Screen to reality: South Korea targets K-pop, K-drama tourism boom

Seoul (AFP) – Deep in South Korea's hinterlands lies a perfect replica of 1900s Seoul: welcome to Sunshine Land, the latest K-drama theme park to cash in on booming K-culture tourism.

Fans of K-pop mega group BTS have long flocked to the South to see sites associated with the boy band, from the dorms where they slept as trainees to recent music video shoot locations.

But as the popularity of South Korean drama has soared overseas – it is the most-viewed non-English content on Netflix, the platform's data shows – more and more tourists are planning trips around their favourite shows.

The idea that foreign tourists would pay good money and drive hundreds of miles out of the capital Seoul to see a K-drama set seemed "crazy" to tour guide Sophy Yoon – until she saw one of her guests break down in tears at Sunshine Land.

"At that moment, it hit me: For me, it was just a studio, but for them, it was something much more," she said.



Members of a K-drama tour group visit the K-drama series ‘Mr Sunshine’ set at Sunshine Studio in Nonsan, South Korea © ANTHONY WALLACE / AFP/File

Preserved from the set of popular 2018 historical series “Mr Sunshine”, the location in Nonsan, 170 kilometres (106 miles) from Seoul, is replete with painstaking replicas of everything from a turn-of-the-century tram to South Korea’s most famous Buddhist bell.

“It’s like when we go to the Spanish steps in Rome where Audrey Hepburn had ice cream,” Yoon said, referring to the 1953 classic movie “Roman Holiday”.

For South Korea’s growing number of K-drama tourists, “every door, every wall has a meaning from a drama that impacted their lives”.

“I get a lot more requests for specific ‘K-drama tours’ now,” she said.

‘Felt right’

The rise of South Korea as a global cultural powerhouse “has contributed to the appeal of Korean tourism,” said Kwak Jae-yeon, the Hallyu content team director at the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO).

South Korea welcomed 1.4 million tourists in September, up 33 percent year-on-year and the highest since the pandemic, with more than a third saying they had decided to come “after being exposed to Korean Wave content”, according to a 2023 KTO poll.



The popularity of South Korean music and dramas has boosted tourism in the country © ANTHONY WALLACE / AFP/File

In Seoul’s central Jongno district, tourists like Sookariyapa Kakij are typical. Wearing a hanbok, traditional Korean dress, the 40-year-old had travelled from Thailand specifically to see where her favourite dramas were filmed.

“I want to find locations where ‘Itaewon Class’ was shot,” she

told AFP, referring to the popular 2020 drama, filmed largely on location in its namesake district of Seoul.

Jennifer Zelinski told AFP she had never left the United States before, but after she discovered K-drama – through the 2019 series "Crash Landing on You" – while stuck at home during the pandemic, she decided to visit South Korea.

"I binged the whole show in a week. I barely slept and went through two whole boxes of tissues," she said.

This "snowballed" into her watching more and more K-drama, Korean variety shows and listening to K-pop, she said, until finally she "felt like I really wanted to see it in person".

"My family and friends were shocked when I said I was travelling to Korea and on my own," said Zelinski, but for her "it just felt right."

Beyond Seoul



Tourism in rural areas has tended to focus on more traditional Korean experiences, which is not interesting to younger travellers eager to explore the land of K-pop and K-drama © ANTHONY WALLACE / AFP/File

The travel industry is racing to catch up: one South Korean tour company on the travel platform Klook said interest in its BTS day tour has “skyrocketed” recently, and they were “completely booked until next February.”

“We are planning to add additional tours for other K-pop idol groups, including Seventeen and NCT 127,” they said.

But most of this new type of tourism is concentrated in Seoul, Jeong Ji-youn, a Kyungpook National University professor, told AFP.

Tourism in rural areas has tended to focus on more traditional Korean experiences, which is not interesting to younger travellers eager to explore the land of K-pop and K-drama.

“There is a need to develop more tourism resources related to contemporary culture that allow people to experience hallyu outside of Seoul,” she said.

The port city of Pohang is better known for shipbuilding and steel plants than tourism, but Emma Brown, 30, from Scotland, travelled more than 8,800 kilometres (5,468 miles) to see it because of “When the Camellia Blooms”.

The 2019 romance series “changed my life”, she told AFP, adding that she felt she “had to feel the drama in person.”

“I just couldn’t miss the opportunity to visit Pohang when I was already in South Korea,” she added.

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