

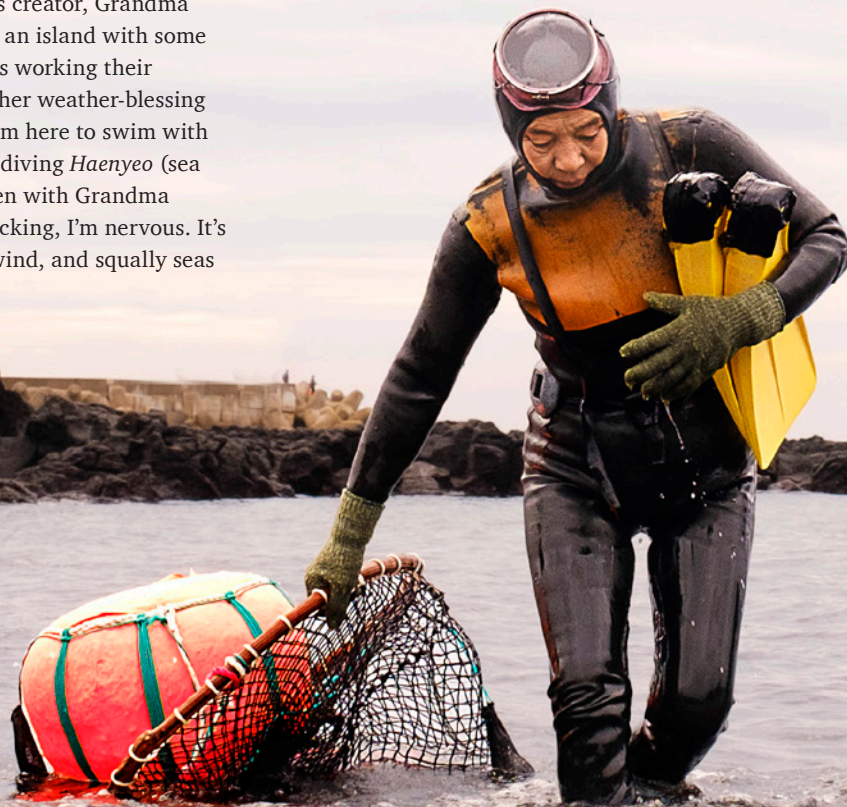


Women of the Sea

The heroic, free-diving Haenyeo women are the heartbeat of Jeju Island – South Korea’s southernmost isle, harvesting seafood for hundreds of years to feed their families. *By Lynn Gail*

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HEN I ARRIVE ON A CLOUDLESS blue-sky day on Jeju Island, South Korea, I’m told I’ve been blessed by the volcanic isle’s creator, Grandma Seolmundae. On an island with some 18,000 goddesses working their wizardry, I pray her weather-blessing bodes me well. I’m here to swim with the fearless free-diving *Haenyeo* (sea women); and even with Grandma Seolmundae’s backing, I’m nervous. It’s autumn – rain, wind, and squally seas



OPENING SPREAD FROM LEFT: A *Haenyeo* diver heads into the deep © Kim Wonkook/ Shutterstock; *Haenyeo* free-diver, 70-year-old Jungryul Ko returns with conch in her basket
 CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Comrades for life, free-divers Jungryul and Jinha head out to sea; The divers throw their nets and orange buoys into the ocean ready to fish; Jungryul and Jinha sort through a net of conch shellfish; Artwork made from ocean-related recycled materials showcase a *Haenyeo* free-diver. Images © Lynn Gail



are predicted and if the ocean is too rough, the *Haenyeo* will cancel. And, if all goes to plan, I wonder if these reputedly iron-willed women will be welcoming.

The anticipated day arrives. Steel grey clouds threaten overhead as we head to Bomok-ro fishing village – one of around 100 *Haenyeo* communities. An easy-to-navigate island measuring 1,846 sq km, each region can be reached within half a day's travel, and two hours later I arrive with my savvy-island guide, Sunny. Thankfully Grandma has waved her wand – the ocean is splat flat, and on an island known for gale-force winds, there's barely a passing puff.

Before heading to the *Haenyeo*'s community house, I'm fitted with a 5mm wetsuit. "The island has three things in abundance." Sunny tells me. "Volcanic stones used for building, strong winds and strong women – the matriarchs of Jeju's society."

The house brims with free-diving fishing equipment, it's also where, after diving, the women share bone-warming soup, soju (rice wine), and sisterhood. The *Haenyeo* have a saying: "If we're close friends, I know how many spoons you have".

UNDER THE SEA

I meet divers 70-year-old Jungryul Ko and 54-year-old Jinha Kim who lead me to the shore. There's no hanging around as they nimbly navigate loose rocks while I follow like a toddler taking first steps. In they go: fins up, masks down, submerging with weight belts attached to wetsuits (worn since 1970) – no tank, no snorkel. Bright orange buoys attached to nets bob on the surface, the only ocean-marker warning passing trawler boats.

Haenyeo hold their breath for up to two minutes – considering world records reach over 13 -minutes, it seems short. But they free-dive for up to six hours a day, with no break and no sustenance. With an average age of 75, these financially-independent warrior women often push boundaries, staying under too long when spotting premium seafood like abalone. On rising to breathe, they lose sight of the prize, so stay submerged, sometimes running out of air. It's a tenacious life – all *Haenyeo* know comrades who have died this way.

Twenty minutes later they return with a hefty catch of conch, a seasnail

with a rubbery texture. Being October, conch numbers are high as it's forbidden to hunt the mollusc from June to September. "Conch tastes like the sea," Sunny says. "With abalone and red sea-cucumbers they're our ocean medicine, a sought-after aphrodisiac – keeps the heart pumping," she smiles. "Shellfish and seaweed are rich in proteins, zinc, potassium, and magnesium, very important in the Korean diet."

In the early 1600s, when Jeju Island's soil was mostly volcanic, women began farming the ocean to feed their families. In freezing temperatures, they wore thin cotton clothing over the upper body. Men, unable to cope in cold waters, stayed home to look after children. Pregnant women even gave birth at sea, some returning within days of delivery. If born a daughter you had no choice but to become a *Haenyeo* – some began from as young as eight years old.

Smiles transcend all languages, and the women befriend me as we head into deeper waters on a trawler boat. Keeping my 'can-I-free-dive?' angst at bay, I check my underwater camera and snorkelling gear many times before jumping in. Like Olympic high-board divers, the women freefall 10 metres to the ocean floor; I reach two metres. It's enough. With good visibility I watch them mermaiding along the ocean floor, collecting huge handfuls



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Fly with Singapore and Scoot Airlines via Singapore to reach Jeju Island.

STAYING THERE

WE Hotel Jeju – a premium health resort recognised by UNESCO as a resting place.

wehotel.co.kr/en/hotel

DINING THERE

Bomok-ro Fishing Village Restaurant, Seogwipo, Jeju Island.

FURTHER INFORMATION

english.visitkorea.or.kr

visitkoreayear.kr

ijto.or.kr/english



of shellfish. On rising, they exhale a soft wolf whistle-like sound (sumbisori), breathe in, then dive again, agile acrobats of the ocean. Baskets full, they jump back on board cackling away in Jeju dialect; bonded by life at sea, they act like family. We reach the harbour where they invite me to their community-owned restaurant.

DIVING SCHOOL

Over delicious Korean dishes: abalone porridge, sea urchin seaweed soup, kimchi, fresh fish and various side dishes, I learn

about their lifestyle, courage and the often unforgiving ocean. Seeing her future as a cooped-up 80-year-old city-dweller, Jinha, a slightly built woman, tells me she left Seoul, South Korea's capital, giving up her career in editorial design to enrol in Jeju's four-month *Haenyeo* course.

"After three years I'm happier, but still fearful of rough swells, passing boats, and getting caught in seaweed," she says. It's a brave transition from office to ocean.

The *Haenyeo* have three free-diving levels, from highest to lowest: sanggun,

junggun and hagon. "It takes over 20 years of mental and physical toughness to reach sanggun." Sunny says. "With Jinha's willpower, she could move from hagon and reach sanggun by her 70s – some *Haenyeo* still dive in their 90s, so it's possible."

After serving restaurant guests, Jungryul joins us. At 70, she has the vitality of someone half her age. A level-one diver, she was born into the culture and began training with her mother at 15 years of age. With no education, the only option was to contribute to her family. Sadness flicks over her face as she tells us her mother suffered a heart attack at sea and died, aged 51. Her self-protecting persona soon returns as she talks of her two daughters, owners of a tangerine farm – one of many on Jeju island. "Neither can swim," she laughs, happy they chose a different pathway to the hard *Haenyeo* life.

At its peak, over 30,000 divers sourced their livelihood from Jeju's unpredictable seas - now less than 4,000 exist. Educated daughters seek easier, safer lifestyles. In 2016, the *Haenyeo* were inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Humanity list. These living legends are so iconic, the Jeju government now offer free courses (men included). But the *Haenyeo* life is not for the fainthearted. Akin to the Special Services, it tests the strongest of resolves, builds iron-clad character, and harnesses lifelong friendships. 🌊

