



## - Public Holidays in South Korea -

### Importance and Implications for Expats

by  
Michael Adler, Nowak & Partner

**NOWAK & PARTNER**

[Market Entry Consulting](#) | [Turnkey Company Setup](#) | [Executive Search & Recruitment](#) | [Interim Management](#)  
[Project Management](#) | [Crisis Management](#) | [Trustee Service](#) | [M&A / JV Negotiations](#)



## - Public Holidays in South Korea -

Coming to Korea as a foreigner, there are several things you might need to adapt to: a new culture and foreign language, a completely new environment, different behaviors, unfamiliar approaches and much more.

You may not think about it at first, but public holidays are an important part of this foreign culture as well. You have to get to know them first to better understand the culture and they also have – in addition to the cultural component and the importance for the locals – a direct impact on expats and their time management.

The public holidays in Korea range from Independence Day to Buddha's Birthday to the Korean Alphabet Day (Hangeul Day). This article focuses on the somewhat curious Hangeul Day as well as on the two most important (and longest) holidays: the Korean Lunar New Year *Seollal* and the harvest festival *Chuseok*.

### Seollal

The Korean New Year is celebrated according to the lunar calendar and lasts for 3 days (The day before Seollal - Seollal - The day after Seollal). Depending on the calendar it takes either place in January or February, on the second full moon after the winter solstice. It rings in the annual Chinese Zodiac, which is also known in other Asian countries.

During Seollal (설날) it is getting quite busy in Korea. This is because it is one of the most important Korean holidays, where Koreans typically travel to their hometown in order to spend the holidays with their families. You can maybe imagine the vast crowds of people traveling across the country at that time. And it is not limited to that as many Koreans living abroad also return to Korea to celebrate Seollal with their families.

Foreigners without a Korean family, with whom they could take part in the celebrations, now experience a curious atmosphere: Seoul appears strangely empty on these days, subway stations are deserted, most restaurants and shops have closed and the few people you meet on the street are usually other foreigners strolling through the void.

Traveling during this time can be a bit difficult, as Koreans usually plan well in advance, having flights, trains and busses already booked many months in advance. Remaining tickets are usually quite expensive but sometimes you can have some luck and find a good bargain. However, there are just so many people on the road that it sometimes takes a multiple of the regular travel time to get to the desired destination – at least if you are traveling by bus or car. The streets are jammed, service stations hopelessly overcrowded.

Particularly for foreigners however, Seollal can offer a great opportunity to enjoy the almost surreal tranquility of the otherwise always busy city or to visit one of Seoul's numerous palaces – admission is usually free on Seollal.

In the meantime, Koreans are travelling to their families with conveniently packaged and neatly furnished gift boxes (containing expensive fruits, honey, canned meat, sweets, ginseng and other delicacies) as well as transporting traditional dishes which they have prepared for their family in advance.

On the morning of Seollal (i.e. on the second day of vacation), the Koreans traditionally hold special ancestral rituals, the so-called "Jesa" (제사). In these rituals Koreans honor their ancestors in front of a well-set dinner table, and often they will be wearing the traditional Korean dress "Hanbok" (한복) for this special occasion. The arrangement of the food on the table is strictly regulated and takes place in assigned rows and categories. Whether meat, fish, fruit or soup – everything has its exact place and a look at tables set in this way can surely arouse astonishment among foreigners. The background to this custom is that the table is set for the ancestors: a note with the names of the ancestors prominently placed on the table symbolizes their spirit, and the food is thus served in front of and for the ancestors.

One important cultural dish which follows the ceremony is (careful, tongue twister!) "Tteokguk" (떡국), a special soup made with rice cake that was cut lengthwise. The white color of the rice cake symbolizes a pure start to the new year, while the elongated shape promises a long life.

A short digression on the Korean Birthday: In the traditional sense, people in Korea do not get older on their birthday. Instead the entire population ages on Seollal by one year. Eating the above-mentioned soup is thereby also seen as a humorous metaphor for getting older (you eat the soup and become a year older), which gives it a certain cultural significance within Korea. It can even happen that (mostly older) Koreans ask you how often you have already eaten Tteokguk. This does of course not mean how many bowls of Tteokguk you have eaten in your life, it is just an indirect and humorous way of asking someone's age, a question which is quite commonly asked by Koreans as it determines both their behavior towards you as well as the whole language structure for conversation. It might be even the first question after you tell them your name.

After dinner, the children perform New Year's bows to the elders and in turn receive New Year's money as a reward. This money is called "Sebaetdon" (세뱃돈) in Korean and this part is of course very exciting for the children. Afterwards there can be games with the family or long conversations with the assembled family members.

It needs to be briefly mentioned that not all Koreans these days still follow these traditions that closely and that Seollal is nowadays also celebrated in a more modern way or in a smaller circle. For smaller families, it may not make sense for example to prepare all the different kinds of food needed for the ancestral rites. And many people also use the precious holidays to go on a short vacation.

Expats however can expect that at least their Korean friends won't have time for them during the Seollal holidays and can therefore make their own plans.

## Chuseok

Another big holiday in Korea is Chuseok (추석), a three-day harvest festival, which is held either at the end of summer or in early autumn depending on the calendar (on the 15th day of the 8th month according to the lunar calendar, to be precise), and it is therefore also known as Korean Thanksgiving.

Chuseok takes place in a similar way like Seollal does. Again, Koreans are travelling to their families with neatly packaged gift boxes and presents. You might imagine the whole thing like Christmas festivities: Families assemble to spend time together; the streets are empty. It is also another occasion where Koreans hold ancestral rites and set the table for their ancestors like they do on Seollal. Koreans then visit the graves of their ancestors, maintain them and remove the weeds. This process is called "Seongmyo" (성묘) in Korean.

What Tteokguk is for Seollal (the soup with the rice cakes cut lengthways), the "Songpyeon" (송편) are for Chuseok. The basic substance, rice, is the same in both. For making Songpyeon, however, rice powder is first kneaded into small balls, then filled (with sweet red bean paste or honey, for example) and afterwards steamed. In contrast to the white Tteokguk soup, it is a colorful dessert. Songpyeon are manufactured in colors such as yellow, orange, pink, purple, green and brown and they are a popular dessert during Chuseok. People already ate them centuries ago: at that time, they were made with the freshly harvested rice from the fields and they were then offered to the ancestors in a ritual, thereby thanking the ancestors for the good harvest. Some families still follow this tradition up to this day and make Songpyeon together – but you can also get them machine-made at almost every corner if you want to save yourself the work.

As with Seollal, expats are advised to plan well in advance if they want to travel during Chuseok, or to hope for last-minute bargains. Otherwise there is also free admission to many places such as the palaces or some museums if you prefer to spend your free time there. With a bit of luck, you can even experience the palaces in their colorful autumn garb.

## Hangeul Day

Another notable holiday in Korea is Hangeul Day (한글날). "Hangeul" is the Korean alphabet which was introduced in 1446 by King Sejong the Great. Before that, people were using characters adopted from the Chinese language (the so-called "Hanja"). Due to the complexity of the Chinese characters and the differences between the Korean and the Chinese language, there were many illiterate people at that time. King Sejong therefore set about developing a Korean writing system that was accessible and easy to learn by anybody. The Hangeul is a very systematic alphabet, which also has the phonological peculiarity that the written design of

many letters is based on the shape that the mouth makes when pronouncing the letter. In short, the design of the letters already shows how the mouth should be formed to pronounce the respective letter.



While having a designated public holiday for the alphabet may seem strange to some, the Koreans are proud of their alphabet and celebrate it on Hangeul Day every year. King Sejong is also highly respected by the Koreans and you can find a huge statue decorating Gwanghwamun Plaza in the heart of Seoul, in honor of the inventor of the Korean alphabet.

For foreigners in Korea without any knowledge of Korean, Hangeul Day may also be the best opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Korean alphabet, getting into the right mood for the holiday. Since it theoretically only takes a few hours to learn the Korean alphabet (the alphabet, not the language!), you can quickly gain a sense of achievement and as another reward you will also be able to navigate through the unfamiliar Korean surroundings more easily. And of course, Koreans are also happy when a foreigner shows interest in their culture and their language.

## Public Holidays in Korea at a glance

In this last section you will find a handy list with a summary of all Korean public holidays.

<b>January 01</b>	New Year's Day
<b>End of January/Beginning of February</b>	Seollal (Lunar New Year) – 3 days
<b>March 01</b>	Independence Movement Day (March 1st Movement Day)
<b>May 01</b>	Labour Day (not an official holiday)
<b>May 05</b>	Children's Day
<b>End of April/Beginning of May</b>	Buddha's Birthday
<b>June 06</b>	Memorial Day
<b>August 15</b>	Liberation Day
<b>Late summer/Beginning of autumn</b>	Chuseok (Thanksgiving) – 3 days
<b>October 03</b>	National Foundation Day
<b>October 09</b>	Hangeul Day
<b>December 25</b>	Christmas

One last note: Korea has introduced replacement holidays for New Year's Day (Seollal), Thanksgiving Day (Chuseok) and Children's Day. If Seollal, Chuseok, or Children's Day fall on a

weekend or other holiday, the first weekday in the following week will act as a substitute holiday. This information can be very useful for expats, as they might not always know about this regulation.

## About Nowak & Partner

Nowak & Partner is a management advisory firm focusing on market entry, executive search and project management in Korea.

We deliver customized turn-key solutions to international companies that are entering the Korean market, hiring key personnel (headhunting) to lead the business in Korea, and negotiating in M&A or joint-venture agreements with Korean counterparts.

We offer project management support across a wide range of areas, where commercial common sense, Korea expertise, and our reliability are winning factors. For established companies in Korea, we are a reliable ally for succeeding at difficult and unusual tasks. We provide locally adapted solutions and provide you with everything you need to make your business operations and market entry to Korea a remarkable success.

Nowak & Partner has successfully completed projects in key industrial sectors in Korea, such as automotive, engineering, robotics, chemical, energy, renewable energy, arts, retail, cosmetics and more.

Market Entry	Project Management	HR Services
<i>We structure your market entry and business development in Korea, including office search, office set-up and HR Services.</i>	<i>We tackle a variety of commercial and technical assignments, offer interim management and support you in difficult times.</i>	<i>We select and recruit executives (C-level and mid-level), technical specialists and strategically critical professionals.</i>
<i>We provide customized one-stop solutions for our customers, including providing freelancers – qualified professionals – who represent your company in Korea.</i>	<i>We negotiate with Korean business partners for you and deliver professional advice regarding your joint venture or M&amp;A endeavours.</i>	<i>We provide a shortlist of the most suitable candidates for your business objectives, leaving you to choose your preferred match.</i>
Turnkey Company Setup	Benchmark Audit	Executive Search
Business Incubation	Interim Management	Team Setup
Office Search & Setup	Crisis Management	HR Assessment
Freelancer Hosting	Negotiations	HR Consulting
Trustee Service	M&A / Joint Venture	Business Coaching

**We fast-track the success of international companies in Korea!**