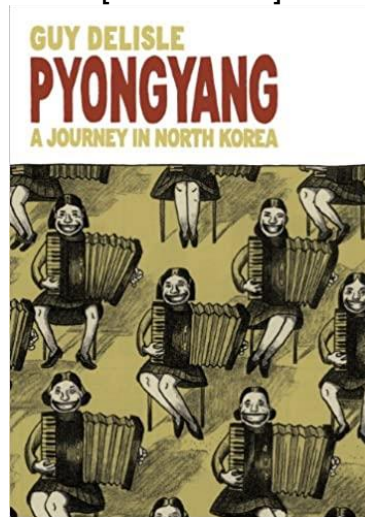


Pyongyang by Guy Delisle

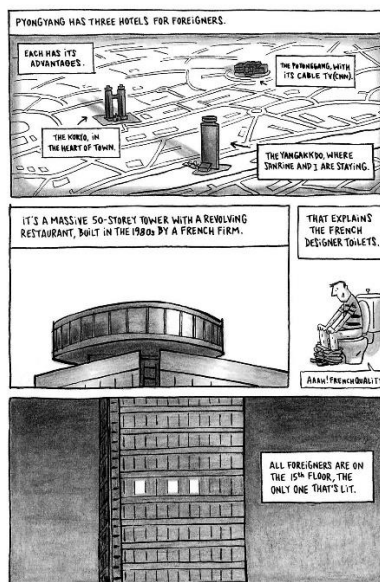
[Non-Fiction]



You could also file this under comedy, for Delisle is an artist with an eye for the absurd, and there's plenty that's absurd about North Korea. The Canadian discovers this on spending a few months working for a French animation studio in the most self-isolated country on the planet.

The tone's set by Delisle's clean, pencil-shaded lines, rendering himself and those he meets as clearly defined cartoons, all the better for expressions of bafflement on Guy's part or the comedic sourness of his implacably stern and stone-faced translator, Mister Sin. "Fresh out of eight years of military service in the country's armed forces. Looks like we're in for a great time! But I don't mind. We're a little family now and that's all that matters: Comrade Guide, Comrade Translator, Foreign Capitalist."

The first thing you learn is that no foreigner is allowed to set foot outside their hotel without being shadowed by at least one of the above (guide or translator, not foreign capitalist), and all such excursions must be pre-arranged. As to the hotel itself – built on an island in the middle of a moat-like river to limit any unauthorised communication with the nation's population – only the floor with foreign nationals staying in it is lit because there's an energy shortage.



Indeed, when Guy is taken to a prominent museum dug into the side of the mountain to withstand nuclear attack, rooms are only illuminated by hand as they pass through. The walls may be made from marble but the light switches are housed in cheap plastic casing with exposed wires dangling.

Back when Delisle visited, the one big department store had no lighting at all (I imagined ushers with ice creams, but no) and there were no street lights at night except to spotlight monuments glorifying Kim Jong-Il or his father Kim Il-Sung who, in spite of being dead, was still President. Yet when Guy is taken to the subway he finds "Marble floors, chandeliers, sculpted columns. It's a subterranean palace to the glory of public transit. Everywhere, garish murals transfigure a reality that just seems drab to me. In a city without enough electricity to power its traffic lights, the subway tunnels are lit up like Las Vegas! The tour ends at the next station... I've never met anyone who's seen more than two stations."



As well as an energy shortage, food was in pretty short supply. But presentation is all, so there were plenty of 'volunteers' in North Korea engaged in painting rocks around trees. When I played the 'Mercenaries' videogame set in North Korea I naively assumed that all those loud-speakers extolling the virtues of the "glorious leader" were Grand Theft Auto-style satire; but no, everywhere Guy goes – whether it's the streets, a construction site, or even the countryside where villagers toil in the fields, there are portable propaganda machines blaring out messages of 'encouragement' or huge signs bearing fanciful slogans like "Advancing gladly despite the hardships!"

Delisle never sneers – he befriends so many locals here, in SHENZHEN, JERUSALEM and BURMA CHRONICLES – he merely observes humanity while shaking his head in wonder. His books are an education but with an emphasis on entertainment. The closest comparison would be Michael Palin’s TV travels, if Palin did his own research then lingered long enough in any location to actually live there.

Also recommended as serious but accessible travel entertainments:

POPPIES OF IRAQ by Brigitte Findakly, Lewis Trondheim

THE ARAB OF THE FUTURE by Riad Sattouf

