

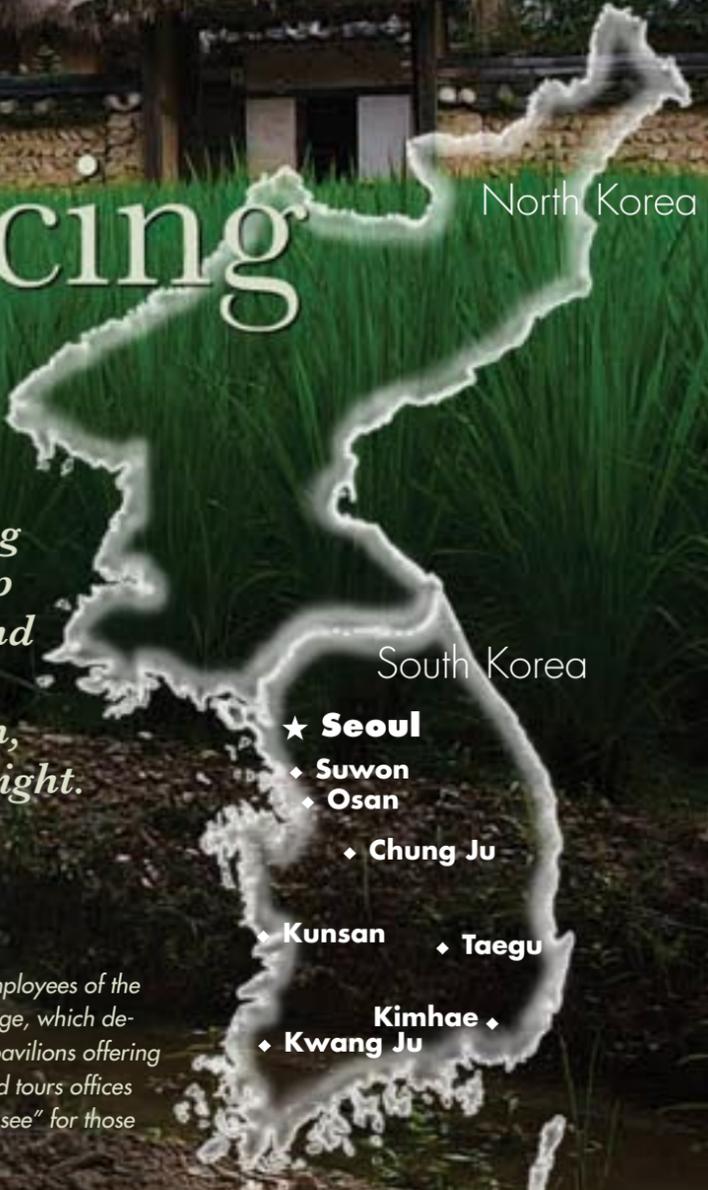


# Embracing Korea

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.  
photos by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

*Airmen working at South Korean collocated operating bases are prepared to equip forces with “beds, beans and bullets” if war ever breaks out. Their motto: One team, one fight, ready to fight tonight.*

**Walking to work can be enjoyable** for employees of the Korean Folk Village near Seoul, South Korea. The village, which depicts early Korean culture, has waterfalls, ponds and pavilions offering a relaxing atmosphere for visitors. Air Force tickets and tours offices around the peninsula offer trips to the village, a “must see” for those interested in Korean culture.



North Korea

South Korea

★ **Seoul**

◆ **Suwon**

◆ **Osan**

◆ **Chung Ju**

◆ **Kunsan**

◆ **Taegu**

◆ **Kimhae**

◆ **Kwang Ju**

**T**ech. Sgt. Nadine Lalanne is bold when it comes to trying new foods. But during one lunch excursion with friends, even she met her match, “Fear Factor” style.

Just outside her base, her friends tried to convince her to eat a live, young octopus. She was directed to take a chopstick, push it through the main body of the little sea creature, twirl its eight legs around like spaghetti and eat the thing whole ... while it was still wiggling around ... suction cups and all.

She chickened out. Fear proved to be a factor for her.

Octopus on a stick isn't something a person can order at McDonald's, or pick up outside the gates of an Americanized Korean city. It's a delicacy that's more prevalent where foreigners are few and English is as rare to hear as Swahili in Butte, Mont.

Taegu and Kimhae air bases are just such places. Tucked away in big cities in the southern part of South Korea, these collocated operating bases, better known as COBs, are geographically separated from American military installations. It's a ratio of one part American per 500,000 Koreans. Airmen at these locations are adventurous and not afraid to mingle with locals. For these strangers in a strange land, learning Hungul, the local lingo, is advantageous. They never know when they'll need to give directions to a taxi driver or catch a bus home.

“A lot of people don't even know we're here,” said Master Sgt. Jessie Reynolds, Taegu's 607th Support Squadron first sergeant. “This place is a well-kept secret. We get the opportunity for more responsibility and

the chance to get immersed in the culture.”

When Sergeant Lalanne received orders to Kimhae, she asked, “What's a Kimhae?”

Good question. It's located near Pusan City, on the southeastern tip of the Korean Peninsula. It has some 4 million residents and is known for its beaches, hot springs, resorts and historic relics. For Sergeant Lalanne, it's home. She lives downtown in the heart of the city.

“I interact daily with Koreans. Once you're outside the gate, you're in a foreign land where many people don't speak English,” she said.

She lives in an off-base, three-bedroom apartment that's a two-minute walk from a park. She pays 1.2 million won per month, a little over \$1,000, which covers rent plus cable television, electricity and water.

“It's a beautiful city. Koreans are great, especially the little kids,” she said. “And I'm not scared to catch a cab by myself at night.”

Very few people own cars; they mostly use taxis, subways and buses.

Kimhae, like its parent base up north, Taegu, leaves a small footprint in the community, much like an infant. There are about 25 Airmen assigned at Taegu. Only about a dozen are at Kimhae.

“At Osan [Air Base, South Korea], it looks like someone kicked the top off an anthill,” Sergeant Reynolds said. “At Taegu, it's so empty I can walk from one end of the base to the other and not see a soul.”

Between five to 10 patrons watch movies in the Taegu theater for free, while the Top Four club sells snacks there to raise money. Since there are so few se-

nior noncommissioned officers, the base has a Top Four organization, as opposed to a Top Three, to allow for more members. COBs appear quaint and tiny, but their members stay busy. Real busy.

Airmen who work at these bases have to manage many different programs at once. For instance, a single base civil engineer serves both Kimhae and Taegu as their on-scene commander, fire marshal, primary ordering officer, services functional officer, communications functional officer, readiness/disaster preparedness officer and explosive ordnance disposal officer.

It's entirely natural for visitors to rent shoes from the bowling alley, pay for a drink and make a billeting reservation all from the same person, who may return to be the disc jockey that night or the movie theater volunteer the next day. And with all those jobs comes accountability.

“The responsibility level here is high,” said Master Sgt. Ken Lett, the chief of supply at Taegu, who also runs five other functions. “When I first got here, I was overwhelmed with brain aches. After a month, it felt good knowing I had that much responsibility.”

The collocated operating bases serve as reception and “bed-down” centers for incoming forces for exercises, contingencies and wartime, as well as manage a massive war reserve materiel program. There are five such bases in the Korean peninsula. They essentially serve as caretakers for military materials, supplies and equipment, to include vehicles, aerospace ground equipment and everything a unit needs to create a bare base — tanks, jet fuel and generators, to name a few.

“Have you ever stored a car for a month and ended up having a dead battery?” asked Tech. Sgt. Gregory Smith, an aerospace ground equipment inspector. “We can't have that. We have to be able to fight tonight,” he said.

They do this by supervising local national employees, who turn the vehicle engines over once in a while, shrink wrap supplies and materials to keep the moisture out and change fluids when needed. In theory, the next time a big exercise kicks off in South Korea, an exercise participant can step into a vehicle, turn the key and drive away, despite the vehicle having been in storage for a year.

Since most active duty Airmen supervise a majority of the work being done at collocated operating bases, they have time for self-improvement.

“I love it here,” said Staff Sgt. Jessica Martinez, who's in charge of the maintenance control and fleet maintenance. She asked to be at Kimhae while her husband is at Osan. During her stay, she earned a bachelor's degree in human resources.

“I love the Air Force, and I love my life. Kimhae is a good assignment for a young NCO like me. But you've got to be self-motivated and be able to maintain everything by yourself.”

Sergeant Lalanne is still trying to motivate herself to overcome the fear of eating wiggly, live sea creatures. For the average American citizen, living among foreigners day in and day out would be intimidating. However, for everyone working at a COB, fear of mingling with foreigners is not a factor. ☺

**For more info**

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**Tech. Sgt. Ronald Smith**

(center), a quality assurance evaluator and the only active duty Air Force member assigned to the Taegu Air Base fire station, observes Korean civilian firefighters practice rescuing a “pilot” during a simulated aircraft accident on the flight line.



**Members at Kimhae Air Base**

take shrink wrapping to a different level. They even wrap buses and automobiles. Staff Sgt. Jessica Martinez (left) and Master Sgt. Mario Lapurga stroll through the storage facility. Small solar panels placed outside the shrink-wrapped vehicles keep batteries charged and ready.