The blessed leader

The towering 26-metre stone statue of the revered Kim Il Sung overlooks the banks of Taedong River, his arm stretched out to indicate the country's bright future. North Korean sculpture is impressively realistic and monumental. On the opposite bank a statue of 'The Workers' Party' symbolizes three social classes: the sickle for the farmers, the hammer for the workers and a calligraphy brush for the intellectuals. (The former Soviet regime considered only the first two classes – intellectuals were potential enemies of the State.)

Pyongyang was almost totally destroyed during the Korean War (1950-53) following continuous bombing by the US. The communist regime then rebuilt the capital from scratch, using sheer grit and determination, intending the city to serve as a shining example of North Korea's peculiar brand of socialism.

The symbolic detail of the many monuments is an essential feature of any guided tour. Koreans love figures. Young female guides in traditional Korean robes explain how 70 azalea flowers lining the 60-metre high, 52.5-metre long and 36.2-metre wide Arc de Triumph were carved to celebrate the 70th birthday of Kim Il Sung. And how 25,550 granite blocks were used to construct the 170-metre Tower of *Juche* 'which symbolizes the strength of Kim Il Sung's doctrine of self-reliance'. They are particularly proud that their Arc de Triumph is higher than its Parisian namesake.

Inside North

Tension is rising in the Korean peninsula as North Korea threatens new missile tests and the level of bellicose rhetoric between North and South escalates. Last month the new US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denounced North Korea as a 'tyranny' but offered an olive branch and economic help if the country shelves its nuclear weapons programme.

French aid worker Jérôme Bossuet looks back on his three years in North Korea and wonders what lies ahead for one of the world's most isolated states, a country where famine is a constant backdrop and despotism is the order of the day.

Korea

ALL PHOTOS: ALINA PAUL/JÉRÔME BOSSUET

I didn't know what I was getting into when I accepted an NGO posting in North Korea, one of the last bastions of Stalinism and, famously, a member of George W Bush's 'axis of evil'.

I knew the Western media's view – the country was a brutal and dangerous regime that plays on the nuclear threat and is ranked last in press freedom. But I wondered about the people. Were things really so bad? Was hunger widespread? Would the country eventually open up to the outside world like China and Vietnam? What would daily life be like? Would I be confined to my living quarters, imprisoned by countless restrictions, watched closely by my assigned translator?

Arriving at Pyongyang Airport I'm met with the imposing portrait of Kim Il Sung, the 'Eternal President' who led the fight against the US in the Korean War and rebuilt the country from the shattered remains. When the elder Kim finally died in 1994 his then 50-year-old son Kim Jong Il assumed the reins of power. (Now 66 and seriously ill, the 'Dear Leader' has yet to anoint a successor.) I present myself at the passport control desk. The military uniform and blank face in front of me don't ease my fears. The official taps on a keyboard, glancing at me suspiciously several times and flicking through every page of my passport. After a nod and a gruff 'OK' comes the screening of luggage: radios and mobile phones are prohibited and laptops duly checked. Once I am through, my Government-appointed 'liaison officer' is waiting for me with a fixed smile. We're off to Munsudong, a diplomatic compound where a handful of expatriates live – staff from the UN, NGOs, embassies and Chinese businessmen.

Preconceptions

My preconceptions are soon challenged. North Koreans are not hostile but they are cautious after 60 years of one-party rule. Whenever I pass someone on the street I see closed, curious or scared faces. But I never encounter aggressive reactions. Sometimes I even get a smile, especially from people who can speak some English (Kim Jong Il wants to promote English as a necessary language for business), hesitantly asking where I come from. 'Are you Russian?' 'No, French.' 'Are you a tourist? 'No, I live in Munsudong.' Astonished widened eyes and raised eyebrow, followed by a nod: 'Ah, you do business!' 'No, I work for a humanitarian agency…' Eyes widen further.

When we visit the provinces, after the appropriate paperwork and permissions, the smiles and curiosity increase. Often children salute and the braver ones shout out hello and run after the four-wheel drive cars.

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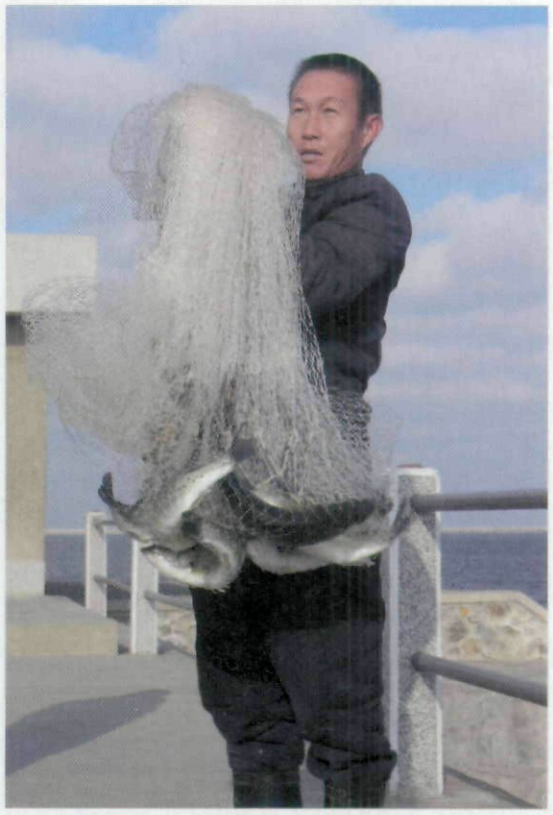
I soon discover that most of the criticism of the country is unfortunately true. It's hard to hide an obsolete industrial and agricultural sector that has been unable to change since the collapse of the Soviet regime and the subsequent loss of North Korea's traditional trading partners. The country is bankrupt – riddled with hunger and natural disasters. It insists on a hostile foreign policy, on spending huge sums on its army and is closed to the outside world. Kim Il Sung's *Juche* ideology

rests on self-reliance. But the country can't provide adequate work, food, clothing, clean water, electricity or healthcare to most of its citizens.

That's the dilemma facing anyone accepting a humanitarian posting here. In a nutshell: are we supporting the regime by helping the people? The needs of the civil population for food, water, sanitation and healthcare are obvious. So how can a total embargo be the right solution? In the end I felt that humanitarian organizations could reach at least part of the population in need and perhaps contradict some of the anti-Western propaganda spread for decades in this country.

Even so, there are few foreign NGOs in North Korea. Obtaining the necessary permission requires hiring translators and local staff, who are attached to the Foreign Affairs Office and pre-selected by the Government. (This constraint led to the UN Development Programme closing its office in 2007.)

I found that my relationship with the 'liaison officer' who manages the local staff team was critical. He was the link between my agency and the military and civil authorities but also the filter for contact with the local population. Each request, from a field visit to the colour and size of the logo on the car, is studied carefully by the Foreign Office in case of a 'threat to the national security'.



A farm labourer shows off his fine catch on a freezing winter day. Our group was later offered the fish for lunch, and given the rest to take back home.

In the field

One week's notice is required to plan field visits. You must make a list of people and institutions you want to meet and the type of information you want to collect. No improvisation is allowed. This makes visiting an ordinary family to assess if they have running water a big challenge.

Most field visits last one day and the majority of projects are less than two hours from the capital. The Government prefers projects to be based in or near Pyongyang. The departure from the office is slow – the liaison officer has to wait by the phone for the green light from the authorities, despite the visit already being confirmed. (Freedom of movement is tightly controlled: if you want to move from the county where you reside you need to ask for a *laissez-passer*.)

After a 90-minute drive and two military checkpoints we arrive at the project site. For three years we will meet the same people: the 'man in charge', the field work engineer and a representative of the local people's committee, the 'ferret'. His job is to make sure our foreign presence is not a 'threat to the national security'. For instance, to say 'no' to a request to photograph a group of children playing in case there is a hidden military target in the background or because the photograph could be used to promote a negative image of North Korea.

First a cigarette, followed by a meeting to inform us of the progress and problems faced since the last visit. Often this revolves around fuel and tyre shortages. Other than that, there are no problems. But when you catch a glimpse of an excavator stuck in the mud and enquire why that wasn't mentioned, you are told: 'We will manage it ourselves'. When the 'man in charge' gets the green light from the military to take us to the project we are led to the car, to avoid walking... even for 200 metres.

At noon, the translators begin to get excited: '*pale pale; siksa siksa*' ('hurry up, hurry up; it's lunchtime').

And our Korean hosts make it a point of honour to welcome us into their office, a traditional farmhouse that will become our canteen for the whole project. We are ushered into a small room dominated by portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. The floor, covered with floral plastic linoleum, is warm from the heat of the *onbol* (traditional Korean oven) in the kitchen below. We sit around a low table in front of a small bowl and metallic chopsticks.

Even with a shortage of resources you will be presented with a plethora of small dishes including pickled vegetables, fern sprouts, fresh sea food and sometimes Korean barbecue when the oil and cigarette fumes rapidly transform the room into a smokehouse. After several glasses of *sul* (rice brandy) and stuffing yourself for an hour you then choose the main dish (a refusal is seen as an insult) – a big bowl of steaming clam soup and rice or cold Korean noodles. The afternoon's field visit somehow seems more daunting after a lunch like that.

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Obvious barriers exist when you want to speak to local families. Using an official translator in the presence of the 'ferret' makes it hard to get spontaneous, honest answers. During my first visit to a water supply project on the east coast I was escorted to different sites. We arrived at a small village of about 40 households to check a solar pumping station, a pilot to test alternative solutions to the energy crisis in rural areas. We were showered with apologies that the pumping station could not be visited because 'the man in charge of the keys' had been called away to harvest rice (it was October and most of the village was in the fields because the harvesting machines were broken). The next visit met with the same apologies. This time 'the man in charge of the keys' had been called away to tend to a family health

Karaoke and Korean *sul*

Waitresses double up as karaoke singers in restaurants, often singing their hearts out with patriotic songs about the war. Karaoke is a passion and most people revel in taking centre stage after a few glasses of *sul*, a strong rice liquor similar to sake. North Koreans enjoy any reason to get festive with dancing and *sul*, and celebrations of their leaders and the Party are strongly reinforced. During the Friendship Festival, for example, the Government invites foreign artists for a series of concerts and shows. Before the events begin, the façades of buildings along the main avenues are repainted in colourful pastel blues, yellows and greens.

The week culminates in the immaculately choreographed 'Mass Games'. Young gymnasts and students practise for hours to create human landscapes of stunning patriotic scenes, ranging from the separation of Korean families during the partition to propaganda slogans and key North Korean landmarks. In October the founding of the Party is celebrated. People dance in the public squares in front of the statues of the Workers' Party and the Eternal President. Standing at the edge of the crowd will guarantee you being whisked into the group by a *sul*-fuelled young man or old granny. Aside from public holidays and festivals, local people have their daily winding-down routines. In the early evening you can spot large gatherings in smoky rooms throughout town: pubs serve large pints of beer (*maekchu*). Friends and colleagues meet to share plates of dry squid (*nakchi*) or dry whiting (*myongtae*) accompanied by a burning soybean sauce. The animated discussion and laughter are not far removed from the bars in London or Sydney at 7 pm.

Moving around

Bicycles are an essential asset to those lucky enough to possess one. This man is probably taking his pig to the farmers' market; since the reforms of 2002, the State has allowed farmers more liberty to sell their surplus in local markets. Of course, your mode of transport is largely dependent on which part of society you belong to. At first glance, North Korea is a country of walkers. Everywhere you look, men with their noses buried in propaganda, women with babies snuggled so deep under their coats that you only catch a glimpse of a little bonnet peeping out, old grannies sometimes with tables and chairs strapped to their back, walk energetically – transporting whatever they need in the simplest way. But over the last five years, the number of vehicles has rapidly increased, especially in Pyongyang. And those with privileged access to private transport are rarely seen walking more than 100 metres. The irony is that many of the cars are Japanese, despite the well-known animosity between the two countries.

Ferrets rule

A Government minder, given the nickname of 'ferret' by the NGO community, keeps a close eye on workers at a polder [dyke] reclamation project in the countryside. Secret police and informers are everywhere in North Korea. Foreign businessmen and NGO workers are closely shadowed to ensure their actions are not a 'threat to national security'. Officially, local people are not allowed to communicate with foreigners and foreigners are not allowed to possess *won*, the national currency, unless converted at the official rate.

North Korea is a 'communist theocracy'. Even though Kim Jong Il's father, Kim Il Sung, died in 1994, he is the country's Eternal President. The social and ideological system established by Kim the father mixes 1950s Stalinism with the absolute monarchy of King Sejong (1418-50) and Kim's own political concoction – *Juche* – a combination of self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-confidence.

Despite the Korean War ceasefire signed in 1953, North Korea considers itself in a state of war. The Pyongyang regime uses this threat to justify its nuclear arsenal and to negotiate economic aid from its neighbours and from the US. The threat of external enemies is also used to justify the *Sogun* (army first) policy initiated by Kim Jong Il in 1997.

issue. It remains a mystery how a visit announced a week in advance repeatedly suffered from the absence of 'the man with the keys' and that no-one else could take his place. And because he is 'the only one who knows how to operate the pump', it's never operating when he's away.

To make up for this I am generously allowed to visit one house to check the water supply from the tap. Two-metre walls surround each farmhouse in the village. The houses, the only private spaces in this communist country, are well kept. A timid lady, dressed in her best, smiles as I greet her in my awkward Korean. Her husband squats outside with his back towards us, his dog obediently beside him on a leash. Almost every inch of the small yard is taken up by a vegetable garden. Marrows climb the wall and pumpkins grow on the tiled roof. We slip into the house one by one. My escorts are uneasy with this level of intimacy. As I enter, a grunt from a dark corner startles me: a pig jumps up, bothered by the intrusion. A pig is precious and is kept indoors to be fattened. The kitchen is on the left, the *onbol* (stove) sunk into the ground. Shelves filled with tin and plastic bowls line the wall behind. The lady points enthusiastically at the water-filled containers beside the shelf. The adjoining eating area is covered in floral linoleum, with a thin mattress and cushions piled up in a corner (doubling as the sleeping room). On the wall, portraits of the Kims hang in such a way that the images are not tainted by the sun's reflection. Two of my escorts leave to smoke a cigarette outside and surprisingly the remaining one allows me to take a rare photograph of the lady turning on her tap.

A matter of great dishonour

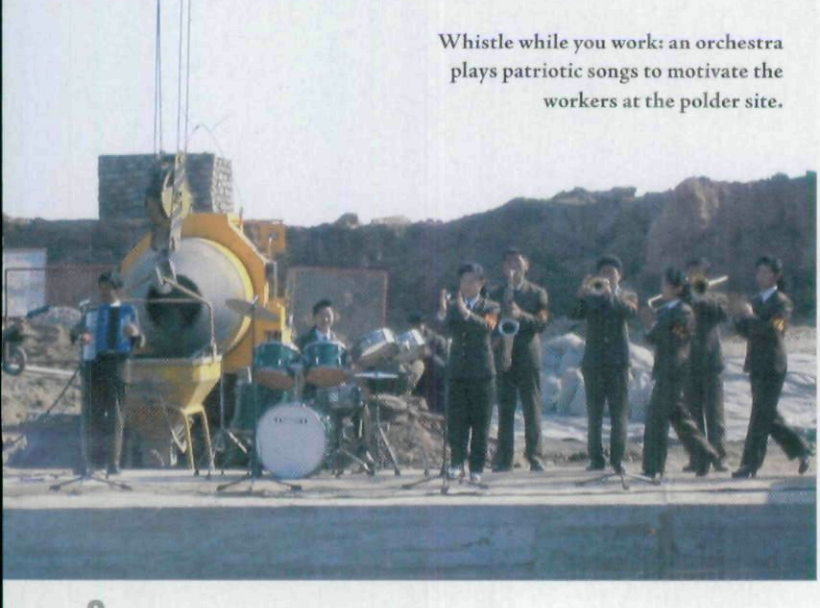
When project sites are far from Pyongyang we are permitted to stay in State hotels, but not allowed to wander outside at night. During the three years I spent in North Korea there was one exception to this rule. During the first polder rehabilitation project (to reclaim additional farmland from the sea and therefore increase food production) we negotiated with the authorities to allow us to find a residence on site due to the distance from the capital. It would be the first (and last) time that foreigners were allowed to stay on a co-operative farm, which was where the project was based.

Early in the morning, workers set off to collect shellfish on the polder (dyke) site. Only 16 per cent of the country is arable land and much of it is exhausted; consequently the State has backed polder construction since the early 1950s to create land suitable for rice cultivation. There are now more than 300,000 hectares of reclaimed land. But the polders require constant upkeep.

The Government resisted the idea. The farm was on the coast, a vulnerable border area. South Korean spies might kidnap us. Finally, after a year-long discussion, we were told we could get a lodging close to the site – at the county town 45 minutes away. It was better than nothing and my only further request was that the lodging be in a habitable state. On the day we were to visit, I was taken up a small hill, located above a school, and the liaison officer pointed to a patch of open ground – having forgotten to mention that we would have to build the lodging ourselves. After several months of construction, the grand opening of the house became a state affair. The authorities proudly showed it to an EU delegation as a sign of co-operation and trust. At least we had lodging for the final year of the project.

This was all made worthwhile by an unforgettable football match to mark the opening of our new abode. There were at least 500 people around the pitch, most of whom had never seen a foreigner, and were probably presuming we were either American or Russian (so for them to lose would have been a matter of great dishonour). There was no risk of that: the expat staff team were thrashed 4-1 by 15-year-olds from the school down the hill. A good mood and national pride were preserved. At sunset, when some of us had collapsed, breathless and exhausted, we were cheerfully told that there was another game to follow, volleyball. Seeing the small size of the young football team, our hopes of an easy revenge were high, only to be dashed when we saw another team arriving in bright clean shirts and 20 centimetres taller. After a few minutes we were being pummelled 0-15 and the trainer gestured with his hand, asking his players to slow down. In North Korea, victory is beautiful but one must not humiliate the opponent, as that would be embarrassing. The people on the co-operative farm are still talking with glee about this unique exchange many years later.

The unwritten rule if you want to keep things comfortable: don't talk politics.



Whistle while you work: an orchestra plays patriotic songs to motivate the workers at the polder site.