

THE SEOUL OF DESIGN AND WELLNESS

How the Korean Wave turned a cultural powerhouse into a global capital for aesthetics and wellbeing

By Sophie Baker



This page: bronze statue commemorating hit song Gangnam Style

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



Step off the plane in Seoul and into the brass glow of tea houses, the scent of pine from bathhouses, and the precision of beauty counters that feel like galleries. For years, Seoul's international reputation rested on K-pop glamour and skincare supremacy. But the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has transformed the city's image. The cinematic framing and layered textures of K-dramas – from neon-lit alleyways to serene hanok courtyards – have set a visual standard the city now lives up to.

From temples to spas, cafés to clinics, spaces have been reimagined to offer both authenticity and modern sophistication. Now, design and wellness are twin forces shaping the city's identity as an international must-visit destination.

Hallyu as the Cultural Catalyst

The influence of Hallyu is impossible to ignore. What started as entertainment has evolved into a full cultural export: food, fashion, design, wellness, even the way a room is lit. And as the world fell in love with all things Korean, the wave of attention prompted a reimagining of Seoul as a destination. Visitors are drawn not just by famous landmarks, but by the streets, courtyards, and interiors they've seen on screen and online. They come to walk the same streets, drink tea in the same light-filled rooms, and experience the same balance of tradition and modernity that they've come to associate with Korean life.



Clockwise from left:
ATEEZ, a popular K-pop
boy group; Seoul's
charismatic, neon-lit
alleys; Cityscape of Seoul

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SOPHIE BAUER





Clockwise from left:
Stylish cafe interior with
vibrant details. Tradition
exists with the modern
touches. K-beauty
has become a global
phenomenon

The Wellness Capital

By 2030, South Korea's wellness tourism market will be worth over USD28 billion. Usually, wellness is a retreat from busy city life. In Seoul, it's part of city life, as embedded in the city as café culture is in Paris.

Centuries-old traditions are being reimagined through the lens of the Korean Wave. This fusion has secured Seoul's place amongst world's leading wellness capitals, offering a distinctly Korean yet globally accessible version of wellbeing.

Tea houses serve restorative infusions in interiors designed to heighten the sensory experience. Design-led urban spas incorporate elements of Korean medicinal philosophies with international wellness trends. Temple stays offer retreats based on Buddhist principles, sometimes accompanied by meditation, movement classes, or plant-based meals.

Meanwhile, traditional Korean bathhouses, known as *jjimjilbangs*, have evolved into curated, social spaces. These are no longer just for scrubbing down or functionality; they're gathering spots for friends, couples, and solo travellers alike, offering wellness that feels shared, not secluded.

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JOPHIE BRACK






 Etihad Airways
 offers 11 flights
 per week to Seoul
ETIHAD.COM

Seoul's design credentials are equally visible. It was the first city named World Design Capital and has held UNESCO City of Design status since 2010.

From the architectural symmetry of Bukchon Hanok Village to the bold, minimalist lines of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, the city treats its built environment as an evolving gallery. In creative neighbourhoods like Seongsu, concept stores treat fragrance, skincare and fashion as immersive experiences. Brand flagships double as cultural landmarks, drawing visitors as much for the interiors as the products. Everywhere, textures invite touch, lighting is layered for mood, and layouts combine function with artistry, making Seoul a true stage for global design.

Where Design and Wellness Converge

In Seoul's buzzing beauty scene, the city's design and wellness worlds fuse in perfect harmony. Flagship skincare stores in Seongsu, Hannam, and Myeongdong are more like art galleries than retail stores. A skin consultation might pair traditional herbal formulas with modern science, all in a beautifully-styled spa-like suite. A fragrance store may feel like stepping into a perfumer's atelier, with scents arranged to guide you through a journey of mood and memory.

These are not just places to buy products, or even receive a service. They are carefully curated, immersive experiences. And for visitors, the city's appeal is not limited to what can be bought or seen, but in how every moment is felt.

Seoul offers travellers more than just sightseeing. It's a city that has mastered the art of uniting design and wellness in harmony, with the appeal rooted in the overall experience as much as in the outcome. Hallyu may have begun as pop culture, but it has evolved into an aesthetic that can be lived, walked, touched. And most of all, felt.

Some cities you visit, but Seoul? Seoul is one you inhabit.



Cocktails from top: Lotte
 World Amusement Park;
 Dongdaemun Design Plaza

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