



Korea's links to its ancient past have survived the ages

[By Robert Selwitz]

GYEONGJU, Korea - Although Gyeongju is virtually unknown outside Korea, its extraordinary remnants from the ancient Silla kingdom make it a world-class wonder.

Wildly popular and often packed with vacationing Korean families, Gyeongju is also home to amazing artifacts, monuments and museums. They honor the country's most powerful dynasty, the Silla, who ruled the entire Korean peninsula, and at its peak major portions of neighboring territory, from 57 B.C. to A.D. 938.

Tombs, temples and statuary are all over a region that covers the bustling commercial city of Gyeongju and the nearby mountains, fields, grottos and seashore.

The city and site are on Korea's southeastern coastline, a four-and-a-half-hour train ride or an hour-long flight from Korea's capital, Seoul. It's also accessible via frequent bus service from Busan, Korea's second-largest city.

Gyeongju itself is a pleasant middle-class city (population approximately 580,000) that at first glance appears to be like many others. That is until you see the dozens of grass-covered minihills, assumed to be royal Silla dynasty tombs. A visit to the one that's been excavated and is open to the public is a genuine revelation, particularly as it demonstrates the kingdom's extraordinary wealth and power.

Located within Tumuli Park, very close to downtown with 23 tombs, the Cheonmachong (Flying Horse) tomb is an incredible experience. Opened in 1974, it was found to contain more than 10,000 items. On view now are replicas of a golden crown and girdle (the originals are in the Gyeongju National

Museum), weapons, jewelry and cooking utensils. Indeed, the tomb held just about anything a member of royalty might need in the afterlife.

Incidentally, this tomb, and presumably those yet to be explored, have survived remarkably vandal-free. One explanation is that the stones - before being covered with clay and soil - were stacked in a dome shape, with each level dependent for stability upon those above and below. Not unlike a house of cards, if any of the stones are disturbed, the whole structure could come crashing down on an unsuspecting interloper. While some bones of a possible robber have been found at a collapsed site, it appears likely that, in general, tomb looting does not appear to have been a major problem.

Of roughly similar vintage is Cheomseongdae, a 29-foot-tall, round structure, cleverly constructed from meticulously cut and symmetrically placed stones. Likely dating to the 7th century, many observers regard this as the Far East's oldest standing observatory.

Another must-see is the Seokguram Grotto, a UNESCO World Heritage site featuring a Buddha in a hillside stone enclosure that, a century ago, was accidentally discovered by a vacationing Japanese postal worker. Carved out of granite blocks at the top of Mount Tohamsan, it features an 11-foot-tall, seated Buddha flanked by some 40 smaller Buddha statues on the antechamber walls.

Originally open to view, its popularity - particularly among touring Korean school



groups - resulted in the Buddha now being viewable only through a plastic shield.

At the foot of the mountain lies another Silla masterpiece and UNESCO site, Bulguksa Temple. While its wooden structures are largely replacements, the millennia-old stone bridges, stairways and pagodas are original. Major surviving structures (experts say there were originally more than 80) include five temples, an assembly hall and a re-cast replica of an extraordinary bell, the original of which is now in the Gyeongju Museum.

Another source of amazing artifacts was Anapji Pond, which once fronted a major Silla royal palace. The setting - featuring several mini-islands and surrounded by gardens and cherry trees (awesome when in bloom) - was drained in 1974. The resulting 700-item trove included an ancient boat, earthenware pottery and jewelry, most of which is now viewable at the museum.

Further afield near the Gampo seaside, there's the underwater tomb of Silla King Munmu. He wanted his ashes to be scattered

on a seaside rock very near the shore. Convinced he could then be transformed into a dragon, the deceased king would still be able to defend his kingdom against invading Japanese.

Not far away is the Gameunsa Temple site erected by Munmu's son, King Shinmun, in A.D. 682. Remnants include a three-story stone pagoda and indications of a series of channels that once funneled seawater to the site.



Less spiritual but another reason to visit the Gampo seaside are the restaurants serving the freshest possible fish. Here, visitors can pick their dinner from the tanks, choose its preparation and enjoy it while overlooking the port. Gampo is also famous for its bustling fish market and extraordinary sunrises.

Koreans are determined and vigorous hikers, and a favorite family destination is artifact-festooned Mount Namsan. Trails of varying degrees of difficulty pass untold numbers of Silla shrines, walls, rock carvings, unexcavated mounds (likely tombs) and pagodas. Indeed, it is said to be home to 120 stone statues of Buddha, 100 stone pagodas and 150 temple sites.

While all of Gyeongju is dubbed "a museum without walls," nowhere is this better illustrated than during a Mount Namsan sojourn. The downside, however, is that at peak seasons it can be almost as crowded as a city during rush hour.

Nevertheless, the higher you climb toward one of Namsan's 180 peaks (the tallest is the 1,620-foot-high Gowisanbong Pak), the

clearer the field. For the most fit, the 30-by-16-foot Buddha relief, considered one of the most impressive Silla relics, is regarded as well worth the effort.

However, even for those lacking any desire to climb, there's a delightful ancient memorial near the mountain's base. Poseokjeong, once a banquet garden, features the granite waterway that was the site of royal drinking games. According to legend, the king would sit at one end and float boats laden with powerful drinks toward courtiers who lined the tiny canal. Wherever the boat stopped, the nearest participant had to down the drink and recite a poem.

As with so much of the Silla legacy, no books detailing drinking game practices - or virtually any other history or hard news about the Silla dynasty's extraordinary rule - have so far been found.



What remains, and is beautifully presented in the Gyeongju National Museum, is a striking collection of world-class artifacts. Its ancient tomb hall features finds from excavated Silla tombs. Anapji Hall is dedicated to objects found in the drained Silla palace pond and the original Divine Bell of Great King Seongdeok, reasons alone to spend several hours here.

Other prime draws in the museum's four buildings include pottery from the mundane to the exquisite, jewelry, a 14-sided die used to make choices in a drinking game, stone carvings, crowns, armor and cooking utensils.

There are also drinking glasses and beaded necklaces that, intriguingly, may have originated in Europe.

IF YOU GO

For more information about Gyeongju or the rest of Korea, contact the Korea Tourism Organization at 800-868-7567 or visit www.tour2korea.com.

Korean Air offers nonstop flights to Korea from Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco. Call 800-438-5000 or visit www.koreanair.com.

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