

An Abbevillian pays visit to South Korea

By Henry E. Green

It tends to be news when an Abbevillian visits a foreign country.

And when we learned that Jaime Coleman of Abbeville visited South Korea in April as part of a Rotary group study exchange, the news seemed all the more special.

North Korea has been much in the news lately, but Coleman can tell you that its southern counterpart on the Korean peninsula is a very different place.

Where the North is isolated and poor, South Korea is a thriving, bustling country which is a democracy.

"They have a president," she said.

Coleman works at Self Regional Healthcare in Greenwood, as a client analyst.

She has, in her words, "a love of travel." And travel she has--she's been to "almost all of the United States, Canada, Europe, and most importantly Bermuda."

She added the mention of Bermuda with a laugh and twinkle in her eye, before turning the conversation back to Korea.

"Every year the Rotary Foundation sponsors these group study exchanges," she said.

Rotary District 7750 partnered with a Rotary District in South Korea on this particular group study exchange.

Thus, a Korean delegation came to the Lakelands, although they did not visit Abbeville.

And Jaime, meanwhile, was

accompanied on her trip to South Korea by four other Americans.

"We had four team members and one team leader," she said.

"The District did a really good job of preparing us for the exchange, and they selected an excellent team," she said. "We truly were friends."

Michelle Hardesty, Travis Seward, Sylvia Yang, and Ed Maier, the team leader, and Jaime comprised the representatives.

Jaime was the only one from Abbeville--the others were from the Greenville area.

She had signed up to be part of the Rotary exchange, but she did not know at the time where they would send her.

"I applied last August," she recalled. A few weeks after she applied, she learned she would be going to South Korea--a choice that pleased her "very much."

"I was thrilled," she said.

She left the United States on April 3, flying from Greenville to Atlanta to Seoul and then to Ulsan, on the southern tip of the peninsula.

All in all, the trip took 15 hours. Because of the tension with the North Koreans, the group had to take a detour over northern Canada, Russia and China.

She and her comrades were exhausted when they arrived, particularly in view of the fact that Korea is 13 hours ahead of Eastern Time.

Finally, she was in Ulsan, where she was to stay the next 28 days. "We were hosted

by a variety of Rotary clubs. Sometimes we were in hotels, sometimes in private homes, and we spent two days in a Buddhist temple," she said.

"Before the trip we were able to request activities and places we wanted to visit, and the temple stay was one thing everyone wanted to do."

They donned special outfits to visit the temple, in keeping with Buddhist tradition.

"The temple experience was designed to show us how simple our needs actually are, without the distractions of modern society," she said.

And she learned something else--Korea is cold. She kept her jacket on top of the monk outfit.

"The temple was in the mountains, and at night it would get down into the low 30s."

However, their seasons are very much like those in the U.S., so as the month pro-

gressed, the weather got warmer.

"We visited several ship-building factories, and learned a great deal about their economic structure and industry."

"Industry there is a relatively recent development, and they're very proud of all they've accomplished."

South Korea has impressive hydroelectric plants, a big automotive industry, and research and development in information technology.

Samsung and LG are based there, she said.

"We also experienced their everyday routines," she said. "Korean meals--lots of kimchee."

Kimchee is pickled cabbage. "Sometimes it's hot, sometimes it's mild--it always has a distinctive smell."

They also visited a number of museums, as well as pottery-making facilities. "We got to make our own pottery,"

she said. "My first effort was terrible--my later efforts were much improved."

Very few South Koreans speak English, Jaime found.

She had had some preparation in learning Korean after she had been accepted--the language preparation was sponsored by Rotary.

Still, Korean is a very hard language to learn. "They have vowels and consonants, as we do, but they also have compound vowels and compound consonants, and their alphabet is character based, like Japanese or Chinese."

The delegation members were told to speak English slowly, and they learned also not to use American slang.

Interpreters were on hand at various places, but they were not always fluent in English.

But they muddled through. One of the team members was actually Korean American, so

she could speak the language. "She could interpret, if we really got into a bind, and she ended up doing more than her fair share of it."

There were some very nice things about the country. South Koreans tend to be friendly to Americans.

"And an older gentleman who served as our interpreter in Jinhae said to me Korea will never forget America," she said. "That meant so much because the reputation of Americans in foreign countries tends to be negative--arrogant, aggressive, and self-centered."

"When I was accepted I wanted to do a really good job of representing South Carolina and the country. We didn't know exactly what their opinions of Americans might be. Being a representative is a big deal."

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A trip to Korea--Abbevillian Jaime Coleman recently talked about her visit to South Korea earlier this year as part of a Rotary exchange program. (Staff photo by Henry E. Green)