

## Stuck on an Island, For What It's Worth

My roommate and I planned our trip to Jeju Island, South Korea in the wee hours of the morning when our brains were fried from studying late into the night. That's when most of the really good ideas came.

About three months had passed since my roommate and I had arrived in Seoul, South Korea to study abroad at Yonsei University, one of the top three universities in the country and my grandmother's alma mater. I had dreamed of visiting South Korea since I was young to see the homeland of my grandparents and learn their language.

In those first weeks after our arrival, I was struck by the thought that every street in Seoul could be photographed and framed. Neon signs competing for attention in a narrow alleyway, street vendors doling out red tteokbokki, red and green palace gates with people floating in and out with pearls in their hair and hanboks trailing around them. Even the narrow alleyways have a mysterious ambience of their own, with doors opening into stairways lit either too dimly or too garishly to feel completely safe and the perpetual fear of a delivery motorcyclist zooming out of the darkness without a word of warning.

Yet as the months passed, I felt like I was slowly suffocating. Having grown up in the Seattle metropolitan area, I was accustomed to city life, but living in a city with more people living there than my entire state was a new experience. I wanted a break from the subways bursting with people in business suits and neutral-toned blazers, the metallic skyscrapers proudly bearing the names of big businesses, the latest K-pop hits blasting from speakers on streets lined with clubs, karaoke rooms, and restaurants (sometimes hard to tell apart). It's not quite that the gleam of traveling in a new country was wearing off, or that I felt put off by the work-hard, play-hard atmosphere of the young people surrounding me. I just felt like I could use a deep breath of fresh air.

Since we had already planned a trip to Busan, a coastal city in the southern end of the peninsula, planning our Jeju trip was easy. We invited four other exchange students studying in Seoul, bought our plane tickets, and arranged the hotel reservations. I beat back my procrastination enough to finish my weekend homework early. Finally, our bags were packed and ready.

There was just one problem, and I ignored the warning signs.

I woke up feeling a little strange the day before we left. I guess everyone finds out that they're sick differently – my first symptom usually feels like there's a gaping hole at the back of my throat. I don't know why I always imagine it like that, but it feels like the soft flesh around my pharynx has been removed and each time I swallow, an abyss yawns deep inside. I felt the beginnings of something like that. I chalked it up to stress and fatigue from my mad homework cram session, and against my better judgment, decided to go ahead and take the flight as planned.

When we arrived at our hotel, the relief of getting there safely and the excitement of our new surroundings drowned out my worries. My friend's mom had helped us arrange reservations with the hotel company she worked for, and the front desk staff treated us as special guests because of our affiliation. We gazed in wonder at the towering ceiling and glittering Christmas decorations and listened to the voice of a live singer floating up from downstairs as we checked in. Apparently the hotel was much larger than I thought – there was an entire amusement park, casino, and shopping mall built into the property. The front desk staff handed us maps to help us see where everything was.

By the time I crawled under the covers of the luxurious bed, my whole body felt like it was aching. It was no better in the morning. I went to brush my teeth and wash my face with a sinking feeling inside, feeling even sicker as the thought penetrated deeper and deeper.

*I might have COVID. I might have COVID. I might have COVID.*

After everyone in the group was ready, we walked across the hotel grounds in pursuit of breakfast. I started to perk up as we walked, the sunlight shining down pleasantly and the air so quiet I would have thought it was a residential neighborhood rather than hotel property. At the convenience store next to the cafe, I bought a rapid COVID test, having let my friends know earlier that I was taking a precaution because I wasn't feeling like myself. As I stared down at the COVID tester, I watched in dismay as the second red line appeared.

“How's the test going?” my friend asked nonchalantly.

“It's positive.”

“It's POSITIVE?!?”

A few discussions and phone calls later, with a lot of help from my friends, I was in a taxi on my way to get an official COVID test at a local hospital clinic. It all felt like a very, very bad dream. A million worries materialized before me. I would be here alone on an island for a week. I'd need to find a way to get food delivered to me wherever I was quarantining. I'd need to email all my professors and ask for excused absences from class and somehow stay up with my courses without my laptop or any of my notes. And the worry persisted that I might have endangered so many people along the way to my destination. I felt like kicking myself for bringing this on my own head. I had seen this coming, and now I had to pay the price.

As expected, the hospital COVID test came back positive and I stood outside on the street, overwhelmed with all the things I had to do to prepare for my seven-day quarantine. I found a place to sit at an empty picnic table and made a seven-day reservation for a cheaper hotel than the one my friends and I had been staying at. The room wouldn't be ready until 3 PM, my reservation read.

When I looked at the map navigation app on my phone, I noticed there was a beach nearby. My friend and I had discussed our mutual desire to visit one of the Jeju beaches, and here was an opportunity right in front of me. It was only about a 15 minute walk to Hwasun Golden Sand Beach, down a winding path away from the main road.

The weather seemed utterly unfazed by my chaotic state of mind. It was one of those days when the temperature leaves absolutely nothing to be desired. A gentle wind was blowing and the sun gleamed on the ocean in the distance. I put my hands in my pockets and buried myself in my heavy black jacket, finally feeling a little calmer.

On my left, I suddenly saw an orchard of dwarf-sized orange trees behind a rock wall. They were the most vibrant, perfect orange trees I had ever seen. Earlier that morning I had bought a small bag of oranges in the convenience store, and each wedge had been all but bursting out of its peel with sweetness. I had pressed my friends to go to an orange farm with me before I had known I was sick, and I couldn't believe I had found one without even trying.

In the midst of my disappointment and fear about what was going to happen to me over the next seven days, the sight of those oranges seemed like a gift meant just for me. My body aches seemed to dissipate as I breathed the fresh air and felt the sun on my skin.

It brought me back to the time I had spent several days in the hospital recovering from spinal surgery, and had just been discharged to go home. I had lain in bed and looked out the window, and the sight of the huge green tree across the road as its entire mass of branches heaved in one slow-motion dance under the summer breeze seemed to me the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I had felt like a baby, then – not only because I couldn't dress or feed myself alone, but also because I felt like I was suddenly seeing the outside world for the first time. It was a sort of healing that no amount of medicine or sleep could bring.

As I continued along the path, a small family passed me on bicycles. It made me smile inside. What a fun way to spend a day in Jeju, I thought. Rather than go to all the flashy tourist spots, why not hop on a bike and ride down an orange-tree-lined road in the direction of the ocean? Perhaps they were locals and knew all the roads by heart. I walked a little further on, and almost jumped when I saw that someone was napping on the side of the road. That made me smile too. Well, he must definitely be a local. I couldn't see his face, which was covered probably to shade him from the sun, but he lay on the edge of another orange tree orchard. I wondered if he was a farmer, taking a midday break from the harvesting.

Finally, a broad expanse of sand and clumps of tall, feathery grasses greeted me as I walked up to the edge of the beach. It was almost deserted. I crossed a bridge over a small stream, into which slabs of stone had been placed so that you could sit down and have a picnic right in the water. I went up to a clump of grass and knelt to touch the sand and admire the stalks blowing in the wind, their downy heads illuminated by the sunlight.

On the shore, small waves lapped against the sand with the quietest of whispering noises. The faded, watercolor outline of a lighthouse stood against the horizon in the distance. I found a perfect tiny seashell, and then another, and saw more scattered on the ground. Their etched ridges radiated across stripes of white that blended into an oily orange-beige.

I took off my sneakers and went down to the water, feeling the waves wash over my toes first with a painful chill and then with the feeling of lukewarm tea. Still bundled in my heavy jacket, and too tired to care much what I looked like, I hoisted up my pant legs and walked along the wet sand. I have all the time in the world, I thought to myself. I could walk all the way down to the end of the beach and come back if I wanted.

With each step, my heel sank into the fine sand and unstuck itself gently, leaving a peach-stone-size divet that quickly refilled itself to its former smooth surface. It was strange, having that sense of limitless time, like walking into infinity. Normally I'd be worried about the next thing on my schedule. Wake up, study, go to class, study some more, hang out with a friend, do it all the next day. But now my planner was an ocean away, and I didn't know what was coming next.

After a little while I turned back, realizing I should probably check my text messages and make sure others knew where I was. The dry sand stuck to my wet feet and left a grainy layer around my heels and toes. I sat cross-legged and tried to drink in the beauty around me, dreading the next seven days I would be stuck inside. After a little while I watched others come down to the shore. Every generation seemed represented: a group of middle-aged men and women, some of whom were laughing as if they were teenagers; a woman who crouched down next to the toddler at her side, so that they stood at the same level and looked out to sea; a young man and woman, who stood shoulder to shoulder and walked down to the edge of the waves and took pictures together. Two older women in brightly-colored tops and sun visors sat next to each other on the sand in friendly silence, legs outstretched. I wondered what they might think if all these people knew I had COVID. The scene seemed incongruous with the disaster I was in.

Please protect my friends from getting sick, I prayed. Please let everything be okay. The God who created the oranges and the sea foam and the perfect seashells felt nearer in my aloneness than in all my moments of feeling in control. The panic at being stuck here on this island for seven days with almost nothing but the clothes on my back faded and gave way to peace. I looked out onto the scene. This day alone, I thought, had made everything worth it.