

North Korea 2018

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Diary of a second visit to North Korea, after a first in 2001.

Extracted from Jan's book

Love from T & J: Postcards from Abroad

Printed in 2019 as a limited edition

Postcards from North Korea 2018

Hello from Pyongyang, September 4

Well, we are back in North Korea, and are already glad to have made a second visit. In many ways it has changed enormously since we were here 17 years ago, certainly from our first impressions arriving in Pyongyang. The high-rise apartment blocks that were all dull white and grey are now very cheerily painted in all colours of the rainbow, and very much the better for it. There are even some cars on the roads, and the people walking the streets generally seemed brighter, happier, more purposeful if you like, rather than worn-down and drudgy as they were before. And there are shops! With stuff to buy in them! In fact we were taken into a huge department store on one occasion and allowed to roam free among its four floors, where there was everything from washing machines and fridges, to shirts and dresses, to a fully-stocked supermarket on the ground floor, all very busy, and didn't seem anything out of the ordinary. But – away from the elite zone of Pyongyang, it must be a different story. We saw the good bits, and there are lots that are kept well away from visitors' eyes. You can never be sure of what really goes on.

We – Tony and me, and our group, nine of us in total – were met at the airport by our guide, a lovely lady called Kim, and the back-up 'minder', a personable young lad who had 'volunteered' for the job (he wasn't paid, but the experience would be all to the good on his CV, he told us, as his ambition is to join the army) and who was very vigilant about never letting any of us out of his sight! We were put up in a smart hotel on the edge of town, in the Sports Village, surrounded by stadiums of all shapes and sizes, each one individually dedicated to its own sport – gymnastics, table tennis, swimming, martial arts, football, athletics, you name it, think of a sport, and it has a stadium to itself.

Dinner that evening was quite literally a taste of what was to come: a full-blown breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, usually consisting of dozens of different dishes to pick and choose from (luckily, as there were only so many that you would want to get involved with). Copious amounts of beer at all meals (good for me) and assorted suspect 'colas' (but not American Coca Cola).

Next morning, we were introduced to the North Korean experience in earnest. We had a visit to the Kumsusan Palace, or the Mausoleum, for Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il, the now-dead Great Leader and Dear Leader. We were told what to wear (long everything) and what not to take (anything), and were subjected to high-powered, rigorous security.



Cameras were obviously out of the question, and went into a tray to be collected later, along with wallets, hotel key-cards, coins..... Tony had a pen confiscated, my chiffon scarf was taken off me, we were patted up and down by guards and passed through various x-ray machines until we arrived at a holding pen, where we stood and waited. And waited. (We were to discover that there's a great deal of queuing and waiting, and waiting and queuing, in North Korea!)

Finally we were escorted down an escalator, and then on to the first of two interminably long and tediously slow travelators, where we had to stand still and look straight ahead (Tony at one point turned sideways to talk to me, and was immediately put to rights by a guard). All the while we were passing through corridors and into an immense building, lined with marble and granite, massively opulent, until we eventually arrived at the first room, practically bigger than Wembley Stadium, occupied by two larger-than-lifesize waxworks of Kim One and Kim Two. Here, we were told to form lines of no more than four people at a time, walk forward, and bow to the effigies. To show our respect. I did a sort of quick nod of the head, I don't think Tony did anything, but no guards took us outside to be shot, so we got away with it.

Then it was through rooms and more rooms, each lined with medals and honours that the Kims had been given, along with more rooms of gifts (including two cars, a plane and two railway carriages), with the adjoining corridors lined with photographs of them meeting and greeting the people. And ultimately, two rooms: a humidifier to pass through on entering and leaving each, one room for the actual mummified body of Kim Il Sung, and the other, similar, for Kim Jung Il, both with dimmed red ceiling lights for macabre atmosphere. Weird. Very weird. These, obviously, required a great deal of bowing and scraping, first at the foot, then to the left, then to the right of the bodies, before we filed out along more corridors, more blown-up photographs, more marble and crystal chandeliers, to the outside world. Phew!



Blocks of flats near the centre of Pyongyang, seen from the top of the Juche Tower; stark in 2001, painted in 2018.

Time for lunch, naturally, then off to the Juche Tower, the tallest stone monument in the world (apparently), in honour of the Juche Idea, which was Kim Il Sung's philosophic, idealistic, communistic answer to religion. Much revered by the well-indoctrinated North Koreans, who pay homage on a daily basis to everything that the various Kims ever thought, said or did. More practically, as the highest point in town, the tower provided an excellent viewing platform for pictures of the city!

Moving out of Pyongyang, the next port of call was a half-day bus ride away to Kaesong, and the DMZ (De-Militarised Zone) at Panmunjom, the bit that is absolutely on the border of North and South Korea, and has the well-known three blue huts straddling the border. Inside the middle hut, the not-to-be-crossed dividing line is marked by a microphone wire down the length of the boardroom table, where officials of each side can sit to talk to each other without leaving their respective countries. And outside, the North and the South army patrols glare at each other across the concrete strip that is the actual border. We've been to the DMZ four times now, twice from each side, and it doesn't change much! Each side has its own story of who did what to whom, and there's absolutely no point in arguing, so you just accept it for the tourist attraction that it's now become. Although it does serve a purpose when President Moon of South Korea recently stepped across the sacred concrete strip to shake hands with Kim Three; all very symbolic, though not very fruitful.

We moved on, along the border zone, and up a very steep path and a long flight of stone steps, in rain and cloud, to view The Concrete Wall. I can't remember who built the wall or what the significance of it is, but it was irrelevant anyway as it was shrouded in cloud and nobody saw anything. And we had to go down the steps and path (a good 15-minute walk) in absolutely torrential rain, so despite umbrellas, hats, raincoats, the lot, we were all soaked to the skin by the time we were back at the bus. And we were staying that night in a 'typical Korean dwelling'. In other words, a mattress on the floor, 15-watt lamp and questionable bathroom



Statues - magnificent.



DMZ huts astride the border; at Panmunjom.

facilities. Tony and I had been there before, so we knew what to expect, and in fairness, it was a very well thought-out hotel complex. They had taken an original village street and turned each house into a guest room, so that it really was a ‘typical, old-style, Korean dwelling’. We really enjoyed it, but the rest of our group were not happy at all about the minimal amenities!

There was much grumbling, even when the management laid on a demonstration of the rice-smashing ceremony. This was a first for us, and has to be seen to be believed. Two men dressed in white satin suits (looking for all the world like Elvis-impersonators) stood opposite each other wielding hefty sledgehammers, and proceeded to pound seven bells out of an innocuous heap of steamed rice until it was reduced to a mass of glutinous starch. At which point a pretty lady in national costume sliced it up, rolled each slice in brown flour, and then *made us eat it*. I can’t tell you how disgusting it was. One small nibble was enough. Any more and I suspect our internal digestive systems would have been clogged up permanently.

Next morning we hot-footed (or hot-bussed) it out of Kaesong back to Pyongyang, and to the giant bronze statues of Kims One and Two on Mansu Hill (last time we were there it was only Kim One, as Kim Jung Il was still alive and kicking). The statues constitute a hugely reverential site for local worshippers! The perceived custom is to buy flowers (ready-made bouquets from a handy, near-by stall) to lay at the foot of the statues. I’m slightly horrified to say that all the rest of our group each bought a bouquet, and made much of having their photos and selfies taken on their smart phones. Needless to say, Tony and I didn’t. I’ll buy as many poppies as you like for Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, but I’m damned if I’m paying good money for dead commie despots!



Kim One and Kim Two.

Then came the obligatory trip on the Metro. And this again was quite different from our previous visit. The stations are still deep, deep, deep underground, and beautifully decorated with mosaic images, but whereas last time we were ushered on to a specially selected train with two student girls coincidentally already in the coach, studying their college books and never glancing in our direction: the whole episode shrieked ‘stooge, stooge, stooge’. This time we were in with the general rush-hour standing-room-only hoi polloi, and it struck us as a refreshingly good step forward in, just, ordinariness.

Hello from Chongjin, September 7

From trains to planes. We had three internal plane flights while we were there, none of which I was especially enthusiastic about beforehand, but in the event they were perfectly all right. They were old-fashioned, Russian propeller-planes of historic vintage, with frilly curtains at the windows. Furthermore, no airport terminals, just land anywhere on the runway and get off and walk. Everything was totally relaxed. A bit like those vintage BOAC adverts you sometimes get a glimpse of!

Anyway, first plane journey over, we landed at Samjiyon, in the far north of the country near the Chinese border, and close to Mount Paekdu. This is the nearest thing the North Koreans have to a sacred mountain. It's an extinct volcano, the highest mountain in Korea, with an apparently beautiful lake in the caldera. This was the high point of Tony's trip, half the reason we'd gone there in the first place, the one place he really wanted to be and to see. And it rained. And it poured. And the clouds were down to ankle-deep, and the wind was horrendous, and it was freezing cold and..... suffice it to say, it was **not** the highlight of our trip. Tony was bitterly disappointed, but what can you do against the weather? The bus ground its way up to the halfway point, where the promised funicular was not running (out of fuel), and after several hours' waiting, a 4WD bus took us up to the summit, where we braved the elements sufficiently to peer over the edge of what should have been the viewpoint, but was in fact just cloud and more cloud, and then we went back again. And of course the disappointment was made even worse by the fact that the next few days were all in cloudless blue sunshine. Ho hum.

Never mind, the bus-trip back was good, past some very fancy waterfalls, some very abundant-looking allotments, lots of families enjoying themselves, and eventually to our hotel for the night: minimal illumination, only enhanced if you plugged in the (dysfunctional) fridge, but it didn't matter anyway, because there was a six-hour power cut. Dinner by torchlight, then! Hey, we're enjoying ourselves!

Next morning, after a breakfast of bread *and* jam – wow! – we went to a Grand Monument, an enormous great statue of Kim Il Sung (again), but more extraordinarily, a series of statues, effigies, I don't know how to describe them, but just brilliantly carved and sculpted 3D images of people, both soldiers and citizens, and unbelievably realistically cast in bronze. The talent that went into creating those..... for me, that was the highlight of the trip. No, it was one of them! Because next we had the visit to the kindergarten in Chongjin. Six and seven-year-olds, so sweet you wouldn't believe, singing, dancing,



Mosaic wall in the Metro.



Manual labour in a quarry, or is it womanual labour?

drumming, doing acrobatics, playing highly complex piano duets and complicated Chinese harp instrumentals..... these are **six** and **seven** year-olds! How much pressure has been put on them to have so much undeniable ability at that age? What normal childhood have they missed out on? We loved their performances (tears-pouring-down-the-cheeks material) but you do have to stop and wonder: at what expense?

We stopped at the Language School, and were taken into the English class, where the (very, very indoctrinated) head of department gave a 'power to the people' type of introduction, before letting the students loose to talk to us. Tony came up trumps, chatting to our two 16-year-old lads, one of whom wanted to be a doctor like his brother, the other wanted to be an IT engineer. The privileged ones. Yet again, you wonder about the others.

In between all these Special Sites of Specific Interest we were frog-marched on endless visits to Revolutionary Sites. There are a great many Revolutionary Sites around, wherever one of the Kims, or occasionally the first Kim's wife, had single-handedly defeated the marauding Japanese infantries by means of super-human powers, or had at least set foot, or had possibly looked out over the horizon, or might conceivably have lost the will to live (like me) before ultimately conquering the Japanese enemy, thanks to the empowering and energising forces of Kim. And Kim. And – er – Kim.

Hello from Pyongyang again, September 9

I know I'm being facetious. But really – beyond all the bright lights and the pretty colours and the happy smiling shoppers, there is still a huge chasm between them and us. Particularly the 'them' in the countryside, beyond the bounds of where we were privileged to be. The people we came across are totally brainwashed and indoctrinated, and have no concept of what real life is all about. We were taken to the International Friendship Exhibition (out among the mountains at Myohyang). This is actually two sites devoted exclusively to the gifts that Kims 1 and 2 were given by grovelling, sycophantic heads of state and organisations. Both buildings were of the grandly opulent style, 'marble hallways' doesn't even begin to describe them, and the goods on display behind the showcases must have added up to **billions** of poundsworth. Everything from tea sets to trains (from China), and from pottery to a plane (from Russia). Room after room after room of priceless gifts, all sitting

unused and just for show. Even, I'm slightly horrified to admit, a framed photograph from the Nottingham Union of Miners, to commemorate the miners' strike in 1985. Crocodile handbags, snakeskin shoes, far too many elephant tusks from just about every African country: there is no end to the obscenity of the wealth on display, and it did, in the end, rather get to us. And they are all underground, far inside a granite mountain – nuclear fall-out shelters for Kim and his cronies.



Kindergarten concert with Chinese harp.

We were glad to get out, and to enjoy a most enjoyable outdoor barbecue lunch in the park, with lamb, beef, duck and wild boar cooked on personal table-top griddles, while smiling waitresses came with little hand-held bellows to keep the charcoal going. Far too much food for us to eat, and I only hope that somewhere behind the scenes, the smiling waitresses got to enjoy what we decadent Westerners left behind.

And so to the grand finale. Our visit was timed to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the founding of North Korea, and there was a huge commemoration ceremony in the May Day Stadium (as stadiums go, their biggest and best). Known as the Arirang Mass Games, it cost us a hundred dollars each for seats. It was worth every penny. It's impossible to describe how magnificent the performance was. More than 100,000 men, women and children taking part in a performance that was halfway between mass drill and grand ballet, with superb gymnastics going on at the same time. Thousands of people synchronised to perfection: 3000 girls doing back somersaults in perfect synch; 600 ladies playing Chinese harps, beautifully. And on the far side of the stadium, 17,000 men holding open pages of over-sized books to create giant pictures. The backdrop, the lighting, the projected images were superlative, but it was the sheer mass of people performing so brilliantly that took the breath away. We won't forget that in a hurry.



Rehearsing for the parade.



Arirang Mass Games, spectacle on a giant scale; Kim Three (Kim Jong Un) was there, along with wife (Ri Sol Ju).



Oh, incidentally – we were under the same roof as Kim Jung Un, Kim Three, The Supreme Leader, as he's known to his fanatical compatriots. The fact that he was there – sitting not that far from us, actually – was a bit special. I can report first-hand that he's still small, still fat, still got a stupid haircut. We saw him wave to the crowd, but after that we couldn't see very much, because the entire stadium was in a semi-orgasmic state of uproar, standing, waving, cheering, bowing, scraping.....

We came away totally mesmerised. It's impossible to explain quite how fantastical it was. Obviously and needless to say, cameras weren't an option. During the four-hour security screening we had endured to get there, everything was taken from us apart from absolutely essential clothing! Par for the course. You don't go to North Korea to come away with much photographic evidence. Practically everywhere we went our guides were hissing "no photos, no photos". While the cameras were confiscated we obviously couldn't, but when we did have them with us, Tony was shooting from the hip, as it were, left, right and centre. Lots of illicit pix, therefore, and ones that Michael Palin and the BBC camera crew couldn't get.

Postscript

So, when it came to escaping from North Korea, by plane to Beijing, we were slightly spooked by tales of cameras being searched at the point of departure, and any offending material being wiped out, or possibly offenders being taken outside and shot! So Tony put a back-up card in his camera, with acceptable pretty pictures on, and the **un**acceptable card was hidden in my handbag. So yes, I was his mule! But we were lucky, they waved us all through without a second thought, and..... we still have the pictures to prove it! After Korea, we continued to Mongolia for a further week. That's another story.
