

DEMOGRAPHIA



SEOUL-INCHEON: AUTOMOBILE ORIENTED COMPACT CITY

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	19,800,000	New York
Urbanized Area* Population	14,600,000	Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	278	Calgary, Albany, Porto Alegre, Manchester
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	720	
Population per Square Mile	52,500	Mumbai, Manila, Tianjin
Population per Square Kilometer	20,700	
Capital of South Korea 7 th largest urbanized area in the world		
Urbanized Area Map: <i>Map of Seoul & Metropolitan Area</i> (Geographic Information System), available at department store book departments (more than 100 maps)		
*Continuously built up area		

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Good maps are an absolute necessity for an urban tour. This was the principal lesson of Seoul. I had arrived on a Friday night, after dark at the now replaced Kimpo International Airport. The rental car company had only the most ineffective map, so it was up to me to figure out how to get to my hotel in the central area. South Korea has accomplished much over the past one-half century. Effective road signage is not a notable accomplishment, though signs are in English (and Korean). The trip to downtown took at least twice as long as it should have, and I was fortunate to see the hotel sign high in the skyline, or it could have taken much longer to get there on the narrow, one-way street on which it was located.

The next morning I began my tour. I had only the useless rental car map and the usual English language map that serves no more than the understandable limited geographical interest of tourists and elitist inquisitiveness of so many urban planners. Not even all of the central city of Seoul was covered, much less the balance of the urban area, with its 5,000,000 to 10,000,000 additional people. After stopping at petrol stations and small stores, it became clear that little help was available. For a brief few hours I decided I would make my own map, and began driving the area's many motorways, including the roadways on the banks of the Han River.

South Korea is in some ways similar to America in a surreal sort of way. The motorway route numbering signs are in the shape (white with black lettering federal shield) of the U.S. route system signs that date from the 1920s. Until the coming of the interstate highway system in the late 1950s, these were the primary route signs in the U.S. road system, as long-distance road travelers were well familiar with US-1, US-51, US-99, US-40 and, of course US-66. But the South Korean signs have an interesting wrinkle. They have the color scheme of the later, modified U.S. interstate highway signs, with the top quarter (or so) red and the bottom three-quarters blue.

Then there are the churches. It is said that South Korea is approximately one-half Christian and one-half Buddhist. I had known that some of the largest individual Christian churches in the world are in South Korea, and had heard that some in Seoul had more than 25,000 members. As I left the airport, there were lighted crosses all over. It was too dark, and they were too far away for me to examine the ecclesiastical architecture. But what I saw the next morning was completely unexpected. For the most part, the crosses were simple, near duplicate add-ons to the buildings that housed the churches. Those buildings might have a resemblance to a 20th century U.S. protestant church building, but more often than not they were appended to the top of commercial buildings, where I presume the churches had taken space. In some cases, the crosses were at the top of large buildings. This was a particularly unique sight, because of the Korean habit of filling much of the window space of suburban office buildings with signs. There were, of course, churches that looked more conventional. The Roman Catholic Cathedral within walking distance of my hotel was of a traditional design, and walking in on Sunday morning I was surprised to see women with their heads covered in a fashion abandoned throughout most of the West after Vatican II. Then across the elevated boulevard (which itself enters the large hill to the south of downtown) is a very large Presbyterian Church campus, including a traditional style sanctuary and modern buildings. To the west, toward the main central railway station, there is also a traditional style Methodist Church. But all in all, the casual visitor to Seoul could easily come away with the impression that everyone is Christian and that they all attend the equivalent of what we would call “store-front” churches.

Meanwhile, making my own map of Seoul was not working out well. I had managed to get to Incheon on the southern belt route and driven past the nearly completed new soccer stadium. At Incheon is the mud of the bay that General MacArthur managed to avoid in his surprise invasion during the Korean War.

Finally, as the afternoon wore on, I began to notice the enclosed shopping malls along the motorway --- following the multi-story design typical of Seoul (recall that one, the Sampoong Superstore collapsed in 1995, killing nearly 500 people). It struck me that maybe it would be better to have a good map in Korean than a worthless one in English. I found the book section of a department store, and managed to find a very good atlas of Seoul-Inchon (*Map of Seoul & Metropolitan Area*, Geographic Information System, 126 map pages). Virtually none of the pages has English on it, but there is no problem finding your way around the metropolitan area with this tool. Having learned this lesson, I went to the bookstore district in Tokyo on the brief subsequent stopover and managed, with some difficulty, to obtain similarly valuable atlases of Tokyo-Yokohama, Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto, Nagoya and Hiroshima. The staff at the store seemed somewhat baffled that a non-Japanese speaking American would be seeking Japanese atlases. But eventually the commercial transaction was completed.

But back to Seoul. A fascinating place. It is, without doubt, one of the world's most dense urban areas. The urbanized area is estimated to have a population density of 52,500 per square mile (20,700 per square kilometer). Among urbanized areas for which *Demographia* has data, only Hong Kong, Cairo, Chongqing and Tianjin are more dense. Seoul is slightly more dense than Mumbai, though Mumbai's core densities are much higher. There are two megacities in the urbanized area. Seoul itself has more than 10 million people. Only Mumbai and Sao Paulo are larger, other than the large province-cities of China (Chongqing, Beijing and Shanghai). The city has a population density of more than 75,000 per square mile (non-urbanized land, including a national park, excluded). And then there is Incheon, on the coast to the West, with nearly 2,000,000 people.

Seoul is a very peaceful place in a very threatening area. Approximately 30 miles to the north is the demilitarized zone that separates North Korea and South Korea. During the Korean War, Seoul itself changed hands many times. In the northern suburbs, there are many military checkpoints, yet it is clear that life goes on with little apparent concern for potential conflict. In a world concerned about peace on the Korean peninsula, none have so much at stake than the residents of this urban area.

In a world replete with cases of explosive urban growth, Seoul stands out. At the beginning of the Korean War (1950) the area had perhaps 2,000,000 residents. Now, depending on the definition, Seoul is home to from 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 people --- one of the world's genuine megacities.

Seoul has a high-income world look about it, despite the fact that it is middle income. Perhaps it is the fact that so many people live in comparatively new high-rise blocks. In the suburbs, few single-family dwellings are found. Instead, there are large, multi-building high-rise buildings, often sponsored by South Korea's financially enfeebled industrial giants.

The central business district is, appropriately, one of the largest in the world, with more than 1.2 million jobs, similar to the size of the Osaka Loop and central London. The buildings, not surprisingly, are overwhelmingly of modern design. Yet, within the central business district will also be found more historical, traditional Korean designs.

A drive along the Han River, that cuts the city and the urbanized area in half east to west, gives a good perspective of the city. There is the National Assembly, the central business district to the north, and the many bridges, at least 20 from the eastern ring road to the western edge of the urbanized area. They are of multiple designs, from historic to very modern. And one of them, the Sungsoo, collapsed in 1994 killing more than 30 people. It has been replaced by an impressive new structure.

Traffic is terrible in Seoul. Despite comparatively low automobile ownership rates, the high density generates traffic intensities more than double that of Los Angeles. A number of central business district streets have elevated boulevards and motorways built over them. There are also a number of wide streets, in addition to a good motorway system. There is also an attractive central railway station, where soon high-speed-rail trains will be arriving to drain the wallets of taxpayers already burdened by an economy that has been in trouble.

And while Seoul-Inchon is the among the most compact of the world's largest urban areas, it is clear that having access throughout the urban area requires an automobile. This is no Hong Kong, though it might be if it had one-half the population and covered one-half the land area. Seoul has just become too large. Only 38 percent of travel is on public transport, approximately 20 percentage points less than Tokyo-Yokohama and Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto. This is despite lower incomes and lower levels of car ownership. The difference, of course, is that the two Japanese mega-metropolitan areas built their extensive, profitable regional rail cities before and as the urban area was sprawling. Government treasuries simply cannot print money fast enough to do that after a city has already sprawled, even the more limited sprawl of Seoul.



Elevated Street in Central Business District (One of Many)



Seoul City Hall



Central Business District



Central Business District



Inchon War Memorial



The Mud at Inchon



“Store-Front” Church



Presbyterian Church in Central Business District



Central Railway Station



Traditional Architecture in Central Business District



Residential District in City of Seoul



Exurban Residential Development Under Construction (North of City)



Motorway on North Bank of the Han River



Buddhist Temple, Central Business District

By Wendell Cox

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