

North Korea



Second time around - now with Mass Games September 2018



...First stop Beijing then Pyongyang

... Korea Konsult had three separate organized tours at the same time to North Korea. As I know Julia and Michel, the owners, from a previous trip to North Korea, they asked me if I was willing to help out and guide one of the groups. I happily accepted, especially since it coincided with the National Day and Mass Games in Pyongyang.

I flew in to Beijing and spent a night there to make sure I got there in good time to be able to meet up all the group participants the following in morning. The group consisted of 26 people from 7 countries in all. We had Russians, Estonians, French, Dutch and visitors from the Nordic countries. Quite a mix. One couple from Sweden had a tight connection from Sweden to China and therefore missed the onward flight to Pyongyang. We managed to get them onto the next flight however. Another couple was interrogated at the airport for having stayed at a private friend's house in Beijing without having reported this in their arrival card. We managed to get them through at the very last moment. And, as if this was not enough, another person collapsed at the passport /emigration point from an allergic reaction. We also managed to get him on-board eventually but only just.



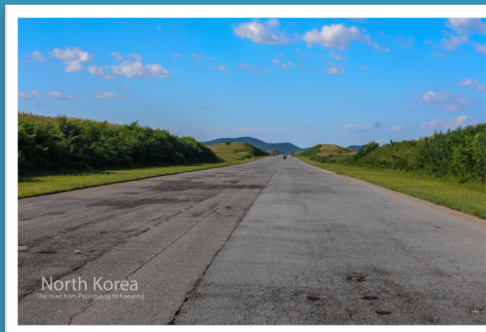
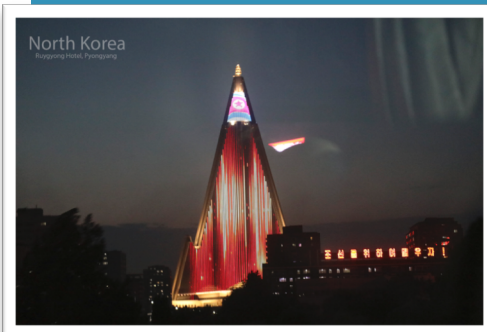
Pyongyang With 3 million people

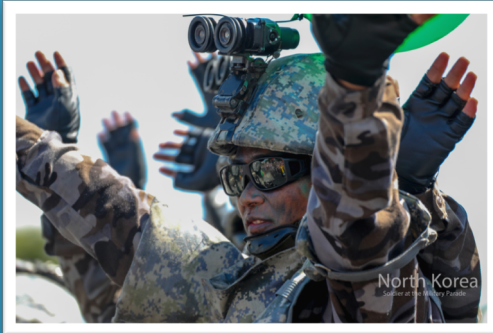


We departed with **Air Koryo**, Korea's own airline, from Beijing and landed at the brand-new airport in Pyongyang. A very modern airport which could have been anywhere else in the world. Quite different from my previous visit some six years ago.

We were met by our local two guides: Two female guides by the name Song and Kim, both speaking very good English of course. Before checking in at our hotel, we made a visit to the Juche Tower, a general quick tour around the city and also a stop at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum – unveiled in 2013 by the leader Kim Jong Un after massive renovation. The US spy ship USS Pueblo, captured by the North Koreans, had been moved from its previous place to this newly restored War museum.

We were supposed to stay at the famous **Yanggakdo International Hotel**, but had been changed to **Ryonggang Hotel** due to many foreign prominent guests visiting in connection to the National Day.





The Demilitarised Zone (DMZ)

We had, as usual, a whole palette of things to choose from which we could visit. However, as this visit coincided with the National Day and the Mass Games celebration – it was important to choose carefully and try and layout a plan not running in to too many other visitors. This meant we had to make changes frequently into our program. One day was set to visit **the DMZ** on the border to South Korea. This is a trip of 170 km travelling on not the best of roads going south. We took off very early in the morning from Pyongyang, and actually become the first of bus-loads of tourists being let into the buffer zone. We also visited Panmunjom, a village where in 1953 Armistice Talks were held between DPR Korea and the United Nations Command.

We also made a stop at **Kaesong** – capital of Korea up to the 15th century. Kaesong is the only city in Korea which has preserved its original makeup as it hasn't been destroyed during the Korean war. It is also home to **12 historic sites from the UNESCO World Heritage list**. We had also a traditional lunch at the **Tongil Restaurant "reunification"**. We were served a traditional lunch with 12 side-dishes served in brass bowls fit for the kings.

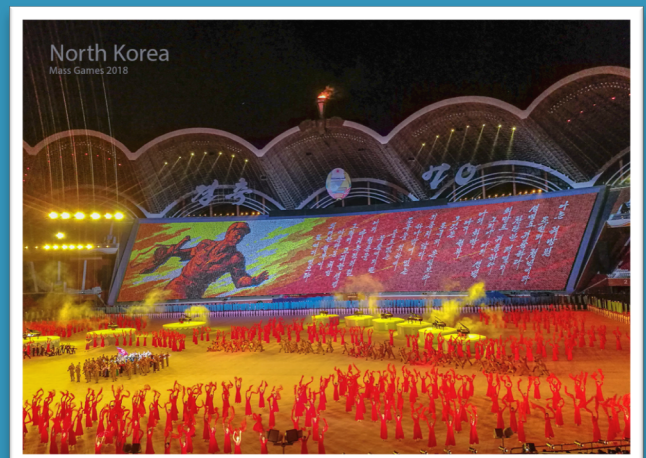




National Day and Mass Games....

Starting out the day by visiting the Arch of Triumph – built in 1982 continuing on to visit one of very few “shopping centres” of Pyongyang, we were able to purchase some local produce at this centre on three floors. Food section, clothes section and a restaurant on the top floor.

We had been asked and denied to visit the Military parade taking place on Kim Il Sung square as this was only for invitees and prominent heads of state visiting. We ended up in the end stopping on the main street instead – stopping for a short while to visit the Military parade passing through the packed streets lined with Koreans cheering on and waving their flags as the trucks with soldiers from the different troops passed by. This time, as opposed to my last visit, there were no heavy artillery or armoured tanks on the streets – only soldiers with weapons. The main event of the day was however to visit the Mass Games celebrating the National Day at the May Day stadium. There were said to be some 150,000 visitors and for the first time ever, tourists were able to watch as also President Kim Il Un (DPRK) as well President Moon Jae-in, South Korean president also visited. First time in 5 years since the last Mass Games celebration.





The Mausoleum of the presidents....

Again, setting out early and for a pre-set time of arrival due to all the visitors today, we managed to visit the famous **Kumsusan Palace of Sun. mausoleum** of president Kim Il Sung and the leader Kim Jong Il. Here we were instructed to follow a strict dress code: No shorts, T-shirts, sandals, no blue jeans and mini-skirts. We also had to walk in columns of 5 by 5 people and had to follow strict instructions by local staff all throughout this visit.

We visited a **Buddhist temple near the Mausoleum** and got to participate in a ceremony here. The Pyongyang Metro is of course a must to visit. To my surprise we were now able to travel six stops in total on this visit. On my last visit we only were allowed to travel one stop. Rumours had it then that they really only had two stations, although claiming they had sixteen in total. The stations are lavishly decorated with mosaic features of the leaders as well as highly decorated lamps in the ceilings.

In the evening we went to visit **the National Circus of Pyongyang**. The performance was as could be expected of course very advanced and acrobatic. The Koreans are extremely drilled and proficient in anything they do when it comes to putting on a performance.

