

John's Korean Adventure – Part Two

Hi everyone!

It's John at last emailing you the second installment of my adventures abroad. Sorry that it's taken me so long to fill you in on my life in Korea. I've been very busy, but the real reason is that there are too many things to share – recounting it all is too daunting a task! Oh well, I'll just have to do my best. Sit back and enjoy!

I am living in a city called Gwangju. It's about the size of a medium American city, but it has well over a million residents. It's not a bad town. The downtown area is fantastic. There's tons of shops and restaurants of all sorts of shapes and sizes. More about that later.

I'm working at Kims School. It's a hagwon. (Everyone say it with me: "Hagwon" Very good!) Hagwons are private schools for Korean children. Kids go to hagwons in addition to their regular schooling. Getting into a university is incredibly competitive in Korea, so kids are given as much schooling as they can possibly get. That's where a hagwon comes in. It's kind of like mass after school tutoring. We teach everything, not just English: Math, Science, Korean... Of course, I only teach English.

My hours are pretty good right now, although my schedule varies from month to month. Right now I have class from 4:50 to 10:10 Monday to Friday, but I'll often be at the school much earlier to do prep work. Since my students can only understand a smattering of what I'm saying, I have to be overly prepared with projects and activities to keep their interest.

My students range from about 10 – 16 years old. Contrary to Western stereotypes of Asian children, they are not incredibly bright and well behaved. We don't have the severe discipline problems they have back home like fighting, drugs, bullying or anything like that, but it is virtually impossible to keep a class quiet for more than a few minutes at a time. In my youngest classes, it's difficult to keep them in their seats for more than a moment! Part of this has to do with the fact that I don't speak Korean, so I can't hold their attention by talking to them, nor can I really yell at them when they're being bad. I think another big problem is that these kids are overschooled. They're going to their regular school during the day, then coming to my school for several hours at night. 6 days a week! (Fortunately it's in my contract that I only work 5 days a week.)

I have to wear a shirt and tie to work, as well as a lab coat. It sounds strange, but it's really good to have some distinction between teachers and students, and it also keeps the chalk off all my clothes. Now that it's summer, men don't have to wear their lab coats. (Korea has a very sexist culture.) One other strange thing: almost all the teachers wear

slippers or sandals instead of shoes. It's a very Korean (and I imagine Asian) thing. I bought myself a pair of slippers for work, but they don't fit too well. It's hard to find shoes in my size here. But is nice to get home and just slip off the shoes.

All teachers carry bamboo sticks with them. It's kind of a status symbol, and it's great to smack across the board or a desk to get their attention, but the real reason for it is to hit students when they misbehave. No, I'm not kidding. When kids arrive at school, there's several teachers waiting to see if they have their homework. If they don't, they get a slap across the palms. In class, if they don't have their books (and for whatever reason, a lot of them forget their books) or they misbehave, they get a slap across the palms. I don't hit my kids, but it's an accepted part of the culture, so I've learned not to mind when Korean teachers do.

I teach 21 40-minute classes a week. For 17 of them, I have a Korean teaching partner. Sometimes they are just a translator and disciplinarian, and sometimes they are a true teaching partner. It all depends on who I'm paired with for the class. Four of my classes are solo classes – no Korean teaching partner. One of those is with older students, so it's OK. The other three are with my youngest kids, and it's tough. I can't present any new materials to them because I don't have a Korean to translate. I also can only do very basic games and activities because I can't explain what I want them to do. Those are my hardest classes, but they're also my favorite, because I'm free to run the show as I please. I don't have to bounce ideas off a teaching partner. And the young kids, while they're rowdy most of the time, are awfully sweet. They all scream “Hello John!” when I come in the room, and give me high-fives when we pass each other in the hall.

Koreans tend to assume that foreigners are mind readers. There are several English-speaking teachers here, but the problem isn't the language; it's the fact that they forget to tell you things. My first day of work is the perfect example:

I was told that I'd have a meeting with one of the teachers at 1pm. So I got dressed up, grabbed a notebook and pen and went to meet her. She spent 15 minutes showing me the schedule and then said, "So your first class is in two hours. You'd better start preparing." I had two hours to grab a taxi, run downtown, buy a lab coat, run back and write up lesson plans for the five classes I had that day. Thanks for the warning.

That's better than my roommate's first day. His Korean teaching partner introduced him to his class, then turned to him and said, "OK, teach."

I live in an apartment/dormitory above the school. It's so convenient to ride the elevator to work, or run home if I have time off or have forgotten something. I share it with four other English teachers at the school. They're all Canadian (2 guys & 2 girls) and they're fantastic. They made me feel a part of the gang right away. Apparently the girl who I replaced was a nightmare to live and work with, so I was like a breath of fresh air for them!

Our apartment's pretty cool. There's a reasonably sized kitchen, a small living room and two bathrooms. We each get our own bedroom. I've got a twin sized bed & I bought myself a comforter that I've dubbed "The Un-Comforter". But I'm used to it by now. I'm sleeping like a baby.

We have a TV, VCR, cable and a computer with high-speed internet access. Korean TV is very funny. Home shopping and infomercials seem to be the most popular shows. According to my students, WWF Wrestling is the best thing to watch. They also have video game shows, where you watch the action as professional video gamers play against each other. Koreans play a strange sort of checkers/chess game that you can watch on TV too. We often will have an American movie playing with Korean subtitles, but occasionally it's dubbed over in Korean, which is very frustrating. We also get quite a few American TV shows like *Friends*, *Frasier* and *Third Rock from the Sun*. They show Major League Baseball and NBA highlights, too.

Once again, I'm back to my nocturnal ways. I'm regularly up to 3am and waking up around noon. It sounds bad, but it's not unusual: the other night I got in from downtown at 3am, and all of my roommates were still out! I'm both ashamed and proud to admit that in the three weeks since I've been here, I've gotten home from the bar after dawn twice. No, I'm not a lush - it's just the foreign teacher culture. When you work at night like we do, it kind of sets your whole day askew.

I have a status here somewhere between celebrity and freak show. My kids are amazed at how tall I am. "Teacher, you very tall!" I estimated that I was two meters tall (actually, I'm 1.89 meters, but who's counting?), so now some of the students know me as Two Meter John. When I tell them that my brothers are both taller than I am, they all ooh and ahh. It's very funny.

The first time I write on the chalkboard in each of my classes, all the kids start talking and yelling. Why? Because I'm left handed.

My kids also think my arms are funny. Koreans don't have hair on their arms, so I'm strange to them. My little kids will come up to me and pet my arm to feel the hair. One of my kids even said, "You have fur!"

Koreans aren't afraid to stare at foreigners on the street or in the shops. I went to a small town the other day where they don't see many foreigners and was flocked by kids screaming and laughing. But even in Gwangju you'll pass by adults on the street who say, "Hello" and laugh and giggle. When I say hello back in Korean, they laugh even louder. Once an old man came up to me and friends on the street and just stood there laughing. I don't think he'd ever seen so many foreigners in one place. I've had taxi drivers pull out their English lesson books (while they're driving) and ask me how to pronounce things. For the most part it's fun, but every once in a while it gets annoying.

Well this has been a long message and I haven't even gotten to food yet! It will have to wait until next time!

As a preview, though, I've attached a video of me eating some Korean cuisine. It's not great quality, because I've compressed it for email. The narrator is my friend Jason. He's from New Zealand, so we call him Kiwi Jay. The woman you catch a glimpse of is my roommate Paige. The dashing young man that is the focus of this video is none other than yours truly.

Miss you all! Talk to you soon!

Love,
John
The Traveling Man