

## Author A.C. Frieden Takes a Rare Look Inside North Korea's Capital

**PYONGYANG, North Korea (Sep. 13, 2009)** – Chicago-based author A.C. Frieden traveled to North Korea this week to research scenes for his upcoming thriller *The Serpent's Game* and to collect additional information for other planned Cold War-related thrillers, mysteries and short stories. Frieden arrived in Pyongyang on September 8, joining a small group of Westerners equally curious to explore this reclusive Asian country of 24 million inhabitants. Escorted by government guides at nearly all times, Frieden visited many of the prominent sites in the capital and ventured south to Kaesong and the demilitarized zone at Panmunjom. His visit coincided with the 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), the country's official name, on September 9.



**Photo above:** Author A.C. Frieden at the top of the Juche Tower, overlooking the west bank of the Taedong River in Pyongyang, North Korea. The 170 meter tall tower (officially named the Tower of the Juche Idea) is located on the east bank of the Taedong River, opposite Kim Il-sung Square. The tower was completed in 1982 to commemorate Kim Il-sung's 70th birthday and offers amazing views of the city.

"Though my movements are restricted, it is impossible for the authorities to hide everything," Frieden said. "Crisscrossing the capital by tour bus, you see the infrastructure, the people, the kiosks, the side streets, and other aspects of daily life, both good and bad, all of which is superimposed on what the DPRK wants you to see, and this mosaic of reality and propaganda is fascinating." His four days in Pyongyang included visits to some of the country's most venerated sites, including the Kumsusan Memorial Palace (a/k/a the Kim Il-sung's mausoleum), the Juche Tower, and the Victorious Fatherland Liberation Museum (a/k/a Army Museum).

Frieden also attended the hour-long Arirang Mass Games, an intricate highly choreographed gymnastics spectacle with tens of thousands of trained performers at the May First Stadium, one of the world's largest. With an elaborate 16-arched structure arranged in a ring, the stadium can seat up to 150,000 people. But the performers far outnumbered the spectators, many of whom having been induced to attend because of the presence of Westerners and an important Chinese delegation.

Frieden also had a glimpse of the Pyongyang Metro, which features some of the deepest subway stations in existence (several of them more than 100 meters below ground). Opened in the mid-1970s, the Metro's tunnels and stations were given multiple functions: to link several key military command centers and various government continuation facilities, as well as to provide civilians with a series of bomb shelters and to make transportation more efficient. The military-only portion of the Metro is more extensive than the public lines and at some locations have NBC filtration systems for use in wartime. Frieden rode Line 1 of the Metro from its terminus at Puhung station to Yonggwang station, near the Koryo Hotel. "Although my guides were proud to show the subway system," Frieden remarked, "I suspect that given the nearly vacant stations that the Metro is not the preferred form of transportation, perhaps because not all the stations are fully operational." However, the city's bus system does not appear to be an ideal alternative, since buses are few in number, mostly in poor condition, and overcrowded during peak hours.



**Photo above:** Chicago-based author A.C. Frieden (center) in a Pyongyang Metro car at the Puhung station. These railcars were built in West Germany between 1957 and 1965 and sold to the DPRK in the late 1990s.

One of the most important sites Frieden visited is the Kumsusan Memorial Palace. Following Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, his son and successor, Kim Jong-il, transformed the building into a mausoleum. Kim Il-sung's embalmed body lies inside a glass sarcophagus in a large, dark, centrally located marble-lined room. His various possessions are also on display, including one of his Mercedes sedans, a railcar and a collection of photographs, medals, official gifts and awards. The mausoleum is a site often visited by foreign dignitaries, such as Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, earlier in the year. Frieden also visited some of Pyongyang's other monuments and memorials, including the Arch of Triumph (similar in size to the arch in Paris); the Arch of Reunification; the Workers Party of Korea Monument; the Revolutionary Martyr's Cemetery; the Mansu Hill Memorial; and the Kim Il-sung's birthplace at Mangyongdae.

Despite the difficulty of interacting directly with ordinary Pyongyang residents, at opportune times Frieden was able to have meaningful, often candid conversations with locals, many of whom have an anecdotal understanding of life outside their country. "Many locals were curious, yet also shy and fearful, but they were amazingly frank when they understood that I was an equally curious observer uninterested in challenging their political system or ideology," noted Frieden, nursing a

North Korean beer in the revolving rooftop bar of the Yanggakdo International Hotel (which didn't revolve because of maintenance problems). "And the more Western chocolate, alcohol and cigarettes I shared with them, the more relaxed and open we all became and the more our similarities emerged. We're all human, after all."

Frieden's second day in Pyongyang was the country's 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary. Celebrations by ordinary civilians included commemorative visits to monuments and dance parties and gatherings in public squares across the city. Patriotic songs spilled from loudspeakers at various sites. Political and military officials, as well as school children, placed flowers at statues of the country's founder, Kim Il-sung, and at war cemeteries. "The celebrations were not extravagant," Frieden said, "partly because it's not a significant year, like last year's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which involved elaborate parades in Kim Il-sung Square, but there may be other reasons for the low key event this year."



**Photo above:** A.C. Frieden at the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, the mausoleum where North Korea's "Dear Leader" lies embalmed for visitors to see.

Frieden's visit to Pyongyang also included a tour of the *USS Pueblo*, an American reconnaissance vessel that triggered a dangerous Cold War standoff. In January 1968, the ship was sent on an electronic intelligence gathering mission off the coast of North Korea. The *Pueblo* was attacked by North Korean naval vessels and MiG jets. The 82 surviving crew members were captured and held prisoner for 11 months. Today, the *Pueblo* is anchored on the west bank of the Taedong River in the on the south end of Pyongyang. Much of its communications equipment, including encryption machines and radios are on display. "As an author of Cold War and espionage novels," said Frieden, "the *Pueblo* is a great find for my research."

In addition to the *Pueblo*, the North Koreans have placed on display a torpedo-shaped Mine Reconnaissance System (MRS) operated by the US Navy that was captured in 2006. Though the loss of the MRS attracted far less press than the *Pueblo*, the equipment contained an important assortment of advanced sensors, all of which have since been examined by Russian, Chinese and DPRK engineers.





**Photo above:** A.C. Frieden on board the USS Pueblo, captured by the North Koreans in 1968.

While Frieden took advantage of seeing as many sites as possible in this Orwellian capital, it was apparent that many areas remained off limits. Westerners were kept far away from the luxurious residences of the loyal elite who live on Changgwang Street and other exclusive parts of Pyongyang's north side, which is encircled by police checkpoints. Nor were Western guests permitted to see much of the city's huge Soviet-style housing complexes such as those on Kwangbok Street, perhaps because many are in a state of disrepair and offer few modern amenities to their inhabitants. Frieden was also carefully shielded from much of the country's poor and destitute, but the guides were not able to hide everything. "The back of the bus offered an often unrestricted vantage," said Frieden, "so I kept my camera busy for the sporadic opportunities to see how ordinary citizens live, particularly in the side streets of Pyongyang and in rural areas."

**Photo below:** A.C. Frieden attending the elaborate Mass Games in the May Day Stadium.





*Image above: Author A.C. Frieden visits Mansu Hill, the site of the Mansudae Assembly Hall and several key monuments, including a giant bronze statue of Kim Il-sung, the founder of the DPRK.*

**About the author:** A.C. Frieden is a Swiss-Brazilian novelist and lawyer living in Chicago. He is currently working on several political novels and thrillers, including one set partly in North Korea. For more information, visit his website at [www.acfrieden.com](http://www.acfrieden.com) and his literary travel blog.

*PRESS NOTE: For A.C. Frieden's visit to other parts of North Korea, including Kaesong and the DMZ at Panmunjom, see Press Release 090913PR2.*

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