

South Korea—how do you describe the sights, sounds, smells, energy, and people of this cosmopolitan country and its capital city Seoul? It certainly is a place of contrasts: mountains and super highways, rice paddies and barbed wire fences, church steeples (the country is 1/3 Christian) against skyscrapers, traditional houses with wood frames and tiled roofs between high-rise apartment complexes, pungent food and incense, opulent palaces and narrow alleys, golden shrines and pop stars. We even saw a Little Free Library on the grounds of a Buddhist temple. And everywhere people, unfailingly polite, always bowing, gracious, and helpful.

The Rotary Conference, held an hour outside Seoul in a complex of two immense buildings called KINTEX, was more than ready to host almost 50,000 Rotarians representing 160 countries. Your mind starts to reel as hundreds of shuttle busses deliver people from hotels all over the city for the biggest Rotary International Conference ever held. While Eva Marie Restel and I would occasionally meet up with folks from other parts of District 6250, mostly we took the opportunity to chat with strangers. Are there any people friendlier than Rotarians? We don't think so.

Keynote speakers were the highlight of each day. RI President K.R. Ravindran opened the sessions by elaborating on his 2016 theme, "Be a Gift to the World," followed by an address by Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on the productive partnership between the UN and Rotary. The prime ministers of Korea and Sri Lanka also congratulated Rotary International on its centennial of progress and achievements.



Additional speakers included Gary Knell, CEO of National Geographic Society and Rebecca Martin, Director of Center for Global Health at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They and others covered such diverse topics as environment, peace, looting, slavery, the future, and of course the total push for the eradication of polio in the remaining two countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Rotarians share the knowledge that we are united in a world-wide service organization, working towards common goals, crossing cultural and language barriers, and linking us all.

A very emotional experience for a number of us was a pre-convention tour of the DMZ and J.S.A. (demilitarized zone and Joint Security Area) located about 1 ½ hours north of Seoul. It's a stark, bleak barbed-wire fenced area separating North and South Korea. You can feel the tension at the border checkpoint with security forces from both sides armed and on high alert. No photos, no gestures and practically no talking. We were glad to leave that particular location. The tour included a walk into the Third Infiltrator Tunnel, one of four discovered since the cease fire in 1953. These tunnels (there are probably more yet to be found) under the DMZ were designed to deliver 30 thousand troops and vehicles per hour to invade Seoul. The North Koreans deny this of course saying they were mining for coal (there is no coal in Korea). Peace talks continue and divided families hope for reunification.



Thank you Downtown Rotary for allowing me to represent you at this international conference. Thanks also to Rotarian Mary Mickelson for the travel arrangements and to my traveling companion and co-representative, Eva Marie Restel. We had a wonderful and inspirational time. We also decided we could get used to being bowed to all the time....

Patricia A. Boge, President 2016-17