

Andong's Dosan Seowon Confucian Academy



Andong is a center of traditional Korean culture. One of its most celebrated sites is the Dosan Seowon, or Dosan Confucian Academy.

The city of **Andong** in North Gyeongsang Province is famous as one of Korea's cultural centers. Well-known for its conservative tastes and preservation of folk culture, Andong is high on the list of many travelers' must-see sites. And one of my favorite places in Andong is the **Dosan Seowon** (도산서원), or Dosan Confucian Academy (original name: Dosan Seodang).

Constructed in 1574 during the 7th year of **King Seonjo**'s (선조왕) reign, the school was built to enshrine the memorial tablet of **Yi Hwang** (이황). Yi is one of Korea's most celebrated philosophers. And if you've been to Korea, you've no doubt seen his likeness, because that's him on the ubiquitous 1,000-won (\$0.72) note.



Yi Hwang (pen

name Toegye) is regarded as one of Korea’s foremost intellectuals. Most Koreans see his face every day on the 1,000-won note. The Dosan Seowon was built in his honor.

Despite the historic and cultural nature of the academy, which is Korea’s largest and most famous, it’s somewhat remarkable that it still exists. The school, which in its day was the center of the Yeongnam School of **Neo-Confucianism**, was one of only 47 so-called “lucky” academies that escaped the widespread destruction of such schools during the rule of **Heungseon Daewongun (홍선대원군)**, the father of Korea’s emperor, **Gojong**.



A map of the

academy’s campus (click [here](#) for larger).

Thankfully, in recent decades the Korean government has worked to preserve these precious landmarks. In 1969, government support helped to repair the academy, and today, the Dosan Seowon site consists of at least 17 different structures.



The beautifully

spare interior of one of the buildings.

Among them, the most important building is the **Sangdeoksa (상덕사)** where Yi Hwang's memorial tablet is enshrined. Located farthest from the entrance, the simple building was built in 1574 and is surrounded by what was originally an earthen wall, but was later rebuilt out of stone.



The unadorned

Jangpangak once stored thousands of wooden blocks, which were used to reprint the works of Yi Hwang and King Seonjo.

To the right of Sangdeoksa is probably my favorite building. **Jangpangak (장판각)** is a beautiful, if unadorned structure. Unlike the colorful tapestries that cover most of the academy's walls and roof eaves, this building was where almost 3,000 wooden blocks were preserved. The blocks, which contained the written works of Yi Hwang and King Seonjo, were transferred to the Korea Studies Advancement Center for safe-keeping in 2003.



The main lecture

hall, or Jeongyodang.

The complex has a number of other rooms to explore. Two libraries on either side of the central pathway were built high off the ground to minimize humidity. The Chinese letters “*gwangmyeong*” on the hanging board were written by Yi, whose pen name was **Toegye** (퇴계). The translation of *gwangmyeong* means, “books give us hope and prospects.” If you keep following the path, it leads to the **Jeongyodang** (도산서원 전교당) or lecture hall.



When the area below the school was flooded by the Andong Dam, the Sisadan Stele was moved to its current picturesque location. Depending on the water level, it appears as an island.

In 1792, King Jeongjo held a special government examination to celebrate Yi Hwang.

Reportedly, some 7,000 people took that exam and the King marked the occasion by creating a

stele and shelter. But when the nearby Andong Dam was built, the area was flooded, so the **Sisadan Stele** (시사단) had to be moved. Well, today, it sits across from the academy amid a grove of pine on top of a picturesque island. The calm waters reflect the bucolic scenery of low mountains and fields.



A young student explores an old school.

And, finally, the academy's grounds also include an excellent museum that looks at Yi's life, his philosophy and poetry. Each signboard is translated into English, Chinese and Japanese, and is

definitely worth a visit.



Getting There:

→ From Seoul, non-stop buses leave the Dong Seoul Bus Terminal (subway line 2's Gangbyeon Station, exits #3 or 4) for Andong 34 times per day. The 2 hour 50 minute ride is 15,400 won each way.

Once at the Andong Intercity Bus Terminal, take city bus #67 for Dosan Seowon. The 30-minute ride runs four times daily. Operating hours 09:00-18:00. The entrance fee is 1,500 for adults.

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