

Sections

- News
- Letters
- Pulse
- Sports
- Stripes Accent
- Stripes Travel
- Sunday magazine

Information

- About us /
Contacts
- Archive highlights
- Archive Photo of
the Day
- Classified ads
- Library research
- Links
- Print Shop
- Stripes Lite

Search Stars & Stripes

Current Articles
Archives

STARS AND STRIPES.

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At Insadong, step inside Seoul

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

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A crisp metal clanging sails through the air, the sound of a vendor wordlessly advertising his product: a thick, sticky chunk of candy.

The sound comes from an oversized pair of scissors; it's the traditional way a seller of *yut* — the Korean term for a chewy, caramel-like candy — alerts passers-by of his goods.

It's one of the many fading Korean traditions kept alive in Insadong — the hub of Seoul's art district.

Insadong is a diagonal, cobblestone street in the middle of the city where a cornucopia of activity centers on Korean culture.

While often frequented by tourists, the majority of Insadong's visitors are Koreans, enjoying slices of culture from yesteryear, as well as lively dance performances, crafts people and shops.

From Buddhist woodcarvings to Korean-style pottery — and pricier upscale art galleries with paintings and sculpture — Insadong captures both the old and new South Korea. Some goods are typical touristy fare, but it's easily possible to find unique items that represent a sliver of Korea's style and history.

There are a few oddball stores that don't quite fit the traditional mold but are interesting. Do Art, a store styled in an art deco theme, sells simple but stylish kitchenware, stationary and furniture. A store named Supreme has comic-book memorabilia along with clothes and Americana knickknacks.

On the weekends, it's not uncommon for Korean performers to undertake *sangmo*, a feisty, active traditional dance with beating drums and performers cycling around each other in concentric patterns. *Pansori* is another style that features performers acting out old stories through both song and dance.

Because the street is focused on art, it attracts the occasional nomadic guitarist or saxophonist, who plays for tips. Artists set up street canvases and speedily paint your mug for a price.

The street is also prime for eating. Numerous *ajumma*, older Korean women, sell traditional snacks, such as squid, cooked on hot rocks on a mobile cart. A much more odiferous snack is *bondaegee*, boiled silkworm larvae popular with children.

In the small alley branching off from Insadong, there are many traditional Korean restaurants. Coffee and tea shops are in equal number, making the area of town a lounging, relaxing trip.

If you are up for a movie, you're also in luck. Mirospace Theater, which is in the second basement floor of the Insa Art Plaza was a co-host for the Seoul Independent Film Festival last December, featuring independent films from around the world.

The theater is also one of the few theaters screening Korean movies with English subtitles. The quality of Korean movies has risen dramatically over the last 10 years, with slick productions and sharp story lines.

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