

MT. MAISAN

Pagodas, vistas and meat at Jinan's 'Horse Ear Mountain'

Written and photographed by Rob McGovern



Tapyeongjae Lake, Mt. Maisan

As summer transforms into the cooler and more colorful autumn, millions of air conditioners are gradually silenced as the temperature outside returns to tolerable. This is the perfect time to escape the city and head into the mountains to observe the transition into autumn. Leave behind the sounds and smells, the suited businessmen, and the seriousness of life, and replace it with the chatter of cicadas, the sweet songs of birds, and the chlorophyll-scented breeze.

Here, the only traffic you'll encounter is clad in luminous walking gear. Come fall, Mother Nature rouges swaths of countryside with reds and orange and gentle streams babble as they traverse rocky paths before disappearing into the earth.

Take in the beauty, speak the ancient tales of legend, and add a dash of mystique to find yourself in Maisan Provincial Park, deep in the Korean countryside in Jeollabuk-do's Jinan County.

The small park is home to Maisan—literally “horse ears mountain,” as it is topped with a pair of rocky peaks that resemble horse ears. These horse ears, however, have a story.



The Legend of the Horse Ear Peaks

It is claimed that the twin peaks of Maisan, the couple peaks, are the only such formation in the world. The gendered peaks—one male (Sut-mai-bong) and one female (Am-mai-bong), the latter being 6m taller than the former—are said to have been gods (or fairies, depending on who you ask) that descended to earth and had a child. They lived happily on earth, but one day decided to return to the heavens. They had to do this under cover of darkness, for being seen would have dire repercussions. A clear night, lit by moonlight, was to be the night they left, but the sky became overcast, and so they waited until dawn. As they ascended, the dawn light showing them the way, an early-rising villager spotted them, and they instantly turned to stone and fell back to earth, becoming the rocky twin peaks of Maisan.

Silent bliss

Setting off from the north Maisan parking lot and walking to the south parking lot is a good route through the peaks, as it deposits you at the better restaurants of the park. The path from the parking lot leads to steps that go up into the trees, but before you even begin the ascent there is something missing. There is a distinct lack of manmade noise. The noise is replaced by cicadas and crickets and the monotonous tapping of a *moktak* emanating from Mai-sa, a small temple at the base of the climb. This is what the Korean countryside sounds like, and it is why tourists from all over Korea and the world come to these provincial parks. As you start climbing the steps, there is the sound of a flowing stream in one ear and insects and birds in the other, the *moktak* fading away with every step.

Stone pagodas of Tapsa Temple



Temples and history

In summer, the canopy that covers the walkway is a rain-invigorated green, lush and fresh and a haven from the sun. In autumn, it is a patchwork of burnt oranges and deep reds that lines the short climb to the base of the female peak. There is a path to the top of this peak, which, sadly, was closed at the time of writing.

Towering over walkers below, the peaks are bare and sheer, but on the ground the park is full of flowering shrubs that add dashes of color and give dragonflies somewhere to stop and pose for photographs. This path through the peaks takes you past Hwaeom Cave and eventually to Tapsa, a temple complex where a 25-year-old monk, Yi Gap-yong, spent 30 years meditating and building over 100 stone pagodas by hand, around 80 of which remain. The temple complex is one of the more surreal ones in the country, as the conical stone pagodas are dotted around the temple while a seated statue of Yi watches over them.

A short walk from Tapsa, past Tapyeongjae, a lake with swan-shaped leisure boats, and past Geumdang-sa, a temple built in 814 that, among other things, served as a guerrilla base during the Japanese colonial period, there are restaurants crowding the path on both sides.

Mountains of meat

Meat figures heavily in this gauntlet of eating places, tempting your senses from both sides. A specialty of the park seems to be smoked racks of ribs. Many of these restaurants have racks smoking away at the front in glass-faced, wood-fired smokers. Rack after rack of ribs glistens and drips with marinade as they are smoked to the point where gravity has almost enough influence to drag the meat from the bones. Huge slabs of *moksal* sit in a cooler waiting to be sliced up at another restaurant.

Ending the day

It is a short walk from here to the south parking lot, where you can get a bus to either Jinan Terminal or Jeonju. With the last bus leaving for Jinan from the south lot at 7pm, the restaurants start to wind down around 6:30pm, although there are lots of cars parked around, suggesting that people make the short drive from Jinan to eat here.

The walk from north to south takes around an hour at a leisurely pace, but you will need to factor in time to take photographs and admire the scenery, especially at Tapsa, as well as stopping to eat.

Maisan Provincial Park is a wonderful place to visit, and not particularly taxing even on weary legs. The scenery is beautiful, the temples interesting, and the food delicious. It is a very doable day trip from Seoul, but would perhaps be even better as part of a weekend itinerary that took in some other sites of the region perhaps a day in Jeonju, with that city as a base.



Meat at one of the restaurants near the south parking lot



GETTING THERE

Getting to Maisan from Seoul isn't the easiest of trips. There are only two direct buses from Seoul to Jinan, one at 10:10am and the other at 3:10pm, taking around 3 hours and 30 minutes and costing 13,800 won. The better option is to take the direct and more frequent bus from nearby Jeonju to Maisan. Buses from Seoul to Jeonju run very frequently. The bus journey from Jinan Terminal to north Maisan takes about 10 minutes, but would be easily walkable. Entrance to the park costs 2,000 won.

PLACES TO STAY

Jinan's not really the kind of place you would stay over unless you were planning on spending more than a day in the county. Like most places in Korea, there are options here including motels and *jjimjilbang*. Most convenient is probably the *minbak* in the southern parking lot, Dana Minbak (063-432-2881). The best option would probably be to take a bus to nearby Jeonju, where you have a lot more options, including a *hanok* hotel as well as bigger hotels, motels, and more *jjimjilbang*.

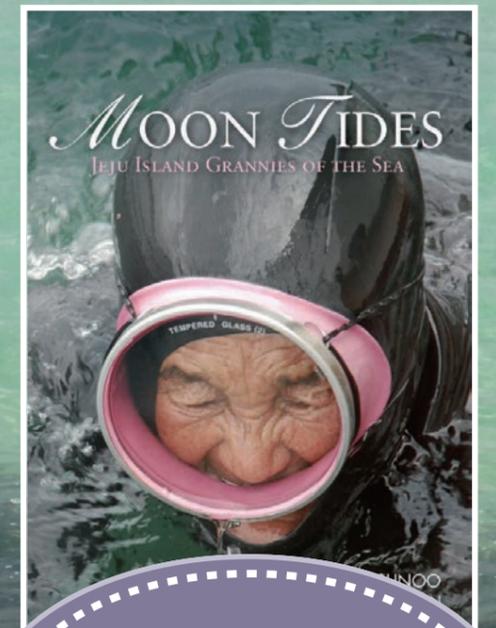
MORE INFO

The excellent KTO regional tourism offices can give you advice on everything from bus times and costs, to where to eat and where to find accommodation. Call (02) 1330 for information about Seoul and (063) 1330 for info on Jeollabuk-do and Maisan.

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