

Gaepyeong Village in Hamyang

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1. About the Course

Hamyang is well known for being an area where many people of great learning and virtuous character once lived. This scenic place surrounded by rugged peaks and deep valleys produced many fine scholars.

Gaepyeong Village, which we are about to see, has its origins in the 14th and 15th centuries with the arrival of the three clans from different regions. It has many of the original houses of representative members of the ruling class of the southern Korean Peninsula, and many of their descendants still live here today. The houses here range in age from roughly 100 to 400 years old. The walls made from earth and stone were designed to improve drainage, and the thin, broad archstones were designed in order for the footsteps of owners or visitors to be heard. The functional design demonstrates the wisdom of earlier generations.

So, shall we have a look inside the village?

2. House of Piety and Loyalty

After entering the village and passing a number of small houses, a residence on the right with a large gate will be immediately noticeable. If you look above the gate you will see that there are Chinese characters carved into a wooden signboard above. It is a plaque once given by the state to loyalists and devoted sons. You can easily assume that this is no ordinary house.

600 years ago, this was the house of Jeong Yeo-chang, one of the greatest neo-Confucian scholars of the Joseon Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism was the ruling ideology of the time. They say the actual house you're looking at now was built about 100 years after his death at the site of his birthplace by his descendants. But you will still feel as if his lessons are transmitted through this old house.

They say that the large stone in front of the outer quarters indicated a place set aside for admonishing juniors and subordinates, quietly so as not to let others know. Also, from the places such as a restroom provided for guests throughout this old house you can get an idea of the prudence of the host.

3. Live Lowly like a Bug

The power struggle between government ministers was fierce during the Joseon Dynasty. After a series of incidents in which the king's wrath was aroused, scores of scholars were purged and executed. Jeong Yeo-chang lost his life during purge.

According to historical records, he was a scholar who had no interest in political power and only wished to concentrate on his studies. He was also well known for loyalty and filial piety greater than most others. After his father died on the battlefield, he spent one month searching for his body before finding it and bringing it home. His filial piety towards his mother was also strong, and after she passed away the state wanted to give him a prize for his filial conduct. But he refused, as he believed he had simply done his duty as a good son.

4. House of Champan and the Head House of the No Clan

This house is the oldest building among the many traditional Korean houses in the village. This old house was traditionally passed down through the family of the No Clan, and it is known as the former residence of a *champan* or second minister, a position that we would now call mayor.

They say it was also the birthplace of No Geun-yeong, a champion of the game *go*, a Chinese board game, during the late 19th century. He is said to have loved this game so much he was willing to make wild bets with even the deed of his house as collateral.

Just a bit further in from this house is the Head House of the No Clan. It was rebuilt in 1824 on the site of the original 15th century house. In those days in every house of appreciable size there was a family shrine for performing rituals for ancestors, and this house was no exception.

5. A Well with a Story, a Rock of Fertility

At the beginning of the walking path, a well and a large, round rock are immediately noticeable. They say the rock represents fertility.

There is an old story about this well and rock. In this village, they said that digging a well was bad for the luck of the region, so except for this place, there were absolutely no wells dug here. One day a woman over the age of 40 conceived a child. However, her son died by drowning when he was eight years old. The woman was so grief-stricken she ended up bed-ridden, but one day her son appeared in a dream and told her he was in the well. As soon as it dawned, she ran to the well and drank as much water as she could in order to save her son stuck in the well. After that, she had another child at the age of 50. It is said that from that day forth, those unable to conceive a child would come here to circle the old rock and pray to be able to conceive a child.

6. Ildu Walking Path

After looking around the village, we would invite you to cross the bridge over the brook and enjoy a pleasant walk along the Ildu Walking Path that leads in the direction of a great pine tree hill. This walking path is a reconstruction of the route once enjoyed by Jeong Yeo-chang, and was named after his pen-name. The path begins near a place with a well and a large round rock. After you pass the great pine tree on the hill and go through the bamboo forest and the rice paddy ridge way, the walking road will end as you come down to the colony of pine trees near the entrance to the village.

The great pine tree on the hill was once a tree in which the village people performed rituals. This tree was held as sacred by the village and said to determine the village's destiny. Until the mid-20th century people continue to perform the ritual and make wishes to the tree. As you walk along the path, you will see between the trees of the pine forest a small observatory, too. From this vantage point you will have a view of the whole village. If you go past the observatory and make your way to the village entrance you will come across a colony of pine trees, which is said to be a forest planted to protect the village.

7. A Village Where the Houses and People's Hearts are Beautiful

If you go through the gate of the House of the Jeong Clan, you will find a scene of wonderful beauty, wide yards and old trees. While this residence was composed of a variety of buildings when it was originally built in 1880, since then many have collapsed and only a few remain.

The house between this residence and one of the walls is the Odam House. This is the house of the famous writer Jeong Hwan-pil of the late Joseon Dynasty. This house has a unique design distinctive from other residences. For example, the doors of all the rooms were made demountable in order to assure good ventilation in the summertime.

As the gates of this village are always wide open to anyone, foreigners too should feel no apprehension about going in and having a look around these old residences. Rather than be subjected to scrutiny they will be welcomed to explore until their heart's content. So we hope you will set any concerns aside and enjoy looking around these old houses of Korea freely.