Life and Seoul

The border between North and South Korea is the world's most heavily militarised. So why is there a funfair and busloads of smiling tourists?

WORDS **EDWARD DOCX**

The first totems we drive past are the Garbage Mountains. And, contrary to the name, they are almost beautiful – green, rolling, lightly wooded and crisscrossed by trails on which Seoul-weary citizens might wander. The South Koreans are proud of having transformed their terrible trash problems into parkland; they do it carefully, stabilising the vast mounds, protecting nearby rivers, planting skillfully and collecting methane to heat civic amenities. We are on Freedom Motorway – so called, they say, because one day it will reconnect the communist North with the capitalist South. I am with my translator, Kwon, and a photographer and we are on the 35-mile journey out of Seoul towards the world's most heavily militarised border, which divides the two countries.

The Han River runs beside us deep and wide and glinting in metallic shades of blue-grey. The road turns north. As we move outside the precincts of Seoul, we begin to pass pale clusters of tower blocks. These are further evidence of the economic miracle: the satellite cities. And here live the ever-expanding metropolitan overspill in thousands upon thousands of new apartments linked by malls and walkways that light up at night with an ethereal charm. Another few miles and Kwon points towards an industrial complex, the place where LG, the vast electronics company, is developing its "eighth generation" technology; so sharp and real, he jokes, that they don't dare bring it out for fear of people walking straight through the screens. His pride, several decades into the job, is characteristic of South Koreans.

So far so good on Freedom Highway. But now, some 15 miles in, the tone of our trip begins to change. Besides the billboards, we begin passing under several bridges daubed in cheaper fly posters. They seem unnecessarily frequent and yet they carry neither traffic nor pedestrians. Kwon's face becomes more sombre. They are anti-tank devices, he explains, dummy bridges, heavy concrete structures primed with explosives, ready to be detonated in >

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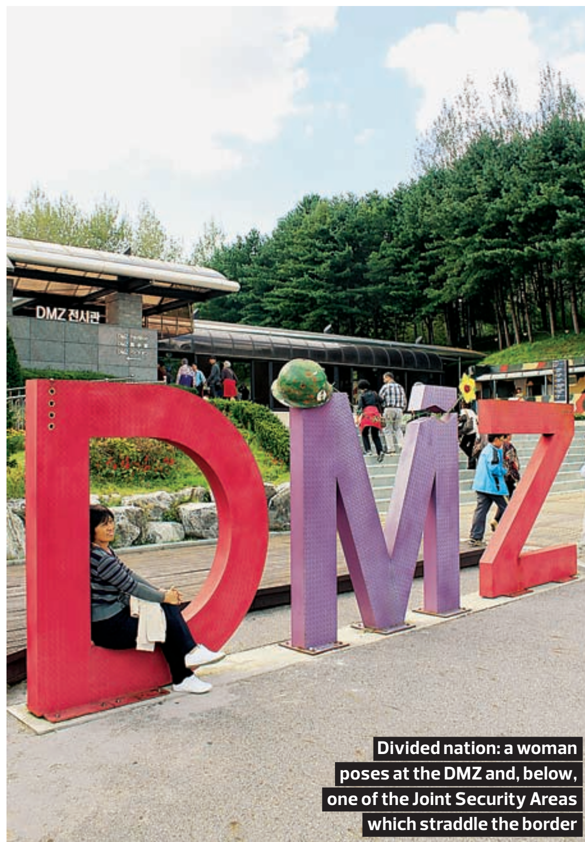
"The scariest place on earth": (left) soldiers and dogs guard the DMZ (Demilitarised Zone) between North and South Korea. Above: the Han River snaking through Seoul

PHOTOGRAPH **NATHAN BENN**

the event of an invasion. To the South Koreans, this is not idle talk: the Seoul subway has signs telling passengers what to do in the event of an attack. Not a year goes by without some dangerous border skirmish or serious naval incident (such as the sinking of the warship Cheonan in March); they consider invasion a real and present danger. By most conventional military measures, the South would eventually overwhelm the North, but the capital's proximity to the border weighs heavily – decisively – in the balance of such grim calculations, since Seoul would be horribly vulnerable long before any such conflict could be "won".

BEFORE THE SECOND World War, Korea was a colony of Japan. When the Japanese surrendered to the Americans, Korea was freed but divided into two zones of occupation roughly along the 38th parallel: North–Soviet and South–American. Political chaos and infighting ensued. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, China backed the North Koreans with air support from Russia while America backed the South Koreans with the ground support of the UK and UN. Communism faced capitalism in what was effectively a cold-war super-power showdown by proxy. The ceasefire signed on 27 July 1953 was only an armistice agreement, and the two Koreas remain technically at war.

Twenty-five miles out of central Seoul, the Han River on our left is mingling with the murkier waters of the Imjin River, which the South Koreans call "the river of the dead" because of the number of bodies that (they claim) floated down from the North during the rumoured famines of the 1990s. It's a macabre name for a macabre place. And no less so for the English ear since it was during the Korean War that the Imjin also witnessed the legendary last stand of the 400 men of the Gloucestershire Regiment who, cut off and surrounded, defended the crest of a single hill against the relentless Chinese attack (eight times their number) for 24 crucial hours, which allowed the rest of the UN troops to regroup.



Divided nation: a woman poses at the DMZ and, below, one of the Joint Security Areas which straddle the border

RICHARD REED; ALAMY

We begin to pass pillboxes, troops, sentry posts and artillery. Our journey slows. The last few miles are clogged with checkpoints, and both sides of the road have stark warning signs: "Danger of Death – Landmines". But the strangest thing of all is that when we arrive at the infamous Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) – "the scariest place on earth", as Bill Clinton once said – we find that it is packed with giggling crocodiles of children in bright yellow tracksuits and coaches full of buoyant OAPs wearing visors and eating ice creams. And there's a funfair and candyfloss and fast-food restaurants and people selling baseball caps and yoyos, and somehow the whole thing is wrong.

The DMZ was originally created as a buffer zone. Running for 160 miles across the Korean peninsular, it is 2.5 miles wide – two on either side of the actual border – and the idea is that neither side deploys military hardware inside its confines. When you watch the video as part of the "DMZ experience", they make the case (after the scenes of orphans and slaughter) for it becoming a wonderful nature reserve. But the DMZ is no more the place for a funfair than Alton Towers is for testing missiles. Putting aside the history of the actual war – families severed; 3 million slaughtered – there has been a steady recurrence of shootings, stand-offs, murders and maiming in and around the border every year since. Perhaps the most chilling incident (and there are plenty of candidates) was the killing of two American officers by North Korean guards, who brutally hacked them to death with the axe that they were using to trim a tree that obscured a line of sight in the Joint Security Area (JSA).

The JSA is the area right in the heart of the DMZ where the two sides meet to negotiate in the blue huts that straddle the actual border and are painstakingly divided within – equal square footage, lines down the centre of the tables, same number of chairs, etc. The JSA is also where the guards of the two nations stand face to face, legs apart and fists clenched, quivering in readiness to fight, seize, repel or shoot defectors, one side wearing sunglasses so they don't get into any incendiary staring matches.

Ice creams and souvenirs notwithstanding, the main thing the visitor comes to feel when considering all this – the military machismo, the acronyms, the deadly infantile theatre >

don't much like the idea of a greater Korea; and the Kim dynasty can only lose through unification – what they need most of all for their internal politics is a big and highly visible enemy muscling up and down their border day and night.

Meanwhile, there is a new younger generation of South Koreans for whom the issue is by no means as clear cut as it was. They are well educated and they know all about the German experience and they are afraid of the cost – estimated at trillions of dollars; they are fearful that reunification will derail the economic miracle, plunge the entire peninsular into a backward spiral and result in the arrival of thousands of economic migrants hanging around those totems of which they are so proud. South Korea has moved on too far, they say. Olympics, World Cups, Grand Prix, the G20... that's what modern Korea is about these days. It just can't assimilate a nation stuck in the 1950s which has neither the food to feed its people nor the power to light their homes. (The cost of the power alone would be staggering – at night the satellite pictures show North Korea as being almost totally dark.) So now the South Korean president is proposing a reunification tax to help prepare the country for when the day comes. But it's far from clear whether the majority would vote for it.

SO TO THE LAST part of our tour – the Third Tunnel of Aggression – in its way, the most sinister "attraction" of our day trip. While negotiating above ground, the North dug a series of secret tunnels under the DMZ to rush troops up behind enemy lines. These were only discovered after a defector revealed their existence and the South began looking for them. So far they've found four, but there are rumoured to be another 20.

First we catch the funfair-style monorail ride straight down into the ground. Then we begin a long and stooping walk in single file that takes us right under the DMZ. Eventually, in the narrow and damp claustrophobia about 500ft below the surface, we come to a point where the south has blocked the tunnel with several coils of razor wire, concrete and a massively reinforced steel door locked with the world's heaviest padlock. If ever there was a visual metaphor... Someone brave and wise and with a very big heart needs to find that key and stop the madness. ■

ESSENTIALS

Korean Air (0800 413 000; koreanair.com) flies London Heathrow to Seoul Incheon from £757 return. The IP Boutique Hotel (ipboutiquehotel.com) has doubles from £110 a night. Further information from the Korean National Tourist Office, New Zealand House, Haymarket, London SW1 (020 7321 2535; tour2korea.com; visitseoul.net)

of the guards, one flag higher, the other flag wider – is that the whole place is about as insane as humanity can manage: terrifying, ridiculous, brittle, fraught, psychotic. And the most telling impression the visitor takes away from the Joint Security Area is that it is the most *in*secure place on the continent.

THIS YEAR BROUGHT a crucial moment in the macro-politics of the two Koreas. There are persistent rumours of the ill health of Kim Jong-il, the autocratic ruler of the North, and in October news agencies reported that his son, Kim Jong-un, had been anointed heir. Will this mean change? Older South Koreans think it unlikely, while the few sources who know anything about the Kim dynasty's inner circle maintain that Kim Jong-un is just like his father. On the other hand, say some young Seoulians, Kim Jong-un was educated in Switzerland and is rumoured to like burgers. And he's only 27. Will he have the stomach for another 50 years' hardline communism?

Despite the propaganda on both sides, we can be fairly sure that the ordinary folk of North Korea are no more bent on military aggression than ordinary folk anywhere in the world. Kwon has travelled there several times – and they want what we all want, he says: decent food, security, healthcare, shelter and the chance to bring up their children without fear. Indeed there is also a cynical line of thinking that the only people at the table who unequivocally want reunification (and fast) are, perversely, the North Korean people.

Constant alert: watchtowers along the DMZ, which is 160 miles long and 2.5 miles wide

RICHARD REED

Except, of course, they are not at the table. The Americans seek to retain reasons for their heavy military presence in South Korea; the Chinese and the Russians want the buffer zone of a communist North; the Japanese >

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