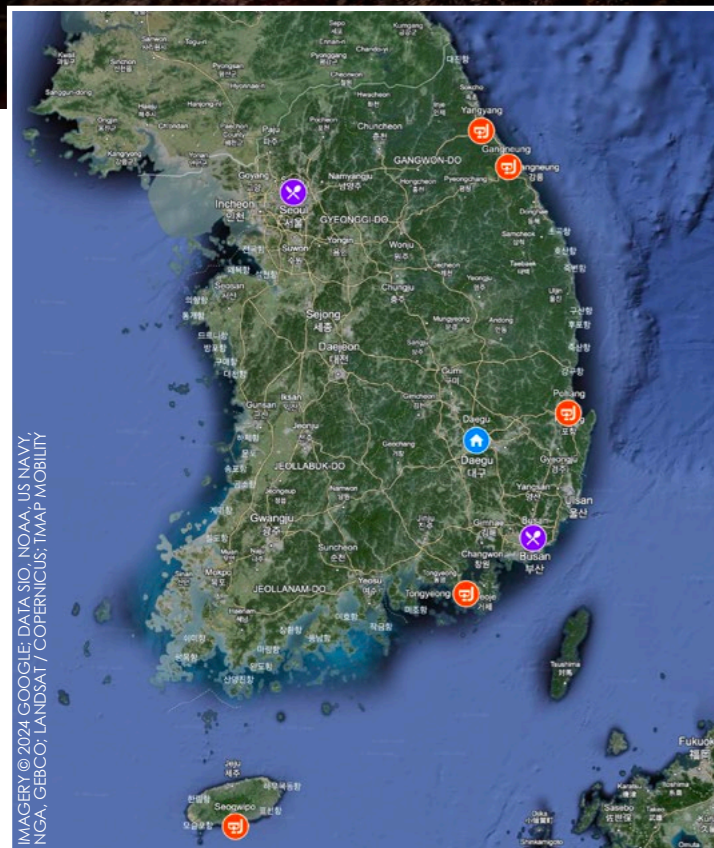
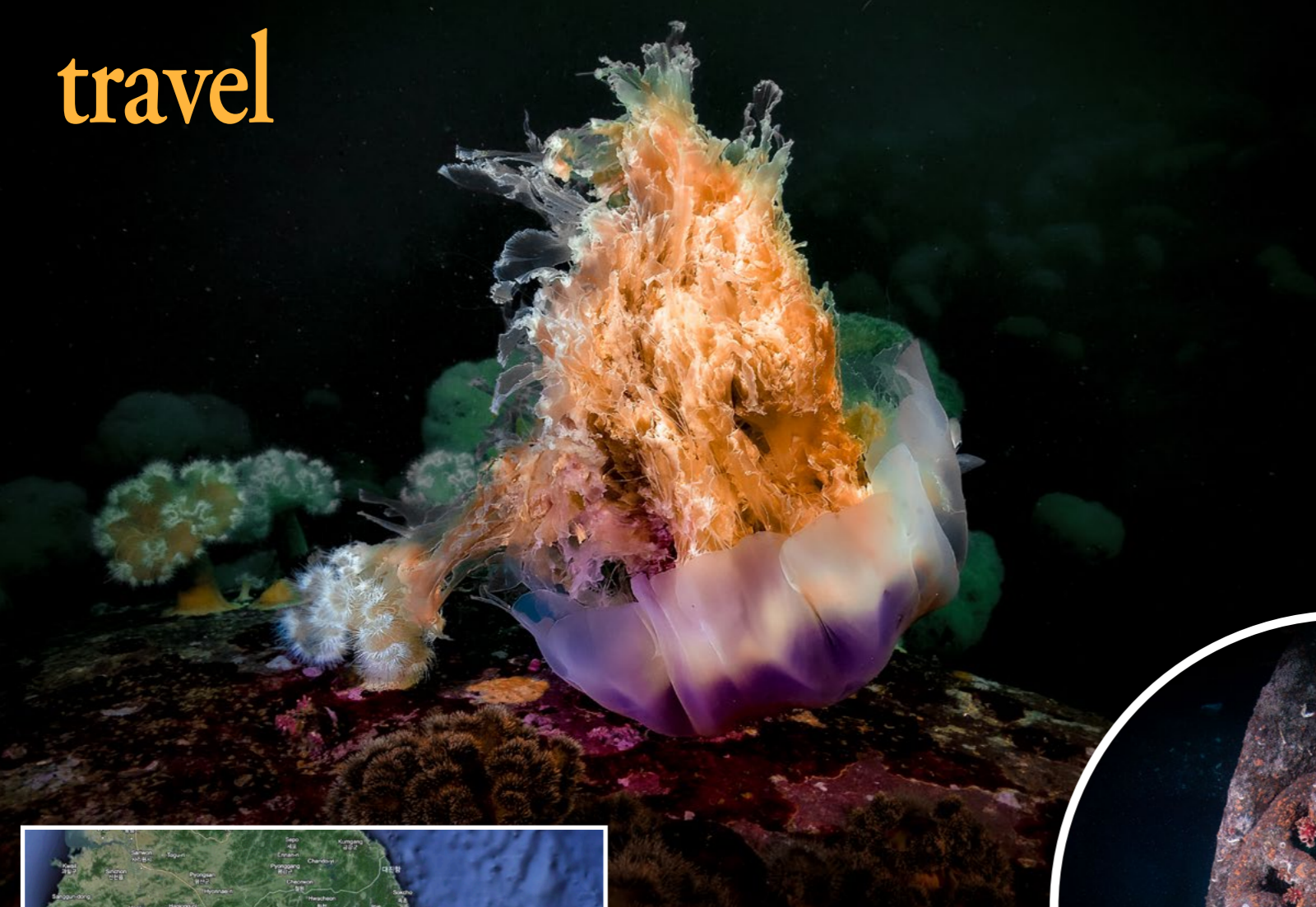


South Korea

Text and photos
by Drew Holder

*Diving, Nature Trails
& Fine Dining*





Lion's mane jellyfish (top left) and giant plumose anemone (top right) at Yangyang; Anchor chain near the propellers of the *Stella* wreck at Gangneung (center); A beautiful *Sakuraeolis gerberina* nudibranch at Pohang (previous page)

South Korea has a lot to offer underwater photographers, recreational divers, and technical divers, from wall dives and artificial reefs to a variety of marine life and a wide array of nudibranchs, not to mention topside attractions to enjoy between dives, from beautiful nature parks and scenic trails to cultural events and fine dining. Drew Holder gives us an inside look.

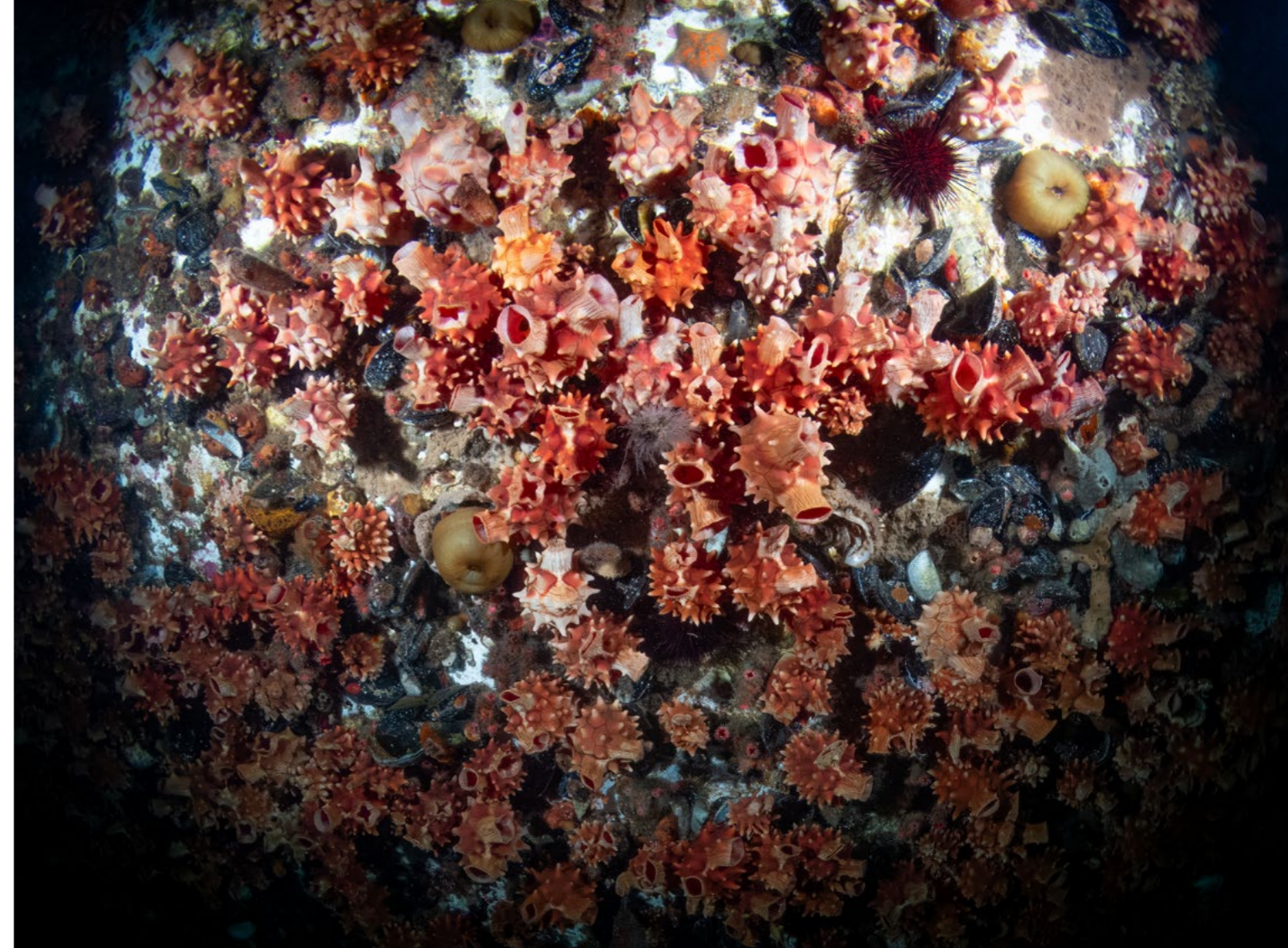
South Korea has been a hidden gem of a dive destination for both my 11-year-old son and me. After living in South Korea for almost two years, we have had the opportunity to explore several areas from Yangyang on the northeast coast down to Jeju Island in the south of the peninsula.

Much of the east coast down to the south coast is rocky coastline with cliffs in many areas. There are several sandy beach areas on the eastern and southern coasts that can facilitate shore diving, but most diving is done by boat. The

Fun topside excursions include one of the many well-maintained trails leading to Udusan Chulreong suspension bridge in Gayasan National Park near Daegu

Map of South Korea showing dive locations mentioned in this article (red dots), Daegu (blue dot), and Seoul and Busan (purple dots) where you can explore 36 Michelin Star and 72 Bib Gourmand restaurants.





King post on the deck of the *Stella* wreck, Gangneung (left); Divers explore the hull of the wreck (top left); Divers explore the hull of the wreck (top left); Communications rack deep inside the wreck (top center); Hundreds of sea pineapples on the hull (top right); Diver on the deck (right)



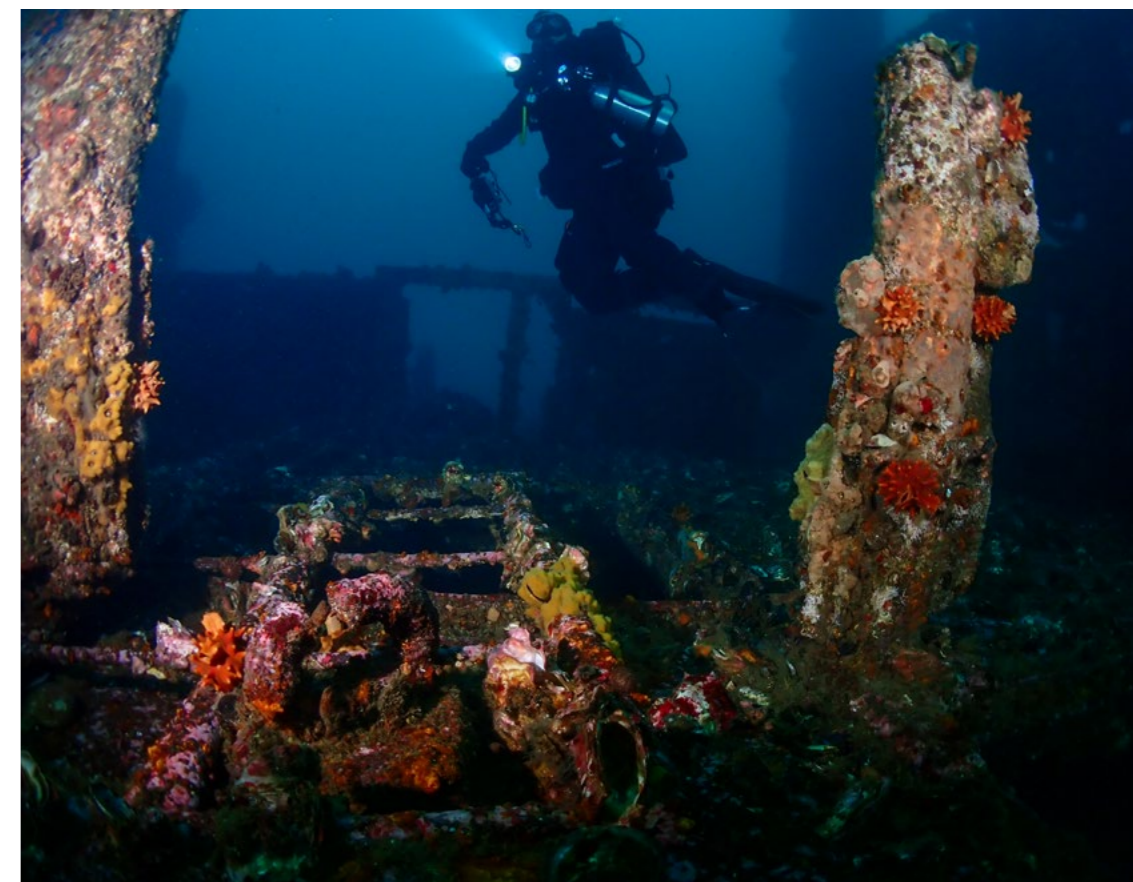
western coast of South Korea has shallower waters with tidal mudflats that do not offer as many diving opportunities. Below are five locations around South Korea and photos of some of the biodiversity that I have seen along the way.

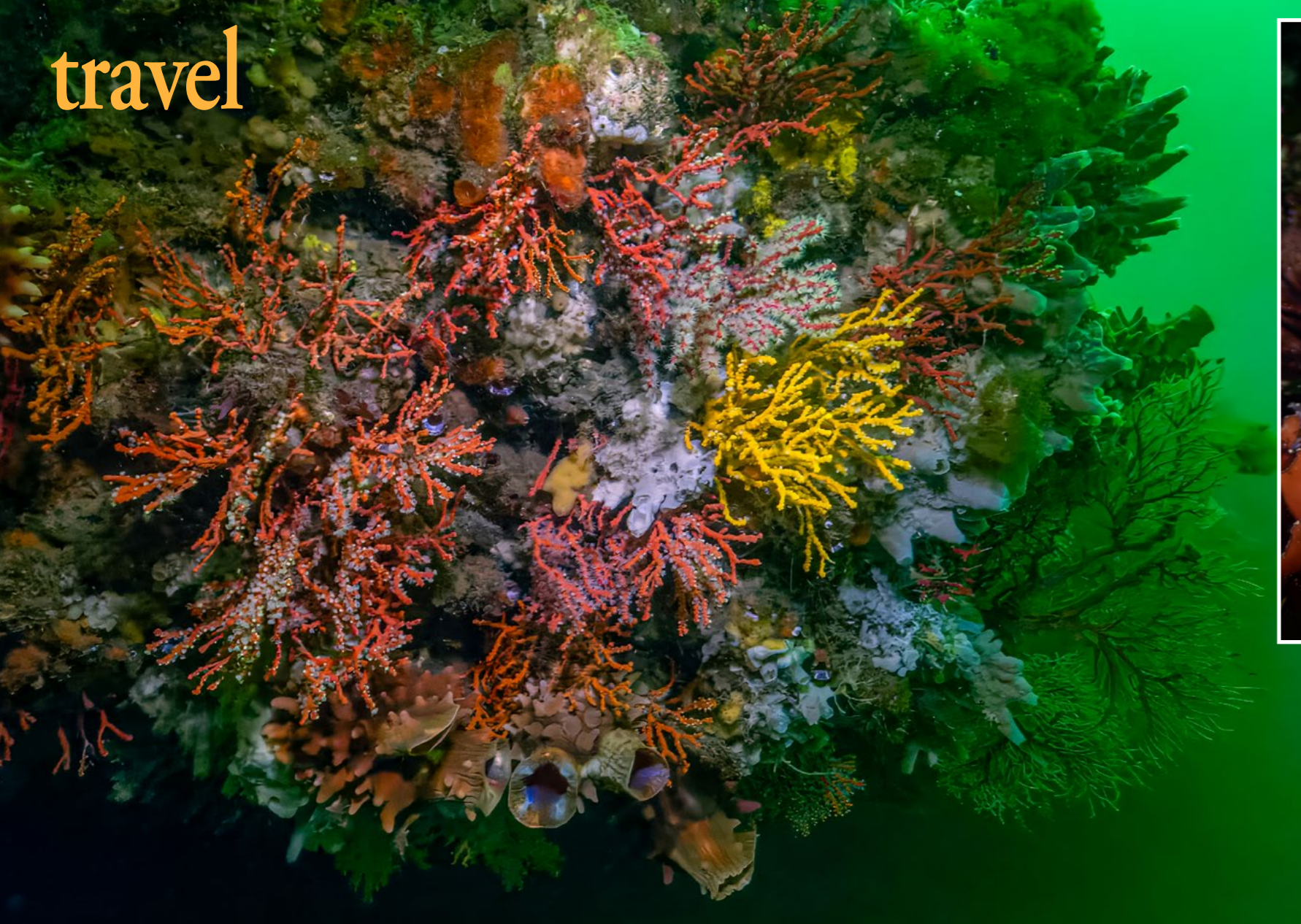
Yangyang. Located on the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan, this area offers deeper waters closer to shore. My experience in this area was in November with water temperatures of 52°F (11°C) at a depth of 90ft (~27m). Marine life in this

area includes jellyfish, plumose anemones, and several species of pufferfish.

Gangneung. This area is the home to the *Stella* wreck, a fishing trawler that was sunk as an artificial reef and tourist attraction. The wreck lies in about 100ft (~30m) of water and is frequented by moderate to strong currents. Other artificial reefs such as armored personnel carriers and various types of military equipment can be found in the area.

Pohang. This location became my most frequented area to dive as it was only an hour's drive from where I lived. This area boasts a variety of life with patches of cold-water cor-

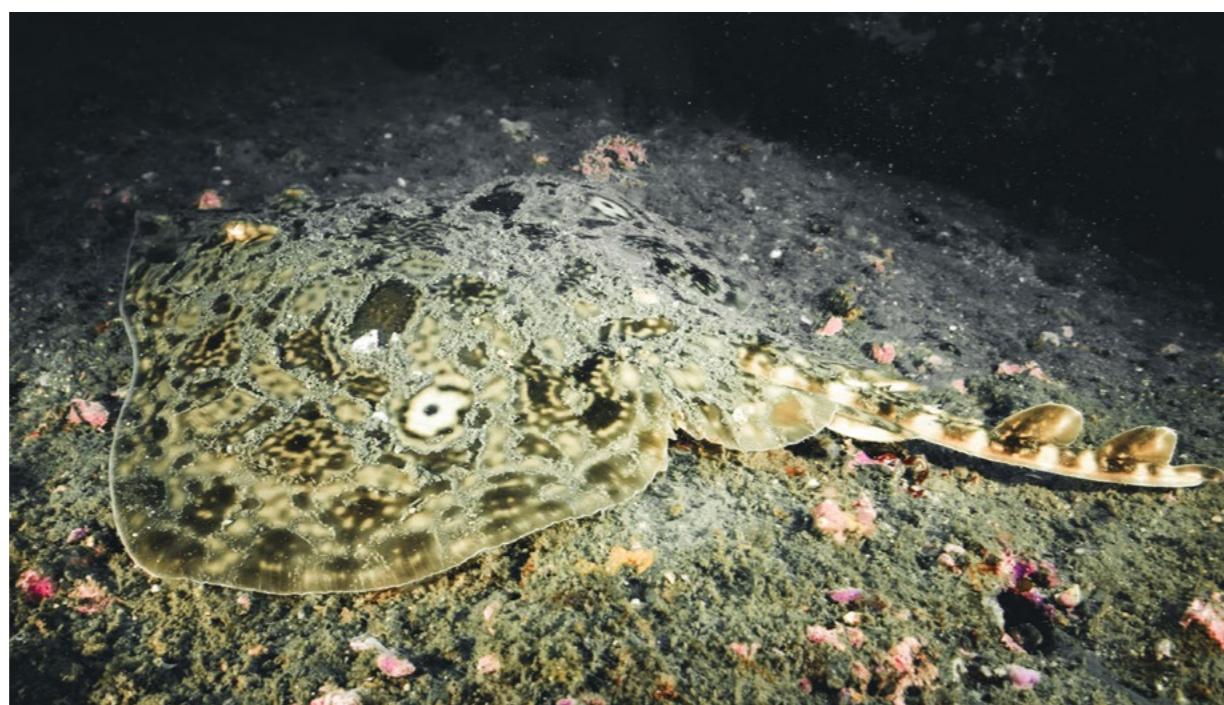




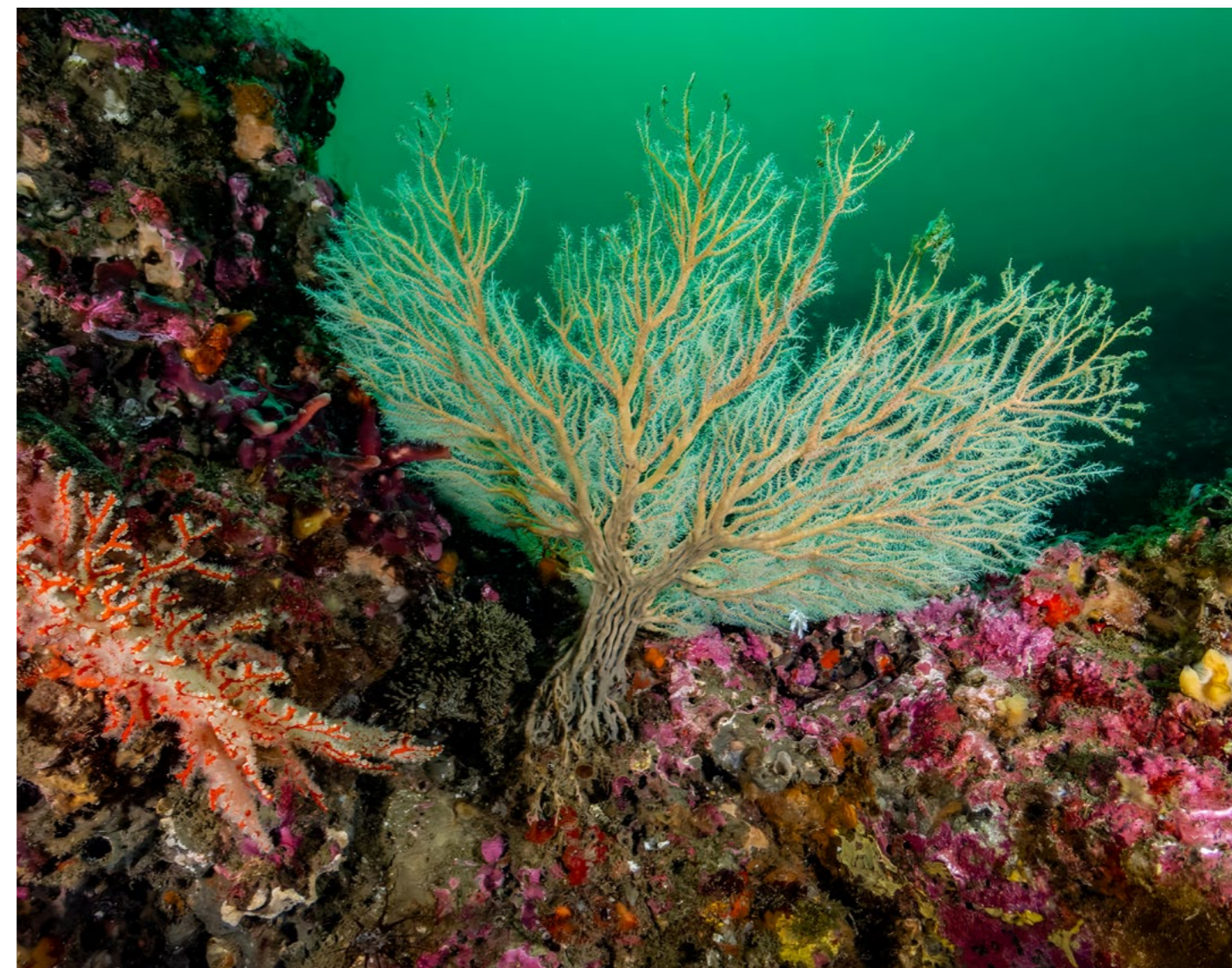
South Korea

Offshore in the East Sea at Pohang: Cuttlefish in a defensive posture (left); Red and yellow corals mixed with tunicates (far left)—in summer, the waters turn green from algae growth; Tree-like corals grow in areas frequented by current (below).

als, many different types of nudibranchs, skates, octopus, and even cuttlefish. Farther offshore, the bottom is composed of some sandy areas that are sandwiched between massive boulders. Some areas have small canyons that look like riverbeds and are unique to swim through. Closer to the shore, there is a large, sheltered harbor that receives less surge, allowing the underwater plant life to thrive. In this kelp habitat, there are many sea hares ranging in size from tennis balls to basketballs.



Large skate resting on the seafloor, offshore in the East Sea at Pohang



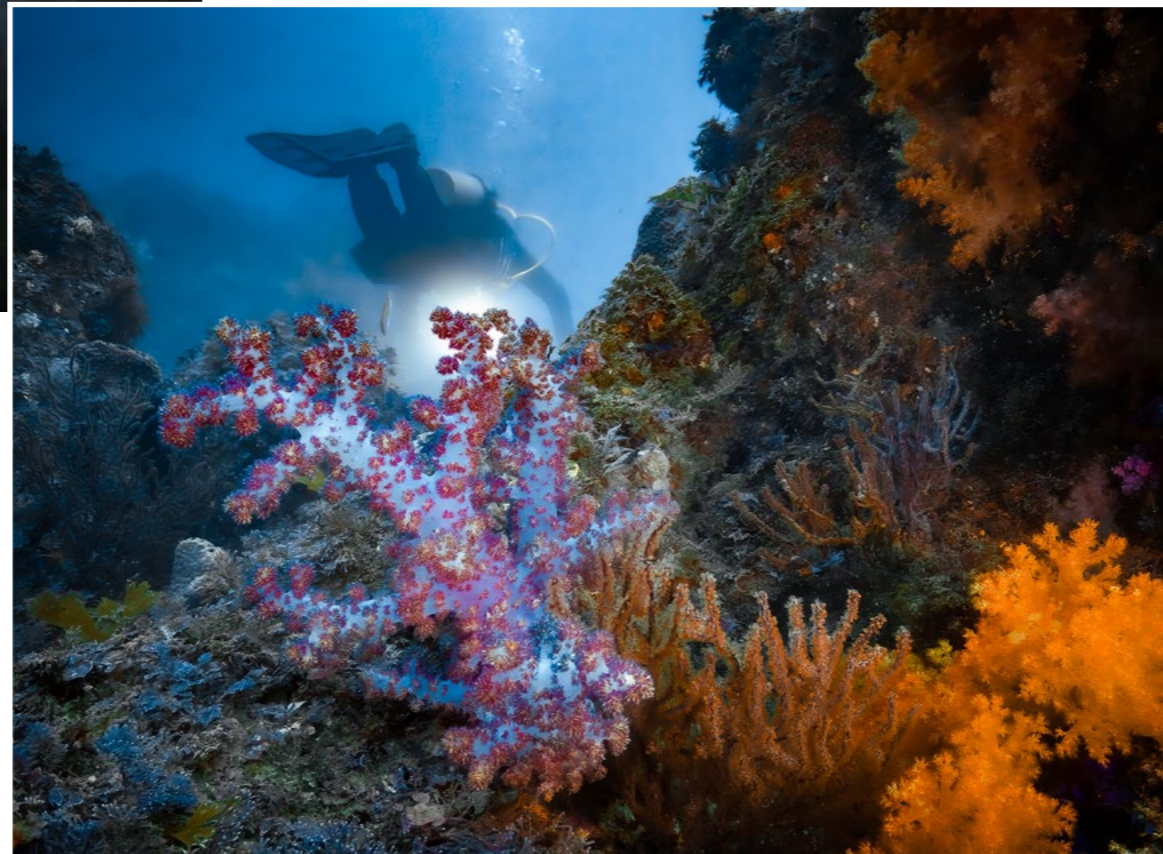
At Tongyeong in the South Sea: Octopus concealing itself under a ledge of barnacles (right); Gold and purple crinoid (far right); Lionfish on rocky reef (center); Curious filefish inspecting my camera lights (below).



Tongyeong. Unlike Yangyang, Gangneung, and Pohang, Tongyeong is in the South Sea. The land features of this area have a multitude of small peninsulas and islands scattered along the southern coast. The dive operator that I used would take divers by boat an hour south, past most of the commercial fishing areas, out to remote islands. The boat would then drop divers off around these small islands for a wall dive type of experience. Here you will find more tropical species of fish, anemones, lionfish, crinoids, and nudibranchs.

Colonies of small anthozoans cover many of the rocks around the various islands in the South Sea at Tongyeong.





Jeju Island. I only had one opportunity to experience diving in Jeju and it was great! Most people fly to Jeju Island, which is south of the Korean peninsula, but I took my family by ferry from Mokpo, on the southwestern coast, and it was far superior to traveling there by air. The four-hour ferry ride was relaxing and felt more like a cruise ship than a ferry. The ferry allows you to take your rental or personal vehicle, and there are restaurants and plenty of activities to do on board.

Once on the island, we traveled to the south side as most of the dive centers are in Seogwipo. I did three dives on my trip, the first two had excellent visibility and amazing soft corals everywhere. For the third dive, I asked the guide if

Colorful soft corals on the rocky reef at Seogwipo, Jeju Island (above and top left); Impressive white variety of black corals at Jeju Island (top center).

At Seogwipo on Jeju Island: Columnar basalt formations on the coastline (above); My son Mark sits on a shelf of solidified volcanic ash that has been eroded by changing water levels over the eons (top right).





With black spots on its white body, this *Chromodoris orientalis* nudibranch resembles a Dalmatian (left).

full of life, covered with thousands of soft corals and tropical fish.

Nudibranchs!

there were any shipwrecks in the area. He said, "Yes, but it will be a difficult dive."

This third dive was amazing, even though the visibility was less than ideal. On this dive, the current was strong, the depth was 130ft (~39m), and there was a tourist submarine lurking in the background behind the haze of the water. However, the wreck itself was

Every dive site I visited in South Korea had nudibranchs. After hundreds of dives in tropical areas of the Pacific, it was always a rare treat to see a nudibranch. It is a different story in the waters of South Korea—the nudibranchs are everywhere! The pictures I present here are just a few of what can be seen, but there are many more out there.



At Pohang: Cherry blossom nudibranch (above); *Hypselodoris festiva* nudibranch, or blue dorid, showing off its vivid blue colors (top right); The Hiro's sea slug is extremely small in size (top left); A type of *Dendrodoris* nudibranch (far left)



An elevator platform is commonly used to lift divers and their gear from the tag line to the dive boat.

Korean style dive boats

The main feature that most dive boats in South Korea have in common (and is the most convenient) is the use of an elevator system instead of ladders to get back on the boat after the dive. These systems use a winch mounted on the top of an elevator that lifts a platform out of the water, carrying one or two divers at a time. Entry into the water, however, remains the standard means, with either a back roll or a giant stride.



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Topside excursions

After almost two years of traveling in South Korea, it is difficult to pick my favorite sites from the many places my family and I have explored. Here are a few places that were exceptional.

Homigot Sunrise Square, located in Pohang, in the easternmost part of the country, is famous for its sculpture of a hand reaching out from the ocean (note the seagull in the photo for scale). As the most easterly point in South Korea, it receives the first sunrise each day. If you



Each winter, an ice mound is “grown” for the ice hill festival at the Biseul Mountain Recreational Forest (left), about an hour’s drive from Daegu; View of the giant hand sculpture and the pier at Homigot Sunrise Square in Pohang (above); Seagulls perch on the tips of the fingers of the hand sculpture overlooking the sea (right).

arrive early enough, you can photograph the sun and the sculpture in the same frame.

Jeju Island has a milder climate than the Korean peninsula and feels much more subtropical. The island has many attractions, with my personal favorite being the geological and volcanic features. There are areas along the coastline where you can see different layers of volcanic ash deposits that span thousands of years, revealed by water erosion. You can also find columnar basalt, a hexagonal lava rock formation created when lava comes in contact with water.



TRAVEL TIPS

Navigation apps. Use one or all of the following while in South Korea: Naver, Kakao, or Waze. (Most apps from outside South Korea will not work.)

Translation apps. Papago seems to give the best results for translating English to Hangul. I have noticed that many of the locals use this as their primary translation app. Google Translate also works, but it may not convey more complex sentences as accurately.

Cell phones. Make sure your cell phone supports LTE data and can operate on bands 3, 8 and 26. If not, South Korea has a robust, free WiFi network throughout the country, enabling you to make calls when within range of a router. ■





Entrance to one of the temples on the top of Biseul Mountain (left); The view from the three-way suspension Udusan Chulreong Bridge at Gayasan National Park was well worth the 30-minute hike up the mountain (right); The scenery and ancient atmosphere at Biseul Mountain made the visit to this area feel otherworldly (below).



Biseul Mountain Recreational Forest. Located about an hour's drive inland, just outside the city of Daegu, this place is a great attraction to see in winter. An ice hill festival is held here annually, for which an ice formation is "grown." It can be seen while hiking in the forest. The hazy forest with ancient temples along the path is a must see.

Gayasan National Park. If you are looking for some crazy scenic views from a three-way suspension bridge, look no further than the Udusan Chulreong bridge in Gayasan National Park. The park is located just west of Daegu. It takes about 30 minutes to hike up a winding staircase to the top of the mountain, which leads

to the wobbly bridge—for those who are not afraid of heights.

Apsan Mountain. Finally, a view from the top of Apsan Mountain, located in Daegu Apsan Park, south of the city. There is an intriguing directional sign here, showing where South Korea sits amongst the rest of the world.

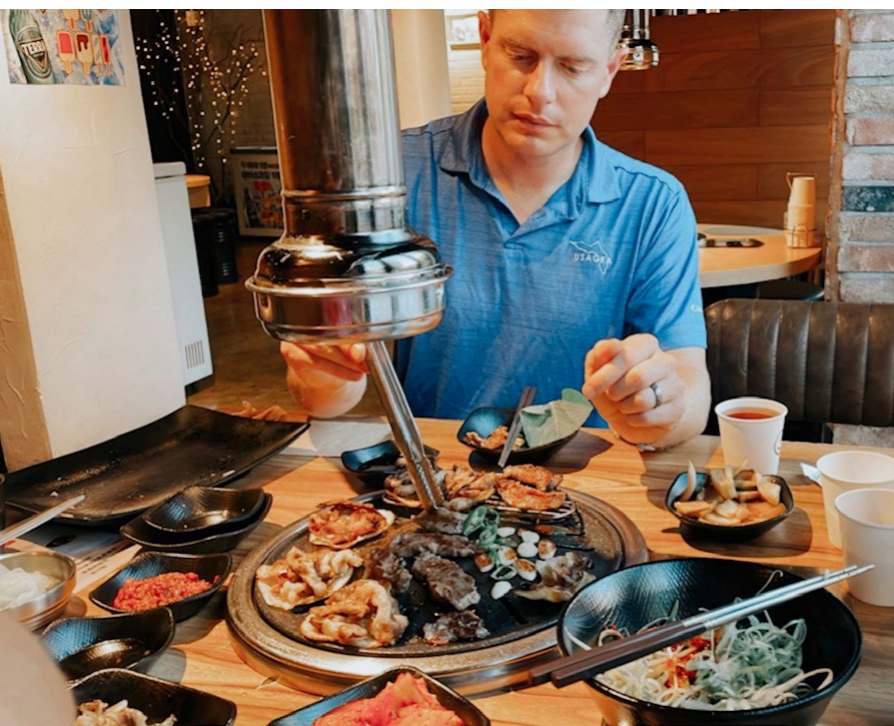


At the summit of Apsan Mountain in Daegu, you can see the city from above as well as this intriguing sign showing directions and distances to cities around the world.

Delicious lunch at the café in the Osulloc Tea Museum in Seogwipo on Jeju Island (below); Tasty Korean-style BBQ (bottom left); A fun, Oreo-decorated cake from a Korean bakery (center)



An array of Korean side dishes called *banchan* (above), placed in the center of the table, is shared among dining companions. (Wikipedia)



Topside Fare: Fine Dining in Seoul & Busan

Text edited by G. Symes

In South Korea, there is plenty to enjoy between dives when it comes to fine dining. There are 36 restaurants in the country that have been awarded Michelin stars, one of the highest honors a restaurant can receive.

While 33 are located in Seoul, three are in Busan on the country's southeastern coast. After diving in the northeast at Yangyang and Gangneung, why not make a stop in Busan for some fine dining on your way south to dive at Tongyeong and Jeju Island?

Bib Gourmand
There are also 15 restaurants in Busan and 57 restaurants in Seoul that have received the Bib Gourmand award for quality cuisine at moderate prices. So, you do not have to break the bank to eat well.

Final thoughts

South Korea never seemed like a bucket list dive destination to me, initially, but I have come to appreciate its beauty after seeing it first-hand. It may not be for the tropical, warm water enthusiast. However, if you want to see unique things and experience



Vegan course at A Flower Blossom on the Rice restaurant in Seoul

Green Star

For eco-conscious diners, there are three restaurants that have received the Green Star, which recognizes sustainable practices that meet both ethical and environmental standards: the Michelin-starred Fiotto in Busan, and Gigas and A Flower Blossom on the Rice in Seoul.

Food tasting tours

There are also a number of

food tours to enjoy in cities across the country, including tours of local food markets, street food stalls, little known cafés, and tours led by local chefs. Explore a taste of **Busan** or a **foodie tour in Seoul**. ■

For more information, see the Michelin Guide at [guide.michelin.com](https://www.guide.michelin.com) or the **K-Food Tour Guide**.

SOURCES: MICHELIN GUIDE, KOREA TOURISM ORGANIZATION

Cuisine

When my family and I moved to South Korea, we really did not know what to expect when it came to food options, but lucky for us, we were in for many delicious treats. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that you did not have to go far in the cities to find a café, a

bakery, or just about any genre of restaurant.

Not only have we come to appreciate the taste of the food, but we have been consistently blown away by the level of detail, craftsmanship, and pride that the chefs put into their creations. South Korea has certainly spoiled our taste buds.

As of early 2024, there are now over 200 Michelin-recognized restaurants in the country, including 36 Michelin-starred restaurants and 72 Bib Gourmand (good, yet moderately priced) establishments in the capital city of Seoul, as well as in Busan on the southeastern coast (– Ed).

a new culture by taking the road less traveled, then go dive in South Korea! ■

Drew Holder is an American underwater photographer based in Daegu, South Korea. Visit: [Instagram.com/h20_life_below](https://www.instagram.com/h20_life_below)

Special thanks go to Yellow Submarine Dive Center in Daegu. Course director, Mr. Lee (aka Red), has helped US and international divers for many years, offering PADI training and guided tours of the East Sea of Korea. Visit: [yellowsubmarinedive.modoo.at](https://www.yellowsubmarinedive.modoo.at) (for English, use your browser's translation tool).