

Jeju Island: Phenomenal Natural Beauty

Jeju-do is a volcanic island located 130 kilometers off the southern coast of South Korea. It is the country's largest island, smallest province and home to its tallest mountain, Halla-san, a dramatic-looking dormant volcano that rises 1,950 meters above sea level. The people of Jeju have developed a culture and language that are distinct from those of mainland Korea, and the island is famous for its matriarchal family structure, symbolized by the haenyeo ("sea women"), who make a living from deep-sea diving to harvest marine products.



Jeju Island, also known as the "Island of the Gods," is a popular vacation spot for Koreans and many Japanese. It remains one of the top honeymoon destinations for Korean newlyweds. The island's mixture of volcanic rock, frequent rains, and temperate climate, make it very similar to the Hawaiian Islands in the U.S.

The island offers visitors a wide range of activities: hiking on Halla-san (South Korea's highest peak), catching sunrises and sunsets over the ocean, viewing majestic waterfalls, riding horses, or just lying around on the sandy beaches.

Before the invention of modern means of transportation, travel to and from the mainland was often a difficult and dangerous journey that few attempted. Since the island was cut off from the mainland in this way, the people on the island developed their own unique culture and dialect.



Out of this culture was born a set of unusual icons that demonstrate the uniqueness of the island: "Haenyeo," "Dolhareubang," "Galot," and "Bangsatap."

Back in the days when Jeju Island was a land of fishing villages, the local women were responsible for a large part of the family's income. "Haenyeo" (female divers) often went diving to collect shellfish and edible seaweed, filling the quiet sea air with whistles announcing their catch.

Every visitor to Jeju is sure to see their fair share of Dolhareubang (literally "old grandfather stone statues"). Sometimes serious-looking, sometimes almost comical, these statues dot the landscape and have become one of the most widely-recognized symbols of the island.



The word "Galot" refers to traditional Jeju clothing that is dyed with persimmon juice. Often associated with the area's agricultural way of life, these orange-hued, lightweight pieces of clothing are a trademark of Jeju.

Another special sight are the Bangsatap piled all around the island: at houses, beaches, and even tourist attractions. These small, round towers made of many stones were thought to ward off evil, protect the village, and bring prosperity to the people. It is because of this deep-seated belief that one can still see Bangsatap near the entranceways of many buildings.

Jeju's phenomenal natural beauty, historical legacies, quirky museums, and array of water sports make it one of the best vacation spots in Korea.

Although tourism is one of the main industries on the island, many of the hotels and other tourist areas are run by mainland companies, so much of the income never gets put back into the local economy. Also, since the attractions are geared towards tourists, many of the entrance fees can be hefty (although the locally owned and operated ones tend to be cheaper). Similar to Gyeongju and some other areas, local residents can enter most places for free or for a steeply discounted price.

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Date: 2012-01-30

Article link:

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