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HOW KOREA'S EXPAT HUB ROSE FROM SEEDY SLUM TO ELITE ESCAPE



COVER STORY

Edited by Elaine Ramirez (elaine@groovekorea.com)

ITALE DREAM

HOW KOREA'S EXPAT HUB ROSE FROM SEEDY SLUM TO ELITE ESCAPE



WOMEN

DOWN

Story by **Dave Hazzan**
Photos by **Andrew Faulk, Michael Hurt** and **Kaegan Saenz** and courtesy of **Stars & Stripes**
Illustrations by **Michael Roy** / Additional reporting by **Jongmin Lee**



In 1984, the Kyunghyang Shinmun newspaper described Itaewon as “Seoul’s foreigner village, frequented by races from 59 countries, where a flourishing international shopping area coexists with the vanity of women in their 20s who go astray.”

The Korean newspaper went on to describe the neighborhood as a place of high crime, sleazy bars and shady individuals. “Among foreign vagabond criminals, there are shameless crimes like taking money from women in their 20s on the pretext of international marriage. There are sometimes violent incidents by uneducated blacks such as the rape of women as well.”

The message was racist, rude and clear: if you are a respectable Korean, stay away from Itaewon. And for years, most “respectable” Koreans did.

Thirty years later, K-pop singer and producer J.Y. Park wrote “Itaewon Freedom” with a different message about Itaewon: “Delivery men deliver, salesmen sell, Kim Tae-won plays the guitar — everyone gather in Itaewon!”

And everyone has. Today, Koreans of all ages, classes and occupations stream in and out of Itaewon’s restaurants, bars and shops. Salarymen, students and families mix with English teachers, foreign laborers, U.S. soldiers and Department of Defense workers.

Wayne Gold, owner of the Wolfhound Pub and Reilly’s Taphouse and who has been in Itaewon since 1997, says the makeup of the people now is completely different. “It’s reversed,” he says. “Before it was 20/80 (Koreans to foreigners). Now it’s 80/20.”

How did one run-down neighborhood, known just 30 years ago as a place off-limits to everyone but GIs and prostitutes, become a place so hip that JYP thinks it’s a better party district than Gangnam, Hongdae or Sinchon?

The story is intertwined with the story of Korea’s development, its relationship with the United States and the rest of the outside world, and how its people freed themselves from fearing the unknown to embracing it: Itaewon Freedom.





ITAEWON BECAME A U.S. ARMY 'GICHIJON,' OR CAMPTOWN, A PLACE THAT REPRESENTED FREEDOM FROM THE RULES ON BASE. THERE WERE GENERALLY ONLY TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE IN ITAEWON IN THE 1950S: THE U.S. SOLDIERS AND THE KOREAN WOMEN WHO SERVED THEM.

Land of the stranger

Itaewon has been home to foreigners since the Joseon era. The name Itaewon means “pear orchard,” and indeed there were pear trees. But it can also mean “stranger” — appropriate since during the first Japanese invasion of Korea in 1591, Japanese soldiers lived in Itaewon. According to the Itaewon Special Tourism Zone office, their Korean wives and mixed-blood children continued to live there even after the Japanese soldiers themselves had left.

Buddhist temples, including at least one nunnery, provided accommodations to the few tourists and strangers who came to Korea at that time. Itaewon was outside Seoul’s fortress walls, and so would probably have also had a small farming village, given its proximity to the Han River, according to the ISTZ. There was also a Japanese customs house, or official house of sorts, to welcome emissaries into Korea.

In 1905, Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and took protectorate control of Korea. Though the Chinese once had a small, informal camp at what is today Camp Coiner, it was the Japanese who established the first full-fledged military base at Yongsan Garrison, in 1907. Japan’s 20th Army was barracked there, and it became the headquarters for the country’s 35-year occupation. According to graduate student and longtime Seoul resident Jacco Zwetsloot, more than half the buildings still standing there were built by the Japanese.

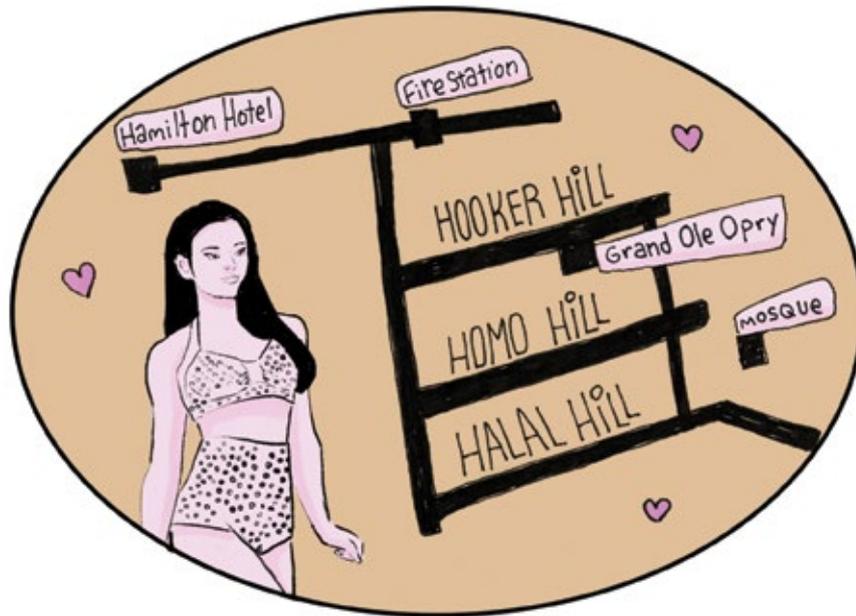
“If you go towards Haebangchon, towards the tunnel, on the right side there are some apartments,” says Zwetsloot. “That used to be the shooting range.”

“Down in Hannam Village,” he says, “was where the cavalry was located.”

Zwetsloot also describes a railroad that ran into the center of Yongsan, which served as a hub. “You could basically move anything by rail from Busan to Yongsan, Yongsan to Manchuria, very easily. So they moved tanks, they moved all sorts of things.”

The development of Itaewon began with that Japanese base. Soldiers frequented the neighborhood, and there were shooting ranges and other facilities for them, including “comfort stations” — places to find prostitutes.

Overall, though, little is known about what Itaewon looked like exactly during this period. What’s certain is that in 1945, with Japan’s defeat in World War II and subsequent departure from the peninsula, Itaewon — and the rest of Korea — changed radically.



Sex among allies

The U.S. Army moved in and took over the Japanese military headquarters in 1945, and left in 1949. When the troops returned two years later to fight the Korean War, they came back to Yongsan. In 1957, they established Yongsan as the primary headquarters for the United States Forces Korea.

Itaewon became a U.S. Army “gichijon,” or camptown, a place that represented freedom from the rules on base. There were generally only two types of people in Itaewon at that time: the U.S. soldiers and the Korean women who served them. Buildings as they are now didn’t exist — it was mostly ramshackle, temporary houses. The roads were paved with on-dol stones, like unburned charcoal.

In the 1950s, the United States was at the height of its glory — the undisputed victor in World War II, the richest country in the world and the occupier or patron of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and much of the rest of the world. Korea, on the other hand, had never seen worse days. Decimated by war and famine and divided in half by the Cold War, it was by many accounts the poorest country in the world. South Korea may have been an equal to the United States on paper, but in actuality, it was little more than a vassal. Nowhere was this revealed more vividly than in Itaewon, and in the neighborhood’s primary industry: prostitution.

“The war, with its accompanying poverty, social and political chaos, separation of families and millions of young orphans and widows, ‘mass-produced’ prostitutes, creating a large supply of girls and women without homes

and livelihoods,” Katharine Moon writes in her study “Sex Among Allies” (1997). Many of the prostitutes were war orphans, supporting entire families in the countryside. Very few had any education at all; a girl who had completed middle school was considered highly educated.

Hal Voelkel was the young son of American missionaries during the ‘50s. He remembers many of the girls standing by the side of the road, bow-legged and very sick looking, hustling for tricks.

“A most vivid memory was the lines of prostitutes along the street waiting for GIs to come by, pick them up, go back to the base where they’d eat, go to the movies, et cetera.” Voelkel says. “I clearly remember after the movie ended and the lights came on one time, a woman was readjusting her bra and blouse — I was about 14 years old then, very curious!”

Though there are no figures for the time, it’s assumed prostitution was done all over Itaewon — in the back alleys, in small huts and on the floors of shacks.

Some families also lived in Itaewon. Ken Seo was born in Itaewon in 1963, and has lived there his whole life with his family.

“A long time ago, my neighbors were all U.S. Army. U.S. Army children, we grew up together,” says Seo, now a Ph.D. student at Korea University and vice president of the ISTZ. He spoke enough English as a child to communicate with the American kids: “I went on base many times. With the children on base, it was my playground. We played together with U.S. Army kids.”

He says there was no animosity between the American and Korean kids, though they attended different schools and there was a clear wealth gap.

Seo remembers there were no pubs or restaurants in Itaewon back then. The Americans got their food and drink on the base. But there was plenty of sex. “I was very young,” Seo says, but he knew it was there.

Itaewon became a place where “respectable” Koreans didn’t go — a taboo that stayed with the neighborhood for the rest of the century. According to Ewha University professor Kim Eun-shil, Itaewon was described in the media as a place of “excretory culture, where American soldiers engaged in hedonism, prostitution, illegal drugs and criminal activities.”

The poorest of the poor made their homes there. The 1961 local film “Obaltan (Aimless Bullet)” was banned in South Korea for decades because it made life in the country out to be too difficult. It featured a North Korean refugee family forced to make a life in a neighborhood no one wanted to live in — Haebangchon.

“Haebangchon was founded by North Korean refugees who were looking for a place to settle after or during the war. They basically created a slum on the slopes of the mountain adjoining the base,” Jacco Zwetsloot says of the area just northwest of Itaewon’s main strip. “These were properties that were basically squatted on, and later on became houses of North Korean refugees.”



Nightlife and black markets

Growth began in the 1960s, and the neighborhood changed again. A few buildings went up. Foreign embassies, especially from newly independent Third World countries, began opening in the Hannam-dong area, and ambassadors took their residences in the Itaewon hills. But on the ground, the streets still belonged to the U.S. GIs and the women they paid.

Tom Casey, 75, was stationed in Itaewon in 1968 with the U.S. Army. He never left. He says Itaewon at the time was still small — maybe 4,000 to 5,000 people lived there.

In 1968, there was still a countrywide curfew. At midnight, a siren would sound, and if you weren't off the streets by then, the police would lock you up until 5 the next morning when the curfew was lifted again.

In 1971, the 121st Evacuation Hospital moved from Bupyeong to Yongsan Garrison, bringing with it about 10,000 associated civilians. Merchants came along with them, and the shopping area began to develop. Tailors opened up, and shops selling leather goods and surplus brand-name clothes.

Nightclubs, catering almost exclusively to GIs, started opening around this time, and some of them would manage to stay open all night with special tourist licenses. Others cheated, with back doors and black-out curtains over windows. The Hamilton Hotel opened in 1973, with a club underground that could stay open all night. It was full every night of the week. "We had a lot of fun there," Casey says.

The nightclubs opened in the area known as Texas Street. Today, it's the street that leads up from the corner with the fire station, passing Hooker Hill, Homo Hill and ending at Halal Hill.

King Club, UN Club, 7 Club, Lucky Club and the Grand Ole Opry all opened in or around Texas Street at that time. All were duty-free — they got the small bottles of beer no one else had, and bought them tax free. "The government did it after the war to give some enticement to the GIs to move off the base," Casey says. "They gave them a special license that

was almost impossible to get." But there was a catch: foreigners only. No Koreans were allowed to enter.

"And once in a while they would check," Casey says. "And if they had Koreans in there drinking, the police would say, 'We're going to take away your license.' So for years, those clubs had no Koreans in there, only GIs. Every night it was packed with GIs."

But there weren't only GIs, there were also plenty of Koreans — women to service the men.

The women at the clubs wore badges with numbers. The longer she had worked at the club, the lower her number was. "They hated to wear them," Casey says. "Wouldn't you?"

The women served drinks to the men, chatted them up — and for extra cash, slept with them. The purpose of the number was, according to Casey, so a customer could report the woman if he caught a venereal disease. The woman would then be tested, and if she was found to be infected, could be jailed for a few weeks while the infection cleared up.

Prostitution was not legal in Korea, nor was it entirely illegal. According to "Sex Among Allies" author Moon, the women were recognized as "special entertainers." In order to work in the clubs, she had to go to a local VD clinic, "undergo gynecological and blood examinations and receive a VD card." She would then have to go back once a week for an exam and have her card stamped "healthy." The card had to be carried at all times. If she failed the test, she couldn't work until she was clean.

Juicy bars — so named for the juices men would buy the ladies as they flirted — popped up all over the neighborhood. Moon says the idea was the women would hang out with the men, sell them drinks, and get them to buy them drinks. But their main source of income was sex services.

There was little freedom for most of these women. "Owners and pimps generally took 80 percent and gave the prostitute 20 percent of her earnings per trick," Moon writes. By the late 1960s, it cost \$2 (worth about \$13 today) or less for a "short time" with a prostitute;

IN THE 1950S, THE UNITED STATES WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF ITS GLORY — THE UNDISPUTED VICTOR IN WORLD WAR II, THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD AND THE OCCUPIER OR PATRON OF WESTERN EUROPE, JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA AND MUCH OF THE REST OF THE WORLD. KOREA, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAD NEVER SEEN WORSE DAYS. DECIMATED BY WAR AND FAMINE AND DIVIDED IN HALF BY THE COLD WAR, IT WAS BY MANY ACCOUNTS THE POOREST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD.

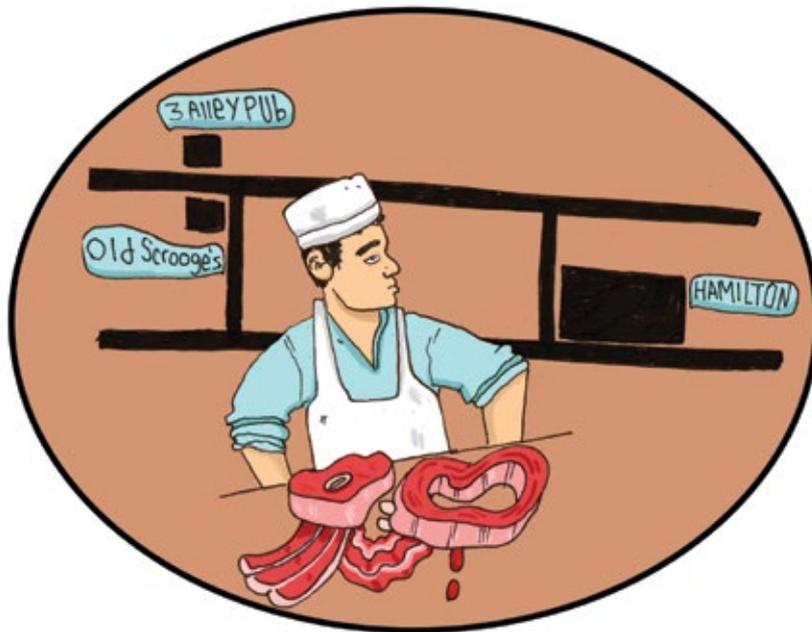
overnight was \$5 to \$10.

This meant one night with a GI could earn the woman as little as 50 cents, about \$3.50 in Korea today. In 1965, a survey indicated that 84 percent of American GIs had been with a prostitute. There were thought to be 13,000 prostitutes throughout the country catering to American soldiers.

Women were often indebted to the bar owners, and it was very difficult to get out of it. The goal for most of these women was to marry a GI and emigrate, since their prospects for marriage in Korea were very poor, owing to their disreputable pasts. Once they did marry, many divorced and returned to Korea, opening up juicy bars of their own, according to Moon.

Casey describes how during raids, police would sometimes check for VD cards. If an American brought his Korean wife in, the police would take her away anyway for not having a card. "Are they going to take her away from you? Damn right they will. Put her on the bus, she's gone. You get near the bus, you're going to get clubbed."

Casey says the GIs were pretty much in the area by themselves. There were no Russians because of the Cold War. The Japanese were still not allowed visas. There were very few American women, and the foreign workers hadn't started showing up yet. "It was kind of a strange world, just the Korean girls and the GIs," Casey says. "That's why there were so many marriages. They were registering 2,000 or 3,000 marriages a year all over Korea."



The 'mecca' for music and marijuana

In other parts of the neighborhood, a few pockets of Koreans began to congregate. The fact that Itaewon wasn't respectable made it a draw for the free-spirited. Itaewon freedom in the 1960s and 1970s meant a place to hear rock 'n' roll, and a place to get high.

According to a 2013 article by journalist Jason Strother for Yonhap News Agency, marijuana was actually legal — or at least not illegal — in Korea until 1976. But very few Koreans knew what it was, and it's assumed it was originally imported into the country by U.S. soldiers.

Strother writes of Korean student Kim Woo-jin, who loved to smoke marijuana with his friends and listen to Shin Joong-hyun, Korean band Love and Peace and Simon and Garfunkel. And then they'd all go to Itaewon. Kim says Itaewon "was the 'mecca' for Western music as well as marijuana," Strother writes.

Many clubs didn't admit Koreans, even if they were technically allowed to, because they didn't want confrontations — usually over women — between Korean men and GIs. But one part of Itaewon did admit young Korean men.

Professor Kim Eun-shil writes about young students visiting Itaewon in the 1970s. "In order to have a good time in Itaewon, they had to speak some English, have some knowledge of music and be confident enough to say, 'This is our country. I have the right to go where I want,'" Kim writes in the Korea Journal. "This kind of cultural and emotional capital was the backdrop against which it was possible to enjoy long hair, marijuana and rock,

all of which were considered deviant by the average Korean."

Gay Koreans, Kim says, probably started coming to Itaewon in the 1970s as well, though the scene was still underground. "But even before there were gay bars in Itaewon, some Korean gay men went to Itaewon, hoping to meet homosexuals among the American soldiers, tourists or others," writes Kim.

Korea's Muslims also began gathering in Itaewon at this time. President Park Chung-hee donated the land near the top of Texas Street to the Islamic community in Seoul, and Seoul Central Mosque opened on May 21, 1976. It is now one of Itaewon's most distinctive landmarks.

According to Imam Abdul Rahman Lee, the land was donated there because the Korean government wanted to improve relations between South Korea and Muslim countries — particularly the Gulf states, which supplied most of Korea's oil.

"Itaewon was a gathering place for foreigners, even then," Lee says. Itaewon's proximity to the embassies of many Islamic countries was a key reason it was built on that land. Though there were only 3,000 to 4,000 Muslims in Korea in the '70s, the establishment of the mosque would portend changes in the future.

On Yongsan Garrison, near what's now the Hyatt Hotel, Itaewon's small number of Jews had also started worshipping. But this facility was located on-base, so someone had to sign you in — usually the Jewish chaplain.

Japanese tourists also started coming in the 1970s as visa restrictions eased and the Ko-

rean government started hankering for Japanese yen. Japanese sex tours started to come around Itaewon and elsewhere.

There were 217,278 Japanese visitors to Korea in 1972, according to "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," (1995) a paper by John Lie. By 1978, the number had tripled to 667,319. In 1976, 98 percent of male Japanese tourists were unaccompanied by women.

"According to a Korean government ministry poll in 1973, 80 percent of Japanese tourists listed 'gisaeng party' as their most memorable experience in Korea," Lie writes. The gisaeng houses were traditional-style houses of prostitution, similar to Japanese geisha houses. They were set up to cater to foreign men, and were promoted by the government, especially in Japan, where Korean "brothel tours" were commonly sold.

Korea Church Women United estimated there were 100,000 women involved in brothel tours in 1978. By 1983, it had tripled to 300,000. However, it's unclear how many of these brothels were in Itaewon.

But Itaewon largely remained the place for GIs. In 1976, Tom Casey opened the Sportsman's Club, three doors down from the Itaewon Stairs, while he was still a soldier. By 1980 it was the place to be. (Opening the club while still on duty did not make him popular with the U.S. Congress. Says Casey, "(Congress) said, 'We've got GIs opening fuckin' nightclubs in Korea? What the hell's going on over there?'" But he had retired by the time Congress got wind of it.)

THERE WERE NO PUBS OR RESTAURANTS IN ITAEWON IN THE 1960S. THE AMERICANS GOT THEIR FOOD AND DRINK ON THE BASE. BUT THERE WAS PLENTY OF SEX.

The Sportsman's was the first disco of its type in Korea, bringing in DJs from the Armed Forces Network Radio. Casey didn't have the duty-free license, but that meant he could allow anybody in. His partner was Korean championship boxer Hong Soo-hwan, a big favorite of President Park Chung-hee's, which meant it was difficult for anyone to touch Casey.

Al Green, DJ David Jensen, "Shaft" actor Richard Roundtree, Jacqueline Bisset and Leif Garrett all visited the Sportsmen's Club, he says.

Lon, who requested his surname be omitted, says it was the most exciting, and exclusive, club in the area. "At the front door you'd have Tom, or a goon or two he'd hired, who would stand there with an ugly stick," Lon says. They would decide who could come in. "There were good-looking people in there, so it felt good if you got in."

Robert Neff is now a writer on Joseon history, but in the early 1980s, he was stationed in Korea with the U.S. Army. He describes Itaewon then as "dirty and sex-filled."

"I remember going to a couple of sex shows there," Neff says. "They were all illegal obviously. I remember the girls would go up on the stage and kind of strip down — they wouldn't totally strip down — and they'd have guys come up on stage and lightly play with them and stuff."

The main curfew ended in the early 1980s, but other curfews would come and go — both for the general public and for the GIs.

Neff says the curfews didn't work "because everybody just got drunk earlier. It made it even wilder because by 11:30, everyone was trying to scramble for rooms. People did desperate things. (If) you didn't have a room, you would just go with anybody."

Neff says that they were offering enticements to stay on base, too. "On base, you had the 'steam and creams' as a way of curtailng GIs from going off post." They stopped around 1988, reportedly after a general's wife found out about them. "They were on all the American bases around Korea, and basically you would go in for a massage, and the massage had a happy ending." His sergeant told him to make his way there when he first arrived; they were right next to the barracks. "There were a lot of efforts to keep the GIs from going off-post to seek entertainment."



Old Itaewon



July 12, 1971: Street between Itaewon fire station and Bogwang elementary school. A sign of Seven Club, the popular club in the '70s, is seen. Published by The Kyunghyang Shinmun.



Sept. 9, 1987: A bar in Itaewon. Published by The Kyunghyang Shinmun.



1988: A favorite hang-out spot, behind the Itaewon fire station. Published by Seoul City Hall.



Nov. 21, 1986: Teenagers in Itaewon. Published by DongA Ilbo.



Jan. 1, 1986: Shopping street in Itaewon. Published by The Kyunghyang Shinmun.



July 4, 1986: Shopping street in Itaewon. Published by The Kyunghyang Shinmun.



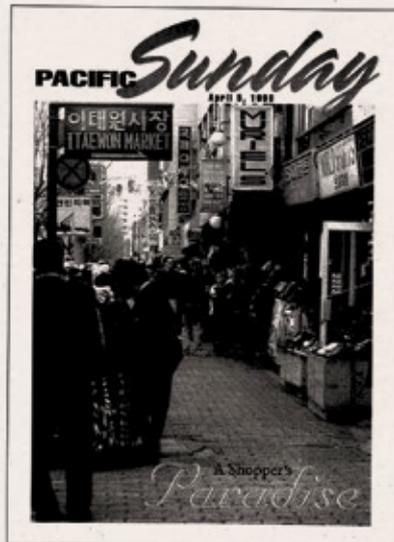
Oct. 2, 1988: Itaewon shopping street, full of people due to international events held in the district. Published by the DongA Ilbo.



Oct. 3, 1985: Itaewon shopping street, where a banner congratulating the opening of an international conference is seen. Published by the DongA Ilbo.



Stars and Stripes Aug. 2, 1977. Used with permission. © Stars and Stripes.



Stars and Stripes April 5, 1998. Used with permission. © Stars and Stripes.



Stars and Stripes April 5, 1998. Used with permission. © Stars and Stripes.



April 21, 1991: UN Village looking down from Hill Top Apartment. Published by The Kyunghyang Shinmun.



Stars and Stripes Dec. 17, 2003. Used with permission. © Stars and Stripes.

2002 Itaewon Photos by Michael Hurt







COVER STORY
Edited by Elaine Ramirez (elaine@groovekorea.com)



Olympic expectations

In the '80s, Itaewon began to modernize, along with the rest of the city. Tourism was picking up — in 1978, South Korea saw more than 1 million tourists for the first time, according to the Korean Tourism Organization. Women's Army Corps and nurses — and later just female soldiers — became some of the first foreign women there. English teachers slowly started showing up. There were more international marriages, and more Koreans arriving who were not there specifically to service GIs.

But, Casey says, Itaewon was "still not the best place for your daughter to hang around," and it was still rare to see Koreans out on Friday or Saturday nights.

The media was never kind to Itaewon. Since the early 1970s, local papers ran sensational reports of crimes by GIs — many true, many unproven. In 1984, the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* published what it described as an exclusive on the neighborhood. The article describes the town as being filled with 10,000 "vagabond" foreigners who had overstayed their visas and "easily and often turn into criminals."

The article quotes one "sour" merchant as saying, "It's not just foreigners' prostitutes, now it's female university students or teenagers from good families who chase after foreigners and spend money on them."

In 1983, the Seoul government declared Itaewon a "special tourism zone." More shops opened, selling all sorts of souvenirs, especially leather goods. Japanese tourists in particu-

lar would walk off with bags of cheap leather goods and stay in the Hamilton Hotel, according to Seo of the ISTZ.

Many residents describe the 1986 Asian Games and especially the 1988 Olympics as watersheds for Itaewon. Tourists came to Seoul to watch the Games, sometimes clashing with more assertive locals who were not used to seeing so many foreigners in their city at once. Many tourists were shepherded to Itaewon.

Kim Eun-shil interviewed many Itaewon business owners, who viewed themselves as "patriots" who had earned vital foreign currency for the developing nation. But those very merchants were disparaged once special events ended, Kim says.

"Many interviewees said that during the Olympics, Itaewon was packed with tourists, but that afterward, the mass media looked down on Itaewon as a place of crime and squalor," Kim writes. "They were angry that the government first behaved as if it were satisfied with earning dollars, but that once Itaewon became famous, the government treated the neighborhood as if it were corrupt."

In the early 1990s, Itaewon's economy became saturated and slumped into recession. As textile manufacturing moved to cheaper locations, bonded goods were no longer available for sale. Merchants switched to manufacturing knock-offs. The police cracked down on this, and many merchants lost their livelihoods in fines.

The economy picked up again when new faces started showing up in Korea, zeroing in on Itaewon: English teachers, foreign laborers, foreign students and openly gay Koreans.

As more Westerners arrived, black marketing — the practice of buying duty-free goods on the U.S. base and illegally reselling them in Korea — became commonplace. Zwetsloot remembers having to pay outrageous prices for deodorant, mint-flavored toothpaste, pancake syrup and other items that were not available at legal shops. For women, a hot item was tampons.

It happened all the time and not everyone got caught. But sometimes people got greedy. Zwetsloot recalls one institution in 2000 or so that had perfected the practice. "It was a coffee shop by day, but by night, it was like something from 'The Great Escape,'" he says. "They had a tunnel rigged up from the behind the scenes there, under the wall, into a container box inside Hannam Village (a USFK installation). And someone working inside Hannam Village would wheel in crates of liquor, which would then be trundled on rails underneath the walls into the cafe, and then taken and resold to all the bars in Itaewon at a mark-up. Talk about a license to print money; they must have made a hundred grand before they got caught." They finally got busted and went to jail. "But it was a great scam while it lasted."

Muff diving and the rise of hedonism

When Nevada Rhodes arrived in Korea in 1994, he visited Itaewon his first weekend. "I was in constant awe," he says. "The whole world is right here."

Itaewon had actually become international by then. It had also become hedonistic in new ways that didn't exist when the GIs were only trying to hit up Korean girls. "There were some wonderful party bars here," Rhodes recalls. "And it seemed like the rules that are in bars now were out the window then."

Rhodes VJed at The Loft and a few other bars, which held '70s and '80s theme parties where everyone dressed up. "There were blowjobs (the drink) and the muff-diving drinks with whipped cream," Rhodes says. "The girls would win stuff for the most seductive way to eat whipped cream off a banana. The guys would win prizes for the best muff diving." The "muff diving" involved licking whipped cream off a paper plate. "The guys would win headlamps — I called them muff-diving lamps. I forgot what the girls would win."

It was in the mid-'90s when the gay scene started emerging around Homo Hill, though Rhodes says there were plenty of gay clubs off the Hill as well. The Hill itself was "100 percent" gay bars by then, according to Rhodes. "They tried to put a straight bar in there once and it failed mightily. They tried to put in a lesbian bar and that did not work at all."

But the district was still a dangerous place, he says. He witnessed two incidents he described as "riots," with groups of soldiers brawling at the top of Texas Street, while the MPs and local police did nothing.

'OUR AREA USED TO BE A VERY FAMILY-FRIENDLY, LOVELY LITTLE COMMUNITY WITH A RICE SHOP AND A BUTCHER AND DRY CLEANER'S. IT WAS A REALLY NICE PLACE TO LIVE IN AND HANG AROUND. AND ONE BY ONE THOSE PLACES ARE DISAPPEARING.'

PAUL MATTHEWS



Wayne Gold is now co-owner of Wolfhound and Reilly's Tapouse, but when he arrived in 1998, he was another English teacher from Canada.

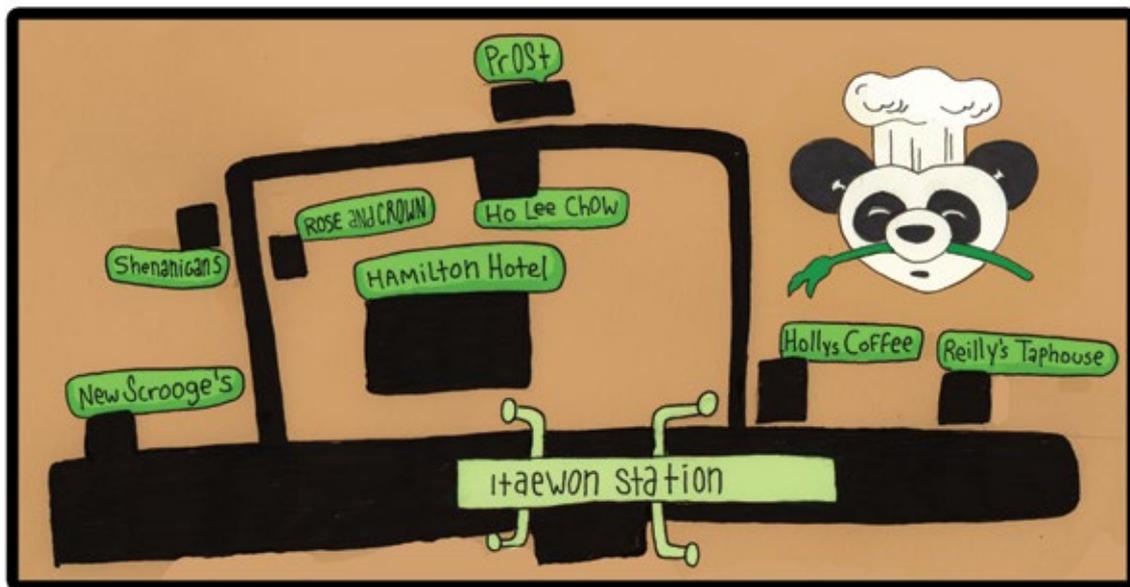
"Hooker Hill was a huge party back then, too," Gold says. "Especially in the warmer months, from midnight that alley would just be rammed. You'd go into the bars to get drinks, but then come out." He says there were lots of soldiers and lots of fights, and at least once a month the MPs would be "dragging someone" down the hill.

Rhodes and Gold described Hollywood's Bar at the time as like the Cantina in "Star Wars." "Because all these people from around the universe were there," Rhodes says. "And I swear, some of them were not from Earth."

The working women changed, too. The cost of buying a Korean prostitute went up — exponentially so, and many average GIs could no longer afford it. Replacing them were Chinese, Filipino and Russian women, many of whom were trafficked, according to a Time magazine report from 2002.

At the same time, as travel restrictions on Koreans were lifted and the country's standard of living rose, fewer women were looking for foreign husbands to help them escape. A more liberal attitude in Korea generally also meant Korean women could hook up with Western men as they liked — though this was still usually kept secret from friends and family.

Itaewon still remained off-limits to "respectable" Koreans. The highly publicized 1997 murder of a college student in a restaurant bathroom and media reports of seedy bars and high crime continued to keep mainstream Koreans away.



Influx of the elite

Itaewon Station opened in 2000, putting the district on the metropolitan grid. The first of the big foreign restaurants began to open, along with pubs and bars that didn't cater exclusively to horny young men or aging Department of Defense civilians.

Gecko's opened on the corner by the subway station, and was one of the first places one could get a lunch in Itaewon that wasn't Korean. Then 3 Alley Pub opened in the alley behind the Hamilton Hotel, with a goshiwon (place with inexpensive one-room accommodation) on top of it and nothing around it but Korean restaurants and businesses. Moghul opened down the street. Benjamin Joinau opened Le St-Ex, a French bistro, in 2000.

"Everyone told us we were crazy," Joinau says. He was aware of the neighborhood's bad reputation, but he also felt something was changing.

"The subway station was going to open, and Itaewon geographically is the center of Seoul," Joinau says. "It's historically speaking almost the only cosmopolitan area of Seoul. I thought if there was a place to open a French bistro, this was the place."

Le St-Ex succeeded in a somewhat ironic manner — because the location was considered seedy, the rich and famous would eat there. "At the beginning we attracted a kind of elite of Korean people who wanted something different," Joinau says. "Most of them wanted to have a discreet way to go out. Because there were very few Korean people (in Itaewon), famous people, rich people, actors could come and not be recognized." The movie stars came to Itaewon because no one else did.

Paul Matthews, an actor from the U.K. who has lived

in the area since 2001, says the restaurant culture has been the prime mover for change in Itaewon over the past decade, with restaurants like Le St-Ex, La Tavola, La Cigale de Montmartre and Moghul paving the way.

"And then it became about upscale drinking too, like when the Bungalow opened," Matthews says. "It wasn't just about skeezy bars. It was about classier drinking, cocktails and having a nice night out."

Joe McPherson, who runs the Zen Kimchi blog, says the Smokey Saloon, in that same alley behind the Hamilton, in 2005 "hit the Korean food blogs big time. For a couple of years, a line formed outside the restaurant, mostly Seoulites who had rarely ventured into Itaewon. More blog-worthy restaurants opened, which whittled away Itaewon's seedy reputation."

McPherson also singles out Vatos Urban Tacos, which in 2011 "exploded on the Korean food blog and media scene more aggressively than any restaurant before." Soon it had to move to the main street. That, McPherson feels, is when Itaewon truly gentrified. "It went from seedy to not unsafe to trendy."

Wayne Gold notes that even late at night, whereas it once took 20 minutes to line up for an egg burger after leaving the bar, one can now choose between a kebab, a Moroccan sandwich or even an empanada.

Gold points to one (now defunct) bar that was famous for having "the best burger" in Korea. "And they were getting those prefab ones off the base," he says. Now, he shakes his head in amazement at what's available. "Kids today, they don't understand," he jokes.



Spreading beyond the Hill

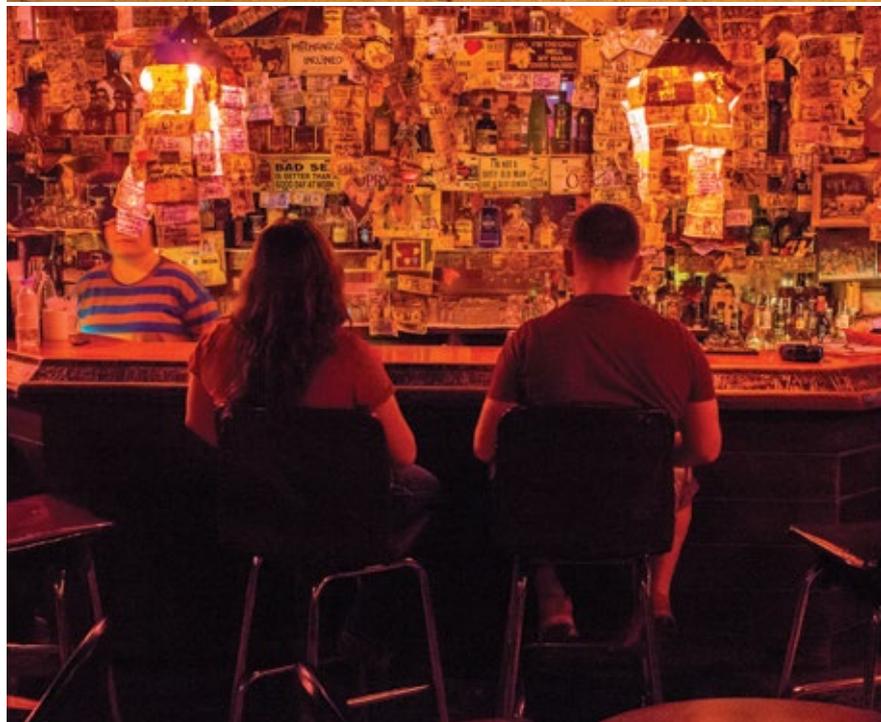
Itaewon has also become a base for the gay scene, with Western attitudes defining the mainstream in the district. Hong Seok-cheon, Korea's most famous gay personality, told NPR in 2012 he feels Itaewon is the only place he can live comfortably as a gay man. Reverend Daniel Payne, the senior pastor at the progressive Open Doors Community Church in Haebangchon, says, "Itaewon is the hub for gay foreigners and most young gay Koreans. At least on Homo Hill, many gay people find a safe place to be themselves without fear of reprisal and judgment."

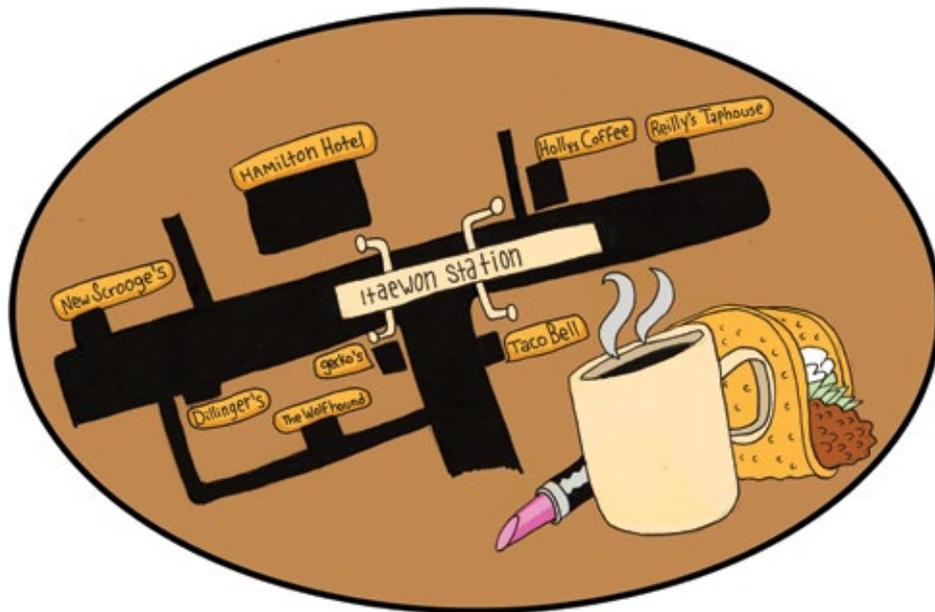
Now Payne feels the gay scene is spilling out of Itaewon as people feel more comfortable with themselves. "As Korean society slowly — emphasis on slowly — opens up, many young gay Koreans are feeling more and more empowered to be out in other places and areas of life," Payne says.

Up by the mosque, Halal Hill developed. What was just a mosque became a sprawling "Muslim Town," with halal butchers, Islamic bookstores and guesthouses, and travel agents specializing in pilgrimages to Mecca. This was to cater not only to the increasing number of Korean Muslims, but also to the tens of thousands of Muslim laborers who were streaming into the country.

Korea's approximately 1,000 Jews also gather in Itaewon. Chabad House, near the Samsung museum, serves as a de facto "Jewish embassy" for Jews all over the country, providing religious services, kosher food and a place to meet. Rabbi Osher Litzman says the Jewish community has always centered around Itaewon.

"Which is very convenient," Litzman says. "Many people decide to live near us." Jewish services used to be held on the base, but it was impossible to cater to everyone, because Israelis were not permitted to enter Yongsan Garrison. "Now, we are here, and we welcome everyone: Soldiers, Israelis, everyone is welcome to join us."





Out with the old

In spring 2011, legendary Korean pop-singer and producer JYP released “Itaewon Freedom,” a fun, retro parody tune about partying in Itaewon. The lyrics, all in Korean, describe a freer, alternative neighborhood where everyone can go. Less crowded than Gangnam or Hongdae, more exciting than Sinchon, it had something for all tastes. Suddenly, residents and local businesses began to see a huge influx of Korean patrons to what were once expat stomping grounds.

But with Itaewon’s increasing popularity, rents throughout the neighborhood have been skyrocketing; according to one anonymous source, in the alley behind the Hamilton, which has recently seen massive remodeling, they have doubled in the past year. “Which is going to be very difficult for the foreign restaurants. All of them are going to move away.” He sighs. “The profit is not here anymore.”

Paul Matthews, the British actor, likes the gentrification, but says, “It means I may have to leave.” The landlord is trying to sell the building Matthews lives in, and once that happens, it’s not likely he’ll be able to afford the new rent.

“Our area used to be a very family-friendly, lovely little community with a rice shop and a butcher and dry cleaner’s,” Matthews says. “It was a really nice place to live in and hang around. And one by one those places are disappearing.”

One long-term resident, who asked to remain anonymous, said, “I hate that Itaewon has become cool with Koreans because of

some stupid song, yet they wouldn’t step foot in the ‘hood 10 years ago. From what I understand, foreigners have been living in Itaewon for more than 700 years, yet on a Saturday afternoon I’m stared at like a weird animal in a zoo.”

Michael Hurt, a longtime expat, sees a “theme park of difference.” He says Koreans are coming in because it’s now considered cool to do things outside of their cultural comfort zone. “Now Itaewon is a direct place to do that. Now you can go eat your good, real Italian pasta, play the ice cream game with the Turkish guy, and then go home and not see those people again,” he says.

The biggest fear of all is that Itaewon will just become another trendy neighborhood, another long line of fancy cafe chains and cosmetics stores, says McPherson. Itaewon’s “new trendiness has raised the rents, pushing out the businesses that made it special in the first place,” he says. Gangnam’s Garosu-gil was once a street of unique restaurants and cafes. But once it became trendy, “all those restaurants were replaced with Caffe Benes and Faceshops. The same is starting to happen to Itaewon.”

He believes that Itaewon is different and needs to stay different. “For a city the size of Seoul, it suffers from an embarrassing lack of cosmopolitan diversity. It’s the largest small town in the world,” says McPherson. “Imagine McDonald’s, Starbucks and Subway taking over all the authentic restaurant space in LA’s Koreatown and San Francisco’s Chinatown.

Unique cultural enclaves hold great value to cities and should be recognized.”

Zwetsloot points to Hongdae as an example of what’s going on in Itaewon. “Go to Hongdae now, the rent can only be afforded by companies. It’s become a corporate place,” he says. “And the real Hongdae has moved to the back streets.”

The popularity of Itaewon has spread to neighboring Haebangchon, which is no longer the place for North Korean refugees — now it’s filled with trendy restaurants that get highlighted on Korean TV programs.

Gyeongnidan, down the hill from Noksapyeong station, was once a cheaper, less trendy alternative to Itaewon as well. But according to restaurant owner Daniel Tudor, that’s changed too.

“Gyeongnidan is booming now, and becoming corporate, sadly,” Tudor says. He originally opened The Booth in the neighborhood because it was cheaper than Itaewon. But now, “we’ve got chaebol-owned cafes, queues outside every bar or restaurant, and even those red-jacketed tourist information volunteers wandering around. From a purely selfish perspective, it’s good for business, but we hope the area doesn’t end up going over the top like Garosu-gil.”

Even Hooker Hill is being gentrified, Zwetsloot notes. After a fire burned down a bunch of juicy bars in 2011, they weren’t replaced by more juicy bars — now there’s a hotel for Chinese tourists. When Hooker Hill is gentrified, he says, “the old Itaewon is just about gone.”



The new Itaewon Freedom

Strolling up Hooker Hill today, men will still get asked to follow girls into juicy bars and dark doorways. The bars and clubs up here have been mostly the same for 20 years: Friends Bar, now popular with Filipino workers; Polly's Kettle, which for decades has served soju cocktails out of plastic pop bottles sawn in half; and the Grand Ole Opry, the cowboy bar with the raised square dance floor in the center. Every night since Mama Kim opened the Opry 39 years ago, she has played "The Star-Spangled Banner" at midnight.

Mama Kim is in her mid-70s and tends the bar alone now; she can't afford any help, but she doesn't need it anyway, as there are so few customers. She still gets the small beer bottles duty-free, but now she is allowed to admit anyone. But no one really comes anymore.

"Itaewon is not good now," Kim says. "The Koreans think Itaewon is good, but American people come and they say it's bad. You know why: Hamilton backside, it's all Korean. Many businesses, it's good. But here, if we don't have Americans, we close."

Kim — a close friend of Tom Casey's — misses the old days, even if they were exploitative and poor. It used to be that she would sell 30 to 35 cases of beer in a night. Now she doesn't even sell five cases.

"Forty years I have watched this place," Kim says. "Before, we had 20 good years. After (2001), it went down. It's really bad now. Too many bars. More people (in Itaewon), but they're all Korean." While Westerners are content with dive bars, Koreans, for the most part, are not.

Down Texas Street — home to remnants of the old Itaewon, still the place most Koreans would not want their daughters wandering around — and around the corner, across the main street and behind the Hamilton, there is the new Itaewon.

Le Saint-Ex, 3 Alley and Moghul are still there, but they're the dinosaurs now. The street is filled with new options, most of them bright, beautiful and expensive. London Pride with its fire engine red façade, The Fox Hole with its shiny black exterior, Hong Seok-cheon's My Chelsea, Zelen at the top of the stairs — they are all emblematic of the new Itaewon.

Outside a new gastropub, in another rapidly gentrifying alley, a lemon yellow Lamborghini sits unattended. One of Gangnam's nouveau riche is out looking for an authentic evening of foreign food and beer. Inside the pub, they can make sure your hamburger is matched with the right IPA, your steak with the right porter. This is as far from the Kyunghyang Shinmun's dirty enclave of "vagabond criminals" as you can go. It's still foreign, but it's a whole different breed of it.

It's a new Itaewon, an Itaewon of money. It's a fun Itaewon, a multicultural Itaewon, a cosmopolitan Itaewon — Itaewon Freedom, for those who can afford it.

GROOVE

'ITAEWON IS NOT GOOD NOW. THE KOREANS THINK ITAEWON IS GOOD, BUT AMERICAN PEOPLE COME AND THEY SAY IT'S BAD. YOU KNOW WHY: HAMILTON BACKSIDE, IT'S ALL KOREAN. MANY BUSINESSES, IT'S GOOD. BUT HERE, IF WE DON'T HAVE AMERICANS, WE CLOSE.'

MAMA KIM, GRAND OLE OPRY