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Moving to North Korea

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** So, You Think You Want to Move to Pyongyang? (Reality Check #1)
- **Chapter 2** The *Actual* Ways In: Diplomat, Spy, or Very Specific Widget-Maker?
- **Chapter 3** The Invitation: More Elusive Than a Unicorn Riding a Nyan Cat
- **Chapter 4** Vetting: Prepare for a Colonoscopy of Your Entire Life (Metaphorically... Probably)
- **Chapter 5** The Visa: Not Your Average Sticker (And Probably Not Tourist Class)
- **Chapter 6** Packing List: What You Absolutely Need (and What Will Be Confiscated Immediately)
- **Chapter 7** Landing in Pyongyang: Smile, Wave, and Don't Touch Anything Shiny
- **Chapter 8** Registration Day: Meeting Your New Best Friends (in Official Uniforms)
- **Chapter 9** Your New Digs: The Expat Compound Experience (It's Cozier Than You Think... Or Else)
- **Chapter 10** Unpacking & Decorating (Within Strict Guidelines, Naturally)
- **Chapter 11** Getting Around: Your Chaperone is Your Chariot
- **Chapter 12** Shopping Spree: Mastering the Art of the Hard-Currency Store
- **Chapter 13** Dining Out (and In): Kimchi, Cold Noodles, and Constant Supervision
- **Chapter 14** Staying Connected (Sort Of): The DPRK Intranet and Other Digital Adventures
- **Chapter 15** Making Friends: Navigating Social Life When Everyone is Watching
- **Chapter 16** Leisure Time: Approved Fun Only, Please!
- **Chapter 17** Healthcare Hints: The Pyongyang Friendship Hospital and Your Evacuation Plan
- **Chapter 18** The Juche Idea: Required Reading (or at Least Skimming)
- **Chapter 19** Dos and Don'ts: How *Not* to Cause an International Incident
- **Chapter 20** Currency Conundrums: Won vs. Dollars, Euros, and Yuan
- **Chapter 21** Dealing with Authority: Politeness is Your Superpower
- **Chapter 22** Renewing Your Stay: Please Sir, Can I Have Some More (Scrutiny)?
- **Chapter 23** Can I Bring Fluffy? Pets, Possessions, and Import Puzzles
- **Chapter 24** Citizenship Dreams: Spoiler Alert - Probably Not Happening
- **Chapter 25** Saying Goodbye: The Equally Complicated Art of Leaving North Korea

Introduction

So, you've decided the usual expat haunts – Paris, London, Tokyo – are just too... easy? You're seeking a real challenge, a place where 'off the beaten path' is an understatement the size of the Ryugyong Hotel? Perhaps you accidentally clicked the wrong destination on the 'Global Relocation Options for the Truly Adventurous (or Possibly Insane)' website? Whatever your reasons, welcome, intrepid soul, to the only guide you'll ever need (or possibly find) for the remarkably niche ambition of moving to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea!

Let's be absolutely crystal clear from the outset: this isn't your typical 'Moving Abroad' handbook filled with tips on finding hip cafes or navigating rush hour traffic. We assume you've mastered the basics of packing boxes and forwarding mail. Instead, this guide plunges headfirst into the unique, often baffling, and occasionally nerve-wracking specifics of setting up shop (or rather, being carefully placed) in North Korea. Forget generic advice about culture shock; we're talking about the practicalities of life in one of the world's most isolated countries – think mandatory minders, hard-currency stores, and the distinct lack of casual internet browsing.

Thinking the visa process for that Schengen visa was a bureaucratic nightmare? Oh, you sweet summer child. Securing permission for long-term residency in the DPRK makes scaling Mount Everest in flip-flops look like a sensible afternoon stroll. It typically requires an official invitation – something not exactly handed out like flyers – and involves levels of background checking and vetting that would make even the most seasoned intelligence operative sweat. This isn't about *choosing* to move; it's about being *allowed* in under very specific, state-approved circumstances.

Within these pages, we'll explore the peculiar realities of expat life in Pyongyang (because let's face it, options elsewhere are slimmer than a diplomat's excuse). We'll delve into the designated housing compounds, the highly restricted freedom of movement (imagine a city-wide escape room, but with real consequences), the fascinating world of censored communications, and the cozy, close-knit (read: tiny and inescapable) foreign community. You'll get the lowdown on navigating daily life when your every move might be observed, why befriending locals is trickier than advanced calculus, and how developing a sincere appreciation for the revolutionary operas might just be a survival skill.

Now, before you enthusiastically start packing your phrasebook and stashing emergency chocolate (highly recommended, by the way), a crucial word of caution is in order. North Korea isn't exactly famed for its predictable policies or transparent regulations. Rules regarding currency, movement, communication, the permitted

length of your hair, or even the availability of imported cheese can change with bewildering speed and little warning. Therefore, treat this book as your humorous, hopefully helpful, but decidedly *unofficial* field guide. **Always, always, always** consult the latest information directly from the relevant DPRK authorities, your sponsoring embassy, or the organization that somehow managed to get you invited. Official sources are paramount. Don't come crying to us if the rules for using the foreigners' hospital changed yesterday and now require payment in rare stamps.

Right then. If the prospect of extreme bureaucracy, constant surveillance, profound isolation, and potentially questionable plumbing hasn't sent you sprinting towards the nearest Costa Rica relocation seminar, congratulations! You might just have the bizarre blend of patience, curiosity, and perhaps mild delirium required to contemplate this unique path. Let's buckle up (metaphorically, of course - seatbelt usage may vary) and explore the extraordinary, practical details of moving to North Korea. Turn the page... if you're absolutely sure.

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CHAPTER ONE: So, You Think You Want to Move to Pyongyang? (Reality Check #1)

Alright, deep breaths. You've navigated the introduction, acknowledged the inherent oddity of this entire endeavour, and you're still here. Perhaps you possess an adventurous spirit previously only found in nineteenth-century explorers who cheerfully labelled malaria-infested swamps as 'promising farmland'. Or maybe you just have a profound, inexplicable desire to live somewhere with truly unique traffic patterns – namely, the lack thereof. Whatever spark ignited this peculiar flame, let's fan it gently with the bellows of stark reality before we go any further. This chapter is your first, essential reality check, the cold splash of water before you attempt to dive into an empty pool.

First things first: when we talk about moving to North Korea as a foreigner, for all intents and purposes, we are talking about moving to Pyongyang. Forget charming countryside villages, bustling port cities, or serene mountain retreats accessible to outsiders. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea operates under an extremely centralized system, and the designated zone for the vast majority of the minuscule foreign population is the capital city. Think of it less as choosing a city within a country and more like being assigned a specific, heavily curated corner within a very large, politically sensitive theme park. If your dream involved setting up a quaint bed and breakfast near Mount Paektu, you might need to radically adjust your expectations, possibly towards managing the stationery cupboard in a Pyongyang-based embassy.

Now, let's tackle the most fundamental difference between contemplating a move to Pyongyang and, say, pondering a relocation to Portugal for the cheap custard tarts. In most places, *you* decide you want to move. You research visas, look for jobs or housing, fill out forms, and navigate the bureaucracy. It might be complex, tedious, even maddening, but the initial impetus comes from you. Moving to North Korea flips this script entirely. It's not about you *wanting* to go; it's about the North Korean state *allowing* you in, usually because you fit into a very specific category of person they happen to need or have a diplomatic agreement with. Forget browsing online job boards for Pyongyang postings or checking property websites for trendy downtown lofts. The process, such as it is, almost invariably begins with an invitation from their side. You are selected, vetted, and permitted entry based on criteria that are largely opaque and entirely outside your control.

This is crucial to internalize. Your burning desire to experience Juche ideology firsthand, your fascination with socialist architecture, or your belief that you could really contribute to the local synchronized swimming scene are, frankly, irrelevant

from the perspective of gaining residency. The gatekeepers aren't looking for enthusiastic immigrants; they're fulfilling specific, state-defined requirements. Think of it like trying to join an ultra-exclusive, secret society where the membership rules are unpublished, the screening process involves mind-readers (probably metaphorical, we think), and they only recruit biochemists who also happen to be world-class tuba players, but only on alternate Tuesdays when Jupiter aligns with Mars. The odds are not, statistically speaking, in your favour unless you happen to be that tuba-playing biochemist they suddenly need.

This leads us neatly onto common misconceptions. Perhaps fuelled by fleeting news reports, curated documentaries, or the sheer mystery surrounding the country, people can develop some... interesting ideas. Is it a misunderstood worker's paradise, free from the evils of consumerism? Is it a land of pristine nature and disciplined citizens, offering an escape from chaotic Western life? Is it a giant, fascinating puzzle box waiting for an adventurous outsider to unlock its secrets? While elements of truth might be twisted into these notions (discipline is certainly present, consumerism looks different), the reality for a foreign resident is far less romantic and far more constrained. The lack of advertising billboards doesn't automatically translate to tranquil enlightenment, especially when replaced by ubiquitous portraits and revolutionary slogans. The 'escape' from Western chaos involves stepping into a different kind of order - one that dictates where you can go, who you can talk to, and what information you can access.

Let's try to quantify the difficulty level. Imagine the bureaucratic hurdles of moving to, say, Japan or Switzerland. Now multiply that by the logistical challenges of relocating to a remote research station in Antarctica. Add the security screening intensity of applying for a top-secret clearance at Area 51. Then, layer on the social restrictions of a medieval monastery. Finally, wrap it all in the enigma of a sphinx asking riddles in a language you don't speak. You're maybe, *possibly*, starting to approach the ballpark of what arranging a long-term stay in North Korea entails for someone not arriving in a diplomatic pouch. It's not just 'hard'; it's a fundamentally different category of international movement, operating on principles alien to most immigration systems.

Therefore, this guide you're holding? It's not going to tell you the best districts for expats (there's basically one, maybe two designated areas), the coolest underground bars (assume none, unless 'underground' refers to an actual bunker), or how to navigate the local dating scene (short answer: don't). We won't be comparing international schools or debating the merits of different gym memberships. This book focuses on the peculiar mechanics of getting in (if you're one of the chosen few), the unique constraints of daily life once there, and the practicalities of existing within a system designed for control and self-reliance, not foreign convenience. Think less 'Lonely Planet' and more 'Survival Handbook for the Extremely Vetted and Constantly Observed'.

What kind of person, hypothetically, might thrive, or at least survive, in such an environment? Forget Type A personalities who need constant control and predictable schedules. Forget social butterflies who crave spontaneous interactions and diverse experiences. The successful Pyongyang expat (a rare breed indeed) likely possesses monk-like patience, the adaptability of a tardigrade, a minimal requirement for personal autonomy, and an almost zen-like acceptance of ambiguity. A deep-seated ability to follow rules, even seemingly arbitrary ones, is non-negotiable. A robust internal life is probably helpful, given the external limitations. And, crucially, a well-developed, possibly quite dark, sense of humour might be the most vital tool in your psychological toolkit, deployed internally, of course. Public sarcastic commentary is generally frowned upon.

Why, then, do *any* foreigners end up living there? As hinted in the introduction and explored further in the next chapter, it boils down to specific roles. Diplomats representing their countries, staff from a handful of approved international organisations (like UN agencies or certain NGOs focused on humanitarian aid), technicians or specialists invited for very specific projects deemed essential by the DPRK government, perhaps a few language instructors, and maybe, just maybe, someone involved in a tightly controlled joint business venture. Notice the common thread: these individuals are there because their presence serves a distinct purpose for the North Korean state, fitting into predefined slots within their system. They aren't there because they won a "Move to Pyongyang" lottery or filled out a form online. Their personal desire to be there is secondary to their function.

Compounding the challenge is the sheer difficulty of obtaining reliable, practical, up-to-the-minute information before you even get close to packing a bag. Planning a move to France? You'll drown in websites, blogs, forums, expat testimonials, and government portals detailing every conceivable aspect of immigration and daily life. Planning a move to North Korea? You'll find official government statements (often long on ideology, short on practical detail), news articles focusing on geopolitics, tightly controlled tourist accounts, and precious little nuts-and-bolts guidance for prospective residents. The information landscape reflects the country's isolation. You'll be heavily reliant on your sponsoring organisation (embassy, NGO, government counterpart) for guidance, and even they might struggle with sudden policy shifts or bureaucratic quirks. That warning in the introduction about double-checking everything with official sources? Consider it tattooed on the inside of your eyelids.

So, consider this chapter your Reality Check Numero Uno. Moving to North Korea isn't a career move you choose lightly, like deciding between accounting and marketing. It isn't a lifestyle choice, like opting for the buzz of New York or the beaches of Thailand. It's an exceptional circumstance, a deviation from the global norm of migration, driven almost entirely by the host country's specific, limited requirements and subject to their absolute control. It demands a profound adjustment of expectations regarding

personal freedom, information access, social interaction, and bureaucratic transparency. It requires navigating a system that views foreign residents primarily through the lens of utility and security.

If you've read this far and your reaction is less "Good grief, run for the hills!" and more "Hmm, fascinatingly complex, tell me more," then perhaps you do possess the requisite blend of resilience, curiosity, and possibly mild eccentricity to continue reading. Just remember that the path ahead isn't about finding loopholes or charming your way in. It's about understanding if you, by some quirk of fate or professional alignment, happen to fit one of the very few, very specific keys designed for the North Korean lock. Don't mistake the existence of this guide for an endorsement of feasibility for the average reader. It's more akin to a field manual for spotting a snow leopard - acknowledging the creature exists, describing its habitat and behaviours, but fully aware that encountering one requires extraordinary circumstances and frankly, a good deal of luck. Now, if you're ready for Reality Check #2, let's talk about who *actually* gets through the door...

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