

METRO in focus

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NORTH Korea is a land of secrets and lies. It is a country where Google cannot map a single road, where the people must believe former premiere Kim Jong-il was the reincarnation of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung and a famine state where Communism cannot be charmed by the trappings of modernisation.

It's hardly Thailand but since 1993, Nick Bonner has been ferrying Westerners into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and his 300 or so trips have allowed him to watch the state 'evolve'. Since Kim Jong-il died aged 69

There's nothing to see here – or so they say

Six months after the enigmatic Kim Jong-un took power in North Korea, **JENNI MARSH** talks to the Briton who has been selling holidays there for the past decade to discover what the nuclear-armed state has to offer

last December, Mr Bonner had a ringside seat as Kim Jong-un – whose age is unknown – took over. 'One of the most remarkable things

about North Korea is how little things change,' said Mr Bonner, a former landscape artist from Cheshire. 'You can focus on surface issues,

such as the small increase in mobile phones, or what Chinese brands are making it across the border but that doesn't trickle down very far.'

He notes that while the 100th birthday of the country's grandfather,

Kim Il Song, was celebrated with great fanfare in April, the inauguration of the new leader passed without ceremony, as 'he's not meant to be publicly available'. Mr Bonner's love affair

with the People's Republic began by accident. In 1993, while visiting a friend in Beijing, he joined the British Embassy football league and befriended a North Korean man running a tour company to his home nation. Despite the borders to foreigners being opened to non-aligned tourists

in 1987, the coaches were empty. 'This was during the Arduous March, during which millions starved to death and there was total economic stagnation, so it was difficult,' Mr Bonner said. 'At first, I wasn't convinced about tourism, I was just fascinated by the buildings. Then I got to know the people and realised the black-and-white view of the world portrays just isn't the whole picture. We wanted to give people the chance to see that.'

Today, Mr Bonner's company, Koryo Tours, is an established brand. For about £1,200, visitors can enjoy a six-night jaunt to the DPRK, including a stay in the capital

Pyongyang's Yanggakdo Hotel, trips to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation Museum and even North Korean beaches.

Koryo's big break came by helping **L**onely Planet secure a tourist visa. Philosophy graduate Simon Cockerell joined the operation and Mr Bonner made a series of award-winning documentaries, beginning where he started: on the football pitch.

The Game Of Their Lives remembered the North Korean football team that qualified for the 1966 World Cup through a series of flukes, then upset the odds by beating Italy 1-0 in the first round in Middlesbrough. Hailing from a country where live football broadcasts are often banned for fear of national humiliation, winning a place in the quarter-finals

should have made them national treasures but after that victory 'they disappeared off the face of the earth'.

Wanting to highlight the fruits of cross-culture exchanges, Mr Bonner traced the seven surviving players and flew them back to Britain. 'On the flight from Shanghai, I remember thinking, "It's going really well". Then I saw a thin ribbon of smoke floating down the aisle. A player had lit up a cigarette. It was like herding cats.'

One night there was a knock at their hotel door. 'A family of South Koreans heard about us. One said, "We may be from South Korea but we're all Koreans".'

'Since the Korean War, people from the North and South aren't allowed to meet, so it was one of those Hollywood scenes, happening in the abyss of Yorkshire.'

It is moments like these – when humanity transcends politics – that get Mr Bonner excited.

'People tend to think all North Koreans are the same – that they are anti-

American robots who cry when they are told to.

To those who say Pyongyang is a show city, consider this: It has 1 million residents. If visitors are arrogant enough to think they are all faking their daily lives, it's not true. There aren't enough visitors to warrant it.'

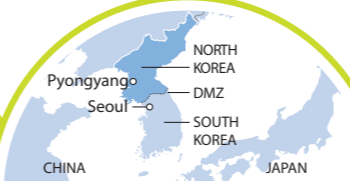
Despite his obvious affection, Mr Bonner, who lives in Beijing, does not see progress under Kim Jong-un. When he began running tours to North Korea, it wasn't too different from China. A decade on, it is unbelievable that just a 90-minute flight separates these two worlds.

'Traditionally, North Korea has always been an isolated slip between two worlds colliding – China and Japan,' he said. 'As China evolves, North Korea strengthens its isolation.'

'We were there for the 50th celebrations of the end of the Korean War, which marks their independence. The appetite for it had died.'

'There is a sense now that this has gone on for far too long. The best we can do is shine a light on that.'

North Korea's top tourist attractions



The demilitarised zone (DMZ), above, is a dramatic 260km strip of land that has become a thriving spot for wildlife and several endangered species, including the Korean tiger and the Amur leopard can be found along the heavily fortified fences

Pyongyang: Completely rebuilt in recent years, its attractions include the 20m high bronze statue of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-il, the world's deepest underground system at 110m and the Juche Tower

Mount Baekdu
In the north-eastern tip of the North Korea, Mount Baekdu offers stunning views from its 2,744m summit. This extinct volcano has a huge crater with a lake at the centre and has inspired much Korean literature



Mass games
100,000 gymnasts put on beautiful baton-twirling displays. The largest choreographed performance in the world, they take place at least once a year



The International Friendship Exhibition
This series of halls contains gifts given to North Korea's leaders by Chairman Mao, Joseph Stalin and Yasser Arafat. There are 150 rooms and 220,000 gifts and, according to legend, it was built by Kim Jong-il in three days



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