5 REASONS THAT FLYING AIR KORYO, THE WORLD'S WORST AIRLINE, ISN'T ALL THAT BAD

News / Airlines

Change is in the air in North Korea. After years of being ranked by Skytrax as the world's worst airline, national carrier Air Koryo is undergoing a revolution, according to interviews with passengers and travel agents.

New planes, new in-flight entertainment options, smart new uniforms for the cabin attendants, even business class. It's all part of supreme leader Kim Jong Un's effort to boost tourist numbers 20-fold to 2 million by 2020 and supplement the nation's meager foreign exchange.

Here are five reasons to book your ticket now, before the thrill of flying the world's only one-star airline vanishes forever. (And as long as you don't mind helping fund Kim's nuclear-weapons program.)

The Hermit Kingdom

Besides the joy of experiencing Air Koryo, the main draw for most travelers is to have a peek inside the world's most isolated country. As Singaporean Mindy Tan put it after visiting last year: "I'm sick of all the same footage of marching, pictures of Kim. I just had to witness it for myself."

Don't worry about the odd nuclear test or missile launch, here you can run a marathon down Pyongyang's totalitarian streets or watch 100,000 kids doing synchronized dancing. The country is

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trying to open up attractions like the Masikryong Ski Resort and the Lake Taesong golf club. And where else can you still get stopped from taking a selfie in the wrong place?

The in-flight entertainment

The communal screens that drop down from the ceiling will keep you entertained with propaganda broadcasts and concerts by supreme leader Kim Jong Un's favorite all-female band, Moranbong, who sing patriotic songs about, well, Kim Jong Un. Bring noise-cancelling earphones. There's no volume control.

The planes

You don't often get tour agents who will arrange a trip to a country just to fly in its planes, but in North Korea this is possible. London-based Juche Travel Services offers an aviation-themed tour. Air Koryo recently acquired two Russian-built Tupolev Tu-204s for international routes, with an economy ticket costing about 900 yuan ($137) for the two-hour journey from Beijing. Once in Pyongyang, you can hop into Soviet-era aircraft such as a Mil Mi-17 transport helicopter for a buzz over the capital, or a view of the mountains.

"It's a very different experience, traveling back 20, 30 years," says Sam Chui, an aviation enthusiast who's flown Air Koryo about 20 times.

Airport queues

While you may suffer the inconvenience of long queues and immigration hassles at your point of departure on your way to North Korea, once you arrive in the Democratic People's Republic, it should be a breeze.

No longer do you have to shuffle through the strange temporary shed that has been masquerading as an airport terminal for the past five years, now the capital has a sleek, brand-new building. And with fewer than half a dozen international flights a day, and little chance of delays due to strikes, the airport bus may deliver you on time to an almost deserted building.

The burger

While the food, especially in the new business-class lounge, has improved, the most-photographed component of an Air Koryo trip remains the famous "mystery-meat" burger.

"The burger has been going on for so many years, everyone's making fun of it," says Chui, who has eaten at least 10 of them. To put to rest the long-running dispute over the source of the protein, we contacted Air Koryo's office in Beijing for clarification. The airline's representatives didn't respond.

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