

Four Days in North Korea

In Pyongyang, the lights go out at 9 p.m.

By [Sarah Wang](#) | Slate.com



Schoolgirls on a Pyongyang street

North Korea left no traces in my passport, not even a visa. It showed that I left China in July and returned four days later. There was no indication of where I had been, except that I passed through customs in Dandong, a city in northeastern China that borders the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In those four "lost" days, I traveled to Pyongyang and Kaesong, North Korea, with a dozen "potential investors" from China. Most of the people in the group were businessmen interested in buying factories, land, mines, and timber in the DPRK whenever the prohibitions on such purchases are removed.

With each passing day, the businessmen got more and more agitated because they couldn't use their computers or mobile phones—they weren't even allowed to bring them into the country. There is no Internet access in North Korea—the Pyongyang elite use an intranet to listen to music and watch movies. There are three TV channels, and North Koreans usually go to telephone booths when they need to make calls.

Faced with these anxious visitors, the North Korean guards were calm, determined, and patient. It took them two hours to inspect our luggage when the group entered the country and four hours to go through every picture on our cameras—and to delete the ones they deemed improper—when we left. They apparently didn't know that it is easy to switch out memory cards.



A patriotic banner in Pyongyang

From our first moments in the country, it was obvious that some North Koreans receive special treatment. The train for Pyongyang had 15 cars, but only the three "international compartments" had fans to fight the sweltering heat. Well-dressed North Koreans took up the majority of seats in the compartment. The women wore silk blouses, nice skirts, and high heels, and the men were decked out in good T-shirts, which sometimes showed off their big bellies.

They were the only fat North Koreans that I saw on the trip. The people in the streets of Pyongyang and Kaesong were often downright skinny. In Pyongyang, I had my picture taken with two elementary-school boys in Kim Il-Sung Square, and I could clearly feel their ribs when I put my hands on their backs.

For the most part, though, photographing people was strictly forbidden. Nor could we take pictures of soldiers patrolling the border with China, of trains and stations, or of the rice- and cornfields outside the train window. Four railway policemen were seated right across from us in the carriage. When one of the businessmen tried to take a photograph of our compartment, they didn't hesitate to grab his camera. Later in the trip, our tour guides intervened whenever we tried to take pictures. "Our people don't like to be photographed," they explained.

It took the train seven hours to cover the 140 miles between Sinuiju and Pyongyang. When we arrived in the capital, we were whisked to a 47-story hotel built on an island in the Taedong River. In the hotel's basement, a few North Koreans joined the Chinese gamblers at Casino Pyongyang's four card tables and 10 slot machines. Most local people are barred from the island.



Pyongyang street scene

In the next two days, we were transported from one monument to another. Through the windows of the van, I could see that every street in Pyongyang had at least two unfinished buildings. Construction had begun in the early 1990s, halted around 1995, and had never resumed. There was a curtain beside my seat, which I could hide behind when I wanted to take pictures of the streets.

The men in the streets usually wore black or dark blue uniforms that looked like Mao suits, and the women wore cheap white or gray blouses with black or dark blue skirts. The most popular shoes were made of dark blue cloth, with white shoelaces and white plastic soles. The blue color ran and stained the laces when it rained.

While the guards ate their meals or watched the children's shows that were staged for us foreigners, I twice managed to wander into the streets and was able to explore for about 10 minutes each time. Once I walked into a grocery store on the ground floor of a residential building. The store was empty except for three 10-foot-tall heaps on the ground—one of cabbage, one of tomatoes, and one of turnips. There were no price tags and no customers. A middle-aged woman in a black uniform stood behind the counter, which held small piles of peanuts and pine seeds that looked as though they had been there for a long time.



Pyongyang schoolboys

Our guides repeatedly reassured us that the people had enough food and that each Pyongyang resident receives a ration of vegetables and rice every day. They didn't mention meat or fruit. When a member of the tour group spat out the tasteless meat that was a rare treat at one of our meals, the waitress standing behind him visibly stiffened. On one occasion, I drew a banana on a piece of paper and showed it to a waitress; she had never seen one. She knew about apples, but she had never eaten one.

I brought 150 Kit-Kat bars into the country, and I always took several out of my bag when I was alone with a North Korean. They would hesitate for a few seconds, look around to make sure that no one else was watching, and then stuff the Kit-Kats into their pockets.

Despite the lack of food, North Koreans work hard. They have been fighting a "150-day battle" since April 20. The campaign is designed to increase industrial output to "fight against American sanctions," according to our tour guides.

"We Koreans have long had a hatred for the United States. Those people bombed our land and killed our people in the war, and they reactivated the use of nuclear weapons in 1994. At that time we had natural disasters, and they imposed sanctions on us. So we had the Arduous March between 1995 and 1998. We were all hungry," one guide told us. "Now we don't have natural disasters, but the Americans are imposing stricter sanctions. If we don't strengthen our national defense forces, we cannot safeguard our motherland. If we don't make military construction our priority, we cannot safeguard socialism," she said.

In every urban neighborhood and every rural village there were banners proclaiming, "Work hard for 150 days and we will have the victory!" and "Kim Jong-il is the sun of the 21st century!" Large posters showed farmers, workers, soldiers, and students united under a shining sun.

The "battle" was being waged, but Pyongyang was a quiet city. There weren't many vehicles on its wide streets, and rush hour was marked by long queues at bus stops. On three occasions I saw passengers physically pushing their bus until the engine started up again.



Cycling in the North Korean capital

The island on which our hotel stood was guarded, and we could not leave at night. There may not have been any point going out anyway: There are no streetlamps, and after sunset, the only lights came from the windows of residential buildings. Around 9 o'clock, all the lights were turned off, and the city sank into darkness.

Still, each day my desire to light out on my own grew stronger. On our second night in Pyongyang, there was a heavy rainfall, and the soldiers who guarded the bridge took shelter under their umbrellas and didn't notice whether I wore a Kim Il-Sung pin. That's how I got off the island.



Pyongyang railway station

The streets' only illumination came from the dim lights on the many bicycles that sped by. I soon lost my bearings. Then I looked up and saw the [Juche Tower](#), Pyongyang's premier tourist destination, in the distance. The red, flamelike torch at its apex and the white lights along the body of the monument were the only lights in a dark world.

When I returned to the island, I visited the revolving restaurant on the hotel's 47th floor. It offered a panoramic view of Pyongyang, but there was nothing to see except the darkness.