

# Omi-Banggwang Course

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## **1. Omi-Banggwang Course**

In this section of the trail, you'll be walking in the wide plains of Gurye.

If you walk along the long straight road ahead and narrow paths in between, you'll be passing through seven villages in Jirisan Mountain. Unlike other hiking sections, you'll see old houses along the way as well as the local people of Gurye. Most of the villagers have been living in the fertile land for many generations. You'll also hear stories about the nature and ecology of the mountain while on the trail.

Now, let's start the journey and see the nature and history of the mountain regions.

## **2. A Village with Good *Feng Shui***

You should have seen two old houses while walking in the wide plain around Omi Village. Besides the fact that the houses are over 200 years old, they're a little excessively large for a small village like this.

It's because for hundreds of years, the village has been regarded as the most auspicious location according to *feng shui* principles. Since ancient times, both in Korea and China, people always considered the geomantic topography of the mountain and river before building a house near them.

Then what are the qualifications of an auspicious place? There are many conditions that are taken into account, but generally a plot of land is considered auspicious when there is a mountain behind and a river in front. So it wouldn't be a bad idea to stop walking and take a look around you. You will see why the village is considered to be a place with good *feng shui*. From the perspective of the village, Jirisan Mountain is right behind with Seomjingang River, which flows in front of the village. These two factors alone are enough to make it the best spot. Today, all you'll see is a tiny rural village, but there used to be more than one hundred houses here a few hundred years ago, and a majority of the houses were owned and occupied by some of the most powerful families. Most of them moved here from all over the country because of good *feng shui*.

## **3. The Hill Where Boats Were Tied**

Walk along the asphalt pavement for a while, and you'll see a town sign with two dragons sitting on top of it. The sign is there to inform visitors that you're at the entrance to a village called Yongdu-ri, which literally means "dragon head-village" in Korean. In Korean culture, the foot of Jirisan Mountain is often referred to as a dragon, and this village is situated at the head of the dragon-shaped land. That's why it's

called the "dragon head village".

However, this place is more popularly known as the 'Hill Where Boats were Tied'. Although it's just an asphalt paved hill today, it used to be a dock in the past when a stream of the Seomjingang River reached this place a long time ago. People traveled by boat to this hill, and they tied their boat to it. That's why people call it the Hill Where Boats were Tied.

#### **4. The Village Drawn on the Sand**

This is called the "Sand Drawn Village". According to a folktale that's been passed down for about 1,000 years, a Buddhist monk was taking a short break here when a Taoist came up to him and described the principles of the energy of the Korean Peninsula by drawing a picture on the sandy ground. That's how this village was named. But where is the sandy ground?

It may be a little hard to believe, but this grassland used to be covered with sand in the past. People couldn't grow rice here because there was no reservoir nearby. So they drew water from the reservoir situated on the northern side of the village, and turned the sandy land into rice fields along the stream of river they have created.

It took years of effort, but they finally succeeded in completely turning the sand dunes into rice paddies. Thanks to the effort of their ancestors, the locals are endowed with a fertile land.

#### **5. The Secret Garden**

This old house called Ssangsanjae is what this village is famous for. The first thing you might want to do upon arriving at this place is try the water from the natural fountain located on the right side of the house. The water is very rich in minerals and vitamins, because it coursed through the roots of various medicinal plants. The locals and experts say that the water is good for your health and longevity. Maybe that's why it's one of the most well-known natural spring water fountains in Korea.

Let's move in to the house. When you step into the gate, you'll see that the gate is disproportionately small for the size of the traditional Korean estate. With a large courtyard, the house compound is more like a secret garden. If you pass through the unique bamboo path, you'll see a charming garden with dwarf trees and natural rocks. This is only a small portion of the courtyard: Follow the path along the garden and go through a side door, and you'll be taken aback by a large reservoir.

It would be a great chance for you to experience a traditional Korean house, since this house also offers lodging accommodations for visitors. One of the things you'll experience is *ondol*, a traditional Korean underfloor heating system used to heat up the room. Just about every traditional Korean house is heated by *ondol*.

## **6. Korea's First National Park**

Jirisan Mountain is the first national park in Korea, widely known for abundant natural resources. But before being designated as a national park, the mountain suffered too much logging. Soon after the Korean War, so many people cut down trees in the mountain to rebuild their house. The amount of trees cut down in the mountain was staggering. According to a witness, he saw more than 250 trucks carry out trees every day. While it's understandable that the war victims needed wood to build a house for their family to stay out of rain and cold, it's still sad to think that such a beautiful mountain as this had patches of bare ground because of people.

But people soon realized that uncontrolled logging can eventually ruin their lives, and began protecting their natural resources. Thanks to those who came together to protect the natural environment, the mountain finally became the first national park in the country, lush with trees again.

## **7. Deserted Mountain Rice Fields**

Can you see the field of reeds on one side of the mountain slope between the village and a grove of trees higher up the mountain?

It used to be a rice field in the past. It can be hard to believe that people actually grew rice in the middle of a mountain. But in the past, people living in the mountain planted rice wherever they can to eke out a living, including mountain slopes.

Modern industrialization changed all this. A majority of people moved out of their farming or mountain village, leaving their rice paddies behind. Without the care of farmers, the rice fields quickly turned into an overgrown field of weeds and reeds. Untouched by humans, rice paddies returned to nature and are now playing a more important role for the environment, mainly because weed fields traps rainwater.

It serves as an excellent source of water for wild animals, particularly in a drought. Moreover, water evaporates on hot summer days to cool the heat of the mountain. So when untouched by people, even rice paddies return the wilderness.

## **8. Moon House Burning**

On the first full moon of the Lunar New Year, the people of Hwangjeon Village host a very special festival called the ‘Moon House Burning’.

The villagers would build a tower by piling up pine branches and bamboo sticks in the eastern part of their village. After the tower is built, villagers would gather around to hold a short ritual and make wishes for the New Year as they burn the branches.

It’s a night festival, so people start gathering at the site when a number of farmers play their traditional Korean musical instruments in the evening. When there are enough people, the village chief starts praying to the Heavens and gods as the master of ceremonies.

The highlight of the festival is when people start lighting up the branches. As the tower burns, the bamboo sticks start popping in the fire. That’s when people start praying for their wishes, mostly for a healthy and worry-free New Year.

## **9. Lifting Stone and Coming-of-Age**

Follow the stone wall around Hwangjeon Village, and you’ll see the town hall. And in front of the town hall, you’ll find a mound of rocks that’s more than six feet high. It’s the town’s symbol, and it’s supposed to stop the good energy flowing out of the town. It’s a folk belief, and the locals think the sacred rocks protect the town.

And right next to the mound of rocks, you’ll see a round rock. It’s not that big, but it looks quite heavy for a person to lift. In the past, farmers formed a cooperative community so that they can help each other when planting and harvesting crops. Working in teams, they had different types of work cut out for everyone, depending on the individuals’ physical strength. To test how strong they are, they held an annual rock lifting competition. The ones who can lift the heavy rock were given more laborious work, and the ones who can’t were given less physically demanding role.

The competition was a serious deal for boys in particular. It’s because boys who can lift this rock earned the respect of the adults and could work as farmers, while those who can’t were forced to run household errands as they usually do. So for boys, lifting this rock meant taking a giant step into adulthood and being respected as a man.

## **10. Asiatic Black Bears of Jirisan**

Cross the arch bridge over the creek, and you'll see a brown building. It's the Species Restoration Technology Institute under the Korea National Park Service. Jirisan Mountain has more wildlife species than other mountains in Korea, since its natural environment is better preserved. It's home to a number of endangered species, making it the place to go if you want to see some of the rare species. The Korean government set up a research center dedicated to studying and preserving endangered species, and their primary goal is to restore the ecology of wildlife.

Those at the Center devote much of their time to protecting and breeding Asiatic black bears, which are designated as a natural monument in this country.

Asiatic black bears are distinguished by their heart-shaped white fur on their chest. Only 50 years ago, there were 100 of them living in Jirisan Mountain. But thanks to poachers, they became nearly extinct. That's how the Species Restoration Center came to be established, and the purpose of this Center is to protect and breed these bears. The bears are raised here until they're released to the nature, when experts at the Center decide that they're ready to adapt to the natural environment of the mountain.

## **11. Water Tax**

Suhan Village is a small, peaceful town.

Back in the 1980s, farmers had to pay taxes for drawing water from reservoirs for their irrigation. The low price of rice at the time was enough to make life difficult for the farmers, and paying taxes for using water would make things even worse for them.

Since ancient times, farmers in this region used water from streams flowing down from the mountain gorges, and the government suddenly decided to levy taxes on them. The new tax law said that the more water they use, the more tax they should pay. This didn't make any sense to the farmers.

Enraged by the injustice of the law, the people of this village responded that they'll pay the tax in rice and cereals. The word spread throughout the country, and every farmer in Korea fought against the tax law. In the end, the law was abolished.

## **12. The Light Emitting Village**

This village is called Banggwang, which means 'emit light' in Korean. So Banggwang Village literally means the 'village that emits light'.

It's a unique name, but not as unique as the story how the village was named. A long time ago, two Buddhist monks, one old and the other a youth, were passing by the village. When they did, the little monk picked up three grains of rice without asking the owner.

The old monk told the little monk, "Since you took the rice without the permission of the owner, you'll have to work for him for three years to pay the debt." After having said this, he turned the boy into a bull.

The farmer found the bull left unattended, so he took it home to raise it. He soon realized that it was no ordinary bull when he saw that the dung from the bull shone when it hit the ground. It also made excellent dung manure. That's how the town became to be known as the "light emitting village."