

Heart of Seoul

Five Grand Palaces in Two Days

WORDS JOSEPH REANEY PHOTOGRAPHY STEPHANIE ANGLEMYER

It's ten in the morning when the drum beat starts. The heavy thud-thud-thud of anticipation. The crowd falls silent – even the breeze drops to a whisper – as the relief guards appear at the gate. Resplendent in uniforms of crimson and cornflower, holding colourful banners aloft and accompanied by a cacophony of bugles and conch shells, they slow step in synchronicity across the palace courtyard towards the on-duty sentries.

The Changing of the Guard at Gyeongbokgung Palace is one of Seoul's oldest traditions. This display of military might first took place in 1469 and today guards are changed six times a day, on the hour, in a festival of colour where ceremonial costumes, instruments and weapons whirl past in every direction. A rare and welcome celebration of a prestigious past in a city – and country – preoccupied with the future.

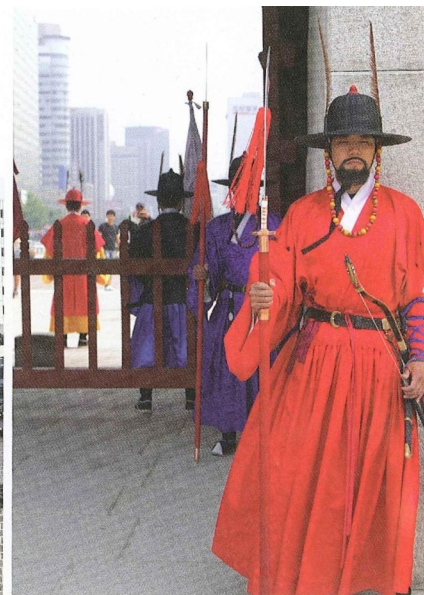
Geunjeongjeon, Gyeongbokgung:
tiny animal sculptures on the
balustrades of the Throne Room



Gwanghwamun Gate, Gyeongbokgung:
a towering memorial to the past in a city
of the future

THE LARGEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS OF SEOUL'S PALACES, GYEONGBOKGUNG WAS ALSO THE MOST SIGNIFICANT

Hyangwonjeon, Gyeongbokgung:
a tranquil island pavilion on a placid lake,
accessible by bridge



Gwanghwamun Gate, Gyeongbokgung:
a royal sentry stands guard at the main
palace entrance

It was a fitting introduction to the first of the five grand palaces I would visit over the coming weekend.

GYEONGBOKGUNG

The largest and most ambitious of Seoul's palaces, Gyeongbokgung was also the most significant. First constructed in 1394 by King Taejo, founder of the Joseon Dynasty, this complex was the primary seat of power on the Korean peninsula for centuries – until the Japanese invaded and burned it to the ground. Today, following a series of renovation projects during the 20th Century, many structures still stand tall.

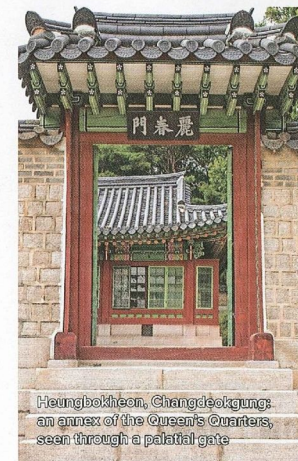
As I venture through the main palace gate, the building that dominates the view is the Imperial Throne Room. A two-tiered wooden construction with a delicate floral finish and balustrades topped with tiny sculptures of real and fictional animals (from cats and monkeys to dragons and phoenixes), its exterior is hard to miss. The interior, with its colourful wooden throne and intricate ceiling carvings, is also a delight.

Elsewhere in the 100-acre Gyeongbokgung complex, highlights include the King's Quarters, the Queen's Quarters, the Royal Banquet Hall and the Royal Library. But the structure that tugs hardest at the heart-strings is Hyangwonjeon: a tiny hexagonal pavilion perched on a cherry tree-laden isle in the palace lake.

CHANGDEOKGUNG

Second in importance only to Gyeongbokgung, this spectacular palace was first built a mere decade later in 1405. Arriving at the southeastern edge of the complex in the early afternoon, I venture through the imposing 17th Century Donghwamun Gate: a giant

wooden work of art that bows in its middle to greet visitors. The moment I step into the grounds it becomes clear why this was the favourite palace of a host of Joseon rulers. This green and shaded park is an oasis of tranquility in a region of traffic and tinnitus. As an ancient royal residence, Changdeokgung also boasts works of extraordinary architectural beauty, but these all feel part of the natural surroundings. From the much-rebuilt Injeongjeon Hall to the never-altered Geumcheongyo Bridge (600 years and counting), there is a harmony to this palace not found in Gyeongbokgung. I spent most of my time absorbed in the pavilions, ponds and poetry of Biwon garden.



Heungbokheon, Changdeokgung:
an annex of the Queen's Quarters,
seen through a palatial gate

CHANGGYEONGGUNG

The final stop on my first day exploring the palaces of Seoul, Changgyeonggung is a mere 20 minute walk from my previous sojourn, yet the contrast is stark. The oldest of the city palaces, Changgyeonggung was originally built in 1104 as a summer residence for the Kings of the Koryo Dynasty – only later obtained by the Joseons – and this has led to a very different orientation and layout. The palace's standing structures are generally older as well, with many first assembled in the 15th Century. But the thing that most struck me was the sense of spirituality about the place. Not only is it connected to the famous Jongmyo shrine, but the grounds are also dotted with pagodas, holy tombs and carved goblins for warding off evil spirits.

As I watch the sun set over Okcheongyo Bridge, a feeling of inner peace folds around me like a blanket.

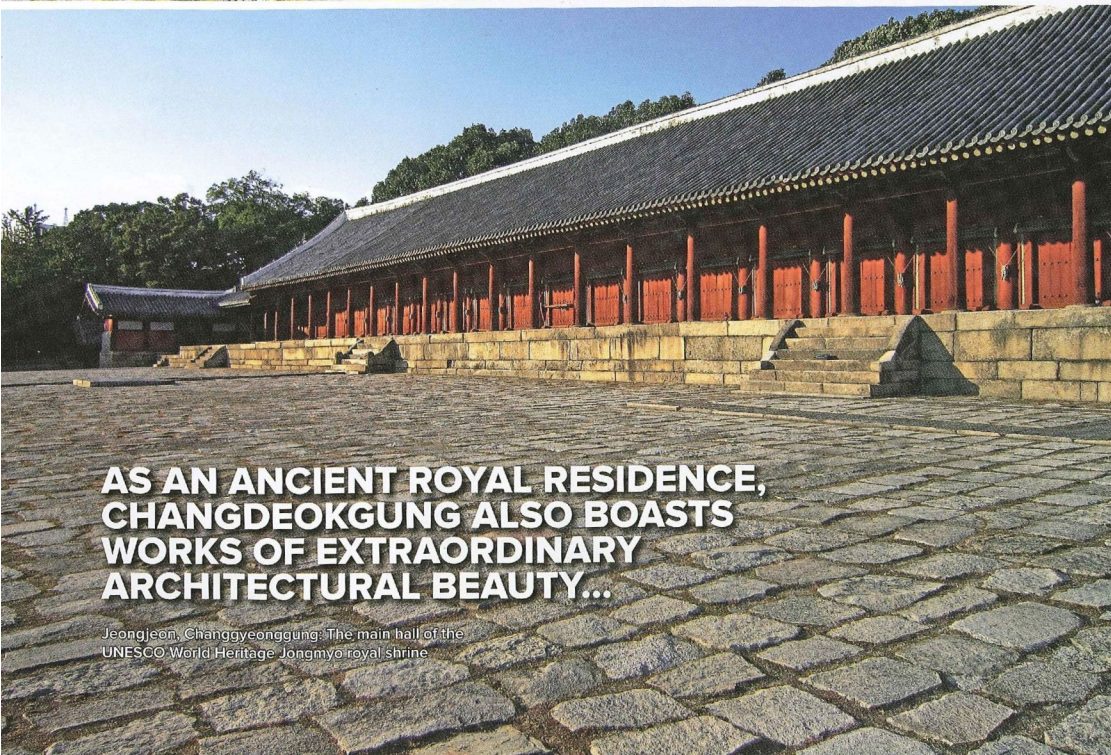


Injeongjeon Hall, Changdeokgung:
a sneak peek of the lofty throne room
through Injeongmun Gate

Huijeongdang Hall, Changdeokgung:
once the king's bed chamber and later
a residence for women

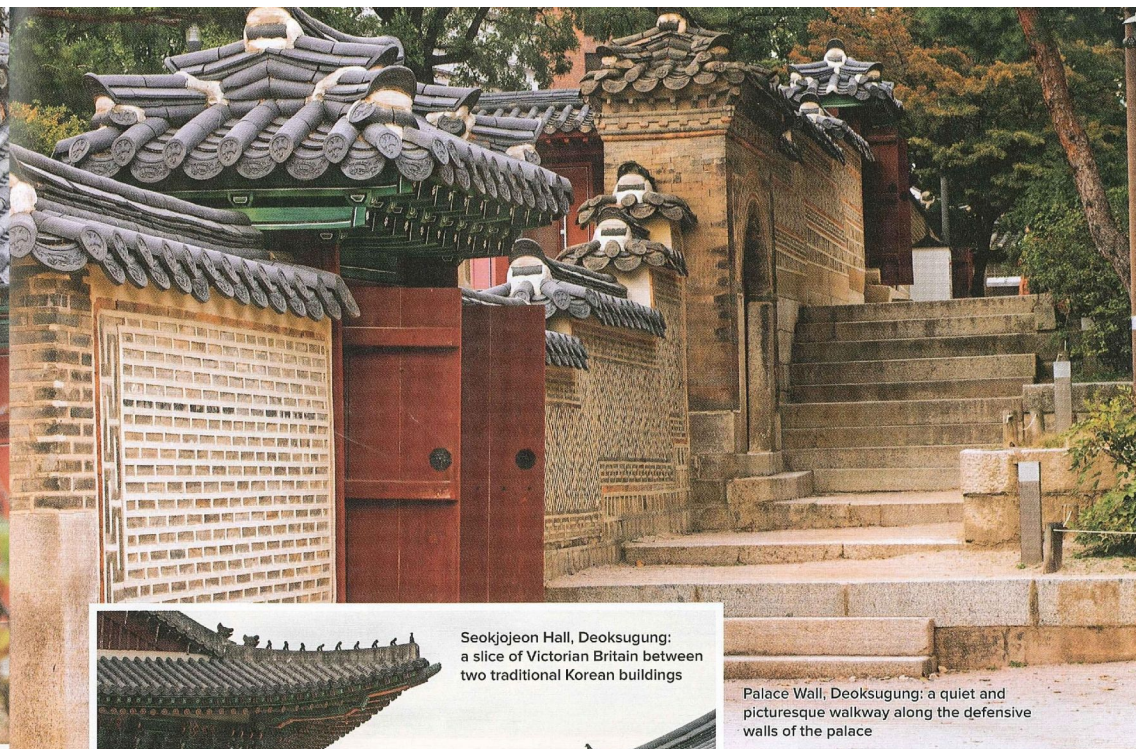


Myeongjeongmun Gate, Changgyeonggung: a newly-married couple takes photographs



AS AN ANCIENT ROYAL RESIDENCE, CHANGDEOKGUNG ALSO BOASTS WORKS OF EXTRAORDINARY ARCHITECTURAL BEAUTY...

Jeongjeon, Changgyeonggung: The main hall of the UNESCO World Heritage Jongmyo royal shrine



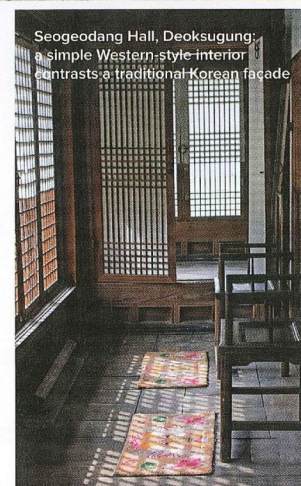
Seokjojeon Hall, Deoksugung: a slice of Victorian Britain between two traditional Korean buildings



Palace Wall, Deoksugung: a quiet and picturesque walkway along the defensive walls of the palace

DEOKSUGUNG

I began my second day standing outside the main gate of Deoksugung, Seoul's most southerly palace, its architecture is more centred on Western ideals, resulting in buildings with a unique fusion of European and Asian styles. While exteriors of the buildings are often similar to those at other palaces, interiors are often heavily influenced by Western architecture; there is even an imposing neoclassical hall that looks like it has been lifted straight out of Victorian Britain. Other palace features,



Segeodang Hall, Deoksugung: a simple Western-style interior contrasts a traditional Korean facade

including forested gardens, royal statues and the National Museum of Art, mark this palace as a more diverse experience than most.

GYEONGHUIGUNG

From Deoksugung I ventured west to see the last of the palaces: Gyeonghuigung. The newest of the five – not only because it was built in the 17th Century, but also as it was only restored (from next to nothing) in 1985 – it does not assert the time-honoured beauty of the others. However, it does offer a spectacular entrance gate and two fascinating city exhibitions: the Seoul Museum of Art and the Museum of History.

It also emerges into the gastronomic centre of the Korean capital, so I resolved my two-day palatial tour with a dinner of pajeon pancakes and makgeolli rice wine. A meal, and a weekend, fit for a Joseon king. ☺