

MOBILE FRIENDLY



the **unspoken rules** **of Korea**

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR TRAVELERS &
LONG-TERM RESIDENTS

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FOR VISITORS

Short-Term Travelers, Tourists, First-Timers



Short-term visitors usually get by with basic manners. This section focuses on the unspoken rules — the micro-behaviors that cause misunderstandings or instant judgment. If you're staying longer than 3 months, [Section 2](#) is essential.

1. SOCIAL BEHAVIOR & FIRST IMPRESSIONS

- ❖ Koreans notice micro-behaviors: line etiquette, noise level, how you handle trays/chopsticks.
- ❖ Staring is normal. It's curiosity, not hostility.
- ❖ Being loud on public transport draws negative attention.



SECTION 1 (CONTINUED): FOR VISITORS

Short-Term Travelers, Tourists, First-Timers



2. DINING & DRINKING ETIQUETTE

- ❖ Don't pour your own drink first — pour for others, then they pour for you.
- ❖ Bills are split by taking turns, not exact amounts.
- ❖ Speaking Korean may get you free service (서비스), but it's not guaranteed.



꿀팁 (PRO TIP): *Never stick chopsticks upright into rice; it resembles funeral rituals and is considered bad luck.*

3. PUBLIC SPACE NORMS



- ❖ Being bumped during rush hour is normal. It can feel rude if they don't apologize but it's not personal.
- ❖ Holding doors is not expected; lingering creates awkwardness.

꿀팁 (PRO TIP): *Don't sit in priority seats unless you absolutely need to — these seats are reserved for the elderly, pregnant, disabled.*

SECTION 1 (CONTINUED): FOR VISITORS

Short-Term Travelers, Tourists, First-Timers



4. COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS

- ✧ Speaking English louder doesn't help. Slow down instead.

- ✧ Younger Koreans may know basic English; older generations often don't.



꿀팁 (PRO TIP): Koreans often avoid saying “no” directly — hesitation or soft phrases like “maybe later” or “I’ll think about it” usually mean no.

5. SAFETY & SYSTEMS



- ✧ You can leave your laptop alone in cafés — theft is low, social trust is high. Still, be mindful depending on how valuable it is.
- ✧ Trash sorting is strict but inconsistently enforced. Follow signs even if locals don't.

꿀팁 (PRO TIP): Public bathrooms vary — many cafés require a receipt or door code. Convenience store bathrooms are hit-or-miss.



SECTION 2:

LIVING IN KOREA

Long-Term Residents, Expats, Foreign Workers



This is the insider layer of Korean culture — the social logic, hierarchy, and norms that affect everyday life once you stay beyond the tourist phase.

1. HIERARCHY & SOCIAL RANK

- ❖ Age hierarchy is permanent. You're always either older or a younger sibling.
선배 or 후배 (sunbae or hoobae).
- ❖ Unsolicited advice from elders is common. Ignoring it causes loss of face — nod, thank them, move on.
- ❖ You can speak bluntly only with close friends — not acquaintances.



꿀팁 (PRO TIP):

Titles matter more than names at work — calling someone by their role (과장님, 선생님, 대표님) is safer and more respectful.

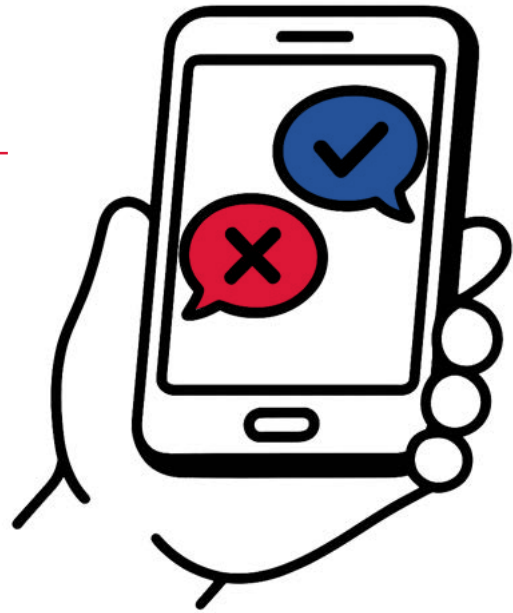
2. COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS

✧ Fast replies = respect.

✧ Leaving someone on read = avoidance or passive rejection.

✧ Kakao group chats follow these rules:

- Silence = agreement
- Delayed reply = social penalty
- Too many questions = burdening the group



꿀팁 (PRO TIP): Many Koreans avoid confrontation — “ghosting” is normalized compared to Western standards.

3. GROUP CULTURE & SOCIAL INCLUSION



✧ Your personal preference doesn't outweigh the group's plan.

✧ Declining group meals/drinks repeatedly leads to silent exclusion.

✧ Drinking is part of work culture. You don't have to drink much — but showing up matters.

4. APPEARANCE & DAILY LIFE

- ✧ Appearance influences how you are treated — not vanity, but cultural norm.
- ✧ Close Korean people may make direct comments on appearance. Don't be offended if they say you look tired. Usually it's a sign of care to notice details



꿀팁 (PRO TIP): Tattoos are becoming normalized (simple fine line tattoos), but in workplaces, saunas, and public pools, you may still be asked to cover them.

5. WORK & HOUSING REALITIES



- ✧ Landlords avoid repairs unless absolutely necessary; follow-up is required.
- ✧ Work environments often prioritize harmony and hierarchy over efficiency.
- ✧ Koreans tolerate inconvenience longer than foreigners expect — long commutes, job dissatisfaction, etc.

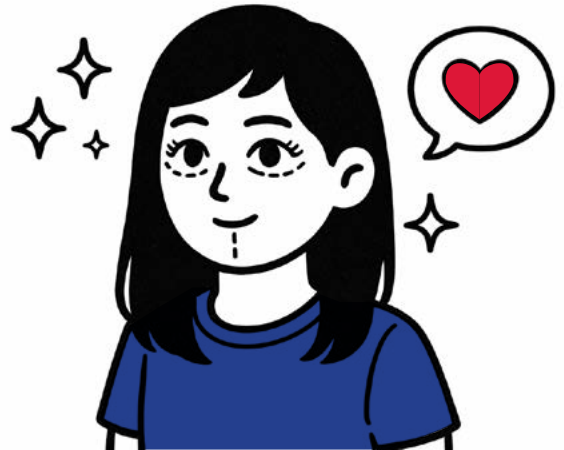
6. SOCIAL BOUNDARIES & CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

❖ Publicly complaining about Korea isolates you quickly — even if your criticism is valid.

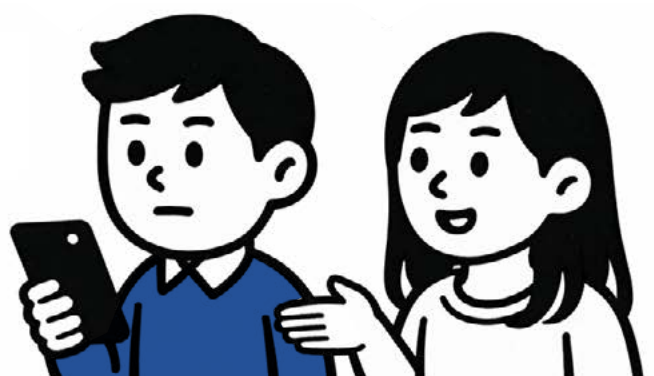
❖ Foreigners criticizing Korea is viewed differently than locals doing it.

❖ There is high concern with “not burdening others,” which explains:

- *indirect communication*
- *polite lies*
- *avoidance instead of confrontation*



꿀팁 (PRO TIP):
Avoid sensitive topics (North Korea, politics, class status, plastic surgery) unless close with the person.



EMERGENCY & IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Contacts All Visitors Need to Know

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

112 — Police

119 — Fire & Medical Emergencies

1330 — General Help with English

1339 — Medical Emergency Hotline with English

HOW TO CONNECT TO AN ENGLISH SPEAKER:

General instructions for the numbers above

- 1 Call the number
- 2 Stay on the line
- 3 When the automated Korean message begins, **press 9** (*English service shortcut when available*)
- 4 If "9" doesn't work, **stay silent** — the system usually transfers you automatically to the foreign language line



* For 119 medical emergencies, say **"English help please"** immediately after they answer

꿀팁 (PRO TIP): *Speak slowly and avoid slang; they are trained but not fluent.*

SECTION 4:

QUICK REFERENCE CHEAT SHEET

A fast-scan summary for both travelers and residents.



VISITORS

WHAT TO REMEMBER

- Lines matter more than anything
- Keep your voice down on public transport
- Pour drinks for others first
- Bumping into someone is not considered rude in Korea
- Don't act overly shocked at "service" items as well as expecting them
- Don't insist on exact 50/50 splitting
- Expect stares; ignore them
- Follow trash rules even if others don't
- Café laptop theft is rare



Priority seats are sacred — avoid them unless needed

Koreans rarely say "no" directly — avoid direct rejections as well as listening for hesitation

the unspoken
rules of korea

SECTION 4:

QUICK REFERENCE CHEAT SHEET

A fast-scan summary for both travelers and residents.



LIVING IN KOREA

WHAT TO REMEMBER

- Reply fast; silence sends signals
- Age hierarchy shapes every interaction
- Group > individual
- Drinking = networking
- Appearance impacts daily treatment
- Criticizing Korea publicly is risky
- Repairs require persistence
- Indirect communication = harmony



***Titles matter
more than names***

***Confrontation is
avoided; ghosting
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