**LETTER FROM A TRAITOR**

Trust is love. - KIM JONG IL

*Dear Mr. Win,*

My remaining sources in Pyongyang tell me you’re still alive.

What’s more, you’ve apparently been transferred to a less demanding position in another, quieter division of the Ministry. If that is the case, I’m genuinely relieved and happy for you. I was never only angry about what happened between us, and never at you alone. You were, however, the one who threatened in private that morning to kill me or have me killed.

“Let me put it this way: One small bullet …”

The little office became even hotter and stickier. The bitter smoke from your local cigarettes – which I only smoke as a last resort – swirled up to the ceiling.

“… one small bullet from a rifle can kill only one man.”

A long, long pause.

“We’ll see what happens.”

At the time, it was pretty disturbing. You hadn’t been yourself for quite some time already and were slowly but surely becoming more and more of a stranger to me – a brooding, destructive and unpredictable demon who barely spoke or understood the language of humans. But suspicion and hostility were on the rise all over Pyongyang at the time, to a degree I’d never experienced before. Not least, your words were given what we might call a certain extra resonance by the fact that North Korea, just a few days earlier, had surprised the world with its biggest nuclear testing to date, ten times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. You weren’t there in the hotel lobby when I and the other pale and – quite literally – shaken foreign visitors watched the extra newsflash on the state TV channel, in which North Korea declared itself the world’s newest nuclear power. Maybe you were out drinking somewhere. But over the past year, I’ve been asking myself whether your death threat may have held some deeper meaning. There was something in the tone of your voice, something sad and soft rather than angry and hard. In any case, I remember feeling much more saddened than scared. The worst part was the suspicion that began spreading backwards at that point, poisoning everything that had led up to that moment between us. Had it all been an act from the start? That nagging, retroactive doubt, casting a shadow over all the years of our friendship, pulled us even further into the darkness that for some time had been looming above us, gathering over the country and the city. But now, according to my local sources, you appear to have returned to the safe side, *your* safe side, as I have to mine. And for you to ever read this, your whole existence – in other words, the whole country and system of North Korea – would have to collapse first. Alternatively, you’d have to become one of the traitors the state protects you all from and scares you with, from morning to night, all year long, throughout your lives. Both for your own sake and that of the rest of the population, I hope neither will happen for some time yet.

No matter what, neither of us can get around the fact that it is you I am I writing to. You were and will always be my North Korean travelling companion, interpreter, fixer, joint venture partner, crisis manager, drinking buddy, friend and foe and friend and foe all over again … To airbrush you out of my North Korea would not only be impossible, but also misleading, and unfair to the man you once were and someday, I hope, can become once again. I therefore beg your tacit forgiveness for dragging you along again on this one last journey, because no-one I know of can give North Korea a face more human than yours.

Thank you, my friend.

**The beauty of a man lies not in his looks but in his ideological and moral traits. - KIM JONG IL**

Your real name, like most Korean names, is a combination of three short syllables. Each of these is composed of the relatively few standard characters that are the building blocks of written Korean. When the whole name is used, the surname – Kim, for example – is placed in front of a usually two-syllable first name, and the stress is always on the last syllable: Kim Jong *Un.* Even without the inevitable connotations of goose step and slavish discipline your country is saddled with in the eyes of the world, I find that Korean easily lends itself to the language and tone of command, whether it’s barked out *Gangnam style* by South Korean pop stars or sonorously declaimed *Pyongyang style* by North Korean newsreaders in a robust staccato with resonant diphthongs and sentence intonations counting down to an explosive exclamation mark:

*IL-SIM-DAN-GYOL! [[1]](#footnote-1)*

I’ll risk leaving your globally anonymous “first name” unchanged, since I call you Mister in real life too. This isn’t just a phonetic foreign body in the Korean language, but also somewhat politically incorrect in North Korea’s thoroughly politicised official vocabulary. “Mister” is a title with roots in the feudal societies of the past and implies a form of politeness and subservience at odds with the socialist ideal of equality and brotherhood. The capitalist marionettes of the South are happy to call each other “Mr.” and “Mrs.”, but you northerners use the term *dongji* instead, corresponding to the soviet Russian *tovarisch,* the (East) German *Genosse* and the English *comrade.* In North Korea, people address you as [your first name]-*dongji*, but neither you nor any of your colleagues at the Ministry – excuse me, your *work comrades* – mind it when I call you Mister Kim, Mister Choi and so on.

Both of us enjoy being a bit naughty, of course, a bit politically incorrect, and this attitude we share is one of the many delicate little threads that have bound us together during the years of our collaboration. For me at least, it’s also quite simply a matter of white man’s convenience – sticking to the rhythms my tongue and brain have become accustomed to throughout a life immersed in languages far from the Korean. The double syllable first, then the single syllable.

“Win”, on the other hand, is a name I’ve chosen specially for this occasion. It both sounds and looks Korean and resembles a number of typical Korean surnames, such as Won, Shin, Min, Mun and Wi. The actual combination “Win”, however, doesn’t exist in Korea, even though it sounds like it *could* have. Like so many things North Korean, in other words, the codename I’ve given you is plausible, but not entirely true.

We both carry a lot of baggage from home. In my part of the world, as you very well know, the country and system you serve – for the two are a *single-hearted unity*, of course – are known, amongst other things, as “a gruesome dictatorship”, “the world’s most conformist and fear-based society”, “an absurd, ghastly, totalitarian prison camp” and the recurring: “the closest we’ve come to National Socialism since The Third Reich.” To sum it up: “The world’s most isolated country and the world’s worst regime.” I imagine you shaking your head in quiet, almost amused resignation. You know as well as I do that any foreigner who has any dealings with North Korea – in any capacity other than reluctant diplomat, concerned aid worker or finger-wagging human rights activist – is considered fair game for the attacks of the righteously indignant. Let me mention a small selection of distinctions our work together has earned me over the years: “useful idiot to the horror regime”, “immoral and egocentric”, “propaganda tool for one of the worst regimes in history,” “naïve collaborationist” and last, but not least: “Vidkun Quisling. Morten Traavik. Jørn Andersen.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Your own baggage is at least as heavy as mine, although the content is different. Your employer – “the world’s worst regime” – is quite unimpressed with the society I grew up in and identify with: “imperialist ideology and culture”, “Western books and films full of decadence” and “spiritual and cultural poison” are but a few examples taken from the North Korean state media.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We both know that prejudices aren’t something you can just leave behind in a safety deposit box when you enter a country. You may remember your countryman the music professor, who took part in a guest ensemble we arranged in Norway a few years ago, and whose belief in the evils of capitalism were confirmed when he needed to use the toilet in Frogner Park.

This usually lovable and unassuming Korean gentleman was unable to hide his deep contempt for a society so thoroughly corrupted by rampant capitalism that it even charges money for the most basic of human needs! At least, he said, it was good for the students he had brought along, and would serve as a warning to them, to see with their own eyes just how ruthless capitalism really is. When your own government and the system you serve describe yourselves, on the other hand, the tone is quite different – and again, let me emphasise that the selection of quotes here is random and limited, since there really is no end to the material at hand: “The light of Asia since the dawn of time”, “the land of the morning calm”, “a dream of living a prosperous life in a thriving socialist nation which is now transformed into reality”[[4]](#footnote-4), “a politically independent, economically self-sufficient and militarily alert socialist power”[[5]](#footnote-5), “a knowledge-based economic giant”, or as your own President for Eternity puts it:

Ours is a single nation with 5000 years of history, it is a valorous, ambitious nation that has been vigorously fighting against foreign invaders and successive reactionary rulers from olden times, and it is a talented nation that has contributed greatly to mankind’s development of science and culture.

You and other representatives of North Korea who are regularly in contact with foreigners and are trusted enough to be allowed to travel far beyond the country’s borders, are naturally all very aware of the utter contradiction – and bitter conflict – between these heavily entrenched and strictly policed worldviews. Any visitor to your country – all more or less suspicious in your eyes, whether they are atomic energy inspectors, charter tourists, heads of state or aid workers – share a common daydream of cracking the North Korean Code, an adventurous hope of unveiling as much as possible of the “real North Korea behind the façade”, and, not least, to be the very first outsider to do so.

This supposed contrast between “real” and “fake”, “authentic” and “staged”, is something we Europeans and our descendants in the New World have cultivated since ancient Greek times – often against our own better judgement. But old habits die hard, as I’m sure you know. You and your gatekeeper colleagues can *sense* all of this – you smell the blood of a Christian, as the saying goes in our Norwegian folk tales. The more curious and insistent we become, the more you hold back, which of course makes us even more curious, and so it goes on – the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object.

Your exaggerated suspicion seems almost comic to us, but the truth is that it conceals an almost touching naivety and keeps it in check. Many times, it has struck me how bad you North Koreans are, or rather how bad you allow yourselves to be, at judging foreigners. You simply can’t tell who your friends and foes really are. And how could it be otherwise? Your system doesn’t exactly reward excessive curiosity about the outside world and its impulses, to put it mildly.

The day independent backpacking is allowed in North Korea – or at least becomes conceivable – you may find yourself smiling at the story of an acquaintance of mine, who was approached on a summer day at the bottom of Karl Johan Street (you’ve been there) by a pair of polite backpackers. Where, they wondered, could they get hold of typical Norwegian souvenirs, such as troll figurines? Since they were standing in the middle of a what is arguably the world’s highest-density souvenir troll location, my indigenous friend must have looked slightly bemused, but as you know, foreigners sometimes need a helping hand. Hesitating slightly, he pointed towards the rows of cheap shops and souvenir stalls lining Norway’s parade street, and mumbled: “Well, you should probably just…” With a slightly overbearing smile, the two young adventurers brushed his suggestion aside, leaned in and looked at him meaningfully. “No, no, we don’t mean the tourist tat. Where do you *Norwegians* buy your trolls?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

But apart from these primal urges, we explorers of North Korea are a pretty mixed crowd. For some of us, a trip to North Korea is a test of manhood, for others a pilgrimage, for a select few almost a matter of routine. Most of us you will meet only once, and when you do, we’ll usually go out of our way to humour you, either out of exaggerated politeness, fear, or both. That is why I believe there are many things along the road we’re about to travel that neither you nor your own people know, or have been allowed to know, about North Korea and those who seek it out. A view from the outside is both the thing your country fears the most and the thing it needs the most. Both with good reason, if you ask me. Here, anyway, is a collection of basic facts about your country that most outsiders with an opinion on the matter more or less seem to agree upon:

**(Quite reliable)**

**COUNTRY FACTS**

**Flag: Red, white and blue**

The red colour of the flag of the DPRK represents the blood of the revolutionary forerunners and comrades-in-arms, the white colour the pure loyalty of our service personnel and people who support our Party, and the blue colour or high and beautiful dreams and ambition. - KIM JONG UN

**NAME: THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK)**

*Founded by Kim Il Sung on 9 September, Juche 37 (1948), an independent socialist state protecting the Korean people’s interests, where the masses are the rulers of all things and all things serve the masses. Despite being constantly busy after liberation, Kim Il Sung gave the question of the new state’s name a lot of thought. Some found the name too long, pointing out that other countries had shorter names. The president answered nonetheless that we are the ones who decide the name of our country, the way its people – the country’s true rulers – demand.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Both inside and outside North Korea, this somewhat intractable name is usually abbreviated with the English initials DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea). [[8]](#footnote-8)

As visitors, this is the official appellation you will hear, more often than not, from the state-employed guides who also act as your interpreters, fixers and of course minders.

However, hardly anyone will be offended if you use the internationally prevalent name – North Korea – which is also easier to remember. Nor will you risk sanctions or any kind of unpleasantness. In fact, in the official terminology – the state’s origin story, if you will – the two Koreas are also referred to as “north” and “south”, although always with lowercase initials: “north Korea” and “south Korea”. According to the state narrative, the partition of the Korean peninsula is of course merely a temporary state of affairs, and to use capital letters would be to implicitly accept the unnatural division of a people and country that are one and the same.

**THE NORTH KOREAN KALENDAR: JUCHE**

The Korean Peninsula is located in the same time zone as Japan, seven hours ahead of Norway. But North Korea flaunts a *calendar* all of its own: *Juche* (pronounced *choo-che*) is named after the state ideology and was officially introduced in 1997, when the three-year mourning period following Kim Il Sung’s death came to an end. Juche begins with Kim Il Sung’s birth in 1912, which isn’t Year Zero, since it would be inappropriate (and risky) to denote The Great Leader’s birthdate as *nothing*. This is the reason why our Gregorian 1912 corresponds to Juche 1, and the centenary of Kim Il Sung’s birth was celebrated in 2012 as Juche 101. What’s more, North Korea has no form of BK and AK dating (before and after Kim), and even in the homeland of Juche, the official calendar is used somewhat half-heartedly.

Both in the national media and foreign-language publications, dates are usually quoted alongside the Western calendar, for example: Juche 107 (2018).

**LOCATION: IN THE MIDDLE OF EAST ASIA[[9]](#footnote-9)**

To the north, the rivers Amnok (in Chinese: Yalu) and Tuman (Tumen) form a 1420 km long natural frontier with China (North Korea’s longest border). At its easternmost point, the border ends in a trijunction where the two countries meet Russia. Norway’s neighbour to the east shares a 17 km stretch of frontier with North Korea – Russia’s shortest and easternmost border. Which is long enough, of course, to amply justify a Norwegian wanting to please his North Korean hosts with a friendship toast or two to the fact that we only have one country between us. To the east lies another regional superpower, Japan, with which both Koreas have a complex and historically fraught relationship. For hundreds of years, China and Japan took turns dominating and at times colonising the whole Korean peninsula.

From this squeezed-in position between three superpowers comes the Korean expression “a shrimp among whales” and the saying: “Between fighting whales, the shrimp is crushed.”

Most people, however, will have heard a lot more about the third, southern border with “the other Korea”, known all over the world as the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). It is along this highly militarised border line one understands what it actually means that North Korea has been at war for almost 70 years – not only ideologically, but quite physically and literally. The Korean Armistice Agreement, which was signed in 1953 by the warring parties in the Korean war and marked the end of hostilities, is merely a truce, not a declaration of lasting peace. Formally and technically, North Korea is still at war, not only with its arch-enemies South Korea and the US, but also with the United Nations and thus the whole world – you and me, if you will.

SPREADING DISCOCRACY

(MORTEN THE THIRD)

Foreign activities are very delicate political activities that demand keen political insight, the greatest prudence and a rich knowledge of etiquette. – KIM JONG IL.

2008. The ageing Tupolev model that forms the backbone of Air Koryo’s somewhat antiquated fleet of ex-Soviet airplanes humps laboriously towards the terminal in the distance. The seemingly endless landing strip makes taxiing feel like a ten-minute drive along country roads. Reportedly, the airstrip was designed to be long and tortuous in order to delay American warplanes in the event of a new Korean war. The population here is given constant reminders that this is an imminent threat. I unbuckle the shackles of my well-worn ex-Soviet airplane seat and grab my first souvenir from a world apart: a cardboard fan with the Air Koryo logo on it, handed out by the stewardesses before take-off because the air conditioning was down. Under my arm, I carry a disco ball marked Eurolite, 30 centimetres in diameter, “the classic effect with a stable plastic core and genuine glass mirror facets 10 X 10 mm”.

In doing so, I am probably not only violating the North Korean regime’s strict ban against all forms of Western culture, but also the equally strict Western sanctions against importing them.[[10]](#footnote-10) We are in the era of Kim Jong Il and George W. Bush, and seven years are yet to pass before the airport will be expanded and modernised under the wise and caring guidance of Kim the Third. Sunan remains North Korea’s only international airport. It is built to deal with a maximum traffic load of one inbound *or* outbound flight a day, and is no bigger than a medium-sized Norwegian regional airport such as Kirkenes or Kristiansand.

Since the airport’s heyday – if that’s the right expression – all regular air connections with the outside world (which were never very frequent in the first place) have been discontinued, except for the last umbilical cord, Peking-Pyongyang. To be able to cope with even just one daily flight, North Korea’s own Air Koryo splits the week with Air China – and we’re talking workdays only, of course. Weekends are quiet at Sunan International Airport.

So here I am. In North Korea! A destination for the restless and perhaps slightly maladjusted adventurer, since those of us who seek the place out often feel a certain aversion towards our own home-grown brand of modernity: the relentless pace of life, the alienation, the commodification and so on. The world is shrinking, as are the polar ice caps and jungles: Thailand is the new Mallorca, Vietnam the new Provence. Tibet is almost as packed with Chinese tourists as the Fish Market in Bergen in July. Yet deep inside a true Lionheart lies the explorer’s irrepressible yearning for the Promised Land. A place yet to be *discovered.* A place where the wild things are.

The terminal building is crowned with the letters PYONGYANG in Korean signs along one side of the flat roof, and Latin letters opposite. In the middle, several metres tall, towers a portrait of a beaming Kim Il Sung, who after abandoning his mortal shell in 1994 has worked on tirelessly as North Korea’s *President for Eternity –*the world’s only dead head of state. For a first-time visitor to North Korea and Pyongyang, the composition comes across as a quite unequivocal instruction to regard these three new acquaintances – the country, the city and the man – as one and the same.

If you long to get away from it all, you’ve come to the right place. In customs, my mobile phone is impounded by two gruff uniformed inspectors with an English (perhaps even overall?) vocabulary consisting of exactly two words: “cell” and “phone!” In return, I am handed a receipt as translucent and brittle as old rolling tobacco paper, and I pray in my heart that the custom officers’ duplicate won’t reach the last stages of disintegration during my stay. And so I say goodbye to the wide web and globalised chaos of the world. Ahead, North Korea’s isolated cosmos awaits. In less than two weeks (if all goes well) I’ll be able to reconnect with the outside world again.

An ancient Japanese minibus from the host organisation is waiting for me in the half-empty parking lot outside the terminal. All of my sense impressions have an alluring, bittersweet taste of bygone Eastern bloc. Outside the window, a landscape glides by that looks like what I imagine Norwegian rural areas must have been like in the 1930s, before the mechanisation of agriculture. Here and there, a traffic constable leans on a veteran motorcycle. A few people are riding bicycles (for some reason, there are only ladies’ bicycles in North Korea). Everyone else is either walking or bent over thin wisps of green in a brownish, dusty sea of meagre farmland. This antipastoral scene from the Middle Ages could just as well have belonged to a poor, but more colourful and photogenic country like Cambodia or Laos, had it not been for the cool morning air and the almost Nordic landscape of bare mountains in the distance. We Norwegians often forget how unique our own regional policies are in a global context, ensuring almost as a national article of faith that rural communities remain thriving, prosperous and well-populated. Unfortunately, like many other countries, North Korea has yet to be inspired by us in this area, and the contrast between dreary outskirts and imposing capital are as glaring here as they are in other developing countries like Pakistan and Uganda. None of my hosts mention the mirror ball glittering in the autumn sun on the car seat next to me like an egg from outer space. Is it out of politeness? Ignorance? Disgust? Raising a warning finger to the country’s youth, the party organ and voice of truth *Rodong Sinmun* (The Worker’s Newspaper) regularly rails against various forms of creeping democratisation: “The imperialist strategy is to make young people mental cripples infected with the virus of reactionary ideologies and corrupt bourgeois way of life and use them in its efforts to disintegrate those countries advocating independence against imperialism!”

It’s no surprise, then, that I carry in my mental baggage a solid and perhaps not entirely unfounded expectation that all forms of “reactionary and corrupt bourgeois culture”[[11]](#footnote-11), which my imported mirror ball, after all, could easily be taken to represent, are strictly prohibited in North Korea.

Like so many other visitors to this suspicious country, I am travelling – at least partly – under false colours. Of course I am. But for the time being at least, my North Korean hosts seem blissfully unsuspecting and believe that I am an ordinary and guileless tourist. Being as cut off as they are from the Internet and the international media, I assume they don’t have a clue as to what an *intervention artist* might be. Just a few months ago, the disco ball on the seat next to me was glittering above the heads of the finalists in the world’s first beauty pageant for landmine victims, held in the capital of Angola, Luanda, with a formidable national and international press corps in attendance. The winner was crowned by the country’s First Lady in a sparkling banquet hall not far from the national monument to Angola’s first president, Augustino Neto, which, incidentally, was designed and built by North Korean architects. Many had written off the Miss Landmine project in advance (rightly so, for that matter) as unrealistic and unworkable. In the end, however, its international breakthrough was so big that I now have wind in my sails and a taste for other seemingly impossible projects in “difficult” countries. The disco ball is my lucky talisman and a feeler I’m throwing out to see if I can find any leeway at all for a similar artistic intervention in North Korean society. My initial plan is to take a series of photos of myself all dressed up like a classic Western playboy in a designer suit and tie, with Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses, posing with the disco ball under my arm in all or as many as possible of the destinations we’re meant to visit during my stay. I’ve decided to call the series *Discocracy.[[12]](#footnote-12)*

**PYONGYANG: THE CITY CENTRE[[13]](#footnote-13)**

He who builds monuments, cares for their safety and guarantees their maintenance forever, is a true patriot. – KIM JONG UN

North Korea’s capital and biggest city lies along the Taedong River (in Korean: *Taedonggang*) on a vast plain where the southwestern lowlands meet the eastern and northern mountain ranges. The name Pyongyang can mean both “flatland” and “peaceful place.”

The city’s history can be traced at least as far back as the fifth century A.D., when the imperial Koguryo dynasty made it its capital. But because the old Pyongyang was razed to the ground by half a million American bombs during the Korean war, the city had to be rebuilt from scratch, which also allowed it to be tailored to practical and ideological needs. That’s why there are extremely few statues around the country of historical figures outside the Kim dynasty, and few or none at all from the time *before* Kim (B.K.).

Part of the aid package from Stalin’s Soviet Union and its satellite states in the Eastern Bloc during the reconstruction of Pyongyang were architects and engineers from North Korea’s European counterpart, the German Democratic Republic. The East Germans clearly came equipped with their own experiences from a bombed-out capital and gave the new Pyongyang an orderly, open and airy layout, with a number of large parks and green lungs which still give North Korea’s capital the distinct feel of an Asian East Berlin.

Driving south from the airport towards the city centre, one sees Pyongyang’s TV tower, a smaller version of the GDR capital’s famous landmark, the Fernsehturm, silhouetted against the sky on a hill above **Pyongyang’s Arch of Triumph**. The arch is an even more obvious plagiarism of foreign models. Here as elsewhere, however, the North Koreans have added a few touches of their own: a layered hat of stylised roofs in the typical East Asian style make the North Korean copy ten metres taller than its French, spiritual sperm donor. The Arch of Triumph was built to celebrate Kim Il Sung’s seventieth birthday on April 15, 1982, along with another landmark of central Pyongyang waiting just around the corner. The monument is dedicated to the Resistance and the country’s victory over the Japanese, with the official dates of the struggle’s beginning (1925) and end (1945) engraved in its pillars. It’s hardly a coincidence that Pyongyang’s city planners made the only access route from the airport to the city centre pass through this awe-inspiring, concrete colossus. The effect is that of driving both through a physical gate to the city and a symbolic portal into the Pyongyang universe. And *there* we go, passing under the concrete arch.

The bus drives on along the mildly rolling side of the lush **Moran Hill**, Pyongyang’s own Central Park and a popular destination on public holidays, which, oddly enough, often seem to coincide with the Leaders’ birthdays. The hill also lends its name to the closest thing the country has produced, so far, to modern pop stars: Kim Jong Un’s own “house band”, the girl band **Moranbong.** This unique North Korean blend of the Spice Girls and the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo performed in public for the first time in the summer of 2012, reportedly at the request of the recently appointed Supreme Leader himself. The repertoire, naturally, is of the edifying variety – Kim-pop? – and can be divided into two main genres: earnest love ballads to the Leaders, such as “We Call Him Father” and patriotic girl scout versions of Seventies disco pop, Baccara-style, such as “The Train To The Future”. With their short-skirted officer’s uniforms and prim, yet mildly suggestive onstage moves, Moranbong’s image has been quite aptly defined in the Western press as “totalitarian with a hint of naughty*”.* Their greatest hit to date is the ruthlessly catchy “We Will Go to Mount Paektu” (*Garira Paektusan Urô*) from 2015. It is a tribute to the Kim dynasty scantily dressed up in mountain-hiking metaphors. On the other side of the road from the Moran Park, we pass the **Chollima Statue**, one of many examples of the North Korean state propaganda apparatus’s ingenious use of pan-Korean myths, legends and folklore. According to a folk tale, Chollima is the name of a winged horse almost identical to the Pegasus of Greek mythology, who could run (or fly) one thousand *ri* or 400 kilometres in a day.[[14]](#footnote-14) Chollima roamed the country looking for a rider who could break it in, but eventually had to give up and flew up to heaven instead. The statue “symbolises the heroic zeal and indomitable resolve of our people, who with their incessant creativity continue breaking new ground in the spirit of Chollima.” When the bombed-out city of Pyongyang and the rest of North Korea was being rebuilt after the Korean war, the authorities mobilised the masses to a collective “voluntary” effort by means of a national public awareness campaign, *Chollima Speed*, which was clearly inspired by Mao and The Great Leap Forward. Chollima Speed has entered the North Korean vocabulary and remains a well-known term, especially to those who remember the reconstruction effort and the following years. Lately, however, the term is getting tough competition from the capital’s own *Pyongyang Speed.* As our bus approaches the top of Mansu Hill (Mansudae), the road takes a long and gradual right turn. All of a sudden, we are Lilliputians gazing up at Gulliver or awe-struck natives at the feet of the mighty Kim Kong. At the top of the hill, two 22-metre tall idols rear up, the centrepiece of the **Mansudae Grand Monument**, which was inaugurated on Kim Il Sung’s sixtieth birthday in 1972 and thus (knowingly) set the bar quite high for well-wishers planning future birthday bashes. The statue of North Korea’s national patriarch, towering in lonely majesty at the time, was reportedly covered in gold leaf for the first few years of its existence. But after China’s then-deputy Prime Minister and future leader, Deng Xiaoping, made it very clear to his North Korean hosts during a state visit that gilded statues were incompatible with the ideals of socialism, the gold was replaced with a somewhat less sumptuous layer of bronze.

After Kim Jong Il’s death in December 2011, a new building effort was set to Chollima and Pyongyang Speed combined, and in April 2012 a statue of the Son was unveiled next to the Father. The duo, of equal height, is flanked by two symmetrical, 50-metre long, 22.5-metre tall marble wings in the shape of unfurled, red Socialist flags, like a stage curtain opening to a standing ovation. The wing on the right, or to the north if you’re facing the statues, is dedicated to “The anti-Japanese revolutionary struggle,” while the one on the left honours “Socialist reconstruction” after the Korean war. Each of the flags also form a backdrop to a grand parade of Communism’s standard catalogue of action figures: five-metre tall workers, peasants and guerrilla soldiers staring boldly into a glorious future with their rifles, shovels and mining picks raised victoriously above their heads. Since its inauguration, the Mansudae monument has become the country’s most important public shrine. All year round, a steady stream of schoolchildren dressed in distinctive Young Pioneer uniforms, companies of conscripts from provincial garrisons, friendship associations and common people walk up the terraced hill and the boulevard-wide stairs beneath Mansu Hill to lay down wreaths and bow deeply and deferentially at the giants’ feet. The whole monument gains further perspective, depth and symbolic heft against the enormous mosaic of Mount Paektu behind it, covering half the foremost sidewall of the **Museum of the Korean Revolution**. Here, 54,000 square metres and over 90 exhibition halls are dedicated to the “Revolution”, that is to say the history of North Korea, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

The whole official narrative of the two first generations of the Kim dynasty unfolds over a total wall length spanning more than 4.5 kilometres. This means that as a visitor, you never get to see, and perhaps never feel the need to see, the collection in its entirety. A respectful female guide[[15]](#footnote-15) dressed in the national costume *jogori*, reminiscent of a tulle dress, leads you politely, but firmly through the world’s biggest scrapbook: room after room plastered from knee-height to ceiling with slogans, quotes, newspaper articles, hero paintings and photos, mostly in Korean. You’ll listen to recordings of radio speeches and study a proportionately small, but important section dedicated to the Leaders’ theoretical works – memoirs, speeches and political treatises – published in a respectable selection of world languages. Notice also that all depictions of the Leaders are lovingly framed in thick gold thread, while all direct quotes (from party organs, interviews and so on) “make do” with silver thread. In all publications printed in North Korea, regardless of language, the Leaders’ names are always typeset in slightly bigger letters than the rest of the text. The Leaders’ utterances are usually typeset in bold, which can sometimes spoil the suspense in the state-authorised collections of anecdotes about their lives and exploits, for example when an anonymous “man of noble appearance” offers a ride to a poor old lady who finds herself stranded alone on a country road in the middle of nowhere. When he shouts “**Wait, old lady!**”, the alert reader already suspects what is going on. North Koreans half hope and half expect that you, like them, will want to pay your respects to their Eternal President and Eternal Chairman. For decades it was standard procedure for all new arrivals – it didn’t matter if you were a tourist, an aid worker or an ambassador – to be driven straight from the airport to the foot of the statue of the Great Leader, to ritually bow and place a wreath before being allowed to check in to your hotel or diplomatic residence.

In keeping with the relative softening-up of recent years, the North Korean hosts are going easier on their demands, and they now often give you a day or two after arrival before it’s time to step up and bend the knee. Despite what many believe, it’s quite all right to refrain from bowing if you have ethical qualms about the submission ritual. But if you want to avoid making your guides uncomfortable, it’s considered polite to stand at a certain distance from the part of the group that chooses to approach the statues and go through the moves. It’s also perfectly all right to take pictures, but as your guides are bound to remind you more than once over the course of your stay, any picture of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il must include the *whole* subject – meaning that the angle you choose must never be allowed to crop the Leaders’ full figures or faces. Today is arrival day, however, so we won’t have to deal with these rules for the time being. Mansudae disappears in the rear-view mirror as the bus drives on down the gentle slope, towards the intersection in front of the distinctive, cylindrical high-rise buildings along **Changjon Street.** Get your camera ready! With a bit of luck, we’ll run into a red light and have orchestra seats to a show featuring some of Pyongyang’s unknown stars: In recent years, the tautly uniformed female traffic constables with their commanding whistles, batons and precisely choreographed moves have finally had a bit of moderate traffic to direct. Even during the worst years of the energy crisis, these clockwork ballerina-like figures impassively presided over the inexistent traffic of the giant boulevards in a unique blend of the exotic, the beautiful, the moving and the disturbing that in many ways represents the North Korean experience in a nutshell.

Taking a right now down Changjon, we head towards the **Supreme People’s Assembly**. North Korea’s National Assembly occupies yet another neo-classicist concrete colossus at the foot of Mansu Hill, set apart from the Grand Monument by a picturesque fountain park. Every time I pass this imposing concrete structure, I think of one elected representative in particular, and a man in a brown jacket:

**CHOICES, CHOICES**

The leader, the party and the masses form a common entity sharing a life-and-death destiny. – KIM JONG Il

One should always be wary of countries that proclaim a religion or an ideology in their name. A state system presenting itself to the world as “The Islamic Republic”, “The People’s Republic”, “The Democratic Republic” and the like is rarely a paradise of freedom of thought and expression. Here as in so many other areas, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea follows the principle that you can’t have too much of a good thing, and hedges its bets. What many people don’t know is that the North Korean state actually goes to the trouble of holding regular elections – almost like the real thing! The Supreme People’s Assembly consists of almost 700 representatives, one from each of the country’s constituencies, who are elected for five-year terms in general elections where the constituency’s electorate votes for its preferred candidate. To spare voters the agonies of choice, the authorities decide in advance which candidate is the preferred one, since there is only one candidate for each constituency. The overwhelming majority of these candidates – over 600 at any given time – belong to the sole governing party, the Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK): a safe basis, in other words, for forming a stable government. The rest of the representatives come from two of the supporting or “prop” parties, which largely exist to lend a certain credibility to the D in DPRK.

On a sunny election day in the spring of 2014, in the company of Bent and Pål, a journalist and a cameraman from Norwegian TV2 for whom Mr. Win and I have obtained access to the country, I set out to report from the general mood in Electoral District 17 in central Pyongyang. We set up our camera in front of the entrance to the polling station, where a long line of North Koreans dressed in their Sunday best await their turns under a large, colourful poster bearing the motto:

MARCH 9 IS ELECTION DAY FOR THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PEOPLE’S ASSEMBLY! EVERYONE, LET US SHOW OUR VOTE OF AGREEMENT!

The big, open square is lavishly decorated with garlands and balloons. Off to the side, a group of well-dressed voters of both sexes dance to the frisky tones of Moranbong’s “We Will Go to Mount Paektu”, either out of sheer joy, one imagines, after having voted YES!, or because they can hardly wait to do so. At the end of the queue, a voting booth awaits where citizens cast their votes under the encouraging smiles from two large portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Mr. Win, slightly stressed as usual, has made arrangements for TV2 to interview the district’s electoral supervisor, and taken it upon himself to act as an interpreter, both between two different languages and two diverging definitions of representative government:

*TV2: Do you always sing and dance and get all dressed up to celebrate the election?*

*The electoral supervisor:* Yes, of course, spirits are always high when we choose our representatives to the People’s Assembly! Our electoral law prescribes creating events that lend a festive atmosphere to the electoral process. People aren’t celebrating because it’s mandatory, but because it’s election day for the People’s Assembly. Anyone over the age of 17 is going out to vote anyway, so they’re expressing their joy over voting for their representative to the People’s Assembly. The people (*points to the dancing voters in the background*) have nominated their candidate themselves, so they’re happy that someone they’ve chosen will be working for them.

*TV2:* *How many parties are running for election?*

(Mr. Win, in Korean, to the electoral supervisor):

*Elections are being held in other districts too, of course … Are there other parties besides the Worker’s Party of Korea represented in other districts, for example the Chondo-party, or, you know …*

(has forgotten the name of the last of North Korea’s three existing parties)

… *the other one … Do candidates from other parties get elected too?*

*The electoral supervisor:* Sure, there are candidates like that too.

(Our allotted time with the electoral supervisor has come to an end. He thanks us and hurries off, finding a place to stand a bit further away. A voter, Mr. Rim Gwang Hun, also stands close by.)

*TV2: How does it feel to be here and to vote today?*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* On this election day I am especially reminded of how marshal Kim Jong Un and the people are of a single heart and a single will.

*TV2:* *This looks like … a big day for people here. Can you tell us a bit about what’s going on?*

*Mr. Win* (in Korean, to Mr. Rim): *In Norway, for instance, election day isn’t really that different from any other day, but here we have celebrations and parties everywhere.*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* Yes, today is a special day for the party, for marshal Kim Jong Un and for the people. The election reflects the people’s choice of their own representatives, so the day couldn’t have been better.

*TV2: What do you expect from your candidates once they’re elected to the National Assembly?*

*Rim Gwang Hun:* They’ll give their all and work tirelessly to repay the people who elected them. With the trust the people have given them, they must work for the people, the party and our marshal. They must defer to the people and what is best for the people and show their commitment. They have the people’s complete trust because that is what the people expect of them.

(We move on to Mr. Han Kwang Hak, a factory worker, also out doing his civic duty.)

*TV2: Can you tell us what it feels like to vote here today?*

*Han Kwang Hak:* This election is in line with the Songun Principle. It strengthens the nation, reaffirms our socialist ideals and is an important opportunity to show the Korean people’s determination and will.

*TV2:* *It feels like a really special day for the citizens of Pyongyang.*

*Han Kwang Hak:* It’s a wonderful day, because this is the day that shows us how to make use of our rights as citizens.

*TV2: Usually in Norway, only about sixty percent of people entitled to vote participate in general elections. What do you think the attendance will be in this election?*

*Han Kwang Hak:* Oh, all registered voters will be participating in the election, of course. There’s a mobile polling station that visits people who can’t make it to the polling station on their own, for example the sick or disabled. So we expect a one hundred percent attendance.

(Finally we get to speak to the actual candidate for Electoral District 17, Jo Gil Nyo, an unassuming little woman in her fifties who has dressed up for the occasion, like most of the other women, in the national costume *joseonot*. She looks constantly incredulous and amused at the foreign reporter’s questions.)

*TV2: Are you excited about the election?*

*Mrs. Jo:* I’m so proud, my heart is about to burst! As a simple worker in the Public Roads Administration, I could never have dreamed of such an honour!

*TV2:* *Do you think you’re going to win here in District 17 today?*

*Mrs. Jo (laughs):* I’m not sure everyone is going to vote “yes”, but we’ll just have to wait for the results …

*Authoritative man in brown jacket (interrupts in Korean and gestures to Mr. Win to get him to translate):* Our comrade here *(motions to Mrs. Jo)* has already been through the initial selection process approving her candidacy, so today’s election is just the final stage of the process. It’s perfectly normal for these voters to dance for joy.

*TV2* (to Mrs. Jo): *What will be your signature issues as a representative of the National Assembly?*

*Mr. Win* (confused, in Korean to Mrs. Jo): *Which issues will be important to you once you’ve been elected … You see, this is a question about your position and areas of responsibility …*

*Authoritative man in brown jacket* (interrupts in Korean again, gestures to Mr. Win to make him translate): Our comrade here (*gestures to Mrs Jo)* is a group leader in the Public Roads Administration, where she will go on performing her duties. It’s not like she can leave her job just like that … On the other hand, she will of course be participating in the Assembly’s debates whenever there are special issues at stake for the country.

It is here, then, in the Supreme People’s Assembly just off to our right, that the newly elected Mrs. Jo Gil Nyo will be dealing with the challenges of the country along with her newly elected colleagues over the next five years … If, that is, the Public Roads Administration can spare her from time to time.

Continuing our tour of the city, we head straight ahead along **Sungni Street**, a main artery of central Pyongyang that runs parallel to the lazy course of the Taedong River a block away. Keep your cameras ready, because Sungni is about to cross the symbolic heart of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, **Kim Il Sung Square**, modelled after its Soviet and Chinese big brothers. According to North Korea’s own guidebooks, all of the country’s main roads begin here, in front of the oblong pavilion at one end, decorated with portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and flanked by low stone bleachers. From this platform, the Kim currently in office receives the people’s adoring tribute during the gigantic and meticulously staged mass parades for which the country quite rightly has become both famous and infamous.

Dear Mr. Win,

*The* first and decisive investigation into the limits of the North Korean state’s tolerance takes place on National Day itself, 9 September 2008, a few years before you entered my life.

The scene is the grand parade celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of the DPRK, and all of Pyongyang has once again been mobilised to display its unflinching loyalty.

As part of the peculiar friendship association I’m travelling with for the occasion, the Ministry has invited me to attend this gigantic demonstration of national unity and purity on Kim Il Sung Square. Here, hundreds of thousands of festively dressed citizens will soon form a human mosaic of colourful propaganda messages, specially made to be viewed at an angle from the leadership’s elevated tribune above. These masses will form a backdrop to endless ranks of stiffly goose-stepping soldiers and convoys of cannons and rockets. The mood is hectic and expectant, and the crowds are packed and sweaty like commuters on a train at rush hour. Security measures around the whole inner city are stricter than airport security checks on steroids. We foreigners have received thorough admonitions about making sure we hold on to the entry IDs our Korean facilitators have handed out. If we lose them, we lose all hope of getting through the eye of the needle to the standing tribune for VIP guests flanking the leadership tribune itself. We’ve also been asked to dress up as nicely as we can.

Entering the square itself, we pass several metal detector checkpoints, first a series of small, beeping, hand-held models briskly rubbed up and down our already sweaty bodies by enlisted soldiers, then the usual portals we’re familiar with from airports all over the world. It is rumoured that the beloved leader Kim Jong Il himself will be here to bless the masses and receive their unanimous adulation on this great day. The possibility of smuggling in anything at all that could conceivably look like an assassination weapon must therefore be utterly eliminated. The disco ball I carry under my arm is still sparkling like crazy on this fine day and casting little dancing specks of reflected sunlight in a 360-degree radius, both on me and the uniforms and faces of the officers guarding this final security checkpoint before we’re allowed in. All the ball lacks to make it resemble a poorly camouflaged, old-fashioned hand bomb, is a fuse, or perhaps it looks more like a gay landmine.

Now that the gravity and solemnity of the occasion really hits us with full force, I am ready, at best, to part with my disco ball at the checkpoint, but also, if worst comes to worst, to get kicked off the square. Apparently, our designated spots are only a few metres away from the place where Kim Jong Il is going to stand. I try to look friendly and relaxed while one of the stone-faced officers points to the foreign body I’m carrying and asks one of our guides a question in Korean. Our guide dutifully translates: “He wants to know what that thing is, and why you’ve brought it.” I swallow and take a deep breath. In the language of movies, this is what we call *suspense* – a frozen moment that could lead to just about anything.

I clear my throat. “Well, this is a, ehm, so-called disco ball. Where I come from, we use them as decoration when people get together to dance, have fun and celebrate great occasions like the one we’re celebrating today. As you can see, it spreads the sun’s rays in a beautiful way, so that as many people as possible can feel and enjoy its warmth. The thing is, in my part of the world, a lot of people are under the delusion that joy and warmth are prohibited in the DPRK, because of the many misunderstandings circulating about your country, as you may have heard. Yeah, I know, it’s ridiculous, right? That’s why I brought the mirror ball and this camera right here – check it if you want, no problem – to take some pictures that show how the DPRK is actually much more open and hospitable than most people think, even on a day as important as this one is for your country. In this way, the mirror ball could become a symbol of peace and understanding between different nations, if it helps people in my part of the world shape a more correct opinion of your country and its proud culture.”

Two minutes later I’m standing in my designated VIP spot, dressed in my designer outfit with the mirror ball safe and sound under my arm, less than twenty metres away from the place where Kim Jong Il probably will be appearing shortly. Another uniformed officer standing guard on the tribune itself gives me the thumbs-up sign and wants his picture taken with me and the ball.

I thought you might appreciate the story, since I don’t think I’ve ever told you the full version. I also think you’ll nod in recognition at this first dress rehearsal for my way of communicating and negotiating with the North Koreans, which I’ve had plenty of opportunities to refine since then, with you as my slightly nervous assistant: presenting an unknown content in a familiar form.

Kim Il Sung Square was – naturally – one of the first public works to be completed during reconstruction after the Korean war, and was suitably inaugurated with a proper military parade as early as 1954, the year after the ceasefire was signed. Crossing the football stadium-sized square on foot, you’ll notice a mesh of tens of thousands of tiny white circles painted right on the flagstones, each with its own number next to it. These come in handy when a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, soldiers and civilians alike, is supposed to act as “a single great heart and mind” composed of smaller sections lined up with millimetre precision.

Watch out so you don’t turn your head too fast and sprain your neck now that we’re just zipping by: At the opposite end of the elevated platform, Kim Jong Il Square opens out towards the Taedong River and the **Juche Tower** (self-portrait with disco ball: no problem), mirrored in the water from the other riverbank and facing the leaders’ platform less than a kilometre away. Along with the Arch of Triumph, the tower was the other big “surprise” Kim Il Sung received on his seventieth birthday. It was a gift from his increasingly favoured son and heir, Kim Jong Il, who had figured out years earlier that his father liked to be reminded (and remind others) of his own great achievements – half-invented though they may be – like having liberated the country and invented a worldwide ideology.

The 25,550 stone blocks forming the tower equal the number of days in the Great Leader’s life. According to the North Koreans, the 170-metre tall Juche Tower is the world’s tallest granite structure. It is crowned with a 20-metre high flame sculpted in semi-transparent red glass and metal, and illuminated from within. This beacon of Socialism with a Korean Face has shone nonstop since its inauguration. Perhaps the light from the red torch reached the full height of its symbolic effect during the years of the Arduous March, when the energy crisis was at its worst. Even today, surrounded by a more reliably illuminated capital, the Juche Tower maintains a look that is both solemn and slightly ominous, like a mutation of the Washington monument and Tolkien’s Barad-dûr, with Sauron’s flaming eye staring straight into the soul of the weak of faith.

A lift on the inside goes all the way up to a balcony right under the base of the torch, affording a 360-degree panoramic view and photographic radius over the city and beyond. Inside the base at the opposite end of the tower, there are embedded plaques reportedly sent from “Juche study groups” all over the world, most of them from the 1970s, when the international prospects of the Juche ideology were looking a bit brighter than they are today. Amongst contributions from Juche superpowers like Benin, Slovakia and Finland, we also find the “Group for the study of comrade Kim Il Sung’s Juche Thought in Bergen, Norway, May 26 1976”, which has been given pride of place near the entry door. In front of the foot of the tower, on the side facing Kim Il Sung Square, a group of bronze sculptures stand tall, with a worker, a farmer and an intellectual lifting their favourite tools above their heads – the hammer, the sickle and the paintbrush – to form the party symbol. Like the party symbol (and so much else in North Korea) the statue is inspired – to the very highest degree – by Soviet models. In this case, it is Vera Mukhina’s well known *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*,from the height of the Stalin era, that has been given the honour of plagiarism with a Korean face.

If the bus hasn’t reached the corner of the next block already, we can turn around and take another quick look at the opposite end of Kim Il Sung Square. Now we’re just in time to catch a glimpse of the mighty building with the reversely arched gable roof in the East Asian style, towering right behind the parade pavilion and looking, at a distance, like an extension of it. **The Grand People’s Study House** reminds us that we are much further east, after all, than old East Berlin. Despite the Forbidden City-like façade, the Grand People’s Study House is just that, a gigantic combination of national library, a venue for evening classes and further education, and a reading hall for ordinary students. (Self-portrait with disco ball: no problem whatsoever.)

Now that our bus is heading south on Sungni again, for the past fifteen minutes we’ve been moving through a geographic rectangle split in two roughly equal parts by the Taedong River. The short sides of the rectangle are composed, respectively, of two straight axes between Kim Il Sung Square and the Juche Tower, and the Mansudae Grand Monument and the **Monument to the Foundation of the Worker’s Party**, which can be seen in the distance on the other side of the river if you stand with your back to the two Kim statues. This big old bundle of charm – which was inaugurated to mark the party’s 50th anniversary and is therefore, of course, 50 metres tall – is, like the statue at the foot of the Juche Tower a few blocks away, a variation of the party symbol’s hammer, sickle and paintbrush in three-dimensional form. Three clenched concrete fists lift these symbolic tools towards the sky and are held together by a circular concrete belt (a halo, perhaps?) bearing the motto: “Long live the Worker’s Party of Korea, organiser and guide to the Korean people’s triumph!” (Self-portrait with disco ball: sure, and I added an electric guitar the year after.) Seen from the inside of this “circus ring”, the belt is decorated with bronze reliefs celebrating the different phases of the “glorious road the Worker’s Party of Korea has travelled”, and also …

What, you’re tired already?! We’ve barely seen a fifth of it yet!

Sure, your first and possibly only visit to North Korea can easily end up feeling like a triathlon of monuments, statues, memorials, museums, prestige constructions, mausoleums and (a hundred and) fifty shades of Kim. For years and years, the regime has been chiselling away, digging into, pruning, sculpting, fortifying and leaving its mark for the foreseeable future on the country’s physical surface, like a deranged plastic surgeon attempting to recreate his loved one in his own image. *I am the state – which means you are too*. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that those who only visit Pyongyang and North Korea once barely have the time or the opportunity to debunk the oft-imported cliché that the whole city and the country are just one big, elaborate theatre set.

Another common Western characterisation of the city, “show window”, also carries a suggestion of something artificial and staged. (Where do North Koreans *really* buy their trolls?) A contributing factor to this sense of a staged production is the absence of the chaotic variety of impressions most of us are used to from home: the cacophony of big city noises, neon commercials, street garbage, sidewalk cafés, variations in skin colour and clothes style. Contrasts. Conflicts. The human condition.

With that kind of mental baggage as a yardstick, it’s no wonder Pyongyang and the rest of North Korea come across as disturbingly well-ordered and homogeneous. To be sure, real life in North Korea *is* both controlled and hierarchical, but it is far from artificial. It is made of flesh and blood, concrete and steel. It may seem like an unnecessary truism, but Pyongyang and its inhabitants are still there after we turn off the lights in our hotel room.

Speaking of which, we’re approaching our hotel now and will soon be able to check in our jet-lagged, aching bones. For practical purposes, for example that it’s easier to keep tabs on us that way, most Western tourists in Pyongyang who haven’t explicitly asked for it well in advance will receive accommodation in a handful of approved hotels. Usually it will be the **Yanggakdo International Hotel,** the biggest in the country with its 1000 rooms rising up in splendid isolation over the homonymous island in the Taedong River. Geographically, the Yanggakdo Hotel is located in the middle of the city, where the river veers through the southwestern part of central Pyongyang, but only one bridge connects the island to the mainland. For this reason, it is impractical and tiring to get to the city centre and back again in anything other than a safe tourist bus with the rest of your group. Nor does Yanggak Island have any residential areas, which basically makes it a well-planned tourist reserve, playfully known to North Korean connoisseurs as *Alcatraz –*a nickname that will gain an even darker ring during tragic events a few years later. Luckily, however, nobody knows about that yet. Despite its centrally remote location, the hotel has several good cafés and restaurants, particularly the rotating one at the top of the building where you’ll be able to take your first, tentative steps into the country’s perhaps surprisingly abundant *cuisine*.

**FOOD AND DRINKS**

You have to experience hunger before you can know when hour stomach is full. – KIM JONG IL

A common characteristic of the hotel dining halls where you’ll be eating most of your meals is that few, if any, of the waitresses (they’re always ladies) speak a word of any foreign language, despite being very service-minded and friendly. Nor can you really rely on the English-language menus, with their disturbing wording, such as “raw sliced crap” and “strange flavour chicken”. So turn it into an adventure instead! North Korea is a clean country with a climate not unlike that of Scandinavia, so the risk that you’ll contract anything more serious than a bout of ordinary traveller’s tummy is actually quite low.

This language barrier isn’t as absurd as it can seem at first, by the way. Knowledge of languages equals flow of information, and qualifications of that kind are reserved for trusted associates who deal with foreigners in more controlled settings. The tourist guides and minders assigned to foreign guests always work in pairs, naturally, to keep an eye not only on the group, but each other as well.

If you get your Korean guides to join you for a bit of partying out on the town – and you should definitely give it a try – you may notice that North Korean bars and restaurants often have a slightly secluded, closed-in feel to them. They’re the complete opposite of Nordic airiness and light. Maybe it’s because so much of life in the country is about people looking over your shoulder. Most North Koreans don’t enjoy being on display in their leisure time. Many restaurants have booth-like cubicles between the tables, where the most desirable and prestigious seating arrangement is to have your own little dining room, which gives you some privacy while also making it clear that you’re an important and wealthy person. Despite having a lot in common with both the Chinese (noodles and dumplings) and the Japanese (maki and tempura) cuisines, Korean food has an entirely distinct identity in a regional context. Key ingredients are chili and garlic, which are used in almost everything.

One striking aspect are the many side dishes. Sometimes it feels like the whole meal consists of nothing but trimmings. We’ll spare you a long and largely meaningless list of dishes with exotic-sounding names, which you probably won’t have the time or the opportunity to try during your hectic stay. Instead, inspired by the leadership’s well known on-the-spot guidance, we’ve made a small selection of key (and not least *authentic*) recipes, which will give you a little taste of the “most secretive country in the world” and perhaps also allow you to impress your family and friends.[[16]](#footnote-16)

RECIPE:

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

*(Pyongyang Raengmyon)*

As far as I can tell, Mr. Win generally has as little interest in food as he has in art and culture. His everyday diet could have belonged to a Western heavy metal rocker in the Seventies. It consists of a constant stream of local Kumgangsan cigarettes, local Taedonggang beer, shots of the Korean national drink, *soju*, and dirty jokes. He seems quite simply to find food boring – yet another area in which he stands out, in a culture that attaches a lot of importance to food, both as a culinary experience and as a mark of national identity. One of a few exceptions to the rule is the capital’s signature dish, which Mr. Win devours with great relish. To quote the DPRK Cooks Association:

“Pyongyang Raengmyon is a one of a kind cold noodle dish made with aromatic buckwheat flour. It is famous for its chewy yet tender noodles, unique and flavorful broth, and garnishes, which come served in a special metal bowl. This is a dish suited for any time of day, but is especially good for treating hangover.”

So maybe it isn’t *only* a question of taste that makes Mr. Win order Pyongyang noodles so often. The dish also has devotees higher up in the system, where it was served as North Korea’s contribution to the dinner menu during the summit between South Korea’s president Moon Jae In and Kim Jong Un in April 2018.

**INGREDIENTS**

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

(1 portion)

1 litre water

100g beef

100g pork

50g chicken

1 tbsp. salt

1 ½ tbsp. soy sauce

1 tbsp. sugar

1 tbsp. chopped spring onion

1 tbsp. clear vinegar

50g cabbage kimchi

50g radish kimchi

60g cucumber

1 tsp. ground red chili pepper (gochugaru)

2 cloves garlic

1 tsp. ground black pepper

40g asian pear

1 tsp. baking soda

400g buckwheat flour

100g hard-boiled eggs

**PREPARATION**

**COLD PYONGYANG NOODLES**

1. In a stock pot, bring beef, pork, and chicken to a boil until the meat is very tender, then remove meat. Season with broth with salt, soy sauce, green onion, and ground black pepper then put aside to chill.
2. Thinly slice beef and pork. Tear chicken into bite sized pieces and soak in a bit of broth to keep moist. Chop the cabbage and radish kimchi into roughly the same size pieces as the meat, cut the cucumbers lengthwise then cut diagonally into thin slices, mix these ingredients together with salt, vinegar, ground red chili pepper, chopped green onion, minced garlic, and sugar. In a separate bowl, julienne the asian pear.
3. For the noodles, mix together baking soda with hot water (70ºC) then add buckwheat flour to make a dough.[[17]](#footnote-17) Put the dough through a noodle press directly into boiling hot water, stirring gently to prevent noodles from sticking together. When the noodles float to the top, drain into a colander and rinse 2-3 times under cold water. Strain well.
4. To serve, dip the noodles into the chilled broth, then place in bowl. Top with kimchi and cucumber mixture, meat, pear, and half a hardboiled egg. Pour in the broth. Serve with vinegar and soy sauce.

1. 일심단결 is one of the regime’s favourite propaganda slogans: “Single-hearted unity”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All of the above characterisations of North Korea in general and yours truly in particular are taken from the so-called think tank Civita’s coverage of my art projects in collaboration with the North Korean authorities since 2012. With one exception, the tweet about the treasonous trio Quisling/Traavik/Anderson, credited to the twitter user @rabiatus.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The party organ *Rodong Sinmun* (The Worker’s Newspaper), 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Korea Today,* 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Panorama of Korea, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Forget it, a good Norwegian will never disclose the location of our real troll shops to a foreigner. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Panorama of Korea, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A word of advice based on personal experience: The letters P and O are adjacent on most keyboards. When communicating with North Korea, make sure to check that you’ve written DPRK and not DORK. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Understanding Korea 1: Nature,* Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang Juche 105 (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *European Council Regulation No. 329/200 of 27 March 2007 concerning restrictive measure against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,* article 4: “It shall be prohibited […] to sell, supply, transfer or export, directly or indirectly, luxury goods to North Korea.” (This can and should, however, raise the question of whether disco is to be defined as luxury product or nescessity.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Editorials in *Rodong Sinmun,* 2009 and 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example http://traavik.info/works/discocracy [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. English names of places and objects of interest will be used where appropriate, since it is the language most Western tourists will be using to communicate with the North Koreans. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *ri* = old Korean unit of measurement corresponding to roughly 400 metres [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Museum guides in North Korea are always women. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. All recipes are taken from the *Korean Culinary Book #1: Best Recipes of Pyongyang,* Cooks Association of the DPRK 1998. Possible questions, complaints, feedback and compensation claims can be addressed to the publisher, DPRK’s Cooks Association, by phone: (+859) 2 381 86 89, or fax: (+859) 2 281 47 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. If you want, you can cheat a little and buy ready-made buckwheat noodles – also known as soba noodles – in a well-assorted Asian grocery store or a health food shop. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)