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Ship tales over seaweed soup



SMOOTH SAILING Chennai welcomes the ROKS Choi Young , a Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin class destroyer in the South Korean navy PHOTOS: V. GANESAN



DEEPA ALEXANDER's rendezvous with the officers and crew of Korean naval ships *Choi Young* and *Cheonji* on their visit to the city

Monsoon's exuberance is fast fading as stacked, grey clouds scatter in the brilliant sunshine. The shuttle bus at Chennai Port is chock-a-block with Korean expats, Indian families and children. There is little trace of wind — the Tricolour on the docked *INS Rajput* hangs limply in the sultry air. There are plenty of excited little hands waving Indian and Korean flags, to welcome the Korean warships that are in the city to promote mutual understanding.

By the time the ROKS *Choi Young*, a Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin class destroyer in the South Korean navy, pulls in, accompanied by a tugboat, the crowds have swelled by the dockside. Enthusiastic photographers weave their way through men, women and children greeting the officers and sailors lined up on the bow of the ship. The Indian Navy displays a welcome banner and the ship sails in, its many flags aflutter, to the tune of 'Sweet Caroline' belted out by the naval band on board.

Nearly 10 feet below the deck, a row of faces appears at the portholes, guiding the mooring ropes ashore. And five able-bodied men fit a gangplank between the *Choi Young* and the dockside. The head of the Consulate General of South Korea for Southern India, Kim Kyungsoo, is the first to climb on board.

Built by Hyundai Heavy Industries and commissioned in 2008, *Choi Young* is named after a legendary Korean general of the 13th Century, just as most Korean naval destroyers are commonly named after kings and generals. At 30 kts, *Choi Young* moves like a power ballad; it sliced through the waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans before it made its way up the Bay of Bengal from Colombo. But it was in the Arabian Sea that the ship earned its presidential honours — in 2011, it rescued the Korean crew of the *Samho Jewelry* from Somali pirates in operation Dawn of Gulf Of Aden. Today, the ship, along with ROKS *Cheonji*, a combat support ship, forms part of the Republic of Korea Navy Cruise Training Task Group.

Headed by its commander, Rear Admiral Chun Jungsoo, the group comprises 650 members, including 140 midshipmen of the Naval Academy's 69th course. The male and female midshipmen call on 12 ports as part of their on-sea training. By now, most of the crowd assembled is beginning to look and feel like baked clams. It is a welcome relief when seats are thrown open in a huge shuttered hall that overlooks the deck.

The band strikes up the national anthems of India and Korea. The midshipmen — the razor-sharp creases on their uniforms refusing to succumb to the humidity — offer a general salute to honour the special guests. War cries rent the air from the decks of the *Cheonji*.

After flailing about in the heat to an adroit band, groups are guided through the interiors by a host of midshipmen, their name badges bearing the surnames Lee, Park, Kim and Choi. Female midshipmen make up 10 per cent of the course. I follow Petty Officer Third Class Park. He leads me through the corridors of the *Choi Young*, past the boards with names of its officers and senior crew, the yellow sash that signifies the presidential citation, the table laden with peak caps placed in order of rank, its line-up of guns on the bow and its missile launch system. I listen in

rapt attention to Rear Admiral Chun Jungsoo talk about his command duties in rapid-fire Korean. A translator explains his service badges — the gold one that represents surface warfare, a medal for 30 years of military service and a replica of the presidential citation.

Crossing over to the *Cheonji* calls for some lung power as the climb is steep. A narrow flight of steps leads to the interaction hall with simulated models. And around the corner, at the seamen's mess, is a Korean lunch spread — seaweed soup, bibimbap, kimchi and a variety of tiny, salted shrimp. It's served piping hot in steel trays and a silence descends on the hall as everyone tucks in.

Lunch over, and as I start to leave, it is impossible to pull away from the railing. It's not so much the Bergman-esque beauty of the sea, nor is it the lingering gravitas of the band. It is the scene playing out at a lunch table. A midshipman explains to a Tamil boy in Korean how to use chopsticks and he seems to understand perfectly