

DEPARTURES

MARCH / APRIL 2010



STEP INTO SPRING

THE
FASHION
ISSUE

En Route from North Korea

Just returned from a reconnaissance trip to North Korea that I can only describe as mind-blowing. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is one of the most fascinating places I've ever been. No other country has cut itself off so completely from the rest of the world, so I almost felt like I was on another planet while there.

North Koreans are fiercely proud of their culture, which revolves around its devotion to one man: Kim Il-sung, the "eternal president of the republic." He died in 1994 but still permeates every moment, his image decorating almost every building, wall, hillside, and chest (people wear a Kim Il-sung pin at all times).

The pomp and circumstance surrounding a visit to his monument involves endless moving walkways, grandiose marble halls, and repeated bows to the Great Leader, who lies in state.

North Korea is, of course, a socialist country, and every person works for the collective—even "creative" artists and musicians hold nine-to-five salaried jobs and are told what to produce. In return, they get free housing, schooling, and health care.

The country is physically beautiful, with gorgeous rural areas and impressive buildings and monuments. I took a daily seven-mile run along the Taedong River; at first my guides told me I couldn't go out unaccompanied, but they eventually came around, trusting me to run and come right back. I traveled all over with them, stopping at villages (including a cooperative farm town of 2,500 people living and working together), schools, hospitals, and even an orphanage, where I spent hours holding and playing with children. I also

visited the foreboding South Korea border (where I posed for a picture with a DPRK soldier), the War Museum, and a so-called spy ship, the USS Pueblo.

In Pyongyang I attended the Mass Games, a 90-minute dance and gymnastics extravaganza, which was one of the most dazzling performances I have ever seen. It's a cross between Cirque du Soleil and the Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing, with 100,000 synchronized performers in the world's largest stadium (it seats 150,000). What looked like a giant LCD screen was actually 20,000 children holding up colored cards, which they changed every 30 seconds or so to create new mosaic scenes.

Why did I go? Curiosity and adventure were the driving factors, but I had a good business reason too. My company, Remote Lands, is now offering bespoke itineraries to North Korea. Clients can experience everything I did, plus make visits to far-flung Buddhist temples, movie sets, and more.

Our trips are in no way an endorsement of the country's autocratic regime, but rather an enlightening, one-of-a-kind experience that can lead to greater understanding. The North Koreans dislike our government, or at least its past policies, but they don't hate us as a people and were warm and friendly to me. It's easy to hate and fear from afar, but when standing face to face—or, better yet, sharing a cup of tea or a beer—with a local, the barriers melt away. (As Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.") North Korea is not for everyone, but for those intrepid few who have been almost everywhere, it is the last frontier.

—CATHERINE HEALD



For its North Korea itineraries, which begin in Beijing, Remote Lands arranges visas, flights, hotels, meals, cars and drivers, and guides for visits to schools, hospitals, orphanages, farms, factories, temples, movie sets, and other cultural destinations. From \$1,000 per person, per day (maximum of ten days); 646-415-8092; remotelands.com.