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Things I Learned While I Was in North Korea



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September 27, 2013 By Tim Urban



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That was weird.



I was only in North Korea for five days, but that was more than enough to make it clear that North Korea is every bit as weird as I always thought it was.

It merged the Soviet Union under Stalin with an ancient Chinese Empire, mixed in The Truman Show and then made the whole thing Holocaust-esque, you have modern day North Korea.

It's a dictatorship of the most extreme kind, a cult of personality beyond anything Stalin or Mao could have imagined, a country as closed off to the world and as secretive as they come, keeping both the outside world and its own people completely in the dark about one another—a true hermit kingdom.

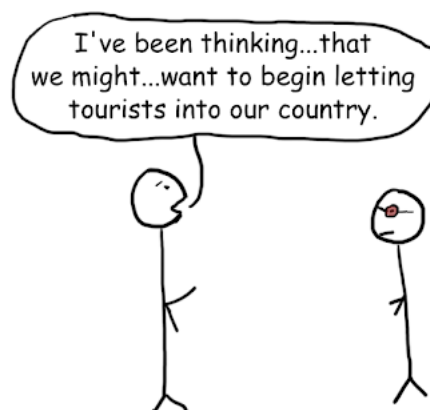
A question, then, is "Why would an American tourist ever be allowed into the country?"

Allow me to illustrate what I believe is the reasoning behind my being let in:

High Level Government Meeting

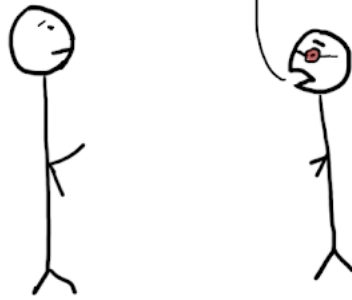


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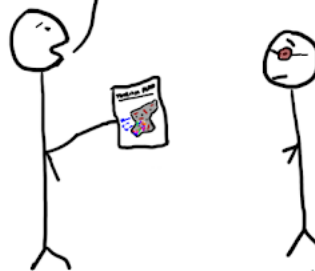
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But they'll see our shit!



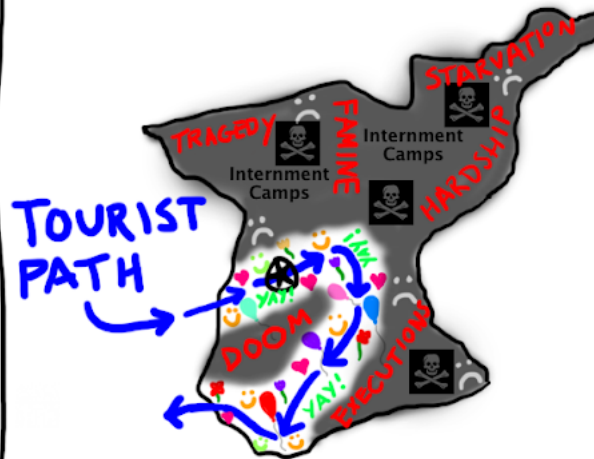
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Well I think I've come up with a perfect solution.

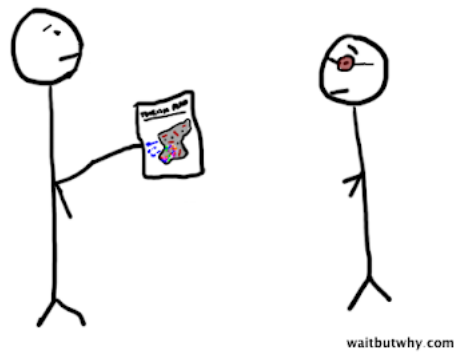


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And so, I was allowed in, along with a small group of other Westerners, accompanied (at all times) by three North Korean guides. And my experience there felt a lot like the route depicted above—we saw Pyongyang and a couple other regions, and the North Koreans we laid eyes on throughout were likely the people faring the very best in the country.

Before I talk about what I learned, I'd like to quickly say hi to whomever from the North Korean government is reading this. Only the highest-level officials have access to the internet in North Korea, and I learned that the job of one of them is to scour the internet for anything written about North Korea and keep tabs on what the foreign press is saying. So hi, and haha you can't get me cause I'm back home now and I can say all the things I wasn't allowed to say when I was in your country.

Now that I've jinxed myself to certain assassination, let's get started—

20 Things I Learned While I Was in North Korea

1) The leaders are a really big fucking deal there.

That's not even a strong enough statement. They're the only deal. These are the big three:

1. Kim Il Sung (1912 – 1994)



He's their George Washington and their Stalin and their Jesus and their Santa Claus combined, all in the form of one pudgy dead Korean man. He's the Eternal President—eternal because he had the position abolished for all future so that no one can ever be president again. And they've created an almost entirely fabricated story about all of the legendary accomplishments he didn't accomplish.

There are an estimated 34,000 statues of Kim Il Sung in the country, everything possible is named after him (if they were starting the country today, it would be called Kimilsungland), every adult is required to wear a pin on their shirt with his face on it every day, all students dedicate a large portion of their study to memorizing his speeches and learning about his achievements, and his birthday is the nation's biggest holiday. They even changed the year—it's not 2013 in North Korea, it's Juche 101 (101 years after Kim Il Sung's birth).

As tourists, we were told to only refer to him as President Kim Il Sung.

2. Kim Jong Il (1941 – 2011)



Kim Il Sung's son, and the dick we all got to know well in the last decade. It's said in North Korea that he was born on a sacred Korean mountain top (he was actually born in the Soviet Union) and that his birth caused winter to change to spring (it stayed winter). He's a really big deal too but like one third as big a deal as his father. Some outsiders question whether people are actually obsessed with KJI or they're just scared to not act obsessed.

We were told to only refer to him as General Kim Jong Il.

3. Kim Jong Un (1983 or 1984 –)



Despite being the current Supreme Leader, KJI's son took over well before everyone expected him to

with KJI's surprise death in 2011 (unlike KJI, who had been groomed for leadership for a couple decades before he took over), and while the propaganda machines are superb at depicting the legendary accomplishments of the elder two Kims, no one is really sure what the hell KJU has accomplished. Part of the issue is that the population never heard much about KJU until recently—he has two older brothers who would have presumably taken over had one not been too feminine (i.e. maybe gay) and the other not snuck into Disneyland on a Dominican passport and gotten caught, ruling both out for potential supreme leadership. My sense being in the country was that there isn't that much genuine hero worship going on for KJU.

That didn't stop them from making us refer to him as Marshall Kim Jong Un.

And everywhere you go in the country—everywhere—you see this:

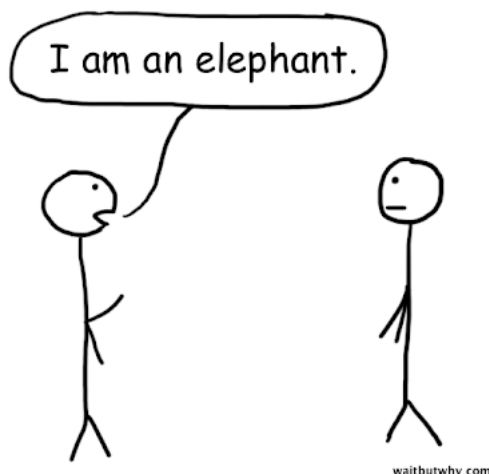


I saw these guys so much it eventually started to seem completely normal, and I began referring to them as “the bros” in my head. Their side-by-side portraits are not only in every public place possible, it's *required* that they be on the wall in every single home in the country, and there are random spot checks by the government to check on this. Each family is also given a special towel, the *only* allowed use of which is to shine the portraits clean every morning. Normal country.

There are also a lot of rules regarding the leaders that apply to visitors as well. When you come up to a statue of one of the bros, you must bow. You must also keep your hands by your side and not behind your back. When you take a photo of one of the statues, you *must* take the photo of the entire body—it's not permitted to cut off any part of it. If you have a newspaper or any other paper with a leader on it, you're not allowed to fold the paper or throw it away. Normal country.

Surprising no one, North Korea comes in dead last in the world in the [Democracy Index](#).

2) Everyone lies about everything all the time.



The government lies to the outside world. The government lies to the people. The press lies to the people. The people lie to each other. The tour guides lie to tourists. It's intense.

The lies range from big things—the government hammers away at the message that the US is preparing to attack North Korea, the press depicts South Korea as a suffering and American-occupied country, the leaders' speeches talk about North Korea being the envy of the world with the highest quality of life—to tiny things—we met a soldier at one point we were told was a colonel, and after he left, a retired army major on my tour told me that he had studied North Korean army uniforms and that the soldier was in fact a captain.

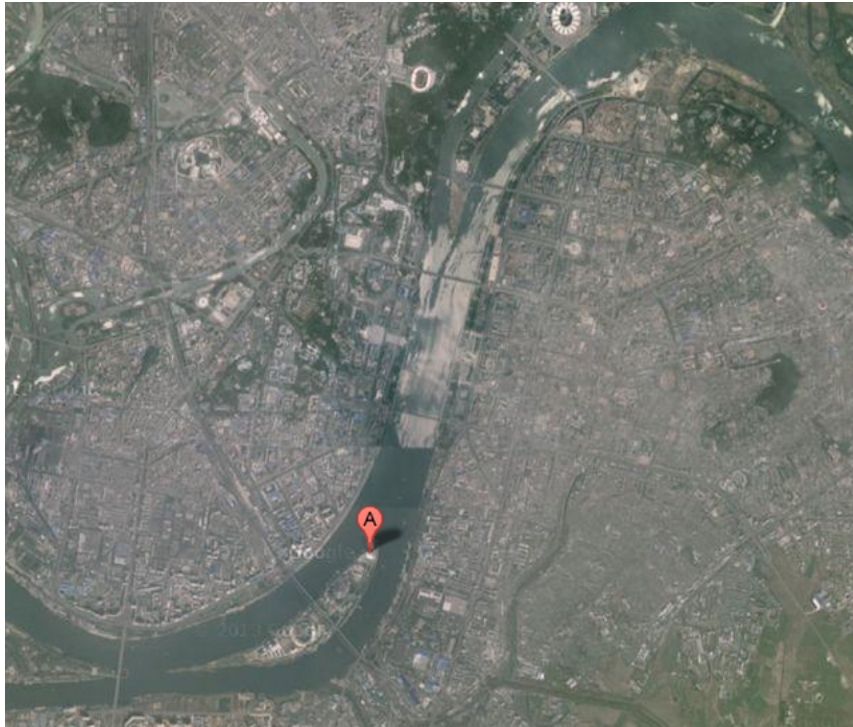
Facts are not a key part of the equation in North Korea.

And it can really mess with your mind as a visitor. I'd find myself in these perplexing situations trying to figure out if a lie-spouting North Korean was in on it or not. Was she thinking, "I know this is false, you know this is false, but I live here so I gotta play the game"? Or was she fully brainwashed and thought she was telling me the truth? It was impossible to tell. During interactions, I'd find myself thinking, "Are you an actor in The Truman Show and you think I'm Truman? Or are you Truman and I'm one of the actors?" Are those kids on the street just pretending to be playing for my benefit? Is any of this real? Am I real?

3) Most visitors to the country are forced to stay in the same hotel when they're in Pyongyang.

[This is it.](#)

You know why they put all visitors here? Because it's on an island in the middle of the city—



The government's biggest fear with visitors is that they sneak off at some point and take photos of something they're not supposed to see, so this island location (with guards surrounding the hotel) is perfect. We were never let out of our guides' sight during the day and told that we weren't to leave the hotel at night under any circumstance.

And even when the rest of the country and much of Pyongyang is without electricity, heat or air conditioning, the Yanggakdo is always bright and comfortable—all part of the plan to project a certain image of the country to visitors.

4) Propaganda is absolutely everywhere.



From the [suffocating number of billboards and murals](#) to the [postcards](#) and [pamphlets](#) and [newspapers](#) to [everything on TV](#), the North Korean people are forced to live and breathe North Korean pride around the clock. There's even a creepy propaganda band, Moranbong Band, whose members were handpicked by Kim Jong Un. [This video](#) of them played in its entirety on both the flight in and out of the country and in nearly every restaurant we went to, and subsequently haunted my sleep. Goebbels couldn't hold a candle to the Kims.

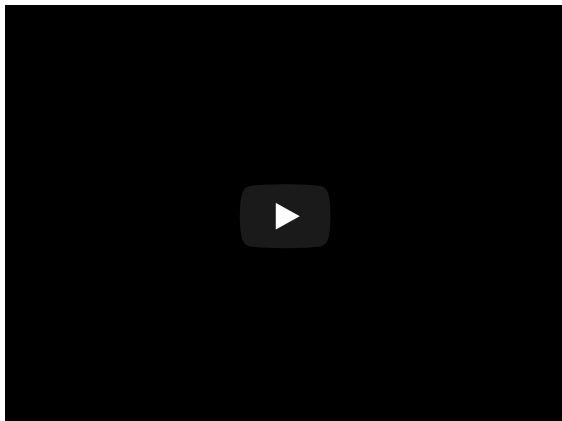
The propaganda I saw fell into four categories: 1) The leaders and their greatness, especially Kim Il Sung, 2) images of the North Korean military and its might, 3) negative depictions of the US and South Korea, and 4) images of North Korean people living joyous and sunshiny lives.

5) The tour guides apparently don't find it awkward to constantly refer to Americans as "American Imperialists" even though I'm standing right there.

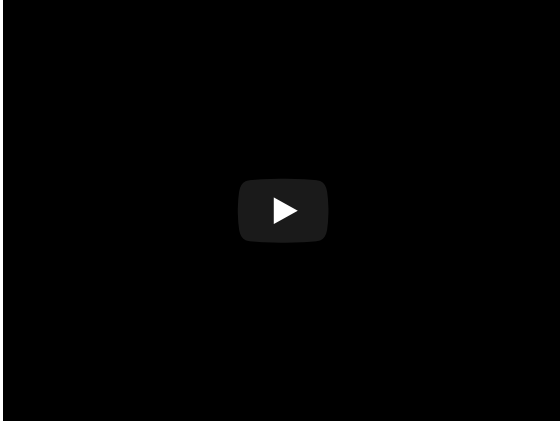
The postcard pictured in the last item was just the tip of the iceberg. If one half of the North Korean story is "Kim Il Sung is a great man," the other half is "The American imperialists started the Korean War and lost, and ever since they've been trying to kill and rape us all and take the country over, but our great military won't allow it."

The North Korean government is *very* into [anti-US sentiment](#)—largely because they've figured out a way to blame basically all of their problems on the US and use fake fear of the US to justify being a poor country the size of Pennsylvania that also has the world's 4th largest army (not to mention spending an unthinkable amount on nuclear weapon technology).

Check out this tour guide translating the soldier's description of what might happen to the US when they make their attack:



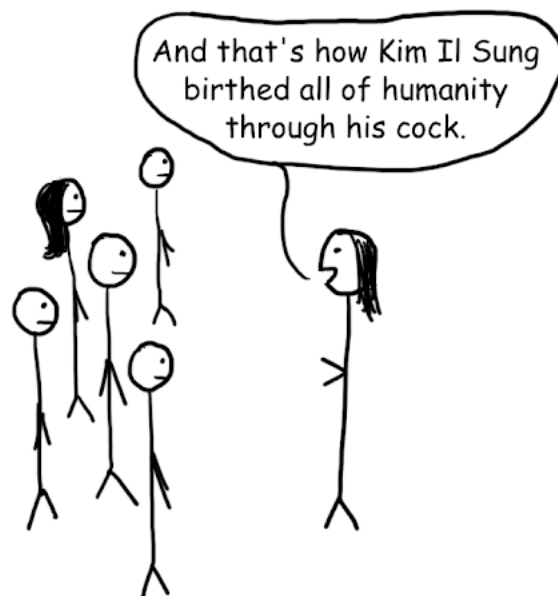
And this anti-US video we were shown on deck of the USS Pueblo, a US Naval ship captured by the North Koreans in 1968 (it's also funny how he says "people"):



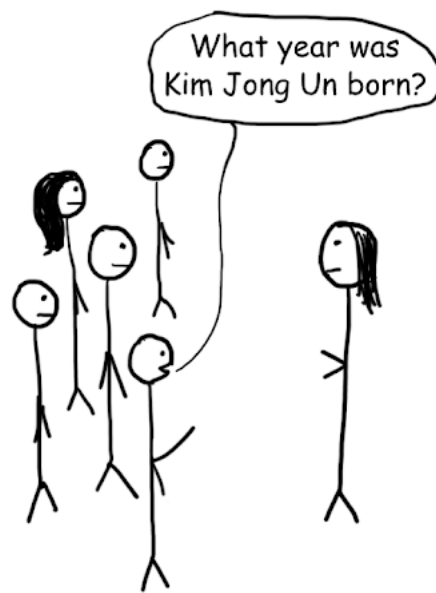
6) It's not cool to call North Korea "North Korea."

The correct term is, "Korea." All [images](#) of the country depict the whole peninsula, what today is North and South Korea combined. In their view, they are proud Koreans, living in Korea, the south half of which is unfortunately currently occupied by the Imperialist Americans.

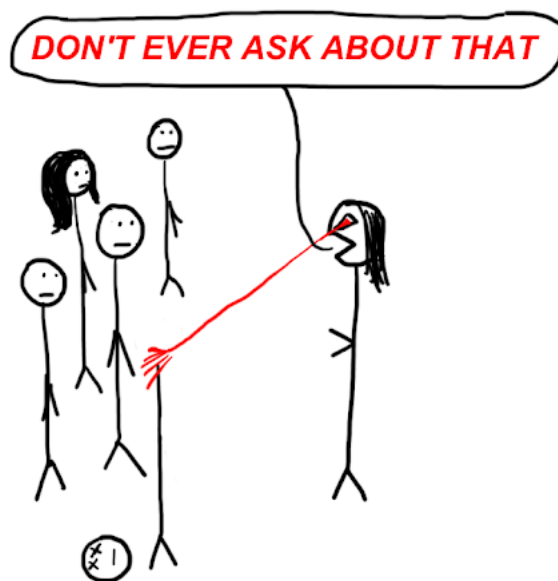
7) Kim Jong Un's exact year of birth is not a subject you should try to gather information on while in the country.



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This is because the exact date is not really known, which apparently upsets them.

8) The same physical place can be fancy and shitty at the same time.

North Korea specializes in the simultaneous fancy shitty place. Simultaneous fancy shittiness happens when a poor country tries to act like things are going fantastically. So there will be a gorgeous museum with huge chandeliers and polished marble floors, but the water won't be running in the bathroom. Or a high-end restaurant with upscale decor that's also sweltering hot because the air conditioning isn't working.

I was told that sometimes visitors are all ready to head into North Korea for their tour when they learn that it's been mysteriously canceled, and the true reason is something like the water not running in the Yanggakdo Hotel that day.

9) North Koreans still talk about the Korean War constantly.

The Korean War is not a part of everyday life in South Korea. The war ended 60 years ago, and today, South Korea has other things to think about, like being a relevant nation with the world's 15th biggest economy.

In North Korea, the war is a constant topic of conversation, and almost everything North Koreans learn about it is flagrantly incorrect. The big lie they're told is that the war was started when the US,

occupying South Korea at the time, attacked the unsuspecting North to try to take control over the whole country. They're told that Kim Il Sung valiantly staved off the Americans and the Americans shrank back in defeat, then continued to occupy South Korea until this day.

Of course, the real story is that Kim Il Sung (who was nothing more than a puppet leader installed by the Soviets because they knew they could control him) tugged on Stalin's sleeve for years, asking him if he could attack the South with Soviet backing, until finally Stalin said "ugh fuck it fine" and the North attacked. The US was, granted, playing a large role in the South at the time, but they were more focused on other things by that point and were caught off-guard. They responded to the North's attack by heading in with the UN and joining the South in the fight. Whatever your opinion of the US's role at the time, they certainly did not start the war by attacking the peaceful North.

But facts never stopped the North Korean government before. There are things [like this](#) in every newspaper I looked at.

At the Korean War Museum, known there as the Museum of American Atrocities, our tour guide spent the whole time telling us that the Americans started the war—everyone in the room knew the truth except the tour guide.

10) All kids wear the same uniform all the time, even when they're not in school.



It's not actually all kids—it's kids from the most well-off families. But those are the families they let visitors come into contact with, so that's what it looked like to me.

11) It's best to just not bring up the huge rocket hotel in the middle of Pyongyang.



The 105-story Ryugyong Hotel, which started to be built in 1987 and still hasn't finished, would seem to be an odd undertaking for a nation whose economy had stagnated, whose infrastructure was rotting, and which looks like [this](#) at night.

But we're in North Korea, so why the fuck not.

It's hard to understand from pictures how weird it is that this building is sitting there in the middle of Pyongyang, a city whose other buildings are all small, shabby concrete blocks from the Soviet Era. The picture below shows a typical Pyongyang building in front of the Ryugyong—



12) North Koreans seem to be lacking a sense of humor about the mausoleum that holds the bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

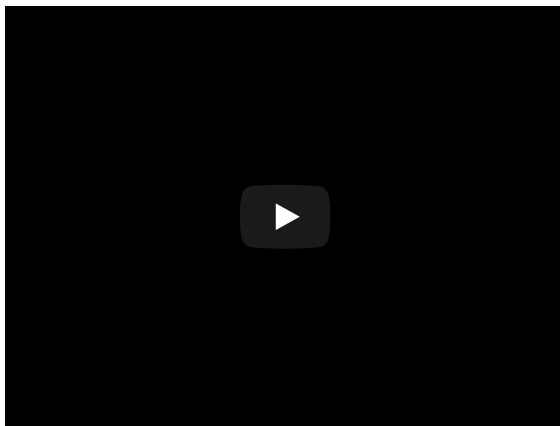
Here's what our old buddy Kim Jong Il is up to these days—



This is the one picture in this post that I did not take—cameras were *strictly* forbidden in the mausoleum, otherwise known as the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, which experts say cost somewhere between \$100 and \$900 million to build.

On a visit with many tense moments, the time I spent in here was the tensest. We had to walk single file in and out and bow three times to each of the two bros.

13) North Korea even manages to have dictator-esque traffic ladies.



Kind of mesmerizing to watch.

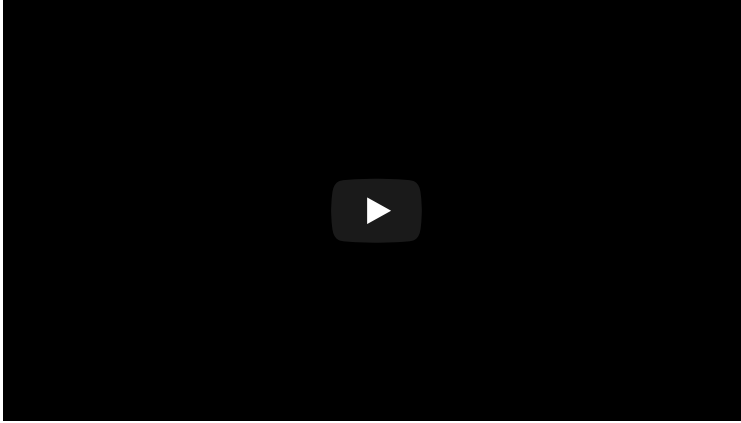
14) The Mass Games are both breathtaking and disturbing.

Let's start with breathtaking. Attending the Mass Games was like attending the opening ceremony of the Olympics. It involves 100,000 (!) performers, many of them young children, depicting the glorious history and thriving modernity of North Korea. The backdrop is a stunning tapestry made of 20,000 kids holding up large colored cards (they have a book of cards and can quickly flip from color to color). I don't throw the word magnificent around very often, and it was magnificent. The Mass Games takes place four days a week for three months every summer.

For the disturbing part, just say the sentence, "North Korea is one of the world's poorest countries, a place where millions of people are starving, hospitals no longer function, and there is almost no electricity," and then read the above paragraph again.

In any case the Mass Games is the perfect North Korean event—centered on propaganda, stresses the collective over the individual, and it makes no sense as a priority given the state of things.

You can see pictures [here](#) and here's a video I took which shows a sampling of the show:



15) No North Korean people have access to the internet because the government is concerned that people would see things that would make them feel unfairly critical toward the West, and the government would like to protect the West's reputation by preventing the people from going on the internet.

Yup. *That* is the story I was told when I asked our North Korean guide why no one can go on the internet. One of the most absurd explanations for anything—apparently the government isn't even trying to lie credibly anymore.

What the (most privileged) people *do* have access to is the North Korean intranet, a network limited to government-approved North Korean websites.

Naturally, North Korea performs badly in the [Press Freedom Index](#), coming in second-to-last, beating only Eritrea (nice job, Eritrea).

16) Kim Jong Il used a MacBook Pro.



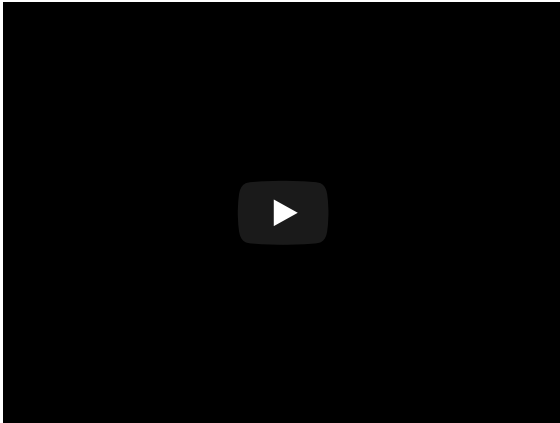
I saw it myself. After seeing his dead body hanging out in the mausoleum, they took us downstairs to a Kim Jong Il museum, which contained awards and honors he had been given throughout his life, a huge animated map showing every route he traveled in his life, and the train he used hundreds of times during this travel (he was scared of flying).

They showed us the inside of the cart, including the room he (supposedly) died in. In it, there was a change of [his favorite outfit](#) and on the desk, a MacBook Pro.

Weird to picture Kim Jong Il putting things in his dock, minimizing windows, and opening his Finder, but that's what happened.

17) Most of the time people walked together, I swear they were walking in step.

Like come on—



18) North Korea is the one place where the museum of ancient times sounds like the good old days.

Normally, going to a museum of any country's ancient times makes you think, "Thank god I don't live then." Whether it's hearts getting cut out in Mexico, public executions and the Black Plague in Europe, or brutal totalitarian Empires in Asia, it tends to be a lot better to live "now" than "then."

But in North Korea, as I was hearing the guide tell story after story of ancient dynasties ruling the peninsula, my thought continued to be, "Eh still sounds better than living here now."

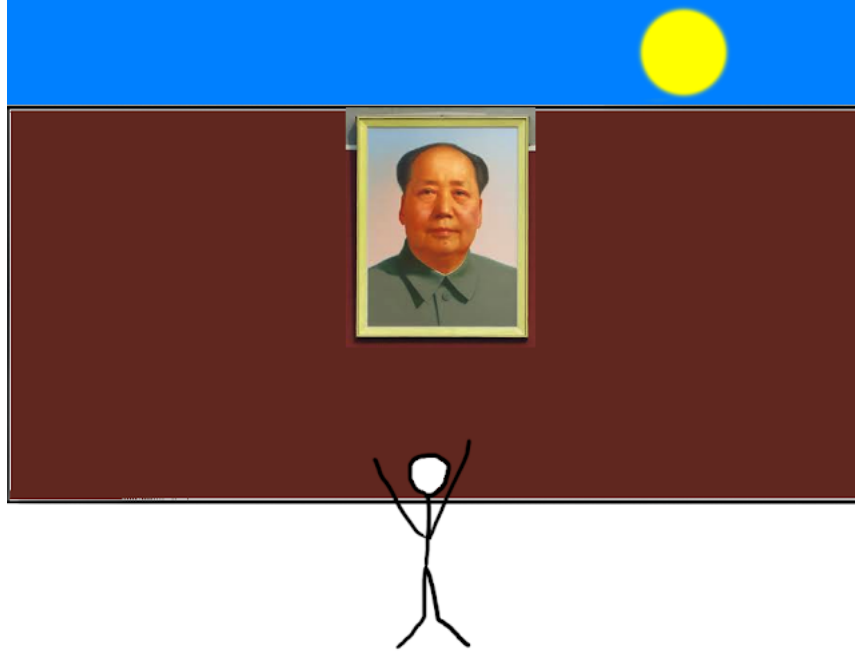
19) Apparently the tears in [this video](#) are actually real.

Okay I'm not sure if they're all real, or if some people are crying because if they don't they'll be sent to a labor camp for the rest of their lives. But I had assumed they were basically all faking *that* level of emotion, an assumption that was debunked when I heard this story:

A New Zealander who worked for the tour company that arranged my tour told me that he was meeting with an employee of the North Korean government's tourism agency *outside* North Korea (one of the rare times you'll ever see a North Korean outside the country), when the news of Kim Jong Il's death came in. He said the man, at the time, was trying to sign something with a pen, and that his hand was shaking so violently that he couldn't do it. The man then tore away to the other room, and emerged a couple hours later, face swollen and eyes red. This was a man outside of North Korea with no reason to fake emotion.

A brutal, heartless totalitarian dictator has to play *quite* the mind tricks on his people to be truly beloved—the Kims are good at what they do.

20) It turns out that there's a place in the world that will make you enter China and think, "Thank god for this land of boundless freedom!"



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North Korea. A place unlike any other.

Pictures from the trip are [here](#).

And below are some videos from my visit to the Mangyongdae Schoolchildren's Palace in Pyongyang, a school for children with elite artistic ability. Of course, only children from the highest ranking families even have a chance to attend this school. (And yes, I am now aware that vertical videos are a bad thing, not a good thing.)

First we had a chance to see the kids practicing:

[Little girls practicing dance.](#)
[Little girls sounding great practicing some weird instrument.](#)
[Little kids practicing the accordion.](#)
[A very focused little girl practicing embroidery.](#)

Then we saw an amazing performance (excuse the terrible video quality):

[The Opening Number.](#)
[A *delightful* dance by four little girls in red boots.](#)
[A little girl who KILLS it on the xylophone and drums.](#)
[A little boy who KILLS it on the ukulele.](#)
[A graceful dance by an animated little girl.](#)
[A little boy who blew me away with his lassos.](#)
[A group of girls dance with fans.](#)

As I walked out, I waved to the kids in the audience and [this is them waving back](#).

Visiting the kids was the saddest part of the trip. They're just as deserving as any other kids of a good life and it's pretty heartbreaking that they're stuck in such a shitty place. The whole population deserves so much better—hopefully something changes there soon.

View all videos [here](#).

[K bye.](#)

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