

Background on Asia Pacific Travel's Involvement with North Korea

As a result of the "Agreed Framework" negotiated in October, 1994 by the Clinton administration with the government of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), also called North Korea, the U.S. government, in January, 1995 formally eased restrictions on economic activities, including tourism, with the DPRK.

In April, 1995, the government of the DPRK held an international sporting event (actually a version of professional wrestling organized by a Japanese professional wrestler) combined with what is described as a "mass gymnastics and artistic performance" on the theme of *Arirang*, a Korean folk song. For the first time since before World War II American tourists were given permission to visit North Korea to attend these events during a limited several week long period.

This invitation, however, was neither widely publicized nor known, and was given with only a short lead-time to respond. Asia Pacific Travel, Ltd. (APTL), in the person of its co-founder and president Walter L. Keats, did learn of this event and took steps to take advantage of this historic opportunity. Unfortunately with the very short lead-time he was unable to organize more than a "group of two", himself and a fellow intrepid traveler, Dr. Richard Marafioti, to travel to North Korea during this narrow "window of opportunity."

Their trip followed the pattern still used today of flying to Beijing, where one can obtain the North Korean visa at the DPRK Embassy there, and then flying from Beijing to Pyongyang using the

North Korean airline Air Koryo. On this initial fact-finding trip the pair were able to visit Pyongyang, Nampo, Kaesong, Panmunjom, Wonsan and Kumgang during their nine day stay. They requested and were permitted to exit North Korea via rail from Pyongyang to Shenyang at the conclusion of their stay. While in Pyongyang Mr. Keats began his discussions with North Korean travel officials about bringing American tourists to North Korea in the future.

Although progress on the diplomatic front did move forward under the Agreed Framework, there were no further invitations for America tourists for some years to come (presumably not a reflection on the behavior of Mr. Keats and Dr. Marafioti and the few other Americans who had also been able to take advantage of the 1995 window but related to broader diplomatic and other considerations, not the least of which was the severe famine that killed many North Koreans in the intervening years.)

Mr. Keats was able to visit North Korea again, however, in June, 2000 while on a trip to South Korea. The South Korean company Hyundai Asan had negotiated with the North Korean government to open the southeastern-most corner of North Korea to tourism. This region is named Kumgang, or Diamond Mountains, after the scenic mountain area well-known to all Koreans.

Kumgang was officially opened in November, 1998 with tourists coming and going from South Korea by ship. Today tourists can visit Kumgang by comfortable bus from Seoul, crossing the

DMZ by road, on one, two, three or even more night packages.

Initially it was thought that the majority of tourists would be from South Korea. This has proven to be the case with over 1.5 million South Koreans having visited Kumgang since its opening in the fall of 1998. Only a little over 5,000 non-Koreans have visited Kumgang during that same period. There were and still are no restrictions on participation in these tours by non-Koreans, so Mr. Keats was one of the few foreigners to experience these unique tours both by sea and by land.

The restrictions the North Koreans imposed on Hyundai Asan at the beginning required them to take tourists from a South Korean port east out into international waters, then north, then back west into North Korean waters to the port at Mt. Kumgang. The ship Mr. Keats sailed on in 2000 was in fact the old "Love Boat" from the TV series of the same name that had been purchased by Hyundai as one of several ships it was using for this service. The trip was pleasant enough, and certainly qualified as a "visit to North Korea," but it did take more time than most Americans, other than those already in South Korea, normally have to spare.

Finally in the summer of 2002, the North Korean government announced that they would be holding another *Arirang* mass performance, this time featuring a huge 100,000 person cast of performers. Although not stated as such, the obvious purpose of this unique extravaganza was to draw attention away from the South Korean's joint hosting with Japan of the World Cup Soccer finals. Initially

Americans were not invited to come, but finally with little time to spare, the invitation was extended to Americans, most likely due to low signups by other international visitors.

Again, with little time to inform and solicit participants, Asia Pacific Travel was left with a "coalition of the available" that included Mr. Keats, his wife, Ms. Winnie Lu who is a Vice President of Asia Pacific Travel, and their 16-year old daughter Alexandra Keats. On this trip the "group" was able to visit Pyongyang, Nampo, Mt. Myohyang, Kaesong and Panmunjom. Their trip was a memorable one for all three as they found their hosts to be friendly and flexible, most likely due to the small size of their group. The friendliness is consistent with the Asian custom of showing a guest respect and the desire to ensure that the guest is happy while in the care of the host.

While in Pyongyang Mr. Keats, and Ms. Lu met with travel officials to discuss future American travel to North Korea. The talks were friendly, but it was not in the power of these officials to decide when Americans could visit North Korea.

Almost coincidentally during the early 2000s Mr. Keats met with another North Korean travel official at a regional trade show in Asia. Mr. Keats emphasized to this official his interest in promoting American travel to North Korea when the opportunity again presented itself.

As a result of these persistent contacts over the last eleven years, Asia Pacific Travel was given the opportunity to bring American tourists to North Korea three more times. In the fall of 2004 there was

an opportunity for Asia Pacific Travel to send Americans to attend a martial arts gathering, but this was with only about two weeks notice. In August, 2005 there was another opportunity related to a series of *Arirang* performances. Again, notice only came less than a month before the program. The few Americans who were able to go were mostly expatriates working in China.

Finally, in December, 2005, after numerous communications back and forth explaining that for a trip of the time and distance involved in traveling to North Korea Americans, other “long haul” visitors needed months of notice, the North Korean travel officials gave Asia Pacific Travel, Ltd. permission to bring Americans and other nationalities to North Korea during the period of August 10 through October 10, 2006. Through concerned efforts Asia Pacific Travel was able to book a little over 200 Americans to visit North Korea during this window of opportunity.

Unfortunately, with less than a month to go, a typhoon hit North Korea causing severe flooding and loss of life. The flooding was so severe, occurring even in Pyongyang the site of the *Arirang* performances, that the North Koreans

were forced to cancel the entire series of performances and no tourists were permitted to visit North Korea in 2006.

The North Koreans bounced back by the end of the year and announced that they planned to stage *Arirang* performances twice in 2007, from mid-April to mid-May, and from mid-August to mid-October. Asia Pacific Travel again received official permission to bring Americans and other nationalities to attend those performances.

For 2008 the North Koreans have also given Asia Pacific Travel, Ltd. permission to bring Americans and other nationalities to attend the *Arirang* performances that are scheduled for August 1 through mid-September, 2008.

With this history in mind Asia Pacific Travel, Ltd. continues to offer a variety of itineraries for its international clientele to take advantage of these windows of opportunity. They are displayed on our website in the “Itineraries” section. If you wish to be notified when future windows become available, please click on the “Contact Us” button at the top of the web page and leave us your contact information.

Asia Pacific Travel, Ltd.

P.O. Box 350
Kenilworth, IL 60043-0350 USA

Toll Free: 1-800-262-6420
Telephone: 1-847-251-6400
Facsimile: 1-847-256-5601
Email: info@asia1on1.com

Websites:

www.asia1on1.com
www.northkorea1on1.com