29
AUG

IN ASIA, KOREA

# Inside North Korea: Running the Pyongyang Marathon

Why the hell would anyone want to go to North Korea? This is a question my parents posed, and even my students, as I told them my husband and I were heading to its capital to participate in the annual marathon.

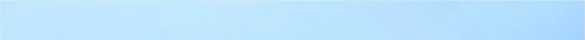
The short answer: curiosity. While living in Seoul, I had the opportunity to listen to stories from several North Korean refugees. How they escaped through China, how they left behind loved ones, and how they lived in a constant state of fear. I remember feeling completely ignorant, as I knew nothing about the country other than the fact they harbored nuclear warheads.

Not that visiting North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), shed much light on the matter. All tour groups (there's two big ones, Young Pioneers and Koryo) work with the government, are required to follow a certain itinerary, and use designated North Korean tour guides. In essence, we saw what the government wanted us to see.

Still, it was fascinating, and I count myself lucky that I was able to go (and leave) before tensions really started rising (I was there in April).

### HERE'S A LOOK OUR 3-DAY TOUR OF PYONGYANG, THE NATION'S CAPITAL:

## Day 1: Arrival, DMZ, And A Lot Of Looking Out The Bus Window.



평 양
TERMINAL 2

Before departing Shanghai, we were briefed on our trip and reminded of **the rules**:

- No religious paraphernalia.
- No Western literature or films about North Korea.
- Do not take photos of military personnel.
- Do not mock or mimic statues.
- If you take a photo of a statue, the entire statue must be in the frame.
- You are to respect the supreme leaders and refer to Kim Il Sung as President (which he is called for eternity), Kim Jong Il as General (again, he's the forever general) and Kim Jong Un as Marshall.
- You are not allowed to use the local currency (EUR, USD and CNY are ok) and cannot leave the country with local money.
- Your phone will be temporarily confiscated at the border. You will get it back, but you will not have access to Internet for the duration of your stay.
- You may not leave the group or the hotel at any time.

After arriving in the early morning hours to the small, quiet airport, we quickly dropped off our things at the hotel and headed to the **DMZ**, or Demilitarized Zone.

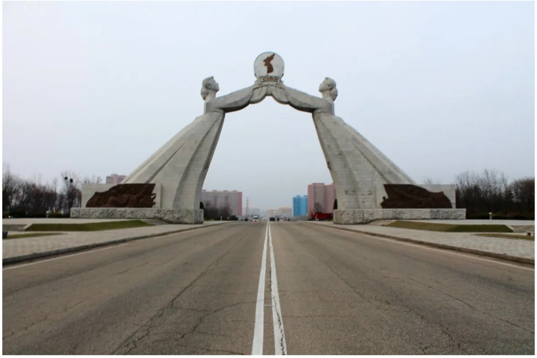
The 2.5 hour drive there was captivating. For 160 km, all we saw were expansive rice fields and the farmers tending to them. Workers appeared as ants against the vast landscape, walking in twos or pedaling bicycles to get to where they were going.

Our visit at the actual "tourist attraction" was met with much less fanfare than in South Korea. No soldiers glaring at one another, no talk of underground tunnels–just a look at the demarcation line and the Military Armistice Commission Conference Room for a bit of a history lesson. One of the guards even posed for pictures.

The rest of the afternoon was spent viewing historical objects and porcelain from the Koryo Dynasty at **Kaesong Koryo Museum**, buying stamps at **Kaesong Korean Stamp Exhibition Hall** (I opted to take a nap on the bus instead), and eating a traditional **royal Korean lunch.**

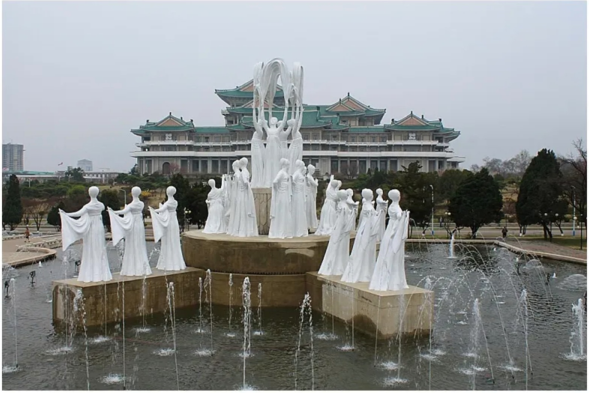
On the way back to town, we stopped to take pictures at the **Arch of Reunification**, a big stone symbol of hope that the North and South will one day make peace.

Notice **how few cars are on the road**. All citizens, with the exception of a few high-level government officials, rely on public transport. Images of women walking hand-in-hand wearing traditional dress and men biking in a straight line made me think of Lois Lowry's *The Giver.*

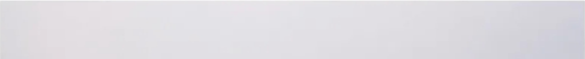


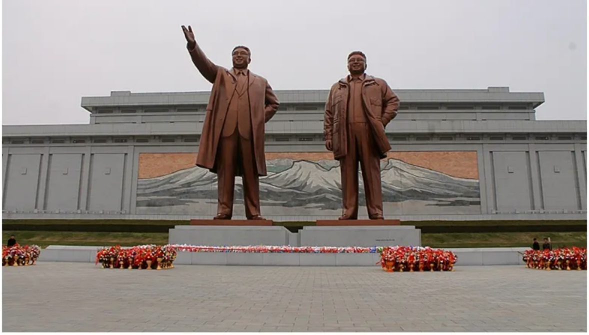
## Day 2: Pyongyang City Tour

Pyongyang is surprisingly beautiful. With its colorful, Soviet style architecture,  lack of advertising, and polished statues of the supreme leaders looming large, it could easily be the backdrop for a post apocalyptic sci-fi film. Here are some sights from around town:

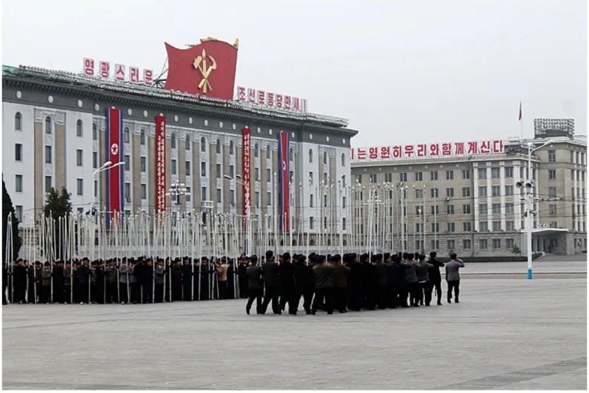


**Mansudae Fountain Park:** A place our tour guide described as “the best place to take a girl on a romantic date.” When I asked if her boyfriend had taken her there, and she covered her mouth and laughed. I think that’s a yes.





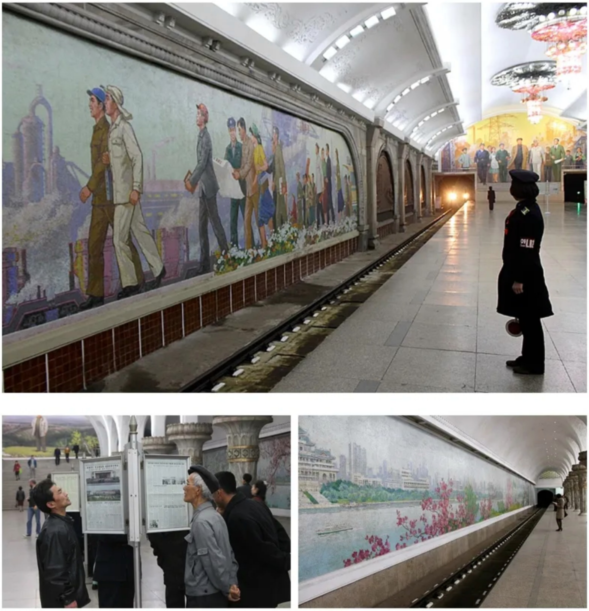
**Mansudae Grand Monument:** Perched on top of a hill, overlooking downtown Pyongyang, stands two enormous bronze statues of President Kim Il Sung and General Kim Jong Il. North Koreans lined up to present flowers and bow–treating them like deities. It is expected for foreigners to do the same.



**Kim Il Sung Square:** The image you've seen over and over again on CNN, as it serves as a gathering place for rallies, dances and military parades. Here, soldiers practice marching in unison in order to properly celebrate President Kim Il Sung's birthday, which was a couple short weeks away.

방전쟁승리기념관종합안내도

**Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum** : An opportunity to learn about the Korean War from the North's point of view (i.e. why it was America's fault). The museum features photos, documents, dioramas and captured US military equipment, including the USS Pueblo.



**Pyongyang Metro:** The deepest subway system in the world at 110 meters, it conveniently doubles as a nuclear bunker, just in case. Each station on the tourist trail artfully depicts North Korea’s revolutionary goals and achievements to impressionable commuters. It’s beautiful, other worldly and, yes, functional.

KIM JONG IL BRIEF HISTORY
KIM JONG IL SHORT BIOGRAPHY
SONGUN—POLITICS OF KIM JONG IL
KIM JONG IL THE GREAT MAN
KIM JONG IL SHORT BIOGRAPHY
KIM JONG IL THE PEOPLE'S LEADER
KIM JONG IL ON THE JUCHE PHILOSOPHY
KIM IL SUNG
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE SONGUN IDEA

**Foreign Languages Bookshop** : Shelves upon shelves stocked with propaganda. This store sells Korean publications translated into English, German, French, Russian, Chinese, and Spanish, so that almost anyone can read about why Kim Jong Il was so great.

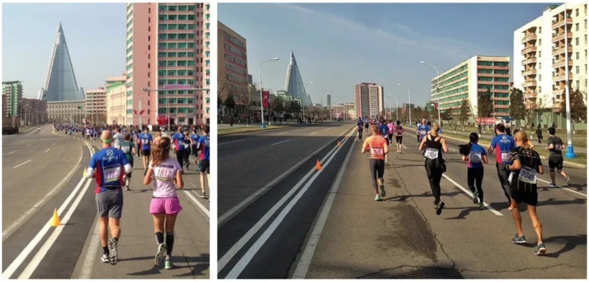
**The Party Foundation Monument at the Tower of Juche Idea:** Located on the Taedong River, the statue celebrating the Worker's Party of Korea stands tall, celebrating the country's workers, farmers and intellectuals. It also makes for quite a nice view at sunset.

## Day 3: The Marathon

호가 2조
AMATEUR 2
KORYO

제28차 만경대상국제마라손경기대회
참가자들을 열렬히 환영한다!
WARM WELCOME TO
THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 28th
MANGYONGDAE PRIZE
INTERNATIONAL MARATHON!
8-2

GATE 6-1
5-1
MANGYONGDAE PRIZE INTERNATIONAL MARATHON
1426



I'm not a runner. In fact, I didn't even train for the run, convinced I would just walk the 10k while Luke ran the half. But once we walked into that stadium, packed with locals dressed in suits and gowns, clapping in unison, adrenaline took over. I ended up running the entire race–convinced by the fanfare that I was actually an athlete who'd been flown into the country to compete with their runners–people who train six days a week. Needless to say, I had to call out of work the next day and lost a toenail.

The course starts and ends in **Kim Il Sung stadium** and weaves through the city center. Locals line the streets with outstretched hands, high-fiving you as you run past. Little kids yell "Hello!" and the elderly, "Pali! Pali! (Go, Go!)." They smile, and it appears they're happy. Then again, it also seems like it's a mandatory event, since everyone is either in the arena or on the street, cheering in their Sunday best.

And, that's my point. A beautiful, strange experience that I will never forget; but it's been three months since I left the DPRK and still don't know what to make of it.

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North Korea

## 18 Comments

### Sue Loveday

POSTED AT 11:49H, 30 AUGUST

What a great story! You certainly are a go-getter and it sounds like you married the perfect mate for you. Love from us!

### Admin_jennifer

POSTED AT 13:29H, 30 AUGUST

Thanks, Sue! Yep, I definitely found the right man for me. Feel free to visit us any time. 🙂 Much love!

### Patty Blank

POSTED AT 12:14H, 30 AUGUST

Oh Jennifer, thanks for this. I have always wanted to go there. Once I flew over North Korea and just seeing the country from above was eerie. It is SO CLEAN! And looks like an isolated movie set. What an adventure! But tell me, what was your fear level? That constant edge must have been exciting!

### Admin_jennifer

POSTED AT 13:28H, 30 AUGUST

It was very clean and VERY eerie. Most of my pictures are of empty streets, since everyone has the same work schedule. And to be honest, I wasn't as scared as I probably should have been. The North Koreans were so lovely and we went with a tour agency that takes people all the time.

Thanks for reading! 🙂

### The Adventurer

POSTED AT 13:19H, 30 AUGUST

Wow this was incredible to read about! I was in South Korea a few years ago and went to the DMZ but on the southern side. It was interesting to hear stories about the Korean War (growing up in the states I feel like our teachers rarely got into the details). I think it would be so interesting to visit North Korea and it's amazing you got the chance and ran a marathon too!

https://dreamofadventures.com/

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 13:26H, 30 AUGUST

Thanks for reading! I also went to the DMZ on the Southern side and it was much different. Believe it or not, it felt less strict on the Northern end! Although there was more to see and more to do when going from Seoul.

**Brenda Glass**

POSTED AT 22:33H, 31 AUGUST

I want to be YOU when I grow up!

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 01:33H, 01 SEPTEMBER

Haha well, thanks so much! Glad I can ignite some wanderlust through my blog. 🙂

**Becky**

POSTED AT 07:47H, 04 SEPTEMBER

Oh wow! North Korea sounds so interesting, I'd love to go there one day but I'd probably be too scared. I'm currently in South Korea and I was thinking about going to the DMZ from Seoul but not sure yet if I should do it.

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 05:35H, 06 SEPTEMBER

Becky, definitely do it! I went to the DMZ while living in Seoul about 8 years ago, and it was very interesting. It's a very popular tourist attraction for South Korea, so various companies take people every day. Make sure to visit the tunnels and surrounding area!

tfh.

**Deasy @ Ticket For Adventure**

POSTED AT 17:40H, 04 SEPTEMBER

Wow, that's quite a bucket list adventure to have. So daring and brave of you to partake in this! I completely wish I could have experienced being in North Korea as it is right now (or a few months ago).

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 05:33H, 06 SEPTEMBER

Deasy, it was definitely a bucket list adventure! It's been more than 3 months and I still can't really wrap my head around the whole experience. Thanks for reading!

**Linda Young**

POSTED AT 12:01H, 05 SEPTEMBER

I thoroughly enjoyed your interesting view of North Korea!! You're one brave woman to travel to many places that could be dangerous and life threatening. I'll never visit the majority of the places you've written about in person, but have visited them through your in depth perspective. Thanks for enlightening my horizon!!

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 05:33H, 06 SEPTEMBER

Thanks so much for your kind words, Linda! I'm glad I can share these experiences with you. 🙂

**Dan**

POSTED AT 15:09H, 10 NOVEMBER

Great photos Jen. Happy travels to you and Luke.

**Admin_jennifer**

POSTED AT 02:43H, 11 NOVEMBER

Thank you. It was a very photogenic place!

**Nicole Van De Waline**

POSTED AT 22:33H, 27 JULY

Such gorgeous photos! It looks a beautiful country to travel to

**Jennifer Stevens**

POSTED AT 14:46H, 29 JULY

Thank you. It was such an amazing experience!