

**Title: Why Naju?**

**Name: Bettina Dirauf**

**Nationality: German**

I get on an air-conditioned KTX train together with hundreds of people. The door soon closes behind me and the train departs from Yongsan Station, located at the very center of Seoul, at eleven a.m. The train soon leaves behind the capital city and I can no longer see skyscrapers outside my window. Mesmerized by the scenery outside, I lose track of time. The train then arrives in Naju Station just three hours after departing from Yongsan.

Why Naju of all places to visit in Korea? What drew me to this small city that has a population of only 98-thousand? If you accompany me on my three-day trip to this southern city, you will soon find out why.

Once I arrive in Naju, I head for Moksa Naea, the place where I'll stay for two nights. Moksa Naea used to be the private home of the highest-ranking official of Naju-mok. The structure is shaped like a horseshoe, is surrounded by a fence and has a clean, spacious courtyard. A woman who appears to be in her 50s approaches me from the structure and greets me. After a warm welcome, she shows me around Moksa Naea. There, I get to experience what the life of a politician who enjoyed privileges would have been like. Though I have to pay between 35 and 107 euros to stay a night, I get to spend a quiet night in a spectacular room. Besides, I get to have access to a newly-built sanitary facility and get to enjoy the hospitality of the hostess who serves delicious Korean dishes.

In the afternoon, I set out to explore the city. I first head to the Naju-mok Cultural Center. Though it's small in size, the Naju-mok Cultural Center has very organized displays like most museums in Korea. In many display stands, you can check out reenactments of historical images as well as informative signs and videos. At present, Naju is a very small city but in the past it used to be a key industrial hub given its advantageous location along the Youngsan riverside. Naju was also politically significant and as a result, it came to be the largest administrative district in the Jeolla Provinces. Two restored gates demonstrate Naju's significance. After I finish looking around the cultural center, I take a walk and look in awe at the restored gates.

Night is falling and it's time for dinner. I head out to seek a restaurant that serves gomtang, Naju's most famous dish. Out of a number of restaurants, I enter one and sit on one of the dark brown wooden tables lined up in a wide hall. At one side of the hall there is an open kitchen and next to it, there are men and women stirring large stone bowls that are steaming hot with gomtang that smell delicious. They bow their heads toward their bowls and eagerly eat their gomtang. Just minutes after I order, a waitress brings me a steaming bowl of gomtang. The gomtang has tender beef and soup that's been boiled for hours and is served with a bowl of rice and little bit of vegetables. Each table has two large jars of kimchi, so you can put in kimchi and kimchi soup if you want to eat your gomtang hot. The gomtang is absolutely delicious.

On my second day, after having a traditional Korean breakfast at Moksa Naea, I head toward Mount Geumseong that is not too far away from the city. Once I get there, I climb the mountain's four peaks, Nojeok, Odong, Dabok and Jeongnyeong which stand 451 meters above sea level. I also look around an

ancient fortress in the mountain and breathe in scents of fresh pine trees and listen to the chirping of cicadas.

By the time I've conquered the four peaks, night is falling and it's time for rest. I head to Jung-heung Gold Spa and Resort at Jiseok River which is the only water park in the Jeolla Provinces where you can dabble in fresh water. Every year, a great number of people come to the resort, which is surrounded by breathtaking scenery. Time passes by fast as I enjoy my time in the resort among many Koreans. I head back to Naju as shadows are getting longer. Once I arrive in Naju, I have dinner at a restaurant that serves fresh fish from the Youngsan River. With a full stomach, I head straight to a noraebang and compete in a singing contest with Korean guests there. Then I spend the rest of the evening having couple of beers with my tour guides.

The next morning, I wake up with a heavy heart as I know I will be leaving Korea soon. But with no time to lose, I visit the Geumseongwan guesthouse.

Before I leave, I say my goodbyes to the hostess and get on the three-thirty train that will take me back to Seoul. Looking at my three-day trip in Naju, no one can now question why I picked Naju of all places in Korea.

First day: Depart from Yongsang at 11 a.m.

Stay two nights at Naju: Moksa Naea

Third day: Depart from Naju at 3:30 for Seoul