

# SOUTH KOREA

An everyday guide to expatriate life and work.



Together, all the way.™



# SOUTH KOREA COUNTRY GUIDE

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### Quick facts<sup>1</sup>

**Capital:** Seoul

**Population:** 51 million

**Major language:** Korean

**Major religion:** Buddhism

**Currency:** South Korea Won

**Time zone:** GMT +9

**Emergency number:** 112

**Electricity:** 220 volts, 60 Hz

**Drive on the:** Right

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-korea/essential-info-for-south-korea>



## Overview

South Korea is a wonderful celebration of old and new, mixing ancient history and time-honored traditions with a vision that looks ever towards the future. More than holding its own against fellow East Asian giants, South Korea is one of the tech industry's biggest superpowers and enjoys some of the fastest internet speeds on the planet.

Teaching English as a foreign language is the biggest draw card for adventurous young professionals, while there are also opportunities in the automobile manufacturing, petrochemicals and shipbuilding industries.

New arrivals can expect a generous dose of culture shock during their first few months – South Korean cities often operate at frenetic speeds, the cuisine can be challenging even for fellow East Asian neighbors and its reputation as one of the most connected and technologically advanced nations means it's extremely hard to switch off.

This guide seeks to help expats adjust to South Korean life, with information detailing everything from climate, communications, job markets, education and accommodation, to tax, banking, costs of living, business etiquette, culture and healthcare.

## Getting Started

### Climate and weather

The temperate climate of South Korea means a land of distinct seasons. Spring blooms in a cool and mild environment, losing its winter chill as it moves into June. Summers are hot and humid and usually begin with rain showers, especially in the southern regions.

Red, orange and gold leaves herald the coming of autumn. A particularly beautiful time of the year, temperatures remain around a pleasant 22°C (72°F). Winters are cold, dry and icy, reaching extreme levels in the north and mountainous regions. While snowfall is prevalent throughout the country, it hardly ever reaches the southern coastline.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/south-korea>

### Visas

Foreign nationals traveling to South Korea will need a visa, unless their home country is on a visa-waiver list. Dependent on nationality, tourists can travel to South Korea for anything between 30 and 90 days. Note that it's not possible to change from a tourist visa to a work visa while inside South Korea.

Expats wanting to work in South Korea require a work visa. Normally valid for a year, application forms can be obtained through the South Korean Ministry of Justice's website for immigration services. Once approved, the Ministry of Justice will award a Certificate of Confirmation for Visa Issuance.

While there are various types of visas, perhaps the most pertinent for expats is the Foreign Language Instructor visa. The application process requires an original employment contract, letter from the educational institution, academic transcripts, reference letters, medical clearance and a completed visa form, amongst others.<sup>1</sup>

An Alien Registration Card (ARC) is needed to do all manner of things as an expat in South Korea. These include opening bank accounts, applying for a driving license as well as getting a functioning phone number. Expats can receive these cards at any immigration office.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.expattarrivals.com/south-korea/visas-for-south-korea>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.expattarrivals.com/south-korea/work-permits-for-south-korea>

### Accommodations

High levels of population density in South Korea means expats won't have a large degree of choice when it comes to accommodation. Houses and villas, the most popular for those with children, are hard to come by in the large urban areas and can be expensive.

Most expats settle in apartments in the high rises of sprawling cities like Seoul, Busan, Daegu and Daejeon. They're generally very small, getting larger as one moves away from the busy metropolises to smaller towns.

On the plus side, most companies tend to arrange accommodation for employees traveling to South Korea, especially those teaching English as a foreign language. The struggles of finding a place to stay is thus a rare occurrence, but can be done via online property portals.

Living areas normally come furnished and with underfloor heating. While expats will need to pay their own gas, electricity and internet costs, they will also need to contribute key money. Key money, called jeonse, is similar to a deposit except the amount is extraordinarily large. Paid back at the end of the lease, a large deposit will mean less rent charged.<sup>3</sup>

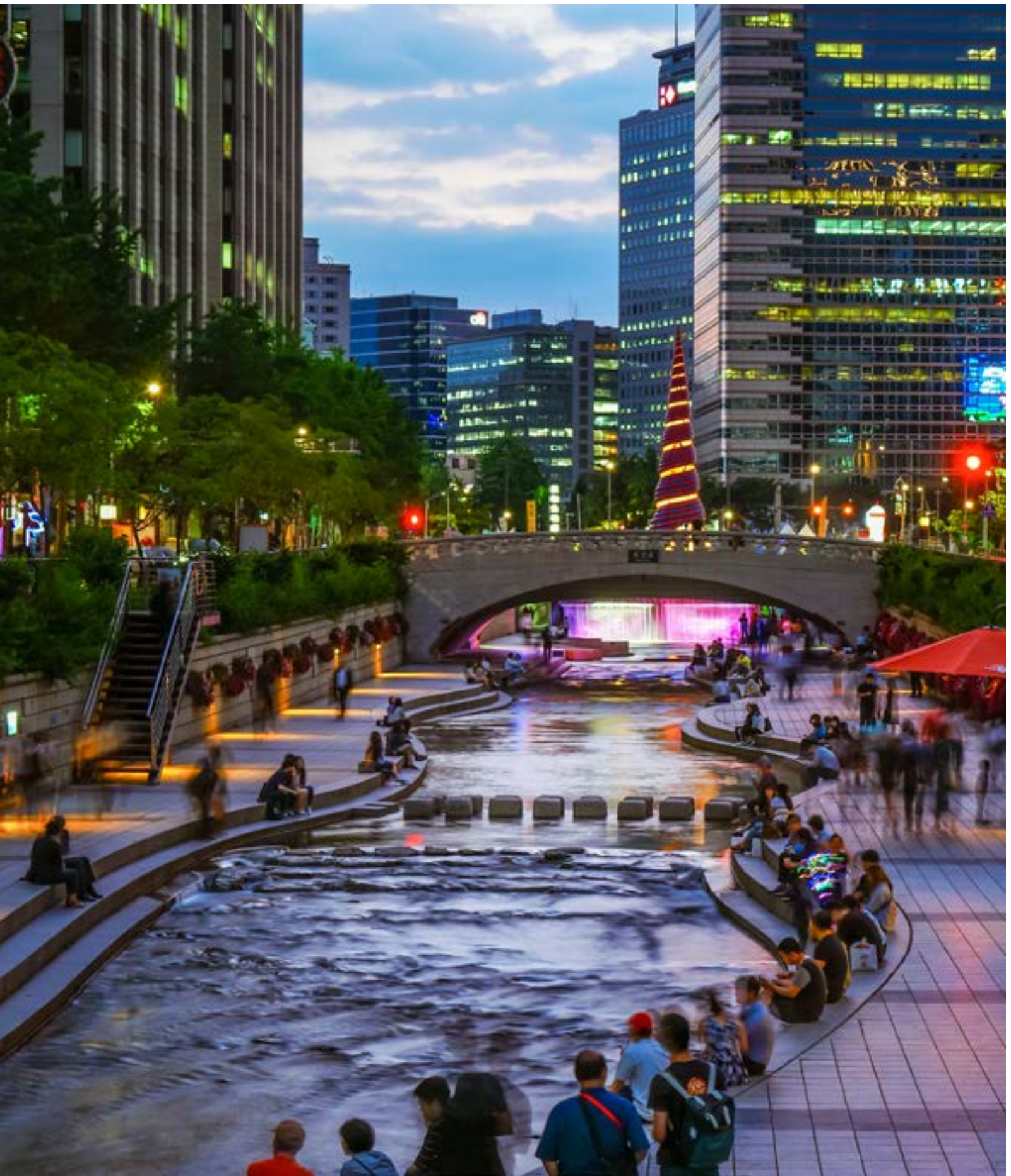
### Schools

Education is very highly valued in South Korean society, with local students extremely committed to their studies. Most expat families choose to send their children to international schools, most of which are based in Seoul. Students benefit from learning from curricula derived from their home country, including the American, French and British curriculum and the International Baccalaureate (IB).

If one's child is fluent in Korean, public schooling can be considered. Extra-curricular activities aren't a huge priority, with focus instead placed on science, mathematics, Korean and English.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.expattarrivals.com/south-korea/accommodation-in-south-korea>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.expattarrivals.com/south-korea/education-and-schools-in-south-korea>



## Culture

Family and respect are vital cogs in Korean culture, as well as cherishing tradition and academic excellence. Kibun is a concept that can loosely be translated into honor, sometimes referred to as “saving face”. It’s considered a terrible act to shame somebody in public, with great effort made to maintain each person’s dignity and respect during social interactions. It’s considered very important to identify somebody’s disposition, with these observations referred to as nunchi.<sup>1</sup>

## Language

South Koreans speak Korean. As there’s a large focus on English in schools, the younger generation are fairly bilingual, especially in a big city like Seoul. But once expats travel further out of city centers to smaller towns and rural areas, Korean becomes more prominent. Those wanting to learn the language shouldn’t be put off by different regional dialects as standard Korean is almost universally understood.<sup>2</sup>

## Social etiquette and cultural faux pas

Arriving in a new country can often be overwhelming and expats will definitely be in for a fair bit of culture shock when arriving in South Korean. Hopefully the following tips will help ease expats into Korean social life.<sup>3</sup>

- There’s certain etiquette followed during meal times, chiefly not sticking one’s eating utensils upright in their dish. This is only done to honor the dead. There are other things considered impolite to do, including starting to eat before an elder has begun as well as lifting one’s bowl off the table.
- Personal space is important. Most South Koreans don’t enjoy being touched or hugged by people they’re unfamiliar with and consider it insulting.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/south-korea-guide#C4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gapyear.com/articles/288307/south-korea-languages>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/south-korea-guide#C4>

- If one is gesturing for somebody to come closer, they should never point with the index finger, as per the usual Western practice. Instead, the palm of the hand is pointed down in a clawing motion.
- Visitors invited to somebody’s home should always bring a gift, with chocolate, sweets and flowers being acceptable. Alcohol shouldn’t be considered. Expats should always remember to take their shoes off before entering somebody’s house, although this is becoming less prevalent.
- Using red ink isn’t acceptable as it symbolizes death and implies the writer hopes for death upon the addressee.

## Eating

Eating in South Korea is usually centered round rice and soup, with a palate that is generally very spicy. The country’s cuisine is fairly low in fat but contains high levels of salt, combining lots of fish, garlic and vegetables. It’s also known for having many side dishes, called banchan, which can amount to as many as three to twenty types. They include spinach, bean sprouts, dried fish and more.

Kimchi, a ubiquitous preserved cabbage fermented in spicy chili flakes, is a mainstay for every meal. Often eaten with rice, it’s usually free as a side dish in restaurants. Indeed, it’s so popular that locals often have second fridges purely for storing various flavors of kimchi. It can also be made from white radishes, cucumbers, chives and other vegetables. Other favorite Korean condiments include doenjang, fermented soybean paste, and gochujang, a spicy chili paste.<sup>4</sup>

Other dishes that may whet the appetite include grilled pork belly called samgyeopsal, Korean fried chicken,

<sup>4</sup> [https://wikitravel.org/en/South\\_Korea#Eat](https://wikitravel.org/en/South_Korea#Eat)



ramen noodles, bulgogi and the healthy bibimbap, a fried egg atop a bed of hot vegetables and rice. It wouldn't be surprising to see kimchi alongside any of these offerings.

For those after a taste of home, there are loads of Western food options. These offerings can be more expensive though, in both supermarkets and restaurants.<sup>5</sup>

## Drinking

Drinking forms an integral part of South Korean life. Bars serve as places where corporate rules and constricting boardroom behavior can be relaxed, often seeing the closing of business deals and offering of job positions or promotions.

Expats shouldn't fill up their own drink when out with others. Instead, everybody is expected to watch each other's drinks and fill them up when empty. When pouring a drink, it's polite to use both hands, as well as when accepting a drink. Group bonding over large drinking sessions is seen as a definite cultural aspect of South Korean life. This can often occur at the hugely popular karaoke bars, called noraebang.

The most popular drink in South Korea is a beverage similar to vodka called soju. While it's often drunk straight, it's also mixed with coke or beer. Locals may be viewed as heavy drinkers, with a combination of cheap alcohol and a conservative business culture said to contribute towards excessive consumption when out in public.<sup>6</sup>

## Holidays

Holidays in South Korea aren't heavily focused on any religious calendar. Instead, most coincide with days of national significance, celebrating events such as liberation, harvest time and the legendary founding of the Korean state.<sup>7</sup>

New Year's Day - 1 January

Seollal - 27 to 30 January

March 1st Movement Day - 1 March

Buddha's Birthday - 3 May

Children's Day - 5 May

Memorial Day - 6 June

Liberation Day - 15 August

Chuseok - 2 to 6 October

National Foundation Day - 3 October

Hangeul Day - 9 October

Christmas Day - 25 December

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gone2korea.com/korean-food/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://wikitravel.org/en/South\\_Korea#Drink](https://wikitravel.org/en/South_Korea#Drink)

<sup>7</sup> <https://publicholidays.co.kr/>

## Transport

It's not difficult to get around South Korea. Most major metropolises are connected via air, rail and road routes. Because of the country's extremely reliable public transport systems, owning a car is unnecessary.

Express trains hurdle from one side of the Republic to the other, often in as little as two hours. The underground is perhaps the best way to get around the congested big cities, with tracks meandering beneath places such as Seoul, Busan, Gwangju, Daejeon, Daegu and Incheon. While useful for getting around the inner city, routes tend to drop off as they move further and further away into the outer areas and suburbs.

Bus travel is cheaper, useful for both short- and long-distance journeys, and also comes in handy for reaching more rural areas. Taxi drivers may not speak English so it's advisable that somebody fluent in Korean either accompanies expats or writes down the destination for the driver.

It's possible for expats to drive in South Korea with an International Driver's Permit. It's relatively easy to navigate the roads as many road signs are in both Korean and English, while traffic drives on the right side of the road.<sup>8</sup>

## Getting in Touch

Keeping in contact with friends and family is an absolute breeze in South Korea, informally known as the internet speed capital of the world. Every form of communication is reliable, from the postal services to the landlines.

## Telephone

The three mobile service providers are SK Telecom, Korea Telecom and LG Uplus. All three have great English options, but expats may still want to set up their mobile accounts in Seoul, where English customer service is ubiquitous. Korea Telecom and SK Broadband are the two largest landline companies, with expats needing their passport and foreign registration card to open an account.

## Internet

As mentioned, South Korea leads the way when it comes to connectivity speeds, beating rival giants like China and Japan. Fiber optic cable is ubiquitous, especially in the capital of Seoul. Internet cafes are everywhere, while WiFi is available in most public spaces. Even access in remote areas is good. The most popular internet service providers are Korea Telecom and SK Broadband, with smaller companies United and Chollian trailing behind.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.expatarivals.com/south-korea/transport-and-driving-in-south-korea>

## Postal Services

Korea Post is the national postal service in South Korea, enjoying a reputation for being both efficient and reliable. It provides local, international, and express mail services, amongst other offerings. Private courier options include DHL, Rapid Parcel, FedEx and Royale International.

## Employment

### The job market

South Korea is home to massive technology companies such as Samsung and LG as well as automobile giants like Hyundai, Daewoo and Kia, producing some 4 million cars a year. Other major industries include petrochemicals and shipbuilding.<sup>9</sup>

Teaching English as a foreign language is by far the most popular occupation for expats in South Korea. This has meant an increase in the number of private language institutions as well as job openings in public schools.<sup>10</sup>

### Income tax

Those expats living as non-residents in South Korea for five years or less will pay tax only on locally earned income. After living in the country for longer than five years, expats will be taxed as Korean residents and subsequently pay tax on both local and international income. There's a progressive tax system in South Korea, meaning different tax brackets apply according to the amount one earns. These rates can range from 6 to 33%.<sup>11</sup>

### Business etiquette

The office environment is centered round *kibun*, with the importance of family, honor and reputation driving corporate behavior. The make-up of business structures is traditionally hierarchical, reflecting the emphasis that society places on respecting elders and those in positions of authority.

There are a couple of ways that businesspeople can greet one another in South Korea. Traditionally, people bow on meeting. It's also expected to bow when individuals leave the room. Shaking hands is also becoming acceptable, with one's left hand holding their right forearm during the action. Women generally don't shake hands and will rather nod.

Negotiations can be frustrating for those looking for a fast and direct resolution. This is inherently due to locals disliking telling people "no". Discussions therefore can be longer than usual as people attempt to come to an agreement without outward conflict. Business cards are a ritualistic part of Korean culture and should be accepted either with two hands or with one's right arm supported by

their left.<sup>12</sup>

## Retirement

Expats with an interest in technology and Eastern culture will definitely consider retiring to South Korea. But those who do choose to settle in the Republic will do so at big expenses so expats should make sure they're financially comfortable. Places popular for retirees include Seoul, Busan, Cheonan, Incheon and Geoje Island. There's no specific visa for retirees, with expats instead either possessing a long-term visa with multiple re-entry status or a resident permit. One could potentially become a citizen, although it's next to impossible.<sup>13</sup>

## Finance

### Currency

The official currency is the South Korean won (KRW), which is divided into 100 jeon.

Money is available in the following denominations:

- Notes: 1,000, 5,000, 10,000 and 50,000 KRW
- Coins: 10, 50, 100 and 500 KRW

### Cost of living

Living in South Korea can be extremely expensive, especially if one is living in Seoul. Indeed, Seoul is ranked sixth in the Mercer Cost of Living Survey for 2017.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, the main cost for expats is accommodation.

For foreigners working in South Korea, most employers generally organize their accommodation for them. This can mean either paying for their rent or giving them a housing allowance. Eating out is definitely affordable if one sticks to the local fair, with most establishments selling international cuisine charging more exorbitant prices. Public transport is also reasonable.

The cost of education may make a dent in the expat budget. The primary choice of most expat families is to send their kids to international schools. While maintaining high standards and familiar curricula, tuition at these institutions is often extremely high.

### Banking

Banking in South Korea is both simple and advanced. While not prevalent throughout, there are banks with English services, with many incorporating English into their online banking offerings. Some of the biggest banks include Citibank, Korea Exchange Bank, Woori Bank, Kookmin Bank and Shinhan Bank.

<sup>9</sup> <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/working-abroad/341528-working-in-south-korea>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-korea/working-in-south-korea>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.greenbacktaxservices.com/blog/top-8-facts-taxes-expatriates-south-korea/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/south-korea-guide#C4>

<sup>13</sup> <https://transferwise.com/au/blog/guide-to-retiring-in-south-korea>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mercer.com/newsroom/cost-of-living-2017.html>



Alien Registration Cards, referred to as ARC, are required to open a bank account. These cards must be obtained by all those visiting South Korea for more than 91 days.<sup>15</sup> Expats will also need copies of their working visa and passport.<sup>16</sup>

## Health

Healthcare is of an exceptional standard in South Korea, equal or better than many of its Western counterparts. Public healthcare is rolled out via the National Health Insurance. It's accessible to all those living as residents in the country, regardless of being a local or foreign national. But expats must have acquired their Alien Registration Card from a Korea Immigration Service. Contributions towards national health insurance are paid by employers.

### Private Medical Insurance

While public healthcare is of a good standard, it doesn't cover everything. In particular, visits to specialist physicians and treatments of chronic illnesses can mount up as they aren't always covered in the national scheme. Thus, it's advisable that expats always have comprehensive health insurance.

### Emergencies

Expats can dial 112 for the police and 119 for fire, emergency and ambulance services. Emergency vehicles are responsive and efficient with calls immediately tracing the location of the caller. For those callers who can't speak Korean, they're transferred to an English operator.

### Pharmacies

Called yakgook, pharmacies aren't difficult to find in South Korea and are easily identified by a green cross. Hospitals aren't permitted to dispense prescription medication, so they're often located near hospitals but also in most suburbs and neighborhoods. Those expats who have signed up to the National Health Insurance will receive these prescriptions at extremely subsidized rates but they also sell over-the-counter medication.<sup>17</sup>

### Health Risks

Sanitation is of good quality in South Korea, with tap water safe to drink. The biggest threat to an expat's health is air pollution, which is common all year round. Those with respiratory issues and the elderly should be wary. There's also an issue with malaria in rural regions, so preventative medication is highly recommended.

### Vaccinations

It's recommended that travelers are vaccinated for hepa-titis A and typhoid, along with routine vaccinations for measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, chickenpox, polio and a yearly flu shot.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/GK/GK\\_EN\\_2\\_8\\_1\\_1.jsp](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/GK/GK_EN_2_8_1_1.jsp)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-korea/banking-money-and-taxes-in-south-korea>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.expatarrivals.com/south-korea/healthcare-in-south-korea> <sup>18</sup> [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/south-korea?s\\_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/south-korea?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001)

