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NORTH KOREA'S BORDER IS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO PENETRATE IN THE WORLD. EVEN THE CIA HAS TROUBLE CROSSING IT. WE FIGURED OUT HOW: ENTER THE NORTH KOREAN AMATEUR GOLF TOURNAMENT. IT'S TEE TIME INSIDE THE AXIS OF EVIL

BY KEVIN COOK



“You da mandarin!”
The Brits were cheering the second secretary. A trim, bespectacled diplomat in electric-blue golf togs, the second secretary—Mongolia’s deputy ambassador to North Korea—laced his drive around a dogleg toward a herd of scrawny goats. He pumped his fist while the Brits, Alex and Simon, hailed him with sprays of Korean lager and shouts of “You da mandarin” and “You da Manchurian,” until somebody said that mandarins and Manchurians are Chinese, not Mongolian.

The beery Brits took that in. “Very well then,” Alex said. “You da Mongolian!”

The second secretary bowed. “Crazy boys, I love your ass,” he said. Or words to that effect—I was distracted by the beauty-pageant winner who was buffing my balls. She was my caddie, Sun-Yi. We were next up in the 2012 Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Amateur Golf Open, the biggest golfing event in the unfree world, and I needed my A game. To catch the leaders I’d have to make a run at late dictator Kim Jong II’s course record of 11 holes in one.

Fifteen golfers had come to North

ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTIN PAGE

DANGER // 18 // HOLES

Korea: from Hong Kong and Dongguan in China, from Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, from Australia, New Zealand, England, Finland and the United States. Some flew to Beijing and rode an overnight train that creaked through 100 miles of desolate North Korean countryside where the electricity might work for an hour a day. I caught a 15-hour flight from JFK in New York to Seoul, South Korea, followed by a two-hour flight to Shenyang, China and then a short flight on state-owned Air Koryo to the North Korean capital, Pyongyang. It would have been simpler to fly the 120 miles from Seoul to Pyongyang, but commercial airlines detour around North Korean airspace to avoid getting shot down.

As the world's last Stalinist dictatorship, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a relic of the Cold War. After World War II freed Korea from Japanese occupation, Russia took over the northern half of the country, while the U.S. ran the southern half. Today prosperous, golf-crazy South Korea buzzes with commerce, Russia and China embrace their own forms of moneygrubbing, and even Cuba chases tourist dollars. But the DPRK sticks to grim, stone-faced totalitarianism. Only a handful of Westerners are allowed in each year. The regime views them—us—as likely spies, and while getting into the country was easy, there were no guarantees about getting out. An American soldier who defected to North Korea in 1962 tried to leave in 1966. Forty-six years later he's still in Pyongyang.

As suspected spies we surrendered our cell phones to a soldier at the airport. We were assigned a tour guide who confiscated our passports and a minder whose job was to keep an eye on us. There would be no Wi-Fi during our visit to Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's locked-down land, no internet and not much TV except for state-approved channels that played military music. One golfer who glimpsed a shot of Barack and Michelle Obama holding hands on TV called it North Korean porn.

It wasn't the best week to arrive. Cash-strapped North Korea had recently launched a satellite that experts compared to a dishwasher wrapped in duct tape. It fell apart in flight—a global embarrassment. Aerial photos revealed that the regime had resumed building a nuclear reactor—a global provocation.

The day I arrived, a U.S. general admitted to parachuting *real* spies into North Korea. *The Pyongyang Times* railed against imperialist America, calling the U.S. “a criminal



state” and “the ringleader of man-killing.” A Frommer's travel guide I left in a Shenyang trash can placed North Korea atop its list of dangerous nations. Under “Places to Avoid,” it read, “the entire country.”

But tour planner Dylan Harris, a shaggy-haired Englishman who runs a firm called Lupine Travel, swore I'd be safe behind the Bamboo Curtain. After almost a decade of dealing with North Korea's secretive government, he knew which palms to grease. The regime was as hungry for hard currency as its people were for rice. Fifteen hundred capital dollars per golfer and we were in.

So damn the satellites. Let's launch some Pro-Vs!



ABOVE: THE WRITER WITH HIS CADDIE, SUN-YI. BELOW: SMOG COVERS PYONGYANG. WE GOT INTO NORTH KOREA. WOULD WE GET BACK OUT?



BELOW: A SNAPSHOT WITH “GOLF BROTHER” CHULUUN MUNKHBAT, A MONGOLIAN LAWYER WITH A KILLER SHORT GAME.



from Joseph Stalin to Kim Il Sung—as well as a railway car from Mao Tse-tung, an East German tank, a bear's head from Romanian tyrant (continued on page 131)

On day one of our invasion of the Democratic People's Republic, a dozen pasty golfers gathered on the communist side of the DMZ between North Korea and South Korea, the most dangerous border on earth. More than 500 soldiers have died

KIM JONG IL MADE 11 HOLES IN ONE IN HIS FIRST ROUND OF GOLF. HE FINISHED 38 UNDER PAR—THE BEST ROUND IN GOLF HISTORY.

in various skirmishes at the DMZ, a two-mile-wide stretch of barbed and electrified fences, observation towers and minefields. In 1976 a North Korean lieutenant attacked American soldiers trimming a popular in the DMZ, plunging a hatchet into a U.S. captain's neck. (In North Korea's account, border guards “confronted U.S. troops, daringly catching a flying ax thrown by the enemy.”) Two Americans died.

Our minds led a friendlier tour of the International Friendship Exhibition at Mount Myohyang, where 90,000 gifts attest to the world's affection for North Korean founding father Kim Il Sung, his late son (the golfing commandant) Kim Jong Il and his son, 28-year-old Kim Jong Un, who became the planet's youngest head of state when he took over last year. The gift museum held a bulletproof limousine—a present

GOLF

(continued from page 80)

Nicolae Ceaușescu and, from the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, a stuffed crocodile standing on its hind legs, holding a tray of drinks. America gave a basketball signed by Michael Jordan. The ball led our minder, Mr. Liu [some names have been changed], to ask where we were from.

"America," admitted Josh, the wisass in the bunch, a sweet-swinging six-handicapper working undercover for *Golf Magazine*. "Land of Michael Jordan."

Mr. Liu said, "Down with America!" Which made everyone a little uneasy until he cracked up.

Exhausted, we finally landed at our hotel. A 47-floor tower on an island in the Taedong River, the Yanggakdo International Hotel is the tallest habitable building in North Korea. I say "habitable" because the Yanggakdo is dwarfed by another nearby building, the empty Ryugyong Hotel. Looming over Pyongyang like a 1,000-foot alien rocket, the 105-story Ryugyong was meant to be the nation's showplace, the tallest hotel in the world. But Russian financing fell through. Twenty-five years after construction began, the Ryugyong stands deserted. It appears on no maps. It's bad form to mention its name. Until recently the regime denied its existence even as the so-called Hotel of Doom cast a mile-long shadow over the capital city.

"Can't see a thing," Simon said, staring right at it. "Anyway, our crib's superior."

He was right. Aside from its arm-biting elevators, the Yanggakdo tops most Hiltons. We spent our euros, the preferred imperialist currency, in a subterranean floor featuring a bar, swimming pool, casino, barbershop, massage therapist, billiard and Ping-Pong tables and a three-lane bowling alley. The rest of the hotel was mostly off-limits, with Westerners restricted to a few VIP floors where the rooms were said to be bugged. We were especially not allowed on the fifth floor, which was said to be the spies' floor, where eavesdroppers listen in on the VIP floors above.

Mr. Liu and his colleague Miss Song monitored our movements. The gifts we presented them—cartons of Marlboros for him, chocolates for her—made them rich compared with most North Koreans. Mr. Liu told me I was free to jog up and down the river island but not to cross the bridge that led to the rest of Pyongyang. "Soldiers will stop you," he said. In 2008, when a South Korean woman wandered away from her tour group, a North Korean sentry shot her in the head.

We looked bloody conspicuous in our Titleist and TaylorMade caps, taking practice swings outside our hotel the night before the second annual DPRK Amateur Golf Open. Later, toasting our grim-faced hosts over beers, grayish vodka and several more beers, Josh filled us in on North Korea's golf history. It consists mainly of one tall tale: In 1994, dictator Kim Jong Il teed up at the course we would play the next morning. It was his first round of golf, witnessed by 17 armed guards and members of the regime's

media office. And according to every last witness, the so-called Dear Leader made a hole in one that day. And then he made 10 more. He finished 38 under par for 18 holes, with 11 aces—the best round in golf history. The dictator's score was more than 20 strokes better than any other round anybody ever shot.

Lying in bed that night, I couldn't help thinking that a golf tournament was a pretty stupid reason to fly halfway around the world to a place you might never escape. The only stupider thing would be to fly halfway around the world to a golf tournament and lose.

I had come to win.



On day one of the open we breakfasted on fried eggs, strong coffee and kimchi, the national pickled-cabbage dish, then piled into a tour bus for the drive to the most exclusive golf course in North Korea. Because it's the only golf course in North Korea.

We doped out the tournament on the way. Wisecracking Josh, the *Golf Magazine* mole, was the foremost golfer in a field full of whack-a-mole hacks. Then there was Anti from Finland, a lanky blond engineer with 300-yard power. He might be a threat. The same went for bearded, beery Simon from London. His mate Alex, a garrulous journo from one of Rupert Murdoch's tabloids, swung like he was fending off subpoenas, but Simon could flip a flop shot like Phil Mickelson. His 36 handicap was fishier than sushi.

Aussie Mike's fluid swing got leaky under pressure. Fifty-year-old Kiwi, a genial chop from New Zealand, wouldn't break 100. I was a long shot with no short game, a once-decent 80-shooter who hadn't made a 10-foot putt since 2010. And nobody knew what to think of the Mongolian foursome, who dressed like tour pros. They'd learned the game by watching a David Leadbetter DVD.

The 20-mile ride to Pyongyang Golf Club took an hour. There was no traffic in the smog-shrouded capital, where only party leaders have cars. The deserted eight-lane boulevard was pocked with potholes that forced our bus driver to pick his way forward like a man in a minefield. We passed work crews tending rice paddies and cabbage fields. Old women bent under the weight of water buckets hanging from yokes strapped to their backs. Workers stopped to glance at our bus. We were a novelty, a bunch of foreign guys in golf caps rolling by in air-conditioned splendor.

The clubhouse at Pyongyang Golf Club is a green-gabled hulk on top of a hill. It was dim inside. A painting showing Kim Il Sung greeting world leaders filled one wall, but it was hard to make out the details. Here as elsewhere lights stayed off during the day to conserve electricity. As our eyes adjusted we beheld a row of white-gloved young women in lavender uniforms. Clearly chosen for their looks, our caddies could have passed for Korean Air flight attendants. They had little training as caddies and spoke next to no English. Mine, the beaming Sun-Yi, could say "iron seven," "wood one," "good sha"

and "caddie fee 10 euro." Determined to prove herself, she insisted on marking and cleaning my ball even on the practice green.

"Attention, *s'il vous plaît*." That was Maxime, the tournament director. Plump, silver-haired Maxime, a former PGA European Tour rules official who had made Ryder Cup rulings for Jack Nicklaus and Seve Ballesteros, would take no guff from the sorry likes of us. Rather than stroke play or match play, he announced, we would play the first round by the Callaway scoring system.

"First on the tee will be...Mr. Cook from America!"

I hadn't hit a golf ball in six months. There was no driving range; I was jet-lagged, surprised, with no time to concoct an excuse to let somebody else hit. Sun-Yi handed me a gleaming Top-Flite and a tee. Photographers from the Associated Press and North Korea's Ministry of Sport crouched beside the tee marker to record my opening shot. Josh strolled past with a word of encouragement. "Better you than me, dude," he said.

I took a practice stab. Swing easy, I thought. Rotate hips and shoulders over the left knee. Or is it the right knee? Don't think. Above all don't think about dribbling a grounder off in news photos worldwide. Or whiffing.

At the top of my swing, the ball looked like Pluto. The next sound surprised me: polite applause. My ball climbed over the fairway as Sun-Yi reached for my clubs. "Good sha!" she said.

"The 2012 Democratic People's Republic et cetera, et cetera is under way," Maxime said.

On the green, Sun-Yi went into her elaborate ball-marking ceremony. Stooping at the knees, she marked my ball with a one-won coin, cleaned the ball and cupped it in her hands as if it were a robin's egg. When my turn to putt came she replaced the ball, studied my line to the hole, then showed how the putt would break with a swooping motion of her arms. I pictured my Top-Flite swooping into the cup. Instead it died on the way. The greens were seeded with a strain of grass that seemed to exude glue.

"Five," I told my playing partner, a Mongolian lawyer named Chuluun Munkhbat. "How about you?" Per Maxime's instructions we were keeping each other's scores, just like tour pros.

"One," he said.

"Funny! For a second I thought you said one."

"Yes. One."

I'd watched him make bogey. Maybe this was golf in the Kimdom—we all knew about Kim Jong Il's 11 aces and "official" score of 38 under par in his first round of golf. I wouldn't be party to a third-world plot to bust the records of the old Scottish game. "Mr. Chuluun, you didn't have a hole-in-one," I said.

"Yes, one. Like you."

It took a minute of batting phrases through the language barrier to figure out that Mongolia's golfers, all 50 or 60 of them, keep score by recording how many strokes over par they shoot on each hole. A bogey's a one, a double bogey a two.

We shook hands. "Mr. Chuluun, let's make some zeroes."

His face lit up. "Call me Munkhbat."

He zeroed both par-three holes on the front nine. I zeroed the par-fives. Feeling jaunty as we made the turn, I expected a hot dog at a halfway house but got a multicourse meal instead. In a dining hall at the top of a rickety staircase, where a boxy RCA TV showed ranks of marching soldiers, silent waitresses served bean sprouts in soy sauce, thin-sliced pork, steaming dumplings, crunchy whitefish, rice curry, kimchi, clams, mushrooms in peanut paste and peas with orange and purple tendrils of something or other. We washed it down with ice-cold Tiger beer, the Singaporean lager featured in *Tropic Thunder*. Londoner Alex had us hip-hooraying our hosts until he noticed the numbers stamped on the bottom of his beer can.

"Two fowsin' ten?"

All our beers were past their expiration dates. Importing stale beer helps North Korea fight its trade deficit, which the regime blames on American sanctions.

Alex held his Tiger beer aloft. "Drink up, lads," he said, "before it's too late!"

Munkhbat and I waddled to the 10th tee with bellies full of Tigers. We spent much of the afternoon up to our knees in the

course's jungly rough. Two hours later I limped in with a round of 90. Bogey golf.

Maxime collected scorecards. By his reckoning, given our handicaps and some strange rules that made no sense at all, my 90 was worse than Munkhbat's 102. I'd shot my way to second-to-last place with the second-best score of the day. Our leader was Simon. Alex offered his countryman a toast. "To Simon. Cunt-gratulations!"

In the evening our minders led the way to the Pyongyang Circus. A live orchestra accompanied acrobats and dancing bears while the crowd—mostly soldiers—applauded in unison as if keeping time to music. We golfers cheered the waltzing, rope-skipping bears and went wild for the feature attraction, a baboon that roller-skated down a slide to the stage, where he leaped and dunked a basketball.

Celtics fan Josh yawned. "Big deal. Nobody was guarding him."

Back at the Yanggakdo, the state-sponsored TV channel was running a nature documentary. In one sequence a colony of ants encountered a stream. The ants formed a raft, a squiggling Frisbee-size mass of themselves, and floated into the water. The ones on the bottom drowned, but the others made it across. I wanted to yell, "Korean ants, save yourselves!" What would the electronic ears in the walls make of that? Instead

I did push-ups and practiced my putting. Let them listen to grunts and groans.



Day two brought a new scoring plan called the Stableford system in which double bogeys and worse don't hurt your score. My new playing partner, Kiwi, the genial duffer from New Zealand, said he ran a candy factory in China. "Guess what's one of our top items," he said, pronouncing it "oitemes."

I guessed candy.

"Edible underwear! Quoit popular with the Chinese. We also make a gummy dildo."

After a bouncy nine and another multicourse lunch, we joined the others at the 10th tee for a long-drive contest. I set the pace until the second guy hit. Antti, the tall Finn, thumped one 310 yards but was DQ'd by Maxime when his ball ran into the rough, leaving the 40-euro pot to Simon for his 300-yarder.

I needed to par the long 18th hole to stay alive in the tournament. My three-wood second shot bounced into sticky rough a hundred yards from the green. "You moit tike a drop," Kiwi clucked. But I hadn't flown 8,000 miles and surrendered my cell phone to play for sixes. I took an iron seven and slashed. Leaves and roots flew. Sun-Yi covered her eyes. The ball blooped into a gully short of the green. My chip ran past the hole. My putt rifled off the back of the tin cup, popped straight up and fell in. "Nice pa!" Sun-Yi chimed. We shook hands, a folded 10-euro bill passing from my hand to hers. Ten euros, equal to about \$13, was a wind-fall for Sun-Yi, who probably gave it to her father when she got home. If he's a typical worker, her father earns about \$21 a week.

Maxime, tallying scores in the clubhouse, promised to decipher his rankings in time for tomorrow's final round. Simon looked unbeatable with his 30-plus handicap and net scores in the 50s. Dinner was sizzling beef at North Korea's number one restaurant. That's its name: Restaurant Number 1. Picking strips of meat off steaming hibachis, we dipped them in soy and mustard sauces. Until Mr. Liu mentioned that we weren't eating beef.

Two dozen chopsticks stopped in midair. Kiwi, who knew his way around East Asia, said we moit be foinding a new meaning for *dogleg*.

Mr. Liu said, "Duck!" Aussie Mike ducked his head as if dodging a bullet. "It's duck," Mr. Liu repeated.

After dinner Mr. Liu led us to a firing range. "Don't worry. We won't be shooting you," he said. The range was a warren of half-lit channels with bull's-eye targets at one end and trigger-happy golfers at the other. There was nothing virtual about this first-person shooter game. Pretty girls handed out small-bore .22 rifle shells in brass casings. Unnerved at the thought of using live ammo—we could spin around and slaughter Simon!—we spent the first few minutes shooting walls and floor.

I liked my wood-stock rifle better than my putter. Placing the sight on a bull's-eye 55 yards away, I sipped a breath, held it and



"After they smoked the peace pipe, everyone got the munchies, so they invented Thanksgiving."

squeezed the trigger. The bullet struck the target a couple of inches off-line. My next shot was closer. My last bullet drilled a hole in the bull's-eye. Damned if I wasn't going to finish first in something in this hemisphere.

"Perfect," Mr. Liu said. "Good shooting for an American."

The pistol was another story. You can't brace a handgun against your shoulder. You have to aim it in your outstretched hand. None of my shots hit near the bull's-eye.

"Let me try," Mr. Liu said.

Our minder was 30 years old, with sharp cheekbones and dark, watchful eyes. Officially a tour guide, he was also a representative of his government, trained for mental and physical excellence, and this was the first favor he'd asked in a week of looking after us.

"Sure thing." I handed him the gun. Mr. Liu shut one eye and squeezed off a round. He missed the bull's-eye by half an inch.

"Almost," I said.

He fired again. A little higher.

"Almost!"

Two more shots left two more holes, evenly spaced half an inch off the bull's-eye. At this point I quit talking. I was catching on. Mr. Liu squeezed off three more rounds, completing a ring of bullet holes around the bull's-eye. Then he gave me a look that said, Sometimes I get tired of watching you pampered fucks screw around in my country. Maybe his look meant something only he knew, but the general point crossed the DMZ between us. He was more than a tour guide.

Next he led us to an outdoor enclosure. "Here you shoot chicken." Sure enough, a man scooting past with a squirming bundle released two birds, a rooster and a hen, into a dirt-walled enclosure 50 yards away. "Five euros per shot," Mr. Liu said. A premium price to put our live ammo in live animals.

Nobody moved. Finally Josh tossed his bucket hat aside. "You wusses!" Hoisting a rifle, he asked how many of us were vegans. He put the rifle sight on the cock's red chest and pulled the trigger. But he chickened out, purposely shooting high. A warning shot, he called it.

The tour bus waited, air-conditioned and karaoke-ready. During the ride to the hotel the Brits used the karaoke mike to regale us with their version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic": "Jesus can't play rugby cuz his dad would rig the game./Jesus can't play rugby cuz his hands are full o' holes./Jesus can't play rugby cuz his crown would burst the ball./Jesus saves, Jesus saves, Jesus saves!"

And then Miss Song surprised us by taking the mike. After a moment of looking at her shoes she began a slow lament for a lost love. Two lovers belonged together, the song went, but were apart for so long that their hearts were torn in half. Eyes shining, she explained that the song was about the two Koreas. The bus went quiet. Maybe the party line about reunification had been drilled into Miss Song since girlhood, and maybe she knew little or nothing of the world beyond this blinkered country whose bosses spent billions on nuclear weapons while hungry citizens huddled

in the dark. But she meant what she sang. Her patriotism made a busful of half-drunk cynics give her a round of applause.



"You da mandrill! Da manicurist. Da Mandingo."

I had the Mongolians heckling the Brits.

"You da mammogram!"

Too late. Simon was home free. Somebody asked Josh, who'd shot 77 in the second round and lost ground, what he'd need to shoot today in order to win. "I'd have to shoot Simon," he said. And if Simon made a wobbly target after draining enough Taedonggangs to make the state-run brewery step up production, he was no wobblier than most of us. We'd closed the bar at four A.M. and gathered four hours later.

With everyone but Simon playing for booby prizes, we swung with abandon on the last day. Sun-Yi learned to say, "Good bogey!"

After scrounging a Mongolian zero at the 17th I needed a third straight par on the par-five 18th to shoot a third straight 90. The definition of bogey golf. To Emerson, foolish consistency was the bogey of little minds, but to me it was a goal that could make or break my week in North Korea. My excuse is that there are only about 1,000 freaks on earth who can really play golf. The rest of us are out for small victories: a career-best round, a winning bet, a par on the last hole.

Sun-Yi marked my ball on the 18th green. She cleaned the ball, replaced it and swooped her arms to show how the putt would break.

A short sidehill putt. Sink it and I could doff my cap and shake hands all around. Miss it and I would have to picture and re-picture this five-foot putt during the long ride back to the hotel, tomorrow's flight to Shenyang, the trip to and a four-hour lay-over in Seoul, a 15-hour flight over the Arctic to JFK and the rest of my miserable life.

"You can moik it," Kiwi said.

Five feet. I'd have to hit it hard. I took a breath and fired. When I looked up the putt was a foot from the hole, losing speed like a North Korean rocket.

We sang Mongolian drinking songs in a clubhouse strewn with beer cans. Simon, posing with the trophy, smiled while we hurled cracks at him. Kiwi handed out breath mints from his factory. The second secretary, who'd fired a net 55 to finish second, called for order. He nodded to Chuluun Munkhbat, who held a bottle of Chinggis vodka.

"Mongolian spirit," Munkhbat called it. Pouring a shot for Simon and one for himself, he toasted the victor, saying he'd see him again "with lower handicap!" Then he went around the room, dispensing a shot and a few words for each player. Fully toasty by the time he got to me, he called me a name that made me forget my putt on the last hole. Chuluun Munkhbat, son of Chuluun of Ulaanbaatar, a descendant of Genghis Khan, touched his shot glass to mine.

"See you again," he said, "golf brother."

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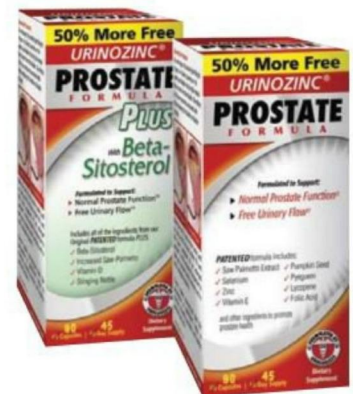
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