

## **Experience Report Seoul, Korea**

Before starting, I can already say that going to Seoul was one of the best decisions I made in my life. Even though I did not know too much about Seoul and Korea prior to leaving, it has been an unforgettable experience I can wholeheartedly recommend. However, before talking about my experiences there, both academically and socially, I want to briefly summarize some organizational stuff and hopefully offer some good advice for anyone who also plans to go to Korea.

Personally, I got most my information, as well as the idea of going to Korea, from friends who are from or have been to Korea themselves. Although I originally planned on going to Japan, Seoul became more and more intriguing to me as I only heard good things about it but it still kept a mystery as I did not know much about the culture compared to Japan. In the end, I think this was a good decision as your expectations are much vaguer. Apart from that reading the reports was also a very good source as it gave more insight into the life at Korea University specifically. Otherwise, I can recommend staying in contact with peers who also visit the same university. Going to a vastly different culture where you probably cannot even understand the language can be very overwhelming. Having peers to talk to who go through the same experience mainly helps to not stress out too much. All in all, I felt like that most things have a simple solution. Of course, the university is used to having a lot of exchange students from all around the world and they will try to make it as comfortable as possible. Therefore, don't be afraid to also write the people at Korea University if you have any questions. They usually reply quickly and are very helpful.

When applying to the university itself or for the visa, it can also be a bit overwhelming. Nevertheless, the information sheets are usually very detailed with all the information you might need. Personally, I did not have any problems as you can find a lot of information on the internet. Other things, like getting your ARC card, worked themselves out once I was there. For that I can recommend just using the university service they will send you per mail once you have arrived. One thing that is important though, is to apply to things as early as possible. For example, if you want to join a club I recommend writing them weeks in advance. You can usually find them on Instagram. Also, a lot of things like the course list are on a first come first serve basis. I personally had the problem that I did not get into the Korean language course I originally wanted to. Luckily, there are still options to get into courses later on. Moreover, for the language course there are many alternatives. For example, instead of choosing Korean for Beginners one can always choose Korean writing or speaking for beginners which are very similar.

Next, there are a lot of things you might need with which the university might not help you. First, getting an accommodation was easier than expected. The cheapest option is of course a dormitory room, but you will have to share it with another person, and they might be hard to get, at least I did not get one. Also, a kitchen might not be available. However, I was able to get a room in a Goshiwon. These are usually very tiny rooms with a private bathroom and shared kitchen or common area. They are also very affordable, offer utilities like a washing machine, and are easy to get in the proximity of the university. If you are interested, try looking it up on goshipages.com. You can usually just write the landlord over the website itself or with Kakaotalk, a very popular messenger app in Korea I recommend getting. Next,

when it comes to paying in Korea I used Wise for transactions and usually my German Visa card worked fine for most things. However, I met some people who had a Revolut card with seemed to work more reliably. Also, get cash and a T-money card at the airport! The T-money card can be used for all kinds of public transport but can only be charged with cash. I did not know this and walking around aimlessly at the subway station with all my luggage desperately trying to find an ATM was not a pleasant experience. Next, for the SIM card I just got one from KT at the airport as I wanted data to find my Goshiwon. It seemed like a cheaper option is Chingu mobile, which can be purchased near the university. As a last advice, once in Korea you will have to pay for the local health insurance. Luckily, there is an option to get exempt from it. This was the only time I really struggled with the Korean bureaucracy. In the end, I still had to pay after spending hours getting the right documents together because of a small formality. In theory, you will just need a detailed description that your travel insurance covers everything and a bit of luck.

Now I want to talk about my experiences starting with live at the university. Courses at the Korea University are quite different from what I am used to. There is a much higher emphasis on going to lectures compared to the more homework-based study I am used to in Freiburg. This was a bit difficult for me especially when it came to studying for the exams. As I am used to mainly going through my exercises, it was hard to really know what to expect from the exams. However, I have to say that the courses were a bit easier compared to Germany. I only took courses in English, three in Physics and one language course, and apparently, they are a bit easier as many Koreans are not that confident in English. Therefore, passing the courses was not too difficult which was good as it gave more time to explore the city. Additionally, connecting with Korean peers was quite difficult for me. In my courses, it seemed like there was not too much interest there to meet foreigners. Luckily, I had the feeling that the professors are usually quite happy to have foreign students in their classes. So, feel free to chat with them a bit.

One of the main things I was worried about before going to Seoul, was whether I would be able to meet any friends. In hindsight I can say that that fear was completely unwarranted. With around 700 exchange students it is not a problem at all to meet some new friends. I met a lot of interesting people, whether through my Goshiwon, classes or university events. Overall, this was definitely a highlight for me as it got me my most precious memories and also taught me to be more open towards new people. One thing that helped a lot with this was Kuba (Korea University Buddy Assistant). This is a group of Korean students and a lot of international students. The great thing about it is that the Korean student will regularly host events like dinner, lunch, a city tour or even a party night. This is not only one of the best opportunities to meet new people but also to talk with Koreans about both Korean culture but also about any problems you might have with the university or living in Seoul in general. With Kuba you will also be able to go to the KoYon Games. This is a big sport tournament between the Korea and Yonsei University with a big afterparty near the Korea University. However, I felt like the main focus wasn't on the sport itself but on the cheering around it. For me, that was one of the most fun experiences I had as it also felt truly unique. I had an amazing time singing and dancing in the street with complete strangers, while cheering for one university and trash talking another one I did not even know existed a few months ago. Also, it was really cute to experience the fake "rivalry" between the two universities.

All in all, I feel like Korea University is a great university to do an exchange at. Of course it is also a very renowned university academically, but the longer I stayed the more I realized for myself how much the experience is more important to me. And Korea University definitely offers a lot for that. Beside the big and beautiful campus to explore, the many events by Kuba offer an insight into a university life that is vastly different from Germany. While concepts like "school spirit" and a real campus aren't necessarily things I would prefer, it was absolutely a new, unforgettable experience.

Lastly, I want to talk about the city and country itself. One of the reasons I chose Korea was to be at a place far away from Germany, especially in the cultural sense to experience something different. Of course, that means that a big part for me was not only the university life but also everything around it. Firstly, I loved going out for food and drinks around the university or head to Itaewon or Hongdae. Here I also made the experience that it becomes a lot easier to meet and chat with locals as the night goes on. Overall, it felt like Koreans love to talk with foreigners there are just sometimes shy about it due to speaking English. Other great spots I can really recommend are going on a hike at Bukhansan mountain to enjoy a beautiful view or make a short trip to Gyeongju, a more traditional town in the south-east. Nonetheless, Seoul is huge and beautiful city with so much to do, I never got bored or ran out of things during the whole semester.

Summarizing the whole experience is not an easy thing to do for me. However, I would always say I would always do it again for the first time, but I would not go there again. Living in such a huge city like Seoul was quite exhausting for me. For half a semester it is great because it truly feels like an adventure. However, I realised for myself that on the long run, I crave the quieter life of Germany and Freiburg. Still, it has been an amazing experience that definitely helped me grow as person. Whether it is about being a more open person, or learning to take things as they are as I was out of my comfort zone more than once. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to experience a new culture first hand and meet so many amazing people. More than anything, I feel like an exchange like this is so incredible because of the people you meet from all over the world and experiencing this new culture together.