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World Cup Memories and the Power of Hospitality ^[1]

Watching the 2026 World Cup games, I recalled how much fun it was in 2002 when I got to attend a U.S. match in Daegu (pictured above), as well as in Seoul.

Just as the U.S. successfully co-hosted this year's tournament with Canada and Mexico, the 2002 World Cup was co-hosted by South Korea and Japan. While the tournament was widely regarded as a successful and friendly collaboration between the two nations, it also reflected the lingering tensions of a complex shared history. I recall the the Japanese cheering when Korea scored, but not vice versa. I asked a Korean contact and he said: "If we'd occupied each other, maybe. But there is still lots of baggage." I was amazed they were able to jointly host. Regarding ticket languages, there was a compromise: Korean on top for games in Korea, Japanese on top in Japan--a practical approach.

Walking across Daegu--Korea's third largest city--I pretended to be a non-Korean speaking visiting American.

I stopped at a BBQ restaurant and ordered Kalbi--BBQ beef ribs--and a beer. The waitress was trying to figure out how to say "two orders minimum" in English, but her manager interceded. "Here's a foreigner come to our country," he said. "He wants to eat our food. Give him an order."

Then, she graciously demonstrated how to eat a "Korean BBQ lettuce taco." I was truly impressed and grateful for their kindness (Luckily that year, the U.S and South Korea--long-time allies--played to a tie.). I like to think the 2026 World Cup attendees from abroad enjoyed comparable experiences in the U.S.
