

# KUMGANG

## *THE NORTH KOREAN GHOST TOWN*



The Mount Kumgang tourist complex in North Korea, near the DMZ, was built in 1998 by the South Korean giant company Hyundai. The chaebol (Korean word for people who own family-controlled conglomerates) paid a fee of \$1 billion to the North Korean government for 50 years of exclusivity. The cost of the 500 km<sup>2</sup> project was \$400 million, including hotels, a spa, a fire station, a tourism office, a golf course, a supermarket, a clinic and tours in the mountain...

Kumgangsan resort attracted nearly 2 millions tourists from 1998 to 2008.

In July 2008, a South Korean tourist, Miss Park Wang-ja, was shot dead there. As a result, South Korea decided to stop all the tours in North Korea. The North Korean government said the tourist entered the military zone, and ignored the warnings from the North Korean soldiers.

So in retaliation, North Korea decided to seize the whole tourist complex.

This decision was a real drama. Not only for the tourism industry, but also for the separated families: Kumgang was the place where hundreds of North and South Korean relatives were able to meet each other for the first time in decades. For those reasons, since 2008, Mount Kumgang complex has become a ghost town. Only very few western tourists could visit the area.

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The road leading to Kungang built for tourists is still sealed off all along by high green wire fences, in order to prevent local people from accessing the area and the tourist complex. A billboard just before arriving says that Seoul is only 64 km away. .



When my North Korean guides talk about Kumgang, their main interest is about trekking in the sacred mountain. They like to speak about the "Diamond Mountains", which are part of the Korean history.



What a picturesque scene! Mountains peaks and pine forests everywhere. A quick stop in Samil Lake allows me to enjoy the incredible view of unspoiled water. Such a perfect place to canoe or chill on a long chair. However, nothing can be done.



The only people I see are soldiers taking care of cows...



My bus arrives in the complex. At first glance, it looks like a giant empty parking lot of a supermarket. There is nobody around, not even a soldier.



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Hyundai even built a fire station in the complex...All the former footprints from the South Korea investors have been deleted. In the elevator, the Samsung logo has been hidden by a scotch tape.



Kumgang was the place where hundreds of North and South Korean relatives were able to meet each other for the first time in decades. Unauthorized contacts between people from North and South are strictly forbidden in both Koreas. Those meetings were the only legal way for families separated to catch up with each other after years of living apart.



Few houses are along the road, with some signs on the doors. My guides explain that they have been seized by the North Korea government when South Korea failed to keep its commitments. A classic way to rewrite history in North Korea!



A sign on a door that shows this house has been seized by the north Korean government. Like everything in the complex. Hyundai lost \$1 billion.



A billboard shows what the complex could have been, if only the joint venture deal would have gone on... North Korea tries to find new investors but the task is tough.



Bus stop for Haegeumgang floating hotel. No more buses for years. Since 2008, Mount Kungang complex has become a ghost town.

My guide says that the whole complex is built with North Korea's funds. Of course this is not true. I'm always amazed at the way they lie, so well and so often! A real talent.



Haegeumgang floating hotel. The 90-meter floating structure has travelled over 13000 km to arrive in North Korea. It was originally located in the Great Barrier Reef, then it was moved to Vietnam. In the year 2000, Hyundai decided to use it for the Kungang Tourism Project. 20 millions dollars lost in this hotel.



The main attraction is the supermarket invested by a Hong Kong company. Inside, it is surprisingly modern.





다스한 아래쪽에  
잠 재워주면

It looks like a duty free shop in an airport, with lots of beauty products, comfortable sofas and a huge plasma TV. Anyway, we are in North Korea! Suddenly a man in his undershirt comes out of a backstage door. The TV broadcasts some war propaganda movie.



The shop is filled with 10 North Korean sales assistants who have nothing to do except smiling.



My guide asks for the South Korean products sold here, but he is quite disappointed. As a matter of fact, nowadays most of the shops just sell local North Korean products like ginger roots and honey, as the deal with the South is over. Euro is accepted as payment.



They say we are the first western visitors for months. .



The kind of beauty products all the North Korean women from Pyongyang dream to buy. Only the elite can access to them.



I ask for the toilets and I'm invited to go at the first floor. I discover a brand-new coffee shop, totally abandoned, far from the North Korean style. A shop attendant discreetly follows me all the way. When I take out my camera, in no time at all, she stops me from taking pictures. . .



According to my guide, everything is working as usual, even if it is empty!



The last news about the resort tells that North Korea is trying to launch a new cruise ship routes linking Kumgang to Vladivostok. It seems a casino could be open at the boat. Meanwhile, the old people from the North and South separated die one after another..



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