

A WALK THROUGH SEOUL PLAZA

Seoul Plaza bore witness to nearly all of the upheavals along Korea's turbulent road to liberation and modernization during the last century. Today, it is the city's favorite location for cultural events and a quiet place to read. A tour of the city would not be complete without a walk through Seoul Plaza. *by Chung Da-young / photographs by Lee Jae-hui*

If you are walking around downtown Seoul, you will almost certainly pass through Seoul Plaza. Located in the heart of the city, the Seoul Plaza is at the crossroads to all areas of old Seoul – Sejong-daero road will lead to Gyeongbokgung Palace, to the north is Cheonggyecheon Stream, and Myeong-dong and Namdaemun are a short walk away. The Plaza has witnessed many history-changing events in Korea for more than a hundred years.

1 Desks are available all around the library for studying and reading.
2 The library is spacious and full of light for the convenience of visitors.
3 The five-meter high bookcase is a popular feature of the library.



AT THE HEART OF SEOUL'S MODERNIZATION

Seoul Plaza first took shape in 1897 when King Gojong returned to Deoksugung Palace after the 1895 assassination of Queen Min. A wide

road was laid between Gyeongbokgung Palace and the main gate of Deoksugung Palace and a modern plaza was constructed in front of Deoksugung Palace. The plaza was situated in a central location near the Central Government Complex in Gwanghwamun, the Parliament Building (now used as the Seoul Metropolitan Council), and the Seoul Museum of Art building in Jeong-dong, which was once the Supreme Court of Korea. It soon became the center stage for the nation's liberation movement from Japanese occupation including, most notably, the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919. The square was later an important location for the pro-democracy movement in the 1960s and rallies throughout Korea's modern history.



Seoul Plaza came under the global spotlight during the 2002 FIFA World Cup when 80,000 people dressed in red shirts gathered there to cheer on the Korean national team. The mass of supporters clad in red, known as the Red Devils, cheered in a highly organized cadence of shouting and clapping in front of jumbo screens.

After the World Cup, the Seoul Metropolitan Government rebuilt the square to provide a better city environment and a green area for Seoulites. In 2004, the traffic lanes that cut across the square and the wide road that ran directly past the old City Hall were removed to make way for a vast green. The Floor Water Fountain was built at the west corner of the plaza. The fountain, a circle of water holes bored into in the sidewalk with 48 floor lights, is an attractive feature of the plaza in the warmer months.

Seoul Government hosts many cultural events throughout the year on Seoul Plaza including the popular Hi! Seoul Festival and various performances. This past October, the Korean pop star PSY held a free concert at the plaza as promised earlier to thank his fans for kick-starting the success of his viral hit song “Gangnam Style.” The singer had earlier vowed to perform topless if his song topped the U.S. chart, and he kept his promise despite remaining at No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100 for a second week. The concert reached its peak when the singer sang his hit song and more than 100,000 fans did the famous “horse dance” with the singer. According to the Seoul Metropolitan Police, this was the largest crowd in Seoul Plaza since the 2002 FIFA World Cup. The city government supported the event by providing the square grounds and diverting traffic within a three-block radius.

Towards the winter festive season, the plaza transforms into a public ice skating rink for Seoulites and foreign visitors alike. The grass is temporarily removed from the square and an ice skating rink is built over the grounds. Ice skates can be rented at a reasonable rate of KRW 1,000 (USD 0.93) for one hour, and lockers

and helmets for young children are available free of charge. The skating rink was first installed in 2004, and it has since become a popular dating site for young couples and a special treat for children with their parents.

NEW LIBRARY, NEW CITY HALL

New attractions of Seoul Plaza are the old City Hall, which reopened as the Seoul Metropolitan Library, and the new City Hall building right behind it. The old City Hall was built in 1926, during the Japanese Colonial Period.

After liberation in 1945, it served as a local government building, and for more than 60 years it served as the government building for the Seoul Metropolitan Government. The government city decided to build a new city hall to house the expanding government offices and staff, and remodel the old City Hall as a public library.

After four years of construction, the government moved into the new building in September of last year, and Seoul Metropolitan Library opened its doors to the public. The library restored the main marble staircase and halls of the old City Hall, symbolizing the historical heritage of Seoul.

The library has a collection of over 200,000 volumes and 20 computers to view 4,200 DVDs and audio books. Visitors are free to walk into the library to read books, catch up with current affairs, or just take a break from walking. The third floor displays the most iconic features of the library where visitors can see the restored and remodeled old Mayor's Office, reception room, and meeting room.



Ice skating in the middle of downtown Seoul is sure to be an unforgettable memory for many foreign visitors.

INFORMATION
How to get there City Hall Subway Station, Line 1 or 2, Exit 5

Skating Rink
Open: Dec 14, 2012 to Feb 3, 2013 / 10 AM to 10 PM
Skate Rental Fee: KRW 1,000 per pair of ice skates, 30percent discount for group reservation of 20 persons or more.
Website: www.seoulskate.or.kr/eng.php

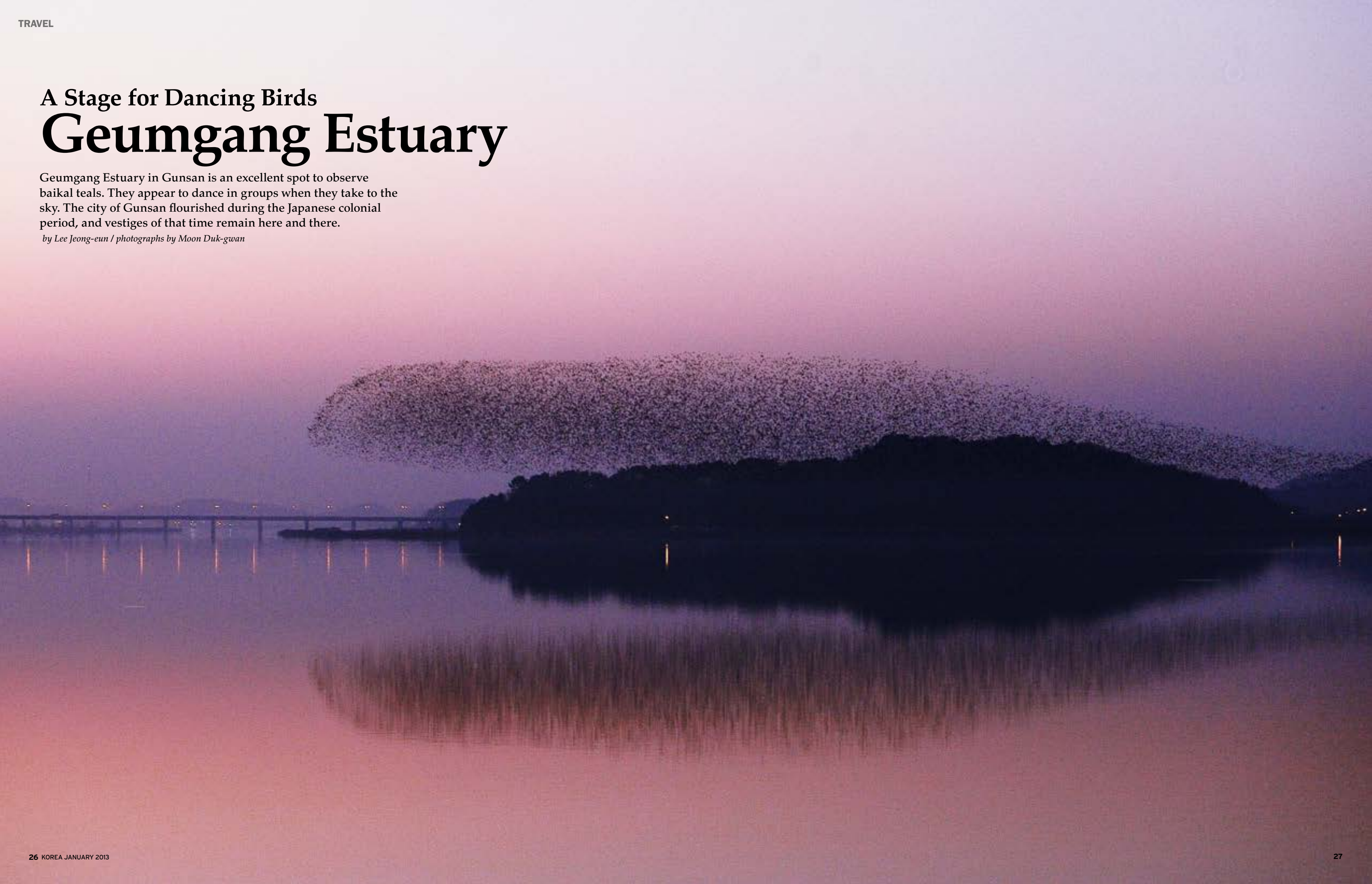
Seoul Metropolitan Library
Open: 9 AM to 9 PM (weekdays), 9 AM to 6 PM (weekends)
Website: lib.seoul.go.kr/www/html/en/main.jsp

A Stage for Dancing Birds

Geumgang Estuary

Geumgang Estuary in Gunsan is an excellent spot to observe baikal teals. They appear to dance in groups when they take to the sky. The city of Gunsan flourished during the Japanese colonial period, and vestiges of that time remain here and there.

by Lee Jeong-eun / photographs by Moon Duk-gwan





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When the sun sinks below the horizon behind Geumgang Estuary and the sky glows in shades of wine, a long island in the river comes alive. Did you read that correctly? What seemed to be a mere island a moment before is a colony of migrant birds. These birds hunt together and soar high into the sky every day around sunrise and sunset. When the leader takes off, hundreds of thousands follow, blocking out the sky with their numbers and making for a spectacular, surreal scene of continuously shifting shapes. People think of their impromptu movements romantically as “group dancing,” but in fact the birds are jockeying with one another to be as close to the

1 Numerous migratory birds from Siberia return to the Geumgang Estuary every winter.
2 Gunsan was the fastest growing city in Korea in the early 20th century.



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center of the flock as possible, where it is safer.

The Korean Peninsula greets numerous migratory birds from Siberia every winter. Geumgang Estuary is an especially important destination for those winged visitors with its shallow waters, gentle currents, and vast farms nearby that afford excellent spots for resting and hunting. Some 90 percent of the world’s baikal teals come to this very estuary every year to spend the winter.

The teals rest all day long in the river, and when the sun sets, they fly over Mt. Manghaesan to the Gimje Plains in search of food, coming back at dawn.

They can be seen from a number of bird observatories, the best of which is Napo Sipjatteul Bird Observatory.

A CITY OF HISTORY

Visitors to Gunsan are strongly recommended to see the Geumgang River. Gunsan was the fastest growing city in Korea in the early 20th century, serving as the port of choice for the Japanese for shipping out their plunder of Korea’s bounty, be that rice, minerals, or other resources. The Japanese built a port and railways, and Japanese culture firmly took root across the entire city where about half the 16,000 residents were Japanese. The customs house,



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temple, and residences from the period remain. Especially famous are Dongguksa Temple, a two-story wooden house built by a Japanese named Hirose dubbed “Hirose’s House,” and the railway village in Gyeongam-dong.

If you visit Gunsan with children, don’t miss the Jinpo Maritime Theme Park in the inner harbor. The park was built in commemoration of Jinpodaechoep (Great Battle of Jinpo), a major Korean triumph against Japanese infiltrators in the Geumgang Estuary in August 1380, the sixth year of the reign of King U of the Goryeo Dynasty. General Choe Mu-seon, who was also a scientist and inventor, led Korean forces to victory using cannons of his own invention charged with a powerful form of gunpowder. On display in the park are retired military vehicles used by the Korean Army, Navy, and Air Force.

Dongguksa is a typical Japanese temple surrounded by a lush bamboo forest. All the parts of the temple including the main buildings, toilets, and bath are connected by a corridor, revealing some of the salient features of Japanese architecture.

The reed field in the village of Sinseong is not part of Gunsan but of Seocheon. Still, it is near the bird observatories and is one of the four most important reed fields in Korea. Seen

from the 1.2-kilometer embankment, the fields spread unbroken all the way to the Geumgang River and the hills of Gunsan far off in the distance.

When you get your first hunger pangs during your visit, you may want to try a bun stuffed with adzuki bean paste at Yiseongdang, Korea’s oldest Western-style bakery, which was founded in 1909 and run by Japanese owners before liberation in 1945. Every day, the bakery sells about 1,000 rice buns stuffed with adzuki bean paste. It also offers vegetable buns and croquettes stuffed with curry and glass noodles.

3, 4 Vestiges of the Japanese colonial period remain all over the city.

5 The Japanese chose Gunsan for shipping out their plunder of rice and resources from Korea, building a port and railways.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

what to eat

Jjamppong at Bokseongnu

Dozens of people can regularly be seen lined up in front of Bokseongnu eagerly waiting for a bowl of Gunsan-style *jjamppong*, a big bowl of noodles filled to the brim with soup containing lots of seafood such as cockles and clams and topped with softly pan-fried pork as a garnish.



how to get there

Car It takes about two hours from Seoul to Seocheon Interchange via Seohaean Expressway.

Train It takes around three hours from Yongsan Station to Janghang Station.

Bus It takes roughly one hour from Seoul to Janghang.



Swim Your Dream in Jeju The Seogwipo Penguin Swimming Festival

Courageous people gather together on Jeju to swim in the cold winter waters to make a wish for the New Year. This is the 14th Seogwipo Penguin Swimming Festival. *by Lee Jeong-eun*

The so-called “polar bear swimmers” take a plunge into the cold waters in Vancouver and New York City on New Year’s Day. At Haeundae Beach in Busan and Jungmun Saekdal Beach on Jeju Island, the “penguin swimmers” venture into the sea to ring in the New Year with hope in their hearts. This year marks the 14th Seogwipo Penguin Swimming Festival. Extreme swimming enthusiasts will bring excitement to Jungmun Saekdal Beach by fearlessly plunging into the winter waters

on January 5, 2013. The theme of the festival this year is “A Power Start for 2013,” which encourages putting the last year behind and planning for a brighter new year.

The festival features lots of exciting things to see and do in addition to the swimming competition. Participants will send up balloons with their wishes for the New Year, ring the “Bell of Promise,” bury a time capsule containing their New Year’s resolutions, compete in the “Penguin Wrestling King”

contest, search for “gifts of fortune” buried in the sand, and enjoy a celebratory performance by a brass band. These other events will start at 9:30 a.m. and the swimming contest begins at 11:00 a.m.

The “penguin” swimmers will warm up by doing aerobics with professional aerobics practitioners, and then jump into the water at the sound of a Korean traditional gong called *jing*.

How many will turn out on the beach to swim this winter? Every year, beautiful Jungmun Saekdal Beach has seen 500 to 800 people take the penguin plunge, with more than 2,000 visitors enjoying the other events. The penguin swimmers are of all ages. Children usually have fun paddling their feet in the water, and some group participants give shouts of joy and excitement or play a mock cavalry battle in the water to show off their health and youth. Yet, the water is so cold that even the heartiest of them have to get out after about half an hour.

This extraordinary winter event attracts locals and foreign visitors alike. Catherine Rusk, a Canadian English teacher at a middle school on Jeju, mustered up the courage to become a penguin swimmer in January 2012. She recalls that it was indeed cold, but she had so much fun that the cold was bearable enough.

One of the most delightful moments for penguin swimmers may be when they pick up a “ball of fortune” while swimming. The organizers of the festival scatter balls of fortune in the sea beforehand, and getting your hand on one of the balls means that you can stay at a hotel in the Jungmun tourist district, have a meal at the ICC Jeju (International Convention Center), or play golf at the Jungmun Golf Club free of charge.

The finale of the festival is eating traditional specialties of Jeju—*momguk* (a thick pork and seaweed soup), *dombegogi* (broiled sliced pork), and other wonderful dishes, all prepared by villagers nearby. This warms the bodies and hearts of the “penguins” after their jaunt in the winter sea.



JEJUDO AS UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE

Being Korea’s largest island, Jeju is a fascinating tourist destination. It is off the southern coast of the Korean Peninsula. Marado, the nation’s southernmost island, is only eight kilometers off Jeju.

Jeju is home to Mt. Hallasan, which rises from the center of the island and is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, along with the lava tubes that run all over the island. These and other unique features make Jeju breathtakingly beautiful wherever you go.

Still, Jungmun, where the Penguin Swimming Festival takes place, is definitely one of Jeju’s best tourist destinations, famous for the Yeomiji Botanical Garden, the tiered Cheonjeyeon Waterfalls, and the Jungmun-Daepo Columnar Joints. The area has excellent accommodations and leisure facilities including hotels, condominiums, golf courses, windsurfing areas, and shopping centers. This is, needless to say, an extremely popular area for tourists.



1 The Seogwipo Penguin Swimming Festival is held to put the last year behind and plan for a brighter new year.
2 Around 2,000 to 3,000 people visit the festival every year.