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Hwaunsa Temple Stay

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Hwaunsa Temple Stay

A popular escapade for visitors and citizens of South Korea is to participate in a Temple Stay. This is a two daylong program where you are able to witness the activities that occur in a temple and learn more about the Buddhist monasteries. It is said to be an amazing experience for both travellers and residents of Korea. A group of us decided to go to Hwaunsa temple, about an hour outside of Seoul.

Throughout our temple stay, we learned more about the process of becoming a Buddhist nun and the basic ideals they support and represent. We were served dinner, all vegetarians, and always served precisely at 6 o'clock in the evening. It was advised that we finish all of our food, as it is seen to be rude to waste any. Our food was delicious: rice, kimchi, seafood pancake, seaweed, and a light soup with tofu.

After dinner, we gathered together to make a sand mandala. At first, this appeared to be a cheesy juvenile craft, putting colorful sand inside the lines of a printed out design. However, our mentor explained to us the meaning behind the sand mandala. Buddhist monks gather around to create an intricately symbolic sand mandala. They fill in the smallest crafts with sand and the finished product is absolutely stunning. However, after days of hard work, they clean off their finished work, put it into a bottle and return the sand back into the river. This action is said to represent impermanence. Throughout our lives, experiences come and go. It is important to take pleasure in every positive opportunity and be hopeful when anything negative occurs, for it shall not last forever. This message really resonated with me to encourage me to always be present. Throughout this experience, it has been easy for my mind to wander on what I am going to do when I get back or how excited I am to see my family. However, I cannot let those thoughts take away from this rare experience here.

The next morning, we arose at 4 AM for our morning ceremony. The head nun stood on top of the hill where the main temple stood, ringing a bell while chanting, waking up the temple. We sat inside the temple and performed three bowing prostrations (processes used when entering a Buddhist temple). We then meditated and chanted along with the head nun leading the ceremony. After our ceremony, we had a heavy breakfast of rice and kimchi along with soy meat that tasted exactly like beef but was vegetarian.

Our project of the day was to create a lotus flower. This craft also had a specialized meaning. The lotus flower blooms from the swamps of dirty mud. It is said to represent the beauty that can come out of any negative and messy situation. No matter how troubled your life may seem, there is always a lotus flower that blooms from it.

Overall, this experience taught me the importance of quieting my mind and being present in a situation. I think often times, when staying in a location for so long, we get comfortable and take the little experiences for granted. Coming up to my third month here, I definitely have found a routine to my schedule. While that makes me feel more at home here, I feel like it also makes me lazy in not wanting to experience more about this city.

-Michaela