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SPECIAL

SEOUL. *the good city*

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Leaving the verdant tropical island that we call our home and cruising at 850 kilometres per hour at an elevation of over 10,000 metres for almost ten hours with a slight stop over at Changi airport, Singapore the giant metallic bird touched down smoothly at the runway and taxied to the Incheon International Airport, Seoul on a bright sunny morning. The transition from developing to a developed world was at once conspicuous.

The five star rated Incheon airport is a massive modern complex with state-of-art technology that has 44 boarding ports and 50 customs inspection counters. It handles 31,000 pieces of luggage per hour. In a year it handles 2.7 million tons. In its full capacity the total baggage handling could reach 4.9 million tons per year.

Outside, it was the vastness of space that the eye caught instantly as it tried to copy as panoramic a view as possible. An hour's drive amidst the morning traffic that at times reaches crawling pace saw us at the centre of Seoul. A blend of East and West, tradition and modernity, technology and age-old wisdom - that is Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea.

A modern city with a population of little over 10 million or half that of Sri Lanka, Seoul remains distinctly clean and harmonious with nature. It is the fifth largest city in the world. A city of affluence Seoul accounts for 21 percent of the GDP of Korea which stands at US \$ 20,000 per capita or ten times the Sri Lankan figure.

Despite its passage to high-tech defilem,

being the most wired city with a broadband connectivity of over 70 percent its cultural life still retains the simple traditions of yore alongside sophisticated technology driven cultural marvels.

The simple love story of Miso (Beautiful smile), a rustic damsel in love with a handsome youth who after being separated from the lover for some time at the end liberates her from the custody of a wicked but powerful competitor that is presented in the form of an original Korean musical continues to attract theatre-goers daily in the heart of Seoul. It is said that no visit to Korea is complete



Windows in Master Craftsman Sim Yong-sik's house in Seoul

without taking in Miso.

Seoul with a history of 600 years, though relatively short by Sri Lankan standards, is nevertheless several hundred years older than New York or Washington.

A pine tree of equal age in the premises of the Superior Court bears testimony to the city's age.

The city is bifurcated into north and south by the river Han (Great River) which runs from West to East. Twenty seven beautiful bridges that cross the Han and the sky bridges connecting them in a myriad

of paths at multiple levels form part of the beautiful landscape of the city besides being the arteries of commerce and life.

Traditional Korean houses built on Confucian principles and modern

condominium complexes encompassing hundreds and thousands of apartments together with skyscraper buildings form the city skyline.

Seoul is a planned city where the planners have taken care to show grandeur, tradition and modernity through architecture. Massive stone, cement, iron and steel structures blend with traditional wooden homes in perfect harmony with the environment. While traditional homes have rows of bamboos grown in the foreground and a special place for a collection of huge earthen pots filled with water, modern buildings have concrete jars and bamboo groves as a

a jigsaw puzzle without a single nail being used. Incidentally he has visited Sri Lanka too and studied Sri Lankan arts and crafts.

No visit to Seoul will be complete without a ride in the cable car to the Seoul tower that stands atop the Namsan Mountain at 242 metres above sea level.

The tower at its zenith is 479 metres above sea level. A 360 degree panoramic view of Seoul could be seen from the tower.

Another attraction in Seoul is the Cheonggyecheon, a rivulet that runs across the city from West to East in the city centre that flows into the Han. It is a modern artificial stream on the site of an original stream that was closed with concrete by the Japanese during their occupation. It was President Lee Myung-bak who initiated the project when he was Mayor of Seoul.

The soul of Seoul lies with its people, a friendly and hospitable lot. They are overly polite and have an inclination to offer the best to their guests. They relish food, especially the traditional dishes and want their visitors to try each and every one of the several dozen dishes they offer at traditional lunches or dinners. Of course, Korean food with its Asian flavour is wholesome, delicious and nutritious. Worth of special mention are the different varieties of green and herbal teas famous for their medicinal and aphrodisiac properties.

reminder of tradition. Seoul, not content with its achievements plans to be a city of the future. Named World Designer City 2010, Seoul eyes the future with a hope to become a global technology and Culture hub. In line with the modern trend Seoul intends to be a full-fledged green city. Already hybrid and electric vehicles are on its roads.

Korea has a rich tradition of woodcraft. Entire buildings made of wood with intricate carvings that fit into different mosaic filled walls, doors and windows is a treat to the eye. Master craftsman Sim Yong-sik has a nice wooden cottage with ultra-modern facilities in down-town Seoul. He has designed it with due deference to tradition. An expert in woodcraft his particular forte is the production of traditional Korean doors and windows. The entire house - walls and windows could be dismantled as it is fitted piece by piece like



Traditional Korean house



A scene from the musical Miso