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host families through the South Korean Lions Club.

“They split us up two to a family so we had someone familiar with us,” Steckler said. “The first family I stayed with had a daughter who was 23 and spoke really good English. Most of the people in their mid-20s and younger (in Korea) speak at least a little bit of English. The second night we stayed with a family who didn’t speak any English. We spent most of the time laughing, smiling and using gestures to communicate with each other. The daughter in that family actually called a friend of hers who spoke English to translate what we wanted for breakfast.”

Steckler said she was impressed with the generosity of her host families and the various tour guides and Lions Club members they met on the trip.

“Going into the trip I kept an open mind and I really got a lot more than I expected,” she said.

The group spent time learning traditional Korean arts and participated in a traditional Korean tea ceremony. They even got the chance to wear hanboks — traditional Korean dresses — and visit the UN Cemetery for Korean War fatalities, but not everything was focused on the past.

“We went to a modern performance of ‘Nanta,’ which is kind of like ‘Stomp’ over here,” Steckler said. “It had a cooking theme and they moved knives to the music. I couldn’t believe they didn’t get hurt. We also got some chances to explore on our own and soak in the sights of Seoul. I saw and gained far more experience than I thought possible in two weeks.”

In addition to the sights and sounds of South Korea, Steckler said the group got a chance to dine on South Korean cuisine.

“The main dishes were usually vegetables and rice with a red bean paste to make it spicy,” she said. “We had dumplings and a lot of snacks. I also tried octopus and silk worms. The octopus wasn’t bad except for the texture. There was also a lot of noodle dishes. Everything had a lot of vegetables. There wasn’t a lot of meat. The last night we had (Korean barbecue) and it was really good after not having a lot of meat for a while.”

Although visiting her homeland and becoming more familiar with the customs and traditions of Korea were valuable to Steckler, she said an unexpected bonus of the trip was meeting other adopted Koreans who grew up in the U.S.

“Being able to talk and relate with 10 other adoptees was really one of the best parts,” she said. “It was great to realize ‘you get how I feel.’ I’m sure all of us were made fun of some time in our lives and it was nice to relate to someone who understands.”

Steckler said she and the other tour members are planning to stay in touch. She also plans to contact many of the people she met in South Korea.

“It was really amazing how close we became in just 2 weeks,” Steckler said of her tour mates. “I really think of them as some of my best friends. We have so much in common. It’s nice to have that network and relationship.”

Steckler, who will be returning to complete her final year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln this fall, says she will spend the next couple months reflecting on her experience and thinking.

“It was such an amazing experience that I almost feel speechless coming out of it,” she said.

■ by Tera Schmidt

Photos Courtesy of Emily Steckler

See more of Emily’s trip to South Korea by checking it out online at <http://spotted.yankton.net>



ABOVE: To experience more of the culture the group stayed with host families. Emily is pictured above with one of her host mothers and host sister, Jeehye. During their two day stay in Busan, the host family often went with them.

BELOW: The group visited many temples during their travels, taking in as many of the country’s natural treasures as they could.



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