



# the WORLD'S most SECRETIVE spa?



If there's one place you probably wouldn't expect to visit a spa, North Korea would be it. Not that you wouldn't feel the urge to indulge in a little relaxation. The compulsory guided tours are intense, with a gruelling itinerary that sees you jumping on and off the bus half a dozen times per day to pay your respects to increasingly grandiose monuments of the Great Leader, all to the soundtrack of a generous dose of propaganda dished out by the guides.



So when our ancient coach pulled up outside the Ryonggang Hot Bath Resort, I was disproportionately excited. Compared to spas in more developed Asian countries, Ryonggang is pretty basic. But any alternative to bowing before enormous statues or listening

to never ending renditions of the Kim Il Sung hymn was a welcome diversion.

The spa was built in 1992 allegedly for the exclusive use of Party members – the elite of North Korean society (everything in the North is alleged – it's practically impossible to actually pin people down on specifics). Party members clearly like to keep their affairs private and the high hedges that virtually hide each of the four-roomed villas from view are certainly a blessing. What it might lack in up to date fixtures and treatments, Ryonggang makes up for with good old fashioned peace and quiet. Located far from any cities, towns or factories, the air is filled with nothing but silence and the utmost freshness.

Other than the novelty value of being in North Korea, that's the real draw of the Ryonggang Spa – it's a no-frills, back to basics experience – a nostalgic return to a long-gone era of pampering before the advent of cactus massages, paraffin pedicures or oxygen facials.

The villas offered a nod in the direction of traditional Korea, so we left our shoes in the porch and shuffled to our rooms in ill-fitting plastic slippers. Hotel rooms in North Korea never disappoint, as long as you're hoping for the epitome of hideous retro decor. Ryonggang seems to predate the decade in which it was built by at least 50 years, sporting faded green carpet with matching bedspreads and a sideboard filled with glassware my grandmother would think twice before displaying.

But we were not there to critique questionable interior design; we were there to sample the country's top hot spa. Although the Spartan bathroom had a slightly depressing and undeniably institutional feel to it, I was praising the secretive nature of communism on realising the mineral waters were available without leaving our room. I spent a year living in South Korea, during which my British discomfort at getting naked in front of strangers (albeit same sex ones) prevented

me from visiting their communal *jjimjilbang* (hot mineral baths). Unless you count an embarrassing foray to our local mud spa where an employee attempted to force me and a couple of horrified friends to remove our bikinis. So the thought of enjoying the hot healing waters without struggling to keep my bits covered further boosted Ryonggang's relaxation levels.

Our ten-strong group emerged for dinner sporting faces in various shades of fuchsia, having found the 50-degree bath painfully hot, yet insisting on bathing for longer than the recommended 20 minutes. Not being a group necessarily keen on spas, most were thrilled to be served a dinner more in line with wealthy politicians' desires than those of health conscious spa goers – a banquet high in carbs, fat and flavour, washed down with free flowing bottles of Taedonggang, North Korea's delicious beer. Still tingling from the healing waters, we adjourned to the games room to see what other methods North Korean officials employ to unwind. The cavernous, echoey hall just screamed communist – spotlessly clean, devoid of any decoration at all and offering the least atmosphere of any room I've ever entered. A few guests played chess in the corner, others watched military processions on TV and we settled into some deceptively uncomfortable chairs to watch our guide systematically annihilate everyone on the ping pong table.

Keen to fill my lungs with as much of the night air as I could, I took a slow meander back to my villa, getting lost numerous times en route. Don't get me wrong – Ryonggang is not a particularly large place but in a country where electricity is hard to come by, outdoor lights at 'luxury' resorts are pretty low on the priorities list. Fortunately, interior lights were still functioning, so I could once more admire the faded pattern of my olive green carpet before drifting off into the soundest sleep that northern Asia has to offer.

Skipping what was sure to be a calorific breakfast the following morning, I braved another sweat-inducing bath (feeling a certain affinity for lobsters) before quickly exploring the grounds. Our tour, like all trips to the Hermit Kingdom, was all about seeing as much as possible rather than savouring each place we visited and it was with reluctance that I loaded my bag back on to the coach just after nine o'clock, ready to head to the next stop.

Austere communal areas and questionable carpeting aside, Ryonggang greatly exceeded expectations and my only regret is that we didn't get to stay longer, I would happily have traded a morning looking at the engineering miracle that is the West Sea Barrage in order to spend more time walking the leafy paths, watching the colony of cranes take flight and enjoying the total tranquility and simplicity of an old school spa. 🌿