

Possible glitch sends Pokémon Go players to South Korean city

By Youkyung Lee
AP Technology Writer

SEOUL, South Korea — The seaside South Korean city of Sokcho is enjoying a surge of visitors who are wandering the streets at all hours as they look at their smartphones. Why? It appears to be the only place in the country where Pokémon Go players can chase the mobile game's virtual monsters.

Local restaurants, hotels, and businesses are trying to capitalize on the sudden craze by luring tourists with photos of Pikachu and other monsters in their backyard and promising free gifts to the Pokémon "trainers." The mayor pledged to increase free Wi-Fi hotspots and battery-charging stations, and travel agencies have launched Pokémon-themed tour packages to Sokcho. Hotels in the east coast city near the North Korean border reportedly saw a surge in reservations.

The mobile game has become a blockbuster hit in the U.S., but it has not been officially launched in South Korea.

Niantic Inc., a San Francisco spinoff of Google parent Alphabet Inc., overlays cute Nintendo characters onto the physical world. Gamers have to find spots in the real world to capture and train Psyduck, Meowth, and other virtual monsters.

Speculations went wild among local media and the public that South Koreans cannot play the game because the government restricts Google Maps service for security reasons.

But South Korean authorities later denied that and instead attributed the monsters' appearance in Sokcho to map glitches. By the way Niantic organizes the region, Sokcho and its neighboring area bordering North Korea were classified as North America, the state-run National Geographic Information Institute said, denying earlier reports that they were categorized as North Korea. Neither Google nor Niantic immediately responded to e-mails seeking comment.

Whatever the reason, South Korean Pokémon Go players have been going to great lengths to take advantage.

It was after midnight when college student Han Kyeol and three friends drove out of Seoul, and 4:00am when they



POKÉMON PROBLEMS. Two South Koreans play the Pokémon Go game with their mobile phones in Sokcho, South Korea. The seaside South Korean city of Sokcho is enjoying a surge of visitors who are wandering the streets at all hours as they look at their smartphones. It appears to be the only place in the country where Pokémon Go players can chase the mobile game's virtual monsters. (Lee Jong-hun/ Yonhap via AP)

what the government restricts," said Lee Se-moon, an official at Sokcho city's tourism department. "But it is a great help for the city's tourism because media continues to report about Sokcho and game manias are promoting Sokcho."

South Korea restricts the use of mapping data by foreign companies that do not operate its servers in the domestic market, citing concerns over disclosing military locations amid tensions with North Korea. It is not clear how the Pokémon Go phenomenon would play out ahead of a government decision expected next month on whether to allow Google to use South Korean mapping data.

Even after the country's land ministry said on its official Twitter account that Google Maps service is not needed to play Pokémon Go, which uses the phone's GPS technology to find animated characters, South Korean users did not believe the government, denouncing it as nonsense.

Some express regrets over what the country is missing due to tensions with North Korea.

"We can't play the game because we are a divided country, but this is what the global trend is," said Lee, the Pokémon Go trainer in Sokcho. "I wish people could play the game here so it could stimulate the regional economy. I got to go to new places and found a beautiful cliff as I was looking for the spots."

arrived at a Sokcho beach.

"As soon as we got out of the car, four of us turned on our smartphones and began playing Pokémon Go," the 24-year-old said by phone from Seoul. "It was very dark, but what was amazing was that there were a lot of men roaming around the beaches with smartphones in their hands at 4:00am."

Han hadn't visited Sokcho in more than a decade, and hadn't considered a return trip before Pokémon Go came around. He enjoyed his overnight trip so much that he plans to return with his girlfriend. "We went to a 24-hour raw fish place, saw the sun rise, and stopped by the main tourist attractions," he said.

Lee Jung-hwan, a 26-year-old video producer, has been travelling to Sokcho and other towns in Gangwon province to find and capture monsters. When he finds Pokéstop, a key location where trainers can find items such as eggs that can hatch into a full monster, he shares the location on the Facebook group for Pokémon Go players in South Korea.

"I met people who took a day off to come to Sokcho, people who worked in the morning and left their job in the afternoon, and people who took a vacation," he said by phone from Sokcho.

The city of 80,000 is a popular summer destination for mountain hikers and beachgoers. Local businesses are keen on

adding Pokémon Go players who call the place "Pallet Town," the hometown of Pokémon's main protagonist.

The city had four times more hotel room bookings Tuesday and Wednesday than it did on those days the previous week, the Yonhap news agency reported, citing Interpark Tour, a hotel-booking website.

On Auction, the South Korean unit of eBay, tour agencies began selling round-trip bus tours to Sokcho, calling the destination Pallet Town. A local restaurant hung a banner outside welcoming the trainers to a glass of cold water and free smartphone charging. Ramada Hotel in Sokcho promised three free hotel stay packages to those who capture three monsters in Sokcho.

The city, however, was hesitant to fully embrace the game, given the central government's restrictions on Google Maps.

"For the city, it is not easy to promote

Ultraconservative lobby backs Japan PM charter change drive

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — An influential political lobby in Japan will do its utmost to capitalize on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's election victory and push for the constitution to be revised to allow a more active military, according to the group's chairman.

Abe's gains in the upper house in the recent election mean his party can cobble together the crucial two-thirds majority in both houses to propose a revision and put it to a referendum, if it gets support from lawmakers in other parties open to the changes.

Tadae Takubo, chairman of Nippon Kaigi, or Japan Conference, said the war-renouncing constitution that makes Japan's defense "defective" needs to be corrected.

It's time to grow out of Japan's "silly" postwar goal of becoming an economic power with lightweight military, and seek to restore Japan with more self-respect, traditional family values, and principles under the emperor as head of nation, said Takubo, an international politics professor at Kyorin University.

"This is a golden opportunity that has never happened before. If I were in the prime minister's position, I will go all out to accomplish a revision during the current term," Takubo said. His organization will provide full support to push forward the drive, he said.

For Abe and his ultra-conservative supporters, like Nippon Kaigi, the 1947 constitution is the legacy of Japan's defeat in World War II and an imposition of the victor's world order and values. The charter renounces the use of force in international conflicts and limits Japan's military to self-defense only, although Japan has a well-equipped modern army, navy, and air force that work closely with the United States, its top ally.

Abe's ruling party proposed revisions to the constitution in 2012 that intended to restore traditions similar to prewar-era family values centered on the emperor, and to put national interest before individuals' basic human rights in some cases. It was never formally submitted to parliament.

Abe did not make the constitution a focus of the election, but said he takes the victory as a public endorsement for a revision, pledging to launch a parliamentary committee to discuss which articles to change and how.

Founded in 1997, Nippon Kaigi has strived to revise the constitution to restore traditional gender roles, increase imperial worshipping, and put public interest before individuals. The group is believed to be behind Abe's comeback in 2012 and has become increasingly influential.

Their grassroots movement backed by Shinto shrines and other new religious groups has a growing membership that

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