

Korea a new travel hotspot

Written by GENIVI FACTAO and MYLA IGLESIAS
Saturday, 29 October 2011 11:42



Korean tele-dramas like "Stairway to Heaven," "Jewel in the Palace" and, the latest, "Big Thing," as well as K-pop music have generated interest among Filipinos in the life and culture of Korean.

The interest has been further piqued by the presence of many Koreans learning the English language here.

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The young Koreans can be seen everywhere, especially in restaurants and malls.

Recently we had the chance to visit Seoul, thanks to Cebu Pacific which also flies to Busan.

The flight to Incheon (Seoul) International Airport took 3.5 hours. We arrived at about 9 p.m. (Korean time is an hour ahead of ours).

In Seoul, old and new structures compliment each other.

We stayed at Hotel Somerset Palace, but as expected we spent most of our time outdoors, taking in the sights — the palaces, the traditional houses, the Blue House, gingko-lined streets and fog-shrouded mountains — and savoring Korean dishes.

South Korea has a population of close to 50 million, 11 million of which live in Seoul.

Most of the people carry the surname Park, Kim or Lee.

Our guide does not have figures about visitors, but said half are Japanese, 15 to percent are from China and other East Asian countries (including the Philippines) and the rest are from the other parts of the world.

About 70-75 percent of the peninsula is covered by mountains, breeding folks with a well-gained reputation for hard work.

The society highly values education.

Most mothers stay home to teach their children after school.

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The wave of young Koreans coming to the Philippines to study English is part this phenomenon.

The Blue House, the Korean Malacañang, is a tourist draw although visible only during the two to three minutes that it takes a sightseeing bus to pass by.

Taking pictures by the way is not allowed after an incident in the 1970s where a North Korean terrorist disguised as tourist tried to bomb the place.

Another must-see is the Gyeongbokgung Palace, built in 1395 or three years after the founding of the Joseon dynasty by Yi Seong-gye.

The palace was destroyed by fire during the Japanese invasion of 1592 and was reconstructed from 1865 to 1868.

The latest restoration was completed in 1995.

The ceiling boasts of 12 animal figures, imported from China, which are believed to devour the fire spirit, hence serving as a protection from fire.

A palace trivia: the king had from 200 to 300 concubines.

The royal couple lived in separate rooms and the king slept with queen only one a year.

One cannot claim to have visited without trying Korean food — kimchi (pickled vegetable), bulgogi (barbeque) and bibimbap (spicy mix of vegetable and meat topped with raw egg) being the more familiar.

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Kimchi has been a part of the Korean diet since time immemorial.

It is said to be the secret of the good health and slimness of Koreans.

There are more than 150 ways to prepare it and every Korean mom has her own recipe.

The weather during our three-day visit in middle of October was a crisp 11-22 degrees, good for taking a stroll, although there were occasional light rains.

Insadong is the place for Korean souvenirs.

The street is relaxing and it is cool to walk and take a look at arts and crafts displayed in and outside galleries.

Myeongdong is a bustling street with high-rise buildings, shopping malls and boutiques.

It tops the list of Korean shopping spots.

We went to Migliora mall and Shinsegae department store to look for common household stuff.

The exchange rate is around P450 for the equivalent of 10,000 won.

For 10,000 won, one can buy little items like ref magnet, key chain, chopsticks.

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A good jacket costs about 50,000 won and a pair of lingerie costs about 28,000 won.

Instant noodles cost 1,000 won a pack.