

The Dynasty of Design

In a hanok, guests can discover a hotel experience where the past meets elegant modernity, as a new generation of architects, designers and hoteliers reimagine Korea's iconic abode

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OVER THE PAST two decades South Korea – once a relatively neglected corner of Northeast Asia – has blossomed into an alluring destination, with a record-breaking 18.5 million visitors arriving in 2025 alone. Many are attracted to the country's hyperkinetic vibes and ultra-modern splendours as seen and heard in its pop music, TV dramas and films. But some come seeking a quieter, older and perhaps more elegant version of the country, as found in a hanok stay.

Hanok are traditional detached homes built with craftsmanship developed over centuries, and are noted for their characteristic curved, tiled roofs, wooden beams, detailed stonework and interior courtyards known as *madang*. In the wake of the

Korean War and the frenzy to build apartment blocks during the decades that followed, many of the country's hanok were destroyed. In the early 60s there were nearly 130,000 in the capital, Seoul; by 2020 only some 8,000 remained.

The iconic buildings fell out of favour with many Koreans, as noted by Colin Marshall, a cultural essayist who lives in Seoul. "For most of the 20th century, things visibly old – or indeed visibly Korean – were liable to be dismissed reflexively as *chonseureoweo*, a word with connotations of homely outmodedness," he tells *Beyond*. "But these days, with the benefit of a bit more historical distance, their cachet has grown."

PHOTOGRAPHY: Nostalgia Hanok Hotels



LESSON IN HARMONY
Nostalgia Hanok uses natural materials to engender tranquillity



“Hanok hotels offer the hanok experience with more luxury and comfort”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Traditional hanok in Jeonju; woodblock print at Gyeongbokgung Palace; Rakkojae Seoul Main Hanok; traditional tea-making ceremony; Gyeongju the Nine Hanok Stay

Some Koreans realised they were losing one of the country’s great treasures, which resulted in efforts – led by hanok enthusiasts such as leading South Korean architect Cho Jung-goo – to preserve these iconic structures. In fact, it was Cho who designed the country’s first hanok hotel, Ragung, in the ancient city of Gyeongju in 2007. “It was criticised for its departures from classical hanok purity,” notes Marshall, though its construction signalled that new designers were keen to modernise the form with nods to both comfort and contemporary sensibilities. It also marked the beginning of a trend.

“In the mid-2010s, there was a boom in hanok guest houses,” explains Seoul-based author and hanok preservationist Robert J. Fouser. “This created demand for hanok experiences and more upscale hanok hotels began to appear. Most of the hanok guest houses in the 2010s were spartan and had small or shared bathrooms. Hanok hotels offer the hanok experience with more luxury and comfort.”

It should come as no surprise that you’ll find South Korea’s most famous concentration of hanok in the country’s biggest city, Seoul. Surrounded by the regal

Gyeongbokgung Palace, Changdeokgung Palace and Jongmyo Shrine, Bukchon Hanok Village is home to more than 900 traditional structures that date back some 600 years to the Joseon dynasty.

When the boom in hanok stays began in the early 2010s, most opened their doors in the historic south-western city of Jeonju, and the ones that were in Bukchon tended to be bare-bones affairs. “Restrictions were stricter in Bukchon,” Fouser says. “After the Covid pandemic, restrictions in Bukchon were loosened and more luxurious hanok stays emerged.”

Among these is Nostalgia Hanok Hotel – part of the local luxury hospitality group Nostalgia – which features six separate houses nestled throughout the village, all within a quick walking distance of the hotel’s Welcome Center.

Nostalgia CEO Paul Park employed a different designer for each house, giving them free rein to imbue the hanok with a unique flavour. “Each Nostalgia Hanok has its own story,” he said in an interview with Singapore’s CNA. “No two are alike.”

For example, the renovation for its Hillo Jae hanok was overseen by Seoul design firm Kilyeon, which also collaborated with local artists to make the most out of the space. This includes a large stone-like object by artist Huh Myoung-wook, as well as a sleek ceramic dining table built by artist Lee Hun-chung. While these objects give the space a very contemporary flavour, the emphasis is on comfort.

While Nostalgia Hanok Hotel is known for adding modern touches to the old bones of hanok spaces, the people behind Rakkojae are sticklers for tradition

This 140-year-old property in Bukchon Village was renovated in 2003 by master carpenter Young Jin Chung and – aside electricity and plumbing – exists and operates largely as it would have when it housed the *yangban* (nobility) of the Joseon dynasty.

There are just five rooms at Rakkojae: three in the main house and one in each of the small separate houses on the property, all of which surround a central courtyard where a striking Korean red pine tree reaches toward the sky.

While the hotels in Seoul’s Bukchon Village are leading the way in what is possible in a hanok stay, there are also properties outside of the capital that are worth consideration. Gyeongju – the ancient capital of the Silla dynasty – has Cho Jung-goo’s iconic Ragung hotel, along with other excellent spots such as Soi Hanok Stay and Gyeongju the Nine →



PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Parren Taylor; Rakkojae Hanok Collection; Gyeongju The Nine





ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN TRADITIONAL DESIGN

What makes a hanok a hanok

While new architects and designers have taken plenty of liberties to reinterpret the hanok for modern times, there are some very specific characteristics that define them.



The roof

Hanok employ a curved roof made from tiles called *giwa* that give them their signature silhouette. The raised ends of the roof can also be found in classical Chinese and Japanese architecture. Traditionally, the *giwa* roof would only be for wealthy and aristocratic residents. Hanok for commoners used a basic thatch roof, or *choga*.

Ondol

This floor heating system is one of the hanok's best-known features and is used for modern Korean housing as well. A traditional *ondol* connects the fire built in the kitchen with a layer of stones underneath the floor, which radiate heat – in the past Koreans

didn't just sit on the floor but slept on it as well.

Daecheongmaru

This open-air elevated wooden platform acts as a central hall, and allows air to circulate in the hot, sultry months of the Korean summer, making it a cool place to gather. In the past, the family would often eat here and use it to perform important events such as weddings and ancestral rites.

Madang

The hanok's central courtyard and front yard, and a place to gather or perform agricultural tasks. Traditionally, it would be left empty to emphasise the sense of open space.

Harmony with nature

Hanok often face a river with a mountain backdrop, affording them plenty of light and protection from the wind.



Hanok Stay – a romantic country pension complete with swimming pool. Jeonju boasts scores of great guest houses in its famed hanok village, though the place that has raised the bar is the Hanok Heritage Hotel. Designed by architect Cho Chung-il, this award-winning complex sits near a scenic river bend in rugged Gangwon province, and was inspired by Seoul's Jongmyo Shrine.

While a hanok stay is a good chance to experience traditional Korean culture, there are other factors that make them attractive. "As detached houses, they are quieter and offer more privacy," says Fouser. "The madang lets air and light in and is a great place for entertaining in Spring and Fall."

For Marshall, they also bring to mind their often-noble roots. "A hanok is like a palace grounds in miniature," he says. "Even a 'city hanok', much smaller than the rural version, gives a sense of movement through a complex of buildings rather than just one."

According to Go Soojin, co-owner of Gyeongju the Nine Hanok Stay, what makes really makes a hanok stay great is the opportunity to commune with another time. "Hanok are special because you can't find them everywhere," she tells *Beyond*. "You have to venture off the beaten path. While the exterior preserves its historic character and traditional charm, the interior is designed to be warm, inviting and equipped with modern comforts. There will always be those looking to reconnect with their past, and hanok provide that unique cultural experience." ¹

OPPOSITE Hanok hotel in Jeonju

TOP Baek In-je House, Seoul

Etihad offers up to two non-stop flights daily from Abu Dhabi to Seoul Incheon.