



*Jeju Island,  
Nature & Culture*

by Anne Hilty

# *Dedication*

*To the Island, Herself*



# *Introduction*

Fire meets ice (lava meets cold sea), and dramatic natural artforms ensue. Jeju's scenery is awe-inspiring: coastal, central volcano (aka, sleeping giant creator goddess Seolmundae), smaller yet abundant hills, odd rock formations, wetlands, primal forest, and everywhere, that black basalt. Add to that the island's culture: shamans, Buddhists, free-diving women, horses, goddesses, stone houses with thatched roofs, small fields and low stone walls, fishing boats in small marinas, burial mounds with altars and stone servants. Toss in some intense weather patterns, with strong wind and too many typhoons, and infuse every rock, wave, and tree with *spirit*.

This is Jeju. Like none other.















## *Nature*

Dominating the island is its central shield volcano, Mount Halla, at 1,947m (6,388 ft), while 368 secondary cones dot the island. “You can see Hallasan from wherever you are,” a common sentiment – albeit wearing various faces. Multiple eruptions also resulted in a remarkable system of lava tubes, a porous surface with deep aquifers below, several wetlands, unusual primal forests with their own microclimate, numerous outlying islands and islets, all surrounded by that all-defining sea. The island hosts 4 ecosystems: alpine coniferous forest, temperate broadleaf forest, warm temperate evergreen lucidophyll forest, and temperate grassland. Its natural wonders have been given multiple recognitions by UNESCO, Ramsar, and Global Geoparks.















## *Stone Houses, Persimmon Clothes*

On an island created by volcano, there's a lot of stone. A hardship, the fields had to be meticulously cleaned of their stone by hand before planting; cleverly, an entire culture grew up around it, with stone houses, fences, shrines and altars, changing 'rooms' for divers, and much more. Porous black basalt is predominant and an icon of the island, while gray granite cliffs and red scoria can be found in the southwest region. The houses had thick thatched roofs which were replaced annually – or following a typhoon. A persimmon tree varietal is native to the island, its fruit picked while still green and used to dye clothing; this not only rendered the textile more durable, but seemingly repelled insects.















## *Divers, Fishers, Farmers*

Jeju's free-diving women, known today as *haenyeo* and UNESCO-inscribed, have become globally known, though their labor method is waning in the wake of modernity. Harvesting the sea, they are renowned for their prowess -- and courage. Men in the coastal villages have typically been fishers, and even today, small ports dot the shoreline; too often they died at sea, however, leading to a predominance of women – and a mythical island of *leodo*, representing the afterlife. Both coastal and inland villagers, women and men, have maintained their small farms, working them primarily by hand and horse, typically sharing the labor with others in systems of mutual aid. Burial mounds can often be spotted in the fields; the land is sacred, its spirits worshipped, and ancestors memorialized.





위대공안실









## *Hardship*

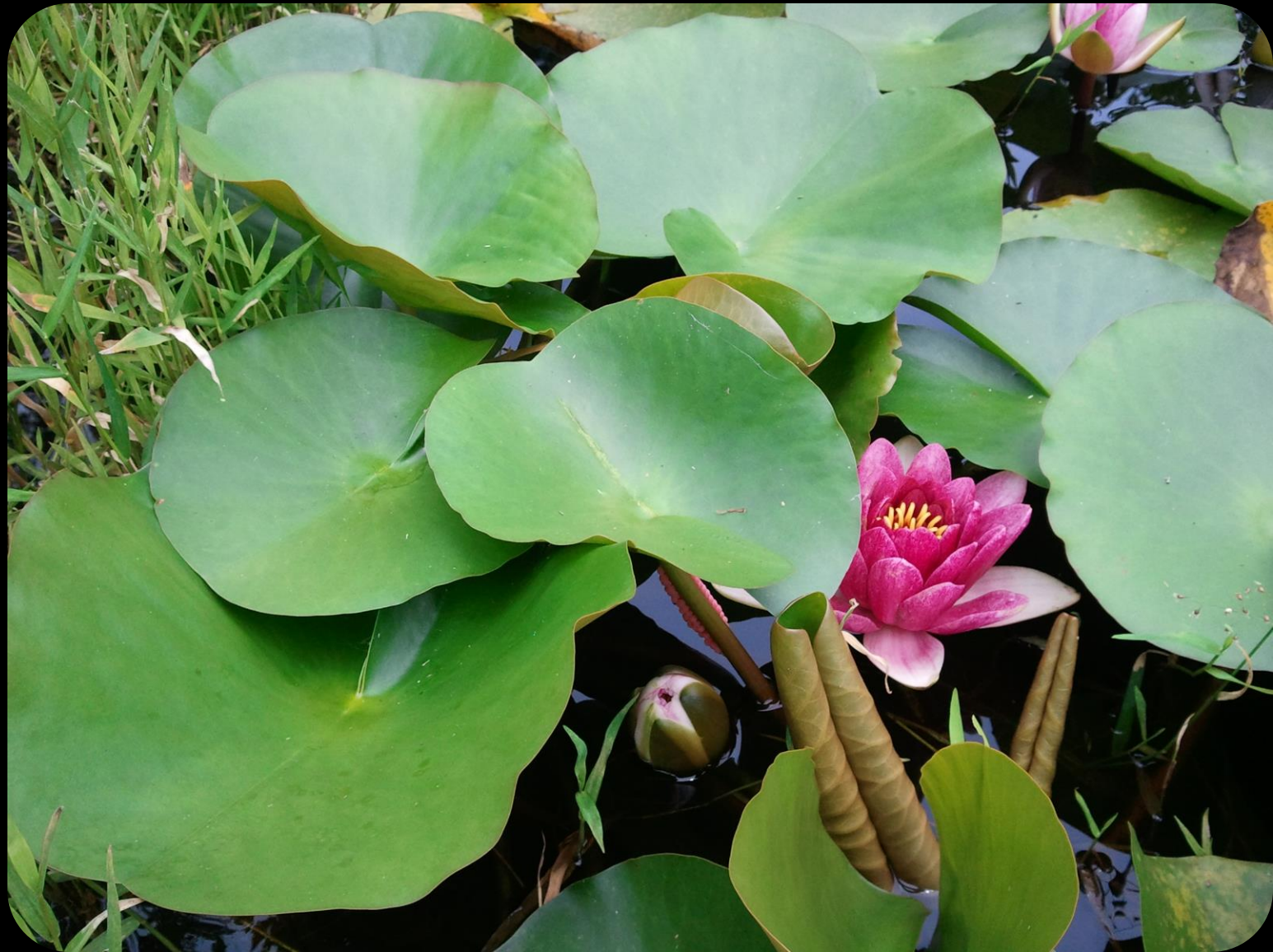
Life on the island was never easy, the makings of a stalwart and self-reliant people. A volcanic island is one of lava beds that can't be tilled nor built upon; stony fields that must be cleared, with crop limitations; porous rock that sieves the water to aquifers below, but often means drought at the surface. Nearly 400 secondary cones makes for a hilly interior terrain, challenging to farm. A windy climate brings its own difficulties for both farmers and fishers; too-frequent typhoons bring damage and death, especially for those at sea. Isolation, as an island more than 80 km (50+ mi) from the mainland, means a lack of resources and vulnerability to invasion.

In modern times, life has grown considerably easier.















# Myth

Seolmundae sleeps with her head atop Mt. Halla, her legs stretching west, hair flowing east. She *is* Hallasan, and Hallasan is She. Or, She is deep beneath the Muljangori wetlands. For Jeju's creator is a giant goddess. Or a volcano. The 3 founding patriarchs, demi-gods Ko, Yang, and Bu, rose from 3 lava vents in the Oldtown area of today's Jeju City – and wed 3 princesses from a faraway land, who drifted ashore in a large wooden box, their bridal chambers 3 caves of Honinji in Jeju's southeast. Earth goddess Jacheongbi brought the 5 grains to Jeju's people; Yowang and Yowang-buin are the dragon king and queen of the sea, while Yeongdeung visits early each year to bless the sea harvest – or not.

And so much more. Jeju mythology is very rich indeed.















## *Shamans and Shrines*

Jeju's indigenous religion is shamanic, influenced by migration from central Siberia and a 100-year rule by Mongolia. An animistic worldview of manifest deity, every aspect of nature is intimately connected to the spirit world, and outdoor places of worship abound. On Jeju, gods and spirits are often thought of as ancestors, and as members of the community. The *Simbang* or shaman is an integrated member of society and well respected; public and private *gut*, or rituals, are still held today. Rituals are offered for the well-being of the society, to ensure a bountiful harvest, as death rites or healing, to aid family prosperity, and much more. True adherents, however, are primarily of the elder generations, and after 5 millennia, its sustainability is in question.











-맛달 -해조 찜  
간지순요리재민문하인  
제주형도음식보존연구원





## *Buddhists and Temples*

Buddhism came to Jeju in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, soon after it was adopted by the then-3 kingdoms of today's Korean peninsula. It was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, that it began to gain a foothold on the island; by the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was suppressed by the Joseon dynasty and went underground, emerging again 5 centuries later in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jeju, like Korea mainland, is known for religious syncretism; Buddhism on the island has adopted Jowang, goddess of the hearth, and Yowang, dragon king of the sea, while Shamanism often includes images of the Buddha. Many of Jeju's elder generation have been known to attend both temple and shamanic ritual. More than 2 dozen Buddhist temples can be found on the island today.















## *Trauma and Healing*

Jeju is no stranger to trauma. In the late 1940s, Korean military began a nationwide anti-Communist campaign; on Jeju, there ensued a 7-year period of terror (1947-54) during which an estimated 10% of the island's then-300k population was executed, while many more were imprisoned or disappeared.

Deeply contentious, for almost 50 years it was illegal even to mention this period, and Jeju people are still struggling to heal. A national truth commission was in operation 2000-2009; on Jeju, a peace park, memorial hall, and research foundation were established in 2008, and a trauma center in 2020. In 2019 those formerly accused were exonerated, and in 2021, a law to provide victim compensation was positively revised. Each April an official memorial service and many other activities are held, as Jeju continues to heal.















## *Walking the Olle*

One of the loveliest ways to experience the beauty of Jeju's nature and culture is to walk its trail system, *Jeju Olle*. Developed 2007-2012, the inspiration of former journalist and Jeju native Suh Myungsook, this 437 km (272 mi) system in 29 segments winds its way along the coast, inland to the mid-mountain region, by ferries to several outlying islands, and through more than 135 villages as well as sites both sacred and historic.

Time magazine, in including Jeju in its 2023 list of World's Greatest Places, echoes what I discovered in my 2012 and 2013 treks of the Olle: the system provides a unique window into Jeju.















## *Afterword*

I lived on Jeju Island for 6 years, having made many prior visits during 4 years' residence in Seoul. I trekked the full 437 km *Jeju Olle* trail system 2 years in a row, climbed the central volcano thrice and nearly 100 of its 368 secondary cones, visited 6 of its outlying islands, and deeply researched the local culture.

I miss this magical island. Jeju will always have my heart.



## Books by Anne Hilty:

Cultural Trauma and Healing: The Case of Jeju Island (©2023)

Tales from the Trails: Jeju Olle (©2023)

Dear Jeju, I love you: The unique culture of Jeju Island, Korea (©2023)

Jeju through a Gendered Lens: Collected Works (©2023)

Love Letters to Korea: A Year in Seoul (©2023)

Sisters at Sea: Jeju Haenyeo (©2023)

Goddesses and Strong Jeju Women: Women's Empowerment through  
Goddess Mythology (©2023)

*Exclusively on Amazon (Kindle, Paperback, Hardback):*

<https://author.amazon.com/profile>



## About the Author

Anne Hilty, PhD, is a cultural psychologist and author of several books and 200 articles. From New York, she has lived abroad since 2005 in both Asia and Europe, and has solo-travelled to 113 countries for her research. She is now based in Istanbul and has a company in Hong Kong.

For more information:

[annehilty.com](http://annehilty.com)

[eastwestpsyche.org](http://eastwestpsyche.org)