

WEST SEA WINTER

Avoid the skiing crowds with a hibernial hiatus at
Taeanhaean National Park

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Photographed by Ryu Seunghoo

There is something untamed yet beautiful about beaches in winter. Coastal regions in Korea are weathered by gale force, sub-zero winds during the winter months but there is something fulfilling, something challenging about being in the thick of it. Nature turns the tables in winter, sending the lounging revelers and sand castle building families home, along with the sand sculptors and Frisbee throwers. Nature has forced them indoors to complain about the cold and to revel in their *ondol*. But not everyone is so easily scared off and rewards await those who defy Mother.

All-year beaches

Korea has almost 2,500km of coastline, thousands of islands and hundreds of beaches, yet very few, with perhaps Jeju Island providing an exception or two, have the allure of the palm fringed beaches of Southeast Asia. Daecheon Beach in July hosts the annual mud fest and Haeundae Beach in Busan attempts every year to set a new world record for the number of parasols crammed onto a stretch of sand, but when the mercury drops and the summer shorts are put away for another year, that coastline gets a bit forgotten. But it doesn't have to.

Korea has 20 national parks, four of which are marine parks; the northernmost of these is Taeanhaean National park. Taehan County, Chungcheongnam-do, is the gateway to Taeanhaean National Park. Designated in 1978, it consists of 26 separate beaches, 72 islands (of which only four are inhabited) and 230 km of coastline that encircles the Taean Peninsula and Anmyeon-do.

Grandfather and Grandmother Rock,
Kkotji Beach, Anmyeondo Island

Playing in the winter sun

The ride from Seoul takes around 2 hours and 30 minutes and then another 15 minutes on a regional bus, snaking southwards through the villages and townships that make up the peninsula and the connected Anmyeon-do. As the smell of the countryside fills the overheated bus, you arrive at Nam-myeon.

A 10-minute walk to the sea and Mongsan Beach in time to see the sun, a glowing orb of burnt orange slowly descending to the sea, ineffective in preventing the cheeks of the children who are playing a game of chicken at the water’s edge with its icy tentacles being chapped by the bitter coastal winds that whip along the beach. Even though it is off season, 10 meters back from the beach, among the pine trees that lean away from the sea, battered by the wind since they were saplings, entrenched and sheltered are tents in various stages of construction.

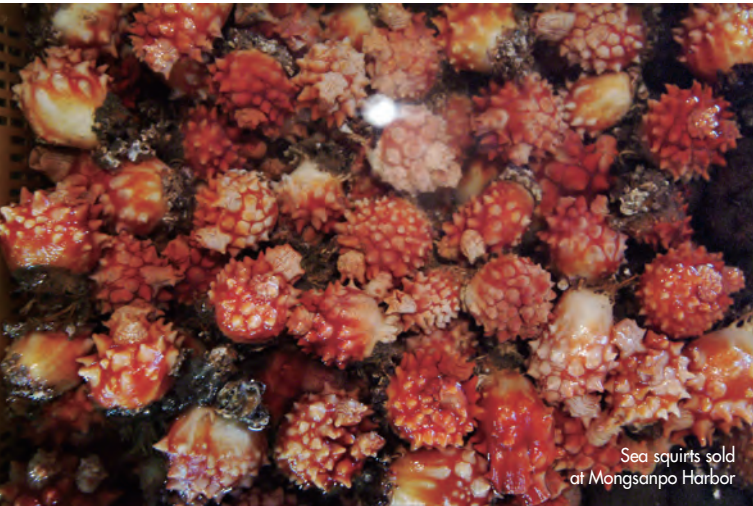
All the while, the sounds and smells of Koreans on holiday are all around. *Samgyeopsal* sizzles and the crackling noise of a fire intertwines with K-pop from a parked car as a huge 10-man tent sits next to the cooking meat. The sounds and smell of the sea are challenged by the fire, the meat and the music.

Walking the Haebyeongil—beach road trails

The area is awash with marked trails that are easy to find and follow, and offer interesting information about native species along the way. The courses are marked on maps and numbered with all the pertinent information so you can plan beforehand how far you want to walk. Currently, there are six marked trails that vary in distance from 12km to 29km and take on average between four and 10 hours to walk. Mongsan Beach to Dereuni Port is a 13km trail that should take the average walker around four hours. Telltale signs that even in the dead of winter these trails are popular, aside from the slew of tents and vehicles around, are the tracks of walking poles that dot the beach leading to the trail and continue along it. The marked trail is bordered with rope on one side and a grass covered dune on the other, offering scant protection from the wind that whips off the surface of the swirling West Sea. A hot honey and red ginseng drink fends off the cold for a while. Gloved and scarfed people walk along the beach and to and from their encampments with armfuls of firewood and supplies from the semi-permanent mart.



Grilled seafood at Hakampo Camping Ground



Sea squirts sold at Mongsanpo Harbor



Mallipo Beach

GETTING THERE

Buses go direct from Seoul’s Nambu Terminal to Taean (every 30—50 minutes (6:40am—8pm, 8,700 won) and take two hours and 20 minutes) and from there you can take a local bus to Hakampo which stops at Mongsan Beach.



Mongsanpo Harbor

The courses are essentially pieces of one long course from Hakam Beach in the northernmost part of the park to Yeokmokhang in the southern part of Anmyeon-do. Currently only two of the proposed six trails are currently complete but this year trails 1—3 are scheduled to open, meaning it will be possible to get from Hakam Beach to Kkotgil, halfway down Anmyeon-do, with the last 29km from Kkotgil to Yeokmokhang opening in 2013.

Crude history

Taean has a secret past that visitors these days may thankfully not be aware of.

Images of volunteers, local residents and police, covered in “black gold,” shovelling crude oil from the beaches around Taean County will sadly long be associated with the area of western Korea that fell victim to an accident in 2007. Around 66,000 barrels of crude oil poured into the West Sea after a collision. Taean and the national park seem to have recovered. The wildlife, highlighted by the signposts on the trails, is there, sheltering from the polar breeze and the campers are back too. In summer this would be a magnificent place but in winter it is equally enticing, a respite from the hustle and bustle of city living. The best time to go would perhaps be when there is snowfall. When everyone is heading for ski resorts, into the mountains and away from the coast, Taeanhaean National Park might offer winter seclusion and the chance to sit by a campfire as

it crackles in one ear and the winter sea rustles in the other.


Eating the fruits of the sea

Seeing as this is the sea, it is only appropriate to eat its fruits. There are lots of places to eat fresh seafood along the coast and in local towns and villages. These two places are listed by the KTO.

For those who need a full stomach to take on the full 13km from Mongsan Beach there is Mongsanpo Hoetjip (041-672-2886); further down the coast, at Kkotji, there is Pooreun Pada Hoetjip (041-673-9200). Both places serve a selection of raw fish dishes.

Sleeping

The rhythmic sound of the white noise of the sea will aid sleeping for most people but that probably won’t be enough for a good night’s sleep. There are lots of places to stay including pensions, motels and *minbak* guest houses. The best place to stay on Moksan Beach is probably Insengun arum dao (인생은 아름다워) pension. It costs 80,000 won per night for two and is located among the pine trees, just meters from the beach.

Even in the dead of winter you will likely find geared-up Koreans camping with all mod cons scattered across the park. Camping costs an average of 15,000 won per night with an extra charge of 3,000 won for use of electricity. There are new-looking shower facilities too. 

MORE INFORMATION

Call Korea Tourism Organization on 1330 or Taean-gun Office on (041) 670-2335.