SECURITY HEIGHTEDED EVEN AS NORTH KOREA TRIES TO WOO TOURISTS

News / Airlines



So you're thinking of taking an exotic vacation, having a little adventure and coming back with lots of stories for your envious friends and colleagues. Believe it or not, North Korea might just be the place for you.

But watch what you bring. And what you do. And what you say.

While North Korea is making a strong push to increase the number of tourists who visit the country each year -- currently a few thousand come from Western countries and more from neighboring China -- it is stepping up its enforcement of a broad set of strict but sometimes ambiguously implemented regulations about what foreign visitors can bring with them or what they can do while in the country.

North Korea's push for tourists began in 2013 and visitors can now enjoy a surprisingly broad array of options, from helicopter rides over the capital to surfing on the country's scenic eastern coast. With winter now setting in, the North is hoping its newly opened luxury ski resort near the city of Wonsan, which was largely empty of tourists last season while Pyongyang closed its borders over

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Ebola fears, will be a big draw.

Even so, the pro-tourism policy, like many other business opportunities that involve dealing with and possibly making concessions to the outside world, poses an obvious conundrum for Pyongyang - the potential of economic gains that require change, versus concerns about how that might undermine regime security.

"Despite the policy of getting more tourists, they still see security, or at least perceptions of security, as a bigger concern, and tourism is pretty far down the list of priorities," said Simon Cockerell of Beijing-based Koryo Tours, which has specialized in North Korea travel since 1993. "It's clear that the restrictions, rules and so on often act against increasing tourist numbers."

For those visitors who do break the rules, the risks of detention, arrest and possibly even jail sentences are real enough, especially if the offender is from the United States. The U.S. State Department recently updated and expanded its already blunt warning against North Korean travel. In a nutshell, its advice is simple: Just don't do it.

"While tourism and the flexibility of travel in the DPRK has expanded, there has been a measurable increase in security at the borders," said Andrea Lee, CEO of New Jersey-based Uri Tours, which has been organizing tours to the North -- officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea -- for 15 years.

Detentions and arrests, while certain to grab international headlines, are actually quite rare.

Most involve extenuating circumstances, such as illegal border crossings or religious or political activities that lead to fairly predictable problems. The vast majority of tourists also visit on carefully orchestrated tours arranged by major agencies that specialize in travel to the North and are well versed in the latest set of dos and don'ts, which they pass on to their clients before anyone boards the flight to Pyongyang.

"I have never heard of anyone getting in trouble by accident or by doing something that they genuinely thought would not cause them any trouble," Cockerell said. "There are rules and laws, of course, that differ from those most visitors are used to, but they are not secret and responsible companies advise their clients in advance what can and can't be done."

Just how does one toe the line in one of the world's most authoritarian countries?

For many, the first test comes while they are still in the air.

On North Korea's flagship airline, Air Koryo, cabin attendants sternly scold passengers shooting souvenir photos and delete anything they decide is inappropriate. English-language newspapers are available on most flights, but crumpling them will bring a lecture and possibly require a written apology. Newspapers inevitably feature photos of Kim Jong Un and defacing the leader's image is a serious crime.

Customs can also be a shock.

Scrutiny of books is increasing to the point some agencies advise against bringing any at all. At Pyongyang's new airport, officials recently started to not only turn on laptops but to also at times search whatever is on them extensively.

They can and often do, as the most recent State Department warning noted, "inspect USB drives, CDs, DVDs, mobile phones, tablets, laptops, or any other electronic and multimedia devices

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brought into the country. Internet browsing histories and cookies on travelers' computers and other electronic devices are subject to search for banned content, including pornography or material critical of the DPRK government."

Anything pro-South Korea, of course, is a no-no. And heaven forbid taking a Bible.

Once inside the country, visitors can expect to have virtually no freedom to roam about unescorted.

But they can still land in hot water if they start up conversations with random people on the street, do anything that smacks of politicking or proselytizing, attempt to exchange currency with an unauthorized vendor, take unauthorized photographs, shop at stores not designated for foreigners or in any way show disrespect to the "Great Persons of Mount Paektu" - national founder Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il and the current dictator, Kim Jong Un.

And, as the State Department warns, if you take a mobile phone and feel like calling home, "please keep in mind that you have no right to privacy in North Korea and should assume your communications are monitored."

"The DPRK is a much different place to visit now than it was a decade ago. Now, travelers can visit 8 of the 9 provinces and there are a wide range of activities available to tourists," said Lee, of Uri Tours. "In our experience, the DPRK is a safe and rewarding place to visit. However, travelers are expected to follow the rules and to be escorted by our guides at all times."

So, is it worth it?

Seeing North Korea first-hand can be a great opportunity to learn something about one of the most enigmatic places on the planet. But like the 24 million people who live here, for whom the pleasures of tourism abroad are not an option, you won't have much freedom to really make the most of it.

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