

Vacationing in North Korea: only for the brave or crazy?

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In the popular mind, there may be no more forbidding destination on Earth. I've never had as many people ask if I was serious when I mentioned I was heading to North Korea.

In fact, I had no worries. I was going as an official guest, invited by the Institute of American Studies of the Foreign Ministry. Having invited me, the North Koreans wanted the trip to proceed smoothly. I also understood what not to do.

Failing at the latter has proved to be the undoing of a number of Americans, most spectacularly collegian Otto Warmbier, who died after being released by North Korea in what Pyongyang claimed was a medically induced coma. Three Americans, six South Koreans and seven citizens of other nations remain in custody in North Korea.

Some attributed Warmbier's release to the Trump administration's efforts, though it has no more leverage than its predecessor. While in the North I asked if the government sent Warmbier home as a conciliatory gesture to Washington. The unequivocal response was that it was strictly a humanitarian matter.

Warmbier's family blames the Obama administration for failing to win his release, but the decision always was Pyongyang's. Why the North released him now is impossible to know: Perhaps North Korean leader Kim Jong Un decided that holding a comatose prisoner was a political liability.

The cases of Warmbier and other Americans, some going back years, are uniformly tragic: people punished for actions that should not be considered criminal. But the North is not alone in penalizing foreigners for dubious offenses. The main difference may be that Pyongyang, more than most other "hostile" states, sees potential political value in jailed Americans.

Still, 1,000 Americans visit North Korea annually and don't get arrested. Young Pioneer Tours, which organized the trip on which Warmbier traveled, pointed out that it had brought in more than 8,000 other travelers without incident.

On my plane to North Korea I sat next to a British citizen who was making his third tourist visit. The worst trouble he had was being told to delete photos deemed inappropriate.

A number of humanitarian groups, some explicitly religious, work in the officially atheist nation. I met several NGO staffers and volunteers in the midst of a lengthy sojourn providing medical

care. None had ever ended up in jail. In fact, arrests aren't random but, in North Korea's view, for cause. North Korean officials say they punish intentional, not accidental, rules violations.

I chatted with the head of a Western NGO active in the North who said her group had looked into the cases of those jailed: All had committed some illegal act. That doesn't mean their conduct warranted punishment. But they put themselves under the North's authority.

Warmbier's case looks extreme even by North Korean standards. Some knowledgeable Westerners suggest that his actual offense was more egregious and more humiliating for the North. The poster incident merely became the cover story. Of course, that still wouldn't justify his awful treatment.

Legislation has been introduced in the U.S. Congress to ban Americans from traveling to the North. Some nations, such as South Korea, already do so. But a free society should protect the liberty of people to travel and explore. This right shouldn't be limited without compelling justification.

Visiting North Korea has educational value. Those who spend time there are more likely to understand it. For governments that lack a diplomatic presence; visitors from their nations are the best alternative.

Going to the North also causes those living in free societies to better appreciate their systems. I left thankful that I lived in a society which, however imperfectly, protected individual liberty.

Watching, meeting, and especially working, with people who don't fit the official stereotype provide North Koreans with an education as well. Knowledge is transmitted, curiosity is aroused. Engagement is no panacea but is more likely than isolation to encourage Pyongyang's positive evolution.

Banning people from visiting North Korea would be especially perverse when the rest of the world remains free to go. It would be better to think how best to transform the North's people as well as government over the long term.

We may never know what happened to Warmbier. His tragic case reminds us that visiting North Korea requires special caution. But that's no reason to block people from going.

North Koreans have much both to learn and teach. Until the North changes, individual travelers may end up being the most important and perhaps only ambassadors for many nations to North Korea.

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