

North Korea

조선민주주의인민공화국



NAME:	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
CAPITAL:	P'yongyang
LANGUAGE:	Korean
RELIGION:	None & Buddhism- Confucianism
CURRENCY:	Won

Getting Started

When to Visit

Summers in [North Korea](#) consist of the time between about June to September, but this time is also the monsoon or rainy season. Temperatures in Pyongyang average about 75°F (25°C) during this time, while the mountains are cooler and the west receives a fair amount of humidity and rain. Winters hover right below the freezing point with the mountains remaining snowy for much of winter and the coasts typically about 15°F (-10°C) as an average. The fall (autumn) tends to be fairly warm and sunny as the leaves change color, while in the spring the Cherry Blossoms are in full color in about March-May.

A final point to consider before planning your travel is local holidays. Unlike most countries, [North Korea](#) bans tourists from the country during some holidays and during others, promotes tourism. The most common time to visit North Korea is during the Mass Games, which occurs in the months of August to October. Some citizens of particular nations are only allowed in the country during this time and in some cases only during certain weeks of the games.

Weather

Although weather can be generalized based upon years past, for more up to date weather patterns and predicted future weather patterns, visit weather websites like [weather.com](#); many local news sources also have information for international weather forecasts.

Tours & Cruises

There are few options when it comes to traveling to North Korea and, depending on your citizenship, you may have to take a government-run tour in order to be allowed into the country. Due to that and the

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fact that few companies are allowed to operate within North Korea, you have about one option:

Ryohaengsa: This is the official tourism bureau of North Korea, but is a hassle to work with. Not surprisingly, they don't have a website, but can be contacted at +86/(10)6437-6666

Koryo Tours: This is perhaps the most popular tour group operating in North Korea; they are very familiar with North Korean bureaucracy and are in touch with the current situation so can offer up to the minute advice while planning your tour.

Guidebooks

If you're on an organized tour and don't want to pay the extra money for a guide book that may be confiscated by customs, you may not need anything more than this guide! However, if you need more detailed and up to date information, there are a couple guidebooks with a chapter dedicated to North Korea.

Lonely Planet: Great maps and updated often with comprehensive housing information, restaurants, & transportation options. Backpackers and adventurers love these guidebooks. (South Korea book with a chapter dedicated to North Korea)

Rough Guides: Cover various aspects of travel from culture to getting by on the cheap. (South Korea book with a chapter dedicated to North Korea)

Culture

Personality, Culture, & Identity

North Korea is everything that Kim Il-Sung brainwashed North Korea to be and that is, unfortunately, an isolated xenophobic country with so much national and ethnic pride that simply being foreign is an unforgivable sin. Of course, that situation is the very reason the country is so appealing and intriguing to many.

The people of **North Korea** are so isolated that they don't know any better than to believe what their government tells them is true. Many of these people have been the victims of lies from the day they were born and it worked due to Korea's past. For centuries, the people have been occupied by foreign powers and once they finally gained freedom, their government used this hatred of everything foreign to their advantage as they isolated their people, instilled greater pride, then emotionally blackmailed their people into accepting every change the government forced on their people.

The **North Koreans** view themselves as "Korean" just as the **South Koreans** do. As in the south, the Koreans in the north are very proud people who will defend what they believe they are at all costs. After centuries under foreign rule, both sets of Koreans have reacted in a very proud fashion since gaining independence in the early 1950s. Like in the south, this identity is truly all encompassing of the North Korean lifestyle, but focused on ethnicity and politics. However, unlike the south, the North Korean lifestyle and culture that supports their identity is very different from the lifestyle in the south. Most of the North Korean people believe the South Koreans to be "Korean" much like themselves, but also believe the South Korean government as an evil so no one from the south can be trusted, nor entirely included in the north's definition of "Korean."

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History

The ancient [Koreans](#) were divided into a number of groups on the Korean peninsula and on what is today mainland China. Some of these groups were focused on the mountainous interior and north, while others lived on the lowlands. The terrain separated these groups and unity among the people took much to accomplish.

Not until the 400s or 500s did any one of these groups gain enough influence and power to oversee a vast area on the peninsula and even then there were a number of political entities that held power in various parts of the peninsula. During this time much of the [Korean](#) way of life was similar to that of [China](#) at the time and in the 600s Buddhism was introduced from China, making a substantial impact, particularly in the south.

In 936 the kingdom of Goryeo (the root of the word [Korea](#)) came to control much of today's Korean peninsula. This group ruled the region for the next couple centuries as Buddhism was spread and a distinct culture and ethnicity formed.

The [Mongols](#), based in [Beijing](#) invaded the [Korean](#) peninsula in the 1200s and quickly overtook the landmass. With this invasion came Confucism and thoughts competing with Buddhism. After the Mongols and Chinese withdrew from the peninsula there was much debate between philosophies and allegiances. These debates and the battles that arose from them, continued until almost 1400 when a Confucism leader came to power and moved the capital to what is today known as Seoul.

[Korea](#) was then overcome by the [Japanese](#) in the 1500s and the Manchu [Chinese](#) in the 1600s. Despite this foreign rule, this time instilled a Korean pride in the people as they further developed their culture, identity, and even a distinct alphabet.

Once free from foreign rule in the 1800s, the [Koreans](#) counter-reacted to their past and banned foreigners from their country. The [Japanese](#)

and small groups of [French](#) missionaries were asked to leave and the government only continued communication with [China](#). This self-isolationism only lasted briefly though as the [Far East](#) trade routes were becoming increasingly important for [European](#) and [North American](#) powers.

Due to small battles and military threats from the [United States](#) and [Japan](#), [Korea](#) finally opened up to the outside world in the late 1800s. Unfortunately, their fear of foreign rule came to being almost immediately after they opened up as Japan took the peninsula in the 1890s.

After a very brief period of independence starting in 1897, [Japan](#) retook the peninsula and maintained control on the region on and off until the end of World War II (WWII). The Japanese attempted to destroy [Korean](#) culture in a number of ways, but in part by destroying symbolic history such as buildings. This led to strong resistance and a failing economy in Korea. Many people fled to Manchuria (in [China](#)), while others stayed to fight or to try to make a living.

During WWII the [Japanese](#) insisted the [Koreans](#) fight on their side, but few agreed to this and many joined the [Chinese](#) army to liberate themselves from Japanese rule. Due to their geographic location, the Korean peninsula was the victim of Chinese-Japanese battles and by war's end the peninsula was in poor condition. To put a bigger strain on the economy, many of those Koreans who fled under Japanese rule returned to the peninsula.

At the conclusion of WWII, the peninsula was divided between the [United States](#) (in the south) and the Soviet Union (in the north) in the form of administration zones, but with the idea that the two sides would unite. The United Nations (UN) led a peninsula-wide popular election to determine future political governance, but the [north](#) refused to participate. Once results were tallied, the [south](#) declared independence as the "Republic of Korea" and the north countered by claiming independence as the "People's Democratic Republic of Korea;" both side claimed jurisdiction over the entire peninsula.

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This political tension rose in the late 1940s until the Korean War broke out in 1950. After a surprise attack and quick advance into the [south](#), the [north](#) fell back as the UN and US landed troops on the peninsula. To respond, [China](#) and the Soviet Union (although unofficially) entered the war and in 1953 the war ceased in a stalemate with a new border almost exactly where the original border had been.

Before, during, and after the Korean War, [North Korea](#)'s government has been very "stable" as Kim Il-Sung and now his son, Kim Jong-Il have ruled the country during this period. However stability doesn't imply a positive state and the north is filled with restrictions, ridiculous laws, lacks of freedom, and is an example of how to violate nearly every human rights issue.

After great strides of improvement economically and infrastructurally in the 1950s, [North Korea](#) has stalled. This began in 1956 with de-Stalinization, a process of condemning self-rule and cult followings. In order to prevent the loss of his own cult, Kim Il-Sung shut his country off from the country leading this charge, the Soviet Union, then closed his country off from nearly every country other than [China](#).

In addition to [North Korea](#)'s self-imposed isolation, due to their poor human rights record, declining willingness to communicate, and their interest in producing atomic bombs, much of the world has placed trade restrictions or embargoes on North Korea. This has led to an isolated state with a crippling economy and worsening conditions. Every drought is magnified because trade to North Korea is almost non-existent and thousands of people starve as a result of this inability to obtain food.

These economic failures have led to massive barrowing, defaulting on loans, and due to a fear of international invasion, a strong focus on military build-up. Even after Kim Il-Sung died in 1994 and his son took over little has changed.

The situation in relation to [South Korea](#) is still unresolved. The people in the south today debate what is the best direction for their future;

many people maintain unity, while many young people view a joint state would be little more than an economic burden, crippling the future of the nation. In the north, most people believe their leaders when told that they are the best country in the world and everyone else is falling behind; if the north and south do unite in the near future, the [North Koreans](#) will be in for a sad awakening.

Dress & Behavior

There are many odd restrictions in [North Korea](#). The most important thing to note is to avoid anything the government will see as provocative, like [South Korean](#) flags or anti-communist slogans on shirts. In fact the best course of action is to avoid any clothing with any words or pictures as, even though these may not be offensive, the government may decide it is and put you on the next flight out of the country. On this same note, saying anything that could in any way be taken as an insult on the Korean people, government, or, most importantly, leadership will also put you on the next flight out of the country at best and in jail as a foreign spy at worst.

The first dress restriction, if that's the correct word, is that men are expected to keep their hair no longer than a couple inches in length so be sure to get a close haircut before arriving. For women, pants are outlawed as long skirts are the cultural norm so visitors may want to purchase a few of those prior to arrival. In general, most foreigners are only allowed into the country with a government-issued tour guide; check with your tour company before arrival for an updated list of dress restrictions in [North Korea](#).

Behaviorally, the [North Koreans](#) are just as strict and unusual. You must be very respectful and courteous of local customs and traditions as they are very proud of their history, food, language, and culture. This begins and ends with being quiet, respectful, and modest, and standing out in North Korea is never a good idea so try to blend in.

Unlike many [Far East](#) countries, where saving "face" is important, in [North Korea](#) if you insult a person instead of them feeling shamed, you

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are just expelled from the country so be wary of what you say. Also remember that if you're on a tour and make any insulting comments or ask unwelcomed questions your tour guide may be punished or even imprisoned for your lack of understanding so keep your opinions to yourself until you leave the country.

When greeting people, the junior person in the group must bow to show respect, as the senior person in the group may reciprocate respect by offering his or her hand to shake. If you do shake hands, shake with your right hand and grab the other person's right arm with your left hand to show respect.

Dinning etiquette in [North Korea](#) has a number of unique customs as well; to learn about dining etiquette in North Korea, continue reading below.

Food

Dining Etiquette

Dining in [North Korea](#) is unique to much of the world. While dining etiquette at the table itself are similar to that of South Korea, many social protocols are very different. First, and the most obvious difference is that in North Korea you will not be allowed to eat at a local's home and if you could, it is highly unlikely you'll get such an invitation since many locals are fearful of foreigners and are unlikely to take such a risk. More so, most locals won't even be willing to dine with you in public at one of the country's few restaurants.

If, on the off chance you do get to dine with locals, wait to be shown a seat as seating arrangements may be pre-arranged or dictated by social standing. The oldest person present should begin dining, so wait until invited to begin eating or until everyone else is already eating. If you are being served drinks, which may or may not be the case, fill the glass of those around you and let them fill your glass (although women should not fill other women's glasses). If drinks are served with food, it tends to be either tea or water, rarely is it an alcoholic beverage. Throughout the course of the meal, if you decide to take a drink or even speak to those around you, put your chopsticks down.

Even if you aren't eating with locals, but are in public at a restaurant, you should follow some rules so you aren't disrespectful to the restaurant staff. Of course, if a restaurant allows you in the door as a foreigner, you are most likely with a government tour guide and the restaurant is used to foreigners so you can probably get away with some poor manners although this will not be accepted well by neither the wait staff nor your government-issued host. If you're given a small plate, it is essentially a "discard tray," on which you should place bones, shells, etc. The chopsticks are obviously for eating the food and you may want to become accustomed to using these before arrival as touching food with your hands is off limits. If served both rice and a spoon, eat the rice with the spoon. Unlike many [Far East](#) countries,

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don't bring the rice or soup bowl up to your mouth, but leave these on the table itself. When you do finally finish eating, place your chopsticks back on your chopstick rest and eat everything you've taken, even the last grain of rice.

If you're lucky enough to get into [North Korea](#) and get to sample the local foods, you'll surely notice that there is no such thing as fast food or "ethnic" foods as little to no outside culinary influence has entered North Korea since about 1950.

History & Influences

[North Korean](#) food is based on what they people had available years ago. This was essentially just barley and millet, local vegetables, some meats, and beans. Despite these commonalities, the country's climate is fairly complex for the small land area it occupies and each part of the country grows different foods better depending on the mountains, water exposure, and ocean currents. North Korea, being particularly mountainous has difficulties growing a number of items, making their diet hardier than that of the south's.

Hundreds of year ago, due to the [Chinese](#) entering the peninsula, rice was introduced and overtook barley and millet in popularity, except in mountainous towns where rice didn't grow well. Pork and seafood also grew in popularity at that time, as did beef, although beef has never become overly popular.

Later, in the 500s with the introduction of Buddhism to the Korean peninsula, meats almost entirely fell off the menu, but have since returned, although not in significant quantities in the north. What this change did though, especially due to Korea's location as a peninsula, is increase the amount of fish and seafood consumed in the diet.

Shockingly, since the 500s few significant changes have taken place. As was traditional, even today there are few national dishes (although exceptions exist) as regional dishes dominate locals' homes. Meals are commonly served in multiple small meals as opposed to large entrees

and often include at least one soup or stew, which are every popular in [North Korea](#).

Unlike many countries though, [North Korea](#) is extremely isolated and is saddled with a number of trade embargoes, preventing new foods from entering the country. Fast food is unheard of today and due to their lack of arable farm lands, their diet is severely limited, particularly in times of drought. Meats are expensive and are nearly inaccessible except for the government's elite. North Korean cuisine today is fairly authentic to their historic roots as it continues to be very susceptible to climate changes and hence, availability.

Staple Foods

Noodles: are commonly made from wheat, rice, or buckwheat

Rice: a common side or base with many dishes

Regional Varieties & Specialties

Kimchi: fermented vegetables with a variety of seasonings; there are well over 100 versions

Drinks

The [North Koreans](#) only drink what is available in the country and that reaches back to their traditional drinks, including ginseng, ginger, and fruit drinks. Some beers are available as is *soju*, a local alcohol. *Sikhye* may also be found in some locations; this is a sweet rice drink.

Since many countries ban trade with [North Korea](#) so the alcoholic options are severely limited. A traditional Korean alcohol is *soju*, which is a liquor distilled from rice.

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Practical Information

Visas

Every foreign national needs a visa to enter [North Korea](#), however the requirements for citizens of different nationalities varies. In addition, the government tends to alter their visa requirements based on the time of year, their mood, politics, and anything else a person can think of. Additionally, North Korea is known to deny visa applications when an individual applies directly to the government. For these reasons, it is highly recommend that you apply for a visa through a travel agency who is aware of current requirements and may have a working relationship with the North Korean government, therefore substantially increasing your chances of receiving a visa.

Health & Insurance

Every part of the world has different health concerns and diseases, including [North Korea](#). Before traveling, consult with a physician to learn more about your destination and what steps you can take to prevent illness. At the time of writing, North Korea didn't have any health immunizations that are required prior to arrival, although a number of immunizations are strongly recommended.

Many health insurance providers don't cover health care that is provided outside your home country. Before going abroad check with your health insurance to see if they cover international care and be sure to mention that your travel is to North Korea, as many insurance providers will not cover medical expenses there. If you do have to purchase an international medical insurance option, you may prefer to do so from a company that specializes in international medical insurance and offer medical evacuation.

Transportation

Since you most likely have to go on an organized tour to gain access to [North Korea](#), your transportation needs will vary. Most travel agencies begin their tours of North Korea in Beijing, [China](#) and may include travel to and from North Korea from [Beijing](#), so before booking any transportation be sure to find out what is included in your tour package. Additionally, most domestic travel will be included in the tour cost as the government doesn't like foreigners walking the streets without a government official. Before booking any transportation though, even a flight to Beijing, be sure to guarantee you have been granted a visa (which may be issued, but not gathered until you are in Beijing) so don't book anything until you have your arrangements with a travel agent set.

Largest International Airlines: [Air France](#), [American Airlines](#); [British Airways](#); [Cathay Pacific](#); [China Southern Airlines](#); [Delta](#); [Emirates](#); [KLM](#); [LAN](#); [Lufthansa](#); [Qantas](#); [Singapore Airlines](#); [United Airlines](#).

Housing

In North Korea you stay where the government or your tour operator tells you to stay. Your housing will not be high end compared to what can be found in most of the world, but it should be clean and safe; it may also be wired with recording devices.

Opening Hours, Expenses, & Tipping

Opening hours, expenses, tipping... these are things that don't really matter in [North Korea](#) for a tourist since you'll be with a tour guide during your entire stay and all expenses will most likely be included with your tour. However, for those who are curious, the North Koreans are on a similar schedule as the South Koreans. Prices and options, however are radically different from that in the south. There are no western hotels or restaurants in North Korea so prices tend to be lower,

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given the fact that all places are only catered to the locals and the income levels in North Korea are very low.

In regards to tipping, check with your tour company on get their recommendation on how much to tip your local guides and drivers. There is debate whether it's better to tip in items like chocolates, cosmetics, and picture of your family/city or if you should tip in US dollars or Euros. The debate is in regards to your guide's safety and whether or not receiving foreign currency is a liability.

Crime & Safety

Generally speaking, [North Korea](#) for a documented tourist who is entering on the North Korean Government's terms should be safe. The government won't allow entry if they deem an individual a risk and once a visa has been issued and you enter the country, you will be with a government-issued tour guide for the duration of your stay. While this may be inhibiting, it also provides a certain measure of safety.

This, however does not change the fact that [North Korea's](#) government does not get along with many other governments in the world and you may find yourself in the middle of this political argument. While the government has not been known to arrest or cause harm to individuals that have entered legally and kept their mouth shut, they often times will revoke visas due to international arguments, have asked tourists to leave prior to their intended departure, and in some more extreme cases have arrested individuals that have questioned the government's actions. Making statements or questioning the government is the best way to land yourself in jail or expelled from the country and this is most likely the biggest criminal or safety risk you will face as a tourist.

Additionally, the [North Koreans](#) are very disciplined and crimes often come with stiff penalties so petty crime, and even major crimes are rare. Being the victim of these crimes is almost unheard of, however being the aggressor of one of these crimes is quite easy. Having a very different set of laws and procedures than most of the world, many actions could, unknowingly be a crime, such as taking a picture of the

wrong building or subway. For this reason, always ask your guide for permission before taking a picture and be careful what you say at all times.

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