



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WARD LASSOE

The “always bronze” statues of North Korea’s first two leaders, Kim Il-Sung and his son Kim Jong-Il, in Pyongyang, North Korea.

Inside North Korea

A Lowcountry resident takes week-long tour of repressive, totalitarian country

BY WARD V.B. LASSOE
Special to *The Post and Courier*

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During the immigration process at the sparkling new Pyongyang Airport, two stern-looking soldiers were examining the contents of my luggage as well as my cell-phone and laptop computer.

Long before our plane took off from China, my tour operator warned that soldiers here would look for very specific “contraband,” including copies of the Bible or the Koran, since organized religion is banned in North Korea. The other item that could land you in prison is a copy of “The Interview,” the recent movie that satirizes North Korea’s current leader Kim Jong-Un.

I’d watched “The Interview” on Netflix before the trip, and common sense told me there should be no record of this on my laptop. But when the soldiers immediately went to the videos section of my computer, it was clear they knew what they were doing.

As the guards stared me down, I started sweating thinking they somehow would find some evidence of this movie on my computer.

Fortunately, my worries were unfounded, and my week-long tour of North Korea could begin.

‘You’re crazy’

When I told friends and family I was planning a North Korea trip, their responses ranged from, “Aren’t you



Propaganda poster showing North Korean soldiers attacking an “imperialist American,” who’s typically depicted with a hook nose and claw-like hands.

scared?” to “Isn’t that illegal?” to “You’re crazy.”

This reclusive, repressive, authoritarian and volatile nation is certainly not a typical vacation destination, but I’ve always been attracted to offbeat travel adventures. I’ve previously traveled from Charleston to Iraq and Iran, so I joked that this visit would complete my “Axis of Evil” tour.

It is legal for Americans to visit North Korea, although the U.S. government frowns on the idea, saying, “The Department of State strongly recommends against all travel by U.S. citizens to North Korea. ... U.S. citizens have been subject to arrest and long-term detention for actions that would not be cause for arrest in the United States or other countries.”

Foreigners are not allowed to travel here independently but may with an organized tour company. I chose Young Pioneer Tours, a relatively new budget operator whose website boasts that it specializes in tours “to places that your mother wants you to stay away from.”

Of the few thousand tourists from Western countries who visit North Korea each year, only a fraction come from the United States. On my tour, I was one of only three Americans out of about 70 people.

Music starts, tours stop

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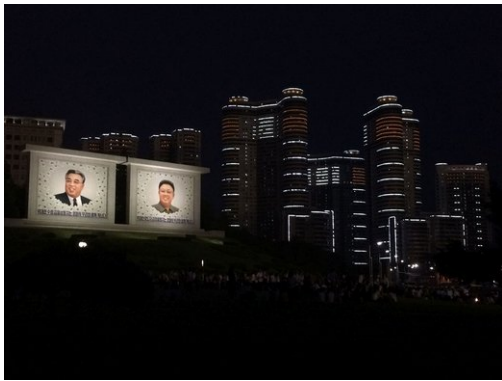
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On the bus leaving the airport, our tour group met our North Korean tour guide who would remain with us during our entire trip.

She picked up the bus microphone and introduced herself as "Miss Yu," then asked us, "Now what is my name?" We responded in unison "Miss Yu!" She then cocked her head to the side, giggled, and said "Oh! I miss you, too!"

Outside the bus window, the first thing I noticed was darkness. North Korea's limited electric supply means that huge swaths of the country are subject to blackouts.



Images of North Korea's first two leaders, Kim Il-Sung and his son Kim Jong-Il, are everywhere in Pyongyang, North Korea.

As we approached the capital city of Pyongyang, there were some brightly lit statues and government buildings, and the contrast of light and dark made these monuments look even more imposing.

We stayed at the Yanggakdo Hotel, one of Pyongyang's tallest buildings. It felt like a throwback to the 1970s, with some dated features like a revolving restaurant on the top floor. It was not luxurious, but it was comfortable. Still, we were warned never to leave the hotel grounds without our tour group, so there would be no morning jogs around the city.

Instead, we awoke early for a visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the border between North and South Korea. The Korean War ended in 1953, but no peace treaty was ever signed, so the two countries are still officially "at war."

Although it's called "demilitarized," this is definitely the most heavily fortified border in the world. The sight of soldiers on either side staring each other down highlighted the constant state of distrust between the two nations.

Just weeks after we were there, tensions between the two sides heated up because South Korea was blasting pop music through loudspeakers toward North Korea. This led to a temporary breakdown in relations between the two countries, and all tours to the DMZ were suspended.

We visited a traditional Korean restaurant for lunch, and one of the dining options was dog.



Fireworks punctuate the mass dance for Liberation Day.

It's considered a delicacy, especially by older Koreans. I couldn't bring myself to order it, but I did sample a bite from a fellow traveler who was less squeamish. It didn't taste like chicken, but it wasn't bad. Of course, someone at the table made the inevitable joke about getting a "doggie bag" after the meal.

There is plenty of an anti-American sentiment on display in North Korea, including kitschy propaganda posters and laughable headlines in the local newspaper ("U.S. Plans Biological Warfare!").

In the posters, American soldiers are always pictured with large, hooked noses and clawed hands.

Apparently, the indoctrination of North Koreans begins at an early age. We heard stories of toddlers being taught anti-American nursery rhymes, while older students learn a unique way to conjugate verbs. ("We will kill Americans. We are killing Americans. We have killed Americans.")

Despite the visible anti-American sentiment, I never felt unsafe or unwelcome. I was never treated any differently or singled out for any particular discrimination. During the times we got to interact with locals, I was tempted to make them aware that I was a dreaded "imperialist American," but we were warned such honesty would make for an awkward encounter.

Our trip coincided with the 70th anniversary of Liberation Day, a major holiday marking the end of the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula following World War II.

In the evening, there was a "mass dance" in one of the massive public squares in Pyongyang.

The sight of thousands of dancers in traditional dress all moving in unison was a true visual spectacle.

After the first few rounds of dances, the people on our tour were invited to join in. I was paired up with a local woman who gamely tried to help me master some of the intricate dances.

The next day, we were off to Kumsusan Palace where the embalmed bodies of North Korea's first two leaders, Kim Il-Sung and his son Kim Jong-Il, lie in state.

Every North Korean is required to wear a lapel pin with pictures of the leaders whenever they are in public, and every home in North Korea is required to prominently display their portraits.

We also were warned repeatedly that if we took a photograph of any statue of the Kims, we needed to include the entire statue in the frame: no cutting off any arms or legs.



A subway station displays some very fancy chandeliers.

As we worked our way through the massive marble Kumsusan Palace, we each had to enter a small chamber where we were blasted with jets of air from every direction, apparently to remove any dirt or “contaminants.” Cameras also were strictly forbidden here.

The bodies of the former leaders were on display in glass cases inside solemn, dimly lit rooms, and the viewing protocol was strict: All visitors are required to walk around the bodies while stopping to make a bow on each side.

We also visited two massive statues of the leaders, each more than 80 feet tall. I had read that the original statue of Kim Il-Sung had been coated in gold leaf when it was unveiled in 1972, but that changed after a visit by some Chinese government officials. They complained that gold statues were inappropriate for leaders of a communist country, so the statue was re-coated with a more subtle bronze.

When I asked Miss Yu about this, she stuck to the party line. She assured me that the statues were never gold.

“Always bronze, always bronze,” she insisted.

Despite the certainty in her words, the look on her face betrayed her discomfort at having to repeat information that she clearly knew was false.



Ward Lassoe stands in front of the Arch of Triumph, a larger version of the famous Parisian landmark. Provided

The next morning, one in our tour group made things hard on Miss Yu. We realized that a British guy was missing. A quick check of his room showed his bed hadn't been slept in.

Miss Yu's face was ashen as the search for him intensified. After 30 minutes, he was found passed out in a hotel stairway, apparently after having indulged in too much soju, a potent Korean liquor.

Even after he turned up, Miss Yu still looked unsettled. When I asked her how it felt to have one of her guests go missing, she told me, "My life just got shorter."

Other highlights included a ride on Pyongyang's subway, the world's deepest system since it also was designed to double as bomb shelters in the event of nuclear attack, as well as a visit to the Arch of Triumph, a larger version of Paris' well-known landmark.

I wondered if anything was staged for the benefit of our group: crafted scenes that might show how "normal" life is in North Korea. I honestly don't think that's possible given how many places we visited and how many people we saw. There also were times I was allowed to wander out of eyeshot of our tour leaders.



Propaganda poster showing North Korean soldiers attacking an "imperialist American."

Most all of our time was spent in the capital city, where all enjoy connections to the military or government and have a better quality of life. I had to remind myself that the scenes of "normalcy" that we saw here did not erase the existence of brutal prison camps and the hardships of rural life in North Korea.

Our last night of the tour involved a big dinner with some drinking back at the hotel's karaoke bar. Toward the end of the night, I wandered down to see some of my fellow tourists lip-syncing to the Village People song "YMCA." They had adapted the chorus to celebrate our visit to North Korea, or as it's officially known, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"D-P-R-K.

D-P-R-K.

It's fun to stay in the DPRK.

It's fun to stay in the DPRK."

As I watched their performance, I realized "fun" is not the best word. "Surreal" is much better.

It's only fitting that my last bit of drama also took place at the airport.

Before we left on the trip, we were advised to bring euros or Chinese yuan for spending money since credit cards are useless and there are no ATMs.

We also were told that we would never get the local currency, the North Korean won, because of its special significance. All the bills include a portrait of one of the former leaders, so this makes the currency too "valuable" for foreigners.

One day, I bought a soda at a small kiosk in a park, and I was surprised to get a 5000 won note in change. I knew there were rules against taking any currency out of the country, but this was too tempting a souvenir to leave behind.

Fortunately, the search of our luggage on the way home was much less intense than on our arrival.

Otherwise, they would have found the face of their Dear Leader wrapped in my boxer shorts.

Maybe smuggling out the currency was an unwise move.

Just a few weeks ago, I read about the arrest of an American in North Korea.

When I booked my trip, I was aware that North Korean authorities had detained Americans before, either for entering the country illegally, for their connection to South Korea or their religious or political activities while there.

I knew those situations wouldn't apply to me, so I honestly wasn't too worried.

But this most recent arrest seems to break that pattern.

Otto Warmbier is an American college student who also was on a Young Pioneers tour in North Korea. He was arrested Jan. 2 at the Pyongyang Airport as he was about to board his flight home.

From all indications, he had no ulterior political or religious motivations. He simply seems to have been a curious American who wanted to see North Korea, just like me, except he's now been detained for a month with no indication when he will be released.

Ward Lassoe is a psychotherapist with a private practice in Charleston.