Motto Podcast – Season 7, episode 267

Annyeong Seoul! The Korean chronicles of Roberto, Elena and Roger

Episode transcript

With Roberto Lachin and Elena Travaini, from Insadong, Seoul. Transcript revised from automatic speech recognition. mottopodcast.org

Roberto: Good morning everyone, dear friends of Motto Podcast! I'm your friend Roberto Lachin, co-hosting with…

Elena: …Elena Travaini! Good morning and good evening, everyone.

Roberto: We're sitting in a rather alternative café in the Insadong neighbourhood, in South Korea. Let's put your minds at rest straight away: this time Roger managed to board the plane with us without any problem, so we landed happily in Seoul.

Elena: And we've seen a bit of everything.

Roberto: I'd start my Korean chronicles by saying that, if you'd walked down a certain street in Seoul on Monday morning, you'd have seen a very, very angry Roberto kicking the cans lying on the ground. Because we realised right away that Korea isn't very accessible for us blind people. What happened? We had to get to several Blindly Dancing appointments with the Italian Women Korea Group, a really lovely event we'll talk about later. I'd got an international card and loaded it with Korean won, but it wasn't accepted anywhere, or at least at first we found out that taxi drivers didn't accept it: they only take cash in the local currency or local cards. And above all, they don't accept guide dogs. It's really very hard: even though there's a Korean law, you tell them in English and they either pretend not to understand, or you have to argue with them in Korean. So much so that, after three hours, three hours spent on the pavement waiting for a taxi that would take us, we had to make a video call with a kind Korean lady who speaks Italian, who told us: "No, no, don't hang up! Now stop a taxi driver and I'll give him a piece of my mind".

Elena: And we were all in the taxi…

Roberto: …we were all in the taxi, with her watching us through the phone.

Elena: "No, no, no, don't end the call, I have to watch!" But then, through the Italian Cultural Institute, we had a sheet printed with the Korean law on guide dogs, which says taxis must take them. So, if you need to come to Korea, contact the Institute or the Embassy, because they're very, very willing to give you all the information you need.

Roberto: We'd especially like to thank Erika Sfascia of the Italian Cultural Institute, who helped us with absolutely everything, and also Sara Ferri of the Italian women in Korea, and of course all the Italian women in Korea. You're all great, really great: we love you, big hugs!

Elena: Of course! We also held some wonderful events at the Seoul Institute of the Arts, a university where people study art, and it was lovely to sit with the students and chat about this and that. Roby, you asked about music CDs, books, where to buy a thousand things, because of course Roby had to buy a thousand things…

Roberto: A compulsive souvenir shopper, because I love them! As I was saying, Korea is a bit hard to get around for a blind person, especially with a guide dog. At least at the beginning you have to get your bearings: you go into the underground with your phone, you try to film, but everything is written in Korean. Yes, it's a mess, everything is written in Korean. Like in Japan, at the various underground gates there should be people to help you. I say "should be" because they're never there. We have this card called T-money, which you can top up with cash and tap at the gates of the metro, the train, the buses and in some little shops to pay. For us it always made strange sounds, different from everyone else's…

Elena: …and we got through anyway! And if we didn't get through, they let us through anyway.

Roberto: Nobody said anything. I don't know how many journeys I made without paying, it's crazy!

Elena: You can also use T-money in convenience stores, to buy food. But be careful: Roby had to use the physical card, while I could also use it through the phone app, tapping it on the reader, which is handier. You can download it and top it up, but careful: not with Visa cards. I had a Visa card and of course I couldn't top up the electronic version.

Roberto: Visa cards here are only accepted as physical cards. Otherwise Mastercard rules.

Elena: Sometimes in shops you can ask to pay with Apple Pay, but it's not guaranteed. And if you want to do like us and try the street food, guys, you need cash.

Roberto: Cash! Be aware that in Seoul there are loads of little street stalls that only take cash, or at most T-money, the card we were talking about.

Elena: What can I say…

Roberto: At first, as I said, I was very, very angry because nothing worked for us. I felt very discriminated against, to tell you the truth. And then the magic happened: you got on trains, on the metro, you went into shopping centres, and people were literally in love with Roger.

Elena: Roger Rabbit was a sensation! He was the star of this whole trip, from Singapore to Tokyo and all the way here to Seoul. He was photographed in every position, and now the little rascal has figured out how it works: when he sees someone looking at him, instead of staying nice and still he rolls onto his back…

Roberto: …yes…

Elena: …he gets his tummy scratched, he does all his cute tricks, and so of course people take pictures of him.

Roberto: There were girls taking photos of him, throwing down their magazines with the idols and going over to Roger!

Elena: Exactly, he's the new Korean superstar!

Roberto: So, what did we visit? Talking about iconic places, we visited the Lotte World Tower, the tallest tower in Korea: 555 metres high.

Elena: And you felt every bit of that height, both going up and coming down!

Roberto: It's one of the tallest towers in Asia; the Tokyo Skytree is of course taller by over a hundred metres. But what can I say, there's not much around it, because it's just shopping centres: a complex of two or three towers with shopping centres and little else, in these modern areas.

Elena: Very luxurious shops, and very expensive ones too.

Roberto: Then, well, you go up and there's a nice view.

Elena: But I gave you a really lovely experience!

Roberto: So, the only two things that struck me about this tower, one negatively and one positively. Inside, everywhere, you find photos of kids who won video game tournaments; there's even a throne from a video game they won, but I couldn't tell you how to spell its name.

Elena: And everyone taking pictures of these gamers!

Roberto: The best thing, though, is that at a certain point, maybe on the hundred-and-twentieth floor, there's…

Elena: …a floor made completely of transparent glass, and you can see down below! Even Roger was trembling a little, weren't you, Roger? Super brave, so much so that he and I lay down on it…

Roberto: …and we took selfies too…

Elena: …stealing the scene and the space from everyone else!

Roberto: Yes, that's true. There really are shopping centres galore: in the central area there's everything you could want and more. But I couldn't find an official Samsung store, and here they pronounce the name differently.

Elena: We asked: "Excuse me, where's the Samsung store?" "Sorry, what?" "Samsung! Samsung, Korea!" "No, I don't know it, what is it?"

Roberto: In the end we showed them the logo: "Ah, Samsung!"

Elena: No, guys! There's a big difficulty here: the language. The language is a real problem.

Roberto: I can't pronounce most of the places we'll talk about in this podcast, so, to avoid embarrassing myself…

Elena: …to avoid embarrassing ourselves!

Roberto: Another iconic place is the Royal Palace, in a rather special area: you come out of the various metro and train stations…

Elena: …and you walk along little streets lined almost entirely with food shops…

Roberto: …or shops renting a kind of traditional Korean kimono, for men and for women.

Elena: I wanted to wear one too, but he refused. A minute's silence for the sudden death of Roberto right now, because he didn't let me try on the traditional Korean dress! And that's the excuse for us to come back, also because now I've learned to get around on the metro, on the last day.

Roberto: So, you should know that we went into one of these rental shops and they sent us away because Roger, the guide dog, was with us. I told them: "Look, there's a Korean law on guide dogs". "Oh yes, yes, we know the law, but the dog would make a mess: please leave". And so we left with our tails between our legs.

Elena: The Royal Palace…

Roberto: …is a big area where, once you've paid the entrance fee, a few euros, two or three euros…

Elena: …you go in, and it's a group of small palaces…

Roberto: …that have been rebuilt from scratch in recent years.

Elena: And they're still restoring them.

Roberto: Oh yes, because this area was destroyed several times. By a fire around 1590, during the first Japanese invasion: Korean slaves, called nobi, set fire to the area because it was full of documents listing their names with the title of slave. They thought that by burning everything they might be freed. And later, during the second Japanese occupation, many of the monuments and palaces that stood here were destroyed, and only…

Elena: …very few remained. And now they're rebuilding them.

Roberto: So the shape is traditional, but they're new.

Elena: And the most appalling thing is that you can't go inside: you can only walk along the paths and, basically, take photos. In traditional Korean dress they would have been really lovely photos, just so you know!

Roberto: I was happy to have gone to the artificial pond with a little island and a sort of small temple…

Elena: …where the first radio communications started…

Roberto: …around the nineties.

Elena: And where there was a beautiful girl in traditional dress, with an umbrella too. Speaking of umbrellas…

Roberto: We went to a beautiful Starbucks. You know we love Starbucks: all over the world they have extraordinary locations. We were in a park running partly along the Han river, the famous river that crosses Seoul. Well, here there's a kind of cruise ship, a mini three-storey ship…

Elena: …which you reach by a gangway, and it's a gigantic café…

Roberto: …with a Starbucks too, and a gallery on the upper floors.

Elena: Actually, it's almost all Starbucks.

Roberto: Almost entirely, there was something else too. And there I bought a beautiful Starbucks umbrella…

Elena: …which you broke on me straight away!

Roberto: I lost the tip at the Royal Palace: it got stuck somewhere.

Elena: There you go, he broke my umbrella too! But you see, you learn things, because walking through this park we noticed signs on the ground telling you things. The paths were practically all marked with Korean road signs. We're used to the park near home, where the path is just dirt between the lawns. There, instead, the paths had cycle lanes, they were divided by direction, with yellow and white zebra crossings, arrows, stop signs; traffic lights were almost the only thing missing. And yet we were in the middle of a park where people were cycling, exercising, playing, but everything was perfectly signposted.

Roberto: Another iconic place in Seoul, as artificial intelligence suggested to me, is the Dongmyo market, I really apologise for the pronunciation: a market that started in the eighties to help elderly and poor people buy spare parts for anything, and second-hand clothes too. So a kind of flea market. We went there with great interest, because in recent years it was made famous by some YouTubers and idols who filmed themselves buying second-hand clothes, and that brought the place back into fashion. But when you go there, it's really very, very sad: things just thrown there without even being washed, full of holes, a bit dirty. We went with Marco, one of the Motto Podcast staff on this trip, into an eighties-style shop selling lamps and slightly retro things…

Elena: …and we asked the gentleman, the old man who was there: "Excuse me, we'd like to buy this lamp".

Roberto: And he answered rudely: "No, no, no".

Elena: "All right, then I want to buy this one". "No, no!"

Roberto: He didn't want us to buy anything, crazy! And then there were shops selling pipes, metal sheets, basically everything for DIY…

Elena: …watch straps! Watch straps everywhere, they sold packs full of straps…

Roberto: …or belt buckles. Crazy stuff, but all in a rather sad way, with no enthusiasm.

Elena: I saw very few people smiling around there.

Roberto: The same goes for a huge shopping centre, Techno Mart: I don't know how many floors it had, 10 or 12, entirely dedicated to electronics, cameras, video games. You find whole floors of stalls with anything to do with electronics, but all in silence.

Elena: We went there at 10 in the morning and we were the only customers. It was just us.

Roberto: We wanted to look at travel bags, suitcases, and there was nobody there. So the shop assistants from the other kiosks, so to speak…

Elena: …went to the café to call the assistants of that shop, to get them to come to us, because they were all very relaxed, taking a break.

Roberto: Very unusual was a floor dedicated to second-hand phones: there was this sort of gallery where you walked among rows and rows, lines of used phones. There was even the Nokia 3310!

Elena: Guys, it was an almost idyllic experience, the 3310! And there Roby bought himself some wireless headphones shaped like cat ears, pink and purple of course, super cool, and they even light up. Because you wanted to be in the Korean kawaii mood, sorry?

Roberto: But anyway, the area we liked most is where we are now, Insadong. This is already the second time we've come here.

Elena: It's a rather traditional neighbourhood, with little local craft shops.

Roberto: Right now we're in a building where you take the lift up to the fourth floor…

Elena: …and there's a sort of bridge…

Roberto: …that spirals downwards and connects…

Elena: …all the little shops in the area. So, walking along this bridge…

Roberto: …you can go into the little shops, of all different kinds.

Elena: Amazing!

Roberto: Right now, while we're recording the podcast, there's a man making Motto Podcast and Blindly Dancing stamps for us: we can't wait to go and pick them up!

Elena: There was even a shop where you could make any object out of plastic, because here everything can be customised. Absolutely awesome, and he didn't let me do that either!

Roberto: Anyway, what did she want to customise?

Elena: My phone case. I wanted to make it with glue.

Roberto: The phone case: it would have taken about an hour!

Elena: So what? These are experiences! Girls, please, lovers of customised things, pink stuff, cats, kittens and everything Korean and kawaii: I beg you, leave

a like and write "Elena 1, Roberto 0". Elena 1, Roberto 0! Anyway, now you've got skincare coming.

Roberto: Skincare, maybe. Now we have to go to an area a bit like Shinjuku, but smaller, where there's street food until late at night…

Elena: …and where there are loads of…

Roberto: …skincare shops, those things I don't understand, and we'll go and visit them.

Elena: There are sales on at the moment.

Roberto: We happened to buy some face masks as gifts: we saw that in Italy they cost 30 euros each, here 1 euro, 2 euros. Crazy! At the airport we saw girls with huge bags…

Elena: …stuffed full of these beauty products. And that makes me realise how little make-up I wear!

Roberto: I saw some beautiful magnet shops, and there are many craftspeople here. I bought a dalhangari, a moon jar shaped like a full moon, very, very beautiful and unusual, and a pagoda incense holder that I really treasure: it's my souvenir of Seoul and of Korea.

Elena: And what can I say, Seoul is lovely to walk around. Honestly, it's nice to get lost, because if you make all your changes on the metro you'll get lost anyway. But even if you can see, you'll get lost: I can assure you, Marco is our witness, poor thing! Getting lost outside a station, we found a sort of…

Roberto: …a real gold market, like in Abu Dhabi.

Elena: Lots of little covered areas you walk into, with many square stalls surrounded by benches where you sit down…

Roberto: …and the assistant, from the middle of the square, brings out the various objects, golden trinkets, real gold, and precious stones.

Elena: Yes. Squishies are all the rage here, these…

Roberto: …stress-relief toys that feel like touching rotten eggs, fried fish, sandwiches. Anyone with a habit of squeezing these things to relieve stress will find every kind. There are loads of…

Elena: …coffee chains…

Roberto: …and here they drink coffee in gigantic cups, cold, with ice.

Elena: Yes, with ice, that's true.

Roberto: I found my favourite chain, Dozo Coffee Reserve, where I bought some beautiful handmade ceramic cups, with a very unusual, rough texture, which I can't wait to use when I get back to Italy. To be honest, I bought loads of cups on this trip.

Elena: Yes, and I'll break them all to get my revenge! Absolutely. Listen, let's get back to telling our listeners something practical.

Roberto: Yes.

Elena: After four days in which Marco helped us get around, we reached our moment of total independence. As for the metro, here's some information: it's much easier to follow the colours marked on the floor…

Roberto: …and on the walls.

Elena: Each metro line has a colour and a number: follow the signs you find. If you can't see them, there's an app, Naver Map, which is very precise for getting around: it even tells you how many metres to walk and when to turn right or left.

Roberto: Because Google Maps doesn't work: we found that out the hard way. So everyone uses Naver.

Elena: Exactly, Naver. And on the metro it even tells you when to get off: "Get off at the next stop". That's very handy too. It takes time: Seoul isn't as intuitive as other cities, it takes longer, but in my opinion, by asking for help, it's doable. Expect to use the translator a lot, especially for food, guys, because otherwise you risk going away empty-handed!

Roberto: You have to use Google Translate or similar, it's an everyday thing: they always use it with foreigners too.

Elena: Let's say it doesn't seem a very touristy city, or one equipped for tourism…

Roberto: …having tourists almost seems like an afterthought. Even though we did see lots of Italians. It's interesting to know that we saw really very few disabled people. Maybe today, on the last day, we saw one blind person and one person in a wheelchair. Disability here is still something hidden, a bit of a source of shame for people. So much so that on the buses there are videos explaining not to touch guide dogs, that they exist, how they work and so on, but we never saw any. Samsung here is also the sponsor of Korea's guide dog school, yet we didn't see any guide dogs.

Elena: On 15 October…

Roberto: …it was National White Cane Day: along the river they held a walk where blind people walked together with sighted people and volunteers. We were supposed to go, but we got a bit lost in the streets, so we don't know how it went. The city is partly modern and partly not; let's say it's a sort of copy of big metropolises like New York or Tokyo. What I really appreciate is that, unlike other big cities, people use their phones little: on the metro, on public transport, they talk.

Elena: In other places you see everyone on their phone, here…

Roberto: …you see half on their phones, but half talking.

Elena: Some people chat. And let me tell you: this area where we are right now is really very…

Roberto: …lively, very beautiful. I like it a lot.

Elena: Seoul is beautiful, but worth another visit.

Roberto: Yes, we need to come back at a calmer pace to give you another opinion. We hope we've entertained you with our adventures. On the website mottopodcast.org, in the description of this episode, you'll find some photos and videos; we're uploading others to our YouTube channel, Mottopod: go and watch them, or check out our Instagram channels.

Elena: From Seoul I'd say that's all. In the coming weeks…

Roberto: …we'll air the special interviews with Italians abroad.

Elena: We'll have Sara Ferri of the Italian Women Korea Group, and we have…

Roberto: …an Italian who made a very special journey, and whom we bumped into here in Seoul. No spoilers…

Elena: …we can't…

Roberto: …tell you anything! And during our running around to sort out Roger's documents, next to a vet there was an Italian restaurant…

Elena: …which even won…

Roberto: …the TV programme Little Big Italy recently.

Elena: And what do you think we did? Try to guess: we ate and…

Roberto: …besides eating, we did the interview. But you'll hear more about that in the coming weeks.

Elena: That's all from Seoul. Our appointment… is to go and pick up the stamps!

Roberto: Ah yes, right, let's go and get the stamps!

Elena: Next Tuesday you'll find out whether we got them. Bye everyone!