28 April Beijing

Six days in Beijing and I’ve practised the route to Koryo Tours enough that I get to the Orientation session early. The KT office is on an alley that runs off an alley, and the offices are a motley collection of rooms that clearly once comprised a house that, in Beijing terms, would have been spacious. As it is it’s now filled with desks, papers, brochures, socialist realism posters and office staff, mostly young, putting the logistics of their various tours together. It has a nice hum and an optimistic vibe.

Marcus and Adrian send us into the Orientation room as we arrive. Our visa photos are plastered on an easel at the front, like a most wanted list in a particularly underfunded police station. The five day tour, led by Adrian; the seven and ten day tours, led by Marcus. I’m on the seven, with two additional days tacked on, on each side of the border with China. Both are young Australians, Adrian wisecracking, Marcus quieter, both eager to underline the potential risks of the trip. We’ve read the information sent to us in multiple formats, but it pays to hear it again. No photographs of ordinary people without their permission. No photographs of military installations or personnel, even on construction sites. All photos of the Dear Leaders—Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, both passed on to that Great Socialist Collective in the Sky—must include the full statue or portrait, no partials. Any newspaper or magazine with a photo of the Respected Leader (that would be Kim Jong Un) cannot be creased where the photo is. No selfies, no jumping up and down or peace signs. Behave!

There’s more. Visits to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where the two departed leaders lie in state, must be in more formal dress; suit jacket, collared shirt and tie for men, dress and close-toed shoes for women. I’ve been practising tying a tie for a week in preparation for this and I think I can almost pull it off. Or tie it on, for that matter. We are to get in lines of four or six and bow long and low and in unison. If you don’t want to bow, don’t come along. Don’t say “North Korea”, to the North Koreans it’s always the DPRK, as they view themselves as part of one people, hoping for reunification with the South.

The days will be long, as it’s in both Koryo and the government’s interest to keep us so busy we don’t get up to mischief. Each day starts with breakfast in the hotel at a designated time, give or take half an hour, and we are expected to be in the lobby ready to go at the given hour. Then we are herded into a bus and zipped to sites in Pyongyang, the capital, and other cities, back to the hotel around eight each night. It sounds managed, as we expected, but Marcus and Adrian assure us the guides can be very forthcoming if we gain their trust.

I look around the room. These folks are travel vets. You can see it from their clothes and their demeanour. They’ve signed up for a DPRK tour because there are few places like it in the world today; shrouded in mystery and misinformation. Only a few thousand non-Chinese visit each year. We’re privileged, and we need to bear that in mind as we meet the Korean people of the northern part of the peninsula.

28 April Pyongyang

A two hour delay for our flight from Beijing, waiting, apparently for a Japanese trade delegation. Beijing is strangely quiet where we are, but then DPRK isn’t your average destination. I find a Starbucks and some good coffee, not knowing if it will be my last for some days.

We all make sacrifices.

Tony and I talk sports, especially Australian Rules football, as we cool our heels, all of us slightly on edge. The Japanese arrive, all overfed entitlement in their lookalike suits, walking straight past us and on to the plane. The Japanese have a lot to answer for in East Asia, and especially with the Koreas, due to their activities in WW II. I suddenly wonder if our two Japanese on the tour are aware of this, as the Japanese school curriculum is apparently a whitewashing. The Air Koryo plane is a Tupolev 100, clean, relatively comfortable, with three flight attendants who might have been professional models. A precursor of the display aspect of our tour? The food is a mystery burger that others found surprisingly tasty.

In my group: Tony (Australia) Naoyuki (Yuki) from Japan and Herjeet (Singapore), on the 8-9 day; Noé (Switzerland), Chris (Australia), Derek (England), Bob (England), Louis and Sam (England), Joan (Australia), Shigeki (Japan) and Fabrice (France) on the 7 day; Shani and Nimrod (Israel), on the 10 day, with Jaden (Australia), Steven (New Zealand) and several others attached on the fiver. Mrs. Ri and Mr. Chae are our two main DPRK tour guides, with Mr. Kim also involved translating for the Japanese.

The Pyongyang airport places a premium on security, unsurprisingly, and my political journal *New Eastern Europe* was checked before it was okayed. Not that they checked very hard; it was presented to me, on a table, upside down and opening in the reverse direction. Otherwise customs, baggage and other elements are straightforward, though long—they really do check things, and it’s more than perfunctory. The airport is clean open, fairly busy at our time of arrival, and the atmosphere is generally friendly. Most of our crew has already found a place to buy souvenir passports. They’ve run out when I find it. I make a silent vow to buy one at the first opportunity. I manage a couple of pins, bitterly.

The Yanggakdo hotel lies on an island in the centre of town. Hence, it’s a conveniently secure place to park dangerous forigners. There’s also a football stadium and a large cinema used for a film festival on the island. Shortly after we check in four of us are taken there in the almost complete darkness to watch a film co-directed and produced by Koryo Tours founder Nicholas Bonner, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*. A kind of classic socialist feel-good comedy, with a fetching heroine who rises from the coal mines and construction site labour to become an accomplished trapeze artist. Over the top camera work and acting, sentimental and amusingly earnest, and yet effective for all that. Asian acting tends to look overcooked to the western eye. Dinner in the “Rainbow Restaurant” is modest but okay, not much on offer for vegetarians beyond a plate of greasy potatoes and white rice, which after 12 hours of near fasting, is just enough to keep me going. Good conversation at the table, though, with Noé, Yuki, Herjeet, and the crusty and very British Brit, Bob. Marcus tells me the possibilities of seeing a Revolutionary Opera on May 4 look promising. I’ve been pushing the Koryo office for some weeks on this, so this is good news.

The hotel is 47 stories, a “luxury” hotel, certainly impressive in some ways though the carpets and floors are scarred by the remnants of smokers. A friendly hotel porter greets you at the lobby lifts in white gloves and uniform and, as far as I can tell, his job is to gesture to whichever lift is open. We’ll see a lot of this in coming days—people who have jobs that would drive Westerners wild with boredom, but which the people here appear to do with a degree of satisfaction.

There’s a souvenir shop and post office in the lobby (handy, as I remain an unrepentant postcard mailer), and on a lower level billiards, a bowling alley, a swimming pool and shopping. The view from my 36th floor room is impressive; the Taedong River sweeps out wide and silver through the heart of the city.

The morning: we’re off to Kumsusan, the sacred site where Koreans view the two departed Dear Leaders lying in state. As such we are checking out this morning, and over our time in the DPRK we’re never given a chance to unpack, with constant movement between points and returns to the Yanggakdo. This places a premium on evening preparation. Tonight we’re staying the night in Kaesong, three hours away. All of us need to be in dress clothes this morning for the mausoleum trip. My computer and phone are registering different times (1/2 hour behind Beijing) so I get up an hour early and I’m down in the empty, cavernous lobby facing a puzzled doorman before anyone else.

General Reflections: the guides are obviously elite members of DPRK society. They express what appears to be an unfeigned pride in their country. I’ve experienced that before in socialist countries. They’re not dupes; they are motivated, in their meetings with foreigners, to put their society’s best face on, as we do when we greet visitors. Capital cities are showcases in many countries, and Pyongyang more so than others. It reminds me a lot of Minsk, the capital of Belarus, a beautiful country ruled by a moron and idiot named Alyeksandr Lukashenko for about thirty years. Belarus also prizes unity of thought and patriotism and Minsk is a kind of Potemkin capital, a gleaming showcase beyond the means of ordinary citizens. Yet it is beautiful for all that, as Pyongyang is in the pale morning that (finally) grows around me.

April 29 Kaesong

This is an all-inclusive tour. In contrast to what that normally means—resort, obsequious attention from Manuel the waiter, drink until you drop—this inclusiveness means that we are on the go about thirteen hours a day. And the best part is that, while on the move, one sees and feels so many things separate from the actual sites we visit.

As a list, to get it over with, today we see the Kamsusun Palace of the Sun, a stamp “museum”, a “folklore village” a foreign language bookshop (selling books about and by the Dear Leaders, of course), the King Kongmin tombs, and, finally, well after dark had descended, an arrival at Kaesong, an historic city about two and a half hours from Pyongyang via a highway that is a paved road in name only. Such is the state of infrastructure in DPRK, and there isn’t a bigger obstacle to economic prosperity. It doesn’t matter who helps you avoid sanctions, if you lose your axel and a wheel while delivering the goods.

The amount of new visual information borders on the overwhelming even by the second day of the tour. Any spare second is spent writing the journal. I write this, for instance, leaning against the wall of my traditional style Korean room at the “Folklore Hotel” (oh, how I’m re-evaluating my feelings about the word “folklore”). It’s a lovely, civilised room, covered in tatami, with a mattress on the heated floor. No chairs or tables, and one never knows when the power will go out—no hot water until a single hour tomorrow morning, either—so I need to get some of this down. I’ve got a headlamp on just in case.

This is surely one of the best tour groups I’ve been a part of. Team Marcus and Team Adrian spend much of the day together and we share three guides, so there is always a nice, sizeable number of people to talk to and learn from. I spend a lot of time with Herjeet, a beautiful Singaporean with silky, South Asian-inflected English, and Tony, the Australian who acts as the social glue for several of us. They’re both intelligent, engaging and socially astute. But Fabrice and the young Swiss guy who he has formed a palship with, Noé, are super company as well; they comprise the other culture vultures on the tour, and saw the film with me last night. Shani and Nimrod, the Israeli couple, are a study in how to get things right in a relationship. He is sinewy and lanky, long hair in a ponytail, a sneaky smart sense of humour, and quiet. She is voluptuous, talks to anyone, asks questions about anything, laughs at herself, and clearly adores her hubby. Like so many of the travelers on this sojourn, they’ve been *everywhere.* Most of these people are pros, not so much in the *Up in the Air* business sense, but rather in having been dozens of offbeat destinations.

The two Irish guys on Adrian’s bus, Owen and Gary, fit that category, too, as well as Steven the Cambodian-Kiwi and Yuki and Shigeki, the two Japanese, camera bedecked in an absolute parody of Nipponais self-stereotyping. There’s also a tough and flexible senior contingent. Crusty Bob is 70 and made it third to the top of the Folklore Village hilltop site. Joan the Aussie is 77, and, though she was clearly struggling by the end of the day, she’s a trouper.

Our guides are Mrs Ri (pronounced “Li”, Mr Chae and Mr. Kim. Mrs Ri is in charge. Mr Chae tries a little too hard but is sincere and friendly. Mr. Kim is young and green. It’s Mrs Ri’s job to remind us—constantly—not to take inappropriate photos, especially at the multiple road checkpoints we pass. The warnings should hardly be necessary by now but the two Japanese are insatiable photographers who walk the line of cultural insensitivity. As they are putting the tour and our guides at some risk I speak to both at points over the first two days. They just don’t get it. It’s just a photo for them, but it’s the dignity of local people on the other, or the job security of our guides at an extreme.

So, those are the foundational facts. Harder to quantify are my impressions. Let’s start by listing some things I didn’t see, that one would expect to see in most western societies:

* No one on the street walking along with their head bowed over their cellphone
* No angry horn honking
* No desperate mental health refugees or homeless people left to their own devices and wandering the street
* No displays of aggression between pedestrians and cars
* No litter

Let’s list some things I did see:

* Women and men working harmoniously together on a construction site and in the fields, where 90% of the labour appears to be back-breakingly manual
* Groups of boys, girls and youth playing sports outdoors—remember when that was a thing?
* People dressed respectably—not uniformly, but a degree or three higher than western casual in most cases.

I’m not suggesting that the DPRK works as a society better than our own. But it’s worth qualifying the constant refrain from the west of the poor, mistreated people trope, a restless mass awaiting a free society. DPRK society is certainly not free, in the current Western sense. But there are choices, as Mrs. Ri describes them; technical school, university faculties, vocational work, the military. People are full citizens at seventeen, which is when they must start to wear “the pin”—actually different pins, each representing one or both of the departed Dear Leaders, each pin specific to a trade or vocation. Korean children are drilled in the Asian style. In the coming days we’ll see remarkable examples of this, for good or ill—and it isn’t all one or the other. Choice is sanctified in the West as a measure of freedom but has been utilised by unscrupulous business and political factions in our societies to disenfranchise people, who become overwhelmed with the individual menus with which they are presented. No one ever reads the fine print, so isn’t it at least arguable that it might be a good idea to limit the fine print, limit the choices to the essentials?

The idea of freedom attached to our notion of western democratic values—one vote per person, regardless of station—has begun to seem naïve in our time. Putin’s Russia, Kaczynski’s Poland and Orbàn’s Hungary stand as current examples of how people in some nations—affluent, lucky nations, mostly—come to rue the amount of freedom forced on them and begin to opt for choices being made on their behalf which privilege their weakest impulses, the tendency to tribalism and ethno-cultural grouping. The DPRK is completely homogeneous ethnically; there is no diversity, at all. The corollary to that is there is a sense of unity, a social cohesion based on shared norms and mores which in some cases goes back going back thousands of years (and in others, to 1953) that effectively replaces the glories of individualised menus of freedom.

Have I been co-opted? Am I saying that North Koreans are happy and content? I won’t say they’re not. Unlike Russia, there has never been evidence uncovered here of any organised or nascent rebellion against party rule. There must be resistance, of course. But it has primarily taken the form of people acting with their feet, and defecting.

Wouldn’t this shared community based on restrictions and much smaller inequality gaps immediately falter the moment the internet and globalisation begin to expand people’s dreams and their sense of the world? Life is tough here, especially outside Pyongyang. On the road to Kaesong we saw scenes that were almost medieval, farmers driving ox-carts, peasants crouched low over fields, harvesting by hand, people walking dusty roads from one town to another. Power comes and goes. The DPRK famine of the 90s rivalled Ukraine’s Great Hunger in intensity. The government, the ruling party, and the Dear Leader have been, at all times, self-interested and venal.

And yet I see and read no evidence of a strong, sustained push for democracy of the kind we have mistakenly taken as a panacea since the advent of the 20th century. Perhaps one doesn’t miss what one doesn’t have. Perhaps. Perhaps Confucianism has been distorted over time to persuade people to bow mindlessly to authority and value the collective over the individual. Perhaps. But there’s no disputing that our society has gotten many things wrong, or many things that were once right have migrated out of our control. Our social fabric is fraying rapidly; families are shrinking when they are formed at all. Multitudes become addicted to mood-altering drugs because the day-to-day reality of our society is too depressing, or too hopeless, to dissuade them from self-destructive acts. The rise of the Trumps of the world and their supporters is the rise of those who feel they were duped, promised a voice, promised prosperity, promised the hegemony of their race, and were given none of these. Shorn of meaningful purpose, the overgrown children of the west retreat into e-games and on-line socialising and forget to vote, believing it purposeless. Faced with this, is it so unlikely that a simpler, slower, quieter life, with a guaranteed place in it, might be appealing?

This is romantic, I know. But it’s not delusional. What’s delusional is our belief—inculcated in us from childhood just as surely as socialist dogma is injected into the DPRK’s young—that free market capitalism is the only route to individual enfranchisement, that multi-party democracies, which have demonstrated their sclerotic destructiveness even in our own time, are somehow the true meaning of freedom and that all peoples around the globe are thirsting for this fount of freedom, waiting for their chance or for the noble hand of the benevolent West to unchain them. The Crusaders no doubt thought they were doing the Arab world a favour. We’ve been playing this foul hand for hundreds of years. Why can’t we accept that freedom is not the only thing people want? That security may be more important for more than half the world’s population? And that freedom and security are locked in a constant state of tension?

I still believe that western democracy of the Scandinavian or Canadian kind makes use of this tension in a creative way that brings the greatest benefit to their citizens. But I no longer believe that only this approach provides people with happiness or contentment. And I see a society, the past two days, where people, through a shared sense of place and purpose, have acquired a sense of *belonging*—and that, to me, is where happiness and contentment reside.

I digressed, but only slightly; this was never going to be a simple travelogue. The journal is called *Awkward Honesty* because I am increasingly aware of a need, an imperative, to see and report clearly what I learn about myself and others. Or what I fail to learn. That means coming to terms with some of my deficiencies, as well as the deficiencies of my society, and to apply honesty to both with hope and positivity. There’s nothing negative or cynical in this exercise. I retain, and depend upon, Wonder, as a source of meaning. Wonder is out of fashion, but then, it always is, as Cynics always occupy the Cool Kid corner. I read extensively before I arrived. I was a well-informed layman before that. I have a long history in the science of discerning politics and political movements. And with all that said, and knowing the grinding roughness of life in parts and at points in the DPRK, *there is much to admire here*.

Final observations on this day. The soil here is red, vividly so, like the flag. The country is filled with mountains that are not so high that they are mythic. They point to a transcendence that is difficult to achieve, but realistic to hope for, if one proceeds down a dusty path, step by step.

April 30 DMZ

The days are so full that it strains my capacity to remember all that we did. I’m going to avoid a list of activities, because that isn’t the objective of this journal. I’ll talk about the sensations I experienced instead.

I awake in on the floor of my traditional Korean room in the Kaesong Folklore Hotel, having slept without interruption throughout the night—a rare occurrence. The promised hot water (one hour) doesn’t materialise at 6:30 as promised so I simply towel down with cold water and soap and enjoy the wake-up of it. Egg and toast for breakfast with much too little coffee; it’s not what the Koreans eat, but my appetite says that’s okay.

Kaesong is a mid-sized city about 30 kilometres from the Demiltarised Zone established by the U.S. and the DPRK in 1953. The soil is more brown than red here, and it’s the centre of the DPRK’s ginseng trade, which explains all the ginseng-flavoured alcohol in the hotel shop. Kaesong itself is pretty, a mixture of old and new. Parts of Kaesong were amongst the only areas of the north that were not bombed during the War, so there are houses that are centuries old, built in the traditional, winged roof Korean style. The other half of the city takes advantage of the history through a brisk tourist trade based on proximity to the DMZ. People walking or on bikes stare at our bus as it goes by. Occasionally someone waves, but most often it’s someone stopping dead still and staring. We are Martians.

There are some statues of the Dear (departed) Leaders we are obliged to see and another so-called “stamp museum” before lunch, which features eleven golden bowls arrayed in front of each traveler. Mine are encouragingly vegetarian and deliciously variable. Tofu, cold noodles, a couple of kinds of cabbage, potatoes, nori…I finish about 5 of the eleven altogether with my rice.

We board the bus and head to Panmunjom, the little village nearest to the DMZ. This takes a fair bit of time, even from nearby Kaesong. The roads here are miserable and narrow, with cyclists typically lined on both sides as dust swirls into thick eddies around them, they float in and out of view like ghosts. But as is repeatedly occurring here, my time in the bus is amongst the most riveting parts of the day. I stare through the window at farm labourers hunched over in dark fields, working their crops by hand. A few ancient tractors, red cabs with blue motor casings and orange hub caps, stand idly. Often a soldier is standing at a distance, holding his automatic weapon, all alone in a far part of the field, no checkpoint, no official vehicle. Like so many people here, he’s tasked with making sure each worker performs their duties until the sun goes down.

The highway here is full of cyclists and not a few walkers, even soldiers, going from town to town or farm to farm. The dust must be blinding as our buses (there are two) trundle by, but their expression never changes. They are concentrating on staying upright, and staying on the road. We pass within millimetres, never slowing. Their acknowledgement is grim, their adjustment grudging.

No combines or harvesters in sight, no farmhouses near the road, just expanses of brown dirt, tilled in neat, hand-made furrows by sunburnt men and women who park their bikes in the middle of the field. The better to get home with when the day is done, I think. The bikes stand incongruously, roadless, like makeshift scarecrows.

And then we arrive at the legendary, notorious No Man’s Land, the DMZ. It’s a study in white-grey concrete, extensive, more like a movie set than something real. Two kilometres of it is in the DPRK and two kilometres belongs to South Korea, and within the DPRK’s section there are farmers who are bussed in to till the fertile soil, because this is a place where no soil can go to waste. There’s a small house where the armistice was negotiated, and a larger, empty, cold structure where it was signed. Our army guide, a stern-faced and cordial Lieutenant, explained that this structure was built in four days to prevent the Americans from signing the treaty in a temporary structure and then erasing it from their history. There were other, shall we say, debatable details in his account, told without a hint of expression but with evident considerable pride. I need to read a good account of that period now to square the competing versions I’ve heard. I’m sure the truth lies somewhere in-between.

There’s a third building from which one can see from a height the South Korean fortifications and the land beyond. Just below this viewing platform is the actual set of blue huts where the line goes through, where defections of soldiers have taken place, and where the South Korean President met the DPRK Generalissimo just the other day to open a new era between the two parts of the riven nation. Stirring stuff. But what is staged and what is real?

Judging by the manic buying and selling going on at the north side souvenir shop, the action on the south side must be madness. If peace breaks out both sides are going to lose a lot of business; or, like the Germans, they’ll create something like a Checkpoint Charlie Museum and profit from the nostalgia. I admired the patience and good-nature of the soldiers who gave us explanations and posed for endless photos. This is surely not what they signed up for.

A three hour ride back to Pyongyang and a chance to settle for a couple of nights. Dinner is at a local place famed for its barbecued duck and holds little appeal for me, but the camaraderie is excellent, as it has been throughout the tour. The restaurant bravely supplies me with more non-carnivorous fare than I can finish. Tomorrow is May Day, and crowds will be out all over Pyongyang, a real chance to mingle with Koreans. The lucky ones, those who live in the capital and have some income to dispose of, will head for a Fun Fair (would that our commercial nomenclature was so simple) in the evening. I’ll be seeing those farm labourers, bent double, hunching along a furrow like characters from Brueghel, in my head.

May 1 May Day

One of the biggest holidays of the year in Communist countries dawns cloudy with a hint of gloomy rain in Pyongyang. But the revelers in the streets appear undeterred. After all, the events, such as the Fun Fair, have taken months to organise. Our tour hosts were eager for us to get out into the city to mix with the locals on their off-day. So out we go in the morning to the metro, to be ushered in free of charge to two of the ornate new metro stops on a two-line system, covering the western side of Pyongyang. These were indeed dazzling, reminiscent of the Moscow metro, with chandeliers and large statues of Dear Leaders and mosaics of heroic workers on the walls. Teeming crowds, every bit as anxious to be the last one on a crowded train as in Tokyo or Beijing.

We get out at a third, rather less spectacular metro station to visit the Arch of Triumph, a larger and more recent version of the one seen by rather more people in France. Triumph is all in the eye of the beholder, of course, and the DPRK believes they triumphed in the conflicts that erupted from 1935 to 53. Japan retreated, so that was a triumph, but the situation with the US is more complicated. Still, a good opportunity to build a massive and useless building, right?

We’re all enjoying being amongst ordinary Koreans. A dog is spotted and fawned over by Shani. No cats, yet, so no fawning from me. In case our heads have been turned by metro travel we are taken on a tram ride, a rather famous tram, one with 44 red stars on the side, each signifiying 50,000 safe rides. As we rolled along at a speed slightly above snail it became abundantly clear why the driver’s track record was so spotless. Locals stopped in the tracks and gawked. We scared small children. Aliens are real, why didn’t Mommy tell us?

From the tram it was on to the Fun Fair, another of those DPRK things, like books and films, named in a charmingly direct manner. It’s a fair! Have fun! Not so much different than “Amusement Park”, I suppose… there were rides, and sporting games all over the almost grassless plain, volleyball mainly, with some footie, and some of the players were skilled. Michael Palin, of Monty Python and travelogue fame, is there, watching in his casual, fade-in-the-background way. Tony shook his hand and also met Nick Bonner, Koryo Tours’ founder. I miss all that, to my chagrin. I don’t miss the opportunity to pick up an ice cream at one of the kiosks, though, the first street food I’ve been allowed to buy here. It’s delicious, too, more ice than cream.

Lunch at a local restaurant that is even better than previous days. I have a new appreciation for pickled cabbage, *kim chi* and other varieties. At this point I’d have perished without it. I remember nothing of the restaurant or the experience, beyond being ushered in by gorgeous, traditionally costumed geishas, er, female Koreans, as we always are at every restaurant; being served by other young, attractive females, as we always are, and asking Tony 100 questions about Australian Rules Football, which he dutifully answers articulately and in full and with some brio.

Shortly after lunch we’re taken to the modern, specially designed building where the National Circus trains and performs. For a mere 20 Euros we’re treated to a May Day show with a packed and enthusiastic audience of locals. Acrobatics of all kinds, *jongleurs* and comics who manage the transitions brilliantly, throwing hats across the stage and catching them on their heads without missing a single one. The trapeze artists are extremely talented but fail several jumps to sighs and moans from the audience. Mrs. Ri spins it as being down to their desire to increase their level of risk and difficulty, and who am I to disagree? A live band of musicians watches the performers closely to one side, playing cue music that is an interesting fusion of western and Asian influences.

Ninety minutes of non-stop action and the performance is finished. Beside me Tony has finally mastered the rhythmic hand clap. In the milling crowd we can never be lost for long; we tower over other heads.

I’m feeling like that should make the day’s apotheosis but of course there’s more to do. The Cemetery of the Martyrs reminds me so much of Belarus and the monument at Brest, with its iconic socialist realism stone carvings, austere, large open spaces and silent, stern guards. Then there’s some kind of huge monument featuring the three symbols of communist DPRK, the hammer, sickle and writing brush. To the positively inclined these stand for the equal contributions, Mrs. Ri notes, of the labourer, the farmer and the intellectual. Conversely, they could represent the oppression of the state (we’ll hammer you), its quixotic government (we’ll starve you), and its revision of history (we write it). Very big, these monuments. Like Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*: *how was China*? *Very big, China*. *And Japan? Very small, Japan.* And the DPRK? Very insecure, the DPRK.

But the people. The people, above all, are memorable. They are lovely in so many ways. Physically, few people carry excess weight, most are uniformed in some way, virtually all move on the streets in a dignified manner that would be unrealistic, perhaps even frowned upon, in western societies. It’s a look from 60 years ago, when you made sure you looked respectable before going out. When you knew it was going to take some time, on a bike or a tram, to get to work. When, as a kid, you played outside, with your hands, touching real things.

So many people told me I would not be allowed to see anything on a tour of the DPRK but the opposite is true. Of course they’re showing us everything they’re proud of, but so would any tour in any country I can think of. There are aspects we can’t see, but we’ve been able to ask questions of virtually every kind—Shani, seated behind Mrs. Ri, is especially direct and probing—and Mrs Ri has answered them forthrightly. When something, like huge monuments, or showcase hotels, is presented to us, the opposite effect of what’s intended can result. This group has been around the block. It’s done a few laps in the arena of life. They’re discerning.

Beyond this there is the simple fact that city or a society cannot be stage-managed for tourists. People have lives to live, and they do, right in front of us. We meet them, we talk to them, and on the bus we observe in silent fascination. For me in some ways this is the most interesting time of day, those moments in between managed events when we watch life on the streets or in the fields. Buses pass us by, stop adjacent to us, packed full of faces creased with the day’s cares. Cyclists complete the same route they do every day. Our eyes are open, and we are able to see. What we see, the consensus amongst the group, is a society that is poor, and authoritarian, and far behind in development, in commerce, technology, communications. On the other hand, we see a society that is socially harmonious, where people have meaning to their lives, as spare as those lives may seem to affluent westerners. People have work to do, and they work for each other, and to make a better life for their children, like other people do. They have fewer choices, yes, but fewer distractions, also.

When the modern age arrives, and it will arrive just as soon as peace is made with South Korea and trade begins to build, there will be a rupture in the social compact in the DPRK. Progress is a hard thing to measure, and in the west we have often erred by believing that all technological innovation is inherently beneficial and that freedom trumps security as a social good. When these globalised values come to the DPRK its citizens will have the choice of acquiring these values and all the material benefits that generally accompany them, but leaving behind much of the custom and behaviour that binds them together as a people.

Evening at a boat restaurant. It takes off on a brief jaunt across the river, and we can view the few neon lights of the city. A girl band is brought into the dining room to celebrate the holiday with pop versions of patriotic and folkoric songs. Mrs. Ri tells us most of the fancier restaurants do this, that the performers are always women, and invariably that they are servers in the restaurant. These are astonishingly capable. Each plays more than one instrument, varying from saxophones to accordion to a dulcimer-like traditional instrument and a small version of kodo drums that are played like a *bodhran*. Each takes a turn singing soloes, then in chorus with the others. All are stunningly beautiful, similar in height, black hair shining, none with too large a bosom or too noticeable a posterior, with expressions that never vary more than a degree beyond pleasant detachment. The playing is perfect, the correct playing of well-trained and over-disciplined students who are not permitted to stray. Everything, in fact, was perfect, from the gorgeous brocaded silk dresses of pink, red and light green to the pearl white make-up that shines in the hot lights. Too perfect to feel quite real, but impressive. At moments one can see glimpses of humans underneath the paint and the practised gestures, hints that appear and disappear like rumours. They play, and sing, each replaced by another stepping to the front, until it seems a carousel of pretty fembots. The audience, including me, is rapt.

May 2 Pyongsong

Cold and rain. I wake early to finish some postcards and get them mailed from the post office in the lobby of the hotel before we check out. My body appears to have fully adjusted to the time zone, not that I ever really suffer from jet lag. It’s more the stress of being punctual for things, and gradually figuring out how much time things take, like the lift from the 36th floor, or the second cup of powdered coffee I invariably order.

The morning is domestic, in a traveler’s way. A quick bus jaunt over to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, a huge complex where we are greeted by yet another comely guide who speaks decent English and takes us on a slightly hurried tour of the DPRK’s version of Korean War history. There are a couple of interesting films we’re shown, the first explaining—again, from the DPRK point of view—the origins of the war and the geopolitical motivations, and the second an account of the tracking and capture of the *U.S.S. Pueblo* and its 83 American sailors in 1968.

I remember the incident being reported at that time, and the American President Lyndon Johnson’s angry response. It never occurred to me, even as a politically engaged and left-of-centre kid, to question the U.S. version of events—that the ship was a research vessel, that its sailors had been unfairly kidnapped in international waters, and that this represented a breach of the armistice. Time has told us that in fact the *Pueblo* was a ship fitted for spying and its sailors were trained in espionage, and that the ship was not only in DPRK waters when captured but had encroached on DPRK territory some 17 times previously. Everything the U.S. government said publicly, in other words, was a lie.

This was 1968, when trust in the U.S. government was at an all-time low, and the culture war in the States was well and truly underway. The Weather Underground, the Panthers, riots in Watts and Detroit, the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy. American hawks were in retreat on their own soil, under assault from their own people, so the humiliation of a military vessel being captured by the forces of a tiny Communist nation must have felt unendurable.

The museum tour begins with a walk outdoors through captured US military ordinance, not really an impressive number, but significant to any Korean from the North. Then we’re taken to see the actual *USS Pueblo*. We go inside and are shown the film of the capture of the vessel, the confessions by the crew and the U.S. Government’s eventual agreement to officially apologise. The cryptography room is clearly marked in American English as one goes through the vessel; there’s no doubt about the boat’s ultimate purpose.

Inside the museum there are various memorials to dead and surviving heroes of the DPRK and the second film is shown. As with every museum and monument in the DPRK, it’s all ultra clean, spacious, modern and impressive in a singular, unified outlook sort of way.

A completely different experience awaits us at our next stop, an art atelier. Ceramics for sale are on display on the first floor, and we’re introduced to several working artists as they work on a second floor. This is where I take over the questioning—*how long does it take to make your pallet? Do you work in oils as well as watercolours?*—and earn a nod of appreciation from an older artist whose landscape watercolour works are stunningly beautiful. In another room I venture to ask the price of a piece I particularly like but $30000 USD is a touch beyond my budget. Maybe next time!

The rain and cold are playing havoc with our schedule, and we discover that a couple of destinations have been pulled off the itinerary because staff are taking a day off after having worked through May Day. We repair to a “Hot Pot” restaurant for lunch. Each of us is given a hot pot sitting on a gas-lit boilerplate, and a plate of raw food, in my case vegetables, to cook. My attempts are humorously abysmal. I manage to make tofu, sliced cabbage and potatoes a little hotter, but the raw egg cooks successfully, so I mix it in with the rest of the food and the rice, added a lot of chili pepper flakes and salt. The non-cook’s successful gambit! At the end of the meal we’re surprised to discover—not all of happily—that we will once again be treated to a musical performance. A lower budget version than that of the previous night, only three women this time, in modestly ornate traditional dress, singing with a fourth working the recorded background music on a computer. Just like last night, one of the women picks Marcus for the second time to work the floor with her. My oh my, what a good sport he is.

The highlight of the day is as prosaic as it is reassuring. After a tour of the May Day stadium, DPRK’s largest, we’re offered the chance to go to a bowling alley and relax until our drive to Pyongsong. Marcus is anticipating that we’ll all happily bowl and be easily visible to our Korean minders, but Mrs. Ri had let slip that there was a café nearby and several of us immediately flee in search of quality java. The café does not disappoint. It has books on shelves—a rarity so far in DPRK—and its menu handwritten on the front of the counter is in Latin characters. The whole panoply of coffee addiction opens to us, Americanos to macchiato, even affogato. I sit with Herjeet, Chris from Brisbane and the huge, slightly odd Derek, who says he’s from England. He’s worked in Germany for thirty years and speaks English as if it’s his second language, with a pronounced German accent. Excellent conversation over even better cookies: the politics of being South Asian in Singapore, future models for the DPRK that could work to give its citizens more freedom to travel or surf the web under authoritarianism, recommendations for travel from Brisbane (Chris) to the Antaractic (Herjeet, who’s been everywhere).

With time to spare we slouch back to the bowling alley and I take on Shani and Nimrod in a game of billiards that is soon being watched by all. I win handily amidst much laughter—the banter I enjoy with Shani and Nimrod’s quiet wit and astute observations has created an easy, lovely bond between us. They are a super couple, warm, open, politically literate, engaged, and mutually supportive in a way that is tough and durable rather than sentimental.

We rumble back to the hotel in Pyongsong. The rain pours down, the power goes out, and the night is young. We’re promised an hour of hot water tonight and 90 minutes tomorrow morning, enough, I’ve now trained myself to think, that perhaps other cultures should take this approach. Instead of heating water needlessly through the whole day, let’s keep it hot for showers at the traditional times and leave the rest to cold water and flexible hygiene. How this would go over in germaphobe North America I have an exact idea.

May 3 Pyongsang

Morning. The sky is clearing and the hot water is working so there’s time to roll over on the wooden bedframe with its exceedingly thin mattress, yet comfortable for all that, and sleep in until 6. Putter about until 6:30, wait an extra five minutes to be safe, and go in the bathroom and give it a try. It works. Luxury!

I’ve begun to notice that there are few birds and many fewer cats and dogs visible thus far in DPRK. I can hear a couple outside my room this morning, I think. No, that’s a peculiar mechanical squeak from the buses going by. We’ve seen a tiny dog or two—Shani and Nimrod are particularly caninophile—but no cats. When we pass the farms we see straggly clumps of sheep and mangy goats sometimes, sometimes a single, lonely cow—no herds. Perhaps farms farther into the interior or off the main roads are more fully livestocked.

A fine evening last night in the bar of this shabby but quite lovely hotel. The restaurant room doubles as the bar, so the transition was effortless, and Tony and Louis, one of our tour people from Derby, talked long and relatively late about film, education, and, inevitably politics and the future of the DPRK. Vastly enjoyable. Adrian’s tour group have finished, it’s just the two longer trip folk now. The people on the longer tours are almost all grizzled travelers. They’re knowledgeable, flexible, and quick with a tip, and they have great stories. I do, too. I fit in easily with this crowd. It still surprises me how distinct my life is in its two parts; Halifax, where I don’t fit in in any way and must work assiduously to understand and avoid offending local sensibilities, and the world of nomads, where my choices and beliefs are accepted and welcomed. Lying in between is the central Canadian world of my friends, where I am at once awkward, vulnerable and welcomed home, like a prodigal.

Evening Nampo

The days are beginning to outstrip my ability to keep up with accounts. So much on offer today, just on the official agenda, not to mention everything glimpsed in the off moments, looking out the bus window, waiting to be picked up, watching the guides. Their body language is unfeigned; Mrs. Ri calls the shots and Mr. Chae and Mr. Kim do the jumping.

There are no squirrels in DPRK. That’s the shattering conclusion after much passage of parks and trees in the bus. If the tree rats can’t survive, it makes you fear for the cockroaches.

The staff of the hotel in Pyongsong gather in a line atop the front steps to bid us adieu. It is sweet, almost like we’re visiting dignitaries, or wealthy customers who might return. Instead we’re a motley crew of nomads passing through. It’s touching, though. They’ve been told to stand on the steps, but the waving and the smiles are authentic. Such is the strength of the individual in a collective state.

Our major stop of the morning is at a primary school, billed as one of the best in Pyongsong, the first stop on what could be described as a showcase day. We spend more than an hour touring the school, watching children learning English (compulsory in DPRK; did anyone in the West realise that?), physics, rehearsing dance numbers. The children are uniformed, serious and adorable, the facilities spare but well maintained, the teachers assiduous. It would be a happy place to learn about learning, I think. We leave the teacher who acts as our guide a grab bag of gifts gathered from the group and move on.

Leaving Pyongsong we drive back into Pyongyang for another delicious lunch and a visit to a local “supermarket”. It turns to be a three story department store, and our first chance to swap for some actual DPRK currency, which we all want to illegally abscond with when we depart the country. Lunchtime traffic—the Koreans get two hours—and it’s mad busy. On the third floor beer is selling for 23 Euro cents a mug and heaping plates of hot food are being served to eager customers dispensing with the pretense of manners. On floor number two women shop for clothing and on the ground floor there is an actual supermarket; a supermarket that barely sells a healthy item. Huge Costco-sized bags of candy and cookies abound. It reminds me of my experience walking into a Hudson’s Bay store in the high Arctic town of Gjoa Haven many years ago, where a solitary waxed cabbage sold for $C13 and teeth rotting candy was in every aisle. Here there’s freeze-dried ramen and other powdered noodle kits, so beloved of Asian students in Canadian universities. The real benefit of the activity, though, is mixing with everyday Pyongyangers.

A visit to the National Film Studios is mildly disappointing. A genial man in a rumpled white shirt and trousers escorts us through various “streets” built for multiple shoots. As such they need to easily represent the urban locations where most DPRK films are set. So there’s “Korean street” (1930s), “Japanese street”, “Chinese Street”; Europe gets a single house built in four contrasting styles on each side of the house. To a cultural studies scholar, much less a film scholar, the whole idea that the essence of a people and their culture can be reduced to a street is inherently problematic, but that’s the fun of it. Derek and Noé dress up as Chinese Emperor and bodyguard to the great amusement of our guides. Somehow, Marcus isn’t asked to sing.

From the film studio we make a beeline for the Mangyongdae Schoolchildren’s Palace. This is a palace both in the socialist sense (a centre of culture) and in the sense of being a luxurious building. I struggle to think of any western alternative. It curves (like the arms of a mother encircling her children, Mrs. Ri tells us), and its walls are made of transparent glass which shows the multiple happy pastels adorning the walls within. The ceilings are high, the halls expansive, the classrooms and rehearsal halls bright and well-equipped. This is a centre for extra-curricular excellence, and students from all over Pyongyang are eligible. Our teenage guide takes us from one showpiece class to another, each filled with students who are at the top of the food chain in DPRK (and in the DPRK such accomplishment can literally mean that). The dancers are superbly precise, each young face set in a rictus smile, each lithe body using the same Texas Children’s Beauty Pageant moves. The music is relentlessly upbeat. The DPRK is on the march! I get the need for indoctrination, and I’m not being facetious about that. But why not let the kids actually show that they’re enjoying what they’re doing so well?

The building and its teachers and equipment are state of the art. The children are all skilled, if not all talented. They are trained seals. Each Thursday they perform before an adoring public, changing their show every three weeks or a month. This introduces a healthy competitive element to the training. If you want to do your art for a living, you should be thinking about making the cut for the performance, first. I think most of these kids won’t become artists, though many will make skilled performers, and the number of singing servers will be continually replenished. But the rictus smiles unnerve me. The rest of the group really likes the show.

For me though, there’s no doubt what the highlight of the day is; Michael Palin has again appeared with Nicholas Bonner. We pass him in the hallway and I “do a Canadian”. I agonise about whether to run up to him and possibly make a nuisance of myself, and the moment passes. But then we’re filing into the auditorium for the performance and he’s right there, leaning against a wall in a casually chic jacket, arms folded, watching, and as I pass I reach out a hand to him instinctively. After just a hint of a hesitation he takes it, and I’m shaking hands with Michael Palin, star of *Monty Python* *and the Holy Grail, A Fish Called Wanda* and a myriad of hugely successful travelogues for television, and just one of those people who seem inherently, publicly, good.

“Mr. Palin. Canada misses you. Please come!”

That’s what I say. Slightly taken aback, he smiles. “I’m going to be there in the fall, actually.” And that’s it. I manage to avoid stepping on his feet or inadvertently head-butting him, so I call that a win.

The relentless march goes on. We abandon Pyongyang, heading to Nampo. The multi-lane highway is empty, and we soon learn why. The road looks flat but isn’t. It's full of apocalyptic bumps, the lane lines have all vanished. It’s not for the faint of heart. Nampo is only about 40 kilometres from Pyongyang, but it takes two hours, the first part on this tortuous highway, and then, ironically, slightly faster progress on a single-lane cobblestone road, then dirt. Darkness closes around us rapidly, and we roll into the collection of neat, isolated chalets that constitute our digs for the night just as the light disappears into blackness.

It’s quite wonderful. On the 300 metres or so walk from the main building to my chalet, I’m surrounded by thick pine forest on both sides. The stars are clear enough in the night sky that you can almost reach up and pluck one out. After a sumptuous dinner the group heads out for a “petrol clam fry”. Even though I’m not going, I need to know just what this constitutes. Nimrod, who attends, and apparently nearly immolates the place, fills me in. You pour petrol—kerosene, actually—over the clams. Right on ‘em. Slavering with hunger yet? Then you burn it off by pouring Russian vodka on the clams. By then they’re also apparently cooked. Sorry I missed that. But I had to talk to you, reader. I stray, I forget, I can’t be accounted, but I always come back to you. Baby.

May 4 Revolutionary Opera

Day seven marks the end of the DPRK tour for several of my busmates. They’re up on the 47th floor of the Yanggakdo Hotel having a last beer before trains and buses tomorrow morning. We finish this leg of the tour with an American-style pizza at a high-priced joint in Pyongyang with the now obligatory live female singer. She sings “Danny Boy,” which to my knowledge is not a Korean folk tune. This place is not only foreigner-marketed but a cut beyond what the average Pyongyanger can afford. I don’t care; I’m eating pizza. More chatting with Shani and Nimrod, who have become great companions on this tour. I hope I see them again.

A very peculiar day. We depart Nampo in the morning and drive to the West Sea Barrage, a huge, 8km long concrete bulwark and network of dams separating the “sweet water” of the Taedong from the Yellow Sea. Very impressive, the sea. Concrete, not so much. But the view from atop the building on the mainland just off the barrage, furnished with obligatory local tour guide, is spectacular.

Then it’s off to our first factory of the day, a glass pane-making enterprise. The factories we see are the prizewinners of the DPRK, so they’re show pieces, replete with their own guides waiting cheerfully for us as we disembark from the bus. Showpiece or not, the scale and methods of such factories are incredibly interesting. We gape at small bored concrete holes through which shoots of red hot fire were escaping, walk along the assembly following a pane of glass as it’s inspected, cut and either crushed or taken off the line and stacked.

We have lunch somewhere, I can’t possibly remember these things now, for me they involve being bombarded with small dishes of cucumbers, please don’t ask. Then it’s off to the Grand People’s Study House. It’s the New York Public Library of Pyongyang, where in the Music Appreciation room they turn on a ghettoblaster so we can musically appreciate “Hey Jude.” Mr. Kim looks up “The Beatles” on Korean Wikipedia. Apparently John Lennon was the Dear Leader of The Beatles. No one told Paul.

We also visit a catfish factory. I’m not making this up. Catfish is apparently the staple fish of the DPRK economy and this is the sole (pun intended) factory producing the greasy buggers, 2500 metric tonnes of them per year in 1kilo units. I remember catfish from my childhood as inedible, the food of desperation. Here it’s used in everything. Slathered in sauce or fried in batter it becomes unrecognisable. Shani is intent on stroking a fish for some reason but the distance to the water in the tanks is too great. She refuses to believe Nimrod and I will hold onto her legs if we help lower her down. Probably she’s right.

At this point the group splits up, four of us headed for the event I’ve been waiting for all week. The Revolutionary Opera! We’re dropped off at the Grand Theatre, already teeming with spectators, and introduced to a young female guide who speaks brilliant English and actually knows something about opera.

The performance itself lives up to my expectations, in both a positive and negative sense. It’s luxuriously staged, with a detailed, realistic set which can be changed in seconds due to several hydraulic lifts operating not just up and down but side to side. Four microphones periodically pop up at the front of the stage, so you know what’s coming: *choral section*! They then slide hypnotically back into the floor. Costumes of the Korean War, beautifully detailed, intricately timed special effects (especially explosives), a pit orchestra that includes both a men’s and women’s choir (separated at the ends of the pit, of course—one wouldn’t want to suggest any congress between musicians). It’s lavish, in the way Catholics used to make their churches lavish, and for some of the same reasons.

The opera is entitled “The Victory of the Revolution is in Sight”. The story involves a young Korean woman serving in the army during the anti-Japanese rebellion (c. 1935). She’s pulled away from her daughter to serve the homeland (teary and sentimental scenes and singing), welcomed by her cheerful and determined comrades in the army unit (rousing patriotic singing), captured by the Japanese (sad singing). She’s tortured, her eyes gouged out, and dragged across the snowy plains, but she won’t divulge the location of Revolutionary HQ. She returns to her village, and is greeted with joy and relief by the villagers (teary and sentimental singing followed by rousing, patriotic singing). They cheer as she stands atop a hill and shouts “I may be blind, but I can see the victory of the Revolution!” It’s a true story if you believe the Koreans, and I’m willing to believe the germ of it is. Western opera narratives rest on similarly shaky foundations (William Tell, anyone?).

I’ve spent much of my career studying different acting styles, and it must be noted that western operatic acting is generally awful. The acting of this Revolutionary Opera lives down to that standard; it’s full of stiff poses, overcooked gesturing and sing-song delivery. Watching the fixed smiles and polished gestures of the children who danced for us at the primary school and the Children’s Palace, it appears that preparation for this style begins early and that the representation of emotion is considered sophisticated, while the authentic production of emotion, would, in this equation, be considered crude. The singing was uniformly excellent. My friend Leslie Barcza would say that’s the central point of any opera and I can’t disagree with him, except to qualify that by saying that if the singing is excellent why can’t the acting be as well?

Augmenting the mild sense of disappointment is the staging. The sets are traditional , making use of a realism we haven’t followed in the west for fifty years. The mise-en-scène is formulaic. The actor-singers tended to cluster at the front of the stage in a line, particularly when the mics zoomed up. The music—which could be altered with little effort for western ears—absolutely met its goal of promoting the revolution and socialist thought. In musical terms it wasn’t half bad, but it would be stretching it to call it truly operatic. In tone, style and rhythm it was closer to Lloyd Webber.

All in all it’s a memorable experience and a lifetime opportunity achieved. I walk out of the theatre amidst happy groups of children and adults with more insights into this remarkable and complex society. And that’s the point of theatre, isn’t it?

May 5 Dongrim

I sleep late and get down to breakfast hoping to catch Shani and Nimrod before they leave and discover that I’m the first person at breakfast. Eventually Tony arrives, then Herjeet and it’s clear that the bulk of the group has left for their flight. But not the lovely Israeli couple who have become my close companions on the tour. They finally appear and I can give them the card I wrote out hastily this morning.

Good byes in the lobby and it’s Yuki, Herjeet, Tony and I on the minibus to the train station with Marcus and Mrs Ri. We’re wrangled through a special entrance to the station, and then a special entrance on to the platform, and when we get to our cabin—six bunks, three a side—it’s just us three with Yuki on a different car. The distance from Pyongyang to Sinuiju is quite short, but it takes well over four hours at a crawl to get there; the four of us spend most of our time in the dining car, where we’re served a palatial meal none of us can finish for 55 RMB each. A couple behind us passes us a freeze dried package of clams because…we’re nice? Just about everyone in the dining car stares at us like zoo animals throughout, though not continuously. Outside the landscape of northern Korea skips by, grasslands and farms, forests and low mountains, labourers pushing on with the planting season. There are small groups of huts clustered together to house the workers from the army and the cities who are obliged to donate their free time each year to agricultural labour in the name of the Fatherland. Wizened goats graze by the side of the tracks. The country seems so empty, though one can always see people in view.

Our stop is Tongrim, the stop prior to Sinuiju. No one is quite sure why but I remember a remark from back at the Koryo office about the hotels in Sinuiju being not up to standard. So the stop creeps up on us and a porter sticks his head in and says “Stop!” and points at us. We mobilise quickly. The train is in the station, and stopping, we have no time at all to gather our things, it’s a mad dash to get enough baggage in the hallway by the exit to show that we’re on our way before the train can start again. On the soft asphalt platform two KITC agents identifiable by their jackets are waiting for us. A thickset man, taller than the average Korean, with a spray of uncontrolled black hair, introduces himself as Mr. Chae, and a lovely, moon-faced young woman, also relatively tall, is Ms. Ri. Once again we have guides named Chae and Ri!

This day is going to be as managed like all the others, with the difference being that there is far less to do. We’re given a full hour to drop our bags at the hotel—which is modern and luxurious, set in the midst of a pine forest—and then taken on a walk to the local waterfall, a cute tiny little thing which might be mistaken for a wellspring in Canada or a particularly attractive leaking watermain. It takes all of about five minutes to get there, and another five to climb to the top of a small covered platform to enjoy the view of the local forest, and that’s it. We walk back and are given a tour of the facilities. A ping-pong hall, a swimming pool, a billiards room, a masseuse on call. Herjeet opts for the massage, as it’s only 4:30 and we have three hours until dinner. Tony and I opt for billiards and play three enjoyable, competitive games. A woman in the room appears to exist for the sole reason of re-racking our balls for each new game.

I’ve learned a lot about Tony on this tour. He’s an open, gregarious fellow, but also keenly discerning and not easily pushed along. He has a lovely family—wife, daughter and son—and is a year into his retirement from management level work at an educational institution close to where he lives outside Melbourne. He and his wife Robyn are intrepid travelers and Tony is an avid sportsman. I noticed his sinewy build the moment I walked into the Orientation meeting at Koryo and thought to myself, *this guy looks tough as nails*. We’re quite alike in a lot of ways and very distinct in others, and we quickly formed a great bond based on mutual respect for the other guy’s point of view. On the tour he’s been a consummate team player, always on the lookout for the benefit of others.

I mention Tony here because on the train this afternoon, looking through two of the self-published family photo albums he’d given Harjeet, I thought to myself, not for the first time, *this guy has a perfect life*. He’d kept his eyes on the most essential prizes—good job, good marriage, good planning for retirement. He seems to have kept his passions simple and easy to access: Aussie Rules Football and the Richmond Tigers in particular—he’s spent the entire tour garbed in their gear—golf, traveling, and his family. His gifts for the various guides we meet are padded beer bottle holders in Richmond colours. There are no pretensions to him.

And in thinking *this guy has the perfect family*, I move myself into the image, because of our shared characteristics and age. The next thought is *I’ve never had that.* Many blessings, a privileged life, but not that. I never take my good fortune for granted. And yet.

Tony’s got his passions, but they’re managed. The priority is living well, doing right by his family, learning more about the world and its people. He’s played by the rules all the way through without, it seems, ever feeling cowed or bowed by them. He’s his own man. His support is as deep as the support he gives, which is as it should be.

I decide to swim, something, apart from the month I spend at the Black Sea that I rarely do. Crawl 25 metres one way, backstroke on the return, a delicious feeling of skills returning. I love using my body. A guy in the locker room watches me closely as I disrobe. Slightly creepy, but it turns out that’s his job, to make sure I use the toothbrush and paste provided and return the towel and the basket to the desk. He grins. Disconcerting.

We meet for dinner with Mr. Chae, who is sweating profusely, and Ms. Ri, the charmer who really likes men and has decided that she likes me because I find her attractive. Mr. Chae is clearly more comfortable dealing with groups of rowdy Chinese businessmen than with these cagey Caucasians. He says he drinks “only a little” but he’s clearly thirsting for a taste. Dinner is outrageous, I’m getting used to too much food. Even though they haven’t planned for a vegetarian in their midst I’m gasping for air by the end of it.

The dinner experience isn't over with the food, of course. The room is chock full of visiting North Koreans and Chinese, and after the obligatory female-waiters-as-girl-band numbers, there’s a karaoke contest between the Korean and the Chinese tables. The singers are so good I’m certain they’re plants. Song after song features raised fists to the Fatherland or bowed heads to the heroes who died for it, and I feel a bit like a fat kid watching a bunch of fitness freaks celebrating their ideology. We wait for a polite six songs before leaving so as not to cause offence, and weave our way through the haze of smoke and the slightly feral atmosphere of Koreans and Chinese competing to pretend they’re not competing.

May 6 Dondang

A slightly surreal day, but which day isn’t? I awake to noises outside my window and look to see a group of Chinese women doing group exercises in the front driveway.

The day is epitomised by our slightly disheveled tour leader Mr. Chae, who combines awkward levels of bonhomie with hints of authoritarianism. Constantly anxious, he covers it with questions straight out of the “don’t do this” tour guides handbook, such as “Enjoying good time?” “How do you like our city?”

We depart the bucolic Tongrim hotel and its gauche Chinese day trippers at 9 precisely, following a series of Mr. Chae questions about our breakfast habits. He’s a little upset that we’re not eating much. Tony has a dodgy stomach. Herjeet usually just has tea and one item, such as porridge. I eat whatever kinds of toast are available. The two trays of sausage sandwiches and the glasses of heated milk go untouched, and Mr. Chae is indignant.

Tongrim is 51 kms from Sinuiju, the putative objective of this leg of the tour. Thus being housed in a hotel, as nice as it was, with nothing to do but pretend to be pensioners on a Blackpool holiday is a bit grating. Instead of taking the train all the way into town as we could have done yesterday, we’re left with a tortuous ride over broken roads which jangles nerves and backs. At one “bridge”—I’ll call it a bridge although half of it was missing, having dropped on the poor unsuspecting river below—we stop the van and walk over to the other side. Mr. Chae negotiates with the citizen work brigade about finding a way across with the van. We cover the 50 clicks in about two hours, all told.

It’s a let-down. We’re all emotionally drained from seven twelve hour days of non-stop illumination about the DPRK. Sinuiju is a county seat of 30,000 people with very little in the way of significant landmarks or culture, apart from being hard up against the Yellow River, with China on the other side. We’re feeling a bit uncertain about the travel arrangements made for getting across the border, Tony and Herjeet to Beijing and me to Dandong. Mr. Chae is evasive when asked about the train tickets, and Ms. Ri can’t elaborate.

We see a cosmetics factory that is closed. A Revolutionary Museum featuring giant portraits of the Dear Leaders meeting people from all walks of life. A Museum of History that opens just for us on a Sunday; a lovely, polite woman who is clearly interested in her work takes us through the first cultural building we’ve seen that acknowledges a Korean existence prior to 1905. There’s a walk through a riverside park, where wedding couples cheer as Tony inserts himself into their photos, wrapping muscly arms around the bride and groom. A few minutes watching youth soccer, a boys team against a (much larger) girls team, after much campaigning by Tony and me. An art gallery, featuring—surprise!—portraits of the Dear Leaders mixing with people from all walks of life or inspiring smiling troops. And, the *pièce de la résistance*, a performance at a kindergarten.

Of many surreal events these past eight days this is perhaps one of the most surreal. These children are frighteningly good. They dance, and sing, on tune and in unison, they do some complicated circus tricks, they play multiple instruments. There are two M.C.s, a little boy and girl, and the girl adopts the same odd, breathy, high-pitched voice our women presenters have all used on this tour, including at the circus and the opera. A decent arts performance high school in Canada would struggle to produce this level of skill. It feels like an hour-long descent into the Twilight Zone (*The man wakes up. Am I Korean? Did I have children?*). The children perform with plastic smiles and polished, plastic gestures. And the Korean half of the audience *knows every word of every song*.

The children would walk off the little stage and expertly pull random people out of the audience, shove a microphone in their faces, and that person would sing without missing a lyric beat. Ethnic homogeneity produces this kind of musical hive mindset, I’ve found. I’ve witnessed it in Serbia, around a campfire in Mokra Gora, and in Malspils, Latvia, where a diverse group of artists each had a national song to offer except me. Canada, in a way, represents the opposite of this shared consensus. At times I’m envious of it. What a sense of community! Mostly, however, I find it surreal, because it seems so distant from my own experience.

More. I mentioned the Korean half of the audience. The other half were visiting Chinese on tours; we were the only western foreigners (Herjeet is Singaporean, but Western in orientation). The Chinese got some simultaneous translation, they clapped along, they took photos and jostled in the aisles. Just as they had with the girl-band-waitress performance the night before. And what I observe is that neither culture seems all that fussed with having time to be quiet and think.

Let’s remember that these children, and their teachers, are performing for foreigners on a Sunday, their only day off.

By the time we exit, shell-shocked by pre-pubescent virtuosity, it’s nearing the time the train for to Dandong. Mr. Chae finally admits he hadn’t been able to get tickets earlier in the day, that we would have to get them at the station. The process still wasn’t clear. Will Tony and Herjeet stay on the train through to Beijing? Do I have a guide waiting for me in Dandong? Where do we pass through customs? It turns out that the process is relatively straightforward, but that the Koreans either don’t know it, or don’t feel any particular need to lay it out for us.

Mr. Chae is running back and forth. The officials he’s chatting up all laugh, but nothing seems to be happening, or, when it happens, it happens twice. Our customs forms, which we’d already filled out, are re-done on a group form by Ms. Ri. The tickets are secured, no seats, but it’s only ten minutes to cross the water and the crowd is surprisingly small. We’re led out on the platform, wait, then we’re told to get on a certain car where we crowd together in the vestibule, looking at the DPRK for the last time. Ms. Ri waves and winks.

The train began its journey across the Friendship Bridge. We still don’t know if anyone will be in Dandong to meet us. We arrive, the crowd sweeps forward as one mob, we clear customs, a young-looking guy in western clothes trots up and the last of our anxieties disappears. Tony and Herjeet are given their tickets to Beijing and shown the entrance to the platform by David, the guide.

And suddenly it was time to say goodbye to two people I’d grown very close to throughout the indelible experience of our tour through the north of the Korean peninsula. A manly handshake with Tony, a hug with Herjeet, and they were receding into the crowds, the three of us far too experienced as travelers to linger over a good-bye. Goodbyes are best said quickly and fervently, without excess sentiment. These are people I would very much like to see on up the road a piece.

The day ends in a fancy hotel, by my plebeian standards, one I could never afford in Canada. The DPRK is inside me now, above all its people, so kind, so warm and welcoming. But the road goes ever on and on, as Tolkien writes. Dinner out with David at a local eatery discussing, in great detail and effusively, Chinese, Korean, and global politics. I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship.