

Before this latest trip, the last time I saw South Korea was through a filthy gas mask lens. It was the opposite of looking through rose-colored glasses. Everything had a foggy, scratchy feel to it. During the decade I was in the Pacific Air Forces, I deployed three times to South Korea for Foal Eagle exercises. Usually it was to a remote location. Usually it meant wearing a gas mask, rubber boots and a chem suit. The work days were long, and time off was nonexistent.

For Master Sgt. Val Gempis, the photojournalist who accompanied me, the trip triggered memories of an annual exercise called Team Spirit.

"About half a million troops use to converge there, turning the country, about the size of Indiana, into one huge aerial, land and naval battle playground for United States and allied forces during winter," he said.

"Even the spiciest local delicacies wouldn't bring relief to your freezing bones. Whipping rain and kicking winds also greeted us frequently during our one-month stay," he recalled. "Our tents were usually submerged in ankle-deep mud. We had a gaso-

line heater that provided miniscule warmth. It would die in the middle of the night. There were times when I foolishly tried to roll out of my cot to reignite the heat but couldn't because my sleeping bag was coated with a thin sheet of ice."

Those memories played in our minds as we traveled to South Korea.

Unlocking South Korea's secrets

However, we ended the trip with a different view — completely opposite of what we had expected.

Unlike most Airmen who are assigned to one base, we had the chance to visit, in one fell swoop, multiple bases. We not only toured Osan and Kunsan, but also little-known places like Kimhae and Taegu.

At the major bases, we visited the flight line, rode with the cops, burrowed inside command centers and chatted with support people.

We also made it a point to do things off base. At Kunsan, we visited handicapped children in an orphanage in the countryside. Midway between Kunsan and Osan, we tried to stay clean during a mud festival on a beach, where we also cooked snails and colorful clams over a hiba-

chi and ate them for lunch. We saw a Bengal tiger in a hotel near Taegu, and we marveled at traditional dancers as they leapt in the air during exhibitions in Seoul.

Those off-base excursions offered a different perspective that Sergeant Gempis and I hadn't experienced. During Team Spirit and Foal Eagle, South Korea meant nothing but exercise, exercise, exercise. This other side of Korea intrigued us. It made the assignment memorable.

Unfortunately, we saw very few Americans outside their Air Force gates unlocking the secrets of South Korea. Many of the tours were free or cost very little. During our careers, Sergeant Gempis and I have heard hundreds of stories beginning, "There's nothing to do in South Korea but [fill in the blank]."

We had probably done and seen more things off base in three weeks in South Korea than most people have seen during an entire tour there. Readers can easily counter this statement by saying we did that because it was part of our job, which is true. However, we could have easily just covered on-base events, but we felt it was important to include off-base events in our itinerary to truly catch the flavor of South Korea.

That should also be a goal of everyone stationed overseas. Unless off-base events become a part of your "itinerary" while in a foreign land, you'll miss out on the best that country has to offer.

— Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

Called a farmers' dance, drums and whistles pierce the air in a clash of color and sound during a performance at the Korean Folk Village. Airmen stationed in South Korea can experience the Korean culture, past and present, at the 243-acre site.

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

