Hidden Floors in Pyongyang Hotels by JohnsonGareth

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The Yanggakdo Hotel in Pyongyang was completed in 1995, during the peak of the countryâ€™s worst famine â€“ the Arduous March. With several hotels already existing in North Koreaâ€™s capital city, it is quite hard to understand what motivated authorities to build another large facility at that time â€“ except that this was the first, and to date only, hotel to be situated remotely on an island. Its therefore ideal for North Korea tours. For a country that does its best to keep tourists and locals separated at all times, the obvious benefits of an island hotel are clear to see. It avoids uncomfortable questions from tourists about restrictions on movement during tours (visitors roam the island freely during their stay), and minimizes the exposure locals have to affluent foreigners. But what about those North Koreans who have to work at the Yanggakdo hotel?

Most hotels in North Korea that are used for international visitors are absent of both propaganda campaign posters and portraits of the Kims. Featuring plenty of curious and talkative foreigners, rooms with TVs that can pick up BBC, CNN and CCTV, and in some cases even boasting broadband internet connections, these hotels can be a source of potentially destabilizing information for some North Koreans. This is especially so for those workers that are permanently based in the hotels they must work in; engineers, cleaning staff, and security operatives. For people like these, the work environment might even be enough to challenge deeply engrained concepts regarding foreigners, and potentially undermine faith in government credentials. Faced with this dynamic, the designers of the Yanggakdo took some fascinating steps to mitigate the effects that hotel work might put on staff.

As anyone who has visited the Yanggakdo will know, there is no fifth floor on any of the elevator panels available to tourists, a fact that has intrigued tourists for years. For long there have been rumors that this is because the fifth floor is where the Yanggakdoâ€™s â€œspy commandâ€• was situated area off limits due to supposedly being the location where occupant â€œmonitoringâ€• took place. Stories of tourist surveillance abounded during the 1990s, so it is easy to see how rumors like this arose. But the reality is is that the fifth floor is where the hotel administration offices can be found. The intriguing difference between this and any other international hotel office that the Yangakkdoâ€™s is filled with propaganda- to a level quite uncommon even in the DPRK.

As can be revealed by these pictures, the fifth floor of the Yanggakdo is covered with extremely anti-foreign and pro-regime propaganda. In contrast with the decor of the rest of the hotel and the environment itsâ€™ architects designed to embrace tourists, these pictures show a side designed to chill, provoke, and threaten.

We entered via the sixth floor, which although marked on the elevator, was clearly not designed for tourist access. When we got off the elevator everything seemed different, the ceiling was a lot lower than in other floors and there were shoes outside all of the doors. After walking around a few steps it quickly became apparent that this was where the floor that the staff lived.

After walking down the stairs to the fifth floor we were amazed by what we saw â€“ it was really quite a hair-raising experience to see so much hatred visible in the propaganda towards the very people that the hotel was built for. It was a great example of the contradictions you can see in North Korea, possibly the best there is.â€•

So, what to make of it?

While the propaganda is certainly astonishing to see, it is nevertheless easy to understand its

purpose. In all likelihood, the strong emphasis on propaganda that can be found in the fifth floor office area is probably there to compensate for the combined lack of propaganda that can be found in other areas, and the impact that tourists might have on the North Koreans working there. Such anti-foreign imagery serves as a reminder to staff that no matter how good an impression foreigners might make, it is critical that behind closed doors they remember that tourists cannot be trusted. It also serves to remind staff of the legitimacy of their beliefs, government, and future aspirations.

The fact the fifth floor was missed out on the Yanggakdo elevator controls ultimately led to years of speculation and myth-building regarding its contents. Had this been any other country, it is doubtful that anyone would have bothered trying to sneak in to see what was there, such are the prevalence of staff-only floors in hotels worldwide. But although merely functioning as an office area, the fifth floor of the Yanggakdo provides some interesting insights into the Pyongyang governmentâ€™s attempts to control the mindsets of its citizens. Propaganda like this might well be found in other hotels across the DPRK, but as inflows of information continue to increase, one wonders if it can continue having its desired effect.

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