

Beat: News

North Korea to reopen borders for tourists by April 2015

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USPA News - North Korea will reopen its borders for tourists in the first quarter of next year, in time for international tourists to attend the Pyongyang Marathon in April, a tour operator said on Thursday, nearly two months after the reclusive country shut its borders over Ebola fears. Koryo Tours, which is one of the few independent travel groups that organize trips to North Korea, said it had received confirmation from North Korea's Ministry of Sport that the Pyongyang Marathon on April 12, 2015, will be open to international tourists.

It will be only the second time that Western amateurs are permitted to participate in the event. North Korea virtually shut its borders in October when it notified tour operators that it would no longer accept foreign tourists, citing fears that foreigners could bring the deadly Ebola virus to the country, which has a poor medical infrastructure and would be crippled by a serious epidemic. North Korea also briefly closed its borders in May 2003 in response to the SARS outbreak in neighboring China. "[We] have been in lengthy discussions with our partners in Pyongyang to reach an agreement that those booked through our company should be cleared for entry into North Korea", said Koryo Tours founder Nick Bonner. "The information we currently have from our contacts is that this temporary suspension of tours to North Korea will be lifted at some point during the first quarter of 2015, and certainly in time for the Pyongyang Marathon of 12 April 2015." Bonner said North Korea's sole airline, Air Koryo, is expected to fly an extra flight from Shanghai to Pyongyang on April 9, with a limited number of seats available for Western tourists. The current ban on foreign tourists, which does not affect diplomats and other official business, was announced just months after Korea International Travel Agency said that the number of foreign tourists entering North Korea had jumped by 20 percent during the first half of 2014. The vast majority of foreign tourists are from China, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands a year, but the number of Westerners has also increased in recent years.

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