

# Condé Nast Traveler

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MARCH 2023

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WOMEN IN TRAVEL



# WHY WE TRAVEL

» pilgrimage



The bright lights of Myeongdong, central Seoul

## Gorging on K-drama, IRL

For a growing segment of travelers, Seoul really can feel like something straight out of a TV show. By Sarah Khan

I was agonizingly late for barbecue on my first night in Seoul when I emerged at Gwanghwamun Square, flustered and overwhelmed, hoping my dinner companions hadn't finished the banchan without me. That's when I saw it: the countenance of a stone warrior staring down at me from his pedestal. I gaped back at him, my galbi cravings briefly forgotten. This was my first time in this plaza, and yet my brain insisted I'd been here before. Amid the disorientation of navigating this unfamiliar place, here was something I recognized—from its role in the 2018 Korean show *Memories of the Alhambra*.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ATLANTIDE PHOTOTRAVEL/GETTY IMAGES; ANTHONY WALLACE/GETTY IMAGES; DIEGO MARIOTTINI/GETTY IMAGES



A street art installation in Seoul in honor of Psy's famous song



A mural of BTS star RM, in the Goyang area

Even after Psy horse-trotted his way to YouTube glory and BTS built Army, its global fan club, I remained largely ignorant of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu—a Chinese term for South Korea's ascendant cultural power. But as I pined for far-flung adventures during the pandemic, I found companionship in Korean dramas. My gateway series was *Crash Landing on You*, an endearing if implausible romance between a South Korean heiress and a North Korean soldier; I blazed through 16 episodes in 5 days, my heart alternately migrating to my throat and melting into a maudlin lump. The fashion, the food, the tableaux, the personalities: This was my world.

I lived here now. I added Korean slang to Google Translate, Korean won to my XE currency app, Korean beauty products to my Sephora cart, and Korean ingredients to my grocery list. These viewing sessions became my closest approximation to travel, filling the passport-shaped hole in my life. By the time South Korea's borders reopened, Seoul had jumped from "someday" to "ASAP" on my travel wish list—and I guess I wasn't alone. "We've seen a huge interest in travel to Korea," said Grant Ekelund of InsideAsia Tours, which offers tailor-made adventures to the country, including K-pop tours. "It's been increasing for years, but the pandemic accelerated it."

After I arrived, I saw recognizable elements all around me. My first evening, searching bleary-eyed for a meal, I found comfort in the signage at Angel-in-Us, the setting of Yoon Se-Ri and Ri Jeong-Hyeok's reunion in *Crash Landing on You*. So what if it's Seoul's answer to Starbucks? At the upscale skin-care emporium Tirtir, I sprang for a purple tube of Collagen Core Glow Mask, whose packaging claimed responsibility for the absurd good looks of Hyun Bin—star of *Memories of the Alhambra* and *Crash Landing on You*. I passed street stalls selling the ppopgi candy I knew from *Squid Game* and the fish-shaped bungeoppang pastries I'd craved while watching *Vincenzo*. For a place I'd never visited before, South Korea was comfortingly familiar.

InsideAsia arranged for a mother-of-pearl manicure for me at Unistella, a temple to nail art where K-pop royalty BlackPink go for their sculptural talons. Afterward, I had lunch at Yujeong Sikdang, a humble canteen where BTS hung out when they were unknown Big Hit trainees. Today it's an Army pilgrimage site, wallpapered with cutouts of the pop stars like the inside of a teenage girl's locker. I ate vegetarian bibimbap under the smoldering eyes of Jimin and J-Hope.

BTS loyalists also pay their respects at Bit & Boot, the salon where members go to have their lustrous tresses coiffed. "A lot of international fans come here just to take a picture of the building,"

cofounder Choi Soo Chan told me. As I left, my guide murmured that Monsta X's Joohoney was walking past. That combination of words and letters meant nothing to me in the moment, but to a not-insignificant segment of the world's population, my fleeting glimpse of the K-pop star alone would have made the trip worthwhile.

Of course, a culture is so much more than its celluloid depictions, and Seoul, whose rich past still stands out amid its kinetic future, defies K-drama tropes. But when I saw heartthrob Song Joong-ki's handsome face smiling at me from a billboard or dug into a platter of yukjeon beef pancakes like the ones Won-deuk craved in *100 Days My Prince*, I felt grateful for my year of incessant bingeing. Pop culture helped me find familiarity in the foreign, and in the relentless AI-powered forward march of Seoul, that makes a big difference.

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*InsideAsia Tours offers 12-night Hallyu tours of South Korea from \$5,025 per person; [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com)*