

NORTH KOREA



To those who haven't been, North Korea is a land depicted by propaganda and secrecy, repression and strict state governance. Make up your own mind on this unique opportunity to experience the mysterious and isolated nation so often in the press but visited by so few. Meet its people and hear their realities, venture into North Korea's wild reaches, climb above the clouds in the country's barely visited National Parks, including the Mysterious Fragrant Mountain on this conversation-starting adventure of the year.

Aim

The physical aim of this epic expedition is to trek North Korea's wild National Parks, whose peaks include Piro peak in the Myohyang region and Mount Kumgang which has been nominated for UNESCO protection. Myohyang is named after the mystical shapes and inexplicable fragrances found locally and deemed a sacred site; local legends call it the home of King Tangun, forefather of the Korean people.

The secondary, cultural aim to this expedition is to visit North Korea's religious and monumental architecture, its cultural centres in capital Pyongyang and this secretive state's troubled southern border with South Korea.

Highlights

- Climb Myohyang's highest peak: the Mysterious Fragrant Mountain.
- Explore Kumgang's dramatic landscapes reaching 1638m.
- Aim to camp out (a very rare activity) in wild North Korea.
- Visit capital Pyongyang and its monumental architecture.
- Visit the Demilitarized Zone on the southern border.

What our teams say

“The North Korea expedition was incredible. To climb mountains that few ever get to see was a once in a lifetime experience. Couple that with the opportunity to go into the secretive country and learn firsthand about one of most unusual cultures in the world, and you have a trip that will be remembered for a lifetime.” – George Kourounis, 2017 teammate.

Why Go

Tourism in North Korea

Few have visited North Korea, with four-figures of international visitors annually. This Secret Compass expedition, with just 12 places available, offers an unparalleled opportunity to meet and to interact on a personal level with guides, local people met en route and employees within North Korea’s tourist industry. This is a unique opportunity to travel outside of the cities and camp out in the rural and rarely travelled national parks. In springtime, flowers and new blooms carpet the hills. Photographers, get ready!

North Korea in the news

North Korea often finds itself in the press for all the wrong reasons. However, most academics and regional experts are of the opinion that the benefits of tourism to the region outweigh any cons. Exposure to international visitors can help keep some North Koreans in touch with the outside world and, in tandem, those within North Korea’s tourism industry have played ‘a significant role as a news source, providing insights and tip-offs from within a country that has tight restrictions on journalists’ according to a Guardian article. In terms of NGO activity, several groups are present including six branches of the UN.

Culture and cuisine

North Korea left our Secret Compass guide (who’s visited over 80 countries) pretty speechless. Its cuisine includes delicacies like barbecued duck, fresh fish and crab and a regional speciality – cold noodles which taste better than they sound. An excellent micro brewery will be visited. Religious buildings such as ornate Buddhist temples pock the mist-shrouded hills and welcome Western guests. A highlight is a visit to the International Friendship Exhibition in Myohyang.

Visiting North Korea

North Korea is not a typical travel destination. Plans can change at short notice due to factors beyond our control. The group will be escorted by government guides throughout and there will be little freedom outside of the hotels. Strict rules are in place concerning photography, dress and behaviour in cities, at tourist sites and in the national parks. Facilities outside Pyongyang can be basic. Some hotels do not offer hot water and in remote areas, power cuts are common. Team members should have a robust and adventurous spirit in readiness to take challenges like this in their stride.

The plan

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans. Read more about our [Approach](#) here. The following is the outline plan for this pioneering expedition – the ‘substance’ rather than the specifics. A fuller itinerary is provided in the North Korea Expedition Handbook which is available on request or upon application to join the team.

Teammates arrive

All teammates will arrive into Beijing at or before 1800 on 20 May 2019. Anyone who is collecting their North Korean visa in Beijing can do this in the daytime, prior to meeting. You’ll get yourself to the designated Beijing team hotel where your Secret Compass leader will await. This expedition officially begins at 1800 with an

introductory team briefing and a welcome team dinner at the hotel. After breakfast, the team transfers to Beijing airport for the flight to Pyongyang in North Korea. On arrival, local guides will escort the group to a restaurant for the in-country briefing. There'll be dinner and a hotel stay and the expedition proper commences!

On expedition

This expedition is a mix of trekking, sightseeing and cultural insight. The team will be accompanied by official guides at all times and teammates must understand that freedom of movement will be limited on this expedition. While in North Korea, your planned itinerary includes visits to the Grand Theatre, Kim Il Sung Square, the Foreign Language Bookshop, Mansudae Fountain Park and Grand Monument, Pyongyang Metro, Arc of Triumph, Morabong and Juche Tower. There will be wide-reaching views over this impressive city. You'll also visit the fascinating International Friendship Museum and the Pyohon Temple, in the Myohyang region.

You'll spend three days trekking over several remote ridge lines and peaks through the Myohyang National Park in an attempt to reach the park's highest peak, Piro Peak (1909m). You'll aim to camp in this region, sleeping out in hammocks, an activity practically unheard of in North Korea. A two-day trekking phase is then planned over on the east coast in the Mount Kumgang region. A relaxing spa visit awaits when you most need it, too. During this trekking phases you'll stay in hotels and will trek with a day sack, leaving your main bag at the hotel.

Goal achieved

Peaks climbed and cultural sights soaked up, your expedition pace now slows down, with your final day in country includes exploration of Panmunjom and the De-Militarised Zone (DMZ) that marks the North Korea – South Korea border. Back in Pyongyang you'll enjoy a farewell team meal. On the expedition's final morning you'll fly back to Beijing where the expedition officially ends at Beijing airport. Teammates are free to organise onward travel from 1500 on 12 June 2019.

Fitness

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. The most challenging aspects of this pioneering and culturally fascinating North Korea expedition are likely to be the steep trekking sections in the national parks.

Applicants will receive a Handbook with further expedition information. View Secret Compass's suggested [Expedition Training Advice](#) and get in touch with any fitness, health, training or kit questions that remain. Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and the expedition's goal so do take training seriously, prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go! Teammates must be comfortable with the following.

Minimum fitness requirements

- Trek: up to 20km a day.
- Daily activity: up to 8hrs daily on the trek phase.
- Carry: up to a maximum of approx. 20kg (generally less).
- Terrain: A variety of established trekking routes in National Parks, but with some trails are very steep, with exposed sections involving scrambling techniques.
- Climate: hot but comfortable.
- Swim: not required.
- Age: 21+

Practicalities

Accommodation

You'll stay in comfortable mid-range hotels for the duration of your visit. Hammocks will be provided by Secret Compass for the intended overnight camping trip.

Food

The North Koreans pride themselves on feeding their guests well. Lunches and dinners will be large, with a range of different dishes to suit all palates being served. The cuisine will typically be traditional North Korean. All other meals and snacks will be provided by Secret Compass.

Transport

A flight from Beijing to Pyongyang is included in this expedition team place. Once in North Korea, transfers between destinations will be made by minibus or small coach. In the National Parks, much trekking on foot will be carried out.

Kit list

The North Korea Expedition Handbook contains a full recommended kit list. This online Handbook is provided to all potential teammates upon application to join this team.

Included

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- Professional Secret Compass expedition leader with full communications kit and medical kit.
- In-country North Korean guides, support and vehicles.
- An internal return flight from Beijing to Pyongyang.
- All accommodation as outlined in the itinerary.
- All transport as outlined in the itinerary.
- Hammocks for the trekking stage of the expedition.
- All food (snacks and meals) and soft drinks.

Not included

- International [flights](#)/ travel to and from Beijing.
- [Travel insurance](#) (obligatory).
- Visas where relevant (Chinese visa and North Korean visa, though Secret Compass will issue visa advice in a timely manner).
- Tips to local guides (discretionary).
- Personal equipment (full kit list in the Handbook).
- Beverages and any costs of a personal nature.

Exped FAQ

On application, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our general FAQ will answer many other questions. Get in touch if your question remains unanswered.

Is it possible to visit North Korea?

Yes, it's positively encouraged.

Is it safe to visit North Korea?

2017 was a tumultuous year of international relations for the DPRK, the country has rarely been out of the news

since. Despite the negative media portrayal of the DPRK in the West, we deem the country as perfectly safe to visit for culturally sensitive travellers looking for a unique travel experience. In the three decades that our partners have worked in the country, they have never encountered a single issue where one of their clients was in any danger or the victim of any crime. In our opinion, North Korea is one of the safest countries in the world to visit and this will be our fifth expedition there.

However, in August 2017 the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK FCO) changed their travel advice on visiting the DPR Korea, and for the first time advised against all but essential travel to North Korea. We must stress to all persons interested in booking our North Korea expedition, that your visit may be contrary to the advice of the UK FCO (or your own government if not a UK Citizen), and that changes in the UK FCO's position on tours to North Korea (as with several other countries that Secret Compass expeditions visit) are not grounds for cancellation. We always work closely with our partners in the region and the ultimate decision on the safety of travel to any region is one taken between our office and partners in country.

As and when the FCO advise against travel to the DPR Korea, any conventional travel insurance policy you may have will likely be invalid for the expedition. However, specialist insurers should be able to provide you with cover and we have some recommendations [here](#).

Can I get a visa?

Citizens of a great many nations can apply for a tourist visa to visit North Korea with relative ease. Check online to see if you are eligible to apply. We currently advise citizens of the USA not to travel to North Korea due to restrictions the USA are intending to place on their own citizens from 1 Sept. 2017 – if you are US citizen interested in the trip please check online for up to date information.

Secret Compass will oversee the North Korean visa application process for booked teammates. Chinese visas are the teammates responsibility.

Are we really camping?

The expedition intends to include two night's camping in a North Korean national park. Your kit list will outline the necessary kit and equipment for this phase. The rest of the time you'll stay in comfortable hotels.

Will our phones be censored?

No, but North Korea is a secretive, closed state as is well documented. Secret Compass will provide to booked teammates in-depth advice on what can and cannot be brought into the country.

How can I find out more?

Apply for this expedition team using the button on this page to receive your Expedition Handbook with fuller details. The Application page explains the joining process. Secret Compass is then on hand to answer any questions or to firm up your place on the team.

Will there be 'phone signal or Internet?

Your mobile phones will not work in North Korea and there will be no access to wifi or to the Internet for the duration of the expedition. In Beijing your phones will work and there is plenty of access to wifi, however many sites are still blocked by the government such as all Google platforms and apps, and Facebook. Secret Compass will issue cultural information to booked teammates including what it is and is not appropriate to bring into the country.

Can I arrive a day late?

As The Plan outlines, there is an included flight (from Beijing to Pyongyang) and in-country briefing planned on arrival in North Korea that all teammates need to be present for, so start and end dates for this expedition are fixed.

Does North Korea have a dress code?

While trekking, sensible trekking clothing as outlined in the Expedition Handbook's kit list will be fine. In the cities, smarter clothing than for a 'backpacking' trip are required such as button-down shirts and smart trousers (not jeans) for men and modest outfits (covered shoulders and below the knee) for women.

Can we take pictures?

Photography is generally allowed in North Korea though there are restrictions. Your in-country and Secret Compass guides will let you know when and where photography is and is not appropriate and their guidance must be adhered to. Certain camera lenses are also restricted, do your research prior to arrival.