

First in GIST – My Amazing South Korean Experience

Written by: **Shereen Sirhan**

A Student at the Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management

After a 13 hour flight from Tel-Aviv to Seoul, the first thing I found out when I stepped off the plane was that my luggage was lost! This made me realize that I was on my own halfway around the world; far away from any family or friends who could help me. The only one here I could depend on was myself, and obviously it was not the perfect start for my internship in South Korea that I had hoped for. I was so worried about how I would be able to handle everything by myself. What I did not know at that time was that I wouldn't actually be alone, but rather surrounded by very nice people who would willingly help me as much as they could.

I spent the summer of 2013 in Gwangju, the sixth largest city in South Korea, where I participated in the internship program GIST- Gwangju Institute of Science and Technology. I worked in a laboratory for Intelligent Design and Graphics. In the beginning I was very nervous, especially since GIST was ranked in 6th place in the world in the QS World University Rankings for 2013. But once I settled in, all my worries and fears faded away. I realized that all I needed to do was to try to do my best work and enjoy my stay in South Korea.

Time passes by so fast when you have a lot to do. Working everyday from 9:00 AM till 6:00 PM in a lab and sometimes even overtime at night can be exhausting. But if you are a Technion student you're already used to putting in a lot of studying hours, and so for you it wouldn't be a big deal. On the contrary, you will enjoy it a lot since you are working in a totally different and motivating environment. It was very exciting to learn so many new things all at once, whether it was academic learning, advanced practical experience or learning about the Korean culture, traditions and lifestyle.

I was told that this internship program was the best of its kind due to its many facilities, but besides that, I can tell you that I had a few extra amazing experiences of my own. For example, when I arrived without my luggage (because it had gotten lost in transit), my professor insisted on giving me extra money to buy new clothes, so that it would make it easier for me to focus on my work in the lab and feel comfortable. He took me himself to the shopping mall, since I had no idea where I could buy clothes, and I am very thankful for this. Moreover, I had the luck of participating in a conference held by Dongguk University in Seoul city, where we stayed for three days. It gave me a good understanding of what a conference is all about, and why it was important to attend. I broadened my horizons by listening to presenters talking about their research papers. Furthermore, watching two of my fellow lab



members receiving awards for best papers inspired and motivated me even more. Also, we had an arranged cultural trip to Suncheon for all the interns. We visited an old Korean style village where houses were still built with thick straws for the roof and clay walls; I felt like I was transported back in time to another period of Korean history.



The best part was the fact that we did not have to cook during our entire stay. We used to eat lunch and dinner in restaurants or at cafeterias on campus every day. At first it was difficult for me to get used to Korean food, since I am not a seafood lover and I can't eat the very spicy food characteristic of Korean cuisine. However, there are many other delicious dishes. We ate out every day for two reasons: first because of the low cost, and second because we simply didn't have a kitchen in the dormitories. When you hear no kitchen you think it must be hard, but it was not a big deal as I explained before. If you are lucky enough to meet a nice Korean student with an extra refrigerator, they may let you use it once in a while. This was a perfect way to keep fresh milk, for breakfast at least.



During the internship I had an opportunity to form professional relationships with many Koreans colleagues, some of whom have become doctors in different fields. Others are researchers working for big companies (such as LG) or business owners, which I believe can be very useful contacts in the event of any future business notions I may have. During my stay I also made a lot of friends with interns coming from different countries. My roommate Jara is from Spain, and we became close friends very fast. She is planning to visit me here in Israel so I can show her around the country. I also have good friends from the Netherland, USA, Germany, Turkey, Finland and other countries. We used to hang out all the time together in Gwangju, walking around downtown where we



tried Korean food and drinks in its traditional restaurants. We walked along the art streets, sang in karaoke rooms and enjoyed the night life till morning! Moreover, we used to travel every weekend to a different city: Seoul, Daegu, Mokpo, Busan and Wando County. Together we visited many fascinating historical sites like the Royal Palace in Seoul (Gyeongbokgung) and other old traditional buildings, did some shopping at street markets, enjoyed beaching, and attended festivals like "Mokpo Sea Festival" and "Chicken and Beer Festival – Daegu." One of the best adventures was when we rented a traditional Korean house on the beach in Wando Island. In such houses you have to take off your shoes before entering, because the floor is made of wood. Inside the house we had no furniture at all, so we had to sit and sleep on the floor, even without a mattress. We spent all that night playing Korean drinking games, dancing, grilling fish and swimming.

In conclusion, I enjoyed every minute of my stay in Gwangju: I learned many new practical skills in the laboratory, and gained more academic experience and proficiencies. I met new people, enjoyed interacting with them, discussed different issues and learned a lot from our similarities and differences. The internship was very useful for me on many levels. Therefore, I strongly recommend other students to try this experience, and hope they will enjoy and learn as much as I did.

