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THE DISASTERS OF AN UNTRIED TRAVELER IN KOREA

By:
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“Hey, welcome back,” your coworker greets you as he steps into the office kitchenette. “How was your trip?”

“Oh, it was fantastic!” you respond as you lift the handle on the Keurig, placing your K-cup in the slot. The aroma of hazelnut and caramel surrounds you in warmth, contradicting the cold glow of the fluorescent lights—as well as staving off the cold reality of being back at work—as you regale your teammate with all the fun you’d had the past two weeks.

Well. Aren’t you a little liar.

Oh, sure. The things you told your coworker *did* happen. And you *did* feel the emotions you described. But you also *did* lie—by omission.

Because you didn't mention *any* of the bad stuff. Not the flat tire or the sunburn or the food poisoning. And who could blame you? Those aren't the stories most people want to hear. Certainly not your coworker.

But those are just the stories I'm about to tell.

I Don't Think That Guy Was Really a Monk

Ashley and I collapsed heavily onto the pavilion. God, what a disappointing day.

First we'd gone to [Itaewon](#), a neighborhood known as Seoul's International District due to the high number of expats and U.S. military personnel in the area. It *sounded* like an amazing place to visit. And maybe it would have been, if it weren't for me. For some reason, I hadn't thought to find specific places within Itaewon to visit, so we'd just kind of wandered around the neighborhood for a couple of hours. The only interesting thing we'd found was a café that, while offering many delicious pastries to buy, was so crowded there'd been absolutely nowhere to sit.

Then we'd come to [Namsangol Hanok Village](#) to see the traditional Korean houses. Except the place didn't have much to offer. It was kind of small, offered very little in entertainment, and honestly



A hanok in Namsangol Hanok Village

didn't contain anything we hadn't already seen.

So we'd decided to cut our losses and plan the route to our next destination: [Namsan Park](#). I'd been looking forward to visiting the park and the tower and riding the cable car for years. This was sure to be one of

the highlights of the trip, and would *definitely* make up for this admittedly sub-par day.

As I opened Naver Map to figure out how to get there, a monk with a friendly smile on his face came up to us. The man didn't speak English, but he seemed nice enough. He handed over some cheap beaded bracelet, which my sister and I politely took. I was reminded of an episode of [The Return of Superman](#), when Seungjae and his father visited a reenactment village and interacted with some pretend beggars. I figured this guy was a paid actor who handed out these bracelets to all visitors.

But the situation suddenly changed when the man asked us for money.

Confession: I'm not good with surprises. If I encounter a situation I'm unprepared for, my brain stops doing that thinking thing it's supposed to be really good at. Which explained why I just forked over 20 won—a little under 20 US dollars—without question.

In hindsight, all the names in the record book he was carrying were Western. If it walks like a con and quacks like a con...

Ashley, to her credit, was more quick-thinking than me. She tried to hand him 5 won instead of 20. Unfortunately, the man wouldn't have it. He kept pointing to all the other names in the book, all of whom had donated 20 won. It seemed he wasn't going to leave us alone until Ashley gave him what he wanted. So she did.

After he left, Ashley glared at me. "Why did you have to give him that much money?"

I shrugged unhappily, the knowledge that we'd likely been conned swirling low in my belly. "I just saw all the other people in his book had donated 20 and just automatically gave it to him," I said as I reached into my purse for my phone. "I was so surprised, I just couldn't—"

I left off suddenly, my shame sharpening into fear.

My phone wasn't in my purse.

I stood up quickly, looking around at the pavilion, then on the ground. I checked my pockets. My phone wasn't there. I swear I'd had it in my hand when...when the monk showed up.

"Oh my god. I think that monk stole my phone," I whispered harshly to my sister.

“What?” Ashley stood up too, searching to make sure she hadn’t grabbed it by mistake.

“I cannot believe this is happening!” I explained, struggling to keep the panic at bay. And failing horribly.

I looked up and found the monk, who making his way to the restroom. Perhaps I was reading too much into it, but he just seemed suspicious. As he reached the door to the men’s room, I could have sworn that he glanced right and left, as though he were searching to make sure he wasn’t being followed.

Why did he look over his shoulder like that? I wondered. Is it a coincidence that he immediately headed to the bathroom after leaving us? Is he meeting somebody—a partner, perhaps—and he’s going to pass my phone off to him so that, if somebody in authority checks his pockets, there’s nothing there and so I look like I’m accusing an innocent [halabeoji](#) of theft?

I continued to frantically check my pockets and my purse once again, but it wasn’t—

Oh.

I glanced sheepishly at my sister as I removed my cell phone from my purse’s smallest pocket. A pocket I’d never once put my phone in the entire time I’d owned this purse. Until now, apparently.

“Found it,” I said with a grimace.

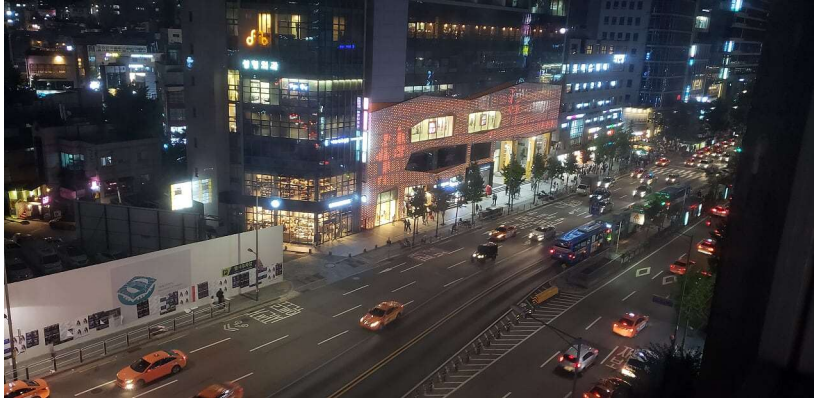
Ashley sighed and shot me a glare, one which I’d definitely earned. “I think it’s time we go to Namsan Park. Unless there’s an elderly person you’d like to accuse of stealing our [Wi-Fi egg](#)?” she asked with exasperation.

I paused to consider. “No. I had that on the books for our trip to [Myeongdong](#) in a couple days.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and started walking away instead of replying. Well, I thought I was funny.

I jogged to catch up. “Okay, so he’s not a phone thief,” I said to my sister as we exited the disappointing village. “But I also don’t think that guy was really a monk, either.”

I Kind of Wish I'd Been Eaten by Zombies



View of Hongdae from my Airbnb

My alarm blared loudly through the studio Airbnb my sister and I had rented. I groaned in protest. Even though I hadn't moved any part of my body, I could still feel my toes screaming in pain.

This was not a good start to the day. Then again, neither was waking up at three in the morning.

I reached over, shut the alarm off, and slowly sat up. "Ashley," I called as I rubbed sleepers from my eyes. "Time to get up. We have to get ready."

My sister made a sound that had me questioning if I should be on my way to an exorcist instead of the train station. I shot her an amused look and tentatively placed my feet on the ground as I stood. Pain shot through my toes, and I muffled a cry.

Well. Wasn't this day just going to be oodles of fun.

As I hobbled towards the bathroom, I couldn't help but regret yesterday. A tour guide was supposed to take us to a festival at [Han River](#). Unfortunately, rainy weather had cancelled the festival, so our guide had instead led us on a walking tour of the area for *hours*. My feet had paid the price.

The itinerary for today was to take the train to [Busan](#), a seaside city at the southern tip of Korea. We'd booked a tour company to take us to some popular attractions in and round the city. I was excited to just sit back and let other people take the lead for the day. And more than a little excited to be taking the train—[Train to Busan](#) was both my favorite Korean film and my favorite zombie film, so I couldn't help but fangirl a little bit. Okay, a lot.

Despite my tortured toes, today was going to be awesome.



Today had sucked. So much.

I resisted the urge to rub my eyes with the heels of my hands as I sat on the cold plastic seat, back in Busan station. Anxiety whirled round and round my chest and brain. I could feel my sister staring at me, expecting me to make a decision. But going on this tour had been my decision, and look how that'd turned out. Badly. Up until the very end.

The train ride from our Airbnb to Busan had been blissfully uneventful, but that peace, unfortunately, wasn't to last. The first hint: just ten minutes into our visit, and we'd somehow gotten trapped in the train station.

The instructions from our guide said to meet the group outside of Exit 7, where we would then hop on the tour bus that would take us to each of the attractions we were scheduled to visit. The only problem was, Exit 7 didn't exist. There was Exit 6. And Exit 8 not far from that. But Exit 7 was nowhere to be seen. My sister and I circled the station at least three times, to no avail.

Booking the tour bus was supposed to mean *less* walking.

I sighed, even though what I really wanted to do was cry. "Maybe we should just take any exit, just to get outside," I suggested. "Even if we still can't see a marker for Exit 7, maybe we'll see a group of people loitering around, or maybe they'll have a sign with the company logo."

Luckily, my plan worked, and we boarded the tour bus just six minutes late. But I had a sinking feeling that our luck had officially ended.

Which it had. As evidenced by the fact that our tour guides had taken us to a freakin' mall. We'd seriously traveled across the country to visit *a mall*? They have malls in Seoul. They have malls in America, too, for that matter.

I understood that our tour guides had no control over the weather, and thus no control over the fact that our first destination—the [Danubi train](#) at Taejongdae—had been cancelled because of a light misting rain. Our tour guides did have full control, however, on where we went instead. And they chose a FREAKIN' MALL. Even if malls were a rarity, it'd still be a crappy backup plan. This mall was almost entirely clothing stores, and there was no way I'd fit in teeny tiny Korean sizes. If I managed to fit one thigh in a Korean size XL, it'd be a miracle.

Ashley and I had wandered around the mall for a while, but the only purchase I'd made was a cute stationary set. Perhaps I'd use the set to write a strongly worded letter to the tour guide company, asking them to find a fifth destination in Busan worth traveling for.

I ended up spending a decent chunk of time flipping through my phone in between bites of my lunch, looking at all the attractions in and round Busan that we could have been visiting instead.

Not gonna lie, though, the bulgogi burger I'd gotten from Lotteria was pretty good. Then again: when has bulgogi-anything ever disappointed?

But even after the mall, things hadn't gone quite right. Sure, [Haedong Yonggungsa Temple](#) had been lovely. But it was also very small. And we'd spent way too much time there. Conversely, [Songdo Beach](#) had a lot to offer and enjoy, but we'd spent so little time there, we hadn't even had time to ride the cable car, which had made Ashley angry. At *me*. Like I'd been the one to create the tour guide itinerary.

When we'd exited the bus at our last destination, I'd surveyed the view before me in disbelief. Or rather, I'd surveyed what little of the view was visible with disbelief. Most of it, unfortunately, was shrouded in thick fog.



The colorful homes of Gamcheon Culture Village, obscured by fog

Of course, [Gamcheon Culture Village](#) was still beautiful. There was a poetry here, in the fact that even this thick fog couldn't completely destroy the color that battled back the gloom. It also seemed like the perfect setting

for a horror or paranormal fantasy novel. I could easily imagine villains wandering the alleys, plotting to destroy this town just as thoroughly as the fog was.

But I had been in no mood to appreciate what the fog offered. After everything else that had happened, those muted colors before me had seemed mocking. I'd been looking forward to Gamcheon the most. And it should have lived up to expectations—how could a bunch of painted buildings throw a curveball, after all?

Fog, that's how.

The tour was over now, but things *still* weren't going right.

When I'd bought our train tickets to and from Busan, I'd had to estimate when the tour would be over, and then give us a bit of a buffer, just in case the tour took longer than anticipated. I didn't even consider for a moment that the tour would end *two hours* earlier than estimated.

And that was the decision Ashley wanted me to make. What to do next. Neither of us wanted to hang out at Busan Station for another two hours, of course. But buying the tickets had been complicated in the first place, I wasn't sure how much English the station employees knew, and it had never occurred to me during any of my Korean studies to learn the phrase for "Can I exchange my ticket for an earlier train?"

Hindsight really is 20/20.

And at that moment, I'd had it. Each step I'd taken all day had sent a stab of pain through most of my toes, I'd hardly gotten any sleep, none of the attractions we'd come here for had gone as planned, and now this. I could feel a panic attack coming on. I could barely think—damn, I could barely BREATHE. I really didn't want to have to make this decision. It didn't matter that I was 29; I wanted an actual grown-up to make this decision. And I wanted a do-over. I wanted this trip to go well. I wanted functioning feet. I wanted to wrap myself in the comforter waiting for me back at the Airbnb. I wanted so many things right now.

I sat, frozen in place, avoiding eye contact with my sister, just like I wanted to avoid this decision.

"Rehann?" Ashley prompted, a bit of an edge in her voice.

"I-I'm s-sorry," I stuttered, "I just d-don't know w-what to d-do right now."

On top of the fear, I also felt like a failure. I was the older sister; I was supposed to be able to handle this.

After a pause, Ashley said, "Come on. I've got this. I'll do all the talking."



I sighed heavily as I settled back into the cushioned seat, and then carefully propped my used and abused feet on the footrest in front of me. Ashley had successfully exchanged our ticket for an earlier train—it had actually been a simple process—and we were finally on our way back to the cozy Airbnb we called home. Already I could feel my heart calming, the panic receding. Though just 15 minutes ago my entire body had been at DEFCON 1, I was already feeling embarrassed. I realized that I had made what was, yeah, a pretty crappy situation so much worse than it needed to be.

Way to stay cool, calm, and collected in the face of the unexpected.

As I closed my eyes and surrounded myself with the familiarity provided by the vocals of my favorite K-pop group, I couldn't help but think: I kind of wish I'd been eaten by zombies. It sounded like a less stressful way to spend a day.

Open up to Disaster

One of my favorite lyrics says, "[Open up to disaster—and paradise.](#)" The first time I heard it, my breath caught. This simple sentence holds so much truth, and it's a truth that I—as somebody who's afraid to take any and all risks—really need to remember. Because while only making the safe choices can protect you from negative consequences, it also keeps some of the best experiences that life has to offer at a far distance. And traveling is all about experiences—both good and bad. The calamity and the perfection. You can't grow by only experiencing the good parts of life.

South Korea is my favorite place in the world. Even more than two years later, I can still conjure up the magic that surrounded me when I looked out over Seoul on top of Mount Namsan, or the wonder I felt as I walked towards the bright colors of [Changgyeonggung](#), the [hanbok](#) that I was wearing rustling with every step I took. Nothing could ever ruin my memories or feelings of Seoul. Certainly not a few disasters.

So, the next time you recount your adventures with family, friends, or coworkers, tell the truth. Tell your them about something that went wrong during your trip. Something that made you sad or afraid or angry. Open up to disaster.

...and maybe a little bit of paradise, too.