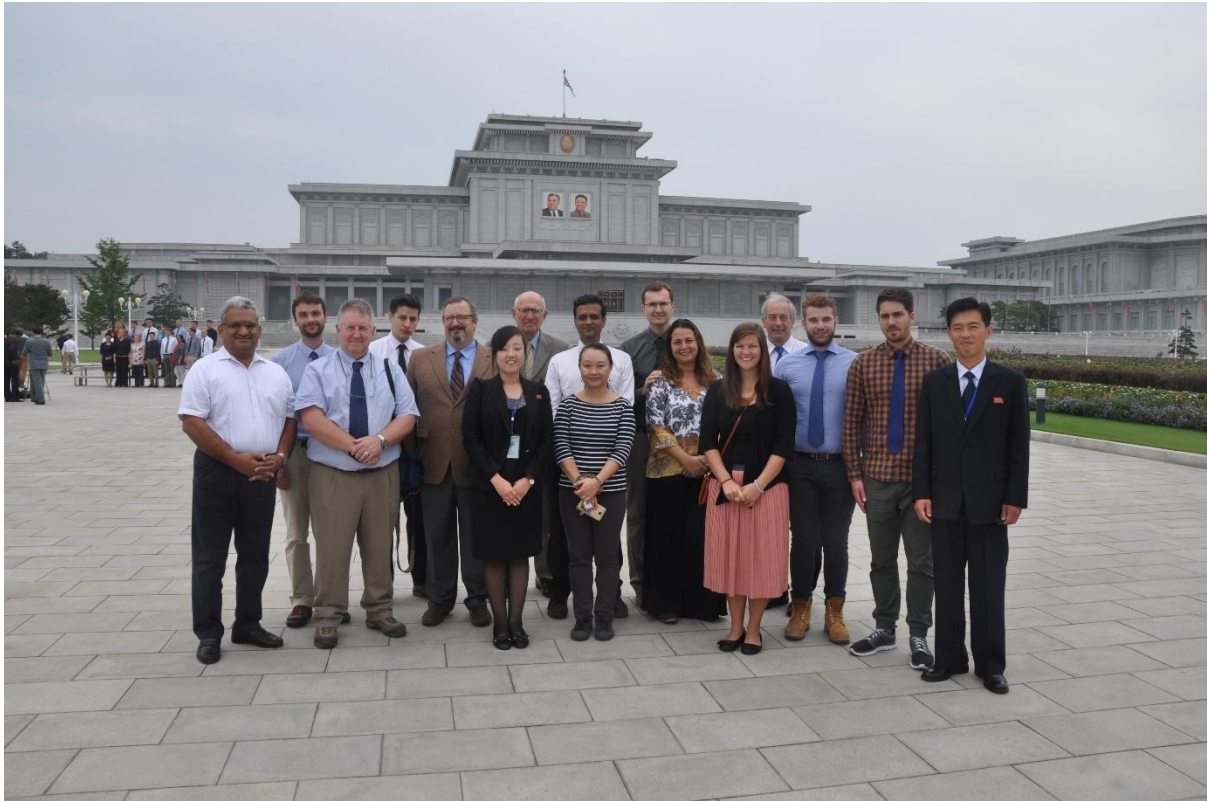


My North Korea

I visited DPRK from October 1 to 8th , 2016 and returned enthralled.



I love to travel. I feel it is a part of education more so in the present day world when the number of tax payers in India is less than the people who have travelled abroad.

I travelled to many places in the world. My father joined me for Pakistan

It is difficult, although it is approved. Friends', relatives and well-wishers do not permit although law permits. It does not have many visitors because of an in presumption that the dictator shorts a relative in parliament or because of public executions.

A couple of operators organise conditioned tours from Beijing.

They are costly, but a few many €2500 per person but a few many as cheap as less than €1100 (all inclusive) from Beijing.

They have a one hour briefing session on evening before, about 'Dos' and 'Don't' while in North Korea. A few of them are as under:

Each group of about 10-12 persons

2 local guides will always accompany group.

After visiting all continents and many countries including Antarctica Mt Kailash and Pakistan where next? Why not DPRK ? Yes and the answer was there.

Nobody seemed willing to join me. The relatives who trusted me in the beginning and confirmed to join me withdrew a week later on one pretext or the other. But a 42 years old and a dear friend Ananth Subramanian joined me.



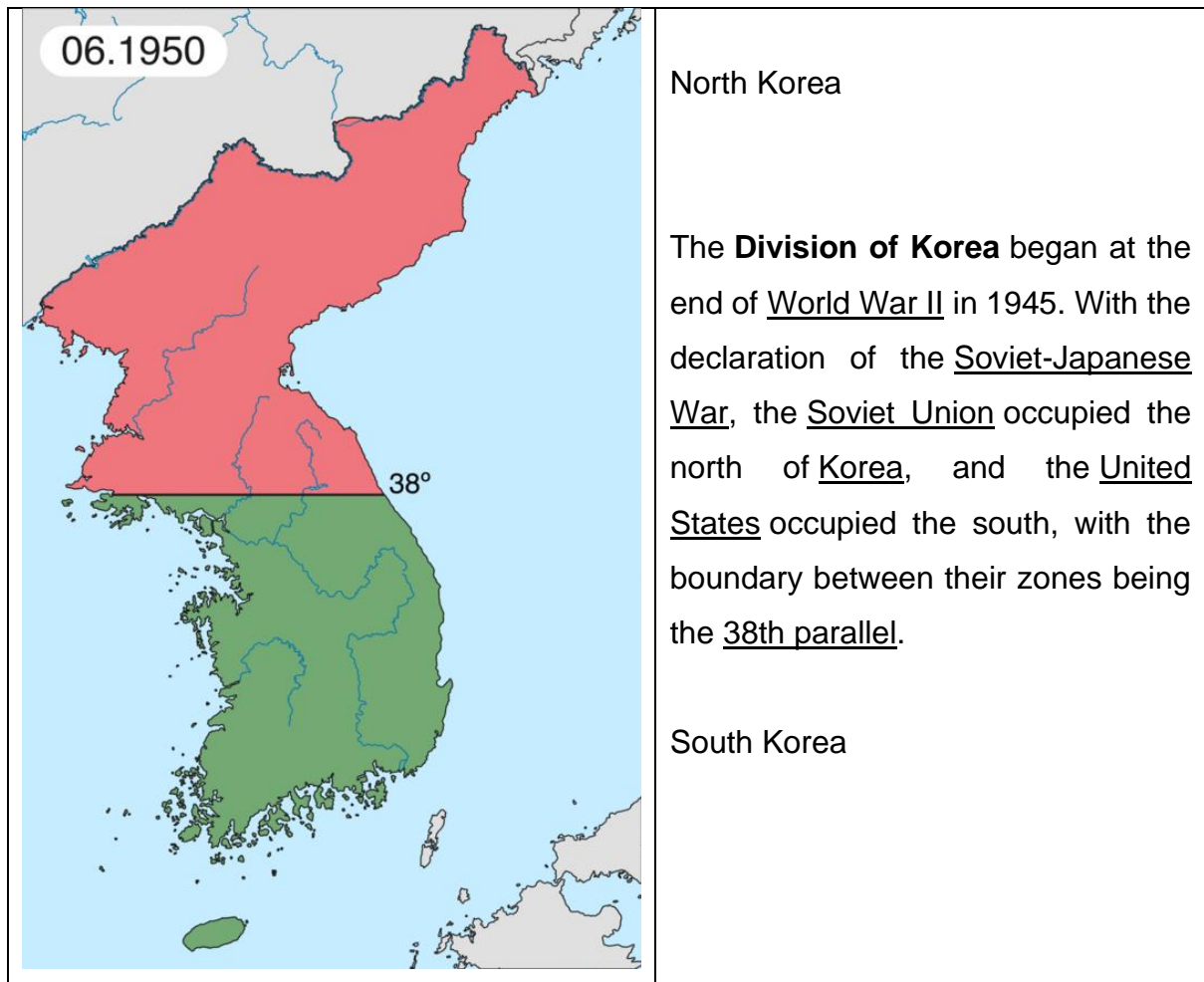
North Korea is a country in East Asia constituting the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Group photo of our tour at the South Korea border

To the north and northwest, the country is bordered by China and by Russia and to the south, it is bordered by South Korea, with the heavily fortified Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two. Nevertheless, North Korea, like its southern counterpart, claims to be the legitimate government of the entire peninsula and adjacent islands.

In 1910, Korea was annexed by Imperial Japan. At the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II in 1945, Korea was divided into two zones, with the north occupied by the Soviet Union and the south occupied by the United States. Negotiations on reunification failed, and in 1948, separate governments were formed: the socialist Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north, and the capitalist Republic of Korea in the south. An invasion initiated by North Korea led to

the Korean War (1950–1953). The Korean Armistice Agreement brought about a ceasefire, but no peace treaty was signed.

North Korea officially describes itself as a "self-reliant" socialist state, and formally holds elections, though they have been described by outside observers as sham elections. Outside observers also generally view North Korea as a Stalinist dictatorship, particularly noting the elaborate cult of personality around the Kim dynasty. The Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), led by a member of the ruling family, holds absolute power in the state and leads the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland of which all political officers are required to be members. Juche, an ideology of national self-reliance, was introduced into the constitution in 1972. The means of production are owned by the state through state-run enterprises and collectivized farms. Most service—such as healthcare, education, housing and food production—are subsidized or state-funded. From 1994 to 1998, North Korea suffered a famine that resulted in the deaths of between 240,000 and 420,000 people, and the population continues to suffer malnutrition. North Korea follows Songun, or "military-first" policy. It is the country with the highest number of military and paramilitary personnel, with a total of 9,495,000 active, reserve and paramilitary personnel, or approximately 37% of its population. Its active duty army of 1.21 million is the fourth largest in the world, after China, the United States and India; consisting of 4.7% of its population. It possesses nuclear weapons.



It is not permitted to travel to North Korea on a visa like we go to USA or Europe or any other country. We should register with either Koryo tour or Young Pioneer Tours. They are the operators based in UK with an office in Beijing. Forget any independent travel in North Korea, you'll be on an authorized tour. Anything else is considered espionage.

We need to register on line with a scanned copy of the passport. The payment is by credit card. The tour is cheap. Then they apply for the group visa. We never get a visa. We never get any immigration stamp on our passport either while entering into or coming out of the country. I requested for immigration stamp on my passport then the customs authorities guided me to their embassy in New Delhi.

<https://koryogroup.com/tours/dprk-north-korea/group>

<https://www.youngpioneertours.com/north-korea-tours/>

I looked at various tours of both operators. I selected one which offered my suitable dates. I was keen for a night travel in train inside the country. I stayed 5 days in Pyongyang, one night on train and one night in a village.



A common Low Income Group home



Bicycle and not car is the order of the day



A Low Income Group room having old generation TV and pedestal fan.



A bathroom in Low Income Group home. They store water.



A kitchen in low income group home.



They keep poultry for home needs.

We flew from Beijing. There is no choice. We choose to return by train via Sinuju- an option which the Americans don't have. (Train travel inside the country is not permitted to American Passport Holders)

At 4 pm of the preceding day of the travel all the travellers are required to assemble in the office of the operator for the briefing of an hour. Failure to attend this means you can't travel to DPRK. Amongst many instructions the one which I remembered most is "Never to criticise North Korea Govt, King or Military even in our Hindi language so long as we are inside the territory of North Korea". Because any communication may be subject to bugging.

Only two flights operate internationally between Beijing and Pyongyang. One of Air Koryo and other of Air China. The Pyongyang airport is barren at all other times of the day. It has very strict customs. They check extremely thoroughly all laptops, all pen drives and cameras. It took me 45 minutes to get the clearance. They suspect to check

for anything to carry like bible, Christianity, pro American or pro South Korean literature in soft or hard copy.

North Korea: 8 Things to Know Before You Go

Ever wondered what it's like traveling the hermit kingdom of North Korea? From local laws to crime, here's what you need to know to stay safe if you travel to North Korea.



The Korean war ended in 1953, and since then the Korean Peninsula has been divided by a demilitarised zone (DMZ), separating the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

Curiosity will probably get the cat killed in North Korea – perhaps even your tour guide – and you may be expelled from the country if you probe to many questions or step out of line. Still, North Korea is a fascinating and totally unique country, and you may be curious to experience the place for yourself. First, you must learn to follow all the rules to the letter.

1. The political situation in North Korea

While peace is maintained under an armistice agreement, the two Koreas are still technically at war and inter-Korean relations are extremely tense.

North Korea is a communist state; it's safe to assume that you will be under surveillance at all times. North Korean government security personnel closely monitor the activities and conversations of foreigners. Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched.

North Korea is a closed society with little, if any, information available about internal political developments. Although access to international satellite TV channels is available in hotels used by foreigners, such access may be curtailed in a crisis. Civil unrest, internal instability and/or an escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula could arise rapidly and you may get little or no information about this from the local media or authorities.

2. Tourism in North Korea

This is a country in which total obedience to the state is the norm. There is no "dissension" in North Korea and travelers must abide by this or simply not travel there. Curiosity may well get you or your guide killed in North Korea, it's as simple as that.

Tourism in North Korea is unlike anything you will have experienced anywhere else in the world. Your every movement is controlled, watched and carefully planned by the Government. Most, if not all tours, are ultimately run by the Korean International Travel Company and it will be their guides who show you around.

Forget any notions of independent, adventure or solo travel, it just doesn't work that way in North Korea.

Travel throughout the country is only possible as part of a guided tour. Independent travel is not permitted, you must not leave your hotel without a guide, you will not be allowed to travel on the public transport system at all, and both you and your guide will be punished if you infringe the rules.

If you are not prepared to accept severe limitations on your movements and behavior, you should not go to North Korea.



Kim Il-Sung Square, Pyongyang.

3. Entry limits to North Korea

There are some nationalities that are not even permitted entry to North Korea. South Koreans are not permitted entry and there have been reports of difficulties regarding Israeli, American, British and Japanese nationals. However, in January 2010, North Korea lifted the restrictions on American citizens who are now free to visit at any time of the year.

4. Total control

When you arrive in North Korea, your guide will take your passport and keep it for "security reasons". You will get it back only a few hours before scheduled departure.

Also, DPRK border officials routinely confiscate visitors' cell phones upon arrival, returning the phone only upon departure.

You will not have access to anyone or anything that is not part of your authorized tour. You will not get any insight into how local North Korean people live. Your tour will be highly choreographed to visit only authorized sites, shop in approved stores, and speak only to official guides.

Do not break any of the rules of the tour; doing so will place your guide at risk. He/she will be subjected to imprisonment and even torture, for assisting your "espionage". Do what the guides do, praise every stop on your tour, and remember the rule, "If you have nothing good to say, don't say it at all."



Soldiers paying respect to Kim Il-sung in North Korea. All tourists do so.

5. Honor the leader

Most, if not all, tour groups are asked to solemnly bow and lay flowers on one or two occasions in front of statues of Kim Il Sung when visiting monuments of national importance. Always act in a respectful manner around images of North Korean leaders.

If you don't think you can follow the rules, behave respectfully and keep any negative thoughts or opinions to yourself you should reconsider traveling to North Korea.

It is a criminal act in North Korea to show disrespect to the country's current and former leaders, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Il-Sung. Persons violating the laws of North Korea, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested, or imprisoned.

6. Local laws you should know

Any unauthorized activities can and will be seen as an attempt at espionage. If you travel unescorted without explicit official authorization, or any attempt to talk to a North Korean citizen authorities will see these actions as attempted espionage. Always stay with a guide and never do anything to draw attention to yourself from local authorities.

North Korean authorities may fine or arrest you for unauthorized currency transactions, or for shopping at stores not designated for foreigners.

Do not take pictures unless you are told you can; North Korean government authorities may view taking unauthorized pictures as espionage, confiscate cameras and film and/or detain the photographer. Photographing scenes of poverty or other things that may cause a negative impression of the DPRK may also result in confiscation. You should ask permission before taking photographs in the DPRK, including of officials, soldiers or other people. DPRK guides can provide permission to take photographs.

7. Crime in North Korea

You will not be affected by any serious crime in North Korea. Your visit will be so tightly controlled that you will simply not be in a position to be the victim of crime. Just because your movements are tightly choreographed you should not get too complacent.

8. Health in North Korea

Your visit will be so tightly controlled that there should be no real risks to your health in North Korea.

I shall narrate certain, very interesting features about North Korea, which may be common amongst a few countries, but not at this level.

Every male is supposed to serve military for 3 years between the ages 18 – 25. This is mandatory. No exception.

There is no photography in the country.

Divorce and Extra marital affair is almost nil in this country. I visited a few families. They have no internet no Wi-Fi no WhatsApp. In evening the family sits together and they meet as we used to meet 40 years back.

I found the country as Crime free.

Women do not smoke but smoking rate is extremely high amongst men.

All the property and industries are owned by the Government, so there is no industrialist.

Housing is free and basic food is free for all citizens.

Citizens are not allowed to communicate with us, the foreigners. They are not allowed to get passport. They cannot travel abroad. They cannot interact with foreigners.

The TV channels can show only local and censored news, which almost all the time keep praising the king.

The people in general are extremely family oriented and they live with basic necessities only.

Top military officials and scientists enjoy ultimate luxury in the country.

They have the system of cooperative farming, as the land is owned by the Govt. The labour gets points for their working day in the particular field. The labour put effort by leaning on walls, tilling the land, cleaning the field, sowing the seeds, sprinkling fertilizers, watering the fields, maintaining the growth of crops and cultivating the crops.

These jobs are done by different labours who get points for their work. On the basis of points earned by them, they get the salary, food, housing etc during the year. They work hard and sincerely but for less hours.

All most everything is owned by the Govt and /or by the Military, therefore, photography at public places is prohibited by law, because Military establishment photography cannot be taken (practically people takes photographs)

Airports, Railways e.g. are maintained by Military only.

Internet is not connected and most of the people use old simple mobile only for calling and SMS.

The buildings are mostly 4 storeyed without lift. Buildings do not have parking area as they do not need it.



The buildings are in perfect design and shape.

People do not own cars. The entire country would hardly have around 500 cars to be used by top military people and top scientists for travelling.

Mode of public transport is excellent, extremely efficient and the fares are very low.



There is no traffic on road.

North Korea - Forest Area (% Of Land Area) is high 41%. USA 34% India 21%

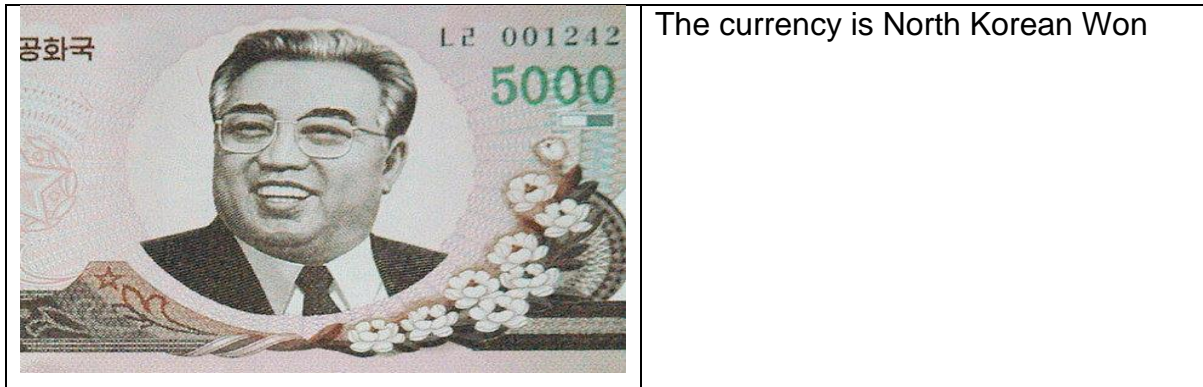
The air is pure. Vehicular pollution is low. We feel it.

The country had faced total devastation in wars and the entire land was made flat. They have reached in today's position by strong leadership and hard work by the citizen.

There is one Central Bank 6 Local banks and Banks oversea. There are no ATMs.

There are no credit cards. The foreigners are not allowed to deal in local currency and at local shops. They can deal in US \$, Euro or Chinese Yuan ¥

Local Currency \$1 = Won ₩ 100 only. That too at selected 5 shops or departmental stores.



The living is extremely cheap. Education is encouraged and the students are highly disciplined.

We visited their film city for shooting. It was simple.



On my visit to a nursery school, they made me sit with the students. Those toddlers of average 4 years old were taught number one music, patriotism and sports.



Children showing their study books



Kids identifying the notes being played by me



Nursery Class room learning to fight the war with Americans



School children and teachers giving a photograph

Since 1996 every Olympic medal tally of North Korea had been more than double of India.

There is no beggar in the country and no stray dogs.

People use bicycle for local travels.

The country is border with Russia and China. The movie theatre shows limited films which passes through rigorous censorship. Tax (Lagan with subtitles) of Aamir Khan is popular film there.

Foreign travellers are not supposed to deal with local people or in the local market.

As foreign traveller I had permitted to deal only in US\$, Euro or Chinese Yuan, that too only at 3 shopping malls. Other shopping is prohibited by law. The same items had been upto 8(yes 8) times costlier for foreign tourists.

Railway system is not very advanced but they have underground metro trains connected to various places in the country.



Deep underground Metro in North Korea

The houses are more or less similar design, so the country look extremely beautiful.

Buddhism is followed by 5% of people.

Others have no religion but they worship the King. The entire population is non-vegetarian.

Dog is eaten as food there.

Senior Citizens lives with their children.

Some senior citizens home exists.

I had been to a one big theme park, which had many rides. I had to take photo of few locals, but as usual they have never seen a Camera so they were scared of photograph.

Ananth clicked a photo from long distance and showed to them on mobile screen. They were excited, but they were also scared. There is no common language, so we communicate with symbols and finally they agreed me to be photograph with them.

We had stayed in a very costly Yanggakdo International Hotel hotel in Pyongyang.

People live with a purpose in DPRK from childhood till old age.



I have seen a child of 11 years old doing front and back football practicing for 1.5 hours non-stop without any mistake. His efforts that day justified his claim for an Olympic medal later.

No one is allowed to walk on green grass lawn and the penalty is very high. It is an offence to throw anything in garden. The cleanliness of gardens can only be imagined.



The clean North Korea gardens

No permit to put the waste here and there, the waste should be put in dustbins which have been kept for this purpose.

Every citizen is in military without uniform. Therefore, if somebody throws waste in lawn, any other citizen observing this must report it to police otherwise he has committed an offence.

This is the secret of their cleanliness.

In the history 3 Americans have faced 12 years imprisonment while visiting North Korea. Their offence include

drug smuggling, treason, espionage, political dissidence, and proselytizing religious beliefs that contradict practiced Juche ideology e.g.,

- 1) Distributing bibles amongst citizen
- 2) Disrespect of the Country's flag by rubbing it below his shoes on the floor, which was captured by CCTV.

North Korea wants to earn money from the tourist. Therefore, encourages International tourists. But to be on the safer side manage it on a much selected basis.

I went to a rural area. On the way, I developed friendship with their local guide and I shall entertain some magic tricks. He was astonished because in DPRK there are no magic shows. He forced me to teach some tricks to hem. I agreed but in bargain I insisted to perform for the hotel staff.



Getting ready for a magic show



Performing magic show blindfolded in North Korea for hotel staff

I had been a great experience that the basic magic had been something new to them.

We had been to North Korea and South Korea border. I have taken certain photographs, which were not permitted. Suddenly, a military man approached and asked me “Sir did you take photographs” I said, I don’t know, but I gave the camera to him. He deleted last 3 photographs and gave the camera back to me.

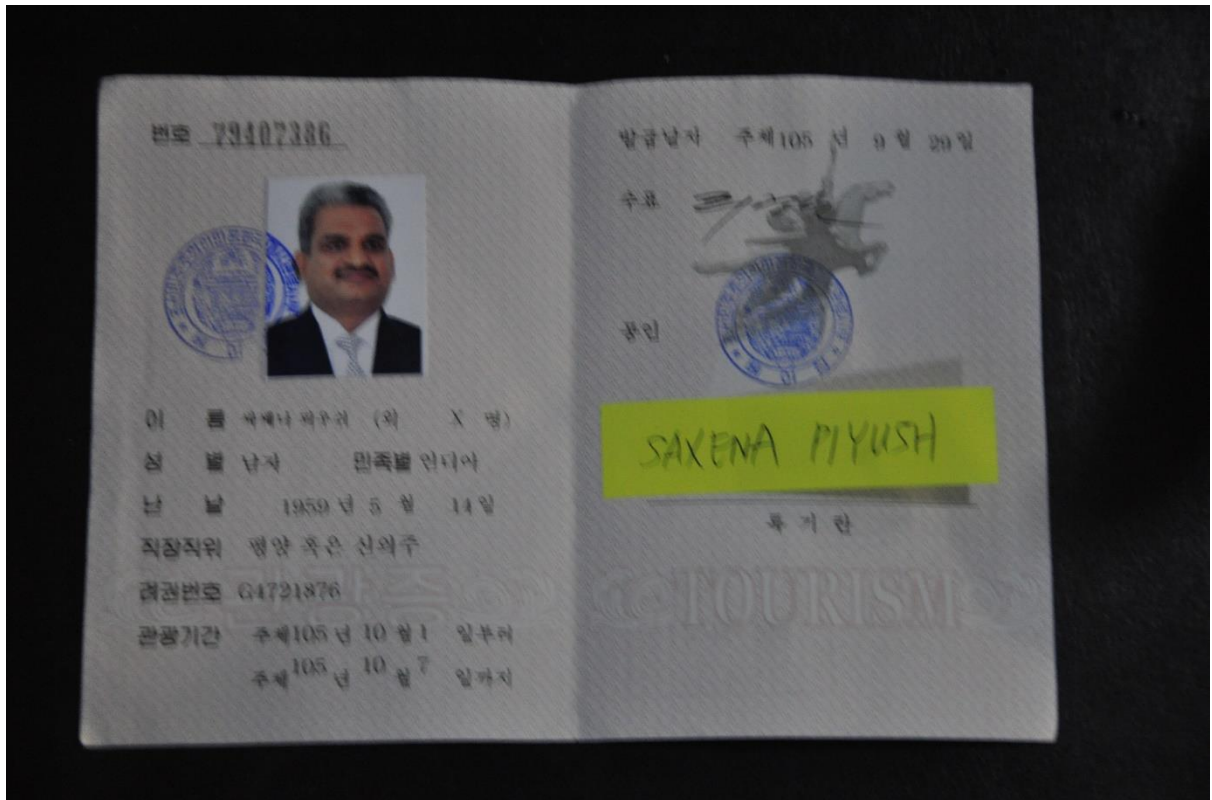
It is not permitted to bring into North Korea, soft or hard copy of any brochure through laptop or pen drive.

The customs checking of the pen drive, hard disk or lap top etc. is very strict and it take 45 minutes to get the customs clearance.

My friend Anand Subramanian, travelled with me from Bombay to Bombay through North Korea. He knows Spanish, French, little bit of Chinese, Portugese and few other foreign languages and thus he was easily mixing with other companions.

From the airport, we are brought to the hotel and we are instructed to deposit our passport with the tour operator. We were prohibited to move out except with the guide.

The visa is paper visa, which was given separately.



This is the paper bias for travel to North Korea

Immigration stamp is not put on the passport. So theoretically we have no proof of visiting North Korea.

India has an embassy in North Korea and similarly they have an embassy in Delhi.

I have a reason to feel that all the propaganda raised against DPRK is by western media.

I went to a saloon to get my hair cut as the King has. It was not permitted.

The language of the citizen is Korean, but even the translators of the South Korean Language find it difficult to understand.

State owns all land.

Citizens are employed or it may be comparative earning points in lieu of wages which are later converted to produce for use or barter.

Divorce Rate is low in North Korea

Pornography is forbidden in North Korea. The production, distribution and importation of pornography is punished harshly by the government. Sexuality is restricted in the conservative North Korean culture.

Extra-marital affairs are much less. No organised prostitution. Sometimes due to poverty a few poor wives approach rich men for easy money to finance their well being of their families. This may be with the consent of her poor husband. The incidences are however rare.

Looking at the scale of punishment and the harsh judicial system, it is a crime free country.

No tax on income. No duties. No tax collection agency. No evasion. In a nutshell no expenses on enforcement agencies. No corruption. What a country? All resources only for welfare of the country.

Result a Happy Population

Housing free

Basic food free

No lift in 5 storey building

Toilets are not European except in big hotels and posh apartments.

No beds, No TVs

No travel outside DPRK

Most of the public toilets are really dirty. They are Indian style for squatting. In homes also they have similar.



People sleep on floors. They need to privately store water for home consumption.

North Korea impresses with synchronised dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtvvbVNggOA>

It is amazing to see their interest in Music. Here they excel once again. This finally leads to their excellent choreography.

North Korea Kids Outrageously Performing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnehuC3miMI>

Five barren airports





While boarding train at the Pyongyang Railway station



Passenger car can go upto platform



The railway stations are generally barren.

Govt gives food clothing and house to all citizens. For security reason he lives in many homes

North Korea has friendly relations with Russia and China

Movies – Awara hoon

Only one shop for foreigners in Wonne

Buddhism - 5% 90%no religion

Two Churches

North Korean Cuisine

North Korea is known to lay on a grand spread of meat and fish. And dog is not an unusual addition to the table. A typical meal will often involve a variety of small dishes all shared by everyone. Lots of Asian style things such as noodle soups and stir-fries, with general spicy and oily vibes. However, amongst this, you'll also find that a valuable part of every meal is vegetables and tofu in all shapes and sizes!

Despite the heavy meat and fish consumption, there is a number of things you'll be able to eat, and will actually be really pleasantly surprised about!

Senior Citizens live with children

But a few senior citizens home exist

Student learn about leaders

Only 3 foreign currencies

They have not seen camera, internet and photograph

People live with a purpose in DPRK from childhood till old age

I have talked about normal practice

Kin Sung Un

Photo ok

No cut

No crumbling

Keep newspaper / photo carefully

Lawn / not allowed to walk on grass lawn

Every citizen is responsible to inform military of any violations by other citizens or foreigners

How I took photo in rides on local....

In all maps – they show South Korea 7 provinces as part of North Korea

War museum panorama

Status and pictures

Beer is free, Water is charged

King wants tourist money at his terms

Holding of handrails – no



I stand in North Korea. Across the water is China. Trip getting over soon.