

AFTER HOURS: PYONGYANG

The lights may go out, but the nightlife goes on



Kristina Pérez for The Wall Street Journal

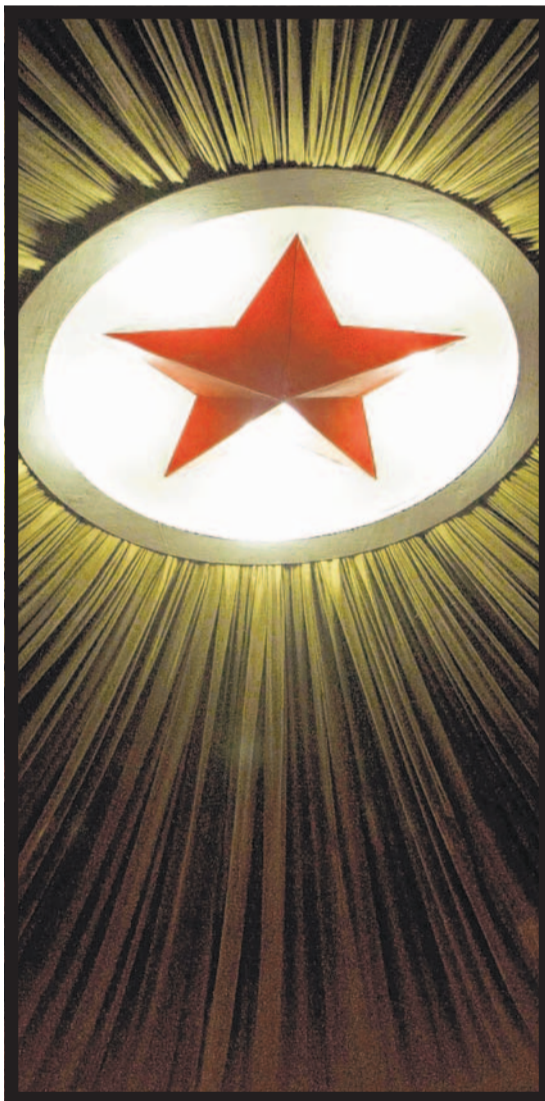
BY KRISTINA PÉREZ

Pyongyang
In North Korea's capital, "after dark" means something different than in most places its size. Nightfall in electricity-starved Pyongyang is more like nightfall in the middle of the ocean than like nightfall in a city of two million people. Seen from space, North Korea is a black spot set against the light pollution of neighboring China and South Korea.

For all that, Pyongyang doesn't actually shut down when the sun sets. To serve its trickle of visitors, the city offers its own version of nightlife. Besides foreign envoys shuttling in for nuclear discussions and businesspeople looking to make deals, about 2,000 Western tourists come to Pyongyang each year, many, like me, to attend the famous, stadium-size show called Arirang. It's a spectacle of mass gymnastics, dance, military marching and incredible animated pictures created by thousands of people flipping colored cards.

The number of visitors could edge up. According to Koryo Tours, a Beijing-based agency specializing in trips to North Korea, the government has notified it that more Americans will be let in during the non-Arirang season (the show generally runs from August to October).

For tourists, the days are filled with sights that have what ruler Kim Jong Il calls "high ideological content." (A government-supplied guide and minder comes along, day and night.) High on the list is the Mansudae Grand Monument, boasting a massive statue of the country's late founder, Kim Il Sung, where visitors lay flowers and line up to bow in an orderly fashion. Another must-see is the USS Pueblo, a U.S. Navy intelligence ship captured off the coast of North Korea in 1968; conducting the tour the day we visited was an elderly man dressed in navy whites who was one of the sailors in the original boarding party. And then there's the underground train system, with



Above, rosy-fingered dawn on the Taedong River, with the Tower of the Juche Idea visible just beyond the bridge; left, the red star rising in the diorama room of the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum.



The Egypt Palace casino in Yanggakdo Hotel, which offers slot machines and card games including blackjack, is generally open until 4 a.m.

its mosaics of peasants revolting and huge chandeliers meant to look like stars.

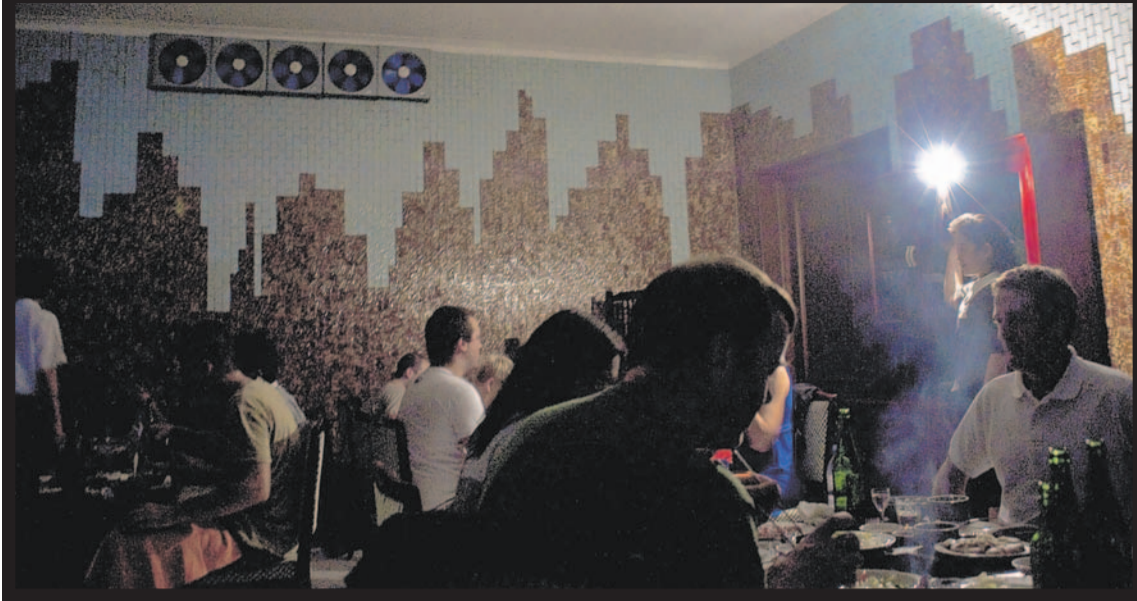
But there's also the unexpected, like the Pyolmuri Teahouse, a Western-style cafe whose name translates roughly as "constellation of the stars." Opened in 2005 with the help of the nonprofit Adventist Development and Relief Agency, the cafe—equipped, as it proudly points out, with German-made ovens and Italian pasta-making machines—offers a tasty apple pie, a surprisingly decent cappuccino and a great chance to people-watch. Egyptian telecommunications provider Orascom brought mobile technology to North Korea last year, and now demurely dressed teenage girls are accessorizing their *hanboks*, or traditional Korean dresses, with platform shoes and colorful, decorative, straps on their cellphones. (We tourists had surrendered our phones at the airport, along with our passports; they were returned just before we boarded the return flight.)

As evening approaches, take a stroll (minder in tow) along the deserted embankment of the Taedong River to Kim Il Sung Square. From this vantage point, you can photograph some picture-postcard views while it's still light. An ideal place to watch the sunset is from the Tower of the Juche Idea, named for the country's official ideology, a word typically translated as "self-reliance." The 170-meter tower, built on the occasion of Kim Il Sung's 70th birthday, is said to contain one white stone block for each day of his life to that point. (He died in 1994, at the age of 82, and while his son is now ruler, the elder Kim is "eternal president.")

From the top there's a panoramic view over the capital out to the surrounding mountains. The lack of cars on the roads—vehicles aren't freely available for purchase—and scarcity of heavy industry means the air is remarkably clear.

Then it's time to think about where to have dinner. Don't dawdle; most Pyongyang eateries generally

TRAVEL



close by 9 p.m. The choices range quite widely, from hot pot at Chongryu Hot Pot restaurant to roast duck at Pyongyang Duck Barbeque Restaurant No. 1 to Macanese fare such as egg tarts at the imaginatively named Macau Restaurant.

Whatever you pick, forget dining by candlelight. Here, it's more likely to be by flashlight. On my first night, just as my tour group was tucking into a typical Korean meal of *naengmyon* (cold noodles) and *bulgogi* (barbecued beef) at Mangyongdae KITC restaurant, the lights went out. But the waitresses have come to expect power outages, and before we knew it they were coming around with huge flashlights, one for each table. The room lights still hadn't come back on by the time we left about an hour later.

Checking out the city's after-dinner scene is easy: There's one nightclub and one casino, both located in the same place, the 1,001-room Yanggakdo Hotel, one of about a dozen hotels where foreigners are allowed to stay. (All the tourist hotels do offer some evening activities—like a karaoke bar—but the Yanggakdo is the place to be.) You won't see any locals here; the entertainment venues are off limits to North Korean citizens.

Start at the aptly named Revolving Restaurant, also known as the Swivel Restaurant, on the 47th floor. It has all the glamour of a 1980s airport lounge, but still attracts businesspeople and Russian exchange students. Grab a seat by the window and admire the lack of city lights as you circle around. Order a serving of soju. Traditionally made from rice, although sometimes also from acorns, it's the national liquor.

Less-adventurous travelers could sample some of the country's homegrown beer. The best-known brands are Ryongsong, Ponghak and Taedonggang. Taedonggang, which last year was bizarrely the subject of an advertisement on state TV, is made using equipment that once produced the likes of Brown's Bitter and Mann's Best Ale in Trowbridge, England. North Korea bought the shut-down brewery from its U.K. owner and had it dismantled and shipped over in 2000. The restaurant stays open until 1 a.m. or 2 a.m., or when the last customer leaves.

Sufficiently mellowed, head for the nightclub on the lower ground floor. You can groove to the beat of familiar pop tunes from the '70s and '80s (was that the Bee Gees' "Stay-in' Alive," or too much soju?) until about 3:30 a.m. if there's enough business; otherwise the staff close the doors at about 1:30 a.m.

If you're still not ready to call it a night and you're feeling lucky, pop next door to the Egypt Palace casino.

Replete with slot machines and tables for card games including blackjack, the casino is generally open until 4 a.m. But if you aren't staying in the hotel, how long you can play depends on what kind of deal you can

strike with your minder.

After that, there is only the 7 a.m. "workers' siren," a citywide wake-up call. It might serve to tell you whether you had too much soju. On your last day in Pyongyang,

When a power outage darkened Mangyongdae KITC restaurant, the waitresses were quick to distribute huge flashlights, one for each table.

by the way, brace yourself for one final, unexpected spending opportunity, befitting a state eager for hard currency. We'd already experienced one big earner, the shop selling souvenir stamps (such as an envelope bearing a Mona Lisa stamp, postmarked on the day of issue, about \$7) and hand-painted propaganda posters (such as one showing flying pens attacking former U.S. President Richard Nixon). Now some tourism officials rushed onto our airport-bound bus with something more modern: videos of our three-day stay, going for just under \$30. I couldn't resist.

Courtesy of the advertising department of Korea International Travel Co., the 45-minute video compact disk features me and my 24 traveling companions as we played tourist, drinking beer at lunch and riding the escalators of the underground-train stations. These scenes are interspersed with footage of 80,000 performers at the Arirang mass games, and the whole thing is set to a rousing soundtrack mixing modernized folk songs, swelling orchestral passages and the worst elevator music I've ever heard.

Thankfully, there is no record of my night out. At least some things that happen in Pyongyang, stay in Pyongyang.

Kristina Pérez is an Asia-based writer.

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