

A Chemical Beach Tour in North Korea



For a long time, I had wanted to enjoy the beaches of North Korea promoted in official brochures. But the best one – located on the East Coast in Hamhung, the second largest city in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with a population of 800,000 – was not open to tourists. This finally changed in 2011 and I jumped on the opportunity to be one of the first to visit the place.

My North Korean guide got starry-eyed while talking about this beach. He was extolling the "excellent stretches of pristine beach." I don't think that he ever went there but he learnt the official propaganda by heart.

He told me that every North Korean citizen had the secret dream of enjoying a beach holiday. On the brochure he gave me, it said, "Majon, the resort in the suburbs of Hamhung and an industrial city" – an example of North Korean marketing..



After arriving in Hamhung, a five-hour drive from Pyongyang, I follow the mandatory city tour. One stop in front of the Grand Theatre – not possible to go inside. I'm allowed to open the bus window if I want to take a picture.

Another stop in front of Kim Il Sung's giant statue. My guide explains, "The hill was built by people so they could erect the statue of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung on top of it. From there, you have a great view over the city. Let's go!"





In fact, the view from the top shows a dull city surrounded by the smoke from the factory chimneys as Hamhung is home to the best beach in North Korea but is also an industrial city with many chemical complexes. Everywhere we drive, we see factories when they are not hidden by the chimney smoke.



내 나라의 무릇 하늘

<p>1. 만물과 공생하는 조화로운 자연에서 화랑 연꽃 피우며 위대한 조국을 아낌없이 바쳐온 무릇의 하늘이 내 조국의 자강민중이여 불쌍한가</p>	<p>2. 조종의 눈발 강아도 무릇의 하늘이 물에도 빛나는 내 나라의 맑은 하늘 아낌없이 바쳐온 무릇의 하늘이 이천만년 본부름도 가질수 없었어</p>	<p>3. 이 세상 그 어디에 하늘은 없어도 내 보자 무릇의 하늘이 여기 가 있었어 아낌없이 바쳐온 무릇의 하늘이 내 나라의 정든 하늘을 간고살가</p>
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My guide tells me that there is no pollution in the city... I ask him to be serious for once. Sometimes, too much propaganda kills the propaganda...!

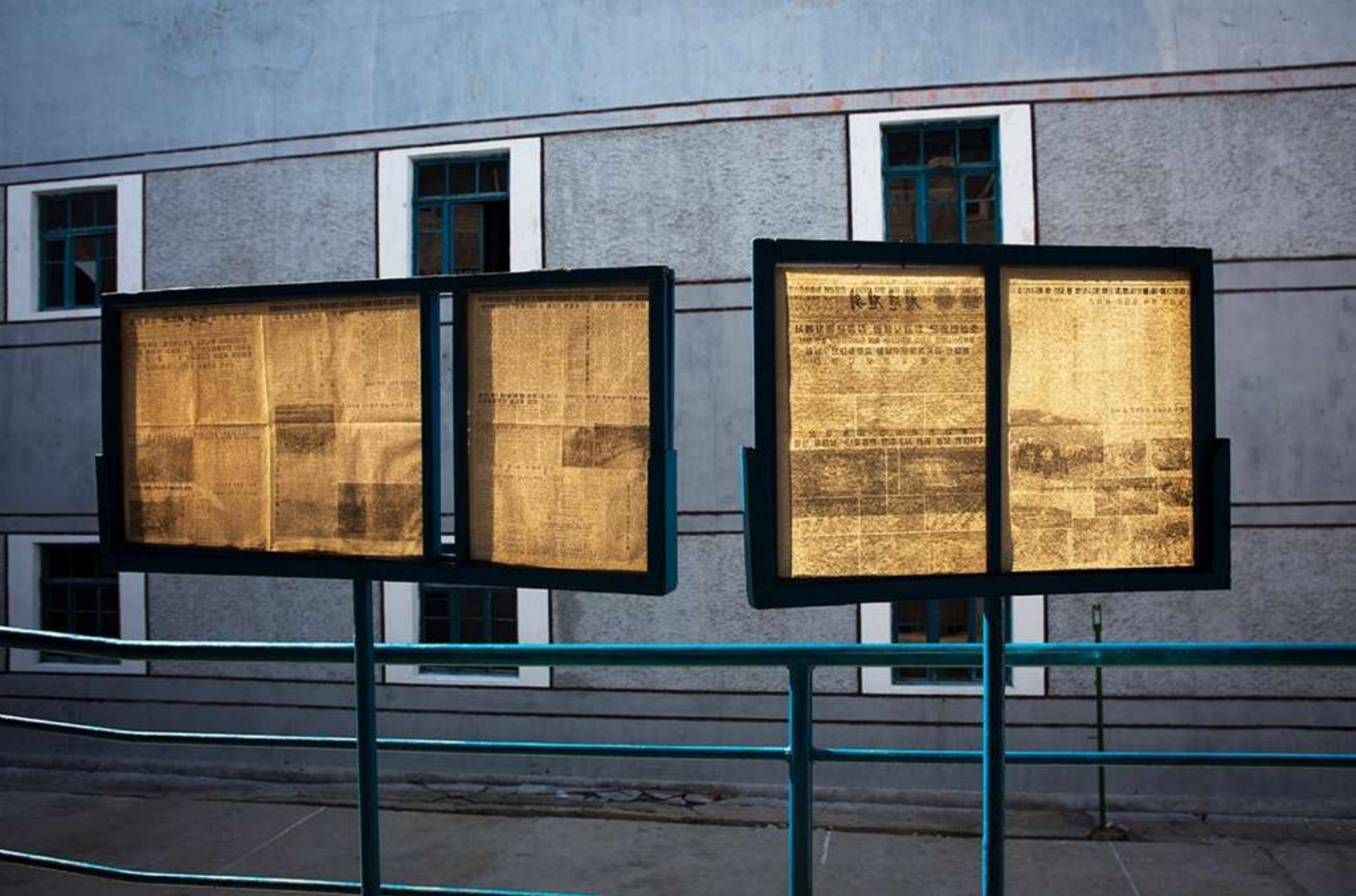


I am invited to visit the Hungnam Fertilizer Complex. An alarming yellow smoke in the sky leads us to the plant..



Huge propaganda billboards welcome the workers and visitors: « A strong and prosperous country! »

A committee of local officials is there to meet me. They explain to me that the Hungnam Complex was built to supply the nation with fertilizer for agriculture. They do not mention that North Korea has abused chemical fertilizers, which has caused soil exhaustion. But they had to meet the economic targets..



At the entrance, there is an old newspaper that has been sun-faded for years. It looks like the only official newspaper the workers read in the Pyongyang subway on their way to work to learn about the glorious actions of the Dear Leaders.

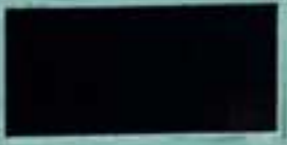


Behind a window, some people are looking at me. I can't see their faces as the window glass has been made opaque with a plastic sheet.

Perhaps some industrial secrets are hidden behind this window...



Inside, I understand that everything the officials are showing me has been made specially for tourists. Only two staff, a male and a female, work in a giant area resembling the Beaubourg museum in Paris: colorful pipes are going in and out of huge machines making squeaky noises.



Many machines have medals hanging from them, showing that they have been working for much longer than what they were originally built for. North Koreans give such rewards for any kind of machine. I have seen the same medals in elevators, roundabouts and even on planes..



Suddenly, I can hear the whistling noise of a leakage in the pipes. An aggressive ammonia smell fills the air, I start coughing, more and more loudly... I am suffocating, gasping for air... It appears that I am the only one to panic. A worker quietly comes to close a valve and the wind dissipates the ammonia.

The officials cannot resist laughing when they see me with a red face...



A few months before my visit, the town where I was living, Toulouse, France, suffered an ammonium nitrate explosion in a chemical plant called AZote Fertilisant (AZF), which killed 31 people and left 2,500 injured. I share this story with the officials. In response, they all smile and say that this could not happen in North Korea – the security is at its best here.



Inside the factory, a propaganda poster says: A strong and prosperous country ...let's take a firm control of the military revolution route and go forward!



The February 8 Vinalon complex from the bus. This is the factory where they manufacture Vinalon, the pride of North Korea.



Vinalon is a synthetic fiber used to make the famous suits worn by North Korean men. Nowadays, there are less people who still wear the suits made of Vinalon. These suits make their wearer look like a robot as the fabric is very rough. Now, China has flooded the Hermit Kingdom's market with cheap clothes that people prefer to wear. Only in official meetings do you still see men wearing Vinalon clothes. My guide admits that it is also very scratchy and you sweat a lot in it.!



The area is famous for its fisheries. The fish is being dried everywhere and when you pass a residential building, you can smell it, mixed with the local chemical pollution. This is no holiday for your nose...



A giant fresco shows Kim Il Sung talking with local fishermen on the shore.



The room is basic in a little chalet with thin walls so you can share everything with your neighbors. The guide invites you to take your shoes off and wear plastic slippers.



The hotel is on an empty 1km-long beach. The government is seeking to promote domestic vacations. International ones are not possible for the majority of North Koreans. The television broadcasts footage of the Majon beach filled with people playing sport, swimming, singing or having a picnic...



A French tourist is swimming in the sea and it seems that the water is rather warm. He jokes, "With all the chemicals they dump into the sea, it naturally heats up!" I also go for a dip in the sea. The water is surprising clear.



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In the bathroom, there is no running water. The bathtub is already filled with water, which must be heated by immersing an electrical resistance in it. Before the fall of the wall, it seems that a lot of lucky communist sympathizers were able to come to the hotel for holidays. But after the crisis, everything fell apart and nothing has since been renovated..



There is a telephone/fax shop in the lobby but my guide says that it isn't working. By our standards, this is a 1.5 stars hotel. By North Korean standards, it is a luxury resort and the local people who used to come here were part of the elite..



I ask to go into town, to the best restaurant. But my guide says, "It's better to eat at the hotel restaurant. All the other ones are full tonight." It is of course totally empty. The cook sells me abalone for 5 euros a piece. I must pay in cash before being served. Maybe they're afraid that I will escape to the South...



The only guests that I meet are foreigners working for the Red Cross and Red Crescent. You cannot miss them with their huge SUVs. They tell me that most of the time, they are the only people staying at the resort.



As I complain about the overinflated prices of the restaurant and the low quality of the food, my guide organizes a party with clams on the beach. The shells are placed on the sand, then he pours some gasoline on them and lights a match. With the heat from the flames, the clams start opening up.

The taste with the gasoline is disgusting, but for North Koreans, it is a feast. I offer my portion to my guide.



There is a discotheque in the hotel. There are only two North Korean couples. The men are drinking. The girls look bored. The DJ is playing a Modern Talking Megamix on a loop. The girls are happy to share a dance, the men less so. At 9pm, the DJ finishes his set. Time to go back to the suite!



Most of the time, the people I met on vacation were part of a work group and the holidays they were enjoying were some kind of reward for the good work they did. Very few can afford the costs of transportation and lodging with their low salaries. Getting the authorizations to leave their village represents another challenge. You cannot move freely in North Korea, even when you are a local.



My guide tells me that the hotel was built by Dear Leader Kim Jong Il to show how much he loved his people and wanted them to be happy. Today, the only locals enjoying the beach are two shy children. Their father is waiting for them in his car on the parking lot, a brand new Mercedes...

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