

# Best for eastern chic: Seoul

By Clifford Coonan

*Saturday, 7 February 2009*

In the past few years, Seoul has emerged as one of Asia's hippest destinations – slicker and cooler than the balmy southeast Asian cities, but less frantic and crowded than Tokyo. Some of its best bits can be found down the quiet lanes that have an intimacy you would not expect in a metropolis of 20 million people.

Now trying to reinvent itself as a tourist hub, Seoul has a lot to offer, particularly to Asian travellers who come for the food and the familiar culture. It's just difficult to find a single, catchy line to promote the city. It's nice to hang out in. The people are quirky and friendly. The food is great. There is room to breathe in Seoul, with an exciting café, bar and restaurant culture. Its appeal just doesn't really translate into a soundbite.

Seoul was founded 600 years ago though most of the city is newly rebuilt after being flattened during the Korean War (1950-1953). It still pays its respects to its ancient traditions despite constant reinventions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Insa-dong alleyway; here is a plethora of shops selling antiques, delicate paintings, calligraphy, ceramics, lacquerware and woodwork, and the ancient Korean musical instruments, such as the gayagum, a zither-like instrument, or the stringed geomungo.

A most entertaining way to examine the combination of ancient and modern is the martial arts comedy *Jump!*. Featuring a drunk uncle, a martial arts master, a frustrated pair of young lovers, incompetent robbers, and a lot of taekwondo and slapstick, *Jump!* has run on Broadway and earned kudos at the Edinburgh Fringe.

There is glamour here too. Top actress Kim Min-hee and her model boyfriend Lee Su-hyuk waft past as we enter the high-end Italian "retail lifestyle space" Corso Como, which last year opened a flagship shop in the exclusive Cheongdam-dong shopping street, only its second store outside Italy. This is where you go to buy your John Galliano shirts, and despite world economic gloom there are still plenty of shoppers here.

"We have higher limit customers, so haven't been affected much by the recession. We also have a wide offering of goods," said spokeswoman Zoe Yoonkyung Kim as we wander around the store, browsing art books and checking out the labels before heading to the café for coffee and food. Yes, the food. For many visitors to Korea, kimchi will be the dealbreaker on whether they can truly dive into the native culture or just graze at its edges.

Kimchi is a traditional dish of vegetables with varied seasonings, which is served with everything. You can have kimchi stew, kimchi fried rice and even kimchi pizza. It's incredibly good for you. Space kimchi went with the first Korean astronaut to the Russian-manned space ship Soyuz, and people say "Kimchi!" when having their photographs taken. Many of these

varieties of kimchi can be found in the Kwangjung market. Don't worry if you don't like kimchi, there are lots of other dishes on offer: ginseng chicken, barbecue dishes and tofu soups. You can also find great Western food – the Italian food at Mad for Garlic! chain is excellent, as are the hamburgers at the upscale Kraze Burgers franchise.

Korea's history is a martial one, of constantly repelling invaders or securing territory in order to survive, so it is no surprise to find a lot of armour on display at the National Museum. But the focus is on courage rather than aggression, epitomised by the plum tree paintings by Jo Huiryang (1789-1866). The plum tree's flowering in winter is seen as a sign of resolve in the face of adversity, and Seoul still displays this kind of attitude in spades.

At the Bongeunsa temple downtown, one of the biggest Buddhist temples in the city, anxious parents pray at a special shrine devoted to ensuring their kids make it into Ivy League colleges in the United States. But even when they do, they always return to Seoul.