

Driving Tours 2026

Japan - Shikoku Island

Korea - Seoul, Busan and Jeju Island



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Japan 2026

Driving Tour of Shikoku

8 March 2026 – Comfort Hotel, Matsuyama

We arrived in Osaka two days ago. On our first night, we stayed at the Nikko Hotel at the airport. The next morning, we sorted out train tickets to and from Okayama, which would be the jumping-off point for our driving trip through Shikoku.

The last time we were in Osaka, we spent hours wandering the streets in the dark looking for our hotel. This time, with a few more trips to Japan under our belts, we breezed through three connections to Okayama, culminating in a 45-minute Shinkansen ride covering 176 km.

Picking up our car this morning was seamless - as most transactions are in Japan - even with our extremely limited (read: non-existent) Japanese. Off we went, GPS locked in, navigator confident ... driver not so much. Yes, we initially headed back toward Osaka instead of south toward Hiroshima.

Back on track, we found our way to the Kôsan-ji Temple complex. The temple itself was a real find, far exceeding our expectations, especially the “Hill of



Hope,” a marble landscape constructed over 16 years and opened in 2000.

More importantly, we took a stroll through the small town around the complex. That turned out to be the highlight of our day. This is the sort of thing that happens when you're a traveller rather than a tourist. Looking for a shortcut back to our car park, we stumbled across a local afternoon food market. The main attraction was a traditional drumming performance by school-age children - just amazing. Among the several dozen locals enjoying the show and a lunchtime street food feast, we were the only Westerners. You have to love being off the beaten track.

It was then a long haul along winding roads and across several spectacular bridges, which linked many small islands to Shikoku. We made a brief stop at a heavily reconstructed castle in the coastal town of Imabari.

9 March – Matsuyama

A cool start to the day at 2°C, but in the sunshine we were quite comfortable as we walked through the city toward Matsuyama Castle. By mid-morning, the temperature had risen to 12°C under clear blue skies, perfect for climbing the steep mountain path to the castle.

There were two other options, cable car or chairlift, but we needed some exercise, so we took the 750m climb. Oddly enough, we've learned that steep descents are harder on the legs than climbs, so we took the cable car down.

We've visited the castle before. It's one of the largest in Japan and, while not the most spectacular, it was well worth a second visit.





This is our twelfth trip to Japan, but only our second driving adventure. Our first was in Hokkaido, and we loved the freedom and flexibility. This trip is shaping up the same way. In recent years, Japan has become extremely popular with tourists. Overtourism is an issue in the “golden triangle” of Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto. While we don’t begrudge others wanting to experience this wonderful country, we don’t want to see them! Today, we counted five Westerners and even these, we’d classify as travellers rather than tourists. Most people we encountered were retired locals - our kind of crowd.

Our agenda today was simple: the castle and Dôgo Onsen. Famous throughout Japan but little known elsewhere, it was an easy drive through surprisingly light traffic for a city of over a million.

Parking, however, proved more challenging. In the old part of the city, we found ourselves on a narrow winding road barely wider than our tiny hire car. After some colourful language, we eventually escaped and found a car park right next to the onsen, one we had driven past 20 minutes earlier.

We’re not really into communal bathing, but the history drew us in. We opted for a tour of the Imperial bathhouse. Though rebuilt many times, the current structure dates from 1896. Given its all-wood construction, it’s remarkable it remains in such excellent condition.

Our guide, a woman likely in her 60s, was a gem. Her English was good, and she used a translation app when needed. It was her quiet humour that made the experience memorable - another unexpected highlight.





11 March – Toyoko Inn, Kochi

Yesterday was a long drive to the southwestern tip of Shikoku. Our plan was to head inland to visit a castle in Ôzu, then continue south to the coast. Thinking we had time to spare, we added a detour down a finger-shaped peninsula. Good idea in theory, but we underestimated the roads. Imagine driving down your driveway for 60 km, with houses right on the edge and cars coming toward you around blind corners. Thankfully, speeds were low and drivers courteous. We were disappointed that some attractions required long hikes, and time was short. However, we did climb to an observation deck with stunning coastal views, including a distant lighthouse.

Today was much more relaxed. We drove through beautiful mountain scenery to Nakatsu Gorge. Only a few other travellers joined us on a pleasant walk along the rocky gorge, with its famously clear blue-green water.

Passing through small mountain towns, we were struck by the number of elderly residents, many appearing to be well into their 80s. There's also a sense of slow decline: deserted homes, closed businesses, and decaying buildings. Japan's shrinking population is clearly affecting these rural areas.

12 March – Kochi

Another long day, though we didn't cover much distance. Winding roads and low speed limits (30–50 km/h) meant progress was slow, though locals often drive about 10 km/h over the limit.

Our first stop was Monet's Garden: beautiful, though much of it was just on the verge of spring bloom.







With time to spare, we visited a converted school-turned-aquarium. The outdoor pool contained schools of fish and large turtles, while classrooms were preserved as they were, chalkboards, overhead projectors and all, just like our own classrooms in the 1970s. Other rooms housed tanks filled with marine life.

Along the coast, large concrete walls protect against tsunamis. We also noticed tall towers in many towns, eventually realising they are tsunami evacuation towers for areas far from high ground.

13 March – Kochi

A quiet day with time to do some washing. From our window, we had a great view of Kochi Castle.

The current keep dates from 1757, making it one of Japan's twelve oldest castles. It's also ranked among the country's top 100. Not entirely sure how those rankings work, but it's clearly well regarded.



14 March – Marugame, APA Hotel

A beautiful drive through central Shikoku today, though cold, around 2°C with wind chill. The roads were winding, but the scenery was spectacular.

The highlight was the Kazurabashi Vine Bridge over the Iya River. Though now reinforced with steel cables, these are covered in vines, replaced every four years, a fascinating blend of tradition and safety.

With our driving tour nearing its end, some observations: Driving in Shikoku is generally straightforward. Roads are





good, signage clear, and drivers courteous. Minor roads can be extremely narrow, requiring concentration. Speed limits are low, but there's some flexibility.

Our Nissan Note hybrid has been impressively efficient, around 3 L/100 km over nearly 1,000 km.

Parking is easy in rural areas but can be tricky (and paid) in cities. Overall, though, driving here is easier and less stressful than in Australia.

Would we recommend it? Absolutely.

15 March – Marugame

When booking, we had planned to stay in Takamatsu, but prices were unexpectedly high, so we based ourselves in nearby Marugame.

On the way to the Naruto Whirlpools, we avoided expressways to enjoy the scenery. All went well until Takamatsu City, where we discovered the cause of the high hotel prices: the Takamatsu Marathon. Roads were closed everywhere, and it took nearly an hour to escape the maze. Eventually, we reached the whirlpools, three hours to travel about 75 km. Even at moderate tidal strength, they were impressive.

A chance stop at the “German House” museum revealed a fascinating piece of history: German internees during WWI were held in Japan and formed strong cultural ties with locals. Some even stayed on, married locals, becoming teachers and writers.

16 March – Marugame

With no firm plans today, we visited Shikokumura, an open-air heritage museum near Takamatsu. Set in beautiful gardens, it features relocated historic buildings - farmhouses, workshops, and even a lighthouse. It's one of the best such museums we've seen.

Later, we visited Takamatsu Castle. While modest, it's one of only four castles located by the sea. The extensive gardens and moat made it well worth the small entry fee.

17 March – Livemax Hotel, Okayama

Our final day on the road. We covered 1,350 km for just AUD \$95 in fuel - remarkably efficient.

Crossing from Shikoku to Honshu via a series of bridges was a highlight in itself.

Okayama, with just over a million people, had the heaviest traffic we encountered, but still manageable, comparable to Brisbane.

We visited Kurashiki Bikan, a historic canal district, pleasant, though somewhat commercialised. For the first time, we saw noticeable numbers of European tourists.

We finished with Okayama Castle. Impressive from afar, but clearly a modern reconstruction, more like a themed attraction than a historic site.

Tomorrow: Shinkansen to Shin-Osaka, then on to Kansai Airport and home via Kuala Lumpur.





Review of Shikoku Road Trip

This was our second driving trip in Japan, after Hokkaido. Shikoku is more mountainous, with many narrow winding roads, but overall, driving conditions are good.

Expressways are available but expensive, and you miss much of the scenery. Parking is manageable, and even city parking is inexpensive by Australian standards.

Driving offers access to experiences you simply can't get otherwise, especially in rural areas.

We hired through Nissan in Okayama, which offered easy booking, efficient service, and reasonable pricing. The ETC toll card is highly recommended.

In vehicle navigation systems can be tricky, even in English. Google Maps worked far better.

Bottom line: Would we do it again? Absolutely. In fact, we're already planning our next driving adventure in Japan, the island of Kyushu.

Korea 2026

Seoul, Busan and Driving Tour Jeju Island

13 May 2026 - Weco Stay Hotel, Insadong, Seoul

We arrived in Seoul last night at around 8:00 pm. By 8:45, we were waiting for the shuttle bus to our overnight stay at the Best Western Hotel, Incheon Airport, which involved an inter-terminal train shuttle and a couple of very long walks.

After a good night's sleep, we took the shuttle bus back to the airport this morning to get some cash, top up our T-Money IC cards, and catch the all-stops AREX train into the city.

As our hotel for the next couple of nights was self-check-in and unavailable until 4:00 pm, we decided to store our luggage at Seoul Station. We have used machine lockers plenty of times over the years, and finding the right bank of lockers is always a challenge, especially in larger stations, but today we ran into a new tech problem. Lockers in Seoul are managed through an app that requires a local phone number, which wasn't possible with our data-only eSIMs. Our only option was a staffed luggage storage facility, which we eventually found. With the bags off our backs, we were free for the day.

This was our third trip to Korea, so we had already seen much of what Seoul has to offer, but with most of the day to fill before we could access our hotel, we took the Metro to Coex Mall to see the famous Starfield Library. It is more a work of art than a functional library, and today it was well patronised by a mainly Korean clientele.

On our way back to the station, we stopped at the incredible National Museum of Korea. We had been there before, but it is such an enormous facility that there was still plenty left to see. Needing to collect our luggage by 4:00 pm, we reluctantly headed back to Seoul Station. We have negotiated subway systems all

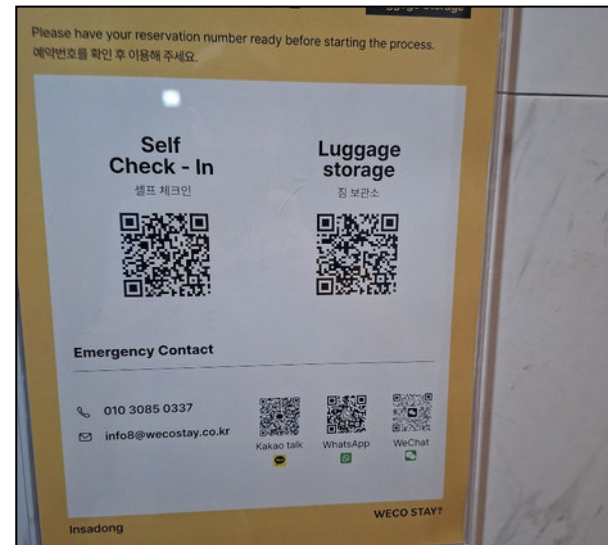
over the world, but Seoul's is the biggest, so we can forgive ourselves for ending up on a train in the wrong direction just when time was tight. Luckily, we noticed before reaching the end of the line and made it back to Seoul Station just in time to collect our bags. We had taken photos of station signs to use as breadcrumbs to find the luggage storage shop, but at one point we were still uncertain. In a mild panic, both on our phones checking Kakao Maps, we were approached by a young guy offering help but, though he tried hard, he couldn't quite set us straight. Then we found the photo that matched the sign just ahead of us and collected our luggage with 60 seconds to spare.

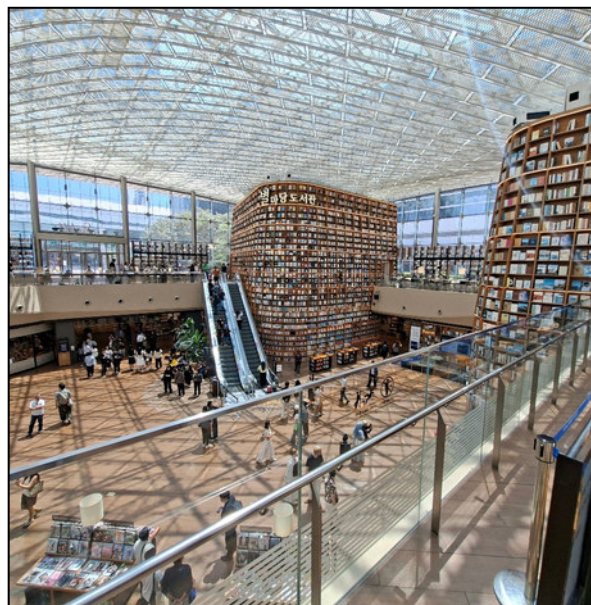
We hadn't realised when we booked that the hotel operated on a self-check-in basis, though we have dealt with places like this before. Our first surprise on arrival was a guest luggage storage room accessed by QR code. Entry to our room involved scanning another code that led us to a login page. We worked it all out in the end, but it is still a little disconcerting to have no staff on site at all. Even so, it is a great off-the-tourist-track neighbourhood, the room is fine, and it comes with a washing machine, a full-size fridge and a self-catering kitchen.

14 May - Insadong

Last time we were in Seoul, we did a flying visit to the Korean War Memorial. With an easy day to fill before our train trip to Busan, we decided to give what seemed to be a great museum the time it deserved.

Australians will immediately make comparisons with the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. We don't intend to do a







detailed comparison, but at a high level, they are essentially on a par. The main difference is in the depth of culture and history that is embodied in the Korean memorial.

Australia played a part in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953. In fact, Australia was the third nation, after the USA and the UK, to send aid, to the tune of 16,000 soldiers, airmen, and sailors. Accordingly, the Australian flag is flying in the third position in the array of flags that grace the forecourt of the memorial, a mammoth effort given that it was only five years after the end of WWII. There were many displays on the long history of wars and invasions that have raged across the Korean peninsula over more than a thousand years. It is just amazing how many countries have attacked Korea. To name just a few: the USA, China, Russia, the UK, France and, multiple times over hundreds of years, Japan. It was only in 1945 that Korea was finally freed from the yoke of brutal Japanese occupation.

Our last stop before heading home for an early afternoon of washing was the central city's landscaped Cheonggyecheon stream, a peaceful enclave in a busy city of 22 million people.

15 May - Toyoko Inn, Busan

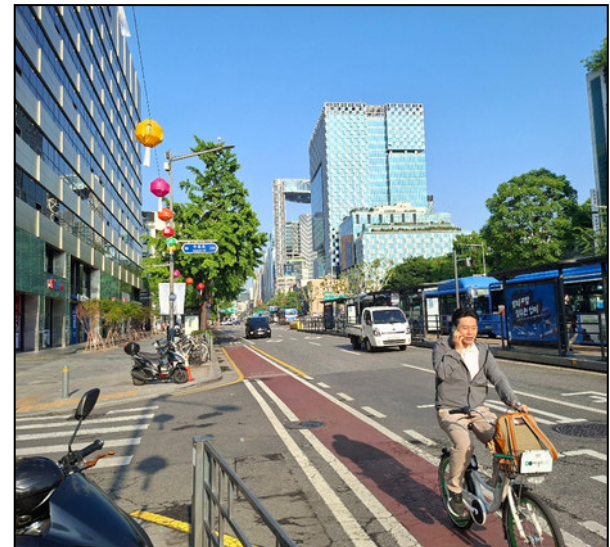
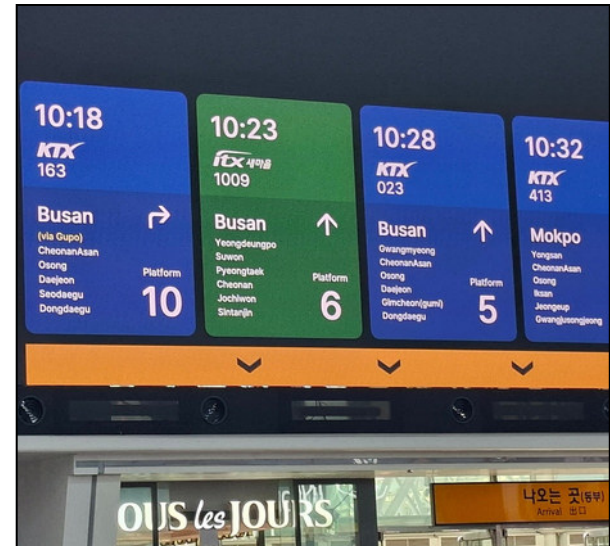
Today's KTX high-speed train ride down from Seoul was very smooth and relaxing. While not on the scale of Beijing or Shanghai Station, Seoul Station runs very efficiently. Thousands mill about on the concourse, waiting for their platform to be posted. Once it is, you simply head to the train, take your seat, and relax. No ticket gates, no checks on board - we didn't even see a conductor. We had our tickets, but nobody asked to see them. It just works.





Our train was due to leave at 10:28 am. Between 10:00 and its departure, there were four KTX services to Busan alone, as well as a couple to other cities. Seoul to Busan is clearly a very busy line. Busan is the country's second-largest city, but what a casual observer might miss is that Seoul Station is not the city's only departure point for high-speed rail. There are two other HSR stations in Seoul sending trains to other destinations. So, for the dreamers back home in Australia, that is the sort of frequency needed to support high-speed rail. It simply is not possible in Australia. South Korea has twice Australia's population living in an area half the size of Victoria. Dream on.

Our journey took just over two and a half hours. There were a lot of open spaces and mountain scenery along the way, but the most obvious feature was the clusters of high-rise apartments that were very rarely out of view. Some of these clusters would house many thousands of people. Australia, at the time of writing, is suffering a major housing crisis. Fingers are pointed at the government, of course, and with some justification. The popular cause for some is immigration. There is some truth in this, and something needs to be done to better manage Australia's immigration intake, but seeing how people live in many of the countries we have visited on our travels, cultural aspects may also have an impact. Throwing up densely packed high-rise apartments solves the problem in many nations, particularly in Asia, but Australia is a suburban, backyard-with-a-BBQ culture. We want our block of dirt. Very few of us live in apartments and most aspire to the low-density Aussie dream. Until that changes, we may be





doomed to live in a country where younger generations continue to struggle to find reasonably priced housing.

16 May - Busan

A beach day today. We visited Haeundae Beach on our first trip to Korea a few years back, but that was on a miserable rainy day. Today, Saturday, by contrast, was sunny and hot. We were lucky to be on the metro fairly early, beating the crowds. As is typical on weekends, Koreans were out and about in force and, unbeknown to us when we set off, the beach was hosting the 2026 Sand Festival. Our early start gave us an uncrowded opportunity to stroll through the amazing sculptures created by artists from Korea, Canada and Russia.



On our last trip, we rode the Blue Line Park railway along the coast with our views spoiled by rain and wind. Today, while there was a little haze, the sun was out and the beach gradually filled with thousands of people enjoying the sun and the many activities provided by the Sand Festival. We made our booking for the train, but were left with a two-hour wait before we could board. Walking about to kill time, we almost fell over backwards looking up at an enormous 100-storey beachside skyscraper. It offered an observation deck, so why not? The view was amazing. Hundreds of high-rise apartments rolled out before us, many clinging to cliffs overlooking the sea. A bit of a pricey experience, but well worth the cost.

The train trip was crowded but we managed to grab a seat in the front row with good sea views. While waiting to board, we



started chatting with a little Korean boy who spoke fantastic English. Turns out, he was in kindergarten and his English teacher was Australian. Just amazing. He also spoke smatterings of Japanese and Spanish because kids in his class were from those countries.

On the return trip, we stopped off to walk out on the glass-bottom skywalk. Many younger folk were a little freaked out, but we oldies had no issues. There was another skywalk a couple of kilometres further on. As the trains only passed every 30 minutes, we figured we could beat the train back by walking along the boardwalk that ran beside the tracks. A long walk, but it was a nice day. By the time we got back to Haeundae Beach, the whole area was packed as metro train after metro train offloaded hundreds of people. We had had enough by early afternoon and were keen to beat the rush on the trains later in the day. Good call. We managed to get a seat for all of the 50-minute trip back to central Busan.

17 May - Hotel Leo, Jeju City

We made an early start today. Anticipating a busy airport and a long metro trip, we opted for an Uber. It was our first time using one in Korea, where taxis can also be booked through the app. You read all sorts of things online about taxi drivers scamming those of us who are used to Uber being purely a rideshare system, but we have used Ubers in many countries and have never had a problem. Today was no exception. Mario Andretti (not his real name) got us to the terminal in record time and, once we had unclenched our fists and opened our eyes, all was fine. Busan is a surprisingly small airport for a city of its size. We were through security in two





minutes and cooling our heels for two hours waiting for our flight.

Now, we have done many long flights and a few shorter ones, but we can't recall one this short. Up to cruising altitude in 10 minutes. Drinks cart down the aisle. "Crew, prepare the aircraft for landing." The flight was scheduled for 9:55 and we were in the terminal at Jeju at 10:30! The old girl beside me, not my wife, only had time to down half her paper cup of tomato juice.

The remainder of our day didn't go as smoothly.

We had carefully studied the Jeju bus maps and identified a few services that would get us to our hotel, but our plans collapsed when we boarded a 365 rather than a 356. We only spotted the mistake as we approached the outer suburbs. After consulting our mapping apps, we eventually found our way to the hotel. Unable to check in, and on the advice of the extremely helpful woman on reception, we once again ventured into the maze that is the Jeju bus system. Yep, we got the wrong bus again. A couple of stumbles later, we found the little-known old Confucian school that we had passed on our roundabout journey from the airport. Returning to the hotel towards the end of the day to do some washing, we finally managed to catch the correct bus. Lesson learned. Tomorrow, we will take an Uber to the airport to pick up our hire car for the rest of the journey.

18 May - Jeju City

As burned as we felt by yesterday's bus-system experience,



we were forced to fall back on the buses again this morning to get to the airport and pick up our hire car. There are Uber taxis in Jeju, but after a couple of failed attempts to book one, we gave up. We guessed that the short distance to the airport did not appeal to drivers. This time, though, we had no trouble at all picking up the right bus for the 10-minute trip.

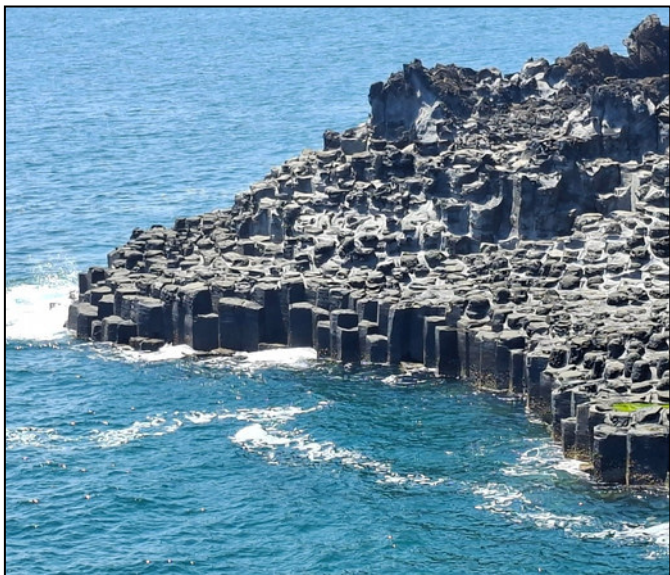
As usual, the first hour or so of driving on the wrong side of the road is a little stressful but, having driven on the wrong side many times over the years, it all comes back quickly, even in the heavy traffic of the morning peak in Jeju.

With one or two hiccups, we managed to find all our attractions, Mt Songaksan, the Jusangieolli Cliffs and Cheonjiyeon waterfall.

As always, there was a twist. Our fancy new Hyundai kept warning us that fuel was low. The gauge, as we interpreted it, was full. Just to be safe, we pulled in and topped up. The tank was empty! Our hire company, SK Rentals, has a strange system for managing fuel usage. We were issued with a card to buy fuel and when we drop the car off, the company will calculate our usage based on kilometres driven and our litres-per-kilometre rate as recorded by the vehicle computer.

There were several tourist buses at every location we visited, but they were all locals or mixed groups of Asians of undetermined origin. There were a few Westerners about, mostly Americans, because you can always hear them, and a smattering of Europeans. Australians don't seem to have discovered Korea in the same way they have taken to Japan.







19 May - Jeju City

Last day on the island today with a fairly full agenda. First up, Manjanggul Lava Tube. At the end of a narrow country road, we came to a dead stop! Attraction closed. OK. Next, Woljeongri Beach. No chance of meeting a closed sign this time. Great little beach with beautiful white sand, emerald water and next to no people. Peaceful, but more than a little windy today. The peace was soon shattered as six or seven buses rolled into the tiny car park and disgorged hundreds of university-aged students. We had encountered this lot yesterday as we were arriving at another attraction and they were leaving.

Today was the first day that we didn't have totally blue skies. By the time we arrived at the oceanside tuff mountain Seongsan Ilchulbong, rain was threatening, but we pressed on regardless. The climb was extremely challenging, but we made it. The rain held off until we had finished our short stroll through the small but interesting Seongeup Folk Village when, for the first time on this trip, the rain came down. It was 3:00 pm, so what more could we have asked for?



20 May - Hotel the Designers, Seoul Station

Our first whole day of rain on the trip. We drove our hire car back to the depot in the rain, flew on to Seoul in the rain, and then walked to the hotel in the rain. But that's OK. We have very little to do until we fly out tomorrow night, so we are

grateful for the fine weather we had on all but these last two days. Having done nothing today except travel, this seems a good point to talk about driving on Jeju Island.

Firstly, why drive on Jeju when there is a detailed bus network covering much of the island?

Our initial plan was to use the buses rather than drive. However, as we got further into the details of our planning, it became clear that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to cover what we wanted to do by bus. The real issue was the time it would have taken to get from attraction to attraction, given the fairly irregular schedules and the resultant time lost waiting for buses. Also, missing a bus could throw a whole day into chaos.

There were other options. Uber Taxis offers an hourly rate, or we could simply have used taxis from place to place. The Uber option was expensive over two full days and a little inflexible. Ordinary taxis would have involved a fair amount of risk, either because of pressure on supply at the more popular attractions or, conversely, the chance of not finding one at all in less visited areas. Car-hire rates on Jeju are low compared with costs at home in Australia, so car hire it was.

We hired through Avis, but our vehicle was provided by SK Car Rentals, Korea's largest hire company. Our pick up and drop off were smooth and the vehicle was excellent.

So, driving in Jeju. For context, we are Australians, so we drive on the left. I am 73 years old, and over the past 50 years I have driven all over the world, including in Europe, the UK,





Southern Africa, the US and Canada, briefly in South America, and in several Asian countries including Malaysia, Japan, and Korea. That may sound like a brag and maybe it is, but it gives some sense of where these comments are coming from.

The bottom line for us is that driving on Jeju could best be described as reasonably comfortable from our perspective. Roads are universally good to excellent. Drivers on the island are generally fair to good, but there is a noticeable skill range that will keep most foreign drivers on their toes. There is a high degree of aggressive driving, particularly in the city. There is also a proportion of drivers, probably including us, who are hesitant from time to time, drawing horn blasts from impatient locals. There must be a large number of hire cars on the road at any time on Jeju, given the enormous number of tourists on the island. Most of these are Koreans on holiday. The problem with some of these drivers is that they may not be very experienced, particularly if they live in large cities where they would drive infrequently, if at all.



A couple of oddities should be noted. Turning right at a stop light is strictly regulated by the lights. A green arrow is legally required to turn. In practice, turning operates much as it does in the US. Delaying on a turn attracts a series of impatient horn blasts. Roundabouts must be a new thing on the island, because drivers don't seem to have a clue how to manage them. There are a couple in the city that are a little as one would expect in India. Perhaps the most difficult thing for foreign drivers is the constant change in speed limits. The highest we came across was 80 km/h. There are very



common all-day 30 km/h school zones. Other limits can change within 500 m. All these are speed-camera monitored and enforced. Locals know where the cameras are and they will hit the brakes without warning when a monitor is near. But the very worst are the average-speed monitoring zones. Maintaining an average of 50 km/h through a mountain descent is virtually impossible. What we find amusing is that some crazy drivers fly along well above the limit so that their average speed is above the limit. So they either pull up and wait for their speed average to drop, or crawl along to get the same result.

On the positive side, most traffic rules are obeyed, with the significant exception of indicating lane changes. So, drive or not? How much experience have you had?

