

# PAEKU, THE LAND OF FAKE NEWS



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Mount Paektu volcano is a holy place for North Koreans. They consider it the place of their ancestral origin. In the 1950s, the country's founding father Kim Il-Sung commanded an anti-Japanese guerrilla from a secret camp located here.

North Koreans say that his son Kim Jong-il was born here in 1942. He was actually born in Siberia, where his father had taken refuge after fleeing the Japanese troops.

The Dear Leaders are said to have a "Mount Paektu bloodline." A famous rallying cry says, *"Let us all join in the general offensive to hasten the final victory in the revolutionary spirit of Paektu!"*

A new problem may rise: when North Korea tests a nuclear weapon, experts say that the energy released could trigger a volcanic... eruption in Paektu. That would be a huge disaster that would kill thousands in North Korea as well as in China.



The only way for foreign tourists to reach Paektu is to take an Air Koryo flight from Pyongyang to Samjiyon airport. They will share the plane with soldiers. These planes are very old and would be blacklisted in Europe. The use of my laptop was forbidden during the flight, long before the Trump administration passed a similar measure!



Upon arrival at Samjiyon airport, the luggage delivery is very quick and carried out by men in uniforms.



The villages around Samjiyon look brand new but if you look closer through the house windows, you can see evidence of the hard times people must face here.





Groups of students walk for weeks in the footsteps of Kim Il Sung, who, according to the propaganda, set up his secret camp in Paektu after he joined the anti-Japanese resistance. Every year, tens of thousands of North Koreans visit the mountain for political education tours.



The first stop on the pilgrimage is the Samjiyon Grand Monument. The famous statue of the bugler is a national icon in the DPRK and can be seen in many places throughout the country.



The local guide was very happy to meet foreigners as very few of them come here – it is too far, too cold and too expensive.



The Paektusan Secret Camp is an area where secret bases were built according to the policy promulgated by Kim Il Sung. Very young guards wearing coats that are too big for them take care of the place.



항일의 녀성영웅  
김정숙 동지께서  
의우선 우등불자리

Secret camp no.1 served as the headquarters of the Korean People's Army. The official propaganda presents them as heroes and the guides explain to the visitors that their fire pits are kept as relics.



Korean soldiers carved on tree trunks slogans that speak to the Korean people's aspiration to live a happy life under the leadership of Kim Il Sung.



As part of the myth of Kim Jong Il's birth here, the propaganda says that soldiers shared the news by carving it on trees all around the country.

Those trees are given special protection and kept under glass and plastic as though they are holy relics. They look like giant condoms that go up and down thanks to an electric system.



Many carved writings have been kept safe and can be seen in the area:  
"20 million compatriots feel pride in the Paektu star," "Kim Jong Il is the star that rose in the sky over Mount Paektu."  
The guides were proud to press on the green buttons to remove the protection so I could see the trunks.



Kim Jong Il's Native Home. It is a wooden house in the forest where Kim Jong Il was supposedly born on 16 February 1942. Inside, you can see the toys and the blankets that were reportedly used by Kim as a baby. In fact, Kim Jong Il was born in Siberia, Russia, during his father's exile from Korea in 1941.



The native house must always be cleared of snow, so cute volunteers are at work all day long.



During big celebrations such as the Arirang show in Pyongyang, the native house is cheered loudly by the crowd in the stadium. Very few North Koreans have actually visited the area but they have all learned about this house as early as in kindergarten.



Kim Jong Il and his parents on a fresco in Paektu. They are called the "Three Commanders of Mount Paektu." The official biography reports that Kim Jong Il's birth was believed to be supernatural as it was marked by the appearance of a double rainbow over the mountain, a new star in the sky and the season changing from winter to spring.



A North Korean man taking a picture of the volcano. The weather is very cold in the area and sometimes, the road leading up to the summit is too icy for the old buses.



The remote area of Paektu experiences freezing temperatures in the winter. I first came here in May and the trip had to be cancelled because the road was too icy. I came back the following year in the summer.



In the summer, the road leading up to the summit is free of snow and ice. Only a very strong wind blows all year long.



The view at the top is breathtaking. Paektu is an active volcano which last erupted in 1903. 1,000 years ago, Paektu saw one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in human history. The huge explosion caused the volcano's crater to collapse, forming the Chon lake.



At the top of the volcano, students enjoy shouting slogans such as "Become the pillars and the iron shields that support the lineage of Mount Paektu and defend it to the death!" Some of them must be freezing at this altitude in the light clothes that they're wearing...



North Korean visitors must listen to a local guide telling them about the Paektu and Kim Il Sung story. They have heard this fake story thousands of times since they were children.



As an important myth in the story of their country, Paektu is in the minds and hearts of all North Koreans. During the Arirang show at the Kim Il Sung stadium, it can be seen when the sun rises.



The summit is 2,744 meters high. Wrapped up in her dog hair coat, this local guide narrates the exploits of the country's founder. Winter lasts 8 months here. She said that the lowest temperature she ever experienced was  $-36^{\circ}$ !



In the DPRK, there are many pictures and murals that show the Dear Leaders standing on Mount Paektu, like this one inside the hotel for foreigners that is located at the base of the volcano.



In the Samjiyon museum, Mount Paektu is displayed behind a television that shows the Dear Leaders visiting the area. On this particular day however, the DVD was broken and a Microsoft logo kept playing instead...



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