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Get into hot water in the shadow of a Korean mountain

By Claudia Hammond

Mount Soraksan National Park provides a breathtaking setting for a spa centre.

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Every day the fishermen land their catch at Daepo Harbour in South Korea. Their wives display the fish in tiers of red and blue plastic bowls. Once you've chosen your unlucky fish, it is prepared by cutting parallel diagonal lines to make sashimi, which you eat on the harbour-side sitting on upturned buckets or indoors on a traditional heated floor.

This fish market is in Sokcho, on the east coast of South Korea, and it set me up for an introduction to nearby Mount Soraksan National Park. This is thought by many to be the most beautiful place in the country. It's a favourite weekend destination for Koreans, but so few foreign tourists seem to leave Seoul that when I caught a domestic flight to the region, I was the only non-Korean on the plane. But as South Korea's popularity tends to grow each time it hosts a major sporting event, we'll hear more about the park when it co-hosts the football World Cup next year.

The best time to visit the park is the autumn, when the trees provide an amazing display of red, gold and rust leaves. Koreans come from all over to admire the colours and catch a cable car to the top of the mountain. A short climb brings them to the summit where it's traditional to shout "yoo-hoo" as loudly as possible. The day I went it was packed with couples and families, although it wasn't high season. The week before, an episode from Korea's most popular soap had featured a couple visiting the park. The next weekend everyone else had followed suit and I'm sure all practised their yodelling.

That was the easy bit. I took a longer hike through the park, which is made up of hundreds of square miles of woods, waterfalls and natural hot springs, punctuated by landmarks such as Tottering Rock – a round 10ft-high boulder which looks as though it could easily be rolled straight off the mountain. Korean families take it in turns to try to push it off the edge, and it's the ambition of each child to be the one to succeed. But as soon as they push it, it rocks forward and then, luckily for the people still on the way up, it just swings straight back into place.

I hiked for a day, then decided to take advantage of the park's natural hot springs. At first sight the Sorak Waterpia centre looked like just another spa with pool, but it was much more. Inside there were at least 20 water massage machines, ranging from the gently soothing to the downright violent. They also had single-sex areas for nude swimming. A row of women sat in front on upturned buckets washing themselves (the favoured form of seating in South Korea, apparently), while I experienced the unusual sensation of swimming naked up to a giant window with only the mountain gazing in.

Outside there was a complex of small pools cut into a rockery, with saunas built into caves. It was freezing, but the natural hot springs certainly were hot – foot-hoppingly so. I soon adopted the Korean technique of lowering myself slowly into the pool and then coping with the heat by staying very still. For the braver, there were near-boiling waterfalls and a fluorescent-green lemon-flavoured pool. But my favourite was the simplest: a rectangular pool of steaming blue water surrounded by mountains. Perfect.

Back in the more civilised centre of the park, I took a neat curved path to the Buddhist temple of Siheungsa. A woman sat in a hut with a pot of white paint and people paid to have their wish painted on a tile. The tiles were displayed as they dried and later turned upside down and put on the roof. Any vicars with a church in need of repair could do well to copy this cunning method of getting their roof re-tiled.