

# Sleeping in Seoul

In Seoul, sleep doesn't always come easily. The city pulses day and night, with convenience stores glowing at 3 a.m., cafés still bustling at 5, and bathhouses that welcome the weary until dawn. People find themselves snatching at sleep; for the Seoulites, this is home.

"It is very different; we take sleep less seriously," says Jae Seong, a 20-year-old student at the University of Seoul. "Or I guess we are more flexible, at school you sleep when you can and then don't when you are busy." In a place where all-night study sessions meet dawn ramen deliveries, sleep becomes a moving target rather than a nightly routine.

Restaurants, spas, and even libraries are constantly operating. With an intense nightlife, the city caters to the rhythms of its nocturnal clients, especially students and overworked office workers. This isn't just social—it's structural. The system has been constantly tweaked and changed to suit its busy users.

Jjimjilbangs—Korean bathhouses are the most unique of Seoul's sleep scene. These gender-segregated sanctuaries offer more than steam and saunas; they're warm, welcoming places where people nap communally in shorts and T-shirts. Jjimjilbang affords people the opportunity to get off their feet and seek refuge wherever they find themselves.

"They are very small, though; it is not like a hotel with lots of rooms, they are like bunks," Jae explains. "We always have creative sleeping spaces, unusual for people from Europe, but it works."

With 17,000 people per square kilometre, Seoul is ranked as the sixth most densely populated city in the world, with a population density twice that of New York. Space is limited as a result. Many residents live in tiny one-room apartments or goshiwons; rooms designed to be big enough for solely a bed and a desk. This has given rise to a culture of functional sleep design: foldable mattresses, storable bedding, and multipurpose furniture.

"At home, it's different as well," Jae says. "I have a mat here. I had a bed in Madrid and the same in London. I like the beds I had, but they're unfamiliar, so I will say I prefer the mat." Culture dominates practicality in this sense as Seoul maintains long-standing traditions. Many Korean homes use ondol floor heating, making floor-sleeping feel more cosy and traditional.

On Seoul's expansive subway system, people often find themselves dozing off. "People are not shy about sleeping," Jae tells us. "Sleeping for longer trips on the subway is safe; people use alarms to be safe." It's a quiet trust in public infrastructure, and rightly so, with the sleek and effective system known for its cleanliness and pleasant atmosphere.

Yet for all its ingenuity, Seoul isn't immune to modern sleep struggles. High academic and professional demands also shape the city's sleep culture. Chronic sleep deprivation is perhaps too frequent and is what has necessitated opportunism. "There are also more places to sleep in our neighbourhoods," Jae adds. "We have cafes where workers can nap during breaks."

These nap cafés are a growing market of sleep-positive spaces in the city. Small, serene, with soft lighting. They never could facilitate a typical eight hours, but they allow the typical person to snatch at sleep when they can.

Yasaik is a late-night snack and another common feature of nightlife in Seoul. From bubbling bowls of tteokbokki to deep-fried chicken delivered to your door at 2 a.m., it is not designed as a main meal but is still an essential part of the nightly routine, and perhaps one that would have nutritionists look elsewhere.

For travellers or city-dwellers in transition, capsule hotels have become a go-to. Compact in nature but highly practical, areas like Gangnam or Hongdae offer a cheap alternative to traditional hotels. This is yet another example of how Seoul has adapted to embrace the atypical nature of the city's sleeping patterns.

Seoul's sleep culture may seem counterintuitive to Western norms, where people constantly pursue perfection and optimisation. But in Seoul, sleep is flexible, public, and communal. Though it lacks consistency in practice, it is ever-present throughout the capital.