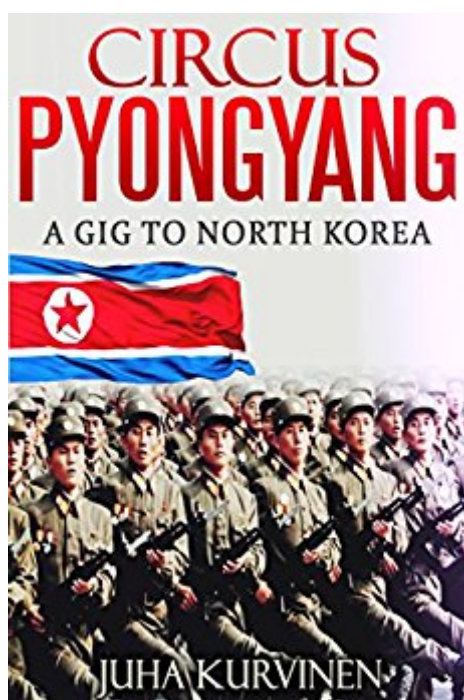


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Circus Pyongyang: A Gig To North Korea (True Story: What Really Happened At The Birthday Party Of North Korean President Kim Il-Sung?)



Synopsis

Juha Kurvinen, chainsaw juggler and holder of two official Guinness World Records, gets one day an invitation to perform at a circus in North Korea organized to honour the birthday of president Kim Il-Sung. Joining Kurvinen is the most famous Finnish professional magician Jori A. Kopponen, who has always wanted to travel to an "another planet". The party is being held at the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang. The artists have asked two journalists to assist them on this trip. It is strictly prohibited for journalists to enter the closed country. Constant fear of getting caught, brainwash and culture shock hits on every member of the Finnish travel party, when they have to operate under constant surveillance. Circus Pyongyang is a true story of a trip made by a Finnish artist entourage to the most closed state in the world, which is being presented as a terrestrial paradise for its western guests. The truth is something else. It's a trip to another planet, Circus Pyongyang."Circus Pyongyang was an enjoyable read, hard to put down. The language flows nicely. Structure is well thought out. At times Circus Pyongyang reminded me of the odysseys of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson and his linguistic gimmicks."- Eero Karisalmi, Radio Melodia / Radio Auran AallotTranslated by Tomi-Pekka Astikainen

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Customer Reviews

The author, a juggler living in Finland, unexpectedly receives an invitation to perform in Pyongyang at a celebration of their late 'Great Leader' Kim Il-sung's birthday. The only information about North Korea he could find was scary - horrible concentration camps, nuclear weapons, public executions, and out of bounds for reporters. After assembling a magician and assistants to assist with his act, it was off to Moscow's North Korean embassy - the first leg of the trip. Then it was onto an Air Koryo plane (blacklisted as 'highly dangerous') to an isolated and totalitarian dictatorship with 23 million inhabitants. 'Photography prohibited!' screamed a soldier running towards Kurvinen as he prepared to take a picture of a military orchestra greeting them upon landing. Everyone wore Kim Il-sung (died 1994) pins, and gigantic pictures, statues, and phrases praising the father-son duo dominated most everywhere. Cell phones and any written material were collected - 'for your own safety.' They were first taken to a with an immense hall made of marble, decorative chandeliers, aquariums everywhere, then to a much smaller and unattractive hotel where they were to stay. Ceremonial dinners etc. however took place in much more impressive settings. Streets were almost deserted, despite a poster advertising Chinese cars (reserved only for the highest party officials). The few vehicles seen were 1970s and 1960s vintage. Guards were everywhere - 'For your own safety.' Kurvinen continues, covering the processions, rehearsals, and performances in a land devoted to pretense.

A juggler and his magician friend get invited to North Korea to perform in an arts festival. The trip, financed by the North Korean government, turns out to be largely a propaganda opportunity, as television crews follow the international performers everywhere to turn footage that will be used to promote the government. Whenever they approach the performers, local journalists ask only a single question: What do you think of our Great Leader? If the author was actually North Korean, rather than an honored European guest, he probably wouldn't have survived long. No cell phones are allowed in the country, but Kurvinen and his highly skilled musician friend, self described by the author as "professional con artists," sneak a disassembled one past the inspectors and put it together as soon as they are free of minders. It doesn't get a signal, but before long the author is checking for bugs in his room by shouting into a suspicious-looking bundle of wires, "how the hell can 23 million people adore that fat bastard? No consequences from that indiscretion, suggesting

the only surveillance is human: A dutiful North Korean guide named Kim is all over the foreign guests like a cheap suit. They can't leave the hotel without her, and she constantly steers the conversation to the Leader and the superiority of North Korean society to other cultures. The performers' heads start to swim from the constant propaganda...always the same story about the Great Leader, his accomplishments, his brave battle against American imperialists etc. And then there's the shrill March music all the time, even early in the morning when the author and his friends wake up hungover. Oh, did I mention the author drinks heavily? Because after all, when confronted with the most surrealistically repressive country in the world, what else is there to do but down the local Pyongyang beer, or even an ice cold Tiger or two from bordering China? It's possible the author always drinks heavily--he doesn't say. But but no matter, he survived two weeks in the Hermit Kingdom without getting thrown in a labor camp and even scored a bottle of authentic snake wine to bring home as a souvenir. If you're looking for an insightful academic treatise on North Korea, move on. And yes, the English is a bit stilted. But if you want to spend an hour with an likeable, irascible Finn as he spins a great tale, pull up a seat and prepare to be entertained.

One would wish everyone who pays a visit to North-Korea, for whatever reason, takes the trouble of sitting down afterwards to write an eyewitness account. One doesn't have to be a great writer, nor does one's English have to be impeccable. Juha Kurvinen did just that: he is an excellent observer with a sense of humor and ample curiosity. I believe every word. He explains, by the way, how it is that Westerners go along with what the regime expects of them, instead of staging an open protest. Protesting is virtually impossible while there and refraining from it has nothing to do with cowardice. So: kudo's for Juha. I paid less than \$ 4 and it's more than worth every penny.

This is a very interesting book that expanded my knowledge of life within North Korea. While they were only in the country for a couple weeks, their description of the control exhibited by the North Korean government is very interesting and disturbing. I am always amazed that the citizens of North Korea are controlled in such a manner that they really do not understand what is going on in the rest of the world. Truly a sad situation for these citizens.

North Korea is probably the country we, Westerners, know the least about, and with good reason: the country is normally closed off to foreigners. North Korea's regime has, for the past 60 years, prevented its population from any sort of direct contact with the outside world. This is why this book is particularly insightful and, yes, moving. The author, after being invited to perform in the country by

its then-president, got to witness North Korea from the inside and interact with its people. And, by sharing his journey, he allows us to get a glimpse at the everyday life of North Koreans under the harsh rule of its dictators. The book is not perfect (the author's mother tongue clearly isn't English), but those are mere details compared to the journey you will embark upon when reading this book.

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