Red Star Utopia
INSIDE NORTH KOREA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUSTIN ANDREWS
FOREWORD BY SIMON COCKERELL
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FOREWORD

Simon Cockerell

EVER SINCE THE FIRST of my many professional and personal visits to North Korea, I’m sure I have not passed a single day without observing photos of the country—photos online, photos taken by me, photos on Instagram, in the media, in books and magazines, websites and on blogs. In the work of Austin Andrews though, I find something new, something unique, and something incredibly exciting.

In his photographs we are shown real life contrasts. We see North Korea’s rural population living unenviable existences in very difficult situations contrasted with the lives of some people of Pyongyang enjoying activities and opportunities afforded to the capital’s residents. The photos prove that while North Koreans are often thought of as a lumpen ‘they’, the reality is that there is a range of life experiences lived across the land. Many of these experiences are sad, dark, and not one you would wish to share, while others are optimistic, passionate, and aspirational.

I have facilitated a great number of visits to North Korea and it is part of my company’s work to plan varied itineraries for foreign visitors. However, Austin made an unusual request for a trip by train from Pyongyang to the Rason free trade zone in the far north of the country. As far as I know, the only other foreigners to have made this journey were my wife and myself, and some workers from the Russian Embassy. The Rason train is slow-going, and offers unique views of amazing mountains and stunning vistas along the Sea of Japan, along with rare scenes of village life along the way. Austin’s photos from the journey on the Pyongyang to Rason train are ‘firsts’ in many ways.

**Variety despite limitations**

Overall, Austin has expressed a remarkable variety within North Korea—his pictures taking you into the cities, out through the country, to some expected sites but many unexpected ones too. His photos show massive political monuments, simple rustic villages, people having fun, people looking troubled, people getting on with life, people taking a moment.

When familiarizing visitors to North Korea, topics we discuss include limits placed upon those wishing to take photos when in the country: ask your guides, don’t take pictures of the military, don’t take pictures of any representation of the country’s Leaders that people will take to be insulting or mocking, and ask local people before bothering them with your camera. These are a combination of customs, rules, and, in the last case, simply politeness.

It is true that some of the photos in this book might raise a brief frown from some North Koreans, but even in the DPRK, beauty, art, and a sense of aesthetics are appreciated. I believe that the people I know would and will appreciate this collection for a very finely chosen, well presented, and simply stunning representation of their country; in a certain time, in a certain space. Moments are caught
often denied in reports speaking for them. They deserve to have more chances for interaction and to have agency in how they are portrayed outside of their own borders, as well as within them.

In all, I have visited North Korea on 170 occasions at the time of writing and I have had the honour of meeting a great many North Koreans over the course of these visits; drinking with some, arguing with some (yes, there is overlap in this ‘some’), building intense trust with some, being betrayed and let down by some too. I have made true friends in a place where the limits on contact and interaction usually preclude such a thing. I say ‘friends’ not in a glib way, I have known many people who describe almost everyone they know as a friend, but I am talking about your real mates, around whom you don’t have to watch your mouth, who take you as you are. Friendship is possible in North Korea, but it is very hard. Many people who go there can become frustrated by the slow pace of getting to know people well, or by not being able to keep in touch easily with them upon leaving the country.

Whether you have been there or not, intend to go there or not, or simply are not sure, this book will provide you with some amazing insight from a truly talented and remarkable artist. For more than six thousand days now I have seen North Korea photos daily, but Austin Andrews’ photos speak to me about the country that I know myself. So immerse yourself in this work and I hope you get as much enjoyment from them as I have.

— Simon Cockerell
INTRODUCTION
Austin Andrews

There aren’t many blank spots left on the map. Even North Korea, for all the bluster about being the most secretive nation on earth, isn’t a true mystery anymore. Not on a sociopolitical level anyway. Would-be explorers are better challenged to look to the ocean floor, or to the frontiers of climate research and gene mapping. But given its vise-grip on the popular imagination, there are few places swathed in as much misinformation as North Korea. Legends and historical anomalies here are routinely accepted as truths by the West, in part because North Korea seems from the outside like a place where the most implausible tales could be plausible. Unlikely stories swell and feed further stories.

North Korea has a reputation for being a difficult country to photograph. That reputation paints the state as your totalitarian tour guide, shunting you like livestock from sight to sight on a concrete-set itinerary designed to sell you the party line and keep you out of trouble, in that order. You’ll leave the country, its reputation maintains, with the same thirty photos snapped by everyone who visited before you. One popular story sets the expectation for interactions with a cast of thousands of actors playing well-fed citizens, placed on streets and subways for your benefit. Before my first trip, I was told by a stranger at the airport that she would pray for me. Then I stopped telling people where I was going.

The reality is far more complex, as realities tend to be. Yes, your movements are heavily restricted. Your guides are fastened to you from the moment you enter the hotel lobby in the morning to the moment you return to your room at night, bleary-eyed and spent. And having you return to your room each night with the right impression means everything to them. But far from being the same merry-go-round ride each time, there are spontaneous and surprising sights everywhere. Things won’t always go according to plan. And when they don’t, the result can give more insight into North Korea society than any number of lectures on historical troop movements or civic policy ever could. Interactions with locals are as genuine as the barrier between cultures allow. Even Pyongyang, the showcase capital where an estimated ten to fifteen percent of the population lives, offers a spilled jewel box of tiny delights seen out of windows and in the margins. And once you leave Pyongyang, all bets are off.

So the real question becomes; Will your guides trust you enough to document the surprises you see?

A world out of time
This project, long before it became this book, began as a chance to see the entire length of the country by rail on a local train — without guides or a minder. This journey hadn’t been offered to foreigners before, and I was to be its guinea pig. For thirty-six hours, the country sprawled before me in a slow motion panorama, through mountain passes and fishing villages, military camps and decaying cities of industry. Scenes passed before my window that would reinforce what the most uninformed cynic might believe about the harshness of life in North Korea. To raise my camera here would have invited real
trouble, while certain other photographs I did take were deleted at military photo checks. But I also saw inspiring portraits of community and resilience in the form of centuries-old rituals and in visions of the future that wouldn’t be out of place in surging South Korea. With the low December sun and long nights made longer by the country’s chronic power shortages, the landscapes took on a painterly quality heightened by the surreality of people who populate them. The train wasn’t just a time machine. It was a portal to a dreamy, unmoored world cast out of time.

Much has been made of North Korea’s strict policy against photographing military, construction, and poverty. But the lens often sees these sights as cheap spectacle anyway, of value mostly for their unfamiliarity or their ability to provoke easy emotions. Instead, I made a game of seeking out the rhythms and routines of daily life. The more evocative the vignette, the better the photograph. The surprise was finding more in these routines that felt familiar to me from elsewhere than not. Parallels to my life in Vancouver were everywhere despite North Korea’s decades-long isolation. Even a culture grown in a near-vacuum follows basic principles of human behaviour.

This game, of course, can be difficult to master when you’re always on the move. So I had to adopt a new strategy. Recognizing and appreciating my guides’ patience became everything, as did a showing a healthy (and deferential) interest in the country’s history and culture — enough, anyway, to justify why I would sometimes spend five minutes with my camera pointed off my hip waiting for a scene to play out. I’d find my frame, strike up a conversation, and listen to my guides until the scene I’d kept half an eye out for had taken shape in that frame. Never have I resented the shutter snap of my Nikon as much or as often as I did in North Korea.

Changing attitudes

About half the photos in the book have been cropped from their original dimensions, and about half of those are because of the limited complement of lenses I brought into the country. On my first trip, my bulbous 14-24mm wide lens was passed between wary inspectors at customs, and, putting stock in reports online that telephoto lenses were prohibited, I didn’t bring any lenses that could get me closer than a midrange zoom. I only learned when fact-checking this paragraph that this law hasn’t been enforced in years. But erring on the side of caution is always a good idea in North Korea, even if it cost me a handful of photographs that would have been in this book. In the case of others, I just zoomed later in the photo editing software. Not a great way to get telephoto shots, but sometimes necessity trumps aesthetics.

Operating without a laptop in a country with no internet brings interesting challenges too. Backups had to be done in-camera, copying favourites from one card slot to another and stashing the duplicates for safekeeping. Google searches were replaced with fingers crossed for serendipity in itineraries built to maximize distance covered by ground (thus maximizing the possibilities for getting lost or ending up off the best-trod tracks).

Returning to North Korea six months later, two weeks before the feted summit between US President Donald Trump and Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong Un, I hardly recognized the country. A lot of this had to do with the shift in seasons. But there were
changes in circumstance, too. The country had shifted its time zone in the interim, once again sharing a clock with South Korea in a gesture of goodwill. And the panoply of very visible and very confronting anti-American propaganda I had seen on streets and bus stations in December—large murals of the US Capitol building in flames and tattered US flags—was gone. The narrative had changed. The imperialist American aggressors were no longer adversaries-to-be in nuclear war. Now, for the first time in the nation’s short history, there was the potential they could become allies.

Presenting a balanced cross-section of all strata of life in North Korea isn’t possible. Perhaps I’ll make another attempt under different conditions years or decades in the future, but for now it’s better to look at this collection as a curated peek behind the curtain. Imagination will be required to fill in certain blanks, and other photos are made more interesting by what’s not in them. But just as a small dose of skepticism helps to penetrate certain wonky facades, it’s a hazard to carry too much cynicism into the pages that follow. If no longer a true mystery, North Korea is nevertheless a nation of idiosyncrasies at odds with the face it puts up to the world. Utopia, as we’ll see, can mean many things.

— Austin Andrews
Continental Drift: Korean men fish from ice floes in the Taedong River. Although it shares lines of latitude with California and Spain, winters in North Korea are bitterly cold, with bracing Siberian winds chilling the country from October through March.
Carbon Copied: Soldiers of the Korean People’s Army march across Kim Il Sung Square in central Pyongyang. North Korean men are mandated to serve up to ten years of national service, and the country’s army is among the largest in the world.
The Arduous March: A man braves new ice in a mountain pass in remote South Hamgyong province. Nearly eighty per cent of North Korea’s land area is composed of mountains and uplands, leading early European visitors to liken its topography to “a sea in a heavy gale.”
Cloud Piercers: Storm whorls churn through tower blocks in central Pyongyang. North Korea's economic isolation extends to its architecture, and the Stalinist style favoured after the Korean War has given way to homegrown trends that, with imagination, could resemble designs from some alternate future.
Pantopticon: The smiling portraits of Eternal President Kim Il Sung and Eternal General Secretary Kim Jong Il keep watch over Kim Il Sung Square the morning after a heavy snowfall. Rare among nations whose leaders have cultivated a cult of personality, in recent years North Korea’s departed leaders are generally depicted with warm, benevolent expressions and poses.
Symbols of the Revolution: The Juche Tower disappears into cloud high over East Pyongyang. Named for North Korea's ideological policy of economic self-reliance, the tower is reminiscent in design and significance to the Washington Monument, which it surpasses in height by just one metre. The obelisk is the world's tallest stone structure.
Totalitropolis: A spectrum of post-Soviet architectural styles contour Pyongyang’s skyline, from the Grand People’s Study House (left), designed in a traditional Korean style and completed in 1982 to mark President Kim Il Sung’s 70th birthday, to the forward-looking 18-tower apartment complex of Changjon Street (right), completed exactly thirty years later to mark his 100th birthday.
Venerated Bronze: A group of students make way for a wedding party arriving to pay their respects to North Korea’s departed leaders. Overhauled after the 2011 death of Kim Jong Il, Pyongyang’s Mansudae Grand Monument is among the most sacred sites in North Korea.
Country Life, City Shadow: The rocket ship silhouette of the 105-storey Ryugyong Hotel looms over frozen fields north of Pyongyang. When construction began on the 330-metre tower in 1987, the building was to be the tallest building in the world outside the United States. More than thirty years later, it is still unfinished and unoccupied.
Blue Sky Camouflage: A street scene at the base of the Ryugyong Hotel. An empty concrete shell for decades, construction resumed in 2008 with help from the Egyptian telecommunications company Orascom. A 2012 opening was set to coincide with Eternal President Kim Il Sung’s 100th birthday, but work was halted again before the structure could be completed.
Author of the acclaimed photography book *Shadow Hymns*, Canadian photographer and filmmaker Austin Andrews has also profiled stories on six continents for *TIME, Foreign Policy* and *Maclean’s*, and in the online edition of *National Geographic*. As a film director and editor, Austin's films have screened at international festivals including Sundance, Tribeca, and Hot Docs.

Foreword writer Simon Cockerell has made almost two hundred trips to the DPRK. His Beijing-based company, Koryo Tours, promotes interaction between North Koreans and people from the outside world as a way of counteracting official narratives inside North Korea of what foreigners are like, as well as how the twenty-five million people of North Korea are perceived in the rest of the world.
In Red Star Utopia: Inside North Korea, Austin Andrews uncovers visual clues about the country’s hardline isolationist experiment and how it affects the rhythms and routines of its people.