

FAQ's – what you should know

If you have read some of our travellers tales and testimonies you will see what an amazing experience a trip to DPRK with us is. We follow with some answers to questions you might have:

Should I travel to North Korea?

Travel broadens the mind and no more so than in North Korea. There are no restrictions for you to visit and the United Nations, European Union and other agencies see tourism as a positive way of engagement. Very few journalists are allowed into North Korea so the amazing experiences you will embrace there are rarely publicised. It is not a country that many people visit, and there is virtually no information available about it. Koryo Tours has been responsible for opening up destination such as Wonsan to tourism but perhaps the greatest impact is that which we have on the Koreans. Any contact we have with the Korean people has to be beneficial in breaking down barriers, particularly as many people outside Pyongyang have not seen let alone interacted with foreigners. On our tours amazing things happen such as tourists joining in folk celebrations with the Koreans on their day off. Tourists have experienced the most magical times including impromptu football matches with workers, playing with Korean children, being approached by Koreans who practice broken English on them. In the West we portray the Koreans as a very humourless and robotic people, however this stereotype is soon broken if you travel there, they are a very proud people and although their life is a struggle their humour and warmth is unsurpassed.

Is it Safe?

The DPRK does not appear on any lists of countries where it is dangerous to visit and is probably one of the safest countries in the world you can visit. In over fifteen years' experience and nearly 1000 tours we have never felt that our groups were in any danger. We have never had any problems with the Korean authorities, experienced any thefts or felt in any way threatened. All of Europe (apart from France) and countries such as Canada, Australia etc. have diplomatic relations with North Korea and they support tourism. We are always welcomed by the Korean people and are seen as guests in their country. Certainly, if you are willing to smile and be courteous you will receive a very positive response. It is one of the last places in the world where there are very few visitors and you can have a big impact on whom you meet. No specific vaccinations are required for visiting the DPRK but we ask you to check with your doctor for advice before you travel.

Should I travel on a group tour or an independent tour?

Group tours are on set dates that we have scheduled in advance, usually to coincide with a major holiday or event in the DPRK, see our tours page for forthcoming group tours. We offer three grades of group tour to cater for different budgets and tastes. In North Korea travelling in a group is often much more fun and relaxing than being on your own for several days with just two Korean guides and your driver, so in this case group tourism makes sense. A typical tour consist of between 8 and 18 tourists, most are made up of couples, individual travellers and perhaps one or two friends. About a quarter of our tourists are female. During the day the itinerary is often fairly packed so you are kept busy but you get a good lunch break. There is plenty of time to be on your own, if you wish, in the evenings and we also offer a single room supplement at cost price if you prefer your privacy.

Independent tours are tours where you choose the dates and have more control over the itinerary (although it still has to be arranged in advance), the downside of this is that independent tours tend to cost more as there are less people in the group. If you have a group of friends or colleagues who would like to travel with you then the more people in the group, the lower the price will be. Again we offer three grades of tour- from basic to a more luxurious trip offering a more in-depth experience.

All tours, whether group or independent, are accompanied by two Korean guides and a driver, even if the 'group' consists of just one person they will be with you at all times during the day. Due to our experience in the DPRK we are given the best guides (male and female), they are always very good company and add a great deal to your visit. It is not unusual for tourists and guides to remain in contact by letter long after the trip.

How much will the tour cost?

The tours are extremely good value for money because they are all inclusive. We employ the best guides and pack the

itineraries with exciting places to visit and things to see. We provide the best possible tour itinerary and our experience tells us that if you cut any corners you end up missing the best sites and get a second grade trip. We are aware that tours are expensive but the basic reason for this is that tourists to the DPRK are obliged to have a full service package. Only two airlines fly to Pyongyang so there is almost no competition to keep prices down. There are only 4 trains a week with very limited capacity and there is a limited choice of hotels that are available to foreigners, all expensive ones. It should be noted however that the tours we sell are all inclusive from Beijing to DPRK and back to Beijing; covered in the price are plane and train tickets, hotel accommodation, meals, guides, transport around DPRK and entrance fees to the places visited, extra money is only required for extra drinks with your meals, tips and souvenirs/general spending money. We also offer discounts to students and to groups of people booking together.

How long does it take to get a visa?

We ask you to complete application for the tours one month before the departure date, in some cases (if you live in Beijing for example) this can be reduced but one month is the optimum time. The visa can be issued in Beijing just before the tour or in your home country (if you have a DPRK Embassy there), you should let us know when you intend to leave your home country so that we can arrange the best place to have the visa issued. At no time at all do you need to send us your passport, we do not need it at any point in the applications process.

What can I do if I don't get a double entry Chinese visa for the trip (only get a single entry)?

It is possible to obtain a re-entry visa at the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang, however this is closed for weekends and holidays both DPRK and China and can also be quite expensive (EUR 60 - 160 depending on your nationality and how quickly the visa needs to be processed). This should be a last resort; please do your very best to obtain a double entry Chinese visa for the trip and inform us if you have not been able to do so.

Can I take pictures/video?

There are many restrictions on photography that have to be obeyed in DPRK, however you can take pictures of most things and everyone who visits always takes many more pictures than they think they will (extra digital memory cards and sticks are NOT available in DPRK so be sure to take plenty of those). The Koreans do not examine your film or force you to develop the films you have taken (although the customs officials at Sinuiju may ask to see your pictures). Video cameras are generally prohibited but can be taken on some occasions, again restrictions as to their use do apply. If your camera has GPS mentioned on it, let us know

What is the food like and how is the food situation in North Korea?

DPRK is a country that has suffered severe food shortages over the last decade and western NGOs have been operating in the DPRK for many years. Although the famine situation has been largely relieved it is far from a culinary land of plenty. However as a visitor and guest in the DPRK you will be well fed with 3 meals a day including meat and fish. The food in DPRK is far from fantastic but is not too bad, some meals are very good and some are just good enough. Vegetarians can be catered for although it cannot be guaranteed that utensils used to touch food will not have touched meat, or that cooking oil does not contain animal fats. If you are a vegan then we would need to discuss this with you before your trip. Fruit and chocolate is scarce in the DPRK so if you need this while you are on the tour then you should take it with you from Beijing.

The food situation for the normal people of North Korea is still in a critical state, the supply of food still barely reaches the demand so the situation is still tenuous and malnutrition is a serious problem. We have contacts in the major and minor NGOs involved in helping with the problems so if you were interested in more information or making a donation (we work with an agency helping orphans and disabled children in the country)

Can we go anywhere we want?

There are many restrictions on the movements of foreign visitors to DPRK. You basically have to be accompanied wherever you go (you can however stroll in the grounds of the hotel without your camera!) and much of the country is off limits even to NGOs and diplomats. The standard locations we take in on our tours include; Pyongyang, Nampo, Mount Myohyang area, Kaesong and surrounding area, Panmunjom/DMZ, Wonsan and surrounding area, Kumgangsan and area, Paekdusan, Samjiyon, Sinchon, Mount Kuwol and area, among other places. We can also arrange for tours to visit other less common places such as Hamhung, Mount Chilbo, Sinuiju, and Rajin-Sonbong free

trade zone. Again because of the time we spend in DPRK we are often the first to test out new itineraries and areas previously off limits such as the Kumgangsan mountains and Haeju and we try and include these where possible.

Can we talk to local people?

Contact with local people is possible but is difficult for several reasons; the main reason is the language barrier (foreign languages are not widely spoken in DPRK) and other reasons are that the people are generally very wary of foreigners and also are very shy (and careful with drawing attention to themselves). You are free to attempt a dialogue with a local but do not be surprised if they are not interested in talking to you. However it can be very rewarding when you do manage to make some human contact and your guides and Nick, Simon and Hannah will make every effort to enable it. We are in the country every month and make sure we take you to the best spots for mixing with the locals, for example the May Day games in the park or at the Kimjongilia flower show.

What happens if I need medical attention?

Pyongyang has a foreigners' hospital which is of higher quality than the other hospitals in the country, if you need any medical treatment above the order of a few aspirin or a plaster/band-aid then you would be sent here (Note that Koryo Tours cannot be held responsible for any medical costs). In dire emergencies you should check that your insurance company has a provision to have you airlifted back to Beijing where there are international hospitals available.

Will there be a parade, Mass Games, etc?

Military parades and Mass Games happen a lot less frequently than people think; less than once a year on major anniversaries. Western tourists are not allowed to attend the military parades but we do get invited to other celebratory events such as Mass Dancing on Kim Il Sung Square, Mass Games and occasional public festivities. We cannot guarantee what celebrations will take place until quite close to the dates and in some cases only on the day. We expect Mass Games to run from August to October. Mass Dancing events on Kim Il Sung square and around the city can take place in February, April, May, July, and September. Please contact us and we can update you with what activities are expected. May Day (workers' day off) is often a great time to attend festive celebrations with the people, (team games such as tug of war competitions in the park) and mid-April is the Pyongyang festival for Peace and Friendship where entertainers from around the world (mainly the socialist countries) come and perform. There is also the Pyongyang Film Festival held once every two years in September. We always manage to attend the best event that it is possible to attend on festival days.

What are the hotels like?

The hotel we use in Pyongyang for our classic and standard group tour is the deluxe class Yanggakdo Hotel. It is western 3 star (Chinese 4 star) equivalent and equipped with bars, restaurants, shops, swimming pool, bowling, casino, and other entertainment facilities (including Karaoke of course). The hotel has reliable electricity, heating, air conditioning, hot water, and now have foreign TV channels including BBC World and Japanese and Chinese TV. For our 'standard' independent tours the hotels are of a slightly lower standard with fewer facilities (no international tv or 24 hr hot water etc) but still comfortable. The 'exclusive' hotels are the best available and we use upgraded rooms to ensure a luxury experience.

The hotels we use outside of Pyongyang are less well developed and have temperamental supplies of electricity and hot water, however there are some spectacular hotels in other places in DPRK such as the traditional Korean style Minsok (Folk) Hotel in Kaesong and the Pyramidal Hyangsan Hotel near Mount Myohyang.

How many tourists go to North Korea every year?

It is estimated that less than 2000 western tourists visit the DPRK every year (we take over half of these) and although this number is rising it is still an exclusive club to be a member of. There are around 20 - 30,000 Chinese visitors a year and large numbers of Japanese Korean groups (Koreans living in Japan).

Is there an expat community in North Korea?

There are now around 140 resident foreigners in Pyongyang excluding Russians and Chinese. Most are Embassy staff, NGO workers, staff from the UN, World Food Programme, etc and assorted others including 3 English teachers at Kim

Il Sung University, a Bank Manager, and even the one remaining US defector to DPRK – Pyongyang's longest serving foreign resident and the subject of our latest documentary film 'Crossing the Line'.

Have there been any changes in recent years?

In 2002 some economic reforms took place moving the Won (DPRK currency) to a more market oriented valuing system; as a result of this people are now expected to pay for many services and in return they are paid money for working. This has meant that things like small kiosks along the streets selling items such as bread and drinks have started popping up and North Korea's first official market was completed in Pyongyang in 2003 with more opening since then. These changes may not seem like much from the outside but they are fairly radical when viewed in the context of the DPRK, however, it is difficult to know how far these reforms will be continued if at all.

Will I be spied on?

Despite claims in various newspapers it seems to us (although we don't know for sure) very unlikely indeed that the Koreans would bug the hotel rooms of western visitors. Paranoid fantasies aside, what can the average visitor possibly have to say that would be of interest to the Korean authorities? If they want to hear a foreign viewpoint on something they will ask you! Nevertheless as in all places in DPRK it is best to restrain any criticisms until having left the country.

Will the guides try to brainwash me?

The guides, like all North Koreans, have very strong beliefs which probably differ quite starkly from most tourists; however they will not try to brainwash you for perhaps the simple reason that their system of 'Juche' socialism is intended for those of Korean blood only. They are not into spreading world revolution through the mouths of their handful of western visitors. They express their beliefs and faiths very strongly and these are held universally throughout the DPRK so it is both impolite and futile to argue certain points with the Koreans. Something to remember when visiting is that they will not try to brainwash you, so don't try to 'liberate' their minds in return, it would only breed resentment and cause irritation.

What are the guides like?

We work with a small core of the best male and female guides available; they are employees of KITC (Korea International Travel Company) and range in age from early 20's to late 40's. They are all fluent English speakers (we can also provide guides who speak French, German, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and other languages) and have a lot of experience in dealing with foreigners. We can say honestly that they are good people, great fun and as normal as you can get.... not the robotic 'minders' you may be expecting. Many of our tourists strike up a great relationship with their guides and send on photos of home or even make a return trip to keep in touch.

What are the trains and planes like? Are they safe?

First the trains; there are 4 international trains a week between Beijing and Pyongyang and back again, 2 are Chinese and 2 are Korean, they are more or less the same. There is only one class of accommodation available for the 24 hour journey and that is soft sleeper class meaning 4 beds to each cabin, 12 cabins to each carriage. Each carriage has 2 western style toilets and a samovar for boiling water available for the whole trip. The trains are safe and although the 2 international carriages are attached to a very large local train when in China, only the international passengers can get into the international carriages so there is nobody wandering around who shouldn't be.

Note that there is not a passenger train to Vladivostok at the time of writing, this service has been suspended. Since 2008 Air China has operated a service between Pyongyang and Beijing and for independent tours you are welcome to use these, however we prefer to use the Air Koryo fleet. Travelling Air Koryo means your holiday starts as soon as you get on the plane - the red uniformed Air Koryo hostesses, the in-flight DPRK magazines, the packed lunch and the North Korean history announcement over the tannoy are not to be missed.

The Air Koryo fleet is composed of 1960s Russian models, usually an Ilyushin but occasionally a Tupolev (for the charter flight to Paekdusan a small Antonov 12 is used). Although these are not the newest planes available they are well maintained and we use them regularly - and they are loved by the various pilots we have taken in! The seats are not the most comfortable with limited space in economy class but it is possible to upgrade to business class and after all, the longest flight you can take with Air Koryo is only one and a half hours. In 2008 Air Koryo put into service its first brand new plane for several years, a Tupolev Tu-204-300, this plane is often used on the Beijing-Pyongyang route and another has apparently been ordered. Air Koryo have 3 flights a week to Beijing, 2 to Shenyang (in North East China)



and one to Vladivostok in Eastern Russia. In the past there were 2 flights a week to Khabarovsk also in Russia but this route is currently not in use. Occasionally there are flights also to Macau and to Bangkok but not as often as Air Koryo's timetable claims them to be. Air Koryo is a safe airline and has been in operation since 1956, in that time not one fatal accident has occurred.

Can I write about my trip?

North Korea does not issue visas to journalists except in special circumstances where they are invited by the authorities. Occasionally this restriction is relaxed and we are able to take journalists, if you are a journalist wanting to go then please contact us and we can try on your behalf or we can add your name to a list to be informed as and when you are permitted to go. In the past some journalists have tried to sneak in to DPRK by submitting false details, when this happens the company they travel with is held responsible and there are grave consequences; in 1997 we were shut down for 9 months when a British Channel 4 journalist came on a tour with fake details - this not only causes us and our Korean guides problems it also created problems for two aid agencies we had introduced to the country. Please do not compromise our work in North Korea. We require each of our tourists to sign a form stating that they will not publish any articles about the tours without our express permission, we are required to insist upon this by DPRK law.

If you are interested in writing a travelogue or report on the tour for a personal website or something similar then we have no problem with this as long as you discuss it with us beforehand and have our written agreement.

Please feel free to contact our office anytime if you have further questions.