

Smoking the ‘Special Plant’ in North Korea

So there I was, on holiday in North Korea. I had signed up for a tour of Rason, a Special Economic Zone in the northern corner of the country, and we had arrived in the middle of a fresh bout of North Korean sabre-rattling.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was –according to the Western media – poised on the brink of nuclear war with the South, with Japan, the US, et al., and at the same time I was hanging out in a small port town somewhere near the Russian border.

As is generally the case with tours to North Korea, I had visited as a part of a group; however, this was no ordinary group. Some of my contacts in the tourism industry, regular visitors to the DPRK, were putting on a ‘staff outing’ of sorts... and I’d been invited along for the ride.

The details of the tour – as well as my own reflections on visiting the country at a time of seemingly imminent war– are the subject of my Bohemian Blog post about visiting North Korea during the 2013 ‘Korean Crisis’. What follows here are the parts I left out.

Rason Market

One of our Korean guides, a Mr Kim, was supposed to represent North Korea’s own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Having him around certainly seemed to unlock doors for us; doors which usually remained firmly closed to tourists.

[‘Kim’ wasn’t his real name, but I felt it better not to implicate him too closely in this report. Considering almost a third of all North Koreans have the family name ‘Kim’, this seemed a reasonable substitute.]

On the standard North Korea tour package, a group will be allotted two Korean guides. It’s their job to keep you in line – a job which they usually handle with a cheerful yet firm approach:

Don’t go in there.

Don’t photograph this.

I can’t answer that... but wouldn’t you rather hear about our Dear Leader’s birthday celebrations?

Fearful of getting into trouble with their superiors, most North Korean guides err on the side of caution. They’ll impose a blanket rule of no photography from the tour bus, and if there’s ever any doubt the answer will invariably be “no.”

Our Mr Kim was able to speak with confidence, though. When he answered in the negative it was absolute; but there were plenty of other occasions when he’d be able to flash his ID card, or call ahead to authorise our entry into restricted areas.

One of the first places we were to visit was the local bank.

As we arrived, two Korean girls in make-up and high heels were struggling to carry a sports bag, heavy with banknotes, to the back of a waiting taxi. Inside the building, security seemed slim; business was not conducted through bullet-proof glass like the banks back home, but rather over tables in a series of simple offices.

We queued up to change our Chinese yuan into the local currency: North Korean won. I was aware just how unusual this was; the majority of tourists in the DPRK will be spending Chinese or US currency, and are usually restricted from handling the local notes.

With an exchange rate of roughly won 1,450 to £1 (or won 900 to \$1), the notes were numbered into the thousands. Different denominations bore the face of President Kim Il-sung, an image of the president’s birthplace at Mangyongdae-guyok,

the Arch of Triumph in Pyongyang and, on the won 200 banknote, a likeness of the mythical flying horse, Chollima.

Carrying roughly one quarter of a million won between us, we headed down to the market. Up until a few years ago, Rason’s market was off-limits to tourists for a long time; a friend in the company told me the closure followed an incident in which a Chinese tourist was pickpocketed. He had reported the theft to his embassy, and pushed for recompense from the North Korean tourism industry. As a result of the international drama which followed, North Korea decided it would be simpler not to let foreigners enter the market at all.

The market was a sprawling maze of wooden tables, overflowing with everything from fruit to hand tools.

Mr Kim made a few calls, and pretty soon we were heading inside. We were urged to leave our wallets on the bus, instead taking a handful of local banknotes concealed in an inside pocket. Cameras were also strictly forbidden.

The market was a sprawling maze of wooden tables, overflowing with everything from fruit to hand tools. Immediately upon our entrance, a wave seemed to move through the crowd as several hundred pairs of eyes turned to assess the intrusion. If the streets of Pyongyang and other North Korean cities may appear empty, even desolate at times, this place was the exact opposite... and I was struck by the sense of having stumbled across that fabled thing which seems so hopelessly impossible to find: the ‘real’ North Korea.

I yearned in pain for my camera, my shutter finger itching like a phantom limb.

As our group separated, moved through the stalls and began to mingle with the bemused locals, our Korean guides floated about us like owls on speed. In situations like these, there is much scope for speculating the punishment that would await them (and according to some, by association, their families) were they to lose sight of their Western wards. Luckily for them however, we didn’t exactly blend in.

It was interesting to see the range of reactions that our presence elicited from the unsuspecting people of North Korea. Some gasped in shock, covering their mouths and nudging their friends to look at us; children waved, giggled, shouted “hello” and then ran away; vendors called and beckoned us to browse their wares. Everywhere I looked there was a movement of heads turning quickly away –everybody here wanted a good look at the strangers, but most wouldn’t hold our gaze.

One elderly man in a tired military uniform followed us through the market, scowling from a distance. Several times I felt tiny hands patting at my trouser pockets, then turned, to see dirty-faced children peering out from the crowds. On one occasion I was confronted by an actual beggar; it’s still the first and only time I’ve seen a North Korean ask a foreigner for money, and something which the DPRK leadership does its absolute best to stamp out.

I yearned in pain for my camera, my shutter finger itching like a phantom limb.

At one point we bumped into a few of the girls from the massage parlour we’d visited in Rason. They stopped browsing to chat with us, and, for just the briefest of moments, I could almost have believed this wasn’t the strangest place I had ever been.

Things were to get a whole lot stranger



though, as we approached the covered stalls at the heart of the market. While the outer yard had been stocked with fruits, vegetables and all manner of seafood, Rason’s indoor market is a repository for every kind of bric-a-brac you could care to think of... and most of it imported from China. Shoes, toys, make-up, cigarette lighters and DIY tools that look around 40 years old; clothing, military uniforms (which we were forbidden from buying), spices, chocolates, soft drinks, dried noodles, bottled spirits, beer and a whole aisle lined with mounds of dry, hand-picked tobacco.

We were just walking past the tobacco sellers when we spotted another stall ahead, piled with mounds of green, rather than brown, plant matter. It turned out to be exactly what we first suspected: a veritable mountain of dried marijuana plants.

In the name of scientific enquiry, it seemed appropriate to buy some... and the little old ladies running the stall were happy to load us up with plastic bags full of the stuff, charging us roughly £0.50 each.

No one seemed to have a problem with us buying the stuff, and so we decided to put it to the ultimate test: purchasing papers from another stall before rolling up and lighting comically oversized joints right there in the middle of the crowded market. Bizarre as the situation was, it seemed a reasonably safe move... and with several hundred people already staring at us, we weren’t likely to feel any more paranoid than we already were.

At another stall we bought live spider crabs for our dinner, before leaving the market to continue the grand tour of Rason – with just one difference. From this point onwards, every time our group was walking on the street, sat in a park or being shown around some monument or other, there would be at least two fat joints being passed around.

Later that day, we visited a traditional Korean pagoda situated in a nearby village.

“This monument celebrates the fact that our dear leader Kim Jong-il stayed in this very building during one of his visits to Rason,” our Korean guide was telling us.

“Far out,” someone mumbled in reply.

A pleasant dinner

That night we settled down for a meal at a private dining room in the Kum Yong Company Restaurant. It’s one of Rason’s tourist-friendly eateries, by which I mean that the service and surroundings had been so carefully and thoroughly Westernised, as to give little or no impression of how real locals live. I guess the same could be said for five-star restaurants the world over, though.

One member of the group was celebrating a birthday, and the cake was the first thing to reach our table. This was followed by the usual selection of hot and cold platters (kimchi, salad, fried eggs, battered meat and bean sprouts) while the kitchen prepared the crabs we had bought from the market earlier.

All this time we were rolling joint after joint, without tobacco, and the air in the room was thick with sweet, herbal fumes. In fact, coming back from a trip to the facilities I was almost unable to find my chair again – until my eyes grew accustomed to

the haze.

The substance we’d bought was not strong – far from it, in fact. It was just the dried leaves of the plant and a little bud, a far inferior product to what one might find in the West; but the taste – and the effect – was unmistakable. Besides, mild or not, at the rate that we kept rolling them it soon caught up with us.

Once or twice the waitress came by to collect plates, and, coughing, made mock gestures of trying to sweep the clouds away with her hands. She didn’t mind at all, but rather seemed perplexed how something so commonplace could cause such unprecedented excitement.

In the corner of the room, a small television set was doing all it could to keep us abreast of important current affairs. The news presenter –an impassioned middle-aged woman with immaculate hair – was talking about a potential attack from South Korea, about US manoeuvres on the Korean Peninsula. Suddenly I remembered that I was in a country threatening to launch nuclear warheads against its neighbours, and that the whole world was holding its breath to see what the next days would bring.

The news programme came to an end, and was replaced by a film in which a Korean girl roamed the mountains in a fierce storm, looking for her lost goats. The waitress brought more beers, shots of the local rice wine known as Soju, and someone passed me a joint. I had already forgotten about the nuclear war.

Smoking Weed in North Korea

It wasn’t until the next evening – the last night of our tour – that Mr Kim decided to join us for a smoke.

We were sat around drinking beers in a hotel bar, just across the town square from our own lodgings. Here the waitresses were taking it in turns to sing for us, clutching cheap Chinese microphones as they performed note-perfect renditions of one (Party-approved) karaoke classic after another. Many of these songs had once been written to celebrate the anniversary of a military victory... while each of the North Korean leaders is given their own orchestral theme (check out the Song of General Kim Jong-un, for example).

It was a pop song called “Whistle” that really got stuck in my head though, as it seemed to be on constant cycle during our trip – playing in shops, restaurants and offices. That evening I’m sure we heard it at least half a dozen times, and the melody would come back to haunt my dreams for weeks to come.

Sat around a long wooden table, we were drinking beer with our Korean guides – who up until this point had eschewed the weed.

They seemed to be ever-so-slightly uncomfortable with our discovery of their ‘special plant’; it was their job to make sure we saw a positive representation of the DPRK, and I don’t think they had planned on chaperoning a giggling pack of red-eyed imbeciles around their country’s proud military monuments.

I sat next to Mr Kim, who, dressed in his usual dark suit and glasses, looked every part the intelligence officer. He was snacking on strips of dried fish to accompany his beer, and he offered me some. By way of a polite gesture I offered him a joint in return, very much expecting him to refuse it. Instead he smiled, winked, and put his arm round my shoulder as he started puffing away on the fat paper cone.

Things got even more bizarre when the Russians arrived – a group of dock workers from the Vladivostok region, currently on leave in Rason and keen to get some alcohol inside them. One of my last memories

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This piece first appeared as “On Smoking Weed in North Korea” on The Bohemian Blog. Reprinted with permission.

North Korea continued

of the evening is of knocking back large tumblers of Korean vodka with a walking stereotype of a man; he had the arms and chest of a bear, a square head topped with a white crew cut and a well manicured ‘Uncle Joe’ moustache... as well as a superhuman thirst for vodka.

The first time I visited North Korea I saw the famous monuments in Pyongyang, visited the Korean Demilitarized Zone in the south, but remained very much aware of my distance from the world around me; I often felt as though trapped inside a bubble, which prevented any kind of real interaction.

Here in the rural northeast however, far removed from the leader’s watchful gaze, things are very different. Chinese and even Russian contractors explore at their leisure, while Western tour groups are allowed more freedom than anywhere else in the country.

My extra-curricular activities at Rason’s bank, its market and its bars, were a window onto another side of life in the DPRK; and, while they often painted a picture of poverty and dependency, nevertheless it was a refreshingly honest experience compared to the theatrics and misdirection so typical of tours to North Korea.

A final note

The earliest evidence for cannabis cultivation in northern Korea dates from more than 4,000 years ago. The plant has been used throughout history on the peninsula, both for hemp and – by all accounts – recreationally. Cannabis grows abundantly in the wild there, and stories of soldiers smoking it during the Korean War are well documented.

Under the current government, it becomes more difficult to know the full extent of the plant’s cultivation and use in contemporary North Korea. When I first published this article, I made the seemingly logical assumption that cannabis was legal in the

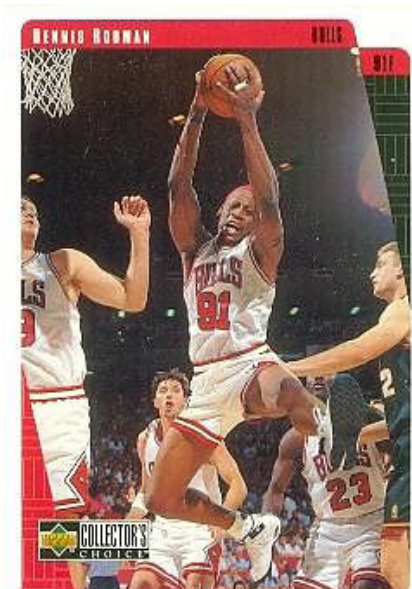
country; usually if tour guides let you do a thing, it implies that it’s not a problem.

I’ve since retracted that statement however –there seems to be doubt in some quarters as to the actual law regarding the plant’s use, and I don’t claim to know anything beyond my own personal experience. Some outside experts claim that the substance is illegal in the country; but it seems likely that such rules, if they exist, are not strongly enforced in all places. My own experience is just one of numerous accounts coming from foreigners who’ve encountered cannabis in the DPRK.

For further reading on the subject, I highly recommend “Cannabis in North Korea” by Seshata on SensiSeeds.com

Dennis Rodman, Kim Jung-Un

Rebounding requires math
you gotta calculate the speed and path
and the angle of the ricochet
minus big men in your way



Dennis Rodman is a genius
It don’t matter how much meanness
Jealous people spew at him
and now he’s found a friend in Kim

Oh, lucky man who finds a friend
a one on whom you can depend
to give you rope or cut you slack
and always honest feedback

Dennis Rodman, Kim Jung-up
They have got it goin’ on!
Each of them is so unique
Both of them make people freak!



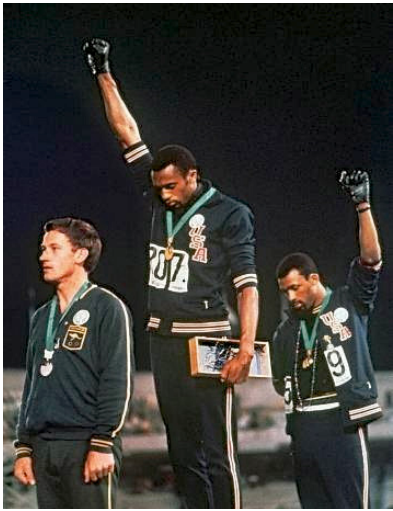
Thus they share a common bond
Plus they have a natural fondness
Kim has got a little girl
He let Dennis show her to the world

Wonder what they talk about
Disneyland or Beirut?
Or the days of slavery?
Or the days of Singman Rhee?



Or Beyonce, Nora Jones
Scotty Pippen, Karl Malone?
When they share their thoughts profound
You know Dennis lets him get a rebound

Diplomacy requires math
you gotta calculate the speed and path
and the angle of the ricochet
times big men jumping in your way.



From ‘Song of Myself’

By Walt Whitman

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes,
the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart,
the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore
and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising
from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much?
Have you reckon’d the earth much?
Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

—From *Leaves of Grass*

