

North Korea



Redefining the term rogue state through its isolationism, controversial nuclear weapons programme and missile testing, North Korea is probably the most mysterious country in the world today and one almost entirely untouched by tourism. Off the beaten path seems too slight a term for a nation that admits fewer than 2000 Westerners a year, and whose overwhelming attraction is its isolation and backwardness.

Here the Kim dynasty, which began life as a Soviet-sponsored communist government in the 1950s, has evolved into a hereditary dictatorship owing far more to Confucianism than Marxism. The founder of the state, Kim Il Sung, may have died in 1994, but he is still the president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the name locals prefer for their country). His son, a man who has only ever uttered one sentence in public (it was 'Long Live the Victorious Korean People's Army' at a rally in Pyongyang in the early 1990s), continues to rule like a medieval monarch, an unknown quantity with nuclear weapons and a huge army at his beck and call, giving sleepless nights to governments in Seoul, Tokyo and Washington.

A trip to North Korea is strictly on its government's terms, and it's essential to accept that you'll have no independence during your trip – you'll be accompanied by two government-approved local guides at all times and only hear a very one-sided view of history throughout the trip. Those who can accept these terms will have a fascinating trip into another rather unsettling world. Simply to see a country where the Cold War is still being fought, where mobile phones and the internet are unknown, and where total obedience to the state is universally unquestioned is, for many, reason enough to visit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the grotesque totalitarian architecture in **Pyongyang** (p358).
- Feel the full force of Cold War tensions with a visit to **Panmunjom** (p369) in the Demilitarized Zone, where an uneasy armistice holds
- Visit Pyongyang between August and October to see the incredible **Mass Games** (p355), a gymnastic spectacle featuring thousands of perfectly trained North Koreans
- Explore the remote far north and Korea's highest peak and holy mountain **Paekdusan** (p372)
- Enjoy pristine mountain walks in the stunning resort of **Kumgangsan** (p371)



GETTING STARTED

Trips to North Korea usually run like clockwork. Two guides will accompany you everywhere you go outside the hotel and control what you see and the spiel you hear while seeing it. Forward planning is a must: almost everything you want to see needs to be approved before your arrival as ad hoc arrangements make the guides very nervous and thus less fun to be around. That said, itineraries are always provisional and some things are usually cancelled at the last moment for no discernable reason, although something else will always be substituted in its place.

The best option is to enjoy a positive relationship with your guides (who don't make the decisions; they simply enforce them and monitor you during your stay), as once they trust you, they'll help you make the most of your trip. Days are long in North Korean tourism – you'll see a surprising amount in just a four-day tour, and possibly be burned out on a full-week tour.

When to Go

The best time to plan a trip is during the Arirang Mass Games (mid-August until mid-October most years) or during a national holiday. Special performances, which have been rehearsed for months, can be included in the itinerary. During these periods train and plane tickets are harder to obtain, so ensure that you have booked well in advance. In general, the most pleasant months for a visit are April, May, June, September and October. July and August are often unpleasantly humid and overcast. Tours don't usually run in the winter: they finish in November, then start again in March. The month of February sees

FAST FACTS

- Area: 120,540 sq km
- Population: 23 million
- Currency: North Korean won (unofficial rate: 3000KPW = €1 on the black market)
- Percentage of GDP spent on the military: 31.3%
- Minimum military service for men: six years
- Number of internet cafés: none

the Great Leader's birthday and foreigners are particularly unwelcome at this time of year. Those finding themselves in North Korea in winter will find power shortages common (although not usually in hotels) and it's generally a cold and miserable time to visit.

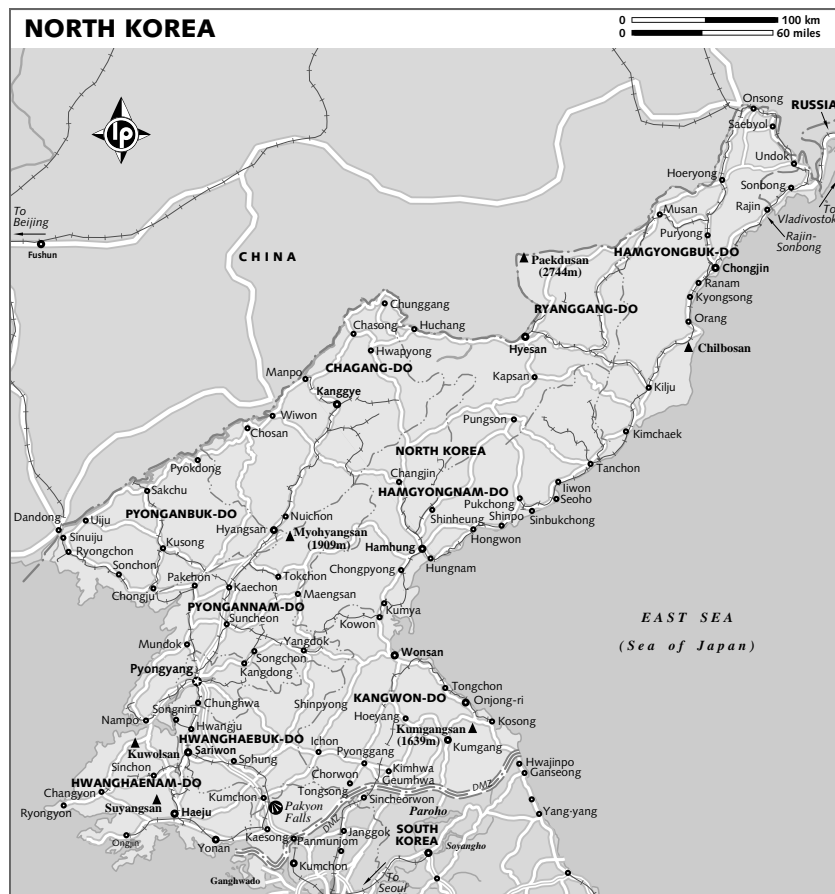
Costs & Money

As a tourist, North Korea is no budget destination. Opportunities to cut costs by staying in youth hostels do not exist. As well as paying for your bed and board in advance, you will also have to pay for two guides and a driver, making group tourism one of the few measures that can save you money.

As a rough guide, solo travellers should bank on paying about €250 per day for guides, hotel and full board. This can be reduced to around €130 per day if you go as part of a group. Note that the euro and Chinese yuan are the accepted currency for visitors to use and that small change in both currencies (euro coins and yuan in denominations of under 50)

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Anything medical or electrical that you will need during your stay; this includes simple everyday products such as painkillers, tampons and condoms. Everything from memory cards to batteries for your camera are best brought in too – such basic items are sometimes available, but their price and quality can be quite different from elsewhere. As most trips are no longer than a week, bringing fruit from China is a great idea for snacking between sights – even a bag of apples is a luxury item in Pyongyang. Small change in euros (€1 and 50c are especially useful) and yuan (10, 20 and 50 yuan notes) are a huge help, as there's never any change in the hotels and shops. Small token gifts for your guides are a good idea – pens, postcards of your hometown, cigarettes (for male guides only) or chocolates will always go down well. Just as important is what not to bring, as these rules are quite strict. Mobile phones and laptop computers are best left at home. Most of all, bring a sense of humour and an open mind – you'll need both to make North Korea enjoyable and rewarding.



is a huge advantage as most places can't change big notes.

Once in North Korea, the only major expenses will be the souvenirs and other gifts that are on sale at every tourist attraction. Apart from evening drinks and telephone/fax costs, there is little opportunity to spend your money elsewhere. It's customary to tip the guides at the end of each tour, so budget a minimum of €20 per guide for this.

Tours

Ryohaengsa (☎ +86-10-6437 6666/3133; fax 6436 9089; Korean International Travel Company, 2nd fl, Yanxiang, No A2 Jiangtai Rd, Chaoyang District, Qionghuating) Every visitor to North Korea must book all their accommodation, guides and transport with the

government monolith, North Korea's version of Intourist for anyone lucky enough to have visited pre-*perestroika* Russia. Booking your tour through a travel agent will simply mean that they have the job of dealing with Ryohaengsa on your behalf. The advantage of this is that travel agents are IATA (International Air Transport Association) bonded and will return your money if your trip is cancelled, whereas Ryohaengsa will not. Moreover, dealing directly with the North Korean authorities is not most people's idea of fun.

Air Koryo (☎ 10-6501 1557/1559; fax 6501 2591; Swisotel Bldg, Hong Kong-Macau Center, Dongsi Shitau Lijiao, Beijing 100027) The main office in Beijing is the office most used to dealing with travellers and has Ryohaengsa staff working there.

The number of North Korean specialists is very limited, but those who run tours include:

Geographic Expeditions (☎ 1-415-922-0448; www.geosex.com; 1008 General Kennedy Avenue, PO Box 29902, San Francisco, CA 94129-0902) This upmarket American outfit was the first to pioneer US tourism to DPRK. While US citizens are allowed into North Korea only during the Mass Games, Geographic Expeditions have tours that include Paekdusan and Mt Chilbo as well as the DMZ and Kaesong. All-inclusive prices from the US (which include flights and accommodation in Beijing) start at around US\$5000 for 11 nights, seven of which are in DPRK.

Koryo Tours (☎ 10-6416 7544; www.koryogroup.com; Room 43, Red House Hotel, 10 Tai Ping Zhuang, Chun Xiao Lu, Chun Xiu Lu, Dong Zhi Men Wai, Chaoyang District, 100027 Beijing) Nick Bonner's Beijing-based company has been offering DPRK tours for over a decade. Koryo are the undoubted specialists, having a very good relationship with Korea International Tourist Service (KITS) and doing a host of other things from producing film in DPRK to selling North Korean art in Beijing (www.pyongyangartstudio.com). Tours can be tailored to meet specialist interests and individual travel can also be arranged.

Its website is an excellent place to start for any tourist, as it is packed with information about all things DPRK. A standard five-night tour of North Korea is available for as little as €990 all inclusive from Beijing.

Regent Holidays (☎ 20-2921 1711; www.regent-holidays.co.uk; 15 John St, Bristol BS1 2HR) Specialists in obscure destinations, Regent have been taking groups into North Korea since the late 1980s. A fully inclusive nine-day tour including the

Mass Games costs £1295 (starting from Beijing). Longer tours including the charter flight to Paekdusan start at £1545 per person.

VNC Travel (☎ 030-23115001; www.vnc.nl; Catharijnesingel 70, Postbus 79, 3500 AB Utrecht) This Dutch company specialises in travel to Asia, and includes both group and individual tours to North Korea. A standard seven-day tour taking in Pyongyang, Kaesong, the DMZ and Mt Myohyang is €1034 (starting and ending in Beijing). Longer tours are also available.

Other operators that offer tours: **Bestway Tours & Safaris** (☎ 1-604 2647378; www.bestway.com; Suite 206, 8678 Greenall Avenue, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5J 3M6)

Explore (☎ 44-870 333 4001; www.explore.co.uk; Nelson House, 55 Victoria Rd, Farnborough, Hampshire GU14 7PA, UK)

Tin Bo Travel Services (☎ 1-613 238 7093; www.tinboholidays.com; 2nd fl, 725 Somerset St W, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 6P7)

See (p378) for information about travelling on your own.

Travel Literature

The single best book to read if you're curious to know what a trip to DPRK is like is Guy Delisle's graphic novel *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*. A French-Canadian cartoonist 'on the margins of the globalised world', Delisle was seconded to Pyongyang to work on cartoons, and his methodical documentation of all aspects of his trip is priceless. Highly recommended, even more so for any recent visitors who will find themselves laughing out loud in recognition.

SHOULD YOU VISIT?

North Korea is a police state with a human-rights record worse than anywhere else on earth. Concentration camps, executions, state-orchestrated terror and mass-control by a vast propaganda machine are a daily reality for millions here. All the revenue from your trip will go directly to the government, and during the Mass Games this is a sizable amount. So should you visit, and is it morally acceptable to do so?

The case against visiting, as outlined above, is strong. On the other hand, those who argue that you *should* visit point out that tourism is one of the few ways of encouraging openness in DPRK, of letting people see that the West is interested and, more importantly, friendly – not an insignificant fact for a population brought up on a relentless diet of anti-US propaganda. The one thing you should never do is come here to stir up trouble – your guides and any North Koreans having contact with your group will suffer very serious consequences and you'll achieve nothing more than a speedy deportation. If you do come, listen to the version of history given to you by the guides, accept that this is their version (however untrue) and leave serious criticism until you are back at your hotel.