

JACK JONES'S ASIA TOUR BLOG: Seoul, South Korea *Thurs 30 July*



After a ten-hour flight, on a jumbo jet large enough to house a herd of particularly excitable elephants, we landed in Seoul, South Korea. A sprawling goliath of a city it straddles a river much like the Thames. Skyscrapers and apartment blocks bunch together and flow right up to the base of the mountains in the north. The mountains, which a few of our cast ventured to climb within the Bukhansan National Park, often referred to as the lungs of Seoul. When asking for directions to Bukhansan I would advise getting the pronunciation right, as I inadvertently ended up asking our hotel receptionist how to get to a place in North Korea.

The DMZ is also a fascinating, if somewhat scary, place to visit. A truly unique experience on the planet. The DMZ is the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea, essentially a buffer zone between the two countries, which no-one is permitted to cross. A wall 149 miles long splits the country in two, along the southern side of the border that has been in place since 1953, when the Korean War was ended by a ceasefire agreement between the two sides. We ventured underground to walk along one of four tunnels that the North Koreans dug underneath the DMZ, in an attempt to infiltrate the South. Not for the claustrophobic, the tunnel forces you to hunch over as you walk along it, unless you happen to be fittingly short. In which case you can let out a self-satisfied giggle every time you hear someone crack their hard hat against the rough, granite ceiling.

There is a thick metal door halfway along the tunnel, about 170 meters from the actual border line, which prevents you from going further. We found ourselves wondering if the North Koreans had built a similar door on their side but apparently no-one has checked. Or at least our tour guide hadn't. Though I suppose you can't really blame him for not wanting to peek. The most bizarre thing about the whole experience is that the North Koreans painted the walls of the tunnels black as they went, hoping to claim that they were mining for coal if they were ever caught! Surely someone would just point to the paint buckets behind them and the drip marks on their boots and call that claim into question. The tunnels were found however, four in total, though it wasn't clear if the diggers themselves were caught.

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South Korea isn't all doom though of course. Home to ancient, majestic palaces, buddhist temples, and the music video that almost broke YouTube. Gangnam Style pretty much redefined the term 'viral' when it became the first video on YouTube to get over 1 billion views. That's 1/7 of the Earth's total population. I didn't think 1/7th of the Earth's population even had internet access. Or maybe somewhere, hidden in a hovel of pillows and take away boxes, one obsessive fan is watching it over and over and over again until they pass out in a hypnotic trance. There is a giant sculpture in the Gangnam district (one stop away from us on the metro) five meters high of the singer's hands in the signature dance move position to commemorate its global popularity. Other lesser known facts about Korea include the fact that Seoul is the record holder for the tallest Lego tower ever erected. It was made by 4,000 children, using 500,000 Lego blocks and measuring 105ft tall. It is also home to the world's largest Ikea. You could probably live in it for five years before anyone noticed.



The theatre we are performing in, the LG Arts Center, is built within what looks like a tower block. It hardly seems like a theatre of that size could fit inside on the fifth floor, yet by some mockery of physics (or clever engineering for the skeptics) somehow it does. We have all of our usual crew touring with us, the wigs, wardrobe and backstage technicians, all of whom have a local Korean crew to work with. The Korean dressers and crew have been absolutely fantastic.

We have translators in the theatre that are always on hand to help out, however you will sometimes find yourself playing a game of charades during the show if a translator isn't nearby. One of my dresser's actually goes to the length of fanning me with a giant piece of paper during my quick change to help cool me down, which always makes me feel slightly spoilt, but not enough to ask her to stop. I'm not a masochist. There was one funny moment, during the post-opening night show drinks, where our Company Manager had thanked the Korean crew for all their

work. The Koreans hadn't understood at all so politely clapped along with everyone else until someone bent over and whispered in their ear, at which point all their faces lit up and laughed as they realised everyone was clapping them.

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It's interesting learning what people here find funny too. There are certain comedic moments in the show where in England you'd get a big belly laugh, here you're lucky if you get an awkward cough to break the silence. It's the difference in cultures of course, though it's hard to pin point what that difference in humour actually is. They are always massively appreciative at the end of the show however and we have had to add an extra bow!

I've really enjoyed my time here, despite struggling with jet lag and the bewildering idea that when we return to the UK we may no longer be a part of Europe. Even here in Korea it made front page news, though what their stance on the whole thing was I don't know. Watching the UK from a distance this past week has been strange and difficult for the whole company, almost like watching a storm from a safe distance but knowing that your boat is heading right for its heart. Amongst all of this chaos and division it has been comforting to be part of something that connects to people despite the differences in race, culture and religion. Even if we do sometimes differ on what's funny.

