



CYCLING THE RIVERS OF SOUTH KOREA

Submitted by Rick and Julie Howell

Improvement makes strait roads but the crooked roads without improvement are the roads of genius. (William Blake)

Julie and Rick Howell, long-time coalition members, share their memorable journey through South Korea, from south to north, during an early April window of good weather that coincided with the season of spring blossoms. They believe that the 4 Rivers Cycle Path, an amazing network of cycling infrastructure, is strongly recommended for those who have done the European adventure. It's four hours by bus from Seoul to Busan, a direct line through tunnelled mountains and elevated expressways: By bicycle it's a 6-8 day journey, meandering the rivers and farm lands, far from the madding crowd. Compared to Europe, this gig is cheaper, more challenging, culturally rich and gives the cyclist a wonderful glimpse at Asian hospitality.

In 2008, an ambitious and visionary South Korean government decided to address the problem of flooding and at the same time create an infrastructure for nation wide cycling. With the construction of dykes and dams, the rivers were tamed and the dyke benches became cycle paths. These were paved, lined and signed by 2012, creating one of the best cycling routes in the world. Called the 4 Rivers Cycling Path, the main route, 685 km., connects Seoul and Busan, primarily following the Han and Nakdong river systems. Between the river basins a mountainous section parallels several smaller rivers, old rail beds and a shared road over the passes. Hugely popular with local riders this amazing corridor is relatively unknown to the foreign cyclist.

For the most part the path is easy to follow, the blue signage bearing the 4 Rivers logo visible at every turn. However, at some major intersections and through larger towns, signs were often lacking. On several occasions, with our limited Korean, we had to decipher the confusing hangul characters (a combination of lines and circles). Getting lost, as we know, is all part of the journey and reminds us that we are strangers in a strange land. Maps provided by the tourism bureau are barely adequate while google map is ineffective. Korea has its own mapping system, Naver, but of course everything is in Korean. We relied on several blogs and a "map my ride" website.



The pathway is clean, well maintained and provides adequate amenities along the route. Toilets of various types appear every five kilometres, more or less. Most have running water and some include classical music during your interlude. Exercise stations, convenience stores, and bicycle repair stations are located near larger cities while you are on your own for food in the rural back country. We packed plenty of crackers, dried fruit and carried a small jar of peanut butter for those long stretches.



Accommodation became a chore at the end of each day's ride. Camp grounds abound along the river ways but for those who are travelling light and want a shower and a pillow, motels are in short supply and hard to locate. We soon became experts in discovering the motel symbols and found the infamous love hotels the best venues for the night. These fancy, theme based love nests appear frequently on the edge of major centres providing a service for those who dwell in multigenerational houses, young adults seeking privacy from parental homes, those pursuing a secret rendezvous and the foreign cyclist.



Not to belabour the point, but these motels are perfect: Large rooms to accommodate bikes (management has no problem taking bikes to the room – unless they provide bike lockers)



elaborate décor, hot tubs for a good soak, large flat screen TVs, complimentary water and juice in the fridge, and free coffee – all for \$40. Locating and negotiating, for non-Korean speakers, presents wonderful opportunities for mime performances and finger play. Other nights were spent in a bicycle guest house (home cooked dinner and breakfast, room with heated floor, mats and quilts - \$60) and a 17th Century traditional house in the folk village of Hahoe near Andong.

Spring was an ideal time for this trip (although most choose the fall – summer is the hot, rainy season). We saw the blossoms at their peak. Cherry and apple, azaleas, tulips and blooms unknown. The winds varied, some days a lovely push from behind and one long day struggling with a head wind out of the north west.



The journey is designed as a travel experience, complete with a passport that can be purchased for \$4.00 at various locations en route. Stamps are collected at certification points (red telephone booths) placed along the path. Collection of all the stamps earns a gold medallion.

The Korean people are friendly; the youngest speak some English. Many go out of their way to provide “service”. Just before showering at a guest house one evening, the hostess appeared with two cold beer and freshly picked cucumbers from her garden – “Service” she explained, bowing graciously as she placed the tray before us.

For more information you can check out this website

<http://seoulcycle.com/our-team/>

