

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



In North Korea, where behavior is tightly controlled,  
LOOKING AT THE EARTH FROM EVERY POSSIBLE ANGLE

how can a photographer hope to capture individuality?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STÉPHAN GLADIEU

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Children pause between collisions on a bumper car course at Mangyongdae Funfair outside Pyongyang. In this totalitarian country, few residents have had the experience of posing for a portrait.

**PREVIOUS PHOTOS**

Left: An entertainment wonderland perches on top of a food factory, where workers can swim, play basketball, or relax in a sauna. On display in the pool is a trophy the factory received for providing food to North Korea's athletes.

Right: Students bowl at the colorful Golden Lane Bowling Alley. The large facility, which also has arcade games and a bar, is a popular stop for tourists on government-controlled trips.



Two office workers stand in front of Pyongyang's Monument to Party Founding. The hammer, sickle (center), and calligraphy brush represent workers, farmers, and intellectuals.



A doctor examines a worker in North Korea's largest textile factory, where a majority of the 10,000 employees are women. Before UN sanctions in 2017, textiles were one of the most profitable exports.



## THE BACKSTORY

IN A COUNTRY WHERE CONFORMITY IS REQUIRED,  
A PORTRAIT IS REVOLUTIONARY.

**THERE ARE 25 MILLION PEOPLE** in North Korea, but the only visible portraits are of its leaders. Regular people are rarely photographed unless they are in a large group—even on their wedding day.

In 2017 French photographer Stéphan Gladieu went to North Korea to discover its citizens' individuality. At factories and farms the cleanest workers were trotted out for him. "In a country where 'individuals' don't exist, I was doing something crazy by asking people to stand alone," says Gladieu. He was repeatedly reminded of this by his minders, who chose the

facilities he visited. He picked his subjects—though sometimes the minders would argue the person was too ugly, old, or unkempt.

Taken alone, each portrait could look like smiling propaganda for the authoritarian regime. Together, they have an unsettling uniformity. The subversion is in this repetition, he says. Even standing next to him, his guides didn't understand what he was doing. "They could never see what I saw," says Gladieu. "They're so far away, in a different world."

—NINA STROCHLIC



A family poses behind a tribute to the North Korean space program at a water park in Pyongyang.