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PAGES 6-10



Back to School!



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Pronunciation Tips for Americans

Learning to speak Korean can feel intimidating at first, but let me tell you the truth: Koreans love it when foreigners try. You don't need perfect pronunciation. You don't need to sound native. You just need to try with sincerity. This chapter gives you simple pronunciation tips that help you sound natural without stress.

The Korean Pronunciation Mindset

Koreans listen to your effort more than your accuracy. They hear your heart, not your mistakes. Even imperfect Korean is appreciated with warmth.

Sounds Americans Find Challenging

1. The "eo" vowel: Often spelled "eo" in romanization. It's softer than "uh" and not as round as "aw." Relax your tongue and say something between "sun" and "saw."
2. The Korean "r/l" sound: Between an American R and L. A quick, soft tap of your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Think of the Spanish "pero."
3. Double consonants (kk, tt, pp, ss, jj): These are not louder — just tighter and cleaner. Short and precise.
4. The "ng" sound: At the start of a word, it is silent. At the end, it becomes "ng."
5. The "eu" sound: A flat vowel made with your mouth stretched horizontally. It's not "oo," not "uh," but a neutral sound.

Intonation Matters

Korean sentences are flatter, smoother, and calmer than English. To sound natural: lower your tone, avoid rising intonation, speak gently.

Rhythm and Flow

Korean words flow together. Don't

KOREA DECODED

Gianni Youn



separate each syllable too much. Let it feel natural and continuous.

Essential Korean Phrases for Real Life

Phrasebooks often teach phrases you'll never use. Here are ones that actually matter for daily life — simple, useful, and warmly received by Koreans.

Everyday Politeness

Hello — annyeonghaseyo
Thank you — gamsahamnida
Yes — ne
No — aniyoo
Excuse me — joesonghamnida
Please — (built into the verb ending "-juseyo")

In Restaurants

"Water, please." — mul juseyo
"Not spicy, please." — an maeun geollo juseyo
"The food is delicious!" — masiseoyo

"Check, please." — gyesanseojuseyo

Transportation

"Stop here, please." — yeogiseosewojuseyo
"Straight ahead." — jikjin
"Left" — oenjjok
"Right" — oreunjjok

Emergencies

"Help, please." — dowajuseyo
"I need a hospital." — byeongwon gaya haeyo
"I'm lost." — gireul ileosseoyo

Connecting With People

"Nice to meet you." — bangapseumnida
"I am American." — miguk saram-ieyo
"I like Korea." — hanguk joayo
"I'm learning Korean." — hangugeobaeugo isseoyo
"Thank you for your kindness." — chinjeore gamsahaeyo

Final Thought

These aren't just phrases — they are bridges. When you speak them, even imperfectly, Koreans feel your sincerity. They open their hearts. They help you. They welcome you.
Language isn't just communication — it's connection.



About the author:

Gianni Youn is a Multimedia Consultant at Stars and Stripes and author of KOREA DECODED: A Korean American's Guide for Americans Who Want to Understand Korea. For more cultural insights, follow Gianni on Instagram: @Gianni_Youn



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KOREA KIDS' CORNER

Top 15 destinations near Pyeongtaek

BY HYEMIN LEE,
STRIPES KOREA

Pyeongtaek is the largest host city in Korea, home to two U.S. military bases: Osan Air Base and Camp Humphreys. Though it's easy to travel to many destinations across Korea within just a couple of hours, families newly arrived in the area may wonder where to take their kids nearby. Many Pyeongtaek residents explore not only attractions within the city but also quick getaways in neighboring cities like Anseong and Asan, only about a 20-30-minute drive away.

For those looking for the best spots around town, here are some family-friendly destinations close to Pyeongtaek.

lee.hyemin@stripes.com

1 Anseong Farmland **Anseong**

Anseong Farmland is a large agricultural theme park beloved by families with children. In spring and autumn, the farmland features breathtaking landscapes with vast fields of canola, sunflowers and cosmos flowers. The park offers a variety of farm experiences such as feeding animals and horseback riding. Children have plenty of chances to get close to farm animals like sheep, goats, pigs and rabbits. They can also explore a play area featuring a trampline park, racing cart zone and amusement rides.

■ **Best season to visit:** Spring and autumn are especially beautiful with blooming flowers.

■ **Distance:** About 30 minutes (18km) from Camp Humphreys / 40 minutes (25km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 28 Daesindu-gil, Gongdo-eup, Anseong-si, Gyeonggi-do
HOURS: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. daily

ADMISSION: Adult 15,000 won / Children 13,000 won (Discount available for those with DoD ID or birthday person and through Naver)



Photo courtesy of Anseong Farmland



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
ANSEONG
FARMLAND

2 Starfield Anseong **Anseong**

Starfield Anseong is a popular shopping mall with various entertainment facilities and shopping options for all ages. The mall is especially family-friendly, offering free stroller rentals for babies and pets as well as nursing rooms. The mall features both indoor and outdoor playgrounds, kid-friendly cafés, a kids' library with English books, a pet park and other fun facilities. The mall is home to a large toy store and budget-friendly shops, making it perfect for families looking to eat, shop and play in one spot.

■ **Best season to visit:** All year round. It's great for days when you want to stay indoors during hot summers, cold winters or rainy weather.

■ **Distance:** About 25 minutes (11km) from Camp Humphreys / 30 minutes (18km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 3930-39 Seodong-daero, Anseong-si, Gyeonggi-do
HOURS: 10 a.m. - 10 p.m.



Photo courtesy of Starfield Anseong



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
STARFIELD
ANSEONG

3 Aquafield **Anseong**

Aquafield, located inside Starfield Anseong, is a leisure destination that combines a kid-friendly water park, luxury spa and modern jjimjilbang. Traditional Korean jjimjilbangs feature gender-separated bathhouses and themed spa rooms like salt rooms and ice rooms, but Aquafield elevates the experience to a stylish, resort level one. Families can enjoy rooftop infinity pools, themed sauna rooms, a bathhouse area and spacious play zones. Aquafield truly offers a therapeutic experience that's perfect for family bonding and a refreshing break. Many discount options are available, so check their website before your visit.

■ **Best season to visit:** All year round, but especially summer for the water park and winter for the spa and sauna rooms.

LOCATION: 3F, Starfield Anseong

HOURS: 9 a.m. – 10 p.m. / Water park (indoor): 9 a.m. – 9 p.m. / Water park (outdoor): 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.

ADMISSION: Free for children under 36 months (Proof required)

-Jjimjil Spa (6 hrs): Adults 26,000 won / Children under middle school 21,000 won

-Water park (6 hrs): Adults 58,000 won / Children under middle school 48,000 won

-Multi-pass (9 hrs): Adults 68,000 won / Children under middle school 58,000 won



Photo courtesy of Aquafield



NAVER MAP

4 Oeam Folk Village **Asan**

About a 30-40-minute drive from Pyeongtaek, you'll discover Korea's past at Oeam Folk Village, built in the early 1500s during the Joseon era. Backed by mountains and facing rivers, Oeam is one of the few folk villages in Korea, remaining unspoiled by time and modernization, so the entire village is much like a living folk museum. The village feels like



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea

you've slipped back in time, surrounded by the lively beat of folk drums and people in colorful hanbok.

On weekends and holidays, visitors can enjoy a variety of hands-on activities at traditional houses such as tea ceremonies and Korean paper crafts. Visitors can also rent beautiful hanbok, traditional attire, at affordable prices.

■ **Best season to visit:** Spring and fall for stunning nature backdrops and wearing hanbok. Also, during folk festivals around January-February and in October.

■ **Distance:** About 35 minutes (35km) from Camp Humphreys / 45 minutes (50km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 5 Oeam Folk Road, Songak-myeon, Asan-si, Chungcheongnam-do

HOURS: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. (April – Oct.) / 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. (Nov. – March)

ADMISSION: Adults 2,000 won / Children 1,000 won



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
OEAAM FOLK
VILLAGE

5 Main Street Café **Pyeongtaek**

Café Main Street, a New York City-themed eatery near Pyeongtaek Port, is so popular that visitors from all over Korea make the trip to check it out. Stepping inside feels like being transported to Main Street in New York City. The three-story building is filled with New York-themed murals and designed like a trick-eye art museum. Visitors can enjoy a variety of pastries, cakes, shakes, coffees and other beverages. The café also has a kids' café with affordable prices where children can play freely while parents enjoy coffee and pastry.

■ **Best time to visit:** All year round since it's indoors. The café also sits right by Pyeongtaek Port and Pyeongtaek Lake Tourist Complex, so many also come to explore the seaside area on clear days.

■ **Distance:** About 35 minutes (25km) from Camp Humphreys / 40 minutes (33km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 697-13 Manho-ri, Poseung-eup, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do

HOURS: 10 a.m. - 9 p.m. daily

PARKING: Free parking available



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
MAIN STREET

6 Jang Young-sil Science Museum & Ecology and Insect Center **Asan**

Jang Young-sil Science Museum is a small, hands-on museum named after one of the most respected scientists of the Joseon era. Exhibits introduce some of Jang's inventions, including the Jagyeokru water clock and Cheugugi rain gauge, while interactive zones let children explore basic science, space and aviation. Right next to the science museum is the Ecology and Insect Center, where children can see small animals, reptiles, fish and insects in themed habitats. Hands-on zones also let them touch beetle larvae and get an up-close look at butterflies. Both attractions are beloved by families with young children. Families can make more of the trip by purchasing a package ticket that covers the science museum, Ecology and Insect Center and observatory.

■ **Best time to visit:** All year round, especially on hot, cold or rainy days.

■ **Distance:** About 30 minutes from Camp Humphreys / 45 minutes from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 5-4 Baemi-dong, Asan-si, Chungcheongnam-do

HOURS: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. (March – Oct.) / 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. (Nov. – Feb.) / Closed

Mondays, New Year's Day, Seollal and Chuseok

ADMISSION: Adults 2,500 won / Children 1,500 won / Package ticket: Adults 5,000 won / Children 3,200 won



Photo courtesy of Asan Jang Yeong-sil Science Museum



NAVER MAP

7 Asan Spavis **Asan**

Asan Spavis is a family-friendly water park, perfect for young children, featuring both indoor and outdoor zones with various spa facilities. The park offers reasonable prices and special discounts for the U.S. military community. Asan is well known for its hot springs, and Asan Spavis uses 100% natural hot spring water rich in minerals. Families can enjoy a wide range of attractions, including a water playground for kids, multiple hot spring baths, a lazy river pool and more. The water park also has a wave pool and slides, but they're open only during peak season.

■ **Best time to visit:** Summer for the water park and winter for the hot springs.

■ **Distance:** About 25 minutes (20km) from Camp Humphreys / 42 minutes (40km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 67 Asan Oncheon-ro 157 beon-gil, Asan-si

HOURS: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. (Water park) / 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. (Sauna/Bathhouse) / Hours vary by season, so please check before your visit.

ADMISSION: Spa (water park + hot spring): 50,000 won-65,000 won / Afternoon admission (after 2 p.m.): 20,000 won-24,000 won / Special discount (about 50% or more) available for U.S. military community members with a DoD ID (or base ID). The discount also applies to everyone in the same party.



Photo courtesy of Asan Spavis



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
ASAN SPAVIS

8 Pinnacle Land Asan

Pinnacle Land is a hillside arboretum filled with colorful flowerbeds, adorable animals and wide-open fields. During the spring flower festival, endless rows of tulips and daffodils fill the garden. In fall, chrysanthemums take over the landscape. Many families and couples visit the park to take photos with flower backdrops and enjoy peaceful walks. Visitors can also stop by the animal zone to feed deer, alpacas and goats. After exploring, the café near the lake is the perfect spot to rest with coffee, pastries and beautiful lake views.

- **Best time to visit:** April–May for the spring flower festival with tulips and daffodils and mid-September–late November for the fall chrysanthemum festival.
- **Distance:** About 25 minutes (22 km) from Camp Humphreys / 40 minutes (35 km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 20-22 Wolseon-gil, Yeongin-myeon, Asan-si, Chungcheongnam-do
HOURS: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. (Closed Mondays / extended hours on Saturdays during festival seasons)
ADMISSION: 10,000 to 16,000 won (depending on season and event)
PARKING: Large, free parking is available on-site.



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
PINNACLE LAND

9 Sapgyoho Amusement Park Dangjin

Sapgyoho is home to the closest amusement park to Camp Humphreys, only about a 30-minute drive away. Compared to larger theme parks, Sapgyoho Amusement Park isn't very big, so many families come here for a quick seaside outing to enjoy just a few hours. The park has about 12 rides, including the Viking, Space Shot, Bumper Cars and Disco. The most popular attraction is the giant Ferris wheel, offering stunning ocean views. There's no entrance fee and visitors purchase individual ride tickets (5,000 won to 7,000 won).

- **Best time to visit:** Spring and fall, or evenings when the weather is nice.
- **Distance:** About 30 minutes (30km) from Camp Humphreys / 45 minutes (45km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 15 Sapgyocheon 3-gil, Dangjin-si, Chungcheongnam-do
HOURS: 10:30 a.m. – 9:30 p.m. (Mon.–Fri.) / 10 a.m. – 10 p.m. (Weekends) / Closed on rainy days



Photo courtesy of Sapgyoho Amusement Park



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
SAPGYOHO
AMUSEMENT PARK

10 Dinosaur World Asan

Dinosaur World is a dinosaur themed park (or kid's café), a paradise for little dino fans. The park features a large group of realistic dinosaur model exhibits, rides and shows. The dinosaur rides move and roar like real dinosaurs, and visitors can ride them as much as they want. The shows are very enjoyable: the enormous dinosaurs take the stage, marching, playing and dancing with kids. An interactive magic show is also a favorite among children as they receive balloon animals or magic wands as gifts.

- **Best time to visit:** All year round. Located inside a large mall, it's a perfect indoor family outing for shopping, dining and fun.
- **Distance:** About 15 minutes (12km) from Camp Humphreys / 30 minutes (30km) from Osan Air Base.

ADDRESS: 127 Haewian-gil, Dunpo-myeon, Asan-si
HOURS: 10:30 a.m. – 6:30 p.m. (Mon.–Fri.) / 10:30 a.m. – 7:30 p.m. (Sat.–Sun.) / No shows available on Tuesdays
ADMISSION: 20,000 won / Free for children under 1 year old / 10,000 won for children aged 12 to 23 months / 13,000 won per person for a group of 20 or more / 16,500 won for a customer who purchases over 100,000 won at the mall.



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea



NAVER MAP



MORE ABOUT
DINOSAUR WORLD

11 Animal Club Pyeongtaek

Animal Club is a unique animal café and playground where kids can meet a variety of animals and enjoy exciting activities in one place. Visitors can interact with sheep, ponies, guinea pigs, meerkats, parrots, cats, dogs and other animals. The large indoor playground features ball pits, big slides and other play zones. On weekends, recreation programs keep kids busy with games and events. For parents, there's a cozy café area for drinks and snacks. It's a popular spot for families with children, as well as young adults who come to meet the animals and enjoy the café.

- **Best season to visit:** All year round, especially when you want to relax while kids play safely indoors.
- **Distance:** About 17 minutes (7km) from Osan Air Base / 25 minutes (18km) from Camp Humphreys

ADDRESS: 1544 Cheongwon-ro, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do
HOURS: 11 a.m. – 6:30 p.m. (Mon., Wed.–Fri.) / 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. (Sat.–Sun.) / Closed Tuesdays

ADMISSION: 12,900 won for 90 minutes / 15,000 won for 2 hours / 19,000 won for 3 hours / Free for children under 18 months with proof



Photos courtesy of Animal Club



NAVER MAP

12 Jinwicheon Recreation Area Pyeongtaek

Jinwicheon Recreation Area is a large riverside park near Osan Air Base, perfect for camping and enjoying the outdoors. The park features basketball and foot volleyball courts, as well as many auto-camping sites where visitors can spend the night by the river. It also has plenty of designated rest areas, making it easy to enjoy picnics or a simple day trip. Riding the rail bike is a must-do activity to enjoy stunning views of the surrounding landscape. In summer, a water play zone opens for children to splash and cool off.

- **Best time to visit:** Spring and fall for camping and outdoor activities. Summer for the water play zone.
- **Distance:** About 10 minutes (5km) from Osan Air Base / 40 minutes (25km) from Camp Humphreys

ADDRESS: 264-15 Jinwiseo-ro, Jinwi-myeon, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do
HOURS: 9 a.m. – 9 p.m.
ADMISSION: Free
PARKING: 3,000 won to 6,000 won
OTHER FEES: Rail bike: 2,000 won / Camping: 30,000 won



Photo courtesy of Jinwicheon Recreation Area



NAVER MAP



WEBSITE

13 Naeri Cultural Park Pyeongtaek

Naeri Cultural Park is a beautiful riverside park where families can relax and enjoy nature, just a minute from Camp Humphreys. The park is very eco-friendly with lawns and flower beds, perfect for picnics, strolls or seasonal photos. Children can run safely across the open fields while parents rest on benches or walking decks by the water. The park is especially loved for the seasonal blooms during spring and fall. In summer, a fun water playground is set up for kids to cool off and splash around.

- **Best season to visit:** Mid-June to July for hydrangeas, July to mid-August for the water play zone, and late September to early November for pink muhly grass. Since it's nearby the base, anytime on clear days is great for a walk.
- **Distance:** About 1-2 minutes (1km) from Camp Humphreys / 35 minutes (20km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 16-6 Naeri 1-gil, Paengseong-eup, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do
HOURS: Open year-round
ADMISSION & PARKING: Free



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea



NAVER MAP

14 Free bike rental on riversides Pyeongtaek

When the weather warms up or cools down, renting a bike from two Pyeongtaek's free public bike rental shops is a favorite activity among locals. Both shops sit in scenic spots surrounded by grass, flowers, and long riding paths along the water. The shops offer a variety of bikes, including tandem bikes, kids' bikes and those with baskets or back seats, so everyone in the family can enjoy a ride. Renting a bike is simple: just fill out a short form and verify your phone number. Both shops connect directly to riverside bike paths, and you can also request a brochure with route information to plan your adventure. Helmets are provided free of charge. Bikes can be rented for up to two hours at a time. If you'd like to ride longer, you can rent it again after return.

- **Best time to visit:** Spring for cherry blossoms and fall for cosmos flowers and silver grass.

PYEONGTAEK FREE BIKE RENTAL

LOCATIONS: Branch 1–Tongbokcheon Stream:
174 Dongsak-ro, Branch 2–Oseong Riverside:
486 Gangbyeon-ro, Oseong-myeon
HOURS: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. / Closed Mondays, public holidays and during bad weather



Photo by Hyemin Lee, Stripes Korea



NAVER MAP
Tongbokcheon
Stream



NAVER MAP
Oseong
Riverside



WEBSITE
Pyeongtaek free
bike rental

15 Baramsae Village & Sopung Garden Pyeongtaek

Baramsae Village is one of Pyeongtaek's best autumn destinations, hosting the Pink Muhly Festival from late September to mid-November. The wide fields are filled with pink muhly grass along with other seasonal blooms such as pampas grass, cosmos, and sunflowers, creating endless photo opportunities.

Just a 3-minute walk away is Sopung Garden Park, another eco-friendly attraction with seasonal foliage, flower fields and migratory birds, perfect for a fall picnic. "Sopung" means picnic in Korean, and true to its name, the park has plenty of picnic spots and playgrounds.

- **Best season to visit:** Fall, especially late September to mid-November during the Pink Muhly Festival.
- **Distance:** About 10 minutes (9km) from Camp Humphreys / 20 minutes (11km) from Osan Air Base

ADDRESS: 18 Saeak-gil, Godeok-myeon, Pyeongtaek-si
HOURS: 7 a.m. – 6 p.m.
ADMISSION: Adults 4,000 won / Preschool children and seniors (65+) 2,000 won / Ticket prices may vary.
PARKING: Free parking available at Sopung Garden



Photo courtesy of Baramsae Village



NAVER MAP
Baramsae Village



NAVER MAP
Parking



ONE DAY IN SEOUL

Let your local guide give you a tour

STORY AND PHOTOS BY HYEMIN LEE,
STRIPES KOREA

If you had only one day in Seoul, here is exactly where I would take you as your local guide.

The route begins at Gwanghwamun Square, the historic royal center and still one of the city's main districts. Gwanghwamun is the main gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace and the square in front takes its name from it. From here, along one connected route, you can reach the palace, national museums, government landmarks,

traditional neighborhoods and the Cheonggyecheon Stream, and they are all within walking distance.

When your time in Seoul is short, you cannot see everything in a day. The key is knowing which stops matter most. Follow this route, and you will see the places no first-time visitor should miss and also find some hidden spots that many visitors walk past simply because no one tells them where to look. This is why Gwanghwamun Square is where I would begin.

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Route at a glance



Map courtesy of JONGNO-GU Office

START: Gwanghwamun Station, Line 5

ROUTE: ① Gwanghwamun Square → ② National Museum of Korean Contemporary History → ③ Hanbok rental shop area → ④ Gyeongbokgung Palace → ⑤ National Folk Museum of Korea → ⑥ Bukchon Hanok Village → ⑦ Cheonggyecheon Stream

TIME: About 5 to 7 hours, depending on your pace and meal stops

GETTING AROUND: The route is walkable, but taxis are useful when you want to save time or energy. Taxis come easily through Uber or Kakao T app and fares in Korea are relatively cheap.

COST: Every stop on this route is free except Gyeongbokgung, and even that is free if you wear hanbok. Your spending goes to hanbok rental, food and transportation, roughly 30,000–60,000 won (about \$20–\$40) per person for the day.

1st Stop Start at Gwanghwamun Square

Gwanghwamun Square is where Korea gathered for national celebrations, large public events such as BTS's full-group comeback take place. South Korea has a national stage, Gwanghwamun Square.

Meet two here

Two of the most respected historical figures in Korea are buried here. If you ask Koreans to name the country's two names usually come first. They are King Sejong and Admiral Yi Sun-sin.

Admiral Yi Sun-sin: The first statue of a Korean naval commander who defended Korea from 1592 to 1598. He defeated much stronger Japanese forces and is admired not only for his military prowess but also for his devotion to the country against all odds.

King Sejong the Great: Behind Admiral Yi Sun-sin is a statue of King Sejong, known for creating Hangeul, the Korean alphabet. King Sejong's reign was a golden age for Korea, and his writing system depended on Chinese characters. King Sejong was able to read and write.



King Sejong the Great

Garden of Gratitude

Next to King Sejong, the square also holds the Garden of Gratitude, opened in 2026. Its 23 stone pillars represent South Korea and the 22 countries that sent combat troops or medical support during the Korean War. Standing in the center of Seoul, the memorial thanks the nations and service members who helped defend the country when it needed it most.

The square has a secret garden behind the King Sejong statue. The Story of King Sejong and his lives and achievements are displayed in the Garden of Gratitude, Freedom Hall. It is a good place to visit if you want to learn about the country's history and also make a good indoor space when the weather is uncomfortable.



Garden of Gratitude



Gwanghwamun Square

DUL

our!

Square

thers. Major
e rallies and
place here. If
Square is it.



Admiral Yi Sun-sin

oes on the square

ical figures in Korea stand in the square. country's greatest historical figures, these ey represent courage, service, leadership

e you meet is Admiral Yi Sun-sin, the na- rea during the Japanese invasions of 1592 r forces under impossible conditions. Ko- victories but for his patience, leadership t every obstacle.

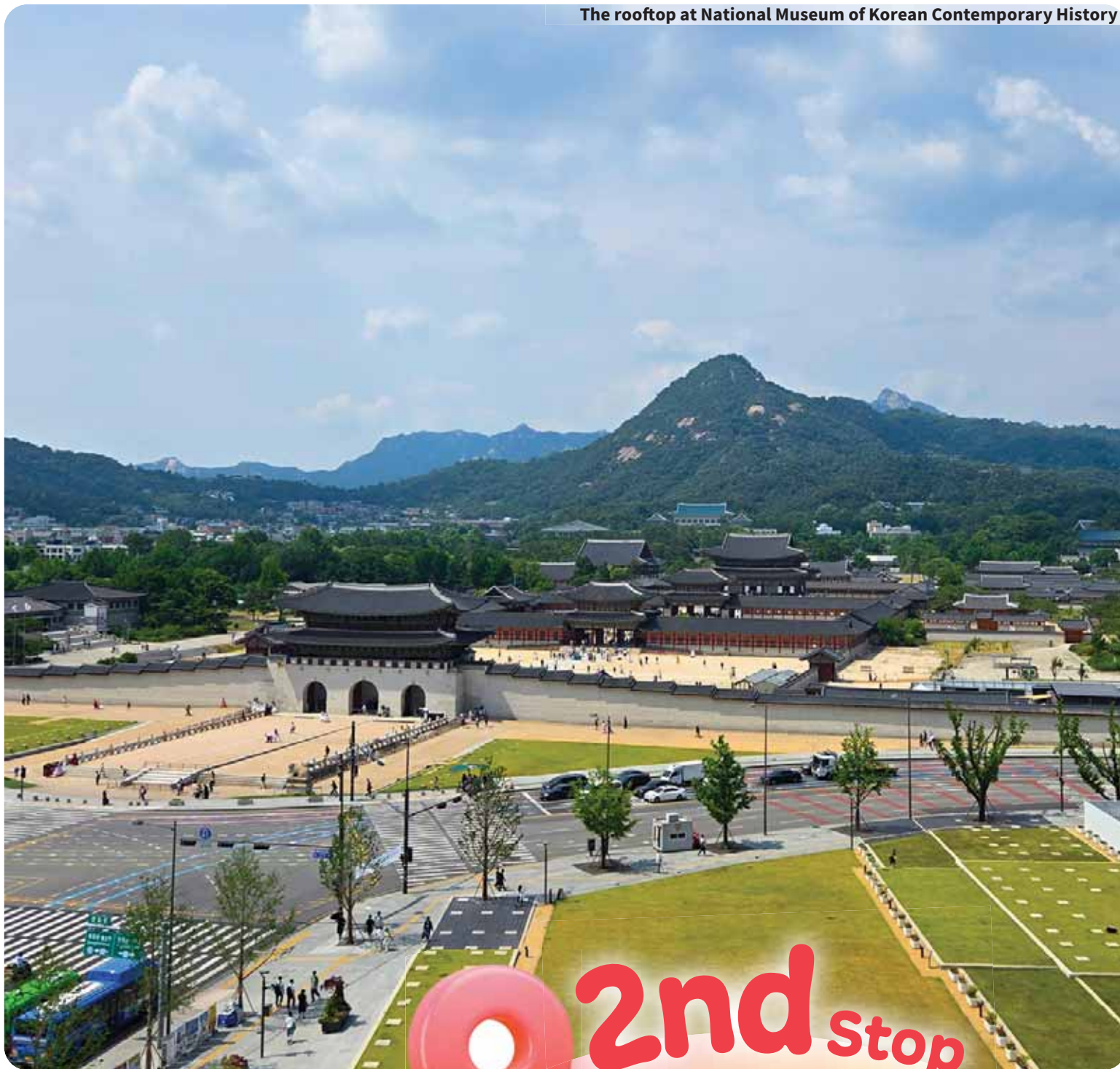
dmiral Yi stands King Sejong the Great, Korean alphabet. Before Hangul, reading characters which were difficult for ordi- vanted everyone, regardless of class, to be

Local's tip

ond layer underground. An entrance be- statue leads to two free exhibitions, The d The Story of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, on the of the two heroes. Beneath the Garden of l tells the story of the Korean War and the South Korea. These spaces are worth vis- n more about the monuments above. They r rest stop when the square is crowded or table.



The rooftop at National Museum of Korean Contemporary History



The rooftop you shouldn't miss

From Gwanghwamun Square to the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, about 3 minutes on foot.



GWANGHWAMUN SQUARE
NAVER MAP

Next to the square, near the U.S. Embassy, is the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History. Admission is free and the halls trace Korea's modern history from the Japanese occupation through liberation, the Korean War and the rapid growth that followed. If you have time, walk through them. The exhibits are worth it. If you do not, take the elevator to the eighth floor.

Whenever I am in Gwanghwamun, I stop by this museum, even when I have no time for the exhibits. I come for the rooftop where the view opens onto Gyeongbokgung Palace. Behind it stand the Blue House, the Korean presidential building, and Mt. Bugaksan rising beyond. In the same view, Gwanghwamun Square spreads out below surrounded by government buildings and downtown traffic.

It is a beautiful view, but what keeps me there is how it shows Korea in one picture: The old royal capital and the center of the city people live in today. From here you also see just how large Gyeongbokgung Palace is and you get a clear look at where the route heads next. Many visitors pass the museum without knowing this rooftop exists. Even on a tight schedule, this is the one spot I would not skip.

SEE MORE ON PAGE 8

■ National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

LOCATION: 198 Sejong-daero, Jongno-gu, Seoul / near Line 5,

Gwanghwamun Station, Exit 2

HOURS: 10 a.m.–6 p.m. (Mon./Tue./Thu./Fri./Sun.) /
10 a.m.–9 p.m. (Wed./ Sat.) / Closed Jan. 1, Seollal
and Chuseok (The rooftop garden keeps the same
hours.)

ADMISSION: Free



NAVER MAP

Next stop



From the museum to the hanbok shops,
about 8 minutes on foot.

3rd Stop

Rent hanbok

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

From the museum, head toward Gyeongbokgung Station Exit 3 or 4 where hanbok rental shops are clustered near the palace.

Hanbok is traditional Korean clothing that Koreans still wear for major holidays and special occasions. Renting one is affordable and each shop has a variety of colors and designs. Wearing hanbok gets you into Gyeongbokgung free, but that is not the main reason to try it. It makes the palace visit more vivid, and gives you plenty of opportunities to take photos in a setting that matches the clothing.

Rentals start at one hour and the prices increase with longer times. For a palace visit, two hours may be enough. I would recommend at least three hours because this route also takes you to Bukchon Hanok Village.



At a hanbok shop

Words

Hanbok: Hanbok (한복)
Size: Saijeu (사이즈)
Color: Saek (색)

Phrases

Do you have a larger size?:

Deo keun saijeu isseoyo? (더 큰 사이즈 있어요?)

Do you have a smaller size?:

Deo jageun saijeu isseoyo? (더 작은 사이즈 있어요?)

Do you have another color?:

Dareun saek isseoyo? (다른 색 있어요?)

Can I try this on?:

Igeo ibeobwado dwaeyo? (이거 입어봐도 돼요?)

How much is this?: Igeo eolmayeyo? (이거 얼마예요?)



Local's tip

●**Eat before renting hanbok or after returning it.** Snacks are fine, but a full meal can be awkward in rented clothing and spills can leave stains. More importantly, your rental time runs quickly.

●**Where to eat:** You can find many restaurants around Gyeongbokgung Station. If you want more options, walk north toward Seochon Village. The neighborhood also has Tongin Market, where visitors can exchange won for traditional brass coins (yeopjeon) and use them to buy snacks and small dishes at the market stalls.

Hanbok rental shops

LOCATION: Around Line 3, Gyeongbokgung Station Exit 3-4 and surrounding blocks and side streets.

HOURS: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. (Most shops follow the palace's schedule, so note that Gyeongbokgung is closed Tuesdays.)

PRICES: Around 15,000 won-45,000 won depending on the design and rental time.



NEARBY OPTION
(K-STAR HANBOK)
NAVER MAP

Changing of the Royal Guard at Gyeongbokgung



Gyeonghoeru Pavilion

Gyeongbokgung Palace

LOCATION: Near Line 3, Gyeongbokgung Station Exit 5 or Line 5, Gwanghwamun Station Exit 2

HOURS: 9 a.m.–6 p.m. (March–May & Sept.–Oct.) / 9 a.m.–6:30 p.m. (June–Aug.) / 9 a.m.–5 p.m. (Nov.–Feb.) / Closed Tuesdays

TICKET: 3,000 won / Free for visitors wearing hanbok; Koreans age 24 and under or 65 and older; foreigners age 18 and under or 65 and older

CHANGING OF THE ROYAL GUARD: 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. (20 min) / Guard Duty Performance: 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. (10 min) / Guard Training Session: 9:35 a.m. and 1:35 p.m. (15 min, Hyeopsaengmun Gate)



NAVER MAP

From the hanbok shops to
Gyeongbokgung's main gate,
Gwanghwamun, about 7 minutes on foot.

4th Stop

Gyeongbokgung Palace

Gyeongbokgung was the main palace of the Joseon Dynasty and is the largest and most symbolic of Seoul's five royal palaces.

If possible, try to time your visit with the Changing of the Royal Guard Ceremony, held twice a day at Gwanghwamun Gate. The ceremony recreates a changing of guards of the royal military units that once protected the palace. Afterward, you can take photos with the guards at their posts. Even if you miss the ceremony, it will not ruin your visit. The palace itself is more than enough.

The grounds are huge, and your legs may give out before you see everything. If you need to narrow it down, do not miss these three photo spots: Gwanghwamun Gate at the front; Geunjeongjeon Hall, the main throne hall where kings held ceremonies and received envoys; and Gyeonghoeru Pavilion, a banquet hall overlooking a pond and one of the most beautiful corners of the palace.

Next stop

From Gwanghwamun Gate to the National Folk Museum, 11 to 15 minutes on foot.



The museum is on the eastern side of the palace, and exploring Gyeongbokgung usually takes more than an hour.



File photo

5th Stop

The National Folk Museum and the way to Bukchon

On the eastern side of the palace grounds, the National Folk Museum of Korea shifts the focus from royalty to ordinary life. The museum explores how Koreans lived, worked and marked the seasons outside the palace walls.

The museum is worth exploring, but if time is tight, you can stay outside. The building with a traditional pagoda tower on top is beautiful, and the outdoor displays are the best part: jangseung (wooden guardian poles), a traditional house, a waterwheel and a recreated neighborhood from the 1970s and 80s.

The museum also fits naturally into this route because leaving from this side puts you on the way to Bukchon Hanok Village.

■The National Folk Museum

LOCATION: Near Line 3, Gyeongbokgung Station, Exit 5 or Anguk Station, Exit 1

HOURS: Mar.–Oct.: 9 a.m.–6 p.m.

(Thu.–Tue.) & 9 a.m.–8 p.m.

(Wed.); Nov.–Feb.: 9 a.m.–5

p.m. / Closed Jan. 1, Seollal,

Chuseok Day

ADMISSION: Free



NAVER MAP



Speakin' Korean



From the folk museum to Bukchon Hanok Village, about 10 to 15 minutes on foot.

6th Stop

Bukchon Hanok Village



About a 10–15 minute walk, you can reach Bukchon Hanok Village. Gyeongbokgung was the royal court. Bukchon was the neighborhood where many noble families and government officials lived. The area with about 600 years of history is home to Seoul's largest clusters of hanok, traditional Korean houses. Some now house cultural centers, workshops, cafés and guesthouses, but many are private homes. Entry is free but visitors can come only between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. since people still live here.

Bukchon is large, so do not wear yourself out wandering every lane. The village has eight scenic viewpoints. If you see only one, make it View No. 6, a downhill lane where tiled roofs step down toward the skyline with N Seoul Tower on Mt. Namsan in the distance. Even with tired legs, this is the view I would not miss.

By the time you reach Bukchon, you may want a break. The area has plenty of cafés, souvenir stores and snack shops for a cold drink or a Korean snack like hotteok. Just keep an eye on your hanbok rental time.

From Bukchon to the hanbok shops, about 30 minutes on foot or about 10 minutes by taxi (6,000 to 8,000 won). Anguk Station is another option, but it is about a 10–15 minute walk from the main viewpoint, and taking the subway for only one stop may not save much time.

■Bukchon Hanok Village

LOCATION: Bukchon-ro 11-gil 60 or Gahoe-dong 31-78 (Bukchon view No. 6)

HOURS: 10 a.m.–5 p.m. in the restricted Red Zone



NAVER MAP

SEE MORE ON PAGE 10

Next stop



Finding your way

■Words

Subway station:
Jihacheol-yeok (지하철역)
Exit: Chulgu (출구)
Taxi: Taeksi (택시)

Right: Oreunjok (오른쪽)
Left: Oenjjok (왼쪽)
Straight: Jikjin (직진)
Here: Yeogi (여기)

■Phrases

Where is Exit 3?: Sam-beon chulgu eodiyeyo? (3번 출구 어디예요?)

How do I get to Gyeongbokgung?:

Gyeongbokgung eotteoke gayo? (경복궁 어떻게 가요?)

Is this the way to Bukchon?:

Bukchon ganeun gil majayo? (북촌 가는 길 맞아요?)

Please take me here: Yeogi-ro gajuseyo. (여기로 가주세요.)

Please stop here: Yeogi-seo sewojuseyo. (여기서 세워주세요.)

How long does it take?:

Eolmana geolloyeyo? (얼마나 걸려요?)

File photo





Cheonggyecheon night view
File photo

From the
hanbok shops to
Cheonggyecheon
Plaza, about 18
minutes on foot or 5
to 10 minutes by taxi
(about 5,000 won).



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

After a day exploring Korea's past through the palace and hanok village, Cheonggyecheon brings you back to modern Seoul. The stream runs through the middle of downtown as an urban retreat where people enjoy slow walks or pause by the water.

It did not always look this way. During Korea's rapid industrialization it was buried under concrete and an elevated highway until the city restored it as a public space in 2005.

You can sit beside the water with snacks and cool your feet at the water's edge. Keep in mind that swimming, bathing and drinking alcohol are prohibited, and visitors should take all trash with them.

Cheonggyecheon is especially beautiful at night. Have dinner nearby, then walk along the water under the city lights. It is peaceful to end the day beside a stream once buried and later brought back by the city.

7th Stop Finish at Cheonggyecheon Stream



CHEONGGYE
PLAZA
NAVER MAP



At travel destinations

Words

Photo: Sajin (사진)
Entrance: Ipgu (입구)
Restroom:
Hwajangsil (화장실)
Square:
Gwangjang (광장)

Palace: Gung (궁)
Stream: Cheon (천)
Traditional Korean
house: Hanok (한옥)
Museum:
Bangmulgwan
(박물관)

Phrases

Could you take a photo for me?:

Sajin jom jjigeojuseyo. (사진 좀 찍어주세요.)

Where is the entrance?:

Ipgu eodiyeyo? (입구 어디예요?)

Where is the restroom?:

Hwajangsil eodiyeyo? (화장실 어디예요?)

It's really beautiful:

Jeongmal areumdawoyo. (정말 아름다워요.)

What is this?: Ige mwoyeyo? (이게 뭐예요?)

What time does it close?:

Myeot si-kkaji haeyo? (몇 시까지 해요?)

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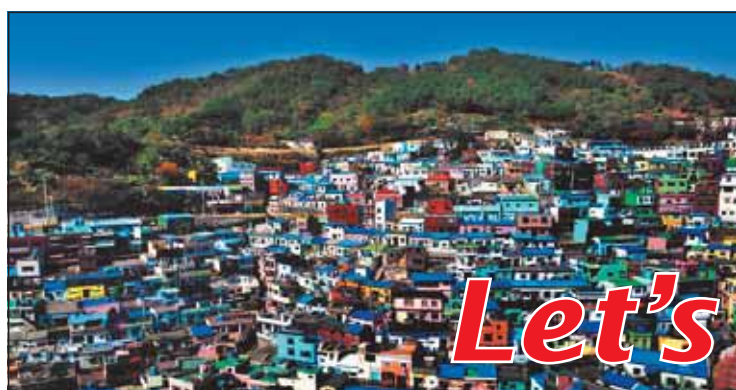
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Stripes Sports Trivia

Which slugger earned the nickname Mr. October thanks to his talent for delivering in the playoffs?

Answer
Reggie Jackson



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Or visit your local TAP Center

DID YOU KNOW?

For most South Korean men, serving in the military is mandatory since the country remains technically at war with North Korea. The service lasts 18 to 21 months depending on the branch. The weight of this duty is real: draft evasion is punishable by up to three years in prison and those who try to avoid service can face arrest and strong social criticism. Still, most Korean men carry their responsibility, pausing their studies or careers, stepping away from family, friends and daily life to serve. For many Korean men, enlistment is a milestone as significant as college or a first job, carrying sacrifice, duty and pride all at once.



Hangul of the week

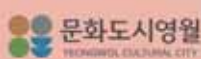
군대

Gundae (Military)

Language Lesson

I'm going to the military.

Gundae-e gayo.
(군대에 가요)



DISCOVER YEONGWOL

THE 2026 CULTURAL CITY OF KOREA



MORE INFO

Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

1 Wrangler's rope
6 Normal beginning?
10 Spew forth
14 Poe's middle name
15 Grandson of Adam
16 Pot starter
17 Monthly bank mailings
19 Familiar with
20 Kachina doll carver
21 Withdrawal to a safe place
23 Proverbial waste-maker
25 Neighbor of Uganda
26 Straw hat
28 Teakettle emission
30 Blue whales have big ones
32 Sorority letter
36 Small drink
37 Big plot of land
39 50 Cent piece?
40 "Flowers for Algernon" author Daniel
42 Mistaken
44 Carnival attractions
46 Kitchen whistler
47 Pre-euro Portuguese money
50 Close-knit group
51 Collaborator
54 SOS responder
57 Quite often
58 Kitchen surface
60 Yard tool
61 Baxter or Bancroft
62 Historic Tuscan city
63 Historic Scott
64 Arabian and Caspian
65 Brings home

DOWN

1 Eyelid fringe
2 Voice below soprano
3 Foolishly giddy
4 Fill to excess
5 Start for step or stop
6 Annoyance
7 Writer Quindlen
8 Drilling grp.
9 Guarantee
10 Siddhartha ____: the Buddha
11 Remove fasteners
12 Ceded a seat
13 Cosmetic dye
18 Like grams and liters
22 Roused from sleep
24 Save for later
26 Luxuriate
27 Sheriff Taylor's son
28 Prophets
29 Russian emperor

31 Locust or larch
33 Sit-in participant
34 Reiser or Rudd
35 Cathedral recess
38 Racing vehicle
41 Blew, as a volcano
43 Tuscany, once
45 Biblical seamstress

47 Digital greeting
48 Kind of panel
49 "You Send Me" singer Sam
50 Road markers
52 Blue-ribbon
53 Sushi selection
55 Mass. neighbor
56 Transcript stats
59 Opposite of WNW

Answers to Previous Crossword:

S	H	A	R	P	B	I	D	S	S	M	U	G
L	E	V	E	R	L	O	U	T	P	I	T	A
A	R	I	S	E	A	N	N	O	T	A	T	E
M	O	D	I	C	U	M	G	A	R	N	I	S
					G	E	N	E	R	A	T	I
B	L	U	N	D	E	R	E	R	B	E	A	S
R	I	N	S	E	S	D	E	S	E	R	T	E
I	D	I			C	A	D	E	T	I	V	E
N	O	T	A	L	O	N	E		O	L	I	V
E	N	A	T	E		D	E	C	L	I	N	E
					R	E	D	H	E	R	R	I
A	V	I	A	T	O	R		A	D	D	E	D
Z	E	A	L	O	U	S	L		S	N	A	R
O	R	N	O		R	O	B	O		A	U	D
V	A	S	T		I	N	O	N		Y	E	A

SUDOKU

Difficulty: Medium

	2			3	9	7		
					8	6		5
	1							
	4		7		3	5		2
5		7		6				
					3			6
		9	5				1	
		1	2					
2	6							9

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Edited by Margie E. Burke

HOW TO SOLVE:

Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

5	1	2	4	3	7	6	8	9
7	4	9	8	1	6	3	2	5
6	8	3	2	9	5	4	1	7
4	3	7	9	5	8	1	6	2
1	6	8	7	4	2	9	5	3
9	2	5	3	6	1	7	4	8
8	7	6	1	2	9	5	3	4
3	9	1	5	8	4	2	7	6
2	5	4	6	7	3	8	9	1



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Lois Rapp

Welcome back to school, Pacific family!
It is my pleasure to welcome DoWEA Pacific students and families to the 2026–27 school year.

We are proud to serve military-connected students from prekindergarten through 12th Grade across our schools in Guam, Korea, mainland Japan, and Okinawa.

At DoWEA, military-connected students are at the heart of all we do. Wherever military life takes your family, our schools are committed to helping every student feel welcome and supported. Whether your child is entering a DoWEA classroom for the first time or preparing for graduation, they will find a school community ready to educate and empower them to succeed in a dynamic world.

This year, DoWEA will continue celebrating our nation’s 250th anniversary. Students will have opportunities to explore the people, events, innovations, and ideals that have shaped our nation while developing the knowledge, curiosity, and love of learning that will serve them throughout their lives.

DoWEA’s Blueprint for Continuous Improvement continues to guide our work in providing a high-quality educational experience for every student, every day. Families can learn more about our Blueprint and focus on Student Excellence, Instructional Excellence, Service Excellence, and Organizational Excellence at dodea.edu/blueprint.

We value the important role parents play as their child’s first educators and are proud to partner with you in your child’s academic journey.

Here’s to another fantastic school year!

– Lois Rapp, DoWEA Pacific Director for Student Excellence



School Year 2026–2027

(175 Instructional Days and 190 Teacher Workdays)

First Semester (79 Instructional Days)

Monday, August 17	First Day of School
Monday, September 7	Labor Day: Federal Holiday
Monday, October 12	Columbus Day: Federal Holiday
Thursday, October 15	End of First Quarter (40 Instructional Days)
Friday, October 16	No School for Students – Teacher Workday
Wednesday, November 11	Veterans Day: Federal Holiday
Wednesday, November 25	School Holiday
Thursday, November 26	Thanksgiving Day: Federal Holiday
Friday, November 27	School Holiday
Thursday, December 17	End of Second Quarter and First Semester (39 Instructional Days)
Friday, December 18	No School for Students – Teacher Workday
Monday, December 21	Begin Winter Recess (21 December – 2 January)
Friday, December 25	Christmas: Federal Holiday

Second Semester (96 Instructional Days)

Friday, January 1	New Year’s Day: Federal Holiday
Monday, January 4	Begin Second semester and Third Quarter
Monday, January 18	Martin Luther King Day: Federal Holiday
Monday, February 15	Presidents’ Day: Federal Holiday
Thursday, March 25	End of Third Quarter (56 Instructional Days)
Friday, March 26	No School for Students – Teacher Workday
Monday, March 29	Begin Spring Recess (29 March – 2 April)
Monday, May 31	Memorial Day: Federal Holiday
Wednesday, June 2	End of Fourth Quarter and Second Semester (40 Instructional Days)
Thursday, June 3	No School for Students – Teacher Workday

2026

2027

What’s Inside

- Residential Fitness Test mandatory in schools
- Mobile device ban to take effect this year
- Families welcome decision to add middle school sports

Helpful links



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ACTIVITIES



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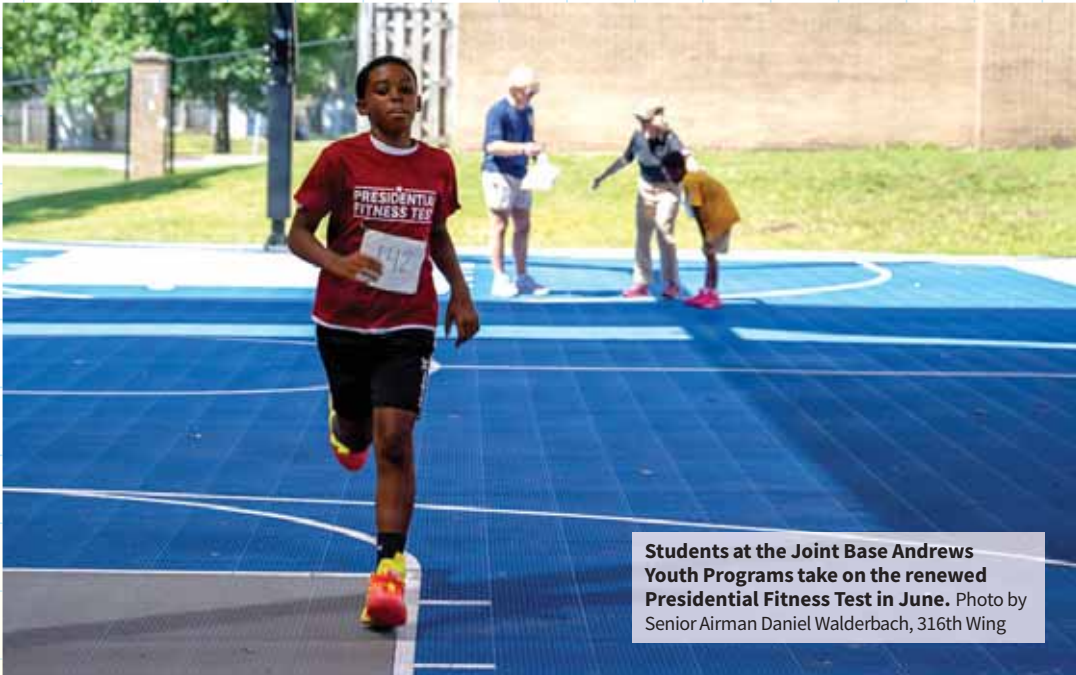
CONDITIONAL
ENROLLMENT



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STUDENT
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PROGRAM



Students at the Joint Base Andrews Youth Programs take on the renewed Presidential Fitness Test in June. Photo by Senior Airman Daniel Walderbach, 316th Wing

Presidential Fitness Test mandatory in schools

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN, STARS AND STRIPES

Schoolchildren of U.S. service members will be vying for an award in gym class that many of their parents and grandparents likely remember well. In May, the Pentagon reinstated the Presidential Fitness Test at its schools as part of a broader push by the White House to reverse a decline in health and physical fitness across America.

EXCLUSIVE NEWS FROM: STARS AND STRIPES
www.stripes.com

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said the fitness program will be mandatory at 161 Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools across 30 installations worldwide. He hopes the rest of the nation's schools will follow DODEA's lead, he said.

"It's going to be mandatory for the young kids of those service members who use those schools," he said while speaking alongside President Donald Trump, schoolchildren, professional athletes and others at an Oval Office ceremony.

"We need young, strong, healthy Americans, whether you serve in the military or any other aspect of your life," Hegseth said. "The idea that competition is bad is the beginning of a decline of a nation."

The Presidential Fitness Test was an annual ritual for generations of American schoolchildren, from the late 1950s, when the first tests were administered, to 2013. Students were scored on a variety of drills, including a 1-mile run, broad jump and pullups. President Barack Obama replaced the test with the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, with a focus on minimizing comparisons between children and supporting students in their pursuit of personal fitness goals and overall health. Advocates of the Obama-era program said children were more likely to stay active long term if fitness was framed around improvement rather than competition.

In July 2025, Trump signed an executive order restoring the test in public schools. At May's ceremony, he signed a proclamation to reestablish the Presidential Physical Fitness Award, which recognizes the top test takers across all categories in the fitness test.

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report published in April said Trump's directive restoring the test included no mandates, timelines or enforcement mechanisms, leaving implementation dependent on existing state education policies. The report found many states lack the infrastructure needed for large-scale standardized fitness testing. Despite those challenges, Trump framed the effort as part of a broader push to revive competition and athletic culture in schools.

"We're bringing it back," he said. "My administration is working very hard to defend America's cherished athletic traditions and pass our values of excellence and competitiveness to the next generation."

The awards are certificates signed by the president, which are available for download on the White House's website. "Hit at least one target from every category and you'll earn the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. Train hard — you've got this!" it says on the page.

The new fitness categories for the test are divided into core strength, cardio and upper body, with a choice of two different exercises for each one: curl-ups or planks; 1-mile run or 20-meter beep test, also known as a shuttle run; and right-angle pushups or pullups.

A 13-year-old boy, for example, could earn the presidential fitness award by holding a plank for at least 134 seconds, running the mile in 6 minutes, 50 seconds or faster and completing seven pullups, according to a fitness benchmark chart posted by the White House. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is leading the administration's "Make America Healthy Again" initiative, lamented the growing obesity rate among American youth, maintaining that nearly 80% of young people cannot meet the standards for military service.

"That should be an eye-opener for all of us," he said, adding that competition is good for kids. "We need to teach people how to win and how to lose and how to process victory and defeat," he said.

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@stripesksttown



WEBSITE



Photo by Brian McElhiney, Stars and Stripes



Photo by Eric Mendiola, Stars and Stripes

Mobile devices not allowed in classrooms this year

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN, STARS AND STRIPES

Students attending the Pentagon's schools this year will no longer be allowed to keep personal electronic devices on them during the school day, according to new guidance.

EXCLUSIVE NEWS FROM: STARS AND STRIPES
www.stripes.com

Smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, Bluetooth-enabled devices and gaming systems with internet-connected capability must be silenced or turned off and securely stored from the start of the school day until dismissal, according to a form letter emailed to parents and guardians in May from some Department of Defense Education Activity principals.

"This change will remove distractions and keep the focus of our

classrooms on education," was viewed by Stars and Stripes known as the Department of Defense Education Activity.

The implementation guidelines allow exceptions to the school-day ban for medical purposes, special education instructional activities, safety or curriculum-based activities that require a student to be able to do so using a smartphone in a designated location with staff or parents says.

"We are sharing this information so parents and guardians have time to prepare their children before the start of school," an email says. "We appreciate your understanding and enforcing these expectations to ensure a focused, safe, and productive learning environment for all students."

Get involved this school year!

Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) strengthen school communities through family involvement, volunteer support, events and activities.

School Advisory Committees (SAC) provide parents, students, staff and military community representatives with a forum to share feedback and advise school leadership directly on matters affecting students and families.

Families interested in participating are encouraged to contact their school for more information.



WEBSITE





Photo by Colin Cruickshank, DODEA Europe



Middle schoolers play flag football at Yokota Air Base, Japan, on April 20, 2024. Photo by Alexzandra Gracey, U.S. Air Force



Photo by Cynthia Abel, Special to Stripes

Dave Ornauer, Stars and Stripes

Families welcome decision to add middle school sports

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN, STARS AND STRIPES

Military families that have spent years pushing for middle school sports at Defense Department schools welcomed a Pentagon decision to launch athletic programs for students in grades six through eight worldwide.

The Pentagon's middle schools will begin offering sports this year, defense officials announced this week, marking the first time a school-sponsored athletic program will be available for children in those grades.

The Department of Defense Education Activity "this winter is expanding athletic opportunities to every DODEA middle schooler worldwide," Anthony Tata, the defense secretary for personnel and readiness, said on X on July 17.

"Parents & students asked - @SecWar answered," he added, referring to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, whose department oversees the Pentagon's network of 161 schools in Europe, Asia and the United States.

Military and civilian families, especially those stationed overseas, have long called for more sports at DODEA middle schools, where extracurricular athletic opportunities have ranged from sparse to nonexistent and fall far short of those at comparable U.S. public schools.

Maribel Jarzabek, an Air Force spouse in Belgium, called the announcement a "phenomenal opportunity."

"It looks like they took to heart a lot of the parents' comments on this issue," she said.

While stationed at Camp Humphreys in South Korea, Jarzabek started a middle school running club after learning that students had no organized school sports. Nearly 90 students joined, she said.

"We had all of these kids who wanted to run, who needed something to do (after school)," Jarzabek said. "And they loved it."

Her older daughter, Cassie, had participated in a middle school running club while the family lived in Japan, allowing her to continue competing before high school.

"She was able to keep practicing, be in competition with other kids and enhance her skills," Jarzabek said. Without the running club, Cassie "would not have started until her freshman year" and "would be a few years behind," she added.

Overseas families often lack access to gym space, YMCA programs and other recreational opportunities available in the United States, said Army spouse Kim Haith, who also advocated for middle school sports while stationed at

Camp Humphreys.

"Sports have been shown to improve mental health, provide critical team building skills and allow for students to obtain scholarships to attend colleges they may not have been otherwise able to afford," said Haith, a mother of three school-age children.

At some bases overseas, DODEA middle schools have allowed students to practice with high school teams in sports such as tennis and cross-country, but often not in competitions.

Other installations have relied on command-sponsored recreational and developmental leagues to fill the gap, such as the Army's Morale, Welfare and Recreation and the Air Force's Child and Youth Program.

Those programs, however, often limit the number of participants because of funding constraints and lack of volunteer coaches.

DODEA, which also goes by the Department of Defense Education Activity, did not provide details on which sports will be available at its middle schools and whether programs will be competitive, recreational or a mix of both.

"Schools will receive dedicated funding to successfully launch and sustain these middle school athletic opportunities," DODEA spokeswoman Jessica Tackaberry said in a statement.

The agency plans to coordinate with middle and middle/high schools throughout the fall to support the rollout, she said. The goal is to provide families starting this fall with more information about participation, schedules and other program details, Tackaberry added.

Expanding middle school sports is consistent with a focus by President Donald Trump and Hegseth on physical fitness, she said.

Starting this past spring, DODEA made the Presidential Fitness Test mandatory after Trump signed an executive order to restore it.

The test, which consists of events to gauge core strength, upper body strength and cardiovascular fitness, dates to the 1950s in public schools.

The sports offering for middle schoolers could affect nearly 14,000 students, a number that reflects enrollment in grades six through eight at DODEA schools worldwide as of June, according to agency data.

Some parents of DODEA middle schoolers are already dreaming big.

"We are stationed in Japan with a middle schooler who is obsessed with baseball, as are so many other kids at his school," said Kara Misiak, in response to Tata's X post. "Please make sure it is included. It would make them so happy!"

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Photo by Michael O'Day, DODEA

provide a secure place for students to store their devices during instructional time, such as lockers. Prior to the DODEA-wide ban, smartphone use in the Pentagon's school system, which serves more than 65,000 children of American service members and DOD personnel stationed in the United States and overseas, varied by school. Some schools already limited use of devices, while others had no restrictions.

In the U.S., at least nine states have laws in place to curtail students' use of cellphones during school hours. The restrictions reflect a broader push by educators and policymakers who say smartphones have become a major classroom distraction and may contribute to student mental health and behavioral problems.

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