



CHINESE TOURS TO NORTH KOREA GROWING

As North Korean tours to Keumgang Mountain and other trips aimed at South Korean visitors are all currently frozen, trips into the DPRK by Chinese tourists are beginning to grow. On April 10, a North Korean official revealed that Chinese group tours would be warmly welcomed by Pyongyang, and on April 12, a group of approximately 400 Chinese visitors and officials arrived in the North. Pyongyang and Beijing reached an agreement on tours last February. Cho Seong-kyu, director of the Choson International Tours, stated that his office, responsible for tours for foreigners to North Korea, is preparing a tour course to Pyongyang, Kaesong, Myohyang Mountain and Nampo for Chinese visitors. He explained that since 1988, 20,000 Chinese tourists annually visit Pyongyang, and that many more tour courses were being prepared.

For the past four years, the Chinese government has banned group tours to the DPRK, but that restriction has been completely lifted. Now, tourist trains are being operated and the range of tours offered is growing. Group tours to North Korea were banned in 2006 after Chinese officials were found to have been inappropriately gambling during their trips, but tours will resume on May 12. With 800 Chinese tourists set to board a DPRK-bound train leaving from Hangzhou, it appears that many Chinese are interested in tours of North Korea. On March 18, China's National Development and Reform Commission and its Bureau of Travel and Tourism released a "Northeast China Tourism Industry Development Plan," in which it revealed the plan to permit tours to North Korea. Following last year's measures to improve industry in the northeast provinces, Beijing is now aiming specifically to bolster the tourism industry in the



region by arranging overland tours to Russia and North Korea, as well as developing other new domestic and international tour destinations.

In addition to the existing tour to Sonyang-Dandong-Pyongyang, new routes from Baishan (Jilin Province)-Changbai-Hyesan and Yanji-Hunchun-Fangchuan-Rajin/Chungjin have been included. Until now, tour courses to North Korea were limited to Dandong-Sinuiju-Pyongyang, Sanhezhen-Chungjin/Mount Chilbo, and Mount Baekdu-Samjiyon-Pyongyang. As Rajin Port is opened, the Bureau of Travel and Tourism also plans overland trips to the city, in conjunction with a ferry shuttling Chinese tourists to Vladivostok, South Korea, and Japan. In addition, the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture is promoting the development of a longer tour, from Hunchun through Rajin, on to Pyongyang and even down to Panmunjom.

North Korea has announced the seizure of South Korean property at the Keumgang Mountain tourist resort, and now Chinese travel agents are signing contracts to sell tours to the resort developed mainly by Hyundai-Asan and South Korean government investment. North Korean authorities have offered six-month contracts allowing the Chinese tour operators to book Keumgang tours, guaranteeing them access to hotels and other facilities in the resort area. Over 1,000 Chinese tourists have already booked tours to Keumgang, to begin after April 20.

North Korea froze South Korean government assets in the resort, including the Visitors' Center, a spa, and a duty-free store, and deported South Korean employees in a first stage of measures to pressure the South into restarting cross-border tours. On April 13, the North stepped up the measures, freezing Hyundai-Asan and other South Korean private-sector assets, ordering the deportation of employees related to these businesses as well. Korean Central Broadcasting reported on April 8, "Because of south Korean authorities, Hyundai's tourism agreement and



contract have become invalid,” announcing that domestic and international tours would begin again with a new tour operator.