

# SUMMER TRAVEL



## The Ultimate Trip | BY RONALD OSBORN



In August 2012, I had the opportunity to travel to North Korea for the second annual Ultimate Frisbee<sup>1</sup> “Peace Tournament.” The event was conceived and developed by a friend of mine, Andray Abrahamian, from college days at Newbold College of Higher Education, working in partnership with Koryo Tours, a Beijing-based travel company that has led trips to North Korea for the past twenty years. Andray is an avid Ultimate<sup>2</sup> player and executive director of the Choson Exchange, a nongovernmental organization that supports economic development in North Korea. Approximately twenty of us, mostly from the United States but also from Britain and Australia, spent one week in Pyongyang, with daytrips into the countryside and to North Korea’s border with South Korea.

We introduced North Korean schoolchildren and others to the game of Frisbee, which is completely unknown in the country, and visited a wide variety of cultural and historical sites. Although our movements were heavily restricted, the North Korea I experienced was far more relaxed than I imagined it would be. We were at full liberty to take photos, provided only that they were not of military things and that we asked permission from people first. At the risk of sounding like a fellow traveler with Dennis Rodman, the North Koreans I met defied widespread stereotypes with their friendliness, warmth, hospitality, and generosity. There were countless visual reminders that the country is a totalitarian Communist state.

Left: Playing Frisbee in Kim Il-sung Square.

However, in my photos I tried to capture not only this aspect of North Korea, but also the common humanity of the people who live there.<sup>3</sup> ■

### References

1. The game is a noncontact team sport whose object “is to score points by passing the disc to a player in the opposing end zone, similar to an end zone in American football or rugby.” Disc Ace, “Ultimate Frisbee Information.” Ultimate Frisbee, <http://ultimatefrisbeeinfo.com/index>, June 11, 2013.

2. Note: while the sport was originally named “Ultimate Frisbee,” it is now referred to as “Ultimate,” as “Frisbee” is a registered trademarked name. Disc Ace, “Ultimate Frisbee Information.”

3. For *Spectrum* readers interested in learning more about North Korea, I recommend Bruce Cumings’s excellent and provocative book, *North Korea: Another Country*. New York: The New Press, 2004.

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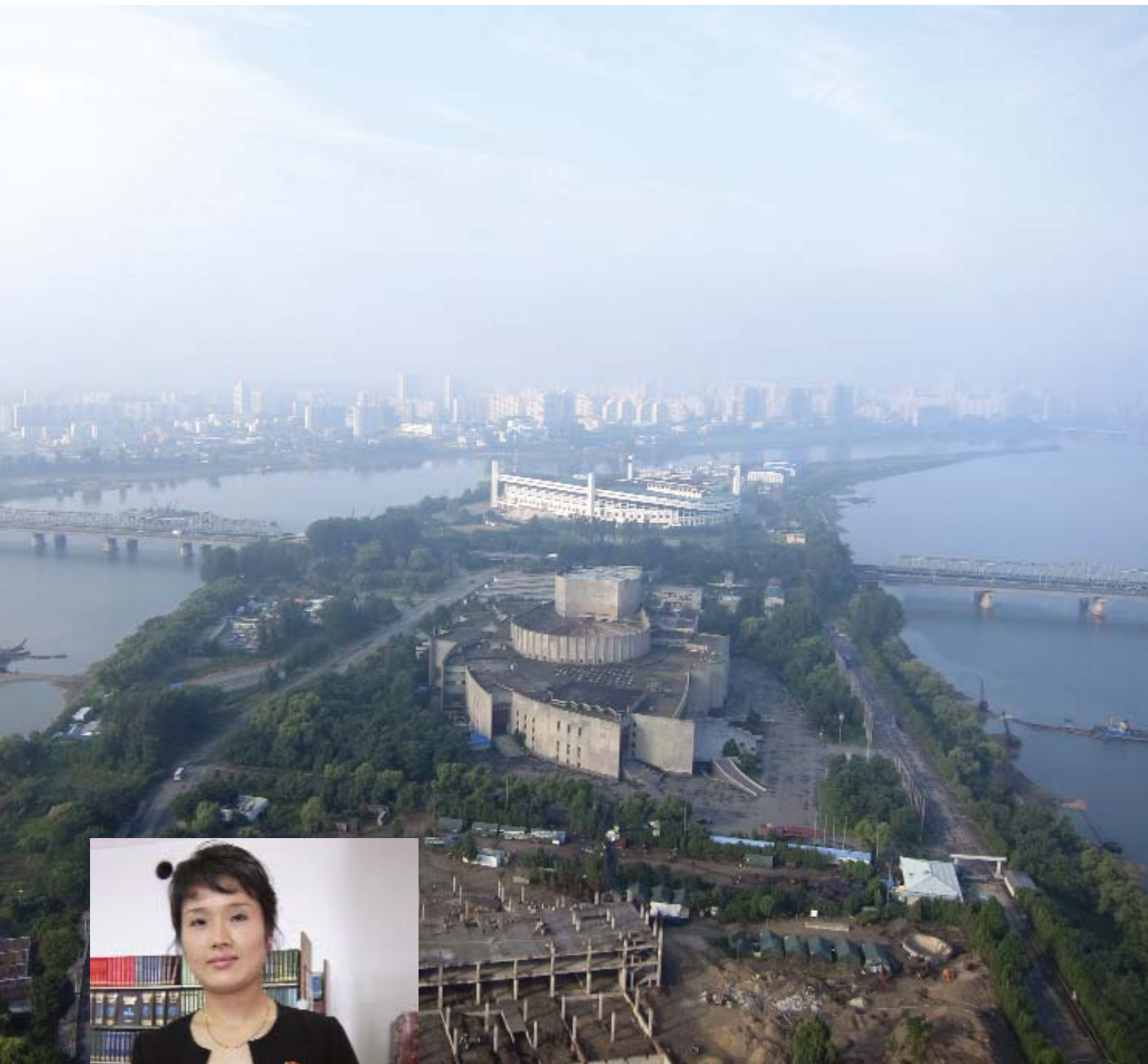
the author of *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence, and Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).



**Right: View of Pyongyang from Yanggakdo Hotel. Visitors are not permitted to leave the island on which the hotel sits unless accompanied by North Korean guides.**



**Above: North Korean men enjoying a barbecue in a Pyongyang park on Liberation Day, a holiday which celebrates the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. One man is preoccupied with texting on his cell phone. A majority of adults in Pyongyang reportedly now have cell phones with services provided by the Egyptian company Orascom. No calls can be made either in or out of the country with mobile devices. Similarly, North Koreans have access to the national “intranet,” but not the Internet.**



**Left: Guide in the Grand People's Study House, the North Korean equivalent of the US Library of Congress.**





**Above: Soldiers pay their respects at the birthplace of Kim Il-sung just outside Pyongyang.**

**Right: Family at Pyongyang Golden Lane Bowling Alley.**





Below: North Korean woman.





Right: Schoolchildren in Pyongyang learning how to play Frisbee. Not a single person we spoke with on our trip had seen or thrown a Frisbee before our arrival.

Below: North Korean man in uniform. All adult North Koreans wear pins of Kim Jong-il and/or Kim Il-sung. Foreigners are forbidden to wear pins of the two leaders, but may wear pins of the North Korean flag.





**Left: College students at Pyongyang Golden Lane Bowling Alley. These students and others at Golden Lane represent North Korea's tiny "middle class." They are neither the scions of the political and military elite, nor the children of the masses of rural poor. Simply living inside Pyongyang, North Korea's model city, is itself a great privilege, and people from outside the capital cannot enter it without special authorization.**