

A large-scale performance in a grand hall. The stage is filled with hundreds of dancers in vibrant, colorful costumes (red, pink, yellow, green). They are holding large, circular props. In the background, a massive globe is visible on the right, and a large red wall with stylized Chinese characters is on the left. The ceiling is high and features decorative lighting. The overall atmosphere is grand and celebratory.

# the greatest (and most secret) show on earth?

Dancers and slogans honour the state's founder Kim il-sung as a "Great Sun"

**It's history, but  
not as we know  
it—complete with  
1,000 backflipping  
toddlers and  
human-powered  
animation.  
Welcome to  
North Korea's  
Mass Games...**



**North Korea has quite a reputation.** Its nuclear programme, alleged funding of terrorism and—most recently—accusations of a torpedo attack on a South Korean warship have ruffled the international community’s feathers and compounded the communist state’s self-imposed isolation.

Yet in the last ten years, the communist government has allowed a trickle of tourists and a few closely monitored journalists into the country. Keen to prop up its feeble economy, it even grants one-off visas to tourists from its bitter capitalist rival America.

That’s because North Korea is gaining a reputation for something altogether different from the aforementioned nuclear programme and torpedo attacks...and it involves schoolchildren in leotards.



Traditional Korea meets modern business for a “happy” future



Thousands of children hold up flash cards depicting the Korean War



Of the fewer than 2,000 Westerners who visit the country each year, nearly all come for the Arirang Mass Games—according to *Guinness World Records*, the largest gymnastic and artistic performance in the world. It takes place from August to October each year, in the 150,000-seat sports stadium in Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital. It includes painstakingly choreographed routines—celebrating the state’s 62-year existence, international defiance, “prosperity” and legendary founder Kim il-sung—performed by 100,000 singers, children, gymnasts and army cadets. Behind them is the show’s most impressive spectacle—a grandstand full of thousands of children who turn cards in unison, creating enormous images ranging from smiling babies to war scenes. I should know—I was there last year... ➤

## PREPARE TO BE AMAZED! Our man takes a ringside seat

My tourist party is accompanied at all times by a guide and a security official, both of whom could get into serious trouble if it's discovered that one of their party has written an unauthorised article (but luckily, I am allowed to take photographs).

When we arrive at the stadium, our guide informs us that we should smile but remain silent if the state TV camera is pointed at us, and that we are not to do anything that could be deemed disrespectful to the regime. We are here not just to be entertained, he emphasises, but for a history lesson. Every night for the last two months, tens of thousands of local spectators have been educated and re-educated on the trials and tribulations of North Korea's history.

Now it's our turn.

The games begin with a sunrise that plunges into darkness, marking the Korean peninsula's Japanese occupation from 1910–1945. Women solemnly march in nondescript smocks as cards are flipped in sequence to create animated flames surging across the stand. Suddenly, a bright light is hoisted skyward and ignites a torch at the top of the arena. My guide tells me this represents the ideological awakening of Kim il-sung, future revolutionary leader and Eternal President of North Korea.

Next, boys in jumpsuits wave red flags as Kim assembles comrades to stage the post-World War Two revolution. Women dance with pink flowers; the Korean People's Army is founded. Flip cards flash stirring battle scenes—the communists take on the Japanese invaders. There's

blood, tears and, with an orchestral crescendo, liberation. My guide wipes a tear from his eye.

But, actually, we've barely begun. Cue trumpets, drums and baton-twirling as hordes of soldiers take to the field to exhibit the nation's improving armed forces. This culminates in the North invading South Korea to “achieve reunification”. They're pegged back as blue-clad US forces intervene—but then red Chinese troops join the communist cause and suddenly the 1950 Korean War is underway, with military marches, flashing flip-card bombs and gasping spectators.

A mesmerising card animation shows the armistice being signed, the peninsula is carved in two and the North celebrates its victory over the invading imperialists. The flash cards display sickly chocolate-box paintings of grinning toddlers, while thousands of the genuine article backflip their way across the stadium.

And so it continues, with smiling animated peasants and dancing chickens symbolising the nation's growing prosperity. It's all leading up to the big finale, where thousands of dancers come

The sun rises over North Korea's mountains at the start of the epic games





together to form the Korean Peninsula, before two of them break rank to embrace—the longed-for reunification of North and South Korea.

The crowd erupts and my education is complete. I exchange a glance with a fellow wide-eyed Westerner, and then we're herded into the gift shop.

### **The Arirang Mass Games is a clumsy propaganda tool.**

It lauds the “achievements” of Kim il-sung and his son and present leader Kim Jong-il in holding off supposed oppressors Japan

and America, and in building a “thriving” economy (which, in reality, is plagued by regular food shortages and power cuts).

But, if you can bring yourself to put the politics aside, few would dispute that this hour-and-a-half-long show, with its vast army of performers—most of whom have trained for years—is an incredible achievement. It is, without doubt, the most astounding, breathtaking extravaganza I've ever witnessed.

*The author of this article has asked to remain anonymous.*