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Visiting North Korea

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Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), more commonly known as North Korea, presents itself as one of the most isolated and secretive nations in the world. For the modern traveler, the prospect of visiting North Korea is both intriguing and daunting, offering a rare opportunity to glimpse a country shrouded in mystery. Tourism to the DPRK is not like traveling to other destinations. The experiences and interactions you may expect in North Korea are heavily controlled and orchestrated by the state, providing a distinct and highly managed view of their nation.

Visiting North Korea necessitates compliance with a strict framework of rules and guidelines established by the state. Independent travel is not an option; every step of the travel experience is mediated through pre-arranged and fully guided tours operated by state-approved agencies. This system ensures that tourists witness curated aspects of North Korean life, mainly through visits to monuments, historical sites, and state-sanctioned exhibitions. Although these tours offer limited interaction with everyday North Korean life, they provide a rare opportunity to observe the country within strictly regulated boundaries.

Prospective travelers must navigate an array of geopolitical considerations and practical logistics. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated matters, resulting in prolonged border closures that stretched from early 2020 through much of 2023, with limited signs of reopening. Anyone considering a trip must keep abreast of the latest advisories and regulations issued by both DPRK officials and international governments, as the situation can change rapidly. This book aims to furnish you with insights into the operational aspects of organizing a journey to the DPRK and the realities that await once you cross its borders.

As a destination, North Korea contrasts sharply with the rest of the world's travel hotspots. You will find a place steeped in ceremonial grandeur and displays of political ideology, a landscape dotted with imposing statues and monumental architecture. Yet, it is a place that requires visitors to adhere to strict regulations and rules — from respectful conduct toward revered leaders to compliance with limited photography permissions. In return, tourists are offered an insight, albeit controlled, into a country few have seen and into a society organized around distinct guiding principles.

Lastly, the decision to visit North Korea involves a set of ethical considerations that are not commonplace with other travel plans. Every traveler must reflect on the implications of their visit: the debate ranges from the perception of tourism as a form of endorsement of the regime to views that it creates opportunities for cultural exchange and human interaction. Regardless of the position one takes, visitors must

approach the trip with an awareness of these complex dimensions.

Given these factors, this guide seeks to equip you with the knowledge needed to engage critically and respectfully with the unique experience of touring North Korea. From understanding the stringent tour frameworks to approaching the ethical debates that surround such a visit, this book aims to provide comprehensive preparation for anyone considering entering this enigmatic part of the world.

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CHAPTER ONE: Is Tourism Allowed?

The very idea often raises eyebrows. "Can you even go there?" is a question frequently fielded by anyone mentioning North Korea in a travel context. Given the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) reputation as one of the world's most secretive, politically isolated, and heavily militarized nations, the assumption for many is that its borders are hermetically sealed to outsiders, particularly those from the West. Yet, counterintuitively perhaps, the answer to whether tourism is allowed is, broadly speaking, yes. However, this 'yes' comes attached with more asterisks, conditions, and caveats than perhaps any other tourist destination on Earth. It's tourism, but absolutely not as the rest of the world knows it.

Forget backpacking solo across the country, renting a car for a spontaneous road trip, or even just wandering off from your hotel for a quiet coffee. Tourism in North Korea operates under a unique and extraordinarily rigid system entirely dictated and controlled by the state. The fundamental, non-negotiable principle is this: independent travel is strictly forbidden. No exceptions. Every single foreign tourist visiting the DPRK *must* be part of a pre-arranged, fully guided tour group, organized through specific channels sanctioned by the North Korean government. There is simply no other way for a tourist to legally enter and travel within the country. This isn't a suggestion or a guideline; it's the absolute foundation upon which all tourism rests.

This immediately differentiates a trip to North Korea from virtually any other travel experience. The sense of freedom and spontaneity that characterizes modern travel is entirely absent. Instead, visitors must accept a journey where every day, every hour, and practically every minute is scheduled in advance by North Korean authorities. Your itinerary is fixed, your movements are constantly monitored, and your interactions are carefully managed. The experience is less about personal discovery and exploration, and more about observing a series of carefully selected presentations of the country, its ideology, and its achievements, all under the watchful eyes of your designated minders.

So, while the gates are technically open to tourists, they open only onto a very specific, narrow, and pre-approved path. This system ensures the government maintains complete control over what visitors see, where they go, and who they interact with. It allows the DPRK to earn valuable foreign currency from tourism while minimizing the perceived risks of uncontrolled foreign influence or observation. The state views tourism not just as an economic activity but as a tool of diplomacy and public relations, a way to showcase its narrative to the outside world, albeit a highly curated and selective one.

The mechanism for arranging such a trip involves working through specialized foreign travel agencies. These agencies, typically based in China or Europe, are officially accredited by the Korea International Travel Company (KITC), the primary state tourism bureau in North Korea, or other related state entities. Prospective tourists cannot simply apply for a visa at a DPRK embassy or book a flight directly. The entire package – visa application, transportation into and out of the country, accommodation, meals, sightseeing, and guides – is bundled and handled by these intermediary tour operators. They act as the essential liaison between the foreign tourist and the North Korean state apparatus. Chapter Two will delve deeper into the specific process of selecting and working with these authorized operators.

Now, who exactly gets the nod to participate in these tightly controlled tours? Generally, citizens of most countries *are* permitted to apply for tourist visas to North Korea. If you hold a passport from Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or many nations across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, you are typically eligible to book a tour, subject, of course, to the visa application being approved. The approval process itself, handled entirely by the tour company and North Korean authorities, is usually straightforward for eligible nationalities, but refusals can happen without any explanation provided. The key takeaway is that nationality alone, for many, is not an automatic barrier.

However, there are significant and politically charged exceptions to this general rule. The most notable involves citizens of the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Due to the unresolved political conflict and the armistice, rather than a peace treaty, that ended the Korean War fighting, travel between the two Koreas is extremely restricted. South Korean citizens are generally prohibited from visiting North Korea as tourists through the standard channels available to other foreigners. Specific inter-Korean projects or family reunions have occasionally allowed limited cross-border visits, but routine tourism is not permitted.

Citizens of the United States face a particularly complex and often fluctuating situation. While North Korea itself has generally permitted American tourists (under the same controlled tour conditions as others), the U.S. government has periodically imposed bans restricting its citizens from using their passports for tourist travel to the DPRK. These bans are typically enacted due to serious safety and security concerns, often triggered by incidents involving the detention of American citizens in North Korea. These detentions have sometimes been lengthy and occurred under opaque circumstances, leading the State Department to deem the risk unacceptable. Therefore, any prospective U.S. traveler *must* meticulously check the current U.S. Department of State travel advisories regarding North Korea before even considering a trip. The permission, in this case, needs to come not just from Pyongyang, but also from Washington D.C., and the latter can change based on diplomatic conditions. Chapter Ten will explore these nationality-specific restrictions and considerations in

greater detail.

Beyond nationality, certain professions also face significant hurdles or outright prohibitions, especially when it comes to tourist visas. The most prominent group here is journalists. Individuals seeking to enter North Korea explicitly for journalistic purposes must apply through entirely separate channels, requiring special permission from the authorities. This permission is notoriously difficult to obtain. Attempting to circumvent this by entering on a tourist visa and then engaging in journalistic activities – gathering information for publication, conducting interviews beyond the sanctioned tour framework, or taking photos/videos with professional intent for news dissemination – is strictly forbidden and incredibly risky. Discovery could lead to immediate expulsion, confiscation of equipment, detention, interrogation, and potentially severe legal consequences. The North Korean state maintains extremely tight control over information and how the country is portrayed externally; unsanctioned journalism is viewed with extreme suspicion.

While less explicitly codified, individuals with backgrounds in military intelligence, certain government roles, or affiliations with particular political or human rights NGOs might also face greater scrutiny during the visa application process. Tour operators often perform preliminary vetting, and the North Korean authorities conduct their own checks. If an applicant is perceived as potentially posing a security risk or having intentions deemed hostile or subversive, the visa application is likely to be denied. The criteria for such denials are opaque and entirely at the discretion of the DPRK government.

Given these tight controls, why does North Korea allow tourism at all? Several factors likely contribute. Firstly, foreign currency. Tourism, even on a relatively small scale compared to global hotspots, provides a source of hard cash – Euros, US Dollars, Chinese Yuan – which is highly valuable for an economy heavily sanctioned and isolated from international financial systems. Tourists pay significant sums for their packaged tours, purchase souvenirs, and spend money on optional activities, all transacted in foreign currency which flows directly or indirectly to state entities.

Secondly, tourism serves a propaganda purpose, both domestically and internationally. Allowing foreigners in, albeit on a short leash, allows the state to present its chosen image of the country – one of stability, order, progress (as defined by the state), and devotion to its leaders. The monumental architecture of Pyongyang, the meticulously staged cultural performances, the visits to model farms or factories – these are all designed to impress and convey a specific message. Even if seasoned travelers recognize the curated nature of the experience, the images and accounts brought back can influence perceptions internationally. Domestically, the presence of foreign tourists can be subtly used to signal the country's standing and engagement with the world, under the government's terms.

Thirdly, it offers a form of controlled engagement. Limited tourism allows the DPRK to interact with the outside world without relinquishing control. The guides, who are often well-educated elites, get exposure to foreigners and their perspectives, albeit within strict professional boundaries. It provides a minimal channel for cultural exchange, however filtered it might be. From the state's perspective, it might be seen as a way to counter negative international portrayals by allowing people to "see for themselves," even if that seeing is meticulously directed.

It is crucial to remember the context provided by recent global events. The COVID-19 pandemic led North Korea to implement some of the world's strictest border closures in January 2020, effectively halting all international tourism for an extended period. As of early 2024, while there have been tentative signs and limited instances of reopening (such as carefully managed groups from Russia following high-level state visits), widespread tourism access comparable to the pre-pandemic era had not yet fully resumed. Therefore, anyone considering a trip must treat information about procedures and accessibility as potentially subject to change. Verifying the current border status and entry requirements directly with authorized tour operators and consulting your home country's travel advisories is absolutely essential before making any commitments. The information in this guide largely reflects the established system prior to 2020, which is expected to be the template for future reopening, but confirmation is paramount.

Understanding that tourism is permitted, but only within this highly circumscribed framework, is key to managing expectations. If you are seeking an adventure defined by freedom, independent exploration, chance encounters, and deep, spontaneous immersion in local culture, North Korea is fundamentally incompatible with those desires. The experience is inherently structured, supervised, and performative to a significant degree. You are an observer within a carefully constructed narrative, not a free agent exploring a new land.

Visitors must be prepared to comply fully with the rules, follow their guides' instructions without deviation, and accept the limitations placed upon their movements and interactions. This acceptance is not merely a suggestion for a smoother trip; it is a prerequisite for ensuring personal safety and avoiding potentially serious complications with the authorities. The consequences of rule-breaking, even if perceived as minor by Western standards, can be severe in the North Korean context, a point that will be elaborated upon in later chapters concerning rules and safety.

The permission to enter as a tourist is conditional not just on your nationality or profession, but on your willingness to operate entirely within the system designed by the DPRK. It requires a certain mindset – curiosity mixed with caution, an ability to observe critically while behaving respectfully, and an understanding that you are participating in an experience orchestrated for specific state purposes. For those able

to accept these conditions, the reward is access, however limited, to a nation that remains profoundly different and largely unseen by the rest of the world.

So, returning to the initial question: Yes, tourism is allowed. It is a functioning, albeit niche, industry managed by the state. Citizens from many countries can, in principle, visit. However, this allowance is predicated entirely on adherence to the mandatory guided tour system and acceptance of its inherent restrictions. It's a pathway into the DPRK, but one that is narrow, meticulously controlled, and subject to the prevailing political winds and, as recent years have shown, global health crises. The door is ajar for some, under very specific terms, offering a unique but demanding travel proposition.

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