

MUFTI ABDOOL KADER HOUSEN

OUR VISIT TO SOUTH KOREA

FAST FACTS:

OFFICIAL NAME: Republic of Korea (ROK)

CAPITAL CITY: Seoul (pron. Soul)

POPULATION: 50 million (100 000 Muslims)

RELIGION: 56% - No religion

28% - Christianity

15% - Buddhism

1% - Other (incl. Islam)

CURRENCY: South Korean Won (KRW)

NATIONAL DISH: Kimchi (fermented vegetables, especially cabbage)

TIME: It is 7 hours ahead of South Africa

POSITIVES: Fourth-largest Asian economy; home to 13 UNESCO heritage sites; inexpensive to visit

NEGATIVES: Citizens are the heaviest drinkers in the world; high rate of suicide; work long hours which impact adversely on religious, family and social life

BY THE WAY: It is the plastic surgery capital of the world.



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

نحمده و نصلي على رسوله الكريم. أما بعد

All praise is due to Almighty ALLAH, the Sustainer, Nourisher and Cherisher of the Universe. Peace, Blessings and Salutations be upon our Beloved Master and Leader, Nabi Muhammad Mustafa ﷺ.

Arrival at Incheon

Alhamdulillah Rabbal Alameen, Fathima and I arrived in Seoul on Saturday, 23 Rabiul Awwal (1 December 2018), after an eight-hour flight from Dubai. This was the second leg of our tour.

During the first leg, we performed Umrah on Thursday night, *Alhamdulillah*. May Allahu Ta'ala accept it, *Aameen*.

We read Fajr, Thuhr and Asr salaats on the plane. Maghrib salaat was read on arrival at Incheon (pron. In-charn) Airport.



Incheon Airport

There we experienced thermal scanning for the first time in our lives. Authorities used an infrared scanner, on Fathima first, then on me. This was to determine our body temperature before we were allowed to enter. If any illness had been detected, we would have been quarantined as a precaution.

Our entry was very easy, with the help and mercy of Allah *Jalla wa 'Ala*. Being South African passport holders, we did not have to apply for visas beforehand and were granted one-month visas on arrival.

Alhamdulillah, two brothers were waiting for us: the Ameer, Haji Muhammad Ilyas Saheb, and Professor Munawar. Prior to meeting them, however, I met some Pakistani brothers who hailed from Jamia Farooqia in Karachi.

I said, "*SubhanAllah!* I studied there. I was the first student from South Africa who studied under Hazrat Moulana Saleemullah Khan Saheb."

We were so happy to have met one another. Although they were not Ulama, they knew the whole history of the Itaewon (*pron. Eetaywon*) area around Seoul Central Masjid because they had stayed in that neighbourhood, *MashAllah*.

We then left for our hotel, which was near Incheon and also near the markaz, Seoul Central, the first and biggest masjid in the whole of Korea. As it was time for Esha salaah, we went to the masjid.



Itaewon neighbourhood around Seoul Central Masjid

We saw that the area next to it was very convenient as there were many Muslim-owned businesses and halaal restaurants but, on the other side, there were many pubs and nightclubs.

It was a Saturday night so there were revellers partying throughout the night – busy with wine, dine and swine – and music was blaring continuously.

Nevertheless, after Esha and supper, we retired to bed as we were quite tired by then.

The brothers came to fetch me on Sunday morning for Fajr. As we walked to the masjid, we saw a large number of people walking on the road. Clearly, all of them were still in a party mood as they were clutching bottles of alcohol. That was something unbelievable.

Drinking in public is legal there and it is not unusual to find people sprawled on the pavements, completely drunk.

That is why we say, *Allahumma laka shukru kullu wa lakal hamdu kullu*, because Allahu Ta'ala has made this wine and swine haraam for us. It is obvious that people do not know what they are doing while intoxicated.

Seoul Central Masjid

It was about seven minutes' walk to the masjid, *Alhamdulillah*. Visitors also know this area as 'Halal Hill' since the masjid is situated on top of a hill overlooking Itaewon. It is very impressive and has an interesting history:

A small facility was erected in 1969 when the President offered land to the Korean Muslim Federation (KMF). When war broke out between South and North Korea in the early seventies, the Turkish Army came to assist South Korea, *SubhanAllah*. The Turkish government sent artisans and others who were skilled and experienced in the building of masajid. In 1974, construction began on a bigger masjid.



Seoul Central Masjid

Money donated by Muslim countries and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, *Rahimullah*, further facilitated its construction.

MashAllah, this beautiful masjid first opened its doors in 1976, an event that saw a surge in the number of Muslims in Korea at the time. The 1990s brought an influx of Muslims from Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh, which further boosted the Muslim population. Today, the masjid accommodates approximately 1 000 musallis for Jumuah salaah, *Alhamdulillah*.

The musallis requested that I should lead the Fajr salaah and give a talk afterwards. There were more than a hundred people in the masjid.

Note that the Muslims number, approximately, 100 000 out of more than 50 million South Koreans. However, the majority of Muslims are not really practising the Deen. So, it is quite commendable that the Jamaat brothers have a hundred people in the *shap guzari*, *MashAllah*, on Saturday night and Sunday morning, when they have programmes at Fajr time.

I met Arab brothers from Egypt and Morocco, African brothers from Senegal and Gambia and others from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. *MashAllah*, there is a big population of Indonesian brothers. They requested that I speak in Arabic, English and Urdu, which I did, *Alhamdulillah*. May Allahu Ta'ala accept it, *Aameen*.

Afterwards, they wanted me to have breakfast with them but I refused, saying I would eat with my wife. They then treated us to a lovely breakfast, after which we rested, as we had a programme later in the day.

Ansan

I was informed that *that* programme would take place after Thuhr in another masjid so we needed to move from the hotel to the Ansan area. There was another beautiful masjid a couple of minutes away from the hotel.

Alhamdulillah, we arrived before Thuhr and went shopping. Goods were quite inexpensive for us as one rand could be exchanged for, approximately, 80 won. South Korea is famous for electronic brands like Samsung and LG, and cars such as Kia and Hyundai, which are driven by most motorists there.

Athaan was given at 1 pm and jamaat was at 1.15 pm. After salaah, we proceeded with the programme, then had lunch. The Jamaat brothers provided meals for us at the hotel and later, Ameer Saheb took us to a few important places in Seoul, *Alhamdulillah*.



Ansan Masjid

One should bear in mind that it was winter. The night that we landed, it was zero degrees. However, if one visits in mid-winter, late December or early January, the temperatures drop to -10, -15 and even -20 degrees. Indoors, we found the extreme cold bearable as central heating was available everywhere – in the hotels and elsewhere as well, *Alhamdulillah*.

After Maghrib we had an hour-long programme in the Ansan Masjid. The Imams there were Moulana Mufti Zakariyya and Mufti Mumtaaz. One was from Bangladesh, and the other, from Indonesia.

When we concluded the programme, some brothers from Hanyang University requested a programme as well. So, *MashAllah*, we left the masjid at about 7.30 pm for Hanyang. Jamaat salaah was at 8 pm there.



About a hundred students from Pakistan attend this university where Professor *Hanyang University* Munawar is a lecturer. He is a Chemical Engineer.

Thus, in one day, we had four programmes, with the help and mercy of Almighty Allah *Jalla wa Ala. Alhamdulillah*, I met many brothers there.

Status of Islam in the country

Conditions are very good there. In the whole of Korea, they have over a hundred musallahs and 23 masajid, such as:

Busan Al-Fatah Masjid: second masjid to be established; built in 1980 with donations from Libya.

Gwangju Umar bin Khattab Masjid: third masjid to be built; opened in 1981; managed by the KMF.

Jeonju (*pron. Jonju*) / Jeolla-do Masjid: a beautiful example of Islamic and Korean architecture combined.



Busan Al-Fatah Masjid

Anyang Masjid: not far from Seoul, it is near Anyang University.

Bupyeong (*pron. Bupyong*) Masjid: situated between Seoul and Incheon.

Paju / Gyeonggi Masjid: located near Imjin River, between Seoul and Kaesong, North Korea.

Some of these masajid are part of larger Islamic centres which also house madaris and other educational facilities. Others are used only for salaah by workers and residents in their respective areas.



Jeonju Masjid

Alhamdulillah, the work of Da'wah and Tableegh is changing the spiritual landscape. However, I was deeply disappointed to find that there were no huffaath to render Khatamul Qur'an in Ramadhan. I told them that, since there were about five months left to Ramadhan 1440, we would send as many huffaath as they required, from South Africa, to undertake this duty, *InshAllah*.

I would urge my fellow South African Ulama, colleagues and Jamaat brothers to visit the country as visas are not a problem. With a one-month visa, one can engage in Da'wah and Tableegh, deliver lectures and teach Tafseer and Ahadith. Much khidmat of the Deen can be made, *InshAllah*, so we make du'a that Allahu Ta'ala makes it easy and accept everyone's good intentions, *Aameen*.

Conclusion

On the whole, we had a wonderful time, *Alhamdulillah*. The people are quite friendly but communication is a problem. I learnt only one word in South Korean: *gamsahabnida*, which is pronounced like the Arabic *khamsa* (*five*) and *hamida* (*praise*). It means 'Thank you'.

Seoul is a very beautiful city. There are 31 bridges over the Han River which are especially impressive. 27 are used for transportation while others are for railways, all linking Seoul to parts of Gyeonggi Province.



Incheon Grand Bridge

Compared to South Africa, South Korea has achieved greater material progress and a better standing, internationally. A South Korean passport is highly rated which means that holders do not need visas elsewhere in the world.

Prior to our departure, the Ameer of the local Tableegh Jamaat, Haji Muhammad Ilyas and I performed Fajr at Incheon Airport. The airport musallah was a bit far so we made salaah in a corner. Fathima also read on one side. We left Seoul at 5 am on Monday, 25 Rabiul Awwal (3 December) for Tokyo, Japan.

We make du'a to Almighty Allah that He rewards all those who contributed to our stay and accepts our humble efforts, *Aameen*.

Rabbana taqabbal minna innaka antas-Samee'ul 'Aleem, Aameen.

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