

Visitors to Korea surge amid 'KPop Demon Hunters' popularity; every corner becomes a 'hot spot'

Increase surpasses pre-COVID levels; K-culture like 'KPop Demon Hunters' playing a major role



Interest in Korea has surged significantly following the global popularity of the American animated film "KPop Demon Hunters," released on Netflix. According to Google Search Trends on Aug. 20, the global search volume for "Korea" is currently at its highest level in two years and eight months since late 2022. Searches for "Korean food" also hit an all-time high, increasing by 75 percent since the show's release. Pictured is a dessert specialty shop in the popular shopping district of Myeongdong in Seoul.

"Tonight at midnight, at Namsan Tower... Don't miss it."

This is how the idol group Saja Boys from the global phenomenon "KPop Demon Hunters" introduced their live performance. It vividly imprinted Korea's tourist attractions on the minds of over 200 million viewers of the animation worldwide.

The film also features locations across Korea as key backdrops: Jamsil Olympic Stadium, the Samsung Station electronic display, Bukchon Hanok Village, Cheongdam Bridge, Jayang Station and the Seoul Naksan Fortress Wall Trail.

While these are familiar places that Seoul citizens might pass by without a second thought, they have become famous locations for foreigners, sparking themed tours and photo challenges. The film also radiates Korea's charm by capturing the essence of K-culture

by featuring bathhouses, hot dog stands, photo booths, traditional Korean medicine clinics, instant "ramen" and "kimbap."

Era of 20 million annual visitors has arrived; exceeds pre-COVID-19 levels

The number of foreign visitors to Korea has recently shown an upward trend, surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

According to the Korea Tourism Organization, 1,733,199 visitors came to Korea last month, a 23.1 percent increase compared with the same period last year. This represents 119.7 percent of the level seen in July 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating further growth. From January to July this year, the number of visitors reached 10.56 million, a 15.9 percent increase compared with the

same period last year. This also represents a recovery to 106.8 percent of the same period in 2019, before COVID-19.

Experts analyze that the increase in visitors to Korea was significantly influenced by Korean cultural products, such as K-culture, including K-pop, K-beauty and K-food. In particular, there has been a rise in tourists seeking to enjoy K-pop in its country of origin or visit filming locations for movies and dramas.

According to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism's "2023 Survey on the Status of Hallyu Overseas," the global number of members of "hallyu," or Korean Wave, fan clubs was estimated at 225 million. The top reason cited by foreign visitors for traveling to Korea was "after experiencing hallyu content" at 32.1 percent.

Government expands tourism promotion to 25 countries, launches 'K-Tourism Pass'

While the end of COVID-19 and structural changes, including the expansion of low-cost carriers (LCCs) played a role, Korea's rise as a desirable tourist destination was driven by its soft power centered on hallyu culture.

The government has established a goal of attracting 18.5 million foreign tourists this year. With foreign tourist arrivals already surpassing 10 million in the first seven months and the global K-culture craze continuing, the target is expected to be reached.

The Hyundai Research Institute projected in a June report that foreign tourist arrivals this year could reach a record high of 20.9

million. This would generate approximately US\$20.25 billion in tourism revenue, equivalent to 29.4 trillion won. This represents about 2.5 percent of last year's nominal domestic consumption (1,167.8 trillion won).

The government is pursuing a strategy to create new demand and enhance profitability by diversifying the inbound tourism market, products and itineraries. Key detailed tasks include ▲ Segmenting key markets, such as China and Japan, ▲ Promoting global K-tourism marketing, ▲ Leveraging the popularity of K-content, ▲ Encouraging visits during international events like APEC and the Osaka Expo, ▲ Targeting special-purpose markets, such as hobby clubs, education and marine tourism, and ▲ Improving regional tourism accessibility. Concurrently, efforts are being made to promote Korea and attract tourists by hosting roadshows directly overseas.

The government is expanding the target countries for tourism promotion from 20 to 25 and will newly issue the K Tourism Pass, which foreign tourists can use for transportation and admission fees.

The government has also allocated budgets for K-food and K-beauty linked to the Korean Wave. In the food sector, it will strengthen customized support at all stages before exporting the products. For the beauty sector, it will support the localization of manufacturing raw materials and establish two joint logistics bases in the United States. 🇺🇸

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A K-food specialty shop in Myeongdong, Seoul