

The world is full of macabre attractions predicated on suffering: from Alcatraz Prison to the Tower of London. Then there's the unlikely tourist destination separating North and South Korea. **Chris Wright** stands to attention.

You went *where?*

TWO SOUTH KOREAN soldiers stand facing north, fists bunched, in a taekwondo stance, staring straight ahead. A few metres away a North Korean soldier looks straight back at them. More South Korean soldiers join their colleagues and glare with them, their intended sense of menace enhanced by sunglasses that leave only the rictus clench of their jaws from which to guess their expression. Time seems to stand still. But then the moment passes. It's an everyday standoff – and the 20 watching tourists file away.

Welcome to Panmunjom, also known as the Joint Security Area (JSA) – on the border of North and South Korea. Bill Clinton once called this “the scariest place on earth” and tension is everywhere in this extraordinary location, the >

**North and South
Korean guards face
off across the DMZ**

KOREA WAR TOURISM



Clockwise from above: ribbons placed in homage to war dead at Freedom Bridge; statue near third tunnel entrance; a giant North Korean flag towers above the DMZ

only place to see the Cold War as it once was. It's a stark illustration of one of the world's most dangerous potential flashpoints, a mental and sometimes physical conflict that has held fast for more than half a century. But it is also, improbably, the heart of what has become a burgeoning tourist itinerary.

Three Seoul tourist operators – only three have been licensed – specialise in tours to Panmunjom and the broader demilitarised zone (DMZ) – a 4km-wide, 241km-long, coast-to-coast, no-man's-land along the border that formed the basis of the 1953 armistice at the end of the Korean War. If it seems an odd thing to do with a free day in Seoul, think again; no tour could teach you more about the threat and tension that ordinary Koreans face every day.

A typical tour takes one of two approaches, or combines them into a single day. DMZ tours focus on one of the four invasion tunnels dug by North Koreans during the peace talks in the 1970s, each one bigger and more sophisticated than the last. The third tunnel – the biggest and the closest to Seoul, reaching just 44km from the city – has been opened to tourists as a daily attraction.

Donning a hard hat and heading down a slope 73m into the ground, visitors reach a dark tunnel that runs 1.6 km, of which they can walk a few hundred metres. It is an extraordinary experience. Officially it is two metres by two, although it never really feels that high; apparently that's big enough to get a full infantry battalion through in an hour. At the end of the section that is open to the public is one of three concrete blockades, each protected by coiled razor wire. It is chilling to think what's beyond them and what these tunnels were intended to do.

It also demonstrates the way that these tours combine fear with the somewhat surreal. When South Korea discovered this tunnel in 1978, the retreating Northerners set about coating the walls in coal dust, so that they could claim they had just been looking for coal. All you have to do is rub your finger against the wall to find it coated black, a solid block of (coal-less) granite behind the disguise. In fact, the whole idea is somehow preposterous: this instrument of invasion has been turned into a lucrative moneyspinner for South Korea, which is nothing if not making the best of things. Even more >

“ A game of one-upmanship won by the North Koreans, whose flag flies some 160m high





KOREA WAR TOURISM



Freedom Bridge; aerial view of Panmunjom (left); the North from Dora Observatory (below)



NOT YOUR AVERAGE TOURIST ITINERARY

North Korea It's actually not that hard to visit North Korea. The established experts are Koryo Tours, a Westerner-staffed outfit in Beijing. It specialises in tours to the Mass Games gymnastic spectacular in Pyongyang.

Darvaza In the 1970s, Soviet gas explorers accidentally collapsed the roof of a cavern in the Turkmenistan desert. Smelling methane, they decided to burn it off before continuing exploration. It's still burning after half a century. Travellers can camp next to this vast flaming crater. It is like being next to the gates of hell – which also occurred to the locals, as Darvaza means “gateway”.

Chernobyl Remarkably, Chernobyl, site of a nuclear disaster in 1986, is now a tourist attraction run by the Ukrainian government. The 30km exclusion zone is now open, although some areas are still considered too dangerous to visit.

Anthrax Island Gruinard Island, off the north-west coast of Scotland, has a sinister past as the site of biological warfare testing during WWII. But after decontamination – including the entire island being drenched with formaldehyde – it was declared clean in 1990 and is now openly promoted to tourists – as well as harbouring plenty of healthy sheep.

preposterous, guides say that the North has asked in all seriousness for a share of the tourism proceeds, since it put the effort into digging the tunnel in the first place.

DMZ tours usually also take in the Dora Observatory, where a viewing platform with binoculars gives a clear view into the North. From a distance, it looks surprisingly beautiful: a range of often snow-covered peaks. You can also see two of the tallest flagpoles in the world, one on each side of the border, a game of one-upmanship eventually won by the North, whose flag flies some 160m high.

It's no surprise that a visit here comes with eccentricities. For example, you can't take a camera into the tunnel, but can buy a photo *jigsaw* of the tunnel in the gift shop, right next to the DMZ baseball caps and officially endorsed DMZ barbed-wire souvenirs.

For the Panmunjom visit – the alternative to the DMZ tour, photo opportunities are strictly moderated. There is, though, plenty to see here – far more than one might expect. The border is straddled by a series of blue UN buildings in which official meetings are still often held, and you can enter one. Since the border bisects the main table (upon which three microphones record every word), this is the one place to wander unrestricted into North Korea, or at least a few metres of it. Next

to the building, a small concrete line marks the border. Also in the JSA is the so-called Bridge of No Return, one of two (the other being the Freedom Bridge at the south of the DMZ, covered on both tours) where prisoner exchanges have taken place over the years.

The whole area is full of surprises. There is a town practically on the border on the South Korean side, called Daeseong-dong, and apart from the constant threat of imminent invasion it's not such a bad place to live: there are no taxes or national service, modern housing and generous land allocations. Its farmers raise ginseng, rice and beans. Also, since nobody in their right mind (Daeseong-dong apart) has built within the DMZ for more than 50 years, it has evolved into a wildlife reserve, with flocks of birdlife and herds of deer within sight of the tour buses.

There is a hope that when reunification comes this will remain an environmental haven. But reunification is much further away now than it was eight or nine years ago. And for all the perplexing novelty of a border tour, it's also a sober reminder of the brutality of the Korean War. They call it a fratricidal war: brother against brother. A glimpse of the border in action provides both a reason for hope that it will never be repeated, and an illustration of the fear that it might.

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