

Jucheon-Unbong Section

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1. The Jucheon-Unbong Section

The Jucheon-Unbong Section is located on the northern corner of Jirisan Mountain, winding along 14 kilometers between Jucheon and Unbong. While exploring this trail, you will pass by six villages and your surroundings will change. You'll also experience a variety of different types of paths as you follow this trail. For example, you'll take a walk over a hill on a pine forest path. The path will open up to a wide plain with a couple of narrow streams. Some patches of the trail are flat and paved, while others meander through the densely wooded mountain. This little adventure will introduce you to many stories about people living on this mountain as well. Now then, shall we start?

2. The Village at the Mouth of a River

This is Jucheon Village. The name of this village means "the mouth of a river" in Korean, because it's located right at the confluence of streams originating from the mountain, and it's where Seomjingang River starts. Likewise, this village was also a place where many travelers came to rest their tired bodies. Years ago, there was a small inn in the village where the Jucheon Village Community Security Center is currently located. The inn was established by the government, and the majority of its guests were officials dispatched to rural areas and merchants. The street may be quiet now, but it was once crowded with travelers coming and going from the inn. To this day, it is mostly used by hikers looking for a place to rest.

3. Two Paths, Two Scenes

There are two paths in Naesong Village. The path crossing the village is wide and paved, while the other is a narrow, meandering path that leads to the inner corners of the village. The larger path was used by the noblemen coming and going to the capital, and the narrow one was frequented by common folks. Dulle-gil is connected to the latter.

The first thing you will notice when you enter the village is a large rock right in the middle of your path. Because of its shape, the local villagers call it the Toad Rock. It stands in the middle of the path, forcing people to go around it. The villagers didn't have it removed despite the inconvenience, because they have long considered this rock to be the guardian of the village. Unlike urban areas where tradition is discarded for development, Dulle-gil still holds most of its old charms.

4. The Warning Ants

This village has an interesting story about ants.

During the late 16th century, Japan invaded the Korean Peninsula, and the villages in Jirisan Mountain served as a fierce battleground. A general who lived in the region assembled an army of civilians to defend themselves from the Japanese troops.

One day, the general and his men fell asleep in one of the ravines after a long and grueling battle, oblivious of the fact that they were right in the midst of the enemy's mountain hideout. In the general's dream, a swarm of ants was crawling around him and some even bit his ears. He woke up, startled, and found himself surrounded by an army of ants for real. Almost immediately, he realized the Japanese were planning an ambush at the foot of the hill. He woke his men up and headed into battle, and protected the nearby villages.

5. The Mountain Path of Nine Dragons

Before automobiles came onto the scene, this mountain track was a nightmare to climb for merchants, since most of them carried their merchandise on their backs. But there was light at the end of the mountain path: a beautiful waterfall where they could rest their feet. The nature surrounding the area was so beautiful that there is even a local legend that nine dragons used to live here. It was also a perfect place for Korean traditional singers to train their voices. They would come to this place and sing as loudly and powerfully as they could in front of the waterfall. They would do this all day for many days until their voice was no longer muffled by the thundering sound of the waterfall.

6. The Wishing Stone Mounds

You will come across a group of stone mounds on your path through the forest. Many people think that they were built for a purpose and some even mistake them for tombs or pagodas. But they're simple stone mounds built by passersby over a very long period of time, one stone at a time. The stones are piled on top of each other, which is a tradition for Koreans to make a wish by placing a stone in the mountain. It's a stone for a wish.

In the regional dialect, the stone mound is called 'Samurak Damurak'. These words are no longer used today, but *samurak* means "hope" and *damurak* means "wall" in Korean. In other words, it is a stone wall where people make wishes.

It's not hard to imagine that the merchants who frequently took this mountain path were probably the ones who placed most of these stones in the first place. The mounds are still getting bigger, because today's mountain lovers who take the paths of Dulle-gil still place their stones here when making a wish. So why don't you make a wish while you're here? All you have to do pick up a stone and place it on top of the mound, and pray for happiness.

7. The Village of Crossing Paths

You are in Hoedeok Village now. The name of this village, “Hoedeok,” means “where the paths cross.” As the name suggests, it’s where two paths cross: One from the village and the other from the mountain. So your surroundings will change noticeably from here on. From this village, the shady mountain path becomes flat and straight along the stream until it reaches Unbong Peak.

While you’re in the village, try to find the house with the highest roof. It is a local traditional house with a roof made of silver grass. Typically, Korean traditional houses were built with a thatched roof made of straw, but silver grass was used in mountain villages, since it’s easier to get silver grass. This village was not an exception, so most of the houses in this village had a silver grass roof back then. However, they all burned down during the Korean War, and only two of them survived.

8. A Village on Baekdudaegan

Nochi Village is the only settlement on the Korean Peninsula divided by a mountain range that runs through its center. The mountain range is called Baekdudaegan, and has been considered the sacred backbone of the peninsula. You can see for yourself on the map in front of the town hall. However, this mountain range is not without a painful history. During the Japanese Colonial Period, the Japanese wanted to block the flow of *feng shui* energy of the Korean Peninsula, so they drove iron stakes or buried padlock-shaped objects into the ground along the mountain range. Most of them were found and removed, but more of them are still being discovered today.

In the village, there is a well, famous for its sweet and cold water. Many visitors stop by for a sip of the rare water before they continue on their path. So it won’t be a bad idea for you to take a short break and quench your thirst before you go.

9. Wishing the Village Good Luck

There is a tall Zelkova tree in front of the town hall. You should have noticed a large tree at the entrance of each village you come across on Dulle-gil trails. They are not just trees, since they have long been considered by the villagers as village guardian deities. People used to hold an annual ritual for this tree, praying for good fortune and prosperity. When the time of year comes, the villagers would come together to play music and share food.

Unfortunately, very few villages still uphold the tradition of this ritual. The abrupt change of lifestyle that came with industrialization has wiped out the traditional ways of life, along with the rituals and festivals. But Nochi Village is one of the few places that still observe rituals for the guardian tree. The annual ceremony takes place on January 15th of the lunar calendar.

10. The Heavenly Maiden's Village

This is Gajang Village. According to *feng shui* experts, the geographical features of this village resemble a heavenly maiden grooming herself. The village was named as such, literally meaning “sprucing up,” and the name implies just how beautiful the scenery is in and around the village.

For a better vantage point, go to the pavilion near the reservoir. It's where you can get a panoramic view of the mountain ridge spreading from the west to the north. The lofty peak on the right end is Manbokdae Terrace, and you can also see the highest peak called Goribong. Take a short break from all the hiking and take the time to marvel at the magnificent scenery.

11. Dokkaebi Stone

There is a stone monument standing across the main road of the village. It was erected by the first family that settled in this village, and comes with an interesting story.

One day, the villagers built a roof above this stone to protect it from rain and snow. But after the completion of the structure, they became ill and some even died for no good reason. In order to find out what went wrong, people called upon a shaman. After carefully observing the stone, the shaman said the roof blocked the path that *dokkaebis* used, and that made them angry. *Dokkaebis* are a type of goblin with a horn or two in Korean folklore, but unlike those described in Western folklore, they had the magical power to reward good people with wealth and punish bad people with mean tricks. So after listening to the shaman, the villagers burned down the roof right away. Soon enough, the mysterious disease went away.

12. Beautiful Hornbeam Forest

The hornbeam forest before you is managed by Unbong Village, and is considered and called the "village forest" among the local people as is often the case in other villages. In Korea, village forests traditionally served as the villagers' resting place, but they were also believed to ward off evil spirits. What makes this forest special is its exceptional beauty. The place is lush with hornbeam trees, which grow only in a clean, pollution-free environment. You'll find that the forest path is almost completely shaded by their lush leaves. So the air in Dulle-gil is as clean as it can be. For your information, this forest is officially recognized as the most beautiful village forest in Korea. This can be a great opportunity for you to take a refreshing walk in the forest, or just relax in the nature.