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Greek ghost villages wake up for tourists

The moonlight is the only light in the alleys of Mikro Chorio, the ancient capital of the Greek island of Tilos. And as in many other abandoned villages in Greece, they only come back to life for the tourists. When night falls, Mikro Chorio (Little Village in Greek) reawakens, as a handful of visitors sip cocktails at the small bar-museum at the foot of the ruins. "We are trying to bring it back to life," said the bar's owner Giorgos Aliferis. For years now, between 11:00 pm and midnight, he has been going in his little van to pick up customers from Livadia, the island's port, where all the villagers were relocated after World War II. "There was no water, no electricity, so people left looking for more comfort," Aliferis's partner Vania Yordanova said as she served drinks on the bar's terrace.

She first had to rush to get the power generator working for the bar after a bumpy 30-minute drive to Mikro Chorio. Then, the deserted island village suddenly lit up like a film set, melancholic Greek music echoing in the starry night. In the 1930s, the capital of Tilos—one of the Dodecanese islands in the southeastern Aegean Sea—still had 1,200 inhabitants, including three priests. But gradually the population headed to the

port, where business was thriving after 1947 when the Dodecanese islands were annexed by Greece from Italy. By the 1960s the school that had once served 180 pupils was also transferred to the port and Mikro Chorio's three cafes closed.

'Crazy dream'

Aliferis, who hails from the Peloponnese in western Greece, discovered the abandoned village of Mikro Chorio in the 1980s, after he arrived on the island when his brother, a doctor, went to work there. "I thought it was really sad that this village was deserted, and I had this crazy dream of bringing it back to life," he said. He keeps the bar open three to four months every year, welcoming a variety of customers. "Visitors come from everywhere—even from abroad—and the descendants of families who used to live in the village return and they are really moved," Aliferis said. But the project, he said, has "cost me a lot, financially and psychologically"—further complicated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has lost him as much as 80 percent of his revenue. Nor is he happy about the asphalt road that is due to be built to the village, which he fears will "change the landscape and the atmosphere".



This photo shows Mikro Chorio (that means Little Village in Greek) on the Greek Aegean island of Tilos. — AFP

Forlorn atmosphere

Mikro Chorio is far from being the only Greek village deserted by its inhabitants who migrated to towns and cities in the search for jobs. And through a variety of initiatives, both public and private, some local people are trying to breathe back life into some of those abandoned places. Vathia, a village on the Mani Peninsula in the southern Peloponnese,

boasts spectacular views of the sea. But its derelict stone castles and the scattered possessions of its former inhabitants, give it a forlorn atmosphere.

Some tourists visit for the 18th-century square towers still dominating the village that, while still thriving in the 19th century, was abandoned because of urban migration. A government-backed restoration project in the 1980s was in turn also scrapped, so the guesthouses remained

without visitors in the wind-battered village. Not far from there, the fortified town of Mystras, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1989, has become a major attraction, one of the 10 most-visited sites in Greece. Tourists flock to its paved alleys, admiring the elaborate frescos of the Byzantine churches and visiting the town's monastery, which is still occupied, even if the town itself was deserted in 1950. Spinalonga, a small abandoned island off Crete, still attracts tourists captivated by its dramatic past.

There, in the Venetian fortress that has become an archaeological site, patients suffering from leprosy stayed there until the early 20th century. Spinalonga is also known as the setting for Victoria Hislop's 2006 bestseller "The Island", a historical novel that was also adapted into a popular Greek television series. Other abandoned villages in Greece also come to life to cater for tourists that are looking for unusual destinations, like the 14th century Perithia on Corfu. Taverns in Perithia open only in the summer for the visitors, who are enchanted by the Venetian style buildings in varying states of dereliction and the prospect of hiking to the summit of Mount Pantokrator. — AFP



This picture shows South Korean television host Song Hae smiling next to his bronze statue on a street named after him in Seoul. — AFP photos



This picture shows South Korean television host Song Hae (right) and film director Jero Yun (left) walking on the street named Song Hae in Seoul.



This undated handout photo obtained from the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) in Busan on October 20, 2020 shows South Korean television host Song Hae in a scene from his documentary film "Song Hae 1927".



South Korean television host Song Hae speaking during an interview with AFP at his office in Seoul.

SPLIT PERSONALITY: THE ELDERLY KOREAN STAR SHAPED BY DIVISION

At the age of 93 the arc of South Korean television host Song Hae's life mirrors that of his country, from Japanese colonialism to war to cultural rise, chequered by suffering and loss. Song is known across the South as the host of "National Singing Contest", a talent show broadcast from a different location each week that has been running for 40 years and remains popular. His warm and funny personality has earned him a huge fanbase, from children to teenagers to the elderly, and the locations named after him include a street in Seoul and a park in Daegu. But Song was born in today's North Korea and was among the millions of people whose families were left divided by the Korean War—which he played a part in ending when he relayed the order to cease fire. "My generation lived in very hapless times," Song told AFP.

His extraordinary life is featured in a documentary that has its world premiere at the Busan film festival, Asia's largest, on Monday. Directed by the award-winning Jero Yun, "Song Hae 1927" focuses on Song's private grief and the turmoil of his family history—as well as being separated from his parents and siblings by the war, his only son was killed in a traffic accident at the age of 23. "Mr. Song is a survivor," said Yun, who has previously tackled themes of migration and North Korean defectors. "My question for this project was, how do we deal with the holes in our mind when we lose someone?"

'Fighting will cease'

Born as Song Bok-hee in 1927 in Jaeryong, in what is now the North, Song grew up during the Japanese colonial era, when he remembers being beaten for speaking Korean and spending gruelling hours cutting hay to feed Japanese cavalrymen's horses. "I still have a scar on my leg from those days, from cutting myself while using a sickle," he said. He studied singing at music school and once hostilities broke out, he regularly stayed away from home to avoid being conscripted into the North's forces. On one occasion his mother called him back as he was leaving. "She told me: 'Be careful this time.' So I just told her: 'I'm coming back in two days'."

It was the last time they ever spoke: with North Korean forces advancing he sought shelter on a US warship evacuating civilians to the South. He spent most of the three-day journey staring at the open waters, not knowing if he would ever be able to return home, and later renamed himself Hae—meaning "sea"—to remember the voyage that forever separated him from his family. In the South, Song became a military signaller, and says that he and his colleagues later transmitted the encoded message that ended hostilities and sealed the division of the peninsula. "We later learned it meant 'As of 2200 on July 27, 1953, fighting on all front lines will cease'," he lamented. "It was me who sent it, and even now I still can't return."

In a motorcycle crash. "I just couldn't say 'be careful of car accidents' on air after losing my son that way," he said.

In 1988 he took over as the "National Singing Contest" host—somehow incongruously given that he had discouraged Chang-jin from pursuing a musical career. At the time professional singers like him were looked down on socially, and he followed the example of his own father, who had also sought to dissuade him. "It's a sin for a father to not understand what his child is going through," he said, wiping away tears. Song has since hosted almost 1,500 episodes of the show from every part of the South, and one installment in Pyongyang, during the "Sunshine Policy" rapprochement of the early 2000s.



South Korean television host Song Hae weeping during an interview with AFP at his office in Seoul.



South Korean television host Song Hae speaking during an interview with AFP at his office in Seoul.

'It's a sin'

In the subsequent decades South Korea has undergone an economic boom while enduring authoritarian military governments from the 1960s to the 1980s—Song was once interrogated for three days for complaining about hardships. The country has gone on to establish itself as a vibrant democracy and a technological and entertainment powerhouse. Song made a career as a singer, comedian and television personality, and spent 17 years hosting a radio show doing traffic reports, until his son Chang-jin was killed

But he was unable to visit his home town, pay his respects at his presumably long-dead parents' graves, nor meet the sister he had left behind, and cried throughout the journey back to Seoul. Unresolved feelings of sadness and resentment against injustice, known as "han", are a longstanding theme in Korean culture and literature. Song said: "Even an entire day would not be enough to count the things that I find to be filled with han." — AFP

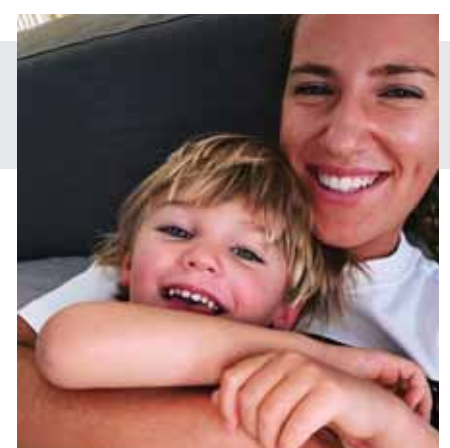
Azarenka's Halloween dilemma: Who will be Elsa?

Victoria Azarenka ended her season after reaching the Ostrava Open final on Sunday but she is now facing another tough battle—striking a deal with her son on his Halloween costume. After losing to compatriot Aryna Sabalenka 6-2, 6-2, Azarenka confessed she had had a "heated argument" with her

four-year-old son Leo who insists on being Elsa, the snow queen from the Walt Disney blockbuster "Frozen". "He likes to wear different costumes every day... and he's into Frozen and Paw Patrol now," said Azarenka. "I said, how about mommy's going to be Elsa, and he said, no, I want to be Elsa, and I said, well, Elsa is a girl,

and he said, well, I want to be Elsa." "So that started to be a heated argument and his dad suggested also that maybe he'll be Olaf but he didn't take that lightly, it was a blunt no," she half-sighed, half-chuckled. The former world number one and this year's US Open finalist still has almost a week to strike a deal with

Leo, but she knows outstanding diplomatic skills will be required to reach a compromise. "One Halloween, when we were able to do it together, we were all skeletons so hopefully we'll figure something out," she said. — AFP



Victoria Azarenka and her son