Relishing Retro in Gunsan

**Time Travel & Railroad Towns**

The historical downtown of Gunsan, Jeollabuk-do Province, is packed with cultural remnants from the past, especially during the country’s modern period of 1900-45. The city has set up a “time travel town” with renovated modern architecture and contemporary cultural properties to create a historical and cultural exhibition. With its retro appeal, this downtown is sure to enchant any visitor.

**Exemplary Urban Regeneration**

Under Japanese colonial rule, Gunsan was a passageway through which rice was transferred to Japan. The Japanese looted rice from granaries in Honam, a region comprising Gwangju and the two Jeolla-do provinces today, across the city’s inner harbors. The waterfront’s hefty storage space attested to the volume of pillaged nutrients. The Japanese dubbed such neighborhoods Jangmi-dong; unlike the transliterated jangmi (“rose” in Korean), these syllables drawn from Chinese characters conjointly denoted “storeroom.” Seemingly identical yet polar in meaning to nature’s beauty, the origins of Jangmi-dong evoke a tragic bitterness.

As Gunsan’s inner harbors became active sites of rice plundering, Japanese financial institutions and public offices were set up and thus formed Jangmi-dong. This accounts for the remnants of modern
Japanese architecture along the streets of the adjacent neighborhoods of Jangmi-dong, Younghwa-dong and Wolmyeong-dong.

The Gunsan city government seeks to restore modern architectural structures to remind people to learn from the past. Modern History Culture Street has refashioned itself as a retro-themed and pedestrian-friendly town. The street’s popularity shot up after its selection from 2015-18 as one of “100 Destinations for Korean Visitors of 2019-20” by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Korea Tourism Organization. Despite chilly weather, the street teems with tourists in winter.

**Time Travel to 1930s**

The culture street is just a ten-minute drive from Gunsan Bus Terminal. The tourist attractions are conveniently clustered for easy browsing. I first dropped by the Gunsan Modern History Museum, which features the city’s historical role as a hub of logistics distribution as well as a venue for Japanese rice plunderers and Gunsan-based independent fighters. The third floor showcases daily scenery from the period arranged in a graphic reenactment of 1930s Gunsan. The experiences of the times in the city range from the famed “buoyant” wharf, log house and Impi Station to Yeongmyeong School and Yamaguchi alcohol wholesalers.

The headquarters of the former Gunsan customs building, situated to the left of the museum, was built in 1908. Along with the buildings of Korea Bank and Seoul History Headquarters, the customs building is considered one of the nation’s three featuring Western Classicist architecture that are still standing. A gray slate roof sits atop the red bricks, giving off a luxuriously vintage aura, and its use as a customs office through 1993 allowed its preservation. The Honam Custom Exhibition Hall displays the history of Gunsan customs.

To the right of the museum is the Gunsan Modern Art Museum, a structure renovated from the Gunsan branch of Japanese No. 18 Bank. The Japanese colonial government used the bank to grant high interest loans to strip Koreans of their land. Among city artworks on display are Ahn Jung Geun Memorial Hall and empty vaults used back then; the empty vaults meant the Korean people starved. This might partly account for Gunsan’s prompt participation in the March 1 Independence Movement in 1919, the first
Experience Korea

To do so.

The Modern Architecture Museum was formerly the Gunsan branch of Chosun Bank owned by the Joseon Government-General. Built in 1922, it exemplifies the penchant of modern Japanese architecture to install steep roofs on tall buildings. The bank took the lead in giving Japanese merchants preferential rights and taking control of Gunsan’s commerce. Modeled for display in the multi-story hall are the city’s modern architectural prototypes and vaults inside the iron gate.

Behind this museum is the buoyant wharf and inner harbor that the Japanese built at the Geumgang River’s estuary bank. The wharf was designed to load boats with rice even at low tide. At the inner harbor’s third groundbreaking ceremony, loads of rice were stocked upward. Packets of rice, too many to fit in the storage, overflew into the pier. Imagery from such snapshots drives home the truism that “lost history yields no future.”

Cinematic Sights

After browsing the inner harbor, I moved on to the retro charms of the city’s streets. Besides modern architectural buildings, I saw the Japanese-style house of Sinheung-dong built during Japan’s colonial rule. This traditional wooden mansion, decked out with a garden beautifully decorated with stonework, shot to fame as a filming site for the 2006 blockbuster film “Tazza: The High Rollers.”

The crucially acclaimed melodrama “Christmas in August” (1998) was also filmed near the mansion, where the protagonist ran the studio Chowon Photography. Built as a film set, the studio remains intact due to the national popularity of retro.

Across Chowon stands Han-Il-Og, which is famous for its stellar beef radish soup. Over the last 40 years, the building, originally a surgical hospital built in the style of a Japanese house in 1937, has customers eagerly waiting at the doorway from early morning.

A ten-minute walk from Han-Il-Og leads to Dongguk Temple, the last Japanese temple standing in Korea, featuring multiple windows in the main inner temple and a steep roof angled at around 75 degrees. Using Japanese architectural materials, the temple has the customary style of the Edo period. The Gunsan Modern History Museum exhibiting the region’s pillage under Japanese colonial rule opened last year in front of the temple.

Korea’s oldest bakery Leeseongdang Bakery has a wide selection of rice-based pastries made from

Located to the right of Modern History Culture Street, the Gunsan Modern Art Museum was once the building that housed the Gunsan branch of Japanese No. 18 Bank. This is a replica of the Chinese Port Arthur Prison, where Korean patriot and martyr Ahn Jung-geun was incarcerated.
Gunsan’s premium rice. Bread made with sweet red bean paste or veggie bread is Leeseongdang’s specialty. Customers every weekend endure lengthy lines just to get a taste.

**Gyeongamdong Railroad Town**

About a ten-minute drive from Dongguk Temple is Gyeongamdong Railroad Town. Lacing both sides of the railroad are shacks, tin houses and prefabricated houses facing each other, with less than a meter separating the railroad and the homes. Fortunately, the tracks are safe to walk on as trains no longer pass through.

In 1994, a paper manufacturer built a 1.1-km railroad to transport raw materials and goods to and from Gunsan Station. The village through which the railroad cut was named Gyeongamdong Railroad Town. Through 2008, two freight trains passed by before noon at a speed of 10 km per hour. The railroad had 11 crossroads. When a station employee shouted or a whistle went off to alert villagers to move away from the freight train, residents would move household goods and sundries like chili, radish greens, flower pots and laundry left out to dry. The ensuing rush of photo aficionados capturing such lively scenery made the town famous.

The discontinuation of the train service, however, caused most residents to leave the town. Fear not, however, as retro-themed storefronts ranging from junk sellers to rentals of old school uniforms and coffee shops moved in. They attract up to 20,000 tourists on weekends. From afar, visitors flock to railroads from bygone days. Even for those not native to or unfamiliar with the region, Gyeongamdong Railroad Town is an enjoyable trip down memory lane.