

## **The Best Ride In Korea**

by Jeff Shields

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Although I've had my bike for almost six months now, it wasn't until recently that I fully realized how great Korean motorcycle travel is. Sure, I was having a beer on the deck of the Mokpo-Jeju ferry and my bike was safely tied up in the hull, but that moment officially ushered in what I've been waiting for all winter: this summer's riding season.

Before returning to Korea I was absolutely certain I would not get a motorcycle. I know all of my friends had them and they were apparently the best way to get around, but I just wasn't interested. In fact, I was terrified of them. After a few months of looking at over-priced Bongos, however, I changed my mind and joined the ranks of the unlicensed, unregistered and uninsured riders of Gwangju.

For those looking to buy a bike there are two ways to go about it. The first way is to find a dealer and buy one from them. Offering both new and used bikes dealers are generally more expensive, but the bikes have definitely been better maintained. Plus, and this is a big plus, they are shinier. Dealers can be found anywhere, but a good number of shops can be found at Dongimno 0-ga, about a block north of Lotte Department Store. The other way is to ask around at the local foreigner bars on the weekend. Given the nature of our revolving door community someone is always looking to sell, and you can usually find a good price from someone desperate to get anything before they continue their travels. You can get a quality used bike from a dealer for as low as 500,000 won and even lower from a private sale. Bikes at these prices are 125cc, which won't exactly make you an Easy Rider, but it is definitely all you need as a beginner.

The issue of having a driver's license and insurance is debatable from a foreigner's point of view. Part of the allure of riding here is that it is so cheap and simple; those things just seem to be an added cost and hassle. The police seem to be blind to motorcycles anyway, and the few times I have heard of foreigners being stopped (if they even stop in the first place) they are quickly let on their way because of the language barrier. Obtaining a license is apparently easy enough; there are Driver's Examination Bureau's throughout the city. Have a Korean friend point you in the direction of the one nearest you, show them your license from home and you'll be on your way after an eye examination and signing some papers.

Once on the road there are myriad places to go, both in and out of Gwangju. City driving is hectic to say the least, and with the Jeollanamdo countryside so accessible there is no reason to stay on the mean streets. A few places that are worth seeing outside of Gwangju are:

- [Wolchulsan](#): South Korea's smallest national park offers a challenging hike for day-trippers with some outstanding views. Highway 13 South out of Gwangju will take you straight there in about an hour and fifteen minutes.
- [Damyang](#): This small town north of Gwangju is the site of the Damyang Bamboo Crafts Museum. Unless you're a big bamboo fan there isn't much fun to be had, other than terrorizing the kids on the bamboo swings (believe me, they'll try to knock you off). Take Highway 15 North for about half an hour.
- Galtam Reservoir - About another half hour from Damyang on Highway 29 is a beautiful reservoir, which boasts some excellent photo opportunities. I know my mother was happy to see some shots other than the inside of bars, making it worth the trek to Jeollabukdo.
- Hwasun Hot Springs - Get in the hot tub! Or at least drive to the other side of Mudeungsan and follow the signs.

As freeing as it is, there are the same petty annoyances that make any new hobby challenging. The most notable would have to be the traffic. We've all gotten in cabs that we didn't think we'd get out of; imagine being part of it! Rest assured though, once you feel comfortable on your bike and discover the not-so-subtle lawlessness that it takes to maneuver in this town you'll accept the traffic as part of the fun. Even two friends of mine who were hit by a bus (yes, the same bus at the same time) dusted themselves off and rode into the sunset on what was left of their motorcycles.

After having my bike it is difficult to imagine being in Korea without one, and the best way to experience the feeling is for yourself. Just point your bike in any direction other than home and see where it takes you. Whenever I think I've seen the best of Korea something always surprises me, and I'm quickly finding out that the best view is from the seat of my motorcycle.