

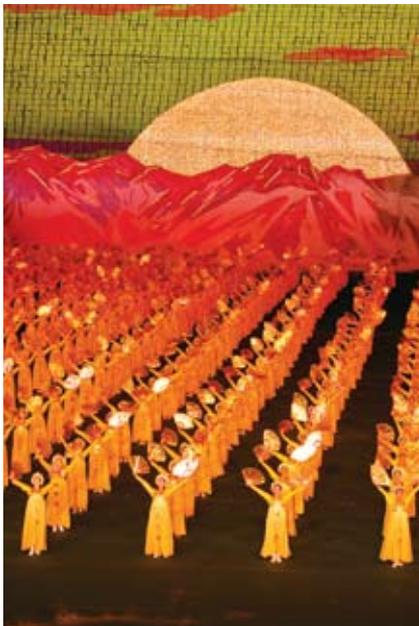
# North Korea:

Travel Frontier





The daily reality of life in North Korea, one of the world's last socialist states, is a source of global intrigue and fascination. American **Jay Tindall**, co-founder of bespoke luxury travel company Remote Lands, visited the country to explore the logistics of becoming the first and only travel provider to offer luxury private trips to this isolated corner of the Asian region.



A young boy levels up his toy gun on the arcade game target and fires, the scene framed by an Asian script propaganda banner overhead that, translated, reads “Kill American Imperialism”. It can only be North Korea, the world’s last bastion of hardline socialism. Although such images are iconic of this small political enclave, I actually had no idea what to expect from my visit. “Is it safe?” seemed to be the first question from most family and friends. Yet the aim of my visit at least was clear: to explore the possibility of including North Korea on the destination list of Remote Lands, the bespoke luxury travel company I co-founded.

North Korea is admittedly not on most people’s Asian travel itineraries. In fact, only around 1,500 closely regulated visitors a year get the chance to take a closer look at this isolated corner of the Asian region, yet it features surprisingly high on the trip wish list of many high net worth but unconventional travellers. The socialist (some would say communist) country is famously reclusive and exclusive, with all tourism tightly regulated by the state owned Tourism Organisation Ryohaengsa. Visitors’ mobile phones are even confiscated on arrival at Pyongyang International Airport by the authorities to collect again only on departure. Only the occasion of the annual Arirang Festival - a Guinness record breaking mass gymnastics and artistic performance held to commemorate the birthday of late leader Kim Il-sung – had got my conspicuously American self access.

Of course, just in case any of the official rules and regulations that govern each and every trip were forgotten, two official ‘guides’ accompanied our group at all times and were quick to remind us: No photos of soldiers, No photos of anything negative, No cropped images of revered leaders Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, and strictly No deviation

from the official trip plan. And they start as they mean to go on; simple things you might take for granted on any other trip, like stopping the car to take a photo or a closer look at something turn out to be almost impossible.

Yet once the boundaries were clear at least I was able to get on with developing first impressions of Pyongyang, as we made our way downtown to the Yanggakdo tourist hotel, isolated on its own small island in the middle of the city. Tidily organised roads, many of them tree-lined, big buildings and huge monuments are the backdrop to a population that go about their business and seem at least contented. High above the rooftops later however, from the vantage point of the Yanggakdo, I catch a glimpse of slum-style interiors behind most buildings’ freshly painted facades.

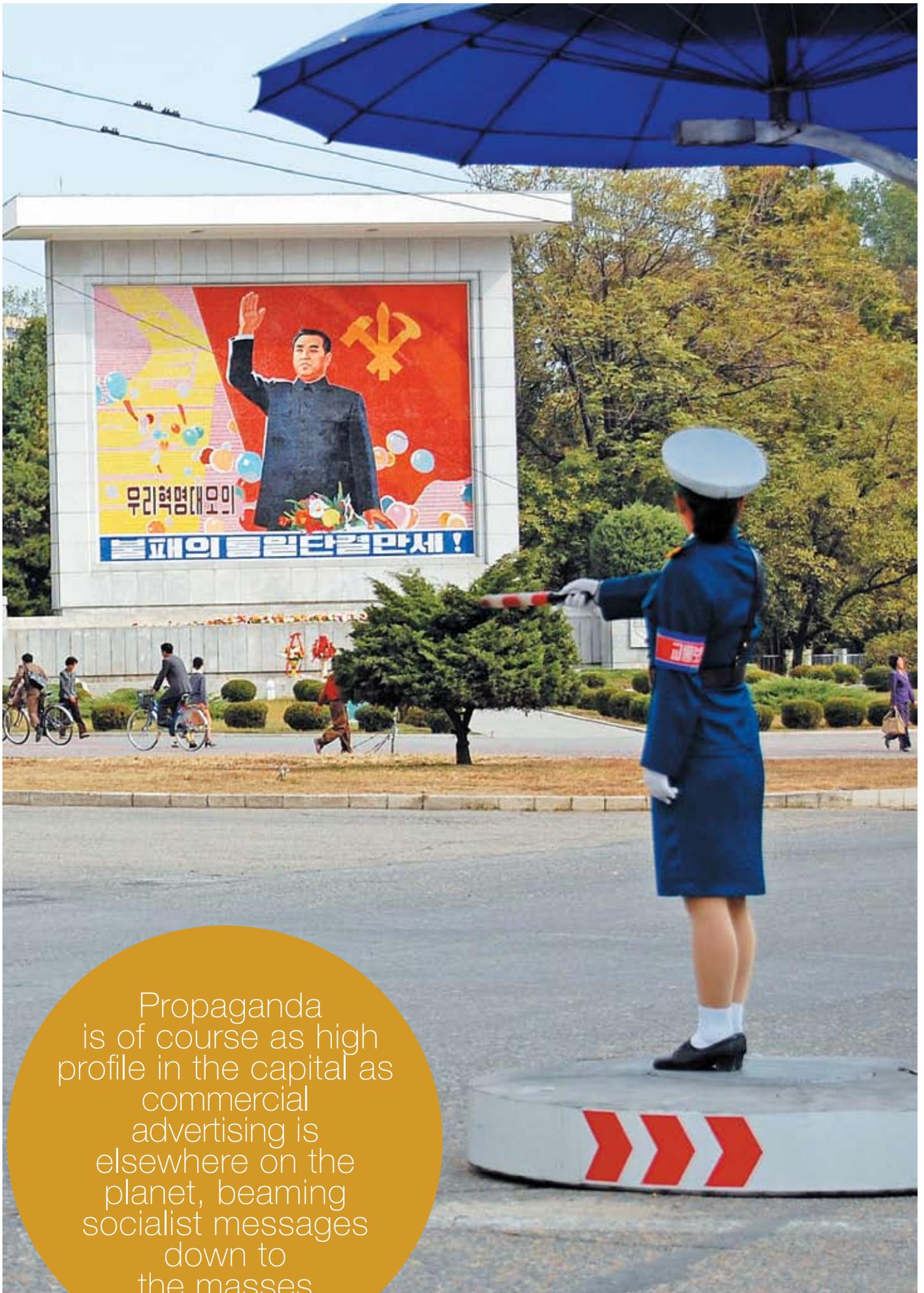
Propaganda is of course as high profile in the capital as commercial advertising is elsewhere on the planet, beaming socialist messages down to the masses, from inspirational calls to “build a prosperous and powerful country” to the rather mundane “Let us satisfy our growing needs for the transportation of goods”. Every jacket or shirt lapel too sports a Kim Il Sung pin, worn without fail to commemorate the country’s founding father. Orderliness too is the order of the day in North Korea, whether the 20,000 children flipping card books in unison to create incredible backdrops to the Arirang Festival, or the female traffic wardens at every intersection marshalling the traffic with careful choreography. (Apparently they only use automated traffic lights when the weather is too hot or cold.) The Festival is certainly a highlight of the trip and on par with any Olympic Games opening ceremony, except that it is performed four times a week for two whole months!



PROPAGANDA RULES: Advertising promotes North Korean interests alone.



TALENT ON SHOW: The country is not afraid to showcase the talents of gifted youngsters.



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A three hour drive to Panmunjom which is the site of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is my first real glimpse of the rural side of North Korea. Exposed for years to news reports of famine and starvation, the huge corn fields and flourishing farms harvesting rice and cabbages seem incongruous to me, although the roads are dirt and the carts pulled by oxen. As we flash through the countryside in our quite literally unstoppable car, the pace of life looks slow and the towns and villages are quaint. The DMZ is by contrast bristling with military protocol and procedure, demarcated into North and South Korea right down to a line on the conference table that straddles the border, where talks between the two countries are held. Soldiers have been facing off here since 1953 despite sharing the same language, history and culture. A young first Lieutenant starts asking me a series of questions in Korean, with my guide translating, but strangely none of my answers are translated back. When I ask if he speaks any English, he says “a little”, but turns out to be fluent with a perfect American accent. He gestures as I turn to leave at the South Korean border buildings just a few hundred feet away, “Your Americans are over there in that building. You can’t see them, but they are looking at your right now”. I can’t help but wonder what the soldiers on the other side might be saying at that very same moment.

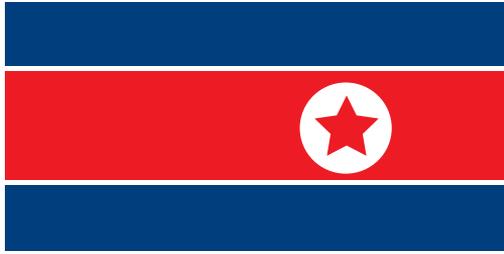
I make my final farewell to North Korea at Kim Il-Sung’s former residence and now mausoleum. Suitably sobered by the rigorous entry procedure, which involves shoe cleaning machines and a clean room to suck the dust off you, I enter the former leader’s final resting place and bow to his embalmed body on three sides as directed. The sheer magnitude of it is –something I’ve never seen before, and a suitable tagline for the whole trip pops into my head: only in North Korea.



HIGH RISE: Ryugyong Hotel in capital Pyongyang.



REVERED: Kim Il-Sung’s mausoleum is a must-see for every citizen.



# North Korea

## Travel Facts

Travel to North Korea is extremely organised, and most people go on package tours. Jay Tindall's bespoke travel company Remote Lands ([www.remotelands.com](http://www.remotelands.com)) is the first to offer luxury private trips to the country, outside the confines of a standard tour group and with a higher level of comfort.



### CULTURE

North Koreans blame the US for most of the hard times they have faced, but most people will criticise America the country, and not Americans. English is spoken well by tourism sector employees.



### STAY

The best hotels in Pyongyang at present are the Potonggang and Yanggakdo Hotels, the latter of which has amazing views of the city along with its own bowling alley, karaoke room, billiards, etc. Standards are 3 star, but Remote Lands' packages enhance facilities with European linens, feather pillows and duvets and personal Asian chefs. Depending on departure country, some guests may be flown into Pyongyang by private jet.

### VISA

American nationals are not normally allowed to visit North Korea, except during the annual Arirang Mass Games. Citizens of South Korea can usually visit only the special tourism zone in Kumgang although tours to Kaesong are now also possible. Citizens of all other countries will need a visa, which will only be issued after a tour has been booked, approved by the North Korean authorities and paid for. A specialist North Korean travel agency can help navigate the complex regulations.