council. In March 1996, the Gangwon Provincial Council passed a resolution against the designation, and council members, along with local representatives, visited the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to submit a statement of opposition, which included signatures from residents.

Ultimately, in June 1996, the Executive Board of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee deferred the listing of Seoraksan as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. The main reason for the failure was the local opposition, along with the IUCN's on-site investigation report, which stated that Seoraksan did not hold significant natural value. Following this rejection, UNESCO introduced a principle that UNESCO World Heritage designation would not be granted if local residents opposed it.

However, failing to be designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site did not permanently disqualify Seoraksan from this status, and it could be revisited at any time. Similarly, North Korea's second World Cultural Heritage Site, the "Historic Monuments and Sites in Kaesong," was initially deferred due to insufficient boundaries and other reasons in 2008 but was eventually designated as a World Cultural Heritage site in 2013, following modifications and improvements.

The primary reason for the opposition to Seoraksan's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site was the issue of installing a cable car. The proposal for the construction of the cable car between Oeseorak and Gwongeumseong was met with resistance from local residents, who were strongly against it. However, despite the failure to secure the UNESCO World Heritage designation, the cable car project was eventually carried out. After 2000, cable car projects for Namseorak (Osaek) and Hangueryeong were also pursued.

The opposition to Seoraksan's UNESCO World Heritage designation, which was based on concerns about the cable car installation, reflected a short-sighted view that focused only on the economic benefits of development. This case offers valuable lessons about the balance between natural conservation and development and the importance of improving public awareness regarding the international protection and support of South Korea's Seoraksan as a tourism resource and a global natural heritage.

At the entrance of Seoraksan, there is a statue of a Asiatic black bear. It was installed in 1995 to honor the last Asiatic black bear that was killed by a gunshot wound at Madungleong on May 22, 1983. Along with the case of the UNESCO World Heritage designation failure, the Asiatic black bear statue at Madungleong entrance serves as a reminder to hikers of the consequences of human greed for nature.

The Seoraksan Visitor Center

The Taebaeksan National Park Office operates this visitor center. It is located on the entrance road to Seoraksan National Park, and visitors can enjoy various experiences such as ecological exhibitions, Seoraksan VR experiences, and the National Park Stamp Tour. In the ecological exhibition, you can see preserved animals native to Seoraksan, such as mountain goats and wild boars.

For a fee of 2,000 won, you can take a photo against the backdrop of Daechongbong and have it printed with a chroma key.

However, it is relatively less crowded as it offers lesser-known and unique experiences.

Shelter

There are a total of 5 shelters in Seoraksan. They operate on all days except during the wildfire prevention period (usually from November 1st to December 15th and from March 2nd to May 15th). You can make reservations through the National Park Reservation Integrated System (<https://reservation.knps.or.kr/>) for overnight stays. Even if you haven't made a reservation, you can still use the emergency supply store, cooking facilities, and restrooms.

Please note that even if you make a reservation, in the event of severe weather warnings such as heavy snowfall or heavy rain on the day of your visit, hiking and shelter usage may be canceled, and in such cases, your reservation fee will be fully refunded.

The emergency supply store sells items like instant rice, bottled water, isobutane gas, butane gas, pocket knives, headlamps, and batteries, while basic first aid supplies such as bandages and sanitary pads are provided for free upon request to visitors. Due to the need for helicopter transport, the prices of these items can be relatively high.

The Seoraksan National Park office staff members reside on-site year-round, and they take turns hiking up and down the mountain for their commute. This unique work environment has been featured in documentary programs and reality TV shows, earning the nickname of "the most challenging workplace to commute to" in South Korea. Despite being located at a higher altitude, specifically at an elevation of 1,670m, Seoraksan's Jungcheong Shelter is considered more difficult to commute to than Jangteo-mok Shelter in Jirisan, which is situated at an elevation of 1,600m. This is because Seoraksan, known for its rocky terrain, offers more challenging hiking conditions than Jirisan's sandy trails.