

NORTH KOREA 2002

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‘I hate purity, I hate goodness! I don’t want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone to be corrupt to the bones.’

Winston Smith to Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, 1949.

This is an account of my visit to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the spring of 2002. In keeping with the feelings of paranoia that the DPRK gives me, I have changed people’s names, just in case.

THURSDAY 25 APRIL 2002

MY WORKMATES wished me well as I left the office only a few minutes later than my planned time of five o’clock in the afternoon. I headed out into the warm sunshine with my small bag. While making the journey to the airport I pulled an elasticated support bandage onto each of my legs as a secure way of holding my valuables. Into each I slipped a thick wad of low-denomination us dollar bills.

There was no need to queue at the check-in desk, which was being run by a branch of what was formerly Swissair. It seems as though their humiliating financial collapse had led them into related business areas. I briefly became excited, thinking that perhaps Swissair and China Airlines were code sharing, but of course they were not.

Time was a little tight so I headed straight through security and bought twenty packs Marlboro cigarettes. My travel agent had asked me to buy ten packs as a present from her to the Korean International Tour Company (KITC). The other ten packs I intended to use as presents from myself. My travel agent had specified the Marlboro

brand because they are especially popular in North Korea, a single pack being worth a month's wages. The ability of this brand to penetrate even the world's most reclusive nation is remarkable.

The airport was not busy and it was easy enough to make my way to the boarding queue, which stretched beyond the gate and into the corridor. It seems as though this part of Heathrow airport pre-dated the introduction of the jumbo jet. For once, I had not spent hours moping around the departure lounge. I tried to call Rowan on her mobile phone but I just got through to an answering machine.

I chatted to my neighbour a little during the flight. She told me that she was on her way to China to visit her daughter who was teaching English in Shenyang, near the Korean border. Her daughter had adopted a sickly orphaned Chinese baby. This was a fine example of glimpsing another life while on the road.

FRIDAY 26 APRIL 2002

The airline breakfast was spinach, hash brown potatoes and mushrooms. Passengers had two dishes shoved in their faces and were told, 'Choose.' This was Chinese service up to its usual standard.

I only managed a glance out of the window because I was sitting in the centre of the seven-seat wide plane. I could see snowy crenulated mountains, black earth and frozen rivers; there was no sign of human habitation.

When I got off the plane and walked into the airport I was surprised by just how modern the building looked. It was easily a match for the airport at Tokyo Narita (although perhaps not Ōsaka Kansai). I only became sure I was in China when I heard someone hawking and spitting.

The official I handed my quarantine form to did not even look at it. I could have declared that I had leprosy and the bubonic plague and still passed. I walked through passport control and customs without any hitches and popped out into the arrivals hall to find a

man holding a sign saying, 'Mr Smith, Mr Eyre'. I told him I was going to change some money and headed off to the Agricultural Bank of China. When I returned to the driver there was still no sign of Mr Smith, who was presumably still waiting for his luggage (as usual I only had hand luggage). I went off to reconfirm my flight back to London and returned to find Rob Smith had arrived. Thankfully, the driver had not taken my hand signals and rudimentary Chinese phrases to mean, 'You can go without me.'

I surveyed the wide roads and glistening skyscrapers from the taxi; Beijing looked more like Japan than the China I remembered from nine years earlier. There were many cars and few pedestrians or bicycles. The workmen squatting in the backs of vans gave the game away a little.

We passed Beijing Central Railway Station. It looked much cleaner than it had on my last visit. Taxis dominated the forecourt rather than groups of destitute country folk waiting for the head of household to find work. Shortly afterwards we arrived at the fancy (and entirely Western) Novotel hotel and underwent a slow computerized check-in procedure. Rob headed to his room before I did.

Half an hour later, we were in the hotel's business centre trying to arrange delivery of our North Korean visas and airline tickets. It was a little unnerving to fly to the far end of Asia without a visa or ticket for my final destination. I was on the phone to the KITC, who said we should pick the papers up from the office on the way to the airport; having them delivered would cost extra. Besides, Ned (the third member of our group) had already arranged to collect his papers from their office so we would be stopping there in any case.

Rob and I agreed to go our separate ways for the afternoon. I collected a pack of cigarettes from my room to help break the ice with locals and then headed out towards Tiananmen Square. I took the stairs rather than the lift on my way back down. There were fourteen flights of steps (I was in room A704) to the ground floor. On one of the landings I encountered a group of chefs taking a break. I shook

hands, exchanged some pleasantries and continued. A little farther on I encountered a group of five women sleeping on the floor. I was a little surprised but also pleased to see I was definitely in Asia now. I tried not to tread on the slumbering bodies as I continued. One of the women gave me a sleepy stare from under her sheet.

I chatted to various local people in my few words of Chinese as I walked down the street. This attracted a great deal of attention. I made friends with a group of vendors on a corner by Tiananmen Square. Handing out cigarettes made me popular. An overweight middle-aged man showed me his Chinese pack and gestured that he would like to swap his pack for mine. I declined the offer. People found it hilarious that I was handing out cigarettes even though I do not smoke myself.

The sight I wanted to see most was Mao's mausoleum but it was closed. I went to look at the giant portrait of Mao and the Gate of Heavenly Peace instead. The ten-lane road running immediately in front of this great edifice spoiled it a little. The square was not especially busy and there were only a few Western tourists around. Vendors sat at little wooden stalls selling trinkets while other people flew kites. Contrary to what one might expect, the atmosphere of the place was a calm one. It was a contrast to the manic bustle of Trafalgar Square in London.

I walked south on a road parallel to the square. I passed some imposing Stalinist buildings but also saw some dusty alleys that revealed the city's true status as part of the developing world. A petite Chinese student accosted me on the road that runs to the south of the square. This road is roughly equivalent to London's Oxford Street, with loud music and gaudy shops. She asked me whether I spoke German; I said I knew a very little. She continued to talk to me in remarkably good English and we walked and conversed for a good couple of hours. I expect her proficiency in English was partly down to chatting to foreigners like me. I learnt some interesting things from this student.

She was twenty-three years old and from a town of a hundred

thousand people (or perhaps that was her county; we became a little confused over terminology) near Wuhan. It turned out that her town was a three-hour bus journey from that city. She told me that the express train only takes twelve hours to travel from Beijing to Wuhan. She made this journey in the uncomfortable but economical Hard Seat class. She was outraged to hear that foreigners had to pay double for their train tickets in China until 1995. She had also been to Shanghai by train but, like almost all people from mainland China, she had never been abroad.

Her parents were farmers; I think they grew rice. They also ran a small grocery store, working hard to send their children to university. She lived in a dormitory in north-west Beijing, sharing a room with five others. Her boyfriend was an aspiring actor and was therefore poor. She was coy about where he lived, which was interesting. Was he homeless? She said it was love at first sight when she first saw him in Tiananmen Square. She told me that he had been reluctant to get involved with her because of his poverty, so she had chased him.

She told me it cost 45,000 Yuan (about £4,000) to buy a two-bedroom flat in Beijing. When I told her that houses in England were somewhat more expensive than this, she suggested I buy a house in China to save money. Another resident of Beijing later told me that this student had probably dropped some zeros off her quote.

I learnt that there were currently ten thousand private cars in Beijing. I failed to establish whether there were any barriers to legal ownership other than having sufficient money to buy the vehicle. I heard elsewhere that the Chinese government was in the process of liberalizing car ownership and that the number of cars on the road was set to increase by more than a half. There were certainly barriers other than money to legal ownership of a Chinese passport. The girl told me that a friend of hers had wanted to go to Italy but was unable to because she did not have the right political connections to obtain her travel papers.

Not surprisingly, she claimed to have a part-time job in an art

gallery. In other words, she acted as a tout for a tourist tat shop. However, we got this familiar ruse out of the way quickly. Either she was a poor tout or else she could tell I would not buy anything.

She told me that south Chinese are different from north Chinese. She said they were more Westernized, even going so far as to say that they 'walk like Westerners'. She said that this was because they had had more contact with the outside world in the past.

I mentioned that I had once travelled with a Chinese girl whose wealthy parents were members of the Chinese Communist Party. My new friend said something about the Communist Party being the same as the Capitalist Party. This was intriguing. Sadly, when I gently probed further she clammed up saying, 'I don't think we should talk about politics.' Seeing as we were in Tiananmen Square at the time and that I was unsure as to the extent of this nation's security apparatus, I readily agreed and quickly changed the subject to food. She said her everyday meals were made up of rice, tomatoes and potatoes.

Towards the end of our conversation she told me that she thought life was pointless and nothing but a dissatisfying struggle. I commented that this was a nihilistic point of view, although on reflection it could equally well be seen as Buddhist. I thought it sad that one so young should be so jaded.

I found it difficult to bring our conversation to an end. Two hours is clearly a lot of talking and a great deal of walking. Yet she showed no signs of letting up. I am unsure of Chinese etiquette in this area. I was concerned that custom might dictate that she could not end the conversation. I encountered this on Hainan Island in south China where a girl with a yellow umbrella came up to me and talked to me on the beach. After some time she told me to go away. It seemed as though she simply could not make her excuses and leave.

Having said goodbye, I wandered down an alleyway (*hútòng* in Chinese) and saw a somewhat less modern side of Beijing. It was dusty and dirty but also felt lively and human. Overall, it was friendlier and more interesting than the wide main streets. I encountered a

public latrine where the squat toilets were holes in the floor without doors or even partitions.

All over central Beijing I noticed people playing a board game with large, rough wooden counters about two inches in diameter and half an inch thick. The board had a grid painted on it. As is common in China, some games attracted a crowd.

As the daylight dimmed, I came to Beijing's main showpiece road. Here I saw Bally, Gucci and Valentino boutiques beneath skyscrapers worthy of Hong Kong or Singapore. There were floodlights and fountains. In what I interpreted to be an effort to look less like they were losing their national identity, the architects had put Asian-type decorations on the buildings, which did make them look attractive even if it failed to make the place look Chinese rather than Western. I saw a floodlit sports ground where lithe youths were playing basketball.

I headed down another *hútòng* and entered an eatery more or less at random. I became an instant celebrity and my slight knowledge of Chinese enabled me to order a decent meal of fried bean-curd, rice and Tsingtao beer. The bean-curd was full-flavoured as it was spiced with chilli, and it did not have the unpleasant slimy texture that is common with that much-derided foodstuff. The rice was just right and the beer was welcome after my long walk. The label on the bottle proclaimed that Tsingtao beer would be a hundred years old in 2003. I chatted with the large family group on the opposite table, who gladly accepted my cigarettes.

Many of the eateries had a young girl outside enticing people inside, although they all seemed to ignore me. However, as I left this place the hustler did call *míngtiān* (tomorrow) to me. I walked on and stopped off at a street-side kiosk to buy some delicious local yoghurt and a pack of disposable razors.

As I walked towards the railway station, some local men sitting near the window of another eatery waved me in to join them. We shared beer and cigarettes. They were remarkably friendly, even though we only had a common vocabulary of about twenty words.

One of them made noodles for a living; he was still wearing his grimy chef's tunic. Another abstained from the beer and cigarettes so I guessed he might be a Muslim. He did not look like a Uighur although he did say he was from Lanzhou, the gateway to north-west China.

I was surprised to see some Islamic wall hangings around the place. There was a picture of Mecca and some Koranic calligraphy. There seemed to be several eateries around the station with a similar Islamic theme, which was fascinating. I was even more surprised to see a few sex shops in the area.

Beijing had changed dramatically since my last visit. I explored further in a state of mild intoxication and stumbled over a clutch of shopping plazas; one even had an ice-skating rink in the basement. As my energy waned I headed back to my hotel where I bathed to wash off the grime of the long day.

SATURDAY 27 APRIL 2002

I slept soundly despite my concern about waking up too late. I ate breakfast in an elaborate high-ceilinged dining hall, where generous quantities of varied and sub-standard fare were on offer. I ate Coco Pops and Honey Nut Cheerios with strawberry yoghurt as well as pastries and an unhealthy amount of coffee. Rob came along and said hello.

Having eaten too much, I went out for an early morning stroll. The street was busy with people travelling to work. I saw one of the vendors I had met the previous day. She was riding along on a bicycle, presumably on the way to her patch. I approached her and she stopped. We greeted one another and she gave me a pack of Tiananmen Square postcards. She was wearing the same denim shirt as she had worn when she sold me a tourist map of Beijing. It had 'Girl' embroidered on it in brightly coloured thread.

I went back to my room to pack my bag and brush my teeth. I

returned my room key and asked the receptionist to write 'International Airport' in Chinese characters on the special taxi instruction card that had been provided by the hotel. I was hoping to simplify my return journey.

I then met Ned and, shortly afterwards, the China Tourism Service representative. Her job was to ensure our journey to the airport went smoothly. As well as this young woman we had a minibus (not a taxi) and a driver. We struggled through the traffic to an even fancier hotel where we picked up our airline tickets and visas from the KITC office. The woman working in there was Chinese rather than Korean and was obviously less than rushed off her feet. The dual framed pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il looked down over the whole room.

Kim Il Sung ran the DPRK from the end of the Second World War until he died in June 1994. He based his presidency on unrevised Stalinist principles, with himself as the genius-leader. His son, Kim Jong Il, took the mantle from his father in what may be the world's first example of dynastic Socialism. This succession had been planned decades in advance. Within the DPRK, Kim Il Sung is often called the 'Great Leader' and Kim Jong Il the 'Dear Leader'.

According to a scathing article I read on CNN's website, Kim Jong Il has a passion for potatoes. CNN claims that the DPRK government denied the US permission to inspect a suspected nuclear installation. The DPRK continued to refuse until the US offered to share some of its potato-farming technology. Apparently, this won over the Dear Leader and he allowed in an inspection team. All they found was an empty tunnel. However, CNN should be wary of thinking of the DPRK as a country where the lunatics are running the asylum; the leadership is as cunning as it is eccentric.

At the airport we waited for some time in the check-in queue. Among the passengers on this twice-weekly flight was a small group of men in Buddhist monk garb. We could easily identify people from the DPRK because they all wore Kim badges. Some people who looked disturbingly like security agents were hanging around

looking mean. We were to see many of this type of person in the DPRK.

We continued to fret over the time as we waited in the lengthy passport and security queues. We managed to make the 11:30 Koryo Air flight JS152 to Pyongyang on time by using the shorter VIP security queue.

We walked straight onto the plane and took our seats at the back. Rob pointed out some cargo stacked next to the emergency exits. I noted that the plane was fitted with luggage racks similar to those often found on buses and trains rather than the usual overhead lockers. I sat next to an Austrian diplomat who told me about daily diplomatic life.

I was not expecting a meal but we were given some poor quality food in a tray with a hinged plastic lid. The stewardesses managed to smile but seemed to have a look of great sadness about them. They wore a great deal of make-up and changed uniforms to serve the food. I was surprised to see that the drink on offer was a clear, fizzy cider; I had not previously associated cider with East Asia.

The ground came into view as we approached Pyongyang. We could see that there was little or no traffic and that the air was unusually clean. The main mode of transport seemed to be walking and the roads were mostly dirt. I strained for a view of Yongbyon (녕변핵시설), the DPRK's nuclear research site; I have read that one can see it from an inbound plane on a clear day.

Once we had landed, I only saw a couple of other planes at the airport. We filtered into immigration. Three men occupied each of the two passport inspection booths. Each booth had an angled mirror attached to the top for some reason. I was unable to see the people inside properly because the glass on the front was half-silvered.

Customs were no stricter than the USA. The official (who was courteous and as friendly as could be expected) asked whether I had any books or magazines. I replied that I did and offered to show them to him, but he declined. He also asked whether I had a satellite phone

or a Global Positioning System (I did not). He guided me through a customs declaration form that was printed entirely in Chinese. He instructed Rob and Ned to copy my entries. This caused trouble because they obediently copied items such as my name and passport number.

I was required to walk through a metal detector and have a metal-detecting wand waved over me. It was sensitive enough to find the spare button sewn into my trouser pocket. They frisked me as a final precaution. No one noticed the leg bandages I was wearing; they held my money but could have easily contained all sorts of literature they would have considered both highly interesting (to themselves) and dangerous (to everyone else).

I made my way into the lobby where I headed straight for the ageing but clean lavatories. They were deserted. The airport as a whole looked a little run down. The departure board showed just two flights: one to Vladivostok and another to Khabarovsk. The arrivals hall was small, and bright sunlight streamed in through the doors.

I was under instructions to look out for a Mrs Ri who would be wearing a blue and white striped shirt. In fact, a Mr Chun and a Mrs Kim (neither of whom was wearing anything with blue and white stripes) rescued me. When I met Mrs Ri later on in the trip I noted that she was wearing a blue and white striped tie.

Rob and Ned turned up soon enough and so we headed out into the clean air. The car park had a hundred or so cars in it; this was more than I was expecting. Our guides introduced themselves formally. It was just as well we got their names there and then; throughout the trip we were never allowed outside our hotel without them. Our guides also introduced us to the driver, who could not speak English. At least, we never heard him speak English. North Korea has a tendency to make one feel paranoid.

We loaded our bags into the back of the Japanese minibus. It was a right hand drive model even though people in the DPRK drive on the right. In practice, this makes little difference; there is so little traffic

on most of the DPRK's roads that a driver is unlikely to see another vehicle, let alone hit one. The airport road was an exception to this; most of the time we could see five or six vehicles, many of them associated with the military. The road was in good condition until we reached the city centre where it became bumpier. We saw a dozen or more soldiers in uniform during our 25-kilometre journey. As we approached the city, it did show signs of life. However, one would see far more in any other Asian city of two million.

Mr Chun told us that Pyongyang (평양) has nineteen districts. The name means 'Flat Place', which is comparable to Kuala Lumpur ('Muddy Estuary') for evocativeness. Mr Chun told me that the roadside orchards were planted with apple trees. Mrs Kim was less informative. Clutching the blue document wallet that she carried throughout our trip, she told us 'I am here to look pretty and make sure you have happy stay.' There were people walking, people on bicycles and people working in the fields. I noticed that the women carried things on their heads. I also noticed people carrying bulky bundles of firewood. There was no litter, no fancy buildings, no industrial estates and no advertising.

As we passed through the main square, we saw thousands of people standing in neat formations. They appeared to be waiting for something. The schoolchildren were squatting on the floor with their hands on their heads. Mr Chun told me that they had been celebrating Kim Il Sung's ninetieth birthday. Kim Il Sung died in 1994 but apparently this does not stop the DPRK from baking a cake and blowing out the candles for their Great Leader when his special day comes around. Mr Chun told us that they were also celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army.

People seemed to live in flats. The ones in Pyongyang were in somewhat better condition than those I saw in the countryside later in the trip. The predominant colour was white and the streets were wide. We drove straight past an entrance to the Grand People's Study

House. It seemed completely deserted but this could be because the entrance we drove past was a special one. Who knows?

We were to stay at the Yanggakdo Hotel. It is situated on the northern tip of a riverine island called Yanggak (양각). Mr Chun told us that the island was named after its shape, which he said is like the 'horn' of a ship. I think he must have meant the *hull* of a ship. The high-rise hotel provided us with wonderful views of the city. However, being on an island, it was sufficiently distant from anywhere in the city worth seeing that we would need our guides, driver and minibus to get there; Pyongyang has no taxis for tourists. The authorities did not want us to go out alone. The hotel had 47 floors, a revolving restaurant on the top, a 'casino' in the basement (this probably just contained some old Japanese pinball machines) and a thousand guest rooms. The lobby was cavernous and occupied mostly by men smoking cigarettes. A good half of them were Koreans, some of whom sat and stood around looking menacing for the entire duration of our stay.

Mr Chun took our passports away for processing. This was a little disquieting, especially in view of the DPRK's shaky diplomatic status. He returned them a few days later. I looked at the historical photo boards in the hotel lobby; they were written in Korean and English. There was a memorable colour picture of a Korean youth operating a lethal-looking multiple rocket-launching weapon with the same sort of gleeful look as one finds in Western advertising. Much of the commentary focused on Japanese and American war atrocities. There was a picture of a cow being hoisted out of a ship by a crane. The caption said that so-and-so many *suk* (승) of rice had been stolen from Korea by the Japanese during the Second World War. I asked Mrs Kim what a *suk* is. She told me (with inexplicable reluctance) that one *suk* is about the same as 2.2 kilograms. She also told me that *suk* are no longer used in Korea. Except, of course, on this historical photo board and on the identical one I saw later at the hotel in Myohyngsan. In actual fact, the *suk* is not a measure of weight but an agricultural

measure of volume akin to the imperial bushel. One *suk* is equivalent to about 180 litres.

I went into the hotel bookshop to take a look around. Mrs Kim followed me closely. It sold books in several languages such as Japanese, English, Korean, German, French, Russian and Chinese. There were piles of political tracts as well as videos, stamps, photo books and CDs. Oddly enough, they were running short of postcards.

We discussed the itinerary, took a shower and then headed out in our minibus. We were off to some kind of park called Mo Ran Hill. We wandered around at a pleasantly slow pace. It was late afternoon and the sun shone warmly through the clear clean air of Pyongyang. We saw few people; they would scarp as soon as our party approached. Those that we saw at a distance seemed to be having picnics and generally enjoying themselves. Children would sometimes peer at us from a distance through the branches of the trees. They all wore red neckerchiefs, just like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Our guides showed us a large theatre that had been built in 1945. They also showed us some pavilions that had been rebuilt after the Korean War. The DPRK calls this conflict the 'Victorious Fatherland Liberation War'. We visited a few pavilions that had been rebuilt out of cement. The locals in each one hurried off as soon as we came near. This meant our group was always alone. The pavilions sat on top of the ancient battlements of Pyongyang, which Mr Chun called 'castles'. I saw a tunnel through the wall at one point and looked inside. Some of the stones in the tunnel wall had holes cut into them, apparently to take some kind of wooden door. The battlements had been restored and were in excellent condition. There was not a scrap of litter anywhere.

The first pavilion we visited provided a superb view over the whole of Pyongyang. Towering over everything else was the grey-brown steep-sided pyramid of the Ryugyong Hotel. This is an unfinished 105-storey concrete shell that was started in 1989 and would have been the world's largest hotel had the DPRK been able to find the

money to complete it. Work on the hotel seems to have resumed in recent years.

Mrs Kim told me that she was the daughter of a diplomat. She had lived abroad in Malaysia, Singapore and China during her childhood. She had then attended the Foreign Studies Institute in Pyongyang. Now, at the age of twenty-seven, she was married with a one-year old baby and a job as a tour guide. She told me that she had read *Jane Eyre* as part of her studies. She was to stay in our hotel even though she had a baby in the same city. She went on to say that she was happy for her mother to care for her child while she conducted our tour.

The next stop was fantastic. It was a monument to the Red Army soldiers who lent a hand to Kim Il Sung as he liberated Korea from the Japanese in 1945. This was exactly the sort of stern Socialist monument I had come to the DPRK to see. It was inscribed in Korean and Cyrillic. Mr Chun told me that Vladimir Putin (the Russian President) had visited the monument during his trip to the DPRK in 2000.

I asked Mr Chun to explain the North Korean flag to me. He told me that the white circle represents unity, the red star inside the white circle represents Socialism, the red oblong is the red flag of Socialism, the white stripes represent the purity (Mr Chun used the word 'homogeneity') of the Korean race and the blue oblongs represent purity of thought.

I looked out over the Taedong River (대동강) with Mr Chun. He told me about the DPRK's long-term environmental concerns. He also told me that most people in Pyongyang work in offices. The roads were almost empty except for some overcrowded buses. Pyongyang is one of the few places outside England where I have seen red double-decker buses being used on city streets. However, the ones in Pyongyang are more modern than those in London.

Our minibus was waiting for us at the bottom of the long flight of steps that led up to the monument. We were whisked back to the hotel and had a few moments to ourselves before heading down to dinner. There was no menu but we ate well. We were presented with clear

soup, cold noodles, cucumber and meat salad, fried chicken, deep-fried eggs, kimchi, malty Korean beer, bottled water and battered potato slices. Kimchi (김치), Korea's national dish, is a sort of spicy soup made from pickled cabbage, chilli and garlic. The deep fried eggs came as little spheres coated in breadcrumbs. We ate the food from a multitude of small ceramic plates using metal chopsticks. Rob took to kimchi immediately but Ned disliked it. I found the local variety to be less pungent than the example I once tried in London.

Mr Chun and Mrs Kim joined us for a chat once we had eaten. Mrs Kim refused alcohol but Mr Chun did drink a little beer. I said that the DPRK should export its brew and call it 'Juche Beer'. They were surprised that I had even heard of *Juche* (주체사상). It is a kind of nationalistic self-reliance and it has become the guiding philosophy of the DPRK. Mr Chun told us that he had visited Finland, Libya, Sweden and India all as part of a drive to encourage tourism to the DPRK. He certainly has his work cut out for him. He had also visited the relatively local city of Beijing eight times.

Later on, I took the stairs down from the thirteenth floor. I did not find any slumbering maids this time. I was in search of a back massage. I paid a cashier and then hung around the counter for a full half hour while a bunch of sullen-looking hotel staff talked on the phone. Eventually, the middle-aged masseuse, who was wearing a medical-style smock, beckoned me into a room containing a special massage bed. There was a face-hole so one could lie flat out and face down at the same time. She laughed at my hairy chest and proceeded to give me a brutal pummelling. It was past eleven o'clock by the time she had finished but jet lag meant that I fell asleep much later.

SUNDAY 28 APRIL 2002

At breakfast we sat in the same well-spaced seats at the same large table in the same restaurant as the previous evening. Rob and I had a Korean-style breakfast, including some invigorating kimchi. The

staff seemed pleased that we liked Korean food. Ned stuck to Western food at breakfast time and so received the East Asian interpretation of Western bread: thick fluffy slices of crustless sweet white stuff.

While we were eating our breakfast, a Japanese man with a large video camera attempted to interview us. He said he was a journalist. He rattled off a series of forthright questions.

‘Is it expensive?’

‘Do you feel under political pressure?’

‘What do you think of the system here?’

This self-proclaimed journalist was clearly deranged. Given that I was on camera in the world’s most repressive country, I was hardly likely to say, ‘North Korea is an evil totalitarian state. It is effectively a giant prison camp. The sooner it collapses the better for the sake of the ordinary people.’ My response to the other two queries was a simple ‘No’; perhaps he should have tried to make his questions more open-ended. He also asked if I had been restricted in taking photographs. I said I had no camera so I had been allowed to photograph everything I had wanted to. The DPRK’s Ministry of Truth could probably make good use of editing on that statement.

Mrs Kim was waiting for us at the restaurant exit. We went up to our rooms with only a few minutes to spare before we had to meet for the day’s sightseeing. I took the cigarettes I had bought at Heathrow airport down to the lobby for Mr Chun to pass on to his boss. He refused to take them there in public view; he led me back up to his room where he put them in a drawer. His room was opposite ours and identical to it. Evidently they treat their experienced tour guides well here.

It was a sunny day as the five of us headed out to find our minibus. There was a rowdy group of youths just outside the main doors. I took them to be Russian. Our first sight for the day was Mangyongdae (만경대), Kim Il Sung’s birthplace. We could spy crowds of people through the hedges as we approached the complex along the wide empty roads. We turned into the car park and drove straight through

it. Our driver then pushed the minibus through the troops of people, using his horn to clear the way.

All sorts of people were there, dressed in their Sunday best. I noticed that they were marching in rows of five rather than milling in the manner of a normal crowd. Some people gave us furtive glances.

We were allocated guide number three. She spoke no English and seemed to serve no real purpose other than to scowl. The nativity site was made up of a pair of thatched huts with about six rooms in all. These rooms were open-fronted and displayed some well-preserved agricultural implements and a collection of black and white photographs. The locals viewed them with pious awe. There was none of the shouting and pushing that one encounters elsewhere in Asia.

As well as the two huts, there was what looked like an elevated grain store. We were told that Kim Il Sung used to study up there in his youth. They called it a 'summer house'. The space underneath had room for a cow or two; it was equipped with a manger and a bag hanging in the corner. We were told with hushed respect that it had been used as a hen's nest.

The reverence of the locals seemed to rub off on me somehow, even though the buildings were obviously reconstructed and I felt little fealty towards the Great Leader. The place certainly had a strong sense of occasion. There was a group of women dressed in traditional costume outside the hallowed compound. They were having great fun taking photographs of one another.

We visited a little grey stone well where we saw people enjoying the holy water. Then we headed up what our guides called the 'mountain peak'. It turned out to be a low hill, although our first rest stop saw a breathless Mrs Kim. We had stopped at a mural painted on a large block of white marble. The mural depicted Kim Il Sung studying some ideological treatise in an idyllic setting that happened to be the very hill we were climbing. Next to Kim lay a sickle and in the background stood a cow.

There were many locals around and vendors sold ice cream from

modest stalls. Everyone studiously ignored us. We reached the summit where there was a white concrete pavilion. It provided a splendid view over Pyongyang and the Taedong River. The clean air meant we could see for miles. Beneath us were some riverine islands. The only sign of industrial activity came from the coal-fired power station where a tall chimney disgorged light brown smoke. Mr Chun told us that hot water from the power station is fed to the buildings in Pyongyang.

I asked about a large but inactive piece of machinery that I could see on one of the islands. Mr Chun told me that it was used for dredging the river. I was impressed by the size of the Taedong; it was perhaps half as wide again as the River Thames.

We descended from the hill by a deserted path. It seemed as though they were using a special route to keep us apart from the locals. The minibus took us past some clean but run-down looking blocks of flats set in patches of dusty grassless soil. Our next sight was the Pyongyang Metro, one of the things I had been particularly looking forward to. It is a two-line network. The stations have names like 'Reunification', 'Comrade' and 'Three Rejuvenations'. We were to travel a single stop from a terminus. The station building looked impressive from the outside; Mr Chun said it was built in 1987. We admired the electrical subway map in the lobby, where a row of buttons allowed passengers to illuminate the various stations. Our station was called *Puhung* (부흥), which means 'Revitalization'.

Mr Chun paid for our tickets. The fare was ten *jon* (there are a hundred *jon* (전) to the *won* (원)) to any station in Pyongyang, be it 'Red Star' or 'Sacrifice in Battle'. Mr Chun told me that a typical DPRK wage is 300 *won* a month. This is \$1.50 at the 2002 black market rate and \$140 at the 2002 official exchange rate.

We went through the low turnstiles where an attendant took our tickets. We stepped onto an escalator which must have been one of the longest in the world. Rousing revolutionary music was playing in the background. I never got used to the DPRK's version of background

music; it always gave me the creeps that my hosts were playing songs that could easily be exhorting the population to rise up and slaughter the Western forces.

I asked Mr Chun why the tunnels were so deep. He said it was because the soil under Pyongyang is sandy so the engineers needed to dig to a depth of a hundred metres to stop water seeping in. A patch of damp I saw on the platform's high white ceiling corroborated this claim. However, I have read elsewhere that the Pyongyang Metro is simply part of a warren of underground tunnels that have been dug beneath Pyongyang as part of the government's formidable military preparations.

The station was well-endowed with ideological splendour, which is usual for Communist metro systems. The wall at the entrance to the platform was decorated with a large translucent sculpture made of a material that looked like coloured plastic. Elaborate coloured chandeliers hung from the distant ceiling. The other walls were covered with hyper-realistic Socialist paintings that depicted happy people carrying tools, weapons and abundant food. The back wall was graced by an especially large painting of Kim Il Sung giving on-the-spot guidance with a big electricity pylon behind him. An electricity pylon also appears in North Korea's national emblem. However, I never saw a single one of these structures in the week that I was in the DPRK.

The train conductors were attractive young women dressed in smart military-style uniforms. They controlled the trains by waving coloured paddles. One of them kept a stern eye on us while we waited. There were glass and metal newspaper holders standing in the centre of the wide platform so that people could read the news during the three-minute interval between trains. If the *Pyongyang Times* and the press releases put out by the Korean Central News Agency (www.kcna.co.jp) are anything to go by, the North Korean newspapers contain only vitriolic anti-American propaganda and self-congratulatory reports of state visits.

A train arrived and we boarded it. Mr Chun said that the trains were built in the DPRK, although in truth the trains originate from the Berlin U-Bahn. The people at our end of the carriage immediately stood up and walked away to the far end.

I looked about me as we made the five-minute journey. Mrs Kim asked whether we had lights inside the tunnels on the London Underground. I was interested to see that there was graffiti scratched on the windows. It was unintelligible but some of it at least seemed to be in Roman characters. This corroborated the idea that the trains may have been second-hand.

We alighted at the next stop. It was called *Yongwang* (영광), which means 'Glory'. The platform was, if anything, more impressive than the one at Puhang. Large ornate columns with gold-coloured trimmings supported the ceiling. A toddler ambled across the platform in our direction but did not seem to be interested in us in particular. I noticed a girl deliberately hide her face from us as we travelled up the lengthy escalator. We were pleased to see a little stall near the station exit selling nothing but English-language Pyongyang Metro brochures for the bargain price of one dollar. We bought one each. They had been printed as recently as 1994 so they must have been selling well. It was clear that the vendor had been put there specifically to wait for us; I found this disconcerting.

Our next stop was the Grand People's Study House, which we had passed the day before. We entered through a pair of high, elaborately carved doors with velvet cosies on the enormous handles. There was an electronic chiming bell at the top of the building; we could hear it from our hotel over a kilometre away. This was an unexpected consequence of the low level of traffic: Pyongyang is a pleasantly quiet city. The bell was chiming eleven o'clock as we entered. I was told that the Grand People's Study House has a capacity of ten thousand people a day. If that many people were visiting the place then they were certainly not using the same entrance as we did.

Mr Chun introduced us to a stern English-speaking guide. She

looked about forty years old and was dressed in an intimidating beige suit. The large entrance lobby was deserted except for our party and the usual security agents. There was a mural of Mount Paektu behind an oversized statue of Kim Il Sung sitting on a chair. The statue was backlit in blue to add to the drama. Mount Paektu (백두산) is known in the DPRK as the Revolutionary Mountain. It is a beautiful volcanic crater lake where Kim Il Sung is said to have fought his 'Revolutionary Anti-Japanese Struggle'. Our guide switched on the escalator and we were carried upstairs into the main part of the library. She started to tell us all about the Grand People's Study House. It contains thirty million books; by way of comparison, the British Library holds fourteen million. I did not ask if all the books were different. It is open from eight o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night, every day with no holidays. Everyone is welcome to visit it. This must be a limited sense of the word 'everyone' which excludes people that do not have permission to enter Pyongyang. I said, 'You need special permission to visit the British Library.'

'Why?'

'Because it's a capitalist country.'

The first sight was a computerized catalogue. Each of the several dozen computers was being used by at least one person. There were no chairs so everyone was standing up. No-one acknowledged our presence. The catalogue seemed to use web browsers running on Windows 3.1.

We were shown a reading room especially devoted to those studying the works of Kim Il Sung. The tables could be adjusted to different angles for the convenience of the reader. There was a glass exhibition case in the room showing off some of the works of the Great Leader. The people in the room did not look up from their work as we entered and they appeared to be unperturbed by our guide's stern voice.

Next was a book exhibition hall. It held a desultory collection of books with some people looking around at the far end of the room, well away from us. Some children were rebooting a modern-looking

PC running Microsoft Windows ME. I am not sure how happy the US Government would be about that. They proceeded to play some kind of game with Korean writing on the screen. The best thing about this room was a striking picture of Kim Il Sung and his first wife, Kim Jong Suk, fighting the Japanese in Manchuria. Despite the harsh conditions, Mrs Suk was wearing a skirt. I asked Mr Chun how the brave guerrilla fighters had obtained their weapons and ammunition. Mr Chun explained that they had received no external support and had sustained the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Struggle using supplies raided from Japanese positions. This matches up with what I have read in the Western history books.

As well as taking pot-shots at the Japanese, Kim Jong Suk gave birth to the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il on 16 February 1942. According to the official DPRK histories, he was born in a secret guerrilla camp on the slopes of Mount Paektu. Later on in the trip, I bought a superb children's picture book about the nativity of Kim Jong Il. It opens with the following words:

Heaven called a spirit to him and said: 'Prepare the sacred place of the great man who will save the nation from distress.'

I will leave the reader to imagine what the rest of the book is like.

This history lesson had left Mr Chun and me a little way behind the rest of our party. We hurried on to catch them up. Our next stop was a science lecture. There was an array of television monitors in the room, each showing the same complicated-looking graph. We were then taken to a room containing numerous portable cassette players. Our guide told us that this was the music study hall. She asked whether any of us played the piano. We all shook our heads. She then looked at me and said with unnerving certainty, 'I think you can play the piano.' I reasserted my denial. As it happened, I had spent some years learning to play the piano when I was at school but I can no longer play a single tune. At the time, I assumed that she had read

the expression on my face. However, later that day it occurred to me that they might have found out this fact about me while performing some kind of background check.

This conspiracy theory was backed up by the choice of music they played to us through headphones on our specially assigned cassette players. Ned was given Korean opera; he had mentioned that he liked opera earlier on in the trip. Rob, the ageing hippy, received The Beatles. I got some bass-heavy mainstream rock sung in English; perhaps this was the closest they could find to Death Metal. For some reason, my assigned song had birds twittering in the background.

We were shown an English lesson in progress; the teacher was showing his class a video recording. The scene was a group of men wearing appalling 1970s suits sitting around a table in a restaurant.

‘Where is Mr Brown?’

‘He has gone to get some coffee.’

‘He has gone where?’

‘To get some coffee.’

‘I must see him. It’s important.’

The people in the lesson made a half-hearted attempt to repeat what was being said. A woman stood up and was quizzed by the teacher. His last question was, ‘Is it easy?’ She replied in halting English, ‘Yes, it is easy.’ The teacher kept repeating the question and she the answer until we left.

This was a strange lesson but not as strange as the English class another visitor to the DPRK told me about. She said that they went into a lecture hall where some slogans were written up on the blackboard. Had they been ‘Juche the best philosophy’ or ‘Kim Il Sung is our Great Leader’, it might not have been too bad. However, the slogans were more along the lines of ‘It is better to die in battle than to lead a long life’.

They showed us the computer room. The forty or so people in there seemed to be using web browsers. I noticed that the address

bar on the closest PC contained a raw numerical address rather than a human-readable one. Mrs Kim told us that people in the DPRK are allowed to use the Internet, but only to view sites based within the country. Almost everybody here is too poor to even dream of owning a PC, so Internet access is an academic matter anyway.

We walked from stop to stop through wide, white corridors with high ceilings. Occasionally a lone student would appear from around a corner and almost bump into us. The guide explained to us that the site had been earmarked for an administrative building but Kim Il Sung had insisted that the land be used for the public good. Hence the Grand People's Study House had been built quickly at great expense. Our guides frequently emphasized the rapid construction and high cost of the DPRK's prestige projects.

We stopped at the book access point. This was a desk, built flush in with the wall. Precisely as we arrived, a little trolley appeared on a track. It contained four English-language books, which were placed on the surface in front of us by a sulky-faced librarian. The first was a mathematics textbook called *Time Series*. It was on a subject related to the area covered by my doctoral thesis. The second was called *Word-Perfect for DOS 6.0*. Ned and I both worked in computers so I imagine they thought this would interest us. The third book was called *Connecting LANS*, a subject closely related to my area of work. I found this frightening. The fourth book was called *Child Cardiac Pathology*, which defies explanation.

We were taken to a balcony with a good view over the city. The buildings on either side of the Tower of the Juche Idea were symmetrical. We saw our Austrian diplomat friend talking at a table with some other official-looking people. I asked our guide who they were; she said they were some kind of delegation. She asked me to name my favourite sight in Pyongyang. I (truthfully) said that it was the Ryugyong Hotel. 'What else?' she demanded. I mentioned the Tower of the Juche Idea. This was clearly a more acceptable favourite.

The balcony was next to a gift shop. We did not buy anything and

felt no pressure to do so. We passed the computer catalogue again as we approached the escalator on our way out and noticed that it was completely deserted. It could have been closed for lunch but I could not help feeling that the whole tour had been an elaborate charade. The guide had to change the direction of the escalator so we could descend. Clearly a four-metre high statue of Kim Il Sung was one thing but separate up and down escalators would have been an extravagance. Our guides led us out of the building as the electronic bell was chiming twelve. The tour had taken precisely one hour.

As we left, I asked Mr Chun if I could tip our guide with some cigarettes. He said I could. However, when I tried I received a humiliating rebuff: 'But I am woman!' I quickly went off the cigarette tipping idea.

We ate lunch at our hotel. The kimchi had square pieces of cabbage in it. Throughout the trip, whenever Mr Chun offered me fish he made a wiggling movement with his hand and called it 'fishie'.

The first sight of the afternoon was the Tower of the Juche Idea. Mr Chun explained that the Juche philosophy was that we create our own destiny and so should solve our own problems. In other words, the USA should pull out of South Korea so that the DPRK can invade it easily. The tower was 170 metres high and topped with a red flame that glows at night. The best part was the statue at its base. It depicted a farmer, a worker and an intellectual holding a sickle, hammer and a writing brush. The implements were crossed to form the symbol of the Korean Workers' Party. The people were staring into the distance looking fired-up and contented at the same time.

The tower was flanked by six statues. They depicted various concepts associated with Juche. One was called *Longevity*, although this was perhaps a mistranslation. The subject seemed to be continuity as it depicted an old man, a mother and a small boy. Another statue was called *Impenetrable Fortress*, referring to the DPRK's powerful army. The statue called *Industrial Production* was my favourite out of the six. A woman holding a sheet of cloth symbolized the textile industry,

a man with a pneumatic drill represented heavy industry and construction, and a man holding a walkie-talkie acknowledged the role of high-tech industry in the world of Juche. Another of the statues was called *Bumper Harvest*. Mr Chun explained that this only applied up to 1990, after which natural disasters had caused food production problems.

We asked whether we could go up the tower. Mr Chun looked worried and apologized that we would have to pay; he said he would find out how much. While he did so, we admired a mosaic of differently coloured but identically sized plaques fitted to the wall in an alcove at the base of the tower. One was from England and many were from India and Pakistan. We also spied plaques from Zaire, Mozambique and other similarly progressive nations.

It was cheap to go up the tower so we walked into the underground complex that held the entrance. It felt a bit like the headquarters of an Evil Overlord; a squad of henchmen could have marched past us in neat formation at any moment. The usual local guide joined us but remained silent throughout our visit. Our guides led us along a series of empty white corridors past various anonymous rooms to a lift that took us up the tower. We were told that there was also a staircase. For some reason there were numbers on the lift indicator. The tower was so high that I could feel the change of air pressure in my ears. At the top we had another splendid view over Pyongyang; it is a city blessed with great natural beauty. This is rare in large settlements, although Guilin in China is a notable exception. As well as the white buildings there were wide rivers, islands and mountains in the distance. We could see all this through clear air and without traffic noise. Rob asked Mr Chun where Kim Jong Il lives. Mr Chun replied with a simple 'I don't know.' This was probably the truth. As far as I know, Kim Jong Il lives in a series of luxury mansions, well-equipped with all the trappings of Western decadence. In the gift shop we bought some DPRK flag badges.

The next stop was the Monument to the Korean Workers' Party

Foundation. The guide spoke English well and gave us an in-depth and enthusiastic description of the various parts of the monument. It was made of concrete and consisted of a brush, a sickle and a hammer, each held in a gigantic hand. A circle enclosed the hands. The monument was fifty metres high to symbolize fifty years of the Party: it had been built in 1995. The inside of the circle was decorated with a bronze bas-relief sculpture of the Party's history. One of the scenes included some South Koreans looking as though they wanted unification.

The monument faced the great statue of Kim Il Sung located about a kilometre away. Although the Ryugyong Hotel rose imposingly over Kim's statue, our guides did not mention this embarrassing edifice at all. Rob said he thought that the sleek pyramid was leaning to one side. It is said to have structural flaws that mean that it will never be completed.

We were told that the monument had been built on a patch of empty ground. It struck me as a little odd that a large area of land in the centre of the city should have been left unused. The guide tried to guess Rob's age and was wrong by a wide margin when she said sixty. This caused great embarrassed hilarity. Asians seem to age better than Westerners.

We moved on to the Monument to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War. Like all the monuments we had visited that day, it was almost completely deserted. Our guide here wore an immaculate military uniform and spoke only Korean. Mr Chun translated for us.

There was a four hundred metre long plaza leading up to a gigantic monument to 'eternal victory' cast in bronze. The way to this centrepiece was flanked by eight more enormous bronze sculptures in two neat rows of four; the artistic directors of the DPRK appear to have a strong preference for symmetry. Each of the sculptures was immaculately clean and carried great weight, power, seriousness, sincerity and, above all, energy. One almost felt as though the figures depicted were about to run off the end of the rising podium. Each of

these works symbolized an aspect of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War.

Four of the statues were straightforward, depicting guerrilla warfare, naval fighting, the war in the air and the home front. The other statues told more of a story. One showed soldiers dragging heavy artillery to the top of a mountain because there was a shortage of howitzers. Another commemorated the brave soldiers who defended an island off Incheon for three days, thus allowing the North Korean soldiers to make a strategic withdrawal. As one might expect, there was a statue depicting the 'liberation' of Seoul (서울), with deliriously happy South Koreans expressing eternal gratitude to their glorious saviours. The eighth statue commemorated the Battle of Hill 211. The Americans called this hill Pork Chop because of the pattern the contour lines made on the map.

The monument was bathed in warm afternoon sunlight, which shone on the clean white flagstones beneath our feet. Rob asked about the Chinese soldiers who joined in after the strategic withdrawal and played a far from minor part in the deadlock that followed. We were curtly told that they have their own monument elsewhere in the city.

We had started our tour of this sight beneath an archway, which provided a suitably dramatic entrance to the area devoted to the grand monument. However, it was not Pyongyang's famous Arch of Triumph. This was our next stop. It was here that Kim Il Sung made a speech after chasing the Japanese Aggressors out of Korea with a small amount of help from the Red Army and a few North Korean soldiers. As we admired the great edifice, which is four metres higher than the original in Paris, some Japanese Koreans walked past on the other side of the wide road. They seemed absurdly pleased to see us. They waved frantically and shouted out, 'Where you from?' I called back to them; our yelling seemed out of place in such a quiet street. I noticed they were wearing Kim badges. We were to encounter these characters again.

Conscious that we had a long journey ahead of us, Rob asked if we

could relieve ourselves. We were pointed over to a public convenience and allowed to go there unaccompanied on the condition that we did not take any photographs. Our guides just laughed when we asked whether we would have to pay. It was much like the public lavatories in China only cleaner and deserted. There was a window above the urinals; it was remarkably pleasant to be able to look out into the street while answering the call of nature.

Someone just happened to appear at the arch clutching a fistful of English-language pamphlets. We bought four for a dollar. The DPRK government does not seem to overcharge or swindle its tourists.

The time had come to leave Pyongyang for the time being and we began a trip through the countryside to the Hyangsan Pyramid Hotel. This is near the famous scenic mountain of Myohyangsan (묘향산). The name means 'Mountain of Mysterious Fragrance'. The air was clear and the sun low as we made the journey. We saw peasants working the land with little equipment, just hand-picks and the occasional ox pulling a wooden plough. I saw a very few tractors; they all seemed to have steel wheels rather than conventional rubber tyres. However, not many of them were in operation. This is probably because fuel is so scarce in the DPRK. Apparently, the farmers start transplanting rice to the wet paddy fields from the beginning of May to mid-June. All the work is done by hand so it is a laborious process. City-dwellers are expected to volunteer for agricultural labour during this time.

The plains extended for about a kilometre on either side of the road and then gave way to grassy hills. The higher ground sheltered the peasant houses beneath it. Slogans adorned the slopes, always written on the same white, red and black signs. They were big enough to be read from the road. There were no commercial advertisements at all.

The only vehicles we saw were broken down on the side of the road; of these we saw three. It made me wonder whether the authorities had deliberately cleared the highway for our journey. Mr Chun told us that the road had been built especially for tourists. Occasionally, a sunburned and work-hardened peasant would step out into the road

and attempt to wave down our minibus, presumably to hitch a lift. If the peasant noticed that there were Westerners inside, she (they were invariably women for some reason) would stop waving immediately and retreat back to the thin grass on the verge.

There was little in the way of fenced-off fields. Ridges of earth indicated the boundaries between plots of land. Small red flags on wooden poles fluttered in the wind. The fences I did see were always made from what looked like straw or rough sticks rather than finished wooden posts and wire. They appeared to form livestock pens. People seemed to be scrabbling in the soil for roots to eat, but there could be other explanations for their behaviour of squatting on the ground with a bag. For example, they may have been weeding. I have read that gathering wild food is part of the traditional Korean way of life, much as we English used to gather dandelions to make wine.

I dozed off for a few minutes and awoke feeling refreshed. The sun on the unspoiled countryside was beautiful. Sooner than I expected, the hotel sprung out of the green mountains. It was a large, pyramid-shaped building that would have looked more in place on Marbella's beachfront than in a scenic mountain spot. It was capped with the obligatory revolving restaurant.

We went inside to the imposing lobby. When we sat down to wait for Mr Chun to check us in, the locals seated in the nearby chairs stood up as one and moved. This was typical behaviour in the DPRK and I never got used to it. It was like something out of a deodorant commercial. Indeed, the constant shunning was more disconcerting than the staring squads that often surround travellers elsewhere in Asia.

Each of the hotel's lifts was fitted with a carpet that had the day of the week emblazoned on it. Next to the lifts was a photo board with exactly the same historical display as the one I had seen in the Yanggakdo Hotel. Our room was similar to the one we had just left.

They served us a Western-style dinner. Their interpretation of

Western food was so wide of the mark that it was effectively Korean. This phenomenon is by no means restricted to the DPRK; the English rendition of Italian food is often similarly distant from the original.

Part way through the meal there was a power cut. This left us eating in a dining hall with large windows looking out over a pristine valley. The waitresses drew back the curtains to let in the starlight. When they lit candles the scene became still more enchanting. Sadly, ten minutes later the lights came back on and we were back in the brightly-lit electrical age.

Ned told us that he had been talking to Mr Chun about the re-zoning of the DPRK's agricultural land. Apparently, this reorganization was currently in progress. It involved moving people from small-holdings to large collective farms. It will be interesting to see whether this meets with a comparable level of success to Stalin's attempts at collectivizing agriculture in the USSR.

We spent the rest of the evening drinking cheap Korean beer at the hotel bar in the lobby. Korean beer has a sweet malty flavour and comes in large 660ml bottles. I drank rather more of these bottles than was strictly good for me. As a result, I had trouble falling asleep because the room was pitching and rolling like a ship at sea. I did what I usually do when this happens: I swore off alcohol forever.

MONDAY 29 APRIL 2002

I awoke at half past six to quiet and calm. The tranquillity was particularly welcome because I had a sore head. I sipped water slowly in an attempt to see off my hangover. I arrived late at breakfast to find that the food was more identifiably Western. We determined that a second cup of coffee was completely out of the question; it seemed as though coffee was a scarce commodity in the DPRK, or at least around Myohyangsan. The waitress was clearly embarrassed to have to tell us this. We also had an omelette, butter (which perhaps was just edible fat), brown Asian jam, hot milk and plenty of toast. The toast looked

like slabs of charred expanded polystyrene but tasted slightly better.

Rain was falling heavily outside. We scurried over to the minibus where Mrs Kim was wearing a bright pink traditional Korean dress. Most national costumes are attractive, from the wholesome sackcloth of the Aymara Indians in Bolivia to the kimono of Japan. However, the traditional Korean women's dress, at least the version currently worn in the DPRK, leaves much to be desired. The flare of the skirt starts just below the collarbone and juts outward at an angle sufficiently steep to conceal the occupier's figure entirely. The overall effect of the gaudy embroidery, lurid colours and acres of netting is that of a female head poking out of an accident in a haberdashery shop. Mrs Kim told us that the kimono originated in Korea. That may be so, but either the Japanese have refined the garment beyond recognition or else traditional Korean styling has gone downhill badly since then. Mrs Kim also told us that traditional Korean footwear was made of cloth.

We were taken past throngs of people standing in the rain to a large concrete building decorated and roofed in traditional style. This was the Friendship Exhibition, an elaborate storehouse filled with gifts sent to Kim Il Sung by people from all over the world. The doors were great slabs of finely ornamented bronze. They weighed several tons each and had special handles. I am not sure exactly in what way they were special but we were assured that they were very special indeed. Our guides invited Rob to open one of the doors and feel its weight. An assistant covered the special handle with a special red velvet cloth first. A pair of motionless teenage soldiers stood guard by the door.

We were required to don special cloth shoe covers as we entered. They led us to the introduction hall, which was dominated by a large white statue of Kim Il Sung. We were required to bow respectfully to this graven image and stand in silence for a few moments thinking of his great works. This did not feel as strange as one might imagine; it was good fun being asked to join in with the local customs rather than trying to muscle in on them (which is what I normally do).

Once we had paid our respects, we were shown some of the more notable gifts in the hall. One was a model of some herons from the 'religious leader' (as they described him), Billy Graham. Herons are a symbol of longevity in Korean culture. One has to give credit to Mr Graham for doing his homework.

We were led down an escalator into the basement. All the items are kept underground to protect them from air raids and other calamities. Apparently there are more than a quarter of a million items down there. We spent three hours being shown around. It was much more interesting than I had expected, partly because it gave a superb overview of almost every country in the world. We were told that 170 countries had contributed to the collection, including San Marino. It was a bit like looking through a large stamp collection only with real objects rather than bits of sticky paper.

Most of the items were useless knick-knacks, often outrageously expensive ones. Mr Chun would proudly declare that a particular item was made out of ivory or some other less-than-worthy material. Many of the gifts that had been sent to Kim Il Sung were plants or animals. Photographs displayed on the walls of the long, dark corridors represented these perishables.

Unsurprisingly, the selection from the USA was small, as was that from the UK. Most of the British gifts were from trade union leaders or minor Communist parties. Their presents were all modest ones; one organization had sent a set of ornamental teaspoons. The sole gift from Iceland was a ceramic vase.

However, there were plenty of gifts from African countries. Many of them were beautifully simple and stylized carvings rather than the gold-leaf tat favoured by the Asian countries. The lion skins, elephant teeth and tusks from Africa impressed me less. The owner of a European technical glass factory had presented some bottles shaped like full-sized rifles. Mr Chun told us that this individual was a great admirer of Kim Il Sung. Real guns were a popular gift, which may reflect on the sort of person who gives presents to Kim Il Sung. Donors

included such respected international figures as Fidel Castro, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Colonel Gaddafi, Erich Honecker, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. However, Michael Howard's contribution was not on display. It was a little disconcerting to be told with great pride that a particular knick-knack had come from some notorious tyrant.

I find the idea of sending my own gift appealing. I think that if I sent a trophy cup engraved with 'From the Headquarters of the Nihilist Red Star Alliance, provisional government-in-exile of the Democratic People's Republic of England' then they would put it in the UK display case in all earnestness.

There were large groups of other visitors in the building. They were mostly locals and Chinese tour groups. As we went from room to room our guides turned the lights on and off. Presumably this was intended to save electricity. Standard fluorescent tubes provided light. As is so common in Asia, they had put little effort into flattering illumination.

A French businessman had given Kim a stainless steel and glass desk. We were told that Kim had refused to honour the donor's request to use it and instead had put it on display here so that 'everyone' could enjoy it. There was another desk on display from Syria. It was made from mother of pearl and some other expensive material. The inlay work was intricate and impressively ugly.

Towards the end of our tour we were taken to a pair of imposing doors. Mr Chun told us that there was a wax model of Kim Il Sung inside and that we were to bow respectfully before him. The remarkably lifelike model had been presented by a Chinese organization. A book I bought later in the trip included a picture of the author 'with Kim Il Sung'. The Kim Il Sung in that photograph looked remarkably like the wax model I saw at the Friendship Exhibition, right down to the dais on which the model stood. I wish my memory were good enough for me to be certain about this. The wax model convincingly reproduced the charisma that the real Kim is said to have possessed.

The most impressive exhibit was in a long, narrow room. Here

we were shown an elaborate luxury train carriage from Stalin and a slightly smaller but no less elaborate carriage from Mao Zedong. Both were bullet-proof, dark green and included a conference room complete with a serious-looking table and wooden chairs. We were told that Stalin presented the larger carriage after the Second World War. Mao had waited until after the Korean War to present his smaller but still generous gift. I can imagine Mao detecting a slightly embarrassed look on Kim's face and saying, 'You've already got one, haven't you? Oh dear, but I just couldn't think what else to get you!'

Having completed the tour, we were taken up to the top floor where there was the usual gift shop as well as a refreshments counter. Even though all the exhibits were kept in the basement, the building was six stories high. One can only wonder what the rest of the space is used for. Our guides showed us to the seats of honour at the front of the large covered balcony. Here we peered through the rain that was pouring down over the lush greenery. We drank coffee and were invited to write a paragraph of gushing praise in the visitors' book. As with the other visitors' books we were shown, there was no pressure to write in them but it was clear that writing anything unflattering would cause serious problems. Rob and I wrote a few sentences and Mrs Kim carefully translated them into Korean for the benefit of the Korean Workers' Party propaganda machine. I was embarrassed by my inability to spell the word 'privilege'.

Having admired Kim Il Sung's ego-boosting stash of expensive trinkets, we drove a few hundred metres to another building. This one was, if anything, even more elaborate. It was Kim Jong Il's own Friendship Exhibition. Outside was another pair of guards holding shiny guns. They were as immobile as the wax model of Kim Il Sung we had just seen and looked much more serious. It would almost have been worth learning Korean just to tell them jokes.

The lobby was vast and included a bifurcated marble staircase. A wide, long corridor of dark polished stone led to the displays. Again, the corridor was adorned with photographs of animals and plants

that had been presented to the Dear Leader. The place was so elaborate and so stuffed full of ostentatious treasure that it looked like something out of a James Bond film.

Our path across the entrance hall cut through a passing column of local schoolchildren. The reaction of the girls nearest us as we passed was disconcerting: they flinched when they realized we were Westerners. A similar thing happened a few minutes later. We were in the room that holds gifts that have yet to be placed in their final display cases. Rob watched as two young women in army uniforms wandered over to the place where Ned and I were admiring a four-hundred kilogram bird carved in stone. It had been presented by a Chinese organization. Rob said that when they realized we were Westerners they scurried off as though we had cholera. No doubt the North Korean government would characterize Western ideas of liberalism and free trade as being far more pernicious than a mere fatal disease of insanitation.

We were shown a room filled with South Korean gifts, which appeared to combine demonstrations of goodwill with boasts of that nation's ability to manufacture luxury cars and large television sets. We did not stop here long; Kim Jong Il's exhibition received barely half an hour, far less time than we spend viewing the gifts presented to Kim Il Sung. Indeed, throughout the trip our impression was that Kim Jong Il had inherited his father's power but not his popularity.

I chatted with a Chinese tourist for a few moments while we were taking off our shoe covers. He told me that he was studying in Germany and seemed proud of his Western connections.

We ate a Korean lunch at our hotel followed by the obligatory hour's rest. Mr Chun explained to me that government regulations required that we rest for an hour after eating a meal. Presumably this luxurious regulation does not extend to Korean peasants, especially given the shortage of food.

When we met for the afternoon, Mrs Kim had changed out of her costume and was now wearing a yellow cardigan. Our first stop was

the Pohyon Temple. We toured it in the heavy rain. The buildings had been restored after taking a drubbing from the Americans in the Korean War. One of the pavilions was adorned with eighteenth-century paintings. We were invited to step into one of the temple buildings but our guides threw a fit when Rob stood on the surrounding wooden ledge to take off his shoes. 'Take off shoes!' they pealed in unison. It appears that their idea of the threshold of an East Asian room is slightly different from that of neighbouring countries.

I joined Rob in the temple and explored the dimness while being watched by a grinning man who was dressed as a monk. There was an attractive old bell in a shadowy corner, modest in size and faded with age, just as temple paraphernalia should be.

Next they showed us some inexpertly sculpted bushes. We were asked to guess what the shapes were. I correctly identified a map of the Korean peninsula but caused great hilarity when I told them that the lotus flower looked like a cabbage. The tiger-shaped bush looked more like a spilt blancmange to me.

We viewed a few other damp buildings. They did little for me; I have been over-exposed to temples and shrines. We saw another man pretending to be a monk. He was fiddling with his rosaries and grinning like a maniac. The one thing that made this temple stand apart from all the others I have seen was its cleanliness; no litter was to be seen anywhere.

As we drove on to the Sangwon Valley trailhead, Mrs Kim asked me if I was religious. I said I was not. I returned the question and received an unelaborated reply: 'No'. The scenery at the bottom of the valley was delightful, even in the rain. We were to hike up the valley to admire the waterfalls and scenery.

The trail was well-defined and cut out of bare rock in many places. The authorities clearly put a great deal of effort into keeping it well-maintained; Rob even noticed some flowerbeds. As the path became more difficult, Ned and Mrs Kim turned back. We seemed to be climbing a steep gorge. Mr Chun powered ahead in his blazer,

tie and slip-on shoes, holding his folding umbrella in one hand and pulling on the safety chains with the other. It took some effort to keep up with him.

The route was graced with a series of outstanding waterfalls. They were high and gushing, tumbling down complex arrangements of boulders and rock faces. The government had seen fit to carve revolutionary slogans into the mountainside. Had they been in English I would have considered it state vandalism, but the fact that they were carved in Korean script made them picturesque.

The trees on the steep mountain slopes around us were varied and beautiful. There was a pavilion for us to rest under every kilometre or so. There was also a pavilion at the end of the trail. Here Rob smoked a cigarette and Mr Chun revealed the strain he had been under during the climb by taking off his jacket and loosening his tie. I asked him how long he had been a tour guide.

‘About ten years.’

‘And before then?’

‘Oh, working. Working in the working place.’

Well thank you Mr Chun, your life is an open book to me now.

The climb down was tricky because of the wet rocks. Rob asked Mr Chun whether he ever worried about people slipping. Mr Chun calmly replied that there was a different, gentler path nearby for tourists older than sixty. Rob raced ahead while I chatted to Mr Chun. He was keen to promote tourism to the DPRK. He asked me how much I had paid, how I had heard about the DPRK as a tourist destination and whether I thought it was expensive.

We found Rob, Mrs Kim, Ned and the driver back at the minibus. Rob was smoking another cigarette. As we drove back to the hotel, Mrs Kim told me that her favourite colour was jade.

We went straight up to our rooms to change into dry clothes. While we were there, Rob asked for some hot water. Most East Asian hotel rooms have a flask of hot water and ours was empty. Rob also mentioned that the retractable clothesline in the bathroom seemed to be

stuck. These two minor requests led to multiple visits to our room from an anxious Mr Chun (who stripped off to his vest for the occasion) and various other members of staff. They popped in and out looking terribly concerned. Eventually he offered to move us to a different room. We declined the offer, decided not to mention it again and went down to dinner.

We spent the rest of the evening in the windowless 'casino'. This was just a dimly-lit bar equipped with a dozen disused Japanese pin-ball machines. I made the mistake of asking one of the two barmaids what the Korean word for beer is. She spoke English well enough to take our order and explain that beer was priced at one dollar for two bottles but this question (which I thought was fairly straightforward) threw her into a panic. Normally people respond to such idle curiosity with either the word in question and a little titter at how cute it is for the foreigner to want to learn a bit of the local language, or else a blank look. However, this girl looked as though she was about to be marched off by the Thought Police. She lamely said, 'Yes, Korean beer', and offered me a glass. Rob and Ned took up the challenge and only succeeded in making her more agitated. After a minute or so of futile questioning, a sinister Chinese-speaking tour guide came along and accusingly asked me if he could help. I repeated the question but he did not answer. Clearly the Korean language was a state secret. The two barmaids and the tour guide shouted at each other for a minute or two. Once this confrontation was over, the barmaid stood stiffly upright against the bar for all of forty seconds and then marched out. When she came back a few minutes later she looked composed again. I have no idea what my transgression was. In the end, I just read the word *maekju* (맥주) off the bottle in front of me.

Mindful of my nasty experience with alcohol the night before, I stuck to Malaysian strawberryade and Japanese pineapple juice. As we went to our room just after midnight, I noticed that the 'Tuesday' carpet had already been put in the lift. This efficiency impressed and slightly unnerved me.

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The rain had cleared and the sun shone over the valley beneath our hotel. I wandered around outside in the large forecourt while we waited for our guides. They seemed unused to such punctual charges. There was a clutch of square blocks of flats a few hundred metres down the road. I conjectured that they were for the hotel staff. Their white walls gleamed in the sunshine. A river demarcated the area we were allowed to explore alone. I did not even want to think about what would happen if I transgressed.

As we drove back to Pyongyang, we saw crowds of people gathered at a few spots in the countryside. This was a little mystifying but I dared not ask our guides what was going on. It is difficult to pin down exactly what constituted a question that it was acceptable to ask. However, it was usually easy to tell which questions would be welcomed. The best questions were either factual or related to affairs before the division of Korea.

Just beyond the hotel was a row of peasant houses with traditional-style Korean roofs. They seemed to have been put there for show. I would have thought that the occupants would prefer a long-handled hoe or some extra potatoes to a fancy roof.

As on the way out to Myohyangsan, the scenery was expansive and unspoiled. We saw a few vehicles during this journey and were even overtaken at one point by an expensive-looking car. We also saw an old jalopy filled with Party members and their luggage. There was an electronic bell in our minibus that made a gentle 'ding ding ding' sound whenever our driver went over the speed limit. At the border of the Pyongyang district we had to stop for an inspection. As soon as the guard saw that there were Westerners on board he waved us through with a contemptuous flick of his red flag.

The traffic became busier as we came closer to the city centre. It soon became almost like any other city; at one point our minibus even had to queue. The beautiful traffic policewomen were working hard

with their baton sequences. I asked where the DPRK bought its fuel. Mr Chun said it came mostly from South-East Asia and admitted to a fuel shortage. The Western history books say that this shortage was caused by China and Russia ceasing their subsidized oil supplies. I saw an army truck carrying a pile of cardboard boxes that looked like they might contain televisions.

We were dropped off at the Folklore Museum where we were given a highly informative tour, lasting precisely one hour. Most of the narrative was about traditional Korean clothes. We were shown a woman's umbrella hat, which had a span as large as a golfing umbrella. Another exhibit was a traditional Korean interior. We also saw an old-style picture of a landlord looking decadent and lazy while watching over his labourers. When we came to a chest engraved with calligraphy our guide translated for us: 'Gold and jewels are not valuable; only useful knowledge is.' She went on to ask, 'Is it true? Is it true?' Judging from the two Friendship Exhibitions we had seen the day before, the Great Leader and the Dear Leader clearly thought not. The real political spiel only came at the end of the tour and was disappointingly short.

As part of the tour we were shown some spoons. We were solemnly informed that the spoon had been invented in Korea. The idea that the rest of the world had struggled along eating soup with a fork until the Koreans had come up with this handy gadget caused us great amusement. Indeed, it became a running joke throughout the rest of the trip.

Mrs Kim told me a traditional Korean saying: If you have three daughters then you will not need to lock the doors of your house at night because after paying their dowries there will be nothing left for burglars to steal. Mrs Kim also told us that there is a Korean tradition that a picture of a tiger in your house will scare away burglars.

On leaving the Folklore Museum we went to the Foreign Languages Bookstore. It was just around the corner so we were taken there on foot. This was the first time we had been allowed to go

from one location to the next without using the minibus. It was a warm sunny day with a gentle breeze. It was ideal weather for a stroll around the city streets, especially as there is almost no air pollution in Pyongyang.

The bookshop was light, airy and old-fashioned. It was the only shop we visited that could conceivably have been for locals as well as tourists. We spent more than half an hour examining the goods on display in wood-framed glass cabinets and tall bookcases. Almost every item in the shop could not have been bought in any other country. Much of it was political propaganda that would probably get you arrested if you attempted to sell it in the West.

A large cloth DPRK flag had been draped over one of the display counters. This was in response to Rob's request for such a flag earlier in the trip. We were unsure whether this careful attention to our requests was touching or scary. The guides and shop staff did not say, 'Here is the flag you asked for, sir.' They just waited for Rob to notice and buy it.

The next sight was the Taedong Gate. In an effort to see at least a small part of the city on foot, we asked to walk there. Mr Chun allowed this and we returned the favour by sticking close to him and Mrs Kim as we made the five-minute stroll. There was no litter on the wide pavement, nor were there any drunks, stray dogs, people standing around chatting, street vendors or advertisements. At the time I did not find it sterile or clinical, just pleasant. Presumably this is what the DPRK authorities want to achieve. However, in the long term I think I would find the inorganic nature of the place wearing.

The gate had the Chinese characters for 'Great Eastern Gate' (大東門) written on it. The structure was in good repair and looked a little incongruous next to all the light brown multi-storey concrete buildings. It was located on the banks of the wide Taedong River that runs through the centre of Pyongyang. A little farther along was the Pyongyang Bell (평양종각), a traditional-style Buddhist bell protected by a wooden cage. Next to this stood the Ryongwang

Pavilion (런광정), another traditional wooden pavilion of little real interest.

However, the street scene around us was fascinating. This stretch of riverbank was clearly popular with the locals. A party of young schoolgirls was squatting on the ground while being instructed by their teacher. I have tried squatting in the Asian style. I can just about force my legs into the right position and keep them there for as long as four or five seconds before my sinews start to protest. How Asians manage to stay in that position for the duration of a school lesson is beyond me.

There was also a group of people painting pictures of the pavilion and the surrounding greenery. The quality of their work was high but they all used exactly the same style. The vernal sunshine certainly seemed ideal for painting.

As usual, the locals did their best to ignore us. Some of them gave us furtive glances, especially the children. We dawdled back to the minibus and were taken back to the hotel where we were given the same rooms as before. They had not even emptied the rubbish bin; the half-pack of Marlboros that I had thrown away as a surprise present for the room maid was still there. I had been making an effort to get rid of my stash of cigarettes on the sly. I had kicked a pack under my bed just before leaving the Hyangsan Pyramid Hotel. I also left a pack on the breakfast table in the Yanggakdo Hotel. This second ruse was only partly successful; Mr Chun told me that I had left them behind and was a little surprised when I said that the staff could keep them.

I used the time after lunch to update my journal. Our itinerary did not include much spare time so I had to grab opportunities to note things down when I could. The tour description contained none of the usual 'At leisure in Bangkok' slots. I imagine that this was partly because there were so many sights they wanted us to see. However, their main concern was almost certainly that 'the Devil makes work for idle hands'. That is to say, they wanted to make sure we did not have a chance to sneak out unguarded and pollute the minds of the

local people. The reason Mr Chun gave for our not being allowed out alone was that people might mistake us for Americans and attack us. Since the one thing that the USA and the DPRK governments agree on is that US citizens should not visit the DPRK, this was not a plausible excuse. This was a good example of the Confucian tendency to give face-saving but obviously false explanations. I knew that trying to argue would be pointless; Mr Chun would get into a great deal of trouble if he let us go out unaccompanied. The only other possible motivation for trying to press the point would be to encourage Mr Chun to suggest a change in policy to his superiors. While this could easily happen in the West, I knew that the slightest hint of unorthodoxy in the DPRK would be considered gravely seditious and be treated with great harshness.

Our first stop for the afternoon was the DPRK's art studio. This was a large complex, not unlike a university campus. Some hundreds of people were squatting in the forecourt for no apparent reason. They were shading their eyes from the sun and chatting. Mr Chun told us that they were artists. They certainly did not seem to be busy ones. We were shown into a building and taken to meet three different artists in their private studios. One of them painted using gold dust on paper. This meant that his paintings were outrageously expensive even though they looked as kitsch as anything one could buy at an English car boot sale. Gold is one of the DPRK's natural resources; I have read that unfortunate political prisoners do the work of mining the stuff.

I noticed that the studios were tidy and were not cluttered with the paraphernalia one would normally expect an artist to accumulate. Had all three artists tidied up in preparation for our brief visit? Completed paintings filled the walls; surely these should have been taken off and hung in a gallery or simply sold? I could not help wondering whether these studios were a sham to encourage us to buy the unremarkable work on sale in the shop.

We spent some time in the Pyongyang art emporium. It was the largest retail outlet we saw in the DPRK. Mr Chun explained that its

wares were graded by quality. The ground floor was for the work of Ordinary Artists, the first floor for the work of Merited Artists and the top floor for the work of People's Artists. Almost every item looked like the sort of thing one might buy from a pound shop. Clearly they were aiming at the Chinese and Japanese market. I was disappointed by the complete absence of political art. Rob and Ned bought a few knick-knacks but I abstained.

I saw a country scene painting that I liked. It depicted the usual white peasant houses snuggled up against a steep hill. There was a river and hydroelectric plant in the foreground. The fields were somewhat more fertile than those we had seen. The political slogan strung across the slope above the settlement was what made the picture special. To the North Koreans these slogans must be as commonplace as advertising billboards are in the West.

Mr Chun told us that this institute was responsible for all the monuments and murals we saw around the city. It seems that the DPRK saves its most skilled artists for works of visual propaganda. The quality of craftsmanship shown in the bronze sculptures that adorn Pyongyang is extremely high. There was a sculpture of a Korean airman next to our minibus as we left. It was only a life-sized bust but it projected a strong feeling of energy and ideologically-driven hatred. Much of what is achieved in the DPRK can be put down to coercion and intimidation. However, the artists who fashion the faces of the political sculptures deserve real credit; it is difficult enough to create any kind of convincing expression on a face. To produce faces with just the right blend of political orthodoxy is a notable (albeit misguided) achievement.

This was not the end of our Socialist shopping experience. The next stop was what they called an 'exported goods shop'. As always, there was no pressure to buy anything. This was good because there was hardly anything worth buying. For some unfathomable reason there was a tacky Philips sound system on sale; this struck me as an unlikely purchase for a visitor to the world's most repressive regime.

I bought some blueberry wine. This is a speciality of the remote north-eastern area of Korea, near the short border with Russia. Another drink on sale was a forty-percent spirit called Bog Bilberry Wine. I passed on this not only because of its less than appealing name but also because I feared it would blind me. Elsewhere in the shop I found a suit in the style worn by Korean Workers' Party officials. It was plainly styled with a Mandarin collar. It seems that North Korean cadres eat well: it fitted me across the shoulders but there was a gaping void around my belly so I left it.

Rob bought a bottle of whisky. It amused me to see that the brand was called 'MacArthur's'. General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) directed UN operations in the Korean War from its outbreak in 1950 until 11 April 1951 when President Truman sacked him for insubordination. Considering the vitriolic (but understandable) hatred that the DPRK has for the USA in general and their actions in the Korean War in particular, this was an interesting choice of brand for their shops to say the least. The European equivalent would be Hitler Beer or Hirohito Sake.

Some of the ornaments on sale incorporated female figures into their designs. I noticed that they were always clad in some kind of bathing costume or slip. However, some of the items in the Friendship Exhibition did include undraped ladies. I have read that nudity is strictly taboo in the DPRK; it seems as though the Friendship Exhibition is granted a special dispensation.

Having had my fill of poor-quality consumer goods, I wandered outside into the courtyard. There was some kind of official building in the same compound. Naturally, I did not go to investigate. I met some Chinese tourists who had arrived in a large bus. They were on their way into the shop. They were friendly and delighted by my few words of Chinese. It was lovely standing in the spring sunshine watching the world go by outside the compound gate. As usual, there was no question of crossing the threshold out into the city streets.

Our next stop was the Mangyongdae Children's Palace. On our

way there, we drove down Kwangbok Street. This is a four-kilometre long ten-lane road lined with vast white blocks of flats. We were told that this development was built in eighteen months. While housing developments are not normally an impressive sight, this one had my eyes bulging.

There was little traffic on the road. We saw some lengthy, well-ordered bus queues where the people waiting never seemed to talk to one another. The modern red double-decker buses were crammed to bursting, although to be fair they were no more crowded than the London Underground at rush hour.

The Children's Palace took impressiveness to a scary new level. It was a large C-shaped building with an observatory dome at each end. Mrs Kim told us that the shape of the building was supposed to convey the image of a mother holding out her arms to a child. As soon as we got out of the minibus a stern local girl who looked about nine years old greeted us. She was wearing a white blouse and a bright red neckerchief. She led us up the long, shallow flight of white steps that led to the entrance. She spoke in Korean with Mr Chun translating. Our route was flanked by a series of outsized animal sculptures. One depicted the moon with a rabbit sitting in its crescent. This lunar bunny was looking down to earth through a telescope. I thought of the Orwellian slogan: 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU'.

A statue of a horse pulling a cart full of animals in the triumphant, energetic style typical of DPRK sculpture dominated the centre of the steps. These oversized installations did not look at all childish or cuddly. Taken together they were sinister and frightening, setting the scene for the grotesque spectacle that we were to see inside. For I found the Children's Palace deeply disturbing.

We learnt that the Children's Palace is an extra-curricular activities centre for the young people of Pyongyang. It is free of charge and open to all. The inside of the building was vast and opulent to the point of absurdity. Acres of marble led up to stratospheric ceilings from which hung numerous large and ostentatious chandeliers.

There were fountains and plush carpets. I was soon overcome with bewilderment. Our young guide led us around with a military precision that was disconcerting to see in a child.

She took us to see a series of what were supposedly ordinary lessons in progress. We were shown a computer class where ten year olds used sophisticated database software, spreadsheets and wrote code in Microsoft Visual Basic. I noticed that the PCs were bang up to date. The keyboards were marked in Roman letters only but the screens showed Korean glyphs. Unlike any other class of children in the whole world, the pupils paid no attention to us.

A music class played us a piece of music on accordions. There must have been twenty performers, all wearing little red neckerchiefs. One boy made a mistake and stopped playing with an exceedingly worried look on his face. The teacher went over to see to him. The rest of the children played in perfect time without a single discernible mistake. Ned suggested later that day that we had been listening to a recording; he said that the children had seemed to be miming their performance. I am certain that he was mistaken. As far as I know, it is well-nigh impossible to reproduce music so convincingly using an audio system.

Besides, the dancing classes could only have been real. In the first one, we saw a group of a dozen little girls in black leotards hold a forced smile as they performed a dance in perfect synchronization. They all looked about seven to me. We saw another class where a couple of girls did some baton-tossing moves on a gymnastics mat while a group of smaller children did bar work. Another class demonstrated their prowess on a traditional Korean zither-like instrument called a *kayagum* (가야금). The rich plucking sound filled the high white room.

We were also shown an embroidery class. As before, the children took no notice of us as they worked on their pieces. It is impossible to know whether they had been given prepared items to stitch or really had produced exhibition-quality material. Again, I was struck by the

total absence of paraphernalia around the room. In my art classes at school there was no end of rubbish stacked up in corners and stuffed into cupboards. Similar to this was the calligraphy class. Where were all the old brushes, the sink and the cupboards full of empty ink bottles? Why were the children utterly indifferent to the streams of tourists filing past?

They took us to the cavernous sports hall. A group of about two hundred teenage boys demonstrated some tae kwon do moves with fearful precision. We were shown the swimming pool, which we were told was a hundred metres long, twenty-five metres wide and up to five metres deep. Right on cue, a girl performed an elaborate dive from the highest of the half-dozen or so boards as we admired this chlorinated inland sea.

I asked Mrs Kim how old our guide was. It turned out that she was thirteen. 'Third Grade', said Mrs Kim, evidently under the impression that this might mean something to me. Confucian tradition dictates that a child is aged one at birth and then becomes one year older each New Year's Day. Therefore, our guide may only have been eleven or twelve by Western counting. However, to me she nevertheless looked about nine. Certainly, she was more than happy to accept gifts of sweets at the end of our tour. Perhaps the famine affected Pyongyang badly enough to stunt children's growth.

Our little guide led us down to the large gift shop. It was swarming with Chinese and Japanese tourists. How many extra-curricular activity centres provide an opportunity to buy brightly-coloured tat? I laughed openly at a surreal painting that depicted a group of pink-faced cherub-like cartoon children playing beneath an aggressive interpretation of the navy section of the Monument to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War. I did not notice Mrs Kim standing beside me. 'Are they cute?' she said, not realizing the real reason for my mirth. 'Yes, they are very cute', I replied.

I went to stand outside the shop door where there was an ostentatiously large lobby. We were in a sort of marble pit with a monstrous

chandelier hanging down into it. Mrs Kim followed me and asked, 'Do you want to wash your hands?' This is the East Asian euphemism for visiting the lavatory: Japanese loos are marked 'Hand Wash Room' (お手洗い). The girl appeared out of nowhere and showed me the way up an elaborate marble staircase to the privy. Although it had a high ceiling and a fancy wooden door, it smelt of stale urine and had rickety fittings. On my way there I saw my Japanese friends again. They seemed inordinately pleased to see me. On my way back I chatted to them for a few moments.

I saw a large Korean man in this circulation area. He was wearing a badge with both Kims depicted on it. From his swagger and corpulence I guessed that he was high up in the rotten hierarchy.

We were led towards the theatre to watch a variety show performed by child prodigies. I became separated from our group by the hordes of pushing Chinese as we ascended the escalator. Mrs Kim came to rescue me with a concerned look on her face. We had seats on the front row. Mr Chun sat at one end of our party, Mrs Kim at the other. The stage floor was divided into sections that could be moved from side to side. The stage hands used this mechanism to bring on each set of new performers. A choir sat in a pair of moving stalls, which changed position according to the act. There was an orchestra pit where children played a wide range of instruments. Mrs Kim translated the title of each act for me.

One of the dances had a Russian flavour to it. There was a rendition of a song called *Where Are You, Dear General?* accompanied by a child playing a cheesy synthesizer. Mrs Kim informed me that this was 'the most famous song'. The standard of the performances was exceptionally high. It was at this point that I almost took leave of my senses; what had these children been put through to become so proficient at such an early age? Some of the kids were little more than toddlers and none of them looked over thirteen. The singing acts had children with remarkably mature voices, so they may have been miming. However, the dancing could only have been genuine.

A projection screen at the rear of the stage enhanced the entertainment. I found the reunification dance particularly moving. There was also a deafening drum show.

The Chinese chattered and spat throughout the show. They even walked away from their seats to have photographs taken with the stage in the background. It seems as though they share the Japanese enthusiasm for photography.

On our way out Ned gave our young guide some sweets that he had received as change. Rob gave her a few dollars but I gave her nothing. A band of Chinese grabbed her for some photographs and soon she had her hands full of confectionery. All of a sudden she stood in the dusk looking more like the little girl she was rather than a miniature drill sergeant.

We drove back to the hotel along the concrete canyon of Kwangbok Street. We passed hordes of the children we had just seen performing; they were all wearing Socialist red neckerchiefs and carefully pressed uniforms. The Yanggakdo Hotel had suddenly become busy, presumably because of the forthcoming Mass Gymnastics performance. The show was to be a North Korean Socialist interpretation of the traditional Korean folk song *Arirang* and the opening night was the next day. One of the new tour groups was from Malaysia. While I was taking the lift to my room on the thirteenth floor, the man standing with me asked, 'Ruski?' I said I was English and asked if he was Malaysian. He replied that he was Korean. I was surprised; it was the first and only time a local had struck up conversation with me. He may have been a Japan-born Korean.

A group of thirty-three Westerners turned up that evening. They had arrived on the overnight sleeper train with Koryo Tours. This Beijing-based tour company is the only one I know of that specializes in trips to the DPRK for Westerners. One member of the party told me that every village they had seen on the inbound journey looked exactly the same. Their group had been split into two sections, each one with its own pair of guides. I found travelling as a group of three

(or six counting our guides and driver) unusual; a group of twenty would have made me feel more uncomfortable than the Children's Palace.

Our restaurant was almost full. Later on in the trip, Mr Chun explained that the Yanggakdo Hotel Restaurant Number Two is the DPRK's only restaurant that specializes in dealing with Westerners and their strange ways. The Yanggakdo Hotel also had Chinese and Japanese restaurants. I doubt London has any restaurants that cater specifically for North Koreans. From what I have read about the famine in the DPRK, those dining at such a restaurant would be directed to dig up roots in Hyde Park and forced to sell their daughters for a sack of corn.

The Yanggakdo Hotel also sports a revolving restaurant on the roof. It is infuriating to see such ostentation in a country where even the most fortunate peasants must till the soil with basic hand tools. However, we did not concern ourselves with such moral niceties that evening and headed straight up there for a few beers. The monuments and bridges of the city were lit up by the DPRK's meagre electricity supply. We saw them in steady but slow rotation. The lights were turned off at about eleven o'clock but the flame on top of the Tower of the Juche Idea remained on all night. The view was dramatic but a little eerie because the usual carpet of street lamps and illuminated windows was entirely absent. Was it to save energy or was it an air-raid blackout precaution? We will never find out. There is so much about the DPRK that it is impossible to know; their paranoia, reclusiveness, belligerence and pride yields a sickeningly evil conundrum.

WEDNESDAY 1 MAY 2002

Today is a national holiday in the DPRK; International Labour Day is Communism's most important festival. When I mentioned this to Mr Chun he asked me whether we have 'a day for the working people'

in the West. I told him that we did not. I have since learnt that the Labor Day public holiday held in the United States is a Capitalist equivalent. However, no such holiday exists in Britain.

We ate a traditional Korean breakfast during which I chatted with a German man who somehow looked as though he worked in banking. He was a Burma enthusiast and had been there many times.

When I was in China in 1993 there were two currencies. One was called People's Money or *rénmínbì* and was used by the masses. The other was called Foreign Exchange Certificates. This money was issued in return for hard currency and could be changed back again. However, *rénmínbì* was not convertible. This system caused no end of trouble and was eventually scrapped.

Everything we had bought in the DPRK so far had been priced in US dollars. This struck me as analogous to English shopkeepers accepting Reichsmarks in 1941. Despite US dollars being the primary currency for tourists, the DPRK continues to maintain a dual-currency system similar to that once tried by China. Mr Chun explained that we had to pay for our Mass Gymnastics tickets using a currency called Korean Temporary Foreign Exchange Certificates. This involved exchanging dollars at yet another of the hotel's facilities. Once I had handed over my fifty dollars, the larcenous witches on the other side of the desk claimed that I had not given them any cash at all. I stood my ground and eventually received my foreigners' *won*. Afterwards, Mr Chun apologized for the clerks' behaviour and assured me that he had 'scolded them severely'. I suggested that they should be sent off for some re-education; in the DPRK this is a euphemism for being incarcerated in a prison camp. And I meant it.

The foreign exchange certificates were crisp and fresh. The different denominations were almost identical to one another. They were different from the DPRK notes I had purchased from a collectors' shop in London. I did not see any of the local currency while I was in the DPRK; Mr Chun and Mrs Kim were coy about showing it to me. My guess is that they were ashamed of the state of their folding money;

on the one or two occasions I saw people clutching fistfuls of notes, the ink was faded and the paper badly worn. It makes little sense for a government that is unable to feed its people to expend resources printing banknotes.

No sooner had all three of us acquired our *won* than we were led to the Mass Gymnastics ticket desk twenty metres away. There we bought our tickets for that evening's performance without any fuss. In keeping with the East Asian love of hierarchy, there was a wide range of tickets available. The lowest was Fourth Class at thirty dollars, the highest First Class at an eye-watering five hundred dollars. We chose Third Class tickets at fifty dollars.

This chore completed, we embarked on the day's sightseeing. It seems that Pyongyang has an unending supply of monuments. Most artists will agree that it is easier to paint fanciful things, such as landscapes and monsters, than it is to paint everyday things like people and cats. Similarly, it is much easier for the DPRK government to erect ostentatious one-off spectacles than to provide enough food for the people to eat.

We were taken to a square that held a variety of fountains. We were informed that they had been installed in 1973. Mr Chun pointed out that they took a variety of forms: umbrella, candle and so on. More impressive than the humdrum spurts of water was the carved white marble statue of women dancing with a length of cloth. It was somewhat larger than life and complimented the gushing fountains superbly; it was flowing, continuous, pure and sparking like the water yet immobile and made of stone. Mr Chun showed us a spout that he claimed was the first fountain in Korea. It was eighty metres high and produced a great deal of spray. Nearby were some tourist knick-knack stalls. We were not taken to them and making an uninvited appearance was out of the question.

As we headed back to the minibus, a woman selling flowers approached us. She just happened to have two bouquets, each of which was modest but well-arranged and wrapped in cellophane. We had

got used to this sort of orchestration by now. Mr Chun told us that we would need one bunch for the great statue of Kim Il Sung and another for the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery. The centrepiece of each bouquet was a *kimjongilia* flower. Characteristically, both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il have had flowers named after them. President Sukarno of Indonesia named a flower after Kim Il Sung in 1965. Kim Jong Il had to wait until 1988 when a Japanese horticulturist came up with a new type of begonia and presented it to the Dear Leader on his forty-sixth birthday. Later that day, Mr Chun pointed out a large hothouse as we passed it in the minibus. He told us that it was used specifically for growing *kimilsungia* and *kimjongilia*.

Even though it was a warm, cloudless and sunny day, ideal for strolling around this park-like city, we drove the few hundred metres to the Great Monument Mansu Hill. This is where the country's foremost statue of Kim Il Sung stands. The reader may already have gathered that any Kim statue is up against stiff competition on the greatness front, but this one prevails over all others. We were required to stand a respectful distance from the eighty metre high bronze likeness and make a deep bow. I then placed one of our bouquets at the Great Leader's feet. Having completed this ritual, we were free to explore the rest of the hill.

Mr Chun told us that this statue cost some exorbitant sum to build. No doubt he also told us that it was erected by volunteers at astonishing speed. This monument spiel had already started to sound the same; it was fortunate that our guides were more than happy to chat about plenty of other things.

This image of Kim had his left arm behind his back and his right hand raised to embrace the masses. A pair of remarkable revolutionary sculptures in the usual energetic Socialist style flanked the statue. One sculpture depicted the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Struggle; the other showed Socialist Reconstruction divided into its military and industrial aspects. The people depicted in this pair of sculptures were about five metres high. In total, there were about two hundred

of these bronze giants, so even without the large Kim statue it was an impressive sight. Naturally, the whole monument area was immaculately clean and free of litter. I never tired of this hyper-realistic revolutionary art; my only regret was that I did not see more of it.

It was interesting to compare the figures and expressions on the sculptures we saw with the bodies and faces of real people in the DPRK. The suspicious eyes of the tall, thin men in black suits who seemed to follow us around were something I never saw in bronze. Similarly, the peasants we saw at a distance in the fields looked thin and wore the blank expressions of those who live a life of bare subsistence. Not once did I see a real person who looked muscular, healthy, well-fed and deliriously happy with ideological fervour. The statues presumably represent the way that the government want their people to see themselves. It must take an effort of doublethink to ignore the obvious contradiction. Besides, ordinary people probably never see these wasteful monuments.

While at the Great Monument Mansu Hill we had an opportunity to admire the Chollima Statue. This, we were told, was erected in the 1950s to celebrate the prodigious steel production of a particular factory during the period of reconstruction that followed the Korean War. The factory had a capacity of 60,000 tonnes of steel a year. Kim Il Sung pronounced that it should produce 70,000 tonnes in a year to meet reconstruction requirements. Thanks to their revolutionary zeal, the noble workers in the steelyard produced some 120,000 tonnes of steel in that crucial year. In a spontaneous act of gratitude and joy, the city erected the Chollima Statue to celebrate the achievement. The statue depicts a worker and a peasant riding on a winged horse. Even though it is far smaller than many of the other monuments in the city, the Chollima Statue is one of the most visible. Its style was somewhat different from the other monuments, probably because the correct ideologically orthodox style had not been fully developed at that time.

One day after I had returned to England I was showing a friend my

postcards of Tiananmen Square. When we came to Mao Zedong's mausoleum she exclaimed at the man's immodest choice of building: a columned edifice covering five acres of Tiananmen Square. I agreed and mentioned Kim Il Sung's mausoleum. We passed this on our way to and from our next stop, the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery. Kim's mausoleum is known as the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, formerly called the Presidential Palace. However, calling this complex a palace scarcely hints at its scale. From the minibus, the building seemed to go on and on. Apparently it contains some of the world's longest conveyor belts; they are used to transfer mourning visitors from the entrance to the embalmed body of the Great Leader himself. The white marble walls of the complex were adorned with bas-relief sculptures of herons. Mr Chun told us that it was possible for foreigners to visit the mausoleum, but only after having obtained permission in advance. It is no exaggeration to say that North Korea venerates Kim Il Sung as a god.

The Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery was at the top of a long and steep flight of stone steps. Mr Chun explained to us that Koreans consider climbing steps to be a mark of respect to the dead. However, being tourists who could not be expected to be respectful, we were driven straight to the top. From here we had a splendid view of the city. First we were required to bow at a relatively small ceremonial monument where Ned laid our second bouquet of flowers. We were then free to look around. There were over a hundred bronze busts of the most important martyrs to the Anti-Japanese Revolutionary Struggle. Mr Chun explained that there was not enough space to honour all of the martyrs so the authorities had chosen the most important ones. He also told us that all the people honoured in the cemetery had been friends of Kim Il Sung.

Mr Chun pointed out a particular martyr and told us his story. Apparently, he had been captured by the Japanese and 'tortured severely'. So that he would not give away secrets during his suffering, he had cut out his own tongue. His mother was enshrined in the next

bust to show that families of revolutionaries were treated well. At the top of the shrine the three 'Great Generals' (Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Suk) had their own special busts. Although they were set apart from the others, they were the same size. All the busts looked out over the green city and sparkling river. The cemetery is visible from many places in Pyongyang.

As we walked on to be picked up by the minibus, we met Mrs Ri who happened to be conducting another tour there. We exchanged pleasantries and Mrs Ri asked whether the DPRK contact at my travel agent was well.

Our next stop was the Gwang Pop temple. As with the other temples we had seen, it was immaculate. The lawns were so neat that it looked as though the grass had been trimmed with nail scissors. It had been rebuilt out of concrete after being completely destroyed in the Korean War. The structure was brightly painted and obviously not a working temple. The usual gift shop was a tiny blue tin kiosk, just big enough for someone to sit in and sell brochures. At the main hall I took off my shoes and posted a dollar into the offerings box. I then knelt down in front of the Buddha for a few moments.

This minor sight out of the way, we headed to Pyongyang's fun-fair. It was busy, presumably because of the public holiday. We were invited to take part in a tug o' war; the Koreans took this seriously. They shouted *ki yah! ki yah! ki yah!* as they pulled. There was a small group of musicians and dancers wearing goblin costumes to spur the competitors on. We took part in three tugs altogether, which left me with slightly stiff arms for the rest of the trip. The locals did not seem to be in the slightest bit scared of us. This is a confusing country.

We also watched a wrestling match; combat sports seem to be an important part of traditional Korean culture. Mr Chun arranged for us to have a go on the water ride, which we thoroughly enjoyed. Dozens of local people waved and smiled at us as we went up and down the chutes. Perhaps they are only allowed to be friendly towards foreigners from a distance.

Next we were taken to see some group dancing. There were a few hundred people taking part in a mass circle dance. The music was provided by a loudspeaker van; presumably these are usually used for propaganda broadcasts. We saw several such vans around Pyongyang; they are much more formidable than the puny loudhailers on English political campaign vehicles. Mr Chun asked whether we wanted to join in. Ned and Rob declined but I accepted the offer eagerly. Although I am poor at learning dance steps, this experience was too good to miss. Mrs Kim led me to a partner. I noted with interest that there were three middle-aged women wearing identical deep pink traditional dresses, all in the same part of the dance field. I conjectured that they had been planted there as potential partners for the members of our tour group. The dance lasted for about ten minutes. It was straightforward but I nevertheless entirely failed to get to grips with it. My partner gave me directions, but unfortunately she only spoke Korean. I tried to follow the moves that everyone else was making, but the two thousand people watching me made it a little difficult to concentrate. As is so often the case with dancing, there were far more women than men. Public dancing is a wonderful thing; I rarely see it in England.

Rob told me later that Mrs Kim had wandered back to our group after leaving me with my dance partner. Apparently, Mr Chun was not at all happy about her leaving me unsupervised and so she received a thorough scolding.

We passed dozens of stalls selling drinks and snacks as we walked to the minibus. People were eating picnics on a wide patch of grass below an ancient city gate. Mr Chun had been coy about our next destination and we realized why when we reached it, for it was a surprise meal on the Pyongyang Number One Pleasure Boat. Our driver joined us for this banquet lunch, which we ate outside on the top deck. The centrepiece was barbecued meat; they had even arranged fish for me. There was also a sort of jelly made from maize and raw carp. I was pleased to find that there was plenty of kimchi. We were

also presented with 'Korean bread', which was sweet and looked like slices of Swiss roll.

The boat was packed with tourists. The Malaysians were eating inside on a lower deck. The boat wandered from one side of the river to the other in the sunshine. The Taedong River is lined with trees, which added to the pleasant surroundings. However, Pyongyang is spread out, so it lacks the sort of intimacy one takes for granted in Europe. Indeed, while Pyongyang feels like a large park, it must be an inconvenient place to travel around.

Our next stop was another handicrafts shop. It was large, quiet and musty like all the others. The fittings dated firmly from the 1950s. I bought a set of stamps depicting locomotives for Rowan and a set of stamps depicting the Three Great Generals to make up the change. I then went to stand on the steps outside and watch the world go by. Our driver was squatting there, smoking. I am not sure whether the motive for taking us to all these gift shops was to extract a maximum of hard currency from us or to provide us with ample opportunities to satisfy the modern need to shop. The people working in the shops and our guides showed no interest in whether we bought anything, so I suspect the second possibility.

On 8 July 1853, Commodore Perry arrived in Tokyo as a representative of the US Government. He was commanding a squadron of two steamships and two sailing ships. At the time, Japan had been closed to the outside world since 1639. Perry's task was to deliver a letter to the Japanese government demanding that the country open itself to trade. The Japanese, seeing the 'Black Ships' (as they call them), gave in immediately and promptly embarked on the Meiji restoration. This led to the Second World War, the atom bomb, Japan's subsequent recovery, economic boom and current decline.

When a ship called the *General Sherman* tried to pull a similar stunt on Korea in 1866, it ran aground on a sandbar in Pyongyang. The locals burnt the ship to the waterline and killed all the people on board. The Koreans are not to be trifled with. The DPRK claims that

none other than the great-grandfather of Kim Il Sung masterminded this early victory against the American Imperialists. Mr Chun told us this as we admired the commemorative plaque on the banks of the Taedong River next to the Spy Ship Pueblo.

The North Korean navy seized the Spy Ship Pueblo, an American surveillance vessel, in international waters near Wonsan in January 1968. It is now moored on the banks of the Taedong River where tourists can look aghast at the evils inflicted on the DPRK by the US. A heavily-built soldier, who told us that he was a member of the patrol that captured the ship, showed us around. Mr Chun translated for us. I was inclined to believe this soldier really had helped to capture the vessel; his descriptions of what happened had the ring of an eyewitness. Dotted around the ship were photographs of the event. In the pictures the US soldiers looked worried to an extent entirely commensurate with their predicament. They were released after the US government apologized for spying on the DPRK.

The first thing we were shown when we boarded the ship was a video describing the Pueblo affair from the DPRK's point of view. The narrator's English was perfect but his accent was exceedingly strange; a sort of cross between Geordie and Australian. We sat in the ship's canteen to watch this documentary. We were then shown the rest of the boat. One of the more interesting exhibits was the 'small arms locker', which was the size of a small wardrobe. We were told that it was hit during the brief exchange of fire and, as a result, was perforated with bullet holes made when the ammunition inside went off. The Koreans had helpfully circled these holes in red paint. They had also circled the holes made in the ship's exterior by the Korean patrols. Our guide pointed out the fearsome weapons on the ship's deck: a pair of .50 calibre machine guns. There was one on the left of the bow and one astern. They told us that the DPRK forces in the exchange were made up of seven sailors and two patrol boats. It seemed as though the Americans had been under orders to surrender immediately if attacked.

Next to the small arms locker was a reproduction of the American apology. The most graphic descriptions of the capture came on the ship's bridge. The guide told us how one of the North Korean men had made the captain confess to holding that rank by threatening another sailor with a bayonet. He described how one of the US soldiers had tried to hide behind a cabinet on the bridge. The Korean sailors forced the captain to make an announcement over the Tannoy. Of the 83 Americans, only one was killed: he was hit by Korean gunfire while dumping secret documents over the side of the ship. I was surprised that 83 men could live on board such a cramped vessel.

From the Pueblo, we moved on to the Reunification Monument. It seemed that the government of the DPRK, having failed to achieve unification, had decided to build a monument to it instead. It consisted of a dramatic white marble arch over a deserted road. I noticed that the road itself had solar-powered cat's eyes on it. The arch was formed by a pair of identical women in long flowing clothes running towards one another. At around fifty metres high, it was on a similar scale to the other monuments we had seen. As usual, Mr Chun had all the numbers at the tip of his tongue. The two women were holding a motif depicting the whole Korean peninsula. On the massive base of the monument were four sculptures symbolizing various political aspects of reunification. The full name of the monument is the Monument to the Three Charters for the Reunification of Korea. It was a recent construction and so did not feature in any of our guidebooks.

The base of the monument had an alcove tiled with marble plaques similar to those we had seen beneath the Tower of the Juche Idea. One was from that great man, Lawrence Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo. There was also one from the British Korea friendship association, presented by someone called David Bookbinder. As usual, the monument also included a gift shop. This was built into one of the two bases. We sat inside for about half an hour, enjoying the cool air. We were asked whether we would like to write a testimonial; I did so, using neutral words.

We returned to the hotel for a rest before driving through the dark streets to the May Day Stadium. The absence of light in Pyongyang at night-time is notable; only the monuments were illuminated. The blocks of flats were dimly lit and there was no street lighting at all. Our driver dropped us off directly in front of the 150,000-seat stadium. This parachute-shaped edifice is located on an island and is visible throughout much of Pyongyang. The tall arches tend to look silver in photographs but in reality they are gold-coloured. As we walked through the entrance I could see a large white wall on the far side of the stadium. When we emerged into the floodlights I realized that it was a vast matrix of people holding white cards. Mr Chun could see we were impressed already and said, 'Thirty thousand people'. He told us that two of his daughters were sitting in the matrix and pointed them out beneath the '5' of the '19:53' displayed on the giant digital clock that stood above them.

Five minutes before the start of the performance, the children holding cards started to make pictures. Mr Chun explained that they were displaying the names of various North Korean provinces. Each time the cards changed, the children stamped their feet. With such a large number of people, this sounded like a half-second burst of noise from a waterfall. One trick they had was to make a white ripple run through the display by getting a few hundred people at a time to waggle their cards. We asked Mr Chun how they knew when to change colour; he replied that there were some lights on the roof of the stadium above us. We did not find this explanation convincing.

The performance that followed was easily the most impressive I have ever seen. I sat through the whole show with my mouth open, unable to speak. The most remarkable aspect of the event was its sheer scale. Our guides told us that there were 100,000 performers and I saw no reason to suppose that there were any fewer. This stunning scale was backed up by astonishing proficiency. There were probably more able gymnasts and dancers in this single show than there are in the whole of England. Furthermore, all this individual ability

had been immaculately choreographed. The gymnasts and dancers formed intricate shapes and human sculptures without a hint of disorder. They performed backflips and cartwheels in perfect synchronization.

The pictures made by the card-flippers were intricate and changed frequently. When they were not showing pictures, their white cards acted as an expansive cinema screen. The images they formed included a night sky with a bright star as a portent of the nativity of Kim Il Sung. Others depicted happy, clean, well-dressed, well-fed children playing gleefully. I noticed that the children were depicted with pink skin and round eyes; in other words, they looked Western. This contrasted with the statues we had seen where the people depicted looked distinctly Korean. The Koreans are even prouder of their ethnic homogeneity than the Japanese.

Mr Chun commentated for me every now and again. He seemed to think that the show was an ordinary, unremarkable event. When some thousands of people came on dressed in animal costumes he explained, 'To convert rough food in mountains to meat.' A dozen or so people dressed as chickens, goats, rabbits and eggs would have looked silly. With thousands of them surrounded by tens of thousands of other performers, it was overwhelming. When all the eggs retracted their arms and legs, sat in a row the length of the stadium and wobbled from side to side, I felt as though I was under the influence of a powerful hallucinogenic drug rather than watching a variety show.

There was a trapeze act where the girl fell from the top of the stadium. We gasped in genuine alarm and then saw the safety net appear out of the darkness. Another act was a mass dance using fans. They depicted the sea by bobbing up and down in closely-synchronized waves. At the end of the show the entire cast came on and filled the performance area. They waved and smiled as we left. Only a totalitarian regime could produce such a show.

As we left, our guides asked us whether we had enjoyed the

performance. We found it hard enough to speak at all, let alone describe what we thought of the show. I was feeling dizzy. Our attempts to convey that it was one of the most amazing things we had ever seen (I rank it alongside Borobudur Temple on Java and the Pyramids of Giza) were met with a 'you're just saying that' attitude. Mrs Kim told us that she had taken part in the Mass Gymnastics herself when she was a teenager but was cagey about the role she had played. As we drove away, we saw a large column of teenage boys in white paramilitary uniforms marching and singing a revolutionary song. Was there not a modicum of dissent in even one of those young minds?

On the way back to the hotel we saw a nasty traffic crash. An army truck was lying on the ground; it looked as though the subchassis had snapped. Our guides behaved as though it was not there, and it was clear we were expected to do likewise. We saw several bumps and crashes in Pyongyang. This is remarkable considering the tiny amount of traffic and wide roads. Perhaps it is related to the poor state of repair of most of the vehicles.

We had a late dinner at our hotel. I was presented with the usual battered fish, in this case an especially bony specimen.

THURSDAY 2 MAY 2002

After breakfast, I happened to meet Mrs Ri in the hotel lobby. She spoke English better than any other local I met in the DPRK. She told me that in five years she had conducted only seventeen tours for Westerners. She was well-presented and likeable and I hope to meet her again one day.

We climbed into the minibus and began our journey to the southern city of Kaesong (개성). This city is famous for its ginseng and was capital of the Koryo dynasty (AD 935-1392). It was another glorious sunny day as we motored along the deserted dual carriageway. There was a central reservation but no road markings. We could have driven on the other side of the road quite safely. Our route took us

over a fertile plain. As with our journey north to Mount Myohyangsan, there were people working in the fields with basic hand tools. The most common implement was the size of a trowel. It had a short shaft with a triangular blade at the end. People squatted on the ground hacking at the earth with these things. Again, we saw few tractors and some wooden ploughs being pulled by oxen. The people were sunburnt, thin and wore simple clothes. I do not recall seeing any elderly people at all in the DPRK. We saw a few carts. The DPRK is the only country where I have seen wooden wheels being used in everyday life. Even in India people use old pneumatic tyres on their draught vehicles, but I never saw this in the DPRK.

The sun shone on the mountains that rose around us. It created contrasting patches of light and shade on a canvas that extended all the way to the horizon. The paraphernalia of the modern world was almost entirely absent beyond the road. There was no advertising (only political slogans), no electricity pylons, wire fences, parked cars, shops, warehouses, factories or even grain silos. All we saw were fields and small villages built in lines parallel to the road. The houses were always small, single-story dwellings. Some looked dilapidated; others seemed to be in good repair. None of them looked suitable for surviving the harsh Korean winter.

We stopped at what must be North Korea's only motorway service station. I looked around before heading inside. This did not seem to perturb our guides. I can honestly say that the idea of skipping off across the fields to spread counter-revolutionary ideas among the peasants was not on my mind. The building itself looked like a tank trap. It was a grey concrete shell that spanned the road. Given that the road was as wide as the M1 despite the country's severe shortage of farmland and the near absence of traffic, one can only suppose that this highway is intended for the army. We drank coffee and chatted with our guides. They did not even bother to show us the tourist tat on sale from women in traditional costume. There were stalls outside selling T-shirts and trinkets.

As we came closer to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), we started to see towering blocks of concrete, perhaps fifteen metres high, six metres long and two metres thick, perched by the side of the road. They were tank traps thinly disguised as monuments. We passed a small, run-down city with dirty high-rise blocks of flats and dusty roads.

When we reached Kaesong, we drove straight past the city to the Demilitarized Zone. We stopped at a visitors' centre. With all the tourists milling around, it was somewhat like a Cold War theme park. We stood in the sunshine for a while and bought some knick-knacks at the gift shop. The compound we were in had a high gate on the southern side and, just beyond it, I could see a two-metre cube of concrete held up by a steel cable. This was another tank trap: simply cutting the cable would block the road. All the buildings and trees were neat as can be; the only litter to be seen had been freshly dropped by the Chinese tourists.

Before we had a chance to become complacent about our presence on the world's most heavily fortified border, we were led into a hut where we were given an informative talk on the area around us. A soldier in a smart Korean People's Army uniform gave the presentation using a relief map of the area for illustration. A guide translated for us as he described the heights, weights, dates, ages and breeding habits of various things. Our guides seemed pleased to be able to tell us all this; they had the air of people who had been hard done by and were being given a chance to make their feelings known.

We returned to our minibus and drove through the gate into the DMZ itself. The land we saw in this area was being used for farming rice. Mr Chun told us that the South Koreans use their land for war-like activities. He presented this in such a way as to suggest that the DPRK is a placid, peace-loving country that would just grow rice and tend lost puppies (rather than eat them) if only those nasty South Koreans would leave them alone. A more likely explanation is the severe shortage of cultivatable land in the DPRK. I remarked on the

tall (150 metres) flagpole flying the North Korean flag. Mr Chun told me that the South Koreans have a similarly lofty flagpole; we could see it in the distance.

Our minibus stopped abruptly and did a u-turn. I felt a moment of apprehension; were we being turned back? No, it looked as though our driver had simply overshot his target; we had gone straight past our next stop. This was the compound where the Korean War negotiations had taken place fifty years earlier. As we entered the compound of prefabricated military buildings, I was struck by the neatness of the place. The only imperfection was a single cigarette end sitting on the carefully-manicured lawn.

We were taken into the modest negotiation hall. The talks here had lasted two years while the troops engaged in a bloody and immobile mountain trench war. The narrative we were given by the tour guide did not mention the role of the Chinese troops at all. Mr Chun and Mrs Kim followed us in and out but the guide attached to the other group of Western tourists did all the talking. Having been given their version of the truth about the Korean War, we walked over to the building where the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War armistice was signed. Here we were told that the American Imperialists had wanted to sign the armistice in a tent. We were told that this was because they were 'humiliated and ashamed'. The North Koreans objected and, to prove their point, promptly built a large hut in only five days. The hall itself contained nothing but two tables, one for each side in the conflict. On each table there stood a pair of glass cases. One case held a flag; the other held a copy of the Armistice Agreement. I noticed that the DPRK's flag was adorned with gold-coloured frilly tassels. We were not given a chance to look at the other flag, which was presumably American.

Our guides presented the Armistice Agreement as a resounding victory rather than the conclusion of an inconclusive war that was disastrous for all ordinary Koreans and humiliating for the US and UN. In any case, it was a lovely sunny day, which helped me to keep

my mind off the human suffering associated with the place.

Mr Chun seemed to be in a bit of a hurry as he led us back to the minibus. As we drove past the farmers going about their daily work (or so it seemed), we could see and hear large grey loudspeakers blaring out propaganda. The East Asian enthusiasm for powerful and pervasive PA systems is a mystery to me, although it was less surprising in a totalitarian state. I asked Mrs Kim what the loudspeakers were saying. She said it was just the ordinary radio station broadcasts and went on to explain that it was about unity (with South Korea) and independence (from the rest of the world). All three of us on the tour found Mrs Kim to be enjoyable company. However, she appeared to lap up the DPRK's propaganda with a naïve credulity. Somehow Mr Chun's political orthodoxy seemed less docile.

We moved on to the reunification village of Panmunjom (판문점). It consists of a cluster of huts and buildings straddling the Military Demarcation Line, which was the front line at the end of the Korean War in 1953. Each side in the conflict agreed to withdraw from this line by two kilometres as part of the Armistice Agreement. The convoluted shape of the line reflects its origin in bitter trench warfare. The space left by this action now forms the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Panmunjom sits within the DMZ and is used for official contact between the northern and southern parts of Korea.

The first thing we were shown at Panmunjom was yet another Kim Il Sung signature monument. It was there to commemorate the Great Leader's statement that Korea should be unified as soon as possible. No doubt Kim Il Sung often said this, but on this occasion he said it the day before he died and so the statement warranted a monument. We were never told what Kim's dying words were; presumably they were not to do with reunification.

We were then led around an elaborate marble building to some steps that overlooked the Military Demarcation Line. Here we could see the last remnant of the Cold War. A row of seven prefabricated huts straddled the line. Three of them were light blue and four of them

were clad in large white plastic tiles. We were told that the blue huts belonged to the UN and the white ones to the DPRK. Each hut was about fifteen metres long and four metres wide. The whole area was so well-maintained on both sides that it looked like the grounds of a fancy English hotel.

So far, we had just seen monuments, fields, North Korean soldiers and buildings. The only things we had seen that we would not have expected to see elsewhere in the country were tank traps, and these were just big blocks of concrete. What brought home the Cold War status of the place was the presence of South Korean soldiers on the other side of the line. Each of the spaces between the huts had a few soldiers from each side guarding the border. Though the soldiers were aligned to nations that were bitter enemies, they were standing no more than a few metres from one another. As part of the charade, the DPRK guards stood to attention, staring straight ahead while the South Korean soldiers stood around looking much more relaxed. The overall effect was of a well-disciplined North and a slovenly South. I conjecture that this is because it is difficult for either side to keep an eye on the people visiting the border at the same time as looking smart. The North takes visitors in the morning and the South in the afternoon, so it would be easy to establish a truce allowing each side to look good to its own visitors. Each side has an interest in demonizing the other.

The uniforms worn by the North Korean soldiers looked much smarter than those worn by the South Koreans. The North Korean uniforms seemed to be ceremonial, with sharp creases, cloth caps and brass buttons. The South Koreans wore metal helmets with large Korean characters painted on the front. Their mirrored sunglasses helped to make them look sinister. Their trousers were blue-grey with a pair of yellow stripes down the side, like a tracksuit from 1974. They had their trousers tucked into their boots and they darted around the line of huts looking aggressively curious rather than nervous. There was a marked contrast in stature between the northern and southern

soldiers. The southern soldiers were taller and lankier with lighter skin. The northern soldiers looked more heavily built and had darker skin. No doubt the men on both sides were experts in tae kwon do.

We were led into one of the huts. It seemed to be set up for tourists as well as for post-armistice talks. A microphone cable indicated the Military Demarcation Line. Our guide invited us to sit on the upholstered wooden chairs at the negotiating table. One of the people in the group we were following sat in a chair that straddled the line, so he was in two jurisdictions at once. At either end of the room we could just about make out a video camera through a small window. It appeared to be inside some kind of cubicle. When asked, our guide told us that these cubicles were used by translators during negotiations. A pair of North Korean soldiers stood in front of the door at the southern end of the room. I was a little disappointed because I had been hoping for a pair of South Korean guards, or better still, Americans.

Our guide translated a description of the area given to us by a North Korean soldier. Again, the soldier and guide were clearly enjoying themselves. At one point the soldier broke out of his Korean to say with great glee, 'Violation of AA', ('AA' being the Armistice Agreement). As we listened, we were treated to the sight of a South Korean soldier peering in through one of the hut windows. He shaded his mirrored sunglasses with one hand and moved from window to window in an attempt to improve his view. Our guide broke her translation to remark, 'They are very rude I think!' Another, less aggressively curious soldier looked at us from the other side of the hut. I would like to know what they were looking for; were they afraid we might be carrying machine guns and bazookas? Could it have been part of the propaganda war?

Once our guide had finished her explanation, which consisted of the usual clichés about imperialists, puppet governments, aggressors and atrocities, we were allowed to take photographs and look around the room. This only took a few minutes. The atmosphere was jolly,

even festive; it almost felt like a school outing. I took a photograph of Rob standing next to the window that framed our South Korean observer.

Outside the hut, we took more photographs of the demarcation line. Mrs Kim suggested I ask Ned to take a picture of me standing in front of the South Korean soldiers. I took her advice and Ned kindly gave me a copy of the picture after I had returned home.

We were then led inside the marble building and taken up a fancy staircase, past some high doors and on to a balcony overlooking the huts. Marble walls and floors, high doorways and fancy staircases are popular with the DPRK government. Margaret Thatcher once said that Communist regimes build such elaborate buildings in attempt to legitimize themselves in the absence of a democratic or historical mandate to rule. From the balcony, we could see that all the soldiers had gone from the spaces between the huts. I noticed a North Korean soldier marching across the compound, swinging his arms from side to side in a formal yet silly way. From this vantage point, we could see the South Korean counterpart to the building we were in. Theirs was clad in stainless steel and had curved eaves in the traditional Korean style. This combination looked strange to me. We could see a battery of cameras pointing at us from one of the upper floors. No doubt the building we were in had its own cameras above us. A man standing next to me said with amusement that a year earlier he had been on the other side of the line. Mr Chun pointed out a blue tower to our left on the South Korean side. He said that American soldiers use it, although I did not see any. Mrs Kim stood on the balcony clutching her blue document folder and trying not to look bewildered.

Our tour of Panmunjom was now complete so we got back in the minibus and drove to Kaesong. We passed some more monolithic tank traps. Small concrete chocks kept them aloft: I would not like to be in charge of toppling those massive hunks of stone. I pondered whether the soldiers were meant to use explosives or sledgehammers to remove the chocks.

Once in Kaesong, we were taken to a restaurant housed in a traditional-style building. Unlike most restaurants, it had a large gift shop. Mr Chun told us that the meal we were about to eat was called a *pansanggi* (판상기). We were taken to a large, light room with white walls and a broad table where we were served food in small brass dishes. These brass dishes seemed to be the feature that made the meal a traditional Korean *pansanggi*. The food itself was the same as we had been given in our other meals, but these had been served on small ceramic plates.

The man who had recently visited Panmunjom from the south joined us. He looked about forty-five and was very friendly. He was Saudi Arabian but lived in Japan. He was retired ('But not old', he said), having run the Japanese and South-East Asian operations of a petrochemical company. He had a son who was being educated at a boarding school in Scotland and a daughter who lived with him in Japan. He did not mention a wife or wives. I asked him if his house in Japan was in the traditional Japanese style. He said it was in a combination of traditional Arabic and Japanese styles. He went on to say that he had also had a Japanese-style house built in Saudi Arabia, but the workmanship of the Saudi carpenters had proved unsatisfactory. This would be a serious problem for a traditional-style Japanese house because they are made entirely of wood.

He told us that he now spent most of his time travelling around the world on organized tours that had himself as the sole participant. I had seen his tour car earlier; he had the mandatory two guides and driver all to himself. He told us that his first and only group package tour had been to Los Angeles with some Japanese people. As soon as he had arrived at the airport, he had realized he was not going to enjoy the company of others and had immediately gone his own way. Coincidentally, Los Angeles airport is where my own travel exploits started.

Now, all this could have sounded like boasting. However, he was a

terribly likeable fellow and I only became enraged with envy later on. I told him about my enthusiasm for Japan but, despite my dropping several heavy hints, he did not invite me to visit him at his Japanese address.

He told us that he lived in Japan because his daughter was disabled and Japan has the best facilities in the world for disabled people. To me it seemed clear that he lived in Japan because he had a great deal of enthusiasm for the place and apparently unlimited quantities of money. I asked him how well he could speak Japanese. He replied that he could speak it fluently but had not yet mastered the writing system.

He was the only person I met who had been to North Korea more than once. He said that he had visited four years previously and that the only thing that had changed since then was that the government had started showing revolutionary operas on television as well as military parades. He said he had made his previous visit during the winter. Although the North Korean winter is notoriously harsh, he did not mention that it was cold. On that visit he had stayed in the twin-towered Koryo Hotel. This hotel is in the centre of Pyongyang, so one day he had managed to sneak out without his guides for an hour to look around the city alone. His swarthinness must have helped him blend in with the locals, although he did not look in the least bit East Asian.

At the end of the meal we were given a thimbleful of ginseng wine each. The Korean word for ginseng is *insam* (인삼). Ginseng is a valued East Asian panacea. The lukewarm reception it receives from Westerners no doubt exasperates the Koreans. The wine tasted like a sort of alcoholic herbal tea, which is roughly what I was expecting.

We had some time spare after lunch. It was clear we were expected to hang around in the gift shop. However, I went out to the forecourt to enjoy the sunny day and see what I could see. I watched as a group of Korean security agents reined in some people from the Malaysian party who were wandering around on a grassy mound above the car

park. I looked out into the street. We seemed to be in the centre of the city, where bright sunshine lit up the crumbling grey walls. There was little motorized traffic, although there were plenty of pedestrians and cyclists. The usual slogans and posters were dotted around and loudspeakers played military music, thus spoiling the otherwise tranquil and soothing scene. Here were people going about their daily business untroubled by the internal combustion engine, air pollution, fashion or advertising. Sadly, the freedom from these curses of Western society is accompanied by the somewhat more severe and immediate curses of starvation and terror. The only reason these people do not have cars and fancy clothes is that they *cannot* have them.

We drove past the famous Nam (South) Gate on our way to our next stop, which was Sonjuk Bridge. We were reliably informed of its extreme antiquity, no doubt having being built shortly after the invention of the spoon. We were told that the stone handrails were newer. These went across the bridge as well as along the side of it, which made it look like a stone cattle pen. We were still inside the city, but the spacious planning and absence of traffic made it feel more like a village. The mature trees that shaded the plaza completed the effect.

Near the bridge there were about a dozen children squatting on the floor painting the historical scene. The technical quality of the pictures was extremely high. It is impossible to know whether they were genuine or a set-up. They ignored us as we looked over their shoulders. As in Pyongyang, all their pictures were in exactly the same conventional style. There was no hint of East Asian influence or unorthodox experimentation. These children dressed in Western-style clothes and painted Western-style pictures. Despite the government's vitriolic anti-American propaganda, the DPRK seems determined to compete with the West on its own terms.

There were some women standing at drinks stalls. The stalls did not seem to be doing much of a trade. Who knows why they were there? More noticeable was the tall, thin young man with gimlet eyes and a black suit who was pacing around with the stealthy watchfulness of a

panther. Rob asked Mr Chun who he was. Mr Chun, with a perfectly straight face, told us that this terrifying character was the manager of the drinks stalls. Drinks stalls do not require external management. Even if they did, such a sinister character would not do the work. He would have looked more in place cutting deals in Sicily's Corleone.

Having admired the bridge, we crossed the road to visit the Koryo Museum. We were shown some pottery that would have looked in place on the shelves of a department store. To my inexpert eye, it looked as though it dated back no more than fifty or a hundred years. However, our guides told us that it was a thousand years old. Perhaps lying about this sort of thing is considered acceptable in Korean culture. We had a chuckle when we were shown a set of spoons. The compound itself was attractive. It covered a fair amount of land and all the walls and buildings were authentic, small and unostentatious. As usual, there was no litter and all the plants were well-tended. The only other people we saw there was a couple wearing Western-style wedding clothes accompanied by a man with a video camera. I pondered whether this might be typical practice for North Korean weddings and was slightly puzzled by the complete absence of guests.

Our next stop was called the Concrete Wall. This is a tank trap put up by the South Koreans on their side of the DMZ. The North Koreans have declared this to be a symbol of the division of their peninsula. It took around forty minutes to drive there through the most interesting rural scenes we saw during the entire trip. The road was surfaced but rough. There were many people working in the fields. They wore either brightly coloured Wellington boots or else worked the fields unshod. As we had seen before, they dug the soil with primitive tools and many people squatted on the ground looking for roots to eat. There were low, long covers made from straw on a wooden frame in some of the fields. Mr Chun explained that these were used to protect the ginseng while it grew. Apparently it takes some years to grow ginseng, which is why it is so expensive. We also saw more of the straw fences with red flags flying from thin wooden poles. Yoked oxen

pulled wooden-wheeled carts and wooden ploughs. We occasionally saw caves and bunkers in the hilly landscape. There were more tank traps by the side of the road; I noticed some strategically placed at the top of a pass over a rocky ridge. We also saw the houses that the ordinary people live in. They were similar to the ones we had already seen, although they were more run down. They did not look like the sort of place one would choose to survive the frigid cold of the Korean winter. On the other hand, they were not much worse than the houses I had seen in Sicily a few weeks earlier, and they were much better than the dwellings found in Indian shanty towns. However, neither place is so cold in the winter.

I was interested to see soldiers working in the fields. I have read that the army of the DPRK is so large that troops are often put to work on civilian projects. Conversely, many civilian activities are given a military slant in the DPRK. There was so much to see from the minibus that I did not even think about our destination.

The road got steeper and its surface became corrugated, possibly to provide extra grip for vehicles. All of a sudden we arrived in an immaculate little compound. Neatly trimmed trees and hedges surrounded the courtyard. These completely obscured our view of the surrounding area. We were met by a pair of well-presented soldiers who led us through the single small building to a balcony where they set up some green military binoculars. Each of these devices stood on an adjustable tripod; it seems likely that they were army surplus.

Using the binoculars, we could look out over the Military Demarcation Line. We could see four South Korean military posts from our position. Each one had bright yellow placards leaning against the front fence. They bore Korean characters written in black; no doubt these were political slogans. Clearly propaganda took precedence over camouflage.

I liked the non-stop propaganda that was being broadcast from oversized loudspeakers even more. There were no roads or factories to compete against but the PA system must nevertheless have been

tremendously powerful to be able to reach us so clearly over a distance of more than a kilometre. We asked what they were saying; Mrs Kim, with a look of genuine distress, told us that they had just said, 'Enjoy yourself while you are still young!' Mrs Kim's expression was that of one who felt hurt and betrayed. I think the South Koreans might have had a point, but I did not mention it at the time. As well as talking, the loudspeakers played mainstream pop music. Mr Chun said that the DPRK also broadcasts over the DMZ but assured us that it was only the municipal radio stations. From what I know of the DPRK, these broadcasts are probably frightening.

The soldiers were friendly and smiling. They spoke no English and they had not been given any patter to reel off via Mr Chun. Our guides chatted away with them and took at least as much interest in the scene as we did. Indeed, I can imagine that curiosity about South Korea must be widespread and strong in the DPRK. Koreans are proud of their ethnic homogeneity and seem to feel a strong bond with one another.

Mr Chun pointed out what he said was a US nuclear base on the side of a distant mountain. All we could see was a large satellite dish. One of the soldiers spotted some people on the Concrete Wall. He produced a special pair of even more powerful binoculars and set them up on the retaining wall built against the grassy bank in front of the building. This was our very own concrete wall. Through them we could make out some people in bright red overalls doing what may have been routine maintenance work.

I presume that the title 'Concrete Wall' is intended to sound sinister and evoke division and suffering, but I feel it loses just about everything in translation. There is too much concrete around these days for the word to convey any sinister overtones. Indeed, it has become a byword for blandness. From this distance, the Concrete Wall just looked like a long, grey-brown line. Rob and Ned said that they thought it was thick. This is a desirable property for a tank trap, but not for something designed to keep people out. Through the most

powerful binoculars, we could see that the South Korean posts were flying the UN flag. For some unfathomable reason, Christmas decorations were strung up on various wires and poles. We could also see some South Koreans playing basketball in their compound. Clearly no one was worried about war breaking out.

We learnt that the soldiers at the post we were visiting had been stationed there for more than five months. This seemed harsh, but a moment's thought revealed the assignment as a cushy one. It certainly seemed better than running up a freezing mountain in full battle dress under sheets of rain in the middle of the night. Mr Chun pointed out that it was their military duty. I found the younger of the two soldiers chatting to our driver and offered him some Marlboro cigarettes. He refused, but the more senior soldier accepted them. The two soldiers seemed completely unperturbed by the propaganda booming across the valley.

A remarkable feature of the DMZ is that its lethality to humans has made it hospitable to wildlife. With a surprising contempt for nature, our guides never mentioned this interesting and important aspect of the DMZ. We saw beautiful big black butterflies fluttering around the compound. The space in front of us was lush and green in a way I saw nowhere else in the DPRK. There are proposals to turn the DMZ into a nature reserve should reunification ever happen. Bill Clinton, the former US president, once described this area as 'the scariest place on Earth'. To a naïve observer it would have seemed remarkably tranquil, especially in the moments between propaganda broadcasts. I found it sad, strange and interesting.

We spent more than an hour surveying the DMZ. This site was the only one we visited that did not have some kind of gift shop or souvenir vendor. As soon as we got into the minibus, Mrs Kim asked me for a pair of the earplugs I had shown her earlier. She put them in, which left me wondering whether I really was that bad to talk to.

As we approached Kaesong we saw dozens of ordinary people setting pretty little white stones into the edge of the road. This

appeared to be the sort of supposedly voluntary labour that people are expected to do after school or work. I saw a powerful loudspeaker in a field; presumably this was used to direct the volunteers. Many people were coming and going, either on foot or by bicycle. However, I did not see a single person who looked over sixty. Towering tank traps gave an eerie backdrop to this work.

The sky had become overcast by this time, which made the countryside look bleak. The empty land and low clouds reminded me of the Cambridgeshire fens where I lived as a small child. Even though we had already had an eyeful that day, there was still another treat to come: the tomb of King Kongmin.

I have seen plenty of traditional East Asian architecture and have become familiar with the elegantly bowed tile roofs, the red wooden pillars and raised floors. It was refreshing to visit this site as it was in an entirely different style. King Kongmin (reigned AD 1352-1374) designed his own tomb. It consisted of two grassy mounds, one for the king himself and one of identical size for his wife. These mounds sat on twelve-sided stone pedestals and were surrounded by stone carvings, alternately of sheep and tigers. Mr Chun explained that this was because King Kongmin considered himself to be as gentle as a sheep to his subjects but as fierce as a tiger to his enemies. We were allowed to climb the long flight of stone steps that lead up to the tomb. Mr Chun told us that the Japanese Aggressors had looted the tomb itself so that only the structure remained. He told us this with palpable but well-controlled anger. He should be glad that the British Museum had not found the site, for they would have removed it entirely.

Large statues of soldiers and administrators flanked the area in front of the mounds. Mr Chun explained that the order in which these statues stood was significant. The eldest administrators stood closest to the king and the youngest farthest away. The reverse was true of the warriors. The idea was that an administrator would win the trust of the king through long and loyal service and so would be closer to him. Conversely, an experienced and trusted soldier would

be sent to the borders of the land because he was most able to defend the vulnerable parts of the kingdom.

Mr Chun told us the story of how King Kongmin chose this site for his tomb. The king delegated the decision to his geomancers. Geomancy is the practice of divining auspicious locations for buildings and is important in traditional Korean culture. Once the geomancers had selected the spot where we were standing, the king and his entourage paid it a visit. The king had his geomancers brought to the site they had chosen. Here they were guarded by some of his soldiers. Meanwhile, the king hiked up a nearby hill to look at the site from on high. He told his soldiers that if he raised his handkerchief then it meant that he disapproved of the geomancers' choice and they should be killed on the spot. This seemed to be an early incentive scheme to encourage high-quality geomancy.

The king climbed the hill and stood at the top. He admired the view and declared that he liked the choice his geomancers had made. However, he was perspiring from the exertion of his climb. Mr Chun indicated the hill in question: it was indeed high and steep, commanding a dramatic view of the surrounding area. Its peak seemed to graze the mid-grey sky. The king pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his damp forehead. The soldiers interpreted this as the prearranged signal and immediately killed the unfortunate geomancers. Mr Chun mimed stabbing a geomancer with a sword to illustrate this tragic end to the story. The precise way he twisted the imaginary blade made me wonder whether he had been trained to inflict fatal stab wounds.

Mr Chun told me that this particular site was popular with Westerners. I can see why; it is a little different from the things one usually sees in East Asia but at the same time is thoroughly authentic. The location was remote and romantic; from our vantage point we could not see a single house or road. However, we could see some locals laying out pictures and trinkets on a blanket at the bottom of the tomb steps. We looked at them on our way back to the minibus.

An old man with only a few teeth was among the vendors. He

pointed out a picture of some young women bathing and sniggered childishly. He pointed out the two boys in the picture who were watching from behind a bush; this device is typical of East Asian art. I was surprised to see such a picture, tame though it was, in the prudish DPRK.

We stayed in Kaesong that night. Our hotel was a pleasant surprise. We knew that it was meant to be a 'folklore' hotel but were not expecting anything so authentic. It was made up of about twenty small traditional-style wooden buildings arranged around a row of walled and gated courtyards alongside a stream. Like many East Asian watercourses, it was enclosed in a concrete U-shape. Mr Chun showed us to our quarters. Rob and I were given a four-roomed cottage. It was almost as large as my flat in London.

The building had a bedroom, a sitting room and another room containing a water cooler and refrigerator. The entrance was a sliding door with glass on the outside and paper on the inside. We also had a bathroom. Mr Chun asked us what time we would like to receive hot water; clearly we were the only guests. Our hot water ration was one hour in the evening and one hour in the morning. 'They will send', he assured us. When I turned on the hot tap outside of ration hours it disgorged a thick brown sludge.

The sitting room even had an ageing Hitachi television in it, complete with its own velveteen cosy. It was clear that this room was designed around smoking: it had four armchairs arranged in two rows facing each other across a low table with ashtrays on it. Men in the DPRK smoke a great deal. The floor was covered in rice straw matting, similar to Japanese *tatami* (畳) mats. I dragged one of the futons, known as *yo* (요) in Korean, out of Rob's room and into the water cooler room where I intended to sleep.

At half-past seven, we left our cosy cottage and met Ned in the restaurant. We removed our shoes and sat on the floor by a low table. Mr Chun was there to make sure we were happy and settled. I was sitting on my heels in the Japanese *seiza* (正座) posture. I asked

Mr Chun whether this was the correct way to sit at a Korean table. He laughed and told me that I was sitting in the woman's way. I quickly changed to sitting cross-legged.

A quiet and smiling waitress served us; she appeared to be enjoying the task. There seemed to be no one else around so it was a little eerie. This atmosphere intensified when there was a power cut. Unperturbed, the waitress brought in a candle for us. This was a welcome change from the usual harsh fluorescent lights. Ned and Rob were both carrying travel torches, which they produced to see us through the few moments of darkness.

Once we had eaten, we invited Mr Chun to our cottage. We drank whisky and chatted. Rob and Ned talked at length about how the DPRK ought to issue visas in London. Mr Chun said little other than, 'There are many problems in our country.' The low lighting and alcohol made for a convivial evening so we missed our hour of hot water.

The rooms had traditional Korean under-floor heating, known as *ondol* (온돌) in Korean. We were assured that, like the spoon, this was a Korean invention. Unfortunately, the Koreans did not invent the thermostat; my room seemed to have the fires of Hell burning beneath it. The heavy rain that fell that night did little to lower the temperature.

There was nothing but silence as I drifted off to sleep: no bawdy shouting from people in bars, no traffic rumbling past, no barking dogs, no bickering couples or any other of the sounds of life that one normally hears in any city. The North Korean government seems to have subdued its subjects entirely.

FRIDAY 3 MAY 2002

When Rob got up for his early morning smoke, he found that the door to our courtyard was locked from the outside. He used one of his handy gadgets to unlatch it and went out for a wander around the hotel compound. After breakfast, Rob told Mr Chun that we had been

locked in. Mr Chun gave an embarrassed smile and a little laugh saying, 'Ah, I forgot to unlock this morning. I locked it for your safety.' With characteristic friendliness, Rob said, 'Aha! We caught you out there didn't we?' The fact that it was locked on the outside made it clear that they wanted to keep us in rather than thieves and brigands out.

Once Rob had returned, I took the opportunity to have a look around the compound myself. I did not go through the main gate for fear of getting our guides into trouble. There was a military guard on the entrance; clearly they were serious about keeping us separate from the locals. The soldiers kept an eye on me; I got the impression they were more curious than suspicious. From within the compound I could see people going up and down the road. Presumably they were on their way to work. There was little motorized traffic; almost everyone walked or cycled. The morning moisture had damped down the dust that had been in the air the previous afternoon. I would not have guessed that this town had been ravaged by famine, although the dull, utilitarian buildings identified it as being run by a Communist government.

We had asked to visit the Pyongyang Film Studio as part of our trip. This was on our version of the itinerary but not on theirs. However, they were as keen as ever to please so they squeezed it on to the front of our last full day. This meant that we had to eat our breakfast early and depart Kaesong at eight o'clock. Breakfast was served at the same low table as we had eaten at the previous evening. The same waitress served us, but this time there was no chance of the lights going out.

The sky was overcast as we departed but soon cleared to reveal another bright and sunny day. As on our outward journey, we stopped at the service station (or tank-trap). It amused me to see that the gift shop there stocked tins of pork. Some of the other items on sale looked as though they had been around for decades.

When we arrived at the film studio, we were informed that it covered an area of 700,000 square kilometres. I think they must have

meant square metres because the Korean peninsula as a whole only occupies 220,000 square kilometres. Kim Il Sung himself ordered the studio to be constructed. Our guides told us that a thousand films had been made here.

We hung around waiting for our guides to resolve some kind of dispute; clearly deviating from the itinerary was a problem for them. The people at the studio had an air of hostility. I found that many of the DPRK locals I encountered made me feel uneasy; the tour guides I met were all notable exceptions to this. While we waited, I noticed three women squatting on the ground weeding a grass verge. The scene outside the compound was semi-rural; we were on the edge of the city but there were rice fields between the buildings. The clouds had settled again and the buildings around us were in true Stalinist style, so the overall effect was depressing.

Eventually, we were allowed to proceed and so piled back into the minibus. We drove perhaps twenty metres before alighting to see some large revolutionary murals. I was delighted to find that I recognized the pictures from the DPRK bank notes that I had acquired back home. When I told our guides that I knew the pictures from their currency, they ignored me; I conjecture that exporting local currency is illegal and I should not have recognized them. I had never supposed that the pictures were derived from films; one was jovially entitled *Seas of Blood*, the other was more pleasantly named *The Flower Girl*. Both murals depicted people brandishing guns and looking revolutionary. I also saw one of these film stills painted on side of an official building in the centre of Pyongyang. The DPRK seems to like its films, even though they have not yet received much international acclaim.

We were taken to a pavilion and were shown what was supposed to be a take of a scene in a real film. We were introduced to the film's director, who was a Merited Artist. We were spared the Ordinary Gaffer and People's Key Grip. The action began. A group of about fifteen girls in traditional costume performed a formal dance. I noticed that one

of them was looking at us rather than straight ahead. Then there was a scene where a woman dressed as a boy came to petition the king. They talked in Korean for a couple of minutes before she revealed her true sex by showing her long hair. There was a studio light shining on the king to beef up the sunshine.

It was easy to tell that they were not really filming; the ancient camera made no noise and the action went on for far longer than what I believe is normal for films. There was not a single change in camera angle, although the camera was mounted on a little track on the pavilion floor so that it could move back and forth. The DPRK's film-goers have probably become familiar with that pavilion.

We were led to what we were told was the props room. Two women helped us dress up in flimsy costumes that were supposedly used in films. Rob looked good as a king, being taller than average. Ned made a remarkably good warrior. I was kitted out as a nobleman although I doubt I looked the part. I fear we looked like something out of a primary school play.

We were then shown around the film sets. There was a large raised pavilion, which we climbed up to using a ladder. We were shown some peasant huts, of which there were several. Perhaps this emphasis on humble dwellings was politically motivated. Each one had a plot of land outside it that was planted with real vegetables. It seems that the food shortage is severe enough for them to use every available patch of land. There was also a rice-pounding machine that was driven by a fully operational waterwheel.

The only activity we saw in the film studio was the sham routine we saw on our arrival. Everywhere else was silent and empty; no one was doing any maintenance and there was none of the paraphernalia one might expect to see at a real film studio. All the buildings were solid and permanent. Each film produced by the DPRK must be similar to many others in both content and appearance.

We were shown the area that contained European-style buildings. Our guides gestured towards a large mansion of the sort one might

find in Beverly Hills. 'I think this is what English house is like', said Mr Chun. We attempted to explain that the building was more Central European than English in style, that Rob was Scottish rather than English and that most people in England live in far smaller dwellings. This was, of course, all utterly futile.

Mr Chun pointed out a large edifice nearby. He said that it was a reproduction of a famous university building in Seoul. The remarkable thing was that it really did look like a full-scale reproduction of a large and important building. They had not just built enough to make a convincing film set; it was the complete structure. One can only guess what the real motivation for constructing this complex was. My favourite is that Kim Jong Il (who has an artistic bent) wished to create a park filled with buildings of many different styles, similar to Portmeirion in Wales. With such a variety of buildings, it made an ideal film set. I know little of the technicalities of making films, but somehow I would have expected to see more filming infrastructure, rooms with one wall missing and backless buildings.

My favourite bit was the fake entertainment district. There was a whole town centre in a mixture of styles such as Korea under Japanese occupation, 1930s China and 1960s Korea. I could even read a few of the Japanese symbols. There was a painted billboard for *The Seven Year Itch*, which included a liberal interpretation of Marilyn Monroe's face. There was also an advertisement for *Singin' In The Rain*. I wondered whether the DPRK had ever allowed these films to be shown. An interesting feature of this ghost town was that each building had multiple façades so it could be used for different settings. Films in the DPRK are almost certainly awful, but at least the populace is spared reality television; even the news here is fictional.

We left the film studio to go to our hotel for lunch. I was feeling unnerved by the strangeness of the place we had just visited. Rob was sitting on the back seat next to Mrs Kim. He took out his guidebook to Korea, which was in the form of a guide to South Korea with some notes on the DPRK in the back. Though this book had only fifty pages

devoted to the DPRK, it did cover just about everything there is to be known about tourism here. Mrs Kim asked to look at the book and immediately became intensely interested in the descriptions of South Korea. Had Mrs Kim not been North Korean, she would have been interested in the account of her own country. However, here in the DPRK, people know little about South Korea other than the propaganda about puppet governments and us Imperialists.

‘Can I buy this book off you?’ she asked. This is a roundabout East Asian way of asking for something. To her it perhaps seemed polite; it would have been difficult for her to understand that this sounded ruder to us than asking for it outright.

Characteristically, Rob had carefully annotated his copy of the book so Ned gladly offered his. We quickly and quietly conferred over whether such a book would get Mrs Kim into hot water with the North Korean security forces. Rob asked her outright if she was likely to get into trouble for possessing such seditious material. She said she did not think it would be a problem. She went on to say that she would think about it and tell us what she had decided later on. She did take the book in the end. This makes me think that she is either well-connected or else naïve. From what I know of the DPRK I think she may have been taking a serious risk. Strangely enough, Mr Chun did not even acknowledge that this subversive exchange was taking place.

Mr Chun came to talk to us as we ate our lunch. He told us that he had once hosted a large group of English train spotters. Even the unflappable Mr Chun was somewhat perturbed by their fascination for rolling stock. He said, ‘They see some old tram and they are...’, he struggled for the correct word in English, ‘...frantic. They tell us, the guides, the history of the train.’

After lunch, I met Mrs Kim in the bookshop. One thing I like about the DPRK is that the gift shops have far more books in them than anywhere else I have visited. I bought a large stamp album for Rowan’s mother. It was hard bound with a grey vinyl cover and looked at least

ten years old. It contained some hundreds of interesting stamps, all of them from the DPRK. Having bought this, I asked about other stamps they might have. The shop workers were sour and sulky (I believe they were Chinese rather than Korean) but Mrs Kim was as kind and helpful as can be. After looking through a few sets of stamps depicting flowers, notable mushrooms and great soccer players, I said that my real interest was in political stamps. I was presented with two packs of Kim Il Sung stamps. In their minds, the genius-leader and politics were the same thing. I gracefully accepted them.

To round everything off, I bought a CD of North Korean music. I was surprised and disappointed to find that they only had modern electronic music played by painfully bad synthesizer ensembles. This would have to do. My disc included the North Korean classic *Where Are You Dear General?* that we saw performed at the children's talent show. Not surprisingly, this song is about Kim Il Sung. I would have liked a recording of some music played on the eerie *kayagum* instruments but these were not available. I also wanted to buy a video cassette of the year 2000 Mass Gymnastics, but these too were out of stock.

This shopping trip made us a little late for the afternoon part of the itinerary. We were driven to the National History Museum where we were shown all sorts of historical knick-knacks in rapid succession. Our guide spoke English. She showed us a chariot dating from around 350 BC. It was so well-preserved I might have thought it had been made around 1972 had I not been told otherwise. We saw two reproduction tombs, which were surprisingly atmospheric. Indeed, the whole museum had a tomblike feel to it thanks to the complete absence of any other visitors except for a serious-looking ten-year old boy. He was wearing school uniform and a revolutionary red neckerchief. It looked as though he had been brought in especially to impress us. He feigned interest in the exhibits as he followed us around.

We were shown a model of a wooden ship with an iron top and iron spikes sticking out of it. We were told that this Korean ironclad

ship pre-dated the invention of such vessels by the English. I tried to look impressed but I was too busy pondering the idea that ironclad ships were a historically important invention. Thinking about it, they would have provided a significant naval advantage.

We left this museum on the hour and headed to the Foreign Languages Bookstore for another visit. While this place was probably a hard currency souvenir store specializing in books rather than an academic bookshop for foreign language students, I do think it was the best shop we visited in the DPRK. We only stayed for a few minutes, during which I bought the Mass Gymnastics video I desired. For some reason I was given an 'export ticket' on a scrap of poor-quality paper. Clearly media of all kinds are strictly controlled in the DPRK. I was not disappointed when I watched the tape after my return to England; it was every bit as impressive as the show we had seen live. Remarkably enough, the choreography was almost completely different; it seems that they devise a new spectacle each time. Like much else concerning the Mass Gymnastics, this beggars belief.

As we were leaving the bookshop, Rob asked for permission to photograph the attractive traffic policewoman standing in the road nearby. Mr Chun gave him the go-ahead. In spite of her apparent coolness, she gave Rob a smile as we passed in the minibus. This delighted him. As one might expect, she did not break her elegant baton sequence. Mr Chun told Rob that he should send a copy of the photograph to the KTRC so that he could pass it on to the traffic policewoman. This means that either the traffic policewoman stands in the same place every day or else Mr Chun knows her personally. I suspect the former.

Our next stop was Pyongyang's Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, which is even larger than the Imperial War Museum in London. This was the closest we ever got to the towering concrete shell of the Ryugyong Hotel. From what I could see, its base was in ruins. Of all the things I saw in the DPRK, I found this hotel to be one

of the most fascinating. It is a towering monument to the inefficient megalomania of this corrupt regime.

We were greeted by a North Korean dominatrix. Our guide was wearing full Korean People's Army dress uniform, with a tight pencil skirt and a peaked cap held on at a rakish rearward angle by hair grips. She was endowed with a cold steely beauty and completed the picture by holding her pointing stick at a punitive angle. The Marquis de Sade would have been ecstatic.

As usual, shadowy security agents followed us as we moved from room to room. They seemed to be there to ensure that we did not make a run for it or attempt to talk to any locals. As we entered each chamber they turned on the lights and stood in the doorway behind us. Our guide would then pick up a fresh pointing stick and narrate in Korean with Mr Chun translating. One large room was devoted to proving that the United States started the Korean War. It included extracts from (apparently genuine) official letters and documents enlarged to many times their original size. Key phrases implying that the United States was the aggressor were highlighted, usually well out of context.

Mrs Kim seemed to be genuinely upset by the place; I think this was the first time she had visited it. She was clearly saddened by the pain her country had suffered. I quoted the figure of a million deaths in the war; Mrs Kim said it was even more. She went on to say that the Americans had used 'some virus' as part of their offensive.

As part of our tour, we were given a lecture on the overall development of the Korean War. Our guide used a map of the Korean peninsula as a prop. It was at least four metres high and covered with those sinister curved black arrows beloved of military historians. She indicated different areas of the country with precise pointing-stick movements. We were told in all seriousness that the USA invaded the northern part of Korea but only advanced one or two kilometres before being driven back by the North Korean forces. I could entertain the DPRK's complaints about the USA's intolerance of political

systems different from its own. I was also prepared to entertain the idea that some of the DPRK's propaganda was a difference in spin rather than fact. However, the idea that a world superpower armed with atomic bombs could only advance one or two kilometres in a premeditated attack on a small, poor country is obviously a barefaced lie. The alleged attack started on a Sunday afternoon, which is yet another of the grievances that the DPRK held against the USA.

A startling omission from the account was the role played by Chinese troops in the war. According to the books I have read on the subject, China sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Korea after the devastating counter-attack launched by US-led forces under UN Security Council Resolutions 82 and 83. The USA's action caused the DPRK forces to retreat (possibly in a deliberate strategic move) almost to the Chinese border. I have no reason to disbelieve these accounts, even after hearing out the DPRK's version of events in full. The Korean War was so bloody because it was really an ideological war between the USA and China, with Korea as the hapless staging ground.

The museum's basement was filled with captured UN military equipment. Our guides showed us a collection of machine guns and ammunition in a glass case. We walked a little farther and came to a large collection of captured fighter planes, armoured cars, tanks and other heavy military equipment. In other museums, such items would have been restored to their pre-combat condition. However, this hardware still bore its battle damage. The sliced-off cockpits, crumpled armour plating, shell holes and smashed glass were a stark reminder of the frenetic brutality of war. A few years later I saw a similar display on the plaza outside Syria's October War Panorama, which was created in collaboration with the DPRK.

Less impressive but highly amusing was the model theatre. This installation consisted of a small stage with several tiers of upholstered fold-down seats in front of it. When we were shown to our places the room was almost completely dark and we had no idea what was going

on. This would have been unnerving back home and was considerably more so here. When the curtain came up, we were treated to a cardboard-and-string sound and light show with English-language narration in an impenetrable 1955 BBC accent. I managed to work out that it was describing an incident in the Korean War where a group of DPRK soldiers attempted to drive some lorries over a mountain range, were attacked by UN forces but nevertheless succeeded after a display of great bravery. The mountains were made of papier-mâché, the model planes slid along metal wires and torch bulbs were used to depict military flares. As ever, the show was accompanied by rousing military music. Our guides watched it with unironic glee.

It was a revelation to see this almost forgotten war treated in such comprehensive detail. However, I found it difficult to concentrate on this unique opportunity to appreciate a radically different perspective on a major war simply because our guide was so heartbreakingly attractive.

The afternoon sun streamed in through the tall windows as we walked down the empty wide marble corridors. I strained for views of the Ryugyong Hotel. We came to a large circular room which seemed to have some kind of auditorium within it. All of a sudden, we were surrounded by a horde of Chinese tourists, which made the place feel more like a real museum. Mr Chun became agitated, telling us that we would have to hurry if we were to arrive at the circus on time. We were led into the auditorium where we saw another of the DPRK's attempts to bring history alive. This one was somewhat more effective than the silly show we had seen earlier. We stood on a large circular platform surrounded on all sides by weaponry and barbed wire. Clearly the idea was to reproduce the view from a hill surrounded by American forces. This is what the Koreans call a 'panorama' and a similar display forms the centrepiece of the October War Panorama in Syria. The large numbers of Chinese tourists around us inevitably detracted from the impact. A few minutes into the show there was a power cut, which destroyed any remaining atmosphere.

Anxious to keep to schedule, Mr Chun asked us in all seriousness whether we would prefer to spend another couple of hours looking at this museum or go to the circus. Not surprisingly, we favoured the circus. The minibus whisked us down the empty white concrete canyon of Kwangbok Street. Hundreds of people were standing in orderly bus queues by the side of the road. We got out at the Pyongyang Circus and joined the crowds of Chinese filing in. We took our seats just as the show was starting.

I had been looking forward to the circus because of a clown act that I had read about. A previous visitor to the DPRK reported a circus performance that included an American GI clown complete with a blonde wig, fake big nose and swaggering walk. Although I am no clown enthusiast, this struck me as an act of supreme comic genius. The combined might of the West's light entertainment scriptwriters could never come up with such a brilliant idea. Indeed, I think it would be worth visiting the DPRK just to see politically-motivated anti-American slapstick comedy. Nowhere else in the world could clowns attract the attention of the CIA. Therefore I was disappointed when the show ended without this treat. All we saw was a circus performance that was certainly good, but no different from what one could see anywhere else in the world.

From the circus we were taken to a real restaurant, that is to say, a restaurant that was not attached to a hotel. The staff led us through the slightly run-down main dining hall to a private room where our two guides, our driver and we three tourists enjoyed our farewell banquet. Earlier in the day, Mr Chun had been telling us that we were to be served with 'duck meat' as though it were some fine delicacy. It turned out that he had been talking about 'dark meat', which I still do not see as a delicacy. It was another barbecue, with large plates of raw flesh on the table. We were also given a thimbleful each of Pyongyang's speciality spirit. Mrs Kim did not drink at all but she did stand up to demonstrate the manner in which she thought Rob would direct traffic, mimicking his habit of tilting his head to one side. This

is something Rob often did when being fed a particularly outrageous line of propaganda.

The room itself looked as though it had seen better days some decades ago; this added to the charm of the place. As we waited for the minibus outside the entrance, I chatted briefly with two members of staff who were there to see us off. They seemed pleased to be talking to a foreigner. On the journey back to the hotel, Rob took advantage of the dark streets to slip Mrs Kim a tip by torchlight. Tipping guides is another aspect of organized tours with which I am entirely unfamiliar.

On our return to the hotel, we invited our guides up to the revolving restaurant. Mrs Kim came along immediately and drank orangeade. Mr Chun asserted his authority by turning up a little later. He drank imported Tiger beer. By this time we had built up a good relationship with our guides and so enjoyed a jovial evening's drinking. I told Mrs Kim that it concerned me that our countries were enemies. I confided that I had felt bad when I had seen the captured British armoured car in the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum. This second bit was a lie: the British involvement in the Korean War did not bother me in the slightest. Her response was a remarkable one, especially from a North Korean: 'People and governments are different I think.'

Things warmed up to the extent that Rob kissed Mrs Kim on the cheek. Mrs Kim started playing the bar's piano and turned out to be surprisingly good. It was a memorable send-off.

In the lift on the way back to our room I met a Japanese man from Tokyo who worked in shipbuilding. Somehow one feels a sense of camaraderie with anyone who has had the imagination and made the effort to visit such a reclusive country.

SATURDAY 4 MAY 2002

The only item on our itinerary today was to catch the morning train to Beijing at 10:10. This meant that we could have an unhurried breakfast and a sit down in the hotel lobby. We were introduced to an official who, we were told, was the man in charge of the KITC. He asked us if we had enjoyed our trip. Rob and Ned expressed their desire for a North Korean consulate in London to simplify the visa application process. The official disarmed them quite effectively by assuring them that it was perfectly possible to have the visas issued in London. When I mentioned this to my travel agent she said that this was typical North Korean behaviour: they are often not entirely truthful. This is consistent with Confucian culture; often lying is not seen as lying if it is done for the good of the group.

I also met Nicholas Bonner, owner of a specialist North Korean travel agency. Mindful that I might want to take another trip to the DPRK in the future, I introduced myself to him. Like many other people, he commented on the expense of visiting the DPRK. He also told me that he did not run his business for the money.

We went to the train station in the minibus, as ever chaperoned by our two guides and our driver. It was another sunny day, the clarity of the air unsullied by pollution. I sat next to Mrs Kim who was clutching Ned's copy of the Korea guidebook in place of her usual blue plastic document wallet. I asked to take a look and slipped in a twenty-dollar bill by way of a tip. I concealed my gift to Mr Chun by folding up the twenty-dollar bill and giving it to him underneath my room key card, which I had forgotten to hand in. I gave the driver a pack of Marlboros.

Our guides showed us to our train compartment. There was no question of slipping into the lower-class carriages or looking around the station. We chatted to our guides until just before departure time. As we were waving to Mr Chun and Mrs Kim from the slowly accelerating train, Mrs Kim turned her back. When she turned around

again, we could see that she was weeping. It was a touching farewell image from Pyongyang. I would like to think that she was shedding tears for me but the incident with the earplugs strongly suggests otherwise. Mr Chun remained as composed as ever.

One of the carriages was part of the Trans-Siberian train. Apparently there is a Pyongyang–Moscow service. This carriage was different from all the others, being white and having Cyrillic characters painted on the side. These said, ‘100 Years of the Trans-Siberian Railway’. There were two Russian guards on the train. One of them told Rob that the entire journey would take two weeks.

The fourth occupant of our four-berth train compartment was a smartly-dressed Chinese woman. She quickly decamped to the compartment next door. The rest of the people in our part of the train seemed to be Chinese. They were eating generous amounts of food, drinking beer, smoking, talking loudly and generally having a good time.

Our journey through the North Korean countryside took up most of the day. It was both pleasant and strange to see so much land unsullied by construction sites, litter or large buildings. All we saw were small peasant houses, mountains and fields. Even after a week here I was not used to the eerie underdevelopment. Indeed, during my week in the DPRK, I hardly saw any economic activity at all beyond agriculture, tourism, a hair salon and the ice cream stalls. There did not seem to be any smoking chimneys, deliveries, construction or shops. The DPRK appeared to be short of real work to do.

We ate lunch in the dining car. It took some care to eat while being juddered about by the movement of the train. The service was up to the usual high standard. There was no menu; we just ate what we were served.

As we trundled along, I waved at the underfed, sunburnt peasants who stared at us from the fields and level crossings. Invariably they smiled and waved back. It seems that waving to foreigners is allowed in the DPRK. At the border city of Sinuiju (신의주), we stopped for

two hours on either side for a perfunctory customs check. We could easily have smuggled guns, treasure or even Mrs Kim out of the DPRK. The DPRK customs official was young but wore the same double-Kim badge as I had seen the fat man with a swagger at the Children's Palace wearing. It stands to reason that customs officials have to be politically reliable.

The train lavatories were locked for all four hours, which became uncomfortable. Ever ready with gadgets, Rob produced a robust pair of travel pliers. He used them to open the window as well as the lavatory door, which made things more pleasant for all three of us. This was not the only reason we breathed a sigh of relief on crossing the border; Communist China may not be a liberal place, but it felt far less oppressive than the DPRK.

The contrast between China and Korea as we crossed the Yalu River was profound. The Chinese border city of Dadong had shiny high-rise office blocks, building sites and bustling streets. Looking back towards Sinuiju, all we could see was undeveloped countryside. We were allowed to get off the train for a stroll along the platform on both sides of the border. On the Korean side I saw the station's mandatory portrait of Kim Il Sung and an operational steam train backing up on the tracks. The driver was leaning out of the window to see where he was going. I thought about walking through the underpass beneath the line to look around the rest of the station but I had been too well-trained by our Korean guides to even dare.

On the Chinese side I did manage to wander into the station building through a high, wide corridor. At the end of the corridor was a large grocery stand. Coming from the DPRK, it was a bit of a novelty to go to a shop that sold things I wanted to buy and did not have shiftily-looking security agents hanging around it. There were no other customers and the four or five women working there did not seem especially interested in serving me. I managed to buy three bananas using my pidgin Chinese. As I was walking back to the train, I looked through a window in the corridor and saw the station's capacious

waiting room on the floor below. It was filled with hundreds of people sitting on orange plastic seats. Our train had been shunted on to a much longer one; no doubt these people would fill it. The door to the Hard Seat section of the train was locked so that we would not be disturbed by the masses.

The station staff opened the waiting room floodgates ten minutes before we were due to leave. We could see the crowds swarming up the platform from our window. They looked like a single grey mass. That evening we drank and talked politics for the first time; it was a subject best avoided in the DPRK. I gave our guard a pack of Marlboros. Rob said that he looked overjoyed with the gift, almost jumping in the air and tapping his heels in delight.

I slept badly. The train was noisy, there was no linen and the blankets were tiny. I got up at first light feeling filthy. There was dirt under my fingernails, there was no shower and I had no clean clothes to change into. The litter by the railway tracks made it clear we were back in the real world. I asked the guard what time we would arrive in Beijing that morning. He said 9:23, which turned out to be exactly right. When we arrived, a large number of North Koreans got off the train. Exactly where they had been hiding during the journey I have no idea; I certainly did not see any of them.

Ned and I said goodbye to Rob at the station exit. We pushed our way through the crowds to the nearby Xinqiao Hotel. I was going to take a shower in the room Ned had booked but it was not ready so we said our goodbyes. I telephoned Rowan from the hotel's business centre to let her know that the North Korean authorities had not arrested me for political subversion. As on my outbound journey, I got through to an answering machine.

I had agreed to take a packet of North Korean posters back to England for Rob. He was following up his trip to the DPRK with three weeks of travel around China, so it made sense for me to take the posters back for him. Mindful of Rob's fascinating stories about his smuggling exploits, I took advantage of the flat surfaces in the

business centre to unroll the packet and check it for contraband. Of course, it was all above board.

I had a couple of hours to spare so I wandered down to the place where I had met the woman who had given me a packet of postcards on the morning we had left for the DPRK. Sure enough, she was there. I gave her a pack of postcards of Pyongyang which I had bought especially for her. Not to be outdone, she rushed off and brought me back a Beijing Olympics 2008 cap in red, my favourite colour. As I walked back towards the station I was grabbed by another of the street vendors I had met the week before. She was thin, perhaps only five feet tall and aged about forty. She tried to sell me all manner of things and I even took a passing interest in some postage stamps. She had nothing I especially wanted so I gave her my last pack of Marlboros, which she seemed fairly pleased with. I left her with a cheerful (albeit somewhat insincere) *nǐ shì wǒde péngyou*, which means, 'You are my friend' in Chinese.

Unable to find the airport bus, I took a taxi using the phrase card the hotel receptionist had written out for me a week before. I chatted to the driver, a fat man in his forties, using a mixture of English and Chinese. My flight home was uneventful and Rowan met me when I arrived at Heathrow airport. Normal life would now be resumed.

Epilogue: Return to the DMZ

Rowan and I visited the Republic of Korea in September 2008 as part of our honeymoon. We spent a day visiting the Korean Demilitarized Zone from Seoul. Here is an account of our visit.

WEDNESDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2008

WE SLEPT fitfully because we were both anxious about waking up early to reach the fancy Lotte Hotel in time for our tour to the Korean Demilitarized Zone. We sat on one of the many outdoor benches near the Lotte Hotel and ate the breakfast that we had bought the night before. Seoul's numerous benches are popular with its large population of down-and-outs.

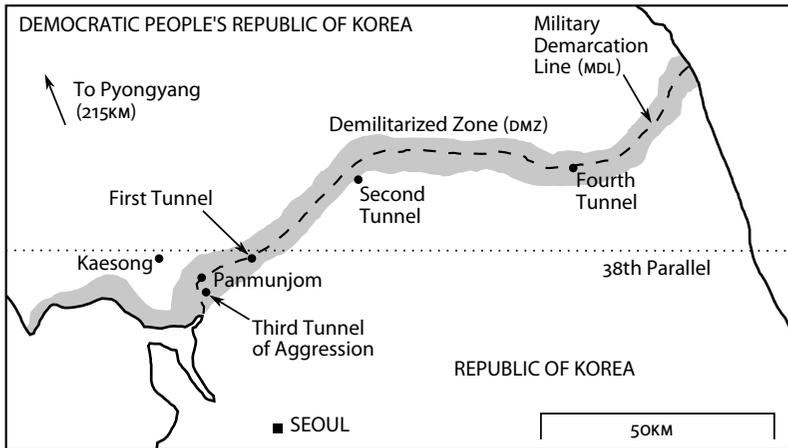
Our thrifty picnic breakfast contrasted with the opulent lift that we took inside the Lotte Hotel. It was a pastiche of Victoriana, with ornate decorations and wood panelling. The effect was marred somewhat by the presence of a video screen that showed moving pictures and an inaccurate weather forecast. A poster on the wall of the lift boasted of the hotel restaurant's three Michelin stars. From our tour company's desk we were directed to a special tour departure lobby on the second floor of the hotel. This lobby was, like the rest of the hotel, luxuriously decorated and the crowd of tourists looked somewhat incongruous in their casual clothes. Most of the tourists were Japanese but there was a smattering of Westerners. We sat waiting on a round upholstered bench for a few minutes before being directed to climb aboard a red tour bus and take our assigned seats.

English speakers were sat at the back of the bus, Japanese speakers at the front. The English-speaking tour guide was a young woman called Sun. She told us a substantial amount of background information which I found interesting but unfortunately my poor night's sleep caused me to yawn a little, which did not please Sun.

As we drove through Seoul, we passed a large hospital that bore the thought-provoking name 'Severance Hospital'. Sun didn't know where the name came from so I looked it up later and learned that the hospital was named after its founder.

Our first stop on the tour was the 'Third Tunnel of Aggression', the third of the estimated twenty DPRK infiltration tunnels to have been found by the Republic of Korea (ROK). The visitors' complex was well-organized and little expense had been spared in its construction. Our guide ordered us to don the blue helmets that had been provided. I imagined that they had chosen blue helmets because of their association with the UN and hence the ROK's legitimization of its conflict with the DPRK. Suitably hatted, we sat in a covered pavilion to listen to a briefing. We then climbed into a small open monorail train that was wide enough to accommodate three passengers in each row. The train took us down through a narrow tunnel, descending 70 metres at an 11% gradient. This was an access tunnel that had been built by the ROK on discovering the DPRK's excavations. Rowan and I both had middle seats so were spared from knocking our heads on the sides of the tunnel. Passengers riding next to the walls fared less well and made good use of their helmets. The tunnel was lit by green LEDs attached to the centre of the tunnel roof; they produced an eerie light reminiscent of a Gothic nightclub.

We disembarked at the end of the access tunnel. Another tour group immediately clambered on the monorail. Sun led us down the tunnel that had been dug by the DPRK, pointing out features as we went. Most notable was that the walls were of solid granite, requiring considerable effort to tunnel through. Sun pointed out the holes that had been used for dynamite blasting and explained that the direction they faced proved that the tunnel had been built by the DPRK rather than the ROK. Sun also explained that the tunnel was wet and so had been built with a 3° slope to the north so that water would drain back to the DPRK. Sun said that the DPRK had spread coal dust on the walls of the tunnel in an effort to make it appear that they were just



mining coal. It would have taken a startling ignorance of geology to accept this excuse: the rocks in that area hold no coal.

We walked down the tunnel for about three minutes. I was at the front of the line and could hear Sun panting slightly from the exertion. Parts of the tunnel's ceiling were held up by scaffolding, which provided a robust test for my helmet at one point. Our walk brought us to the first blockage that the ROK had installed in the tunnel; it was a thick concrete wall with an observation port built into it. Through this port I could see another blocking wall. Razor wire kept us away from the wall itself. We stopped to listen to Sun, who explained that the DPRK could have sent 30,000 troops an hour through this tunnel. I could well believe this estimate; the DPRK's tunnel was a major feat of engineering rather than an improvised *Great Escape*-type effort. Indeed, it was better constructed than the monorail tunnel that had (presumably) been constructed without any constraints to maintain secrecy. It seemed to me that there would have been room to transport light artillery and heavy machine guns as well as troops, although it was not nearly wide enough to accommodate armoured vehicles. Sun told us that Kim Il Sung had ordered the construction of

the tunnels because he had been impressed by the Vietcong's highly effective use of underground warrens in the Vietnam War.

We headed back the way we had come. When we reached the join between the access tunnel and the DPRK tunnel, Sun showed us the 7.5cm wide bore hole that had enabled the ROK to find the Tunnel of Aggression. It was right at the edge of the DPRK's tunnel. This struck me as slightly suspicious but could also be interpreted as an illustration of how difficult it is for the ROK to find these tunnels. So far they have found four of the estimated twenty. It took intelligence gathered from a DPRK defector to find this one.

Our group declined the offer to return to the surface using the monorail and instead walked up a newer tunnel, which also had an 11% gradient. A picture showed the mechanical mole that had been used to dig this second access tunnel. There was a striking difference between the cool underground air and the hot, moist air at the tunnel's entrance.

Our guides herded us into an auditorium where we were played a silly propaganda film that would have been worthy of the DPRK itself. It pretended that the DMZ, one of the world's most heavily armoured regions, was soon to become a nature and recreation park. From the auditorium we were given an inadequate amount of time to look around an informative museum about the tunnels. Rowan was particularly interested to learn that the Fourth Tunnel of Aggression had been found 143 metres underground.

We climbed back on the bus and were taken to the Dorasan Observatory. This observatory was not for looking at the heavens but for looking over the border at the DPRK. It was busy with schoolchildren and other visitors but we nevertheless managed to get to a pair of pay binoculars and spend two minutes surveying the land on the far side of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), just as I had surveyed the ROK from the DPRK six years earlier. Unlike the ROK, use of the binoculars in the DPRK was uncontested and free of charge. Through the binoculars I could see a special industrial zone, which

even had a construction crane, a symbol of development that I never saw in the DPRK during my visit in 2002. Behind the industrial zone stood the city of Kaesong, where I had stayed in a traditional-style hotel. Despite the distance of a few miles, the powerful binoculars enabled me to distinguish individual buildings. However, the most striking contrast between north and south was the vegetation. The hills of the DPRK were barren whereas those of the ROK were lush with thick green bushes in which cicadas buzzed loudly. I conjectured that the North Koreans had denuded the hills for firewood. When I asked Sun she suggested that the DPRK was unable to put out fires and also that it might be a security measure to deny would-be defectors hiding places on their southward journey. I favour the firewood explanation simply because the denuding of hills extends well beyond the border region.

Photography was restricted to an area behind a yellow line painted on the ground, some way back from the row of binoculars. The reason for this restriction was unclear to me but I didn't dare ask. I climbed the steps that led up the front of the camouflage-painted observatory building and found a luxurious indoor viewing hall that looked like a cross between a lecture theatre and a cinema, except that a large window overlooking the DPRK took the place of the cinema screen. Presumably this was intended for winter viewing.

On my visit to the DPRK observatory I had heard propaganda being blared over powerful loudspeakers from South to North. There was none of that here, not in either direction. It wasn't clear whether the ROK had decided to stop such broadcasts as part of its 'sunshine policy' or whether they just didn't broadcast in that area. Asking our guide was out of the question; I feared I might land myself in serious trouble if I revealed that I had been to the DPRK.

Our next stop was Dorasan Railway Station. Railway stations, especially recently-built ones, rarely appear on tourist itineraries. However, this one was sufficiently special to warrant a visit. It was intended as the border station between the ROK and the DPRK and had

been built as what could be interpreted as either a flamboyant propaganda move or else a gesture of good faith and goodwill. The idea was that as soon as the DPRK felt ready, train services could start between Seoul and Pyongyang. The station was a true showpiece: it was spotlessly clean and bright with natural light; beneath the high ceiling hung several large paintings and a mural adorned one wall. A map entitled *Trans Eurasian Railway Network* showed how Seoul could be linked to London and Lisbon by rail if only those pesky North Koreans would allow trains to run through their territory. Having travelled on a train in the DPRK I can testify that some track maintenance would also be in order. Our guide told us that we were 13km from the MDL, which is the de facto border with the DPRK.

A large customs hall stood ready to accept international passengers and a conventional railway station sign indicated the platform for Pyongyang. The authorities had clearly done everything possible to make it a fully-functioning railway station rather than just a token gesture. There were no railway staff though, only a vendor selling souvenirs and a soldier standing guard. As at many East Asian railway stations, there was a souvenir ink stamp that I used to adorn my notebook. A display case showed a concrete railway sleeper that had been signed by former US President George W. Bush. It read, 'MAy [sic] this Railroad reunite Korean families.'

The tour bus took us to an eatery for lunch. Rowan and I ate vegetarian *bibimbap* (비빔밥), a sort of hotpot. We shared a table with three students: a scruffy but switched-on Australian and a Swiss couple who were visiting Korea to see college friends. The Swiss couple ordered a beef dish that they ate in the customary Korean fashion by cooking it over a gas burner set into the middle of the table. Even the most basic eateries in Korea feature these tabletop gas burners. Near the eatery stood a funfair. It was not open but appeared to be in current use. Both the Australian student and I found it strange to see such frivolity so close to the world's tensest border.

We had only twenty minutes to consume our food before being required to board a new bus for our journey to Panmunjom. We had a new guide, an older Korean woman who spoke excellent English and conveyed with authority and clarity the numerous rules and restrictions that applied to our visit. In the pair of seats behind us sat an American baby-boomer couple. The husband talked loudly and relentlessly throughout the tour, ignoring the guide's polite requests for quiet. At one point I thought she was about to call in the military police; I certainly wished she would.

To reach Panmunjom we had to pass through two checkpoints, where we showed our passports. The first was manned by a ROK soldier, the second by an American soldier. We entered the UN camp, which is called Camp Bonifas in memory of an unfortunate captain who was killed by DPRK soldiers while trying to trim some branches off a tree in what is now known as the 'axe murder incident'. Here we were herded into an auditorium where we were issued with poor-quality radio headsets to listen to an English version of the briefing. The Japanese tour group had their briefing broadcast over a PA system. Among the various rules and restrictions was a strict prohibition on hand gestures, lest they be used as propaganda by the DPRK.

The bus took us to the opulent steel-and-glass building that sat facing the huts that straddle the MDL. Our guide instructed us to line up in pairs and file through the building into the UN-blue central hut. A ROK soldier stood on the left-hand long edge of the hut and another soldier guarded the entrance at the northern end. I had entered this hut more than six years earlier by that very door. Our guide had warned us not to walk behind the soldier at that end, claiming that the North Koreans might make a kidnap attempt. Both soldiers stood motionless in a clenched-fisted taekwon do pose. They were tall and muscular and appeared oblivious to the numerous photographs we took of them. These fine men stood in stark contrast to their allied American soldiers, whose substantial paunches hung over their military belts.

We filed back out of the hut and walked under the strong sun towards an elevated viewing platform built to look like a Korean pavilion. Cicada beetles buzzed loudly and powerful Korean soldiers stood guard while American soldiers slouched around chatting. We climbed up to the platform and our guide granted us permission to take photographs in all directions, although she rigorously enforced the gesture ban. From this viewpoint we could see the DPRK's 160-metre high flagpole and, more interestingly, several DPRK soldiers. One stood guard outside the North Korean visitor hall, from which I had viewed the MDL huts in 2002. He held a pair of binoculars and stepped in and out from behind a pillar. To the east of the DPRK's visitor hall stood a guard post covered by sheets of fabric of the sort used while restoring buildings. Around the guard post stood about half a dozen soldiers of the DPRK's Korean People's Army. They were of noticeably smaller stature than their ROK counterparts; no political bickering is necessary to compare the relative success of the two states. All the soldiers stood with their backs to us, presumably observing the restoration of the guard post.

I asked our guide about the ownership of the huts. Some were UN blue and others were covered in pyramid-shaped tiles. She told me that the blue ones were owned by the UN and the tiled ones by the DPRK.

We descended from the viewing pavilion and passed a group of loitering American soldiers as we filed back through the empty glass-and-steel show building. We piled back on the tour bus where the annoying American continued his irritating monologue. He was now wearing a DMZ baseball cap, as was his wife. The bus took us to a modest memorial to the axe murder incident and thence to see the evocatively-named Bridge of No Return, which was used for exchanging prisoners during the Korean War. We were not allowed out of the bus at these sites, although we were allowed to stand up to take photographs. The final stop of the tour was the obligatory souvenir shop, located well outside the confines of Camp Bonifas. Here one

could purchase all manner of Korean knick-knacks and trinkets, including ROK ginseng and DPRK blueberry wine. I resisted the temptation to buy some DPRK banknotes. Rowan liked the idea of a Hello Kitty wearing a Korean People's Army uniform but for some reason these were not available; I can only imagine they had sold out.

Our return to Seoul took us past innumerable high-rise apartment blocks clustered in large housing developments. Nearly half of the ROK's population lives in greater Seoul and I pondered the vulnerability of these people to the DPRK's military might. Not only does the DPRK take an aggressive military stance, it backs this up with the world's fourth-largest standing army and an active arms industry. At 215km away, the DPRK's far smaller capital city of Pyongyang is at a much safer distance from the DMZ than Seoul.

I also pondered the contrast between the visit I had made to the DMZ in 2002 from the DPRK and the one I had just made from the ROK. Although each visit involved similar activities, the atmosphere when I visited from the north was entirely different. On that occasion the mood was positive, even festive, and our hosts made us feel like honoured guests. Today we had been treated more like liabilities to be herded. Although I imagine that the main reason for this is simply that the DPRK handles far fewer visitors than the ROK, it was ironic that in a functioning democracy I was just another member of the masses whereas in one of the world's last bastions of Marxism-Leninism I was treated as a VIP.

