

Will I be brainwashed? Holiday in North Korea

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An unusual destination for holidays: North Korea. As one of the most isolated countries in the world it is mostly in the press for its provocative activity or mass events. There is no free journalism in North Korea. Journalists from other countries are not allowed to enter North Korea, except when invited or have a special agreement. If tourists (and journalists) do have the chance to visit North Korea, they are accompanied by North Korean guides who give them a selected (favourable) picture of the country. However, there are disturbing reports including pictures taken surreptitiously that show aspects of real life which are visibly different from what tourists have been shown. These were the reasons that instigated my desire to take a first-hand-impressions trip to North Korea in 2015.

Because it is impossible for foreigners to travel alone through the country, nor even to go for a walk through the city, it is necessary to go through a tour operator to book a visit. Among the diverse tour operators offering individual and group tours to DPRK, the common feature they have is the obligation to work together with the tourism agency of DPRK, which supplies qualified guides for the tour. Visitors are always accompanied by tour guides who provide a positive story about the country and prohibit taking pictures which might contradict the story.

After selecting a tour operator, one of the first things I learned chatting with him was that within North Korea the country must be referred to as the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This name, he explained, is an expression of the desire to be reunified in the future with the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

My tour began at the Beijing airport with a flight to Pyongyang. There I was joined by other travelers. Our group was made up of people from different countries. During the flight, we watched a classical dancing show. There were no other in-flight entertainment options. The crew served us a horrible, dry "burger" with a quite good beer.

On arrival at Pyongyang airport we had to show all printed matter we brought with us because it is forbidden to bring in books about DPRK or China. After this procedure, our tour

guides, a man, a woman, an assistant and the bus driver, welcomed us and brought us to the bus, which would be our second home over the next days.

It is also possible to enter the country by train (except for Americans who are only allowed to take the plane). However, the trip from Beijing is quite a long trip of around 20 hours. Our first stop was the Pyongyang train station to pick up the rest of our group, including the man from the tour operator agency who always joins his groups. We had to wait a little for the train because there still seem to be problems due to the last time change in August 2015, when Kim Jong-Il decided to give DPRK its own time zone.

Because of the delay at the train station, our program started with din-

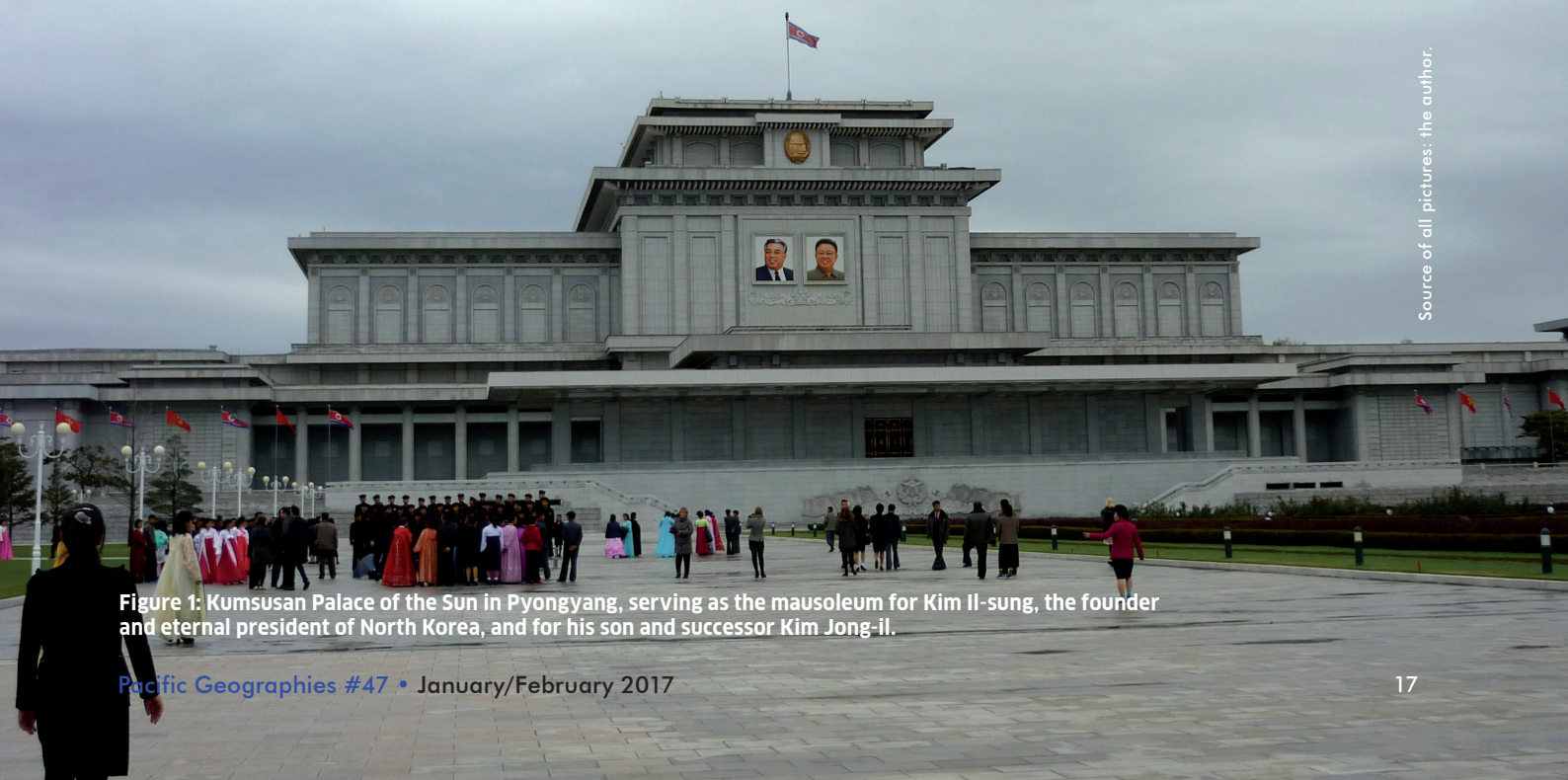


Figure 1: Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang, serving as the mausoleum for Kim Il-sung, the founder and eternal president of North Korea, and for his son and successor Kim Jong-il.

Source of all pictures: the author.



Figure 2: Pyongyang, Changjon Street.

ner in a restaurant. It was not what I would call a cosy restaurant. We arrived at a dark, unlit building, and went up to the first floor to an unheated room with stark lighting and some tables and chairs. Here I should mention that the temperatures in winter are similar to those in Germany. We were the only guests and therefore we asked ourselves if the “theater” was about to begin. For dinner we were served Hot Pot (a heated bowl containing some vegetables in hot water, meat and fish to cook in it) and beer again. Our local tour guides sat separately so we could not talk to them. After dinner we were checked into our hotel Yanggakdo. The hotel had some mysterious features like the absence in the lift of a button to the fifth floor (perhaps that is where the staff have their offices) and we

wondered if there are hidden cameras and microphones in the rooms. The lobby was impressive in contrast to the poor floors but the rooms quite comfortable. The tour guides also slept in the hotel and we were told that we were not allowed to leave the hotel on our own. Our room was on the upper floor with a great view about the city. When we arrived it was already dark outside and just a few buildings had lights. When we opened the window (yes, it was possible to open it normally) it was quiet, no noise from traffic or anything else. In the basement of the hotel there was a recreational area with swimming pool, bowling and a shop. I decided to go swimming. Maybe a chance to get in contact with other guests using the pool, but it didn’t happen. 15 minutes in the swimming pool cost 4€, inclu-

ding looks of disapproval for my bikini, even though I asked before if it is ok to wear it. The heating system of the swimming pool seemed to be very simple so while swimming the warm and cold water take turns switching on because there was no water circulation. So the first evening ended with mixed feelings and a lot of potential for better experiences.

The program for the next three days was full and the guides were really intent on keeping to the time schedule so we quickly got used to their military-like intonation (“Shall we go on?” was a statement and not a question). We had to follow the rules and always ask permission before taking pictures. It was forbidden to take pictures of people who were working or in movement, as it should taken into consideration that this is a culture where people want to look at the cameras and smile. It was also forbidden to take pictures of the landscape while traveling on the bus. When we stopped we were shown what we could take pictures of. Forbidden were: ruins of houses, people walking along the street. The impressive monuments should be photographed just as a whole - not in details. There were also other rules: Do not soil or fold a picture of the leader on the newspaper, always bow in front of a monument ... we were reminded of the rules every time before we got out of the bus. The probability is high that when leaving the country the cameras will be inspected and any unacceptable pictures deleted.

The typical procedure was that as we rode along in our bright green tourists bus the guides told us something about the surroundings. We would stop at a monument, be given some instructions, get off the bus, visit the monument, get back on again and continue to the next stop. There was no opportunity for a walk through the city and anyway it was not allowed.

The first day we started with the **Kumsusan Palace of the Sun** (see fig. 1), where President Kim Il Sung and Chairman Kim Jong Il lie in state. Originally it was the Kumsusan Assembly Hall and the working place of President Kim Il Sung. But after his sudden death in 1994 it became the Kumsusan Memorial Palace and was opened to the public in 2012.

For the locals, the memorial palace is a very special, or even holy, place where they go in formal attire. This



Figure 3: Pyongyang, view from hotel (forbidden picture)

was mandatory for us, too. The procedure to enter the palace is similar to the procedure at European airports: it is required to take off your jacket and check your bag into a locker. Cameras, USB-sticks, etc. are not allowed. Afterwards we were scanned and walked across brushes to clean our shoes. We were given a guided tour through the huge palace and started with Kim Il Sung. We passed through an air-blowing gate, entered a dark room with his embalmed body and were given instructions on how to follow the customary ritual: go in a row of four people to the end of the body and bow, then to the left side and bow, then directly to the right side and bow, then go out. There were several groups of locals too, and it was disconcerting to see them crying while they bowed in front of the dead leader - all of them. It seemed to be a duty. Next we went into a room with hundreds of medals the leader had received from other countries. The third room contained souvenirs which honored the work of the leader. We repeated this procedure with Kim Jong Il. Then we visited the huge and impressive outside area and took some pictures.

After that we drove to the **Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery** on Mt. Taesong. Inaugurated in 1975, the cemetery is situated on a hill with view over the capital. It is the site where revolutionary martyrs had fallen in fights for freedom and independence of the country. The graves of their remains are lined with huge monuments and there is also national music playing. On the way there and back we saw many pedestrians and cyclists. There are hardly any people who own a private car. Because of the rain during the last days, water accumulated on the street under a bridge which we had to pass. It was prohibited to take a picture of the scene, because it shows kind of a mistake and that something is wrong.

Our program continued with the most famous "attraction": **The Statues of the Great Generalissimos** on Mansu Hill, which are two bronze statues of the leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. In the last years the statues changed from time to time the facial expressions and clothes. After bowing in front of the statues visitors were allowed to take pictures of the statues, but as a whole. Pictures of just a part of the statues would be an



Figure 4: Statues of the Great Leaders

affront. The visit was, like at the other places we'd been to so far, accompanied by national music which came out of small speaker boxes around the place.

The next stop on the itinerary was for souvenir shopping at the **foreign bookstore**. Here we could buy political books, cooking books, city guides, audio CDs and more things in different languages. Unfortunately, our tour did not include a visit to a supermarket or department store, though some tours do offer that possibility. And there are some stores where you can pay with foreign currency however your change will be given in US Dollars as tourists cannot get change in Korean People's Won, the local currency.

The foreign bookstore is close to the Kim Il Sung Square, the cen-

tral square in Pyongyang, and is best known as the square where the parades take place. It was built in 1954 and faces the river Taedong and the Juche Tower. On the ground, we could see many white dots in lines used as guides to help form straight lines during parades. And of course the pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il reminded us where we were.

The Juche Tower, erected in 1982, stands at 170 metres tall and is capped with an iconic, 20 metre high glowing red flame. The Tower is a symbol for the Juche Ideology the locals follow. We took an elevator to the rooftop terrace and again enjoyed a great view over Pyongyang. Afterwards we had lunch at the restaurant at the upper floor in our hotel. Of course, we were the only guests. While the beer was again very good the food was only ok.



Figure 5: Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery on Mt. Taesong.



Figure 6: The Monument to Party Founding was unveiled in 1995.

In Mangyongdae, some kilometers from Pyongyang, in the **Native House of President Kim Il Sung** is where the President was born on the 15th April in 1912. The Juche ideology has its own calendar and year Juche 1 corresponds to the birth date of Kim Il Sung. All dates in DPRK are given specifying both Christian and Juche era years. We visited the original house, which has the features of a traditional farmhouse. The guides never got tired of pointing out that the President came from a humble family.

Nearby there is also a theme park but it was closed for the season. North Koreans interviewed in documentaries about the theme park say they are grateful for this gift from their leader.

A highlight of the tour was the me-

tro ride. The metro is one of the deepest in the world. For locals one ride costs the equivalent of Euro 4 cents. The metro was full of people despite being a Sunday afternoon. We were not sure if it would have been crowded like this without our visit as per the rumors of “show” crowds. Some of the metro stations are very splendid with statues of the leader and mural art. Newspapers are hung in display cases for people to read while waiting on the quai. National music is played both in the stations and in the trains. The metro trains are old German trains from Berlin which have been repainted, but the scratches in the windows are still in German. The ride in the metro was one of the rare possibilities to be among the locals, but we were unable to engage with them.



Figure 7: The Arch de Triumph was built in 1982.

We visited more monuments like the Arch de Triumph and the Monument to Party Founding. The **Arch de Triumph** was built in 1982 and is 60 meters tall. It honors the return of President Kim Il Sung in 1945 after the national liberation. The **Monument to Party Founding** was unveiled in 1995, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Worker’s Party of Korea. With its 50 meters tall symbols of hammer, sickle and brush it was very impressive.

Another highlight was the visit of **Kaesong**, a city close to the border to South Korea and the DMZ. While visiting the border, we were accompanied by a soldier and were given a short introduction before going to the place where a house stands half on North Korean and half on South Korean territory. On both sides were soldiers kept an eye on each other.

We spent one night in Kaesong, staying in a traditional hotel with wooden lodges and were told that this is a touristic attraction. The city center of Kaesong has some traditional houses, this was the first and only possibility to go for a short walk of about 10 minutes before we had to get on the bus again. As in every city we visited on this trip we saw a lot of pictures and monuments of the leaders. Adventurous people in our group had dog soup for lunch.

On the ride between Pyongyang and Kaesong we could see something of the country. There were very few cars on the highway; we saw more pedestrians than cars. We took a break at a lonesome motorway rest stop, a restaurant that was built on a bridge straddling the motorway. During our 30-minute pause, we were the only people there and only saw two other cars driving along the street. Along the rural roads we could sometimes see simple houses and people walking on the street or riding on simple bicycles. In the evening, when the sunset, there were barely any lights on and it was more a ride through the darkness.

On the way back to Pyongyang we entered the city by Thongil Street where the **Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification** stands since 2001. It represents the people’s will to achieve the national reunification between North and South Korea in the future. The two women in the monuments represent the two parts of the country.

Next stop was at the **Grand People’s**

Study House which is a library for books, media and locals can also attend the courses of foreign languages. Spanning 100,000 square meters it is an impressive 10-storey-building and visitors are welcomed by a marble statue of the leader in the entrance hall. In spite of the low temperatures outside the building was not heated and we saw people writing an English exam while wearing their winter coats. The contradiction was striking because on the one hand the Study House was a valuable place with a lot of learning resources but on the other hand it was apparent that little attention had been given to what we might consider as being an adequate learning environment. It was very cold inside and the technical features were very basic (not enough lighting in the reading rooms and no photocopiers). I asked one of the tour guides about the education system and he told me that children are sent to school when they are six years old. After twelve years they could study at the university. There are several universities in Pyongyang. On the first sights this seems to be similar with the education systems in Europe, but it remained unclear if everybody is given access to study at university.

Our last item on the agenda was the **Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum**. Outside we could see a lot of war material like bombs, parts of planes as well as a battleship. Taking pictures while visiting inside the building was prohibited. The national history of war was presented from the North Korean perspective and was illustrated with recreated historic sites.

We finished the tour with dinner at a barbecue restaurant where we met other tourists, besides those in our hotel, for the first time. The next day one part of the group flew back to Beijing, one part took the train and one part extended their excursion. At the airport, our cameras were not inspected by the security, though a man from our who left by train told me later that they inspected the pictures on the cameras of those who took the train.

Conclusion

Having visited some parts of DPRK, our impression of the country and the way of living there was very much based on the selected information gi-



Figure 8: Motorway

ven by our tour guides. We could ask them everything, but it did not mean that we got an answer every time. We were perplexed by the locals seeming lack of interest in us, foreign visitors. In DPRK they produce their own movies and TV program and have their own mobile network. It is likely for this that when quizzed our guide about pop culture references he didn't know any of those we named. The intensity of the leader cult is stunning. According to documentaries about the DPRK, locals would never say a critical word against the leader even though his shortcomings are obvious for us tourists. It would seem that they are, understandably, afraid of punishment



Figure 10: Monument to the three charters for national reunification

and probably they would not be able to compare theirs with other political systems. As I mentioned, the unheated buildings and low power was remarkable. The air smelled like coal. But we in our hotel we had heated rooms and every comfort we would have had in hotels of our countries, too.



Figure 9: Entrance area, Grand Study Hall

In the cities we visited we saw every 30 meters someone raking leaves; perhaps just a job to keep people busy? The lonely traffic policewomen at the crossroads didn't have much to do as traffic was similar to that on a Sunday in a small German town. Or the woman in the motorway service who is waiting for guests, these sights seemed strange to us.

The tense atmosphere never relaxed, even during the fun moments singing karaoke with our tour guides on the bus. Everyone we came across, including the guides and the locals in the hotels, were always reserved, making it seem like we were part of a staged performance.



Figure 11: Propaganda poster, Kaesong

It is still quite surreal how isolated people are living there. Overall it was an interesting experience and I plan to travel again to DPRK in a few years as I am interested in pursuing the development of this country. Our tour operator told us that life in DPRK has changed in the last years, but very slowly.

***The author prefers to stay anonymous, because she would like to travel back to North Korea in the future.**