

TEACHING IN KOREA

By Nicole Watson

THE DECISION

All Canadian and American students have heard of a wonderful opportunity to live hard and make good money: teaching English in Asia. It seems too good to be true so they tentatively and cynically looking into the postings, and they are easy to find; nestled comfortably between the 'work from home stuffing envelopes' ad, and the 'looking for a young, beautiful woman to be a big star' ad. It's no wonder so many people scoff at the legitimacy of these contracts, but I have been there, as have many others I know, and not only is it real, it's amazing. As long as you take a few dozen precautions (and anti-nausea tablets).

THE CONTRACT

The first overwhelming and misleading obstacle is deciding on the contract. You can do this on your own or through an agent, but most agents take half if not all of your first month's salary in return. Some academies, however, will hire an agent and they cover the expenses, so in that case, an agent will not only get you the best deal, but you are somewhat protected from fraudulent listings. Most contracts look alike so you need to sniff out the minor differences. They should at least provide round-trip airfare, paid housing and a bonus upon contract completion. The rest is up to you, but shop around because every Academy will offer different salaries in different accommodations. If you like sharing an apartment with a complete stranger where the only thing you have in common is your language, then by all means accept the contract that will place you in a commune. But private apartments are available, so keep looking.

ARRANGEMENTS

If, like most people, you are organized and like to have a little notice before packing up your life and moving to another country, don't teach in Korea. Most contracts are only available one month before the start date, and you could be hired up to one week before the start date. That seems like a lot of time for them, but push for as long as you can get,

because remember you have to quit your job, unless you're unemployed, sublet your place and move all your things, unless you're homeless, and apply for a work visa. Not to mention the two-day flight, and unbelievable jet lag. Unless the reason you're going to Korea is that you have absolutely nothing to leave behind, there's a lot of work to do. If you make this clear to your agent, he can try to get you the most amount of notice, however, as in my case, maybe doing everything in a flash is a good thing because you don't have time to realize the crazy thing you're about to do.

PACKING

When I went to Korea in 2004, I wasn't very educated about the country. Most of my family wished me fun in China, and many told me I should go to Australia for the weekend (which incidentally is 14 hours away). Needless to say I had no idea what to pack. Do your research. If you're going to Seoul, they have over 10 million people in the city, so trust me you can buy toothpaste there and don't need to pack 15 tubes. Some luxuries that might be worthwhile though are fitted sheets (they seem to have only flat), three ply toilet paper, but I'm guessing you won't get more than one month of use out of your supply, and real coffee. You'll switch to tea quickly if you have to drink theirs. Otherwise be confident in the fact that they too wear deodorant and wash their hands. Don't over pack your suitcase for nothing.

THE WEATHER

Depending on where you come from, Korea is either a breath of fresh, fresh air, or a heat wave. They do have four distinct seasons, but don't expect tropical summers and snowy winters. Winter is about two months and can reach -10° , but usually hovers around 0° , making it damp and miserable. Spring is short-lived but beautiful, but quickly makes way for monsoon: practically a season of its own. This is about one month of torrential rain, but it is warm, so feel free to walk around barefoot. Summer is then hot, humid and uncomfortable, with unbelievable smog and beautiful brown skies. If you arrive during the summer, I advise to wear a mask. Coming from North America, the pollution will go straight for your lungs, and could cause breathing problems or bronchitis.

THE FLIGHT

If you've gone with an agent, they probably arranged everything for you, from your work visa to your plane tickets. Just make sure to double check everything. I know many people who didn't and wound up with a visitors' visa, or a flight with four stops lasting 23 hours. Some agents will do anything to save a buck unless you intervene. Do a little research before hand and be specific about the flight path you want but heading from North America to Korea is hardly a walk in the park, so also accept the fact that whatever your route, you're in for a long haul. Ask for an aisle seat; trust me on that one, because if you are confined to the middle for 12 hours, someone near you might not survive. However if a Korean bullies you out of your seat, do not back down. They can smell fear and will use it against you.

YOUR APARTMENT

I was lucky enough to have my own apartment as part of my contract, but when I arrived it wasn't ready so I had to room with another teacher for one week. This was very similar to how I imagine it would be if she was my roommate, so I know for a fact how awkward it can be. Apartments in Korea are not quite as small as most of us imagine they would be, however many academies will have no problem squeezing two, three or even four teachers in one of them. They are generally 3 1/2's and most have a balcony, and the rooms are usually a very decent size. Living alone, I felt like the Queen of my castle, but that one week I had to share the space was very cluttered and difficult. Make sure that if you and your roommate cannot get along to make your private area as comfortable as possible otherwise it will be a very long year.

YOUR FURNISHINGS

Apartments in Korea are like condos in North America: they are owned not rented, so I have been told that many academies will furnish their apartments the same basic way. When I arrived in mine, I had a bed, a loveseat, a TV, and the TV stand. In my kitchen I had a stove (note: it is very rare to have an oven in Korea), a microwave and a small table with a single chair. That was it. Furnishings are very limited, and accessories or

decorations are even more so. I had two plates, two glasses, and some chopsticks. On the bright side, English teachers have formed a solidarity, and you will find that most English teachers who leave to go back home will have a type of rummage sale before they go. They will sell off or even give away some of the things they have acquired, like a DVD player or even a rocking chair. Also, don't be shy to check outside on garbage day. Many people throw away perfectly good furniture items, and there is no shame in sneaking them back up to your place.

TEACHING KIDS

Eventually you will have to concentrate on the reason you're here, teaching. Just because you have been hired as a teacher does not mean you come from a lot of experience, as is the case with most people here. Korea is not very strict on its policies for hiring teachers, so as long as you have a bachelor's degree and are a native English speaker, you're in. This could mean however that your first day will be an absolute terror. Classes are usually about 10 to 12 students large, and although they are usually well behaved, that doesn't take away from the feeling of having 24 eyes staring at you half afraid and half curious on your first day. You might want to break the ice with a little joke, however they probably will not understand you, so my advice is to replace the joke with a candy. Like the cliché of having hot dogs in your pockets to appease dogs, they will do anything once you throw around a little candy.

DISCIPLINE

Once the kids get to know you, it is very likely that their true colors will come out. Some academies will allow or even condone a slap on the hand as discipline, however most foreign teachers are not comfortable with this. Korean students quickly realize this and can take advantage of your apparent weakness. Don't get caught off guard. Methods can range from humiliation, like the classic standing in the back corner, or the more severe standing outside the classroom door with your hands up, or you can use positive reinforcement. A widely used trick is writing every student's name on the board and adding a happy face beside it if they do something good. They all love bragging about how many happy faces they get, and they are completely mortified when you erase one

due to bad behaviour. Once they reach 3 happy faces, reward them with something. Collecting stamps to trade in for a bigger prize is one of the favourites.

TEACHING PRIVATELY

Your work visa allows you to teach at an academy only and there have been cases of teachers who have been caught teaching privately and then deported. This does not mean you should refrain from it because there is big money to be made here. It only means that you have to be careful about it and not brag about your myriad of private contracts to all of your colleagues. Like in most major cities, you will often find free local newspapers, especially in the metro stations. Even if the majority is written in Korean, you can easily find ads placed in the classified section catering to foreign teachers and private contracts. They can pay up to 50 won an hour, and the families are usually very generous and grateful. If you are here, like most people, to make an easy buck, consider doing privates.

THE FOOD

Korean food is now becoming popular in many North American cities, so I advise having a Korean dinner before your trip. It is nothing like Chinese food, so don't expect to order General Tao chicken or chow mein. Like most Asian cultures, they do eat a lot of rice, but they are also very big on soup and vegetables. Kimchi is their biggest export and their proudest product, and it basically consists of different fermented vegetables, usually cabbage, in a hot red pepper sauce. Some of the more traditional Koreans will make it themselves at home and leave them to ferment in kimchi pots for months on end. Not a welcome smell first thing in the morning. Some of the more enticing meals include galbi: raw bbq meat that you cook yourself at the table, and donkass: something similar to a thin pork chop. They're not big on bread so most loaves taste very sugary, including the garlic bread, and don't be surprised to see strange delicacies like silkworm larva, squid jerky, and odd things like potatoes and corn on pizza. It's a taste sensation.

BUYING ESSENTIALS

As I've mentioned, when you arrive in your apartment, it will be virtually empty. The first thing you'll want to do is fill it up with all the comforts of home, and the best place

to do this is Carrefour (pronounced 'Carpoo' if you're taking a taxi). This is a typical department store that carries household products as well as groceries. I recommend buying your own sheet (Singular since as I mentioned, they don't seem to have fitted sheets), shower curtain and probably a fork since you might only find chopsticks in your drawer at home. For cleaning products you will have to rely on the picture on the cover because absolutely nothing is written in English. In fact even the pictures look mostly like comic books with lots of lightning and explosion symbols, but hopefully somebody will be able to point you in the right direction. If you do like rice, your apartment will probably be equipped with a rice cooker and so buying a 20 kg bag, which is the standard size here, will last you all year at an economical price. Further creature comforts might have to be shipped to you from some loving family members back home, but Carrefour will at least let you make your home liveable.

TRAVELLING

You will find that there are many long weekends and national holidays in Korea, so being so close to many other Asian countries, you could easily fly out for three or four days to enjoy a nice vacation. The best and cheapest way to do this is by taking a package tour, which takes care of all of your hotel and transportation requirements, but you will be with a group of Korean people. This is fine except for the fact that they will look at you as if you've gotten lost and are in the wrong place, and you will not be able to speak to anyone because most Korean people over the age of 35 don't speak any English. However, if you go with a group of friends you don't need to make new ones. Tours also include sightseeing and scheduled shopping, but you can easily opt out of those parts and simply meet up again with the tour on the last day. And don't be surprised if you do tour with your Korean buddies and you happen to go to a restaurant together in another country, you will see that many of them will whip out little packages of Korean hot sauce or kimchi before trying the local food. Kimchi is a smell you will not be able to escape.

THE CLOTHES

Korean style is either far past the times or far ahead of the times, because when I went in 2004 they seemed to be in the middle of their 80s craze which is now becoming popular

in North America in 2009. So I'm not sure if this was a leftover from the actual 80s or if they have a keen sense of what fashion will be. Older women tend to wear whatever is comfortable even if this means mixing patterns like flowers and polka dots, paisley and plaid. With the younger generation you will find two extremes: either extremely conservative like schoolgirls who wear turtlenecks and kilts down to their ankles or you will find a stereotypical anime character, with a short short skirt and pigtails. If you plan on doing any clothes shopping in Korea, you either need to be model slim or go on a killer diet before your trip, because the largest size would probably be the equivalent of an 8 in North America. Seeing as though the average North American woman wears a size 12, this is certainly not good business for any Korean shops looking to make a buck on tourists.

GETTING SICK

As I previously mentioned, arriving in winter would probably be your best bet, because although they are damp and you might catch a little cold, it will give you time to adapt to climate change without getting seriously sick right off the bat. I arrived in the spring just in time for the yellow dust which comes over from China every spring and coats absolutely everything with a layer of sticky, grimy yellow paste. You wouldn't dare open your windows so why would you take a chance opening your mouth? I didn't make this connection and instead inhaled more pollution than I care to imagine and developed acute bronchitis with a torn respiratory muscle. If a Korean colleague will take you to a Korean doctor and translate your symptoms, at least it will tide you over for the time being, however he will probably prescribe more medication than you've ever had in your life. The reason for this is that our pills have multiple purposes, but they take a different pill for every tiny additional effect, so you will leave the pharmacy feeling like a drug addict. When you have time make the trip to Itaewon to see the one English doctor in Seoul. You will find yourself telling him your life story simply out of relief that he can understand you.

CALLING IN SICK

If you do happen to get sick, make sure to take your myriad of medication as quickly as possible, because unlike in North America, you are not entitled to sick days at most academies. Of course, if you wind up in the hospital or absolutely insist that you can't make it, they will get another teacher to replace you, but it is highly frowned upon. You might not lose any pay, but you will be given a hard time, because it is the typical Korean work ethic to work through absolutely anything. When I had bronchitis, I temporarily lost my voice, so I met with my boss and tried to mime the problem. He told me that since the only problem I had was a lack of voice, and that I actually had enough energy and well-being to make it through the day, that instead of speaking in class I should simply write or draw everything I wanted to say. I thought he was joking so I started laughing, but when I was drawing pictures in my first class the laughter had subsided.

RECYCLING AND GARBAGE

It is the law in Korea to recycle, and they are very strict about it. You must buy specialized garbage bags from your local corner store that are small and see-through, preventing you from throwing away anything that could be recycled. And believe me they will check. Many apartment buildings have security guards, and they make it a habit to check through any garbage thrown away by a foreigner. I actually had my security guard knock on my door and hand me back my garbage bag without a word until I sought explanation from a colleague. Recycling day will probably be once a week, and if you are unlucky like I was, it will be at 6:30 in the morning. You do not bring down a bin full of mixed recyclables as we do in North America, but instead you will see multiple boxes on the street where you have to sort your own recycling. It is not as simple as glass versus plastic however, you will have to separate juice bottles from wine bottles from beer bottles from newspaper to wrapping paper to toilet paper (if you happen to be recycling that). It is a tedious process, so I shamefully admit that I collected all my bottles and lugged them down about once a month

SUPERSTITIONS

You will learn a lot of superstitions from your students who inadvertently advise you of all the things you can and cannot do in Korea. I learned very quickly that writing someone's name on the board in a red marker meant that you were condemning them to death. They also have an unwarranted fear of fan death. This means that you cannot turn on a fan in a room with the windows closed because the fan will suck your breath away and kill you. The bright side to this is that every apartment is equipped with air conditioning. The thing about superstitions here is that while some are universally accepted as ridiculous, others, like fan death, are very seriously believed in, so don't try to be a smart westerner and talk them out of it. It will only lead to frustration and distrust that you will try to kill them with a fan.

MAILING

If you are like me and enjoy shopping and buying souvenirs from other countries for yourself and everyone you know, then Korea will be both a blessing and a curse. There are many beautiful and traditional items that you can pick up relatively inexpensively, and if you do this on a semi-regular basis, your apartment will be beautifully decorated and feel like home. However, unless you plan on leaving all of your new goodies behind, you need to find a way to transport them back to North America. Don't even think of jamming them into your suitcase, because even if you managed to squeeze in everything you bought, most likely you will be over the plane's weight limit, and you will pay more for the transportation than you did for the shopping. Instead, the Korean postal system is quite cheap, as long as you choose ground mail instead of air. About three or four months before you plan to go home, go to the post office, pick up some boxes, and start packing. A large box by ground mail will take about three months but it will only cost you about \$30 or \$40, depending on the weight; a fraction of the price the airline will charge you. So, either stop shopping or start packing.

TRANSPORTATION

Seoul is a very large city and so traffic is one of the major problems you experience. There are many different interesting corners you can visit; either for shopping or partying

or sightseeing, but don't intend to do them all by taxi. Taxis should be reserved for coming home late at night, and even then, try to share them with as many people as you can. Many taxis do have meters and will charge you a set rate, but some taxi drivers decide upon their own fees, and without any knowledge of the language you will have difficulty disputing them. Also, if you are alone in a taxi, it is very common that he will stop and pick up someone else to add to his fare, and then you will drive which ever one home that lives the closest. Meaning, you could be in for a long trip. Instead take advantage of their extensive subway system, which is half underground and half above ground. I live in Montréal, which is a pretty major city in Canada however; our subway system is about 1/5 of the size of Korea's. It can get confusing transferring lines, so try to get a copy of the subway map before you depart on any venture so you can study and memorize your route. Once you're out there, it might be difficult to find someone to help you, so travel in pairs at the beginning and good luck.

GYMS

Many foreigners take advantage of the many gyms you can find in most neighbourhoods. This is probably because the membership fees are relatively cheap and many academies will pay for most of it, because it certainly isn't due to the comfort and convenience. The gym I went to had exercise equipment galore, and they were one of the few gyms that offered aerobics classes, however the classes were held in the middle of all the exercise equipment, so essentially as you are running on the treadmill, you're staring at 20 people doing jumping jacks in front of you. I was also lucky that my gym was about five minutes away from my apartment, therefore I never had to shower there. As conservative as many Korean women are, the locker room is one place where they let it all hang out, quite literally. They walk around completely exposed and comfortable, letting themselves air dry from their showers. I even had one woman introduce herself and shake my hand while completely naked. It was my first and last experience in a locker room.

BATHROOMS

Unlike any of the horrible rumours about the toilets in China, for the most part Korea does have full, flushing toilets. In fact, some are even high tech, providing you with

buttons for warm air, clean water or even music to drown out any noise. (However be careful if you hit the wrong button as I got a bit of a shower when I was trying to flush). The only thing that I advise is to always keep what we called 'rations' on you. This is simply a wad of toilet paper or pack of kleenex. I say this for 2 reasons: most bathrooms will have absolutely nothing available to you; they even only provide a damp towel to dry your hands after washing, and in most bars or restaurants, they leave the toilet paper on a roll attached to the front cash or bar. I'm not quite sure why, maybe they have a nationwide problem with toilet paper overuse. But whatever the reason, it is awkward pulling off your toilet paper at the front of a restaurant, so be discreet, carry your own.

FESTIVALS

One of the best parts about visiting another country as a worker instead of as a tourist, is that you can participate in their local festivals, which in Korea happen quite often. There are adventure companies which cater to foreigners and provide daily English tours on the weekends, which is the best way to access most of these festivals. Some of the highlights I went to included the lantern Festival, where people get dressed up in traditional costume and parade at night with lit lanterns, mud fest, which is held in a small town outside of Seoul where the entire town is full of mud pits for people to romp around in and wash off in the ocean nearby, and the Inje ice Festival, which is held on a large frozen lake and where you can go ice fishing, eat live minnows, and play strange sports like ice golf and soccer. These festivals are tons of fun, so keep your ears open for when they take place. And if you're lucky, you will end up on the local news or newspaper, because reporters can't get enough of foreigners enjoying their local festivities.

NIGHTLIFE

The nightlife is booming in Seoul, with plenty of clubs, bars and karaoke places to choose from. The best place for foreigners to party is in Itaewon, which is the most North American place in Seoul. Here you will find all the foreign teachers, and many English-speaking establishments. The fun part is that bars stay open all night until about 9 AM, so you can go for a late dinner and dancing afterward, and you can easily spend the night here. And when you do leave a club and want a little bite to eat before heading home,

there are many stands with street snacks that you have access to even at 4 in the morning. Karaoke is known as Noraebang, which is really a private karaoke room for all of your friends. These too are open all night and make a great ending to a busy evening. The only downside is that when you finally make it home at 10 o'clock in the morning, your doorman will probably shake his head in disapproval at the crazy foreigners living in his building.

BONUS

Most contracts include a bonus upon contract completion, and this bonus is usually the equivalent of one month of salary. However, be very careful to abide by the above conditions, like not calling in sick or not teaching too many privates, because if your academy finds any reason to terminate your contract early, you will not only not get your bonus, but you will also have to pay for your own flight home. The rules are strict, and depending on which academy you choose, they can be very tough at enforcing them, so although I encourage you to have a good time during your stay in Korea, don't overdo it or it will cost you. Also, note that most contracts of a year or more offer bonuses. If you take a contract to cover a winter or summer vacation camp, you will probably have to pay for your own flights and will receive no bonus at the end.

FLIGHT HOME

When you have finally had enough of this foreign but endearing culture, and you have completed all your contract agreements, it's time to head out. Your academy will then arrange your travel back home, unless of course you take advantage of this opportunity to see a little more of Asia. If you make the request, your academy will then provide you with a plane ticket to any country you want to go to, as long as it's not more expensive than your flight home would be. This really is a great opportunity for you if you enjoy traveling, so if you're willing to spend the extra month or two away from home, jump all over it. The only thing you will have to pay for is a one-way ticket from that country to yours, so your vacation will come much cheaper than if you organize it from home. Just be sure that whoever purchases your ticket confirms with the travel agent, because these days with all tickets being done electronically, it is easy to make a mistake. I arrived at

the airport willing and eager to finally head home only to discover that my ticket had not been confirmed and therefore I was stranded. A few hours and lots of tears later we got it sorted out, but the last thing you need after a year of drama is one final scene.