Being in North Korea

Andray Abrahamian
Praise for Andray Abrahamian’s

Being in North Korea

“By far the most informative book I’ve read on life in North Korea. Andray Abrahamian writes very entertainingly and knows what he’s talking about. This is a rich and surprisingly revealing portrait of a super-secretive society.”

— Michael Palin

“Quite simply, a must-read for anybody going to North Korea. For everybody else, it is a literary excursion of the best kind — humane, funny in ways you will never expect, grim when it should be, and rich beyond belief with hard-won expertise.”

— Evan Osnos, Staff Writer, The New Yorker

“Each page of Being in North Korea is a fresh revelation. Andray Abrahamian has spent more time in North Korea than anybody I know and he’s such a knowledgeable and amusing guide that you’ll feel like you’ve had the privilege of an exclusive tour by the time you finish reading his book.”

— Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times

“Few North Korea watchers have the breadth and depth of experiences like Andray Abrahamian. Ranging from running a nonprofit training North Koreans on entrepreneurship to undertaking academic studies as a PhD-trained scholar, the author’s work highlights his valuable perceptions about North Korea’s society and markets. Being in North Korea captures Abrahamian’s experiences in a way that informs and entertains.”

— John S. Park, Harvard University

“What is it like over there? This simple but at the same time immensely difficult question is what Abrahamian seeks to answer. Having worked in North Korea and speaking the language, he is the right person for such an endeavor. He identifies himself as an “engager,” but he is far from being apologetic. Based on years of hands-on experience working with an NGO that offers capacity building to North Koreans, he paints a remarkably colorful, detailed, and multifaceted image of what Westerners, in his words, often experience as a ‘no’ society.”

— Rüdiger Frank, Professor, University of Vienna
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In 2016, I helped you start a tuberculosis project in North Korea. You’d been traveling the world, showing how the traditional Asian medical technique of moxibustion can boost the immune systems of patients with tuberculosis. It was one of the passions of your final years, helping forgotten people with this forgotten disease.

Your gentle, smiling face, smothered in a beard and crowning six-feet-five-inches worth of limbs, was enough to put the North Koreans at ease right away. You immediately started evangelizing about your treatment method, winning hearts and minds. I’d suggested I’d play the bad cop that trip, you the good cop. But you weren’t playing, you were just nice.

When we were visiting a TB facility and were told we couldn’t visit the people in the ward up the hill because they were taking naps—even though we could clearly see them standing outside their rooms—your charm and composure helped. You replied, “Oh no, it’s fine, I can see them!” and just start walking up. We laughed as a staff member ran past us to shoo them into their rooms, to “nap.” It was too late, of course, the patients refused to go in. They’d seen you, too, and wanted to talk to this lanky Englishman who seemed to be there to help.

You’ll be missed. Every time I throw a frisbee, every time I tut at the inferiority of simplified *hanzi*, every time I see how much Nana has grown. But you’ll also be missed by the North Koreans you helped, and missed when the country decides it’s ready for more cooperation, more openness, more joy, but you won’t be there.

Songdo, South Korea
July 2020
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There are of course, others. In particular, many North Koreans who explained much to me and who are resilient and good and will hopefully get the chance to make their country a better place someday. I hope one day to be able to thank them by name.

I accept no responsibility for any errors in this book and instead blame all these people.†

Andray Abrahamian
Seoul, South Korea
June 2020

* Sorry for this crap joke.
† And this one.
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A Note about Accuracy

Nearly all names and other identifying descriptors of North Koreans have been changed. In some cases, the names of foreign interlocutors have, too. Locations, dates, and contexts for many conversations or interactions have been altered. However, despite being anonymized, all attributed statements and experiences are accurately described.
I step off the plane, grab my bags, and step out onto the curb, blinking in the bright. The desert heat is making the tarmac dance. Impractically large SUVs pull up, collect loved ones, and roar off. My family arrives, swoops me up, and bundles me into the car amidst hugs and questions and laughter. You must be tired, someone says.

I stare out the window. We zoom on wide boulevards past massive strip malls and obdurate golf courses, their deep greens defying the desert valley landscape. Among the Cadillacs, Mercedes, and SUVs zips the occasional golf cart, ferrying plump retirees to pharmacies, clubhouses, or restaurants where the menu invariably includes something called “surf and turf.”

I am, of course. Tired. I’ve just flown straight from Pyongyang to Palm Springs, with layovers in Beijing and San Francisco, a twenty-hour trip. In my sister’s neighborhood in San Francisco, there are plenty of eccentrics — everyone is free to wear feathers, bow ties, beards, sequins, sparkles, leather, makeup, moustaches . . . whatever they like. Though most wear Old Navy, to be honest.

Yesterday I got out of bed in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, more commonly called North Korea. As it is on every weekday in Pyongyang, a city-wide public address system spirited us awake at six o’clock in the morning, spectral, operatic music wafting as if carried by the dawn itself through the mist and coal dust. We got in a van with our minders, who were responsible for our behavior until the moment we passed immigration. We passed men wearing a mix of Mao suits and Western suits, their choices far more limited, their lives far more proscribed than they would be if they had been going to work in California. As they streamed out of subways and buses, heading to gray or pastel office buildings, we drove past monumental
structures and shrines to ideologies and leaders, sparkling in the morning light.

But tonight, I’ll sleep in California. And as America zooms past, I find myself shaking my head: how can these two places exist on the same planet? Sun-baked California, which spins dreams for so much of the world, and North Korea, which occupies the dark corners of our imagination? What do people in Palm Springs and Pyongyang know of each other?

“Wow, that Kim Jong Un is pretty crazy,” someone will tell me later that week, knowingly, over a surf and turf sandwich. Also, “Do they want to attack us? Will they really nuke Los Angeles?” And of course: “Whoa. What’s it like over there?”

That, of course, is the hardest question of all. What is it like? And who am I to try to tell you? What gives me the right?

Well, I helped set up and run an organization that trains North Koreans in economic policy and entrepreneurship. In North Korea I’ve run sports tournaments and assisted an NGO start-up focused on tuberculosis prevention. I speak Korean, sometimes with a Pyongyang accent. I have a piece of paper that says I have a PhD in international relations and I’ve read or written something about North Korea nearly every day for the past fifteen years. I’ve spoken with as wide a range of North Koreans as any Westerner I know.

With this book, I’ll join a long and dubious heritage of Westerners who have traveled to the “hermit kingdom” and taken it upon themselves to interpret the place to a Western audience. It’s a difficult challenge. I can’t fully extirpate my “Westernness” or all the traditions of the United States, United Kingdom, and Armenia that have informed my worldview. I can’t avoid the power that comes with describing a subject, regardless of what that subject wants. And I’ll be trying to describe a place that is extremely difficult to access. It is, after all, the most closed, mysterious, confounding, blah blah blah ... you’ve heard that all before. At the end of this book, let’s check in with those other explainers of Korea and see how I fit into that heritage.

But first, come fly with me.
Getting to Pyongyang usually requires a flight on Air Koryo, named for the dynasty that ruled Korea from 918 to 1392. The tails of their Russian-manufactured Tupolev 204s carry a stylized image of a crane, a Korean symbol of longevity and, well, flight, one supposes.

Is a passenger’s longevity risked by flying Air Koryo, which Skytrax long ranked as the worst airline in the world? I’ve not heard of any significant harm caused by the airline, though two friends of mine have had the pleasure of an emergency landing as the cabin filled with smoke.

I say “no harm” but that doesn’t include the displeasure of being forced to listen to a concert or movie with the sound piped throughout the cabin. (They don’t provide earphones.) It also doesn’t include the mild unease one might feel after eating a surprisingly gray in-flight burger. It also doesn’t include the mind-numbing wait to check in and collect bags because every North Korean returning home seems to be bringing a flat-screen TV or fridge with them.

Before 2012 you might have flown a 1960s-era Ilyushin or Tupolev, a delectable throwback experience. The seat headrest covers were like doilies, the kind your grandmother might have had on her sofa. There were cloth curtains over the windows. The luggage rack was open, like that on a bus or a train. The planes were rickety, however.

Once I saw the plastic frame from the central air vent peel off and hang down into the aisle. The flight attendant wasn’t tall enough to fix it and it took a foreign passenger’s efforts to wedge it back in place. The stewardess looked mortified. North Koreans often take great pains to make sure everything appears perfect in front of foreign guests. This was embarrassing.
They looked less embarrassed and more angry one time when I snapped pictures of the staff stacking luggage on seats in the rear of the plane. “This is fine,” they told me. “This is allowed under international regulations,” answering a question I hadn’t asked. “Delete your photos.” Flight attendants will also instruct you not to take their picture or any picture on the plane. This ends up being a discussion on every single flight.

It’s a good introduction to the idea that North Korea is a “no” society. Unless something is explicitly permitted, it’s best to act as if it’s forbidden, just to be on the safe side. Also, unlike many other places, when things are forbidden, you are not entitled to an explanation. That’s just how it is.

I can speak Korean quite well, so I’d try to chat with the staff when not being reprimanded for taking pictures. One particular flight attendant, Ms. Nam, seemed particularly taken by me. Over the course of several flights, we’d have a chat if there weren’t many passengers. She had a lovely smile, big bright eyes, and wore too much makeup, as all North Korean flight attendants seem to.

She had a younger brother who was studying tourism management at college. She wanted to get married in two years. Most conversations we had, no matter the topic, would result in her delivering an official explanation.

“That looks like a sports team back there,” I noted once. “Do they play volleyball? Soccer?”

“Well, we get lots of sports teams going abroad for competitions because under the leadership of Kim Jong Un athletic fervor has reached new highs,” she replied. “The party has instructed us to build a sporting powerhouse. The whole society is striving to achieve this goal.”

Her slogan-driven explanations were tiring. We moved on to English language tips that would be helpful to her. Using “sir” and “madam” or “miss” is always nice, I taught her. Useful tools in her trade.

A less-outgoing flight attendant had somehow picked up a nice language quirk, which I left uncorrected: instead of asking “What do you need?” or “May I help you?” she’d march up to someone struggling with the overhead bin or blocking the galley and say, “What’s your problem?” In her high-pitched Pyongyang accent, it sounded mocking and confrontational. “Me?” I nearly replied the first time I heard it, “what’s your problem?”

I realized she didn’t mean it to sound that way and from that moment always tried to listen out for it and chuckle. I saw her on flights for years after that, using that adorable, cruel phrase long after the more pleasant Ms. Nam had disappeared. I guess Ms. Nam got married. Or perhaps our schedules just stopped lining up.
When you fly across the Amrok River that separates Korea from China, you’ll hear a voice announce that fact and that by making that crossing, “we are all reminded of the glorious exploits of Great Leader Kim Il Sung,” who lived in exile for twenty years before returning to Korea in 1945. Another good aide-mémoire of where you’re going. Then you cruise southward along the coastal plain of North Pyongan Province and touch down at Sunan International Airport.

The immigration forms for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea are unexceptional, except for one question asking for your race — they basically care if you’re ethnically Korean or not — and another asking if you’ve brought “exciters” or any other drugs with you. Once you pass passport control, you grab your luggage and join a queue to get your bags x-rayed for contraband or sensitive equipment.

My colleagues and I once had a printer confiscated — or rather, kept at the airport until our flight out. A printer, after all, is a sensitive piece of equipment, able to reproduce and potentially disseminate all kinds of ideas. If you have a lot of camera equipment or other electronics you might have to explain why.

The authorities also log any printed material you are carrying and, if they aren’t too busy, might flip through your devices. Over nine years I’ve messed up at this stage twice. The first time, I’d recently been to an exhibition in Seoul and taken a photo of the front page of a 1994 newspaper that read “Kim Il Sung Dead.” As the border guard swiped onto that image, my stomach knotted. I immediately leaned in toward him and started apologizing in my heaviest Pyongyang accent. I recently visited the “village down there,” I said, using a North Korean euphemism for South Korea. This was at a museum and I didn’t mean to bring it and I know he must be so busy and I don’t want to waste his precious time and I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

“Just delete it,” he said. Relief coursed through me like an exciter rushing through my veins.

The second time was shortly after I’d been to a conference on DPRK–Southeast Asia relations. I’d forgotten I had the conference summary still in my bag. The agent pulled it out and somehow, almost impossibly, randomly flipped to a page and pointed at a sentence that discussed how the Myanmar government had helped try to remove from the country’s shops “DVDs of The Interview, an ostensible comedy film about the assassination of Kim Jong Un.” Honestly, it was absurd, the chances of her landing on perhaps the most incendiary sentence in the whole booklet. Her fingers slowly traced the word as she mouthed the English: “ass-ass-in-ay-shun.” My stomach knotted again. This time I played dumb. “I’m not entirely sure what’s in there,” I
fibbed. (I’d in fact written that bit.) “I went to some presentations at a university and they were giving those out. You can throw it away, I don’t care.”

That seemed to work. They waved me on. But I was nervous for a few hours after that, wondering if my guide would get a call about it.

The most important thing they check is your phone. They take it from you and jot down the model and serial number alongside your name. This is so that if it turns up in the hands of someone who isn’t supposed to have it, it can be linked to you, and in turn linked to your guides or partners. They could then face consequences, especially if the device has been used to try to contact the outside world, as difficult as that might be.

As a foreigner, every visit you make to the DPRK has to be at the invitation of some entity. And that entity and in particular the people assigned to look after you are responsible for your behavior. They will send two guides/partners/minders to meet you. The image of a “minder” might suggest someone relentlessly enforcing the rules and stopping you from doing as you like. In fact, the system means that when you visit, your behavior has consequences for your partners. I have been with someone who took pictures of a street that happened to include a couple of soldiers. This was reported and later in the evening the guides had to sit down with him and delete some photos. They didn’t want to do this, but it had been reported and they were instructed to take care of it. Indeed, much of the time, if you have a good relationship with your partners, you find yourselves working to find solutions to problems that the system throws at you. Fundamentally you’re cooperating to accomplish tasks that aren’t against rules, but constrained by them. Your minders, while part of the system of constraints, are also gently pushing against those constraints; they are often working with you to accomplish shared goals despite being in a system stacked with barriers to success.

And the system is sensitive about pictures, about how North Korea and its people are portrayed in general. Mostly, they ask you not to take pictures of anything connected to the military, any construction sites, or anything indicative of poverty. “Only beautiful, please,” a guide might say. Should you snap a picture of a highway military checkpoint, or even just have your camera out as you pass it, delays and arguments inevitably follow.

In February 2016, a tourist traveling with Young Pioneer Tours did a handstand for a picture in front of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. Kumsusan was once the offices of Kim Il Sung. It is now a vast mausoleum, where the preserved bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il lie in state. It is akin to a holy site, the very center of a mythology the binds the state together. It is the most solemn and immaculate place you can imagine. In fact, it almost certainly exceeds whatever you’re imagining.
The tourist’s handstand photo op was noticed and reported. Shortly thereafter his Korean guide was fired. She’d grievously lost control over her guests and was duly punished. Someone has to be responsible, after all. There have to be consequences. It may not be a case of being sent “straight to the gulag,” but minor things can cause real disruption to people’s lives.

Surprisingly, they aren’t terribly strict about pictures in the airport, relative to other places. The airport itself was for several years a temporary structure, like an eighty-meter long hanger. It was freezing in the winter and too hot in the summer. And dark. A single light like a post-apocalypse harvest moon hung over the place, except of course for two lights illuminating the smiling portraits of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung at the far end. It made for a poor welcome to the country for a first-time visitor.

The building of a new terminal began, haltingly, around 2012; it had the uneven lines and misshapen concrete that defines modern North Korean construction. In 2014 Kim Jong Un even scolded those overseeing the construction, saying that they had “failed to bear in mind the party’s idea of architectural beauty that it is the life and soul and core in architecture to preserve the Juche character and national identity.”

Slightly ambiguous criticism, though he may have been right: After the cladding and interior were completed, it looked like a modern, if unremarkable, small airport terminal anywhere in the world. It is pleasant enough and Kim came around to it, it seems. He visited after it was completed in June 2015 and said it was “well-built as required by modern architectural beauty and national character.” There is a picture of him in the boarding area, next to a chocolate fondue set.

There is a darker side to the travails of the airport’s construction. Part of it is the fact that Ma Won Chun, in charge of major construction projects as the head of the Designing Department of the National Defense Commission, disappeared from public view for nearly a year after Kim’s criticism of the airport. People are punished there, and it can be capricious.

The other part is the glee with which some news agencies highlight stories of cruelty or weirdness in North Korea. The DPRK occupies a very real function for us as Western news consumers in the West: it can always be held up to remind us that we are “normal,” while they are not. This leads to Western news companies trumpeting that “Kim Jong Un EXECUTES New Airport Architect — Because He Didn’t Like the Design,” or the slightly less breathy, “Kim Jong-un Shows Off Airport Designed by Architect He Likely Had Executed.”

Ma Won Chun showed up again in October of that year. He was almost certainly castigated for whatever was displeasing about the airport, as well
as perhaps for other problems associated with its construction. The cycle of punishment, reform, and redemption through loyalty to the state is not an uncommon one in the DPRK.

And architecture and construction are a serious business in today’s North Korea. Indeed, “Construction” is the name of a subway station and of a popular low-grade brand of cigarettes. As you drive into Pyongyang from the suburb of Sunan, you can’t help but notice that a great deal of design and planning have gone into creating the city.

There are no checkpoints on the way into Pyongyang from Sunan Airport, as there are on many roads. Instead, you’ll see tidy three- or four-story apartment buildings. They are concrete and tired, but not grim. They have often been cheered up with pastel paint jobs and plastic made-in-China flowers on their balconies. You may catch someone hand-sweeping the road if you arrive in the morning. Not the sidewalk — the road.

You’ll pass paddy fields and train lines; this is the breadbasket of Korea after all, such as it is. North Korea is some 70 percent mountains — particularly unsuited to supporting a population of twenty-four million people. Then, as you approach Red Star Subway Station, the apartment buildings get taller.

Shortly thereafter epic, monumental Pyongyang emerges. First the April 25 Performance Hall on your right and the forty-meter-tall Immortality Tower boldly proclaiming that “Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il will live with us forever!” Behind this rises the gleaming towers of Ryomyong Street, with 70- and 82-story apartment buildings, bright green and intriguingly shaped, with distinctive bulges and flourishes. Then through the Arch of Triumph, bigger than the one in Paris (of course). On your right, the winged-horse Chollima monument. To the left some green space, Moranbong Park.

Ahead you glimpse the Taedong River, while the driver follows the law and slows down as he drives past gigantic twenty-meter-high bronze statues of the leaders at Mansudae. There they stand, forever surveying their domain, smiling benevolently. If you follow their sight line many kilometers across the river, you’ll see three huge stone fists, gripping a hammer, sickle, and brush, celebrating the founding of the Korean Worker’s Party. Just past the leaders is another new neighborhood of towers, blue this time, then after a couple minutes you see Kim Il Sung Square, a place you instantly recognize from countless news broadcasts of soldiers goose-stepping in a perfection of purpose.

The first time you drive through all this it is hard to believe you’re there in this place that captures so much attention relative to its size. This abstraction, this weird cult, this nuclear state, this garrison society is real! There
are actual people moving about, living their lives. People sometimes remark how humorless the Koreans on the street look, like “robots.” I’ve noticed this impression tends to form when the weather is bad or when people see commuters. Turns out, like any large city, people on their way to work look cranky. And people in winter are cold.

I’ve seen people influenced the other way, also, if they arrive on a weekend, when people are relatively relaxed and enjoying leisure time, shopping, playing sports, enjoying the rivers. “They look so happy and content!” Turns out, like anywhere, people fishing and playing volleyball with their friends look pretty happy. And when it’s sunny, people smile more. Visitors place undue analytical value on the little they get to see, forming broad conclusions on limited experience.

I find Pyongyang a beautiful city, however. It has been planned, of course, to be a showcase city. It was built from scratch after the Korean War. There is a lot of green space and the city is sliced open by two rivers. The Taedong is the bigger of the two, wide enough to have islands in it, on which there are stadia, funfairs, and a dolphinarium. (Of course there is a dolphinarium. Of course.) The riversides have a number of sports facilities. These have all been built under Kim Jong Un, reflecting his goal of creating the “sporting powerhouse” and the “civilized socialist country” about which Ms. Nam had soliloquized.

Pyongyang has Kim Il Sung Square, of course, which sits across the river from the striking granite Juche Tower. The top of the tower has a twenty-meter-high plastic torch, lit up at night and shining all the brighter for the lack of illumination around it. There are a number of less dramatic buildings that are pleasing to the eye. The apartments behind the Party Foundation Monument are designed to look like a red, fluttering flag, for example.

Then, of course, there is the Ryugyong Hotel. Construction began on this 105-story monster in the late 1980s. The collapse of the Communist Bloc and North Korea’s subsequent economic crisis meant that it sat, frozen and gray like a gigantic troll, for two decades. Visible from everywhere, it was a humiliating symbol of the country’s failures. In 2009, however, Orascom began finishing its exterior as part of their deal to create a mobile phone network. Still, it remained an embarrassment: in 2013 a British diplomat told me he once mentioned to a Korean colleague that over the weekend he had gone to a restaurant right next to the Ryugyong. The colleague feigned that he had never heard of the place. As of 2018, the hotel featured a huge LED lightshow on one side, and finally became prominent in domestic propaganda. The inside remains unfinished and probably always will be.
There are four churches. One of them, the Russian Orthodox Church set up in 2006, is used by Russian embassy staff and has a prominent gold onion dome. The other three appear to be mostly for show: some kind of congregation exists, but it isn’t clear what services are like when foreign delegations are not around. This is a far cry from the early 1940s, at which time Northern Korea had about three thousand churches and three hundred thousand Christians, and Pyongyang was called the Jerusalem of the East. Christianity was popular both before Japan took over the country in 1910 and after, as it offered gathering places away from the Japanese overlords.

When Japan was defeated in World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided into Soviet and American zones of control. As leaders, the Americans installed Syngman Rhee, the Soviets, Kim Il Sung. Neither side was interested in cooperating with the other and war broke out in June 1950. This event claimed the lives of several million Koreans, or something like 10 percent of the population. The war has framed the lives of North and South Koreans ever since.

And there is a reason, of course, why there are so few churches left and why the Koreans were able to build a city from scratch. The Americans bombed the country into oblivion between 1950 and 1953. The Koreans are fond of saying of Pyongyang that “only three buildings were left standing after the war.” Whether or not that is exactly true, it is undeniable that “following China’s entry into the war in November 1950, [US Air Force bombers] began to strike North Korean cities and villages even more harshly, designating them as main targets for destruction.”

Some 635,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Korea, more than on Japan in World War II. Napalm was used, for the first time, in Korea — thirty-three thousand tons of it — burning and choking perhaps hundreds of thousands of people to death. General MacArthur, hero of World War II and architect of the Incheon landings, also considered using nuclear weapons in the Korean theater. Nothing remained, leading to the sometimes-used North Korean slogan, “We started with nothing.”

This is true enough, and the state tirelessly keeps the memory of the atrocious bombing campaign alive. It is a central tenant of its self-image as a righteous country at war with vicious thugs; keeping the United States as an eternal enemy also helps explain away a variety of the country’s shortcomings. Fundamentally, the society is organized around having the United States as an enemy. But if the claims about the cruelty of indiscriminate bombing in the Korean War are generally true, the other central claim beggars belief.

If you visit the spectacular Fatherland Liberation War Museum, updated in 2013, you will stop and look up at a ten-meter-high full-color statue of
a young Kim Il Sung, looking remarkably like Kim Jong Un. You will then watch a video arguing one of the main pillars of the North Korean national story: that the Americans invaded the North on June 25, 1950. The North Korean worldview is one in which the Korean people are engaged in a righteous struggle, beset on all sides by an outside world that wishes to destroy them. To believe North Korean historiography, you have to concede that the most powerful military in the world spent months planning the surprise invasion of the North, launched its attack and then within hours was in full disarray, retreating in the face of Kim Il Sung’s military genius.

In contrast, the rest of the world agrees that after lobbying Stalin and Mao for months, it was the Korean People’s Army (KPA) that crossed southward that day. The South Korean army disintegrated like wet paper and the KPA roared down toward the very southern tip of the peninsula. The Americans intervened just in time to defend the port of Pusan, leading the United Nations forces that they had cobbled together.

A few months later, in September, the United States turned the tide by landing forces at Incheon, severing Northern supply lines and forcing a KPA retreat. The North Koreans took flight in disarray and UN forces pushed forward all the way to the border with China. This was a huge mistake, in retrospect, as the just-founded People’s Republic of China sent soldiers pouring into Korea in response, pushing UN forces back to the thirty-eighth parallel. This, tragically, was basically where the war began. Even more tragically, for the next two and a half years, the two sides fought mostly over this line. A staggering three to four million civilians and well over a million combatants died between 1950 and 1953. The war ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.

The Northern part of the peninsula really had become a scorched wasteland and the North Koreans are rightfully proud of the pace with which they rebuilt their shattered infrastructure and industries. They hit their targets during a three-year plan to reconstruct, and then again in a five-year plan from 1957 to 1961. This was done partly through Soviet and Chinese aid — little mentioned in the North — but also because the populace responded exceptionally well to exhortation and encouragement, something mentioned a lot in the North. There are limits to that model, you’d think. You can’t exhort and coerce people into working hard forever, can you?

It isn’t all exhortation — people largely work for wages these days, but North Korea still leans on its traditional method of mobilization from time to time, holding periodic “speed battles” in different sectors. In 2013, they had a “harvest battle,” for example. Also, factories or other workplaces are often called “battle zones” or “battlefields.” In 2016 on either side of the
Korea Worker’s Party Congress they had a 70-day and 200-day nationwide “speed battle.” Imagine, essentially, the whole country putting in overtime, either in their workplaces or outside, being mobilized for beautification or construction projects. These speed battles are exhausting to the citizens involved, which incidentally contributes to social control.

Those new neighborhoods you see on your way into town, Ryomyong and Changgon, were all built super-fast to meet political deadlines: the 100th and 105th anniversaries of Kim Il Sung’s birth, in 2012 and 2017 respectively. (Or in the North Korean calendar, Juche 100 and 105. The calendar follows . . . you get it.) Mirae Scientists street, further along the river, saw over two dozen buildings constructed in under a year from 2014 to 2015, the tallest being fifty-three stories. Indeed, the North Koreans have cycled through slogans, but two prominent ones have been “Pyongyang Speed” and “Chollima Speed,” both callbacks to slogans from the era of reconstruction in the 1950s.

Unfortunately, buildings built during these sorts of campaigns look pretty shoddy within a year or two of completion. Tiles chip, lines are uneven, and stains appear. It turns out mobilizing office workers and using poorly trained soldier-builders does not produce the best results. The buildings are made with local, low-quality concrete and rebar, not steel, even those over 70 stories. (“No. No f—ing way,” a Canadian architect I told once exclaimed as we drove past.) The electricity supply is unreliable, so people don’t want to live too high up in them. Water supply can also be an issue.

They look impressive from a distance or when lit up at night, however. This creates an interesting split. If you’re from Pyongyang, you know that they look pretty bad. If you’re from elsewhere in the country and have only seen them in magazines and on TV, they must seem pretty amazing: monuments to the “golden era of construction ushered in by Kim Jong Un,” as North Koreans describe the current period.

When leaving Pyongyang, the train is an option, for those with the time to saunter up the economic spine of Korea. Most visitors fly out. On Air Koryo, of course.

This is almost always fine. Almost. One time it wasn’t fine was when my colleague, Geoffrey, and another friend who worked for an NGO were flying back to Beijing. Twenty or thirty minutes into the flight, while the attendants were preparing the selection of dodgy burgers, noses started twitching as passengers began to perceive an acrid smell. Then smoke began to fill the cabin and the plane started dropping.

As befits a low-information society, no announcements were made, other than by the flight attendants, who were by now rushing about, telling people
to sit and declaring that there was “no problem.” My friends had been in North Korea enough to know that there was. Oxygen masks dropped as the plane began to shake from the rapid descent, and the passengers’ ears began to hurt and to pop.

Geoffrey sat there stewing; after all he’d sacrificed, setting up an NGO, leaving a lucrative consulting career, all the time and energy, North Korea was going to kill him. My other friend, trying to find zen and fight back her tears, chose to think about the last time she’d had sex: feeling positive and connected to someone, happy and relaxed. It was literally her last day in Pyongyang, having lived there four years. She couldn’t believe it.

The plane limped its way down to Shenyang, where it made an emergency landing. Passengers were put in a holding room while Air Koryo staff went off to do things, without explanation. The airline obviously hadn’t prepared for such an eventuality and it seems they couldn’t get anyone with authority on the phone to tell them what to do with the customers. After a few hours, Geoffrey took the train to Beijing, wondering if someday they’d offer compensation, an apology, or even just an explanation.

He’s still waiting.
Notes