



SEA CHANGE

For centuries, women divers have worked the seas off Korea's Jeju Island, holding their breath for minutes at a time to hunt the ocean floor for seafood. As the country modernizes, this generation of elderly "mermaids" may end up being its last

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OK SEON JEONG DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A MERMAID. The diminutive 77-year-old seems like a regular grandma. Right now, she is in the women's locker room of a diving school on South Korea's Jeju Island, struggling to pull a rubber wetsuit over her knees and grunting under her breath. A moment later, she looks me up and down, throws her head back and hoots something to our translator: My wetsuit is inside out.

For 50 years, Jeong has worked as a *haenyeo* (Korean for "sea" and "woman"), as did her mother and grandmother before her. For centuries, in fact, Jeju's women have been plunging into the chilly depths of the Korean Strait, scouring the ocean floor for abalone, conch, turban snails, sea urchins and sea cucumbers. No one knows for sure why women are the main practitioners of this difficult, dangerous work. Some speculate that they took over in the 17th century, after the island's male population dwindled due to warfare or accidents at sea; others believe they are physically better suited to the task (the Ama shell divers of Japan, mostly female, reinforce this theory).

Either way, there's no doubting the resilience of these women, who may have traded their white cotton wetsuits for neoprene in recent years, but have made few other concessions to modern convenience. Today, as ever, they work without oxygen tanks, diving as far as 30 feet deep on a single breath, for minutes at a time. South Koreans have long looked upon the *haenyeo* as mythical heroes, and that



renown has gone global. In 2016, UNESCO deemed the tradition an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, while Jeong says she often finds herself working under the gaze of a writer or photographer.

Even so, the tradition is in danger of dying out. More lucrative opportunities have lured the island's younger generation away to the mainland, and those who do stay behind show little interest in diving. In the 1960s, there were an estimated 23,000 female divers on the island. Only 4,200 remain today. Jeong's own daughter, who's married to a teacher and living in Seoul, never showed much of an interest in the work, and the same goes for her granddaughter, who works for a German aviation company traveling the world.



Jeong waves away the idea that this is a bad thing. “This is a job that I’ve had to do for survival since I was 20 years old, and one that I’m planning to do until the day I die,” she says, via our translator. For her, diving was the only available option. And it wasn’t an easy one, requiring her to work from sunrise to sunset, risking hypothermia and drowning, for a pittance in salary. “I always wanted a better life for my daughter, my granddaughter, my great-granddaughter and so on,” she says. “An easier one.”

But Jeong is also involved in an effort to keep the tradition alive. For the past four years, she and others like her have moonlighted at the local Beophwan Haenyeo diving school, teaching their skills to villagers, in the hope that a few will be moved to take the profession up.

Occasionally, they will agree to teach an outsider—which is how I’ve come to find myself standing in this locker room, being laughed at for wearing my wetsuit inside out.

ALONG WITH THEIR PHYSICAL TOUGHNESS, the *haenyeo* are known for being strong-willed and brutally candid. After fixing my suit, notebook in hand, I ask Jeong about her work but she swats me away as she gathers our equipment. The translator shrugs. As we head out of the locker room, Jeong greets my obvious enthusiasm with a thin smile. “No one catches a shell on their first day,” she says, tossing a pair of goggles, a weighted belt, a hair cap, flippers and a buoyed net at my feet. “OK?” >

Above: The *haenyeo* brave the choppy and chilly waters of the Korean Strait.

Left: Ok Seon Jeong and writer, Swanson, pose with the turban snails they harvested



I find myself waiting for her to spasm, due to the sea monster that has clamped itself onto her arm.

As we head outside, I am too busy gawping at our surroundings to be dismayed. Located 60 miles south of the Korean Peninsula, Jeju is a volcanic island, with lava caves, a crater lake and some of the richest soil in the world. The land is impossibly green, the water is ridiculously blue and the sun is shining overhead. I follow Jeong as she passes a copse of palm trees and heads down the rocky shore. She's carrying all our gear.

Every few minutes, a car putters past on the winding road that hugs the rugged coastline, which is about as busy as things get around here. On the north side of the island, Jeju City has traffic jams and high-rises. But the south runs at a slower pace. In Beophwan, the village where Jeong works, about 40 women dive professionally (there are 18 other villages with *haenyeo* on the island). Most in Jeong's group are in their 60s and 70s. The oldest is 86. "There's no retirement age here," Jeong quips, though she finds herself teaching more than diving with each passing year.

As feisty and competitive as they can be, these women share deep bonds. When one falls sick, the rest pitch in, taking care of chores and children, even allocating some of their daily harvest to a woman unable to dive. As I peer across the bay, I spot a number of orange buoys bobbing about, each marking a diver's territory for the day. Nearby, a handful of onlookers snap photos as a *haenyeo* emerges from the water, smiling

and raising her bounty above her head.

Ignoring the spectacle, Jeong slides into the water and motions for me to hurry up (the translator won't join us in the sea, meaning the lesson must continue through improvised sign language). As I watch Jeong rinse her pink face mask, she widens her eyes impatiently. "There are no sharks?" I say to no one in particular before dipping a toe. We start in the shallows, where Jeong studies my swimming form. Every time I come up for air, she points her finger down to have me do it again. "She just wants to make sure you're not going to drown!" the translator shouts from the shore.

She swims into deeper water, toward the rock pillars rising out of the seabed. The water is cold and choppy, and I work hard to keep up. When we stop about 100 feet from shore, I am out of breath and Jeong is smiling. She points to her eye, which translates to "pay attention," then plops out of view. I stick my face in the water and watch her clamber down a cluster of boulders, her image growing fainter the deeper she goes. I keep coming up for air, but the old woman continues with apparent ease.

When I look down again, Jeong—about 20 feet down now and little more than blur—is reaching into cracks and crevices on the seabed. I find myself waiting for her to spasm, due to the sea monster that has clamped itself onto her arm. Instead, she surfaces holding two >

Left: a diver surfaces with sea urchins, while others return to shore with their catch. Below: Kyungji Kwon, 76; Changran Oh, 84; Suhyun Park, 62





The rugged work of the *haenyeo* tradition has made it less appealing to younger generations

turban snails, which will later be sold to eateries across the island, or sometimes as far away as Japan. She tosses the snails casually into her net. I get the feeling that she is showing off.

On my first proper dive, I try to mirror my teacher's every move. Before I can descend even 10 feet, however, I have to stop. The pressure is making my head feel like it's about to implode. I come up and point to my ears. Jeong pinches her nose and puffs out her cheeks. I do the same. Then she begins exhaling in little spurts and I follow. Just as I become light-headed, she points downwards, ordering me to take a big breath and descend again.

As I climb down the rocks, I can tell the breathing exercise has helped, because when I look up the surface is 10 feet away. I continue my descent, remembering to pinch my nose and puff my cheeks. I scan the ocean floor for shells but can see none. On my way up, I pass a dark nook and, against my better judgment, blindly reach in. There is something there. I pull it out. A turban snail! I rise to the surface holding it above my head and Jeong cheers, shaking both fists out of the water.

IN 2015, THE JEJU GOVERNMENT INVESTED around \$6.5 million in the preservation of *haenyeo* culture. In 2006, a museum devoted to the tradition was opened on the north side of the island, displaying black-and-white photographs, vintage gear and other trinkets. The UNESCO designation will also help raise awareness of the practice, but it is only through local participation that it will survive as anything other than a historical curiosity. This, anyway, is the thinking behind the Beophwan Haenyeo School, the single-storied seaside structure where Jeong works.

The day I visit, the school's café is packed, mostly with out-of-towners ordering abalone

porridge and sashimi, all of it freshly caught from the waters just outside. For now, business is good. On busy days, Jeong swaps her wetsuit for an apron to help with the cooking and, for the first time in her life, has medical insurance. The school has done a vigorous trade, too: More than 120 women have graduated in the four years since it opened, though few of them will pursue diving professionally.

Jeong, certainly, is a wonderful teacher. I follow behind her as she glides through the depths, pointing out a promising crevice or the glint of a shell on the seafloor. A few hours in, chilly and exhausted, I surface to see the translator flailing her arms in the distance, gesturing for us to come in, and I'm genuinely disappointed. As we swim back, it occurs to me that Jeong won't be able to do this forever, and there aren't that many people to take her place. I want to say something about this when we get ashore, but she is busy divvying up our turban snails—four for me, 11 for her.

Sitting on a rock, she cracks open one of the shells, plucks out the meat, puts it in her mouth and chews. Then she breaks another and gestures for me to do the same. On the first bite, I wince—it makes me think of fishy rubber—and the translator is moved to remind me that these are a delicacy. Jeong, meanwhile, won't let me change out of my soggy wetsuit until I eat all four.

One by one, the other *haenyeo* join us on the rocks. They dump their catch into freshwater buckets and shimmy out of their gear, gabbing and peering into one another's nets. At one point, Jeong points to me, holding up four fingers. "She says you did a good job," the translator whispers. The women laugh and nod in approval. One even gives me a thumbs up. Jeong is beaming. Before I go, I tell her a phrase I've learned: "*Joeun gangsa.*" Good instructor. **AW**

IF YOU GO

There's more to Jeju Island than its mermaids

Eat ZZZ

Jeju is known for its black pork, and this sleek, industrial barbecue restaurant is arguably one of the best spots on the island for it. ZZZ hands out blue aprons to patrons upon arrival, who then cook their meat on tabletop grills as servers refill side dishes, such as kimchi, pickled ginger and head-tingling spicy sauces.

jejuzzz.modoo.at

Drink Led Zeppelin

High-spirited music nerds swear by this vinyl bar in Jeju City. Shelves are stocked and nearly buckling from the weight of decades' worth of records. They're not partial to any genre or decade, and you can't really predict what'll be playing when you arrive.

Enjoy live bands on weekends.

Sleep WE Hotel Wellness Center

With views of the snow-topped Hallasan Mountain, this property is the first health resort in Korea. WE has a long list of calming offerings, such as paddleboard yoga and hydrotherapy classes in the dome-shaped meditation pool.

www.wehotel.co.kr
jejuzzz.modoo.at