

2017 PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION of the PAKTUDAESAN-JULGI in DPRK

EXPEDITION 1: May 25 to June 15, 2017

By Roger Shepherd of HIKEKOREA on June 21, 2017.

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The Paektudaesan-julgi is an 1800km mountain spine that stretches down the entire length of the Korean Peninsula. It serves as its watershed via a continuous ridge that is never cut by water. It also serves a role as the spine of the Korean nation and its character along with the belief that it is a transmitter of all its natural energies. In the DPRK it remains relatively untouched and unvisited by outsiders including most DPRK citizens.

New Zealander Roger Shepherd is a South Korean based photographer and writer. He has been visiting sections of the Paektudaesan-julgi since 2011. He records and documents it through writing and photography. His work is well received in both the North and South of Korea, with numerous exhibitions and articles that send a message to the people of Korea, that despite its division, its oneness can still be sensed through the Paektudaesan-julgi and its people. This year he is embarking on two more expeditions of new mountains of the Paektudaesan-julgi. He recently returned from his first expedition.

Traveling to remote areas at the end of valley roads, past the last village, he and three members of the Korea New Zealand Friendship Society, led by Secretary General Hwang Sung Chol, explored more mountains, camping out in tents for almost two weeks. Their work was made easier by the knowledge of local Korea Forest Service workers and the goodwill of local villagers who shared with them foods like goose, duck, rabbit, freshwater fishes, honey, and a vast range of mountain vegetables and local alcohol's.



봉수령 Bongsu-ryong on the Paektudaesan-julgi, looking east towards Kosan in Kangwon-do province

They travelled through the Kangwon-do and Phyongannam-do provinces in generous weather where they managed to climb 15 mountains in the 20 odd days they had to accomplish this task. Although the roads to access the mountains were treacherous, this meant that the Paektudaesan-julgi was in pristine condition being heavily forested in places. Forestry is actually strictly managed in DPRK, and despite large authorized denuding, many tracts of DPRK remain untouched or preserved as wildlife zones, most of it on the Paektudaesan-julgi. They found ancient stone fire towers on three occasions, heard many local tales of bear and tiger encounters -both historic and recent, and even came across a natural grazing plateau stocked with sheep and cows.

The villages they stayed nearby grew rice, maize, potatoes, etc. The crops in these areas are planted by hand and the fields prepared by ox and man. They also raised pigs, sheep, rabbits and goats. Their homes are normally white painted clay block with wooden framed windows and roofed with timber, ceramic, or stone tiles. They each have a wooden chimney flue for the wood fuelled Ondul heating system. Their yards are normally fenced with thicket to prevent wild pigs from ravaging their personal vegetable plots. There is no flushing toilets or running water in most of the home types and water is drawn from streams. Most homes do have electricity, but not much. There is normally a local school or crèche along with an administrative block which manages the farming allotment and village issues.



Goat herders in Ryongjo-ni, Beopdong-gun, Kangwon-do.

Some smaller villagers consisting of only a few rustic homes but supported by a 4WD track, were completely self-sustainable, and made their living harvesting mountain herbs and spices, timber, and honey. They are seasonal abodes operating only in the warm months of the year.

Despite this hardy life, the village people appear to own a peaceful and pastoral spirit far from the constraints and demands of modern society. They appeared healthy and fit. They were literate and smart, with a humble and polite manner. Their villages are organised and they are in touch with their land. However, these remote rural areas are in need of some long awaited development that would improve their overall lives.

Roger will be returning for his second expedition this August 10 to September 25. He will be exploring the northern regions of Ryanggang-do and Hamgyongnam-do. The fruits of his work will be turned into another photo essay book by April 2018. He will also launch a crowdfunding campaign in South Korea to help redeem the costs of his work and starting in mid-October 2017, will run photo exhibitions including 360° virtual reality footage from the mountain tops of DPRK.



Polaroid: Standing on Minbong-san 1135m, Maengsan-gun, Phyongannam-do with free grazing pastures in the background.