



BELARUS TO NORTH KOREA: ULTIMATE TOUR FOR AVIATION GEEKS

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Ilyushin. Tupolev. Antonov.

For aviation fanatics, opportunities to fly in Soviet-era commercial jets built by one of these companies get fewer by the year.

Which is why an annual tour operated by one UK company has become incredibly popular with hardcore plane-spotters from around the world.

Stopping in Belarus and North Korea, Juche Travel's upcoming DPRK Aviation Tour, which runs May 6-13, offers opportunities to fly on a variety of rare aircraft.

"Both countries are considered bucket list destinations for aviation enthusiasts, as they are some of the last bastions of Soviet-era aviation," Juche Travel owner David Thompson told CNN.

What types of planes will be on offer?

Tour goers can fly in aircraft ranging from classic Soviet-era propeller, jet aircraft and helicopters, up to the latest generation of Russian and Ukrainian passenger jets.

In Belarus, avgeeks can get their thrills aboard an Antonov An-12, Antonov An-26, Antonov An-2, Let L-140 and Mil Mi-2.

In North Korea, there's the Antonov An-24, Antonov An-148, Ilyushin IL-18, Ilyushin IL-62, Ilyushin IL-76, Mil Mi-17 and the beloved Tupolev triumvirate -- the Tu-134, Tu-154 and Tu-204.

"These types of aircraft are becoming increasingly difficult to fly, and by combining the two countries into one tour it will allow enthusiasts to fly on pretty much every type of Soviet-era civil airliner in the space of a week," said Thompson.

Flights don't come cheap

Flights can be booked on an "a la carte" basis, allowing travelers to personalize their tour.

Want to do it all?

Prepare to shell out a few thousand euros for the flights alone.

For instance, the proposed first day in Minsk includes a tour of the capital's aircraft repair facilities followed by optional flights on an An-12, An-26 and L-410.

Total cost for those three flights is 1,190 euros (\$1,353).

In North Korea, day one of the tour has travelers heading to Pyongyang Sunan Airport for optional charter flights aboard flag carrier Air Koryo's last surviving Ilyushin IL-62 (250 euros per person), as well as the last passenger Ilyushin IL-18 in service (150 euros), one of the airline's Ilyushin IL-76 cargo planes (250 euros) and the latest addition to the fleet, the Antonov An-148 (150 euros).

Travelers wishing to skip either the Belarus or North Korea portion of the tour can do so.

Thompson said about 75 customers have signed up for this year's tour.

Controlling aviation fans like 'herding cats'

Because the tours have been running for several years, Thompson says many of the earlier challenges of operating in North Korea have been ironed out.

"Often the biggest challenge is controlling dozens of excited aviation enthusiasts on the apron, which is sometimes akin to herding cats," he joked.

"Luckily the Korean flight crews and airport staff are used to us now and we are always treated with a friendly smile.

"We do our best to push access, photography, filming and the like to maximize our customers' exposure to the aircraft."

Tour is an eye-opener, says past participant

We reached out to renowned aviation photographer Sam Chui, who has been to North Korea several times, to find out if Juche's aviation experience actually lives up to the hype.

"The Juche aviation tour is great in that it provided many aviation enthusiasts a unique opportunity to fly some of the last ever Soviet built aircraft that are banned elsewhere but remain active in

North Korea," he told CNN.

"Aviation was the key motivation for me to go but during the tour, all of us gained an immense attachment to the country and its people.

"It is one of the last places in the world where there are few visitors and you can have a big impact on whom you meet."

Is the trip safe?

Does the idea of rushing through the skies on Soviet-era planes operated by a North Korean airliner sound like a death wish?

Thompson has a few words of reassurance to offer.

"We wouldn't run these tours if we weren't comfortable with the safety element," he said.

"Air Koryo has an exemplary safety record and their fleet of aircraft is immaculately maintained. Their last major incident of note was over 30 years ago.

"We have had many international air crew, flight engineers and ground staff participate in our tours and they are always amazed at the pristine condition of the fleet."

According to Airlineratings.com, which monitors 407 airlines, Air Koryo has a safety rating of 5.5 out of 7.

The ratings system is based on analysis of info from the world's aviation governing body, IATA, along with governments and crash data.







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