

KOREAN

ENCORE

An eighth-century carving of Kwan Seum Bosal, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, graces the top of Namsan Mountain near Busan, South Korea, which pulses with 21st-century innovation.

FROM LEFT: ROBERT HARDING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO;
YOORAN PARK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

A teacher returns to Busan as a student *By Lavinia Spalding*

was sitting on the steps of a tiny Buddhist hermitage high on a mountain in Gyeongju, South Korea, when Myung-Jung Sunim, the resident nun I'd met a few hours before, pointed up. "Look," she said. "The moon is bright. The stars are bright. That's because you came here."

Myung-Jung Sunim and I sat, admiring the sky, the silhouetted pine trees, the stillness. Shortly before 8 p.m.—when we'd begin observing noble silence—we headed inside and she said goodnight, leaving me alone in the small shrine room. I glanced at my blanket on the floor. I knew I should sleep; meditation would begin at 4 a.m., after which we'd climb to the top of Namsan Mountain. But to close my eyes now seemed insane: Outside my window was a national treasure and, at this moment, I was the only human on the planet looking at it.

I'd come to Gyeongju—the capital of Korea's ancient Shilla Empire (57 BCE–935 CE)—because of another Sunim (the Korean title for nun or monk). When I was in my 20s, I'd spent hours discussing Buddhism with a monk named Won-Tong Sunim. Today, two decades later, I'd driven with him from Busan (located 45 miles south) to Gyeongju, and we'd hiked Namsan, home to 150 temples, 130 stone Buddhas, and 100 pagodas. Just before dusk, we'd reached National Treasure 312, Chilburam, or Hermitage of Seven Buddhas, where Myung-Jung Sunim greeted us with cups of snow chrysanthemum tea. And now, tonight, those seven Buddhas, carved in stone more than 1,000 years ago, stood before me, illuminated by lights and an almost-full moon. I sat, crossed my legs, and inhaled incense.

It was my 49th birthday, which meant nearly half my life had passed since I'd moved to Busan to teach English. I'd spent six years in Korea, constantly reinventing myself. I'd earned a red belt in taekwondo, cooked traditional dishes, and become proficient in speaking Korean. I'd also studied meditation with Won-Tong Sunim, beginning my path to Buddhism. Over time, however, I'd lost most of what I'd learned. I quit taekwondo just weeks before testing for my black belt, stopped making Korean food, and let my grasp of the language deteriorate. Though I remain a Buddhist, my practice is patchy.

So, I returned—my first visit in 17 years—for a one-week cultural crash course designed to pack six of my younger years into six days. I wanted to pursue the lost passions that once fueled my life while rediscovering the place that shaped me.

SOUTH KOREA'S SECOND CITY

Things didn't go smoothly at first. I couldn't communicate with the hotel owner, who spoke like a contestant in a Korean speed-talking competition. Then, the next morning, I spent hours roaming the quiet, hilly Gwangandong neighborhood searching unsuccessfully for my old apartment. When I turned to ogle a scene more Californian than Korean—a corgi sunbathing in a café doorway—I twisted my ankle and had to reschedule my taekwondo class.

I also found that the city I loved had changed. Even the name was different (when I'd lived here, it was spelled "Pusan").

Because I'd watched the blockbuster *Black Panther*, filmed partly in Busan, I knew that a dazzling suspension bridge (the scene of an epic car chase) now stretched across the bay. Still, the place looked too shiny. A certain down-to-earth grittiness had always distinguished Busan—South Korea's largest port and second-largest metropolis, population 3.5 million—from glamorous, cosmopolitan Seoul.

Now, shimmering skyscrapers punctuated the city like clusters of exclamation points, and the streets teemed with boutique shops, contemporary art galleries, craft breweries, and cafés so cute they were trip hazards. Busan is home to Centum City Shinsegae, the world's largest department store, and the Busan International Film Festival, one of Asia's biggest film festivals. There's a yacht club now, with a rooftop bar. And there's a glass-bottomed skywalk that extends over the sea. Last year, *Lonely Planet* named my undersung, under-touristed city its top Asian destination.

I, too, had changed. Once equipped to easily navigate the metro, I found myself incapable of reading the map. Running late to my first lesson at the Korean Language Institute for Foreigners, I admitted defeat and hailed a taxi. I feared it was a bad omen for the rest of my visit.

CONVERSING, COOKING, AND KICKING

"Anyonghasseyo!" my instructor, Jenna Kang, sang out as I entered the office. I returned her greeting in Korean, then immediately switched to English. To Jenna's credit, she kept speaking Korean until I did, too. And soon, words flew from corners of my brain like popcorn from a deep kettle. During a grammar lesson covering present, past, future, interrogative, formal, and formal-honorific, Jenna momentarily switched to English. "Your pronunciation is natural!" she exclaimed. "That can be a problem—Koreans probably speak quickly to you." I thought of my speed-talking hotel proprietor, to whom I was forever repeating the phrase *moreugesseumnida* (I don't know).

Jenna sent me away with homework, so I spent the bus



Gamcheon Culture Village



A colorful Busan street scene



Cinema Center, one venue of the Busan International Film Festival



Jagalchi, South Korea's biggest fish market



Centum City Shinsegae, the world's largest department store

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PANWASIN SEEMALA/ALAMY; STOCK PHOTO; HEMISALAMY; STOCK PHOTO (3); CELILIA COLUSSI/ALAMY; STOCK PHOTO



Clockwise from top right: Our writer's visit ranged from the practical—doing her Korean-language homework—to the inspirational—ascending Namsan Mountain with monk Won-Tong Sunim and nun Myung-Jung Sunim, who brewed cups of snow chrysanthemum tea.

Long ago, a succession of ajummas had taught me family recipes (including japchae), so I worried that learning from a man might feel disloyal. Luckily, Jun-Ho regularly invoked an ajumma. After asking me to knead the sujebi dough for 10 minutes, he said, “My mother kneads it for 30 minutes.” As I sautéed wild parsley for the haemul-jeon, he said, “My mother uses different vegetables for this dish.” With each recipe, he shared his mom’s interpretation.

My favorite flavor memories imbued the dishes: garlic, sesame, soy, red pepper. The japchae was perfect. “Koreans consider japchae festival food,” Jun-Ho said. “It’s eaten especially on Korean Thanksgiving and Lunar New Year.”

“I could eat it every day,” I said.

Jun-Ho smiled. “Then every day is your festival.”

After class, I roamed the labyrinthine streets and stairways of the Gamcheon Culture Village, a hillside community dedicated to preserving local arts. I admired mosaics, murals, sculptures, and views of terraced, pastel-colored houses. Along the main drag, young couples strolled arm-in-arm wearing rented *hanboks* (traditional Korean clothes). Shops sold everything from handicrafts to selfie sticks; one store carried nothing but novelty socks, and a kiosk sold cotton candy with cartoon faces. Before leaving, I sat on a

bench savoring one final taste of the day: *bungeoppang* (warm, crispy fish-shaped bread with a sweet red-bean filling) while marveling at how improbably hip Busan had become.

By the appointed evening for my class at Daeyoung Taekwondo, my ankle hadn’t fully healed. I went anyway, determined to complete my crash course. I communicated to Master Yoon that I was injured and could use only one side of my body.

“Take it easy,” he instructed me. “Soft practice.” So I limped while the other students did laps, literally running circles around me. When they jumped, I stood still. Master Yoon bounded over. “Sit and watch?” he asked. I sheepishly accepted a chair. Later, as I was contemplating sneaking out, he returned. “Man-to-man combat?” he offered. Though

my left ankle ached, I figured I could still kick with my right foot—and when that foot made a resounding *thwack*, Master Yoon seemed impressed.

For the rest of class, I kicked, punched, and yelled. I paired with a green belt and threw her on the mat by twisting my thumb into her wrist. Finally, Master Yoon presented a stack of boards. When my turn came, I summoned my red-belted self and kicked the board—(Shall we call it what it was? A super-thin pine plank.)—with all my strength. It broke in half, pieces flew, and my spirit soared.

Toward week’s end, I had a 20-minute conversation with the hotel owner without saying “*moreugesseumnida*” once. But Jenna wasn’t finished giving me homework. “Watch Korean dramas,” she suggested. Meanwhile, Jun-Ho emailed me recipes to re-create at home. Even Won-Tong Sunim had an assignment for me. “Just meditate 10 minutes a day,” he said. “It’s good for your mind.” Challenges accepted. As for taekwondo? I could finally let go of my regret for not earning a black belt. Breaking the board was enough.

I also let go of my objections to the updated Busan and surrendered to modernizations, such as Gorilla Brewing’s tasty IPA, Wood House Hotel’s perfect cappuccino, and Shinsega’s opulent spa. And I turned up enough of Busan’s distinctive grit. The smell of *duenjang* (soybean paste) still wafted from windows, and fish cakes and soju were still sold in *pojangmachas*, rickety plastic tents. The city appeared newer, but its old soul was intact.

A REAWAKENING

The morning after my birthday, I woke at 3:45 in the shrine room and meditated. Then, shortly before sunrise, Myung-Jung Sunim, Won-Tong Sunim, and I set out. It was a grueling 20-minute scramble to the top of Namsan, and my ankle complained. But daylight was breaking, and we didn’t want to miss whatever was at the mountaintop.

When we arrived, I understood. On a steep rock face above the Bonghwa Valley was an eighth-century carving of Kwan Seum Bosal, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It was transcendent. We did prostrations on the narrow cliff ledge, then silently watched the sky turn saffron. And slowly, it came to me that my quest hadn’t been academic after all, but spiritual: the timeless, archetypal search for meaning in a sacred place. Korea was a pilgrimage back to myself. Twenty-five years ago, this country had shaped me into a dauntless young woman. Now I’d found that woman again, inside me, and she was eager for more reinvention. I couldn’t let her down.

After some time, Myung-Jung Sunim broke our silence. “It’s clear today,” she said. “Many people climb up here and cannot see the sunrise. I think you are very lucky.”

“*Algesseumnida*,” I said. I know.

Lavinia Spalding is the author of *Writing Away* (Travelers’ Tales, 2009) and series editor of *The Best Women’s Travel Writing* (Travelers’ Tales). Her work has also appeared in *Afar* and *Sunset* magazines.

LAVINIA SPALDING

LEARN

JunoTrip Cooking Class. Daily morning class (about four hours). *About \$56. junotrip.com.*

Daeyoung Taekwondo. Government-certified to teach foreigners. *About \$51. klook.com.*

Korean Language Institute for Foreigners. Private and group classes from beginner to advanced. *About \$25 for 50-minute private lesson; \$9 for a group class. kliff.co.kr.*

Beomeosa. You can book an overnight temple stay at this 1,300-year-old national monument in Busan. *About \$59. beomeo.kr/eng_templestay/idx.php.*

DO

Hit the Sand. Haeundae and Gwangalli are popular beaches. At night, street performers come out and Gwangandaekyo, a.k.a. Diamond Bridge, is lit up with 100,000 colors.

Head to a Fish Market. Jagalchi, featured in *Black Panther*, is South Korea’s largest fish market. Choose your seafood downstairs, then head upstairs to any restaurant that will prepare dishes with your selected ingredients.

Sing Like a K-Pop Celeb. *Noraebang* (Korean karaoke) is a national obsession anyone can join. You’ll find singing rooms on almost every commercial city block. Pay by the hour and belt out tunes (in English or Korean) over drinks and baskets of shrimp-flavored chips.

Indulge in a Bathhouse. *Jjimjilbangs* (bathhouses) are intrinsic to Korean culture, and Busan has hundreds, mostly inexpensive (around \$8), packed with families, and some open 24 hours a day for soaking, scrubbing, and sleeping. Spa Land at Centum City Shinsega has 22 spas and 13 themed saunas.

The Korea Tourism Organization has more information about South Korea. (323) 634-0280; *english.visitkorea.or.kr.*

Your AAA travel agent can provide trip-planning information. Visit an Auto Club branch, call (800) 814-7471, or go to *AAA.com/explore.*