

Seoul to Busan via Jeju

written by Marcus | 15 May, 2016



28th April – 15th May 2016

After a short spin from his flat Elbert delivers us to the blue line that would lead our way out of Seoul and all the way down to Busan. The next two or three weeks ought to be easy with the route largely dictated for us by the network of bike paths that follow rivers and valleys all over Korea. All of it is well sign posted, the main route has a painted line along its length and there are toilets and camping areas at convenient intervals. Along each of the routes there are phone boxes where we can stamp our 'bike passports' as an incentive to ride as much as possible. It's billed as being a cyclist's paradise.



Stamps mean prizes



No phone here



A passport with many stamps

We begin the journey alongside the Namhangang River that runs right through Seoul, collecting Tara (www.followmargopolo.com) before making our way out of the city. There are few hills, it's 20 degrees C and the river meanders through some lovely countryside. This feels like a holiday compared to a lot of the places we've been to in the last few months. We're lucky with the weather as Korea is usually plagued by dust clouds and pollution at this time of year, blowing over from its huge neighbour China. It's not often I'd be glad to have a headwind but if it keeps the skies clear then maybe it's the lesser of two evils.



The Namhangang River in Seoul



Tara in tow

As promised, finding somewhere to camp is easy with open meadows and covered shelters never too far away. Koreans seem to love camping and we'd seen lots of tents alongside the river in Seoul at the weekend. The path has its drawbacks though, by staying near the river we're kept away from villages and towns which is great for avoiding traffic but means we don't pass by many shops or cafes. It also means we miss out on seeing much of the Korean culture other than through meeting fellow bike path users. Instead of the usual nod from people coming the other way we're given a full bow with a bend of the arms bringing their forehead down to the handlebars. I get used to doing the same and it's like a spin class upper body workout when several riders come past at once. But one benefit from the lack of shops is that we can't be tempted by 7-11s to spend all our cash. South Korea is an expensive country, especially compared to bargain China, so our daily food budget has leapt up.



Easy camping



Cycle shelter

It's easy to get complacent with the blue line and signposts removing the need to think about navigating so when they

occasionally disappear we're a bit flummoxed. While consulting the map we realise that we've missed a turning but by chance we've arrived at a thermal spa. Free camping is great for the budget but not so convenient for washing facilities so a soak in a hot bath sounds like a great idea. We dig out swimwear and head inside with the girls heading left to their changing area while I turn right. The segregation is not just for the changing areas though and it's quickly apparent that we won't be needing bathing suits, just our birthday suits. It's been a while since I'd stripped off and had a bath with total strangers but this is a popular part of Korean culture so I settle into the 45 degree water with the other men and try to relax. The water is naturally carbonated and once you've been sat still for a while tiny bubbles form all over your skin. Following the example of my bathmates I alternate from hot to cold to hot with a few minutes in the sauna too. There's a barber in the changing room who looks a bit afraid when I ask for a moustache trim. Facial hair is not a common sight here so I suspect it's not something he's used to dealing with. A liberal splash of skin lotion completes the process and I feel like a new man.

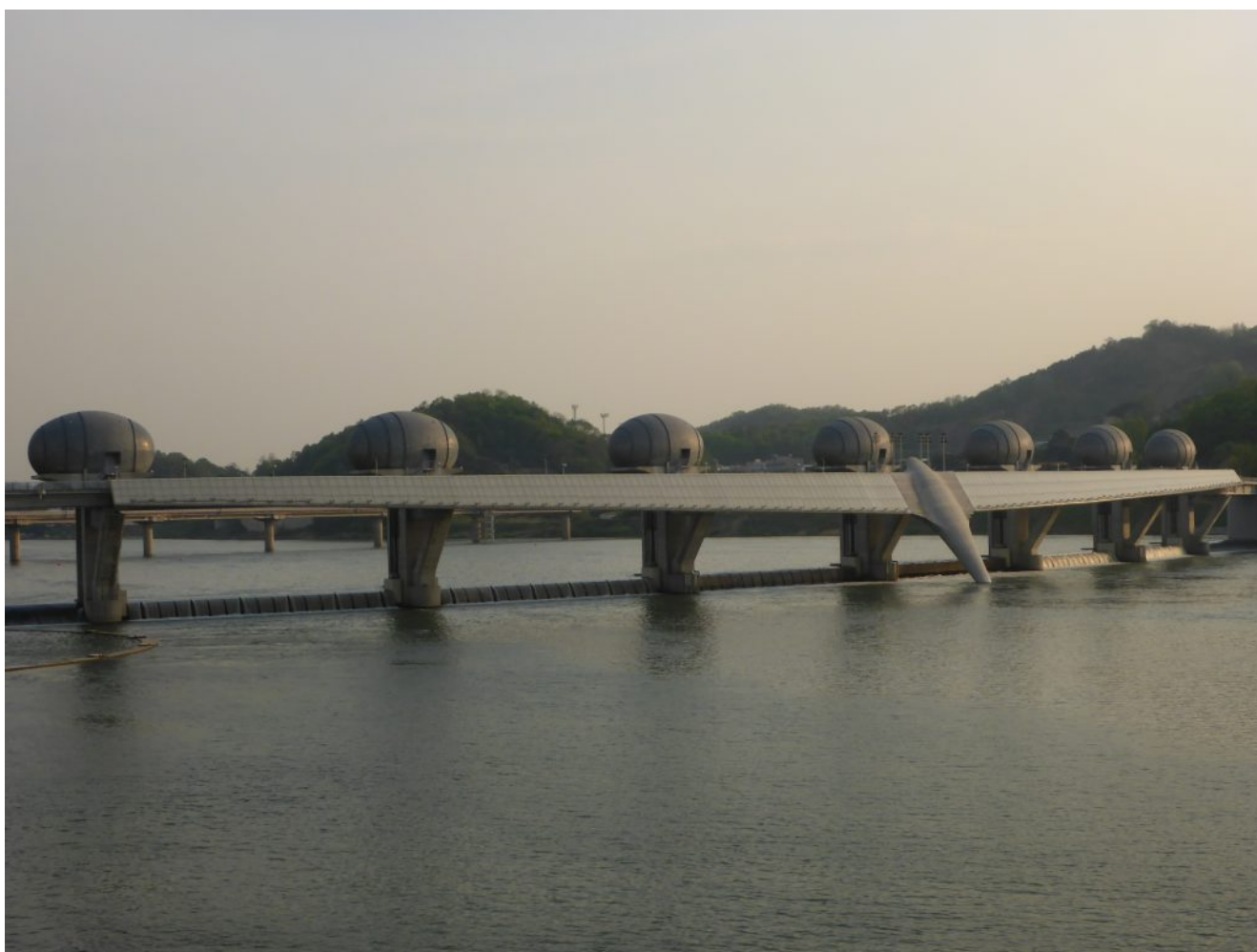


Hot spa

Outside the girls emerge looking suitably radiant and it sounds like things were much more sociable on their side. Lots

of chatting and laughter whereas the men just sat looking meditative.

The Namhangang river is well controlled with impressive dams and weirs at various points. The bike path is sponsored by K-Water and they're obviously keen to show off their assets as the route crosses over the best of these structures so we get to take a closer look. After crossing one of these huge bridges we find ourselves alongside a rowing venue that's busy with small boats preparing for a regatta. Our friend Mr Hung in Hanoi had told us he was bringing the Vietnamese squad to race here in the hope that he would qualify one or two boats for the Olympics. Frustratingly, we're on the wrong side of the river from the racing and the boat house so can only watch the action from a distance. (We later hear that the Vietnam women's double did qualify for Rio).



One of the many huge weirs on the Namhangang River



Watching a regatta from afar



"Don't attempt to ride on the water"

The Namhangang river path ends half way down the country and before we join the next river we have to climb up and over the

biggest hill on the route. We winch up the 5km hill and are congratulated by several other cyclists once we reach the top.

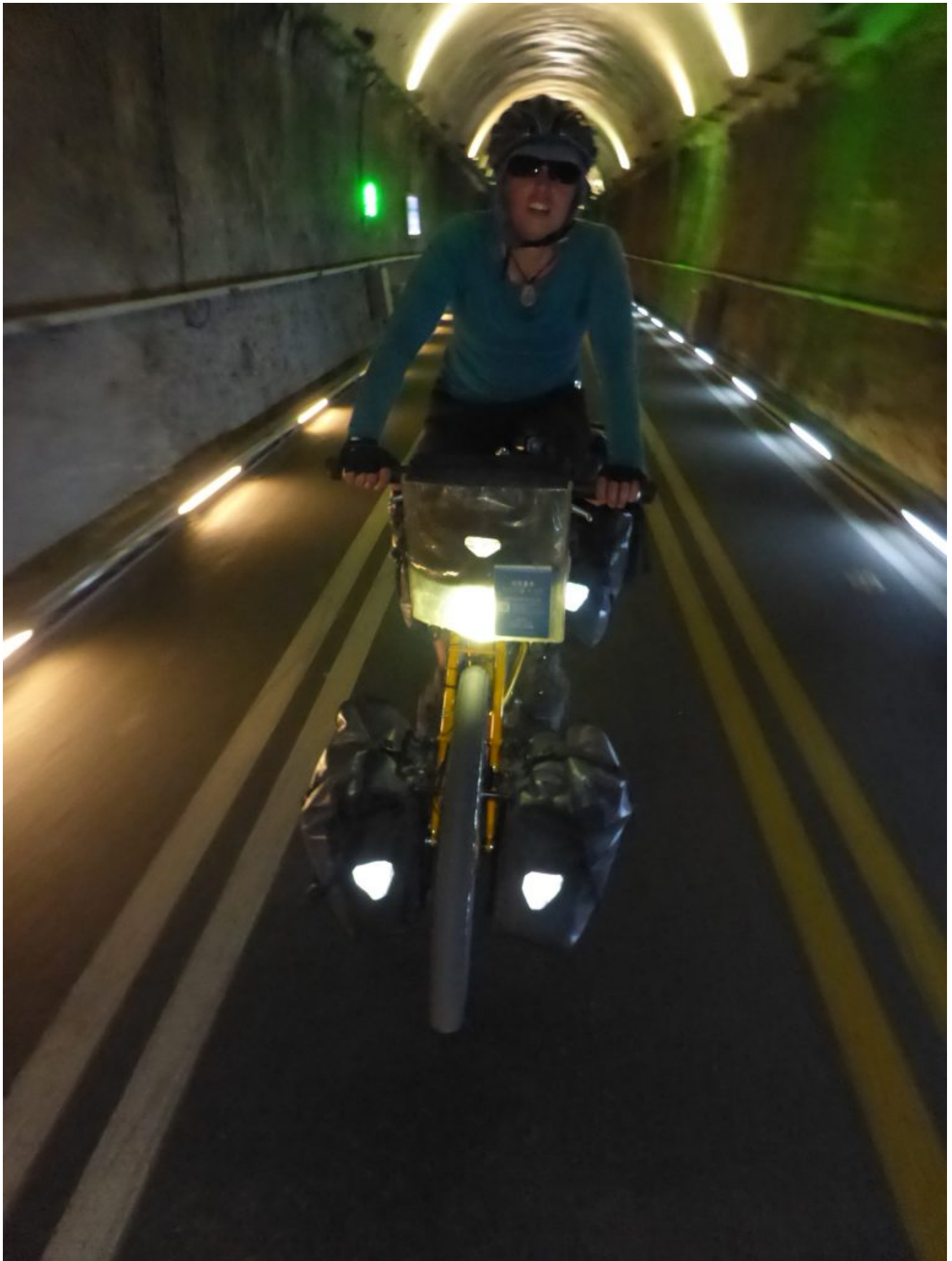


The cars get a tunnel, bikes get a big hill instead

Riding with Tara highlights the different dynamics of the tandem compared to a solo bike. She can tap along comfortably while we grind up the hills but then gravity comes to our aid once we start descending and get to stretch out a lead. This to-ing and fro-ing continues through this mountainous stretch as the path takes us up increasingly steep hills. A 25% ramp is at the very limit of what we can get up and is an absolute lung buster, thankfully just short enough for us to cope before collapsing in a heap.



Photo courtesy of Tara



A smaller Weir



A steep off road climb

This brings us onto the Nakdonggang river where things level out again. We pass rice paddies and hundreds of rows of polythene tunnels. There are very few people working the land as mechanisation and technology seem to have made farming much easier here compared to elsewhere in Asia. Like everything else in South Korea this is a far cry from the crowded fields we'd seen up in North Korea.



Korean industrial farming

The investment in this path must have been huge and there is little expense spared. Some sections are on boardwalks standing on stilts in the river, other parts occupy the top of wide earth mounds. There are bike themed sculptures all along the route too and a bike museum at Sangu. The money seems to have been well spent though as there are thousands of people using it. Very expensive mountain bikes and carbon race machines pootle alongside families. Being away from the traffic makes it safe and easy for anyone to take up cycling. For us though it's becoming a bit too mundane. The ease with which we're able to travel without traffic or a need to navigate was fun to begin with but after five days we're craving a change. Our excuse to leave the path and brave the roads comes 130km before Busan where we turn off and start to head down towards the south coast.



The bike path steps out over water every now and again



A huge bike themed dam



Bridge at Sangu



Sangu cycle museum



Pimp my ride, Sangu Cycle Museum



Football wheeled bike



Approaching Daegu



Cyclist's toilet block



Camping spot with an elevated dining room

We're now in amongst the cars and it's clear that they're not used to bikes. Lots of them pass a bit too close for comfort so I move out a bit further into the road to try and occupy more space. This tactic forces cars to wait for it to be clear on the other side before overtaking which may delay them a few seconds but gives us a bit more security. Things get a bit too hectic in Jinju when a car door opens right in front of us catching the bars and throwing us into the gutter. The occupant of the car just looks at the heap of tandem and crew at her feet and says "Ang yong ha se yo" (hello).



Statues depicting the movement of the wood blocks used to print the sacred scriptures that we'd seen safely stored North of the border.



Convex mirror selfie

Our target is the ferry port at Yeosu which lies on a peninsula off the south coast. Without a blue line to follow we have to take our chances with our own route choices but on paper it looks quite straightforward. Our map shows a bridge that leads from the mainland onto a small island then we can hop over another bridge onto the peninsula. Easy on paper.



Soaked even before we set off

Once we arrive in Gwangyang the bridge looms up in front of us. It's a huge suspension bridge, the 4th largest in the world, and although the rain that was pelting down earlier in the day has stopped, there's still a howling gale. We begin climbing up and over it, leaning against the wind as it whips down the channel between the island and the mainland. The road sits 85m above the water but we don't spend too much time admiring the view as it needs all my concentration to keep the bike upright. Luckily there's not much traffic but there is a car following us very slowly. It's the police. They don't try and stop us but keep following until we're safely over to the other side. Here they pull alongside and tell us that bikes aren't allowed on the bridge but it's a bit late to do anything about it.



Tara with our police escort over the bridge at Gwangyang
We're then in amongst a huge industrial area with pipes and
cables and chimneys a blight on what could have been a

beautiful coastline. Yeosu seems to be most famous for an Expo that was held here a few years ago. It prompted the building of the huge bridge and also a brand new port which is now used by most of the ferry traffic. We didn't know this and arrive at the old port only to find a few shuttered windows firmly closed. In a side room we find someone who has enough English to help and tells us we should go to the new port to catch the ferry to Jeju. "It's only 20 minutes away by bike". Which is fine but we only have 30 minutes before the boat leaves. Usually when we're told how long it should take us to ride somewhere the estimate is wildly optimistic, thankfully this time the guess was conservative and we drop down into the correct port after a frantic 10 minute blast across town. There's just enough time to grab the tickets, load the bikes and then head for the on-board cafe for 2nd breakfast.

The volcanic island of Jeju is a popular holiday destination, particularly for honeymooning couples. We're heading there to visit some friends of Kirsty who teach at an international school in the south west corner that is just over a day's ride from the port. On the way we stop for the night just outside Jeju city and find a nice patch of grass outside a temple. We greet the monk in residence to ask for permission and after a call to his boss he tells us it's fine. No sooner are the tents unpacked when he comes back to say it's too windy to camp so his boss had told him to let us stay in their house. As it's a sacred building I have to stay in a different room from the girls but we're made to feel at home and get chatting with the monk. His reaction when we explain how far we've ridden and for how long is "Jesus Christ!". As a Buddhist monk I guess he can get away with that!



Yongduam (Dragon) rock, Jeju City



Jeju guardian statue made from pumice, which feature all over the island looking after gateways and buildings



Our new friend ☺☺☺



Getting ready for Buddha's big knees up

In the morning the temple 'grandmothers' arrive and won't let us leave without a huge bag of kim bop, seafood and rice rolled up in seaweed. Outside the temple we're greeted by a familiar face. Elbert has arrived with his cycling team for a few days of riding round the island. Luckily we'd managed to get here at the same time so can ride with them for the day.



An enlightened stoker

Jeju has its own blue line that leads cyclists round the island and like the mainland routes, there are stamps to collect and a shiny sticker in our bike passports if we complete the 230km loop. This is the last path that Elbert has to ride before he's awarded the Grand Slam for completing every one of the Korean bike paths, an impressive achievement. We hop onto the back of his peloton and enjoy a sociable spin down the west coast.



In the mix with Elbert's cycling team



Refuelling on kimchi and makkoli



Just when you thought it was safe to get back in the water...



Elbert's team of old school friends

Just before Daejong it's time for us to peel off so we wave goodbye to Elbert and the team and head up to Alan and Judy's house. Alan used to work with Kirsty but made his escape from the world of programming several years ago and he and Judy now both work at the North London Collegiate school. These franchised international schools are becoming increasingly common and offer a useful extra income for the parent schools back in the UK.

We've been asked to earn our keep by giving a presentation at the school the next day. Some of the staff are keen cyclists too so take as much interest in our stories as the children. The school is an impressive facility and commands huge fees for the privileged few who can afford to come here. There are only a handful of international schools in Korea so parents who want their children to gain internationally recognised qualifications, which can lead to a place at the world's best universities have to pay a premium.



NLCS, Jeju

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She's Not Pedalling On The Back

Travels by tandem

They started in 2014...
 They have ridden a tandem through 38 countries...
 They've travelled over 30,000km...
They're here at NLCS Jeju!

Kirsty McGaul and Marcus Mumford

UK, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, South Korea

**Senior Library
 Friday, 1:30pm**



2015년
 클
 제스 2015.12.19 sat 19:30pm

Today's feature presentation



Giving our talk at NLCS



Some of the audience members

In the evening we join a staff outing on some of the school's mountain bikes, our first ride on solo bikes since Siem Reap in February. Once again it's almost like learning to cycle again, it feels so different!



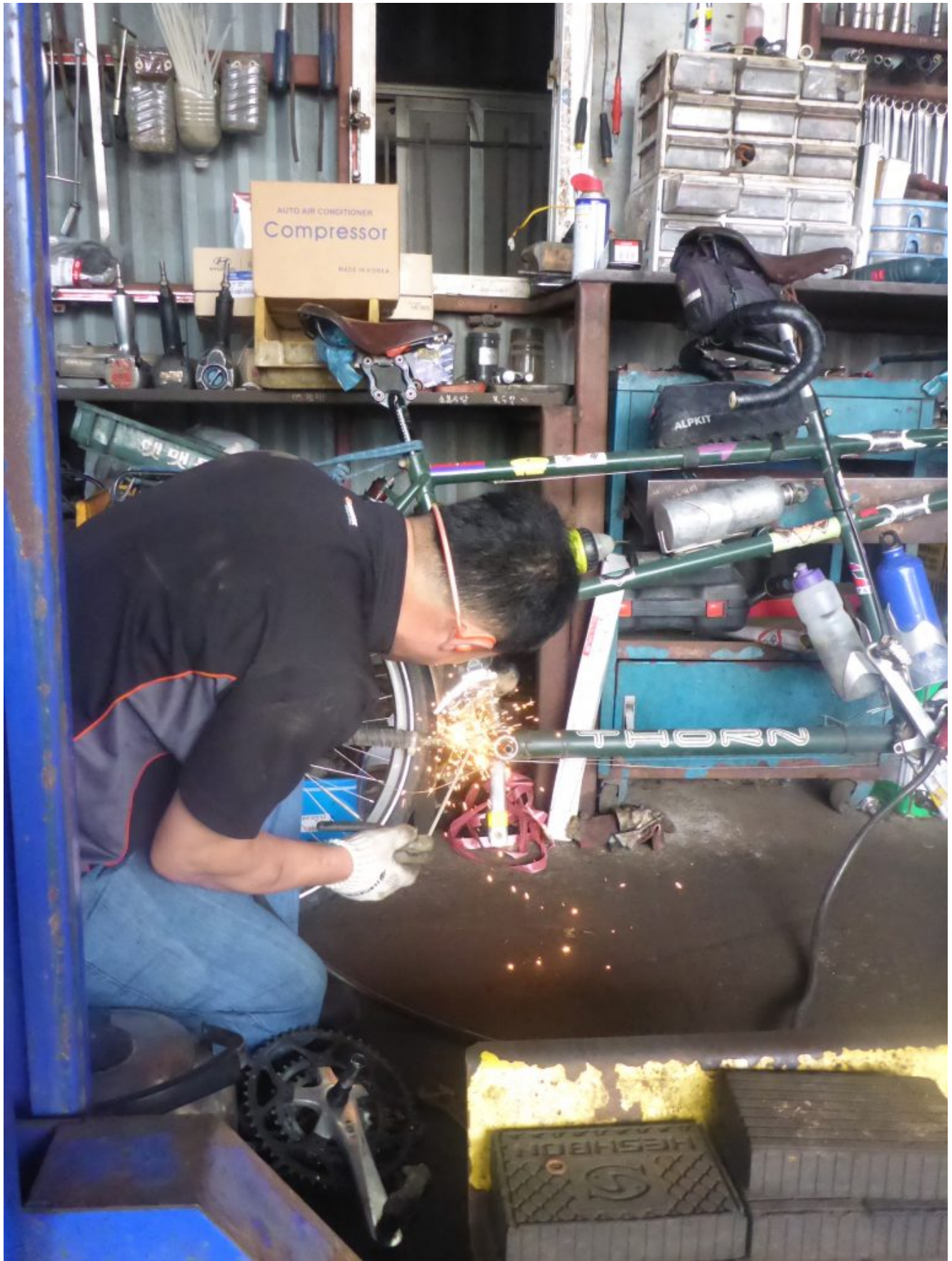
Kirsty trying to remember to steer on the mountain bike

It's great to have time to rest and recuperate while staying on Jeju. It's also a good opportunity to clean and fettle the bikes. While inspecting the frame I notice an ominous line behind the chainset and with the wheel off and a squeeze of the chainstay my fears are confirmed. It's a crack in the frame. Not fatal, yet, but it needs welding before we can continue.



Cracked chainstay

This is where being in a developed country is a disadvantage. In poorer areas of the world people have to mend and adapt things all the time so you're never far from a mechanic. Here everything is newer, more reliable and largely disposable so a man with a welder is harder to find. I have to ride 10km to find someone but he's more than happy to help out and within 15 minutes the crack has been welded up and we're good to go again. This is why most people ride steel touring bikes, it's a material that can easily be fixed.



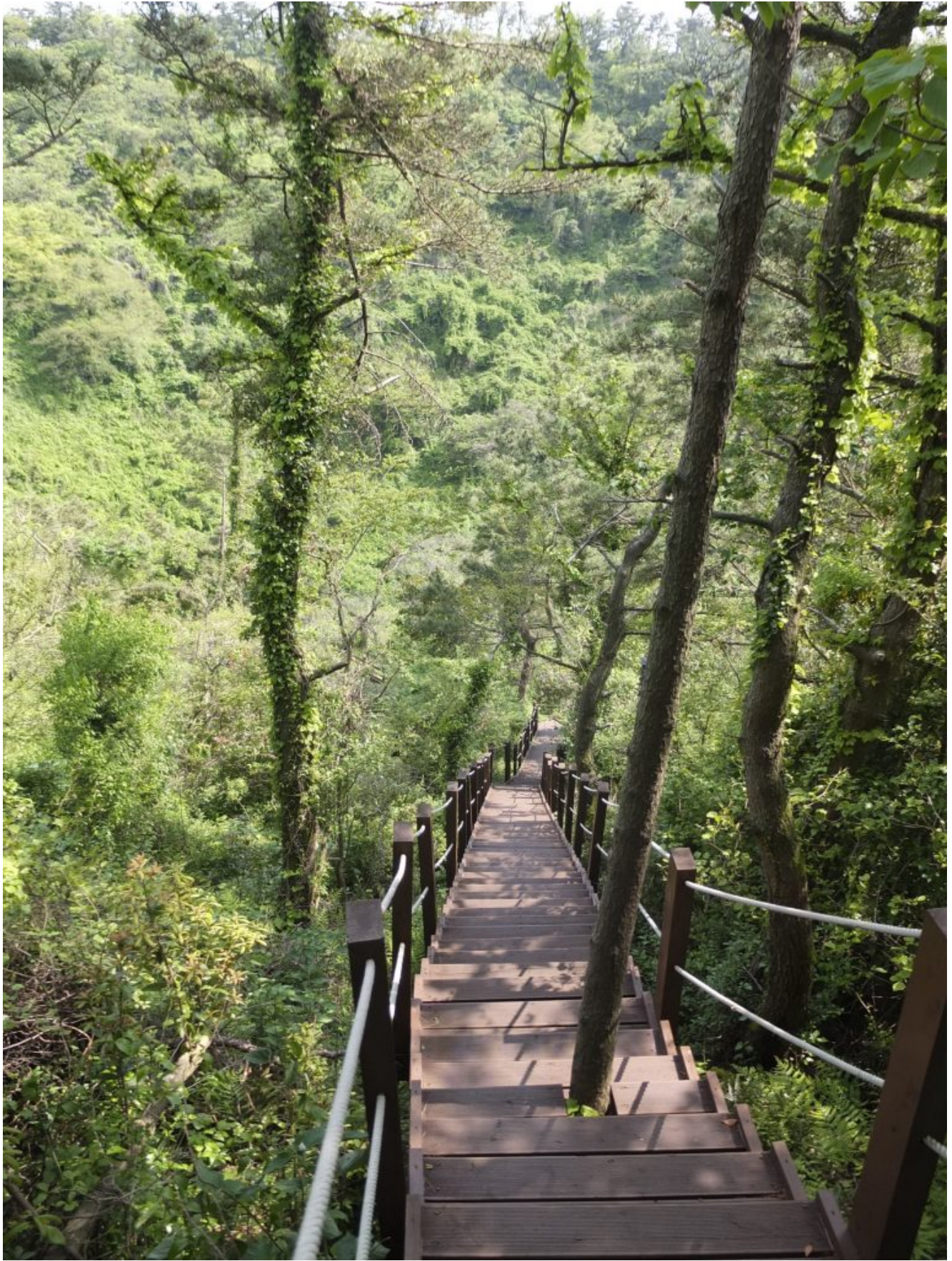
Cycle surgery

In the middle of the island is the main volcanic cone of Mount Hallasan but there are also over 360 smaller volcanic craters,

called oriurns, dotted around it. Alan and Judy take us up to one near to their house and once we drop down over the rim and into the crater it feels like a tropical oasis full of wildlife, birds, butterflies and plants.



An afternoon stroll up a volcanic crater



Down into the Jeori Orium



One of Kirsty's nieces told us we shouldn't leave England or Germany because other countries have volcanoes and snakes....

We've had a great stay and despite the gannet-like tenancies of 3 cyclists to clear out a house of food, Alan and Judy seem to have enjoyed having us. After a final hearty breakfast we say our goodbyes and head back to the coast to find the blue line.



Alan and Judy, our wonderful hosts in Daejong

We make our way round the island past black rocks, black sandy beaches and small fishing villages. Out in the sea there are

flippers pointing into the air which then upend to reveal wetsuited divers. These are the haenyeo women divers of Jeju who have traditionally worked in the sea to collect shellfish and seaweed. Back on land the men stand around waiting for the women to come back with their catch and seem to have the better deal. It's a dying tradition though and the average age of the divers is over 60 so this is a sight that will become rarer for visitors to Jeju.



Unusual sculptures at Sigwipo Sex and Health Museum. A place for honeymooning couples to visit as an educational ice breaker.



Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow



Drying Squid



Statue of one of the haenyeo women divers



Bottoms up



Haenyeo



Meanwhile the men smoke and wait for the women to finish their work

Our last 2 days on the island are soggy. Our climb up the famous Sunrise Peak is rewarded with a view of the inside of a white cloud and we enjoy some shelter inside the lava tubes at Manjanggul-gi. It's then another quick boarding when we get back to Jeju City to catch the ferry as again we arrive with 30 minutes to spare. This time we sail into Mokpo on the south west corner of the mainland.



Sunrise Peak (peak not shown)



Tent guardians



Manjanggul-gi lava tube. A cave formed by flowing lava 300,000 years ago.



Fleet of boats with arrays of lights for fishing squid at night.



Just in time to catch the ferry from Jeju to Mokpo

As we make our way up alongside the Yeongsangang River on another of the 4 rivers cycle paths I'm finding it hard to stay enthusiastic. My mood has been on the darker side of glum for a few days now with several contributing factors. As well as the wet weather it's as if our kit is rebelling as a tent pole breaks, then a brake cable, then I snap a tent peg, a handful of spokes loosen on the back wheel, then the chainring bolts come loose and we bend a chain ring. My body has joined in too as an infection on my cheek spreads to my eyelid to make me look (even more) gruesome. But nagging behind all of that is another feeling which became apparent when we were on the mountain bikes on Jeju: I miss cycling.



Back on the cycle path

That may seem like an odd statement from someone who has spent the best part of 20 months sat on a bicycle but riding a

touring tandem lends as much similarity to riding a lightweight road bike as driving an HGV does to driving a Ferrari. The process of turning pedals, changing gears and moving forward is essentially the same but the feeling of responsiveness and agility that makes a road bike exciting is entirely lacking on the tandem. It's not surprising or unexpected given how different a vehicle it is to the other machines in our 'stable' back home and not one of my other bikes would have allowed us to have the adventure that we're having . But every once in a while I can't help dreaming about flying along these roads on something lighter. A chat with Tara reveals that she has the same thoughts but is careful not to say such things within earshot of her bike 'Dozer'. I should also be grateful that at least I get to enjoy some semblance of cycling in that I get to steer and brake and control the bike which is more than poor Kirsty gets to do.



Avenue of Japanese maple trees

We slog it out up the cycle path to Damjangdam then turn onto proper roads that throw some steep hills at us as we cross back towards the East side of the country. Another visit to soak in a spa helps to ease some aching limbs and we get given some melons by a friendly couple who guide us to a quiet camping spot on the edge of a small town. This gesture of kindness shouldn't be underestimated as fruit is unbelievably expensive here. In Kyrgyzstan we were being given watermelons for free or at most spending 50c, here they cost \$15.

We rejoin the main cross country path where we left it and complete the route down to Busan to make sure we have a full complement of stamps in our Bike Passports. This is important as once we arrive at the finish we are able present the books at the certification centre and claim our medals and certificates. They have some examples for us to pose with for a photo but the actual ones will need to be printed and engraved and sent out after 2 or 3 weeks. This is actually a relief as I don't think we have room in the panniers for them!



Onto the final stretch before Busan



The finish of the Cross Korea Cycle Road



KOREA CROSS COUNTRY CYCLING ROAD

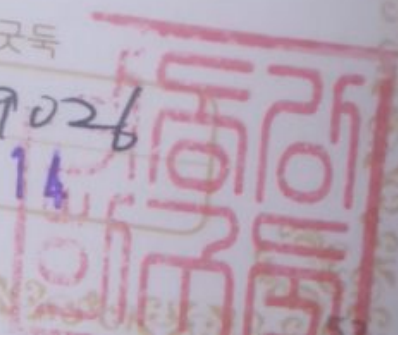


Cross country road

국토 종주

아라 서해갑문~낙동강 하굿둑

인증번호	C00-0049026
종주확인	2016.05.14



A gold star for our efforts



Medals and Certificates all round

We spend our last night on the beach in Busan, at the edge of the Eurasian Landmass. Behind us we can recall so many

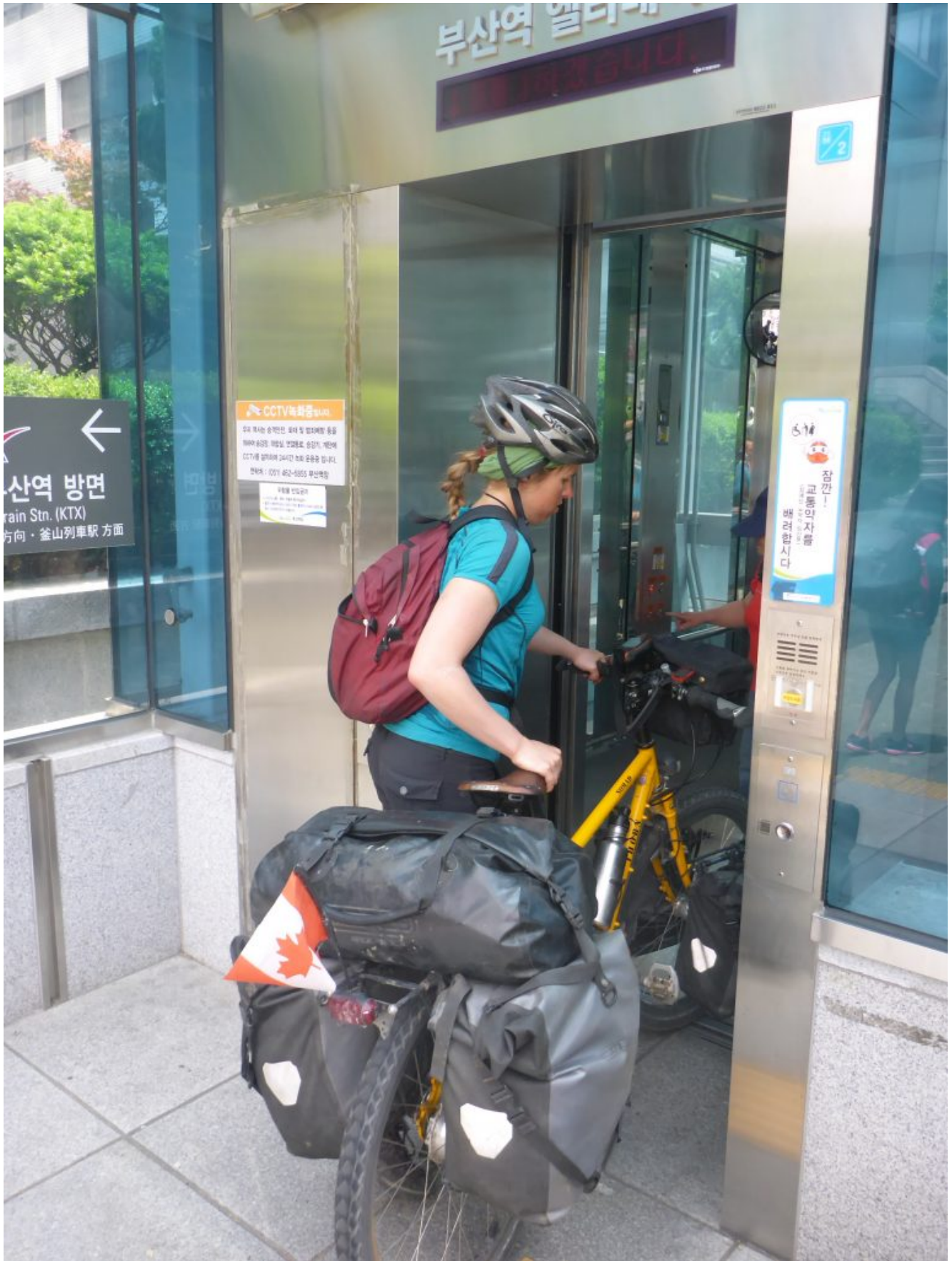
memories and trace so many changes of culture and landscape that we've seen gradually develop since we left England. South Korea has been the next cultural link to take us from China to Japan with elements of both sides apparent. To the outgoing attitude of the Chinese has been added some of the formalities and manners of Japan along with high tech cities and a cleaner environment. Comparing it to what we saw in the North we can't help but wonder what a unified country would have looked like and whether that dream for many will ever come true. It's been an interesting country in many ways but perhaps not what adventure lovers like us would call a bike paradise.



On the beach at Busan

From here we leave Tara as she heads back to Seoul then onwards to Melbourne for a working holiday planting trees and earning herself cash for more bike miles. We board an overnight ferry towards Fukuoka and in our first experience of

Japanese efficiency and punctuality we're made to board 3 hours before it actually leaves. The onboard Spa helps pass the time so when the boat eventually pulls out of the port we get to watch Korea disappear while we soak in a hot bath. Up ahead I'm ready to try and channel some zen calm and just enjoy being on a machine that takes us places rather than trying to think of what we're doing as cycling. Besides, riding a bike with two people on it is technically illegal in Japan so it may be that we won't be doing much riding anyway.



Tara heads off to catch a bus back to Seoul



Our allocated floor space on the ferry to Japan