

TESTIMONIES

Thanks for all your help in organizing such a unique trip. As you know by now, it went really, really well. I got so many great pictures that it will take months to sort through them all, still that's all worthwhile for reviewing the memories! I seriously would go right back again if the chance came again, ideally I would like to get up to the mountains in the far north or out to the East coast (let me know when more towns and places out that way open up to western tourists) hope to see you again in Pyongyang before too long!
US TOURIST

Absolutely amazing - That is by far the weirdest place I have ever been to. It is truly unique - like no other place anywhere. The guides were also great. Have to say we also had quite an interesting group of fellow travelers on the tour - it was a real group of punters - made the whole thing even better. I would certainly go back again. The trip was beyond all of my wildest expectations. If I can get a group together of a few people, I will try to come back again if Arirang is repeated.
US TOURIST

It was a tremendous experience!! It was a close call but you fellows were miracle workers. The visit was more exciting and interesting than I had anticipated. Hotel and food were better than expected. Arirang, Children's Art Institute, and circus were amazing. We actually went to Arirang twice! I hope they keep the door open for awhile so more people can visit before it all goes away. I feel sorry for the people, but it is a unique tourist destination. They could definitely generate some serious revenue from tourism if they wanted to. Thanks again for offering the tour and for getting me into the country.
US TOURIST

I am still smiling! I loved the enthusiasm of the group. I loved the terribly cautious and polite requests for permission to take a photograph, and then, when given, the mad, wild, happy snapping! I have never seen a group so enjoy everything! The guys were even snapping the plates of food! The day we got the "bad news" - that the bookshop was closed, but then the "good news" - that we could photograph the traffic warden and all the guys leapt up and ran out of the bus to the corner and snapped away - that was hilarious!

US TOURIST

I'm now back in the US after finishing my tour of China. However, the highlight of my trip to the Far East was definitely the Korean section. Thanks for making the preparations for the trip pretty painless. As I said to you in Beijing, the relaxed and informal way that Koryo Tours appears to work, together with your efficiency, make a very good combination. For me, the best part was seeing the Mass Games in the stadium, the colors, co-ordination and sheer numbers were amazing. However, for an unforgettable introduction, the first morning, when we went up to Mangyongdae with the roads lined with thousands of children was hard to beat. Once again thanks for making the holiday what it was and keep up the good work. Best Wishes

US TOURIST

BLOGS AND WEBSITES

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Behind Enemy Lines

North Korea - October 2005

Last week, on the Fijian island of Taveuni, I had a bit of a laugh playing with time travel. I went from today to yesterday and back to today several times in one minute while other tourists watched uninterestedly from a parked van. They had seen this before: Taveuni is probably the world's most accessible piece of land on which the International Date Line (actually the 180 through. Last month I crossed a different line, the 38th parallel, and ended up fifty years in the past. This time, nobody stayed on the bus; everyone wanted to have a laugh.

Koryo Air flight JS221. There is no record of such a flight in the Sabre computerized flight booking system. But it was a full flight and that's how we got to Pyongyang from Beijing.

Although I sat in seat 1D, there was no first class - only a freezing section (the rear) and a suffocating section (the front). Next to me was a South Korean diplomat. Since the overhead baggage area was smaller than a glove compartment, they had to store my backpack next to the cockpit door.

A meal was served: inedible, but the beer was good and I stocked up on my first North Korean souvenirs: salt and pepper and an Air Koryo wetnap. Then magazines from 2001 and the Pyongyang Times. Every item rare and probably marketable on eBay.

We didn't fly over the Yellow Sea, we made a terrestrial loop over Chinese territory and began our descent over bleak landscape: finally, North Korea! Pyongyang Sunan International Airport usually receives about five flights per week (from Beijing and Shenyang in China, and Vladivostok). This was busy season. There were the first ever tourist charters from Seoul to accommodate the 7000 South Koreans who were also allowed to visit for the first time.

The arrival was exactly like the pictures I'd seen: a simple two story building

with "Pyongyang" written in Korean and English with a portrait in between, the first of many I would see, of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung. Judging from the amount of brass hanging out, you'd think they were expecting a state visit. After deplaning we boarded a bus for the twenty second ride to the terminal. Immigration was easy but they denied my request for a passport stamp. Customs wasn't tricky either but they were concerned if I had a cell phone or GPS. All cell phones were confiscated until departure from the country. We boarded a Korean International Tourist Company bus parked out front and met our guides: Mr. Kim, 33, a well-mannered fluent English speaker, Mr. X, a 25 year old trainee, whom I later learned was high on the food chain because his grandfather is buried in the martyr's cemetery, and Mr. Ooh (secret police). Plus, a full-time cameraman with quite a coif who was always jolly, and our efficient bus driver.

We had a 25-minute drive from the airport to the hotel. This is where the amazement hit: holy shit, I was in North Korea! A wide, paved road led past empty fields and characterless gray concrete squares of apartment blocks. There was more activity than I expected. Dozens of people were sprucing up a green fence in anticipation of the end of the week's first time visit from Chinese president Hu Jin Tao.

We were assigned to the Yanggakdo a French built 47-story modern hotel on an island in the Taedong River, easy to control and monitor any unexpected movement of its guests.

After waiting around a few minutes for keys, my roommate (an Indian-American doctor from Newport Beach) and I deposited our bags in the room. We had about a half-hour before departure, a rare half-hour of downtime on a schedule packed four-day tour of the country. I snapped some photos of sunset over the Taedong from our tenth floor river view room and made a detour to the revolving restaurant (not revolving at the moment) on the 47th floor where I apparently interrupted a disciplinary meeting of the all-female wait staff. No smiles or hellos. I snapped some panoramic photos and met up with the others in the lobby bar behind the 100-gallon fish tank with the live sea turtle.

North Korea draft beer was so tasty that I actually had it on my mind for the rest of the night.

I was on a high. I'd been waiting nine years to come here and I could feel an excitement for travel that I hadn't felt in years. All my senses were alert and when we got back on the bus to drive through the streets of Pyongyang I was fascinated.

It was now dark. Pyongyang is not La Ville Luminiere and power rationing is a way of life. The rectangular high rises radiated enough light. There was almost no incandescent light to remind me of a giant Lite Brite traffic and the few pedestrians on the street looked like they were scurrying home.

Fifteen minutes after we left, we arrived at the May Day Stadium, the world's largest (150,000 seats). The stadium was brightly lit and there was a buzz around the stadium as spectators and participants to the show filed in.

The centerpiece of our trip to North Korea was the Arirang Mass Games. Probably the largest show on earth in terms of cast size. 100,000 performers engage in a show which I can describe as a combination of Cirque du Soleil and the Super Bowl halftime show.

Our avoidance of an entry queue was evidence of our VIP treatment which was to continue for the remainder of the tour. As soon as we got in, I raided the souvenir counter: posters, a program, a VCD, and lapel pins.

Four weeks prior I went to see Vasco da Gama (the soccer team, not the explorer) kick off from their home stadium in Rio de Janeiro. At the time I thought how dull live NFL games are compared to this team worship. But the adrenaline rush of walking into this behemoth of socialist architecture with the obedient roar of the 20,000 card flippers rehearsing directly across the field from us will forever be unmatched.

The Mass Games requires attention to two areas. The students seated in the opposite stands who hold poster-sized books containing pages of solid colors which when turned in unison, create an enormous mosaic 300 feet long and 200 feet high. On the directors' signal, the mosaic can change from socialist realism art to stunning landscapes to a massive portrait of Kim Il Sung (the

crowd goes wild for this) in a matter of seconds, flawlessly.

On the floor of the stadium, up to 80,000 dancers, marchers, soldiers, and acrobats play through a variety of scenes and themes of building socialism and reunifying the two Koreas. The show runs nearly ninety minutes and is performed daily for three months. It was said that over 200,000,000 man-hours have been spent on its production. The only surprise was that with all the effort put into the show, the soundtrack was canned and played through a giant PA system.

For fifty Euros we got folding chairs in the tourist section. The 100 Euro and 300 Euro seats were positioned higher up but no one in my group could justify the additional expense. After all, we had plunked down 1790 Euros for the four-day privilege of visiting DPRK.

The end of the show left me full of adrenaline which was helpful because the Korean peninsula, one of the coldest parts of Asia, was beginning to reveal that it was indeed the middle of autumn.

From May Day stadium we were shuttled to the Pyongyang Grand Theater Restaurant which appeared to be closed to all but our group and a few other foreigners. >From what I heard, restaurants are not the type of place people would privately decide to go. "Honey, feel like eating at the Grand Theater Restaurant on Saturday night? I'll make a reservation!" is not something I imagined would pass through the lips of a North Korean. Most socializing in this country is done in groups: work units, student groups, sports clubs, etc.

Despite the famine of North Korea we hear about in the West, our first meal in the country was a banquet: a non-stop procession of dishes and Pyongyang beer, most of it delicious.

avenues. We returned™Back on to the Lite Brite to the hotel on our secluded island. Though we were given no bedtime curfew, leaving the hotel to verify Pyongyang's non-existent nightlife was not permitted. We were not allowed to go anywhere without our guides. As Simon put it, "you won't get arrested or anything, it's the guides who will get in trouble".

Before we left for the games, we were all told that we were going to have to

change rooms when we got back. We thought Mr. Kim was joking when he told us this because he even had a bit of a chuckle when he mentioned it. We couldn't figure out why we would have to change rooms since none of us complained about the room and the 500-room hotel surely had enough rooms to accommodate more than anybody. Mr. Kim never gave us an answer but it didn't matter because that was the end of it, the subject was never brought back up and we ended up staying put in our original rooms.

Nothing on the tour was flexible, everything was pre-arranged, and we always showed up expectedly, we never surprised anyone. In fact, two days later when we visited the Pyongyang metro to ride the subway from one station to another, there happened to be a table conveniently set up in station number two with Pyongyang metro souvenir books in English available for sale. The man selling the books wasn't an enterprising capitalist, but a government employee who knew we'd be there even before we did.

Touring the Yanggakdo, however was allowed. There were a few shops, a swimming pool, bowling alley, karaoke bar, casino (run by a Macao company), Japanese restaurant, nightclub, and massage parlor reputed to be a brothel (also staffed by Chinese). I settled in the lobby bar with Chris and Bryan for the draught beers I'd been dreaming about all day. After a long day and preparing for another one, I crashed at 12:30.

Day 2

For years when I thought of coming to DPRK I always imagined pinching myself saying, "I can't believe I'm in North Korea!" But there was really no time to pinch myself - we had a full schedule today. I was up and alert at 6AM.

After a hot shower I went outside to enjoy the cool morning and was joined by Ashok, Bryan, Richard, and David. We thought we'd go for a stroll around the island but there was really nowhere to go. Simon told us there was a golf driving range where we could slice balls into the clear Taedong River.

Richard led us there and sure enough, for 2.50 Euros we got fifty balls and an

assortment of clubs. Not having come near a golf ball in three years I was impressed with my succession of 200 yard drives, straight as an arrow on 75% of them. The only drawback was that my arms hurt until I got back to Beijing. We went to Dining Room #1 which was full of diners - mostly South Koreans. Half of our group was at the table and all were confused. We each tried to serve ourselves at the buffet of Korean food and all were politely told to sit down by the waitress who eventually came by with omelets and white bread sans crust.

We left around ten to ride over the bridge over the river, into the city, and my fascination with this place began again. My eyes were glued to the window of Pyongyang like I was watching a developing story on CNN. The streets were much busier than I had imagined and heard about. According to David from Hawaii, what we were seeing was not unlike the Soviet Union of the 1960's: no color, no advertising (except for a few billboards for a car called "The Whistle" which isn't available to private citizens - so why were they advertising?), socialist slogans and socialist realism posters, portraits of the two Kims on many corners, long cues for the bus and sad-looking shops.

I had fun making a game of waving at people, freaking them out (because less than 2000 Western tourists per year visit this country), and seeing if they would wave back. Some did, smiling enthusiastically, and others turned away shyly, not really knowing how to react.

We passed many of the monuments which we would visit two days later, which I had seen dozens of times in my mind through memory of the tourist brochures I bought from the North Korean embassy in Beijing nine years ago.

January 1997

I entered the embassy easily and it was pretty empty. I cleared my throat to attract a woman from the desk and she took my passport and started flipping through some notebook.

After five minutes, a man came over and asked what I needed. "Tourist visa."

He walked me to another office and one of the counselors told me, "We cannot issue tourist visas to US passport holders. Hopefully that will change in the near future, things will change." I asked him about a business visa and he said I need an invitation from a company in Pyongyang. I told him I couldn't get one, so I asked if he had any souvenirs. "What kind of souvenirs?" "Books or magazines," I said.

He sent me to a waiting room where I waited for ten minutes. He came back with a stack of brochures, booklets, and postcards - stuff you'd get in a travel agency. He said to take what I wish and left while I sorted it out. I didn't want to take everything so I picked half out and he came back.

He said, "It's best you buy everything." I asked, "how much?" He replied, "everything?" I answered, "no, just my pile." He punched some numbers in a calculator and I almost burst out into laughter when he came up with...\$120! For free travel agency brochures.

This is how hard up the North Koreans are for money. I said, "That's too much. I can only pay \$5." He pointed to a book and remarked, "This is worth \$10." I said, "I have to eat and pay my hotel bill." He countered, "OK \$80." We bargained for ten minutes and I got this stack of rare collector junk for \$10.

Back to 2005, Day 2

We were on our way to Panmunjom, the DMZ, about 2½ hours south. DPRK only has four highways, all void of traffic and the occasional passing vehicle is a rarity. I loved driving through the capital but I was also interested to see the countryside.

Southbound we passed empty fields and collective farm workers and the occasional lonely village which I couldn't figure out how to access because the highway had no exits. The land looked like the cityscape: bleak and unimaginative. We kept passing concrete columns which Bryan, an ex-General's aid (Tommy Franks) told me were anti-tank barriers and lots of tunnels through the low mountainous terrain.

We had the fortunate fun of being involved in what may have been one of the DPRK's few traffic accidents: a truck coming northbound on the wrong side of the road clipped and broke our side mirror. We stopped. The truck kept going and we had an unscheduled opportunity to get out on the highway and listen to the silence of the countryside while our driver retrieved the broken mirror parts from the tunnel which was the scene of the accident.

Then we pressed southward past Kaesong city, the only place indicated by highway signs.

We arrived at the DMZ visitor's center where we had a briefing in Korean given by a uniformed officer, translated by Mr. Kim. Throughout the DPRK visit, our three guides took turns translating explanations of the sites that we saw.

There was a little model of Panmunjom over which the class was conducted. I didn't pay much attention because I had been here before, but on the other side, nine years ago.

We then walked five minutes to the building where the 1953 armistice was signed which also contained a small museum. We were the only tourists there. Then a bus to the border site, to the building of which was my only photo of North Korea until now. There was also a stone monument to Kim Il Sung's last signature before he died. His dying thoughts and wishes were of reunification. We entered the DMZ admin building, went to the second floor and in a strange dimension, I was looking at my own army looking at me through binoculars across the border 100 feet away, halfway around the world. Nine years ago I gaped in awe about the absurdity of the situation from the other side, fascinated with the building I was now standing in.

Geographically speaking, if I walked two minutes across to the DMZ visitor's center in South Korea, I could hop on a bus and be in Seoul in 45 minutes. But in reality, if I tried to cross the border on foot, I'd either be detained or shot by which side I don't know and I'll definitely end up on CNN.

The fastest way to Seoul from here was to drive back to Pyongyang, fly to Beijing, and catch a flight to Seoul. Probably take a few days instead of 47 minutes.

The conversation here was interesting - again we were the only tourists and we were hanging out with the KPA officers in olive uniforms with gold stars chatting about the situation. Bryan trumped them all by revealing that he had been a soldier on the other side, many years ago; well, not too many he was only 35.

Although we had different opinions about who started the Korean War 55 years ago, we all agreed a new war would be a disaster for both sides with millions dead in both capitals within the first 24 hours. Sure, the US could lose its 37,000 troops in South Korea but the Korean peninsula would be the biggest crisis in the world and the people safe at home in America who have no stake in this half-century old conflict would forget about it faster than Bush forgot about Katrina.

After about an hour here, we said goodbye to our hosts and drove off to Kaesong city, a few minutes north. We had another excellent spread waiting for us. We were never given menus at any restaurant so I have no idea what anything would cost local people if they were to eat here (we were the only diners today). But according to Simon, the North Koreans don't use money in most situations because everything is provided for by the state. All part of the "Juche" idea of North Korea's form of isolationist socialism which loosely translates into everything will be provided by the state and that which is not should be self-provided.

Although the official exchange rate was 160 Won to the dollar, Simon said the real exchange rate was closer to 3000 and that the North Koreans earn between W6000-8000/month.

After lunch I visited the gift shop attached to the restaurant and they had some interesting books but I assumed I would be able to get these in a few days when we go to the Foreign Language Bookshop. I ended up with "The Works of Kim Il Sung, Volume 32." Bryan ended up with Volume 8 and we joked about trading but realized there is something like 48 volumes!

We did a short tour of Kaesong city stopping first at a medium-sized bronze statue of Kim Il Sung, high on a hill overlooking the city. We were asked to bow

which we all did obligingly. Photos were permitted but only in whole. A headshot or partial body shot was deemed disrespectful. Throughout the tour we were told when we could and couldn't take photographs. None were allowed from the moving bus. The DPRK didn't want images exported of people working, poverty, or critical sights like bridges of the military.

Two days later, while waiting for the bus to leave a gift shop in central Pyongyang, I asked Mr. Kim if I could walk fifty feet away to snap a picture of a propaganda billboard. He denied me the privilege because the men were raking something around the base.

For our only visit to a historical sight predating the war and the two Kim cult, we had a nice tour of a historical museum which was occupying the traditional structures of an old university. The piece of pride was a metal typeface of a Chinese block character which predated both the Hangul script and the Gutenberg press. There was even an article about it in this day's (week's, month's, year's, etc.) Pyongyang Times

The other main attraction in the area were the twin tombs of a 13th century king and his wife, mounds of green earth covering both tombs in the traditional Korean manner (similar to the ones I'd seen in Kyongju, South Korea), perhaps the only architectural style the two Koreas still share.

It was quite a beautiful spot in the countryside, twenty minutes out of town on a bumpy dirt road. Here too, on the way to the site, we made a game of waving to the pedestrians. The Keasongers were a bit more receptive and curious than the people of Pyongyang.

From the hilltop site of the royal mounds we heard music coming from the forest. Susan, the youngest and biggest envelope pusher in the group asked if we could join the picnickers to say hello. Our first chance to meet regular North Koreans who weren't involved in the tourist industry.

Before coming on this trip I had read some travelogues on line and was half expecting to see what I had read about staged events. People assigned to places where tourists would be just so this abnormal place would appear to be a normal place (i.e. extras).

This scene was 100% real though. We startled the group of ten men, three women, and a few babies. The men were drunk, leftover stew lay in a large wok on a campfire, and there was dancing to tape recorded music. We approached slowly and I passed out cigarettes. They asked us where we were from and when twelve out of the fifteen of us revealed, "the US", faces turned sour for a second until they came to terms that we were just good people and they were good people and that our troubles lay between our governments not individuals.

We began to dance with them. Although we couldn't speak each other's languages, we were able to communicate with gestures and had a great time hanging out with them in this unique cultural exchange. They gave me a sticky rice-based sweet which stuck to the roof of my mouth for the rest of the day. After fifteen minutes, we left.

In another instance of the North Koreans knowing we'd arrive before we did, out at this site in the middle of nowhere, 25 silk paintings were laid out in the parking lot next to the bus. I bought one for \$10 which will probably require a \$150 frame.

We bussed back to Pyongyang on the same road without streetlights or illuminated villages, road assistance, or rest stops. Motor trouble out here at night would be a problem as there are no cell phones in this country and I didn't see any patrol cars. There certainly wasn't any traffic.

We had dinner at another private restaurant and like all of the restaurant meals, we had videos with North Korean hits (usually about reunification or glorifying socialism, Juche, or the Great Leader). The guides always ate at a separate table, sometimes in a different room.

When we arrived back at the hotel I spent \$80 on books and postcards, potluck really because books weren't always available in English so I also had items in Chinese, Russian, German, Korean, French, and Spanish.

The bar was quieter than last night so I had a few beers and crashed by twelve.

Day 3

Packing was difficult because of all the souvenirs I've acquired don't fit in my backpack and now I've got heavy, overflowing, plastic bags to carry too. While getting ready I watched a BBC report about a journalists' visit to North Korea. I couldn't make out what he was saying because the channel kept freezing like the satellite signal was being interrupted. I don't know if it was a satellite issue or a BBC issue but the other channels (Russian, Chinese, Japanese) all seem to come in okay, except the Russian channel which didn't seem to have any picture, only sound.

Today's breakfast was upgraded to buffet. Maybe our comments to Mr. Kim yesterday were channeled through to the hotel staff? We checked out after eating and while waiting for the formalities to pass, I gave out the gifts for the guides which I brought from home. Nothing fancy: some postcards and key chains, plus a few feminine gifts which I brought in case we had a woman guide. My mother suggested a bath kit but I didn't think it would make sense since I presumed the North Koreans would have showers but not baths.

We were splitting the day between Pyongyang and a three-hour drive north to Mt. Myohyang. So we left around nine for another lightning speed sightseeing tour. Our first stop was Fountain Park, which was, well, basically what it sounds like. A large concrete plaza in the center of Pyongyang (again, void of people) with socialist realism sculptures and rocky waterfalls producing a loud roar of water.

The sky was gray overcast and the city looked especially bleak, devoid of any color. Eventually the locals began to cross the park but never made eye contact or recognition of any of us. We were actually allowed to walk away from our guides (albeit, within 100 meters) to freely take photos anywhere in the park. I was curious to see if we would be given more flexibility or extended any trust as the tour went on.

On to Mansudae Hill which was supposed to be our first stop after leaving the airport and arriving in the city on day one. I think it's sort of a ritual. This is where the twenty meter bronze statue of Kim Il Sung overlooks the city holding his arm up in a "look what I've got here" manner. Simon bought a small

bouquet of flowers for our group. After, he placed them at the base of his shining metal shoes we stood in a horizontal line and bowed in unison.

After us, it was a group of workers in suits. Everyone here, like everyone else in the country, was wearing a lapel pin of Kim Il Sung. And although we all wanted one, this was the one item not available for sale. It was a North Korean's most prized possession.

Then a group of school kids in uniforms, their teacher delivering a teary address over the microphone. I couldn't decide if he was actually grieving or just a good actor. I asked our security police guide if I could take a picture of the kiddies and was told that the teacher didn't think this was a good idea and was denied.

Flanking the Great Statue were the twin socialist realism bas-relief sculptures of the victory march. They looked like copies of the in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Amazing detail that would make Michelangelo jealous. I snapped an interesting piece of detail of the KPA soldiers tramping on a GI Joe's helmet and US flag. After a professional group photo we left.

The whole trip was information overload. I wanted to learn so much about everything. If we weren't visiting a sight, I was talking to Simon or the others on the bus or just taking mental photos of the cityscape.

Imagine if everyone in America visited George Washington's birthplace. Now although I'm not particularly patriotic, I know my history, and without cheating, I believe that he was born in Mt. Vernon, Virginia (or maybe he died there?). I don't imagine the majority of Americans would guess better. But this is North Korea and our next stop was Mangyongdae, Kim Il Sung's birthplace.

Three simple thatched huts proved humbled beginnings. The grounds were beautiful and the colors of the foliage this time of year were spectacular.

This was the most crowded sight we'd visited. Everyone was dressed solemnly - men in dark suits but school kids in tracksuits. I saw a large group of traditionally dressed women. I don't know if they were part of the attraction or if they were a work unit.

I wonder if this was one of those situations where people genuinely want to

visit or they feel that if they don't visit, others will make note of this and brand them unpatriotic.

Like the metro in Moscow, Prague, or a handful of other former communist cities in Europe, a descent on the escalator takes several minutes. Music is piped in but there are no advertisements.

The exterior of the building was plain and when we walked in I detected a bit of shock and indifference to us by those who cued up for metro tickets. The only real price I found out for anything in North Korea were metro tickets at five Won (would equal \$.03 at the official rate, but \$.003 at the real rate!). My guide got one for me simply by knocking on the ticket office window and flashing a badge. Then he probably said something like, "give me a free metro ticket or you'll end up in the gulag before I finish my sentence" Afterward he joked with me, "you owe me five Won."

We never bought tickets for the group nor were we asked for any. It was as if we didn't exist, were invisible. I tried to substitute New York in this scenario. As I lead a group of tourists past an open gate next to the turnstiles of the NYC subway, "It's okay officer, they're in a tour group!"

Like Moscow, Pyongyang did have ornate metro stations, 3 out of 17). I expected the metro to be closed to everyone but tourists but we got to mix with the locals once again. It wasn't exactly crowded. There were probably more people waiting for the monorail at Disney World the last time I was there. The station was spotless with beautiful mosaics, dim lanterns, dark carriages (complete with graffiti etched into the windows - done by the Germans, as these cars used to run through East Berlin). This was definitely a fifty-year time warp.

So we admired one station for a few minutes, rode to another (there were even ordinary people in our car!), admired the other station, bought my souvenir metro guide, and left. We were still in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory mode ("There's so much to see and so little time to see it"). We were in the thick of the city now. It seemed like quite an active place.

With 45 minutes to browse and buy at the Pyongyang stamp shop, everyone

filed off the bus. Simply not enough time. Fifteen of us were competing for the attention of three shop girls. I wanted some anti-US stamps as collector's items, and a few postcards. Okay, plus a book and t-shirt. The funniest stamp was the one to commemorate the "International Conference of Journalists against US Imperialism" and showed a bunch of pens stabbing Richard Nixon. Next door was the monstrous Koryo Hotel where we were originally supposed to stay. It looked more interesting and more fun, especially being in the center of town. But we wouldn't have been allowed out anyway; plus, they didn't have a driving range!

I bought a Pyongyang Koryo Hotel towel in the gift shop, then joined a few of the group at the bar when I got to sample the almost delicious Pyongyang dark draught beer. I'm sure Kim Il Sung crafted the stout himself.

Lunch was at the 450m TV tower (it seems every communist city has one). Sadly, this was the worst weather day of the trip. While sitting at breakfast this morning I was hoping that the fog would lift by this afternoon but when we reached the top of the TV tower, the views just didn't exist. Again, we were the only ones there. Lunch was delicious and we were treated to karaoke hits sung by the restaurant staff.

Since the Korean War (52 years earlier) seems to be the main news story here, visiting the Fatherland War Liberation Museum was like catching up on the DPRK's view of current events. Our museum guide wasn't a retired schoolteacher or geeky history buff, but a uniformed female KPA soldier. The building, like every structure we've been in since arriving here, was freezing. They must save a fortune cooling these places in the summer but being late fall, these huge, empty, characterless corridors and rooms couldn't retain any heat.

We toured from random room to random room (there were too many rooms in the museum to see everything on one tour) and were shown models, maps, photos, and relics of evidence indicating all guilt and defeat to the US imperialist forces. I think we rented the museum because regardless of how popular this topic of American defeat and Korean victory rests with the people,

there were no others here except our group. There were destroyed planes, tanks, and jeeps. A few of our group had fun posing (clandestine) for photos in these vehicles.

Around the corner was the Monument to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War, another empty concrete space flanked by large socialist realism sculptures. Apparently this is a popular spot for wedding photos just as is the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow - it's a communist thing. Drenched in mist and fog, Pyongyang had an eerie effect. Everything was denied light and color and Pyongyang, an already bland and colorless city, remained gray.

We took our bus for a quick ride to the USS Pueblo docked in the middle of the city on the Taedong River. No, the Pueblo wasn't a gift from the comrade Cuban communists, it was a US spy ship captured in 1968. The crew abandoned ship 38 years ago but only after being detained under harsh treatment for eleven months. While on a "scientific mission" on a "research vessel", the fateful crew allegedly sailed out of international waters in to the hands of the North Korean Navy. Another tense diplomatic episode during a decade filled with mistrust between the two countries.

The tour of the boat wasn't fascinating. I had seen boats before. The video shown about the history of the capture of the Pueblo was just more propaganda. The interesting thing was that we were given a tour by one of the officers who actually captured the boat! Talk about stumbling on to a job! He didn't seem to have any animosity toward us being American and like the officers we met at the DMZ, I think he actually found it ironic to be talking to Americans about the military position of the DPRK.

Here we had more contact with the locals. This time school kids who were sitting on a hill above the rover waiting for our group to leave the Pueblo. I juggled rocks (in the absence of balls) for them and they all cheered. Richard wanted to yell out "hello" to them in Korean but must have mixed-up his newly learnt phrases and confused the kids when he shouted "Thank You!" instead. Earlier, on the way back from Mangyongdae, we drove down Sports Street which was lined with different sized complexes, each the home of the sports

clubs for its respective sport. The ping-pong center had a ping-pong paddle bas-relief sculpture over its door, the basketball building, a basketball, and so on. Mr. Kim explained that there were sports clubs who used the centers for practice and performance. All of the buildings were built for the Youth Games held here in 1989. It wasn't for casual walk-ups who decide to just run in for a game of volleyball or bowling. That just didn't exist.

We were visiting the Children's Palace, another one of these practice/performance centers but for the super-talented children of the arts. Since we were sort of running late I didn't have time to absorb the enormity of the building, the murals, sculptures, and neighborhood.

Inside was freezing, of course. We went straight to the auditorium which was already filling up with South Korean tourists. I met two Israelis, one of whom claimed to be the first Israeli ever to visit North Korea (Simon later laughed at this). It was his second trip this month. I asked his friend what he thought and he told me he would never come back because, "I am a businessman. I don't like to be on anyone else's schedule except mine."

The show started. I wasn't sure about the theme but it was certainly packed with amazing performers. There was dancing, singing, music, drumming, hula hooping, and gymnastics. It wasn't the Mass games but it was an entertaining and relaxing enough way to spend an hour.

On the way out I passed something often forgotten about in the world of aerospace. The North Korean space shuttle. Apparently they either have admiration for ours or desire for their own because a large model sits central stage and reminds these stars of the nation of Korea's greatness every time they enter the building.

It was just about dark when we left the theater. We were leaving the city tonight for a drive up north. Another dark night road trip. I tried sleeping on the bus but I was too awake by this whole experience. But I managed to doze off a bit and the next thing I knew, the lights on the bus were turned on and we arrived in the mountain village of Mt. Myohyang.

I knew where we were going, I'd seen pictures of this hotel before: another

pyramid with a revolving restaurant. Only, this one wasn't 105 stories and the revolving restaurant actually worked! But what was the point because the hotel was only ten stories, there were no views except the mountains, and the restaurant only revolved at night.

While waiting to check in, I raided the hotel gift shop and bought some books and lapel pins. This was the first and only shopping experience in the DPRK where I was able to bargain a little bit for my goods. All prices are quoted in Euros. Payment is possible in Euros, Dollars, Japanese Yen, or Chinese Renminbi. They used the exchange of 1.25 Dollars to the Euro which was about five points too high. There were no cash registers and it seems as if all calculations were made in the head.

Dinner was in a huge dining room. We were sharing the room with a group of South Koreans (were these the same people we keep seeing in Pyongyang?). This hotel had the worst food of the trip. The meat wasn't appetizing but luckily a Korean meal has so many dishes served at once there is always something to eat. We sat around drinking beers after dinner and although we each had a beer included in the meal, we only had to pay \$1 per bottle thereafter.

Tonight's entertainment was karaoke in Karaoke Bar Number One. It was a good time. We drank beer, brandy, and wine. The list of songs on the karaoke menu was antiquated and safe. They did have a few Beatles songs but not "Revolution". A lot of Carpenter's titles I had long forgotten about, some Frank Sinatra, some Bee-Gee's ("Massachusetts").

We took turns with the South Koreans. It seemed like they had a pretty long list of songs and they weren't as shy as us Westerners when it came to singing but they had absolutely no rhythm and the supporters at the tables couldn't even clap to the beat.

I sang "Fly Me to the Moon" but it was at a speed I was unfamiliar with and I think a few people walked out on me. Chris wanted to sing "We Are the Champions" because he found "We Are the Champs." on the list but he fell into the trap (Simon says at least one person per trip does this). This was actually a

nine-minute Japanese soccer song, not the Queen hit. On that note (or off note, rather) I went to sleep.

Day 4

Another foggy start; but it didn't matter, we were staying inside this morning. Breakfast was equally as bad as dinner. While waiting to check out I bought the balance of the lapel pins which I did not have. Outside, I kicked the soccer ball around with Simon and snapped some pictures of the beautiful foliage and the mountain scenery. We were just killing time waiting for the British/Chinese couple to come down so we could leave. They were already running thirty minutes late, holding up the group, and everyone was getting pissed off. The guides seemed unable to formulate a plan to get them motivated. They couple didn't answer the phone in the room and nobody has been up to knock. In what may have been North Korea's first vote, we voted to leave now and let the late lovers meet up with our group at the site.

Ten minutes away by bus we arrived at the International Friendship Exhibition Hall. This pawn shop collection of items was the DPRK's way of providing proof of its legitimacy worldwide. After being in the country a few days, something began to become obvious. Like father, like son. Each of the Kims had a museum. The Kim Il Sung pavilion looked like a traditional Korean temple from the outside but was in fact build into the side of a mountain. Heavy bronze twenty-foot doors provided protection to this cave not to mention two armed guards with silver AK-47's. Did they really think someone was going to try to penetrate this fortress?

We had to put shoe covers on so to not scuff the exhibit's marble floors. With hundreds of rooms and over 219,000 items on display, the hour that we had in here was just an introduction. No cameras were allowed and no souvenir books were on sale. I met the LA Times' Asia Bureau Chief who interviewed me by phone from China when I got home and despite writing an entertaining article, without pictures, the scale and scope of the collection is lost.

Our traditionally dressed female guide pointed out the obvious donors of the gifts as we shuffled from room to room. Some friendly countries like Russia and China had given so many gifts that they seemed to have their own rooms. Gifts didn't just come from government officials and heads of state, they were from unknown private citizens as well. I asked Mr. Ooh if I could give a gift or how it was done rather. All gifts are accepted but not all are put on display. I had my multi-functional hiking watch with me but doubted it would be displayed ('Mr. Adam Malis of Boca Raton, America generously donates this time piece').

So what was on display? Plaques, carvings, ivory, china, glass, sculptures, a train from Josef Stalin, a fleet of five KGB sedans from Moscow, swords, guns, knives, a soccer ball from Pele and set of gems like the ones I bought in Minas Gerais from Brasil, a silver engraved ashtray from President Jimmy Carter, clocks, DVD players and a big screen TV from Samsung, a Michael Jordan signed basketball from Secretary of State Madeline Albright, an entire room of furniture (this room looked like a furniture clearance sale).

Top prize for strangest gift went to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas gift of a stuffed crocodile serving drinks of a waiter's tray. Top prize for tackiest display went to the Madame Tussaud style wax figure of Kim Il Sung standing in front of beautiful country scenery. We had to be silent in this room.

Between visiting the different museums, we paused on the balcony of Big Kim's pavilion to admire the foliage and mountain scenery. The gift shop was probably the bleakest in North Korea. I bought a wooden cigarette holder and a box of wooden toothpicks. As much as I would have liked to stick around and view more rooms and make lists of silly gifts, we had to press on because we still had a full day of sightseeing in Pyongyang and we still hadn't even driven the two hours to get there. We had our final awful meal at the hotel, ten minutes away, which consisted of inedible-looking hamburgers.

The bus ride back to Pyongyang was uneventful except for a pee-stop we made of the side of the road. There are no rest stops, or emergency lanes for that matter, the lack of traffic makes either unnecessary. Several of us ran into the

bushes where a farmer just happened to be nearby. As soon as we appeared he must have thought he was hallucinating because he took off running!

Something back in Pyongyang was different. The city was now decorated. It didn't look like Christmas in Manhattan but the Chinese president was due in town so the roads were lined with the dual flags of North Korea and China criss-crossed in a friendship position.

There were also banners and billboards in Korean and Chinese declaring eternal friendship between the two neighbors. Hu Jin Tao was probably the biggest visitor DPRK has ever received. Brian made a political observation. He suspected that Hu was coming to have something signed by Kim. He said the Chinese president doesn't hop on a plane to Pyongyang to negotiate - that's already been done. He's come to close a deal.

We stopped at the Arch de Triumph, a copy of the French monument, only nine meters taller, and commenting only on one war, the only war in the DPRK's history. We parked in front of Kim Il Sung stadium, another massive sports arena (95,000 seats) in the center of the city. Also, on the horizon, annoyingly was the TV tower, with today's weather providing clear views. That's the inflexibility of pre-arranged tours.

Everybody was excited about the Foreign Language Bookshop, reputed to have the best book and music selection in the country. But before going in we had a close-up opportunity to photograph one of the few uniformed lady traffic cops in action. There are no traffic lights in Pyongyang so at the busiest intersections a cute girl in a blue uniform with a striped wand robotically instructs the few passing cars.

I had already bought most of the books I wanted but managed to find another \$50 worth of crap ranging from a CD to books like "The US Imperialists Started the Korean War" to more lapel pins. I have no idea what I'm going to do with this stuff but since it can't be bought anywhere else, I felt obligated to stock up.

Then I had a moment of freedom when I asked if I could run back to the bus to

check my stock and see if I wasn't duplicating any book purchases. They said yes and soon I was running down a Pyongyang street unattended. I could have...I don't know what. What were they afraid I would do that required constant monitoring anyway?

After the bookshop visit we actually were allowed to walk as a group to Kim Il Sung square, the center of Pyongyang. I felt an amazing adrenaline rush as we walked down the avenue past everyday people. I would have never guessed I would be doing this only a few weeks ago.

The square (empty, of course) was no Red Square or Tiananmen Square. There was no mausoleum here. Kim Il Sung lies in the Kumsusan Memorial Palace outside town. But it was massive and full of cool socialist posters and portraits of Marx and Lenin and Kim Il Sung. From the square, all the amazing Pyongyang monuments were visible, particularly the Juche Tower, right in front of us, across the river.

The clock was ticking. We were supposed to go there for sunset and the day was ending quickly. We had a ten-minute obligatory stop in a gift shop and then played soccer in the parking lot for another ten minutes before heading to the other side of the river.

The Juche Tower, a 170-meter granite monolith topped by a sculpted flame, offers the best views of Pyongyang. Within a few minutes of cramming into a 1950's New York-looking elevator, we arrived at the top, at the base of the flame. The wind was impressive and the fall temperatures quickly felt wintry. But the views were stunning. Sort of Pyongyang's Empire State Building. The views we had today made up for the foggy lunch at the TV tower.

Ten minutes was all we could stand, plus it was getting dark and we still had one monument to see. Luckily it was only a five-minute drive. We ended the tower tour in a different room than we started in and there just so happened to be a gift shop where I was able to buy a balsa wood model of the Juche Tower which now sits on my desk at work. At the base of the tower was a hall of plaques from different countries all praising the juche idea. Guarding it from the front, on the river side, was the trident of the worker (represented by the

hammer), the farmer (represented by the sickle), and the intellect (represented by the brush).

The Monument to the Workers was another version of this, without people, and made of stone instead of bronze.

With no time to spare, the ones who coughed up the fifty euros again headed to the mass games. We had a rare glimpse of Pyongyang lit up at night because of the importance of their main international guest. Driving down the wide avenues to and from the games was surreal.

There were a lot of Chinese tourists here tonight. We were worried that we might not be able to see the games again because if President Hu Jin Tao wanted to see the games, it would most definitely be a closed show.

After settling in to our seats we were informed that we were allowed to move to the 100 Euro seats at no extra charge since they had the space available. It was colder than the other night, maybe because the seating wasn't as dense but this added height advantage would give us a different perspective of the games so we welcomed it. The games were the same as the other night and as expected, they weren't as exciting as the first time but I spent less time photographing them and more time watching the show.

Our last diner was at Pyongyang Duck Restaurant Number one. This was a real treat. Barbequed Pyongyang duck served with soup and noodles. The dining company was great. We had a fun time laughing about our experience here and then I got some good humor material from the DPRK government. One of the books I bought in the Foreign Language Book Shop titled "A Sightseeing Guide to Korea" strangely included a section on first aid measures. Why a tourism guidebook decided to include this information is beyond me but it did provide some good laughs.

On the bus ride back to the hotel I began to read passages from the guide: "In case of sunstroke: the patient should lie in a cool place, taking off his coat" (why would someone be wearing a coat if it were hot enough to get sunstroke?) and "it is advisable for the patient to take sugared water or cucumber juice" (where would one get cucumber juice in North Korea?) and "In case of hiccups:

...the tongue should be pulled hard and held with gauze or a clean towel”
(would this be the responsibility of the guide?).

Laughter exploded around me and I was prodded to recite the text on the bus’s PA system. Mr. Kim permitted. I read word for word from beginning to end. Cracks of giggling made me pause after each point. I was on a roll. Then the bus stopped short and using the microphone’s cord to support myself, I was whipped around the aisle. The cord shorted and the microphone was no longer. Mr. Kim wasn’t happy.

He was now very serious and wanted to know what I was saying over the microphone. I told him I was reading a book produced by his government. He didn’t believe me. I showed him the page. He scanned it but unconvinced, pushed the book back in my face. I thought I was up shit’s creek. I started to picture the interrogation room, the inadequate appointed lawyer, the quick show trial. DPRK=1, Yankees=0.

When the bus pulled into the hotel, I extended my hand in apology and said, “I hope I didn’t offend you, we were only having a good time.” Then, one of the coldest silent stares I ever received and no handshake. It was official, we were now at war.

Since we were just arriving back in Pyongyang, we had to check in again. We got the exact same room (it’s not like anyone else was staying here while we were away). I unpacked my entire library of books and souvenirs and repacked them for tomorrow’s journey, then hit the bar.

I was still very uneasy about the bus incident and when Mr. Kim came down and sat at the big table with members of our group and another small group, I got no warmth extended but was less worried about the secret police carrying me out in the middle of the night. Now I was convinced there would be a DPRK agent parked in a “Whistle” out front of my house back home. After my beer, I went to crash around 1AM.

Following the Red Star to Freedom

I was up at five, nervous and excited about going back to China and putting the whole experience under my belt. I felt I had really earned stripes on this trip. After breakfast we checked out, got our surrendered passports back, and to add to my foreign currency collection, I bought 700 Won for \$5 from the hotel's money changer (the official rate is W160/\$ versus the unofficial rate of W3000/\$).

I gave out the last of my gifts to the guides and we hopped on the bus to the airport. I would to have liked to have stayed and seen more but I was still uneasy about last night's incident. Our three guides escorted us to the airport where a massive amount of travelers, probably more than Pyongyang Airport gets in an average month, were checking in to depart.

People who got their cell phones confiscated at customs on the way in got theirs back. We had a few forms to fill out but otherwise it was an easy departure. Upstairs in the departure lounge a big screen TV played a video of military parades in Kim Il Sung Square. I had seen these images on CNN and now I've walked in their footsteps, behind enemy lines.

I sat across from Alejandro Cao de Benos, the self-appointed president of the Korean Friendship Association. A Spaniard who was dressed like he just attended a DPRK worker's rally (he often dresses like a North Korean general). I didn't talk to him but I marveled at his conviction in the system of foreign governance: he was hardcore *juche*.

Soon we arrived in Beijing. The airport is now one of the busiest in Asia and the formalities for entering China are simple and efficient. Passing through customs into the largest communist country in the world, I couldn't help but feel a sense of overwhelming freedom. Only leaving North Korea could fulfill this strange phenomenon.

In the airport while waiting for others to go into the city center I met a group of Iranians who were leaving China. They saw my jacket full of commie lapel pins and began to laugh at my mockery of it. When they told me they were

from Iran, I told them I was from America. We shook hands and with that my tour of the Axis of Evil was over.