

North Korea



Asia's dark star and one of the most mysterious places on earth, North Korea immediately evokes images of nuclear standoff, hauntingly empty city streets and huge monuments to the cult of Kim Il-sung. More strangeness abounds: the long-dead founder of the nation remains its 'eternal' president and his ailing son, the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, a man who has almost never spoken in public and about whom very little indeed is even known, is considered by the local population to be something of a living god. Welcome to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the world's strangest holiday destination.

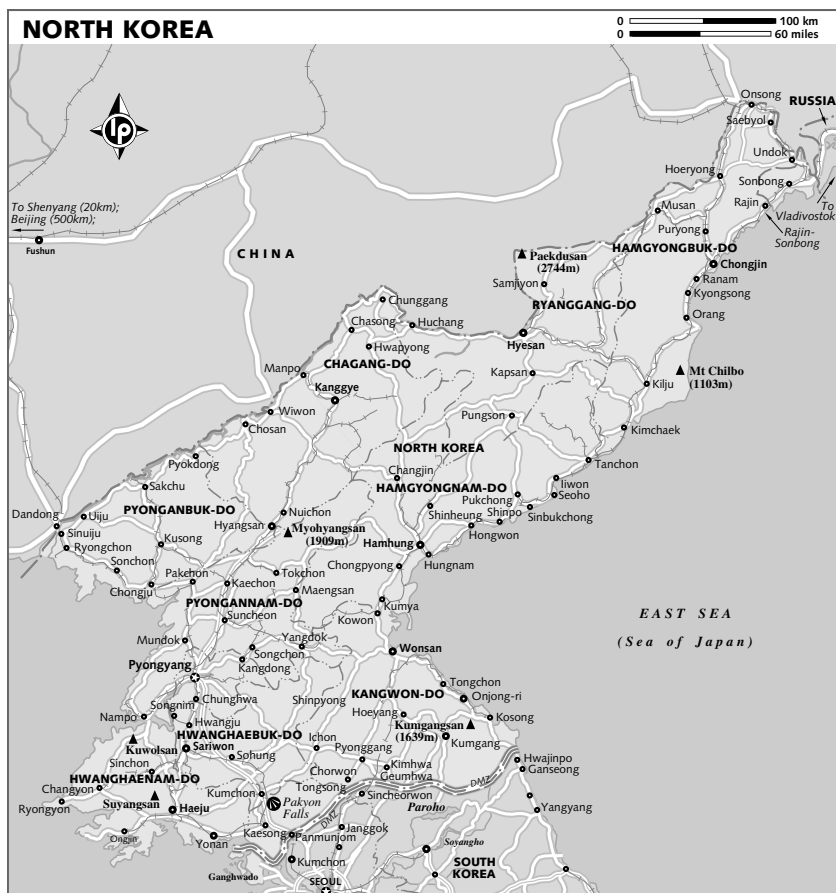
It comes as a surprise to many people that you can even visit North Korea, and yet tourism to the world's most isolated and totalitarian state is booming, relatively speaking. A few years ago South Koreans and Americans were unable to visit, all tourists were vetted by the authorities before visas were issued and locals would barely dare to make eye contact with foreigners. Despite still being a very repressive police state, there's nevertheless been a little liberalisation of the rules governing visits – now South Koreans and Americans can visit with no problem and the more gregarious locals are even happy to chat and practise their English on the street.

A trip here is strictly on the government's terms though, and it's essential to accept that you'll have no independence during your trip – you'll be accompanied by two government-appointed local guides at all times and only hear a one-sided view of history. Those who can't accept this might be better off staying away – those who can will have a fascinating trip into another, unsettling world. Simply to see a country where the Cold War is still being fought and where obedience to the state is universally unquestioned is, for many, reason enough to visit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the architecture, monuments and general totalitarian weirdness of **Pyongyang** (p361)
- Feel the full force of Cold War tensions during a visit to **Panmunjom** (p373) in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), where an uneasy armistice holds
- Visit Pyongyang between August and October to see the incredible **Mass Games** (p359), a gymnastic spectacle featuring thousands of athletes and dancers in perfect formation
- Explore the remote far north and Korea's highest peak and holy mountain **Paekdusan** (p376)
- Enjoy pristine mountain walks and some lovely beaches along the coast in and around **Mt Chilbo** (p378)





Getting Started

You need do nothing special to get a visa save pay through the nose for a guided tour. North Korea is not dangerous and for travellers it's very comfortable. By law though, two guides must accompany you everywhere you go outside your hotel and they will control what you see and the spiel you hear while seeing it. Itineraries are always provisional and some things are usually cancelled at the last moment for no discernable reason, although something else will always be substituted in its place.

No matter where you're from or what you want to see, you'll need to book via a travel agency (see p350). Consider your itinerary and the amount of time you'd like to spend

in North Korea carefully, as itineraries can be hard (if not always impossible) to change once there. Days are long in North Korean tourism – you'll see a surprising amount in just a four-day tour, and possibly be burned out on a full-week of resolutely revolutionary sightseeing.

When to Go

The best time to plan a trip is during the Mass Games (mid-August until mid-October most years) or during a national holiday when you'll see mass dances or even big parades, which make for a uniquely North Korean experience. In general, the most pleasant months for a visit are April, May, June, September and October. July and August are often unpleasantly humid