Arriving in Pyongyang’s Sosan international airport, my mobile phone was taken away for the duration of my trip, a reminder that the rules here are very different from those in most of the rest of the world. The airport also gave a sharp reminder of North Korea’s self-imposed isolation: the flight board shows just three international destinations, two in China, one in Russia.

North Korea clings to a form of communism abandoned by Russia and Eastern Europe 20 years ago, and even for the few journalists who can get visas, restrictions on reporting inside the country are tight. I made two trips to the country, officially named the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, accompanying Glyn Ford, formerly a British Member of the European Parliament and member of the parliament’s foreign policy delegation responsible for relations with North Korea.
The tours were extensive, whisking us from one city to another, but there were restrictions. One was that we were accompanied, at all hours of the day, by a government official and a translator. Secondly, we were not taken to labour camps, nuclear sites, or to the north of the country, where the World Food Program has reported near-starvation conditions with millions surviving on western food handouts and eating wild grass.

Almost every aspect of life in North Korea is suffused with politics, and with the efforts by the authorities to encourage a cult of hero worship around the republic’s founder, Kim Il-sung, and the current ruler, his son, Kim Jong-il. In the place of advertising hoardings that you find in most cities are billboards showing the faces of father and son, along with slogans telling the citizens of one of the poorest countries on earth that they are living in a worker’s paradise. Pictures of both men are inside every office, shop and school. Such is the hero worship for Kim Il-sung that the authorities changed the calendar, designating the year of his birth as Year Zero, with 2010 rewritten as year 99. To avoid confusion, The Pyongyang Times, North Korea’s English language daily newspaper, prints both dates side-by-side on its masthead.

The Dear Leader, as the current leader is referred to by most people, even has an orchid named after him, called Kimjongilia, a specially bred red begonia.
Huge pictures of Kim Il-sung, made up of thousands of individual placards, are held up for the spectators at the Arirang Mass Games, the largest spectacle of song and dance in the world. The theme of these dance spectacles is relentlessly political, featuring thousands of performers depicting the struggle of workers, peasants and soldiers to free North Korea from official tyranny.

Dancers simulating wheat beneath giant image of Kim Il-Sung at the Prosper Fatherland festival.

The Prosper Fatherland festival celebrating 2012, the centenary of Kim Il-Sung's birth. The Festival involves 100,000 dancers and gymnasts. In the seats 20,000 school children turn sets of flashcards providing a kaleidoscopic backdrop.

Spectators (left) and dancers (right) at the 2008 Arirang Festival in Pyongyang's May Day Stadium. Arirang Festival is normally held annually for over 15 days in July-August. The Festival involves 100,000 dancers and gymnasts. In the seats 20,000 school children turn sets of flashcards providing a kaleidoscopic backdrop. The Guinness Book of Records lists it as the biggest gymnastics event in the world.

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Many historians say communism was imposed on North Korea by the Soviet Union which occupied the territory after World War II, just as America imposed capitalism on South Korea, but in North Korea itself Kim Il-sung is portrayed as the man responsible for the communist system. His depiction in official propaganda is of a God-like figure, perfect in every respect.

Centerpiece of this hero-worship is his former residence in Pyongyang which was turned into a mausoleum after his death in 1994. A huge white statue of the man, who is called Eternal President, sits in a cavernous main hall backlit in pink. And in another room lies his body, preserved complete with a dark suit under a crystal case, with spectators filing past to peer in.

North Korean tourists have their photo taken outside the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, the former residence of Kim Il-Sung in Pyongyang, which was turned into a vast mausoleum after his death on July 8, 1994.
To underline the official position that both father and son are universally loved, a second complex, the International Friendship House in Mount Myohyang, displays 80,000 gifts sent to the two men from home and abroad. Among highlights on display are a black limousine presented by Stalin, a basketball signed by Michael Jordan, and a collection of shotguns, pistols and rifles from Russian former President, current Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin.
The Russian Orthodox church in Pyongyang which was opened in 2007 to cement growing ties between the two countries.

A monk at a Buddhist temple at Mount Myohyang.
Wherever you go, the politics goes with you. In the cities, loud speakers are arranged on the streets to blast out music to the citizens three times a day. In the morning, they play stirring ballads to get them up and out to work with the proper revolutionary spirit. In the evenings, they play rhythmic numbers to accompany movement routines that the workers are obliged to complete after work. Then at night, the speakers play lullabies to send everyone off to sleep. The few bookshops are stocked with beautifully bound volumes of the works of the two men.
In the countryside, peasants work alongside red banners fixed to poles that proclaim the glory of the revolution, or tell them to work harder. The concept of the heroic worker applies even to machines: buses are awarded a red star medal for every 50,000 kilometers they travel, in recognition of their service to support the continuous revolution.

A rural scene in Sariwon area, about 70km south of Pyongyang.

A rural scene outside Wonsan, near the Sea of Japan.

The highway from Pyongyang to Wonsan.

A rural scene outside Wonsan, near the Sea of Japan. The bicycle remains the most common form of transport in North Korea where there are few private cars. Each bicycle must have a license plate.
A reminder of the tension that underpins this revolution comes at the border. The Korean War, which confirmed the separation of North and South, ended in 1953 but no peace agreement was ever signed, so the two sides are technically still at war, and it shows. The border itself is marked by a narrow raised concrete strip, a few inches high. On either side of it, armed border guards from North and South glower at each other.

Panmunjom, the border between South and North Korea, at the centre of the 4km-wide De-Militarised Zone.

James Joseph Dresnok, a former US soldier who deserted and walked across the border to North Korea in 1962, where he has lived ever since.
One man I was allowed to talk to at length was James Dresnok, an American with an extraordinary story. Back in 1962, he was a US Army soldier on duty at the border when he decided to defect. He threw his gun away and simply walked across the border.

Nearly four decades later, he has married and raised children and become a celebrity, through playing the part of an evil American general in a long-running television series. He still faces treason charges if he goes back to the United States, but he insists he has no wish to. Back in America, he was raised in foster homes and felt nobody cared for him. In Pyongyang, by contrast, he feels wanted: “The government will take care of me until my dying breath,” he told me.

Two men who want to go home are Moriiaki Wakabayashi and Takahiro Konishi, former members of Japan’s terrorist Red Army Faction who hijacked an airliner in 1970 and flew it, and its passengers, to Pyongyang. Like Dresnok, they got used to life in the North. But both are also homesick. Wakabayashi was the bass player of a rock band, “Les Rallizes Desnudes” which continues to enjoy a cult following in Japan nearly 40 years later, and he would like to go home and reap the benefits. However, he says he won’t go home unless Japan drops charges of hijacking he would face.
Travelling around, it is impossible not to notice the contradictions. Most glaring of all is the huge gap between rich and poor. Officially, North Korea is a communist state where all are equal and the workers are heroes. But the reality is that some are ‘more equal’ than others. The elite who impose and police this system live a life of privilege. Private cars are not affordable for ordinary people, but the elite cruise the big empty boulevards in imported Mercedes. While the workers struggle to find food in markets and drab state shops, the elite in Pyongyang now have a burger bar and a pizza restaurant. Both establishments are in theory open to all, but the prices keep the ordinary people out: a pizza at the Kovital Daesonghaeun Pizzeria in downtown Pyongyang, priced in Euros, not the Won (the national currency), is €4 Euros, equivalent to three months’ salary for the average worker.

While official propaganda chastises the United States as the great enemy intent on invasion, the elite sip Coca Cola imported from China.

For shopping the elite have a handful of boutiques, the imported dresses they offer would cost the workers employed there at least seven years of salary to afford. For leisure their latest craze is bowling. Once again, while in theory the Pyongyang Gold Bowling Alley is open to all, the price for a session, USD $15 dollars, ensures that the ordinary workers are kept out.
Even homegrown products are arranged in two-tier fashion. The state controls beer production, producing one kind of beer called Taedonggang for ordinary people, and a second “improved version” called Rakwon for the elite. Housing is likewise arranged to reinforce privilege. In Pyongyang, where special permission is required to live, or even visit, apartment blocks are arranged in three concentric circles. The best apartments, for the elite, are in the centre. Around them are more modest homes allocated to bureaucrats, and while the workers may be officially classed as heroes, they get the shabbiest apartments, with intermittent power and water, on the outskirts.

What ordinary people think of this, and whether they see the irony, I could not find out. When talking to people on the street, I would ask the translator to ask someone how they felt about life, what difficulties they had, and did they want to go abroad. The translator, smiling, would say there was no need to ask such questions, saying “Irina, we have a great country, a great people, our life is good, people are happy.”

The country’s name declares it democratic, but there are no free elections. Genuine opposition political parties are banned. So is a free press. So is foreign travel. So are the internet, dance clubs, religious observance and any form of private business, unless it is approved by the elite. The government bombards its citizens with euphoric declarations that they are living in a worker’s paradise, yet the poverty of North Korea contrasts sharply with the prosperity of China, South Korea and Japan, all of which have embraced the free market.
Pyongyang’s embroidery institute with portraits of a North Korean founder Kim Il-Sung and the current leader, his son, Kim Jong-il.

Workers at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint venture between the two Koreas.
Out on the streets, our hosts, who were impeccably polite, allowed us to stop and talk to ordinary people, but with two official guides looking on, nobody I spoke to felt inclined to say anything negative about their lives in general or the regime in particular.

Officials we interviewed poured praise on the system: “This beer factory was completed by the warm care and leadership of the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il for the convenience of the people,” announced a beer factory manager. A doctor at Pyongyang Maternity Hospital told me: “Some Western countries criticise my country because they do not understand us, but we keep our socialist system, we are keeping principles of peace and independence.”

Yet if the people were reticent, they were always polite. The regime keeps up a constant barrage of propaganda portraying the country as under threat, in particular from the US and Japan, yet none of this fury or fear was evident in holidaymakers we met at a resort at Wonsan. On the beach, people were at their most relaxed, and we chatted happily to groups of students who bombarded me with questions about life outside. Some boys told me they play pirated American computer games without mentioning any anti-American rhetoric. One boy told me I was the first foreign person he had ever met.
Kim Jong Suk Nursery in Pyongyang, named after Kim Il-Sung’s first wife who died during childbirth in 1949. On the wall are pictures of Kim Il-Sung and the current leader, his son, Kim Jong-II.

Students at an English language class at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies.

Kim Jong Suk Nursery in Pyongyang, named after Kim Il-Sung’s first wife who died during childbirth in 1949.
Twenty four days in North Korea was long enough to convince me of one thing: the ordinary people are neither fanatical, nor living in utter misery. They seem to accept the status quo. The government insists people live in a spirit of near euphoria. Meanwhile one western visitor reported that this is a land where nobody smiles. Neither view seems accurate. The ordinary people know how to smile, and it seems to me that they do their best to wrestle what joy they can from a life full of restrictions, the fear of prison camps, power cuts and privation.

Those I met showed none of the hostility to the outside world exhibited by their rulers, only an intense and polite curiosity. This friendly and dignified spirit of people is, I hope, captured in these photographs, with which I tried to show the humanity of the people I met. It is a humanity that gives me hope that, however the political tensions play out, they will one day enjoy a brighter future.
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