

Asian journey, from Uzbekistan to North Korea

Diary of a journey by train across Kazakhstan and China in 2001

For the summer of 2001 Jan and I had a visit to North Korea, joining a small tour group from Regent Travel (because independent travel was not, and is still not, permitted in that closed country). To avoid travelling all the way to and from Beijing solely to join the Korea tour, we decided on Uzbekistan and the remains of the Aral Sea as add-ons along the way, and would travel overland from one to the other instead of taking another flight. Especially as the ex-Russian ‘Stans’ were new to us, we booked ahead for the main travel links; Regent Travel also provided these, along with links through local agents to a couple of obscure tours (but left problems with some of their other tenuous connections). Many of the details we left to fix as we went along, so we were not tied to itineraries at each stopover. We then had a grand trip of six weeks, no longer constrained by the length of time that Jan could take off from work.

Thursday August 2, London

Afternoon train from Nottingham is cancelled, so good that we have some spare time, so can still make it in time to Heathrow to check in for our flight on Uzbek Air to Tashkent. Plane is full of Sikhs, because it continues to Amritsar. Off ramp at 9.15pm, taxi out, then back because of an engine problem. Fortunately we have been up-graded to Business, due to Jan’s deal with the Sunday Times, because we then sit, and sleep a bit, on the plane until 1.15am, when there is a mutiny in the Economy section that seems to lack air conditioning. Into a lounge for good rolls and drinks, then leave at about 3am with special permission for a night take-off, and then it’s daylight after a couple of hours.

Friday August 3, into Samarkand

Flight descends through patchy cloud above Kazakhstan, over desert in the Syrdarya valley. Clear into Tashkent at 2pm, six hours late. Only eight of us get off, so no queues at immigration, and all very easy. An agent with a name board meets us; had planned to go by road, so catch up by taking a flight to Samarkand leaving at 3.20. A little Antonov propeller plane, with all our bags carried on, so very simple. Flight goes over endless cotton fields, some grain, some rice, and over the Syrdarya river. Tashkent is huge, but there are no other large towns. Houses are clustered on collective farms, not a good prospect.

Into Samarkand at 4.20pm, and take a \$2 taxi to the Hotel Furkat. This is a large house with a courtyard, close to the Registan; small clean room, friendly owner, dozen other westerners staying. Change money at \$1 = 1000 som; official rate is 450, and 800 was the offer at the airport.

Straight out for a walkabout. The Registan is magnificent, with rehearsals for a dance show in the square. A dubious policeman takes us up one of the minarets for \$2 each; amazing steep stairs in nearly total darkness, then some great views.



Islamic architecture.





Two of the three madrassas that front onto the magnificent square that is the Registan in Samarkand.

Market crowds in Samarkand.

All the Registan buildings are superb, but some are cracking. All the minarets lean, but maybe by design, as many (but not all) have one profile vertical and one that tapers in; possibly very clever architecture. Walk along main street; all restored brickwork but looking good. An outside bazaar has lots of food. Excellent dinner of shish kebabs, bread, dumplings, tomato salad, Coke and beer for a total of \$4. Cool walk back to drinks in our courtyard.

Saturday August 4, Samarkand

Slept until 8am and needed it. Amazing family breakfast on table packed with food: currants, soft figs, melon, fried eggs, solid bread, apricot jam, fruit, green tea, coffee, sweet buns.



Walk to bazaar, huge and colourful, but no meat market, blackberry juice to drink. Bright clothes on the women, flashing gold teeth on men and women, lots of good vegetables, but all sold by the farmers' wives with no sign of wholesalers. Called in Bibi Khanym Mosque, very grand with fine blue dome, but enormous cracks in the brickwork beneath. Walk back to Registan, and through the madrassas in each block, but now just courtyards with tourist shops. Back to hotel at 1pm, for siesta through heat of the day,

Out again at 3pm for walk eastwards through back streets of the old town; quiet with just a few glimpses of courtyards and a few little corner shops. Emerge at Shahr-i-Zindah mausoleum, where the adjacent cemetery has rows of tombs with enamelled brickwork. New tombs have photographs etched onto polished dolerite headstones. Walk to bazaar and catch minibus west, but it turns off sharpish and we have to take another one to reach the new Russian town. Grand boulevards and open spaces; Guri Amir Mausoleum looks good in old style; then back through suburbs to the Registan and another big dance rehearsal. Walk to bazaar; local folk hardly smiley but always friendly; surprised to find that we are English and then respond with 'Manchester United' or 'Maggie Thatcher'. A different restaurant for a similar dinner, but the beers again not good. A third beer from a shop on the way back is better for evening diary time in our hotel courtyard.

Sunday August 5, bus to Bukhara

Up at 7.00 for breakfast, and leave at 8.00 with guide to bus station on the edge of town, where it would have been easy to buy our own tickets. Leave at 8.30 on an old 40-seat bus that is much better than the faster and dearer microbuses. Only eight people at first, but it stops everywhere, and is full most of the time after the first hour. Seriously tatty bus with collapsing seats and buckled windows; locals joining with huge bags of fabric or food. At town stops, kids come on to sell food, notably suzma (balls of cream cheese).



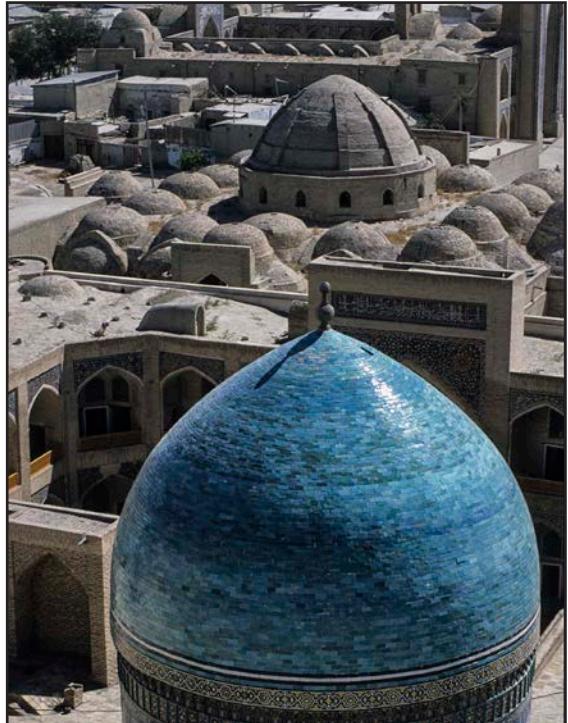
Decay at Bibi Khanym Mosque.



Labi Hauz square at the heart of Bukhara.

Dome of Kalon Mosque and domes on the bazaars in Bukhara.

Nearly all the route is across irrigated farmland, with canals and pipelines everywhere. Vast areas of cotton (most has been picked), less of apples, grain, sunflowers, maize; some flooded fields, vegetable gardens near the villages. Most of land is traditional farming, but some Soviet monoculture away from the villages. Small towns and villages look OK, very basic but no glaring poverty. Road is mostly four lanes with almost no traffic, smooth with few potholes. Three police checks along the way



Into Bukhara bus station at 3pm. Cold drinks, then a taxi for 600S (down from 1000) into the back streets to Sasha and Son, another large house round a courtyard. Excellent room with low beams, small window, air con, TV and bathroom. A really good place to stay.

Walkabout through the old town; many houses faced with mud and straw over timber and upright bricks, with whitewash outside. Walk to Bukhara Hotel but airline office is closed. Labi Hauz square is magnificent and delightful; huge old mulberry trees (one protected as it was planted in 1477), large water tank, intermittent fountains, diving kids, old men playing draughts and backgammon, cafes, cool shade. At east end Nadir Divanbegi Medressa is 1620s, tiled front, splendid courtyard now with shops and restaurant. West end is a covered bazaar. We like Bukhara already.

Easy to buy drinks for room fridge. Then back to Labi Hauz to sit by the lake for drinks and then dinner; kebabs with plov (rice with spices and good bits of mutton) and Jan finds a good beer first time. A lovely evening, and then short walkabout back to hotel.

Monday August 6, Bukhara

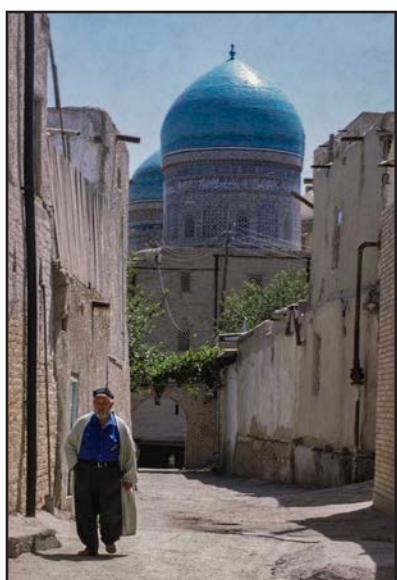
Another spectacular breakfast, to the sounds of Beethoven, then out at 7.30. The khanaka hall on Labi Hauz is good in the sun. Through three covered bazaars (the taqis) to the Tim Abdullah Khan, with silk looms inside; the silk warp already dyed with patterns before the weft is added: such care.

Lovely buildings and streets, pale yellow bricks are so clean and no traffic in most of the paved streets. Kalon Mosque and Mir-i-Ab Medressa are fantastic around a square as good as the Registan though smaller;



Minaret stairway.

Kalon minaret.



Bukhara back road.

mosque has superb arched bays all around and fine blue dome. Up the minaret for views, 47 m tall, built 1827 and in perfect condition. The madrassa is still used as a college, so not open to visitors. Tilework and three domes make a splendid site; it leaves Samarkand behind (except for the sheer size of its Registan).

The Ark is the old, royal, fortress, with massive raked walls of brick, and a fine entrance in from the Registan (meaning sandy place), the open square where Stoddart and Conolly were beheaded in 1842 when they came as emissaries from Queen Victoria. Out across the ring road, cafe for drinks, and a dusty road to the farmers' market; in along melon alley, then hardware, then food halls, still active at midday; good dried apricots, raisins and sugar crystals. Back past Ark to Zindon Jail, with displays and Stoddart and Conolly's cell: a deep pit five metres across below a central hole, where they were held for some months, horrendous. Back to hotel for 3pm break, via back streets where all houses are hidden in courtyards. Music in shops and cafes varies from Für Elise to Phil Collins to Greensleeves; traditional street bands have drums made with skins of fish, goat and cow.

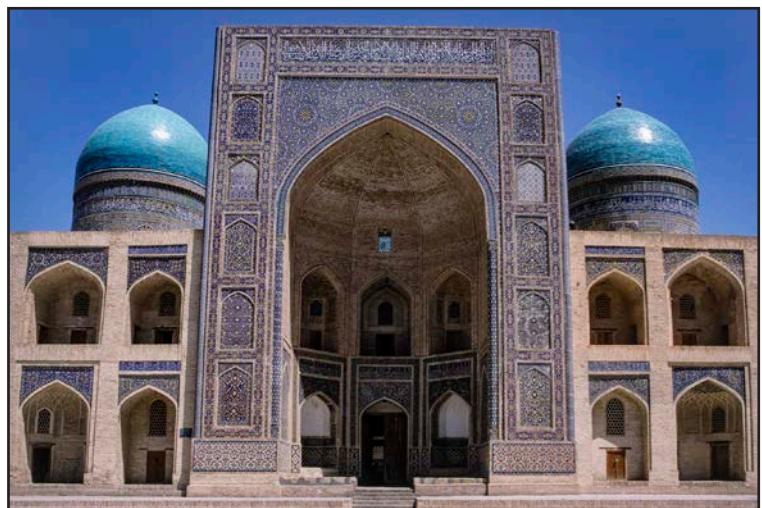
Back to Labi Hauz at 5pm for drinks, then plov and shashlyk for a good dinner beside the lake. Amazingly cool beneath cloudless blue skies. A very relaxed town; tourist stalls in the obvious places, heavy on embroidered bead bags, hats and brassware that is engraved on request; but few visitors and minimal sales hassle; a few tour groups and rather more backpackers than in Samarkand. The big hotels south of the town centre keep the groups away, except for one at dinner in the madrassa restaurant. We change our outward plane tickets from Tuesday to Wednesday, so another day here is a welcome prospect.

Tuesday August 7, Bukhara countryside

Another good breakfast, this time with Elton John on tape. Walk through the bazaars, but a stall with a lovely brass icon that we had decided to buy was not there. Back streets to Ark, and into Samani Park, with mausoleum in plain brick, 1100 years old, before majolica tiles were in use; then past beautiful Abdullah Khan Medressa. Chashma Ayub has beginnings of a good water museum; Bukhara was built among the marshes where Zaraishan river breaks up and dies before reaching the Amudarya; lots of canals old and new, last marshes drained in early 1900s; no mention of Soviet cotton disaster, though some canals are from that era. Out through the market to buy socks, a new belt, raisins and nuts.



The beautiful gatehouse of Char Minar, Bukhara.



Madrassa of Mir-i-Arab, in Bukhara.

The beautiful gatehouse of Char Minar, Bukhara.

Wednesday August 8, Tashkent

Still in Bukhara, out again at 7.45 for another delightful stroll through the old town. Loop round to the Kalan Mosque, and find the icon seller on a new pitch, so buy our favourite for \$25. Back via Labi Hauz where fewer people around, and hotel by 10am. Then taxi to airport for 500 som with no haggling. New airport is being built, but now very small. Internal flight has no check-in, no boarding cards, no security, no hold luggage; just hand in your ticket as you get on with all your own gear. Good flight in a combi-jet for one hour.



Melon sales for the Tashkent to Moscow train.

At Tashkent, a bus takes us to the exit, beside the terminal, so straight onto the street and walk across the square to buses. Some confusion over route; after bus, train, metro then tram, find the Orzu Hotel out in the suburbs; simple, new, adequate place. Ride a tram into town, but very uninspiring; nearly all new after an M5 earthquake flattened most of the city in 1966. Huge boulevards, no big shops, good parks, no warmth, though we never found any sort of centre. Tram back out to suburbs, and good kebabs in a cafe, before walking back to the hotel for an early night.

Thursday August 9, train to Aralsk

Up at 2.00am for taxi to the station, then long queue through Customs to get onto train. Excellent new train of 22 coaches (going to Moscow), all sleeping cars with compartments for four; we share with young Russian lady and sweet daughter two years old. Train leaves at 4.10am, but soon at the border, so endless passport checks until dawn, then asleep as we set off across Kazakhstan.

Soon awake, in awe of lovely steppe grasslands. Jump off train to buy ice creams, and buy fizzy water and roubles from sellers on the train. General lack of food on trains or stations, except for fruit sellers, though vendors have cigarettes, vodka, watches, shirts and dresses and eager to change money. Police do not like people buying roubles, but give up over small amounts for foreigners. Buy some tengi off Aussie and American in the next compartment who are heading for Moscow so are glad to off-load Kazakh currency. Then everyone is given a package with chocolate croissant, coffee packet, sugar, soup, toothpaste, brush. Into Syrdarya valley and cross a few canals and roads, but little irrigated land; spot the river a few times, but lots of desert, sage and sand. Train trundles slowly after Arys Junction, diesel-hauled, and 1000 km takes a long time.

Large station at the provincial capital, Qyzylorda, has mural of the Aral Sea with ships. On into the night, past Baykonur Cosmodrome space station, and sleep till 1.30am. Then off just before 2.00am. Nurzhan and landlady are waiting on the platform at Aralsk; we are almost the only people to get off. Five minutes by car through silent town, and stay not in a hotel but in a Kazakh house across the street. Fine room, all wood and wool carpets over plastered mud-brick walls. Loo across the yard, spotless. Various babushkas shuffling about. Tea and chat, then sleep.

Friday August 10, ‘Aral Sea’

Up at 8.00, for eggs breakfast, then off at 9.00 with Nurzhan and driver in a Russian jeep. End of the street was the harbour, but now green fields with a plastic swimming pool and a few rusting ships. Adjacent yard was used for making water tanks out of old ships' hulls, but now closed. No industry in town, just subsistence farming and local products.



Perpetual dust on the outskirts of the dying town of Aralsk.



Bactrian camels near Aralsk.



Jan with Nurzhan and two Zhalangdash boys at the ships' graveyard.

large cemeteries miles from anywhere, and endless rolling desert. Turn off into Zhalangdash, an old fishing town and now seriously dead. Collect two local boys for the drive out beyond the old coast road and round a ‘bay’ to a ships’ graveyard; ten rusting hulks have been sitting in the sand since the 1970s; incredibly corroded with decking full of holes so that it is a tad risky to walk over.

Back to the village, and into a house for tea, bread and apricots. Lovely family, all sitting on the floor around the food. The village did have 100 fishermen, now just 18. Our host was a fisherman until about 1970, then an inspector, then worked in a factory at Baykonur, then got sacked, so now farms from home. Desperate life, with little or nothing to do in the village or in Aralsk.

Drive across more desert that was the seabed to Tastubek, an even worse village of a few dozen houses and zero appeal; no electricity. Coast of the Little Aral was on edge of village in 1998, but now down by five metres and two kilometres away, since the dam separating it from the Large Aral failed in 1999 and drained most of the Little Aral. Fibreglass fishing boats upturned on the beach, with 5-cm mesh nets. Flounder flatfish catch is rotting in the nets because it could not be recovered during five days of strong winds. The sea is saline and muddy, against a beach of shingle and shells.

Back in Aralsk, walk to sunny ex-harbour, then to excellent museum for rushed visit before it closes. Then to office of Danish fisheries project; very switched-on local girl with optimistic outlook for the Small Aral Sea once the dam is re-built (planned for 2002) to again capture the Syrdarya flow and make it a freshwater lake with overflow to the remnants of the Large Aral. Walk around town, and policeman demands to see visas for no reason. Back to hotel for excellent dinner of meat, rice, stew, broth, salad, fruit, buckwheat etc.



Aral Sea that was.



*Zhalangdash.
Kids with no prospects.
Fisherman's family.*





Our train from Aralsk to Almaty.

Taxi with Nurzhan to the station, for the 11.50 (midnight) Kazakh Express from Moscow to Almaty. No lights on the station, so difficult to find the right coach in a five-minute panic stop. Then find that no berths are vacant, so we sit in the guard's compartment until 4am, when we get two top berths, while two families change over in lower berths. Asked to pay for sheets, but we had no tengi, so they came for free. Very hot, but good to sleep.

Saturday August 11, train to Almaty

Wake around 8am, very hot and airless, but better in the corridor beside the one precious open window. Travelling back south across the steppes to Arys, then east on the electric Turk-Sib line. Train full and busy at stations. Loud music in corridors, passengers keep turning volume down, but idiot guard then turns it back to maximum; ceaseless battle. We are given free lunch and dinner in the dining car; probably because we should have been in a 2-berth compartment. Mountains to south have patches of snow. Rolling grasslands to north are much cultivated, with large towns at intervals; not as barren as further west. Beautiful sunset as we rise to higher altitudes.

Sunday August 12, Almaty

Wake up at 6am to a grey morning, and train goes into Almaty 2 station near the city centre. Met by a Kan Tengri agent with news that the train to Urumqi goes only on Saturday and Monday (even though we were 'booked' on a Sunday train), but not to worry as the train arrives into Urumqi at 7am, with plenty of time to get to Tianchi. So we have an extra day in Almaty, which turns out good. Taken by car to luxurious Otrar Hotel in excellent central location. A good buffet breakfast; and move watches an hour forward as railway time differs from local time.

Set off walkabout at 10.30. The gold spires of Zenkov Cathedral are visible from our hotel room, with snow-capped mountains beyond. Beautiful wooden building in the sunshine; service inside has lovely taped music, and the wall of icons is superb. Through the park and up Dostyk (street), grand boulevard with oak trees, fine buildings, fountains, and not-so-good blocks of flats. Quiet on a Sunday morning but many shops, a large supermarket and lots of drink stalls open.

Trolley bus west for 20T (=10p) each, to St Nicholas Cathedral, with beautiful blue onion domes; wedding has a chanting priest, and then outside bride follows ritual by throwing 'gold' coins onto the pavement for the poor to pick up. Square is lively with small funfair and lots of folk sitting out to enjoy the sunshine. Through bazaar that is quiet on Sunday, and bus east to Zhibek shopping area, with outside cafes and artists' displays along pedestrianized street. Walk back to hotel. TV News in English was about outbreak of bubonic plague at Aralsk; which explains the policeman's warning to beware of the rats.



Zenkov Cathedral, Almaty.



Art sales in Almaty.



Afternoon in the park, Almaty.



Medeu ice stadium, with catch dam behind.

Afternoon walk via Zenkov Cathedral and Panfilov Park, with impressive war memorial, eternal flame and another wedding group. The large Green Market is quiet. Walk to cafes on Gogol (street) for very good shashlyk dinners, then back to hotel. Almaty is a delightful city.

Monday August 13, Alatau Mountains

Clear morning in Almaty; up at 7.30 for another excellent buffet breakfast; then check out but leave bags at the hotel. Walk through park and up Dostyk to catch #6 bus to the mountains. Wait 30 minutes, then a potential scrum for seats, but the bus stops with its door right in front of Jan, so we are lucky.

Out through town, continuously uphill on gigantic pediment. After 10 km, into mountain valley, and even steeper uphill between steep slopes of granite, grass and conifer, for another 10 km. Then into Medeu with car parks, cafes and huge centre for speed skating (now dry). And all for 12p on the bus. Set off walking then do a deal with a private ‘taxi’ to Shymbulak. Road winds up the side of huge mudslide-defence dam: massive rockfill structure, caught a big slide in 1973, since raised, but no repeat slide; moraine dams within catchment have been engineered, so now less chance of a flood and mudslide. Walkabout cut short by rain, and ski-lift goes up into cloud, so no need or chance to go higher. A lovely area, but steep terrain and serious walking.

Walk back down from ice stadium for photos of the debris catch barriers, with gaps for the road to go through. Then catch a bus into town. Trolley bus down to the market, then a relaxed wander people-watching in the main street, and an excellent dinner at a pavement cafe. Walk into the cathedral park for a lovely evening with people all around.

Back at the hotel for car to the station for train that leaves on time at 8.55pm. The Genghis Khan Express with nine Chinese coaches and four Kazakh. We have a 4-berth compartment to ourselves in a Kazakh coach, so really comfortable, and we have our supply of beer, Coke and water. Snow on the mountains and the sun soon goes down. Almaty was a great town and we are sad to leave.



Grasslands in front of foothills of the Tien Shan

Tuesday August 14, train to Urumqi

Beautiful morning with sun up at 7am railway time, on vast, flat, open grasslands, as we stop at Aktogag and reverse onto the Urumqi line. Train is very comfortable, with small opening windows on both sides, and good washrooms in each coach. Cold at night, and blankets are needed when the windows are open. Head east on more dead-flat steppe, much of it just sage with a few grazing animals. At Beskol, buy water and bread with our last tengi, for a fine breakfast of ham, cheese and eggs brought from Almaty. Bits of snow on the Alatau Mountains to the south, with clean streams draining from

them. Lots of empty space in a dry land. Alakol Lake is huge; some salt extraction; no sign of fishing, but locals sell fish at the next station. More grassland with a few horses. Bleak railway villages with nothing else. Then the frontier with four lines of fences and watch towers.

Into Dostyk at 1.30pm; large yards, many freight trains, lines of bogies for the change of gauge. Military abound, and passports are taken off us. Kazakhs did not want our (essential!) Almaty registration documents; the Kazakh police are far too heavy if they ever want to develop a tourist industry. Once into the station, some police prevent us getting back into the train, whereas others do not mind; walk out to the bogie-changing yards for some photos; and we are still there at 4.30; slow! Train moves across the frontier at 7.30 than stops again. Chinese inspectors look in every compartment at 9.30; open every case, unscrew ceiling panels to check; all very slow! Long delay, then Chinese Immigration in big, new, fancy station, but no drinks or services. Clocks go forward one hour, and we finally leave at 12.45. A total of 10 hours and 15 minutes is our record for crossing a frontier.



Change of gauge for our train.

Wednesday August 15, Tianchi

Up at 6.30 with sunrise. Train was very fast through the night on new track, and we are into Urumqi at 7.40. Large modern station within a huge city of endless high-rise blocks, with grey-green grass hills rising immediately south of the railway. Agent with a name board is waiting for us; had not booked him but he appears after the wrong-day train error; he knew that the previous day's Kazakh train had been cancelled ages ago. So we have a car through the city for a good breakfast of eggs, zu and dim sum in the Overseas Chinese Hotel; he changes money for us, easy on the black market but £1=12Y, almost the same as the bank rate. Then to a new bus station for a bus at 8.50; good 20-seater and he tells all the passengers about the English visitors.

Out onto motorway with almost no traffic, between field of sunflowers, then turn off and climb steadily into the Tien Shan between fields lined with cypresses. Into narrower valley passing many yurts: this is a Kazakh area not Uyghur. Past big car parks and chair lift, and arrive just before 11am at Tianchi (means Heavenly Lake). At bus stop, Rashid speaks English and offers a yurt camp; he is a bit of an entrepreneur and gathers most of the western travellers. Five minutes' walk to the lake, where hordes of Chinese tourists swarming over rocks, boats, Kazakh stalls, etc, in tourist town on an end moraine. Beautiful view along lake to Bogda Shan, 5400m high with active glaciers on all sides.

Walk 3 km along trail beside lake to Rashid's camp, and get places in a yurt with four other travellers, for just 40Y each. Plateful of plov and tea for lunch. Site has three families in ten yurts; a good place, but the loos are 'in the forest'. Lake is in a beautiful glaciated trough in flysch, volcanics and jasper. Lovely walk for another few kilometres to the end of the lake, where only a deserted ski-camp and no drinks; so then walk back past camp for same distance to the first cafe with beer and Coke. Sun is still high at 7pm Beijing time. A really beautiful place, and an almost cloudless day (after it had rained the day before, so we were lucky this time). Numerous eagles soaring and fishing, but not diving.

Thursday August 16, Tianchi and Urumqi

Good night in yurt; quilts and pillows on carpeted floor were comfortable and warm. Sun up over hills at 8am, and soon warm enough to be out. Noodle soup for breakfast. Walk down the lake to see the crowds on the



Walk alongside Heavenly Lake (Tianchi) on the way to Rashid's camp where we stayed in a yurt for the night.



Kazakh girl posing for Chinese tourists.

Tianchi and Bogda Shan.

moraine; numerous Chinese and Japanese dressing in Kazakh gear for photos. Rashid's home and farm is down the valley in a big Kazakh community, and he takes the yurts up for each summer, April to October. Lake outlet is controlled, with an overflow level that accounts for the high strandline. Pretty pagoda in the woods by the outlet river, with Kazakh kids posing for photos with or without goats with silly feather hats. Interesting to see the Chinese tourist scene, but further up the lake was not to be missed.

Collect the bags from camp, and walk to half-way cafe for beer and Coke. Cheery bus driver was waiting for us, and bus back left at 4.45, back into Urumqi for 6.30. Easy to telephone from a stall in the bus station yard, and the agent arrives in a few minutes with our train tickets. Bus across town to the station, and leave bags in one of many baggage offices, before an evening walkabout. Buy good fruit, including green Turfan sultanas, and have an excellent meal of shashlyk, plov, beer and tea (but poor Chinese cola) at street stall for 13Y. Watch traffic chaos during road reconstruction, then dusk at 9.30, so walk to station and find soft-class waiting room for comfort. Main waiting room is crowded but lots of good stalls to buy water, Coke and beer. Onto the train at 11.30, and we share a soft-class sleeper with two silent Chinese. Very comfortable, and train is fast through the night.



Train across the Gobi Desert.

Friday August 17, Gobi Desert

Wake at 8.00 soon after sun up, when train stops briefly at Hami. Soon past any irrigated farmland and out into very barren desert. The Gobi has some flats with sage, but a lot of bare rock on slopes. Windy and dusty east of Dunhuang, so could barely see snow on Qilian Shan; Jiayuguan Fort much restored at the western end of the Great Wall, and city nearby is huge and modern. New railways being built; entire route is now double track, and new high-speed trains start to appear. Platform guards, wearing face masks against the ceaseless dust, stand at attention as we leave. Nearer to the mountains, streams feed irrigation and rich farming. At 7pm into a crowded dining car for a really good dinner of chicken and ginger in the best style of Sichuan cooking. Coke and beer and dusk at 8.45 in hazy cloud.

Saturday August 18, Lanzhou

Into station at 7am dawn in steady rain. In half-flooded yard find a taxi at reasonable rate for ride to Huarui Hotel in central main square. Travel girl in lobby has our train tickets for Chengdu, and offers to fix a trip to Binglingsi. Room on 19th floor with great views over city, very grey in rain but looking good later in the day.

Walkabout with umbrellas in the rain. Huang He lives up to its name by being very yellow, but rather featureless and no river traffic. Back into town past dozens of mobile-phone shops, and a brass band playing outside the grand opening of yet another; there are now more mobile phones in China than in USA, while the

landlines fall into disrepair. Even better was a marching band of schoolchildren. Along food street for good baozi (steamed buns with pork filling). Back in hotel to dry off, and travel girl can find no bus to Binglingsi. So when rain stops, we go back out and book a tour for Sunday with Western Travel. Then an excellent dinner of chicken, nuts and chilli at a pavement cafe. Walk back through evening crowds in a large market and in the square. Lanzhou has long been well known for having less visitor-appeal than Birmingham, but now not too bad, and the way China has modernised in the last ten years is almost unbelievable; endless new shops with lots of stock, but not yet large food supermarkets.

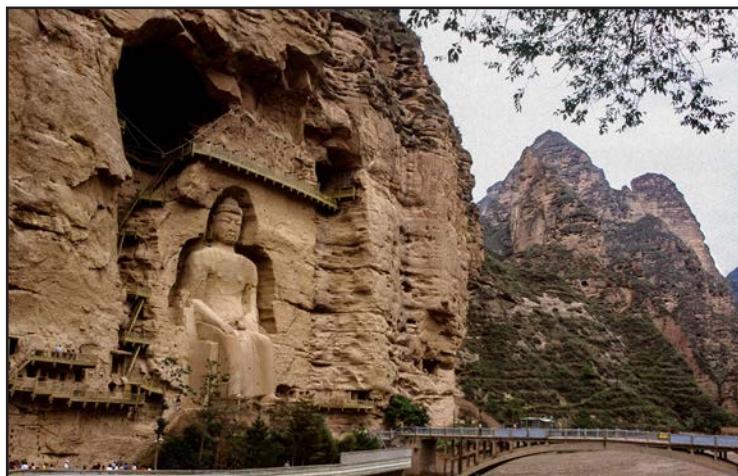
Sunday August 19, Binglingsi

Brighter morning for 7.30 mini breakfast, and then wait for car; but van arrives with two from USA and two from Oz, so we get a rebate. Out of town west on Silk Road expressway alongside river. Turn south onto sandstone hills and up onto loess plateau with deep gullies, some piping and landslides, some terracing, many cave houses, also mud-brick houses. Large roadside propaganda notices: ‘Give birth to fewer, get rich quicker’; ‘The fewer the children, the better the quality’.

Descend to Huang He San Xia (= Yellow River Three Gorges); huge dam has water level 15 metres down from crest as it is primarily for flood-control; major recreation site with dozens of boats and speedboats. We have one of latter for long ride to caves; along gorge between vertical cliffs in horizontal sandstone, then 30 minutes in open water before turning up a very muddy brown inlet; into a side gorge between granite walls with sandstone above carved into pseudokarst towers. Then walk up Liuja Gorge to Binglingsi caves, with large and small caves, and giant Buddhas (one is 27 metres tall) all carved into sandstone cliff; enjoyable stroll around very fine site, and 1200 years old. Return by boat, and van stops on way back to look into some loess caves, now just used for fodder storage.



Lanzhou from our hotel window.



The large Buddha carved in the sandstone cliff at Binglingsi.

Back into Lanzhou, and we take a taxi out to beautiful farmland where chive fields have huge stacks of straw used for winter insulation after chive leaves are cut but the tuber is left in the ground. Return to town and walk through to food street for another good dinner at a Kazakh restaurant; this time with shashlyk for starters followed by excessive amounts of very tasty chicken, potatoes, ginger and chillies with Coke and beer. Walk back through dark streets, but still hordes in our hotel square, at cafes and grand sales promotions for new cars.



Storage of chives in fields outside Lanzhou.



Terraces carved into the hillsides in the extensive loess lands of Gansu province.

Monday August 20, Lanzhou and the loess lands

Clear morning, but smog builds up by midday. Walkabout on sunny busy morning, but none of the old-style Chinese chaos, no hutongs, but large blocks of flats; a new Christian church with huge nave and families in a chapel. Then out in the markets, cicadas in baskets, and a chicken dying slowly in a furnace; some things don't change; but a carved walnut now priced at an incredible 4000Y.

Taxi from hotel for only 8Y to total chaos at station being rebuilt, a crammed waiting room, and then join the hordes in a scrum onto the train. New, air-con, hard-sleeper coach, very full and we have two mid-level berths half a coach apart, but no worries. Train radio speakers play Auld Lang Syne as we depart.

Wonderful afternoon ride through loess lands in bright sunshine; lovely countryside with so much intensive agriculture, some under plastic, some in half-greenhouses; no machinery anywhere, and no animals. Major new road construction, and doubling of the railway with better alignment through new tunnels. Train is smooth and fast except for long waits in passing loops. Good dinner in dining car, beef and chicken, little spiced. Play cards and read through the evening, but both asleep before lights out.

Tuesday August 21, into Chengdu

Wake at 7.00 to sunny morning; eggs and sultanas for breakfast. Hilly terrain in Red Basin sandstones, and lots of crops blown down by wind. Into Chengdu a little late at 2.30pm. Seething mass at the exit, then outside to signs for buses and taxi in English too. Walk to bus station and catch double-deck #16 all across town for 1Y each. High rises, traffic, big shops, bicycles; a newly modernised China, so different from 1991.

Walk along river to Jiaotong Fandian (Traffic Hotel), cheap and very good. Chaos at check-in and no room booking; then they find it under sub-sub-agent's name; and no tickets for our pre-booked tour on next day. Phone CITS and promised they will be ready in the morning. Walkabout on lovely river promenade and excellent tea house (though we declined the ear-cleaning service). Today's propaganda notices include 'Be civilised, progressive and contributory to the glory of Chengdu'. Dinner at Paul's, run by a 1960s hippy with good cheap food and lots of talk about travel to Tibet, which is now possible, as restrictions relax.



A 'Yellow River' of cyclists in Chengdu.

Old and new in Chengdu.



Wednesday August 22, north to Songpan

Good basic breakfast and chaotic check-out, and van arrives for us at 7.30. Across town in gentle rain to a roadside stop, and onto a 28-seat bus, good, clean, new; with 20 Chinese tourists, including geography students, Zhou and Lijan (whose English is better than our Mandarin). Leave at 9.00 on Chengguan expressway across plains. Into mountains through limestone ridge, but then all schists with very steep valley sides, some terracing, lots of hydro-electric. Many buses on our road, and two stops, one in a village and one in a new service station. Weather improves to thin sun through high cloud. Hillside villages have many satellite dishes; like upturned faces worshipping the great TV god in the sky.

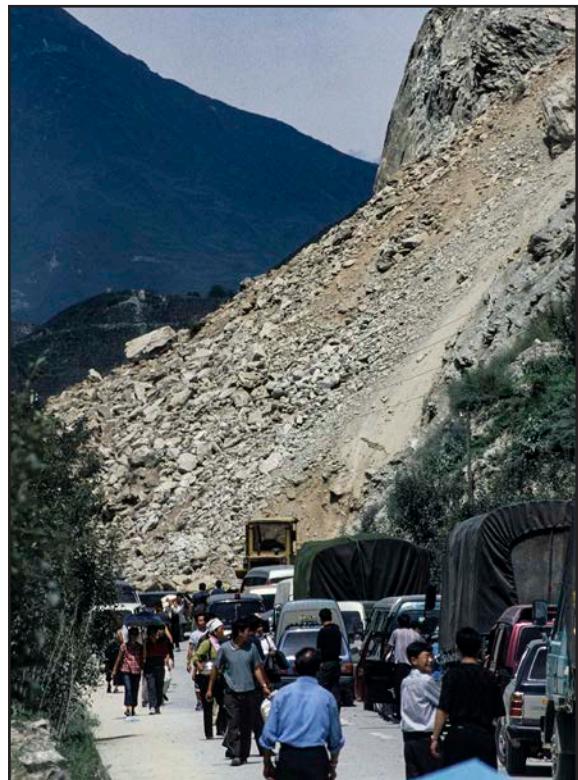
At 12.30, stop behind line of buses and trucks. We walk forward (much to distress of our tour guide), and find we are #305 in a queue behind a landslide that has dumped rock debris more than five metres deep on the road, with no easy push-off to the side. Failure of steep cut face in near-vertical schists, probably due to yesterday's rainfall. Excavators at work to clear a single track over the debris for all except the heavy trucks, and our bus crosses at 6.30pm. Independence Day film was on the bus-video to pass some of the time, while villagers came by selling fruit.

Dinner at the lunch-stop, then evening ride up spectacular valleys with horrendous rock overhangs and plenty of landslide potential. See tracks of mega slides on far side of valley; then the road hairpins up out of the valley and into darkness. Into Songpan at 10.30pm, fantastic smart new hotel and room keys are handed out. Excellent room, with Coke and beer from over the road.

Thursday August 23, Jiuzhaigou

Wake-up call at 5.30, and off at 6.45 dawn after breakfast. Soon call at a Bonpo monastery; typical Buddhist style. monks, many prayer wheels (with no need to go round clockwise), and 700 Buddhas in temple's wall niches. Over a pass and long descent to Jiuzhaigou, where there is an incredible new tourist town with hotels and hundreds of buses bringing in visitors. We stop at very smart hotel that is just a year old, with excellent rooms.

Into the Park; delay for tickets, then shuttle bus up park road past lots of travertine in the river channel. Group stops at restaurant, midday, for lunch. So we go off on our own, on shuttle bus to Bamboo Lake, and then walk down



The landslide that closed our road for a day.



*Bonpo monastery near Songpan.
Cascades over a travertine barrier at Jiuzhaigou.*



from Panda Lake amid hordes of Chinese, and we see no foreigners all day. Travertine pools are fantastic blues and greens, and very beautiful, but lack of sun leaves photos a bit weak. Bus to Luorilang Falls, then to Shuzhen Falls, and we walk down an unmade path beside the water, with very few people about. Lovely water wheels driving Bonpo prayer wheels. Good visitor centre, then we are back at the hotel at 6pm for a good dinner and a short evening stroll.

Friday August 24, Huanglong

Up at 6.00 and leave in spots of rain. Long climb to pass, and bus stops to collect two Tibetan girls who sing beautifully and well earn their keep. Stop at factory shop beside Tibetan community with zhos, horses and wooden houses all around. Then down to northern end of Songpan, to excellent mineral museum (not well curated, but some very good pegmatite and dendritic manganese oxides). Call in at oxygen shop, and six of our group rent lilo-pillows full of oxygen for the high altitude at Huanglong. Good lunch stop and an exciting encounter with hua jiao (Sichuan pepper).

Then great new road over high grasslands with grazing zhos and yaks, over pass at 4200 metres, in limestone with caves in cliffs and roadcuts. Construction gangs living in grim tents camps. Steep descent into eastbound valley, and stop in a yard with more than 100 other buses. Tickets given out at 1.45, and told back in bus at 4.00; barely enough time (cut short because of landslide). Huanglong is a fantastic site; wonderful pools and travertine dams for two kilometres rising 300 metres, all forming the great yellow dragon (that's the meaning of huanglong, and dragon = snake) between slopes of forested limestone. Lots of people stagger in the thin air at 3500 metres, and resort to their oxygen supplies; only one other westerner, with a Chinese friend. Up the main path to junction with woodland trail back down, then quick run up to top monastery beside geothermal source pools; through woods at first but then the best pools of all. Signs claim a total of 3400 terraced pools; an amazing and beautiful sight, surely the world's best travertine.

Bus back over pass and should have stopped again in Songpan, but have to go further because of the landslide restrictions on the road. In dusk, pass lake formed in 1933 behind a dam of landslide debris when it drowned a small town. More old landslides and remnant terraces passed in fading light, then 90 minutes in darkness. Into hotel in Maoxian at 9.30, for a mediocre meal, and a short walkabout in the rather unexciting town.



Beautiful colours in a lake at Jiuzhaigou.



Limestone mountains on the road to Huanglong.



Just a few of the travertine dams and pools at the upper end of Huanglong.



Lower end of the travertine that forms the 'Yellow Dragon' of Huanglong.



Wonderland of travertine at Huanglong.

Pillow of oxygen to counter the high altitude at Huanglong.

Saturday August 25, south to Chengdu

Up at 7.00 and soon leave, but then have to wait for two hours at the landslide. Still being cleared, and southbound traffic is in the morning only, which is why we had to come on as far as Maoxian last night. Brief stops at herbal medicine clinic and another mineral shop. Then down steep valleys; more villages with satellite dishes, limestone quarries and a really dirty town with coal mines. Good lunch stop, then onto Chengdu and into the city. Bus runs round folks' hotels, but could not find ours, so drops us off in centre and we have an excellent walk through the markets, back to the Jiaotong Hotel.

On our own again, we check out the Ximennan bus station next door, but Leshan tickets for tomorrow are only bought on the bus. Walk into town centre; tree-lined streets, and Friendship Store (the old foreigners-only shop) now replaced by a mega-shopping-mall. Then back to river, and we pick a restaurant with a difficult Mongolian hot-pot (cooked in soup, instead of water); the duck and beansprouts were good, but we avoided the whole frogs and the various dubious entrails on offer.

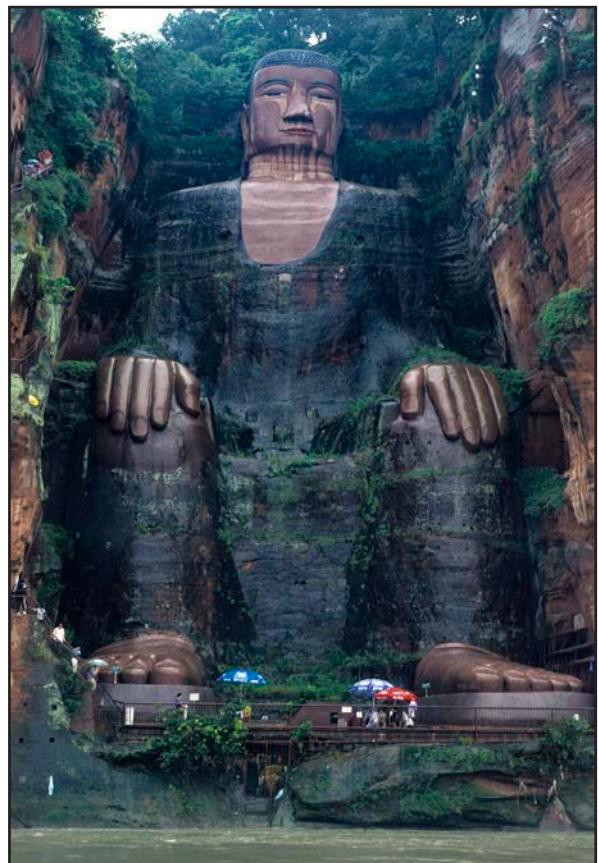
Sunday August 26, bus to Leshan

Downstairs to the bus station for the 7.25 bus to Leshan. Along empty motorway past lots of rice, and tea on the hills; all in fog and murk. Dropped off at 10.00 on street corner in Leshan, for long walk on river promenade in drizzle. Lots of tour boats on the Mingjiang, but few takers in the rain. Frontage hotels closed, with dubious tout waiting outside, but best ignored; so walk through town centre to luxurious Jiazhou Hotel with a room for 360Y overlooking the river, but all views soon lost in rain and fog. There is a Newcastle Arms pub next door. Walkabout for beer and Coke, and Dadu River is fast white water.

Rain stops at 4pm, but still thick mist; walk round lively town. Find a superb street of cafes with excellent Sichuan hot-pot; help yourself to colour-coded skewers of meats or veg, and cook in our own tub of boiling spiced water; we had 42 skewers; best street meal ever. In the main square, lines of locals doing tai chi, even in the rain and dark. Good town for an evening stroll, then hotel luxury.

Monday August 27, Leshan Buddha

Up at 8.00, still raining, good breakfast in hotel. Bus and walk to the river, then ferry across the Minjiang, and 20Y each for a boat trip to the giant Buddha known as Da Fo; a very fine sight even in the mist and rain, all carved into a river cliff of Red Basin Cretaceous sandstone. Boat



The Buddha carved in sandstone at Leshan.



Scenes at the Wangshu Temple in Chengdu.

struggles to hold still in front of the Buddha, having joined the fast Dadu River. Good walkways abound, but not for a rainy day. Ferry and walk back to hotel for midday checkout, then local bus out to main bus station: huge, efficient and easy, and we get seats on a 12.40 bus back to Chengdu; rain most of the way. Stop at out-of-town bus terminal, and take a #28 into the centre, back to our hotel.

Walkabout through markets; not good for the chickens and fish that die to order. Find a good hot-pot restaurant, where we choose the spicy boiling pan, a bit too hot; but we have a total of 105 skewers at about eight pence each; very good mushrooms, quails' eggs and meatballs. Another good day, even in the rain.

Tuesday August 28, Chengdu

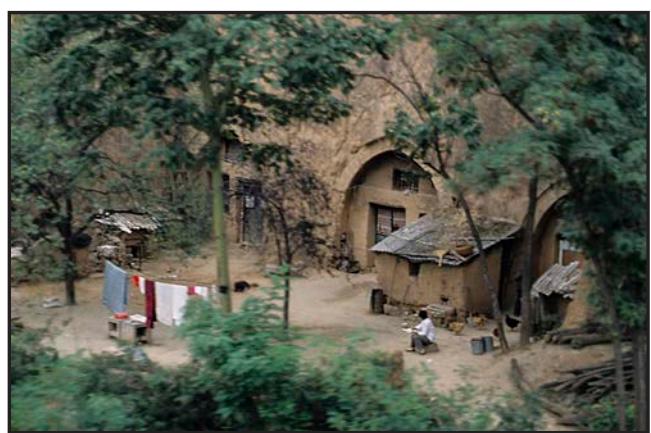
Still raining; good breakfast; leave bags in hotel to go out round town. Take a #16 bus to Wangshu Temple; large, active, courtyards, many worshippers, giant joss sticks, smoke, monks preparing huge midday meal with rice offerings from street parade; one hall has 480 beautiful figures carved into slates; great atmosphere.

Walk back through town; lots of shops, not enough customers; clappers exhort people to go into sales. Macdonalds has spicy chicken wings and perfect ice cream sundaes. Huge book shop on four floors, with dozens of kids sitting on the floor and avidly reading; good maps, but no Huanglong book (but buy one at a bookstall inside a large hotel). Have hot baozi from the famous Gan shop; superb pork fillings and costing just 1.5Y for two. Then along river for Coke and green tea at a big chai house now that rain has stopped.

Collect bags from hotel, and meet the two Oz from Binglingsi; they had been to Emei Shan but saw nothing in the bad weather. Bus #16 to the station, for a last good ride through town. Buy chicken, duck, sultanas and drinks at food-stalls, then join the hordes out to the train leaving at 6.45pm. Fun crowd on the train in hard sleeper; soon dark; buy a good 10Y box dinner of rice, pork and veg to share with our chicken legs and drinks.

Wednesday August 29, train through loess lands

Morning fog in the hills, until we descend to better weather at Baoji. Spectacular loess country for most of the day; no large expanses of terraces as in Gansu; more gully erosion and piping failures; lots of caves, many still in use. East of Xian there is an almost continuous line of new towns; past Hua Shan in misty silhouette. The loess country is even better once into Henan; vertical-sided gullies, pinnacles, natural arches; many large cave houses still in use and looking quite presentable. Dinner is a bit basic because they had run out of the good bits, so our duck and chicken were welcome with their rice and veg.



Cave house carved into the loess of the Yellow River valley.

Thursday August 30, Beijing

Wake at 5.20 as coach comes alive, and into Beijing' new West Station at 6.20. Bus #1 along Chang'an is a great intro to a Beijing morning. Walk south to hotel via small Dongjian Park, where hundreds of locals are exercising in their pyjamas, on kids' climbing frames, tai chi line dancing, sword swinging, bum-slapping, finger clenching, leg-stretching, back-bending, etc; lovely. Xinqiao Hotel has a new entrance on the next road south (surprise!), and is luxurious. Into room at 7am, then meet up at breakfast with Rachel from Regent. Taxi to Korean travel agent for our visas, then bus back.

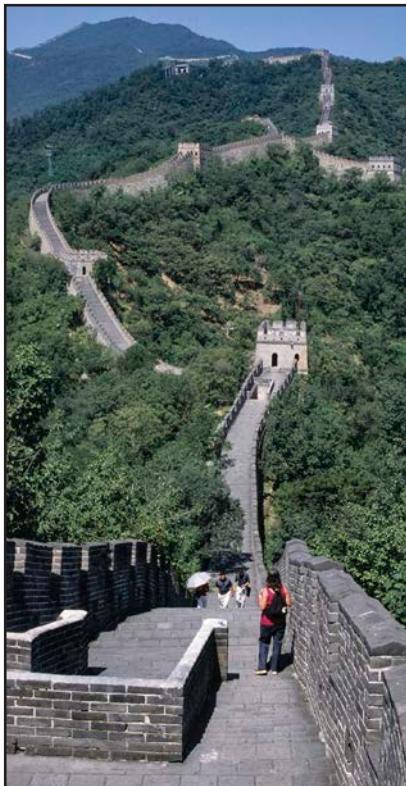


Morning exercises in Dongjian Park, in Beijing.

Metro and bus to Tiantan Park of Heavenly Peace, awful long walk in from west gate, and then not all that exciting; out of north gate, cold drinks, and buses to Tiananmen. Now paved with granite, no concrete, no numbers and no bloodstains, but police everywhere. Bus north to Jingshan Park with hill 40 m high of spoil from moat; splendid evening view of Forbidden and new cities. Bus back to hotel, then rush for metro to Plaza Universe Theatre for acrobat show; fantastic performance, kids 6–20 years old, supple, strong and clever beyond belief, with great appreciative audience; only an hour, but brilliant. Metro to Qianmen, and walk to the original 1864 Old Duck restaurant for classic Beijing Duck; pictures on the wall of old Beijing and visiting premiers including Heath, Bush, Kohl and Castro. Excellent end to the day.

Friday August 31, Mutianyu Great Wall

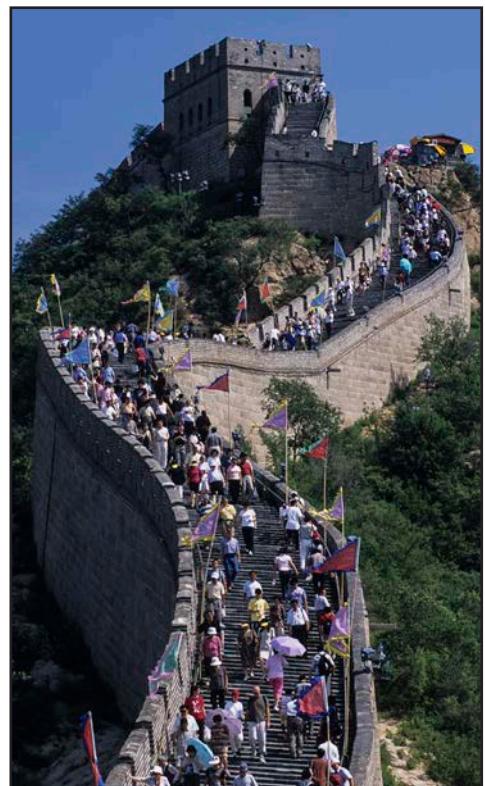
Bright sunny day for metro to Dongzhimen, and 8Y for one hour on a bus to Huairou. Avoid the taxi touts and walk into town centre to catch a minibus for 6Y each to Mutianyu. Take the cable car up onto the Wall (included in the 90Y entrance fee), then walk a mile to the west; splendid views, mountains almost clear; wall is in good condition, restored as far as the horizons with fine towers; almost no-one else there, so much better than the crowds at Badaling. Take the alternative route down from the wall on wheeled sledges down a kilometre-long, steel cresta-run: brilliant. Same route back to hotel for 6pm. Take a bus to Qianmen, for dinner of shashlyks from street stall, then walk to lovely night market in Dashilan with magnificent pre-1949 store fronts along a busy hutong. Memorable end to another brilliant day.



Great Wall at Mutianyu.

The usual crowds at Badaling.

Fun way down at Mutianyu.





Pyongyang: view of high-rise flats beside an empty highway, that are both so typical of the soulless city.

Residential area within Pyongyang.

Saturday September 1, into North Korea

Another sunny day. Now in the hands of the Regent group, so leave at 8.00 in cars to the airport, which is all new and reasonably efficient. The group is Blackpool John, Chinese David, sexy Jackie with student son Daniel, us, quiet German Philip and panicky Rachel; with the common interest of gaining just a glimpse of the world's most bizarre country. Flight is on a Koryo Ilyushin jet, and down to Pyongyang at 2.30 over endless rice paddies, isolated villages and empty roads.

Airport is in a wilderness; no departures on the board; easy passport control, picky Customs where all mobile phones are confiscated (but do all turn up on departure). A 40-seat bus is for the eight of us plus lady interpreter/guide, male minder and male driver, all called Lee.

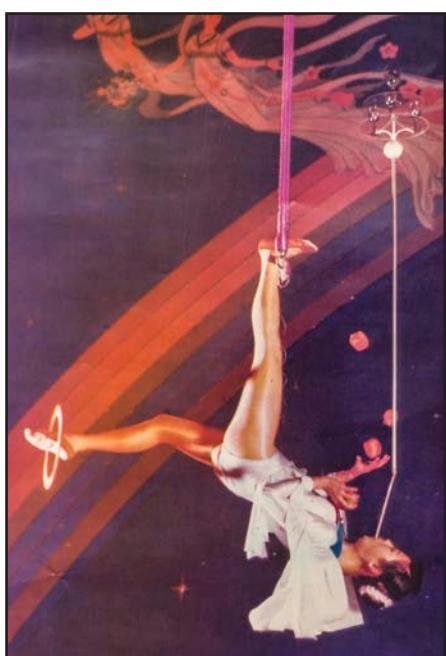
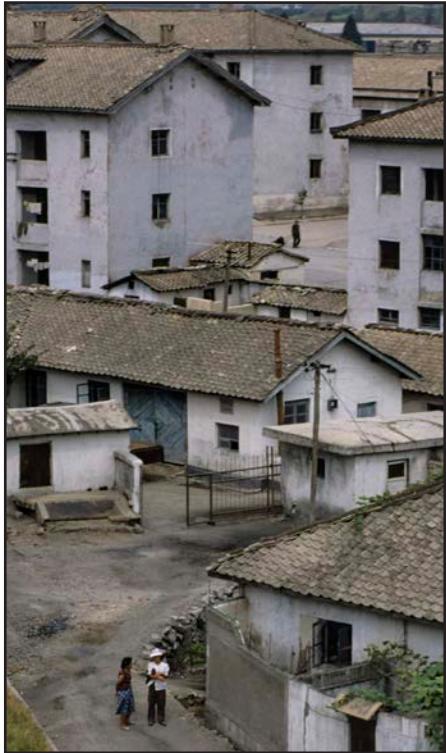
Road into town is wide and empty; people about in fields and on road. No adverts, just giant picture of Dear Leader (Kim Jong-il). Guide tells us how Great Leader (Kim Il-sung) saved the country from the Japanese in 1945 (no mention of USA) and how USA flattened Korea in 1950s (no mention of destruction by the Red armies). Pyongyang is huge; many giant monuments; unfinished hotel 105 stories tall; buses on streets, very few cars, few trucks; no markets or street stalls; shops are Russian style with no frontage and no displays.

Yanggakdo Hotel is on an island (to prevent walkabouts), with 45 floors with good room (high up after asking) but only water or beer to drink. Foyer has displays of Dear Leader and heavy propaganda of Japanese and American atrocities. Straight out to circus; not as good as Beijing acrobats except for brilliant synchronised swimming with poles balanced on straws held in teeth. An audience of 2000 people; tickets cost 5W, when monthly wage is 250W, but no rent and no tax.

In 'car-park' outside, students and drum-bands practise for October parades. Groups of kids on the streets; 6.30 rush-hour of walking workers; few bikes. Night view from hotel is a city with few lights, no street lights, no traffic, little noise; weird.

Sunday September 2, Pyongyang

Beautiful sunny day for tour of an amazing city: like a textbook of boulevards, high-rises, underpasses, monuments, but no humanity. Fine sites and people look OK, including 'volunteer' cleaners to keep the streets spotless. Shops closed on Sunday; no street stalls except one with ice creams; hassle to buy because she will not accept 'foreign exchange money'; so our minder makes her give me an ice cream, then I make him pay her; not a popular move. We are shepherded everywhere, and in trouble when we stray into a courtyard between



Incredible multi-tasking acrobat.

flats. Everything is controlled. People have to use underpasses to cross totally empty roads.

Images of Great Leader (Kim 1) and Dear Leader (Kim 2) are everywhere. Kim 1 was a nobody until liberation from Japanese (no mention of USA role). 1950s war (the ‘American War’) has a victory monument, but minder tells us war never ended; blames it all on US aggression, and does not know about brother of Kim 1 who was purged. Tour to magnificent Fountain Square, Triumph Arch (one metre larger than that one in Paris) and the huge bronze statue of Kim 1 at Mansudae (where groups of North Koreans are marched up to the square and then have to bow to the statue and present flowers); also superb statues and friezes on the sides of the square. Lunch on boat on river, then Juche Tower for great views of blocks of flats, and out into the country to visit a well-restored, ancient king’s tomb.

Back to hotel for dinner, and message from head of Koryo not to wander off to take photos (aimed at German Phil who did try and got stopped in a block of flats). Some of the monuments are very fine, but at what cost? Country has lots of rice and maize, with communes of houses or flats for farmers; all homes are state-owned, rent-free, but farmers hand over all their crop, except for one small patch for themselves. Minder thinks there will be Korean Unification within a few years, but it will take longer for a total merger; he has absolutely no concept of the wealth in South Korea and the consequent disparity. Lunch and dinner are good, but cannot buy a soft drink anywhere; hotel shop only takes US dollars and gives no change.

Monday September 3, to Kaesong

Morning in Pyongyang, again in sunshine. Out to birthplace of Kim 1, but it’s a fake set-up, in a park with lovely restored farmers’ houses. Past funfair (closed) back into town centre, to massive Library. Shown round various rooms with students reading, translating books, listening to lectures; but all or most are stooges set up for our visit. Check of Geology in English section of card index revealed 25 books, some good, all pre-1991, including a regional geology of Tanzania, all gifts from visiting academics. Out onto balcony with view of main square with thousands of workers, students and women in pink traditional dresses



Spectacular statues and fountains in central Pyongyang.



North Korean people who have been marched up to Mansudae, where bowing to the giant bronze statue of Kim Il-sung is compulsory.

Formal traditional dress is a requirement for the crowds obliged to gather in Pyongyang’s main square to ‘greet’ the Chinese president.

(beautiful mass effect) all gathered to welcome Jiang Zemin from China, but we are taken away long before that happens. Later we see hundreds of them walking home; everyone walks. Visit to Metro postponed because it is closed. So walk back to hotel. No sign of shops with fresh food; monthly supplies of rice, noodles, salt, soy and oil are all issued by government, and every street has women hauling their family's sacks of food in metal trolleys.

Afternoon drive to Kaesong on empty four-lane motorway that 'goes to Seoul'. Rice and maize fields, not much else. All farmers in clusters of new concrete houses that replace villages destroyed in the 1950s war. Call at a Shilla king's tomb with traditional earth domes fronted by statues of sheep (for honesty), tigers (for protection) and faithful guards, all in a lovely setting amid wooded hills; minder does not like it when I take a photo of farmer with a cow-drawn plough. Kaesong is ancient capital, good atmosphere with many old houses, as it largely escaped damage during the war. Hotel is a wonderful street of old traditional houses, with two rooms in each; bed is thin futon on floor with bean-bag pillow, and good western bathroom. Traditional Korean dinner is ten dishes of excellent fish, beef, beansprouts, rice, soup, tea, maotai, etc, served on individual tables that are just 15 cm high. A brilliant place to stay.

Tuesday September 4, Panmunjon DMZ

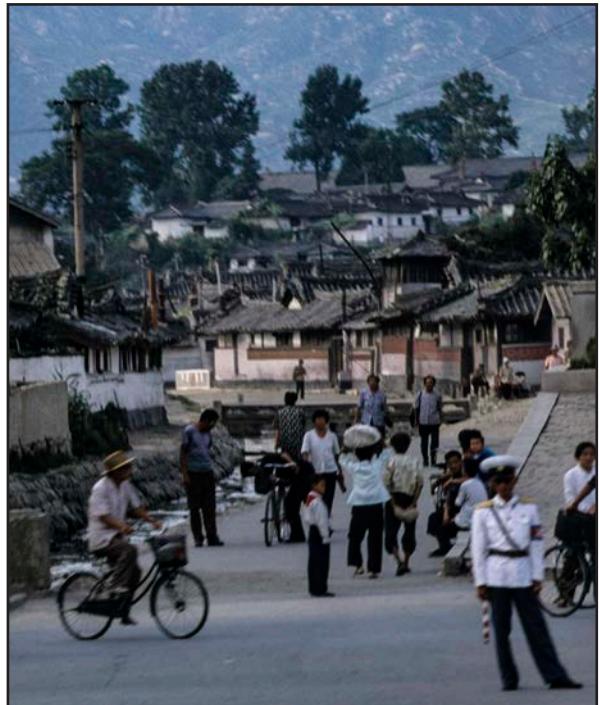
A few street photos from gateway before leaving; people hauling trolleys with sacks of rice, a few with ox-carts hauling vegetables, more bikes than in Pyongyang. Bus to bamboo bridge, where locals washing in river because water supply is down in adjacent blocks of flats. Then Koryo Museum with some fine relics and lovely ginko trees.

Empty freeway out to edge of DMZ and Armistice House that pre-dates the frontier zone. First of many 'debates' with military guides when we argue about American aggression; they have no answers, laugh at problems, just do not answer some questions, and say that they think differently. Interesting to hear the same stories about border disputes that we have already heard (with different slant) from guides on South side. Bus onward, through fence and tank traps, over river, into neutral zone. Monument to Kim 1, who died 'just after' signing a proposal for peace talks; so thoughtful. Then taken into one of the blue huts that straddle the border. North and South soldiers appear for our visit, but most soon disappear. Up into display building for view that almost matches that from the other side, but it's a frontier never to be crossed.

Good lunch in military restaurant, then drive east through lovely countryside; a few farmers trading vegetables but houses are more scruffy. Up narrow road



The basics of a simple life in the countryside of North Korea.



Evening in the suburbs of Kaesong.



Housewife with her family's allocations of food grains.

to observation post on edge of DMZ; and big story about anti-tank wall built by Americans on the border in 1979; apparently a ‘very aggressive wall’!! And another debate with no real answers. Back through Kaesong then empty freeway back to Pyongyang; passed seven trucks going the other way in 170 km; and back to same hotel

Fireworks after dark come from display in Mayday Stadium for Jiang Zemin, later on TV in hotel room; fantastic display with thousands of performers, perfect choreography, synchronised mass acrobatics, catapulted soldiers, beautiful singing; mesmerizing; but is this all that the nation does?

Wednesday September 5, Myohyang

Leave at 8.00 on bus northbound on empty four-lane freeway, passing eight trucks and buses in about 150 km. Adjacent railway has one knackered local train trundle past. More vegetables and beans in the fields. Narrow valley up into the mountains and stop at Hyangsa Hotel, huge gin palace but we are pushed out into tourist rooms by a large group of Party officials.

International Friendship Exhibition has utterly gross collection of thousands of gifts received by Kim 1 and Kim 2 from sycophantic politicians, companies and locals; some lovely paintings, elephant (in a photo) from Thailand, railway carriage from Russia, ashtray from Jimmy Carter, machine gun from Angola, Kimilsungia (an orchid from Indonesia) and Kimjungilia (a begonia from Japan). All in nuclear-shelter tunnels into the granite mountain behind showy frontage buildings. Invited to bow (kowtow) before statue of Kim 1, but decline.

After lunch at hotel, up valley to Pohyon Buddhist Temple, restored and lovely, but inactive and no monks. Then walk up Mongpok Dong trail, up steps and ladders on great dome of lovely big-feldspar granite. Group of locals at a water chute are friendly, but are stooges there for our benefit. Sudden massive rainstorm has us all soaked, but numerous waterfalls come good within a few minutes. Poor dinner at hotel, but two bottles of beer for one imperialist American dollar.

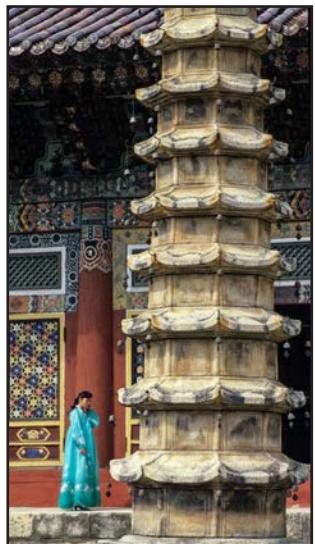
Thursday September 6, Pyongyang

Rainy morning in mountains, but dry back in town. Visit film studios with huge street sets, notably of China in the 1930s, all to make propaganda films about the Kims. Good lunch at hotel, then to History Museum (a bit heavy). Walk along street a short way in sunshine, instead of being forced into bus; panic when I take a look into a shop (minimal tinned and bottled food and no customers), and am dragged out by minders who appear from nowhere.

Metro is magnificent, huge Moscow-style stations with giant murals, all 50 metres underground to double as nuclear shelters; we ride a train in coach that happens to have two girl students in traditional dress who never look up while studying their books; planted for our benefit; tickets cost 10 jeon (=3p) to go anywhere. Art shop has American sailors on special trip out from ship stuck in Nampo harbour for two weeks while grain is unloaded by hand; I explain to our minder that their grain is a gift from America, but he cannot accept the concept. Then to USS Pueblo, moored in the river; heavy propaganda about evil American spyship and heroic Korean military, but we cannot photograph a group of sailors singing on the riverbank.



The blue huts astride the border at Panmunjom.



Buddhist temple at Pohyon.



On the Pyongyang Metro.



North Koreans: what do they know?

Back to hotel for drinks in stationary revolving restaurant, followed by good dinner, and billiards in basement warren, where Pan from Koryo calls by to check up on us and our minders.

Friday September 7, Nampo

Another sunny morning for bus-ride to Nampo on ten-lane motorway with about 50 vehicles per hour. Remains of industry in Nampo, and bus accelerates through the port town (our minder repeating ‘no pictures’) past the US ship unloading grain. Beyond town, irrigated fields and then large flats with evaporation ponds, most of which are derelict. Drive over Nampo Barrage, 5 km long to retain lake in place of salt marshes and channels of Daedong River. Visitor centre overlooks 30 sluices and three ship locks at the outlet. A video shows use of giant coffer dams for some impressive engineering, except for fatuous interventions by Kim 1 and Kim 2. Then back to Pyongyang hotel for lunch, and folk museum that is less than exciting.

Afternoon visit to Children’s Palace; brilliant musicians who are 8–12 years old; one group of a dozen are in a small room playing Chinese harps to beautiful perfection. Then a formal show for an hour, delightful except for the forced Kim-worship. Dinner at barbecue restaurant, but bus-ride back through lightless city streets is freaky.

Saturday September 8, train to China

Easy morning until bus leaves at 9.30 for a 10.10 train, but then delayed while waiting for a mythical Moscow coach. Stand on platform and take some photos, prompting heavy aggro from stroppy army officer. After two hours we have a good dinner in the dining car, while the Moscow coach is attached and train can then depart. Our own coach is full of foreigners, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese and us. Countryside is noticeably poorer away from Pyongyang; only one factory chimney with any smoke, and one other with a few workers. All basic farming, no cars, unfinished interchange on empty highway, very bleak, no joy.

At frontier by 5pm, than an hour’s delay on Korean side; derisory and humourless search of our bags. Then over river bridge and general cheers for the bright lights of China. Escaped! Good dinner on the train, then into the night, attached to back of a Chinese train and much faster than on Korean tracks.

Sunday September 9, Beijing

Wake to morning mist along coast, and pass beside endless rich farming, fish farms, shrimp farms, industry, development and sheer activity: life in the real world. Through Tianjin, with new railways and industry; all so dynamic. Into Beijing at 9.30, and our group disperses, while we take the metro to Xinqiao Hotel.

Out to Qianmen to process some photos, and have excellent baozi. Metro to Yonghegong to visit lively Buddhist temple; huge



Nampo streets and the American grain ship!



Pure delight with Chinese harps in the Children’s Palace.



*Photograph that is forbidden because it show soldiers;
and consequent attempt (failed) at confiscating camera.*



Glimpses of rural life in North Korea, seen from the windows of the train out to the bright lights of China.

standing Buddha, many tourists and worshippers, only a few monks; different from Chengdu. Back to hotel and phone Song; then at 6.30 off with him and his wife to a magnificent duck restaurant (the Bian Ye Fang) for a sumptuous meal in a private room with waitresses hovering. Walk back to hotel, end of a long day.

Monday September 10, Badaling Great Wall

Join a tour bus from Qianmen, out on a six-lane freeway to tourist site just before road tunnels under the Badaling Pass. Enjoy two hours for a walk along the wall, west almost on our own, and east to see the crowds. All resored and well-managed, and different from Mutianyu. Bus back to chaos at the Ming Tombs with guide more concerned with lunch and the shops.



Life goes on in the hutongs of Beijing.

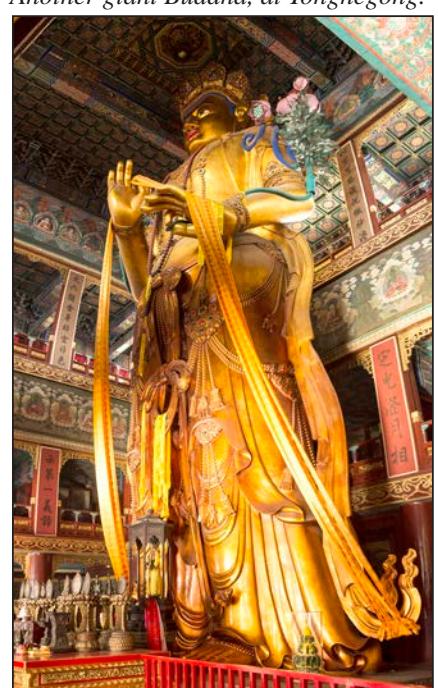
Return to Beijing by 4pm, and walk the hutongs from Qianmen back to Xinqiao, taking in a visit to the 'Underground City' with its cold-war, air-raid system of tunnels and rooms ten metres below street level. Dinner of kebabs, pork baozi and chicken, with Jackie and Daniel in a Dashilan restaurant. A good evening and Badaling was worth the visit, as it is offers a day out very different from the one to Mutianyu.

Tuesday September 11, Beijing to home

Up at 7.00 and straight to Dongjian Park to watch the locals' morning exercises. Good breakfast in the hotel and then a short stroll down Chongwenmen, with giant shopping malls, large medical centres and lots of life. Then share a taxi out to the airport. Flight on 747 Combi, with some good views on great-circle route over Mongolian steppes and Siberian tundra.

Into Heathrow and total chaos, with seething crowds in baggage hall mostly trying to recover bags from flights to America that had all been cancelled immediately after the Twin Towers terrorist attacks in New York. Struggle to buy and then borrow a newspaper to catch up on the news, and then a train home to watch TV in total disbelief with pictures of the Towers' collapse.

A bizarre ending to a fabulous trip.



*See Jan's postscript on the next page:
Instant thoughts on North Korea.*

Tony Waltham
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Instant thoughts on North Korea

This was an email that Jan sent off to family and friends from Beijing on the day after we emerged from the bizarre world of North Korea.

Hello from North Korea.

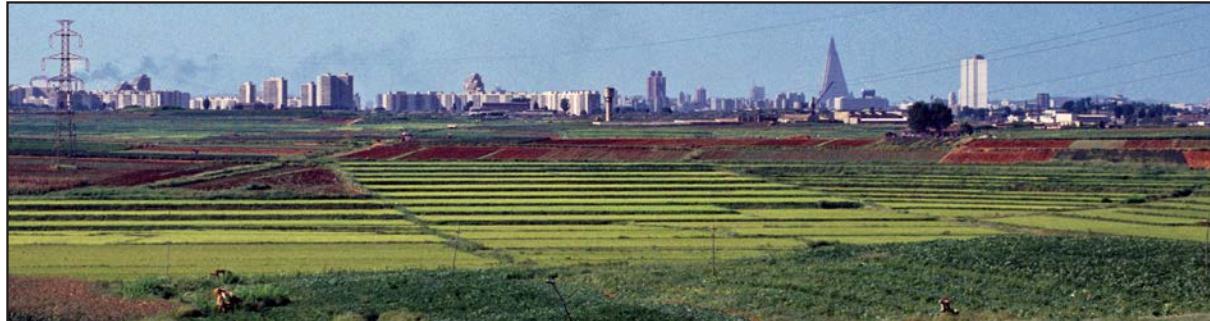
Well actually, not *from* North Korea, because internet is banned there in case anyone learns about the real world. So this is from Beijing, where we arrived this morning.

North Korea is unbelievable. Totally awful living conditions, and totally brainwashed people who think that the sun shines out of their Great Leader's bottom (even though he's been dead for seven years). His son, the Dear Leader, is now revered as an alternative light source, but he is an inadequate git, manipulated by the generals. (And if we'd said that out loud while we were in North Korea we'd be in labour camp by now.) The whole place is controlled and that included us – we weren't allowed to take photographs of anything 'grubby' or of people working or of the army or of the houses or of the shops (what shops??? – they were just bare counters and nearly bare shelves). Basic food is supplied by the state and luxuries...er, there are no luxuries. The standard form of transport is feet, and when a housewife has to take home her monthly bag of rice she uses a handcart or little wooden trolley; incredibly primitive.

A lot of their money has gone on epic monuments, but it does make Pyongyang into a textbook city with wide boulevards and splendid grandeur, but with absolutely no heart or humanity or life. Just bloody great statues of the Great Leader which everyone is supposed to bow to (but certain bolshie Westerners refuse, risking labour camp yet again). There is a ten-lane highway to the nearest port, fifty kilometres away, and about thirty vehicles per hour of total traffic. The city has virtually no traffic apart from the odd bus, but everyone still has to use pedestrian underpasses (on pain of labour camp) and there are no street lights at all after dark. A very weird experience.

At various places we got really heavy anti-American propaganda that was naive in the extreme. It included the Great Leader's single-handed defeat of the Japanese in 1945 with no mention of any US contribution. And they still blame everything on the Americans at every opportunity, even though the whole time we were there an American ship was unloading 50,000 tons of freebie grain to stop them starving. We met the sailors and got the story from them, and when we told our guides and minders (otherwise known as thought police) they were dumbstruck and refused to believe it.

Anyway, great to be back in China (and Tony never thought he'd say that!). It was certainly worth going to North Korea because it was actually more than we could really conceive beforehand. And now we don't have to back there again!



Last view of Pyongyang from the train window.