

The sun shines through the clouds at Sangumburi Crater, a popular tourist site on Jeju Island.

Below: Kim Newton's 1987 photograph of South Korean students mourning the death of Lee Han-yeol.

THE JEWEL OF SOUTH KOREA

A writer and her husband find peace, beauty, and full-circle moments on Jeju Island.

BY CHERI NEWTON / PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIM NEWTON

As our flight lands on the beautiful South Korean island of Jeju, I touch my husband's hand, knowing how much this means to him. He first came here in 1986 to photograph the island for the country's tourism board. A favored place among honeymooners—and just over an hour by plane from Seoul—Jeju's subtropical climate, crystal clear waters, volcanic landscape, and seafood-forward cuisine entice visitors to its shores.

We have taken an Eastar Jet flight from Gimpo International Airport (eastarjet.com) to reach this jewel off the southern coast of the peninsula. When my husband, Kim Newton, first visited, the tourist board was keen to drum up the island's appeal to foreigners and highlight a new hotel that was just opening.

Today, Jeju is a premier tourist destination in South Korea. For New Englanders, it's far-flung but accessible: flight options include a Korean Air non-stop route from Boston to Seoul, though you'll need a separate connection to reach Jeju. For us, it's a place entwined with Kim's personal history.

Kim's arrival here decades ago from Japan, where he was based as a freelance photojournalist, set him on a new path. After completing his work on the island, he was quickly drawn to South Korea's democracy movement, which was fighting to establish free elections and end the country's authoritarian rule.

On the streets of Seoul, he captured a particularly touching photograph of university protesters mourning their fellow student Lee Han-yeol, who died after being struck in the head by a police tear-gas canister. Kim's photo seemed to encapsulate the deep feelings of the South Korean public. Published in *U.S. News & World Report*, it was seen around the world.

Kim's time in the country left a deep impression on him. And now, nearly four decades later, he is ready to experience Jeju all over again.



WE ARE HERE AT THE INVITATION OF FILMMAKER KIM MAN-JIN, whom we met in 2017 when he asked my husband to appear in a documentary about Lee's death, in which the photograph figured heavily. It

was the beginning of a deep friendship.

Man-jin has curated a three-day trip for us, one that he hopes will deepen our understanding of the island's rich—and painful—history. We will be joined by a photographer named Lee Soon-koo, who helped film the documentary and will also be shooting our latest travels, as well as a mountaineering expert who will guide us on our walks.

After picking up our rental car (both Hertz and Avis have kiosks on Jeju), we head out into the mild autumn weather.

Our host tells us that we aren't here, this time, to trek up South Korea's tallest mountain, **Hal-lasan** (6,388 feet), or walk any of the **Jeju Olle Trail** (jejuolle.org/trail_en), the island's network of stunning footpaths. We *will* walk some of the smaller cones and craters to acquaint ourselves with Jeju's terrain. And, Man-jin adds, our first stop is the most essential: We need to know what happened here.

As we arrive at the **Jeju 4.3 Peace Park** (jeju-43peace.org), crows flying overhead squawk in greeting. We learn that a grim history followed the Korean Peninsula's liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945. The park's name references the date of a civilian uprising on the island and the subsequent crackdown by South Korean authorities in which tens of thousands were killed.

Exhibits honor the Jeju residents who lost their lives during the massacre. It isn't pleasant to take in, but the peace park's museum is laid out beautifully and includes art made by locals. Watching school groups playing between the various exhibits feels like a positive reference to South Korea's mostly peaceful here and now.

A stop for some noodle soup made with Jeju pork (the island is famous for its native pigs), as well as some refreshing local tangerines, refuels us for a pleasant walk at the **Jeju Stone Park** (jeju.go.kr/jejustonepark/index.htm). I am intrigued by the huge, mysterious volcanic statues here known as "stone grandfathers." A symbol of Jeju, they are said to guard against evil spirits, but to me their faces are humorous and comforting.

A museum here teaches visitors about Jeju's formation, in which volcanic activity figures heavily. The "sky pond" atop the museum is mesmerizing; rubber boots are placed at the edge, an invitation for visitors to wade in.

Our next stop is **Sangumburi Crater** (visitjeju.net/en), an impressive site awash in green and surrounded by fields of waving golden reeds. With the day's dramatic skies, I can see why this atmospheric location has been used as a backdrop in Korean films and television shows. As I look over the crater, I pause for a private moment to honor and thank my late mother, who had Jeju on her lengthy list of must-visit places.

Our first dinner as a group is at **Unjeongine**

(instagram.com/jeju_unjeongine), a restaurant specializing in seafood, particularly the aromatic, delicate cutlassfish. Man-jin explains that the long, thin fish is caught in the waters near Jeju and quite popular among Koreans. He says he especially likes it braised spicy-style with red pepper, but the version we have here is grilled, only mildly spicy. (The restaurant's owner, a good friend of Man-jin's, reaches in to cut the bone out of the fish for me.)

Rice comes served in a heavy stone pot and topped with abalone, which infuses a deep umami flavor. A soup made with sea urchin and seaweed reminds us that the crystal-clear sea is very close.

MAN-JIN HAS ARRANGED FOR US TO STAY IN A VILLA, but there is no shortage of accommodations on the island.

Hotels, including the newly launched **Grand Hyatt Jeju** (hyatt.com, from \$207), range in price and look to appeal to all kinds of visitor budgets and personal styles. **Podo Hotel**, an exquisite boutique offering designed by renowned Korean architect Itami Jun, offers guests the opportunity to soak in aragonite spring water in a private hot tub located in one's own bathroom (podohotel.southkrhotel.com/en/, from \$336).

Right: A reproduction of a "stone grandfather."

Below: The path around Biyang Island.



I put that one in my back pocket for future visits. Meanwhile, the affordable **O2 Heal Resort** (o2heal.kr/, from \$53) tempts beachgoers with its waterfront location.

THE NEXT DAY, WE'RE OFF TO JEJU'S BIYANG ISLAND, off its northwest coast. We hope to see some haenyeo, the women divers who for generations have made a living free-diving into the ocean's depths for seafood. In 2016, UNESCO recognized haenyeo on its list of "intangible cultural heritage of humanity."

Known for its fishing industry, Biyang is easy to get to by ferry from **Hallim Port** (tickets can be purchased from ferry companies for around \$10, roundtrip). We walk the perimeter of the volcanic island in an hour, but skip the tougher walk up to the peak. A paved walkway around the island makes it possible to bike and there are places to sit along the way. The volcanic rock shoreline is full of interesting tidal pools. The photographers in our group are in their element.

I spot the distinctive floats of the women divers, which sit on the water's surface as they dive for their catch. But they are far out, near an outcrop of volcanic rocks protruding from the sea. Nope, we are not going to be able to watch them up close, but just seeing their heads reemerge from the depths is inspiring.

We have plenty of time before the next ferry to enjoy a local delicacy, haemul pajeon, a seafood pancake, at



a tiny restaurant. It is simply the most delicious thing I have eaten on this trip—and that is saying a lot. The men begin tucking into little metal cups of makgeolli, Korean rice wine. OK, it isn't 5 p.m. yet, but tradition is tradition. I join them for a taste.

Back on Jeju, Man-Jin brings us to the **Kim Tschang-Yeul Art Museum** (kimtschang-yeul.jeju.go.kr), named for the deceased artist whose modernist art, in this contemplative space, gives us a moment to breathe. His famous "Water Drops" series seemingly encapsulates centuries of Korean sorrow, and most certainly, some of his own. The "Phenomenon" series is colorful, meditative, and the perfect end to a busy day.

OUR FINAL DAY HAS COME TOO SOON, and Man-jin says he has something special in store for us, in addition to our final dinner. Arriving at a big parking

Clockwise from top: A seafood feast at Unjeongine restaurant; a haenyeo swims in waters off Biyang Island; volcanic rocks along Hyeopjae Beach give way to a view of Biyang.

I FINALLY MEET SOME OF THESE INCREDIBLE HAENYEO, WHO SEEM TO HOLD TOGETHER THE SOUL OF JEJU.

lot, I wonder what he has planned. And then I see the tickets he hands us, for **Cheonjiyeon Waterfalls** (visitjeju.net/en).

From a tall forest in a gorge, a stream flows toward the ocean. Along a 1-mile loop, we head toward the sound of the waterfall, stopping to observe the mystical-looking cranes sitting on the ponds. After rambling along a short path, we reach the stunning fall and see why its name translates to "where heaven meets earth." We take turns with rowdy school groups posing for photos, a misty spray giving us a feeling of fun and well-being.

We make a quick stop at the shanty house and gallery of artist **Lee Jung-seob** (culture.seogwipo.go.kr/jslee) in the city of Seogwipo, where he lived in 1951. It was a productive period for him, but this gallery holds only a few of his precious Fauvist-inspired works. Man-jin explains that after the artist's death, his paintings were highly sought after, including by the country's museum and wealthy private collectors.

Enjoying the fine view from the gallery's rooftop, the moment seems poignant as our journey with Man-jin winds down. He tells us that he brought us here because, despite harsh living conditions, Lee Jung-seob never gave up hope for art. This seems like a message for us and our time.

High winds have prevented us from walking up Saebyeol Oreum, a volcanic cone, earlier today. Man-jin was disappointed for us, knowing what a special vista it yields to those who do manage to climb it. It was the first time we all felt a hint of coolness in the autumn air.

We take a sunset walk on Hyeopjae Beach in the coastal town of Hallim. From the beach, we can see Biyang's pristine, rocky coastline. The photographers in our group chase the juicy light with their cameras. Everything looks so beautiful, and we feel so grateful for our time together.

Our final dinner is at **Jeju Island Haenyeo Three Sisters** (275 *Hallimhaean-ro*, *Hallim-eup*, *Jeju-si*), a restaurant overlooking the ocean. It is run by a third generation of women divers, so I finally get my chance to meet some of these incredible haenyeo, who seem to hold together the soul of Jeju through their sustainable fishing practices. We feast again on cutlassfish, as well as sumptuous fresh shrimp.

As the evening ends, Kim and I begin to sense that we will someday return to this island. During our brief visit, Man-jin has broadened our understanding of Korean history and deepened our connection with the culture and terrain of South Korea's jewel, the soulful Jeju. And that is worth revisiting. ■

Writer Cheri Newton and freelance photographer Kim Newton are based in Tucson. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.