

{Destination}

Korea



Korea's mountainside villages come alive with fall color. Photo courtesy of Korea Tourism Organization

An Autumn Unmatched

Fall in South Korea reveals cool weather and beautiful color

The first signs of seasonal change are approaching: a slight breeze, a few clouds and a sense that cooler weather lies ahead. OK, that's probably true somewhere, but not so much here in Southern California, where it's forever summer.

A proper autumn may conjure New England — baked apple treats and covered bridges are nice. But why not try Joseon Dynasty palaces and sauteed pine mushrooms instead?

South Korea, the ultramodern high-tech wonderland of Northeast Asia, is more than endless cities, barbeque foods and winter games. An escape in fall provides both natural wonder and special events as the weather gives up its hot, humid summer. It's a near consensus that fall is the best time of year to travel to the nation, as it combines the best of Fahrenheit, food and foliage — dare we say you won't regret skipping New England one bit once you see these leaves?

Within the city limits of Seoul, you'll find five spectacular palaces of the Joseon Dynasty that are over 600 years old. Two of them, Gyeongbokgung Palace and Changdeokgung Palace, offer something special for autumn visitors: night tours. Starting in late August, the palaces are open in the evening. Visitors can enjoy a rare glimpse of these opulent UNESCO World Heritage sites coming alive under lanterns and moonlight.

A stroll can work up an appetite, and, luckily, Seoul delivers. Dongdaemun Market near the palace grounds keeps late hours and is perfect for shopping and snacking. Seafood stalls abound, and you'll find that fall seasonal items are No. 1 on the

menu. Blue crab, jumbo prawns and gizzard shad with garlic sauce in a lettuce wrap are favorites.

To really experience South Korea as autumn approaches, hitch a ride to the east. As the city gives way to the mountains, you'll see fall foliage that puts a Vermont October to shame. The South Korean countryside has no less than a dozen beautiful, vista-filled sites awash with red, yellow and sienna tones.

Favorites include five spectacular summits: Seoraksan, Naejangsan, Juwangsan, Odesan and Jirisan Mountains, Misty valleys, craggy peaks and crisp, fresh air draw visitors from across the globe. Hiking is perfect to take it all in — try the Biryong Falls hike in the Osaek Mineral Spring area. The journey is highlighted by the cascading falls themselves, which are said to look like a dragon spreading its wings toward the sky.

Feeling extra adventurous? Head south to Jeju Island and hike Hallasan, a volcano that is also South Korea's highest peak. Scaling the mountain is doable in a day, and you can take in an island's worth of fall air and color. For a less strenuous trek, the Olle-gil trail system allows you to circumnavigate the entire island.

The cooler weather makes coastal destinations appealing as well. Yeosu, on the country's southern tip, gives off a "Cape Cod in autumn" vibe half a world away. Take it all in via the Ocean Railbike -- a human powered, rail-going touring machine that hugs the coast. At night, wander the artistically lit waterfront and enjoy fresh sashimi, called *hoe*, on cliffs overlooking the harbor.

For traditional charm, the lakeside city of Chuncheon is the perfect destination. You don't have to be in love to visit Chuncheon Romantic Market, but you might find yourself enamored with the place before you leave. Shopping, from traditional *hanbok* clothing to haute couture, gives way to delicious food stalls.

Chuncheon is located in an agrarian province, so it's perfect for Korean farm-to-fork dining. A Korean dish that's ideal for cooler days is *dak galbi*, a table serving of spicy stir-fried chicken, cabbage, sweet potatoes and *tteok* (Korean rice cake). It's best served in a cast-iron skillet in the table's center, so bring a big appetite or a group of eaters and enjoy the warmth of your meal and surroundings. You'll get all the feeling and flavor of fall before your flight back to always-sunny SoCal.

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