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Travel Writing

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Seoul Connection

Just for a minute, imagine a world where Internet connection was no problem, where your smart phone would always have connection to all of the resources it has to offer. Destination: Seoul, South Korea. With 97% of the city connected to Wi-Fi, according to tnooz.com, this city is one of the most connected cities in the world.

Back in 2011, the city of Seoul spent \$44 million to allow residents to connect to Wi-Fi any way possible: Buses, cars, subways, street corners, stores and just about anywhere you can imagine. Anywhere you look, people are on their phones. It's as if face-to-face interaction is no more.

"Koreans have a need for Wi-Fi. Their culture is so fast and up to date, including the use of technology. They spend their days with it day in and day out at their fingertips -literally. Wi-Fi availability is what I would desk a country trademark," said expat Tab Burnett.

Walk into any subway station and look around. All that is seen are people on their phones with their headphones in. It's so quiet on subway ride that you can't help but notice when a foreigner boards.

This constant connectivity is a high contrast to its neighboring country, North Korea, where internet signal won't go into the country or out of the country: a part

of Korea that is cut off to any outside contact. It's amazing what Seoul has done with their culture and high profile IT status.

"At the same time, this hyper connectivity allows Korea to lead innovation in many ways. For example, there's a lot of smart use of QR codes -- like you can scan a QR code at a bus stop and find out when the next bus is coming. In addition, Seoul's previously impossible-to-navigate back alleys are not as much of a maze anymore, thanks to GPS on our smartphones," Hannah Bae, Seoul resident, said.

It's easy to spot a tourist on a subway system because of the giant, hand held maps that are being carried. One will notice, upon entering almost any subway station, that not only is everyone glued to their phones, they are also looking at maps. If someone has a smart phone, there is an app that allows the subway map to show on the screen, which many residents take advantage of when looking for a place to go.

"If you look around the subway, you'll see almost everyone glued to their smartphones. We're addicted to our mobile devices," Bae said.

Seoul's connectivity is not just for residents either. Meet Samantha. Samantha is a typical American tourist who is used to texting, Facebooking and being on any social media site non-stop. She walks the streets of Seoul missing her friends and family back home, wondering what they are doing in the past (ten hour time difference, hello). Samantha stops at a coffee house in the morning and is instantly receiving messages. Her next stop: a temple, and even there the Wi-Fi signal is strong. Throughout the day, Samantha has no problems keeping up with her friends or surfing the web because not only does the country have its own Wi-Fi to connect

to but also a lot of Wi-Fi is open for tourists and out-of -country visitors. This is a typical day for a tourist and also a resident.

“Wi-Fi is a life savior as an expat. Having Wi-Fi constantly available helps me plans my days, figure the route if lost, and most importantly... fit in with the locals. Koreans are always on their phones, iPads, laptops, etc. - always. As a foreigner I feel if awkward if I'm not glued to a screen in transport to my next spot or ideally sitting by in public,” Burnett said.

Not only does the free Wi-Fi offer an interesting atmosphere, it also drives a culture fueled by innovations and technology. While driving its own culture, Seoul is driving others as well. Minju Kim, a student from South Korea, studying at a University in Seoul, uses Wi-Fi on a daily basis, to keep up with friends, schoolwork and find her way around. Kim realizes the importance of Wi-Fi but also how Korean connectivity is vital to her culture and others.

“I do think innovations of Seoul are driving other countries to be more reliant on technology. Samsung constantly provides fast, convenient, multi-function smartphones to Korean markets and Korean people react to the products by buying the products. I heard that Korea is the country of the highest percentage of its population using smartphones. I do believe Korean people creating the smartphone boom certainly affect other countries to be more reliant on technology,” said Kim.

Korea is a unique place and not just because of the culture. Although, there are many sites to see, parks to visit and people to meet, Korea has the gift of Wi-Fi to offer to its residents and its tourist. Seoul's heart is reflected in the niceness of the people, the ability to connect and the beautiful city.