

Geumgye-Donggang Section

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1. About Geumgye-Donggang Section

The route you will follow today connects Geumgye Village to Donggang Village. If you are interested in the history and culture of Korea, you must have heard of a dynasty called Joseon before.

As you walk along the course, you will encounter historical stories of the Joseon Dynasty, which lasted for five hundred years from its beginning at the end of the 14th century. Here is a story about one of the kings of the Joseon Dynasty: Usurping the throne from his young nephew, the new king banished his nephew to Jirisan Mountain. The young, dethroned nephew and his followers faced death for criticizing the uncle and their sad story is related to this section. However, the route does not only tell of dark, heartbreaking stories. Every summer cool streams that flow through the villages of the mountain and historical temples over 400 years old await travelers.

2. A Village that Produced Charcoal

At the end of the 17th century there was a policy that required every village to offer up their specialty products to the government. This village has long been known to produce high quality charcoal. The superior charcoal was of such high grade that it was used for cooking dishes offered to the king, or as royal air freshener.

There is a stream flowing in front of the village and a concrete bridge across the stream. Originally, before the construction of the concrete, there was a wooden bridge just a little further down the stream. It washed away some 20 years ago in torrential rain that caused the level of the stream to swell dramatically. Unfortunately at the same time, villagers were trying to move their livestock, including cows and pigs, over the wooden bridge to safety and about twenty people were swept away. Many local people lost their loved ones in the accident.

Even today, on the anniversary of the accident, people gather on the current bridge and hold a memorial service.

3. A Sad Story of a Married Couple

At the entrance of the village stands a huge tree. Much like the sacred trees that appear in Greek mythology, this tree is known to house a guardian spirit whose job it is to protect the village. This tree has stood for close to 600 years at this location, silently protecting the village.

There is a very sad story related to this tree. A long time ago, there lived a very poor married couple. The husband studied hard to pass the state examination but was unsuccessful on two attempts in a row. Each night when the moon rose, the wife would come to the tree and pray for her husband's success all night long. When the husband left the village to take the third examination, he ran into a thief in the mountains and was killed. Without knowing what had happened to him, the wife prayed everyday in front of this tree, and after a year, when her husband still did not return, she became ill and died.

The villagers buried the husband and wife together and offered a memorial ceremony to them by the tree every year. As if by magic, as soon as the villagers began to offer the memorial services to the dead husband and wife, the village became more successful. It produced many high-ranking public officials as well as famous scholars.

4. Story of a Lacquer Tree

As you walk towards the village, you will see a row of trees lining the road. These are lacquer trees, mainly found on the Korean Peninsula and in China.

Since ancient times, the liquid extracted from the lacquer tree has been used in various ways in Korea. They collected sap from the tree by cutting the surface of the tree during the summer and used it to paint furniture or serving dishes. Master artisans collected the liquid while burning the lacquer tree in fire, and used the resultant sap for making medicine.

Furniture that has been varnished with the lacquer tree sap has a high shine and is less prone to damage from insects and such. Furthermore, the edible lacquer sap has beneficial effects, such as increasing stamina and remedying problems with digestive organs such as the stomach and intestines. As a word of warning, those with sensitive allergies should not touch the lacquer trees since the plant can trigger a severe rash.

There is a master artisan in this village who has been producing medicine from the lacquer tree for more than 50 years. This area used to support a thriving community of lacquer master craftsmen. However, as the work is strenuous and difficult, the tradition hasn't survived and there are only one or two remaining masters still working.

5. Temple Used as a Hospital

As you walk along the trail, you will come to a Buddhist temple called Byeoksongsa that was built some 450 years ago.

The Buddhist monk who constructed this temple was bright and passed the state examination at the young age of twenty. He got a high governmental office position, but was disappointed by the corruption of his fellow officials. Also, having witnessed people dying from the war that was raging at that time, he eventually decided to become a monk.

Unlike other temples, the main focus of this temple was to provide care to those suffering from war injuries, and during the Korean War, the temple operated like a hospital.

As you walk along, you will see a small stone gate and if you enter through it, you will find yourself in a sculpture garden. There is also a small pond and a small structure behind it where a statue of Buddha is housed. The place has been extended frequently over the past 50 years and serves as a place of remembrance for those who died in the mountain during the Korean War.

6. A Married Couple who Burned the Totem Poles as Firewood

Just as you begin the steep climb up the hill you will see a village, along with the hill of a distant mountain to the right.

There is a story that has been told for generations about a married couple who ended their travels and chose to settle down in this village. This couple had been the source of numerous stories and scandal as they had traveled the country. They were also the main characters of a folk tale about a husband who was a Casanova and a wife who was a man-eater.

In the end, these two came to Jirisan Mountain to settle down and spend the remainder of their lives. The husband, who had made so many mistakes, was still the same. He was lazy and didn't work.

One day, the wife asked her husband to gather some firewood. Feeling lazy and not wanting to climb the mountain to search for wood, the husband went to the entrance of the village and literally pulled out the wooden totem 'village guardians' that looked like trees. Having uprooted the totem poles, the husband was cursed with eight hundred different kinds of illnesses and finally died.

7. A Person Lying on the Mountain

As you walk along the forest trail, you will see a small side road. If you follow the side road a little way, you will suddenly come upon an open clearing. The clearing offers sweeping views of the distant peaks of the mountain, but you will also notice something else interesting.

Look at the ridge on the right side of the mountaintop. Can you see where it goes up and down? If you take a closer look, you will see how the rolling hill resembles the figure of a man lying on his side, with his feet to the left and his face to the right. Villagers refer to it as the “Buddha Rock.”

The rugged rock below this is a noted rock famous in the mountain region and has many legends relating to it. One of the famous stories is about a well-known Buddhist monk who played Korean chess with the guardian deity of Jirisan Mountain for seven days and during that seven day period, the sun supposedly did not set.

8. The Legend of the Donkey Rock

Here the running water slows for a little bit and forms a lake-like puddle. Every summer the different elements of the environment, including the rocks lining the valley, the running stream, and the trees, combine together to create spectacular scenery. Many poets have written about this place, deeply moved by what they saw here.

The following legend relates to the rock sitting in the middle of the pond.

Long ago, there lived a wizard who made a donkey deliver food to him from the village. There was no bridge over the valley but whenever the donkey called out on the other side of the valley, the wizard would turn his staff into a bridge so the donkey could cross.

One day, the nine dragons that lived in the pond had a loud fight and the wizard stepped in to intervene. While the wizard was busy stopping the fight, the donkey arrived on the opposite side of the valley and called and called, but the wizard didn't put out a bridge. The loyal donkey was swept away by the swelling water and died. He is represented by the large, gray rock that appeared here after his death.

9. Village that Produced Paper

Up until recent years, this village raised pigs by housing them under the toilet stalls where they could feed on human excrement. This method of pig rearing was a tradition that had been passed down through the generations in a few regions in Korea. Pigs raised in this way in this region are referred to as Jirisan pigs

and the meat is known for its outstanding flavor. Although most pigs are gone, you can see them being raised this way here in this village.

This village is also famous for making paper from paper mulberry trees. With the advancement of paper making technology, paper is a common commodity, but in the past, paper was valuable. Paper mulberry trees were used to produce paper. The process required many steps, including boiling the tree bark and then spreading it wide to dry before treating it with various chemicals.

Even today, if you look at some of the rocks put aside in the village, you will see blackened marks as well as a large cast iron caldron. Up until fifty years ago, the village was famous for paper production and many people made a living by making paper. However, the industry has now died out due to modern manufacturing methods.

10. Friendship between Brothers

There is a famous story about two brothers who were born in this village.

One day as they were walking along the road together, they found two gold nuggets. Ecstatic with glee, they each carried one gold nugget and boarded a boat to cross the river. However, when they got to the middle of the river, the younger brother suddenly threw his gold into the water. Shocked, the older brother asked why he had thrown the gold. The younger brother replied, "I suddenly thought that I could have had both if it weren't for you." Fearing his own thoughts, the younger brother chose their brotherly love over a gold nugget. Moved by his younger brother's actions, the older brother also threw his gold nugget into the river as well.

The older brother of this story later became a famous scholar who held a very high office in government and his grave lies near this village.

Near the riverbank in front of the village, there is a mound of rocks and out of one large rock grows a pine tree. It has long been one of the most famous attractions in the village as it was where many aristocrats and scholars stopped by during the hot summer months to escape the heat and take a rest.

11. Place where the Prince Lived

If you stand here and look down the mountain, you will notice a river far off in the distance. On the right side of the meandering river, where it looks as though the foot of a mountain has been severed, there used

to be an island. This is where a banished prince lived some six hundred years ago.

During that time, the Joseon Dynasty was ruled by a young king who had no prior political experience. During his reign of confusion, there were many who sought to secure power for themselves. In the end, the young king was dethroned by his uncle through an evil, traitorous scheme and was banished to Jirisan Mountain.

Unfortunately, after only four years, he became ill and faced death alone. To console the spirit of the young king, who died unfairly, the people of this village built a pavilion where the king used to live.

However, something bad happened near the pavilion every year. People frequently fell ill with nameless diseases and there was a famine. On one occasion, torrential rains caused a huge flood and the pavilion was washed away by the surging water.

There still is a housing plot on the site, but it is still rumored to be unlucky to build a house there and as such it remains in ruins.

12. The Story of Jirisan Green Tea

The small villages that dot the foothills in the shadow of the mountain and the river that flows through the valley create a picturesque landscape. Across the river was a site for a temple that was commissioned by the king long ago, but it no longer exists.

A story that has been told for generations in this village is about a government official who governed the people well.

About five hundred years ago, there was a law that required each region to pay the government with specific items as a form of tax once a year. One of the items accepted for payment from this region was green tea. The residents in the area were not tea farmers and they paid a lot of money to purchase green tea from another region and sent it in to pay their tax.

The government official who found out about this situation began to research green tea farming, and one day, he found out in an old document that tea was once grown on Jirisan Mountain. Based on this finding, he searched the whole of the mountain region for a year and collected many different green tea plants. After further research and study, he ascertained a particular variety that was suited to this region.

By educating people about the green tea varieties and cultivation techniques, the government official

helped to lower the village's tax burden by supporting residents to produce their own green tea.

13. Flower Rock

Behind the village, tall trees form a forest. These trees serve as guardian deities and since long ago they have served as a rest area for weary travelers.

Five hundred years ago, a newly appointed official also stopped by here and sat on the rock to take a rest. Impressed with the beautiful scenery of the place, he named it, "Flower Rock." It must have been that the surrounding mountain area was as beautiful as a flower.

The official, who had not had the chance to travel in his forty years of life, always busy studying, came to this place and during his two year-term, he took excursions to many scenic spots and left many records. His writing still survives and serves as an important historical reference for Jirisan Mountain as well as a travel essay, relaying stories from various places around the mountainside.

14. Donggang Village

This is Donggang Village, the last stop on this section. The small stream running through this village later flows into a river.

On the hill behind the village, there is a rock that is supposed to ensure the peace and fortune of this town. The rock has an interesting, phallic shape. Rocks shaped like this can be found frequently in Korea, and they are said to protect the prosperity of future generations and the peace of the village. The villagers believe that this rock is the reason that the village was once a wealthy area and why it escaped great harm during the Korean War.

The people living in the village are known for their hard work and diligence and they eked out a living not only by tilling the land and raising farm animals, but also by going out fishing or catching marsh snails in the river and logging the mountainside. Such diligence is probably the reason for the village's affluence.