

Journey into Kimland

by Scott Fisher

When was the last trip you took where:

- the guide wouldn't allow you to keep your passport?
- you weren't allowed to use the local currency?
- criticism of the place you traveled could get a guide into serious trouble?
- on your return you felt you had to be careful bringing back books, pins and T-shirts because they might be illegal?

All this and more can be yours with a trip to the DPRK, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Orwellian Country Names, better known as North Korea. In an age where you can get Starbucks on Thai islands, Baskin-Robbins in Saigon, Coke and McDonalds just about everywhere, it's nice to finally visit a place lacking even the knowledge of such things. The most end-of-the-earth Chinese villager knows of Michael Jordan, but in North Korea our big city Pyongyang guides had no clue who he was - until we pointed out his name on an autographed basketball in the Gifts to Kim Jong-il Museum. Then they were sure he must be someone really important. A mere basketball player? No way!



Locked Door, Kaesong, North Korea

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

But I get ahead of myself. My goal here is to present the story of a trip into what can best be described as 'Kimland'. A country totally dedicated to the Great Leader Kim Il-sung, his Juche ideology and his son the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il.

To get started I'll go back to the beginning. From where I sit typing this in Seoul the border is about an hour away. Should I want, I could get up right now and go to a restaurant, watch the news, use the Internet, drive, or go to the airport and get a flight

anywhere in the world. My guess is you can do about the same things from where you're sitting.

Across that border up there though, it's a different story. There are no restaurants for me, or for you, outside of those select few specifically approved for foreigners. The only news is state news, on both channels. The Internet is something you access via satellite from a diplomatic compound. To leave, the city or the country, you need government approval stamped into your passport or travel document.

This isn't a developmental issue. Third World countries don't shoot missiles over Japan or try to launch satellites into space. No, in the case of North Korea, the differences are all by choice. What I or most others on the planet can do, like heading over to the next town to meet a friend or tuning in a radio station, are banned or tightly regulated. The DMZ is not a border between two countries. It's the edge of the known world butting up against a nation trying desperately to keep it away.

With all this, why go to North Korea? Why go someplace so purposely unappealing to foreigners, especially Americans? For me, after living, working and studying in South Korea for the better part of a decade, North Korea had become a forbidden fruit. I'd tried to go several times, but had always been prevented because of my nationality.

That is, until this year's 'Arirang Festival'. The "Mass Gymnastic and Artistic Performance" was ostensibly in honor of departed leader Kim Il-sung's 90th birthday in April, 2002. From the timing and openness to foreigners though, even us evil Americans, a more apt description might be 'Festival to make us feel better cause the World Cup is in the South' or maybe, 'Festival to get us a lot of hard currency'.



My 'ticket' to North Korea

The first reports from across the border on the festival and the possibility of American tourists being granted visas came in late March. Some friends and I started to follow the reports closely. Maybe, just maybe, if Bush didn't piss them off again with another axis of evil comment, we could actually go. Throughout April reports indicated the North was wavering between allowing and banning Americans. Finally, by early May, it was clear we had a good chance and so six of us, all having lived, worked and known each other for years in South Korea, decided to take advantage of this rare opportunity to visit a place we'd heard about for so long.

Unfortunately, unless you're a bird, you don't just zip across the border from South Korea into North Korea. Instead you go by way of Beijing. This in order to get your travel papers, instructions from the official DPRK travel agency, a bouquet of flowers . . .

Getting Closer

Early in the visa application process we had been told that, news reports aside, a group of Americans would have very little chance of getting visas on our own. It would be better to join a group of Japanese college students planning to go at a similar time as part of one large group. Why? Apparently the travel agency hoped those in charge of granting the visas would just see one big group and not pay much attention to its components. It worked. We got the visas. But only after a lengthy, time-consuming process.

It finally started to hit home that we were actually going to North Korea in the Beijing Airport, while standing in line for Air Koryo, the national airline of the DPRK. Seeing 'Beijing-Pyongyang' up on the board, plus the North Koreans (easily identified by the Kim Il-sung pins they all wore over their hearts) standing in line had everyone in the group getting excited. The odd twang of the North Korean accent began to be discernible amongst the Japanese and Chinese conversations.

Any North Korean allowed out of the country is such an obvious elite that we were all curious about their backgrounds. The people we were looking at, after all, were most likely card-carrying members of one of the governments of the "axis of evil". I tried to feel intimidated, or at least impressed, but mostly I just felt ignored. None of the openness or gregariousness of South Koreans toward foreigners. The Northerners paid our curious looks no attention and kept to themselves. Perhaps they were used to being watched.

When we finally boarded, I felt like I was stepping back into the 1970s. From the old Russian plane, to the crew uniforms, even the clothes and hairstyles of the 'elite' North Korean passengers, everything screamed early-70s kitsch. After grabbing some reading materials I jammed myself into the tiny seat and started to see what the North had to say.

North Korean 'journalism' rarely fails to entertain, and the in-flight reading material on Air Koryo was no exception. As you can see from the headlines, the articles were models of unbiased reporting.



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The front page, of course, was mainly about the fantastic exploits of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il. But after that came plenty of space for anti-US and anti-South Korean diatribes.

The 'Profile' article to the right is the second of a two-part series on how the South's Lee Hoi-chang (leading candidate for president in the 2002 elections) is really a despicable traitor. It seems he had the temerity to suggest that the South demand reciprocity for its donations to the North.



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

When the flight attendants started the drink service, I finally got a long awaited chance to actually talk to a North Korean. Sure enough, the accent was so thick it felt like a different language at first. Even a lot of the words were different, the most important one being the name of the country. In South Korean one says "han-guk," but saying that in the North apparently causes your listener's face to curl up like they've just taken a big suck on a lemon.

This I learned about 10 seconds into my attempted conversation with the attendant. At the mention of the naughty word her face got all twitchy and our conversation was abruptly over. Odd, whenever I use the Northern term ("Chosun") in the South people just laugh at the weird foreigner. Apparently things are a bit more serious in the North.

On to Pyongyang



Main Terminal, Pyongyang International Airport

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The plane touched down a couple of hours later at Pyongyang International Airport. A giant picture of Kim Il-sung looked down over the barren tarmac as we made our way down the steps of the plane and into waiting Air Koryo buses for the 30-second trip to the terminal. Once at the terminal, even before clearing immigration, I met Mr. Baek, the man who was to be our main tour guide. He first divided us into language groups, the Japanese from our tour into one group, the two Chinese into another, the two Germans got put into our six-man English speaking group.

This brings me to my first problem - how much should I talk about our North Korean guides? Guides are your constant companions on a trip to the North, whether you want them to be or not. The problem here is that I'm going to say some things that don't reflect well on the DPRK and I worry about possibly nasty repercussions for them. Another of the people in our group wrote a series of articles on the trip for *The Korea Times* once we got back to Seoul. He and his editors decided to handle the situation by changing the names of all the North Koreans involved. I've decided to handle the problem the same way, so any North Korean names mentioned will be made up.

After Mr. Baek's brief introduction, it was time to fill out forms and, for those of us living in the South, start worrying about what exactly the North was going to stamp into our passports. A North Korean stamp, interesting rarity though it may be, would hardly prove endearing when we flew back to Seoul - with a little bad luck it could even get us deported.

After filling out the forms, I walked up to the little wooden box housing the immigration agent and nervously handed over my passport. Mr. Baek stood next to me, ready to smooth over any problems. The agent gave my passport and the forms a brief once-over, stamped a piece of paper and . . . that was it. I've had more trouble getting through toll booths than getting through North Korean immigration. Plus the North is courteous enough to follow the time-worn pariah path of stamping a piece of paper and then stapling the paper into the passport. The paper to be removed a few days later when you depart.

Everyone else then began working their way through immigration. Apparently, the whole tour was on one giant group visa and everyone had to go through one line. While the others were getting stamped in, I went over to the forlorn-looking little luggage carrier to grab my bag. Even some of the little hick towns I've flown into in the South had bigger airports than this. Clean and well-organized it was, a haven of international commerce it wasn't.

As I was waiting for the others, Mr. Baek came up and told me I was in charge of

helping him fill out the 'forbidden items' customs paperwork. I had tried showing off my Korean when we first met and, after the shock wore off, I guess Mr. Baek thought he'd put me to work. Having never been a lackey of the communist oppressors before, I decided to help him round up everyone for questioning.

We finally got everyone in the English speaking group together (the guides constantly hurrying us, while we paid them little attention, was to become a major theme of the trip) and Mr. Baek ran down the list of problematic items (books, cameras, magazines, newspapers, etc.) while I translated. Anytime you had one of the items you held up your hand so he could take a look and write it down. After a few minutes though, and still only part way down the list, Mr. Baek apparently decided he had seen enough and marched us over to customs.



Interrogation Translator

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

He handed the customs agent our forms and then motioned for us to put our bags through what appeared to be one of the oldest x-ray machines currently at work on our planet. I swear the thing must have helped in the original fight against polio. Anyway, when some of us complained about possible film damage, the clerk motioned us over to another, much newer, machine. The bags went through, they looked over us, the bags and our forms and that was it. The world's most tightly sealed country and we get through customs and immigration in less than 30 minutes. I'd half expected cavity searches, book burnings and perhaps a cattle prod. Instead it took less time than it usually takes just to walk up to the immigration line in most other international airports. There went reality again, screwing up my preconceptions.

Once out of the terminal, we were all herded over to what became our second home for the next three days - our tour bus. Freshly imported from Japan, the giant thing was actually quite nice - air-conditioning, video player, even an accursed karaoke machine.

As we boarded the bus, we were again divided. The two Chinese went in the front with their guide and some type of government, most likely Worker's Party, official. Then came the group of 10 Japanese with their guide and finally, in the back, came us with our two guides. This pattern was not to vary in the slightest for the rest of the trip.

The guides got up and took turns introducing themselves as the bus left the airport and pulled into the Korean countryside. Mr. Baek went first with another brief introduction, then he passed off to Mr. Huk. Mr. Huk was quite young and obviously somewhat nervous. It turned out he was fresh out of college and this was to be his first experience as a tour guide. He quickly identified himself as a trainee with the tour company and asked for our understanding in case he made any mistakes. Everything was nice and pleasant.

Then Mr. Baek got up again and recited what was to become a common refrain anytime something touchy was about to happen. "There is a famous English phrase that says when in Rome, one should do as the Romans do. Here in North Korea, please do as we do and you will have a nice vacation."

Threat or promise? As I pondered that idea, the reason for the little speech became apparent. "We need you to give us your passports for safe keeping and exit processing. We will return them to you when you leave." What was left unsaid, said it all. "Give us your papers or there will be trouble." Fortunately, the guide in Beijing, plus a couple of travel books, had assured us that this was normal. Plus, it's not like keeping them would have made any difference - the nearest US embassy was past about a million soldiers down in Seoul.

As the countryside passed by, we all started to tune out the guides and look out the window. It was a beautiful, clear summer day and we were all anxious to get our first look at the 'real' North Korea. The road was lined with trees and we were surrounded by green countryside. Off in the distance, villagers were working the fields, using machines to work the soil instead of the animals I'd half-expected.

The ride to Pyongyang is less than 30 minutes and, compared to Seoul and most other Asian cities, clean, green and unpolluted. The fact that we saw maybe a dozen other cars and buses during the half-hour drive obviously having something to do with that. As we approached the city, rows of bland, block-style buildings could be seen off in the distance, as well as the more famous monuments of the Pyongyang skyline ...

Pyongyang - The Monuments of Kimland

What is it with dictatorships and their odd obsession to have everything the biggest, tallest, widest and longest? Does North Korea really need the world's biggest stadium? Or a 'victory arch' larger than the one in Paris? Or, and by far the most ridiculous, the world's largest and tallest hotel?

My favorite though, had to be the *Tower of the Juche Idea*. 'Juche' is the Kim clan ideology that stresses national self-reliance and independence above all else. Rather than proving their independence by feeding their own people, they spend millions of dollars on an elaborate tower extolling the virtues of a bankrupt ideology. One guesses the irony is not lost on the international aid workers brought in to feed the starving masses of 'the nation of self-reliance'.

The first stop on any tour is designed to smack you on the head with the reality of life in Kimland. That morning, at the airport in Beijing, our group had been given a bouquet of flowers to present at the monument to North Korea's founder, the Great Leader, the Lodestar of the Revolution, the Supreme Comrade, the Glorious General and Vanquisher of the Japanese, the Founder of Juche . . . Kim Il-sung. This wasn't an option. A member of our group was expected to solemnly present the flowers, while the rest of us silently bowed our heads in respect and admiration. Failure to do so, all of the guides and guidebooks said, would cause "trouble."

On the bus to the monument, again leading in with the 'when in Rome' speech, Mr. Baek explained what a special occasion this was for us. How Pyongyang newlyweds and others embarking on a new and important step in their lives would come to the statue to pay their respects. How people in the countryside would come from far and wide for a glimpse.



Grand Monument to Kim Il-sung on Mansu Hill

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Kim Il-sung, Mansu Hill
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

As we approached the monument, the Americans in our group passed around the bouquet like it was poison. No one wanted to be the one stuck with sucking up to the Kims. Fortunately, the problem was solved, in an interesting bit of geopolitics meeting reality, when one of the Chinese members of the group volunteered to present the flowers. Now what to do about the bowing . . .

The first thing you notice as you approach the monument is simply its sheer size. Located on the top of a hill, the giant bronze statue of Kim looms powerfully over the citizens of Pyongyang below. In the statue, Kim appears with his right arm outstretched, as if exhorting his people on to some great victory. It's hard for pictures to do justice to the sheer size and weightiness of the actual figure. When you approach, even the tallest person barely comes to the bottom of Kim's feet.

Once off the bus, as we did finally approach, the guides held us back a few meters so the designated flower girl could walk up and solemnly present our gift to the statue. With that we were expected to bow our heads and observe a small moment of silence. Fortunately, the guides were too busy with their own bowing to pay us much attention.



Looking Down on Pyongyang from the Kim Statue
Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Once the moment of silence was over, we were free to wander the monument for a few minutes, with the understanding we would be respectful and refrain from approaching too closely to the actual statue. Everyone's cameras burst forth at our first approved opportunity to take pictures in the DPRK.

We could tell by the wreaths next to our flowers that others had come and gone earlier that day, but for now the place was mostly ours. Except for the 25 people in our group, the massive square stood empty. This much open space in Seoul, especially on such a beautiful day, would have been jammed with picnickers, couples, vendors, kiosks and a decent bit of pandemonium. Here though, all was quiet, peaceful and empty.



3 Dorks and a Dictator
Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Kim's statue was flanked on either side by these red banners and images of the newly freed proletariat. The carving on the images is highly detailed and meant to be evocative of the victories of Kim Il-sung and North Korean socialism.



Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

"Long Live the Banner of Marxist-Leninist-Style Proletariat Internationalism" A somewhat less than catchy expression of international solidarity among the socialist and worker's parties of the world.



Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

"Long Live General Kim Il-sung!" Also notice the person on the left who has broken his shackles.



Statue at Juche Tower

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The North Koreans are somewhat atypical in that they add the writing brush of the intellectual to the hammer and sickle of the worker and peasant. The hammer-sickle-brush emblem is quite common and can be seen on everything from statues, to pins, buildings, etc. In the center of Pyongyang (barely visible in the middle of the cityscape photo above) is a large park with giant versions of the same hammer, sickle and brush.

After 5-10 minutes of looking at the statues, the guides were pushing and prodding us to hurry and get back on the bus. We were urged to, "hurry, hurry, hurry" in a way that would be instantly familiar to anyone who's ever boarded a bus, subway or elevator in South Korea. The first bit of rushing at the airport had been cool - we'd all been ready to get the tour started. It was at this point, barely an hour in the country, that people first got irritated by the relentless pressure to move to the next place.

The next place was supposed to be a good one though, North Korea's version of the Arch of Triumph in Paris. Of course, as it was to be endlessly pointed out, theirs is taller than the one in France. The triumph in question was *North Korea's* defeat of the Japanese in 1945. Thus kicking them off the Korean peninsula and, as a side benefit, ending World War II. When asked about the US role in the war the guides mostly demurred, preferring instead to discuss the awe inspiring military exploits of General Kim.



Arch of Triumph

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The giant arch was easily visible as we made our way further into the uncrowded city. The barren streets, nearly devoid of both people and cars, are a stark contrast to the teeming masses that jam Asia's other large cities. As we got out of the bus, warned to hurry up so we didn't fall behind schedule, we were again granted the privilege of taking pictures. This time, to line up the photos, we had to walk into the middle of what seemed to be a major street - though there was hardly a car in sight. Seoul has more traffic at 3am in a freezing blizzard than this street did in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

We got our pictures, then hurriedly went back to the bus. Before we got back though, we came upon a little bonus sitting at the foot of the arch - a small souvenir stand. A chance to see what the North had to offer, plus an opportunity to talk to someone other than our guides.



Close-up, Arch of Triumph

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The stand was nothing like those in the South, where they are jammed with everything from food and drink to towels, wood carvings, dolls, and ceramics. All we had here

were a few drinks and some pins. North Koreans are really big on pins - every adult in the country wears a pin of one of the Kims over their heart, everyday, everywhere they go. These aren't for sale. Instead they have to be earned (or bought from refugees along the North Korean-Chinese border) and are taken very seriously. We asked the young guide, Mr. Huk, about this. What would happen if you forgot to put your Kim pin on one morning? He was incredulous, "How could one forget their head, or their heart, when they left in the morning!?!". The idea of forgetting to wear one's pin was apparently quite preposterous.

Still, the ones they had on sale at the Arch were interesting. A few commemorated the Arirang Festival, plus one or two sported the North Korean flag. Wearing either pin could probably get us jail time, or at the very least deported, in the South. Still though, most of us went ahead and got a few. Naturally, since all together we were buying at least 20 pins, we asked for a discount. Pretty much standard practice when buying a lot of anything in the South, or for that matter, anywhere else in Asia. Here it just got us a weird look and a refusal. The price was set by the government per pin or per drink, so how could it change? We all paid full price.

Once business was attended to, curiosity got the better of the ladies and they started asking us where we were from, where we had learned our Korean, etc. Before I could think, I said I'd learned it in South Korea, again, like on the plane, using the South Korean term. The same sour expression at what must be a very non-PC term twisted the woman's face. Before we could get much further though, the guides came and hustled us off. No more holding up the rest of the group while we selfishly talked to people. We had to hurry so we could go see one of the true treasures of the world - the *Tower of the Juche Idea*. A tower honoring Kim Il-sung and his philosophy, and of course the tallest or roundest or most whateverest in the world. It just couldn't be missed!

Tower of the Juche Idea



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The *Tower of the Juche Idea*, with its flaming top, stands like a beacon along the eastern shore of the Taedong River in central Pyongyang. The tower serves as a chance for the North to begin educating visitors not just on the greatness of Kim Il-sung, but also on *Kim Il-sungism*, as Juche is also called.

This "leading light of world philosophy" extolls the virtues of the independent North Korean way of socialism. By stressing strength through independence and self-reliance, it's thought the people of the North can be inoculated against the evil material temptations of the outside world. "We may be poor, but at least we have our dignity. Unlike those money grubbing sellouts in the South." That kinda thing.

The tower itself offers great views of the city and surrounding area. The sky was crystal clear the day we went and you could see forever. That is, once we paid the extra \$10 to go to the top.



Juche Tower - riverside view

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



View south from Juche Tower

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The Yanggakdo International Hotel is the tall building in the foreground. It was to become our home for the next few days.

What I'll always remember from my visit to the tower though, is not the view, but rather my first chance to 'ditch' the guides and the rest of the group. When the bus pulled up to the base of the tower we were once again broken into our language groups, then this time we were paired with a new guide from among the staff at the tower.

In what was to become a pattern over the next few days at all the larger monuments, a 'specialist guide' for that place would come out and give the tour while one of our normal guides provided the translation. They would also answer any of our questions, either through the guide, or, once they got over the shock of foreigners speaking Korean, directly from us.

It was at the Juche Tower that I first began to realize being able to speak Korean was going to add an interesting dimension to the trip (and as an added bonus prove somewhat unsettling to Mr. Huk, our rookie guide).

The tower guide started with a walk around the base of the tower, extolling both its virtues as well as those of Juche's founder. We learned how the different levels and various designs making up the tower all correspond to some aspect of Kim Il-sung's life.



View east from Juche Tower

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



View west from Juche Tower

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The hulking, unfinished frame of the 100-story, 3000-room Ryugyong Hotel dominates the skyline in this direction. Originally designed to be the world's largest hotel (?!?!), construction was halted in the early 90s when the government either ran out of money or finally realized this was a pretty dumbass idea.

It was kind of interesting, but the beautiful location of the tower, right along the river, ended up stealing the show. As the guide wound up her presentation someone asked if we could go down and get some pictures from along the river. This request was granted and everyone, including our normal guides, headed down to the riverbank.

Except me. I hung back and tried to strike up a conversation with the tower guide. At first she was reluctant, saying her English wasn't very good. I persisted and she finally relented, once the idea of a white person speaking Korean worked its way past her preconceptions.

We started by talking about her job and whether a lot of people were coming for the Arirang Festival. As we talked, she was walking me around the corner of the building, out of earshot of the others.

Once we were away from the others, the questions came pouring out. "What's life like in the South? Why do you live there? What's it like living there? What about your students (I'd told her I teach at a university) - what are they like? What do people in the South say about the North?" The woman was full of curiosity about life across the border, barely two hours south of where we were standing.

I tried my best to answer, as we both kept looking over our shoulders to see if the others were coming. I felt really sorry for this lady. All she was doing was asking some basic questions about life in another country, but she was worried about getting into trouble. I'm going to wonder for a long time if I should even be writing about her . . .

Our conversation lasted about 10 minutes. Mostly with her asking questions about the outside world, especially the South. I found it odd that she was asking an American so many questions about South Korea, but she just seemed curious about what life was 'really' like on the other half of the Korean peninsula. As a guide, she'd had much more interaction with outsiders than the average DPRK citizen. I guess this inkling of forbidden knowledge is what drove her to take a chance and try to learn a bit more about the outside world.

Later, as I met and tried to talk with other people in a similar way, I realized how unique this woman was. First, she allowed herself to wander away from the group with me, knowing full well others would see, if not hear. Second, she was brimming with questions and curiosity. Something I never got from anyone else the whole trip. Finally, once we were out of earshot, she totally dropped the endless *Kim is great* droning in favor of just having a 'normal' conversation. Every other time I was able to pull someone aside it just ended up in a fit of ideological proselytizing. Perhaps the independence of the Juche Tower had worn off on her . . .

When we saw the others coming back, she returned to telling me how great Kim was, but still got a weird look from Mr. Huk, our young guide.

Once everyone got back, we paid our \$10 and headed to the top of the tower. A couple of ear pops in the elevator later and we were at the top. The view was fantastic, as you can (hopefully) see from some of the pictures above. While looking over the city Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk pointed out our next stop - the Yanggakdo International Hotel.

As for my former conversation partner, I think she felt nervous about what she had just done. She kept telling our guides how nice it had been to be able to talk to a foreigner in Korean and enlighten him directly on the virtues of the *Great Leader*. I played along, thanking her profusely for all her information and tried to throw out a couple of positive comments on Kim and Juche to make her look good. After a while, it seemed Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk bought the cover story and were satisfied nothing untoward had happened.

I'm going to wonder about that lady for a long time.



View from river side - Juche Tower

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Yanggakdo International Hotel

"Was the hotel ok? Did you have electricity? Water? Food? Were the rooms bugged? Could you leave?" People are always curious about our hotel in ways I've never heard after trips to other countries. The hotel, while far from luxurious, was fine. Though the anti-US and anti-Japanese photo displays in the lobby were less than welcoming.

The hotel, complete with meeting rooms, restaurants, a nightclub, and a revolving bar at the top, is located on a small island in the center of the Taedong River. Relatively isolated, with the only connections to the rest of the city being two bridges, the hotel seemed a perfect spot to house foreigners. Though free to walk the grounds, any attempt to leave the island was regulated by our guides and the guards on the premises. We could leave - as long as we had permission and went with one of our guides.



Yanggakdo International Hotel

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The rooms were big, with incredible views stretching from the heart of Pyongyang to the distant countryside. They had beds, hot water, fridges (though no rip-off mini-bars in the People's Republic) and, for all we know, bugs. Any time we talked in the rooms, we tried to keep things general, especially avoiding direct criticism of the Kim clan. Were they bugged? I don't know. Could we have gotten into trouble for saying something negative about the Kims? Again, I don't know. But there's something about the pervasive presence of big brother in the North that discourages regime commentary until the voyage home.

That first day, after we arrived, the guides oversaw check-in and divvied us up, two per room. They were very clear about who was going into which room - no switching once we got our keys.

Before we were allowed to go up to our rooms though, we first had to decide which tickets we wanted for the Arirang show. We'd seen signs and heard from the guides how great it was, and were looking forward to seeing it in person.

The hitch was, which tickets? They ranged in price from \$50 to \$300. Our travel agent in Beijing had warned us we'd have to choose shortly after arrival.



View north - Juche Tower in the distance

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

He'd also been kind enough to tell us there was little difference between the \$100 and \$50 seats, and that both were fine. At the time, we'd discussed it and decided on the cheap seats - \$50. Here in the North though, the guides weren't so helpful. They'd obviously sized us up as lower-priced buyers, so they split our German and American group away from the Japanese and, after a brief explanation, urged us to get the \$100 tickets.

Front row at a football game? Okay, maybe I'll pay \$100. To see the Arirang Festival? Not gonna happen. A look of consternation passed over Mr. Baek's and Mr. Huk's faces when we said we wanted the \$50 seats. "Yes, that's possible, but I think there aren't many Americans that come here. If you only buy the \$50 seats then everyone will see you and maybe you'll embarrass your country."

Of all the things I've done that could be considered embarrassing to America (not that many, by the way - any time something weird happens I say I'm French . . .), this one seemed pretty benign. Our German comrades concurred and we stuck with \$50 a ticket, much to the chagrin of our guides.

The more I think about it, the more I get the impression the guides were judged by how well they upsold the Arirang tickets. Obviously, the more high-priced seats, the better. For some time after this, they seemed downright surly. I don't think it helped that the Japanese group also went with the cheap seats.

Once we got the tickets, we were finally free to proceed up to our rooms for a couple of hours of free time. All of this with the admonishment to be back down to Dining Room Two by 6 o'clock sharp for dinner. After that was the big event - the Arirang Festival.



Morning view SW of hotel - power plant smokestack visible in the distance

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Morning view NW of hotel - Ryugyong Hotel visible in the distance

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Arirang Festival

I'd heard plenty about this show before I came and, frankly, had been a little skeptical. A bunch of people flipping around colored squares? How impressive could that be?

To put it mildly, my expectations were blown away. The show was spectacular, and somewhat eerie, all at the same time. If Orwell had put a stadium scene in 1984, this would have been it. How could 100,000 people, as everyone claimed anyway, all work together in such perfect harmony? Mr. Huk, who sat next to me throughout the performance and who always seemed brimming with fervor to show nonbelievers the *one true way*, used the beauty of the performance to fill my ear, endlessly, with the utter, undeniable greatness of North Korea. For him, this many people working together in lockstep precision was a sign that he and his countrymen were of one pure heart, of one pure mind, working together to fulfill the ideals of the Kims and Juche.

"The people who come here for the performance are from all walks of life. Workers, students, soldiers, everyone who comes here is a volunteer. No one is paid. They do it because they love our country. The Arirang Festival shows how we can work together as one to achieve anything we desire, no matter who stands against us."

Mr. Huk was polite enough not to point out the 'who' in this sentence meant me, or more specifically, my government. And, of course, the puppet government down in the South where I was living.

The spectacle was something I'll never forget, though perhaps not for the reasons Mr. Huk and his countrymen intended. The show was so precise as to be robotic. No one outside the group, everyone buried within it. All done with a flair and focus that was chilling to behold. The model of mass unity that was being held up as proof of greatness and independence smacked of mindlessness. Everyone in the performance was human, with their own hopes, dreams and desires. This however, was something to be eliminated, not tolerated or encouraged. These were things that still had to be rooted out in an effort to build the utopian, Juche-centered society. The zeal in Mr. Huk's voice spoke not of a country, but of a cult.



Daytime view of the Arirang Festival stadium

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

We pulled up to the stadium after a beautiful evening drive along the Taedong River. Our bus dropped us off at the stadium, having passed hundreds of people along the way heading to join in or watch the show. The atmosphere was very friendly, with people smiling and waving to us in the tour bus.

As we walked up to the stadium, we passed a small group of souvenir stands selling Arirang posters and t-shirts, North Korean stamps, and even pizza. Of course, the guides told us we had no time to browse. We had to, "hurry, hurry, hurry" to get inside before the show started. They promised to allow us a few minutes to shop after the performance.

As we walked into the giant stadium (of course one of the largest stadiums in the world, with a reputed capacity of 150,000), I was towards the front, looking for our '3rd Class' seats. The signs pointed up into the crowd and that's where I started to go, only to be stopped by Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk. Instead, we were taken down to great seats right near the front, in a separate area roped off for tourists. Our travel agent in Beijing had been right - the \$50 seats were fine and anything more would have been a waste of money. From the stadium signs though, we were nowhere near the 3rd-class section. Best guess, unless we had bought the top of the line \$300 tickets, we would have been in exactly the same section.

As we took our seats, the mammoth size of the stadium became apparent. I've been to dozens of games at the University of Michigan's 110,000 person stadium and this place was noticeably larger.

People were spread out getting ready on the field down below, as well as on the opposite side. Fortunately, we had a few minutes to take pictures and look around before the performance.



Taking our '3rd class' seats

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

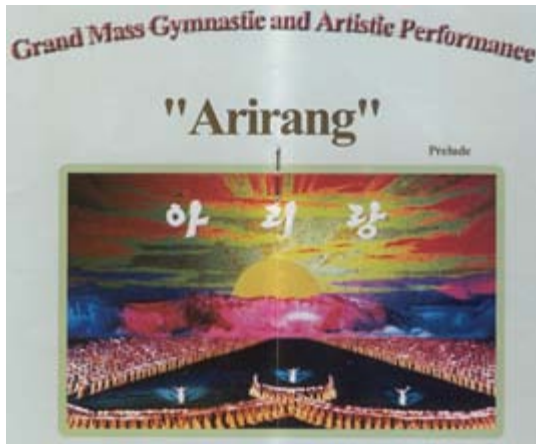


Warming up

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The sights unfolding across from us were amazing. The flowers you see in the picture above are part of one large image - a collage formed by 50,000 people holding large, colored cards above their heads. With a shout from the director, a low roar would roll across the stadium as people flipped their cards to make the next image. It was like a giant slide show, only with the pictures being formed simultaneously by 50,000 people. A different image rolled across the entire far-side of the stadium every couple of seconds, all coordinated with thousands of other performers on the stadium floor. This was going to be something special . . .

Prelude



We had been given a festival program as we arrived. The event kicked off with a 'grand prelude', followed by four acts, each with several scenes, and then ended with a grand finale. The whole thing was scheduled to last over an hour.

With some cajoling from the guides, we all took our seats. I had Mr. Huk on my right ready to whisper the meanings of the images and scenes as they unfolded. With a hush the stadium went dark and the performance began.



'Dawn' of the performance

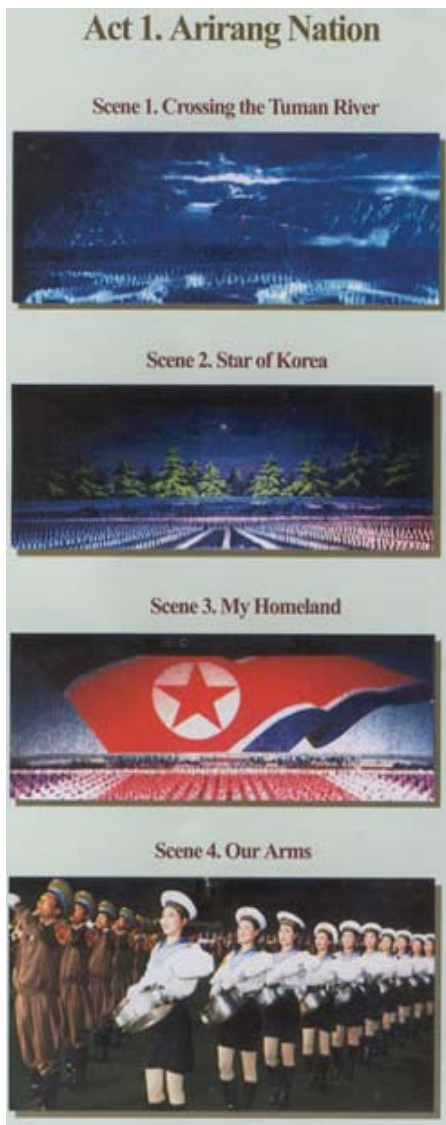
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



The large characters over the sun spell out 'Arirang'

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Act 1



Official Arirang Program
all program scans by Scott

The lighting, music, pictures and performers were minutely choreographed, with the images seeming to flow across the stadium. The only problem I had was trying to decipher what Mr. Huk was saying, while still keeping my eyes on the performance.

When he told me it took 100,000 people to put on the show I didn't believe him at first. As the performance unfolded, the masses of people marching in and out erased all doubt.



Group of child performers



Stretching high

Photos courtesy Thomas St. John



The words are 'Star of Chosun'. Three guesses who that is . . .

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The was probably the most amazing scene. A wind seemed to rustle the trees, while above, the star appeared to glimmer and shine. All done by people holding up cards.



Kim Il-sung

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon




North Korean flag, with female performers dancing below.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Act 2

Act 2. Arirang of Army-centred Policy

<p>Scene 1. Oh, Shining Moon of My Country</p>  <p>A stage scene with a large, glowing yellow moon in the sky and performers in white costumes on a blue stage.</p>	<p>Scene 3. Drumbeats in My Country</p>  <p>A stage scene with performers in white costumes arranged in a circular formation, playing drums.</p>
<p>Scene 2. Laugh Heartily</p>  <p>A stage scene with performers in colorful costumes (red, white, and blue) standing in a line.</p>	<p>Scene 4. People's Army</p>  <p>A stage scene with a large red flag and a white star in the center, with performers in white costumes below.</p>

Nationalism and the exalted position of the North Korean army were key underlying themes to the whole performance (if not the entire trip) and in the second act, *Arirang of Army-centered Policy*, they burst to the fore. Soldiers entered and dominated the stadium floor, while martial images filled the stands.



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Beside me, Mr. Huk could barely contain himself. His enthusiasm to educate me on the wonders of the Glorious People's Army had him on an emotional high. The voice in my ear became louder and more insistent, he grabbed my arm for emphasis, all the while filling me in on the special meanings of each scene.

Notice how similar the flag is to the giant sculptures at the Kim statue. The phrase here roughly translates as "Let's be able to take on the world".



Roughly translated as 'together with the army'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Photos courtesy Thomas St. John



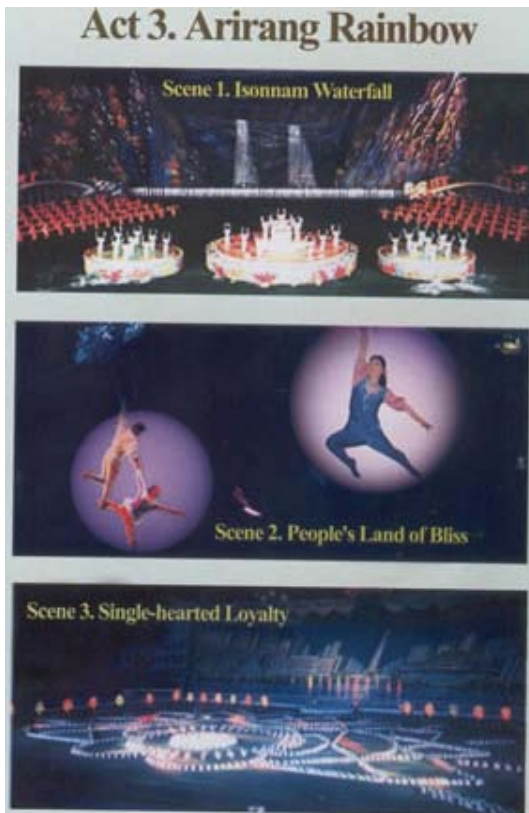
The Military and The People

Notice the soldiers having bayonet practice on the stadium floor. The lights flashing off hundreds of shining bayonets were one of the more memorable scenes of the show.



Machine gun unit with female soldiers parading in the foreground.

Act 3



Scan of official program by Scott

The third act was devoted to political and economic messages, many stressing the current and future development of North Korean society. Mr. Huk delighted in telling me of the great advances made by DPRK researchers in economics, science, agriculture, and politics.



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

'The Dawn of the World' - here represented by land reform. True, in that the post-WWII land reform policy of Kim Il-sung helped gain popular support for the new government.



'Modernization and Information of the People's Economy'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

For some reason the women dancing at the bottom of this picture are all holding tennis rackets . . .



'Science and Technology to the Highest Level!'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Ironic statement for a country that bars its citizens from international travel, non-government broadcasts, Internet access . . . It's so afraid of the Internet polluting the masses that DPRK official and quasi-official websites are run from Japan and China.



'Comrades are the Party's Foundation'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

A traditional folk dance common in both the North and the South. This scene would be familiar to anyone who's visited a folk village or traditional performance in the South. The colorful swirls are made by strips of fabric hung from the hats of the dancers. Very long movements are accomplished by standing on someone's shoulders, as shown.

Act 4 and Finale

Act 4. Arirang of Reunification



Finale. Arirang of Prosperity



Scan of official program by Scott

The fourth act and grand finale focused on Korean unification and the prosperity that would ensue, throughout the peninsula, should such a glorious event ever come to pass.

When I told Mr. Huk that some South Koreans oppose unification because they worried it would cost too much to bring the North up to their level, he looked at me like I'd slapped him. He had no comprehension of this idea whatsoever. Instead, to him, I was just being a rude prick for saying such a ridiculous thing. After thinking about it for a moment, he told me those people couldn't be true Koreans, instead they must be (and here he threw me an accusing look) US or Japanese lackeys.

The unification scenes contained lots of references to Mt. Baekdu, an important place in both South and North Korean (where it's thought to be *Dear Leader* Kim Jong-il's birthplace) mythos.

The mountain is located in the North along the border with China. It's not uncommon for South Korean tourists to travel to the Chinese-side of Mt. Baekdu to experience the mythic mountain.



'Flowers of Mt. Baekdu'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

If you look closely, you can see heads sticking out from behind the placards in the close-up above.



Photos courtesy Thomas St. John

The mountains and young dancers symbolize the bright future of Korean unification.



Finale - a peaceful world

Photos courtesy Thomas St. John



'Shining Forever - Arirang'

Photos courtesy Thomas St. John

The final scene, with thousands of performers crowding the floor of the stadium while the crowd gives them a well-deserved standing ovation.

The applause was barely beginning to die down before Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk were hurrying us out of the stadium. No talking about the spectacle we had just witnessed, instead it was, "go, go, go." They dangled a carrot this time though, reminding us we would have some free time to shop at the souvenir stands.

We fought our way through the crowds to the outside, where Mr. Baek was generous enough to offer us 10 minutes to wander around. After some debating, we finally got him to push it to 15 minutes. Which, in retrospect, might have been the most stunning event of the entire evening.

The pickings at the various stands were interesting, but pretty slim. Some beautiful posters of the Arirang Festival, a huge variety of DPRK stamps, and some T-shirts so poorly made we were warned to frame them rather than wear them. The food vendors had mostly closed up shop - forcing me to miss my chance for pizza and a Coke in Pyongyang.

Something nearly as odd was about to happen though. When I bought several sets of the Arirang posters, an amazing event took place - not a discount, but free wrapping, plus a bag! Mr. Baek had worked with me on the purchase and was both pleased and surprised at the fantastic deal. Getting something extra when making a bulk purchase - the evil ways of the capitalists were at last infiltrating the Juche bastions!

As our 15 minutes wound down, everyone straggled back to the appointed meeting place for the walk to the bus and ride back to the hotel. Our first day in North Korea had come to an end, but tomorrow held what promised to be one of the most interesting parts of the whole trip - a visit to the DMZ.

DMZ

The day, as did all our days in North Korea, started early. We were down in Dining Room 2 by 7am for a quick breakfast, then onto the bus for the three-hour trip *south* to the DMZ. Most of us had visited the DMZ from South Korea, and the chance to visit from the opposite side was one of the more intriguing parts of the whole trip.

The idea of being only an hour away from my home in downtown Seoul, yet having no way of getting there without first flying to China, seemed surreal. I was going to be within 15 minutes of one of my best friend's houses, yet trying to go there would cause an international incident and probably get me shot. Even trying to make a call on the cell phone I had smuggled along expressly for this purpose could have gotten me into a lot of trouble.



Morning Commute

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart

As we were leaving Pyongyang that morning, we could see people heading off to work, many by bus and trolley, but also quite a few on foot. Here you can see groups of people following the railroad tracks out of town to their work sites.

The picture here was taken surreptitiously. The guides weren't too happy about us taking pictures of things they thought might embarrass their country and this is a good example. A few seconds after taking this photo, Mr. Baek clued in and Brian was told to put his camera away.



Road to DMZ

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Once outside Pyongyang, we got our first extended chance to examine the North Korean countryside. For the most part it looked poor and treeless, with most towns located well off the main road. Even on a beautiful summer day, few people were visible working in the fields, or even walking around.

The road itself was basically empty. Anyone in need of an extended nap on a large, flat surface could do a lot worse than curling up in the middle of the highway south of Pyongyang.

There were several obvious checkpoints along the way. For the most part we drove right by, but you could see the soldiers manning the checkpoints writing something down as we passed.

About halfway down, we pulled over to a rest area and, while talking to the roadside guard, I watched as he jotted down the license numbers of passing vehicles. When I asked why he was writing down the info, he just gave me a weird look and went about his business. I guess car theft is not a big problem in North Korea.



Notice the barren hillsides

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Never saw many people either . . .

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



'Long Live the Glorious *Juche* Ideology!'

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Propaganda signs praising the Kims, *Juche*, and following government directives (e.g. "*The Government Decides and the People Act!*") could be seen along many roads in North Korea, even far out in the countryside.

As we approached 'the world's most heavily defended border', our guides stepped up the warnings about not taking pictures without permission, staying with the group and listening to the on-site guides. The eerie part was, though we were in the middle of a million soldiers, how quiet and peaceful the surroundings were, just like when you approach from the South. Everything is so well hidden, at least when tourists are about, you would never know you're surrounded by two giant armies.

As we got closer to the border, I kept sneaking looks at my cell phone to see if we were within range of South Korean service towers. With the guides milling around the bus, this probably wasn't too bright, but I figured the risk was outweighed by a chance to make an 'illegal' phone call. So far, no connection. Maybe I just had to get closer . . .

Finally, the bus pulled into a small compound and we were able to step out onto the North's side of the DMZ. To the right was a small building with a meeting room and gift shop (the South actually has a duty free shop on their side), to the left was a row of trees and restrooms, while to our front was a narrow road that led first into the actual DMZ, and then into the South.

I quickly headed for the restrooms to hide out and give my phone another try. *Memo to SK Telecom: Your service is weak! A friend using another carrier was able to get a signal and put a call through to his girlfriend. I was left holding a hunk of useless plastic.*



Large road sign heading to DMZ

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

After risking arrest for trying to make phone calls, we headed back to the group, narrowly avoiding getting caught by one of the guides as he entered the restroom. When we got back to the group, we were herded into a small meeting room for a briefing on the situation in the DMZ and JSA ("Joint Security Area", also the name of a popular movie in the South). Gathered around a large topographical model of the area, we were given a little background on what the JSA is for (meetings and exchanges between the North and South, plus the North and the UN/US), its layout, and where we would be going on our tour. I was happy to see we would be going right up to the border, even entering the same UN building straddling the dividing line that most of us had visited from the South.



Getting our briefing before heading into the DMZ

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Dividing line between North and South

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



View south from inside DMZ

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The pictures above were taken from the steps of the main North Korean building overlooking the Joint Security Area (also sometimes referred to as *Panmunjom*). The large building opposite is in South Korea. The soldiers in the gray uniforms at the top are South Korean, those in the brown uniforms below are from the North. The blue UN buildings are half in the North, half in the South and are used for meetings between the two sides. I'm standing about an hour from my home in downtown Seoul and less than 15 meters from the South. Going across that line is illegal and would probably get me shot. The only way home was via China.



Close-up North-South Divide

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

You can see here how close the guards get to one-another. Later, I asked one of the guards with us on the bus if he ever said anything to the Southern soldier.

"No!"

Not even swearing at them?

"No! It's against the rules."

I'm curious how truthful that is. At this range, who would ever know?

A key point of the picture to the left is the guard standing in the center. He's there to keep us from making a quick dash across the line to defect, something that actually happened during the Cold War, when a Soviet tourist ran across in a hail of gunfire.



Taking a picture of us taking photos . . .

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The soldiers on the South Korean side seemed very interested in what we were doing. If you visit the DMZ from the South, then you have troops from the North taking your picture and looking you over. Now, on the opposite side, it was time to have the South check us out and take photos.

One of the people in our group was wearing a South Korean soccer jersey (the World Cup had started a few days before) and that *really* got the attention of the South Korean guards. The only way he could have gotten that shirt was by going, very recently, to South Korea. They paid so much attention to him he was actually pretty worried something would happen when we got back to the South.

After being given plenty of time (for a change!) for pictures from the outside, we were taken into one of the blue buildings to see where North-South meetings actually take place. It's the exact same building you visit when you go on the trip from the South. The only difference is there are two North Korean guards standing in front of the South's door to keep you from defecting!



Inside the main building where North-South and North-UN discussions are held.

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

While in the room, you are allowed to wander freely from one side to another, in effect walking back and forth between North and South Korea. Were that it was so easy all of the time.

You know where the dividing line is because a long table goes across the exact center of the room. Down the exact center of the table is a thick microphone cord that shows the precise boundary between the two sides. Everything seems to be measured right down to the last centimeter, with both sides getting exactly the same space, furniture, microphone setup, etc.

While inside, you can have a seat at the table where the delegates sit during meetings. You are also treated to the spectacle of South Korean guards peering into the building - just like North Korean guards do when you take the tour from the South. Again, they were mainly interested in the guy wearing the South Korean soccer jersey. Since the windows are basically soundproof, any ideas of talking through them were out of the question.

After a few minutes looking around and snapping pictures inside the building, we were hustled out and taken back into the main North Korean building overlooking the area. That's where we were able to get a lot of these pictures. That's also where Mr. Huk and I nearly got into a fight . . .



Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



SK soldiers checking us out.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Main North Korean building facing the border in the JSA (notice the four cameras)
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

- on an interesting side note, the North Korean soldier pictured here to my right, who served as our main guide in the JSA, is one of the higher-ranking NK soldiers in the area. I've caught a glimpse of him on the news several times since then, whenever there's a story about the DMZ/JSA and Panmunjom.

The building I'm standing in front of, above, is directly opposite the large South Korean building pictured further above, in the photos looking south. The picture to the right is from one of the visitor's rooms inside the North's building.

Why is this important? What does it have to do with me nearly getting into a fight with Mr. Huk? The key is to show that the building I'm standing in front of is actually a real building.

The first time I took the DMZ tour from the South (in 1992), and on subsequent tours up until the mid-90s, the US soldier leading the tour would tell everyone the North's was not a real building. Instead it was "a facade designed to look large and impressive, but is in reality only a frame a few feet (one meter) thick." As the only view of the building at that time was from the direct front, there was no way to confirm the thickness. Unless you visited the North . . .

While looking over the area from the balcony, I told Mr. Huk that story, about how we weren't actually standing in a 'real' building.



The two Kims watch over the main visitor's room overlooking the JSA
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

His reaction was immediate and will forever serve as my personal definition of 'venomous'.

"Now you can see the lies! The lies of the American imperialists and their South Korean puppets!"

He literally spat this out. Foam flew from his lips he was so incensed.

"Someday you will discover the truth about everything! They only tell you lies! Lies!"

"Ah, yes Mr. Huk, there are many lies in the world. I hope I'm there when you discover the truth also."

I decided to have a little fun. My words had him bug-eyed with rage. Veins popped from his forehead.

"Me?! It is YOU who needs to discover the truth. I already know the truth!"

"There are many truths. I hope we are together when they are all discovered."

At this point he'd lost self-control and was right in my face, screaming in a frustrated combination of English and Korean.

"You don't know what you are talking about! WE know! YOU don't know!"

"Yes, and there are some things we know that you don't. Hopefully I can be there when you find them out."

By this point our conversation had begun to attract a lot of attention from the other guides. Even if you didn't know both languages, it was very obvious something heated was taking place. That was when Mr. Baek, the more experienced guide, walked between us and urged everyone to head back inside and get on with the tour. Eye-contact broken, and reminded of 'The Schedule', Mr. Huk walked back in, obviously upset at his failure to convince me of all the lies.

The main thing I took away from the whole episode, was why would the US Army guides give the North this kind of ammunition in the first place?

As we filed back into the room pictured above right, Mr. Huk was telling the other guides my story of 'the lies' told on the South's tour. Though they found it interesting, none had quite the fervor as young Mr. Huk. The main DMZ on-site guide and I had already had a couple of brief conversations and, after he listened to Mr. Huk, seemed to find my story interesting and, for some reason, evidence of some sort of trustworthiness. After a couple more questions about the South, he asked me to sign their guestbook. Which, from the way it came about, was not something he normally asked.

At this point one of our normal guides, the one most obviously a Worker's Party official assigned to overlook things, warned everyone to be careful. *"You never know what an American might write in that thing."* When the DMZ guide went ahead and led me over to the book, a little crowd of guides and soldiers gathered around to make sure I wasn't writing anything negative. I decided against the 'down with your idiot dictator' line and instead wrote something about hoping for a quick and peaceful unification. The fact that I wrote it in Korean (and thankfully didn't make any stupid spelling mistakes) went over very well. The main DMZ guide gave me a pat on the back and a handshake. And then kept talking to me about the South and the US presence there.

"When do you think the US soldiers will leave so we can have unification?"

"Well, the South's a democracy. I guess when they vote to kick us out we'll leave."

"Still, doesn't the fact they haven't done that yet show you how they really are American lackeys?"

"Either that or it shows they don't want you invading them again."

This last comment got me an amused smirk. It was obvious we both wanted to continue the conversation in a less crowded setting, but for now it was not to be. This guy, probably in his mid-40s, had obviously had a lot more exposure to the outside world than any of our, much younger, guides. I found out later that guards along the border could, most likely very secretly, pick up South Korean broadcasts. Unfortunately 'The Schedule' once again intruded and we had to move on, negating what would have been an interesting conversation.



Plaque commemorating Kim Il-sung's visit to the JSA, shortly before he died

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The other part of our DMZ tour included visits to the building where the armistice ending the Korean War was signed, plus a visit to a small museum presenting the North's view on the war and subsequent life along the DMZ. All this was led by the main DMZ guide, with translations provided by our normal guides.

This part of the tour was interesting for getting a clearer view of the North's take on the war and its role in it. The museum allowed them to put their own perspective on the war, who started it, how it ended and what's taken place since.



Korean War peace talks building
- the red sign says the place was graced by the presence of Kim Jong-il.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The wackiest idea here is that the US and South have erected a giant, unscalable wall entirely across their side of the DMZ. Oddly, I have yet to see this mysterious wall during numerous motorcycle drives near the DMZ, nor during my 10 years in Korea.

Now why would the North want to tell its people there's a wall between them and the South . . .



Table where ceasefire was finally signed

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The 'American imperialists are to blame for everything bad' line was laid on pretty thick during this part of the tour. Always with the aside that it was the US military they hated, not the American people. As if the US military is not made up of American people.

Most of us had lived in the South long enough to have heard both sides, but for the Japanese and Chinese on the tour there was nothing to balance the North's version. We got some very nasty looks on this part of the trip.



Stele commemorating the signing of the ceasefire in July, 1953

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The translation is quite interesting:

It was here on July 27, 1953 that the American imperialists got down on their knees before the heroic Chosun people to sign the ceasefire for the war they had provoked June 25, 1950.



North Korean Flag

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Here you can see the ceasefire agreement and flags of the North Korean and UN armies (no sign of a Chinese flag for their army). On the left is the North Korean flag and the ceasefire agreement in Korean, while on the right is the UN flag and the agreement in English.

The key is to look carefully at the two flags. The guides enjoyed pointing out that even though it had been 50 years since the war ended, the colors of the North Korean flag hadn't ran and were still perfect. Whereas the colors of the blue UN flag had dissolved into a mottled brown.

"We have never opened the glass cases in all the 50 years they have been sitting here. It shows the strength and true character of our flag."



United Nations Flag

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

A large part of the museum is devoted to showing US imperialism, US fault for the Korean War, US fault for the ongoing division of Korea, US fault for the sun getting in your eyes one a bright day, US fault for the rain being too wet . . . you get the idea.

It was interesting to watch our two guides during all this. Mr. Huk, the younger guide on his first visit, was obviously getting rather worked up. He kept trying to, "show us the truth." Mr. Baek, the older guide, mostly seemed to be concerned with moving us along and keeping to 'The Schedule'.



Museum Tour

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Above you can see the guide pointing out evidence of US aggression, infiltration, etc. The pictures at the left are of Americans being captured (how did the photographers know when to be there?). No mention is made of the NK tunnels under the DMZ.



American 'infiltrators'
Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Mention is made of recent joint NK-US efforts to locate the remains of MIA US soldiers. Mr. Huk was very proud of this act of kindness and was quite surprised (and then decided not to believe me) when I told him the US was forced to pay for this service.



Ax from the infamous 'Tree-Cutting Incident'
Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

This is the "military ax" the North took from a group of American soldiers attempting to cut down a tree in the DMZ in August, 1976. The incident gets a lot of attention on tours from both the North and South. The Americans were attacked and two killed by a group of North Korean soldiers who used the ax and club shown above to hack and beat the US soldiers to death. The Southern tour stresses the brutality of the North, the North stresses the 'illegality' of the tree-cutting.



Close-up of North Korean soldier

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Close-up of South Korean soldier

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Notice the North Korean soldier, even on a hot summer day, wearing a long-sleeve winter uniform. While his Southern counterpart, apparently wearing a helmet borrowed from his big brother, gets to keep cool in short-sleeves and shades. If you look closely you can also see the Kim Il-sung pin over the heart of the North Korean.

As the tour wound down it made everyone look forward to revisiting from the Southern side, especially to see if they were still saying we had been in a 'fake' building (they aren't). I also got a chance to say good-bye to the DMZ guard/guide I had been able to talk to during our visit. We both promised to resume our conversation again at a more propitious time. After that it was back on the bus for the short trip to the beautiful, traditional city of Kaesong.

Traditional Kaesong and the Koryo Museum

Kaesong, located just a short trip from the DMZ, was once the capital of the whole country, back during the Koryo (the origin of the word "Korea") dynasty. At the time it was famous for artistic development, Buddhism, and the beauty of its women. Though not many traditional areas remain, the North has preserved and restored a small area of buildings that now mainly serve as restaurants. The sudden trip back into a quieter, more traditional Korea, especially after the modern mess of the DMZ, makes for a radical change of atmosphere.

The buildings shown below are only 15-20 minutes from the DMZ, but seem a world away. The lunch was done in a traditional style with everyone sitting on the floor, while dishes served by women in traditional *hanbok* gradually filled up the tables in front of us. The only thing that seemed out of place (other than us) was the meat. Having dined on dog meat numerous times in the South, most of us agreed that we probably weren't eating beef. Squeamish diners beware - nothing says you're eating dog like having little hairs poking out of the fatty parts of the meat.



Walking through a small, traditional part of Kaesong to our restaurant.

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Kaesong rooflines

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Sitting inside the old, restored house, I couldn't believe I was in the North, especially so close to the border. It reminded me of similar historic areas in the South.

After the meal, questionable though the meat may have been, and a short walk through the area, it was easy to imagine this place becoming quite popular with South Korean tourists should the border ever reopen. Especially given Kaesong's reputation as a well-heeled place of wine, women and song.

Of course, based on Kaesong's fame as the home of beautiful *kisaeng* (kind of a Korean geisha), I would also bet that parts of this area could become a well-known red light district, post-reunification. Perhaps a more traditional, upscale version of Seoul's well-known Chongnyangni and Miari red light areas.

To the right, you can see another of the restaurants in the restored area, this one specializing in noodles. Unfortunately 'The Schedule' prevented us from trying any of the other places, or even enjoying a leisurely walk. After a quick stop at a souvenir shop, it was back on the bus and off to the Koryo Museum.



Noodle Restaurant, Kaesong

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Far more typical building in Kaesong

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

- The sign carries a message quite common on buildings and roadways in the North. Roughly translated it says 'Whatever the Great Comrade Kim Jong-il Decides, We Do!'



Rear building of the Koryo Museum

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The museum was only a short ride away from Kaesong, with a peaceful, natural setting. The place was empty of other tourists and, other than the pleasant grounds, really didn't have much to see.

Wandering the grounds was nice, but this was one of the few places where 'The Schedule' about matched how long everyone wanted to stay.



Plaque identifying the 'Koryo Museum'

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

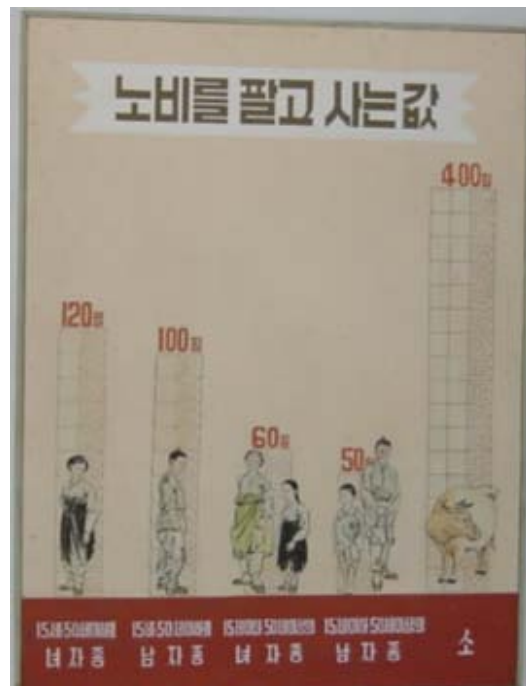


Guide showing tomb re-creation

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Even in an empty place surrounded by high walls, we still had to have not only the on-site guide, but all of our normal guides watching over us as well.

The picture to the right, purporting to show the prices of various slaves in the Chosun dynasty, addresses one of the touchier topics in Korean Studies - were slaves formerly bought and sold in Korea like they were in other parts of the world.



Museum plaque showing prices of slaves during Korea's Chosun dynasty.

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Old men playing cards

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

Old men are pretty much the same everywhere. Without much to do and probably bored hanging out at home, these gentlemen decided to spend part of their summer day sitting in the shade and playing cards. I would hazard a guess that in Kimland they're not doing any gambling though.

Behind the three guys, you can see part of the well-rested wall that goes most of the way around the museum complex. Hard to believe such a peaceful place is so close to the border, but just like in the South, people seem to have grown used to living near a warzone.

Also, just like in the South, couples about to be married head to a traditional place with a photographer and a couple of friends to take wedding photos. Most likely the couple here hasn't gotten married yet - they're just getting some pictures for the album prior to the big day. The idea that the groom shouldn't see the bride in her wedding dress ahead of time has never really caught on in Korea.



Wedding Party

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

We had a chance to speak briefly with the groom, who spoke surprisingly good English. Somewhere in their wedding album they have a picture of all of us as well.

The young man shown here was out painting with his father on the grounds of the museum, a sight that would be familiar to anyone who has visited palaces in the South, where it's common to see painters and photographers of all ages practicing their hobbies. The father was actually a professional - his works were for sale. Judging from his son's paintings, he would soon be following in the old man's footsteps.



Young Painter

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

One of the things that struck me most about the trip to the museum was how much it reminded me of similar places in the South. Not just the traditional design, but the people.

The most striking similarities are shown in these last three pictures - people using the palace/museum in exactly the same ways they're used in the South. We were the only

tourists, everyone else was using the place as a park or backdrop. Again, scenes familiar to anyone who's spent time traveling in the South. This museum was the only place in all of North Korea where I felt strong similarities between the two countries. The rest of the time it felt more like opposite ends of the planet than separate sides of the 38th parallel.

Pyongyang Circus

Should a circus be depressing? You wouldn't think so, but that's exactly how I felt before this one even got started. After the long drive back up to Pyongyang from Kaesong, everyone, including our guides, was getting a bit tired and road-weary. What better way to get some energy back than going to the circus with a bunch of excited kids?

After pulling back in to Pyongyang, the bus finally stopped at one of the city's giant concrete monoliths, this one identifying itself as the State Circus. We could see crowds of kids coming up the street and filing in as we made our way to the entrance. Once inside, we passed (as in, we were hurried past) crowds of kids gathered in groups around a row of souvenir stands, then made our way to the center auditorium. Unlike Arirang, this time we didn't have to pay extra for the seats. We had plush, comfortable ones directly in the center, right up front, not three meters from the stage.

As we sat down, I did something I wouldn't normally do even on a bet - I took a seat as close as possible to a group of school kids. Constantly being chaperoned and hemmed-in by our guides was driving me nuts and I wanted to try talking to someone new and 'unauthorized'. Who better to try and break through the wall with than a bunch of hyped-up kids on a class trip?



Trying to talk with some school kids at the circus. Those with the red scarves have already become 'Young Pioneers', the first rung of party membership.

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

I started with a hearty hello that boomed across everyone in the next section. Followed by a goofy, "You guys come here much? This is my first time. I heard it's pretty fun though . . ."

As you can see from the picture above, I definitely got a reaction. After some dropped jaws and stunned looks, I had the whole group smiling and giggling.

Now, to see if I could get anyone to talk to me.

"Have you guys been here before? Or is this your first time . . .?"

Once they got past my weird, Seoul-style Korean accent all heads swung up toward their teacher to see if they could respond. She's the one in the picture just to the left of my head, fixing her necklace.

No reaction.

So I tried again. "This seems like a pretty nice building. Must be fun to come here with your class. What do you guys think . . .?"

Again, all eyes swung up to the teacher, and again she wasn't having any part of it. I could tell the kids were dying to answer, or at least say something, but without approval from the teacher, discipline held and they just kept looking and smiling.

Once I figured out what was going on, I decided to go right to the source. This time I swiveled around a little further and addressed the teacher directly.

"Hello!"

Across the kid's section all eyes swung back up to their teacher, but zero acknowledgment. I didn't exist and this wasn't happening.

By now I was getting irritated. The kids obviously wanted to talk, but Ms. Sourpuss was shutting me down. Once more I stared right at her and said hello. By this point, I could tell I was getting to her assistant (the one to her right in the picture). Finally, after some more staring and yet another hello, the assistant whispered something into the teacher's ear and gave a nod in my direction.

Thus somewhat acknowledged, I again gave a nice greeting and followed up with a quick question about the place, just like I'd asked the kids. Finally, with her assistant and all her students staring at her, she was forced to respond.

"The building is for the circus. It's very good."

And with that she turned back toward the students, gave them a sharp look and said something I couldn't hear, but that apparently ended all hope of further response. I was dismissed and our conversation was over. The kids kept glancing at me as if to talk, but none of them were willing to risk their teacher's wrath. Another lost opportunity to have an interesting conversation.

That pretty much soured me on the Pyongyang circus before it even began. Would it have been so bad to let the kids talk? Were they so fragile that a simple conversation with a foreigner would pollute them?

Only a little over 24 hours and already my time in the North was beginning to irritate me. What kind of place was so tight and structured that even the simplest conversations had to be restricted, monitored and regulated?

Some of the others in our group had seen what happened (you can see one person getting it on video in the picture above) and asked me what was going on. I started to bitch and moan about Ms. Sourpuss, but just then the performance started and it was time to turn our attention to center-stage.

The performers first came out group by group: clowns, acrobats, twirlers, etc, maybe 20-30 performers in all. After some quick introductions, the show got under way, so close we could practically touch the performers. Things started out pretty tame, but in a short time heated up to some truly stunning acrobatics.



Circus Acrobats

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Acrobats flying high

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Tower of Acrobats

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

The building and equipment were definitely showing their age, but the performances were spectacular. People were flipping and flying all over the place. Several of the scenes had performers performing dangerous stunts, as shown here, without the aid of a net or safety wire.

The whole show lasted about an hour and, while no Arirang, was still quite incredible. The best part though, was when some clowns came into the audience and grabbed a couple of people to join them on stage. Who do you think they chose?

Ms. Sourpuss! After much cajoling and pressuring, they finally convinced her to come up on stage. Where, much to the delight of her students and our tour group, she proceeded to get the hell embarrassed out of her by some pretty sadistic clowns. Ah, the sweet justice of karma . . .

After that highlight, the show came to a close and the audience gave the performers a huge round of applause. Next up for us was a quick mini-fight with the guides to gain approval to use the, apparently unapproved for foreigners, restrooms. Then it was back to the bus for the short ride home to the hotel. Day two was just about over.



The busy streets of Pyongyang

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



North Korean SUV

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

As it was a Sunday and everyone had the day off, the streets were somewhat more crowded than the day before. You could actually see people walking around, plus get a glimpse of the occasional car and SUV/Jeep-type vehicle.

Pyongyang has a lot of very clean, beautiful parks, especially along its rivers, and quite a few (for Pyongyang anyway) people could be seen picnicking and enjoying the nice summer weather. The uncrowded, uncluttered and unhurried streets of Pyongyang are a huge contrast to any other city I have ever visited, especially in Asia and on the Korean peninsula.

As you can see from the city scenery, the architecture of the North can best be described as 'Soviet-drab', for the most part. There are some buildings, like the one shown here to the right, that pleasantly deviate from the norm and, simply by their sheer rarity, add a bit of eclecticism to the city's streets.

Some of the city's newer museums (not shown here, but similar to the Kims' museums shown on tomorrow's visit to Mt. Myohyang), have been done in a newer, 'Super-Sized Traditional' style. A design method that, while somewhat imposing, does at least have a memorable Korean-style appearance.

Any drive around town also brought along a complement of roadside propaganda signs, plus pictures of the Kims.



Actual non-dull looking building

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



One of about five billion pictures of Kim Il-sung. Here the caption reads, "Our revered father Comrade Kim Il-sung will be forever in our hearts".

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



**"With the great general, we will win!"
Three guesses what the great general's last name is.**

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Mt. Myohyang and the International Friendship Exhibition

Known as the 'mountain of mysterious fragrance', Mt. Myohyang (*Myohyangsan* in Korean) is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen on the Korean peninsula. Thanks to the International Friendship Exhibition, it is also one of the weirdest. Though the name sounds nice enough, *an exhibition of friendship*, in reality the place is best described as the mecca of Kim-clan worship.

We arrived at the mountain after a three-hour bus ride that took us north, up the center of the country, about halfway to the border with China. Another day on the bus talking to the guides, which by this time was beginning to get on everyone's nerves, did at least offer some interesting moments. For one thing, it allowed us to get to know them a little better, at least the part of themselves they allowed us to know. Mr. Baek, for example, proved to be a huge music fan. He happily whiled away a good part of the trip listening to one of our MP3 players. A device which confused him at first, "How do you put the music in it?" but soon had him stretched out in the back of the bus with headphones and a relaxed smile.

After exhausting our music collection, we got to talking about money, not salaries, but actual bills and coins. As foreigners in North Korea, we were forced to use a separate currency reserved only for tourists and visitors (a policy that's reportedly since been changed). For young Mr. Huk, some of the bills we had were new, and he seemed to enjoy the chance to look them over. We also showed him some of the Chinese money we had from our time in Beijing. In return, they gave us a chance to check out some of their "real" North Korean currency.

It was then that I remembered I had some South Korean change sitting in my bag. I dug up a 50-won coin and showed it to Mr. Baek, who was sitting in front of me. He curiously looked it over for a bit and then handed it back. Just then Mr. Huk, who'd been talking to someone else, happened to turn and see the coin. Thinking it was from China, he held out his hand to take a look, while simultaneously asking where it was from.

When I reached over, I saw Mr. Baek's eyes go wide in anticipation. As I went to drop the coin into Mr. Huk's hand, I said it was from the South. He jerked his hand back like I was pouring acid. His whole body literally recoiled at the presence of the coin.

"No thank you, I do not want to see it."

With that he turned away, visibly shaken at my affront to his sensibilities. Mr. Baek gave me a grin and told me I'd better put the money back in my bag.



Mt. Myohyang and the International Friendship Exhibition, home to shrines for the 'Great Leader', Kim Il-sung, and his son the 'Dear Leader', Kim Jong-il.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Entrance to the shrine of Kim Il-sung, International Friendship Exhibition
(located just out of sight at the top of the road in the picture above)

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

As we neared Myohyangsan, the trip began to get much more scenic. Instead of hills, we started to see mountains, while denuded farmland gradually gave way to forest. For several miles we drove through the lush mountain scenery you see here, until finally pulling into the International Friendship Exhibition, top picture above.

A gentle rain was coming down and made the area even more peaceful and secluded. As we got out of the bus, we could get a basic idea of the layout. In the middle were a couple of long, low, administrative-type buildings, while at either end were much more ornate structures with traditional Korean architecture.

These traditional-style buildings turned out to house the two main "friendship" exhibits, one devoted to Kim Il-sung, the other to Kim Jong-il. This is when we found out "International Friendship Exhibition" really means "Shrines Housing Gifts Donated by Foreign Countries to the Glorious Kims". Our guides turned very serious at this point, telling us we needed to be, "proper and respectful at all times."



**Dangling Wind Chime
Kim Jong-il Shrine**

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Honor Guard, Shrine to Kim Il-sung

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon



Kim Jong-il Shrine - notice the shoe covers

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

We visited the museums in order of hierarchy, first Kim Il-sung, then Kim Jong-il. As we approached the first building, we could see honor guards on both sides of the door - a door the local guide warned us not to touch. Instead, we were told to select a member of our group to don ceremonial white gloves, then he would have the honor of opening the door.

Once inside, the first thing we were instructed to do was put covers on over our shoes. The polished marble floors of the Kim shrine were not to be dirtied by the soles of our nasty shoes. A picture of the shoe covers are in the photo to the left.

Once properly attired, we were ordered to turn over all of our cameras and bags for safe-keeping until the end of the tour. No sneaking unauthorized pictures in the Kim Il-sung shrine. Friendship, apparently, is a one-way street.

The tour began by the guide leading us down a long hall into the hushed, peaceful interior of the building. Since it had been a very long bus ride, we next asked to see the hushed, peaceful interior of the rest room. The guide pointed out the direction and, once a ways away and having noticed the slipperiness of our shoe coverings, we were gliding around the polished floors like giddy school kids on a frozen pond.

Once out of sight of all guides and guards (a true rarity), we found that with a running start you could slide a good three meters (9 feet) across what is easily the most polished floor on the face of the planet. I've been on ice stickier than that floor. Soon the place was echoing with the shouts and collisions of our impromptu skating competition.

Unfortunately, this was hardly the "proper and respectful" attitude Mr. Huk and Mr. Baek had in mind. Once we had skated our way back into sight, we were quickly urged to quiet down. The local guide just gave us a puzzled look and restarted the tour.

The tour consisted of room after room of gifts to Kim Il-sung from around the world, broken down by geographic area. Here gifts from Russia, there gifts from Africa, another room for the Americas, etc. The place was colossal, the picture above in no way does it justice. We could have spent all day wandering around the place and still not seen it all. God knows (Kim Il-sung knows?) though, the schedule would never have permitted that. We were just shown some of the larger rooms and the more interesting gifts. The winners here were easily the armored train cars presented by the Soviet Union and China back in the glorious days of communist brotherhood. The cars were truly plush, all wood and silk and fine embroidery. Certainly not a bad way to travel and, after our experience with Air Koryo, solid evidence as to why the Kims nearly always travel by train.

The most memorable room though, was the inner sanctum of the Kim Il-sung shrine.

Before being allowed in, the guides turned hyper-serious. Telling us we were about to see a representation of the Great Leader, they insisted on a solemn and respectful demeanor. We were to enter, bow our heads and leave without uttering a word, or laughing, or smiling, or, left unsaid, sliding around like idiots. Even with gloves, we weren't allowed to touch this door, the local guide opened it for us.

Standing as if amidst trees and water, a life-size wax figure looked on all who entered. The lighting was all on Kim, making him really appear to be standing before us. As we quietly approached, you could see the effects put into maintaining the aura. In this windowless, soundproof room, the fake water glistened and rippled, while the fake leaves on the fake trees stirred as if from a passing breeze. At the center of it all was an amazingly life-like Kim, slightly elevated, as if standing on a rise, looking down on our little group.

We paused at the guide's signal, before we got too close. We stood looking at the figure and background while the guides bowed their heads, then we were quickly ushered out. It had lasted all of 30 seconds, but the guide acted as if we'd undergone a life-altering experience. When I asked about the glistening water and blowing leaves she and Mr. Huk beamed.

"I didn't think you were paying attention. You did see. How did you feel on seeing our Great Leader?"

I rattled off something about how devoted his people must be to have built a place like this. The local guide agreed. She regaled me with how people from around the world visited to pay their respects to the Great Leader (I guess that now somehow includes me . . .) and honor him with the fabulous gifts we had just seen.

"People come from around the world with the best their country has to offer. Koreans never need to leave Korea to see the world. The best things from every country are all right here."

Now how can anyone argue with that?

Kim Jong-il Museum/Shrine

After the highlight of viewing Kim's wax figure, we were led out of his shrine and down the road to the shrine of his son. Of course, this was after removing our shoe covers and being given back our bags and cameras.

Items we had to immediately turn right back in as we entered the Junior Kim's shrine. We even had to put on shoe covers again. Though one member of our group did manage to slip a small, single-use camera into his pocket without the guides noticing. Not being able to take pictures of some of these gifts and accompanying plaques was very frustrating, and explains why there are so few pictures in this chapter.

In contrast to the visit to his dad's place, in the Kim Jong-il shrine our first stop was the inner sanctum with the statue of Kim. The same seriousness came over the guides as we were again warned to be on our best behavior. The drill was the same - enter in strict silence, gaze upon Kim's raised and seated visage (think Lincoln Monument in Washington D.C.), bow heads for a moment, then exit quickly.

This time though, the guides weren't paying as much attention. As we left, one of our group was able to hang back and surreptitiously snap the photo you see below. Not bad

considering he had to yank out the camera, point and shoot from pocket level, and then get the camera back into his pocket before anyone noticed. Had he been caught, the repercussions could have been severe. Luckily, everything went fine and below you can see what is perhaps the only unofficial photo ever published of the inside of that shrine.



'Illegal' photo of the Kim Jong-il statue inside the Kim Jong-il shrine.

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart

After that, we were taken to see the gifts to Kim Jong-il. This was actually more interesting than his dad's place, mainly because everything was more recent (Kim Jr. having taking over only in the mid-90s). The first room we were taken contained gifts presented by prominent South Korean industrialists during their visits in the late 90s. Sitting side-by-side were top-of-the-line LG, Samsung and Hyundai entertainment systems, complete with large screen TVs, stereos, VCRs and plenty of speakers. Some of the same equipment you might have sitting in your living room, here sitting in a museum showing off the glorious gifts received by the Dear Leader.

The next room contained more gifts from the South, including a Hyundai Grandeur donated by the former chairman of Hyundai (whose family is originally from the North). Mr. Huk asked me if I'd ever seen one of these cars during my time in the South. When I said, "Sure, my neighbor has one just like it," you could tell he thought I was lying. How could such a great gift, a gift implying so much respect, belong to some normal bozo like my neighbor? This was obviously a car reserved for the elite, capitalist oppressors, not some common car for the masses. When I told him I wished the chairman had given away a lot more so there'd be less traffic in the South, he got fed up with my obvious lies, gave me a disgusted look and moved on to proselytize someone else.

Ever wonder why CNN seems to be the only Western news organization regularly allowed into North Korea? The next room perhaps offered a clue. In the 'Gifts from America' room, a whole section of one wall is taken up by gifts from CNN. A few engraved plaques, a coffee cup (yeah, a freaking coffee cup), a logo ashtray, etc. Probably, at most, a couple hundred bucks worth of crap that nonetheless get pride of place in the museum - for they reveal obvious signs of respect from a world-famous news organization. The people at CNN are certainly using their heads and showing they know how to play the game. Though one wonders how that fits in with journalistic integrity.

Another of the noteworthy gifts in this section was the guestbook signature from former

U.S. President Carter's visit. The several sentences, "wishing you peace and good fortune" (hard to remember verbatim when notes and pictures are banned) were a model of empty diplomatic phrases. Exactly the kind of stuff we were getting used to saying ourselves.

The other interesting gift is one I mentioned at the very beginning of this travelogue - a basketball autographed by Michael Jordan. This one presented by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright during her fall 2000 visit to Pyongyang. Mr. Huk's eyes lit up in recognition of the name we had asked him about the day before, when trying to figure out what he knew of the outside world.

"That's the person you talked about? He really is a basketball player!?" Mr. Huk was incredulous that a simple autographed basketball was all that the mighty US government had presented. No cars, entertainment centers or nice respectful plaques, just a damn basketball. It seemed to bother him for quite a while, he even asked me about it later on the bus back to Pyongyang. When I told him Jordan is kind of an American god, who got his start by playing basketball, he seemed somewhat mollified.

After the gifts display, it was on to the souvenir shop, where we were also asked to sign the guestbook. An act we found out later gets counted in the grand total of overseas gifts presented to the two Kims. Apparently, most of the 10s of 1000s of gifts come in the form of messages and signatures from guests.

I knew something was up when we weren't rushed through the gift buying, and sure enough, it seemed the rain was going to keep us from what would have been a very scenic mountain hike. Instead, we were to hang out on the balcony of the shrine for a while before heading off to a nearby hotel for lunch. For the first and only time the whole trip, we had some time to sit, relax and look around. They even let us get our cameras to take some shots from the top of the balcony, hence the outdoor photos shown above.

During our wait, I also witnessed one of the odder spectacles of the whole trip - a group of Korean-Japanese high school students visiting the shrine on a separate tour. Without getting too long-winded, there are large numbers of Korean-Japanese, descendants of those taken to Japan when Korea was a Japanese colony (1910-1945), who still believe the North Korean regime is the rightful ruler of the entire peninsula. One of the largest North Korean hard currency sources is donations from these 'overseas compatriots' in Japan. Chances are, if you've ever played pachinko in Japan (since most pachinko parlors are owned by these Korean-Japanese), a portion of what you paid was donated to North Korea.

The students we saw were part of a North Korea affiliated high school in Japan. While we talked and took pictures, they took turns breaking into smaller groups to sing songs eulogizing the two Kims, North Korea, Juche, etc. The singing and, apparently very real, fervor were unbelievable. Even Mr. Baek was giving them some odd looks as they continued their emotional, non-stop singing. To grow up in a place as modern and open as Japan, yet still subscribe to this ideology and regime . . . wow. The memory of those earnest young faces fervently singing away is one of the strongest of the trip.

After about half an hour, we finally caught up to the schedule and were herded back onto our bus. After a fancy lunch in an empty hotel surrounded by beautiful mountains, we were off to Pyongyang to visit Kim Il-sung's birthplace.

Mangyongdae, Schoolchildren's Palace and Pyongyang Subway

After having driven halfway to the Chinese border to visit Mt. Myohyang, it was to be another long bus-ride back to Pyongyang for our tour of *Mangyongdae*, the reputed birthplace of Kim Il-sung. After the big lunch, and with the steady rolling of the bus, everyone settled in to relax a bit on the way home. Other than teaching the guides how to play Hearts, and sneaking a few photos, the trip back wasn't too memorable.

Except when Mr. Baek almost caught me spying through his files.

Throughout the entire trip, I had seen all of our guides (including the Japanese and Chinese speaking guides) carrying around and constantly referring to various papers they had stuffed inside folders. I was curious as hell as to what they were looking at. Secret background info? A dossier on our group's activities? Approved ways to praise the Kims? What was in those files?

I saw my chance for a peek with the guides engaged in a fierce battle of Hearts. Our group had basically taken over the rear of the bus from day one, with Mr. Baek watching over us from the very back row of seats. With the card game though, he had moved up a couple of rows, leaving the back open, and, to my surprise, his folder sitting alone on the seat next to the window. Feigning a sudden interest in the passing scenery, I hopped into the back seat, right over the folder.

I glanced up at the card game, . . . everyone still busy there. So, using the seats to cover what I was doing, I opened the folder and started flipping through the loose-leaf pages.

Glancing them over, I found they were mainly brief synopses of each place on the itinerary, in English and Korean, to help the guides remember what to say. Plus a list of all the members of our tour and . . .

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Shit! Mr. Baek had looked up from the card game and noticed me in the back row looking at something.

"Oh, I was just trying to open this window. It's a little hot in here. But the thing seems stuck . . . ah, there we go. It's open now. Do you want me to open it a lot or is a little ok?"

"Uh, whatever you want. I'm fine."

And with that my heart returned to beating normally. No international spying incident. No five-year slave labor sentence. Just me being reminded, once again, of the usefulness of being a good liar. Perhaps I was adopting more of the local culture than I had anticipated.



Mangyongdae - Birthplace of Kim Il-sung

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Mangyongdae Guide

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The rest of the ride back down to Pyongyang passed uneventfully. About three hours after leaving Mt. Myohyang, we finally pulled into Mangyongdae on the outskirts of Pyongyang. The rain had become a light drizzle as we walked up the short path from the parking lot to the actual house.

The area around Mangyongdae is a pleasant little park, all grass, landscaping and trees. The house itself aims to reflect Kim's humble beginnings as a peasant man of the people. Everything from the thatched roof to the sparse interior and the pictures of his relatives are designed to stress his commoner background.

Mr. Huk and the on-site guide both took pains to point out these humble beginnings at every turn. Even showing us the kimchi pots and vegetable storage barrels Kim's mother was supposed to have used while he was growing up. The contrast of these humble beginnings with the lavishness of the *Gifts to Kim Museum* couldn't have been greater.



Marker identifying the site as the birthplace of Kim Il-sung on April 15, 1912.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

As the place is a national shrine, it appears to be visited by a large number of tour groups, both foreign and domestic. The parking lot was quite large and we could see groups of North Koreans off in the distance, unfortunately too far away to observe their reactions to the shrine. The flowers in the photo above were presumably placed there to show the devotion of these visitors.

The overall feeling of Mangyongdae is more that of a memorial to a respected national leader than the 'Kim Il-sung is god, god is Kim Il-sung' religiosity of most other Great Leader sites. The key here seemed to be stressing the simplicity and commonness, alongside a few sprinkles of anti-foreign sentiment, of both Kim and his immediate family.



Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Photos of Kim's parents and relatives, all of whom were (of course) renowned defenders of the common people and heroic resistance fighters during the Japanese colonial period. The picture at the bottom right was explained as Kim hugging his mother upon his return from years of guerilla fighting against the Japanese in Manchuria and northern Korea.

The rain here again interfered with The Schedule, causing us to cancel a short hike through the grounds. Apparently the hill on which the house and park are located commands a great view of the city below and we missed out on some beautiful pictures. The good point about the change was that it would allow us more time at the next stop. One that proved to offer great views in its own right, though more cultural than pictorial.

Schoolchildren's Palace

Near Kim Il-sung's birthplace on the outskirts of Pyongyang stands the giant *Schoolchildren's Palace*. The North Korean leader strongly believed children are the future of his party and nation, so he spent a good deal of state resources developing educational and after-school facilities for children and young teenagers (older teenagers are generally put to 'volunteer' work). The facilities in Pyongyang built for the children of the elite have become a national showcase, where foreign visitors are taken as a way of showcasing the North's devotion to its youngest citizens.

A devotion that in many ways is truly impressive, but different from what one sees in the South. I'll never forget addressing children in the North using the standard low form of Korean (as an adult would in the South) and being told by our guides that's considered rather rude in the North. According to Kim, children are the innocent leaders of tomorrow's revolution and therefore the 'low form' should only be for children you know personally, all others should be addressed using the standard, mid-level polite form (Korean has several different levels of formality/familiarity based on age, social position, family and school ties, etc.). This is a huge cultural shift compared with the South and one that never fails to surprise my Southern friends.



Schoolchildren's Palace and our 'Young Pioneer' guide

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart



Schoolchildren's Palace Guide

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Calling this building a palace is a rare triumph of truth over hyperbole for the North. Several stories high, it boasts three wings, a huge gymnasium, a fully equipped computer room (though without Net access) and dozens of classrooms teaching everything from ballet to calligraphy, accordion to taekwondo.

We were given a grand tour by the young lady pictured here to the left. Though a young teen, her poise and professionalism were remarkable. She obviously took great pride in her work of being able to show off to foreigners all that the Great Leader had given his children.

Her voice and method of speaking were one of the most interesting parts of this tour. She already had the North Korean method of public speaking down pat, a method wherein you are supposed to enthuse like a preacher caught up in the fervor of an old-time revival. Incredible.

The first place our dynamo little guide led us was the computer room. And yes, they even use Windows in North Korea. Though one doubts Microsoft ever sees their cut.

Oddly enough, the students were using the English version of Windows 98 rather than the Korean one. When I asked Mr. Huk why, he looked at me like I was an idiot and said because there wasn't a Korean version. A fact that must come as a huge surprise to Microsoft Korea!

There was no Internet access in the computer room, however. Privileged future leaders of the DPRK or not, modernity still comes with limits.



Computer study under the two Kims

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The Internet was basically a giant mystery to the North Koreans I met. Some of them had at least heard the word, but they didn't really seem to have a handle on exactly what it was. Even Mr. Baek, who'd once traveled outside the country to China, didn't quite have a grasp of what exactly e-mail and the Internet really were.

When asked if he felt like they were missing out on all the great information available on the Net, Mr. Huk just brushed us off with, "We already know the truth from our government. Why would we want to learn what others say?" Which, in a nutshell, seemed a pretty good explanation of North Korean thought as a whole.



Taekwondo Practice

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

After the computer room, the next place we were taken was a giant gymnasium. At one end you had a large group of, mainly boys, practicing taekwondo. At the other end you had a group of again, mainly boys, practicing basketball.

Given that we had a couple of professional-caliber taekwondo athletes in our group, we stopped to watch that for awhile (and weren't even hurried!). The guides even asked if any of us wanted to join in. We all declined as we began to focus more on the basketball end of the gym.

After walking down for a closer look, we asked the guides if we could join in for a short game. They loved the idea and soon we were paired up into two teams of four. It took awhile to get them to realize we didn't want to gang up on the kids, instead wanting to join them and play against each other. Once settled, we got into a heated little 4-on-4 pick-up game.



Hoopin' it up in North Korea

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The kids turned out to be pretty damn good, with smooth jump shots and plenty of confidence handling the ball. The coach even joined in, he's the one under the basket in the white shirt above. As you can see from Dan's rather unique method of catching the ball, some of us weren't quite up to the level of these young teens.

Our relative lack of ability didn't matter though, the spectacle of a bunch of foreigners playing basketball generated A LOT of interest from everyone else in the gym. We

pretty much brought taekwondo practice and all other activities to a halt. Even the janitors stopped to check us out. Unfortunately, we were unable to give them what they really wanted - a giant dunk. Even though a couple of us are well over six feet (1.8 meters) tall, we are unfortunately far too white to have enough hops for slamin'.

Given that they were training at probably the top youth gym in the country, I'm very curious about the future of some of these young athletes. You would expect at least a few of them to be on a North Korean national team in another 10 years or so. Who knows, maybe some of those kids will be representing their country in the Olympics one day.

After the gym, it was on to a tour of several classrooms full of apparently earnest young dance, calligraphy and music students. Classrooms where, after our basketball game, the main impression we probably made was that foreigners are really sweaty.



Group of young girls studying dance - notice the bright smiles

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Our young guide led us on the prearranged tour of the various classrooms shown here. The key in all of the pictures is to notice the beaming smiles on everyone's faces. While very cute and photogenic, it was so obviously coached as to be funny.

All you had to do was quickly stick your head back into a classroom after everyone had filed out. Then you'd see the kind of expressions you'd expect to find on a group of kids cooped up in a stuffy classroom after school.



Korean Traditional Instrument Practice

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Accordion Practice

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

Even more interesting was when they saw someone had stuck their head back in. A kind of mini-wave of smiles would gradually sweep across the room as the kids and teacher realized you were still butting into their class.

In a couple of rooms I tried to ask some questions to see if I could get a conversation started but, other than some giggles at my weird accent, was never able to generate much of a reaction. Just like at the circus the day before - we were to be smiled at only - no interaction.

The teachers were basically the same as the one I'd encountered at the circus. Friendly enough when they had to be, but in no way willing to talk to us. They simply thanked everyone whenever we praised them and their class and then went back to teaching.

I can't really blame them - keeping a bunch of preteens focused on class when you have large groups of people (foreigners nonetheless!) barging in and out can't be easy. You have to commend their professionalism, especially given how amazing their students were with their singing, dancing and writing. Incredible what kids can do when you take away their video games.



"For the sake of North Korea . . ."

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Giant image of Kim Il-sung shown during a song in his honor.

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Close-up of some of the young performers.
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The highlight of the palace tour was a musical performance by the students. To say it was incredible would be a huge understatement. How kids that young can be so talented and perform so well is beyond me. Their timing and professionalism would do honor to anyone.

Here of course, the honor was all to the Kims and the North Korean regime. The message was one of how lucky the children were to grow up in such a special place and with such a devoted leader willing to look after their needs and dreams.



"We are one" - written above and sang as the chorus of a song of reunification
Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

At the end of the show we all got out of our seats to give the students a rousing and well-deserved standing ovation. It really was an amazing thing to see so many children working together to create such a professional performance. CDs were on sale in the lobby and they did a brisk business among the foreign visitors, some of whom, including me, later posted clips on the Internet.

This same school was visited by President Kim Dae-jung's wife, the first lady of South Korea, during the summit between the leaders of the North and South in 2000. Part of the children's performance was broadcast live on South Korean TV and was a sensational PR coup for the North. The hopeful reunification theme went over very well with the South Korean public and resulted in the students being invited for a headline-making trip and well-received performance down in Seoul. Commentators in the South even worried publicly about South Korea's own 'lazy' youth, thought to be frittering away their childhoods yapping on cell phones, surfing the Internet and playing computer games. Concern that mainly brought a collective yawn from South Korean kids.

Once our show was over, it was back to the bus for one of the final stops on the tour - a hoped for visit to the Pyongyang subway. This part of the tour was, according to both our guides and various guidebooks on travel to North Korea, an option given only at the guides' discretion. Apparently our behavior, sliding around the *Gifts to Kim Il-sung Museum* and arguing at the DMZ notwithstanding, had been good enough to merit this 'special' tour.

Pyongyang Subway

The Pyongyang subway system is equal parts public transportation, art gallery and air raid shelter. The tracks are set far beneath the surface, similar to those in Moscow, to keep them safe and to provide shelter for the populace in case of an American bombing. To get down to them requires a lengthy escalator (unlike the subway escalators in America's capital, the ones in Pyongyang actually seemed to work) ride that makes one feel like you're descending into the very depths of the earth. Those with vertigo or a fear of heights need not apply.



Pyongyang Subway Map

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

The system itself, as shown by the map to the left, is not very extensive. Though our guides were quite proud of the interactive map system shown here. By pressing one of the bottom buttons (which denote the various stations), lights would flash on the main board to clearly show you the stops and route between your current station and destination. All for a two-line subway!

Our guides asked if the Seoul subway system had a similar system for their passengers. They seemed pleased to find out that it was lacking such an advanced, customer-oriented system.

Unfortunately, the picture above doesn't quite show one of the other unique features of the subway - the station names. In Pyongyang, rather than denoting particular places, all the stations are given names like *Liberation*, *Unification*, and *Victory*.

Once inside and down near the tracks, you find the walls, pillars and ceilings full of intricate design work and ornate paintings. Some of the best art in North Korea is actually located a few hundred feet below ground.

In the picture to the right, you can see the obvious efforts that went into making the subway a showcase for the regime. From the pillar carvings, huge painting at the end and intricate glasswork on the ceilings, everything is designed to impress. While we were visiting there was even plenty of power to light the stations. Indicating a supply of electricity that some say isn't always so generous.



View of station between arrivals

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John



Subway mural of happy industrious workers

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart



**Subway car
- including pictures of you know who**

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart

A less than generous aspect of the subway we encountered firsthand was restroom usage. A couple of people in our group needed to use one during the visit to the subway, something you'd expect to be quick and painless.

Well, here it turned into a major hassle. First, the people had to get permission from the guides to even look for a restroom. Once located, the guides had to approve its use by foreigners, which they refused to do, instead standing in front of the door, barring entry. They insisted the group of unscheduled bathroom users wait until the next stop, where they were promised nicer facilities. Despite some pretty hearty bitching, in two languages, the guides remained firm, forcing everyone to wait until after we boarded the subway and went to the next stop.

The whole incident got pretty heated and even drew some attention from passersby, until cooler heads prevailed and the naughty group was convinced to hold it a few minutes. Interesting drama to observe and indicative of how tempers were beginning to fray.

The subway cars themselves, though aged, were immaculate and, during the late afternoon, remarkably uncrowded. Our group was herded into the last car of the train, one devoid of passengers except for a single hapless young lady. She froze and stared at our group of foreigners like a deer caught in headlights. After a few seconds, and an audible gasp, she gathered her things and literally sprinted out the door. Now if that would only happen when I board the crowded Seoul subway.

As the lady ran out, the doors swished shut and we were locked inside our own private car. Of course, each car is proudly adorned with pictures of the two Kims, so we wouldn't be totally alone during your journey. Once someone noticed this, most of the group proceeded to spend the train ride rotating, one-by-one, to pose for a shot under the Kims.

As the train pulled into the next station, the shock on the face of those waiting to board was immediate and palpable. If aliens had lined up to come out of our subway car, those waiting at the platform would have been less shocked. Everyone was especially careful to hang back and make sure we were really leaving before they dared board our 'foreign' car.

I was half-tempted to hold up and jump back onto the subway, just as the doors began to shut. That would have certainly gotten everyone's heart pumping. But, deciding I wasn't in the mood to be arrested the day before I left, plus still curious as to how the whole restroom saga was going to play out, I let discretion rule the day and walked off with the others.

Once off the subway, Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk were finally able to locate suitable restroom facilities. Of course, once they found the proper place, they then had to run off and track down the key. By this point, the sheer ordeal of finding a john that would accept foreign tour groups had turned the restroom into a mini-tourist attraction all its own. Practically the whole tour group proceeded to file in and have a look.



**Hmm, somebody seems to be out of place here,
notice the wide berth given the foreigner**

Photo courtesy Thomas St. John

After the impromptu potty tour, we were quickly rounded up and marched out to the waiting bus. Something that must have seemed especially strange to our bus driver - take the foreigners to one subway stop, let them off, then drive to the next stop to pick them up. I can't imagine myself doing that in too many other countries, though seeing such a beautiful, relatively empty subway system was well worth the side trip. My only regret from the subway experience mirrors my main regret from the whole trip - the lack of an opportunity to interact with people other than our guides.

Once back on the bus, we headed off to the last stop on our tour - a visit to a well-known (according to the guides) restaurant for one of North Korea's most famous foods.

Pyongyang Naeng-myon

No visit to Pyongyang would possibly be complete without trying the city's signature dish - *naeng-myon*. Basically, it's a bowl of cold vermicelli noodles with an egg, a couple of hunks of meat, and some hot sauce thrown in for spiciness. The cold noodles ('*naeng*' means 'cold' or 'chilled' in Korean) are supposed to be the perfect meal for cooling down on a hot summer day.



Pyongyang Naeng-myon Specialty Restaurant

Photo courtesy Ben Jorgenson



Naeng-myon Close-up

Photo courtesy Dan Harmon

I've tried naeng-myon a few times at restaurants in the South (where the best stuff is always referred to as *Pyongyang* naeng-myon) and normally can't stand it. But here, for whatever reason, it actually tasted pretty good. Perhaps I was finally coming under the spell of Mr. Baek's, "when in Rome" mantra.

For those who found the idea of cold noodles unappealing (see picture at left), the restaurant served up a large variety of other foods, for what turned out to be the best meal of the whole trip. Those with foreign currency to spend, and those who live off of them, are certainly not among the North's starving masses.

As this was the last stop on our tour and we no longer had to worry about 'The Schedule', it turned out to be a leisurely meal, with time to do more than just wolf down your food and run back to the bus. We finally got a chance to enjoy a couple of beers and even blow off some steam with the guy on the tour who was most obviously the Worker's Party hack, easily identified by his Kim Jong-il style bouffant hairdo and habit of wearing one-piece jumpsuits.

He'd taken a liking to a couple of us and after dinner proceeded to regale our group of Korean speakers with a flurry of off-color jokes and comments. It was hard to believe, but the staid Party guy was actually pretty funny. We traded back his jokes with a few we'd learned in the South, which got him laughing pretty hard too - once he figured out our thick accents. He seemed especially fascinated by the fact that several of us taught at Korea's most famous women's school. Something he'd obviously been curious about the whole time and finally got around to asking and joking about that last evening.

An interesting side benefit of this conversation turned out to be the reaction of the other guides. They had always given this guy plenty of deference and this time was no different. Laughing and talking with him eliminated any possibility of being rushed along on our last night. I only regretted it had taken us so long to figure that out.

Eventually though, the schedule and bored stares of the non-Korean speakers prevailed, and it was time to board the bus for one last trip to the hotel. Night had fallen and it was time to head home and pack for tomorrow's departure.

Departing Kimland

One last day of waking up at 6am on 'vacation'. Only a few more chances to be harried into hurrying by Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk. Only a few more hours until being able to get a real newspaper and watch some CNN International.

That's what ran through my mind as I hung from the wake-up call and rested my head back on the lumpy pillow. Only a few more hours and I'd be out of this place. I couldn't imagine the isolation people on extended assignments in Kimland must feel. It had only been four days and to a man we were all dying to get out. I can't remember the last place I wanted to leave as much as North Korea.

We had our last meal down in Dining Room #2 and boarded the bus for the quick ride to the airport. For a change, everyone actually arrived downstairs on time and ready to go. Apparently the Americans weren't the only ones looking forward to getting out.

The 30-minute ride out to the airport was for the most part quiet and uneventful. We talked with the guides about how unusually busy they were with all of the tourists in town for *Arirang*. One of the guys on the trip attempted to surreptitiously snap some last-chance pictures (see the bottom of this page) of people walking along the, apparently unused, train tracks. Mr. Baek caught on though and suggested, loudly, that it would be nice if everyone just put their cameras away until they got home.

Once at the airport, Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk helped us get our boarding passes, check-in our bags and, most importantly, finally give us back our passports. In the waiting area, just before heading to immigration, we pooled some money together to tip the two guides, mainly out of curiosity with whether or not they'd accept.

Mr. Baek, the experienced hand, knew what was coming, thanked us and that was it. Young Mr. Huk though, was all sorts of confused. Tipping was definitely outside his party-approved frame of reference and he struggled to make a decision. Which, after days stuck listening to his rote parroting of the party line, amused the hell out of us.

On the one hand, taking money for a tip would certainly be a bourgeois capitalist no-no. On the other hand, he'd been taught to try and please his guests by adjusting, to some extent, to their ways and customs. We tried, "just donate the money to the poor if it makes you feel uncomfortable," but that just drew the stern admonishment that North Korea had no poor people. Finally, we convinced him that it would be a cultural affront and our feelings would be hurt if he didn't take it. With a sigh, "Well, if that's your culture, I guess I should accept it," he finally took the tip.

I wonder how long he felt guilty about it. From what I got to know of him during our short but intense time together, my guess is this moral dilemma probably bothered him for quite some time. Just the same, I'd also be willing to bet that a return trip would find him far more open to the practice.

As we talked with Mr. Huk, just before stepping into the immigration departure line, we asked him what he thought of his first time being a guide and dealing with foreigners. With a truly puzzled look on his face he uttered what was probably the most honest thing he said the whole trip, "I don't understand many of your ways." After witnessing the huge emphasis the regime placed on getting dollars, it's my cynical guess that tipping would be one of the first of "our ways" he would come to understand.



Everyone checking to see if there is any sign remaining in their passport of the trip to North Korea - something that could have gotten us into trouble upon re-entering the South. Fortunately, all evidence had been removed by North Korean immigration.

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart

Finally, the line at departure had worn down and it was our turn for immigration. We started working our way through the process, with Mr. Baek and Mr. Huk watching over us to make sure everything went smoothly.

It didn't.

One of the people in our group had a discrepancy with his passport number. A bored clerk somewhere along the line in the visa process had accidentally transposed a couple of numbers from his passport when making out our official visa. A typo that, unfortunately, no one had noticed until now. Apparently in North Korea, your papers are checked more thoroughly on the way out than on the way in!

While he was held up, the rest of us, whose numbers hadn't gotten screwed up, were cleared to pass. While Tommy stood forlornly staring at us, we gathered 10 meters (30 feet) away, on the other side of immigration, and offered whatever help ("Don't worry, I'm sure they'll find you a great job in the salt mines!") we thought he needed.

At first.

After 10 minutes or so, with departure time bearing down and everyone else from the group already onboard the plane, we all started to get nervous. The last thing anyone wanted to do was abandon someone in North Korea. Plus, later that day (and light years away) in Seoul, no one wanted to call Tommy's wife and explain how a typo had left him stuck in Pyongyang. We watched as the immigration officials really grilled him and our two guides. His look of irritation gradually turned to concern and outright panic. He was going to get left behind in North Korea while his friends took off, and all because some bureaucrat had flipped a couple of numbers!

Finally, with the sound of the plane's engines warming outside, our two guides convinced the customs officials to let him pass. Apparently, the matching pictures on the two documents convinced them that it really was, in fact, just an innocent mistake.

Once he finally got clearance to proceed, Tommy practically time-traveled across the line and into the departure area. With one last wave to the guides, we ran out the doors and to the bus for the 10-second ride across the tarmac to our waiting plane.

It was finally time to begin putting North Korea behind us.



Off into the mist . . .

Photo courtesy Brian Stuart

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