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Rare visit to North Korea opens area couple's eyes to life there

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North Korea is not likely to be found on a list of popular tourist destinations.

But the "hermit kingdom" was the first choice of destination for Homer residents Ray and Christine Cunningham on a recent trip overseas.

Ray, a certified records manager and certified archivist who is manager of records services at the University of Illinois, and Christine, a board member for the Homer Community Improvement Association, visited the country Oct. 7-11. They traveled with Koryo Tours, a company that operates out of Beijing.

Few Americans have entered North Korea since the height of the Korean War 55 years ago, and travel visas from America are difficult to get. Tours through the country are highly restricted – visitors are not allowed to take photos of prohibited subjects, to leave the company of their tour guides or to interact freely with the people. Cell phones and laptop computers are not permitted, and literature must be declared upon entry.

"We spent most of our time in Pyongyang, the capital," Ray Cunningham said. "We went to Kaesong in the south to the demilitarized zone for a day trip, and we went for an overnight in the mountains to the north to Mount Myohyang.

"We were out in the countryside to a degree. We drove during the day on both those trips, and we were able to see more of the country than we thought we would."

He said his primary reason for wanting to go was simply that so few are allowed in, and he has made a life goal of traveling to closed societies to see them for himself. He said Christine was also eager to go when he proposed the trip.

"I really wanted to go to understand," he said. "It's interesting to confront your own biases and views of a society and try to see if they conform to what we know – and in this case, they didn't at all. Any society that there is, is so far more complex and different than its public image.

"If you're in that society, you see the trappings of communism, but I think what you're actually seeing is something very Korean that is more ancient. Their resistance to the outside goes back thousands of years, rather than just last week."

In the capital, the tour group was housed on the 37th floor of a hotel situated on an island in the Taedong River. Thirty other floors were empty – tourism is not a thriving industry here.

While in the capital, the tour group attended a two-day mass gymnastics event with 100,000 performers, all choreographed and synchronized. It's a history of Korea displayed in gymnastics, and Ray Cunningham said he has never seen anything like it in the world.

The posters for the mass games were not printed. They were stenciled and hand-painted on several kinds of paper, including wallpaper. He said there was, as far as he could see, no printed material of any kind, including newspapers, being produced in



Ray Cunningham

A North Korean army officer guides a tour of the joint security area of the demilitarized zone. Both North and South take turns escorting tourists, waiting for each side to clear the area.

the country.

Ray Cunningham said basic economic activities that we take for granted are not taking place in North Korea; the only commercial industry he saw evidence of was synthetic cloth and clothing manufacturing as a byproduct of coal production.

Christine Cunningham said that while the clothing styles are generally dated, everyone always appeared clean and neat, both in the city and the countryside, regardless of means. Women wore traditional dresses in bright colors, or tailored suits that looked straight out of the '40s. Men generally wore work clothes, but even when these were a bit threadbare, they were clean. And there was no trash to be found anywhere.

While modern technology was generally not to be found, a stop at a school computer lab was on the itinerary, and Christine Cunningham said the students were learning programming on very up-to-date Dell computers.

"The kids go to public school for certain hours a day, then the best and the brightest go do a few more hours at the Children's Palace," she said. "And so if they're good musicians, or good dancers, or good mathematicians or whatever, they go there and do their hobby.

"(The guides) were always pointing out the difference between communism and their society, that instead of just the hammer and the sickle, they had the hammer, sickle, and the writing brush, because Kim Il Sung thought intellectuals were just as important as farmers and workers."

While touring the Kim Il Sung Square, the couple was approached by a group of school girls in Pyongyang. Ray Cunningham said, based on prior reports of tour experiences, he had not expected to be allowed so close to the children.

He said the children's teacher did not limit the interaction and actually encouraged the children.

"They were very curious, they wanted their picture taken with us and they wanted to touch us and interact with us," Christine Cunningham said. "We were way over on the side of the square, and a group of girls came and got me, and they dragged me all the way over to the other side of the square where their group was."

The group toured the navy ship USS Pueblo, which is now moored in Pyongyang. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the ship's seizure by North Korea.

The group also toured the War Museum, and the female guide, dressed in military uniform, started out stern and made references to "American imperialists" committing "horrible atrocities," but then changed demeanor halfway through the tour, became flirtatious and giggly and made references to "the handsome American helicopter pilots" who were shot down.

Christine Cunningham quoted her as saying, "I think we shoot down American pilots to get more handsome men."

Said Ray Cunningham: "Pyongyang, being the capital city, is cleaner and more representative of what they would like to project.

"Once you get out of the capital city, you begin to see what others in the country truly live like, and it's much different."

He documented the tour with photographs to the extent that he was allowed – and managed to get some unauthorized photos. Photographic restrictions applied to construction sites, agricultural sites and the public transportation systems. Photography wasn't allowed from the windows of the tour bus, but visitors were allowed to view the countryside they drove through.

Ray Cunningham said the photographic restrictions were not for reasons of military security, but were rather meant to limit documentation of economic development problems.

He said many buildings were dilapidated, and most construction involved rehabilitation of older buildings. Workers used bamboo scaffolding, sticks and ropes for pulleys, and very primitive methods of creating concrete.

Agriculture was likewise entirely nonmechanized, and all farming is accomplished exclusively with hand tools.

"Whenever they gather up the harvest, they're storing it locally in public or private buildings. We were seeing people drying corn on roofs and in public buildings. And storage is short, so they're having a good harvest," he said.

Private vehicles were extremely rare, and water buffalo are used instead of trucks to transport grain. Transportation is generally by foot, and the public transportation system is inadequate, with extremely long lines.

In the steep mountains of the north, the tour group visited a Buddhist shrine at Mount Myohyang, and the couple described it as breathtaking and beautiful.

"It was very well-kept," Ray Cunningham said. "But one has to be suspicious that that isn't made for tourists, and indeed I've read subsequently that they had planned on bringing South Korean tourists to try to get more people to it, so they had put money into it."

Conversations with the North Koreans – while limited – were friendly and candid, the couple said. Only certain topics were off-limits: the leadership, the penal system and interaction with South Korea.

Christine Cunningham said that through these dialogues, North Korean familial traditions – arranged marriage, communal field work, care for the elderly at home – painted a picture of a culture where family is the main unit, neighbors can feel secure in one another, and the national leader is regarded as the father to all the people.

Ray Cunningham said the couple thoroughly enjoyed their visit.

Travel log

Ray Cunningham has been a busy traveler – and he's hit countries many others have not.

"In the 1970s and '80s, I traveled alone to the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, living off the black markets by bringing in blue jeans and tennis shoes, and exploring locations where people were generally not permitted," he said. "Photography in those days was difficult, and film was often confiscated."

Here is a rundown of his years of travel to closed societies:

- Soviet Union: 1982, 1985, 1989, 1991
- East Germany: 1982, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1991
- Czechoslovakia: 1979, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1991
- Hungary: 1985, 1989, 1990
- Yugoslavia: 1969, 1979, 1982, 1989, 1991
- Poland: 1989, 1991
- Romania: 1979, 1982
- Bulgaria: 1979, 1982
- Mongolia: 1985
- China: 1985

A look at Christine Cunningham's travels:

- Czechoslovakia: 1990
- East Germany: 1990
- Hungary: 1990

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