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South Korea

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Introduction

South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea, stands today as one of the most dynamic and influential countries in East Asia. Though occupying only the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, it looms large on the world stage in fields as diverse as technology, pop culture, economics, and diplomacy. Behind this remarkable visibility is a long, multifaceted history of resilience, creativity, and transformation that continues to shape the present and inspire the future.

From its earliest days, the land now called South Korea has been a meeting ground of civilizations—a site where ancient kingdoms flourished and distinctive traditions took root. Over thousands of years, Korea has weathered invasions, internal strife, and periods of unity and division. The scars and strengths of that history remain visible in the bustling cities, the quiet mountain temples, and the everyday customs of its people.

The twentieth century was especially turbulent for South Korea. Japanese colonization, devastating war, authoritarian regimes, and then a meteoric leap from poverty to prosperity have defined recent generations. These dramatic upheavals fueled a society at once grounded in enduring Confucian values and yet unfailingly adaptable, forward-thinking, and global in perspective. Today’s South Korea is both a showcase of rapid modernization and technological achievement, and an ardent preserver of its own cultural treasures.

Culturally, South Korea’s influence has soared beyond expectations. The global phenomenon known as “Hallyu,” or the Korean Wave, has brought K-pop, cinema, dramas, cuisine, fashion, and language to every continent, opening a new chapter for global cultural exchange in the 21st century. Yet, beneath the surface of glitzy entertainment and high-tech lifestyles, South Korea grapples with enduring challenges—demographic shifts, social change, and the persistent shadow of division from the North.

This book, “South Korea: Portrait of a Country,” seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of this remarkable nation. It journeys through the landscapes, peoples, and stories that have shaped modern South Korea, offering perspectives on its history, society, art, politics, economy, and contemporary life. With chapters dedicated to both the foundational aspects and the dynamic changes of today, readers will discover not just what South Korea is, but how it came to be, and where it might go next.

Whether you are planning to visit, seeking to understand the news, or simply curious about a nation whose impact is ever growing, this book invites you to step into South

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Korea’s world—its triumphs and trials, its modern vibrancy and ancient depths, its unity and contradictions. As this portrait unfolds, it is my hope that readers will find not only knowledge but also new ways of seeing what it means to be part of the global community in our time.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its Borders: Geography of South Korea

South Korea occupies the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, a finger of land extending south from the vast East Asian landmass. To its north lies North Korea, separated by the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a 4-kilometer-wide (2.5 miles) strip of land that acts as a buffer along the 1953 military cease-fire line. This boundary, roughly following the 38th parallel, stretches approximately 240 kilometers (150 miles) from the Han River estuary in the west to just south of the North Korean town of Kosŏng on the east coast. To the east, the country is bordered by the East Sea (Sea of Japan), to the south by the East China Sea, and to the west by the Yellow Sea. The Korea Strait, a relatively narrow body of water, separates South Korea from the Japanese island of Tsushima to the southeast.

South Korea's total land area is approximately 100,364 square kilometers (38,751 square miles), with about 290 square kilometers (110 square miles) occupied by water. To put this in perspective, South Korea is roughly the size of Portugal or Hungary, or the U.S. state of Indiana. The country's unique geological landscape is a result of tectonic plate movement, volcanic activity, and erosion, a process that has sculpted its diverse topography of mountains, valleys, and coastal plains.

The topography of South Korea is largely defined by its mountains, which cover about three-quarters of its land area. Early European visitors famously described the land as resembling "a sea in a heavy gale" due to the numerous successive mountain ranges that crisscross the peninsula. The country's highest peak is Hallasan, an extinct volcano that forms Jeju Island and rises to 1,950 meters (6,398 feet) above sea level.

Two major mountain ranges dominate the South Korean landscape. The Taebaek Mountains run primarily in a north-south direction along the eastern coastline, extending into North Korea. This range serves as the country's main drainage divide, separating the eastern slopes from the more gentle western slopes. From the Taebaek Mountains, several other ranges branch off with a northeast-southwest orientation. Most notable among these are the Sobaek Mountains, which undulate in a long S-shape across the peninsula, forming a significant portion of the Baekdu-daegan, the symbolic "spine" of Korea. The peaks of the Sobaek Mountains are generally well over 1,000 meters above sea level, with Jirisan, at 1,915 meters (6,283 feet), being the highest peak in the range and the tallest on the South Korean mainland after Hallasan.

While mountains are pervasive, lowlands constitute only about 30% of South Korea's total land area. These vital flatlands are primarily found along the coasts, especially

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the west coast, and along major rivers. Key lowland areas include the Han River plain around Seoul, the Pyeongtaek coastal plain southwest of Seoul, the Geum River basin, the Nakdong River basin, and the Yeongsan and Honam plains in the southwest. A narrow plain also stretches along the east coast.

South Korea is largely surrounded by water, boasting a coastline of 2,413 kilometers (1,499 miles) along its three seas. The eastern coastline is generally unindented and relatively straight, with mountains dropping dramatically into the sea. In contrast, the southern and western coasts are jagged and irregular, forming a complex ria coastline with many inlets and bays. This convoluted southern and western coastline is also home to approximately three thousand islands, most of which are small and uninhabited. The shallow Yellow Sea off the western coast and the intricate Korean coastline create one of the world's most pronounced tidal variations, with a maximum of about 9 meters (30 feet) at Incheon, the entry port for Seoul.

The country's rivers primarily flow westward or southward, emptying into either the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea. Only a few short, swift rivers drain eastward from the Taebaek Mountains. South Korea's three principal rivers, the Han, Geum, and Nakdong, all originate in the Taebaek Mountains and wind their way through the ranges before reaching their lowland plains. The Nakdong River is South Korea's longest, flowing southward for 523 kilometers (325 miles) to the Korea Strait. The Han River, famously flowing through Seoul, is 514 kilometers long, and the Geum River measures 401 kilometers. These major rivers tend to be broad and shallow, with significant seasonal variations in their water flow.

South Korea experiences a temperate climate with four distinct seasons, a characteristic shared with other East Asian countries. The climate is heavily influenced by its proximity to the Asian landmass, which leads to significant summer-winter temperature extremes. The northeast Asian monsoons also profoundly affect precipitation patterns.

Winters, typically from late November to mid-March, are cold and relatively dry, especially in the north and interior regions. Average winter temperatures in Seoul hover around 0°C (32°F), but they can drop below freezing, sometimes reaching -15°C (5°F) on particularly cold days. Northern and mountainous areas like Gangwon Province can be even colder. Snowfall is relatively rare and usually not abundant, though it creates picturesque winter landscapes in mountainous regions. A cold, dry wind often blows from the continent during winter. The southern coast, however, remains milder, with average January temperatures generally above freezing.

Summers, from June to August, are hot, humid, and rainy. High humidity can make the heat feel sweltering, particularly in July and August. Average temperatures across the country are more uniform during the summer, with August being the warmest month, averaging around 25°C (77°F). In Seoul, average daily highs in August can reach 31°C

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(87°F), with nighttime lows around 22°C (72°F). Central regions like Daejeon and Daegu can experience slightly higher daytime highs, climbing to 32°C (89°F).

Most of South Korea's precipitation occurs during the summer monsoon period, from late June through September, with 60-70% of the annual rainfall happening within these three months. This phenomenon, known as *jangma*, can bring heavy rainfall and significantly increase the likelihood of extreme precipitation events. Typhoons are also possible from July through September, particularly affecting coastal and island regions.

Spring, from March to May, and autumn, from September to November, are generally short but pleasant, characterized by clear skies and comfortable temperatures. These seasons are often considered the best times to visit.

The majority of South Korea's soils are derived from granite and gneiss, ancient Precambrian rocks that form a significant part of the country's geology. As a result, sandy and brown-colored soils are common. These soils are typically well-leached and have a low humus content. In the highlands, one can find podzolic soils, also known as ash-gray forest soils, which are formed by the cold of the long winter season.

South Korea is home to three distinct terrestrial ecoregions: Central Korean deciduous forests, Manchurian mixed forests, and Southern Korea evergreen forests. While dense forests once covered the peninsula, much of the ancient Korean forests were cut down over centuries. However, successful reforestation programs since the 1960s, coupled with a decline in firewood use as an energy source, have led to a significant recovery of foliage on South Korea's hills. Except for narrow subtropical belts along the southern coast and on Jeju Island, which feature evergreen broad-leaved forests, most areas contain a mix of deciduous broad-leaved and coniferous trees. Pine species are particularly representative, alongside spruces, larches, and yews. Indigenous flora includes the white forsythia, a shrub, and the Korean fir.

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