

## Culture Shock: Naked in Korea

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**Late September, Chuseok holiday:** I visit Seorak Mountain. My hiking group stays in a hotel known for its restorative hot springs. After dinner, a group of girls head for the baths. Made physically ill at the thought of being naked in public, I pretend to be tired and watch *The Bourne Ultimatum* in my room alone. The next day, I sneak down to the bottom floor of the hotel to see the baths for myself. There is one woman relaxing in what seems to me a large hot tub. Another stands near the back wall, exfoliating. I mutter an apology about forgetting my towel and retreat.

**November 9<sup>th</sup>:** I visit a nearby gym, Universiade. I tour the exercise facilities and decide they're sufficient for any *Biggest Loser* fan. I've never had a gym membership before, but Korea's active lifestyle and healthy food has inspired me. I shell out the cash and grab my free bag. I jog on the treadmill for a few minutes. I get tired. I try and do a chin-up on the weight machines and decide tomorrow is another day. Back in the locker room, I notice a pair of glass doors: a sauna. There are three large hot tubs in differing shades of blue and green, a cooler lap pool on my left, and rows of showers to my right. At the very back of the room are three steam rooms with varying degrees of heat and precipitation. There are also lots of naked ladies. My eyes grow wide and I scurry back to the safety of my locker. I look around for a familiar face. I quickly realize I'm unlikely to find one here, and take comfort in that fact. I strip down. I am not brave, but I *am* cheap. It seems the quickest way to get me to participate in this piece of culture is to make me pay for it. I walk briskly back to the sauna with my head down and practically dive into the largest bath. Only my head pokes out. My eyes dart, scanning the room for those who are fascinated by my nakedness. No one cares. I stay for a few more minutes and take the same brisk walk out.

**November 10<sup>th</sup>:** Day two in the sauna. I stay for a total of ten minutes. I breathe deeply. It feels good.

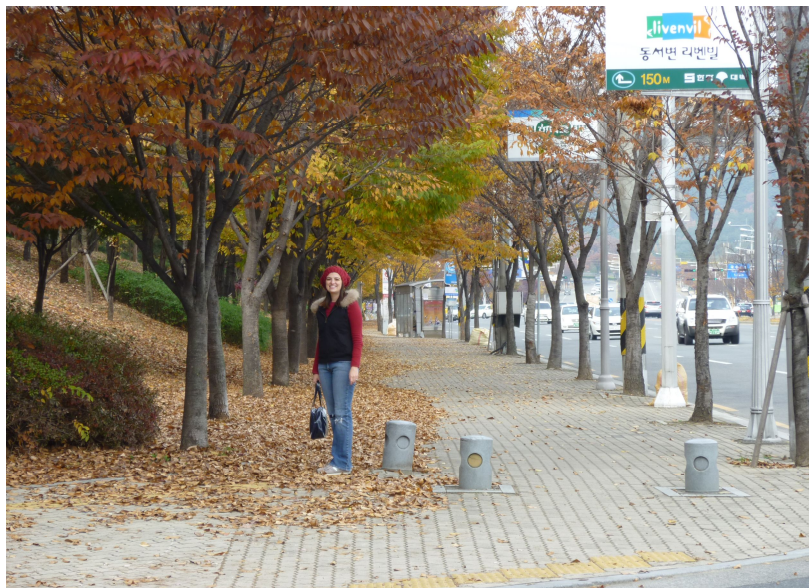
**November 11<sup>th</sup>:** A woman paddles up to me in the warmest pool. She wears a towel around her head and looks forty but swears she's sixty. I imagine what the aloe and jasmine-infused water is currently doing for my own complexion. She asks me to explain the phrases 'can't

get enough of” and ‘cut and dry’. Buck naked, I oblige.

**November 12<sup>th</sup>:** My worst nightmare. Two of my third-grade students splash into the pool. “Chelsea-teacher!” I keep my cool. I wonder when they’ll tell my co-teacher, Hyoh Bin, that they saw me naked. I know Hyoh Bin will think it’s funny because she has an excellent sense of humor. (One day she wore her glasses to school and told the students she was Hyoh Bin’s twin. Three students believed her and were devastated when told there was only one Hyoh Bin.)

**November 13<sup>th</sup>:** I can’t go to the gym today. I’m disappointed. I realize it is not the physical exertion I will miss, but my relaxing twenty minutes in the sauna.

**November 19<sup>th</sup>:** I teach my weekly conversation class to a group of female teachers at Dongbyeon Elementary. We are discussing the American idiom ‘bite the bullet.’ I ask each teacher to share a time when they bit the bullet. My story is the sauna. I laugh for a long time with my coworkers, who admit to being equally as nervous their first time in the sauna. We talk about femininity and sisterhood. We talk about our bodies and what it means to be a Korean woman and an American woman. We talk about shame and empowerment. A second-grade teacher, Hun Joo, asks me what time I like to go to the sauna. “Before dinner, around six. Why?” “Because you and I will never meet.” “Chelsea-teacher,” interjects Gi Won, a third-grade teacher, “I will see you there. And I want a hug.”



Author on her way to the gym AND the sauna!