

# BUSAN

## A timeless city

Wander through artistic alleyways and along modern beachfronts in South Korea's second city — a place where tradition and innovation go hand in hand. Words: Chris Tharp



The Haeundae Beach Train (also called the Sky Capsule) offers breathtaking views of Dongbu Mountain  
Left: Gamcheon Culture Village

**B**usan has transformed into a lively modern metropolis — a centre for commerce, culture and technology, having once had a reputation for being a rough-and-tumble maritime hub. Pockets of the old port town, however, still remain thriving neighbourhoods where the past rubs shoulders with the bright, shiny and new. From colourful hillside villages to bustling beachside strips, each of Busan's local districts offer its own unique flavour and a window into what makes the city tick. Combine this with fresh seafood and an emerging restaurant and bar scene, and it's no wonder people are starting to take notice. Here are four of the city's most exciting districts.

### 1 HAEUNDAE

Haeundae is a district synonymous with its beach, a mile-long stretch of sand where travellers can experience the tranquillity of the ocean while strolling through a modern cityscape. This area is one of the Busan's main tourist attractions, located on the eastern side of the city, at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula.

Seagulls soar, swoop and squawk as some of the city's newest and loftiest buildings gaze out across the rolling waves. These include the Haeundae LCT The Sharp which opened in 2019, consisting of three skyscrapers. The tallest building features a 98th-floor observatory (Busan X the Sky) offering an eagle's-eye view of the East Sea, as well as the tightly packed urban district surrounding it.

While the impressive views make Haeundae what it is, there's plenty to do here, too. Visitors can ride on the newly constructed Haeundae Blue Line Park Sky Capsule, a private elevated rail car that carries passengers through the picturesque pines and rocky outcroppings along the base of Dalmaji Hill. Club D Oasis is also worth a visit, a luxury spa complete with high-end amenities including an infinity rooftop pool, a garden terrace and a private bar. This district is also home to two restaurants that have recently been awarded a Michelin star each — Mori serving authentic Japanese cuisine and Fiotto serving pasta-only dishes. And, the legendary Haeundae Somunnae Amsongalbijip is also located here, which has been grilling Hanu beef over hot coals since 1964.

Furthermore, the popular (and very delicious) Haeundae Traditional Market is an excellent place to explore with many stalls serving fresh raw fish, along with Haeridangil Street, where scores of historic houses and workshops have been converted into quirky cafes, bars and hole-in-the-wall eateries.

Still, the beach is undeniably the highlight here, and Gorilla Brewing Haeundae occupies prime oceanfront real estate. This craft beer pub and eatery is located next to Haeundae Beach and is treasured all over town for its wide selection of brews. "Haeundae has a real big-city global vibe compared to other areas in Busan," says Gorilla community manager Laura Jeon. "I've lived here for more than 13 years, but spending a day at the beach still feels like I'm on holiday."



## 2 GWANGALLI

If Haeundae is the star of the show, Gwangalli surely gives it a run for its money, with Busan's most iconic structure, the Gwangan Bridge, serving as an impressive backdrop. Gwangalli Beach is a popular destination for watersports enthusiasts, pursuing their passions throughout much of the year.

Gwangalli is also known for the lively road of restaurants, pubs and cafes lining its beach road, known as the Gwangalli Beach strip. These options range from chic cafes to old-school basement karaoke rooms and include HQ Bar, a popular spot for visitors looking for cold drinks and live music overlooking the famous bridge. After dark, the restaurants' neon signs cast colourful reflections on the dark surface of the sea. "I was born and raised in Busan", says HQ Bar co-owner Jee Kim. "Like a lot of areas in this city, Gwangalli has gone from a quiet and humble beach enclave to a fun and lively destination."

In an already seafood-rich city, it's high praise that Gwangalli is known as one of the best spots to tuck into a plate of *hoe* (thinly sliced white, raw fish). Among the scores of options is Millak Raw Fish Town, a complex that allows visitors to select their entrées, which are plucked from the tanks and served spliced up at their tables within minutes.

At dusk, Gwangalli is home to a number of hip nightlife spots which have sprung up in the neighbourhood's backstreets, including Bar DiLan, which stocks a superb wine selection. However, the beach still manages to maintain its old-school feel. "It's very boisterous and unpretentious" Jee says, "it's a mixture of new high-rises and back-alley restaurants right in front of the sea".

## 3 GAMCHEON CULTURE VILLAGE

Busan has been a vital port and trading post for centuries, however it really didn't come into its own as a city until the Korean War, when thousands of refugees poured in and set up shanty towns on the hillsides. Over time, the residents replaced the lean-tos and tin-roofed huts with permanent structures, although the haphazard feel of the temporary settlements often remained.

A number of these historic neighbourhoods still exist, though Gamcheon Culture Village, also known as Busan's Machu Picchu, is by far the most famous. Terraced across a steep slope over a narrow valley, this jumble of tiny, brightly-coloured pastel homes is served by narrow staircases and a rabbit warren of alleys. What began as an attempt to add some life to the neighbourhood with a few murals and painted rooftops has blossomed into a fully-fledged art project, making it one of the city's most vibrant neighbourhoods and biggest tourist draws.

Touring the maze of alleyways in this village is free, however visitors can head to the city's information centre where useful maps and guides can be purchased to assist in navigating the maze of colourful and complex passages. The Little Museum is located at the entrance of the village where visitors can start their day by gaining insight into the area's vibrant past, the local architecture and its artistic transformation.

A couple of hours can be spent exploring these streets, taking in the lively murals. There are many art galleries, quaint cafes and shops located along the narrow lanes, as well as beautiful rooftops and observation decks that provide panoramic views of the city.



## 4 NAMPO-DONG

Nampo-dong is Busan's old harbour district and arguably the city at its most traditional, located in Busan's southern centre. This is where it all began, and despite the arrival of the high-end stores that line its shopping street, the neighbourhood feels deeply rooted and oozes character. Nampo-dong is most famous for its markets, especially Jagalchi, which has been one of Korea's important seafood exchanges for more than 600 years. A stroll through its vibrant pathways offers an insight into the lives of the local fishmongers and the city's past.

Across the street from Jagalchi is BIFF Square, where the Busan International Film Festival started. While films are still screened there during the festival, the square is better known for its street food carts, offering up Korean staples such as *tteokbokki* (a simmered rice cake), fried dumplings and *eomuk* (fish cakes). The speciality here, however, is the *ssiat hotteok*, a fried pancake filled with gooey, melted brown sugar, topped with a sprinkle of seeds.

The Nampo-dong alleys are worthy of further exploration, including the labyrinthine Gukje Market where visitors can stock up on souvenirs such as hand-carved wooden figurines; or the Bupyeong Kkangtong Market, famous dishes such as *guksu* (noodles) and *pajeon* (green onion pancake). Close by is the Busan Tower in the historic Yongdusan Park. Now eclipsed by new stratospheric high-rises, this nearly 400ft construction still provides epic views of Nampo-dong and beyond. This is vintage Busan at its best, representing the city's past skyline, a throwback to an era when this was the highest structure in town, an idea that seems quaint now.

From left: Gwangan Bridge connecting Haeundae District to Suyeong District; Jagalchi Market in Nampo-dong, one of Korea's important seafood exchanges

### PLAN YOUR TRIP

There are daily direct flights from Heathrow to Seoul's Incheon International Airport. From there, it's a one-hour flight to Busan or a three-hour high-speed train journey from Seoul Station. While in Busan, the Visit Busan Pass is useful for navigating the city, with free use of the city tour bus. For more details, visit [visitbusan.net](http://visitbusan.net)

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