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Living in North Korea

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Introduction

Living in North Korea as an expatriate is a unique and challenging experience. Unlike the vibrant, diverse expat communities found in cities such as London, Dubai, or Shanghai, North Korea is home to only a small, select group of foreigners—primarily diplomats, aid workers, educators, and business specialists. The country's history of isolation, its highly regulated environment, and its deep-rooted political and social ideology set it apart from any other assignment in the world.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is often shrouded in mystery and misconception. For many, the "hermit kingdom" evokes images of a rugged and impenetrable society, but this book seeks to look beyond the stereotypes to provide a grounded, practical guide for those considering a temporary or extended stay. Drawing on the realities faced by expats who have lived and worked inside the country, this guide offers a comprehensive overview of the systems, routines, and challenges you will encounter, from housing and healthcare to work culture and social interactions.

North Korea's rules and customs may feel intimidating at first. The strict limits on personal freedoms, the constant presence of surveillance, and the lack of access to many everyday conveniences can make the adjustment period demanding. Yet, for those with open minds and adaptable temperaments, living in North Korea offers profound insights into a society few have ever glimpsed closely. Daily life takes on a new rhythm, one paced by regulated routines, formalized relationships, and occasional, unexpected moments of connection with local counterparts.

This guide pays special attention to the practicalities and nuances that shape expat life. What should you pack? How do you maintain communication with the outside world? What is shopping like, and how do you navigate transportation, healthcare, or education for your children? What are the unwritten rules for interacting with North Korean colleagues? Each chapter is designed to equip you with essential information while also highlighting the rich, sometimes perplexing, cultural context in which you will reside.

Despite the many restrictions, most expatriates find a degree of normalcy and even occasional enjoyment in their daily lives. The expat community in Pyongyang is tightly-knit; friendships form quickly amidst shared challenges. Social gatherings, visits to the limited selection of restaurants and shops, and cultural events provide a rhythm to life that, while sometimes monotonous, often brings unexpected rewards and a strong sense of camaraderie.

Ultimately, living in North Korea is an adventure like no other—a test of adaptability, resilience, and cross-cultural understanding. Whether you are coming as a diplomat, an aid worker, a teacher, or a business specialist, this guide aims to prepare you for every aspect of your journey, illuminating both the difficulties and the rare privileges of experiencing life inside one of the world’s most enigmatic countries.

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CHAPTER ONE: Understanding North Korea: History and Ideology

North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is a nation unlike any other, shaped profoundly by its unique history and a guiding ideology that permeates every aspect of society. To truly understand what it means to live and work within its borders, one must first grasp the foundational elements that have forged this enigmatic "hermit kingdom." From its dramatic post-World War II origins to the evolution of its distinctive political philosophies, these historical threads are woven into the fabric of daily life for both locals and expatriates alike.

The Korean Peninsula, a land of striking mountains and coastal plains, has a long and often turbulent history. Before its division, Korea had developed a distinct culture and civilization, even uniting under the Silla Dynasty in 668 A.D.. However, its strategic location in East Asia made it a frequent point of contention for larger powers. In 1910, the Joseon Dynasty ended with Japan's annexation and colonization of Korea, a period remembered by Koreans as brutal. This era of Japanese rule, which lasted until the end of World War II in 1945, profoundly shaped Korean society and laid some groundwork for North Korea's later emphasis on heavy industry.

With Japan's surrender in 1945, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into two zones: the North occupied by the Soviet Union and the South by the United States. This division, initially intended to be temporary, became permanent with the onset of the Cold War and the failure of the two superpowers to agree on a unified government. In 1948, two separate governments emerged: the Soviet-aligned Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North and the American-aligned Republic of Korea in the South, each claiming to be the legitimate government of the entire peninsula.

The tensions culminated in the Korean War, which erupted in 1950 when North Korean forces invaded the South. The conflict, marked by immense destruction, ended in a stalemate in 1953 with an armistice agreement, but no formal peace treaty was ever signed. This left the peninsula divided by the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a stark physical manifestation of the ongoing ideological chasm. In the aftermath of the war, North Korea, with significant economic aid and expertise from other Eastern Bloc countries, embarked on rebuilding its economy, focusing on industrialization under a centrally planned system.

At the helm of this nascent state was Kim Il-sung, North Korea's first leader. He quickly consolidated power, purging rival factions and establishing a pervasive personality cult that centered on himself as the "Great Leader". It was during this period that Kim Il-

sung began to champion his personal philosophy of *Juche*, which means "self-reliance". Initially a concept emphasizing national pride and independence from foreign aid, *Juche* evolved into a complex ideology that became enshrined as the official state philosophy in the 1972 constitution.

Juche is far more than just a political slogan; it is the foundational philosophy that dictates North Korea's approach to politics, economics, and national defense. It posits that the masses are the masters of the revolution and construction, and they are also the driving force behind it. Kim Il-sung outlined three core principles of *Juche*: political and ideological independence (*jaju*), economic independence (*jarip*), and military independence (*jawi*). This ideology has been instrumental in justifying North Korea's isolationist policies and its determination to develop domestic resources and technologies, including its pursuit of nuclear weapons, as a deterrent against perceived foreign threats.

As Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung's son, prepared to succeed his father, *Juche* continued to evolve. He further elaborated on the ideology, emphasizing the importance of loyalty to the leader and making some ideological breaks from traditional Marxism-Leninism. Under Kim Jong-il's leadership, another crucial policy emerged: *Songun*, or "military-first" politics. This policy prioritizes the Korean People's Army in state affairs and the allocation of resources, elevating the military as the "supreme repository of power". *Songun* became a guiding principle for political and economic life, deeply embedding militarism into all aspects of North Korean society.

While references to communism were quietly removed from the constitution in 2009, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, incorporating *Juche* and *Songun*, remains the official ideology of North Korea. This complex ideological framework, blending elements of Marxism-Leninism, Korean nationalism, and Confucian values, continues to shape the country's unique governance structure and its relationship with the outside world. For expats, understanding these ideological underpinnings is not just an academic exercise; it's essential for comprehending daily interactions, state policies, and the broader context of life in the DPRK.

The geography of North Korea also plays a significant role in its development and isolation. The country occupies the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, bordering China and Russia to the north and South Korea to the south. Much of the terrain is mountainous, with around 80% of its land area composed of hills and mountains, making less than 15% arable. This mountainous landscape, often described by early European visitors as resembling "a sea in a heavy gale," has historically made communication between eastern and western parts of the country challenging. Most of the population resides in the lowland plains and valleys.

North Korea experiences a humid continental climate with four distinct seasons. Winters are long, cold, and clear, with temperatures in Pyongyang averaging between

-13 and -3 °C (9 and 27 °F) in January. Northern mountainous regions can be even harsher, with temperatures occasionally plummeting to -40 °C (-40 °F). Summers are short, hot, humid, and rainy, influenced by monsoon winds from the Pacific Ocean. Pyongyang sees average summer temperatures around 29 °C (84 °F) in August. Approximately 60% of all precipitation occurs between June and September, often bringing heavy rainfall that can lead to flooding.

These climatic conditions and geographical features have, in part, reinforced the nation's emphasis on self-reliance and internal development. With limited arable land and distinct seasonal challenges, agricultural practices and resource management are critical. The presence of significant mineral resources, including lead, zinc, gold, silver, copper, and coal, has also influenced the country's economic strategy.

In essence, North Korea is a country profoundly shaped by its post-war division, the strong leadership of the Kim dynasty, and its unique guiding ideologies of *Juche* and *Songun*. These elements have fostered a highly centralized and controlled society, where self-reliance and military strength are paramount. Understanding this historical and ideological backdrop is the crucial first step for any expat seeking to navigate the intricacies of daily life and work in this truly extraordinary nation.

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