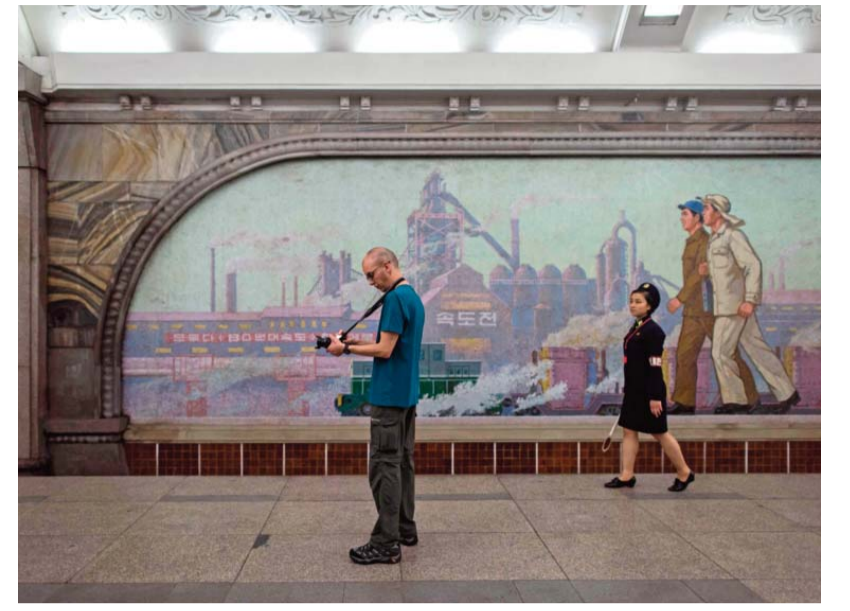




Tourists pose for a group photo before statues of late North Korean leaders Kim Il-Sung (left) and Kim Jong-Il (right), on Mansu hill in Pyongyang. — AFP photos



Tourists take selfie during a visit to a subway station in Pyongyang.



Last chance to see North Korea for US tourists

The Westerners lined up yesterday before giant statues of North Korea's founder Kim Il-Sung and his son and successor Kim Jong-Il and, on command from their guide, bowed deeply. It is a ritual that the Trump administration intends to stop US tourists performing, with Washington due to impose a ban this week on its citizens holidaying in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as the North is officially known.

"President Kim Il-Sung liberated our country and built a people's paradise on this land," they were told. Call center manager Kyle Myers, 28, from Ireland, said he wanted "to go somewhere very different from what I'm used to" for his first trip to Asia, "to see something that not a lot of people from back home have seen". The mounting tensions in the year since he booked the tour had made him nervous, he said, but he added: "I don't see the threat here for tourists as long as they behave themselves and they follow the rules of the country."

as the potential ramifications for North Koreans who earn their living from tourism, he said, it would "completely eliminate any human interaction between United States citizens and North Korean citizens". Pyongyang's state propaganda about the US was "100 percent negative", he said, but contacts between tourists and locals "work against the idea that foreigners are some kind of monolithic evil force out to undermine the North Koreans".



A tourist poses for a photo before the Taedong river in Pyongyang.

The move comes amid heightened tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile ambitions-it launched a rocket earlier this month which specialists say could reach Alaska or Hawaii-and after the death of US student Otto Warmbier, who had been imprisoned for more than a year by Pyongyang. Warmbier was convicted of crimes against the state and sentenced to 15 years' hard labor for trying to steal a propaganda poster from a Pyongyang hotel. He was sent home in June in a mysterious coma that proved fatal soon afterwards.

Most tourists to North Korea are motivated by curiosity and the desire to experience a different destination. The iconic 20-metre-high (66-feet) statues at Mansu hill look out over Pyongyang and groups of North Koreans in suits and ties arrive regularly to pay their respects. Passing traffic is obliged to slow down. As the tourists reached the platform speakers played "We miss our general", about Kim Jong-Il, the father of current leader Kim Jong-Un.

'A little disquieting'

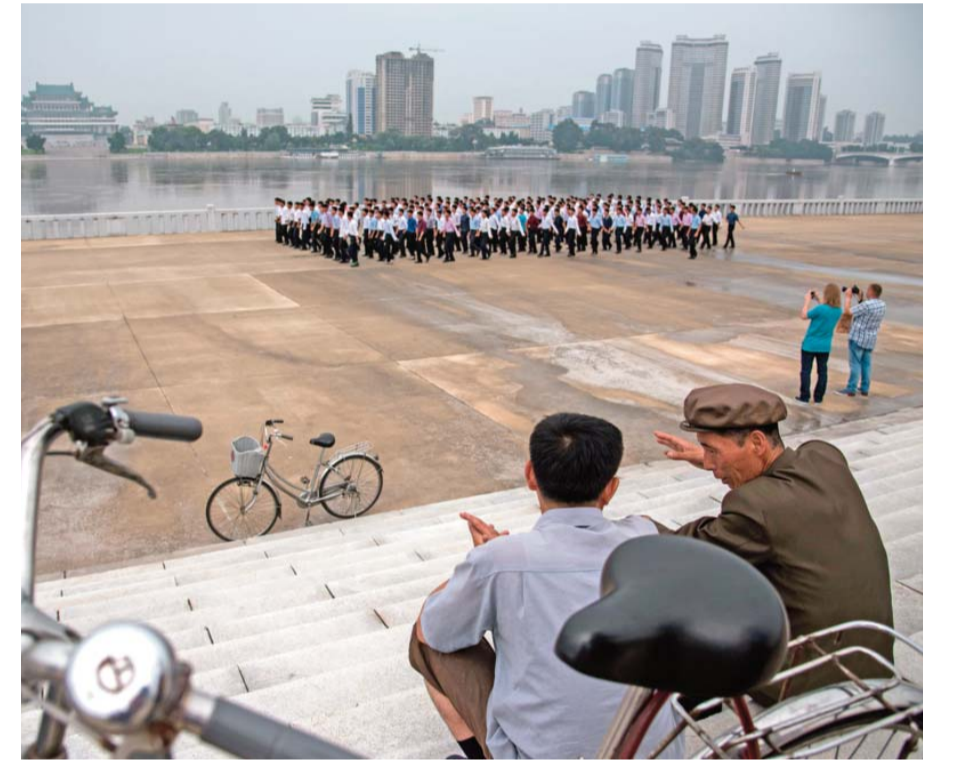
Some of the visitors-who paid from 1,850 euros (\$2,157) for the tour-expressed enthusiasm. Australian IT manager Pallavi Phadke, 43, was among those who placed a bouquet before the statues. It was "a sign of respect", she told AFP. "It's the same as covering your head when you go to a mosque or removing your shoes when you go to a temple. The people seem happy, they certainly don't appear to be oppressed or anything," she said. "They're very proud of their country, they're proud of their history and it's nice to watch them be patriotic."

Many disagree, with the United Nations, multiple Western governments and independent groups accusing Pyongyang of widespread human rights violations. Other tourists were more skeptical. Mark Hill, a writer and editor from Calgary in Canada, compared the statues to "a very grim Mount Rushmore". "It's all very impressive and also a little disquieting," he said. For years the US State Department has warned its citizens against travelling to North Korea, telling them that they are "at serious risk of arrest and long-term detention under North Korea's system of law enforcement", which "imposes unduly harsh sentences for actions that would not be considered crimes in the United States", including showing disrespect to the country's leaders and proselytizing. It is "entirely possible that money spent by tourists in the DPRK" goes to fund its weapons programs, it adds. The ban will go into force 30 days after it is formally declared, said department spokeswoman Heather Nauert, and "US passports will be invalid for travel to, through and in North Korea".

'Monolithic evil force'

The vast majority of tourists to North Korea are from China, its sole major ally and key provider of trade and aid. Americans make up around 20 percent of the 4,000 to 5,000 Western tourists who go to the country each year, according to Simon Cockrell of Koryo Tours, the leader in the niche market, which brought Sunday's visitors to Pyongyang. Warmbier's death had already hammered the market. He said, with bookings down 50 percent since then. "It's would-be customers' perceptions that anybody can make a mistake," he told AFP. "And almost everyone in their lives has made some mistake and of course they don't want the consequences of that mistake to be so devastating."

But Washington's move, he said, was self-defeating. As well



Tourists (right) take photos before the Taedong river in Pyongyang.

"The idea that tourism is somehow sustaining the government is absurd," he added. "The numbers are very low, the revenues are very low." Young Pioneer Tours, the firm which brought Warmbier to the North, had already said it would no longer take US citizens to the country. Among Sunday's tour group was comedy writer Evan Symon, from Los Angeles, who as a result of Washington's ban is likely to be one of the last American tourists to the country for several years. "It's just what happened," he said. "Kind of cool in a way, I guess." — AFP

London Zoo welcomes a new kind of visitor: Robotic dinosaurs



A tour guide poses with a puppet of a baby T Rex in London Zoo's new Time Travel Safari exhibit named Zoorassic Park in London.

London Zoo is welcoming a new star attraction this summer: robotic dinosaurs. Visitors will see robotic replicas of Mesozoic-era dinosaurs, including T. Rex and Triceratops, which lived approximately 65 million years ago, at a "time travel safari" exhibit named Zoorassic Park.

The robots make sounds and motions that mimic the real-life dinosaurs. Some even drip water out of their mouths or spray it at passers-by. Information about the dinosaurs' massive extinction is dispersed throughout the display at the zoo in north London. At the end, visitors are "transported" back to modern times with a video on endangered species, recent extinctions and conservation efforts. The exhibition opens Saturday and runs until Sept 3. — AP



A tour guide poses with a replica of a T Rex in London Zoo's new Time Travel Safari exhibit named Zoorassic Park in London. — AFP photos



This undated artist rendering provided by Pier55 Inc/Heatherwick Studio, shows the proposed redevelopment of Pier 55 in New York City. — AP photos

Futuristic NY pier project pits billionaire vs billionaire

A crumbling old New York City pier is at the center of an urban renewal effort that's turned into a battle between billionaires. Media mogul Barry Diller and his wife, fashion maven Diane von Furstenberg, have pledged to transform the pier on the Hudson River into a \$250 million futuristic park and entertainment space. One major opponent of the plan is real estate developer Douglas Durst.

He has joined forces with fellow environmentalists who argue that the avant-garde structure will disrupt the river's wildlife. Attorney Richard Emery, who represents the opponents, told The Associated Press that a meeting is planned for Monday to try to reach a settlement and avert a lawsuit against the project. The Hudson River Park Trust plans to proceed with work in mid-August. — AP



In this file photo, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, left, and her husband, media mogul Barry Diller, attend the The Museum of Modern Art Film Benefit 2014, in New York.