

TV

The best K-dramas on Netflix, according to someone who has seen them all

Here's where to start on your K-drama journey — including the one romance everyone seems to be talking about.



Son Ye-jin in "Crash Landing on You." [Netflix](#)

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By Jae-Ha Kim

These days, I watch almost exclusively Korean dramas — or K-dramas, as they're commonly called. Originating from South Korea, these shows tend to span only a single season, but they pack a *lot* of drama in.

Just as there are different genres in U.S. television, K-dramas focus on a variety of subjects, from wholesome romances to dystopians looking to make socio-political points.

Before some streaming sites like Netflix made Korean dramas readily available, the only legitimate option was to watch whatever was offered on cable. But even then, many Korean immigrants (like my parents) supplemented their viewing by renting grainy bootlegged VHS tapes and DVDs at their local Korean grocery store. There was no need for subtitles in the days of yore, because the market for these videos was specific: Korean speakers who didn't need language assistance.

ADVERTISING

In today's market, viewers have the luxury of watching shows almost at the same time as they're released in South Korea — and with subtitles. Previously regarded as niche viewing, K-dramas were once only available to stream on sites that specifically catered to Asian content (Viki, Kocowa, the now defunct Dramafever). But these days, premium streaming services like Disney+ and Apple TV+ — which traditionally have showcased Western content — have dipped into the K-drama market.

But both have a long way to go before catching up with Netflix's impressive catalog of K-dramas.

According to the [Hollywood Reporter](#), Netflix has spent \$700 million on creating Korean content, including over 80 shows. With the Korean hit series “Squid Game” and “All of Us Are Dead,” the streaming service saw a payoff in their investments. On the way? A Korean remake of the popular Spanish show “Money Heist,” out this summer.

Below, find some of my favorite Korean shows that are available on Netflix. Some are romantic, while others are gory. But one thing they share in common is they're binge worthy and unforgettable.

'The K2'

(Engsub) tvN drama 'The K2' Main Teaser 44s



Ji Chang-wook (“The Healer”) excels in action adventures, as this K-drama demonstrates. In “The K2,” he plays a mercenary who becomes a de facto bodyguard for the illegitimate daughter of a politician with his eyes on the Blue House (the equivalent of our White House). Girls’ Generation’s Im Yoon-Ah plays the daughter, who has been hidden away in an overseas nunnery. (Just go with it.) Preposterous plot aside, the series is full of exciting action scenes, perfectly choreographed fight sequences and enough twists to keep you hitting the “next episode” button.

'Hospital Playlist' (2020)

Hospital Playlist | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



Forget about the implausibility of five medical school friends getting prominent jobs at the same hospital and performing as a group together after work. Granted, the band is just something they do for fun in one of their basements. What are the odds that five doctor besties would also be talented musicians? Both seasons of this medical drama are so well executed that the viewer can forgive its improbable premise. Each character is brilliant at their job, but also flawed in their personal life. And herein lies the strength of “Hospital Playlist.” While they may perform heroic feats in surgery — saving lives that appear unsaveable — they don’t allow each other to nurture a god complex. One of the most meaningful lessons the show’s “fabulous five” teach their underlings is that doctors need to display patience to their distressed patients.

'Squid Game' (2021)

Squid Game | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



An allegory for South Korea's hyper competitive society, "Squid Game" is Netflix's most watched show, as of 2021. Lee Jung-jae plays a down-on-his-luck man who's willing to risk it all for the possibility of winning a game of life and death in the impossible-to-turn-away-from series. "Squid Game" made a star out of newcomer HoYeon Jung, who portrays a North Korean defector trying to win enough money to reunite her family. This series is bloody, shocking and not for the faint of heart. But the stories it tells evoke very real feelings of despair, fear and betrayal.

'Thirty-Nine' (2022)

Thirty-Nine | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



This women-centric series starring Son Ye-jin (“Crash Landing on You”), Jeon Mi-do (“Hospital Playlist”) and Kim Ji-hyun (“The Smile Has Left Your Eyes”) is a reminder that life can end at any moment — yet somehow, it’s more uplifting than it is grim. This trio of 39-year-olds have been besties since high school. When one of them is diagnosed with a terminal illness, her friends try to help make her the happiest dying person ever. This K-drama also does a beautiful job of depicting how survivors can cherish a loved one’s memory while processing their own grief.

'D.P.' (2021)

D.P. | Official Trailer | Netflix



Jung Hae-in (“Pretty Noona Who Buys Me Food”) stars as a private serving his mandatory 18-month military duty in South Korea. After joining a team called the Deserter Pursuit, he diligently works to return soldiers who’ve escaped — often feeling uncertain about whether he’s doing the right thing. “D.P.” is unflinching in its depiction of military brutality and the ramifications of ignoring the victims’ pleas for help.

'Crash Landing on You' (2019)

Crash Landing on You | Official Trailer #1 | Netflix [ENG SUB]



The chemistry between lead actors Son Ye-jin (“Pretty Noona Who Buys Me Food”) and Hyun Bin (“Memories of the Alhambra”) is off-the-charts in this romantic action series. As a result, it's no surprise it's a mega-hit with an upcoming musical adaptation. Son plays a super rich South Korean businesswoman who accidentally paraglides into the DMZ, where she is rescued by a ridiculously handsome captain for the Korean People’s Army. While the series finale was bittersweet, CLoY fans were delighted that there was a *happily ever after* in real life: Son Ye-jin and Hyun Bin got married this past March.

'Twenty Five Twenty One' (2022)

Twenty Five Twenty One | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



The series begins in 1998, when many South Koreans were struggling financially due to the IMF crisis. Hee-do (Kim Tae-ri, “The Handmaiden”) is an elite high school fencer who has no idea what any of that means. Yi-jin (Nam Joo-hyuk, “Start-Up”) is all too aware. His once wealthy family lost everything, forcing him to drop out of college. The K-drama title refers to the ages Yi-jin and Hee-do are when they allow themselves to pursue romance. The show might remind you of the way things felt earth-shattering and momentous as a young adult.

'Mr. Sunshine' (2018)

Mr. Sunshine | Weekly Trailer 6 [HD] | Netflix



A sweeping tale set at the end of the 19th century, “Mr. Sunshine” offers a tour de force performance by Lee Byung-hun (“Squid Game”). Lee portrays the child of slaves who smuggles his way into the United States. When he returns to his birth country, it’s as Eugene Choi, a U.S. military officer. After encountering Ae-shin (Kim Tae-ri, “Little Forest”) — a noblewoman who’s the orphaned daughter of freedom fighters — he suspects that their goals are more aligned than either lets on. Like many K-drama endings, the finale doesn’t leave much room for a happily-ever-after ending. But it does hold true to the characters fighting for a free country.

'Move to Heaven' (2021)

Move to Heaven | Official Teaser | Netflix



Tang Joon-sang (“Racket Boys”) stars as teenager with Asperger’s Syndrome and Lee Je-hoon (“Signal”) becomes his guardian after the boy’s father dies. They work together at the family-owned Move to Heaven, which handles the cleanup after the most distressful deaths leave families traumatized and unable (or unwilling) to collect their relatives’ belongings. Both actors bring layered nuance to their characters who must sort through their own complex feelings and emotional wounds.

'It’s Okay to Not Be Okay' (2020)

It's Okay to Not Be Okay | Official Trailer #1 | Netflix [ENG SUB]



When a selfless younger sibling (Kim Soo-hyun, “My Love From the Star”) is left in charge of his autistic older brother (Oh Jung-se, “When the Camellia Blooms”), their lives change after a macabre children’s author (Seo Ye-ji, “Lawless Lawyer”) befriends them. There is a plot twist involving a beloved character who turns out to be not what they seem to be. But the real epiphany is how we sometimes twist past memories into something that never occurred. Much of the series takes place in a psychiatric hospital, where the K-drama’s thesis — it’s okay to not be okay — is reinforced.

'All of Us Are Dead' (2022)

All of Us Are Dead | Now Streaming | Netflix



This zombie-centric series is all the more frightening because it's set in a high school. When an infectious disease turns students into zombies, the survivors do what most kids probably would: Wait to be saved by adults. When they realize no one is coming to rescue them, they try to save themselves. But even as classmates are dying around them, issues of wealth and hierarchy affect some of their behavior towards each other. Years of classist indoctrination aren't going to be erased, not even during an emergency. And that's the true terror — even moreso than the zombies.

'Hotel Del Luna' (2019)

#1 hotel for your journey to the afterlife | Hotel Del Luna Highlights | Netflix [E...



The titular hotel serves as a high-end purgatory before the deceased can move on to heaven (or hell!). Operated by a morose young woman (Lee Ji-eun, “My Mister”) — who actually is over 1,300 years old — she is joined by a smart (and alive) man (Yeo Jin-goo, “The Crowned Clown”) who eventually adapts to the hotel’s unusual clientele. United, the two help the undead come to terms with their demise so they can enter the afterlife. The proprietress also atones for her actions centuries ago that left her in this predicament.

'Kingdom' (2018)

Kingdom | Official Trailer [HD] | Netflix



Separated into two seasons — each six episodes long— “Kingdom” is a historical drama *and* a clever twist on the zombie genre. Crown Prince Lee Chang (Ju Ji-Hoon, “Hyena”) hears of a mysterious illness turning people into zombies, and suspects that his own father has been zombified. With the help of Seo-bi (Bae Doona, “Cloud Atlas”) — a physician who had learned about this disease from her mentor — he tries to protect his country from being destroyed by not only the creatures, but the greedy politicians clamoring to take control over Joseon.

'One Spring Night' (2019)

One Spring Night | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB CC]



The protagonist of this series is a 20-something single father (Jung Hae-in, “Prison Playbook”). Even though he has a good job as a pharmacist and is as good-looking as any celebrity, he is discriminated against because he and his college sweetheart had a child out of wedlock. As his parents often remind each other, the best their son can hope for is to marry a widow or a divorcee. After all, who else would want to become involved with him? The answer lies in a pretty and slightly older librarian (Han Ji-min, “Our Blues”) who isn’t bothered by his past, but has to navigate her way out of a long-term relationship with a boyfriend who refuses to be dumped.

'Signal' (2016)

[KkrDrama] SIGNAL 시그널 Trailer (On NETFLIX In 2019)



In this time-traveling crime series, two police officers (played by Lee Je-Hoon and Choi Jin-woong) communicate with each other ... while living decades apart. With one in the past and the other in the future, they are able to prevent tragedies and close cases that had previously been unresolved. Kudos to Kim Hye-soo (“Hyena”) for her portrayal of the first female police officer in the squad. Initially viewed as little more than the department’s coffee maker, she grows to become a fierce and effective leader.

'Our Blues' (2022)

BTS' Jimin and Ha Sung-woon sing for Our Blues OST 🐧💜☁️ | Our Blues E...



Set on Jeju Island, this slice-of-life series boasts some of South Korea's biggest names — Lee Byung-hun (“Iris”), Lee Jung-eun (“Parasite”), Shin Min-a (“Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha”), Kim Woo-bin (“The Heirs”). “Our Blues” tackles a myriad of topics in a languid and deliberate way that allows viewers to feel fully immersed in the characters’ lives.

'Reply 1988' (2015)

Run, Deok-sun! RUN! 🏃 | Reply 1988 | Netflix



The third part of a trilogy, “Reply 1988” is the best of the series, each of which follows a girl as she moves through high school. The series — which include “Reply 1997” and “Reply 1994” — also share characters, with familiar faces popping up between eras. The five central teens’ friendships are fun to watch as they grow and mature. But their parents’ story arcs are just as interesting.

'Navillera' (2021)

Navillera | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



This is the rare K-drama that isn't focused on a romance. Rather, the story's about a talented but poor young ballet dancer (Song Kang, "Sweet Home") who is tasked with teaching a septuagenarian (Park In-hwan, "Miss Granny") how to dance. The latter pursues his childhood dream, despite his family's embarrassment that he's not behaving like a *normal* grandfather. Even with some soapy elements added in, "Navillera" is a poignant series, reinforcing that no one is too old to tackle their dreams and that those dreams should never be discounted.

Jae-Ha Kim

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