

## The Great Outdoors

by Jeff Shields

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OK, so it may have rained a little, but certainly not on my parade. And I'll admit there were a few bugs, but it wasn't exactly an *Indiana Jones* movie. Still, I think most of us have at one time or another just needed to get out of town, and this less-than-perfect setting was paradise for twelve brave souls without a raincoat between them.

With so many seemingly trapped in Gwangju, it doesn't take too long in driving out of town to realize that we are a city surrounded by nature. Between [Mudeungsan](#) looming in the east to the farmland to the south we are blessed with the opportunity to get away from it all, if even for a day, and enjoy a more rural version of Korea. Led by a friend who just happened upon this place on a motorcycle ride, our bike gang found ourselves heading to the thriving metropolis of Hwasun. While that town never has much to offer, a well-timed left took us to the backside of Mudeungsan and to an amazing mountain retreat. Tucked among the trees of Anyang forest is a wonderful spot boasting cabins, rivers, and places to have an actual campfire - heaven for a small-town Canadian boy missing this year's camping season.

The cabins themselves are rustic to say the least, but it's the wood that makes them good. As soon as I walked in I was blindsided by the nostalgia of my grandparent's cottage and the twenty years since I've been there. Most cabins at the park are similar, with ours being a two-story lodge with a small kitchen and a fully-functional washroom. It was just like a cottage at home, except this one noticeably didn't have a stick of furniture in it. As my self-directed praises of "genius" got louder and louder as I unrolled my sleeping bag I noticed a pile of blankets and floor mats in the corner of the main floor, making the others in the group quite happy. Outside was a fire-pit, a sitting area and a picnic table to keep us occupied while we set up our barbeques and chilled the beer. It was as close to home as I've been in nine months.

One thing with a weekend outdoors is that any sort of weather can happen, and after a beautiful week it was just too much to ask that it continued for one more night. As soon as we drove through one of the most beautiful valleys I've ever seen, and after one rider made his passenger walk up a particularly daunting hill, the sky opened up for twelve hours of rain. And not just a drop here or there, but a downpour. Being of an outdoorsy persuasion, we certainly didn't mind huddling under the tree-cover to stay outside for as long as possible. Plus, the entertainment was too good to pass up. Just across from our lot was an initiation ritual known to Korean university students as MT, or Membership

Training. While it was somewhat humorous to see 20 students rolling around the mud and screaming their apartment building's name, I wondered how joining the school orchestra could be so grueling. After an hour of humiliation they did seem somewhat amused by the crowd of foreigners congratulating them, chanting "[Dong-Dong Ju](#)" (a vile Korean booze) and heckling the MT drill sergeant. Even on a weekend getaway the opportunity to be both seen and heard was too good to pass up.

Despite the rain, despite the insects, it was an amazing time. Gwangju is a fantastic city and is as much of a home as I've had in a long time, but there is something to be said for the great outdoors. Motorcycles, barbeques and beer, and most importantly, good friends are all things that make a year in Gwangju worth it. You just have to get out of the city to discover it, and you might even realize home might not be so far away after all.