The Issue of the Ethics and Impact of Tourism in the DPRK

Ethical behaviour in tourism is often defined as the responsibility of individuals and organisations to consider the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of their actions. It requires careful deliberation regarding the effects on various stakeholders, such as local communities, workers, tourists, and governments. In the case of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea, the ethical concerns surrounding tourism are particularly complex. While some view tourism as an opportunity to engage with one of the world’s most isolated nations, others raise significant concerns about the potential for tourism to directly or indirectly fund and legitimise the oppressive regime that governs the country.

One of the key ethical issues surrounding tourism in North Korea is the concern that tourism revenue may be used to "fund and legitimise the regime," as highlighted by various human rights organisations. These groups argue that any financial growth , including that from tourists, might serve to strengthen the Kim regime, which has been widely criticised for systemic human rights violations, including ,forced labor, and widespread surveillance of its citizens.

However, there is significant ambiguity regarding the actual financial flow from tourism in North Korea, as the government has not released any credible economic data. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to ascertain how much revenue is generated by tourism, and more importantly, where it is allocated. Without clear data, it is impossible to definitively argue whether tourism in the DPRK directly supports the government’s human rights violations.

Lord David Alton, the Chair of the UK Government's All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea, has expressed concerns over tourism to the country, stating, “I don’t think people should simply go to North Korea as tourists. Their visit provides the regime with foreign currency and aids and abets a regime which the United Nations Commission of Inquiry report says is responsible for human rights violations 'without parallel.'” This statement echoes the broader ethical concern that, even if tourists are unaware, their visits may inadvertently contribute to the regime’s continued power and its ability to suppress dissent.

Visitors are typically escorted by government-approved guides, and are restricted from interacting freely with local citizens. Any form of unsanctioned communication or behaviour is severely penalised, which gives the country an almost "dystopian" atmosphere, particularly in comparison to global norms for free movement and expression.

Furthermore, the portrayal of North Korea as a country trapped in a totalitarian regime can often overshadow the experiences of its citizens. While tourism may bring economic benefits to local areas, it is also critical to consider how much of this revenue actually reaches ordinary citizens. Given the tight grip the regime has on the economy, it is unclear whether any benefits from tourism truly trickle down to the people.

**Points to consider**

* Is it still ethical to travel to the DPRK given that there are no confirmed reports that it helps with the regime ?
* Is there a way to monitor the safety of the travellers to the DPRK ?
* Should travellers to the DPRK be subject to a fine?

**Websites that could help :**

* <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/blog/is-it-ethical-to-travel-to-north-korea/2023/5/8#:~:text=While%20human%20rights%20groups%20have,Pioneer%20Tours%20help%20spark%20interests>
* <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/ethics-taking-trip-north-korea-tourist-n193736>
* <https://www.inertianetwork.com/magazine/ethics-and-realities-of-visiting-north-korea>