

Thailand’s “Death Fest” invites visitors to embrace mortality

By Jintamas Saksornchai
The Associated Press

NONTHABURI, Thailand — Thailand’s “Death Fest” invites people to confront mortality while also offering practical services and spiritual advice for the inevitable.

The unusual fair, now in its second year, has broached the subject that’s uncomfortable for many. It’s also one of the central teachings of Buddhism, which shapes much of Thailand’s culture, about life’s unavoidable sufferings: birth, old age, sickness, and death.

Sangduan Ngamvinijaroon attended the three-day event with her mother in Nonthaburi province near Bangkok. She said death used to be a difficult subject for her family, but having spent more than 20 years caring for ill family members, including her husband who had a stroke and relatives with cancer, she has



EMBRACING MORTALITY. A visitor lies inside a coffin made of mycelium, the rootlike fibers of fungi, at “Death Fest” in Nonthaburi, Thailand. “Death Fest,” now in its second year, invites people to confront mortality while also offering practical services and spiritual advice for the inevitable. (AP Photo/Kittinun Rodsupan)

Office worker Phinutda Seehad said it felt calming.

“I don’t think I’m scared of death,” she said. “I also don’t want to die, but when the time comes, I don’t think it will be that frightening.”

One company displayed a biodegradable coffin made from mycelium — the rootlike fibers of fungi — which helps naturally with decomposition.

Founder Jirawan Kumsao said the design reflects a more environmentally friendly approach to burial. Although she brought a human-sized coffin to the event, her company mainly produces coffins for pets.

“It gives people comfort to know they’ve cared for their pets until the very end,” she said. “It looks like a spacecraft, a capsule, for sending them to another world.”

Noppasaward Panyajaray, founder of the online memorial platform Sharesouls, has seen a similar emotional bond. Her service allows users to store photos and share stories about loved ones, creating a digital space where friends and family can leave messages and pay their respects.

She said her original idea was for the platform to preserve memories of family members. But she was surprised to find that many users were creating memorial pages for their pets.

“Many people sent me a message to say thank you, because nowadays we don’t really have any space to store stories or memories about their pets,” she said. “Every pet is meaningful to their owners as much as a family member.”



ARMY HANGOUT. Walls are decorated with pictures of K-pop band BTS at Yoojung Sikdang, a restaurant in Seoul where BTS members frequently ate during their trainee days, in Seoul, South Korea. The Seoul café and restaurant where BTS members spent time learning how to sing, dance, and perform are drawing visitors from around the globe during the band’s huge comeback. (AP Photo/Juwon Park)

BTS fans stream to Seoul café, restaurant that once served as bases for the K-pop superstars

By Juwon Park
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A Seoul café and restaurant that once served as bases for BTS members when they were mere K-pop trainees are drawing visitors from around the globe during the band’s huge comeback.

A recent Friday stream of visitors to Café Hyuga, once a dormitory where band members stayed, included Evelyn Florntino, who flew from the Philippines where she was visiting family after failing to get tickets to the group’s tour dates in the United States. Instead, she attended the Seoul concert a day after the release of their fifth studio album, *ARIRANG*.

“Unfortunately (I) was not lucky to get a ticket,” the Hawai’i resident told The Associated Press. “So now I’m here in Korea to at least watch the free concert they’re doing.”

Florntino, who had researched the café on Google, called it “humbling” to see the modest building wedged in a narrow alley of low-rise buildings in Gangnam — a wealthy district better known for its luxury high-rises and upscale boutiques.

Alejandra Valencia had travelled even farther, from Colombia, drawn by a deep personal connection. She credits the band with pulling her through a period of depression. “They saved me,” Valencia said. “And the time flies, and now I am an ARMY,” she said, referring to the group’s fan base.

A short walk away, at the restaurant

Yoojung Sikdang, owner Jang Young Kun greeted visitors in a purple BTS hoodie — a gift from an Australian fan. The restaurant is in the building that housed BTS members’ old dance practice room.

“BTS was with us here in this building for about three to four years,” said Jang, 78. “The basement was their practice room — they trained down there and really shared their everyday lives with us.”

K-pop trainees are young hopefuls recruited by entertainment agencies and put through years of intensive singing, dancing, and performance training before they debut publicly — a system that shaped global K-pop bands like BTS, which debuted in 2013, and Blackpink, among others.

Jang recalled the members eating at his restaurant daily between practices. He also remembered the morning RM and Suga came upstairs to share some news.

“Namjoon (RM) told me the group had settled on a name — Bangtan Sonyeondan,” Jang said. “I told them, ‘You’re going to blow up with that name. It’s Korean, it’s unique.’”

“The BTS boys were incredibly polite,” Jang added. “They had such bright, warm personalities — if they saw you 10 times a day, they’d bow a full 90 degrees every single time. They were always greeting people, always cheerful, and they worked incredibly hard. They’d practice through the night, then come out and wash up in our bathroom, even dyeing their hair in there.”



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