

A Walk In The Park: A Weekend At Jirisan

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At some point in our collective tenures in Gwangju, most of us have conquered Mudeungsan. And why not? It's easily accessible, there is a fantastic variety of trails, and most importantly, it can be done in a day. For those whose mountaineering spirit runs a little deeper there is the allure of [Jirisan](#), Korea's largest national park, just two hours northeast of Gwangju. To delay winter for just one more weekend, a friend and I hit the trails last November and found out that Jirisan is much more than just another mountain.

From Gwangju, the easiest access to Jirisan is via Hwaomsa, a small village at the southwest entrance to the park. There is also an astounding Buddhist temple there. After a day's hike to the ridge of the mountain we planned to stay at the [Nagodan](#) shelter and descend via the Piagol Valley. Sadly, the 7:30 am wake-up call was the earliest I had ever been up in Gwangju. I was sure the sun was up somewhere, but the dense clouds surrounding my apartment building left me with doubt. Undeterred, I hoped Jirisan would be a mountain oasis of boat drinks and blue skies.

At the rest stop, my hiking partner and I passed by the walking sticks, parkas, and portable stoves to pick up our souvenir national park bandanas, an item that would have untold value later. Just being in the foothills of the mountain we could feel the difference in the air, and as we once again boarded the bus we realized how great it was to get out of the city.

As we deboarded in Hwaomsa we saw for the first time that the only thing more frightening than an angry ajumma is one trying to sell you something. We were assaulted by a horde of women in second-hand clothes, each boasting the best bibimbap. Undemocratically we opted for the restaurant closest to the road; perhaps a subconscious attempt to save our steps.

In addition to the restaurants (the last full meal we would see that weekend) Hwaomsa also has a well-stocked convenience store to stock up at, whether it's for the day or for the weekend. Travelling light, we got the hiker's standard: crackers, chocolate bars, fruit, precooked rice, water, and of course, soju. Like the bandanas, this too would prove to be quite valuable later in the weekend.

The grey skies of Gwangju followed us to the mountain and had blackened into rain. While the descending hikers were literally running for their cars we were quite comfortable. Along the well-marked trail a man informed us that if we were planning to stay at Nagodan we should have a reservation. Nodding politely we continued. All of the hikers we had seen were going down; who else but two Canadians without raincoats would disregard both weather and season for a weekend on the mountain?

At this time of year most of the leaves had already fallen, but the bareness of the trees seemed to give the mountain an honesty the other seasons wouldn't allow. With the leaves on the ground we could see the mountain for what it truly was: an awesome terrain marked by both beauty and abrasion. Historically speaking, Jirisan has been used for invasion, battle and hiding, and the crunch of the leaves below us echoed much more than our progress.

By the time we reached Nagodan the ridge of the mountain was completely covered in black clouds, giving the impression it was much later than it really was. In a way it was frightening, almost like how your first Halloween without your parents might have been. Nagodan itself is well-stocked, provides excellent views, and unbeknownst to us, is only one kilometre away from a parking lot. It seems that reservations are a good idea after all, especially if you plan a trip once hiking season officially starts. Thankfully there were a few no-shows on the reservation list and we were allowed to spend the night in their sleeping quarters, which was simply two-levels of heated floor. Beside the main lodge is a dining hall, where the more equipped hikers unloaded propane stoves for full mountain feasts. Our ramen seemed even less appealing than usual, especially considering we had already finished our appetizer of soda crackers. However, what was initially our greatest fear turned into our prime bartering chip, and a soju-less family offered some galbi in exchange for a few bottles and a free English lesson. Once again my theory of always buying too much booze paid off.

As the night continued the clouds dispersed to make way for one of the most brilliant skies I have seen since arriving in Korea. Fuelled by so-ju I took the time to look around and see one of Korea's most beautiful landscapes lit only by the moon and the stars. Suddenly every song that ever made my cry came hurtling through my memory, reasserting themselves in the soundtrack of my life.

Unable to sleep through the symphony of snores we woke up to sunny skies and a brisk morning breeze. This was the Jirisan I had come to see. Walking along the spine of the mountain we moved quickly and happily, greeting our fellow hikers as we passed. The panorama is as amazing as it is advertised, and it's hard to not stop and take another

picture every two minutes. This was definitely another in a long list of moments reminding me how great it is to be in Korea.

After another consultation of our Lonely Planet it became clear that we had walked clear off their map. It was a good thing we didn't bother to ask anyone the best way to get down. Thankfully our bandanas had a reliable trail map to get us through the Piagol Valley. With the best 2000 won I have ever spent in hand we passed through the valley to Jikjeon, a tiny village at the bottom with little to offer except a cold beer and a bus back to Hwaomsa, where we could venture back to Gwang-ju.

In the spirit of the weekend, though, it was best not to look that far ahead. We still had a few hours of sunshine, a late bus, and a well-deserved beer to worry about.