

North Korea (DPRK)



Kim Il Sung's
100-year jubilee
(1912-2012)

April, 2012



Pyongyang to DMZ

After a late arrival to Pyongyang, we got through the custom clearance after a thorough check of our luggage and camera equipment. Although not as difficult as I had anticipated. I had heard that you were not allowed to bring in so called professional camera equipment (whatever that means) nor lenses over 300 mm. The mobile phones (GPS) however had to be put in a bag which was sealed. This was not returned until leaving the country. All-in-all we were six people from Club-100 in the group.

Our first day start with breakfast near Mangyongdae Museum (Birthplace of Kim Il Sung) just outside of Pyongyang. After this stop and visit, it was time to travel south, the 170 km towards Kaesong and the demilitarized zone at parallel 38 (DMZ). We were lined up and carefully marched, like a military group, through the various buildings of interest. We made a stop at the building where the armistice agreement was made. We also made a visit to the famous blue building which covers both side of the border i.e. south as well as north Korea. Here is a table in the centre of the building where both sides supposedly meet occasionally, it is rumored, to exchange information and talk. We were able to sit down here and also take pictures on either side of the building there are soldiers guarding the two exit doors.

The DMZ is also otherwise covered with a wide buffer zone (ca: 4 km wide). There are a number of tunnels which have been dug out over time under the actual border. These are said to have been made by North Korea in order to be able to quickly move troops into South Korea. Most of these have however been discovered and sealed off.





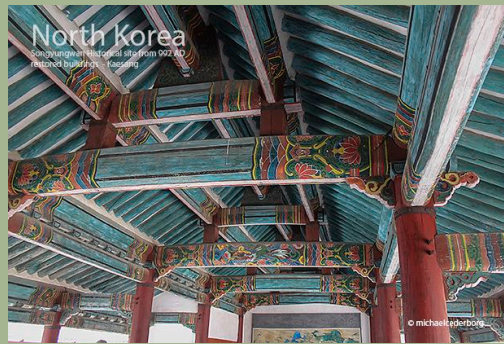
38th parallel (DMZ)

The demilitarized zone between North and South Korea is anything but demilitarized. It is one of the most well-guarded borders in the world. Over 1.5 million Koreans and some 40,000 American soldiers fought along the 38th parallel back in the 50-ies. The Armistice Talks Hall is a small building where on July 27th, 1953, a cease-fire agreement was signed. This is today a museum where they the actual agreement is on display along with many photographs from the signing, the table and chairs. The walls are covered with "evidence" in photos showing it was USA who was the aggressor and not North-Korea.

The Military Armistice Commission Conference Hall is a collection of blue and white buildings placed right over the border dividing the two countries. This building is still in use, it is said, for meetings where information is exchanged and various demands are being put. A table is placed over the border with chairs on both sides.

When we visited the North Koreans were very pleased with having launched a satellite. This we could watch in the North Korean state television and was of course pronounced a success. It turned out the satellite did not go very far before falling back down again. The incident was also condemned by the rest of the world as it goes against the international treated which the rest of the world wants DPRK to abide by.





King Kongmin's grave

After the visit at DMZ we make a stop to **King Kongmin's grave just south-west of Kaesong**. King Kongmin was the 31st emperor of Koryo empire and ruled between 1352 and to his death in 1374. Here are also his wife and higher military dignitaries buried. The place is well chosen, overlooking the whole valley.

We visit also **Songyungwan**, today very much a restored palace ground with some 20 buildings from 992 AD. This is also the place for at the time an institute of higher education for the whole country. Here the aristocracy could learn about Confucius. Most of it was however destroyed during the Japanese invasion back in 1592 and has since been rebuilt and restored. Since, 1987, the Koryo museum is also housed in these buildings with many clay pots and jewellery from the Koryo dynasty.

We finish off the day by visiting Kim Il Sung's statue in central Kaesong where a group picture is taken (puh). We have an incident where one of the visitors of the group have her ankle twisted. We have to make a stop at a local hospital to have it looked at. Interesting to see how the Korean guides handle this out of the program incident. We are not allowed inside the hospital, apart from the injured person of course.

Once this has been looked at, and it is suggested she has to have it looked at by a doctor outside of Korea, they are busy working out how to rearrange and put her on the next flight out. We are all in the meantime checked into a local hotel. This is not foreign tourist standard. The beds are made of plywood with a thin mattress. It is cold outside, and just as cold inside, as there seems to be no heating of this place. So, yes, we are freezing our nuts off during this night, but collect our things and get ready to go back to Pyongyang then following morning after breakfast.





Maternity Hospital

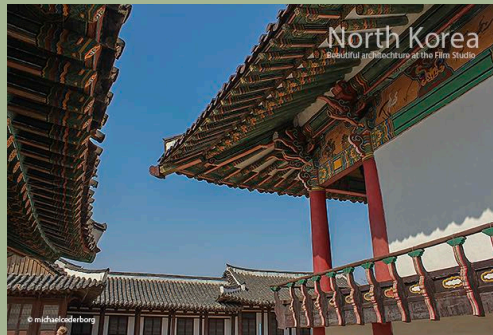
Back in Pyongyang we are making a visit to the Maternity Hospital. It is said to have more than 1500 beds and is the most advanced hospital in the city and country. We are met by a guide and the administrative chief of the hospital. After having received white coats and slippers, it is off to make a tour around the premises.

I am wondering why it is so empty everywhere. There seems to be no or very few patients or staff around when we look at the wards. We visit the ward where they check on pregnant women with ultrasound equipment. We get to see when they take ultrasound on one woman. No one believes however that the woman I actually there to perform a real test, but is there as an actor. We continue visiting the odontology, which is located a couple of meters away from the ultrasound testing! There is one chair in the middle of this large room (see picture above). Again, there is a person sitting in the chair and a dentist "performing" some work on the patient, while the whole group looks on.

We continue our tour around the premises and see old equipment donated from the west, seeming to be from the 50-ies or 60-ies rather. A stop at the neonatal ward where we see prematurely born children. Very strange feeling to walk around here. They make a show of triplets which we see.

In the afternoon we continue to visit the Korean Art Gallery, the Film studio, the Korean Museum of War, a bookshop and the subway.



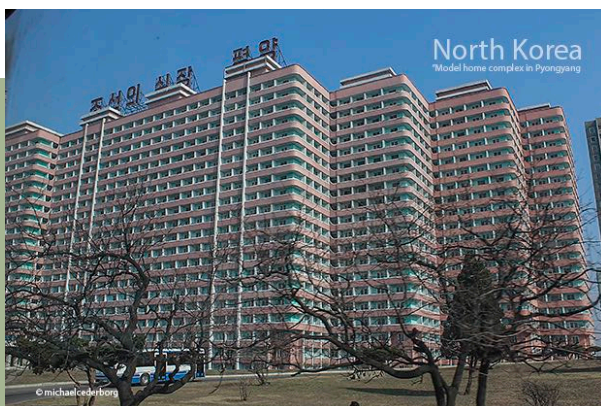


Pyongyang Film studio

After a short visit to the Korean Art Gallery, which was a real sleeping pill, I managed to lose the group and make a visit to the large square outside – The Kim Il Sung's Square. This was interesting as it was packed with people practicing various moves and dances for the upcoming celebration a few days later. It took one of the three guides over 10 minutes to realize one in the group was missing, but he did find me eventually and was not overly happy about my little disappearing act.

The Film studio was next on the agenda. This is a huge area and blocks of buildings where they make their own films. What wasn't mentioned by the guide is the fact that Choi Eun-hee was a leading actress in South Korea when she was kidnapped on the orders of the leader-in-waiting Kim Jong Il in the late 70-ies in Hongkong. She was transported back on a ship to North Korea. Her ex-husband, a famous film director, was also abducted a few months later. The duo eventually escaped in connection to a performance abroad.

The people who live in Pyongyang are privileged compared to those living outside the capital. It is not possible to travel freely within the country without a travel-pass. There are many check-points on the roads, but then again there is virtually no traffic at all. I could stand in the middle of the road and watch in both direction for a long while without seeing a single car, bus or truck.





Subway & Museum of War

We visited the Museum of War or The Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, which is the “undemanding” official name. Here we are taught how the war was won by the North Koreans. Room upon room was filled with old tanks, canons, crashed airplanes all American or south Korean of course. The walls were filled with maps showing the successful North-Korean movements during the war. There is even a 360° degree rotating floor where the visitors are seated to see a female officer showing us visitors the different faces and developments including how they captures a high-ranking American officer towards the end of the war.

The subway was the highlight of the day, as we got to travel two stations. There are rumors that there are only these two stations even though they officially claim to have two separate lines and some 16 stations in total. No one really knows at this point in time. I heard years later however, that someone had actually travelled further than these two stations. The stations we visit are elaborately decorated. It is said this subway is over 100 meters below earth, the deepest in the world, as it is designed to function as a bunker in case of a nuclear attack from the west (read USA).





North Korea
Soldier at Martyr's cemetery
© michaelcederborg



North Korea
Artillery Battalion at the Martyrs' Grave
© michaelcederborg

The Martyr's cemetery

We walk up the 300 granite steps to the top, Jujak Peak, where the burial site is located with over 200 martyrs buried. We line up, as usual, in rows and wait for the signal to move forward. One row at a time to leave flowers and show our respect to the fallen soldiers. Everything was done on command here. Even the activities which involve us being tourists. The revolutionary Martyr's Cemetery is also visited by many militaries from various squads.

Today is especially many soldiers visiting as it is 100 years since the birth of Kim Il Sung. This also gives an excellent opportunity to photograph them at a distance. Has to be done a little bit, when our guides are not watching as photographing people and especially military is not popular. They are playing pompous Korean music at the cemetery today.

The food at the restaurants is surprisingly good. The restaurants which we do visit are special restaurants for foreign tourist and owned by the government-controlled tourist organization KITC. Ordinary Koreans cannot eat here. **A "Hot Pot" restaurant named Chongry is quite good.**



North Korea
Soldiers at Martyrs' cemetery
© michaelcederborg



North Korea
Infantry Patrol posing for the Camera
© michaelcederborg



North Korea
Battalion of Artillery paying their respects
© michaelcederborg



Mangyongdae Fun Fair

On the big day, the 15th of April, and the celebration of Kim Il Sung's birthday, we had hoped to see the military parade. Well, surprise, surprise, in order to get rid of us and all other tourists, not being VIP's and special invites, they had a special event arranged for us outside of Pyongyang instead. **The Mangyongdae Fun Fair park**, had been arranged as a "Festival" with various groups performing for us with acrobatics and so forth. Sure, we had good weather and some of the performances were of course well executed. However, we had set our mind on seeing the real celebration taking place in the city.

After long discussions and raised voices from me and some of the other tourists and some phone calls to the center, who coordinates all the tourist activities and groups, did they finally relent and agree to go back to the city to see if we could at least get a glimpse of the military parade. On the way back, we passed **also Kim Il Sung's Mausoleum**, which was closed at the time. I did get to visit this on my second trip to DPRK some six years later however.

Please not (picture below right) three old Volvo 142 from ca: 1974. These and many more still running in the city were part of a trade deal Sweden made back in the 70-ies. North Korea has still not paid for these cars and other goods delivered at the time.





The Military Parade

Again, after having put pressure on the guides to make sure that we got a glimpse of the parade, they eventually agreed after having checked with "control center". Most of the streets were closed off today in connection to the celebration. Our bus managed to get through the check points however and parked the bus a couple of hundred meters away from the main street where the parade took place.

When having stopped, we got instructions from the guides that we were to wait outside the bus for further instructions and could not go individually to watch the show. As soon as we got out from the bus, we all stormed away towards the main street, not waiting for the guides or their instructions. This was just too good to miss.

It is with mixed feelings of course that one sees this spectacle modelled on the Russian Red Square parades of old. The streets were packed with people who stood waving their flags while the troops came down the main street in waves on their military vehicles loaded with all sorts of weapons. Much of it supposedly only dummies, but with a clear purpose of course to show the world what a potent military power North Korea is.

To all of this, they load military music is coming out of the speakers lining the streets.





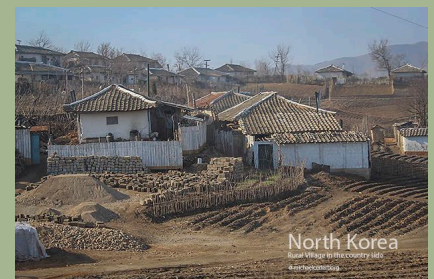
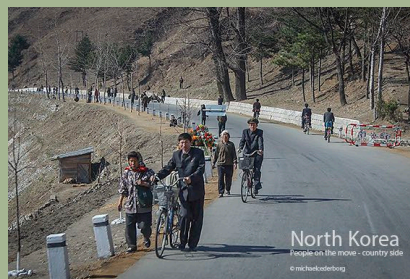
The country-side

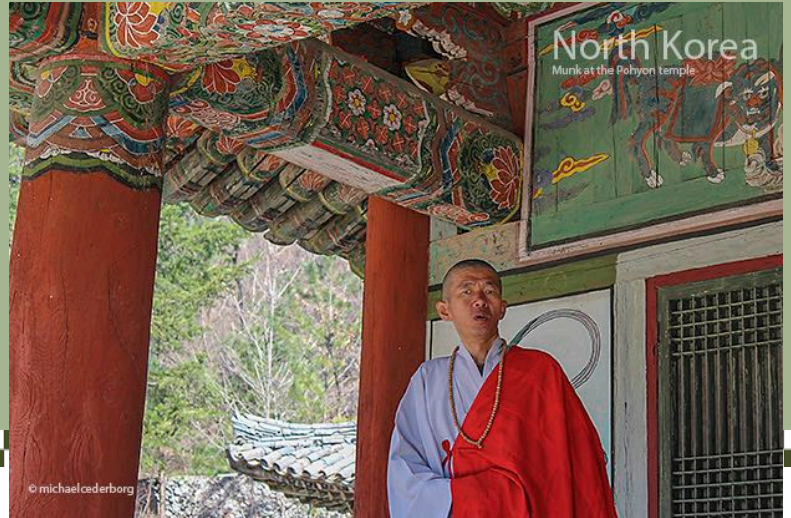
We also get to visit the north and the city of **Pyongyang** (ca 55 km north of Pyongyang), as well as the mountains (ca 160 km north). The roads are usually two-lane highways in both directions, but scarcely any traffic is seen. Only the occasional bus or truck, but other than that – nothing. They are naturally also intended to be used for moving military troops when necessary. The condition of the roads is so-so, and in dire need of repair.

When looking out the windows from our bus, we sometimes see people out working on their fields hacking away and also spreading cow-dung. All this work is done manually. They have modelled their farming on the Russian old cooperative model. The land looks very dry and unfertile. We see very few tractors or other mechanical aid used in their farming activities. No irrigation systems available. People move about using horse and cart, bicycles or simply by walking.

All side-roads taking off from the main road are guarded by military police. All private citizens have to apply for a permit to travel between city to city and using the roads. No freedom of movement here. They have planted trees on both sides of the main highway in order to cover as much as possible the view from passing by vehicles.

The guides keep reminding us that it is strictly forbidden to take photographs from the windows of the bus. This turns out to be impossible of course to enforce, as we all want to take pictures. Approaching military postings and check-points are strictly forbidden to photograph as well.





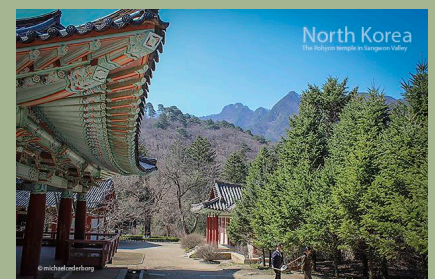
Mt. Myohyang & Manpok valley

Having travelled some 160 km to the north on poor roads, we eventually arrive to **mount Myohyang measuring 1900 meter** above sea-level. We arrive quite late, so we have to hurry up before it gets dark. We don't get up all the way to the top, but still quite high, and this is quite exhausting even so.

We take night in a smaller village/city. They serve us dinner and here we also get to drink beer – lots of beer. The staff, young girls, are very curious about us and our visit. They don't seem as they have seen a lot of foreigner before. We pull-up a computer and show pictures from back home which is a huge success. They all stand behind and watch in awe what we are showing them.



We continue thereafter to **Sangwon Valley to visit the holy Buddhist temple Pohyon**. It dates back to 1042 AD. Circa 70% survived the war and the rest has been rebuilt. Last, but not least, **we make a stop at the International Friendship Exhibition**. This is a huge building where they keep all the presents which has been received over time from foreign presidents and dignitaries visiting. It is truly a mixture of horrible things as well as some beautiful antiques.





Leaving by train

In Pyongyang, which is dedicated for selected people only. Not anyone can move to Pyongyang – the model city. The flats are distributed by the state in a very strict way depending on your job function and level. There is no rent, nor payment for running cost such as heating and electricity. The general public do not pay taxes. Education, hospitals and care for the elderly is paid for by the government.

Everyone is allocated a job depending on once education and skill. The electricity is often turned off at night/evenings in order to save cost. This can be observed from our hotel, when the city at night looks quite dark.

Many or most apartments are equipped with small speakers which cannot be turned off. Only the volume can be slightly adjusted apparently. This is used by the government as a source for spreading information / propaganda. On the walls in the apartment it is not allowed to hang personal photographs or paintings etc. Only the two official pictures of the two great leaders are allowed – Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il.

We leave North Korea by train instead of by air. It takes ca 24 hours from Pyongyang to Beijing. The border control takes hours and hours, as they go through the compartments and check through our luggage. They also confiscate small memory cards with photos, if they find any. So, these are best to hide carefully. We also get our mobile phones back no.

