

# Sensei Says

#13 - December 2001

Originally printed in the BMAI Newsletter "Best Times"

Continuing the tales of my journey to Korea last year...

The climate change during the one-hour flight from Seoul to Cheju Island is much like arriving in sunny Southern California after being under the clouds of Eugene all winter. Cheju's main crop is tangerines, and they grow abundantly. We never had a Cheju Tangerine that didn't rank as the sweetest citrus we'd ever tasted. Tangerines are so plentiful that when you go into a shop there is usually a box of them sitting out for you to slurp down while you shop. They peel in about five seconds – and disappear nearly as fast!

Not surprisingly, Cheju Island was made by volcanic activity. At one time, most of the island was completely covered in large chunks of lava. The little ones are the size of coconuts. There are three-foot high lava rock fences everywhere. Apparently, the only way to clear the fields of rocks was to pile them up as fences. The rocks are everywhere.

Since primitive times, the islanders have had a guardian figure who is believed to bring good luck. You see many statues of the guardian on Cheju. The original statues were about ten feet high. Of course, the statues are made of lava rock. Today these guardian figures are one of the most popular souvenirs taken off the island by tourists. I think the guardian is indeed looking after them. Every day tourists are happy to buy up the rocks and haul them off the island for free – in the form of guardian deities. It may take a while, but some day the guardian might finally rid them of all those pesky rocks!

Our accommodations on Cheju were a bit more tolerable than in Seoul. We only had a 45-minute bus ride to the tournament site (which, in comparison, seemed very short to us). We also concurred that having eight people in a three-bedroom suite gave us more time to enjoy each other's company. We all slept in the traditional Korean style (on the floor), except for Shihan Dennis Dallas, the most senior man in the room. He got the one bed.

The hotel room had a beautiful view overlooking both the ocean and a tiny fishing village. Directly below us we watched people tend their small gardens that were divided into tiny pieces of dirt between all the large rock fences. The huts and houses are made of lava, even the outhouses. The old women were permanently bent over from a life of labor. The men stood a bit straighter, but moved as if each step was a great effort. Their simple life seemed locked in time, despite the changing world around them, even with a giant hotel towering over their homes.

At night the view of the ocean looked more like an interstate than an ocean. The entire coastline was filled with fishing boats. Immensely bright spotlights shone out of the darkness by the hundreds. Their pursuit is squid, and the Koreans love it in all forms - raw, boiled, freeze dried, and crispy fried!

While the deliciously sweet tangerines are a specialty of Cheju Island; red-hot, spicy, kimchee is found at the table during any "real" Korean meal. For all that kimchee you need a lot of cabbage, and a lot of garlic. And that's what they grow in all the fields that don't have tangerine trees. Garlic and cabbage everywhere!

Over the next week we spent most of our time observing the World Taekwondo Championships. We did skip some of the tournament so we could do a little sightseeing, but most of the time was spent inside a gymnasium enjoying the matches. I took about eight hours of video, which is available to watch at the dojo. There were many excellent matches, and also some fun taekwondo demonstrations. I will write more about that later.

At one point during the opening ceremony the camera found itself fixed on some adorable children who were sitting on a ledge, all dressed up in their taekwondo uniforms. Although the cute kids were supposed to be the focus of the shot, when looking at the big TV screen all everyone really saw were the two giant Americans who were standing behind the kids; especially me, I was wearing shorts to show off my glowing white legs!

The reason we were standing requires some explanation. You see, for the comfort of the spectators, the stadium had custom molded plastic seats, which perfectly fit the spectators' seat (i.e. rear, bottom, gluteus maximus, etc.). Well.... they fit unless you are equipped with an extra wide kind of seat (like me). Mathematically speaking, my hips are equal to approximately one and a half Korean hips, therefore, one quarter of me would have to sit on the person to my right, and one quarter on the person to my left. Now you understand why we were standing. (A similar situation happened on the buses. We had to wedge ourselves into the seats to fit two people in the allowed space, the armrest conveniently acted as a tourniquet.)

So, there we were (Shihan Dallas and me) right there on the big video screen, oblivious of our fame. It wasn't until the next day when a woman selling taekwondo equipment at the tournament said (in perfect English), "I saw you on TV!" that we learned just how much my white legs stuck out. But, it wasn't until several days after that, in a small restaurant, far from the tournament, that we discovered how far our fame extended. To our amazement, the woman in the restaurant said (in perfect English), "I saw you on TV!" It was then that we learned that what we saw on the big video screen in the gymnasium was actually a national broadcast throughout all of Korea. Finally, my chance to be in the national spotlight, and it's the wrong country!

And speaking of TV. When we first got into our hotel room and turned on the television to see some Korean programming, what do you suppose was the first thing we saw? An interview with Good Ol' Oregonian Peter DeFazio. It's a small world after all!

I'll finish this column with some random observations from what really was a more enjoyable trip than I let on (and my memory fades about the long bus rides) :

If you live in Korea you have Korean food nearly every meal. Think about that for a moment. Most Americans can't even stand having the same ethnic food two meals in a row!

If you are an American, they assume you love baseball – and even expect you to know who is playing in the World Series (I didn't. In fact, I had never even heard of one of the teams).

Corn and chopped carrots come standard on pizza. Yes, even on a cheese pizza!

Korean currency is called a "won." The exchange rate is about 1,300 won to the US dollar. Their lowest denomination is a 10 won coin. So, you can't just get one won!

Sidewalks in Korea are about the same size as the one's in Eugene. Therefore, they have to make their cars smaller (otherwise they wouldn't fit on the sidewalks).

When they drive on the street, they drive on the same side as us.

And, the highlight of my trip, I saw my very first pink belt. Yes, it was a moment to remember. I'm not sure what it means, or what you have to do to get a pink belt. And I was too afraid to ask. Anybody that is that small and already a Pink Belt has got to be dangerous! To be continued ...again...

- Alan Best