

Cruising By Rail



Korea's Newest Train Excursion Showcases The Wonders Of The East Coast

By Laurie Carter

Wearing a blue and gold livery that instantly reminds you of luxury rail icons like the Blue Train and Rocky Mountaineer, Korea's crisply modern Haerang takes rail touring in a different direction. While most train excursions focus on the journey rather than the destination, Haerang bills itself as a rail cruise.

Patterned on river cruising, with the convenience of one-time unpacking and mobile accommodations, Haerang lets you experience the culture beyond the windows with a busy schedule of daytrips – although the train itself is so pleasant, you'll be glad there's also plenty of time on board.

Accommodations range from deluxe rooms and suites for two, to family spaces for three, and all rooms are equipped with bed(s), individual shower room/toilet, TV and air conditioning. Suites provide additional amenities including sofa, table and audio system. Onboard common areas include the Sunrise restaurant; a café, open 24/7; and the observation car with panoramic windows, lots of open space and a selection of magazines, DVDs and free Internet service, plus a program of shows and entertainment throughout the day.

The Haerang package includes all meals and bus excursions. Some meals are served on the train, but part of the experience is sampling regional specialties like hanjeongsik, raw fish and hanu beef at well-known local restaurants.

Day 1: Following departure from Seoul Station the train stops at Gokseong Station for a visit to the Gokseong Leisure Culture Center where the entertainment is a traditional Korean musical performance. A short bus ride brings you to the Seomjingang River Rail Village for some unique touring on a rail bike – think paddleboat on railway tracks – and a scenic view of the Seomjingang River.

Get ready to shift gears from quirky to antique as you move on to Mount Jirisan and the Hwaomsa Buddhist Temple. With a history spanning more than 1,500 years, this complex is home to several Korean national treasures, including the largest stone light in the country and three multi-storey pagodas, along with humble straw-roofed houses and a water mill.

Day 2: Overnight you travel to Masan Station, the departure point for some high-level sightseeing. The two-kilometre Hallyeosudo cable car ride (longest in Korea) takes just 15 minutes from Tongyeong and deposits you near the summit of 461-metre Mount Mireuksan.

From there it's a short hike along the wooden decks to Mireuksan Observatory and views of Tongyeong Port and Hallyeosudo Marine National Park. On a clear day, a distant island of Japan is visible on the horizon and in spring the mountaintop erupts in a burst of flowers.

Shoppers get a chance to let loose at Tongyeong Ottchil Art Museum, known for its modern paintings, traditional lacquerware, and mother-of-pearl crafts that have been a famous product of Tongyeong for more than four centuries.

During the afternoon, Haerang rumbles through the countryside to the "open-air museum" of Gyeongju, capital of the Silla kingdom for a thousand years from 57 BCE to 935 CE. Food features large in the cultural experience with an authentic hanjeongsik dinner in a hanok restaurant. You cap the evening at the beautifully landscaped and artistically lit Anapji Pond.

Day 3: At 5 a.m. Haerang pulls into Jeongdongjiin Station just in time for you to walk to the neighbouring sandy beach and catch the sunrise over the East Sea.



Photographers might want to stake out a different vantage point and capture the pine trees and quaint station silhouetted against the early morning sky.

After breakfast aboard, the itinerary might seem backwards with a soak in the hot springs at the Donghae Yakcheon Silver Town followed by a hike in the Mureung Valley. The waters of Mureung Valley flow over wide sheets of rock and form a large pond along the path. The scenery is lovely as the valley twists and turns around Samhwas Temple and Seonnyeotang Ravine to Ssangpok and Yongchu Falls. Yet the most fascinating sight is the 5,000-square-metre Mureung Rock, inscribed with the names and works of poets and scholars who once frequented the valley also known as Arcadia.

Sliding from the sublime to the olfactory, the Mukho Fish Market in Mukhohang Port, is a must-see. As you walk among the aisles of fresh seafood, you'll be engulfed in the pungent smells and accosted by the lively sales pitches.

And there's one more "high" light on the tour. Haerang rolls through Jeongamgul Tunnel (second longest railway tunnel in Korea) to arrive at Chujeon Station (the country's highest at 855 metres above sea level). The commemorative rock, thoughtfully inscribed "The highest station in Korea," is an obvious photo stop.

[Sidebar note for winter rail travel fans: Chujeon Station is the destination for the Fantastic Snow Flower Train tours that run December to February.]

Haerang offers a selection of itineraries: the two-day/one night Southeast or Southwest routes; and the three-day/two night Aura route that takes in the Eastern region along with both the Southeast and Southwest.

For more information, visit www.visitkorea.or.kr. Details on the Haerang Railroad Cruise are available under the Attractions/Travel Highlights tab. ✈



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Center: The two-kilometre Hallyeosudo cable car ride (longest in Korea) takes just 15 minutes from Tongyeong and deposits you near the top of Mount Mireuksan and views of Tongyeong Port and Hallyeosudo Marine National Park.

Bottom: The Mukho Fish Market in Mukhohang Port, is a must-see. As you walk among the aisles of fresh seafood, you'll be engulfed in the pungent smells and accosted by the lively sales pitches.