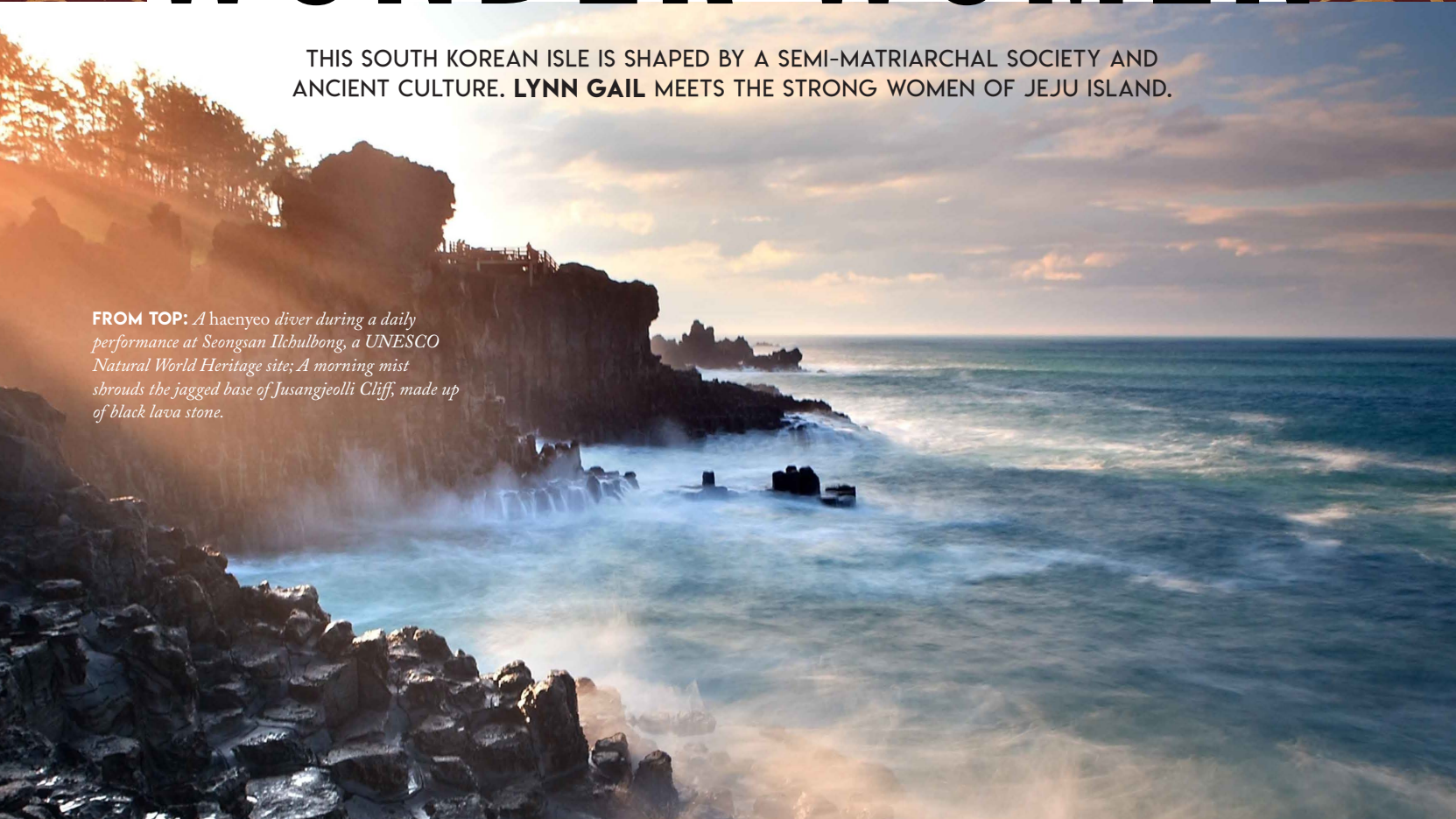




WONDER WOMEN

THIS SOUTH KOREAN ISLE IS SHAPED BY A SEMI-MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY AND ANCIENT CULTURE. **LYNN GAIL** MEETS THE STRONG WOMEN OF JEJU ISLAND.

FROM TOP: A haenyeo diver during a daily performance at Seongsan Ilchulbong, a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site; A morning mist shrouds the jagged base of Jusangjeolli Cliff, made up of black lava stone.



PHOTOGRAPHY LYNN GAIL (DIVERS, TUTTI COLORI STUDIO); PHOTO KOREA/KIM KWANG-JAE (JUSANGJEOLLI CLIFF); PHOTO KOREA/KIM JEONG-SEON (WOMEN BY THE ROCKS); GETTY IMAGES/PANGJEE_9 (SANBANGGULSA TEMPLE ROOF DETAIL); GETTY IMAGES/BY YS (SQUID DETAIL)



South Korea's top holiday destination Jeju Island has many magical highlights in its boast-worthy bag-of-tricks, but the ace that trumps all is the free-diving *haenyeo*, the island's legendary sea women. Their fluoro-orange buoys still highlight the ocean like push pins on a mariner's map – a sure sign these Viking-strong women, some in their eighties, continue to hunt and gather seafood.

When you first meet the haenyeo, you'll be struck not by the wrinkled lines weathering their faces but by the playful twinkle in their eyes that belies their senior years. Long hailed as the semi-matriarchs of Jeju's society, the haenyeo first took to the icy waters edging the island's rocky shores some 400 years ago to source seafood for their families and surrounding communities. Growing fresh resources on the island on a large scale was deemed impossible due to constant high winds and the fact the infertile ground is largely made up of volcanic rock.

Though haenyeo numbers have dropped from more than 30,000 to around 4000, they are still integral to the fishing industry and, more recently, tourism. Many of the women also own and work in restaurants, serving dishes they themselves consume daily: abalone porridge, octopus, conch, sea cucumber and seaweed.

With young women now choosing career-oriented pathways instead of a life at sea, UNESCO recently added the haenyeo to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list to preserve their legacy. Initiatives such as daily haenyeo performances at Seongsan Ilchulbong (Sunrise Peak) showcase their free-diving skills alongside a deep companionship shared from a lifetime of working together in tough conditions. The Haenyeo Museum exhibits artefacts and video footage shows the women talking candidly about the hard life they were born into; with no choice, they followed their mothers, providing for their families. You'll see haenyeo statues, sculptures and signs along the coast, mirroring a deep respect felt by locals. Here, women shape the culture. And haenyeo are just one example of strong women bringing the colour to Jeju Island.



Jeju Island | **POSTCARDS**

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Preparing the morning catch at Seongsan Ilchulbong (Sunrise Peak); Tutti Colori Studio; The livelihood of the haenyeo, traditional women divers, consists of harvesting shellfish and seaweed; See the haenyeo hard at work in the Korean province of Jeju.*



A REAL ONE-OFF

When Kim Myeong, creator of Tutti Colori Studio, greets you wearing one of her nature-inspired dresses, her melodic voice and quiet demeanour are immediately relaxing, her inner strength undeniable. Wanting to raise their children in a safe environment, Kim and her husband chose to settle on Jeju Island after an earthquake struck near a nuclear power plant close to their home on mainland South Korea in 2016. Four years later, they purchased a rundown 100-year-old farmhouse, remodelling it into a studio with a boutique and gift shop selling Kim's one-off designs.

Tutti Colori is not your everyday gallery. Influenced by the island's weather patterns, countryside and volcanic landscape, Kim created a space where guests can unwind during therapeutic three-hour art classes. She developed The Nature Palette, an all-in-one booklet where you're given artistic licence to paint freely. Overlooking a pretty cottage garden, you'll disconnect from adulthood as your inner child lets the paintbrush do the talking. When your album is complete, follow the generated QR codes to connect with nature's accompanying soundtracks. >>





From spirited sea women and creatives to leaders in religion and controllers of financial matters, women shape Jeju Island in numerous ways.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: A Buddhist monk serves tea at Yakcheonsa Temple; Seongsan Ilchulbong is a volcano on Jeju Island; A Buddhist student at Yakcheonsa Temple; Sisters are doing it for themselves at Cafe D.CRE.

FEMALE MONKHOOD

It seems no role is unattainable to women on Jeju. Ja Yu, a female monk at Asia's largest temple, Yakcheonsa, leads overnight programs. Speaking little English, she effortlessly communicates joy and compassion. From an early age, Ja Yu felt the 'calling', but took an office job when her father passed away to better support

her mother. She finally dedicated her life to Buddhism in her late twenties and, after spending 26 years in South Korea's famous temple, Haeinsa, transferred to Jeju for a quieter life.

Stress levels naturally lower as Ja Yu imparts Buddha's wisdom while you slowly string 108 *mala* prayer beads together (later used to count prostrate bows during prayer time). She believes Buddhism clears multiple clouds that cover the Buddha within. A light-hearted tea ceremony teaches you that nothing

lasts forever, the ego serves the self: we are mortal beings. To finish, there's raucous noise to be made as you clang and bang gigantic *dharma* instruments – a bell, drum, gong and a long wooden fish – in a ritual celebrating life.

SISTERHOOD

From spirited sea women and creatives to leaders in religion and controllers of financial matters, women shape Jeju Island in numerous ways. During Covid, three sisters, Sanghee, Sookhee and Gyounghee Hong, became concerned for their ageing parents who were running the family's tangerine farm. Over many discussions, they decided to build a book cafe on the farmland. Sanghee, a tour guide for 20 years, no longer felt secure; Sookhee was close to retirement; and Gyounghee, widowed. At times, joining forces created sibling friction, but they overcame their differences, becoming part-bakers, part-baristas and builders. The cafe was due to open early December 2023, but plans were only approved prior to the new year. Cafe D.CRE is now due to open early November, another testament to the empowered women of Jeju Island. **IT**



A Traveller's Checklist

GETTING THERE

SINGAPORE AIRLINES and SCOOT fly to Jeju Island via Singapore.

STAYING THERE

Book a *hanok*, a traditional Korean room, at THE SEAES HOTEL & RESORT.

EATING THERE

Look out to sea as you sip a signature smoothie made with figs and strawberries at TROPICAL HIDEAWAY RESTAURANT.

PLAYING THERE

Climb more than 500 steps to reach a 5000-year-old crater at SUNRISE PEAK.

For more information, visit english.visitkorea.or.kr