

# Forbes

## The North Korea Washington Doesn't Want Americans To See: Photo Essay

Doug Bandow

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North Korea, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, long has been called "the Hermit Kingdom," as the ancient Korean monarchy was known. The moniker long irritated DPRK officials, though 25 years ago when I first visited it was more accurate. There weren't many Western travelers and engaging in common American activities, such as jogging, which I did every day, garnering stares from virtually everyone—though, even more weirdly, virtually no one made eye contact. On this trip, in response to an invitation from the Institute for American Studies of the Foreign Ministry, there were few stares.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration plans to ban travel by Americans to the North as of September 1. That's a mistake, since U.S. visitors both educate North Koreans and are educated by North Koreans. It is a process that encourages social transformation and long term change in the DPRK, which is desperately needed in a system of monarchical communism which holds an entire population in bondage.

Although more Westerners visit the North today, Beijing remains the primary entry point. You can fly in on Air Koryo, as I did, or Air China, though the latter is known to adjust its service to reflect both economics and politics. Perhaps someday American airports will display Pyongyang as a destination. But not in the near future, since it soon will be illegal for Americans to travel to the DPRK. At least, their passports will be tagged as invalid for travel there. But Pyongyang could accept them anyway. I suspect Americans will continue to visit, just as Americans routinely traveled to Cuba illicitly despite the only recently modified ban.

At least the airport wasn't so ghostly on my arrival. The flight board suggested that the travelers on my "puddle-jumper" jet were not alone for the day. When I departed my flight was the only one listed.

The Pyongyang airport is modern. The North Korean government went to a lot of expense for few flights, though perhaps it had hoped for more. I wanted to take pictures during the customs check. The guard logged into my computer—of course, I couldn't complain too much since U.S. officials once did the same on my return from overseas. She also carefully listed two flash drives on my customs form, along with my computer, camera, and phone. (The authorities confiscated

two different and blank flash drives from my checked bag going out. Maybe they were afraid that I'd stolen the secret plans to their nukes or ICBMs.)

Pictures of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung and his son and successor, Kim Jong-il, are ubiquitous. When I visited 25 years ago I used a lot of film recording various examples. There were more pictures today, since we now have two past leaders plus Kim Jong-un in charge. The visuals began early, as we drove in from the airport. But one of my guides soon informed me that I shouldn't take pictures of the pictures, which was very strange even for the DPRK. I wasn't intending to draw mustaches on the images. I was showing the world what the North Korean state showed its people and visitors alike. But the DPRK's personality cult apparently has sometimes abstruse doctrines akin to those of a state religion.

What is a country without a good military museum, in this case the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum? I have to say, despite bestowing a long boring name on the facility, the North Koreans otherwise know how to reshape their history.

I didn't visit to the previous version of the museum 25 years ago, so I don't know how it compared. But the refurbished facility spares no expense. And it is used to "educate" the young and the soldiers, who were in attendance when I visited.

There were a lot of visitors, but the grounds were expansive enough to accommodate even more. The museum obviously is a regular stop for any Pyongyang political pilgrimage.

Of course, what is a trip without a standard tourist pose? At least it proves that I was there. The statue nicely shows how the North Koreans are really into heroic gestures. Which, of course, their leaders monopolize.

In any war even the winner loses a lot of "stuff." And in the early days of America's military intervention U.S. forces were forced to retreat; they also had to do so after China intervened in late 1950. So the North Koreans enjoy displaying some of their war booty. I proposed repatriating it back to the U.S., but they weren't interested.

Perhaps the most celebrated acquisition, though years later, was of the USS Pueblo. Of course, the North Koreans tell a heroic story of capturing the vessel used by sneaky imperialists to violate the DPRK's sacred territorial waters. The bullet holes in the vessel bring home the brutal reality of the seizure, during which one American sailor was killed. There are lots of statues at the museum too. We have George Washington crossing the Delaware River. The North Koreans commemorate lots and lots of heroic moments, and "go large" at most every opportunity.

The museum is filled with exhibits based on similar themes. Most interesting was the lack of any mention, at least that I saw, of the Chinese role in the conflict. You would be forgiven for believing that Kim Il-sung and a few other guys here and there "liberated" about 95 percent of the peninsula until the American "imperialists" showed up with their "satellite" allies to aid the "South Korean puppets." Kim and his buddies then lost ground to overwhelming force, but mysteriously were able to suddenly drive the U.S. forces back south. Perhaps due to superior North Korean cooking, or something like that. It's not as if the Chinese were involved.

Pyongyang looks much more like a normal city than 25 years ago. Then there were no private cars and few government ones. I wondered why they bothered with traffic lights. Today there is traffic. It's not much by U.S. (or Chinese!) standards. But there's no longer the ghostly sense of empty boulevards.

The lady traffic cops have become a celebrated fixture in the capital. They definitely stand out. But far more striking to me is how North Korean women—in Pyongyang, anyway—look so normal in the sense of dressing nicely. Fashion has come to Pyongyang, at least. In contrast, the men remain more likely to look “socialist plain,” if I can coin a phrase.

It turns out that even DPRK apparatchiks like to have fun. The waterpark is real, not Potemkin, though it's not clear if everyone in the city can use it. You don't live in Pyongyang if you're not a trusted member of the elite, near the top of the “Songbun” social classification or caste system. However, with the growth of a middle class money also matters.

Through its actions—conducting constant wars, far more than launched by any other state today—America arguably is the most militaristic state today. Moreover, the virtual deification of the military by some in a democratic, constitutional republic dedicated to individual liberty is a bit creepy. I say that as the proud son (unusually, both my mother and father were in uniform), former brother-in-law, nephew, uncle, and friend of Americans who well served--and continue to serve--their nation. However, in Pyongyang the military/mobilization imagery is about as ubiquitous as the pictures of the Great Leader (granddad), Dear Leader (dad), and Supreme Leader (kid).

The factory making children's backpacks employed similar militaristic encouragement of patriotic productivity. Such posters certainly fit the overall propaganda message of a nation under siege but united, ready to strike back at the imperialistic evildoers, etc., etc.

The backpack factory did make backpacks. I was told how the Supreme Leader visited, providing his approval (so-called “on the spot guidance,” which seems to occur almost everywhere in this relatively small nation) to the models produced. Naturally, given the Supreme Leader's commitment to the nation's young, it was explained, the designs are superior to those produced in China and elsewhere. Sad to say, I'm not much of an expert in the quality of kids' backpacks, so I couldn't confirm that claim.

Stalinesque architecture no longer is the rage. There are plenty of ugly, stodgy, bulky, box-like buildings in Pyongyang. For many such structures, political art—pictures, slogans, and the like—are the only attractions. But one of the dramatic changes in Pyongyang since my first visit is the increased construction based on new designs. Of course, I don't know what the insides of the buildings look like. But at least the structures are far more interesting to view.

One of the great mysteries in Pyongyang is the 105 story Ryugyong Hotel, nicknamed the “Hotel of Doom” by irreverent foreign observers. Construction began in 1987 but ceased around 1992, apparently when resources became scarcer. I jogged right up to it that year when it was just a concrete skeleton. Rumors abounded that it was structurally unsound and it sat unfinished for years while dominating the city skyline. Then the building's outside was completed in 2011,

though the structure remained closed. Last month the walls surrounding the building came down and walkways into the building were opened, but it isn't clear, or at least hasn't been reported, to what use the Ryugyong is being put. It remains a dramatic sight. I previously suggested that they drape it with red bunting and make it into another revolutionary monument, but—surprise!—my advice was ignored.

I stayed at a far less interesting facility. The Pothonggang Hotel was serviceable—clean if basic. Maybe two stars. But the restaurant actually produced tasty Western meals which matched the pictures in the menu. And I could get onto the internet. Interestingly, since only foreigners are allowed access, there are no restrictions, at least which I found. When I flew back to Beijing Youtube, Twitter, and more were stuck behind the Great Firewall of China.

Lots of folks on the streets. And it wasn't nearly so dreary compared to 25 years ago. Of special note was the fact that women dressed up. Men still were pretty plain. But women wore high heels, skirts, and colorful blouses. Again, the city looked and felt more normal than last time.

I went to see the Koryo Hotel, where I stayed 25 years ago. The design was a bit klunkier than the Pothonggang, and the building looked a bit worse for wear on the outside. But across the street people were buying food at a corner bakery. A small sign of greater prosperity that was not there a quarter century ago.

The Mangyongdae Children's Palace had been refurbished since my visit 25 years ago. It was much nicer and more modern inside. Still, the facility had a Potemkin feel to it. I wasn't the only visitor, and we'd wander into different rooms to watch the kids practicing calligraphy, playing instruments, dancing, engaging in gymnastics, and so on. I wondered how much the children learned when they seemed to be constantly interrupted and asked to engage in one routine or another to entertain the interlopers.

Pictures of the Great and Dear Leaders were in every room. Like Orthodox icons, looking down benevolently upon the faithful. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un does not join them. Instead, he appears in larger photos documenting his activities, such as visiting buildings like the Children's Palace (always "giving guidance," as guides laud working under "the wise leadership of the Supreme Leader). One wonders, if the Communist monarchy survives to another generation, will he then join the others on the wall?

Children's art was displayed at the "palace." Most of it was peaceful and unexceptional. But, again, images of the military were never far away. Such art, however, was minor compared to the missile mock-up that dominated the center of the building. A quarter century ago the North Koreans displayed a model of the U.S. space shuttle (really!). But these presumably are more desperate times requiring greater military preparedness.

The Juche Monument is another dominating landmark. Naturally, it is taller than the Washington Monument, or so I was told. Juche stands for self-reliance. And the DPRK does make a lot of stuff at home. But the Kim dynasty also is happy to trade goods, counterfeit money, sell drugs, and launch cyber attacks to make money. One might call it "self-reliance with Korean characteristics."

Pyongyang has taken on the look of a more normal city. I didn't get out into rural areas this time. A quarter century ago the countryside was far poorer than urban life, even in second tier cities. Pyongyang is the nation's showcase yet on my last trip I saw an ox-cart in the city. I didn't see anything like that this time, though similar signs of poverty could be better hidden. However, a lot about the capital suggested real growth, which was affirmed by the recent Bank of [South] Korea report that last year the North enjoyed its fastest growth in 17 years.

Last time I was taken to an underused maternity hospital, which had lots of bassinets but few kids, lots of foreign medical equipment but few machines plugged in. This time I visited the Okryu Children's Hospital across the street. It is newer, appears to my untutored eyes to be modern, and actually looks like it has real patients.

Of course, I was told that everything was "free," compared to health care in terrible capitalist societies. But one suspects that if you don't live in the capital the hospital won't help you very much. And even if you live in Pyongyang not all are equal. Of course, political posters are everywhere, some featuring militaristic themes, even in the peaceful confines of a kids' hospital.

Perhaps my favorite site in Pyongyang is the Arch of Triumph. It is modeled after the one in Paris, but is bigger, naturally. After all, how could anyone compare Napoleon's minor victories to those of Kim Il-sung? Sadly, the inscription thanking China, that little country to the north, seemed to be missing from the monument. But the arch remains quite impressive. Nearby is an older building, representing more traditional, ugly communist architecture, featuring pictures of the Great and Dear Leaders (l to r). Naturally, their images adorn many structures. Ever watchful ...

I actually had serious meetings to attend. At the Foreign Ministry I spoke with Choe Kang-il, Vice President of the Institute for American Studies and Deputy Director General for North American Affairs at the Foreign Ministry. He was well-spoken and amid the revolutionary rhetoric made serious arguments. Washington wants his country to disarm. But the U.S. routinely engages in regime change—Iraq and Afghanistan are but two examples. Even more so Libya. So the North Koreans see nukes as keeping the peace, which means preventing Washington from attacking them. For good reason I would prefer that the DPRK not possess the bomb and ICBMs, but there is nothing irrational in their claims. And, if President Donald Trump was sitting in Pyongyang facing an aggressive superpower which bombed, invaded, and occupied other nations at will, he probably would want nukes and missiles too.

The Foreign Ministry adjoins Kim Il-sung Square, where the grand parades and big assemblies occur. It would be fascinating to be there during an event. No doubt, for a North Korean it would not be good for one's career and even health to turn down an invitation from the state to attend. But one wonders how the crowds feel and sound. Can the most jaded residents keep up an appearance of enthusiasm? Fear may provide powerful motivation.

The centrality of the leader, whoever it is, cannot be overstated. Kim Il-sung is the eternal president, reigning from the great beyond. Kim Jong-il, though less popular according to defectors, remains officially venerated. And the Supreme Leader is discussed in reverent tones. One of my guides did a half-bow whenever we arrived at a building with a statue of one of the

big three. However, my favorite “over-the-top” moment was going to the Science and Technology Center, which had a small, circular meeting area on the first floor. The red plaque marks the seat where the Supreme Leader sat when he visited. I had the terribly irreverent, individualistic desire to plop down in that spot and take a selfie—after all, I’m an honored guest, and an American. So I’m obviously entitled to do what I want! But I decided that act might not end well.

Despite appearances, not all life in the DPRK is political. Visitors on longer tours with more guides often have more meaningful informal interaction with “real” North Koreans. It’s one of the reasons I believe banning travel to the North is foolish and counterproductive. The best way to undermine propaganda claims about Americans is for North Koreans to meet Americans. The North is changing, in some ways dramatically—cell phones are common, for instance. And foreign contact promotes greater openness. Nevertheless, it remains hard for anyone to get away from the political for long.

One can only hope for the time when people in the North can go about their lives without having to constantly worry about politics. North Korea's brutal totalitarian system has turned an entire nation into a prison camp. People around the world should hope and pray for a time when they can visit a Korean peninsula that is entirely free and at peace.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties*