

Liz Adams – North Korea, Summer 2014

I travelled to North Korea in August 2014 with an English tour company for a 4 day tour. Having initially thought that this was not even nearly enough time to spend in a country too have any feel of it, by the time we were leaving, I felt like I'd been there a few months. Before I went, I'd read the strange news stories that come out of North Korea and the fascinating accounts from defectors who had managed to escape. North Korea is often presented facetiously in Western press and it is often suggested that North Korea is soon to collapse. Considering these predictions have been made about the country for several years, I was interested to find out how North Korea had been able to remain intact despite pressures from the US and South Korea and an insecure friendship with China. To be able to visit a state that still, to some extent, has (or claims to have) remained loyal to communist ideologies was hugely exciting.

We travelled from Beijing to Dandong on the overnight train and then boarded the North Korean train which took us over the Sino-Korean Friendship bridge crossing the Yalu river. The train was impossibly slow train and smelt like there were several dead animals in the ventilation system. We stopped for the North Korean version of border control after 30 minutes. About 20 North Korean guards and officials walked up and down our carriage, collecting visas, doing body scans and asking for information on our electrical devices. The process took about 2.5 hours (the same happened on leaving the country) before we finally started moving for Pyongyang again. The train journey took about 7 hours altogether before we arrived and met our two guides for the trip without whom we were not allowed anywhere outside the hotel.

The guides had certain set places that they had to take us so our days were incredibly full. We visited the mausoleum, where the bodies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are kept - their bodies are kept in glass coffins in the centre of a huge marble room and you are taken in, lined up in groups of 4, and then told to bow to the leader three times. We also went to the Grand People's Study House which is effectively their national library where they claim to hold 30 million books. We weren't allowed to see any of them and we didn't see any students either but apparently they all came in the afternoon.

I had always wanted to travel to North Korea, a country that in many ways is frozen in the 1950's at the same time as trying to remain up to date technologically. As the former British Ambassador to North Korea explained it to us, Kim Il-sung left Korea for several years and when he returned his only knowledge of Korea was as it was when he had left. For this reason, he attempted to return the North of Korea to his ideal: a conservative country with traditions of modesty and obedience that Korea had once been. When we asked our guides what happened to women that had children out of wedlock, our guide initially refused to answer and then sharply told us it would never happen. I found this side to Korea particularly interesting; instead of striving for social revolution and leaving traditional culture behind, as China did, North Korea has instead used that social structure to maintain order. I am very grateful to have been able to travel to North Korea and understand this element of their culture.

Finally, if anyone else is thinking of travelling to North Korea, then feel free to get in touch with Lucy Lim or me if you have any questions. We managed to get a large 'student discount' from one of the companies as trips to North Korea are all very expensive so please ask for advice on that too if you need it.