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Review: Koryo Offers Diners a Look Inside the Hermit Kingdom

By Ingrid Burke

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Bibimbap is a traditional dish of rice and vegetables topped with an egg.

Koryo, the Russian capital's only North Korean restaurant, offers Muscovites the chance to brush up on their knowledge of the hermit kingdom — or reinforce their stereotypes.

The moment my friend and I stepped into Koryo, we were ushered to a table with a plum view of a big-screen TV airing continuous footage of lavish North Korean pop-rock performances, dazzling nature scenes and glimpses of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un doing admirable deeds.

The fact that the waitresses are dressed in matching cropped black skirt suits with broad fuchsia collars — each with her long hair secured in the same low pony tail — only adds to the unique experience of dining here.

Although the waitresses were almost hyper-attentive, leaping into action the moment a glass

or plate neared emptiness, the overall atmosphere is fun and relaxed. The restaurant seems to be particularly popular with foreigners. On the day we visited, we could hear a broad range of languages being spoken — maybe tourists and expats are attracted by the unique opportunity Koryo offers to sample the cuisine and culture of such an isolated country.

The menu is expansive and reasonable, offering a broad range of North Korean dishes along with international fare such as avocado soup and spaghetti.

Most entrees, including grilled duck and fried soy bean curd, average between 300 and 500 rubles ($5-10). Diners looking for a more sumptuous experience can shell out 2,990 rubles ($56) for sinseollo, a popular soup spilling over with seafood, meatballs and vegetables and kept warm throughout the meal in a bundt-shaped samovar of sorts, or 2,490 rubles for a whole lamb's leg.

The bar is fully stocked, offering a broad range of spirits, beer, wine and non-alcoholic beverages. While the price of alcohol is fairly standard, with beer ranging between 120-260 rubles, tea is pricey — averaging 250-290 rubles per pot.

We ordered kimchi, spicy grilled calamari rings and the traditional Korean dish bibimbap.

Koryo's take on kimchi, a popular Korean side dish consisting of fermented vegetables, is slightly pungent, its flavors complex rather than pepper hot. It received rave reviews all around.

The calamari rings were perfectly grilled and served with slices of eye-wateringly spicy pepper, all doused in a rich brown sauce that was equal parts hot and sweet.

Bibimbap is a traditional rice dish filled with various types of vegetables sectioned off over the rice, with an egg cooked sunny side up lying on top. Koryo's variation on the dish is notably lacking in meat, which is often found in renditions of the dish in South Korean restaurants. But the diverse medley of flavors and textures provided by the combination of egg, rice, dried seaweed, mushrooms and other vegetables left little to be desired.

And for anyone looking to host a particularly memorable wedding reception or birthday party, Koryo has a room that can be rented out for private events. For 900 rubles per hour, you will receive a beautifully designed — albeit windowless — room with a karaoke machine, a large table that can seat 15 and a room-length couch. Food can be purchased off the menu during events at the restaurant.

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