UNC Charlotte
Niner International
Country Guide

Learn more about where you'll be living from a UNC Charlotte student who has already done it.
Which city and country did you live in abroad?
During my stay abroad, I lived in Seoul, South Korea, in a region called Sinchon.

What is the climate like in that location?
I lived in Seoul during the summer, so the weather was extremely hot. As a matter of fact, during my stay, the heat was the highest it had been in over a century. I would most definitely be sure to back short sleeved clothing. Packing a portable water bottle would be beneficial as well. Lastly, make certain to pack your swim gear as Korea has quite a few of water festivals during the summertime. These festivals are a fun and sociable way to keep cool during the harsh summer heat in South Korea.

What was the city's public transportation like?
South Korea is known for its convenient transportation system throughout the country. Because the country is about the size of Minnesota, it is quite simple to navigate from city to city. Walking is the most common mode of transportation, used by both natives and foreigners. Be sure to bring your walking shoes. However, transportation services range from railways, highways, bus routes, and even ferries. Most of these services are reasonably priced, but a transportation card (T Money Card, Korea Tour Card, etc.) is necessary for most if not all of these services. Almost all of these services announce stops and destinations in a variety of languages, including English, Chinese.

Describe the types of food that are common in that city.
Of course, most restaurants offered Korean food. Nonetheless, I could find just about any food I was craving in South Korea. Koreans delight in "Western" delicacies as well, such as, pizza, fried chicken, burgers, and pasta, but be warned that some of these foods have Korean twists to them. Korean food is usually very flavorful and full of spices, typically "gochujang" a traditional Korean chili paste. This gives the food a red appearance and tends to add heat to the dish. "Kimchi" is also a staple in Korean cuisine. Essentially, kimchi is fermented vegetables and are various side dishes served during just about every meal. South Korea is also known for its barbecue. There are several barbecue places throughout South Korea. Stews are also popular, as well as various...
Are there any particular restaurants you would recommend students try if they are in that city? (If possible, list the name of the restaurant and a link to the website)

A popular chicken sandwich joint I would highly recommend is "Mom's Touch", it is similar to Chick-fil-A.

Was it easy to travel to nearby cities and countries? (If you traveled in your personal time, what modes of transportation did you use (e.g. bus, train, airplane, etc.). How did you book these travel plans? Online? Local bus station? Generally what was the cost of travelling in that region? Where did you stay (e.g. Airbnb, hostels, hotels) when you travelled?)

My main mode of transportation when it came to national travel was the subway system. The subway runs throughout just about all of Korea, so it is the most convenient and fastest way to travel in my opinion. The few times I left my university's city, I stayed in a hostel once, because there are inexpensive places called "jjimjilbang" located everywhere. These places are like sauna houses, where you can bathe, eat and sleep for a very low price. I normally spent my nights traveling at these professional establishments. They are very safe, convenient, and overall an interesting experience. I recommend trying one out at least once. Be sure though to find a jjimjilbang that is praised by locals or recommended online as they can sometimes be not so clean.

What are some of the differences between U.S. culture and the host country culture? (Are there any gestures or differences in communication style that is different from the US that you noticed? (smiling, eye contact etc.))

Like any culture, there are differences that one should be ready to adapt and assimilate to. One aspect that significantly stands out in Korean culture is humbleness. For example, if someone were to compliment your outfit, smile or anything, it is expected that the individual receiving the praise deny the the remark instead of saying "thank you." In the US, saying "thank you" shows acts of gratitude, but in South Korea, it would cause people to believe you are a bit conceited. Luckily, natives do not expect foreigners to know all of the intricate details of their culture, so it is not something to significantly stress over.

Generally, how would you describe the locals in the host city? (Were the locals friendly and helpful? Would you recommend approaching the locals for help?)

Korean people are usually very nice and hospitable. When it comes to their interactions with foreigners, they do not expect them to know a whole lot about their culture or language. Because of that, Koreans mostly will speak to you in English if they are comfortable enough. In my experience, I never came across a rude or unhelpful local. Once, some friends and I were lost and needed directions so we asked a local student about our age for help. He was extremely nice and helpful. After he assisted us and left, he quickly returned to ask if we could take a picture with him as foreigners are not too common.
Are there any cultural events that you attended during your stay that you would recommend to students (e.g. festivals, holidays, etc.)?
(How did you find out about these events?)

Two well-known festivals that take place during the summer in South Korea are the Sinchon Water Festival and the Boryeong Mud Festival. The mud festival was an event that my program exclusively offered its members. It takes place at Daecheon Beach. The water festival is in Sinchon, where Yonsei University is located, so word got around about the event pretty quickly.

Describe any culture shock that you experienced while abroad.
(If culture shock was present what would you recommend for future students to avoid or lessen the shock?)

A cultural aspect in Korea that may cause a sense of culture shock for American students is the fact that people sometimes share food all together without using individual plates. Everyone eats together and out of shared plates, pans, etc. Another factor that might cause trouble is some restaurants in South Korea do not allow people to eat alone. The minimum party number is two.

Did you find it difficult to meet locals of the host city? Why or why not?
(In your experience were the locals open and welcoming of tourists? Where and how did you befriend the locals during your stay?)

During my stay in South Korea, I made a few Korean friends. However, I would say it is a bit difficult to establish relationships with locals in South Korea. Koreans usually tend to keep to themselves and their close circle of friends and family. Part of this is wrapped up in aspects of Korean culture and tradition, however as globalization continues to occur and more foreigners are flocking to South Korea, Korean locals are beginning to become accustomed to foreigners. In my case, I had a host family in South Korea and through them met several of my Korean friends.

Housing

What type of housing did you live in (e.g. homestay, dorm, apartment, etc.)?
(Why did you choose this style of housing? Did you have access to a kitchen? How often/what was the process for doing laundry (in house or local laundry mat)?)

While studying abroad, I stayed in a dorm. This style of housing was highly recommended with the program I chose. Kitchen stations where available during my stay and there were washing and drying machines were also stationed on the main level of the dormitory. Girls and boys laundry rooms were separated. It is also important to note that it was not free to use the laundry machines. There were transaction stations in the laundry rooms that required cash to be used to place currency onto a laundry card. These cards were necessary to use the machines in the dormitory.
Describe your accommodations.
(Did you have access to hot water? Wifi? Did you live with roommates?)

Hot water was accessible, as well as wifi. I roomed with a roommate because it was cheaper, but the option to room alone was available; several of my friends roomed in a single. The rooms were quaint, but not entirely too small. In my opinion there was enough storage. Something that was unfortunate though is the fact that there is no mini-fridge in the dorm rooms. Instead, there are community refrigerators on the basement level where the community kitchens are located. Be sure to label your products. The ground level also had a gym which I loved.

Where was your housing located in regards to the city center or host university?
(How long did it take, using public transportation or walking, to get to classes every day? How long did it take to travel to the center of the city or any other major locations in that city?)

The exchange student houses were located to the Northeast of campus. The walk to get to my classes everyday was about 20 minutes, however, there was a shuttle that came close to the dorms to take students to the main part of campus. This easily minimized the time it took to get to class to about 5-7 minutes. When traveling outside of the university on foot, it took about 25-30 minutes to get to the heart of Sinchon. If one is not too on walking though, taxis are located all around the area and will take you to wherever you desire to go.

OTHER RESOURCES

What was the cost of living like? What ways can you keep costs low in that city?
(Compared to the cost of living in the city of Charlotte was it more or less expensive in that city? Were there any student discounts you took advantage of?)

Living on a budget is definitely a possibility in South Korea. I believe that living in South Korea is less expensive than Charlotte. With that being said though, I would advise saving up before traveling to Korea simply because there is so much to do there. As far as student discounts go, a few restaurants surrounding the campus offer discounts to students.

Are you expected to tip servers or taxi drivers abroad?
(If so, what was the common tip rate? Was it the same rate as here in Charlotte (10-20%)?)

South Korea is without a doubt a no-tip culture. Staff workers no matter the profession do not expect to get paid extra for their services. This applies to taxi drivers as well.
How did you communicate when you were abroad?
(e.g. did you use your own phone, did you only communicate if there was access to Wi-Fi, did you purchase a phone abroad, etc.)? (Would you recommend any helpful apps? Maybe whatsapp or a currency exchange app?)

I had previously studied Korean before studying abroad in South Korea, so I knew basic levels of communication and could easily navigate throughout the country. However, I still downloaded a slew of useful apps on my phone. A few translation apps I used frequently were Google Translate and Dictionary & Translator. I bought a cellular data plan that I secured before traveling abroad. This meant that I could access internet if no wifi services were available at the moment. In Korea though, wifi is made available almost anywhere. Therefore I only used this plan in the rare occurrence that I could not connect to a source of wifi. With the program I chose though, they offer

What would you recommend students bring to be able to charge their electronics?
(Describe the electrical outlets, tips to keep in mind, etc.).

Definitely bring all your essential chargers, however I cannot stress the importance of bringing a outlet converter. All the outlets are different in Korea, so you cannot charge your electronics without a converter. When leaving your living quarters, I would recommend bringing your charger and converter as well.

What do you know now about the location or program that you wish you would have known before going abroad?

Something that I wish I would have done was make a list of all the places I wished to go before traveling. I say this because once I got to South Korea, I had no idea what to do first. I had no organization to where I wanted to travel and ended up only traveling to a few of the destinations I desired to go. South Korea is an extremely fun place, and there is so much to do that can distract you. I recommend listing the places you really want to go before arriving in Korea.

What’s your first and last name?
Noah Hines

Which semester and year did you go abroad (e.g. fall 2016, summer 2017, etc.)?
Summer 2018
Which program did you participate in?

CIEE

What was your student level when you went abroad (e.g. freshman, sophomore, etc.)?
If you would be open to being contact by other UNC Charlotte students who are interested
in your experience abroad, please provide your contact information (email, phone number,
social medial, etc.)

I was transitioning from a Sophmore to a Junior.